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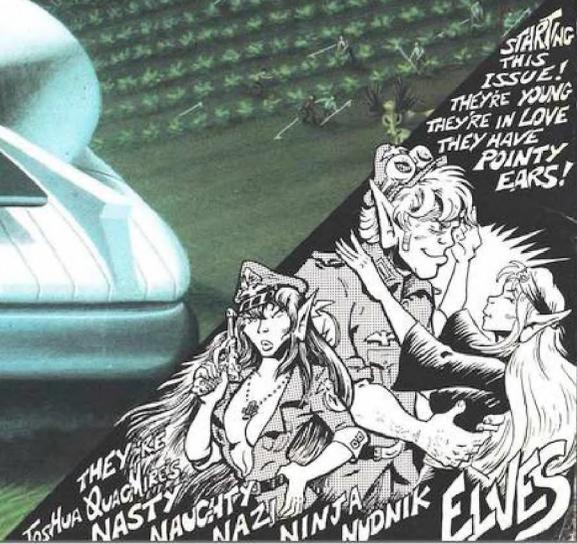
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In this issue:

Diana L. Paxson
Richard A. Lupoff
Esther M. Friesner
Jessica Salmonson
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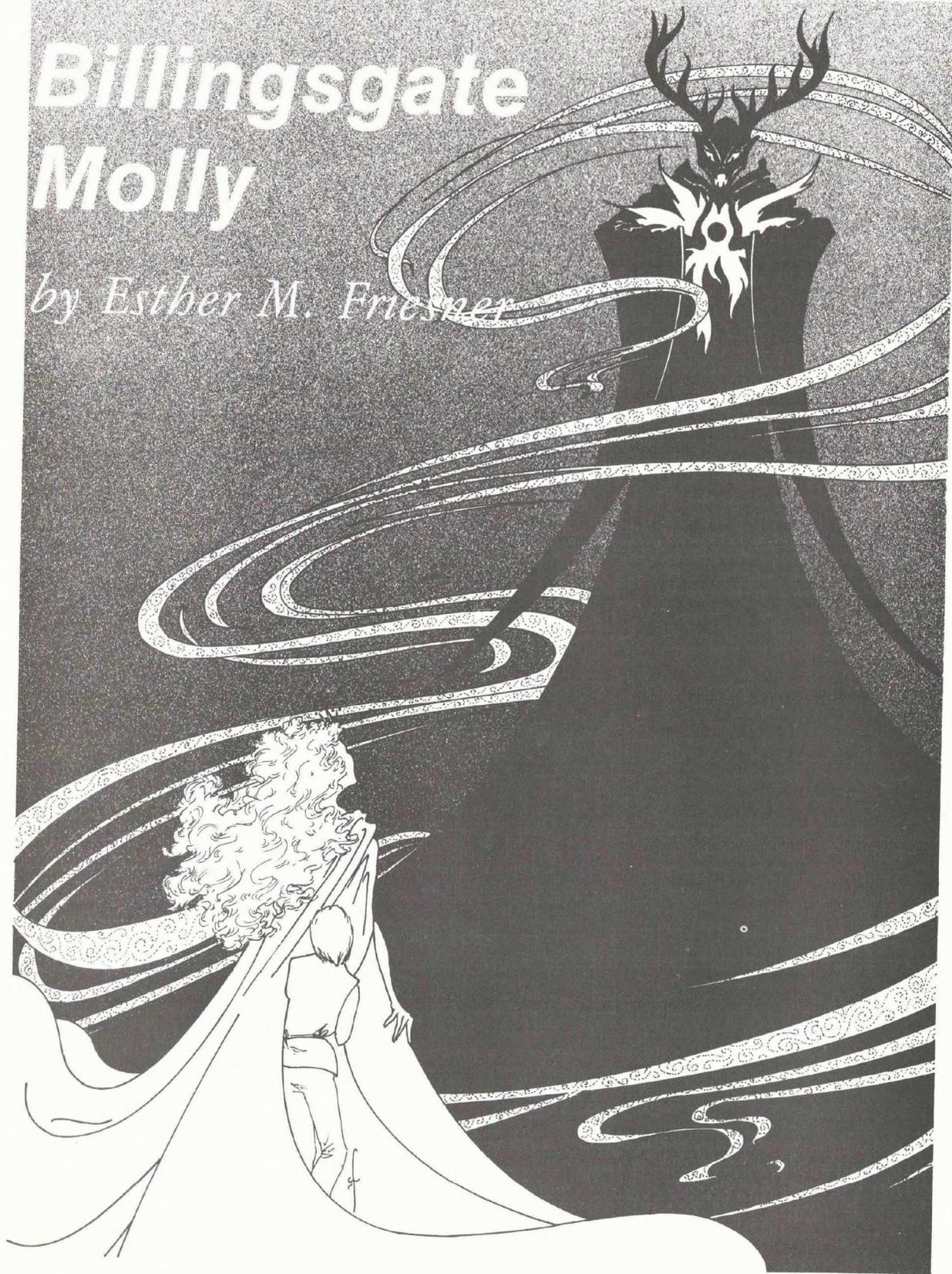
Barry A. Wilson

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Billingsgate Molly

by Esther M. Friesner



UNHAND ME, DAMN YOU!

Well, and so what if you're just doing your job? Ever stop to think I might just be doing mine? Hey? Put your bloody Peeler in a fine copper-buttoned uniform and you think you've the right to stop a gentleman from pursuing his fancy of an evening. Yes, and if my fancy's to climb the front of a whacking great market building, who's to object? I only wanted to see her face again. That's her face up there, on Britannia's statue. It's not her face as I most recall it, but it's close enough. It'll have to do.

You're not taking me anywhere. Don't let this toff's get-up fool you. You're no more than a bully-boy in blue, and I'm a guttersnipe that's never been fully at ease with your fine clothes or your fine manner of talk. Oh, yes, and I call myself guttersnipe proud, I do! A chimney sweep, a brat born to die young, coughing up lungs gone black from cleaning out the flues of the gentry.

If I'm not dead yet, it's Molly's doing, and not you nor a platoon of bulls like you'll keep me from laying these flowers at her feet.

God, she was an ugly sow! So ugly she was famous for it. I heard about her long before I ever met her: Billingsgate Molly, with a tongue sharp and pungent as any seaman's and a face to fright the devil. My earliest recall of her's the sight of a rum-reddened nose and a mouth full of half-rotten teeth, the touch of horn-skinned hands that reeked of fish long dead. She shot out a claw and seized me by the thin cloth of my sooty jacket, rumpling my hair with her other hand.

"So this is Jilly's boy, eh? Like to end on the gallows, sure enough." She got a firmer grip on me and thrust her grimy snout an inch away from mine. My master—a one-eyed liar who swore he'd sailed with Nelson—stood by grinning. The stench of Molly's sweat, the foulness of her breath, the waves of fishy air from the herring cart she tended, they'll never leave me. And neither will the love I bear her.

"Jilly?" I was a bold cock sparrow. None of a child's proper breeding in me. Likely 'cause I somehow knew few chimneysweeps ever lived to grow out of childhood, so we all did our cursing early, to season us proper for Hell when it came. "Who the bloody devil's that?"

Molly laughed. Her coarse linen sleeves were rolled up so's I could see the flab of her upper arms dance when she laughed. "Your mother, that's who Jilly is, chuck! Or was; dead now, and it's taken me these seven long years to find what became of her boy." She released me and dug deep between her sagging breasts for a greasy bit of felt tied round with twine. She tossed it to my

master's waiting hands. "That'll settle it," she said.

Bought and sold, it was that easy. Oh, don't raise your eyebrows that way, my good man. Our dear Queen Victoria sits on her throne and says, "tsk, tsk," very prettily about the horrid, wicked, sorry state of the world, but what's she do about it? Nah, don't tell me no one sells children these days, matey. Or what's a factory for?

I was happy to be merchandise that day. My old master counted out the coins, grunted once, and wrested my bristle broom from my hands. Then he slouched off. It was all the farewell we two had. Molly launched a fine curse on his back before she turned to me.

"Come on," was all she said. She stood, kicked over the empty crate she'd been sitting on, hoisted her barrow by the handles, and trundled it away. Oaths fluttered around her head like gulls about a dory, and I came scampering after.

"Where are we going?" She was an old bitch, but the pace she set had me panting before long. Night had come on, and I didn't know my way through that part of London. She set down the cart and gave me a canny look.

"Where? Well, that's a question with answers enough, my lovely. I could tell you we're off to see the roots of Buckingham Palace itself, now, couldn't I? Aye, or tell you we're for the high road to Hell. But you'd know the way there yerself. Agh, child—" And she spat a gray gob into the gutter, then touched my cheek gentler than the brush of a summer butterfly. "Child, we're only going back to our true home."

"Home, Molly? You've turned ambitious, or a fool."

At first I didn't see him. He was blacker than a shadow's shadow, and he seemed to ripple out of the darkened sidestreet like a devil's banner. We were down not a block from here—Billingsgate proper, where the fishmongers come and the porters sweat. I can show you the very spot, if you insist, but I don't think you will.

Molly grabbed me and hid me in her bosom, or tried to. I heard cold laughter and I fought myself loose. Always best to put a face to the thing you fear. That's what I used to think, but never again, never again.

It was a chill, starry night. You could just glimpse the powdery trail of the Bears and the Hunter with his Dogs running alongside. And this one—this thing of darkness—reached up with his laughter and swept them all out of the sky. His eyes were empty of any human light, yet they shone—Christ, how they shimmered! Beautiful, beautiful: I'd never seen anything so fine. He saw me want what shone in his eyes, and that made him laugh all the more.

"Greedy brat you have there, Molly. He'll do well to pay for your passage back. Hand

him over."

Molly thrust me behind her. I clung to her skirts, but still I yearned forward, reaching for those shining eyes with all my heart. "This one's not for you, Ythar, may the Lady burn you blacker than you are! There's no payment for the use of the homeward road, either, so take your talk of it and use it to wipe your snotty nose!"

"Oh, sweet Molly, why have you tarried so long in this foul outer world? What's enchanted you so about these ugly, short-lived creatures?" Ythar came nearer; Molly stood her ground, only sweeping her rough-spun skirts back like a swan's wings to shelter me between. I peeped out and saw him take her chin in his hand and lift it to the blaze of his eyes.

God strike me dead here and now if I'm lying. The unholy light that filled his eyes spilled over her face—it changed her. I saw the gap-toothed, rum-raddled caricature of a woman melt away, the piggy eyes grow large and lustrous, the skin bloom soft as any rose, and white—white! White as a lady can be who's never known the touch of sunlight, who's only come out to dance with the moon and stars.

"I make my own choices, Ythar," she said. "I've been a duke's lady here, and I've been a farmer's bride. I have taught new rhymes to a poet and old songs to a bard. Yes, and I've been teacher and whore, and even served one of their gods in a nun's garb, and now I'm nothing but Billingsgate Molly, a fishwife, a crone, and all of that's been better to be than to return to you!"

The night cold struck me by surprise. Ythar had seized her, whipped her close to him, and left me shivering without her skirts to warm me. He held her tight enough against him to make them into one shadow, so tight that she couldn't even struggle to get free.

"I hate this world you love, this pretty island toy that's taken you from me," he said. His voice was snarling like an angry cat's. "If you won't come willingly home, I'll seal your choices away from you forever. You won't pay for your little dalliances here in the upper air; not that. But I'll take my payment for the lost years and the humiliation I've suffered. I'll take it where it will hurt you most, my pretty Moll."

His darkness tricked into the night itself, and he was gone. The beautiful creature he'd held in his arms was my repulsive old Molly again. She staggered back and leaned against the handles of her cart. Timidly I tugged at her skirt.

"Who was that? What did he mean?"

She looked down at me, and there was something left of the shining magic of Ythar's eyes mirrored in her own. By that ghostlight she looked at me, looked at me closer than any woman's looked at me since. Her hands weren't callused any more, and they smelled

"Billingsgate Molly"

© 1985 by Esther M. Friesner

of lilacs when she cupped my face.

"Jilly's boy," she murmured. "Sweet Jill, for his sake and for yours, I'll face it."

"Who in Hell was that?" I demanded, my voice going shrill. I wasn't a child to let grown-ups ignore me.

"No one in Hell, love; no one in Hell," she said. She took my hand and yanked me, running, through the streets. We abandoned the herring cart, we never said a word, we only ran.

You with your bull's-eye lantern, have you ever raced through this London of ours with no other light but the stars? Have you ever felt the cobbles slick under your feet, glimmering like the scales of a monstrous black dragon, twisting into impossible, ever-changing curves even as you run? Where were we going? Why did we run? I hadn't the breath to ask. If I slackened the pace, she yanked me again, until my eyes burned and my chest swelled with the sick desire to stop or to die.

I thought I heard water lapping nearby. I imagined we'd come down to the Thames, but I couldn't see the water. It sounded close, yet how could that be? It's all clear sky when you're that near the river, not moonless dark like what I saw then. Blackness had swallowed us whole, a howling dark filled with clammy winds that ran their cobweb fingers through my hair and sobbed songs without words or hope into my terrified ears.

Molly stopped. She stopped, and the winds stopped, and I fell crying to the cobbles—oh, yes, there were still cobbles underfoot. She hugged me and said, "There, chuck, you're tired. I'll go on ahead to do what I must."

I clung to her, shaking, my eyes tight shut and my baby mouth empty of sailor's words for once. I begged her not to leave me alone. "You'll go off and not come back for me. I know it!" I wailed. "You'll leave me here lost to die!"

She looked down at me and smoothed back my hair. "Leave you, my sweet one? No, never that, while I live. I've searched for you too long to lose you now."

"Where are we, Molly?" I clutched her hands, warm as a friendly hearthside. Looking up, my eyes now used to the dark, I saw a ribbed roof curving high overhead and stretching off forever, like a behemoth's maw. Remembering her earlier jest I asked, "Are we at the roots of the Palace?"

"Bless you, we're deeper than that!" Her hands stank of fish again, and scraped my cheek. "We're nigh the very roots of the island, the heart of home. He'll strike here, if I know him. Lady knows what he'll set against the guards, or what beast he'll ride to battle. But you and I, love, we'll be there to stop him. You're Jilly's boy, and you've a small part of your mother's power in those baby hands. No, I'm not afraid to face Ythar

and all his sorceries. With you beside me, it's almost as if she were here again."

Her words confused me utterly, not that I had time to question them. What power would any wench who mothered me ever have, unless it were the power to drink gin and die poor? We went on, the water-sounds grew louder, and Molly lifted me into a boat that was suddenly there. It breasted the river like a living thing, Moll standing tall in the prow, I cowering in the bottom. Whatever river we crossed, it wasn't old Father Thames; it smelled too clean.

We were ashore again, and now I saw a light before us, a red glow brighter and more breathtaking than a hundred sunsets seen from the dome of St. Paul's. I felt Molly's hand in mine soften, looked to see the spotted paw turn to a lady's delicate hand, and raised my eyes full of wonder to the heavenly creature she'd become.

"Welcome, Lady Tarian!"

You in your fine blue uniform, lording it over the ragged Londoners, you'd look a beggar next to those men. Silver covered their breasts, and gems so pure they seemed to be bits of floating light winked from their brows. They towered above me—all adults seem monstrous tall to a child, but these I *knew* were tall men. Men . . . yes, I'm laughing. They were as much men as we're mudworms.

And my old Molly commanded them like a queen. "Where is the Lady? I bring the Princess Jilhya's son!"

They leaned their golden pikestaves forward and knelt before us. Their leader looked at me, and I saw tears in his eyes. "We thought she was dead, my Lady Tarian. The Lady herself went into mourning long ago, and no longer cares for the world above."

Molly's hand tightened around mine painfully. "She is dead, Chuar. Her son is halfblood, and not fit to inherit the rule, true. But he is her son! He is of the world above, and doomed to remain so, but half his blood runs royal. For his sake, and for the sake of his children, the Lady must look to the upper world again. For her dead daughter's sake."

The guard called Chuar shook his head. "She's set us here to guard the patron beast of the island where her daughter was last known to be. It will take time before one of my men can reach her with a message."

"Time?" I flattened myself against Molly's side. I knew that voice. Chuar and his men snapped to their feet, pikes ready, and the nameless cavern around us blazed with their anger and fear. "Time is all you'll never have!"

Ythar came from the shadow, alone. His hands were cupped like a little boy's holding a captive firefly. The guards seemed to relax, seeing him come so solitary and harmless-like, and Chuar said, "It's because of you my Lady Tarian and the Princess fled our land; your fault that Jilhya's gone! You know no

man's allowed here but my troop. Go! When the Lady hears her daughter's dead, I'd advise you not to linger here too long."

"And who will tell the Lady anything about it?" Ythar glided closer. A pulsing sound came from his cupped hands, faint, growing louder.

"Oran!" A young one leaped from the guards' rank at Chuar's command. "Find our Lady; ride to her quickly and tell her all you've heard the Lady Tarian tell me." Oran traced brief signs on the air, and a creature—deer-footed, with the body of a lion and a maiden's trailing blonde hair—stood saddled with scarlet for him.

But as he mounted, Ythar only breathed through his laced fingers and a thread of shining green smoke snaked out to ring Oran's mount. The creature reared, screaming. Oran slashed with his shortsword at the circling green. It thinned, throbbled, gathered in on itself, then tore into a thousand glassy daggers and stabbed man and mount to a merciless death.

Ythar half-smiled. "Send no more messengers, Chuar. Call off your men, unless you'd like to lose them. I hold enough power here to deal with all of you, yet have enough left to do what I've come to do. Step aside, Chuar, my Lady Tarian. My business is with the beast."

Chuar and his men stared at what was left of poor Oran. They held their pikes on guard, but their reluctance was plain. Tarian—my Molly—was the only one standing proud and fearless against Ythar. "You'll not harm the beast."

"Oh, but I will, my love! The patron beast, the soul of this pretty island, he's mine. And with his death the land sinks back into the sea. That's all I'm after—an end to the land that seduced you. Payment! Payment for the years you spent there, the happiness you had, the men of the land who had you while I—while I—" The fires burned black in his eyes, and I no longer desired them. Abruptly he lowered his voice. "Enough."

And something in a cavern beyond the trembling guard echoed *Enough!*

It came forth, its glory filling the place where we stood. Its wings swept wide, thrusting the shadows away, pouring wonder into my heart and soul until I knew that the thing I'd thirsted for in Ythar's eyes was only a poor, warped mockery of the beast's miracle. Colored like the lightning it was; a bolt of lightning to hang in the sky forever. The shape of it? You tell me the shape of strength, man! Not strength of muscle; the strength that every soul of this island—man, woman, and child—holds against wickedness. Put a name to it? Not I, but it's there. There even under a Peeler's natty blue breast. We've marched with a leopard banner and we've marched with a lion and a unicorn, and God alone knows what creature we'll march with when the final

battle comes. Well, I tell you that they're one and all the faces, souls, and bodies of the beast that guards our loving land.

But Ythar? He opened his hands wide, and a horror sprang from his keeping. It glowed like the rot of dead sea-creatures tossed up by the tide, and it wore despair for a crown. Terrible huge it leaped from his hands, and it buried its poison deep in the throat of the beast.

The beast reeled back, nigh overwhelmed by the sheer treachery of Ythar's surprise attack. Oh, it tried to recover itself, hooves and claws striking out, but it was a blind fight with no plan behind it; and Ythar's beast

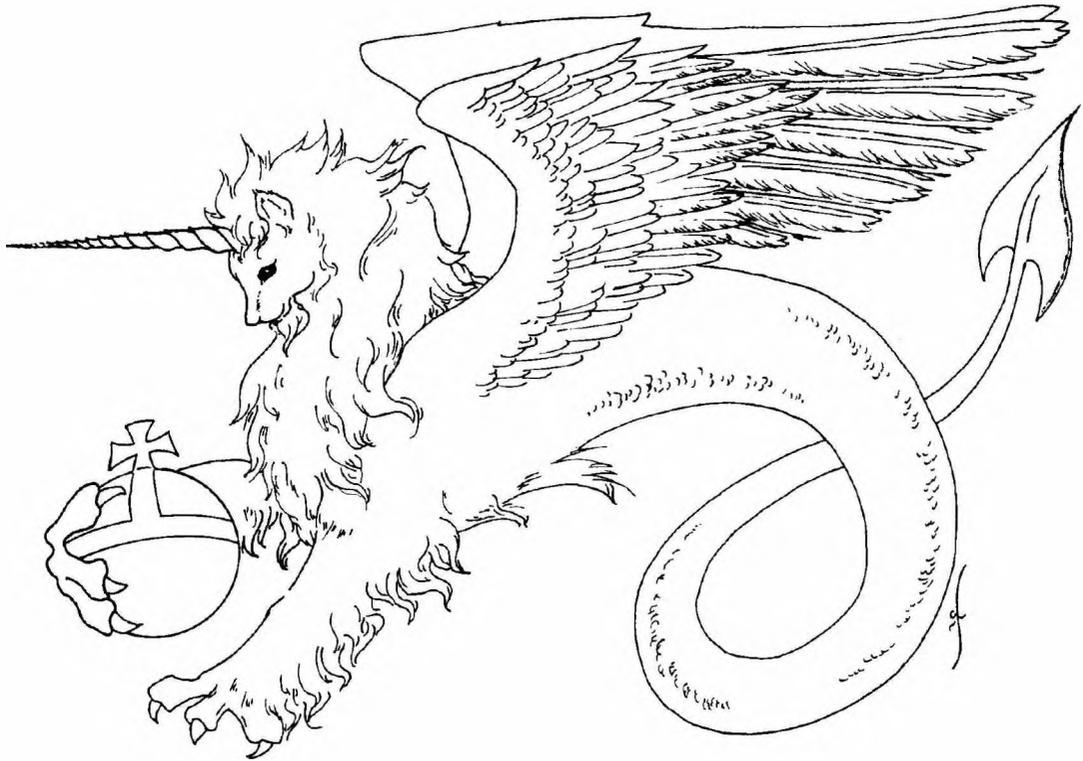
should have let him have me on any terms he set, rather than live to see you die like this!"

But Chuar's hand held her strongly. He was a ruined thing, yet he forced the words out. "No, my love. Whatever Ythar is, you'd never satisfy him by surrender. He'd only demand more. You did well to flee him; you could never have won if you'd fought back. Sweet Tarian—" And that was all, before he died.

We were the only man-sized things left living in that weird cavern somewhere under Londontown. The dead were scattered points of silver, flashing now and then in the

The power she hurled against Ythar was forged in fury and sang like the flight of an arrow. It spiraled out from her and cut Ythar's creature in two, and the howl that monster made dying was enough to flatten me to the cobbles and send the dead guards rolling over and over in a clatter of silvery armor.

"You are still a fool, my Lady." Ythar scowled, and from his wrinkled brow I saw a crown of antlers sprout, and hooked talons from his heels. His mouth gaped, lips curved back into a snake's fanged maw, and razored wings lifted him on a whirlwind he called out of nothingness.



knew its purpose. I saw blood dim the lightning brightness, and the great wings crumpled down. Mark me: In some battles it's not enough to have what's right on your side, or what's beautiful.

Ythar's laughter shuddered like thunder in the dark. Chuar's guardsmen lunged for him with their pikestaves, and he reaped their deaths like wheat, with a gesture. Chuar was the last to die, and his death wasn't quick. He fell beneath the churning paws of the warring creatures, and Molly had to dart in and drag him out to die in her lap.

"Chuar, my brother—" She was crying. "Ah, Lady! I should have stayed. I

brilliance reflected from the beasts locked in battle. Molly—Tarian—whatever name she'd been or chose to be—she laid Chuar's body down tenderly and stood up tall and bright as a spear, rays of light like spears starting out from her body, and the stone walls crackled like charring wood.

Rage of love or hate or just a heart that's been afraid too long—what was in her then? I don't know. All of them, I think. She'd said we were going home, the home she and my mother'd left to escape Ythar's demands. Yes, a heart that's weary of running and finally chooses to fight for what it loves: that was Molly.

"While you remained willingly above, I could not touch you. All that has changed! You know your powers are no match for mine here below. The beast is wounded! The beast will die, and the land die with it, and I will give them both their deaths as a bridal gift to you, my loving Lady Tarian!"

He climbed on the black wind, then plunged down, a whirling circle of swords.

But she was there, rising on a wave of light to meet him. And I, watching, knew that Ythar did not lie; that all my Molly's powers wouldn't be enough against him.

Then *she* was there: the other. She was with me as suddenly as daylight when

you first open your eyes. A ghost, a dream, a haunting; a face I'd never seen, yet I'd always known. She was robbed and crowned with majesty, but in her eyes I saw only tenderness. She bowed and left her kiss sweetly warm on my lips. Her mind called the name she'd given me at birth and that had died with her, and my own heart answered, longing, *Mother!*

Molly's light flashed out, joined to mine just as the apparition of my mother vanished, and enveloped Ythar. For a moment he hung there, like a moth in lamplight. Then he collapsed inward, crushed to ash in a fist of flame. I saw his bones before they, too, burned away, then I didn't see or know a thing for a long time.

I woke up in a basement room that smelled of salt fish and fresh bread, rum and flowers. "About time you're up, sluggy!" Molly stood, hands on hips, by the side of the pallet where I lay.

"Ythar—" I began.

She knelt and put a hasty finger to my lips. "That's done. Every price's been paid. Now you don't think about it any longer, chuck. We've got more important things to see to once you're rested."

More important than what we'd just been through? She never mentioned the doings of

that night again. She was Molly the hag, ugly Moll, Billingsgate Molly the fishwife with God's most repulsive face, and that's how she stayed till the day she died. For she did die. I was with her at the last, summoned back from Brazenose College, Oxford, to hold her hand and help her out of the world.

Oxford! Is that all that fills your little mind with wonder after what I've told you? Yes, Oxford for a chimneysweep, and Eton before that, and all through Molly's doing; the one small crumb of sorcery left her after her interview with the Lady.

"She never forgave me for your mother's death," old Molly wheezed. Her hands had acquired so many new layers of work-roughened skin that they seemed to be made entirely of roofslate. "Jilhyra was always my loving friend; she made her own choice to follow me when I first left our homeland to escape Ythar's so-called love. But the Lady never saw it that way. She needed someone to blame all her grief on. 'If you love that island enough to lure my child away, then take it!' she told me. 'Use your blood to heal the beast, for I won't. Make Britain your own, but you'll do it at the cost of your powers.'" Molly shut her eyes and sighed.

"So I did as my Lady would have me do," she said. "I opened my veins and let the

magic pour from them over the beast's wounds until they were healed. You, poor child, I tapped your pitiful powers, too; robbed you of Jilhyra's birthright. You've no more magic left to you, now. Forgive old Molly?"

Forgive her? Christ, how I wept when I kissed her horrible face! She died at evensong in my arms.

That's her face up there—her true face, the face I saw by Ythar's terrible eye-light. That's the face I gave to the statue of Britannia I made, and it's at Billingsgate Molly's feet I'm going to lay these flowers. For she saved you and me both to live to see this night, believe it or doubt it; us and all Britain besides.

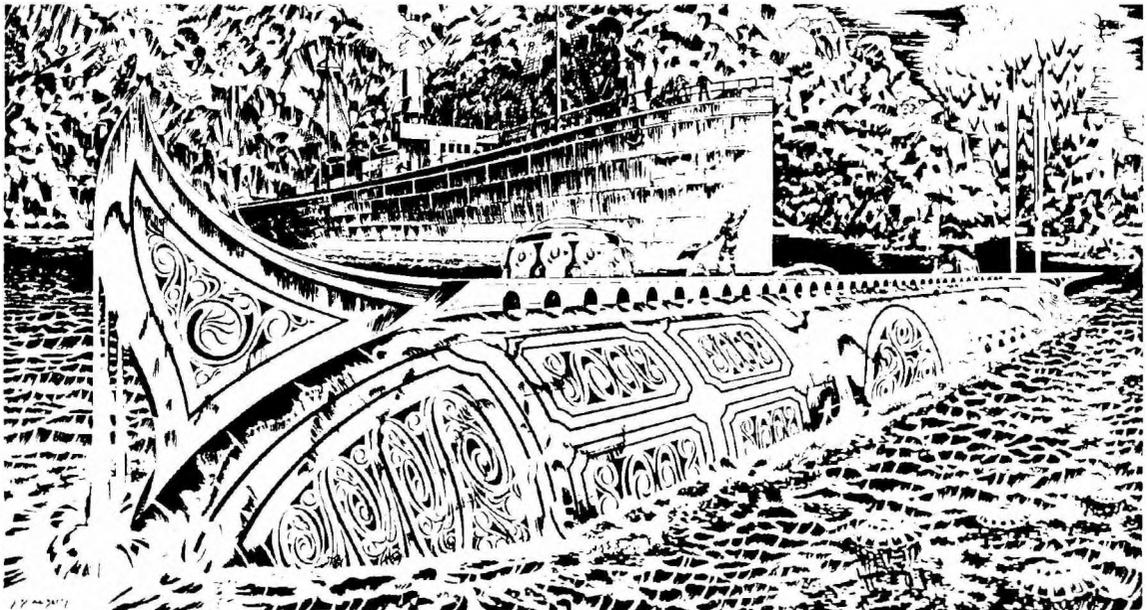
Nah, what's the use? Arrest me, then, if that's what you've the stomach for, you blue-backed bastard. It's a fool who wastes time explaining dreams to—

Eh?

Y-yes. Yes, of course I'll be careful. Quick, too? Done before you pass this part of your beat again, I swear it.

Well, Moll, I'll be damned. Even from down here I can feel you giving him blessing with your smile.

—fb—



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Editorial

While we don't do a regular book review column in *Fantasy Book*, this time I wanted to mention a few new books of special interest to our readers. Why am I so sure these will interest you? Well, they're all by writers whose works have been appearing in our pages, two first novels, a second novel, and one dictionary. A dictionary, you ask? Trust me.

Infinity's Web, by Sheila Finch, is a novel of alternate realities, and a good one. The various versions of a single character are the focal points of the stories of different worlds, and the characterizations are convincing and well structured. Among other things, it gives an interesting view of how environment shapes a person, since the character ranges from aging hippie artisan to housewife to professional sorceress (the latter in a London controlled by the Third Reich). *Infinity's Web* is a solid science fiction story with magic, science and theology neatly interwoven. A good read. [Bantam paperback, \$2.95]

Esther Friesner has been quite a regular here in *Fantasy Book*, with works both witty and serious. Her *Mustapha and his Wise Dog* is a silly/serious Arabian Nights fable, taking place in a land that could only exist in the imagination (or any good Sinbad movie). She also manages to work in every "dog" word, phrase, or outright cliché that you could imagine (or dread) as the chapter titles. Frighteningly enough, they all make sense in context. If you're not put off by an occasional 'dog' pun, you will undoubtedly enjoy *Mustapha and his Wise Dog*. [Avon paperback, \$2.95]

Although *Become the Hunted*, by Jefferson P. Swycaffer, is actually his second novel, it takes place first, so I decided to mention it. His first novel, *Not In Our Stars* (which takes place second) was a novel of interstellar war. *Become the Hunted* is a novel of espionage and intrigue. Both are set in the universe described by the Traveller science fiction role playing game. Trying to write a novel to match what happens in a game is difficult, but it's done well here, especially in *Become the Hunted*. As in any good thriller, the explanations and motivations gradually unfold for the reader, as the bad guys (or are they?) get ever closer to final victory. A hard-SF adventure thriller, and if that suits you, you'll like it. [Avon paperback, \$2.95]

Now for that dictionary. *The New Devil's Dictionary* by J. N. Williamson, is a dictionary of all the dreadful clichés that appear in horror stories, along with listings of some of the authors who have helped to make them dreadful. Williamson's book helps drive stakes through the hearts of Phrases That Would Not Die, such as:

Mesmerized. There to be put in a sentence when the writer has used "hypnotized" rather too often.

Chittering. A sound (source unseen) small monster things make—just out of sight.

Cosmic. Oft precedes "justice," "frenzy," "horror," and "sex," the latter exclusively during this decade or the preceding one. HPL. 91.4%.

In this last example, HPL indicates that H. P. Lovecraft was guilty of using this word to pieces, and that an estimated 91.4% of horror writers follow in his hallowed footsteps in that regard.

Williamson pokes fun at a lot of contemporary writers, including himself. The only real problem that I see is that the book may be of interest only to people who write (and want to avoid the clichés), or who have to read manuscripts all day (like myself, and any other editor who has considered making paper dolls out of the next submission to boast "a nameless, faceless horror" with "undulating tentacles," that makes "ghastly sounds" as it creeps out of the "castle's bowels"). *The New Devil's Dictionary* is well illustrated by J. K. Potter. Apparently many of the illustrations were commissioned for, but not used in, other projects (works of horror, I hope), and are excellent illustrations of some of the most visual clichés on the list. *The New Devil's Dictionary* is published by W. Paul Ganley, trade paperback edition \$5, hardbound edition \$15.

As you may have noticed, we're trying another experimental story form in this issue. Josh Quagmire's cartoon work has been a favorite of mine for some time, and I'm happy to have him doing this special story for us. Let us know what you think of this and the other innovations we've made over the last few issues. I know that we no longer devote any precious pages to printing the letters you send, but we *do* listen to what you tell us, and we try to make changes in the directions that you, the readers, say that you want. This doesn't mean that we'll make radical changes in response to a vocal minority; it does mean that we want *Fantasy Book* to be a magazine that you, the readers, will continue to enjoy and support. So if you have a favorite feature, author, or artist that you've seen in our pages, or if we do something that you absolutely *can't stand*, please tell us. I promise you that every letter of comment is read by either the publisher or myself (both, in most cases), so you're not just sending out messages in bottles to float in the ocean of corporate publishing. We want to hear from you, and we care what you have to say.

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—Nick Smith



a Spell in Time

by Sansoucy Kathenor

THEORY HOLDS THAT A SPELL is more effective in a foreign language than in a familiar one, and practice has proved the theory true. The more remote and unknown the language, the better. Following this logic, Major Sorcerer Loreddy had invented a language of his own, one that would be unknown to every other person in the world.

Unfortunately, the spells he recited in that language did not work.

So annoyed was Loreddy at his failure that he almost cursed, which would have been a dangerous thing for a magician to do. Eventually he applied further logic to the problem and realized that a genuine language must involve communication; so some second person had to learn this one to make the theory valid.

Loreddy had no apprentice at the time of his inspiration, so his only recourse was to teach his language to one of the villagers. It was not a solution he liked. What if, for example, the villager learned some of Loreddy's spells and applied a few without training or authorization?

Further inspiration struck Loreddy as he thought about it. He would teach his spell language to the village idiot, whose memory surpassed normal by as much as her reasoning powers fell below. She could learn to communicate in the new language, but would never think to use it for spells herself.

Loreddy rushed down into the village and sought out the girl's family. "I want Ree," he announced.

"What for?" asked Ree's mother blankly.

"To memorize something for me." Loreddy said impatiently. "Why else would anyone want her?"

Since Loreddy's local reputation was that of a trustworthy (if also a tactless) man, Ree's mother agreed and called her husband to ratify the arrangement. Ree's father tried to bargain for payment for Ree's service, pointing out that, at fifteen, she was old enough to start earning some money for the family, but Loreddy argued him down to an agreement that the sorcerer would perform a healing spell over the girl each day she worked for him, in the hope it might lessen her disability.

Loreddy went off smugly pleased that he had solved his problem. He had no idea his real problems were about to begin

* * * *

The first days went swimmingly. Ree was quick enough to learn, though she lacked the ability to reason from what she knew, and she learned the names Loreddy assigned to objects and actions faster than Loreddy did himself. She fetched things on order, performed on command the sets of gestures or little symbolic dances he taught her, answered as ordered in the spell language, and sat motionlessly watching him whenever she was not being spoken to or directed to do something.

So the days passed. In the mornings, Ree's parents would point her up Sorcerer's Hill. She would stroll up the slight incline and sit outside Loreddy's small house watching the butterflies until he emerged with orders for conversation or activities. At the end of the day he would recite a healing spell like a benediction, and point her back down to her home. And the new language began to serve beautifully for his spells, increasing their efficiency by a good ten percent; five percent by the natural law of language in spells, and a second five by his personal belief in the efficacy of the device.

It never occurred to Loreddy that Ree also had faith in his spells, or that she remembered things she had not been instructed to learn, or that she was capable of even the slightest of original thoughts. He talked to her as he would have done to an apprentice, discussing what he was studying or practicing, but he expected neither comprehension nor response, for as far as he could see, his healing spells had done nothing for her.

The dimming light, one afternoon, reminded Loreddy of the late hour. Closing his book, he went into his workroom to look for Ree and send her home before she missed supper. He found her standing by his workbench, leafing through an open book which lay there.

"Time to leave, Ree. Never mind the book, it doesn't have any pictures in it."

"Nor much valid information," she said crisply.

His jaw and the book he was carrying dropped simultaneously. "Wha-at did you say?"

"I implied that it's an obsolete text. I hope you don't rely on its validity."

"Who are you?" he demanded, for the girl who stood before him, though her features were Ree's, had neither Ree's vacant expression nor her slack posture. She held herself proudly, and intelligence and humor sparkled in her dark eyes.

"Don't you have enough faith in your ability simply to believe you've worked a cure?" There was a hint of teasing in her voice.

Loreddy winced, then said angrily, "You're not Ree. You're someone who's taken possession of her body. Now talk fast, or I'll use an exorcizing spell—and that *does* work."

"Not in this case, because I'm *not* in possession. Rather, I'm Ree's guest. You'd have to persuade *her* to make me leave, or subject her to some sort of psychic shock, or drag her off to some thaumaturgically dead spot. Otherwise, I stay."

"How? How did you get here? And who are you?"

"I'm Major Sorceress Dorin."

"Nonsense. Dorin was killed last year in a spectacular implosion of miscast spells. Even I heard about that."

"I was killed, but my personality pattern and memories survived and are now here at Ree's invitation, augmenting hers."

"How could that happen?"

"Ree wanted desperately to be whole. She recited all your healing spells and a few assorted others while she performed all the power-amplifying gestures she's seen you use."

"Oh, my bewhiskered stars!" muttered Loreddy, remembering even under provocation to keep his expletives mild.

"Since her belief in your spells was extraordinarily strong, her power invoking brought me in to fill her need."

"But how were you still around? It's pretty rare for even a major practitioner to remain on this plane after death."

"I was murdered!" said Dorin grimly. "Naturally that invoked a strong binding."

"Murdered? I heard it was an accident." She snorted. "The implosion was a cover-up by Werrig."

"He's the one who killed you?"

"That's right."

"I've never met him, but the name's familiar. I assume he's Major class?"

"And ambitious to become a Controlling Sorcerer."

Surprise and concern touched Loreddy's face. "That is ambitious."

"And frequently fatal—to the seeker or others. His efforts to get *my* knowledge killed *me*."

"What do you intend to do now that you're . . . back?"

"I don't know yet. I have to find out what he's doing, first."

Loreddy looked doubtful. "News isn't very up-to-date in this part of the country."

"I wasn't proposing to sit back and wait for news to reach me," said Dorin. "Ree and I will go hunt him up."

"Here, now—you can't do that! Ree's a minor; she can't wander around the country by herself."

"Ah, but she can travel with you if you make her your apprentice."

"I'm not going anywhere!"

"Wouldn't you rather come along than have Ree vanish while she's in your care?"

"You wouldn't!"

"I would."

As his initial shock faded, Loreddy's thoughts tumbled between past and potential future. He had done no traveling since he had buried himself in this backwater practice after finally passing his examinations for Minor category. The shock and shame of having failed his first attempt, after having been a star apprentice touted for one of the top positions in his province, had led him to reject even the few offers of a place in the city that came his way. He had found a hole and crawled into it, wanting only to be forgotten by his former friends and the cousins who were his only living relatives. Yet not even his craving for obscurity had been able to defeat his natural inclination to experiment, and his accumulation of published papers had eventually brought him his upgrading to Major. The shame and doubt of himself had never left him, though, and he stayed in his self-imposed exile. The thought of now going back into the main current of life first repelled him, then insidiously began to attract him. He had once enjoyed the bustle of a large city, and he felt a stirring curiosity to see one again. After all, who would remember him? And what harm could it do just to hunt up a little information on this Werrig? If they *did* find evidence that he was planning some dangerous activity, all they could or need do was report it to the Guild Council.

"Where are you planning to go?" he asked Dorin.

"Werrig lives in Jind, but I think it would be foolish to go straight to that province, since I'm a year out of touch with events. If I remember my geography, the province of Mistru lies between here and Jind, and Mistru is reputed to have a number of wild-magic

locations. I suggest you say you've had a vision of some danger emanating from one of these, along with an imperative to go find out which one. Before going off on that mission, we'll naturally pay a professional courtesy call on the Provincial Magician at Shar, where we'll pick up the latest gossip."

Before he was sure he had definitely decided to go, Loreddy found himself making preparations for the trip. He had Ree's parents thumbprint an agreement to apprentice Ree to him after Ree-Dorin had demonstrated a carefully gauged amount of improvement in understanding, and he sent word to the magician of a neighboring village to act as his locum during his absence. Then he went home and alternately brooded over his foolishness and looked forward to the trip.

Ree-Dorin reported back to him the next morning as he was finishing his packing. "I'll look after the transportation," Dorin offered. "Ree wants to do it, using my knowledge. Flying horses suit you?"

"Whatever you like," agreed Loreddy.

But when he came out with his luggage, he stopped and stared. "*What*, in the name of all curiosity, are *those*?"

"Shh," said Dorin. "You'll hurt Ree's feelings. She got the spell just a big wrong. Her first try, you know. She seems to have tapped a sea horse pattern. But they're made in an adequate size, and they have properly functioning wings, and we've devised saddles to fit inside the curve of the tail, so there's no reason not to use them. Ree's proud of them."

Loreddy put his head between his hands and muttered something about ". . . laughing stock . . ."

"Not at all," said Dorin. "A touch of imaginative eccentricity raises a magician's mana. I have great hopes for Ree. If we stay together long enough, we shall make a splendid magician."

They landed at Magicians' Hall in Shar. Ree-Dorin disenchanted the sea horses, and they went in to claim rooms. Loreddy in the main block and Ree-Dorin in the apprentices' wing.

Prompted previously by Dorin, Loreddy followed protocol by reporting to the Provincial Magician, Hream. He gave her the prepared story about his vision that he must visit the wild-magic sites in Mistru's wilderness.

She remarked, "You realize, of course, that there is some risk in that?"

"Wild magic is always risky. But I don't intend to interfere with anything—just observe. If I see anything that needs attention, I'll report it and you can send some experts to deal with it."

"Good. Do you know anything about the area?"

"No."

"I don't suppose anyone knows much about it. No one bothers going into the backlands nowadays; we don't like the thought of stumbling over uncontrolled magic any more than a layperson would. At the very least, it would be embarrassing to have one's spells turned a bit cockeyed by the interference! And if someone has foolishly roiled up a site, we want to get it smoothed down before the disturbance can affect inhabited lands. And, by the way, if you turn out to have a talent for spotting trouble before it happens, we'd like to have you work here."

Loreddy hastily disclaimed any talent. "Any magician can be hit by a vision now and then," he added.

"True—and not always accurate ones, either. Like dreams, they can be jumbled and seem to add up to more than is really there. But it's important to check on any that suggest trouble."

After dinner, Ree-Dorin reported back to Loreddy in his quarters. "I have news."

"So have I," grumbled Loreddy. "We're going to have to go on this jaunt around Mistru. Hream's expecting a report on it."

Dorin shook her head. "We may have a chance to deal with Werrig right away. If so, we can then tell Hream the real story."

"Deal with Werrig? You've found evidence against him?"

"No, I've found he's here in Shar."

"Here? Does he know *we're* here?"

Dorin shrugged. "He may have heard, but it'll mean nothing to him. Make his acquaintance, if you can, and see what you can learn about him. I'll pick up gossip from the apprentices, and we—"

She was interrupted by a knock at the door, and went to answer it. They saw a man perhaps fifteen years older than Loreddy's thirty years, of medium height and build, with hair beginning to recede and gray. He wore the golden-clasped, sky-blue cloak of a Major Sorcerer over a quiet gray tunic and pants, with well-polished black half-boots—clothes which spoke of professional success, urban sophistication, and a personality devoid of flamboyance. Loreddy was momentarily aware that his own tunic and pants were not a matched suit, and that nothing about him looked polished or urban. Even his "apprentice," in her brand-new grass-green cloak and her patched tunic looked smarter and better suited to their new environment, but she, too, appeared rustic beside the distinguished-looking visitor.

"Major Loreddy?" inquired the newcomer, gazing past the apprentice. "I'd like to talk, if you have the time. My name is Werrig."

After a blank, startled moment, Loreddy said hastily, "Come in, Major. Sit down."

Dorin murmured, "I'll make tea, Master," and moved to light the small brazier, pump a potful of water at the sink, and wait, with

a packet of herbs, for the water to boil, while the two magicians settled themselves and exchanged a few civilities.

After the courtesies, Werrig remarked, "I've been hearing rumors that you're going on a trip to investigate the enchanted sites of Mistru's backland. A vision that something was stirring the old power spots."

"Yes," agreed Loreddy cautiously.

"Nothing definite?" Werrig pressed gently.

Loreddy shook his head. "I'm not a visionary; I received nothing but the need to look. I don't even know if it was a true vision."

Werrig was relaxed but attentive, giving the impression that he was both interested and courteously respectful. Whatever his abilities, in person he was not formidable; in fact, he seemed friendly and affable, showing no consciousness of Loreddy's rusticity or lack of status. Loreddy found himself relaxing also.

"I think your vision was a true one, Major," said Werrig. "I've had a similar one myself, that something important is to be found at one of the Mistru power spots. So I've come to suggest that we should travel together to look at them."

Under cover of presenting the tea, Dorin murmured pressing, "Agree!"

Loreddy felt that events were running away with him, but he could think of no excuse that would let him escape. He mumbled, "It's good of you to take an interest . . ."

"Not at all," returned Werrig. "We're pooling our interests. I understand you have no further business here in Shar? Good. Let's set out tomorrow morning." He discussed supplies knowledgeably while Ree-Dorin dutifully made notes, then he went over a map of their route with Loreddy.

When Werrig had taken his leave, Dorin shrugged at Loreddy's questioning gaze. "I've no idea what he's after. I presume he has some reason for wanting to go into the backlands, and wants to misdirect people's curiosity. I very much doubt the coincidence of his alleged vision; he probably invented it after hearing about yours. Going with us would be good camouflage for his real reason, whatever it is."

Loreddy mused, "If you hadn't warned me about him, I'd have said he was a kindly and friendly man."

"It's a manner he cultivates—like the men who win people's confidence, then cheat them out of their money. Were you expecting a gaunt and intense fanatic?"

"I suppose I was."

"Only minor evil goes around advertising itself," said Dorin dryly. "Those who claim to be a threat are generally trying to make it so by wishing—and bluff. Werrig is much more dangerous than that."

"Then how can we hope to deal with him?" worried Loreddy, all his self-doubts surging



back. "He's already defeated you once, and I'm not even in his class."

"Loreddy, you must stop underrating yourself. If you hadn't buried yourself in a country practice, you'd have your self-confidence back by now."

"Not after the mess I made of my prospects."

"I've heard about your failure, Loreddy. I came to the Institute just after you'd left, and people were still moralizing about it."

"They're probably *still* talking about it!"

"I doubt it. It was forgotten with the next piece of gossip. But I was curious, and looked up your history."

"Why?"

"To find out what made a quiet, earnest, steady young man try such a spectacular feat for his Practical."

"And what did you learn?" asked Loreddy, between curiosity and antagonism.

"That when your mother died in childbirth, your father rejected you and you spent all your childhood trying to become worthy of his love. That he, too, died while you were a child, without any great deeds to lay at his

feet. That you were tested and found to have so much potential that the famous Forzen took you on as apprentice. You worked harder than the least talented aspirant, and Forzen pushed you to do even more. It was *his* idea to carve a proper harbor for the city out of the shoreline cliffs. He wanted to show he could teach so well that his apprentice would go straight to Major degree."

"What? Where did you get that idea?"

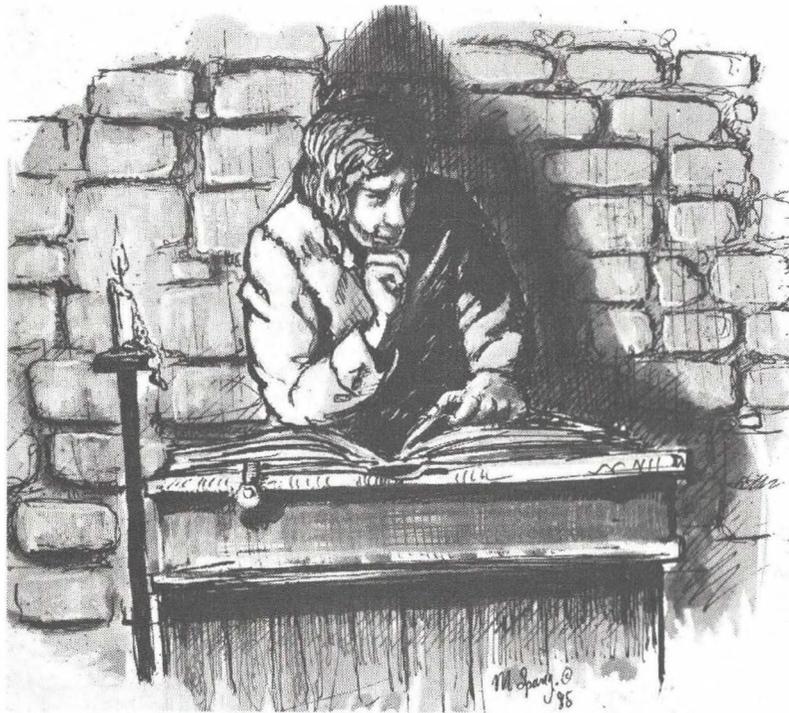
"I talked to him; he admitted it. It was he who got the examiners to give you a second chance."

"Yes, I knew that, but I didn't know he'd taken the blame for my stupidity."

"Your efforts were to please the man who had become like a father to you. I also heard how the young woman to whom you were betrothed rejected you."

"As well she might, after I nearly smothered the examiners in a swamp of seabottom mud—a direct result of the small landslide I caused," muttered Loreddy, in bitter memory.

"And I heard how you ran away to hide, even though Forzen offered you an oppor-



tunity to work with him, and found others willing to give you a position."

"Wouldn't you have done the same?"

"No, I'd have stayed and fought for my reputation. But, then, I didn't have your early problems to shape me. I had a loving family who were very proud of my large and small successes."

"Till Werrig ended them."

"Which he did only because I trusted him—a mistake I shan't make again. This time, we hold the advantage of being unsuspected."

"I hope that's sufficient," said Loreddy gloomily.

The three explorers met on the landing terrace the following morning. Werrig had already conjured his own transportation when the others arrived: a dark brown flying horse, as conservative as his other possessions. Loreddy hesitated a moment, glanced at Ree-Dorin, then with a sudden and defiant determination reconjured the two giant flying sea horses, bringing a delighted smile from Ree, as his deliberate choice removed the blemish of error from her own effort of the day before.

The first leg of the journey was a long one, from the city and farmland across a succession of wild terrains: forest, swamp, and barren, rocky plain. Many leagues later, they approached a range of low hills, in which, according to their map, lay their first destination. To pinpoint their location after their long flight, the explorers divided to check landmarks each way along the row of hills.

"How did you meet Werrig, Dorin?" Loreddy asked as they scanned their region.

"He sought me out because he was interested in the research I was doing in time suspension and back-jumping."

Loreddy looked at her with surprised respect. "No one has ever mastered time. Not many will even try tampering with it."

"There are stories that a few people have managed to manipulate time slightly, even a few records of their work. I dug them out and tried new variations of my own—nothing spectacular, not like one man a century ago who tried to set up a travel channel back to the beginning of the world."

"Did he get anywhere?"

Dorin laughed. "Perhaps. Whatever he did apparently killed him, though. I suspect I'm the first person who's ever heard of him since!"

"Did you follow up his work?"

"Nothing so ambitious. I was just trying to step outside time for a few seconds—to move about while everything else stayed frozen in the moment I had left; or, alternatively, to step back a few seconds and make something different from what it had been the first time."

"Did you have any success?"

"Not much luck in halting time, but I managed to move back a few half-seconds. I once got as far as *five* seconds. I stepped aside and saw myself each time. During the five-second interval, I used a pen to write my name on my own back, to prove I had existed twice in that time."

"Did you feel yourself do that in your first experience of the moment?"

"No, because I hadn't yet done the writing! I changed what *had* happened, not what was happening. I lived each experience in sequence, then blended back to a single existence and was able to see the proof of my memory in a mirror. It wasn't much, but it turned out to be my greatest triumph—because it drew Werrig's attention to me and got me killed."

"What happened?"

"Werrig thought I had succeeded in *mastering* time-backing. When his wiles failed to get the secret out of me, he tried to force me to use the spell for stepping back in time to change things. He poisoned me and waited for me to go back and remove the poison so he could observe and learn the time spell. But I couldn't make such a long jump, so I used my dying moments instead to hold myself to this plane."

"I'm surprised you can even be polite to him."

"It's worth it for the chance to stop him. Besides, I don't have to. When we talk to him, I let Ree's emotions dominate. Though I've told her she can't trust him, she doesn't dislike him. Far from it, in fact. If I feel my own dislike obtruding, I can withdraw to a tenuous connection and leave things to her."

"But," asked Loreddy with his usual lack of tact, considering that Ree was also hearing him, "if you withdraw from Ree, won't she revert to idiocy?"

"No, no. Give yourself credit. Loreddy. Surely your healing spells have had *some* effect. Ree's always had the ability to observe and remember. What she hadn't been able to do was to reason properly, or to consider the consequences of her actions, so she was afraid to do anything on her own. She still lacks the experience to make good judgments, but she's learning gradually as we share our memories. She wants me to go on handling things for her most of the time, but she can manage on her own now in simple situations, if she has to. She's rather like a child half her age, in that respect."

Loreddy sighed. "I wish the situation *were* simple!"

They rejoined Werrig, compared notes to locate themselves, and set off again for their first goal, a spring in the wooded hills. They landed by the stream that flowed from the spring and followed it on foot toward the source.

The magicians cut a forked stick to make a dowsing rod, and placed on it the appropriate spell to make it point toward anything embodying magic, remembering to make it immune to their own routine personal protective spells. The stick pointed at the spring, but rather half-heartedly.

"A very weak source of wild magic,"

remarked Werrig. "A few strange plants, but not many, and not *very* strange. I think we can count this spot out of the search."

They returned to their mounts and began the flight to the next site, an ancient burial mound.

Already weary from their long flight to the area, and now feeling let-down as well, they were careless in their approach. Without warning, Ree-Dorin's mount began twitching about its flight path, nearly pitching her off, while the shape of Loreddy's began blurring. Werrig whipped his horse around before it could be affected and flew back to a safe distance, calling to the others to follow, out of range of the site's magic. Even by the time the other two had turned, the burst of interference had died out again, but they hurriedly followed Werrig to a landing and resumed their approach on foot.

It was a difficult walk over rough, hummocky ground, but it was not for that reason that they found their pace steadily slowing until they came to a complete stop, still some distance away from the mound.

"It wants us to go away," said Ree.

Loreddy nodded. "A repulsion spell. But we can go on by will power." He began plodding doggedly ahead.

"No need to strain ourselves," said Werrig. "We can shield ourselves by diversion spells."

"Why waste the energy?"

"I don't mind spending it," said Werrig, weaving the counter-spells over the entire group. The pressure to turn back left them, and they walked on till they reached the mound. Werrig tuned out the repulsion spell from the dowsing rod, and the magicians examined the mound's magic with it. They found that so much of the site's power had been channeled into the imposed repulsion spell by its ancient users that only random hursts were left, so they crossed the second site off their list.

They camped nearby for the night. During their camp duties, Loreddy seized an opportunity to question Dorin again. "What do you plan to *do* about Werrig?"

"I won't know till I know what *he's* planning," she returned, "and I've no idea yet what that is, except that it will further his ambitions."

"Are you sure *he* has dangerous ambitions? He seems perfectly honest and moral. He's done nothing worse than show off how big a supply of power he must have—and that's hardly sinful."

"I don't know what's driving him," admitted Dorin, "but it's nothing petty. Remember, he's killed for it. And *he doesn't* have it yet!"

* * * *

Their single goal the next day was a cave called the Healing Hole. As they entered, Loreddy was suddenly conscious of an uneasy

feeling; something was wrong, or missing, or unfamiliar. He looked at the others, wondering if they, too, felt the strangeness, and pulled out the dowsing rod. It twisted sharply out away from the cave.

Werrig nodded. "An antichanted place. Presumably its name refers to a tradition of coming here to be free of spells cast by ill-wishers."

Checking the strength of the magic field, Werrig went on, "Again, it seems to be of only moderate strength, so we may as well leave and call our standing protective spells back to us. It feels a little uncomfortable to have them absent. We're very lucky it wasn't this site we flew too close to."

They withdrew to their mounts and paused for an early lunch before beginning the long flight to the next cluster of sites. During a moment alone with his apprentice, Loreddy muttered, "What are you going to do, Dorin, if we finish visiting all the sites and you still haven't figured out what Werrig wants?"

Ree said, "Dorin isn't here anymore."

Loreddy stared at her. "What do you mean?"

"She left while we were in the cave."

"Well, yes, that would make sense. It was *worse* than a magically dead spot. But she should have returned after you came out. All our spells came back when we summoned them."

Ree shook her head petulantly, and tossed her dark curls. "Well, *she* didn't." As Loreddy continued to stare at her, aghast now, she smiled and added, "And I'm not sure I want to *try* to bring her back. We were merging, you know, just like Dorin's time-streams merged when she used her spells. The longer we stayed together, the more alike we became. Maybe I want to be Ree, not Ree-Dorin. Maybe I want to stay me. Does it matter to you? *I'm* smart now. I can think and talk. Maybe I won't get to be a magician after all, but there are lots of other interesting things for a clever girl to do in the world."

"But . . . she's the only one who knows what we're doing—going to do—*will* know what we're going to do . . ."

She leaned toward him. "Why can't we just go on with what we *are* doing, you and I?" "Because—well, there isn't much purpose in it without her."

"Hmp. Then *I* think we should help Werrig with whatever he's looking for. After all, *he* was willing to help *us*."

Loreddy could not think of anything else to do, so he agreed absently, and sank deep into thought.

Ree stood up, straightened her garments, and wandered toward the place where Werrig rested.

Well, now, Loreddy mused. If Dorin had in fact been cut off from Ree, did it not change the situation? He had been here under duress to be Dorin's helper; was he in

any way bound to carry on for her? And how could he, even if he wanted to? He had no idea how to discover what Werrig was up to, or how to stop it, or even—a thought that had been nudging at him surfaced—even if he *should* stop it. He had only Dorin's word that Werrig's intentions were evil, and all of Werrig's actions thus far seemed to indicate a perfectly moral person. Could Dorin be mistaken? Or could she herself have been the less-than-upright one? After all, she had resorted to an implied threat to force Loreddy to join her vengeance mission. Had she been trying not to foil a dangerous plot, but to thwart the legitimate activities of a one-time rival?

Well, unless he wanted to look a fool by telling Werrig the whole story or by churlishly leaving without explanation, he had no other course than to continue the search. Gloomily, Loreddy rejoined Werrig and Ree and they mounted up to begin their next flight.

* * * *

The first intended site in the new group was a circle of standing stones. Werrig described how its ancient builders had used it as a calendar by marking seasonal movements of sun and moon by the stones' alignments. Loreddy asked Werrig if he were a professional antiquary.

"No, my talents don't lie in that direction. Many people think that all you have to do is spell an ancient artifact to reveal its use, but actually you need to do a great deal of interpretation of the bits of information you get. I haven't had the time to go in for such specialized studies; I just read what the antiquaries report."

Loreddy nodded. "My studies aren't so esoteric, but I never seem to have enough time, either, and don't expect to have enough in a lifetime. What we need is some way of stretching time out. Has anyone ever worked on that?" he asked, carefully casual.

"Several that I know of, usually with little or no success. The most recent, I believe, was Major Sorceress Dorin." Werrig's voice was perfectly easy as he named his alleged victim. "Ever hear of her?"

Loreddy managed to keep his own tone even and vague. "Wasn't she the one who died a year or so ago in some spectacular manner?"

"That's right. I understand she was not only trying to suspend time but to move backwards in it as well. That intrigued me, of course, so I made her acquaintance. She claimed she had some success, but she didn't publish anything on it before she made her fatal mistake. No one knows quite what that was, of course, but we speculate she got squashed by a contracting moment she had tried to divide and hold suspended. From my reading on the subject, I find that most of the experimenters in the field have come to sticky ends. They become obsessed, I suspect,

and try too much—specifically, trying to move themselves to distant time. I doubt if it's possible to do more than to establish communication through long time."

"How would one do even that?"

"Perhaps by exchange of pure thought? Or perhaps there might be some non-human creatures capable of moving through time who could serve as messengers."

"Where would we find them?"

"That's the problem, isn't it? Perhaps in a world that existed before ours. Legends say there were such."

"You're making my head reel," complained Loreddy. "Do you believe any of these possibilities are true?"

"I hold no belief, except that they are worth investigating."

"How would you do that?"

"Basically the same way antiquaries probe into the past—by using some ancient object to focus and guide one's vision. But, of course, extremely ancient objects are rare, and all they give you is a view—usually blurry, at that. You can't actually make any sort of contact without some further kind of key. That's what all the long-time-span dabblers have hunted for."

"Have you done any experiments yourself?"

"Not after reading the early papers and thinking about their fatal results. I'd want to be pretty sure of myself before experimenting in *that* field! Oh, I admit to temptation—as I said, I think I can see where some of the others made their mistakes—but I'm in no hurry to follow my predecessors . . . lest I follow them too far!"

They camped within a short flight of the standing stones, preferring to make the approach rested and in daylight. But Loreddy did not find the night entirely restful: he was beset by worries, questions, and decisions that needed to be made.

Which version was true, Dorin's or Werrig's? He knew so little about either of them. Both had seemed pleasant companions, but his acquaintance was too brief for him to know much about the character of either. Ree, who must have learned something about Dorin's character, seemed fond of Werrig in spite of what Dorin had told them about him. Did that mean Ree knew Dorin was exaggerating, or even lying? Gratitude to Dorin might have kept Ree from contradiction.

Had Dorin lied? Had Werrig really killed her, or was she carrying out a vendetta against a rival? Had the trauma of death tipped Dorin's mind over the border into insanity? Werrig had said that time experimenters tended toward obsession, and that was already borderline insanity. She had not *sounded* insane, but why should she? A mad person's behavior is usually perfectly reasonable if one grants the contrary-to-fact

belief that motivates it. He had accepted her statement that Werrig had murdered her, so her assessment of the need to thwart his mysterious ambitions had seemed both reasonable and admirable. But it *could* have been mere harassment of an innocent man.

Even supposing Dorin's story were true, how committed was he to carrying on for her? If she were now completely dead, was he still bound by his promise to aid her cause, or had her cause died with her? If the cause were vengeance, then surely it had. But supposing she had told the entire truth, and Werrig did need to be stopped before he endangered others by his ambitions, then there was no one left but Loreddy himself to do the stopping.

Which magician had lied?

* * * * *

The standing stones proved to have the strongest magic field they had yet encountered, but little of it was wild: it had been channeled into preserving the stones and their alignments. Werrig followed the dowsing rod to a boulder set in the center of the circle. "Here's the anchor spot."

"What's that?" asked Ree.

"A contact point through which the ancients anchored their stability spells to some point in the even more distant past."

He pointed to some forms in the boulder. "These are fossils, which the antiquaries say are shapes in stone of creatures that lived so long ago that even the strongest history spells can elicit only vague information about them . . . little more than the rough order of their age."

Loreddy gestured at the fossils. "Were the makers of these the beings you spoke of, who lived in a previous world?"

"No, these are of our world, and are natural products of its creatures. Nothing material can last from one world to another. Early remains can only point the direction of a previous world, and these are not early enough to point infallibly."

They stopped at a sinkhole but found it thaumaturgically dead, so they flew on toward a mountain range marked with a cluster of three sites.

Only Werrig managed to retain his enthusiasm for the search. Loreddy and Ree had grown bored, weary, and stiff from the long hours of flying. Werrig continued to tell them about the findings of antiquaries: the lives lived by people so ancient that they had no written records. "They had no rational grasp of magic as a system of natural laws. They thought it worked at the whim of gods—and even their gods were petty and inconsistent things. Some theorists believe there *were* gods once, in one of the worlds before ours—creatures, rather, that would be *as* gods to us—but the primitives couldn't contact them. They simply invented supernatural reflections of themselves which were

worse than useless to them."

"But belief helps magic," pointed out Loreddy. "That is a law."

"Belief in the magic itself, or in its practitioner. Not belief in something extraneous. Had they contacted real gods, their power would have been immense. As it was, they couldn't even make their little gods exist—not long enough to leave any traces, anyway."

"Just as well," said Loreddy. "I'd hate to run into the remnant of some conjuration of superstition. I'm glad we live in an era of rationality."

"We've progressed a long way, but we're still influenced by our past," Werrig remarked. "I am struck, for instance, by the precariousness of our social system, and by the fact that though we have thankfully eliminated the way of life of our ancestors we persist in looking back on their time as a golden age!"

"What do you mean, that our society's precarious?"

"Our ancestors lived in a state of frequent war and pillage. We live in peace, but only because we're prosperous. That's precarious. We could slip back into the perils of their ways if we lost our prosperity."

"I always thought prosperity came from peace, not the other way around."

"Each affects the other. The instant you get shortages—or even the fear of them—you get squabbles. And what's going to preserve peace once cooperation is replaced by selfish competition?"

"Our moral teachings."

"Derived from one of the laws of magic—that everything obtained must be paid for. A magician is paid with respect as well as with material things, and expends the mana engendered by the respect in working spells. If prosperity fails, so do payments and spells, and with them the belief in laws—and in morality. So our peace is precarious, and anarchy constantly hovers."

"I suppose so. But is there anything better? Force of arms is halfway back to anarchy."

"I agree wholeheartedly. It's a pity that the all-knowing, super-powerful gods of our ancestors were imaginary."

Almost holding his breath at his daring, Loreddy asked, "Do you think a magician—it would have to be a Controlling Sorcerer—might someday devise a way to impose permanent peace, or morality, or prosperity?"

"We all work for them, but even if someone had the ability to see what was needed, no single, unaided magician would have the power to enforce it."

"So we seem to be stuck with what we've got."

"And can only hope our successors improve on us as we did on our predecessors."

Loreddy felt a vast sense of relief. Werrig had spoken calmly, philosophically, on the subject of ruling his fellow humans, and had

dismissed the idea as impractical. Surely Dorin had simply mistaken some philosophical musings of Werrig for the overriding ambition she had feared, and had seen murder in accidental death. Perhaps, if she were a little mad from her obsessive studies, she was even projecting her *own* wishes into her view of Werrig. And perhaps it was a fortunate thing that chance—or Ree—had prevented her return.

They briefly investigated an old silver mine, but it had only traces of magic left. Their final goal for the day was a mountain peak, which they climbed cautiously on foot. This site was no disappointment; it was so abundantly charged that they could feel the magic leaking into them. The sensation was invigorating but worrisome; wild magic could work havoc by its randomness before it was fully absorbed into the personal mana. There appeared, however, to be no threat other than this routine danger, so the group hurriedly moved back down out of the zone of influence, which fortunately was concentrated at the peak.

They made camp a short flight away. Loreddy, mentally counting the few more sites they must visit before he was released from the journey, was startled to hear Werrig murmur, "Tomorrow we will find it."

"Find what?" Loreddy demanded.

"I don't know. But don't you feel it?"

And in a sudden foreboding, a flash of clairvoyance sparked by the wild magic he had absorbed, Loreddy felt an echo of Werrig's certainty.

The following morning, the predictive effect of the absorbed wild magic had worn off, but Loreddy's premonition had left him with a sense of depression and worry that lifted only a little as they rose into the exhilarating freshness of a cool clear sky. Their destination—their final destination if the magicians were right—was a fissure formed when some long-past cataclysm had split a plateau that stretched along a length of the mountain range.

They found a place where they could climb down, and approached the rim on foot. The descent was strenuous and mildly dangerous, but they reached the bottom of the crevice without mishap.

A tiny stream trickled along a narrow channel, supporting a scattering of hardy greenery near its path. Only diffuse light came down this far during the morning, so the stream had little sparkle to it, and the air retained much of the chill of night. There was little breeze, and no animal life stirred. The place had a feeling of timeless waiting . . . and deep, still magic. They had been too absorbed with the physical danger during their descent to notice the rapidly rising gradient of the magic, but Loreddy did not



need to take the dowsing rod from his pack to know that the area was saturated.

Yet it did not feel in any way wild or dangerous. It seemed, rather, orderly and undisturbed—perhaps, he mused, because no sentient being had ever interacted with it. Perhaps natural magic *was* orderly until humans roiled it up.

As they rested and looked around them, Loreddy pointed out bands of fossils in the face they had descended. Werrig nodded. "Yes, they and their strata have concentrated the magic here. Each layer was formed at a different time, over stretches of years we find hard to imagine."

He pointed to a particular band. "Those fossils are among the earliest known. But you see there is a stretch of rock even below that. We are looking back toward the earliest days of our world, a time before life itself existed."

He added softly, "This is the spot . . . there are so many focuses here: the passage of time, preserved in the cliff; the beginning of time, for our world, symbolized in the pre-life rock; the depths of the Earth, symbolized by this split down through the strata; the moment of life's beginning, not only marked in the rock layers, but also symbol-

ized in the traces about the stream, running water itself, that can wear away the hardest of rock or metal, in time; and a place that is between light and darkness . . ."

Again for a few moments they all stood gazing about in silence, awed by the intensity of the power that saturated the area, breathing the aura, feeling it press against their skin and prickle at their hair. Then Loreddy asked suddenly, "But what's *wrong*? What's the danger? It feels so peaceful—so undisturbed here. . . . There isn't even the sense of undirected wildness we felt at the mountain peak. Were we both wrong in thinking this is the spot we're looking for?"

"Now that I've seen this place, I'm sure I'm right," returned Werrig. "But to find what it holds, we must probe into it. And that means into time, since its focus is basically in that."

"Time! But you said that's too dangerous to attempt!"

"Trying to stop it or travel in it is foolhardy. Merely looking is difficult, but not fatal. The antiquaries do it all the time. I don't have their skill or experience, but I have a far greater advantage than any of them have ever had: an extreme abundance of time-

saturated objects around me, to boost my efforts, and a whole array of chronologically sorted rocks and fossils to serve as a guide. I will, however, need help."

Loreddy shook his head. "I don't know a thing about time-searching."

"I'll teach you all you need to start, and both of us will learn as we proceed. We'll be seeing back further than anyone ever has before, so we'll be learning more of the how as well as the what." The prospect put a tinge of excitement into Werrig's usually calm tone and face, and Loreddy's last doubts faded. If Werrig were willing to share both his accumulated knowledge and the high-mana knowledge he would soon acquire, he could hardly be the ruthless, selfish, power-mad person Dorin had called him.

Another thought slipped past Loreddy's decade-old barriers. If they succeeded in this, his reputation would be restored! In one step, he would not only wipe out the memory of his public shame, but also recover all the lost ground of his years of hiding. If there really were something to discover, and if they could find it. . . . What could it be? Something done by one of those earlier experimenters in time, who had delved so incautiously?

"Stand close to us, child," Werrig told Ree, "so you'll be within range of our spell. You might see something we miss, since we'll be concentrating mostly on the spell. Don't be worried by anything you see; it won't be real, merely an image." He turned back to Loreddy and explained the procedures. When Loreddy had them clear, the two magicians began the spell.

The scene began to shimmer as if in a heat haze, then to waver as if seen through water. Finally it steadied again, but they seemed to be seeing two scenes at once: the real one, and one of the cleft in winter. Snow vanished and reappeared several times, then the flickering seasons blurred together.

As the magicians continued their spell, the unreal scene began to change in jumps and pauses of longer but erratic length. In the pseudoscene, the crevice itself disappeared, replaced at various times by plains, forest, hills, desert, lakes, swamp, jungle, mountains, beach, steppe, muskeg, glacier, sea, and even sea bottom.

Strange beasts appeared, only to be replaced by stranger yet: huge hairy creatures, then even larger ones with leathery hides, then soft-skinned ones that walked with a clumsy sprawl. Giant insects flitted among what must have been trees.

Seascapes took over, with fish, shelled animals, and things too odd in shape for the viewers to give names to. And then all moving life vanished, and there were only rocks, some at first covered by lichen-like traces, then all bare. Seas shrank and vanished and the land was a tumble of glowing or hardening lavas, while ashes and cloud filled the

thick air.

Werrig cried, "Hold!" and the flickering changes of the ancient scenes settled into an almost steady image. The humans became again aware of their real surroundings. They gazed through the outlines of the crevice's walls at the seething volcanos and geysers of the formative land.

The two magicians sat down to rest. Loreddy asked, "How far back are we? This sounds wildly foolish, but I got the impression we went through . . . through *millions* of years!"

"Not wild enough, Loreddy. I think we've gone through hundreds, maybe thousands of millions."

"I . . . don't think I can grasp such a time span," said Loreddy. "Was there a beginning to time? If so, we must be very near it."

"If our antiquaries' theories are right, there was a beginning to our world, our cosmos. But I don't think we're even halfway there yet. And they think there were other worlds—universes, they call them—before ours."

"How far back are we going?" asked Ree, who seemed completely unawed by all they had seen.

"As far as we can," answered Werrig.

It occurred to Loreddy that they had seen no trace of anything disturbed by the earlier time explorers. Yet if Werrig were right, all paths in time came together, so if the magicians failed to find anything here, was there any use going on with their search? By now, Loreddy was so keen to find something that he ignored the likelihood it would be something wrong. He asked anxiously, "What if we get all the way back without finding anything? Right to the beginning of our time, and another universe beyond it. What then?"

Ree answered before the other magician could frame a response. "Then Werrig will go through and bring back one of the gods to rule over everybody so everyone will stay moral and we won't have any war. He's already told us all about that."

Loreddy laughed. "Don't take things so literally, Ree. That was just a philosophical argument. But what *will* we do if we find nothing?"

"That will depend on what we *do* see. But I can assure you," said Werrig, smiling, "that I've no intention of trying to thrust myself through the barrier to that other universe." He added seriously, "I'm convinced that the researchers who tried that killed themselves in the effort—that such an effort would completely use up their life forces along with all the mana they had accumulated. That's one reason we're approaching so cautiously. We don't want to stumble into anything. Or perhaps I should say, into nothing!" He stood up. "Ready to go on?"

With a shiver that might have been either

excitement or fear, Loreddy also stood up. "Ready."

Their own scene faded again, and the ancient vision went reeling further back. The entire surface of the world seemed to become molten rock, and the skies were raining dust, pebbles, and huge boulders. Then the world shrank, still among the crashing hail, which thickened in intensity, then thinned in texture, as did the shrunken Earth, until all were swirls and clumps within a vast cloud, distantly lit by a mighty glow that faded and shrank as the great, rotating cloud expanded, ever thinning, till it ceased to be visible at all. A misty wave went past them, closing into a huge sphere of bright cloud that shrank in turn toward a distant point. Its brightness grew till it was dazzling even so far away. Then, suddenly, it vanished.

They hung in blackness pierced by the light of countless stars, far clearer and brighter than any they had ever seen before. The stars' brightness grew, as if they were approaching. The blackness became crowded with them. All the space about the watchers was filled with swirls of stars. Then there was darkness again everywhere, with long strings of wispy motion, dimly lit here and there from a thicker knot in the tenuous cloud streams. Then all grew light instead of dark. They were immersed in a very sea of light, and could see nothing at all.

And they stopped again.

They could no longer see their real scene but, held within their common spell, could discern each other as if by their ordinary senses.

"We're there!" cried Werrig. "We're at the barrier to the other universe!"

For a moment no one spoke again, as all tried to grasp the meaning of being there. Then Loreddy said, in aching disappointment, "And we haven't found a trace of a disturbance left by someone before us. We must have been wrong all along."

Werrig laughed. "You were, Loreddy, but I wasn't! I saw no danger, except the risk of tackling this. What I saw was the chance of finding a source of power great enough to enable me to reach this spot. I echoed your vision to persuade you to come with me because I needed two people I could easily manipulate, one at least a magician competent enough to help me."

A cold thread of fear and suspicion began to creep through Loreddy. *Had Dorin been right, after all?* "Manipulate? For what purpose?"

"To send through the barrier. I have to stay here, to guide things. If one life-force is enough energy to break through—and your lovely apprentice does seem to have a life-force as strong as any I've ever sensed—then the other may survive long enough to make the contact for me."

"What contact?"

"With the god, of course. I told you, we need something stronger than goodwill and voluntary restraint to maintain our peace and morality. The Being I seek will be able to impose morality upon everyone."

"Something from another universe!" cried Loreddy. "How could it know what *is* moral for us?"

Werrig chuckled. "Well, you may have the first chance to tell it." He sobered. "I would instruct it most carefully, I assure you. After all, I'll be part of the world it will be ruling."

Dorin had been right! And *wrong!* Werrig's ambition was far beyond personal power, beyond reason or argument. Obsession.

"You're mad," whispered Loreddy, not aware that he spoke.

Werrig shrugged. "If you judge sanity by the standard of the majority, every reformer or innovator is mad. But if there are absolute standards, I may be the sanest man who has ever lived."

"Do you think, even if I were to survive going through the barrier, that I'd search out your Being or ask it to come here?"

"You needn't do anything. The knowledge of what I want is in your mind, and my spell will send you to a Being with the necessary power, if there is any such."

"I can jumble any spell you use."

"Try it," smiled Werrig. "And while you're at it, you might even try getting away from me, or harming me."

Loreddy tried. Nothing happened. "What have you done? How?"

"Remember that antichanted cave, where we all lost our routine protective spells? I placed a contact spell onto both you and your little apprentice before you restored your screens. When we reached this final phase, I simply reached along the contacts and forbade you to harm me or leave me or interfere with any spell I use. So prepare yourself to meet a god!"

Werrig began a new spell.

The nothingness/everythingness about them became chaotic, then began to change into symbolic shapes. A whirlpool formed, elongated, and suddenly became an endless tunnel. Werrig paused, studying the tunnel, which was still twisting uncertainly. He worked on it, and it began to steady.

Loreddy strained again against his psychic bonds. He cast his mind back to the cave scene, trying to see the moment when Werrig had spell-touched him. Might there have been some tiny flaw in his grip? He would have had to hurry, to grab both him and Ree before . . .

Both! He could not have touched Dorin, whose existence he did not even suspect . . . especially since she hadn't even *been* there after the cave. Had Ree pushed her away? How far? Could she be summoned back? To call Dorin would not be a direct action against Werrig, but if Loreddy told Ree to try it,



Werrig would understand at least as quickly as Ree and could bind her not to act.

And then Loreddy remembered why he'd taken Ree into his service in the first place!

Deliberately, Loreddy began to curse Werrig—not with real curses, of course, since he was prohibited from hurting him: simple verbal abuse, name-calling and angry expletives. Werrig ignored him. Loreddy ran through insults in several foreign languages, then switched into his own invented language, yelling to Ree, "Bring back the one you sent away—the one who made you whole!"

Ree looked at him, and comprehension flashed into her face.

The tunnel was stabilized. Werrig turned back to his reluctant assistants—and staggered. Then he and Ree-Dorin both stood rigid, minds locked in lethal battle.

Werrig had more experience, but Dorin had the energy of her hatred for her murderer, and she could draw on Ree's energy as well. They were balanced, and might stay locked forever, drawing also on the energies of the place.

But no, Werrig's greater knowledge of it would give him the edge, eventually. Dorin's knowledge of time spells was limited to her experiments in—

Loreddy yelled again in the spell language: "Move back in time!"

And suddenly, Werrig was gone! There was a terrible wrench, as Loreddy tried to stay with him, as ordered by Werrig's spell. Then the compulsion snapped. Loreddy found that Ree-Dorin was helping him up. He tried to ask a question, but could not speak for a moment.

Dorin answered anyway. "Half a second! When I jumped back, I had half a second to hit him from a new angle while all his effort and attention were on the old one. I flipped him through his own tunnel! It was glorious!"

"What if he fetches his Being himself?"
"According to his own theory, passage through the barrier expends a life-energy. He won't survive. But even if that's wrong and he does, the spell was for a benign being, and Werrig's mind contains the knowledge that our world wouldn't want the Being, so it

would—or should—refuse, yes? I don't think Werrig's plan would have worked in any case, but now that we've found out what it was—and fulfilled the imperative of saving our own lives—we can close up this connection and carry back a warning to our world."

"How? I don't remember enough of either spell to reverse them."

"Ree does. Her memory's superb. That's why you took her on, remember? Come on, I'll guide us."

The return through time was accomplished without difficulty. Moving through space in their own time was another matter. The crevice was no longer a peaceful spot. It seemed to be heaving and roiling with its disturbed magic. The two magicians were buffeted, dizzied, dragged at, confused.

Stray illusions faded in and out around them, and the ground seemed unsteady.

When at last they had fought their way out of the storm of magic and paused to rest, Loreddy gasped, "Once I get home again, I'm never going to stir. I'm not even going to venture any new spells!"

Ree-Dorin sighed, shook her head, and took Loreddy's hands in her own. "After finding a way to beat the most dangerous man our world has ever seen? Don't be silly, Loreddy. It's high time you faced the world again."

"But it was you—"

"*You* out-thought him!"

I did! Loreddy realized. I didn't have time to worry that I couldn't. Maybe I wouldn't have failed, even that first time, if I hadn't

Doubted myself. Maybe I've been a doubting fool for years enough.

He looked back at Ree-Dorin. "Maybe you're right," he said.

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About the Author

SANSOUCY KATHENOR was one of the winners in the 1985 Writers of the Future competition, and has won a number of other awards as well for her short stories and poetry. She is currently preparing the second edition of her *Rhyme and Reason: a Manual of Poetry Techniques*, and has had two books of poetry published as well.

Incantation

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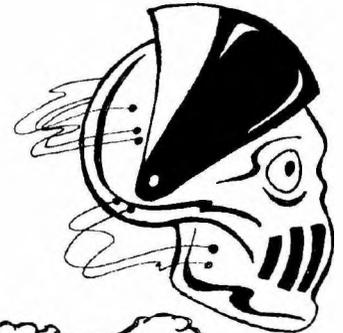
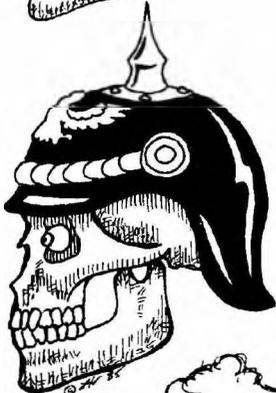
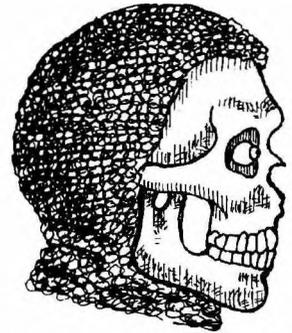


O savage gods
Of tribe and horde—
Stay the arrow!
Dull the sword!

O nighttime gods
Of fright and fear—
Snap the mace-chain!
Break the spear!

O battle gods
Of death and life—
Turn the bullet!
Blunt the knife!

Atomic Age addendum:
O high-tech gods
Without a qualm—
Ground the missile!
Stop the bomb!





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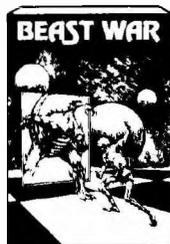
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Like Shytt

by Jefferson P. Swycaffer

DARK ALE FLOWED under the billion stars that shone over the fumey garden of the Pirate's Council, smuggled in a valley on the night-face of Krudin. Ale flowed and pipes were passed about; pirate Captains, nervous away from their needful raiding-ships,

strolled about in aggressive impudence. They were garbed in all manner, male and female in nearly even number, from the near-nudity that some favored, where only body paint preserved dignity, to those who clanked about in full combat armor.

Captain Alambard Diersel had had too much to drink, too much even for a man whose capacity for strong drink had become a watchword among the brotherhood. He failed to look where he stepped, and snagged loose the cape of Captain Morgana Causala.

"Watch where you walk," he snarled at her, adding insult to injury.

Morgana gave him a cool sneer as she retrieved her cape. "Go back to your ship, Captain Diersel," she said in a low voice. She turned away, the incident already forgotten.

But the motion awoke a memory in Captain Alambard Diersel: the memory of one who had turned his back upon a pirate's mate he thought was dying. Diersel's judgement fractured. "Be damned to you, woman!" Diersel said, his teeth grinding upon the words. "Be damned to you forever!"

Morgana Causala spun back to him, her hands tracing the pattern upon the air that dispels a curse of damnation. Curses ground out beneath the stars are the most potent, and Diersel was strong. He slapped his thigh, indicating that he meant to curse her by the power of his right leg, and he bared his teeth. Curses often were by the power of an eye—the scattering of eye-patches, black or silver—spoke for the risk of the act. Some cursed by their voice, or their teeth, or their very soul (old Captain Sir-him-down had cursed Gregor Satanshook by both legs; Gregor, much amused, had flown them, still kicking, from the mainmast).

"You shall never damn me again, boy-Diersel." So coolly she said it, so gently, that the Council of Pirate Captains backed away, leaving fighting space to the two. 'Twas the rule here: loud voices shall be ignored, but a soft threat is meant.

Did Diersel heed? Did he save himself by giving the woman a snarl and turning his back upon her?

"Like Shytt"

© 1985 by Jefferson P. Swycaffer



He damned her again, did boy-Diersel. "Be damned, woman." And again, "Be damned."

When he awoke, he was naked in his bed aboard the *Laughing Jack*, his spaceship, and there was a specter, the specter of Morgana's voice, in bed beside him to chill him, and it had this to say:

"Jack is your ship: the *Laughing Jack*. Now Jack you are: Captain Jack Shytt. And this name will be your name until you do a thing that Captain Morgana Causala could not herself do."

The specter then evaporated, and far away Morgana's voice returned to her who had been dumb, and she smiled and bellowed for the joy of it. Captain Jack Shytt, who had been Captain Alambard Diersel, smote his thigh with the intensity of his anger, that he had not had the wit and speed to oppose the curse, thus forever depriving Morgana of her haughty voice.

"Shirmer!" he bellowed then. "Shirmer, come in to me and bring me my clothes."

From the deck outside the Captain's cabin, Shirmer's voice responded briskly, "Yes, Captain Shytt."

Shytt leaped from his bed, his hand groping for a knife. A knife leaped into his hand. Shytt used it to slash at his leg, letting the blood flow onto the blade of the knife, one of the many minor enchantments that Shytt knew. *Come in to me, Shirmer, and I'll teach you my name!*

Shirmer entered and stood amazed at the raw anger upon the face of his Captain. "What, sir—?"

"What did you call me, Shirmer, you dog?" The veins stood out upon Shytt's stiff neck; his chest was thrust forward with the killing rage that pervaded him.

"Sir! I only called you *sir*." Shirmer knew that his death was one word away from him.

"And before that?"

"Nothing, Captain Shytt! I never—" And he died with his sentence incomplete, as Shytt's blade found his heart. For a man to die with his last sentence incomplete is unwise; Shirmer should have but nodded. His ghost yet haunts the spaceways.

Shytt dressed, a deep scowl upon his face. Something was badly wrong, for Shirmer had died without ever knowing what he had done.

Upon the deck, beneath the booming mainsail, the men had gathered, knowing well that murder had been done. That was their Captain's right, though, and none of them felt much like contesting it. Wilkins, the Second Mate, now First, stood back with the men, keeping them calm.

"Are you with me?" Shytt asked, the ritual question, the proper form for inviting a lack of confidence motion. Had another shouted that, there would have been a fight for the Captaincy. Had another answered Shytt's call

with a challenge, the result would likewise have been settled with their blades. But Shytt shouted it, and his crew had none other to follow.

"Aye! We stand with Captain Shytt!" It was unanimous.

Shytt was aghast, taken utterly aback by this. It could not be. "What did you say, you oathbreaking rats?"

The men, themselves at a loss, said nothing, but rolled their eyes in fear. The rumor was true, they then knew. A curse had been put upon their Captain. What would it turn out to be?

Wilkins, knowing that he and he alone could settle this without bloodshed, stepped forward. "We are with you, Captain. We will follow you, and we will fight for you. Will you be our Captain?"

To this that was also ritual, Captain Shytt had but one answer: "Aye!" He drew in his breath. "But what, dogs, is my name?"

"You are Captain Jack Shytt of the *Laughing Jack!*"

The curse held.

A curse can hold, though, over the crew of a ship more readily than it will hold over the Captain. The Captain bears the magic of the ship, and to the spirit of the ship he makes his love each and every night that he is within his cabin. An impotent Captain is a dead Captain the next day. Yet, while he is able to function, this contact with the spirit more powerful than he accumulates, day by day, until the magic of the ship and the magic of the man is strong upon him.

"My name is Captain . . ." the struggle that took place lasted for only the briefest instant: Morgana's power was clearly greater than was his. "Jack Shytt!" screamed he, and fell to his knees.

The space barkentine spun gently between the stars, the ethereal wind filling its flapping sails of gauze.

Between the stars, there is only the ship's clock to tell day from night. Night it was, then, when Captain Shytt peered over the rail at the devilish depths below. Too far to fall, too far to sail. *I am . . . Jack Shytt. But that is not my name! My name is . . . Jack Shytt.* The curse was a strong one.

But my name will come back to me if I can do a thing that Captain Morgana Causala could not do.

By Morigan, I shall!

In the months that followed, Captain Shytt brought riches to his crew, although the taste of defeat was ever in his mouth. He sacked Dentosa. He sacked Dentosa! None had sacked Dentosa for twenty years, and although their ion-cannon carried away two of his masts, he tacked across the orbits and laid his laser broadsides into the coast-mounted defenses. He sacked Dentosa, as none would have believed, yet the comment of the General of their shore defense, before

he died, was only, "Captain Morgana Causala could have done it in half the time."

He rebuilt his ship and broke the alliance of Dwimmericity at the battle of Exuberance. The star-swimming skysharks still remember Exuberance; there were corpses to eat, bones to gnaw upon, and frothing souls to drink.

But the citizens of Dwimmericity, when they sent their radioed message of surrender, addressed it to Morgana Causala because they thought that only she was capable of winning such a battle.

The curse held.

Captain Shytt broke empires and sacked strongholds from one end of the galaxy to the other. He performed miracles, and never before, save twice, had a pirate Captain become so famous. One of these, whose eminence he could never hope to equal, was Captain Morgana Causala.

And Captain Shytt was smart enough—just barely smart enough—to avoid pitting his fleet and his ship against hers. He knew he would lose. The curse fed upon this knowledge, and the curse held.

One night, in the privacy of his cabin, Captain Shytt struggled with the curse, hoping to throw it off by sheer force of will. He was uncommonly strong of will, and it once or twice seemed that he might succeed. In the end, the curse was as strong as ever.

And, defeated, he lay upon his bunk, and that night made only the most uninspired love to the voluptuous spirit of his ship, who, in her throes of frustrated desire, called out in her thin voice: "You *are* only Jack Shytt, but until now I never believed it."

"Am I?" he railed. "Am I? I am! I never took the name willingly, but if it is to be mine, at least I know that the worlds fear it. The worlds fear the name of Captain Jack Shytt, and thus it is no name to be ashamed of. The name is mine. I accept it; I welcome it. In soul and spirit, as well as in name, I am Captain Jack Shytt!"

That felt good. And it was something that Captain Morgana Causala could never have done, giving up and accepting a curse.

The curse was broken. Captain Morgana Causala knew it, instantly, across the light-years.

They met, not many months later, at Krudin where it had all begun.

"Captain Causala," he greeted her.

"You've broken my curse," she said, watching him. "And so, I'll give you your old name back, which I had stolen. You are once again Captain—"

"No," he smiled. "Am I a man of so little consistency? I am Captain Jack Shytt, and you would do well to remember that."

That night they made love, and although love with a ship's spirit is soulful, love between humans is satisfying.

The Shaper of Butterflies



by Diana L. Paxson

THE OLD MAN STOOD in a blaze of sunlight, drawing from the air between his fingertips a stream of butterflies. They fluttered uncertainly about his head, their shadows interweaving with the blue and white damask of the arras behind him, crimson and golden and amber and iridescent black, as if they had emerged from the brocade of his gown.

"Master Giraldu, my lord will see you now." The page Andreas held open the door, his eyes involuntarily following the butterflies. The old man looked at him and smiled, then lifted his arm in a deft sweep too complex for the boy to follow. When his hands fell, the butterflies were gone. Andreas blinked, then recollected himself and pulled

back the door as the old man came toward him, walking as if his joints were no longer quite up to supporting him.

Why was I surprised? thought the boy. *It is only old Giraldu, and I have seen that butterfly trick a hundred times. I hope they taught him something more useful than that in Wurtemberg or Toledo—wherever it was he learned his wizardry.* He closed the door softly and followed Giraldu into the presence-chamber of the Hugh, Count of Amory.

The count was sitting on the deep ledge of the window whose leaded panes made a mosaic of the gentle countryside. Amory was a generous land, nestled in the fairest corner of Gaul, yet not wholly desirable, for on one side it bordered on Faerie.

"It will not be so pleasant a month

hence if we do not stop the Worm," the count said harshly. The older man shook his head apologetically.

Andreas felt his stomach tighten. *Why did my lord call in this old fool?* he thought despairingly. *He is only good for outworn philosophizing.*

The lines grew deeper in the count's face. "I have called on my lord of Normandie, but he is in Albion now. And though he would send men quickly were I attacked by Frankland or Bretagne, he depends on *me* to keep the match against Broceliande. He will not come, or if he does I fear it cannot be in time."

"And you fear that even if he did come it would not do—that this beast is nothing that can be overcome by strength of men?" said Master Giraldu quietly.

The count shrugged. "We will try what

strength of men can do, but I think, Master Giraldu, that this is a thing of wizardry. I want you to ride with us."

The old man bowed his head. "Yes, Well, I will try what the strength of wizardry can do." He sighed, no doubt dreading the weary miles in the saddle and the hard beds of a campaign, thought the boy disdainfully. He repressed a twitch of excitement. *Will they take me with them when they go?*

Master Giraldu straightened. "When do we depart?"

"Tomorrow at dawn." The count gestured dismissal. "Andreas, go with him and help him to prepare."

Andreas followed the wizard down the passageway, bridding his impatience as he bridled his steps to the old man's pace. He would rather have stayed with the count, but perhaps if he attached himself to Master Giraldu they would let him accompany him on the expedition. Page to a worn-out wizard was not his idea of an appropriate occupation for a future hero, but it would be better than staying behind.

Master Giraldu occupied a room in the unused north tower. It had never been formally awarded him, just as he had never been formally accepted into the service of the count of Amory. He had simply arrived, road-wearied and much thinner than he was now, and because his tricks amused the countess, who was at that time making a slow recovery from the birth of her third child, he had stayed on.

Andreas stared as he followed Master Giraldu in, for he had never been in the wizard's chambers before. He had expected stuffed dragonets hanging from the ceiling, great gilded books whose pages turned of themselves, or perhaps a familiar owl. But as he looked around him he repressed a sneer, reminding himself that this was only a hedge-wizard after all.

Books there were, certainly, spread out on the worktable and stacked in teetering piles on the floor, but aside from some astrological charts tacked to the wall and the alchemical apparatus on the table, there was not much that smacked of sorcery. And even the alembic contained only the dregs of mulled wine.

Master Giraldu turned about distractedly and muttered under his breath. "Yes . . . I will need the *Beastary*, and the herbal, perhaps the *Echridion*, and . . . yes, the *Clavicle of Solomon*." Still muttering, he began to move books from one pile to another, sneezing as dust puffed into the air.

After watching the old man spend half an hour in disorganized search for the first three books, Andreas stepped forward in exasperation to help him. Soon he too was coughing and covered with dust. What kind of wizard could not even summon a sylph to blow the dust away? he wondered.

Andreas picked up a small volume behind

the table and dropped it again, his fingers prickling as if he had grasped a nettle. Gingerly he reached once more, but the old man was before him, clucking anxiously.

"Dear, dear—the *Grimoire*! I wondered where it had got to. Yes, I suppose that must go, too. . . . No, boy, don't touch it or you will hurt your fingers." Draping the book with a dingy piece of silk, he picked it up and added it to the pile. Then he peered at the corner again. "And here's the *Clavicle*! I should have known that they would be together." He set the final volume on top of the rest.

Andreas stared. "Is that all you're going to take? They say that the Worm is as long as the Great Hall, and too broad to fit through its door. They say it is covered with slime that will sear the skin off a man's back, and that its breath is so foul that anyone who breathes it dies. And that is before it even begins to feed. What will you do if it comes after you, old man? Throw books at its head?"

Giraldu straightened as if some of his pounds and his years had for a moment fallen away. "Books contain *words*, boy! All words are powerful. If you did not have them you could only feel, not think, and then where would you be? But in *these* books are words of Power, words to compel angels and demons, words for charms and spells. I will want other things, too, but it is *these* books that will tell me what I need. . . ."

He found a scrap of parchment and his inkwell and, leafing through the books he had selected, began to make notes. "Here, boy," he said at last, "go down to the herb garden and see if they have these. . . ." He handed the list to Andreas, then looked at him sharply. "You *do* read, don't you, boy?"

Andreas flushed, remembering his painful lessons with Father Boniface. "Of course I read!" he exclaimed, peering at the list. "You want vervain, and . . . ditanny, and hu . . ." he brought the paper closer, trying to make out Giraldu's scrawl. The paper was snatched from his hand.

"*Hyssop*, boy! Oh dear, oh dear!" He held the paper in front of Andreas again. "Pennyroyal, and bergamot, salt . . ." he read the list, then pressed it into the boy's hand and shooed him out into the hall. "Go on! We have so little time!"

* * * *

Andreas whacked his switch across the nose of the packmule, which had halted to snatch a mouthful of leaves, then settled back into the saddle of his pony. They were a weck out from home, and he was beginning to wonder if they would ever find the Worm.

He was also beginning to worry about Giraldu. The old man had borne up well enough for the first several days, pointing out features of natural history to Andreas and amusing them all with bawdy tales, but now he slumped in the saddle and wheezed

alarmingly getting on and off the horse. Unwillingly, the boy recognized that more than his need for the old man's patronage would make him sorry if he came to harm.

Giraldu appeared to be suffering more sorely as the afternoon wore on, distracting Andreas from the significance of the ruined farmsteads they passed. Only a low-voiced conversation between two of the men-at-arms brought home to him the fact that this was Worm-Sign. Then he wondered if Giraldu were simply afraid.

As the devastation increased and Andreas looked more closely, his own stomach grew unpleasantly cold. He had not quite expected the crushed houses to look so pitiful, or the slimed and broken trail through the forest to be so broad. Half-consumed corpses of cattle and sheep littered the yards, but what was worst was the stench—dank and fetid as the stink of a corpse-filled well—that remained wherever the beast had been.

The count urged his warhorse ahead of the column, the pennon on his lance fluttering gaily in the afternoon light. But the soldiers behind him murmured unhappily. No horseplay or bawdy jokes set the line of men to laughing now, and Andreas did not know whether to be consoled or disquieted by the fact that the men-at-arms shared his fear. He stared anxiously at each thicket they passed, wondering if the Worm were hidden there. If only he could hear what the knights were saying as they trotted in close order behind their lord . . . surely *they* were unafraid.

They made camp that night at the edge of the forest, since fear of the Worm had emptied the countryside. Not that this part of the domain was heavily populated at best, for here Armory bordered on the Faerie forest of Broceliande, through which strange creatures sometimes emerged to trouble the lands of men.

As Andreas laid out their bedding he asked Giraldu how this could be. The scent of roasting meat drifted from the campfires and he could hear the whicker of a horse and cheerful conversation among the men. Here with fires lighted and their familiar encampment rising around them, it seemed safe enough to laugh and to ask.

Giraldu leaned back with his legs stuck out in front of him, against the bundle that had been unpacked from the mule. "There's hope for you, lad, if you have that much curiosity," he said. "Indeed, that's a question that has troubled men for more years than I've been alive."

"Well, do you have an answer?" Andreas twitched his bedroll straight and sat back on his heels. "I know that the geography of Faerie is strange—in Frankland it borders here on Amory, and on Glastonbury in Albion, and other places as well. But none of them are connected to each other! How can Faerie reach from here to there without

touching the lands in between?"

"In ancient times, Gateways to the Otherworld were more common, they say. But Faerie has drawn steadily away from us since the faith of Christ came to these lands." Automatically, Giraldu crossed himself, then went on. "Once it overlay our world as a blanket lies on a bed—" he draped one flowing sleeve across his knee—"—but now the blanket is crumpled, and only parts of it touch . . ." he twisted and crumpled his sleeve so that only its folds touched his robe, and those not always in the same plane as the rest.

They were interrupted by a soldier who brought them mugs of thin beer and a loaf of bread, and they began to eat eagerly. The setting sun sent long shafts of light through the grass, and birds called softly as they winged homeward. Firelight gleamed on the oiled leather of the saddles and sparkled red on their fittings, coppered the silver of Master Giraldu's hair, and lent to his travel-worn features a healthy glow.

"Someday, perhaps, Faerie will depart entirely," the old man said softly, lifting his long sleeve from across his knee. "We will lose much that is fair and wonderful, then . . . Think of a world without unicorns!"

A passing man-at-arms laughed cynically. "Think of a world without the Worm!"

Giraldu drew his hand across his brow. "I suppose you are right. Terror as well as beauty are there. But in Broceliande there are creatures to prey on such as the Worm. Here it is out of place and therefore uncontrolled."

"The controlling will have to be done by men!" The soldier put his hands on his hips and set his feet in the ground. "As Sigurd Fafnirsbane killed the Worm that troubled his land, so we will destroy this thing that has come to Amory!"

"May it be so!" a chorus of assents echoed from the men around them, like responses in the mass.

Andreas looked at their strong shoulders and bold eyes, and was comforted, for surely no creature, even one out of Faerie, could stand against such as these. And if they succeeded, there would be no need for Master Giraldu to try, or fail. . . . Only, as he looked back at the sunset, he saw through a gap in the trees a bar of pearly mist flushed rose by the deepening light, and realized that it was the border of Faerie.

As the blue dusk faded into a cool spring evening, Master Giraldu dug out his astrolabe from the baggage and potted about attempting to take readings from the skies. But the stars were obscured by flying wisps of cloud, as if Faerie were reaching for its lost territories. After a time, he jammed the device back into its case.

"How can I cast a chart if I can't see where anything is?" he grumbled as he tugged off his boots and prepared for bed. The Count's pavilion glowed within like a lantern at a fair,

and they could hear the comforting murmur of the lord and his knights plotting their strategy, but Giraldu was still muttering and trying to find a comfortable position on the stony ground as Andreas fell asleep.

Once or twice he woke to pull his covers closer, for the night had grown cold, and dew was soaking the blankets. Nearby wheezing told him that the old man was still awake, and he knew a moment's pity for old bones. But he was deeply asleep when the Worm came upon them in the still hour just before dawn.

For the first moments, Andreas knew only the stench and the sense of some bulk denser than the darkness. The air throbbed with a low deep humming, and trembled with cries of pain and fear. He struggled in his blankets as if gripped by a nightmare, not understanding that this reality was worse than any dream.

"Get up! Wake up, you wretched boy! A fine tidbit you'd make—come on!"

Andreas struck out at the hard hands that were shaking him, then focused on Master Giraldu's agonized face and let him tear the tangle of blankets away.

"He'd barely notice you going down," gasped the old man as he jerked Andreas to his feet. "Run! This way's clear!"

Stumbling over stones and equipment, they gained the shelter of the wood. Master Giraldu groaned and clutched at the trunk of a tree for support while Andreas held him, astonished to feel his old body shaking to the racing of his heart.

From the clearing where their camp had been they heard for a while the thrashing of the Worm and the shrieks of the men who had not been able to get away, then, as the sun rose, only the continuous rumble of the monster digesting its meal.

* * * *

By noon, the Count's crisp direction had enabled them to set up a makeshift camp half a mile away, furnished with what people had carried away, and a few undamaged necessities which some of the nimbler and more courageous had spirited from the vicinity of the sleeping Worm. Andreas himself had managed to recover most of Master Giraldu's books and equipment, thereby somewhat redeeming his pride from the shame of having had to be rescued when the creature attacked.

According to the *Beastary*, the Worm would remain in place until it had rested and absorbed its meal. Now that they had found it, there was no danger (or hope) that it would move away. While Giraldu treated those who had been burned by the creature's slime with a hastily concocted poultice of herbs, the Count worked to equip a picked group of knights with the weapons and horses they had saved.

When they set out at last, they were a brave sight in the afternoon sun, though the

discerning eye might have picked out deficiencies in their arms. But the sunlight glowed on pennon and surcoat and glittered on scoured mail as they rode. And not having asked permission, Andreas was disobeying no order when he followed them.

Unfortunately, the Worm had evidently digested sufficiently to rouse at the first jingle of mail. It reared up against the charging men, glistening gray-green segments sliding one into another until it neared the treetops, stubby legs waving in the air. Then it fell upon them, and the battle became a repetition of the night before. But this time Andreas could see clearly how the creature's maw yawned as it engulfed an entire horse and man, or how seared skin pulled away from the raw flesh below.

Count Hugh and his men fought bravely, but their sharp swords could only score the surface of the monster's bulk, releasing more deadly slime, and though their spears pierced it, they served only to enrage, as in Iberia the picadores enrage the bull. "We will do all that men can . . ." the Count had said as he'd ridden out against this foe, but what if the Worm were proof against all that men could do?

Andreas was white and retching when at last he followed the wounded Count and what was left of his men back to camp.

That night they posted guards, and Master Giraldu did not go to bed at all. As the boy dropped off to a troubled sleep he saw the old man sorting out bundles and leafing through one book after another as he searched for spells. As he had told Lord Hugh, he was a Master of Arts of the University of Toledo, and for seven years he had eaten the Count's bread. Now the time for payment was come.

Andreas woke to a gray dawn and the murmur of the old man's voice.

" . . . O EMMANUEL, defend me against the malignant enemy . . . succour me, I conjure Thee, my God. O AGIOS, O THEOS, AGIOS, ISCHYROS, ATHANATOS, ELJESON, HIMAS, Holy God, Strong God . . ." the mutter of invocation went on, breaking only when Giraldu paused to consult the little leather book he held. He was clad in an undyed linen robe, yellowed along the fold lines as if it had been packed away for many years, and his silver hair had been combed until it shone like an aureole. A bulky bundle lay ready beside him.

Once more a little procession wound across the meadow toward the Worm. But this time the rest of the men huddled in the trees where Andreas had hidden to watch the fight the day before, while the wizard opened his bundle and began as quietly as he could to set up his spell.

After a moment of indecision, Andreas went after him, gagging at the Worm-Stench that weighted the air. He was just in time to catch an iron candlestick that fell from

Giraldus's arms as he started to set another one down.

"What do you want me to do?" the boy asked quietly.

"I *should* do it all myself . . ." Giraldus muttered under his breath. Then, "There's hope for you, boy — if only you were trained!" Impulsively he thrust the bundle into Andreas's arms. "Follow me around the circle and hand me things!"

Moving more easily now, the wizard set candles at the other four points of the circle he had made around the Worm. Then, muttering strange incantations, he began to sprinkle a mixture of herbs in a circle connecting the candles, lighting each one.

"I should connect those candles with lines to make a pentagram . . . but the evil spirit is already manifested within. I hope . . . well, never mind, there's nothing to be done about it now." Giraldus crossed himself hastily and drew a triangle upon the grass in front of the great circle in the center of which the Worm lay curled. He motioned to Andreas to set the bundle down.

"Now, boy, go back to safety. You've been a great help, but there's nothing more you can do." He looked up abruptly as the Worm grumbled and stirred and subsided again. "Already it senses the power of the herbs. . . ." He fumbled in the bundle for a brazier and struggled to get the coals to light. Then he set silver candlesticks wreathed in vervain to either side and lighted their virgin candles. Finally he placed a curiously painted wand and several jars and bottles within.

Hearing the Worm move again, Andreas jumped, and Giraldus saw him still standing there. "What, are you waiting to be sacrificed? In the name of Heaven, boy, move!"

Andreas backed away, increasing his pace as the Worm groaned again and a quiver ran along its slick sides. Giraldus was hurriedly inscribing letters and sigils inside and outside his triangle and casting wine and camphor on the brazier until a pungent smoke began to curl.

"I offer Thee this incense as the purest which I have been able to obtain, O sublime ADONAY, ELOIM, ARIEL, and JEHAVAM. Incline to me in Thy power, and enable me to succeed in this great enterprise. So be it. AMEN."

As the wind shifted, the words of the magician came clearly to those who waited among the trees. "Amen . . ." some of them echoed him. Andreas bowed his head.

"Well, whether the old man be a wizard or no, he's surely a brave man . . ." said one of the soldiers.

Andreas squinted anxiously at the lonely white figure coughing in the thick smoke as he continued to patter through the conjurations and prayers.

"I command and adjure thee, Emperor



Lucifer . . . to send to me thy creature and messenger which is called DRACO the Serpent or WYRM and to submit him to my power, failing which I will smite thee and thy whole race with the terrible Blasting Rod into the depth of the bottomless abysses, and that by the power of those great words in the Clavicle—by ADONAY, ELOIM, ARIEL, JEHOVAM, TAGLA, MATHON . . ."

The stream of names continued as Giraldus gestured menacingly, but the men were hardly listening now, for as if aroused by the conjuration, the Worm woke. White membranes slid back from its glaucous eyes and greenish flesh rippled sickeningly as it reared back, questing for the thing that had disturbed it. Then its maw opened in a moan that shook the earth and released an obscene exhalation that blew two of the candles out.

"By OARIOS, ALMOAZIN, MEMBROT, VARIOS . . . ETITNAMUS, ZARIATNATMIX . . ." the words came intermittently through the roaring of the Worm, though Giraldus was shouting now, his hair tossing and sweat shining on his brow. Suddenly he thrust first one and then the other end of his wand into the brazier and held it out again.

"Hear me, oh thou spirit from infernal Hell, and obey me, or by the mighty power of this Blasting Rod I will smite and torment thee eternally!" Giraldus cried. The creature heaved itself upward until it towered over them, as if the magician's words had indeed caused it some pain.

"He's going to do it! He's hurting it! Praise to St. Michael and St. George!" Count Hugh

exclaimed. Several men crossed themselves. But to Andreas, the movements of the Worm seemed to show annoyance and confusion rather than agony. Biting his lip with anxiety, he began to creep toward the wizard.

Giraldus threw onto the brazier a handful of powder that exploded in a great puff of blue light and sent a wave of aromatic scent across the field. But the words that accompanied this action were lost in an angry belch as the Worm focused on the wizard at last.

Like a deck of shuffled cards collapsing it sank back to earth and rolled forward, flinching only momentarily as it touched the circle of herbs. Giraldus stood as if tranced, waving his hand frantically and mouthing conjurations that could not be heard.

"Stop, lad, or you'll be killed, too!" Count Hugh's voice rang across the field, but for the first time in his life Andreas did not obey. Now the Worm filled his vision as if it had swallowed the world. He scattered the useless lines and sigils and pulled Giraldus away.

Dazed, the old man followed him without protesting, the Blasting Rod dropped unnoticed from his nerveless hand. At each step, Andreas expected to feel the fetid breath of the Worm, but as its roaring receded he realized that it was expending its anger on the impedimenta of magic rather than on the magician.

In appalled silence the others helped Andreas to half-carry the old man back to the camp, looking over their shoulders to see if the Worm were following. When they reached the dubious safety of the fire,

Andreas sank to the ground with Giraldus in his arms.

"I failed . . ." the old man made no attempt to stop the tears that runneled his grimed cheeks. "Oh, my Lord, I tried so hard . . ."

Count Hugh bent over him, schooling his haggard face to calm. "Nay, Master—you did your best, but the task was beyond your skill. I was wrong to have forced it upon you." He patted Giraldus awkwardly with his wounded arm. "You need feel no shame . . . we have all failed. . . ."

"He called on devils! It's a judgement on us all. We need a priest here, not a sorcerer!" Someone made the sign against the Evil Eye.

"Priests are sweet meat!" another man gave a bitter laugh. "Don't you think they tried that in the villages when the Thing first came? The priests were eaten first of all!"

The stench of the Worm clinging to Giraldus poisoned the clean air. Ignoring his protests, Andreas stripped off his ruined robe and began to bathe him, wondering at his fragility. When he had done, he found the old man's other gown and eased him into the travel-stained brocade.

Count Hugh was ordering the camp, assigning guards and arranging for a hunting party to replenish their supplies.

"But my Lord, surely now we are going home? There is nothing more we can do here. . . ."

Fear grew in the faces of the men gathered around the Count as he shook his head. "I will not go back to tell my folk I fled," he said grimly. "Let us rest now, for at sunset I mean to attack again."

Giraldus tried to rise, and could not. "He must not do it—that is foolish bravery!" he muttered as Andreas patted his shoulder soothingly.

"And who here is going to tell our Lord what he can and cannot do?" the man who had helped Andreas bring water shook his head. "His grandsire was a Northman, and I have heard that when they feel their doom upon them they go fey. I think that such a doom has fallen upon his Lordship now."

"I know, I know . . ." Giraldus seemed to sink in upon himself, his old face twisting with grief. "But the young should not die before the old." For a while, his lips moved silently, and Andreas wondered if his mind had been unhinged by the shock of the Worm.

* * * * *

The day wore on. Some of the men tried to while away the time by dicing, but their hearts were not in it, for their eyes would keep going to Count Hugh, who sat with his writing tables open on his knee. "He writes to his Lady . . ." they whispered then. "He knows that when he faces the Worm again he will die."

Andreas fanned the flies away from the old man's face and brought him a little bread and

wine, and after a while Giraldus began to ramble unconnectedly through tales of his youthful wanderings. *My Lord will die, and Giraldus will die, thought Andreas, and I will be left alone . . .*

" . . . and after I had studied a while at Padua I went eastward into the lands of the Greeks, hoping to find masters of a deeper knowledge there," said Giraldus. "But they spend all their time quarreling among themselves and rebelling against their Emperor. So I sought forgotten temples, and at last I even ventured to climb Mount Olympus to see if the gods had lingered there. . . ." He looked around at Andreas with a ghost of his old grin. "You may not believe that I was ever a climber of mountains, but in those days, in my young days, I was a goat upon the hills!" He fell silent, remembering.

"And did you find anything?" asked Andreas at last.

"Yes . . ." said the old man. "Yes, indeed, for though I did not know it I had already passed through into Faerie." His voice became slower and clearer, as if in remembering his youth he were becoming a younger man.

"One day, after sleeping in the cool shade by a spring, I woke to find a wood-nymph bathing there. And she was beautiful, with her brown skin shining in the sun and water droplets glistening like jewels in her russet hair. Her eyes were as green as sunlight shining through new leaves. . . ."

Andreas heard in Giraldus's voice the echo of falling water and the warmth of the sun in those far southern lands.

"And as I have told you, I was young, so I courted her and she became my love. And it seemed to me that I spent only a few weeks there, though later I discovered that three years had passed, for after a time I became lonely for the speech of men and went back down the Mountain. But before I left her, my Lyria taught me to shape butterflies. . . . An act of will, a spark within the soul, a pattern in the air that twists Reality. . . ." The old man smiled and his fingers moved, and when he opened them a tiny green butterfly fluttered upward, lit for a moment on his shoulder, then took its wavering flight away.

Giraldus sighed and his voice became that of an old man again. "And that was the only piece of real magic I ever learned to do," he said bitterly. "The rest I have painfully amassed through study, but it is all words, as you saw. . . . I am not a real wizard at all!"

He shook his head painfully. "It should have worked! I do not understand—the ritual comes down from Solomon and no evil spirit should be able to stand against it! And you saw—" he turned to Andreas in appeal—"you saw how the creature disliked the incense and the herbs!"

Andreas sought for a way to soothe the old man's distress. "But what if it is not a creature of the Devil—didn't you tell me yourself that

the Worm came out of Faerie?"

Giraldus's eyes blazed and he sat up suddenly. "Faerie!" He peered across the field at the sleeping Worm, then back in the direction where Andreas had seen the rosy mist the night before. "I am an old fool, and I have been among Churchmen too long! If there's anything strange or beautiful in this world they think Satan must have made it—they tried to tell me that my Lyria was a succubus from Hell, but I knew better than to believe them then!" He clapped his hands together like a little child. "No wonder the conjuration did not work for me!"

Andreas watched him, feeling as if he were the older and more sober of the two. For what use was it to know why the spell had not worked on the Worm if they did not know what to do instead? That would not stop Count Hugh from laying down his life in a lost cause when evening came.

After a time it seemed as if Giraldus had remembered that, too, for he became silent, staring at the distant bulk of the Worm and knitting his bushy brows. Finally he laid his hand on Andreas's arm.

"My boy, I want you to speak to the Count for me, and this is what you must say. As he is Lord, he has the right to go again against the Worm, but in the name of the love he bears his Lady, I ask him to allow me to face the Creature, too, and that I do so before him."

Andreas's eyes filled with tears. "Don't—please! If you are afraid to be homeless I will go with you into the world. If you have some new plan, let me tell the Count, but otherwise—"

"Nay, boy, though at my age it would be little loss, I do not mean to throw my life away. I do not have a plan yet, but I feel something stirring in me, like a seed in the ground, or a child in the womb, or a caterpillar. . . ." His lips clamped shut but his eyes were sparkling now. "You go on, boy, and tell him what I told you to say."

When Andreas returned he found the wizard sitting cross-legged with his eyes unfocused, muttering to himself. An hour had passed before Giraldus roused, called for one of the men-at-arms, and commanded him in the Count's name to go back to the last farmstead they had passed and bring from its wreckage the hanks of yarn he had seen there and all of the flowers he could find. The man looked at him strangely, but he obeyed, for Giraldus was, after all, a magician, however ineffective, and anything was better than waiting for the Count to die.

When the messenger returned, Giraldus had marshalled all the archers. He set them to work cutting the yarn into ten-yard lengths and tying them to arrows. Then he laid them together on the ground and began to walk around them, chanting, and sprinkling them with water into which a little salt had been dissolved.

*"As the spinner spins her thread
So the wizard winds a spell.
Round and round and round I go—
God grant that I spin it well!
Web of woman you have been,
Web of wonder you shall be:
Like to like I bind until
The spell is binding perfectly!"*

Around and around the circle moved the wizard, murmuring his verses, and Andreas felt his skin prickle as he went by.

"Take up your bows and the arrows and the yarn," said Master Giralduis at last. "And bring the flowers with you also." Without looking to see if they had obeyed, he marched straight-backed toward the Worm.

"But is that all you're going to do?" asked one of the soldiers bewilderedly, remembering the elaborate preparations of the night before.

Giralduis turned for a moment, smiling, and pointed to his brow. "This time the magic is here."

When they came to the reeking shambles where their previous battles had been lost, the others fell behind. Only Andreas and the Count came farther, watching warily. But Giralduis moved forward until he was a few paces away from the Worm and, taking a deep breath, began to sing.

His voice was thin and quavering, and he sang in a language Andreas did not know, but as he went on it seemed to them all that he was singing of fragrant hillsides and shady groves where the wind rustled in the leaves, of flowers swaying in the wind, that glowed with colors for which they had no words. And they wondered if they were imagining a change in the air around them as the charnel smell gave way to a perfume like the breath of spring. They breathed deeply, looking around them with wondering eyes.

"Bring the flowers," Giralduis said softly, "and lay them in a circle around the Worm."

Andreas hastened to obey, and the others followed his lead until roses and daisies and poppies like drops of blood lay in a bright garland upon the trampled ground. The Worm stirred and muttered in its charmed sleep.

Giralduis spoke again. "Archers, shoot your arrows high so that the strands of yarn will fall upon the Creature's back." The archers took up their positions, crossing themselves, and the wizard raised his hand.

"Like to like I bind until the spell is bonded perfectly. . . ." He let his hand drop, and the arrows trailed their burdens through the air.

Anger boomed and the Worm began to thrash as the first strands touched it, but whether it were an effect of the beasts own secretions or of the will of the magician, the more the Worm writhed the more closely the yarn stuck to its hide, and under and around



it until it was wound about with yarn. And as the archers shot and the Worm struggled, the wizard was singing, a soft song, a sleep song, like the winter murmur of innumerable bees.

By the time all of the yarn was gone, except for an occasional shudder the Worm was still. The men gazed at Giralduis in awe and began to cheer, but he hushed them and waved them away.

"This is only the first part of the magic, and you have done it very well—" he said in a low voice. "The rest must be done by me. I cannot tell if it will succeed, and if it does not, the Worm will be more furious than before."

As they backed away, the old man closed his eyes and frowned in concentration. He was humming under his breath, and as the hum became louder he stretched out his hands toward the quiescent monster as if through them he could project his will. Andreas, trailing the others, took illusory shelter behind a fallen tree.

"As above, so below. . . ." Giralduis said softly, as if reminding himself. "Like things will behave in a like manner no matter what their scale. . . and thou, creature of Faerie, art still an earthbound crawling thing. Is the likeness close enough? Wilt thou believe what I believe thee to be?"

His hands moved in hypnotic swirls. "Sleep. . ." he chanted softly, "and feel around thee the passing of the seasons, from fall to winter and from winter to spring. And

as the seasons change dost thou feel thyself changing as well, shrinking and transforming and growing anew, leaving behind thy hate and voracity, and learning joy? Sleep. . . and change. . . until thou art born anew. . . ." Still chanting, Giralduis began his circumambulations, following the path of flowers around the shrouded form of the Worm.

It moved, and for a moment Andreas stiffened in fear, but the creature's struggles were contained within its bindings, like a cat trying to get out of a bag. Fascinated, he watched as the thing humped and contorted. Giralduis continued to walk, his steps now faltering and uneven as if his own vitality were flowing into the spell along with his will. At last he swayed to a halt and Andreas crept from his hiding place and ran to him, afraid that he would fall.

He could not tell if the wizard even knew he were there. As he braced himself against Giralduis's weight, he saw that the man's face was drawn and his eyes tightly closed, his expression rapt as if his thoughts were leagues away. They waited while the movements of the bulk before them gradually stilled.

Then, Giralduis stretched out his arms once more and cried out in a great voice, "The Season is accomplished and the Time is here! Sleeper awake! Carrion, come forth in glory now!"

The sticky mass quivered violently once, twice, and a tear split its surface until the outer wrapping of strands of yarn and crushed

flowers and the integument of the Worm fell free. Something moved tentatively, something which was huge and contorted but which was not the Worm.

The wizard's hands moved in a pattern which struck in Andreas some chord of familiarity. "Come forth, my beloved." Giraldu whispered then, "come forth and be a Butterfly!"

Slowly the thing extended an angular foreleg and dragged itself from the wreckage of its past. Its colors began to shimmer as the cool wind dried it. One jeweled eye swiveled, focused on them, and moved on. It took another step, and Andreas tried to pull the wizard away, but the old man would not move. *Be a butterfly!* the boy's lips moved

in soundless prayer. *Please be a butterfly!*

The wind was rising and the forest rustled in a wordless echo of the indrawn breaths of the men beneath the trees. As it touched the creature that had been the Worm, it swayed, and another limb extended, unfolded, and grew into a wing that glistened in the afternoon sun. In a moment the other wing had unfolded, and the Butterfly stood balancing awkwardly, opening infant wings to the mid-wife wind.

As the wings dried and hardened, their colors began to glow, crimson and golden and amber and the iridescent black of a crow's wing, like the colors in the magician's gown. And then Andreas understood that the magician had poured out his own soul to accom-

plish the transformation. The Butterfly moved a little, and the colors caught the sun, glowing more splendidly than the windows of the great cathedral of Chartres that Andreas had once seen. Its antennae turned toward the magician, questing uncertainly.

"Ah, my child," murmured Giraldu, "thou must needs go back to Faerie now. Fly away to Ettinmoor where the Giants' children play, for there only wilt though find flowers worthy of thee. . . . Go now—" he stretched one trembling hand toward the west, where the declining sun was haloed by dazzling mist. "Behold, there lies thy road!"

The gorgeous wings moved, at first tentatively, then with greater power, until man and boy were buffeted by the blast. The wizard called out to the wind then, and the wind gave him answer with a great blast that lifted the frantically fluttering Butterfly into the air. For a moment it faltered, and they held their breaths lest it should crash down on them. Then it found the rhythm of flight and, wings beating strongly, rose in great circles into the air.

The Butterfly flew westward as the wizard had asked, its colors flashing in the setting sun. But steadily it dwindled until at last it merged with the mists of Faerie and was gone.

Pointing, Giraldu tried to speak, but his face whitened and, gasping for air, he slid helplessly to the ground.

"Master! My master! Somebody help me!" Andreas cried. The Count ran toward them, shouting to his men to bring water, to go back for horses, to bring a litter to transport him to the camp. Andreas bent over the still figure, heedless of the tears that added new splotches to the old man's stained gown. He alone had been close enough to understand how great an effort Giraldu had made, and when the old man did not answer, the boy's throat tightened with grief and fear.

It was evening before Master Giraldu opened his eyes once more. They had built up the fire and made a shelter of brushwood to keep off the wind. The fitful flicker of light across his face made it seem to move even while he was still, and so Andreas, dozing by his side, missed the first wrinkling of the eyelids that showed he was awake at last.

Then Giraldu sighed, and as Andreas turned to him he smiled like the first glimmer of sunlight through clouds. "Andreas . . . what of the Worm?"

"The Butterfly!" corrected Andreas, relief turning his bones to water as he gazed at the man into whose service he had entered so unwillingly. "You did it! You *are* a wizard, and you must live. Live, and I promise to take care of you!"

"Yes . . . yes . . ." and again the wizard smiled. "And I . . . will teach you how to shape butterflies."

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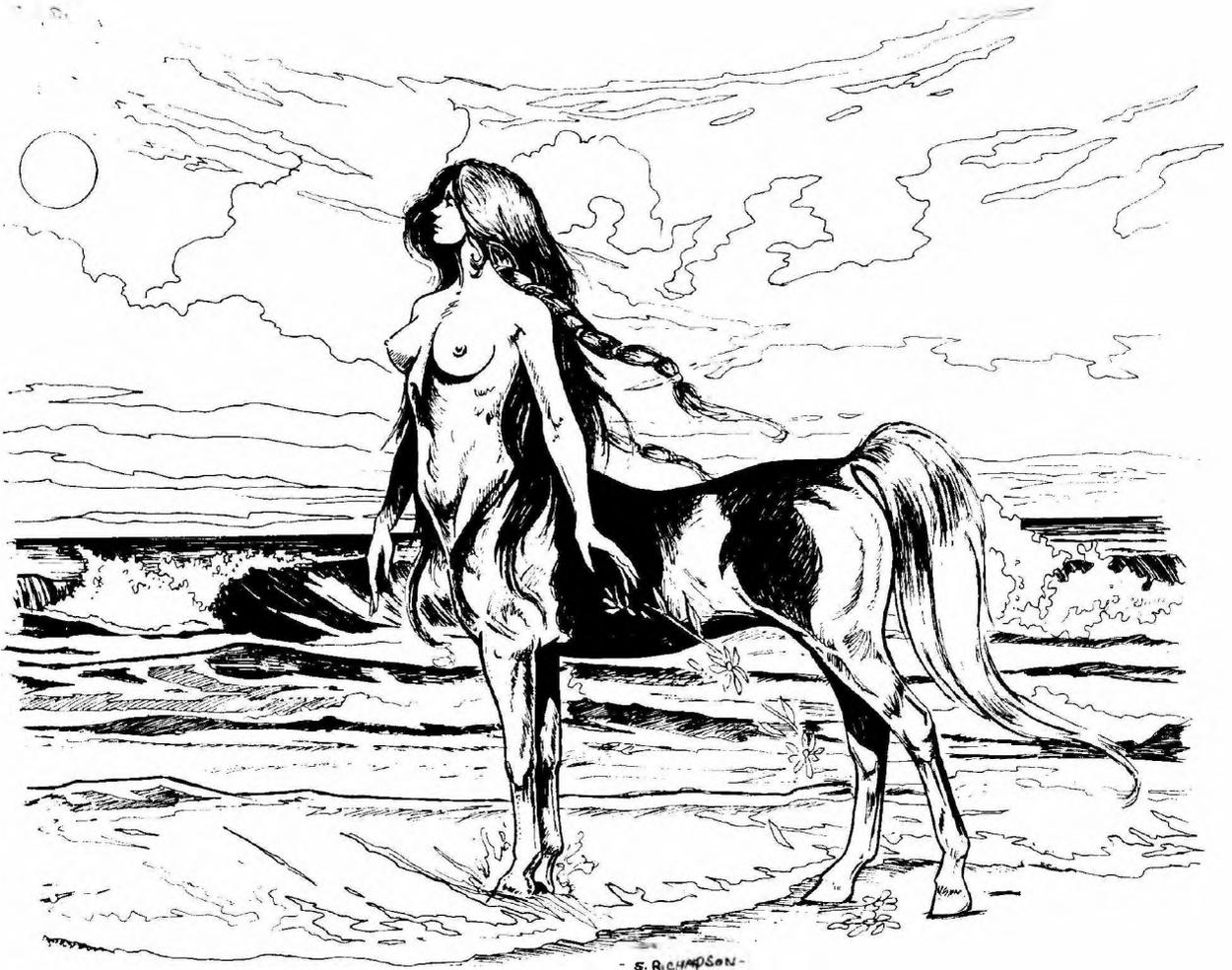
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Three Centaur Tales by Richard A. Lupoff

1. ACRAEA AND PHORCYS

Acraea awakened shuddering, the morning sunlight strong and dazzling in her eyes. She lunged at Phorcys, burying her face in his strong, muscular chest. The curly hairs of his chest, once black as midnight, were now scattered with gray. But his arms when they folded her to him were no less strong than they had been in his youth.

"And what," Phorcys muttered, "and what is it, my dear?"

She felt his hands, roughened by years of toil but gentle when they touched her,

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smooth the hair of her head and trace the curve and flow of it into her mane.

"It was—it was a night-terror."

"Again, eh?"

She nodded.

"The same?"

She felt tears brim over in her eyes. "I'm getting you wet."

"As I have done for you, my darling, how many times?"

He had made her laugh, as he could always do. Someday they would be parted, she feared. What if Phorcys were killed on one of his jaunts? How could she live?

"It was the same." She felt more composed now. "The same. The heavens opened and the gods appeared and cursed us. They cursed

us all."

"Just as before," Phorcys said. "And the rest?"

"Yes. They judged us. For our sins they cursed us all. The greatest of the gods pointed a finger and cursed us. The sky grew black with clouds. Cold winds roared. Hail fell and when it struck, each stone turned to a hungry lizard, all teeth and scales. They hissed and struck at us."

"And the rest?"

"Hold me, Phorcys!"

He did. She could feel his belly pressed to her. His hands moved down her back, onto her flanks, caressing her.

"Then the greater curse," she whispered. "The greater curse was spoken, and a blade

of fire sprang from the god's hand and severed us, each of us, severed us from a single being into two.

"And each half was not a half-creature but a whole monster! Each upper half, as it lay writhing in agony, spread and grew. It grew new parts, it became a monster, a being like a macaque, only hairless, nearly hairless. It was monstrous. And each lower half grew a terrible neck and head, something like a cameleopard. Only its neck was short.

"And when they saw each other, they knew they were broken. Incomplete. And the apethings ran after the giraffe-things and tied them with ropes and climbed on their backs and tried to become whole again, but they could not, they could not."

She stopped, gasping.

"There was no more?" Phorcys asked.

"There was no more." Acraea shook her head. "They could not live. Such monsters could not live. Even the cruel gods would not permit that."

"It was nothing."

"Promise, Phorcys."

"Such abominations could never be. Never."

He held her tighter and she wept until the tremors left her body. She strove with all her strength to believe him

2. ACRAEA AND THE TOOTH

"Now listen, girls," Asterion said. "Your mother has gone to visit her family and left you in my charge. You must all behave, and not make too much noise, and not smash

About the Author

RICHARD A. LUPOFF's association with fantasy and its allied forms goes back to early childhood when he first read *The Teenie-Weenies* by William Donahey, *Maximo the Amazing Superman* by Russ Winterbotham, *Aladdin Junior* in the Sunday papers, and *Captain Marvel* in the comic books. His own contributions to the field go back almost as far, first as a fan, then as critic, editor, anthologist, author, and screenwriter. He is best known for his novels, the most recent of which are *Circumpolar!*, *Sun's End*, and *Lovecraft's Book*, but he has, over the years, published nearly 100 short stories for such disparate publications as *Fantasy and Science Fiction*, *Heavy Metal*, *Mike Shayne's Mystery Magazine*, *Cosmos*, *Dude*, and *Amazing Stories*. Three of his short stories have been published as chapbooks: "Nebogipfel at the End of Time," "Stroka Prospekt," and "The Digital Wristwatch of Philip K. Dick." He was an editor for Canaveral Press in the 1960s, for *Crawdaddy* and *Organ* magazines in the 1970s, and currently for Canyon Press in Redwood City, California.

things or get into brawls. And you must curry your father's flanks, as you have been taught so well to do, and prepare my meals, and in general behave as good and beautiful daughters.

"Is all this understood?"

The three sisters nodded, but their father insisted on individual affirmation. He called their names.

"Euboea?"

She nodded. She was the shy one. She crimsoned as her sisters tittered, and they tittered as she crimsoned, and that made her grow more red of face than ever, and that made the others laugh the harder, until Euboea covered her face with her hands and galloped away and hid.

"Prosymna?"

"Yes, father." She was the beautiful one. Her eyes were as large as two dark pools, and as deep. Her mane and her tail were long and glossy and she decorated them with flowers and ribbons and there was never seen a strand misplaced. Young as she was, her tiny breasts were beginning, nipples as delicate, velvety, and pink as the early buds of moss roses.

Already boys followed her around, but she ignored them and dealt only with her sisters or her parents.

She cantered away to gaze into her favorite pond, standing beneath a flowering yew tree, framing herself against its green branches and the blue sky as she studied her reflection in the water beneath it.

"Acraea?" Asterion said.

This was long before Acraea became grown, strong, the finest and most courageous of her kind. Now she was the youngest and smallest of the three, with freckles on her cheeks, twigs in her mane, always with a nest of burrs in her tail or a pebble in her hoof, and a chip missing from a front tooth which none could keep from staring at when she spoke.

Acraea never smiled. She hated to have others stare at her broken tooth. She had asked only once, a big girl from beyond the second hill, whom she had met gathering wild apples, and who had stared at her chipped tooth.

"What are you gazing at?" Acraea had asked.

"Nothing," the big girl had replied.

"What do you mean?"

"There is nothing where half of your tooth should be," the other had laughed.

Acraea had galloped home weeping to the arms of her mother.

"Never mind," her mother had said.

"Never mind, my darling. You are missing only half a tooth, and she is missing all of kindness. Which is the greater lack?"

Acraea had sniffed and sobbed the less.

"Besides," her mother had said, "it's only a baby-tooth that's broken. Soon it will fall out anyway, and you shall have a fine whole

tooth in its place."

Which was quite true. Acraea agreed that a noble trait like kindness was far more important than a tooth.

Still, when her baby tooth fell out and was replaced by a fine whole tooth, she was careful not to chip that new one.

3. CRONUS AND PHILYRA

"Look at that."

"Yes, I love it."

He touched her hair and ran his fingers through its glossy length to the small of her back. He felt her shiver and he smiled.

"Spring nights make me feel like a young stallion again."

Now she smiled. "You are. You shall always be."

"Hmph." He slid his hand down her flank, and there it encountered her own. Their fingers twined.

The zephyr hissed softly through olive trees. Far below them moonlight glinted off the peaceful Aegean.

"And you," he said. He trotted his hind-quarters in a semi-circle so they were face-to-face, hands holding hands. "As beautiful and as fresh as a yearling." He touched her breast, his strong and callused fingers gliding across softness.

"Cronus!"

"Eh?"

"I'm blushing! It's good no one is here."

"What's to be ashamed of? That you are still beautiful, that we still enjoy each other?"

"Of course not!" She pulled away from him and trotted off, skimming downhill toward the rock-strewn beach.

He did not follow at first, but watched her instead.

"Philyra." He whispered her name. Her dark mane and tail streamed behind her, flashing the dark-defying moonlight as she went.

Cronus called her name aloud but she did not so much as glance over her shoulder at him. He started after her, his great legs skipping over rocks, consuming the distance that separated them.

She disappeared into a copse of dark evergreens. He paused and waited until he saw her flash from the far side, her back and shoulders pale as snow in the moonlight, her flanks and legs as dark and rich as mahogany.

He pursued her again. He circled the evergreens rather than plunge through them. The delay gave her time to reach the sandy shore ahead of him.

He approached from behind. He slipped his arms around her ribs. The only sounds were softly hissing surf, softly hissing winds, and the breathing of the two of them. Cronus could tell that Philyra was half-winded by her race from the olive grove to the beach.

Reaching from behind, he cupped her

breasts and laid his face against her shoulder. He kissed her shoulder, tasting the salt of her sweat. He could feel her nipples hard in the palms of his hands.

"Huh," he said.

"Cronus."

"Huh."

"What if someone sees?"

"What's to be ashamed of? That you are still beautiful, that we still enjoy each other?"

He felt her slide her hand down his spine, to the place where human and equine joined. The tenderest point of centauroi, the point most easily damaged, and paradoxically the place where greatest pleasure was inspired.

"Here?" he asked.

"Here. Here on this beach."

He slid his right hand from her breast down her belly, caressing the softness there; his left, down her back, to the place where human and equine joined.

"Do you remember our first time, Cronus?"

"Of course."

"Of course of course. Stallions always say

of course. As if it were a thing to be taken for granted. It is a sacred thing, Cronus. Don't stop what you're doing." She shivered. "When a filly takes her first stallion, Cronus, it is a sacred thing. Oh, that's good." She pressed her flank against his own.

"You mean I was your first?" He ran his hand along her flank. She flicked her tail; it stung him deliciously.

"I said, our first time, Cronus."

"Yes, but you did not say it was yours."

"I did not, did I? A little higher, dear."

She heaved a sigh.

"Now," he said, and began his move.

"Soon," she said. She pulled from his grasp and trotted a ways down the strand. "Do you see a ship?"

He stood by her. "I see the moon and the sea."

"It could be Chiron. He is due back."

"It's only the glint of moonlight. Chiron will be back in a few days."

"But what if it is he? Won't you be embarrassed? In front of your own son, Cronus?"

"I'm glad to hear that he is my son." He picked up a pebble and scaled it across the wavelets.

"You know he is." She took his hand and held it to her cheek. She turned her face, then, and licked daintily between his fingers. She could hear the sharp intake of his breath.

He kissed the side of her neck. He slipped his other hand along her flank, pulling her to him. With his hip he pressed against her.

"You taste of berries, Cronus."

"Your taste of love." He turned her face toward himself and tasted her mouth. "Richer than mead, and more drunk-making. Now, Philyra, now."

She made a sound that meant Now, and welcomed him, there on the beach.

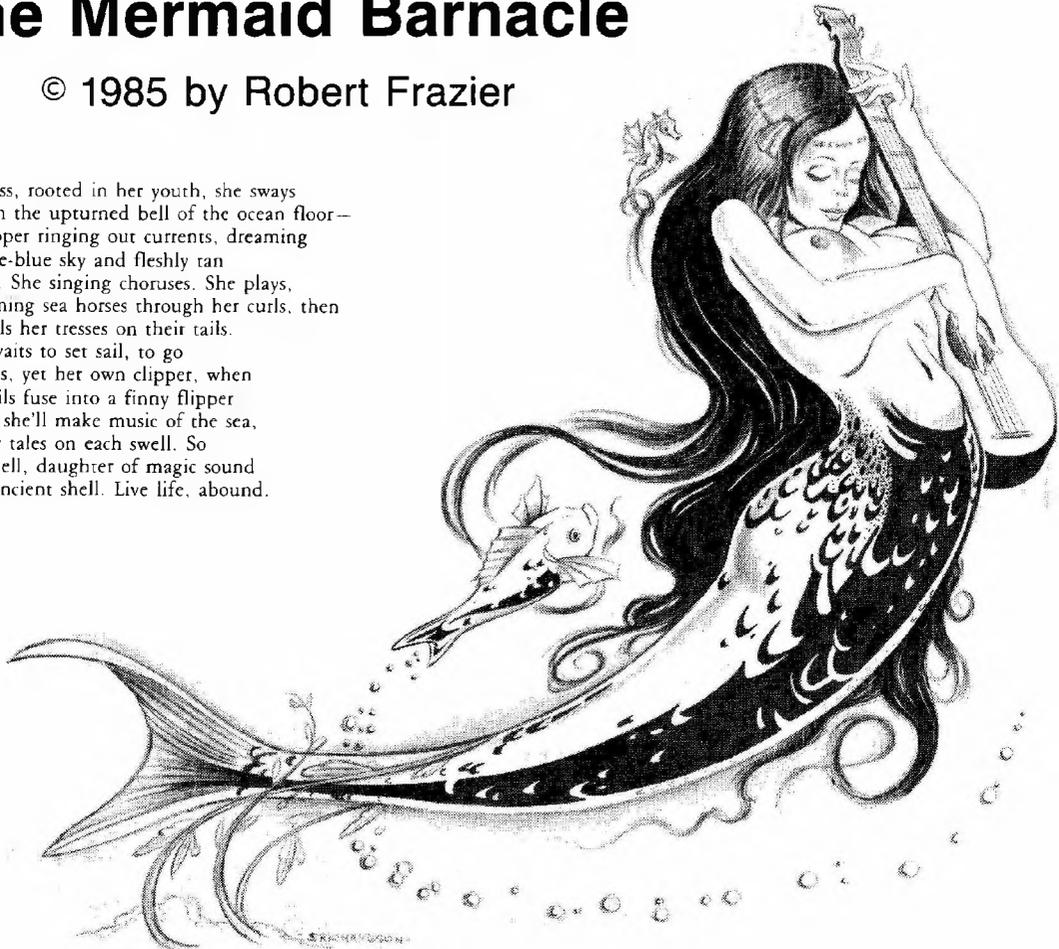
The wind shifted, bringing a sea-smell to their nostrils, there on the beach. The Aegean sent up foam, wetting their hooves. The moon sank slowly away toward the far, fabled Pillars of Hercules.

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The Mermaid Barnacle

© 1985 by Robert Frazier

Tailless, rooted in her youth, she sways within the upturned bell of the ocean floor—a clapper ringing out currents, dreaming an eye-blue sky and fleshly ran shore. She singing choruses. She plays, streaming sea horses through her curls, then unfurls her tresses on their tails. She waits to set sail, to go sailless, yet her own clipper, when tendrils fuse into a finny flipper Then she'll make music of the sea, sagely tales on each swell. So age well, daughter of magic sound and ancient shell. Live life, abound.





The Rape by Terri E. Pinckard

MIRYAM LOOKED BEHIND HER and held her shopping basket tightly. She hurried a little as she walked home in the dark and the crisp wind that blew steadily.

Someone followed silently as she scurried across the empty square. She wrapped her shawl more closely around her, and held her breath until her side ached, trying not to show that she knew.

She was 16. Her young breasts budded tightly against the blouse she wore. Her skirt whipped about her legs.

The steps followed doggedly. "Five more blocks to go," she thought. "Only five more blocks to go, and I'll be safe."

It was not to be. The steps quickened. As she passed into the shadow of a huge fig tree,

they caught up with her. A hand reached out from the darkness to seize her from behind. She screamed once. Then the heavy weight of a body bore her to the ground, her mouth covered so that she could not scream. It thrust itself purposefully into her. She fainted from the fear, the pain, and the horror of it.

When she awoke, she was alone. The wind had died down and the silence no longer threatened. She lay there feeling used and bruised, and the wreckage of her life lay in the torn skirt that cuddled itself high around her hips.

She whimpered, and crawled to gather the fruit and replace them in the basket that had fallen on its side a few feet away. Then she stood and arranged her skirt as best as could be.

Miryam's first conscious thought was of what her love, Yoseleh, would think.

Would he still want to marry her? Such a high value was placed on wedding night virginity. In the small Semitic town, it wasn't easy to hide anything, and she thought of the whispers, the glances, the nightmare that faced her now.

She took a step and whimpered once again. "It hurts," she thought. "Oh, God, it hurts."

Miryam walked slowly home, not looking behind her anymore. There was no fear riding her shoulder now, nothing more could happen. Only an "again," and that didn't matter.

She reached her street and saw the flickering lights of home. She walked on, to enter the house, put the basket of fruit on the table, and ran to her room. Once there, she hid the torn skirt and bloodied undergarments, and sat, shaking miserably in fear and hurt. She wanted only to be held in

someone's arms, to be told it hadn't happened, that tomorrow she would wake up and it would all be just a dream. The young girl sat in the dark and cried alone.

Later she rose and poured a bath. She washed and sat in the hot water, letting it soak away the feeling of dirtiness, letting it soak away the ache between her legs. Then she finished and changed into clean clothes, brushing her hair until it shone. Finally, she drew a deep breath and went to join the family.

"Miryam, our love. The fruit looks good. Come help set the table for dinner. Yoseleh will be coming afterwards. Tonight he turns 35 and will also formally ask for your troth. Tonight we have a feast."

The words rang in and around her. She sat through the meal wanting to scream out the night's happenings, but the words caught in her throat. After dinner was over and the table cleared, she washed the dishes. Every once in a while, someone would address a question to her and she would answer automatically, attempting to call an excitement into her voice over her coming nuptials. The fruit, symbolic of the ghostly secret inside her, nestled in a large bowl, and tears welled up in her eyes as she carried it to grace the center of the table. It lay there for all to see, each piece another stab of pain, yet no one notice. Only she knew what that bowl of fruit had cost her.

Yoseleh arrived and the talk became stimulated with teasing and joviality.

"Come along, Sister," her brother boomed. "Let's get going. I'll even get your coat for you. Guess I have to act like a gentleman tonight, eh?"

She smiled as she was expected to. Her father came to put his arm around her and

she smiled up at him. Her mother dabbed at her eyes as she said, "My own darling is growing up. Tonight you will become officially engaged. In two months you'll be a married woman."

The tradition was to travel to three neighbors' homes for public announcement and congratulatory wine. The evening was short for everyone but Miryam. Then the ritual was finished and she was Yoseleh's. He was shackled to her now, to what had happened to her and to what might happen. She prayed as she had never prayed before.

But she was not to be let off that easily. One moon's month passed, and then another. The wedding day came and Yoseleh became her husband. And he, who cared so much about her virginity, never even knew she wasn't a virgin. Whether from fear of pain, or fear of Yoseleh finding out, her whole body had tensed.

After the wedding, her life fell into a routine of housekeeping, shopping, and wonderful nights with Yoseleh. She *almost* forgot.

But then she began to show beneath her tight-waisted skirt, and Yoseleh was puzzled. They had been married such a short time. The night came when she lay in Yoseleh's arms and he questioned her—and she told him ". . . I heard the whistling of the wind, after, and then I fainted."

Yoseleh became furious. "Who was he? I'll kill him."

She panicked in fear. "I don't know," she cried. "It was no one, just a shadow. I don't know. He was like a ghost."

"It's all right, dear one. Everything will be all right. We just won't talk about it again," Yoseleh told her.

But her mother and aunt looked at her and

knew. The word somehow spread—"It happened on the night of the announcement," they whispered. "She says she can't remember it. It can't be Yoseleh's. He would not have done such a thing."

Neighbors averted their eyes when she passed.

Yoseleh made the decision to move to another town, where no one knew the exact date of their marriage. But two of the townswomen went to visit their cousin in the same town the couple had settled in, and the word spread even more.

The day of birth came too quickly. Yoseleh faced the women who had come to midwife, but also came to see if the baby looked like anyone their cousin might know.

"She remembers nothing about it," he yelled. "Does she have to live with this shame all her life? Will the word precede us to our dying day? This is our firstborn. He is going to be a great man. I know and I accept. I believe in my wife."

Miryam looked at Yoseleh with pride and love. She gave her utmost thrust to the birth of her firstborn son as she looked out of the window and up into the winter sky. And, as the cry of the baby rent the air, she concentrated hard on the biggest, brightest star she had ever in her young life seen.

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About the Author

TERRI ELLEN PINCKARD was born May 24, 1930, in Asbury Park, New Jersey. In 1963, with her husband Tom, she founded the Pinckard Science Fiction Writer's Salon, which continues annually to this day.



The Sad Wizard

by John T. Aquino

*"In the instant of a breath, by witches' wish,
fast to the feet of a crisp crow, past millions
of miles of fields and seas, you fly, gentle,
to me. I have seen you. Eons have I waited.
'Fore creeds and laws, church with cross and
spite, books not drawn, and trips for
pleasure, always I. Come to me. Live my
spell. I will fill your form with life and
through you, at least, I will leave here."*

UNTIL HE WAS BORN, James Bolt, like all babies, had been the darling of the gods. He was then plucked out, christened, and educated. But he continually, though unknowingly, strove to preserve his faerie thoughts. When he could read, he neglected the political speeches and articles his father tried to use as primers and read of Venus and Adonis in a quarto translation of Ovid, of Arthur and his knights and their dream of Camelot, and other paeans to gallantry and magic. Through the poems of Wyatt and Howard, James learned, through the spell of words, that trees do talk, birds do mourn the dead, and hearts do cry. James's father's tutoring, however, soon buried these thoughts deep in James's soul.

James learned that he was of a noble family—a family of which few people had ever heard. Queen Elizabeth had knighted James's father for his bravery in the Irish wars, but two years later had him thrown out of a royal reception for being unknown to her. James took his father's place at court, in the back. His duties at court were not taxing. He dressed in finery, he listened to politics and policy, and he awaited the opportunity to fight in great wars—wars that the queen predicted would never come. Mostly, he spent his time writing poetry, last vestige of his youth's desire, to a young lady-in-waiting named Elizabeth or Beth, whose eyes and hair were the brown of a walnut's heart and whose smile was subtle.

XXXI.

*When I walk upon the beach alone
And count the ways I love thee true,
Even the gulls cry that you are mine own
And waves mutmur gentle thoughts of you.
To lose you, love, would mean my death,
My lovely, saintly, godly Beth.*

"The Sad Wizard"

© 1985 by John T. Aquino

James thought that it was shyness that caused Beth not to reply or acknowledge. He continued writing.

CXV.

For Beth, my love,

I send this dove

As a symbol of my loving,

Like a flameless light

Or a starless night

Or pewter in need of rubbing.

Nothing will stop me, not even death,

Come to me, come to me, come to me, Beth.

Beth did not come to him. The night after she received this poem, Beth's two brothers, Basil and George, followed James home, knocked on the door, criticized the meter of his verse, then beat him up.

James was stricken for days with grief and shame. As always, he put his feelings into poetry:

When love is gone, then life is lost,

Like budding spring to killing frost.

Farewell meaning, farewell soul,

I will vanish to my hole.

And so, James walked and walked, searching for a hole where he could hide. He wandered through forests and streams, valleys and hills. He did not look where he was going, mostly because he was searching for a rhyme for "lifeless."

It was a summer day in the truest sense, for everything seemed the sum of its parts. A tree's leaf did swell with the throbbing of its cells and threads, its bark did glisten with the wet of morning dew, its roots strained and pushed forward for another inch, another inch. A fisherman on the beach mending his net whistled as James passed him, singing a hymn to his lips that pursed, to his lungs that pushed the breath, to his brain that made the tune. But James ignored the tree and the man, thinking only of "lifeless, strifeless, titheless."

He walked past a woman with two children on her knees nursing still another in the shade of a beached ship, three children playing with a ball in a graveyard over the remains of poets and mathematicians, and an old man sitting in a chair, slowly closing his eyes forever, watching the endless flight of a gull.

He passed ships and homes, fields empty and with flower, stones of towers that fell with Rome. Hours had flown by so quickly that soon they were without meaning. In the middle of a field, barren except for flond turfs of wild grass, there was a tall mound, perhaps the shovel leavings of graves, or perhaps a grave itself, or the tenth layer of a deceased civilization that both dwelt with toads and soared with angels. It was solid, rockish, perhaps a star from the inky black which fell solely to sink itself in earth's crust.

James walked right toward it. For some reason, he could not get his poem right. He tried it aloud:

*"Thy lack of care has sapped my breath
And made me all but lifeless.*

I think that I would take my life,

But alas I find me knifeless."

"For the sake of Bran, wretch," cried a voice from the mound, "that not only kills the meter but the sense!"

James walked to the mound to see who was speaking.

"If you must finish it, and I don't see why you should," the voice continued, "this is the way:

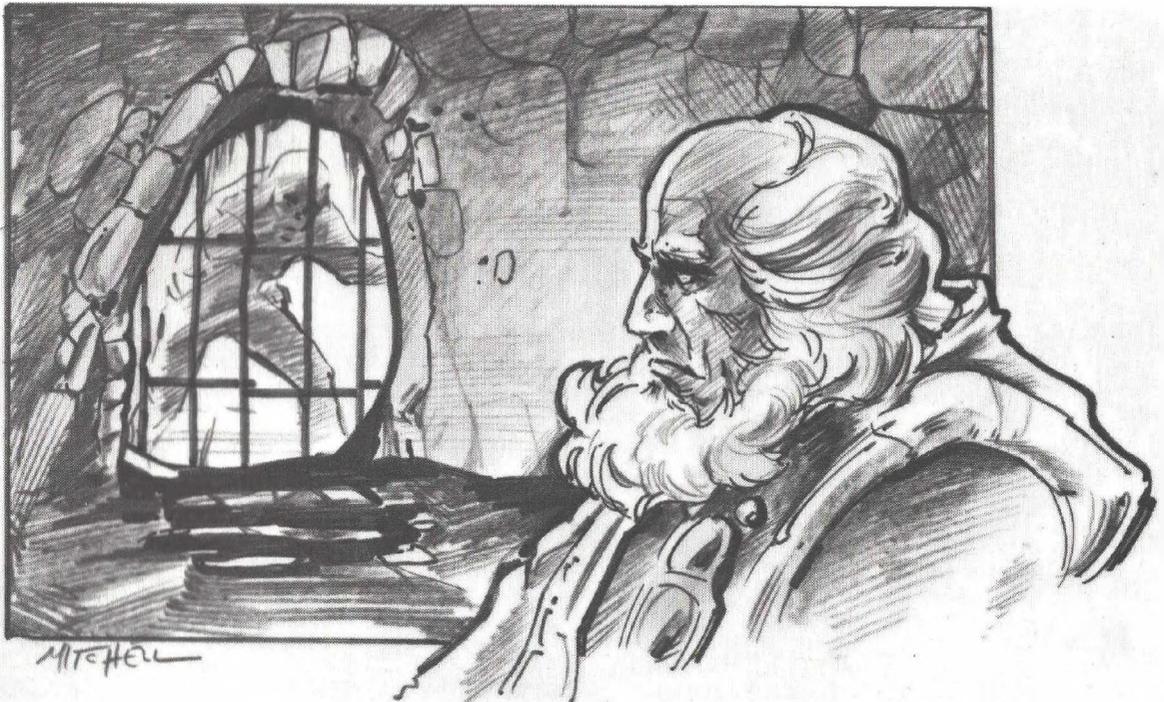
My breath is sapped, my vision fades,

My arm hangs limp and lifeless.

You are to blame, most wicked maid,

For 'tis you who left me wifeless."

James came to the other side of the mound and found an opening. He went into frigid darkness and with his first step found more room than the outside shell showed. He came ten feet forward and found a grating of wrought iron. Through the bars he could see



a figure, stooped and cloaked, sitting behind a gray stone construction that could have been an altar. What light there was came from a candle on a stack of books to James's left, just within his line of vision.

"Come in," said the figure. "The gate will open—for you."

James touched the bars, which jumped at his touch. James came freely into the room and was greeted by the smell, not of rot and age, but of fresh jasmine newly cut.

"I hope you do not mind my improvement on your rhyme, but I really cannot stand a shattered iam."

"Who are you?" James asked in wonder.

"I am—a magician," said the cloaked man. "Of sorts," he added.

"Are you?" James said earnestly, but with just a touch of skepticism. "How shall I win her?"

The ancient voice crackled in laughter. "So abrupt. So to the point. The lady Beth," he sighed. "If you must win her," he said, "have your poems printed."

"Printed?"

"Yes. A limited run, a thousand copies or so. A suitable Latin title, 'Poetae Elizabethae,' or something like that."

"I see," James said excitedly. "Then she will see my love by my spreading it to the world. I will make her famous. Then others will tell her I love her."

"Yes, yes," said the old man. "For a printer, William Jaggard is not bad. I hear—very cheap—though I would not like to have him over for dinner."

"I will do it," James said breathlessly. "Thank you, sir. Bless you," he shouted, running mindlessly into the darkness.

"Bless yourself," the old voice laughed after him. "And, when you talk to Philip Henslowe, keep saying 'four pounds three!'"

The reaction to "Poetae Elizabethae" was almost immediate. The day Jaggard's edition was issued, Basil and George drew swords on James as he was coming out of the Mermaid's Tavern. James was never skilled at swords, but their laughter at James's awkwardness made Basil and George careless. Basil was trampled by a runaway carriage and George, trying to hack James in half, wrapped his sword around a post and plunged the blade into his own shoulder.

James was acclaimed a hero. There was even a ballad written about "Lucky Jim, or How the Gods of Chance Caused a Man to Be Saved for His Lady." This gave Jaggard the printer an idea. He called James in.

"Look, my boy," he said in a whisper while continually glancing over his shoulder, "you take these poems you have written about this Beth, the ballad, the first act of *Hamlet* but cut out the ghost, the third act of *Romeo and Juliet*, act five of *Henry V* when he woos the French queen, mix it together in sequence, and we have one hell of a play! Of course, a play has to be performed. Philip Henslowe runs a theater—"

Philip Henslowe was a very short man who sat on a very high stool writing in a ledger. He had a huge mole in the center of his

forehead, hair only on the back of his head, and a huge belly from sitting.

"Jaggard," he screeched from the depth of his hose, "gave me your play. It sounds familiar to me, and the rhymes are sometimes harsh to my ears, but there is the stuff of greatness in it, somewhere." Some men entered the room as Henslowe was speaking. "Still, it needs some work—all plays do. We often share tasks here; Dekker, Shakespeare, and Jonson here will shape it up. And," he thumbed sloppily through his ledger, "for your work we will give you—two pounds."

James found himself shouting the old man's words. "Four pounds, three."

Henslowe's ledger fell from his desk. There was mumbling from the men in the shadows of the room: "Of all the gall! Young scallion! Look at Henslowe!"

The fat man said nothing, as if waiting for James to talk. Then, when James just stood there, he smiled suddenly. "Perhaps," Henslowe chewed his lip, "two, six?"

"Four pounds, three!"

"Three!"

"Four pounds, three!"

"Three, six!"

"Four pounds, three!"

"Done! Done!"

The shadowy figures behind Henslowe bowed to James, and he in return bowed back.

Love's Cup, or Persistency Rewarded, as the play was finally called, opened at the Swan Theater and was well received. Beth was in the audience, as was her father. There was

acted the tale of James who was all but driven to madness for love of Beth. But the two are kept apart by differences between their families. He kills her two brothers in a duel, then wins her love by his clever discourse and his beautiful poems.

After seeing the play, Beth's father disowned her and drove her in the rain from his home. "Out, out you thing to be maligned!"

"But father," she said, "he was nothing to me. He made it up in his fancy."

"Nonsense!" he cried. "How could he have made it all up in his head?"

Beth fled. And she went to the only refuge she knew, to a man who claimed to adore her and who was, after all, the cause of her troubles.

Three days later, James and Beth were married by a half-sober minister ten miles from London. The total cost to James, including coach, lodging, the minister's fee, and the minister's drink, was four pounds, three.

* * * * *

Two weeks later, in the middle of the night, James awoke, thinking of the old man in the cave. He took himself from Beth's arms and wandered in darkness and fog in search of the cave in the barren field.

"Old man!" he cried aloud as he walked. He did not know the time or where he was going or why there was suddenly fog in an evening that had been clear and bright. "Old man!" he cried.

"Here I am," said the voice. "By an astounding coincidence, you are exactly 3.6 meters from the gate now. Take three giant steps forward."

"Probably is for historians," the old man laughed.

"And tonight, I—I heard you call me."

"That is because I did."

"But—how?" James stammered foolishly.

"Come here," the old man said, extending his arm. "Come around and see my pool of tears."

"Your what?"

"My crystal pool. Cried of my own tears."

James came forward and saw on the marble, altar-like structure a perfectly circular pool of water. It was completely flat; there was no depth to it. As he looked, James saw a milky cloud form in the pool, though the



James did as he was told and, though he could not see, heard the sharp ring of the gate flying open. James took another step forward and saw—the cloak had fallen to the old man's shoulders. His face seemed to James gentle and loving. The old man's beard was soft and silken; his smile warm and magically beneficent.

"Who are you, old man," James said softly but firmly. "I had almost convinced myself that I had dreamed you. But you knew Beth's name and I had not told you. You knew about the four pounds, three, and you probably knew what would happen if I had my poems printed."

movement did not disturb its surface. In a second, the cloud disappeared and within the pool's confines James saw Beth lying asleep on their bed, wearing the white linen bed-sheets that he had bought for her last Wednesday, an empty space beside her where he had lain.

"But that's Beth, my wife!" James marveled.

"Yes, you must be thinking of her," the old man said calmly.

"I was. I was wishing she were with me. But how can it be?"

"Why, my tears were magic, of course. Consequently—"

"Who are you?" James demanded.

"Oh, I have many names." The old man produced a metal wand from nowhere and stuck and stirred it in Beth's image as if he were mixing batter. Beth's form was whipped away. "Some call me devil's son, some the god of the sky. Jupiter, Myrddin, Merlinus, Merlin—"

"Merlin! King Arthur's Merlin! The Magician! Yes, you said you were a—"

"Of sorts." The old man cut him off hastily. "The term 'magician' is much too limited. I have seen the dawn of creation and the dusk of humanity. To me, time is a whirlwind in which I walk. I have tossed thunder-claps at hysterical Athenians, charmed witless Celts with sleight-of-hand and hymns. Imprisoned here by the witch Nimue whom I stupidly coveted, I have been somewhat less active than before, but for my amusement I have breathed melodies into the air, then blown them into the minds of Palestrina and Henry VIII, and for isolated moments shared the minds of Gregory, Nennius, Chaucer, Malory—"

"Some of them I have heard of, but—"

Merlin leaned forward and began to speak persuasively to James, moving the wand here and there for emphasis. But his manner was still calm, logical, as if his statements were facts beyond denial. "I am here now, but in a few seconds I may be strolling through the streets of London, in a hundred years I will be standing on a hill watching the flames of Montezuma's castle and discussing gravitational force with Isaac Newton—but only because I had gone there before, when I was free."

"I don't understand you," James said, his

voice an anxious whine. "I know nothing of walking in time or of this Newton. What of me, me and Beth? What are we to you?"

Merlin stared at James, as if slightly annoyed at the interruption to his autobiographical discourse. "Your Beth means nothing to me. And soon will mean nothing to you. You will not stay with her long."

"That's rubbish. I will never leave my Beth. Never."

"Never?" Merlin asked coolly. "Not even for power. For the rule of England and beyond. Not even for wealth beyond the dreams of a Getty or a Mellon. You will leave her. Tomorrow, as a matter of fact. I know

because I have walked in time. I also know because I will cause you to. I cannot wait for that day when I am free and Nimue and I will walk through the ruins of Bristol hand in hand. I still have power to influence life. I still have a destiny. I have chosen you, young man. You will leave your Beth, your moment's pleasure. You will do it because I tell you. And then you will become the new Arthur, King of England, and master of the Round Table!"

"You are mad!" James shouted at him. "Undeniably mad. You have escaped from the care of monks and hidden in this cave. I have been listening to a madman."

James turned to go. Merlin did not move. "You cannot leave me. You are mine. You have always stayed."

James took another step. He felt a blow to his head and then a rush of sound to his ears, like thunder. He looked before him and saw scores of people seated in rows, beating their hands together. He looked to his left and right and saw beside him men dressed in Roman togas, smiling, and bowing toward the rows of people. James was in another time, another place. It was 1864, at a performance of *Julius Caesar* in Washington, D.C., starting for their only time together, Julius, Edwin, and John Wilkes Booth. James found himself bowing with them and smiling. The one to James's left, a short man with a drooping mustache, noticed James. "Who are you?" he said in a hoarse whisper.

"I am James Bolt in the time of Elizabeth of England and have been sent here by Merlin the magician."

And then James was gone.

"Julius," John Wilkes Booth said to his brother, who was once again next to him, "Now I am sure that I am mad."

James was back again in Merlin's cave.

"Who am I?" Merlin asked, standing behind him.

James thought to himself. His life at court had brought him obscurity and heartbreak. Ten minutes with an old man who claimed to be a Celtic myth had brought him success. He was no longer to be stuck in the back of court, but was now the hero of a storybook—the new Arthur. His old life was returning to him.

"Who am I?" repeated the old man. "Or do you require further proof? Prehistoric times? The Battle of Dunkirk? The exploration of the planet Pluto?"

"You are Merlin the magician," James responded weakly, staring ahead.

"Will you listen to what I have to say?"

"Yes," said James in a somewhat firmer voice.

"Fine," said Merlin, drawing near. "But then, I knew you would. I will banish your inhibitions and mold you into history. I am very sorry that I could not let you remain at the play longer. It is really quite a perform-

ance. The Booths have a natural flair for theatrical verisimilitude. But we have more important things to be concerned about. Here." He handed James a gold coin which glistened and seemed new, though the words, "Arturus Rex," dated it as 1000 years old. "Now you will think of me even when you are not here."

"Will—Beth be all right?" James asked.

"She will fare well for herself. But come. With my help, you will become the queen's lover and then consort of England!"

"The queen's—" James started, but did not finish, for his head was still spinning. He could only say in argument, "But she is sixty!"

"Fifty-nine," said Merlin.

Beth was just awakening when James returned. "My dearest," she said, startled. She pulled the sheet from her and ran to him naked. She pressed her body to his, standing on her bare tip-toes to kiss him. "Where have you been, my love?"

James slithered from her and walked around the bed. "Beth, I have something to say to you. Sit down." He sat on the bed and waited for her. Beth looked at him for a while in some astonishment, then finally came forward and sat next to him.

"Beth, tonight I have had the most wonderful experience of my life."

"And I also, my beloved."

"No, no, Beth," he said with his eyes closed in annoyance. "You do not understand. Ever since—ever since I was a little boy, I've wanted to ride with the knights, to right wrongs, to charm fair damsels with my deeds and verse, to do good. Now, I have achieved some success with my verse, as you will surely attest—"

Beth said nothing, but only looked at her feet.

"But my father wanted me to serve at court. And he was right, in a way; to do good, one must have power. But I am nothing at court. Only now—tonight—here, let me show you." He fumbled in his pockets and produced the coin Merlin had given him.

"You met a numismatist?"

And James told her of his meetings with Merlin. "And I must leave you," he said at the end. "Merlin insists. I must make love to the queen. Well, what do you think?"

Beth said nothing for a moment. She bent down and seemed to pick something up. She moved toward him. "I can sum up what I think in six words, James. 'My father,' 'my purity,' and 'my love.'" She whipped it around from behind her back and smacked him squarely in the forehead with their bedpan.

His senses returned just in time to see Beth, fully attired, heading through the door.

"You'll think about it differently when I become king!" he shouted after her.

James's conquest of the queen was gradual. At first, on Merlin's advice, he merely smiled at her politely as she passed by his position at court. After a summer rain, she almost slipped on a wet stretch of ground, but James was close by and caught her hand and held her upright (Merlin had arranged the thunderstorm just by thinking about it). Later, the queen asked for a member of the court who spoke Spanish to deal with an ambassador from the court of Francis I. James volunteered, then ran to Merlin's cave where the magician gave him a one-night course in Spanish by means of words written on little cards. James received the commission and performed brilliantly ("The queen cannot forgive wrongs so clumsily executed."). Soon, he was given more and more commissions from the queen. One night, she asked him to her royal apartments to commend him.

"You know," he told her sheepishly, "I wrote 'Poetae Elizabethae' for you." The queen blushed and asked him to stay and tell her more.

"Am I very old?" she asked as he held her.

He ran his hand over her body. She was firm and fair, despite her years. "No. You are very young. And very wise."

"Let me teach you," she said.

Two years passed. Philip Henslowe spent less and less time running his theater; his belly was draining his life. William Jaggard continued his somewhat larcenous printing practices. He was jailed several times, but never for long. Beth, to avoid politically motivated imprisonment due to James's liaison with the queen, went to America and worked with the missionaries. Merlin told James that by his thoughts he had washed Beth's mind of hurt and shame and that she was quite content and no longer thought of James. James did not enjoy being forgotten, but then there was so much else to enjoy. His "Poetae Elizabethae" went into twelve printings, though James wrote no more. His position at court was enviable. He learned to eat snails. And he grew a fashionable beard.

James was sitting in Merlin's cave, tossing the coin Merlin had given him. "I am really the queen's puppy dog," James told Merlin, who was sitting before his crystal pool and staring into it sullenly. "She has a vein or something, and she is too old. But she says I give her energy. And look at me!" James laughed and stroked his beard and touched the rich braid on his shoulders and wrists. "Captain of the Queen's Guards, Diplomatic Liaison with Spain and Italy, Member of the Queen's Council—"

"Have you asked her to make you consort?" Merlin interrupted him.

"Repeatedly," James said as he rose. "She has told me that if I ask her that one more

time she will have my head."

"Then it is time to move. Come here. Look into my pool."

James leaned over and saw in the pool the queen's carriage leaving the palace. "Yes," said James. "She is on her afternoon ride." "Is the guard loyal to you?"

"Of course."

"Muster them, order them to capture her carriage and hold the queen. Give her one last chance to make you consort. If she will not, then you will take the crown."

"Are you mad? The people will not support—"

"The support of the people has never been necessary in government. I brought England Arthur and a score of years of enlightened peace that is still lauded and treasured in book and song. Arthur was but a boy, like you, but together we eliminated discordant bands, and joined the warring factions of Britannia into a cohesive, harmonious whole governed by justice and reason. It takes courage merged with wisdom."

"But why?" James asked. "What is she doing wrong?"

"Nothing," Merlin said simply, "except that she has no son. Before she dies, *now* is the time to plot England's path."

In spite of his father, James had never really understood politics. What Merlin said made sense. He had heard talk of the lack of an heir at court, but he had not listened closely.

"But she will fight, will she not? She is a proud woman."

"You may have to banish her," said Merlin, stirring the image in his pool with his metal wand. "Perhaps all of your women will end up in America."

* * * * *

The queen's carriage was red and gold and black. It hobbled and weaved on the road to Saint Alban's, a pleasant and reassuring sight to those it passed. Suddenly, from a cluster of trees at the road's fork, darted James and the Queen's Guards, their rapiers high and flashing in the sun. "No harm to the queen!" James shouted in shrill voice. He held Merlin's coin tight in his hand.

The queen's escort of five turned and watched in amazement as the queen's own guard swept like a Mongol horde upon them. Then, with lightning precision, they drew their swords, told the coachman to speed the queen to safety, and prepared to fulfill their duty, heroically and bloodily.

"Stop!" cried the queen from her carriage window. The coachman pulled the carriage slowly and cautiously to a halt. "Drop your swords. Drop them, I say! You are to offer no resistance, do you hear?"

Captain James Bolt and the guard circled the carriage, the queen's escort sitting on their horses in a humiliated and dejected manner. "Yahoo!" they cried at their victory. "Hi lo!

I lo! Hilooo!"

James rode up to the carriage and opened its door. The queen was sitting calmly amidst the upholstery of blue and red velvet. "Well, Captain Bolt, we seem to have misjudged you all this time. Are we under arrest?"

"Actually," James said conversationally, using the words Merlin had given him, "you left for your ride before I had the chance to ask you a question. Will you make me consort?"

"No," she said harshly. "Better men than you have asked. It would be an insult to them and their memory to accept you."

James's pride caused his spine to arch and his voice to go strident again. "If you will not let me help you guide England, then I will take it from you and show you how to rule."

The queen smiled. "What can you give England, Captain Bolt, that I cannot?"

James smiled in return. "Magic. Courage merged with wisdom."

"I see. Well, Captain Bolt, for better or worse, England shall avoid your governance." She leaned forward and shouted into the open air to her left: "Take them!"

From the trees to both sides of the carriage rode over a hundred soldiers selected from the veterans of the Irish wars, their rapiers continually weaving and flashing. James and the guard had their weapons at their sides; they were unprepared.

James fumbled for his sword as his first lieutenant fell beside him, a gash in his throat; then others were hacked to death before they could draw or shift for position. Then a grizzled old man, whom James recognized as an old friend of his father, a man who had taken the young James on his knee and predicted a great future, moved his horse slowly toward James, his sword pointed in ritual fashion at James's heart. James tried to doge the blade, but the old man was quick; the blade shot deep into his arm.

James dropped from his horse and joined his men there. The ground was red and wet. James dragged himself up and saw that the veterans had dismounted and surrounded him. He heard the queen's voice, "Hold! Save him for the Tower!" The veterans moved so that she could see him and he her.

"As I told you, James, better men than you. Many are still of the opinion that a woman is easy prey for a man. You were a pleasure, James, but like all pleasures there soon becomes too much of you. And so now, eat England's dirt."

* * * * *

In the Tower, James sat and thought of what he had done. He thought of the beauty in life he had never studied. He thought of Beth and how he wished that she were there — if only for him to look at and write about as he had when they were both at court. Perhaps, he mused, it would have been better for them both if they had never met.

James felt like writing again. He was of some importance, so many from the court saw to his needs from time to time — Raleigh, Cecil, Essex. Essex, young like James, gave him pen and paper and a mug of stout he smuggled in. On a scrap of paper, that would not be found until years later by a young boy from Wisconsin playing with the Tower's cracks, James Bolt wrote his last poem:

*When God peers down from his heavenly throne,
Midst angel psalm and penitent moan,
'Tis humbly I'll address his majesty,
"Twas tragic circumstance brought me to thee.*

*Wrong hopes, wrong dreams, wrong time,
wrong place
Robbed my life, sucked forth my grace.*

*A hapless, stupid suppliant am I.
But at least, dear God, I now know why."*

"Not bad," said a voice from his mug of stout. "At least your rhymes have improved." Reflected there in the stout was Merlin's face.

James was not particularly impressed or surprised. "Speaking from your crystal pool, I see. If my rhymes have improved, old man, it was done without thee."

"That is false," Merlin protested. You are better than when I found you. You will die with nobility and dignity. You were never meant for politics. But you will die well."

And still, in spite of the resentment he felt, James found Merlin's face to be kind and loving — though now somewhat sad and confused.

"Yes. It is knowing how well you will die that has made it easier for me to . . . deceive you." The stout seemed to ripple as Merlin shrugged. "You — each person — is but a brief flash of light in the vast movement of time. I know this to be true. Some of us are of no importance ourselves. Sometimes the higher, more important good must be served. This is why you must be —"

"Sacrificed," James said.

"Yes. Because someone else, who will gain in importance and favor from your demise, will be England's might, the new Arthur — for a while."

"Who?" James asked, suddenly earnest.

"You will see," said Merlin's face, vanishing into foam.

"You were talking to someone?" asked Lord Essex entering the cell.

"Praying to my god. I suppose," said James.

"They are ready," Essex said.

And they took James Bolt to a hastily constructed scaffold, before a throng of six men and two women. He submitted without a word, knelt down, and placed his head on a block wet with morning dew. When the blade fell, he was staring at Lord Essex, who was acting as Marshall, and who was holding in his hand a golden coin like the one Merlin had given James.

* * * *

The next thing James knew, he was walking in a land with no boundaries, no sky, no color, though there was music in the humming and whispering of a million voices.

Standing, waiting for him, was a shortish man dressed in a black robe and hood, though the hood did not obscure his face, which was gaunt. His eyes were black and beady, and he was smiling, a half-smile such as those of either bemusement or guile.

"Welcome, Brother James. We have been waiting for you."

"Who are you?"

The man started walking, and James walked with him. "My name really depends on what literature you read. To some I am Belinus, I am Pluto, I am Dis, Hades, Mephistopheles—"

"Am I in Hell, then?"

"No. You are dead. That is all you need to know."

"Where are you taking me?"

"To where you will be."

They walked for a while in silence.

"And what of Merlin?" James asked. "And Essex?"

"Do you really care?"

"As an observer I am interested."

"Good answer," said the short man, "for that is exactly what we are." He stopped and turned to look James face to face. "Gaze into my eyes."

And James looked into the reflection of the man's black eyes, and soon, as the eyes clouded, then cleared, he saw Essex in Merlin's cave and Merlin embracing him; he saw Essex in the queen's lap; he saw Essex riding through the streets of London trying to rally the populace to his side in his quest for the crown, but windows closed and Essex, alone, was arrested and later executed on the same scaffold where James had knelt and bowed.

"And so," James said, "Essex does not rule."

"No."

"Merlin did not—"

"No," said the short man as they resumed walking. "Merlin is a strange case. He really, imprisoned as he is, has little influence in the course of things, except that he adds some color and some motivation."

"What of Merlin?" James asked.

"He will be free one day, and he and Arthur will ride again to cure the world's wrongs. Until then, he will continue to meddle from time to time, but not have the effect he would like."

"He must know that he will not succeed."

"He should know. It is sad to think of him trying again and again, with failure inevitable, to recapture with young men like you his moment of glory with Arthur and the Round Table. But he must try."

"Do you expect me to feel sorry for him?" James said bitterly.

"I expect you to feel nothing," the short man said. "You are dead."

James walked—and saw that they were walking in a valley of the truest green color, the purest air that he had ever breathed, with the scent of flowers that became honey in his mouth. And there in the valley, James saw men riding in festive games. In the clear air, their standards were plain to James.

"Arthur and his knights," James said in wonder.

"Yes," said the short man with his half-smile. "After the way Merlin used you, it was the least we could do. When Arthur rides again, you will ride with him. It is not necessarily reward here in Avalon, but we thought that it was fitting."

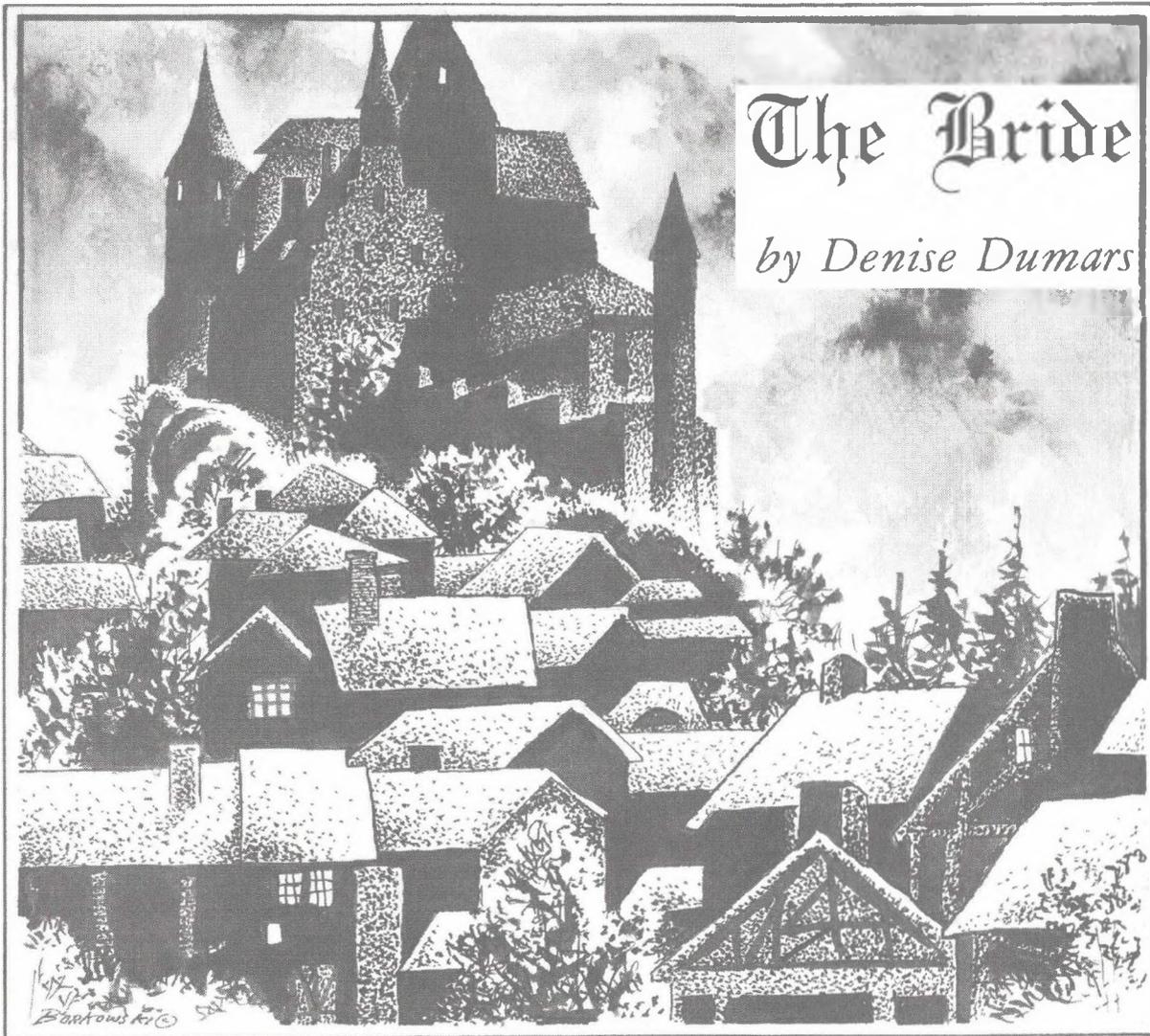
James and the short man walked toward Arthur and his knights, and they did not hear a distant murmur.

"In the instant of a breath. . . ."



The Bride

by Denise Dumars



NEARLY TWO YEARS HAD PASSED since I last saw my oldest and dearest friend, Roland deVeltre. Business matters and the ever-accumulating effluvia of a lifetime had kept me from him, though he was often in my thoughts. So when his missive arrived, telling me of his remarriage. I virtually ground my business to a halt and set forth on my journey to the town of M—, his and my birthplace.

The great, brooding castle of deVeltre—if that ruin may be deemed such—sat above the township of M—. Its great dark windows, set in the gray carapace like the withering face and eyes of an old man, looked down upon the township with a comically sad face. Odd. I thought, on approach—how very desolate the castle now looked. It was

hard to believe that my friend, a newlywed, resided there.

A pervasive wave of melancholy descended upon my person as I approached the heavy oaken doors of the old castle. It was a sense of unease much like that which I experience when calling on a client who keeps a particularly large watch dog. I tried desperately to shake off this feeling, and when Roland's servant opened the door, I forced my lips to smile.

Roland came bursting into the foyer, giving for the moment the impression of the energetic youth who had once romped with me in the hills above M—. He took my hand and pumped it vigorously, and it was only then, upon looking more closely, that my heart sank.

Though his pleasure in seeing me was profound, and his smile genuine, it was obvious

that Roland deVeltre was a changed man. His eyes shone with an unnatural light, and greenish circles shadowed them. As we embraced, I noticed his extreme thinness, and he seemed almost to have shrunk. His face was as pale as a prisoner's, and his hair hung limply like so much damp straw.

"Aha, the newlywed!" I cried, feigning jollity. "And how fares the happy couple?"

He beamed, his grin giving a skull-like appearance to his face. "Ah—a bliss, my dear Garrick—a bliss more serene than, oh, than sleep, or eternity! But come, you must meet my bride, the Lady Marabelle."

He ushered me into the library, which by comparison seemed a much warmer and friendlier room. I felt that the sight of those familiar volumes put me far more at ease than the cadaverous visage of my friend.

He excused himself, and came back shortly

"The Bride"

© 1985 by Denise Dumars

with his new bride. I rose, smiling, and hoped sincerely that my face did not fall at the sight of the new Madame deVeltre.

I took her hand and kissed it, nearly recoiling at the touch of her icy flesh against my lips. Her complexion was the gray-white of modeler's clay, and wisps of her hair floated about her head like spiderwebs. I cannot begin to describe the color of that hair, for it was in fact colorless, and dull as a crow's. Her figure was thin to the point of emaciation, and her eyes—those eyes! But that is another matter altogether.

How I suddenly missed the Lady Lorene, Roland's first wife. Lorene had a head of thick auburn hair, always threatening to fall loose and wild like a mare's mane. She was always laughing, and her charm was only exceeded by her wit. Many's the night the three of us had sipped brandy far into the morning hours, telling stories, Lorene's laughter filling the rooms of the dank old castle with light. When she died, giving birth to a child who would not live, it was as sad a day for me as for poor Roland.

Marabelle rather reminded me of a lichen growing in the arctic tundra, or a colorless polyp on the forest floor that never sees the sun. She glided when she walked. We followed her to the dining room, and it occurred to me that apprehension was ruining my appetite.

Roland ladeled soup, and after smelling its rich fragrance I found that I was hungry after all. I devoured it as did Roland. I mentioned tactfully that I was glad to see that his appetite had returned. Marabelle turned her nose up at the potage, and motioned the servant to take her soup plate away.

Roland and I conversed while, for the most part, Marabelle sipped bird-like at her wine and ate little. A glorious roast was presented as the main course, with all the trimmings. I took an end slice, as I prefer my meat well-cooked, and was somewhat surprised to see Lady Marabelle take a rare and bloody center cut. Indeed, it was only after the roast came that she perked up, her eyes suddenly glowing alive, as the eyes of a somnambule upon awakening. Roland and I were talking of the occult, for as boys we had devoured his father's volumes of arcane knowledge, attempting necromantic feats and only succeeding in frightening ourselves. We were laughing over our youthful pretensions to sorcery when the Lady Marabelle spoke up.

"Of course, yours was but children's play—a silly, scary game. Neither of you has any talent for it. That sort of thing runs in families."

"And does it run in your family?" I asked.

"Sorcery? Certainly not. But the occult is a wide and varied field. Roland's father has a worthy sampling in his collection, but it is far from complete."

"Oh, then you are a scholar, Lady Marabelle."

"In a way. Much of the most important occult knowledge has never been written down, as you probably know."

Her speech sent shivers up my spine. I sensed that I had hit upon a touchy subject with her, and my frivolous treatment of it was obviously not to her liking.

When we adjourned to the library, I was surprised but not altogether disappointed when Lady Marabelle excused herself in order to retire. "I retire early," she explained, "for I rarely sleep through the night. Often I am restless and roam the halls, so if you hear footsteps, Mr. LaVeque, do not be frightened, for it will only be me."

Roland left me to myself for the moment to escort his bride to her chamber. I pondered upon the strange couple; the uneasy feeling I got from the new Madame deVeltre. Their attentions toward each other were rather guarded, I noticed, not at all what I would have expected from newlyweds. I could not help but feel that she held some power over the much-changed Roland, small and wraith-like though she was.

My thoughts again drifted to the wise and beautiful Lorene, who with Roland had been as happy as a child, and he as well. Now it seemed that Marabelle was turning Roland into a colorless, anemic wraith like herself. I tried to convince myself that this was not the case, that I was overreacting, but my instincts told me differently.

Roland returned rather sooner than I had expected him to, and jolted me from my thoughts.

"Well, old friend," he said, "what did you think of her?"

He had asked the question I'd hoped he wouldn't. Should I lie, I wondered, or do I dare tell the truth? "She's very quiet and shy. I feel I have to get to know her better."

"Ah, yes, she *is* reserved. But I think she likes you. She said she found some of your comments—interesting."

"Just where did you meet her, old boy?"

"In the highlands of Scotland. Hers is a very old and landed family, though I can't say as I've met any of them. What do you say to another brandy?"

We talked late into the night, and I found that my friend really knew very little about his wife's background. It seems that for some reason she was estranged from her family, though living on a generous allowance from her father.

There was very little I could comfortably discuss with my friend regarding his new wife, with whom he seemed obsessed. When we had had enough of talking 'old times,' and when my friend began to look even more wan and peaked than before, I suggested that we retire.

The travel, the brandy, and the late talk

acted as a soporific. Instantly, it seemed. I was asleep.

It must have been nearing dawn when I awoke. Suddenly, it was as though a cannon blast or some other sharp noise had awakened me. I was aware, all at once, that my chamber door was opening, slowly. My immediate thought was to reach for my pistol, but my hands seemed immobile. And what should appear through that slowly opening door but the ghost-like form of my host's new wife!

For an instant my fears were over. "Lady," I said softly, "you must be sleepwalking. Awake, Lady Marabelle, you know not what you do!"

But she moved ever nearer my bed, and in the false dawn I saw that she was no sleep-walker. Indeed, those shrouded eyes burned more brightly than those of the cat or owl or other night creature. And I was suddenly powerless. I could not wrest my gaze from those mesmeric gray eyes that seemed deeper than the lochs of Scotland.

Into the dawn she remained with me. I was unable to resist her, though my very soul cried out for me to stop, to save myself from sure damnation. For her cold hands thrilled me as no mortal woman's could, and when she lay against me I felt no beating of the heart.

Twice or thrice I swooned with ecstasy, as though mortal man were not meant to endure such unholy passions. Then, as if in return for her unasked for, unearthly delights, the thing called Marabelle asked a little of me. With her small, pointed teeth she incised a discreet opening in my neck. She lapped at my flowing blood as would a kitten with a dish of milk. Somehow, I lost consciousness.

In the morning I awoke with a terrible headache, and only the shadowy recollection of the night's events. Full consciousness was slow in coming; memory, even slower.

I now knew why my friend appeared to be wasting away. I realized that his life was in jeopardy—his life, even his very soul. I knew no name for the creature that he called Marabelle, only that she was something other than human, something surely evil.

And how was I to tell him? He would think me mad—think that I had been the seducer, the corruptor of his young wife! Surely she ravished him in his sleep—bled him for her own unholy appetites—he could not know. No sign of it showed in his innocent face. He seemed happy, and yet—in the hills of India, it is said, there are men who are addicted to the bite of the cobra—surely my friend was suffering a similar fate!

At length I rose and dressed for breakfast, and descended the stairs with a heavy heart. And how fortunate was I! I found my friend alone in the dining room. He smiled as brightly as ever, but when he gazed upon me



more thoroughly, a look of great apprehension came over his face. I greeted him, but he recoiled from my touch, looking more and more anxious, ultimately backing away from me.

"Friend Roland! What is the matter? Do come tell me."

But he was already dashing toward the stairs.

And there she was, at the top of the stairs,

her gray eyes glittering in the bright morning sun. Roland stopped short at the sight of her.

Then, shaking all over with rage, he belated out to her these words:

"You promised me! You said when you became my wife that I would be the *only* man!"

I can see her now in my mind's eye, smiling down at him as though he were a petulant child, letting him rave, all the time smiling that consummately evil smile. Even now as I sit safe in my chamber far away from there, it chills me to the bone to think of it.

So he knew. He knew, and he didn't care. With this frightful realization came the knowledge that Roland was in this precarious situation wholly of his own will.

In my horror I fled the deVeltre castle, leaving half my belongings behind. To this day I have not returned, nor do I intend to. I do not know if Roland is still alive, but I pray for him daily and cherish the memory of our once-great friendship.

— fb —

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About the Author

DENISE DUMARS is 29 years old, not married, and lives in Hawthorne, California. She's was born under the sign of Aquarius. She has an M.A. in English, has won poetry awards, and is currently employed by the El Segundo Public Library, where she's in charge of the science fiction and fantasy department—which, she says, is considered to be an honor for a mere clerk. She's had the usual slew of weird jobs: artist's model, tarot card reader, tutor, etc.

FANTASY GAME REVIEW

by Andrew M. Robinson

**Fantasy Hero, a fantasy role-playing game from:
Hero Games
92A 21st Ave.
San Mateo CA 94403
\$14.95**

The latest and hottest offering in the fantasy role-playing game market is Hero Games' *Fantasy Hero*. Starting some years ago with the redoubtable super-hero role-playing game, *Champions*, the Hero Games people have made steady progress into each of the major rpg genres. Over a year ago, they produced *Justice Inc.*, a 1920's-30s rpg, and now with *Fantasy Hero* they have moved into fantasy role-playing. Next on the list is *Danger International*, a modern-day game featuring espionage, soldier-of-fortune, private eye, and other similar fare. *DI* is supposed to be out by Christmas. After that, *Star Hero* should warp in, featuring role-playing space adventure.

All the Hero Games products share the same basic combat and skills system, so players familiar with *Champions* or *Justice, Inc.* will find much of the *Fantasy Hero* game readily understandable. An additional advantage is that characters may be moved from one of these games to another with only minor adjustments. If you've had a burning desire to drop an elf into a superhero campaign, this is the system which will allow you to do so.

The new player may initially encounter difficulty with the large technical vocabulary associated with the game. While these are mostly everyday words such as "Stun" or "Body," a new player must keep in mind the designer-assigned definitions of these terms as he reads the rules. The authors have carefully provided a complete, easy to read summary at the beginning of the various major sections (combat, magic, skills) for the reader's use. As the player reads each section, he may refer back to them constantly to minimize confusion.

Looking over all of the myriad fantasy role-playing games on the market, one can make a list of the most desired game features and compare. By my standard, *Fantasy Hero* seems to be a game that's made all the right decisions. Character design is completely under the player's control never dependent on the roll of a die. A complete skills system is provided, with ordinary skills such as tailoring and smithing, as well as combat skills such as weapons skill and stealth. The combat system is well designed and nicely detailed, with options like hit-location rules that provide a choice between more realism and faster play. The biggest plus of *Fantasy Hero* is the magic system. This unique system allows the player to "build" virtually any spell he desires, with tailor-made special effects, advantages, and disadvantages. Finally, characters are not tied to an arbitrary schedule for hits, skills, or spells. Character advancement is instead facilitated through the direct purchase of characteristics, skills, and spells in exchange for experience points.

The *Fantasy Hero* character starts with minimal numbers in his various characteristics, and is given a number of character points to spend. He may spend these points any way he chooses,

on skills, spells, items, money, or higher characteristics. In this manner, the player may design any sort of character he wishes, yet no matter how points are spent on any one character all characters will be roughly balanced with respect to each other.

In addition to the starting points for character design, players may gain extra points by taking a number of "character disadvantages." These nominal disadvantages serve as a real plus to the game, not only because they add to the total points available for character design, but because they greatly aid the player in defining his character's background and state of mind. Giving your character a strong sense of duty and integrity, combined with a dislike of horses yields several starting points for building his personality.

Fantasy Hero characters have eight basic characteristics, which do a very good job of covering their various aspects. Strength, constitution, dexterity, body, and comeliness cover the physical parts of a character, while intelligence, ego, presence, and comeliness cover the mental aspects. There are six "figured" characteristics which are calculated from the basic ones. Any or all of these may be increased through the expenditure of character points. The figured statistics cover such categories as the toughness of the character (physical and energy resistance), the number of actions per turn he may take (his speed), how much endurance he has available to spend on various actions, how much knocking about he can take before falling unconscious (stun), and the rate at which he can recover his expended endurance and lost stun (recovery). Each of the various characteristics has a pertinent place within the game; all contribute to the realism of the character.

Combat is handled very skillfully in *Fantasy Hero*. Combat maneuvers are realistic and complete, including such options as shield block, bracing with an archery weapon, disarming an opponent, or pinning him and forcing him to yield ground. Characters who buy skill levels with weapons can use those levels for a variety of purposes, such as doing extra damage or increasing the likelihood of a successful hit, or even to add a bit of flashiness as they fight.

Damage from combat is also presented in a realistic manner. Rules cover the impairment of limbs, stunning or knocking out opponents, and bleeding from wounds, as well as death.

While characters often make skill rolls to show the successful completion of various goals, as in other rpg's, *Fantasy Hero* offers the unusual features of complementary rolls and character vs character skill rolls. For complementary rolls, a character may use related skills to add to his chance of success on a different skill roll. For example, if a character is attempting a Seduction skill roll, he might first employ such skills as Courty Graces and Oratory to improve his chance. An example of a character vs. character skill roll would be a case in which one character hides an item and another attempts to find it. The success with which the first character hid the item directly affects the searcher's chance of locating it. Another example would be where one char-

acter is attempting to go unnoticed via a stealth roll while another character wants a perception roll to find him. A satisfyingly complete list of skill roll modifiers, such as time spent, location, appropriate equipment, favorable or unfavorable situation, and player role-playing is also provided.

In most fantasy rpg's, a character's background is largely made up by the player just prior to rolling dice. The option of race, such as dwarf, elf, or human, may be limited by the dice. In a few games, the religion, prior social status, etc. might also be determined by a die roll.

In *Fantasy Hero*, the player may choose one or more "character packages." Such packages consist of a set of character minima, skills, spells, and character disadvantages with a particular background or occupation. Packages can also be used to determine character race or religion, or past occupations of the character. Many players will pick one or more packages for their characters, since on the whole they are beneficial in that the character gains somewhat more in character points than the package actually costs. Characters are restricted in how many packages they may initially take simply because they have only a limited number of points available for character construction. After that, the referee may well limit the character's purchase of packages because they often represent *time* invested by the character in the past, and a character may have to sit out part of a campaign before buying another one.

As an example of a package, a referee may design a "dwarf" package; any character who wishes to have a dwarven character would be obliged to spend some of his points on a higher minimum strength and constitution, stone- or metal-working skill, increased visual perception in the dark, and perhaps a love of enclosed spaces or fear of the open. The same character might have been a warrior in times past, and thus could take a "veterans" package. If the character were currently employed for a local baron as siege engineer, he might have taken a "combat engineer" package. However, if the character took up the position of the Court Bard during the course of a campaign the referee might require him to spend time before allowing him to buy a "bard" package.

Fantasy Hero provides a number of basic packages, plus complete rules and guidelines for the referee and players to make their own. A book of packages is a possibility for future publication by Hero Games.

One of the greatest advantages of *Fantasy Hero* is that virtually every aspect of a campaign is under the control of the referee. He can, if he desires, design every spell, create all of the player packages (and thus pre-define all the possible player backgrounds), write up all of the creatures and make up the design of all the magic items. Other rpg's usually present one or all of these categories as given, with limited player or referee freedom to add to the list or change what's there. The *Fantasy Hero* ref can thus tailor-design his game in advance, even before the players begin to build their characters.

But this advantage of *Fantasy Hero* can also be a drawback. The amount of pre-game work necessary for the meticulous referee in *Fantasy Hero* can be staggering. It will most likely be necessary for referees to trade off some of the control over the design of the game to the players in return for sharing the work. The easiest way to accomplish this is to allow the players to design their own spells and character packages. The referee, of course, always has the option of modifying these to fit the overall campaign he plans to run, and it allows the players a chance to do some of the design work themselves.

Another big time-saver will be the additional game supplements upon which Hero Games is currently hard at work. In the next six months we can expect to see a Bestiary of animals and creatures, two campaign books containing nations and

worlds in which to set a campaign, a book of spells, a book of magic items, and the aforementioned character package book.

The most revolutionary aspect of *Fantasy Hero* must be the magical spell rules. This unique system allows the players to design any and all spells they want, in a manner that balances spells relative to each other and the effect achieved. Many fantasy rpg's present players with an artificial layout of spells, often tied to "spell levels" and "character levels," i.e. only a limited set of spells are available, and characters are restricted in the spells they may learn. In many such systems, the given set of spells cannot even be added to, and in any case the base spell set is known to all players, thus frequently denying the thrill of surprise when a character or NPC whips out a little ditty that supposedly has never been seen before.

Fantasy Hero takes a completely different approach to the entire subject. The only rule-mandated limitation on what a player may give his character is the number of available character points to be spent. There are no artificial restrictions on the character; he may have whatever he can get (though, of course, the referee must always have the option of modifying or rejecting proposed spells if he feels they wouldn't be conducive to the good play of the campaign).

In *Fantasy Hero*, the player first decides what basic effect(s) he wants his spell to have. For example, if the player wants his pet sorcerer to be able to blip about via teleportation, arriving with a blinding flash of light, he may do so by taking the Transport effect linked with the Dazzle effect. Once the base effects have been decided upon, the player may then add various advantages such as an Area effect (so he may Transport others along with himself), or disadvantages such as requiring Gestures or allowing undesirable Side Effects.

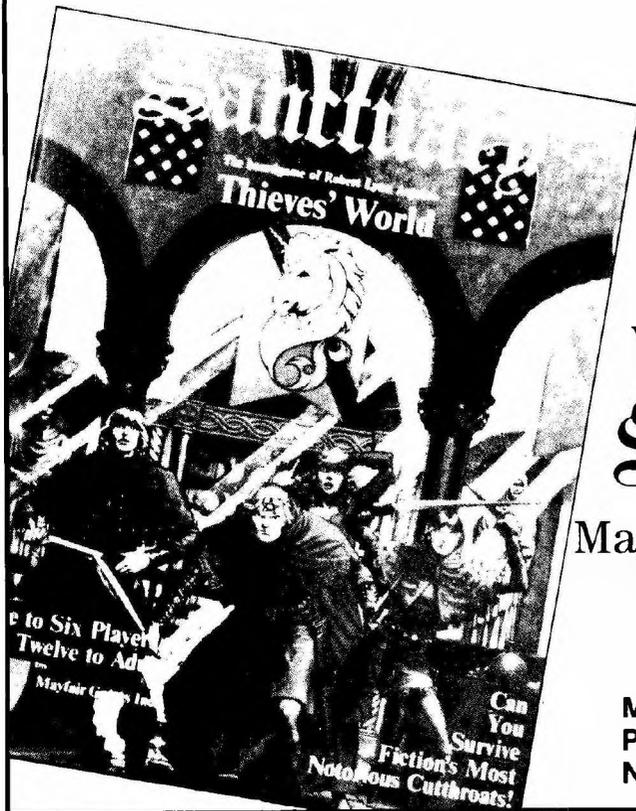
Experienced fantasy rpg players may be put off by *Fantasy Hero*'s use of three six-sided dice to resolve combat rolls. The hit probability is the attacker's combat value (his dexterity over three, rounded) plus any skill levels plus other modifiers (weapon mods, situation or action mods) vs the defender's combat value plus any skill levels plus other modifiers. The resulting number (which may be negative) is added to 11, and this is the roll the attacker must match or get under to hit. Using 3D6 instead of a twenty-sided or percentile die as in most other fantasy rpg's means that there's a much sharper bell curve; the difference of a level or two makes for a much larger difference in *Fantasy Hero* than in other games.

One of the main features of *Fantasy Hero* is that the effect is what counts; the mechanics derive from the desired effect. Thus, in the magic system, the player decides what effect he wishes to achieve, then arranges the mechanics to follow suit. However, in a few cases this philosophy is carried to an extreme. Weapon weights, for example, are taken from the number of dice of damage they do, so a dagger and a longbow, both of which do a 1D6 killing attack, weigh the same. A broadsword, which does twice as much damage as a dagger, weighs exactly twice as much. But the overall effect is manageable, and players can readily adjust things to fit their own tastes.

Fantasy Hero represents a new generation of fantasy rpg. The authors have obviously drawn heavily from experience gained from long years of fantasy role-playing. The game designers avoided the mistakes inherent in many previous such games. Features such as total player control over character design, a comprehensive skill system, realistic combat maneuvers, a unique new magic system built upon player design rather than arbitrarily presented lists of spells, plus the fact that *Fantasy Hero* is but one of a family of specific-genre games utilizing the same role-playing system mark it as not only the newest but the best game on the market.

—Andrew M. Robinson

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Biofeedback

by Charles L. Harness

THE MUSIC CONSOLE had turned a radiant blue, and I stared at it in awe and fear. The fear was composite: fear of what was going on . . . fear that my wife or daughter might pick this moment to try to open the door (which was locked). And maybe a few less definable fears. Not to mention, the sound coming from the fourteen speakers of the console was gorgeous but incomprehensible. Was it *music*?

Maybe.

I looked up at the bas-relief on the wall: Bernini's *Ecstasy of St. Theresa*. The angel was about to pierce her heart with the divine dart, and her face was raptured. Was she hallucinating? Was I? No, I wasn't. It was perfectly normal. But the console was certainly not normal; nor was its audio product.

This was the evening of the final test. I was listening to the end result, the climax. And obviously something had gone either horribly wrong in the feedback system, or else (and beyond my wildest expectations) wonderfully right.

Weeks ago it had sounded like such a great idea. I was a composer. Not very good, not very bad. I had attained what I considered to be a respectable mediocrity. There was (alas) a tremendous gap between my ambition and my talent. For what I really wanted to do was to create the most sublime music ever written. Better than Bach, Beethoven, Brahms. Better than anybody. And right

away that raised a question. Better in whose judgement? Mine? The listener's? And can it be *too* sublime? Maybe there's a cut-off point beyond which bad, non-musical things happen.

And how did I come to write this most magnificent of all compositions? The one I listened to at this very moment? The steps were many, along paths that meandered through a maze of possibilities, with numerous dead-ends and failures.

I began with a main-frame computer. I programmed it to generate Bach-like cantatas; epochal symphonies à la Beethoven; delicate charmers in the Mozart manner; visceral variations reminiscent of Wagner. The gamut. And these things had been good. How good? The best criterion was the amount of pleasure they gave a listener. How to measure pleasure? By counting the goosebumps on the forearm? No. There was a better way: measure the amounts of endorphin synthesized by certain neurons in the cerebrum of the listener. These are the cells located in the "music" area of the temporal lobe, facing the Sylvian fissure. And while we're at it, we should measure a few of the other self-generated cranial opioid peptides. Unhappily, there's no good way to make this measurement in the functioning human brain. But I was good with electronics, and I designed the second computer, this radiant blue creature that held me spellbound at this very moment. This second computer took the music generated by the composing computer and listened to it, much as a human being

would, and as it listened it showed its pleasure (if any) by releasing its traces of endorphin and other brain-peptides stored in capsules in its circuits. The amounts released were recorded on printouts. Some compositions created by the composing computer gave high amounts; others produced only minuscule quantities.

The next step had been obvious — biofeedback. A form of cybernetics. Let the receiving computer listen, generate its neural transmitter chemicals, then make suggestions to the composing computer for improvement, determinable by increase in peptide output.

And that had worked. At least on a quantitative chemical level. However, along about here in the experimental series, I had begun to lose contact with the musical product. Sometimes it sounded like music, sometimes it didn't. Theoretically (I assumed), to the receiving computer it *was* music, *marvelous* music, and getting better all the time.

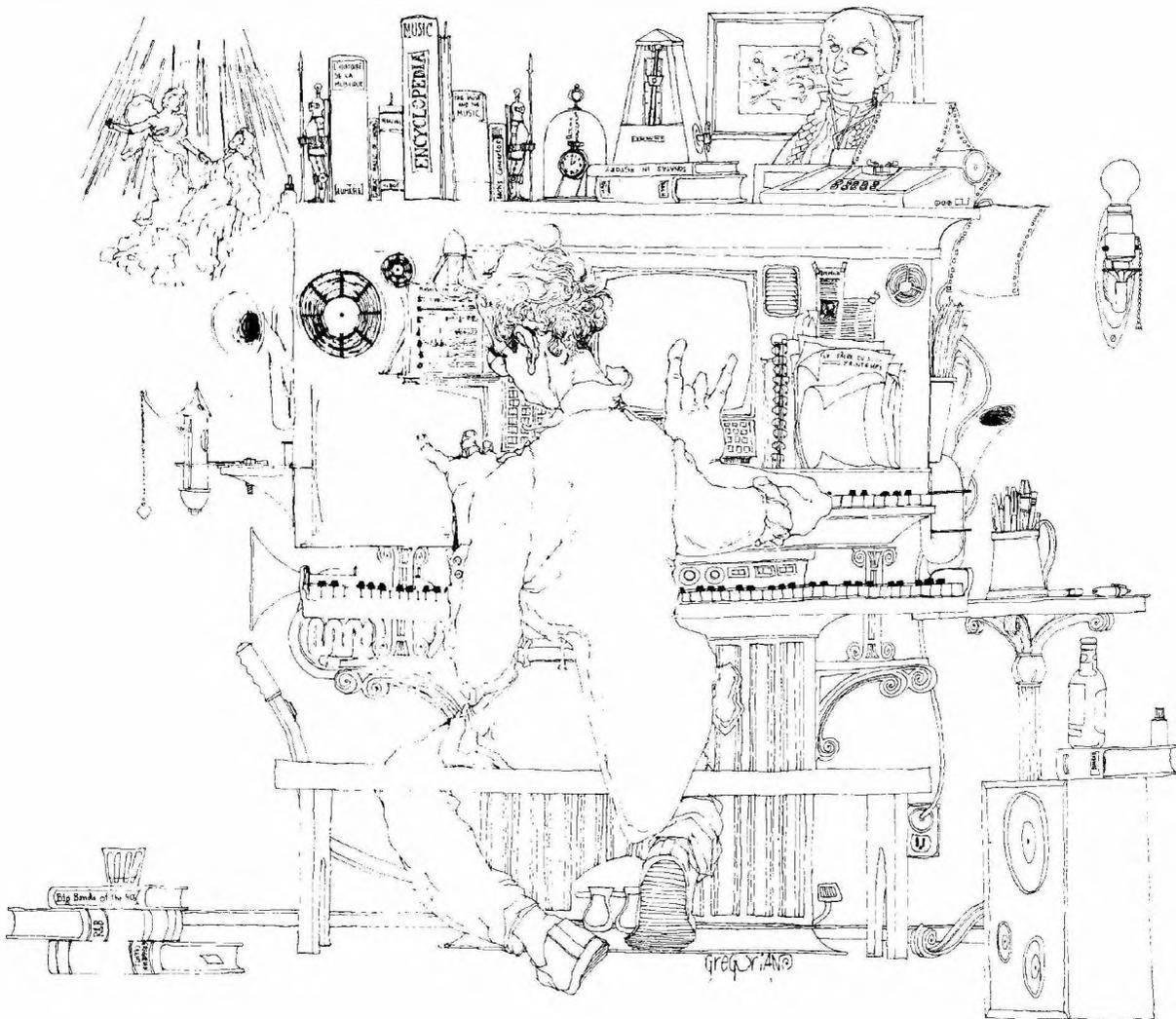
Over the past several days I had converted my entire musical library to floppy discs and had plugged this material into the composer-computer's memory banks. Everything from Albinoni to Zupko. All countries, all cultures, East, West, everything in between. Mozart, all the 626 items in the Koechel catalog. Schubert, the 600 songs. Bach (ah, especially Bach!), the 47 volumes of the Bach Gesellschaft. Everything.

But back to the present. I had a problem, and I didn't know how to deal with it.

The console was still a rich, vibrant blue. *Why?*

"Biofeedback"

© 1985 by Charles L. Harness



Hindu deities were always portrayed in glowing blue. Was *that* the explanation? Blue for Brahma the Creator? I had created something in the . . . but just the underlying framework. My creatures were now doing the creating.

I listened to tones that might first have been heard in the civilizations of the ancient Indus Valley. Something that might have been carried over into the present by the great Hindu composer, Ravi Shankar. I doubted that it would appeal to Western listeners. Of course, some of the very greatest music had been derided at first. Of the Rasoumowsky quartets, the violinist Radicati had said to Beethoven: "Surely you do not consider these works to be music?" And Nicholas Rubinstein, director of the Moscow Conservatory, commenting on Tchaikowsky's *Piano Concerto in D Flat Minor*: "Unplayable! Absolutely worthless." The directors of the Dresden opera called Wagner's *Lohengrin* "a

dangerous experiment" and refused to produce it. Not that you could really blame any of those contemporary critics. Their ears couldn't handle it. To paraphrase Hungerford, beauty is in the ear of the beholder. Of course, there were *some* compositions that should be pounded to a pulp and tossed in the garbage.

But I'm listening now, and I like what I hear. Sometimes I can pick out individual instruments—the standard components of any orchestra: piccolo, flute, oboe, clarinet, bassoon, horns, trumpet, drums, cymbals, harp, violins. And then sometimes I think I can distinguish other sounds . . . from strange instruments that exist only in the minds of the two computers.

I watch. The receiver is changing again. It is losing its blue luminescence. Is that good or bad? I don't know. And now the console seems to be bursting out in dartles of tiny flame-tongues. That's logical. That's the

Islamic symbol of holiness. Not real fire. Just symbolic. The music is familiar; it recalls the melody played twenty-four hours a day at the tomb of the Muslim mystic, Celaleddin Rumi, at Konya, Turkey.

And now . . . a voice. Startling, really. Nothing in the programs about a voice. How had the electronic duo managed *that*? And not just once voice. A whole chorus. Male, female. Just as in the great chorus in Beethoven's *Ninth*. Except this was more like a Gregorian chant. Ahah! The flames of Islam dying . . . vanishing . . . and now superseded by a halo, hovering, glowing.

And just listen to that.

I hear variations, mingling, subliminal intimations . . . of Bach's *Fantasia and Fugue in G-Minor*, overlain by his *Passacaglia in C-Minor*. Bach, yet not Bach. Bach wavering between life and something beyond life. And now a sequence that suggests his *St. Matthew's Passion*.

The hair on my head is standing up. Gooseflesh dances up and down my cheeks, my arms, my back.

And at that moment the receiving console starts to rise slowly from the floor. It floats. Its halo is now above eye level.

I find myself thinking, well, so it levitates. Rather natural, isn't it? What did I expect?

Whither now, oh laureled Cantor of Leipzig, thou thirteenth apostle, and master of the heavenly chorus? Ah yes, we know *that* seductive melody: *O komm susser Tod*

—O come sweet death.

I listen. My eyes grow dreamy. A smile deepens around my mouth. I am not at all surprised when the receiver becomes translucent, nor when it vanishes, speakers, cables, and all.

The music stops.

For a moment I just stand there, listening in my inner mind to what had been.

Reluctantly I reentered history. I noticed then that my hands were a radiant blue. I knew that in a few minutes the blue would change to mythic flamelets; and then would come the halo. And *then* what? Passage into another dimension? Death?

No! Stop right here! No more!

The blue began to fade. I watched my hands, not daring to breathe. So far, so good. They weren't going to erupt into flamelets. Everything was coming back. Back to my normal world. Normal, except that the receiving computer had vanished.

Sixty seconds ago it had existed. Now the only trace was a clean oblong on the rug.

My awe and fear were beginning to return.

I opened the studio door and listened. Music . . . if it could be called that . . . coming from my daughter's room. She was playing something on her stereo. Something that broadcast a raucous warmth and affection. Theoretically, my experiment should not have affected her. She had not heard my music, nor had she been subject to any kind of biofeedback.

I tiptoed down the hall, listened at her door for a moment, then opened it a couple of inches and peeked in. She was sitting in bed, propped up against a cluster of pillows and stuffed animals. Her knees were drawn up under her chin and her arms were locked around them. She was staring into space.

Her face was a study in transcendence. Oh, how very like Bernini's *Theresa!*

Great heavens! I thought. Now she'll start the transformation! First she'll turn blue, then come the flamelets, then the halo, then . . . zap! Gone!

I'd have to barge in, break it up, pull the plug.

But, wait . . . the record jacket leaning against the bed caught my eye: *The Beatles, a Medley.*

I blinked. I had given it to her for her fourteenth birthday. I listened. They were singing. Something about wanting to hold her hand.

I closed the door silently and stepped away.

I walked back to the composer-computer, pulled out the cassette that carried the evening's magic music, and I took it out to the back sidewalk and demolished it with a sledge.

—fb—

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Faramigon's Eye

by John Gregory Betancourt

On a certain night in the oldest city in the world—

* * * * *

I.

The sudden storm that swept down from the Shoranda Mountains to the north of Zelloque brought an odd feel to the air, a strange, urgent itch of anticipation, a sense of approaching disaster. Like fingernails scraping across slate, it grated on nerves, made one want to cringe in fear and pain . . . to stay inside with doors barred and windows shuttered.

The night was black, with swollen clouds brooding over the city. Rain fell in sheets, splattering red-tiled roofs, flooding cobbled streets. Small rivers poured down gutters through corroded copper grates, into rat-infested sewers. Winds roared, shaking buildings. The sky flickered with lightning.

The oldest men in Zelloque looked out and wondered, for this was the storm the ancient tales called Faramigon's Eye—the storm that only came before great sorcery.

*No one could mistake it.
It always brought death.*

* * * * *

II.

The storm roared on.

"Faramigon's Eye"

© 1985 by John Gregory Betancourt

In his palace overlooking the city, the Great Lord of Zelloque had not missed the change in weather, either. His name was Narmon Ri, and he wore blue and gold robes to show his wealth and nobility. He was fast approaching his sixtieth year, but his quick gray eyes still missed nothing.

Before him stood all the wizards in Zelloque, bound in chains. Some were dressed in dark robes, some in nightgowns, one was naked—whatever they'd been wearing when his soldiers broke down the doors to their homes and workshops, dragging them, chained and gagged, to the audience chamber of his palace.

Narmon Ri studied them for a long minute. Only seventeen—he'd thought there'd be more. He recognized most: tall, gaunt-faced Meliur; Thras the Blind; solemn Rianthis; and old Lorenk—they'd served him well over the years. But he had no intention of allowing sorcery powerful enough to summon Faramigon's Eye inside *his* city. He walked down the line of wizards. Which one—or ones—was responsible? He could ask a thousand times and never know the truth. Their faces remained unreadable.

Their apprentices and servants hadn't told, either. His best torturers had worked on them for hours, with little result. Oh, they'd confessed soon enough—to anything he asked. Faramigon's Eye, thievery,

murder—*anything*. In disgust, he had let the torturers have their sport and murder them all . . . painfully.

He studied the wizards for one last minute. Their eyes burned with hatred and anger. They would kill him if he let them go. He knew it.

"Cut off their heads and bury them outside the city," he said.

His soldiers moved to obey.

The storm rolled on.

* * * * *

III.

Jace Terrin huddled on his pallet, thin blanket gathered around his shoulders, listening to the winds rage outside. Rain drove against the stone walls of the wine shop, banged shutters, hissed under the door in sudden, chill gusts. When lightning came, it spilled through cracks in the shutter slats, showing rows of tables and chairs. Normally Slab's Tavern would've been open, even at this late an hour, Jace scurrying between customers with a pitcher of cool, dark ale in hand, ready to fill any empty mug for two copper coins. His master, Ulander Rasyrn, would have sat at a table in the corner, bargaining with ships' captains for smuggled goods and loot taken in piracy.

But not this night.

Not even a befuddled drunk had wandered in from the storm after dark, so Rasyrn closed



early and went to his mansion in the better part of town. He left Jace, his youngest servant, to guard the wineshop alone.

And so Jace Terrin lay in his bed under the wine counter, listening to the noises of the storm, counting seconds between flashes of lightning and rolls of thunder. He was only eight, and afraid of the darkness outside. It made him think of how alone he was—how his mother had died four years earlier, how his father had sold him to Rasym at the slave auction.

He whimpered. He had to fight back tears for the dozenth time that night. He still remembered his mother's face, so soft and beautiful, and her long, golden-blond hair. . . .

Then the drum of rain in the streets let up, the roar of thunder faded. Silence came, strange, unnatural.

He heard footsteps outside—a slow, heavy tread.

Jace crept from his bed and stood. The floor's paving stones chilled his feet, so he slipped sandals on. The reek of stale wine and opium hung heavy in the air, but there was something else, too, something indefinably *alien* that made his skin crawl and the hair on the back of his neck stand on end.

Trembling, he listened. Silence burred in his ears. The footsteps had stopped.

He saw a light in front of the tavern. It spilled through cracks in the door. Something scratched there, like a dog wanting in. He knew it wasn't a dog.

Then he heard a voice whisper, "I have come for you, my son."

The light spilling through the cracks in the door became a luminous fog that crept toward him, closer, closer. Jace tried to run, but his legs wouldn't move—he could only stand and watch in growing horror—

The fog swirled around and around, up into a rough phantom-shape—the figure of a man. White robes slowly drifted around him. Only his eyes showed color, gleaming blue, like chips of sapphire.

Then the figure extended one hand.

"Come," he whispered, "my son."

Jace walked forward into his cool, moist embrace.

IV.

The storm roared.

Narmon Ri took it as a personal affront. He stood on the highest balcony of his palace, shielded from the rain by a red canopy that flapped and threatened to come loose at any moment. The winds were growing stronger.

He stared out at the city lights and cursed. Faramigon's Eye should have let up with the death of the wizards. It *should* have. He could think of only one answer.

They'd missed the wizard responsible.

Turning, he stalked back into the dark study that opened onto the balcony. "Haslif Jader!" he shouted.

His Chief Counselor appeared in seconds, looking pale and haggard. His long black hair was wet and pasted to his skull; trickles of water ran down his bloated white face. The red robes gathered around his fat body were dry, though—he'd obviously just changed. His sandals squished when he walked.

"Yes, Lord?" Haslif asked, bowing.

Narmon gestured at the balcony. "The storm goes on. You said it would end with the death of the wizard responsible!"

"It should have, Lord!"

"Then . . . the wizard responsible must still be alive. The guards missed one, somewhere. I want him found. I want him *dead*. And if I can't have the wizard's head, I'll have yours! Now get *out*!"

Bowing hastily, Haslif turned and fled.

Narmon Ri turned and stared out the balcony's doors. The storm mocked him. Rain slashed down from dark skies; lightning flickered. Thunder roared with laughter at his foolishness.

He cursed softly under his breath.

V.

In a round stone chamber buried fifty feet beneath the house of the wizard Karkaris, something stirred in the dark. Light feet padded across the room, small hands touched wet rock walls and found no exit.

"Father?" a thin voice called. "Father?"

VI.

Haslif Jader shivered. The storm outside still raged. Each clap of thunder was a pronouncement of doom.

He had served the Great Lord of Zelloque as Chief Counselor for twelve long years. After all this time in the Great Lord's service, he found the prospect of losing his head over a change in the weather distressing, to say the least. He didn't believe the old tales of Faramigon's Eye.

He found Tayn Lastoq—the Captain of the City Guard—at work in the guardroom, arranging patrol assignments. They'd been friends for many years. The Counselor had even been indirectly responsible for Tayn's appointment to his position.

"What news, Has?" the Captain of the Guard called.

Jader sank down in the nearest chair and shivered. "His Lordship thinks there must still be a wizard in the city—one *you* missed. He wants that wizard's head, or he'll have *ours* in its place!"

Tayn swallowed, one hand moving protectively to his neck. "How?"

"I don't *know*! Call out the guards—have them search every house in Zelloque!"

"That would take too long. Be practical!"

"Oh, if only the other wizards weren't all dead—if they have ways of finding each other—"

"The Oracle!" Tayn said. "We will consult the gods!"

VII.

The wizard Karkaris walked in darkness, down a winding, narrow stair into the depths of the Earth. He'd spent years exploring the labyrinths below Zelloque, searching for the

House of the Winds. Scrolls told of it. Rumors whispered of it. Wizards said it was a myth. He had found it.

He almost smiled.

But, then, he hadn't smiled in . . . many years.

He came to the small iron lantern he kept at the bottom of the stairwell. Picking it up, he spoke a word and its wick flared with a cold, blue light. It cast weird shadows on the walls. The wizard's tight-stretched skin, hollowed cheeks, and sunken eyes made his face skull-like. His yellow teeth were chipped and broken.

Tucked in the crook of his left arm was a large stone bowl with designs carved on the outside. Characters in the fluid Lorinsi script had been painted on the inside. Also in the bowl was a long, sharp sacrificial knife, its blade worn almost paper-thin from centuries of use.

Holding the lantern high over his head, he continued on until he came to a small stone door. He pulled a key from his belt, fitted it in the lock, and turned it. With a harsh, grating sound, the door swung open.

A small figure rushed out and tried to squeeze past. Karkaris hooked the boy's arm and lifted him off the floor, pinning him against the wall.

He stared at the writhing human boy, the blasphemous *thing* that had cost his beloved Maelera her life. The *thing* he hated most in the world. The very touch of its warm, young flesh made him nauseous.

"Come, my son," he forced himself to say, "why would you flee from your father?" He laughed—a shrill, evil sound—and he fingered the knife in the bowl.

VIII.

Two men, one thin, one fat, both wrapped in thick, waterproof cloaks, rode down the southern highway from Zelloque. Their horses slogged through knee-deep mud. An icy wind whipped past. They shivered under their cloaks, but kept moving.

Beating rain made it hard to see the path ahead. At last a high stone wall loomed out of the darkness. A wooden gate barred their way.

"This is it!" Tain shouted, pulling up. He slipped from his saddle and led his horse forward. Haslif dismounted and followed more slowly.

The gate slowly swung open as they approached. A boy of perhaps twelve waited there, as if he'd been expecting visitors. He wore the thinnest of woolen cloaks, but seemed unaffected by the weather. His pale blue eyes studied them for a long moment; Haslif found his gaze disconcerting.

"The Oracle is waiting for you," the child said softly. "Follow me."

Turning, he led them up a narrow path, through a grove of oaks whose branches

whipped dangerously in the wind, up a rocky slope to the mouth of a cave. The entrance had been widened so three or four men could have passed through side by side, and now gold doors guarded it. Both were flung open. The floor inside looked dry.

"Go in," the boy told them. His voice sounded strangely remote. He took the reins of their horses.

Haslif swallowed, then stepped forward—and into another world.

IX

The storm roared.

Narmon Ri studied it with a measure of detachment he'd never experienced before. Faramigon's Eye was beautiful, in its way . . . beautiful. . . . Its rush of wind was a drug on his senses, its patter of rain hypnotic. He sat entranced for what seemed hours.

His rule of Zelloque had been unexceptional at most; no important wars had been fought; the taxes came in on schedule; the people lived and died without his help. He had done nothing his father's father hadn't done. And Zelloque prospered.

But now . . . *Faramigon's Eye*.

Which wizard? How had his men missed one? Wizards had to register with the Captain of the Guard upon entering Zelloque. It had been that way for generations—and surely none would have flouted the law so openly!

But the storm. . . .

Perhaps they'd missed the wizard—or taken some other person in the wizard's stead! He sat up, excited now. All he had to do was check—

"Haslif Jader!" he shouted.

A moment later, a knock came at his door. "Enter," he called.

A tall, muscular soldier stepped in. He had the dark hair and sharp features of a native Zelloquan. "I am sorry to disturb you, Lord Ri, but your Counselor isn't here. He and Captain Lastoq have gone to consult the Oracle."

"Fools," Narmon muttered. "I had already thought of that. Oracles are next to useless." He looked at the soldier. "What's your name?"

"Zalpev Yoonlag, sir."

"Very well, Yoonlag, you've just been promoted to Captain of the Guard for the rest of the night. Take a squad of men and dig up the heads of the wizards I just had killed. Bring them all back to me."

"Sir?"

"You heard me—now go!"

The new Captain of the Guard ran.

X.

The Oracle was old. He sat alone in the darkest part of the cave, a blanket spread before him. Torches burned smokily from deep niches in the walls; shadows danced

across his face. Tain Lastoq watched the aged one for a minute before clearing his throat.

"I know who you are." The Oracle's voice quavered with age. "I know why you have come. I will spin my wheel and share my vision with you, if the spirit of Shon Atasha the Creator is willing. Please, sit with me."

"Thank you, most noble-born of seers," Haslif began.

Tain cut him off with a sharp gesture. "We have no time for such formality." He sat, glad when the Counselor shut up and did the same.

The Oracle reached forward and drew away a black cloth. Beneath it sat a golden wheel; rubies and emeralds sparkled in intricate patterns on its surface. Slowly the Oracle spun the wheel with his right hand.

Tain watched in fascination. *Around and around*. The cave blurred and shifted; Haslif was a dim, hulking shape to his right. The Oracle wavered like a reflection in a lake. *Around and around*. For an instant Tain fancied that if he reached out and touched the old man, the Oracle would ripple beneath his hand, rings of his being spreading through the earth like waves in a pond. *Around and around*. Then he realized the Oracle was whispering, but though he strained to hear, he made no sense of the words.

His mind seemed to be floating free of his body, his face drifting just above the surface of a warm river of blood.

He seemed to be flying high over Zelloque; he recognized the spires of the palace of the Great Lord Narmon Ri; he looked out upon the rain-swept docks, with their single-masted ships; he saw the choppy harbor leading out onto the Sea of Seren.

Then the river swept him down dark, deserted streets, to the grating of a sewer, down, down into blackness that lasted for ages. At last, light flared around him. A small lantern bobbed up and down. It was clenched in a gray, skeletal hand. Tain looked at the one who held it—at a cracked, decaying face he knew . . . *Karkaris!*

The wizard crooned to himself, over and over, and he shambled down a stone passageway. The words, distant, as though from great distance, rose to Tain's ears:

" . . . my beloved, oh yes, my beloved. You will be mine again. He promised, he promised, and he will keep His promise, I swear! No more death, my beloved. The abomination shall die and you shall live again. . . ."

The wizard hurried through the tunnels, growing silent when he came to a winding stair. He headed down.

The scene drifted and changed. Tain looked upon a round room and saw a naked child stretched out on a stone altar. Karkaris loomed over the boy, clutching a knife, chanting words that chilled Tain's blood.

Tayn seemed to see something hunched over the altar, a twisting of space—eyes, blazing eyes, and teeth—a shadowy, evil presence that fed on the boy's soul—

Tayn shivered.

The scene shifted again . . . back to the streets of Zelloque. Darkness rolled like fog between the buildings, tendrils streaming through cracks in doors and windows, reaching for those within. Screams echoed, cries of fear, clangs of swords—all quickly stifled. Death had come to Zelloque. It would take all within the City walls.

Tayn recoiled in terror.

The sweeping vision of Zelloque faded; he sat in front of the Oracle once more.

"I can tell you nothing else," the old man said. "Go now." He covered his wheel with a cloth, then rose and went off into darkness.

Tayn found Haslif Jader weeping softly.

"What is it?" he asked.

"We will all die—I saw—"

"You saw the future. What will come to pass—unless we change it. Come; we must return now. We found what we came to learn—the wizard Karkaris is still alive."

They went outside. The boy waited with their horses. Mounting quickly, they headed for Zelloque at a gallop.

XI.

The wizard Karkaris bore his son through the labyrinth of passages to a circular chamber known only as the House of the Winds. It was a curious room, with a series of holes carved in its roof. As air moved through the tunnels, the holes gave off a low moaning sound.

Karkaris hung his lantern on a hook in the wall.

At the center of the House of the Winds stood a low stone table. One side slanted slightly toward the floor. Grooves leading to a spout had been cut in its surface—they gathered blood from sacrificial victims.

He set Jace Terrin in the center of the table, then stripped away the boy's clothes so they wouldn't interfere with the final thrust of his knife. He put the bowl on the floor under the blood spout, taking the knife in his right hand. Only then did he begin to chant.

The words he spoke were in a tongue so ancient that no one alive understood it fully any more. The room filled with echoing whispers. Wind moaned through the holes in the ceiling. A cold, wet darkness gathered in the air over the boy's head.

Karkaris called the name of the Dark God, the God of Death.

XII.

Narmon Ri sat in the audience chamber, waiting for his men to return. He didn't wait long. With little ceremony, his temporary Captain of the Guard returned. Four men



carrying a mud-splattered wooden coffin set it down on the floor.

"Lord Ri," Yoonlag said, saluting. Mud covered him from his boots to his chin, and water dripped from his clothing onto the gold and silver mosaic at his feet. "We have all the heads now."

"Excellent," Narmon Ri said. "Open the coffin."

Someone brought a crowbar forward. One of the soldiers pried the nails up, soon swinging the lid back.

Narmon stepped forward and began lifting heads out by the hair. The dead wizards' mouths gaped; their eyes stared; blood dripped from their necks and splattered on the tiles at Narmon's feet. One by one he threw the heads aside, splattering blood. His courtiers moved back a safe distance.

"Ah!" he shouted. "I knew it!"

The last head in the coffin was that of an old crone. Holding it up, he tried to visualize her body. Then he knew. He'd seen her several times—she served . . . *had served* . . . the wizard Karkaris.

And that meant Karkaris still lived.

"Round up all the soldiers you can find," he said to Yoonlag. Grim, he turned for the armory to fetch his weapons.

The storm seemed to roar its approval.

XIII.

Forty-four men surrounded a dark building in the run-down slums of the west section of Zelloque. Rain made puddles dance; somewhere close, a shutter banged in the wind. Here the buildings were tall and close together, leaning far out over the narrow

street. The dark, five-story house on the corner belonged to the wizard Karkaris.

Narmon Ri led the band of men; he was splendid in his polished armor and red-plumed helm. Captain Yoonlag, sword drawn, stood close to his right. Ten others waited just behind him. Narmon grinned up at the storm and raised his hand in salute, knowing he'd conquered it.

"Break down the door," he said.

Two soldiers with axes, capes wrapped tight about their shoulders, pushed forward. Muscles straining, they swung at the door. Wood splintered at once. After six blows, a hole appeared. One of the axemen reached through and unbolted the door.

Narmon Ri drew his sword.

"There's someone coming," Yoonlag said.

"Who?" The Great Lord turned around and spotted two horsemen clattering up the street. After a second, he recognized them—Haslif Jader and Tayn Lastoq. Two more swords to kill the wizard . . . or rather, he decided, at least one. His Chief Counselor was notably unaccomplished in the arts of war.

Both men were soaking wet and panting for breath when they pulled up and dismounted. Haslif started to speak, but Narmon Ri waved him to silence.

"It's about time you got here," he said. "You went to see the Oracle—without my permission. Well, what did you discover?"

"That the wizard Karkaris is responsible," Tayn said.

"I already knew that."

"He's in the old tunnels under the city—and he's going to let loose some demon to

kill everyone in Zelloque!"

"What?" Narmon cried. "Are you certain?"

Hasfl nodded. "We must hurry, Lord!"

"Very well." He motioned to Yoonlag. "Lead the men in."

"Yes, Lord Ri." Motioning for ten soldiers to follow him, he kicked open the door and ran inside. The other City Guards followed close behind. Narmon Ri came last, with the Captain of the Guard and the Chief Counselor at his side.

The soldiers stormed through the rooms while they waited, searching for any servants they'd missed the first time, and for Karkaris. They smashed the furniture, ripped open the cupboards, and knocked holes in the walls looking for secret passages and rooms. The noise rose to a deafening level.

After a minute, Yoonlag came to report. "The house is deserted, Lord. I found an open trap door leading down from the wizard's workshop."

Narmon Ri smiled thinly, hefting his sword and imagining what it would be like to lop off Karkaris's head. "That's what I want. Lead me to it."

* * * *

XIV.

His chanting done, Karkaris looked into the hole he'd made in the fabric of the universe. About five feet wide and ten feet high, it floated just above his son's head. Glowing red eyes peered out at him from amid black mists. He felt a deepening sense of despair, a longing for death and release, and he knew he looked upon the realm of the Dark God.

The red eyes stared, unblinking. He had the impression of a giant beast crouched to pounce—

A low voice called to him from the rift. It bore all the pain in the world, all the agony and hopelessness. He almost cringed from it.

"What do you want of me, wizard?"

"I want my wife?"

"Who is your wife?"

"She is—" He caught himself. He could not speak her name or he would never have her back. Of this the old scrolls had been certain. He smiled. "You know whom I seek."

"I know all there is to know. Give me what I ask."

"You demand so much—"

The Dark God chuckled. It was an ugly, gurgling sound. The gateway began to fold in upon itself.

"No! I will pay! All the souls in Zelloque will be yours before this night is through. I have promised."

The rift returned to its former size.

Karkaris knew the Dark One toyed with him. Legends whispered of this god's madness—how he now existed only to torture and torment.

"After we seal our bargain," the Dark God said, "a soul will come to you. One who is

dead and loved will live again through love. Do you agree?"

"Yes." *And if I don't keep my word,* Karkaris thought, *you will have all eternity to extract the payment from my soul.* He said: "No man can escape his final meeting with you. I will not live many more years. I do not seek eternal torture. I will keep my word."

"Seal the bargain."

"Very well." Karkaris took a deep breath. "I give you my son."

He plunged his dagger into Jace Terrin's chest. Blood spurted high in the air. He laughed as his son gasped and died. Blood trickled from the boy's mouth. Karkaris smiled as he looked up at the blazing red beast-eyes.

"Behold," the Dark God said, and the eyes moved aside.

Far off, as if down a corridor, Karkaris saw she who had been his wife. Her face was breathtakingly beautiful, her skin a delicate pink, her hair a cascade of gold—just as he had always remembered her. She held something before her, but he couldn't see what it was. He did not care! For four long years he had locked himself from the world, for four long years he had tortured himself so she would live again! Now she was his. Not even death could steal *his* possessions! And he saw how she wept for joy at her freedom. He stood and reached for her hand, eager to help her back to Earth—

Boots clattered behind him. Startled, he whirled around—and found himself face to face with the Great Lord of Zelloque.

He spoke a single word of power. Narmon Ri and the other soldiers froze, trapped in a bubble of time. He smiled. They would die as soon as his wife was fully restored.

He smelled her perfume, turned to welcome her.

And screamed.

Red-hot brands burned into his stomach. Swords seemed to tip through his guts, spilling entrails. He felt it. He saw red. The world shrieked at him. He began to scream and scream—

Then a clarity came as he allowed his mind to float free from his body. The world was crystalline, all silver and ice. The Dark God stared at him from the rift and laughed.

He looked down and saw that the dagger, the one he'd used to sacrifice his son, had been buried to the hilt in his stomach, just below the breastbone. The tip of the blade curved up and into his heart. And the delicate hand that had thrust it there—

"Maclera," he whispered, shocked. He coughed blood. He saw then what she'd carried from the Dark God's kingdom—a child's soul. *Her* child's soul, for Jace Terrin had never been Karkaris's, though he'd fathered the boy.

Carefully Maclera lowered her son's small,

misty soul onto the stone table. Karkaris watched as it drifted into the boy's corpse. The stab-wound closed and healed. The child slept, breathing slow and steady.

And Maclera, the woman he loved, tears glistening on her cheeks, turned and slipped through the rift, went back to the Dark God. . . .

Have I changed so much that she no longer loves me? he wondered. Already he felt his strength waning. Letting his mind separate itself from his body's pain, he fell to his knees, hands closing about the hilt of the knife. Slowly, he began to pull it out. It seemed far longer than he remembered, its blade scraped bone with a grating sound, then was free. It would take time, but he could heal his wound. Already he began to frame the spell in his mind.

The Great Lord of Zelloque was starting to move, still raising his sword.

The hole in the universe was closing as his spells came undone. Maclera was gone. He could hear the Dark God's laughter, far in the distance.

"Maclera," he whispered. He'd suffered for her. He'd devoted his life to winning her back from death. How could she betray him for a . . . *child?*

Then he heard the hiss of a sword cutting through the air and felt a coldness touch his neck. Then he saw no more.

* * * *

XV.

Slowly the storm moved out to sea, leaving dripping rooftops and streets washed clean. Cold stars shone through gaps in the clouds. Faramigon's Eye had passed.

One by one the shutters opened, flooding the city with light. Pipe music drifted from taverns near the docks. Girls danced and sailors drank. Dogs wandered the streets in search of scraps. Far off, a cock crowed.

Beneath Zelloque, a solemn procession moved. Narmon Ri, the Great Lord himself, carried a sleeping child wrapped in a blanket. One day, perhaps, he would adopt the boy as his son, but that time was far in the future. Now there was only exhaustion. Soldiers followed, dragging the corpse of the wizard their Lord had slain . . . on a certain night in the oldest city in the world.

—fb—

About the Author

JOHN BETANCOURT, aside from Assistant-Editing and reviewing books for *Amazing Science Fiction Stories*, is working on becoming a hack writer. He's just turned in a 70,000-word interactive-fiction book to TSR, Inc. ("It's supposed to be for adults—but I know better"), and is looking forward to writing "real" fiction (like this story) again.

Wings

by Mary Elizabeth Counselman

"Boy! I don't wanta hear of you hangin' around that lady veterinary no more! A lady vet! Ladies oughtn't to mate horses or watch a cow drop a calf, or like that! It *ain't nice!*"

"Paw." I said patiently, "times has changed. Anne was trainin' to be a *people* nurse when she had this-here *accident*. Nobody won't hire a scar-faced, one-eyed home-nurse, so . . ."

"Hmp! 'Pears to me you two got purty thick—her tellin' you her life-story, like! Now you *keep away* from her, you hear me?"

"Yes, Paw."

"Yes *what*, Buddy?"

"Yes *sir*, Paw . . ."

I had to bite my tongue to keep back the words that was boiling up inside me like a volcano. Ever since Evie . . . I'm s'posed to call her "Maw," in spite she's only five years older than me! Ever since she up and left, it's been pure-dee hell on our farm! Seems like I can't do one thing to please Paw, ever-which way I go!

We run this-here horse farm, see, just the two of us. Me. I wasn't more'n two when my real mother died. I don't recollect much about her, except Paw said she was a fine church-goer and a good worker. . . .

Evie was a waitress at the A-Okay Cafe in Haleyville—that's a jerkwater town halfway betwixt our spread and Montgomery. Her and Paw got friendly, and afore I knowed it she'd up and married him! God! I hated that blonde-headed floozie! See, I knowed for sure she was hooked on cocaine, and figured to make Paw support her hundred-a-day habit. But Paw—he couldn't see she was anything but a lone, weak woman-body as

needed a *man*. That is, till she took off one night with a soldier, without so much as a by-your-leave! It suremike hit him hard.

"Paw . . ." I tried again. "There's somethin' dead-wrong with that little white colt we bought in the bunch the Gover'mint was sellin' farmers to raise for dogmeat. I kind of took a shine to him, and you said I could keep him for *my* horse, to train as a quarter horse. But—"

Paw was busyin' himself with the hogs, carrying buckets of slop and pouring it in the troughs. He cut his eyes around at me, stern-like, and snapped: "I don't see you pitchin' hay! Stir your stumps, boy! You got some'n to say to me? Git on with it! The colt's sickly?"

"Yeah . . . I mean, yes sir. That's why I taken it to the vet. And Anne said . . ."

"Anne! What's *she* know about horses?"

"Plenty!" I said, kind of sharp. "Her folks was circus. Had 'em a dog-and-pony act, is howcome she likes animals so much. She said the colt had some kind of a *risin'* on each side, up high, near its neck. I'd noticed it did, and it felt *hot*. Old Doc Seamore—the vet she's trainin' under—he said he never saw nothin' like it before. A long, swollen *lump*. On both sides. Peg kinda shies and whinnies when you touch it. . . ."

"Hmp." Paw said, and shrugged. "Well, you'll have to shoot him, son. Can't have no *sickly* critter on *this* farm! We got enough trouble and expense without payin' a *vet* good money. Might be contagious, too! Somethin' like anthrax can wipe out a whole herd!"

And that, according to Paw, was that. I had a hard fight, holding back what I wanted to call him: *A stinky, straight-laced old fogey!* He didn't mind the money he was paying out

to skip tracers to find Evie! Oh, I stumbled on the checks he had paid out, running through our accounts one day. Near-about a thousand dollars he'd paid some private eye to find her. I figured he was out for revenge—and almost pitied Evie everwhen he did come up on her.

Well, I made up my mind, for once, to disobey him. Shoot Peg—? I just *couldn't!* There was something about that little yearling that was *strange*. He seemed to know my very thoughts. And he followed me around like a dog, everwhere I was working the chores—stringing fence or plowing up new ground.

No siree! I wasn't *about* to shoot Peg. Peg, I called him—for Pegasus. Me and Anne read all about *him*, see, in a mythology book. I was real interested, not having much book-learning from the fifth grade, on account our schoolhouse was burnt down. Paw said *he* could learn me all a horse-trainer needed to know—and it wasn't out of no *book!* But Anne, she put a lot of store by book-learning, and we'd set under a tree sometimes and she'd read aloud to me. Wonderful stuff! Like about Pegasus.

See, he was this horse in Greek myth that had *wings*. A Greek superhero name of Perseus, he cut off the head of Medusa, and out of the trickling blood Pegasus was born. He flew up to the gods' place—'way up beyond the Moon—and Athena caught him and tamed him with a gold bridle. Then she give Bellerophon—another superhero—the bridle when he set out to fight the Chimera and the Amazons. But Pegasus threw him off, and Zeus made him into a constellation. Anne showed me the very stars one night in the sky—and that's when I kissed her and asked would she marry a dumb farmer, just

"Wings"

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turned 16. She cried and said why would I want a wife that was disfigured and ten years older than me? But, she said, we could be *Friends*—like the Quakers. And that she'd help me *hide* Peg, so as Paw would *think* I shot him and buried him like he ordered me to.

That's howcome we found this little cave, see, and hid Peg there. We'd slip off and meet whenever I could dodge Paw's eagle-eye, or she could leave her job at the veterinary hospital. She was sensitive about her burnt face, what she got in a circus-tent fire that killed her folks. They was proud of her makin' a people-nurse when the circus winter-quartered.

Anne was great with animals. They'd come to her—wild bunnies and birds and all! She never tried to *catch* 'em. Just set real still, and they'd come to trust her, like I did. I felt kinda peaceful with her. You know? Some ways, she put me in mind of my mother—her I hardly remember.

Peg, he trusted Anne, too. She'd feel those lumps on his sides and maybe put a poultice on 'em. He never reared up or kicked at her, even when she slipped a bridle on him for the first time. It was a *gold* bridle that she'd made, with hand-tooled black leather and real gold studs—just for the fun of it. She'd laugh and say it was Athena's Bridle, and we'd pretend Peg was the Winged Horse of the Greeks.

Another myth she read aloud to me, by the campfire one night: see, these Muses held a contest of song. The music was so pretty it charmed the streams to stop. And a mountain called Helicon, it grew as tall as the heavens. Poseidon told Pegasus to make it stop growing by striking it with his hoof—and where he put his hoof down, a fountain flowed up. Its water inspired the folks to write poetry, and that's howcome Pegasus is connected up with poetry-writing, even today.

"Golly gee-whiz!" I said. "I wish I could write a poem! But all I'm good fer is training horses. And if Paw catches me *disobeyin'* him like I done, it's gonna be Katie-bar-the-door!"

"He doesn't know about this cave," Anne soothed me. "And I'll soon cure up those risings on the colt's neck. Whatever they *are!*"

Well, me and her worked with the colt for about two weeks, but the swellings kept getting worse. Peg, he'd rear up and paw the air now when we'd touch them. And then, one night, it was raining, and the cave was steamy-hot. Them swellings *burs!* I figured pus would come out. But, lo and behold, it was a kind of *dry fluff!*

Anne looked at me with her one good eye wide and wondering.

"Buddy," she whispered, "It's *feathers!* Those old myths, now—they're *always based on fact*. It's no telling where that colt came from, during a roundup of wild horses. And

it's no telling *what* kind of *blood* he may have rolled in, out there on the range! *Medusa blood?* Some snakes, like sidewinders, may have the same kind of chemical! And a *hybrid* can result from *anything!* Look at the duck-billed platypus—half-mammal, half duck! It's strange, but it can happen! And nobody can say for sure just *when* a mutation starts. It has to start *somewhere*—with some *individual* creature. . . ."

Well, I realized we had us a freak. A "hybrid" Anne called Peg. Those fluffy feathers developed into quilled, strong ones. They grew and *grew*, and it wasn't a month before the muscles and bones spread and stretched—and *turned into as pretty a pair of wings as you'd see on an eagle!*

Paw, he'd got suspicious about me being gone so often, when he called me and I wasn't around. The thing I feared was just bound to happen. He followed me one evening. Caught me and Anne grooming Peg and chattering away, as happy as a clam together. "Boy!"

I jumped a mile high. Anne, she kind of whimpered and drew back agin me. I gulped and couldn't say a thing as Paw stalked into the cave and looked over my colt.

Then his eyes sort of widened and narrowed, and he cursed softly.

"Well, I'll be switched!" he whispered, all the fire and thunder knocked right out of him. "Son, we got us a *freak attraction!* I don't recollect ever hearin' tell of a *horse with wings!* But . . . people'll pay a dollar to see what I see! *We're rich!* Tourists'll come from miles around. And all we have to do is take their money!"

Anne let out a long-held breath, and I sort of grinned. *Now* Paw wouldn't have shot my colt for *anything!*

And he was sure right about the tourists. They did come—by the thousands! Paw was smart enough to keep Peg in the barn, where nobody could peek at him without paying. He started with a dollar, and went up to five. Money rolled in, and he slapped me on the back like I was a *partner*—not just his sixteen-year-old son! He even sidled around Anne, with only a few jibes at her being a "lady vet." But when she tried to tell him those *myths*, he snorted.

"Foolishness! All that long-time-ago stuff? It ain't *true!* It's *ignorant!* It's *superstition*, is all. A *freak*, now—that's like P.T. Barnum's two-headed calf. Folks like to gawk at such, and they'll pay to do it!"

Well, sir, it went on for about two months, and into the spring. Peg, he stood it pretty well—all those strangers poking and prying and holding flash-cameras close up to him. He reared up a couple of times when a TV camera took shots of him. And that really set 'im off! He spread out his wings and *flapped them*—like he was just about ready to take off! All kinds of offers poured in. But

Paw was smart enough to turn 'em down, rather than risk something happening to our "gold mine," as he called Peg. Supposin' he spooked and run off? And got hit by a truck—?

"Enough's enough," he told me. "I ain't greedy, like some. Let the tourists come to us if they want to see and touch and take pitchers."

Right about then, I blurted out that I aimed to marry up with Anne. That tore it! I was glad I told him private-like, because

"*You? Just a kid?*" Paw exploded. "Why, she's *ugly!* Near old enough to be your *ma!* No-siree, I'll not sign no papers to let you ruin your life, boy! You're under-age, you know. *Eighteen* is the age you can marry in this state without parental consent!"

That was two long years off. Anne was what I wanted, and I knew it. And I was a *man* grown—by all standards! Why couldn't Paw see that? Was it just his bitterness because Evie had left him?

That night, I was exercising Peg in a field near the house—so mad and dejected I couldn't see straight! I hadn't never got on his back, but this evening I tried it, just for luck. I figured Peg would cut up and throw me a mile high. And I didn't much care whether I landed all broke up or not.

But *no!* When I slipped Anne's gold bridle over his nose, he gentled down as quiet as you please, and let me slip onto his back with my legs hugging his sides, just under those crazy wings. Off we went at a gallop—and it was like music, the way he run. I held onto his mane that was flying back in my face, and rode him clean over to our cave, where Anne and me had hid him.

And there she was—*crying!* I reined in Peg and hopped off. She came to me, and I put my arms around her.

"What's wrong?" I asked her. "Somebody hurt your feelin'?"

"I . . . I've lost my job at the vet hospital," she sobbed. "Oh, I can't blame old Doc for firing me—I was gone so much. But . . . *now* what? I've got no place to go! And I'm nearly broke!"

I had to tell her what Paw said. If we eloped, he'd have it annulled. We sat there, loving each other up, sort of miserable and hopeless. The sun went down, and Peg stomped his hoof with impatience. I went to him, Anne beside me, and we petted him a little together.

"He let me ride him," I said. "Wonder if he'd carry double?"

Well, sir, he did—as quiet and peaceable as a lamb. Anne hugged me around the waist, and I set off at the wild gallop. Give a horse his head, he'll head for the barn without you makin' him.

Then—

I looked down. It was dark, but I could see the lights of the different farms *far below*

us. I hung on, scared stiff. *We was flying!* Peg had took to the air!

Anne hugged me tight, and laughed like crazy.

"Let's go to . . . oh, *China!*" she whispered. "I've always wanted to, but I knew I'd never have fare to travel!"

Right away, we found ourselves soaring above a crowded street in Hong Kong. People didn't seem to notice us, but we could see all the wonderful sights—the parades and dragons and fireworks, just like I dreamed.

Then we was suddenly back at the farm, galloping along together toward the barn. I stared at Anne for a minute as we dismounted and led Peg into his warm stall, hardly winded at all.

"Did we really *fly*?" I stammered. "Or just dream we did?"

"Who cares?" Anne giggled, kissing me. "If we *think* it happened, maybe it *did*!"

After that, we could hardly wait till dark. The stars flew down to meet us—all the constellations the Greeks named for things familiar to them in their day—a chariot, a snake, a warrior in armor, a lady settin' in a chair. We'd close our eyes and wish we was in the faraway places you only can just find on the geography map—Australia, Timbuktoo, Greenland—anywhere on Earth! Peg took us there—flying through cloudbanks like as if they was fields of green grass on our home farm.

I wished Paw could see us—just once!

Then, out of the blue, out of the crowd of tourists that flocked to see Peg every day, *she* came. Evie! That private eye had missed her comin' and goin' completely. But there

she turned up—ragged and dirty, and carrying a cryin' baby. Not Paw's, for sure!

Paw was a stiff-backed, stubborn, violent man . . . and she'd hurt his pride real bad. I thought: *Now he's got his revenge. Now he's gonna kill her, and burn for it, and I'll inherit the farm and marry Anne.* I wanted it to happen—and I didn't want it. You know? But there wasn't no way you could stop Paw from doin' what he took into his head. I waited, trembling like a leaf. . . .

But—How wrong can you be about somebody you've knowed life-long? Or *thought* you knowed!

Paw just looked at her, and shook his head kinda sad, and held out his arms. Evie kinda sobbed, and ran into his hug like a lost sheep. Paw didn't want to *kill* her! He just wanted her back with him. It's a *person* you love, not anything they do or don't do.

I told Anne the next day, and she nodded like she'd knowed it all along.

"Too bad he can't see it's the same with us," she said. "Riding Peg and all. And reading stories out loud by campfire. . . . Buddy, if you *believe* in each other, *why, anything* can come to pass! If we believe Peg can fly and carry us all over this big world, he *can*! There's *magic* in believing! No telling—Evie may settle down and make your paw a good wife, if he *believes* she will!"

Anne smiled up at me. And, right then, she was the most beautiful woman I ever saw. Trouble was, she couldn't see herself the way I saw her. The smile faded, and she said, unhappy-like:

"Maybe your paw's right about me, though. Maybe before you're eighteen you'll

meet some pretty girl your own age, and . . . and . . ."

I kissed her once—so she'd *know* it! I could've took her right then. All the way. But I wanted it to be *right* with us, and legal.

"Maybe," I teased. Then I laughed. "Like as not, she'll think a Chimera is somethin' to wear, and she couldn't tell a winged horse from Adam's off ox! And right there, I'd leave her flat. And come lookin' for *you*. You and ole crazy Peg."

—fb—

About the Author

MARY ELIZABETH COUNSELMAN's fantasy fiction is widely reprinted, but most of it originated way back in the original *Weird Tales*. It's worth noting that when she becomes hooked on a title, she becomes *hooked* on a title, and has had three collections of her work published in the U.S. and Great Britain, all titled (stubbornly) *Half in Shadow*. Just as stubbornly, she has made a lifelong study of cats, and is putting together a chronicle titled *The Meow Generation*. She promises some startling news about cat personalities in her 25-feline "catdominium," which she runs, at age 74, with Tender Loving Care as the only medication. In these days of Medicare cutbacks and rising medical bills, it's interesting to note that all of her cats are in excellent health and tend to live to a ripe old age. Portions of this upcoming non-fiction book have already appeared in the publication, *Cat Fancy*.





A Haunted Tale of Justice

by Jessica Amanda Salmonson

I HEARD THIS STORY when a child and have always believed it to be true. I've told it to a few people since. They say it had to be a dream, there never was such a story. I persist in believing it. It happened long ago. There was a robber with a bag of gold fleeing through the cemetery. He knew it was only a matter of hours before his capture, for there had been a young witness to a lamentable homicide; and, given his occupation, none were apt to believe it was an accidental killing.

He stopped to rest on the rim of a broken fountain. In the center of the fountain stood a gorgeous, sexless angel. The robber trod through the waterless basin to peer into the angel's mout, from which water would never again spout. Within, the robber detected a large enough hollow into which to pack the gold. Taking the gold pieces by twos and threes, he dropped them into the angel's mouth.

Before morning he was captured. Of the gold, he would reveal nothing. He knew he would be hanged until dead at all events, because of the daughter who witnessed the death of her father. The robber felt that his death should be satisfaction enough, and obstinately refused to confess to anything.

With gold clogging the angel's throat, it could not breathe comfortably, and lamented over and over again in its mind, "Oh! Oh me! My throat is clogged with gold!" Not until St. Michaelmas, a holiday of miracles, was the angel able to give a cough, thus regurgitating several coins among the many. The heavenly cough sent the coins halfway across the cemetery to settle atop the unmarked grave of the robber, whose long trial had ended and who had recently been hanged until dead.

As nobody concerned himself with the

grave, it was already a weed-patch and the coins were hidden in brittle grass.

On six more St. Michaelmas holidays, the stone angel gave coughs that sent forth strings of coins. When it was no longer so badly congested, the angel thought, "Ah! Ah! A few more years of this, and I shall have cleared my lungs completely!"

During those six years, the family of the man who had been robbed and killed fell into terrible poverty. The mother died and the young girl grew to beautiful womanhood, but without decent clothes or prospects for marriage. But she never complained. And she went dutifully to the graves of her father and mother, who were side by side, no less than once a week.

One day she spied a young man who was vaguely familiar. He was standing across the cemetery on a weedy little mound that lacked a headstone. She could not quite recognize him, yet he hailed her with a friendly tone.

"Maiden!" he called. "Maiden! Would you come speak with me?"

For some reason he would not come to her, but insisted that she come to the place where he was standing.

"Maiden! Won't you look at this poor grave? It has been neglected a long time."

She approached and said, "If it concerns you, why don't you pull the weeds and trim the grass?"

"Alas! I lack the strength! But in your hands is the power of forgiveness, so it is for you to do. It is my own grave, dearest maiden, and a weight has been placed upon it so that I cannot go to where it is that souls must go. If you would care for my stoneless grave, your act would set me free."

Then the specter faded as a beam of light slanted under the shading trees. The young woman drew back with fright and remembrance. It had been her father's killer who begged succor! All the terror of that time, when she had been not full fourteen years of age, rushed to the front of her mind in

an instant. She hurried away from the robber's grave vowing never to forgive him by the labor of her hands.

Yet remaining a dutiful daughter, she could not avoid the ghost altogether. Whenever she visited her father and mother, the murderer would appear on his own grave further on, and cry out, "Maiden! Maiden! God rewards those who are forgiving!"

But she would not. And the specter became so bold as to invade her dreams, or nightmares as they were. When he came in dreams, he was not the handsome ghost she had seen upon the site of his burial. Rather, his neck would be broken, his features puffy and blue, and he would spit blood while demanding, "Weed my grave! Weed my grave!"

Only within the graveyard was he handsome and clear-eyed. The maiden had to admit, if this had not been the man who slew her father and caused her mother's early death, she might have found him greatly attractive. He had a look of sincerity, of sorrow and regret. And it was pitiful to see him trapped on that small mound of weeds.

"Come no more to my dreams!" she scolded, standing between the graves of her parents, where she felt safe.

"I come to no one's dreams," he said.

"You do! Your neck is always broken!"

"We each live in dreams of our own making," said the tragically handsome specter. "I'm sorry if I am in your dreams. But they are your dreams, and mine are separate."

"Nevertheless, I shan't forgive you."

"Not even to the length of a single prayer for the repose of my spirit? It might remove me from your dreams."

"Perhaps that," she said. "I'll say one prayer for you in the Chapel."

"It would be better," he said, "if you came to my grave on St. Michaelmas and prayed for me then."

It was months before St. Michaelmas, but,

strange to say, the robber's ghost appeared to her no more, neither in dreams nor when she went to her parents' graves. She had the unhappy feeling, however, that if she broke her promise the ghost would return after St. Michaelmas. So she awaited the day with a combination of resolve and trepidation.

Leaves were on the ground when she went to pray for the robber. Her prayer was this: "I can't forgive him, God, so won't you?"

At that moment, the stone angel coughed. A string of coins shot through the air like bullets, slaying the kneeling maiden. She fell flat upon the robber's grave.

When she was discovered, and the coins too, people spoke ill of her, and notwithstanding that she had been only thirteen or fourteen years old when her father was killed, it seemed obvious to everyone that she had

had some affair with the robber at that time. Wasn't that why she visited the robber's grave where she fell dead? Wasn't that how she happened to have with her, at the graveside, half the gold that had never been recovered until then? Clearly, people said, she had struck herself several times about the face out of madness and remorse, to die with the gold she had never dared spend, and with the lover against whom she had once borne witness while he admitted nothing. No doubt his silence was out of a greater faithfulness to her than she had had toward him, for in silence he had refused to name any accomplice.

And the town's minister, who believed the story, took a strange kind of pity on her and put her stoneless grave next to that of the robber.

By evidence within the tale, I am of the

opinion that full half the gold remained for the angel to cough up. I'm convinced that somewhere is a grave covered with weeds, and perhaps two, upon which the rest of the coins by now have fallen. I've been watching for this treasure my whole life. I watch for it in the marketplace and the uptown shops. I watch the streets and gutters and the aisles of every church or bus. I look for it in all the places of the dead, even in the houses of my friends, and through the windows of apartments, on the fairgrounds and in the movie houses. Wherever there are unmarked graves, I look there. And I listen. I always listen not for the rustle of wings, but the wheezing cough that is the only likely gift of Michaelmas Day or any other.

—fb—

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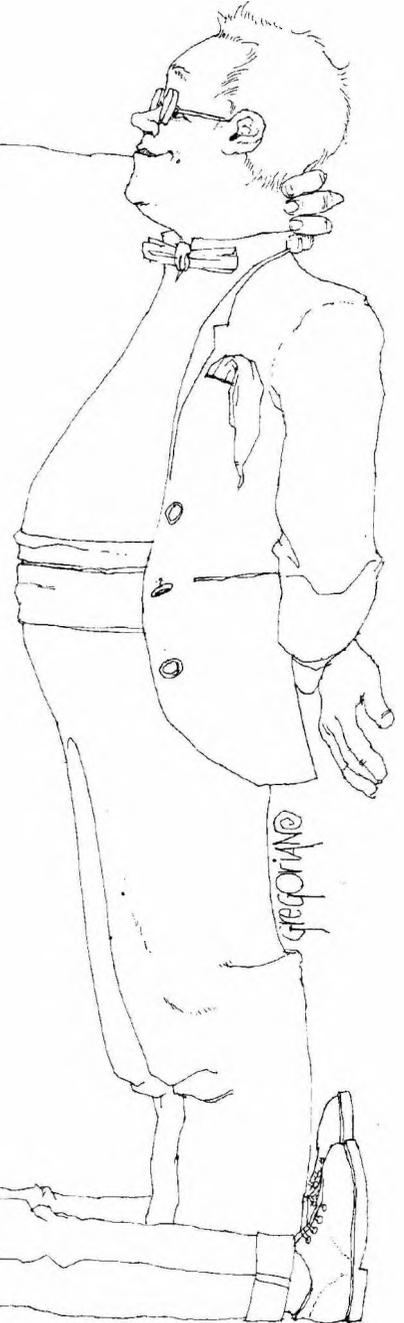
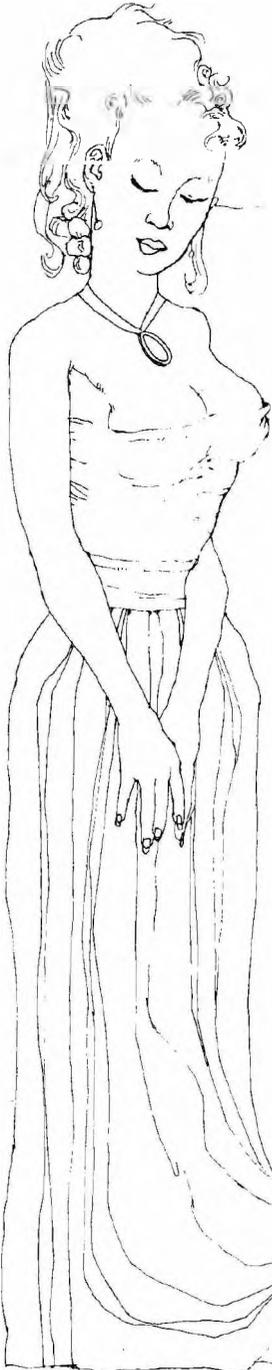
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The Vampire of Gretna Green

© 1985 by Esther M. Friesner



This England of our mad King George, with regent on the throne.
Is not the sort of place where ladies like to be alone.
So when the London "season" strikes and men unmarried quail,
Then—view halloo!—the British girls are hot on Hymen's trail.
Yet oftentimes their dear Pappas or brothers tall and grim
Pick out a rich, uncultured boor and tell them, "Marry *him*."
What! Marry that unlettered lout? The pig without a sty?
Each lass of spirit tells her kin that she would rather die.
Yet death, for all that Byron sings, is no prospect to please,
Nor is it fashion with the *ton* of the best families.
Wherefore a girl with common sense by no means ends her life.
But finds a darkly brooding man Romantic (*sans* a wife).
I speak of all this foofaraw from past experience
Because, you see, I've had a hand (and more) in these events.
For I am tall and dark and gaunt and brooding as you please.
The prototype Romantic to bring girls to their knees.
My name is immaterial—I change it all the time;
Sometimes to suit my fancy, sometimes to suit the rhyme.
I would I had a shilling for each girl who's said to me:
"If you plead honest passion, sir, I pray you, let us flee!
"Oh fly with me to Gretna Green across the Scottish border,
"And there I'll gladly marry you! (My passport is in order)."
And so I pack a hasty bag, our coach departs by night,
I read her Shelley's verses just to liven up our flight,
She leans her dear head on my breast and sighs a gentle moo,
And ere the night had flown away her Pa finds she has, too!
But all too late, for by the time her kin have found her gone,
We've pledged our troth at Gretna Green, the wedding ring is on,
And she's become my eager bride, so willing for my bed
That when the magic moment comes she meekly bows her head.
I love girls who cooperate! I haven't got all night,
And bowing of the head presents the jugular just right.
I see you pale! But why, my friends? Does none among you think
That on a fellow's wedding night he just might *need* a drink?
The darksome deed is duly done. (I love alliteration!)
And I am on the homeward coach without more hesitation.
So here's a toast to mad King George, and one for Prinny too!
And here's to Shelley, Byron, Keats, and all the poets' crew
Who make the ladies crave Romance to soak life's every scene,
And I will gladly stand the drinks for all at Gretna Green!



*Aunt Vicky's Li'l Chamber
of Horrors Presents:*

*The Nasty
Naughty
Nazi
Ninja
Nudnik
Elves*

by Joshua Quagmire



*JOSHUA
QUAGMIRE
©85.*



WELL, HELLO & THERE KIDDIES... AND WELCOME IN THROUGH THE CREAKING DOOR TO AUNT VICKY'S LITTLE CHAMBER OF GOODIES...



AHEM... I MEAN, "LITTLE CHAMBER OF HORRORS"... THAT IS...



AND NOW FOR TONIGHTS FOXY FABLE FROM YOUR CONGENIAL... AND I DO MEAN, CONGENIAL... HOSTESS! I'VE GOT A DELICIOUS TALE FOR YOU... FULL OF LUST, PASSION, VENGEANCE, VENDETTAS, VIOLENCE, AND... ELVES... OH NO... THIS ISN'T ABOUT THOSE SILLY LIL CUTESYFIE ELVES... THESE ARE MY KIND OF ELVES... THEY'RE THE

NASTY NAUGHTY NAZI NINJA NUDNIK ELVES...!

WR: DICK GLASS

OR: JUSTA D'QUAGHIRE INKS: F. TUBBINS...

TWO HOUSEHOLDS, BOTH ALIKE IN INFAMY, IN FAIRYLAND, BUT NOT HOLLYWOOD, WE LAY OUR SCENE... FROM ANCIENT GRUDGE BREAK TO NEW MUTINY, WHERE ELFIN BLOOD MAKES ELFISH HANDS UNCLEAN, TWIXT POINTY EARS AND POINTY HEADS MUCH MISCHIEF GROWS A PAIR OF STAR-CROSS'D LOVERS RENDEZVOUS WITHIN THE WOODS WHOSE MISADVENTURE LEADS TO STYGIAN DIRGES AND WOE AND IF THEY DON'T DIE BEFORE THIS TALE IS O'ER, YOU'LL WISH THEY HAD... (AND IF YOU DON'T LIKE THAT... RHYME IT YOURSELF...)



oh Herman, mein Liebchen

Munch Munch

BRAT TAT TAT



YES, AS OUR STORY OPENS, HERMAN AN HEIDI ARE HAVING A PEACEFUL PICNIC IN THE WOODS AS YOUNG NAZI LOVERS ARE WONT TO DO... SETTING LANDMINES AND TRIPWIRE AND MACHINE GUNNING SQUIRRELS... EVEN HAND-GRENADING A FEW BEARS... BUT THEY WERE NOT ALONE...

YES, IT'S THEIR SWORN ENEMIES, THE NINJA ELVES!



AND WE ALL KNOW THE ONLY THING NINJA ELVES HATE WORSE THAN ONE POINTY EARED NAZI ELF IS TWO POINTY EARED NAZI ELVES...!



OH SWEET MYSTERY OF LIFE... AS THEY STOOD THERE ENRAPTURED IN PASSION,

LOST IN EACH OTHER'S GAZE... HERMAN FELT THE HOT BLOOD PULSE FROM THE ENDS OF HIS TOES TO THE TIPS OF HIS POINTY EARS ... IT WAS LOVE AT FIRST SIGHT...!



AND HERMAN FELT AN ODD TINGLING AS THEY STUCK THEIR KATANAS IN HIS BACK... BUT JUST THEN... HUH??



'BOUT CUTEY BUNNY AN WILBER WOOD-TICK, AN...

NEXT: HOLD ONTO YOUR HATS AS WICKY AND TAFFY SQUARE OFF FOR THE BATTLE OF THE CENTURY... OR... EVERYBODY HATES ELVES, BUT NOBODY DOES ANYTHING ABOUT IT...!

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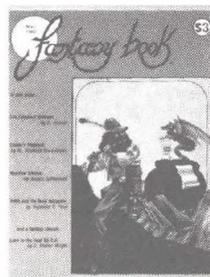
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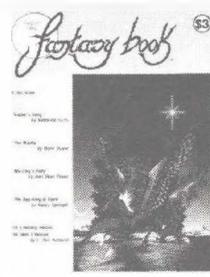
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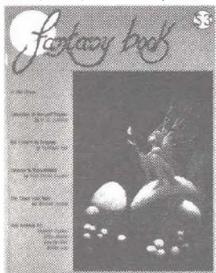
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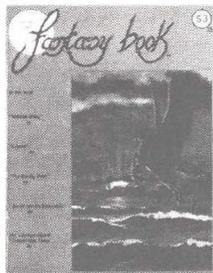
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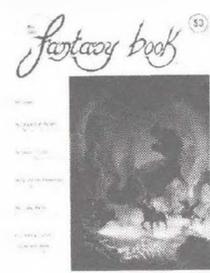
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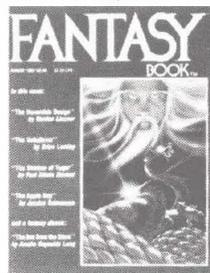
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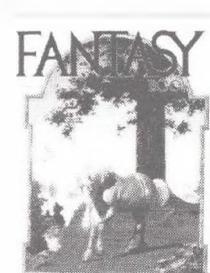
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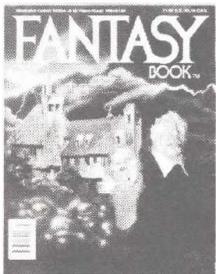
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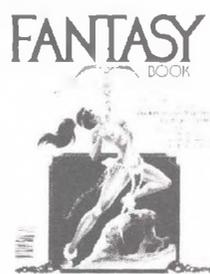
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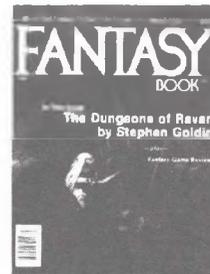
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