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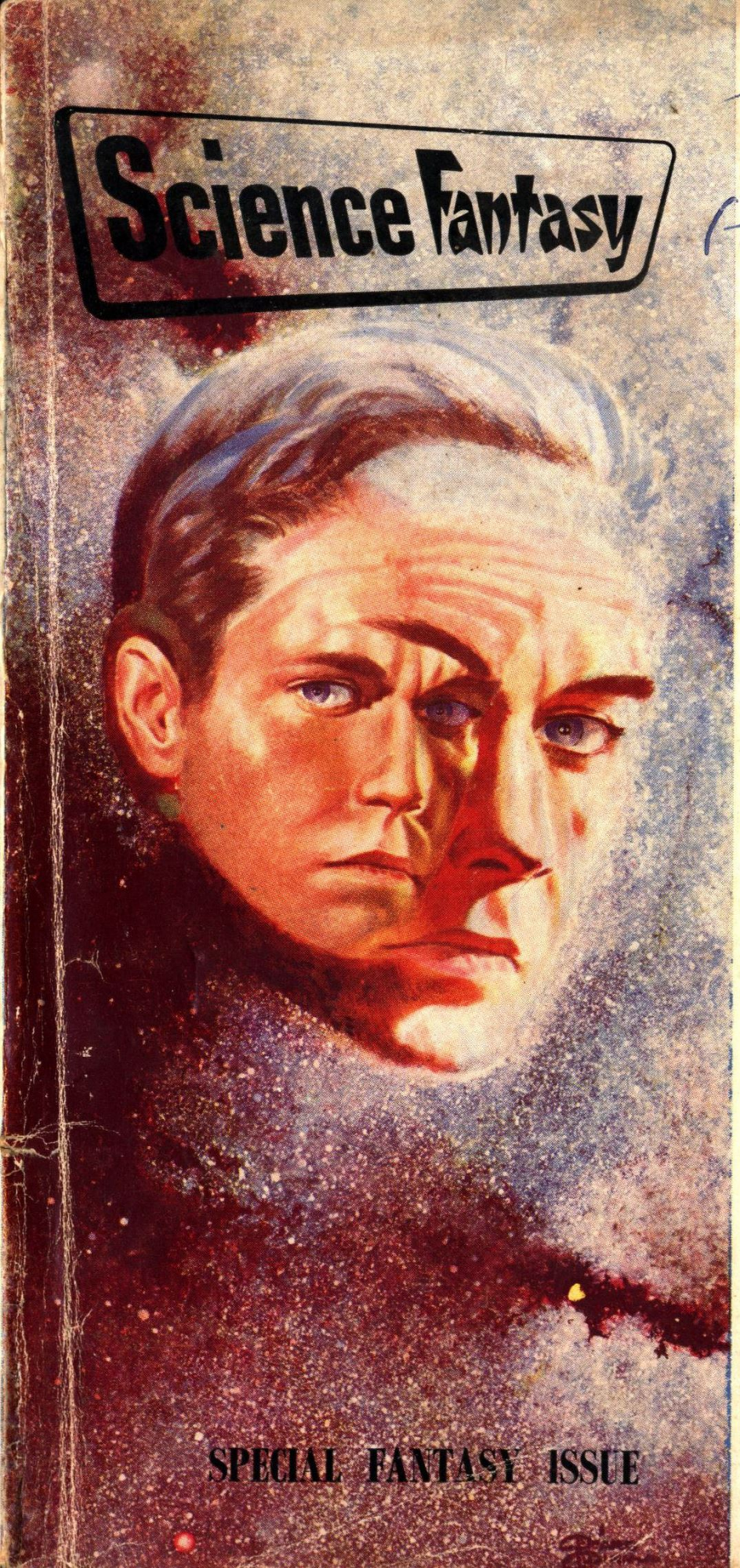

SPECIAL FANTASY ISSUE

JOHN BRUNNER
Father Of Lies

THOMAS BURNETT SWANN
Where Is The Bird Of Fire ?

CLAUDE & RHODA NUNES
The Problem

★

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Not since his brilliant short novel " Earth Is But A Star " in 1958 *has John Brunner produced such a delightful fantasy as the story which follows.*

FATHER OF LIES

BY JOHN BRUNNER

---

one

Calmly, Miles Croton applied the brakes and brought the car to an easy stop. Then he backed up a few yards, one eye on the rear-view mirror, but his main attention on the thing in the field beside the road. He reached out to draw from beneath the dashboard a microphone on a spring-wound reel of flex, and with a fingertip tapped out a call-signal on the activating button : dit-dit-dit-dah-dit, dit-dit-dit-dah-dit.

" What is it ?" said Colin's voice from the speaker grille under the dash.

Narrowing his eyes a little, Miles peered forward. " A dragon," he said. " About seven miles from the village."

" How's the road at that point ?" Colin said.

" Still good. Metalled surface as far ahead as I can see, which is only about a quarter of a mile. Going by the weathering effects, it was made up in the twenties or thirties."

" Not much traffic," Colin said.

" None at all, looks like. Hedges probably meet across the middle of the road in summer. They're getting fairly thick already, and it's barely April."

" Uh-huh. And this dragon ?"

There was a scratching, rustling sound from the speaker. Miles had a momentary vision of serious-faced Colin making his shorthand notes on the pad before him, even though the conversation was of course being recorded.

" Big," he said. " I caught sight of its back a couple of times before I realised what it was. It's standing under a clump of trees, partly shadowed. Not much detail. About ten feet high at the shoulder, thirty to forty feet long, plus the tail. A sort of anthracite black, dingy except where the light catches it. Flexible neck. Mouth looks big enough to swallow me up, car and all."

" Breathing fire ?" Colin said.

" Not that I can see."

" Wings ?"

" Sort of bat-like wings, folded close to the sides, with a kind of pleated effect that makes it hard to see details." Miles lifted the thirty-five millimetre camera hanging on its short strap against his chest. He focused as he talked. " I'm trying for a picture of it, but it's badly sited for a clear shot, and I don't want to get out of the car."

He took his picture, advanced the film and took a second one.

" I heard the clicks," Colin said. " Okay. What are you going to do—drive on ?"

" I'm not sure. I think maybe I'll hang around till it moves away. It looks very—well, disturbing."

" Seven miles from the village, you said ?"

" By my reckoning. I agree it's improbable, but what *is* probable in this lunatic corner of the world ?"

" So far from the village it's not likely to be dangerous," Colin said. " Still, that's up to you. What— ?"

" Hold it," Miles broke in. " It's moving. Damn ! This road is only about ten feet wide, and now I can't say whether it's coming to look at me so I ought to swing the car, or whether it's just going for a walk and I'd better not rev the engine and catch its attention."

He heard the sound of Colin's heavy breathing from the speaker grille. Without looking away from the dragon, he felt for the cushion of the passenger seat and tilted it forward ; his fingertips rested lightly on the cool smooth stock of the repeating rifle which was concealed underneath.

Ignoring the flimsy barrier of a seven-foot thorn hedge in the first flush of spring growth, the dragon tramped out of the field. For a heart-stopping moment its stupid, vast-mouthed head faced him up the narrow road ; then it turned with majestic deliberation and began to walk in the other direction, its tail leaving a muddy streak on the ground between its huge muddy footprints.

He took two more pictures before he spoke again to mention these prints to Colin. " That much detail this far from the village," he said.

" I see your point," Colin said. There was a faint rattling sound ; he was indulging his inevitable habit of rapping his pen between his teeth, up and down. " How about your gun ? Is it still working ?"

Miles froze for a second ; then he gave a laugh which was more nervous than he meant it to be. He said, " Damn you for reminding me. But I'm glad you didn't speak up earlier. I was sitting here with my hand on it while the dragon was looking at me. I wonder if I got those pictures, even."

" If your engine is still running, you probably did."

" That makes sense," Miles agreed, somewhat relieved, and prodded the accelerator with his toe. The answering rise in the note of the engine was very reassuring. " I wish we could run an aerial survey of the whole area some time."

" We will. Some time. When we can stretch the funds. Well, what are you going to do ?"

Miles leaned forward. " That looks like—yes, it is. The dragon just took to the air. It must be about half a mile ahead. God, what a sight ! It's got wings on it like I don't know what."

He stared, fascinated, at the bulk of the monster flapping leisurely upward over the peaceful countryside.

" Still more than six miles," Colin said practically. " He's expanding, isn't he ?"

" It looks like it," Miles confirmed. " I certainly won't be able to go beyond that point in the car. I'll follow the road as far as I can in safety, and then I'll swing it around and leave it ready to come back to. I'd be much happier if I knew where the road led to, I must say."

" It probably runs past the ogre's cave," Colin said. " We know that much from Hugh's reports, and so far our mapping indicates that spatial relationships are normal over most of the area."

" *Most* of the area," Miles muttered. " Okay, I imagine it's safe for me to go ahead now. Keep listening."

He laid the microphone on top of the dashboard, where it would pick up his voice if he spoke loudly, and engaged gear again. Eyes and ears alert, he rolled forward. By now the dark shape of the dragon was little more than a blot in the sky.

As he had guessed from the apparent distance at which the monster had risen into the air, he was able to go little more than another half-mile before he rounded a bend and found that the road was running out on him. For a few hundred yards more there were visible patches of metalled surface, but the muddy potholes grew larger and larger, and undoubtedly they joined up into one rough, rutted dirt track not far away. He stopped and swung the car.

" Colin ?" he said. " Get a fix on me here, if you can. It's almost the end of the road."

" Will do," Colin said, and after a moment whistled. " It's growing !" he went on. " You're definitely more than six miles out."

" I wonder if I ought to go on after all," Miles said slowly.

" It's entirely up to you," Colin answered. " I don't think anyone would blame you for turning back."

Miles pondered. Finally he said, " No, I'll go ahead for a bit, anyway. See if I can establish one or two landmarks."

" As you like."

He turned off the engine, leaving the ignition key in place, and got out of the car. He listened for a moment, hearing only the breeze rustling the leaves, feeling the warm spring sun, before he went around to the back and fetched his big-bitted woodsman's axe. It was comforting to have something infallible in his hand. He swung it through a whistling arc, and then checked its flight, and froze.

He walked forward after a moment, to the place where the big potholes started to mar the road, and stared down thoughtfully for fully half a minute. Then he returned to the car and picked up the microphone.

" Colin ? I've got to go ahead. What do you make of this ? There are tyre-marks on the road past this point."

" Tyre-marks ?"

" Perfectly distinct. Fresh. I can even recognise that it's a Dunlop tread."

" You're right—you will have to go on," Colin said after a pause. " But don't do anything damned silly, will you ?"

" I'll try not to. I hope Hugh was wrong about the location of the ogre's cave."

" So do I, in that case. Well—best of luck, anyway."

" Thanks."

He put back the microphone and closed the door of the car. Thoughtfully he matted his beard a little with his fingers, rumpled his hair, and set the helve of his axe on his shoulder. Then he began to walk circumspectly along the road.

As he had expected, it decayed rapidly to a mere track. It sloped slightly downwards, which fitted with his tentative estimate of the lie of the land—there was a fairly wide brook somewhere near here, and the general direction of the road suggested that the two must cross. There might be a bridge, but he doubted it ; more likely, there was just a ford.

And—yes, there it was. The ford. And in the very middle of it a baby-car stuck up to its axles in mud, with the driver's door open.

He lifted his axe from his shoulder and balanced it in both hands, his mouth setting in a grim line. There was a row of slippery stepping-stones paralleling the course which the road took across the brook. He went out along these after a thorough survey of the neighbourhood which revealed no sign of anybody, and stood in mid-stream studying the car.

No sign of violence, as far as he could tell. The driver must just have given up and gone to look for a telephone or a farmer with a tractor to haul the car out. He hoped devoutly that he had gone back the way he had come, rather than continuing ahead.

Then he noticed a dim gleam on the car's dashboard, and craned forward. The instrument lighting was on. So, when he took a closer look, were the headlights and rearlights. In the morning sun he hadn't detected their last faint glimmering when he approached. He reached inside and turned off the switch. That was disheartening. It implied that the car had stranded here in the dark, and the driver would have left the lights on to warn anyone else coming this way of the obstacle it made. In which case, not being able to see how badly the road ahead had deteriorated, he might have gone on instead of turning back.

There was no sign of footprints on the farther side of the ford, but the track was grassy there, so that meant nothing.

Frowning, he went on.

Like most of the area around here, his surroundings had a curiously constricted air. Although there was open sky above, he felt closed in. The hedges were high and untended ; when there was a gap, it revealed little more than a glimpse of a field beyond, with new season's grass growing among the stale dry stalks of its dead predecessors. Beyond the field there would inevitably be trees. They closed off any chance of a view beyond. It might have seemed accidental that there was no sense of distance or landscape. Miles knew better.

Consequently he kept himself alert for any hint of noise, and when he heard the distant shouting his first reaction was to poise his axe in his hands and cock his head to estimate its source.

Over there, on his left. Some distance off, as yet.

He hurried forward to one of the rare gaps in the hedge, and scrambled through, paying no attention to scratches. In the field he had entered an oak-tree stood by itself, and, dropping the helve of his axe through his belt, he swung himself up on one of its lower branches. From here he had a good view of the source of the shouting.

Not far away, a group of people in dirty ragged clothes, led by one finely-dressed young man on horseback, were clustered around a rocky outcrop on a steep slope. There was a cave in the base of the rock—big, dark and yawning—and close by a post had been set up. At this post most of the ragged people were busy doing something which their bodies concealed from him.

It was the young man on horseback who had begun the shouting, pointing up into the sky towards a dark, moving shape which grew moment by moment. The dragon, of course. Then . . .

Yes, he was right. The people busy about the post finished their work and took to their heels, and the young rider slapped his horse on the withers and broke into a canter ahead of them. As they departed, Miles saw clearly what the post was for.

If he had had another few seconds to think it out, he would probably have guessed even before he saw.

Stripped of all covering except an astonishing mantle of bright brown hair, there was a girl tied to the post, ready for the dragon's return.

two

Colin Graves tilted back his chair, crossed his legs, and tiredly ran his fingers through the curly black beard to which he was not yet used because it was so new before lighting a cigarette from the packet on the table beside the transmitter and the tape recorder.

Then he looked round at his companions and said, "Well?"

" We oughtn't to have let him go in alone," Myra Wilson said in a subdued tone. She was a round-faced girl whose glasses gave her an air of owlish silliness which she seemed rather to like.

" Hugh's been in alone," Colin said.

A little self-consciously, Hugh Baker shifted on his chair. He was sitting the wrong way round as he usually did, his big bare arms with their dusting of fair hair resting on the chair's back. He said, " True enough. But—hell, I'll be honest : if I'd known what I was in for, I wouldn't have been so eager."

Colin drew on his cigarette again and stared at the map on the wall—the inch-to-the-mile Ordnance Survey map with the curious errors which had started all the trouble. He said, " I think we're all crazy. Know that ?"

" Of course we're crazy," Myra said. " Give me one of your cigarettes, will you ? I've run out. Barry said he'd get me some, but he's being a hell of a long time."

" Probably run into some trouble," Hugh said. " He wasn't sure what he was looking for, remember. And the records may be incomplete."

Colin tossed the packet across to Myra before getting up and studying the curious map more closely. At last he took a red pencil from his pocket and drew a neat curve on the map —a curve beginning and ending at the junction of grid lines and not following them. He added a cross and a series of dots.

" He left the car about there," he said. He tapped the cross he had drawn. " So the road is good nearly as far as we estimated. According to what you found out, Hugh, the ogre's cave was on the edge of the area, right ?"

Hugh nodded. Ripples went through his full viking beard ; he had two years' start on the others. He said, " The far edge from where I went in. I'm sure that was what was meant."

" What do you make of those tyre-tracks ?" Myra said. " We weren't expecting that."

" I suppose people must have stumbled into the area occasionally," Colin frowned. " But not out again, presumably. Strangers who weren't going anywhere in particular—looking for a picnic site, or something like that."

" There can't have been many of them," Myra said. "This is not tourist country, even nowadays."

" We get in," Hugh said. " Without trouble."

" Ye-es." Colin tipped ash into the wastebasket alongside the radio table. " I'd give a lot to know the exact mechanics of this exclusion-principle. That's a fair amount of territory, you know. And there are quite a number of people in it. You'd think there'd be *some* contact."

" We've been over all this before," Myra said, thrusting back her hair from her forehead. " And we've got exactly nowhere. We need more data. And more people."

" That's what I meant when I said we were crazy," Colin answered. " Seven of us tackling a thing like this. This is a vast—fantastic !—enigma which needs better resources than a bunch of amateurs can bring to bear."

" We know," Hugh said. " Save your breath."

There was the noise of an engine outside ; Colin turned to the window. " That's the jeep," he said. " One gets you six he's forgotten something even after all this time. He's waving —go down and give him a hand with the stuff. I'd better stay here and listen in case Miles comes through."

The others nodded and went out, leaving the door—as usual—ajar. It couldn't be shut ; it was warped with long exposure to the wind and rain. Nobody had lived in this creaking, musty cottage in living memory, but it was quite habitable now that the roof had been patched and the weak spots in the floors made good with nailed-down boards. And it was the only possible choice for the job in hand.

At least it was better than being under canvas—marginally better. Colin thought of four miserable weeks he had spent watching Loch Ruin for its hypothetical monster, two years ago, and of the three weeks when it had rained during that time.

On the other hand, it was considerably more comfortable not to find what you were looking for. If they had actually tracked down the Loch Ruin monster, which was supposed

to have sunk several boats with a dozen people in, they could have done nothing with it.

Here they'd found much more than they'd bargained for.

" Tiger by the tail," Colin said under his breath, and turned the pages of his shorthand book to check that the impersonal words were really there : the statements Miles had made about the dragon.

Now Barry and the others were coming up from the hard-standing where the jeep was usually parked, laden with such necessities as canned foods, paraffin and cigarettes. They were talking excitedly as they entered.

" Barry thinks he found it," Hugh said as he shouldered back the door protesting on its rusty hinges. " Go on, Barry—tell him about it."

" I hope it's reassuring," Colin said dryly. He flicked ash off his cigarette. " Me, I'm getting a mite tense."

Barry unloaded his armful of goods on the table and started to sort them as he talked. He was a nervous, intense, small man ; he was already going bald although he was only in his mid-twenties, and his voice tended to peak occasionally in a childish falsetto when he was very excited. He was excited now.

" I went to the County Records Office," he said. " I had a long talk with the chief clerk, and I also saw the county surveyor for a short while. I know what the village is called, I think."

" Go on," Colin said, hooking his foot round the leg of his chair and swivelling it so he could sit with his back to the radio.

" I said we were staying in this cottage and were interested in knowing something about it," Barry said. " I made it clear this was just idle curiosity, of course. They were very obliging and helpful and gave me access to all the records they had—which are pretty inadequate, of course. But this cottage was built just about when I estimated it must have been, in 1836, and at that time it was in the parish of Didswater. By the way, it hasn't been occupied since 1914, apparently—later than we imagined."

Colin made a mental gloss on what Barry was saying. "Just about when *I* estimated "—that had turned out to be right. " Later than *we* imagined "—that turned out to be wrong.

He said nothing.

" Well, the parish of Didswater has vanished. It just isn't mentioned in any records they could show me later than 1845. That fits, doesn't it ?"

" Well enough," Colin said. " But where does it get us ?"

" What do you mean ?" Barry said, instantly on edge.

" Exactly what I say. Does knowing the name of the village tell us what we're up against ?"

" Will you let me finish, then ?" Barry said, flushing.

" There's more to it than that, I gather," Hugh said, transferring canned foods from a case he had carried up from the jeep and stacking them in rows on a wobbly shelf in the corner.

" Sorry," Colin said. " I'm a bit worried about Miles, that's all."

" Yes, Hugh and Myra told me." Barry took the chair Hugh had been sitting on and perched on its edge facing Colin. " What *may* get us somewhere—as you're pleased to put it—is this. The lord of the manor in 1845 was a certain Lord Davinside. Here's where it starts to fit together. You know I suggested there might be some Arthurian connections here ?"

" Ye - es."

Barry gave him a sharp look, but went on. " Well, it so happens that among the papers which Tennyson left when he died is a curiosity. It's called—" He paused impressively.

" The Davinside letter," Myra said into the pause. " Of course. That's fascinating, Barry, go on."

Undecided for a moment whether to be annoyed at having his revelation deflated or to be flattered at the compliment, Barry hesitated. Finally he shrugged and got to his feet.

" What's that ?" Hugh said. " This letter, I mean."

" An oddity. No one's ever been able to account for it." Barry spread his hands. " It's dated 1842—which was the year Tennyson published *Morte d'Arthur* and some other Arthurian poems—and it's a piece of apparently mock-medieval invective against him and his work. Why he kept it is anyone's guess, but it's usually believed that he hung on to it as something amusing to show his friends. And let me throw you one more fact which seems to me to tie in here. 1845 was the year they planned the route of the Metropolitan and Provincial Railway, and they wanted to take it across Lord Davinside's property, and they sent down two surveyors who trespassed on his land without his permission, and he personally hunted them off with a pack of hounds."

He gestured at the map pinned to the wall. " As you can see, the railway makes a big loop around the area. The detour must have cost thousands."

Hugh and Myra nodded thoughtfully. Colin stubbed his cigarette. He said, " That's very interesting. But it still gets us nowhere."

" What do you mean ?" Barry said slowly.

" I think we're behaving like idiots," Colin said. He got to his feet. " Let's face it ! This isn't any longer something we can treat as a sort of undergraduates' vacation project, like the Loch Ness survey and the Loch Ruin survey. You were right, Barry—there's a hole in the map here. There's a place where time seems to have gone backward instead of forward. There's a piece of the countryside where for generations no one seems to have ventured—the roads tail away into rutted tracks, the local farmers never seem to go that way when they're out shooting, and people tell stories about legendary beasts in the villages roundabout. Shamefacedly.

" Right—Hugh's been in, and seen it, talked with people who still use a dialect that vanished from the rest of England centuries back. He's seen a castle, and heard about an ogre, and now today Miles has called up to report a dragon. We know enough to know that we don't know enough. If I'd had any sense I'd have advised Miles to turn back before he saw the tyre-tracks which persuaded him he had to go on. We're meddling with something unbelievably big."

" Unbelievable is the word," Barry said. " Who, *pray*, do you want me to hand this over to ? Are you going to call a policeman ? Or the army ? They'll laugh at us. We agreed that we were going to work at this for months if necessary, piling up incontrovertible data. And we can do it—if you don't betray the confidence I placed in you when I asked you to help with it."

" Barry's right," Myra said. " This mustn't end up in the sillier newspapers as a scare story. It's too serious for that."

" Yes," Colin said. " I only wish we'd started to take it seriously before. If we had, we wouldn't have let Miles go in by himself. I wish to God he'd come back !"

* * *

two

For an eternal moment after he saw clearly what they had been doing over there at the post by the mouth of the cave, Miles felt the universe around him shudder and grind into a new alignment. He recovered from it to find himself shaking and sweating all over, with the echo of a soundless question dying in his mind.

What the hell am I doing here ?

Up till this very instant, when he found himself on the limb of an isolated oak, the weight of a woodsman's axe dragging at his belt, his body crudely wrapped in garments carefully tattered to pass muster among the people he might encounter, he had been acting with a sort of bravado, not engaged in what he was doing, but merely going through the motions.

Even the sight of the dragon, which he had taken so calmly, was little more than a pin-prick of reality on his sceptically armoured mind. The facts involving him were only as real as the words in which they were presented to him. There was going to be a weighable, measurable explanation, and in the certain knowledge of its eventual arrival he did not need to worry about the evident impossibility of what was happening.

But now— !

God damn it, he thought, *those were real people down there* !

He strained his eyes after the fleeing rabble, but already the rider who led them was out of sight and only the slowest of the others was not yet gone among the trees and bushes the other side of the rocky outcrop. And, of course, the girl lashed to the pole before the cave.

Whatever peculiar corner of legend this was dragged back from, the purpose was clear. This was the ancient practice of maiden-sacrifice ; that black, awkward, limping-cross shape in the sky was a dragon—and this, *here*, *now*, was Miles Croton.

Here. Now. He had never thought that such simple little words could hold such an oozing weight of terror.

To stay and watch and try to persuade himself that dragons were creatures of myth was unthinkable—or rather, it was thinkable, for he considered the idea, but in the same instant as it came to him he discarded it and labelled it unactable upon.

The jolt with which his heels met the ground was another jar of reality upon insulated optimism ; his crude, fancy-dress buskins reported the presence of flints faithfully to the soles of his feet as he started away from the oak where he had been watching. Breaking into a mindless run he fumbled the helve of his axe up past his belt, and cast a frightened glance at the dragon before plunging through a gap in yet another skin-rasping hedgerow and coming in plain sight of the cave.

The bound girl stared and screamed. As though all his awareness had been filed to a keen point, and had etched every detail microscopically sharp in the world about him, he saw the line of her throat tauten just before he heard the sound, and would have spared precious breath to shout back at her but that he realised he would probably not be understood. And to charge towards her, axe raised, was an act terrifying enough without adding an incomprehensible yell.

The space separating him from her seemed to grow as he covered it on pounding feet, yet at last it was done and she was through with screaming, her face pale and vacant, her eyes fixed on him like a rabbit's on a snake. She was bound with crude thongs of hide passed round her neck, her waist and her ankles ; perhaps—had not the dragon threatened to stoop early to its cave—her captors would have been merciful enough to draw the uppermost one tight before leaving her there, so strangling her, as the executioner was said to have piled wet wood on the fire of a repentant heretic burning at the stake, so that the smoke choked before the fire roasted.

He gave another wild glance upwards to see the dragon looming enormous now, and swung the axe against the pole—once, twice, three times, and the thongs were severed and white chips showed on the dark wood.

The girl cried out and would have fallen, but he changed hands on the axe-helve and caught her wrist, praying that she would not faint ; she found her balance, and enough presence of mind to realise that she had been set free, not attacked again. The only thing it occurred to him to do was to return the way he had come. He pointed with the axe, shouting something fierce and empty, and dragged her forward.

Halfway across the open field they were suddenly shadowed, and a vast hissing noise like the escape of steam from a boiler deafened them for a second. That past, there was a heavy thud which shook the ground ; the girl cried out again, and

Miles stumbled turning to look behind him and thinking that his axe against that dragon was a straw in his hands.

But the beast had settled at the mouth of its cave, and the carcass of a scrawny ox engaged its attention; it wasted only a second or two on snuffing at the wooden post and the ground about it before sinking its fanged jaws into the animal and beginning to feed. Incontinently Miles dragged the girl forward again, thrusting her through the hedge whose thorns marked her pale gold skin with red claw-marks.

At the foot of the oak which he had jumped down from only minutes before he paused to take his bearings, and she collapsed to the ground, panting and weeping. He spoke briefly to her in the laboriously-learned accent he had practised with Barry and Colin in what now seemed to be another world than this, but she looked at him vacantly and went on gulping air. Clearly he had not learned his lesson well.

He let his eyes linger on her for another moment—she was beautiful he saw now, from her wave of waist-long hair and large, soft-lipped mouth to her small feet, mud-stained and cut about one heel by a flint, so that she limped. Then he stared at the enclosing, constricting thorn-hedges which limited his field of view, trying to decide which gap had brought him from the track at whose beginning he had left his car.

That one, surely. Yes—but the brook must lie in a hollow, and beyond that gap the ground could be seen to rise. A hint of new fear began in his mind.

But before it could take form, the girl had raised her head and spoken piteously to him, fighting the words past her lips as her need to gasp for air allowed her.

" Where is this place ?" she forced out. " Who are you ? What happened to me ?"

Hardly believing his ears, he stared at her. Then he saw that her skin was clean except where mud had splashed up on her legs, and that it was all of a pale golden shade, all of it, and probably she was about twenty years old and it occurred to him that she was almost as tall as himself, and her flat, muscular belly and her firm small bosom were—the word was *modern.* Once again things that had been mere wordplay turned in his mind and became real and relevant.

But before he could speak, she had raised a shaking arm and pointed at his chest. She said, "A—a camera, for God's sake ! What are you *playing* at ?"

He looked down in astonishment. Of all things to have forgotten ! It must have been catching sight of the tyre-tracks which drove the camera out of his mind, and since then, even when it was bumping against his chest while he ran, he must subconsciously have ignored the information on the grounds that his whole get-up was unfamiliar to him.

A camera ; his matted hair and beard, his axe, his belted smock and his tattered homespun breeches, and his rough, handmade buskins—he must be an appalling sight, Miles thought. He dropped on one knee beside her.

" You're the driver of the car that got stranded in the ford," he said.

" Am I ?" she said. " Oh, my God ! Am I ? I don't know who I am or what's happened to me, except that I'm sure I must be out of my mind." She put both hands to her temples and swayed where she sat.

" No, you aren't crazy," Miles said in an urgent voice. " I can't explain it all now, but I can get you out of here—I have a car about a mile up the road. Here !" He began to pull off his smock. " Put this on ! You'd better have these boots, too."

She pressed her hands over her eyes and seemed to calm herself by sheer will-power. " No, I can walk," she said. " I'm used to going without shoes. I just cut my heel on a sharp stone, that's all. It's nothing much."

She took the smock curiously and pulled it over her head, dragging her hair in huge handfuls through the gaping neck-opening and pouring it down her back like a gleaming brown river. Then she tried to get to her feet. He steadied her with one hand, the other still clinging to the axe.

" Who are you ?" she said.

" I'm Miles Croton. Are you sure you can walk all right ?"

She nodded. " Which way ?"

" Over there," Miles said, pointing, and refraining from adding that he was not absolutely sure. " That gap in the hedge."

She set her teeth and started to walk, favouring her cut heel. Alert for any sound of danger, he followed her at a few paces' distance, axe held in both hands. Everything was quiet again. A bird was chirping somewhere, acid-sweet in the hedgerow. He had hoped to catch the sound of the brook, which would lead them back to the ford and a definite land-

mark, but he could not hear it. Damn the ill-luck which had compelled him to rush away from the track without a chance to mark his trail properly ! And damn his city-bred carelessness, too !

He thought of stories about greenhorns in the African bush, who contrived to lose themselves within a hundred yards of camp. He was beginning to understand how this was possible.

Still, that was certainly the oak he had climbed. If the worst came to the worst, they could try every gap in the hedges surrounding this field, and one of them would give on to the track. And he could follow his own footprints back to the ford, perhaps.

As the girl was coming up to the gap in the hedge, he called on her to wait and let him go ahead. He had the intention of merely glancing through to check that the track lay beyond. Instead, the instant after he had peered past the thick-growing thorns, he darted back, his heart pounding.

" Quick !" he said, and caught her arm. " Over to the tree!"

" What— ?"

" Quick !" he whispered, and dragged her after him. " Get behind it—no, better, get up in it and hide among the branches if we can !"

Again she tried to ask why, but she read his face this time and changed her mind. One-handed he hoisted her up on the lowermost branch which he had used before, and followed her with the agility of panic. Then he swung round and stared at the gap in the hedge, so innocent-seeming, and so deadly.

" What did you see ?" she whispered—it seemed natural to whisper, though they were alone in the middle of the field.

" Get in close to the trunk," Miles answered in the same low tone. " Maybe he'll miss us."

" One of the madmen who tied me up ?" she suggested, obeying with a shiver of fear.

" Worse," Miles said. " I heard there was an ogre in this area somewhere—I damned nearly walked into him. My—God !"

He thrust her around the bole of the tree, feet insecure on unlevel branches, and tried to press close to the bark himself. Fascinated, he stared at the apparition coming into the field.

He heard the girl stifle a cry ; glancing aside, he saw she was biting the back of her hand to control herself. He gave her an unconvincing smile of encouragement.

Yes, that must be the ogre Hugh had heard rumours about on his venture into the other side of the area. Like a tree ! Eight feet high—nine perhaps, naked with a horrible animal nakedness, its . . . *his* skin showing dirty pinkish-grey through a matting of hair like that on the back of a wild pig except on the head, the belly and the legs, which were thickly covered with a darker, closer-set growth. His wide nostrils snorted over a loose mouth full of ugly yellow pegs of teeth ; on one shoulder rested a club made of a whole branch broken from a young tree, gnawed short enough to wield at the point where it grew thin. If a gorilla weighed five hundred and fifty pounds at full growth, Miles thought, this thing-man must weigh eight hundred. You expected the earth to quake at every footfall.

He thought of the gun he had left in the car. It was no use to bring a gun, they had decided. Beyond a certain point in this area, a car's engine ceased to fire, a camera ceased to take pictures, radio communication failed—and so, they had worked out, a gun would probably refuse to fire. They had settled on the axe as the best compromise ; a sword required skill.

Then, though, it was an intellectual game, word-chopping. Now . . .

The ogre paused. He snuffed the air. His monstrous head turned towards the tree. After a moment, he started to walk forward.

Wild thoughts chased through Miles's mind ; it wasn't true, he would have to wield the axe one-handed so as to keep his grip on his precarious perch, it was too heavy to swing with one hand, anyway could he get enough force behind the blow to kill and what would he be killing—a man, or a beast ? Out there, somewhere, behind the cunningly plotted screen of hedge and copse and hill, was a world without ogres or dragons with tidy civilised towns and the rule of scientific law. If thinking could have taken him back, he would have gone in that moment.

Ponderous, monstrous, intensely horrible, the ogre tramped forward on vast splay feet, the dull animal eyes under the receding brow sorting out Miles from the sparse-leaved tree-branches and assessing him as prey.

Miles snatched his gaze away from the ogre for one instant, to glance at the girl pressed close to the tree-trunk, her face

milk-white with shock and disbelief. He had nothing to guide him in what he should do. This kind of thing should have happened to Hugh Baker, he thought—not to Miles Croton. Hugh, with his powerful build and quick, aggressive responses would even revel in such a challenge as this. But for himself, he was city-bred, living in his brain rather than his body. This was nightmare to him.

But *something* had to be done. Leisurely, the ogre was approaching. He sought for a foothold secure enough to give him room for the axe to swing, raised it, kept it poised where he could bring it crashing down. Sweat crawled into his aching eyes.

The movement of lifting the axe had not gone unnoticed. The ogre—though hardly seeming intelligent on a human scale—had some cunning of his own, and walked a little sideways, staring up from out of axe-sweep range. He caressed the helve of his tree-branch club, muttering a crooning chant of anticipation that raised the hairs prickling on the back of Miles's neck.

Then, though, impatience got the better of him. Instead of trying perhaps to go around the tree, or leaping up to snatch at the end of the branch on which Miles was balancing himself, in which case his tremendous weight would have bowed it and even perhaps torn it away from the trunk, he started forward with his club still on his shoulder, one hand lifted to clutch Miles's feet.

The girl screamed. Possibly the ogre had not noticed that there were two people in the tree ; at any rate, his attention was distracted for one precious moment. Miles swung the axe.

His aim was bad. Instead of the keen-edged blade meeting the upraised arm, it overshot, and only the wooden helve made contact. Still, he had put all his force into the downward drive, and the ogre yelped with pain, leaping back and putting his hurt wrist to his slobber-lipped mouth. Miles lost his balance with the wild-swinging weight of the axe ; he thought for a heart-stopping second that he was going to fall to the ground, but flailing his arms brought him back to stability, the axe-head serving as a prop against the wide flat upper surface of the branch on which he stood.

The ogre's dismay gave way almost at once to savage rage. He gave a hoot of ear-splitting violence ; dropping his hurt arm to his side, he raised his club in the other and strode

forward to break Miles's legs with it. That was his clear intention, at least. The first blow Miles dodged, and then the second, but only at the cost of losing his footing and landing astraddle of the branch with painful suddenness. The jar blinded him with tears, beyond which the stinking, shrieking shape of his adversary was only a wavery outline.

He cried out with alarm and swung the axe randomly, and at the limit of its sweep there was a sudden soft resistance, a biting-in sensation, a howl of mortal agony. The helve was torn from his grip and he tumbled forward to the ground.

Again the girl cried out. Miles dashed the tears from his eyes and rose to an unskilful parody of a wrestling crouch, not knowing whether he was going to die but expecting to with a remote part of his mind.

Slowly his vision cleared. A few paces away on the soft spring grass the ogre was lying in a puddle of spreading gore ; the axe, smeared with blood from blade to helve-tip, was beside him. Whimpering, his expression as pathetic as that of any animal in pain, the ogre was trying to staunch the river of blood pouring from a great gash which started at his shoulder and bit deep into the swelling muscles of his chest.

As Miles got slowly to his feet, the ogre groaned. With one hand—the hand on the side opposite the wound—he picked up the other, staring at it stupidly as though it did not belong to him any more. Clearly the lucky stroke had severed the shoulder muscles so badly that that arm hung useless.

Sick, Miles knew what he had to do. He moved cautiously to seize the axe. Trying not to notice that his hands were slippery with the blood all over them, he raised it and walked forward.

It was curiously like chopping at half-rotted wood.

Eyes wide, moving unsteadily, the girl came down to stand beside him and look at the corpse.

" What—was it ?" she said. " Some sort of—ape ? Escaped from somewhere ?"

Miles shook his head. Turning aside, he looked for a tussock of clean grass and wiped his hands on it as best he could, and then tore up clumps from further afield to wipe the axe.

He said, " No. It was an ogre. Not escaped, but—hell, I can't explain just one thing about what goes on. I'd have to explain everything."

The girl said nothing for a moment. Then she went on in a subdued tone. " I thought it was going to—but it didn't. How did you manage to keep your head ? Or are you used to this kind of thing ?"

There was a sharp note of false sarcasm on the last words ; Miles looked up at her, and could read the struggle going on between hysteria and calmness, as it showed on her face.

" Let's move," he said abruptly, rising and taking her hand. " Let's get to hell away from here."

Like scuttering rabbits making for safety in their burrows, they fled across the field to a gap in the enclosing hedge. This time some subconscious clue must have guided him, Miles thought, for when he clambered through between the grasping thorns he found he had arrived where he had hoped —on the track which he had followed from the outside world.

Determinedly they stumbled along, the girl favouring her cut heel and picking soft places to tread, he warily glancing about him and ready at any moment to unshoulder the axe which had now saved their lives. It seemed incredibly peaceful here—sunshine, birdsong, hesitant spring foliage and even flowers marking their way.

Yet behind any hedge, any tree, death might lurk. Or something worse.

At last he heard the dim splashing of water. The ford must lie just ahead. He caught his companion's attention and gave her a skull-like grin ; it felt skull-like.

" We're coming to the place where your car got stuck," he said. " It isn't far now."

" Thank God," the girl said.

They hurried their pace without noticing. It was the keen anticipation of coming in sight of the ford and the car which was their undoing, Miles knew afterwards. He allowed his alertness to diminish. When the ambushers leapt on them from an overhanging tree, a few yards before they rounded the last bend in the road before seeing the ford, he had no chance to do anything but utter a muffled cry.

Then a brawny arm was around his throat and he was fainting.

* * *

three

Day-long, the tension in the cottage mounted. They waited at the radio, staring at it sometimes as if they would will it to crackle to life with a call from Miles. They smoked unceasingly till their throats were harsh and their mouths sour. A dozen times they called Isaac and Enid at the other base, on the far side of the frightening blank area, knowing that the act was ridiculous—Miles had had no intention of trying to make his way right across, but only to venture a mile or two inside and then return to his car.

Later on in the afternoon, Myra got a scratch meal together and passed round mugs of strong instant coffee, sickly-thick with condensed milk and much sugar. The distraction was welcome. It was at least a quarter-hour before Hugh stirred and said what had already been said twenty times since the morning in the same weary tone of voice by all of them.

" What in hell can have *happened* to him ?"

Colin lit another cigarette ; after the first puff he rubbed it out on the tiled floor. He said, " The dragon could have eaten him."

Myra paused in measuring out another cup of coffee and stared at him. " Colin ! You're not serious !"

" Why the hell not ?" Colin said angrily, rising to his feet. " God alone knows what goes on inside that area. If a dragon can be real enough to be visible, it can be real enough to eat somebody. Or the ogre which Hugh heard about could have beaten his head in for him. Or he could have met someone who thought he was a devil. His car could have been seen by someone—"

" Nonsense," Barry said with asperity. He was that much less perturbed than his companions. He seemed to be totally armoured against worrying about Miles as though his discovery of the morning about the possible origin of this phenomenon had constituted a complete day's work for him and he had no mental effort left over for anything else.

" Why nonsense ?" Colin said. " Go on—tell us !"

Barry flushed. He said, " He left his car on a stretch of metalled road—or so you told me, anyway ! That means he was well away from the village."

" Seven miles," Colin nodded. " And yet he'd just seen a dragon."

He bent forward, bringing his head close to Barry's face. " Now you figure this," he said. " Suppose that—whoever's responsible for the phenomenon—suppose he learned from our earlier intrusions into the area that someone was coming after him. Suppose he's decided to push outwards, how about that ? Can you think of any reason why he shouldn't ?"

" Of course I can," Barry said scornfully. " Why should he bite off more than he can chew ? If there *is* in fact any person responsible."

" So it's an accident of nature now," Colin said.

" Will you two stop *wrangling* !" Myra said violently. " It's not getting us anywhere."

" Right," Colin nodded, and moved back to his chair.

Hugh shifted uneasily on his own seat. He said, " If he's not back by nightfall, we'll have to go after him, you know."

Barry swung round to look at him. " Are you crazy ?" he exclaimed, his voice peaking on its inevitable crest of falsetto. " Go in there at night ?"

The others looked at him. He grew aware of their stares, and froze for a moment ; then moved, jerkily, like a puppet on ill-controlled strings.

" What else ?" Hugh said at last. " Leave him ? Abandon him ?"

" I think Barry would do that," Myra said. She sounded surprised, as if the possibility was brand-new to her.

" Damn you," Barry said huskily. " That's a foul thing to say."

" Then why do you think we shouldn't go looking for Miles ?" Colin said.

" I— " Barry checked himself and swallowed. Sweat stood out on his face. He started again. " I think it would be stupid to go looking over strange country after dark. Either we wait till morning, or we'd better go right away."

" We go right away, then," Colin said, getting up.

" Agreed," Hugh said, copying him. " We'll leave Myra here by the radio, in case. Colin, we'd better both go—and Barry drive. We might need a getaway man."

Barry didn't move. His face was pale. He said, " I think it would be better—"

" Not to go," Hugh cut in sarcastically. " So do I. But so long as Miles might be in danger, we're going, understood ? You got us into this, remember ?"

" Now look here !" Barry flared.

Myra cut him short. She said, " It's getting late. Don't waste time arguing !" Shouldering past Barry to get to the radio, she added, " I'll tell Isaac what we're doing right away."

" Come on," Hugh said to Barry, jerking his head at the door. After a moment, trembling a little, Barry stood up and went out in company with him.

Waiting while Myra got through on the radio and told Isaac, Colin watched the jeep from the window. There seemed to be some sort of trouble, apparently, for after only a few moments Hugh came striding to the cottage and flung back the door.

" The damned thing won't start !" he said. " Has Barry been out of sight of any of us so he could— ?"

" Stop it !" Colin said. " No, he hasn't. Calm down. If it won't start, that's because—"

" Colin !" Myra said from behind him. " Something's happened to the radio. I can't even get the carrier hum."

" Are you sure ?" Colin said, turning to her.

" Absolutely. Damn it, you heard Isaac yourself only a minute ago !" She raised a pale face to him.

He fiddled quickly with the dials. It was true enough. The set was completely dead ; the speaker sounded as though it had been stuffed with cottonwool.

" What's wrong ?" Hugh said, looking from one to the other of them.

Colin delayed his answer for a moment, staring out of the window at the jeep. Barry boasted some mechanical knowledge ; he had the bonnet open and was peering inside.

He said, " Hugh, when you tried the jeep—was it just that it wouldn't fire, or was the starter out of order too ?"

" Everything. Like a flat battery," Hugh said. " Not even the ignition light worked."

" Well, there's one reason," Colin said. " We picked this cottage because it was the closest habitable place near the edge of the blank area. At a guess, it's now the closest inside the blank area. We've been found out, and he—whatever he is —has moved against us."

He looked at the ground outside. The shadows were growing long already.

" Miles ! Miles, it's me, Vivien ! Wake up ! Oh, in heaven's name why don't you *wake up* ?"

The urgent, frightened whisper came to his ear from very close, on a hiss of warm breath and underlined with a touch from a tress of soft hair which was pleasant on his cheek—so much better than the prickly coarse straw which was under him, like a yogi's bed.

He came awake then, all of a piece, the diffuse discomfort localising into a sore throat and badly bruised ribs as well as the hardness of the ground and the roughness of the straw. The air was full of a sweetish, heavy smell. He fumbled after it for a moment and then placed it. They must be in a cow-byre. And indeed, a moment later, he heard a champing noise from somewhere nearby, and after that a slopping, spreading sound.

He tried to sit up, and the pain from his bruised ribs made him wince. He bit back most of his grunt of complaint, but enough escaped for Vivien to move quickly sideways on her knees beside him and put her arm behind his shoulders to steady him.

"Are you all right?" she said softly.

"I—think so," Miles said. And added, inanely, "You didn't tell me your name was Vivien."

"Vivien Hill," she said.

He pulled up his knees and folded his arms around them, staring into enveloping darkness. On all sides of them were black walls, chinked with wan strips of silver where—yes, it must be moonlight leaking through. Barely enough reached them to see each other's outlines dimly in the murk. One strip was longer than the rest, and vertical. An ill-fastened door, Miles reasoned. But ill-fastened only comparatively. They would be securely enough penned, and well guarded into the bargain.

"You can't see anything," Vivien said. "I've looked out of all the holes I can reach. There's just night, and stars, and half a moon, and you can see a few black trees and a building with no lights showing, twenty yards away. And there are noises from the other side of the wall behind you."

"Cows," Miles said. "You can hear them chewing the cud." He put his hand out to touch the nearest wall, and his fingers reported the rough surface of unplaned, crudely-split planks, some of them with the bark still on. He felt further, and a thick upright post with something hanging down from it—a hide thong, or a rope worn smooth—met his inquiring hand.

" This could be the bull-stall," he said. " In which case, it's substantial." He hoped he sounded reassuringly matter-of-fact ; actually, he had never lived on a farm, and knew nothing about farming practice of the twentieth century, let alone those of the quasi-archaic world they found themselves trapped in.

Beside him, Vivien stirred. She put her hands up to press her temples. In a faraway voice she said, " Very interesting. I'm in a bull-stall. It stinks and it's cold and there's nothing but horrible scratchy straw and this—this *thing* I'm wearing is a piece of rag and everybody seems to be an escaped lunatic up to and including *me* !"

Alarmed, Miles turned to her. She went on, " What I want to know is just this—quite simply this. I'm in a bull-stall—fine, wonderful ! *Why* am I in a bull-stall ? Why did they set on me when I came away from the car ? Why did they strip me and tie me to that post ? What goes on—? Oh, for the love of God will you tell me *what goes on* ?"

She clutched at him with sudden wildness, and her eyes caught a gleam of light from a chink in the wall and showed large and frightened, inches from Miles's face.

All he could think of to say was what came to his mind on picturing what she must have been through. He said, " You're tough, aren't you ? Anyone else would probably have broken down by this time."

" I'm going to," she said raggedly. " Any moment now."

He drew her close to him, putting his arm round her to comfort her ; closeness brought with it after a few minutes some welcome warmth also, for the night was cool. He said, " I'll try and explain. It's complicated, but—well, let me start like this. Where were you going ? What were you doing by yourself on the road out there ?"

She passed one hand across her forehead tiredly. She said, " I—I used to come up this way sometimes, two or three years ago. With a friend of mine who lived near here. There was a place we used to go with a stream and lots of trees and you could swim and lie in the sun. I've been in towns all the winter and I wanted to get out in the country for a weekend, that was all. So I drove to the place I knew, and there were people camping there, so I went looking for somewhere

where there wasn't anybody. It was late. I chose a road which looked as if it didn't lead anywhere."

"And you got stuck in the mud at the ford," Miles said.

"That's right. I hadn't passed any houses for miles, so I thought of going on, but I found the road was bad—so I spent the night in the car, and when it was getting dawn I saw somebody coming, I thought, and went to talk to him, and I couldn't understand him, and he called some other people —I don't know where from—and they tied me up and put me on a horse and took me to a horrible squalid village with more of these mad people—"

Her voice was beginning to waver towards tears. He cut her words short. "All right," he said. "Now I'll tell you how I got into this—not just me, but a bunch of us. Seven of us. The others are still outside, and tomorrow they'll come looking for us and they'll get us away."

He hoped he sounded confident; he wasn't convincing himself.

"Anyway," he hurried on, "what happened was this. We were all at university together, and some of us were involved with the Loch Ruin project—did you hear about that?"

"I—think so," she said. "You went to look for the monster that was supposed to be bigger than the one in Loch Ness."

"That's right. Not me, actually, but some of the others. Well, there was this man Barry Higlett who was involved. Nobody likes him very much, but he was very persuasive, and he had a peculiar discovery he'd made about a map of this area. He'd been out here—he's made a hobby, you see, of looking into strange rumours like the Loch Ruin monster—and he showed his data to some of us. You remember, the papers made a laughing-stock of the Loch Ruin expedition, and some people involved got disgusted, and they refused to have anything more to do with Barry. But this time it did look as if he'd got hold of something. He showed us his maps, and some old records he'd turned up, and in the end half a dozen of us couldn't resist the temptation to investigate. But because of what happened to the Loch Ruin project, we made it a strict rule that we'd lie to the papers and to anybody outside the group who got curious.

"Some of us came down here during last Christmas vac. We made some inquiries. We talked to people who'd spent

all their lives in this district. And we found that there was a kind of—blank area, that's what we called it, for want of anything better. There are roads which nobody seems to have bothered to use since before the last war. Some of them, in fact, don't seem to have been used since the last century. You were driving along one of them. There are fields where local people just don't go, even though they are wild now, and form a source of weed-seeds that give them trouble with their own crops. There are woods where the local children just don't go when they're out gathering mushrooms or picking blackberries. And to cap everything else, there are errors on the Ordnance Survey map of the area. A roughly circular area of about a hundred and twenty square miles is *not* as it's shown on the map."

She was breathing with a sort of agitated haste ; the sound made an uneven accompaniment to his explanation.

" We only had time to make preliminary inquiries on our first expedition," he went on. " We did decide to try and follow one of the roads which we calculated entered the blank area, but the car broke down, and we were so sick by the time we'd pushed it a mile back along the road—only to find it was running perfectly again—we gave up and postponed that part."

" My engine failed," Vivien said. " In the middle of the ford. It just went dead."

" We found out why later," Miles said, nodding forgetful of the darkness. " For some reason, inside the blank area nothing seems to have changed for—well, for centuries, going by the appearance of the country and the people. During our winter trip, we worked all round the northern fringe of the area ; it wasn't till a few weeks ago that we started down here. We've rented a cottage which is only a short distance from the edge of the area, and we've got a pretty elaborate set-up—we have radio communication in my car with the cottage and with our other base, which is under canvas on the north side. That's for fixing position, of course—you need two lines to fix a position.

" Directly after we came up this time, we started venturing into the blank area. We've been taking it slowly, because of what happens. Cars' engines won't run past a certain point, as you know. Cameras stop working. I had a rifle in my car, but it probably wouldn't have worked if I'd brought it

with me. Hugh—that's one of my friends, Hugh Baker—went right into the area on his own about ten days ago, and met some of the people living here. He's studied Old English, fortunately, and he'd dressed himself up like—well, like a peasant—and he managed to find out a great deal in a short time. But he said he wouldn't do it again by himself. I don't know what made me decide to copy him. I must have been crazy. Because, you see, he was told about an ogre living on the other side—and we saw an ogre, and a dragon."

He heard her teeth chatter briefly, probably more from fear than from cold. She said, " But this is—it's ridiculous !"

" Ridiculous or not, it seems to be real," Miles said soberly. " It's not just that time has stood still here, as we imagined at first—though that would be hard enough to account for. It's more that some—I don't know what to call it—some other plane of existence, perhaps, crops through here into the real world. A plane where the giants and dragons of legend are somehow given substance and actuality, and where the force of progress is turned aside by an invisible barrier, just as the local people are turned aside from using those roads or walking through those woods by some unconscious reluctance to break what has the compelling effect of habit."

" I—" she began, and broke off, her hand finding his shoulder and closing on it convulsively. " Look !" she exclaimed, and moved against him.

He saw what had attracted her attention in the same moment. Through the clinks in the rough wooden wall they could see a moving yellow flame—a torch burning. And now there were sounds outside : horses' hooves, the jingling of harness, the murmur of low voices, and finally the tramping of feet.

They rose to their feet without saying anything. The door of their prison was unbarred with a scraping of wood on wood, and thrown back, revealing four brawny men with raised clubs and another man between them, wearing a cloak that showed rich red in the fitful torchlight. Miles recognised him for the young rider who had supervised the tying of Vivien to the stake.

" Come out !" he said in the harsh, antique dialect which Miles had learned to understand from Hugh's sketchy instruction. " By the rood I adjure you to come out !"

There was nothing to do but to obey.

* * *

Barry raised his head from the engine of the jeep as the others came down towards him from the cottage.

" Very funny !" he said in a shrill voice. " Very clever ! I congratulate whoever thought of the joke !"

" There's no joke," Colin said. " The radio's out, too."

" No," Barry said. His eyes switched from face to face, like a trapped animal's. " No," he said again. " It's a joke. It's gone too far."

" Everything's gone too far," Colin said. " And it isn't a joke." He wiped his face with the back of his hand.

" We'll have to go after Miles anyway. On foot, since we have to," Hugh said. " Take axes with us, perhaps. And something to make fire, and some food."

" What ?" Barry said. " What ?"

Myra shrugged. She looked down at her feet. " He's right," she said without enthusiasm.

Barry seemed to gather himself together. His fingers curled over into his palms. He took a pace away from the useless vehicle, coming to where he could face both Hugh and Colin.

He said, " Let me get this straight. What you're saying is that somehow the blank area has got bigger."

" Exactly," Colin grunted. " We're inside it."

" And it's true about the radio ?" Barry shot at Myra.

" Go try it for yourself, damn you," she snapped.

" Well, then !" Barry said. He drew a handkerchief from his pocket and started to wipe his hands clean of the grease from his fiddling with the jeep engine. " Well, then ! Let's get out of it ! I'm going to ! We want to stay outside it—keep the base going. You must be raving, all of you, talking about going after Miles on foot. You're—"

Colin looked significantly at Hugh, whose expression was of mingled dismay and anger. Hugh shrugged and nodded, and moved towards Barry.

Doing the same, Colin said, " Let's set you right, here and now. I'm tired of the way you're behaving, Barry. We all are. You got us into this—oh, we came with our eyes open, all right, but you didn't. You seem to have been expecting this to be another Loch Ruin episode : a quiet amusing holiday with a gimmick. It's turned out to be a deadly business with real mysteries and real dangers. We bargained for that because you were so persuasive ; now things have turned out this way, we're prepared to act accordingly. We're telling you to do the same, is that understood ? This isn't a game

with paper and words ; this isn't a tricky little hobby to employ your mind when you find yourself at a loose end. This is serious, and it's got to be treated that way."

" We've got to help Miles," Myra said. " If we still can."

" Will you stop blaming me !" Barry said. He put his handkerchief away ; he had to try twice before he got it all back in the pocket. " Did I order Miles to stick his neck out ? Did I ?"

" This isn't a game any longer," Colin said. " Stop playing with words, I tell you ! Let's get back up to the cottage and put some suitable clothes on. Hugh, get out the axes, will you ? Myra, make up some packets of provisions. Matches'll probably go on working in the dead area—friction is basic. We'll take plenty of those. Come on."

He started up towards the cottage. The others followed his example, including Barry, who hesitated only a moment ; then the prospect of being left to himself in the midst of impossible dangers overcame his reluctance, and he hurried after them.

At what point had play-acting shaded over into reality ? The question haunted Colin's mind. What they were doing still had the outward appearance of acting ; until some very recent time, it hadn't been appearance only. True, they had actual physical facts to conjure with—but they had conjured, treated them like a chess-problem or like the paper " facts " in a thriller, which hold clues to a murderer who will never be hanged.

Weird, to walk into dusk across peaceful countryside, paralleling the road which Miles had driven down, and to think of dragons ; to wear fancy-dress costumes of rags and tatters and try to bludgeon the mind into accepting the knowledge that Miles had spoken of a dragon as Hugh had spoken of an ogre, as a man might speak of seeing a bus and a policeman.

Dusk was gathering. It was unbelievably peaceful—if you could think of it that way. They could not. They thought of lurking menace in the twilight.

Over on his left Barry kept snicking the bolt-action of the other rifle ; they had only seven rounds for this one, although they had more for the gun which had been—perhaps still was—in Miles's car. The noise was maddening and loud in the stillness. It was getting on Colin's nerves ; he was grateful

when Hugh's patience wore down first and he rounded on Barry.

" For pity's sake will you stop doing that ?" he growled. " If we want to advertise our arrival we can hire a brass band !"

" Lord knows why he brought it," Myra said morosely. " It probably won't work. Hell of a lot of confidence he has in his own ideas, hasn't he ?"

" Shut up, Myra," Colin cut in before Barry could utter his boiling retort. " And you too, Barry—and walk quietly, Hugh ; your feet are like elephants'."

There was an interval of silence. The road began to decay. Colin was just thinking that Miles's car must be somewhere at hand when he caught sight of it standing on the side of the road around the next bend.

There was no sign of struggle, fortunately, or even of the car having been interfered with, but it was completely immobilised by the same strange blanketing force which had put the jeep out of action. They could do nothing about it ; they just left it where it was. With some glee Barry exchanged his gun for the one under the car's passenger seat, and filled his pockets with spare rounds of ammunition.

" Why are you going to so much trouble ?" Myra said.

" Because—" Barry began, and broke off. Hugh stepped between them with a weary sigh.

" Let's settle this once and for all," he said. He took the gun from Barry's grasp and set it to his shoulder, the muzzle raised in the general direction of the rising moon. He fired.

Nothing happened, except the click of the firing-pin going forward on its spring. He ejected that round and tried a second, with the same result. He lowered the gun, emptying it with practised movements, and put it back in the car.

Then he turned sarcastically to Barry. " May we persuade you to try an axe instead ?" he said.

" Don't," Myra said. " That frightens me."

" *Shut up* !" Colin yelled. " Stop riding Barry, for Christ's own sake ! See if you can spot these wheeltracks Miles reported. Do something constructive for a change !"

With a scowl at the others, Barry obeyed, and discovered them within moments a few yards further on. Standing around the tracks they held a brief conference, and came to

the only possible decision : to follow them as their unique clue to Miles's path.

They went ahead again in silence for a while. Colin broke it with a low mutter. " I wish I wasn't so much of a townee," he said. " So's Miles, come to think of it."

" Why ?" Hugh said, glancing round from just ahead.

" All this." He made a vague gesture. " The thought that it's getting absolutely dark—one doesn't think in terms like that without conscious effort if you've lived in towns all your life as I have. You turn on a light. But there's no light to turn on."

" There's moonlight," Hugh said. " The moon's going up."

" Maybe I can't explain it," Colin shrugged. " It's just a sort of nightmare sensation that the non-town world is uncontrollable. A town is subject to man—a place to huddle together away from natural things."

" Natural things ?" Barry had overheard the last phrase and was glancing back. " Dragons and ogres—natural ?"

" I'm glad you've finally been dented by what's really going on," Colin said.

" I've had enough of this !" Barry flared.

" No, I mean it," Colin said. " Stop being so sensitive, for heaven's sake. What I mean is I'm glad you've caught on to the fact that here we've got something we can't just turn the bright clear light of scepticism on for it to shrink and shrivel into dust. We're stuck with a real danger."

" You've said that before," Barry grumbled. " How about you leading the way for a change ?"

" Okay." Colin lengthened his stride.

At the ford they found the baby-car stuck in the mud, and around it many footprints which it was hard to see clearly in the gloom. Out of curiosity Myra tried a match ; it lit, and gave them a welcome half-minute of bright yellow flame before it burned her fingers. That was something of a relief. They exchanged wan smiles by its light.

Beyond the ford, however, they could merely follow the overgrown track, and speculate as they went on the fate of the driver of the abandoned car. In the hope of discovering some clue to Miles's fate also they began to peer through every gap in the hedge they came to, which seemed superficially sensible, yet cost them so much walking time one way and another Colin was beginning to suspect it was a means of

avoiding arriving too soon in the very heart of this perilous country, when Hugh saw something lying on the ground in an adjacent field and uttered a startled oath, pointing.

" What the hell is *that* ?" concurred Colin, looking past him.

" It looks too damned much like a body for my comfort," Hugh said, and started to scramble through the hedge. Their minds alive maggotwise with half-formed suspicions and terrors, they followed him.

He outpaced them across the field with his long legs, and before they had come up to him was able to turn and say, " No, thank the lord, it's not Miles. But—what is it ?"

Colin stared down at the thing. Out of the corner of his eye he saw both Myra and Barry turn away, their mouths working.

" Do you suppose that's what they mean by an ogre in these parts ?" he said at last, gesturing at the hideous corpse.

" I suppose so," Hugh said. " But—God, what a brute ! He must have stood eight feet tall !"

Against his reflex desire to keep his distance, Colin went down on one knee and peered closely at the gash on the monster's shoulder. There was another which had split his skull, but that one was full of blood-clots and the shape of it could not be made out. He said, " I think that's an axe-blow. Do you ?"

Hugh bent down also. After a moment, he said, " You're probably right. In which case Miles must have given a damned good account of himself—if it was Miles."

" Hey, you two !" Myra's voice, sharp-edged with alarm, cut across the silence. " Get away from there ! It sounds as if there's people coming—a big crowd of them !"

Hugh and Colin shot to their feet like puppets whose strings had been jerked. Myra was right ; distinctly to be heard was a murmur of speech and then the neigh of a horse.

" Let's get out of sight !" Hugh said. " Over there—look, under the hedge—quickly !"

They fled in the direction in which he pointed, and a moment later were sprawled together in shadow under over-hanging thorn-tipped branches. Cautiously raising their heads they saw a company of people enter the field, most on foot, but with one rider at their head. This man's horse, however, perhaps scenting the odour of death on the quiet air, threw up its head and whinnied as it entered the field, and the rider

was forced after some moments to dismount and go ahead like the rest on foot.

They seemed to know about the ogre's body, for none of them went near ; they headed instead towards a single oak-tree standing perhaps twenty paces further away, and there drew themselves up in half a circle. Their number was about twenty, Colin estimated. They stood silent, as though waiting.

From among them their leader stood forth, facing the oak. He raised his arms. Perhaps it was an illusion, but the stillness seemed suddenly to be redoubled in intensity.

Then he began to chant, in an eldritch voice that somehow rasped the ears. Colin saw how the twenty others grouped under the tree's branches shivered and moved perceptibly closer to one another.

" Do you hear that ?" Hugh said faintly from arm's length away, huddled under the hedge. " Do you hear that, for—?"

" What is it ?" Barry said sharply.

" Sssht !" Myra hissed. " They'll hear you."

" It's—" Hugh said in a barely audible voice, and broke off. He raised one hand and pointed towards the oak-tree.

The group gathered under the tree had bowed their heads, all except the man who had raised the chant. And now there was another voice answering : a bass voice, forming words at whose meaning Colin could only snatch, grasping nothing. A voice with a curious echoing quality, as though uttered from inside the tree.

four

It must be worse for Vivien than for himself, Miles thought. He could follow at least some of the coarse dialect spiked with antique French which their captors used, but even after all the tuition he had had from Hugh he was only getting the bare gist of it.

In a sense, it was both reassuring and terrifying. As he and Vivien were ordered out of their improvised prison and escorted across the moonlit farmyard outside, to walk by torchlight down a rutted lane with the four armed men in front and behind and the rider following on, there were remarks passed in a low, awe-filled tone about someone they referred to as " he "—with a little, barely perceptible pause

before and after. They had hypothesised, for want of a better explanation, that the phenomenon of the blank area might be controlled by somebody, and deliberately maintained by paranormal means. If these men spoke of a mysterious " he," that pointed to their guess being correct. So much was reassuring.

On the other hand, these were frightened men. One could almost scent the terror which they were perhaps ashamed to admit openly to one another ; it could be read in their eyes as they studied their captives. Even the rider, his long oval face silver-pale in the thin moonglow, looked warily upon them.

It was a long walk by the light of the torch. Miles judged that almost half an hour passed, their captors making nervous jokes between themselves and sometimes speculating on the significance of the recent events. The rider spoke little, except once or twice to chide his underlings for lack of confidence in the mysterious " he."

Miles went hand in hand with Vivien, wishing that they too could talk together, but when he ventured to speak his reward was a numbing blow on the shoulder from the man walking directly behind him, and a curt order from the rider to hold his tongue. The reason could be pieced together from what was said by the escort afterwards : they were sure that Miles must be a demon, not a man, for he had laid low the ogre, and if he were permitted to speak in his unknown (to them) tongue, he might chant an incantation and so call up spirits to set him and Vivien free.

From various clues let fall during the walk, several other things began to be clear to Miles. These people, existing in a curious half-world between legend and reality, were accustomed to miracles of a sort—they endured the depredations of the dragon, they accepted the necessity of magic and once or twice mentioned charms which they wore against it, and they had known of the ogre and its savage nature all their lives. This was ordinary ; they had no standard by which to question it.

Now this universe was strangely riven. The ogre was dead, but that was not all. This woman—they meant Vivien, and eyed her fearfully—had come among them dressed in outlandish garb and speaking a tongue no one could understand. They had stripped her and searched her for witch-marks, and

found them ; one man spoke lasciviously of the business of the inspection. Miles glossed the words automatically. What they had taken for a witch-mark must be a vaccination scar or something of the sort.

Who it was who had had the idea of pitting this witch against their ancient enemy, the dragon, Miles could not establish, but it had clearly appealed to the people. She had been rescued—by a stranger. And in this world there were no strangers. Or until lately there had been no strangers. Miles was not the first ; another man, with a fair beard and speaking with a peculiar accent had been reported on the other side of the village some time ago.

Hugh Baker, obviously. He'd spoken with several of the people here. They had treated him with awkward courtesy, as he had later told the others, but were plainly in awe of him.

The attempt to feed Vivien to the dragon had failed. The ogre was dead. In this backwater world, the common people had failed to blot out the unbelievable intruders. They had consulted with some—oracle ? Wise man ? The word used meant " oak-tree " in their dialect, but Miles assumed it to be an ekename for someone whom they regarded with nearly as much awe as " he " himself.

And the advice given was to bring the strangers to the castle dominating the village, where presumably "he" kept his court.

Bit by bit, deliberately and artificially, Miles was bringing himself back to the state of mind in which he had foolhardily ventured into the blank area. It was the only way he could think of to armour himself against the insidious fear of what might be going to happen to them. After all, he'd been gone quite a long time now, so the others would certainly have set out to look for him, and then of course there was a chance that someone might have known that Vivien was travelling this way . . . but that wasn't to be relied on. No, there was only the knowledge that he had friends who would come after him to sustain him—that, and a slender hope that he might prove, if not more powerful, then quicker-witted than the mysterious lord of this weird domain.

Gradually their goal began to take form ahead, blackness against blackness : the castle. Hugh had seen it from a distance, with the village clustered around its foot. Now the washy moonlight laid a few specks of silver on its roofs and

towers, hinting at its bulk but showing no details. It seemed to crouch over the tumbledown dwellings in the village like a shapeless sphinx. Almost one could imagine that at some time in the past it had reached out a clumsy or angry paw and struck at something in the village that displeased it, for the houses were twisted with age, their walls bowing outward, their roofs sagging.

It was eerie in the village. There were no lights to be seen anywhere, yet as he and Vivien were hurried along through its single unpaved street Miles had a sense of being watched, as though every blind window in those precarious walls was an eye. The last few hundred yards of their way was up a steep, potholed slope, for the castle was set on ground somewhat higher than the level of the village, and then reared up beyond that again.

A gleam of light showed on one of the battlements as the party approached ; a voice was heard shouting something, and another light—a torch held high—appeared seemingly from within the vast black wall directly in front of them. Someone called curtly for them to identify themselves, and the rider spurred his horse past the others to do so.

The torch had been brought through a little postern gate in a far bigger gate, fully twenty feet high, which formed the main entrance to the castle. Glimpses of their surroundings came to Miles as the wavering torch glow picked out highlights—the heads of iron bolts passing through the wooden gate, the uneven walls which glistened, suggesting that they were coated with creeping moisture, the faces of men who came out silently to see to the rider's horse and to scrutinise the captives.

Prodded from behind, they stepped through the postern gate into the castle yard. At once the air seemed to grow colder yet, and a smell of fungus and old damp met their nostrils. The torches now picked out strands of hanging creeper on the walls, clumps of grass tilting the paving-stones, an old, almost toothless dog lifting himself on his forepaws at the end of a rusty chain and trying to growl at the intruders.

Vivien's hand closed so tightly on his that it was almost painful ; he gave her a forced smile which did not change the fixed expression of terror now distorting her pretty face. She had taken her lower lip between her teeth and bitten it so hard that a trace of red showed on her chin.

Miles shivered, and tried desperately to concentrate on remaining calm.

" Come !" the rider said, and with a gesture indicated that the man who had brought the torch out to them should lead the way.

They crossed the uneven flags of the yard in silence, except for the clinking of spurs at the heels of the man ahead of them. It was possible to glimpse his face occasionally ; it was very pale and drawn, and his forehead glistened with sweat.

They reached an iron-studded door on the other side of the yard. Here the man bearing the torch knocked three times with his fist. There was a pause ; then bolts screeched back in unoiled runners and the door opened.

" Enter !" said the young man, and went in.

There were candles here—many of them, in sconces and candlesticks and simply planted on ledges under the windows, which were blacked out with shaped screens of canvas on wooden frameworks. By their light, almost dazzling after the night outside, they saw that they were in a raftered hall—perhaps formerly the banqueting hall of the castle. The rafters were draped in fantastic swathes of grey cobwebs that shivered in the warm updraught from the candles. A fire burned on a hearth big enough for an ox to roast there, in an iron fire-basket ; a spit and turning-jack black with soot were above the hearth.

The walls were of bare stone, hung at intervals with gaudy but faded banners ; some showed coats of arms, others were mere patched-up pictures of banal events, with green for grass, blue for sky, and black stick-figures imposed thereon. The floor was bare stone also, with some tattered rugs lying in front of the fire. So still that at first glance Miles took them for statues, two girl-children ten or twelve years old stood near the hearth with pale frightened faces and big eyes ; they were dressed in homespun smocks and their feet were bare.

All this was the setting. What mattered was set against it like a rasping discord against a dull half-musical drone.

The young man leading them turned as he entered, bowing his head and folding his hands meekly on his chest. He said in a choking voice, " Brother ! It is done and they are here."

" Push them forward," said a voice which had such a quality of wrongness that Miles clenched his fingers into his palms. He raised his eyes, and saw the lord of this impossible domain.

In the exact middle of the hall, under a candelabrum loaded with every candle it could bear, there was a table. A round table. There were chairs set up to it, some empty, their backs and legs stippled with wormholes and their seats threadbare, others containing suits of armour, polished and propped and tied into stiff parodies of natural positions. The visors on the helmets were down ; the gauntlets rested limp on the edge of the table, their leather palms torn into holes.

The middle of the table was specked with drips of wax from the candles above. A few pieces of glass and china were set out, and there were some bones and crusts of bread on dishes. Opposite the door were three chairs somewhat better kept than those dedicated to the grotesque ghosts whose armour was the only token of their presence : one held a staring-eyed woman in a gown embroidered with gold and silver lace, now much tarnished, whose hair was knotted untidily up on the crown of her head and surmounted by a ridiculous coronet from which many of the brilliants were missing ; one was empty, and across the back two words were embroidered in faded gold thread like that on the woman's gown.

And the third—the chair which faced Miles and Vivien directly across the table—held a creature with the body of a child of twelve, a face in which could be seen the shadow of a resemblance to the handsome, pale young man who had brought Miles and Vivien here, and above that a bloated, baby-bald cranium which rose at the back into a sort of sagging bag of tight-stretched skin traced with pulsating veins.

The eyes in that face, half-childlike, half-ancient, fixed the intruders like steel spikes. The horrible voice, in which childish petulence was crossed with madness, spoke again.

" Was it difficult, Brother Kay ?"

The young man swallowed hard. He shook his head and muttered something incomprehensible.

" Good, good, good !" the child-thing shrilled, and broke for a sickening moment into a kind of neighing laughter. " I know what you're thinking, Brother Kay, but you're wrong, you're wrong ! There's nothing they can do for you, you churl, you varlet, you scurvy knave. Now they're here they'll have to do what I tell them, as everyone else. Heh !" A final squirt of wet, bubbling mirth that put a streel of drool on the narrow pointed chin.

" Tell me your names, now !" he went on after a moment. " Who are you and where do you come from to trouble me in my private realm of Logres ?"

In the next instant, as though lightning had struck, Miles knew exactly what had brought about this fantastic backwater of the world, and what he himself must do to save them. He threw his head back proudly and spoke in a voice to make the rafters ring.

" The Lady Vivien of the Hill !" he cried. " And I the knight who comes fated to take the chair at your right hand !"

" What ?" the child-thing said, and began to shake.

Miles let go of Vivien's hand and strode forward, not daring to betray uncertainty by look or gesture, seeing the words on the back of the empty chair grow clear enough to read.

Siege Perilous, they read. He turned, and sat down.

A phrase formed itself in Colin's mind and kept repeating over and over : *this is the weirdest thing, this is the weirdest thing* . . .

The sun had crept out of sight among the clouds in the west, and the night cool had followed the appearance of the stars. Wan moonlight played on the ogre's body, lying in the grass still and harmless, and the twenty people grouped facing the solitary oak. Here under the hedge no noise, except a painful and irregular moaning from Barry, so soft that although it was alarming for there to be any sound at all Colin could not in reason be frightened of anyone overhearing it out there by the tree.

Whatever was happening, it was a slow, lengthy process. The young man who had intoned the chant at the beginning of the—ritual was the word that suggested itself—ritual, then, was putting questions, most of them too faint to be understood by the four at the edge of the field ; to each question came an answer in the curious hollow booming voice which seemed to emanate from the tree itself.

Not daring to speak, the listeners exchanged questions with their eyes, and in the last of the daylight Colin thought he saw that Hugh had found some sort of clue to what was happening ; at any rate he was nodding, his beard white in the moonlight, as he stared across the grass towards the tree.

At last it was over, and the young man raised his chant a second time, striking curious unfinished intervals in the

eldritch melody. Turning away, he spoke brusquely to a man near him, who ran to fetch the horse standing by the place where they had all come into the field. The young man mounted, and in a straggling line everyone else followed him out of sight.

"Thank heaven for that," Myra said. Cautiously they stirred from cramped positions, got to their knees, rubbed at the damp stickiness which had permeated their clothes where they lay against the moist earth.

"Let's get out of here," Barry said in a tremulous high-pitched whisper. "Let's for God's sake get out of here!"

"Shut up," Colin said coldly. "If you think you stand a better chance on your own, try it—but don't expect us to come after you, all right?"

Barry flinched under the scorn in Colin's voice and did not answer. The sound of this teeth chattering followed. Colin disregarded it. He turned to Hugh.

"You look as though you were making some sense out of that rigmarole," he said in a low voice. "What was it? Do you know?"

"I think so," Hugh said. "I *think* so. We've got to gamble anyway—agreed?"

"What else have we got to go by?" Myra said. "If our luck gives out, that's too bad."

"If I've figured this right at all," Colin said, "luck has a different meaning hereabouts from what it usually has. Go on, Hugh—what did you make of it?"

Hugh hesitated. At last he shook his head. "It sounds crazy," he said. "We'd better try it. If it doesn't work, we're no worse off. How are you with an axe, Colin?"

"I—well, I don't know. I suppose I can use one after a fashion."

"You're going to have to. We're going to go and chop down that oak."

"We're *what*?" Colin said, and in the same moment there was a despairing cry from Barry.

"No! No, you're insane! You can't just start cutting down trees—people will hear us, they'll come and capture us, and what'll become of us then?"

"Keep your voice down if you're afraid of someone hearing you, then!" Myra snapped. "Explain, Hugh—what's the point of this? Where will it get us?"

" If Barry would stop wailing and start thinking, he'd be able to tell you," Hugh said caustically. " It was his idea in the first place that there was an Arthurian tie-up in this affair. Well, that's an oak, and some people just came to talk to it. Do you see what I'm after ?"

Colin retrieved his axe, nodding. He said, " It makes a perverted kind of sense, in this context anyway. Let's go."

" No you don't !" Barry shouted, and started forward to take Hugh by the arm. The big man moved reluctantly but firmly ; a second later Barry was sprawling on the ground, clutching his belly, all the wind driven out of him.

" Sorry," Hugh muttered, eyeing Colin. Colin shrugged, shouldering his axe, and began to walk towards the tree.

They paused when they came close ; the bole seemed very thick and formidable, and chopping through it would certainly be a slow, long job. Hugh spat on his hands and rubbed his palms up and down his axe-helve.

" One each side," he said. " You go round the tree."

He poised his axe ; swung ; splinters and chips of bark flew.

The tree seemed suddenly and fantastically to *writhe*, all the way up its trunk and along its branches. Colin stopped dead in mid-stride as he made to take his place opposite Hugh. He said, his voice trembling a little, " It looks as though you guessed right."

" Well, then, hurry up !" Hugh said savagely, and launched his second blow.

Colin's arms ached ; his throat was raw and dry from the gulps of air he was drawing in. He was unused to such work, and when Hugh was managing to keep a steady rhythm—slower now than when he started, but still regular—he was beginning to miss his stroke, or to aim badly, and fail to widen the gash he had cut in the wood.

It was quite dark now, and the trunk was shadowed from the moon by the top of the tree ; his eyes struggled with the task of distinguishing the trunk from its background. Curiously it seemed to be moving again. He paused with the head of his axe on the ground. Peering closer, he saw . . .

" Watch out !" Myra shrilled, and he jumped backwards, seeing that Hugh had done the same a moment earlier.

Like a man's arms flailing, the upper branches were waving without a wind. A crack had opened in the side of the bole. Splitting noises like bones breaking rent the air. And then,

faintly behind the cracks at first, but growing louder, there came high moaning sounds, with a heart-stopping quality of human agony to colour them.

They stared at the tree as it rocked on the narrowed base of its trunk, where the two axes had bitten deep into it. The split ran down, and one whole side of the tree toppled with a crunching noise.

" Help him !" Myra said, starting forward.

At first Colin did not see what she meant. Then he wiped his eyes and looked again, and saw that there was emerging from the tree—*from* the tree, sliding out from the newly exposed surface of raw wood, as a ghost might slide out between the molecules of a wall—a pale, twisted, moaning figure. A man. An old, shrunken, naked man with pipestem limbs and a little wisp of white beard clinging at his chin.

He stepped to the ground. If Myra had not caught him, he would have fallen. But, resting on her arm, he was able to compose himself and draw himself up with a kind of pathetic dignity, nodding first to her, then to Hugh and Colin.

He said in a wheezy voice, " I thank you, gentlemen, as my rescuers. My captivity has been a long and intolerable one, and I had long relinquished hope of standing on my feet again."

Colin pulled off the ragged coat which was his outer garment and put it around the old man's shoulders. He said, " But —who are you ?"

" I, sir ?" The old man gave a would-be sardonic chuckle ; it changed into a racking cough, from which he had to wait to recover before he could speak further. " I am, sir," he began again, "though you'd not think it from my present estate, James Richard, seventh Baron Davinside, and very grateful to you all."

" Well, I'll be—" Colin began slowly, and swung round. " Barry ! Did you hear that ?"

The field was empty but for the four of them clustered at the shattered tree.

" Where's he gone ?" Hugh said. " Myra ! Where did he go ?"

" *I* don't know," Myra said. " I didn't see him go !"

" The fool !" Colin said. " The blind, stupid fool ! What can have got into him ? What chance does he think he stands on his own, of getting away from here ?"

" We can't go looking for him," Hugh said. " We daren't."

" Of course we daren't," Colin snapped. " Ah, but—the hell with him for the moment. We've got to find out what's going *on* here." He turned to old Lord Davinside. " You, sir !" he said. " Can you explain to us why such extraordinary things happen in this area ?"

The old man coughed again, clutching his chest. He said as soon as he was over the fit, " Sir, if as I surmise you come from the world beyond where things change forward with the passage of time rather than back, your ability to use so mild a word as ' extraordinary ' bespeaks much knowledge, or much confidence. I can tell you what happened, but I cannot tell you why or how it happened."

He tottered on shuffling feet through a quarter-circle, groping blindly about him. " I would be seated," he wheezed. " Then let me speak."

five

No single act in all his life had cost Miles so much effort in sheer self-control as that short walk around the table in the ghastly hall, to take his place next to the child-thing who was its lord and master. He had only that blinding flash of inspiration to guide him, and the vague hope of help from the companions who might come looking for him to sustain his resolution.

Dangerous possibilities flitted through his mind : suppose he had guessed wrong ; suppose that the words embroidered on the back of that chair—*Siege Perilous*—were more than the symbolic expression of a child's play-acting ; suppose that the terrible imagination which had been able to create a dragon and an ogre as necessary parts of this private kingdom were able to strike him down . . .

Yet against that he could set a little calm, reasoned knowledge. What was there to account for the failure of mechanical devices in this backwater world, except the probability that here, by some paranormal means, disbelief and ignorance could acquire tangible force ? Such things had no part in this world—but this world itself had no part of the real world outside, the greater world to which he as Miles Croton belonged.

And this, here, was in effect a child.

He lowered himself into the Siege Perilous, closing his eyes for one moment ; opening them again, he saw Vivien's pale face across the table, and smiled at her. Turning, he bestowed the same smile on the child-thing.

He said, " See ! I have taken my place."

The chair was only a chair. Some of the gold threads on the back had broken or frayed, and they scratched his skin if he leaned against them. That was all.

But he hated to think of what might have happened if he had guessed wrong.

A look of strained puzzlement crossed the wizened, old-young face of the child-thing. He said, " Where—have you come from, then ?"

" I've travelled far and had many perilous adventures," Miles said solemnly, only too conscious of the deadliness of the game he was playing. " Riding on a steed that breathed smoke, and armed with thunder and lightning."

Beyond the child-thing, the woman in the faded gown turned her vacant blue eyes on him. A flash of comprehension showed in her face for a moment, struggled and was gone. Miles felt a stir of unutterable loathing for this place and its master.

" But you are a knight," the child-thing said. " Not an enchanter." Yet a trace of greed coloured the words.

" Not many of us are so fortunate as to be both," Miles said. " But I have been—friendly with enchanters."

The child-thing's tongue showed pink for a moment between his lips. He said, " You have had strange adventures, you say ? You must tell of them. Elfrida ! Yvette ! Bring wine ! Make a place for the lady—how said you she was called ?"

The two statue-still children by the hearth moved, making little wordless noises like the chattering of squirrels, one running to the hall door and vanishing, the other making shift to tug a heavy chair away from the table so that Vivien could sit down between two of the suits of armour. She did so nervously, her eyes all the time on Miles.

" The Lady Vivien of the Hill," Miles said.

At once a suspicious look crossed the child-thing's face. He said, " The Lady Vivien ? The enchantress Vivien ? No, that cannot be !"

He leaned forward to stare at Vivien, and the bag-like bulge on the crown of his head pulsed disgustingly. It would be

apparently so easy, Miles thought, to strike now, raising one arm behind—and yet that would surely seal their fate, for all the people of the castle and the village would avenge their lunatic master.

He said as smoothly as he could, " We'll speak of the adventures which I've seen in other lands, which certainly will entertain you well."

The hostility in the child-thing's eyes died bit by bit. He sat back, nodding. " Speak, then," he said. " In truth, it grows dull here in Logres, and you must be a great hero to have slain the ogre. Of course, ogres have been slain before, and they spawn anew like the phoenix of the fable, but that you well know, certainly."

Miles hesitated. The girl who had run from the hall came back before he could speak, and brought with her a china jug —an ordinary china ewer from an old-fashioned bedroom washstand. It was very full and extremely heavy for her spindly limbs. Miles stared at it, fascinated. It was another piece of the pattern, and his suspicions were rapidly being confirmed.

The other girl set a cracked glass in front of Vivien ; the girl with the jug poured something thick and black into it. Then she did the same for Miles. Reluctantly he lifted the glass up, seeing bits of dirt and specks of dust floating on the syrupy-viscous surface of the liquid.

" My wine is good," the child-thing said slyly. " Taste it, and you'll see !"

Cautiously Miles obeyed. It was a preparation of fruit of some kind—blackberries, perhaps—and it was almost nauseatingly sweet. But he made as though much impressed, and smacked his lips.

The child-thing chuckled, changeable as the sea in his moods. He said, " We are famous for hospitality, you see ! We see few strangers, but those who do come by, we treat them well."

Vivien said suddenly, " But not all your people know how to treat strangers."

Miles stared at her in alarm. The child-thing said, " What said you ? Of my people ?"

" Is it courtesy to have me stripped, to feed me to the dragon as would have happened but that—but that Sir Miles came to my rescue ?"

With a blast of amazement so strong that it almost made him dizzy-faint, Miles realised that she must have worked out for herself the key to what was happening. But that was wonderful ! It meant that he was not after all alone in his deadly word-fencing.

He said sternly, " Indeed that was a keen discourtesy !"

" An ill-chance !" the child-thing said. " For know you, the dragon has sore ravaged the land these many years, and the people in fear and trembling seek to placate it that they may keep safe their flocks and herds, but it is written—yes, it is written—" A faraway look was coming to his eyes, and he rolled his head from side to side on his scrawny neck.

Suddenly his gaze fell on the young man he had addressed as Brother Kay, standing still by the door, perhaps hoping not to be noticed again. He threw up his arm and pointed, a look of diabolical cunning coming to his face, a note of screeching delight entering his voice.

" A noble champion shall come !" he declaimed. " To rescue a fair maiden ! To slay the ogre who eats the people's children ! Yes ! Yes ! And a false kinsman of the king shall seek to foil this plan and—you, traitor brother, you, it's you !"

Kay swayed where he stood. He said in a moaning voice, " No, brother ! No, I swear, it isn't so ! Why should I plot against my brother ?"

" You *always* plotted against me," the child-thing said with venom. " You won't do as I tell you ! You tell bad things about me, you tell lies and pretend they're true, you always have done. You tried to make—"

He broke off with a sidelong glance at the vacant-eyed woman in the next chair, and gave a stifled sob. A silly lear crawled down his sunken cheek. He seemed to compose himself by force.

" You try to steal the queen's love from me," he cried. " Criminal traitor, caitiff knave ! False Brother Kay, I'll have no more of it. Gird yourself—here's come a champion to do battle in the name of the queen ! Clear the floor, and there shall be such combat done as men will speak of it from now on and forever till your black blood gushes at your throat."

The voice had taken on a chanting rhythm. Giving a sidelong glance, Miles saw with horror that drool was trickling

over the child-thing's chin. Kay stood rock-still now. Only his eyes and lips moved.

He said, " As God's my witness, brother, it's a lie. I never did such things !"

" Elfrida !" the child-thing cried. " Take armour to him ! Get armour likewise for my champion !"

The girl scuttled to obey, running to the nearest chair on which armour was placed and struggling to untie the strings that held it in a quasi-living pose. Kay still did not move.

" Get you to it !" the child-thing shrieked. " Or must I call men to set it on you by force, and roast you in it till it's *red-hot* ?"

Savagely he leaned forward, almost falling with the great weight of his abominable head, his thin, claw-like hands clutching the sides of his chair.

He would do that, too, Miles thought. He looked at Vivien and saw that she did indeed understand what had happened here, and knew as he did that the threat was no empty one.

Something had to be done, and at once. Miles snatched up his glass from the table and banged it down. He said, " I did not come here to spill a stranger's blood ! I came to—to slay the dragon that threatens the village !"

" Aye !" Vivien chimed in. Miles marvelled at the lack of nervous tremor in her voice. " And then there'll be battle to gladden the eye and heroism to be told in story—"

Aware that all was not well, she broke off. She licked her lips and shrank back in her chair.

" Oh-ho !" the child-thing said. " Oh-ho ! So there we see truth, like a star in darkness. Liar. Deceiver." His voice was hideously soft, almost caressing. " Not for nothing, now I see, is your name called Vivien, sweet-tongued flatterer and cheat."

She put her hand to her mouth.

" And you, deceiving knight unworthy of the name !" the child-thing said, turning to face Miles. He put out his hand to the table, feeling for Miles's glass, and hooked his fingers around it. " To kill the dragon—you have come to kill the dragon. Fool !"

With appalling suddenness he snatched up the glass from the table and hurled its contents into Miles's face. He fell back spluttering, wiped at his eyes, and scrambled to his feet as he recovered.

"To kill a dragon!" the child-thing screamed at him. "Why, fool, knave, simpleton—that dragon is my toy, the thing I made, mine, mine, *mine*! Yvette, call to me my trusty men, and bid them treat these evil-thinkers as they well deserve."

The girl dashed out, shouting shrilly, and Vivien got up from her chair, her face white. Unexpectedly, the woman in the faded gown, who had been staring without comprehension at the spectacle of Miles's face stained purple with the blackberry wine, burst into wave after wave of high, mindless laughter, which started insane echoes among the rafters and brought dust sifting down from the cobwebs above to play in the light of the candles.

The child-thing bestowed a loving leer on her. He said, "Well may you laugh, but there'll be better cause for mirth soon, my heart. What shall we have done with them, hey—these evil folk who come to cheat us of our rights? Shall we spit them over the fire on yonder hearth, or tie them in a treetop for the crows to pick? Shall we bury them to their necks in dung—how say you justice shall be done to them?"

The woman stopped laughing as abruptly as she had begun, and after a moment shook her head meaninglessly. She saw a puddle of the blackberry wine on the table, put her finger in it and then applied it to her mouth.

The child-thing looked away, and once again a tear ran on his cheek.

"Well, one way or another," he said. He began to lever himself down from his chair; his legs did not reach the ground. For the first time Miles saw that he was dressed in a velvet suit, of a rich brown colour, and a lace collar spread over his shoulders. One shoulder was higher than the other. When he walked, he swayed in an irregular rhythm, limping on one leg and jerking forward as though the weight of his head was liable at any moment to outrun the support of his body.

Miles backed away from him around the table. It seemed ridiculous to have to give ground before this creature who reached—now he stood on a level—no higher than his elbows, and yet there were two good reasons why he was compelled to. For one thing, he did not know if there were any limit to the child-thing's powers; for another, there were men being called to the hall.

Vivien darted to his side ; when she laid her hand on his arm, he could feel a shaking that must rack her whole body.

" Ye-esss !" the child-thing said. " You're afraid of me, aren't you ? That's sensible ! I'm *glad* you're afraid of me. I want everyone to be afraid of me. Everyone in Logres has to be afraid of me, and you're in Logres, and you're afraid. Oh, swee-eet ! Swee-eet !"

Crooning, he rocked his head from side to side again. Once more Miles and Vivien gave ground, circling the table, and he limped after them like a sort of monstrous spider, some trick of the light creating a twelve-foot shadow behind him on the wall.

" Where are the men I called ?" he cried suddenly with passion. " Elfrida ! Go after Yvette, bring them here, and say I'll give them twenty lashes in the morning that made their pace so slow !"

The girl obeyed, and her voice faded in the night outside, like a banshee's wail. Once more the idiot circling of the table renewed, past the limp suits of armour in their awful poses, past the woman in the faded gown who was trying to lick the last drops from the glass whose contents the child-thing had hurled at Miles.

" What can we *do* ?" Vivien said under her breath. " Oh, he looks so fragile and so—pitiful !"

Miles hesitated. From the corner of his eye he could see that the suit of armour propped in the chair he would pass next had a sword in its scabbard girded by its side. It was a desperate chance to take, to try and snatch it—who could say it had not rusted fast ? But this was a time of desperation.

" Move aside !" he said harshly to Vivien, and leapt to seize the sword.

In the next several seconds astonishing things occurred. The hilt of the sword resisted him for a moment, then gave way; he raised it, looked at it, and saw he held not a blade, but a stump of a blade. Rust had eaten the metal through. He stared stupidly at it for what seemed an age. Vivien screamed, and the child-thing gave his high neighing laugh.

Something was going to happen. It could be felt in the air, like the oppressive prelude to a thunderstorm.

And then—a dark thing rose in the air behind the swollen head. A staff, perhaps. A stick, or a club. Poised for an instant. Swept down with all the force that more than a

century of hatred could put into the blow so that it sank into the sagging bag-like excrescence where perhaps the ruler of this pseudo-Logres kept the source of his mysterious, unholy powers, bringing a flow of blood, a cry like that of a child in torment, and release.

The child-thing fell, and there behind him in a shadow, his face white with the beginning of knowledge as to what he had done, was the forgotten brother Kay. He looked at his hands, he looked at the body on the floor before him, and he began to laugh, laugh, laugh with the dreadful hysterical note of mad delirium.

" Oh, God !" Vivien said. " Oh God, look at it !" She turned and buried her face in Miles's shoulder, while a clatter of feet sounded in the yard outside. Thinking belatedly of those who would come in answer to the child-thing's call, Miles scanned the hall wildly for some weapon which would serve, saw a carving-knife on the table and snatched it up.

Yet, when the hall door was flung back and men came pouring in to find their master dead with Kay and Miles and Vivien standing by, they did not move to arrest them. They fell back against the walls and spoke in hushed voices, while still more people followed them into the hall.

Incredulous, Miles could not trust his eyes. He thought he saw Hugh—Colin—even Myra, there in the doorway. He made to speak. They saw him, recognised him, smiled awful tired smiles of relief to see him yet alive, but motioned that he and Vivien should remain where they were.

There was an old man hobbling between them, wearing an old cloak and with sandals too big for his narrow feet. Despite his age and his rags, he carried himself with some dignity.

Leaning on the arms of Hugh and Colin, he surveyed the scene. He saw the body of the child-thing sprawled on the floor ; he saw Kay, whose laughter had given place now to frenzied weeping and who had turned where he stood and was beating at the stone walls with his fists, and the monstrous parody of an Arthurian banquet at which the child-thing had so long presided.

Trembling, he let go of Hugh's and Colin's arms and walked an unsteady pace or two forward, to the side of the body. He lowered himself bit by bit, helping to support himself by holding the back of a nearby chair, until he was on his knees. He said, " So, so, so ! It was to come to this—well, let it

be. Now the devil can take back his spawn. Let the father of lies bring this lie to an end—God knows, God knows, it's lasted far too long !"

He bowed his chin, with its wisp of beard, to his chest. The woman in the faded gown was staring at him, and a frown had come to her face, as though she was struggling to recapture a faint, faint memory of seeing this old man before.

There was a moment of utter silence in the hall ; even Kay ceasing to weep. The old man seemed to become limp ; he bent, and toppled forward, and lay still—forever still—across the body of what had been his son.

The people of the castle did not trouble the strangers. Someone had dredged up from somewhere the almost forgotten ritual which had to be followed when the lord of this place died, and two lords were dead, and there was much to be done in the great hall where now the only candles burning were at the head and foot of the two corpses.

It was ghastly—yet no more weird than anything that had gone before—to them to be standing before the fire with corpses for company, and empty suits of armour, while they spoke in low tones and tried to explain to each other what had happened.

" The key was Arthur, of course," Vivien said.

Miles looked at her, remembering with respect how she had found that out herself in spite of her terror. He said, " It was indeed. Colin, who was the old man ?"

Briefly Colin explained how they had come to bring him here, and continued, " He said he wanted to tell us everything, to lighten the burden on his soul. In his own eyes, he was the guilty one. I think he was a little mad himself long before his son imprisoned him in the oak-tree."

All those listening shivered, as though they felt the brush of supernatural beings passing.

" He was Baron Davinside. He was an eccentric, that's certain, and perhaps even a monomaniac—he was crazy about the Arthurian legends, had sunk himself in them, had tried to recreate a medieval atmosphere on his estates. Perhaps his undoing began there. He was married once to a girl he said he loved very much—Kay's mother, who died in child-birth. That too probably helped to unstable him. For he conceived a monstrous plan to salvage the family fortunes.

" There was a woman—an heiress, the only daughter of a rich family in the next county. Her father was dead, and

had settled all his fortune upon her to pass to her eldest son when she married. The reason why she was single was simple. She was completely mad."

"Then—" Vivien said faintly.

"We've seen her," Miles supplied. "The woman sitting next to—*him*." He gestured at the body on the table between the candles.

Colin nodded. His voice took on a haunted note.

"He married her, yes, and what's more fathered a child on her. *That* child. The hope of riches for Lord Davinside, if he could bring him up till he was of age to inherit the entailed fortune. Do you understand?"

"God, it's disgusting," Myra said hotly. "I think he deserved what happened to him."

"So did he, at the end," Colin reminded her. "Of course, in such a condition he hoped his son would never be able to claim and enjoy his inheritance; meantime, it was his to administer.

"But this proved to be no ordinary child. Crippled, he yet had a phenomenal intelligence, and something more—something of which the secret perhaps lay in that horrible outgrowth of brain on the crown of his head. Bit by bit, helped by his father's obsession with the days of Arthurian legend, he began to create for himself a world in which he could rule.

"His father he hated, feared and respected all at the same time. Hated, because he knew there was no real love between them; feared, because he was powerful in the family; respected because he was the source of the wisdom which he took for his own."

"That fits," Hugh muttered. "Very exactly."

Colin nodded.

"He wanted his mother to love him, too. But she didn't. She was barely aware of his—or anyone else's—existence, with her mind fogged by insanity. But it seemed to him that her love had been stolen, by his elder half-brother Kay, who had obviously no mother of his own, and who doubtless often angered him by refusing to take part in his elaborate games of Arthurian make-believe.

"At what stage the make-believe turned to that horrible reality, we'll perhaps never be sure. It was when he was some ten or twelve years old, and Kay five years older. Maybe his

power, till then dormant, matured. And then, all at once, the world turned to nightmare for everyone around him. The land of legend escaped from his mind and pervaded the real world."

He glanced at Hugh, requesting with his eyes that he take up the tale.

"His father, you see," Hugh said sombrely, "had called him Arthur. As a joke, perhaps. And it occurred to him that this man who claimed to be his father wasn't, after all—but the wizard Merlin, who was entombed in an oak-tree. This suited his emotional feelings about his father. That was the first direct and terrible thing he did. His father couldn't tell us how he did it, and now he himself is dead we'll never know—but it was done. He knew an isolated oak-tree on the estate, and he imprisoned his father there, leaving him only the power to speak when properly conjured."

"I get the impression," Miles said after a pause, "that in this—this Logres of his, there was a strange mingling of childish make-believe and reality."

"Oh, yes. No doubt about that," Hugh agreed. "For instance—well, the child was fantastically intelligent in his way. He would read Malory in the original, and perhaps even the older stories which his father showed to him. He knew the proper dialects supposed to have been spoken in Arthurian days, and consequently, by some unimaginable force he possessed, he brought it about that the people who served him spoke that language and no other."

"But he himself spoke to us in the English of his own day," Miles said. "And he had the little girls bring wine to us, and they brought it in an ordinary china ewer, off a washstand. And it was a sickly blackberry syrup, not wine at all."

"Logical," Colin said. "Probably, like most children, he liked very sweet things. That was his idea of a delicious drink, and wine was delicious, so that was wine in his mind."

"But the dragon!" Vivien said. "And the ogre!"

"You can explain—or rather make guesses—about them too," Hugh said. "He knew that any proper Arthurian kingdom must have its quota of strange beasts and giants. So when the estate became his Logres, there was a dragon, and an ogre. And quite possibly there are other strange things as well. We know he had a wizard imprisoned in a tree. To him, some part of the area might have been a Vale of Avalon, and there might be a Grail somewhere."

" I suspect not," Colin put in. " The result of the apparition of the Grail was the dispersal of the company of knights ; he'd have let that one go by."

" Yet he had a Siege Perilous," Miles frowned. " But of course he didn't seem to take it seriously." An idea struck him. " I see !" he went on. " When I said I'd come to kill the dragon, that was when he grew suspicious and angry. I must have seemed like one of the interfering adults he hated so much, come to take his toy away."

"He called it his toy," Vivien said. "Don't you remember?"

" So he did. So he had his kingdom, and his mother to play the part of his queen, and his fantastic power to impose his will on the country roundabout. Thank God his power was limited ! Only a little of the world was shut in by him—it might have been the whole of England !"

And suddenly he realised.

" Hey-y-y !" he said. " Where's Barry ? Why isn't he with you ?"

The others exchanged glances. Colin spoke up and explained briefly how Barry's endurance had failed him and he had vanished while they were cutting down the tree.

" What do you suppose happened to him ?" Myra said after a pause.

" God knows," Hugh answered bitterly. " But if he had the wits to keep out of harm's way till now, he'll probably still be all right in the morning, and we'll find him then."

" What are we going to do about everybody here ?" Myra went on. " After all, they're our responsibility in a sense—we snatched them out of their familiar little world, and tomorrow they're going to be exposed for the first time to the twentieth century. It's going to be horrible for them !"

" Are they going to go on letting us alone as they've done ?" Vivien said nervously. " I mean—we have been responsible for killing their lord and master, and perhaps some of them might hold us guilty of the old man's death as well."

" No chance of that, luckily," Colin said. " When we came to the castle Lord Davinside spoke with some of the retainers—I can't make head or tail of the relative times these people have experienced ; some of them, like Arthur himself, haven't grown older in more than a century, while others have grown old and died in the ordinary way—anyway, that can be sorted out later. I was saying : he spoke with some of the

retainers who recognised him, and he ordered them to accept us as his friends. We're spoken for."

"That's a relief—" Miles was starting to say, when there was a sudden commotion outside. Loud noises, coupled with shouting in high shrill voices, and the sound of running feet, came to them.

They looked at each other, and all together headed for the door.

Outside, across the castle yard, there were bright lights. People were milling around the entrance to the yard, and the gate was grinding back on its hinges. Familiar noises sorted themselves out of the hubbub : cars' engines revving, authoritative voices calling out in twentieth-century accents.

"Well, I'll be damned !" Hugh said explosively. "I'll bet you anything you like the swine *made* it ! I'd never have thought he had the sense or the guts !"

He hesitated a second, then started at a run across the yard.

"Who ? Who's he talking about ?" Vivien said.

"Barry he must mean," Miles said. "Lord above, what kind of a story can he have spun to get all these people here ? It sounds like a small army that's arrived !"

"I don't care who they are," Vivien said with sudden overwhelming weariness. "I just want to know if they can get me out of here, back to a nice safe comfortable world where you don't have anything worse to worry about than H-bombs—no ogres, no dragons, no wizards . . . God, Miles ! Did you ever think before what a horrible world children actually live in ?"

"Children are cruel creatures," Miles said. "They have to learn to be human, slowly and painfully. And far too many people never do learn, even when they're adults. A child born of an idiot mother, jealous of his half-brother, unloved by his father who saw him only as a source of future wealth—what else could one have expected ? Oh, come on ! Let's get away from it. Our part in this is over."

She smiled at him. After a moment she nodded and put her arm through his, and together they walked across the castle yard to watch the arrival of Logres in the real world.

—John Brunner

Outstanding fantasy stories are all too rare these days—Science Fantasy *is the sole outlet for authors who still love this medium —so that when we received Thomas Burnett Swann's latest novelette we felt privileged to be its publisher.*

WHERE IS THE BIRD OF FIRE?

BY THOMAS BURNETT SWANN

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one

I am very old by the counting of my people, the Fauns—ten full years. Hardly a boyhood, men would say, but we are the race with cloven hooves and pointed, furry ears, descendants of the great god Faunus who roamed with Saturn in the Golden Age. Like the goats, our cousins, we count ten years a lifetime.

And in my years, I have seen the beginning of Rome, a city on the Palatine which Romulus says will straddle the orange Tiber and spread west to the Tyrrhenian Sea, south through the new Greek settlement at Cumae to the tip of Italy, and north through Etruria to the land of the Gauls. Romulus, the Wolf, says these things, and I believe him, because with one exception he has never failed. Now, however, I do not wish to speak of Romulus, but of his twin brother, Remus, who was also part of the beginning. Remus, the bird of fire. With a reed pen, I will write his story on papyrus and trust it to the coffers of time which, cool in the earth, endure and preserve.

My people have wandered the hills and forests of Central Italy since the reign of Saturn : the blue-rocked Apennines where the Tiber springs, and the forests of beech and oak where Dryads comb green hair in the sun-dappled branches. When invaders arrived from Africa and from the tall Alps to the north, Saturn withdrew to a land where the Fauns could not follow him. Forsaken, they remained in Italy, together with the Dryads in their leafy houses.

A Faun's life has always been brief and simple. We wear no clothes to encumber our movements except, in the winter months which have no name, a covering of wolf skin. Our only weapon is a simple sling with a hempen cord. We have no females of our own and must propagate by enticing maidens from the walled towns. I was born to an Alba Longan who had come to draw water from the Numicus River, outside her city.

Because the city was bowed under King Amulius, a tyrant who some years before had stolen the throne from his kindly brother Numitor and imprisoned him in the palace, she was willing to stay, for a little, with my father in the woods. But when she gave birth to me and saw my cloven hooves and pointed ears, she cried " I would rather nurse a goat !" and hurried back to her town and its tyrannical king. I was left to be reared by a band of Fauns, who had built a small encampment in the woods, with branches raised on stakes to shelter them from the rains of Jupiter, and a low palisade to guard against marauding wolves or unfriendly shepherds.

It was night and we had built a fire, not only to cook our supper but to comfort ourselves in the loneliness of the black woods. Evil forces had come with the flight of Saturn, Lemures or ghosts and blood-sucking Striges. My father, holding nine black beans in his mouth, made the circuit of our camp and spat them out one by one, mumbling each time, " With this I ransom me and mine." The Lemures, it was said by the shepherds who had taught him the custom, followed and ate the beans and were appeased.

This done, he bathed his hands in a clay vessel of water, clanged together two copper cooking pots left by my mother, and said, " Good Folks, get you gone." At six months old—five years or so in human terms—I was much impressed with my father's ritual. He had never shown me the least affection,

but neither had anyone else, and a Faun's place, I judged, was to be brave and clever, not affectionate.

My father looked very gallant confronting the ghosts and very wise since, even while facing them bravely, he spoke with discretion. The other Fauns, eight of them, gnarled, brown, hairy creatures as old, one would think, as the oaks of the forest, squatted on their hooves and watched with admiration and also impatience, since they had not yet enjoyed their supper of roasted hares and myrtle berries.

But scarcely had my father uttered " Good Folks " than a tree trunk crashed through the thin palisade and figures ran through the opening and thrashed among us with wooden staves. Lemures, I thought at first, but their staves and goatskin loin cloths marked them as shepherds. I heard the names " Romulus " and " Wolf " applied to the same man and guessed him to be their leader, the brawniest and the youngest.

The first thing they did was to stamp out our fire. I scrambled to shelter in a thicket of witch grass and watched with round-eyed terror and with ears quivering above my head. By the light of smouldering embers, I saw my father struck to the ground by Romulus himself. I roused myself and scurried to his side, but Romulus's brawny arms scooped me into the air. He raised me above his head, opened his mouth, and gave the high thin wail of a hunting she-wolf. Then with the camp in shambles and the Fauns either fallen or staggering, he leaped through the broken fence with me in his arms, and his shepherds followed him, hugging roasted hares.

I gave my captor a sharp kick with my hoof, but he squeezed me so hard that I gasped for breath, and I thought it best to lie still.

Through the woods we raced ; through oak trees older than Saturn, and feathery cypresses like Etruscan maidens dancing to soundless flutes. At last the earth became marshy and Romulus's sandals squished in the sodden grass. I had heard my father speak of this malarial country near the Tiber, and I held my breath to avoid the poisonous vapours. Finally I grew faint and gulped in breaths, expecting the air to burn as it entered my lungs. Throughout the journey, Romulus never seemed short of breath, never stumbled, never rested.

We began to climb and soon reached the summit of what I guessed to be that hill of shepherds, the Palatine. On a broad

plateau, hearth fires flickered through the doorways of circular huts. The jogging motion of my captor made the fires seem to dance and sway, and I blinked my eyes to make sure that they were real and not some feverish dream implanted by the swamp. From their pens of stone, pigs grunted and cattle lowed in resentment at being awakened.

One of the huts, the largest, seemed to belong to Romulus. We entered through a low door—though Romulus stooped, he brushed my ears against the lintel—and I found myself in a windowless, goat-smelling room with an earthen floor baked hard by the central fire. Romulus thrust me against a wall where a goat was nibbling a pile of straw. A hole in the roof allowed some smoke to escape, but some remained, and I waited for my eyes to stop watering before I could get a clear look at my captor.

I saw that the powerful arms which had held me belonged to one little more than a boy (at the time, of course, he looked overpoweringly adult, but still the youngest in the hut). Yet he was tall, broad, with muscular legs and with muscles tight across the bare abdomen above his loin cloth. A thin adolescent down darkened his chin, but the furrow between his eyebrows suggested ambitions beyond his years. His crow-black hair, unevenly cropped about an inch from his scalp, rioted in curls.

He stood in the firelight and laughed, and I dimly understood even then, why men twice his age could follow and call him Wolf. His handsome face held a wolf's cruelty, together with its preternatural strength. Had I been older, I might have seen also a wolf's fierce tenderness toward those it loves ; for this boy, though he loved rarely, could love with great tenacity. As it was, I thought him cruel and powerful, nothing more, and I cowered in terror.

An aged shepherd, his long white hair bound in a fillet behind his head, rose from the fire when Romulus entered with his five men. The five immediately began to laugh and boast about their victory over my people. But when Romulus spoke, the others were silent.

" The Fauns were driving out spirits, Faustulus," he explained to the old man. " Their leader said, ' Good Folks, get you gone,' and in we come ! See, I have captured a baby."

" In a year he will be full grown," said Faustulus, whose face, though wrinkled like a brick shattered in a kiln, held an ageless

dignity. He was no mere shepherd, I later found, but a man of learning from Carthage. Shipwrecked near the mouth of the Tiber, he had wandered inland to take shelter with herdsmen and married a girl named Larentia. When his rustic bride hesitated to return with him to Carthage, he remained with her people and learned their trade.

" What will you do with him then ? Your nocturnal games are childish, Romulus. They bring you no closer to the throne of Alba Longa."

Romulus frowned. " Everything I do, Faustulus, brings me closer to the throne. Tonight we wrestle with Fauns. Tomorrow, soldiers. My men need practice."

His ominous tone and the thought of what he had done to my father made me tremble. I burrowed into the hay where the goat seemed unlikely to eat (a foul-smelling beast, cousin though he was !) and peered out between wisps of straw.

Romulus saw my terror. To Faustulus he said, " You ask me what I will do with our captive. Eat him, before he grows up ! Goat flesh cooked on a spit." When Faustulus seemed ill-disposed to the joke (or serious intention, I was not sure which), Romulus addressed a young shepherd with the stupid, flattened eyes of a ram. " Faustulus, it seems, is not hungry. What about you, Celer ?"

Winking at Romulus, Celer felt my arms and muttered, " Too thin, too thin. Fatten him first, eh ?" His speech was thick and slow, as if he were speaking with a mouthful of wine.

Romulus seemed to debate. " No," he said finally. " He may be thin, but I am hungry. And I want to make a belt of his ears." With that he hoisted me from the ground and lowered me toward the fire by the stump of my tail ! I lay very still until I felt the flames singe my ears. Then I began to bleat, and Romulus and the ram-eyed Celer threw back their heads in merriment.

A voice spoke from the doorway, low but forceful. " Put him down, Romulus."

Romulus turned and, recognizing the speaker, tossed me back into the straw. With one tremendous bound he reached the door and embraced his brother.

" Remus," he cried, " I thought they had kept you in Veii !"

Remus returned his brother's embrace with enthusiasm, though his slight frame was almost engulfed by Romulus's massive hug. Like the others, he wore a loin cloth, but of wool,

not goatskin, and dyed to the green of the woodpecker which haunts the forests of Latium. Over his shoulder hung a bow, and at his side, a quiver of arrows, their bronze nocks enwreathed with feathers to match his loin cloth. When I saw his hair, bound with a fillet but spilling in silken fire behind his head, I caught my breath. Picus, the woodpecker god, I thought. Who except gods and Gauls, in this part of Italy, had yellow hair (and Etruscan ladies, with the help of their famous cosmetics) ?

He released himself from Romulus's hug and walked over to my nest of straw. I squirmed away from him. A god he might be, but after all I had been kidnapped and almost cooked by his brother. I need not have feared him, however. He lifted me in his arms as my mother might if she had not disliked my ears. He cradled me against his smooth bronze chest—fragrant with clover as if he had slept in a meadow—and stroked the fur of my ears, smoothing it toward the tips.

" Little Faun," he said. " Don't be afraid. Tomorrow I will take you back to your people."

" Take him back !" protested Romulus. " I caught him myself."

" Fauns are not animals," said Remus. " At least, not entirely. They have lived in this forest for centuries, and we have no right to capture their children." He pointed to Romulus's bloody stave. " Or fight their fathers."

" They enjoy a fight as much as we do," shrugged Romulus. " We knocked them about a bit, nothing more. If I don't train my shepherds, how can they capture a city ?" He grinned broadly, his sharp white teeth glittering in the firelight. " If we don't take the city, what will we do for women ?" Celer and the others—except Faustulus—whooped their approval. I was later to learn that these young shepherds, driven from Alba Longa and other towns of Latium for minor crimes, were womanless, and that Romulus had promised a house in the city and a wife for every man. Romulus winked at Celer. " My brother knows much of animals, but nothing of women. We will find him a girl when we take Alba Longa—a saucy wench with breasts like ripe pomegranates."

" Brother," said Remus, a slow smile curving his lips. "What do *you* know of pomegranates ? You must have been gardening beyond the Palatine !"

" I know !" cried Celer. " I know about them ! The girls I remember—"

" And the girls I imagine," sighed Remus.

" Remember, imagine," said Romulus. " One is as bad as the other. But once we take the city—! Now, brother, tell us about your journey to Veii."

Romulus and the others seated themselves around the fire, while Remus remained standing. Clearly there had been an urgent purpose behind his visit to Veii, the Etruscan city twelve miles to the north. Even at my age, I sensed that purpose and, crouching at his feet, awaited his words more eagerly than those of my father when he told me stories of Dryads and river goddesses. What I failed to understand at the time was later clarified for me by Remus.

The brothers, it seemed, claimed to be sons of the war god Mars and a Vestal princess, Rhea, daughter of that same King Numitor whom Amulius had deposed and imprisoned in the palace. As Remus spoke, I learned how these royal twins in exile longed, above everything, to seize the throne of Alba Longa and restore their grandfather or rule in his place. Remus had gone to Veii to ask the *lucomo* or king to back their cause. It was a brazen thing for a young Latin shepherd, even a deposed prince, to seek audience with an Etruscan king and ask him to make war against a Latin city. But Romulus and Remus, after all, were very young.

I passed into the city (said Remus) with farmers taking shelter for the night. The palace astonished me. Its walls were of purple stucco, and terra cotta sphinxes flanked the entrance. I told the guards that I wished to see their king ; that I could speak only with him. Would they tell him that Remus, exiled prince of Alba Longa sought an audience.

" Yellow Hair," one of them said. " Our king is a jolly man. I will take him word. Your boldness will make him laugh."

After a long time, the guard returned and said that the king would see me now—in his banquet hall. In the great hall, the ceiling was painted with winged monsters and strange enormous cats. The king was lying on a couch with a young woman at his side. She was almost unrobed. He motioned me to a couch next to him and laid his arm, heavy with amber and gold, on my shoulder.

" Remus," he said, " I have heard your story from shepherds who once served Amulius but now serve me. They told me how your mother, the Vestal Rhea, bore you to the god Mars and was buried alive for breaking her vow of chastity. How her uncle, King Amulius, ordered the shepherd Faustulus to drown you in the Tiber, but the shepherd set you adrift in a hollow log. How the log came ashore and a she-wolf suckled you in her cave and a woodpecker brought you berries, until Faustulus found and reared you as his own children.

" The story, it seems, is widely known in the country, though Amulius himself believes you long dead—for tyrants are rarely told the truth. I greet you as the prince you are. But we of Veii want peace with Rome, our closest neighbour. Lead your shepherds against Amulius, if you must, and pray to Mars that the townspeople rise to help you. When you have captured the city, come to me again and we shall sign treaties of amity. Until then, let us be friends but not allies."

I looked closely into his face, the short pointed beard, black as a vulture, the arched eyebrows, the almond eyes, and saw that he would not change his mind. I took my leave and followed the basalt road through the great arched gate and returned to you.

Romulus sprang to his feet, narrowly avoiding my ears. " No help from Veii then. And we are not yet strong enough alone. Thirty shepherds at most, even if we scour the countryside." He fingered the stubble on his chin, as if craving the ample beard—and the years—of a man. " We shall have to wait at least a year before we attack," he continued, with the heavy weariness of one who was not used to waiting—who, at seventeen, was something of a leader already and covetous of wider leadership. " Gather more shepherds around us. Send scouts to the city and feel out the mood of the crowd." Neither Romulus nor Remus had visited Alba Longa ; their royal blood made it difficult to pass as herdsmen. " Father Mars, let it not be long !"

He strode to the corner of the hut where a weathered bronze spear, green with age, lay apart like a holy relic. Mars, as everyone knows, manifests himself in spears and shields. " One day soon, Great Father, let me say to you : ' Mars, awaken !' "

" But even if we take the city," asked Remus, " will our grandfather let us rule ? The throne is rightfully his."

" He is very old," said Romulus. " When he steps aside—and he will, very soon—we will build a temple to Mars and train an army even the Etruscans will fear."

" And offer asylum to slaves, and even to birds and animals."

" Oh, Remus," chided his brother. " This is a *city* we will rule, not a menagerie ! For once, forget your animals."

" But the city can learn from the forest ! Remember when I cured your fever with berries last year ? A bear showed them to me, growing beside the Tiber."

Romulus shook his head. " Remus," he smiled, " we shall have our problems ruling together. I sometimes wish that I had no brother or that I did not love him above all men. But let us capture the city—then we shall plan our government. Now it is late. Almost Cockcrow time."

With a warm goodnight to Romulus and Faustulus, Remus gathered me in his arms and left the hut. Of course I could walk quite well by myself, but rather than lose my ride I said nothing. Stumbling a bit with his burden, he descended the bank of the Palatine toward the Tiber, which looped like an adder in the starlight and swelled in places as if digesting a meal. Near the foot of the hill we entered the mouth of a cave where a small fire burned on a raised clay bearth. Remus stirred the fire.

" I hate the dark," he said. " It is sad with spirits. People who died like my mother, without proper rites."

Sleepily I looked around me and saw that the earthen floor had been covered with rushes and clover, that a pallet of clean white wool lay in the corner, and that earthen pots lined the opposite wall. There was no one in the cave, but a large dog lay asleep beyond the fire. As we entered, the animal awoke and opened its eyes. A dog indeed ! An immense wolf, its yellow-grey fur matted with age, rose on its haunches and faced us. Whether it snarled or grinned, I could not be sure. When Remus bent to deposit me on the pallet, I refused at first to let go of his neck.

" Lie still, little Faun," he laughed. " This is Luperca, my foster mother. It was she who found Romulus and me on the bank of the Tiber and brought us to this very cave. She is very old now. Sometimes she walks in the woods, but at night she shares my cave and my supper." He knelt beside her and stroked her black-rimmed ears. In looking back, I can see the nobility of the scene, this boy with slender hands and hair as

yellow as sunflowers, the aged wolf that had suckled him in this very cave. But at six months old, I saw only a flea-bitten animal which monopolized my friend's attention.

" My name is Sylvan," I said haughtily. They were the first words I had spoken since my capture.

" I did not know you could talk," he laughed, rising from my rival and coming to lie beside me.

" Nobody asked me," I said, less haughty now that he had answered my summons. As the firelight dwindled, he talked of Alba Longa and how, when he ruled the city with Romulus, Fauns would be as welcome as men.

" You have surely seen the city," he said, and before I could tell him yes, that my father had carried me once to see the walls and pointed, ' That is where your mother ran off to,' he continued. " It is a very small city, really just a town. But its houses are white and clean, and its temple to Vesta is as pure as the goddess's flame. It is now an unhappy city. Amulius is a harsh ruler. He killed my mother, Sylvan. He laughed when she told him that Mars was my father. ' You have broken your vow,' he said, and buried her alive in the earth. Faustulus saw her before she died. Just a girl, really. Bewildered but proud. She looked at Amulius with her large black eyes and said : ' Mars is my husband and he will look after my sons.'

" Everyone believed her except Amulius. You see why I hate him. And I have other reasons. He taxes the vintners a third of their time and the shepherds a fourth of their sheep. What do they get in return ? The protection of his soldiers —when they are not stealing wine and sheep ! But Sylvan, forgive me. I am keeping you awake with problems beyond your months. Sleep little Faun. Tomorrow I will take you home."

But I already knew that I did not wish to return to my people.

two

Twelve months had passed. Growing two inches a month, I had reached a Faun's full height of five feet. Sometimes I looked in the stream that flowed near our cave and admired my reflection, for Fauns are vain as long as they resemble young saplings, and until they begin to grow gnarled—alas, too quickly—like the oaks of Saturn. My skin was the bronze of Etruscan shields. I wore my ears proudly, waving their silken

fur above my head. I combed my tail with a hazel branch and kept it free from thistles and burrs. Remus was eighteen now but soon I would overtake him. Together with Luperca, I still shared his cave and we often hunted together, I with a sling, he with a bow and arrow. But at his insistence we hunted only the lower animals, and then from necessity—the hare and the wild pig. Bears and deer and even wolves had nothing to fear from us. Sometimes on these hunts I saw my father and called to him in passing. The first time he stopped to speak with me. I saw the scar which Romulus's staff had left between his ears. He looked much older than I remembered and a little stooped.

" Is it well with you ?" he asked, ignoring Remus.

" Yes, Father," I answered, half expecting him to embrace me. For I had grown used to Remus's affection.

But family ties among Fauns are usually shallow ; we live such a little time. " Good," he said. " I thought they might have killed you." He galloped into the forest.

On the Palatine Hill, new huts had risen near that of Romulus and Faustulus. Sabine shepherds had moved there from a neighbouring hill, the Quirinal (named for their spear god, Quirinus), and also thieves and murderers from the forest, whom Romulus welcomed too readily into his group. When Remus objected, Romulus argued that thieves, much more than shepherds, could help to capture a town. They could move with stealth and strike with sudden fury.

As shepherds, of course, the brothers must care for a large herd of cattle and sheep, leading them from pasture to pasture both on and below the Palatine, guarding them from wolves and bears, and making sacrifice to the deities called the Pales. The herds they tended belonged to an Alba Longan named Tullius, who often sent an overseer from the city to count or examine his animals ; hence, our source of news about Amulius and his increasing tyrannies.

One day the overseer complained that the king had doubled taxes, the next, that his soldiers had insulted a Vestal or executed a boy for petty theft. The soldiers numbered a thousand—all the able bodied men in town were subject to duty at one time or another—and by no means the whole number approved of Amulius or victimized civilians. But a hard core, rewarded with land, cattle, or armour (there was no coinage yet in Latium), served Amulius willingly.

Inflamed by word from the city, Romulus left his herds in the care of sheep dogs and drilled his men ; he taught them how to

climb rocky cliffs like city walls or move with the swiftness of wolves. On the hill called Aventine, Remus taught them to whittle bows from hickory limbs and feather their arrows for deadly accuracy.

One day, when Remus was resting from both the herds and the training of archers, we had an adventure which seemed at the time unrelated to war and conquest, though it later proved vastly important. I found Remus standing under the fig tree near the mouth of his cave. He called it the Fig-Tree of Rumina, the goddess who protected suckling infants, because he felt that she had watched over him and Romulus while they fed from the she-wolf.

Finding him preoccupied, I crept up silently, seized his waist, and rolled him to the grass. My disadvantage in such matches was my tail, which he liked to take hold of and jerk until I begged for mercy. This morning, however, I had caught him by surprise, and soon I was sitting on his chest, triumphant. Already I had grown to outweigh him, with my hooves and my slim but sinewy body.

" Enough," he gasped. " Let me up !" I rose and we fell against each other, laughing and catching our breath.

"The next time you turn your back," he swore, "I will pull out your tail by the roots !" Suddenly he became serious. " Sylvan, my bees are dying."

He had found the bees in a poorly concealed log, stunned them with smoke, and removed them to a hollow in the fig tree, safe from hungry bears and shepherds. For awhile they had seemed to thrive and Remus had been delighted, taking their honey only when they had enough to spare. But now—

" Look," he said, drawing me to the tree which lifted its broad rough leaves to a remarkable forty feet. " The bees are very ill."

I stood beside him, my hand on his shoulder, and peered up into the tree. The bees were carrying off their dead in great numbers. Two of them, overwhelmed by the weight of a third, fell to the ground at my feet.

" They look beyond our help," I said. " But there are other hives, Remus. There will be no lack of honey."

"But I am fond of *these*," he protested, turning to face me. " They are my friends, Sylvan. Not once have they stung me, even when I took their honey." He looked so troubled, so young and vulnerable, that I was speechless. In the year I had known him he had hardly changed. His face was still beardless,

his hair, like woven sunlight. Who could explain how this blonde, green-eyed boy, so different from Romulus, had been born to a dark Latin Mother? Only Mars knew the answer. Yet Rhea, the gentle Vestal, and not the warlike Mars, seemed more truly his parent.

"Wait," I said. "Fauns love honey and sometimes keep bees. My father will know what to do."

We went to find him in the forest south of the Aventine. Though a Faun without clothes and with only a slingshot to encumber me, I could barely keep pace with Remus, who raced through the woods as if he wore wings. As a matter of fact, he had sewn his loin cloth with those same woodpecker feathers he used to wreathe his arrows.

"Remus, take pity," I gasped. "I expect you to rise through the treetops!"

Remus laughed. "They say a woodpecker fed me when I was small."

"And gave you his wings."

In the deepest part of the forest, the trees were tall as hills and older than Saturn. What they had seen had left them weary—bent, twisted, and sagging—but still powerful. Oaks were the oldest, but ilec trees, too, and grey-barked beeches mixed sunlight and shadows in a venerable mist of limbs. Blue-eyed owls hooted among the leaves and magpies, birds of good omen, chattered in hidden recesses. A woodpecker burned his small green flame against the greater fire of the forest, and Remus pointed to him excitedly. "It was one like that who fed me berries."

Remus might have wandered for days without finding my father, but Fauns have an instinct in the woods and I led him straight to our camp.

Outside the palisade, I bleated like a goat to signify kinship with those behind the barrier. A section was lifted aside and a Faun, knotty and mottled like the underside of a rock, filled the entrance. His ears quivered with suspicion.

"It is Sylvan," I said. "Will you tell Nemus, my father, I wish to see him?"

The Faun vanished without a word. Another took his place. To human eyes—to Remus, as he later confessed—there was nothing to distinguish this Faun from the first. But I knew my father by the scar on his head and by the length of his ears—they were very long, even for a Faun.

" Sylvan," he said without emotion. " You want me ?"

" Yes, Father. This is Remus, my friend."

" I have seen you together."

" We need your help. Remus's bees are dying. We hoped you could help us save them. The hive is well placed. But a sickness has taken them. They are carrying off their dead."

Nemus thought a moment. " Ah," he said. " You must find a Dryad."

" A Dryad, Father ?"

" Yes. They speak to the bees. They know all cures."

" But Dryads are rare. I have never seen one."

" I have," said Nemus proudly. " Her hair was the colour of oak leaves, and her skin, like milk—" He broke off, as if embarrassed by his own enthusiasm. " But I will tell you where to look. Two miles to the south of this camp, there is a circle of oaks. Some say Saturn planted them. At any rate, one is inhabited by a Dryad. Which one I cannot say. I saw her dipping water from a spring and followed her to a ruined altar among the oaks. There she escaped me. You must hide in the bushes and watch the bees for an hour or more. In the tree where the most of them light will be your Dryad. Taking her nectar, you know. But tell me, Sylvan, why are these bees so important ? Let them die. There are others."

Remus answered for me. " They are friends. We like to hear them work outside our cave. Now they are almost quiet."

" Friends, you call them ? You are one of the Old Ones, aren't you, boy ? Your hair is ripe barley, but your heart might have lived with Saturn. In the old time, there was love in the forest. So the records of my people say. A scrawl on a stone, a picture, an image of clay—always they tell of love. Fauns, men, and animals living in harmony." He turned to his son. " Look after him, Sylvan. Help him to find his Dryad. Help him always. He is one who is marked to be hurt."

I reached out and touched my father on the shoulder, as I often touched Remus. He seemed surprised, whether pleased or offended I could not say. When he turned his back, we went to find our Dryad.

There was the ring of oaks, just as he had said. Not the most ancient trees, if planted by Saturn, but old nonetheless. In their midst rose a pile of crumbling stones which had once formed an altar. Fingertips of sun touched the stones and live plants overrunning them, white narcissi with red-rimmed coronas, spiny-leafed acanthuses, and jonquils yellow as if the

sunlight had flowered into the petals. We did not explore the altar however, and risk discovery by the Dryad, but crouched in some bushes beyond the oaks and watched for bees.

Soon a faint buzzing tingled my ears. I cocked them toward the sound and nudged Remus. A swarm of bees was approach ing the ring of oaks. We watched them circle and vanish in the oak tree nearest the altar, a large tree with a trunk perhaps twenty feet wide at the base, and a welter of greenery high in the air. Yes, it could easily house a Dryad. I started to rise, but Remus grasped my tail.

" No," he whispered. " Your father said to watch where the *most* bees go."

We waited, I fretfully, since a minute to a man seems like ten to a Faun. Soon I grew sleepy and, using Remus's back for a pillow, slept until he shook me.

" Three swarms have entered that tree and left again," he said. " No other tree has attracted so many. That must be the one."

We rose and walked to the tree in question. " We forgot to ask your father how to get inside," Remus said, staring at the great trunk. Apparently the bees had entered through a hole invisible to us and far above our heads. The trunk was much too rough and broad to climb, and there were no branches within reach of our hands. We circled the base, prodding among the roots for an entrance, but succeeded only in dislodging a turquoise lizard that ran over Remus's sandal and flickered toward the altar.

Thoughtful, Remus stared after him. " Your father lost sight of the Dryad near the altar." We followed the lizard to the crumbling stones and began to kick among the rubble, careful, however, not to crush the jonquils or narcissi. A field mouse, poised for escape, stared at us from the tallest stone. A honey bee surged from a shaken jonquil.

" Sylvan," Remus cried at last. " I think we have found it!" Eagerly he brushed aside bushes and, head first, squirmed into an opening just large enough for one body at a time. I followed him without enthusiasm. Such holes concealed poisonous adders as well as harmless lizards and mice.

The walls were smooth ; neither roots nor rocks tore at our bodies. But the journey seemed long and the blackness grew oppressive. I imagined an adder with every bend of the tunnel.

Suddenly Remus stood up and pulled me beside him. We had entered the trunk of a tree, the Dryad's tree, I hoped. Far

above our heads, a light shone roundly through an opening. Climbing toward the light, wooden rungs had been carved in the side of the trunk.

" We have found it," he cried, joyfully pulling my tail. " We have found her house !"

" I hope she is more accessible than her house," I muttered.

We started to climb and at once I felt dizzy, since the tree was very tall. I consoled myself that our Dryad would perhaps be beautiful. I had heard that they remained young until they died with their trees. Remus and I saw no women on the Palatine, and imagination was a poor substitute. I had seen him scratching pictures on the walls of our cave, Rumina and other goddesses. He invariably drew them young, bountiful, radiant, the image of Woman in his own young heart. Did such a woman await us now ?

Through the circular opening, we drew ourselves into a room which roughly followed the shape of the trunk. Small round windows cut in the walls admitted sunshine. A couch stood across the room, with feet like a lion's and a silken coverlet prancing with warriors. The air smelled of living wood, and white narcissus petals carpeted the floor. Somewhat hesitantly we advanced into the room. At once I collided with a table and almost upset a lamp like a twisted dragon. Remus, meanwhile, had settled in a backless chair.

" It is citrus wood from Carthage," he said. " I saw one like it in Veii. But where is the Dryad ?"

" The ladder continues," I noted, hastily ridding myself of the dragon lamp. " There must be a second room over our head."

Remus walked to the ladder. " I will call her. She must not think we are robbers."

But he did not have to call, for we heard footsteps descending the ladder. I lifted the sling from my neck in case the Dryad should be armed. Aeneas, after all, had found a race of fierce Amazons in Italy. Dryads who lived alone, Amazons or not, must know how to fight for their trees.

The Dryad paused at the foot of the ladder and faced us. She was diminuitive even to a five-foot Faun—no taller than four herself. Her hair fell long and loosely over her shoulders, green hair, a dark leaf-green that in the shadows looked black, but where the sunlight struck it smouldered like jade that travellers

bring from the East. Her mouth was pink and small ; her skin, the pure fresh white of goat's milk. A brown linen robe, bordered with tiny acorns, rippled to sandaled feet.

She waited for us to speak and explain ourselves. When we said nothing—what could we say ? our invasion was evident —she spoke herself, slowly as if out of practice, but with great precision.

" You have violated my house. I was sleeping above when your clumsy sandals woke me. May Janus, the door-god, curse you with evil spirits !"

" I am sorry we woke you," said Remus. " As for violating your house, we were not sure it *was* a house until we found this room. Then we forgot ourselves in its beauty." He paused. " We have come to ask a favour."

" A favour ?" she cried. "I can guess the favour you mean." She fixed her glare on me. " You are the worst, you Fauns. Did it never occur to you to cover your loins, as your friend does ?"

" If you notice my nakedness," I said proudly, " perhaps it is because you admire it. Dryads need men, and Fauns need women. Why should they not be friends ?"

" I have banqueted kings," she spat. " Shall I frolic with strangers who blunder in from the woods—a Faun and a shepherd ?"

" We only want to ask you about our bees," Remus blinked, a small hurt child scolded for a deed he has not committed. He stepped toward her and she did not move. " Our bees are dying and we want you to heal them." They stared at each other. Then, incredibly, unpredictably even to me, he took her in his arms. Like the scolded child who does the very thing of which he has been accused, he kissed her small pink lips. Quick as an adder her hand rose—for the first time I saw the dagger— and raked down his side.

With a cry he withdrew, staring not at his blood-streaked side but at her, and not with anger but shame at his own affront. I seized the knife before she could use it again and caught her, struggling, in my arms. Furious because she had hurt my friend, I pressed her wrists cruelly until she lay still. I felt her breasts against my flesh, and then, before I could want her too much myself, said,

" Remus, she is yours. Kiss her again !"

" Let her go," he said.

" But Remus, she attacked you. She deserves what she feared."

" Sylvan, let her go," he said, a small boy, baffled, defeated, but not to be disobeyed. I released her. She stared at the streak down his side.

" Please," he said to her. " My bees are dying. Tell me what to do for them."

She drew him into the clear light of a window and dabbed the blood with a corner of her robe. " Burn galbanum under the hive and carry them clusters of raisins in leaves of thyme. They will heal and grow strong again." Then she took a long, unhurried look at him, and I might have been in another oak, for all they noticed me. " You are very young. At first you were hidden in the shadows. When you kissed me, I was sure you were like the rest."

" I am," he said. " I came to ask you about my bees, but I forgot them. I wanted your body. You made me think of grass and flowers in the hot sun. I am like the rest."

" But you told your friend to release me. Why weren't you angry when I hurt you ?"

" I was. With myself."

She held his face between her hands. " You are fragrant from the forest. You have lain in clover, I think. Like Aeneas, the Trojan. I loved him, you know. He came to me just as you have. All Latium rang with his triumphs—Turnus defeated, Camilla's Amazons put to rout ! He sat on my couch and said,

' Mellonia, I am tired. Since the sack of Troy I have wandered and fought. I have lost my wife and my father and forsaken a queen of Carthage. And I am tired.'

" I took his head between my hands and kissed him, my prince, my warrior. In the years that followed, I watched him grow old. He married the princess Lavinia to found a royal line here in Latium. But he died in my arms, an old man with hair like a white waterfall. And I cursed this tree which kept me young. I wanted to die with Aeneas. The years passed and I did not give myself, even in loneliness. I have waited for another Aeneas."

She turned away from him and stared through a window at a swarm of bees approaching the tree. " They are bringing me honey. My little friends. Your friends too." She faced him again.

" Why are you young ? Aeneas was grey when he came to me, older than I in wars and loves, though younger in years.

Now I am ancient. But you are young. You cannot have waited for anything very long. Your eyes are naked, a child's. You have not learned to hide your thoughts. You want me and fear me. I could stab you with words more sharply than with this dagger. Why do you come here young and virginal? I will make you old. My face is a girl's, but my eyes are tired with waiting."

Like round-built merchant ships laden with precious oils, the bees invaded the room and unloaded their nectar in a cup of agate. She held out her hand and some of them lit in her palm. "To me, Remus, you are like the bees. Their life is six weeks."

"Then help me to be like Aeneas!"

She reached up to him and loosened the fillet which bound his hair. "It spills like sunflowers. I am cold, so cold. Give me your sunflowers, Remus. Prince of Alba Longa!"

"You know me?"

"Not at first. Only when I had hurt you. I knew you by your yellow hair and your gentleness. The forest speaks of you, Remus. With love."

Their voices blended with the whirr of bees, and the scent of nectar throbbed in my nostrils like a sweet intoxicant. I had lingered too long. I backed down the ladder and returned to the pile of stones.

Much later, when Remus stepped from the tunnel, he said, "Sylvan, you are crying!"

"I am *not* crying," I protested. "Fauns don't cry. We take things as they come and make light of everything. A bramble bush scratched my eyes and made them water."

He looked doubtful but did not press me. In fact, he said little even after we left the circle of oaks and plunged into the forest.

"The Dryad," I asked. "Was she hospitable?" I pressed him with the hope that he would speak of her lightly, as a woman possessed and forgotten. I wanted him to reassure me that I was not replaced in his heart by a bad tempered Dryad older than Aeneas!

"Yes."

"Remus," I chided. "Your spirits seem mildewed. Have you nothing to tell me about Mellonia?"

It was almost as if the aged Faustulus were speaking. "What is there to say about love? It isn't happiness, altogether; it is sadness too. It is simply possession."

" I should think you would feel like wrestling," I said. " Or drawing one of your goddesses. Or swimming the Tiber. You don't look possessed to me, you look vacant."

" I am thinking of many things," he said. " Yesterday, I wanted to punish the man who had killed my mother, and I wanted to be king for the sake of Fauns and wolves and runaway slaves. Now I want to be king for her sake also."

We were nearing the Palatine. At the mouth of our cave, he stopped and faced me and placed his hands on my shoulders.

" Sylvan, why were you crying back there ?"

" I told you," I snapped.

" Did you think she had driven you out of my heart, little Faun ?"

He had not called me " little Faun " since that night a year—ten years—ago, when Romulus stole me from my camp. " Yes," I said, losing control of my tears. " And not to a girl but a witch ! Or squirrel, I should say, the way she lives in a tree. Remus, she will bite you yet." Being half goat, I always saw people as animals.

He did not laugh at me and try to make light of my tears, but touched his fingers, lightly as butterflies, to my ear. " In the circle of oaks," he said, " there were jonquils and narcissi growing together. There was room for both. Do you understand what I am saying, Sylvan "

Just them the ram-eyed Celer hurried toward us down the hill. If anything, his eyes had grown flatter and more stupid with the passing year.

" Remus," he called in his thick slurred way. " News from the city ! Romulus wants you in his hut."

three

In the early dusk, the hill lay shadowed and strange, and the hut of Romulus seemed misted to stone. Solemn and dignified, sheep roamed the paths and, pausing, were hardly separable from the low rocks which Vulcan, it was said, had thrust from his caverns in a fiery temper. Shepherds and those who had recently joined them, Romulus's latest recruits, loitered in small groups talking about the day's work or tomorrow's drill. The newcomers held apart from the original shepherds. Their garb was the same simple loin cloth, but their faces, though mostly young, were scarred and sullen. One, I knew, was a murderer who had fled from Lavinium after killing his wife ;

another, a parricide from the new Greek colony at Cumae. It was men like these whom Remus wished to bar from the Palatine, and Romulus welcomed because they knew how to fight.

When the wife-killer saw me, he bleated like a goat. Remus wheeled in anger but I shoved him toward Romulus's hut. He must not fight on my account.

" You sound like a frog," I called good-naturedly. " Do it like this." And I bleated so convincingly that she-goats answered from every direction.

A figure loomed toward us, a tall ship scudding in a sea of mist. It was Romulus. To me he nodded, to Remus he smiled.

" Brother," he said. " Gaius is here from the city. He has brought us news." We walked into his hut, where a small, bearded man who reminded me of a water bug, so freely did he skip about the room, was telling a story he seemed to have told several times and would no doubt tell again. His eyes sparkled when he saw Remus and me, a new audience.

" Remus," he said. " And Sylvan, is it not ? Listen to what I have seen ! I met Numitor in the market yesterday with two attendants. Lately Amulius has allowed him considerable freedom. To appease the people, I expect, and keep them from growling about taxes. Anyway, a half-grown sheep dog was barking at one of Amulius's soldiers. A friendly dog, wanting to play. But the soldier did not. He raised his spear and drove it through the animal's heart. Numitor cried out in anger and raised his staff to strike the man. The soldier, far from cowed, drew his sword, but a barber and a vintner intervened while Numitor's attendants hurried him back to the palace.

" As the old man disappeared, I heard him shout, ' If my grandsons had lived, there would be no soldiers !' Everyone who had watched the scene—myself included—was stirred by Numitor's courage. And everyone wished that there were truly grandsons to drive the soldiers from the street."

With a vigorous skip, he ended his story and smote Remus's shoulder for emphasis. Remus's emotion was evident. His eyes, wide and troubled, mirrored the flames from the hearth : mournful lights in a green, sad forest. As far as I knew, no one had told the overseer the boy's real identity. But Gaius watched him with unusual interest. Perhaps he had overheard the shepherds.

Sparing Gaius the temptation to repeat his story, Romulus led him to the door. " It is bad news you bring us, Gaius. Thank Jove we are kingless here ! Do you wonder we stay in the country ?"

Gaius smiled ironically. Doubtless he guessed that most of Romulus's men and Romulus himself avoided the city for reasons that had nothing to do with a fondness for the countryside.

" When I think of Amulius," he sighed, " I am tempted to stay here with you. They call him The Toad, you know, though he calls himself The Bear. But Tullius, my master, depends on me. His herds have multiplied, Romulus. I shall take him good news." With a backward wave, he bobbed down the Palatine.

In Romulus's hut, Faustulus, Celer, the twins, and I gathered by the fire to evaluate Gaius's news. On such occasions, Remus always included me, though the first time both Romulus and Celer had objected to the presence of a Faun.

" We have waited with patience," Romulus said with unsuppressed excitement. " Now the mood of the city seems right. They will flock to our side the minute they know us ! But they have to be told who we are, and our grandfather is the one to tell them. First we must identify ourselves to him. I will go to Alba Longa tomorrow and get an audience."

" But he lives in Amulius's palace," cried the aged Faustulus bent like a hickory bow but taut, like the rest of us, with the spirit of revolt. " How can you get an audience ?"

" He is right," said Remus. " You can't simply walk to the palace as I did in Veii and ask to see Numitor. Amulius's guards are much too suspicious. Your height and bearing set you apart at once. I should be the one to go."

" You, Remus ? What about your hair ? Blonde men in Latium are as rare as virgins in Etruria. They will take you for a spy from the Gauls ! Even if they don't, how will you gain an audience with Numitor ?"

" I have thought what I would do for some time. First I will dye my hair dark brown. You know the umber that's dug from the banks of the Tiber ? I will rub some in my hair and disguise the colour. Then I will steal one of Numitor's cows. His shepherds will catch me and take me to Numitor. In the theft of cows, the owner and not the king has the right to pass judgment. Amulius will have no hand in this unless Numitor turns me over to him. I don't believe he will."

" No," said Romulus, " it is much too dangerous. I won't let you take the risk."

Usually I wanted to kick him with both my hooves. Now I wanted to embrace him.

" Remus is right," said that idiot, Celer, mouthing his usual monosyllables. " Old men love him. He's soft and polite. Let him go, Romulus. I have a stake in this too."

Yes, I thought, cattle, women, and a house in town. That's all you want. What do you know about government ? Remus, my friend, even if you win the city, you will not have won your justice.

" It is settled then," said Remus with a finality that ended argument.

" And I will help you," I said.

" No, I will do it alone. Fauns are not popular in Latium. The shepherds might kill you right off."

Romulus looked troubled. He stroked his beginning beard and furrowed his brow. This fierce, ambitious young man, who feared neither wolves nor warriors, was unashamedly afraid for his brother. At last, like a father sending his son to fight the Gauls, he placed his hands on Remus's shoulders and said,

" Go then, Brother. But while you are gone, I will gather the shepherds. We will be ready to attack the city when you return with word from Numitor. If you don't return within three days, we will attack anyway. The gate is strong, but the walls aren't high to shepherds who live on hills."

" Or to shepherds led by princes," said Faustulus proudly, drawing the twins to his side. " For eighteen years I have called you my sons. In fact, since I found you in the cave at the breast of Luperca. After you had fed, she let me take you—she, your second mother, knew that the time had come for a third. And I carried you back to this very hut and to Larentia, my wife. When Larentia died a year later, I brought you up myself. Now, like the wolf, I must step aside and return you to your grandfather. You will not shame him."

In our cave the next morning, Remus veiled his head in a cloak and addressed a prayer to the god Bonus Eventus, whose image he had scratched on the wall. No one knew the god's true appearance, but Remus had made him young and round-cheeked, with a spray of barley in his hand. Holding out his arms and quite oblivious to Luperca and me, Remus prayed :

" Bonus Eventus, god who brings luck to the farmer with his barley and his olive trees, bring me luck too ; send me safely to my grandfather !"

After the prayer, he set a cup of milk before the image, for everyone knows that the gods, whether human as Remus and the Etruscans supposed, or bodiless powers in the wind, the rock, the tree, demand offerings of food. (Luperca eyed the milk, and I hoped that the god drank quickly !) Then he attended to his bees, burning galbanum under the hive and carrying them raisins in thyme.

" Look after them, will you ?" he asked. " And Luperca too. You may have to feed her from your hands. She is very feeble." (Not too feeble to drink that milk, I thought.) " And Sylvan. Will you tell Mellonia where I have gone ? I had meant to visit her today."

I stamped my hoof in protest. " The squirrel lady ?"

" Goddess," he corrected.

" Goddess ? She will live no longer than her tree !"

" But her tree has lived hundreds of years, and will live hundreds more. Till Saturn returns. Then he will find her another."

" Is that what she told you ? What about lightning ? And floods ? And woodcutters ?"

" Your ears are quivering," he grinned. " They always do when you get angry." And he began to stroke them with his irresistable fingers. " You will see Mellonia ? Promise me, Sylvan."

" Don't do that," I cried. " You know how it tickles."

" But you like to be tickled."

" That's my point. You can make me promise anything."

" Would you rather I yanked your tail ?"

" All right, all right. I will see Mellonia. Now go and steal your cow."

Of course I had meant all along to help him. My problem was how to remain hidden until he had begun his theft, then run out and implicate myself and share his capture. I followed his tracks at a safe distance. In the marshes, I was careful not to let my hooves squish noisily, and among the Sabine burial mounds, some fresh, some covered with grass, I steeled myself not to take fright at the presence of spirits and break into a gallop. I was careful to keep a tree or a hill between us. He moved rapidly, as always, but his tracks and my keen sense of hearing kept me on his trail.

Numitor's shepherds lay asleep in the shade, three gnarled men as ancient as their master, who, it was said, hired only the old to work for him because the young reminded him of his lost daughter and grandsons. At the feet of the shepherds lay an aged sheep dog who also seemed to be sleeping. I hid behind an ilex tree and waited for developments.

Remus advanced into the herd and singled out a thin, black cow with a shrunken udder. The dog stared at him sleepily as the three shepherds continued to drowse.

" Ho there, cow, off with you !" Remus cried, scuffling through the bushes with a great racket. Like a child chasing geese, he seemed to enjoy himself.

The dog made no move until he saw the shepherds open their eyes. Then he hobbled forward and warily circled the intruder. The men rubbed their eyes and began to shout, " Thief, thief !" Remus pretended to be bewildered by their cries and ran in circles around the cow. I sprang from my ilex tree and joined him.

" I told you not to come," he whispered, as angry as I had ever seen him.

" Two of them," croaked a shepherd. " And one a Faun. They might have made off with the herd !"

They cautiously approached the spot where we circled the cow, who, unperturbed by our sallies, continued her breakfast of grass, while the dog, preening himself on his vigilence, barked from a bed of lupine.

" Brave dog, brave Balbus," the shepherds muttered, stroking the animal on its flea-bitten head. One of them fetched some leathern thongs from a lean-to beside the pasture.

" Now," said the least infirm of the three, who seemed their leader. " Tie their hands."

Without resistance, we offered our hands. While a shepherd bound them, the leader waved his staff threateningly and the dog rushed in and out barking, then withdrew to catch his breath.

" They are just boys," said our binder, craning his neck and squinting for a clear look. " Need we take them to Numitor in town ? It's such a long walk, Julius. A good thrashing may be all they need."

Remus hurried to speak. " My father thrashed me once. That is why I ran away. It made me rebellious. No, I am afraid you must take us to Numitor, unless you want every cow

stolen and sold to the Etruscans across the river." He looked very fierce and tilted his head as if to look down in scorn on these men who dared call him just a boy. " And my friend here, the Faun. Would you believe it ! Young as he is, he has already carried off six maidens." He added wickedly, " I have carried off seven. But then, I am older."

" Boys they may be," sighed the leader, " but dangerous ones. Numitor will have to judge. Can the two of you get them to town while Balbus and I watch the herds ?"

The old men looked at each other and then toward town, as if weighing the effect of twenty-four miles on their weathered ankles. One of them prodded Remus with his staff, the other me. We lurched forward obligingly. " We will try," they sighed.

" Give them a whack if they talk," advised the leader, and off we went to find Numitor.

Alba Longa, the city of Romulus's and Remus's dream, which I myself had seen only from the woods at the foot of its plateau, was in truth a modest walled town of five thousand people. Its rock walls, though tall, were starting to crumble, and its streets grew grass between their cobblestones. Nevertheless the houses glittered whitely with plaster and looked to us both like little palaces.

" And their roofs," Remus whispered. " They are covered with *baked clay shingles.*" We were used, of course, to the thatched roofs of shepherd huts. " No danger of fire, no rain soaking through."

" Ho there, thieves, get on with you," our captors shouted, and prodded us with their staves. Everywhere the people stared at our advance, to the obvious pleasure of the shepherds, who cried the more loudly, " Ho there !" A vestal with a black Etruscan vase almost spilled her water. A vintner dropped his pig-skin of wine and a thin red stream trickled among the cobblestones. There were barbers in stalls by the road, and sellers of vegetables holding great melons in their hands ; children, sheep dogs, and asses ; and, brash and numerous, the soldiers of Amulius. In most Latin cities, I knew, there was no standing army, no soldiers except in wartime. But Amulius's men, brandishing spears tipped with bronze, marched through the city as if to say, " We march on the king's business, and it is not for civilians to inquire its nature."

" Ho there," shouted our captors once too often, and a soldier swatted them both on the head with the shaft of his spear. " Be quiet, old men. You are near the palace." Chastened, the shepherds fell silent and ceased to prod us.

To the left lay the temple of Vesta, raised by Etruscan architects on a stone platform, with four square pillars across the front. Its pediment twinkled with orange terra cotta but not with the images beloved by the Etruscans, for the Latin goddess Vesta lived in the flame of her hearth and had no physical semblence. Opposite the temple crouched the palace of Amulius, a low white rectangle distinguished only by size from the houses we had passed. It was whispered that one day Amulius hoped to build a true Etruscan palace, multi-coloured instead of white, with frescoes and colonnades, from the cattle he took in taxes ; he would trade them to the Etruscans for architects and stone.

As a start, at least, he had flanked his gate with bronze Etruscan lions, slender and lithe-legged, their tails looped over to touch their backs, their eyes almond-shaped like those of the men who had made them. In front of the lions stood a pair of human guards, only less lordly than the animals.

" Have you business in the king's palace ?" one of them demanded. His jerkin was leather, his crested helmet, bronze.

Our captors had not recovered their composure since the scene with the soldier. They stammered awkwardly and Remus had to speak for them.

" They caught us stealing Numitor's cattle. They want to receive his judgment."

At mention of Numitor, the guards softened. One of them leaned into the gate and called, and a withered attendant appeared from the interior. Guard and attendant whispered together ; attendant disappeared and shortly returned. He led us down a hallway supported by wooden timbers and into a garden behind the palace, enclosed on three sides by a brick wall. Roses rioted in vermillion chaos and crocuses spilled like golden goblets. It was the first flower garden I had ever seen. I wanted to roll in the blossoms, thorns and all, and kick my hooves in the air. Then I saw the king of the garden and forgot to dream. He sat in a backless chair and stared into a milky pool. His white curving hair was hardly distinguishable from his robes, which billowed around his feet and hid his sandals.

He seemed unaware of us. The attendent drew his attention. " Prince, your shepherds have brought two thieves to receive justice."

He raised his head and looked at us without expression. His face was as yellow and cracked as papyrus, laid in a tomb by pharaohs older than Saturn ; god-men ruling the Nile before the Etruscans had passed through Egypt and brought her lore to Italy. A face like papyrus whose writing has been erased by time ; inscrutable.

" Bring them forward," he said. We knelt and Remus took his hand.

" My king," he said, nothing more, but with infinite sincerity.

Numitor withdrew his hand and motioned the boy to rise. " I am not your king," he said stiffly. " I never was. You are much too young—the age of my grandsons, had they lived. And they were born after I had lost my throne. Tell me, boy, why did you steal my cattle ?"

" Because I wanted to see you."

" To see me ? I don't understand."

" As a thief, I knew they would bring me to receive your judgment."

" You were right. Before I deliver judgment, what favour do you ask ? I warn you, I have few to give."

" Your blessing. Your love."

" An old man loves his children. I have none. His grandchildren. I have none. My heart has rid itself of love. A nest without swallows. But what is your name ? Something about you stirs me to remember—"

" A shepherd named me Remus, and my brother, Romulus. We are twins."

The names, of course, were meaningless to him, but he caught at Remus's last word. " Twins, you say ?"

" Soon after we were born, our mother was buried in a pit and we were taken to be drowned in the Tiber. But Faustulus saved us and made us his sons."

Numitor groaned and surged to his feet, like the geysers of Vulcan, white with borax, which roar from the earth and shudder in the air.

" What are you saying ?" he thundered. " You lie as well as steal. I saw my grandsons when Amulius took them from my daughter. One had dark hair, darker than yours. One had gold, gold like this flower." He crushed a crocus under his sandal. " A gift from the god, his father. Which are you ?"

" The gold-haired." Remus fell to his knees and ducked his head in the pool, which began to run rivulets of brown. He rose and shook out his hair. Though streaked with umber, it glittered yellowly like gold among veins of iron.

I watched the papyrus mask. The worn and time-veined surface trembled and softened, the forgotten language of love spoke in misting eyes. He ran his hand through Remus's hair and felt the molten umber between his fingers.

" Time," he said. " Give me time. I am not used to tears. They burn like wine." An old man sightless with tears, he took the boy in his arms. " Rhea," he whispered, " your son has come back to me."

" You are a senile old fool," a voice croaked from the door. " This boy has played a trick on you. He should be taught a lesson."

I recognised Amulius though I had never seen him. I knew him from the veined toad eyes which never blinked, the hunched and dwarfish shape. Amulius the Toad.

" Guards !" he called.

"Go to Romulus," Remus whispered. "I will hold him off."

Behind me a prince and a tyrant grappled in roses and thorns. With a single thrust of my hooves, I clutched the top of the wall and drew myself up the bricks. " Bonus Eventus," I prayed, " help me to bring him help !"

four

I landed in a narrow street behind the palace and my hooves clattered on the cobblestones. An old woman, carrying melons from market, paused in surprise, then trudged down the street with a shrug that seemed to say : " Let Amulius protect his own palace. If Fauns can rob it, good for them." There was no one else in sight, but an ass, tethered to a stake, watched me vacantly. His master, it seemed, had business in the shop of a dyer, which reeked with decaying trumpet shells, much prized for their purple dye.

Remus had given me seconds. As soon as the guards overpowered him, they would follow me or send their friends. I must reach the gate quickly ; I must run. But a running Faun, in a city of soldiers, would look suspicious. They would take me for a thief. Nibbling grass between the stones, the tethered ass browsed in the sun. I loosed his rope and kicked him with the full force of my hoof. He galloped down the street.

" Whoa, whoa," I shouted, galloping after him as if to recover my own escaping property. Round a bend he sped and into the central street and straight toward the towers of the gate. When he slowed, I slowed. When he quickened, I quickened

and yelled " Whoa !" A hand reached out to stop him ; I caught my breath ; but he burst free and charged for the gate. The guards laughed and spurred him on with a slap to his flank and a cry of " Giddyap !" Upsetting a potter's cart, laden with orange clay lamps, I hurried after him.

" May thieves crack your skull," cried the potter. I waved without looking back and raced down the hill toward the forest. To the left of me, Lake Albanus glittered in the afternoon sun, and skiffs of hollowed alder poised like dragonflies on its molten turquoise. Ahead of me dusky cypresses signalled the path to the Palatine.

I found Romulus with Celer and the herd at the foot of the Palatine. When I told him what had happened, he turned very pale and drove his staff into the ground.

" I *knew* I should have gone."

" Never mind," I consoled. " Who can say no to Remus ?"

" If they harm him, I will burn the city ! Celer, watch the cattle." He hurried me up the hill, making plans as he went. " We will attack tonight. In the dark, we may be able to climb the walls before we are seen."

" But the people won't know us. Remus had no chance to tell Numitor about our plan."

" No matter. We can't delay. Once in the city, we will shout his name—' Long live Numitor !'—and hope to rally support."

Romulus was right, we could not delay. But what could we do against walls and soldiers ? If we battered down the gate with a tree, soldiers would surely be waiting. If we climbed the walls, they might see us and still be waiting. Since Alba Longa stands on a ridge, it is difficult to reach the walls without detection, even at night. I said nothing ; Romulus knew the dangers. But I could not risk Remus's life with such a puny effort.

I descended the Palatine and headed for the cave. I wanted to think. On the way I passed Celer with the herd. He leaned against a rock, staff in hand and a straw between his teeth. Complacent oaf, I thought. Calm as a sheep when Remus's life is in danger.

" So they shut the Woodpecker in a cage," he grinned. " Big games tonight, eh ?" Before I could hoof him, he changed the subject. " Sylvan, I hear you found a Dryad. Where's her tree ?"

" She is Remus's Dryad," I said indignantly.

" And yours," he smirked. " And mine, if you show me her tree."

" North of the Quirinal," I lied. " An ilex tree with a lightning mark on the trunk." I lowered my ears to muffle his answer and hurried to the cave. Inside, I threw myself on a pallet of clover, but the fragrance reminded me of Remus and clouded my thoughts. I paced the floor. Luperca crept from the rear of the cave and pressed against my leg. I knelt and took her head in my hands.

" Luperca," I said. " Remus has gone to the city. They have taken him captive. What shall I do ?" She looked at me with such intelligence that I felt she understood my words ; she began to whine and I wished that I understood hers.

Then I heard a swarming of bees outside the cave. I walked out and looked at the hive in the fig tree. Mellonia's remedy had worked. The bees were recovering their health. Mellonia! She was the one to help Remus. She had cured his bees. Might she not have secrets to release him from prison ? After all, she had loved Aeneas, the incomparable warrior. I galloped for the circle of oaks. Behind me, a conch shell boomed from the Palatine, and I knew that Romulus was summoning his men.

I stood at the foot of her oak and called : " Mellonia, I have come from Remus." No answer.

Again I called. A voice, muffled by branches, answered. " I am coming down. Wait for me by the altar."

In a surprisingly short time, she emerged from the tunnel. She was not the Mellonia I remembered, hard and queenly, but a pale tree child blinking in the alien sun. She raised a hand to shelter her eyes.

" He is hurt ?"

" No. But Amulius has taken him prisoner." I told her about his capture.

" What does Romulus mean to do ?"

I explained his plan—as much as I knew.

" Romulus's shepherds," she sighed. " I have seen them drilling in the woods. They are brave but they have no armour. They have no spears. Only their staves and bows. What good are bows against walls, or in fighting hand to hand through the streets ? They will cost Remus his life."

" Mellonia," I cried desperately. " You can save him. I know you can."

She touched my cheek with the tips of her fingers, like little blades of grass. " You are a good friend to him, Sylvan. You and I and the forest, we are his friends. Perhaps we can save him. Go back to Romulus now. Say that when Arcturus shines directly over the temple of Vesta, I will come to him in the woods below the city gate. Let him do nothing till I come, but have his men in readiness."

I pressed her hand ; it was warm and small like a swallow. " Mellonia, I have not been kind to you."

" Nor I to you. But Remus has made us friends. You are his brother, Sylvan. Far more than Romulus, the Wolf. Trust me."

I turned to go and she called after me. " Sylvan, wait. In truth I am afraid for him. The forest is restless. The cranes have been flying all day, as they do before a storm. But there has been no storm. And all last night, owls cried in my tree. I have looked for vultures, birds of good omen. Especially for woodpeckers. There are none to be seen."

" Good omens ?" I cried. " You are Remus's good omen !"

Tall above Alba Longa, the temple of Vesta burned in the moonlight, and orange Arcturus, the star of spring, climbed above the stone pediment. Fifty shepherds crouched in the forest below the gate : Romulus with his ancient spear consecrated to Mars ; several with bows and arrows, the use of which Remus had taught them ; but most armed only with knives, staves, or slingshots. The bodies of all were bare except tor loin cloths—no greaves on their legs nor metal corselets to hide their chests and backs from the plunge of an arrow or the bite of a sword.

Their battering ram was an elm tree cut in the forest ; their ladders looked as frail as saplings untested by storms. How many Shepherds I wondered would survive the night ? I was glad that the bent Faustulus, at Romulus's insistence, had remained on the Palatine. A momentary pity possessed me. Who could blame them, rough though they were, for wanting houses in town and women to tend their hearths ?

" We can wait no longer," said Romulus. It fretted him following orders from a Dryad he had never seen. Nothing but concern for Remus, I think, and knowledge of his own inadequacy, could have made him listen at all.

" But Arcturus has just now risen above the temple," I protested. " Before, it was still climbing. I know she will come !"

" What can she do if she does ? We are fools to try the gate, which seems to be her intention. We should scale the wall on the far side."

Then I heard the bees. " Hush," I said. " She is coming."

My ears quivered. The droning grew louder ; curiously the men peered into the forest. I felt like a traveller approaching a waterfall. At first he hears just a murmur, faint and distant. Then the trees fall away and the murmur roars in his ears.

Now they surrounded us, bees beyond counting. Kindled by the moonlight, they curved like a Milky Way above our heads and wove a shield from the darkness. Mellonia led them. She seemed to be made out of leaves and mist and moonlight. She walked in a cloud of bees, and I had to look closely to see that her feet touched the ground. The men gaped at her ; Romulus too, and that stupid Celer most of all.

" Is that your Dryad ?" he whispered. " She looks like a goddess !"

I gaped too, but less at her beauty than at the dark stains on her face—were they blood ?—and at her torn, dishevelled robe.

" It is nothing," she whispered, passing me. " Part of my plan." She singled out Romulus. It was not hard for her to recognise him, the brawniest of all the young men and the only one with a spear.

" Romulus," she said. " Brother of Remus, I salute you. When the gate is open, I will raise my arm. Enter with your men."

Before he could question her somewhat cryptic directions, she was gone, climbing the hill toward the gate. The bees swirled high above her ; their droning died, their fires flickered out in the darkness.

" What does she mean to do ?" Romulus gasped. " Sylvan, she is mad."

" Or a witch," cried Celer, staring after her.

The men shuddered and whispered among themselves. Something moved in the forest. Shapes inseparable from the trees, not to be seen, scarcely to be heard. Something breathed.

" Striges," went the whisper. " Vampires."

" Lemures. She sent to make us follow her !"

Now she was midway to the gate. " Guards," she called out, her voice broken as if with pain, yet strong enough to be heard in the towers that flanked the gate. " Help me. I am hurt." She fell to her knees. " Help me."

Silence. Then a voice, hesitant, testing. " Who are you ?"

" I have come from Veii. Wolves attacked my escort in the forest."

Creaking, the gate swung inward on its massive stone pivot. A lamp flickered in one of the towers, vanished, reappeared on the ground. Its bearer paused in the gateway. Mellonia rose, staggered, fell again. " Help me." The guard walked toward her, sword in hand.

She raised her arm.

" They will shut the gate in our face," groaned Romulus. " We can never climb the hill in time !" But his hesitation was brief. Whatever his faults, he was not a coward. With a low cry to his men, he raced up the hill toward the gate. I ran beside him. The hill swelled above us, endless and black. I felt like a swimmer in the trough of a mountainous wave. Would we never make its crest ?

Kneeling beside Mellonia, the guard raised his head and saw us. " Shut the gate !" he shouted. He scurried to safety ; the gate swung inward, monstrous, implacable.

Then a shadow crossed the moon. I looked up ; my ears stood on end. Mellonia's bees ! In a deadly amber stream, they poured from the sky. A shout, a thrashing in the tower. The gate groaned slowly to silence, half open.

I dug my hooves in the turf, kicked aside stones, drove myself furiously forward. Romulus tripped and I heaved him back in the path. Through the half open gate, I saw the movement of men, the flash of a spear, the swirling of bees and bronze. Then we were in the city. The bees withdrew and left us to fight our battle.

A soldier charged me, levelling his spear and grinning like the demons of death in Etruscan tombs. I raised my sling and caught him in the teeth. He stopped, a round black hole where his teeth had been, and stared at me. Blood gushed out of the hole. Like a broken bow, he fell at my feet.

" We have them outnumbered," Romulus shouted. " They are falling back !" Spears wavered, shields swung aside. The street near the gate lay empty except for ourselves.

" Numitor !" " Numitor is king !" Romulus began the cry, and the rest of us took it up. " Numitor is king !" Dazed with too easy a victory, we surged toward the heart of town, the temple, the palace, and Remus.

But the street was barred. A row of spears glittered across our path, like the oars of a galley raised from the sea in sparkling unison. A wall of spears to bar our advance, and behind them another, another, and finally a row of archers, grim as Etruscan bronzes. The soldiers we had routed were few. Now we must meet an army. Already our limbs were streaked with blood. We had spent our wind in the climb and the fight at the gate. We had lost some men—six I counted with a hasty glance in the street. We were tired, outnumbered, and armourless. How could we shake those fixed, immovable spears ?

" Where are the bees ?" I cried. " Mellonia, where are your bees ?"

Then I saw the wolves, thudding through the gate and into the street. Muffled as raindrops, their feet padded on the stones. My nostrils quivered with the scent of fur, grassy and wet from the forest. I felt hot breath and smelled decaying flesh. We crouched against walls to let them pass. The wolves ignored us. Straight toward the soldiers they went, the levelled spears and the tightening bows. Mellonia and Luperca followed them.

Mellonia spoke so softly that I could not make out her words, or should I say incantation. It is said that the Etruscan princes, when they hunt, bewitch the animals with the piping of flutes and lure them into their nets. Mellonia's voice, it seemed, had such a power over wolves. Sometimes, it is true, an animal balked or threatened to turn from the pack. But Luperca, surprisingly agile, snapped at his heels and hurried him back into line. The venerable wolf who had suckled my friend in a cave and the aged, ageless Dryad : both were queens.

The line trembled, the spears wavered, like oars engulfed by a wave. The long taut bows swayed in the archer's arms. And the wolves attacked. High above the wavering spears, a body spun in the air. Spears shot up to ward off its deadly fall. The line was broken. The archers never fired. Men and animals rolled in the street ; armour clattered on stones and weighed men down ; animals sprang on their chests and tore at their naked faces. Spears were useless, arrows worse. A few had time to draw daggers. Most used their hands.

Some of the men broke free and began to run. Wolves loped after them. Wounded, in pain, the soldiers reeled against doorways and beat their fists for admittance. The doors remained shut.

The city had wakened. On the rooftops, torches flared, people crouched behind them and stared at the rout of the tyrants who, a few hours ago, had tyrannized Alba Longa. Now a weird procession formed : Mellonia and Luperca with the wolf pack, a cloud of returning bees above their heads ; Romulus with his shepherds, raising their staves in token of victory.

But an army's march is slow, and Remus was still in the palace. Ignoring the wolves, I pushed to Mellonia's side.

" Come ahead with me," I urged.

She nodded. " Luperca can watch the wolves."

In a cloud of bees, we raced through the market of silent stalls, where tomorrow the vintner would hawk his wine and the farmer his gourds and grapes. A terrified soldier reeled from our path. A sheep dog snapped at our heels but, hearing the wolves, ducked in an alleyway.

The palace was almost dark. The temple of Vesta, across the road, lent a fitful light from its eternal hearth. The Etruscan lions growled in brazen impotence. They had no soldiers to guard them. The gate was unbarred. We entered the central corridor and, following a light, turned aside into a large hall.

" Amulius's audience room," Mellonia said. She pointed to a curule chair of gold and ivory raised on a stone platform. A tall candelabrum, hung with lamps, cast mournful flickerings on the tapestry behind the throne. Seeing that the room was empty, I turned to continue our search. Mellonia stopped me.

" We will lose minutes. Let my bees find him." She raised her arms and inscribed in the air a series of circles and lines, like the loopings of bees when they tell the location of flowers. The bees understood and swarmed from the room.

We looked at each other. Where was the powerful sorceress who had opened the gate of a city to admit the forest ? Like a swallow after a storm, beaten and bruised, she sank to the floor. I motioned her to sit in the chair.

" No," she said. " Amulius sat there." She stared at the plum-coloured hangings behind the chair. " Even his dye is false. Not Tyrian purple, the colour of kings, but the dye of trumpet shells."

I sat beside her and rested her in my arms. " It will be all right," I said. " Soon we will have him back again."

" Now perhaps. But later ? He will always be hurt, always be threatened."

" We will look after him."

" We are vulnerable too. Even now I am weary for my tall bark walls. I cannot leave them for long."

Abruptly the bees returned, circling in the doorway to catch our attention. In the dark corridor, we lost sight of them, but their droning guided us through several turnings and down a stairway redolent of rocks and moisture. We stepped into a cellar lit by a single torch, smoky and pungent with resin. The room opened through a barred door into a small cell. The door swung wide on its pivot and Amulius's body, clutching a dagger, hunched like a bloated toad across the sill. Remus stood in the cell beyond the body.

" He came to get me," he said, dazed.

" And you had to kill him ?"

" No. They did." He pointed to the bees which had lit on the pallet in his cell. I knelt beside the body and saw the red welts, a hundred or more, and the closed swollen eyes.

"He unbolted the door and said that my friends were coming; he was going to make me his hostage. I stepped backward. He drew his dagger, and they hit him from the back like a hundred hundred slingshots. He scraped at his eyes, groaned, and fell to the floor. Then you came."

" The bees love you," Mellonia said proudly. " Some may have come from your own hive. They sensed your danger."

He buried his face in the fall of her hair and she held him with exquisite tenderness. For the first time, I loved him loving her. Two children they seemed, warm in each other's arms and forgetful that love, however strong, is also brief, because it is bound by the frailties of the flesh. I wanted to enfold them in the magic circle of my own love and blunt, like a ring of shields, all menacing arrows. But I was a Faun, briefer than men.

At last she drew apart from him. " How pale you have grown, shut up in the palace. In a single day, you wilt like a lotus.

" Come," I said. " We must find Romulus. He is much concerned." We climbed the stairs.

The palace thundered with men. Their shadows bristling on tapestried walls, they stalked through the rooms with torches and gasped at treasures which, to the eyes of a shepherd (and mine as well), rivalled the riches of Carthage. A fan made of peacock feathers. Pearls as big as acorns. A mirror whose handle was the neck of a graceful swan ! Guards and servants were nowhere in evidence. They must have fled with our

arrival, and the palace lay temptingly accessible. The shepherds seemed to forget that they had come to liberate and not to loot.

We found Romulus in Amulius's audience room, and I must say for him that he was not himself looting, but, torch in hand, trying to organize a search for Remus. He was having trouble; his men were more concerned with found treasures than with lost brothers. When he saw us, he whooped like a Gaul on the warpath. Throwing his torch to me, he lifted his twin from the floor and hugged him with brotherly ardour. Often he seemed the crudest of warriors, a brash young wolf who, in spite of his tender years, had somehow missed youthfulness. But with Remus he was youthful as well as young, and only with Remus could I like him.

" We have taken the city," he cried, while I steadied his torch and shielded my eyes from its sputtering resin. " Brother, Alba Longa is ours !"

" And Numitor's," Remus reminded us. " Has anyone seen the king ?"

In a room at the back of the palace, we found him on a couch, his white beard overflowing a crimson coverlet. He had slept through the fall of the city, and he thought himself still asleep when Remus explained what had happened and said, " This is your grandson Romulus."

At last the sleep had cleared from his eyes. He held out his arms to Romulus, though clearly he was ill at ease with this great muscular grandson, smelling of wolves and blood, who came to him from the forest.

Romulus and Remus supported the king between them and, with Mellonia and me, headed for the gate. Along the way, in corridors and sleeping chambers, Romulus gathered his men, and a sizeable procession emerged from the palace. Beyond the Etruscan lions, twenty or more shepherds lounged or sat in the street, placed there by Romulus and awaiting his signal to enter the palace. They stared at Numitor with mild curiosity.

On the roofs of the houses, the townspeople waited too. But Mellonia's wolves still prowled the streets, and the timorous Alba Longans, though visibly moved at the presence of Numitor, were not yet ready to risk descent.

Romulus stepped forward with Numitor and raised the aged king's arm into the air. " People of Alba Longa, your king is restored to you !"

With a slight motion, Numitor released himself from Romulus's support and stood alone. He straightened his

bowed shoulders and lifted his weathered face. Forgetting their timidity, the people cheered as if they themselves had restored him to his throne. The shepherds were silent ; it was not Numitor they wanted but Romulus. Had they fought to restore an old man to a throne he had lost before they were born ? I watched Romulus's face and saw his impatience for Numitor to address the people and abdicate in favour of his grandsons. The Wolf had done the honourable thing ; he had proclaimed his grandfather king. The next move was Numitor's.

Meanwhile, Mellonia had left us. I saw her in the street with Luperca, gathering her wolves and bees as a shepherd gathers sheep. Remus saw her too, but she shook her head : he was not to follow.

" She is tired," I whispered. " She wants her tree."

" People of Alba Longa," Numitor was saying in a clear, resonant voice. " Amulius is dead. My grandsons have come back to me. A staff in my old age, they will help me to live out my years—to rule wisely if only for a little. As king of Alba Longa, I hereby declare an amnesty to all who supported Amulius. I will end my reign with peace, even as I began it. The years between are forgotten." He paused, I should say posed, and lifted his arms with the studied flourish of a mime. A king, it seemed, even in exile, never forgot the gestures of royalty.

The applause was vehement.

" Long live Numitor !"

" King of Alba Longa !"

The people clambered from the rooftops and thrust their way through Romulus's men to the feet of their restored king. Remus tightened his hand on my shoulder. Romulus paled. A mutter, lost in the general cheering, ran among the shepherds. We had rescued Remus ; for me, that was enough. But the shepherds wanted more, and rightly, while Romulus and Remus had dreamed of a throne since childhood.

At last the old man's strength was failing. " Help me to bed, will you, my grandsons ? Tell your men the largess of the palace is theirs. The wines, the fruits, the venisons. Tomorrow I will rule—with your help. Now I will sleep."

When Numitor slept and Romulus's men roamed the palace, a sausage in one hand, a cluster of grapes in the other, Romulus, Remus, and I talked in the garden. The jonquils, beaten gold goblets by day, had paled with the moon into silver and seemed to be spilling moonlight into the pool.

For once, Celer was absent from our council. Romulus assured us that he had not been wounded, but no one had seen him since Numitor addressed his people.

" Chasing some wench," I muttered.

Our conversation turned to Numitor.

" Did you see his excitement ?" Remus asked. " He will reign for years !"

" Then we will build our own city," Romulus announced. " Even if we reign with Numitor, we can't have our way in Alba Longa. What changes can we make while an old man holds the throne ? His people will not accept change as long as he lives. They have had a tyrant ; now they want a venerable figurehead. Let them have what they want. We will build *our* city on the Palatine. Already we have a circle of huts. Next, add a wall, then a temple to Mars, then a place of government—"

" And a shrine to our mother," said Remus, kindling to the plan. " A temple to Rumina and a park for the birds and animals. I think, though, Romulus, that the Palatine is not the best hill. True, there are huts already. But some of the owners are thieves and cut-throats, as you well know. Let them keep their huts, but in our new city there will not be room for such men. Why not build on the Aventine ? It is almost as high, and closer to the forest, to Mellonia and her friends, who won us our victory."

" Ask Father Mars who won our victory " Romulus snapped. " Mellonia helped, it is true. But my shepherds, Remus, took the city. The men you call thieves and cut-throats."

" Men like Celer make good warriors," Remus granted. " But not good citizens. I mean no disrespect to the man. But Romulus, can you see him worshipping in a temple or sitting in a senate house ? Give him a woman and herds, but leave him on the Palatine. Build our city on the Aventine !"

" Ask for a sign from heaven," I interrupted. The gods, I thought, should favour Remus, who worshipped all of them and not the war god only. " Consult a sheep's liver, as the Etruscan augurs do, or watch for birds of good omen."

" Very well," said Romulus reluctantly. " We shall ask for a sign. Early one morning—the best time for omens—we shall climb our respective hills and watch the sky for vultures, the luckiest of birds. Whoever sees the most shall choose his hill for our city. Now, my brother, let us sleep before we quarrel."

The palace abounded in couches ; I chose one with feet like an eagle's and fell asleep, dreaming of vultures.

five

With less reluctance than the brothers anticipated, Numitor received their declaration that they wished to build a city on the Tiber. Doubtless realizing that such a city would stand as a safeguard between Alba Longa and the Etruscans—now friendly, but expanding—Numitor had promised to send workmen and materials, and he had already purchased the herds of Tullius and given them to the twins who had long been their shepherds.

But first a site must be chosen. At sunrise three days after the capture of Alba Longa, Remus and I stood atop the Aventine, watching for vultures. The day had been chosen because it was sacred to the Pales, deities of shepherds who had given their name to the Palatine. Before sunrise, Remus had fumigated his herds with sulphur to drive out evil spirits and scattered the stalls with arbute boughs, beloved by the goats, and wreaths of myrtle and laurel. Later the shepherds on the Palatine would leap through bonfires and, facing the east, pray to the Pales. A lucky day, one would think, for omens. But for whom ?

" I wonder why the gods favour vultures," I said, wrinkling my nose as I pictured the birds at a feast. " Such an ugly creature."

Remus laughed. " Ugly, yes. But helpful. They rid the forest of carcasses. And they never kill."

" Which way will they come ?"

" They may not come at all. They are very rare in this country. Mellonia says to watch the river, where the animals go to drink and die."

He had visited her daily since the fall of Alba Longa. Her name had grown pleasant even to my long ears. Instead of his usual loin-cloth, he was wearing a tunic, almost sleeveless and falling just below the thighs, which the Dryad had woven from rushes and leaves. Soon it would wilt, but Mellonia had promised him a leaf-coloured garment of wool to take its place. " Now you are part of my tree," she had said. " Green leaves, green tunic. You carry the forest with you."

" But how will Romulus know if we *really* see the number we say ?"

" He will take our word," said Remus, surprised.

" And you will take his ?"

" Of course."

" It means a lot to him to build on the Palatine."

" I know. But he would never lie to us."

" Remus. Have you ever thought of building your own city —without Romulus. It won't be easy to rule with him. If you win your hill, it will be even harder. And men like Celer, how will you keep them out ? Or make them behave if they enter ?"

" I will build with Romulus or not at all. He is my brother. Do you realize, Sylvan, I shared the same womb with him ? We have never been apart."

" You love him deeply, don't you ?"

" He is one of three. You, Romulus, Mellonia. I love Mellonia as someone beyond me, a goddess or a queen. Green leaves in the uppermost branches of a tree. I love her with awe and a little sadness. I love you, Sylvan, as someone close and warm. A fire on a cold night. Barley loaves baking on the hearth. You never judge me. With you I am most myself. And Romulus ? The stone pillars of a temple. The bronze of a shield. Hard things, yes. But strong and needed."

" You are very different from Romulus. He is not always a shield. He is "—I chose my words carefully, not wishing to offend him—" rash in some ways."

" I know," he said sadly. " And I try to temper his rashness. In return, he gives me courage."

" Courage, Remus ? You have strength enough of your own. I never saw you hesitate when you knew what was right."

" You can't see my heart. It leaps like a grasshopper sometimes ! Romulus, though, is fearless."

Then you are the braver, I thought. You conquer fear, while Romulus's courage is thoughtless, instinctive. But I said nothing ; he would only make light of himself.

And then we saw them : High above the orange turbulence of the Tiber, six vultures glided to the north. Clumsy birds, ugly —I had not changed my mind—but oh, how welcome.

" Remus, you have won !" I cried. " Even if Romulus sees them, we saw them first. They are flying *toward* and not away from him."

We raced down the hill and scrambled up the Palatine, a few hundred yards to the north.

" Slow down, Woodpecker," I shouted. " Your tunic has given you wings."

He laughed and tore me a leaf from his waist. " Catch my feathers and fly !"

In a flurry of leaves and dust, we burst through the circle of huts and found Romulus, waiting with a small band of men, on the highest part of the hill.

" Six of them," Remus cried. " Romulus, we saw six at once !"

Romulus looked surprised, but he spoke blandly. " So did we. Just before you came." His face at last showed the start of a beard, a small black V below his chin. The ambitious boy, impatient but waiting, had hardened into a man who, no less ambitious, had ceased to wait.

" It must have been the same six. They were flying this way."

" No matter. They still count."

" Then we are tied."

" No," put in Celer. " We have seen *twelve*." He twisted his mouth to the caricature of a smile, but his flat eyes were cold.

" Twelve ? There have never been so many near th ese hills!"

Romulus started to speak, but Celer continued. " Today there were. The six that just passed, and before them, six more. Even larger—as big as eagles. They circled twice to be sure we saw them. Sent by the gods, eh, Romulus ?"

" Is it true ?" Remus asked his brother.

Romulus glowered. " Of course it is true. Celer has told you. And the city is mine to build where I choose."

Remus paled and spoke with effort. " Build it then." It must have been clear to him that Celer had lied and that Romulus, though hesitant at first, had repeated the lie. " Sylvan," Remus said to me, " I am going to the cave."

We started down the hill. Behind us Romulus was giving orders. " Find me a bull and a heifer. We will plough the boundaries of our new city. But first we will celebrate the feast of the Pales. Celer, break out the wine. And the rest of you, build us some bonfires."

The men whooped approval and scuffled about their work. After the feast, Romulus would yoke the animals to a bronze-tipped plough and drive them around the base of the hill where he meant to build his walls, leaving a space for the gate. The area enclosed by the plough would be fortunate ground. Whoever crossed the furrow instead of entering by the desig-

nated gate would shatter the luck of the builders and allow the invasion of hostile spirits.

Remus was silent until we reached the cave. He threw himself on his pallet and Luperca, as if she sensed his trouble, crept beside him.

" You can build your own city," I suggested.

"No, I will help Romulus. But first I must understand him."

" I know how you feel. Your hill was the best."

He looked up at me. " The hill is not important. Romulus lied. That is important. He is building his city on a lie and the men know."

" No one objected. They like the Palatine."

"That is the harm. They knew and said nothing."

I left him alone all morning and waited under the fig tree. Once I looked in the cave. His eyes were open, but he did not appear to see me, nor to hear the merriment on top of the hill.

" Rumina," I said, more in conversation than in prayer. " You are the goddess of the suckling herds. But your tree stands right at our door. Neglect the lambs for awhile and help my friend."

In the afternoon, I climbed the fig tree and captured some honey in a round clay bowl. The bees, sensing perhaps for whom it was meant (or instructed by Rumina herself), made no objection. In the cave, I knelt beside Remus.

" Eat it," I said crossly. " You have brooded enough."

He smiled, sat up, and took the bowl from my hands. He tilted it to his lips as if it were milk, for he relished the honey from his own bees, and drained the bowl.

" Now," he said, " I will help Romulus with his walls. But first I want to see Mellonia."

" I will wait for you here."

" No, come with me."

" You must have things to say in private. Who wants a Faun's big ears at such a time ?"

" She has grown to love you. Besides—" His smile faded. " I want you with me. It is something I feel—a loneliness, a fear—I am not sure what. I want you with me."

In the woods beyond the Aventine, we encountered Celer and three of his friends, leaning on each other for support and thrashing through the undergrowth with such a racket that turquoise lizards flew in all directions. When they saw us they

stopped, and Celer looked momentarily sobered. He forced a grin.

" Big Ears and Woodpecker," he said. " You missed our feast. The gods will be hurt."

" They are hurt already," said Remus, without slowing. " But not by Sylvan and me." The revellers made for the Palatine with surprising directness.

Suddenly I remembered that Celer had asked me the location of Mellonia's tree. I had not told him, but the night of the wolves he had vanished from Alba Longa. Had he followed her home, I wondered, and then today, emboldened with wine and friends, returned to invade her tree ?

" Remus," I said. " Do you think he has found her tree ?"

We began to run.

The branches of Mellonia's oak tree sprawled like a city which has grown without planning, its temples and archways mingled in artless beauty. From a distance, there was nothing to hint an invasion.

We approached the trunk.

" That lowermost branch," said Remus tensely. " I think it is starting to wilt."

" Too little sun," I said, but without conviction.

He began to call. " Mellonia !" " Mellonia !"

I searched the ground for traces of a fire or other means of assault, but the trunk was untouched. Around the altar, however, there were definite signs of Celer and his friends—jonquils in crushed profusion, rocks overturned, and, yes, they had entered the tunnel ; it reeked of their wine.

Mellonia's room lay hushed and broken. We found her beside the couch, a white small body blackened with bruises and cradled, incongruously, in a bed of narcissus petals. Remus lifted her on to the couch and smoothed her tangled green hair, in which petals had caught as if to take root in its venture. She opened her eyes.

" Little bird," she said. " Who will look after you ?" That was all.

He covered her body with petals and kissed her on the mouth which could no longer feel bruises. " I had never meant to outlive you," he said.

I turned my head but I heard his tears. Or was it the column of bees that swayed through the open window, the forest grieving for its queen, and for the king who had loved her ?

The shepherds say that bees speak only what is in our hearts—our grief, our joy, not theirs. That their murmur is always the same, and it is we who darken or lighten it to our mood. Perhaps, then, I heard my own tears.

We left her in the tree with the bees. " She would not want to be moved," Remus said. " The oak is dying. They will go to earth together."

We stared at the tree and already, it seemed, the wilt was stealing upward to the green and sunny towers.

" Did you hear what she said ?" he asked.

I pressed his hand. " Yes. Yes, little bird."

When we reached the Palatine, Romulus had driven his team around the foot of the hill. For one short space, the gate, he had left the earth unbroken. Stripped completely in the hot April sun, he leaned on the plough, his massive thighs diamonded with sweat. Drops rolled down his beard. He looked very tired—and very royal.

With mattocks and shovels, the shepherds were setting to work inside the circle. Romulus had captured the *numen* or magic of the gods. Now they must build strong walls and enclose the magic securely. They sang as they dug, Celer and his friends the loudest :

Romulus, son of the spear god Mars,
Nursed by the long grey wolf . . .

Celer looked up from his work and saw us. He dropped his shovel.

Pausing outside the circle, Remus cried : " Romulus, your walls are useless, the luck is gone. A murderer stands inside!" He jumped the furrow. The shepherds stared at him in horror. I myself, midway to the gate, gasped at his daring. He sprang at Celer. Celer recovered his shovel but Remus parried, wrestled it from his hands, and felled him with a blow to his shoulder.

Romulus snatched a shovel from the shepherd nearest him. " Idiot !" he shouted to Remus. " It is you who have broken our luck. Fight me, not Celer."

" Keep away from me," Remus warned. But he made no move to defend himself from Romulus ; he was waiting for Celer, dazed but conscious, to regain his feet.

Romulus struck him with the back of his shovel. I saw Remus's eyes. Surprise, that was all. Not fear, not anger. Then he fell. In the forest, once, I heard a she-wolf cry when a

shepherd killed her cubs. All pain, all yearning. A cry from the vital organs of her body, as if their red swift pulsing could wrench her cubs from death. So Romulus cried and knelt beside his brother. In Remus's hair, the stains were of earth, not blood ; the umber soil mingling with the sunflowers. But the stalk was broken.

I took Remus's shovel. " Stand up," I said to Romulus. " I am going to kill you."

He looked up at me through tears. " Sylvan, I wish you would."

I think it was Remus who held my hand. Born of one womb, he had said. Romulus, his brother, his pillar and shield of bronze. Instead of killing him, I knelt at his side.

Troubled and respectful, the shepherds surrounded us, and Faustulus laid his hand on Romulus's neck.

" My son, you meant him no harm. Let me prepare his body for burial."

Romulus shook his head. " I must make my peace with him first."

" And you, Sylvan ?"

" I will stay with Remus."

The men climbed the hill. The sunlight thinned and shadows came to watch with us. Somewhere a cow lowed with quiet urgency. It is late, I thought. She is waiting for Remus to milk her.

" He must have a place for the night," I said. " He never liked the dark."

Romulus stirred. I think he had forgotten me. "The cave?"

" No. He would be alone there. We will take him to Melonia's tree. Celer killed her, you know—he and his friends."

He looked at me with stunned comprehension. " Then that was why Remus attacked him. They will die for this, Sylvan."

I kindled a torch in the cave with pieces of flint and returned to Romulus. Luperca followed me. Romulus stroked her head.

" Old mother," he said, " you loved him too." He lifted his brother and held him lightly, with Remus's hair agianst his cheek. " His hair smells of clover."

" I know."

We walked slowly—Luperca was very weak—and came at last to the tree. Trembling but quiet, she waited outside the cave.

We placed him on the couch beside Mellonia. I pressed my cheek to the shoulder where, as a child, I had clung to be warmed and loved. I crossed his arms as if I were folding wings.

" Little bird," I said. " You reproached Mellonia because you had to outlive her. But I am the one you punished. All of your life was loving—except for this. Where is your city, my friend ?"

" In me," Romulus answered.

I turned on him angrily. " In you ?" Then I was sorry. Tears ran out of his eyes. He made no effort to hide them. I thought that he was going to fall and held out my hand. He grasped it and steadied himself.

" You think I want walls and armies," he said, " and nothing more ? At first I did. This morning I did, when I lied about the birds. But then I had Remus ; it seemed I would always have him. Whatever I did, he would love me. He was all I needed of gentleness. Now he is gone—unless I capture him in my city. A great city, Sylvan. Men will call her Rome after me, and her legions will conquer the world—Carthage and Sardis, Karnak, Sidon, and Babylon. But her highways will carry laws as well as armies, learning as well as conquest. Sylvan, don't you see ? Remus will live in us and the city we build. Come back with me, Little Faun !"

Where is the bird of fire ? In the tall green flame of the cypress, I see his shadow, flickering with the swallows. In the city that crowds the Palatine, where Fauns walk with men and wolves are fed in the temples, I hear the rush of his wings. But that is his shadow and sound. The bird himself is gone. Always his wings beat just beyond my hands, and the wind possesses his cry. Where is the bird of fire ? Look up, he burns in the sky, with Saturn and the Golden Age. I will go to find him.

—Thomas Burnett Swann

Acknowledgments

I wish to express a particular debt to Alan Lake Chidsey's *Romulus : Builder of Rome* and Carlo Maria Franzero's *The Life and Times of Tarquin the Etruscan.* T.B.S.

The aliens set Man a test before agreeing to admit him to their society—a simple one, to paint a picture. The subject matter—anything !

THE PROBLEM

BY CLAUDE & RHODA NUNES

Are you afraid of death ? Do you wonder whether the prospect of standing alone one day, face to face with the unbeatable adversary, will leave you trembling and afraid—or stimulate you to fight back ?

Perhaps the threat of extinction has been the most powerful force behind the struggle to survive and advance.

" Could that be what lies behind the action of the aliens ?" thought the Admiral for the hundredth time. " Doubtless they realise that an individual or an army placed in a seemingly impossible situation, will be stimulated to make use of all possible resources—mental or physical."

" Failing this," he thought, viewing the clouded planet in his scanner, "we will most likely flunk their examination and contact will stop for decades—even forever."

He remembered so many planets, with varying degrees of clarity. Worlds that were eager to join the League, but did not measure up to the required standards. Worlds too, that were determined not to join and had to be tricked into it. Remarkable how it was the worlds that would probably have most to contribute, that were usually among the most suspicious and stubborn.

He studied the report again. This one was the most extraordinary to date. He thumbed the intercom.

" Send up Dr. Brewer," said the Admiral, as the vision screen lighted.

A few minutes later, his door bell pealed, and the chief psychologist of the space cruiser entered.

"Sit down Doctor !" He followed suit as he spoke, and faced the officer from one of the form fitting chairs in the cabin.

" Drink ?" He gestured at the cabinet, but was not surprised when the medic refused.

" I suppose you have seen our initial films of the planet ?" He gestured at the screen.

The psychologist nodded. Such as were available had been viewed by the majority of the personnel aboard. That was standard procedure, and realising that the question was mainly rhetorical, he remained silent, and waited for his superior to continue.

" Rather scanty, don't you think," he ventured after a moment, as the Admiral continued to look pensive and undecided.

" It's all they would allow, as you already know. They seem to be a remarkably suspicious lot."

" Or else they are still reserving judgment," said Doctor Brewer, with a faint query in his voice.

The Admiral laughed a little wryly. Even after many years of experience, it was still difficult to be treated by other beings as a strange animal, an animal to be subjected to tests like an aboriginal, to determine his level of intelligence or capacity to learn.

" Well, Terrans always did learn the hard way," he said half aloud. " But perhaps that is the best if not the only way to learn."

" Anyway, Doctor Brewer," he smiled at the officer, who was eyeing him with some amusement, as if he had caught the remark. " I called you up to see the report from our survey party." He reached out and passed the pages of the paper to the lean figure in the other chair.

A few minutes passed and the psychologist passed the report back to his superior officer and relaxed again.

" So this is going to be one of the toughies," he remarked slowly, still thinking of the remarkable demand that had been made by the aliens. No, not demand really. It was difficult to define, but it was more like a suggestion. But, either one fell in with it or . . . He wondered how serious the matter could be.

The Admiral rose and paced the cabin a few times, evidently thinking deeply. Then he sat down abruptly again.

" So the position is that before they will agree to submit to our tests, which I have little doubt they will pass, they insist on submitting us to a test of their devising, to find whether we measure up to certain standards of their own."

Bill Brewer chuckled. " It is rather irritating to have one's own tactics used against one. Sometimes it has proved to be the best tactic, in war at any rate, where the aggressor does not expect his own plans to be used against him."

" But this is not war, or rather not in the usual meaning of the term." The Admiral studied the report again.

" So until we can provide the necessary guinea-pig, they refuse any contact at all with our people. To get down to basics though, have you any candidate in mind, that qualifies for the position ?"

Bill Brewer hesitated for a moment. " There is one," he said reluctantly, " but is it fair to ask him to volunteer for a test that may end in his death ?"

" That's why it has to be a volunteer," answered the Admiral slowly. " As far as I can see there is no other course we can follow."

Of course he volunteered. It was a matter of little choice, as the members of every expedition were picked for certain qualities of mind and make-up. Even without those qualities and the general all round propaganda, it would be difficult to refuse.

After his briefing, John Collins, Draughtsman, amateur painter and a host of other things, like all the members of the crew, sat on his berth, thinking about his assignment.

Tomorrow he would be alone. No doubt he would be surrounded by hordes of aliens, watching for him to make a slip, but aloneness was not always a matter of company, or the lack of it.

Here it would be an aloneness of the mind, because of inability as yet to understand the mores of the new society. Perhaps one day, man and alien would stand at the same window together and look out at the galaxy, but until some basis of understanding could be reached, they could only stand on both sides of a barrier eyeing each other with suspicion.

" Why an artist though," he wondered again. " What does an artist have to contribute to understanding between races. After all, the ability to picture beauty is not necessarily an attribute of morality. There are probably more great personages with no artistic appreciation, than otherwise."

He also wondered why they had specified that failure of their test would result in his death. That was unusual, but the aliens were adamant that immediately the man chosen by the Terrans was deemed to have failed, he would be killed, and the ambassadors expelled from the planet.

John shivered a little. It was not easy to contemplate the prospect, and dying under such alien conditions made it seem even less attractive, if such a thing were possible.

The Terran scientists had given him such information as they possessed. That the inhabitants were humanoid and were already past the large city stage and had dispersed over their planet, as the Terrans had done centuries earlier, seemed the salient points to be studied.

" Surprise ! Surprise !" thought John to himself, as he faced the aliens. " Now all I have to do is to paint a picture."

They faced him impassively, as he stood in the large well-lit hall by the side of a canvas-like square set on a tripod support. Paints and brushes, as required, were ready to hand, and now —all he had to do was paint a picture.

This was certainly the craziest situation an individual had ever found himself in, and the fate of many worlds, perhaps even of the galaxy, rested on whether he made the correct decision or not.

He remembered how they had received him with seemingly normal friendly restraint, but how he had been isolated from contact with the people of the planet. Evidently there were to be as few clues as possible to his solving the problem, he had thought, but without any idea of its simplicity—and yet complexity.

Through the interpreter he had merely been informed that they expected him to paint a picture. No details were provided as to the subject or style. All they would admit, was that the success or failure of his mission rested on the painting, and that he was to be allotted three days to consider the question before commencing the work. If he fancied that he could solve the problem before that period had elapsed, then he was welcome to begin earlier.

" Only three days to consider something that was as bad as putting one's head in the lion's mouth," he laughed wryly. Still, he was doing himself and Terra no good by crying over future spilt milk, so he forced himself to consider the question as logically as possible.

" Firstly," he decided, " they might wish to judge the ability of Terrans, by their dexterity. Some form of testing may have been devised to judge character by method and technique."

This appeared rather unlikely to him, as it was not probable that the facets relating to one species were equally applicable to another. There remained only the supposition that they were interested in the subject to be chosen for the picture. This was far more probable and he wondered whether they hoped to learn from this, the human approach to life and to behaviour patterns in particular.

John tried hard to concentrate, but over all there was the idea of the menace that was implied by failure. He looked at the aliens, wondering what form death would take, and whether he would live long enough to realise how or why it came. Or whether it would be instantaneous and painless.

With an almost visible mental shrug, he turned back to the problem again. Obviously, the aliens believed they could learn something from him, something that might be of value to them in future. At the same time, he could hardly believe that they were interested in proving how different the two species were.

" That's it," he exclaimed aloud, and they eyed him with what may have been curiosity. " The purpose of this test must obviously be to determine whether similarities between them could not lead to a measure of co-operation."

He pondered quickly now, and his thoughts raced ahead, as he tried to picture the most important factor in Terran culture.

Less than a day later he stood calmly by the easel, and started to paint. The aliens studied his picture with interest as it developed.

Thirty hours later John, sat in the main cabin of the space-cruiser. Present were the Admiral and all the chief officers of the vessel.

After congratulations on his success in solving the problem set by the aliens, the Admiral asked him to give them a summing up.

After detailing the exact nature of the test which had been applied to him, John paused for a while, as it was obvious that everyone present was endeavouring to think of a suitable solution.

Eventually John decided to resume his story and continued: "Well, sir, first I approached the task from the angle that the picture must be fairly obvious. That automatically ruled out any attempt at more extreme forms of modern art expression."

He thought for a moment. "Then I decided that it should rather be a study of humans or animals, or something that was recognisably a live and a reasoning being. There was also an idea that the picture must reflect some basic, that is at the bottom of all human-animal behaviour."

"This probably gives rather a vast field for study," said John thoughtfully, "but my opinion was that they would be satisfied with one idea only, provided that it was moral and fitted in with their own code of ethics. So I took a fairly random choice, since any one of you might have chosen differently. I will admit, however, that I was influenced more or less by what your early probing had decided was the state of the current civilisation."

"And that was?" asked Doctor Brewer.

"The fact that there was no sign of large, overcrowded cities. Although the level of advance indicated that they had passed through it, sometime within the last two hundred years or so. Anyway, to get down to brass tacks, I decided to paint a human group, with a child as the focal point."

"Rather a common subject for the painters in the Middle Ages," remarked one officer thoughtfully. "But why a group? Why not just one individual, like a child say?"

"That's the nub of the matter," returned John. "The state of the civilisation indicated that the indiscipline of the young people would probably have passed. Remember that once overcrowding and large cities disappeared on Terra, the juvenile crime wave dropped. The young were no longer driven to excesses to satisfy their emotions, and as a result there was a return to a more balanced family life."

"I see," Doctor Brewer nodded thoughtfully. "So any putting of the child on a pedestal, would have been resented by the aliens?"

"Perhaps," said John half apologetically. "All this is theory, of course, and there may be some other explanation of why I was released. Anyway, I painted the picture of the mother and father, admiring their child, with a group of visitors studying them and the child, some critically, some admiringly."

" I recognise the picture," Doctor Brewer ejaculated, " but I daresay you used your own interpretation ?"

" Well, yes, I thought it would be necessary to make a point that although they were loving and admiring, there was no adulation in the attitudes of either the parents or the onlookers."

" Just one more question," said the psychologist thoughtfully. " Did you paint in any golden aureoles around the heads of the people, as was usually done for this particular type of subject ?"

" As a matter of fact," said John somewhat surprisedly, " I had put them in only as an afterthought, because I could not see that they would serve any purpose, since the aliens could not possibly have any understanding of what they signified."

Dr. Brewer looked pensive. " Perhaps there is more to your solution than you think."

One of the scientists had been listening to the exchange with great interest, and he now interrupted.

" Excuse me, but as a matter of fact, your touching the matter of haloes is rather a coincidence."

Everyone eyed him with surprise as he continued.

" Our pictures have just been subjected to tests under various light frequencies, and it appears that all the aliens have haloes of some sort, which are not visible in our frequency range."

Dr. Brewer looked thoughtful. " I suppose there is no correlation between position in the society and the strength of the aureoles ?"

The scientist nodded.

" As a matter of fact, there is. The stronger the personality, the more pronounced the halo."

As the psychologist nodded thoughtfully, the Admiral, who had been eyeing them with amused curiosity, could no longer restrain his impatience.

" If you don't mind enlightening us lesser mortals, perhaps you would tell us what picture was painted ?"

" It was ' The Adoration of the Magi '."

—Claude and Rhoda Nunes

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