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# **Schlock!**

**WEBZINE**

VOL. 11, ISSUE 20  
25TH JUNE-2ND  
JULY 2017

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# SCHLOCK! WEBZINE

Edited by  
Gavin Chappell

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Schlock! Webzine

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Jules Verne, H Rider Haggard*

## SCHLOCK! WEBZINE

Welcome to Schlock! the webzine for science fiction, fantasy and horror.

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Schlock! is a weekly webzine dedicated to short stories, flash fiction, serialised novels and novellas, within the genres of science fiction, fantasy and horror. We publish new and old works of pulp sword and sorcery, urban fantasy, dark fantasy and gothic horror. If you want to read quality works of new pulp fantasy, science fiction or horror, Schlock! is the webzine for you!

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Schlock! Webzine is always willing to consider new science fiction, fantasy and horror short stories, serials, graphic novels and comic strips, reviews and art. Submit fiction, articles, art or links to your own site to [editor@schlock.co.uk](mailto:editor@schlock.co.uk). We will also review published and self-published novels. Please contact the editor at the above email address for further details.

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## EDITORIAL

This week and next we have a Midsummer Madness special, and we're going all whimsical, with tales of magic, fairies, elves and gods. An arrogant young boy believes he is the son of a star. Another boy sets out to find the key at the end of the rainbow. A troll spawned warrior abducts the daughter of the elf king. A changeling learns the secret of the Small People's gardens. Rat and Mole meet the Great God Pan. And True Thomas travels to the Otherworld.

Out in space, the Callistoans and Scroungers meet in combat. The tale of *The Family Portraits* reaches its sinister close. The settlers on Lincoln Island set out to explore their surroundings again. And Olaf encounters the Iconoclasts.

—Gavin Chappell

Copies of a limited edition collection of Gary Murphy stories are still available from [Summer of Schlock!](#)

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## THE STAR CHILD by Oscar Wilde

Once upon a time two poor Woodcutters were making their way home through a great pine-forest. It was winter, and a night of bitter cold. The snow lay thick upon the ground, and upon the branches of the trees: the frost kept snapping the little twigs on either side of them, as they passed: and when they came to the Mountain-Torrent she was hanging motionless in air, for the Ice-King had kissed her.

So cold was it that even the animals and the birds did not know what to make of it.

‘Ugh!’ snarled the Wolf as he limped through the brushwood with his tail between his legs, ‘this is perfectly monstrous weather. Why doesn’t the Government look to it?’

‘Weet! weet! weet!’ twittered the green Linnets, ‘the old Earth is dead, and they have laid her out in her white shroud.’

‘The Earth is going to be married, and this is her bridal dress,’ whispered the Turtle-doves to each other. Their little pink feet were quite frost-bitten, but they felt that it was their duty to take a romantic view of the situation.

‘Nonsense!’ growled the Wolf. ‘I tell you that it is all the fault of the Government, and if you don’t believe me I shall eat you.’ The Wolf had a thoroughly practical mind, and was never at a loss for a good argument.

‘Well, for my own part, said the Woodpecker, who was a born philosopher, ‘I don’t care an atomic theory for explanations. If a thing is so, it is so, and at present it is terribly cold.’

Terribly cold it certainly was. The little Squirrels, who lived inside the tall fir-tree, kept rubbing each other’s noses to keep themselves warm, and the Rabbits curled themselves up in their holes, and did not venture even to look out of doors. The only people who seemed to enjoy it were the great horned Owls. Their feathers were quite stiff with rime, but they did not mind, and they rolled their large yellow eyes, and called out to each other across the forest, ‘Tu-whit! Tu-whoo! Tu-whit! Tu-whoo! what delightful weather we are having!’

On and on went the two Woodcutters, blowing lustily upon their fingers, and stamping with their huge iron-shod boots upon the caked snow. Once they sank into a deep drift, and came out as white as millers are, when the stones are grinding; and once they slipped on the hard smooth ice where the marsh-water was frozen, and their faggots fell out of their bundles, and they had to pick them up and bind them together again; and once they thought that they had lost their way, and a great terror seized on them, for they knew that the Snow is cruel to those who sleep in her arms. But they put their trust in the good Saint Martin, who watches over all travellers, and retraced their steps, and went warily, and at last they reached the outskirts of the forest, and saw, far down in the valley beneath them, the lights of the village in which they dwelt.

So overjoyed were they at their deliverance that they laughed aloud, and the Earth seemed to them like a flower of silver, and the Moon like a flower of gold.

Yet, after that they had laughed they became sad, for they remembered their poverty, and one of them said to the other, ‘Why did we make merry, seeing that life is for the rich, and not for



such as we are? Better that we had died of cold in the forest, or that some wild beast had fallen upon us and slain us.'

'Truly,' answered his companion, much is given to some, and little is given to others. Injustice has parcelled out the world, nor is there equal division of aught save of sorrow.'

But as they were bewailing their misery to each other this strange thing happened. There fell from heaven a very bright and beautiful star. It slipped down the side of the sky, passing by the other stars in its course, and, as they watched it wondering, it seemed to them to sink behind a clump of willow-trees that stood hard by a little sheep-fold no more than a stone's throw away.

'Why! there is a crock of gold for whoever finds it,' they cried, and they set to and ran, so eager were they for the gold.

And one of them ran faster than his mate, and outstripped him, and forced his way through the willows, and came out on the other side, and lo! there was indeed a thing of gold lying on the white snow. So he hastened towards it, and stooping down placed his hands upon it, and it was a cloak of golden tissue, curiously wrought with stars, and wrapped in many folds. And he cried out to his comrade that he had found the treasure that had fallen from the sky, and when his comrade had come up, they sat them down in the snow, and loosened the folds of the cloak that they might divide the pieces of gold. But, alas! no gold was in it, nor silver, nor, indeed, treasure of any kind, but only a little child who was asleep.

And one of them said to the other: 'This is a bitter ending to our hope, nor have we any good fortune, for what doth a child profit to a man? Let us leave it here, and go our way, seeing that we are poor men, and have children of our own whose bread we may not give to another.'

But his companion answered him: 'Nay, but it were an evil thing to leave the child to perish here in the snow, and though I am as poor as thou art, and have many mouths to feed, and but little in the pot, yet will I bring it home with me, and my wife shall have care of it.'

So very tenderly he took up the child, and wrapped the cloak around it to shield it from the harsh cold, and made his way down the hill to the village, his comrade marvelling much at his foolishness and softness of heart.

And when they came to the village, his comrade said to him, 'Thou hast the child, therefore give me the cloak, for it is meet that we should share.'

But he answered him: 'Nay, for the cloak is neither mine nor thine, but the child's only,' and he bade him Godspeed, and went to his own house and knocked.

And when his wife opened the door and saw that her husband had returned safe to her, she put her arms round his neck and kissed him, and took from his back the bundle of faggots, and brushed the snow off his boots, and bade him come in.

But he said to her, 'I have found something in the forest, and I have brought it to thee to have care of it,' and he stirred not from the threshold.



‘What is it?’ she cried. ‘Show it to me, for the house is bare, and we have need of many things.’ And he drew the cloak back, and showed her the sleeping child.

‘Alack, goodman!’ she murmured, ‘have we not children enough of our own, that thou must needs bring a changeling to sit by the hearth? And who knows if it will not bring us bad fortune? And how shall we tend it?’ And she was wroth against him.

‘Nay, but it is a Star-Child,’ he answered; and he told her the strange manner of the finding of it.

But she would not be appeased, but mocked at him, and spoke angrily, and cried: ‘Our children lack bread, and shall we feed the child of another? Who is there who careth for us? And who giveth us food?’

‘Nay, but God careth for the sparrows even, and feedeth them,’ he answered.

‘Do not the sparrows die of hunger in the winter?’ she asked. And is it not winter now?’ And the man answered nothing, but stirred not from the threshold.

And a bitter wind from the forest came in through the open door, and made her tremble, and she shivered, and said to him: ‘Wilt thou not close the door? There cometh a bitter wind into the house, and I am cold.’

‘Into a house where a heart is hard cometh there not always a bitter wind?’ he asked. And the woman answered him nothing, but crept closer to the fire.

And after a time she turned round and looked at him, and her eyes were full of tears. And he came in swiftly, and placed the child in her arms, and she kissed it, and laid it in a little bed where the youngest of their own children was lying. And on the morrow the Woodcutter took the curious cloak of gold and placed it in a great chest, and a chain of amber that was round the child’s neck his wife took and set it in the chest also.

So the Star-Child was brought up with the children of the Woodcutter, and sat at the same board with them, and was their playmate. And every year he became more beautiful to look at, so that all those who dwelt in the village were filled with wonder, for, while they were swarthy and black-haired, he was white and delicate as sawn ivory, and his curls were like the rings of the daffodil. His lips, also, were like the petals of a red flower, and his eyes were like violets by a river of pure water, and his body like the narcissus of a field where the mower comes not.

Yet did his beauty work him evil. For he grew proud, and cruel, and selfish. The children of the Woodcutter, and the other children of the village, he despised, saying that they were of mean parentage, while he was noble, being sprung from a Star, and he made himself master over them, and called them his servants. No pity had he for the poor, or for those who were blind or maimed or in any way afflicted, but would cast stones at them and drive them forth on to the highway, and bid them beg their bread elsewhere, so that none save the outlaws came twice to that village to ask for aims. Indeed, he was as one enamoured of beauty, and would mock at the weakly and ill-favoured, and make jest of them; and himself he loved, and in summer, when the winds were still, he would lie by the well in the priest’s orchard and look down at the marvel of his own face, and laugh for the pleasure he had in his fairness.

Often did the Woodcutter and his wife chide him, and say: 'We did not deal with thee as thou dealest with those who are left desolate, and have none to succour them. Wherefore art thou so cruel to all who need pity?'

Often did the old priest send for him, and seek to teach him the love of living things, saying to him: 'The fly is thy brother. Do it no harm. The wild birds that roam through the forest have their freedom. Snare them not for thy pleasure. God made the blind-worm and the mole, and each has its place. Who art thou to bring pain into God's world? Even the cattle of the field praise Him.'

But the Star-Child heeded not their words, but would frown and flout, and go back to his companions, and lead them. And his companions followed him, for he was fair, and fleet of foot, and could dance, and pipe, and make music. And wherever the Star-Child led them they followed, and whatever the Star-Child bade them do, that did they. And when he pierced with a sharp reed the dim eyes of the mole, they laughed, and when he cast stones at the leper they laughed also. And in all things he ruled them, and they became hard of heart, even as he was.

Now there passed one day through the village a poor beggar-woman. Her garments were torn and ragged, and her feet were bleeding from the rough road on which she had travelled, and she was in very evil plight. And being weary she sat her down under a chestnut-tree to rest.

But when the Star-Child saw her, he said to his companions, 'See! There sitteth a foul beggar-woman under that fair and green-leaved tree. Come, let us drive her hence, for she is ugly and ill-favoured.'

So he came near and threw stones at her, and mocked her, and she looked at him with terror in her eyes, nor did she move her gaze from him. And when the Woodcutter, who was cleaving logs in a haggard hard by, saw what the Star-Child was doing, he ran up and rebuked him, and said to him: 'Surely thou art hard of heart and knowest not mercy, for what evil has this poor woman done to thee that thou should'st treat her in this wise?'

And the Star-Child grew red with anger, and stamped his foot upon the ground, and said, 'Who art thou to question me what I do? I am no son of thine to do thy bidding.'

'Thou speakest truly,' answered the Woodcutter, 'yet did I show thee pity when I found thee in the forest.'

And when the woman heard these words she gave a loud cry, and fell into a swoon. And the Woodcutter carried her to his own house, and his wife had care of her, and when she rose up from the swoon into which she had fallen, they set meat and drink before her, and bade her have comfort.

But she would neither eat nor drink, but said to the Woodcutter, 'Didst thou not say that the child was found in the forest? And was it not ten years from this day?'

And the Woodcutter answered, 'Yea, it was in the forest that I found him, and it is ten years from this day.'

‘And what signs didst thou find with him?’ she cried. ‘Bare he not upon his neck a chain of amber? Was not round him a cloak of gold tissue broidered with stars?’

‘Truly,’ answered the Woodcutter, ‘it was even as thou sayest.’ And he took the cloak and the amber chain from the chest where they lay, and showed them to her.

And when she saw them she wept for joy, and said, ‘He is my little son whom I lost in the forest. I pray thee send for him quickly, for in search of him have I wandered over the whole world.’

So the Woodcutter and his wife went out and called to the Star-Child, and said to him, ‘Go into the house, and there shalt thou find thy mother, who is waiting for thee.’

So he ran in, filled with wonder and great gladness. But when he saw her who was waiting there, he laughed scornfully and said, ‘Why, where is my mother? For I see none here but this vile beggar-woman.’

And the woman answered him, ‘I am thy mother.’

‘Thou art mad to say so,’ cried the Star-Child angrily. ‘I am no son of thine, for thou art a beggar, and ugly, and in rags. Therefore get thee hence, and let me see thy foul face no more.’

‘Nay, but thou art indeed my little son, whom I bare in the forest,’ she cried, and she fell on her knees, and held out her arms to him. ‘The robbers stole thee from me, and left thee to die,’ she murmured, ‘but I recognized thee when I saw thee, and the signs also have I recognized, the cloak of golden tissue and the amber-chain. Therefore I pray thee come with me, for over the whole world have I wandered in search of thee. Come with me, my son, for I have need of thy love.’

But the Star-Child stirred not from his place, but shut the doors of his heart against her, nor was there any sound heard save the sound of the woman weeping for pain.

And at last he spoke to her, and his voice was hard and bitter. ‘If in very truth thou art my mother,’ he said, ‘it had been better hadst thou stayed away, and not come here to bring me to shame, seeing that I thought I was the child of some Star and not a beggar’s child, as thou tellest me that I am. Therefore get thee hence, and let me see thee no more.’

‘Alas! my son,’ she cried, ‘wilt thou not kiss me before I go? For I have suffered much to find thee.’

‘Nay,’ said the Star-Child, ‘but thou art too foul to look at and rather would I kiss the adder or the toad than thee.’

So the woman rose up, and went away into the forest weeping bitterly, and when the Star-Child saw that she had gone, he was glad, and ran back to his playmates that he might play with them.

But when they beheld him coming, they mocked him and said, 'Why, thou art as foul as the toad, and as loathsome as the adder. Get thee hence, for we will not suffer thee to play with us,' and they drove him out of the garden.

And the Star-Child frowned and said to himself, 'What is this that they say to me? I will go to the well of water and look into it, and it shall tell me of my beauty.'

So he went to the well of water and looked into it, and lo! his face was as the face of a toad, and his body was scaled like an adder. And he flung himself down on the grass and wept, and said to himself, 'Surely this has come upon me by reason of my sin. For I have denied my mother, and driven her away, and been proud, and cruel to her. Wherefore I will go and seek her through the whole world, nor will I rest till I have found her.'

And there came to him the little daughter of the Woodcutter, and she put her hand upon his shoulder and said, 'What doth it matter if thou hast lost thy comeliness? Stay with us, and I will not mock at thee.'

And he said to her, 'Nay, but I have been cruel to my mother, and as a punishment has this evil been sent to me. Wherefore I must go hence, and wander through the world till I find her, and she give me her forgiveness.'

So he ran away into the forest and called out to his mother to come to him, but there was no answer. All day long he called to her, and when the sun set he lay down to sleep on a bed of leaves, and the birds and the animals fled from him, as they remembered his cruelty, and he was alone save for the toad that watched him, and the slow adder that crawled past.

And in the morning he rose up, and plucked some bitter berries from the trees and ate them, and took his way through the great wood, weeping sorely. And of everything that he met he made enquiry if perchance they had seen his mother.

He said to the Mole, 'Thou canst go beneath the earth. Tell me, is my mother there?'

And the Mole answered, 'Thou hast blinded mine eyes. How should I know?'

He said to the Linnet, 'Thou canst fly over the tops of the tall trees, and canst see the whole world. Tell me, canst thou see my mother?'

And the Linnet answered, 'Thou hast clipt my wings for thy pleasure. How should I fly?'

And to the little Squirrel who lived in the fir-tree, and was lonely, he said, 'Where is my mother?'

And the Squirrel answered, 'Thou hast slain mine. Dost thou seek to slay thine also?'

And the Star-Child wept and bowed his head, and prayed forgiveness of God's things, and went on through the forest, seeking for the beggar-woman. And on the third day he came to the other side of the forest and went down into the plain.

And when he passed through the villages the children mocked him, and threw stones at him, and the carlots would not suffer him even to sleep in the byres lest he might bring mildew on

the stored corn, so foul was he to look at, and their hired men drove him away, and there was none who had pity on him. Nor could he hear anywhere of the beggar-woman who was his mother, though for the space of three years he wandered over the world, and often seemed to see her on the road in front of him, and would call to her, and run after her till the sharp flints made his feet to bleed. But overtake her he could not, and those who dwelt by the way did ever deny that they had seen her, or any like to her, and they made sport of his sorrow.

For the space of three years he wandered over the world, and in the world there was neither love nor loving-kindness nor charity for him, but it was even such a world as he had made for himself in the days of his great pride.

And one evening he came to the gate of a strong-walled city that stood by a river, and, weary and footsore though he was, he made to enter in. But the soldiers who stood on guard dropped their halberts across the entrance, and said roughly to him, 'What is thy business in the city?'

'I am seeking for my mother,' he answered, 'and I pray ye to suffer me to pass, for it may be that she is in this city.'

But they mocked at him, and one of them wagged a black beard, and set down his shield and cried, 'Of a truth, thy mother will not be merry when she sees thee, for thou art more ill-favoured than the toad of the marsh, or the adder that crawls in the fen. Get thee gone. Get thee gone. Thy mother dwells not in this city.'

And another, who held a yellow banner in his hand, said to him, 'Who is thy mother, and wherefore art thou seeking for her?'

And he answered, 'My mother is a beggar even as I am, and I have treated her evilly, and I pray ye to suffer me to pass that she may give me her forgiveness, if it be that she tarrieth in this city.' But they would not, and pricked him with their spears.

And, as he turned away weeping, one whose armour was inlaid with gilt flowers, and on whose helmet couched a lion that had wings, came up and made enquiry of the soldiers who it was who had sought entrance. And they said to him, 'It is a beggar and the child of a beggar, and we have driven him away.'

'Nay,' he cried, laughing, 'but we will sell the foul thing for a slave, and his price shall be the price of a bowl of sweet wine.'

And an old and evil-visaged man who was passing by called out, and said, 'I will buy him for that price,' and, when he had paid the price, he took the Star-Child by the hand and led him into the city.

And after that they had gone through many streets they came to a little door that was set in a wall that was covered with a pomegranate tree. And the old man touched the door with a ring of graven jasper and it opened, and they went down five steps of brass into a garden filled with black poppies and green jars of burnt clay. And the old man took then from his turban a scarf of figured silk, and bound with it the eyes of the Star-Child, and drove him in front of him. And when the scarf was taken off his eyes, the Star-Child found himself in a dungeon, that was lit by a lantern of horn.

And the old man set before him some mouldy bread on a trencher and said, 'Eat,' and some brackish water in a cup and said, 'Drink,' and when he had eaten and drunk, the old man went out, locking the door behind him and fastening it with an iron chain.

And on the morrow the old man, who was indeed the subtlest of the magicians of Libya and had learned his art from one who dwelt in the tombs of the Nile, came in to him and frowned at him, and said, 'In a wood that is nigh to the gate of this city of Giaours there are three pieces of gold. One is of white gold, and another is of yellow gold, and the gold of the third one is red. To-day thou shalt bring me the piece of white gold, and if thou bringest it not back, I will beat thee with a hundred stripes. Get thee away quickly, and at sunset I will be waiting for thee at the door of the garden. See that thou bringest the white gold, or it shall go in with thee, for thou art my slave, and I have bought thee for the price of a bowl of sweet wine.' And he bound the eyes of the Star-Child with the scarf of figured silk, and led him through the house, and through the garden of poppies, and up the five steps of brass. And having opened the little door with his ring he set him in the street.

And the Star-Child went out of the gate of the city, and came to the wood of which the Magician had spoken to him.

Now this wood was very fair to look at from without, and seemed full of singing birds and of sweet-scented flowers, and the Star-Child entered it gladly. Yet did its beauty profit him little, for wherever he went harsh briars and thorns shot up from the ground and encompassed him, and evil nettles stung him, and the thistle pierced him with her daggers, so that he was in sore distress. Nor could he anywhere find the piece of white gold of which the Magician had spoken, though he sought for it from morn to noon, and from noon to sunset. And at sunset he set his face towards home, weeping bitterly, for he knew what fate was in store for him.

But when he had reached the outskirts of the wood, he heard from a thicket a cry as of someone in pain. And forgetting his own sorrow he ran back to the place, and saw there a little Hare caught in a trap that some hunter had set for it.

And the Star-Child had pity on it, and released it, and said to it, 'I am myself but a slave, yet may I give thee thy freedom.'

And the Hare answered him, and said: 'Surely thou hast given me freedom, and what shall I give thee in return?'

And the Star-Child said to it, 'I am seeking for a piece of white gold, nor can I anywhere find it, and if I bring it not to my master he will beat me.'

'Come thou with me,' said the Hare, 'and I will lead thee to it, for I know where it is hidden, and for what purpose.'

So the Star-Child went with the Hare, and lo! in the cleft of a great oak-tree he saw the piece of white gold that he was seeking. And he was filled with joy, and seized it, and said to the Hare, 'The service that I did to thee thou hast rendered back again many times over and the kindness that I showed thee thou hast repaid a hundredfold.'

‘Nay,’ answered the Hare, ‘but as thou dealt with me, so I did deal with thee,’ and it ran away swiftly, and the Star-Child went towards the city.

Now at the gate of the city there was seated one who was a leper. Over his face hung a cowl of grey linen, and through the eyelets his eyes gleamed like red coals. And when he saw the Star-Child coming, he struck upon a wooden bowl, and clattered his bell, and called out to him, and said, ‘Give me a piece of money, or I must die of hunger. For they have thrust me out of the city, and there is no one who has pity on me.’

‘Alas!’ cried the Star-Child, ‘I have but one piece of money in my wallet, and if I bring it not to my master he will beat me for I am his slave.’

But the leper entreated him, and prayed of him, till the Star-Child had pity, and gave him the piece of white gold.

And when he came to the Magician’s house, the Magician opened to him, and brought him in, and said to him, ‘Hast thou the piece of white gold?’ And the Star-Child answered, ‘I have it not.’ So the Magician fell upon him, and beat him, and set before him an empty trencher, and said ‘Eat,’ and an empty cup, and said, ‘Drink,’ and flung him again into the dungeon.

And on the morrow the Magician came to him, and said, ‘If to-day thou bringest me not the piece of yellow gold, I will surely keep thee as my slave, and give thee three hundred stripes.’

So the Star-Child went to the wood, and all day long he searched for the piece of yellow gold, but nowhere could he find it. And at sunset he sat him down and began to weep, and as he was weeping there came to him the little Hare that he had rescued from the trap.

And the Hare said to him, ‘Why art thou weeping? And what dost thou seek in the wood?’

And the Star-Child answered, ‘I am seeking for a piece of yellow gold that is hidden here, and if I find it not my master will beat me, and keep me as a slave.’

‘Follow me,’ cried the Hare, and it ran through the wood till it came to a pool of water. And at the bottom of the pool the piece of yellow gold was lying.

‘How shall I thank thee?’ said the Star-Child, ‘for lo! this is the second time that you have succoured me.’

‘Nay, but thou hadst pity on me first,’ said the Hare, and it ran away swiftly.

And the Star-Child took the piece of yellow gold, and put it in his wallet, and hurried to the city. But the leper saw him coming, and ran to meet him and knelt down and cried, ‘Give me a piece of money or I shall die of hunger.’

And the Star-Child said to him, ‘I have in my wallet but one piece of yellow gold, and if I bring it not to my master he will beat me and keep me as his slave.’

But the leper entreated him sore, so that the Star-Child had pity on him, and gave him the piece of yellow gold.



And when he came to the Magician's house, the Magician opened to him, and brought him in, and said to him, 'Hast thou the piece of yellow gold?' And the Star-Child said to him, 'I have it not.' So the Magician fell upon him, and beat him, and loaded him with chains, and cast him again into the dungeon.

And on the morrow the Magician came to him, and said, 'If to-day thou bringest me the piece of red gold I will set thee free, but if thou bringest it not I will surely slay thee.'

So the Star-Child went to the wood, and all day long he searched for the piece of red gold, but nowhere could he find it. And at evening he sat him down, and wept, and as he was weeping there came to him the little Hare.

And the Hare said to him, 'The piece of red gold that thou seekest is in the cavern that is behind thee. Therefore weep no more but be glad.'

'How shall I reward thee,' cried the Star-Child, 'for lo! this is the third time thou hast succoured me.'

'Nay, but thou hadst pity on me first,' said the Hare, and it ran away swiftly.

And the Star-Child entered the cavern, and in its farthest corner he found the piece of red gold. So he put it in his wallet, and hurried to the city. And the leper seeing him coming, stood in the centre of the road, and cried out, and said to him, 'Give me the piece of red money, or I must die,' and the Star-Child had pity on him again, and gave him the piece of red gold, saying, 'Thy need is greater than mine.' Yet was his heart heavy, for he knew what evil fate awaited him.

But lo! as he passed through the gate of the city, the guards bowed down and made obeisance to him, saying, 'How beautiful is our lord!' and a crowd of citizens followed him, and cried out, 'Surely there is none so beautiful in the whole world!' so that the Star-Child wept, and said to himself, 'They are mocking me, and making light of my misery.' And so large was the concourse of the people, that he lost the threads of his way, and found himself at last in a great square, in which there was a palace of a King.

And the gate of the palace opened, and the priests and the high officers of the city ran forth to meet him, and they abased themselves before him, and said, 'Thou art our lord for whom we have been waiting, and the sort of our King.'

And the Star-Child answered them and said, 'I am no king's son, but the child of a poor beggar-woman. And how say ye that I am beautiful, for I know that I am evil to look at?'

Then he, whose armour was inlaid with gilt flowers, and on whose helmet couched a lion that had wings, held up a shield, and cried, 'How saith my lord that he is not beautiful?'

And the Star-Child looked, and lo! his face was even as it had been, and his comeliness had come back to him, and he saw that in his eyes which he had not seen there before.

And the priests and the high officers knelt down and said to him, 'It was prophesied of old that on this day should come he who was to rule over us. Therefore, let our lord take this crown and this sceptre, and be in his justice and mercy our King over us.'

But he said to them, 'I am not worthy, for I have denied the mother who bare me, nor may I rest till I have found her, and known her forgiveness. Therefore, let me go, for I must wander again over the world, and may not tarry here, though ye bring me the crown and the sceptre.' And as he spake he turned his face from them towards the street that led to the gate of the city, and lo! amongst the crowd that pressed round the soldiers, he saw the beggar-woman who was his mother, and at her side stood the leper, who had sat by the road.

And a cry of joy broke from his lips, and he ran over, and kneeling down he kissed the wounds on his mother's feet, and wet them with his tears. He bowed his head in the dust, and sobbing, as one whose heart might break, he said to her: 'Mother, I denied thee in the hour of my pride. Accept me in the hour of my humility. Mother, I gave thee hatred. Do thou give me love. Mother, I rejected thee. Receive thy child now.' But the beggar-woman answered him not a word.

And he reached out his hands, and clasped the white feet of the leper, and said to him: 'Thrice did I give thee of my mercy. Bid my mother speak to me once.' But the leper answered him not a word.

And he sobbed again, and said: 'Mother, my suffering is greater than I can bear. Give me thy forgiveness, and let me go back to the forest.' And the beggar-woman put her hand on his head, and said to him, 'Rise,' and the leper put his hand on his head, and said to him 'Rise,' also.

And he rose up from his feet, and looked at them, and lo! they were a King and a Queen.

And the Queen said to him, 'This is thy father whom thou hast succoured.'

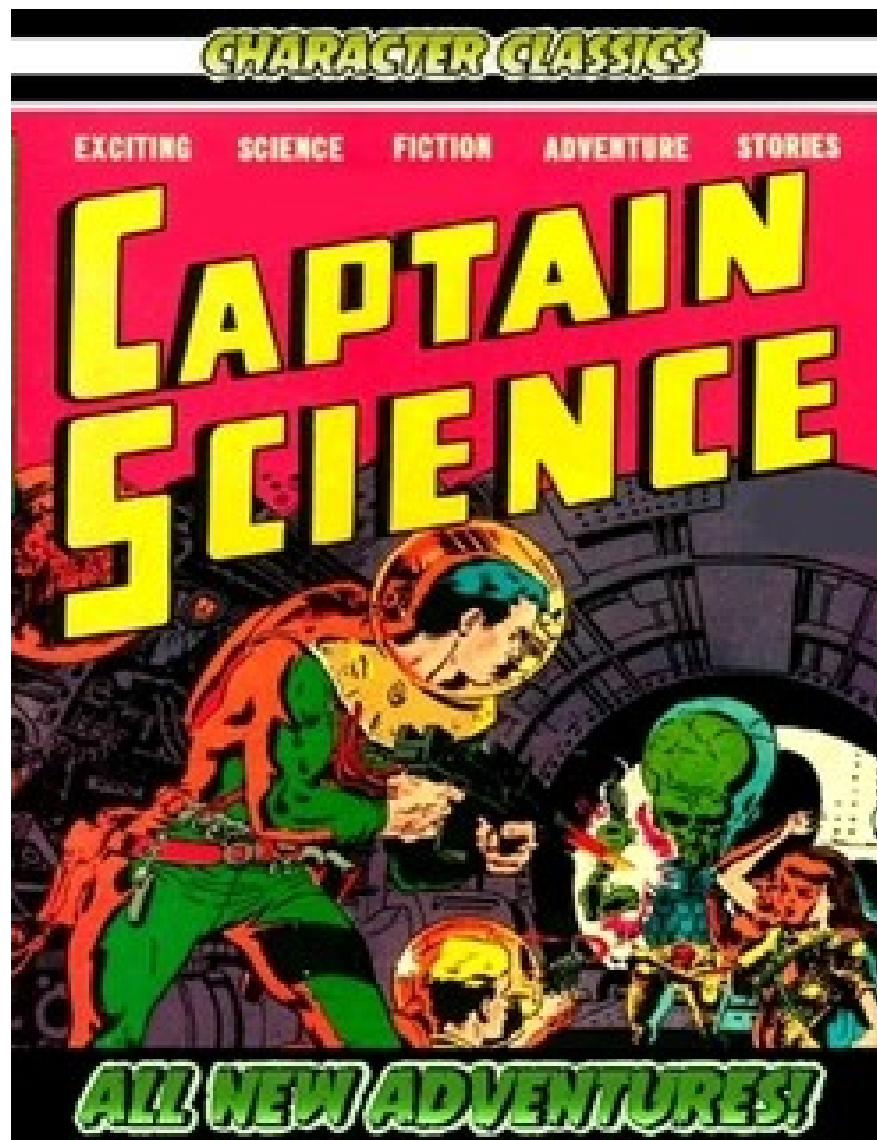
And the King said, 'This is thy mother, whose feet thou hast washed with thy tears.'

And they fell on his neck and kissed him, and brought him into the palace, and clothed him in fair raiment, and set the crown upon his head, and the sceptre in his hand, and over the city that stood by the river he ruled, and was its lord. 'Much justice and mercy did he show to all, and the evil Magician he banished, and to the Woodcutter and his wife he sent many rich gifts, and to their children he gave high honour. Nor would he suffer any to be cruel to bird or beast, but taught love and loving-kindness and charity, and to the poor he gave bread, and to the naked he gave raiment, and there was peace and plenty in the land.

Yet ruled he not long, so great had been his suffering, and so bitter the fire of his testing, for after the space of three years he died. And he who came after him ruled evilly.

THE END

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## THE GOLDEN KEY by George MacDonald

There was a boy who used to sit in the twilight and listen to his great-aunt's stories.

She told him that if he could reach the place where the end of the rainbow stands he would find there a golden key.

"And what is the key for?" the boy would ask. "What is it the key of? What will it open?"

"That nobody knows," his aunt would reply. "He has to find that out."

"I suppose, being gold," the boy once said, thoughtfully, "that I could get a good deal of money for it if I sold it."

"Better never find it than sell it," returned his aunt. And then the boy went to bed and dreamed about the golden key.

Now, all that his great-aunt told the boy about the golden key would have been nonsense, had it not been that their little house stood on the borders of Fairyland. For it is perfectly well known that out of Fairyland nobody ever can find where the rainbow stands. The creature takes such good care of its golden key, always flitting from place to place, lest anyone should find it! But in Fairyland it is quite different. Things that look real in this country look very thin indeed in Fairyland, while some of the things that here cannot stand still for a moment, will not move there. So it was not in the least absurd of the old lady to tell her nephew such things about the golden key.

"Did you ever know anybody find it?" he asked one evening.

"Yes. Your father, I believe, found it."

"And what did he do with it, can you tell me?"

"He never told me."

"What was it like?"

"He never showed it to me."

"How does a new key come there always?"

"I don't know. There it is."

"Perhaps it is the rainbow's egg."

"Perhaps it is. You will be a happy boy if you find the nest."

"Perhaps it comes tumbling down the rainbow from the sky."

"Perhaps it does."

One evening, in summer, he went into his own room, and stood at the lattice-window, and gazed into the forest which fringed the outskirts of Fairyland. It came close up to his great-aunt's garden, and, indeed, sent some straggling trees into it. The forest lay to the east, and the sun, which was setting behind the cottage, looked straight into the dark wood with his level red eye. The trees were all old, and had few branches below, so that the sun could see a great way into the forest; and the boy, being keen-sighted, could see almost as far as the sun. The trunks stood like rows of red columns in the shine of the red sun, and he could see down aisle after aisle in the vanishing distance. And as he gazed into the forest he began to feel as if the trees were all waiting for him, and had something they could not go on with till he came to them. But he was hungry, and wanted his supper. So he lingered.

Suddenly, far among the trees, as far as the sun could shine, he saw a glorious thing. It was the end of a rainbow, large and brilliant. He could count all the seven colours, and could see shade after shade beyond the violet; while before the red stood a colour more gorgeous and mysterious still. It was a colour he had never seen before. Only the spring of the rainbow-arch was visible. He could see nothing of it above the trees.

"The golden key!" he said to himself, and darted out of the house, and into the wood.

He had not gone far before the sun set. But the rainbow only glowed the brighter: for the rainbow of Fairyland is not dependent upon the sun as ours is. The trees welcomed him. The bushes made way for him. The rainbow grew larger and brighter; and at length he found himself within two trees of it.

It was a grand sight, burning away there in silence, with its gorgeous, its lovely, its delicate colours, each distinct, all combining. He could now see a great deal more of it. It rose high into the blue heavens, but bent so little that he could not tell how high the crown of the arch must reach. It was still only a small portion of a huge bow.

He stood gazing at it till he forgot himself with delight—even forgot the key which he had come to seek. And as he stood it grew more wonderful still. For in each of the colours, which was as large as the column of a church, he could faintly see beautiful forms slowly ascending as if by the steps of a winding stair. The forms appeared irregularly—now one, now many, now several, now none—men and women and children—all different, all beautiful.

He drew nearer to the rainbow. It vanished. He started back a step in dismay. It was there again, as beautiful as ever. So he contented himself with standing as near it as he might, and watching the forms that ascended the glorious colours towards the unknown height of the arch, which did not end abruptly, but faded away in the blue air, so gradually that he could not say where it ceased.

When the thought of the golden key returned, the boy very wisely proceeded to mark out in his mind the space covered by the foundation of the rainbow, in order that he might know where to search, should the rainbow disappear. It was based chiefly upon a bed of moss.

Meantime it had grown quite dark in the wood. The rainbow alone was visible by its own light. But the moment the moon rose the rainbow vanished. Nor could any change of place restore the vision to the boy's eyes. So he threw himself down upon the mossy bed, to wait till the sunlight would give him a chance of finding the key. There he fell fast asleep.

When he woke in the morning the sun was looking straight into his eyes. He turned away from it, and the same moment saw a brilliant little thing lying on the moss within a foot of his face. It was the golden key. The pipe of it was of plain gold, as bright as gold could be. The handle was curiously wrought and set with sapphires. In a terror of delight he put out his hand and took it, and had it.

He lay for a while, turning it over and over, and feeding his eyes upon its beauty. Then he jumped to his feet, remembering that the pretty thing was of no use to him yet. Where was the lock to which the key belonged? It must be somewhere, for how could anybody be so silly as make a key for which there was no lock? Where should he go to look for it? He gazed about him, up into the air, down to the earth, but saw no keyhole in the clouds, in the grass, or in the trees.

Just as he began to grow disconsolate, however, he saw something glimmering in the wood. It was a mere glimmer that he saw, but he took it for a glimmer of rainbow, and went towards it.—And now I will go back to the borders of the forest.

Not far from the house where the boy had lived there was another house, the owner of which was a merchant, who was much away from home. He had lost his wife some years before, and had only one child, a little girl, whom he left to the charge of two servants, who were very idle and careless. So she was neglected and left untidy, and was sometimes ill-used besides.

Now, it is well known that the little creatures commonly called fairies, though there are many different kinds of fairies in Fairyland, have an exceeding dislike to untidiness. Indeed, they are quite spiteful to slovenly people. Being used to all the lovely ways of the trees and flowers, and to the neatness of the birds and all woodland creatures, it makes them feel miserable, even in their deep woods and on their grassy carpets, to think that within the same moonlight lies a dirty, uncomfortable, slovenly house. And this makes them angry with the people that live in it, and they would gladly drive them out of the world if they could. They want the whole earth nice and clean. So they pinch the maids black and blue, and play them all manner of uncomfortable tricks.

But this house was quite a shame, and the fairies in the forest could not endure it. They tried everything on the maids without effect, and at last resolved upon making a clean riddance, beginning with the child. They ought to have known that it was not her fault, but they have little principle and much mischief in them, and they thought that if they got rid of her the maids would be sure to be turned away.

So one evening, the poor little girl having been put to bed early, before the sun was down, the servants went off to the village, locking the door behind them. The child did not know she was alone, and lay contentedly looking out of her window towards the forest, of which, however, she could not see much, because of the ivy and other creeping plants which had straggled across her window. All at once she saw an ape making faces at her out of the mirror, and the heads carved upon a great old wardrobe grinning fearfully. Then two old spider-legged chairs came forward into the middle of the room, and began to dance a queer, old-fashioned dance. This set her laughing, and she forgot the ape and the grinning heads. So the fairies saw they had made a mistake, and sent the chairs back to their places. But they knew that she had been reading the story of Silverhair all day. So the next moment she heard the voices of the three bears upon the stair, big voice, middle voice, and little voice, and she

heard their soft, heavy tread, as if they had had stockings over their boots, coming nearer and nearer to the door of her room, till she could bear it no longer. She did just as Silverhair did, and as the fairies wanted her to do: she darted to the window, pulled it open, got upon the ivy, and so scrambled to the ground. She then fled to the forest as fast as she could run.

Now, although she did not know it, this was the very best way she could have gone; for nothing is ever so mischievous in its own place as it is out of it; and, besides, these mischievous creatures were only the children of Fairyland, as it were, and there are many other beings there as well; and if a wanderer gets in among them, the good ones will always help him more than the evil ones will be able to hurt him.

The sun was now set, and the darkness coming on, but the child thought of no danger but the bears behind her. If she had looked round, however, she would have seen that she was followed by a very different creature from a bear. It was a curious creature, made like a fish, but covered, instead of scales, with feathers of all colours, sparkling like those of a humming-bird. It had fins, not wings, and swam through the air as a fish does through the water. Its head was like the head of a small owl.

After running a long way, and as the last of the light was disappearing, she passed under a tree with drooping branches. It dropped its branches to the ground all about her, and caught her as in a trap. She struggled to get out, but the branches pressed her closer and closer to the trunk. She was in great terror and distress, when the air-fish, swimming into the thicket of branches, began tearing them with its beak. They loosened their hold at once, and the creature went on attacking them, till at length they let the child go. Then the air-fish came from behind her, and swam on in front, glittering and sparkling all lovely colours; and she followed.

It led her gently along till all at once it swam in at a cottage-door. The child followed still. There was a bright fire in the middle of the floor, upon which stood a pot without a lid, full of water that boiled and bubbled furiously. The air-fish swam straight to the pot and into the boiling water, where it lay quiet. A beautiful woman rose from the opposite side of the fire and came to meet the girl. She took her up in her arms, and said,—

“Ah, you are come at last! I have been looking for you a long time.”

She sat down with her on her lap, and there the girl sat staring at her. She had never seen anything so beautiful. She was tall and strong, with white arms and neck, and a delicate flush on her face. The child could not tell what was the colour of her hair, but could not help thinking it had a tinge of dark green. She had not one ornament upon her, but she looked as if she had just put off quantities of diamonds and emeralds. Yet here she was in the simplest, poorest little cottage, where she was evidently at home. She was dressed in shining green.

The girl looked at the lady, and the lady looked at the girl.

“What is your name?” asked the lady.

“The servants always call me Tangle.”

“Ah, that was because your hair was so untidy. But that was their fault, the naughty women! Still it is a pretty name, and I will call you Tangle too. You must not mind my asking you



questions, for you may ask me the same questions, every one of them, and any others that you like. How old are you?"

"Ten," answered Tangle.

"You don't look like it," said the lady.

"How old are you, please?" returned Tangle.

"Thousands of years old," answered the lady.

"You don't look like it," said Tangle.

"Don't I? I think I do. Don't you see how beautiful I am?"

And her great blue eyes looked down on the little Tangle, as if all the stars in the sky were melted in them to make their brightness.

"Ah! but," said Tangle, "when people live long they grow old. At least

I always thought so."

"I have no time to grow old," said the lady. "I am too busy for that. It is very idle to grow old.—But I cannot have my little girl so untidy. Do you know I can't find a clean spot on your face to kiss?"

"Perhaps," suggested Tangle, feeling ashamed, but not too much so to say a word for herself—"perhaps that is because the tree made me cry so."

"My poor darling!" said the lady, looking now as if the moon were melted in her eyes, and kissing her little face, dirty as it was, "the naughty tree must suffer for making a girl cry."

"And what is your name, please?" asked Tangle.

"Grandmother," answered the lady.

"Is it really?"

"Yes, indeed. I never tell stories, even in fun."

"How good of you!"

"I couldn't if I tried. It would come true if I said it, and then I should be punished enough." And she smiled like the sun through a summer-shower.

"But now," she went on, "I must get you washed and dressed, and then we shall have some supper."

"Oh! I had supper long ago," said Tangle.

“Yes, indeed you had,” answered the lady—“three years ago. You don’t know that it is three years since you ran away from the bears. You are thirteen and more now.”

Tangle could only stare. She felt quite sure it was true.

“You will not be afraid of anything I do with you—will you?” said the lady.

“I will try very hard not to be; but I can’t be certain, you know,” replied Tangle.

“I like your saying so, and I shall be quite satisfied,” answered the lady.

She took off the girl’s night-gown, rose with her in her arms, and going to the wall of the cottage, opened a door. Then Tangle saw a deep tank, the sides of which were filled with green plants, which had flowers of all colours. There was a roof over it like the roof of the cottage. It was filled with beautiful clear water, in which swam a multitude of such fishes as the one that had led her to the cottage. It was the light their colours gave that showed the place in which they were.

The lady spoke some words Tangle could not understand, and threw her into the tank.

The fishes came crowding about her. Two or three of them got under her head and kept it up. The rest of them rubbed themselves all over her, and with their wet feathers washed her quite clean. Then the lady, who had been looking on all the time, spoke again; whereupon some thirty or forty of the fishes rose out of the water underneath Tangle, and so bore her up to the arms the lady held out to take her. She carried her back to the fire, and, having dried her well, opened a chest, and taking out the finest linen garments, smelling of grass and lavender, put them upon her, and over all a green dress, just like her own, shining like hers, and soft like hers, and going into just such lovely folds from the waist, where it was tied with a brown cord, to her bare feet.

“Won’t you give me a pair of shoes too, Grandmother?” said Tangle.

“No, my dear; no shoes. Look here. I wear no shoes.”

So saying she lifted her dress a little, and there were the loveliest white feet, but no shoes. Then Tangle was content to go without shoes too. And the lady sat down with her again, and combed her hair, and brushed it, and then left it to dry while she got the supper.

First she got bread out of one hole in the wall; then milk out of another; then several kinds of fruit out of a third; and then she went to the pot on the fire, and took out the fish, now nicely cooked, and, as soon as she had pulled off its feathered skin, ready to be eaten.

“But,” exclaimed Tangle. And she stared at the fish, and could say no more.

“I know what you mean,” returned the lady. “You do not like to eat the messenger that brought you home. But it is the kindest return you can make. The creature was afraid to go until it saw me put the pot on, and heard me promise it should be boiled the moment it returned with you. Then it darted out of the door at once. You saw it go into the pot of itself the moment it entered, did you not?”

“I did,” answered Tangle, “and I thought it very strange; but then I saw you, and forgot all about the fish.”

“In Fairyland,” resumed the lady, as they sat down to the table, “the ambition of the animals is to be eaten by the people; for that is their highest end in that condition. But they are not therefore destroyed. Out of that pot comes something more than the dead fish, you will see.”

Tangle now remarked that the lid was on the pot. But the lady took no further notice of it till they had eaten the fish, which Tangle found nicer than any fish she had ever tasted before. It was as white as snow, and as delicate as cream. And the moment she had swallowed a mouthful of it, a change she could not describe began to take place in her. She heard a murmuring all about her, which became more and more articulate, and at length, as she went on eating, grew intelligible. By the time she had finished her share, the sounds of all the animals in the forest came crowding through the door to her ears; for the door still stood wide open, though it was pitch dark outside; and they were no longer sounds only; they were speech, and speech that she could understand. She could tell what the insects in the cottage were saying to each other too. She had even a suspicion that the trees and flowers all about the cottage were holding midnight communications with each other; but what they said she could not hear.

As soon as the fish was eaten, the lady went to the fire and took the lid off the pot. A lovely little creature in human shape, with large white wings, rose out of it, and flew round and round the roof of the cottage; then dropped, fluttering, and nestled in the lap of the lady. She spoke to it some strange words, carried it to the door, and threw it out into the darkness. Tangle heard the flapping of its wings die away in the distance.

“Now have we done the fish any harm?” she said, returning.

“No,” answered Tangle, “I do not think we have. I should not mind eating one every day.”

“They must wait their time, like you and me too, my little Tangle.”

And she smiled a smile which the sadness in it made more lovely.

“But,” she continued, “I think we may have one for supper to-morrow.”

So saying she went to the door of the tank, and spoke; and now Tangle understood her perfectly.

“I want one of you,” she said,—“the wisest.”

Thereupon the fishes got together in the middle of the tank, with their heads forming a circle above the water, and their tails a larger circle beneath it. They were holding a council, in which their relative wisdom should be determined. At length one of them flew up into the lady’s hand, looking lively and ready.

“You know where the rainbow stands?” she asked.

“Yes, Mother, quite well,” answered the fish.

“Bring home a young man you will find there, who does not know where to go.”

The fish was out of the door in a moment. Then the lady told Tangle it was time to go to bed; and, opening another door in the side of the cottage, showed her a little arbour, cool and green, with a bed of purple heath growing in it, upon which she threw a large wrapper made of the feathered skins of the wise fishes, shining gorgeous in the firelight.

Tangle was soon lost in the strangest, loveliest dreams. And the beautiful lady was in every one of her dreams.

In the morning she woke to the rustling of leaves over her head, and the sound of running water. But, to her surprise, she could find no door—nothing but the moss-grown wall of the cottage. So she crept through an opening in the arbour, and stood in the forest. Then she bathed in a stream that ran merrily through the trees, and felt happier; for having once been in her grandmother’s pond, she must be clean and tidy ever after; and, having put on her green dress, felt like a lady.

She spent that day in the wood, listening to the birds and beasts and creeping things. She understood all that they said, though she could not repeat a word of it; and every kind had a different language, while there was a common though more limited understanding between all the inhabitants of the forest. She saw nothing of the beautiful lady, but she felt that she was near her all the time; and she took care not to go out of sight of the cottage. It was round, like a snow-hut or a wigwam; and she could see neither door nor window in it. The fact was, it had no windows; and though it was full of doors, they all opened from the inside, and could not even be seen from the outside.

She was standing at the foot of a tree in the twilight, listening to a quarrel between a mole and a squirrel, in which the mole told the squirrel that the tail was the best of him, and the squirrel called the mole Spade-fists, when, the darkness having deepened around her, she became aware of something shining in her face, and looking round, saw that the door of the cottage was open, and the red light of the fire flowing from it like a river through the darkness. She left Mole and Squirrel to settle matters as they might, and darted off to the cottage. Entering, she found the pot boiling on the fire, and the grand, lovely lady sitting on the other side of it.

“I’ve been watching you all day,” said the lady. “You shall have something to eat by and by, but we must wait till our supper comes home.”

She took Tangle on her knee, and began to sing to her—such songs as made her wish she could listen to them for ever. But at length in rushed the shining fish, and snuggled down in the pot. It was followed by a youth who had outgrown his worn garments. His face was ruddy with health, and in his hand he carried a little jewel, which sparkled in the firelight.

The first words the lady said were,—

“What is that in your hand, Mossy?”

Now Mossy was the name his companions had given him, because he had a favourite stone covered with moss, on which he used to sit whole days reading; and they said the moss had begun to grow upon him too.

Mossy held out his hand. The moment the lady saw that it was the golden key, she rose from her chair, kissed Mossy on the forehead, made him sit down on her seat, and stood before him like a servant. Mossy could not bear this, and rose at once. But the lady begged him, with tears in her beautiful eyes, to sit, and let her wait on him.

“But you are a great, splendid, beautiful lady,” said Mossy.

“Yes, I am. But I work all day long—that is my pleasure; and you will have to leave me so soon!”

“How do you know that, if you please, madam?” asked Mossy.

“Because you have got the golden key.”

“But I don’t know what it is for. I can’t find the key-hole. Will you tell me what to do?”

“You must look for the key-hole. That is your work. I cannot help you.

I can only tell you that if you look for it you will find it.”

“What kind of box will it open? What is there inside?”

“I do not know. I dream about it, but I know nothing.”

“Must I go at once?”

“You may stop here to-night, and have some of my supper. But you must go in the morning. All I can do for you is to give you clothes. Here is a girl called Tangle, whom you must take with you.”

“That will be nice,” said Mossy.

“No, no!” said Tangle. “I don’t want to leave you, please, Grandmother.”

“You must go with him, Tangle. I am sorry to lose you, but it will be the best thing for you. Even the fishes, you see, have to go into the pot, and then out into the dark. If you fall in with the Old Man of the Sea, mind you ask him whether he has not got some more fishes ready for me. My tank is getting thin.”

So saying, she took the fish from the pot, and put the lid on as before. They sat down and ate the fish, and then the winged creature rose from the pot, circled the roof, and settled on the lady’s lap. She talked to it, carried it to the door, and threw it out into the dark. They heard the flap of its wings die away in the distance.

The lady then showed Mossy into just such another chamber as that of Tangle; and in the morning he found a suit of clothes laid beside him. He looked very handsome in them. But the wearer of Grandmother’s clothes never thinks about how he or she looks, but thinks always how handsome other people are.

Tangle was very unwilling to go.

“Why should I leave you? I don’t know the young man,” she said to the lady.

“I am never allowed to keep my children long. You need not go with him except you please, but you must go some day; and I should like you to go with him, for he has the golden key. No girl need be afraid to go with a youth that has the golden key. You will take care of her, Mossy, will you not?”

“That I will,” said Mossy.

And Tangle cast a glance at him, and thought she should like to go with him.

“And,” said the lady, “if you should lose each other as you go through the—the—I never can remember the name of that country,—do not be afraid, but go on and on.”

She kissed Tangle on the mouth and Mossy on the forehead, led them to the door, and waved her hand eastward. Mossy and Tangle took each other’s hand and walked away into the depth of the forest. In his right hand Mossy held the golden key.

They wandered thus a long way, with endless amusement from the talk of the animals. They soon learned enough of their language to ask them necessary questions. The squirrels were always friendly, and gave them nuts out of their own hoards; but the bees were selfish and rude, justifying themselves on the ground that Tangle and Mossy were not subjects of their queen, and charity must begin at home, though indeed they had not one drone in their poorhouse at the time. Even the blinking moles would fetch them an earth-nut or a truffle now and then, talking as if their mouths, as well as their eyes and ears, were full of cotton wool, or their own velvety fur. By the time they got out of the forest they were very fond of each other, and Tangle was not in the least sorry that her grandmother had sent her away with Mossy.

At length the trees grew smaller, and stood farther apart, and the ground began to rise, and it got more and more steep, till the trees were all left behind, and the two were climbing a narrow path with rocks on each side. Suddenly they came upon a rude doorway, by which they entered a narrow gallery cut in the rock. It grew darker and darker, till it was pitch-dark, and they had to feel their way. At length the light began to return, and at last they came out upon a narrow path on the face of a lofty precipice. This path went winding down the rock to a wide plain, circular in shape, and surrounded on all sides by mountains. Those opposite to them were a great way off, and towered to an awful height, shooting up sharp, blue, ice-enamelled pinnacles. An utter silence reigned where they stood. Not even the sound of water reached them.

Looking down, they could not tell whether the valley below was a grassy plain or a great still lake. They had never seen any space look like it. The way to it was difficult and dangerous, but down the narrow path they went, and reached the bottom in safety. They found it composed of smooth, light-coloured sandstone, undulating in parts, but mostly level. It was no wonder to them now that they had not been able to tell what it was, for this surface was everywhere crowded with shadows. The mass was chiefly made up of the shadows of leaves innumerable, of all lovely and imaginative forms, waving to and fro, floating and quivering in the breath of a breeze whose motion was unfelt, whose sound was unheard. No forests

clothed the mountain-sides, no trees were anywhere to be seen, and yet the shadows of the leaves, branches, and stems of all various trees covered the valley as far as their eyes could reach. They soon spied the shadows of flowers mingled with those of the leaves, and now and then the shadow of a bird

with open beak, and throat distended with song. At times would appear the forms of strange, graceful creatures, running up and down the shadow-boles and along the branches, to disappear in the wind-tossed foliage. As they walked they waded knee-deep in the lovely lake. For the shadows were not merely lying on the surface of the ground, but heaped up above it like substantial forms of darkness, as if they had been cast upon a thousand different planes of the air. Tangle and Mossy often lifted their heads and gazed upwards to discern whence the shadows came; but they could see nothing more than a bright mist spread above them, higher than the tops of the mountains, which stood clear against it. No forests, no leaves, no birds were visible.

After a while, they reached more open spaces, where the shadows were thinner; and came even to portions over which shadows only flitted, leaving them clear for such as might follow. Now a wonderful form, half bird-like half human, would float across on outspread sailing pinions. Anon an exquisite shadow group of gambolling children would be followed by the loveliest female form, and that again by the grand stride of a Titanic shape, each disappearing in the surrounding press of shadowy foliage. Sometimes a profile of unspeakable beauty or grandeur would appear for a moment and vanish. Sometimes they seemed lovers that passed linked arm in arm, sometimes father and son, sometimes brothers in loving contest, sometimes sisters entwined in gracefulest community of complex form. Sometimes wild horses would tear across, free, or bestrode by noble shadows of ruling men. But some of the things which pleased them most they never knew how to describe.

About the middle of the plain they sat down to rest in the heart of a heap of shadows. After sitting for a while, each, looking up, saw the other in tears: they were each longing after the country whence the shadows fell.

“We must find the country from which the shadows come,” said Mossy.

“We must, dear Mossy,” responded Tangle. “What if your golden key should be the key to it?”

“Ah! that would be grand,” returned Mossy.—”But we must rest here for a little, and then we shall be able to cross the plain before night.”

So he lay down on the ground, and about him on every side, and over his head, was the constant play of the wonderful shadows. He could look through them, and see the one behind the other, till they mixed in a mass of darkness. Tangle, too, lay admiring, and wondering, and longing after the country whence the shadows came. When they were rested they rose and pursued their journey.

How long they were in crossing this plain I cannot tell; but before night Mossy’s hair was streaked with gray, and Tangle had got wrinkles on her forehead.

As evening grew on, the shadows fell deeper and rose higher. At length they reached a place where they rose above their heads, and made all dark around them. Then they took hold of each other’s hand, and walked on in silence and in some dismay. They felt the gathering



darkness, and something strangely solemn besides, and the beauty of the shadows ceased to delight them. All at once Tangle found that she had not a hold of Mossy's hand, though when she lost it she could not tell.

"Mossy, Mossy!" she cried aloud in terror.

But no Mossy replied.

A moment after, the shadows sank to her feet, and down under her feet, and the mountains rose before her. She turned towards the gloomy region she had left, and called once more upon Mossy. There the gloom lay tossing and heaving, a dark, stormy, foamless sea of shadows, but no Mossy rose out of it, or came climbing up the hill on which she stood. She threw herself down and wept in despair.

Suddenly she remembered that the beautiful lady had told them, if they lost each other in a country of which she could not remember the name, they were not to be afraid, but to go straight on.

"And besides," she said to herself, "Mossy has the golden key, and so no harm will come to him, I do believe."

She rose from the ground, and went on.

Before long she arrived at a precipice, in the face of which a stair was cut. When she had ascended half-way, the stair ceased, and the path led straight into the mountain. She was afraid to enter, and turning again towards the stair, grew giddy at sight of the depth beneath her, and was forced to throw herself down in the mouth of the cave.

When she opened her eyes, she saw a beautiful little figure with wings standing beside her, waiting.

"I know you," said Tangle. "You are my fish."

"Yes. But I am a fish no longer. I am an a♦ranth now."

"What is that?" asked Tangle.

"What you see I am," answered the shape. "And I am come to lead you through the mountain."

"Oh! thank you, dear fish—a♦ranth, I mean," returned Tangle, rising.

Thereupon the a♦ranth took to his wings, and flew on through the long, narrow passage, reminding Tangle very much of the way he had swum on before her when he was a fish. And the moment his white wings moved, they began to throw off a continuous shower of sparks of all colours, which lighted up the passage before them.—All at once he vanished, and Tangle heard a low, sweet sound, quite different from the rush and crackle of his wings. Before her was an open arch, and through it came light, mixed with the sound of sea-waves.

She hurried out, and fell, tired and happy, upon the yellow sand of the shore. There she lay, half asleep with weariness and rest, listening to the low splash and retreat of the tiny waves, which seemed ever enticing the land to leave off being land, and become sea. And as she lay, her eyes were fixed upon the foot of a great rainbow standing far away against the sky on the other side of the sea. At length she fell fast asleep.

When she awoke, she saw an old man with long white hair down to his shoulders, leaning upon a stick covered with green buds, and so bending over her.

“What do you want here, beautiful woman?” he said.

“Am I beautiful? I am so glad!” said Tangle, rising. “My grandmother is beautiful.”

“Yes. But what do you want?” he repeated, kindly.

“I think I want you. Are not you the Old Man of the Sea?”

“I am.”

“Then Grandmother says, have you any more fishes ready for her?”

“We will go and see, my dear,” answered the old man, speaking yet more kindly than before. “And I can do something for you, can I not?”

“Yes—show me the way up to the country from which the shadows fall,” said Tangle.

For there she hoped to find Mossy again.

“Ah! indeed, that would be worth doing,” said the old man. “But I cannot, for I do not know the way myself. But I will send you to the Old Man of the Earth. Perhaps he can tell you. He is much older than I am.”

Leaning on his staff, he conducted her along the shore to a steep rock, that looked like a petrified ship turned upside down. The door of it was the rudder of a great vessel, ages ago at the bottom of the sea. Immediately within the door was a stair in the rock, down which the old man went, and Tangle followed. At the bottom the old man had his house, and there he lived.

As soon as she entered it, Tangle heard a strange noise, unlike anything she had ever heard before. She soon found that it was the fishes talking. She tried to understand what they said; but their speech was so old-fashioned, and rude, and undefined, that she could not make much of it.

“I will go and see about those fishes for my daughter,” said the Old Man of the Sea.

And moving a slide in the wall of his house, he first looked out, and then tapped upon a thick piece of crystal that filled the round opening. Tangle came up behind him, and peeping through the window into the heart of the great deep green ocean, saw the most curious creatures, some very ugly, all very odd, and with especially queer mouths, swimming about everywhere, above and below, but all coming towards the window in answer to the tap of the

Old Man of the Sea. Only a few could get their mouths against the glass; but those who were floating miles away yet turned their heads towards it. The old man looked through the whole flock carefully for some minutes, and then turning to Tangle, said,—

“I am sorry I have not got one ready yet. I want more time than she does. But I will send some as soon as I can.”

He then shut the slide.

Presently a great noise arose in the sea. The old man opened the slide again, and tapped on the glass, whereupon the fishes were all as still as sleep.

“They were only talking about you,” he said. “And they do speak such nonsense!—To-morrow,” he continued, “I must show you the way to the Old Man of the Earth. He lives a long way from here.”

“Do let me go at once,” said Tangle.

“No. That is not possible. You must come this way first.”

He led her to a hole in the wall, which she had not observed before. It was covered with the green leaves and white blossoms of a creeping plant.

“Only white-blossoming plants can grow under the sea,” said the old man. “In there you will find a bath, in which you must lie till I call you.”

Tangle went in, and found a smaller room or cave, in the further corner of which was a great basin hollowed out of a rock, and half-full of the clearest sea-water. Little streams were constantly running into it from cracks in the wall of the cavern. It was polished quite smooth inside, and had a carpet of yellow sand in the bottom of it. Large green leaves and white flowers of various plants crowded up and over it, draping and covering it almost entirely.

No sooner was she undressed and lying in the bath, than she began to feel as if the water were sinking into her, and she were receiving all the good of sleep without undergoing its forgetfulness. She felt the good coming all the time. And she grew happier and more hopeful than she had been since she lost Mossy. But she could not help thinking how very sad it was for a poor old man to live there all alone, and have to take care of a whole seaful of stupid and riotous fishes.

After about an hour, as she thought, she heard his voice calling her, and rose out of the bath. All the fatigue and aching of her long journey had vanished. She was as whole, and strong, and well as if she had slept for seven days.

Returning to the opening that led into the other part of the house, she started back with amazement, for through it she saw the form of a grand man, with a majestic and beautiful face, waiting for her.

“Come,” he said; “I see you are ready.”

She entered with reverence.

“Where is the Old Man of the Sea?” she asked, humbly.

“There is no one here but me,” he answered, smiling. “Some people call me the Old Man of the Sea. Others have another name for me, and are terribly frightened when they meet me taking a walk by the shore. Therefore I avoid being seen by them, for they are so afraid, that they never see what I really am. You see me now.—But I must show you the way to the Old Man of the Earth.”

He led her into the cave where the bath was, and there she saw, in the opposite corner, a second opening in the rock.

“Go down that stair, and it will bring you to him,” said the Old Man of the Sea.

With humble thanks Tangle took her leave. She went down the winding stair, till she began to fear there was no end to it. Still down and down it went, rough and broken, with springs of water bursting out of the rocks and running down the steps beside her. It was quite dark about her, and yet she could see. For after being in that bath, people’s eyes always give out a light they can see by. There were no creeping things in the way. All was safe and pleasant though so dark and damp and deep.

At last there was not one step more, and she found herself in a glimmering cave. On a stone in the middle of it sat a figure with its back towards her—the figure of an old man bent double with age. From behind she could see his white beard spread out on the rocky floor in front of him. He did not move as she entered, so she passed round that she might stand before him and speak to him.

The moment she looked in his face, she saw that he was a youth of marvellous beauty. He sat entranced with the delight of what he beheld in a mirror of something like silver, which lay on the floor at his feet, and which from behind she had taken for his white beard. He sat on, heedless of her presence, pale with the joy of his vision. She stood and watched him. At length, all trembling, she spoke. But her voice made no sound. Yet the youth lifted up his head. He showed no surprise, however, at seeing her—only smiled a welcome.

“Are you the Old Man of the Earth?” Tangle had said.

And the youth answered, and Tangle heard him, though not with her ears:—

“I am. What can I do for you?”

“Tell me the way to the country whence the shadows fall.”

“Ah! that I do not know. I only dream about it myself. I see its shadows sometimes in my mirror: the way to it I do not know. But I think the Old Man of the Fire must know. He is much older than I am. He is the oldest man of all.”

“Where does he live?”

“I will show you the way to his place. I never saw him myself.”

So saying, the young man rose, and then stood for a while gazing at Tangle.

“I wish I could see that country too,” he said. “But I must mind my work.”

He led her to the side of the cave, and told her to lay her ear against the wall.

“What do you hear?” he asked.

“I hear,” answered Tangle, “the sound of a great water running inside the rock.”

“That river runs down to the dwelling of the oldest man of all—the Old Man of the Fire. I wish I could go to see him. But I must mind my work. That river is the only way to him.”

Then the Old Man of the Earth stooped over the floor of the cave, raised a huge stone from it, and left it leaning. It disclosed a great hole that went plumb-down.

“That is the way,” he said.

“But there are no stairs.”

“You must throw yourself in. There is no other way.”

She turned and looked him full in the face—stood so for a whole minute, as she thought: it was a whole year—then threw herself headlong into the hole.

When she came to herself, she found herself gliding down fast and deep. Her head was under water, but that did not signify, for, when she thought about it, she could not remember that she had breathed once since her bath in the cave of the Old Man of the Sea. When she lifted up her head a sudden and fierce heat struck her, and she sank it again instantly, and went sweeping on.

Gradually the stream grew shallower. At length she could hardly keep her head under. Then the water could carry her no farther. She rose from the channel, and went step for step down the burning descent. The water ceased altogether. The heat was terrible. She felt scorched to the bone, but it did not touch her strength. It grew hotter and hotter. She said, “I can bear it no longer.” Yet she went on.

At the long last, the stair ended at a rude archway in an all but glowing rock. Through this archway Tangle fell exhausted into a cool mossy cave. The floor and walls were covered with moss—green, soft, and damp. A little stream spouted from a rent in the rock and fell into a basin of moss. She plunged her face into it and drank. Then she lifted her head and looked around. Then she rose and looked again. She saw no one in the cave. But the moment she stood upright she had a marvellous sense that she was in the secret of the earth and all its ways. Everything she had seen, or learned from books; all that her grandmother had said or sung to her; all the talk of the beasts, birds, and fishes; all that had happened to her on her journey with Mossy, and since then in the heart of the earth with the Old man and the Older man—all was plain: she understood it all, and saw that everything meant the same thing, though she could not have put it into words again.

The next moment she descried, in a corner of the cave, a little naked child sitting on the moss. He was playing with balls of various colours and sizes, which he disposed in strange figures upon the floor beside him. And now Tangle felt that there was something in her knowledge which was not in her understanding. For she knew there must be an infinite meaning in the change and sequence and individual forms of the figures into which the child arranged the balls, as well as in the varied harmonies of their colours, but what it all meant she could not tell. He went on busily, tirelessly, playing his solitary game, without looking up, or seeming to know that there was a stranger in his deep-withdrawn cell. Diligently as a lace-maker shifts her bobbins, he shifted and arranged his balls. Flashes of meaning would now pass from them to Tangle, and now again all would be not merely obscure, but utterly dark. She stood looking for a long time, for there was fascination in the sight; and the longer she looked the more an indescribable vague intelligence went on rousing itself in her mind. For seven years she had stood there watching the naked child with his coloured balls, and it seemed to her like seven hours, when all at once the shape the balls took, she knew not why, reminded her of the Valley of Shadows, and she spoke:—

“Where is the Old Man of the Fire?” she said.

I think I must be indebted to Novalis for these geometrical figures.

“Here I am,” answered the child, rising and leaving his balls on the moss. “What can I do for you?”

There was such an awfulness of absolute repose on the face of the child that Tangle stood dumb before him. He had no smile, but the love in his large gray eyes was deep as the centre. And with the repose there lay on his face a shimmer as of moonlight, which seemed as if any moment it might break into such a ravishing smile as would cause the beholder to weep himself to death. But the smile never came, and the moonlight lay there unbroken. For the heart of the child was too deep for any smile to reach from it to his face.

“Are you the oldest man of all?” Tangle at length, although filled with awe, ventured to ask.

“Yes, I am. I am very, very old. I am able to help you, I know. I can help everybody.” And the child drew near and looked up in her face so that she burst into tears.

“Can you tell me the way to the country the shadows fall from?” she sobbed.

“Yes. I know the way quite well. I go there myself sometimes. But you could not go my way; you are not old enough. I will show you how you can go.”

“Do not send me out into the great heat again,” prayed Tangle.

“I will not,” answered the child.

And he reached up, and put his little cool hand on her heart.

“Now,” he said, “you can go. The fire will not burn you. Come.”

He led her from the cave, and following him through another archway, she found herself in a vast desert of sand and rock. The sky of it was of rock, lowering over them like solid

thunderclouds; and the whole place was so hot that she saw, in bright rivulets, the yellow gold and white silver and red copper trickling molten from the rocks. But the heat never came near her.

When they had gone some distance, the child turned up a great stone, and took something like an egg from under it. He next drew a long curved line in the sand with his finger, and laid the egg in it. He then spoke something Tangle could not understand. The egg broke, a small snake came out, and, lying in the line in the sand, grew and grew till he filled it. The moment he was thus full-grown, he began to glide away, undulating like a sea-wave.

“Follow that serpent,” said the child. “He will lead you the right way.”

Tangle followed the serpent. But she could not go far without looking back at the marvellous child. He stood alone in the midst of the glowing desert, beside a fountain of red flame that had burst forth at his feet, his naked whiteness glimmering a pale rosy red in the torrid fire. There he stood, looking after her, till, from the lengthening distance, she could see him no more. The serpent went straight on, turning neither to the right nor left.

Meantime Mossy had got out of the Lake of Shadows, and, following his mournful, lonely way, had reached the sea-shore. It was a dark, stormy evening. The sun had set. The wind was blowing from the sea. The waves had surrounded the rock within which lay the old man’s house. A deep water rolled between it and the shore, upon which a majestic figure was walking alone.

Mossy went up to him and said,—

“Will you tell me where to find the Old Man of the Sea?”

“I am the Old Man of the Sea,” the figure answered.

“I see a strong kingly man of middle age,” returned Mossy.

Then the old man looked at him more intently, and said,—

“Your sight, young man, is better than that of most who take this way. The night is stormy: come to my house and tell me what I can do for you.”

Mossy followed him. The waves flew from before the footsteps of the Old Man of the Sea, and Mossy followed upon dry sand.

When they had reached the cave, they sat down and gazed at each other.

Now Mossy was an old man by this time. He looked much older than the Old Man of the Sea, and his feet were very weary.

After looking at him for a moment, the old man took him by the hand and led him into his inner cave. There he helped him to undress, and laid him in the bath. And he saw that one of his hands Mossy did not open.

“What have you in that hand?” he asked.



Mossy opened his hand, and there lay the golden key.

“Ah!” said the old man, “that accounts for your knowing me. And I know the way you have to go.”

“I want to find the country whence the shadows fall,” said Mossy.

“I dare say you do. So do I. But meantime, one thing is certain.—What is that key for, do you think?”

“For a key-hole somewhere. But I don’t know why I keep it. I never could find the key-hole. And I have lived a good while, I believe,” said Mossy, sadly. “I’m not sure that I’m not old. I know my feet ache.”

“Do they?” said the old man, as if he really meant to ask the question; and Mossy, who was still lying in the bath, watched his feet for a moment before he replied,—“No, they do not. Perhaps I am not old either.”

“Get up and look at yourself in the water.”

He rose and looked at himself in the water, and there was not a gray hair on his head or a wrinkle on his skin.

“You have tasted of death now,” said the old man. “Is it good?”

“It is good,” said Mossy. “It is better than life.”

“No,” said the old man: it is only more life.—Your feet will make no holes in the water now.”

“What do you mean?”

“I will show you that presently.”

They returned to the outer cave, and sat and talked together for a long time. At length the Old Man of the Sea rose, and said to Mossy,—

“Follow me.”

He led him up the stair again, and opened another door. They stood on the level of the raging sea, looking towards the east. Across the waste of waters, against the bosom of a fierce black cloud, stood the foot of a rainbow, glowing in the dark.

“This indeed is my way,” said Mossy, as soon as he saw the rainbow, and stepped out upon the sea. His feet made no holes in the water. He fought the wind, and clomb the waves, and went on towards the rainbow.

The storm died away. A lovely day and a lovelier night followed. A cool wind blew over the wide plain of the quiet ocean. And still Mossy journeyed eastward. But the rainbow had vanished with the storm.

Day after day he held on, and he thought he had no guide. He did not see how a shining fish under the water directed his steps. He crossed the sea, and came to a great precipice of rock, up which he could discover but one path. Nor did this lead him farther than half-way up the rock, where it ended on a platform. Here he stood and pondered.—It could not be that the way stopped here, else what was the path for? It was a rough path, not very plain, yet certainly a path.—He examined the face of the rock. It was smooth as glass. But as his eyes kept roving hopelessly over it, something glittered, and he caught sight of a row of small sapphires. They bordered a little hole in the rock.

“The key-hole!” he cried.

He tried the key. It fitted. It turned. A great clang and clash, as of iron bolts on huge brazen caldrons, echoed thunderously within. He drew out the key. The rock in front of him began to fall. He retreated from it as far as the breadth of the platform would allow. A great slab fell at his feet. In front was still the solid rock, with this one slab fallen forward out of it. But the moment he stepped upon it, a second fell, just short of the edge of the first, making the next step of a stair, which thus kept dropping itself before him as he ascended into the heart of the precipice. It led him into a hall fit for such an approach—irregular and rude in formation, but floor, sides, pillars, and vaulted roof, all one mass of shining stones of every colour that light can show. In the centre stood seven columns, ranged from red to violet. And on the pedestal of one of them sat a woman, motionless, with her face bowed upon her knees. Seven years had she sat there waiting. She lifted her head as Mossy drew near. It was Tangle. Her hair had grown to her feet, and was rippled like the windless sea on broad sands. Her face was beautiful, like her grandmother’s, and as still and peaceful as that of the Old Man of the Fire. Her form was tall and noble. Yet Mossy knew her at once.

“How beautiful you are, Tangle!” he said, in delight and astonishment.

“Am I?” she returned. “Oh, I have waited for you so long! But you, you are like the Old Man of the Sea. No. You are like the Old Man of the Earth. No, no. You are like the oldest man of all. You are like them all. And yet you are my own old Mossy! How did you come here? What did you do after I lost you? Did you find the key-hole? Have you got the key still?”

She had a hundred questions to ask him, and he a hundred more to ask her. They told each other all their adventures, and were as happy as man and woman could be. For they were younger and better, and stronger and wiser, than they had ever been before.

It began to grow dark. And they wanted more than ever to reach the country whence the shadows fall. So they looked about them for a way out of the cave. The door by which Mossy entered had closed again, and there was half a mile of rock between them and the sea. Neither could Tangle find the opening in the floor by which the serpent had led her thither. They searched till it grew so dark that they could see nothing, and gave it up.

After a while, however, the cave began to glimmer again. The light came from the moon, but it did not look like moonlight, for it gleamed through those seven pillars in the middle, and filled the place with all colours. And now Mossy saw that there was a pillar beside the red

one, which he had not observed before. And it was of the same new colour that he had seen in the rainbow when he saw it first in the fairy forest. And on it he saw a sparkle of blue. It was the sapphires round the key-hole.

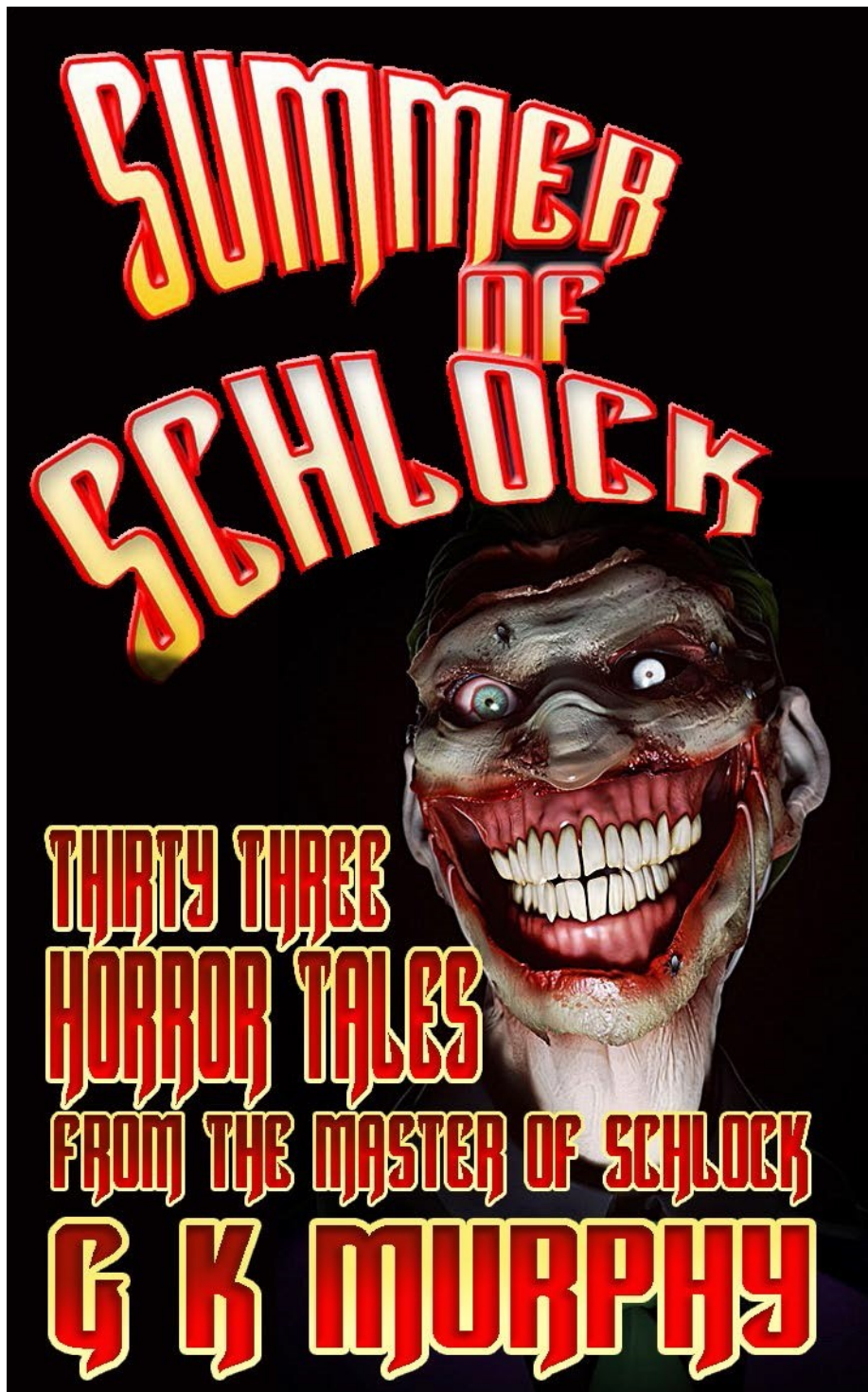
He took his key. It turned in the lock to the sound of Aeolian music. A door opened upon slow hinges, and disclosed a winding stair within. The key vanished from his fingers. Tangle went up. Mossy followed. The door closed behind them. They climbed out of the earth; and, still climbing, rose above it. They were in the rainbow. Far abroad, over ocean and land, they could see through its transparent walls the earth beneath their feet. Stairs beside stairs wound up together, and beautiful beings of all ages climbed along with them.

They knew that they were going up to the country whence the shadows fall.

And by this time I think they must have got there.

THE END

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## STARKAD IN ALFHEIM by Gavin Chappell

Starkad gazed at the wet nurse as she let little Grim suck, the baby's late mother Ogn on his mind as he tried to think of a way to prove himself in the eyes of the world—of the worlds. They had to know that he was a strong man, that he would guard his own. What could he do? If only he had a helpmeet with him, someone like Ogn at his side, she would be able to counsel him.

One night he asked the wet nurse, but she shook her head.

'Why you want to prove yourself?' she asked. He explained as simply as he could. Her inscrutable Lappish face pondered the dilemma. 'You lost girl, girl second beautifulest in all worlds?' Starkad nodded impatiently. 'Why you content with her?'

'What?' Starkad barked. Grim began to cry.

Once the wet nurse had quieted him she looked up again. 'Why not make beautifulest girl in all worlds wife? Then all respect you.'

'Princess Alfchild...?' Starkad gazed off into the distance, excited yet appalled by the idea. 'Make the princess of the elves my wife? King Alf won't like that! It will be spoken of in all the worlds there are.' He was startled by the wet nurse's cunning. 'Raiders would surely leave the valley alone if they heard about this...! Grim would grow up in a settled land. And it would shut Snjalli's snout.'

'King wouldn't like?' the wet nurse asked.

Starkad glanced at her. Maybe she wasn't so clever after all. 'He won't give her to me gladly,' he explained. 'Besides, I won't make a new name for myself by meekly asking him for his daughter's hand in marriage. He's been saving her up for someone important. Someone big.'

There was a rumble of thunder from outside. Starkad looked upwards uneasily, seeing the cave roof, but his mind travelling out into the autumn sky. 'If the worlds are to learn that my people are well defended, I must make a show of force. I shall journey to the world of the elves and carry off the princess.'

'Carry off?' the wet nurse asked. 'Like Hergrim Halftroll? If she betrothed to man, he be angry?'

Starkad shrugged. 'Angry? He'll be furious if he's any kind of man. But that doesn't matter. What matters is my name, my reputation. That's what will ensure peace in this land. War with others!'

'What if betrothed comes for revenge?' the wet nurse asked.

'Then I'll kill him,' said Starkad simply.

Again, thunder rumbled, somewhere out to sea.

The wet nurse's idea gave Starkad new hope. The rest of that month he spent preparing for an autumnal raid of the world of the elves. He would go alone, since that would gain him greater glory, rather than raising a crew from Snjalli's kin. For that he would need a boat small enough to require only a one man crew but large enough to survive the journey through theseas of darkness required to take him to the elf world. He would also need a good idea of the ground he would have to cover on reaching it.

He had never been to Alfheim, but he knew that much of it was wooded. Alf was its king, and he dwelt at Gimle in the midst of the forest, a bright city of graceful towers and bridges amid the trees. The world was the property of the god Frey, who had been given it as a tooth gift when young. Yet Starkad had no fear of that peaceful deity. Frey was no warrior, but a lover of peace and prosperity.

Starkad went down to his boatsheds and inspected the vessels there. They had been there since his father's day; some of their timbers were rotten and needed replacing. He had not sailed out on raiding expeditions for a few years, not since coming to terms with the king of the Glittering Plains. Well, that was all in the past now.

With the aid of some fishermen, he prepared a small vessel for the expedition into Alfheim, replacing rotten or broken strakes, renewing the rigging and prevailing upon the fishermen's wives to re-stitch the sail. On the second day of work Snjalli came down to see what was happening.

'You mean to go out in that?' he asked, openly insolent. 'In the summer my men and I went raiding in a longship. We brought back much booty after raiding ships and islands and villages. What do you hope to achieve?'

Starkad restrained a desire to seize his neighbour and fling him into the chilly waters of the fjord. 'I am going on an expedition, Master Snjalli,' he said through gritted teeth. 'I am not going to fight Vikings.'

Snjalli's lip curled. 'You hope to go fishing?' he said, as if fishing was some shameful, unmanly deed. The men helping Starkad replace the rigging paused to glower at him.

'I hope to go fishing,' Starkad said, 'for the biggest fish in these or any other waters.'

Snjalli's jaw flapped open. 'You mean to go hunting for the Midgard Serpent?' He jumped at an explanation. 'Even Thor had no success in that expedition. What madness has seized you now?'

'I do not go fishing for Jormungand,' Starkad said, returning to his work as if Snjalli was not there. 'I have bigger fish than that to fry.'

Snjalli wandered off wearing a puzzled expression.

Starkad paid the fishermen with gold rings from his hoard and they returned to their work. He noticed Snjalli watching from the entrance to his longhouse up the valley, and spent the rest

of the day engaged in minor tasks round the boatsheds as the fully rigged boat rode at anchor in the roadstead off shore.

He returned to his longhouse as the sun set, gracing the headland at the edge of the fjord with a rosy glow. For a moment, it seemed to Starkad that the promontory had been drenched in blood.

He rose around midnight. The wet nurse knew the plan, although no one else did, unless she had blabbed to Snjalli's folk. The autumn night was not too cold, though a wind stirred, coming in off the sea. As Starkad made his way down the valley, his great feet thudding on the turf. The cold night sky above was spangled with stars. He thought he heard another rumble of thunder.

Reaching the boatsheds, he waded out to where his boat lay at anchor. As he hauled himself aboard, the boat almost capsized under his sudden weight before bobbing back up again. He unreefed the sails, and raised the anchor. The breeze filled his sail. Slowly he drifted out into the open waters of the fjord, and he began sailing towards the fjord entrance. It was a long voyage to the world of the elves, and Starkad had told the wet nurse that it was unlikely that he would be back before the end of autumn.

At first, Starkad sailed through seas traversed by men, passing longships and curraughs, galleys and dromonds. But soon he found himself entering unknown seas, seas where the stars were strange, where the sun never rose. He sailed for longer than he could tell through pitch blackness, where even sunstones or compasses were useless. He was sailing into the west, or so he hoped. Westward was the way to Alfheim, to the world of the elves; so tradition had it. And now tradition was his only navigator.

After almost tearing out the bottom of his boat on unseen reefs, he began to despair of ever reaching his destination. It had been a crazy idea. Sailing to the world of the giants had been different, it was a place he knew well, over the Elivagar in lands where his father had dwelt long ago. But the world of the elves was another world entirely, the place of hidden folk. Some said it lay westward, others maintained it was under the ground, with dwarfs and the dead. But surely it was the swart elves who lived in such gloomy conditions, Starkad thought, gazing round at the sightless night surrounding his ship. King Alf's folk were the elves of light, second only in power to the Aesir themselves, Odin's people.

Now Starkad saw on the horizon a green grey line, above which flew dark dots that must be birds. The dark seas opened out like a window on seas of light in a summer sunshine that poured its light down from beyond the clouds. Starkad had not dreamed that the dark seas he had traversed might conceal such beauty. Now the ruby glow seemed redundant as yellow light poured down from the sky. He had passed out of darkness into seas of light. Looking back he could see the line of darkness behind him, from which he had come.

Seeing an inlet some way ahead, he crossed to the steering oar and guided his vessel towards the bay. Shortly afterwards he had moored the boat in a little sandy cove, overhung with trees and bushes. The scent of rotting leaves was almost overpowering. The sun glimmered down through the russet leaved trees and the air was chill. Starkad stepped ashore, hands resting on the pommels of his swords as he examined his new surroundings.

A winding path led up the bank and into the trees. Nobody was around. It seemed that he had entered the world of the elves without being seen, despite the eerie nature of his arrival.

He strode up the path. The trees leaned over his path, roofing it like a red brown tunnel. Birds sang upon the boughs, and the undergrowth was alive with the scurrying of small animals. The path grew steeper as he ascended the side of a plateau then it levelled out again. At times, through gaps in the foliage, he caught glimpses of distant mountains.

Reached the head of a valley, he gazed down at what seemed to be a city. Gimle, he supposed. Delicate towers of white and cream rose among the trees, while walkways led from bough to bough. Treehouses occupied many of the trees. A stream ran through the middle of the valley, crossed by a wooden bridge. Outside the city meadows ran down to the banks of the stream. To one side of the main gate was a grove of trees, in the centre of which was a megalithic altar.

Elves were to be seen throughout the city, some working at handicrafts, others patrolling the walkways. Still more were visible riding through the meadows. Starkad remained where he was, watching and waiting. The city seemed a haven of tranquillity. He remembered the cold home of the giants, and the savage world of men. Alfheim was apparently a peaceful and prosperous place. And yet those guards looked as if they could handle themselves in a fight.

As Starkad watched, he saw a group of elf maidens depart from the main city gate, accompanied by a few elf men in armour. Reaching the meadows, they danced in rings, holding hands, carousing and revelling as several elfin minstrels played from a recumbent stone on the meadow's edge. Amidst them danced one elf maiden who was more beautiful than the rest. Even at this distance, Starkad was certain he had found Princess Alfild.

He made his way down the slope, lumbering from tree to tree. He didn't want any of the elves to see him. They would know that the presence of an interloper from another world did not bode well. At last he reached the valley floor. Willows grew along the stream and he concealed himself among them as he approached the meadows where Princess Alfild and her maidens played.

At last he reached the edge of the meadows. As he hid behind a withered trunk, he heard clear, bright voices drifting across the leaf strewn sward, mingled with the strains of the fiddles.

'It is time for the feast, fair maidens,' trilled Princess Alfild. 'While my father makes his offering in the ring of stones, deep in the forest, we will have our own autumn feast!' The other elves gathered around her. Handmaidens spread sheets on the grass on which everyone sat cross-legged, and food was laid out for them all to eat, cold meats and salads. Bottles of wine and mead were uncorked and soon full goblets sparkled in the elf maidens' hands. Laughter rang out across the meadow.

Starkad watched the male elves, who stood talking quietly in a small group to one side. As guards they seemed negligent, and laughed and joked with the maidens and the minstrels rather than keeping an eye on their surroundings. Starkad gripped his swords and readied himself. His eyes fixed on Princess Alfild. The rumours of her beauty had not been exaggerated, he told himself. She was indeed even more beautiful than Ogn Alfasprengi.



Tall for a woman, and slender, she had fair hair that swept down her back, while her green gown was spun from silk. Round her throat blazed jewels of the whiteness of diamonds, but they were not as comely as her face. And her only guards were four or five elf warriors, who seemed to have no thought in their heads but of dallying with white throated maidens. Starkad's lip curled.

He awaited his moment. Now the warriors were drinking, having been handed goblets by handmaidens who had come tripping up to them, eyes wide and admiring. This would be too easy.

He burst out from the willows, swords flashing in the spring sunlight, ran straight through a group of dancing maidens and decapitated the first of the guards with a single swing of a sword. Screams and shrieks erupted from slender throats as the head, clasped in an exquisitely wrought winged helmet, landed with a splash in a fruit sorbet. Blood fountained from the headless torso, which took a step forward then toppled backwards into the nearest elf guard, who turned, looking pale, and menaced Starkad with a halberd. Starkad sneered as the guards hurried to stop him, spun round, whirling his swords, and sent them falling on every side, spattering the sweet meadow with their blood.

The slaughter took seconds. Elf maidens and minstrels ran shrieking for the city. Starkad pursued them, cutting down two fleeing minstrels. The princess stood proudly in the centre of the meadow as her handmaidens urged her to run.

'Who are you?' she demanded, her voice vibrant with hauteur. She was magnificent as she walked fearlessly towards him. 'Begone from this place, troll!'

'My name is Starkad!' he bellowed, running towards her. 'Starkad Aludreng! Hear that name, elves of Alfheim! Remember it!'

He seized her and despite her struggles, slung her over his shoulder. Her handmaidens tried to grab her from him but he knocked them aside with blows. He bent down to snatch up a few stray goblets—pure gold they were, as far as he could tell—and thrust them into his waist belt, then turned, hitched the angry princess to a more convenient position on his shoulder, and ran for the side of the valley.

Horns were belling out from the city now as the maidens streamed in with their tale of woe, but Starkad thought he could make it into the thick forest before the full guard was mustered or before the king came to rescue his daughter. Although she struggled and spat like a wildcat, he noticed that her flesh against his shoulder was warm and soft, and she exuded a delicate scent like a rose in summer.

As he ran past the willows, she shouted to him, 'Put me down! Put me down—what is your name, trollspawn? Starkad? Put me down, Starkad! What is the meaning of this?'

'You,' he panted, still running, 'are to be my bride.'

She began struggling again. When she realised that this was futile, clamped as she was in the iron grasp of his arms, she went limp. 'No,' she cried. 'I will not be your wife! I am Princess Alfild of Alfheim. Even Thor of the Aesir praises my beauty. Sif herself is said to be jealous of me. I will not become the wife of an ugly, deformed troll.' She was furious.

Starkad laughed. ‘Savage little kitten,’ he taunted her. ‘Look back at your city, princess, because it’s the last time you’ll see it. You’re mine. You will bear fine sturdy sons for me, a line that will be conquerors, which will gain an ever living name.’

‘You’ve carried me off,’ she wailed, ‘just to glut a greedy ambition? I am a person, not your booty! Let me go now, you misbegotten trollspawn!’

Starkad slapped her rump affectionately. ‘Accept it. Your father the king and all his men are unable to rescue you. I shall take you back to my home in the world of men and there you shall submit to me.’

Reaching the head of the valley, he glanced back to see the city of the elves thronged with darting figures, like a forest anthill crushed by a booted foot. The elves seemed to be lacking in all direction. Some were following, but at a distance. He didn’t think they posed much threat. He turned and ran through the trees, with Princess Alfild’s struggling form still slung over his shoulder.

As he did so, a drumming noise came from the clearing ahead and he saw a host of riders heading through the trees towards him. The man who led them wore a circlet upon his brow.

Starkad ran for the undergrowth, and flung himself down into a ditch, still holding the struggling princess, whose finery was smeared with Alfheim mud. He looked back over his shoulder. The riders galloped past oblivious.

‘That is my father,’ said Princess Alfild in a muffled tone.

Starkad turned to see she had wriggled her face free from his enveloping palm. She might give the alarm. He slammed his hand back over her mouth, then tore a strip off her dress to gag her with. She got a hand free and scratched at his face. He tripped her with his leg and she fell with a splash into the ditch water. He rolled her over, and bound her slim arms behind her, then rolled her over again—she was covered top to toe in mud by now—and gagged her. Even so, she managed to sink a slender knee into his groin. He grunted.

By now the riders must be back at the city. If King Alf led them, and that certainly would explain the circlet the leader wore, then the elves would soon be better organised. He had to get back to the boat as soon as possible.

With a grunt, he heaved the princess back over his shoulder, squelched back out of the ditch, and ran down the forest path, now churned up by fresh hoof prints.

He had got halfway to the coast, and the seas of darkness were visible through the trees, when his ears caught more drumming of hoofs from the distance, in the direction of the elfin city. He looked back but could see no sign of pursuit through the avenues of trees. Nonetheless, the sound of riders, shouted commands, the clatter of arms and armour pursued him. Were they too far off? Or—a horrible thought struck him—were they invisible? They were elves, after all.

He turned and ran on. At last he came down into the cove, Princess Alfild still struggling on his shoulder. He deposited her in the bow, cut the painter, and steered a course for the sea of

darkness. His paddles splashed in the water. Soon they were so far across the sea that Alfheim was no longer visible.

Princess Alfhild tried to kick him. He removed her gag. 'I'll untie you,' he said, ignoring the unprincess-like torrent of invective, 'if you promise to sit quietly and be a good girl.'

'This is an outrage!' she snarled. 'Turn about at once and return me to my father.'

Starkad left her lying in the scuppers, hands still bound, and went to inspect his caulking.

On they sailed across the dark sea, with little more than a breeze in the sails, enough to keep them sailing. Starkad tried to ask the princess if her people were sailors, but she proved unhelpful. There was no sign of pursuit, which surprised Starkad. He had only grabbed the golden goblets so he could fling them aside to slow down pursuers. He inspected one thoughtfully. It was an exquisite piece of work. He looked up. Despite her bedraggled appearance, the same could be said of Princess Alfhild. Her eyes met his and she gave him a look of pure hatred.

'It seems that your father doesn't love you as much as you thought,' he taunted her. 'Otherwise he would be after you by now.'

She looked away, as best as she could, lying in the scuppers with her hands tied behind her back. Starkad sat down beside her. 'Accept it,' he told her. 'You're my wife now.' He reached out to stroke her grimy cheek and she shrank away. 'I've won you by right of conquest.'

'I am not plunder,' she hissed. 'You cannot steal me. I am a princess of the elves, not a treasure hoard.'

'You're more precious and more beautiful than that,' the giant told her with heavy gallantry. She stared at him, eyes narrowed to slits, but this time she did not look away.

The seas of darkness gave way to more earthly oceans. Starkad survived the voyage by fishing. The fish had to be eaten raw since he had not been able to stock up on firewood at their previous landfall. The princess hated this, but Starkad told her that he was accustomed to such privations.

'You boast of your poverty?' she said, as he fed her by hand. As she gulped down a piece of raw, fresh fish, she made a moue of disgust.

'Hardiness,' Starkad corrected her. 'In the world of the giants, and even in that of men, I have lived a harsh, rugged life. It has made me manly, not an idle fop of the sort you know from Alfheim.'

'Why do you feel you have to impress me?' she fleered. 'You have me at your mercy. You don't need to boast about how tough you are, you've overpowered me. Who are you trying to convince? Me? Or yourself?'

Without replying, Starkad went and stood in the prow, gazing at the rise and fall of the waves as they sailed on towards the shores of Midgard.

She didn't seem to appreciate that he came from a tougher, manlier world than her own. The decadent delights of dancing and singing and feasting that had been her life so far were gone now. Now she was adrift in a savage world, where strength was needed to survive. Starkad had survived, because he was strong. He was ruthless. He took what he wanted. He had taken her! She should accept defeat, accept his superiority. And yet, even helpless and at his mercy, she had a tongue that was more wounding than the sharpest spear. He was at a loss as to how he should tame her.

One morning, he saw seagulls flocking off the starboard bow, and turned the vessel in that direction. Soon a line of clouds was visible on the horizon, and he knew that must mean landfall wasn't far off. The stars of the Midgard night had guided him for the last few days, and he was sure they were nearing the Telemark coast. Taking a sighting on the sun, he sailed north east.

A day later, they were ashore. Snjalli and his kin came to greet them.

'When you vanished in the night, Aludreng, we were afraid,' Snjalli confessed. 'We thought you had abandoned us. Where did you go?' He eyed Starkad's otherworldly prisoner doubtfully. Princess Alfhild looked a little better after Starkad had dangled her over the side to clean up the worst of the mud, but she was still disheveled and dispirited in appearance. 'Who is this strange female?' He noticed her bonds. 'A slave?'

'She is my wife, by right of conquest.' Starkad cut her bonds. 'This is Alfhild, princess of the elves.'

'You carried her off?' Snjalli said. 'Why, you have brought doom down upon us all! Her kindred will come seeking vengeance!'

'Her kindred are soft gutted pleasure seekers,' Starkad said, 'without the gumption to come after her. Isn't that right, wife? Your father has abandoned you.' He clapped the princess over her shoulder. 'Now you have no one in the world. Except me.'

When he struck her, she gave him an angry look. Now her hands were freed, she aimed a claw at him, but he grabbed her wrist and held her fast. Snjalli shook his head. 'There will be a reckoning for this, Aludreng, mark my words.'

Starkad paid him no heed. Taking Alfhild by the arm, he marched her up the valley to his cavern under the waterfall. Inside, Starkad found the wet nurse feeding Grim. She looked up placidly, and eyed the captive princess.

'You found your wife, then,' was all she said.

'Take care of her,' Starkad commanded, and pushed the princess in the thrall's direction. Leaving them to become acquainted, he stepped back through the curtain of water and surveyed his lands to see how they had fared during his absence.

Later he returned to find the princess transformed. The wet nurse had washed and stitched her tattered clothes and Alfhild herself had been bathed, had her hair brushed, and once again

exuded that flower like scent. As Starkad entered the cavern, the elf maid was holding Grim, looking down into his entranced face and cooing.

‘You like children?’ said Starkad.

She looked up, her face serene. ‘Yes,’ she murmured. ‘Is he yours?’

Starkad shook his head. ‘His mother and father are dead. I am his foster father.’

She studied him enquiringly, still rocking the child. Starkad sent the wet nurse to the kitchen cave to prepare a homecoming meal.

‘Who are you, who kills elf warriors without a qualm, who has abducted me and treated me shamefully, dragging me from world to world—and yet who fosters orphans?’

Starkad laughed. ‘You’ll learn there is more to me than meets the eye,’ he said, ‘now you are my wife. I may look like a monster, but I am a man.’

When Alf, king of Alfheim, returned to his tree city of Gimle from making his offerings at the autumn sacrifice, he found all in disarray. There were signs of a massacre in the river meadows where his daughter liked to picnic with her maidens. Armed elves ran hither and thither, all seemingly on some urgent errand, but with no sign that anyone was in command. Other elves were running into houses, running out of houses, panicking, hiding. King Alf leapt down from his steed, flung the reins to a nearby guard, who dropped his spear and shield and stared at them in bewilderment.

The king leapt atop a tree stump and shouted, ‘Silence!’

Gradually, the confusion died away. The running elves stopped running. The guards, apart from the one holding the horse’s reins, formed up in orderly lines. Alf’s riders reined their horses behind him. The citizens of Gimle gathered, talking amongst themselves until another shout from their king quietened them.

‘What is happening here?’ the king cried. ‘My riders and I return from the autumn sacrifice to find all in chaos. Has an army attacked while we were offering to the gods?’

An elfin chamberlain hurried forward, his eyes wide. ‘No army, sire!’ he said. ‘It was but one man that attacked! And...’

The king interrupted before the chamberlain could finish. ‘One man? One man was capable of sacking my city in my absence?’

‘A giant he was!’ the chamberlain protested. ‘An eight armed giant! Your guards tried to fight him but...’

‘I have seen the bodies and the blood.’ The king interrupted again. ‘But where is this attacker’s body? Surely you won’t tell me he escaped after inflicting such losses on my city?’

The chamberlain looked ready to weep. 'Sire! He returned from whence he came, only moments ago. He went in that direction!' A trembling finger indicated the path down which the king and his riders had entered the valley. 'Surely you must have seen him! And sire...'

The king frowned. 'I saw no one.' He looked to his men for confirmation and they all shook their heads. 'He didn't go that way. What are these lies?'

'But sire...!' the chamberlain said. 'There is more!'

'What else? Tell me!' the king commanded.

'The giant who attacked the city...'

'Yes, go on!'

'He carried off the princess!'

The king stared at him in abject confusion.

'He abducted Alfhild, princess of Alfheim.'

In horror, the king looked back in the direction he had come from. They were close to the coast here, but they had never had to patrol the shore; few were rash enough to raid Alfheim. All knew that they had the favour of the gods. And yet this giant had invaded and carried off his daughter.

'He'll be too far away now,' said the king thoughtfully. 'Away across the seas of darkness.'

He turned back to the chamberlain. 'This city must be put into order at once!' he said. 'And call a council of the general assembly. This invasion must be discussed, as must be our response!'

He strode away to his hall.

The general assembly gathered on the plain outside the city. Present were representatives of all the trade guilds and the landholders and the warriors of Gimle and the surrounding countryside. The king faced them, and spoke sombrely.

'We have been attacked,' he said, 'by a foe from another world. It seems that one of the giants of Jotunheim or Trollheim has visited us. As I am sure you all know, this attack has hit me badly. He has carried off my daughter, who was accounted the most beautiful maiden in all the worlds. He also slew several of my guards and some minstrels.'

'We must ensure that in future my fellow musicians are protected from such attacks,' said the hirsute grandmaster of the minstrels' guild. Several of his fellow masters nodded in whisky agreement.

'The guards also require assurances that they will be given full warning of such attacks ahead of time,' said the guard captain, a burly, scarred elf. 'We in Gimle have not been attacked for generations.' And elven generations were centuries of human time.

‘You must be prepared for attack at any time!’ the king said. He shook his head. ‘It’s my fault. In the long years of peace and prosperity that Frey has bestowed upon us, I have allowed you to go soft.’ The guard captain looked angry.

A silk clad merchant piped up.

‘What I want to know,’ he said, ‘is what steps will be taken to ensure that this never happens again? We should muster a war band at once and invade Jotunheim.’

‘To avenge ourselves on a single rogue giant?’ the guard captain said. ‘Then we would have war with the giants. It would be a long, protracted conflict, in uncertain country. Besides, some of the giants are on the side of our allies the Aesir. We do not wish to alienate the Aesir, or the Vanir!’

‘We should send a force in pursuit of this giant,’ said a landowner. ‘Hunt him down and kill him for what he has done. I would have thought you would be most keen to do this, sire,’ he added, turning to the king, ‘since the giant has carried off your beloved daughter.’

The king sighed. ‘Trackers have found signs of where he went, and he must have passed by me by mere yards. They traced his flight through the forest to an inlet in the sea of darkness. A boat had been moored there, but it was long gone. So was the giant. So was my daughter. Where they went, who knows? Who can track a boat across the waters of the ocean?’

The guard captain shook his head. ‘We elves have no skill as sailors,’ he said. ‘In the forest our trackers are the finest, but at sea...’

‘No one but the most skilled of seers could track a fugitive across the seas of darkness,’ said the merchant firmly. ‘We need to make a show of strength. Enter the world of the giants with a war host and loot and burn. I will happily provide for the commissary needs of the army, at a discount, sire, and in return for a fifth share of any plunder...’

‘We do not wish to make war with the giants,’ the king stated. ‘It is a war we could not win, and besides, we do not even know if the giant in question came from Jotunheim. Giants dwell in other worlds, including Midgard.’

‘In Midgard?’ said the captain, shocked. ‘Surely Thor would not permit such a thing!’ Thor was guardian of Midgard, just as Frey ruled over Alfheim.

‘Thor...’ said the king. ‘Thor was much enamoured with my daughter, and wanted her as another wife...’

‘Thor could track down this giant,’ said the minstrel, ‘and would avenge our indignity willingly. He slays giants for sport, and if we were to tell him that this one had ravished a girl he was fond of...’

‘The thunder god would move heaven and earth to find the giant and rescue my daughter,’ said the king. He looked pensive. ‘This means I will have to accept him as my son in law. I would do so gladly, although my daughter is not so eager to join his harem...’

‘Once she has been rescued from her abductor by Thor, she will see reason,’ the landowner assured him.

‘Then we must speak with him,’ said the king. ‘We will offer up a sacrifice to him. I shall pray to Thor at the height of the ritual, and bid him go out into the worlds to hunt down this malformed giant.’

‘Do you think that even Thor could defeat him?’ the captain asked. ‘He is mighty, and has eight arms, so he wields four swords at once. That was why my men fell before him. Fighting him is like fighting four normal giants.’

The king brooded. ‘If anyone can defeat him, it would be Thor.’

‘Sire,’ said the merchant, ‘what if the giant...’ He halted.

‘What is it?’ the king said impatiently. ‘Go on!’

The merchant looked at the others. ‘I was going to say, what if he has taken your daughter’s maidenhood? Will Thor be so eager to rescue his intended if he knows she is no longer a virgin?’

The king tugged at his moustache. ‘We shall not mention it to him,’ he said at last. ‘Not until it is necessary.’

He was filled with horror and disgust at the notion of his daughter naked in the arms of an eight armed murderous monster. And what would the children be like? Thank the gods his wife had died before this outraged occurred.

The full moon rose over the grove in the woods where stood the rune carved stone circle where from time immemorial the elves of Alfheim had sacrificed to their gods, the Aesir and Vanir. Hundreds of elves stood on the edges of the grove, holding torches as the oxen were led down the ceremonial way to the killing ground before the altar. The king stood beside the stone, holding the sacrificial poleaxe in his hand. Great cauldrons had been hung over blazing fires in which the meat of the oxen would be seethed before the elves feasted upon it in the name of their defender, Thor.

‘Hail to the gods!’ the king called up to the starry heavens. ‘Hail to the goddesses! Hail to the holy powers!’

Two elves led the first ox to the king’s side and he struck it with the poleaxe. It sank to its knees and the king slit its throat. The blood spurted out, spraying the altar, drenching it, and a coppery tang hung in the air. As soon as the ox had stopped moving, other elves hauled it over to the first of the cauldrons where they butchered it and thrust the meat into the bubbling liquid.

Ox after ox was led forward, each garlanded with flowers. The king grew tired swinging his poleaxe, but even as his sinews ached, he thought of his daughter, a prisoner of that wicked giant, living in a cold, draughty cave in the world of men, and it fired his resolve. Blood pooled around his feet and still he slew oxen and still the elfin butchers filled the seething cauldrons with meat.



Now the king took a horn of mead and lifted it high, pointing it to the four quarters. 'I offer this mead in the name of Thor, defender of worlds, son of Odin, wielder of the hammer, crusher of the giants.' He poured the mead onto the ground. 'Come to us, I bid thee, and bring us your aid!' Thunder rumbled from a cloudless night sky and lightning split the darkness.

A chariot rumbled into the grove, driven by two huge goats. A gasp came from the assembled elves. The king quailed at the burly, bearded man who stood in the back of the vehicle. Over his shoulder he carried a large, short handled hammer. His eyes blazed fiercely, and his beard and long, plaited hair was red. His face was also ruddy. His body was massive, muscular, mighty.

He glared about him. 'I am Thor,' he bellowed. 'You called my name? Who are you?'

The king stepped forward. 'I, I am king of the elves,' he said. 'My daughter is Princess Alfild.'

Thor stared at him, then laughed a booming laugh. He leapt down off his chariot and clapped the king over the shoulders. 'Hah ha!' he shouted. 'I know the girl! Leastways, I've seen her around. Bit of a looker, hey? I wouldn't mind her for my wife. Sif's annoyed. So's Jarnsaxa. But you can't be son of Odin without putting a few noses out of joint. Haughty little misses, them.'

He drew the king closer. 'She's not a nagger, is she?' he asked in a quieter voice. 'Don't like naggers. Got two already! Sometimes I think I'd rather wed my goats. Hah ha! Get it? Eh? Eh? Get it?' He slapped the king on the back.

When he had got his breath back, the king said, 'Certainly. I understand you. My, my wife was the same. No longer with us, of course.'

'Lucky you!' Thor boomed, and nudged him in the ribs. He halted, and peered round at the silent ranks of elves. 'What the Hel do they want?' he asked. While waiting for the king to reply, he thrust a ham-like fist into a bubbling cauldron and hauled out a hunk of ox meat. 'Well?' he added indistinctly, munching eagerly.

'They are my people, O Thor,' said the king. 'We gathered here to call upon you. To beseech for your aid.'

'Well!' said Thor. 'All you need do is ask. Though I thought Frey was your god.'

'Frey is indeed our god,' said the king, 'but as you know he is a god of peace. We need a god who knows how to fight.'

Thor stuck his thumbs into his belt and puffed out his chest. He tapped himself on the breastbone and grinned. 'You chose well, elf king,' he boomed. 'But what can I do for you?' His eyes narrowed. 'This isn't one of Loki's tricks, is it? I'm not going to be made to look a fool, am I?' He peered about him, genuinely concerned, then said, 'No, of course, my father fettered that little pest in a hell pit. So it's not Loki. What is it? Trolls that need hunting, first giants' skulls to crush? Hey, where is your little girl?'

‘It is to do with a giant, yes,’ said the king. ‘An eight armed giant. And with my little girl. She’s been abducted.’

‘No!’ said Thor in wonder. ‘Who is it who’s had the gall to run off with Thor’s intended? I’ll break his bastard bones for him! I’ll rip off those arms of his!’ He pounded one mighty fist into another. ‘I’ll go straight to the world of giants and find him and then I’ll kill him!’

The king smiled slyly. ‘I was rather hoping you’d say that.’

Starkad sat peacefully in the sun beside the waterfall, watching Alfild in the meadow, playing with young Grim as best she could, waddling as she was from her pregnant belly. It was almost a year since he had carried her off from her own world. She had softened towards him, though he didn’t think she loved him. She had accepted the situation. And there had been no repercussions, no attempts by her elfin kin to seek vengeance. Not that he had thought there would be.

At first Grim had occupied her time, and she had shared the wet nurse’s duties in caring for him. Ogn’s son was constantly getting himself into trouble. He was aggressive for his age, something that Alfild forgave, although she ascribed it to his trollish blood and his early upbringing.

Rising to his feet, Starkad lumbered over to join them.

The moment his dark, malformed shadow fell over them, Grim toddled to his feet and waved a fist at his foster father. Alfild gave him a disapproving frown. ‘You scare him,’ she said accusingly.

Starkad was troubled. ‘I did naught,’ he protested. ‘I only came over to join you.’

Alfild shook her head. ‘A troll like you knows naught of fatherhood,’ she muttered, and looked away.

Her eyes brightened. ‘Look! Here comes the wet nurse.’

Starkad saw the Lapp girl trudging up the hill path. She had been sent to the village earlier to get eggs and meal, and she carried a basket under one arm. Seeing her master and mistress watching her, she hurried up. Soon she was with them. Alfild took the supplies from the wet nurse, who welcomed the embrace of Grim. Starkad watched the happy domestic scene darkly. It seemed he could never connect with his family and dependents.

‘I talk to Snjalli’s wife,’ the wet nurse said. ‘She say wandering witch come to village. Conjured spirits, told people’s fortunes. Said Snjalli’s son would be happy and prosperous and die an old man in his bed.’

Alfild beamed broadly. Her people were fascinated by magic and witchcraft.

She turned to her husband. 'We should ask her to stay the night with us,' she said. 'She is still in the neighbourhood?' she asked the wet nurse, who nodded. 'There, husband! We should invite her here before she goes on her way!'

Starkad scowled. He didn't approve of troubling spirits or raising ghosts.

'No man can know his fate,' he muttered. 'And to die a straw death in old age will mean an afterlife in Hel's cold kingdom.'

'But wouldn't you want to know?' Alfild asked. 'Don't you want to know what will be Grim's fate?' She rested her hand on her pregnant belly. 'Or Sturvirk—or Baugheid?' She had settled on both a name for a girl and a name for a boy.

Starkad could not believe he would father anyone other than a boy. 'What if his fate was a terrible one?' he asked. 'What if he learnt that he was fated to die of sickness or disease?'

Alfild pouted, and frowned. 'Naught like that will happen to my baby,' she said. 'Please, husband.' She reached out and stroked one of his arms. 'Please!'

Starkad shook his head obstinately.

But that night, much to Starkad's displeasure, Alfild invited the witch to his subterranean hall behind the waterfall. He sat in his elaborately carved chair, a dark expression on his face, his many hands gripping its arms as the firelight red lit an eerie scene.

The witch, whose name was Huld, was a plump, middle aged woman who spoke in a scatter-brained fashion, her lips forever in a fatuous smile. Starkad's own lips were thin as he looked on the proceedings in distaste.

Alfild sat on a rug, Grim in her lap, resting his little head on her belly. The wet nurse watched keenly. The witch chanted strange, uncanny words. Starkad thought that such sights were not suitable for children.

Now the witch sat back, her head against the back of the platform she had erected. She ceased her chant gradually, her words drifting away from her lips. Now her eyes rolled upwards in their sockets, as if she was trying to see the inside of her own skull. For a moment she sat there in silence.

'Too much mead,' Starkad scoffed. 'She's fallen asleep.' Assuming she hadn't died, he told himself. But that was too much to hope for.

His wife gave him a disapproving look. She put her fingers to her lips.

'Don't distract her!' she hissed. 'You'll break her trance.'

'Trance!' Starkad said. 'She's dead drunk, that's all. You were too generous with that mead.'

Before Huld had begun her chanting, or taken over Starkad's dais, she had demanded a meal, including a porridge made of the hearts of all animals available. Alfild had managed to find a pig's heart and a lamb's heart, although the witch had seemed to think this inadequate. However, she had tucked in with a will, and washed it down with half a jug full of mead.

It looked like an easy enough life to Starkad. To wander the land swindling housewives with tales of fortune telling and conjuring, getting a free meal in every household. His fingers itched to give the fraud of a witch a good thrashing, the whipping such impudent beggars deserved, and put her out of the cave with speed. He gave his wife a glare, but she wasn't looking at him anymore.

Huld's mouth gaped open and she yawned cavernously. Starkad snorted. 'What did I say? She's gone to sleep!'

Alfild's brow furrowed. 'Be silent!' she said. 'She's not asleep. She has sent her soul out into the otherworld. Do you know naught of witchcraft?'

Starkad was certain the woman had simply gone to sleep. He resented her wife's superior airs. This nonsense was just that. The witch had got herself drunk at his own expense and now she had fallen asleep!

Then her eyes rolled back down and she stared forwards, apparently unseeingly. Her voice opened again.

'She sees a boy, a boy who is an orphan, mother and father dead by violence.'

Alfild clutched at Grim's shoulders and the little boy gurgled happily. 'She means you,' she hissed.

'Anyone could have told her Grim's an orphan,' Starkad said. 'Besides, what does she mean, "She sees"?''

Alfild gave him another glare. 'Everyone knows that spaewives speak of themselves like that. Sssh! She has more to say.'

'She sees a boy,' the witch repeated, 'a boy grown to manhood, though still young. He sails into the storm. Riches and renown are his; he weds his foster sister.'

'She sees, further down the stream of time, a dwarf forged, cursed sword...' The witch broke off and stared unseeingly into the distance.

Alfild looked unbelievably at Grim. 'Does she mean that our foster son will marry our daughter?' she asked.

'Daughter!' Starkad sneered. 'She's making it up! We'll have a son.'

And now the witch had gone silent again. Dreaming up more lies, no doubt, Starkad thought.

Alfhild shook her head. 'It is possible,' she said. 'Maybe I bear a daughter. They may well become close.' She looked excited. 'But did you hear? Riches and renown!' Then she looked troubled. 'Although I don't like the idea of him sailing the sea. That sounds dangerous.'

Starkad barked with laughter. 'How else is the lad to get riches and renown if he doesn't seize it with all his hands? That's how I got mine.'

Alfhild sniffed and looked round the cave. 'I'd like to think he could become wealthy as a landowner or merchant,' she said. 'What's wrong with that?' she added as Starkad snorted. 'Plenty of men have become wealthy through trade.'

'And what name have they won for themselves?' Starkad asked. 'The name of coward. Is that what you want for Grim?'

Alfhild looked pensive. 'I don't want him taking after his father, or his foster father either,' she said.

Starkad grunted. 'Has this hag any more to add?' he demanded. 'Or has she gone to sleep again?'

'I thought you weren't interested in what she had to say,' Alfhild said snidely.

Starkad sat back. 'I'm not,' he said. But he had become interested despite himself. He wanted to hear more.

Huld's mouth gaped again. Again she yawned. The cave was so quiet that the hiss of her escaping breath was audible despite the crackle of the fire and the distant roar of the waterfall.

'She sees...' came the susurrus of breath, 'she sees a boy...'

'Not again,' said Starkad.

'Sssh!' said Alfhild.

'She sees a boy... whose mother hates her father,' Huld said at last.

Starkad stared at Alfhild. The elf refused to look at him, but clasped her hands as if protectively over her big belly.

'She sees his blood runs pure,' Huld went on; 'she sees him conceived in anger. She sees him follow in his father's footsteps...'

Starkad sat up. Was this his son? 'She sees a hall in flames, screaming women...' Alfhild nodded bitterly. '...a woman slain by vengeful brothers...' Starkad shook his head. This made no sense. 'She sees the seed of evil sown, not burnt by fire. It grows. It blossoms.' She paused, then added, 'It is here.'

'What?' Starkad said, looking around in puzzlement. 'It's here? Where?'

‘...it will be reborn...’ Huld’s eyes rolled back in their sockets.

Starkad stared at Alfild. ‘What does she mean?’

‘Evil is here,’ said Alfild.

‘Where?’ Starkad said. ‘Where is this evil? I see naught.’

‘I thought you didn’t believe,’ Alfild replied sulkily.

Starkad laughed. ‘Of course I don’t,’ he said. ‘I just want to know what she means when she says that evil is here.’

‘Isn’t it obvious?’ Alfild cried. ‘You’re evil. Anyone can see that.’

Starkad stared at her, wounded. After a long silence, during which the fire crackled and the falls thundered in the distance, and the witch’s breathing wheezed on, and Grim nodded in Alfild’s arms, he said, ‘Does my unborn son’s mother really hate his father?’

Alfild looked away. ‘I don’t know,’ she said. ‘I... sometimes I do. Why shouldn’t I? I, I thought you didn’t believe in this.’

‘Maybe not,’ he said, ‘but I want to hear more from her. We’ve heard about the children, although it made little sense. But what of us? What of you? What... what of me?’

‘Why don’t you ask her?’ said Alfild viciously. ‘Oh, but you don’t believe in witchcraft, do you? Shall I ask for you? Are you too afraid? Are you frightened of what you will learn of your own future? Would you prefer it that you never knew?’

‘I don’t want to know my fate,’ Starkad said contemptuously. But he did. He wanted to know what would happen to him. ‘What of your own fate? What will happen to my wife?’ he asked the witch.

‘She sees an elfin girl, freed from drudgery,’ Huld wheezed. ‘She sees happiness when there was sorrow. She sees love where once was hate...’

Leaping from his seat Starkad struck the witch across the face. Alfild cried out in protest. Huld’s eyes snapped back in her head and she looked venomously at him. Grim woke, crying.

Huld dabbed at her bruised cheek. She looked up. ‘No, dear,’ she said. ‘Don’t castigate your man. He will pay for his crimes. She sees...!’

Above the distant crash of the falls, came a boom of thunder.

Thor rode his chariot across the moonlit sky. Down below, he saw where the craggy land met the crashing waves of the sea. Great fjords had nibbled the shores in many places. Here the Bones of Ymir lay close to the surface, the great stone skeleton of the cosmic giant who

Thor's father Odin had slain in the morning of the world. Thor himself had not been born in those days. And yet it was Jord, the goddess of the earth, who had been his mother.

He had been searching Midgard for some while now, having abandoned his quest in the world of the giants as fruitless. No word of Starkad or his people had he got from friendly giants, except that he had defeated Gudmund's people and demanded his daughter as his wife as part of the peace settlement. Gudmund disowned the girl, and he had heard no more of her. A shame.

From what Thor had heard of Ogn, she would make an impressive addition to his collection of wives. Still, Princess Alfild, Starkad's latest prey, was of more importance—and greater beauty, from what Thor had heard of Ogn's beauty. Alfild's was undeniable. That was why he had chosen her for his new wife. He wondered what he would do if the girl had fallen for Starkad. But that was impossible, not when she knew Thor loved her.

'There!' he bellowed to the goats that drew his chariot, seeing a valley far below. 'That is where they said he has his cave! Go down!'

The chariot began to descend. Thor shook his hammer and thunder boomed from the livid clouds, while blue white lightning crackled down at the ground far below.

Filthy cave dwelling troll. To infest a mountain on Midgard, the world Thor had sworn to protect, and to pose as some kind of god to the people who dwelt nearby! The world was a big place, and even gods could not keep their eyes on all that happened—except Odin. Despite his missing eye, Odin could see everywhere, or at least his ravens could. But he kept his own counsel. He had never warned his son that this deformed giant had taken up residence in a Midgard cave.

The mountain peaks drew ever nearer, very sharp, like needles below. The valley opened up between them. It was night. Thor could see very little. But there was a river, its foaming stream visible in the moonlight. Along its side as it wound towards the sea was a small village. And further up the mountainside was a waterfall.

At last they touched down in the meadow beside the roaring falls. Thor jumped down from his chariot, gripping his hammer in his gauntleted hands. He took a pace closer to the waterfall, standing on the edge of the sloping meadow.

'Come out!' he boomed. 'Come out now, trollspawn! Ravisher of women! Come out and meet your match!'

For a moment there was silence, broken only by the roar of the falls.

'Come out!' Thor shouted. 'Or shall I come in and get you?'

Then he saw a grey figure looming amid the water. At last it came out, wading through the stream and onto dry land. Thor's lip curled at the huge, malformed shape.

'Who challenges Starkad?' the giant demanded. In four of his eight hands he held unsheathed swords. Thor laughed.

‘Who challenges you? Weep on your knees, trollspawn!’ he boomed. ‘For I am Thor! I am the vanquisher of many of your kin!’

‘Your father slew Ymir,’ Starkad noted, stomping towards him, swords glinting in the moonlight. ‘You are known for hunting giants for sport. It will be a pleasure to slay you, Thor.’

Thor laughed again, and whirled his hammer. Starkad raced across the intervening turf, swords swinging from every direction. Thor reached out with his left gauntleted fist, seized one blade and shattered it with a squeeze. At the same time, he brought his hammer in low, smashing Starkad’s thighbone.

Starkad gasped with pain, and went down on one knee. He dropped the sword that Thor had broken, upturned another to lean on it, then stabbed up at the looming thunder god with a third, trying to get his belly. In an electric crackle, Thor swung his hammer round and parried the blow. As hammer met sword, sparks cascaded across the turf, a fiery likeness of the waterfall behind them. But this was what Starkad had been expecting. He lunged with the last remaining sword, straight at Thor’s heart.

With a roar, Thor leapt back, but still Starkad’s sword pierced his fur jacket, wounding him shallowly in the breastbone. Thor gripped his belt of might. His eyes flashed like the lightning, his beard bristled, and he advanced, swinging his hammer. Starkad tried to rise, but his broken leg gave under him, and Thor’s hammer smashed his skull.

With a thud, his great carcase fell to the turf.

Hammer over his shoulder, one gauntleted hand in his belt, Thor studied the slaughtered giant with a grin of satisfaction. He stirred the corpse with his booted foot. When there was no response, he hung his hammer from his belt, seized one of Starkad’s arms and tore it from its socket.

As he fulfilled his vow a small group appeared from the waterfall. One of them was a lithe elfin form he knew. Flinging the last of Starkad’s arms down on the gory turf beside his chariot, he went to meet her.

His ruddy face fell as he saw the princess’ companions. One was some kind of thrall woman, which was fine. But the thrall and the princess brought with them a toddler, who clung to the thrall’s skirts. The lad was too old to be progeny of Alfild and the late Starkad. But Thor also saw a prominent bulge in the princess’ belly.

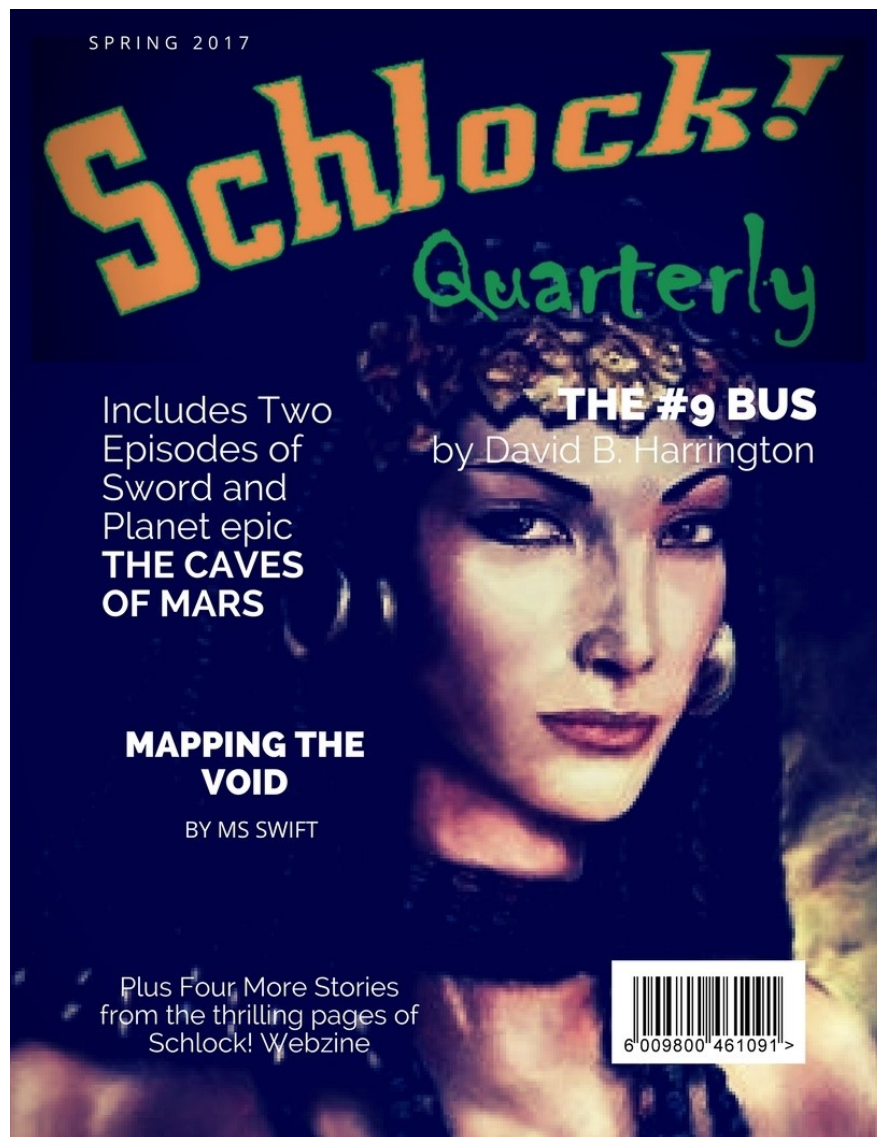
‘Yes. I bear Starkad’s child, Thor,’ Princess Alfild affirmed. ‘And you are the killer of its father.’

Thor rested his hammer on his shoulder and raked Alfild with his fiery glance. ‘You’re damaged goods, lass,’ he told her levelly. ‘I’m the eldest son of Odin. I wouldn’t keep you as a mistress, let alone wed you.’

He turned, mounted his chariot, and with a rumble of thunder and a flash of lightning took off into the storm-wracked night sky.



THE END



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## THE SMALL PEOPLE by Arthur Quiller-Couch

You thought it natural, my dear lady, to lay this command on me at the dance last night. We had parted, two months ago, in London, and we met, unexpectedly and to music, in this corner of the land where (they say) the piskies still keep. And certainly, when I led you out upon the balcony (that you might not see the new moon through glass and lose a lucky month), it was not hard to picture the Small People at their play on the turf and among the dim flower-beds below us. But, as a matter of fact, they are dead, these Small People. They were the long-lived but not immortal spirits of the folk who inhabited Cornwall many thousands of years back—far beyond Christ's birth. They were "poor innocents," not good enough for heaven yet too good for the eternal fires; and when they first came, were of ordinary stature. But after Christ's birth they began to grow smaller and smaller, and at length turned into emmets and vanished from the earth.

The last I heard of them was a sad and serious little history, very different from the old legends. Part of it I was told by a hospital surgeon, of all people in the world. Part I learnt by looking at your beautiful gown last night, as you leant on the balcony-rail. You remember how heavy the dew was, and that I fetched a shawl for your shoulders. You did not wrap it so tightly round but that four marguerites in gold embroidery showed on the front of your bodice; and these come into the tale, the remainder of which I was taught this morning before breakfast, down among the cairns by the sea where the Small People's Gardens still remain—sheltered spots of green, with here and there some ferns and cliff-pinks left. For me they are libraries where sometimes I read for a whole summer's day; and with the help of the hospital surgeon, I bring you from them a story about your ball-gown which is perfectly true.

Twenty years ago—before the fairies had dwindled into ants, and when wayfarers were still used to turn their coats inside out, after nightfall, for fear of being "pisky-led"—there lived, down at the village, a girl who knew all the secrets of the Small People's Gardens. Where you and I discover sea-pinks only, and hear only the wash of the waves, she would go on midsummer nights and find flowers of every colour spread, and hundreds of little lights moving among them, and fountains and waterfalls and swarms of small ladies and gentlemen, dressed in green and gold, walking and sporting among them, or reposing on the turf and telling stories to the most ravishing soft music. This was as much as she would relate; but it is certain that the piskies were friends of hers. For, in spite of her nightly wanderings, her housework was always well and cleanly done before other girls were dressed—the morning milk fresh in the dairy, the step sanded, the fire lit and the scalding-pans warming over it. And as for her needlework, it was a wonder.

Some said she was a changeling; others that she had found the four-leaved clover or the fairy ointment, and rubbed her eyes with it. But it was her own secret; for whenever the people tried to follow her to the "Gardens," whir! whir! whir! buzzed in their ears, as if a night of bees were passing, and every limb would feel as if stuck full of pins and pinched with tweezers, and they were rolled over and over, their tongues tied as if with cords, and at last, as soon as they could manage, they would pick themselves up, and hobble home for their lives.

Well, the history—which, I must remind you, is a true one—goes on to say that in time the girl grew ambitious, or fell in love (I cannot remember which), and went to London. In any case it must have been a strong call that took her: for there are no fairies in London. I regret that my researches do not allow me to tell you how the Small People at home took her departure; but we will suppose that it grieved them deeply. Nor can I say precisely how the girl fared for many years. I think her fortune contained both joy and sorrow for a while; and I suspect that many passages of her life would be sadly out of place in this story, even if they could be hunted out. Indeed, fairy-tales have to omit so much nowadays, and therefore seem so antiquated, that one marvels how they could ever have been in fashion.

But you may take it as sure that in the end this girl met with more sorrow than joy; for when next she comes into sight it is in London streets and she is in rags. Moreover, though she wears a flush on her cheeks, above the wrinkles, it does not come of health or high spirits, but perhaps from the fact that in the twenty years' interval she has seen millions of men and women, but not one single fairy.

In those latter days I met her many times. She passed under your windows shortly before dawn on the night that you gave your dance, early in the season. You saw her, I think?—a woman who staggered a little, and had some words with the policeman at the corner: but, after all, a staggering woman in London is no such memorable sight. All day long she was seeking work, work, work; and after dark she sought forgetfulness. She found the one, in small quantities, and out of it she managed to buy the other, now and then, over the counter. But she had long given up looking for the fairies. The lights along the Embankment had ceased to remind her of those in the Small People's Gardens; nor did the noise bursting from music-hall doors as she passed, recall the old sounds; and as for the scents, there were plenty in London, but none resembling that of the garden which you might smell a mile out at sea.

I told you that her needlework had been a marvel when she lived down at the village. Curiously enough, this was the one gift of the fairies that stayed by her, and it remained as wonderful as ever. Her most frequent employer was a flat-footed Jew with a large, fleshy face; and because she had a name for honesty, she was not seldom entrusted with costly pieces of stuff, and allowed to carry them home to turn into ball-dresses under the roof through the gaps of which, as she stitched, she could see the night pass from purple to black, and from black to the lilac of daybreak. There, with a hundred pounds' worth of silk and lace on her knee, she would sit and work a dozen hours to earn as many pence. With fingers weary and——But you know Hood's song, and no doubt have taken it to heart a dozen times.

It came to this, however, that one evening, when she had not eaten for forty hours, her employer gave her a piece of embroidery to work against time. The fact is, my dear lady, that you are very particular about having your commissions executed to the hour, and your dressmakers are anxious to oblige, knowing that you never squabble over the price. To be sure, you have never heard of the flat-footed Jew man—how should you? And we may believe that your dressmakers knew just as little of the poor woman who had used to be the friend of the Small People. But the truth remains that, in the press of your many pleasures, you were pardonably twenty-four hours late in ordering the gown in which you were to appear an angel.

Ah, madam! will it comfort you to hear that you were the one to reconcile the Small People with that poor sister of yours who had left them, twenty years before, and wanted them so sorely? The hospital doctor gave her complaint a long name, and I gather that it has a place by itself in books of pathology. But the woman's tale was that, after she had been stitching through the long night, the dawn came through the roof and found her with four marguerites still left to be embroidered in gold on the pieces of satin that lay in her lap. She threaded her needle afresh, rubbed her weary eyes, and began—when, lo! a miracle.

Instead of one hand, there were four at work—four hands, four needles, four lines of thread. The four marguerites were all being embroidered at the same time! The piskies had forgiven, had remembered her at last, after these many years, and were coming to her help, as of old. Ah, madam, the tears of thankfulness that ran from her hot eyes and fell upon those golden marguerites of yours!

Of course her eyes were disordered. There was only one flower, really. There was only one embroidered in the morning, when they found her sobbing, with your bodice still in her lap, and took her to the hospital; and that is why the dressmakers failed to keep faith with you for once, and made you so angry.

Dear lady, the piskies are not easily summoned, in these days.

THE END.

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## THE PIPER AT THE GATES OF DAWN by Kenneth Grahame

The Willow-Wren was piping his thin little song, hidden himself in the dark selvedge of the river bank. Though it was past ten o'clock at night, the sky still clung to and retained some lingering skirts of light from the departed day; and the sullen heats of the torrid afternoon broke up and rolled away at the dispersing touch of the cool fingers of the short midsummer night. Mole lay stretched on the bank, still panting from the stress of the fierce day that had been cloudless from dawn to late sunset, and waited for his friend to return. He had been on the river with some companions, leaving the Water Rat free to keep an engagement of long standing with Otter; and he had come back to find the house dark and deserted, and no sign of Rat, who was doubtless keeping it up late with his old comrade. It was still too hot to think of staying indoors, so he lay on some cool dock-leaves, and thought over the past day and its doings, and how very good they all had been.

The Rat's light footfall was presently heard approaching over the parched grass. 'O, the blessed coolness!' he said, and sat down, gazing thoughtfully into the river, silent and pre-occupied.

'You stayed to supper, of course?' said the Mole presently.

'Simply had to,' said the Rat. 'They wouldn't hear of my going before. You know how kind they always are. And they made things as jolly for me as ever they could, right up to the moment I left. But I felt a brute all the time, as it was clear to me they were very unhappy, though they tried to hide it. Mole, I'm afraid they're in trouble. Little Portly is missing again; and you know what a lot his father thinks of him, though he never says much about it.'

'What, that child?' said the Mole lightly. 'Well, suppose he is; why worry about it? He's always straying off and getting lost, and turning up again; he's so adventurous. But no harm ever happens to him. Everybody hereabouts knows him and likes him, just as they do old Otter, and you may be sure some animal or other will come across him and bring him back again all right. Why, we've found him ourselves, miles from home, and quite self-possessed and cheerful!'

'Yes; but this time it's more serious,' said the Rat gravely. 'He's been missing for some days now, and the Otters have hunted everywhere, high and low, without finding the slightest trace. And they've asked every animal, too, for miles around, and no one knows anything about him. Otter's evidently more anxious than he'll admit. I got out of him that young Portly hasn't learnt to swim very well yet, and I can see he's thinking of the weir. There's a lot of water coming down still, considering the time of the year, and the place always had a fascination for the child. And then there are—well, traps and things—you know. Otter's not the fellow to be nervous about any son of his before it's time. And now he is nervous. When I left, he came out with me—said he wanted some air, and talked about stretching his legs. But I could see it wasn't that, so I drew him out and pumped him, and got it all from him at last. He was going to spend the night watching by the ford. You know the place where the old ford used to be, in by-gone days before they built the bridge?'

'I know it well,' said the Mole. 'But why should Otter choose to watch there?'

'Well, it seems that it was there he gave Portly his first swimming-lesson,' continued the Rat. 'From that shallow, gravelly spit near the bank. And it was there he used to teach him fishing,

and there young Portly caught his first fish, of which he was so very proud. The child loved the spot, and Otter thinks that if he came wandering back from wherever he is—if he is anywhere by this time, poor little chap—he might make for the ford he was so fond of; or if he came across it he'd remember it well, and stop there and play, perhaps. So Otter goes there every night and watches—on the chance, you know, just on the chance!

They were silent for a time, both thinking of the same thing—the lonely, heart-sore animal, crouched by the ford, watching and waiting, the long night through—on the chance.

‘Well, well,’ said the Rat presently, ‘I suppose we ought to be thinking about turning in. But he never offered to move.

‘Rat,’ said the Mole, ‘I simply can’t go and turn in, and go to sleep, and do nothing, even though there doesn’t seem to be anything to be done. We’ll get the boat out, and paddle up stream. The moon will be up in an hour or so, and then we will search as well as we can—anyhow, it will be better than going to bed and doing nothing.’

‘Just what I was thinking myself,’ said the Rat. ‘It’s not the sort of night for bed anyhow; and daybreak is not so very far off, and then we may pick up some news of him from early risers as we go along.’

They got the boat out, and the Rat took the sculls, paddling with caution. Out in mid-stream, there was a clear, narrow track that faintly reflected the sky; but wherever shadows fell on the water from bank, bush, or tree, they were as solid to all appearance as the banks themselves, and the Mole had to steer with judgment accordingly. Dark and deserted as it was, the night was full of small noises, song and chatter and rustling, telling of the busy little population who were up and about, plying their trades and vocations through the night till sunshine should fall on them at last and send them off to their well-earned repose. The water’s own noises, too, were more apparent than by day, its gurglings and ‘cloops’ more unexpected and near at hand; and constantly they started at what seemed a sudden clear call from an actual articulate voice.

The line of the horizon was clear and hard against the sky, and in one particular quarter it showed black against a silvery climbing phosphorescence that grew and grew. At last, over the rim of the waiting earth the moon lifted with slow majesty till it swung clear of the horizon and rode off, free of moorings; and once more they began to see surfaces—meadows wide-spread, and quiet gardens, and the river itself from bank to bank, all softly disclosed, all washed clean of mystery and terror, all radiant again as by day, but with a difference that was tremendous. Their old haunts greeted them again in other raiment, as if they had slipped away and put on this pure new apparel and come quietly back, smiling as they shyly waited to see if they would be recognised again under it.

Fastening their boat to a willow, the friends landed in this silent, silver kingdom, and patiently explored the hedges, the hollow trees the runnels and their little culverts, the ditches and dry water-ways. Embarking again and crossing over, they worked their way up the stream in this manner, while the moon, serene and detached in a cloudless sky, did what she could, though so far off, to help them in their quest; till her hour came and she sank earthwards reluctantly, and left them, and mystery once more held field and river.

Then a change began slowly to declare itself. The horizon became clearer, field and tree came more into sight, and somehow with a different look; the mystery began to drop away from them. A bird piped suddenly, and was still; and a light breeze sprang up and set the reeds and bulrushes rustling. Rat, who was in the stern of the boat, while Mole sculled, sat up suddenly and listened with a passionate intentness. Mole, who with gentle strokes was just keeping the boat moving while he scanned the banks with care, looked at him with curiosity.

‘It’s gone!’ sighed the Rat, sinking back in his seat again. ‘So beautiful and strange and new! Since it was to end so soon, I almost wish I had never heard it. For it has roused a longing in me that is pain, and nothing seems worth while but just to hear that sound once more and go on listening to it for ever. No! There it is again!’ he cried, alert once more. Entranced, he was silent for a long space, spell-bound.

‘Now it passes on and I begin to lose it,’ he said presently. ‘O Mole! the beauty of it! The merry bubble and joy, the thin, clear, happy call of the distant piping! Such music I never dreamed of, and the call in it is stronger even than the music is sweet! Row on, Mole, row! For the music and the call must be for us.’

The Mole, greatly wondering, obeyed. ‘I hear nothing myself,’ he said, ‘but the wind playing in the reeds and rushes and osiers.’

The Rat never answered, if indeed he heard. Rapt, transported, trembling, he was possessed in all his senses by this new divine thing that caught up his helpless soul and swung and dandled it, a powerless but happy infant in a strong sustaining grasp.

In silence Mole rowed steadily, and soon they came to a point where the river divided, a long backwater branching off to one side. With a slight movement of his head Rat, who had long dropped the rudder-lines, directed the rower to take the backwater. The creeping tide of light gained and gained, and now they could see the colour of the flowers that gemmed the water’s edge.

‘Clearer and nearer still,’ cried the Rat joyously. ‘Now you must surely hear it! Ah—at last—I see you do!’

Breathless and transfixed the Mole stopped rowing as the liquid run of that glad piping broke on him like a wave, caught him up, and possessed him utterly. He saw the tears on his comrade’s cheeks, and bowed his head and understood. For a space they hung there, brushed by the purple loose-strife that fringed the bank; then the clear imperious summons that marched hand-in-hand with the intoxicating melody imposed its will on Mole, and mechanically he bent to his oars again. And the light grew steadily stronger, but no birds sang as they were wont to do at the approach of dawn; and but for the heavenly music all was marvellously still.

On either side of them, as they glided onwards, the rich meadow-grass seemed that morning of a freshness and a greenness unsurpassable. Never had they noticed the roses so vivid, the willow-herb so riotous, the meadow-sweet so odorous and pervading. Then the murmur of the approaching weir began to hold the air, and they felt a consciousness that they were nearing the end, whatever it might be, that surely awaited their expedition.



A wide half-circle of foam and glinting lights and shining shoulders of green water, the great weir closed the backwater from bank to bank, troubled all the quiet surface with twirling eddies and floating foam-streaks, and deadened all other sounds with its solemn and soothing rumble. In midmost of the stream, embraced in the weir's shimmering arm-spread, a small island lay anchored, fringed close with willow and silver birch and alder. Reserved, shy, but full of significance, it hid whatever it might hold behind a veil, keeping it till the hour should come, and, with the hour, those who were called and chosen.

Slowly, but with no doubt or hesitation whatever, and in something of a solemn expectancy, the two animals passed through the broken, tumultuous water and moored their boat at the flowery margin of the island. In silence they landed, and pushed through the blossom and scented herbage and undergrowth that led up to the level ground, till they stood on a little lawn of a marvellous green, set round with Nature's own orchard-trees—crab-apple, wild cherry, and sloe.

'This is the place of my song-dream, the place the music played to me,' whispered the Rat, as if in a trance. 'Here, in this holy place, here if anywhere, surely we shall find Him!'

Then suddenly the Mole felt a great Awe fall upon him, an awe that turned his muscles to water, bowed his head, and rooted his feet to the ground. It was no panic terror—indeed he felt wonderfully at peace and happy—but it was an awe that smote and held him and, without seeing, he knew it could only mean that some august Presence was very, very near. With difficulty he turned to look for his friend, and saw him at his side cowed, stricken, and trembling violently. And still there was utter silence in the populous bird-haunted branches around them; and still the light grew and grew.

Perhaps he would never have dared to raise his eyes, but that, though the piping was now hushed, the call and the summons seemed still dominant and imperious. He might not refuse, were Death himself waiting to strike him instantly, once he had looked with mortal eye on things rightly kept hidden. Trembling he obeyed, and raised his humble head; and then, in that utter clearness of the imminent dawn, while Nature, flushed with fulness of incredible colour, seemed to hold her breath for the event, he looked in the very eyes of the Friend and Helper; saw the backward sweep of the curved horns, gleaming in the growing daylight; saw the stern, hooked nose between the kindly eyes that were looking down on them humourously, while the bearded mouth broke into a half-smile at the corners; saw the rippling muscles on the arm that lay across the broad chest, the long supple hand still holding the pan-pipes only just fallen away from the parted lips; saw the splendid curves of the shaggy limbs disposed in majestic ease on the sward; saw, last of all, nestling between his very hooves, sleeping soundly in utter peace and contentment, the little, round, podgy, childish form of the baby otter. All this he saw, for one moment breathless and intense, vivid on the morning sky; and still, as he looked, he lived; and still, as he lived, he wondered.

'Rat!' he found breath to whisper, shaking. 'Are you afraid?'

'Afraid?' murmured the Rat, his eyes shining with unutterable love. 'Afraid! Of Him? O, never, never! And yet—and yet—O, Mole, I am afraid!'

Then the two animals, crouching to the earth, bowed their heads and did worship.

Sudden and magnificent, the sun's broad golden rim showed itself over the horizon facing them; and the first rays, shooting across the level water-meadows, took the animals full in the eyes and dazzled them. When they were able to look once more, the Vision had vanished, and the air was full of the carol of birds that hailed the dawn.

As they stared blankly, in dumb misery deepening as they slowly realised all they had seen and all they had lost, a capricious little breeze, dancing up from the surface of the water, tossed the aspens, shook the dewy roses, and blew lightly and caressingly in their faces; and with its soft touch came instant oblivion. For this is the last best gift that the kindly demi-god is careful to bestow on those to whom he has revealed himself in their helping: the gift of forgetfulness. Lest the awful remembrance should remain and grow, and over-shadow mirth and pleasure, and the great haunting memory should spoil all the after-lives of little animals helped out of difficulties, in order that they should be happy and light-hearted as before.

Mole rubbed his eyes and stared at Rat, who was looking about him in a puzzled sort of way. 'I beg your pardon; what did you say, Rat?' he asked.

'I think I was only remarking,' said Rat slowly, 'that this was the right sort of place, and that here, if anywhere, we should find him. And look! Why, there he is, the little fellow!' And with a cry of delight he ran towards the slumbering Portly.

But Mole stood still a moment, held in thought. As one wakened suddenly from a beautiful dream, who struggles to recall it, and can re-capture nothing but a dim sense of the beauty of it, the beauty! Till that, too, fades away in its turn, and the dreamer bitterly accepts the hard, cold waking and all its penalties; so Mole, after struggling with his memory for a brief space, shook his head sadly and followed the Rat.

Portly woke up with a joyous squeak, and wriggled with pleasure at the sight of his father's friends, who had played with him so often in past days. In a moment, however, his face grew blank, and he fell to hunting round in a circle with pleading whine. As a child that has fallen happily asleep in its nurse's arms, and wakes to find itself alone and laid in a strange place, and searches corners and cupboards, and runs from room to room, despair growing silently in its heart, even so Portly searched the island and searched, dogged and unwearying, till at last the black moment came for giving it up, and sitting down and crying bitterly.

The Mole ran quickly to comfort the little animal; but Rat, lingering, looked long and doubtfully at certain hoof-marks deep in the sward.

'Some—great—animal—has been here,' he murmured slowly and thoughtfully; and stood musing, musing; his mind strangely stirred.

'Come along, Rat!' called the Mole. 'Think of poor Otter, waiting up there by the ford!'

Portly had soon been comforted by the promise of a treat—a jaunt on the river in Mr. Rat's real boat; and the two animals conducted him to the water's side, placed him securely between them in the bottom of the boat, and paddled off down the backwater. The sun was fully up by now, and hot on them, birds sang lustily and without restraint, and flowers smiled and nodded from either bank, but somehow—so thought the animals—with less of richness and blaze of colour than they seemed to remember seeing quite recently somewhere—they wondered where.

The main river reached again, they turned the boat's head upstream, towards the point where they knew their friend was keeping his lonely vigil. As they drew near the familiar ford, the Mole took the boat in to the bank, and they lifted Portly out and set him on his legs on the tow-path, gave him his marching orders and a friendly farewell pat on the back, and shoved out into mid-stream. They watched the little animal as he waddled along the path contentedly and with importance; watched him till they saw his muzzle suddenly lift and his waddle break into a clumsy amble as he quickened his pace with shrill whines and wriggles of recognition. Looking up the river, they could see Otter start up, tense and rigid, from out of the shallows where he crouched in dumb patience, and could hear his amazed and joyous bark as he bounded up through the osiers on to the path. Then the Mole, with a strong pull on one oar, swung the boat round and let the full stream bear them down again whither it would, their quest now happily ended.

'I feel strangely tired, Rat,' said the Mole, leaning wearily over his oars as the boat drifted. 'It's being up all night, you'll say, perhaps; but that's nothing. We do as much half the nights of the week, at this time of the year. No; I feel as if I had been through something very exciting and rather terrible, and it was just over; and yet nothing particular has happened.'

'Or something very surprising and splendid and beautiful,' murmured the Rat, leaning back and closing his eyes. 'I feel just as you do, Mole; simply dead tired, though not body-tired. It's lucky we've got the stream with us, to take us home. Isn't it jolly to feel the sun again, soaking into one's bones! And hark to the wind playing in the reeds!'

'It's like music—far away music,' said the Mole nodding drowsily.

'So I was thinking,' murmured the Rat, dreamful and languid. 'Dance-music—the lilting sort that runs on without a stop—but with words in it, too—it passes into words and out of them again—I catch them at intervals—then it is dance-music once more, and then nothing but the reeds' soft thin whispering.'

'You hear better than I,' said the Mole sadly. 'I cannot catch the words.'

'Let me try and give you them,' said the Rat softly, his eyes still closed. 'Now it is turning into words again—faint but clear—Lest the awe should dwell—And turn your frolic to fret—You shall look on my power at the helping hour—But then you shall forget! Now the reeds take it up—forget, forget, they sigh, and it dies away in a rustle and a whisper. Then the voice returns—

'Lest limbs be reddened and rent—I spring the trap that is set—As I loose the snare you may glimpse me there—For surely you shall forget! Row nearer, Mole, nearer to the reeds! It is hard to catch, and grows each minute fainter.

'Helper and healer, I cheer—Small waifs in the woodland wet—Strays I find in it, wounds I bind in it—Bidding them all forget! Nearer, Mole, nearer! No, it is no good; the song has died away into reed-talk.'

'But what do the words mean?' asked the wondering Mole.

‘That I do not know,’ said the Rat simply. ‘I passed them on to you as they reached me. Ah! now they return again, and this time full and clear! This time, at last, it is the real, the unmistakable thing, simple—passionate—perfect———’

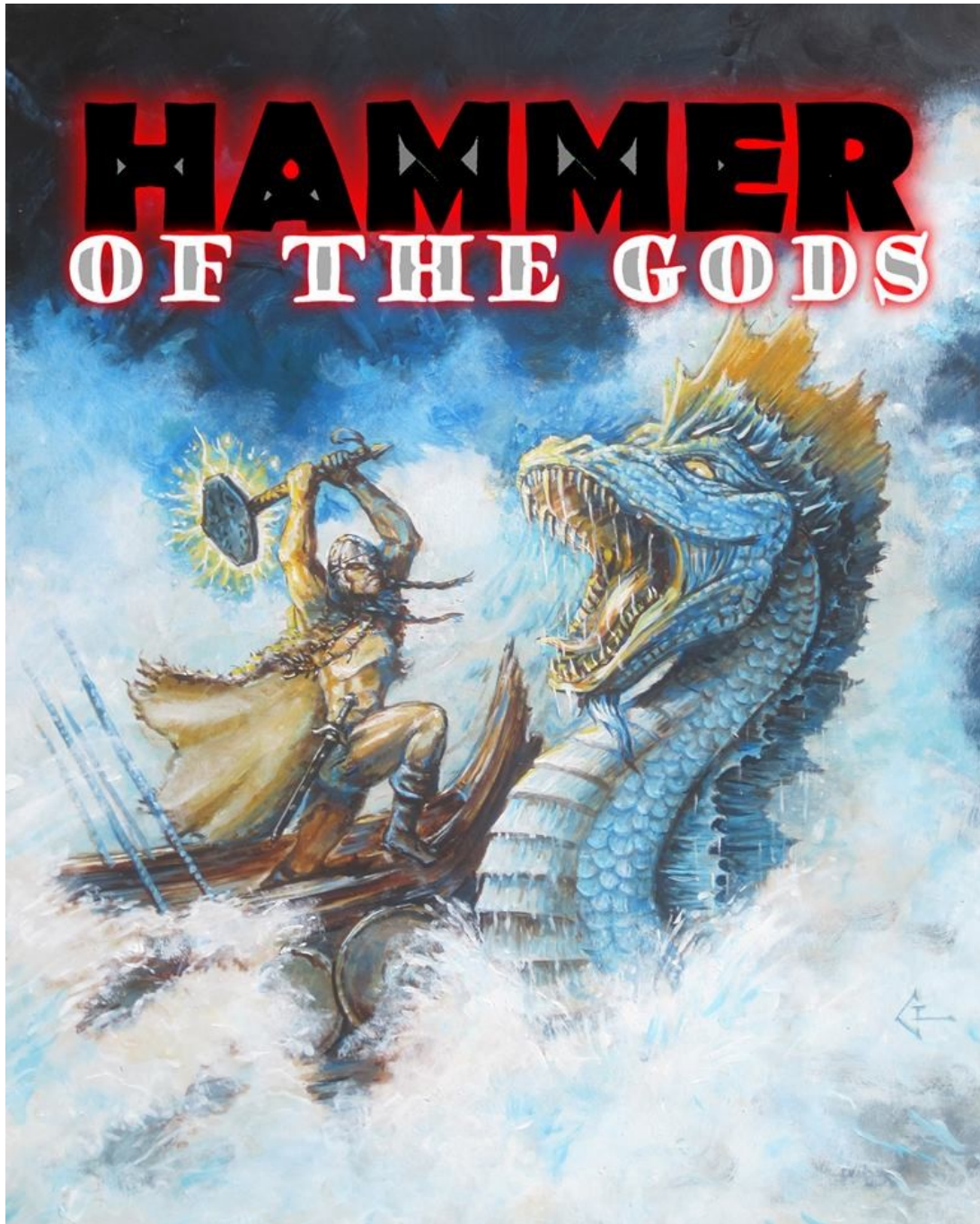
‘Well, let’s have it, then,’ said the Mole, after he had waited patiently for a few minutes, half-dozing in the hot sun.

But no answer came. He looked, and understood the silence. With a smile of much happiness on his face, and something of a listening look still lingering there, the weary Rat was fast asleep.

THE END

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voyaging take them? Theirs is a world of trolls and dragons, and  
many other realms lie beyond...*



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THOMAS THE RHYMER by Anon

True Thomas lay oer yond grassy bank,  
And he beheld a ladie gay,  
A ladie that was brisk and bold,  
Come riding oer the fernie brae.  
Her skirt was of the grass-green silk,  
Her mantel of the velvet fine,  
At ilka tett of her horse's mane  
Hung fifty silver bells and nine.  
True Thomas he took off his hat,  
And bowed him low down till his knee:  
'All hail, thou mighty Queen of Heaven!  
For your peer on earth I never did see.'  
'O no, O no, True Thomas,' she says,  
'That name does not belong to me;  
I am but the queen of fair Elfland,  
And I'm come here for to visit thee.

'But ye maun go wi me now, Thomas,  
True Thomas, ye maun go wi me,  
For ye maun serve me seven years,  
Thro weel or wae as may chance to be.'  
She turned about her milk-white steed,  
And took True Thomas up behind,  
And aye whenever her bridle rang,  
The steed flew swifter than the wind.  
For forty days and forty nights  
He wade thro red blude to the knee,  
And he saw neither sun nor moon,  
But heard the roaring of the sea.  
O they rade on, and further on,  
Until they came to a garden green:  
'Light down, light down, ye ladie free,  
Some of that fruit let me pull to thee.'  
'O no, O no, True Thomas,' she says,  
'That fruit maun not be touched by thee,  
For a' the plagues that are in hell  
Light on the fruit of this countrie.  
'But I have a loaf here in my lap,  
Likewise a bottle of claret wine,  
And now ere we go farther on,  
We'll rest a while, and ye may dine.'  
When he had eaten and drunk his fill,  
'Lay down your head upon my knee,'  
The lady sayd, re we climb yon hill,  
And I will show you fairlies three.  
'O see not ye yon narrow road,  
So thick beset wi thorns and briers?  
That is the path of righteousness,

Tho after it but few enquires.  
 ‘And see not ye that braid braid road,  
 That lies across yon lillie leven?  
 That is the path of wickedness,  
 Tho some call it the road to heaven.  
 ‘And see not ye that bonny road,  
 Which winds about the fernie brae?  
 That is the road to fair Elfland,  
 Whe[re] you and I this night maun gae.  
 ‘But Thomas, ye maun hold your tongue,  
 Whatever you may hear or see,  
 For gin ae word you should chance to speak,  
 You will neer get back to your ain countrie.’  
 He has gotten a coat of the even cloth,  
 And a pair of shoes of velvet green,  
 And till seven years were past and gone  
 True Thomas on earth was never seen.

As Thomas lay on Huntlie banks-+-  
 A wat a weel bred man was he-+-  
 And there he spied a lady fair,  
 Coming riding down by the Eildon tree.  
 The horse she rode on was dapple gray,  
 And in her hand she held bells nine;  
 I thought I heard this fair lady say  
 These fair siller bells they should a’ be mine.  
 It’s Thomas even forward went,  
 And lootit low down on his knee:  
 ‘Weel met thee save, my lady fair,  
 For thou’rt the flower o this countrie.’  
 ‘O no, O no, Thomas,’ she says,  
 ‘O no, O no, that can never be,  
 For I’m but a lady of an unco land,  
 Comd out a hunting, as ye may see.  
 ‘O harp and carp, Thomas,’ she says,  
 ‘O harp and carp, and go wi me;  
 It’s be seven years, Thomas, and a day,  
 Or you see man or woman in your ain countrie.’  
 It’s she has rode, and Thomas ran,  
 Until they cam to yon water clear;  
 He’s coosten off his hose and shon,  
 And he’s wooden the water up to the knee.  
 It’s she has rode, and Thomas ran,  
 Until they cam to yon garden green;  
 He’s put up his hand for to pull down ane,

For the lack o food he was like to tyne.  
 'Hold your hand, Thomas,' she says,  
 'Hold your hand, that must not be;  
 It was a' that cursed fruit o thine  
 Beggared man and woman in your countrie.  
 'But I have a loaf and a soup o wine,  
 And ye shall go and dine wi me;  
 And lay yer head down in my lap,  
 And I will tell ye farlies three.  
 'It's dont ye see yon broad broad way,  
 That leadeth down by yon skerry fell?  
 It's ill's the man that dothe thereon gang,  
 For it leadeth him straight to the gates o hell.  
 'It's dont ye see yon narrow way,  
 That leadeth down by yon lillie lea?  
 It's weel's the man that doth therein gang,  
 For it leads him straight to the heaven hie.'

It's when she cam into the hall-+-  
 I wat a weel bred man was he-+-  
 They've asked him question[s], one and all,  
 But he answered none but that fair ladie.  
 O they speerd at her where she did him get,  
 And she told them at the Eildon tree;  
 .....  
 .....

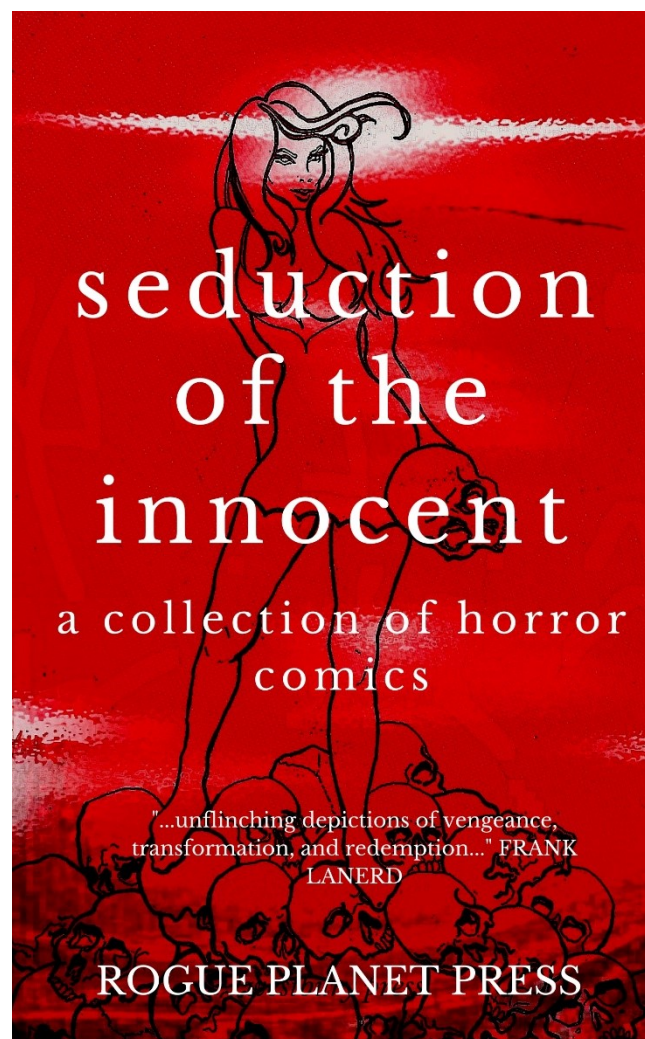
TRUE Thomas lay on Huntlie bank,  
 A ferlie he spied wi' his ee,  
 And there he saw a lady bright,  
 Come riding down by the Eildon Tree.  
 Her shirt was o the grass-green silk,  
 Her mantle o the velvet fyne,  
 At ilka tett of her horse's mane  
 Hang fifty siller bells and nine.  
 True Thomas, he pulld aff his cap,  
 And louted low down to his knee:  
 'All hail, thou mighty Queen of Heaven!  
 For thy peer on earth I never did see.'  
 'O no, O no, Thomas,' she said,  
 'That name does not belang to me;  
 I am but the queen of fair Elfland,  
 That am hither come to visit thee.  
 'Harp and carp, Thomas,' she said,  
 'Harp and carp along wi me,



And if ye dare to kiss my lips,  
 Sure of your bodie I will be.'  
 'Betide me weal, betide me woe,  
 That weird shall never daunt me;'  
 Syne he has kissed her rosy lips,  
 All underneath the Eildon Tree.  
 'Now, ye maun go wi me,' she said,  
 'True Thomas, ye maun go wi me,  
 And ye maun serve me seven years,  
 Thro weal or woe, as may chance to be.'  
 She mounted on her milk-white steed,  
 She's taen True Thomas up behind,  
 And aye whenever her bridle rung,  
 The steed flew swifter than the wind.  
 O they rade on, and farther on-+-  
 The steed gaed swifter than the wind-+-  
 Untill they reached a desart wide,  
 And living land was left behind.  
 'Light down, light down, now, True Thomas,  
 And lean your head upon my knee;  
 Abide and rest a little space,  
 And I will shew you ferlies three.  
 'O see ye not yon narrow road,  
 So thick beset with thorns and briers?  
 That is the path of righteousness,  
 Tho after it but few enquires.  
 'And see not ye that braid braid road,  
 That lies across that lily leven?  
 That is the path of wickedness,  
 Tho some call it the road to heaven.  
 'And see not ye that bonny road,  
 That winds about the fernie brae?  
 That is the road to fair Elfland,  
 Where thou and I this night maun gae.  
 'But, Thomas, ye maun hold your tongue,  
 Whatever ye may hear or see,  
 For, if you speak word in Elflyn land,  
 Ye'll neer get back to your ain countrie.'  
 O they rade on, and farther on,  
 And they waded thro rivers aboon the knee,  
 And they saw neither sun nor moon,  
 But they heard the roaring of the sea.  
 It was mirk mirk night, and there was nae stern light,  
 And they waded thro red blude to the knee;  
 For a' the blude that's shed on earth  
 Rins thro the springs o that countrie.  
 Syne they came on to a garden green,  
 And she pu'd an apple frae a tree:  
 'Take this for thy wages, True Thomas,  
 It will give the tongue that can never lie.'

'My tongue is mine ain,' True Thomas said;  
'A gudely gift ye wad gie to me!  
I neither dought to buy nor sell,  
At fair or tryst where I may be.  
'I dought neither speak to prince or peer,  
Nor ask of grace from fair ladye.'  
'Now hold thy peace,' the lady said,  
'For as I say, so must it be.'  
He has gotten a coat of the even cloth,  
And a pair of shoes of velvet green,  
And till seven years were gane and past  
True Thomas on earth was never seen.

THE END



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## THE BATTLE FOR CALLISTO by Gregory KH Bryant

### Episode Thirteen

The command deck of the “Grand Marquis” was a grotesque mélange of both the super-technological and the primitive.

A well-trained crew worked the consoles with well-honed efficiency.

The deck was clean, its surfaces uncluttered. The permanent crew of six men, with Tu Hit, pilot of the “Grand Marquis” in command, carried out their duties in a well-lit, bright quarters.

The men who ran the controls of the ship so effectively decorated their bodies in primitive fashion.

Tattoos, amputated fingertips, ritual scars and beads embedded in the flesh, all these attested to allegiances to various tribes within the Scroungers, and status among those tribes. Those who had killed an enemy were entitled to a particular set of tattoos commemorating the event. Each kill merited another tattoo. Some had their whole bodies covered with such markings.

Particular commanders sometimes required the sacrifice of a fingertip, or the marking of the body with a scar as a token of loyalty. Earrings, nose rings, pierced nipples and tongues, all gave notice of allegiance, or status among crews and tribes.

The contrast between the decorated bodies of the crew that ran the “Grand Marquis” and the hyper-efficient ship itself was only more emphasized by the rank stench of rotting flesh that pervaded every corner of the command deck, and the three human heads from which that odor emanated, and which decorated the portal into the command deck, hanging by their hair nailed to the bulkhead above.

The whole interior of the “Grand Marquis” was decorated with such souvenirs, heads and other body parts of those who had fallen victim to the ravages of Turhan Mot’s piracy. Entire hallways lined with skulls painted and gilded. Jars filled with teeth for use in creating jewelry. Rooms wallpapered with flayed human hides, elaborate in their tattoos and imitating stained glass of a hellish provenance.

Such was the taste of Turhan Mot.

At this moment, Turhan Mot was at the command deck of his ship, observing as his fleet attacked Callisto and the “Bellerophon”. Next to him, on the one hand, was Tu Hit, his bald head tattooed with the stripes of a tiger leaping from his shoulders.

On the other hand stood the malignant and ill-disciplined Mokem Bet, Turhan Mot’s second in command. Mokem Bet had cut the throat of Carter Ward on the flight deck of Interplanetary Station 3, but failed to kill him.

Ward, of course, had not forgotten that.

Turhan Mot studied the visiscreen before them—one of a dozen screens throughout the command deck, all displaying Callisto and its neighborhood.

There, clearly marked on the visiscreen, was the “Bellerophon”. It had already begun pulling away, slowly gathering momentum. Colonel Westland was hoping to draw the battle away from Callisto Base 1, and to interplanetary speeds, where it would have some advantage. Surrounding the “Bellerophon” was the defensive swarm of Lieutenant Hardy’s fighter ships. Turhan Mot was sure they would stay with the “Bellerophon”.

“They will be no threat to us until they are provoked,” he said.

“But they have taken notice of our approach more swiftly than pleases us,” he finished, with a glance at Tu Hit.

Tu Hit was not perturbed. He spoke plainly.

“Nor could it be helped, my captain,” he said. “As it please him to recall, in no sooner time than ten minutes could we arrive at Callisto after emerging from behind the sphere of Jupiter. And when once we have emerged from the shadow of Jupiter, we must be instantly observed.”

Turhan Mot ignored him, and turned his attention to the visiscreen. There, portside, was the “Reliant”, Yamir’s heavily fortified ship. Flying in and out among the two vast transport ships were forty other smaller, interplanetary ships that had also joined Turhan Mot’s campaign. They began peeling away from the armada, to begin their separate attacks on the bases of Ganymede and Europa.

“Begin the deployment of our fighter ships,” Turhan Mot said to Mokem Bet.

Mokem Bet leaned into a microphone and said into it, “Deploy the fighters. Begin with ‘A’ Squadron through ‘G’. Target as practiced.”

Three slim fighter spacecraft leaped through one of the plasma walls of the flight deck of the “Grand Marquis”, swiftly followed by three more. In swift order, two dozen fighter craft, low-slung and painted flat black were flying directly at “The Bellerophon”.

“Here they come, boys!” Lieutenant Hardy warned his fighters. “Look sharp!”

He spoke from the pilot’s seat of his fighter, a single-seater which made up a part of the defensive web surrounding the “Bellerophon”. Hardy was commanding a fighter task force, a group of five ships, and through this task force, the entire fleet of fighters—eighty, of which a full forty had been deployed—defending the “Bellerophon”.

“You get all that, Bridgemont?” Colonel Westland asked through their subspace communications system.

Westland was at his Command Centre on the “Bellerophon”. Two dozen screens and a scalable holographic projection of the Jovian System gave him every possible view of the coming battle. His command crew, of twenty-four specialists, were in constant communication with every one of the fighter pilots. Cameras gave the command crew a view from every ship.

At the moment, Westland was speaking to Colonel Bridgemont, who had hurried to his own Command Centre at Callisto Base 1, the instant the sirens had started blaring. Bridgemont was still hurrying to understand the attack.

“That was forty ships, small interplanetary, attacking our bases on Europa, Ganymede and Io?” Bridgemont answered.

His own Command Centre was staffed by eighteen. He could observe the colonies from surveillance cameras, and could instantly close in on any of four hundred ground-based views throughout the inner Jovian system.

“Can’t give me any more than that?”

“Sorry, Gerald,” Westland answered. “That’s all the intelligence we’ve got so far. I’ll shoot you anything else we get, soon as we get it.”

“Thanks, Frank. Stay alive, if you can.”

“Same to you,” Westland answered.

Bridgemont closed the call and turned to his crew.

“Let’s get to work, people.”

The Command Centre was instantly a hive of activity. Communications flew between Io, Ganymede, Europa and back to Callisto. As each minute passed, Bridgemont got a more detailed picture of the attack unfolding.

He had six colonies on Ganymede, with a combined civilian population of forty thousand people. Europa held another eight colonies, with a total population of six thousand souls.

His security staff on Ganymede amounted to a force of twelve hundred men and women. His staff on Europa was not much larger, totaling only fourteen hundred. Of these, the officers qualified to carry weapons came to sixteen hundred personnel, spread over twelve colonies on two separate moons. The weapons of Jovian Security were limited to laser pistols, stun guns of various makes, and clubs, almost none of them of lethal force. It didn’t look good.

Bridgemont turned his attention, momentarily, to Io. The colonies on Io were never permanently staffed, though at the moment there were twenty-four planetary geologists working there.

Bridgemont could send a ship to Io, but otherwise he’d have to concentrate all his forces and all his attention on Europa, Ganymede and Callisto.

And that reminded him. Illara? Where was she?

“Lieutenant,” he said to a woman sitting at a console. She wore the black and purple uniform of Jovian Security.

“Get me through to Illara. Captain Illara Fain.”

“Yes, sir,” she said.

She turned back to the console and opened a signal.

A signal that Illara was forced, momentarily, to ignore.

A fourth plasma burst exploded just outside her canopy.

At that instant, she plunged into the plume of the volcano Tvashtar. Once ejected from the mouth of the volcano, the sulphur froze, and settled back to the surface of Io with the quality of a snowfall.

Illara sent her ship directly into that massive, two-hundred mile high plume, which surrounded the volcano on all sides. She vanished from her pursuers. They followed her into the plume, as Illara had expected, still firing, but switching now to the less expensive EMPs and laser blasts.

Illara brought ‘Izzy’ close to the surface of Io, under the constantly spewing umbrella of sulphur. She flew near to the base of Tvashtar, rounding it, and circling the volcano. Her pursuers followed hot behind. Illara accelerated, and though the two ships in pursuit tried to keep up, ‘Izzy’ easily outran them.

And in a moment, Illara had lapped her pursuers, and was coming up on them from behind. She fired a quantum burst that caused three quarters of one ship to vanish away. The pilot of the second ship, startled, lurched to the left, trying to evade Illara’s second shot.

Illara’s second shot missed the ship, and the beam of it scattered harmlessly into the thin atmosphere of Io. But the second ship, while trying to avoid that shot, drove directly into the plume of sulphur as it spewed directly from the mouth of Tvashtar, before the sulphur froze. The ship broke up into countless pieces so suddenly it almost liquefied. It rained down upon the frozen golden plains of Io.

“Yeah... Happy Cowgirl here,” Illara said, responding at last to the signal from Jovian Security Command Centre. Each pilot flew by a nickname, to avoid giving away their ship’s call numbers, and Illara had chosen, on the spur of the moment, ‘Happy Cowgirl’.

“Happy Cowgirl. This is Central. Top Dog is on signal. Over.”

“Put him on, Central. Over.”

Wasting no time with needless preliminaries, Bridgemont, or ‘Top Dog’, began speaking.

“Where are you? Over.”

“Io. Over.”

“You encounter any hostiles? Over.”

“Two. They’re down. Might be more. Over.”

“Look for them. You don’t find any, go straight to Europa. Intelligence is we have forty hostiles hitting us. We need every ship we can muster. Over.”

“Will do. Over.”

Their conversation concluded, Bridgemont handed the communicator back to the lieutenant.

It had been a relief to hear Illara.

The ships attacking the “Bellerophon” ignored Ward and Mud. Mud’s ship, the “Charon”, and Ward’s ship, the O8-111A were tiny against the “Grand Marquis”, insignificant even. And the pilots flying out from the bowels of the “Grand Marquis” were intent upon their target.

Flying against them without firing, Ward and Mud therefore drew no fire, and no attention. By the time the attackers knew Ward and Mud were there, the two had already zipped past.

Large plasma walls opened onto the flight deck that filled the long central column of the “Grand Marquis”. They were purple in hue, with rainbow highlights shimmering upon the surface. These plasma walls made it possible for ships to enter and leave the “Grand Marquis” without the complexities of mechanical doors—of simply slipped through the plasma barrier. Long and rectangular in shape, six of these plasma walls pierced each side of the “Grand Marquis”, port and starboard.

It was only when Ward and Mud came within close approach of the ship that they at last drew any attention to themselves. Turhan Mot, on the command deck, observed the two ships approaching on one of the visiscreens.

“Those,” he said, pointing to the pixels approaching against the current of his outgoing fleet. He tapped on the screen with a sharpened fingernail. “Enlarge.”

The image expanded until the ships came clearly in view. The call numbers on one of the ships, ‘O8-111A’, were plain to see.

Mokem Bet made no effort to hide his surprise. He looked toward Turhan Mot.

“My captain...” he began.

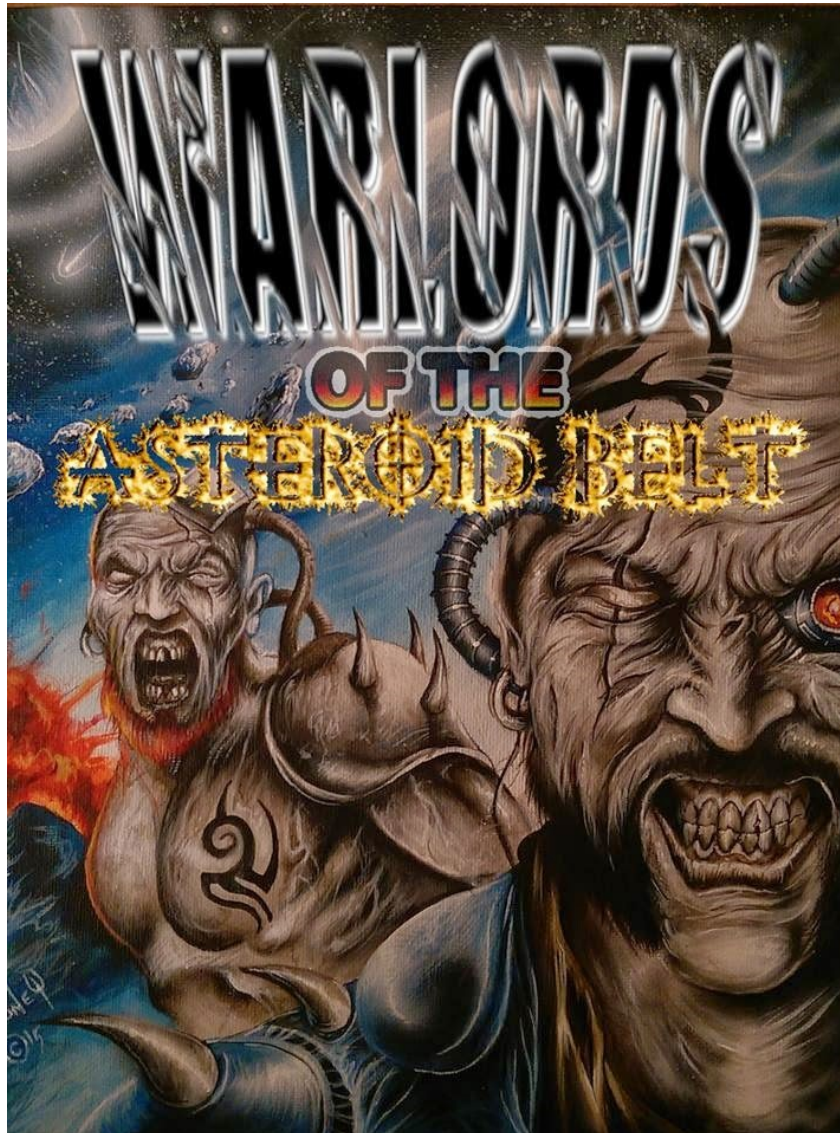
Turhan Mot ignored his question.

“Send a command to our gunners aboard the “Grand Marquis”, he said. “They are to direct their fire at those two ships. Destroy them.”

“Yes, my captain,” Mokem Bet replied.

CONTINUES NEXT WEEK

*Carter Ward’s earlier adventures, along with those of other interplanetary rogues, are chronicled in [Warlords of the Asteroid Belt](#) and [Deep Space Dogfights](#).*



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## TALES OF THE DEAD: THE FAMILY PORTRAITS by Johann August Apel

### Part Two

Their society was soon augmented by the mistress of the château, in whom Ferdinand recognised one of those who sat by his side the preceding evening. In consideration for Emily, they omitted all the subjects most interesting to Ferdinand; but after supper the baron drew nearer to him.

“I doubt not,” said he to him, “that you are anxious to have some light thrown on events, of which, according to your recital last night, you were a spectator. I knew you from the first; and I knew also, that the story you related as of a friend, was your own history. I cannot, however, inform you of more than I know: but that will perhaps be sufficient to save Emily, for whom I feel the affection of a daughter, from chagrin and uneasiness; and from your recital of last evening, I perceive you take a lively interest concerning her.”

“Preserve Emily from uneasiness,” replied Ferdinand with warmth; “explain yourself: what is there I ought to do?”

“We cannot,” answered the baron, “converse here with propriety; to-morrow morning I will come and see you in your apartment.”

Ferdinand asked him for an audience that night; but the baron was inflexible. “It is not my wish,” said he, “to work upon your imagination by any marvellous recital, but to converse with you on the very important concerns of two distinguished families. For which reason, I think the freshness of morning will be better suited to lessen the horror that my recital must cause you: therefore, if not inconvenient to you, I wish you to attend me at an early hour in the morning: I am fond of rising with the sun; and yet I have never found the time till mid-day too long for arranging my affairs,” added he, smiling, and turning half round towards the rest of the party, as if speaking on indifferent topics.

Ferdinand passed a night of agitation, thinking of the conference he was to have with the baron; who was at his window at dawn of day. “You know,” said the baron, “that I married the old count of Wartburg’s sister; which alliance was less the cause, than the consequence, of our intimate friendship. We reciprocally communicated our most secret thoughts, and the one never undertook anything, without the other taking an equal interest with himself in his projects. The count had, however, one secret from me, of which I should never have come at the knowledge but for an accident.

“On a sudden, a report was spread abroad, that the phantom of the Nun’s rock had been seen, which was the name given by the peasantry to the old ruined tower which you knew. Persons of sense only laughed at the report: I was anxious the following night to unmask this spectre, and I already anticipated my triumph: but to my no small surprise, the count endeavoured to dissuade me from the attempt; and the more I persisted, the more serious his arguments became; and at length he conjured me in the name of friendship to relinquish the design.

“His gravity of manner excited my attention; I asked him several questions; I even regarded his fears in the light of disease, and urged him to take suitable remedies: but he answered me with an air of chagrin, ‘Brother, you know my sincerity towards you; but this is a secret

sacred to my family. My son can alone be informed of it, and that only on my death-bed. Therefore ask me no more questions.'

"I held my peace; but I secretly collected all the traditions known amongst the peasantry. The most generally believed one was, that the phantom of the Nun's rock was seen when any one of the count's family were about to die; and in effect, in a few days after the count's youngest son expired. The count seemed to apprehend it: he gave the strictest possible charge to the nurse to take care of him; and under pretext of feeling indisposed himself, sent for two physicians to the castle: but these extreme precautions were precisely the cause of the child's death; for the nurse passing over the stones near the ruins, in her extreme care took the child in her arms to carry him, and her foot slipping, she fell, and in her fall wounded the child so much, that he expired on the spot. She said she fancied that she saw the child extended, bleeding in the midst of the stones; that her fright had made her fall with her face on the earth; and that when she came to herself, the child was absolutely lying weltering in his blood, precisely on the same spot where she had seen his ghost.

"I will not tire you with a relation of all the sayings uttered by an illiterate woman to explain the cause of the vision, for under similar accidents invention far outstrips reality. I could not expect to gain much more satisfactory information from the family records; for the principal documents were preserved in an iron chest, the key of which was never out of the possession of the owner of the castle. I however discovered, by the genealogical register and other similar papers, that this family had never had collateral male branches; but further than this, my researches could not discover.

"At length, on my friend's death-bed I obtained some information, which, however, was far from being satisfactory. You remember, that while the son was on his travels, the father was attacked by the complaint which carried him off so suddenly. The evening previous to his decease, he sent for me express, dismissed all those who were with him, and turning towards me, said: 'I am aware that my end is fast approaching, and am the first of my family that has been carried off without communicating to his son the secret on which the safety of our house depends. Swear to me to reveal it only to my son, and I shall die contented.'

"In the names of friendship and honour, I promised what he exacted of me, and he thus began:

"The origin of my race, as you know, is not to be traced. Ditmar, the first of my ancestry mentioned in the written records, accompanied the emperor Otho to Italy. His history is also very obscure. He had an enemy called count Bruno, whose only son he killed in revenge, according to ancient tradition, and then kept the father confined till his death in that tower, whose ruins, situated in the Nun's rock, still defy the hand of time. That portrait which hangs alone in the state-chamber, is Ditmar's; and if the traditions of the family are to be believed, it was painted by the Dead. In fact, it is almost impossible to believe that any human being could have contemplated sufficiently long to paint the portrait, the outline of features so hideous. My forefathers have frequently tried to plaster over this redoubtable figure; but in the night, the colours came through the plaster, and re-appeared as distinctly as before; and often in the night, this Ditmar has been seen wandering abroad dressed in the garb represented in the picture; and by kissing the descendants of the family, has doomed them to death. Three of my children have received this fatal kiss. It is said, a monk imposed on him this penance in expiation of his crimes. But he cannot destroy all the children of his race: for so long as the ruins of the old tower shall remain, and whilst one stone shall remain on

another, so long shall the count de Wartburg's family exist; and so long shall the spirit of Ditmar wander on earth, and devote to death the branches of his house, without being able to annihilate the trunk. His race will never be extinct; and his punishment will only cease when the ruins of the tower are entirely dispersed. He brought up, with a truly paternal care, the daughter of his enemy, and wedded her to a rich and powerful knight; but notwithstanding this, the monk never remitted his penance. Ditmar, however, foreseeing that one day or other his race would perish, was certainly anxious ere then, to prepare for an event on which his deliverance depended; and accordingly made a relative disposition of his hereditary property, in case of his family becoming extinct. The act which contained his will, was ratified by the emperor Otho: as yet it has not been opened, and nobody knows its contents. It is kept in the secret archives of our house.'

"The speaking thus much was a great effort to my friend. He required a little rest, but was shortly after incapable of articulating a single word. I performed the commission with which he charged me to his son."

"And he did, notwithstanding—" replied Ferdinand.

"Even so," answered the baron: "but judge more favourably of your excellent friend. I have often seen him alone in the great state-chamber, with his eyes fixed on this horrible portrait: he would then go into the other rooms, where the portraits of his ancestors were ranged for several successive generations; and after contemplating them with visible internal emotion, would return to that of the founder of his house. Broken sentences, and frequent soliloquies, which I overheard by accident, did not leave me a shadow of doubt, but that he was the first of his race who had magnanimity of soul sufficient to resolve on liberating the spirit of Ditmar from its penance, and of sacrificing himself to release his house from the malediction that hung over it. Possibly he was strengthened in his resolutions by the grief he experienced for the death of his dearly beloved."

"Oh!" cried Ferdinand deeply affected, "how like my friend!"

"He had, however, in the ardour of his enthusiasm, forgotten to guard his sister's sensibility," said the baron.

"How so?" demanded Ferdinand.

"It is in consequence of this," answered the baron, "that I now address myself to you, and reveal to you the secret. I have told you that Ditmar demonstrated a paternal affection to the daughter of his enemy, had given her a handsome portion, and had married her to a valiant knight. Learn then, that this knight was Adelbert de Meltheim, from whom the counts of this name descended in a direct line."

"Is it possible?" exclaimed Ferdinand, "the author of my race!"

"The same," answered the baron; "and according to appearances, Ditmar designed that the family of Meltheim should succeed him on the extinction of his own. Haste, then, in order to establish your probable right to the—"

"Never—" said Ferdinand "—so long as Emily—"

“This is no more than I expected from you,” replied the baron; “but remember, that in Ditmar’s time the girls were not thought of in deeds of this kind. Your inconsiderate generosity would be prejudicial to Emily. For the next of kin who lay claim to the fief, do not probably possess very gallant ideas.”

“As a relation, though only on the female side, I have taken the necessary measures; and I think it right you should be present at the castle of Wartburg when the seals are broken, that you may be immediately recognised as the only immediate descendant of Adelbert, and that you may take instant possession of the inheritance.”

“And Emily?” demanded Ferdinand.

“As for what is to be done for her,” replied the baron, “I leave to you; and feel certain of her being provided for suitably, since her destiny will be in the hands of a man whose birth equals her own, who knows how to appreciate the rank in which she is placed, and who will evince his claims to merit and esteem.”

“Have I a right, then,” said Ferdinand, “to flatter myself with the hope that Emily will permit me to surrender her the property to which she is actually entitled?”

“Consult Emily on the subject,” said the baron.—And here finished the conference.

Ferdinand, delighted, ran to Emily. She answered with the same frankness he had manifested; and they were neither of them slow to confess their mutual passion.

Several days passed in this amiable delirium. The inhabitants of the château participated in the joy of the young lovers; and Ferdinand at length wrote to his mother, to announce the choice he had made.

They were occupied in preparations for removing to the castle of Wartburg, when a letter arrived, which at once destroyed Ferdinand’s happiness. His mother refused to consent to his marriage with Emily: her husband having, she said, on his death-bed, insisted on his wedding the baron of Hainthal’s daughter, and that she should refuse her consent to any other marriage. He had discovered a family secret, which forced him peremptorily to press this point, on which depended his son’s welfare, and the happiness of his family; she had given her promise, and was obliged to maintain it, although much afflicted at being compelled to act contrary to her son’s inclinations.

In vain did Ferdinand conjure his mother to change her determination; he declared to her that he would be the last of his race, rather than renounce Emily. She was not displeased with his entreaties, but remained inflexible.

The baron plainly perceived, from Ferdinand’s uneasiness and agitation, that his happiness had fled; and as he possessed his entire confidence, he soon became acquainted with the cause of his grief. He wrote in consequence to the countess Meltheim, and expressed his astonishment at the singular disposition the count had made on his death-bed: but all he could obtain from her, was a promise to come to the castle of Wartburg, to see the female whom she destined for her son, and the one whom he had himself chosen; and probably to elucidate by her arrival so singular and complicated an affair.

Spring was beginning to enliven all nature, when Ferdinand, accompanied by Emily, the baron, and his daughter, arrived at the castle of Wartburg. The preparations which the principal cause of their journey required, occupied some days. Ferdinand and Emily consoled themselves in the hope that the countess of Meltheim's presence would remove every obstacle which opposed their love, and that at sight of the two lovers she would overcome her scruples.

A few days afterwards she arrived, embraced Emily in the most affectionate manner, and called her, her dear daughter, at the same time expressing her great regret that she could not really consider her such, being obliged to fulfil a promise made to her dying husband.

The baron at length persuaded her to reveal the motive for this singular determination: and after deliberating a short time, she thus expressed herself:—

“The secret you are anxious I should reveal to you, concerns your family, Monsieur le Baron: consequently, if you release me from the necessity of longer silence, I am very willing to abandon my scruples. A fatal picture has, you know, robbed me of my daughter; and my husband, after this melancholy accident, determined on entirely removing this unfortunate portrait: he accordingly gave orders for it to be put in a heap of old furniture, where no one would think of looking for it; and in order to discover the best place to conceal it, he was present when it was taken there. In the removal, he perceived a piece of parchment behind the canvass which the fall had a little damaged: having removed it, he discovered it to be an old document, of a singular nature. The original of this portrait, (said the deed,) was called Bertha de Hainthal; she fixes her looks on her female descendants, in order that if any one of them should receive its death by this portrait, it may prove an expiatory sacrifice which will reconcile her to God. She will then see the families of Hainthal and Meltheim united by the bonds of love; and finding herself released, she will have cause to rejoice in the birth of her after-born descendants.

“This then is the motive which made my husband anxious to fulfil, by the projected marriage, the vows of Bertha; for the death of his daughter, caused by Bertha, had rendered her very name formidable to him. You see, therefore, I have the same reasons for adhering to the promise made my dying husband.”

“Did not the count,” demanded the baron, “allege any more positive reason for this command?”

“Nothing more, most assuredly,” replied the countess.

“Well then,” answered the baron, “in case the writing of which you speak should admit of an explanation wholly differing from, but equally clear with, the one attached thereto by the deceased, would you sooner follow the sense than the letter of the writing?”

“There is no doubt on that subject,” answered the countess; “for no one is more anxious than myself to see that unfortunate promise set aside.”

“Know then,” said the baron, “that the corpse of that Bertha, who occasioned the death of your daughter, reposes here at Wartburg; and that, on this subject, as well as all the other mysteries of the castle, we shall have our doubts satisfied.”

The baron would not at this time explain himself further; but said to the countess, that the documents contained in the archives of the castle would afford the necessary information; and recommended that Ferdinand should, with all possible dispatch, hasten everything relative to the succession. Conformable to the baron's wish, it was requisite that, previous to any other research, the secret deeds contained in the archives should be opened. The law commissioners, and the next of kin who were present, who, most likely, promised themselves an ample compensation for their curiosity in the contents of the other parts of the records, were anxious to raise objections; but the baron represented to them, that the secrets of the family appertained to the unknown heir alone, and that consequently no one had a right to become acquainted with them, unless permitted by him.

These reasons produced the proper effect. They followed the baron into the immense vault in which were deposited the family records. They therein discovered an iron chest, which had not been opened for nearly a thousand years. A massive chain, which several times wound round it, was strongly fixed to the floor and to the wall; but the emperor's grand seal was a greater security for this sacred deposit, than all the chains and bolts which guarded it. It was instantly recognised and removed: the strong bolts yielded; and from the chest was taken the old parchment which had resisted the effects of time. This piece contained, as the baron expected, the disposition which confirmed the right of inheritance to the house of Meltheim, in case of the extinction of the house of Wartburg: and Ferdinand, according to the baron's advice, having in readiness the deeds justifying and acknowledging him as the lawful heir to the house of Meltheim, the next of kin with regret permitted what they could not oppose; and he took possession of the inheritance. The baron having made him a signal, he immediately sealed the chest with his seal. He afterwards entertained the strangers in a splendid manner; and at night found himself in possession of his castle, with only his mother, Emily, the baron, and his daughter.

"It will be but just," said the baron, "to devote this night, which introduces a new name into this castle, to the memory of those who have hitherto possessed it. And we shall acquit ourselves most suitably in this duty, by reading in the council-chamber the documents which, without doubt, are destined to explain, as supplementary deeds, the will of Ditmar."

This arrangement was instantly adopted. The hearts of Emily and Ferdinand were divided between hope and fear; for they impatiently, yet doubtingly, awaited the denouement of Bertha's history, which, after so many successive generations, had in so incomprehensible a manner interfered with their attachment.

The chamber was lighted: Ferdinand opened the iron case; and the baron examined the old parchments.

"This," cried he, after having searched some short time, "will inform us." So saying, he drew from the chest some sheets of parchment. On the one which enveloped the rest was the portrait of a knight of an agreeable figure, and habited in the costume of the tenth century: and the inscription at the bottom called him Ditmar; but they could scarcely discover the slightest resemblance in it to the frightful portrait in the state-chamber.

The baron offered to translate, in reading to them the document written in Latin, provided they would make allowances for the errors which were likely to arise from so hasty a translation. The curiosity of his auditors was so greatly excited, that they readily consented; and he then read as follows:

“I the undersigned Tutilon, monk of St. Gall, have, with the lord Ditmar’s consent, written the following narrative: I have omitted nothing, nor written aught of my own accord.

“Being sent for to Metz, to carve in stone the image of the Virgin Mary; and that mother of our blessed Saviour having opened my eyes and directed my hands, so that I could contemplate her celestial countenance, and represent it on stone to be worshipped by true believers, the lord Ditmar discovered me, and engaged me to follow him to his castle, in order that I might execute his portrait for his descendants. I began painting it in the state-chamber of his castle; and on returning the following day to resume my task, I found that a strange hand had been at work, and had given to the portrait quite a different countenance, which was horrible to look at, for it resembled one who had risen from the dead. I trembled with terror: however, I effaced these hideous features, and I painted anew the count Ditmar’s figure, according to my recollection; but the following day I again discovered the nocturnal labour of the stranger hand. I was seized with still greater fear, but resolved to watch during the night; and I recommenced painting the knight’s figure, such as it really was. At midnight I took a torch, and advancing softly into the chamber to examine the portrait, I perceived a spectre resembling the skeleton of a child; it held a pencil, and was endeavouring to give Ditmar’s image the hideous features of death.

“On my entering, the spectre slowly turned its head towards me, that I might see its frightful visage. My terror became extreme: I advanced no further, but retired to my room, where I remained in prayer till morning; for I was unwilling to interrupt the work executed in the dead of night. In the morning, discovering the same strange features in Ditmar’s portrait as that of the two preceding mornings, I did not again risk effacing the work of the nightly painter; but went in search of the knight, and related to him what I had seen. I shewed him the picture. He trembled with horror, and confessed his crimes to me, for which he required absolution. Having for three successive days invoked all the saints to my assistance, I imposed on him as a penance for the murder of his enemy, which he had avowed to me, to submit to the most rigid mortifications in a dungeon during the rest of his life. But I told him, that as he had murdered an innocent child, his spirit would never be at rest till it had witnessed the extermination of his race; for the Almighty would punish the death of that child by the death of the children of Ditmar, who, with the exception of one in each generation, would all be carried off in early life; and as for him, his spirit would wander during the night, resembling the portrait painted by the hand of the skeleton child; and that he would condemn to death, by a kiss, the children who were the sacrifices to his crimes, in the same manner as he had given one to his enemy’s child before he killed it: and that, in fine, his race should not become extinct, so long as stone remained on stone in the tower where he had permitted his enemy to die of hunger. I then gave him absolution. He immediately made over his seigniorship to his son; and married the daughter of his enemy, who had been brought up by him, to the brave knight Sir Adalbert. He bequeathed all his property, in case of his race becoming extinct, to this knight’s descendants, and caused this will to be ratified by the emperor Otho. After having done so, he retired to a cave near the tower, where his corpse is interred; for he died like a pious recluse, and expiated his crimes by extreme penance. As soon as he was laid in his coffin, he resembled the portrait in the state-chamber; but during his life he was like the portrait depicted on this parchment, which I was able to paint without interruption, after having given him absolution: and by his command I have written and signed this document since his death; and I deposit it, with the emperor’s letters patent, in an iron chest, which I have caused to be sealed. I pray God speedily to deliver his soul, and to cause his body to rise from the dead to everlasting felicity!”

“He is delivered,” cried Emily, greatly affected; “and his image will no longer spread terror around. But I confess that the sight of that figure, and even that of the frightful portrait itself, would never have led me to dream of such horrible crimes as the monk Tutilon relates. Certain I am, his enemy must have mortally wounded his happiness, or he undoubtedly would have been incapable of committing such frightful crimes.”

“Possibly,” said the baron, continuing his researches, “we shall discover some explanation on that point.”

“We must also find some respecting Bertha,” replied Ferdinand in a low tone, and casting a timid look on Emily and his mother.

“This night,” answered the baron, “is consecrated to the memory of the dead; let us therefore forget our own concerns, since those of the past call our attention.”

“Assuredly,” exclaimed Emily, “the unfortunate person who secured these sheets in the chest, ardently looked forward to the hope of their coming to light; let us therefore delay it no longer.”

The baron, after having examined several, read aloud these words:

“The confession of Ditmar.” And he continued thus:—”Peace and health. When this sheet is drawn from the obscurity in which it is now buried, my soul will, I hope firmly in God and the saints, be at eternal rest and peace. But for your good I have ordered to be committed to paper the cause of my chastisement, in order that you may learn that vengeance belongs to God alone, and not to men; for the most just amongst them knows not how to judge: and again, that you may not in your heart condemn me, but rather that you may pity me; for my misery has nearly equalled my crimes; and my spirit would never have dreamt of evil, if man had not rent my heart.”

“How justly,” exclaimed Ferdinand, “has Emily’s good sense divined thus much!”

The baron continued: “My name is Ditmar; they surnamed me The Rich, though I was then only a poor knight, and my only possession was a very small castle. When the emperor Otho departed for Italy, whither he was called by the beautiful Adelaide to receive her hand, I followed him; and I gained the affection of the most charming woman in Pavia, whom I conducted as my intended spouse to the castle of my forefathers. Already the day appointed for the celebration of my nuptials was at hand: the emperor sent for me. His favourite, the count Bruno de Hainthal had seen Bertha—”

“Bertha!” exclaimed every one present. But the baron, without permitting them to interrupt him, continued his translation.

“One day, when the emperor had promised to grant him any recompence that he thought his services merited, he asked of him my intended bride. Otho was mute with astonishment;—but his imperial word was given. I presented myself before the emperor, who offered me riches, lands, honours, if I would but consent to yield Bertha to the count: but she was dearer to me than every worldly good. The emperor yielded to a torrent of anger: he carried off my



intended bride by force, ordered my castle to be pulled down, and caused me to be thrown into prison.

“I cursed his power and my destiny. The amiable figure of Bertha, however, appeared to me in a dream; and I consoled myself during the day by the sweet illusions of the night. At length my keeper said to me: ‘I pity you, Ditmar; you suffer in a prison for your fidelity, while Bertha abandons you. To-morrow she weds the count: accede then to the emperor’s wish, ere it be too late; and ask of him what you think fit, as a recompence for the loss of the faithless fair.’ These words froze my heart. The following night, instead of the gracious image of Bertha, the frightful spirit of vengeance presented itself to me. The following morning I said to my keeper: Go and tell the emperor, I yield Bertha to his Bruno; but as a recompence, I demand this tower, and as much land as will be requisite to build me a new castle.’ The emperor was satisfied; for he frequently repented his violent passions, but he could not alter what he had already decided. He therefore gave me the tower in which I had been confined, and all the lands around it for the space of four leagues. He also gave me more gold and silver than was sufficient to build a castle much more magnificent than the one he had caused to be pulled down. I took unto myself a wife, in order to perpetuate my race; but Bertha still reigned sole mistress of my heart. I also built myself a castle, from which I made a communication, by subterranean and secret passages, with my former prison the tower, and with the castle of Bruno, the residence of my mortal enemy. As soon as the edifice was completed, I entered the fortress by the secret passage, and appeared as the spirit of one of his ancestors before the bed of his son, the heir with which Bertha had presented him. The women who lay beside him were seized with fear: I leaned over the child, who was the precise image of its mother, and kissed its forehead; but—it was the kiss of death; it carried with it a secret poison.

“Bruno and Bertha acknowledged the vengeance of Heaven: they received it as a punishment for the wrongs they had occasioned me; and they devoted their first child to the service of God. As it was a girl, I spared it: but Bertha had no more children; and Bruno, irritated to find his race so nearly annihilated, repudiated his wife, as if he repented the injustice of which he had been guilty in taking her, and married another. The unfortunate Bertha took refuge in a monastery, and consecrated herself to Heaven: but her reason fled; and one night she quitted her retreat, came to the tower in which I had been confined in consequence of her perfidy, there bewailed her crime, and there grief terminated her existence; which circumstance gave rise to that tower being called the Nun’s Rock. I heard, during the night, her sobs; and on going to the tower found Bertha extended motionless; the dews of night had seized her:—she was dead. I then resolved to avenge her loss. I placed her corpse in a deep vault beneath the tower; and having by means of my subterranean passage discovered all the count’s movements, I attacked him when unguarded; and dragging him to the vault which contained his wife’s corpse, I there abandoned him. The emperor, irritated against him for having divorced Bertha, gave me all his possessions, as a remuneration for the injustice I had heretofore experienced.

“I caused all the subterranean passages to be closed. I took under my care his daughter Hildegard, and brought her up as my child: she loved the count Adalbert de Meltheim. But one night her mother’s ghost appeared to her, and reminded her that she was consecrated to the Almighty: this vision, however, could not deter her from marrying Adalbert. The night of her marriage the phantom appeared again before her bed, and thus addressed her:

“‘Since you have infringed the vow I made, my spirit can never be at rest, till one of your female descendants receives its death from me.’

“This discourse occasioned me to send for the venerable Tutilon, monk of St. Gall, who was very celebrated, in order that he might paint a portrait of Bertha, as she had painted herself in the monastery during her insanity; and I gave it to her daughter.

“Tutilon concealed behind that portrait a writing on parchment, the contents of which were as follows:

“‘I am Bertha; and I look at my daughters, to see whether one of them will not die for me, in expiation of my crimes, and thus reconcile me to God. Then shall I see the two families of Meltheim and Hainthal reunited by love, and in the birth of their descendants I shall enjoy happiness.’”

“This then,” exclaimed Ferdinand, “is the fatal writing that is to separate me from Emily; but which, in fact, only unites me to her more firmly! and Bertha, delivered from her penance, blesses the alliance; for by my marriage with Emily, the descendants of Bertha and Ditmar will be reunited.”

“Do you think,” demanded the baron of the countess, “that this explanation can admit of the slightest doubt?”

The only answer the countess made, was by embracing Emily, and placing her hand in that of her son.

The joy was universal. Clotilde in particular had an air of extreme delight; and her father several times, in a jocular manner, scolded her for expressing her joy so vehemently. The following morning they removed the seals from the state-chamber, in order to contemplate the horrible portrait with somewhat less of sadness than heretofore: but they found that it had faded in a singular manner, and the colours, which formerly appeared so harsh, had blended and become softened.

Shortly after arrived the young man who was anxious to enter into an argument with Ferdinand on the explication of the mysteries relative to the portraits. Clotilde did not conceal that he was far from indifferent to her; and they discovered the joy she had evinced, in discovering the favourable turn Emily’s attachment had taken, was not altogether disinterested, but occasioned by the prospect it afforded of happiness to herself. Her father, in fact, would never have approved her choice, had not the countess Meltheim removed all pretensions to Clotilde.

“But,” asked Ferdinand of Clotilde’s intended, “do you not forgive our having searched into certain mysteries which concerned us?”

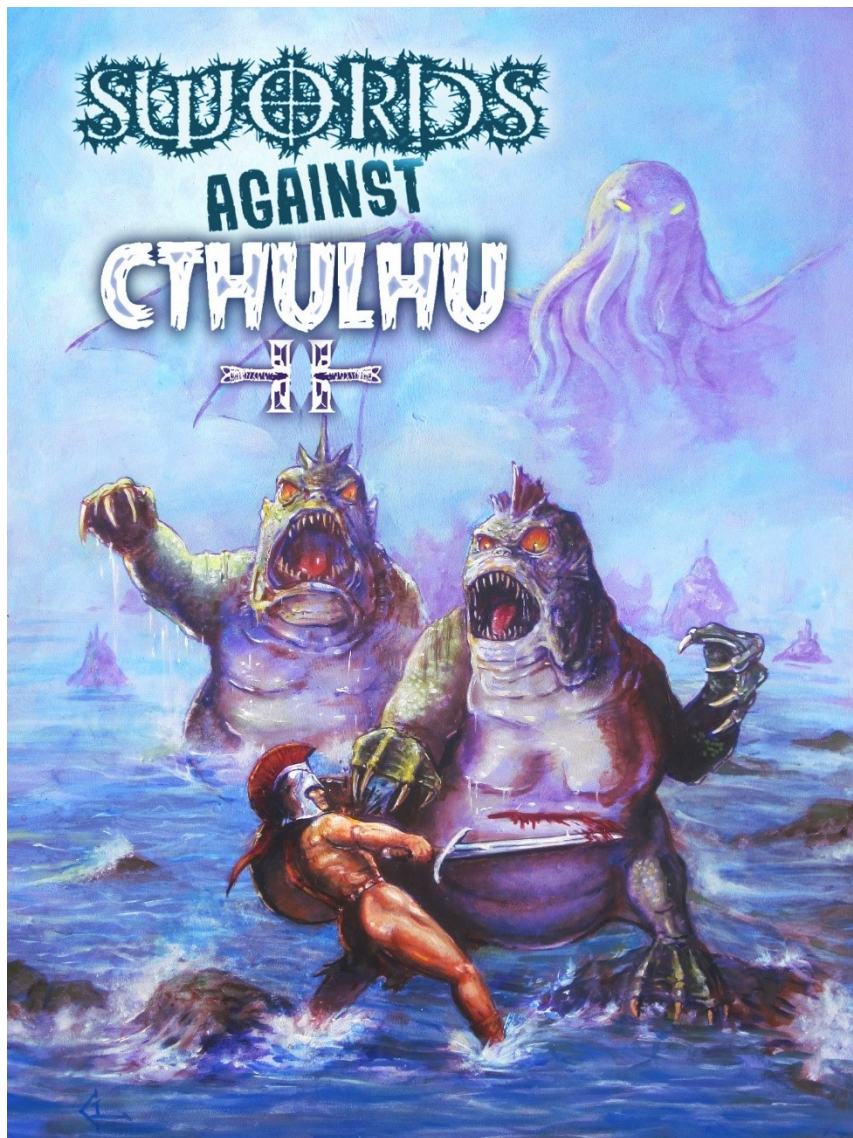
“Completely,” he answered; “but not less disinterestedly than formerly, when I maintained a contrary opinion. I ought now to confess to you, that I was present at the fatal accident which caused your sister’s death, and that I then discovered the writing concealed behind the portrait. I naturally explained it as your father did afterwards; but I held my peace; for the consequences have brought to light what the discovery of that writing had caused me to apprehend for my love.”

“Unsatisfactory explanations are bad,” replied Ferdinand, laughing.

The happy issue of these discoveries spread universal joy amongst the inhabitants of the castle, which was in some degree heightened by the beauty of the season. The lovers were anxious to celebrate their marriage ere the fall of the leaf. And when next the primrose’s return announced the approach of spring, Emily gave birth to a charming boy.

Ferdinand’s mother, Clotilde and her husband, and all the friends of the family, among whom were the pastor who was so fond of music, and his pretty little wife, assembled at the fête given in honour of the christening. When the priest who was performing the ceremony asked what name he was to give the child, that of Ditmar was uttered by every mouth, as if they had previously agreed on it. The christening over, Ferdinand, elate with joy, accompanied by his relations and guests, carried his son to the state-chamber, before his forefather’s portrait; but it was no longer perceptible; the colours, figure,—all had disappeared; not the slightest trace remained.

THE END



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## THE MYSTERIOUS ISLAND by Jules Verne

### Part Two: Abandoned

#### Chapter 19

Two years already! and for two years the colonists had had no communication with their fellow-creatures! They were without news from the civilized world, lost on this island, as completely as if they had been on the most minute star of the celestial hemisphere!

What was now happening in their country? The picture of their native land was always before their eyes, the land torn by civil war at the time they left it, and which the Southern rebellion was perhaps still staining with blood! It was a great sorrow to them, and they often talked together of these things, without ever doubting however that the cause of the North must triumph, for the honor of the American Confederation.

During these two years not a vessel had passed in sight of the island; or, at least, not a sail had been seen. It was evident that Lincoln Island was out of the usual track, and also that it was unknown, —as was besides proved by the maps, —for though there was no port, vessels might have visited it for the purpose of renewing their store of water. But the surrounding ocean was deserted as far as the eye could reach, and the colonists must rely on themselves for regaining their native land.

However, one chance of rescue existed, and this chance was discussed one day on the first week of April, when the colonists were gathered together in the dining-room of Granite House.

They had been talking of America, of their native country, which they had so little hope of ever seeing again.

“Decidedly we have only one way,” said Spilett, “one single way for leaving Lincoln Island, and that is, to build a vessel large enough to sail several hundred miles. It appears to me, that when one has built a boat it is just as easy to build a ship!”

“And in which we might go to the Pomoutous,” added Herbert, “just as easily as we went to Tabor Island.”

“I do not say no,” replied Pencroft, who had always the casting vote in maritime questions; “I do not say no, although it is not exactly the same thing to make a long as a short voyage! If our little craft had been caught in any heavy gale of wind during the voyage to Tabor Island, we should have known that land was at no great distance either way; but twelve hundred miles is a pretty long way, and the nearest land is at least that distance!”

“Would you not, in that case, Pencroft, attempt the adventure?” asked the reporter.

“I will attempt anything that is desired, Mr. Spilett,” answered the sailor, “and you know well that I am not a man to flinch!”

“Remember, besides, that we number another sailor amongst us now,” remarked Neb.

“Who is that?” asked Pencroft.

“Ayrton.”

“If he will consent to come,” said Pencroft.

“Nonsense!” returned the reporter; “do you think that if Lord Glenarvan’s yacht had appeared at Tabor Island, while he was still living there, Ayrton would have refused to depart?”

“You forget, my friends,” then said Cyrus Harding, “that Ayrton was not in possession of his reason during the last years of his stay there. But that is not the question. The point is to know if we may count among our chances of being rescued, the return of the Scotch vessel. Now, Lord Glenarvan promised Ayrton that he would return to take him off from Tabor Island when he considered that his crimes were expiated, and I believe that he will return.”

“Yes,” said the reporter, “and I will add that he will return soon, for it is twelve years since Ayrton was abandoned.”

“Well!” answered Pencroft, “I agree with you that the nobleman will return, and soon too. But where will he touch? At Tabor Island, and not at Lincoln Island.”

“That is the more certain,” replied Herbert, “as Lincoln Island is not even marked on the map.”

“Therefore, my friends,” said the engineer, “we ought to take the necessary precautions for making our presence and that of Ayrton on Lincoln Island known at Tabor Island.”

“Certainly,” answered the reporter, “and nothing is easier than to place in the hut, which was Captain Grant’s and Ayrton’s dwelling, a notice which Lord Glenarvan and his crew cannot help finding, giving the position of our island.”

“It is a pity,” remarked the sailor, “that we forgot to take that precaution on our first visit to Tabor Island.”

“And why should we have done it?” asked Herbert. “At that time we did not know Ayrton’s history; we did not know that any one was likely to come some day to fetch him, and when we did know his history, the season was too advanced to allow us to return then to Tabor Island.”

“Yes,” replied Harding, “it was too late, and we must put off the voyage until next spring.”

“But suppose the Scotch yacht comes before that,” said Pencroft.

“That is not probable,” replied the engineer, “for Lord Glenarvan would not choose the winter season to venture into these seas. Either he has already returned to Tabor Island, since Ayrton has been with us, that is to say, during the last five months and has left again; or he will not come till later, and it will be time enough in the first fine October days to go to Tabor Island, and leave a notice there.”

“We must allow,” said Neb, “that it will be very unfortunate if the ‘Duncan’ has returned to these parts only a few months ago!”

“I hope that it is not so,” replied Cyrus Harding, “and that Heaven has not deprived us of the best chance which remains to us.”

“I think,” observed the reporter, “that at any rate we shall know what we have to depend on when we have been to Tabor Island, for if the yacht has returned there, they will necessarily have left some traces of their visit.”

“That is evident,” answered the engineer. “So then, my friends, since we have this chance of returning to our country, we must wait patiently, and if it is taken from us we shall see what will be best to do.”

“At any rate,” remarked Pencroft, “it is well understood that if we do leave Lincoln Island, it will not be because we were uncomfortable there!”

“No, Pencroft,” replied the engineer, “it will be because we are far from all that a man holds dearest in the world, his family, his friends, his native land!”

Matters being thus decided, the building of a vessel large enough to sail either to the Archipelagoes in the north, or to New Zealand in the west, was no longer talked of, and they busied themselves in their accustomed occupations, with a view to wintering a third time in Granite House.

However, it was agreed that before the stormy weather came on, their little vessel should be employed in making a voyage round the island. A complete survey of the coast had not yet been made, and the colonists had but an imperfect idea of the shore to the west and north, from the mouth of Falls River to the Mandible Capes, as well as of the narrow bay between them, which opened like a shark’s jaws.

The plan of this excursion was proposed by Pencroft, and Cyrus Harding fully acquiesced in it, for he himself wished to see this part of his domain.

The weather was variable, but the barometer did not fluctuate by sudden movements, and they could therefore count on tolerable weather. However, during the first week of April, after a sudden barometrical fall, a renewed rise was marked by a heavy gale of wind, lasting five or six days; then the needle of the instrument remained stationary at a height of twenty-nine inches and nine-tenths, and the weather appeared propitious for an excursion.

The departure was fixed for the 16th of April, and the “Bonadventure,” anchored in Port Balloon, was provisioned for a voyage which might be of some duration.

Cyrus Harding informed Ayrton of the projected expedition, and proposed that he should take part in it, but Ayrton preferring to remain on shore, it was decided that he should come to Granite House during the absence of his companions. Master Jup was ordered to keep him company, and made no remonstrance.

On the morning of the 16th of April all the colonists, including Top, embarked. A fine breeze blew from the south-west, and the “Bonadventure” tacked on leaving Port Balloon so as to

reach Reptile End. Of the ninety miles which the perimeter of the island measured, twenty included the south coast between the port and the promontory. The wind being right ahead it was necessary to hug the shore.

It took the whole day to reach the promontory, for the vessel on leaving port had only two hours of ebb tide and had therefore to make way for six hours against the flood. It was nightfall before the promontory was doubled.

The sailor then proposed to the engineer that they should continue sailing slowly with two reefs in the sail. But Harding preferred to anchor a few cable-lengths from the shore, so as to survey that part of the coast during the day. It was agreed also that as they were anxious for a minute exploration of the coast they should not sail during the night, but would always, when the weather permitted it, be at anchor near the shore.

The night was passed under the promontory, and the wind having fallen, nothing disturbed the silence. The passengers, with the exception of the sailor, scarcely slept as well on board the "Bonadventure" as they would have done in their rooms at Granite House, but they did sleep however. Pencroft set sail at break of day, and by going on the larboard tack they could keep close to the shore.

The colonists knew this beautiful wooded coast, since they had already explored it on foot, and yet it again excited their admiration. They coasted along as close in as possible, so as to notice everything, avoiding always the trunks of trees which floated here and there. Several times also they anchored, and Gideon Spilett took photographs of the superb scenery.

About noon the "Bonadventure" arrived at the mouth of Falls River. Beyond, on the left bank, a few scattered trees appeared, and three miles further even these dwindled into solitary groups among the western spurs of the mountain, whose arid ridge sloped down to the shore.

What a contrast between the northern and southern part of the coast! In proportion as one was woody and fertile so was the other rugged and barren! It might have been designated as one of those iron coasts, as they are called in some countries, and its wild confusion appeared to indicate that a sudden crystallization had been produced in the yet liquid basalt of some distant geological sea. These stupendous masses would have terrified the settlers if they had been cast at first on this part of the island! They had not been able to perceive the sinister aspect of this shore from the summit of Mount Franklin, for they overlooked it from too great a height, but viewed from the sea it presented a wild appearance which could not perhaps be equaled in any corner of the globe.

The "Bonadventure" sailed along this coast for the distance of half a mile. It was easy to see that it was composed of blocks of all sizes, from twenty to three hundred feet in height, and of all shapes, round like towers, prismatic like steeples, pyramidal like obelisks, conical like factory chimneys. An iceberg of the Polar seas could not have been more capricious in its terrible sublimity! Here, bridges were thrown from one rock to another; there, arches like those of a wave, into the depths of which the eye could not penetrate; in one place, large vaulted excavations presented a monumental aspect; in another, a crowd of columns, spires, and arches, such as no Gothic cathedral ever possessed. Every caprice of nature, still more varied than those of the imagination, appeared on this grand coast, which extended over a length of eight or nine miles.



Cyrus Harding and his companions gazed, with a feeling of surprise bordering on stupefaction. But, although they remained silent, Top, not being troubled with feelings of this sort, uttered barks which were repeated by the thousand echoes of the basaltic cliff. The engineer even observed that these barks had something strange in them, like those which the dog had uttered at the mouth of the well in Granite House.

“Let us go close in,” said he.

And the “Bonadventure” sailed as near as possible to the rocky shore. Perhaps some cave, which it would be advisable to explore, existed there? But Harding saw nothing, not a cavern, not a cleft which could serve as a retreat to any being whatever, for the foot of the cliff was washed by the surf. Soon Top’s barks ceased, and the vessel continued her course at a few cables-length from the coast.

In the northwest part of the island the shore became again flat and sandy. A few trees here and there rose above a low, marshy ground, which the colonists had already surveyed, and in violent contrast to the other desert shore, life was again manifested by the presence of myriads of water-fowl. That evening the “Bonadventure” anchored in a small bay to the north of the island, near the land, such was the depth of water there. The night passed quietly, for the breeze died away with the last light of day, and only rose again with the first streaks of dawn.

As it was easy to land, the usual hunters of the colony, that is to say, Herbert and Gideon Spilett, went for a ramble of two hours or so, and returned with several strings of wild duck and snipe. Top had done wonders, and not a bird had been lost, thanks to his zeal and cleverness.

At eight o’clock in the morning the “Bonadventure” set sail, and ran rapidly towards North Mandible Cape, for the wind was right astern and freshening rapidly.

“However,” observed Pencroft, “I should not be surprised if a gale came up from the west. Yesterday the sun set in a very red-looking horizon, and now, this morning, those mares-tails don’t forbode anything good.”

These mares-tails are cirrus clouds, scattered in the zenith, their height from the sea being less than five thousand feet. They look like light pieces of cotton wool, and their presence usually announces some sudden change in the weather.

“Well,” said Harding, “let us carry as much sail as possible, and run for shelter into Shark Gulf. I think that the ‘Bonadventure’ will be safe there.”

“Perfectly,” replied Pencroft, “and besides, the north coast is merely sand, very uninteresting to look at.”

“I shall not be sorry,” resumed the engineer, “to pass not only to-night but to-morrow in that bay, which is worth being carefully explored.”

“I think that we shall be obliged to do so, whether we like it or not,” answered Pencroft, “for the sky looks very threatening towards the west. Dirty weather is coming on!”

“At any rate we have a favorable wind for reaching Cape Mandible,” observed the reporter.

“A very fine wind,” replied the sailor; “but we must tack to enter the gulf, and I should like to see my way clear in these unknown quarters.”

“Quarters which appear to be filled with rocks,” added Herbert, “if we judge by what we saw on the south coast of Shark Gulf.”

“Pencroft,” said Cyrus Harding, “do as you think best, we will leave it to you.”

“Don’t make your mind uneasy, captain,” replied the sailor, “I shall not expose myself needlessly! I would rather a knife were run into my ribs than a sharp rock into those of my ‘Bonadventure!’”

That which Pencroft called ribs was the part of his vessel under water, and he valued it more than his own skin.

“What o’clock is it?” asked Pencroft.

“Ten o’clock,” replied Gideon Spilett.

“And what distance is it to the Cape, captain?”

“About fifteen miles,” replied the engineer.

“That’s a matter of two hours and a half,” said the sailor, “and we shall be off the Cape between twelve and one o’clock. Unluckily, the tide will be turning at that moment, and will be ebbing out of the gulf. I am afraid that it will be very difficult to get in, having both wind and tide against us.”

“And the more so that it is a full moon to-day,” remarked Herbert, “and these April tides are very strong.”

“Well, Pencroft,” asked Harding, “can you not anchor off the Cape?”

“Anchor near land, with bad weather coming on!” exclaimed the sailor. “What are you thinking of, captain? We should run aground, of a certainty!”

“What will you do then?”

“I shall try to keep in the offing until the flood, that is to say, till about seven in the evening, and if there is still light enough I will try to enter the gulf; if not, we must stand off and on during the night, and we will enter to-morrow at sunrise.”

“As I told you, Pencroft, we will leave it to you,” answered Harding.

“Ah!” said Pencroft, “if there was only a lighthouse on the coast, it would be much more convenient for sailors.”

“Yes,” replied Herbert, “and this time we shall have no obliging engineer to light a fire to guide us into port!”

“Why, indeed, my dear Cyrus,” said Spilett, “we have never thanked you; but frankly, without that fire we should never have been able—”

“A fire?” asked Harding, much astonished at the reporter’s words.

“We mean, captain,” answered Pencroft, “that on board the ‘Bonadventure’ we were very anxious during the few hours before our return, and we should have passed to windward of the island, if it had not been for the precaution you took of lighting a fire the night of the 19th of October, on Prospect Heights.”

“Yes, yes! That was a lucky idea of mine!” replied the engineer.

“And this time,” continued the sailor, “unless the idea occurs to Ayrton, there will be no one to do us that little service!”

“No! No one!” answered Cyrus Harding.

A few minutes after, finding himself alone in the bows of the vessel, with the reporter, the engineer bent down and whispered, —

“If there is one thing certain in this world, Spilett, it is that I never lighted any fire during the night of the 19th of October, neither on Prospect Heights nor on any other part of the island!”

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## THE WANDERER'S NECKLACE by H Rider Haggard

### Book II: Byzantium

#### Chapter III: Mother and Son

The next vision of this Byzantine life of mine that rises before me is that of a great round building crowned with men clad in bishops' robes. At least they wore mitres, and each of them had a crooked pastoral staff which in most cases was carried by an attendant monk.

Some debate was in progress, or rather raging. Its subject seemed to be as to whether images should or should not be worshipped in churches. It was a furious thing, that debate. One party to it were called Iconoclasts, that was the party which did not like images, and I think the other party were called Orthodox, but of this I am not sure. So furious was it that I, the general and governor of the prison, had been commanded by those in authority to attend in order to prevent violence. The beginnings of what happened I do not remember. What I do remember is that the anti-Iconoclasts, the party to which the Empress Irene belonged, that was therefore the fashionable sect, being, as it seemed to me, worsted in argument, fell back on violence.

There followed a great tumult, in which the spectators took part, and the strange sight was seen of priests and their partisans, and even of bishops themselves, falling upon their adversaries and beating them with whatever weapon was to hand; yes, even with their pastoral staves. It was a wonderful thing to behold, these ministers of the Christ of peace belabouring each other with pastoral staves!

The party that advocated the worship of images was the more numerous and had the greater number of adherents, and therefore those who thought otherwise were defeated. A few of them were dragged out into the street and killed by the mob which waited there, and more were wounded, notwithstanding all that I and the guards could do to protect them. Among the Iconoclasts was a gentle-faced old man with a long beard, one of the bishops from Egypt, who was named Barnabas. He had said little in the debate, which lasted for several days, and when he spoke his words were full of charity and kindness. Still, the image faction hated him, and when the final tumult began some of them set upon him. Indeed, one brawny, dark-faced bishop—I think it was he of Antioch—rushed at Barnabas, and before I could thrust him back, broke a jewelled staff upon his head, while other priests tore his robe from neck to shoulder and spat in his face.

At last the riot was quelled; the dead were borne away, and orders came to me that I was to convey Barnabas to the State prison if he still lived, together with some others, of whom I remember nothing. So thither I took Barnabas, and there, with the help of the prison physician—he to whom I had given the poisoned figs and the dead monkey to be examined—I nursed him back to life and health.

His illness was long, for one of the blows which he had received crippled him, and during it we talked much together. He was a very sweet-natured man and holy, a native of Britain, whose father or grandfather had been a Dane, and therefore there was a tie between us. In his youth he was a soldier. Having been taken prisoner in some war, he came to Italy, where he was ordained a priest at Rome. Afterwards he was sent as a missionary to Egypt, where he was appointed the head of a monastery, and in the end elected to a bishopric. But he had

never forgotten the Danish tongue, which his parents taught him as a child, and so we were able to talk together in that language.

Now it would seem that since that night when the Cæsar Nicephorus strove to hang himself, I had obtained and studied a copy of the Christian Scriptures—how I do not know—and therefore was able to discuss these matters with Barnabas the bishop. Of our arguments I remember nothing, save that I pointed out to him that whereas the tree seemed to me to be very good, its fruits were vile beyond imagination, and I instanced the horrible tumult when he had been wounded almost to death, not by common men, but by the very leaders of the Christians.

He answered that these things must happen; that Christ Himself had said He came to bring not peace but a sword, and that only through war and struggle would the last truth be reached. The spirit was always good, he added, but the flesh was always vile. These deeds were those of the flesh, which passed away, but the spirit remained pure and immortal.

The end of it was that under the teaching of the holy Barnabas, saint and martyr (for afterwards he was murdered by the followers of the false prophet, Mahomet), I became a Christian and a new man. Now at length I understood what grace it was that had given me courage to offer battle to the heathen god, Odin, and to smite him down. Now I saw also where shone the light which I had been seeking these many years. Aye, and I clasped that light to my bosom to be my lamp in life and death.

So a day came when my beloved master, Barnabas, who would allow no delay in this matter, baptised me in his cell with water taken from his drinking vessel, charging me to make public profession before the Church when opportunity should arise.

It was just at this time that Irene returned from the Baths, and I sent to her a written report of all that had happened at the prison since I had been appointed its governor. Also I prayed that if it were her will I might be relieved of my office, as it was one which did not please me.

A few days later, while I sat in my chamber at the prison writing a paper concerning a prisoner who had died, the porter at the gate announced that a messenger from the Augusta wished to see me. I bade him show in the messenger, and presently there entered no chamberlain or eunuch, but a woman wrapped in a dark cloak. When the man had gone and the door was shut, she threw off the cloak and I saw that my visitor was Martina, the favourite waiting-lady of the Empress. We greeted each other warmly, who were always friends, and I asked her tidings.

“My tidings are, Olaf, that the waters have suited the Augusta very well. She has lost several pounds in weight and her skin is now like that of a young child.”

“All health to the Augusta!” I said, laughing. “But you have not come here to tell me of the state of the royal skin. What next, Martina?”

“This, Olaf. The Empress has read your report with her own eyes, which is a rare thing for her to do. She said she wished to see whether or no you could write Greek. She is much pleased with the report, and told Stauracius in my presence that she had done well in choosing you for your office while she was absent from the city, since thereby she had saved the lives of the Cæsars and Nobilissimi, desiring as she does that these princes should be kept

alive, at any rate for the present. She accedes also to your prayer, and will relieve you of your office as soon as a new governor can be chosen. You are to return to guard her person, but with your rank of general confirmed."

"That is all good news, Martina; so good that I wonder what sting is hidden in all this honey."

"That you will find out presently, Olaf. One I can warn you of, however—the sting of jealousy. Advancement such as yours draws eyes to you, not all of them in love."

I nodded and she went on:

"Meantime your star seems to shine very bright indeed. One might almost say that the Augusta worshipped it, at least she talks of you to me continually, and once or twice was in half a mind to send for you to the Baths. Indeed, had it not been for reasons of State connected with your prisoners I think she would have done so."

"Ah!" I said, "now I think I begin to feel another sting in the honey."

"Another sting in the honey! Nay, nay, you mean a divine perfume, an essence of added sweetness, a flavour of the flowers on Mount Ida. Why, Olaf, if I were your enemy, as I dare say I shall be some day, for often we learn to hate those whom we have—rather liked, your head and your shoulders might bid good-bye to each other for such words as those."

"Perhaps, Martina; and if they did I do not know that it would greatly matter—now."

"Not greatly matter, when you are driving at full gallop along Fortune's road to Fame's temple with an Empress for your charioteer! Are you blind or mad, Olaf, or both? And what do you mean by your 'now'? Olaf, something has happened to you since last we met. Have you fallen in love with some fair prisoner in this hateful place and been repulsed? Such a fool as you are might take refusal even from a captive in his own hands. At least you are different."

"Yes, Martina, something has happened to me. I have become a Christian."

"Oh! Olaf, now I see that you are not a fool, as I thought, but very clever. Why, only yesterday the Augusta said to me—it was after she had read that report of yours—that if you were but a Christian she would be minded to lift you high indeed. But as you remained the most obstinate of heathens she did not see how it could be done without causing great trouble."

"Now I wish one could be a Christian within and remain a pagan without," I answered grimly; "though alas! that may not be. Martina, do you not understand that it was for no such reasons as these that I kissed the Cross; that in so doing I sought not fortune, but to be its servant?"

"By the Saints! you'll be tonsured next, and ill enough it would suit you," she exclaimed. "Remember, if things grow too—difficult, you can always be tonsured, Olaf. Only then you will have to give up the hope of that lady who wears the other half of the necklace somewhere. I don't mean Irene's sham half, but the real one. Oh! stop blushing and stammering, I know the story, and all about Iduna the Fair also. An exalted person told it me,

and so did you, although you were not aware that you had done so, for you are not one who can keep a secret to himself. May all the guardian angels help that necklace-lady if ever she should meet another lady whom I will not name. And now why do you talk so much? Are you learning to preach, or what? If you really do mean to become a monk, Olaf, there is another thing you must give up, and that is war, except of the kind which you saw at the Council the other day. God above us! what a sight it would be to see you battering another bishop with a hook-shaped staff over a question of images or the Two Natures. I should be sorry for that bishop. But you haven't told me who converted you."

"Barnabas of Egypt," I said.

"Oh! I hoped that it had been a lady saint; the story would have been so much more interesting to the Court. Well, our imperial mistress does not like Barnabas, because he does not like images, and that may be a sting in her honey. But perhaps she will forgive him for your sake. You'll have to worship images."

"What do I care about images? It is the spirit that I seek, Martina, and all these things are nothing."

"You are thorough, as usual, Olaf, and jump farther than you can see. Well, be advised and say naught for or against images. As they have no meaning for you, what can it matter if they are or are not there? Leave them to the blind eyes and little minds. And now I must be gone, who can listen to your gossip no longer. Oh! I had forgotten my message. The Augusta commands that you shall wait on her this evening immediately after she has supped. Hear and obey!"

Having delivered this formal mandate, to neglect which meant imprisonment, or worse, she threw her cloak about her, and with a wondering glance at my face, opened the door and went.

At the hour appointed, or, rather, somewhat before it, I attended at the private apartments of the palace. Evidently I was expected, for one of the chamberlains, on seeing me, bowed and bade me be seated, then left the ante-room. Presently the door opened again, and through it came Martina, clad in her white official robe.

"You are early, Olaf," she said, "like a lover who keeps a tryst. Well, it is always wise to meet good fortune half way. But why do you come clad in full armour? It is not the custom to wait thus upon the Empress at this hour when you are off duty."

"I thought that I was on duty, Martina."

"Then, as usual, you thought wrong. Take off that armour; she says that the sight of it always makes her feel cold after supper. I say take it off; or if you cannot, I will help you."

So the mail was removed, leaving me clad in my plain blue tunic and hose.

"Would you have me come before the Empress thus?" I asked.

By way of answer she clapped her hands and bade the eunuch who answered the signal to bring a certain robe. He went, and presently reappeared with a wondrous garment of silk

broidered with gold, such as nobles of high rank wore at festivals. This robe, which fitted as though it had been made for me, I put on, though I liked the look of it little. Martina would have had me even remove my sword, but I refused, saying:

“Except at the express order of the Empress, I and my sword are not parted.”

“Well, she said nothing about the sword, Olaf, so let it be. All she said was that I must be careful that the robe matched the colour of the necklace you wear. She cannot bear colours which jar upon each other, especially by lamp-light.”

“Am I a man,” I asked angrily, “or a beast being decked for sacrifice?”

“Fie, Olaf, have you not yet forgotten your heathen talk? Remember, I pray you, that you are now a Christian in a Christian land.”

“I thank you for reminding me of it,” I replied; and that moment a chamberlain, entering hurriedly, commanded my presence.

“Good luck to you, Olaf,” said Martina as I followed him. “Be sure to tell me the news later—or to-morrow.”

Then the chamberlain led me, not into the audience hall, as I had expected, but to the private imperial dining chamber. Here, reclining upon couches in the old Roman fashion, one on either side of a narrow table on which stood fruits and flagons of rich-hued Greek wine, were the two greatest people in the world, the Augusta Irene and the Augustus Constantine, her son.

She was wonderfully apparelled in a low-cut garment of white silk, over which fell a mantle of the imperial purple, and I noted that on her dazzling bosom hung that necklace of emerald beetles separated by golden shells which she had caused to be copied from my own. On her fair hair that grew low upon her forehead and was parted in the middle, she wore a diadem of gold in which were set emeralds to match the beetles of the necklace. The Augustus was arrayed in the festal garments of a Cæsar, also covered with a purple cloak. He was a heavy-faced and somewhat stupid-looking youth, dark-haired, like his father and uncles, but having large, blue, and not unkindly eyes. From his flushed face I gathered that he had drunk well of the strong Greek wine, and from the sullen look about his mouth that, as was common, he had been quarrelling with his mother.

I stood at the end of the table and saluted first the Empress and then the Emperor.

“Who’s this?” he asked, glancing at me.

“General Olaf, of my guard,” she answered, “Governor of the State Prison. You remember, you wished me to send for him to settle the point as to which we were arguing.”

“Oh! yes. Well, General Olaf, of my mother’s guard, have you not been told that you should salute the Augustus before the Augusta?”



“Sire,” I answered humbly, “I have heard nothing of that matter, but in the land where I was bred I was taught that if a man and a woman were together I must always bow first to the woman and then to the man.”

“Well said,” exclaimed the Empress, clapping her hands; but the Emperor answered: “Doubtless your mother taught you that, not your father. Next time you enter the imperial chamber be pleased to forget the lesson and to remember that Emperors and Empresses are not men and women.”

“Sire,” I answered, “as you command I will remember that Emperors and Empresses are not men and women, but Emperors and Empresses.”

At these words the Augustus began to scowl, but, changing his mind, laughed, as did his mother. He filled a gold cup with wine and pushed it towards me, saying:

“Drink to us, soldier, for after you have done so, our wits may be better matched.”

I took the cup and holding it, said:

“I pledge your Imperial Majesties, who shine upon the world like twin stars in the sky. All hail to your Majesties!” and I drank, but not too deep.

“You are clever,” growled the Augustus. “Well, keep the cup; you’ve earned it. Yet drain it first, man. You have scarce wet your lips. Do you fear that it is poisoned, as you say yonder fruits are?” And he pointed to a side-table, where stood a jar of glass in which were those very figs that had been sent to the princes in the prison.

“The cup you give is mine,” interrupted Irene; “still, my servant is welcome to the gift. It shall be sent to your quarters, General.”

“A soldier has no need of such gauds, your Majesties,” I began, when Constantine, who, while we spoke, had swallowed another draught of the strong wine, broke in angrily:

“May I not give a cup of gold but you must claim it, I to whom the Empire and all its wealth belong?”

Snatching up the beaker he dashed it to the floor, spilling the wine, of which I, who wished to keep my head cool, was glad.

“Have done,” he went on in his drunken rage. “Shall the Cæsars huckster over a piece of worked gold like Jews in a market? Give me those figs, man; I’ll settle the matter of this poison.”

I brought the jar of figs, and, bowing, set them down before him. That they were the same I knew, for the glass was labelled in my own writing and in that of the physician. He cut away the sealed parchment which was stretched over the mouth of the jar.

“Now hearken you, Olaf,” he said. “It is true that I ordered fruit to be sent to that fool-Cæsar, my uncle, because the last time I saw him Nicephorus prayed me for it, and I was willing to do him a pleasure. But that I ordered the fruit to be poisoned, as my mother says, is a lie, and

may God curse the tongue that spoke it. I will show you that it was a lie,” and plunging his hand into the spirit of the jar, he drew out two of the figs. “Now,” he went on, waving them about in a half-drunken fashion, “this General Olaf of yours says that these are the same figs which were sent to the Cæsar, I mean the blind priest, Father Nicephorus. Don’t you, Olaf?”

“Yes, Sire,” I answered, “they were placed in that bottle in my presence and sealed with my seal.”

“Well, those figs were sent by me, and this Olaf tells us they are poisoned. I’ll show him, and you too, mother, that they are not poisoned, for I will eat one of them.”

Now I looked at the Augusta, but she sat silent, her arms folded on her white bosom, her handsome face turned as it were to stone.

Constantine lifted the fig towards his loose mouth. Again I looked at the Augusta. Still she sat there like a statue, and it came into my mind that it was her purpose to allow this wine-bemused man to eat the fig. Then I acted.

“Augustus,” I said, “you must not touch that fruit,” and stepping forward I took it from his hand.

He sprang to his feet and began to revile me.

“You watch-dog of the North!” he shouted. “Do you dare to say to the Emperor that he shall not do this or that? By all the images my mother worships I’ll have you whipped through the Circus.”

“That you will never do,” I answered, for my free blood boiled at the insult. “I tell you, Sire,” I went on, leaving out certain words which I meant to speak, “that the fig is poisoned.”

“And I tell you that you lie, you heathen savage. See here! Either you eat that fig or I do, so that we may know who speaks the truth. If you won’t, I will. Now obey, or, by Christ! to-morrow you shall be shorter by a head.”

“The Augustus is pleased to threaten, which is unnecessary,” I remarked. “If I eat the fig, will the Augustus swear to leave the rest of them uneaten?”

“Aye,” he answered with a hiccough, “for then I shall know the truth, and for the truth I live, though,” he added, “I haven’t found it yet.”

“And if I do not eat it, will the Augustus do so?”

“By the Holy Blood, yes. I’ll eat a dozen of them. Am I one to be hectored by a woman and a barbarian? Eat, or I eat.”

“Good, Sire. It is better that a barbarian should die than that the world should lose its glorious Emperor. I eat, and when you are as I soon shall be, as will happen even to an emperor, may my blood lie heavy on your soul, the blood which I give to save your life.”

Then I lifted the fig to my lips.

Before ever it touched them, with a motion swift as that of a panther springing on its prey, Irene had leapt from her couch and dashed the fruit from my hand. She turned upon her son.

“What kind of a thing are you,” she asked, “who would suffer a brave man to poison himself that he may save your worthless life? Oh! God, what have I done that I should have given birth to such a hound? Whoever poisoned them, these fruits are poisoned, as has been proved and can be proved again, yes, and shall be. I tell you that if Olaf had tasted one of them by now he would have been dead or dying.”

Constantine drank another cup of wine, which, oddly enough, seemed to sober him for the moment.

“I find all this strange,” he said heavily. “You, my mother, would have suffered me to eat the fig which you declare is poisoned; a matter whereof you may know something. But when the General Olaf offers to eat it in my place, with your own royal hand you dash it from his lips, as he dashed it from mine. And there is another thing which is still more strange. This Olaf, who also says the figs are poisoned, offered to eat one of them if I promised I would not do so, which means, if he is right, that he offered to give his life for mine. Yet I have done nothing for him except call him hard names; and as he is your servant he has nothing to look for from me if I should win the fight with you at last. Now I have heard much talk of miracles, but this is the only one I have ever seen. Either Olaf is a liar, or he is a great man and a saint. He says, I am told, that the monkey which ate one of those figs died. Well, I never thought of it before, but there are more monkeys in the palace. Indeed, one lives on the terrace near by, for I fed it this afternoon. We’ll put the matter to the proof and learn of what stuff this Olaf is really made.”

On the table stood a silver bell, and as he spoke he struck it. A chamberlain entered and was ordered to bring in the monkey. He departed, and with incredible swiftness the beast and its keeper arrived. It was a large animal of the baboon tribe, famous throughout the palace for its tricks. Indeed, on entering, at a word from the man who led it, it bowed to all of us.

“Give your beast these,” said the Emperor, handing the keeper several of the figs.

The baboon took the fruits and, having sniffed at them, put them aside. Then the keeper fed it with some sweetmeats, which it caught and devoured, and presently, when its fears were allayed, threw it one of the figs, which it swallowed, doubtless thinking it a sweetmeat. A minute or two later it began to show signs of distress and shortly afterwards died in convulsions.

“Now,” said Irene, “now do you believe, my son?”

“Yes,” he answered, “I believe that there is a saint in Constantinople. Sir Saint, I salute you. You have saved my life and if it should come my way, by your brother saints! I’ll save yours, although you are my mother’s servant.”

So speaking, he drank off yet another cup of wine and reeled from the room.

The keeper, at a sign from Irene, lifted up the body of the dead ape and also left the chamber, weeping as he went, for he had loved this beast.

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