

John Brunner - The Traveler in Black

one

IMPRINT OF CHAOS

Ante mare et terras et quod tegit omnia caelum unus erat toto naturae vultus in orbe, quen dixere Chaos:
rudis indigestaque moles.

-Ovid: Metamorphoses, I5

I

He had many names, but one nature, and this unique nature made him subject to certain laws not binding upon ordinary persons. In a compensatory fashion, he was also free from certain other laws more commonly in force.

Still, there was nothing to choose as regards rigidity between his particular set of laws and those others. And one rule by which he had very strictly to abide was that at set seasons he should overlook that portion of the All which had been allotted to him as his individual responsibility.

Accordingly, on the day after the conjunction of four significant planets in that vicinity, he set forth on a journey which was to be at once the same as and yet different from those many which had preceded it.

It had been ordained that at this time, unless there were some pressing reason to the contrary, he should tramp along commonplace roads, and with goodwill enough-it was not a constituent of his nature that he should rail against necessity-he so arranged his route that it wound and turned and curved through all those zones where he might be made answerable for events, and ended within a short distance of where it had begun. It ended, to be precise, at the city called Ryovora: that place of all places in his domains where people had their heads screwed on the right way.

He did this for an excellent reason. It was an assurance to him that when he subsequently reviewed the situation the memory of one spot where he might justly feel pleased with his work would be uppermost in recollection.

Therefore, on a sunny morning when there were birds singing and few clouds in a sky filled with the scent of flowers, he began to trudge along a dusty road towards his first destination.

That was a great black city upreared around a high tower, which was called by its inhabitants Acromel, the place where honey itself was bitter. It was sometimes a cause of mild astonishment-even to him of the many names and the single nature-that this most difficult of cities should be located within a few hours' walking of Ryovora. Nonetheless, it was so.

And to be able to state without fear of contradiction that anything whatsoever was so was a gauge and earnest of his achievement.

Before him, the road began to zig-zag on the slope of a hill dotted with grey-leaved bushes, A local wind raised dust-devils among the bushes and erased the footprints of those who passed by. It was under this hill that the traveler had incarcerated Laprivian of the Yellow Eyes, to whom memories of yesterday were hateful; some small power remained to this elemental, and he perforce employed it to wipe yesterday's traces away.

He took his staff in his hand-it was made of light, curdled with a number of interesting forces-and rapped once on an outcrop of bare rock at the side of the pathway.

"Laprivian!" he cried. "Laprivian of the Yellow Eyes!"

At his call the dust-devils ceased their whirling. Resentfully, they sank back to the earth, so that the dust of which they were composed again covered the bared roots of the grey-leaved bushes. Most folk in the district assumed that the leaves were grey from the dust of passage, or from their nature; it was not so.

Laprivian heaved in his underground prison, and the road shook. Cracks wide enough to have swallowed a farm-cart appeared in its surface. From them, a great voice boomed.

"What do you want with me, today of all days? Have you not had enough even now of tormenting me?"

"I do not torment -you," was the calm reply. "It is your memory that torments you."

"Leave me be, then," said the great voice sullenly. "Let me go on wiping away that memory."

"As you wish, so be it," the traveler answered, and gestured with his staff. The cracks in the road closed click; the dust-devils re-formed; and when he looked back from the crest of the hill his footsteps had already been expunged.

The road wound on, empty, towards Acromel. For some distance before it actually reached the city it ran contiguous with the river called Metamorphia, a fact known to rather few people, because although it seemed that this was the same river which poured in under the high black battlements of the city, it was not the same-for good and sufficient cause. It was the nature of the river Metamorphia to change the nature of things, and consequently it changed its own nature after flowing a prescribed number of leagues.

The traveler paused by a stone wall overlooking the dark stream, and meditatively regarded objects floating past. Some had been fishes, perhaps; others were detritus of the banks-leaves, branches, stones. Those which had been stones continued to float, of course; those which had been of a flotatory nature sank.

He broke a piece of stone from the crumbling parapet of the wall, and cast it down. The alteration it underwent was not altogether pleasant to witness.

He raised his eyes after a while, and descried a girl on the opposite bank, who had come forward out of a clump of trees while he was lost in contemplation. She was extremely beautiful. Moreover she had been at no pains to hide the fact, for she was dressed exclusively in her long, lovely hair.

"You also are aware of the nature of this river," she said after regarding him for a little.

"I have been advised that the nature of the river is to change the nature of things," the traveler conceded. "And consequently it changes its own nature also."

"Come down with me, then, and bathe in it!"

"Why should you wish your nature changed?" was the reply. "Are you not beautiful?"

"Beautiful I am!" cried the girl passionately. "But I am without sense!"

"Then you are Lorega of Acromel, and your fame has spread far."

"I am Lorega of Acromel, as you say." She fixed him with her honey-colored eyes, and shrugged the garb of her hair more closely around her. "And how do men call you?"

"I have many names, but one nature. You may call me Mazda, or anything you please."

"Do you not even know your own name, then? Do you not have a name that you prefer?"

"The name matters little if the nature does not change."

She laughed scornfully. "You speak in resounding but in empty phrases, Mazda or whoever you may be! If your nature is unchangeable, give demonstration! Let me see you descend into the water of this river!"

"I did not say that," murmured the traveler peaceably. "I did not say my nature was unchangeable."

"Then you are a coward. Nonetheless, come down with me and bathe in this river."

"I shall not. And it would be well for you to think on this, Lorega of Acromel: that if you are without sense, your intention to bathe in Metamorphia is also without sense."

"That is too deep for me," said Lorega unhappily, and a tear stole down her satiny cheek. "I cannot reason as wise persons do. Therefore let my nature be changed!"

"As you wish, so be it," said the traveler in a heavy tone, and motioned with his staff. A great lump of the bank detached itself and fell with a huge splashing into the water. A wave of this water soaked Lorega from head to foot, and she underwent, as did the earth of the bank the moment it broke the surface, changes.

Thoughtfully, and a mite sadly, the traveler turned to continue his journey towards Acromel. Behind him, the welkin rang with the miserable cries of what had formerly been Lorega. But he was bound by certain laws. He did not look back.

Before the vast black gate of the city, which was a hundred feet high and a hundred feet wide, two men in shabby clothes were fighting with quarter-staffs. The traveler leaned on his own staff and watched them batter at one another for fully an hour before they both found themselves too weak to continue, and had to stand panting and glaring at each other to recover their breath.

"What is the quarrel between you?" said the traveler then.

"Little man in black, it concerns not you," grunted the nearer of the two. "Go your way and leave us be."

"Wait!" said the other. "Ask first whether he likewise is bent on the same errand!"

"A good point!" conceded the first, and raised his great cudgel menacingly. "Speak, you!"

"First I must know what your errand was, before I can say if mine is the same or not," the traveler pointed out.

"A good point!" admitted the second, who had now also approached to threaten him. "Know that I am

Ripil of the village called Masergon-"

"And I," interrupted the first, "am Tolex of the village called Wyve. Last week I set forth from my father's house, he having six other sons older than I-"

"As did I!" Ripil broke in. "Exactly as did I! You've registered my name, I trust, stranger? You will have good cause to remember it one day!"

"All men will!" snapped Tolex contemptuously. "They will remember your name to laugh at it, and when boys scribble it daringly on the wall with charcoal old women will spit on the ground as they hobble past!"

Ripil scowled at him. "Booby! Possessed of unbelievable effrontery! Go your way before it is too late, and the people of this city hang you in chains before the altar!"

"Your errand, though!" cried the traveler, just in time to forestall a renewal of the fighting.

Tolex gave him a huge but humorless grin. "Why, it's all so simple! This idiot called Ripil came hither thinking to make his fortune, dethrone Duke Vault, and claim the hand of Lorega of Acromel! As though a dunderheaded village lout could do more than dream of such glories!"

"And your own ambition?"

"Why, I have come to make my fortune and be chosen as heir to Duke Vault, when naturally I shall be assigned Lorega's hand!"

The traveler, not unexpectedly, burst out laughing. In a moment Tolex began to laugh also, thinking that it was Ripil's foolishness alone which had caused the joke, and Ripil, his face black like a storm-cloud, caught up his quarterstaff and began to belabor him anew.

The traveler left them to it, and went forward into the city.

II

In this city called Acromel there was a temple, crowning the black tower about which the buildings clustered like a single onyx on a pillar of agate. In this temple, before the red idol of the god Lacrovas-Pellidin-Agshad-Agshad, Duke Vault yawned behind his hand.

"Take her," he said to the chief priest, nodding his large black-bearded head to his left. The priest bowed to the hard slippery floor and signaled his minions. In a moment the consort who had shared Vault's life for fifteen years, and until that moment had also shared his throne, was hanging from the gallows in front of the altar, her heart's blood trickling onto Agshad's hands outstretched like a cup to receive it.

And still that was not enough.

Duke Vault knitted his brows until his forehead was creased like a field trenched to grow vegetables, and drummed with his thick fingers on the arm of his ebony chair. He looked at the idol.

From the vantage-point where he sat, he saw Agshad in the attitude of accepting sacrifice: mouth open, eyes closed, hands outstretched and cupped with blood filling them. On the left Pellidin, who shared Agshad's body but not his head or his limbs, was portrayed in the act of executing justice: to wit, wringing

the life from three persons of indeterminate sex-indeterminate, because Pellidin's cruel grasp had compressed their bodies into a gelatinous mess and left only their arms and legs sticking out like the limbs of a beetle. On the right, Lacrovas was portrayed in the mode of obliterating enemies, with a sword in one hand and a morning-star in the other. And finally, facing away from the spot where by preference Duke Vul had his throne located, there was the second Agshad in the attitude of devotion, with hands clasped together and eyes cast heavenward in a beseeching look. That was the aspect of the Quadruple God with which Duke Vul had the least concern.

Below the dais on which he presided, priests and acolytes by the hundred-predominantly sacrificers, men expert in every art of human butchery-wove their lines of movement into traditional magical patterns. Their chanting ascended eerily towards the domed roof of the temple, along with the stink of candles made from the fat of those who had hung earlier in the chains before the altar. There was no point in letting their mortal remains go to waste, was there?

But on the other hand there was no point-so far-in any of this ritual. At least, the desired effect had not been accomplished. If even his own consort had not sufficed to provoke the sought-after reaction, what would? Duke Vul cast around in his mind.

On impulse, he signaled the deputy chief priest, and pointed a hairy-backed finger at the chief priest himself. "Take him," he directed.

And that was no good, either.

Accordingly, he sent out the temple guard into the city at half an hour past noon of that day, and the guardsmen set about gathering idle citizens into the yard before the temple. If it wasn't a matter of quality, reasoned Duke Vul, it might perhaps be a matter of quantity. The second priest-now of course the chief priest by right of succession-had been consulted, and had given it as his considered opinion that a hundred all at once must have the desired effect. Duke Vul, to be on the safe side, had ordained that a thousand should be brought to the temple, and had set carpenters and metalsmiths to work on the chain-jangling gallows to accommodate them.

The temple guardsmen carried out their assignment with a will, all the better because they feared the lot might fall on them when Duke Vul had used up his supply of ordinary townsfolk. They brought in everyone they could catch, and among the crowd was a small man in black clothing, who seemed to be consumed with uncontrollable laughter.

His merriment, in fact, was so extreme that it became infectious, and the Duke noticed the fact and bellowed across the temple floor in a howl of fury.

"Who is that idiot who laughs in this sacred spot?" his bull voice demanded. "Does the fellow not realize that these are serious matters and may be disturbed by the least error in our actions? Priests! Drag him forth and make him stand before me!"

In a little while, because the throng was so great, the black-clad traveler was escorted to the foot of the duke's dais. He bowed compliantly enough when the rough hand of a guardsman struck him behind the head, but the cheerful twinkle did not depart from his eyes, and this peculiarity struck Duke Vul at once.

He began to muse about the consequences of sacrificing one who did not take the Quadruple God seriously, and eventually spoke through the tangle of his beard.

"How do men call you, foolish one?" he boomed.

"I have many names, but one nature."

"And why are you laughing at these holy matters?"

"But I am not!"

"Then are you laughing at me?" thundered the duke, heaving himself forward on his throne so that the boards of the dais creaked and squealed. His eyes flashed terribly.

"No, I laugh at the foolishness of mankind," said the black-clad traveler.

"So! In what impressively mirthful manner is this foolishness manifest, pray?"

"Why, thus," the traveler said, and told the story of Tolex and Ripil, fighting before the gate of the city.

But Duke Vault did not find the anecdote in the least degree amusing. He commanded that the temple guard should at once go in search of these two, and fumed while they were hunted down. When they arrived, however, it was as corpses they were laid on the temple floor.

"Mighty Duke!" cried the guardsmen respectfully, bowing their heads as one, and then let their captain continue.

"Sire, we found these two clasped dying in each other's arms. Each bore one bloody cudgel; each has a broken skull."

"Throw them into the river," said Duke Vault curtly, and resumed converse with the black-clad traveler.

"You arrogate to yourself the right to laugh at men's foolishness," he said, and gave a wicked grin. "Then tell me this: are you yourself entirely wise?"

"Alas, yes," said the traveler. "I have but one nature." "Then you can succeed where all my so-called wise men have failed. See you this idol?"

"I could hardly avoid seeing it. It is a considerable work of-ah--art."

"It is claimed that a way exists to invest it with life, and when this way is found it will then set forth to lay waste the enemies of this city and execute justice upon them. By every means we have sought to bestow life upon it; we have given it blood, which is life, as you doubtless know, from every class and condition of person. Even my consort, who but a few hours ago sat beside me on this throne"-the duke wiped away an imaginary tear-"now hangs with her throat gashed on that chain-jangling gibbet before the altar. Still, though, the idol declines to come to life. We need its aid, for our enemies are abroad in every corner of the world; from Ryovora to the ends of the earth they plot our downfall and destruction."

"Some of what you say is true," nodded the traveler.

"Some? Only some? What then is false? Tell me! And it had better be correct, or else you shall go to join that stupid chief priest who finally tired my patience! You can see what became of him!"

The traveler glanced up and spread his hands. Indeed, it was perfectly clear-what with the second mouth, the red-oozing one, the priest had lately acquired in his throat.

"Well, first of all," he said, "there does exist a way to bring the idol to life. And second, yes, it will then destroy the enemies of this city. But third, they do not hide in far corners of the land. They are here in Acromel."

"Say you so?" Duke Vault frowned. "You may be right, for, knowing what a powerful weapon we wield against them-or shall wield, when we unknot this riddle-they may well be trying to interfere with, our experiments. Good! Go on!"

"How so, short of demonstrating what I mean?"

"You?" The duke jerked forward on his throne, clutching the ebony arms so tightly his knuckles glistened white. "You can bring the idol to life?"

The traveler gave a weary nod. All the laughter had gone out of him.

"Then do it!" roared Duke Vault. "But remember! If you fail, a worse fate awaits you than my chief priest suffered!"

"As you wish, so be it," sighed the traveler. With his staff he made a single pass in the air before the altar, and the idol moved.

Agshad in the attitude of devotion did not open his clasped hands. But Lacrovas swung his sword, and Duke Vault's bearded head sprang from his shoulders.

Pellidin let fall the three crushed persons from his hand and seized the headless body. That he squeezed instead, and the cupped hands of Agshad in the posture of accepting sacrifice filled with the blood of the duke, expressed like juice from a ripe fruit.

After that the idol stepped down from the altar and began to stamp on the priests.

Thoughtfully, having made his escape unnoticed in the confusion, the traveler took to the road again.

Perhaps there would be nothing worse to behold during this journey than what he had observed in Acromel. Perhaps there would be something a million times as bad. It was to establish such information that he undertook his journeyings.

In Kanish-Kulya they were fighting a war, and each side was breathing threatenings and slaughter against the other.

"Oh that fire would descend from heaven and eat up our enemies!" cried the Kanishmen.

"Oh that the earth would open and swallow up our enemies!" cried the Kulyamen.

"As you wish," said the traveler, "so be it."

He tapped the ground with his staff, and Fegrim who was pent in a volcano answered that tapping and heaved mightily. Afterwards, when the country was beginning to sprout again-for lava makes fertile soil-men dug up bones and skulls as they prepared the ground for planting.

On the shores of Lake Taxhling, men sat around their canoes swapping lies while they waited for a

particular favorable star to ascend above the horizon. One lied better than all the rest.

But he lied not as his companion lied-to pass the time, to amuse each other harmlessly. He lied to feed a consuming vanity hungrier than all the bellies of all the people in the villages along the shore of the lake, who waited day in, day out, with inexhaustible patience for their menfolk to return with their catch.

Said the braggart, "If only I could meet with such another fish as I caught single-handed in Lake Moroho when I was a stripling of fifteen! Then you would understand the fisherman's art! Alas, though"-with a sigh-"there are only piddling fish in Lake Taxhling!"

"As you wish, so be it," said the traveler, who had accepted the offer of food by their fire. And the next dawn the boaster came home screaming with excitement about the huge fish he had caught, as great as the one he had taken in Lake Moroho. His companions crowded around to see it-and the mountains rang with their laughter, because it was smaller than some others they themselves had taken during the night.

"I do not wish him to love me for my beauty or my fortune," declared the haughty child of a merchant in the city called Barbizond, where there was always a rainbow in the sky owing to the presence of the bright being Sardhin chained inside a thundercloud with fetters of lightning. The girl was beautiful, and rich, and inordinately proud.

"No!" she continually insisted, discarding suitor after suitor. "I wish to be loved for myself, for what I am!"

"As you wish, so be it," said the traveler, who had come in the guise of a pilgrim to one of the jousts organized that this lady might view her potential husbands. Twenty-one men had died in the lists that afternoon, and she had thrown her glove in the champion's face and gone to supper.

The next time there were jousts announced, no challenger came, and the girl pulled a face and demanded that more heralds go forth. Her father summoned a hundred heralds. The news went abroad. And personable young men said in every city, "Fight for a stuck-up shrew like her? Ho-ho! I've better ways to pass my time, and so've my friends!"

At length the truth dawned upon her, and she became miserable. She had never been happy. She had only thought she was happy. Little by little, her pride evaporated. And one day, a young man came by chance to her father's house and found she was a quiet, submissive, pleasant girl, and married her.

Thus the journey approached its end. The traveler felt a natural relief that nothing excessively untoward had occurred as he hastened his footsteps towards the goal and climax of his excursion-towards Ryovora, where men were sensible and clear-sighted, and made no trouble that he had to rectify. After this final visit, he could be assured that his duty was fulfilled.

Not that all was well by any means. There were enchanters still, and ogres, and certain elementals roamed abroad, and of human problems there might be no end. Still, the worst of his afflictions were growing fewer. One by one, the imprints of the original chaos were fading away, like the footmarks of travelers on the road above the hill where Laprivian of the Yellow Eyes was prisoned.

Then, as the gold and silver towers of Ryovora came to view, he saw that an aura surrounded them as of a brewing storm, and his hope and trust in the people of that city melted away.

III

At the city called Barbizond, where he had been but recently, there was likewise an aura around the

tallest towers. There, however, it was a fair thing and pleasant to look upon, imbued with the essence of bright-if cruel, nonetheless lovely-Sardhin chained in his cloud. Ryovora had been immune since time immemorial from such disadvantageous infestations as elementals, principalities and powers; the local folk prided themselves on being creatures of hard plain sense, sober in the making of decisions, practical and rational and causing a minimum of trouble to the world.

That something had happened to alter this state of affairs... ! There was a conundrum to make the very universe shiver in chill anticipation!

The traveler turned aside from the track, making no attempt to conceal his frowns, and instead of pursuing a straight course into the city, he diverged across a verdant meadow in the midst of which hovered a mist like the mists of early morning, but more dense. When the grey wisps had closed around him entirely, to the point where they would have incapacitated the vision of any ordinary trespasser, he dissolved one of the forces which curdled the light he employed as a staff, and a clear bright beam penetrated the opacity. It had barely sheared the mist when a quiet voice spoke to him.

"Since you know where you are, I know who you are. Come into the castle, and be welcome,"

The mist lifted, and the traveler went forward into the courtyard of a castle that reared seemingly to heaven, with great towers which almost pierced the sky. Two dragons chained beside the portcullis bowed their heads fawningly to the visitor; four man-like persons whose bodies were of burnished steel came to escort him-one before, one behind, one at each side- through the gateway and across the yard; twenty trumpeters sounded a blast from a gallery as he ascended the steps towards the chief tower and keep, and they also were of polished steel.

There was a scent of magic in this air. Echoes of half-forgotten cantrips resounded, incredibly faint, from the masonry of the walls. Here and there blue light dripped from a projecting cornice; shadows moved with no one to cast them.

Then a door of oak studded with brass swung open on silent hinges, giving access to a room across which slanted a thick bar of sunlight from a window standing wide. The sunlight illumined the shriveled mummy of a mandrake. In jars covered with black cloth, ranged on an oak shelf, were twenty homunculi. A brazier burned, giving off a thick, very pleasant smell like warm honey.

From behind a table on which heavy books were piled that served also as a perch for a drowsy owl, a person in dark red robes rose to greet the traveler, and spoke, inclining his head.

"It is traditional that no one shall pierce the mist with which I protect my privacy save an invited guest or one who has a single nature. And, the universe being as it is, only one-ah-individual has a single nature. I am the enchanter Manuus. Be welcome, sir."

The black-clad traveler bent his head in reply. A chair was placed for him, not by visible hands; he sat in it, disposing his cloak comfortably over the arm. Manuus took from a cupboard a large flask and two mugs of pottery ornamented with complex symbols in blue enamel. From the flask-which bore symbols in green enamel-he spilled a couple of drops of sparkling liquid, muttering words which made the walls hum faintly. The drops vanished before they reached the floor, and the enchanter gave a nod of satisfaction and filled the mugs.

"What is your business here, sir?" he inquired, resuming his own seat after handing the first mug to his caller.

"There is an aura about Ryovora," said the traveler. "Before I enter the city I wish to ascertain what its cause may be."

Manuus nodded thoughtfully, stroking the wispy grey beard that clung at his chin like a wisp of the mist that guarded his home from casual prying.

"You will forgive me mentioning the fact," he said in an apologetic tone, "but it is asserted somewhere in one of these books--in a volume, moreover, in which I have come to place some degree of confidence--that if your nature is single, then it must logically follow that you answer questions as well as asking them."

"That is so. And I see plainly that you put trust in the tome of which you speak. The faceless drinker to whom you poured libation a moment ago is not elsewhere referred to."

Silence ensued between them for a space, while each contemplated the other. There was, though, a certain distinction, inasmuch as the enchanter studied the outward guise of the traveler, whereas the traveler examined the totality of his host.

"Ask away, then," invited the traveler at length. "And I may say that the more involved your question, the simpler and more difficult to understand will be my answer."

"And vice versa?" suggested Manuus, his old eyes twinkling.

"Exactly."

"Very well, then. Who are you? Note, please, that I do not ask how you are called. You have an infinity of names."

The traveler smiled. "You are a talented man," he conceded. "That is a good question, frankly phrased. So I will answer frankly. I am he to whom was entrusted the task of bringing order forth from chaos. Hence the reason why I have but one nature."

"If your nature were such that you demanded honor in full measure with your worth, all the days of my life would not suffice to do you homage," said Manuus seriously. "Ask now what you would know."

"What's the trouble in Ryovora?"

Maliciously, Manuus made his eyes sparkle. He said, "I am not bound by your laws, sir. Therefore I will answer in the human style--simply, to simple questions. There is dissatisfaction with the order of things as they are."

"Fair," the traveler conceded. "Ask away."

Manuus hesitated. "Who," he resumed at length, "imposed-?"

And his tongue locked in his mouth, while the traveler looked on him with an expression blending cynicism and sympathy. When at last the enchanter was able to speak again, he muttered, "Your pardon. It was of the nature of a test. I had seen it stated that..."

"That there are certain questions which one literally and physically is forbidden to ask?" The traveler chuckled. "Why, then, your test has confirmed the fact. I, even I, could not answer the question I suspect

you were intending to frame. However, a question that cannot be asked is ipso facto no question at all. You may try again."

Manuus licked his lips. What had transpired within his head during that instant of involuntary paralysis defied comprehension. He was, though, brave and enterprising, and shortly ventured, "On the other hand I believe I may legitimately ask: what is the purpose of your task?"

"You may."

"So I do." Leaning back triumphant in his chair.

"Why! When all things have but one nature, they will be subsumed into the Original All. Time will stop. This conclusion is desirable."

Manuus looked sourly at the brazier. "Desirable, perhaps-but appallingly dull. Speak again."

"In what particular respect are the citizens of Ryovora dissatisfied?"

Manuus turned the question over and over in his brilliant mind, seeking a way to milk from it a further opportunity to interrogate his distinguished visitor. He failed.

"They are displeased that they have no gods," he replied.

Three bolts of lightning sheared the clear blue sky beyond the window; three claps of thunder in succession made the room re-echo and startled the sleepy owl into giving three little hops across the great book on which he squatted. The black-clad traveler ignored these events, taking a further sip from his mug, but on his face a frown was suddenly engraved.

"Ask a third time," he invited.

"Why, this is not altogether necessary," said Manuus in high delight. "But so I will!" He darted his gaze from place to place within the room as though in quest of inspiration, and finally lit on the proper line of inquiry.

"What was there, before things became as they are now?"

"I will show you," said the traveler, and dipped one fingertip into his mug. He drew forth a drop of liquid in which was entrapped a sparkling bubble.

"Regard this bubble," he instructed Manuus. "And see..."

In those days, the forces were none of them chained. They raged unchecked through every corner and quarter of the cosmos. Here for instance ruled Laprivian of the Yellow Eyes, capricious, whimsical; when he stared things melted in frightful agony. There a bright being shed radiance, but the radiance was all-consuming, and that which was solid and dull was flashed into fire. At another place, creatures in number one million fought desperately for the possession of a single grain of dust; the fury of their contesting laid waste solar systems.

Once-twice-a third time something burgeoned, which had about it a comforting aura of rationality, predictability, stability; about this nucleus, time was generated from eternity. Time entails memory, memory entails conscience, conscience entails thought for the future, which is itself implied by the

existence of time. Twice the forces of chaos raged around this focal point, and swallowed it back into oblivion; then the will of Tuprid and Caschalanva, of Quorril and Lry, and of an infinite number of elemental beings, reigned once more. But none, of them was supreme, because in chaos nothing can endure, nothing can be absolute, nothing sure or certain or reliable.

In that age, suns flashed like fires, burning brightly one instant, ashes the next. On planets circling a million suns creatures who could think struggled to reduce the chaos to order, and when they thought they had most nearly achieved it, chance ordained that all their work should go for nothing, absorbed again into the faceless dark.

"But that was before me," said the traveler, and squashed the bubble so that it burst.

"I have seen," said Manuus with inexpressible weariness. "But I have not understood."

"Man does not comprehend chaos. That is why man is man, and not of another nature." The traveler smiled at him. "I wish now to pose my final question; do you grant that I have well and sufficiently answered yours?"

"You have given me another million questions to ask," sighed Manuus, shaking his grey head. "But that also, I suppose, stems from the nature of mankind. Ask away."

"Your supposition is correct. Now my last question: enchanter, what is your opinion of a god?"

"I do not know what a god is," said Manuus. "And I doubt that any man knows, though many think they do."

"Fair enough," said the black-clad traveler, and rose.

"Have you not even one more question to put to me?" suggested the enchanter with a wan smile.

"No," said the traveler.

Manuus gave a shrug and rose also. "Then I can only thank you for having graced my dwelling, sir," he said formally. "Few of my colleagues can have enjoyed the honor of receiving you personally."

The traveler bestowed on him a hard, forthright look.

"I have many names, but one nature," he said. "Man has one name, and many more than two natures. But the essential two are these: that he shall strive to impose order on chaos, and that he shall strive to take advantage of chaos. You, sir, are not a better enchanter for having received me here, but a worse one. And, I may say, such people as you are often the greatest allies of the powers who were before me."

"I resent that, sir," said Manuus frostily. "Let it not be said that I oppose one whose task I am aware of."

"A third element of man's nature," the traveler murmured, "is this: that he shall not understand what he is doing. Good day to you, Manuus-though whether it will be is rather up to you than up to me."

The traveler left Manuus deep in thought, with one elbow on a book in front of him, his chin cupped in his hand, his eyes staring vacantly at his pet owl. The traveler set forward, towards the gold and silver towers of Ryovora, and there went among the populace confirming what he had been told.

That same argument which Manuus had put him bluntly, he heard indirectly expressed before the houses of the great merchant-enchanters, who conjured this city's goods from the far corners of the world; so too in the market-square, and in private homes, and in taverns and theatres and laboratories and even in the houses of ill-repute. And when at last he came to stand upon the roof of a high silver tower and overlook the sleeping city in the small dead hours, he was convinced.

Yes, truly, the people of Ryovora were dissatisfied, and it was as Manuus had claimed. They had struggled through centuries inquiring of the mute cosmos what its nature and the nature of man might be, and they were left still hungering, to the point of growing weary.

This hunger-so they said-would be assuaged if only they had a god, as did their neighbors in Acromel. News had arrived, of course, that the god of Acromel had caused the death of many citizens, and widespread misery, but they ascribed all that to the stupidity of Duke Vaul. "We are sensible people!" they insisted. "We would know how to treat a god!"

The traveler stood gazing out over the placid, sleeping city. Moonlight shone on the roofs of glorious buildings, on the river's ripples, on bridges and mansions and on fine wide roads.

He had asked everywhere, "What is the nature of a god?" And they had said confidently, "We have no god, so how can we tell? But if we had one-ah, then we should know!"

The traveler remained rapt in thought until the dawn-flush tinged the east, absorbing and reviewing the desire that inchoately washed against his mind. At last, a breath or two before the sun rose, a quirking smile twisted his mouth upwards, and he put out his staff over the city and said, "As you wish, so be it."

Then, his task for the moment being accomplished, he departed.

IV

To park a car while one goes for a walk in the woods is not uncommon. To return and find that the car is no longer there is not unprecedented. But to return and find that the road itself, on which the car was parked, has likewise vanished, is a different matter entirely.

Yet for a man who rules himself by the straightforward logic of common sense, there is no need instantly to assume that a problem of this nature is insoluble. Bernard Brown was such a person, and it was to him that this improbable event had just occurred.

"Well!" he said, looking at the indisputably grassy surface of the narrow ride between two high hedges where to the best of his recollection-and his memory was a good one-there had shortly before been a tarmac highway. "Well!" he said again, and since there was no obvious alternative sat down on a rock and smoked a cigarette in a philosophical manner.

However, no one came by who might enlighten him on the fate either of his car or of the road it had been on, so when the cigarette had reduced to a stub, he dropped it in the grass, ground it out with his foot, and began to walk along the lane between the hedges.

By the straightforward logic of common sense, a road which had been here a scant hour ago could not during his absence have removed itself to another location. Therefore it must be he who was misplaced; he had no doubt missed his way in the pleasant summery woodland, and would eventually return if not to the road he had first followed then to some other that intersected with it.

He strode along jauntily enough, not much worried by the turn of affairs, and whistled as he walked. Occasionally the hedges on either side parted after he had gone by, and eyes studied him thoughtfully, but since he did not notice this fact it did not trouble him.

At length the hedges ended, and with them the trees of the wood, and he emerged onto a rutted track between two ploughed fields. On the near side of one of these fields a man with a kerchief tied around his neck and his legs soiled to the knee with dirt was backing up a large and obstreperous horse, harnessed to a cart whose contents were indeterminate but stank incredibly. Politely ignoring the smell, Bernard spoke to the man directly.

"Excuse me! Can you tell me the way to the London road?"

The man considered for a moment. Then he spat in the earth where it was new-turned by his horse's enormous hooves, and said bluntly, "No."

Well, that was at least an answer, if not a very helpful one. Bernard Brown shrugged and walked on.

Again the grassy ride passed between hedges, and began to wind so that at any one moment only twenty paces of it before and twenty behind were in clear view. From around a bend ahead a voice could be heard raised in song and growing louder. This voice was of intersexual quality, neither altogether male nor altogether female, and shrilled occasionally on the highest notes with shiver-provoking acidity.

Shortly, the singer came in sight, and Bernard found himself confronted by a young man, with very white hair cut short around his head, riding negligently on a gaily caparisoned horse that moved its head in time with the beat of its master's song. His attire was extraordinary, for he wore a shirt of red and yellow and loose breeches of bright green, the color of a sour apple, and his horse was if anything more surprising, inasmuch as it was skewbald of purple and pale blue. The rider accompanied his singing on a small plucked instrument, the strings of which chirruped like birds.

When he perceived Bernard, he abandoned his song in mid-phrase, let his instrument fall on a baldric to his side, and halted his horse. Then he leaned one hand on the pommel of his saddle and fixed the pedestrian with bright hard eyes; these were violet.

"Good morrow, stranger," he said in a light tone. "And what is your business here?"

"I'm trying to find the London road again," said Bernard Brown, lifting his eyebrows in astonishment at the spectacle.

"There is no such road near here," said the young man, and shook his head sorrowfully. "I know that to be a fact for all the roads in this vicinity belong to me."

"Now this is all very well," said Bernard, and gave a smile to show he was party to the joke. "But while it may amuse you to make such a grandiose assertion, it does not amuse me to be denied essential guidance. I've lost my way somehow, through taking a wrong turning in the woods, and I badly need directions."

The young man drew himself upright and urged his horse forward-and it could be seen now that this was not a young man riding a horse, nor was there in fact a horse being ridden, but some sort of confusion of the two, in that the man's legs were not separated at all from his mount. They ended in fleshy stalks, uniting with the belly of that part of the composite animal resembling a horse.

"This is extraordinary!" thought Bernard to himself, but being mannerly forbore to remark on the combination.

The young man gave him a hard stare, hand falling to a sharp sword beside his left thigh. "Who are you?" he demanded. "And where are you from, that you do not recognize me?"

Nettled, Bernard rejoined, "Unless you had taken part in a circus, or been exhibited at the Zoo, I would not presume to recognize you!"

The horse-head and the man-head together reared back in appalled amazement, and the bright sword whined through the air. Discreetly, feeling that he had to do with a creature whose mind was as abnormal as its body, Bernard had already stepped out of range when the blade flashed by.

"I am Jorkas!" howled the man-horse creature. "Now do you still say you do not know me?"

Alarmed at the composite personage's behavior, Bernard replied in a tone as civil as could be expected after the attack with the sword, "No, sir, I do not, and I may say that your actions give me little cause to wish we had become acquainted earlier."

The man-face contorted with unbelievable rage, and the sword swung high for a second blow as the horse-body danced three steps towards Bernard. He was on the point of making an inglorious-and predictably ill-fated-retreat, when a sudden ringing noise indicated that the blade had struck something very resistant in its downward passage. Indeed, the man-creature was shaking its sword-arm as though it had been numbed all the way to the shoulder.

The obstacle the sword had encountered was a glittering staff, upheld in the firm grip of a black-clad man who had somehow contrived to approach the two of them without being noticed. This person was now standing, leaning on the staff, and regarding Jorkas with a wry expression.

Jorkas shrugged, sheathed the sword, and took up his instrument again. His horse-legs bore him cantering away down the lane, and when he was out of sight around the bend his counter-tenor voice was once more heard raised in song.

"Thank you, sir," Bernard said to his rescuer, wiping his face and not unduly surprised to find he had been perspiring. "I must confess I was not prepared to meet anything like that in this quiet lane."

The black-clad one smiled, a faraway look in his eyes. "I have rendered some small service," he said matter-of-factly. "And I would add a smidgin of advice to it, too. If you expect nothing and everything, you will do well."

Bernard settled his jacket more comfortably around his shoulders and blinked several times in succession. "Well, sir, taken whichever way, I cannot see your advice proving unsound. Particularly if this neighborhood is populated by more amazing freaks such as Jorkas!"

"Yes, he bears the imprint of chaos, does he not?" said the man in black. "He is left over, so to speak. He is fairly harmless; things have by-passed him, and his power grows small."

"The power of that sword, had it reached its target, would have been quite sufficient to dispose of me, Bernard pointed out. "Has he escaped from some- some fantastic menagerie?"

"He has rather endured from a period of absolute confusion," was the reply, which though apparently

meaningful served not at all to lessen either Bernard's puzzlement or his alarm. He decided, nonetheless, to forego further inquiry into the matter, and to revert to his major preoccupation.

"Can you, sir, tell me where lies the London road?"

"I can," said the other with a chuckle. "But it would be of small help to you if I did, since you cannot come to it from here. No, listen to me, and I will give you directions which will eventually bring you where you wish to be."

Since that was the best the black-clad man was willing to offer, Bernard had perforce to nod his acceptance.

"Go forward from here," said his mentor, "until you reach three twisted alder-trees standing alone in a meadow. You will recognize them readily enough. Stand before them and bow your head three times, and then take the path around them. In a little while it will bring you to a city. And whatever you do, do not speak with a woman in clothing the color of blood. Otherwise I cannot answer for the consequences."

"What nonsense!" thought Bernard to himself. But since he had no choice he thanked the other civilly and went on circumspectly down the lane.

The three alder-trees poked up, white and gnarled, from the grass of the promised meadow, like the fingers of a skeleton. Bernard hesitated, looking about him. He felt foolish to be going to do what he had been advised to do. Still, as far as he could tell no one was watching him, and the straightforward logic of common sense had long ago informed him that he was not at present in a location where common sense was greatly prized.

He was troubled, though, that he could see no sign at all of a road beyond this point, so that unless he did what he had been told, and it-ah-worked, he would have to retrace his path, with the concomitant prospect of a second encounter with Jorkas. For that he had no stomach. Accordingly he bowed his head three times, and was amazed to find that he was standing on a clearly-defined path. Which, he likewise noticed, led nowhere except around the alders.

Well, the black-clad man had said he should take the path which led around them. He turned to his left and strode resolutely along the circular path, hopeful of getting somewhere eventually.

At his third turn, when he was feeling truly embarrassed by his own silliness, he looked towards the alder-trees again and saw a very beautiful woman standing among them. She had a face of perfect oval shape, skin like mother-of-pearl and hair blacker than midnight. But she was gowned from shoulders to ankles in a dress that was red as blood.

She spoke to him in a musical voice, sarcastically. "And where do you think your circumambulations will carry you, my foolish friend? Did no one ever inform you that walking in circles takes you nowhere? Why not go forward? See!"

She raised her right arm, on which golden bracelets jangled, and when Bernard followed her pointing fingers he saw a city clustered around an enormous tower, the top of which resembled an onyx and the shaft of which resembled agate.

A strange sort of city! Yet at least a habitation, not a stretch of deserted countryside. He was half-minded to make hastily towards it, and yet felt a vague foreboding. There was an aura about that

city...

He spoke to the air, to himself, not to the woman in red, and said, "The man who saved me from Jorkas advised me not to speak with a woman in a dress the color of blood. I assume this advice extends to not following any suggestion she may make to me." Doggedly he continued his rotatory progress, while the woman's laughter tinkled irritatingly in his ears, and was rewarded on his next circuit to see that she had gone. Somewhere. Somehow.

Moreover, another city was in "sight, and this was not so disturbing. Its towers were of gold and silver, and although the sky about it was of an electrical blue shade that seemed to presage nothing less familiar than the advent of a storm.

"There, perhaps," reasoned Bernard, "I may escape this conglomeration of cryptic non-meaningful events, and may even track down someone who can tell me how to get home."

He struck out across the meadow, and shortly came to a good though dusty road, which led straight towards the city with the gold and silver towers. Determined to reach it in the least possible time, he thrust the road behind him with feet that now began to ache more than a little.

"So!" said the enchanter Manuus, leaning back in his chair with a chuckle. "So!" he said again, dropping the cover-made of bat's skin as fine and supple as silk -over his scrying-glass. "Well, well, well, well, well!"

V

At the head of the council table-which, because the weather was oppressive, he had caused to be set out under the sycamore trees in the Moth Garden-the Margrave of Ryovora sat, frowning terribly.

Before him, the table stretched almost a hundred feet, in sections that were joined so cleverly the overarching trees could admire their reflections intact in the polished top. Nothing spoiled the perfection of this table, except the purplish sheen it had acquired from the heavy close air now filling the city.

To right and left of him, ranked in their chairs, sat the nobility of Ryovora, men and women of vast individual distinction: the merchant-enchanters, the persons of inquiring mind, the thinkers, the creators, all those to whom this city owed its fame and reputation.

The Margrave spoke, not looking at those who listened.

"Tell us what has taken place in your quarter of the town, Petrovic."

Petrovic, a dry little man with a withered face like an old apple, coughed apologetically and said, "There are omens. I have cast runes to ascertain their meaning.

They have no known meaning. Milk has been soured in the pan four mornings running in my demesne."

"And Ruman?"

Ruman was a man built like an oak tree, whose thick gnarled hands were twisting restlessly in his lap. He said, "I have slaughtered animals to divine what may be read in their entrails. I agree with Petrovic-these omens have no known significance. But two springs under the wall of the city, which have not failed in more centuries than I can discover, are dry this morning."

"And Gostala?"

Gostala was a woman with a queenly bosom and a queenly diadem of white hair plaited around her head. She said, "I have watched the flight of birds each dawn for seven days, and also at sunset. The results are confused. But a two-headed lamb has been born in the village of Dunwray."

"And Eadwil?"

Eadwil was hardly more than a boy. His chin was innocent of a beard and when he spoke his voice was like a reed pipe; still, one must respect his precocious wisdom. He said, "I have analyzed the relative situations of the stars and planets, and am driven to the hypotheses that either we know nothing at all or some unknown heavenly body is influencing events. A comet, perhaps. But yesterday lightning struck three times out of a clear sky, and-and, Margrave, I'm frightened!"

The Margrave nodded and made a comforting gesture in the air. It didn't help much. He said, "But this cannot be the whole story. I move that we-here, now, in full council-ask Him Who Must Know."

Eadwil rose to his feet. On his youthful lips trembled a sob, which he stoutly repressed.

"I request your permission to withdraw, then," he said. "It is well known how He Who Must Know deals with those in-uh-my condition."

The Margrave coughed and nodded approval of the discreet reference. Eadwil owed some of his precocity to the postponement of a major upheaval in his physiology, and the elemental they were considering found virgins vulnerable to his powers.

"Agreed," he said, and Eadwil departed, sighing with relief.

Before they could proceed with the business before them, however, there was a rustling sound from far down the table, and a voice spoke like the sougling of wind in bare winter woods.

"Margrave, I suggest otherwise."

The Margrave shifted uncomfortably in his chair. That was Tyllwin who spoke, a figure as gaunt as a scarecrow and as thin as a rake, who sat among them by courtesy because no one knew where he had come from or how old he was, but everyone knew he had many and peculiar powers which had never been put to use. Just as well, maybe. Whenever Tyllwin spoke, untoward events followed. The Margrave saw with alarm that several blossoms on nearby trees were withering.

"Speak, Tyllwin," he muttered, and braced himself.

Tyllwin chuckled, a scratching noise, and the flowers on the whole of one tree turned to fruit and rotted where they hung. His nearest neighbors left their seats hastily and moved towards the Margrave's end of the table.

Tyllwin's huge found head, like a turnip-ghost's, turned to watch them, and a smile curved his dusty lips. He said, "Is it not certain, masters of Ryovora, that these things foreshadow an important event?"

The rotten fruits fell with a squelching sound, and, ants hurried from among the roots of the trees to investigate. The company hardly dared do more than nod.

"Therefore," said Tyllwin, "I suggest we investigate the commotion which is shortly to take place at the main gate."

He fell silent. A few dead leaves blew across the table. Most of them clustered before Tyllwin's place, and he touched them with a bony hand, making them dissolve. The watchers trembled.

Still, the Margrave was relieved to find that nothing more outrageous was going to follow Tyllwin's unexpected loquacity. He said, "Well, what is the opinion of you all?"

Ruman spoke up, with a glance towards Tyllwin that lasted only half a second after meeting Tyllwin's eyes. He said, "I have not scried any such commotion."

"But you have not scried since yesterday," objected Gostala with feminine practicality.

"True, true. Then I am with Tyllwin."

"Petrovic?" inquired the Margrave.

"I am aware," that dried-up individual said in a doubtful tone, "that the people believe all our troubles would be at an end if we had a god, as other cities do. I hope that in this instance they are wrong; they usually are. Having heard from our neighbors at Acromel how severely they suffer from their deity-"

"This is far from the point," interrupted Gostala, tapping the table with a thumb-bone which had once been the property of a man fortunate enough-or unfortunate enough-to be her lover. "I say we do not know. Let us therefore expect both nothing and everything."

"Rational and well-spoken!" approved the Margrave. "Those in favor...?"

All present laid their right hands on the table, except Tuc, who had left his in the mouth of a dragon beyond an interesting sea of fire far to the north. Even Tyllwin moved with the rest, causing yet more leaves to wither and tremble on the tree that had suffered most since he broke from his impassivity.

"Agreed, then," said the Margrave. "Let us go thither."

The company rose with a bustle and began to adjourn to the main gate. The Margrave, however, remained behind a few moments, contemplating Tyllwin, who had not vacated his place.

When the others were at a distance he judged safe, he addressed the enchanter in a low voice.

"Tyllwin, what is your opinion of a god?"

Tyllwin laughed creakingly. "I have been asked that before," he said. "And I will answer as I did then: I do not know what a god is, and I doubt that many men do, either."

A branch on the tree overhanging him split with a warning cry, so that the Margrave flung up his hand automatically before his face. When he looked again, Tyllwin was gone.

The commotion at the gates, foreseen by Tyllwin and by no other of the council members, had already begun when the stately procession entered the avenue leading to them. Each enchanter had come after his or her own style: Petrovic walking with his staff called Nitra, from which voices could sometimes be

heard when the moon was full; Gostala riding on a creature she had conjured out of the deep water which was its natural element, that cried aloud in heart-rending agony at every step; Ruman on the shoulders of a giant ape fettered with brass; Eadwil on his own young legs, although his feet shone red-hot when he had gone ten paces-this was to do with a geas about which no one ever inquired closely. The air about them crackled with the struggle between protective conjurations and the tense oppressive aura that enshrouded Ryovora.

In the wide street before the gateway a crowd had gathered, laughing, shouting, exclaiming with wonderment. In the midst of the throng, a man in outlandish attire, his face set in a frown of puzzlement, was vainly trying to contend with a hundred questions simultaneously.

The crowd parted to let the nobility by, and at once closed in again, like water around a slow-moving boat

The Margrave came up behind the rest, panting somewhat, for he was getting fat, and looked the stranger over curiously, while the people's voices rose to almost a roar and then sank again into a muttering buzz. At last, having cast a beseeching glance at his companions and received no offers of assistance, he was compelled to address the newcomer.

"Sir, who are you and what do you want?"

In the terribly patient tone of one dealing with lunatics, the stranger said, "My name is Bernard Brown, and all I want is to go home."

"That is easy enough," said the Margrave in relief. But if he had paused to reflect that Tyllwin was concerned at this man's arrival, he would not so soon have been optimistic. He rounded on Petrovic. "Will you oblige?" he said.

Petrovic looked up in the air and down at the ground. He scratched a number of ideograms in the dust with his staff Nitra, then hastily scuffed them over with his foot. He said flatly, "No."

"Well, if you won't you won't," sighed the Margrave. He appealed to Gostala, who merely shook her regal head and went on scrutinizing Bernard Brown.

"Eadwil!" cried the Margrave.

The boy, whose face had gone perfectly pale, stammered a few incomprehensible words and burst into tears.

"See! They can't! What did I tell you?" bellowed a bull-like voice from the crowd, and the Margrave shot a glance at the speaker as sharp as a spear.

"Come forth!" he commanded, and with the aid of a number of bystanders the fellow pushed and shoved until he stood before his ruler. He was an insolent-faced churl with a shock of corn-colored hair, and wore a leather apron with big pockets in which reposed the tools of his trade. He appeared to be some kind of worker in metal.

"You are-" said the Margrave, and ran through a short formula in his mind. "You are Brim, a locksmith. What did you mean by what you said?"

"What I said, of course," the fellow retorted, seeming amused. "Why, anyone can see he's not to be

pushed around by ordinary folk!"

"Explain further," commanded the Margrave.

"Why, 'tes simple as your mind...sir." Brim thrust an errant lock of hair back into place with his blunt thumb. "I see it plain, and so do all of us. Here we've been saying these years past that what's amiss with Ryovora is we haven't got a god like all those towns around the world every wherever. And now, today, what else do the omens say? Can you tell us that?"

He thrust a stubby finger at the Margrave's chest. The Margrave recoiled and looked at him distastefully. But he was by inclination an honest man, so he had to shake his head and admit that although the noble enchanters had speculated long and long about the recent omens they had not been able to arrive at any conclusion.

"There, mates! What did I tell you?" bellowed Brim, whirling to face the crowd. There was an answering yell, and in a moment the situation had turned topsyturvy. The throng had closed in on Bernard Brown, unmindful that they trod on some of the nobles' toes, and had seized him and gone chairing him down the avenue, while men, women and children ran and skipped behind him, singing a rhythmic song and laughing like hyenas.

"Well!" said the Margrave in vexation. "This is a most improper and irregular state of affairs!"

VI

The Margrave had cause to repeat those words, with still greater emphasis and an even more sombre expression, the following morning. He sat once more at the head of the long table in the Moth Garden, for the air had become if anything more oppressive than yesterday; moreover, reports of omens seemed to have doubled in number.

"This is extremely aggravating!" said the Margrave testily. "Virtually the entire populace is firmly convinced this stranger is a god, simply because they can't make head or tail of what he says. Accordingly, they have turned me out of my own palace-I spent an uncomfortable night here in the Moth Garden-and are at work converting it into a temple for this character without so much as a by-your-leave!"

Eadwil suppressed an inappropriate smile. "Moreover," he supplied, "all those persons who have voyaged extensively are being interrogated concerning the correct manner in which to pay homage to a new deity. Brim the locksmith, around whom this ferment seems to be most turgid, has traveled to Acromel and is enthusiastic for human sacrifice; there is a group of women who in their youth were captives in Barbizond and wish to hold daily single combats before the altar; a man who formerly fished Lake Taxhling declares that the sole method of adopting the god is to burn down the city twice a year and re-build it, as the fisherfolk do with their reed-hut villages..."

Petrovic shook his withered head and opined, "No good will come of this."

"Has anyone knowledge of Tyllwin's whereabouts?" inquired the Margrave, for the gaunt one's place was empty today.

A shudder went down the table, and those in earshot shook their heads, not without expressions of relief.

"Well, then, let us proceed to a decision," said the Margrave. He shifted in his chair; his night in the open,

although the weather was warm, had left him feeling bruised all over.

"The first point to establish," said Gostala sensibly, "is whether this Bernard Brown is indeed a god. If not-well!"

"Agreed!" came a chorus in reply.

Ruman snorted and thumped the table with a ham-like fist. "And how, pray, do we set about that?" he demanded with honey-sweet sarcasm. "For we have all previously confessed that we do not know what a god is. Was that not the reason why we never had gods in the old days?"

"I fear very much," said the Margrave heavily, "that the days of rational procedure in Ryovora may be finished. It would appear that the populace are already treating Bernard Brown as a god; unless, then, we arrive at disproofs adequate to disabuse them, life in Ryovora is doomed to become insufferable."

"Hah!" said Gostala without mirth.

"I have a suggestion," ventured Eadwil. "A god is reputed to have knowledge and power beyond what men may command. Let us therefore interrogate Bernard Brown on the most recondite and esoteric of our arts. If he fails to answer well, let us challenge him before the people, so that it may be seen his talents are small compared to ours."

"The proposal is rational," admitted the Margrave. "As I said, however, the days of rational thought here may be numbered.... However, if there is no better idea-?"

None was forthcoming. Accordingly, the company betook themselves to the newly converted temple, that had formerly been the palace of the Margrave.

They found Bernard Brown-much worried, to judge by his expression-seated on a large silver and ebony throne above an enormous improvised altar. Before this throne the townsfolk were coming and going with gifts. Their most prized possessions were heaped about his feet, from their inherited table-plate to their newest garments. On the altar were piled luscious fruits and choice cuts of meat, together with bottles of delicious wine. Bernard Brown was sucking at one of the fruits and attempting to question the people. But they would not answer him; they merely listened respectfully, then went and wrote down what he said, with a view to creating a canon of mystical precepts.

The newcomers paused in the great hall to examine what had been done, and Eadwil spoke privily to the Margrave.

"Has not Tyllwin been here?" he said under his breath.

"You are right!" confirmed the Margrave. "I can scent his power in the air. Now what snare has that devious personage laid in our path?"

He advanced towards the altar. Taking his stand some ten feet away-because of the heaped-up gifts- he raised his voice and addressed the putative god.

"Sir! We are the nobility of Ryovora, come to determine whether or no you are a god, as the populace maintain!"

Bernard Brown gave a cautious nod. "I was advised about your intention," he confided. "And I have

been warned not to deny the possibility. Since meeting with Jorkas on my way here, I have acquired a healthy respect for the advice I am given hereabouts, no matter how lunatic it may seem. Contrariwise, however, being honest, I must state that prior to my arrival in your city the notion that I might be a god had never crossed my mind."

The Margrave exchanged frustrated glances first with Eadwil and then with Ruman, who snorted characteristically and called to Bernard Brown.

"Are we to take it, then, that you believe it possible you're a god?"

"I don't know what to believe," said Bernard unhappily. "Until yesterday I had always pictured myself as a perfectly ordinary man. But certainly I am not ordinary in this world, wherever and whatever it may be."

"Come now!" said Ruman, bridling. "This is a reputable and well-regarded city! Or was, until you chose to intrude on its traditional sober existence."

"I chose nothing of the sort, if you will forgive my contradicting you," Bernard sighed. "All I want is to be allowed to go home!"

"This does not sound like the utterance of a god," the Margrave muttered to Eadwil, who nodded.

"Sir," he said to Bernard, "we wish to determine your powers. Are you acquainted with the Book of Universal Shame, and can you conjure from it?"

By now, the townspeople had ceased their going and coming before the altar, and were gathering in silence to listen to this discussion. It was plain that a few of them were unconvinced, propitiating Bernard only by way of insurance, as it were.

"I never heard of it," said Bernard, swallowing.

"Then of the Book of Three Red Elephants? Perhaps of the Casket of Disbelief?"

To each name Bernard shook his head.

Eadwil turned smiling to the Margrave. "It is most unlikely that he is a god!"

Then in their turn Petrovic, Gostala and Ruman questioned Bernard about the most esoteric wisdom known to them-which implied the most esoteric wisdom known to anyone. Some few individuals surpassed the enchanter of Ryovora, such as Manus, but those persons were far beyond the commerce of everyday life and chose to exist alone with their powers, not intruding on mundane affairs.

To each inquiry Bernard was constrained to reply in the negative, and in the watching crowd some began to stare significantly at Brim. The locksmith grew more and more flustered and annoyed, until at last, when Ruman had completed his questioning, he strode forward and faced the altar challengingly, hands on hips.

"Let's have it straight!" he bellowed. "Are you a god, or is this false pretenses?"

"I-I was advised not to deny it," said Bernard tentatively, and the Margrave clapped his hand to his forehead.

"Fool that I am!" he exclaimed, and thrust Brim to one side, ignoring the fellow's complaint. "It was Tyllwin who advised you thus, was it not?"

"I don't suppose it can do much harm to say who it was," Bernard decided reflectively. "Uh-whether it was Tyllwin or not, I'm unsure, for he gave me no name. But I can describe him: a very charming elderly gentleman, with a wisp of white beard clinging at his chin."

"Manuus!" exclaimed several persons together, and the Margrave whirled to face his colleagues.

"How many of you had seen Tyllwin before yesterday?" he demanded.

"Why-" began three or four speakers, and as one fell silent with expressions of amazement.

"You have it!" snapped the Margrave. "He was there, and some enchantment persuaded us he was seated by right and custom. But I for one now realize that I have no other knowledge of Tyllwin. Well, then! So Manuus is behind all this! We must go to him and tell him that he is not permitted to meddle in Ryovora's affairs. If he chose to live among us as a responsible citizen, that would be a different cauldron of spells. But as things are, we can only respect his privacy so long as he respects ours."

There was much shuffling of feet. With juvenile dignity Eadwil spoke up. "Margrave, I regret that I dare not face Manuus in this connection. My powers are inadequate as yet. I hate to shelter behind my youth-but."

And he took his leave.

One by one, shamefacedly, the others of the council followed his example, until the Margrave was left by himself, and the townsfolk, having garnered from these events only that the nobles had failed to disprove Bernard's divinity, hastily resumed their self-imposed tasks.

"A fine lot we breed in Ryovora!" exclaimed the Margrave scornfully. The scorn was a mask for his own forebodings; he was less of an enchanter than many who served under him, having achieved his eminence on administrative skills. But nonetheless he was a resolute man, and accordingly he summoned his train and set forth to beard Manuus in his castle.

The mists parted in such fashion as to imply that this call was not unexpected, and having left his attendants huddled together in the great yard he ascended to Manuus's sanctum with determined steps. There the enchanter greeted him with warm expressions of respect.

But the Margrave was ill at ease in this place of uncomfortable forces, and came to the point as quickly as manners would permit. He said firmly, when he had the chance, "Sir, since you are Tyllwin's master you know my errand."

"Correction," the enchanter parried blandly. "I am Tyllwin. I have certain other natures beside my own-a trait which I share with all persons save one alone."

The Margrave made an appropriate sign at the mention of him who has many names but one nature, and pressed on with what he had to say.

"We will not tolerate interference, sir," he declared. "Since time immemorial we in Ryovora have striven to create a tradition of calm rationality, and to rely upon hard sense. This petty trick of intruding a so-called god like a gaming-piece into our affairs is hardly worthy of a gentleman of your distinction."

"I agree," said Manuus. "And you may therefrom deduce it is not of my choosing."

"What?"

"In this matter," the enchanter continued, ignoring the exclamation, "you and I are on the same side: so to say, the outside. It will perhaps interest you to know that he of whom we were speaking a moment ago-whose nature is single-was sitting in that chair only two days ago."

The Margrave shivered, and wondered what he had stumbled into. He said respectfully, "Manuus, your powers are beyond imagining!"

"Oh, he did not come at my bidding!" With a thin chuckle. "Rather the reverse!"

"However that may be, I shall take leave of you," said the Margrave, rising and bowing. "For if this matter is his concern, I dare do nothing to intervene."

Manuus shook his head, his eyes twinkling. "I am afraid you have no choice, Margrave," he said. "Like it or not, you and I are both concatenated in this web."

At which the Margrave departed, his heart so heavy he could barely lift his boots, and when he was gone Manuus fell to ceremonies of a land that had not been performed in living memory, and strange phenomena attended them. There was a storm on peaceful Lake Taxhling; in Barbizond, three madmen ran screaming through the streets; on a hill near Acromel, dust-devils ceased their whirling. Last, but not least, several persons in Ryovora itself saw visions of a disturbing nature, and went hastily to the new-designated temple to place yet more offerings at the feet of Bernard Brown and to consult the already sizable record of his sayings.

Studying them, they found no comfort.

VII

And thus the matter was to remain for another day. The Margrave, making as was his custom the best of a bad job, called up an obliging spirit and had a pavilion built in the Moth Garden to serve as a temporary surrogate for his palace; there he sat, swearing mightily, far into the night, while he pondered the information Manuus had divulged.

Those other nobles of Ryovora who were best skilled in the art of magic met to discuss in low tones over their wine the riddle of distinguishing divinity from humanity. They remained unswayed by both the clamor of the populace, led by Brim, and the scant evidence furnished by their interrogation of Bernard Brown. It seemed implausible, they allowed, that such a person should be a god; nonetheless, one must respect the powers of Manuus, and perhaps in the mood to make a jest of Ryovora he could have conjured up an authentic deity....

The common folk, similarly, found themselves impaled by a dilemma. However, they had been longing for a god of some sort for a considerable while; indisputably someone strange had come among them, preceded by complex indecipherable omens, and it was generally deemed advisable to act as though he were a genuine god until some incontestable argument to the contrary should be advanced.

So the night passed; and of those many who spent it restlessly, not the least fervent seeker of repose was Bernard Brown, for all that his couch was a vast stack of gorgeous offerings in velvet and satin.

It had been centuries since another city had marched against Ryovora. The citizens had long ago deduced that their best protection was their reputation; who after all would dare attack that city where pre-eminently the populace enjoyed the gift to plan and reason?

Perennially cautious, nonetheless, they financed the wages of a team of watchmen... and next day as dawn was breaking the current incumbent of the watchman's post en route to his customary breakfast gave a casual glance across the country separating Ryovora from Acromel.

And saw with astonishment-not to mention disbelief-that a red idol a hundred feet high was striding with enormous yells towards him.

Such an idol, the watchman realized, could be none other than the Quadruple God of Acromel.

Around the monstrous crimson feet were fetters of riveted steel; before and behind, men went with blazing torches on poles fifty feet long, prodding and driving it in a desired direction. Sometimes the thing's yelling howled into a ridiculous falsetto when a torch made contact with its blood-colored limbs, and the drovers had to scatter and flee from the blows of eight gigantic fists. But they returned, and it became plain to see that they now well understood the actions of their idol, and could drive it like a maddened bull because its rage made it unthinking.

The watchman sounded an alarm, that spread through the streets of Ryovora like flood-waters through a burst levee, and men, women, even children leapt from sleep to dash hither and thither in confusion.

One by one the nobles were summoned, and assembled on the ramparts in an impressive band; thousand by thousand the common folk acquired makeshift weapons-knives, scythes, axes-and numbered off into centuries to prepare for battle.

So arrayed they waited tensely while the sun cleared the horizon and the Quadruple God with his attendants came to take station before the city walls.

At a sign from one who seemed to be the leader, the torch-wielders compelled the god to halt, and he stood screaming empty threats at the unresponsive sky. Then this same man advanced to stand on a small knoll and gaze insolently at the nobles of Ryovora.

"Greetings!" he called merrily. "News has come to us in Acromel that you have been fortunate enough to acquire a god in the past few days! Well, as it happens we in Acromel have been fortunate in more ways than one-we have lost Duke Vaul, who had for many years oppressed us, and we have gained power of the Quadruple God." The man gestured over his shoulder at the misshapen idol.

"It seems to us," the spokesman went on, "that our god is very foolish, although extremely strong. It is said that your god is weak, but extremely wise. We have not been able to make head or tail of these cryptic utterances which have been relayed to us! Regardless of that, we wish to try conclusions and thus determine whether brute strength in a god is a quality superior to sageness. I await your answer, sirs and ladies! Failing this trial, we shall of course goad the Quadruple God into Ryovora, and since he overtops all but your highest towers, I suspect that would be a major misfortune for the city."

He bowed with a flourish of his right hand, and descended from the knoll.

The Margrave, scowling so deeply it seemed a ploughshare must have crossed his brow, called the nobles into conference on the ramparts, and spoke worriedly concerning this challenge. Some were of

opinion that if the personage with many names and one nature had taken a hand, there was nothing any of them could do; others poured scorn on this faint-hearted attitude, among them Ruman, whose bull laugh echoed around the walls.

"Never say die!" he boomed. "Some magic is of an order that will bind even gods, and I have important knowledge of this magic. Go, fetch me a black goat and a white pigeon, and a mirror cracked from edge to edge, and I will discomfit the Quadruple Idiot over there!"

So it was ordained, and Ruman withdrew into a large black cloud with his goat, his pigeon and his mirror, and what he did to them brought about thunderclaps.

But eventually the cloud blew away, and there was no trace of Ruman.

"This is ridiculous!" said Gostala with feminine directness, and Petrovic nodded his old dried-up head.

"I agree," he rasped. "Goats, forsooth! Pigeons! Mirrors! Claptrap! Now I came prepared, Margrave- I have here a phial containing the blood of an unborn child. That and my knowledge are all I require."

Then Petrovic set about his task, and did what he had to do in the sight of all, which was most disturbing. The Margrave, trying not to watch, wished Petrovic had had the decency to conceal himself as Ruman had done.

Yet the business failed, and Petrovic returned to them at last speaking a tongue no one could understand, and burst into tears when he realized what had transpired. The great red idol still fumed and howled and shook his chains.

"Igoroth!" said Gostala in exasperation. "Dumedinnis! And likewise Algorithon!"

Three odd-looking gentlemen-one in blue, one in white, one in green-walked through a nearby wall and stood before her. None of them was entirely normal in appearance, though it was hard to say in what particular respect.

"Get rid of that-object!" directed Gostala forcefully.

The three peculiar personages looked at her, then at each other, then at her again. Premeditatedly, they shook their heads, and departed, taking her with them.

The Margrave hastily hurled a protective charm about the city, to guard against a re-appearance of the three-for they were notoriously tough to tackle-and bit his lip in frustration. This was a bad business altogether, and the worst fears he had carried away from his interview with Manuus were being overfulfilled.

"These are indeed magics to bind a god," said Eadwil, his boyish face white and strained because his feet were blazing hot-he had walked from his dwelling when news of the attack was brought. "But are they magics to bind one such as Manuus? Margrave, I think Tyllwin may be found in the vicinity."

"You are a true citizen of Ryovora," the Margrave said with enthusiasm. "That is clear reasoning."

He strode forward to the battlements and cupped his hands around his mouth. "Tyllwin!" he bellowed towards the Acromel party. "Tyllwin, ha!"

An acre of grass turned brown and died, while songbirds that had been chanting in the trees nearby fell stiffly from their perches. And from the besieging company the gaunt figure of Tyllwin was borne into view on the back of a brawny slave.

"You desire speech with me, Margrave?" said that scarecrow form.

"So this is your doing!" exclaimed the Margrave in disgust.

Tyllwin's thin chuckle carried clearly to his ears; also to those of various dogs, causing them to howl.

"Why, Margrave, did I not state that you and I are on the same side in this matter? Admit frankly that the pretended god in your palace is not to your taste! Admit that it is in our common interest to show his fallibility by matching him against this perfectly genuine god from Acromel!"

"It's for this reason that you have destroyed three of the leading enchanters of our city?" bellowed the Margrave. "Why could you not have left us to deal with the matter ourselves?"

Tyllwin's voice was suddenly as dull as doom. "Because he whose nature is single has a hand in the affair."

He fell silent. A horse neighed into the quietness, and the neigh became a scream of agony.

The Margrave looked helplessly at Eadwil, who shook his head. "Against Manuus, which of us can stand?" he said. "Moreover, the business is escaping our control. Look down into the street. The townsfolk have gone to fetch their god, supplicating him for protection."

Indeed, down the broad avenue leading to the main gate, they saw a pressing throng of men and women, and among them a figure in outlandish attire who was crying out for aid and receiving none. Brim the locksmith could be discerned grasping his elbow, hurrying him willy-nilly along, and occasional voices rang out distinct above the general uproar.

"Save us! Defeat the enemy god! We have no hope except in you!"

"Hah!" said the Margrave in mingled pity and annoyance. "So nothing will convince them the wretch is not a god, but that he be laid low by the Quadruple One. Well, at least we now know which way the lot is cast."

Eadwil mustered the ghost of a smile. "I wonder!" he said. "I wonder...!"

Shortly the leaders of the crowd opened the gates, and poured forth onto an open level space where they could confront the menacing array of troops from Acromel. On seeing those armored ranks-for the enemy had doubtless made careful preparations, whereas the folk of Ryovora had been surprised-many felt qualms and tried to draw back, but the press was too great, and at length the mass of them, in number three or four thousand, simmered and seethed but stood still.

Urging his god forward, and sweating, Brim the locksmith made a path to the front of the crowd. "There!" he bellowed, throwing up his arm to indicate the hideous red idol. "That's the best they can muster against you! Hark at his howling! Why, already he fears your mere presence!"

"I must go down," said the Margrave in low tones. "I have no stomach to stand and watch the poor fools massacred."

"I will come also," said Eadwil. And accordingly they descended together to the gate. Among muttered threats from the commoners, saying that if these nobles were going to- interfere out of spite they would get short shrift, they elbowed closer and closer to Bernard. The heat of Eadwil's glowing feet helped clear a path.

At last the Margrave was face to face with Bernard Brown, and cast on him a look full of sympathy.

"This is none of our doing," he said in apologetic tones. "It seems that the people of Ryovora, so long reputed sensible, have finally taken leave of their senses."

Bernard Brown blinked unhappily at him. "I think you are right, sir," he agreed. "Especially since this galumphing monstrosity is plainly nothing more than an overgrown child."

"A what?" said the Margrave, and Eadwil was seen to be grinning almost from ear to ear.

"An overgrown child," repeated Bernard patiently. "Why, he howls and strikes out and breaks things at random-this is not the behavior of an intelligent, adult personality! Moreover, one must assume that the folk of Acromel have attempted to establish communication with the idol, must one not?"

"Why-ah..." The Margrave was bewildered. "One would imagine so, yes!"

"Yet their preferred mode of communication proves to be torches on sticks." Bernard spread his hands. "I deduce that we have here a case of arrested development, and what I would propose..."

VIII

Wave upon wave of laughter rang out around the walls of Ryovora, and at once the citizens, led by the Margrave, set about implementing Bernard's plan. Eadwil stood a little apart, his lips set in a smile that bid fair to become permanent.

Meanwhile, the sky grew to full brightness, and the sun hoisted itself towards the meridian. Among the ranks of those from Acromel a certain impatience grew manifest. The long torches which served to goad the idol were withdrawn one by one, soaked in fresh pitch, and re-lit; the chains which tethered his sixteen limbs were anchored firmly to posts hammered in the ground, so that the teams of men afoot and ahorse who weighed him down when he was on the move might relax for a while; but in the comings and goings of the people, there was more restlessness than purpose.

Ultimately, towards mid-day, the spokesman who had previously addressed the nobility of Ryovora again ascended his knoll and called for the Margrave. Sweating from his work, hands filthy, his richly embroidered sleeves turned back above his elbows, the Margrave leaned over the ramparts and gave a wave.

"Margrave! Our god is restive! Time wastes, and we desire to know the outcome of this affair!"

The Margrave glanced down into the avenue below the wall, where work was proceeding apace under Bernard Brown's direction. Far below him, Eadwil raised an arm in signal that all was ready.

"Good!" said the Margrave to himself, and called to the spokesman for Acromel.

"Our city's god is prepared to meet yours!"

The man from Acromel at once spun on his heel and yelled to those charged with loosing the Quadruple God's chains. A moment passed; then, from the front of the crowd before the gate, diffidently yet with unfaltering strides Bernard Brown marched out towards the enemy.

A gust of merriment ascended, and the welkin echoed with scornful gibes. But Bernard kept on marching towards the Quadruple God.

And the Quadruple God paid him no attention.

Behind the approaching man, behind the ramparts of the city, another figure was appearing-a figure so gigantic, so bloated, so huge that the Quadruple God seemed a mere ant by comparison. This apparition had a head with teeth twenty feet long in its gash of a mouth; it had arms like a hundred barrels, it had legs planted either side of a tall building.

This figure was growing. It was rising as though from the depths of the earth, and all four heads of the Quadruple God were striving to fasten their eyes on it at once.

Gracefully, considering its incredible bulk-thanks to an afterthought of Eadwil's-the bloated colossus raised its arms into a menacing posture. From the camp of the men of Acromel, the naked eye could not detect the fine silk cords governing its motions.

And then this construct of inflated wineskins, of paint and cane and waxed fabric supported with hot air, spoke with the massed voice of all the citizens of Ryovora, a voice like the crashing of a waterfall.

"Go away!" said the monster with terrible emphasis.

And the Quadruple God burst his chains, stamped on the torch-bearers, and fled.

Only once was his panicky progress interrupted before he regained the familiar sanctuary of his temple at Acromel on the far horizon. That was when a gaunt and scarecrow-like person rushed into his path, crying in a voice which though thin and reedy caused cracks to open in the surface of the land, and strange colors to muddy the clear blue of the sky.

The Quadruple God trampled this nuisance with three of his eight massive feet, and left nothing but a smear like a crushed beetle to mark the spot.

Triumphantly, the people of Ryovora went forward in the wake of the people of Acromel, and with their ad-hoc weapons wrought considerable havoc among the laggards. Not the most tongue-tied of them was Brim the locksmith, who spent more breath on yelling praise of his own perceptiveness than on catching up with the rearguard of the enemy.

But certain of his fellows who had been lukewarm in their acceptance of Bernard Brown as a ready-made god turned aside to surround Brim in a hostile manner. "Nonsense!" they said emphatically. "If we had not been lured by fools like you away from our customary trust in common sense, we should have seen what he saw and done what he advised, anyway."

Then they set about Brim with meticulous thoroughness, and impressed the extent of his stupidity upon him, in such fashion as to ensure he could never again overlook these various mementos. That chore attended to, and the other party in utter disarray, they returned with satisfaction to their homes. By that time the aura of blue depression which had pervaded the atmosphere these many weeks past had

dissipated; the cause for rejoicing which this gave them made them forget altogether about Bernard Brown.

The Margrave and his nobles assembled again in the Moth Garden, and the people began to reclaim the offerings they had set before Bernard's altar, to feast on them and deck themselves in gaudy ceremonial attire. To preoccupy the nobles, though, there were still problems, and Eadwil spoke of the most pressing when they were met.

He said, "I think, sirs and ladies, that the age for enchantments is passing."

The Margrave nodded. So did several others. Some of them glanced at the place which had been-very briefly-Tyllwin's.

"Regard it this way," said Eadwil musingly. "In its nature enchantment, magic, whatever term you give the art, is a survival of the chaos which we know reigned before time. But the imprint of that chaos is fading from the world. The confusion which causes stone idols to walk, elementals to be personified in storm-clouds, humans to blend with animals and spirits to speak from fire and water, is gradually succumbing to that same hard sense on which we in Ryovora traditionally rely."

"Well spoken!" applauded the Margrave. Eadwil gave him a sidelong glance and concluded thus.

"Manuus is-was-whether as Tyllwin or himself, a master of chaos. So are we all in lesser degree. But the greatest master of all has proved to be a simple stranger lacking all acquaintance with the esoteric arts. Colleagues and friends, magic is of the past. Rationality and logic will rule the future." He bent his gaze below the table. "My feet, I may add, have not burned since I arrived at this conclusion. So I think I shall forthwith take steps to set right the other disadvantage consequent upon my command of magic. Excuse me."

And with a hop and a skip he departed in the wake of a saucy-eyed girl who was bearing fruit from the garden to the feast the people were preparing.

Another who was in the Moth Garden was a black-clad traveler, whose face twitched into a satisfied smile when he heard Eadwil's words. He did not need to wait longer or listen more.

On that same knoll from which the spokesman of Acromel's forces had addressed the Margrave, Bernard Brown sat with his chin in his hands, staring gloomily at nothing. His dismal contemplation was interrupted at length by the presence of one who was not a stranger, who stood before him leaning on a remarkable staff.

"I've seen you before," said Bernard slowly. "Well, who are you?"

The black-clad one chuckled. "He to whom the task was given of bringing order out of chaos in this corner of the universe," he replied. "And who are you?"

"I'm not sure I know any longer," admitted Bernard after a pause. "I thought I was Bernard Brown until recently, and that I was a rather ordinary kind of person. But these past few days people have been telling me so repeatedly I'm a god that I've almost been convinced of the idea."

The black-clad man clucked with his tongue. "I'm afraid that isn't true at all," he said. "So-since I was responsible for involving you with all this-I'd better explain."

He sat down companionably alongside Bernard on the knoll, and gestured in the air with his staff. A short distance away, in a pleasant meadow, some clinging ground-mist cleared to reveal the ruins of a castle, smoking quietly.

"An enchanter called Manuus dwelt there," he said. "A person with-so to speak-a vested interest in the chaos which formerly engulfed the entire universe. This sort of thing."

He gestured again, and out of a hill a mile or two this side of Acromel a-a-a... Well, a pair of yellow eyes peered briefly. What could be seen in those eyes defied description. It made Bernard shudder with amazement and repugnance.

"So where am I?" he demanded. "Or is it a question of when am I?"

"Neither. We are speaking of a borderland between chaos, existing in eternity, and reason, existing in time.

At this moment, the balance is uncertain, but it is tipping, bit by bit. You have been quite invaluable in tilting it beyond a crucial point."

"I don't understand!" complained Bernard.

"No matter. If you did understand the nature of chaos, men being what they are, you would certainly be conceited enough to wish to exploit it. This in fact is what those vain enchanters do: turn the forces of chaos to their own advantage. But, logically, to control chaos with reason is to impose lasting order on it. This implies in turn that sooner or later chaos will reign no longer."

Bernard's face exhibited sudden comprehension. "I see!" he exclaimed. "In other words, these magicians or whatever necessarily destroy what they most desire to preserve, by imposing rational control on it."

"You get the point exactly," said the one in black.

"And it's up to you to ensure that things come out right?"

"Alas, yes!"

"Hmm!" Bernard rubbed his chin. "That sounds like a tough chore! Who landed you with it, if I may ask?"

"You may not. I'm very sorry." The tone was final; still, the words were succeeded by a chuckle. This black-garbed fellow was really very pleasant, Bernard reflected. Casting around for the other question he had meant to put, he recalled it.

"Well, then! May I at least ask what it was I did?"

"That, yes! You see, there was dissatisfaction in Ryovora so long as the people felt they had to have "a god. So I gave them one... of a kind. And after all that, they realized their god had done nothing for them which they could not have achieved by using their heads. My compliments, by the way, on the elegant manner in which you demonstrated that."

"I was scared silly," confessed Bernard.

"But you kept your wits about you, and refused to be overawed by mere size. The universe is a big place, and there are many corners of it where chaos on the grand scale still obtains. This, then, is a valuable attitude to inculcate."

Bernard pondered for a while. At last he shook his head and sighed. "I guess I'm actually dreaming," he said. "I can't believe a word you say."

"Congratulations, and thank you," said the black-clad one dryly. "That you can speak thus is an earnest of my eventual success. Sometimes it seems a very long way away."

"What will-if this is the right way to put it-what will happen then?"

"I don't know," said his companion. "Why should I care? I'll have finished my appointed job. And since you have now finished yours..."

When he was alone, the traveler in black stood awhile leaning on his staff of curdled light, gazing at the wreck of Manuus's castle.

Chaos.

He decreed it out of existence. Since Manuus no longer held it tenaciously in being, it disappeared. Across the site the grass grew green and orderly.

The traveler wished that Bernard had not asked his last question. It was discomforting. Now and then he regretted that he must inevitably find out its answer.

Yet it was not in his nature-and his nature was single-to undo anything he had done. Therefore, inexorably, he was approaching that ultimate moment.

He shrugged, and then there was nothing but the knoll and the afternoon sunlight, while people made merry in Ryovora.

two

BREAK THE DOOR OF HELL

"I will break the door of hell and smash the bolts; I will bring up the dead to eat food with the living, and the living shall be outnumbered by the host of them."

-The Epic of Gilgamesh

I

Time had come to Ryovora.

The traveler in black contemplated the fact from the brow of the hill where he had imprisoned Laprivan, more eons ago than it was possible to count. Leaning on his staff made of light, he repressed a shiver. Single though his nature might be, unique though that attribute certainly was, he was not immune from apprehension; his endowments did not include omniscience.

Time had come to that great city: Time, in which could exist order and logic and rational thought. And so

it was removed from his domain for ever, vanished from the borderland of chaos situated timeless in eternity.

The task for which his single nature fitted him was the bringing forth of order; accordingly it might have been expected that he should feel the satisfaction of achievement, or even a mildly conceited pleasure. He did not, and for this there were two most cogent reasons and a third which he preferred not to consider.

The first, and most piquing, was that his duty lay on him: this season followed the conjunction of four significant planets hereabout, and he was setting forth to oversee that portion of the All which lay in his charge, as he was constrained to. And he had grown accustomed to terminating his round of inspection at Ryovora. Lapses and backsliding from common sense had occasionally minded him to alter this habit; still, he had never done so, and to discover that Ryovora was elsewhere annoyed him somewhat.

The second reason was not annoying. It was alarming, and dismaying, and unprecedented, and many other distressing epithets.

"In sum," the traveler in black announced to the air, "it's unheard-of!"

Another city had arisen in the borderland of chaos, and it was stamped all over with the betraying mark of Time.

How was it possible? Carried in some eddy whose flow ran counter to the universal trend, so that from reason and logic it receded to the random reign of chance? Presumably. Yet the means whereby such an eddy might be created seemed inconceivable. Some great enchantment would be required, and in the grip of Time enchantment was impossible.

"A contradiction in terms!" exclaimed the traveler, speaking aloud again to distract his mind from the third and least palatable reason for regretting the loss of Ryovora. It was known to him that when he had accomplished his task all things would have but one nature; then they would be subsumed into the Original All, and time would have a stop. Beyond which point...

He glanced around him at the hillside. As ever, among the sparse-leaved grey bushes, dust-devils were sifting their substance, fine as ashes, over the footprints he had left on the path. Raising his staff, he tapped with it on a rock: once, twice, and again.

At the third tap the elemental Laprivan of the Yellow Eyes heaved in his underground prison and cracks appeared in the road. From these his voice boomed, monstrous, making the welkin echo.

"Leave me be!"

"What do you know of the city which stands yonder?" said the traveler in black.

"Nothing," responded Laprivan with sullenness.

"Nothing? You say so to spare yourself the pain of memory! Shall I send you where Ryovora has gone, into the domain of Time? There memories cannot be expunged by whirling dust!"

The whole hill shuddered, and an avalanche of pale rock rattled on its further side. The sourceless voice moaned, "What should I know of the city yonder? No man has come from it and passed this way."

"Bad," said the traveler thoughtfully. "Very bad."

After that he was silent for a long while, until at last the elemental pleaded, "Leave me be! Leave me to wipe clean the slate of yesterday!"

"As you wish, so be it," said the traveler absently, and tapped with his staff again. The cracks in the ground closed; the dust-devils resumed their revolutions.

Ignoring all this, the traveler gazed over the green and gracious meadows of the valley. There the strange city lay in noon-tide sunlight like a worn-out toy cast aside by a giant-child. The heedless ruin of Time was everywhere about it, toothmarks of the greatest leveler on brick and stone and metal. It had been fair and rich, that was plain; its gates were of oak and bronze-but the bronze was corroded green; its towers were of silver and orichalcum-but their bright sheen was overlaid with a dull mist like the foul breath of a swamp; its streets were broad and paved with marble-but the flags lifted to the roots of wild plants, and here and there one found holes filled by the rain and noxious with algae and insect-larvae.

Out of Time and into chaos. Almost beyond belief.

At length he stirred himself. There was nothing else for it-so he reasoned-but to set off on his journey of obligation, and come at last not to familiar, welcome Ryovora, but to this enigma wished on him by fate and boding no good whatever.

Anxiety carried him far and fast, and little by little it was mitigated by relief. To learn that Acromel stood where it had, albeit altered; to find that they yet fished Lake Taxhling when the proper stars came out, and that the river Metamorphia fed it with strange unspawned creatures, greedy and unwholesome-this was reassuring, an earnest of balance continued in the cosmos.

And at these places, and many many more, he did what on this as on all his journeys was required of him.

A lonely hut stood on the shelf-edge of a mountain pasture in the land called Eyneran; here when he paused to ask a crust of bread and a sup of ewe's milk from the flock, high and distant as clouds on the steep meadow, a woman with a frightened face opened the ill-carpentered door to him, and met his request with a silent shake of the head.

She was wrinkled and worn out beyond her years; yet the hut was sound, a savory smell filled the air, and the clean floor and many copper pots the traveler could see assorted badly with her ragged gown and bare feet. He waited. Shortly a cry-man-deep, yet edged with a child's petulance-rang out.

"Mother, come here! The pot's boiling over! What's keeping you, you lazy slut?"

"Mintra!" whispered the woman, and a patter of feet announced the passage of a girl, some twelve years old, across the floor to tend the pot.

Another cry, still louder: "Mother, I told you to come here! Mintra can't lift the pot when it's full, you stupid old bag of bones!"

"We can't give you food," the woman said to the traveler. "All of it is for my son."

The traveler nodded, but waited still. Then at last with great heaving and panting the son came into view: gross-bulging in his apparel of velvet worked with gilt wire and stained with slobberings of food, so tall he nearly scraped the roof with his pate, yet so fat he breathed hard for the simple effort of standing upright.

His fist, big as a ham, cracked his mother behind the ear.

"Why don't you die, you lazy old cow, and get it over with?" he bellowed.

"It'd be a merciful relief," the woman whimpered. "And die I would of my own free will, but that I stand alone between you and Mintra! With me gone you'd take her like a harlot, sister or no!"

"And wouldn't she be a tasty bit for my bed?" chortled the son with an evil grin, his tongue emerging thick as an ox's to stroke his lips lasciviously.

"As you wish," said the traveler, "so be it." And he knocked his staff on the threshold and took his leave.

That night the plague stole silent from the mountain mist, and took the mother as the son had wished; then the girl Mintra fled on light feet down the hill-trails and the fever-giddy glutton went calling her among the heedless sheep until his gross weight dislodged a rock and sent him over a precipice to feed the crows.

In the rich city Gryte a thief spoke to curse the briefness of the summer night, which had cut short his plan to break the wall of a merchant's counting-house.

"Oh that dawn never overtook me!" he cried. "Oh that I had lasting darkness whereby to ply my trade!"

"As you wish," said the traveler, "so be it." And darkness came: two thick grey cataracts that shut the light away.

Likewise in Medham was another rogue, striving to seduce a lady who feared her charms were passing with the years so that he might win to a coffer of gold secreted in her chamber. "I love you!" declared this smooth-tongued deceiver. "I'd wed you had you no more than rags and a shack!"

"As you wish, so be it," said the traveler, and bailiffs came down the street to advise the lady that her house and treasure were forfeit on another's debt. Upon which the liar turned and ran, not staying to hear a city officer who followed hard on the bailiffs' heels report the honoring of the debt a day past due.

So too in Wocrahin a swaggering bully came down the street on market-day, cuffing aside children with the back of his hand and housewives with the flat of his sword. "Oh that my way were not cluttered with such riffraff!" he exclaimed, his shoulder butting into the traveler's chest.

"As you wish, so be it," said the traveler, and when the bully turned the corner the street he walked was empty under a leaden sky-and the buildings on either side, and the taverns, and the shops. Nor did he again in all eternity have to push aside the riffraff he had cursed; he was alone.

This, however, was not the sum total of the traveler's doings as he passed from place to place within his realm. In Kanish-Kulya they had built a wall to keep Kanishmen and Kulyamen apart, and from either side, set into the masonry, grinned down the skulls of those dead in a war for which the reason had long been forgotten. In this strange and dreadful place Fegrim was pent under a volcano; shadowed by its cone the traveler halted and spoke long and seriously with that elemental, and when he was done the country for a mile on every side was dusted with cinders, little and bright as fireflies.

At Gander's Well, branched Yorbeth brooded in the guise of a tall tree whose main root tapped a wonderful subterranean spring and whose boughs, fed with miraculous sap, sprouted leaves and fruit the like of which had not been seen under any sun before. The traveler spent an hour in the shade of that tree, and for the questions he asked was constrained to carry away a red twig and later catch a cat and

perform a ceremony with these two items-a price he paid with heavy heart, for he had been told nothing of any great use in his inquiries.

Also he consulted with Farchgrind, and in Leppersley he cast the bones of a girl's foot to read the runes they formed, and after great labor he incarcerated Wolpec in a candle over whose flame he smoked a piece of glass which thereupon showed three truths: one ineluctable, one debatable and one incomprehensible. That was in Teq, when the end of his journey was near.

So presently he came to Barbizond, where there was always a rainbow in the sky because of the bright being Sardhin, chained inside a thundercloud with fetters of lightning. Three courses remained to him: he might free Sardhin and let him speak, and from here to the horizon nothing would be left save himself, the elemental, and that which was of its nature bright, as jewels, or fire, or the edge of a keen-bladed knife; or he might do as once he had done under similar circumstances-address himself to an enchanter and make use of powers that trespassed too far towards naked chaos to be within his own scope--or, finally, he might go forward in ignorance to the strange city and confront the challenge of fate without the armor of foreknowledge.

Some little while remained to him before he needed to take his irreversible decision. Coming to Barbizond, therefore, he made his way down a fine broad avenue where plane and lime trees alternated in the direction of a steel-blue temple. There stood the altar of Hnua-Threl, who was also Sardhin when he chose to be; the people invoked him with daily single combats on the temple floor. They were not a gentle folk, these inhabitants of Barbizond, but they were stately, and died-in tournaments, or by the assassin's knife, or by their own hand-with dignity.

A death had lately occurred, that was plain, for approaching the city gate came a funeral procession: on a high-wheeled cart drawn by apes in brazen harness, the corpse wrapped in sheets of lead, gold and woven leaves; a band of gongmen beating a slow measure to accompany musicians whistling on bird-toned pipes no longer than a finger; eight female slaves naked to the ceaseless warm rain; and last a straggle of mourners, conducting themselves for the most part with appropriate solemnity.

He who passed penultimately of the mourners, however, was a fat and jolly person on each of whose shoulders perched a boy-child, and the two were playing peekaboo around the brim of his enormous leather hat. The traveler stared long at him before stepping out from the shelter of the nearest tree and addressing him courteously.

"Your pardon, sir, but are you not named Eadwil?"

"I am," the fat one answered, not loath to halt and let the funeral wend its way to the graveyard without his assistance. "Should I know you, sir?"

"Perhaps not," said the traveler in black. "Though I know you. I'd not expected to see you here; you were formerly one of the chief merchant enchanters of Ryovora."

"A long time ago, sir," Eadwil answered with a deprecating smile. The two children on his shoulders giggled, and one of them tried to catch hold of the traveler's staff, almost lost his balance, and righted himself with the aid of a pat from Eadwil's broad soft hand.

"May I ask what brought about your change of residence?" the traveler murmured.

"My change of employment," Eadwil shrugged, again nearly dislodging the more venturesome boy. "You spoke of me as a merchant enchanter; so I was! But when the decision was taken, many years ago, to let

rational thought rule Ryovora and put an end to conjurations there, certain consequences followed. For myself I have no regrets; there was a geas upon me which made my feet glow red-hot when I walked, and now nothing worse attends a long tramp like today's than an occasional blister. And these my grandsons too -hey, you little nuisances?-they'd not be here today if I'd continued to submit to the other main restriction which purchased my powers." He rubbed the boys' backs affectionately, and they responded by pulling his ears.

This was quite true, as the traveler was aware. Eadwil had postponed the growing of his beard until unusually late in life by making the trade on which his command of magic had been founded.

"So there came an end to my conjuring of fine silks and spices, of rare wines and exotic perfumes!" Eadwil pursed his lips. "And there were, one must confess, certain persons in Ryovora who felt the lack of these luxuries and accused us retired enchanters of-ha-hm!-betraying them. Therefore I removed to Barbizond. It's a fair city in its way, and even though the local customs are not wholly to my taste, here they do at least have scores of enchanters of their own, so that no one plagues me to be about magical doings.... You have late news of Ryovora, sir? For it comes to my mind that I've heard nothing from my old home in quite a while."

The traveler shook his head and gave a wry smile. "It's a fair span since I set foot there. Indeed, I was hoping you might be able to give me certain information which I lack, rather than vice versa."

Eadwil looked politely downcast at being of no help; then one of the boys grew impatient and started to fidget.

"Home?" said his grandfather, and laughed indulgently. "Very well-old Harpentile is in no state to notice that we failed to attend his burying. Good day to you, sir," he added to the traveler. "It's been pleasant to renew our acquaintance, and I greatly hope you find someone who can aid you in these inquiries where I failed you."

"As you wish, so be it," said the traveler under his breath, and a great weight seemed to recede from his heart.

II

That accomplished, there was no more to 'do than sit and wait until the course of fate worked itself out. The traveler took a chair at a curbside tavern; with his elbows on a green table-top, protected from the rain by a pink umbrella, he watched the passers-by and wondered in what guise his helper would come.

The avenue grew crowded as the day wasted. Horsemen in gay jerkins with armor clanking at their saddlebows came by, challengers in some tourney for the hand of an heiress; also there were pedlars, and wonder-workers possessed of a few small tricks-for which they had paid excessively, to judge by their reddened eyes, pocked cheeks, limping gait or even womanly-shrill voices.... No wonder, the traveler reflected, Eadwil felt his grandsons were the better bargain.

Women, too, passed: high-wimpled dames attended by maids and dandling curious unnamable pets; harlots in diaphanous cloaks through which it was not quite possible to tell if they were diseased; goodwives with panniers of stinking salted fish and loaves of bread and sealed jars of pollywogs for use in the commonplace home enchantments of this city.

And children likewise: many naked, not necessarily from poverty but because skin was the best raincoat under Barbizond's light continual shower, others in fantastical costumes to match their parents' whims-

helmets of huge eggshells, bodices of leaves glued like scales and breeches made to resemble plant-stems in springtime. With spinning windmills, toy lances, tops, hoops and skipping-ropes, they darted among the adults and left a trail of joyful disorder.

There was no joy in the heart of the traveler in black-only a dulled apprehension.

The places at the tables before the tavern filled with customers, until only one was left-the second chair at the table where the traveler waited. Then, to the instant, appeared a curious bewildered figure from the direction of the city gate: a pale-faced, wild-haired man in a russet cape, clinging to a pitiful bag of belongings as though to a baulk of timber in an ocean of insanity. Time had etched his brow with suffering, and the traveler knew him the moment he clapped eyes on him.

Abreast of the tavern the stranger stopped. Enviously his eyes scanned the delicacies placed before the customers: fragrant stoups of wine, mounds of mashed fruit stuck with silver spoons, crisp sheets of the moon-bark that only this city's enchanters knew how to conjure across the freezing gulf of space without spoiling. Huddling his bag under his arm, he felt in his script for money, and produced one solitary copper coin.

Hesitant, he approached the traveler in black. "Sir, by your leave," he muttered, "will this purchase anything at your tavern here?" And proffered the coin on a trembling palm.

The traveler took it and turned it over, and was at pains to conceal the shock he felt on seeing what name the reverse of the coin bore.

Ys!

A city in Time so great and famous that rumors of it had crossed the tenuous border of chaos, running ahead of those who bore its news until the stories were magnified beyond believing, until there were prophecies caused by the recirculation of those rumors through one corner of eternity and back to Time ahead of reality.

"No?" said the stranger sadly, seeing how long the black-clad one spent staring at his only money.

"Why-!" the latter exclaimed, and rubbed the coin with his fingertips, very lightly. "I should say so, friend! Is it not good gold, that passes anywhere?"

"Gold?" The stranger snatched it back, almost dropping his shabby bag in his agitation, and scrutinized it incredulously. Through the coppery tarnish gleamed the dull warm yellow of precious metal.

Without more ado he slumped into the vacant chair at this table, and a waggle-hipped servant-girl came to his side. "Food and drink!" he commanded, letting the miraculous coin ring on the table. "I starve and I'm clemmed with thirst-therefore be quick!"

Eyes twinkling, the traveler regarded his new acquaintance. "And how are you called, sir?" he demanded.

"Jacques of Ys is my name," the other sighed. "Though truth to tell I'm not overmuch inclined to add my origin to my name any longer."

"Why so?"

"Could you wish to be shamed by connection with a cityful of fools?"

"Considering the matter with due reflection," said the traveler, "I think-no."

"Well, then!" Jacques ran his long bony fingers through his already untidy hair; the water had been trying to slick it down, but half an ocean would have been unequal to the task. He was a gaunt man, neither old nor young, with burning grey eyes and a bush of tawny beard.

"So in what way are the folk of Ys foolish?" probed the traveler.

"Oh, once they were a great people," grunted Jacques. "And that's where the trouble started, I suppose.

Once we had a fleet-and not on any land-locked lake, either, but on Oceanus itself, mother of storms and gulls. Also we had an army to guard our trade-routes, skilful money-changers, wise counselors... Ah, Ys was among the noblest cities of the world!"

"I believe I've heard so," the traveler agreed.

"Then your news is stale, sir!" Jacques thumped the table. "Listen! There came changes-in the times, in the weather, in the currents of the sea. To be expected, I say, for did not Heraclitus teach us all things flow? But soft living and much ease had stolen the brains out of the people's heads! Faced with the silting-up of our great estuary, did they go to it and build dredgers? They did not! Faced with a landslide that closed our chief silk-road, did they send scouts to locate another way? They did not! Faced with long winters that killed our autumn wheat in the ground, did they sow barley or the hardy northern oat? They did not!"

"Then what did they do?" the traveler inquired. "If anything."

"Fell first to moaning and wringing their hands, and lamenting their sad fate; then, when this proved unfruitful and incapable of filling the granaries, turned to a crowning imbecility and invoked the impossible aid of magic. I see you scowl, sir, and well you may, for all the world knows that magic is a vain and ridiculous snare laid by evil demons in the path of mankind."

This was a stubborn and unobservant fellow, clearly; with his hand closed around a coin that veritable magic-and no petty domestic hearth-spell, either-had turned from copper to gold, he could still make such an assertion. He would not care for this domain in which he now found himself. Still, there was no help for that.

"And to what purposes tended their research in- ah-magic?" the traveler asked.

"To bring back the great days of the past, if you please," said Jacques with majestic scorn, and on the last word crammed his mouth full from a dish the serving-girl placed before him.

While he assuaged his hunger, his companion contemplated these data. Yes, such an event as Jacques had described would account for the paradox of Ys reversing the cosmic trend and exchanging Time for eternity and its attendant confusions. But there must have been a great and terrible lust in the minds of very many people for the change to be brought about; there must have been public foolishness on a scale unparalleled in the All. Thinking on this, the traveler felt his face grow grim.

Reaching for his staff, he made to depart, and Jacques glanced up with his cheeks bulging. Having swallowed frantically, he spoke, "Sir, did I intrude on your meditations? Your pardon if-"

"No, no! You merely recalled me to some unfinished business. You are correct in your description of the people of Ys. They are fools indeed. So do not-if you will take my advice-go back there."

"Where else shall I go, then?" Jacques countered, and for a second despair looked out from behind his eyes. "I set off thinking no place could be worse than my home-town had now become-yet on this brief journey I've seen wonders and marvels that make me question my own good sense. I met a creature on the road that was neither man nor beast, but a blending; I saw a shining sprite washing feet like alabaster in a cloud rimmed with rainbows; and once when I bent to drink from a stream I saw pictures in the water which... No, I dare not say what I thought I saw." "That would be the brook called Geirion," said the traveler, and appended a crooked smile. "Don't worry- things seen there can never become real. The folk round about go to the brook to rid themselves of baseless fears."

Jacques glanced over his shoulder at the motley crowd and shivered with dismay. "Nonetheless, sir, I'm not minded to remain in this peculiar city!"

"It would be more comfortable for you to adapt to the local customs than to go home," the traveler warned. "A certain rather spectacular doom is apt to overtake Ys, if things are as you say."

"Doom!" cried Jacques, and an unholy joy lit his face. "I told them so-over and again I told them! Would I could witness it, for the satisfaction of seeing how right I was!"

The traveler sighed, but there was no help for it now; his single nature bound him to unique courses of action. He said sourly, "As you wish, so be it. Go hence towards the city men call Acromel, where honey is bitter, but do not enter it. Go rather around it towards the setting sun, and you will reach a gray hill fledged with grey bushes where there are always dust-devils, which will wipe out your tracks the moment you have passed. From the brow of that hill you may behold Ys at the moment of disaster."

"Now just a moment!" exclaimed Jacques, rising. "From my boyhood up I've wandered around Ys, and I know of no such hill as you describe!"

The traveler shrugged and turned away. Jacques caught his cloak.

"Wait! What's your name, that you say such strange things and send me on such an improbable errand?"

"You may call me Mazda, or anything you choose." The black-clad traveler shook off the grip with a moue of distaste.

"Hah! That's rich!" Jacques set his hands on his hips and laughed. "But still... Well, sir, for the sake of wanting to see how Ys goes to its doom, I'll follow your instructions. And my thanks!"

He parodied a bow, flourishing a hat that was not on his head.

"You may not thank me more than this once," said the traveler sadly, and went his way.

III

Lord Vengis sat in the Hall of State at Ys, and gazed at the nobility assembled in his presence. He tried to ignore the sad condition of the hall. Once this had been a building to marvel at: mirrors higher than a man lined its walls, set between pilasters of marble, gilt and onyx, and the arching roof had been painted by a great master with scenes in eleven bright colors, depicting the birth of Saint Clotilda, the martyrdom of Saint Galfroy-that one was mostly in red-and the ascension of Saint Eulogos to heaven on the back of

a leaping dolphin. Moreover the floor had been carpeted with ermine and bear-pelts.

The pelts had gone. Or, to be more exact, some of them had gone away and returned-but in unusual fashion: they had been cut into coats for the nobles, and now enveloped impressive paunches and bosoms with the assistance of gilt girdles. Moreover, half of the mirrors were fly-specked, and some were cracked, while worst of all some of the slabs of marble forming the floor had been prised up to expose crude foundations of rubble-a rumor having run around as to the effectiveness of marble for sacrificial altars-and on an irregularity due to this cause, in an ill-lit corner, Lord Vengis had twisted his ankle en route to his throne.

This place was a condensation of the trouble afflicting the whole of Ys. The harbors that once swallowed the twice-daily ocean tides were blocked with stinking silt; grass grew on the stone moles, as in the wheel-ruts on the fine old roads leading away from the city-at least, according to report; none of the personages present could vouch for the assertion, all having declined to venture out of Ys since things took this turn for the worse. So also in the gardens of the great houses a plant like, but not identical with, mistletoe had spread over the handsome trees, letting fall a horrid sticky fruit on those who walked beneath; in the deep sweet-water wells servants claimed that they heard ominous voices, so that now they refused to let -down buckets for fear of drawing up those who spoke; last week's market had reduced to two old men squabbling over a cracked earthen pot and a comb of dirty wild honey.

Lord Vengis glowered at the company, and they fell silent by degrees. Their attendants moved, silent as shadows, to the double doors of entrance, closed them, barred them against all intrusion-for this was no discussion which common people were permitted to overhear.

With the clanging down of the final bar, one leapt to his feet at the end of the front rank of gilded chairs, uttering a groan and cramming his fingers into his mouth. All eyes turned.

"Fool, Bardolus!" Lord Vengis rapped. "What ails you?"

"In that mirror!" Bardolus gibbered, trying to point and finding his shaky arm disobedient to his will. "I saw in the mirror-"

"What? What?" chorused a dozen fearful voices.

Bardolus was a small man whose manner was never better than diffident; he was accounted clever, but in a sly fashion that had won him few friends and none who would trust him. He said now, mopping sweat, "I don't know. I saw something in that mirror that was not also in this hall."

Time hesitated in its course, until Lord Vengis gave a harsh laugh and slapped the arm of his throne.

"You'll have to grow accustomed to manifestations like that, Bardolus!" he giped. "So long as the things stay in the mirror, what's to worry you? It's when they emerge into the everyday world that you must look out. Why, only the other day, when I was in my thaumaturgic cabinet testing a certain formula, I-But enough of that." He coughed, and behind his polite covering hand glanced to see whether his words had had the desired effect. They had, even though the episode to which he referred was an invention. True, he'd spent much time in his cabinet; true, he'd rehearsed many formulae; alas, nothing had so far come of his efforts, not even a harmless spectre in a mirror.

Still, that would change. One could tell by the feel of the very air. There were forces in it that no man could put a name to, and sometimes scalps prickled as they do before a thunderstorm.

"We are here for a reason you know," he said after an impressive pause. "We are agreed on the only course open to us. We admit that modern Ys stands on the shoulders of great men and women. Yet to what has their ambition led us? Unkind fate has burdened us with such difficulties as they never encountered, and we eat stale bread and rancid meat, where they gorged pies running with gravy and soft delicious fruits from the ends of the earth. We drink plain water, none too clean, where they enjoyed wine and mead, and beer like brown crystal!

"We have concluded that for all their-admitted- greatness, they are responsible, not us! We did not ask to be born at a time when our trees rot, our crops wither, our harbor is blocked. In every way they are responsible: for siting Ys where it stands, for breeding children to inherit such a miserable legacy!"

"Aye!" came a rumble of assent from around the hall.

"Some faint-hearts, some ignorant fools, have argued with us," Vengis went on, warming to a speech he had not intended to deliver. "These, of course, are base-born, lacking the insight which is the birthright of the nobility. Jacques the scrivener, for example, would have had us turn to with hoes and shovels and clear the harbor-and if hoes and shovels were lacking, with our bare hands!"

This time the response lay between a shudder and a chuckle. "What's become of Jacques, by the way?" someone asked audibly.

"Does it matter?" Vengis countered, drawing together his beetling brows. "We know we are adopting the right course. We have decided that we must employ more potent tools than crude-ah-agricultural implements to cope with so massive a disaster. We must, in short, restore all our fortunes, and the splendour of our city, and root out once for all the disaffection among the rabble spread by such as Jacques, by exploiting the mightiest means available to us. Magically, by decree of the will, by harnessing supernatural forces, we shall again make Ys the envy of the world!"

A roar of approval and a barrage of clapping. Unnoticed in the shadows, one listener alone did not applaud; instead, he stood leaning on his staff, shaking his head from side to side.

"Let us have news, then-encouraging news of our progress!" Vengis cried. "I call first on Dame Seulte, around whose home last time I rode by I could not help noticing an aura pregnant with remarkable phenomena."

Silence. At length a portly woman near the back of the hall rose-with some difficulty, for her weight- and spoke.

"Dame Seulte, as you know, is my close neighbor, and as she is not here I think perhaps I ought to mention that yesterday she was in high spirits and confident of success in her experiments. She had obtained a freewill gift of a child to offer to-well, to a creature best not named directly. When I met her, she was leading the pretty thing home on a leash of green leather. Such a sweet sight!"

"Dame Rosa!" said a young man from nearer the front, turning in his chair. "A free-will gift-are you sure?"

And his companion, a pale girl of no more than eighteen in a dress of brown velvet, said doubtfully, "My maid referred to a fire at Dame Seulte's house this morning..."

Vengis slapped the arm of his throne again, making a sound as sharp as a gavel's rap. He said sternly, "No defeatist talk if you please, Lady Vivette!"

"But are you sure it was a free-will gift?" persisted the young man at Vivette's side.

Dame Rosa said stiffly, "Dame Seulte had promised to raise the child as her own, and the parents were poor and hungry; they parted with it willingly."

"Then there must have been a fire at her home this morning," said the young man, and shrugged. "Our copy of the book she conjured from has a leaf that hers lacks, and on it the authorities are cited by dozens. Ingredients obtained by deception are of no avail in that ceremony."

There was a stunned pause. Dame Seulte, after all, had only been trying to manifest a comparatively straight-forward elemental.

"I have more cheerful news," said a sweet, enticing voice from the opposite side of the assembly. They turned gratefully; this was Lady Meleagra, whose eyes like sapphires, lips like rose-petals and skin like snow had broken hearts for ten of her twenty-one years. As Eadwil had once done in Ryovora-though she was unaware of that precedent-she had purchased her ability upon terms. Herself, she had not yet suffered in consequence; she was, though, constrained to impose a most regrettable proviso on anyone who craved to share the pleasures of her bedchamber. It was an efficacious precaution against undesired supernatural intervention, but it had signally reduced the number of her suitors.

"I sense a change here in Ys," she mused aloud. "A great wonder has overtaken this city. So far I do not know its precise nature, but the fact is indisputable. See!"

She extended one graceful arm, swathed in white lace so fine her skin tinted it pink, and in the central aisle dividing the company a thing appeared. It was dark, and it writhed; apart from that it had no describable attributes save two glowing eyes alive with hatred. It lasted half a minute before it slowly faded, and at its going the air was permeated by a dank steamy odor against which those foresighted enough to have brought them buried their noses in bouquets of flowers.

By degrees a clamor arose, and on all sides the nobles strove to show they had been equally successful. "Look!" cried Messer Hautnoix, and between his hands he strung a chain of gleaming bubbles from nowhere, and again, and yet a third time before the glamour faded. And: "See!" cried Dame Faussein, shaking a drum made of a gourd and capped either end with tattooed skin from a drowned sailor; this made the hall pitch-black for as long as it sounded, and all present had the eerie sense that they were adrift in an infinite void. And: "Watch!" bellowed rough old Messer d'Icque, spreading a scarlet cloth at the full stretch of both arms; on the cloth, a mouth opened and uttered five sonorous words that no one present understood.

Smiles greeted these achievements, and loud approbation gave place to a babble of inquiry as to means. "Five nights drunk under a gallows!" boasted Messer Hautnoix-"A day and a night and a day kissing the mouth of the man who bequeathed his skin!" bragged Dame Faussein-"Doing things to a goat I can't discuss with ladies present," Messer d'Icque muttered behind his hand.

"But Ub-Shebbab came to me when I did no more than call his name," said Meleagra, and at these disturbing words those closest to her chair drew as far back as they could without appearing rude.

Vengis on his high throne joined neither in the praising nor in the questioning; his heavy-jowled face remained set as stone. Had he not submitted himself to worse indignities? Had he not made pledges which in retrospect caused him to quail? And what had derived from his struggles? Nothing! Not even a pretty trick-sinness like Messer Hautnoix's shining bubbles!

He thumped on his chair-side again, and cut through the chatter with a furious roar.

"Enough! Enough! Are you children early out of school, that you disgrace our meeting with mere gossip? How far do these cantrips advance us to our goal? That's the question!"

A little embarrassed, the company subsided into a period of asking each other with their eyes whether any was bold enough to claim progress in their central problem. At first they avoided looking at Meleagra; then, no other offer being forthcoming, they took that plunge and were rewarded with a sigh and a shake of the head.

"As I thought!" Vengis crowed in scorn. "You're overwhelmed with bright spectacle, and have forgotten the urgent purpose confronting us. Next time you go to conjure, ask yourselves first this: if I succeed, what comes by way of benefit? Can I eat it? Can I put in on my back, or mend my roof with it? In fine, how will it serve not only me, but the nobility and commonalty of Ys?"

He glared at the now fidgety assembly. "It's not going to be easy, I know that well. I've had no success to speak of, myself. But at least I haven't been diverted down superfluous by-ways!"

The one standing in shadow shook his head once more. Here truly was a company of fools, and chief of them their chief Vengis: a man of consuming arrogance and vanity, blind to his faults and proud beyond description. This being so...

He gave a gentle cough, and heads whisked to see from whom the noise issued. Vengis half-rose from his seat in astonishment.

"What are you doing here?" he thundered. "Who let you in without my leave?"

The traveler in black walked without a sound along the aisle dividing the company until he was face to face with Vengis, and there was that in his eyes which stifled further speech prior to the answering of that double question.

At last he said, "As to what I am doing here-why, I am listening to and pondering what you've said. As to the leave that was granted me to join you, I go where my presence is required, whether you wish it or no."

The ranked nobles of the city held their breath. This was the utterance of one holding an authority they dared not challenge.

"What-what do you want of us?" whispered Vengis when he had regained some of his composure.

"Say rather what you want of me," the traveler riposted with a sardonic cock of his head. "From the confusion of your meeting I've been unable to make it out. Put it in words for me. That is, if you have any clear idea of your ambitions...?"

There was a gently insulting turn to that last phrase. Vengis bridled.

"Of course we do!" he blustered. "Have you not seen the pitiable pass to which our fair city is reduced?"

"I have," acknowledged the black-garbed intruder. "And as nearly as I can discern, you hold your ancestors to be to blame."

"We do so!" Vengis snapped. "And we crave to make them rectify their crime. We seek to call them back, that they may behold the ruin they've bequeathed us, and compel them to set matters right."

"Compulsion is no part of my nature," said the traveler. "I am acquainted only with free choice. Yet you say you have chosen-what then restrains you from action?"

"What do you think?" That was Bardolus, half-frantic with the tension of the moment. "We want the power to bring about this aim, and so far all we've managed to achieve is some minor manifestations and a few personal calamities!"

"Like the one which overtook Dame Seulte?"

"Ah... Well, yes, I suppose!"

"And is this the common desire of you all?" asked the traveler with very great sadness, casting his gaze to the furthest corners of the company..

"Aye!" came the chorus of replies.

"As you wish," said the traveler, "so be it." And he departed.

IV

Where he went, none of them saw. He passed from among them swiftly as thought, silently as shadows, and they had no more stomach for their consultations since he had spoken.

Yet they felt a lightness, a sense of promise, as they called the servants to unbar the doors and made their several ways towards their homes. The streets by which they passed seemed more crowded than of late, and not a few of them had the impression that they recognized among the throng a familiar face, a known gait, or a garment of distinctive cut. However, such fancies were of a piece with the general mood, and served only to heighten the taut anticipation they had brought away from the Hall of State.

"What think you of Dame Seulte's fate?" said the Lady Vivette to her companion-who was also her brother, but they had judged that an advantage in making their earlier experiments. She spoke as their carriage creaked and jolted into the courtyard of their ancestral home, a short ride only from the Hall of State; behind, the hinges of the gates complained of rust and lack of oil when the retainers forced them to.

"I think she was unwise," her brother said. His name was Ormond to the world, but recently he had adopted another during a midnight ritual, and Vivette knew what it was and held some power over him in consequence.

"Do you believe we have been gifted by this-this personage?" Vivette inquired. "I have a feeling myself that perhaps we have."

Ormond shrugged. "We can but put it to the test. Shall we now, or wait until after dinner?"

"Now!" Vivette said positively.

So, duly, they made their preparations: putting on fantastical garments which contained unexpected lacunae, and over these various organic items relinquished by their original owners, such as a necklace of

children's eyes embedded in glass for Vivette and a mask made from a horse's head for Ormond. Arrayed, they repaired to a room in the highest tower of their mansion, where by custom deceased heads of their family had been laid in state for a day and a night before burial since untold generations ago.

There, in a pentacle bounded by four braziers and a pot of wax boiling over a lamp, they indulged in some not unpleasurable pastimes, taking care to recite continually turn and turn about a series of impressive cantrips. The room darkened as they went on, and great excitement almost interrupted their concentration, but they stuck at it, and...

"Look!" whispered Vivette, and pointed to the catafalque removed to a corner of the room. Under the black velvet draperies a form was lying—that of a man armed and armored.

"Why! Just so, in the picture downstairs, did Honorius our great-grandfather lie when he was awaiting burial!" Ormond snapped, and leapt to his feet to pull back the velvet.

Impassive, a steel visor confronted them. Vivette eased it open, and in the dark interior of the helmet eyes gleamed and a rush of foetid breath escaped. Stiffly, with effort, the occupant of the armor arose from the catafalque.

"Come, my descendants, let me kiss you both," said a rusty voice, and iron arms resistlessly encircled them, though they struggled to get away. "What, have you no affection to your own kinsman?"

There was a hollow hideous chuckle as the embrace grew tighter; the necklace of eyes cracked, like a handful of cobnuts, the horse-mask went thudding to the floor, and spittle-wet lips clamped first on one mouth, then the other.

Both fainted.

When they recovered, the figure in armor was gone, but where it had taken shape on the catafalque lay a manuscript book in bindings of leather and brass, open to the page recording the death of Honorius from a contagious fever against which no medicine was of use, in the three-and-thirtieth year of his age.

Dame Rosa, in her palanquin borne between two white female donkeys, passed the corner on which stood the house formerly owned by Dame Seulte, and drew aside the curtains to peer curiously upward. Sure enough, as her maid had declared, from the window of the room in which Seulte had been accustomed to conduct her experiments, a licking tongue of greasy black smoke had smeared the wall.

She clucked with her tongue. Poor Seulte! Had she but waited another day, she might have enjoyed the fruit of her efforts. That at least was Dame Rosa's belief; she trusted the promise the one in black had made, and looked forward with impatience to the earliest moment she could closet herself with her books and apparatus and rehearse with improvements the most relevant of her formulae.

Her family had in the past been counted among the most lascivious of Ys, and excessive indulgence by its womenfolk in the pleasures of the bed had often threatened to overpopulate the resources of their not inconsiderable estates. Accordingly there was a cellar where surplus children had for generations been discreetly disposed of, not by crude and brutal means but by consigning the problem of their nourishment to the fates. She entered this cellar by a bronze door, which she locked with a heavy key, and passed between rows of wooden stalls in each of which a set of rat-gnawed bones lay on foul straw, gyves about one ankle.

She had chosen this place after much thought. Surely, she reasoned, the point of departure to eternity of

so many spirits must be imbued with a peculiar potency!

Her method of working involved feathers, four liquids of which the least noxious was fresh blood, and long silent concentration while seated on a stool of unique design with no other covering for her ample frame than her age-sparse hair could afford. Briskly she carried out the introductory rites; then she sat down and closed her eyes, shivering from excitement and not from cold.

She had, the books stated, to keep her eyes shut until she had completed the recital of a cantrip that lasted eight whole pages in minuscule script. There were two pages to go when she heard the first rustlings and clicketings behind her. There was one page to go when the first touch came on her fleshy thigh. Desperately wanting to know what marvels her work had brought about, she raced through the last page, and on the concluding word came the first bite.

Thirty starving children mad with hunger, their teeth as keen as any rat's, left gnaw-marks on her bones too.

Bardolus trembled as he piled many curious ingredients high on the charcoal-filled brazier before his mirror. He had chosen the mirror spell out of those known to him because he had, after all, come closest to success with it before-even if he had been taken aback to see a manifestation in the unconstrained mirrors of the Hall of State.

He wished he could find the courage to abandon the entire project, but fear and conceit combined to drive him on. He was beside himself with jealousy to think that a slip of a girl like Meleagra--not to mention that coarse peasant type d'Icque, or stupid complacent Dame Faussein!--had mastered magical powers in such a matter-of-fact fashion, while he still cried out in terror at the consequences of his own thaumaturgy.

He struck a light and ignited the pile. Saturated with the fat of a sow that had devoured her own farrow, it blazed up and gave off a choking smoke that veiled the mirror until it was all consumed.

Then the air cleared, and in the mirror he found a face he knew: that of his mother, who was dead.

"My son Bardolus," she said with fawning sweetness. "Look behind you! There is an oaken cupboard which you have known since you were a child. Press the last knob in the carved design, and a secret drawer will open. In the drawer is that which gave me power over your father. Take it as my gift."

The image faded. A little puzzled, Bardolus hesitated before doing as directed. He remembered his father only dimly; he had been a strange man, alternating between hysterical gaiety and depression so deep he would sit by the hour contemplating a knife or a dish of poison, plucking up the courage to take his own life.

Yet... power.

He pressed the knob and the drawer slid open, revealing a packet made of a strange yellow paper and sealed with green wax. He broke the seal convulsively, and a fine powder spurted at his face, seeming to seek his nostrils of its own accord. He tried to dodge, but that was useless; he inhaled it all, and the packet lay empty on his palm.

Another few seconds, and vast elation filled him. Why, he could do anything! He was ten feet tall, stronger than an ox, more potent than the heroes of legend and so handsome no wench could withstand him if he courted her.

He threw down the packet and raced towards the street.

From the mirror drifted mists, that coalesced into the shape of his mother, and ultimately grew strong enough to lift the empty packet in gnarled old fingers and regard it out of bleary eyes.

"You deserve no better fate than the one who got you on my body against my will," she whispered. "One hour, Bardolus-one hour of delirium! And afterwards despair. For it will be no use hunting for more of this drug, Bardolus! I never compounded more than one dose at a time, and it was by postponing for a day the next mixing that I held power over your father. There is no one to mix it for you, Bardolus! No one at all!"

V

But these were not all the calamities that overtook Ys, that once-fair city. For those whom the black-clad traveler had challenged truly did not know what would rescue them from their predicament, and out of greed and laziness had demanded the utmost they could conceive. Lost in this plethora of manifestations-somewhere-was precisely and exactly what was needful; that much the traveler was bound to grant. But, as he had warned them, he could not compel anyone to do the right thing. Choice was what he dealt in.

And those who made a wrong choice did so because of what they were.

His friends had generally liked Messer Hautnoix, who was engagingly like a child, what with his delight in such toys as the pretty colored bubbles he had displayed in the Hall of State. It was characteristic of him that, compelled to spend five nights under a gibbet for the privilege, he passed the entire time drunk to avoid excessive contemplation of his plight.

Yet when he repaired to his chosen ground of the execution dock and chuckled while he cut the throats of a white cock and a black hen, the one who came to him proved to be the first bearer of his line's name, professionally the municipal hangman, who had so loved his work that more than once he paid the silence of witnesses who would have saved victims from the rope; this being discovered, they had set him swinging on his own gallows at the last.

Much time having passed since he last performed his office, he seized his chance with alacrity, and sunset found Messer Hautnoix dangling from a noose while his forebear walked back to the city gate, rubbing his bloated hands to think of what he could look forward to.

Dame Faussein, who had paid a drowned sailor so generously for the loan of his skin, made further use of her curious little drum when she came home, regarding tried and tested means as superior to any not yet proven workable. It was regrettable-and she certainly did regret it, though not for long-that this time the darkness to which its beating carried her was the musty interior of her ancestral vault, where the warmth of her living body, while it lasted, gave strange solace to an aunt and two uncles whose relationship, now as in their lifetimes, was more complex than the conventional ties of kinship. Her eyes continued to perceive darkness when the three together had lifted off the enclosing marble lid of their mausoleum and gone forth to see how things now stood with Ys.

Messer d'Icque was indeed of peasant stock-that was no secret in Ys. His inclinations were towards country matters, and it has never been any secret anywhere that events transpire in lonely country districts at which the sophisticates of cities would be nauseated or appalled. The whole of his urban residence had been stunk out for weeks by a dung-pile he had had made in the central courtyard, because it was said to

be in the warmth of rotting manure that homunculi came to artificial life. This heap of foulness he ignored today, however; his mind was set on the proper employment of his stock of animelles, a springtime by-product on farms, where sheep and cattle are bred. His plan, moreover, was not to fry and serve them as a seasonal delicacy.

To him, the ritual completed, came a progenitor who had felt the frustration of an aging wife, racked with childbearing beyond the point at which she was capable of assuaging his desires, and who had violated the daughter of his bailiff, it then also being spring. The bailiff had returned early from the task of which animelles were the result, and to avenge the slight on his family's honor had made prompt use of the implement in his hand. For twenty-one generations the sufferer had awaited the chance to afflict on another the operation sustained by himself, and he did so without a by-your-leave. Leaving Messer d'Icque to leak away his life's blood, he thereafter set out to multiply his trophies from all possible male sources.

No word of this had been brought to the beauteous Meleagra when she came home. She had never cared for Messer d'Icque, thinking him rough and ill-bred, and the news that he had involuntarily qualified to share her overnight company would have interested her not at all.

In a boudoir hung with lace draperies, containing a round golden bed and a mirror abstracted from the Hall of State, as being the largest in Ys-which she had mounted cunningly on the ceiling-she caused her maids first to draw curtains at the many high windows, then to light candles which gave off a fragrant, intoxicating aroma. She suffered them to remove her clothing, to prepare her a bath in which she dissolved a handful of polychrome salts, and to sing in harmony while they sponged her from head to toe. Sweetmeats were brought on a white platter and a silver filigree dish, and twenty-four new gowns were displayed before her on the body of a dumb girl who matched the dimensions of her figure.

All the while this was going on, she was musing over a crucial decision: should she, or should she not, act upon the promise the black-clad one had made?

That he had the power to which he laid claim, she never doubted. Two years before anyone else in Ys saw what needed to be done, she had closed a bargain concerning her virginity which she had scrupulously kept- at first partly from fear, but lately out of simple habit.

And what she had purchased by the bargain had enabled her to recognize the single nature of their unaccountable visitor.

A single nature! Surely that must imply its possessor could neither lie nor deceive! In which case she might employ her talents now to produce results compared to which her previous achievements were dross. Her whole life since the age of eleven had been on the edge of a precipice-and there were creatures at the bottom of the chasm which she had eluded only by the most exact pre-planning. Accordingly, the notion of exercising her powers at least once in full foreknowledge of success attracted her. An uncharacteristic yielding to vanity had made her call Ub-Shebbab to the Hall of State; he was the meekest and mildest of the beings she had conjured up, yet her skin prickled when she thought of what might have...

No, that happened only to fools and bunglers. And she was neither. She reached her decision and dismissed her maids. Them gone, she put on a gown which had not been displayed during her bath, worked all over in gold wire with a single sentence in a forgotten language; then she opened a brass chest and took out gifts she had exacted from various suitors before information about her inflexible rule was noised abroad.

There was a twig from Yorbeth, bearing a leaf transparent as glass and a brown, blotched fruit which tinkled like a bell; there was a vial of rainwater caught at the foot of the rainbow overarching Barbizond, that had a trifle of Sardhin's essence in it; there was a block of pumice from the volcano where Fegrim slumbered; there was a jar of grey dust from the hill where Laprivan was shut away; there was a hair from the head of Farchgrind, an inch of candle that had revealed the secret thoughts of Wolpec but had been allowed to burn one instant longer than was safe, and a drawing of two birds and a crocodile made by a possessed child.

Also there was a book.

Following with care the instructions it contained, she danced around her boudoir keening, crawled twice backwards across the floor with a knife between her teeth, and at last cut her forearm and let three drops of her blood fall on the carpet. When she looked for them the stains had vanished.

Nothing else happened in the room. She had expected that; humming, she called her maids back to change her gown for something more conventional and went down to the dining-hall where supper was to be served.

Already as she approached it she could hear the clatter of dishes, the clamor of conversation. That boded a great company. She hurried the last few steps and threw open the door.

Every place at her great table-and there were thirty-six-was taken; the servants had pressed into use benches from the kitchen, too, and the sideboards and the serving-tables were alike packed with a hungry horde. For all the scullions and maids could do, the food, brought on trolleys because there was more of it than a man could lift, disappeared within instants of being set down, and still the howl went up for more. The bread had gone, the meat, the wine; now it was boiled turnips and hedge-greens, broth of bones and barley, and beer much too new to serve by ordinary.

Yet that was not all. Behind, between, among those who ate went others looting. The fine brocade drapes had been torn down to clothe naked bodies, leather-backed chairs stripped to afford protection to sore feet, tapestries turned to cloaks and ponchos. One wild-eyed woman, lacking anything else, had smeared herself with gravy to break up the maggot pallidity of her skin.

Meleagra stood in the doorway for a long heartbeat of time before the chief steward caught sight of her and came running to beg her help.

"Mistress, what shall we do? They are in every room -five hundred of them at the least count! And all, all have claimed the right to what you have, for they say they are your ancestors and this is their home too!"

"My ancestors?" whispered Meleagra. Her eyes, drawn as by a magnet, went to him who had taken her seat at the head of the table, and a silence overcame the entire company.

The one at whom she gazed was a cross-eyed, ill-favored fellow in a dirty doublet, unshaven and with black around his nails. He gave her a smile that displayed gapped yellow teeth, and spoke in a soft voice with a peasant's accent.

"Ah, Meleagra, sure and you set a fine table! This meal which you account an everyday affair matches the grandest feasts we held in times gone by!"

"Who-who are you?" Meleagra choked out.

"You know me not?" The fellow cocked an eyebrow traversed by a scar. "Why, Damien, of course, who built the house and founded the family's fortune in the earliest age of Ys. And. at my side Cosimo, my firstborn here-though I had by-blows aplenty in another town! And Syriax his wife and their children Ruslan, Roland and Igraine; and their children Mark, Valetta, Corin, Ludwig, Matthaus, Letty, Seamus; theirs, Orlando, Hugo, Dianne, twins Nathaniel and Enoch-"

"Stop! Stop!" Meleagra put her hands to her temples; the room seemed to be spinning, and from every side gross faces leered at her, or thin drawn faces gazed with stony regard, or dull faces moped, or...

"There is no more food!" the steward shouted. "We have killed all the poultry, the larder's bare, the wine-casks are drained, the last carp is gone from the pond, the beer-barrels are exhausted and even the well is dry!"

"You've done this to me?" Meleagra whispered to her remotest ancestor Damien. "But I gave you breath and life, and this new opportunity-I invited you here!"

"You?" said Damien with contempt. "Is that the only act of importance you can boast of? Did we your ancestors not build this house, this city, its fair avenues and fine harbors and full stores? Have you done nothing save parasitize upon our leavings? I read in your eyes that that is so! Here we are alive, who died before you saw the light-do you still call yourself the mistress of this house? Hah! You are a thing not worth the thinking of, less than dust, for dust can be seen to dance in sunbeams. You are the flame of a candle guttering out. So-poof!"

He blew at the candle closest him upon the great table, and with the extinction of its flame there was no such person as Meleagra-never had been-never could be.

VI

Long hours Lord Vengis had paced in the high room above the Hall of State, pondering the day's events and screwing himself to the point where he would again begin his conjurations. The day wasted; shadows lengthened; evening cold began to permeate the building, and he called for fire.

He was afraid.

He had seen in the eyes of the traveler in black a warning which his pride forbade him to heed; he was ashamed because he was afraid, yet shame could not break fear's grip. He wished to do as his colleagues were doing-what if he alone remained untalented in sorcery when blockheads like Bardolus or half-grown wenches like Vivette boasted powers unnamable?

Nonetheless, he dithered and delayed, and had not yet cast a rune nor recited the first line of a single formula when the sergeant of the guard came stiffly to report a disturbance in the town.

"Disturbance?" Vengis rapped. "Fool, be precise! What do you mean?"

"Why, sir"-and the sergeant rubbed his chin dolefully-"some hours ago there were complaints of desecration in the graveyard by the cathedral, the curate saying that a vault was open and the bones removed. But seeing as how we've had call for similar extraordinary materials that your lordship required, I decided best not to say anything. Now, though, the affair has ramified. For example, the side wall of the building here is cracked where they entombed alive a woman named Igraine-you've seen the plaque-accused of commerce with a familiar spirit in the guise of a cat..."

From the street below came a howl as of maddened beasts, and the sergeant flinched visibly. But he continued in his best official manner.

"Then, your lordship, at dusk reports came of strangers in the city, and we called out the patrols for fear of infiltration by some jealous invader. Myself, I've stopped twenty-one persons, and all spoke with the accent of our city and gave names concordant with our nomenclature. But it seems I've seen such names on gravestones before nowsome, indeed, earlier today when I answered the complaint at the cathedral. And what brings me in to you, begging your indulgence, is the curious business of the man and the two wives."

"What's that?" whispered Vengis, sweat pearling his face.

"Well, sir, there was this man, one whom I'd challenged, walking with a girl of fifteen-odd. Comes up from nowhere a woman aged as he was-forty, maybe- and says she is his wife and what's this hussy doing with her husband? So then the little girl says they were married legally and then there follows screaming of insults and hair-pulling and at the last we must clap 'em in the jail to cool their heels. Which is-uh-difficult. For every cell, they promise me, is full, and that's more than I can understand. This morning the turnkey's records say there were one hundred and one places vacant for new prisoners."

Vengis's voice had failed him. He chewed his nails and stared with burning eyes at the sergeant.

"What shall I do, your lordship?" the man finally asked.

"I-I..." Vengis spun around and strode to a window overlooking the main square. He thrust the casement open and leaned out. By the last dim light of the dying day he could see a myriad people gathering. Some were colorful and substantial, but these were few. Most were grey as the stones they trod, arid trailed curious wispy streamers behind them, like cobwebs. But all alike exhibited an air of bewilderment, as though they were lost in the mazes of time and eternity, and could not find a way back to the present moment.

Vengis began to babble incoherently.

There came a thundering knock at the door of the room where they were, and a cavernous groaning voice said, "Open! Open in the name of the Lord of Ys!"

Shrugging, the sergeant made to obey, but Vengis ran after him, clawing at his arm. "Don't! Don't let them in!" he wailed.

"But, your lordship," said the sergeant firmly, "it is in your name that he seeks entry, so it must be a matter of importance. Besides, with your permission, I'm expecting a report from my patrols."

Vengis searched the room with feverish eyes. In the far corner he spied a closet large as a man; he dashed to it, and slammed the door with him inside.

The sergeant, astonished, went nonetheless to answer the knock, and fell back in dismay before the apparition which confronted him. Gaunt, tall, with a second mouth gaping redly in his throat, here was the figure of legendary Lord Gazemon who had laid the foundation stone of Ys with his own two hands.

Now those hands held a broadsword; now he advanced with slow terrible steps upon the closet in which Vengis thought to secrete himself, and battered down the planks of the door to hale that miserable successor of his into the wan torchlight.

"You know me!" croaked the city's founder.

Gulping, moaning, Vengis contrived a nod, and the huge spectre shook him as a terrier shakes a rat. "Oh, to what a dwarfish stature have shrunk these weaklings of today!" he bellowed. The sergeant, cowering behind an oaken table, could not tell by which mouth Gazemon spoke-his natural one, or the second which had let out his life.

Again the door rattled to an imperious knock, and he scuttled to answer before Gazemon could address him. With trembling hands he admitted those who stood without: Lorin, who had slain Gazemon by treachery and usurped his throne; Angus, who had reclaimed that throne into the rightful line of descent; then Caed; then Dame Degrance who passed for a man and ruled like one until the physicians at her deathbed unmasked her sex; then Walter of Meux; then Auberon; then Lams, and the first Vengis who was a stout and brave leader for the one short year he survived, and others and others to the latest who had sat the chair below prior to the advent of the incumbent lord.

With axes, maces, swords, with pens and scrolls and money-changer's scales according to the form of power by which they had made Ys great, they gathered around the hapless target of their contempt.

"We have walked abroad in the city since we were called from rest," rumbled Gazemon, his grip still fast on Vengis's shoulder. "We have seen stagnant puddles in the streets, shutters dangling from one hinge on the cracked walls of once-fine houses; we have been followed by beggars and starving children in Ys which we devoted our lives to, making it a city that the world should envy! You have given our golden towers to tarnish, our iron doors to rust; you have given our splendid harbor to the mud and our fat grain-fields to the weeds; you have squandered our treasury on baubles, forgetful that we paid for it with blood. How say you all, you who listen here? Is it not time that we held an accounting?"

"Aye, time," they said as one, and hearing the menace in their voices Vengis rolled his eyes upward in their sockets and let go his hold on life.

VII

"Oh, there you are!"

Perched on a grey rock atop a grey hill, Jacques the scrivener forwent his gazing at sunset-gilded Ys in favor of a scowl at the traveler in black who had come to join him. There were no footprints to show by what path he had arrived; still, where Laprivan wiped away the past that was no wonder.

"I've sat here long enough, in all conscience," Jacques complained. "This wind is cold! And, for all you promised I should witness the doom of Ys, I see nothing but what I've always seen when looking on the city from afar. When will this doom befall, tell me that."

The traveler sighed. Now the course of events was grinding to its inexorable conclusion, he felt downcast, despite there never having been an alternative. He did not much like Jacques, regarding him as pompous and self-opinionated, but even so...

"The doom is already in train."

Jacques leapt from his rock and stamped his foot. "You mean I've missed it?"

"That, no," said the traveler. He raised his staff and pointed across the twilight grey of the valley. "Do you

not see, there by the gates, a certain number of persons making in this direction?"

"Why... Yes, I believe I do." Jacques peered hard. "But from this distance I cannot tell who they are."

"I can," the traveler murmured. "They are those who are determined Jacques the scrivener shall not be denied participation in the doom of Ys."

"What?" Turned sidewise in the gloaming, Jacques's face was ghastly pale. "Why me? What do they want with me?"

"A reckoning."

"But... !" Jacques shifted from foot to foot, as though minded to flee. "Explain! Pray explain!"

"So I will," the traveler conceded wearily, and took a comfortable grip to lean on his staff. "You must understand first that the would-be enchanters of Ys have succeeded beyond their wildest dreams, and-as they desired-have called back those who created the city and maintained it in times past. And they found, as was inevitable, that these ancestors were human beings, with human faults and failings, and not infrequently with remarkable outstanding faults, because this is the way with persons who are remarkable and outstanding in other areas of their lives."

"But-but I counseled against this foolishness!" stammered Jacques.

"No," corrected the one in black. "You did not counsel. You said: you are pig-headed fools not to see that I am absolutely, unalterably right while everybody else is wrong. And when they would not listen to such dogmatic bragging-as who would?-you washed your hands of them and wished them a dreadful doom."

"Did I wish them any worse than they deserved?" Jacques was trying to keep up a front of bravado, but a whine had crept into his voice and he had to link his fingers to stop his hands from shaking.

"Discuss the matter with those who are coming to find you," proposed the traveler sardonically. "Their conviction is different from yours. They hold that by making people disgusted with the views you subscribed to, you prevented rational thought from regaining its mastery of Ys. Where you should have reasoned, you flung insults; where you should have argued soberly and with purpose, you castigated honest men with doubts, calling them purblind idiots. This is what they say. Whether your belief or theirs constitutes the truth, I leave for you and them to riddle out."

Jacques looked again at the column of people winding out from the city gate, and now could see them in detail. At the head of the line was a blacksmith with a hammer on his shoulder; behind him, a ditcher came with a mattock, then a gardener with a sickle and two coopers with heavy barrel-staves. And those behind still bore each their handiest weapon, down to a red-handed goodwife wielding the stick from her butter-churn.

He glanced wildly around for a way of escape, teeth chattering. "I must run!" he blurted. "I must hide!"

"It would be of little help," the traveler said. "Those people yonder are determined; though you hid in the pit of Fegrim's volcano, they would still track you down."

"Oh, misery me!" moaned Jacques, burying his head in his hands. "Would that I had never come to this pass! Would that what I've done could be undone!"

"As you wish, so be it," said the traveler, and cheered up, for that put a very satisfactory end to this momentary aberration in the smooth progress of the cosmos. He tapped three times on a nearby rock, and under his breath he said, "Lapri van! Lapri van of the Yellow Eyes!"

Jacques screamed.

Below in the valley, the column of determinedly advancing men and women bound to wreak vengeance on Jacques hesitated, halted, and broke ranks in disorder that grew to panic. For out of the side of the hill Lapri van was peering, and what was behind his eyes belonged to the age when chaos was the All.

Some small power remained to him so long as he survived, and he applied it to this single and unique purpose: to wipe clean the slate of yesterday.

So he looked down on Ys, and saw there what was to him an abomination, the shadow of the past given substance. He reached out one of his arms, and erased -and erased-and erased...

Honorius, sowing contagious fever on the streets, was not.

Thirty sated children, smeared with blood on faces and fingers, were not.

Bardolus's mother, chortling over the fate of her son, was not.

Knotting a noose from every rope in a cord-seller's shop, the first of the line of the Hautnoix was not.

Brandishing his bloody trophies, the adulterous d'Icque was not.

Three who had come forth from a vault were not.

Stripped of its food, its draperies, its gold and silver and precious artworks, the house of Meleagra was silent.

And those who had come to regulate accounts with the decadent lordling Vengis took their leave.

Also many who had come forth from graves and sepulchres, from hollow walls and wayside ditches, from dungeons and the beds of rivers and the bottoms of wells... were not.

"So!" said the traveler in black, when he had restored Lapri van to his captivity. "You have a reprieve, Jacques-are you glad of that?"

The tawny-bearded man mouthed an affirmative.

"And will you learn a lesson from it?"

"I'll try-as heaven is my witness, I will try!"

"Fairly said," the traveler declared. "Go then to join those hiding in the valley. Approach them as a friend, not showing that you're aware why they set forth bearing bludgeons. Say to them that the rule of chaos in Ys is ended, and so is Ys; they must return home for the last time and gather their belongings before they and all the people scatter to the corners of the world."

"But-but is this our world?" Jacques whimpered. "On the way to Barbizond I saw-and now here..."

"Ah, you'll have no more of that kind of thing. It belongs to yesterday, and with other traces of yesterday Laprivan has wiped it out." The traveler allowed himself a smile. "And do not lament excessively for Ys. For cities, as for men, there comes a Time... Besides, there is a prophecy: a prince shall seek a name for his new capital, and he'll be told of Ys, and out of envy for its greatness he will say, 'I name my city Parys, equal to Ys.'"

"I have little faith in prophecies as a rule," said Jacques, staring. "But in this extraordinary place... Well, no matter. Sir, I take my leave, and-and I thank you. You have held up an honest mirror to me, and I cannot resent it."

"Go now," the traveler adjured. "And be quick."

He waited long on the brow of the hill while the last daylight dwindled away and the stars wheeled gradually to the conformation marking midnight. It became more and more difficult to see Ys; the towers melted into mist, the walls and gates were shadow-dark among shadows. For a while torches glimmered; then even they failed to be discerned, and when dawn broke there was neither the city, nor the traveler in black, for anybody to behold.

three

THE WAGER LOST BY WINNING

What Stake will you adventure on this Game? (quoth Arundel).

Why, Sir, though I be naked and penniless, yet stand I in possession of my Head (saith Amalthea). That prize I in no wise, quoth Arundel. I had liefer win a Cooking Pot than such a Numskull. Wager me in place of it that Treasure, which though you lose it to me shall be yours again when I have done.

-Fortunes and Misfortunes of Amalthea

I

Down the slope of a pleasant vale an army marched in good order: colors at the head fluttering in the warm summer breeze, drummers beating a lively stroke for the men behind perspiring in their brass-plated cuirasses and high-thonged boots. Each of the footmen wore a baldric with an axe and a short-sword in leather frogs, and carried a spear and a wide square shield. Each of the officers rode a horse draped in fine light mail, wore a shirt and breeches of velvet sewn with little steel plates, and carried a long-sword in a decorated sheath. Sunlight glinted on pommels bright with enamel and gilt.

Leaning on his staff, the traveler in black stood in the shade of a chestnut-tree and contemplated them as they filed by. Directly he clapped eyes on them, the banners had told him whence they hailed; no city but Teq employed those three special hues in its flag- gold, and silver, and the red of new-spilled blood. They symbolized the moral of a proverb which the traveler knew well, and held barbarous, to the effect that all treasure must be bought by expending life.

In accordance with that precept, the Lords of Teq, before they inherited their fathers estates, must kill all challengers, and did so by any means to hand, whether cleanly by the sword or subtly by drugs and venom. Consequently some persons had come to rule in Teq who were less than fit-great only in their commitment to greed.

"That," said the traveler to the leaves on the chestnut-tree, "is a highly disturbing spectacle!"

However, he stood as and where he was, neither concealed nor conspicuous, and as ever allowed events to pursue their natural course. Few of the rank-and-file soldiery noticed him as they strode along, being preoccupied with the warmth of the day and the weight of their equipment, but two or three of the officers favored him with inquisitive glances. However, they paid no special attention to the sight of this little man in a black cloak, and likely, a mile or two beyond, the recollection of him would be dismissed altogether from their minds.

That was customary, and to be expected. Few folk recognized the traveler in black nowadays, unless they were enchanter of great skill and could detect the uniqueness of one who had many names but a single nature, or perhaps if they were learned in curious arts and aware of the significance of the conjunction of the four planets presently ornamenting the southern sky in a highly specific pattern.

But there had been changes, and those who recognized him now were exceptional.

The journeys the traveler had made had long surpassed the possibility of being counted. Most of them, moreover, were indistinguishable-not because the same events transpired during each or all, but because they were so unlike as to be similar. A little by a little earnest of his eventual triumph were being borne upon him. Perhaps the loss of Ryovora into time had marked the pivotal moment; however that might be, the fact was incontestable. Soon, as the black-garbed traveler counted soonness, all things would have but one nature. He would be unique no more, and time would have a stop. Whereupon...

Release.

Watching the purposeful progress of the army, the traveler considered that notion with faint surprise. It had never previously crossed his mind. But, clearly, it would be a wise and kindly provision by the One who had assigned him his mission if his single nature should include the capacity of growing weary, so that in his instant of accomplishment he might surrender to oblivion with good grace.

That instant, though, still needed to be worked towards. He waited while the rearguard of the army passed, slow commissary-wagons drawn by mules bumping on the rough track; then, when the drumbeats died in the distance, their last faint reverberation given back by the hills like the failing pulse of a sick giant, he stirred himself to continue on his way.

It was not until he came, somewhat later, to Erminvale that he realized, weary or no, he must yet contend with vastly subtle forces arrayed against him.

For a little while, indeed, he could almost convince himself that this was to be the last of his journeys, and that his next return would find the places he had known tight in the clutch of Time. The borderland between rationality and chaos seemed to be shrinking apace as the harsh constraint of logic settled on this corner of the All. Reason is the step-child of memory, and memory exists in Time, not the arbitrary randomness of eternity.

Thus, beyond Leppersley the folk remembered Farchgrind, and that being's chiefest attribute had been that no one should recall his deceits, but fall prey to them again and again. Yet where once there had been a monstrous pile of follies, each a memento to some new-hatched prank-"Build thus and worship me and I will give you more wealth than you can carry!", or: "Build thus and worship me and I will restore you the health and vigor of a man of twenty!" (the wealth of course being tons of ore and the health that of a paralysed cripple)-there were sober families in small neat timber houses, framed with beams pilfered

from the ancient temples, who said, "Yes, we hear Farchgrind if he speaks to us, but we recall what became of grandfather when he believed what he was told, and we carry on about our daily business."

The traveler talked with Farchgrind almost in sorrow, mentioning this skepticism which had overtaken men, and accepted without contradiction the retort.

"You too," said the elemental, "are part of the way things are, and I-I am only part of the way things were!"

Likewise, though there were hoofmarks on the road which Jorkas had patrolled, they were not his; some common cart-horse had indented them, and rain tonight or tomorrow would make the mud a palimpsest for another horse to print anew. Moreover at black Acromel that tall tower like a pillar of onyx crowned with agate where once dukes had made sacrifice to the Quadruple God was broken off short, snapped like a dry stick. In among the ruins fools made ineffectual attempts to revive a dying cult, but their folly was footling compared to the grand insanities of the enchanter Manuus who once had taken a hand in the affairs of this city, or even of the petty tyrant Vengis, whose laziness and greed brought doom on his fellows and himself.

"Ah, if only I could find the key to this mystery!" said one of them, who had bidden the traveler to share the warmth of a fire fed with leather-bound manuscripts from the ducal library. "Then should I have men come to me and bow the knee, offer fine robes to bar the cold instead of these shabby rags, savory dishes to grace my palate instead of this spitted rat I'm toasting on a twig, and nubile virgins from the grandest families to pleasure me, instead of that old hag I was stupid enough to take to wife!"

"As you wish, so be it," said the traveler, and knocked his staff on the altar-slab the fool was using as a hearth.

In the cold dawn that followed, the wife went running to her neighbors to report a miracle: her husband was struck to stone, unmoving yet undead. And, because no other comparable wonder had occurred since the departure of the Quadruple God, all transpired as he had wished. Men set him up on the stump of the great black tower and wrapped their smartest robes about him; they burned expensive delicacies on a brazier, that the scent might waft to his nostrils; and sought beautiful girls that their throats might be cut and their corpses hung before him on gallows stranded with chains-all of this in strict accordance with the ancient custom.

But after a while, when their adulation failed to bring them the favors which they begged, they forgot him and left him helpless to watch the robes fade and the fire die in ashes and the girls' bodies feed the maggots until nothing was left save the bare white bones.

Likewise, a packman met at Gander's Well complained in the shade of brooding Yorbeth whose taproot fed his branches with marvelous sap from that unseen spring, and said, "Oh, but my lot is cruelly hard! See you, each year when the snows melt, I come hither and with the proper precautions contrive to pluck fruit and leaves from these long boughs. Such growths no sun ever shone on before! See here, a fuzzy ball that cries in a faint voice when your hand closes on it! And here too: a leaf transparent as crystal, that shows when you peer through it a scene than no man can swear to identifying! Things of this nature are in great demand by wealthy enchanters.

"But what irks me"-and he leaned forward, grimacing-"is a matter of simple injustice. Do those enchanters plod the rutted road to Gander's Well? Do they risk death or worse to garner the contents of a heavy pack? Why, no! That's left to me! And what I get I must dispose of for a pittance to strangers who doubtless half the time botch the conjurations they plan to build on what I bring them! Would that I

knew beyond a peradventure what marvels can be wrought by using the means I'm making marketable!"

"As you wish," sighed the traveler, "so be it." He knocked with his staff on the coping of the well, and went aside to speak of release to Yorbeth-that release which he himself was coming unexpectedly to envy. For there was one sole way to comprehend the applications of what grew on this tall tree, and that was to take Yorbeth's place within its trunk.

Where, trapped and furious, the packman shortly found himself, possessed of all the secret lore he had suspected, down to the use that might be made of a sheet of the bark when luring Ogram-Vanvit from his lair... and powerless to exploit that for his gain.

Yorbeth of course ceased to be. Heavy-hearted, the traveler went on.

II

In the mountainous land called Eyneran, where folk were above all proud of their sheep and goats, he had once incarcerated the chilly elemental Karth, thanks to whose small remaining power one strange valley stayed frozen beneath a mask of ice when all around the summer flowers grew bright and jangly music drifted from the bell-wethers of the grazing flocks. Here the traveler came upon a fellow who with flint and steel was seeking to ignite the ice, grim-visaged and half-blue with cold.

"Why," inquired the traveler, "do you lavish so much effort on this unprofitable pastime?"

"Oh, you're a simpleton like all the rest!" cried the man, frenziedly striking spark after spark. "Is it not the nature of ice to melt when the hot sun falls on it? Since what is in this valley does not melt, it cannot be ice. Certainly, moreover, it's not stone-it differs in significant respects from rock-crystal, quartz, adamant and fluorspar. Therefore it must be of an amberous nature, QED. And amber is congealed resin, and resin burns well, as any drudge knows who has lit a stove with pine-knots. Accordingly this so-called 'ice' must burn. Sooner or later," he concluded in a more dispirited tone, and wiped his brow. The gesture made a little crackling noise, for so bitter was the wind in this peculiar valley that the sweat of his exertion turned at once to a layer of verglas on his skin.

The traveler thought sadly of Jacques of Ys, who also had been persuaded that he alone of all the world was perfectly right, and suppressed his opinion of the would-be ice-burner's logic. Sensing disagreement nonetheless, the fellow gave him a harsh and hostile glare.

"I'm sick of being mocked by everyone!" he exclaimed. "Would that the true nature of this substance could become clear for you and all to see!"

"As you wish, so be it," said the traveler, realizing that the time of release had come also to Karth. With the cessation of his dwindled ancient power, sunlight thawed the glacier and warm zephyrs fathered water from its edge.

The man looked, and touched, and tasted, and paddled his hands in it, and cried out in dismay.

"If this is. water, that must have been ice-but that was not ice, therefore this is not water!"

Spray lashed him; rivulets formed around his ankles.

"It is not water," he declared, and stood his ground. But when the pent-up floods broke loose they swept him with his flint and steel far down the hillside and dashed him to death on a rock that was deaf to his

entreaties.

Aloof, the black-clad traveler stood on a promontory and watched the whirling waters, thinking that he, so aged that there was not means to measure his duration, knew now what it meant to say, "I am old."

So too in Gryte, a fair city and a rich one, there was a lady who could have had her choice of fifty husbands, but kept her heart whole, as she claimed, for one man who would not look at her, though he had wooed and conquered maidens for leagues around.

"Why does he scorn me?" she cried. "He must be hunting for a wife who will give him surcease from this endless philandering! Can he not come to me, who hunger for him?"

"As you wish, so be it," said the traveler, and next day the man she dreamed of came a-courting her. She pictured all her hopes fulfilled and made him free of her household and her body. And the day after, he treated her as he had treated the rest: rose from her couch where he had taken his pleasure, not sparing a kind look or a kiss, and left her to wring her hands and moan that she was undone.

Likewise there stood a gravestone in the cemetery at Barbizond, under the arch of rainbow signaling the presence of the bright being Sardhin. Grass by it flourished in the gentle never-ceasing rain. The traveler visited it because he owed a particular debt to the man beneath, who full of years and honor had gone to his repose.

Turning away, the traveler was addressed by a person in a cape of leaves who might have passed at a glance for seven years of age, either boy or girl.

"Good morrow, sir!" this person chirruped in a treble voice. "Think you to brace yourself for death by contemplating all these tombs-or have you cause to wish it might overtake some other before yourself?"

"In the latter case, what?" the traveler said.

"Why, then, I could be of service," the person said slyly. "I have been for thirty-one years as you see me-dwarfed, sexless and agile. What better end could I turn such a gift to, than to become the finest assassin ever known in Barbizond? You stand surrounded by testimonials to my skill: here a miserly old ruffian whose daughter paid me half his coffer-load, there an eldest son who blocked his brother's way to an inheritance-

"You speak openly of this foul trade?"

"Why, sir, no one is around to hear me save yourself, and would folk not think you deranged were you to claim a child had boasted of such matters to you?"

"In truth, your childish form is a deep disguise," the traveler conceded. "But tell me: do you speak to me merely to solicit new custom, or because that disguise grows oppressively efficient?"

The person scowled. "Why, I must confess that from time to time the very secrecy which benefits my calling does gall my self-esteem. I gain my living in a unique manner, but no one knows I'm the ultimate expert at my trade save those whom I have served, who dare not admit that they know it. Would that I might be famed far and wide as the past-master of my profession!"

"As you wish, so be it," said the traveler, and struck his staff against the nearest tomb. That very evening rumors took their rise in Barbizond, and everyone who had lost a relative in suspicious circumstances, to

a poison subtler than the enchanters could detect, or a silent noose, or a knife hissing out of shadow, nodded their heads and remarked how marvellously well the appearance of a child of tender years might mask a killer.

The traveler passed the body next morning, sprawled on a dung-heap by the road to Teq.

Will it be now? The question haunted the traveler as he went. With half his being he was apprehensive, for all he had ever known throughout innumerable eons was the task allotted him; with the balance he yearned for it. Karth gone, Yorbeth gone, Jorkas gone-would there shortly also be an end for Tuprid, and Caschalanva, for Quorril and Lry and Laprivan of the Yellow Eyes?

On impulse, when he came to the grove of ash-trees at Segrimond which was one of the places where such things were possible, he constrained Wolpec to enter the customary candle, but when he tried to smoke a piece of glass over its flame and read the three truths therefrom, the glass cracked. With resignation he concluded that this was not for him to learn, and went his way.

In Kanish-Kulya the wall that had once divided Kanishmen from Kulyamen, decked along its top with skulls, had crumbled until it was barely more than a bank enshrouded with ivy and convolvulus, and roads pierced it along which went the gay carts of pedlars and the tall horses of adventure-seeking knights. Yet in the minds of certain men it was as though the old barrier still stood.

"Not only," groused a certain Kanish merchant to the traveler, "does my eldest daughter decline to accept her proper fate, and be sacrificed in traditional manner to Fegrim! She adds insult in injury, and proposes to wed a Kulyan brave!"

The traveler, who knew much about the elemental Fegrim, including his indifference to sacrifices, held his peace.

"This I pledge on my life!" the merchant fumed. "If my daughter carries on the way she's going, I shall never want to speak to her again-nor shall I let her in my house!"

"As you wish, so be it," said the traveler. From that moment forward the merchant uttered never a word; dumb, he stood by to watch the fine procession in which the girl went to claim her bridegroom, and before she returned home apoplexy killed him, so that the house was no longer his.

But nothing in this was remarkable. Greed, hate, jealousy-these were commonplace, and it was not to be questioned that they should defeat themselves.

Onward again, therefore, and now at last to Erminvale.

III

In that land of pleasant rolling downs and copses of birch and maple, there stood the village Wantwich, of small white farms parted by tidy hedgerows, radiating out from a central green where of a summer evening the young people would gather with a fiddler and a harpist to dance arid court in bright costumes of pheasant-feathers and fantastical jingling bangles. At one side of this green was a pond of sweet water which the traveler in black had consigned to the charge of the being Horimos, for whom he had conceived a peculiar affection on discovering that this one alone among all known elementals was too lazy to be harmful, desiring chiefly to be left in peace. While others older than themselves danced, the village children would splash in the pond with delighted cries, or paint their bare bodies with streaks of red and blue clay from the bank, proudly writing each other's names if they knew how. In winter,

moreover, it served for them to skate on, and well wrapped in the whole hides of goats they slid across it with double wooden runners strapped to their feet.

Good things were plentiful in Erminvale: creamy milk, fat cheeses, turnips so firm and sweet you might carve a slice raw and eat it with a dressing of salt, berries and nuts of every description, and bearded barley for nutritious bread. Also they brewed fine beer, and on a festival day they would bear onto the green three vast barrels from which anyone, resident or traveler, might swig at will, the first mug always being poured of course to Horimos. Content with that small token of esteem, he slumbered at the bottom of his mud.

All this was what the girl named Viola had known since a child, and from reports she had heard through visitors she felt well satisfied that she'd been born in Wantwich. Where else offered you a better life? Great cities were crowded and full of smoke and stinks; moreover, they had more demanding patrons than Horimos, like Hnua-Threl of Barbizond black with the dried blood of those who had dueled by his altar, or that blind Lady Luck who smiled randomly on the folk of Teq and might tomorrow turn her back for good on the one she had favored yesterday.

She had heard about Teq from a finely-clad rider who had come, a while ago, on a tall roan stallion, twirling long fair mustachios and spilling gold from his scrip like sand.

He had arrived on the first fine evening of spring, when Viola and her betrothed man Leluak joined all the other young people in a giddy whirling dance around the green, and because it behooved one to be courteous to a stranger-even a stranger who complained about the narrowness of his room at their only inn, and passed unflattering remarks concerning Wantwich beer as against the wines of home-and also, she admitted to herself, because all the other girls would be envious, she had accepted his request to join him in demonstrating some newly-fashionable dances from Teq. Instruction took a moment only; she was a skillful dancer, light on slim legs that not even the bleaching of winter had worn to paleness from last summer's tan. After dancing, they talked.

She learned that his name was Achoreus, and that he served one of the great lords of Teq. She learned further that he thought her beautiful, which she granted, for everyone had always said the same: she had long sleek tresses, large eyes that shifted color ceaselessly like opals, and skin of the smoothness of satin. He declared next that such loveliness was wasted in a backwater hamlet and should be displayed to the nobility and gentry of a great city-meaning Teq. She thanked him for his compliments but explained she was already spoken for. Thereupon he proved that for all his elegant airs he lacked common civility, and tried to fondle her inside her bodice, at which she marched away.

Had he acted decently, inviting her to stroll in the woods with him and find a temporary bed of moss, she would naturally have agreed. It was the custom of Wantwich to receive all strangers as one would one's friends. But as things were-so she told Leluak when bidding him good night-he seemed to expect that the mere sight of him would make her forget the boy she had grown up with all her life. What foolishness!

Accordingly, all plans for her marriage went ahead in the ancient manner, until at sunset the day before the ceremony her father, her mother, her two sisters and her aunt equipped her in the prescribed fashion for a night she had to pass alone, during which she must visit each in turn of five high peaks enclosing Erminvale and there plant five seeds: an apple, a sloe, a cob, an acorn and a grain of barley.

With a leather wallet containing bread and cheese, a flask of water, and a torch of sweet-scented juniper, and followed by the cries of well-wishers, she set forth into the gathering dusk.

The tramp was a long one, and tricky in the dark, but she had wandered through Erminvale since she was

old enough to be allowed out of sight of her mother, and though she must clamber up rocky slopes and thread her way through thickets where night-birds hooted and chattered, she gained each peak in turn with no worse injury than thorn-scratches on her calves. As dawn began to pale the sky, she set in place the final seed, the barley-grain, and watered it from her body to give it a healthy start in life. Then, singing, she turned back, weary but excited, on the road to her home. By about noon she would be safe in Leluak's embrace, and the feasting and merry-making would begin.

Still a mile off, however, she started to sense that something was amiss. Smoke drifted to her on the breeze, but it lacked the rich scent of baking which she had expected. A little closer, and she wondered why there was no shrill music audible, for no one had ever been able to prevent Fiddler Jarge from striking up directly his instrument was tuned, whether or no the bride had come back from the hills.

Worst of all, at the Meeting Rock that marked the last bend in the road, the huge granite slab by which the groom traditionally took the hand of his bride to lead her into Wantwich, there was no sign of Leluak.

She broke into a run, terrified, and rounded the rock. Instantly she saw the furthest outlying house, that of the Remban family, which she remembered seeing built when she was a toddler, and almost fainted with the shock. Its fine clean walls were smeared with a grime of smoke, its gate was broken, and the Rembans' finest plough-ox lay bellowing in a pool of blood.

And there beyond: the Haring house afire-source of the smoke she'd smelled! Her own home with the shutters ripped off their hinges, the front door battered down with an axe from the kindling-pile! Leluak's, unmarked, but the door ajar, and no one within when she shouted through!

Wildly she raced onward to the village green, and there was Jarge's fiddle broken on the ground. The beer-barrels set out for the wedding had been drained. Near them was a patch of scorched grass she could not account for, and all the water of the pond was fouled with the blood of the ducks which daily had quacked there.

Crouched in her chair, from which for longer than Viola could recall she had watched and grinned at the weddings she had witnessed: the only remaining villager of Wantwich, Granny Anderland, who was in fact a great-great-grandmother, toothless and senile.

"Granny!" shrieked Viola. "What happened?"

But all that Granny Anderland could do-all that she had ever been able to do since Viola was a baby-was to expose her gums in a silly grin and rock back and forth on her chair.

Helpless, Viola screamed Leluak's name till she was hoarse, but after that she collapsed from weariness and horror, and that was how the traveler found her when he chanced that way.

IV

He barely checked his pace as he entered Wantwich, along another road than that which Viola had followed on her return from the five peaks. But his expression grew sterner with every step he took, until when finally he could survey the full measure of the calamity from the canter of the green his brow was dark as a thundercloud.

His footsteps were too soft upon the sward for the weeping girl to hear them through her sobs, and it was plain that the old woman near her either had been so shocked as to have lost her reason, or was far too senile to understand the world. Accordingly he addressed the girl first.

At the sound of his voice she cringed away, her face wet with tears displaying a mask of terror. But there was little in the appearance of this small man leaning on a staff to suggest that he could be connected with the rape of Wantwich. And, for all that he looked angry beyond description, it did not seem that that anger was directed at her.

"Who are you, child?" the traveler inquired.

"My-my name is Viola, sir," the girl forced out.

"And what has happened here today?"

"I don't know, I don't know!" Wringing her hands, Viola rose. "Why should anyone want to do this to us? Monsters of some kind must have done it-devils!"

"Well, there are few such creatures left hereabouts," the traveler murmured. "More likely it will have been men, if one can dignify them with that name. Were you away from the village?"

"I was to be married today!" Viola choked.

"I see. Therefore you were walking the five peaks and planting seeds."

"You-you're acquainted with our customs, sir?" Viola was regaining control of herself, able to mop away her blinding tears and look more clearly at the newcomer. "Yet I don't remember that I saw you here before."

"This is not the first time I've been to Wantwich," the traveler said, refraining from any reference to the number or date of his earlier visits. "But, to pursue the important matter: did this old lady witness what occurred?"

"If she did, she won't be able to describe it," Viola said dully. "She has been as you see her for many years. She likes to be talked to, nods and sometimes giggles, but beyond that..." She gave a hopeless shrug.

"I see. In that case we must resort to other means to determine what went on. Girl, are you capable of being brave?"

She stared at him doubtfully. "Sir," she said at length, "if you can do anything to help get back my man, and right the wrong that's been done to these good people, I'll be as brave as you require of me." Her fingers curled over to drive her nails cruelly into her palms. "Oh, that something could be done! I've no notion what-but something must be possible!"

"As you wish, so be it," said the traveler, and took her hand. He led her across the green, past the patch of grass scorched black-at which she cast a puzzled glance-and to the very rim of the sweetwater pond.

"Stand firm," he commanded. "Do not be afraid of what you see."

"I-I don't understand!"

"Better for you that you should not," the traveler muttered, and thrust his staff into the water. He dissolved one of the forces bonding the light of which it was composed, and a shaft of brilliance lanced

downward to the bottom.

"Horimos!" he cried. "Horimos!"

The girl's eyes grew round with wonder, and then her mouth also, with dismay. For the water heaved and bubbled sluggishly as pitch, and from the plopping explosions a thick voice seemed to take form, uttering words.

"Le-e-eave me-e a-a-lo-o-one..."

"Horimos!" rapped the traveler. "Stir yourself-- you've slumbered eons in that soft bed of mud! Shall I remove you to Kanish-Kulya, make you share the pit of that volcano with Fegrim?"

A noise between a grumble and a scream.

"Yes, he'd be a restless companion for you, wouldn't he?" the traveler rasped. "Up! Up! I desire speech with you!"

Beside him Viola had fallen to her knees, all color vanished from her cheeks. Too petrified even to blink, she saw the water in which she had so often bathed rise into tumult-yet absurdly slowly, as though time had been extended to double length. More bubbles burst, and she could watch their surface part; waves and ripples crossed the pond so slowly, one would have thought to push them into new directions without wetting one's palm.

And ultimately...

"You may prefer to close your eyes now," the traveler said didactically, and added, "Horimos! Speak! And be quick-the sooner you tell me what I want to know, the sooner you may sink back into your ooze. What's become of all the people from this village?"

"Been taken away," Horimos mumbled. It was not exactly a mouth he used to shape the words-but then, like all elementals, his physical form was somewhat arbitrary.

"How and by whom?" The traveler rapped the bank impatiently with his staff.

"Army marched in this morning," Horimos sighed. "Went around the village, drove everybody to the green-most of them were there already anyhow. Set up a forge there where the grass is blackened, welded fetters for everyone on a chain. Killed some ducks and hens for their dinner, drank the beer in the barrels, herded the villagers away. Good riddance, say I-never had a moment's peace since you put me here, what with fiddling and dancing and swimming and skating and all the rest of it!"

"Whose was the army? What colors did they fly?"

"Should I know who bears a flag of silver, red and gold?"

The traveler clamped his fingers tighter on his staff.

"And you made no attempt to intervene?"

"Told you-glad to see the back of them." Horimos made the whole surface of the pond yawn in a colossal expression of weariness. "And but for you I'd have enjoyed a decent sleep for a while, now I'm

alone!"

"For your idleness," said the traveler softly, "I decree that until the folk of Wantwich are restored to their homes, you shall itch so much you can enjoy no rest. Begone with you. Hope that the matter is speedily set to rights."

"But-!"

"You argue with me?"

Horimos declined. When once again he had subsided to the bottom of his pond, the water was no longer pellucid and still as before, but roiled continually without a breeze to stir it.

"Who are you?" Viola whispered. "I'd always thought Horimos was-was..."

"Was imaginary?" The traveler chuckled. "Not exactly. But his worst fault is mere laziness, and compared to what faults one finds elsewhere it's far from the grossest of shortcomings.... As for my own identity: you may call me Mazda, or what you will. I have many names, and only one nature."

He waited to see whether the information, which he gave only to those who directly demanded it, meant anything to her. Interestingly, he discovered that it did, for on the instant a blend of hope and awe transfigured her pretty face.

But then he took a second look, and his heart sank. For, in along with the rest, he now detected the betraying signs of selfishness.

"Is it true, then," she cried fiercely, "that I can require of you my heart's desire?"

"Think well if you do so!" the traveler warned, raising his staff. "Only you can know what's in your secret mind! Reflect and ponder!"

"I don't have to," she said with terrible directness. "I want to be reunited with my man!"

The traveler sighed, but as always was resigned to the inexorable course of events. "As you wish, so be it," he replied.

"What shall I do?" Viola whispered, suddenly overcome with a sense of the finality of her request.

"Wait."

"No more than wait? Wait here?" She turned frantically, surveying the ravished homes, the slaughtered livestock, the smoke that still drifted over the burning house. "But-"

And when she looked again for the traveler in black, he was gone.

A little after, when the sun was still high in the sky, there were clapping noises on the road by which the army had arrived, and she stirred from her torpor and made to flee. But the horseman easily ran her down, bowing from his saddle to sweep her off her feet and park her on the withers of his steed, laughing at her vain attempts to break away.

"I missed you when they rounded up the rest of them," said Achoreus of Teq. "I couldn't forget a lovely

face like yours. Even less can I forget an insult like the one you offered me when first I came here. So I dawdled, thinking you'd be back eventually, and here you are. Not for long, though! You're going to rejoin your family and friends, and that country bumpkin you preferred to me!"

He set spurs to his horse, and away they galloped in the wake of the miserable gang of captives strung with chains.

V

Laughter rang loud and shrill under the gorgeous canopy that shaded Lord Fellian of Teq from the naked rays of the sun. The canopy was of pleated dragon-hide, bought at the cost of a man's life in a distant land where chaos and reason had once been less evenly matched and strange improbable beasts went about with lion's claws and eagle's beaks and wings of resounding bronze. Report held that there were no more such creatures to be found; even their bones had been rejected by reality.

"But I have my canopy!" Lord Fellian would say.

Its shade fell on a floor of patterned stone: marble was the commonest of the types of tile composing it, outnumbered by chalcedony, jasper, sardonyx, chrysoberyl, and others yet so rare that they had no name save "one of the tiles in Lord Fellian's gallery." This was on the very apex of the grand high tower from which Lord Fellian might survey his domain: lands from here to the skyline and beyond which bled their wealth into his coffers.

But on the houseward side there was a high wall, that when he sat in his throne of state-made of the bones of a beast of which the enchanters declared no more than one could ever have existed, translucent as water but harder than steel-not even an absent glance over his shoulder might reveal to him the sole building in Teq which outreached his tower. Atop that mighty edifice presided the figure of Lady Luck, the goddess blind in one eye and masked over the other, whose smile dictated the fortune of those who ruled in Teq.

It was not the custom to look on her. It was said that those who secretly tried to, in order to discover whither her gaze was bent, would die a fearful death. And indeed the agents of Lords Fellian, Yuckin and Nusk did occasionally deposit in the chief market-square the bodies of men and women who had clearly undergone some repulsive torture, and the common folk interpreted these as an awful caution. More often than not, these corpses belonged to persons who had boasted of their favor with the Lady. It was taken for granted that the others belonged to those who had not even enjoyed the brief pleasure of making that boast.

To look on Lady Luck was the one gamble no Lord of Teq would risk. Why should he? Was not affluence itself proof that the Lady bent her enigmatic smile continually on the man who possessed it?

Lord Fellian on his chair of inexplicable bones cramped with pure gold, robed in cloth dyed with the purple of the veritable murex, shod with sandals of the softest kidskin on which had been stamped, again in gold, a series of runes to guide him in the most prosperous of paths; his foppish locks entwined with green ribbons, his nails painted with ground pearls, his weak eyes aided with lenses not of rock-crystal such as his rivals must make do with but of diamond, his lobes hung with amber, his girdle glittering with sapphires: he, Lord Fellian, the greatest winner among all the past and present Lords of Teq, laughed, and laughed, and laughed.

The noise drowned out the soft rattling from the table on which a trained monkey, tethered by a velvet leash, kept spilling and gathering up a set of ivory dice, their values after each throw being recorded by a

slave on sheets of parchment; likewise, the humming of a gaming-wheel turned by an idiot-both these, with bias eliminated, to determine whether after fifty thousand throws or spins there would be some subtle preference revealed, that he might exploit in his ceaseless conflict against Lords Yuckin and Nusk. Furthermore his laughter drowned the chirrup of the gorgeous songbirds in a gilded cage which he had won last week from Nusk in a bout at shen fu, and the drone of musicians playing on a suite of instruments he had won-along with their players-from Yuckin a year or more past. Those instruments were of eggshells, ebony and silver, and their tone was agonizingly sweet.

Facing the chair of bones, Achoreus-who had committed himself to the service of Lord Fellian when he was but seventeen and kept complimenting himself on his far-sightedness-grinned from ear to ear at the brilliant inspiration of his master.

"Before those fools learn that winning from me costs nothing," Fellian declared, "I shall have taken the very roofs from over their heads! They will be shamed if they refuse to match my stakes, and I may climb as high as I wish, while they-poor fools!-struggle to clamber after me. Oh, how I look forward to seeing Yuckin's face when tonight I bet him a hundred skillful servants, including girls fit for a royal bed! You've done well, Achoreus. Torquaida, come you here!"

From among the gaggle of retainers who by day and night attended Fellian, subservient to his slightest whim, there shuffled forward the elderly treasurer whose mind retained, so he boasted, even such detail of his master's coffers as how many of the copper coins in store had been clipped around the edge, instead of honestly worn, and were therefore reserved to pay off tradesmen.

In no small part, Fellian acknowledged, his victories in the endless betting-matches with his rivals were due to Torquaida instructing him what they could or could not stake to correspond with his own wagers. He had rewarded the treasurer suitably, while those who served his rivals were more often punished for letting go irreplaceable wonders on lost bets, and grew daily bitterer by consequence.

"Young Achoreus here," the lord declared, "has performed a signal service. We have now, thanks to him, one hundred or more extra servants surplus to the needs of the household, and additionally many children who can doubtless be trained up in a useful skill. How, say you, should this service be repaid?"

"This is a difficult estimate," frowned Torquaida. His ancient voice quavered; Fellian scowled the musicians into silence that he might hear better. "There are two aspects of the matter to consider. First, that he has brought a hundred servants-that is easy. Let him have dirhans to increase his stake in the wager he has made with Captain Ospilo of Lord Yuckin's train; our privy intelligence states that bet is won on odds of nine to four, whereas Ospilo is yet in ignorance of the result. Thereby the winnings may be much enlarged. I'd say: one hundred coins."

Fellian slapped his thigh and chortled at the ingenuity of the deceit, while Achoreus preened his mustachios and basked in the envy of those around.

"Beyond that, however," Torquaida continued in his reedy tones, "it remains to be established what the value of these servants is. As one should not wager on a horse without inspecting both it and its competition, thus too one must begin by looking over the captives."

"Let them be brought, then!" Fellian cried. "Clear a space on the gallery large enough for them to parade!"

"Sir," ventured Achoreus, "there were not a few among them who resented the-ah-the invitation I extended to enter your lordship's service. It will be best to make space also for the escort I detailed to

accompany them."

"What?" Fellian leaned forward on his chair, scowling. "Say you that a man on whom Lady Luck smiles so long and so often is to be injured by-by some stupid peasant? Or is it that you neglected to disarm them?"

Seeing his new-found fortune vanishing any second, Achoreus replied placatingly, "My lord! There was hardly a weapon in the whole village, save rustic implements whose names I scarcely know, not having had truck with country matters-scythes, perhaps, or maybe hatchets.... Which, naturally, we deprived them of! But all of those' we brought are able-bodied, and hence remain possessed of feet and fists!"

"Hmmm!" Fellian rubbed his chin. "Yes, I remember well a gladiator whom Lord Yuckin set against a champion of mine, in years gone by, who lost both net and trident and still won the bout, by some such underhand trick as clawing out his opponent's vitals with his nails." He gave an embarrassed cough; he hated to refer to any wager he had lost. "Well, then, bring them up, but have a guard around them, as you say."

Relieved, Achoreus turned to issue the necessary orders. Accordingly, in a little while, to the music of their fetters clanking, a sorry train of captives wended their way out of the grand courtyard of the palace, up the lower slopes of the ramp leading to the gallery- which were of common granite-and stage by stage on to the higher level, where the parapets were of garnets in their natural matrix, and the floor of cat's-eye, peridot and tourmaline.

Refused food on the long trudge from Erminvale to discourage the energy needed for escape, granted barely enough water to moisten their lips, they found the gradual incline almost too much for them, and their escorts had to prod them forward with the butts of spears.

At last, however, they were ranged along the gallery, out of the shade of the dragon-hide awning, blinking against sunlight at their new and unlooked-for master. At one end of the line was Leluak, his left eye swollen shut from a blow and testifying to his vain resistance; as far distant from him as possible, Viola, nearly naked from the struggle that had led to Achoreus ripping her clothes. And between them, every villager from Wantwich bar Granny Anderland, from babes in arms to gray-pated patriarchs.

Accompanied by the proud Achoreus, Torquaida went along the line peering into face after face, occasionally poking to test the hardness of a muscle or the flab of a belly, his forefinger sharp as one of the styli he used to post his accounts on wax tablets. He halted before one bluff middle-aged fellow in a red jerkin, who looked unutterably weary.

"Who are you?" he croaked.

"Uh..." The man licked his lips. "Well, my name's Harring."

"Say 'so please you!'" Achoreus rasped, and made a threatening gesture towards his sword.

Harring muttered the false civility.

"And what can you do?" Torquaida pursued.

"I'm a brewer." And, reluctantly after a brief mental debate: "Sir!"

"You learn swiftly," Achoreus said with mocking approval, and accompanied Torquaida down the Line.

"You?"

"I'm a baker-sir."

"I? Oh, a sempstress!"

"And I'm a bodger, turner, and mender of ploughs."

The answers came pat upon the questions, as though by naming their trades the captives could reassure themselves they still retained some dignity by virtue of their skill. At Torquaida's direction a clerk made lists of all the names and crafts, leaving aside the children under twelve, and finally presented the lists with a nourish to Lord Fellian.

Scrutinizing them through his diamond lenses, the lord addressed Achoreus.

"And of what standard are these louts in their professions? Competent, or shoddy?"

"As far as I could judge, sir," Achoreus answered, "they might be termed competent. Of course, their criteria fall far short of our own; still, their houses seemed sturdy, they kept their fences well mended, and they had sound byres and folds for their livestock."

"I see." Fellian rubbed the tip of his nose on the sharp facets of a gemstone ringed to his left middle finger. "Then there might be something to be said for keeping them instead of staking them. We have no brewer in the household that I know of. Some scullery drab or turnspit would be less useful than that man- what's his peasant's name? Haring? Therefore do thus, Torquaida: take away their brats and put them to nurse or be apprenticed, then sort the rest and for each one you judge to be worth adding to my staff select one servant we already have, who's lazy or sullen or deformed, and set him at my disposal to be staked tonight. Hah! Was this not an inspiration that I had?" He rubbed his hands and gave a gleeful chuckle.

"Oh, how I long to see the faces of those dunderheads when I wager fifty servants against each of them tonight! I simply cannot fail to gain by this affair! If they win, which Lady Luck I trust will prevent, they will merely clutter up their households with extra mouths to feed, while I have acquired new tradesmen, and should I win-which I no doubt shall-I'll have plenty of spare overseers to cope with the servants those two stake! Ho-ho! We must do this again, Achoreus!"

Achoreus bowed low, and once more stroked his mustachios.

"Take them away," Fellian commanded, and leaned back in his throne, reaching with fat pale fingers for the mouthpiece of a jade huqqah on a lacquered table nearby. An alert slave darted forward and set a piece of glowing charcoal on the pile of scented herbs the bowl contained.

Frightened and angry, but too weak to resist, the folk of Wantwich turned under the goading of the soldiers to wend their way back to the courtyard below. Fellian watched them. As the end of the line drew level with him, he snapped his fingers and all looked expectantly towards him.

"That girl at the tail," he murmured. "She's not unattractive in a country way. Set her apart, bath, perfume and dress her, and let her attend me in my chamber."

"But-!" Achoreus took a pace forward.

"You wish to comment?" Fellian purred dangerously.

"I..." Achoreus hesitated, and at last shook his head.

"Let it be done, then," Fellian smiled, and sucked his huqqah with every appearance of contentment.

VI

Furious, Achoreus turned to superintend the final clearance of the captives from the gallery, and thought the task was done, but when he glanced around there was one stranger remaining, who certainly was neither a household officer nor a slave: a man in a black cloak leaning on a staff.

"Achoreus!" Fellian rasped. "Why have you not taken that fellow with the rest?"

Staring, Achoreus confessed, "I have not seen him before! He was not with the villagers when we assembled them-Ah, but I have seen him, not at Wantwich. Now I recall that when we were on the outward leg from Teq he stood beneath a tree to watch our army pass, having that same staff in his hand."

"And he's come to join the captives of his own accord?" Fellian suggested with a laugh. An answering ripple of amusement at what passed for his brilliant wit echoed from his sycophants. "Well, then! We shall not deny him the privilege he craves!"

Faces brightened everywhere. Fellian was a capricious master, but when he spoke in this jovial fashion it was provable that he was about to distribute favors and gifts at random, saying it was to impress on his retinue the supreme importance of luck.

"So, old man!" he continued. "What brings you hither, if it was not the long chain Unking those who have been here a moment back?"

"A need to know," said the traveler in black, and paced forward on the jeweled floor.

"To know what? When the gaming-wheel of life will spin to a halt for you against the dire dark pointer of death? Why, go ask Lady Luck face to face, and she will tell you instantly!"

At that, certain of his attendants blanched. It was not in good taste to joke about Lady Luck.

"To know," the traveler responded unperturbed, "why you sent armed raiders to rape the village Wantwich."

"Ah, yes," Fellian said ironically. "I can see how a stranger might put a question of that order, lacking proper comprehension of the priorities in life. Many think that all they need ever do is act reasonably, meet obligations, pay their debts... and then some random power intrudes on their silly calm existence, perhaps with a leash, perhaps with a sword, and all their reasoning is set at naught! That then is their opportunity to learn the truth. Not sense but luck is what rules the cosmos-do you hear me? Luck!"

He leaned forward, uttering the last word with such intensity that a spray of spittle danced down to the floor.

"See you that idiot who turns a gaming-wheel for me? Ho, you! Bring the creature here!"

Retainers rushed to obey. Fellian peeled rings from his fingers, decorated with stones that might bring the

price of a, small farm or vineyard, and threw them on the soiled skirt of the idiot's robe.

"Turn her free! Luck has smiled her way today!"

"Not so," contradicted the traveler.

"What? You gainsay me-you gainsay Fellian!" The lord was nearly pop-eyed with horror.

"Say rather I see two sides of this good fortune," the traveler murmured. "Is it not great luck for an idiot to be fed, housed and clothed by a rich lord? Is this not worth more to her than to be given some pretty baubles and left to fend alone? Where is the benefit if next week she starves?"

Fellian began to redden as the validity of the point sank in, and he glared fiercely at someone to his right whom he suspected of being about to giggle.

"You chop logic, do you?" he rasped. "You're a schoolman, no doubt, of the kind we take to gaze on Lady Luck, who thereupon die rather horribly!"

"Which event," the traveler remarked mildly, "puts a term to the possibility of persuading them to share your views. The dead are not the easiest persons to convert; their attitudes tend to be somewhat fixed." He shifted his staff from one hand to the other, and continued.

"Let me see if I understand these views of yours. You maintain, I believe, that life is one long gamble?"

"Yes, of course!" Fellian barked.

"If this is so, why should one need to make more wagers? Is not any other, compared to the wager which embraces the whole of life, too trivial to be worth attention? Clearly you do not agree, I grant, inasmuch as you propose to stake human beings against your rival lords tonight, and for this purpose kidnapped the inoffensive folk of Wantwich."

"Nothing gives spice to life but winning wagers!" Fellian snorted. "I sit here-is it not plain by that token that I already won a great gamble? I staked my very existence on the right to be a Lord of Teq, and that I am here proves that the lady on the tower smiles my way!"

The traveler cocked his head sardonically. He said, "Call yourself a great gambler, a great winner, whatever you like. But I can name a bet you'll not accept."

"What?" Fellian howled, and all around there were cries of shocked dismay. "Think you can insult a Lord of Teq with impunity? Guards, seize and bind him! He has offered me a mortal affront, and he must pay for it!"

"How have I affronted you-how? To say that I can name a bet you will not accept is not to insult you, unless you can but will not match my stakes!" The traveler fixed Fellian with a sharp stare.

"Am I to bet with a nobody? I bet only against my coevals! It takes uncounted wealth to bet with me!" Fellian snorted. "Why, were I to treat you seriously, any bumpkin could come to me and say, 'I wager my rags and clogs, all I possess, against all that you possess -and that's a match!' "

"But there is one thing any man may bet against any other," said the traveler. "For no man can have more than one of it."

There was silence for the space of several heartbeats. "My lord," Torquaida said at last in a rusty voice, "he means life."

Fellian went pale and licked his lips. He blustered, "Even so! A life that may have fifty years to run, like mine? Against one which may snuff out tomorrow, or next week?"

"Regrettably," Torquaida creaked, "that is fair stakes. However"-and he gave a tiny dry smile and wheezing chuckle-"it's over-soon to name the stakes before one knows the bet, is it not?"

Fellian flashed him a grateful grin; this was the outlet he had been unable to spot himself. He said loudly, "Yes, a crucial point! What bet is this that you wish to make with me, old man?"

"I bet you," said the traveler into a universal hush, "that the face of Lady Luck is turned away from your throne."

There was an instant of appalled shock. But with a great effort Fellian forced a booming laugh.

"Why, that wager's lost already!" he exclaimed. "Is it not proof of the lady's favor that I sit here among unparalleled riches?"

"They are what you woke to today," the traveler said. "Tomorrow is yet to eventuate."

"Why stop at tomorrow?" Fellian said. "Next week, next month, next year if you like, when I have won still more bets against Yuckin and Nusk, we'll take you and hoist you on a tall pole that you may look on the lady directly and see that she does smile towards me. Meantime, enjoy the hospitality of my dungeon. Hey, guards!"

"Thank you, I am in no need of lodging," the traveler said. "Moreover, a week is too long. One day will suffice. I will see you again tomorrow; let's say at dawn. For now, however, farewell."

"Seize him!" Fellian bellowed, and the soldiers who had remained behind, on Achoreus's signal, when the party of captives was led away, dashed in the direction of the traveler. But they went crashing against one another, as though they had sought to clutch an armful of empty air.

VII

In the great cave-like kitchens of the palace, a cook sweated with ladle and tongs at a cauldron of half a hogs-head capacity. The fire roaring beneath scorched his skin, the smoke blinded his eyes with tears.

From the dark corner of the hearth, a voice inquired for whom the savory-smelling broth was being prepared.

"Why, for Lord Fellian," sighed the cook.

"But no man can engulf such a deal of soup. Will he have guests?"

"Yes, so he will." The cook grimaced. "They'll eat two ladlefuls, or maybe three."

"And you then will enjoy what is left over?"

"I, sir?" The cook gave a rueful chuckle. "No, on my soul, I wouldn't dare. What my lord leaves in his dish goes to his hounds! Tonight as ever I shall sup off a crust of dry bread and that chunk of moldy bacon-rind. Still, hounds have no taste for wine, so if I'm quick I may claim the dregs from the goblets at the high table, and liquor will soothe my grumbling belly enough to let me sleep."

Among the fierce ammonia stench of guano, the falconer worked by an unglazed window, tooling with gnarled yet delicate hands a design of rhythmical gold leaf onto the hood and jesses of a peregrine falcon.

"This leather is beautiful," said a soft voice from over his shoulder. "But doubtless you put on far finer array when you go forth of an evening to enjoy yourself at a tavern?"

"I, sir?" grunted the falconer, not turning around; the light was wasting, and he was forbidden the extravagance of lamps or candles. "Why, no, I'm in the service of Lord Fellian, and have no time to amuse myself. And had I time, I'd be constrained to wear what you see upon me now-old canvas breeches, bound around the waist with fraying rope. Besides, with what would I purchase a mug of ale? With a scoop of fewmets?"

In the stables, a groom passed a soft cloth caressingly over the fitments of a stall; they were of jacinth and ivory, and the manger was filled with new sweet hay, fine oats fit to have baked bread, and warm-scented bran.

"Palatial," said a voice from behind the partition. "This is merely for a horse?"

"Aye, sir," muttered the groom, declining to be distracted from his work. "For Western Wind, Lord Fellian's favorite steed."

"By comparison, then, I judge you must take your repose on high pillows filled with swan's down, beneath a coverlet of silk, or furs for winter!"

"I sleep on straw, sir-do not jest with me! And if I have time to gather clay to stop the chinks in my hovel against the night's cold, I count myself lucky."

Beside a marble bath, which ran scented water from a gargoyle's mouth, a slender girl measured out grains of rare restorative spices onto a sponge, a loofah, and the bristles of a brush made from the hide of a wild boar.

"With such precautions," a voice said from beyond a curl of rising steam, "beauty must surely be preserved far beyond the normal span."

"Think you I'd dare to waste one grain of this precious essence on my own skin?" the girl retorted, tossing back a tress of hair within which-though she could be aged at most twenty-there glinted a betraying thread of silver. "I'd be lucky, when they detected my pilfering, to be thrown over the sill of that window! Beneath it there is at least a kitchen-midden to give me a soft landing. No, my entire fortune is my youth, and it takes the powers of an elemental and the imagination of a genius to spread youth thin enough to satisfy Lord Fellian from spring to autumn."

"Then why do you endure his service?"

"Because he is a winner in the game of life."

"And how do you know that?"

"Why," sighed the girl, "everyone says so."

In the high-vaulted banqueting-hall, as the sun went down, the rival lords Yuckin and Nusk came to feast with their respective retinues at the expense of the current greatest winner prior to the onset of the night's gambling. They had come to his palace too often of late; there was no friendly chat between them. Gloomily-though with fair appetite, because their own kitchens did not boast such delicacies-they sat apart, growing angrier and angrier as platters of gold succeeded those of silver, goblets of crystal replaced those of enameled pottery... and often recognizing items they had formerly owned.

Lord Fellian, who should have been delighted at the discomfiture of his rivals, was downcast, and the talk at his long table was all of the strange intruder in a black cloak who had laid down so threatening a bet.

"It's nonsense!" roundly declared Achoreus, who was seated beside Fellian as a mark of special favor. "As you rightly said, sir, it's absurd to expect someone of your standing to wager with a penniless nobody-and moreover the bet he named is by definition incapable of settlement!"

But his brow was pearly with sweat, and when he had repeated his assertion for the third time his voice was harsh with a hoarseness no amount of wine could relieve.

"And how say you, Torquaida?" demanded Fellian, hungry for reassurance-though not for food; course after course was being removed from his place untouched.

"There is no need to worry," the elderly treasurer wheezed. "Like you or dislike you, Lords Yuckin and Nusk would have to concede the propriety of declining such a wager. One cannot conduct important affairs on an arbitrary basis!"

Even that, however, did not set Fellian's mind at rest. "Ah, would I knew the outcome of the wager, however foolish!" he grumbled, and at that the black-clad traveler, standing apart in the secrecy of an embrasure, gave a sad smile.

"As you wish," he murmured, "so be it. You have won your bet with me, Lord Fellian-and there are and have been few in all eternity who can make that claim. Yet in the same instant when you won, you lost beyond all eternal hope."

The question settled now, he went away.

Shortly, they cleared the dishes from the hall, bringing in their place the hand-carved dominoes required for the game shen fu, the lacquered plaques destined for match-me-mine and mark-me-well, the tumbling gilded cages full of colored balls known as The Lady's Knucklebones, the gaming-wheels-those with four, those with nine, and those with thirty-three divisions- blind songbirds trained to pick out one and only one among three disparately dyed grains of corn, jumping beans, silver-harnessed fleas, baby toads steeped in strong liquor, and all the other appurtenances on which the Lords of Teq were accustomed to place their bets.

Additionally, from among their respective trains, they marshaled their current champions at wrestling, boxing with cestae, and gladiatorial combat, not to mention tumblers, leapers, imbeciles armed with brushes full of paint, dice-throwing monkeys, and whatever else they had lately stumbled across upon the outcome of whose acts a bet might be laid.

It was the practice for one of the challengers to name a game, and of the challenged to declare the

stakes. Thus, in strict accordance with protocol, Lord Yuckin as the last to lose to Lord Fellian cleared his throat and began with a single hand of shen fu, to which Lord Fellian consented, and won a basket of desert-hoppers-a typical low stake for the early hours.

Then Lord Nusk bet on a jumping toad, and won a purse of coins from Barbizond, to which Lord Fellian replied with a spin of the four-part wheel, and won a bag of sapphires. He nudged his companions and whispered that the old fool on the gallery must have been wrong.

Thus too he won the next five bouts, on toads again, on fleas, on two hands of shen fu, and lastly on the pecking birds. After that he lost a spin of the nine-part wheel and had to concede to Yuckin a chased and jeweled sword that Torquaida dismissed as pretty but not practical; its blade was inferior. No special loss.

"Now, I think," murmured the pleased Lord Fellian, and on Lord Nusk naming shen fu as the next bout, declared his stake: fifty male servants on this single hand.

The impact was all he could have wished. Though they might scornfully disdain involvement with such mundane matters, none knew better than the Lords of Teq how many were kept employed to ensure their affluence, through what different and varied skills. To bet one servant was occasionally a last-resort gesture after a bad night; to bet fifty at one go was unprecedented.

Captain Achoreus chortled at the dismay which overcame the visiting lords, and nudged Torquaida in the fleshless ribs. "The greatest winner!" he murmured, and signaled for another mug of wine.

Yet, when the dominoes were dealt, the Star of Eve fell to Lord Nusk, and only the Inmost Planet to Lord Fellian.

Lord Nusk, who was a fat man with a round bald pate fringed with black, grinned from ear to ear and rubbed his enormous paunch. Scowling, Lord Fellian trembled and made challenge to Lord Yuckin at the same game.

Lord Yuckin, thin and gaunt, eyes blank behind lenses of white crystal, named as much gold as a particular man might carry, and won, and challenged back, and Lord Fellian staked the other fifty servants.

Whereupon he displayed the chief prize of shen fu, the Crown of Stars, and mocked Lord Yuckin's petty deal of Planets Conjoined.

A few minutes later, on a hopping toad, he won back from Lord Nusk the former fifty servants, and again from Lord Yuckin a fresh batch, including three skilled armorers that lord could ill afford to lose, and beyond that a farm in the Dale of Vezby, and a whole year's vintage of sparkling wine, and three trade-galleys with complete crews, and then from Lord Nusk the High Manor of Coper's Tor, with the right to make a celebrated ewe's-milk cheese according to a secret recipe; then lost for five short minutes the Marches of Gowth with all four fortresses and the Shrine of Fire, but won them back on a spin of the four-part wheel and along with them the Estate of Brywood, the Peak of Brend, and the territory from Haggler's Mound to Cape Dismay.

Securely positioned now, he commenced the calculated process of attrition that he had long dreamed of, the process which ultimately would reduce his rivals to penury: a cook who knew how to make sorbets without ice, a kitchen enchanter who could produce strawberries in winter, a charmer who could bring game from barren ground by playing a whistle, an eight-foot-tall swordsman, champion of the last public

games...

Torquaida might have grown harried trying to keep track of the winnings and match what was in hand against what remained to the rival lords. By a supreme effort he remained in control, always remembering to send a clerk to inform Lord Fellian when a stake was unworthy, to say for example that this concubine had suffered the smallpox and was scarred, or that guardsman had a palsy and his sword-arm shook, or that coffer of coins bore a geas, and touched by the winner would turn to pebbles.

Lord Fellian awarded him free of feoff the Estate of Brywood as reward for his valuable support, and laughed joyously night-long at the disarray of his opponents.

VIII

Far down below that ringing laughter, cast back by the high-vaulted roof of the banquet-hall, reached the ears of those miserable deportees from Wantwich who were still awake. Some were asleep-on straw if they were lucky, on hard flags if they were not... but at least asleep.

One who was wakeful even on a mattress of eider-feathers, draped in a diaphanous gown of finest lawn embroidered with seed-pearls, was the girl Viola, surrounded by other female pleasure-objects destined for Lord Fellian's delight. At a footstep on the floor beside her couch, she started and peered into dark, seeing only a black form outlined on greater blackness.

"Is someone there?" she whimpered.

"It is I," said the traveler.

"How-how did you get in?" Viola sat up. "I tried the doors-and the windows, too. And all are locked!"

The traveler forbore to explain.

After a moment, Viola began to weep. "Go away!" she commanded. "I never want to see you again! You did this awful thing to me, and I hate you!"

"On the contrary," the traveler replied. "You did this to yourself."

"I never asked to be locked up here, waiting for some gross-"

"Ah! But you're reunited with your man Leluak, and that's what you said you wanted. You are both under the same roof; when Lord Fellian tires of you, you will be cast forth together to share the same dank alleyway and the same fevers, chills and pestilences. This in essence constitutes reunion."

"I should have thought longer before choosing," Viola said after a while for reflection. The traveler nodded. At least, then, this cruel experience had battered some sense into her skull.

"You had, I believe," he said, "encountered Achoreus before the rape he supervised on Wantwich."

"I did so. I companioned him when he joined us for the spring dance."

"Out of courtesy?"

"Of course." In the dark, the girl bridled.

"Or was it because he was a stranger, and handsome, and every other girl in the village would have changed places with you?"

"A little of that too," she admitted meekly.

"Is it not true, my child, that you were more concerned to regain the handsomest, most eligible bachelor in Wantwiche, for whom you had competed against all the other girls less attractive than yourself, than you were to right the wrong done to your family and friends upon the day of your projected wedding?"

"I must have been!" Viola moaned. "Would that hasty wish of mine could be undone!"

"The second time a person calls upon me," said the traveler, "I may point out the consequences if I choose. Do you truly wish to find yourself again on the green at Wantwiche-alone?"

There was an awful silence, which she eventually broke with a sob.

"However," the traveler resumed, when he judged she had suffered long enough to imprint the moral permanently on her memory, "you may rest easy. All is due to come to a satisfactory conclusion. Though if I were to tell you the name of your savior, you'd not believe it...."

He tapped his staff against the bed she sat on, and concluded, "Sleep, child. Wake at dawn."

Dazed with elation, when the returning sun began to gild the turrets of Teq with the promise of a new day, Lord Fellian struggled to the high gallery of his tower in order to witness the departure of his defeated rivals. On their own! No one in the history of this city had won so fantastic a victory in a single night! Stripped even of their closest body-slaves, Lords Yuckin and Nusk were creeping like whipped dogs into the morning twilight. It had been more by grace than necessity that they had been permitted to retain clothing.

Lord Fellian leaned drunkenly over the parapet of the gallery and whooped like a falconer sighting quarry; when the cowed face of Lord Yuckin tilted upward to see what the noise was, he spilled on it the contents of his latest beaker of wine.

"So much for that old fool who bet that Lady Luck's visage has turned away from me!" he bellowed, and laughed until the racket of his boasting was reflected from the nearby rooftops.

"Are you sure?"

On the edge of his politely voiced question the traveler in black appended the faint swish of his cloak as he advanced across the jeweled floor.

"Why, you... !" Lord Fellian gasped and made to draw back, but the parapet was hard against his spine and there was no way to retreat save into insubstantial air. "Guards! Guards!"

"None of them have followed you up here," said the traveler gravely. "They are persuaded that upon a winner like yourself-if there has ever been one-Lady Luck smiles so long and so favorably that no harm can come to you."

"Ah-hah!" Fellian began to regain his composure.

"I conclude from that statement that you admit you lost your bet with me!"

"Why, no," said the traveler, and his expression showed regret, for it had always seemed a shame to him that a person of intelligence-and Fellian was far from stupid-should be seduced into a self-defeating course of action. "I have won."

"What? You're insane!" Fellian gasped. "Prove your claim!"

"I shall," the traveler said, and smote with his staff against the wall that screened this gallery from sight of the tallest tower in Teq. A slice fell away like a wedge cut from a cheese. Beyond, there where Fellian's reflex gaze darted before he could check himself, Lady Luck's pinnacle loomed on the easterly blueness of the dawn.

A scream died still-born in the lord's throat. He stared and stared, and after a while he said, "But... But there's only a stump!"

And it was true; against the sky, instead of the celebrated statue, nothing but a jagged pediment.

He began to giggle. "Why, you've lost after all!" he chuckled. "You did not make the wager that Lady Luck had ceased to smile on me, which would be a fair victory-you wagered that her face was turned away from my throne!"

"True."

"Then-"

"Then I have won." He gestured with his staff. "Go forward; examine those chunks of stone I have broken from the wall."

Hesitant, yet ashamed to seem frightened, Lord Fellian obeyed. His fingertips fumbled across rough plaster while he coughed at the dust he was stirring up, and found smooth chased stones not conformable to the flat slanting over a shoulder-blade...

"There was a storm," said the traveler didactically. "The figure tumbled and landed in the street. It has always been the custom, has it not, that any who looked on Lady Luck should die? Save the breath you'd waste for an answer; I know your agents dump those whom you dislike in the market-square, claiming that it was for that reason they expired.

"Accordingly, none recognized the fragments. When you commanded stone-masons to assemble the necessary material and build this wall atop your handsome tower, they gathered up whatever they could find, and into the wall they set the broken pieces of the statue, in such fashion that the back of the head was behind your throne."

"But that's not fair!" Fellian shrieked. "You knew this all the time, didn't you?"

"Who are you to talk of 'fair' and 'unfair'?" the traveler snapped. "Did I not hear you yesterday promising to reward Achoreus by increasing his stake on a wager that your privy intelligence informed you he had won? Be silent! I am not here to argue, but to claim my winnings!"

He pointed at Fellian with his staff, and with one hand clutching a fragment of the statue, the other clawing at air as though he could cram it by fistfuls into his choking lungs, the greatest winner of all the Lords of

Teq departed into nowhere.

A while later, when they came upon the corpse, those who had pledged themselves to his service began to quarrel about partitioning what he had left behind, in sum, the total wealth of the city and its environs.

"I will have the treasury!" cried Torquaida. "It's my due!" But a young and vigorous clerk from the counting-house struck him down with a golden candlestick. His old pate cracked across like the shell of an egg.

"If I can have nothing more, I'll take the booty Lord Fellian cheated me of!" vowed Achoreus, and set off in search of the girl Viola. But he tripped on a slippery marble step at the entrance to the women's quarters, and by the time he recovered from his bang on the head she was awake and away.

By contrast, though: on learning that his lord was a loser in the game of life after all, the groom who tended Western Wind saddled up the stallion, sighing.

"At least this small recompense is due to me," he muttered, and opened the door of the stable.

Later, in Barbizond, he offered the steed's services to cover some mares in heat, and from the foals which resulted built up a livery-stable of his own.

Likewise the falconer, on being told the news, gathered his prize merlin and went out into the countryside to get what living he could; he lost the merlin by flying it at an eagle which had stolen a child, a match the eagle was foredoomed to win. But that child was the only son of a wealthy land-owner, and in gratitude he made the falconer bailiff of his estates.

Also the cook gathered a brand from beneath his cauldron and went forth by a secret passage leading from the back of his ox-roasting hearth. There he turned his ankle on a square object lying in the dust of the passageway, and the light of the brand showed that it was the lost Book of Knightly Vigor, from which- legend claimed-the Count of Hyfel, founder of Teq, had gained the amorous skill to woo and wed his twenty-seven brides. With recipes from it he opened a cookshop, and defeated lovers from a score of cities trudged over hill and dale to sample his unique concoctions.

Amid all this coming and going, however, the captives from Wantwiche were content to find their way to freedom in the warm morning sun.

IX

On their first return, the villagers were a trifle puzzled to discover that the pond beside the green, which for as long as anyone could recall had been placid, now roiled unaccountably. However, as their repairs proceeded-new roofs and shutters, new gates and fences, to replace those broken by the troops from Teq-that disturbance ceased. Before the new beer was brewed, before new barrels were coopered, before a new fiddle had been made for Fiddler Jarge, the water had resumed its normal state.

And on the day when-belatedly-Leluak led out his bride to start the dancing proper to a marriage, a person in a black cloak stood with a benign smile in the shelter of a sycamore.

"Was it not clever, Horimos?" he said under his breath to the elemental prisoned beneath the water. "Was it not ingenious to pervert the thinking of rational men into the random path of a gambler, who lacks even the dangerous knowledge of an enchanter when he tampers with the forces of chaos?"

Unnoticed except by the traveler, the pond gave off a bubble full of foul marshy gas, which might have been intended for an answer.

"Shu-ut-brr'p-brr'up!"

"By all means, Horimos," the traveler murmured, and drained the mug of Brewer Harring's good beer which he, like all passers-by on a festival day, had been offered. He set the vessel on a handy stump, and the music rose to a frantic gay crescendo.

When, a little diffidently, the new bride came to greet him and ask if he would like to take his turn at partnering her in the dance, there was no trace of his presence except the empty mug.

four

DREAD EMPIRE

Lo! thy dread empire, Chaos, is restored; Light dies before thy uncreating word...

-Pope: The Dunciad

I

"Good morrow, sir," the folk said civilly to the person in black who stood leaning on a staff-of-unusual substance-watching them fetch and carry water from the Gander's Well. He answered in turn, but absently, preoccupied, and none of them marked him so closely as to recognize him again. It was plain that he was concerned with private thoughts.

Indeed, so absorbed was he that the sun dipped down and the boys and the goodwives whose chore it was to collect water had gone home to their well-earned supper, before he stirred a pace from where he'd wasted the day. Then it was to address a man, well muffled against the evening cool, who came to scrape a few flakes of punk from a rotten tree-stump, not a great distance from the well's mouth, and dropped them as he gathered them into a pottery jar.

Seeing him then apply a fizzling wick of braided withes, the traveler said, "You go a journey, I take it, sir!"

"Why, yes!" the man said, glancing up. "I'm called to see my sister, who's in labor with a nephew for me; her man's abroad, and someone responsible must be by to take her other bairns in charge."

"And this is what you'll use for tinder?" said the traveler, pointing with his staff at the tree-stump.

"None better can be found in this vicinity," said the man. "All who must go a trip by night make use of it. It carries fire through the most amazing storms. In fact, it's said"-but here he coughed, as though by way of apology for seeming to give credit to such a superstition-"there's some bright spirit in it, that fosters the sparks against all odds. If you, sir, whom I judge to be a stranger, think of continuing your walk by night, I counsel you should avail yourself of this. More than once friends of mine have been grateful for it, thinking to finish a journey in daylight, and then coming on a washed-out bridge or flooded ford!"

"How far away then can your sister live? As yet, there's light in the sky; there's an hour or two before full dark, at least."

"Hmph!" said the man, straightening as he capped his tinder-jar and tossed aside his wick of withes, to sputter on ground made wet by water spilled from buckets day-long dipped in the well. " 'Tis plain you really are a stranger, sir! Needs must I go by Cleftor Heights, and there the dark falls fast, believe you me! Indeed, if you'll forgive me, I must make haste, even with this to save me in the pitch black."

"One final question," said the traveler, and gestured with his staff. "I've seen these folk tramp weary miles from town to fill yoked pails of water at this well. Is it regarded as especially sweet?"

The man chuckled. "Why, sir, as to drinking straight, not especially," he returned. "But, see you, the season's on us to brew ale and beer, and-for what reason I know not-if you brew with water from the Gander's Well, you remain lively and jolly all evening long, and the morning after your head's clear and your belly calm. Be sure in the taverns of the town they offer you nothing worse; sometimes they'll try and fool a stranger with what they will not drink themselves."

"Thanks for the counsel," said the traveler in black.

When he was alone, he shook his head sorrowfully. Once on this site Yorbeth had brooded in his guise of a tree, his longest tap-root fed from a miraculous spring. Then that sad greedy fool of a packman...

But he was mortal, which the elemental had not been, and what was left? This stump, yielding tinder for overnight travelers, and a well whose chief renown was for the brewing of beer!

Yet it was not entirely to be wondered at. The news was of a piece with all the rest of what he'd learned during this, the latest of so many journeys undertaken in accordance with the obligations which bound him. Latest? Not impossibly, he was beginning to believe, the last.

For once it had made small difference that this journey was this journey, not the one before or after. In chaos, randomness was so extreme, the very contrasts made for a sense of uniformity. Now there were actual changes: the vanishing of Yorbeth not the greatest.

Back beyond Leppersley, for instance, Farchgrind was a household pet! The people heard him still, but conjured him to entertain their friends, and scoffed when he made his bragging promises. Laprivan of the Yellow Eyes had spent his substance, whatever the nature of it might be, and wearied of his struggle against the past. Footsteps left by those who plodded up his hill endured an hour or more.

And Barbizond had gone with Ryovora, despite Sardhin. The progress of rationality had worn him down-that bright being in his rainbow-gleaming cloud. It was still claimed that a knife from Barbizond would keep its edge forever, but the only man who'd mentioned the notion to the traveler this trip had been a sober farmer in Kanish-Kulya, and he'd employed the same diffident tone as the man just departed, the one who'd been embarrassed at reference to a spirit in the punk which carried fire so well.

That farmer was an earthy man leading a placid life, a little puzzled now and then when one of his fat and happy ploughboys brought some improbable growth to show him: a bunch of grapes that shone like polished metal, a turnip which, split apart, revealed the chambers of a human heart...

But his wine was plentiful and sweet, and there was never a lack of roasts to grace the spits in his kitchen, so he bothered his head not at all with traces of another age. Even the ancestry of his daughter-in-law was a source of kindly jokes around his table. Time was when any good Kanish family like his would have banished Kulya girls to the goose-run, be they never so beautiful-or perhaps honored their beauty by gang-rape if there were half a dozen sufficiently drunken men about.

Now, regal in a gown of peach-colored silk, a Kulya lady nightly shared his dinners, his heir fondly touching her goblet with his own to drink toast after toast to their three handsome boys asleep upstairs. With grandchildren growing apace, who should care when the blade of a harrow caught in the eye-socket of some moldering skull? That war was over; the armistice continued.

Likewise in Teq they made a mock of Lady Luck: her offering was a gobbet of spittle, launched at the floor when one of the company voiced hopes for an over-bold project.

Yet the rule bound him, and the traveler's nature was not such that he should complain. Forth he went on paths grown unfamiliar, and spoke with many people in many places, as for example in Wocrahin, where once-

Memory! Memory! He had never foreseen that that intangible, binding the fluid nature of eternity into the sequential tidiness of Time, would also hamper the will like age itself! Almost, he began to envy those who could die....

No matter. In Wocrahin a man sat gobbling lamprey-pie in a splendid banquet-hall: gross in a purple doublet smeared with gravy-stains. Words chomped around a full mouth of the fish and crust, he forced out, " 'Fonly w'were freah y'muzzhr!'"

"Ah, yes!" sighed his wife, accustomed to interpreting such talk: she fat as a prize breeding-sow, though childless, her vast bosom exposed almost to the bulging nipples over a gown crusted with seed-pearls, her head seeming to be depressed into her neck by the weight of the gem-crusted tiara she had put on, though they had no company to dinner apart from the thirty scrag-lean servants ranged around the hall.

"Would we were free of my mother!" she echoed when she had swilled her gullet with a swig of wine. "Ah, how finely we would live were we rid of her! She eats us out of house and home, the old bag!"

"Sh'yeats zazouter 'ouseername!" concurred the man.

The tall windows of the banquet-hall stood open to the warm summer night. Beyond them, watching the line of beggars who daily came-more from habit than optimism-to beg the cook for scraps, the traveler in black both heard the exchange and also saw the lady's mother, in draggled rags, pleading at the barred grille of the cellar where she was pent for a share of the beggars' crumbs.

He tapped his staff on the wall.

"As you wish, so be it," he said, and went away. The ceiling of the banquet-hall creaked behind him; it freed the greedy pair within a minute from all burdens, life itself not excluded.

Likewise in Medham, a city noted for its lovely girls, a man sat in a tavern who had tried scores of them and recounted how expert he was at seduction.

"Ah, if I had a quart of ale for every one, I'd hardly be sober again in this life!" he hinted to his listeners, turning over his purse and finding it void of coin. "Why, did not the lady Fretcha come to me on hands and knees, saying I'd ruined her for life? Haw-haw! Begged me, on my oath-literally begged me-to make an 'honest woman' of her! Haw-haw-haw! And then there was the lady Brismalet; she did the same-what impudence! And the lady Thespie, and then Padovine... Ho! As I say, did I but have a quart of ale for each-"

"As you wish, so be it," said his neighbor, a person in black with an unusual staff, and rose. No one

noticed him depart. All were too taken aback at the spectacle of the boastful philanderer, belly distended like a hogshead, vomiting disgustingly because he could not hold ale amounting to twenty-six quarts.

"You stupid brute!" cried a carter in a hamlet hard by Acromel, and lashed his horse across the hindquarters with a steel-barbed whip. Violent though was the blow, it barely drew blood-he'd employed the whip so often, the horse's back and legs were cicatrized with impermeable scars. Nonetheless the poor beast whinnied and cringed. Therefore he beat it again, and harder still.

"Ho, that you were blessed with more sense!" he roared. "Would you could learn how not to spill my load crossing a rut!"

Still grumbling about the horse's lack of wit, he went to the back of the cart to retrieve the ill-stowed sack of grain which had tumbled off.

"As you wish, so be it," said the traveler, and the horse reared up, tipping the whole ton-weight of bags on the stooping carter. Then it chewed intelligently through the traces and took its leave, to enjoy lush upland grass and roam free.

"By your favor, sir," said a boy of ten or twelve years, hunting a hedgerow near the village Wyve, "are such plants poisonous or wholesome?"

Offering for inspection a glabrous brownish fungus.

"Wholesome," said the traveler. "They may be fried."

With a moue, the boy tossed the toadstool aside.

"Are you not glad to have found that it's edible?" asked the traveler. "I took it you were gathering food."

"No, sir," said the boy. His voice and eyes were older than his years. "I seek poisons to give to my mother; she rules me unkindly and will not let me do whatever I like."

He sighed enormously. "Ah, that I might recognize instanter what may be relied on to entrain death!"

"As you wish, so be it," said the traveler, and went on, leaving the boy weeping because he realized: no matter what diet is chosen, sooner or later death ensues.

Thus, pretty much as might have been expected, the way of the traveler wound on, until that night which overtook him deeper than other nights on the flank of Rotten Tor, in which he discovered why the honest working-man from Gander's Well had carefully sought tinder to bear on a journey a mere hour in length.

And why the tinder had to be of a tree which once had drunk a marvelous spring far underground.

And also one thing far more important: why, when all about him he saw the triumph of the homely commonplace virtues, the prevalence only of the everyday vices such as laziness and greed-earnest, if any were to be had, of the impending conclusion of his task-he first should learn the flavor of that bitter new edge acquired by apprehension, which turns it into something cruder.

Fear.

Truly this was not like an ordinary night! Though she was wrapped in a good plaid shawl, and had moreover mittens to her hands, the woman was dismayed by the solidity of the blackness, by the chill that bit from it through garments never so well-woven, to the ultimate marrow. Behind her the child Nelva, whom she had not dared to leave at home, was too weary-or too cold- even to whimper.

At least, though, far ahead there gleamed one spark: the mark of her destination.

Though going back...

She shivered so violently her teeth chattered. It was something to be faced, the return, and couldn't be helped. Bowing her head, although there was no apparent wind, she clung to her daughter's hand and hurried on.

Lights gleamed fantastical the length of the little shop. Whoever had suffered by the coming of these unseasonable black nights to the Clef tor Fells, it wasn't Master Buldebrime who owned the place. Lamps shone on the adze-shapen counter facing the door that admitted clients from the street, and on all the pale pine planks doing the duty of shelves which lined the room wherever there was solid wall. There was even a lit lamp hung on that other door, of boards nailed to a saltire frame, giving access to the living-quarters of the house.

Certain of these lamps burned candles of good tallow, and more of rank stale fat. Some burned wicks floating in clear sweet oil, but these were few, and fewest of all that were alight this evening were the ones which fed on exotic aromatic distillations and dispersed into the air not only a luminance slightly tinged with sapphire-blue but also a delightful perfume. These last had reservoirs to match their content: fine-wrought in alabaster, amethyst and orichalcum.

Cold on the street it might be, but shutters had boarded in the shop's two streetward windows long before, so well sealed at their edges by strips of wetted leather that the air within was past being only warm. Now it was hot with all those flames entrapped by clear glass chimneys, or tinted crystal globes, or shields of thin-pared horn. The delicate scent of the most costly of them faded into a stench of vaporized fat; on their rich diet, the flames looked almost starved.

Nonetheless, even now, their glimmering colors made the coarse roof of overarching beams look like a mine of dismal coal illumined unexpectedly by an irrupting river that had washed a shaft of sunshine underground and shown that there were also jewels in the rock.

On the counter a tall time-candle, bright red wax crossed at thumb-joint intervals by bands of black, told that the hours of trading for today were nearly done.

Abruptly and in unison the flames bowed, like heads of barley in a field assaulted by a storm, and in from the street dived the woman, her clogs announcing her arrival on the floor-flags. Forgetful on the instant of her weariness and chill, the toddler Nelva at her skirts exclaimed with ooh! and aah! at seeing this wonderland of colored light. A rush of burnt-wax stink took to the outdoors like a dying man's gasp, and there was a cry from beyond the inner wall: "I come apace!"

Snuffers in hand ready to douse the time-candle and the rest, the owner of the shop appeared in a tallow-stiff smock. Shaven, his red jowls glistened as though he sweated the very fabric of his wares. He was poised to fawn, expecting one of the gentry who came by ordinary to view his stocks late in the evening, they being readier than the common sort to brave the dark, what with their covered carriages and palankeens.

But that lasted a mere eyeblink. Here was only some nondescript poor woman, likely hoping to trade some useless odds and ends against a lamp instead of purchasing one with honest currency.

"What is it you want?" he demanded.

"What would I come here for but a lamp?" the woman snapped, and added from the corner of her mouth, "Be silent, Nelva!"

The little girl complied, but her eyes remained enormously round as she gazed from one to another of the shining lights.

"Here!" went on the woman, slapping coins on the counter. "Three good coppers, as you see-what's more the rims aren't clipped! We need a lamp to eat our supper by. The one we had is broke, and do I set Nelva here close enough by the hearth to see by fire-flame smoke makes her weep and salts her dish with tears. For the bairn's sake, give me the best you can."

She planted her hands on her hips and stood back. Taking up the coins, Master Buldebrime studied them. As claimed, they were properly round and gave back to the time-candle the proper reddish sheen. He bit one, shrugged, and turned to a shelf of his cheapest lamps.

"This is the best I can do," he said, selecting one. "Take it or leave it."

The woman looked it over cannily. She said, "But that's a short candle in it, that's been lit!"

"Then take a brand-new candle, and my blessings," the shopkeeper snorted, catching one up at random from a stack and throwing the shortened one to be re-melted later. "For three coppers that's the most I can spare. And wouldn't part with so much but that yon's a pretty child." He eyed Nelva, leaning forward on the counter. "Hmm! Yes! In three-four years you should let me know again. I'll 'prentice her to the candle-making trade. There's men aplenty who'd wed a wife with such a profitable skill."

Wrapping the lamp in her shawl, the woman said harshly, "Thank you, but no, Master Buldebrime! We hear the tales of your apprentices, even out where we live by Rotten Tor. So you like little girls as well as boys?"

The shopkeeper's face darkened below the saddest ruby of any of his lamps.

"Get out!" he rasped, and made as though to hurl his bronze snuffers.

Though the hand which clutched the coins stayed safely resting on the counter.

Once more the flames quavered as, faced with the prospect of returning to that dreadful black and cold, the child objected to the notion of departure; shortly, however, her mother dragged her over the threshold and the door banged shut. Buldebrime remained for a long moment fuming as foully as his cheapest candles, then mastered his rage and went to bar the entrance. He made the rounds with his snuffers, and resorted at last to his cosy living-room, leaving the shop lit only- through a skylight-by the far-off gleam of four crucial conjunct planets wheeling downward from the zenithal line.

III

Not right, the traveler decided-not right at all!

He stood and pondered on the flank of Rotten Tor, a louring crest so friable not even goats might climb it in safety, staring in what long familiarity assured him must be the direction of Cleftor Vale. Granted that the entire valley lay in the daytime shadow of the Heights, should it not now be lit at least by starshine? And, come to that, was not the moon inclining towards its full?

Yet here was such blackness as only a shout might penetrate-or a scream! Like the one which had just re-echoed to him, in two parts: beginning with the cry of a child, continuing in a tone louder, deeper, more heartfelt.

"Ho, that we were safe at home! Help, if there's anyone there!"

The traveler did not need to hide his smile; the blackness performed that function for him. Tapping his way with his staff, he skirted the brink of the rocky torrent which here assured the summertime vegetation of its moisture, and was shortly heard approaching by the woman who had called out.

"Ah! Friend, whoever you may be!" She caught blindly at his arm. "Save me and my daughter-take us in!"

"I have no lodging hereabout," said the traveler. "But you do, surely."

"What?" The woman seemed bewildered; then of a sudden recovered herself. "Why, what a fool I must be!" She went forward, groping, and shortly was heard to knock her fists on resounding planks. "Home!" she cried. "Oh, praise be!"

A door creaked on awkward hinges, and a gleam of firelight showed the outline of a cottage originally built of sturdy four-square logs and boards, that now was tilt-roofed and wore a melancholy garb of grey-green lichen. The child ran forward and threw her arms around a man who rose from a truckle-bed, discarding a blanket of threadbare woollen stuff, but could not speak in greeting for a cough which overcame him.

"My dear, you're safe!" he croaked when he recovered. "Oh, you should not have taken Nelva!"

"You were asleep," the woman said, embracing him. "And it's so rarely that you sleep quite sound... Ah, but I'm forgetting! Yarn, this gentleman who stands at the door: he's my savior!"

The traveler entered at her beckoning and gave a bow.

"I was almost lost!" the woman babbled. "It was so dark-"

"But surely," Yarn began, and coughed a second time, and tried again. "But surely you went to buy a lamp!"

"Indeed, indeed! To Master Buldebrime's-here, sir," she added to the stranger, bustling about as she spoke while child and father sat down side by side on the bed, "do you make yourself comfortable, and welcome too! I'd have fallen in the gorge had you not chanced by, so completely was I lost on my own doorstep! Excuse the sparseness of our hospitality, but if you fancy such rude fare we can offer a broth of greens, and maybe some bread, and-"

"But to buy a lamp, and come home in the dark!" Yarn got that out in a single breath, before hacking into coughs anew.

"Hah!" The woman stopped in the middle of the floor, where firelight showed her silhouette, and put her hands on her hips. "When I get back to town, shall I ever give Buldebrime a tongue-lashing! That lamp! That lamp! Here!"

She produced it from the folds of her shawl. "Why, did I not light it to see the path by, returning home? And did it not in the same moment smoke over its chimney, blacker than a barn-door?"

She gestured violently at her husband with it.

"Your pardon for my ill-temper, sir," she added to the traveler. "But to be without a lamp these nights is more than a body can bear. It's as though the very dark outside comes creeping in at the unstopped chinks of the wall, dulling the fire-glow! And, say all our neighbors, Goodie Blanchett and Goodie Howkle and the rest: go to Master Buldebrime, his lamps are best, we have our own and sit by night in their warm yellow shine..." As she talked, she was rubbing the smoked-over glass on her shawl. Damp logs on the earth sputtered a counterpoint to her speech.

"I'll light it again, to prove my word," she said, and bent to pick a pine-splinter from the fire.

"What's worst of all," she added as she carried the flame to the twisted wick, "he took coin from me for it-not a mere bucket of ewe's milk, or some trifle we could spare! And it does this! Sir!"-rounding on the traveler-"do you not think it criminal, to take advantage of a poor soul thus?"

But the traveler was not paying attention. Gazing at the lamp-chimney, which as predicted was on the instant blearing over, he was uttering sad words within his head:

"Ah, Wolpec, Wolpec! Has it come to this?"

Once this pallid thing of grimy smoke had been an elemental he-even he-was now and then compelled to consult. There were conditions attached to such inquiry, by which he-even he-was forced to abide. Here, now, on the chimney of a common lamp, there writhed blurred characters such as formerly had expressed transcendent truths... but who alive could certify the meaning of such messages? Those tongues had been forgotten everywhere!"

Reacting to the concentration of his gaze, the woman ventured, "Sir, you're not by any chance skilled in the repair of lamps, are you... ?"

Then, registering the fierceness of his expression, she fell into a puzzled silence.

Some of the old laws, it appeared, still stood, but the understructure of them must have cracked, as a building may retain its general shape yet lack huge plates of stucco from its facade and be unsafe to walk the stairways of. For this lamp was showing three truths in the ancient manner, without the ancient and obligatory rites....

Of three, the first incomprehensible, in a variety of writing that creatures not quite man-like had employed to record dealings in imponderables. It had been hazarded that the records concerned a trade in souls, but that was barely an approximation. In any case, being an invention of chaos, the symbols had any value anyone cared to assign them.

And it was fading, and it was time to ask again.

"How come you to this pass?" the traveler thought.

Now, the one debatable, in a single hieroglyph such as might have been seen on the high pillars of EtnumYuzup before that metropolis dissolved into dust with thunderclaps. The Grand Five Weavers had grown self-indulgent, and no longer observed the instructions they had issued to themselves in the days of the foundation of their city. This might be read plainly; the traveler read it.

One would cease.

Now for the final truth, the ineluctable... but the question must be aptly posed. Indeed, the traveler realized, it had better not be a question but a statement, a truth of comparable import. Within his head he framed it: "I have many names, but a single nature."

The weakening elemental understood, and on the glass appeared the characters of a poem by Shen-i-ya Eng-t'an Zwu, who sat for a thousand years beneath an elm while none could tell whether he lived or died, so wholly was he attuned to the world around.

Smoke

fades into the air

is no more seen

The candle-dousing winds of ages seemed to sigh in the chimney of the cottage.

"Sir," the woman said anxiously, "I wish you'd not bother so much with our trifling problem!"

"Is it not in fact a great matter for you, lacking a lamp?" The traveler didn't raise his head.

The woman sighed. "Well, I must confess it is, sir. For eating close by the fire, and breathing smoke, is hard on my little one, and my man Yarn above all, what with his chest-trouble.... I'd set my heart on having a good bright clear new lamp!"

"As you wish," said the traveler, not without sorrow, "so be it."

He blew out the flame. When he cleaned the glass and lit it anew, it shed a grateful pure yellow light.

Wolpec was little, though wise; candles had sufficed in which to pen him. Fegrim was vast, and underlay a mountain. But he had seen among the snag-toothed peaks of Kanish-Kulya how his volcano slumbered now beneath a cap of white, where once it had spouted smoke a mile high. No ripples stirred the pool of Horimos, and after untold eons the river Metamorphia had changed that nature it once had of changing things.

Wives rinsed their laundry in the spring at Geirion, and the eldritch song Jorkas had been used to sing was turned a lullaby with nonsense words to soothe asleep happy babes in wicker cradles. Even the names of the greatest ones: Tuprid and Iaschalanva, Juorril and Lry-were one to speak them, folk would answer, "Who?"

They had departed, to fret powerless among the stars, and sometimes hurl futile spears of flame across the night... at which sight lovers, hand in hand, would cry merrily, "Look, there's a star to wish on! Wish for early marriage and long happiness!" And kiss, and forget it in a moment.

Except here, and that was very strange. Disquieting! It was indeed in Cleftor country as had been described to him: as though the black of night could filter through the walls and dull the fire. Flames here were sullen red, and their heat was muted. This was not true of the new lamp, but there were reasons for that.

It would be politic, the traveler reasoned, to behold the dawn.

Therefore, dissolving one of the forces that curdled the light-beams of his staff, he picked his way across the hut's floor silently, abandoning the thick warm fleece he'd been allotted for a coverlet. Outside, the last hour of the night was oppressive with mephitic stench, as though every home in the valley had kept a fire ablaze all night against the mantle of blackness, and all their smokes had come together in a foul miasma. Even the blade of light from his staff was foreshortened a pace or two ahead of his toes.

The trade of lamp-maker hereabouts must indeed be a profitable pursuit.

What this blackness was not was easy to define. It wasn't smoke, although much was now mingled in it. It was not fog, clammy and opaque, yet cleanly, being drops of fine-divided water. It was not cloud, which is of the same substance. It was-well, it was an inverse of brightness.

When dawn came, belatedly by the traveler's calculation, it behaved moreover in a peculiar fashion. Rather than thinning and being dispelled, as night ought to be by the rising sun, it drew in on itself, lying bare yard by yard the countryside, as though one could make thick black tar flow uphill. And uphill was its direction, out of the vale and towards the ragged pinnacles of Cleftor Heights. There, at some point almost beyond the traveler's range of vision, it gathered itself as it were into a ball, into a spiraling cone, into a wisp... and nothing.

Yet it had left, over every inch of ground where it had lain, a brooding aura of dismal foreboding.

Going by ordinary ways, he later came on some children turned out of the house to play, who were listlessly tossing pebbles at a target scratched on a tree-bole, and seemingly cared little whether they hit it or not; at least, none among them was keeping score.

"Who rules these lands?" the traveler inquired, and one of them answered.

"I think his name is Garch, sir. Would you that I go home and ask my mother? She would know."

"Thank you; the name's enough," the traveler said.

IV

At the full moon Garch Thegn of Cleftor Heights held certain audiences that differed markedly from the common run of his daily business. One day before the full, he spoke to no one, but locked himself away in private rooms to pore over great tomes and crumbling scrolls; one day after, it was never sure-even to his chief counselors and stewards-whether he would be fit to resume his normal court, in his great hall tiled with chrysoberyl slabs.

Yet withal his was a domain envied far and wide in this country; by all criteria it was improbable. Though most of it was rocky and its soil was thin, its kine were famed for their fatness and the richness of their milk. Though their roots were shallow, often planted in mere crevices, never a hedge but yielded nuts and fruit to be preserved by boiling down in honey. Though it was unpopulous, with villages few and far

between, its folk were tall and strong and raised healthy children; what was more, garments elsewhere reserved to the grandest ladies might here be seen gracing a farmer's wife driving her trap to market, or her daughter on a high-day bound for the wife-taking dance. Velvet and suede, samite and purple plush, were donned as casually as homespun, and only at the very fringes of the Garch estates-as for example hard by Rotten Tor-did families lack for silver spoons and porcelain dishes to entertain company at table.

Paradoxically, with all this the folk of the district were disliked. It was said they were overly cunning; it was said that doing business with them was like trying to stand an eel on its tail. It was further hinted that it was best not to let your daughter marry one, be he never so prosperous, for in a short while her only care for her family would be to take what advantage of them she might, and she'd have become like her neighbors, purse-mouthed, hard-eyed, and fond of coin.

Despite such talk, however, visitors came frequently to Garch's mansion, for purposes of trade. Notable among these, and arriving typically in the second quarter of the moon, were persons of a particular sort, who brought not conventional goods, but ideas, and treasures, and relics-it being at this specific time of the month that the thegn was readiest to receive them.

Few, nonetheless, passed the fierce initial scrutiny of his counselors; penalties for wasting the thegn's time were severe, and all supplicants for audience must be grilled beforehand by these three. Each morning they assembled in an anteroom beside the great hall, with a scribe and a paymaster carrying a chest of coins, and saw everyone who had come intending to trade. Often the business was quick and simple, concerning only regular goods that might be swiftly bargained for, such as tapestry, or unguents, or fine handicrafts. Similarly, there were those who offered services, skill in carving or tailoring or cobbling, and were desirous to display the shield of warrant of their lord over their place of business; these were invariably permitted to undertake a trial venture for a small fixed fee-or, if they failed a first time, for no fee at all-then engaged on contract if their talents proved adequate. One of this sort had once been Master Buldebrime, and now he supplied the lamps and candles for the mansion, toiling monthly up from the town with a selection of his choicest productions.

Sometimes, however, the proceedings went slowly, and involved interrogation, and it was the hardest and most venturesome of the visitors who endured this. A few such were on hand today.

Garch's trusted counselors were three, as aforesaid. In a high-backed chair of horsebones pinned with bronze and padded with bags of chicken-down, the old crone Roiga sat to the left. To the right sat Garch's sister, Lady Scail, on lacquered ivory made soft with whole sheepskins. And in the center, scorning luxury, presided one-eyed Runch on a common counting-house stool. He wore green; Roiga, brown; the lady Scail, yellow. All else in the room was sterile grey.

"Admit the first," said Runch in a barking voice, and alert servants ushered in a man who wore the garb of the Shebyas, itinerant traders whose home on the Isle of Sheb had gone back to yellow jungle; no one was certain why, but enchantment was suspected. Doffing his cap, he placed before Runch an object in a small pink sack.

"Your honors, I bring a rare relic, from a city sunken in the depths of Lake Taxhling. Had I but the gold to finance such an expedition, I'd hire divers-of which as you are doubtless aware there are a plenitude in that region where they gather mussel-pearls-and go rake the bottom-mud to produce beyond a peradventure many other potent articles. He coughed behind his hand and dropped his voice. "I suspect it would be superfluous to mention that knowledge of an extraordinary kind was available to the inhabitants of that city, which I'm sure you will concede it's better not to name aloud."

Runch looked over the relic, which was a corroded axe-blade. He said, pushing it aside, "You cannot

name the city, because it isn't there. What you have is part of the cargo of a boat capsized by a storm. Go away."

"But your honor-your grace-your highness...!" the man expostulated. The crone Roiga snapped bony fingers, and an attendant hurried him away.

"Next," she said in a voice like rustling dried leaves.

A man entered who swept the floor with a blue cloak as he bowed. "I, sire and ladies," he announced, "acquired a book at Pratchelberg. Lacking the skill to read the ancient language in which it's couched, I thought to bring it to your thegn, as being the most renowned, the most expert, the most-

"Save your breath," murmured the lady Scail, having turned a mere half-dozen of the pages. "This text's corrupt, and anyway my brother has a better copy."

Protesting quite as loudly as his forerunner, the man in the blue cloak made a forced departure. To the music of his wails, a third supplicant approached, offering a small furry ball.

"This unique article," he declared, "speaks when it's gently squeezed, crying out in a small shrill voice. By repute it grew on the ranches of Yorbeth, and I laid out half my life's savings so that it might be brought to Thegn Garch."

Roiga took it and listened to its cry. She said as she threw it aside again, "Hah! Yes, indeed, it does speak -by forcing air through twin taut reeds! And do you know what it says? It says, 'The man who bought me is a fool!' Get you gone!"

"Will they never learn?" murmured the lady Scail as this man also was frog-marched out. She had taken a tiny pad of emery and was buffing at her blood-red nails. "Who remains-anyone?"

And there was a girl.

Suddenly there came an electric tingling in the air, and Scail laid by her emery-pad and Roiga closed her thin old hands on the reassuringly solid nearer edge of the table and Runch confirmed his balance on his stool.

She stood before them in a broad hat and fur breeches and a black mail shirt. For a long while there was utter silence.

Then, at length, she moved to place before them a small packet wrapped in parchment and bound with a white ribbon. She said, "Spices."

The three counselors inhaled as one, and it was Roiga who finally said, "Vantcheen-yes?"

The girl nodded. She was very thin, as though a skeleton had been dressed again in its skin without the underlying fat and muscle, and her eyes burned like a black fire.

"Then name your price!" cried Runch.

"Ah, yes. A price." The girl tapped a sharp front tooth with a nail even sharper. "Silver, then. A hammer-head. Three ounces' weight."

The three counselors tensed. Lady Scail said, "As to the shaft...?"

The girl shook her head ever so slightly, and gave ever so slight a smile. She said, "I thank you for the offer. But the shaft has already been-uh-given to me."

"Oh, but you're so young!" exclaimed Roiga. "And yet you're so skilled!"

"Thank you again," the girl murmured, and turned to go.

"Wait!" cried Lady Scail. "Do you not wish to speak with my brother the thegn? It's long since one was here who was so adept!"

"If the constellations are proper for the meeting, I shall meet the thegn," said the girl composedly, and took from the scribe a draft to cover her pay, authorizing the mansion's master smith to forge the silver hammer-head.

There was a deep silence for some while following her departure. The handle of that hammer had to be gristly-and some, particularly men, would call it grisly....

Then they were poised, very well pleased, to adjourn for the day, the only other supplicants for audience being of the common run-disputants over boundary fence, or prospective parents-in-law come to determine the proper size of a marriage-portion-when there was a furious stamping and considerable shouting beyond the door, and at the head of a gaggle of stewards, secretaries and waiting-room maids, their master himself came blasting into the room.

The counselors beheld his expression of blind rage with amazement, rising to their feet.

"I have been cheated and deceived!" roared Garch.

By ordinary he was pretty much a fop, this wealthy lord of improbably rich estates, but now his brown hair and beard were tousled, the laces hung down from his dark red shirt, and his fine worsted stockings slopped over the tops of his boots. To emphasize his outburst, he hammered on the table, and came near to scattering the vantcheen spice.

"Search me this mansion, every nook and cranny!" he shouted. "Moreover, all the lands about! And if it be not found within the hour, send to the deceiver Bulderbrime and bring him here!"

"If what be not found?" countered Scail, who as his sister might most freely of the three ask that simple necessary question without inflaming him to further rage.

Garch mastered himself with vast effort, drew close, and whispered in her ear. By watching the change in her face, base attendants from whom he meant to keep the detailed facts deduced at once it was a matter of grave import. Some among the best informed put two and two together and when they received their orders a moment later-to go forth and bring in all the lamps and candles that could be found-decided it would be politic to go in search of service with some other lord.

It was, after all, a mere day and a half short of full moon.

By contrast with the thegn, Master Bulderbrime was in a high good humor. Walking through the back rooms of his home, that also served as shop, factory and warehouse, he no more than cuffed any of his apprentices today, not once employing the tawse that hung at his belt for administration of severer

punishment.

"Here are eleven candles almost the weight of twelve!" he barked at one child, charged with bearing finished work from the ranked poetry molds to be checked on the steelyard-but even she and the boy who had filled the molds escaped with mere open-handed slaps. Satisfied that they were dutifully trimming the surplus wax to be re-melted, he continued.

"Not so lavish with that essence!" he growled at a boy engaged in adding perfumes, drop by drop, to a mix of oils for the most expensive lamps. "Don't you know it conies from Alpraphand? Hah! I've half a mind to make you walk such a distance on this floor, to brand in your memory knowledge of how far that is! Still, that would take you weeks, and I'll neither feed nor clothe you 'less you're working hard to pay for it!"

Accordingly that apprentice too got off with a smacking.

Persuaded at length that all was well below, as much as affected the making, storing and vending of his wares, he proceeded to the upper floor. This was partitioned into three large chambers. First he came into his own, luxurious, where a couch stood upholstered in deep warm bear-hide and a little girl was industriously polishing a pier-glass.

To her, he said nothing; to himself he murmured that it was a pity she was destined for the eventual requirements of Lord Garch. Otherwise...

Still, there must be no breath of scandal about this house! If there were, respectable folk would cease to apprentice their brats with him, who kept no wife nor even a serving-maid. For that reason, the two other rooms on this story could be locked at night, and the keys remained always under his hand. One room for girls, the other for boys, they were in most regards identical, each containing heaps of rags soiled by long use and troughs into which at dawn and sunset he poured bucketfuls of gruel for the apprentices to lap. Now and then he also accorded them scraps of bacon and the outer leaves of cabbages: experience having shown that without a morsel of meat and a nibble of greens, the children grew sickly-hence unprofitable. He begrudged the cost, but tolerated it.

One further door remained at this level, and he opened it with the smallest of his many keys. Beyond was a steep flight of steps, hardly more than a slanted ladder, which he climbed. Despite the effort it required to haul his bulk to the top, he was humming a cheery strain when he emerged into the attic that it led to: a large open space lighted by two dusty dormers, lately re-floored with well-planed boards that did not creak.

Below, although they applied themselves to their work, the apprentices found time-as usual-to whisper and make gestures with offensive import. One boy of fourteen, bolder than the rest, and inured to being beaten for his obduracy, filched a more-than-finger-sized piece of wax and began to shape it into a human form. Pausing beside him, a girl who might have been pretty before a pint of Bulderbrime's hot tallow seared a puckered scar down her left cheek offered criticism and comment. Others gathered to see what was happening, and suggested improvements. In a little while the likeness to their master was unmistakable, and they chuckled and clutched at one another in delight.

When the doll was perfected, they hid it in a chink between the planks of the wall, to furnish further amusement at some future time.

Above, unaware of this, Buldebrime approached the center of his attic room. There stood a stool and a table bearing a number of books bound in leather from unconventional sources. Also there was a brazier,

and a locked aumbry with carven doors hung from a main-post of the roof. The lamp-maker opened this last, and removed from it a number of small articles: a bundle of feathers, a bag of herbs, and some powders.

Watching from deep shadow, the traveler in black repressed a sigh. He hated these hole-in-corner enchanters, not merely because they were victims of the same paradox that had misled their more distinguished predecessors-desiring to control chaos for the sake of the power to be had from it, yet anxious not to destroy it by exerting over-much control-but also because he'd found them ignorant, discourteous and casual. Buldebrime seemed typical of many.

He did not attempt to make himself known. Had Buldebrime been as adept as he presumably liked to think he was, he would not have needed to be told there was a Presence in the room.

He set out what was requisite for the sorcery he intended to undertake, bar one crucial item: a single candle. And then, in the instant before he discovered that the candle was not where he thought it was, there came a thunderous hammering from the entrance to the shop, followed by a loud cry.

"Buldebrime! Buldebrime! Open in the name of Garch Tegn of Cleftor Heights!"

The traveler gave a nod and took his leave.

V

There was a certain spot, a fair sward set with rocks flat-topped as though designed expressly to be sat upon, commanding a fine view of the thegn's mansion and within lazy strolling distance of the villages nearest thereto. In any other community it might safely have been predicted that on fine clear evenings such as this local folk would often congregate here, bringing provender and beer and possibly a tabor and some fifes, to enjoy the pleasant outlook and reflect on their luck in serving so notably able a ruler.

Here, however, the safe prediction was that by late afternoon all who did not have utterly unavoidable business would have retreated to their homes, bolting and shuttering them against the onset of that unnatural night which soaked up starlight and bit at the bones with vicious teeth.

So indeed the case proved. The last herds were driven back to their byres, the last flocks were folded, long before the sun had touched the divided peaks of the Cleft Tor. As the shadows lengthened, the air grew thick, and the aura which had infected the whole day curdled into a foretaste of the dark to come.

Seated alongside a curving track, his staff across his knees, the traveler gazed towards the thegn's mansion. It was a handsome, if uninspired, edifice. Girdling it in the place of a curteyn-wall there were low-roofed outbuildings perhaps a hundred paces by two hundred, made of grey stone, interrupted by a gate and speckled with windows. These enclosed a courtyard above ground-level, whose cobbled surface concealed subterranean dungeons and other hidden chambers, and from the center of this yard upreared a tower, or rather frustrum, its sloping sides approximating the base of a cone. There were the private quarters of the thegn. Terminating its truncated top, there was a winch-house where by shifts a score or so of muscular deaf-mutes waited the signal to save Garch the effort of climbing stairs, by hauling on ropes to lift a kind of palankeen steadied by greased poles and capable of being halted at any floor of the tower.

As the traveler studied this mansion, he saw servants come to set out torches by the gate, though there was still considerable sun-time left in the day.

Eventually there came in sight around the curve of the road a sort of small procession. It began with a striding man-at-arms, suspiciously staring this way and that. It continued with a personage in the garb of a Shebya: blue cap, green coat, black boots and silver spurs. He rode astride a palfrey. Then came a girl attired in pink as a page, but bosomed too heavily for there to be much chance of mistaking her sex, leading the first of a pair of pack-mules whose wooden saddles were half empty, and lastly another man-at-arms leading the second mule. Such was a common spectacle in any well-governed land; the Shebyas were the greatest traders of the age, and even the poorest possessed at least a couple of beasts and an attendant.

The leader of this party, however, was clearly not overjoyed with whatever business he'd most recently conducted. He frowned as he rode, and not infrequently uttered objurgations.

He redoubled them for fluency and loudness when, on spotting the black-clad figure by the track, the leading man-at-arms dropped his spear to an attack position and cried, "Halt!" The palfrey obeyed with extraordinary promptness, and thereby almost spilled his rider to the road.

"Good morrow," said the traveler mildly. "Sir, would you command your man to put up that over-eager point? It's aligned upon a portion of my carcass that I am anxious to preserve intact."

"Do so," the Shebya commanded, and pulled a face. "Forgive him," he continued, doffing his cap. "But we're collectively upset, I'd have you know, and very edgy, as it were. We've done so poorly on our errand to this famous thegn-of which we had, I must admit, high hopes."

"The saddles of your mules seem light enough," the traveler murmured.

"Oh, ordinary pack-goods one can dispose of anywhere," the Shebya shrugged. His keen eyes were fixed on the curious staff the traveler held, and one could almost hear the logical, though erroneous, deductions he was making. "But... Well, sir, might I hazard a guess that you too are bound to call on Garch?"

"That possibility," the traveler conceded, "should not be entirely ruled out."

"I thought so!" the other exclaimed, leaning forward on his palfrey's withers. "Might I further suggest that you would welcome information concerning the thegn's alleged willingness to purchase-ah-intangibles and other rare items at a respectable price?"

"It would be rash to deny," the traveler said, "that I have heard reference to some such habit of his."

"Then, sir, save your trouble. Turn about, and escape the oncoming night - for, truly, the nights they have hereabout are not of the common cosy kind. The tales you've likely heard are arrant nonsense."

"Nonsense, you say?"

"Yes indeed!" The Shebya grew confidential, lowering his tone. "Why, did I not bring him an object virtually beyond price? And did I not in the upshot have to peddle it door to door, for use in some lousy household enchantment instead of in the grand ceremonials of an adept? That it should keep company with pollywogs and chicken-blood-faugh! I ask you! Would not dragon-spawn have been meeter?"

"And was the article efficacious?" the traveler asked, hiding a smile.

The Shebya spread his hands. "Sir, that is not for me to determine. Suffice it to say that tomorrow will

tell; for the sake of insurance, as it were, against the risk that the purchaser may prove inadequately skilled in conjuration to extract maximum benefit from the acquisition, I suppose to be some distance hence." His mask of annoyance, willy-nilly, gave place to a grin; it was granted by everyone that, rogues though the Shebyas might be, they were at least engaging rogues.

"Howbeit," he appended, "take my advice. Don't go to Garch expecting to sell him remarkable and unique artifacts or data at such price as will ensure comfort to your old age. Apart from all else, the mansion is in a turmoil. Someone, so to speak, would appear to have laden the thegn's codpiece with live ants, and he gibbers like a man distraught, ordering all who displease him to be shortened by the head without appeal. Another excellent reason for departure-which, sir, if you will forgive the briefness of this conversation, inclines me forthwith to resume my journey."

After he and his companions had gone, the traveler remained. The air thickened still further. It felt almost resistant to the limbs, like milk turned with an admixture of rennet. Lost on a high outcrop, a kid bleated hopelessly for its nanny. Chill that one might have mistaken for agonizing frost laid a tight hold on the land, yet no pools crisped with ice. The traveler frowned and waited longer still.

Over the high tower of the mansion, at last, the coffin-black of night started to appear: solid-seeming blotches on the sky. At roughly the same time, there were noises to be heard along the road again, coming from the direction opposite to that which the Shebya and his troupe had taken. Into sight came a party of hurrying men on horseback, full-armed, glancing apprehensively at the gathering dark. Some had equipped themselves with torches, and kept making motions towards their flint and steel.

In their midst, tied face to tail on a dirty donkey, was Buldebrime moaning and crying out, hands lashed at his back and his grease-stiff smock badly torn.

Some distance behind, unable to keep pace, a furious driver cursed a pair of shaggy-fetlocked horses drawing a cart loaded until the springs sagged with candles, lamps, and articles in bags which could not clearly be discerned.

Of itself, the parade might have been amusing. Given the circumstances which had led to it, the traveler could not find it other than appalling.

The darkness spread, and yet it did not move. Rather, it occurred, moment by moment, at places further from its source.

VI

"Be calm!" Lady Scail for the latest of countless times adjured her brother.

"Be calm?" he echoed, mocking her. "How can I be? Are not they deserting us, the traitors, deserting me who gave them prosperity from this lean harsh country and made them the envy of folk in richer lands?"

It was true: news came every' few minutes of some trusted serving-man, soldier or steward who had surreptitiously crept away from the household.

"Is it not, moreover," he pursued, "the night before full moon? Is it not nearing midnight of that night? Must I not shortly go into the prescribed retreat? And how can we tell as yet how greatly we've been deceived by Buldebrime? Perhaps he miscalibrated our time-candles, so we'll have no means to tell the proper hour!"

Admittedly, it was impossible to make astronomic observations under nights as black as these.

Nonetheless, she blasted the same injunction at him, saying, "You fool, you have to keep your head at any cost! How many enchanters have not gone to doom because an elemental took advantage of just that weakness in their character?"

Sweating, gulping draught after draught of wine to lend him courage, he did his best to comply, since reason was on her side. However, self-mastery was hard. The mansion, and not only that but the entire surrounding countryside, was aquiver. The jagged range of Cleftor Heights was thrumming to a soundless vibration of menace, as though one of the beings incarcerated in a restless star had found the means to transmit terror down a shaft of light and struck the bedrock into resonating the keynote of a symphony of disaster, against the advent of the instrumentalists.

Moreover, it is not good for one who invokes the forces of chaos to pay any attention whatsoever to reason....

"Where's Roiga?" Garch demanded of a sudden.

"Where she should be: making ready in your room."

"And Runch?"

"They called him to the gate a while ago. They've sighted the party bringing Buldebrime."

"Then I'll go down to the dungeons," Garch declared, and drained his goblet. "I must be first to learn what that traitor's done!"

There was routine in this mansion, as in the household of any great lord, and to outward appearance it was being maintained. At the corner of two echoing corridors the traveler in black saw proof of this. Thump-thump down the passages to the beat of drums came the nightly provisions for the company at dinner: pies stuffed with game so heavy two men staggered under the load, and the whole roasted haunches of oxen and sheep; then serving-girls with jugs of wine and beer, and butlers carrying fine white linen napkins on their arms, and boys with ewers and basins that the diners might wash their hands in scented water, and harpists, and flautists, and a dwarf. This last hobbled awkwardly in an overlong gown, designed to make him trip often on its hem for the amusement of the gathering.

One could not intelligently foresee there being much laughter in the banquet-hall tonight. The stones from which the building was erected shared the incipient convulsions of the landscape, and overmuch dust danced in the light of the torches.

Intermittently, from beneath the floor, issued screams.

Orderly, with professional niceness, the least spoken-of among Garch's retainers-Tradesman Humblenode, the torturer-had set out the varied equipment for his task: here whips and fetters, thumbscrews there; tongs, knives and nooses at another place; and in the center of all a brazier, at which a little dirty boy worked a blacksmith's bellows in a vain attempt to make the fuel burn as bright as was required. Even here under the courtyard, where the walls oozed continual damp, the pervasive obliterating light-absorption of the strange night made itself known.

At the mere sight of Humblenode's instruments Buldebrime had collapsed into sniveling, and it was long after the thegn's intrusion into his cell that they contrived to make him utter coherent words.

"No, I did not filch any such candle! I have no knowledge of enchantment!"

"Try him with a little red iron," Garch proposed, and Tradesman Humblenode set a suitable tool to the fire.

"Have pity, have pity!" Buldebrime cried. "I swear by Orgimos and Phorophos, by Aldegund and Patrapaz and Dencycon-!"

"I thought you had no knowledge of enchantment?" Garch murmured, and gestured for Humblenode's assistants to stretch the lamp-maker on a rack.

But in a short space from the application of the first iron he escaped into unconsciousness, and not all Humblenode's art sufficed to awake him.

"Is Roiga meantime testing the lamps and candles that were brought with him?" Garch remembered to ask, somewhat belatedly. He had given that instruction, and not checked that it was carried out-though Runch and Roiga, of all his retinue, had most to lose by neglecting his requirements.

"I come from her, sir," a nervous waiting-maid reported, who was trying not to look at the limp body of Buldebrime, or anything else present in the cell. "She assures me she has tested every one, and whatever you seek-uh-isn't there."

Garch drew himself up to his full height. "So the treacherous lamp-man has tricked me," he muttered. "Can he not be aroused by midnight?"

"By no art known to me," said Humblenode apologetically. It was the first time he had failed his master, and he braced himself as though to endure his own style of treatment in consequence.

But Garch swung on his heel and strode away.

He came upon his sister, together with Runch and attendants, at the head of the dank noisome stairway to the dungeons; his private means of vertical transport did not, for logical reasons, extend into this level.

"Have you succeeded?" Scail cried.

"Failed!"

"And midnight nears!" Runch muttered.

"What must be done, must be done," said Garch. "Prepare me for my watch alone."

"But surely tonight it was imperative to conjure Wolpec, and ask his earnest of your ultimate success!" Under her face-mantling layers of rouge and powder, the lady Scail blanched.

"What's to be done will be done now!" Garch snapped. "Like it or not! You have tomorrow's daylight to run away by, if that's your plan. For the moment, leave me - time is short."

Without so much as a brotherly embrace, let alone that other kind which had in the past lent certain crucial potency to his doings, he pushed by them both and was gone.

Under the supervision of the crone Roiga, servants had toiled to bring many articles into the cabinet she was making ready. It lacked windows, naturally; what air there was must seep through tiny crevices, and about each, carefully marked, there had been inscribed a line of minuscule writing in an obsolete syllabary. It lacked furniture, too; in place of that it was hung with curtains of goat-hide, woven marsh-grass and the plaited hair of murdered girls. There was a mirror in the center of its floor, which was as true a circle as the mason's art could contrive, but that mirror was cracked across, and the traveler knew with what hammer the blow would have been struck: silver-headed, hafted with a portion of his anatomy that some man-albeit briefly-would have lived to regret the loss of. He had been aware that enchantments of this calibre were still conducted, but in this case at least one unqualifiedly essential preliminary to them had been totally neglected.

Patience.

Rat's-bane and wolf-hemp; powder of dragon-bone and mullet-roe; candied mallow and murex pigment; vantcheen spice... Yes, all the ancient indispensables were here. Bar one. Bar the one that mattered more than anything.

The traveler withdrew into dismal contemplation.

Then, finally, Garch came, pale and trembling but determined not to let his companions recognize the full depth of his terror, to perform the rites required of him as lord of this land which yielded more than its proper share of good things. He was correctly robed in a chasuble of blood-hue; he correctly wore one shoe of hide and one of cloth; he correctly bore the wand, the orb and the sash; and the proper symbols, though awkwardly, had been inscribed on his palms with henna and indigo.

He entered the door of ashwood clamped with brass, and it was closed at his back with the traditional braided withes: one at the height of his neck, one at the height of his heart, and one at the height of his genitals. That done, Runch and Roiga and Scail perforce withdrew. Unless they chose to run away, indeed, by tomorrow's daylight, the process was in train and they were to be dragged with it.

Even running away might not help.

As for the traveler in black, he had no choice. This was intrinsically a part of that which bound him. From this moment forward, he was compelled to remain. Here was no petty hearthside conjuration, to be laughed at when it failed and probably neglected thereafter; here was no witty tampering with the course of natural events, such as certain happy enchanters had counted a fair reward for the relief of boredom; here was no ritual from which overt profit instantly ensued, such as the merchant enchanters of a bygone age had employed to make their cities prosperous.

No, those trivialities could be ignored. Here, though, was a ceremony so elaborate, so pregnant with possibility and so absolutely devoid of probability that its very name, regardless of what language it was uttered in, sent shivers down the spines of uncomprehending listeners. Here, set on foot in a selfish lordling's mansion, was such a pattern as had not been undertaken since the epoch of the Grand Five Weavers and the Notorious Magisters of Alken Cromlech: the most ancient, the most arcane, the most honorable appellation of the Ones Who-

The traveler froze the progress of his mind. Almost, he had recited the full title to himself. And were he to do so, all-all-everything would be eternally lost.

If it were not already lost. He feared it was.

VII

The lady Scail slept but ill that night, and when her shoulder was gently touched at last by the waiting-maid who attended her in her chamber, she rolled her face fretfully back into her satin pillows.

"Fool!" she snapped. "I said to waken me at dawn. I'll have your head for disturbing me when it's still full dark!"

Indeed, across the windows a pall of utter lightlessness remained.

"But, madam," whispered the poor girl, "according to our time-candles dawn should have befallen an hour ago. Yet the sky remains like pitch!"

Lady Scail sat up on the instant. Through the opened shutters she saw the truth of the maid's assertion. Rising from her night-couch, she exclaimed in wonder.

"Why-why, that bodes success after all! Here, girl, go rout out Runch and Roiga from their beds, and bid them wait on me at once!"

Unprecedentedly, without waiting to be handed her day-time garments, she threw aside her sleeping-gown and struggled by herself into a creased chemise.

Similarly awakened, Roiga trembled with delight and anticipation. She had spent weary decades pent in a worn-out body, with her knees cracking from the rheumatism and her eyes returning blurred images of the outer world. Now under her shriveled bosom her heart beat hammer-wise at the impending prospect of re-purchased youth.

It was the same for one-eyed Runch: still a mighty man to outward view, scorning the luxury of his companions and affecting the disciplined, hardy habits of a soldier accustomed to sleeping in fields and marching all day through sleet and hail. Therefore he reposed at night on a simple bed of planks with one blanket.

But over the past few years he had more and more often failed to pleasure the girls he summoned to his couch, until at length he had been unable to endure further humiliation, and took to sleeping alone.

The promise of being able to rectify that...!

These three, however-and perhaps Garch himself, but none could certify what was transpiring in his secret room-were the only persons in the whole of the Cleftor lands who found any semblance of joy to greet the advent of this amazing and unprecedented...day? Well, "day" it should indeed have been by rights, and everywhere there should have been the normal daily bustle: the younger children playing by the doorway, the older dispatched to their dame-schools with their slates and pencils; the farmers bound to market hauling their travois laden with cheese and bacon, their wives plucking geese or hunting eggs...

But over all the country from Deldale to Herman's Wynd, and back again from Contrescarp to the Ten Leagues' Stone, at Poultry Rock and Brown Hamlet and Legge, at Yammerdale and Gallowtree and Chade, at Swansbroom and Swingthrimble and Slowge, it was dark until what should have been high noon.

And when the light eventually came, it was the wrong sort of light. It was the sickly grew glow of chaos, that bleached all color into the dullness of ash.

Now the mountains showed deformed, like mutant fungi; now the trees, vaguely visible, stood rigid as parodies in a picture, and the random disposition of their branches seemed to summate the entire gestural vocabulary of obscene signs such as might be made with a man's upraised fingers. Watching the changing sky in high delight from the vantage of the tower's solar, Roiga and Scail and Runch shouted in succession for the best wine, the richest mead, the finest delicacies that the stores could offer, by way of pre-celebrating their anticipated triumph. The blackness of night and morning had retreated to the fringes of the Cleftor domain, and now it was as though a tunnel had been opened, vertically to the frontiers of the sky, for the beings from beyond to make a grand re-entry to their former state.

But the servant-maids gawped and gaped and rubbed their ears as they came and went, for there was a dullness to their hearing that occasionally approached an ache, and there was a stale taste in all mouths which twice made Runch accuse a waiting-wench of giving him vinegar, not wine, and a dragging heaviness oppressed all bodies. Yet for the most part those three frenetic counselors-if no one else-were able to ignore it, and drank toast after toast to the wonderful skills of Garch their thegn.

It was not until they were three parts drunken that they realized there was another in the solar apart from the servants they had bidden to attend them.

"Who's that?" cried Scail, and slopped wine down her dress in turning to look over her shoulder.

"Oh-oh!" Roiga moaned, and would have shrunk into hiding.

"Declare yourself!" shouted Runch, rising and drawing the sword he always wore.

"Here I am," the intruder said, black cloak swishing as he strode forward to the tap-tap measure of his staff. "Put up that blade, for it's no protection against the doom that's coming to you."

Runch hesitated, and the sword-point he had presented to the traveler's chest wavered back and forth. He said, "Who...?"

"One who has many names but a single nature."

They were thunderstruck on the instant. Dropping her mug of wine, Scail whimpered, "But I thought-"

"Did you?" the traveler sighed. "Yes, I can believe that you must have regarded my existence as superstition, and your brother likewise. Else you'd have buckled to like sensible folk, and taken what was to hand and made the most of it. Instead of which... Do you know who awaits admission to this place?"

Uncertain, but feigning bravado out of shame at her spasm of cowardice, Roiga said bluffly, "Why of course. Have we not agreed to call on Tuprid?"

"Tuprid who takes pleasure only in destruction, whom I saw snuff a star as men would snuff a candle, that he might witness the dying agony of the creatures on its planets as they froze into everlasting ice. And who else?"

"Why, Caschalanva, of course!" Runch exclaimed.

"He who prefers the fire to Tuprid's cold. They're ancient rivals. Each struggles to outdo the other in causing pain. And with them?"

"Quorril!" said Scail, and began to sound a fraction nervous, which though well justified was a belated sign.

"Whose diet is souls," said the traveler. "And Lry?" They all three nodded.

"To whom," he concluded, love is hate-who breeds discord and warfare like the plague. And you believe these to be the only ones your brother has invoked?"

There was a second of silence. "It was all we agreed he should invoke," Scail said at length. "It's with them that we struck our bargain."

"Bargain!" The traveler gave a sad laugh.

"Why, certainly! Do they not owe us toll, for opening the road back to where they once ruled?" She was on her feet, facing him defiantly. "Should they not be grateful?"

"Yes! Is it not a trifle, in view of such a grand service, that they should restore my manhood?" Runch demanded. And-

"Will they not give me back my youth?" shouted Roiga.

At the same moment there was a shifting underfoot, as though the land had taken on a colossal weight, and their dialogue with the traveler in black was forgotten. They rushed to the windows and peered out, this way and that, striving to catch a glimpse of whatever had descended to the earth.

"Oh, my wonderful brother!" Scail cried. "Had I but the half of his skills!"

"Well, well!" the traveler said, and then again: "Well, well! As you wish, so be it."

None of them heard him. Nor did they hear the later whisper that echoed from the stone walls following his departure, which sounded a little like:

"Now why did I not think of that before?"

VIII

This, therefore, was the manner of the coming back of the former great ones to the world. And it was not totally to their liking.

Left alone in the stock-depleted house of Buldebrime, the gaggle of apprentices had at first been worried and afraid; then the boy of fourteen who had conceived the notion of making that mocking doll sought to calm the youngest of his companions by producing it again, and they dissolved into laughter as he put it through absurd motions by heating it so the limbs could be deformed. Laughter made them grow bolder, and recalled them to routine. They fed themselves, and then since their master was not present to forbid them they made free of the house, tumbling together in many enjoyable games until sleep overtook them.

On the morrow, however, they were frightened anew by the curious unprecedented length of the darkness enveloping the neighborhood, and moreover they were hungry, because last night they had eaten their fill from the supplies in the pantry. For some of them it was the first time in months they had had a square meal; so nothing was left but crumbs.

They hunted high and low by the wan light of such candles as they had managed to make for themselves after Buldebrime's stock had been confiscated by Garch's men, and ultimately found a way to prise off the padlock blocking their access to the attic room. In company of the girl with the scarred face, the leading boy braved the ladder-like steps and looked around the shadowed books and mystic articles with amazement.

"Would that I knew what all these things are for and could employ them!" the girl said.

The traveler spoke soft words, unnoticed, in a corner.

In the increasing chill of their hut by Rotten Tor, little Nelva and her mother listened in agony to the racking coughs the cold afflicted upon Yarn.

"Oh, mother!" the bairn cried, seeing how the fire faded and gave no heat. "Would I knew what the nice man in black did, to make the lamp burn brightly! Then I'd do it to the logs, and we'd all be warm!"

The traveler again spoke unheard words, and went his way.

Trapped by the incredible darkness in a very bad inn, the Shebya trader scratched his flea-bites and wrangled with the landlord, claiming that anyone who offered such hard beds and such foul beer had no right to the regular score from his clients. At length, losing temper, he shouted at the man.

"Ho, that I knew a way to rid the world of greed like yours, that turns one's stomach sour with fury! Ho, that I dealt here only with honest fellows like myself, having codes and principles that require strict adherence to a bargain!"

He was exaggerating just a little; nonetheless, the Shebyas were frank, as all agreed, though a hint of sleight-of-mind might sometimes give them the better of a deal with anybody less subtle.

Chuckling, the traveler spoke and tapped his staff on the wall.

He wondered how it was faring with Garch Thegn of Cleftor Heights.

And the answer, framed in brief, was-not so well.

Down to him came the powers to which he'd bowed, weary of long conjurations, but content inasmuch as all had said to him, "We'll go see first that you have kept your word, and then we'll speak of settling our bargain!"

Which, according to the books in which he reposed his trust, was as fair an answer as they'd ever given anyone.

So into the nervous night, blear-eyed, he waited on their presence, and ultimately at the moment which-said a well-measured time-candle, and no visible stars- corresponded with the time of full moon, he rose expectantly from his uncomfortable posture on the floor in the middle of his cracked mirror.

One came of the four, and only one, and in such rage as made the walls shake and the tower-top tremble. And reached out for Garch, and he was not.

Because...

That elemental, Tuprid, who had snuffed stars, had gone to see first of the places in his allegedly regained domain the nearest to a star, a place of light: to wit, a lamp-maker's shop. And there had found awaiting him a little girl, scar-faced, beside whom a boy clutched her hand to loan her courage, chanting at a candle they had brought and making it burn against the fiercest orders of the visitor. Below, the other children cried, and she thought of them, and made her efforts double, and in the upshot melted a maker of great darkness into shapeless wax dribbling across a book bound in human skin.

After that, very suddenly, the stars could be viewed by the skylight.

Also the elemental Caschalanva, who preferred the taste of fire to that of ice, had gone down by the bitter vales under Rotten Tor, and a little girl who wished desperately to make the logs burn more brightly had sensed in an instant of inspiration precisely what was needful to be done....

And in an inn where fleas plagued the customers, the being Lry who fostered dissension found a predilection towards greed that was emanating from the spot with such force as gales have, using a mountain-range for organ-pipes. Greed being among the chiefest of his tools, he grasped at it-and when it dissipated fractionally after, he was swept into nowhere along with it.

Whereupon, learning of the fate of his companions that were a good deal more than merely companions, Quorril returned to say that they were cheated, and- souls being his diet-seized Garch's with a snatch of an immaterial claw that laid wide open the wall of his secret room, emitting fumes. The high tower of the mansion tumbled down, its foundations turning to mud and sand.

Among the ruins, with her dying breath, the lady Scail called down a doom upon him for what he had done to her brother, and-she being now dowered, as she had desired, with the half of Garch's skills, and in particular that half which concerned the binding, rather than the releasing, of elementals-Quorril ceased his flight to the sky, and perforce joined her, and Roiga, and Runch, buried forever beneath that stack of masonry.

"Where let him rest," the traveler said contentedly, having viewed all this from the vantage of the same sward where he had conversed with the Shebya.

"And Buldebrime, and Tradesman Humblenode," a quiet voice confirmed alongside him. He had not expected to be alone at a moment like this; he did not look around. "And many more!"

"And many less guilty, Highness," he appended. "Yet none of them entirely innocent. Willing, at least, to serve a lord whose power was drawn from chaos, when it was apparent to any commonsensical mind that no mortal force could make this barren land so wealthy. Equally, prepared to apprentice children to masters who starved and beat them, for the sake of having them learn a profitable trade...."

He shrugged, both hands clasping his staff. "No matter, though," he concluded. "Has it not all come to a very tidy end?"

There was a silence. Also it was dark here. But it was the regular honest dark of a spring night around moonset: nothing worse.

"At end," the quiet voice said meditatively. "Yes, perhaps it is an end. It might as well be.... You know, my friend, there's something very curious!"

"Tell me," the traveler invited, who now knew in any case the most important thing that had guided his existence. Still, there were degrees of importance, and even a triviality might provoke interest.

"Of all the qualities I endowed you with," the voice said, "the most potent has proved to be a certain witty elegance. A-a neatness, a sense of practical economy!"

"I've fostered it," the traveler agreed. "Having but one nature, I must needs make the most of what I owned." He gestured with his staff at the barely-seen view. "Besides, was it not that practical mode of thinking which reduced the opportunities of access for the ancient ones to these few should-be-barren acres?"

"Yes, it was."

"And was not that the designated purpose of my being?"

There was no answer. After a while the traveler said, "I'm sorry. You must be feeling grievous loss."

"I?" Beside him the One Who had assigned him to his task, come to witness this last confrontation in the guise of a tall pale and extraordinarily thin girl, shook back long locks under a wide-brimmed hat. "Loss of the other natures that were mine? Why, not at all! Is it not the goal and purpose of the universe that all things shall ultimately have a single nature? I know that to be true, for I decreed it."

This was what they had not realized at Cleftor Heights: that Tuprid and Caschalanva, Quorril and Lry, and moreover Wolpec and Yorbeth and Farchgrind and Fegrim and Laprivian of the Yellow Eyes, and all the countless rest of those elementals, were the fellow-natures of the One Who had conceived an age in which no creature should possess more than one nature-and had created a personage with many names as earnest of that eventual occurrence.

Accordingly, the last remaining nature of that One spoke with the traveler and sounded weary.

"So here I stand, my friend, to link with you like the fingers of a pair of hands, interlocked. What remains to me is what you never had; what remains to you is what I never had. It is a question of complementarity. But after all these eons you understand that."

The traveler nodded, and she heaved a sigh.

"Hah, yes, old friend, my page is past-past like that unnatural night which will nevermore be seen in Cleftor's vales! Eternity at last has found its end, because the powers of chaos have been tamed. And with what little fetters! The wish of a child to help her mother; the distaste of apprentices for then: master; the annoyance of a pedlar-man; and the love of a sister for her stupid brother!"

"Then my time is past too," the traveler said, ignoring her recital of his tricks-to-triumph-which was just, because all he had was in her gift. "And... And I'm not at all sorry. I was almost coming to miss the enemies I matched against in other ages. You could have undermined me by that weakness."

"I could." The answer was predictable. She could- everything. Now, however, it was a question not of "could" but "would," and the time for willing chaos had gone by.

More silence intervened, and then the traveler stretched and yawned.

"I long for rest," he said. "But-one more thing. Who is to come after us?"

"Let him decide who he is," said the pale girl, and took him by the hand which lacked the staff. Turning,

they went together into absence.

The End

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