

# Science Fantasy

## THE DAY OF THE DOOMED KING

by BRIAN W. ALDISS



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# SCIENCE FANTASY

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# SF or not SF? . . A Letter from a Reader

I should like to discuss the subject on which you invited letters, *i.e.*, What is sf, and what is its peculiar charm?

As to the definition, I find it convenient to do it as follows:

"There exists a body of fiction concerning events which are impossible according to the framework of knowledge as it stands at the present moment, or at least requiring assumptions not based on this framework. Call this group 'fantasy' or 'imaginative fiction' or anything else, as you will.

"This group may be divided into three very general categories:

"(a) *The Supernatural*. Here the impossible happens by dint of *forces* (gods, ghosts, etc., totally beyond human ken, and strictly alien to it).

"(b) *Sorcery*. Here the impossible happens by the *control* of the forces outlined above by the human mind, or the utilisation of these forces by means of rituals, etc., based on the human mind.

"*Science Fiction*. Here the impossible happens as a result of, or bounded by 'natural laws'. These laws can be those already existing, extrapolations of same, or entirely new ones made up by the author (*e.g.* psi.)"

That has sf categorised—now, let's see why it doesn't apply. Take for example "time travel". Man goes back in time: there's the "impossible" part. What about the natural laws? How does he go back? If a time machine is employed, there's your science. True, the author can't tell you the theory behind his machine, but it works, and the man built it, so there must be laws saying it's OK.

On the other hand, if the poor chap gets transported just by getting belted on the head with a wrench, or just "slips", where are your "laws"? So just call it a "gap in the space-time continuum" or some such blather, and that's all right. It happens, and it's natural.

Hold on, though! Why not simply say that all these demons and gods exist, and respond to spells and all that, and therefore *that's* happening according to natural laws?

As far as I can see, the only criterion is the author's attitude towards his own story. In *Burn, Witch, Burn*, Merritt suggests that Mme Mandilip's spells are remnants of a lost science. Then put it on the sf side of the line. Similarly "The Dying Earth", etc. If the author says it's science, it's science—he wrote the story. On the other hand, Moorcock says that his equipment is not science. Very well, "Stormbringer" is sorcery.

Only the author can say whether he meant his story to be sf or not. If the author doesn't commit himself, then categories can be invented, as I have done; but there are *no* dividing lines cutting off one from another. There are many stories which obviously fall into one of the groups, but many about which there is doubt. It is because of these that so many definitions have been dreamed up, and none apply.

Now on to your second point: "What is the magic of sf?"

I don't know, but there are several guesses I could make. I've often wondered why the first fantasy stories were written. Was it because somebody simply felt the urge to throw off all restrictions and write what he pleased (Venusian princesses and all)? Was it that he wrote down his daydreams in romantic fashion? Was it that he realised that there was an infinity of new material to be had in this way?

Perhaps the charm of sf lies in this infinite nature. Myself, I think that it's the infinite nature that causes the "sense of wonder" (cliché, but its inventor knew what he was talking about). I shan't attempt to define it. I know what it is and so do you (or you missed your way somewhere), and so do most sf readers (Rule: Never say "all"—it includes too much. Always say "most")—so there's no real need to pin it down and analyse it.

The sense of wonder is a property of the imagination, and sf is unique in that it asks so much of the imagination. It's not overly hard to conceive of a detective investigating a murder, or of boy meeting girl, etc., while a good sf story plays your imagination like a musical instrument. But musical instruments have limits. A detective story is limited and easily reproduced in the imagination, but



science fiction has *no* limits. You can't play a symphony on a violin, but you can't play very much at all on a drum. People who have an imagination analogous to a drum don't like sf. There's a lot of difference between plucking a few notes on a violin and playing a concerto. The first is what an "ordinary" story does—the second is what a good sf story does.

I think that the emotion I get when listening to Tchaikovsky or Chopin is pretty much the same as the emotions I get from a good sf story—that I call the "sense of wonder".

It may seem like rubbish to you—but that's how I see it.

*Note.* My "sense of wonder" seems to be as erratic as my taste in music. I got a lot from "The Stars my Destination" but nothing from "The Demolished Man". Elric really gets me, but I look with indifference upon Conan. I can't explain it.

— BRIAN M. STABLEFORD

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*How many chances have we? Or is there only the one, and that decided by ourselves . . . ?*

# THE DAY OF THE DOOMED KING

by Brian Aldiss

Through his heavy lids, the church hardly appeared to grow nearer until they were upon it. The summer and the wound at his chest made him dizzy. As he stumbled from his horse, the great daisies in the long grass made it seem to him that he was walking across a starry sky, and his perspectives would not come right.

A priest with a rich mantle thrown over his black frock came hurrying to them. He heard Jovann say to the priest, "It is King Vukasan, and he is sore wounded. Make ready a couch for him to rest on."

He muttered into his horse's flank, "We must get to Sveti Andrej and warn them to arm themselves against the Turk," and then the daisies and the sky and dappled shade rippled like a banner, and he had a near view of his silver stirrup before blackness closed upon him.

When he roused again, things were better for him. He lay on a bunk in a cool cell, and his head was clearer. Propping himself on one elbow, he said, "Now I am able to go on to my kinsmen at Sveti Andrej."

Jovann and the black priest were at his side, smiling with anxiety. "My lord king," said the priest, "you have taken grievous harm, and must stay with us until you have strength for the rest of the journey."

His mouth was stiff, but he said, "Priest, yesterday we fought a battle all daylight long against the scimitared Muslim, until the River Babuna flowed with their blood and ours. Courage does not trifle with numbers, that I know, but we had only one blade to every six of theirs, and so in the end every one of my soldiers fell. My cousins at Andrej must be told to make ready to fight, and there



are only my general Jovann and I to tell them. Bind me up and let me go on."

Then Jovann and the priest conferred together, first with Jovann's moustache at the priest's furry ear, and then with the priest's beard at Jovann's ear. Then Jovann came to his king and knelt by the bed, taking his hand and saying, "My lord, though we did not slay the vile Muslim, at least we stayed him; he also has his wounds to bind. So the urgency is only in you, and not in the situation. It is the heat of noonday now. Rest, take some soup and rest, and we will go on later. I must have care of you and not forget that you are of the house of Josevic and your wound bleeds authority."

So he learnt to be persuaded, and they brought him a thin soup and a trout culled from the nearby lake, and a pot of wine, and then they left him to rest.

He could eat no more than a mouthful of the fish. Though he was not conscious of his wound, he was sick inside with worry, wounded to think that the consuming Turk ate his lands away and was never defeated; his people were brave and terrible in battle; why then did God not allow them to flourish? It was as if a vast tide of time flowed continually against them.

Listlessly, he stared through the open window by his bed. This room in the priests' quarters closely overlooked the lake, so that the waters seemed to flow even to the sill. All that punctuated the expanse of his view was a reed bed near at hand; the further shore was an uncertain line of blue, there merely to emphasise the water. He stared at it a long time until, growing tired of its excessive vacancy, he turned his gaze instead to the view within the room.

Although the cell itself was simple, it contained a number of objects, cloaks and instruments and even a field hoe. These had been hastily concealed, at least to some extent, from the royal view, by a screen interposed between the foot of the bed and the chattels. Slowly his stare fixed itself on this screen.

It was carved of wood, elaborately, in a manner that he recognised as that of the masters of Debar, for some of their work graced his own stronghold. Intertwined among leaves and vines were large birds swallowing fruit,

and boys lying piping, and hogs rolling in flowers, and turrets, and lizards that curled like Turkish scimitars. There were numbers of little religious foundations similar to the one in which he rested, scattered like jewels throughout his kingdom; they hid many such treasures as this screen, but at this time he took no delight in them.

For a long while, he lay between lake and screen, thinking he must move and speed on to his kinsmen. Many times he thought he had already climbed from his bed before Jovann arrived at the door, staring anxiously at his face and asking, "Are you strong enough, my lord, to take the road again?"

"Fetch me my sword," he said.

So they set forth again, and this time, the path leading upland, they went by a more complicated way. The horses were fresh from their rest but nervous, and started violently at the jays that flashed across their track. Their nervousness conveyed itself to him, and he sweated inside his shirt until its heavy embroidery knocked cold against his ribs. He started against his will to speak of what was in his mind, of things that he knew a king had better keep hidden from even the most faithful of his generals.

"I fear an evil enchantment upon me," he said through his teeth. "When the wolves howled as my child-wife died at Bitola of the fever, I thought they cried my name, and now I know they did. There is a mark on me, and the mark is disaster."

"Then it is on me as well, and all others who love you," said Jovann. "You are our common wealth, and as surely as the pig-fearing Muslim shall slay you, he shall slay all Serbia."

Then he regretted he had spoken, for it was not in Jovann's position to answer in such a way, but still the words shuddered from his lips. "As our fine clothes cannot hide our nakedness from God, so the trees that make my kingdom fair cannot hide His curse from me. For you know what the legends say, that we south Slavs rode from the East in great numbers when barbaric enemies drove us from the lands of our ancestors. Though our people have for many centuries broken the earth here, and lie under it numerous, yet it is still not our homeland; and I am



afearred, Jovann, afearred lest this land fall all to the dark-visaged Muslim and the distant pashas."

"Your royal brethren will take arms with us against them, and turn them back so roughly that they never again dare cross the Vardar," said Jovann stoutly. But under the thick trees his face seemed to have a green shade that was not of nature; and even as he spoke, he reined his horse and stared anxiously ahead.

On the path where they must ascend, a magpie crouched with a lizard in its gullet. With wings outspread, it beat at the dust and the horses rattled their reins with dislike of the sight. Jovann sucked in a sharp hissing breath, and slid from the saddle, drawing his sword as he moved forward. The black bird flopped dead at his feet, the lizard still protruding from its beak. He made to strike it, but the king cried to him to stay.

"I never knew a magpie to choke to death before, nor to take a lizard," he said. "Better not to touch them. We will ride about them."

So they pricked their horses through the mantle of trees, forcing them along the mountain, and rode with some difficulty until they achieved the plain once more. Here grew the red poppies in their multitudes, millions and millions of them, the hue of dried blood in the distance, of fresh blood underfoot. In the king's head there was only this colour, as he tried to understand the meaning of the lizard and the magpie.

With a heavy hand, he pointed across the plain. "Jakupica Planina lies there, with snow still on its ridge. When we have forded the Topolka, we can camp by the foot of the hills. By tomorrow night, we will rest ourselves by the stoves of Sveti Andrej and lay our story in sympathetic hands. But first I shall call at a small monastery I know of, Sveti Pantelimon by name, where lives a strange and wise seer who shall explain to me what ails me and my kingdom."

So they slowly drew near to the river in the afternoon heat, and came on a shepherd sitting by a flock of sheep, some white and many black, with half-grown lambs among them. The shepherd was a youth who greeted the king without an excess of respect.

"My humble home lies there," he said, when Jovann spoke sharply to him, and he stretched a finger towards a distant hut perched on a rock. "And there waits your enemy the grinning Musilman!" And the finger raised to crags over which a falcon circled. The king and his general looked there, and made out smoke ascending.

"It is impossible they should be here so soon, my lord. Plainly the boy lies," Jovann said in a small voice.

"There is, alas, more than one force of the enemy on my fertile lands," he said and, turning to the boy, asked, "If you know the stinking Muslim is there, why do you not fight? Why do you not join my arms? Have you nothing, even your life, that is precious to you, that you must defend?"

But the boy was not perturbed, answering straightly, "King Vukasan, because you are a king and therefore rich, the laughing Musilman wants all from you, and will take all. But I have nothing, being poor, that he could want. Think you these are my sheep? Then my master would laugh to know it. Think you my life is my own? Then you have a different creed from mine. No, your enemies in the hill will pass me by and leave me as I am."

Jovann drew his sword, and the boy retreated a step, but the king said, "Leave him, for only baseness comes from the base, and he is right to hold that even the thieving Muslim can wish nothing from him. Meanwhile, we have one more reason to press swiftly on towards Sveti Andrej."

But when they had crossed the broad and shallow stream of the Topolka, they came on wide shingle beds, on which the hooves of the horses could obtain small purchase. The heat rose up from these shingle beds, dazzling their eyes, and nothing grew save an occasional poppy and frail yellow flowers with five wide-spread petals to each blossom. And the shingle crunched and seemed to wish to draw them back to the river. So they were tired when they gained the bank, and the weight of the sun grew heavy on their shoulders. When they reached the first foothill, Jovann, taking as little regard for majesty as the shepherd boy had done, flung himself off his horse and declared he could go no further. They climbed down



beneath a tree where a slight breeze stirred, so that the shadows of its branches crawled like vines on the stony ground. They pulled ripening figs from the tree and ate, and the horses cropped at scanty grass. Heavy blood was in their foreheads; they fell asleep as they sprawled.

He stirred, and the foliage above his head was patterned with fruit like the wooden screen from Debar, and there were greedy birds there, screaming and devouring the fruit. The sun was low over the hills, and he sat up guiltily, crying, "Jovann, Jovann, we must go on! Why are we waiting here, my general?"

His companion sat up, rubbing his head and saying grumpily, "As I will die for you, my lord, when the time comes, so when the time comes must I sleep."

But they got to their feet then, and the king forced them to go on, though Jovann would have eaten the cold fish, wrapped in leaves, that he had brought with him for their evening fare. Looking back over the plain of poppies, they heard the clank of a sheep bell as the sheep were ushered towards protection for the night; they saw the lights of the Turk burning on the forehead of the mountain. These sights and sounds were soon hidden from them as they rounded the shoulders of new hills and as night brought down its gentle net upon them.

Wrapped safe in shadow, the king let his mind wander from the ride, until he imagined he had no wound and his child-wife Simonida was alive again; then said he gently to her, "My daughter, you see how the boundaries of our kingdom widen, and how the soldiers and merchants grow as rich as was my grandfather, great Orusan himself. The Bulgars now pay us tribute as far as Bess-Arabia, and the Byzantines are so poor and weak that their cities fall to us every month."

And he imagined that she smiled and answered, "My sweet lord Vukasan, it is good as you say, but let us establish a state that will make the name Serbia sweet even to those it conquers. Let there be not only executions, but laws; not only swords and armies but books and universities, and peace where we can instil peace."

Then did the king smile and stroke her hair, saying, "You know that way shall be my way, even as it would be

your way or the way of my father and grandfather. We will bring wise men to speak to the people from distant Hilander, on the Mount called Athos, and there shall be artists and masons summoned from Thessaloniki, who work less rudely than our native craftsmen. And we shall start new arts and works with men from Ragusa and Venezia, and even beyond, from the courts of Europe, and the Pope in Rome shall heed us . . .”

“You dream too largely, my sweet lord. It is not good to do so.” She had often said it.

“Dreams cannot be too large. Do you know what I dream, my daughter? I dream that one day I may ride into Constantinople and have myself crowned king of Byzantium—Emperor!—while you shall wear no dress but jewels.”

“Then how your subjects will stare at me!” she said with a laugh, but the sound came faint and unnatural, more like the clink of a horse’s bridle, and he could not see her for shade, so that Jovann said at his elbow, “Steady, my lord, as you go, for the way is rocky here.”

And he answered heavily and confusedly, saying, “You are not the companion she was, though I grant you are bolder. What a change has come these last few years! Perhaps you were right in holding I dreamed too largely, for now my dreams are no more and you are gone from me, sweet child of my bed, and all I hear is the rattle of swords, and for the designing of your jewellery I have exchanged battle plans against the fuming Muslim. Ho, then, and hup, or we’ll die before we get to the gates of Constantin’s town!”

The horse plunged under his sharp-digging stirrup, and he returned to his senses, more tired from the mental journey than the actual one.

“Did I speak to myself then, Jovann?”

“It is my lord’s privilege,” said the general.

“Did I speak aloud, tell me?”

“My lord, no, on my oath.” But he knew the man lied to hide his sovereign’s weakness, and bit his lip to keep silence until he had the pleasure of feeling the blood run in the hairs of his beard.

They followed a vague track, not speaking. At last they



heard the noise of a bullock-cart creaking and bumping along, and emerged on to the dusty road that would take them to Sveti Andrej. Now that the trees stood further apart, and their eyes were adjusted to the night journey, they could see the shape of the bullock-cart ahead. He was well awake now, and motioned to Jovann to follow. They rode up to the cart and hailed the driver.

Deciding they now had no cause to go further, the two bullocks dragging the cart stopped and cropped grass in the middle of the road. With an oath, Jovann jumped to the ground, his sword again ready in his hand. The driver of the cart sprawled face up to the stars with his throat cut. Rags lay under his outspread arm, which they examined after a little, and found them to be a peasant woman's clothes.

"This they dare do, so near to home, to kill one of my peasants for the sake of his wife, so near to home, so near to home!"

In a storm of anger and weakness, he felt the tears scald from his eyes, and sat on the bank to weep. Jovann joined him, and put an arm about his shoulders, until he stopped for shame. At that, Jovann thrust a jug into his hands.

"The man's *rakija*, lord. We might as well profit from it, since he no longer can. Drink it, for we have not many hours' travel left, and then we will eat the fish and pluck some of the cherries that are growing above our heads."

He was secretly angry that Jovann could speak of these trivial matters when the urgency of the situation was so great. But a sort of fear gripped him; he was unnerved by the way the bullock-cart had arrived so punctually to deliver its message of death, and he needed to feel the heat of the *rakija* as it plunged down his throat. They drank in turns, quaffing out of the jug.

After a while, the bullocks took the cart off down the road again, creaking and bumping every inch of the way. The two men began to laugh. The king sang a fragment of song:

"How happy are they who dwell in Prilep  
Where the birds nest under every eave  
And the green tree grows."

Although he recalled that the Turk now stood at the gates of Prilep, he sang the verse again into the leafy night. He told Jovann stories of the old days to raise his spirits, of how his grandfather Orusan had in his youth leaped across the fissure in the rock on Pelister and would not marry till he found a girl of hot enough breath to do likewise, no, not though five bare-legged maidens lost their life trying; and of how he himself had swum underground a *vrst* in a cold and unknown river in the same region; and of his father's day-long flight, alone in the hills, with Alisto, the Shiptar prince. And then he thought of his little wife dying in Bitola, and was solemn, and reproached himself. They got to their feet and climbed once more stiffly into their saddles, though Jovann took a great bunch of cherries from the tree as they went, pulling half a branch along with him.

So they rode on through the night, and shivered in their jackets. When dawn leapt over the hills again, they were near to the holy place that the king had mentioned, called Sveti Pantelimon.

He halted his steed by a side track and said, "The way is steep here. I will leave the horses here with you and be back in only an hour, after I have consulted the holy man about the future."

But Jovann protested. "My lord, we are but two hours' travel now from the house of your kinsmen at Sveti Andrej. Let us first carry our ill news to them and set their warlike intentions astir, and then we can return here to your holy man tomorrow, after we have rested."

But he was set in his course, and said so. "Then," said the faithful Jovann with a sigh, "I will follow after you on foot, leading the horses, that where we may ride we can. Heaven guide you, sweet lord, that you know best."

"There is no room for doubt of that," he said sharply, though in his own head there was room enough.

Now they climbed amid sharp spurs of rock, on which the first lizards already crawled to sun themselves. Tortoises ambled from their path, and the progress they made was no faster than that of the tortoise, for the track led back and forth about the hillside. The noise grew of a fast mountain stream by which they could guide them-



selves. When they found it, they saw how it ran deep between two cliffs, and how the path to Sveti Pantelimon followed beside it, as man's paths must ever be slave to those of nature.

Here, after a brief discussion, the horses were hobbled and left, and the king and Jovann went forward together, the one behind the other because the path was so narrow. The water rushed by their feet, making unpleasant music. The rocks above overhung dangerously, so that the trees growing slantwise from one side were often trapped in the vines growing from the other. In one place, a great boulder had fallen and wedged itself between the two sides above their heads, making a bridge for any who were foolhardy enough to pass that way. At another point, where blue flowers clung to the damp rock, they had to bend double, for the path had been painfully chipped through the rock itself.

It was thus, bent double like cripples at Bitola fair, that they reached the monastery of Sveti Pantelimon. Roses grew by it; otherwise it was a grim place, a tiny church built into the rock on a widening ledge of the rock, with a dwelling hut attached. The modest brick cupola of the church was almost scraped by fingers of rock stabbing from the cliff-face.

The intruders were seen. Only four brothers lived here; three of them hurried out to meet their royal guest, whom they recognised. But it was the fourth the king required to see, and after taking *slatko*, the traditional dish of Serbian hospitality, he asked to see this priest.

Jovann rose. "My lord king, I fear for your safety even here, since we know not that even now the foul-stomached Muslim may be riding along this very canyon. I am a soldier. I will guard outside, and give you warning if they come—in a place like this, we might hold off an army."

"Guard well, my general," said the king, and was prompted to give Jovann his hand.

The holy man he wished to see sat in the bare adjoining room. He seemed, with his wrinkled visage, to represent antiquity rather than old age; but his most notable feature was his left eye which, unlike its brown neighbour, was entirely and featurelessly white. To the king, it appeared

that this priest, by name Milos, often saw best with his white eye.

When their courtesies were concluded, the king said, "I am here to ask you only one question, and I need from you only one answer."

"Often, my lord king Vukasan, there is more than one answer to a question. Question and answer are not simple and complete opposites, as are black and white."

"Do not tease me, for I am weary, and the freedom of my kingdom is at stake."

"You know I will do what I can."

"I believe you are among the wisest men in my lands, and that is why I come to you now. Here is the question. Only a few years ago, in the reign of my father and grandfather, whom we all recall and bless, this our kingdom was expanding, and with it the life of our peoples. Life and knowledge and art and worship were gaining strength every day. Now we see all that we hoped for threatened with ruin, as the red-tipped Muslim bites into our lands. So I ask you what will the future be, and how can we influence it for good?"

"That sounds, my lord king, like two questions, both large; but I will reply to you straightly." Milos opened the palm of his hand and stared at it with his white eye. "There are as many futures as there are paths in your kingdom, my lord; but just as some paths, if followed to their end, will take you to the west and others if followed to their end will take you to the east, so there are futures which represent the two extremes of what may be—the best and the worst, we might say. I can, if you will, show you the best and the worst."

"Tell me what you can."

The priest Milos rose and stared out of his small window, which afforded a view onto the gloomy rock beyond. With his back to the king, he said, "First, I will tell you what I see of the good future."

"I see you only a year from now. You lead a great army to a beleaguered city set under an isolated mountain, as it might be Prilep. There you smite the sacrilegious Turk, and scatter the entrails of his soldiery far over the blossoming plain, so that he does not come again to our



Serbian lands. For this great victory, many petty princes turn to your side and swear allegiance to you. The Byzants, being corrupt, offer you their crown. You accept, and rule their domain even as your father hoped you might."

He turned to look at the king, but the king sat there at the bare table with his head bowed, as if indifferent to the burning tidings the priest bore. The latter, nodding, turned back to contemplate the rock and continued in an even tone as previously.

"You rule wisely, if without fire, and make a sensible dynastic marriage, securing the succession of the house of Josevic. The arts and religion flourish as never before in the new kingdom. Many homes of piety and learning and law are established. Now the Slavs come into their inheritance, and go forth to spread their culture to other nations. Long after you are dead, my king, people speak your name with love, even as we speak of your grandfather, Orusan. But the greatness of the nation you founded is beyond your imagining. It spreads right across Europe and the lands of the Russian. Our gentleness and our culture goes with it. There are lands across the sea as yet undiscovered; but the day will come when our emissaries will sail there. And the great inventions of the world yet to come will spring from the seed of our Serbian knowledge, and the mind of all mankind be tempered by our civility. It will be a contemplative world, as we are contemplative, and the love in it will be nourished by that contemplation, until it becomes stronger than wickedness."

He ceased, and the king spoke, though his eyes were fixed on the bare floor. "It is a grand vision you have, priest. And . . . the other, the ill future?"

Milos stared out with his white eye at the rock and said, "In the ill future, I see you leading no grand army. I see a series of small battles, with the shrieking Turk winning almost all of them by superior numbers and science. I see you, my lord king, fall face forward down into the Serbian dust, never to rise again. And I see eventually Serbia herself falling, and the other nations that are our neighbours and rivals all falling to the braying enemy,

until he stands hammering at the gates even of Vienna in the European north. So, my lord, I see night on six centuries in which our culture is trampled underfoot by the conqueror."

Silence came into the chilly room, until the king said heavily, "And the other lands you spoke of, and overseas, how fare they in this ill future?"

"Perhaps you can imagine, my lord. For those six centuries, lost is the name of Serbia, and the places we know and love are regarded simply as the domain of the ginger-whiskered Turk. Europe grows into a fierce and strife-festive nest of warring nations—art they have, but little contemplation, power but little gentleness. They never know what they lack, naturally. And when Serbia finally manages to free itself from its hated bondage, the centuries have changed it until your name is lost, and the very title King no longer revered. And though she may grow to be a modest power in the world, the time when she might have touched the hearts of all men with her essence is long faded, even as are last year's poppies."

After he had heard Milos out, the king rose to his feet, though his body trembled. "You give me two futures, priest and, even as you said, they differ as does a speckled trout from a bird. Now answer my question and say which of them is to be the real future, and how I can realise the good vision of which you spoke first."

The priest turned to face him. "It is not in my power to tell you which future will happen. No man can do that. All I can do is give you an omen, hoping that you will then take power into your own hands. Seers see, rulers rule."

"Give me then an omen!"

"Think for yourself where the futures divide in the prospects I laid before you."

He groaned and said, "Ah, I know full well where they divide. We do not bring enough men against the devilish Muslim at one time. We are, as you say, a contemplative people, and the floods must lap our doorstep before we take in the rug at the portal."

"Suppose it were not a question of being warlike but of being . . . well, too contemplative."

"Then Jovann and I must rouse the whole nation to



fight. This I will do, priest ; this is what I was hastening to Sveti Andrej to do."

"But you called here. Was not that a delay?"

"Priest, I came bleeding from the battle at the River Babuna with all haste."

"All?"

He put a weary hand to his forehead and stared at the bare wall. He recalled the long hours of delay at the monastery, the sleep under the trees, the feast of fish and cherries and *rakija*, and then the diversion here, and he blamed himself deeply for this ineradicable tardiness in his nature, so characteristic of his people also. But there were some more warlike than he, and on them, he saw, the new burden of militarism must rest.

"Jovann," he said. "My bold General Jovann stands outside even now, defending us. He will lend metal to the Serbian arm even if I by my nature cannot."

Milos looked at him with the white eye and said, "Then there is your omen. Come now to the window, my lord king."

By leaning a little way out of the window, it was possible to see the path by the stream below. Jovann lay with his back to a rock, a pink rose between his teeth. All thought of the Turk had plainly left him, for he sat drawing a heart in the dust, and his sword lay some distance from him beneath a bush.

"As we are contemplative, I fear it will not be a contemplative future," Milos said, taking the arm of the king to prevent him swooning.

When the dizziness wore off, King Vukasan shook off the hand that held his. He saw, looking wearily up, that it was Jovann who squatted by his bed. He lay breathing heavily, conscious of the terrible weight on his chest, trying to measure where his spirit had been. He saw the wooden screen at the bottom of his couch, he regarded the still lake outside his window, and he forced a few words through his swollen lips.

"We should have been in Sveti Andrej today."

"My lord, do not fret yourself, there is plenty of time in the world."

And that, my dear unhastening Jovann, is only the truth, thought he, unable to turn the thought into words; but the fate of the coming centuries has to be decided now, and you should have left me here to die and dream of death, and hurry on with the news that my kinsmen must unite and arm . . . But he could only look up into the trusting and gentle face of his general and speak no word of all he feared.

Then his focus slipped, and rested momentarily on the carved screen. He saw that among the wilderness of flowers and leaves a bird strained at a lizard, and a bullock cart traced a path along a vine, and there were little cupolas appearing amid the buds, and shepherd boys and fat sheep, and even a wooden river. Then his head rolled to one side, and he saw instead the vast vacancy of the lake, with the rushes stirring, and the sky reflected in the lake, until it seemed to his labouring mind that all heaven stood just outside the window. He closed his eyes and went to it.

And Jovann moved on tiptoe out to the waiting priests and said, "A mass must be sung, and the villagers must come at once with flowers and mourn their king as he would have it. And all arrangements must be made properly for the burial of this, our great and loved king. I will stay and arrange it for a day or so before taking the news on to Sveti Andrej. There is plenty of time, and the king would not wish us to spoil things by haste."

And one of the priests walked along with him along the narrow way, to summon mourners from the nearest village in the beleaguered hills.

— BRIAN ALDISS

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*Concerning a god called Sid and the Aesir who wore inverted fish bowls . . .*

# THE SAGA OF SID

by Ernest Hill

The vicar considered the christening party through a chink in the vestry door. He sighed. Complete strangers. Pagans. Assembled for the sprinkling of magic water, instinctive desire for invocation, words of power muttered, the lucky sign of a cross. Bells, books and candles. That sallow, rather shapeless girl with pony-tail hair style, a baby in her arms and a hem of lace showing awry beneath her skirt, would be Hetty Jacques. The mother. He vaguely remembered christening her too, twenty-three or was it twenty-four years ago? Her mother had looked very like Hetty today; gawky, unkempt, thick lips parted, cloudy eyes puzzled, dull, vacant, uncomprehending. He had married her too: perspiring, nervous, anything but radiant and three months pregnant, or thereabouts. The red-faced man in tight-fitting black trousers and sports coat, shapeless and two sizes too large for him—that was Jim Jacques. A steady enough young fellow, not very bright. But then no one who had any claims to brightness would have married Hetty. Willingly or at gun-point. A little indiscretion in a hay-loft, probably, followed by a persistent coercion towards the altar, with Hetty's mother on one side and a widening Hetty on the other.

And this is the church, he thought. The House of God. I shall see them again for half-a-dozen christenings and my successor will bury them. 'Religion, C. of E.' on official documents. "Ah well!" he sighed. Why refuse to baptize a child of non-communicants? It wasn't the child's fault, poor little brat. Life was beginning for it, him or her, with a handicap daunting enough without the, at least perfunctory, blessing of the church and sprinkling of the water. And those would be the godparents. Designated to guide and instruct the developing child and exert their

influence towards its entry into the family of Christ. Long-haired, uncouth, uneasy heathens. Yokels. Well, villages were villages all the world over and the better-dressed, the sophisticated agnostics in the cities were just as superstitious at times of birth, marriage and death. A social occasion in St Margarets-in-the-Fields. An outward sign of conformity, respectability and a shy reaching for the hand of God, who perhaps was there after all.

"Who am I?" he asked himself, "to condemn Hetty Jacques?" Was Hetty Jacques any more stupid, retarded—wicked—than her average sisters, resplendent in jodhpurs and svelte, scented and grotesquely urbane in the boredom of their infidelities? Elegance at the hunt ball and rumpled, crumpled, angular and dishevelled on the floor of a shooting-brake afterwards. Moral rectitude was a fairly evenly distributed rarity in all the classes. As was intelligence. Hetty's one affair was sordid only because variegated pre-experience was lacking and Jim had wooed her on a bicycle, rumpled and tugged at a shabby skirt in a cow-shed. Morality is concerned less with the tinsel of the motor-car, sheen of lingerie, flavour of champagne, than with the thing itself. And the thing itself that Hetty had found in the hayloft differed but very little from the Honourable Gladys Jadwin's affair with the Shuttleworth boy last Easter in the back of her father's Bentley. Perhaps the only real difference had been Hetty's ignorance of contraception and Jim's too precipitate haste. Ah well! Mary Magdalene had bathed the Master's feet with ointment and tears. He bustled from the vestry. There were four other christenings after Hetty's.

They gathered around: the Jacques, the godparents, the woman next door, Hetty's parents and old Molly Braddock absent from the cherry-picking with a sprained ankle. He took the child and held it, swathed in its christening robes, over the bowl that now for practical purposes had replaced the ancient Norman font.

"The child's name?" he whispered.

"They are going to call me Sid," the baby said, "I don't like it very much as a name, but if it keeps them happy . . ."

The vicar looked reprovingly at Jim Jacques, standing



bow-legged, bent forward from his broad, strong hips, his big-jointed hands hanging aimlessly, closing and unclosing.

"This is no time for levity," he said. "I must remind you that the baptism of your child is a solemn symbolical undertaking. The washing away of original sin. It is hardly the time or the place to display your talents, however remarkable they may be."

"Quite right, too," Hetty agreed. "Hold your gab, Jim."

"I never spoke a word," Jim protested. "I never said nothing."

"You are obviously a ventriloquist," the vicar accused him.

"I'm no such thing," Jim protested, "I'm a cowman down at Colonel Jollick's place, you know I am."

"Can we get on with the christening?" the baby asked, "I'm very uncomfortable in this absurd linen garment."

The vicar looked at Hetty. "The child spoke!" he said.

"He's very advanced for his age," Hetty agreed proudly.

The vicar looked thoughtfully at Jim Jacques. Truly an unlikely ventriloquist, as unlikely as Hetty herself. His eyes strayed to the godparents and friends. The men cap in hand, awkward, eager to get it over with and wet the child's head in the Four Ale bar of the Chequers. The women reverent with a sense of occasion, the magic water, the bestowal of a name. Hardly possible. Ventriloquists did not really throw their voices. It was an illusion created by the movement of one mouth whilst the other remained apparently closed. He inspected the baby for hidden electronic contrivances.

"You need not be so apprehensive," the baby said, "I'm quite dry and well able to control myself until after this rather ridiculous proceeding is finished."

"I'm at a loss," the vicar confessed, "it's incredible."

"Why not just give him a name, dear?" Hetty asked, "he'll get that impatient if you keep him waiting."

Weakly, the vicar pronounced the time-honoured formula and in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Ghost the incarnation of Hetty and Jim's short burst of fervour in the hay-loft received the name of Sid.

"Thank you!" Sid beamed.

Quite possibly the phenomenon of Sid's premature

articulation would have escaped the attention of the outside world until he had attained the normal years of utterance, for the Jacques kept themselves to themselves in the tied cottage in the hollow below the village and both were loth to admit a stigma of abnormality upon their child's development. But it happened that one of the bell-ringers was also local reporter on the staff of the *Rubbleford Times and Echo*. Hearing, as he did, even across the intervening space between bell-ropes and font, the clear erudite enunciation of the child, a something stirred deep down in his latent sense of newsworthiness. He resolved to seek out the Jacques, interview the baby and, in the words of one of his more exalted contemporaries, 'Publish and be damned'.

Hetty Jacques was feeding her child from a bottle when the bell-ringing reporter arrived. The bottle was necessary, for, although Hetty was lactating happily and generously, Sid was embarrassed at the suggestion of breast-feeding and at the age of three days had politely requested his mother to 'cover up!' at what was to him a shameless display of proffered nipple.

"Come in," she said, "I don't know what it's about, but if it's anything to do with the council, my sink's bunged up and Jim says as it's not his place to muck about with other people's sink-holes and I tip my slops out the back."

"It's the baby," he said. He was a nice young man and his name was Owen Jones.

"What about the baby?" she asked suspiciously, holding the feeding-bottle firmly between its lips.

"It talks!" he said.

"So do you," she snapped, "and a sight too much to my way of thinking."

"How old is the child?" He flicked open a note-book and sucked at a pencil tip. 'Talks like you—says mother' he wrote with his eye on the Nationals and the Cudlip-type headline.

"Three weeks and he talks as well as you do," she confirmed, knowing nothing of the Cudlips. The baby removed the bottle from its mouth and wiped his lips. He turned cold eyes in Owen Jones' direction. "Better," he said, "This gentleman has a trace of Welsh accent."



"But how?" Owen Jones, "How is it possible for a child of three weeks to acquire a vocabulary quite apart from his obvious ability to enunciate?"

"If you've come here nosing and casting aspersions on my education . . ."

"Genes," said Sid, "just a matter of genes."

"Just because my Sid can talk and other kids can't is no occasion for you to go around . . ."

"And chromosomes," said Sid, "quite simple really."

"Saying as he's abnormal or there's anything different about him. You can sling your hook, that's what you can do. Right through that door."

Owen Jones wrote rapidly in his note-book, using a private shorthand he had developed whilst ringing the eighteen changes.

"Why," he asked, "are your genes and your husband's genes different from other people's?"

"He never wears them," she protested. "It's only the young yobs as wears them things. My Jim's respectable."

"You have perhaps heard of Mendel's Law," Sid explained. "My genes have little to do with my parents. I am, you might say, a throwback to a more erudite branch of the family. By illegitimate descent. I regret to say."

"Oh never!" Hetty was shocked. It was one thing to be conceived out of wedlock but quite another to be born so. Partners, even in playful promiscuity, should be chosen from amongst those reliable enough to do the right thing in case of accident.

"It was a long time ago," Sid comforted.

"Even so!" She dabbed her eyes with her apron strings. "There is still a stigma."

"It was long before the Stone Age."

"Oh the shame of it!"

"200,000 years ago."

"I'll never live it down."

Sid returned to his bottle, sucking ruminatively, reflectively, his chromosomes warning him that words were an inadequate defence against the righteous indignation of a woman outraged.

"You'll have to go, mister what-ever-you-said-your-name-was. This has been a great shock to me. I don't know

what his father will say. And don't you go telling everyone in the village about my Sid. Don't you think you can all chuckle because we've been illegitimate since the Stone Age, because I won't have it. I know what goes on after bell-ringing practice on a Saturday night and if I hear you've been gossiping about me, I'll go straight up to the vicarage and tell all I know. I know who was in the organ loft with who and don't you think I don't. Now be off with you and don't you come nosing round here again."

"But Mrs Jacques, you must see that this is a most unusual child . . ."

"I see nothing of the sort. He's my baby and he's going to stay my baby." She picked Sid from his pram and cradled him in her arms, rocking him in the same see-saw motion that his remotest ancestor had devised, however heinous her marriage taboo-breaking crime. Sid closed his eyes. "Aren't you, my precious? Did a nasty man come to bother you just when you wanted to go bye-byes?" Owen Jones stole away thoughtfully, struggling with the birth pangs of embryonic ideation. There was money in this somewhere.

"I don't get it," the circus owner growled through white teeth parted by the wedge end of a cigar butt, "what's the gag?"

"There's no gag," Owen Jones protested, "the child really talks, I tell you. There's a mint of money in a talking baby in any side-show."

"O.K.—I'll buy it. Where is the wonder child?"

"In a village called Rubbleford. His mother leaves the pram out in the front garden every Monday morning while she does the washing. We can slip over the fence and have a word with him when she's not looking. If you're satisfied, we can try and fix the mother. If we can't, we can snatch it another time."

"I'll fix her," he said. "Money'll fix anybody. And I'll fix you too if there's a fiddle. I'm not going all the way down there for nothing. I've got my commitments. Any funny business and I'll have my lion tamer give you a working-over. He'll have you hiding in the cage with the cats to get away from him. Believe you me, if you have a



choice between my tamer and his lions, you take the cats every time."

"There's no fiddle. I want a thousand pounds for the introduction, that's all."

"We'll see," he said, "we'll just have to see."

Sid lay in his pram watching the sunlight play through the rustling leaves of a sycamore tree. A blackbird hopped along a branch, turning his head from side to side in beady-eyed scrutiny. Sid waved. There had been blackbirds in that far-off age before the Stone Age and sycamores and other things Sid could barely remember. His chromosomes were very old indeed. Memory, even in nucleonic acid form, begins to fade with time. There had been sunshine, flowers, scents, an aura of tranquillity. All things beautiful except one thing. What had it been? A plant. Something green and white. His hand trembled, he could not remember. But there had been peace too, a peace somehow more all-pervading than the admitted peace in the cottage and the garden by the place now known as Rubbleford. A peace that one felt within and without, a serenity in the knowledge of the permanence of peace. A woman. Beautiful, kind, loving. A woman with a pot on her head like a fish bowl. Why had his mother worn a pot on her head? All things loving except one thing.

"That's him," Owen Jones whispered. "We'll slip over the fence and you can speak to him. If you're satisfied, grab him and bolt." Sid turned his baby blue eyes to the two faces peering over the edge of his pram. He sucked his thumb.

"Hiya, kid!" Owen Jones greeted him. Sid continued to suck. "This is Uncle Hiram Bartram. He's come all the way from London to see you."

"Goo!" said Sid.

"They tell me you can talk," Hiram Bartram asked, not very hopefully. Sid took his thumb from his mouth and, with the dexterity of the very young, replaced it with his big toe.

"Dada!" he said.

Hiram Bartram looked at Owen Jones and his eyes were dark and hostile. Lions and lionesses lurked in their sombre depths. "Having me on?" he asked ominously.

"I'm not having you on. I tell you I've heard him talk. He can talk as well as you or me if he wants to. Look, Sid, be a good boy and speak for the gentleman!"

Sid blew a bubble, pricking it with his toe. He gurgled happily. "Bla!" he said. At this moment his mother appeared around the corner of the cottage with a basket of clean washing. She was justly angry at the intrusion, though somewhat overawed by the magnificence of Hiram Bartram's white riding-breeches and large cigar.

"I just want to prove to Mr Bartram that Sid can talk," Owen Jones explained. "He's very interested in children." Hetty lifted her child from his pram and held him to her, angrily protective.

"Can't talk," she said. "Never been able to talk. Same as any other baby, my Sid is." She replaced him on the coverlet.

She rocked the pram gently, crooning a half-remembered lullaby as Owen Jones vaulted the fence and sprinted down the lane toward Rubbleford, hotly pursued by Hiram Bartram.

"Did the nasty man wake my precious?"

Sid held his two feet, legs crooked, against his cheek.

"Circus written all over him," he said. "I hardly think it is my destiny to entertain sensation-seeking morons in a side-show."

"Diddums!" she said. But her eyes clouded at the mention of destiny. It was a word she but vaguely understood, implying departure into a separate world, a doing of things that were not of the cottage and Rubbleford. An oblique connection with a Frenchman called Napoleon, the queen, and the wickedness of Hitler. Like every mother she wanted her child to remain as he was, fragile, lovable, tiny, dependent upon her, needing her care, love and protection. Helpless and hers alone. Destiny conjured a precognition of partings, growth, independence and estrangement. A shadow moving across still, placid water from something a long way off, a speck of cloud no bigger than a child's hand rising under the sun. Sid read her thoughts.

"I'll be walking soon," he said. She smiled with anticipation of the pride the first faltering steps would bring



her, Sid clutching for the safety of her guiding hand. "What a clever boy. Now the other foot!" The smile faded in the sad realisation that the first steps would be inevitably, inexorably away from her. Tottering, stumbling, gaining confidence with each essay, plodding steadily into independence. Man on his two feet, master of his—what was the word?—Yes—his destiny. Men hardly had anything as important as destiny in Rubbleford. But they stood on their two feet, left mothers for sweethearts, married, and finally created a world of their own round the Four Ale bar of the Chequers, voicing opinions that neither mothers, wives nor sweethearts shared. She lifted Sid from his pram and held his face against her cheek.

"Come to mummy," she said, "you love your mummy, don't you, precious?" Sid considered the question.

"Yes," he said at length. "You have brought me into the world from the eternal loneliness of the world below Asgard. I am very grateful to you. Since I love no other, all my latent affection is channelled in your direction. Yes, I love you."

"Where did you say you had come from?" Hetty was very suspicious of people from other places and nothing would convince her that her own kith and kin could have their origins outside the parish boundaries of Rubbleford.

"I said Asgard," Sid reflected. "It is only a word and I don't think it means very much. It is always difficult to find a title in one intellectual plane that will hold its meaning in another. Asgard seemed to me to describe what I meant, but it obviously means nothing to you. In fact it means even less to me. I have an impression of a hell with only one 'I'."

Hetty cradled him in the crook of her arm and with her free hand pushed the pram into the cottage. She set Sid in his cot and was about to attend to his nappy when an idea came to her. A stupefying, stupendous idea. An explanation of the phenomenon of Sid. Awe-inspiring, frightening, incredible. She knelt by his cot.

"Precious," she whispered, "are you—are you—God?"

Sid considered the matter, thoughtfully sucking his thumb and blowing ruminative bubbles as an overt sign of an internal effervescence.

"I am troubled a little by wind," he said. "Could you manage a teaspoonful of gripe water?" She supplied his wants, the teaspoon trembling in her nervous hand.

"Are you?" she asked.

"No," Sid reflected, "I don't think I am God. In fact, I am not sure who or what God is. There are, or there were, many gods, those without the initial capital, and I rather think I may be one of those. But the God you mean is a different person altogether and I imagine that if he should incarnate, the incumbent would be aware of his divinity. After all, that other chap knew who he was."

"Jesus Christ?" she asked.

"That's the name," Sid agreed.

"So you are not Jesus?"

"Oh no!" Sid was quite adamant. "I hesitated about God because I am not sure what it would feel like to be God. But I'm certainly not Jesus Christ. I have no sense of mission and anyway I don't think you are a virgin."

"The things you say!" she blushed.

"You may take it that, for all practical purposes, I am not God."

"I'm so glad," she said. "It would have been a terrible responsibility." And they would have crucified my little lamb, she thought, with a thief on one side and a villain on the other. She remembered reading somewhere that that was what they had done. It had been a long time ago, almost as long as the Stone Age, but people weren't any different now. It seemed far too high a price to pay for the satisfaction of saving the world. After all, had Jesus Christ really saved the world? He had tried very hard and paid the full price, but the world didn't seem to be saved at all. Perhaps it was the world's fault and not God's. She hoped that Sid wouldn't be God and would do well at the village school and perhaps get the thing they called a G.C.E. and get a job as an estate agent for Colonel Jollick and wear a yellow waistcoat, leggings and a carnation in his buttonhole. She did not want him to be a cowman like his father, up at 4.30 and smelling of dung-heaps. She did not want him to be God. An estate agent was nice and steady, respectable, but still entailing a certain man-of-the-worldliness, a flamboyance and hob-



nobbing with the gentry. No one would crucify an estate agent, bury him in some cold tomb and wait for him to rise again in glory. If he didn't pass the G.C.E., there was always the council . . .

There was a stomping outside and a thrashing of water on rubber. Jim Jacques hosing down his Wellingtons. She hurriedly laid the table and ladled Irish Stew into the two soup plates. She put a saucepan with Sid's milk to warm on the hob.

"Sid's going to be an estate agent!" she greeted him.

"Danged old heifer's blowed out fit to bust," he said.

"Been at the privet hedge. No good to heifers, isn't privet."

"He's so advanced already, he's certain to get his G.C.E."

"You burnt it," he said, sucking the liquid of the stew through the filtration of his whispers. "Can't abide a stew as is burnt."

"I was talking to Sid," she confessed.

"Arh!" he grumbled, "talks a danged sight too much, he does."

Sid crawled. Sid stumbled, fumbled and finally walked. Sid was a healthy, normal child, average in height, weight, size of shoes and mittens. He had a liking for sweets, ginger beer, cream cakes and comics. He was remarkable only for his inordinate loquacity. He was even somewhat slow in learning to read and write although Hetty did her best to teach him the rudiments at an early age so that he would be a credit to her at school.

"You learned to talk so quickly, love," she chided, "I thought as you'd learn to write in no time at all."

"It's different," he said. "We never wrote, you know: we just remembered."

"Who did?" she asked. He was not sure. It had all been so long ago. Some time before the Stone Age.

"Pre-palaeolithic," he said. "Only of course we didn't call ourselves that." And then there had been the years of loneliness in the world below Asgard—the hell with one 'l'. She took him to the vicar. Somehow, without quite admitting it, she felt that he was pagan. Not just non-church-going. Heathen by default, like everyone else. Too occupied with the business of this life to bother with a preparation for the next. It was more positive than that.

For all the perfunctory respectability of his birth in wedlock and baptism, he was not of the flock. There was something otherworldly, remote, about his attitude to a God she knew was there, however confused or intangible her conception of his godhead might be. She had wanted to teach Sid his prayers, but in fact she could remember none. Only a single verse of a child's hymn that began, "Now the day is over, night is drawing nigh." Sid had liked it immensely. Every evening at nightfall he had sung it to a haunting ululating refrain that bore not the least resemblance to the simple sonorous iambic of the original. More worrying still, there could be no doubt that chanting thus in the remoteness of his inner vision, Sid was in fact at prayer.

The vicar seemed ill at ease in the presence of Sid, who studied him carefully with steady, unblinking, blue eyes, whilst Hetty sat nervously twisting and untwining a handkerchief in her hot, restless hands.

"Well, my little man," the vicar attempted a jovial avuncularity. "And how are we today?"

"I'm very well, thank you," Sid replied, "but mother has been working rather hard of late. She is somewhat overtired."

"I see," said the vicar sympathetically, but more at a loss than ever.

"I want him to learn some prayers," Hetty exploded suddenly. "Some Christian prayers. And I don't know none."

The vicar was at once on stronger ground, feeling a genuine sympathy and understanding with this, the least privileged member of his flock.

"Of course, Mrs Jacques," he said. "A very proper thought on your part. It does you credit. We must arrange for Sid to attend our Sunday school."

"No," Hetty countered. "Sunday school won't do. It's that Mary Bogwood. She looks down on me because Jim's a cowman and her brother Arny's in the motor trade. She wouldn't understand. She wouldn't know what's the matter with my Sid. It's only you can help him, vicar."

The vicar's eyes strayed to Sid, standing upright, disciplined and attentive, his hands clasped behind him.



He reflected that Sid must now be three years old. He seemed a very bright boy. He remembered the voice at the christening and firmly put it from his mind, like doubts of the resurrection of the dead. There had been other disturbing stories since. Keeble, the grocer: a long lecture from Sid at the age of two on the embezzlement of a halfpenny due to short weight in a quarter pound of broken biscuits. Tom Thump, who, in his cups, had been ill-advised enough to get into conversation with Sid, and the error of his ways being so forcibly impressed upon him that he had never touched a drop since. Truly a remarkable young man. Then there was the story of the accident. A carelessly driven sports car had struck the perambulator a glancing blow, overturning Sid head first on to a pile of granite chippings. Not only had he remained calm and unruffled but, search as she did, Hetty could find no mark on him. He had said something odd and wise about only one thing could harm him. Something apparently like the unforgivable sin that no one was quite sure what it was.

"I don't quite follow," he said. "In what way does Sid require my help?"

"Mother thinks I'm a pagan," Sid explained simply.

"Are you?" asked the vicar, still perplexed.

"I don't know," Sid confessed. "It is monotheism that puzzles me. There are of course many planes of carnate personages that one can, if one wishes, refer to as gods. They have been worshipped in one form or another for generations. Maybe above them all is a supreme being. But then, if he is a trinity, that is hardly monotheism. I think when we came to believe there was in fact an All-God, we were so enthusiastic about the conception, that we forgot there were other gods too. If there is a God, I find it difficult to give an opinion about him since I have never met him."

"You see!" Hetty wailed.

"I do indeed!" The vicar blanched.

Sid turned to study the body hanging, grotesque and broken, from a crucifix on the panelled Jacobean wall. It hurt him to think that men could have been so vulgar, savage and ungrateful. True, there had been similar examples of priestly vengeance in that tranquil age of

long ago, but somehow they had been more inevitable, less contrived, less wrong and brutal than this, the last major affront by man to God. It mattered little whether there was in fact a God to affront or not. The crime had been perpetrated against all that God should have been. The attributes existed, even if their personification was lacking in any single, monotheistic form.

"I hate it!" he said violently, turning from the crucifix. Neither the vicar nor his mother understood. It was not the figure that he hated but the world that had nailed the figure there. He remembered that he had never been a part of the world even in the pre-Stone Age. He had watched the ceremonies aloof and from afar. Had he not himself been taboo, despised, rejected—or had that been the other person, his mother perhaps, the woman with the bowl on her head?

"Could you exorcise him, vicar?"

For the first time since his ordination the vicar seriously considered the possibility of exorcism. He reflected that even some agnostic psychiatrists had recently professed a belief in some sort of demoniac possession to account for some forms of otherwise inexplicable madness. The only possible explanation for Sid's infant loquacity was just that—possession. An infant body possessed by an older more erudite mind. The mind of a pagan. But was exorcism more than medieval mumbo-jumbo? It was one thing to believe in the existence of spirits, evil or otherwise, but quite another to assume that the parish incumbent had, by virtue of his cloth and the manipulation of his symbols, some power to banish or control them. Bell, book and candle? In the name of reason—the god to whom we all bow down—what conceivable power might these exert? The book was an object, a book like any other, having no magical power by virtue of its existence. Whatever miracles it might perform within the mind of the reader, its power was dependent upon its being read, rather than upon the spatial arrangement of its molecules. What sounds had bells to frighten and enthrall? They were but instruments of a desire to summon. And candles? Something which had once been symbolical of light, had been in fact the means of light. But now? No, it was patently absurd.



A searchlight perhaps, a mesa beam, but not, no not, a candle.

Sid inspected the rest of the room, the vicar's study. The pictures of seascapes, *Ecce Homo*, a parrot in a cage. A calendar with the Sundays marked in red-pencil squares. It was ten days to Christmas and the first decorations had begun to appear following the ministrations of the Jacobean chatelaine, the vicar's wife. Berried holly, haphazard, here and there, in pots and curtain rails and picture cords about the wall. A preparation for a festivity much older than the birth of a gentle Jew, much older than Mithras whose advent it had also signified. Back to the origins of land culture, crops, the transition from a pastoral age long before the retrogression of early palaeolithic man.

Suddenly, Sid cried out in fear, cowering into the protection of his mother's arms.

"Take it away!" he screamed, "take the horrid thing away!"

"It's the mistletoe," she whispered. "He can't abide mistletoe. Would you mind, sir, taking it down?"

The vicar thoughtfully removed the mistletoe from the chandelier. A rather superfluous piece of vegetation in any case. The usual osculatory ritual of its reverence would hardly be performed beneath it in the vicarage, in the household of an ageing priest. But it was the one thing in all the little world of Sid that had moved him to display any emotion other than well-mannered curiosity. An evil spirit that feared mistletoe? What precise form of supernatural entity would that be? The Druids had used mistletoe, endowing it with obscure magical and curative properties. A great pity that one knew so little about the Druids. What in fact did they do with the mistletoe, cut from an oak tree with a golden scythe?

"It is really a matter more for a psychiatrist than a priest," he murmured, as he deposited the mistletoe safely through the serving hatch. He wanted to avoid the issue with Sid. A parish priest is expected to love the stone and mortar of his church, appreciate and reverence its ancient monuments, accept with benevolent tolerance the peccadilloes of his flock and perform the offices expected

of him. It was unfair to confront him with a problem of deep religious significance for which, by instinct and training, he was unfit to deal. Even a bishop would be confounded by a confrontation with Sid.

"I think," said Sid slowly, "I would like to be exorcised." He was nervous and unsure of himself, still distressed by awareness of the mistletoe's proximity.

"There, there, my lamb," his mother comforted him, "if my precious wants to be exorcised, I'm sure the nice man will exorcise him."

"I should really consult with the bishop," the vicar murmured.

"I don't see why," Sid argued. "If I am willing and my mother wants it. What harm can it do?"

"Well, none, I suppose," the vicar confessed. "But I very much doubt if it will do any good either, or if there is, or ever could be, anything in this world capable of being exorcised."

"Oh! Get on with it!" Hetty wailed.

The vicar consulted a reference book and the Book of Common Prayer. He dispensed holy water into a hand bowl. Making the sign of the Cross on his forehead, he required Sid to kneel. He sprinkled him with holy water and demanded of the devil his name. Both Sid and Sid's devil were silent. The vicar placed his hand on Sid's head and intoned the words of power:

"I exorcise thee, unclean spirit, in the name of Jesus Christ; tremble O Satan, thou enemy of the faith, thou foe of mankind; who hath brought death into the world, who hath deprived men of life and hast rebelled against justice; thou seducer of mankind; thou root of evil; thou source of avarice, discord and envy."

"Is that all?" Hetty asked, expecting at least the tolling of a bell.

"Quite enough, too," the vicar murmured. "It really is too archaic."

"Do you feel any different love?" she asked. "Do you feel you could face the mistletoe now?"

"No!" Sid trembled, "I feel just the same, but a little wet. Please don't bring the mistletoe back."



"And the crucifix?" the vicar asked.

"I am sure He was fine and noble and at least semi-divine. There are so many stages of divinity. Perhaps He was indeed higher than most."

"It seems to be working," Hetty breathed. "Do you think we should try it again on the Sabbath?"

"I have heard those words before," Sid mused, "long ago from afar off, in the world under Asgard. They came to me there and I knew that none of us could ever return, that something had displaced and banished us. That the Golden Age had gone and man had retrogressed. Of course we never belonged to the world in the first place. I don't think the man on the Cross belonged to it either. Perhaps that is why the world has not really been saved at all."

Outside the vicarage a large soup-plate-shaped craft settled carefully between the rose beds. It was semi-transparent, like a green bottle with a light inside. It seemed to be both there and not there, for, shimmering and green, it merged every now and then with the grass and the holly hedge and then reappeared as though hovering between the molecules of air and the world that is within the molecules. The top of the soup plate opened and from it stepped a man and a woman, also pale green and translucent, a shading of the air like the outlines of insects, wings in flight. On their heads they wore round transparent bubbles, like inverted fish-bowls. They entered the vicarage without knocking or opening the door. Odin and Frigg. The Aesir.

"My precious!" Frigg cried, clasping Sid to her heaving but insubstantial breast. Memories stirred and Sid recognised the far-off figure of his mother in the pre-Palaeolithic Age. The lady with the fish bowl. The dispenser of the divine chromosome, the power of speech and eloquence in the days of the Brejdablik, the dwelling of far-sight. The Aesir as they had been before the retrogression and the relegation to a divine plane and Asgard. But there was also Hetty.

"He's mine!" Hetty challenged the whole of the Aesir and any other gods there might be or might not have been.

"He is Baldur the Beautiful," Odin explained, his voice resonant from the depths of his helmet. "The son of Odin and Frigg, slain by the blind god Höder with a shaft of mistletoe put in his hand by Loki, the evil one."

"He's Sid and he's mine!"

"There is something wrong," Sid considered. "I remember distinctly an earthly setting before Brejðablik, the breaking of a marriage taboo, a quite peaceful world before Asgard."

"Yes," Frigg admitted, "we did live for a time on earth. Long before the Ice Age. But earth took exception to divine infidelities and we had to leave. Odin forgave me, of course, for the vagaries of the body are less important to an immortal. But it is true you are part man and part Aesir. After the treachery of the arrow, you descended into the loneliness of Hel, who refused to return you to Asgard. It has taken 5000 years to forge the astral link between Hel and Hetty Jacques and thus bring you to earth. But now you may return to your rightful place in the kingdom of the gods, beloved, wise and beautiful among the Aesir, for whom the world has no further use."

"I can hardly leave Hetty," Baldur/Sid protested. "After all, she is my mother now, even if you were once, and she has been very kind to me." Frigg smiled at Hetty.

"Out of all the women of the earth, she was chosen to bear and nourish you. The gods do not judge with the eyes of men. Hetty is a worthy member of the Aesir, whose ranks she will one day join. But we will not take her now from her own conception of happiness. Sid will remain with her and she will be content. Only Baldur will return with us to Asgard."

Suddenly Odin and Frigg were gone. The spheroid on the lawn sparkled between the roses and in a flash was airborne and away, leaving no mark on the soft soil where it had rested. Only a bunch of mistletoe in an oak tree trembled at its passing.

The vicar rubbed his eyes. He seemed to have dozed off. The central heating. It was always so close in the vicarage since the radiators had come, piping hot from some source of heat his wife had insisted on installing. Hetty looked rather pale standing there, staring from the



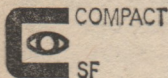
mullioned window, that precocious child cradled in her arms.

"There, there, precious!" Hetty murmured. "It's all over: they've gone."

"Goo!" said Sid.

Everyone, including the vicar, was happier when divinity kept its distance.

— ERNEST HILL



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*When you walk through time, how do you get out of a blind alley?*

# BEYOND TIME'S AEGIS

by Brian Craig

*Time is not merely a dimension measuring the passage of days and nights. Time is a property of the minds of men. And because the race of Man is finite, so too, in a sense, is Time. The present is ever moving to the future, and one day there will come a time when it has run its course. Then, for mankind, there will be no more future. There will still be days and nights but, for the human race, Time will have stopped. There will be no more progress, no more hope for the future. Time will have exhausted the spirit which makes men build. And then cities will fall, and Man will cease to live—he will only exist.*

*But there are forces other than Time. And there will always be rebels.*

## I

The dewy sunlight barely filtered through the sable clouds to illumine palely the fine rain against the drab western sky. Miniscule droplets of water spattered off the neck of the black mare as she raced across the moor. Astride her back was a young man, hardly more than a boy. He wore a large, thick, fur coat, buttoned tightly about his neck, which widened his slim shoulders impressively. His legs were protected by sodden leather trousers. His gloves and kneelength boots were also of leather. His head was bare, and rivulets of water ran down his face, accumulating in the corners of his eyes, and steadily dripping from his pointed chin. Across his shoulders was a crossbow, large and powerful, giving the impression that



it would require stronger arms than its owner's to wind it. At his waist was a quiver of bolts. He wore no sword.

His eyes clung to the ill-defined strip that was the road. Once it had been stone, but now it was overlaid with grass, and clumps of springy sphagnum moss such as covered the low hills. Far away, a yellow light showed against the dark humps of the horizon. Toward this mark of habitation, the Firefly sped.

And through his head buzzed strange words and ideas. Tales told by a man who said that he could walk through time . . .

The huge door creaked noisily as the Firefly pushed it open and slid sinuously round it into the hot room. Smoke from numerous pipes, few of which contained tobacco, swirled in the draught. There were four long tables in the room, along which sat a miscellany of old and middle-aged men. Some turned to stare at the Firefly, but most continued drinking and chattering without a glance at the door.

At the far end of the inn was a crackling, spitting fire, in front of which sat a greasy-haired, round-faced woman of some forty years. Her eyes flicked on to the newcomer, and looked him up and down.

The Firefly threaded his way through the gossiping rustics and addressed the woman.

"You are the mistress of this house? The Red Wolf Queen?"

"Yes. And you?" she questioned.

"I call myself the Firefly, because I reject this world and its torpor, and cast my own light. I wish a room for myself for the night, and a word with you, mistress Red Wolf."

"Four pieces for the room, boy," she replied carefully, as though unaccustomed to speech, "but the word might be more or less expensive."

"I have heard you called a seeress," said the Firefly softly.

A man at the nearest table nudged his companion, and whispered briefly to him. Their talk ceased, and they watched the Red Wolf Queen expectantly. She gave them

a warning look, which they ignored, continuing to stare with semi-glazed eyes.

"You reject this world, and yet you wish to know its secrets?" she commented.

"No. I do not believe your claims to know the future. However, I have heard of the strange tales you tell in your supposed trances. They are weird, and resemble others I have heard. I believe they were told to you by someone else. Who? And where did he go?"

"You must surely reject the beliefs of this world," she said after a moment's consideration, "to taunt a witch in this fashion. In your position, you should be a little more afraid. Things you do not understand are not of necessity false." She glanced at the eavesdroppers at the table, and stood, motioning the Firefly to move into a back room, then followed him. Once inside she spoke again. "Why would you wish such knowledge?"

"Country girls are not noted for their imagination," said the Firefly carefully, "and so someone told you of these things. He told you of wonders which do not exist, and so you took them for things yet to come. So you divulge these things in feigned trances to cheat money from peasants outside. I do not care about this, in fact I admire your ingenuity. I only want to know where he went."

"You would reject this world for his?" The Firefly was relieved that he had to press no further for an admission of her fraud. "You are mad, for I never saw such a tortured man as he. He was searching for something he could never find, And he talked of what he knew and what he expected. Strange things which could surely never exist. Who was he? Tell me, and I will tell you where he went."

"He was a man from another world," answered the Firefly with glinting eyes, "further from here than the stars. Did he not speak to you of travel through immutable time itself? Did he not boast to you that he could walk through time? Did he not tell you of reversing the flow of the ages? These things are wonderful indeed. This world has nothing left in it but death. I reject it, scorn it, and seek others lost in the folds of time. I would leave



this listless life for the Great Ages. Man has come to a dead end. He has no future, but what a glorious past! I would ask him to take me there, back through the cloudy swathes of time." The Firefly stood still for a moment, eyes raised to the sky, striving to pierce the misty veil and behold the Age of Man.

Then he brought himself back to a dingy back room in a tavern in the Futureless Age. "Now tell me," he said abruptly.

The Red Wolf Queen laughed. "You are a strange man. So was he. Two of one kind. He went to the west, to the sunset and the barren deserts. He said he was looking for the future, but he would not walk to it. I told him, and even begged him, to stay and share the future with me. He ignored me, and said he wanted another future. He left me for the empty west. Left me with all his insane ravings and strange tales. Left me to repeat them as dreams and prophesies, so that I might be stared at and held in awe, instead of being called a whore, and spat upon. He left me with nightmares." She stopped, and laughed again, shortly and bitterly.

"He left you with nightmares," said the Firefly, "and I with dreams."

## II

The Firefly rode slowly down the only street in the village. It was cluttered with rubbish, and flies buzzed ceaselessly in the hot mid-morning sun. Cockroaches climbed swiftly over accumulations of discarded food, and maggots went about their business of continuous eating. He stopped to ask of the man he followed.

"Aargh . . . you arsk Anna 'bout 'im. Left 'er wi' child 'e did. Rode off one mornin' wi' 'er weepin' in street, on 'er knees in dust. Ya, staight out in desert."

The afternoon sun shone into the Firefly's eyes as he picked his way through the cracks in the parched rocks. The red and yellow ground swam up across the Firefly's vision, making his eyes and head hurt.

Because of the haze, the Firefly ignored the second sun which appeared on the horizon, but as he approached it, it burned brighter and clearer. Imperceptibly, he altered his course until he was headed straight for the strange light. Soon he could make out a burning sphere suspended in some sort of field between two metal structures. The field was like the heat haze, but stretched horizontally between the apices of the towers. A man stood nearby, in front of a wooden hut at the base of one of the metal towers. He shielded his eyes from the glare as he watched the approach of the Firefly.

When the Firefly reached the globe of light, he asked the man who he was.

"I am the Sun," replied the other.

"And what is that?" asked the Firefly, pointing to the sphere of fire.

"That is the Sun," answered the other in an identical tone.

"And what is that?" asked the Firefly, smiling, pointing to the sun.

"That is the Sun," said the other exactly as before, adding by way of explanation, "This globe is a fragment of the sun which I have captured, and made one with me. My globe, myself and the father sun in the heavens add up to unity. Who are you?"

"I am the Firefly. I reject this world. The sun gives life, but I shun its light to cast my own."

The man who called himself the Sun laughed loudly.

"Take care your wings are not burnt by close approach, little one. Your feeble light is to mine as a shadow to the night. Burn the memory of me into your brain. Watch the glow from behind blistered eyelids, and never speak of your casting a light again. Candle!"

The Firefly sat in the saddle with a thoughtful expression on his face for a while. Then he looked at the flaming incandescence suspended closely between the metal towers, and smiled. His mood changed, and he turned his sweating horse toward the greater fire and set off again for the western edge of the desert. He could hear the laughter of the Sun behind him as he rode on.

He had ridden a half mile further when a grinding



sound broke the desert silence for more than a minute. The Firefly turned in the saddle, and spurred his horse into a position where he could see where the great globe had been. It had fallen to the ground, and clouds of fine sand all but obscured the twisted wreckage of the towers. A large pall of oily smoke swung lazily sky-ward, and the Sun's hut was in flames.

"My light may be pale," murmured the Firefly wryly, "but it does not burn with such a consuming passion, as did yours. Perchance I will live longer, too."

And he turned his horse.

### III

"Westward, he went."

"Aye, lad, I know him. West."

"To the west, boy."

"Yes, yes, he passed. Came from the east, the desert. Went straight through into the forest."

"Him! Bloody lecher. Westward he went. Hope you catch him, may he rot in 'is grave. What you want him for? All right, be like that. *I* don't care."

Around and across the shield rode all the armies of time. Men fought with clubs and claws, ugly men with long arms, small heads and bestial looks. Men fought with lances and swords, and gigantic shields, strange men with kilts and vast beards. Men fought as they did now with broadswords and crossbows, with chain mail and light armour. Men fought with strange weapons which man nowadays had forgotten how to construct.

In an inner ring were the beasts and birds which could be seen every day, and others known only in legend. Leopards, rats, cats and rabbits danced with rhinoceroses, gryphons, unicorns and elephants.

In the third and least ring were pictures of an ideal life, where all was peace, and want was banished, and evil was non-existent. All this was communicated by a few simple pictures, which breathed this imaginary Utopia.

And in the very centre was a picture of a woman. Just a head and shoulders, but expressing more than the whole of the rest of the shield added together. The expression on the face told the Firefly more about himself than a hundred years of experience could have.

And even more miraculous was this face when it was perceived that *every* other character depicted had his or her personal emotion skilfully constructed into their faces. However small a figure, each had its own sadness or joy or hate or love or despair or hope or . . .

The Firefly contemplated the beauty that was in the shield for several minutes. Then he spoke.

"It is a very fine shield," he said, for want of words to express its true effect. Its owner, the Condor, laughed.

"Beautiful," he agreed. "Would you care to fight?"

"I rarely fight for sport. My skill lies in quick killing." The Firefly shrugged apologetically. "Besides, I would not care to hurt that shield, even had I a sword. I carry only a crossbow," he added, running his fingers lightly along the weapon on his back.

"A sword is a valuable weapon, my friend. I know where you could obtain one. My uncle is able to work metal in wondrous fashion."

"Did he make the shield?" asked the Firefly.

"Aye," replied the Condor, as he turned away, waving his hand to indicate that the Firefly was to follow. The Firefly, after a glance to the west, followed.

They travelled barely three miles, yet it took them almost forty minutes, as they had to thread their way through dense thicket and entwining undergrowth. After ten minutes, the ground forced them to dismount and walk the horses the remainder of the way.

Eventually, they reached a tiny, but unusually tidy cottage in a space of ground cleared of vegetation. As they left their horses, an old man, hunch-backed and wrinkled, scuttled out of the door.

"The shield, the shield!" he wailed, "is it . . .?"

The Condor broke in: "It's intact yet. You can't have it back. It's just the right weight for fighting. No one to fight out here though. I've brought a customer. We need



money, and this man has no sword. Show him some of yours."

"No, Condor," said the hunchback, "my swords are not for sale. I'll not have you peddling them. My swords are works of art." He turned to the Firefly. "I am afraid that I have no weapons for sale. I should be very pleased to have you see them, however. They are very beautiful."

"You old fool," said the Condor vehemently, "we need to eat. You'd be the first to squeal if there were no supper tonight. Sell this man a sword. To hell with your works of art. Weapons are instruments, and fighting itself the art. This shield is nothing until it stops a sword blow—and if that slurs your pretty pictures, it's too bad."

"Sir," said the old man to the Firefly, ignoring his nephew, "if you really wish to buy a weapon, I have constructed a gun, which is of a type used long ago. It is an ugly shape, and even I could not instil beauty into it, so I feel that I may sell it."

The Condor spat in the dust, disgustedly. "Gun! Do not soil your fingers with this thing, Firefly. It is a terrible weapon. There is no conceivable art in its use. And the old man lies when he said it was used in the past, for truly, if armies were ever equipped with them, their use would mean the end of the world. Truly it is a terrible weapon."

"The same was said of the crossbow," commented the Firefly drily.

"Do you wish to buy the gun, sir?" said the old man, directing a scornful glance at the Condor. "Do not heed my nephew's ravings about a weapon's art being in its use. A weapon's art is in its construction, as all but the blind can see. Truly, this weapon has no art, but it is effective, and my nephew and I must needs eat, as he observes."

"You are both wrong," said the Firefly carefully. "To my mind, there is no art in weapons at all. A man and a weapon together are a killing machine. Separately they cannot fulfil this function, and are certainly not ornamental. There is no beauty in death, and therefore none in the killing or the killer. That shield is either a weapon or a thing of beauty, not both. When your nephew holds it, it is half of a combination which is deadly, but not artistic."

As for your gun, I am a peaceful man, and rarely use my crossbow. Thank you, but no. Farewell."

The Firefly turned his horse.

#### IV

As the weeks went by the Firefly travelled through the great forest of Holmchapel, and emerged to the pastoral heart of the western lands, the Vales of Stardene. Now the Western Mountains, the Mountains of Misty Mourning were clearly visible. Every night, the sun majestically sank beyond the giant crag known as the Peak of Sorrows.

Then the Man Who Walked Through Time swung to the south, toward the shores of the Singing Sea, and the trailing edge of the wilderness the Firefly had already crossed. The Firefly shrugged philosophically and made his way south, knowing that he was now a bare month behind the one he sought.

The Firefly watched for several minutes as the figure recognisable as a youth of some twenty years capered on the sun-parched rocks. The youth danced madly about, cursing and weeping, all the while picking up boulders such as littered the ground through the whole of the desert and dashing them to the ground near his own feet.

The Firefly's first thought was that the youth had been bitten by a snake. Then he decided that the other was having a fit. As soon as he reached this conclusion he turned off the path, having no intention of becoming involved with a madman. Apparently oblivious of him, the youth continued hopping, twitching and stamping.

The Firefly threaded his way through the intricate pattern of gullies which abounded all through the region except on the trail itself. Suddenly he was confronted by the madman as he rounded a corner. The Firefly sat back in the saddle, apprehensively awaiting developments. The other ran up to within ten paces of the Firefly's horse, when he stumbled and fell headlong.

When he rose there was a gash stretching from the centre of his forehead to his right ear. He mopped blood



away with a grimy sleeve, and then silently faced the Firefly.

"Well," said the latter, "what's the matter?"

The young man picked at his lip for a moment, then replied:

"Who are you?"

"I am the Firefly, for the sun gives life, and I need it not. I reject it, and cast my own light."

The other picked at his lip again, and the Firefly decided that the youth was indeed mad.

"You cast a shadow!" accused the strange man.

"So do you," pointed out the Firefly. "What of it?"

"Does your Shadow hate you?"

"No," answered the Firefly, and urged his horse around the other. The horse, however, was tired, and refused to respond to the Firefly's gentle pushing.

"Mine hates me. I am afraid of it. Do you know what it is like to be afraid of your shadow?"

The Firefly decided that the other did not appear to be dangerous, and dismounted, allowing his horse to wander off. Then he replied:

"No, but I have heard of people who were. Murdered in suspicious circumstances they were. No apparent cause of death. A friend of mine said they'd had the evil eye put on them. Now who do you think might do a thing like that? Look out, your shadow's reaching for you!"

The youth leapt like a desert rat, twisting to fight off his shadow. The Firefly leaned over backward, and his laughter echoed from all around. The youth turned back.

"Nothing to laugh at. Must have nearly got me that time. Thank you for warning me."

"Oh! No! You don't understand, I didn't really . . ." and he collapsed into laughter again.

"I'm glad you understand," said the madman, "It's frightening. Don't laugh. It is near me wherever I go. It leers at me with sightless eyes I cannot see. At night it haunts me, creeping around watching me. It knows I cannot see it, and I stand there, shivering with fear. And in the daytime other shadows join it to gather round and mock me silently.

"And all the time, it is waiting to kill me. Just waiting.

Biding its time until it has weakened my control enough to slip through my guard and kill me. I daren't sleep any more. If I can't get rid of it, I swear I'll go mad."

The Firefly mounted his horse. "I cannot help you," he said as he rode on.

"You cannot go!" wailed the madman. "You cannot leave me to die!"

The Firefly gave him a pitying glance, and spurred his horse forward.

"Don't leave me!" screamed the youth, rushing after the Firefly, falling again as his foot caught in a crack. The Firefly ignored him, and proceeded without looking back.

Then came a wail of anguish, followed by a scream, and another, and another, until the screams ran into one another, rose to a crescendo, and stopped.

The Firefly at last condescended to cast a last look behind him. The boy was gone. A black puddle skittered across the rock, to disappear. Almost unconsciously, the Firefly looked about him for a bird.

He saw no bird.

Then someone laughed. Deep laughter, not the madman's.

"Delayed echo?" asked the Firefly of himself. He shrugged and risked making his animal trot back to the trail.

## V

The Firefly now made rapid progress to the south-west, in which direction the Time-Walker was now apparently headed. The Firefly had found the best information on the object of his search was to be obtained in the brothels along the way. Where there were no brothels, the Firefly had learned to be wary of betraying the purpose of his questions. He had incurred many bruises and hot words by approaching the wrong people. And as he rode, the Firefly had plenty of opportunity for cursing the morals of the man he chased.

"Why are you the Lungfish?" asked the Firefly.

"Why are you the Firefly?" parried the old man, laugh-



ing through his tangled beard. They sat in front of a large fire, and the old man who called himself the Lungfish leaned almost into the leaping flames. Every moment, the Firefly expected to see the old man's wrinkled face catch fire as he choked in the smoke; but, apart from wheezing slightly, the Lungfish showed no discomfort whatsoever.

"I am the Firefly because the sun gives life, and I do not need it, for a Firefly makes his own light, and I am a law to myself. I reject this world, for it is dead. Other men sit back and watch the world degenerate without a pang of conscience. I am disgusted with it. I want to go back to the time when life meant something. I follow a man who said that he could walk through time, to ask him to show me this secret. Man has lost his future, and peacefully passes away. I will not peacefully die, and therefore I am the Firefly."

"That is a proud boast," said the man who was the Lungfish, "and I hope you know what you are saying. Perhaps you are also aware that pride is a deadly danger. A name must be flaunted, for you wear it always. And you must live up to it in consequence. Can you?"

"I can live up to it, Lungfish. Save your chiding for those who warrant it, and do not waste precious advice on me. And can you deny that I tell the truth?"

"No," said the Lungfish gently, "for what you say is true. But still you are somewhat misguided. It is true that for mankind there is no future, and he may only dwindle and die. But is this so bad? In the great times you would return to, men were always striving. They divined, whether accurately or no, that they were searching for happiness. Today you see the result of their striving. Death, yes. Degeneracy, yes. *But never before have so many men been happy at one time.* Man has learned to live with himself. It has cost him all he learned in a centuries long search, but he has attained his object.

"Time has now ceased to have its meaning to Man. A pressure Man imposed upon himself he has removed. Yet you hate him for that?

"You are a rebel, a child fighting against the convulsions of birth. You have refused to cast off the urge of time. Is running a solution? Can you rid yourself of a pressure

no one else feels by running to where everyone feels it? No, boy, you'll die with mankind, whether it be now or long ago. I pity you, boy, for you have the affliction of time, the disease of unhappiness.

"And I sympathise, for I too strive against the immutable force. Not time, but a force beyond your conception.

"I strive for something, too. And knowing it does not make it any the less hard."

The Firefly, who had been lulled into a sense of dull anger at being treated like a child in arms, now started, and in an incredulous tone of voice said:

"You! You preach to me of your own sins? Are you a hypocrite? And what can you possibly strive against? You surely must be accustomed to the idea of death now? How can you wish to return to the great ages, old one?"

"Young man, haste breeds untidy thinking, barely less fatal than excessive pride. I will answer, but it is a long and complex story, and there are many things I am unable to communicate or explain."

"Speak," said the Firefly, settling himself.

"A Lungfish has one claim to the unusual. It is a bridge. It is a water creature, but when its pool is burned dry by the hot summer, it encysts itself in mud, and breathes air until the rain fills its pond and allows it to use its gills once again.

"The Lungfish is therefore a son of two worlds, the world of water, and the world of air, which most fish know only as speedy death. It is a bridge between the past and the future. It marks the end of the sea age of life, and the end of the womb. It was also the beginning of land life, the first great evolutionary expansion. The Lungfish is the first rung on a ladder into eternity—the first hesitant step into the infinite.

"I am the second.

"The first bridge took life from the womb to the world. It was a purely spatial one. The second bridge, of which species I am one, is not a spatial one. Man, *Homo sapiens*, had the stars. He pushed out and out, but could find nothing. So Man collapsed, turned inward to himself, and found happiness instead of sublimity. But just as the fish filled the seas, so has Man filled the galaxies.



"And now he will die. And like a phoenix, I and my kind will rise as he passes away. Our numbers will increase, and his will decline, for happiness is an anti-survival character. Man is content, and therefore has no future. Time has stopped for Mankind.

"And we will pass on to a new environment. Call it what you will. Time? To us the word is meaningless. Space? That is what we have left behind. We go on, not into another dimension, but into a plane where there are no dimensions. I cannot explain."

The Firefly stood up. "You say I boast? You say I cannot live up to my name? What of you and your senile fantasies? You, a frail, weak thing, a superman? I can see what you are. A liar. Perhaps you even delude yourself. You are right, you cannot explain. You can never do that, because there is nothing to explain, nor ever will be. I'll not stay to listen to your lies."

He walked out, slamming the door behind him.

"A mere fish," murmured the Lungfish, dreamily.

## VI

And then the Man Who Walked Through Time swung north again, never reaching the sea. And then north-west, in direct line with the Western Mountains of Misty Mourning. The Firefly had crept to within three weeks of the other's passage, and this figure remained strangely constant. The Firefly began to wonder if the other were not by some means aware of his presence, and was running as fast as the Firefly could follow. Certainly it would have been easy for him to complete the circle of his cast south, and learn of the Firefly's search, and perhaps even its object. The Firefly shrugged away such fruitless ruminations, and continued toward the lonely Western Peaks.

Since the Firefly had left the road for the rambling cart-tracks and rut-roads of more recent formation, villages were fewer, and the distances between farther. It was therefore common for the night to be well advanced before he found shelter.

For fourteen hours now the Firefly had been riding, and for an hour it had been dark. A full moon hung heavy near the horizon.

The sound of chanting voices gave him hope of a bed for the night, but it was with trepidation that he approached. A chant was generally associated with religion, and of religions, especially those unknown to him, the Firefly was wary. The further from the centres of habitation one went, the weirder became the religions. And as travellers had become increasingly rare, isolation of villages had often resulted in each having its particular cult.

From a distance, the Firefly watched the service. He was fairly sure that he was invisible, in the shadow of a large-boled tree. The chant contained many archaic and unknown words, and had a deceptive rhythm, and so the Firefly could not successfully identify its content.

After several minutes, he was able to make out that the singers were insulting some object or person. The Firefly was tired, and eventually decided to approach. The villagers seemed harmless enough.

There was a small group of some seven chanters, and about twenty kneeling or squatting around them. A further hundred or so stood apparently taking no part in the service. To one of these, the Firefly first addressed himself.

"Excuse my curiosity, but what is the function of this chant?" The Firefly thought that the danger of expressing curiosity was less than the danger of ignorance.

The man looked round. "The moon, of course."

"Why the moon, friend. What has it done?"

"The moon brings the dark, my friend. If we can destroy it then there will be no more night," said the man gently.

"No, no," said the Firefly before he could stop himself, "it is the absence of the sun which causes night." He cursed himself for his incautiousness. The last thing he wanted was to be involved in a religious argument.

"You speak nonsense, sir. The sun cannot cause the night, for the sun is never present at night. The moon appears at night, and therefore must be the cause. It is surely obvious."

The Firefly could not allow such absurdity to pass, but



was doubtful as to the advisability of outright contradiction. He therefore adopted a subtler tack.

"But does not the moon appear often during the day? What of the days when the moon rises while the sun is yet in the sky?"

"You speak truth, sir," said the other, patient but pitying, "but you will notice that the moon eventually wins, and darkness falls, though the sun desperately tries to prevent night falling."

"And what of the days when the sun appears before the moon has set?" asked the Firefly.

"Ah! Then the sun has been gathering its strength for all of the night, and the moon is weakened by its battle."

The Firefly was puzzled by the reference to a battle, but concluded that the man meant its battle with the sun for possession of the sky. Then, with the air of a chess-player who had mated his opponent, he went on:

"And are there not nights which are entirely moonless?"

"Ah!" said the other again, "That is our doing. When the moon is at its largest, we hold a service such as is in progress now. And the next night, the moon is beaten into hiding slightly by our warrior, who will be despatched soon. For several days, our warrior will force the moon to hide more and more of itself, finally forcing it completely into hiding. Then we pray that our warrior will prevail, and that the moon will be destroyed. Alas, it always succeeds in defeating our warrior, and returns slowly from its hiding place.

"But someday, we believe that there will come a mighty warrior who will slay the moon. And then will come everlasting day."

The Firefly gave up his attempts to puncture the other's argument, and asked: "And how is this warrior despatched to fight the moon in mortal combat?"

The man pointed to a large stone wheel resting on a long slab of rock set in the ground.

"He is laid on the stone, and the wheel rolled along to crush his skull. Thus the spirit is freed from the body, and floats upward into the sky to do battle for the world." The man pointed dramatically at the moon as he finished his statement.

The Firefly pursed his lips. The common denominator of nearly all religions—human sacrifice. A sickness rose in his throat as he watched with a growing feeling of helplessness. A few minutes later, the sacrifice was chosen, and dragged toward the rocks. The Firefly sat back, relaxing his clutch on the reins of his horse. The sacrifice looked wildly about him for help, and recognising the Firefly as a stranger called out to him for help.

He shook his head slowly.

“My spirit stays where it is,” he murmured, “and my head on its shoulders. I am the Firefly, and I reject this world.”

But he slept in the open that night, a mile beyond the village. And he did not wonder why.

## VII

While riding, the Firefly had much opportunity for consideration of the action he was taking. Mankind was going downhill. Was it wrong to want to return to a time when he was still climbing? It could be said that running away was no solution, but in this case it was at least a temporary cure. Why was man going downhill? Because he was happy. Everyone was happy? No, for some must be unhappy for others to be happy. The sacrifice for instance was unhappy. And he, the Firefly, certainly was not happy. Why not?

It was about noon when the Firefly saw the statue. It was a hot day, and so the Firefly stopped and dismounted to investigate this strange decoration of the lonely road, and to rest.

The statue was fashioned from a mixture of grey and brown clays, in an unpleasing arrangement. It was a grotesque parody of a man. Slightly shorter than the average man, its head was abnormally large, giving the appearance of a giant child. It was eyeless, or at least, where the eyes should have been was a depression with a hump in the middle. The depression was pitted, as by the scraping of a fingernail, perhaps to indicate eyelashes,



and the Firefly decided that the face might have its eyes shut. It was bald, with a perfectly rounded skull. Its mouth was somewhat twisted, and its ears shapeless masses of ill-adhering clay which looked as though they had been added as an afterthought. It was nude, and the skin around its groin was perfectly smooth. It had no sex organ or excretory organ.

The Firefly dismissed it as a bad statue, unworthy of his attention, and after a brief rest and a drink of water, he rode on down the dusty track.

A hundred yards further more were the remnants of two more statues, broken up, their pieces scattered about the path. Both were eyeless, sexless, and inhuman, like the first.

In the next half mile, the Firefly passed seven more statues, some whole, some broken. All had the same general appearance.

Then, the Firefly came to a wooden hovel, outside the door of which a giant man sat shaping clay into a statue such as those he had seen in the road. For a moment or so, the Firefly watched him from the saddle, wondering whether to go on or not. The giant, who was pale and bald, and thin for his eight and a half feet, either failed to detect his presence or ignored him nevertheless. At last curiosity won and the Firefly dismounted.

"I am the Firefly, for I reject the world and cast my own light."

The giant did not look up. "Monster," he said.

"Monster! Is that your name or do you mean me?" The giant continued smoothing the clay of the statue's head into a sphere.

"Did you make those statues?"

"Statues." The giant spat on the ground. "Men."

"Yes, I noticed they were men," said the Firefly, irritated by the other's one word sentences.

"Dead men," put in the giant irrelevantly.

"You'll wear out your tongue," said the Firefly. "You're not trying to tell me that they were alive once?"

The giant looked up in surprise. "Men live."

The Firefly laughed briefly. "Why do you make men?"

"God," retorted the giant.

"You're God! Who told you that?"

The giant extended a finger. "Ring." On the finger was a metal ring with a large colourless jewel set in it. The giant twisted his hand so that the Firefly looked right into the stone.

"Hypnosis," said the giant, stumbling over the word, as the Firefly's head began to spin.

*And he saw all the world . . . and he was around the universe . . . and he was in the universe . . . and he was the universe . . . and there was Earth . . . and it was good . . . and the sky was blue . . . a deep, deep, deep blue . . . and he was falling into the blue . . . and there was life teeming over the globe . . . and there was no man . . . and the fields were unmarred . . . and the mountains unscarred . . . and the sea clean . . . and the winds fresh . . . and the sun shone . . . and rainbows danced . . . and there were no roads . . . no villages . . . no churches . . . no taverns . . . no houses . . . no Man . . . and all moved as he willed it . . . and there was a voice . . . a subservient voice . . . and it said . . . create me . . . and it was the voice of man . . . create me . . . I will serve . . . create me . . . you are God . . . create me . . . create me . . .*

"I don't believe it," stated the Firefly deliberately. The image vanished instantly.

The giant withdrew his hand, to flicker it over his face. As the fingers fluttered over his eyes, he closed them.

"So that's why the statues were eyeless," murmured the Firefly, still dizzy from his abrupt return to reality.

The Firefly dazedly returned to his horse. The giant suddenly stood up. He was stark naked, and the Firefly's eyes grew wide with astonishment.

The skin around the giant's groin was unbroken.

The Firefly urged his horse forward, saying to himself: "And God made Man in his own image."

## VIII

The Firefly reached the Mountains of Misty Mourning, and began to ascend. Up the slopes and along the ridges he went, knowing now the location of his destination. To



the east of the Peak of Sorrows were three mountains arranged in an equilateral triangle, the Peak of Wrath, the Peak of Storms, and the Peak of the Thunderer. On the lower slopes of the Peak of the Thunderer was a small village, known as Hawkeyrie. From there was an easy climb to the summit, where the Man Who Walked Through Time was to be found.

It was the last minutes of twilight when the Firefly cautiously entered the un-named village. From the main street, the nearer of the three peaks of the equilateral was easily visible, and beyond it could be seen the Peak of the Thunderer. The eternal mists hid the valley between the three peaks. From stories he had heard, no one had descended to that valley save the man he sought for many years. When the mountain men wished to reach Hawkeyrie, they went the hard way, over the top. The Firefly had no wish to leave his horse behind, and so decided to follow exactly in the other's footsteps.

Lights still burned in one of the side streets and, associating lights with a tavern, the Firefly turned his horse to the building where the light shone. Surprisingly, the door did not open to his hand. He pushed again, then shrugged and rapped on the door loudly. After a few seconds he heard footsteps, and then the sounds of bolts being withdrawn. A haggard face thrust itself at him, and eyes peered from under heavy lids.

"'Ang me! A stranger. Well?" The hoarse voice somewhat startled the Firefly, but with a calm voice he returned: "I want a room for the night."

"Eh?"

"A room for the night?" asked the Firefly. "Have you?"

The eyelids drooped, and the door began to close. Then the other apparently changed his mind, for it opened again.

"Nime?"

"The Firefly."

"Why?"

"Because I reject this world to seek for another," said the Firefly wearily. "Now can I please come in?"

"Hah!" said the other, a note of comprehension in his

voice, "ya wan' 'scape, huh? Cautious bleeder. Dinna whaya wanned. In."

The Firefly slid round the door, too tired to grasp what the other had said. The bestial creature gave him a grin, showing brown, rotting teeth.

"C'm'in. We 'ready started. Jussa fing f'er." He halted suddenly, as a thought occurred to him. "Y'c'n pay?"

"For the room? Of course."

"Room hell."

"Then what for?"

"W'f'r, w'f'r? Kri' man wanna 'scape 'r no?"

The Firefly at last gathered that the man was offering him some means of escape, and looked up in surprise.

"You can get me back in time?"

"Back 'n time, forw'd 'n time, other side 'vit. 'Ere'r th'r, w'r'v'r y'like. C'n y'pay?"

"Can you prove what you say?" asked the Firefly. The creature looked puzzled, and the Firefly gave up and turned for the door. The other suddenly erupted in agitation.

"Wait! Y'c'n pay later."

"Later?" said the Firefly incredulously, halting. "You mean *afterwards*."

"Yar, 'kay, 'kay. Afterw'ds, later, when y' done."

The Firefly was puzzled. "Will I be able to take my belongings with me?"

"Y' c'n take y' bloody warhorse f'r all I know."

The Firefly fought his tiredness to reason the situation out, but in the end simply let curiosity take over.

"Lead the way," he said resignedly.

At the end of the corridor was a flight of steps, down which the dwarf shambled. Damp dripped from the ceiling, and cockroaches and woodlice inhabited the cracks in the wall. Eventually, the steps ended in a vault some thirty feet underground.

A lantern spread light about the place, and showed that the dirty floor was littered with what appeared to be corpses. The Firefly recoiled, and regretted leaving his crossbow behind, though it would have been little enough use in such a confined space.

"S'a'right," put in the other. "Jus' sleeping."



The Firefly knelt to the nearest. His wrist showed a strong pulse beat, but was stone cold. He slept so deeply that the Firefly thought he could not be woken. He prodded, and the other slept on.

"Whaya doin'. Leave'm alone," snarled the dwarf. "Sit."

The Firefly sat. "Don't I walk through?"

The other laughed, and his laughter echoed and reverberated eerily. "Very comical, yar. I like seeya walk t'rew. Ha!"

There was a sudden biting pain, and a fierce heat. The Firefly howled and leapt to his feet.

"S'awright. Don' panic, it's . . ."

A deep mist whose particles were scintillating motes of silver and gilt descended, cutting off all sound. Through the dust floated tiny packets of intangibility, which adhered to the mind and insinuated themselves into its corridors, fondling his thoughts and erasing his anger and pain. Down, down, down, as globules of colour exploded in his eyes, shimmering into rainbows, swaying, weaving . . .

He was standing on a mound of green turf, and all around him in its fantastic complexity was a vast city. It shimmered and glowed in the caressing sunlight, like the globes of colour, a million windows reflecting light like the facets of a gargantuan diamond. Its walls vibrated to a hidden melody with *movement*, such movement as the Firefly had never seen before. All the people in the world gathered in one place could not have made the movement which was the city.

Even above the city were glinting objects, and his head spun at the sheer immensity of the buildings and the numbers of people. A man approached to help him up.

"Excuse me, but what year is it?" said the Firefly, knowing the figure would be meaningless, but wishing to savour it nevertheless. The man ignored him.

"Remember," whispered a close, cool voice, "that things which you do not understand are not necessarily untrue."

The Firefly whirled. "The Red Wolf Queen!" She roared with mirth and shrank into the distance as if borne on wings.

"This city has everything. Someday it will belong to the

cats and the rats and the bats. Then we will climb, my species and I, to infinity."

The Firefly turned to the incredibly old man, who rapidly transmuted himself into the statue giant. His own voice shrieked at him. "You're God? Who told you that?"

"My fire is small, but it has not your consuming passion," said the Sun from the sky, and then disappeared, leaving the world to night.

"Never fear, Firefly," said a new voice, "our warrior will take care of this."

"You cast a shadow," accused the Firefly's shadow.

"Y'wan' 'scape? y'wan' 'scape?"

"You're a fish, you know that?"

"No, no, don't kill him. My weapons are beautiful."

"Who are you, candle?" Faintly.

"Who are you?"

"Where are you going?"

"All the world's happy."

"Are you happy?"

"The world's happy."

"Happy?"

"?"

The Firefly cried out in anguish. At once the air was still and empty. All the disembodied voices had been swept away. There was a profound, courtroom silence. The Firefly looked up. Nothing could be seen, so he stood up. There was no one in sight. He looked at the wide open door nearby. In bold letters, it was marked EXIT.

He stared, fascinated, at the dark opening. He strode toward it, and peered into the gloom beyond. Hesitantly, he extended a foot. A harsh voice said: "You cannot come this way, sir. One way only."

"I want to get out."

"Sorry, sir. Can you not see that the door is clearly marked EXIT?"

"But that's what I want to do!" There was a silence.

"Sir?" said the door politely.

"Yes?" returned the Firefly.

"Kindly shut the door. Notice that EXIT is on the *inside*. You cannot leave this way."

"But I want to go back."



"That is impossible."

"I want to escape."

"I would not try if I were you, sir."

"So you wouldn't? Do I care?"

"No, sir, and that is part of the problem. Running away serves no real purpose, sir."

"I cast my own light."

There was silence. The Firefly pushed the door. It was locked. The Firefly sat down and wept silently.

As the tears blurred his vision, he awoke. The lantern swung on its nail. A dark figure cut off its light.

"Others aw gone home. Y' started late, see? 'Ow was it? Sat'sfied I bet, huh? Like it?"

"You tricked me. It wasn't real. Not any of it. All a fraud. I'll kill you." As he rose, the Firefly spat out each word slowly and deliberately.

"Wass marrer. Don' hurt. On'y a drug. 'Armless. Evyone likes it? Wass marrer. Drug. Makes people 'appy. Wass marrer? An'on' think y' wasn' 'appy. Carn y' be 'appy? If that don' make y' nothing' ever will." The words rushed out in a bubbling torrent.

"I'll break your neck," said the Firefly grimly.

"Nonono," wailed the dwarf, "I'll tell y'. When they come up 'ere wantin' things, I give 'em 'appiness. What more can I gi' 'em? What else is w'f 'avin'. Don' do it!"

"So that's what happened. You offered me escape through drugs and I thought you meant real escape. You gave them all happiness, did you? What for?"

"To save them," said the other, becoming lucid as the Firefly's grip relaxed.

"What!"

"Yar," said the dwarf, "to save 'em. From 'emselves, fool. From th'r uselessness, from 'r weakness. Gi' 'em a bit ev'ry night 'n th'r 'appy. Why can't people be 'appy? Why ain' y' 'appy. Y' must be bloody far gone un'appy if the drug don' cure y'."

"But it's all unreal," protested the Firefly.

"What isn't?" asked the other.

The Firefly let the other man free, and lowered his arms.

"Look," said the dwarf, "I ain' 'urting them. I 'elp. You need 'elp? I got it. You do wan' 'elp?"

"I am the Firefly?" said he scornfully.

"Pay, huh?" whispered the other, as the Firefly climbed the steps.

"Here's payment," said the Firefly, and spat on the table. He spent another night out in the open air.

## IX

What is real? the dwarf had said. What use was unhappy reality, he had meant. Was happiness everything? The world certainly had plenty of it. But what else? The drugs had failed on the Firefly. Why? Was it because he had no capacity for happiness? Is that why he was unhappy in a joyous world? But what grotesque happiness that warps and kills! The Sun: he was happy, with his piece of fire—but it killed him. A great irony. The statue giant was happy, in his way, too, thinking he was God. Who had given him the hypnotic ring? The shadow man was unhappy, but he was mad. The old man who fashioned weapons, and his nephew. Where they happy? Yes. As the Firefly descended to the hidden valley between the three peaks, he was sorely confused.

Once below the mists, the Firefly stopped in absolute amazement. Throughout the valley spread a vast network of roads, extending in all directions, as far as the eye could see, until they were lost at the edges of the valley. Above the roads soared bridges, suspended by gigantic concrete blocks which had somehow weathered the centuries. In between the webwork of roads were the entrances to hundreds of tunnels, small and semi-hidden, or gaping wide.

And through the centre of the valley ran a mighty road which could not have been less than half a mile wide.

As the Firefly gazed at the human-built wilderness, the incongruity of it all struck him. Here were these hundreds of roads and bridges, congregated in the largest crossroads the world had probably ever seen, and not one extended



without this valley, so tiny when compared to the distances these roads must have spanned when originally built.

The Firefly descended to the point where the roads began and petered out, and set his horse on one of them. He set out across the valley, but soon realised that he was following the road, and not any particular direction. He looked around him, but could see only the surface of the roads which met and left his own. The mist prevented him from seeing more than two hundred yards in any direction, and completely hid the sky, and the sun, from view. He proceeded, attempting to keep in a straight line, but the road curved, forked, and met others so constantly and deceptively that he gave up the task as impossible.

Then the realisation hit him—he was utterly and completely lost at the crossroads of the world. Unless the mist lifted—an occurrence so rare as to almost never happen—he was trapped. His only hope was to keep riding, probably in circles: he had no way of knowing, until he brought himself near enough to sight the upgrade which would take him above the mist.

He rode on, and on, and on . . .

That night he slept on hard, cold tarmac.

And the next day was the same.

And the next.

The night was falling on the third day, when he saw the light. He dismissed it as fancy, but it flashed again, and he heaved a sigh of relief. Then he set off toward it, calling for help.

The lamp was carried by a small, lithe man with a lively, intelligent look. He was dressed poorly, and wore stained sandals. He watched the Firefly for a few seconds, idly swinging his lantern from one finger.

"Who are you, friend?" he asked finally.

"I am the Firefly, and I am very pleased to see you."

"Even a Firefly might lose his way at the crossroads of the world. Few know or can find the key to the roads. You are lost?"

"I am."

"Where were you headed?"

"I was following a man, one who said he could walk through time. As though the next century were as far as

the next hilltop." He laughed. "As for me it is. He was headed for the Peak of the Thunderer. *He* crossed here."

"Ah," replied the other, "I remember him. *He* knew the key to the roads. A clever man, that, though always talking."

"One of his weaknesses," explained the Firefly. "The other was women."

"I call myself Guide, because I know the way across this valley. This mass of pitch, tarmac, stone and metal was once the crossroads of the world. So many roads converged here that almost everyone crossed this point once in his lifetime.

"In the far past, the whole surface, now so desolate, was occupied by men and machines. Now it is deserted save for me and the lost ones who stumble across it.

"It is a great heritage for me to take care of it. All the roads of the world are here, and I look after them. It is a very important job."

The Firefly looked at Guide in amazement. "But don't you know that all the roads stop just outside the valley?"

"Of course I do," said the other, "but what do I care. This is still the centre of the world. What do I care what those outside are doing. To me, the actual time is immaterial. Out here, I might just as well be back in the days when the roads were used. If I like to live in the past, so I shall."

The Firefly laughed. "My friend, you have found a different solution to my own problem. I reject this world, and follow the man who walked through time to take me back to the Great Ages, while you project yourself back into the past merely by being in contact with something that belongs to that age. My friend, we are two of one kind. I only wish your solution would do for me."

"Will it not?"

The Firefly shook his head.

"Then come with me."

"Where to?"

"To the signpost of the world."

The signpost was a glittering grey globe suspended by a gleaming metal thread from the ceiling of the tunnel.



It was not a perfect sphere, but was faceted a million times. On each facet was a name.

"There you are. Any place in the world you may choose to name. The key will tell you which road to take."

"Where is the key?" asked the Firefly. The other tapped his forehead. "Choose well," he said, and left the Firefly alone.

The Firefly touched the surface of the signpost gently, and it quivered delicately. Then he squinted to read the names.

Any place in the world he could have for the asking, to live in the past as did the Guide. But could he live in a dream-world like that? Guide seemed happy enough, but then, who was not? Save, of course, the Firefly. He read, and the names rolled liquidly from his tongue: London, New York, Moscow, Peking, all mighty cities, now fallen to ruin. Palaces, parks, monuments, bridges, factories, airports—strange names—could he ever find happiness there?

He combed the globe for an hour or more before he found names he knew. He picked one.

"The Peak of the Thunderer, Firefly?" It was Guide. The Firefly nodded.

## X

And so the Firefly passed through Hawkeyrie, and ascended the Peak of the Thunderer. There were mixed feelings within him. Fear, triumph, hope—but nowhere any happiness. He was depending for that on The Man Who Walked Through Time.

The arrow came from nowhere to drill a hole through the head of the Firefly's horse. It simply folded up, flinging the Firefly to the ground. Without raising his head, he pulled the crossbow over it, whipping a bolt from his waist almost simultaneously.

"Throw the crossbow aside," commanded a voice from the bushes bordering the road. The Firefly twisted his body so that he could see the speaker, making no move to obey

the order. He could make out vaguely a human shape, which repeated the command. The Firefly kept tight hold on the weapon.

"Why did you shoot my horse? I've nothing valuable."

The archer came into view. It was a woman, dressed in badly stitched pelts from a miscellany of animals.

"Food," she said briefly, "and if you don't throw the crossbow away, we'll be eating you too."

"Food!" said the Firefly, incredulously, "but there's plenty of game around here." He paused to toss his crossbow a few feet away as the woman raised her bow to aim. "There's no necessity to go around shooting travellers and their mounts."

"I'm no huntress," said the woman bitterly. "I can get food for myself, but I've a child to care for."

"What about your husband," asked the Firefly.

"Never had one," said the woman. "Stranger was here some four year ago. Filled my head full of nonsense and my belly full of child. Then went on his way. Madman he must have been. Now get on your way. Have to walk."

"Did this man ever speak of walking through time?"

"Never stopped," said the woman disgustedly, "always talking about that or the like. Mad."

The Man Who Walked Through Time on a previous journey, thought the Firefly, or perhaps the beginning of this one.

"Went on up the mountain. Said he lived at the top. Don't know what he does there. I wouldn't go with him after all that talk. Not that he asked me. Then the baby come."

The Firefly scrambled to his feet. "I'll go then. I hope you and your brat choke on the meat."

He made a move toward his weapon. "Leave it alone. Maybe aims better than this. Get on your way. Much good may it do you to find him."

The Firefly shrugged angrily, and began the long walk up the mountain slope.

He was forced to stop for a rest some four miles later. It was not steep, but there was no road, and it was hot. The Firefly stretched himself out on a rock after probing for snakes with a stick.



A shadow fell across his eyes.

"You are the Firefly, for you reject this world and cast your own light. Yet I see the the sun still irks you."

The Firefly sat up and looked at the man who said he could walk through time.

"I have come a long way to find you. Now I find that you knew I followed. Why did you not approach me before now?"

"I was hoping you would give up the search. You show uncommon tenacity for this time. I even made a deliberate detour to show you were making a mistake. I can't do it, you know."

Fear flashed into the Firefly's eyes. "Can't do what?" he asked, already knowing the answer.

"Take you back in time," said the other calmly. "Time travel into the past is impossible. The past has already happened and is fixed."

"You mean that all your talk was a mass of lies to amuse the ladies while you got them into bed?"

The man's calm was ruffled. "No, that was all true, I can walk through time, but only forward and not back. You seem to have followed my trail extremely accurately."

"It was an easy trail to follow." The Firefly was savage now. "Couldn't you keep your hands off women?"

The time-walker squatted down, ignoring the Firefly's comment. "Why were you looking for me?"

"Because," said the Firefly, all his bitterness pouring out, "this world is dead. I don't really know why. I think it's something to do with time. Time isn't just a measurement, it's an effect. Somehow the cause is gone. There doesn't seem to be any future any more. There's nothing people will work for. You want to go over the next hill? Why? It's pretty much the same as here? You wonder what the stars are? They're worlds, so what? You want to know why that man does that? Why? It won't benefit you. If you want to do it go ahead, nobody cares. Why? Why? Why? There just doesn't seem to be any *drive* any more. People don't want to build, they don't even want to destroy. There's a woman down the mountain with a child. She even thinks she ought to take care of it. You know what she does? She sat by the road

and shot my horse. She could walk to Hawkeyrie and get food for the child, but she doesn't care enough to do it.

"This is the world I was born into. Well, it isn't good enough for me. When I heard about you, I thought I had a chance to get out of it, to go back to a time when there was a living human race, and not just one which exists. And you can't take me. You can only go forward to a future that can never exist. The whole human race is dying, and I've got to sit here watching it die, and dying with it. And I'm the only bloody fool knows it's dying."

"Aren't you being rather selfish, trying to pull yourself out and leaving the rest here to rot. How about teaching them to build again?"

"Oh, yes! I could become a wandering fanatic preaching blood and damnation if they don't follow me. But don't you see that it wouldn't make a damn of difference? Look, what's this funny fellow talking about. Do something? We're dying? He's a madman. Aren't we happy? And that's the irony. They are happy. They're dying, and loving every second of it. Don't you see? They've achieved what they were after—happiness. And it's killing them. They've won that and lost the future."

"In a way," said the Man Who Walked Through Time, "you're right. Everything you said was true, though emotional exaggeration put you too completely in the right. As you say, they've won happiness. And that's not to be taken lightly."

"But it's such a false happiness. Hypnosis, drugs, giving them exactly what will make them happy. The whole world has gone escapist."

"You, too," pointed out the older man.

"Yes," he agreed, "but I've failed. There is no future for me. There is no next step."

"That's a strange attitude. You're the Firefly, remember? This world has no hold over you. You aren't one of those who say: 'Why look for a way out? Things are the way they are'. You're the man who denies this, says: 'There must be a way out. Only my first way out collapsed. I'll look for another.' Or are you going defeatist, too?"

"All right," said the Firefly, half convinced, "what's your way out?"



"I showed it to you," said the other. "I even made a deliberate detour to lead you to my solution, and talk with him. You know as well as I do."

Comprehension and wonderment wiped the angry, puzzled expression from the Firefly's face.

"The Lungfish!"

"That's right, boy. Once there were some fish who found that they could survive when their pool dried up. They didn't die. And when the rain came again, they bred. And because all the others *had* died, there was a higher percentage in the next generation. And next dry season, the same thing happened. And in time, the mutation became dominant, and in time it bred true.

"And now mankind is dying out, because it has lost its driving force. The sands of time have run out for Man. But while mankind dies, something *new* is forming. A new species, the legendary and much maligned *Homo superior* is developing. They have beaten Time. They are independent of Time in their lust to build. Mankind is, as you say, finished. But Man will take a long while in its dying. You, of course, would not in actuality witness its death. And while it is dying, this new species will become more and more numerous. But natural selection is a slow process. I have made it my employment to help it along a little.

"I intend to build up a small colony of mutants here, and then a larger one. I intend to exclude all children who do not carry the gene. The mutants will understand: they are not as emotionally bound to their children as we. I want to make it a selective advantage to belong to this new race *now*. I want to see *Homo superior* breeding true before I die. When I came here from the past, I expected to find a Universe-wide Utopia. I was at first appalled at what I found. But I am determined to help build such a Utopia. Oh, I could walk further and further into the future, and find it. But I want to tackle the problem *here*. Believe me, boy, there's no satisfaction in running away from the problem. If you have the urge to build, start building. Don't go running off looking for some competent builder to teach you the trade.

"I know you won't understand all the talk of genes, but

you must know what I'm trying to tell you. You know what I mean, Firefly: will you help?"

The Firefly was deep in thought. At last he replied:

"I suppose I am one of these new people?"

"No," said the other, "or I wouldn't have to ask for your help, and you would never have got yourself into such a muddle. Somehow you have some Time—how can I put it?—saved up."

The Firefly pondered a moment,

"Then I go my way. I am the Firefly, and I cast my own light."

"In that case," said The Man Who Walked Through Time, "you are still a very muddled young man."

The Firefly moved off down the hill. The older man stood up, and added to himself: "And you'll be back. There are a lot of happy people down there. And you can never be one of them."

— BRIAN CRAIG

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# THE WALL

by Josephine Saxton

It was as if the landscape was divided into two halves, split across by some change in the light, in the atmosphere, in the colours of the air and the earth. It was a great flat valley that rose so shallowly to the summits of the surrounding escarpments that the change in height was scarcely noticeable, but indeed the difference in height between the floor and the horizon was some five hundred feet. A great curving saucer. But the saucer was cracked across from east to west by a difference. The horizon on the north and the horizon on the south when looked at from west or east looked scarcely different from one another when seen in turn, but to bring the eyes forward would have shown how great indeed the difference between these two halves was, and the eyes looking thus would discern a definite line across this area of the world, coming closer, winding upwards, until it was close enough to be seen as a wall.

It was a very high wall, thirty feet in height, and it was very ancient in its stone, dark blue, hard, impenetrable, but rough and worn. Crystalline almost, its surfaces sprang this way and that, revealing whole lumps of glittering faceted hardness, with smooth places where mosses and orange lichens had got hold ; and at its foot many creeping plants ; tough twisted vines bearing clusters of ungathered raisins, convolvulus white and pink, and ivy in many colours, thick, glossy and spidery. Here and there stones had fallen from its old structure, two and three feet thick, and in one place, almost halfway across the floor of the valley, there was a hole through the wall, only six inches across its greatest measurement, and three feet from the floor, which was moist red clay on the north side, and dry white sand on the south side. The top of the wall was sealed to all climbers by rows of dreadful spikes which curved in every direction, cruel, needle sharp, glassy metal rapiers set into green bronze. They were impenetrable in

every way, these swords, and stood endless guard between north and south.

The valley was the home of rats and snakes of many kinds, and thousands of spiders ran in the dust at the foot of the leafy creepers, and rabbits burrowed in the clay on the north side, and lizards scuttled in the sand on the south side. There were two sources of water: one a spring which flooded a puddle in the clay—the water here was cold and green and clear—and the other a limpid pool in the sand under a rock, the water therein being warm and slimy and grey. There were no trees to be seen anywhere, only the earth with the sparse grasses; no habitation save the rabbit warrens.

At either side of the hole in the wall lived a man and a woman. The man lived on the north side where it was usually cold and damp, and the woman lived on the south side where it was usually warm and dry. These two were tall and thin and beautiful, strong and lean, but something was to be seen in their way of moving that spoke of inner suffering, some twisted thing which showed on the outside, almost imperceptible, something from the heart. He was fair in colour with yellow grey hair to his shoulders, and a beard of great length which tangled in great curls, with blackberry thorns and stains of purple juice in his beard from the raisins he had eaten over the years. His feet and hands were horny with callouses from running and scrabbling for wild rabbits, but his fingernails were specklessly white for, in his idle hours, of which there were many, he sat and cleaned them with a little stick of thorn wood, and rubbed them down to a neat shape on a stone in the wall. He wore a threadbare suit of lovat green thorn-proof worsted suiting, a dark green silk shirt which was of the finest quality, with gilt cufflinks which had only enough cuff just to stay hanging in the threads, and a tie which could not be seen for the wild beard.

The woman was dark and brown like a nut that has been polished. Her hair was dark, so dark it was not black but something beyond black, and her lashes and brows matched it in depth and thickness, and the hair fell straight and heavy to her thighs in great thick locks with not a wave or curl. Her hands and feet also were immaculately clean,



but she had callouses on her knees from kneeling in the sand at the side of her pool of water, washing her hair until it shone. Her breasts were still full and young, bearing the marks of suckling an infant, but that was in another life. She was dressed in a dark blue dress of courtelle jersey with brass buttons long ago turned mouldy green. The dress fitted her figure and had a pleat in the back of the skirt, and she showed a little bit of nylon lace, sometimes when she walked, peeping out from under the dress, a very dusty white. She always carried a handbag with her. It was a large white plastic beach bag with bamboo handles, and in it were all manner of bottles containing sun oil, hand lotion, face cream and skin food—none of which she ever used—handkerchiefs, hairpins, dried-up cigarettes, old bills, papers and letters and a paper bag with a clean sanitary pad and two little safety pins wrapped up tight. There was also in the bag a brush and comb, a necklace of heavy beads, several photographs, some dried flowers and several recipes for the making of home-made wines, Irish soda bread and potted meat.

These two people were lovers. For most of the day, in their separate climates, they would sit by the hole in the wall exchanging conversation, peeping at glimpses of one another, able to see only half a face, or a hand, or a length of hair through the fissure, making up poetry for one another which only had meaning for themselves alone; and sometimes they would hold hands through the rock, although they were only able to do this for very short periods of time because of the awkward height of the hole, and the extreme pain caused by being half bent and by the cold sharp rock rubbing on their arms. They would exchange bits of food—blackberries and raw rabbit meat, ripe grapes, and mushrooms—and they would pass bunches of grasses or flowers from around the base of the wall to each other with passionate love messages whispered from the heart and from their deepest feelings. Although they had never seen one another, or touched one another farther than their wrists, they felt deeply for one another in the tenderest way, and were swept by full passions that could never be consummated because of the wall. At times like these—especially was it hard when the moon was full—

they would sit close to the hole and weep and moan in longing for each other, longing for something the other could give were it not for the cruel wall that parted their starving bodies. Many long tortured hours they passed in this way wishing the wall would melt. But it never melted, it stayed there hard and enduring, as if it had always been there and always would be so. They had no ideas of the subject of how to relieve themselves of this terrible situation, for it had been like this so long they could hardly remember when it was, the day they had found themselves, each at a side of the wall. Their love had begun on that very day, even before the sound of their singing voices, and with the rapturous discovery of the hole and the first blissful touches of the hands, and with the dreadful realisation that they could never come closer together than this. All through the years they had yearned but never thought it could ever be any different. They knew, as if with an inborn knowledge, that the wall was too deeply set to be tunnelled under, too long to be walked around, if indeed it had an end anywhere, and much too hideously guarded at its crest.

One day the man began to think that he could not stand it any longer. His body and emotion had taken all they could ; he was racked with desire and his head was full of pain with inner weeping. He suggested to the woman that they should part. He explained that the idea had come to him that there might be other lands where a person might live, over the horizon, away to the north and south, things they had neither of them dreamed of, other loves perhaps, other climates and better food. He felt then that anything would be better than to sit here forever just yearning for something that could never be had. At first, when the woman listened to this idea, she was shocked so deeply inside herself that she became as stone, she neither spoke nor moved for a day or a night, but lay with her head on the stone of the wall in a cold agony such as she had never before experienced. And then she began to weep, silently at first, then with little moans, then louder and from lower in her being, until she screamed in great pain, and cut her forehead on the blue rock and the blood ran into her dark hair, although she felt nothing but the pain of the emotions



caused by the idea. But the man persisted. He spoke to her soothingly and gently, and he explained with a heavy heart that it would cause him an equal pain to be parted forever from her, but that it seemed the only course open to them unless they were to die here without ever having known any other thing better than craving.

After twenty eight days the woman had absorbed this idea herself ; she had turned it over, and tried to visualise the world beyond, without the man, perhaps with strangers, other women, more food, another dress, but she could feel none of it and gave up as the pictures refused to take shape. But she knew also that her man was right, that it had to be so, that they would part, and turn their backs on each other and walk off, she over the hot sand, he over the sticky red clay. She knew it would be like this, she had accepted the idea, and so she finally bent her head down to the hole and agreed with him that they should part. They decided to begin their separate journeys the very next day.

They spent the rest of the day gathering food ; the woman tore off her petticoat and wrapped it around heaps of dried grapes, mushrooms and meat that the man had given her, and he took off his shirt and did the same. They spent a sleepless silent night of unspoken doubts leaning against the hole, and at dawn they clasped hands through the hole, said quiet goodbyes and turned around to walk, he with his bundle, she with a bundle and a handbag.

They each walked for several hours, with such a weight of dread and despair in their hearts as they had never known ; their feet dragged, their backs bent, tears ran gently down their faces, and they each tried to recall the feel of the other's hand through the wall, but already the impression was fading, and it was very difficult to feel anything. So, grieving, they walked slowly towards the perimeter of the north and south sides of the valley, and there in the distance they could each hear strange sounds, smell strange smells, and feel strange changes in the atmosphere. They were four miles apart by now and it was not yet noon, and the way had been uphill for both of them.

At exactly the same moment in time, the man in the

north and the woman in the south met strangers of the opposite sex, and these two asked them the same questions. They enquired who they were, where they lived, and where they were going. Sadly they both told the same tale, and the woman who now faced the man in the north asked him to touch her long fair hair and made kissing mouths at him. He was immediately impassioned by this brazenness and, full of unspent vigour from the many dry years, he held her in his arms and began to make love to her, clumsily and fiercely, his own dark woman already forgotten. At the other side of the valley, she was just then succumbing to the advances of a tall dark man, a person more handsome than she could ever have visualised, raven and brown like herself, strong and passionate, and she was so filled with admiration and physical hunger that she succumbed easily to his embrace. And then the two couples parted, after long kisses and greedy sighing. As they stood up to brush their clothes in the afternoon light they chanced to look back across the valley, and in the distance saw each other, infinite specks, but each speck duplicated, and because each had just then been unfaithful with a stranger, they each knew that the other had too, that the double speck in the distance could mean only one thing.

They were immediately filled with remorse at what they had done, and longed for each other again as much as before, and because they could now see each other, even though it was so far away, they wished very much to be close together again. Having tasted full physical contact with others they now knew that no bliss in the world could match what they would feel for one another, could it be achieved. They had the instant idea that they would run to each other across the sinking plain and somehow overcome the obstacle of the wall which, from this distance, looked very small indeed. So they set off running without even saying goodbye to their lovers-that-were-not-lovers, running and breathing heavily from the unaccustomed effort.

When they were only one mile apart they could see one another quite clearly in the sharp white air which lit this part of the valley with an illusion of clarity which seemed to telescope everything distant much nearer. They paused, then and, staring in wonder, each at the other, a



pure brave kind of love lighted them up within, and it was as if they could see the pool that was the hidden soul. They began to run again and, as the ground levelled off, the sight of them was almost lost behind the top of the wall; but this made them run the last few hundred yards even harder. At last they came up to the wall, and ran up and down at its base in joyous haste, seeking the hole. Soon they stood opposite, and the woman shouted to the man that she was going to climb the wall, and the man shouted to the woman that he was going to scale the wall, but they were so out of breath with running that their words were all muddled up and lost, and together they dropped the bundles and the bag at the base of the wall, and began to climb. It was easy to find toe and handholds in the old vines and creepers and in the crystalline hardness of the rock, and in minutes they were near the top where the cruel spikes stood waiting. Together they made one last desperate push upwards and saw themselves close together at the narrow top of the wall; as the spikes pushed into their bodies and as the blood ran down they stared in horror, not at the pain of Death but at what was really in the heart and soul of the other. In terror they clung to one another, closer and closer, hoping that it was not true, as they embraced breast to breast across the spikes, their cheeks pressed close with blood and tears; it was then that they noticed all the other lovers impaled on the spikes.

Some were long-dead skeletons, dry and dusty, grinning skull to skull; some were mummified by the keen wind, eyes sunk in perpetual bewilderment; and some were rotten and new, astonishingly, quite new.

They turned again to see themselves, wondering dumbly at what they had seen stretching out infinitely along the wall, all the clasping lovers long gone, no kiss nor handhold there with either bliss or agony.

And very quietly they kissed as they clung and died there, impaled across the cold spiky barrier, feeling and thought growing more feeble every second.

In the north and in the south a fair haired woman and a dark haired man set off slowly to walk towards the wall, love stirring in the innermost recesses of their being.

— JOSEPHINE SAXTON

*There was this man who lived in a silver cup in the garden, and a small girl, and Uncle Ernie. Uncle Ernie didn't believe in the man, so . . .*

# YESTERDAYS' GARDENS

by Johnny Byrne

Uncle Ernie sat in an armchair, his eyes vacantly held by a book. From time to time he said things softly to the child playing on the carpet. His niece had taken the roof off her doll's house and was engrossed in arranging the tiny articles of furniture.

"Can I play with the box, Uncle Ernie?" she asked him again. When he didn't answer she sang a rhyme she had made up herself.

Uncle Ernie has  
hidden the box  
and now his tea  
is cold in the pot

"I met the man again to-day," she added after a moment.

"What man?" Uncle Ernie was not really listening.

"The man from the silver cup, the man in the silver cup who lives in our garden."

Uncle Ernie shuddered in spite of the heat. He laid down his book and stared in silence into the fire.

"Your tea is cold," she said accusingly. He didn't answer and she jumped up saying hopefully: "Give me the box and I'll fill your cup with nice hot tea." She filled one of her doll's teacups, adding tiny amounts of milk and sugar. He handled it carefully when she put it in his hands. "Don't forget to stir it, Uncle Ernie," she sang, going back to her house.

"Go to bed, go to bed." He was almost pleading. Then he remembered something important. "You are going away to-morrow, go to bed."

"You must give me back the box first. The man said



that you must. You took it and it's mine. That's not right." Her voice was very serious.

"There is no silver cup in my garden. Nobody can live in a silver cup." Uncle Ernie tried to control himself, "And I told you never to go into the garden." His voice rose to a tired shout.

The child looked up happily. "Am I going home to-morrow?" She smiled. "Then I can take it to bed with me, can't I, Uncle Ernie?" She was silent for a moment. "Am I going home to-morrow?"

Uncle Ernie looked bleakly at nothing. "No, you're not going home to-morrow. You are going to stay with Dr. Esslin and his wife. I've told you that you can't go home again. Your house blew down in the night, remember?" He looked at her doubtfully, trying to decide if she was still young enough for this kind of talk. "They are calling for you early in the morning," he added finally.

The child altered carefully the position of a bed. She didn't appear to hear him. "Why do you never go into the garden?" she said suddenly.

"Gardens are bad for people. They're bad for the hair, bad for the bone and worse for little children." Uncle Ernie spoke as if he were remembering a well-remembered lesson. His niece echoed him parrotlike:

Little boys and  
girls should know  
that gardens in  
air are bad they  
give pain in the  
head pain in the  
bone and all the  
lovely hair is  
vanished by the  
nasty jealous air

"Why is the garden dry and yellow?" She never looked at him when she asked this question. "When I was little it was green and noisy. Why isn't it noisy now?"

"It's quiet." Uncle Ernie said absently. He was remembering and answered her questions from long habit. His eyes turned to the forgotten book once more, and he said

several times, "Gardens are bad: they are yellow and full of dust."

Something in the way he said it made her angry. She kicked the house and the boom it made thundered hollowly round the solid rock walls of the room. She began to say and do things she knew would make him angry. "Why did you send the birds away?" She stopped and, pressing her arms tightly to her back, she pushed her neck stiffly forward and tried to imitate a sparrow. "When I was small I saw little birds that went like this. And wet things that used to crawl up tree trunks. Then when it was time for bed this is what the big black ones used to shout high in the sky at night." She made loud shrilling noises and flapped her arms awkwardly.

She calmed down and her voice lost its shrillness. "The man who gave me the box that you took from me couldn't tell why the sky is always red. Jimmy Esslin made up a song about that," she added and sang:

Red night, red day  
now is the time  
to go away.

"Gardens are poison," said Uncle Ernie, "they're bad for the hair, worse for the bone and a danger to little children." He wasn't listening.

"Can you tell me the name of the dancing flower again? It had real silk on its wings. My daddy showed me how to hold it so carefully in my hand, just like that!" She held out her hand and showed him how. "It moved if you held it properly and when you opened your hand it danced all around you and then went home."

"Yellow and dust, bad," said Uncle Ernie staring sightlessly at the pages in front of him. "Bad it is . . . so bad."

"You told me a lie!" she remembered suddenly.

Uncle Ernie looked up at her.

"That place a long way down the tunnel. The place where you said Mama and Daddy are buried," she pointed, "they are not there at all. The man from the silver cup told me that you lied. They were in the garden when the big light came the night they vanished . . . Oh, it was very bright. I saw it through my bedclothes. And they were in the garden when it came and I heard them make a noise



just before the windsong came pushing all the houses down. The garden was gone after, and I didn't see them again. The man said that they burned up with the birds and trees all yellow like the grass. The man said that they were still in the garden only I couldn't see them."

"There is no man in the garden. Nobody lives in my garden, gardens are bad." Uncle Ernie spoke as if he were trying to convince himself.

"You told me a lie," she said relentlessly. "You told me a big lie."

Uncle Ernie came to life and snapped shut his book. "To bed with you. The Doctor will be calling early for you in the morning."

"The Doctor wants to do something to me. I don't want to go."

He got cross with her. "Remember what happened to the little girl you played with last year. She went into the garden and stayed in the air. Remember! she didn't go to the Doctor. Remember what happened to her afterwards."

"I don't want to go. I want to go home. Jimmy Esslin makes fun of me because of the marks on my face."

Uncle Ernie began to pack up her toys. "You won't see Jimmy Esslin. You won't see him again. He wouldn't stay out of the air."

She began to plead with him for the box he had taken from her. "Will you tell me what is in it if I give it to you?" he asked her.

"Nothing!" she answered, her voice too high.

"And what were you doing with it the last time you had it?" Uncle Ernie had wanted to ask her this before.

"Just playing!" she said. "Can I have it with me in bed, now? It's mine," she warned him. "The man said it was mine. He said everything I wanted was in it."

Uncle Ernie considered for a moment.

"Will you go with Dr. Esslin in the morning?"

"Only if you give me back the box."

He gave her the box. "I'll be quiet," she said. "You won't hear a thing." She held it tightly.

It was small, black and rectangular and had a concealed lid. She shook it first and then opened it too quickly for

him to see how. She showed him the inside. "Look, Uncle Ernie, there's nothing in it, isn't it nice?"

He lifted up the doll's house and took her to the bedroom. She undressed and got into bed still clutching the box. She kissed him and whispered, "Thank you, Uncle Ernie, thank you."

After he left she got out of bed and started to play again. She crept silently to the kitchen and got some hot water. She went back to her room and unpacked her tea service. Sitting on the floor she made a pot of tea, handling the water and tea grains with elaborate care. She began to chant softly:

Uncle Ernie has given me the box  
and now his tea is hot in the pot

Almost happily she repeated this several times. Then her voice became a whisper and she started to coax: "Come out now, come out, Uncle Ernie, come out for your tea." She was speaking to the box which was on the floor beside her. Nothing happened, and she raised her voice just the tiniest fraction. "Uncle Ernie, come out for your tea this instant!"

Uncle Ernie shuffled out and she helped him drink the tea. After he had finished she fussed over him for a while and then sent him back.

Then she called the man—the man who had given her the box.

They spoke for a long time and played games with the box. She cried when it was time for him to leave, and wanted to go with him.

He stayed and told her about skies that were blue and suns that were white when you looked at them. He told her about rain that didn't burn and fruit that grew and was good for the bone. He said that children looked beautiful with hair and she remembered. She was asleep when he left. She had a busy day to-morrow.

—JOHNNY BYRNE



# THE WEIRWOODS

by Thomas Burnett Swann

*A novel of ancient Etruria*

*The Second of Two Parts*

## CHAPTER SEVEN

She watched him leave the room, his feet slapping the tiles, heavily, heavily, because of Arnth in his arms. She watched a myriad eyes extinguish themselves in the darkness after him and reappear, after an endlessness of racking minutes, without him. Serval cats. That much she knew from the pad of the feet. Though their bodies were almost shapeless in the dark, she could guess the long legs, the yellow fur liberally dotted with black, the full, black-ringed tails.

They were led by Bast. She knew his eyes. She thought his name until it boomed in her brain: Bast, Bast, Bast.

They surrounded her couch like soldiers returning to familiar stations on a city wall. Of course! They had come to shield her on this night of strangeness and fear. Gentle Bast, born in Sutrium and unacquainted with his fierce African kinsmen, had brought his friends to form a ring of protection. Against evil. Against the return of Vel.

She was not surprised when he sprang onto the couch and placed an affectionate paw on her arm. Often he slept beside her. Often he laid his head against her cheek. Dearest Bast, your fur is warmth on a cold night. Friendliness. Familiarity. But where is Arnth? Where is my father? They too need your protection.

He prodded her with his paw. Then, foot over foot, he mounted her body and peered into her eyes. He was a heavy animal; it was hard to breathe with the weight of his pressing claws. She felt the heat of his breath and smelled an acrid, salty scent which she did not recognise.

Not only his scent was different. He looked somehow—alien. Perhaps she had frightened him with her stillness. On other nights she had cradled him in her arms. He peered at her with nothing which she could read. Slowly, with deliberate grace, like a trained leopard in one of the great circuses at Tarquinia, he raised his paw.

Then she recognized the smell on his fur. It was blood. The prodding paw, the slow advance, and now, the fixedly staring, almost hypnotic eyes, were gestures shrewdly calculated to tease and torture her. He did not intend to hurry his play. His eyes looked as cold as a topaz under the water. Perhaps they had always been cold. But now she was able to read them without the sentimentalizing haze of her affection, and she grasped the terrible truth that love can never be compelled, from man, from sprite, from beast; that one who loves, however she longs for requital, however long she waits, may receive in return the reverse of what she gives, the dark side of the moon.

His claw flicked the air, narrowly missing her eyes. She blinked; it was the one response of which she was capable. He was pleased; he had made her flinch. The smell of blood seemed a slime of decay oozing down her throat. His purr became a rumble, satisfied, expectant, and then a snarl vibrating through her body like the tremor before an earthquake.

He held his paw like a club. She could guess its power. A blow to her head would stun her; a blow to her throat would rupture the large vein of life-giving, life-sustaining blood which throbbed between the heart and the brain.

Snarls of impatience rose from the cats on the floor. She felt their bodies strike peremptorily against the legs of her couch. Bast stiffened; his friends had told him to hurry; his next blow must not be made in play.

She did not see the hand which delivered her from his weight. She felt his absence like the passing of a fierce pain, the removal of arrows imbedded in flesh. Inexorable arms enclosed her in a coolness of rivers, a freshness of rushes and cicely, and wafted her through the air as lightly as if she lay on a little skiff adrift in the wind.

Vegoia laid her on the tiles beside the couch in the



atrium. Beloved couch, which held the shape of Arnth! There was light enough from the roof to recognise him, his loin cloth and his shock of hair. Fearful couch, which held also the gloom of Vel! She would have known his eyes in total blackness.

Vegoia motioned to Vel. "Take the cats. I will follow you."

"What about Arnth?"

"I will tell him what to do. Hurry now. Meet me at the southern gate. And gather the cats from the streets and the houses."

Vel hesitated above the couch. "Sweet musician, goodbye. You know I wished you well. Always." He left the room, waving his stones and leading the cats.

"Listen to me, Arnth," said Vegoia. "I will tell you exactly what has happened. The stones in my bulla, and those I sent to Vel, are cat's-eyes. According to tradition as found in our *Book of the Lake*, they are the actual eyes of Egyptian cats, crystallised by necromancers in the time of the great pyramids. Before the Etruscans came to Italia, the Egyptians came in their little spineless boats to trade and colonize. They were poor traders and poor colonists. Frightened of forests and homesick for river and desert. They lingered only a year. But they left behind them these very stones, a gift for my people, who had sheltered them on the lake. I as sorceress have the stones in my keeping. When I hold them in my hand—so—they allow me certain powers, the greatest of which is the power to summon cats from a great distance, and speak to them, or rather, think to them. Warnings. Commands. Yes. No. Come. Beware. Tanaquil saw me with the cats in the marketplace. I promised them freedom in return for helping Vel. I told them to come here tonight and wait for Vel and me outside the house. In the dead of night, with the town exhausted after market days, it would not have been hard for us to reach the gate, and the small garrison in the watchtower—four or five men at most, all but one of them asleep—would have been no match for cats which can strike through windows with the speed of Tinia's lightning. We would not have needed to lower the bridge. The river is easily waded in the summer.

"Meanwhile, Vel was to drug you at your supper. I had dipped the stones I sent him in a potion of henbane and bark, and he in turn dipped them in your wine and that of the slaves. I did not want you involved with his escape—you yourself, the slaves, Tanaquil, or her father. You might have been hurt by the cats. Or, tomorrow, risked the wrath of a town which does not lightly release its slaves.

"How, you wonder, did Vel understand what I meant for him to do? By means of the stones. As soon as he held them in his hand, I could think to him as I had to the cats. In the old days, when the sprites were new to the lake, we thought instead of spoke—communicated without any need for words. But once we had learned the tongue called Latin from the Centaurs, the thought-power left us; ebbed like a stream in a hot summer's sun. But the stones restore it to me.

"After the market had closed, I hid in a stall of woollens until the town was asleep, and then I came to this house. As you know, I came too late. Already, Vel had aroused the cats against the town. I had meant him to use the stones only to drug the wine. Or, if I failed to reach him, to use the cats only for his escape. I did not foresee that he would use them against the Sutrii. But you must not think that he bewitched the cats. He simply encouraged them to do what was in their hearts—to kill and be free.

"Now, this is what you must do. When the drug wears off, as it will in a few hours, go with Tanaquil to your cart. It has not been harmed, nor Ursus. By morning, Vel and I will have led the cats from the town. But another danger remains. The slaves. Most of them have not been touched. It was not against them that Vel directed the cats. When they find that their masters are dead, there is no anticipating what they will do. You yourself have nothing to fear. They have always loved you. But Tanaquil is an aristocrat. One of their masters. *Get her out of the town.* Head to the south for Veii. And believe me, I never wished to murder a town. Only to rescue Vel."

She knelt beside him, at once maternal and ardent, and cradled him in her arms. "It seems that our last time together, you must lie in my arms like sleeping Endymion.



I was never meant to be the Lady Moon, content with sleep—or memories. But memories will have to serve us, will they not? Remember me, then, my red-haired rustic. But—” She paused, pressing a hand to her breast, as she had with Tanaquil in the temple. “Do not be sad for me.”

Still on her knees, she turned from the couch and spoke to Tanaquil. “And you. Once I might have hated you. But now, I think, I could love you as a sister—and give you advice. Virginity is a rose without scent. It grows sweet only with the plucking.”

Merciful sleep descended on Tanaquil, only to leave her wracked by merciless nightmares in which a pack of cats terrorized the house and buried her father under a sea of claws. Painfully, gratefully she struggled into the light and out of paralysis.

And who was the red-haired god who knelt beside her, straight from the sun-drenched fields of wheat and barley? Arnth, who else, massaging her wrists with his freckled hands. Strong, homely hands, familiar as ploughed earth or baked bread. The nearness of him suffused her with warmth. Vigour flowed from his body; from his blazing hair and cherished freckles. I am the wheat, she thought, and he is the sun. I have fallen in love with him, and not as with Vel in lust.

She lifted her arms and twined them, weakly but insistently, around his neck. For her, it was a bold and meaningful gesture, eloquent of her love. But he treated her hands as those of a grateful friend and not a would-be beloved. He pressed them with bluff, comradely zeal:

“Thank Tinia! I thought you would never wake! I was ready to carry you to the wagon. You heard Vegoia before you fell asleep? Then you know we must leave at once.”

“Must we?” she said. “I mean, just at this moment?” She leaned against him rather more helplessly than her condition required. “Let me rest a moment, Arnth.”

“Rest in the wagon.”

“Oh, very well,” she sighed. “But—where is my father?” Arnth said nothing.

Shame clawed at her like a spitting cat. Her only thoughts had been of Arnth. “I must go to him at once!”

"No," he said sharply. "There is nothing you can do for him."

"I'm going anyway," she cried. "If he's dead, he has to be given a proper burial."

"There isn't time. The slaves—"

But already she was lurching uncertainly down the corridor on feet which seemed surprised to rediscover their purpose. Arnth caught at her shoulder. She shook off his hand and plunged through the open door into her father's room.

Lars Velcha lay on his side, his face to the wall. He seemed to be sleeping. She hurried around the couch.

"Father," she cried. His mouth and eyes were wrenched to the grimace of a comic mask. His face was as white as linen pounded in a mountain stream. Only his throat was red.

She was instantly sick on the blood-sodden couch. She had never felt close to her father. Compared to her mother and brother, he had always seemed a mortal misplaced among graceful gods, but she had loved him as a sometimes bibulous, sometimes pathetic being who needed her love with the quiet urgency of a man bereft of his wife. She thought: I have to be sick until I have vomited all the blood from my body and become, like my father, as white as linen. I have to be sick in order to punish myself.

Arnth returned her to life. His hand was as solid and reassuring as a ship's rudder. "Come, Tanaquil, the slaves are starting to wake."

"They will help us bury him then!"

"I'm afraid they have other intentions. I caught the one from Athens—Kimon, is he called?—looting the house. He was still groggy from last night's wine. I managed to brain him with a handy vase and take his dagger. It may prove useful before we get out of town. But when he wakes, and the others too, they won't be concerned with burying their dead master. They are free men now. Some may try to harm you."

"But they loved me. They called me Tanaquil of the Poppies."

"They seemed to love you when it suited their purpose."



At the time, a few may have meant what they said. But sudden freedom is like unmixed wine. It muddles the senses and clouds the memory—even the memory of love.”

“I don’t believe you,” she cried, but she believed him, and saw in the eye of her mind—the eye which had once seen gardens—the truth of the cats and the slaves, the truth of the liberation which follows slavery. Vel had unleashed the pack. Alone or in twos and threes, trusted more than the slaves, they had sought the master’s bed. Perhaps he wakes and welcomes them: “Khonsu, Nekmet, Apis. Here, come into my arms or lie beside me under the coverlet . . .”

It is morning. The slaves stir on their pallets, sigh, stretch, and resume the monotonous ritual of the day. Some to the kitchen to pound wheat and bake bread. Some to the garden, armed with hoes and pruning knives. Some to the master’s room with water for his bath or myrrh to anoint his skin.

But the myrrh he needs is for his funeral shroud.

And the slaves are free. At least till the hated soldiers come from Veii (but who, surprised by freedom, thinks of soldiers?); free to rifle the houses and loot the stalls in the marketplace and steal the offerings left in the priestless temples. Free to complete what the cats have begun and drag the surviving masters out of their homes, those without cats, those who bar their doors before they sleep; wives and children.

“I don’t believe you,” she cried again, in one last protest against acceptance.

“You don’t understand, do you, Tanaquil? How a slave could turn on his master? I’ve eaten and slept with slaves. I’ve sung their songs and listened to their stories. Believe me, I know how they feel—and hate.”

Her voice was small. “And you hate us too?”

“No. But I would if you locked me in your fat, sleek houses, as you did Vell!”

She had never heard him speak with such bitterness. Merry Arnth, quick with a song or a smile! Perhaps he hoped to shock her into obedience. Nevertheless, his words had the ring of truth.

She could hear the bodies of slaves as they scraped to

life in their crowded quarters. Groans, the babble of voices, those of the drunk returning to soberness. Harsh voices ; murderous. She opened the coffer which stood in a niche above the couch, removed a coin, silver, stamped with the image of Vanth, and placed it on the tongue of her father.

"If I can't bury you, Father, at least I can give you the fare to pay Charun. The grey ferryman will not make you wait."

They found that the porter at the door had grumbled for the last time. He sat on his stool, leaning his bony shoulders against the wall as if with sleep. It must have been thus that the cats had found him, and left him but not in sleep.

They found the cart unharmed beside the street. Ursus sat on his haunches, pretending to be asleep but peering through a half-closed eye at an over-curious slave who seemed to have theft on his mind. Apparently Vegoia had led the bear from the stable to stand guard in his master's absence. When he saw Arnth, he reared on his hind legs and spread his massive paws. Supporting Tanaquil with one arm, Arnth used his other arm to hug that huge and irascible bulk, and the bear enclosed both of them in what Tanaquil feared would be a crippling embrace, at least for her. But Ursus for once was gentle. He left her gasping but without broken ribs, and she knew herself forgiven for being a woman and accepted at last as a friend.

The streets had the look of a Bacchanalia, but freedom, not wine, was the great intoxicant. There were neither garlands of hyacinths nor staffs entwined with ivy ; there were neither flutes nor drums nor clashing cymbals ; but the cry of the liberated was a thunder of song, and the whirl of bodies, a Bacchic dance. Everyone recognised Arnth. He had sung for them as readily as for their masters ; he had taken their children for rides. They had no reason to harm him, though one old hag, with the wrinkled skin of a raisin, shook her fist at Tanaquil.

"Pitch her down to us," she cried to Arnth. "What do you want with a baggage like that?"

As they neared the end of the houses adjoining the marketplace, an Etruscan gentleman, clad only in slippers,



ran across their path and shrieked that his wife had been murdered: would they stop and help him bury her?

"No," cried Arnth, "but we'll give you a ride out of town!" He had started to pull on the reins when a passing slave, armed with a club, delivered a blow to the poor fellow's neck and went on his way as casually as if he had just defended himself from the bite of a dog.

Tanaquil gasped: "We must help the poor man."

"His neck is broken, I think. Besides, they would kill you if we stopped."

Well then, she thought. Slaves can murder their lords in the light of day, and nothing of order or decency remains to stop them except in this wagon, and what can we do against a town in arms? The world is mad; the Etruscan power was to last a thousand years, but chaos has come before its time, and the gods have fled from their temples.

Chaos indeed had come to the marketplace, in the shape of Weir Ones. Centaurs, Fauns, and Panisci, though as yet no Water Sprites, had returned from the forest to steal what yesterday they had come to buy. The sleeping square had shuddered into life, but its life seemed that of a mortally wounded shark, thrashing destruction even as it died. Assaulted by hooves and paws, the closed stalls were bursting like rotten figs and spilling Milesian linens the colour of strawberries and silks imported from the East and green as the fabled emeralds of Atlantis. A female Centaur draped a fine robe over her flanks and cocked her head to admire the fit, only to have it snatched from her back by a sly Paniscus, who frolicked down the road trailing the cloth, with the woman in close pursuit. Two half-grown Fauns were duelling cumbrously with shields and battle axes. One of them stumbled and fell to the street under his shield, while the other tried to escape with both shields and both axes, but lost them to an acquisitive Centaur, who snatched up the Faun along with his booty. Across the market, Panisci were starting to climb the columns of the temple to Tages and throw down the terra cotta images to eager friends, who held out their paws hopefully but missed as many as they caught and twitched their tails in angry frustration. For the first time, there

were no kittens on the stairs of the temple. They seemed to have followed their elders in the feline exodus.

Unlike the slaves, the Weir Ones did not hesitate to attack the cart.

"There she is," screamed a shrill female voice, and Tanaquil spied the same Faun woman who yesterday had sold her the wilted asphodels. "Stop the bitch, she's getting away!" A Centaur, waving a candelabrum as a weapon, one of its candles still miraculously burning, reared in their path so hugely that even Ursus panicked, rose on his hind legs, and received a cracking blow to his skull. The cart lurched to a stop. Swearing at the top of her capacious lungs, the Faun woman flung herself on to Tanaquil and began to tear at her hair.

Tanaquil caught the woman around the neck—Tages, how she smelled!—and dug her fingernails into the leathery skin, which popped like a hard crust of sun-baked mud. The woman was so surprised that she forgot to swear. She flung a hand to her neck and drew it away with a smear of green blood. Before she remembered the precariousness of her position, poised as she was on the side of the cart, Tanaquil aimed a kick at her hairy haunches. She fell to the cobblestones, swore at a male Faun when he carefully stepped around her but did not offer help, struggled to her hooves, and hobbled down the street with groans instead of oaths.

"Did you see, Arnth?" Tanaquil cried. "Did you see how I beat her off?"

But Arnth was engaged in a running battle with the same Centaur who had stunned Ursus. The bear by now, his thick skull protected by an inch of fur, had recovered his senses and begun to move. The Centaur was loping beside the cart and trying to catch Arnth's shoulder between the brutal Charybdis of his jaws. He had already managed to rake Arnth's skin with his teeth. Arnth meanwhile, all at the same time, was trying to hold the reins, keep his seat, and evade the Centaur's jaws. From the look on his face, he had suffered a painful, even if superficial, wound. He looked as if the next jolt might topple him from his seat. Somehow, he managed to draw a dagger out of his tunic and thrust it between the threatening jaws. Though



the Centaur's head was more human than equine, his jaws were as wide and strong as those of a stallion. Had they managed to close, Arnth would have lost his hand. As it was, the blade of the dagger, pointed to the sky, pierced the roof of the Centaur's mouth. Bucking with pain and spewing green blood on Tanaquil's nightdress, he wheeled from the cart and bellowed frantically for help. No one helped him; the others were too intent on pillaging.

The gate was open, swinging on bronze hinges; the guard lay sprawled in the road, his throat cut, his own spear lodged in his chest (Vel's work, thought Tanaquil when she saw the spear; it was not enough that the cats had cut his throat).

"And the bridge is down," cried Arnth, "and there—the road to Veii! There's no one to stop us now!"

Behind them the buildings of Sutrium crouched in their orange, intimate communion with the earth; without a sign of massacre or invasion; comfortable-seeming as mushrooms without torn roots or broken polls. As yet, no towers had been broken by catapults; nor temples blackened by fire. As yet. But there, a thread in the cloudless sky like a vein in the blue translucency of a jelly fish. Was that not a wisp of smoke? And there, above the palace, a wavering lance of fire . . .

"They're burning the city!" cried Tanaquil above the roll of the wheels.

"Probably someone knocked over a candelabrum or a fire box," said Arnth without surprise. "I don't think the whole city will burn. Just a building here and there."

"You don't care, do you, Arnth?"

"I care about the people."

"But not the houses and temples?"

"No," he admitted. "There are too many towns in the world, too—"

"Too many nets," she finished, but not with reproach. For Tanaquil, who had lost her father, her home, and her town, felt amply repaid by one travelling player, whose hair was friendly fire instead of destroying, and whose hands could build house enough, hut enough for all of her days.

"But it's been too easy," she said. "Our escape, I mean. The open gates, the lowered drawbridge—"

"It's only to be expected," said Arnth. "When Vel and Vegoia left the town, they had to leave everything open behind them. After all, they couldn't raise the drawbridge from the opposite end."

"Do you think they knew the Weir Ones would invade the town?"

"I'm sure they didn't."

"But why didn't the Weir Ones raise the bridge after they entered? Surely they know about the Etruscan garrison, just twenty miles away in Veii. When commerce stops from Sutrium, Veientine soldiers will come to investigate."

"I don't think the Weir Ones planned their invasion. They just stumbled into it."

But the Weir Ones were less improvident than Arnth had suspected. The plain, it appeared, held more than vineyards and olive groves. A gully, a hill, an old farmhouse, seemingly forsaken, thundered into life. Out of the gully, down the hill, and around the farmhouse charged a small army of whooping Centaurs. How such large and blunderous beings had hidden themselves in anything smaller than a forest, it was hard to say. But here they were, athwart the road to Veii. Each of them carried a club of knotted wood and each of them bared his teeth—big, ragged teeth like those of a shark—in a grimace of leering bravado. It was sad to envision the fate of the local farmers.

"They're holding the road against the Veientines," gasped Arnth, jerking the reins to turn the cart. "We'll have to make for the forest."

"The forest? But that's their home!"

"Maybe they are all in Sutrium, or here on the road. Anyway, there is nowhere else to go. In the forest, Vegoia will help us if she can."

"If she will . . ."

"Go under the canopy," said Arnth as they entered the doubtful refuge of the forest. "You'll be safer there. We may have some stones thrown at us."



But Tanaquil was feeling as bold as an Amazon. The Centaurs had not even given chase!

"I don't mind a few stones," she said.

"I do," said Arnth. "If they hurt my friend Tanaquil."

"Oh, very well," she said, concluding that his use of "friend" implied an intimacy beyond mere comradeship. Stooped at the back of the wagon, she peered through the curtains and watched the road they were travelling, with its border of seventy-foot hornbeams: their feminine smoothness of bark and their delicate, wiry twigs belied the hardness of the inner wood, which farmers cut to make yokes for oxen. But she had seen hornbeams all of her life, while the wagon was new to her and, being Arnth's home, infinitely intriguing.

The canvas walls were painted with frescoes like the rock walls of a tomb, and she knew from the subjects that Arnth himself had been the artist. There was Ursus, sniffing at the foot of a honey tree and looking, like most portraits, a little glamourised, a little less huge and fierce than his true craggy self. And Vegoia—when had he found the time to paint her?—rising from a lake with water-silvered shoulders. Naked as Vel she was, and two thirds of her out of the water! Tanaquil resisted the impulse to smudge the hussy with her fist. Then she felt ashamed. Vegoia had saved her life, and Tanaquil truly liked her, if it was possible to like a girl whom you earnestly hoped you had seen for the last time. Well, thought Tanaquil, I will ask Arnth to paint *my* picture and, who knows, he may have to rub out Vegoia to make room for me.

The wagon also contained a couch in a state of advanced dishevelment, though its wolfskin coverlet smelled as fresh as uncut hay, and she pressed it to her cheek lovingly and imagined herself beneath its folds with Arnth, the two of them snuggled together against the approach of night, cold, and cats. What had Vegoia said to her about virginity? A rose which grows sweet only with the plucking. It was high time for the gardener.

In spite of occasional jolts, she managed to smooth the coverlet and then to plump the pillows, which were made of a coarse green cloth stuffed with escaping goosefeathers. Her aristocratic hands, she was finding, were not unsuited

to menial tasks. They had beaten off enemies in the town, and now they were keeping house for her man. It pleased her to call him her man. There was something delectably barbarous about a woman having a man instead of a husband. Knowing Arnth's fear of marriage, she was more than content to be his woman instead of his wife.

She continued her explorations. A bear-shaped lamp with an upturned snout hung from the ceiling. Beside the couch stood a small wicker chair and a balsam chest with handles like sea-horses, but Arnth's clothes, she found, were strewn on the rush-covered boards of the floor. They included: (1) three identical tunics of shaggy green linen; (2) a domed hat which had shrunk to the size of a honey cake; (3) a loin cloth whose green polka dots had faded and stained the white background; (4) a pair of sandals with agate clasps and a broken strap. Strange, the untidiness of his things made her want to cry. She felt as if she had invaded his secret heart without his knowledge, to spy on his habits and affections. But having launched her invasion, she did not intend to retreat.

She lifted one of the tunics and held it against the light from the rear curtains. The cloth had frayed; the colour faded. Work lay ahead of her, she saw; work for her man. She folded each of the tunics and placed them, together with the loin cloth and the dwindled hat, in the bottom of the chest. The scent of Arnth, she noticed, lingered in his clothes. Yes, every man had his particular scent, less overpowering than Vel's, as a rule, but discernible and definitely agreeable to an interested woman. Her father had smelled like leather and olive oiled bronze. Arnth's scent was cool and clean, a little of hay, a little of chestnuts lying among ilex leaves and wild thyme. Touching his clothes, catching the scent of them in her nostrils, was almost like embracing him. He had never really embraced her, she recalled. She had felt his brotherly pat, his comradely arm, but not his *man's* embrace of the woman he desired.

Flying stones or not, she had to join him in the driver's seat. She thrust her head through the flap just as the wagon pitched to a halt and almost tumbled her over the back of Ursus.



Vegoia stood in their path, and behind her an army of cats, the colour of brimstone. She might have been a young Circe, parading the victims of her sorceries.

Tanaquil seized Arnth's arm. "Keep going!" she cried. "They will tear us to pieces!" She had glimpsed the murderous Bast. The cats, however, were not her greatest fear.

But Arnth ignored her. With a wild, triumphant cry, he sprang from the cart—Zeus, how he covered the ground!—and Vegoia opened her arms to welcome him.

And Tanaquil thought: It is not yet time for my picture to join the gallery.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

She looked mercurial to him; cool and elusive like the liquid metal obtained from cinnabar; as if, at his touch, she would sink in the earth to rejoin her element. He felt the lithe solidity of her limbs, the coarse fabric of her wolfskin, but could not believe that she would linger, woman-like, in his arms. He, who had loved her lightly, did not deserve to hold her in thrall. But mercury became fire, and fire warmed him without burning, and Tanaquil, dreaming, sweet-voiced Tanaquil, was a dimly remembered ghost in the corner of his brain, like a moth in a cobweb.

"Dearest Arnth," cried Vegoia. "The Fauns have laid an ambush up the Road. They have already killed some soldiers from Viterbo—dragged them from their chariots. There is nothing I can do to stop them in their madness. There are more of them in the woods. But I know a secret path to the lake."

"And you came to warn me, Vegoia?"

"Why else? When I heard that the Centaurs were blocking the road to Veii, I knew you would have to drive this way. My dear, you are wounded!"

"It's nothing," he shrugged. "Now that you are here." He burned with the closeness of her. Centaurs? Fauns? What had such brutes to do with a forest becharmed by love, the ultimate talisman?

"Arnth, did you hear what I said about the ambush? You look benumbed!"

"Yes, I heard you. But what about Ursus?"

"Unharness him. Leave him in the forest. He will come to no harm."

Ursus was not difficult. He lifted a clumsy paw, as if to extend his blessing on their journey.

Arnth hugged him. "Old friend, we'll soon be together again." Then he reached a hand to Tanaquil. How pale she looked as he helped her to the ground! Frightened, no doubt, by the cats.

"It's all right," he comforted. "Vegoia will see to us now."

A few yards from the path, they found an oak tree, tall as a dozen ship masts end to end, with leaf-swollen heights and bark like the backs of gnarled wood spiders.

"You see," said Vegoia, "there are knobs for your hands and feet. I will lead. Then you, Tanaquil. Arnth will come last to keep you from falling. Can you manage, Tanaquil?"

"I was climbing trees before I was six," said Tanaquil sharply. Then, more softly, almost with fear: "Are the cats coming with us?"

"No. They will stay on the ground."

"And when we come down?"

"You have nothing to fear from them any more. They have what they want."

Tanaquil stared at Bast. "But—he killed my father. Doesn't he hate me too?"

"He hated bondage. Now he is free."

"They ought to be killed," she said bitterly. "All of them. Bast, at least."

Hearing his name, he pressed insinuatingly against her leg; craving attention from his old mistress. She shuddered and shrank away from him.

They began their climb.

Tanaquil did not hesitate to grasp the rough knobs and draw herself up the trunk. The mountainous nightdress helped to protect her body from the bark, but her unprotected hands began to bleed. Arnth felt her blood on the knobs.



"Tanaquil, wait and let me make you a bandage out of my loin cloth."

She shook her head and reached for another hold. "You haven't enough to spare. Besides, your wound is worse than mine, but I haven't heard you complain."

When they reached the lowest branches, climbing became less arduous. It was rather as if they had entered a green waterfall, whose flowing of leaves not only eased their climb, but hid them from the ground.

"They can't follow us," Vegoia reassured. "Even if they saw us climb the tree, the Centaurs are too big and the Fauns can't manage their hooves off the ground. And now——"

And now they approached the town in the top of the tree. A town of birds, thought Arnth, when he saw the circular structures suspended from the branches. They were not, however, nests—not even the big hanging nests of the oriole—but temple-shaped houses the size of pithoi or storage barrels, with columns running around them and a little platform surrounded by a railing like the gunwale of a boat. The walls seemed carved from amber, whose orange translucence ran to yellow and brown and, catching the sunlight, seemed to leap into flames. Figures moved in the heart of the fire, like crickets caught in a space between burning logs, and fluttered, singing, through doorways between the columns and noisily strewed the air. In the broken but brilliant light of the morning sun, they looked like giant sparks cast off by a blacksmith's forge.

"Mellona, the town of the Corn Sprites," Vegoia said proudly. "Have you ever seen such airy loveliness?"

"It is made of amber!" cried Arnth. "I didn't think there was that much amber in all the Great Green Sea!"

"Honey, not amber. They gather it from the farmers and then solidify it into building materials. It is said that a secretion from their own bodies completes the process. They can make it hard for buildings or pliant for bridges, or chip it into small pieces for pottery and tools."

"The houses look like the temple to Tages," observed Tanaquil, her spirits improved, if hardly amiable. "Round, with columns."

"Where do you think the Etruscans found the prototype for their round temples? As you know, most Etruscan buildings are squares or rectangles."

"And there," said Arnth. "Those images on the roof. They look like bees!"

"Exactly. That is not a house but the shrine to Mellonia, the goddess of bees and patron of the town. If you were smaller, you could enter the door and see the image of the goddess, conceived as a queen bee. She is sculptured in honey."

One of the Corn Sprites detached himself from the whirling sparks and lit in Vegoia's hand.

"You remember my friend, Arnza. You met him in my house on the lake. His name, by the way, means 'little Arnth'."

Indeed, Arnth remembered the sprite. They had shared Vegoia's feast. Milky wings sprouted from his shoulders. His head, with its aureole of golden hair and its alabaster skin, was that of a dreaming boy, like one of those Yazatas or angels mentioned by Zoroaster, the Eastern philosopher who had recently died in Iran. But his orange, perfectly round eyes were mischievous more than angelic. Everyone knew of farmers who stinted their gifts of honey and found their figs without juice and their cows without milk (though no one knew how a sprite could milk a cow).

Arnth extended his hand and Arnza lit on his palm; then, bouncing into the air, he gave Arnth's nose a flick of his three-fingered fist.

"He is welcoming you to his town," said Vegoia.

"I was not sure," confessed Arnth. "What does he do when he's angry?"

"Spits. But have no fear. Once they like you, they never change their minds. Even if you step on them."

"You can understand his speech?"

"I know his gestures. We have never felt a need for words, though of course the sprites have a language of their own. When they seem to be singing, they are really speaking."

"You have always been friends with them?"

"My people and I, yes. Not the other Weir Ones. The clumsy Centaurs spill their honey and the sly Fauns eat



the honey and fill the pots with glue which they boil from the hooves of oxen. Only my people know the way I am going to show you. Actually, it is part of a network of roads built by the Corn Sprites. They use it when they do not wish to fly—when the air above the forest is turbulent with wind or dangerous with eagles. Their engineers are second to none.”

The engineers, Arnth saw, had joined the trees by narrow, aerial roadways, perhaps an inch in width, which swayed on the wind like suspension bridges. For Vegoia, Arnth, and Tanaquil, the roads served as ropes which they used to balance themselves as they moved from tree to tree. Sometimes, they moved with their feet on the roads and their hands grappling the branches above their heads. Sometimes, in the spaces without branches, they clung to the roads, their feet swinging in air, and inched hand over straining hand, to the next tree. The roads proved sturdily built; they dipped and swayed but held to their moorings.

At other times the three fugitives had to leave the roads and negotiate thick-set branches whose egresses and ingresses, scaled to the foot-tall dimensions of the sprites, tore at their clothes and left their exposed members smarting with pain. Tanaquil's nightdress had disintegrated to a wisp of cloth which clung tentatively to her body. Arnth's loin cloth had been stained to the colour of bark. Both of them gasped with the heavy exertion of their flight, and Arnth, who because of his travels was more inured to the forest, wondered how the town-bred Tanaquil kept from faltering. Whenever possible, on narrow limbs, in leafy thickets, he supported her with his arm. Only Vegoia, spruce in her wolfskin, remained as fresh and buoyant as an unpicked water lily.

Arnza, meanwhile, their self-appointed guide, piped encouragement and led them through moss and foliage and labyrinthine branches which made a night of the day. Once, he spotted a Faun watching them from the ground and hoping, no doubt, to see them fall, and plummeted angrily down to buzz in his big, furry ears. The Faun threw up his paws and took shelter beneath a blackberry bush.

Vegoia laughed. "You see what I meant about a sprite when he does not like you."

"Was he spitting in the Faun's ear?" asked Arnth.

"Yes. And his spit is pure formic acid. It has been known to cause deafness or put out an eye."

They came at last to the place where the trees met the lake, and stood, as if on the ramparts of a walled town, in the branches of the last tree.

"There," Vegoia said, pointing to the lake and the Town of Walking Towers. "We are safe at last. No one will touch us on the shores of the lake." She skittered down the trunk with the speed of a hungry squirrel. Arnth and Tanaquil followed her with anything but squirrel-like speed. Tanaquil's hands looked as if she had been fishing for oysters in a bed of coral, and Arnth's shoulder as if he had been bitten by a small but zealous shark. Arnza, having delivered them to the shore, spiralled over their heads and disappeared among the treetops.

Vegoia walked to the edge of the lake and called to her friends in the town. Hardly had she raised her voice when a score of joyful canoeists flashed their paddles and aimed for the bank. Nude in the sun and shining like moulded mica, they improvised a song to greet the return of the wanderers:

Where the lake and forest meet,  
Garlands bring we here to greet  
One whose hair is robin-bright,  
One whose hair is woven night . . .

Vel was among the paddlers. He slithered out of the water, shaking himself like an otter, and ran to the tree. Quite oblivious of Tanaquil, he drew Arnth to his feet and urged him toward the lake.

For a moment it seemed to Arnth that the Vel who had followed his music in the streets of Sutrium, the boyish, innocent Vel before the night of the cats, had exorcised the grinning murderer. Or perhaps there had been no murders, nor invasion of Weir Ones, but only phantoms conjured by Vegoia's magic.

Arnth said, almost doubtfully, as if he hoped for an



outraged denial: "Tanaquil's father is dead because of you. Half of a town is dead."

"But not you," said Vel, "Not you. The cats obeyed me. I thought to them with the stones: 'You are not to harm my fwiend.'"

"And Tanaquil?"

"Oh, *her*. I thought them nothing about her. Why should I? I had been her slave. Come now, my canoe is waiting for you."

By now they had reached the water, but Arnth released himself from the boy's possessive grip.

"No, Vel. I am going to ride with my friends," he said, and giving a hand to Tanaquil, followed Vegoia into another and larger canoe. The paddler grinned at Vel. "You see," he seemed to say. "They chose *me*." He dipped his oar and the craft shot on its way.

Vel cried after them: "But Arnth, it was not you I hurt!"

Vegoia said quietly to Arnth: "You are right to break with him for Tanaquil's sake. He has terribly wronged her. But do not judge him. Do not blame him for your own mistake in thinking him human. He is neither more nor less than he has always been."

"But how could he love me and want to kill my friends?"

"He loves you for your music. A Water Sprite's ears are sensitive beyond belief. We can hear an ant crawling up a blade of grass. You ravished his senses with the sweetness of your songs. He also loved your beauty. He had never seen red hair. I think at first he mistook you for a god, and he never forgot his first wonder. Had you been old or ugly, your music would not have charmed him. As it was, you and the music seemed inseparable. He once said to me: 'Arnth looks as if he had been played by a god on a flute.' But his love was selfish. Like the other sprites, he has no heart. He saw you only for what you were to him. *His* friend, *his* musician. Thus, he resented your other friends and loyalties. He has even begrudged your closeness to me."

"I did love him, you know. When I met him in Sutrium, I saw him as myself as a young boy. Hating cages."

"He is not a boy. He is twenty-nine. But in ways he is less than a boy. A small child, quick to love—and quick to destroy. Affectionate—and cruel. How many children dream of killing their parents, guardians, keepers? Smallness and weakness prevent them until they have learned the order and orderliness of the adult world. But Vel had the strength and the means. And it was I who gave him the means. Perhaps I am also one of the children."

"No," he said. "You are wise beyond your years. You have helped me to understand him. In a way, I wronged him from the first. I closed my eyes to everything except what I could pity. And then, as you say, it made me angry when I saw the cruelty which I had overlooked. Well, I see it now, and now I no longer have to judge him. But we can never be friends again. Because of what he did to Tanaquil."

All this time, silent Tanaquil had watched the shore, where a lonely figure crouched beside his canoe. It was hard to say if she were forgiving him or fearing him.

They spent the night in Vegoia's house. Vegoia shared her hammock with Tanaquil, and Arnth, a little offended by such an unsatisfactory arrangement, occupied the floor. He was tired to the bone. His shoulder ached, his hands felt raw and inflamed, and his body throbbed to one long dull and enervating ache which only Vegoia could assuage, and not with potions and unguents. The sounds from the hammock—a heavy breath, a turning body—exacerbated his pain. When the last light had flickered from the last house, and the Town of Walking Towers had become a blackness indistinguishable from the black, star-stippled waters, he fell asleep and dreamed that a large crab, persistent with vise-like pincers, was crushing his shoulder.

Then it was morning. Vegoia knelt beside him. "Tanaquil is still asleep," she whispered. "Would you like to swim with me?"

"Yes," he cried so enthusiastically that Vegoia pressed a finger to his lips.

"Shhh, you will wake her!"



He followed her down the ladder into the lake, and once they had left the shadow of the house, she entered his arms and kissed him with cool yet passionate lips which tasted of tart pomegranates.

"Tanaquil shall have my house," she said. "We shall build our own."

"Where?" It was all he could do to gasp the question. Her kiss had taken his breath.

"We shall build a floating house and live like halcyons on the breast of the lake."

"Hollow a log like Vel's?"

A wistfulness entered her voice. "That is too slow, my dear . . ."

Advised, if not materially assisted, by the Water Sprites, they built a raft of thongs and linden boughs, with a central pole like a mast.

"But what about our *house*?" Arnth asked. "This is only a raft."

"Be patient," she smiled. "Our house is in the making. No, it is made!"

She pointed to the sky. An amber cloud, sustained by a host of Corn Sprites, Arnza among them, was settling toward the raft like a swarm of bees.

"A tent!" cried Arnth as the cloud enveloped the raft and settled over the pole which was not, after all, a mast.

"And woven of honey. The sweetness is still in the cloth."

"It is like the mantle of a Lydian queen!"

"But thinner and finer. And see! They have hung a pennant from the tip of the pole. An image of their goddess to watch over us."

"But how did you call to them? We've been together all morning."

"Remember that I am a sorceress. Perhaps I whistled to them when you turned your back. There are whistles inaudible to human ears."

"Whistle for Ursus then. He would like to see our tent."

"You mean, you would like him to *share* our tent."

"Yes," he admitted. "I worry about him in the woods. I would make him wash, of course."

"He is safe enough. The Fauns and the Centaurs have no quarrel with bears. Besides, he has found a mate. The Corn Sprites told me."

"Ursus with a mate? He is too old!"

"Bears are never too old."

"But he doesn't like females!"

"I never said that he *liked* her. Come now—"

Together they entered the tent. They had woven a hammock of bark, grass, and fibres like the nest of an oriole, and now they covered the floor with rushes, whose flat, grassy leaves and greenish flowers, yellowed by sunlight strained through the walls, resembled a meadow on a sunny day. There were also chairs and an oven, earth-coloured, rather like rocks or tree stumps in the meadow. There was no chest for clothes, since Arnth had discarded the remnants of his loin cloth and Vegoia had given her wolfskin to Tanaquil.

Returning to the open deck, they thrust their long, oak-bladed paddles into the lake and guided their raft away from the shore and the well-intentioned but over-curious Water Sprites. In the middle of the lake, a strange windless calm, like the eye of a storm, enfolded them in a hush of peace.

Vegoia was infinite in love. Now she was young, virginal, wondering, as she numbered the marvels of his body—the big hands, clumsy and tender at once; the adamantine chest, redly dusted with hair; the hard thighs which tapered to powerful legs and ended, incongruously, in feet so small and narrow that they might have belonged to a girl. Her hands, like butterflies, fluttered over his body, shyly, modestly, as if his strength might startle them into flight.

Now she was wise and knowledgeable, mature in years and practised in artifice: queen and temptress, Circe, Medea, Helen, playing his body like an Aeolian lyre and plucking a sinewy music from his limbs.

But he; he had no artifice with which to equal her. Tenderness paralysed him. The touch of his hands, he felt, his rough farmer's hands, must bruise her skin or break her fragile bones. Once, he had loved her lightly and not



lacked confidence. Now, he feared that the hot Vesuvius of his love must burn her to cinders and ashes.

"Dearest Arnth," she whispered. "I am neither Phoenician glass nor Athenian pottery. You would be surprised how much it takes to break me."

He loved her then with all the golden savagery of his youth, and yet with the gentleness of years; leopard and deer inextricable in his kisses, he raged without rending. Words were weak; pallid symbols of the heart's high urgencies. But his body spoke with wordless eloquence; with shouts or whispers, tumult or tenderness.

The morning was radiant and calm. They seemed to lie in the heart of a copper shield laid down by a Titan, weary of battle.

Vegoia trailed her fist in the water. "You are hungry," she smiled. "You are watching my fist as if it were a fish."

"Yes," he admitted. "I was planning to make a hook and—"

"Hook? Not while I have my hands." She dived in the water, melting, it seemed, into the burnished copper, and returned to the raft with a large pike in her hands. Without the least squeamishness she removed the head with a small stone hatchet, primitive but newly sharpened, and wrapped the body in lily pads to cook in the oven.

"But we have no wine," he said. "You left your skins with Tanaquil."

"Will you never learn to trust me, Arnth? It is written in *The Book of the Lake* that love is the greatest inebriant, but man must have drink as well. Be patient. The fish is not yet done."

When the fish was done, the drink was at hand, ferried by Arnza and his friends in cups the size of a snail: a blend of honey and fermented blackberry juice. Arnth and Vegoia sat on the edge of the raft, eating the fish with their fingers and sipping the wine. Arnza, who chose Arnth's knee for his seat, joined them in a libation to the bee goddess while his friends returned to shore. Together they spilled some drops in the lake and Vegoia intoned a prayer:

Mellonia, queen of the bees,  
Watch over this hive, our house ;  
We thank thee for the honey of our roof  
And the honey of our wine ;  
May hours like petals enfold our honied love.

Arnza did not linger beyond the last of the wine. With his three-toed feet, he thrust himself in the air and, pausing to tap Arnth's nose, followed the other sprites to shore.

"He is very respectful of love," said Vegoia. "Ordinarily, he would spend the day with me, but today he did not wish to keep us from our pleasure."

"Perhaps he has gone to see Tanaquil," said Arnth. He had hardly thought of her for a whole day! It was he and not Arnza who ought to pay her a visit. "We must go to see her ourselves. She is sure to be lonely."

"Today?" said Vegoia without enthusiasm.

"Tomorrow."

Imperceptibly the flaxen morning blazed into afternoon, which trailed into dusk like a great queen with saffron robes. But the night was sad for Arnth because of Vegoia. She served him cheese and bread and small red apples the size of plums, but spoke little and ate nothing.

"Vegoia," he asked, "why are you sad tonight?"

"Summer is followed by autumn. Day by night. Today we were very happy."

"But the gods brought us late to love. Surely they owe us more than a day!"

She sat up sharply and pressed a hand to his mouth. "Hush. Turan will hear you. Or one of the darker gods. Never tell them how much they owe. That is for them to say, not us." She took his hand. "Perhaps it is the weight of my love which makes me sad."

"To me," he said, "love is a weightlessness—I feel like a thistledown over an olive grove. And a sweetness—I feel like a Corn Sprite filling his cheeks with honey."

"Weight, weightlessness, sweetness, whatever we call it, there can be too much. A surfeit. I think that tonight you should go to Tanaquil. She also loves you, my dear."

"Tanaquil? Don't be ridiculous! If anyone, she still loves Vel, in spite of everything. Certainly not me."



"She never loved Vel. She merely desired him because he was the first to break her dream. You, she loves. And why not? I do, and I am harder to please."

"We'll both go. We'll take her some blackberry wine."

"It is you she wants, and not as a friend. Go to her, Arnth, and stay the night."

He looked at her with dismay. He had almost forgotten the fickleness of her people. "But it's you I love!"

Her laugh was forced and harsh. Such laughter rang from the brothels of Corinth and Sybaris. "This is nothing to do with love. You will simply be easing her loneliness." Turning her back, she walked to the hammock and slumped into its folds.

He did not dare to touch her, so remote she had grown, and still. Like a pearl in an oyster, he thought. He remembered that, after all, her feet were webbed and her temples sprouted fins. Alien, that was the word. Very well, he would go to Tanaquil and find more welcome than in his own tent!

But Tanaquil was not yet used to the freedom of the lake. He would have to lessen his nudity. With the help of Vegoia's hatchet, he cut a loin cloth out of a lily pad—he simply cut holes for his legs and drew the pad up around his waist and fastened it with a strip which he tore from the bottom of the tent. Not until he entered Vegoia's canoe, moored the raft, did he notice the hatchet which, unthinkingly, he had kept in his hand like a weapon. A weapon? Nonsense! A useful tool. Vegoia had demonstrated its usefulness when she beheaded the fish, and he, when he made his loin cloth. He would take it with him as a gift for Tanaquil.

## CHAPTER NINE

She was thinking around him when his dear, infuriating head appeared at the top of the ladder; thinking of Water Sprites, Corn Sprites, Vegoia, Vel, and life on the lake, but forcing her thoughts to revolve around Arnth without alighting, like bees with a cluster of grapes.

But here he was, and in time to share her dessert of

blueberry cakes (a trifle brown, perhaps, a trifle hard, but after all, she was new at the oven).

"I brought you a hatchet," he said. "For cleaning fish."

Honestly, she thought, what does he take me for, a fishwife? But she forced a smile and accepted the hatchet as if it were a gift of flowers. Then she offered him a blueberry cake.

"You see, I'm learning to cook. Do you think I'm making progress?"

He accepted the cake with zeal and began to eat, but ate less rapidly after the first bite and grimaced as if he were chewing rocks. Perhaps he had poor teeth.

"Do you think I'm making progress?" she repeated.

"Ursus would approve," he smiled wanly.

No doubt, she thought. But Ursus also approved of stale fish and beehives. Never mind. She would take the remark as a compliment.

"I think your loin cloth is charmingly rustic," she said. "Green is your best colour. We're both making progress, aren't we? How do you like my wolfskin? One of the sprites gave it to me. Of course I had to make alterations."

"I thought Vegoia gave you hers."

"It didn't fit," she snapped, though the one she was wearing appeared to have come from a remarkably fat and bedraggled wolf. "We'll be true woodsmen before long," she continued, ashamed of her pique. "Sutrium, by the way, is still in the hands of the slaves and Weir Ones. They're working together, and only this afternoon, I understand, they beat off some soldiers from Veii. One of the Lake Dwellers saw the whole thing. But I wouldn't want to go back even if the city should fall. Would you?"

"No. I like the lake too much."

"Of course you do," she said, the edge returning to her voice. "You and Vegoia."

He looked embarrassed and guilty. Silence blew like a wind between them, extinguishing the candles of their conversation.

She forced herself to speak of trifles. "You see," she said, pointing to a bowl of chestnuts, "I've become a woodsman in more ways than one. I picked those in the forest today."



"You go in the forest alone?" he cried.

"Oh, no, always with the sprites. They are very kind. Sometimes with Arnza too." His concern pleased her. Perhaps she ought to have emphasized the dangers.

Again, the winds of silence, the sputtering candles.

"Take a chair," she said at last. "Here, we can sit by the Port and watch the water. You have no idea the things you can see. This morning I saw a large water rat towing a garland of lilies. He would tow a bit, climb on the garland to rest, jump in the water and tow again."

"I like your hair," he said. "You don't capture it any more with a fillet. It escapes over your shoulders."

"I haven't any flowers in it."

"You don't need any. It is flowered with light from the lamp."

"You were sweet to visit me, Arnth. I've missed you."

"Vegoia and I wish you would visit *us*. Any time you like."

"I might come at the wrong time."

"There is no wrong time for you." He took her hand.

She made a slight pretence of retrieving her hand. Then, as if it were a woodmouse settling into a nest, she let it relax and warm itself in Arnth's big fist.

"What would Vegoia say if she knew you were here with me?"

"Why, nothing," he said, surprised. "Vegoia sent me."

She shot out of her chair like a stone from a slingshot and Arnth threw up his hands as if she had threatened him with blows. Well, she should have! Charun take his honesty! Would he never learn the niceties, the gracious evasions, which women liked in a man?

"You can tell Vegoia that I don't want her leavings! I can find a man of my own. I've had three invitations today from the sprites!" (Actually, it was two, but a little exaggeration would enforce her point.)

"I enjoyed the blueberry cakes," he stammered and, getting a growl in response, climbed down the ladder and into his canoe, while Tanaquil, resisting the temptation to drop some cakes on his head, busied herself with the remnants of supper and energetically ignored his retreat.

"Uncouth farmer," she muttered, and ran to the window to watch his departure.

Once he had left the area of the town, he raised his paddle and looked over his shoulder at her house. Ducking out of the window before she was seen, she fell to the floor and started to number his faults: hands too big for his height; freckles beyond counting; honesty which bordered on rudeness; a stout resistance to domesticity . . .

It was then that she heard the canoe in the Port. She jumped to her feet. He has come back, she thought, and this time Vegoia has not sent him! Restrain yourself, Tanaquil. You can't run to the ladder and fling your arms around him as he steps into the room. You are no longer a child, but a woman of years and experience. Sophistication must be your guide and weapon. Ask yourself: What would Vegoia do?

Vegoia would busy herself with domestic tasks and then, when he entered the room, turn to him and say, quite casually and as if she were expecting any number of men: "Oh, it is you, is it?"

She turned and said, quite casually. "Oh, it is you—"

It was not. It was Vel.

He looked as blue and dazed as a hunter lost in the snow. His eyes were wet and swollen. The fins at his temples were frozen to the hardness of knives.

She did not know if she should fear or pity him. How had she ever desired him, this blue, inhuman, unknowable animal who came toward her without words and without sound except for the slap, slap, slap of his webbed toes?

"Vel, what is it? What do you want?" She felt for the hatchet on the table—a crude, small tool, but also a weapon. Her fingers closed on the wooden handle.

"You made my fwiend hate me. You took his music fwom me."

"He doesn't hate you. He's hurt, that's all. Because of my father."

He had stopped at last; he seemed to study her. She raised the hatchet to show that she was armed.

"He played for me," he said. "When I followed his chawiot, he called me fwiend. But you—you wanted him for yourself. You told him lies about me."



"Vel, I never told him—"

He sprang like a serval cat. She threw up her hands as a shield. She did not strike him with the hatchet. It was he who struck the blade and simultaneously bore her to the floor, his fingers sharp at her throat. The voluminous wolf-skin softened her fall. Nevertheless, she gasped with the weight of his body. Then, his fingers fell from her throat and the weight grew inert.

She rolled him onto his back and knelt beside him. He stared beyond her, bemused and very quiet. He seemed to be sleeping with open eyes; perhaps he was lying on his hollowed log and dreaming of garlands woven from water-lilies, or phoenix-coloured flamingoes, fiery atop their nests. The blade of the hatchet had cloven his skull; blood oozed from the meeting of skin and stone. His body seemed diminished. How slender he was, and young, with his thin, pinched shoulders! Not killer nor beast, but a vulnerable, dying boy.

"I never meant to hurt you," she said. "From the very first, I only wished you well. And yet I have brought you to this."

"It was the gods who brought him to this," Arnth said.

She had not heard him climb the ladder. Though his arms were a little room of warmth and refuge, she thought: it is the old dream, and the arms will fade to the insubstantiality of mist, of smoke, of dust.

But freckles were much too real for a dream. They burned with the bright immediacy of Arnth, the farmer, the piper, the driver of big-wheeled wagons drawn by petulant bears.

"I looked back at your house," he said. "I saw Vel's canoe and came after him. I was afraid for you."

It was then that Vel spoke. His voice was distant and thin. He seemed to be speaking from the bottom of a deep well. "Have you forgiven me, fwiend?"

"Yes, Vel. Yes!"

"Sing for me, sweet musician."

"What about, Vel?"

"Fwiendship. Death."

Arnth sang about gods and heroes: Achilles grieving for the death of Patroclus; Hercules weeping for the lost

Hylas. But friendship, he seemed to say, survives the grave. Achilles, draw your bow ; Hercules, wield your club, and rout the demons who haunt the banks of the Styx ! Friendship awaits you on the far shore. In the meadowlands of Elysium, Patroclus is resurrected, Hylas is found.

She closed her eyes. She felt the thunder of wings (or was it the beating of her own heart?), and saw through her clenched lids a white radiance (or was it the fitful flaring of a lamp?), and fell to her knees before the coming of Vanth, the kind, the implacable . . .

His freckled cheeks were cobwebbed with tears. She had never seen the tears of a man. She could only brush his cheeks with shy fingertips.

"Please don't weep," she said. "You'll wash away your freckles."

He took her hand. "Vel tried to hurt you, didn't he?"

"Yes. But I never meant—this."

"He would have killed you, I think. There was great violence in him. Now we must tell Vegoia."

Vegoia led the procession through the forest. She wore a tunic of leaves, miraculously joined by threads from a spider's web, and somehow she moved with the hush, the fixed eternal-seeming of a natural object, a stone, a root, a hill. Arnth walked at her side, piping the errant Vel to the portals of death with the sound which in life had been more than life to him. Behind the nymph and piper walked the sprites, bearing the wooden sarcophagus which held their friend and the objects which he would need for his perilous journey through the nether lands: a knife to battle the demon, Tuchulcha ; a bow and arrow for hunting ; and a bulla with strong-smelling asafoetida to repel the griffins and demons along the Styx.

Tanaquil walked in the rear of the procession, a solitary figure whom no one blamed but who could not bring herself to walk beside the boy she had killed ; and last of all came the cats from Sutrium, an endless yellow river flowing as if with a single current and to a single sea. Vel had freed them ; Vel was dead. They had come to mourn him.

The mourners left the trees and began to climb a hill



which seemed an unbroken thicket of blackberry brambles. A narrow path crept wispily up the slope and spared their legs the tiny hooked thorns. Close to the top, Vegoia halted and turned to Arnth:

"It is not permitted that you should see the Mundus. You were Vel's friend. But not of his race. You and Tanaquil must return to the lake. The cats will protect you in the woods."

Side by side in the path and stemming the yellow flow of cats, Arnth and Tanaquil watched the Water Sprites as they climbed the hill and slid, like the tail of a dragon, over the bristling crest.

"Are they going to burn his body?" asked Tanaquil.

"No. Fire is the enemy of water. Vel disliked fire. Vegoia told me that they will leave his sarcophagus on a ledge near the rim of the Mundus. Tonight, when even the owls are asleep, his soul will emerge from his mouth and sink down the walls of the pit and into the earth and so to the river where Charun waits with his ferry."

"There will be demons along the way?"

"Yes. But Vel has weapons and charms to protect him. And Vanth will be his guide. Once she has claimed a man, she becomes his friend."

"And across the Styx. There will be music?"

"Music always."

For Tanaquil, the days which followed the burial were indistinct and indistinguishable, a greyness in spite of the sun. She grieved, but did not know the object of her grief, whether her father or Vel or perhaps herself, unloved in love; or every man, caught in the labyrinth which the gods called life and bestowed as if it were a gift. We whirl and claw, she thought. Rend each other in fear, doubt, and anger. But where is the final turning of the maze? Where is the Ariadne whose scarlet thread will lead us to the light?

Arnth and Vegoia treated her with a grave courtesy and a deep, unspoken affection. Complete in themselves, they pitied her incompleteness. Every morning they paddled to visit her and took her in their canoe around the lake and explored inlets roofed with grapevines or dug along the

banks for the stone axe blades of the old Terramara people. Vegoia taught her to fish with her hands and where to find honey trees, blueberry bushes, and edible mushrooms.

"Even the deadly mushrooms have their use," she explained. "You can tip a spear with the poison. The Fauns and the Centaurs are still holding Sutrium, but once they return to the woods, they will not look kindly on you and Arnth. It is wise to carry a spear."

But Arnth and Vegoia, she learned, were not after all the fortunate lovers in a forest idyll. Vegoia was plainly ill. The eternal girl, nymph of the waters, had become a woman with pain-haunted eyes and the pallor of January. Her beauty was undiminished, but she was beautiful in the way of frost on the bronze-green leaves of cypress tree, or an albatross on a sunless afternoon, suspended between the clouds and a tarpon-coloured sea.

But Vegoia refused to admit her illness to Arnth and Tanaquil.

"Water Sprites never get sick," she laughed. "We drown, we are killed by lightning or wild animals. Or we get old and go to the Mundus. But sickness? Turan herself might envy our health! It is grief which makes me pale. Grief for Vel. He was very dear to me, you know."

As for Arnth, he rarely left her side, but he hid his solicitude behind a mask of gallantry. He looked as young as when he had come to Sutrium. He was still the rustic god, abundant with freckles and quick to laugh. But such a sweetness had exalted his face that Tanaquil sometimes caught herself staring at him with a wonder akin to worship. Thus, ironically, she loved him most in his love for Vegoia.

One morning Vegoia paid her a visit without Arnth. Tanaquil offered her a cup of wine and honey, and when they had spilled libations to Mellonia and the gods of the earth, Vegoia spoke:

"Tanaquil, as you know, there are two kinds of wanderers. The first kind wanders because he must. He follows a unicorn which he never expects to catch. How many miles to the highest cloud? Where does the phoenix



build its nest? These are the questions which he asks himself.

"The second kind wanders only because he has found no reason not to wander. Give him a reason—a house, a wife, a friend—and soon he forgets about the other side of the river and the dark side of the moon."

It was often Vegoia's way to approach a subject by indirection. Tanaquil's way was more direct:

"Which kind is Arnth?"

"The second kind. He is happy, I think, on the lake. He has even found Ursus. Every afternoon they fish together in the shallows, and neither one of them looks as if he wants to hit the road."

"Certainly not Arnth," said Tanaquil. "Not while he has you."

"But if he should lose me, Tanaquil, he would wander again, would he not? Unless he should find a second reason to linger. Do you know of such a reason? Of one who will never fret when he wants to fish with Ursus, and never chide him when he eats twelve honey cakes in six bites and asks for twenty? One who will love him all the more for his red hair and freckles, his big hands and little feet? Do you know of such a one, my dear?"

"You know I do, Vegoia. But he still has you, hasn't he?"

"Perhaps I shall leave him," she said with brittle levity. "I am a lake dweller, after all. Fickle. Prone to wandering myself. And of course, heartless."

## CHAPTER TEN

"It is my secret place," Vegoia said. "The Corn Sprites showed it to me, and I used to come here alone when I was very sad or joyful."

"There was no one you wanted to bring with you?"

"Not then. You see, it is a place for love, and sacred to Turan. She brought Adonis here, and mourned him here, after the boar had killed him."

Leathery grapevines, anchored to red-barked dogwood trees, netted a windless bower whose floor was moss; and thickets of sweetbriar sprawled in the sunny spaces beyond

the vines, their dark green leaves exhaling a myrrh-like fragrance denied to their pink, clustered flowers. In just such places the Fauns and the Centaurs danced their midnight orgies and howled at the moon. But not here; not in this secret place, where Turan and not the Moon was queen; Turan, who scorned their lustful ways, their ignorance of love.

"You see, the sprites have proceeded us. They have hung the branches with images of the Goddess."

"But the images look like birds!"

"It is thus that they see her, a scarlet bird. When the wind blows, the feathered images sway and emit sweet pipings from the intricate works in their breasts."

"But we have no gifts for the goddess."

"We have the rarest of gifts." She drew him beside her onto the moss. "Ourselves. Libations and hecatombs are all very well for the other gods. But Turan is a woman. Burnt offerings offend her delicate nostrils. But the sight of love is incense and wine to her."

He smiled. "How do you know her so well? Till a little while ago, you weren't among her worshippers."

"But I have always known her ways. I was simply waiting until I could worship her in the right way."

"What about me? Do you think I will please the goddess?"

She took his hand and studied the palm as if she were reading his fate in the branching, furrowed lines.

"Yes, she would like your hands. Strong yet kind. And your hair would please her too. It is like the fire from one of her altars."

"But my freckles. What would she say about those?"

"Human. Endearing. She wearies of perfect beauty. Maris, lordly as bronze. Adonis, unflawed marble. Perfection is easier worshipped than loved, and Turan wants most of all to love. In fact, I had better stop numbering your graces, or she will envy me!"

"Then I shall number yours. But where shall I start? There are so many of them!"

"Hush," she said, "hush, my dear, and love me," and thus she stabbed him to knowledge of her fragile mortality. "I am neither Phoenician glass nor Athenian pottery," she



had said, but he felt that the touch of his fingers might shatter her into a thousand fragments, a thousand iridescences lost in the bands of the rainbow or the sky various with stars. Felt as if words and imperfect gropings of flesh no longer possessed her; as if he could speak and touch, and yet the essential part of her would slip irretrievably beyond his grasp; burst and dissolve on the air like a vial of sandarac.

"You're going away from me," he said.

She pressed an icy hand against his cheek. "Listen to me, Arnth. Listen to poor, thin words and understand them as if they were luminous. You know how the hunters build a fire in the woods on a winter day. Their hands are numb with holding their bows and nets; they envy the beasts their deep-dug nests. Then, the fire leaps up like the walls of a Corn Sprite's house—yellow and red and orange, and most of all amber. And smoke, not coarse and black, but blue and dusky against the winter sky. Amber fire and blue smoke. And the hunters are warmed. Richly. Not only their bodies. Shall they reproach the fire when it dies to embers? Or the smoke, when it thins and fades above the sere trees? A wood-fire was never meant to be enduring.

"There is a second kind of fire. A hearthfire, which burns with a low, pale flame and little smoke, but burns all winter, fed each day and tended by careful hands. In the best of worlds, woodfires and hearthfires would make a single flame of rich colours burning always. Perhaps the best of worlds is the Elysium which lies beyond the demon-haunted cliffs and the dark Styx. Perhaps. But here, it is not so. And it is the measure of a man that he can move from woodfire to hearthfire without bitterness, without reproaching the gods, his enemies, or himself. Let him remember, if he will, the blue and the amber, but not with regrets for what he has lost; rather, with gratitude for what he has found: a brief, bright burning in a wintry forest."

He took her in his arms. "Why do you speak in riddles? Woodfires. Hearthfires. I am your fire, Vegoia! Warm yourself in my arms!"

"Forgive me if I have puzzled you. I am only saying

that the human heart—from what I have seen of hearts—was not intended to poise always in the flush of worship, like a devotee standing in front of a temple. There are cottages as well as temples. The heart must rest, my dear. Now you must leave me and return to the lake.”

“No! Not without you. You are strange and distant. You frighten me, Vegoia!”

“Go now, Arnth. Later I will come to you. I give you my promise.”

“What good is a promise in an empty room?”

“The promise of a sorceress is not given lightly. Wait for me, my dear.” She pushed him away from her with small, inflexible hands and leaned, soundlessly weeping, against the arbor of vines and dogwood trees. The weight of her body shook the images into a wisp of song, as if the ghosts of birds were singing above the River Styx, with deaf Charun plying his oar and staring up at them to guess the unheard notes. Evanescent as smoke she seemed; or an amber flame burning in a cold forest. She did not call to him across that shaken air, but raised her hand in a slow salutation: little girl’s hand, sending away her friend of the greenbright summer; waving good-bye.

It was not till he reached the lake that he remembered: in their last embrace, he had felt the unmistakable beating of her heart.

I will cook her a meal, he thought. I will busy myself with her loved domestic tasks and summon her from the woods. Stir the coals in the oven. Brown the mussels to the colour of October. Roast the chestnuts until they crack like snails and exude a fragrance of earth, fire, and air. Vegoia, sorceress, I call to you with the strong magic of familiarity. Conjure you into your old shape, in the old place, beside me.

He heard the canoe as it brushed against the raft, and his heart leaped like a netted hare.

“Vegoia!”

It was Tanaquil. She had brought him a basket of grapes.

“You see,” she said proudly, “they look like swollen



amethysts! I practically stole them from the bees. Where is Vegoia?"

"In the forest."

"Alone?"

"Yes."

"You must go and find her!"

"She told me to come here and wait for her."

"Then you must wait. Shall I keep you company?"

"I think she meant for me to wait alone."

Tanaquil nodded with understanding and left him to his vigil.

He waited. Afternoon moved cloudily over the lake, and dusk settled like a woollen shroud, dark and smothering. Arnza came with the rising of the moon; he dipped and spun and pointed toward the shore.

"Quick, quick," he seemed to say.

Following the sprite as a mariner follows Polaris, Arnth paddled his canoe across the lake and moored among the reeds. The sprite sadly forsook him when he entered the forest. The trees were too thick and tangled for flight.

Here and there, on the floor of jutting roots and fallen pine needles, on the lifted arms of trees, the Lady Moon had strewn her crystal slivers, like shavings from the shop of a Titan lapidary.

"Vegoia!" he called, and thought of her slender feet torn by the roots of the trees, who envied her swiftness and clawed at her flesh with old men's fingers, half to caress, half to wound and destroy. Sly old men, lecherous oaks and lusting pines: you shall not touch my beloved! Where have you hidden her from me? I will strike a spark to your desecrated limbs, your grey-moss hair which is snarled with birds and bark! I will slash your knotted knees with sword and axe! Where have you hidden the nymph of the waters?

"Vegoia!"

"V-e-g-o-i-a!" Oak echoes. Pine echoes. Mockery of the trees, rasping back to him the loved, inviolate name. An owl hooted invisibly among the branches. A cat-shape slouched across his path (one of the cats from Sutrium?); paused insolently to flaunt its contempt of men; and vanished, a yellow-eyes shadow with shadows.

Then he saw her. She stood in a clearing of gagea. Cast in silver she seemed; the moon's sister, her feet awash in the silverness of flowers.

She smiled but did not approach him. "In a way I have kept my promise. I could not come to you. But I have brought you to me."

He stumbled toward her as she flickered out of his reach. He might have been trying to catch his reflection in a tide-pool.

"No, Arnth. You must not try to touch me. I am—changed. I have come to say good-bye."

He stopped. He stammered like a small boy. "W-why do you want to leave me?"

"Leave you? I would battle all the Griffins of the Styx to stay with you for a year, a week, a day! But when has an earthling been allowed to choose his fate? You know as well as I that demons surround us, invisible in the trees, bodiless in the wind. And gods beyond demons, and some say, a great winged being called Necessity beyond the gods, the Builder, and the universe. We are waxen images in unseen hands. For awhile, we were overlooked, you and I. Or perhaps a god looked down with condescending pity and allowed us a little hour of love, and then grew bored with our antics and took away his gift. Never ask, my dear. I must go now. Be always beautiful!"

"Vegoia," he cried. "It was I who did this to you. I cursed you with a heart. And now it has broken you!"

"I think I have always had a heart. It lay like a fledgling asleep in my breast. It was you who taught it to fly. Cursed, you say? Blessed! I have never cared for sleep."

He reached to touch her and touched a coolness of wind, and the light of her danced beyond him, will-o'-the-wisp, flickering through the trees, and he did not know if he pursued a nymph, or a light only, a coolness, a handful of wind.

He climbed the hill of the blackberry bushes. He lost the path; his legs caught fire with the thorns. Then, the crest, and emptiness yawned at his feet; the Great Mundus, yawning a pit to the nether lands; a chasm as old as the war between the gods and the Titans, when lightning had gouged the Great Green Sea and cast up the



Mountains of Atlas. Precipitous walls, softened a little with shrubs and vines at the rim, fell into blackness beyond the rays of the moon. Perhaps in the heart of the pit the lidless eyes of Griffins gleamed like moons, and Charon's oar cut the Styx with phosphorescent stars. But the blackness which met his eyes was moonless, starless, lightless. Night compounded by night.

He found the path. He lurched and stumbled, grasped at the scaly hands held out by roots, and stood at last on a ledge where earthen or wooden sarcophagi hunched in a row, like spawning turtles along a beach at night. But death, not life, was their burden. Figures were sculptured on the lids, half-reclining as if at a banquet. A woman with a skin like the underside of a mushroom. An old man with feet like the wings of a bat. A laughing child with a wooden fish in his hands.

Vegoia's sarcophagus had not been closed. She lay like an unlit candle in its narrow gloom. Tomorrow her friends would carve her image in oak or citron wood and shut her from the watching sky. Never mind. Not even the lordly sun could rekindle her light. Not here. Not here. But the dark waters of the Styx would shine with more than the phosphorescence of Charon's oars; with as much of light as the candle had lost.

"You have no gift for Charun," he said. "And I have no coin to place on your tongue. But I think he will not deny you a passage."

The wagon lay on its back like a horseshoe crab, its carapace slashed with knives, and its entrails strewn in the shape of clothes and furnishings. A Veientine army, equipped with siege towers and battering rams, had recaptured Sutrium, and the Fauns and Centaurs, leaving the slaves to the justice of the conquerors, had fled to the woods in fury and vented their wrath on this handiwork of man.

Still, Arnth found, the wreckage was not irreparable. With the help of the Water Sprites, he righted the cart and mended the tattered canopy. With the help of those other sprites, Arnza and his friends, he fitted the bare interior

with a pallet of animal skins, while Tanaquil wove a coverlet out of flamingo feathers.

Now, it was time to depart for Rome, the valorous little town which had recently exiled its Etruscan king, Tarquin the Proud, and declared its independence. The sprites sang and capered as he and Tanaquil took their seats. There were garlands around his neck, Tanaquil's hair had become a garden of roses, and honeysuckle entwined the canopy and seemed to heal the recently mended tears.

"It's like a harvest festival," she whispered. "They might be carrying sheaves instead of flowers."

He frowned. "It's much too soon to sing. Have they forgotten her so easily?" To Arnth at least, brightness had gone from the Town of Walking Towers; swiftness from the waters. Scarcely a month had passed, and yet her people sang.

"Remember what she told you about Vel: 'Don't judge him. He is what he has always been.'"

"I know," he said. "I know. I do love them in spite of their lightness. It's just that I want them to be like her."

"No one is."

Ursus was in his harness, submissive, no longer irascible. He hardly seemed to care that he had lost the patch from his eye, or that the sprites had insisted on twining honeysuckle around his prodigious neck. He is getting old, thought Arnth. When we get to Rome, I will build a room for him, with a bed of straw and a honey pot filled to the brim.

He had to flick the reins to catch the bear's attention. Ursus was not being stubborn. It was just that he seemed preoccupied. He was missing Vegoia.

"Farewell, Arnth!"

"Farewell, Tanaquil!"

"Mellonia sweeten your path!"

The wheels, liberally greased with olive oil, began to turn; the cart groaned into motion and rolled with quickening speed toward Sutrium, Veii, and liberated Rome. Behind and ahead of them marched the Water Sprites; martial now, vigilant for Fauns and Centaurs among the trees; guarding their human friends out of the Weirwoods.



Above them the Corn Sprites wheeled in fiery arcs, and Arnza dipped from the sky to tap Arnth's nose with a last homely gesture of farewell.

"Good-bye, little friend," Arnth cried, and Arnza's smile grew mischievous as if to say: "If I see a Faun, I'll spit in his ear for you!"

Tanaquil sat beside him as quietly as a statue. Her tunic became her. In the weeks on the lake she had tanned and hardened to the brown suppleness of a nymph. Except for her dusky hair and her grave, thoughtful silence, she might have been one of the sprites.

"Are you sure you want to come to Rome with me?" he asked. "Any Etruscan city would be proud to accept the daughter of Lars Velcha. I would stay, if you liked, until you were settled."

"You wouldn't be happy. Etruscans would always treat you like a travelling player. Or a Gaul. But in Rome, you could feel at home, couldn't you?"

"Yes," he admitted. "The Romans are like me. Farmers and travelling players and not princes and slaves. I will build a house, plant some grain, and keep a few pigs. And fight, of course, if Tarquin makes war on us to get back his throne. And sing. I still have my flute, you know. I found it under the wagon."

"I'll go to Rome," she said. "I understand that there's a shortage of women. Didn't the first Romans have to steal their mates from the Sabines?"

"But that was a long time ago."

"How do you know there isn't still a shortage?"

"That's their problem," said Arnth firmly. "You're with me."

"Am I, Arnth?"

She placed a hand on his arm. It was a comfortable hand. What had Vegoia said? "It is the measure of a man that he can move from woodfire to hearthfire without bitterness, without reproaching the gods, his enemies, or himself." He would never forget that brief, bright burning in a wintry forest, the blue and the amber.

But hearthfires were also good.

## LETTER FROM A READER

Dear Kyril,

I've not written a 'letter to the editor' for some time, and so am a little out of practice. However, a couple of points in your editorial call for some comment.

I must start by disagreeing with one point you make—hack writing was not the death of the pulps—the hack writer is still with us, ploughing the same old furrow for the pb editor. The pulps died because of a triple factor of economics (that old pulp paper just wasn't that cheap any more), and competition from three sources—the 'comic' books—the One-eyed Monster—and the paperback. Incidentally, the hack still plies his trade for the comics, which are read by the same age-groups (the ten-year-old to the thirty-year-olds . . . and year by year that thirty goes up) who before the second WW were the main pulp market.

You can consider this for what it is worth—before and during the war the pulp field covered romance to detective to action . . . and so on. Almost every form of 'easily' read fiction was represented by one or more pulp mags. Some twenty years before this the pulp had been a non-specialist magazine; a dash of this and smidgeon of that. After the war the 'pulp' went to the digest size to try and make the economical step required in competing with the paperback. Of the many varieties of 'pulp' magazine taking this course, the sf magazine appears to have been the only one that was 'viable' . . . In nearly every case the big chains have vanished; an odd detective fiction mag crops up, an odd western, an occasional romance. A couple or so of old faithfuls plod on. But the sf mag has maintained its numbers; three in Britain (one a reprint, admittedly) and eight in the U.S. (which includes two that did not exist three years ago, and doesn't include some borderline items like Gamma's companion 'weird' mag).

Some sort of conclusion should be drawn from that, somehow, at least as valid as your contention that hack-writing killed the pulps.

One conclusion I personally draw is that this demand for novelty is a fabrication of a small but vociferous



minority. Often the same folk as those who are demanding a 'higher literary standard' . . .

If the flag of literary excellence is put too darn far up the flag pole, I fear that the result will be a mass desertion in the direction of those who wave banners of 'artistic' appeal—the comic publishers. They have a 'readability' which calls for the negation of all critical faculty.

Let us by all means have a higher standard of 'literature', but for Ghu's sake don't let us lose any 'readability', for if we do, I fear me, we'll lose the readers.

My apologies for the fact that this is rather disjointed. I've added a few side thoughts to my main theme—the fact that hack writing didn't kill the pulps, and these seem to have confused the issue a bit.

Incidentally, yet another aside—M. P. Shiel, Sydney Fowler Wright, and—to a lesser extent—C. S. Lewis and Olaf Stapledon all wrote 'reverse science-fiction' (defeat of man, or at least scientific man), but are still hailed among the greatest of sf writers. Again, a great deal of the early sf, and the middle era sf, (1920—1930 early, 1930—1945 middle era) did not really concern itself 'with what man may next achieve'. It frequently concerned itself with man's reaction to a 'new' situation—crudely, in many cases, but not necessarily the wrong approach. Have a look at Raymond Gallun's *Old Faithful*, and P. Schuyler Miller's *Tetrahedra From Space*. Or some of David Keller's early items. I think that many of our modern writers could well use some of these more 'simple' ideas, and still include their soul-searching 'inner space' material. The overworked holocaust could then be left to recover some of its dramatic effect. Back in the early thirties I used to call Ed Hamilton 'World Wrecker' as he had a habit of blowing up at least two planets before breakfast—modern methods may not be quite so explosive, but the effect is similar—the outcome as wearisome.

Anyway, I must stop putting thoughts onto paper, and let you put the paper in the WPB, and then we can both get to bed . . . me to read SF 74, you to read mss for SF 77, I hope.

KENNETH F. SLATER

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