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THE TOMBS OF ATUAN
Ursula K. LeGuin

WHAT DO YOU MEAN—FANTASY?
Theodore Sturgeon

IN THE CARDS—**Robert Bloch**

AMONG THE GRIMOIRES—**Lester del Rey**

Ph'nglui mglw'nafh Cthulhu R'lyeh wgah-nagl fhtagn!

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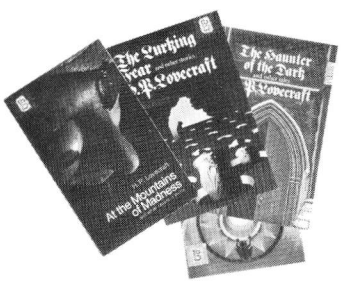

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*Nothing is known of the Old Tongue, except that it was heavily coated.

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WORLDS OF FANTASY

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ALL STORIES NEW

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EDITORIAL CORNER

THEODORE STURGEON

what do you mean—fantasy?

THE late Fletcher Pratt (to whom this field owes a great deal more than most of its adherents realize) once held a sort of sequential symposium at his place in New York. Fred Pohl will remember it, Larry Shaw, Lester del Rey. One evening Dr. Olaf Stapledon showed up. It was nice. For six Wednesday nights, up to a dozen or fifteen highly articulate, highly opinionated *aficionados* went at it, hammer and tongs, on the overall subject "What *is* science fiction?" Inevitably this led to the question of distinguishing between sf and fantasy —a distinction that any fan feels competent to make with finger-popping ease until he has to back it up with definitions that always work.

All kinds of fascinating things happened during those weeks. I recall some of the high points: Someone quoted John Campbell 'way back in the so-called "golden era" of sf, when, having put his special stamp on the old *Astounding*, he launched a fantasy magazine, *Unknown*, later *Unknown Worlds*. "For *Astounding*," he would say, "I want stories which are logical and good," which remains one of the best distinctions to date. Then of course we found ourselves defining "science" and "fiction" and "non-fiction" (isn't that "fact"? By no means—sometimes it's "opinion".) And—is that which is not fact a lie? Is that what fiction-writers are—liars?

To me the highest of the high points came when Fletcher, a tough bearded little gnome of a man, with enormous vitality and an extraordinary mind, suddenly leapt to his feet with the light of revelation blazing through his hornrims, pointed to the upper southwest corner and cried,

"ALL *fiction is fantasy*!"

And you know, he was absolutely right?

Fletcher's symposium has continued in my head to this day. I wish

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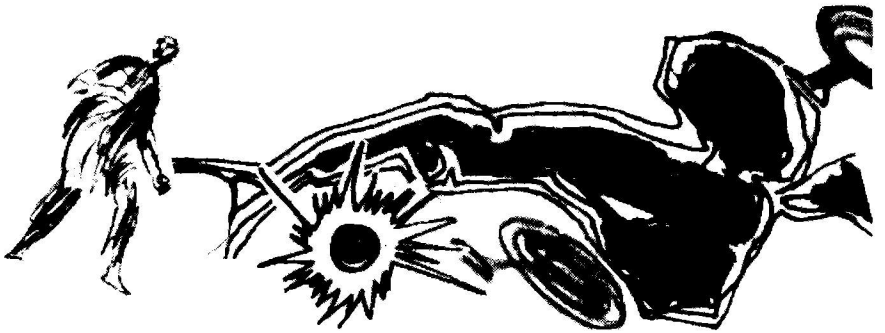

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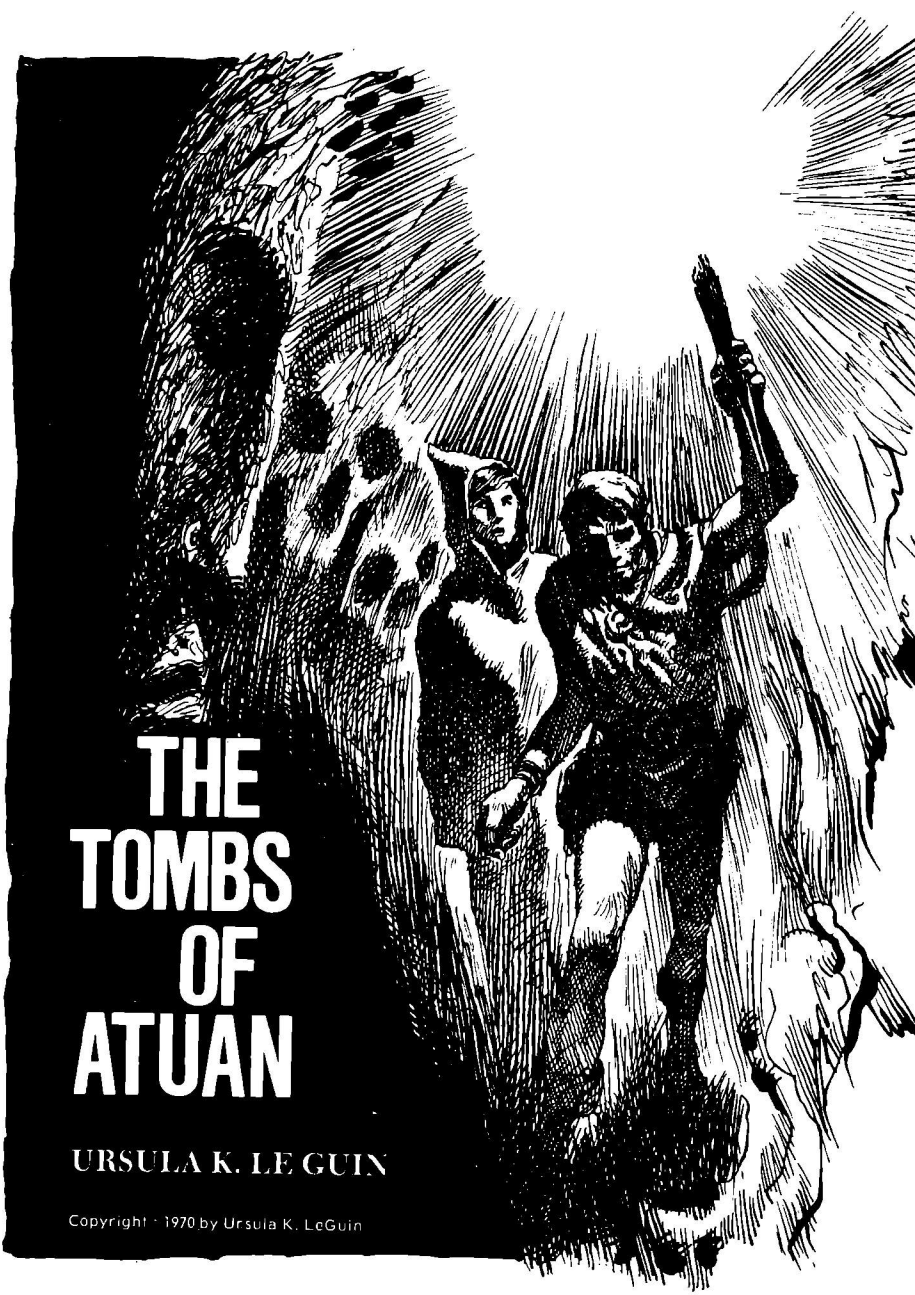


THE TOMBS OF ATUAN

URSULA K. LE GUIN

No use trying to open a door
till you know how a door is opened.
Here are keys to dark places . . .

I

BLACK in the sunlight were the Nine Stones, seven standing, two fallen; so dull, so black they seemed to swallow the desert light that beat down on them in a hot white flood, to devour it, giving back nothing. All around them was a vastness of ruin seeming empty of life: the domed Hall of the Throne and various smaller temples and houses and outbuildings on the slopes of the hill they crowned; around all a wall of great stones, and outside the wall a little huddle of slaves' and guards' huts and sheepfolds; and beyond, only the tawny desert, westward rising to lion-colored mountains, in all other directions running endless out of sight. In the center of this immensity stood the Stones that marked the Tombs of Atuan; and nothing moved in the tremendous noon on the Place of the Tombs, except the shadow of a wheeling hawk and two small figures toiling up the hill.

Black as the Stones themselves they looked, in hoods and long robes of black, and casting short black shadows; but they moved, they brushed the sweat off their faces under the black hoods, and they spoke, breaking the silence with tiny voices. "Follow the path along the Tomb-Wall, mistress," said the one that followed.

"Will we come thus to the entrance of the Labyrinth, Kossil?" said the one that walked ahead.

"Yes," said the other, following with heavy steps, speaking in a cold, slow, soft voice. "But I shall not take you to the Labyrinth, though in the Undertomb we shall pass its entrance. One of the duties of my mistress is the sacrifice of certain prisoners, men who have committed sacrilege against our lord the Godking, or against

the Nameless Ones. It is not fitting that the One Priestess should undertake this duty while yet a child. But my mistress is no longer a child. It is over a year now since she made her crossing into womanhood, and those matters which I have looked after for sixteen years return now into her care. There are three prisoners in the Room of Chains."

"When were they brought here? Why did I not know of it?"

"Prisoners are brought at night, and secretly, in the way prescribed in the rituals of the Tombs."

The girl said nothing. To ritual she had no answer, no questions. Since she had been brought to the Place of the Tombs at five years of age, her life had been spent in constant and absolute obedience to ritual. Every act she did was done in the way prescribed of old. With the other novices of the Place she spun wool, wove black cloth, ground meal, recited chants and histories, sang the Nine Chants nightly, blessed the doorways and the sills; under the tutelage of the two High Priestesses, Kossil and Thar, she learned and performed the special rites of her singular and still higher priestesshood: the Feeding of the Stones with goat's blood, the dances of the dark of the moon danced before the Empty Throne, a hundred other ceremonies and observances. In such rites all the years of her memory had passed. She could not remember any time before she had been brought to the Place, the child reincarnation of the last Priestess of the Tombs; and she was unable to imagine any time to come that might bring any difference, any change. She was sixteen years old, but she had lived since the beginning of time, since the digging of the Tombs of Atuan; she had been reborn a thousand times, and had never had any name . . . .

Tenar, someone had called her once, she remembered the sound of a voice calling; her mother, perhaps. But she could not remember her mother. She had no name, she was the Priestess called *arha*, which means *the eaten one*.

"Kossil!"

"Mistress?"

"When am I to be taken to the Labyrinth? I wish to see it."

"When Thar sees fit. With that I have nothing to do. My charge has been the prisoners only."

Kossil spoke with arrogance, for all she called the girl 'mistress.' Kossil was priestess of the Godking, and her small temple down the

hill was painted fresh and gilt, and its altar was heavy with gold. The divine ruler of the Kargad Lands looked after his temples. The Hall of the Throne of the Nameless Ones was half in ruins, the dome was cracked, the walls were full of mice and owls and bats. Yet, thought the girl called Arha, it would outlast the Godking by as long as it had lasted before him. It would remain. It was the center of things.

And beneath it, so Thar had told her, in the Undertomb and the great maze called the Labyrinth, there were riches enough to fill the Godking's temple ten times over: gold, silver, trophies given to the unnameable Dwellers in the Tombs over the endless generations of their worship. It was like a great, dark city, under the hill, a maze of streets and rooms full of gold, and the swords of old heroes, and old crowns, and bones, and years, and silence.

And she was mistress of all that: the years, the darkness, and the gold.

Yet until this day, though her tutors Thar and Kossil had spoken to her of her underground domains, she had never seen them; she did not even know the entrances, though many times she had wandered, hunting and guessing, seeking the hidden door she knew was there: trying to remember, to remember what she had known for at least a thousand lifetimes, and had forgotten at each dying, each rebirth.

"Here," said Kossil's cold voice.

Arha stopped. She had often walked this path around the Tomb Wall and knew it as she knew every foot of the Place, every rock and thorn and thistle. The great rock wall reared up thrice their height to the left; to the right the hill shelved away into a shallow, arid valley, which soon rose again toward the foothills of the western range. She looked over all the ground nearby and saw nothing that she had not seen before.

"Under the red rocks, mistress."

A few yards down the slope an outcropping of red lava made a stair or little cliff in the hill. When she went down to it and stood on the level before it, facing the rocks, Arha realized that they looked like a rough doorway, four feet high.

"What must be done?"

She had learned long ago that in the holy places it is no use trying to open a door until you know how the door is opened.

"My mistress has all the keys to the dark places."

SINCE the rites of her coming of age Arha had worn on her belt an iron ring on which hung a little dagger and thirteen keys, some long and heavy, some small as fishhooks. She lifted the ring and spread the keys. "That one," Kossil said, pointing and then placed her thick forefinger on a crevice between two red, pitted rock-surfaces.

The key, a long shaft of iron with two ornate wards, entered the crevice. Arha turned it to the left, using both hands, for it was stiff to move; yet it turned smoothly.

"Now?"

"Together—"

Together they pushed at the rough rock-face to the left of the keyhole. Heavily, but without catch and with very little noise, an uneven section of the red rock moved inward until a narrow slit was opened. Inside it was blackness.

Arha stooped and entered.

Kossil, a heavy woman heavily clothed, had to squeeze through the narrow opening. As soon as she was inside she backed against the door and, straining, pushed it shut.

It was absolutely black. There was no light. The dark seemed to press like wet felt upon the open eyes.

They crouched, almost doubled over, for the place they stood in was not four feet high and so narrow that Arha's groping hands touched damp rock at once to right and left.

"Did you bring a light?"

She whispered, as one does in the dark.

"I brought no light," Kossil replied behind her. Kossil's voice too was lowered, but it had an odd sound to it, as if she were smiling. Kossil never smiled. Arha's heart jumped; the blood pounded in her throat. She said to herself, fiercely: This is my place, I belong here, I will not be afraid!

Aloud she said nothing. She started forward; there was only one way to go. It went into the hill, and downward.

Kossil followed, breathing heavily, her garments brushing and scraping against rock and earth.

All at once the roof lifted: Arha could stand straight, and stretching out her hands she felt no walls. The air, which had been close and earthy, touched her face with a cooler dampness, and faint movements in it gave the sense of a great expanse. Arha took a few cautious steps forward into the utter blackness. A pebble, slipping

under her sandaled foot, struck another pebble, and the tiny sound wakened echoes, many echoes, minute, remote, yet more remote. The cavern must be immense, high and broad, yet not empty: something in its darkness, surfaces of invisible objects or partitions, broke the echo into a thousand fragments.

"Here we must be beneath the Stones," the girl said whispering, and her whisper ran out into the hollow blackness and frayed into threads of sound as fine as spiderweb, that clung to the hearing for a long time.

"Yes. This is the Undertomb. Go on. I cannot stay here. Follow the wall to the left. Pass three openings."

Kossil's whisper hissed (and the tiny echoes hissed after it). She was afraid, she was indeed afraid. She did not like to be here among the Nameless Ones, in their tombs, in their caves, in the dark. It was not her place, she did not belong here.

"I shall come here with a torch," Arha said, guiding herself along the wall of the cavern by the touch of her fingers, wondering at the strange shapes of the rock, hollows and swellings and fine curves and edges rough as lace here, smooth as brass there.

"Light is forbidden here." Kossil's whisper was sharp. Even as she said it, Arha knew it must be so. This was the very home of darkness, the inmost center of the night.

Three times her fingers swept across a gap in the complex, rocky blackness. The fourth time she felt for the height and width of the opening, and entered it. Kossil came behind.

In this tunnel, which went upward again at a slight slant, they passed an opening on the left, and then at a branching way took the right: all by feel, by groping, in the blindness of the underearth and the silence inside the ground. In such a passageway as this, one must reach out almost constantly to touch both sides of the tunnel, lest one of the openings that must be counted be missed, or the forking of the way go unnoticed. Touch was one's whole guidance; one could not see the way, but held it in one's hands.

"Where is the entrance to the Labyrinth?"

Arha liked this game in the dark, she wanted a greater puzzle to be set her.

"It was the second opening we passed in the Undertomb. Feel for a door to the right now, a wooden door, perhaps we've passed it already—"

Arha heard Kossil's hands fumbling uneasily along the wall, scraping on the rough rock. She kept her fingertips light against the rock, and in a moment felt the smooth grain of wood beneath them. She pushed on it and the door creaked open easily. She stood for a moment blind with light.

They entered a large low room, walled with hewn stone and lighted by one fuming torch hung from a chain. The place was foul with the torch-smoke that had no outlet. Arha's eyes stung and watered.

"Where are the prisoners?"

"There."

At last she realized that the three heaps of something on the far side of the room were men.

"The door isn't locked. Is there no guard?"

"None is needed."

She went a little farther into the room, hesitant, peering through the smoky haze. The prisoners were manacled by both ankles and one wrist to great rings driven into the rock of the wall. If one of them wanted to lie down, his chained arm must remain raised, hanging from the manacle. Their hair and beards had made a matted tangle which, together with the shadows, hid their faces. One of them half-lay, the other two sat or squatted. They were naked. The smell from them was stronger than the reek of smoke.

One of them seemed to be watching Arha; she thought she saw the glitter of eyes, then was not sure. The others had not moved or lifted their heads.

SHE turned away. "They are not men any more," she said.

"They were never men. They were demons, beast-spirits, who plotted against the sacred life of the Godking!" Kossil's eyes shone with the reddish torchlight.

Arha looked again at the prisoners, awed and curious. "How could a man attack a god? How was it? You: how could you dare attack a living god?"

The one man stared at her through the black brush of his hair, but said nothing.

"Their tongues were cut out before they were sent from Awabath," Kossil said. "Do not speak to them, mistress. They are defilement. They are yours, but not to speak to, nor to look at, nor to

think upon. They are yours to give to the Nameless Ones."

"How are they to be sacrificed?"

Arha no longer looked at the prisoners. She faced Kossil instead, drawing strength from the massive body, the cold voice. She felt dizzy, and the reek of smoke and filth made her sick, yet she seemed to think and speak with perfect calm. Had she not done this many times before?

"The Priestess of the Tombs knows best what manner of death will please her Masters, and it is hers to choose. There are many ways."

"Let Gobar the captain of the guards hew off their heads. And the blood will be poured out before the Throne."

"As if it were a sacrifice of goats?" Kossil seemed to be sneering at her lack of imagination. She stood dumb. Kossil went on, "Besides, Gobar is a man. No man can enter the Dark Places of the Tombs, surely my mistress remembers that? If he enters, he does not leave . . . "

"Who brought them here? Who feeds them?"

"The wardens who serve my temple, Duby and Uahto; they are eunuchs and may enter here on the service of the Nameless Ones, as I may. The Godking's soldiers left the prisoners bound outside the wall, and I and the wardens brought them in through the Prisoner's Door, the door in the red rocks. So it is always done. The food and water is lowered from a trapdoor in one of the rooms behind the Throne."

Arha looked up and saw, beside the chain from which the torch hung, a wooden square set into the stone ceiling. It was far too small for a man to crawl through, but a rope lowered from it would come down just within reach of the middle prisoner of the three. She looked away again quickly.

"Let them not bring any more food or water, then. Let the torch go out."

Kossil bowed. "And the bodies, when they die?"

"Let Duby and Uahto bury them in the great cavern that we passed through, the Undertomb," the girl said, her voice becoming quick and high. "They must do it in the dark. My Masters will eat the bodies."

"It shall be done."

"Is this well, Kossil?"

"It is well, mistress."

"Then let us go," Arha said, very shrill. She turned and hurried back to the wooden door and out of the Room of Chains into the blackness of the tunnel. It seemed sweet and peaceful as a starless night, silent, without sight, or light, or life. She plunged into that clean darkness, hurried forward through it like a swimmer through water. Kossil hastened along, behind her and getting father behind, panting, lumbering. Without hesitation Arha repeated the missed and taken turnings as they had come, skirted the vast echoing Undertomb, and crept, bent over, up the last long tunnel to the shut door of rock. There she crouched down and felt for the long key on the ring at her waist. She found it, but could not find the keyhole. There was no pinprick of light in the invisible wall before her. Her fingers groped over it seeking lock or bolt or handle and finding nothing. Where must the key go? How could she get out?

"Mistress!"

Kossil's voice, magnified by echoes, hissed and boomed far behind her.

"Mistress, the door will not open from inside. There is no way out. There is no return."

Arha crouched against the rock. She said nothing.

"Arha!"

"I am here."

"Come!"

She came, crawling on hands and knees along the passage.

"To the right. Hurry! I must not linger here. Follow me."

Arha got to her feet, and held on to Kossil's robes. They went forward, following the strangely carven wall of the cavern to the right for a long way, then entering a black gap in the blackness. They went upward now, in tunnels, by stairs. The girl still clung to the woman's robe. Her eyes were shut.

There was light, red through her eyelids. She thought it was the torchlit room full of smoke again, and did not open her eyes. But the air smelt sweetish, dry and mouldy, a familiar smell; and her feet were on a staircase almost steep as a ladder. She let go Kossil's robe, and looked. A trapdoor was open over her head. She scrambled through it after Kossil. It let her into a room she knew, a little stone cell containing a couple of chests and iron boxes, in the warren of rooms behind the Throne Room of the Hall. Daylight glimmered gray and faint in the hallway outside its door.

"The other, the Prisoner's Door, leads only into the tunnels. It does not lead out. This is the only way out. If there is any other way I do not know of it, nor does Thar. You must remember it for yourself, if there is one. But I do not think there is." Kossil still spoke in an undertone, and with a kind of spitefulness. Her heavy face within the black cowl was pale, and damp with sweat.

"I don't remember the turnings to this way out."

"I'll tell them to you. Once. You must remember them. Next time I will not come with you, this is not my place. You must come alone."

The girl nodded. She looked up into the older woman's face, and thought how strange it looked, pale with scarcely-mastered fear and yet triumphant, as if Kossil gloated over her weakness.

"I will come alone after this," Arha said, and then trying to turn away from Kossil she felt her legs give way, and saw the room turn over. She fainted in a little black heap at the priestess' feet.

"You'll learn," Kossil said, still breathing heavily, standing motionless. "You'll learn."

II

ARHA was not well for several days. They treated her for fever. She kept to her bed, or sat in the mild autumn sunlight on the porch of the Small House, and looked up at the western hills. She felt weak and stupid. The same ideas occurred to her again and again. She was ashamed of having fainted. She did not want to see Kossil at all: never. It was because she was ashamed of having fainted.

Often, in the sunlight, she would plan how she was going to behave next time she went into the dark places under the hill. She thought many times about what kind of death she should command for the next set of prisoners, more elaborate, better suited to the rituals of the Empty Throne.

Each night, in the dark, she woke up screaming, "They aren't dead yet! They are still dying!"

She dreamed a great deal. She dreamed that she had to cook food, great cauldrons full of savory porridge, and pour it all out into a hole in the ground. She dreamed that she had to carry a full bowl of water, a deep brass bowl, through the dark, to someone who was thirsty. She could never reach this person. She woke, and she herself was

thirsty, but she did not go for a drink. She lay awake, eyes open, in the room without windows.

Manan, the eunuch who was her special guardian, brought her meals to her, and coaxed her to eat, and tried to coax her to talk, or to play catch-sticks with him, as they had used to do. She would not talk. She would stare a while at Manan's bald head and hairless face, like a big yellow potato with two small dark eyes; then she would turn away without answering.

But the demands of the endless ritual of the Place soon brought Arha out of her privacy. Twin kids had been born out of season to a she-goat and were to be sacrified to the Twin God-brothers as the custom was: an important rite, at which the First Priestess must be present. Then it was the dark of the moon, and the ceremonies of the darkness must be performed before the Empty Throne. Arha breathed in the drugging fumes of herbs burning in broad trays of bronze before the Throne, and danced, solitary in black. She danced for the unseen spirits of the dead and the unborn and as she danced the spirits crowded the air around her, following the turn and spin of her feet and the slow, sure gestures of her arms. She sang the songs whose words no man understood. A choir of priestesses hidden in the dusk behind the great double row of columns echoed the strange words after her, and the air in the vast ruinous room hummed with voices, as if the crowding spirits repeated the chants again and again.

The Godking in Awabath sent no more prisoners to the Place, and gradually Arha ceased to dream of the three now long since dead and buried in shallow graves in the great cavern under the Tombstones.

The first time she had to enter that cavern was hard; yet not so hard as she had feared. She had schooled herself up to it so well, had so determined that she would go alone and keep her nerve, that when she came there she was almost dismayed to find that there was nothing to be afraid of. Graves might be there, but she could not see them; she could not see anything. It was black; it was silent. And that was all.

She went there many times, always entering by the trapdoor in the room behind the Throne, until she knew well the whole circuit of the cavern, with its strange sculptured walls, as well as one can know what one cannot see. She never left the walls, for in striking out

across the great hollow she might soon lose the sense of direction in the darkness, and so, blundering back at last to the wall, not know where she was. For as she had learned the first time, the important thing, down in the dark places, was to know which turnings and openings one had passed, and which were to come. It must be done by counting, for they were all alike to the groping hands. Arha's memory had been well trained, and she found no difficulty to this odd trick of finding one's way by touch and number, instead of by sight and common sense. She soon knew by heart all corridors that opened off the Undertomb, the lesser maze that lay under the Hall of the Throne and the hilltop. But there was one corridor she had never entered: the second left of the red-rock entrance, that one which, if she entered mistaking it for one she knew, she might never find a way out of again. Her longing to enter it, to learn the Labyrinth, grew steadily, but she restrained her steps until she had learned all she could aboveground.

Thar knew little about the Labyrinth but the names of certain of its rooms, and the list of directions, of turns made and missed, for getting to these rooms. She would tell these to Arha, but she would never draw them in the dust or even with the gesture of a hand in the air; and she herself had never followed them, had never entered the Labyrinth. But when Arha asked her, "What is the way from the Iron Door that stands open, to the Painted Room?" or, "How does the way run from the Room of Bones to the tunnel by the river?"—then Thar would be silent a little, and then recite the strange directions she had learned long ago from the Arha-that-was: so many crossings passed, so many turns taken. And all these Arha got by heart, as Thar had, often on the first listening. When she lay in bed nights she would repeat them to herself, trying to imagine the places, the rooms, the turnings in the dark.

Thar showed Arha the spyholes that opened into the maze, in every building and temple of the Place, and even under rocks out of doors. The spiderweb of the stone-walled tunnels underlay all the Place and even beyond its walls; there were miles of tunnels, down there in the dark. No person there but she, the two High Priestesses, and the three eunuchs Manan, Uahto, and Duby, knew of the existence of this maze that lay beneath every step they took. There were vague rumors of it among the others; they all knew that there were caves or rooms of some sort under the Tombstones. But none of

them was very curious about anything to do with the Nameless Ones and the places sacred to them. Perhaps they felt that the less they knew, the better. Arha, of course, had been intensely curious, and knowing that there were spyholes into the Labyrinth, had sought for them; yet they were so well concealed, in the pavements of the floors or in the desert ground, that she had never found one, not even the one in her own Small House, until Thar showed it to her.

ONE night in early spring she took a candle-lantern and went down with it, unlit, through the Undertomb, to the second passage to the left of the passage from the red-rock door.

She passed through a doorway, feeling the iron frame set in the rock: the limit, till now, of her explorations. Past the Iron Door she went a long way in the tunnel, and when it began at last to curve to the right, she lit her candle with flint and steel, and looked about her. For light was permitted here. She was no longer in the Undertomb. She was in a place less sacred, though perhaps more dreadful. She was in the Labyrinth.

The raw, blank walls and vault and floor of rock surrounded her in the small sphere of candlelight. The air was dead. Before her and behind her the tunnel stretched off into darkness.

All the tunnels were the same, crossing and recrossing. She kept careful count of her turnings and passings, and recited Thar's directions to herself, though she knew them perfectly. For it would not do to get lost in the Labyrinth. In the Undertomb and the short passages around it, Kossil or Thar might find her, or Manan come seeking for her, for she had taken him there several times. Here, none of them had ever been: only she herself. Little good it would do her if they came to the Undertomb and called aloud, and she was lost in some spiraling tangle of tunnels half a mile away. She imagined how she might hear the echo of voices calling her, echoing down every corridor, and she would try to come to them, but, lost, would only become farther lost. So vividly did she imagine this that she stopped, thinking she heard a distant voice calling. But there was nothing. And she would not get lost. She was very careful; and this was her place, her own domain. The powers of the dark, the Nameless Ones, would guide her steps here, just as they

would lead astray any other mortal who dared enter the Labyrinth of the Tombs.

She did not go far into it that first time, but far enough that the strange, bitter, yet pleasurable certainty of her utter solitude and independence there grew strong in her, and led her back, and back again, and each time farther. She came to the Painted Room and the Six Ways, and followed the long Outmost Tunnel, and penetrated the strange tangle that led to the Room of Bones.

"When was the Labyrinth made?" she asked Thar, and the stern, thin priestess answered, "Mistress, I do not know. No one knows."

"Why was it made?"

"For the hiding away of the treasures of the Tombs, and for the punishment of those who tried to steal those treasures."

"All the treasures I've seen are in the rooms behind the Throne, and the basements under it. What lies in the Labyrinth?"

"A far greater and more ancient treasure. Would you look on it?"

"Yes."

"You must go alone; not even Manan should go there, I think. I know where the Great Treasure is. You told me the way, fifteen years ago, before you died, so that I would remember and tell you when you returned. I can tell you the way to follow in the Labyrinth, beyond the room of paintings; and the key to the treasury is that silver one on your ring, with a figure of a dragon on the haft. But you must go alone."

"Tell me the way."

Thar told her, and she remembered, as she remembered all that was told her. But she did not go to see the Great Treasure of the Tombs. Some feeling that her will or her knowledge was not yet complete held her back. Or perhaps she wanted to keep something in reserve, something to look forward to, that cast a glamor over those endless tunnels through the dark that ended always in blank walls or bare dusty cells. She would wait a while before she saw her treasures.

After all, had she not seen them before?

It still made her feel strange when Thar and Kossil spoke to her of things she had seen or said before she died. She knew that indeed she had died, and had been reborn in a new body at the hour of her old body's death: not only once, sixteen years ago, but sixty years ago, and before that, and before that, back down the years and

hundreds of years, generation before generation, to the very beginning of years when the Labyrinth was dug, and the Stones were raised, and the First Priestess of the Nameless Ones lived in this place and danced before the empty throne. They were all one, all those lives and hers. She was the First Priestess. All human beings were forever reborn, but only she, Arha, was reborn forever as herself. A hundred times she had learned the ways and turnings of the Labyrinth, and had come to the hidden room at last.

Sometimes she thought she remembered. The dark places under the hill were so familiar to her, as if they were not only her domain, but her home. When she breathed in the drug fumes to dance at dark of the moon, her head grew light and her body was no longer hers; then she danced across the centuries, barefoot in black robes, and knew that the dance had never ceased.

Yet it was always strange when Thar said, "You told me before you died . . ."

ONCE she had asked, "Who were those men that came to rob the Tombs? Did any ever do so?" The idea of robbers had struck her as exciting, but improbable. How would they come secretly to the Place? Pilgrims were very few, fewer even than prisoners. Now and then new novices or slaves were sent from lesser temples of the Four Lands, or a small group came to bring some offering of gold or rare incense to one of the temples. And that was all. Nobody came by chance, or to buy and sell, or to sightsee, or to steal; nobody came but under orders. Arha did not even know how far it was to the nearest town; twenty miles or more; and the nearest town was a small one. The Place was guarded and defended by emptiness, by solitude. Anybody crossing the desert that surrounded it, she thought, would have as much chance of going unseen as a black sheep in a snow field.

She was with Thar and Kossil, with whom much of her time was spent now when she was not in the Small House or alone under the hill. It was a stormy, cold night in March. They sat by a tiny fire of sage on the hearth in the room behind the Godking's temple, Kossil's room. Outside the doorway, in the hall, Manan and Duby played a game with sticks and counters, tossing a bundle of sticks and catching as many as possible on the back of the hand. Manan and Arha still sometimes played that game, in secret, in the inner

courtyard of the Small House. The rattle of dropped sticks, the husky mumbles of triumph and defeat, the small crackle of the fire, were the only sounds when the three priestesses fell silent. All around beyond the walls reached the profound silence of the desert night. From time to time came the patter of a sparse, hard shower of rain.

"Many came to rob the Tombs, long ago; but none ever did so," said Thar. Taciturn as she was, she liked now and then to tell a story, often as part of Arha's instruction. She looked tonight as if a story might be got out of her.

"How would any man dare?"

"*They* would dare," Kossil said. "They were sorcerers, wizard-folk from the Inner Lands. That was before the Godkings ruled the Kargad Lands; we were not so strong then. The wizards used to sail from the west to Karego-At and Atuan, to plunder the towns on the coast, loot the farms, even come into the Sacred City Awabath. They came to kill dragons, they said, but they stayed to rob towns and temples."

"And their great heroes would come among us to test their swords," Thar said, "and work their ungodly spells. One of them, a mighty sorcerer and dragonlord, the greatest of them all, came to grief here. It was long ago, very long ago, but the tale is still remembered, and not only in this place. The sorcerer was named Erreth-Akbe, and he was both king and wizard in the West. He came to our lands, and in Awabath he joined with certain Kargish rebel lords and fought for the rule of the city with the High Priest of the Inmost Temple of the Twin Gods. Long they fought, the man's sorcery against the lightning of the gods, and the temple was destroyed around them. At last the High Priest broke the sorcerer's witching-staff, broke in half his amulet of power, and defeated him. He escaped from the city and from the Kargish lands, and fled clear across Earthsea to the farthest west; and there a dragon slew him, because his power was gone. And since that day the power and might of the Inner Lands has ever waned. Now the High Priest was named Intathin, and he was the first of the house of Tarb, that lineage from which, after the fulfillment of the prophecies and the centuries, the Priest-Kings of Karego-At were descended, and from them, the Godkings of all Kargad. So it is that since the day of Intathin the power and might of the Kargish lands has ever grown. Those who came to rob the Tombs, they were sorcerers, trying and trying to

get back the broken amulet of Erreth-Akbe. But it is still here, where the High Priest put it. And so are their bones . . ." Thar pointed at the ground under her feet.

"Half of it is here," Kossil said.

"And the other half lost forever."

"How lost?" asked Arha.

"The one half, in Intathin's hand, was given by him to the Treasury of the Tombs. The other remained in the sorcerer's hand, but he gave it before he fled to a petty king, one of the rebels, named Thoreg of Hupun. I do not know why he did so."

"To cause strife, to make Thoreg proud," Kossil said. "And so it did. The descendants of Thoreg rebelled again when the house of Tarb ruled; and yet again they took arms against the first Godking, refusing to acknowledge him as either King or God. They were an accursed, ensorcelled race. They are all dead now."

Thar nodded. "The father of our present Godking, the Lord who has Arisen, he put down that family of Hupun, and destroyed their palaces. When that was done the half-amulet, which they had always kept ever since the days of Erreth-Akbe and Intathin, was lost. No one knows what became of it. And that was a lifetime ago."

"It was thrown out as trash, no doubt," Kossil said. "They say it doesn't look like anything of value, the Ring of Erreth-Akbe. A curse upon it and upon all things of the wizard-folk!" Kossil spat into the fire.

"Have you seen the half that is here?" Arha asked of Thar.

The thin woman shook her head. "It is in that treasury which we spoke of, to which no one may come but the One Priestess. It may be the greatest of all the treasures there; I do not know. I think perhaps it is. For hundreds of years the sorcerer-folk sent thieves and wizards to try to steal it back, and they would pass by open coffers of gold, seeking that one thing. It is very long since Erreth-Akbe and Intathin lived, and yet still the story is known and told, both here and in the Inner Lands. Most things grow old and perish, when the centuries go on and on. Very few are the precious things that remain precious, or the tales that are still told."

Arha brooded a while and said, "They must have been very brave men, or very stupid, to enter the Tombs. Don't they know the powers of the Nameless Ones?"

"No," said Kossil in her cold, fierce voice. "They have no gods.

They work magic, and think themselves as powerful as gods. But they are not. And when they die, they are not reborn. They become dust and bone, and their ghosts whine on the wind a little while till the wind blows them clean away. They do not have immortal souls."

"What do they look like?" Arha asked, enthralled. "Are they truly all black with white eyes?" She did not remember having said once that she would have turned away and refused to look at the ships from the Inner Lands.

"They are black and vile. I have never seen one," Kossil said with satisfaction, shifting her heavy bulk on the low stool and spreading her hands to the fire.

"May the Twin Gods keep them afar," Thar muttered.

"They will never come here again," said Kossil. And the fire sputtered, and the rain spatted on the roof, and outside the gloomy doorway the sticks rattled, tossed and falling, and Manan cried shrilly, "Aha! A half for me, a half!"

III

AS THE year was rounding again toward winter, Thar died. In the summer a wasting disease had come upon her; she who had been thin grew skeletal, she who had been grim now did not speak at all. Only to Arha would she talk, sometimes, when they were alone together; then even that ceased, and she went silently into the dark. When she was gone Arha missed her sorely. If Thar had been stern, she had never been cruel. It was pride she had taught to Arha, not fear.

Now there was only Kossil.

A new High Priestess for the Temple of the Twin Gods would come in spring from Awabath; until then, Arha and Kossil between them were the rulers of the Place. The woman called the girl 'mistress, and would obey her if commanded. But Arha had learned not to command Kossil. She had the right to do so, but not the strength: it would take very great strength to stand up against Kossil's jealousy of a higher status than her own, her hatred of anything she herself did not control. Kossil had no true worship in her heart of the Nameless Ones or of the gods. She held nothing sacred but power. The Emperor of the Kargad Lands now held the power, and

therefore he was indeed a godking in her eyes, and she would serve him well. But to her the temples were mere show, the Tombstones were rocks, the Tombs of Atuan were dark holes in the ground, terrible but empty. She would do away with the worship of the Empty Throne, if she could. She would do away with the First Priestess, if she dared.

Arha had come to face even this last fact quite steadily, during the past year. Perhaps Thar had helped her to see it, though she had never said anything directly. In the first stages of her illness, before the silence came upon her, she would ask Arha to come to her every few days and would talk to her, telling her much about the doings of the Godking and his predecessor, and the ways of Awabath—matters which she should as an important priestess know, but which were not often flattering to the Godking and his court. And she would speak of her own life, and would describe what the Arha of the previous life had looked like and done; and sometimes, not often, she would mention what might be the difficulties and dangers of Arha's present life. Not once did she mention Kossil by name. But Arha had been her pupil for eleven years, and needed no more than a hint or a tone to understand, and to remember.

After the gloomy commotion of the Rites of Mourning was over, Arha took to avoiding Kossil. When the long works and rituals of the day were done, she went to her solitary dwelling; and whenever there was time, she went to the room behind the Throne, and opened the trapdoor, and went into the dark. In daytime and nighttime, for it made no difference there, she pursued a systematic exploration of her domain. The Undertomb, with its great weight of sacredness, was utterly forbidden to any but priestesses and their most trusted eunuchs. Any other, man or woman, who ventured there would certainly be struck dead by the wrath of the Nameless Ones. But among all the rules she had learned, there was no rule forbidding entry to the Labyrinth. There was no need. It could be entered only from the Undertomb; and anyway, do flies need rules to tell them not to enter in a spider's web?

So she took Manan often into the nearer regions of the Labyrinth, that he might learn the ways. He was not at all eager to go there, but he always obeyed her. She made sure that Duby and Uahto, Kossil's eunuchs, knew the way to the Room of Chains and the way out of the Undertomb, but no more; she never took them into the Labyrinth.

She wanted no one but Manan, utterly faithful to her, to know these secret ways. For they were hers, hers alone, forever.

She had begun her full exploration with the Labyrinth. All the autumn she spent many days walking those endless corridors, and still there were regions of them she had never come to. There was a weariness in that tracing of the vast, meaningless web of ways; the legs grew tired and the mind bored, forever reckoning up the turnings and the passages behind and to come. It was wonderful, laid out in the solid rock underground like the streets of a great city; but it had been made to weary and confuse the mortal walking in it, and even its priestess must feel it to be nothing, in the end, but a great trap.

Since Thar's death she had turned her thorough exploration more to the Hall itself, the altars, the alcoves behind and beneath the altars, the rooms of chests and boxes, the contents of the chests and boxes, the passages and attics, the dusty hollow under the dome where hundreds of bats nested, the basements and underbasements that were the anterooms of the corridors of darkness.

Her hands and sleeves perfumed with the dry sweetness of a musk that had fallen to powder lying for eight centuries in an iron chest, her brow smeared with the clinging black of cobweb, she would kneel for an hour to study the carvings on a beautiful, time-ruined coffer of cedarwood, the gift of some king ages since to the Nameless Powers of the Tombs. There was the king, a tiny stiff figure with a big nose, and there was the Hall of the Throne with its flat dome and porch columns, carved in delicate relief on the wood by some artist who had been dust for how many hundred years. There was the One Priestess, breathing in the drug fumes from the trays of bronze and prophesying or advising the king, whose nose was broken off in this frame; the face of the Priestess was too small to have clear features, yet Arha would imagine that the face was her own face. She wondered what she had told the king with the big nose, and whether he had been grateful.

SHE had favorite places in the Hall of the Throne, as one might have favorite spots to sit in a sunny house. She often went to a little half-loft over one of the robing-rooms in the hinder part of the Hall. There ancient gowns and costumes were kept, left from the days when great kings and lords came to worship at the place of the

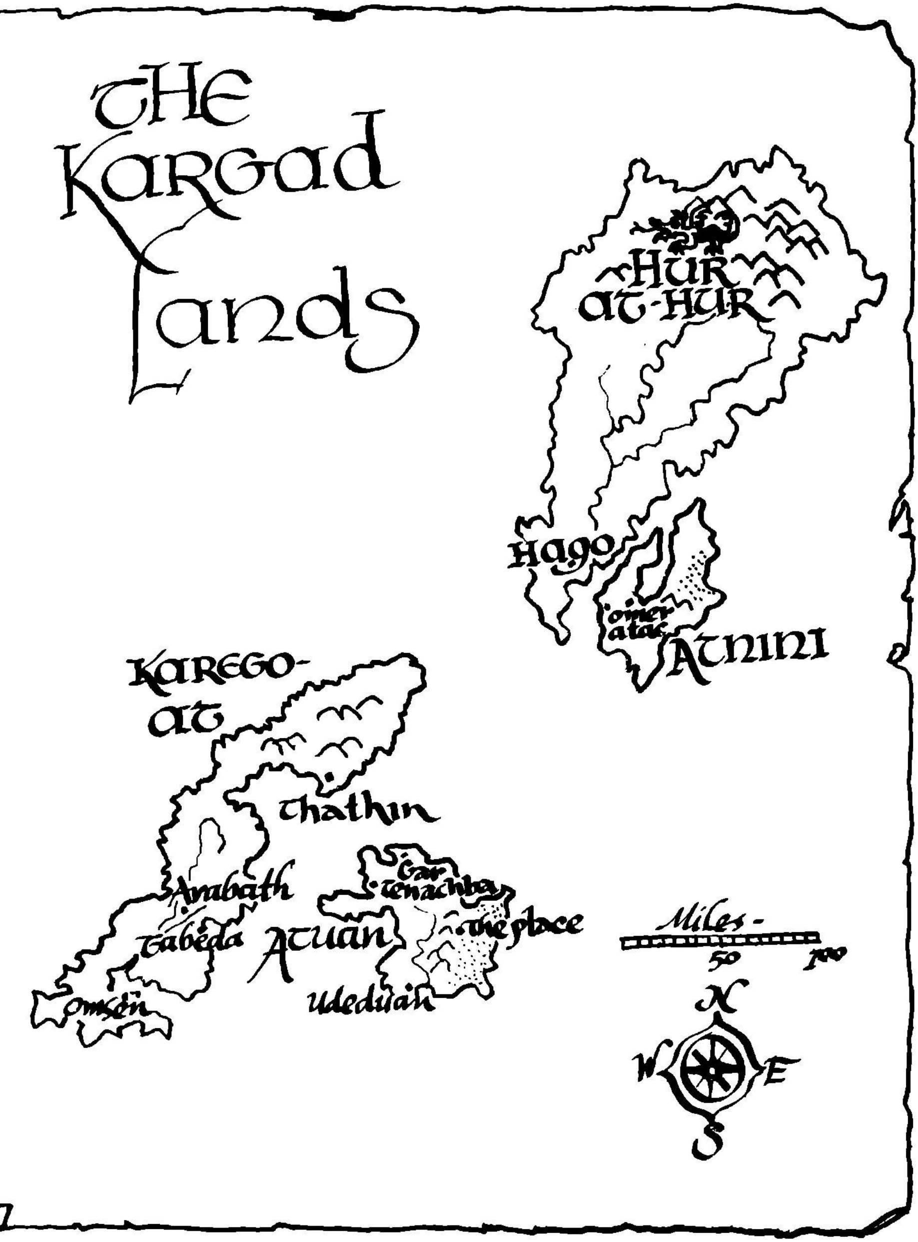
Tombs of Atuan, acknowledging a dominion greater than their own or any man's. Sometimes their daughters, the princesses, had put on these soft white silks, embroidered with topaz and dark amethyst, and had danced with the Priestess of the Throne. There were little painted ivory tablets in one of the treasuries, showing such a dance, and the lords and kings waiting outside the Hall, for then or now no man ever set foot on the ground of the Tombs. But the maidens might come in, and dance with the priestess, in white silk. The priestess herself wore rough cloth, homespun black, always, then and now; but she liked to come and finger the sweet, soft stuff, rotten with age, the unperishing jewels tearing from it by their own slight weight. There was a scent in these chests different from all the musks and incenses of the temples of the Place: a fresher scent, fainter, younger.

In the treasure rooms she would spend a night learning the contents of a single chest, jewel by jewel, the rusted armor, the broken plumes of helms, the buckles and pins and brooches, bronze, silver, silver-gilt, and solid gold.

Owls, undisturbed by her presence, sat on the rafters and opened and shut their yellow eyes. A bit of starlight shone in between tiles of the roof; or the first snow came sifting down, fine and cold as those ancient silks that fell to nothing at hand's touch.

It was too cold in the Hall tonight. She went to the trapdoor, raised it, swung down onto the steps, and closed it above her. She set off silently on the way she now knew so well, the passage to the Undertomb. There, of course, she never bore a light; if she carried a lantern, from going in the Labyrinth or in the dark of night aboveground, she extinguished it before she came near the Undertomb. She had never seen that place, never in all the generations of her priestesshood. In the passage now, she blew out the candle in the lamp she carried, and without slowing her pace at all went forward in the pitch dark, easy as a little fish in dark water. Here, winter or summer, there was no cold, no heat: always the same even chill, a little damp, changeless. Up above, the great frozen winds of winter whipped thin snow over the desert. Here, there was no wind, no season; it was close, it was still, it was safe.

She was going to the room of paintings. She liked sometimes to go there and study the strange wall-drawings that leapt out of the dark at the gleam of her candle: men with long wings and great eyes,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serene and morose. No one could tell her what they were, there were no such paintings elsewhere in the Place, but she thought she knew; they were the spirits of the damned, who are not reborn. The room of paintings was in the Labyrinth, so she must pass through the cavern beneath the Tombstones first. As she approached it down the slanting passage, a faint gray bloomed, a bare hint and glimmer, the echo of an echo of a distant light.

She thought her eyes were tricking her, as they often did in that utter blackness. She closed them, and the gray bloom vanished. She opened them and it reappeared.

She had stopped, and was standing still. Gray, not black. A dull edge of pallor, just visible, where nothing could be visible, where all must be black.

She took a few steps forward and put out her hand to that angle of the tunnel wall; and, infinitely faint, saw the movement of her hand.

She went on. This was strange beyond thought, beyond fear, this faint blooming of light where no light had ever been, in the inmost grave of darkness. She went noiseless on bare feet, black-clothed. At the last turn of the corridor she halted; then very slowly took the last step, and looked, and saw.

—saw what she had never seen, not though she had lived a hundred lives: the great vaulted cavern beneath the Tombstones, not hollowed by man's hand but by the powers of the Earth. It was jeweled with crystals and ornamented with pinnacles and filigrees of white limestone where the waters under earth had worked, eons since: immense, with glittering roof and walls, sparkling, delicate, intricate, a palace of diamonds, a house of amethyst and crystal, from which the ancient darkness had been driven out by glory.

Not bright, but dazzling to the dark-accustomed eye, was the light that worked this wonder. It was a soft gleam, like marshlight, that moved slowly across the cavern, striking a thousand scintillations from the jeweled roof and shifting a thousand fantastic shadows along the carven walls.

The light burned at the end of a staff of wood, smokeless, unconsuming. The staff was held by a human hand. Arha saw the face beside the light: the dark face: the face of a man.

She did not move.

FOR a long time he crossed and recrossed the vast cave. He

moved as if he sought something, looking behind the lacy cataracts of stone, studying the several corridors that led out of the Undertomb, yet not entering them. And still the Priestess of the Tombs stood motionless, in the black angle of the passage, waiting.

What was hardest for her to think, perhaps, was that she was looking at a stranger. She had very seldom seen a stranger. It seemed to her that this must be one of the eunuchs—no, one of the men from over the wall, a goatherd or guard, a slave of the Place; and he had come to see the secrets of the Nameless Ones, maybe to steal something from the Tombs. . .

To steal something. To rob the Dark Powers. Sacrilege: the word came slowly into Arha's mind. This was a man, and no man's foot must ever touch the soil of the Tombs, the holy place. Yet he had come here into the hollow place that was the heart of the Tombs. He had entered. He had made light where light was forbidden, where it had never been since world's beginning. Why did the Nameless Ones not strike him down?

He was standing now looking down at the rocky floor, which was cut and troubled. One could see that it had been opened and reclosed. The sour sterile clods dug up for the graves had not all been stamped down again.

Her Masters had eaten those three. Why did they not eat this one? What were they waiting for?

For their hands to act, for their tongue to speak . . .

"Go! Go! Be gone!" she screamed all at once at the top of her voice. Great echoes shrilled and boomed across the cavern, seeming to blur the dark, startled face that turned toward her and, for one moment, across the shaken splendor of the cavern, saw her. Then the light was gone. All splendor gone. Blind dark, and silence.

Now she could think again. She was released from the spell of light.

He must have come in by the red-rock door, the Prisoners' Door: so he would try to escape by it. Light and silent as the soft-winged owls she ran the half-circuit of the cavern to the low tunnel that led to the door which opened only inward. She stooped there at the entrance of the tunnel. There was no draft of wind from outside: he had not left the door fixed open behind him. It was shut, and if he was in the tunnel, he was trapped there.

But he was not in the tunnel. She was sure of it. So close, in that

cramped place, she would have heard his breath, felt the warmth and pulse of his life itself. There was no one in the tunnel. She stood erect, and listened. Where had he gone?

The darkness pressed like a bandage on her eyes. To have seen the Undertomb confused her; she was bewildered. She had known it only as a region defined by hearing, by hand's touch, by drifts of cool air in the dark: a vastness: a mystery, never to be seen. She had seen it, and the mystery had given place, not to horror, but to beauty, a mystery deeper than that of the dark.

She went slowly forward now, unsure. She felt her way to the left, to the second passageway, the one that led into the Labyrinth. There she paused and listened.

Her ears told her no more than her eyes. But as she stood with one hand on either side of the rock archway she felt a faint, obscure vibration in the rock, and on the chill, stale air was the trace of a scent that did not belong there: the smell of the wild sage that grew on the desert hills, overhead, under the open sky.

Slow and quiet she moved down the corridor, following her nose.

After perhaps a hundred paces she heard him. He was almost as silent as she, but he was not as surefooted in the dark. She heard a slight scuffle, as if he had stumbled on the uneven floor and recovered himself at once. Nothing else. She waited a while and then came slowly on, touching her right-hand fingertips very lightly to the wall. At last a rounded bar of metal came under them. There she stopped, and felt up the strip of iron until, almost as high as she could reach, she touched a projecting handle of rough iron. This, suddenly, with all her strength, she dragged downward.

There was a fearful grinding and a clash. Blue sparks leapt out in a falling shower. Echoes died away, quarreling, down the corridor behind her. She put out her hands and felt, only a few inches before her face, the pocked surface of the iron door.

Returning slowly up the tunnel to the Undertomb, and keeping its wall to her right, she went on to the trapdoor in the Hall of the Throne. She did not hasten and went silently, though there was no need for silence any more. She had caught her thief. The door which he had gone through was the only way into or out of the Labyrinth, and she had locked it on him.

He was down there now, in the darkness underground, and he would never come out again.

Walking slowly and erect, she came past the Throne into the long columned hall. There, where one bronze bowl on the high tripod brimmed with the red glow of charcoal, she turned and approached the seven steps that led up to the Throne.

On the lowest step she knelt and bowed her forehead down to the cold, dusty stone, littered with mouse-bones dropped by the hunting owls.

"Forgive me that I have seen Your darkness broken," she said, not speaking the words aloud. "Forgive me that I have seen Your tombs violated. You will be avenged. O my Masters, death will deliver him to you, and he will never be reborn!"

Yet even as she prayed, in her mind's eye she saw the quivering radiance of the lighted cavern, life in the place of death; and instead of terror at the sacrilege and rage against the thief, she thought only how strange it was, how strange . . .

"What must I tell Kossil?" she asked herself as she came out into the blast of the winter wind and drew her cloak about her. "Nothing. Not yet. *I* am mistress of the Labyrinth. This is no business of the Godking's. I'll tell her after the thief is dead, perhaps. How must I kill him? I should make Kossil come and watch him die. She's fond of death. What is it he was seeking? He must be mad. How did he get in? I have the only key to the red-rock door and the trapdoor, now. He must have come by the red-rock door. Only a sorcerer could open it. A sorcerer—"

She halted, though the wind almost buffeted her off her feet.

"He is a sorcerer, a wizard of the Inner Lands, seeking the amulet of Erreth-Akbe."

And there was such an outrageous glamor in this, that she grew warm all over even in that icy wind and laughed out loud. All around her the Place, and the desert around it, was black and silent; the wind keened; there were no lights down in the Big House. Thin, invisible snow flicked past on the wind.

"If he opened the red-rock door with sorcery, he can open others. He can escape."

THIS thought chilled her for a moment, but it did not convince her. The Nameless Ones had let him enter. Why not? He could not do any harm. What harm is a thief who can't leave the scene of his theft? Spells and black powers he must have, and strong ones no

doubt, since he had got this far: but he would not get farther. No spell cast by mortal man could be stronger than the will of the Nameless Ones, the presences in the Tombs, the Kings whose throne was empty.

To reassure herself of this, she hastened on down to the Small House. Manan was asleep on the porch, rolled up in his cloak and the ratty fur blanket that was his winter bed. She entered quietly, not to waken him, and without lighting any lamp. She opened a little locked room, a mere closet at the end of the hall. She struck a flint spark long enough to find a certain place on the floor, and kneeling, pried up one tile. A bit of heavy, dirty cloth, only a few inches square, was revealed to her touch. This she slipped aside noiselessly. She started back, for a ray of light shot upward, straight into her face.

After a moment, very cautiously, she looked into the opening. She had forgotten that he carried that queer light on his staff. She had been expecting at most to hear him, down there in the dark. She had forgotten the light, but he was where she had expected him to be: right beneath the spyhole, at the iron door that blocked his escape from the Labyrinth.

He was standing there, one hand on his hip, the other holding out at an angle the wooden staff, as tall as he was, to the tip of which clung the soft will-of-the-wisp. His head, which she looked down upon from some six feet above, was cocked a bit to the side. His clothes were those of any winter traveler or pilgrim: a short heavy cloak, a leather tunic, leggings of wool, laced sandals; there was a light pack on his back, a water bottle slung from it, a knife sheathed at his hip. He stood there still as a statue, easy and thoughtful.

Slowly he raised his staff from the ground and held the bright tip of it out towards the door, which Arha could not see from her spyhole. The light changed, growing smaller and brighter, an intense brilliance. He spoke aloud. The language he spoke was strange to Arha, but stranger to her than the words was the voice, deep and resonant.

The light on the staff brightened, flickered, dimmed. For a moment it died quite away, and she could not see him.

The pale violet marshlight reappeared, steady, and she saw him turn away from the door. His spell of opening had failed. The powers that held the lock fast on that door were stronger than any magic he possessed.

He looked about him, as if thinking Now what?

The tunnel or corridor in which he stood was about five feet wide. Its roof was from twelve to fifteen feet above the rough rock floor. The walls here were of dressed stone, laid without mortar but very carefully and closely, so that one could scarcely slip a knife-tip into the joints. They leaned inward increasingly as they rose, forming a vault.

There was nothing else.

He started forward. One stride took him out of Arha's range of vision. The light died away. She was about to replace the cloth and the tile, when again the soft shaft of light rose up out of the floor before her. He had come back to the door. Perhaps he had realized that if he once left it and entered the maze, he was not very likely to find it again.

He spoke, one word only, in a low voice. "*Emenn,*" he said, and then again, louder, "*Emenn!*" And the iron door rattled in its jambs, and low echoes rolled down the vaulted tunnel like thunder, and it seemed to Arha that the floor beneath her shook.

But the door stayed fast.

He laughed then, a short laugh, that of a man who thinks, "What a fool I've made of myself!" He looked around the walls once more and, as he glanced upward, Arha saw the smile lingering on his dark face. Then he sat down, unslung his pack, got out a piece of dry bread, and munched on it. He unstopped his leather bottle of water and shook it; it looked light in his hand, as if nearly empty. He replaced the stopper without drinking. He put the pack behind him for a pillow, pulled his cloak around him, and lay down. His staff was in his right hand. As he lay back, the little wisp or ball of light floated upward from the staff and hung dimly behind his head, a few feet off the ground. His left hand was on his breast, holding something that hung from a heavy chain around his neck. He lay there quite comfortable, legs crossed at the ankle; his gaze wandered across the spyhole and away; he sighed and closed his eyes. The light grew slowly dimmer. He slept.

The clenched hand on his breast relaxed and slipped aside, and the watcher above saw then what talisman he wore on the chain: a bit of rough metal, crescent-shaped, it seemed.

The faint glimmer of his sorcery died away. He lay in silence and the dark.

Arha replaced the cloth and reset the tile in its place, rose cautiously and slipped away to her room. There she lay long awake in the wind-loud darkness, seeing always before her the crystal radiance that had shimmered in the house of death, the soft unburning fire, the stones of the tunnel wall, the quiet face of the man asleep.

IV

NEXT day, when she had finished with her duties at the Twin Gods' temple, and with her teaching of the sacred dances to the novices, she slipped away to the Small House and, darkening the room, opened the spyhole and peered down it. There was no light. He was gone. She had not thought he would stay so long at the unavailing door, but it was the only place she knew to look. How was she to find him now that he had lost himself?

The tunnels of the Labyrinth, by Thar's account and her own experience, extended in all their windings, branchings, spirals, and dead ends, for more than twenty miles. The blind alley that lay farthest from the Tombs was not much more than a mile away in a straight line, probably. But down underground, nothing ran straight. All the tunnels curved, split, rejoined, branched, interlaced, looped, traced elaborate routes that ended where they began, for there was no beginning, and no end. One could go, and go, and go, and still get nowhere, for there was nowhere to get to. There was no center, no heart of the maze. And once the door was locked, there was no end to it. No direction was right.

He might have gone miles by now, and yet not be forty feet from the door where he had entered.

She went to the Hall of the Throne, and to the Twin Gods' temple, and to the cellar under the kitchens, and, choosing a moment when she was alone, looked through each of those spyholes down into the cold, thick dark. When night came, freezing and blazing with stars, she went to certain places on the Hill and raised up certain stones, cleared away the earth, peered down again, and saw the starless darkness underground.

He was there. He must be there. Yet he had escaped her. He would die of thirst before she found him. She would have to send Manan into the maze to find him, once she was sure he was dead. That was

unbearable to think of. As she knelt in the starlight on the bitter ground of the Hill, tears of rage rose in her eyes.

She went to the path that led back down the slope to the temple of the Godking. The columns with their carved capitals shone white with hoarfrost in the starlight, like pillars of bone. She knocked at the rear door, and Kossil let her in.

"What brings my mistress?" said the stout woman, cold and watchful.

"Priestess, there is a man within the Labyrinth."

Kossil was taken off guard; for once something had occurred that she did not expect. She stood and stared. Her eyes seemed to swell a little. It flitted across Arha's mind that Kossil looked very like a desert toad, and a wild laugh rose up in her, was repressed, and died away.

"A man? In the Labyrinth?"

"A man, a stranger." Then as Kossil continued to look at her with disbelief, she added, "I know a man by sight, though I have seen few."

Kossil disdained her irony. "How came a man there?"

"By witchcraft, I think. His skin is dark, perhaps he is from the Inner Lands. He came to rob the Tombs. I found him first in the Undertomb, beneath the very Stones. He ran to the entrance of the Labyrinth when he became aware of me, as if he knew where he went. I locked the iron door behind him. He made spells, but they did not open the door. In the morning he went on into the maze. I cannot find him now."

"Has he a light?"

"Yes."

"Water?"

"A little flask, not full."

"His candle will be burned down already." Kossil pondered. "Four or five days. Maybe six. Then you can send my wardens down to drag the body out. The blood should be fed to the Throne and the—"

"No," Arha said with sudden, shrill fierceness. "I wish to find him alive."

The priestess looked down at the girl from her heavy height. "Why?"

"To make—to make his dying longer. He has committed sacrilege

against the Nameless Ones. He has defiled the Undertomb with light. He came to rob the Tombs of their treasures. He must be punished with worse than lying down in a tunnel alone and dying."

"Yes," Kossil said, as if deliberating. "But how will you catch him, mistress? That is chancy. There is no chance about the other. Is there not a room full of bones, somewhere in the Labyrinth, bones of men who entered it and did not leave it? . . Let the Dark Ones punish him in their own way, in their own ways, the black ways of the Labyrinth. It is a cruel death, thirst."

"I KNOW," the girl said. She turned and went out into the night, pulling her hood up over her head against the hissing, icy wind. Did she not know?

It had been childish of her, and stupid, to come to Kossil. She would get no help there. Kossil herself knew nothing, all she knew was cold waiting and death at the end of it. She did not understand. She did not see that the man must be found. It must not be the same as with those others. She could not bear that again. Since there must be death, let it be swift, in daylight. Surely it would be more fitting that this thief, the first man in centuries brave enough to try to rob the Tombs, should die by sword's edge. He did not even have an immortal soul to be reborn. His ghost would go whining through the corridors. He could not be let die of thirst there alone in the dark.

Arha slept very little that night. The next day was filled with rites and duties. She spent the night going, silent and without lantern, from one spyhole to another in all the dark buildings of the Place, and on the windswept hill. She went to the Small House to bed at last, two or three hours before dawn, but still she could not rest. On the third day, late in the afternoon, she walked out alone onto the desert, toward the river that now lay low in the winter drouth, with ice among the reeds.

A memory had come to her that once, in the autumn, she had gone very far in the Labyrinth, past the Six-Cross, and all along one long curving corridor she had heard behind the stones the sound of running water. Might not a man athirst, if he came that way, stay there? There were spyholes even out here; she had to search for them, but Thar had shown her each one, months ago, and she refound them without much trouble. Her recall of place and shape was like that of a blind person: she seemed to feel her way to each hid-

den spot, rather than to look for it. At the second, the farthest of all from the Tombs, when she pulled up her hood to cut out light, and put her eye to the hole cut in a flat pan of rock, she saw below her the dim glimmer of the wizardly light.

He was there, half out of sight. The spyhole looked down at the very end of the blind alley. She could see only his back, and bent neck, and right arm. He sat near the corner of the walls, and was picking at the stones with his knife, a short dagger of steel with a jeweled grip. The blade of it was broken short. The broken point lay directly under the spyhole. He had snapped it trying to pry apart the stones, to get at the water he could hear running, clear and murmurous in that dead stillness under the earth, on the other side of the impenetrable wall.

His movements were listless. He was very different, after these three nights and days, from the figure that had stood lithe and calm before the iron door and laughed at his own defeat. He was still obstinate, but the power was gone out of him. He had no spell to stir those stones aside, but must use his useless knife. Even his sorcerer's light was wan and dim. As Arha watched, the light flickered; the man's head jerked and he dropped the dagger. Then doggedly he picked it up and tried to force the broken blade between the stones.

Lying among ice-bound reeds on the riverbank, unconscious of where she was or what she was doing, Arha put her mouth to the cold mouth of rock, and cupped her hands around to hold the sound in. "Wizard!" she said, and her voice slipping down the stone throat whispered coldly in the tunnel underground.

The man started and scrambled to his feet, so going out of the circle of her vision when she looked for him. She put her mouth to the spyhole again and said, "Go back along the riverwall to the second turn. The first turn right, miss one, then right again. At the Six Ways, right again. Then left, and right, and left, and right. Stay there in the painted room."

As she moved to look again, she must have let a shaft of daylight shoot through the spyhole into the tunnel for a moment, for when she looked he was back in the circle of her vision and staring upwards at the opening. His face, which she now saw to be scarred in some way, was strained and eager. The lips were parched and black, the eyes bright. He raised his staff, bringing the light closer and closer to her eyes. Frightened, she drew back, stopped the spyhole

with its rock lid and litter of covering stones, rose and went back swiftly to the Place. She found her hands were shaky, and sometimes a giddiness swept over her as she walked. She did not know what to do.

If he followed the directions she had given him, he would come back in the direction of the iron door, to the room of pictures. There was nothing there, no reason for him to go there. There was a spyhole in the ceiling of the painted room, a good one, in the treasury of the Twin Gods' temple; perhaps that was why she had thought of it. She did not know. Why had she spoken to him?

She could let a little water for him down one of the spyholes and then call him to that place. That would keep him alive longer. As long as she pleased, indeed. If she put down water and a little food now and then, he would go on and on, days, months, wandering in the Labyrinth; and she could watch him through the spyholes, and tell him where water was to be found, and sometimes tell him falsely so he would go in vain, but he would always have to go. That would teach him to mock the Nameless Ones, to swagger his foolish manhood in the burial places of the Immortal Dead!

But so long as he was there, she would never be able to enter the Labyrinth herself. Why not? she asked herself, but knew that she would not dare. She was afraid of his power, the arts he had used to enter the Undertomb, the sorcery that kept that light burning. And yet, was that so much to be feared? The powers that ruled in the dark places were on her side, not his. Plainly he could not do much, there in the realm of the Nameless Ones. He had not opened the iron door; he had not summoned magic food, nor brought water through the wall, nor conjured up some demon monster to break down the walls, all of which she had feared he might be able to do. He had not even found his way in three day's wandering to the door of the Great Treasury, which surely he had sought. Arha herself had never yet pursued Thar's directions to that room, putting off and putting off the journey out of a certain awe, a reluctance, a sense that the time had not yet come.

Now she thought, why should he not go that journey for her? He could look all he liked at the treasures of the Tombs. Much good they would do him! She could jeer at him, and tell him to eat the gold and drink the diamonds.

With the nervous, feverish hastiness that had possessed her all

these three days, she ran now to the Twin Gods' temple, unlocked its little vaulted treasury, and uncovered the well hidden spyhole in the floor.

The painted room was below, but pitch dark. The way the man must follow in the maze was much more roundabout, miles longer perhaps; she had forgotten that. And no doubt he was weakened, and not going fast. Perhaps he would forget her directions, and take the wrong turning. Few people could remember directions from one hearing of them, as she could. Perhaps he did not even understand the tongue she spoke. If so, let him wander till he fell down and died in the dark, the fool, the foreigner, the unbeliever. Let his ghost whine down the stone roads of the Tombs of Atuan until the darkness ate even it . . .

NEXT morning, after a night of little sleep and evil dreams, she returned to the spyhole in the little temple. She looked down and saw nothing: blackness. She lowered a candle burning in a little tin lantern on a chain. He was there, in the painted room. She saw, past the candle's glare, his legs and one limp hand. She spoke into the spyhole, which was a large one, the size of a whole floor tile: "Wizard!"

No movement. Was he dead? Was that all the strength he had in him? She sneered; her heart pounded. "Wizard!" she cried, her voice ringing in the hollow room beneath. He stirred, and slowly sat up, and looked around bewildered. After a while he looked up, blinking at the tiny lantern that swung from his ceiling. His face was terrible to see, swollen, dark as a mummy's face.

He put his hand out to his staff that lay on the floor beside him, but no light flowered on the wood. There was no power left in him.

"Do you want to see the treasures of the Tombs of Atuan, wizard?"

He looked up wearily, squinting at the light of her lantern, which was all he could see. After a while, with a wince that might have begun as a smile, he nodded once.

"Go out of this room to the left. Take the first corridor to the left . . ." She rattled off the long series of directions without pause, and at the end said, "There you will find the treasure which you came for. And there, maybe, you'll find water. Which would you rather have now, wizard?"

He got to his feet, leaning on his staff. Looking up with eyes that

could not see her, he tried to say something, but there was no voice in his dry throat. He shrugged a little, and left the painted room.

She would not give him any water. He would never find the way to the treasure room, anyway. The instructions were too long for him to remember; and there was the Pit, if he got that far. He was in the dark, now. He would lose his way, and would fall down at last and die somewhere in the narrow, hollow, dry halls. And Manan would find him and drag him out. And that was the end. Arha clutched the lip of the spyhole with her hands, and rocked her crouching body back and forth, back and forth, biting her lip as if to bear some dreadful pain. She would not give him any water. She would not give him any water. She would give him death, death, death, death, death.

IN THAT gray hour of her life, Kossil came to her, entering the treasury room with heavy step, bulky in black winter robes.

"Is the man dead yet?"

Arha raised her head. There were no tears in her eyes, nothing to hide.

"I think so," she said, getting up and dusting her skirts. "His light has gone out."

"He may be tricking. The soulless ones are very cunning."

"I shall wait a day to be sure."

"Yes, or two days. Then Duby can go down and bring it out. He is stronger than old Manan."

"But Manan is in the service of the Nameless Ones, and Duby is not. There are places within the Labyrinth where Duby should not go, and the thief is in one of these."

"Why, then it is defiled already—"

"It will be made clean by his death there," Arha said. She could see by Kossil's expression that there must be something strange about her own face. "This is my domain, priestess. I must care for it as my Masters bid me. I do not need more lessons in death."

Kossil's face seemed to withdraw into the black hood, like a desert tortoise's into its shell, sour and slow and cold. "Very well, mistress."

They parted before the altar of the God-Brothers. Arha went, without haste now, to the Small House, and called Manan to accompany her. Since she had spoken to Kossil she knew what must be done.

She and Manan went together up the hill, into the Hall, down into

the Undertomb. Straining together at the long handle, they opened the iron door of the Labyrinth. They lit their lanterns there, and entered. Arha led the way to the painted room, and from it started on the way to the Great Treasury.

The thief had not got very far. She and Manan had not walked five hundred paces on their tortuous course when they came upon him, crumpled up in the narrow corridor like a heap of rags thrown down. He had dropped his staff before he fell; it lay some distance from him. His mouth was bloody, his eyes half shut.

"He's alive," said Manan, kneeling, his great yellow hand on the dark throat, feeling the pulse. "Shall I strangle him, mistress?"

"No. I want him alive. Pick him up and bring him after me."

"Alive?" said Manan, disturbed. "What for, little mistress?"

"To be a slave of the Tombs! Be still with your talk and do as I say."

His face more melancholy than ever, Manon obeyed, hoisting the young man effortfully up onto his shoulders like a long sack, and staggering along after Arha thus laden. He could not go far at a time under that load. They stopped a dozen times on the return journey for Manan to catch his breath. At each halt the corridor was the same: the grayish-yellow, close-set stones rising to a vault, the uneven rocky floor, the dead air; Manan groaning and panting, the stranger lying still, the two lanterns burning dull in a dome of light that narrowed away into darkness down the corridor in both directions. At each halt Arha dripped some of the water she had brought in a flask into the dry mouth of the man, a little at a time, lest life returning kill him.

"To the Room of Chains?" Manan asked, as they were in the passage that led to the iron door; and at that, Arha thought for the first time where she must take this prisoner. She did not know.

"Not there, no," she said, sickened as ever by the memory of the smoke and reek and the matted, speechless, unseeing faces. And Kossil might come to the Room of Chains. "He . . . he must stay in the Labyrinth, so that he cannot regain his sorcery. Where is there a room . . ."

"The painted room has a door, and a lock, and a spyhole, mistress. If you trust him with doors."

"He has no powers, down here. Take him there, Manan."

So Manan lugged him back, half again as far as they had come,

too laboring and breathless to protest. When they entered the room of paintings at last, Arha took off her long heavy winter cloak of wool, and laid it on the dusty floor. "Put him on that," she said.

Menan stared in melancholy consternation, wheezing. "Little mistress—"

"I want the man to live, Manan. He'll die of the cold, look how he shakes now."

"Your garment will be defiled. The Priestess' garment. He is an unbeliever, a man," Manan blurted, his small eyes wrinkling up as if in pain.

"Then I shall burn the cloak and have another woven! Come on, Manan!"

At that he stooped, obedient, and let the prisoner flop off his back onto the black cloak. The man lay still as death, but the pulse beat heavy in his throat, and now and then a spasm made his body shiver as it lay.

"He should be chained," said Manan.

"Does he look dangerous?" Arha scoffed; but when Manan pointed out an iron hasp set into the stones, to which the prisoner could be fastened, she let him go fetch a chain and band from the Room of Chains. He shuffled off down the corridors, muttering the directions to himself; he had been to and from the painted room before this, but never by himself.

In the light of her single lantern the paintings on the four walls seemed to move, to twitch, the uncouth human forms with great drooping wings, squatting and standing in a timeless dreariness.

SHE knelt and let water drop, a little at a time, into the prisoner's mouth. At last he coughed, and his hands reached up feebly to the flask. She let him drink. He lay back with his face all wet, besmeared with dust and blood, and muttered something, a word or two in a language she did not know.

Manan returned at last, dragging a length of iron links, a great padlock with its key, and an iron band which fitted around the man's waist and locked there. "It's not tight enough, he can slip out," he grumbled as he locked the end link onto the ring set in the wall.

"No, look." Feeling less fearful of her prisoner now, Arha showed that she could not force her hand between the iron band and the man's ribs. "Not unless he starves longer than four days."

"Little mistress," Manan said plaintively, "I do not question, but . . . what good is he as a slave to the Nameless Ones? He is a man, little one."

"And you are an old fool, Manan. Come along now, finish your fussing."

The prisoner watched them with bright, weary eyes.

"Where's his staff, Manan? There. I'll take that; it has magic in it. Oh, and this: this I'll take too." With a quick movement she seized the chain that showed at the neck of the man's tunic and tore it off over his head, though he tried to catch her arms and stop her. Manan kicked him in the back. She swung the chain over him, out of his reach. "Is this your talisman, wizard? Is it precious to you? It doesn't look like much, couldn't you afford a better one? I shall keep it safe for you."

"You don't know what to do with it," he said, very hoarse, and mispronouncing the words of the Kargish tongue, but clearly enough.

Manan kicked him again, and at that he made a little grunt of pain and shut his eyes.

"Leave off, Manan. Come."

She left the room. Grumbling, Manan followed.

That night, when all the lights of the Place were out, she climbed the hill again, alone. She filled her flask from the well in the room behind the Throne, and took the water and a big, flat, unleavened cake of buckwheat bread down to the painted room in the Labyrinth. She set them just within the prisoner's reach, inside the door. He was asleep, and never stirred. She returned to the Small House, and that night she, too, slept long and sound.

In early afternoon she returned alone to the Labyrinth. The bread was gone, the flask was dry, the stranger was sitting up, his back against the wall. His face still looked hideous with dirt and scabs, but the expression of it was alert.

She stood across the room from him where he could not possibly reach her, chained as he was, and looked at him. Then she looked away. But there was nowhere particular to look. Something prevented her speaking. Her heart beat as if she were afraid. There was no reason to fear him. He was at her mercy.

"It's pleasant to have light," he said in the soft but deep voice which perturbed her.

"What's your name?" she asked pre-emptorily. Her own voice, she thought, sounded uncommonly high and thin.

"Well, mostly I'm called Sparrowhawk."

"Sparrowhawk? Is that your name?"

"No."

"What is your name, then?"

"I cannot tell you that. Are you the One Priestess of the Tombs?"

"Yes."

"What are you called?"

"I am called Arha."

"The one who has been devoured—is that what it means?" His dark eyes watched her intently. He smiled a little. "What is your name?"

"I have no name. Do not ask me questions. Where do you come from?"

"From the Inner Lands, the west."

"From Havnor?"

It was the only name of a city or island of the Inner Lands that she knew.

"Yes, from Havnor."

"Why did you come here?"

"The Tombs of Atuan are famous among my people."

"But you're an infidel, an unbeliever."

He shook his head. "Oh no, priestess. I believe in the powers of darkness! I have met with the Unnamed Ones, in other places."

"What other places?"

"In the Archipelago—the Inner Lands—there are places which belong to the Old Powers of the Earth, like this one. But none so great as this one. Nowhere else have they a temple, and a priestess, and such worship as they receive here."

"You came to worship them," she said, jeering.

"I came to rob them," he said.

She stared at his grave face. "Braggart!"

"I knew it would not be easy."

"Easy! It cannot be done. If you weren't an unbeliever you'd know that. The Nameless Ones look after what is theirs."

"What I seek is not theirs."

"It's yours, no doubt?"

"Mine to claim."

"What are you then—a god? A king?" She looked him up and down, as he sat chained, dirty, exhausted. "You are nothing but a thief!"

He said nothing, but his gaze met hers.

"You are not to look at me!" she said shrilly.

"My lady," he said, "I do not mean offense. I am a stranger and a trespasser. I do not know your ways, nor the courtesies due the Priestess of the Tombs. I am at your mercy, and I ask your pardon if I offend you."

She stood silent, and in a moment she felt the blood rising to her cheeks, hot and foolish. But he was not looking at her and did not see her blush. He had obeyed, and turned away his dark gaze.

NEITHER spoke for some while. The painted figures all around watched them with sad, blind eyes.

She had brought a stone jug of water. His eyes kept straying to that, and after a time she said, "Drink if you like."

He hitched himself over to the jug at once and, hefting it as lightly as if it were a wine cup, drank a long, long draft. Then he wet a corner of his sleeve, and cleaned the grime and bloodclot and cobweb off his face and hands as best he could. He spent some while at this, and the girl watched. When he was done he looked better, but his cat-bath had revealed the scars on one side of his face: old scars long healed, whitish on his dark skin, four parallel ridges from eye to hairline, as if from the scraping talons of a huge claw.

"What is that?" she said. "That scar."

He did not answer at once.

"A dragon?" she said, trying to scoff. Had she not come down here to make mock of her victim, to play cat and mouse with him?

"No, not a dragon."

"You're not a dragonlord, at least, then."

"No," he said rather reluctantly, "I *am* a dragonlord. But the scars were before that. I told you that I had met with the Dark Powers before, in other places of the earth. This on my face is the mark of one of the kinship of the Nameless Ones. But no longer nameless, for I learned his name, in the end."

"What do you mean? What name?"

"I cannot tell you that," he said, and smiled, though his face was grave.

"That's nonsense, fool's babble, sacrilege. They are the Nameless Ones! You don't know what you're talking about—"

"I know even better than you, priestess," he said, his voice deepening. "Look again!" He turned his head so she must see the four terrible marks across his cheek and temple.

"I don't believe you," she said, and her voice shook.

"Priestess," he said gently, "you are not very old; you can't have served the Dark Ones very long."

"But I have. Very long! I am the First Priestess, the Reborn. I have served my masters for a thousand years and a thousand years before that. I am their servant and their voice and their hands. And I am their vengeance on those who defile the Tombs, and look upon what is not to be seen! Stop your lying and your boasting, can't you see that if I say one word my guard will come and cut your head off your shoulders? Or if I go away and lock this door, then nobody will come, never, and you'll die here in the dark, and those I serve will eat your flesh and eat your soul and leave your bones here in the dust?"

Quietly, he nodded.

She stammered, and finding no more to say, swept out of the room and bolted the door behind her with a clang. Let him think she wasn't coming back! Let him sweat, there in the dark, let him curse and shiver and try to work his foul, useless spells!

But in her mind's eye she saw him stretching out to sleep, as she had seen him do by the iron door, serene as a sheep in a sunny meadow.

She spat at the bolted door, and made the sign to avert defilement, and went almost at a run towards the Undertomb.

While she skirted its wall on the way to the trapdoor in the Hall, her fingers brushed along the fine planes and traceries of rock, like frozen lace. A longing swept over her to light her lantern, to see once more, just for a moment, the time-carven stone, the lovely glitter of the walls. She shut her eyes tight and hurried on.

V

NEVER had the rites and duties of the day seemed so many, or so petty, or so long. The little girls with their pale faces and furtive ways, the restless novices, the priestesses whose looks were stern and

cool but whose lives were all a secret brangle of jealousies and miseries and small ambitions and wasted passions—all these women, among whom she had always lived and who made up the human world to her, now appeared to her as both pitiable and boring.

But she who served great powers, she the priestess of grim Night, was free of that pettiness. She did not have to care about the grinding meanness of their common life, the days whose one delight was likely to be getting a bigger slop of lambfat over your lentils than your neighbor got . . . She was free of the days altogether. Underground, there were no days. There was always and only night.

And in that unending night, the prisoner: the dark man, practicer of dark arts, bound in iron and locked in stone, waiting for her to come or not to come, to bring him water and bread and life, or a knife and a butcher's bowl and death, just as the whim took her.

She had told no one but Kossil about the man, and Kossil had not told anyone else. He had been in the painted room three nights and days now, and still she had not asked Arha about him. Perhaps she assumed that he was dead, and that Arha had had Manan take the body to the Room of Bones. It was not like Kossil to take anything for granted; but Arha told herself that there was nothing strange about Kossil's silence. Kossil wanted everything kept secret, and hated to have to ask questions. And besides, Arha had told her not to meddle in her business. Kossil was simply obeying.

However, if the man was supposed to be dead, Arha could not ask for food for him. So, aside from stealing some apples and dried onions from the cellars of the Big House, she did without food. She had her morning and evening meals sent to the Small House pretending she wished to eat alone, and each night took the food down to the painted room in the Labyrinth, all but the soups. She was used to fasting for a day on up to four days at a time, and thought nothing about it. The fellow in the Labyrinth ate up her meager portions of bread and cheese and beans as a toad eats a fly, snap! it's gone. Clearly he could have done so five or six times over; but he thanked her soberly, as if he were her guest and she his hostess at a table such as she had heard of in tales of feasts at the palace of the Godking, all set with roast meats and buttered loaves and wine in crystal. He was very strange.

"What is it like in the Inner Lands?"

She had brought down a little cross-leg folding stool of ivory, so

that she would not have to stand while she questioned him, yet would not have to sit down on the floor, on his level.

"Well, there are many islands. Four times forty, they say, in the Archipelago alone, and then there are the Reaches; no man has ever sailed all the Reaches, nor counted all the lands. And each is different from the others. But the fairest of them all, maybe, is Havnor, the great land at the center of the world. In the heart of Havnor on a broad bay full of ships is the City Havnor. The towers of the city are built of white marble. The house of every prince and merchant has a tower, so they rise up one above the other. The roofs of the houses are red tile, and all the bridges over the canals are covered in mosaic-work, red and blue and green. And the flags of the princes are all colors, flying from the white towers. On the highest of all the towers the Sword of Erreth-Akbe is set, like a pinnacle, skyward. When the sun rises on Havnor it flashes first on that blade and makes it bright, and when it sets the Sword is golden still above the evening, for a while."

"Who was Erreth-Akbe?" she said, sly.

He looked up at her. He said nothing, but he grinned a little. Then as if on second thought he said, "It's true you would know little of him here. Nothing beyond his coming to the Kargish lands, perhaps. And how much of that tale do you know?"

"That he lost his sorcerer's staff and his amulet and his power—like you," she answered. "He escaped from the High Priest and fled into the west, and dragons killed him. But if he'd come here to the Tombs, there had been no need of dragons."

"True enough," said her prisoner.

She wanted no more talk of Erreth-Akbe, sensing a danger in the subject. "He was a dragonlord, they say. And you say you're one. Tell me, what is a dragonlord?"

Her tone was always jeering, his answers direct and plain, as if he took her questions in good faith.

"One whom the dragons will speak with," he said, "that is a dragonlord, or at least that is the center of the matter. It's not a trick of mastering the dragons, as most people think. Dragons have no masters. The question is always the same, with a dragon: will he talk with you or will he eat you? If you can count upon his doing the former, and not doing the latter, why then you're a dragonlord."

"Dragons can speak?"

"Surely! In the Eldest Tongue, the language we men learn so hard and use so brokenly, to make our spells of magic and of patterning. No man knows all that language, or a tenth of it. He has not time to learn it. But dragons live a thousand years . . . They are worth talking to, as you might guess."

"Are there dragons here in Atuan?"

"Not for many centuries, I think, nor in Karego-At. But in your northernmost island, Hur-at-Hur, they say there are still large dragons in the mountains. In the Inner Lands they all keep now to the farthest west, the remote West Reach, islands where no men live and few men come. If they grow hungry, they raid the lands to their east; but that is seldom. I have seen the island where they come to dance together. They fly on their great wings in spirals, in and out, higher and higher over the western sea, like a storming of yellow leaves in autumn." Full of the vision, his eyes gazed through the black paintings on the walls, through the walls and the earth and the darkness, seeing the open sea stretch unbroken to the sunset, the golden dragons on the golden wind.

"YOU are lying," the girl said fiercely, "you are making it up."

He looked at her, startled. "Why should I lie, Arha?"

"To make me feel like a fool, and stupid, and afraid. To make yourself seem wise, and brave, and powerful, and a dragonlord and all this and all that. You've seen dragons dancing, and the towers in Havnor, and you know all about everything. And I know nothing at all and haven't been anywhere. But all you know is lies! You are nothing but a thief and a prisoner, and you have no soul, and you'll never leave this place again. It doesn't matter if there's oceans and dragons and white towers and all that, because you'll never see them again, you'll never even see the light of the sun. All I know is the dark, the night underground. And that's all there really is. That's all there is to know, in the end. The silence, and the dark. You know everything, wizard. But I know one thing—the one true thing!"

He bowed his head. His long hands, copper-brown, were quiet on his knees. She saw the fourfold scar on his cheek. He had gone farther than she into the dark; he knew death better than she did, even death . . . A rush of hatred for him rose up in her, choking her throat for an instant. Why did he sit there so defenseless and so strong? Why could she not defeat him?

"This is why I have let you live," she said suddenly, without the least forethought. "I want you to show me how the tricks of sorcerers are performed. So long as you have some art to show me, you'll stay alive. If you have none, if it's all foolery and lies, why then I'll have done with you. Do you understand?"

"Yes."

"Very well. Go on."

He put his head in his hands a minute, and shifted his position. The iron belt kept him from ever getting quite comfortable, unless he lay down flat.

He raised his face at last and spoke very seriously. "Listen, Arha. I am a mage; what you call a sorcerer. I have certain arts and powers. That's true. It's also true that here in the Place of the Old Powers, my strength is very little and my crafts don't avail me. Now I could work illusion for you, and show you all kinds of wonders. That's the least part of wizardry. I could work illusions when I was a child, I can do them even here. But if you believe them, they'll frighten you, and you may wish to kill me if fear makes you angry. And if you disbelieve them, you'll see them as only lies and foolery, as you say; and so I forfeit my life again. And my purpose and desire, at the moment, is to stay alive."

That made her laugh, and she said, "Oh, you'll stay alive a while, can't you see that? You are stupid! All right, show me these illusions. I know them to be false and won't be afraid of them. I wouldn't be afraid if they were real, as a matter of fact. But go ahead. Your precious skin is safe, for tonight, anyhow."

At that he laughed, as she had a moment ago. They tossed his life back and forth between them like a ball, playing.

"What do you wish me to show you?"

"What can you show me?"

"Anything."

"How you brag and brag!"

"No," he said, evidently a little stung. "I do not. I didn't mean to, anyway."

"Show me something you think worth seeing. Anything!"

He bent his head and looked at his hands a while. Nothing happened. The tallow candle in her lantern burned dim and steady. The black pictures on the walls, the bird-winged, flightless figures with eyes painted dull red and white, loomed over him and over her.

The Labyrinth of the Tombs of Acuar

There was no sound. She sighed, disappointed and somehow grieved. He was weak; he talked great things, but did nothing. He was nothing but a good liar, and not even a good thief. "Well," she said at last, and gathered her skirts together to rise. The wool rustled strangely as she moved. She looked down at herself, and stood up in startlement.

The heavy black she had worn for years was gone: her dress was of turquoise-colored silk, bright and soft as the evening sky. It belled out full from her hips, and all the skirt was embroidered with thin silver threads and seed pearls and tiny crumbs of crystal, so that it glittered softly, like rain in April.

She looked at the magician, speechless.

"Do you like it?"

"Where—"

"It's like a gown I saw a princess wear, once at the Feast of Sunreturn in the New Palace in Havnor," he said, looking at it with satisfaction. "You told me to show you something worth seeing. I show you yourself."

"Make it—make it go away."

"You gave me your cloak," he said as if in reproach. "Can I give you nothing? Well, don't worry. It's only illusion: see."

He seemed not to raise a finger , certainly he said no word; but the blue splendor of silk was gone, and she stood in her own harsh black.

She stood still a while.

"How do I know," she said, "that you are what you seem to be?"

"You don't," said he. "I don't know what I seem, to you."

She brooded again. "You could trick me into seeing you as—" She broke off, for he had raised his hand and pointed upward, the briefest sketch of a gesture. She thought he was casting a spell, and drew back quickly towards the door; but following his gesture, her eyes found high in the dark arching roof the small square that was the spyhole from the treasury of the Twin Gods' temple.

There was no light from the spyhole; she could see nothing, hear no one overhead there; but he had pointed, and his questioning gaze was on her.

Both held perfectly still for some time.

"Your magic is mere folly for the eyes of children," she said clearly. "It is trickery and lies. I have seen enough. You will be fed to the Nameless Ones. I shall not come again."

She took her lantern and went out, and sent the iron bolts home firm and loud. Then she stopped there outside the door and stood dismayed. What must she do?

How much had Kossil seen, or heard? What had they been saying? She could not remember. She never seemed to say what she had intended to say to the prisoner. He always confused her with his talk about dragons, and towers, and giving names to the Nameless, and wanting to stay alive, and being grateful for her cloak to lie on. He never said what he was supposed to say. She had not even asked him about the talisman.

That was just as well, since Kossil had been listening.

WELL, what did it matter, what harm could Kossil do? Even as she asked herself the question she knew the answer. Nothing is easier to kill than a caged hawk. The man was helpless, chained there in the cage of stone. The Priestess of the Godking had only to send her servant Duby to throttle him tonight; or if she and Duby did not know the Labyrinth this far, all she need do was blow poison-dust down the spyhole into the painted room. She had boxes and phials of evil substances, some to poison food or water, some that drugged the air, and killed, if one breathed that air too long. And he would be dead in the morning, and it would all be over. There would never be a light beneath the Tombs again.

Arha hastened through the narrow ways of stone to the entrance from the Undertomb, where Manan waited for her, squatting patient in the dark. He was uneasy about her visits to the prisoner. She would not let him come with her all the way, so they had settled on the compromise. Now she was glad that he was there to hand. Him, at least, she could trust.

"Manan, listen. You are to go to the painted room, right now. Say to the man that you're taking him to be buried alive beneath the Tombs." Manan's little eyes lit up. "Say that aloud. Unlock the chain, and take him to—" She halted, for she had not yet decided where she could best hide the prisoner.

"To the Undertomb," said Manan, eagerly.

"No, fool. I said to say that, not to do it. Wait—"

What place was safe from Kossil and Kossil's spies? None but the deepest places underground, the holiest and most hidden places of the domain of the Nameless, where she dared not come. Yet would

Kossil not dare almost anything? Afraid of the dark places she might be, but she was one who would subdue her fear to gain her ends. There was no telling how much of the plan of the Labyrinth she might actually have learned, from Thar, or from the Arha of the previous life, or even from secret explorations of her own in past years; Arha suspected her of knowing more than she pretended to know. But there was one way she surely could not have learned, the best-kept secret.

"You must bring the man where I lead you, and you must do it in the dark. Then when I bring you back here, you will dig a grave in the Undertomb, and make a coffin for it, and put it in the grave empty, and fill in the earth again, yet so that it can be felt and found if someone sought for it. A deep grave. Do you understand?"

"No," said Manan, dour and fretful. "Little one, this trickery is not wise. It is not good. There should not be a man here! There will come a punishment—"

"An old fool will have his tongue cut out, yes! Do you dare tell me what is wise? I follow the orders of the Dark Powers. Follow me!"

"I'm sorry, little mistress, I'm sorry . . ."

They returned to the painted room. There she waited outside in the tunnel, while Manan entered and unlocked the chain from the hasp in the wall. She heard the deep voice ask, "Where now, Manan?" and the husky alto answer, sullenly, "You are to be buried alive, my mistress says. Under the Tombstones. Get up!" She heard the heavy chain crack like a whip.

The prisoner came out, his arms bound with Manan's leather belt. Manan came behind, holding him like a dog on a short leash, but the collar was around his waist and the leash was iron. His eyes turned to her, but she blew out her candle and without a word set off into the dark. She fell at once into the slow but fairly steady pace that she was used to keeping when she was not carrying a light in the Labyrinth, brushing her fingertips very lightly but almost constantly along the walls on either side. Manan and the prisoner followed behind, much more awkward because of the leash, shuffling and stumbling along. But in the dark they must go; for she did not want either of them to learn this way.

A left turn from the painted room, and pass two openings; go straight on at the Four Ways, and pass the opening to the right; then a long curving way, and a flight of steps down, long, slippery, and

much too narrow for normal human feet. Farther than these steps she had never gone.

The air was fouler here, very still, with a sharp odor to it. The directions were clear in her mind, even the tones of Thar's voice speaking them. Down the steps (behind her, the prisoner stumbled in the pitch blackness, and she heard him gasp as Manan kept him afoot with a mighty jerk on the chain) and at the foot of the steps turn at once to the left. Hold the left then for three openings, then the first right, then hold to the right. The tunnels curved and angled, none ran straight. "Then you must skirt the Pit," said Thar's voice in the darkness of her mind, "and the way is very narrow."

She slowed her step, stooped over, and felt before her with one hand along the floor. The corridor now ran straight for a long way, giving false reassurance to the wanderer. All at once her groping hand, which never ceased to touch and sweep the rock before her, felt nothing. There was a stone lip, an edge: beyond the edge, void. To the right the wall of the corridor plunged down sheer into the pit. To the left there was a ledge or curb, not much more than a hand's-breadth wide.

"There is a pit. Face the wall to the left, press against it, and go sideways. Slide your feet. Keep hold of the chain, Manan . . . Are you on the ledge? It grows narrower. Don't put your weight on your heels. So, I'm past the pit. Reach me your hand. There . . ."

The tunnel ran in short zigzags with many side-openings. From some of these as they passed the sound of their footsteps echoed in a strange way, hollowly; and stranger than that, a very faint draft could be felt, sucking inward. Those corridors must end in pits like the one they had passed. Perhaps there lay, under this low part of the Labyrinth, a hollow place, a cavern so deep and so vast that the cavern of the Undertomb would be little in comparison, a huge black inward emptiness.

Above that great Pit, the corridors grew slowly narrower and lower, until even Arha must stoop. Was there no end to this way?

The end came suddenly: a shut door. Going bent over, and a little faster than usual, Arha ran up against it, jarring her head and hands. She felt for the keyhole, then for the small key on her belt-ring, never used, the silver key with the haft shaped like a dragon. It fit, it turned. She opened the door of the Great Treasure of the Tombs of Atuan. Dry, sour, stale air sighed outward through the dark.

"Manan, you may not enter here. Wait outside the door."

"He, but not I?"

"If you enter this room, Manan, you will not leave it. That is the law for all but me. No mortal being but I has ever left this room alive. Will you go in?"

"I will wait outside," said the melancholy voice in the blackness. "Mistress, mistress, don't shut the door—"

HIS alarm so unnerved her that she left the door ajar. Indeed the place filled her with a dull dread, and she felt some mistrust of the prisoner, pinioned though he was. Once inside, she struck her light. Her hands trembled. The lantern-candle caught reluctantly; the air was close and dead. In the yellowish flicker that seemed bright after the long passages of night, the treasure room loomed about them, full of moving shadows.

There were six great chests, all of stone, all thick with a fine gray dust like the mold on bread: nothing else. The walls were rough, the roof low. The place was cold, with a deep and airless cold that seemed to stop the blood in the heart. There were no cobwebs, only the dust. Nothing lived here, nothing at all, not even the rare, small, white spiders of the Labyrinth. The dust was thick, thick, and every grain of it might be a day that had passed here where there was no time or light: days, months, years, ages all gone to dust.

"This is the place you sought," Arha said, and her voice was steady. "This is the Great Treasure of the Tombs. You have come to it. You cannot ever leave it."

He said nothing, and his face was quiet, but there was in his eyes something that moved her: a desolation, the look of one betrayed.

"You said you wanted to stay alive. This is the only place I know where you can stay alive. Kossil will kill you or make me kill you, Sparrowhawk. But here she cannot reach."

Still he said nothing.

"You could never have left the Tombs in any case, don't you see? This is no different. And at least you've come to the end of your journey. What you sought is here."

He sat down on one of the great chests, looking spent. The trailing chain clanked harshly on the stone. He looked around at the gray walls and the shadows, then at her.

She looked away from him, at the stone chests. She had no wish at

all to open them. And she did not care what marvels rotted in them.

"You don't have to wear that chain, in here." She came to him and unlocked the iron belt, and unbuckled Manan's leather belt from his arms. "I must lock the door, but when I come I will trust you. You know that you *cannot* leave—that you must not try? I am their vengeance, I do their will; but if I fail them—if you fail my trust—then they will avenge themselves. You must not try to leave the room, by hurting me or tricking me when I come. You must believe me."

"I will do as you say," he said gently.

"I'll bring food and water when I can. There won't be much. Water enough, but not much food for a while; I'm getting hungry, do you see. But enough to stay alive on. I may not be able to come back for a day or two days, perhaps even longer. I must get Kossil off the track. But I will come. I promise. Here's the flask. Hoard it, I can't come back soon. But I will come back."

He raised his face to her. His expression was strange. "Take care, Tenar," he said.

VI

SHE brought Manan back through the winding ways in the dark, and left him in the dark of the Undertomb, to dig the grave that must be there as proof to Kossil that the thief had indeed been punished. It was late, and she went straight to the Small House to bed. In the night she woke suddenly: she remembered that she had left her cloak in the painted room. He would have nothing for warmth in that dank vault but his own short cloak, no bed but the dusty stone. A cold grave, a cold grave, she thought miserably, but she was too weary to wake up fully, and soon slipped back into sleep. She began to dream.

She dreamt of the souls of the dead on the walls of the painted room, the figures like great bedraggled birds with human hands and feet and faces, squatting in the dust of the dark places. They could not fly. Clay was their food and dust their drink. They were the souls of those not reborn, the ancient peoples and the unbelievers, those whom the Nameless Ones devoured. They squatted all around her in the shadows, and a faint creaking or cheeping sound came from them now and then. One of them came up quite close to her. She was

afraid at first and tried to draw away, but could not move. This one had the face of a bird, not a human face; but its hair was golden, and it said in a woman's voice, "Tenar," tenderly, softly, "Tenar."

She woke. Her mouth was stopped with clay. She lay in a stone tomb, underground. Her arms and legs were bound with grave clothes and she could not move or speak.

Her despair grew so great that it burst her breast open and like a bird of fire shattered the stone and broke out into the light of day—the light of day, faint in her windowless room.

Really awake this time, she sat up, worn out by that night's dreaming, her mind befogged. She got into her clothes, and went out to the cistern in the walled courtyard of the Small House. She plunged her arms and face, her whole head, into the icy water until her body jumped with cold and her blood raced. Then flinging back her dripping hair she stood erect and looked up into the morning sky.

It was not long past sunrise, a fair winter's day. The sky was yellowish, very clear. High up, so high he caught the sunlight and burned like a fleck of gold, a bird was circling, a hawk or desert eagle.

"I am Tenar," she said, not aloud, and she shook with cold, and terror, and exultation, there under the open, sunwashed sky. "I have my name back. I am Tenar!"

The golden fleck veered westward toward the mountains, out of sight. Sunrise gilded the eaves of the Small House. Sheepbells clanked, down in the folds. The smells of woodsmoke and buckwheat porridge from the kitchen chimneys drifted on the fine, fresh wind.

"I am so hungry . . . How did he know? How did he know my name? . . . Oh, I've got to go eat, I'm so hungry . . ."

She pulled up her hood and ran off to breakfast.

FOOD, after three days of semi-fasting, made her feel solid, gave her ballast; she didn't feel so wild and lighthearted and frightened. She felt quite capable of handling Kossil, after breakfast.

She came up beside the tall, stout figure on the way out of the dining hall of the Big House, and said in a low voice, "I have done away with the robber . . . What a fine day it is!"

The cold gray eyes looked sidelong at her from the black hood.

"I thought that the Priestess must abstain from eating for three days after a human sacrifice."

This was true. Arha had forgotten it, and her face showed that she had forgotten.

"He is not dead yet," she said at last, trying to feign the indifferent tone that had come so easily a moment ago. "He is buried alive. Under the Tombs. In a coffin, you see. There will be some air, the coffin isn't sealed, it's a wooden one. It will go quite slowly, the dying. When I know he is dead then I'll begin the fast."

"How will you know?"

Flustered, she hesitated again. "I will know. The . . . My Masters will tell me."

"I see. Where is the grave?"

"In the Undertomb. I told Manan to dig it beneath the Smooth Stone." She must not answer so quickly, in that foolish, appeasing tone; she must retain her dignity with Kossil.

"Alive, in a wooden coffin. That's a risky thing with a sorcerer, mistress. Did you make sure his mouth was stopped so he cannot say charms? Are his hands bound? They can weave spells with the motion of a finger, even when their tongues are cut out."

"There is nothing to his sorcery, it is mere tricking," the girl said, raising her voice. "He is buried, and my Masters are waiting for his soul. And the rest does not concern you, priestess!"

This time she had gone too far. Others could hear: a couple of novices, Duby, and the priestess Mebbeth, all were in hearing distance. The girls were all ears, and Kossil was aware of it.

"All that happens here is my concern, mistress. All that happens in his realm is the concern of the Godking, the Man Immortal, whose servant I am. Even into the places underground and into the hearts of men does he search and look, and none shall forbid him entrance!"

"I shall. Into the Tombs no one comes if the Nameless Ones forbid it. They were before your Godking and they will be after him. Speak softly of them, priestess. Do not call their vengeance on you. They will come into your dreams, they will enter the dark places in your mind, and you will go mad."

The girl's eyes were blazing. Kossil's face was hidden, drawn back into the black cowl. The others watched, terrified and enthralled.

"They are old," Kossil's voice said, not loud, a whistling thread of

sound out of the depths of the cowl. "They are old. Their worship is forgotten, save in this one place. Their power is gone. They are only shadows. They have no power any more. Do not try to frighten me, Eaten One. You are the First Priestess; does that not mean also that you are the last? . . . You cannot trick me. I see into your heart. The darkness hides nothing from me. Take care, Arha!"

She turned and went on, with her massive, deliberate steps, crushing the frost-starred weeds under her heavy, sandaled feet, going to the white-pillared house of the Godking.

The girl stood, slight and dark, as if frozen to earth, in the front courtyard of the Big House. Nobody moved, nothing moved, only Kossil, in all the vast landscape of court and temple, hill and desert plain and mountain.

"May the Dark Ones eat your soul, Kossil!" she shouted in a voice like a hawk's scream, and lifting her arm with the hand stretched out stiff, she brought the curse down on the priestess' heavy back, even as she set foot on the steps of her temple. Kossil staggered, but did not stop or turn. She went on, and entered the Godking's door.

ARHA spent that day sitting on the lowest step of the Empty Throne. She dared not go into the Labyrinth; she would not go among the other priestesses. A heaviness filled her, and held her there hour after hour in the cold dusk of the great hall. She stared at the pairs of thick pale columns going off into the gloom at the distant end of the hall, and at the shafts of daylight that slanted in from holes in the roof, and at the thick-curling smoke from the bronze tripod of charcoal near the Throne. She made patterns with the little bones of mice on the marble stair, her head bowed, her mind active and yet as if stupefied. Who am I? she asked herself, and got no answer.

Manan came shuffling down the hall between the double rows of columns, when the light had long since ceased to shaft the hall's darkness, and the cold had grown intense. Manan's doughy face was very sad. He stood at a distance from her, his big hands hanging; a torn hem of his rusty cloak dangled by his heel.

"Little mistress."

"What is it, Manan?" She looked at him with dull affection.

"Little one, let me do what you said . . . what you said was done. He must die, little one. He has bewitched you. She will have

revenge. She is old and cruel, and you are too young. You have not strength enough."

"She can't hurt me."

"If she killed you, even in the sight of all, in the open, there is none in all the Empire who would dare punish her. She is the High Priestess of the Godking, and the Godking rules. But she won't kill you in the open. She will do it by stealth, by poison, in the night."

"Then I will be born again."

Manan twisted his big hands together. "Perhaps she will not kill you," he whispered.

"What do you mean?"

"She could lock you into a room in the . . . down there . . . As you have done with him. And you would be alive for years and years, maybe. For years . . . And no new Priestess would be born, for you wouldn't be dead. Yet there would be no Priestess of the Tombs, and the dances of the dark of the moon won't be danced, and the sacrifices won't be made, and the blood not poured out, and the worship of the Dark Ones will be forgotten, forever. She and her Lord would like it to be so."

"*They* would set me free, Manan."

"Not while they are wrathful at you, little mistress," Manan whispered.

"Wrathful?"

"Because of him . . . The sacrilege not paid for. Oh little one, little one! They do not forgive!"

She sat in the dust of the lowest step, her head bowed. She looked at a tiny thing that she held on her palm, the minute skull of a mouse. The owls in the rafters over the Throne stirred a little; it was darkening towards night.

"Do not go down into the Labyrinth tonight," Manan said very low. "Go to your house, and sleep. In the morning go to Kossil, and tell her that you lift the curse from her. And that will be all. You need not worry. I will show her proof."

"Proof?"

"That the sorcerer is dead."

She sat still. Slowly she closed her hand, and the fragile skull cracked and collapsed. When she opened her hand it held nothing but splinters of bone and dust.

"No," she said. She brushed the dust from her palm.

"He must die. He has put a spell on you. You are lost, Arha!"

"He has not put any spell on me. You're old and cowardly, Manan; you're frightened by old women. How do you think you'd come to him and kill him and get your 'proof'? Do you know the way clear to the Great Treasure, that you followed in the dark last night? Can you count the turnings and come to the steps, and then the pit, and then the door? Can you unlock that door? . . . Oh, poor old Manan, your wits are all thick. She has frightened you. You go down to the Small House now, and sleep, and forget all these things. Don't worry me forever with talk of death . . . I'll come later. Go on, go on, old fool, old lump." She had risen, and gently pushed Manan's broad chest, patting him and pushing him to go. "Good night, good night!"

He turned, heavy with reluctance and foreboding, but obedient, and trudged down the long hall under the columns and the ruined roof. She watched him go.

When he had been gone some while she turned and went around the dais of the Throne, and vanished into the dark behind it.

VII

IN THE Great Treasury of the Tombs of Atuan, time did not pass. No light; no life; no least stir of spider in the dust or worm in the cold earth. Rock, and dark, and time not passing.

On the stone lid of a great chest the thief from the Inner Lands lay stretched on his back like the carven figure on a tomb. The dust disturbed by his movements had settled on his clothes. He did not move.

The lock of the door rattled. The door opened. Light broke the dead black and a fresher draft stirred the dead air. The man lay inert.

Arha closed the door and locked it from within, set her lantern on a chest, and slowly approached the motionless figure. She moved timorously, and her eyes were wide, the pupils still fully dilated from her long journey through the dark.

"Sparrowhawk!"

She touched his shoulder and spoke his name again.

He stirred then, and moaned. At last he sat up, face drawn and eyes blank. He looked at her unrecognizing.

"It's I, Arha—Tenar. I brought you water. Here, drink."

He fumbled for the flask as if his hands were numb, and drank, but not deeply.

"How long has it been?" he asked, speaking with difficulty.

"Two days have passed since you came to this room. This is the third night. I couldn't come earlier. I had to steal the food—here it is—" She offered one of the flat gray loaves from the bag she had brought, but he shook his head.

"I'm not hungry. This... this is a deathly place." He put his head in his hands and sat unmoving.

"Are you cold? I brought the cloak from the painted room."

He did not answer.

She put the cloak down and stood gazing at him. She was trembling a little, and her eyes were still black and wide.

All at once she sank down on her knees, bowed over, and began to cry, with deep sobs that wrenched her body, but brought no tears.

He came down stiffly from the chest, and bent over her. "Tenar—"

"I am not Tenar. I am not Arha. The gods are dead, the gods are dead."

He laid his hands on her head, pushing back the hood. He began to speak. His voice was soft, and the words were none she had ever heard. The sound of them came into her heart like rain falling. She grew still to listen.

When she was quiet he lifted her, and set her like a child on the great chest where he had lain. He put his hand on hers.

"Why do you weep, Tenar?"

"I'll tell you. It doesn't matter what I tell you. You can't do anything. You can't help. You're dying too, aren't you? So it doesn't matter. Nothing matters. Kossil, the priestess of the Godking, she was always cruel, she kept trying to make me kill you. The way I killed those others. And I would not. What right has she? And she defied the Nameless Ones and mocked them, and I set a curse upon her. And since then I've been afraid of her, because it's true what Manan said, she doesn't believe in the gods. She wants them to be forgotten, and she'd kill me while I slept. So I didn't sleep. I didn't go back to the Small House. I stayed in the Hall all last night, in one of the lofts, where the dancing dresses are. Before it was light I went down to the Big House and stole some food from the kitchen, and

then I came back to the Hall and stayed there all day. I was trying to find out what I should do. And tonight . . . tonight I was so tired, I thought I could go to a holy place and go to sleep, she might be afraid to come there. So I came down to the Undertomb. That great cave where I first saw you. And . . . and she was there. She must have come in by the trapdoor, she must have made a key, years ago. She was there with a lantern. Scratching in the grave that Manan dug, to see if there was a corpse in it. Like a rat in a graveyard, a great fat black rat, digging. And the light burning in the holy place, the dark place. And the Nameless Ones did nothing. They didn't kill her or drive her mad. They are old, as she said. They are dead. They are all gone. I am not a priestess any more."

The man stood listening, his hand still on hers, his head a little bent. Some vigor had come back into his face and stance, though the scars on his cheek showed livid gray, and there was dust yet on his clothes and hair.

"I went past her, through the Undertomb. Her candle made more shadows than light, and she didn't hear me. I wanted to go into the Labyrinth to be away from her. But when I was in it I kept thinking that I heard her following me. All through the corridors I kept hearing someone behind me. And I didn't know where to go. So I came here. It doesn't matter what I do. They are gone . . ."

"It was for *their* death you wept—their absence? But they are here, Tenar, here. Every instant since I set foot in the cavern under the Tombstones, I have striven against them. Sleeping and awake. If I let go my will for one moment, they will seize me. Listen, Tenar! I think I know the Nameless Ones even better than you do. I know this: they are not dead. They are undying. They strive with my spirit now. And I know this also: they are not gods. They never were. They are not worth the worship of any human soul."

SHE listened, her eyes heavy, her gaze fixed on the flickering lantern in the dust.

"What have they ever done for you?"

"Nothing," she whispered.

"They have no power but for evil. They are ancient and holy and evil: the Lesser Powers of the earth. They cannot leave this place; they *are* this place. And it should be given back to them. I think they drove your priestess Kossil mad a long time ago. The one who be-

lieves that the Nameless Ones do not exist, is a fool or mad. But the one who worships them is a slave. You are free, Tenar. You have broken free."

She listened without changing her expression. He said no more. They were silent; but it was not the silence that had been in that room before she entered. There was the breathing of two of them now, and the movement of life in their veins, and the burning of the candle in its lantern of tin, a tiny, lively sound.

"How is it that you know my name?"

He walked up and down the room, stirring up the fine dust, stretching his arms and shoulders in an effort to shake off the numbing chill.

"Knowing names is my job. My art. To weave the magic of a thing, you see, one must find out its true name. Naming is a powerful thing, and dangerous; that's why in my lands we keep our true-names hidden all our lives long, from all but those whom we trust utterly. After a man has learned a few tricks and methods, most of his time as a wizard is spent in finding out names, and in finding out how to find out names."

"How did you find out mine?"

"I thought about you a good deal," he said, evasive. "Never mind that. What are you going to do now?"

"I don't know."

"Kossil has found an empty grave, by now. What will she do?"

"I don't know. If I go back up, she can have me killed. It is death for a High Priestess to lie. She could have me sacrificed on the steps of the Throne if she wanted. And Manan would have to really cut off my head this time, instead of just lifting the sword and waiting for the Dark Figure to stop it. But this time it wouldn't stop. It would come down and cut off my head."

He looked at her across the room, frowning. "If we stay here long," he said, "you are going to go mad, Tenar. And I am going to die. It's better now that you're here, much better. But it was a long time before you came, and I've used up most of my strength. I can withstand the Dark Ones only so long. They are very strong. You... you know that." He too lost the thread of his speech. He rubbed his hands over his forehead, and presently went to drink again from the flask. He broke off a hunch of bread and sat down on the chest opposite the girl to eat it.

She gave a little whimpering laugh. "Here we sit on the greatest and oldest treasure of the Empire," she said. "The Godking would give all his wives to have one chest of it. And we haven't even opened a lid to look."

"I did," said the Sparrowhawk, chewing.

"In the dark?"

"I made a little light. The werelight. It was hard to do, here. Even with my staff it would have been hard, and without it, it was like trying to light a fire with wet wood in the rain. But it came at last. And I found what I was after."

She raised her face slowly to look at him. "The ring?"

"The half-ring. You have the other half."

"I have it? The other half was lost—"

"And found. I wore it on a chain around my neck. You took it off, and asked me if I couldn't afford a better talisman. The only talisman better than half the Ring of Erreth-Akbe would be the whole. But then, as they say, half a loaf's better than none. So you now have my half, and I have yours." He smiled at her across the shadows of the tomb.

"You said, when I took it, that I didn't know what to do with it."

"That was true."

"And you know?"

He nodded.

"Tell me. Tell me what it is, the ring, and how you came upon the lost half, and how you came here, and why. All this I must know, then maybe I will see what to do."

"Maybe you will. Very well. What is it, the Ring of Erreth-Akbe? Well, you can see that it's not precious-looking, and it's not even a ring. It's too big. An arm-ring, perhaps, yet it seems too small for that. No man knows who it was made for. Elfarran the Fair wore it once, before the Isle of Solea was lost beneath the sea; and it was old when she wore it. And at last it came into the hands of Erreth-Akbe... The Metal is hard silver, pierced with nine holes. There's a design like waves scratched on the outside, and nine Runes of Power on the inside. The half you have bears four runes and a bit of another; and mine likewise. The break came right across the one symbol, and destroyed it. It is what's been called, since then, the Lost Rune. The other eight are knows to mages: Pirr that protects from madness and from wind and fire, Ges that gives endurance, and so

on. But the broken rune was the one that bound the lands. It was the Bond-Rune, the sign of dominion, the sign of peace. No king could rule well if he did not rule beneath that sign. No one knows how it was written. Since it was lost there have been no great kings in Havnor. There have been princes and tyrants, and wars and quarreling among all the lands of Earthsea.

"So the wise lords and mages of the Archipelago wanted the Ring of Erreth-Akbe, that they might restore the lost rune. But at last they gave up sending men out to seek it, since none could take the one half from the Tombs of Atuan, and the other half, which Erreth-Akbe gave to a Kargish king, was lost long since. They said there was no use in the search. That was many hundred years ago.

"Now I come into it thus. When I was a little older than you are now, I was on a . . . chase, a kind of hunt across the sea. That which I hunted, tricked me, so that I was cast up on a desert isle, not far off the coasts of Karego-At and Atuan, south and west of here. It was a little islet, not much more than a sandbar, with long grassy dunes down the middle, and a spring of salty water, and nothing else.

"Yet two people lived there. An old man and woman; brother and sister, I think. They were terrified of me. They had not seen any other human face for—how long? Years, tens of years. But I was in need, and they were kind to me. They had a hut of driftwood, and a fire. The old woman gave me food, mussels she pulled from the rocks at low tide, dried meat of seabirds they killed by throwing stones. She was afraid of me, but she gave me food. Then when I did nothing to frighten her, she came to trust me, and she showed me her treasure. She had a treasure, too . . . It was a little dress. All of silk stuff, with pearls. A little child's dress, a princess' dress. She was wearing uncured sealskin.

"We couldn't talk. I didn't know the Kargish tongue then, and they knew no language of the Archipelago, and little enough of their own. They must have been brought there as young children and left to die. I don't know why, and doubt that they knew. They knew nothing but the island, the wind, and the sea. But when I left she gave me a present. She gave me the lost half of the Ring of Erreth-Akbe."

HE PAUSED for a while.

"I didn't know it for what it was, no more than she did. The great-

est gift of this age of the world, and it was given by a poor old foolish woman in sealskins to a silly lout who stuffed it into his pocket and said thanks and sailed off . . . Well, so I went on, and did what I had to do. And then other things came up, and I went to the Dragon's Run, westward, and so on. But all the time I kept the thing with me, because I felt a gratitude towards that old woman who had given me the only present she had to give, do you see. I put a chain through one of the holes pierced in it, and wore it, and never thought about it. And then one day on Selidor, the Farthest Isle, the land where Erreth-Akbe died in his battle with the dragon Orm—on Selidor I spoke with a dragon, one of that lineage of Orm. He told me what I wore upon my breast.

"He thought it very funny that I hadn't known. Dragons think we are amusing. But they remember Erreth-Akbe; him they speak of as if he were a dragon, not a man.

"When I came back to the Inmost Isles, I went at last to Havnor. I was born on Gont, which lies not far west of your Kargish lands, and I had wandered a good deal since, but I had never been to Havnor. It was time to go there. I saw the white towers, and spoke with the great men, the merchants and the princes and the lords of the ancient domains. I told them what I had. I told them that if they liked, I would go seek the rest of the ring in the Tombs of Atuan, in order to find the Lost Rune, the key to peace. For we need peace sorely in the world. They were full of praise; and one of them even gave me money to provision my boat. So I learned your tongue, and came to Atuan."

"Didn't the people in our towns know you for a Westerner, by your skin, by your speech?"

"Oh, it's easy to fool people," he said rather absently, "if you know the tricks. You make some illusion-changes, and nobody but another mage will see through them. And you have no wizards or mages here in the Kargish lands. That's a queer thing. You banished all your wizards long ago, and forbade the practice of the Art Magic; and now you scarcely believe in it."

"I was taught to disbelieve in it. It is contrary to the teachings of the Priest Kings. But I know that only sorcery could have got you to the Tombs, and in at the door of red rock."

"Not only sorcery, but good advice also. We use writing more than you, I think. Do you know how to read?"

"No. It is one of the black arts."

He nodded. "But a useful one," he said. "An ancient unsuccessful thief left certain descriptions of the Tombs of Atuan, and instructions for entering, if one were able to use one of the Great Spells of Opening. All this was written down in a book in the treasury of a prince of Havnor. He let me read it. So I got as far as the great cavern—"

"The Undertomb."

"The thief who wrote the way to enter, thought that the treasure was there, in the Undertomb. So I looked there, but I had the feeling that it must be better hidden, farther on in the maze. I knew the entrance to the Labyrinth, and when I saw you, I went to it, thinking to hide in the maze and search it. That was a mistake, of course, The Nameless Ones had hold of me already, bewildering my mind. And since then I have grown only weaker and stupider. One must not submit to them, one must resist, keep one's spirit always strong and certain. I learned that a long time ago. But it's hard to do, here, where they are so strong. They are not gods, Tenar. But they are stronger than any man."

THEY were both silent for a long time.

"What else did you find in the treasure chests?" she asked dully.

"Rubbish. Gold, jewels, crowns, swords. Nothing to which any man alive has any claim... Tell me this, Tenar. How were you chosen to be the Priestess of the Tombs?"

"When the First Priestess dies, they go out looking all through Atuan for a girl-baby born on the night the Priestess died. And they always find one. Because it is the Priestess reborn. And when they find the child it must not be blemished or dull of mind, and it must live till it is five years old. Then it is known to be the Priestess reborn, and is brought here to the Place. And after a year of training it is given to the Dark Ones, and its soul is eaten by them. And so it belongs to them, and has belonged to them since the beginning days. And it has no name."

"Do you believe that?"

"I have always believed it."

"Do you believe it now?"

She said nothing.

Again the shadowy silence fell between them. After a long time she said, "Tell me . . . tell me about the dragons in the West."

"Tenar, what will you do? We can't sit here telling each other tales until the candle burns out, and the darkness comes again."

"I don't know what to do. I am afraid." She sat erect on the stone chest, her hands clenched one in the other, and spoke loudly, like one in pain. She said, "I am afraid of the dark."

He answered softly. "You must make a choice. Either you must leave me, lock the door, go up to your altars and give me to your Masters; then go to the Priestess Kossil and make your peace with her. And that is the end of the story. Or, you must unlock the door, and go out of it, with me. Leave the Tombs, leave Atuan, and come with me oversea. And that is the beginning of the story. You must be Arha, or you must be Tenar. You cannot be both."

The deep voice was gentle and certain. She looked through the shadows into his face, which was hard and scarred, but had in it no cruelty, no deceit.

"If I leave the service of the Dark Ones, they will kill me. If I leave this place I will die."

"You will not die. Arha will die."

"I cannot . . . "

"To be reborn one must die, Tenar. It is not so hard as it looks from the other side."

"They would not let us get out. Never."

"Perhaps not. Yet it's worth trying. You have knowledge, and I have skill, and between us we have . . . " He paused.

"We have the Ring of Erreth-Akbe."

"Yes, that. But I thought also of another thing between us. Call it trust . . . Listen, Tenar! I came here a thief, an enemy, armed against you; and you showed me mercy, and trusted me. And I have trusted you from the first time I saw your face, for one moment there in the cave beneath the Tombs, beautiful in darkness. You have proved your trust in me. I have made no return. I will give you what I have to give. My true name is Ged. And this is yours to keep." He had risen, and he held out to her a piece of pierced and carven silver, half-circle-shaped.

"Let the ring at least be rejoined," he said.

She took it from his hand. She slipped from her neck the silver chain on which the other half was strung, and took it off the chain.

She laid the two pieces in her palm so that the broken edges met, and it looked whole.

She did not raise her face.

"I will come with you," she said.

VIII

WHEN she said that, the man named Ged put his hand over hers that held the broken talisman. She looked up startled, and saw him flushed with life and triumph, smiling. She was dismayed and frightened of him. "You have set us both free," he said. "Alone, no one wins free. Come, let's waste no time while we still have time! Hold it out again, for a little." She had closed her fingers over the pieces of silver, but at his request she held them out again on her hand, the broken edges touching.

He did not take them, but put his fingers on them. He said a couple of words, and sweat suddenly sprang out on his face. She felt a queer little tremor on the palm of her hand, as if a small animal sleeping there had moved. Ged sighed; his tense stance relaxed, and he wiped his forehead.

"There," he said, and picking up the Ring of Erreth-Akbe he slid it over the fingers of her right hand, narrowly over the breadth of the hand, and up onto the wrist. "There!" and he regarded it with satisfaction. "It fits. It must be a woman's arm-ring, or a child's."

"Will it hold?" she murmured, nervously feeling the strip of silver slip cold and delicate on her thin arm.

"It will. I couldn't put a mere mending-charm on the Ring of Erreth-Akbe, like a village witch mending a kettle. I had to use a Patterning, and make it whole. It is whole now as if it had never been broken.—Tenar, we must be gone. I'll bring the bag and flask. Wear your cloak. Is there anything more?"

As she fumbled at the door, unlocking it, he said, "I wish I had my staff," and she replied, still whispering, "It's just outside the door. I brought it."

"Why did you bring it?" he asked curiously.

"I thought of . . . taking you to the door. Letting you go."

"That was a choice you didn't have. You could keep me a slave, and be a slave; or set me free, and come free with me. Come, little one, take courage, turn the key."

She turned the dragon-hafted key and opened the door on the low, black corridor. She went out of the Treasury of the Tombs with the ring of Erreth-Akbe on her arm, and the man followed her.

There was a low vibration, not quite a noise, in the rock of the walls and floor and vaulting. It was like distant thunder, like something huge falling a great way off.

The hair on her head rose up, and without stopping to reason she blew out the candle in the tin lantern. She heard the man move behind her; his quiet voice said, so close that his breath stirred her hair, "Leave the lantern. I can make light if need be. What time is it, outside?"

"Long past midnight when I came here."

"We must go forward then."

But he did not move. She realized that she must lead him. Only she knew the way out of the Labyrinth, and he waited to follow her. She set out, stooping because the tunnel here was so low, but keeping a pretty good pace. From unseen cross-passages came a cold breath and a sharp, dank odor, the lifeless smell of the huge hollowness beneath them. When the passage grew a little higher and she could stand upright, she went slower, counting her steps, as they approached the pit. Light-footed, aware of all her movements, he followed a short way behind her. The instant she stopped, he stopped.

"Here's the pit," she whispered. "I can't find the ledge. No, here. Be careful, I think the stones are coming loose... No, no, wait—it's loose—" She sidled back to safety as the stones teetered under her feet. The man caught her arm and held her. Her heart pounded. "The ledge isn't safe, the stones are coming loose."

"I'll make a little light, and look at them. Maybe I can mend them with the right word. It's all right, little one."

She thought how strange it was that he called her what Manan had always called her. And as he kindled a faint glow on the end of his staff, like the glow on rotting wood or a star behind fog, and stepped out onto the narrow way beside the black abyss, she saw the bulk looming in the farther dark beyond him, and knew it for Manan. But her voice was caught in her throat as in a noose, and she could not cry out.

As Manan reached out to push Ged off his shaky perch into the pit beside him; Ged looked up, saw him and with a shout of surprise or

rage struck out at him with the staff. At the shout the light blazed up white and intolerable, straight in the eunuch's face. Manan flung up one of his big hands to shield his eyes, lunged desperately to catch hold of Ged, and missed, and fell.

He made no cry as he fell. No sound came up out of the black pit, no sound of his body hitting the bottom, no sound of his death, none at all. Clinging perilously to the ledge, kneeling frozen at the lip, Ged and Tenar did not move, listened, heard nothing.

The light was a gray wisp, barely visible.

"Come!" Ged said, holding out his hand; she took it, and in three bold steps he brought her across. He quenched the light. She went ahead of him again to lead the way. She was quite numb and did not think of anything. Only after some time she thought, *Is it right or left*?

She stopped.

Halted a few steps behind her, he said softly, "What is it?"

"I am lost. Make the light."

"Lost?"

"I have . . . I have lost count of the turnings."

"I kept count," he said, coming a little closer. "A left turn after the pit; then a right, and a right again."

"Then the next will be right again," she said automatically, but she did not move. "Make the light."

"The light won't show us the way, Tenar."

"Nothing will. It is lost. We are lost."

The dead silence closed in upon her whisper, ate it.

SHE felt the movement and warmth of the other, close to her in the cold dark. He sought her hand and took it. "Go on, Tenar. The next turn to the right."

"Make a light," she pleaded. "The tunnels twist so . . . "

"I cannot. Tenar, they are—They know that we left the Treasury. They know that we're past the pit. They are seeking us, seeking our will, our spirit. To quench it, to devour it. I must keep that alight. I must withstand them: with you. With your help. We must go on."

"There is no way out," she said, but she took one step forward. Then she took another, hesitant as if beneath each step the black hollow void gaped open, the emptiness under the earth. The warm, hard grip of his hand was on her hand. They went forward together.

After what seemed a long time they came to the flight of steps. It had not seemed so steep before, the steps hardly more than slimy notches in the rock. But they climbed it, and then went on a little more rapidly, for she knew that the curving passage went a long way without sideturnings on this side of the steps. Her fingers, trailing the left-hand wall for guidance, crossed a gap, an opening to the left. "Here," she murmured; but he seemed to hold back, as if something in her movements made him doubtful.

"No," she muttered in confusion, "not this, it's the next turn to the left. I don't know. I can't do it. There's no way out."

"We are going to the painted room," the quiet voice said in the darkness. "How should we go there?"

"The left turn after this."

She led on. They made the long circuit, past two false leads, to the passage that branched rightwards towards the room of paintings.

"Straight on," she whispered, and now the long unraveling of the darkness went better, for she knew these passages toward the iron door and had counted their turns a hundred times; the strange weight that lay upon her mind could not confuse her about them, if she did not try to think. But all the time they were getting nearer and nearer to that which weighed upon her and pressed against her; and her legs were so tired and heavy that she whimpered once or twice with the labor of making them move. And beside her the man would breathe deep, and hold the breath, again and again, like one making a mighty effort with all the strength of his body. Sometimes his voice broke out, hushed and sharp, in a word or fragment of a word. So they came at last to the iron door: and in sudden terror she put out her hand.

The door was open.

"Quick!" she said, and pulled her companion through. Then, on the farther side, she halted.

"Why was it open?" she said.

"Because your Masters need your hands to shut it for them."

"We are coming to . . . "

Her voice failed her.

"To the center of the darkness. I know. Yet we're out of the Labyrinth. What ways out of the Undertomb are there?"

"Only one. The door you entered doesn't open from within. The

way goes through the cavern and up passages to a trapdoor in a room behind the Throne. In the Hall of the Throne."

"Then we must go that way."

"But she is there," the girl whispered. "There in the Undertomb. In the cavern. Digging in the empty grave. I cannot pass her, oh, I cannot pass her again!"

"She will have gone by now."

"I cannot go there."

"Tenar, I hold the roof up over our heads, this moment. I keep the walls from closing in upon us. I keep the ground from opening beneath our feet. I have done this since we passed the pit where their servant waited. If I can hold off the earthquake with my hand, do you fear to meet one human soul with me? Trust me, as I have trusted you! Come with me now."

They went forward.

The endless tunnel opened out. The sense of a greater air met them, an enlarging of the dark. They had entered the great cave beneath the Tombstones.

They started to circle it, keeping to the right-hand wall. Tenar had gone only a few steps when she paused. "What is it?" she murmured, her voice barely passing her lips. There was a noise in the dead, vast, black bubble of air: a tremor of shaking, a sound heard by the blood and felt in the bones. The time-carven walls beneath her fingers thrummed, thrummed.

"Go forward," the man's voice said, dry and strained. "Hurry, Tenar."

As she stumbled forward she cried out in her mind, which was as dark, as shaken as the subterranean vault, *Forgive me. O my Masters, O unnamed ones, most ancient ones, forgive me, forgive me!*

There was no answer. There had never been an answer

They came to the passage beneath the Hall, climbed the stairs, came to the last steps up and the trapdoor at their head. It was shut, as she always left it. She pressed the spring that opened it. It did not open.

"It is broken," she said. "It is locked."

He came up past her and put his back against the trap. It did not move.

"It's not locked, but held down by something heavy."

"Can you open it?"

"Perhaps, I think she'll be waiting there. Has she men with her?"

"Duby and Uahto, maybe other eunuchs—men cannot come there—"

"I can't make a spell of opening, and hold off the people waiting up there, and withstand the will of the darkness, all at one time," said his steady voice, considering. "We must try the other door then, the door in the rocks, by which I came in. She knows that it can't be opened from within?"

"She knows. She let me try once."

"Then she may discount it. Come. Come, Tenar!"

She had sunk down on the stone steps, which hummed and shivered as if a great bowstring were being plucked in the depths beneath them.

"What is it—the shaking?"

"Come," he said, so steady and certain that she obeyed, and crept back down the passages and stairs, back to the dreadful cavern.

At the entrance so great a weight of blind and dire hatred came pressing down upon her, like the weight of the earth itself, that she cowered and without knowing it cried out aloud, "They are here! They are here!"

"THEN let them know that we are here," the man said, and from his staff and hands leapt forth a white radiance that broke as a seawave breaks in sunlight, against the thousand diamonds of the roof and walls: a glory of light, through which the two fled, straight across the great cavern, their shadows racing from them into the white traceries and the glittering crevices and the empty, open grave. To the low doorway they ran, down the tunnel, stooping over, she first, he following. There in the tunnel the rocks boomed and moved under their feet. Yet the light was with them still, dazzling. As she saw the dead rock face before her, she heard over the thundering of the earth his voice speaking one word, and as she fell to her knees his staff struck down, over her head, against the red rock of the shut door. The rocks burned white as if afire, and burst asunder.

Outside them was the sky, paling to dawn. A few white stars lay high and cool within it.

Tenar saw the stars, and felt the sweet wind on her face; but she did not get up. She crouched on hands and knees there between the earth and sky.

The man, a strange dark figure in that half-light before the dawn, turned and pulled at her arm to make her get up. His face was black and twisted like a demon's. She cowered away from him, shrieking in a thick voice not her own, as if a dead tongue moved in her mouth, "No! No! Don't touch me—leave me—Go!" And she writhed back away from him, into the crumbling, lipless mouth of the Tombs.

His hard grip loosened. He said in a quiet voice, "By the bond you wear I bid you come, Tenar."

She saw the starlight on the silver of the ring on her arm. Her eyes on that, she rose, staggering. She put her hand in his, and came with him. She could not run. They walked down the hill. From the black mouth among the rocks behind them issued forth a long, long, groaning howl of hatred and lament. Stones fell about them. The ground quivered. They went on, she with her eyes still fixed on the glimmer of starlight on her wrist.

They were in the dim valley westward of the Place. Now they began to climb; and all at once he bade her turn. "See—"

She turned, and saw. They were across the valley, on a level now with the Tombstones, the nine great monoliths that stood or lay above the cavern of diamonds and graves. The stones that stood were moving. They jerked, and leaned slowly like the masts of ships. One of them seemed to twitch and rise taller; then a shudder went through it, and it fell. Another fell, smashing crossways on the first. Behind them the low dome of the Hall of the Throne, black against the yellow light in the east, quivered. The walls bulged. The whole great ruinous mass of stone and masonry changed shape like clay in running water, sank in upon itself, and with a roar and sudden storm of splinters and dust slid sideways and collapsed. The earth of the valley rippled and bucked; a kind of wave ran up the hillside, and a huge crack opened among the Tombstones, gaping on the blackness underneath, oozing dust like gray smoke. The stones that still stood upright toppled into it and were swallowed. Then with a crash that seemed to echo off the sky itself, the raw black lips of the crack closed together; and the hills shook once, and grew still.

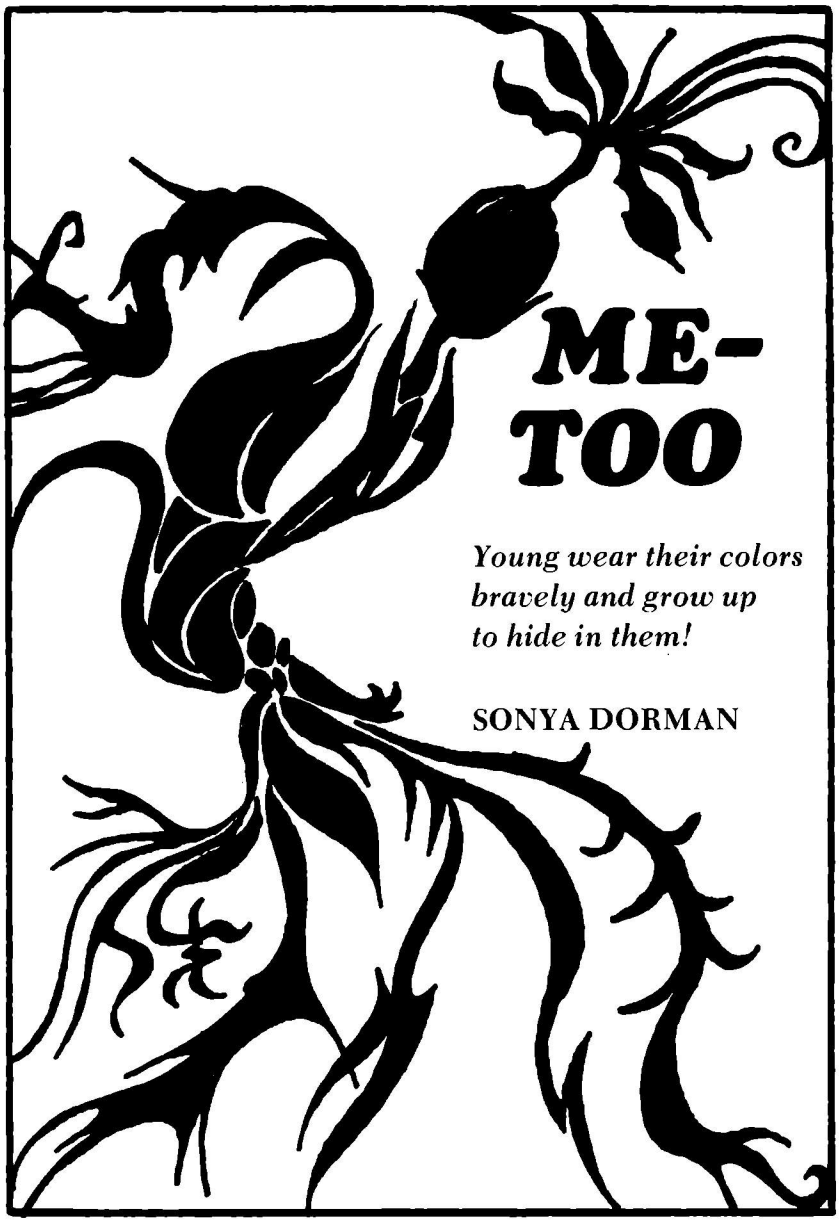
She looked from the horror of earthquake to the man beside her, whose face she had never seen by daylight. "You held it back," she said, and her voice piped like the wind in a reed, after that mighty bellowing and crying of the earth. "You held back the earthquake, the anger of the dark."

"We must go on," he said, turning away from the sunrise and the ruined Tombs. "I am tired, I am cold . . . " He stumbled as they went, and she took his arm. Neither could go faster than a dragging walk. Slowly, like two tiny spiders on a great wall, they toiled up the immense slope of the hill, until at the top they stood on dry ground yellowed by the rising sun and streaked with the long, sparse shadows of the sage. Before them the western mountains stood, their feet purple, their upper slopes gold. The two paused a moment, then passed over the crest of the hill, out of sight of the Place of the Tombs, and were gone.

They crossed the lion-colored mountains, and came down the green westward-looking slopes, until they reached the seacoast of the land of Atuan. No pursuit followed them: the fallen Tombs kept their secret. They went in safety through the towns of Atuan, disguised as Kargish countryfolk by a trick of Ged's wizardry. They came to the shore and found his boat, hidden and with spells of hiding laid on it, in a cave of the rocks; and there Tenar first heard the sound of the sea, which she had only heard in dreams before. So they set sail, and Atuan sank behind them into the eastern sea; and never in her life did Tenar behold it again.

They came, after the sunrises and sunsets, the still days and icy winds of their winter voyage, to the Inmost Sea. They sailed the crowded lanes among great ships, up the Ebavnor Strait and into the bay that lies locked in the heart of Havnor, and across the bay to Havnor Great Port. They saw the white towers, and all the city white and radiant in snow, and the rigging of the hundred ships in harbor glittering with ice in the winter sun. News of their coming had run ahead of them, for the patched red sail of the wizard's boat was known in these seas. A great crowd gathered on the snowy quays.

Tenar sat in the stern, erect, in her ragged cloak of black. She looked at the ring around her wrist, then at the crowded, many-colored shore, the palaces, the white towers. She lifted up her right hand, and sunlight flashed on the silver of the Ring of Erreth-Akbe. A cheer went up, faint and joyous on the wind over the restless water. Ged brought the boat in. A hundred hands reached to catch the rope he flung up to the mooring. He leapt onto the pier and turned, holding out his hand to her. "Come," he said smiling, and she rose, and came. Gravely she walked beside him up the white streets of Havnor, holding his hand, like a child coming home. □



ME-TOO

Young wear their colors bravely and grow up to hide in them!

SONYA DORMAN

THE biphone burred just when I had fought down the temptation to talk with friends—a temptation that often comes on me even while getting on with the job. How nice that someone wanted to call me where I sat between the walls on my work slot. I was delighted to hear that familiar pale red sound.

"This is Me-Too," I said, unnecessarily, because my face was on his screen, but I'd been told I sounded surly when I responded, so I'd been practicing good cheer. We all need some of that.

"Ah," said the Earth whose face was on my screen. "I'm glad you're on. I wanted to ask about an interview."

"We're on inter-view right now, so go ahead," I said.

"No, that wasn't what I meant." He twanged a ruddy shade on my screen, and I thought: oh-oh, he couldn't, he just couldn't, mean what I think he means. The thought caused me to convert a quantity of glucose before I was able to control myself. I managed to concentrate on the muscle which released the membrane between sub and conscious. Then I was on FULL. Although I don't often work on FULL, it's the best way to handle these Earths, who are always and involuntarily separate in their heads, their hearts and sometimes their sexes. "Division" has become a charcoal word since they arrived to trade for our resins.

Just the same, there isn't one of us Fullons who wouldn't work his pods to a powder for the rye and the clover, the buckwheat and the lespideza, that the Earths bring to our planet. Already, in one sprouting cycle, the youngsters are more robust, grow faster, absorb twice as much; another cycle and we may look forward to fulfilling the prophecy: overflow. It is the great privilege.

"Are you still receiving?" he asked.

"Too," I acknowledged, to let him know he was not alone, which is anathema to Earths. Or the concept is. For after all, even without twinning, none of us is ever alone.

"I'm Rudy Van Haap, and am requesting an—er—let us say, lavender?—interview in person." His shade was badly off and by that you may know them, flat, nasal and, at their best, a rasping maroon. Oh but the vetch, the alfalfa, and the pea vine!

Secretly I was flattered, not to mention that an in-person meant at least an hour off the job, but it could not be puce'd around, no, never to my friends or relatives. I became a secretive silver, all the time staying on the job, spinning the wheel with my feet which of

course were not shown on the screen. Mr. Van Haap politely put a silver scrim over his face to show that he understood. I sighed once again with pity; they can never speak our language because their membranes are all one color and mostly hidden.

"What is it you wish to expose?" I asked, reaching out with my upper pod to gather another bundle of body fibers, which I rolled down so my feet fed the loose ends to the wheel. Below the wheel lay the basin into which the saps and resins flowed. I was sure the Earth knew I was continuing to work and hoped this would not be considered rudeness. Our job is perpetual, always taking in and giving off, extruding fiber from our bodies, spinning, controlling and taking in products once more, only to have enough energy to repeat the cycle. If the Earths were going to stay, or to return for trade and barter, they'd have to accept us as we are.

"It's not a matter of exposing anything," he whistled in mocha. "It's just that we have so few in-person contacts and before we return to Earth for another shipload we feel perhaps it would be to the advantage of both, er—groups?—to have this specific exchange."

THEIR world must be simply smothered in vines and lush growth, dense, dense; they thread their way through a labyrinth even when it isn't there. "Oh Mr. Van Haap, what are you bringing, then, in your next ship? May we crimson your return soon?"

"Soon, yes. We have some peanut vines, perhaps? May we arrange for an in-person interview? Say, at third rest?"

"Some seeds?" I greened coyly. I couldn't help myself. Imagine five or six of those slippery black seeds under my belt, all at once! What a balloon of a rainbow I'd be! Oh Earths, it was, in spite of all difficulties, a purple day last week when you arrived!

But coy dreams, hope for seeds, rainbows, even hope for purple, that most lavish emotion, are the traps and trials laid for us. Three-Too had entered my work slot, had come up behind me, and had listened to our contra-passe.

"Seeds!" he blue'd. "There'll be no seeds or morning vines here in our slot of work. Van Haap, you're seducing my early daughter and the late one not yet free of her webs. Get off the screen!" And Three-Too disconnected my biphone with a snip of his tendrils.

"Bad! Rotted! You compost!" And he beat me about the pods until I blue'd for mercy.

He stopped. I thought it was mercy he was bestowing on me, but then, he pressed my contraction muscle and the membrane slid up between my sub and my conscious, while he remained on FULL.

I was cobalt until rest period, and wondering, with deep wonder and worry, if Rudy Van Haap would come to our meadow for a real interview. I was taupe that he would; I was slate that he would not. My cobalt had never been so pure and painful. The handful of clovers had not sufficed to heal me, and my training prevented me from going back on FULL without permission, though it would have somewhat fulfilled me. Everything, everything was desolate in the twilight, though for all the square miles around I could see my fellow Toos. I could think and hope that our prophecy would be fulfilled.

I only wanted to help. It is most important, even as our parchments say, to barter with all peoples for those stuffs which make us grow and multiply, until our planet is full. Not until every demiacre contains its quota of pod and petal will we have our privilege. If only Mr. Van Haap would come to Me-Too in person and record my spectrum.

Full darkness falls. Everywhere we wink and twinkle. My pods are less painful, but they are bruised. Heads droop, wrinkles are comfortable, my people sleeps. Where is the Earth who was coming to see me in person? To exchange with me face to face?

Perhaps the rest of my life will be spent waiting for the one chance to speak myself. Perhaps the continual talk of privilege, of arrival at overflow, is nothing but a story to keep us happy with our lean works. I wish I hadn't thought of that. Now I'm yellow with milky tears; now I'm slowly turning brown with terror.

Agh. There goes my last web, and my body shines clear, like the bodies of Three-Too and the millions of older relatives sparkling in their sleep around me. Mr. Van Haap, the Earth with the welcome seeds and rhizomes, you'll never come to see me even if I put myself on FULL. Not even when I blaze scarlet and tangerine and my pods enlarge, because it's as clear as indigo to me that I'm one little Too among so many. How would you find me in this field? □

DEATH OF A PECULIAR BOAR

NAOMI MITCHISON

The Prince was consumed by hate—and eaten by friends!

"THE witches," said Gwilym Petit Noir, who was also called the Little Black King, "are turning very troublesome. I wish someone would do something." A witch had just carried off one of his younger daughters. He was not much perturbed himself. He had enough daughters; all of them would need dowries. But the rest of the family were fussing. His eldest son, Elifri, said he would lie in wait and fight the witches when they next came but Gwilym, who found this son useful for keeping the Kingdom in order, said he was to do nothing of the kind. The witches were no joke. They used unfair weapons. It would be better to have a tournament and attract some of the ambitious young men. "If only we had one of Arthur's lads," he said, "we'd fix the witches."

Elifri ap Gwilym was annoyed. He was sure he could fix the witches himself. His father was putting more and more of the dull part of ruling the kingdom on to him. The Little Black King was more gray than black now, except for streaks in his beard and his bristly eyebrows. He grew tired and cross when riding round in his armor, or not sleeping in his own bed—so Elifri ap Gwilym had to go

the rounds of the kingdom with the men at arms to collect the rents. Then he had to drive back the rents, maaing and bleating or else bellowing and tossing their horns and occasionally bolting.

Also he had to do justice. He would not have minded that so much, except for the annoying fact that, if people were not satisfied they appealed from him to the Little Black King, and his father was so delighted at being appealed to that he almost always reversed his son's decisions. Very occasionally Elifri had to take action against a giant or some ravening creature out of the wild woods. But he never quite had the equipment and, when he asked his father for a really good sword instead of the old family bone-hacker, his father said that what had been good enough for his ancestors ought to be good enough for Elifri.

The second son Tegid was not a worrier. If he could find a good hunt three days a week, he was content. Tegid had been fostered by a man who was a great hunter himself and indeed was apt to turn himself into a beast of the chase from time to time, usually round about full moon, so as to refresh his memory of how such beings acted. He had bred up his foster-son in the same ways. Tegid was not so good at the doubtful arts as his foster-father had been. He was able with great trouble and fuss to turn himself occasionally into a stag, but as often as not he could not quite manage the horns and had to go about with a hand or a lily or some such nonsense sticking out of his forehead. So usually he merely hunted.

Naf and Cadwry were much the same. It took a lot to worry them. But the witches interfered with their pleasures too. One day those nasty women took a couple of hounds, leashes and all. They were forever flustering the hunt by flapping across just when things were going well. It takes a good horse and an unimaginative rider not to be put off by a witch's toot-toot and the black whiz of bat or broomstick under one's nose.

So Tegid, Naf and Cadwry were all in favor of a tournament. The girls naturally were sky-high. The witches were always bothering them, causing minor ailments, turning the cream, breaking the warp threads on the loom or addling the setting eggs. Not to speak of carrying off poor little Gwaeddan, who in any case had a very bad cough, which was probably the witches' doing to begin with. The two eldest, Gwenllian and Tangwen, decided they must speak to their father about it; for the tournament might prove one of

his ideas, which would only be dropped when the trouble abated. On the other hand if it were done properly—and if any of King Arthur's court *did* come—

They waited till they had him in a good mood, with the drink taken but not to say drunk. They had been through all the chests in the bower, they told him, dropping their deepest curtseys, but there was really nothing—no, not a thing!—fit to wear at the tournament. Besides, Enrhydeg and Teleri were bigger now and would need to be properly dressed like princesses instead of running around in rags.

The Little Black King had been talking about his tournament for at least an hour; in his mind it was already a vastly gay and successful affair with himself as the host. And here were these two girls coming in like sluts and spoiling it all. But—yes, if they were dressed, well, they could make their contribution. Gwilym Petit smiled at them. "And you two," he said, "you, my dears, will of course be the prizes."

Gwenllian looked at Tangwen and giggled. "For the best knight!" she said, and a delicious warm feeling flowed all through her.

"Properly dressed," said the Little King, frowning, "and with jewels. Perhaps."

The two girls curtseyed again. Jewels! "Oh my lord," said Gwenllian, "I must have a cloth-of-gold dress."

"And I must have cloth of silver," said Tangwen. "And, rubies go with cloth of silver."

"Pearls go with cloth of gold," said Gwenllian. "Big ones."

Gwilym Petit sighed and wriggled resentfully, thinking of it in terms of oxen... but he admitted that something of the sort was a necessity, and that when Naf and Cadawry were going round the country, as they would now have to do, announcing the tournament, they could see what was to be picked up in the way of suitable wearing apparel.

"If we are to be prizes, my lord," said Tangwen, "we shall have to stand in the tourney ground."

"Under a may tree," said Gwenllian drowsily; the whole image was deliciously almost too much for her.

"And we shall need mantles of vair," said Tangwen. "Then we shall look truly worthy of our noble father."

Naf and Cadwry spent a really delightful time riding round, sometimes separately and sometimes together, announcing the tourna-

ment. Most people had heard of the Little Black King and the boys were heartily welcomed by several old friends of their father's. One or two spare princesses were offered to them, and Cadwry, whose tastes lay in those directions, actually married a snug little blonde in Wessex. She came away from her father's court riding pillion behind her husband, and it was most unfortunate that he should, while taking a short cut through the Red Knight's country, although he had been warned against it, have been unhorsed and lost her (as well as a good horse).

THE Red Knight, following his usual custom, added the lady to his unrivalled collection of blondes. When, some hours later, Cadwry came to with an atrocious headache, some minor abrasions but otherwise no great damage, he was at any rate relieved to think that he had put his wife's jewels for safekeeping under his mail shirt. One bracelet bought him a new horse; the necklace would do for one of his sisters. When he and Naf met next he said nothing about being a married man. Indeed he had thought so well of his few days' experience that he almost married again, this time in the Cotswolds, but found out in time that the proffered princess had been the victim of rather an awkward enchantment.

Both the young princes took part in several small wars, to oblige their hosts. Naf killed a very unpleasant dwarf who, it was generally thought, must have been at the bottom of last year's harvest failure in that particular kingdom. He also came under the influence of a hermit who told him a number of surprising things which he felt he would have to think over. The brothers arrived together at the court of Arthur the King, or, as he liked to call himself, Roman fashion, Emperor. They were both somewhat abashed, but were well received at the Round Table and, after they had bathed and had their hair cut, given such a feast as they had never come across before, both for variety and solidity. Nor were the dishes and drinking horns ever less than silver and walrus ivory.

Yet the hermit had said to Naf that none of this signified.

When they came back it was high summer and all preparations for the tournament well forward. Elifri and Tegid had been busy accumulating stores for the guests they expected, as was clear from the gloom and anger of the Little King's subjects and the occasional burnt steading. That hermit had said something about oppressors,

too. Yet surely it was in a good cause? One could not be expected to put up with invasions of witches. Naf had never done any worrying before and he disliked it acutely as an occupation. But once you start it is not easy to stop.

They had a mule laden with wearing apparel for their sisters, including a couple of kerchiefs, real Roman silk, which were a present from the Empress Guinevere; she had been most kind and condescending. Gwenllian and Tangwen were in raptures and there was a whirl of cutting out and basting up and sewing on of ribbons and tassels and screaming and laughing and snatching and slapping from the ladies' bower. And in the middle of it all a witch sailed in and made off with a nightgown of pale pink samite.

Several of Arthur's knights came, including Gwynn, Goreu, Howel of Brittany and Teirnion; Gwalchmai himself, the May Hawk, had said he might look in later if his own quest was over in time. There were one or two kings and princes, Peredur of the Foret Sauvage, Morffran from the Castle of Hollies, the local man Cradawg, and a number of others, some with ladies, but most in a bachelor state. It was altogether very lively, and the traveling merchants got wind of it, followed and brought their delightful foreign wares. Gwilym Petit Noir was in his glory. He ate and he drank and he gave gifts and received them, and he fixed up marriages for the younger girls, but not of course for the two prizes, Gwenllian, for the best knight, and Tangwen, for the next best, who walked about rustling their skirts, and displaying their jewels, in a dignified and yet alluring way which they had been practicing for weeks.

Cadwry was extremely uneasy in case his brother-in-law were to turn up, in which event it would be difficult indeed to explain away the affair of the Red Knight. The whole episode might end in a needless war. Most fortunately, however, the Red Knight did not turn up then, nor indeed ever. But the prospect held up Cadwry's other possible matrimonial plans.

Elifri and Tegid found that most of the hard work had fallen on them. Elifri had been shot at twice in the course of his collecting of voluntary contributions from his father's subjects. Once the head of an arrow had gone under the edge of his nauberk and made a bad graze. He had not taken much trouble to find the culprits, either. He had a feeling that they had a cause. Elifri was interested in justice and he could not bear seeing his sisters going about showing them-

selves off. It made him think even iller of women than he had thought before.

TEGID had to arrange the hunts and, as there were so many guests, he always ended with a poor place himself and no sport—which suggested how the tournament and the more practical aspect of the campaign against the witches were likely to turn out. One or two of Arthur's crowd were impressive, Morffran was an accurate shot, but Peredur of the Foret Sauvage was as strong as a bear and cared nothing about what danger he might be walking into.

There were only two raids by the witches, probably for reconnaissance. In one of them all the lights went out and they swept through Gwylym Petit's great hall, whistling and howling and croaking like a mixed pack of evil animals. When the candles and torches were lit again it was found that a visiting knight lay dying in the rushes with a barb in his throat, a hound bitch near to littering was split down the middle and several ladies had gone mad. The other was in the open and some kind of revolting black cloud was dropped, which clung stickily and stinking to the heads and hands of those present and wore off only after several days. The lone casualty was due to a bolting horse.

It looked very much as though the witches would spoil the tournament if given half a chance. One evening it was decided to issue a challenge to the Principal of the College of Witches and have an all-out battle before the tournament. They must put the witches utterly in their place once and for all. There was discussion as to who should lead the assault, but no mad enthusiasm was forthcoming among most of those who gave their opinions; the witches had an unpleasant habit of turning their opponents into low forms of life. After a time Sir Gwyron the Boneless remarked that no doubt they were all aware that the witches would have no power of enchantment over a chaste liver. Virginity was not absolutely necessary, so long as one had confessed and obtained absolution, but—several kings and knights backed out rather self-consciously, at the same time preening themselves and glancing at the ladies who were listening from the back without of course taking part in the debate. But Elifri said explosively: "I knew I could do it myself!"

"Is that so?" said Morffran politely and looking away from the ladies. "You have the qualifications?"

"Never had time for women," snapped Elifri, "Can't see what it's all about, can't see what my father— Sooner a good horse myself, any day."

"Is that so?" said Morffran again, with even greater interest.

The challenge was duly sent and accepted. Peredur of the Foret Sauvage and Elifri were in the front line, but many of the others, including Morffran, were close behind them. There had been a rush to confession and a certain smugness among those who had spent some hours on the chilly chapel flagstones working out their absolution. In spite of this, the witches managed to work on Cradawg so far that he grew a thick furry hide, striped in parts, and even afterwards talked with a peculiar snuffle.

The witches did not rely entirely on enchantment. Some fine fighting was had and quite a number killed on both sides. Elifri did well with the old family sword, better than some more expensively armed; he was sure some of the Round Table knights had been watching him and a report would be sent in. Perhaps—yes, perhaps he would be able to leave the kingdom and his father's subjects and his own sisters.

Finally a parley was held. Peredur and Elifri had a long and lively talk with the Principal of the College of Witches; it did not appear to the others that they had reported the whole of it. But at any rate the witches agreed to withdraw completely from the kingdom of Gwilym Petit Noir, which was the desired result. Plans for the tournament could go ahead.

Although Peredur, who was utterly fearless and madly strong, had killed most witches, several others had done remarkably well. By common consent Morffran of the Castle of Hollies was the second best knight. After him came one or two of Arthur's court, though Howel of Brittany had been severely wounded by a witch's barb. Tegid and Naf had done reasonably well, but Cadwry had contrived not to be present; he had not felt himself qualified to avoid enchantment.

THE day of the tournament was fixed, and just as well, for stocks were beginning to run short and Elifri ap Gwilym thought gloomily that it would be up to him, once again. Gwenllian and Tangwen were highly excited; a good thing when this was over and they could relax.

Indeed it would be fortunate if there were no incidents before hand; Tangwen had already thrown a sharp-cornered box full of preserved toads at her elder sister. She found Morffran much to her liking; so did Gwenllian. Even after confession and absolution he had been polite: more than polite. He had magnificent dark eyes and long lashes. Whereas Peredur had looked at them, when he did look, in a rough and careless way and as though they were rather distasteful; he laughed like a dog barking, and he had large hands with ribbed nails that were never clean or trimmed. Morffran, on the contrary, washed his hands and face every two days at least. He was definitely unmarried; everyone said so. The Castle of Hollies was by all accounts warm and comfortable with ample stable and guest room and a good water supply.

THE great Gwalchmai, Arthur's sister's son, whom the south English called Gawain, did turn up, for he was always one to keep his promises, on the evening before the opening day, having duly punished a king in the Northeast who had spoken disparagingly of Arthur and the Round Table. Gwalchmai was somewhat tired and the great golden spring hawk on his helm had a dented wing. The Little King's daughters all hastened to prepare his bath; Gwenllian soaped his back, and Tangwen, head modestly averted, held a warm towel. Yes, he said, he would certainlly break one lance, but no more. He was too old to compete for such fresh young prizes, would leave that to some lucky lad with hot blood to match their own that coursed so sweetly and showed under the clear skin. Oh, thought Tangwen, peeping round the towel, if only he had felt like competing! She wouldn't have cared about the Castle of Hollies. But Gwalchmai must have had his pick of all the noble ladies of Britain.

The Little King was of course all over himself at the great honor. Gwalchmai was set at his right hand and if, late on in the evening, after the wine had circulated, he did yawn slightly during one of Gwilym Petit's stories, well, he had made a hard journey to be here in time, and he must be ready for his bed.

The day for the tournament was a fine one with great clouds blowing. Everyone came, even those who had been most annoyed at having to give voluntary contributions thought they had better make the best of it and at least see all that was to be seen. Largesse

was scattered at intervals so that some of Gwilym's people took back a bit of what they had given.

The two girls were arranged on a dais among flowers and cushions. They would know by the evening. Everything had been arranged for a quick wedding but of course the victor's wishes would be respected. His damsel, princess or no princess, would be given to him in her gown and jewels and remain his property in her bare skin. The sisters might have very different destinies, according to the mood of the two winners.

An insult might provoke retaliation, not from the Little King, who was bound to accept the consequences of his own tournament, but from the other relatives of the two girls, not to speak of the bards, who had all come flocking for whatever they could make of the story.

Crash bang went the tournament, with hog-maned, hairy-heeled stallions going a-wallop and spears breaking and knights thrown and battles on foot where the combatants tended to lose their tempers, iron hitting iron and wood splintering and cloth tearing. Gwalchmai, after his round, in which he was duly victorious over two kings and an Irish knight with green hair, sat back and rested, not always even observing with professional attention the combats which were going on all over the tournament field, but considering the problems of his uncle, the Emperor, and the jealousies of the Round Table.

People were shouting for Peredur of the Foret Sauvage. He had knocked over one opponent after another, had seized one round the body and crushed his armor in, had thrown another to the ground during the swordplay and jumped on him till he yielded. But Morffran was doing well too; he had an agile hand and a quick eye, had leaped from under a falling horse which might have pinned him and was particularly expert with the small axe.

By the end it was clear to all the observers, including the two most directly involved, that Peredur was the victor and Morffran the runner-up. One of the sisters was going to end with Morffran. Under their breath the girls whispered insults at one another.

The next was a knight called Alun the Broad, but he was recently married and had brought his lady with him. She was a gay and gentle one, and they seemed to be devoted. The three knights rode up to the Little King and saluted with their swords. He, all in a flurry, presented the golden garlands. Alun the Broad turned and

rode along the front of the main pavilion until he came to where his lady was sitting. He knelt to her with his garland and she answered, to the high pleasure of the crowd, with flushing cheeks, a wet mouth and a frank and fair embrace.

The Little King was then seen to be pointing at his two daughters. But it was more than clear that Peredur was shaking his head vigorously. There was a consultation into which Elifri came, speaking with considerable warmth. The excitement was too intense for some of the ladies present, who burst into tears or hysterics. Tangwen slapped Gwenllian who pulled out a handful of her hair; both screamed and pretended to faint. Morffran was looking in their direction. Their father rose to his feet and approached them, waving back the rest of his court.

"My dears," he said and coughed, "Sir Peredur tells me that he has made an arrangement to stay with the Principal of the College of Witches to take a final course in what did he say, yes, to be sure, the Arts. He feels that marriage would, in the circumstances, be inappropriate. And your brother Elifri tells me that he has come to the same arrangement. Most inconsiderate of him. I shall need to have the taxes collected early this year." He paused and coughed again.

"And Sir Morffran, my Lord?" asked Gwenllian, breathing jerkily through her nose.

"Ah yes, Sir Morffran," said the Little King, "he has offered to take Elifri's place as heir to the kingdom."

"But—" said Tangwen, "but—the important part—"

"That is the most important part," said the Little King with rebuke in his voice. "However. And he is proposing to marry both of you. One wife at the Castle of Hollies. One here. Considering himself as two separate persons: for certain purposes. A new idea. A very clever idea. Very clever indeed. Sir Gwalchmai thought so too."

GWENLLIAN looked at Tangwen. And Tangwen signed to her to go on. "But can he—" Gwenllian began.

"He tells me so, he tells me so," said the Little King, rather loud and fast. "Says he sees no difficulty. And with Peredur not wanting to marry and Alun married already, a great deal is to be said for his plan. Morffran appears to be an unusually able young man. And everything will stay in the family. What those dresses of yours cost

me in sheep I wouldn't like to say. I really wouldn't. And each of you will be able to tell him, from time to time, of some agreeable little surprise that would be acceptable to your sister. From her husband. You see, my dears?"

"But can a man have two wives, father?"

"Exceptional men can do so, I understand. In exceptional cases. Which is what this is," said the Little King cheerfully. "So come along, my dear girls, and be given to him. A most successful tournament and these wretched witches professionally dealt with as I intended, and after that we must all have supper."

The girls looked at one another again. They were, after all, dutiful girls, as their father was always saying at the times when he was not shaking his head over the selfishness and frivolity of the younger generation. And besides, neither of them wanted to be the one to back out. So the little ceremony was satisfactory to all concerned, as also the banquet which followed. A great relief to know that no witches would interrupt. It was also a relief, in a way, to know that many guests were to set off home next morning, although of course a few were in bed recovering from their wounds. They would not, however, make any great inroads on the meat and drink.

Morffran of the Castle of Hollies sat with a wife on each hand, Gwalchmai sat by Gwenllian and was bored. The Little King had the wife of Sir Alun Le Broad on his right hand; he found her charming. Sir Alun was frowning. Peredur and Elifri and Gwilym were talking eagerly about the possibilities of the Arts course at the College of Witches in Gloucester. The Principal had taken to Elifri and had promised him an enchanted sword at his graduation. After that he would have more than a chance of the Round Table if he went to Arthur. Naf and Cadwry were discussing tournament form with some of their guests, leaning across the table and illustrating points with fingers dipped in red wine. But Tegid sat by himself, scowling. Here was this Morffran taking the place of the heir to the Kingdom and all so the girls could be pushed off onto someone! And he himself had organized all the sport and seen that this one and that one had the best place, and then they never even thanked him but put it all down to their own cleverness. Clever—them? They would see next time; there was to be a hunt for the remaining guests next day. Morffran had been easily persuaded to stay on.

Tegid had his big idea.

Everything was ready for the final hunt. The ladies rode out on their jennets, both Gwenllian and Tangwen looking somewhat sleepy but much less nervous. The men had their bows and arrows and hunting spears. The cries of the beaters were coming nearer as the half-circle closed. Tegid was not about, but perhaps he was organizing the beaters; a splendid host, Tegid, always thinking of the comfort of his guests.

"Takes after me," said the Little King.

But Tegid was in the middle of a bush, working furiously at his idea, trying to remember everything his foster-father had told him. There must be no mistake. Expecially about the tusks. You had to get a real purchase and then rip. Using the neck muscles.

Stags and hinds dashed in, wild pig, a magnificent white forest bull with black points which fell to Sir Gwalchmai, hares and foxes, innumerable birds at which the ladies behind flew their hawks. Some of the hunters were now on foot, including the bridegroom, Sir Morffran, who might have been showing off his undoubted agility to his wives. Suddenly, and from an entirely unsuspected angle, he was charged by a monstrous boar with huge and dangerous tusks. All would have been over with him, possibly as man, certainly as husband, to judge by the way the boar was about to attack, when Naf, from quite a distance and with great luck threw a spear which went straight into the boar's eye and brain. The boar fell over, dead. Within a yard of Morffran.

Tegid was never seen again. Much talk was made at the time, naturally. The disappearance was put down to direct action by rebellious subjects, several of whom were suspected, caught and tortured without any satisfactory results. Most of this was done by Morffran who took his duties as heir presumptive very seriously and duly gratified the Little King with two grandchildren a year for some time.

It was as well that Naf never learned he had killed his brother, because what the hermit had said was working in his mind. If in addition to the comparatively minor crimes of assault, arson, rape, robbery with violence and so forth, he had added the crime of fratricide, he would have had to take the whole matter very seriously indeed, especially as he had eaten several large slices of roast boar. As it was, he made a pilgrimage to Rome which turned out most enjoyable, once he grew used to the foreigners. □

SANTA TITICACA

CONNIE WILLIS

He was one man against a billion guardians of the treasure—one man too many!

THERE is a chain, pure gold. And it is not the paltry few hundred yards long that legend declares. It did not surround the marketplace—it circled the whole city in a bond of beauty. Now it winds from the shores of Huancane under the whole lake, its grace sweetening the brackishness of Uinamarca's waters in the south, deepening the indigo purity of Chucuito in the north. Draped between Huata and Copacabana, it glimmers in the deepness of the Strait of Tiquina as I have heard the Milky Way does in the depths of your sky. It is our home. It is more, our life, a chain of beauty and purpose that binds us to what you might call the paths of righteousness. Were we to lose it, we would be in a fair way to lose our souls.

The chain is safe. They will not come back in our generation, perhaps not in the next—men fear ridicule more than the Devil. But they've risked reputations and souls before, so they'll return

eventually. Let us hope our grandchildren have a saint like Angelina Amaru.

We were not even sure she knew she helped—the fishers said she was crazy. They blamed her strange habits on her fancy education in Lima. Only Manco thought she was worth looking at. He wanted to meet her, he told the other fishers, but he was afraid. She didn't look quite real, he said, sailing in the old-fashioned balsa with the square sail of a sampan, drifting the lapis lazuli waters of Titicaca with her hand trailing in the wake, her voice fragile as the reeds in the sail when she read aloud. To us.

We saw her, shimmering and strange, above the water. And we heard her—that was the important thing. All that we knew of the world above we learned from her and from the sad, ordinary talk of fishers from Copacabana. Steamers crossing the strait we tried to follow for a time, thinking they would have visitors on holiday such as Angelina read about in *Betty Goes Abroad*, but the engines were too loud, and we could not swim that fast and listen too.

So we had to rely on her for our education. People rarely came beneath the surface; the ones who brought the chain, of course, but that was so long ago that the legend has decayed. The keepers of the chain (I mean the maintenance men I suppose; we are all keepers, guardians; I do not mean high priests whatever they may think of themselves) tell stories of the light that shone around the Indians' heads, of their burnt faces and glittering robes. We have not seen such things since. A diver came within recallable times to look for treasures: we gave him one, a whole city, so that he looked no farther. Then came the cousteau, with boats that came under the water to us. They wanted the chain—they said they wanted it—but they were scientists first. They looked at us and at the animals and the plants of the lake. We didn't even hide the chain more than it already was hidden by soft mud and reeds.

Some of us went into your world during that time. Marmal's grandmother is an old, old lady now, but if she were asked about the cousteau she would shudder, would focus her eyes on the ceiling of the water, would say, "The light, the light, and blue all around. Water and air, swimming in the blue." Marmal's grandmother's love, only a boy then, had wanted to give them the chain in exchange for bringing her back. They had to hide him in the old city—his love herself returned and unbound him. *That* was a time of joy!

And when all that time was long over, when we the grandchildren were grown, Angelina read to us about the happening from an old magazine and we saw that we had had nothing to fear even then. They had been counting us, gathering us in plastic bags to find how many of us were in one place, and multiplying the number because "there was no place in the lake where we did not find the toads." They had decided there were over a billion of us, which was right, but only accidentally so. We do not live all over the lake; we live with the chain. But even birds will lead their enemies away from the nest.

So the cousteau had looked at us and studied us, even noticed that each had individual markings, and did not know we were intelligent. Marmal's grandfather would have told, but he was bound in the Inca ruins. And how else were they to know?

We have no skills, no art, no science. We have a social structure, but it's no more complicated than that of lions—any dolt can belong to a family. Certainly we do not have telepathy or shining raiment or anything like extraterrestrials in Angelina's stories. We don't even have a language of our own. We speak Spanish because we learned it from the fishermen; before that, Quechua, most of which is forgotten. We learn. Not stunningly, like the Betelgeusians in *Astroman Meets the Brain*; we can't hold a shining globe to our foreheads and then to yours and instantly be both idiomatically and syntactically correct. We don't even have an opposed thumb to pick a globe up with. We learn like anybody else, by listening and gradually putting the bits and pieces together. And we extrapolate.

THAT is our science, our art, our skill. Our civilization. We are better at it than humans can ever be—sometimes you miss the obvious along with the subtle. We have only Angelina's books and the fishermen. Yet we know that life in books is not real; that books show what life is wished or feared to be; that events are labeled beginning, climax, end. From casual reference we have figured out most of your society past and present.

Sorry. I seem to brag and have no right. We had to be practically hit over the head when it really counted. I am just trying to explain our way of life to you. The chain belongs to us in the best sense of the word and we had to save it, whether we have an opposed thumb or not. Would it help if I told you that in Quechua they called gold "the tears wept by the sun?" No, I guess not.

The Incas understood. They gave the chain to us. Atahualpa, who would let his people ransom everything for his life, would not let them ransom that. Atahualpa, who hated his brother Huascar enough to war with him, nevertheless gave the chain to him. Huascar hid it and Manco Inca, his successor, set up a government in the mountains to keep it safe until they could find a guardian for the chain. His son Tupa Amaru gave it to us, moving it into the lake by methods, as I said before, lost to legend and yet under the noses of the Spanish. His purpose gone, he lost his uprising and his life. But the chain was in safe hands and so was a forgotten daughter.

When they came after the chain again, with foolishness in their eyes, we had Angelina Amaru to help us. A child of Tupa would know about the toads, and why else would she read us a story from a magazine two generations old? Other than that it was only the *Bible* and stories: *A Party for Pauline, Devil Dick and the Pirates of Dundee.*

The first we knew of the new goldhunters was from Manco. "Crazy people, those new ones," he said to Luis, "After the gold chain. Submarine and everything. They even have a detector that searches out the atomic structure of gold and then is attracted to it, like a magnet."

Luis laughed. "They won't find anything. They never do. Remember the crazy Frenchman—the priests blessed their little boats and what good did it do? You can bet they won't bless that gold magnet. The fat one has already gotten drunk and assaulted two of the village girls. He even grabbed Angelina . . . "

"Angelina!" There was holy anger in Manco's voice.

"Be calm, Manco. She left a bite on his arm that is so bad it has become infected. She is a wild one. No one could harm her. You can be sure."

We learned nothing more from Manco; the mere name of the fat Salazar made him silent with rage. But the other fishers were full of the talk—how the short Miguel had returned to La Paz for more equipment, how the gold magnet had been tested on holy relics of the church, how scandalous that the golden crucifix was in truth only gilt paint, how Salazar was so hungry for gold he was going to take the fantastic boat down tomorrow . . .

"He will find it. It is gold. It is huge. His magnet will lead him straight to it. We're doomed." That was the consensus of the

Family, though Selom was speaking. What can you do if you're a basket case and you're being robbed?

Marmal, my sweet silly, refused to give up. "We can outwit them. We can't stop them from finding it, but we can trick them some way. Cowboy Tom did it in *The Devil Ranchers*. Remember he saved Rancher Harrigan, hid him and then brought him out dressed in bloody garments and they thought he was a ghost and confessed. Why can't we do something like that?"

"Marmal, we're not trying to make anyone confess." Selom's voice was tolerant. She looked at me to see if I would defend her.

I tried. "She's right. If we're going to save the chain it will have to be with a plan from Angelina's books." So we set out to remember all we could of the stories and change them into a plan somehow. Nothing. We had ways of killing spies, getting back wayward husbands, fighting Indians, but nothing for saving the chain. It took us all day and all night to see that. In the morning Salazar brought the boat down and found the chain. And all but Marmal watched our life's blood drain away.

Marmal was listening to Angelina as she read and read and read from a pile of books in the little reed boat. And Marmal was learning it, remembering it with such care and concentration that it came spinning out of her head as fine and fast as a spider's webbing when she told us. That was what she told us about—spiders and purple seaweed and Mars:

"Susan daringly crept up the creaky old ladder into the attic. Then she gasped. The diamond! Glittering fantastically with all the colors of the rainbow. 'What is it?' asked roly poly Rita from the bottom of the ladder. 'It's . . . it's . . .' the afternoon sun drifted under a cloud. 'For heaven's sake, it's just a spider web. On the window. For a minute there it looked just like the diamond. Funny what tricks your mind can play.'"

And "'There are many legends of Inca treasures that Pizarro never found,' Miss James read aloud. 'The Indians claim a caravan of llamas laden with gold was hidden in the caves and valleys of the mountains behind Azangara when they heard of Atahualpa's death. The Spaniards were unable to find the treasure of the Peje Grande located in the ruins of the Chimu temple. In northern Bolivia a river of emeralds was supposed to exist.' Tommy said, 'I'd sure like to get my hands on that emerald llama cave.' Liz hit him on the arm,

'Dope, you got it all mixed up.' Miss James closed the book: 'Greed makes fools of all of us. Time for arithmetic, class.' "

And " 'Oh, look,' said Jenny. The fishers were using nets, just like in the travelogues. She whipped out her camera. Cassandra was staring at Eduardo Dizal, the new passenger. 'I've got a bigger catch in mind,' she cooed."

And "Black Bart came staggering into the camp, gibbering wildly of giant ants and a lost silver mine. He clutched Dan by the throat, then rummaged frantically in a pocket and pulled out a piece of sandstone. He held it out to Dan triumphantly. 'See, silver!' Dan got him to sit down and then gently told him that the rock was not silver. 'Don't you see?' Bart screamed. 'They changed it. The ants, they changed it with a ray of light!' 'Too much sun,' said Dan sadly. 'He might have found something,' said Tex. 'Wouldn't hurt to check.' 'Yeah, and be laughed out of Tombstone. Saddle up. We'll take him into town.' "

And "The young redheaded sailor was asking everyone in the tavern if they'd heard of a place called Mandola. Captain O'Fallon stroked his stubbly chin. 'Mandola... Son, let me tell you about Mandola. Kept losing ships on the reefs ten, twenty years ago. The survivors had wild tales to tell of a mermaid with streaming purple hair that sang them onto the rocks. So they sent out these scientists, and the bloody thing was a dolphin all tangled up in some purple seaweed. Never did figure out how a fish could look so much like a woman. Females!' he snorted, 'They're all alike. I don't care if they're cats or humans or fish. They're all alike.' "

Marmal finished, breathless. "And she said, every time she put down one book and picked up another: 'Salazar wants money and women. Money and women. Miguel will be back in three days. Money and women.' Every time." She looked at us expectantly.

FOR a minute it made no sense, then it made a lot of sense, then it was marvelously simple. Marmal was engulfed with praise. "It wasn't me," she insisted, "It was Angelina. She knows. She has to know." There was no time to speculate about that—we had two days. And a plan. The Family assigned tasks (the men to find an abandoned fishing net, the women to... be women) and hoped Salazar would be greedy enough to come after the chain alone. He was. And the women were ready for him.

I don't know how they did it. They have no nipples and their legs are bent as the legs of all toads, but they have as much femininity as a dolphin. As much as Angelina. That may be the hope of understanding among all races. Or the downfall. They almost fooled us and they did fool Salazar. He came down to drag the chain up from the mud, from where he knew it lay, knew exactly, could have uncovered it with a moment's digging, with one eye on the plastic map he'd made yesterday with his almighty magnet boat; and he ended up following a bunch of toads.

Marmall tossed her graceful head as if to say "Follow me," and he followed. Bidell's hair streamed behind her in sunstreaked water; Leear's long legs, Venna's firm bosom flirted with him out of the corner of his eye. They misted past him in the veil of his own air bubbles, enchantresses every one. And with emaralds in their mouths. He lost his map by snatching at water, at golden locks that turned out to be seaweed, at eyes that were only marks on a trout. It became a twisting chase with all the pallor of a nightmare. We watched them pass, twice, three times over our graveyard of lost nets, and they seemed to be lost children or silent screaming mouths or paralyzed fleeing thoughts with dark closing in on them, a stuffy bleakness reaching out for them, ever faster, ever more smothering.

"No!" Selom was starting after Venna and I was stopping him. Soothing him as he would do with me when Marmal was gone. "She'll be all right. All right. I promise."

They didn't pass over us again; they had led him south to the salty waters, into the violent ascent that ripped his air hose. But he held onto Marmal! Marmal! And Selom held me, talked to me with my words. He finally had to threaten to put me in the old city. That quieted me some. But Marmal! "And it's part of the plan," Selom said, "You know it's part of the plan."

So I tried to concentrate on the net, but the green clinging to it was the color of Marmal and I was no help. I didn't even see what was so obvious—that the net was rotten from its long death in the lake. That it would not hold one of us, let alone . . .

He held Marmal hurtingly in his fist as he surfaced. She looked at him and opened her mouth and said, "I am Atahualpa's daughter, kept under a spell beneath this lake. Let me go and I will show you treasures beyond thought, a million pounds of gold and the lost throne room of Curiachanah, a golden face of the gods that lit the

temple at Cuzco and is wide as the sun itself, anything you want." So he put her in a pail of water to be his slave and his proof for Miguel, a magic toad that talked. And the second day she told him where to find the ruby fish, Peje Grande.

"But what about those emeralds you were carrying in your mouths? What about those? You said anything I want. That's what I want."

"You must not touch that! It is part of the sun god's treasure. It is forbidden. Do not follow the sun maidens, I beg of you. The spell that binds my shape binds the jewels. Who breaks it dies!"

Of course he followed the girls; they didn't even have to carry the pieces of green Coke bottles in their mouths. They led him from the Copacabana shore to where the strait is narrow and dark. To where we waited with the trap, all of us holding our part of the nets in our mouths. The girls swam lightly through the holes and tears. Salazar followed.

And the net didn't hold. The net was too old. Salazar was too big and too determined. There was no sacred treasure and no emeralds and Marmal would be torn apart by his fury and he would take the chain and we would die, all of us because I was so stupid that . . .

"Look," said Selom. "Angelina." She was definitely Tupa Armac's daughter. She was dressed in a fake Inca costume that would not have fooled a child and her face was an Apache's in the *Cowboy Tom* stories, but the flame in her eyes was the flame of Atahualpa betrayed and Tupa bereft. The flame in her hand was Salazar's underwater torch that she'd stolen from his boat when she let Marmal go. But she brandished it like a sword. It was a sword and the penalty for defiling the emerald hoard was death. Had the water been any deeper he would have died from the bends.

The fishermen couldn't stop laughing. First he came shooting up like a rocket, then he started talking. They couldn't decide which was funnier. He claimed there were a dozen treasures, every one from here to Mexico and all mixed up together, silver llamas and ruby fishes, yet he refused to go in the water because the toads would get him. They were really Incas with swords of flame. They stole his map and tried to seduce him and ruined his air hose. And when Angelina walked past he went into screaming fits about how she had attacked him when the festering bite on his arm was proof of who had attacked whom. He was certain about the chain, but he had

conveniently lost the map to toads that talked and swam like beautiful women.

MIGUEL dredged up a few in a better net than ours (Marmal happened to be right there). He identified her from markings on her back which by this time he claimed were a map of the location of the chain in the lake. She swam around, toady as you please and not a peep out of her. Miguel couldn't bundle Salazar onto the train fast enough. He'd come back for the boat later.

The fishers ransacked it meanwhile and went looking for the treasure of Huatanay in every cave for miles around. None of them would have been caught dead even glancing toward the lake. Who would have believed if they did find a chain? By this time the legend had shrunk it to a mere fifteen feet long, used originally to wrap the feet of an Inca statue.

So it's safe. Our only problem was to think of a way to thank Angelina. We were nearly sure that she knew us. The chances of her going swimming in full Inca regalia and warpaint in ice-cold water were slim enough for old-hand extrapolators like ourselves. I think we rather enjoyed speculating. But knowledgeable or not, she had to be thanked. A statue in the town was implausible and we couldn't offer a reward as in *Susan Captures the Jewel Thieves* unless she was partial to chips of Coca Cola glass. But we figured out something to do. Or rather, Marmal did. I am almost afraid to make her my wife—she has so many ideas.

We waited for a day when the sky was full of light (in deference to Marmal's grandmother) and Angelina drifted her hand in the water near the fisherman's boats. Then we used all of our paltry strength together and tipped her boat over. Found out for sure that she was Tupa's child, however distant, and that she knew.

Angelina spluttered, drenched and furious, with her dark hair streaming out behind her, "I trusted you. I helped you, you crummy little animals, and what thanks do I get? Some guardians of the chain! I thought you were supposed to be noble, you dirty double-crossers, you lousy bunch of frog-legged traitors, you . . ."

She of course had the good sense to shut up and sink when she saw Manco hit the water in an agony of love and fear. And of course she had forgiven us by the time he had her safely in his arms. After all, she read us the idea, out of *Margarita Gets Her Man.* □

A SHIP WILL COME

ROBERT F. YOUNG

The boy had already been the man he was to become!

THAT night Skim stayed on the house with his two hundred thousand brothers and sisters and listened excitedly to his father's voice. The night was cold and windless and all the stars were out, sharp and stabbing in the black sky. The three moons were abroad too—the big one, the middle-sized one and the little one. The latter had just risen over the Great Sea and its light lay in a silvery patina upon the waste of water and the littoral. Farther inland the little moon's light combined with the light of the other moons, and the combined light of the three moons rained softly down upon the house where Skim lived with his two hundred thousand brothers and sisters, and upon the other houses in the valley and upon the houses on the hills.

"A ship will come," Skim's father was saying in his deep rustling voice. Actually Skim's father and the house were one and the same, but Skim never thought of them that way. "A great and shining ship from far away, and it will descend from the heavens like a huge and wingless bird and come to rest on the shore of the Great Sea."

Skim knew that his father was quoting from the Santhrith just as he did every night when it was time for Skim and his two hundred

thousand brothers and sisters to go to sleep. So his father's words alone were not responsible for Skim's excitement. The reason behind his excitement was that unknown to his father and his two hundred thousand brothers and sisters —and the hundreds of thousands of brothers and sisters on the other houses, and their fathers—a ship *had* come. It had come that very day. Of all the members of the community, Skim alone had seen it.

But he couldn't break the news to his father and his two hundred thousand brothers and sisters, for a very good reason: the ship had arrived when all the school-age kids had been attending school, or should have been, and to reveal his knowledge of the ship would be tantamount to admitting that he had broken one of the Overseer's most stringent rules—he had played hookey.

And that would never do.

HE HAD begun loitering from the moment he detached himself from the house and, in mere minutes, he had fallen way behind the others. Then, as though loitering weren't enough, he began turning somersaults in the air and describing aerial figure eights. By the time he wafted over the last hill, the other kids had already arranged themselves around the big green schoolhouse and were awaiting the voice of the teacher.

He hadn't been able to help himself—such a lovely day, such a matchless morning. The sun was coming up, pale and pink beyond the morning mists, and a breeze was tiptoeing from the sea, carrying the sea smell with it, begging him to take a ride high into the sky—up where the fluffy clouds were, the kind that never turned to rain beneath you though you lay on them the whole day through.

Why, oh why does it have to be autumn? Skim thought. *Why can't it be summer instead?* Maybe in summer he did have to work, but at least he didn't have to go to school and at least there were a few hours each day when he could detach himself from the house and go where and do what he wanted to.

And then he thought, *Why oh why does it have to be Monday? Why can't it be Saturday or Sunday instead?*

His small green face crinkled in exasperation. All day Saturday waterspouts had walked the horizon and his father had made everyone stay near the house. There hadn't been a thing to do except play wind-tag with his younger brothers and sisters or help his older

brothers and sisters turn sunshine into sugar for the house. He hadn't felt like playing wind-tag and he hadn't seen why he should work in the fall after working so hard all summer.

Yesterday, when the water spouts had disappeared from the horizon and the sky was clear and blue and the wind brisk and begging to be ridden on, who had shown up but ten thousand of his cousins from down the valley, and he'd had to stick around the house all day and help entertain them. And now, when the horizon was free of waterspouts and his ten thousand cousins were gone, he had to go to school! It was too much.

He glowered at the green schoolhouse with all the other kids clustered dutifully around it. The least they could do was share his misery. But maybe *their* fathers were modern and knew that waterspouts never came in over the land, and maybe *their* cousins knew enough to stay home. Probably *they'd* spent *their* weekend captaining cloud rafts and riding elevator winds and doing all the other intriguing things that weekends were made for.

And then, the little breeze from the sea had turned into a wind and sent Skim tumbling down the opposite side of the hill. He righted himself quickly, but did not return to where he'd been. Instead he levitated and lay on his back a few feet above the ground and stared wistfully into the sky where a flock of gulls were winging their way seaward. He lay like that for some time. Presently he realized that he would not be going to school.

He felt the flow of the wind around him, building up its strength. He sucked it through his stomata, letting it permeate the spongy cells and the palisade cells that took up most of his interior and that at the moment were manufacturing only enough carbohydrates for his own needs. He waited until the wind grew even stronger; then, after making sure the Overseer wasn't in sight, he rode the wind straight into the sky.

When the flow abated he leveled, not looking down, waiting for an elevator wind. Presently one came. He let it lift him tumbling skyward, higher still and higher, till he was on an even plane with the lower clouds and the wind faded away. He levitated, lay in the sky like a small green star and looked down at the world below.

The schoolhouse was a tiny green burr directly beneath him, barely distinguishable from the tiny green burrs of the innumerable houses that dotted the hills and the valley. To his right, the country-

side spread out as far as he could see; to his left lay the sparkling sea. Inland, a blue teardrop of a lake caught the morning sunlight. A silvery liana of a river slowly turned to gold.

He found a wind path leading seaward and wafted along it till he was high over the littoral. He climbed a wind slope and slid down its other side. He levitated over a lazy cloud, then dropped through its cool white mists. He caught another elevator wind and again rode it into the blue till he was sure he had reached the top of the sky. Breathless, he paused to rest.

Long and swift and shining, it rode the sky buoyantly as though the sky were a sea and the far patches of ground below were the sea bottom and as though the clouds were fluffy accumulations of white seaweed. Its wake was orange and blue, and there were little round windows all along its sides, only Skim didn't think of them that way, because he had never before seen windows.

He had never seen a ship either, but he had heard his father quote the Santhrith's description so many times that he hadn't the slightest trouble in making identification. Only he hadn't thought the ship would be so big. Why, it was as big as a house . . . as big as two houses . . . as big as—as—why, it was almost as big as the *valley*!

It was also very close. Too close, Skim realized belatedly as the air flow caught him and sucked him toward the shining hull. He fought frantically to be free, but he was helpless. He went tumbling past the windows all the way to the tail, narrowly missing the orange and blue fire of the jets. The wake caught him, tossing him this way and that till he no longer knew up from down. When it finally released him and left him lying limply in the air, the shining ship was gone.

Skim had known it would be back. He had waited patiently all day in the clouds, safely out of the Overseer's sight. Sure enough, back it came, but not till after the sun had set and the stars were in the sky. The ship had descended as the Santhrith had prophesied it would, and had come to rest on the shore of the Great Sea; and Skim, terrified at having broken another of the Overseer's rules—the sunset curfew this time—had hurried home and surreptitiously attached himself to the house.

SKIM's father had finished quoting from the Santhrith, and a great

rustling began as Skim's two hundred thousand brothers and sisters commenced settling down for the night. The majority of them were either too young or too old to go to school. Still, so many pupils were in attendance that the others had not missed him, which was a good thing, because Skim's father set great store by school, almost as much as he did by the Santhrith. This was owing in large part to the Overseer's contagious enthusiasm for the school system. Having established it—and taken over the duties of truant officer—he naturally wanted to see it work, and never lost an opportunity to let the various fathers know how important the system was to the future of their race.

The Overseer had also established the calendar, subdividing the four seasons into five months per season, the months into six weeks each, and the weeks into seven days apiece. It was said that he'd had a hand in the creation of the Santhrith, but of course no one knew for sure. Certainly Skim didn't He'd never cared much for the Santhrith anyway, except for the part about the ship. The rest of it was mere repetition: first there had been the great darkness, and then there had been the seeds, and after the seeds had come the fathers, and after the fathers, the children.

Now, of course, the part about the ship had become the most important part of all—or would when the news of its arrival spread around. Even as the thought crossed Skim's mind, a vast rustling began in the distance and swept swiftly inland across the valley. Presently the rustling reached Skim's house, and his two hundred thousand brothers and sisters added their voices to it, chanting the magic words. "A ship, a ship has come, just like the Santhrith said! It has descended from the sky and come down to rest on the shore of the Great Sea—

"And it is filled with overseers!"

A sizable quantity of Skim's smugness went *Poof!* and vanished into thin air. Even *he* hadn't known that there were beings in the ship. As a matter of fact, he hadn't even dreamed of such a thing, for the simple reason that he'd taken it for granted that the ship was solid all the way through. The Santhrith hadn't said anything about its being hollow.

Breathless, he waited for his father to say something appropriate to the moment, but all his father said was "Humph!" It took a lot to

shake up his father, or, for that matter, any of the fathers in the community.

But Skim himself was shaken up and, he could tell from their frenetic rustlings, his brothers and sisters were shaken up too. He didn't dare leave the house now, but first thing tomorrow morning he'd head for the shore of the Great Sea as fast as he could waft, to see with his own eyes the beings that had come on the ship, and—and—

—And then he remembered—tomorrow was Tuesday! Tomorrow, at the break of day, he had to go to school.

Well he *wouldn't* go to school! Father or no father, Overseer or no Overseer, he wouldn't. He'd play hookey again!

A SMALL boy named Archie was on the ship. His light brown hair went this way and that whenever the wind blew. He had eyes the color of asters in autumn. Like most small boys, he liked to go exploring.

On the morning following the ship's arrival on Experimental Station B-6671-A (as the planet was referred to in the Extraterrestrial Agricultural Catalogue) he was one of the first through the locks and down the Jacob's stairway.

"Don't go far from the ship, Arch," his father called from the top of the stairs as Archie stepped to the ground.

"I won't, dad," Archie called back.

Archie's father was a silviculturist and so were all the rest of the grownups who had come on the ship, with the exception of the crew. It was vacation time on Earth and Archie's father had brought Archie along as a reward for doing well in school. Archie had enjoyed the trip immensely, but he missed having kids his own age to play with.

As he stepped to the ground, he saw that several of the silviculturists, including the Senior Silviculturist himself, had already disembarked and were standing under a tree talking a mile a minute. The entire Silvicultural Team was tremendously excited over the aerial photos the ship had taken during the in-close orbit the previous day and they were more excited yet over the possibility that the trees might be intelligent. This latter eventually had come into being last night when the Senior Silviculturist and two of his assistants had gone outside the ship for a look around and every

leaf in the forest, or so it had seemed to them, had begun to rustle.

Archie walked slowly toward the forest, marveling at its magnificence. He wasn't in possession of all the facts pertaining to the experiment, but he was in possession of some. For instance, he knew that this was the second visit the Silvicultural Team had made to Experimental Station B-6671-A. On the first trip they had traveled at faster-than-light velocity so that they could go back in time to plant the maple-tree seeds that formed the basis of their experiment, and they had arrived on Station B-6671-A seventeen years ago. After planting the seeds, they had returned to Earth at inverse ftl—a form of space travel that pushed the traveler ahead in time—arriving there only a few days after their original departure. Then, on the second trip to Station B-6671-A—the one Archie's father took him on—they had traveled by way of conventional space-warp—a form of space travel that caused neither negative nor positive temporal distortion. Thus, the Silvicultural Team had been able to return to the scene of the planting seventeen years later without having to *wait* seventeen years.

Archie also knew that the law forbade ftl and inverse-ftl velocities, and that you had to have special permission to use them. Like most laws, the ban was sometimes ignored—usually by professional "transseemen" who, for a price, would ferry anyone either into the future or into the past. The Silvicultural Team, though, had had no need to break a law. They had had a long range experiment to carry out. Obtaining permission had been a breeze.

Why would anyone go to so much trouble just to plant maple-tree seeds and observe the result? Archie knew the answer to that one too. The Congress of Galactic States—or COGS, as everybody called it—was honeycombed with "extraterrestrial" bureaus. Each bureau was in constant competition with all the other bureaus and, in order to keep itself funded, had to have a project in the works at all times. Otherwise, COGS might put it on the inactive list, which would automatically throw its members out of a job. To be out of a job in Archie's era meant social ostracism and economic disaster. Gone were the days when a doting government would tide you over till tomorrow.

Gone also were the days when bureaucrats sat behind desks. Today, bureaucrats had to be qualified professionals and had to move out and earn the funds the government allocated to them.

Sometimes they had to resort to trivial projects to keep the money rolling in, but at least they had to earn it. They stocked alien lakes, introduced new elements into alien soils, planted seeds and what have you. They did these things to the best of their ability, because COGS took as dim a view of inefficiency as it did of inactivity.

Archie knew all these things, and in addition he knew that the present experiment had gone wrong somewhere. It had to have gone wrong, because the trees he was looking at were full grown instead of seventeen-year-old saplings.

They were unusual in other ways too, he saw as he neared them. They were more symmetrical than terrestrial maples, and their leaves were greener. They had a vibrant quality that terrestrial maples lacked. They weren't moving and yet somehow they *seemed* to be moving—to be marching down to the sea in undisciplined yet somehow orderly ranks.

Archie's gaze traveled up the straight dark holes to the foliage. The leaves had begun to quiver, which was odd, since there was no wind. Also, this was autumn, yet none of them had lost its chlorophyllic hue. He could almost see them imbibing the first rays of the sun and mixing the rays with oxygen and carbon dioxide and moisture and turning out food for themselves and the trees.

As he stood staring at them, some began to fall—or so he thought at first. Then he saw that they weren't really falling but were separating from the trees and wafting inland, as though an off-shore wind were blowing them away. But no offshore wind was blowing.

Archie wasn't alone in staring at the leaves. The silviculturists were staring too. The exodus took at most a minute. When it was over, only half of the leaves remained on the trees. The rest had wafted inland and out of sight.

Archie abruptly remembered something he had seen in one of the blown-up aerial photos—a big spreading tree that stood apart from the others and had literally millions and millions of leaves arranged in orderly rows around it. Was it toward this tree that the leaves were wafting now?

By this time all of the silviculturists had disembarked and under the direction of the Senior Silviculturist were moving inland in groups of five, each group carrying a portable soil-sampling kit.

Archie moved inland too. Soon he was walking among the long shadows of morning in the park-like forest. A leaf floated down

and came to a hovering pause twelve inches from his face.

Archie stared at the leaf. After a moment he could have sworn that it, too, had a face—that he saw a pair of little eyes in the greenness, and a tiny nose and a minuscule mouth. He found it hard to believe his senses. Was he supplying the physiognomy out of his mind?

The leaf shot upward, turned three somersaults in air and returned to its original position. It looked at Archie expectantly—or at least gave him that impression.

Archie couldn't do somersaults in air, but he could do them on the ground. He did three of them. Springing to his feet, still not quite believing what was happening, he faced the leaf.

The leaf turned three more somersaults, then stood on its head or, more accurately, hovered in an upside-down position, its petiole pointing straight up and its centermost scallop pointing toward the ground.

Archie stood on *his* head.

The leaf commenced a series of complicated aerial maneuvers that Archie couldn't even begin to imitate. The leaf seemed to understand his limitations for soon it resumed its first position, did three and a half somersaults, and ended by standing on its head again.

Archie responded in kind.

The leaf ascended to a height of fifty feet—as a prelude, Archie thought to more aerial acrobatics. It paused, seemed to gaze inland at something hidden from Archie's sight. Then, as though scared, it soared rapidly, skimmed over the treetops and was out of sight.

For some time Archie stood where he was, the implications of his experience registering on his mind. Before long he could no longer contain himself. He had to tell someone about the leaf—and about his conversation with it—right away. His father was the logical candidate.

HE BEGAN running toward the nearest group of silviculturists. They had discarded their soil-sampling kit and had gathered into a tight circle reminiscent of a football huddle. The Senior Silviculturist was the quarterback and Archie's father was the second leading line-rusher. Archie's momentum decreased as he approached the perimeter of the huddle, ceased altogether as the men's voices reached him.

THE FIRST ASSISTANT OF THE SENIOR SILVICULTURIST: "The soil accounts for the rapidity of maturation but it simply won't account for the other phenomena. We may as well face the truth, men. When we failed to provide proper shielding for the seeds, we goofed. Radiation, must have penetrated when the ship went through that storm. They mutated."

THE SECOND ASSISTANT OF THE SENIOR SILVICULTURIST: "I think the so-called P-660 enzyme was affected—possibly transformed into something higher on the scale of awareness." (This was Archie's father speaking.) "And when the P-660 enzyme transmuted to P-730, even greater transformation probably took place."

THE FIRST ASSISTANT OF THE SECOND ASSISTANT OF THE SENIOR SILVICULTURIST: "Be that as it may, our problem remains the same. If we report our negligence to COGS we'll be called on the carpet and accused of inefficiency. Everybody here knows what that means."

THE SECOND ASSISTANT OF THE FIRST ASSISTANT OF THE SENIOR SILVICULTURIST (gloomily): "Deactivation."

THE SENIOR SILVICULTURIST: "I'm afraid it's definitely a matter we'll have to take into consideration."

THE SECOND ASSISTANT OF THE SENIOR SILVICULTURIST: "But the alternative to making a report is to make no report at all, and that's unthinkable!"

THE FIRST ASSISTANT OF THE SENIOR SILVICULTURIST: "Oh, but we *would* make a report. We'd simply leave certain—ah—items out of it."

THE SECOND ASSISTANT OF THE SENIOR SILVICULTURIST: "But that's equally unthinkable! If we fail to make known to COGS that we've inadvertently created intelligent trees, then no steps will be taken to provide a cultural supervisor for them. All of us know the odds against a primitive culture evolving into a useful and self-sustaining civilization. Leaving this one to shift for itself would be tantamount to abandoning a baby."

THE FIRST ASSISTANT OF THE SECOND ASSISTANT OF THE SENIOR SILVICULTURIST: "In view of the fact that a cultural supervisor would be sent here via ftl and in view of the fact that we haven't seen one, it's obvious that no steps will be taken, which means that we're debating a dead issue, that we're soul-searching

ourselves for nothing. The only decision we can come to is one that fits the facts, and the only one that fits the facts is that we're not going to report our brave new young world to COGS or anyone else."

THE SECOND ASSISTANT OF THE SENIOR SILVICULTURIST: "Not necessarily. It's perfectly possible that we haven't—"

THE SENIOR SILVICULTURIST: "I think this is something each of us should think over individually. Since it's time for brunch anyway, I suggest that we adjourn to the ship for a bite to eat and deep cogitation afterward. Later in the day we'll have a conference and come to a final decision."

The football huddle broke up and its components started toward the ship. In stooping to pick up the portable soil-sampler, the Second Assistant of the Senior Silviculturist saw Archie. "Come along, Arch. We'll have ham and eggs."

Dutifully Archie accompanied his father back through the forest to the shore of the sea. All the while he kept thinking of the leaf he had "talked" to, wondering over and over whether the silviculturists really would let it down. Somehow he couldn't believe they would. By the time he sat down to brunch he felt better. Afterward, remembering his father's allusion to P-660 and P-730, he borrowed a microfilm book titled *Our Friends, The Trees* from the ship's library, retired to the cabin he shared with his father and lay back in a viewchair to read.

THE reason for Skim's abrupt departure was the Overseer. Skim had had no idea he was in the vicinity until, rising above the ground in maneuvers designed to impress his new-found friend, he caught a glimpse through the foliage of a telltale green shirt and beret.

All the while he'd been "talking" to the little overseer the big Overseer had been silently watching the proceedings from the concealment of the houses. Skim couldn't leave the scene fast enough.

The Overseer was watching and listening to the group from the ship. Nevertheless, he had noticed Skim, and Skim knew it. The Overseer could single out one leaf from among all others, one of his many abilities.

Skim decided to make himself scarce for a while. He spent the rest

of the morning and part of the afternoon playing cloud-pirate by himself. It was lonely without the other kids, but better than sticking around the school and listening to the teacher. Actually the schoolhouse and the schoolteacher were one and the same, but nobody ever thought of them that way. School was all about the birds and the bees and the buds, and about an invisible hormone that enabled Skim and his two hundred thousand brothers and sisters and his father and all the other kids and their fathers to think and see and do. Attending school was a little like hearing the Santhrith. The dull parts, at that.

What difference did it make *why* he could see and do? The important thing was that he *could.*

By mid-afternoon he was tired of playing alone. He remembered the little overseer he had seen during the morning, hitched a ride on a seaward wind, left the littoral and drifted down to the ship.

Not much was going on. Some of the beings who had come from the ship were lolling in its shade, either resting or lost in thought.

Then he noticed something else, barely within the fringe of houses near the beach. A green shirt and a green beret.

He made a wide detour and wafted into a clearing well out of sight of the Overseer. Hovering half a househeight above the ground, he decided to stay for a while.

The Overseer must really be interested in that ship.

O*UR Friends, The Trees* was a long microfilm and hours passed before Archie reached the part about P-660 and P-730.

An important organic substance—known variously as an enzyme, a plant hormone and a phytochrome—is present in deciduous trees and decides when the first leaf will bud in spring and when the first tree flowers will appear. This substance makes a timepiece more complex than any devised by man. Its "Swiss movement" is dependent for accuracy, on the length of days and nights. When the days are exactly long enough and the nights precisely short enough, this catalyst commences the yearly cycle of rebirth and deciduous trees are born anew.

This substance is present in every seed a tree drops. After reaching the ground, most seeds go through a waiting period before coming to life. How long they wait is decided by the en-

zyme—or plant hormone or phytochrome or clock—which is present in each of them in a form called P-660. P-660 is inert during the waiting period. When the time comes to activate the seed it turns into P-730 and brings the seed to life.

We might go so far as to say that P-730 is a tree's thinkability . . .

Archie understood now what his father had meant about the mutation engendered by the radiation storm. Radiation could have transformed P-660 into something higher on the scale of awareness. The transmutation of P-660 into P-730 might have produced even greater awareness.

Was the Silvicutural Team a little like God? If so, they *had* to assume responsibility for their creation.

But *would* they?

The Senior Silviculturist called a conference a short while later. Archie wasn't invited, but he went anyway. Order was called in the shade of the ship. The Senior Silviculturist presided, standing with his back to the ship, facing the forest. All the others, except for the crew, who held themselves aloof from such matters, sat facing him. Everyone knew that this would be a conference in name only. Whatever the Senior Silviculturist decided, he would be unopposed. But conferences were a bureaucratic must—unthinkable not to have one.

Archie had reached a state of turmoil. He wanted desperately to help the new species which the silviculturists had brought into being, but what could a mere boy do? If only he weren't so young—if only he were a graduate forester like his father—if only—

His attention was captured by the Senior Silviculturist's words.

". . . safe to rule out idealism right from the start. All of us here are hard-headed practical men who have fought for and won rightful niches in the economic hierarchy. It's only natural that we should want to retain those niches at any cost. I have a wife and children myself. I know that the rest of you have similar economic responsibilities, so—"

"That sort of let's you off the hook, doesn't it?"

The clear strong voice had come from the forest. The Senior Silviculturist turned to stare at the broad-shouldered man who emerged from among the trees.

Everybody stared.

After stepping onto the beach, the broad-shouldered man

advanced across the sand and halted at the edge of the gathering. He was wearing a forest-green beret, a forest-green shirt, forest-green breeches and black knee-high boots. He was somewhere in his thirties.

He looked at Archie and smiled. A sort of wistful quality came into his blue eyes. Then he looked at the Senior Silviculturist and the smile vanished. "I," he said, "am the cultural supervisor. Better known in these parts as the 'Overseer'."

The Senior Silviculturist seemed visibly to age. "Then we made a full report after all," he lamented. "We betrayed ourselves."

The Overseer shook his head. "No, you didn't betray yourselves—perish the thought." His face had a gentle aspect, Archie noticed, but it also held stubbornness. His blue eyes were cold and fearless. "I came here on my own."

"How long have you been here?"

"Long enough to do whatever needs to be done. You and your subordinates can stop worrying about your jobs and your consciences. Go ahead. Board ship. Return to Earth."

"Before we do, I wonder if you would be more specific as to what you've done." Archie recognized his father's voice. His father was standing up and questioning the Overseer eagerly. "Also, I wish you'd explain how a deciduous forest like this one is ecologically possible."

The coldness faded in the Overseer's eyes as he looked at Archie's father. A quality came into his voice that Archie couldn't identify. "Certainly. I'll be glad to elaborate.

"My first problem was communication—not as difficult as you might imagine. Once I'd mastered it I selected one of the more intelligent trees and programed it with everything I thought a burgeoning young culture should have. This tree functions as both our schoolhouse and our schoolteacher.

"I prepared my charges for the coming of your ship by incorporating the idea in their bible, which I helped them to create. The bible is in oral form, as there's no written language as yet. I hope that some day they'll have one. Meanwhile the eidetic memories of the trees make retention a simple matter. I'm not fond of tradition-directed societies, but I know of no safer way to start one out.

"To strengthen familial ties I've conditioned the individual leaves of each parent tree to think of the tree as their father and to think of

each other as brothers and sisters, although strictly speaking no sexual demarkation exists. The trees regard themselves as parents. They feel responsible for the welfare of their respective offspring.

"The leaves work during the summer months much as ordinary leaves do. At a certain age, they go to school during the autumn and spring. I've relatively few graduates as yet, but the ones I have seem contented with their lot. As yet, I've no idea of the longevity of either the trees or the leaves.

"During the cold months the leaves remain on the trees in suspended animation. In spring they awake and school is resumed until the services of the leaves are required by the parent trees.

"Reproduction takes place in the same way as on Earth, but I personally plant the seeds. In this way I not only can control population but see to it that each family has room enough for growth. Since no annual leaffall occurs, no humus builds on the forest floor. In fact, in the botanical sense of the term no forest floor exists. But the soil itself, as you've already discovered, contains properties unknown on Earth. These properties not only provide for an accelerated growth rate but also obviate any need for humus.

"I think that covers your question. Any others?"

THE Overseer surveyed his audience, clearly awaiting further interrogation.

Again, only Archie's father spoke. "How did you learn about the trees?"

A warmth showed in the Overseer's face. However he might disapprove of the other silviculturists, he clearly liked Archie's father. "Let's say a little leaf told me about them," he said. He remained where he was for a few more minutes, looking from face to face; then, after a final glance at Archie's father, he turned and walked back to the forest. A moment later he disappeared among the trees.

"Well, he certainly let us off the hook," Archie's father said. "I wonder, though—"

"You should be rejoicing, not wondering," said the Senior Silviculturist. "Alert the captain, someone. Inform him that we're leaving at once."

Archie was staring at the place in the forest where the Overseer had disappeared. The thoughts were moving so fast in his mind that

he could hardly keep up with them. And as though to confuse himself still more, he kept thinking of the Overseer's final words:

Let's say a little leaf told me about them . . .

In a way a little leaf had told Archie about the trees too. A remarkable coincidence, to say the least; even more remarkable, he and the Overseer had another thing in common.

They both liked Archie's father.

Archie stared even harder at the forest, but he was no longer seeing the trees; he was seeing space and time.

What was to prevent him from coming back here after he grew up and graduated from forestry school, and helping the Overseer out? No law said there couldn't be *two* Overseers.

What was to prevent him, as far as that went, after he grew up and graduated, from coming back here via faster-than-light travel and arriving at the same time the original Overseer arrived, then helping him out from scratch? Certainly his father wouldn't object to the idea. On the contrary, his father would be all for it.

Archie's thoughts rushed on, attaining ftl velocity themselves—and came to an abrupt halt. Because if he did come back—if he had come back—via ftl travel, there would be two Overseers here now; and it was clear from the Overseer's speech that there was only one. So he couldn't come back—couldn't have come back. Unless—unless—

Suddenly Archie knew who the Overseer really was—or rather, would be.

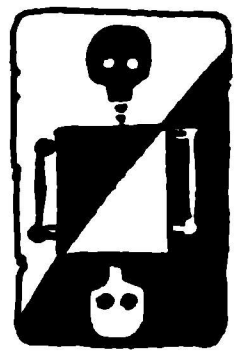
FROM his hiding place in the forest Skim saw the ship rise above the trees, soar into the sky and twinkle for a moment like an evening star. He saw it disappear.

He was bitterly disappointed. He'd wanted the ship to stay forever so that he and the little overseer could become fast friends.

He glanced away from the sky and gave a little start. The big Overseer had entered the clearing and was standing just beneath him. He returned Skim's glance with one of his own—not the stern forbidding look usually reserved for such occasions, but a warm and friendly one. Skim leveled, not understanding. Did rules and regulations have more dimensions than he had been aware of?

A moment later the Overseer looked up at him again—and winked. □

IN THE CARDS



ROBERT BLOCH

Fear gave him three days—
life only a moment—to die!

"SATURDAY night?" Danny said. "What do you mean, I'll die on Saturday night?"

Danny tried to focus his eyes on the old woman but he couldn't make it—too smashed. She was a big fat blur, like the cards spread on the table between them.

"I am truly sorry," the old woman murmured. "I can only read what I see. It is in the cards."

Danny grabbed for the edge of the table and stood up. The smell of incense in the darkened room was making him sick. It wasn't easy to stand and it wasn't easy to laugh either, but he managed.

"Hell with you, sister. You and the cards too."

The old woman stared at him but there was no anger in her eyes, only compassion. Somehow that was even worse.

"I'm not gonna die on Saturday night," Danny told her. "Not me. You're talking to Danny Jackson, remember? I'm a star. A big star. And you, you're just a—"

Standing there, lurching there in the darkness, he told her what she was, using a vocabulary ripened and enriched by thirty years in show biz.

Her eyes never flickered, her glance never wavered, and there was

still nothing in her gaze but pity when he finally ran out of breath.

And ran out of the reeking room, her pity pursuing him.

"*You will die on Saturday night.*"

Damned echo in his ears, even when he gunned the Ferrari and roared away from the curb. The car swayed, playing tag with the yellow line; good thing it was so late and the street was clear of traffic.

It was late and he was bombed, bombed clean out of his silly skull. Had to be, or he'd never have driven all the hell down to South Alvarado to roust a phony, faking old fortune-teller out of bed and lay a fifty-dollar bill on her for a phony, faking fortune, the old witch, the old bitch—

But they were all bitches, all of them. Lola was the worst.

Danny made it to Bel Air, avoiding Sunset and coming up Pico until he could cut over on a side street through Westwood. When you're on the sauce you learn the right routes, the routes that take you safely through the streets, safely through the minutes and the hours and the days and the nights, even when your nerves are screaming and Lola is screaming too.

Screaming and screaming. She'd been waiting up for him and she cut loose the minute he opened the front door.

"Goddam it, where were you, don't you realize you've got a six o'clock call tomorrow morning—?"

A lot more followed, but Danny slammed the door on it, the door of the guest room. He hadn't slept in the same bed with Lola for three months, not only because of what Dr. Carlsen had told him about his ticker.

It was better here without her, dropping his clothes and flopping down on the old king-size, away from the bitch, away from the witch.

ONLY the witch didn't go away. Here in the dark, Danny could see her eyes again, staring at him as if she understood, as if she *knew*. But nobody knew what the Doc had told him, not Lola, not the studio, not even his own agent. So how could some old bag take one look at him and figure it out?

In the cards. It's in the cards.

Her eyes, he remembered her eyes when she'd said it. They were so deep and black. Black as the ace of spades lying there on the

table. The queen of spades had turned up too, and that's when she made that crack about him dying on Saturday night.

Tomorrow was Wednesday. Wednesday, Thursday, Friday, Saturday—

To hell with it. That's what he'd told the old klooch and that's what he told himself. Tomorrow was Wednesday and he'd better think about that; Lola was right, he did have a six o'clock call. The test was shooting. That was what counted. Not counting the days until Saturday, but the few short hours until that test.

Wednesday. Named after Woden, the god of war and battles. Danny's name had been Kuhlsberg once, not Jackson, and he knew, he remembered. Wednesday was war, all right, a battle to leave the bed with that head of his pounding away. Thank God he could sneak out before Lola woke up, and drive through the foggy streets before traffic began to build on the San Diego Freeway.

The fight was only beginning, the fight to smile there under the lights while Benny plastered on the old pancake makeup and fitted the little wings to the perspiring temples where the hairline had eroded. The perspiration was alcohol oozing out of him, it wasn't flop-sweat, because Danny knew he had nothing to worry about. The test was a formality, all they wanted was six minutes of film to show the network brass and the agency people in New York. The series was all set, Fischer had told him that last week, and Fischer never conned him. Best damned agent in the business. So no panic, he knew his lines, all he had to do was step onto the set and walk through the scene. If there were any fluffs, Joe Collins would cover for him. Joe was a good man, he'd never carry a lead himself but he was a real pro. And Rudy Moss was a hell of a director—also an old buddy. They were all friends here, and they all knew how much was riding for them on this series.

"Ready for you, Mr. Jackson."

Danny smiled, stood up, strolled out to where Joe Collins was waiting on the set. He found his chalk-marks, somebody from the camera unit dragged out his tape, the mike-boom came down and he tested his voice for gain. Then they hit the lights and Rudy Moss gave him his cue for action and they rolled.

They rolled and he blew it.

The first take he forgot the business with the cigarette. They cut and started from the top, and he fouled his crossover to Joe, stepped

right out of camera before he realized it. So they rolled again, and by this time he was uptight and Moss didn't like what he was getting, so it was back and take it from the top once more. Then Danny started losing lines—but those things happen. The only trouble was, he had to stand there under those lights and there were interruptions when a plane went over and ruined the sound and somebody came barging in right on the middle of his long speech and then Joe jumped one of his cues and the idiot script-girl threw him the wrong prompt and he was sweating, wringing wet, and his hands started to twitch and Moss was very patient and it was Take Sixteen and no break for lunch and he could see the looks the crew was giving him and finally they wrapped it up at three-thirty, eight and a half solid hours for a lousy dialogue bit, nothing but two-shots and closeups, and it was a bomb.

Everybody was very polite and they said, "Nice work, Mr. Jackson," and "Great", and "You did it, boy," but Danny knew what he'd done.

The fight was over and he'd lost.

NO SENSE going home because Lola would ask him how did it go and Fischer would be calling and to hell with it. He thought of a little joint on the ocean below Malibu, where the lights were nice and dim and you could buy a good steak to anchor the martinis.

That was the right answer. Though he scraped a fender leaving the parking lot after they closed up the place, he made it home without pain. Lola wasn't waiting up for him tonight—tonight hell, it was morning already, Thursday morning—but the bed in the guest room felt better than ever.

Until he closed his eyes and saw what was in the cards. Thursday morning. *Thursday. And two days from now—*

If the old bitch was so good at telling fortunes, if she could see everything in the cards, why hadn't she tipped him off about the test? There was a *real* life-and-death matter for you and she never even mentioned it. Of course she didn't; what could she or anybody else see in a lousy pack of playing cards? That's all they were, ordinary playing cards, and she was a cheap grifter and Saturday was only another day of the week.

And this was Thursday. Thursday noon, now, with Danny up and groping his way to the john and shivering in the shower and shaving

and stumbling downstairs and finding the note and reading it twice, three times, before it finally sank in.

Lola gone. Left him. "*Sorry . . . tried to get through to you . . .can't stand watching you destroy yourself . . . please . . . need help . . . try to understand.*" God, the phrases in that note, like daytime soaper dialogue. But it all added up. Lola was gone.

Danny called her mother's place in Laguna. No answer. Then he tried her sister at Arrowhead. Nothing. By this time he'd cased the joint, seen that she'd cleared out the works, everything; must have taken her all day to pack the station wagon. She meant it; probably been planning the caper for weeks. Next thing he'd be getting a call from some hotshot lawyer, one of those Lear-jet boys. Christ, the least she could have done was waited to find out if he would make the series.

The series. Danny remembered now, he was due in Projection Room Nine at two o'clock; they were screening the test.

But it was after one now. Besides, he didn't need to see the running. He knew what they had in the can—six minutes of worms.

So he climbed in the car and went to Scandia for lunch instead; at least he intended to have lunch, but by late afternoon he still was no farther than the bar.

That was where his agent caught up with him, somewhere between the fifth and the sixth Bloody Mary.

"Thought I'd find you here," Fischer told him. "Get moving."

"Where we going?"

"Up to the office. I'd hate to have all these nice people here see me hit you right in the mouth."

"Get off my back, Fischer."

"Get off your butt." He hauled Danny from the stool. "Come on, let's go."

Fischer's office was on the Strip, only a few blocks away. By the time they were there, Danny was up the wall; he knew what Fischer was going to say.

"No calls," Fischer told the girl on the board. Then he took Danny into the private office *behind* his private office and closed the door.

"All right," Fischer said. "Tell me."

"You saw the test?"

Fischer nodded, waiting. His mouth was grim, but the hard face and the hard talk never fooled Danny. He knew that was Fischer's

act. Fischer was a sweet guy inside, always bleeding for his clients. You could see the compassion in his eyes, it was there now, the same look of pity that the fortune-teller had—

Danny wanted to explain about the fortune-teller but he knew how he would sound and besides it wouldn't do any good. All he could do was say, "I wasn't loaded. I swear to God I wasn't loaded."

"I know that. And nobody said you were. I wish you *had* been—I've seen you play a scene with a couple of drinks under your belt and come off great." Fischer shook his head. "Everybody on the set knew what was wrong with you yesterday, but that wouldn't matter. The trouble is, everybody in the projection room could see it today, up there on the screen. You were hungover."

"It was that bad, huh?"

"That bad?" Fischer sighed, swiveled his chair around to face Danny. "Do I have to spell it out for you, Danny? A guy makes three pictures in a row, all bombs, and he's had it. Sure, I know that Metro thing wasn't your fault, but the word is out and I haven't had an offer for six months. When it comes to films, you're scrubbed. Moynihan tells me—"

"Never mind about Moynihan," Danny said. "He's my business manager. He shouldn't even be talking to you."

"Who else can he talk to when you won't listen?" Fischer opened a folder on his desk, glanced at a type-sheet. "You owe eighty-three on the house and nine on the cars. You're in hock on the furniture, that's another twenty including the redecorating. Your checking account is minus zero. And if they yank your credit cards, you won't have enough left to buy a bagel at Linny's."

Cards? Why did he have to mention cards? Danny felt a rush of heat and loosened his collar.

"KNOCK it off," he said. "All I need is a break."

"I *got* you a break." Fischer was staring at him across the desk, just like the old lady had stared at him across the card table. "Three months I been rupturing myself to line up this TV deal for you. Salary, residuals, participation—I don't have to tell you, you could've been set for life."

Life? Suppose I have only two more days? Danny's chest was pounding, he couldn't take any more of this, but he had to listen. Through the blur he could see Fischer's jabbing finger.

"So you make the test. And what do I see? You, walking around up there like a goddam zombie—"

Zombie. Danny knew what a zombie was. *The living dead.* Something was throbbing inside, throbbing so loud that he could barely hear Fischer saying, "Why, Danny? That's all I want to know. Tell me why."

But Danny couldn't tell him why because he had to take off his jacket, had to take off his shirt, had to tear off his skin and dig out whatever it was that throbbed and pounded, throbbed and pounded underneath. He brought his hand up, feeling the pain shoot through his arm and then—

Nowhere.

Danny opened his eyes and saw the white ceiling. White as in Cedars or Sinai, a hospital ceiling.

So that's where I am. I'm not dead. And what day is this?

"Friday," said the fat nurse. "No, mustn't sit up. Doctor wants us to be careful."

Fat nurses and baby talk, that's all he needed. Doc Carlsen was more helpful when he showed up in the evening.

"No, it's not a stroke, nothing like that. From where I stand it may not even have been a cardiac. Dehydration, malnutrition, general exhaustion—you've been drinking again, haven't you?"

"Yeah."

"I've prescribed some sedation for tonight. You'll have some lab tests tomorrow, to play safe."

"When can I go home?"

"After we check out the tests. Meanwhile, a little rest won't hurt you."

"But tomorrow—"

Danny broke it off right there. What could he say, that tomorrow was Saturday, tomorrow he was going to die; it was in the cards?

Dr. Carlsen didn't believe in cards; he believed in tests and charts and specimens. And why not? Those things made a hell of a lot more sense than the ace of spades on a dusty table in some creep-joint down on South Alvarado.

Being here in the hospital made sense, too. At least he had somebody looking after him and if there *was* trouble tomorrow—

But there wouldn't be. All he had to do was swallow the nembies and go to sleep.

Danny stared at the white ceiling until it turned black and then there was nothing again, nothing but sleep, sweet sleep and the queen of spades sat across the table from him and watched while he reached for a drink only the drink wasn't there because Lola had taken it away with her when she left and he knew it didn't matter, it was only a lousy test and he could walk through it in his sleep, sweet sleep—

Danny was very much alive on Saturday morning and hungry as hell. But they wouldn't give him breakfast, not even a cup of coffee, until after they wheeled him down to the lab for the tests.

For a moment, when they were taking blood, he panicked; but like the nurse said, it wasn't going to kill him, and it didn't.

And afterwards he had lunch, a big lunch, and they let him get up to go to the john and a nice fag orderly came in and gave him a shave and he dozed off again until dinnertime.

So Saturday was almost over and he was still with it. Hell, he was even beginning to feel good, and if he could only have a drink and a cigarette—

"Sorry. Doctor wants us to take our sedative again tonight." The fat nurse was back, a real sweetheart. But Danny took the pills and the water and settled back, because it was nine o'clock, only three hours to go. If he made the stretch everything would be right on.

If he made it? Hell, he was going to make it, he knew it now, he could feel it in his bones, in his ticker. No throbbing, no pounding; all is calm, all is bright. Bright as the white ceiling which was turning gray now, turning black again, black as the ace of spades.

Something started to thump in Danny's chest, but he tensed up, forcing himself to relax—that was funny, tensing up to relax, but it seemed to work, it was working—and now everything was calm again, calm and peaceful, he could sleep because it was quiet. *Quiet as the tomb*—

Danny screamed.

The lights went on and the fat nurse came running into the room. "Mr. Jackson, what's the matter, don't you know it's one in the morning—"

"One in the morning?"

She nodded.

"*Sunday* morning?"

When she nodded again, Danny could have kissed her. In fact he

tried to *kiss* her because he'd made it now and he was home free.

It was easy to go back to sleep then. Everything was easy now that it was Sunday.

Sunday, with the big breakfast and the big paper. Sunday, with the fresh shave and the fag orderly bringing in the flowers from the studio—wait a minute, what the hell was this, there was nothing in the papers, how did the studio know?

DANNY found out when they plugged the phone in for his first call. Fischer.

"Look," Danny said. "I'm sorry about the other day—"

"I'm not," said Fischer. "Shut up and listen."

So Danny listened.

"Maybe it was the best thing that could have happened. Anyway, it gave me a notion. I called the studio and tipped them."

"*You* called the studio?"

"Right. Told them about Lola, too."

"Where'd you pick that up?"

"She phoned me Thursday night. Don't worry. I made her promise not to break the story to the papers until we were ready."

"Ready for what?"

"Stop interrupting and listen," Fischer said. "I told the studio the truth only I juggled the dates a little. Said that Lola split with you on Tuesday instead of Wednesday and you knew it when you came to do the test. The Pagliacci bit, your heart was breaking but the show must go on—you didn't look so good in there but you were giving it the old college try and how could they fault you when you were so shook up you actually collapsed the following day?"

"Do you have to sound so happy about it?" Danny asked.

"I *am* happy and you're gonna be happy too. Because they went for the bundle. Considering the circumstances, they're going to scrap the test, they've already been on the horn to New York and everything's set. You'll do another shot next week, as soon as the Doc says it's okay. How's that for openers, buddy-boy?"

It was good for openers and kept getting better. Because the next one who called was Lola. Crying up a storm.

"Sorry . . . all my fault . . . should have stood by when you needed me . . . told the lawyer to forget it . . . Doctor said I could come to see you tomorrow . . . oh my poor baby . . . "

Oh my aching—

But it was fine, it was A-okay because a divorce right now, even a separation, would have clobbered him for life. And he *had* a life, a whole new life, starting today.

Dr. Carlsen laid the topper on it that afternoon. "Preliminary lab reports are in. Too early to nail it down, but it looks as if I made a pretty good educated guess. Little murmur, slight irregularity there, but nothing we can't control with medication. And a dose of common sense."

"When do I cut out of here?"

"Perhaps tomorrow."

"I was thinking of right now."

Dr. Carlsen shrugged. "You're always thinking about right now. That's your problem." He sat down on the edge of the bed. "I was talking about common sense, Danny. Want me to spell it out for you? Two, maybe three drinks a day—one before dinner, one after, perhaps a nightcap if you're out for the evening. Regular hours. We can talk about the diet and exercise later. But the main thing is for you to stop running scared."

"Me?"

Danny gave him the big smile, but it didn't register. "You're not on now," the Doc told him. "I know what knocked you down. It was fear. Fear of what was happening to your career, fear because your marriage was coming unglued, fear of a heart attack—"

Okay, smart-ass.

"Don't you understand, Danny? Sometimes the dread is worse than the disease itself. If you can learn to face up to the things you're afraid of—"

Danny smiled, Danny nodded, Danny thanked him, Danny hustled him the hell out of there.

Maybe the Doc was right at that. The part about fear made sense. The only trouble was, he didn't know what Danny had really been afraid of. If Danny had told him, Carlsen would have called a shrinker. You don't go around spilling about fortune-tellers who predict you'll die on Saturday night.

But that was over and out now. This was Sunday and he felt great and he wasn't afraid of anything any more.

He wasn't afraid to climb out of bed and take his clothes from the closet, dress himself and march down the hall to the desk. He wasn't

afraid of the fat nurse or the head nurse either, when he told her he was checking out.

Sure there was a lot of static and threats about calling Doctor and this is all highly irregular, Mr. Jackson, but if you insist, sign here.

Danny signed.

The night air felt good as he waited for a taxi out front, and everything was quiet—there was that Sunday feeling in the streets. That *Sunday* feeling.

Danny gave the driver his address and settled back for the long haul out to Bel Air. The driver was smart, he ducked the traffic on Wilshire and swung down over Olympic. Crummy neighborhood, lots of neon fronting the cheap bars—

"Hold it, changed my mind. Let me out here."

What the hell, why not? Didn't Doc say he could have a drink before dinner? Besides, it wasn't the drinks, it was the fear. And that was long gone now. It had died last night.

THAT called for a celebration. Even in a Mickey Mouse joint like this, topless waitresses and faceless customers; that little bird down at the end of the bar wasn't too bad, though.

"Scotch rocks." Danny glanced along the bar. "See what my friend wants."

She wasn't his friend, not yet, but the drink did it. And by the time they had a second one he and Gloria switched to a back booth.

That was her name, Gloria, one of the strippers in the floor show here, but she didn't work Sundays, sort of a busman's holiday if you get what I mean.

Danny got what she meant and a lot more, too; good figure, nice legs, the right kind of mouth. Hell, this was a celebration. It had been a long, long time. So Lola was coming back tomorrow, big deal. This was tonight. *Sun*day night. The first night, the grand opening of a smash hit, a long run. *The New Life of Danny Jackson.*

"Danny Jackson? *You*?" Gloria's mouth hung open. Nice, sensual lower lip. He could always tell, it was like radar, or flying by the seat of your pants. Not the seat exactly, but close. Funny, very funny, and that calls for another drink—

"Of *course* I know who you are." Gloria chug-a-lugged pretty good herself and now they were wedged into the same side of the booth together, all comfy-cozy.

And he was telling her how it was that he happened to fall in here, everything that happened, no names of course, but it was easy to talk and maybe if he had one more for the road—

The road led next door, of course; he had noticed the motel when he left the cab. All very convenient.

George Spelvin and wife is what he signed, and the clerk gave him a funny take but Danny wasn't afraid, he wasn't running scared now.

The ace of spades was only another card in the deck and this was a brand new deal; the queen of spades was gone and Gloria was here instead. Cute little Gloria, red hair against a white pillow, and the bed lamp throwing shadows on the wall. Big black shadows like big black eyes, staring and watching and waiting—

But no, the fear was gone, he was forgetting. *Sunday* night, remember? And he wasn't destroying himself, that was over and out, it had all been a mistake. A mistake to get drunk, a mistake to surrender to a sudden impulse and have his fortune told, a mistake to believe a kooky old klooch and her line about the cards. Cards don't control your life, *you* control your life. He'd proved it. Well, hadn't he?

"Sure, Danny. Sure you have."

He must have been thinking out loud, telling Gloria the whole story. Because she was unbuttoning his shirt and helping him and murmuring, "Sunday, that's what it is, remember? Nothing to be afraid of, I won't hurt you—"

Damned right she wouldn't. She was just what the doctor ordered. Only he hadn't ordered *this*. This one drink before dinner and regular hours and don't be scared. Okay, so he wasn't scared. And to hell with the doctors and the fortune-tellers too.

Danny was ready and he grabbed Gloria and yes, this was it, this was what he'd been waiting for. He stared down into eyes, her dark eyes, like the eyes of the old woman. And now they were widening with pleasure and he could see the pupils, black aces on a dusty table. And there was no pleasure, only this tearing pain, as the Ace of Spades kept coming up, up, *up*—

Danny didn't know it when he died, and he didn't know why he died, either. Gloria had told him nothing, not even the name she used when she did her strip act. It was just one of those phony names that strippers always use. Saturday is what she called herself—Saturday Knight. □

FUNNY PLACE

NAOMI J. KAHN

Humor can be grim, especially for girls of tender years . . .

LUNA PARK is gone now. Steeplechase went later. The Bowery —that non-street sandwiched between Surf Avenue and the Boardwalk—is probably still there. But the bored, tired ticket-sellers are gone, I don't doubt, no longer touting their whips, fun houses, roller coasters, freak shows. No longer do occasional tourists wander along on a summer weekday, following the jaded kids of Coney Island.

The Bowery is—was—sort of a wide alley broken by streets that crossed it running from north to south. Ending at the Boardwalk, it was filled with rides and shooting galleries, cotton candy stands and spook houses, litter and noise. And in the ticket booths stood those grim, tired men, eyes unseeing, each a jack-in-the-box with a broken spring, listing first to one side and then the other and connected by windblown sand, empty boxes, mustard-stained paper napkins.

Only half a block from the ocean, the Bowery had a fishy smell overwhelming even the rancid buttery scent of Coney Island popcorn. The fish odor was the first thing you would notice after being away for a while. I've been away a long time.

It's just about—oh, let's see—twenty-one years since I was a girl wandering alone along the Bowery, a fifty-cent piece clutched in my fist, trying to decide how to spend it and not really wanting to spend it because the fifty-cent piece was somehow more valuable in the having than in the spending. The ride I really wanted to go on, anyhow, always was the Bobsled on Surf Avenue, and I didn't dare. I never did dare. It was one of those few rides about which horror stories circulated. The Bobsled was a kind of roller coaster that traveled, I'd been told, along the sides of walls. And once in a while, someone fell out.

When I was about eight—and that was more than twenty-one years ago—my soon-to-be uncle took me to Steeplechase for the first time. I suppose I had a wonderful day, but my memory of when a friend of my father's took me to the merry-go-round and let me ride three whole times is much stronger. I guess then I was six. Before that I had been permitted only one ride at a time. Then on a glorious rainbowed day in my sixth year I was given three.

BY the time I was thirteen I was allowed to go to Steeplechase alone. It was about a mile from where we lived and I could do the

whole hike on the Boardwalk, and what could be safer than that? To my right—to the south—stretched the railing lined with wooden benches on which old people were sitting wrinkled in the sun. They held tinfoil-covered reflectors to bounce the sunshine up under their chins but had their noses covered with bits of folded paper to keep the sun away. To my left were homes, of all things, for a while. Then came the health food store where my mother shopped, where a wizened little man who looked like a tree root told me that candy was poison. He was found dead, years later, half in and half out of his dirty little store—he had lived there, too—with his arms stretched out in a last reach for something healthy that might save him. He had died of a rat bite.

After the health food store came more houses, some with gypsies in them, and eventually the rides began, the merry-go-round first. There were other merry-go-rounds later, but this was my very own merry-go-round, the one that introduced me to merry-go-rounds. I have a photo of me on it at the age of four, surrounded by other children in snowsuits. Our faces were grim. Have you ever noticed that children don't smile on merry-go-rounds? It's true.

So far I've let you know only about myself, and this is not a story about me though I could tell you several. The story is about a girl named Pi I met at Steeplechase that last summer twenty-one years ago, about what happened to her on a summer weekday when nobody much was around but the unseeing ticket-takers and the jaded kids of Coney Island.

Let me explain about Steeplechase. It was a big amusement park, part of it under a roof and the rest stretching over sprawling acreage outdoors. Steeplechase ran from the Boardwalk to Surf Avenue, its east wall marking the western boundary of the Bowery. Its trademark was a jester face that grinned at you from wherever you happened to look in the park. The signs all read: Steeplechase, the Funny Place. And then there was another one of the gaudy joker faces.

Steeplechase got its name from the "steeplechase" horses—wooden carousel horses that ran a sort of roller coaster track indoors and outdoors, zooming around the park with tourists holding on to them for dear life. It was supposed to be a race, of course, but there were only four horses and we regulars knew their normal sequence.

Except we never rode them. You see, there was something else. Steeplechase also had a stage, sort of a little theater complete with audience section. You could have your ticket punched and go directly onto the stage, which you never did more than once. Or you could wind up on the stage inadvertently, by successfully getting through a maze. You got your ticket punched for that, too. Or you could get onto it free by way of the hall of distorting mirrors.

The stage was a multicolored nightmare of blow-holes and inadequate shelters presided over by a malevolent gnome with an electric prod. Boys could get through all right, usually, but not girls. Especially not girls in skirts, who were mercilessly taunted and shocked and tricked until they were over a blow-hole with their skirts high above their heads, their panties visible, their skins pink with embarrassment.

There were other blow-holes in Steeplechase. One was in front of something people were supposed to look in at—I can't remember what it was, and it may be I never got to look. It was controlled by a man sitting high on an enormous plaster Indian elephant, his sole responsibility the air-vents of Steeplechase. He could watch them all from his control booth high above the ground. From down below I could see only his face or, sometimes, the movements of his shoulders—but I would imagine his crafty little hands darting over the controls, his clawed fingers flipping switches and turing dials as lights flickered and he peered gleefully down at his network of blow-holes.

A girl could avoid most vents in the park but not the vents on stage once she was there. Not with that ugly runt doing his thing. Monstrous in balloon pants and clown costume, he was even more horrible because he required no makeup to look grotesque—more horrible, I think, than any of the professional freaks in Coney Island's freak houses, because while they were tragic he was evil.

Years later I saw him on the Surf Avenue bus. He was wearing faded jeans and an old red sport shirt frayed at the sleeves. And I shuddered. I was no longer a child, I was not on the stage, he carried no electric prod. But he looked at me, I thought with recognition, and I shuddered.

All right, back to the stage. As I've said, you could choose to get on it directly—or you could go through the maze and wind up on

it—or you could get onto it free by way of the hall of distorting mirrors.

Or—and here's the unfair part—you were forced onto it when you left the Steeplechase horse ride. That was rotten. The Steeplechase ponies were a ride even the jaded Coney Island kids liked. Not the race aspect of it, of course, because we could call the winners by rote, even allowing for weight variations among the riders. We were better weight-guessers than the guys with the scales and the kewpie dolls for prizes who guessed weight for a living. But the Steeplechase ride was a roller coaster ride with hair on it. When you were out on one of those graceful painted wooden horses, curving out over nowhere, tracing an arc high above the park, hanging on as if your life depended on it, you could really work up a good scare. But a safe scare. The horror stories were all about the Bobsled. Nobody ever really fell off the Steeplechase horses. But you could pretend you almost did.

Except that we never went on them—because the only exit was via that stage.

I haven't told you the worst part about the stage. It wasn't the gnome. I can look back at him now and realize that he was paid to be horrible—though perhaps he was more horrible than he had to be as a revenge on the world that towered above him remorselessly.

I told you that the stage had an audience. Now, here's the dreadful part. To go in and get a seat in front of the stage, you also had to get your ticket punched as though you were going on a ride. We never did because we could watch free, standing in the back behind a slatted gate. But there were some people who did. All men. All tattered-looking, unshaven, strange-eyed men. And they sat there all day. Every day. Watching the skirts on little girls get blown up over their heads.

There was one other terrible thing in Coney Island. It wasn't in Steeplechase itself, but just a block or two east, on the Bowery. It was in front of a fun house, a spook house, and it was the plaster replica of a huge, hideously fat woman writhing in a manner I didn't think obscene then, just frightening. She twisted and undulated and snaked her bigger-than-life arms through the air, all the while throwing back her head with its mane of carroty hair and laughing, laughing, laughing. That recorded laughter was

louder than life, grotesque, inhuman, totally without joy, evocative of shapes half seen in darkened rooms and stories told at camp after lights-out. I can close my eyes still and hear that laughter. And feel cold, numb with cold, brittle with cold. Twenty-one years later.

NOW I can tell you about Pi.

I don't know what her real name was, or where she came from, except that I was sure she lived somewhere in Coney Island. I had never noticed her at school, but that long summer when I frequently wandered down the Boardwalk to look at the rides and the etched faces of the ticket-sellers I began to see Pi staring in at Steeplechase with the wonder of a tourist's child. But she was there every time I was. She must have been there every day. I guess that's why I decided she had to live somewhere around the amusement area.

I think she was about eleven or twelve, though I'm not certain. She was at that tenuous crossing, child to young girl, and she wavered back and forth, a wisp of a kid, always poorly dressed, preadolescent with just a hint of softness where her breasts would soon be, and with an old, wise, sad look frequently in her gray eyes. Her hair hung straight and yellow-brown, and I never saw her smile. She stared in at Steeplechase as if it were someone else's dream.

The first time I spoke to her I had my pocket crammed with baby-sitting money. I approached her on impulse.

"Hey," I said, "Want to go in?" As usual, she was at the Boardwalk side of Steeplechase, looking up at the parachute jump, visibly trembling as the white chutes had a split second of free fall along their guide wires, then billowed out against the sunlit sky.

"Do you mean me?" It was a wisp of a voice, too. Hesitant, soft. Even then she reminded me of a fawn peering out into the clearing from a thicket, its dappled hide a cloak of invisibility in the shadows of oaks and poplars.

"Uh-huh," I told her. "I have enough money for both of us, and it's no fun going in alone. Come on."

Her big eyes grew round, and I could see the fawn looking carefully about, its nostrils quivering, before it dared to leave its cover.

"I'm afraid," she said finally.

"Of what?" I smiled my most reassuring older-girl smile. "There's nothing in there but a bunch of rides."

She jerked a thin shoulder at the jester face, comic book art in vivid primary colors. "It's bad," she whispered.

"It's just paint," I said, kicking impatiently at the fence with the scuffed toe of one shoe. "Come on. It will be fun."

She made up her mind and nodded. "All right," she murmured. "But sometimes people go on those rides and don't come out."

I wrinkled my nose at her. "Oh, baloney," I stated flatly.

"I counted," Pi said.

"You must have counted wrong." Without waiting for her reply, I changed the subject. "What's your name?"

"People call me Pi," she answered.

I was probably insufferable. I know I assumed a woman-of-the-world attitude. Being thirteen, I had been through Steeplechase many times since that first jaunt with my not-yet-uncle and so felt quite superior. But I did steer Pi away from the rides that were duds and over to things I knew were fun and not really scary—like the long slide, for instance, and the whip, and the ride where heavily insulated round cars collided with each other haphazardly as the angled floor underneath them whirled faster and faster. The Silver Streak, I think it was called.

Before going on a ride, Pi had to watch it first to make sure that everyone who got on also got off. And of course I scoffed. Everybody always got off.

I kept her away from the stage almost until the end. But by then she had suppressed her timidity enough to make a request.

"Can't we go on them?" She pointed, and I didn't have to follow her grubby finger to know what she wanted—the Steeplechase ponies.

"It's all a fix," I told her. "I can tell you, every time, which horse is going to win.

She shook her head, her straight tawny hair flying. "I don't care. It looks like such fun."

"Are you sure you'll come out?" I taunted.

"Oh, yes," she said, in all seriousness. "I don't think they're keeping anybody today."

I was wearing pedal-pushers, but Pi had on a skirt. It was the

skirt she had worn every time I had seen her—a cheap, faded flower print. And it was a full skirt, one that would blow sky-high. And I could guess that her panties might be old, maybe torn, an added humiliation.

But I did not tell her about the hidden hazard of the Steeplechase horses. I was thirteen years old and should have known better, but I could not get myself to worn her. The subject seemed too delicate to mention to that fragile innocent of a girl. I let her lead me to the ticket booth. We clambered together aboard a wooden horse, fastening the peeling leather safety strap tightly around us.

It was a great ride. We flew high and free over the gaudy acres below us, alone in a universe spangled with jester faces, our hair streaming out behind us, my arms clutched tightly around the horse's hard neck, Pi's skinny arms holding desperately onto my waist. Ours was a wooden Pegasus. Never mind that there were tracks under us, never mind that our galactic orbit merely traversed the roofs of other rides. I heard Pi's little cries of joy and exuberance, her shouts of exultation as we rounded a curve and plummeted downward only to soar upward at the last possible moment, still clinging to our gallant painted horse.

I honestly did forget what lay in wait for her.

When the ride was over, Pi and I dismounted and headed for the exit. I knew enough to be wary, but Pi walked straight out onto that stage and into a nightmare.

The gnome saw her at once and went for her, waving his electric prod in her face, daring her to take a step forward. Pi pressed back against the entryway, but it was a one-way door. She tried to make herself as flat as possible.

I, knowing where the blow-holes were, dashed on past her, hopped with a thirteen-year-old's agility over the wobbly walkway, and dashed through the exit, safe from the little man. And, sobbing in a breath, I turned to watch Pi through the slatted gate.

The gnome beckoned at her obscenely, trying to entice her forward. But Pi, terrified beyond belief, would not move. Finally he reached forward and grabbed her small wrist, pulling her from the door and at the same time jabbing the prod at her ankles. I could see her wince and cry out. She was off balance, nearly falling, and he pulled her the more, till she tipped and landed on her

knees. She was crying, and her mouth was moving. "Please, oh please!"

He jerked a thumb skyward, prodding her all the while. A wave of drunken laughter hit my ears. I glanced at the audience. There were ten or a dozen men in the front row, all grinning up at Pi and the gnome.

She got to her feet and started to run. He blocked her, spreading his arms out in front of her. She tried to dodge around him, tears running down her cheeks. But he had had years of practice on that stage, and I saw where he was maneuvering her. Another step, another.

Pi's often-washed cotton skirt went straight up, showing skinny legs, a skinned knee, and old-fashioned cotton panties that had been mended and mended again. Thank God, I thought, they're not torn!

He was not done with Pi. Again he danced before her, backing her into a corner, tormenting her with his prod, backing her still further, over another vent. Again her skirt flew up, and her arms flailed helplessly. For a moment she was blinded by her own skirt and stumbled backward. Then she could see again, and she stepped back still further and spied what she thought was a shelter—the yellow doghouse across the stage. She ran for it, crouched and skittered into it.

The gnome laughed, the first sound I'd ever heard him utter, and there was laughter, out of key and jarringly incongruous from those sick watchers in the front row. They knew and I knew what Pi didn't—that there was no escape from the doghouse.

Three tittering girls came through the entrance, distracting the gnome, who ran at them halfheartedly. His attention was still on Pi, cowering in the yellow doghouse, afraid to come out.

"Pi," I yelled, "next time somebody comes, run for it!"

She did not hear me.

Two of the girls got across unscathed, wobbling to the exit. The third ran across an air-vent, but her skirt was tight and rose barely to mid-thigh. There was a sigh of disappointment from the men in the front row. I looked at them. Their hungry red eyes were again on Pi.

The gnome turned back to her now, coaxing, enticing, then suddenly angry. He got down on his haunches in front of the dog-

house door and poked inside with his electric prod. And Pi screamed. And screamed.

He looked disconcerted, peered around and backed up. There were jeers from the audience. He jerked his head toward the exit, and Pi crawled out, her hair a tangle, tears still staining her cheeks. She edged past him and headed for the wobbly walkway.

But he could not resist one last torture; he reached out with his prod and shocked her about the ankles. Pi stumbled, fell, then crawled, sobbing, for the exit. She fell through it and into my arms, crying bitterly.

"Awful, awful—" she gasped over and over again, sobbing hysterically and clinging to me, wet with tears, with perspiration. The men in the audience still stared at her, leered at her through the slatted gate, enjoying this finale to their twisted thrills. I led her away from them, away from the stage, past jester faces that now seemed to leer, too, to a water fountain, where I made her drink. Then I found I had a handkerchief, and I used it to wash her face.

"Awful," she kept saying, now in a quieter, even more frightening way.

"We'll never take that ride again—never," I reassured her, stroking her dull hair, patting her thin shoulders ineffectually. "Forget it, Pi. It's all over."

Finally she nodded and wiped her eyes with the back of her hand, leaving fresh streaks of dirt.

"I'm sorry," she said. "Everything else was a lot of fun. Thanks for taking me."

I smiled at her. "We'll do it again," I told her, "next time I have some baby-sitting money. But we won't go on the Steeplechase horses."

She was still sniffling, but she smiled back and once again wiped her eyes with the back of her hand, rearranging the pattern of grime.

"I guess they didn't want me this time," she said. "They had me, and they let me go."

"They let everybody go," I said impatiently. "I mean that everybody who goes in comes out. It's only an amusement park."

"No," Pi said gravely. "They keep some."

We parted at the Surf Avenue exit, she walking north toward Mermaid Avenue where the windows of the apartments above the

stores looked down at other stores on the opposite side, where vegetables were sold from bins on the sidewalk and where butcher shops had sawdust on their floor. I made my way to the Boardwalk for the walk home to Sea Gate, where the houses had gardens and the sidewalks were edged with trees.

IT was about two weeks later that I had baby-sat again. I decided to find Pi and take her to Steeplechase once more. I felt quite miserable about what had happened, and I wanted to make it up to her with a perfect day at the amusement park. I also wanted to dispel once and for all her silly ideas about the place. And I found her just where I always found her—on the Boardwalk, staring up round-eyed at the parachute jump watching the falling chutes fill with air, glide downward along their guide wires and bounce as they hit bottom. She smiled when she saw me, no longer the frightened deer—at least not frightened of me.

"Want to go in again?" I asked.

She nodded, her gray eyes taking on a luster I had never seen before. "So far everybody's gotten off the parachute jump," she said.

"Of course. What did you expect?"

Pi still wore the same faded print skirt, the same white cotton blouse, sneakers and white socks on her feet. I felt rather noble, as though I were performing an act of charity, taking a poor orphan on an outing.

Well, Pi and I went in and re-rode some of our favorites and skirted the blow-hole near the man in the control booth on the Indian elephant and carefully avoided going too near the stage, though Pi caught a glimpse of the audience—the same men, always the same men—and shivered. The trouble began when I wanted to go through the rotating barrel and Pi didn't. She was afraid.

The rotating barrel was a huge, turning cylinder; the trick was to get through it, from one end to the other, without losing your balance. It was easy once you got the hang of it, and even if you fell you weren't hurt. Even little kids went through it, tumbled, rolled and came out laughing and clamoring for a second try. But Pi was afraid. I guess it reminded her of something else, somewhere else, but I didn't think of that then. I only knew that I,

bestower of her good time, wanted to go through the rotating barrel and she, insolent, ungrateful child, did not.

Oh, I tried cajoling her at first, assuring her that it was easy and that she could not possibly get hurt. As I spoke, the big cylinder went on turning and turning, kids going through, falling, yelling because yelling was part of the fun, and Pi became more and more stubborn.

Finally she tightened her jaw and stared at me defiantly. "No," she said, in as loud a voice as I had ever heard her use. "If I go in there, they won't let me out!"

"That's ridiculous," I told her. "Everybody comes out. There's nowhere else to go."

She took a deep breath and seemed to stand two inches taller. "I won't go in."

"I paid for the tickets, and I say you will," was my illogical response.

I saw her take my below-the-belt blow without flinching. Jaw still tight, she said, "No." That was, I knew, her final answer.

Remember, I'd been having the time of my life being Lady Bountiful, and now my object of charity had departed from her prepared script of doglike gratitude and abject subordination. So I did what any thirteen-year-old would do. I got mad.

I looked up, over Pi's rigid shoulder, and I saw the hall of distorting mirrors.

And I said to Pi, "Okay, forget it, scaredy-cat. I'll take you to a good place for babies."

Some of the stiffness came out of her spine. She smiled contritely. "Where?" she asked, looking six years old.

I gestured with my head. "Over there. They have all those mirrors that make you look fat and skinny and awful. And it's free, too."

Pi followed me, then raced ahead and pirouetted in front of the first mirror, her fears forgotten, her forgiveness quick. Her reflection was a hugh distortion, an immensely fat Pi with a tiny, skinny neck topped by a flattened pinhead. She laughed the pure, clean, innocent laugh of a very young child, our quarrel far behind her.

She went on to the next mirror, which revealed a long, tubular Pi with strange high feet; and the next, showing a hydrocephalic

Pi with a dwarfed body. She looked like the little man on the stage, and the image frightened her. She ran to the next mirror, to see a Pi bent over backward, receding in the distance, and she laughed again and ran on to the next. The last mirror image I saw of her was grotesquely fat, writhing back and forth with insane, mirthless laughter. Then in front of her was a narrow corridor.

I should have said something sooner, I should have warned her. I knew where that corridor led. In my anger with Pi, I had planned that she should go down it to the fearful stage and the gnome. Now I suddenly changed my mind. But I was well behind Pi, three or four mirrors behind. I called out, "Wait. Wait, Pi."

She did not hear me. The innocent, trusting Pi already had threaded the corridor and was out of sight.

I turned and ran, dodging around dawdlers, dashing madly to the slatted gate that gave me a full view of the Steeplechase stage and its hungry, red-eyed audience. I was just in time to see the look of sheer horror on Pi's face as she stood on that stage and realized where she was.

This time, God help me, it was even worse than before—worse because she knew where she was, knew what awaited her, knew there was no escape. She looked at those men in the front row, then across at the gnome waiting for her in his ballooning clown suit, his arms spread wide, electric prod in his right hand. Then she looked across at me, at my white face behind the white-knuckled fists that gripped the slatted gate, and I could read the knowledge of her betrayal in those round gray eyes. Then I think Pi stopped seeing.

She flattened against the doorway as before. She was frozen with fear, moving only when the gnome took her wrist and pulled her forward, the men in the audience yelling their approval. Pi went stumbling over the air-vents, her skirt flying skyward, the men out front leering and laughing and jabbing each other with their elbows. Tears were coursing down her flat cheeks as she dashed at last for the yellow doghouse and cowered inside. It was like seeing a movie for the second time, but all in slow motion, every-one floating, and the projector stopping every few seconds to bring the film to a jarring halt, burning one frame forever into the screen of my mind.

Then two girls and a boy came through the doorway, gay and

clad in summery color, and the gnome went after them. Then three girls wearing bright, full skirts caught his attention. The men in the audience tittered and hooted until four boys emerged on the stage, experienced and evasive. All the while Pi huddled in the doghouse, afraid to come out.

Much time passed. Many kids crossed the stage, some quickly, some slowly, some laughing, others in terror. Still Pi did not come out.

I stood at that slatted gate until closing time, and Pi never came out.

FINALLY I went home. As punishment for being so late to dinner, I was not allowed to go to Steeplechase for two weeks. When the two weeks were up, I went tearing back to the park, hoping to find Pi, as always, staring up at the parachute jump.

But no Pi.

And again the next day and the next. No Pi.

It was toward the end of summer that I wandered down the Boardwalk again, passing the parachute jump with just a quick glance to verify that Pi wasn't there. I was headed for the Bowery to see how long I could hold on to half a dollar and to stare at the strained, bored, uncaring, unseeing faces of the ticket-takers.

I'd gone about a block, past shooting galleries and rides, past cotton candy stands and souvenir shops and penny arcades, aimlessly and without interest, when I heard that maniacal sound—the raucous, hideous, inhuman laughter of the plaster pseudo-woman in front of the house of horrors. The sound reached out and grabbed me, ricocheting off walls and off the littered street, bouncing up around my ears. There was no sound like it anywhere in the world. It was laughter from beyond the grave; it was the laughter of Buchenwald and the Spanish Inquisition, of Salem and the Inferno.

And I moved toward the source, unable to stop myself, until that writhing, twisting, undulating, bigger-than-life obscenity of a replica of a woman was right in front of me.

And I looked up at her, up into her face.

It was a face I had seen before—on that body—reflected in a distorting mirror.

The face was Pi's. □

THE MAN DOORS SAID HELLO TO

JAMES TIPTREE, JR.

It's a friendly town—if
the people you know are
less than six inches short
or more than nine feet tall!

I WAS all alone at the end of the bar when he came in and I heard it distinctly: "*Hello-o!*"

I froze dead. Go away. But he wasn't talking to me. In fact he wasn't talking to anybody unless he was two midgets. Which was possible, I noted apathetically as he receded down the bar. He was about nine feet tall and dressed by Goodwill Industries.

I went back to trying to decide whether I was suffering more here than if I were someplace else. Here was a ticky grill in a part of town I'd never seen before and didn't etcetera. It had the advantage that none of my, aaugh, friends was apt to come in. On the other hand several hours had yielded no help at all. None.

There was the problem of taking a leak first. When I stood up I found my legs had been bent there too long. They kind of floated me at a tall apparition halfway down the bar, but I managed to veer toward the can.

The can door pushed open behind me and I heard it again, gutsier: "*Hiya.*" Mister Tall came through. Oh, no. I concentrated on my image as the most dangerous slightly paralyzed guy five feet six in the world and finished my business fast. When I left I noticed the door creaked a little. It definitely did not speak English.

I had to stop to blow my nose and he came out. The door said briskly, "*Ciao.*"

It had to be some weirdo ventriloquist gig. As he went by I saw him tap the next door, the one with the female business on it.

"*Hi there,*" it murmured. The *door* said it.

Without meaning to I looked at his eyes. He didn't seem to be two midgets.

"I heard that."

He shrugged.

"It's a friendly city."

"Yo." I shuddered.

"Doors." He shook his head and gestured at the bartender. We seemed to be sitting down again. "Ever think about doors? Zam, bang, hit, hit, all day long. Very little empathy."

"Hit, hit." I touched the cool glass to my forehead. A friendly city. A razor-blade pizza, the day I'd been through. Pete, my so-called agent. Hallee, my so-called girl. *Mr. McFarland.* I was bleeding into my socks.

"Take bus doors," the large weirdo was saying. "Or *subway* doors, it's pitiful the beating they take."

This was better than thinking about Mr. McFarland but not very. "I admit I never thought about it from the doors' viewpoint. One of them clipped me yesterday. In the ankle."

"Alienated." He sighed. "Hard to blame them."

The bartender seemed to have opened a slightly better brand. My door-loving acquaintance was doing something elaborate with a thimble on his key chain. I squinted into the bar mirror FBI-style and saw his hand slide under his limp lapels and come out empty. Our eyes met.

"You're pouring gibsons into your pocket."

"Ordinarily I don't let people see me do that." He grinned shyly.

"I saw it. Samples. Some kind of inspector?"

"Oh no." He laughed bashful-like. "It's this housing shortage, you know. It's no joke."

"Fierce," I said in agreement.

"Too right." He had this proud, shy look. A clown. "They're a great bunch of kids. You have no concept how hard it is for girls to find a place to live in this city. I mean like a decent place." He shrugged and the suit sort of billowed around his struts. "It isn't as though I don't have plenty of room."

What a clown. But it was still better than the Pete-Hallee-Mr. McFarland segue.

"You're telling me you have girls living in your clothes?"

He nodded, glancing around.

"WATCH," he smiled. He selected a teeny kernel of popcorn and held it up beside his Misterogers tie.

A little pink thing about as long as a guppy whipped out and snatched the popcorn back into his tie. I saw it clearly. A perfect girl's arm, but perfect, not like those things that pop out of boxes.

I couldn't help going along with him, setting myself up for the pitch.

"Swear the fingers moved."

"Well, of course."

"Let's see the rest of her."

"Ah, they're doing their nails and you know. The stuff girls do at night."

"They? How many have you?"

"There are six on the lease," he said seriously. "The others aren't home yet."

"Oh? Where do they go?"

"Working. What else?" He gave me a sharp look. "Girls in the city, you know, it's rough. I sort of helped them over a couple of months before they connected, but we're all square now."

"Connected?"

"Why, sure." He had that proud look again. "Model agencies, there's heavy demand for small people. You know those ads where some little girl is standing by a big bottle? Compact cars. Campers.

Makes things look roomy. You probably saw them in those 747 jet commercials."

"That figures," I admitted. The new brand seemed to help. My condominium friend was carefully cutting a morsel of onion into his next thimble of gibsons.

"Going to get stoned in there," I warned him.

"Ah, they're sweet kids. They want some to keep for the others."

I watched the little arm zip out again. Believe it, the nails looked purple now. I started to say something dirty and then changed it.

"How do they make out? I mean, you don't see many guys five inches high."

"You don't?" He sounded surprised. "Oh lord, I don't pry. Girls in the city, you know. Lot of them have friends back home, most likely."

My glass kind of slipped then and the scene flowed into a series of hold shots in which my wallet wouldn't come out and he was holding my arm saying, "There's some all right eats down the way." I was working up to resent that when I noticed we were going out.

The door muttered to him as we went through.

"Thanks." He fixed his zipper. "It's a friendly city."

A blast of cold dark smog made me concentrate on my stomach. We floated along.

"Wait." We were at a corner. My highrise companion was sorting through his change. He picked out a Kennedy half-dollar, reached up and laid it on a ledge of the brick wall.

"Borrowed it last week," he explained as we crossed the street.

"Who leaves money on buildings?"

"Well, I don't know who exactly. Tall people's bank, you know, streets with two R's in them. Comes in handy." He thought a minute. "Isn't there one for short people?"

"Not to my knowledge." Quel kook. The scene was stabilizing, I could make out the next street sign: Harrison.

"Try here," I told him.

"Oh, I have all I need now."

"It has two R's. Show me."

He went to the brownstone ledge and stretched up. His fingers came back holding a dime.

"Pigeons," he said apologetically, cleaning his hand. He started to put the dime back and said, "Hey."

He unfolded a note and showed it to me. One wavery little word in pencil: "*Help.*"

"I know, the windows write letters to you."

"Don't be ridiculous." He frowned at the side of the old walkup. "Human people write notes. Real young or real old," he muttered. "Look up there. Somebody feeds birds."

Without another word we dashed around the corner to the front entrance and up the stoop.

"That's locked," I warned him. But we seemed to be going inside. As I passed the door it said excitedly, "*When's the inaugural*?"

"Some of those old fellows get muddled," he commented over his shoulder, going upstairs like a helicopter. I couldn't imagine why I was cantering after him. I caught him on the third landing.

"Fourth from the corner . . . Second door. Here."

He knocked. Nothing happened.

"Hello?"

He knocked again. Something very faint pattered inside.

"Wh—who?"

"I found your note," he said. "We came as fast as we could."

A chain rattled and a chink appeared. He held up the note.

The door opened another inch and I saw a small fist over a lot of collarbones. She was one of those waifs that look as if any clothes are too big for them. Blue temples. Nothing hair. One big naked eye you could stumble into and drown yourself.

She let go her coat and quickly put glasses over those naked eyes.

"Oh, that was silly of me," she said, very dignified from about the level of his belt.

"I'm not so sure, Ma'am." He frowned over her into the room. "Would you mind if we looked around?"

I was still breaking up at my stupid two-story friend thinking some bird in this city would invite two strange males into her place, when I noticed we were in the middle of her bedroom.

What a freezer. One dim light, one foldbed, one fungusy carpet, one big wardrobe, one chair. Sure enough, a box of birdseed by the window. But no TV or radio, no tapes, no book by the chair, nothing. I had the idea she'd been sitting there in her coat under that dim bulb for a month.

My impulsive companion was looking over everything in silence. He sniffed. Then he walked over and slapped the big wardrobe.

SURPRISINGLY, the light went bright. He sniffed again. Then he grabbed the wardrobe by both sides and wrestled it, boom, scrape, away from the wall. It was a monster-house, dark wood with claw feet and a carved bat pie on top, or maybe it was a vulture. I couldn't tell which because my friend dived behind it and the light went out.

The chick and I stood gaping at each other in the flashes of a sign outside. He was doing something with a hand torch.

The light came on again and he unfolded himself in a shower of dust and held out a piece of wire. I could smell the scorch.

"Rubbed the insulation off against the plug," he said. "That thing has paper backing, too. About ready to go up."

He horsed the wardrobe back and stood squinting at it. Then he hauled off and gave it a thundering kick. We jumped. The wardrobe's bottom drawers sucked in and the piece kind of stood to attention.

"That'll straighten it out for a day or so, Ma'am. First thing in the morning you go find another place to live. Time to eat now."

She started to weave her head, *No thank you*, and her glasses slid down her nose. He picked them off and put them in her pocket. "Eat." He nodded, tucking her hand under his arm and starting out of the room. His other hand swept out and grabbed a bottle of red capsules by the bed and tossed them at me.

"You won't need these tonight, Ma'am," he told her. "He'll keep them for you. Right?"

Her little mouth was going *But, But* silently under the eyes. We trouped down the stairs. When we pushed through the front door it wheezed "*Win with Willkie!*" He thumped it. "A friendly city."

The next two blocks were complicated. I realized it wasn't just me. The girl was weaving all over the place. By the time we reached his eat-stop all seventy-five pounds of her were hanging on my muscular one-thirty. The eatery smelled cheerful, sort of Detroit espresso. As we entered, the revolving door caroled "*H'lo-lo-lo!*"

She heard and looked up at me, puzzled.

"It's a friendly city," I told her. For some reason I put one finger on the end of her nose. She didn't go away.

"I have to eat and run." He herded us into a booth and ordered. He sighed and scratched his shaggy head. "You don't often see a really mean piece of furniture. That old boy was poison all the way through. I knew one just like it once, hell of a history. You can't

blame them: But they're not safe, Ma'am. Especially for someone like you."

"You mean it was trying to start a fire?" I asked. "Why would it burn itself up too?"

His eyebrows went up.

"Surely you've heard of a death wish?"

The chick's head was going like watching a slow sad pingpong match.

"Show her the girl," I urged. "He has girls living in his clothes. Go on, show her."

He laughed, bashful again.

"They're busy. They're fixing their hair now, you know girls."

I started telling her about the Tall People's Bank and we were all laughing like mad when the lasagna finally arrived. It was really all right.

"Look, I have to go uptown now." He laid his spoon over his knife and fork in a pattern. "You guys will be okay now, I think." He smiled at the girl. "He's going to find you a place to stay. First thing in the morning, remember."

It bugged me a little because I'd been working on just that.

"What now? Rushing water to a starving mailbox?"

He gave us half a smile.

"Ah, I have to go chew somebody out."

He scrooched out of the booth and towered over us, pushing in his tie.

"What for?"

He muttered something that sounded like, "The submarine is late."

"Huh?"

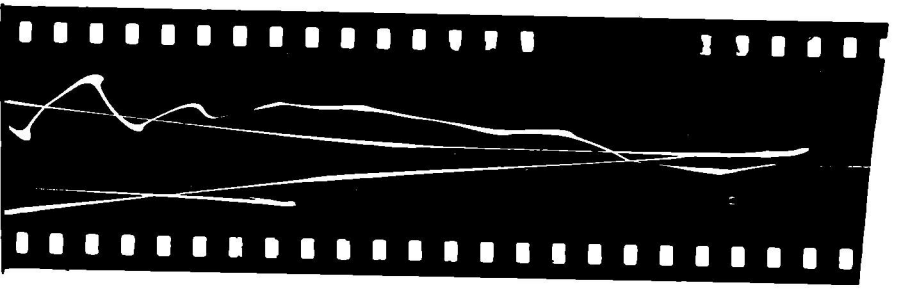
"Like about a hundred years," he said absently. He winked. "See you." As he made off, I saw a little head peeking out of his side pocket. It seemed to be wearing curlers. I waved. Something waved back.

"Beautiful," I told the girl. He really was all right.

But you know, I never did catch his name and when I asked around later nothing checked out. I'll tell you this, though: you wouldn't believe the hassles a guy my size can get into goosing building ledges. But I've spotted one good Kennedy half at Grosvenor and Forty-fourth. We're keeping our eyes on the spot. □

We no longer concern ourselves with medieval terrors of the dark—but what about the terrors of light?

MICHAEL BISHOP



IF A FLOWER COULD ECLIPSE

I

IT WAS white. That was what struck me most forcibly about the classroom when I first saw it. The walls gleamed like porcelain; the light fixtures glistened with a preternatural frostiness; the tilework on the floor was as clean and hard as ivory. The classroom was white and beautifully equipped. From the observation window (it was a two-way mirror, but they termed it otherwise) I could see the drawing tables, the easels, the glass display cases, the sliding chalk boards, and the small soundproofed projection unit in its hard white casing. In a way, the children in the room seemed meant merely as extensions of the equipment. Still observing, I spoke.

"Do you show many films?"

Mrs. Bitler turned toward me in the outer darkness of the observation chamber. In profile she had the tall head of an African princess; her flesh was darkly chocolate, and she wore two small white pearls in the long lobes of her pierced ears. I tried not to look at her, but as I studied the children I heard her voice like a drill in my consciousness.

"We sometimes do, Dr. Greer. We occasionaly show films on *hygiene*."

She spoke resentfully. She spoke the last word in particular as if she were breathing ashes. I could feel her testing the syllables on her firm heavy lips. But I could not immediately determine the sources of her resentment.

"And films on the life sciences," she said. "Current films geared to their intelligence level and suggestive of the modern predicament."

"Very good," I said. "You have that down nicely."

The children were busy at the long tables. They worked with crayons and fingerpaints. They worked with plastic T-squares and drafting pencils. A few were shaping delicate white flowers from tissue paper, constructing elongated stems from wire and florist's tape. Several appeared to be fashioning mobiles out of cardboard and tinfoil. One such mobile hung in the center of the room, a silver mock-up of the atom, slowly turning.

"Which one is Emory?" I asked curtly.

Again, her voice grated like the insidious burr of a drill: "I expect you can pick him out if you look."

Momentarily unsettled, I turned to rebuke her.

But Mrs. Bitler was staring fixedly through the observation window, her chin jutting forward like the cowcatcher of an old locomotive. The analogy was strange, but I felt she carried her pride like a cowcatcher, a means by which to scoop up obstacles and push them insensitively away. Her dark lips were trembling very slightly. But despite my perjorative images, she did not look ridiculous. She looked strong.

I turned back to the window and looked.

"All right, Mrs. Bitler," I said. "I expect it's that one."

The boy looked like a miniaturized monk. He had cloistered himself away from the others at the only single-seating table in the room, a desk with a slanted top. He was in the farthermost corner. Leaning arthritically forward, he perched atop a white enamel stool and pressed a crayon against a sheet of paper. He might have been copying a manuscript.

"Is he as creative as the others?"

"I suppose that's for you to determine." She still had not looked at me.

"Well, then, Mrs. Bitler, let's go in."

We emerged from the observation room's darkness into the enameled clarity of the classroom.

A few children looked up, but Mrs. Bitler rotated her gaunt wrist and set them working again. The classroom smelled antiseptic; and the boy we had seen through the two-way mirror seemed an immensely long way off, humpbacked and isolated. He did not look up, but continued the tedious copying movements of shoulder and arm that made him seem a monk. Even from across the white out-of-time room, I had the feeling he was pressing his crayon mercilessly into the paper, his face screwed in a grimace of pain and unboyish concentration. There would be tight blue veins ticking on his forehead.

I could guess that much. Mrs. Bitler had volunteered nothing. But if the boy had not posed a small tunneling menace to classroom stability (and to himself) I would have never been sent for. All I knew was his name.

Emory Coleman.

Now I stood in the middle of all that encompassing whiteness and stared at Emory's back. The other children were no more than

blurred pockets of color to me, and I wished that Mrs. Bitler would also blur away to an indistinguishable hue, leaving me to deal with the boy. Even in the narrowness of her hostility, she must have sensed this desire; for she stopped between two tables and let me proceed alone. Over the quiet rustling of paper and the children's hushed voices, my footsteps on the tiles were deafening.

But Emory did not look up.

LOCKED tightly away in its hard white casing, the projection unit was at my back. Nevertheless, I believed that in approaching the boy I was walking through the brutal flood of the machine's projection lamps. It was as if my journey toward him somehow demanded the consecration of light. All of it could be explained, however. Mrs. Bitler had put me on edge, and I was therefore projecting on the boy the light of anxiety that she had instilled in me.

After what seemed a long time, I reached Emory. I pulled up a stool from an unattended easel and undiplomatically peered over his shoulder. He still had not seen me. Mrs. Bitler, the other children, the room itself—all were far away, drowned in an ocean of stabbing light. I put my glasses on. Things momentarily untangled themselves, but Emory had detected the movement. He swung his face toward me.

"This is my corner. Who said you could come in?"

"Do you want to see my passport? I have papers."

"They won't suffice," he said quickly. Then the corner of his mouth sagged, as if in chagrin, and he emended his original statement: "They ain't any good."

"No? I'm surprised that anyone would stake out claims in a public facility. A big wide room like this."

"It's not so big. And maybe it's *too* public."

"Look," I said. "Don't you have a buddy in this group?"

"No. I don't have any ***friends*** here." He was correcting my use of a patronizing colloquialism. "You see, I don't choose to have any."

"Now that's what we call a manifestation of antisocial behavior. Did you know that?"

His eyes narrowed, became two lozenges of intense brown, then went opaque. He turned back to his drawing and began pressing his crayon against the paper so fiercely that I heard it snap between his

fingers. I moved my stool beside his desk. Blue veins ticked on his forehead, and flakes of crayon wax lay scattered on the desk's surface like pieces of shrapnel. His knuckles were white with the vehemence of his anger.

"Whoa," I said softly.

He threw the broken crayon on the floor.

"Come on," I said under my breath. "Mrs. Bitler's going to think I'm an absolute incompetent."

Emory looked at me warily for a moment, shuffled all his crayon sketches into a pile together, and abruptly deposited them in the compartment beneath the desk's lift-top surface. I put my hand on the desk.

"Can't I see them?"

"Sure," he said.

His face softened and he reached into his desk, withdrew the sketches.

I took the drawings and shuffled through them, reflecting on one or two and making no comments about either young Coleman's craftsmanship or his unorthodox subject matter. The single most obvious detail of his work was that he had executed every sketch in black. There were black octopi, black starships with black bodies spilling from ruptured bulkheads, black children standing in showers of black fire, black eels and scorpions, charred madonnas and burnt-out planets, witches with black capes, and strangely beautiful black flowers. One sketch was morbidly poignant.

I held it up. "Would you explain this one?"

"No."

"How about telling me the title?"

He paused long enough to make it evident that the idea appealed to him and that he was extemporaneously creating a title.

"*Two Entities Exhumed,*" he said at last.

"Very apt."

It was, I suppose. But the sketch seemed to embody a compassion that the boy's awkward title did not even suggest. Two figures of uncertain age, sex, and race lay sprawled in faintly smoldering rubble, mere sockets for eyes, their mouths blackened and agape. But the hand of one figure was touching the hand of the other. In spite of the desolation of the scene, an infusion of life obviously was taking place.

"My favorite color's black," Emory said. His eyes were the color of brandy. His close-cropped hair was blond.

"You realize that may be an affectation?"

"No," he said quickly. "It's an assertion."

Puzzled, I examined his face. "About what?"

Instead of answering, he lifted the top of his desk again and withdrew a tissue-paper flower, which he extended to me with decorous reserve. The flower was black, like those in the drawings. It was an aggressive parody of all the pale tissue-paper flowers that the other children had made or were making. The delicate tissue was so imbued with black stain that it seemed evil. I took the flower, half expecting the head of a snake to strike from the ebony heart.

"Emory," I said. "if you carry this sort of thing too far, it becomes self-conscious."

He took the flower back, held it deftly in thin fingers and studied its corolla, the separate petals in the center. Was he looking for my snake?

"What is it, Emory? A black rose? A black carnation?"

With no self-consciousness whatever, he looked me square in the face. "If a flower could eclipse, it would look just like this."

"ESPECIALLY a sunflower?" I ventured.

"Nobody ever sees the sun," he said.

"I've never heard of a flower eclipsing. You're not using the word with its scientific definition, are you?"

"No, I'm not." He put the flower inside the desk again and took *Two Entities Exhumed* away from me. My last question had thrown up a small blackness between us. The barrier was almost touchable.

"That's the assertion," he said. "Now go away."

"You believe in blackness?"

"Sometimes there ain't anything else, is there?"

"You believe in Mrs. Bitler?"

Emory put his head on the desk. I looked at the tiny blue veins in his temple for a while, then stood, turned the enamel stool to its original position and faced about. The classroom came into focus again; the whiteness of its walls, ceiling, floor, equipment, was an ironic counterpointing of what I had just discovered. But even more ironically, for one slippery moment I thought I had grasped the gist of the boy's final sardonic question. Emory stayed in his corner. I

returned to Mrs. Bitler past the well-adjusted prodigies who manifested their talents in a reasonable, socially acceptable manner.

Mrs. Bitler and I retreated into the dark observation chamber. We stared through the two-way glass like visitors at an aquarium, standing together, not touching.

"Well," Mrs. Bitler said.

I continued to look at the children. From here Emory became simply one of the group. In the world of concrete and plexiglass and reinforced steel to which we all belonged, these children still believed in flowers and madonnas and even joyously wriggling eels. Inside the tight clean cubicles to which they returned after school, they still contrived horror stories about witches and ogres, made up romances and fairy tales. With his insistence on black, even Emory was a romantic. But outside—above the huge bubble which encysted Atlanta, beyond the architectural miracle which housed us—a nightmare threatened to stifle all our dreams. We had forgotten the exact nature of that nightmare; we no longer remembered its beginnings. We knew only the clean but finite world of the Dome. Within that world I still believed in the children. They were starships who would take us into the freedom of the void.

I turned.

"Don't say 'Well' again, Mrs. Bitler. I heard you the first time. What will the children be doing this afternoon?"

The black woman faced me haughtily.

"Integral calculus. Then a session of kinetic relations—dramas that the children extemporize. Then a break."

"And after that?"

"A film," Mrs. Bitler said defiantly. "On hygiene."

"Wonderful. These children possess quantitative intelligences in the genius range, and we're showing them movies about their nonexistent pubes."

"I don't formulate policy or curriculum, Dr. Greer. You're a fool if you don't know that. I do my job."

She stood before me with awesome dignity, a tall white-frocked tribeswoman aloof from her wizened children. With one dark hand she toyed with the single pearl on her necklace, the pendant at her throat. I backpedaled.

"Mrs. Bitler, I'm sorry."

"And maybe you should know something else. Emory Coleman,

the little boy whose favorite color is black, he's our projectionist. He runs the films."

"Thank you. I appreciate that information. I'll be back this afternoon, in time for the film."

I left Mrs. Bitler and the Van-Ed classroom. The outer corridor was hung with a series of reproductions, all of them abstract and geometric. At last the corridor ended, and I took a lift-tube several floors up to the heart of the education complex. I spent the next two hours at my private carrel in the library. I scanned the visicom tapes and took notes. Our preoccupation with light becomes more and more intense as we discover the unfathomableness of dark.

II

SOME of the things I tell you now are beyond my power to explain. We live in shells, encapsuled in our plexiglass blisters, bound up in the peasecods of our personal isolations. I am going to tell this story as it happened. Little of this appears in the report which I filed with the Vanguard Education Program. Logic and good order prevail in the Program's manifold computer banks.

No one intruded upon my carrel.

In the quiet I took advantage of my access to Van-Ed information. The librarian, a purse-lipped little man with pale jowls, helped me find the tapes that detailed the biographies of Mrs. Bitler and Master Coleman. Then he wandered off into the antiseptic stacks, losing himself amid plastic cartridges and immaculately rebound old books. I heard his voice once or twice, distilled from afar, and knew that other people were actually in the library.

No one intruded. I fed the tapes to the visicom. Information unraveled itself in golden impulses. Letters appeared against the dark green background of the screen in my carrel. I read the information carefully, monitoring the speed with which each electronic sentence unraveled.

The gold filigree, developing against the deep green background, simply displayed information; it made no distinction in emphasis between the name of one's Siamese cat and the death by assassination of one's relatives. Because the visicom system merely advanced a

golden chronology, it was for me to interpret and give emphasis.

Fiona Bitler.

She was black. She was tall. She was aristocratic in her bearing. Those things I knew. But the visicom system told me things that could conceivably aid me in fathoming the mystery of Emory Coleman. The boy's teacher was thirty-four years old, and she held a doctorate in applied psychology from the University's urban extension (that extension now comprising the whole of the University, although the old designations refused to die). No one addressed Fiona Bitler by the title she had earned, however; she refused to permit it. This last fact made me consider her, in a different aspect.

Then the visicom system deluged me with so many visual impulses—dates and names—that I let the information burn on my retinas and fade into conscientious forgetting. I remembered the gnawing trivialities and the forehead-bludgeoning shocks that make a biography and slowly sculpt attitudes. With maddening slowness I began to learn about Fiona Bitler's heart. Although the process did not have a chance to fulfill itself, I can make a beginning.

Born in a stagnant backwater hamlet, Fiona Bitler came into the geodesic cocoon of Atlanta with her parents, immediately after the first Evacuation Lottery. She had been six months old, alive because of the random impartiality of the computers that sifted through the names of remaining rural inhabitants. Her father's name had been Amos Foe. When the family arrived in Atlanta, the authorities boarded them in a walk-up flat in an unrestored ghetto building; they gave her father minimal janitorial duties in a clearing house for organic food-stuffs, a stopgap position. The family existed.

At the age of four, Fiona was reading. Amos Foe found her one evening on her knees on the cold peeling linoleum, hunched over an open spread of newsprint, deciphering the letters by a legerdemain that neither parent could comprehend. Amos Foe and his wife had had only the barest rudiments of education, but their four-year-old daughter was sitting in the drafty halfdarkness reading a newspaper.

The next day Amos took her to the educational complex. He waited six hours in a carpeted anteroom and finally spoke with a tall lean man in a technician's smock. The man talked with Fiona for a few minutes, then made her father return to the anteroom. The interview lasted half an hour. The technician let Fiona read from a thick book with a stippled black binding; he watched the way she

touched the words and magically deciphered them, saying them aloud tentatively. Then he took her back to Amos.

The Foes received new accommodations.

White rooms inside a self-luminous white building that looked monolithic from the street.

Their neighbors were black. But the Foes found themselves in an entirely unique predicament. They did not conform to the patrician ethos of their neighbors' blackness. Throttled by aloof white administrators and supercilious blacks, the family grew introspective. Fiona grew up in her books. At sixteen she processed a six-page application and secured the nomination of one of her private Van-Ed tutors. Consequently, the urban extension accepted her into its psychology programs.

With her father's permission, wary as it was, she quartered herself away from home. She took a room in the extension's sexually and racially integrated dormitory-terraces. Eight floors up, sealed away in an internal section of the complex, she pursued her studies. The walls were still uniformly white, but the people had changed. She emerged from her books.

Upon obtaining her first degree, Fiona Foe married Carlo Bitler.

Here the visicom screen seemed to blur; the gold letters backed up on me and I was lost elsewhere. At last the images became clear again, and the sentences resumed parading silently down the green face of the console.

Of course, I recognized the man's name: Carlo Bitler. But I had never associated that name with marriage, and I had difficulty in associating it now with the darkly proud, but somewhat resigned woman who was Fiona Bitler. I saw her among the children, fierce, commandingly gentle, mildly haggard. She was working within the streamlined creakings of the System, but not particularly liking it. She was not very much like her husband, whom I knew by reputation.

Though this line of narrative may seem momentarily tangential, Carlo Bitler is extremely imporant. He has a great deal to do with the story of Emory Coleman, as well as with that of his wife. Therefore, I ask you to fix the vision and voice of Fiona Bitler in your mind that you may understand the contrast which her husband provides. As quickly as I can, I will detail the most significant events in his biography.

BEFORE his marriage, Carlo Bitler had graduated from the urban extension with degrees in both theology and political science. A *combination of the spiritual ideals and the crass realities,* he often said. He was neither a black man nor a white man, but his soul apparently gravitated to that which was dark and primordial in his make-up. He was wide-nostriled and narrow-lipped; his flesh was the color of coffee; his eyes buoyed within their irises small flecks of golden light, like shattered coins. Unlike Fiona, he had never experienced the stale self-negating existence of the ghettos. The ghettos were roach-infested anachronisms, but unofficially they received sanction and were still standing. Carlo Bitler damned the authorities for niftily pulling their caps over their eyes, for ignoring that which needed change.

He *felt* the inconsistencies. In a closed world supposedly cleansed of its inner pollutions, all the residual hates gnawed at his gut. (Perhaps I am editorializing; the visicom tapes are as matter-of-fact as a newspaper obituary.) But he fought off the hates, looked up, and realized that no help would be forthcoming from without.

So he made noises that he hoped would send groundswells through the concrete, and tremors through every dome-supporting girder in Atlanta. He raised his voice.

He preached from the pulpits of all the back-alley churches. Over the grizzled heads of antedated laborers who still called themselves Negroes, he shouted the necessary one- and two-syllable words. The city buried these people. He wanted them to come out of their rat-holes. Always, Fiona watched him from the backmost pew of the urine-stained synagogue to which his rudely formulated purpose had led him. She watched him out of an uncomprehending love that simply endured. She herself now held a teaching position; she would not question her husband's calling. Finally, the electric glow that seemed to suffuse Carlo Bitler as he reached out with tortured hands to his congregations, as he gesticulated, became a physical adjunct to his person; he generated the charisma that brought to him the young.

As Fiona watched, others in our closed world took note. Something was happening. Here was a man who should not be practicing such demagoguery, the Others said. After all, didn't he have full rights of citizenship? full protection under the Federal Urban Charter? Unlike his own wife, unlike eighty percent of the middle-aged blacks

who now found air and subsistence under the dome, he had never been an integer in an Evacuation Lottery. He held the franchise of any urban-born idiividual. That he should be making these noises was inane, an affront to the City which sheltered him.

In a closed world, pressure must find an outlet.

The pressures were of two kinds. Carlo Bitler had one such pressure inside him, and he released it in those innumerable harangues which returned him to Fiona drained and sallow. The other such pressure was that which grew in the proletarian whites. They remembered just enough history to envision domed Atlanta a racial battleground. Those who felt so threatened had no outlet but invective, through which to release their bewilderment and anger. For a time, the City ignored both factions.

At this point I halted the unraveling of information. The words stood obediently on the console screen, unmoving. Then I shut off the tapes altogether, so that the gold vanished from the background. I knew what was going to happen.

Deliberately, I stalked out of the cluttered study cage, leaving yellow notepaper strewn carelessly about. I walked to a lift-tube. The book stacks through which I found my way all smelled of disinfectant. Somewhere the purse-lipped librarian was mumbling to himself. I rode the clean transparent lift-tube upward until an amber light glowed in the glass carapace just above my head. Then I was alone on the uppermost rampart of the ed-complex.

No sky was overhead, only the colossal honeycombing of steel and opaque plexiglass that still challenged my belief. How had we accomplished this? and why?

We are inside a walnut, I thought. *Who in our walnut is king of infinite space?*

Let me complete for you the biography of Carlo Bitler, as incidental as it may seem to this account of his wife and the Black Period of her grim nine-year-old prodigy. On that parapet I completed his biography in my thoughts.

I had shut off the visicom tapes precisely because I remembered too well.

CARLO Bitler demanded and received the opportunity to address a combined session of the Urban Council and the Conclave of Ward

Representatives. His clamor had bought the time but it didn't buy much.

They gave him twenty minutes on a slow Monday, between two sessions of a debate on fund allocations. Money was wanted for cleaning several monuments. Bitler's remarks would provide an interlude, as if he were a jester or magician.

From the back of the chamber he threaded his way to the platform. He stood stolidly alongside the podium and surveyed the slack-jawed legislators, black and white. He began. He attempted to define his purpose. He spoke to fulfill himself, rocked and leaned to define his own limits in space.

In spite of the air-conditioning, the assembly chamber smelled of sweat.

Carlo Bitler said that he was going to run for ward representative next time around, so that he would not have to threaten in order to be heard. He railed at the legislators, damned them for worrying about chipped and irrelevant statues, while ignoring the crumbling edifices in which black people slept.

"We are entombed," he shouted. "We are all entombed. Every mother's whelp among us. Yet this assembly aspires to dig the black man even deeper. The old buildings stink. They crawl with vermin. You want to replace them with still deeper ghettos. For several decades, the exigencies of history have spared you this confrontation. And now you are burying us . . ."

He stopped in mid-sentence.

A tiny red circle appeared on the right side of his forehead. The report of the pistol sounded through the chamber like a single amplified cough. He tried to complete his sentence.

". . . burying us in light . . ."

The circle on Carlo Bitler's forehead sent out crimson runners; it let them drop across his eyes. Soon the wash of blood obliterated his features so that his face was no more than a horrible Greek mask. One arm still reaching toward his audience, he slumped in a heap beside the podium.

Death by assassination. End of incidental biography.

Of course, there was an untidy aftermath, but that didn't concern me. In the five years since her husband's death Fiona Bitler had pulled her life together, shunned the role of the martyr's widow. She taught children, taught them within the cold white system that her

husband had railed against. "No longer involved in socio-political activity," the tapes had said.

I LOOKED down at the city. The circulating air touched my garments slowly. Beneath the dome I could see the old Regency complex, with its tall central tower and the smoky blue turret that had not revolved in twenty years. A dull and all-pervasive luminosity seemed to hang in the air, like dust. But there was no dust. Only light.

We no longer concern ourselves with the medieval terrors of the dark, I thought.

Then I rode the lift-tube down.

When I returned to my carrel, I found the librarian. He rose diffidently, with a small snorting sound. A number of yellow sheets lay before him on my desk, but it was obvious that his curiosity was merely a purposeless corollary to his job.

"You've had a telecom," he said.

"Who?"

"Oh ho," he said jovially. "A woman. A female."

"Mrs. Bitler?"

"She told me to tell you you're going to miss this week's instruction in hygiene. The projectionist waits for no one."

"No," I said. "I don't imagine he would."

"You want me to replace the tapes for you?"

"No. Just leave them. I only used one. I may want the other one."

He made a deferential bow, pursed his discolored lips, and rearranged the papers on my desk.

"A woman," he said playfully. "A film on hygiene."

I raised my fist in mock anger, but did not touch him. He grinned lopsidedly and left the carrel. Even as he retreated, I pictured not his back but his moist silver eyes fading, fading into the fluorescent labyrinth around us. After sorting out the mess he had made of my papers in trying to arrange them neatly, I left.

The librarian's empty whistling followed me.

III

I WROTE that some of what I must tell you is beyond my power to explain. Let me reiterate. Occasionally people try to live so

strenuously by the processes of logic that they become irrational. Therefore, do not expect explanations of me. I refuse to contribute to the insanities into which you will rationalize yourselves. Darknesses of all sorts exist, and sometimes it is best simply to accept them.

They exist.

Meanwhile, we carry the gnarled rudeness of our souls like shillelaghs. We either stump around or bludgeon aside those things which we do not understand.

It was nearly three when I stumped into the Van-Ed observation room. Through the two-way mirror I could see Mrs. Bitler standing to one side of the classroom. Tables and chairs had been shoved against the walls. Engaged in kinetic relations, the children held forth on the ivory parquetry which they had cleared. They were enacting a conflict of some kind.

There was utter polarity in that conflict. Two groups stood facing one another. Chins jutted forward bellicosely, and hands fisted and unfisted. There seemed to be an unwritten law that no one touched anyone else during these hopefully cathartic little dramas, for all the jutting chins and clenched fists. Whether any such provision in fact existed, the children unanimously obeyed it.

I turned the dial beside the window. The voices of the children came lucidly through several small circular speakers.

They were arguing about the time when the geodesic domes of the twenty-five Urban Nuclei must eventually suffer demolition, releasing us to the sun. The two sides made no concessions, reached no compromises. At last I recognized that my own charge, Emory Coleman, belonged to neither group. He was sitting on the table that supported the projection unit, one lank white arm draped over its casing. He was looking at his feet.

The argument among the other children went on: "We should destroy the domes as soon as we can." "We must keep the domes even after the conditions which prompted them no longer exist." "The domes are a momument to man's stupidity." "No, they are a demonstration of all that mankind can do in cooperation." And on it went.

Emory Coleman looked up at the group, the two groups, which stood in forensic confrontation. His legs continued to swing back

and forth, pale hairless legs that ended in a pair of dark blue moccasins.

"Why doesn't everybody shut up?" he demanded. "You've gone over the allotted time. We ought to be watching our movie."

He dropped the metal canister, from which he had already removed the reel of film, and let it clatter on the floor.

Every head turned toward him, and he began carefully to thread the celluloid through the sprockets of the machine. The hard white casing sat on a rack beneath the projection table. He had removed it almost without our noticing, as easily as he might doff a beanie. Now he was standing and working efficiently at his one apparently gratifying duty.

The other children stared blankly for an instant or two, but Mrs. Bitler nodded her stringent approval and they began to move their chairs into position for the film. Then Mrs. Bitler dialed the lighting down, turning the classroom into a glossy crypt.

It was into this gleaming darkness that I finally stepped. My presence in the classroom caused no stir. Mrs. Bitler, with no evidence of surprise, turned and indicated a chair beside the projection unit.

Emory saw but ignored me. "It's ready," he said.

One of the children drew a white panel out of the wall at the opposite end of the room; the panel was a screen. Then we sat in the darkness, Mrs. Bitler and I, looking over the silhouetted heads of the children and occasionally glancing at Emory's intent profile as he ran the projector.

The film flickered onto the screen in veined splotches of gray and black; it stuttered and blazed like a fire in a wind tunnel. The film was inestimably old, and the frames seemed to jump one another. Numerals burned on the celluloid, then disappeared: *9*, *8*, *5*, *5*, *4*, *2*, *1*. My eyes ached.

"This is going to be a talkie, isn't it?"

Mrs. Bitler looked at me but spoke to the boy: "Emory!"

"What?"

"You've shown this before, haven't you." Her inflection did not suggest a question. "I can tell it's not the scheduled one."

"I've shown it before," he said. "Sort of."

"I think once is enough."

"No," he said. "It's not enough."

The projector contributed a gentle whirring to the otherwise silent room. Either chagrined or acquiescent, Fiona Bitler leaned back in her chair and watched the screen.

"What's going on?"

"Just watch." She refused to look at me. "Just let your eyes show you what later you'll reject altogether."

The meaningless lead-ins at last gave way to a series of scripted titles, all in flourishing longhand. Scratchy marching music came from the stereophonic speakers. Trumpets made scrolls of victrola cacophony in the air. I almost expected to see phalanxes of goose-stepping soldiers come striding through the screen. Some of the children turned cautiously in their chairs.

Was there some mistake? They looked at Emory. Undaunted, he continued to stare at the screen.

"Well," I said. "At least there's sound, isn't there?"

The main title came up. In fancy longhand. *The Dental Institute of America Presents . . . Your Teeth and the Witch of Tooth Decay.* Trumpets and drums rattled from the speakers. The film jitterbugged on the screen.

"Where did he get this thing?"

"From his father." Fiona Bitler still did not turn her head. "He got it once upon a time from his father."

I will not dwell on the preliminaries. A narrator spoke of proper dental care. A crude line drawing showed the alignment of the upper and lower dentures. Arrows appeared in miraculous animation to designate the individual teeth: molars, bicuspids, canines, incisors. There was a somewhat clinical sequence in which a child demonstrated proper and improper methods of brushing the teeth.

The film continued to pop and flicker unsteadily, and the narrator (he never appeared, but I pictured him with a slick moustache and a shiny pompadour) lectured pontifically over the fading martial cadenzas of the trumpets.

Then I heard one of the children nurmur, "She's coming next," and they all shifted in their chairs, readying themselves. I, too, stared nervously at the screen.

ENVISION, then, that same screen.

You see a close-up of the girl who has been demonstrating

brushing techniques. Then another close-up, this one of her soft cherubic mouth. Her lips part. The camera takes us inside the moist dark cavern where her teeth grow up like so many porcelain-hard toadstools, the enamel glistening. We are in another world, an enclosed universe in which moistness and darkness strangely commingle. We are no longer dry and illuminated.

The narrator is still talking, but each of us ignores the insidious drone of his voice. At last he ceases; the music also ceases. All we hear is the whirring of the projector, the odd static in the film itself.

Into this hush comes the hag.

Deep in the sacristy of the girl's throat there appears a conical hat; beneath it, a hideously sutured face. Flickering, the hag arises from the epiglottis, balances on the meat of the child's tongue, and approaches us through a sheen of spittle. She carries a gnarled staff. She proceeds up the row of baby teeth, tapping on their bonewhite crowns. At last she consumes the whole screen. A frightening close-up.

She grins maliciously at us, her audience. When she speaks, her accents are unmistakably those of a previous time's touring-company player.

Acid, acid, stinging poison,
Mixed in cauldron, stirred in chalice,
Poured atop the clean crown chosen
Object of our special malice.

Fester, fester, let the sickness
Plague the pulpy heart within,
Rot the capsule 'round the quickness,
Send the crownlet crashing in.

Sour, sour, Carrie's power
Burns the lustre from your smile,
Chars to chalk the children's hour
Grinning ashen, black and vile.

Carrie the hag falls silent. Her expression undergoes a metamorphosis that renders her even more hideous. She hunches her shoulders, scrunches her head on her neck, cocks an oyster eye at

all of us. It is as if she cannot bear the stinging poison of light from the projector, the flooding lantern light to which she owes her existence on celluloid. She grimaces horribly and draws up her cape to shield her eyes.

The camera records her agony.

Inside the child's mouth she crumples to her knees. Her conical hat totters. At last she looks painfully into the projector lamp again, and haltingly recites.

> Lamp of logic, burning straight
> Through the grottos of our hate,
> Let thy brightness amplify
> The mote of love in each man's eye.

But it is strange. It looks as if someone has lip-synched these words to the contorted movements of the witch's mouth and tongue. What has logic to do with any of this? Then Carrie the hag falls silent and collapses in her billowing robe.

The little girl's mouth closes, eclipsing her. The martial music begins again; so does the narrator's unctuous blabbering. The closing titles appear in their elaborate longhand, caught in the wavering filaments that have accompanied the entire showing. The screen goes white.

And at last you can hear the film itself going *slap slap slap* on the take-up reel.

IV

THE lights were dialed up; the children shuffled their chairs back into some kind of order; and Emory carefully replaced the film in its canister. Fiona Bitler sat unmoving in the small plastic chair that had been made for nine-year-olds. Her eyes had pulled down on her thoughts.

She said nothing.

Waiting for some word from her, the children grew restless. They whispered and fumbled with their school supplies. I stood up and inanely rushed in to fill the vacuum.

"Well," I said jovially. "What did you all think of the movie?"

"We've seen it before," said one little girl, speaking over her shoulder from a table. "But it was different this time."

Emory looked at me. "I've closed the projector up. It's time for us to go. We're seven minutes late already."

Mrs. Bitler at last stood up. She smoothed away the folds in her rumpled smock and turned bewildered eyes on Emory. Then she spoke to the class as a group.

"All right. It's time to go. Place your materials in your desks—everything but the texts you have to read tonight. Tomorrow we'll have language, urban history, and a seminar discussion about the effects of superstition on both primitive and rational societies. You all know which parts you're supposed to take." She looked over the top of Emory's head. "You'd better take that film back to your family's cubicle."

"No," he said. "It has to be shown again. I'll leave it on top of the projection stand."

As the other children began preparing to leave, Mrs. Bitler took an awkward step or two toward the boy. She had no idea what she was going to do, so I interposed myself and spoke to him.

"If you could stay a few extra minutes, I'd like to talk to you a little."

"No." His face tightened. "It's very important I get home when my parents expect me."

"Your stepfather?" Mrs. Bitler asked.

Emory turned away. I watched the other children leave by a clean white panel next to the door to the observation room. They filed out in an anonymous blur of satchels, brightly colored paperback texts, and red and yellow moccasins. Emory went all the way across the room, opened his desk, and removed all the crayon drawings that I had looked at earlier. He also removed the delicate black flower, cupping it in one palm. Across the intervening whiteness of the classroom he spoke to us.

"You can only look at the ones I show you."

Then he too left, his soft blue moccasins padding through the door. With him he carried nothing but his drawings, and the flower. When he was gone, the room was childless.

I SAT down on a table and turned toward Mrs. Bitler. She was standing like a tall African sculpture at one end of the room.

"That was a very odd film."

She said nothing.

"A very odd film on hygiene."

She said nothing.

"I mean, even for these youngsters that was a rather erudite presentation of a subject like tooth-brushing. And weird."

"Didn't you hear the little girl?"

"Which?"

"The one who said that it was different this time. Emory sneaked that same film into the classroom once before, and showed it. But this time it was *different*."

"How?"

"Carrie. The old witch. She didn't speak in poetry. She didn't slump into a pathetic heap after reciting a Blakeian stanza about love. It was *different*."

"Are you sure you remember correctly? Are you certain Emory just didn't bring along another film?"

"I remember. How often do you see a spliced and tattered movie from the middle of a previous century? Besides, everything was the same this time except for the performance of that old witch."

"A fitting prelude to a seminar on superstition."

She looked at me sharply.

"Is he trying to annoy you?" I asked. "Is he trying to make you hate him?"

"I'm afraid I don't understand him well enough to answer that." Fiona Bitler still had not moved; her face was averted from me, darkly sorrel. I tried something new.

"Why are you teaching, Mrs. Bitler? Some would hold that you've let the calling of your husband slip by."

She changed position and fixed me with a long critical look. "You have a long memory, Dr. Greer. And a remarkable ability to make difficult associations."

"No, ma'am. I have access to the Van-Ed tapes."

"The biographies?"

I nodded.

"Well," she said. She touched the pendant at her throat. "You must be amused by the irony of my position in regard to Emory. Do you think it's funny?"

She had lost me. "*Irony*?" I said.

"Let me tell you right now," she said, approaching the table. "It's not a coincidence that I'm teaching that child. It's not a droll little quirk of our destinies."

"I hadn't presumed it was. What exactly are you talking about?"

She stopped, and we made our positions clear. When Fiona Bitler at last understood that I had reviewed only one of the biographies (and that one hers) we sat in conference for nearly an hour.

She believed Emory Coleman had suffered from understanding the mystery of his father. The boy now lived with his mother and a taciturn stepfather whom Fiona—for no good reason—distrusted.

The boy's real father had been a dentist, dead now for five years. While alive, he had made his living working for the urban medicaid programs, caring for that segment of the population confined to the sweat-stained tenements. The man's name had been Gerard Nettlinger; his background was Austrian, and he recalled, as if in the darknesses of racial memory, a prenatal time when witches and unnameable demons had controlled the destinies of men. In the Urban Nucleus, however, these things capitulated to expediency and science. He became a dentist and a good one. He gathered to himself all the supplementary aids of the meticulous practitioner.

But he was a bitter man. The medicaid professional received a fixed salary, one beyond which there was little advancement. The City provided; that was all. Gerard Nettlinger consequently felt some antipathy toward the system which sheltered him, but which denied him the opportunity to govern his own rates. He wanted to practice among an elite cross-section of the City's governing hierarchy, where, if not advancement, he might find other benefits.

The black man—and the black man's need—prohibited him.

The outlet for Gerard Nettlinger's bitterness toward the urban system was in his overweening hatred for those whom he involuntarily treated. He despised the black patients into whose mouths he probed with tongue depressors and drill bit. He considered them inferior, he despised their docility, he raged inwardly that his career should belong so utterly to their helplessness. The City was using him.

"I understand that," Fiona told me. "He was discriminated against."

BUT apparently he worked the more fiercely for all his bitterness. He stopped dragging himself to the boxlike office the Urban Health Bureau had assigned him. Instead, he made voluntary trips to the ghettos. He set up his projector in walk-up flats, bullied the residents into becoming an audience, and showed out-of-date movies on the cracked plaster of the walls. He showed the film that Emory had just shown. Carrie the hag permitted him to play to the primordial Austrian instincts in himself while simultaneously frightening his audience. After the movies he lectured from the tops of stairwells. Sometimes, in the middle of the street, he intimidated skinny black children into opening their mouths; there he brusquely examined their teeth. But he hated those upon whom he so impulsively showered his attention.

"His impulsiveness was not at all unlike Carlo's. In some ways the two men were much alike."

Gerard Nettlinger followed the news. Many things made him angry. Although he had a young wife and a new child, the political affairs of the Urban Nucleus concerned him more than his family. He grew angrier. Finally, one slow Monday afternoon in a legislative assembly chamber, he vented his frustrations through the muzzle of a pistol. Sweating, he stood up in the midst of an august body of politicians and fired at the gesticulating man behind the lectern; the bullet created a victim for him. He knew he had succeeded even as four or five men grabbed wildly at his arm and bore him uncomplaining to the floor. Noise abounded, but he had heard the last few prophetic words and almost sympathized with them.

"... *burying us in light* ..."

Gerard Nettlinger died in a small sterile chamber, the fumes anesthetizing him forever. His son was a prodigy, an immature genius who no longer carried his name but might conceivably carry his primordial guilts and social hatreds. Science did not think that acquired attitudes were in the genes—but which are acquired, which innate hatreds?

Fiona Bitler folded her hands, a movement of gentle finality. The story was over.

"AND you tell me it's no coincidence you're teaching the son of the man who murdered your husband?"

"No," she said. "There's no coincidence. I manuevered to obtain this position, showed credentials, deluged the Van-Ed offices with references."

"Why?"

"Because I had to get close to the boy.'

"Why? To carve your own initials on his psyche?"

She leaned forward, her nostrils flared.

"To teach him forgiveness, Dr. Greer. To communicate through personal contact something like moral understanding."

"Fine sentiments. But whose forgiveness are you teaching him?" I silenced her with an upraised hand. "Do you believe the sins of the father are visited on the son? If so, will the boy forgive you for forgiving him?"

Fiona Bitler touched her taut throat and made a helpless gesture. I was holding my glasses by the frame, letting them dangle in my hand, waiting with blurred eyes.

"All right," she said. "We haven't communicated and consequently I haven't been doing any real teaching."

"The fault isn't entirely yours."

"If I thought so, I'd quit. Now, Dr. Greer, why don't you leave me to straighten things up a little and correlate my notes? You can always interrupt class tomorrow."

"Yes, ma'am. Tomorrow it is." I stood up and surveyed the austere porcelain luster of the room. It seemed achingly empty now that the children were gone and our conversation was over. I made an attempt to cover the emptiness: "Why won't you let anyone call you doctor?"

"Titles are barriers," she said.

"There are others, maybe more important ones."

Mrs. Bitler extended her hand and I took it. The flesh was warm and supple and brown in my grasp. I held her hand a second or two longer than etiquette would dictate proper, but her expression did not change. Then she let her hand drop, I nodded goodbye, and the observation room swallowed me soundlessly. Standing in the darkness, I looked out on the woman who seemed to be an African princess contemplating other worlds from a plain of ice. That was the last time I really ever saw her.

LOOKING through the two-way mirror, I had the inarguable feeling that someone had preceded me into the observation room. The air was warm, as if with the residual warmth of a spy who had just retreated. But no one was there. I calmed my suspicions, opened the panel sealing off the aquarium and left through the Van-Ed suite's outer chamber. I was going home. My head throbbed with the kaleidoscopic pulsing of new information, and I wanted a drink.

One moment I was walking down an empty hallway, too preoccupied to look at the canvases spaced along the walls; the next moment I was facing an individual who had seemingly materialized from the sterility of the corridor itself. I halted, my footfalls echoing away into the labyrinth.

Emory Coleman faced me, his drawings clutched tightly in one hand. With the other he thrust the purplish black flower at my chest. I took the flower and wondered where everyone had gone, where Emory Coleman had come from.

"Are you giving me this?"

"You were talking about me," he said. "About my father."

"I thought you had to be home when your parents expected."

"I went to that room where the teachers spy on us."

"And you listened?"

"Yes."

"Well, what did you think of the conversation?"

"Neither of you learned anything," he said. "You never think about things that happen when it's dark."

"Like your father?" I suggested.

Emory merely eyed me with disdain, the blue veins working in his shaven blond temples. More and more I began to feel exposed, vulnerable, that the corridor was a place of neither comfort nor privacy. As I shifted from foot to foot in that open whiteness, I could hear my very thoughts echoing. Insidiously, the paintings on the walls retreated to a distant vanishing point.

"Is that why you brought the film, Emory? To make us think?"

"It's a film on hygiene," he said. "Just like the Van-Ed people wanted. But there's a witch in it, ain't there?"

"Yes. There certainly is."

"Mrs. Bitler ought to know about blackness, like my father did. But she doesn't. That's why I brought the film with the witch."

"Look, Emory. Mrs. Bitler said that the movie was different this time. So did one of the girls. Was it?"

I stared deep into the heart of the black flower, still half-expecting the coral snake to emerge from the central petal cluster. Emory ignored my question. He turned to study one of the paintings and spoke without looking at me.

"She wants to understand what my father did to her husband by understanding me. But she doesn't want to understand me *first*. And that's why she can't do it, why she can't touch me."

"That's difficult reasoning," I said. "Do you dislike her?"

"Sometimes." He turned back to me from the painting. "But I wouldn't ever do anything malicious. Even if it somehow looked that way."

"I'm afraid I don't understand."

"Do you know what *paradox* means?"

"I believe so."

"Mrs. Bitler taught us that word, but she doesn't know what it means. Hygiene and witches is paradoxical, though, isn't it?"

"I would say so. If for no other reason than to appease you."

"Well, something else is paradoxical, too. Blackness is. Do you want to hear how?"

"If I have to stand in this hallway much longer, I want to hear something either helpful or interesting. One or the other."

Emory composed his features, and stared past me down the hall when he finally began reciting. "Black pushes things apart," he said, "by separating and making outlines. But it's the oldest color, and it pushes things together by covering them all up so that they're just alike. That's what Mrs. Bitler doesn't seem to understand."

"I'll try to remember that.

Then I regretted my tone, for Emory Coleman's eyes suddenly went opaque, like those of a lizard, a creature of another species. Before I could react, he stepped violently forward and knocked the tissue-paper flower out of my hand. My response to his philosophizing had violated years of training. Now I watched the results of that error. Emory Coleman fled down the corridor and all too quickly disappeared in the brightness that held both of us. I picked up the fallen blossom and turned it in my hands. Footfalls echoed. I was alone again.

V

I SPENT the evening with my feet hoisted on an oversized red ottoman, a perspiringly cold glass of Scotch and water in my hand. Watching the patterns that my water-lantern threw against the white fiberboarding, I stared at the ceiling. The shapes enthralled me. In the intense quiet, my mind was empty of everything but the phantasmagoric images overhead and the slowly befogging incursion of the Scotch. I stared at the ceiling for two hours.

Then I stumbled to bed.

The telecom unit woke me. Its buzz sounded inside my skull like the amplified whirring of a dentist's drill. I imagined myself gagging as Gerard Nettlinger probed relentlessly into my jaws. Perhaps I had not come fully awake.

"Hello?"

A voice curled into my ear, not to be mistaken for any other—a shrill contralto that I had heard earlier in the day chanting about Carrie's power. Unmistakably, it was the voice of a witch.

"Who the hell is this?" I shouted.

My mouth tasted as if I had been chewing the tongue of an old canvas shoe, horribly wrong.

"Mrs. Bitler . . . Fiona . . . is this your own patented variety of a practical joke?"

A hesitant cackling. Then silence.

"Come on now. Who is this?"

Nothing in response but the voice of the hag: Shakesperean accents which pieced together a message. I cannot remember if she recited her message in the trochaic meters of Emory's film, but she very clearly ordered me to follow her directions.

Dr. Greer, you will come to the educational complex . . . to the Van-Ed suite . . . And you must come this very moment.

I raged impotently into the telecom unit, demanding answers, begging for elaboration: the unit began to hum.

Groggy from sleep and alcohol, I pulled on my tunic and left the apartment. Fluorescent lamps burned over my head in every corridor; crystal lift-tubes carried me up and down the gleaming levels of masonry; an individual transit-car whisked me through the echoing stone vaults. Anticipating, my stomach churned.

In twenty minutes I burst into the outer office of the Van-Ed suite.

The door stood open, the panel sheathed inside its frame. Silence. The quiet that one encounters in a cathedral sanctuary. A sentient hush. I activated the panel into the observation room, but I could see nothing through the window.

The classroom was an inscrutable black cave.

I rapped on the glass with my knuckles. "Mrs. Bitler, are you there?" Another tattoo on the glass. "Fiona!"

I looked down at my other hand and saw that I had unmercifully crushed the black flower Emory had given me that afternoon. Without realizing how or why, I had carried it with me all the way from the apartment. Turning to the panel into the classroom, I found further evidence that Emory was manipulating my comings and goings. Taped in the middle of the panel was one of Master Coleman's drawings—the sketch that he had shown me on my first visit, fourteen hours ago. I removed the tape and held the sketch uncomprehendingly in my hands, along with the crushed paper flower. There was a legend, in flourishing longhand, just beneath the two figures in the sketch. Two figures who touched in the rubble of Emory's unspecified holocaust. I read the legend.

Only you should look at this one. It explains.

It explained nothing. I held the drawing and the flower, and waited for something momentous to happen. All I could hear was my breathing.

I decided to discover the prankster, whether it was student or teacher. I entered the classroom and dialed the lights up. No one. Rows of red and yellow plastic chairs. Several mobiles turning slowly in the emptiness. The absence of any human being was a palpable thing.

I walked into the classroom, toward the corner where Emory had cloistered himself. The only desk in the room.

Facing that desk, I heard the reverberating clatter of a movie canister on hard tiles. The noise jerked me around. No one. I was looking at the projection unit in its creamy white casting. The battered movie canister lay beside it. No sound but the fading clatter and my own amplified breathing.

What I did next has neither motive nor explanation.

I picked up the canister, removed the reel of film, set aside the projector casing, and carefully threaded the film through the correct sprockets. My hands were shaking, but I made no mistakes. Never

before had I operated a projector; nothing in my work had ever required the use of a machine considered by many obsolescent, if not strictly primitive. But I operated this one. The screen was still in place.

As the lead-in frames of numerals and letters flickered on the screen, I dialed the lights down and perched forward on the edge of a plastic chair. Both numb and expectant, I concentrated on driving down the alcoholic blur that had seeped into my eyes. Victrola music. Trumpets.

What in God's name had manuevered me to this idiocy?

ENVISION the screen.

A crude chart depicts the upper and lower dentures. Animated arrows point out the bicuspids and molars. A little girl (one who has since grown old, died, and blown into the night as dust) is brushing her teeth. The narrator's lubricated baritone slides back and forth in your ears. A close-up of the girl's cherubic mouth.

Then the screen goes totally black. You can hear the film as it bunches in the sprockets and subtly tears.

But even as the film seems to be tearing, the picture reappears. But we are not gazing into the child's enormous mouth; no hag grins at us from her Carlsbad throat. Instead, the confrontation is something other, something terrifyingly other.

You are looking at the aristocratic figure of Fiona Bitler; and Fiona Bitler is standing in the middle of the very classroom in which you are watching her stand. The film depicts her looking pensively at her folded hands, a secret preoccupation playing in her mind. She appears irredeemably isolated and alone. But maybe she is waiting.

I know that I started and came to my feet at some point in this initial sequence of frames, but the woman's herky-jerky image assured me that she was indeed on film. I sat back down, shaking with disbelief.

INTO this uneasy reverie, flouncing through the classroom door like a miniature Mack Sennett cop, comes Emory Coleman. The action develops at twice the normal pace. The child gesticulates, waves his hands and moves back and forth in front of her in comical sparrowlike hops. Mrs. Bitler frowns, places her arms akimbo, speaks, tries to touch the boy's face and watches him hop away with

mincingly censorious steps. The room seems to revolve about their pirouetting bodies.

You realize there is no sound.

Merely a whirlpool of black and white ribbons.

But then Emory (on film) scurries to the projector, takes the film from its canister, winds it onto the machine, and points emphatically at the lighting dial. Mrs. Bitler whirls to the dial, flicks her wrist and plunges the screen you are watching into darkness. You can dimly see both figures in the darkened classroom; they stare toward the deeper screen that exists in their circumscribed celluloid world.

NOW: Envision a screen within a screen.

The filmed persons of Emory Coleman and Fiona Bitler are viewing the same film the boy showed that afternoon. But their movie begins with Carrie the hag proceeding forward from deep in the little girl's throat. She fills the more removed of the two screens with her puckered eyes and stitched alligator's mouth. But no longer does the action waltz by at twice its normal pace; Carrie's slow smile forms in thirty dragging seconds of agonized stasis.

Then the camera dollies back for a long shot and Carrie steps clumsily out of the little girl's mouth. She hoists her ebony skirts over the child's moist bottom lip and carefully plants one bony bare foot . . . *into the classroom.*

She is still a two-dimensional character to you, but to the woman and the boy in that filmed classroom she is a three-dimensional reality, coexisting with them in time.

DRAW back to your first screen: the *real* one.

Emory Coleman and Fiona Bitler rise. The witch is in the classroom with them. She has descended from that other screen. Her eyes grow as wide and bright as silver coins and she points a crooked finger at the two human beings who confront her. She draws a looping circle in the air.

Fiona Bitler grasps the boy protectively to her body. He does not resist. The two of them face their antagonist, locked one against the other.

At that instant the screen bursts into color. You can see the red and yellow chairs, the violet tones of Carrie's wrinkled mask, Emory's soft blue moccasins, the warm chocolate of Fiona's skin. Then Carrie

sweeps the darkness of her cape over the screen and reduces everything again to black and white.

A blinding phosphorescence blots out your vision. Glowworms swim in the water of your eyes.

You recover in time to witness a vivid tableau: On the bonewhite floor lie the charred remains of both Emory Coleman and Fiona Bitler. Each face is punctuated with the black crater of a burnt-out mouth. Their hands are extended and touching.

THINGS concluded swiftly.

I did nothing so melodramatic as to scream or faint away, but I did rush forward from where I had been watching and stop in the middle of the room—exactly on the spot where the two lay outstretched and incinerated; exactly on the spot where the film had shown them. But nothing was there.

Then I smelled sulphur and heard a sound like the popping of grease in a skillet. Again the room filled with light. I turned and saw flames skirling over the surface of the projector, threading between the spokes of the take-up reel, running across the curling film itself. I waited for the fire to burn itself out.

And I waited for Atlanta's dome to collapse in ruins of plexiglass and tangled steel.

All that happened was that the burning stopped. I stood in the empty classroom. When I looked at my hands, I found that I was still clutching Emory's flower. I let it slide to the floor. So white were my hands that I believed myself stricken with some leprous disease. There were ashes in my palms.

But when I looked at that crumpled paper flower, I knew that it had done something other than merely eclipse. □

AMONG THE GRIMOIRES

Lester del Rey

FOR almost a quarter of a century, the reader of real fantasy was faced with only Mother Hubbard's cupboard from which to serve himself; not so much as a bone was to be had. Fantasy, we were told by the pundits who knew little about it, could not be sold. Nobody wanted to read *that* stuff.

Being a perpetual believer in Tinker Bell, perhaps, I never could quite accept this general view. Good fantasy always seemed to enjoy a select but very loyal audience. Four issues of a fantasy magazine I edited half a generation ago far outsold the science-fiction magazines I also edited; the magazine was killed only because no other editor would work with the publisher after I retired. Another great magazine in the field died of a wartime paper shortage and an over-ambitious attempt to revive it only as a reprint.

Now the long famine is ended, and every publisher is suddenly trying to explain how much faith he had all along. Lancer's revival of the Conan stories, combined with the success of Ballantine's reprint of Tolkien, proved that a great many readers still wanted to escape to ensorcelled seas and fairy lands, forlorn or otherwise. At

least sword-and-sorcery and the tale of marvelous realms have been saved. There are also signs that things-that-go-boomp and all-is-not-as-it-seems are finding a few publishers with hope and a measure of faith.

It seems almost ridiculous now to review the work of either J. R. R. Tolkien or Robert E. Howard, since they have already proved their worth. Yet I'm amazed to find fantasy fans who still haven't read the books, or who have been turned off in various ways. Well, Tolkien *has* become a focal point for dull and academic treatises, and perhaps he does take a bit of getting into; and Howard is admittedly rather crude in some stories. Nevertheless, any reader who likes the field should plunge into them at once.

The Hobbit and the three books that make up *The Lord of the Rings*, all by J.R.R. Tolkien (Ballantine, 95¢ each), are pure fun to read. Start with *The Hobbit*; this land of Middle Earth is a complicated one, and the early book is the best introduction. Get through the first chapter somehow; it was written for children and shows it—but beyond that chapter, it comes to life and takes on enchantment. Then go on through the trilogy (all three volumes are really one book, without false conclusions between them). This is the most complete visualization of a land of wonders I have read, and a gorgeous tale of the ancient strife between good and evil—without moralizing. Sometimes, perhaps, as in a few overwritten chapters of the third volume, the vision falters; but the marvel is that it never fails in the long run.

Then, if you've found this rewarding, you can hunt for other stories somewhat like it. I wish you luck. Few will qualify. Perhaps A. Merritt's *Ship of Ishtar* and *The Face in the Abyss*, if a dealer can get them for you, will have the same magic. There is also—happily still on many newsstands—*The Well of the Unicorn*, by Fletcher Pratt (Lancer, 75¢). Pratt wrote this before he knew of Tolkien, yet it is probably closer in spirit to what Tolkien's readers want than any of the pale attempts to follow the pattern lately. This is the story of the making of a man in the world where magic works—at a price; and it is even more the story of the tragedy of a wizard, Meliboë, who knows in advance the price he must pay and who dares cope with the gods of his own powers. Unhappily the sequel to this, which I once discussed with the author, can never be written now, since Pratt had not even begun when he died.

Stepping down a bit—but still at a fairly high level—we have two other possible contenders. The *Island of the Mighty,* by Evangeline Walton (Ballantine Adult Fantasy, 95¢), is a story based on part of the ancient Welsh legends and myths. (Tolkien also drew on these, though less directly.) These are somewhat unfamiliar to most of us, but the tale requires no advance familiarity. The author has reworked and rethought the material until it becomes a genuine novel, rather than a formula rehash of ancient ideas. Her freshness and inner conviction show the writer's obvious love of the work.

Just as *Man of La Mancha* took the bitter, cynical story of Don Quixote and gave it an upsurging modern outlook without distorting the original, Walton's story has taken the darkness and vagueness of these Welsh myths and thoroughly modernized their revelations without altering the original force and dark enchantment of the wellsprings.

A Wizard of Earthsea, by Ursula K. LeGuin (Ace, 75¢), is listed as a Science Fiction Special, but it is pure fantasy, with no false attempt to rationalize it scientifically. This is the story of the training of a wizard, from his first childish success in magic to his discovery of the real enemy his fates have contrived for him from his ignorance. The action takes place on a world of seas, where the forces of the universe are more primitive and more elemental than ours. But the internal landscape of the people is very real.

This isn't as thoroughly developed a book as the writer's *Left Hand of Darkness.* I suspect that it was originally designed to be part of a series of books for younger readers. Nevertheless the writing and the inner feeling are perfect for any adult with sufficient youthful flexibility to be a fantasy reader. And while the ending leaves us with marvelous chances for more, this is a fully finished story on its own.

There should be a sequel, of course. Mrs. LeGuin has proved in science fiction that each book she does against a fixed background of thought is better than the one before. If she can also do that in fantasy, she may well have initiated a wonderful series.

FOR the straight sword-and-sorcery fan, a seeming plethora of material is on the newsstand. And a little of it is even good. To my taste, Robert E. Howard's stories of Conan, the Cimmerian barbarian who descended into the civilized lands left after the fall of

Atlantis and there reaved a kingdom for himself, remain the best.

The tales are often crude, but they have a power and drive that more than compensates. The swash always buckles in Howard's work. The texture of these lands and times before our histories is superb. The monsters and the dark forces are truly menacing, and a hero is a hero. Somehow, Conan is not wooden or cardboard, even though his character is never really subtle. And throughout the works, brawling lust is mixed with just enough laughter at the gods to season both.

Of all the Howard volumes now available, my favorite is *Conan the Conqueror* (Lancer, 95¢). This has just been reissued and should be readily available. Unlike some of the volumes, this is a straight novel and is the work of Howard in its entirety. (Other volumes are made up of shorter lengths, and many of these have been completed or carried on by other writers, notably by L. Sprague de Camp and Lin Carter. While I admire their efforts, I think they would agree that the original writing must necessarily be somewhat truer than even the best imitation by others).

The story takes place at the very peak of Conan's powers, when he has seized the throne of Aquilonia as a barbarian invader and must learn to hold it as the king of a civilized land—but a civilized land menaced by dark magic from older times. Conan is at his best, and so is the world we see around him; detail is given here on other characters on the lesser aspects of the culture and on the wizardry. Also the conflict is clear. The only comparable story in the series is a much shorter piece entitled *The Scarlet Citadel* in the volume chronologically just before this.

Once we leave Conan, we're faced with a selection of books mostly frank imitations of Howard's formula—and only rarely of the spirit and dash of his writing. There are—or have been—hordes of such books, often in series. Probably many serve well enough to fill the void for the sword-and-sorcery fans who have exhausted the original, but I know of none that I feel could have created the trend they try to follow. Howard blazed the trail too clearly, and those who come after somehow seem to move relentlessly along it from Aquilonia to Zamorra. There must be a million byways; there must be men who seized godhoods rather than kingdoms, or who roved freely throughout their days. And there must be lands where Atlantis never was, but where the dark sea gates of Ys opened a new

chaos to be entered by the sons of Mycennea. So far, however, these lands of swordplay and enchantment seem to remain *terra incognita.*

Among the best of those which frankly and honestly imitate Howard are the stories of *Brak, the Barbarian*, by John Jakes. (Some book on Brak is always on the stands, but I can't guess which will be where, so hunt for yourself.) Jakes has a good deal of inventiveness and his inventions are frequently better than those of Howard. Brak is less lusty than Conan—but some of the women are far more to be lusted after than those founded in Howard.

In this field, the better stories are often not novels. L. Sprague de Camp—in addition to working on the fragments of Howard's unfinished stories—has been doing us all a service by gathering these into books before they are lost in the pages of past magazines. His latest anthology is *Warlocks and Warriors* (Putnam, $4.95). Happily, while this contains a few of the better imitations of Howard, it goes beyond and before to present us with a larger picture of the whole field of heroic fantasy, a term perhaps more suitable than sword-and-sorcery and which was first coined, I think, by Mike Moorcock.

The book contains an introduction by de Camp which says about everything that needs saying on the field, and I'd recommend it for those who are really interested in seeing more than Howard and imitation Howard.

Somewhat akin to all this are two books by Norvell Page, who wrote an incredible number of series novels. *Flame Winds* (Berkley, 75¢) the first and perhaps better of these, is an attempt to mix genuine historical fiction with some of the elements of heroic fantasy. Even when the story first appeared in magazine form in 1939, I felt that the effort was not a happy one, and I see no reason now to change my belief.

The novel deals with the strange figure of Prester John, the mythical warrior priest who went into the hinterlands of Asia to spread his version of the doctrine of the Christos. Page gives us an explanation of Prester John that makes him only slightly less hard to accept as historical, but which somehow turns the wonder of the legends into routine fumble-fingered heroism.

At times, the magic in this seems to be pasted in, as if to fit a dubious historical romance to a fantasy market; at other times, it works rather well, though most can be explained by the jargon-term

"hypnotism"—a term which means something in fact but is usually so badly done in fiction that out-and-out magic would make more sense. Page seems to be totally unaware of the limits of hypnotism, so the jargon only reduces the sweep of the story.

For me, something makes the story impossible to believe; yet it is conventionally right enough to prevent escape to a world of wonder. The easiest solution, obviously, is to escape into sleep. The second time I woke up with the book beside me, I stopped trying to reread it. It's probably all right for those who want their make-believe in very tiny doses, but I hope no reader of this column falls into that category.

Once we leave the two currently most popular types of fantasy, the market narrows a bit, and the quality of what we find is totally uncertain. There are a few excellent pieces of general fantasy, but too many where a certain time-hallowed musty quaintness has been mistaken for works of true art.

Many of the best and of the most distressingly quaint among these are to be found in the Ballantine Adult Fantasy series, all under the editorship of Lin Carter. But since I hope to cover the series in more detail later, I'll reserve most of such comments.

Fletcher Pratt's *The Blue Star* (Ballantine, 95¢) has a few touches of almost-quaint writing, but somehow this serves a purpose in the book. It is possibly a combination of historical romance with some degree of magic, but it succeeds; the "history" here is as mythical as the magic. And the witchcraft, which lies behind the power politics in this world that may be somewhere or somewhen, is a trial of the spirit that underlies a marvelous struggle with very real love. It isn't exactly escape literature and it isn't really light reading; whether it's fun in anything except the most deeply intellectual sense I do not know. But in real value as a piece of honest literature inside our field, I personally evaluate it above almost any other story. I find after twenty years and three readings of it that the story improves with each year and each trial.

And, of course, no survey of currently available fantasy would be quite complete without mention of *The Work Ouroborus*, by E.R. Eddison (Ballantine, 75¢). This has a style that is as consciously quaint and odd as any ever put on paper, and it presents just about every obstacle possible to the reader. The chief characters are two "nations" of Witches (who practice no witchcraft) and Demons

(who are not demonic), and getting into it sometimes seems as hard as "functioning" is at first in calculus. Yet the man who hasn't read it will always be the poorer for his lack of experience. It is another book that grows better and bigger as we read through it, and continues to grow with time, long after the reading is finished.

Frankly, the other three books by Eddison, vaguely related to it, are hardly worth the effort, in my opinion. In them can be found even greater quaintness, both in style and in ideas; and the flowers here are all of paper, with the dew shine of the morning that graces the *Worm* only simulated by bits of tinsel.

Finally, there is a minor triumph in the Adult Fantasy series, for which I am indebted to the publisher, who sent me advance proofs. For a good many years, most fantasy fans have known that Hannes Bok wrote a fantasy novel that had appeared in only a badly stripped and bowdlerized magazine version, as *The Blue Flamingo*. It wasn't very good, but those who had read the whole swore that the true story was much better. Then, alas, after the death of Bok, the true version seemed to have vanished forever.

Well, it was never lost. An agent held it, and on hearing of the search was kind enough to send it to Lin Carter. So now it is published complete as *Beyond the Golden Stair* by Hannes Bok (Ballantine, 95¢). It should be on sale after December 28, 1970, incidentally.

Fortunately, the earlier version is one I had almost forgotten, so I could read it afresh.

I'd recommend it with some qualifications. Hannes Bok was a man gifted with an extraordinary sense of form and color—one who could make even the most twisted drawing seem real or could bring freshness to the most conventional dryad in the woods by night.

This shows in the writing. The color of the story and the panoply of scenes justifies the book. However, the characters have none of the Merritt influence Hannes is supposed to have shown; they tend to be stock, except for those seen in only secondary roles. And the plot is simpler than any Merritt could have permitted himself. Even the ending is telescoped too severely.

Yet in spite of its faults, it has the sense of enchantment so rarely found in most market fantasy. And since our world needs the glamor at least as much as it ever did, let us lose no chance. It's a book whose merits far outweight its faults. □

 (Continued from page 2)

I could have contributed, at the time, some of the things which have occurred to me over the ensuing years. For example:

Fantasy is not merely a joy or a privilege or a talent of human beings—it is a vital necessity. I choose the words carefully and I shall say them again: a vital necessity. It is necessary to the species, if a definition of humanity as we know it is to remain valid, to have the penchant for fantasy, and it is necessary to the humanity of each individual. One can go further and say that an individual with no fantasy in him is less of a human being because of it.

It has been shown that to deprive a man of his dreams is to deprive him of his sanity. A device which will waken a sleeper at the onset of REM (rapid eye movement) sleep, which is when the most vivid dreaming occurs, will reduce him to a neurotic state, or worse, in a very short time. I think this is because the complex reality which our senses bring to us must be matched with nonsense—non sense—for balance, for equilibrium. The mind searches for meanings, and to test the validity of the "real", it helps to be able to scan the non-real, the systems of it-won't-work, of it-can't-be, of it-couldn't-happen. I call this the "pigs with wings" syndrome—the ability of the mind to conceptualize that which does not exist—*yet.*"

But embodied in this is "that which does not exist—yet." It is in this area that fantasy begins to be science fiction. Technology is perpetually catching up with the kind of nonsense performed by the fantasist. If I'm to dismiss the idea of hearing the voice of a man fifty years dead from six thousand miles away I'd better break up my Caruso records. When an industrial giant advertises that imagination is its greatest asset, you're looking at fantasy with its work clothes on.

Fantasy has another function, too. It makes fable. When old Aesop told the story of the fox and the grapes, he wasn't describing a real vegetarian fox with human values and the gift of speech. The meaning of the story is larger than the story. The distinction between just any old writing and living literature lies just here—in its fabulous quality. *Gone with the Wind* is a fable; *Forever Amber* is not. GWTW will live and be remembered long after everyone's forgotten who or what Amber was. The fabulous element enters with the fantasy that the fox wants grapes and that it can talk; could the

story possibly be a fable without this fantasy? Characters like Scarlett and Rhett are in the same sense fantastic and fabulous They are 'what if—' people.

Someone once said that there are only three kinds of science fiction: what-if—, if-only—, and if-this-goes-on. I have not yet seen the table of contents for this issue, but sight unseen I can state that you'll find all of these elements in these pages, and at least once, all of them in the same story. Fantasy's like that—generous, profligate. I personally got into the science-fiction field because it had no fences, no horizons. It wasn't until Fletcher's wonderful illumination that night that I began to realize that science fiction and all fiction, are but departments in the larger body of fantasy and that the presence of fantasy in our literature and in our mind is what makes us the complex, colorful, humorful, unexpected tragicomedians we have become in this (compared with our fantasies) rather limited little universe. —*Theodore Sturgeon*

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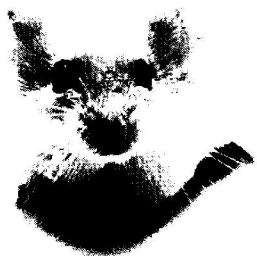

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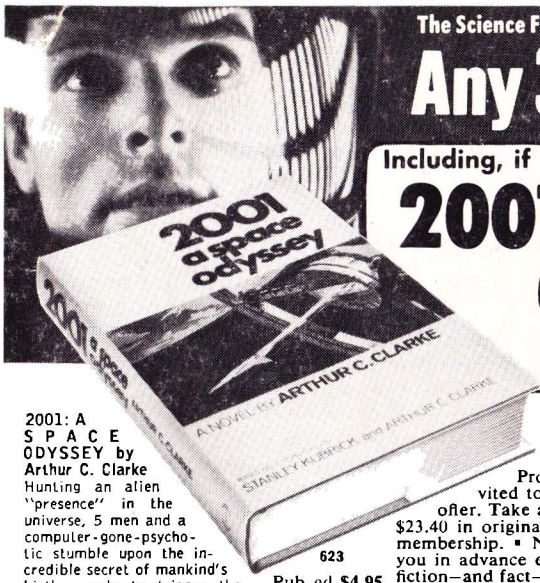

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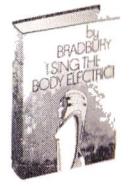

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