FOR 75 YEARS: THE UNIQUE MAGAZINE

Weird Tales®

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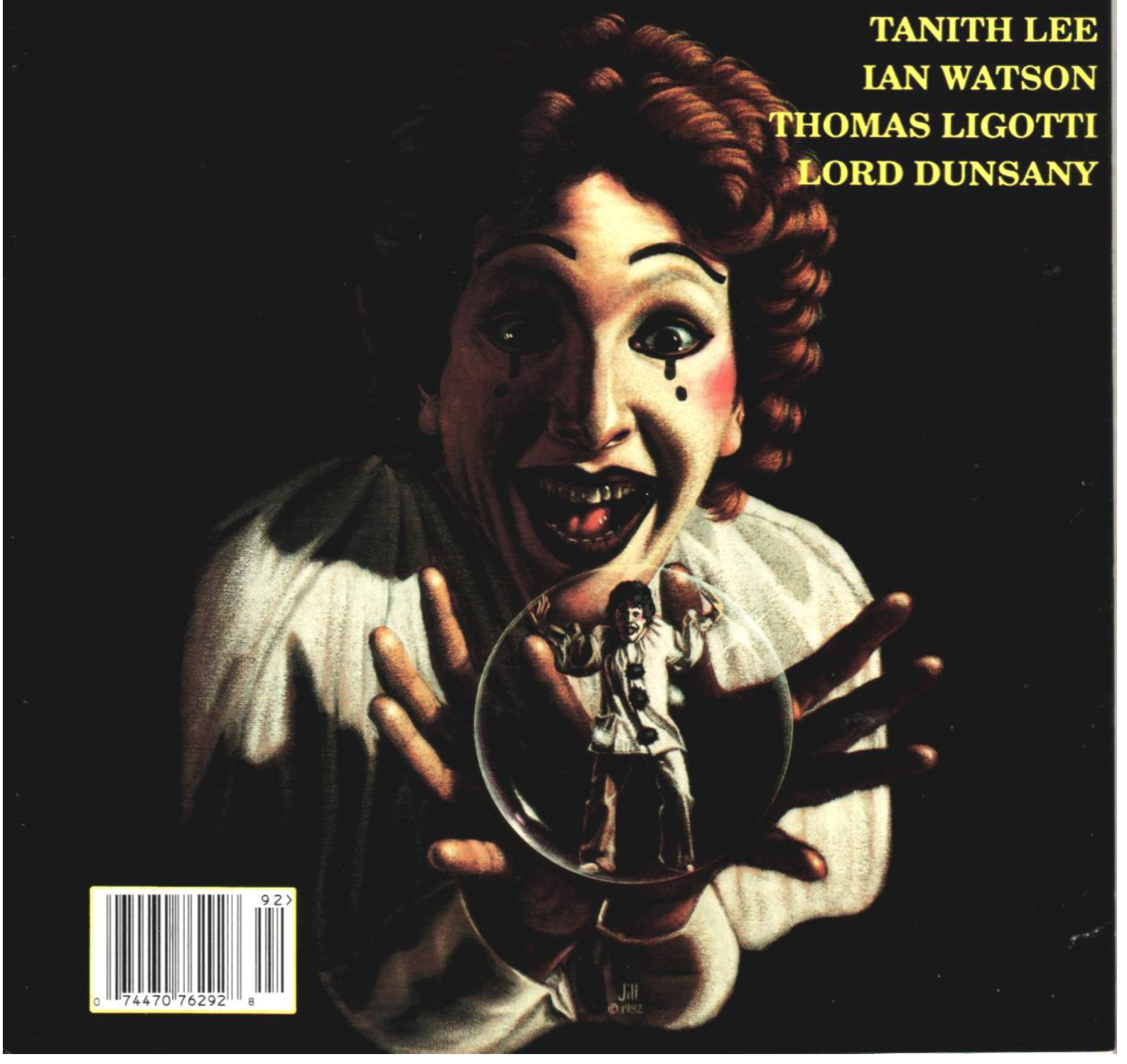

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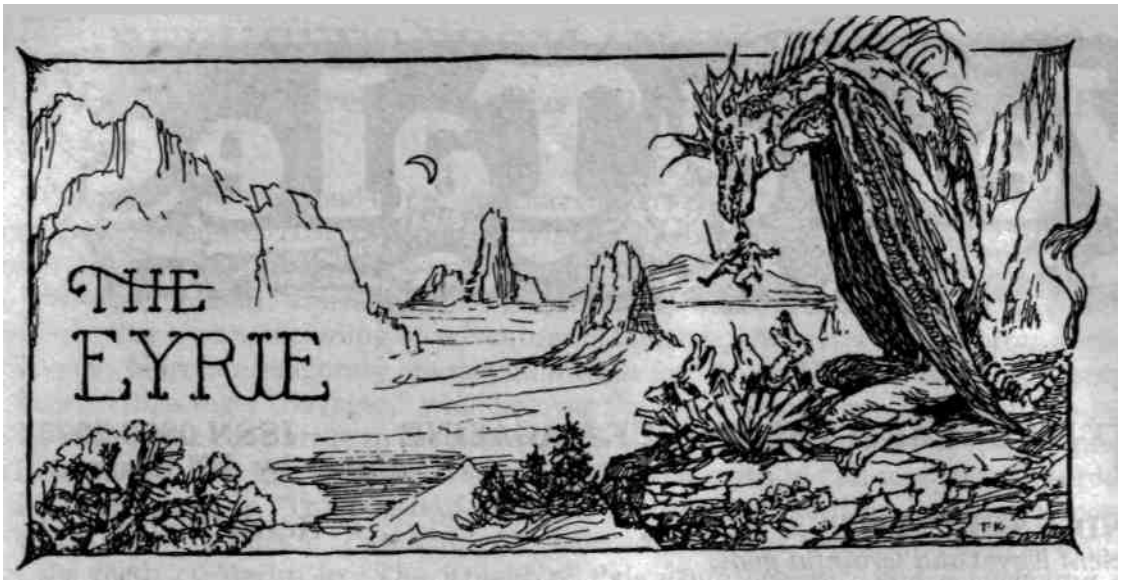

Portrait of the Editor as Patron of the Arts.

We don't have to agree with the opinion columns we run, but we confess we do by and large agree with S.T. Joshi's comments, later in this issue, on weird poetry. Poe, Clark Ashton Smith, Swinburne, Coleridge, Robert E. Howard, Walter de la Mare, and so many others once wrote magnificent ghostly, weird, imaginative verse, some of which (particularly in the 19th century) was as widely read as many novels are today. Now we ask: is poetry dead?

But at the same time we hear a certain Simon and Garfunkel song going through our collective editorial head, the one in which various pretentious types are asking one another questions about whether analysis is worthwhile or the theater is really dead. And once when we were a bit more pretentious than at present (and a whole lot younger) we parroted that very line to a theater person . . . and received the response that was deserved.

Our more mature conclusion is that while the metrical romance doesn't seem at all well these days, and cave painting is perhaps in decline, one gets into difficulty rather quickly when pronouncing any art form "dead," as long as even one single artist of ability is doing sincere work in the medium in question. The audience may be vanishingly small. But *dead* seems a little too final.

Let's say then that in 20th-century American culture, poetry has gone into hibernation. We think Joshi is right that it has declined to virtual irrelevance even among literary people, and we pretty much agree with his analysis of why. It's a standard challenge we offer: "Quote a famous American poem written in the past twenty years." You can't, because there aren't any. There aren't any famous poets either. Arguably Allen Ginsberg was the last, but more as a public figure than as an actual poet.

At the same time, as long as there are still poets out there and poems are still being written and (to whatever degree) published, then poetry isn't really dead.

But how many copies of the typical poetry collection are sold? How many just gather dust on university library shelves? Could it be that, in a country of 250 million people, poetry readers are, quite literally, one in a million? Is poetry read by anyone other than other poets?

Considering the circulation figures given for literary magazines in *Writer's Market,* then *Weird Tales*® is actually one of the most public outlets for poetry anywhere. Certainly for weird and fantastic poetry, we're just about the largest, and the highest paying. It gives us pause. What is to be done?

The answer is, we're going to go on publishing poetry. Since not everybody who reads *Weird Tales*® is a poet, here, at least, poetry is still read as it is supposed to be, by the public.

Maybe ours is a last redoubt; and poetry here is like some exquisite icon created at the Byzantine court just a few years before Constantinople fell to the Turks. The art of the Byzantine court

about A.D. 1450 was still perfectly valid on its own terms, even if only a handful of people ever saw it. Maybe somebody preserved that icon and it was appreciated centuries later. Certainly it was better to have created it than *not* to have done so.

This, then, is our rationale for fantastic poetry, however diminished its audience or appeal may be. This is why we make an extra effort to sponsor poetry.

It may be a bit much for us to claim to be *the* center of the Poetic Universe; we feel a certain sense of stewardship, if you will, without taking ourselves *too* seriously.

Okay, if we're in charge, here's our agenda: While Ezra Pound may have been one of the principal villains who overthrew 20th century English poetry, he did come up with a ringingly good phrase when he said (in *The ABC's of Reading)* that "poetry must be at least as well written as prose." That is to say, it must be lucid. It must (to use Mark Twain's phrase) say what it proposes to say rather than merely come close.

We absolutely reject the idea that poetry must be "difficult," deciphered rather than read, and that if we don't understand it, it must be profound. If we don't understand it, more likely the author hasn't expressed himself well enough.

We refuse to believe that poetry just flows spontaneously onto the paper. We believe in craft, even as we believe in the craft of the short story. A certain editor, for whom we have a great deal of respect, once told us that he never sent poets anything but rejection slips back with poems, because he never once was able to ask for a revision and get back a poem he could publish. Very slowly, indeed with all due respect, we have come to appreciate that this is not so. We are perfectly willing to say, "the last two lines are unclear," or "don't you need an extra syllable in line 14?" Sometimes we *have* been able to get revised poems back in publishable form. This is not, we suspect, because we are so much more editorially perceptive, but because, in the fantasy field, we are perhaps dealing with a different breed of poet, who regards his work as somewhat less ineffable.

For poetry to regain even an audience as large as that enjoyed by the short story, then, first, it must be held to higher standards of intelligibility than are found in general poetry magazines; and second, it must have emotional content. A poem is not a cypher. It is, more often, a lyric, which appeals directly to the emotions. It also should be (here, at least) genuinely imaginative. It should make us see or feel things we have not previously seen or felt. We are not interested in tired rhymes with the same old ghosts and monsters in them. For that matter, we do not insist on rhyme at all, only that if the poet attempts rhyme or meter, it be achieved. We will take a limerick, a sestina, blank verse, or free. Form is anything that works.

What we basically want is to provide a forum where, should a new Clark Ashton Smith arise, he'd find an audience. As long as that's possible, weird poetry isn't dead.

And speaking of Clark Ashton Smith, we apologize to Perry M. Grayson of Tsathoggua Press (6442 Pat Ave., West Hills CA 91307) for not mentioning until now the copy he sent us of Donald Sidney-Fryer's *Clark Ashton Smith: The Sorcerer Departs* (1997, $7.00). This is a revised version of a 1963 essay, which remains one of the best pieces of writing about this important figure, who is still almost wholly absent from standard literary reference works. It is a combination of biography and literary analysis, by an author who is himself a poet of no mean ability. (We're happy to say we've recently acquired a long poem by Mr. Sidney-Fryer for a future issue.) The booklet concludes with the poem of the same title by Smith, which aptly sums up the state of the field after Smith's death:

The sorcerer departs . . . and his high tower is drowned
Slowly by low flat communal seas that level all...

Maybe what we can do here at *Weird Tales*® is at least lower the water level a bit . . . Between Joshi's column, this response, and the more than usual number of poems we have managed to fit into this issue, we hope you enjoy this, our Special Weird Poetry Issue.

Another book we recommend. *The Timeless Tales of Reginald Bretnor,* published by Story Books (4732 Hunting Trail, Lake Worth FL 33467) is a 1000-copy limited edition, a posthumous gathering of many of the best fantastic stories by the late Mr. Bretnor, the inventor of Ferdinand Feghoot and Papa Schimmelhorn. It is a worth tribute, containing fifteen stories and an introduction by Poul Anderson, and sells for $12.95 a copy. One of Bretnor's last stories, "The Haunting of the H.M.S. Dryad," appeared posthumously in *Weird Tales*® #315.

We get letters ...:

The artist **George Barr** writes: *Just finished reading David Schow's "Gills." I laughed and loved it.... because there are parts of it that are so very nearly true.*

When I was living in Los Angeles (1968 to 1972) I got a call from a friend of mine, Bill Hedge, who was a prop maker, a sculptor, and an animator. He had just snagged an assignment to design and build a costume for a film called Octaman.

It was to be, of course, a creature-feature, and the creature was an octopus-like thing that menaced and killed people. Bill was a very skilled craftsman, but had no confidence in his ability to draw well enough to put across his ideas to a producer. He asked me to sketch out some concepts for him.

The thing that always bothered me about the gillman in The Creature from the Black Lagoon *was that, despite the beautiful detail of the costume, it was all too obviously a costume. I envisioned something that would crawl, all tentacled and squirmy, to — if possible — disguise the fact that it was a person beneath that writhing mass. I did drawings showing the overall look of the thing, where a man would fit into it, and how he would move in order to make his human-ness less obvious.*

. . . Bill asked me to go along to meet the producers. I don't remember both their names, but the one who did the majority of the talking was none other than Harry Essex, who, himself, had made the memorable The Creature from the Black Lagoon. He considered it his greatest triumph. It was not that he didn't understand my concept; it was that what I had envisioned was exactly the opposite of what he wanted: a huge, imposing, very man-like thing that would stalk about on two legs "tentacle-ing"people.

It did not good to explain that an octopus, being a mollusk, had no skeletal structure, nothing to support its weight out of the water... that even Ray Harryhausen's monstrous creature in It Came from Beneath the Sea, huge *as it was, probably could not have reached up out of the water to grasp the Golden Gate Bridge and flail about in the city. That would require bones. Mollusks don't have them.*

Essex shrugged that off, saying this was a "crossbreed" between octopus and man, and that its walking about and "tentacle-ing" people was essential to his story.

"Tentacle-ing," it turned out, was his word for the uncoiling and lashing out that this creature's arms must be able to do, in addition to one tentacle being (bones or not) sufficiently rigid to stab a man through the midsection.

Reminding myself that I was being paid to cater to his ideas, I hurried sketched out a creature which incorporated a little of both our concepts. No, he said; it wasn't sufficiently manlike.

So I gave it a huge, octopus-like head (with the mouth he adamantly insisted it have: a modified sucker I invented on the spot), welded four tentacles into legs, and left the thing with four arms for tentacle-ing people. He suggested it have scalelike plates on its abdomen, "like the gill man."

It soon became obvious that what he intended was, basically, a remake of The Creature from the Black Lagoon, *with a (slightly) different species and enough plot changes to make it seem (to him) like a new story.*

I went home, did a slightly more finished version of the approved idea, and gave it to Bill for Mr. Essex's okay. He got it. Then —I'm not exactly sure what happened. ...In any event, Bill turned the job over to a young friend, a teenager named Rick Baker. This talented kid, with his friend Doug Beswick, built the creature from foam rubber.... Then I heard no more about it... vague rumors that the film had been seen here or there...

Then, at a WesterCon in San Francisco, I met actor Kerwin Mathews, who had actually starred in the film. He had tactfully sidestepped the suggestion that we obtain a copy of Octaman *to show at the convention. He said it wasn't really very good, and laughingly suggested that it had never actually been released, but had "escaped." MacLeod is clearly meant to be an English football, Le. a soccer ball—not the American football shown in Allen Koszowski's illustrations. A small point, maybe, but it seriously distracted me from the tale.* To this we can only repeat (without excusing ourselves) the old adage that editing magazines is like assembling jigsaw puzzles against the clock. A hole in the issue appeared. The decision to include the story was made at the last moment. We called up Koszowski and said, "We need a couple spots of a football with eyes." The issue went together ... and nobody noticed, until now. Argh, to use a technical term . . .

Michael Mayhew points out the same failing, but still finds "The Family Football" *a wonderful piece of skewed, but perfectly thought-out world logic. I found myself caught up in, and totally accepting the plight of these middle-class lycan-thropes.* It's hardly Allen Koszowski's fault that we forgot to tell him what kind of football it was, but does this suggest that a thousand words is worth a picture? Mr. Mayhew also has high praise for Schow's "Gills" as "very witty and reminiscent of Robert Deveraux's writing," and he also had good things to say about "Movin' On," "Kill Me Hideously," and "The Giant Vorviades." Regarding the latter, he asks about the pronunciations of some of the imaginary names, to which we can only reply that since the names *are* imaginary, there is no "right" way to pronounce them. We tend to apply English phonetics with just a faint trace of foreign exoticism, but nothing even as elaborate as silent letters or dicritical marks. Thus: "Vorviades" is pronounced Voor-VIE-a-dees, the last syllable being like the Greek, "Herakles," etc. Sekenre, our popular 300-year-old adolescent sorcerer, has a name misspelled from the ancient Egyptian, which he probably pronounces "Sekh-EN-ray."

Bob Waterman writes, *...the Tanith Lee story, "Unlocking the Golden Cage" was my favorite. Her story had a lot of "atmosphere," and her attention to detail had me reaching for a dictionary a couple of times. It took me into another world, a time I could escape to, and stories set before 1900 seem to make this possible for me. The fantastic seems more possible to me in settings before 1900. When I think of the category "Weird Tale," I think of Gothic images, candles, shadows, gloom, architecture, mist, dread, fear, high ceilings, and a deep personal loss, either physical or mental; from within or without.* This of course opens a very large aesthetic argument. Writers as diverse as Lovecraft, Fritz Leiber, and Stephen King have done very well with horrors appearing in the immediate, contemporary world. Bram Stoker got to have it both ways by setting the first four chapters of *Dracula* in remote Transylvania, then bringing his monster back home *to* London.

Elaine Weaver passed on an amusing comment from a family member who saw her reading Ramsey Campbell's "Kill Me Hideously," which was, *must be* a *love story.* Mr. Campbell would probably nod sagely, smile with just a hint of amused menace and say, "Well, yes."

The Most Popular story in issue 315, a little bit, but not all that much to our chagrin, as if we were the host who just upstaged all our own guests, turned out to be Darrell Schweitzer's "The Giant Vorviades," which narrowly edged out Ramsey Campbell's "Kill Me Hideously" and Tanith Lee's "Unlocking the Golden Cage," which tied for second place. These three were well ahead of the rest. Third place goes to John Gregory Betancourt for "Sympathy for Zombies."

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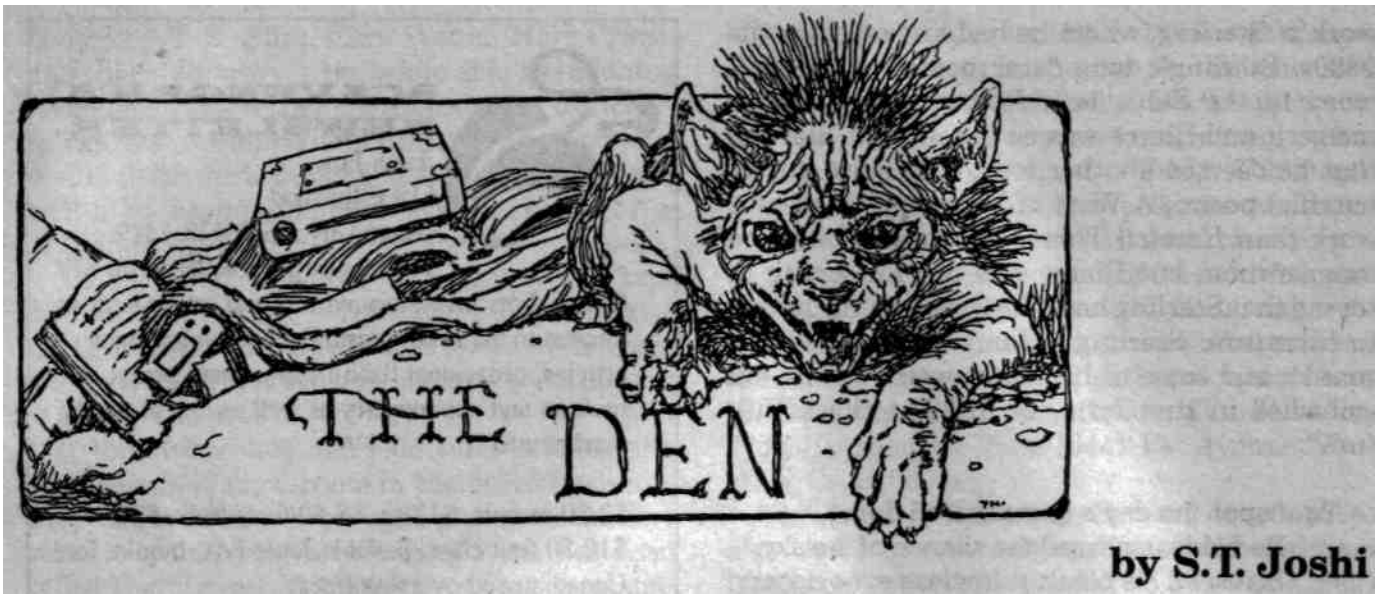


The subject of weird poetry appears today to be little discussed, and the poetry itself little read, for a variety of reasons having much to do with the overall status of poetry in our society. We need hardly be told that poetry has been, for long periods in Western history, not merely the dominant but in some cases the only mode of literary expression; so how has it come about that poetry is now so little a part of even the literate person's cultural baggage? Modern poetry seems utterly irrelevant to our present-day concerns, and most of us would be at a loss to name even a single contemporary poet who could authentically be called great. Is it that we have become insensitive to poetry, or that the poets themselves (as Lord Dunsany, unremittingly hostile to the tendencies of modern poetry, famously put it) have "failed in their duty" to express their age in a way that readers can understand? My own view is strongly on the side of Dunsany, as I will hope to explain as this column progresses.

But the domain of poetry offers much that can satisfy the devotee of the weird. Certainly, the pedigree of the fantastic in poetry is as old as poetry itself, if such instances in classical verse as Odysseus' descent into the underworld *(Odyssey,* Book 9), the various grisly or horrific scenes in ancient tragedy (Oedipus' self-blinding in Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex,* the deaths of Creon and his daughter in Euripides' *Medea,* and many scenes in the Roman playwright Seneca's tragedies), and Catullus' mad "Attis poem" (in which that hapless demigod castrates himself out of frustrated love for his own mother, Cybele) attest. Moving several centuries forward, we find the Romantic poets revelling in the weird — Coleridge's imperishable *Rime of the Ancient Mariner,* Keats's *Lamia,* the spectral ballads of Thomas Moore and James Hogg, and so many others, culminating in the small but immensely influential body of Poe's verse, which was nearly as great a landmark in our field as his short fiction. Much of the best of this work can be found, of course, in August Derleth's compilation *Dark of the Moon* (Arkham House, 1947), although recent research has revealed that many of the selections were in fact made by Donald Wandrei, who was much more knowledgeable in the history of English poetry than Derleth was. I had once thought that, aside from the omission of *Lamia* and some other items I will mention presently, *Dark of the Moon* was well-nigh definitive; but my colleague Dan Clore is at work on an anthology of 17th-, 18th-, and 19th-century weird poetry whose selections will differ significantly from Derleth, and will unearth much meritorious work from such writers as Emily Dickinson, Thomas Hardy, and others not included in *Dark of the Moon.*

Two of the most noted omissions from the Derleth anthology were the weird poems of Ambrose Bierce (1842-1914?) and his pupil, George Sterling (1869-1926). Bierce, of course, was primarily a satirist, both in prose and verse; and the two large volumes of his *Collected Works* (1909-12) devoted to his poetry contain only a relatively small number of items that could be labelled weird. But among them are several distinctive dream-fantasies, several futuristic poems, and a number of cosmic verses that dimly anticipate the work of some of his successors. It was probably these last items that led Bierce to embrace the work of Sterling, whom he had known

since the 1890s. Sterling's long "star poem," *The Testimony of the Suns,* is indeed a riot of cosmic imagery, and Bierce was so taken with Sterling that he deemed another long (and more purely horrific) poem, "A Wine of Wizardry," a greater work than *Hamlet!* This is of course a bit of an exaggeration, but Bierce was not far wrong in saying that Sterling had added something unique to literature. Sterling became a master of the sonnet, and some of his finest weird effects are embodied in that form, as in "The Black Vulture":

> Aloof upon the day's unmeasured dome, He holds unshared the silence of the sky. Far down his bleak, relentless eyes descry The eagle's empire and the falcon's home — Far down, the galleons of sunset roam;
> His hazards on the sea of morning lie; Serene, he hears the broken tempest sigh Where cold sierras gleam like scattered foam.
>
> And least of all he holds the human swarm — Unwitting now that envious men prepare To make their dream and its fulfilment one, When, poised above the caldrons of the storm, Their hearts, contemptuous of death shall dare
> His roads between the thunder and the sun.

Is it any wonder that Sterling himself served as the mentor of the young Clark Ashton Smith (1893-1961) when the latter hesitantly showed his early poems to "the poet laureate of San Francisco" in 1911? It was Sterling who, as Bierce had done before him, tutored Smith in the niceties of meter, diction, imagery, and symbolism; Sterling who shepherded Smith's early volumes of poetry, from *The Star-Treader* (1912) to *Sandalwood* (1925), into print; Sterling whose suicide in 1926 was so traumatic to Smith that it was perhaps a significant factor in his shift away from poetry to prose fiction in the later 1920s. Clark Ashton Smith is not merely the finest weird poet of all time, but, if there is any justice in the world, one of the finest American poets of the century, and his *Selected Poems* (Arkham House, 1971) would be regarded as a landmark if literary history had not taken a very different direction at the very time that Sterling and Smith were producing their best work.

The 1920s is currently remembered as the era of Modernism; one would like to think that in the distant future it will be judged as the period when literature and perhaps other arts took a wrong turn that has condemned entire branches of aesthetics to irrelevance. Poetry is one of these. Whereas Sterling, Smith, and other conservative poets of their day still found strength and inspiration (as all artists up to their time had done) in the great work of the past — specifically, the poetry of Keats, Shelley, and Swinburne — the Modernists were so overwhelmed by the cultural heritage of prior ages that they felt that only a complete break from the past could cause their work to be "original" and vital. They failed to observe Ambrose Bierce's dictum: "The best innovation is superior excellence. The great men are those who excel in their art as they find it; the revolutionaries are commonly second and third rate men — and they do not revolutionize anything." We all know the result. Poetry fundamentally split into two types: one type, headed by William Carlos Williams (with posthumous support from Walt Whitman), regarded conventional metrical poetry as too restrictive, and so poetry became more like prose, and in many instances indistinguishable from it; another type was embodied by T. S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, Hart Crane, and their followers, who, while also abandoning formal metre, felt that poetry must be "difficult" to express a complex and difficult age, and as a result their work became esoteric, obscure, and well-nigh incomprehensible even to the majority of literate readers.

To my mind, however, if poetry is not kept distinct from prose — not merely in terms of rhythm and metre, but also in terms of imagery, metaphor, and symbolism — then it is nothing. It is simply bad prose.

If the Modernists had paid some attention to their humble fellow-poets in the weird tradition, they might not have brought poetry to the dire state it is in. Many members of what has been called the "Lovecraft circle" produced outstanding verse, and did so very largely because they adhered to traditional metrical forms; but they also filled their poetry with the pungent metaphors and images that create an unbridgeable gap between verse and prose and render poetry the highest expression of the human aesthetic sense.

Lovecraft himself was by no means the leading poet of his own literary circle, and he knew it. Setting Clark Ashton Smith aside as an unapproachable pinnacle, Lovecraft's verse cannot even

be judged comparable to that of some of his younger colleagues, whom he far outstripped in prose fiction. My edition of Lovecraft's *Fantastic Poetry* (Necronomicon Press, 1990, 1993) does contain a modicum of good work; but my forthcoming edition of Lovecraft's *The Ancient Track: Complete Poetical Works* (Necronomicon Press) — which will include even scraps of verse buried in published and unpublished letters — will be of interest only because we long ago reached the stage where every word of Lovecraft's, good or bad, is of some interest.

Donald Wandrei (1908-1987) perhaps ranks second only to Smith as a weird poet. He himself was thrilled by Smith's *Ebony and Crystal* when he read it in 1923, and he began corresponding with Smith the next year — two years before he ever came in touch with Lovecraft. Wandrei's two early volumes of poetry, *Ecstasy* (1928) and *Dark Odyssey* (1931), are choice items for the collector; scarcely less so is his *Poems for Midnight* (Arkham House, 1964), with its 750-copy print run. That volume, however, failed to include several poems from his earlier collections, as well as a number of uncollected poems, necessitating my edition of his *Collected Poems* (Necronomicon Press, 1988).

Frank Belknap Long (1901-1994) was also an able poet, although his output was slimmer and more uneven than Wandrei's. He too produced two early collections of poetry much sought after by the collector, *A Man from Genoa* (1926) and *The Goblin Tower* (1935; typeset by Lovecraft and R. H. Barlow), as well as a later gathering of his best work, *In Mayan Splendor* (Arkham House, 1977). But like Wandrei, Long omitted a number of his poems from this volume, and the remainder have now been gathered up in Perry M. Grayson's 1995 compilation, *The Darkling Tide* (Tsathoggua Press [6442 Pat Avenue, West Hills, CA 91307]).

The verse of Robert E. Howard (1906-1936) also deserves mention, and the slim Arkham House collection *Always Comes Evening* (1957) gathers only a small proportion of it. Howard's verse may be as voluminous as Lovecraft's, and it deserves to be assembled.

The members of the Lovecraft circle did their best poetic work in the 1920s and 1930s. Smith, of course (although in this context it is unfair to consider him in any sense a satellite of Lovecraft), went on to great work well into the 1950s. It is a shame that Derleth (himself a noted poet, although not primarily in the weird vein) delayed publication of Smith's *Selected Poems* for so long: Smith had completed assembling the volume by 1949, but Arkham House's financial difficulties of the 1950s, along with the general difficulty of selling large volumes of poetry, delayed publication until 1971, years after Smith's own death and just prior to Derleth's own. Hundreds of Smith's poems remain uncollected and unpublished, and it would probably require two or three large volumes to gather them all. David E. Schultz has long been at work on such a project, and we hope not merely that he can finish the job soon, but that some publisher will have the sense to issue it.

Since Smith's heyday, no one has attained to his eminence as a weird poet. Joseph Payne Brennan (1918-1990) did creditable work, and his *Sixty Selected Poems* (New Establishment Press, 1985) is an admirable volume. Arkham House has continued to issue limited editions of various poets, among them Stanley McNail and Donald Sidney-Fryer. McNail's *Something Breathing* (1965) was reissued in an expanded edition in 1987 by Embassy Hall Editions (Berkeley, CA), while Sidney-Fryer's *Songs and Sonnets Atlantean* (1972) is already two and a half decades old, and the author has done much good work in the interim; let us hope that his recent verse may appear soon. Of recent Arkham House volumes of poetry, perhaps only Richard L. Tierney's *Collected Poems* (1981) is noteworthy. G. Sutton Breiding, Bruce Boston, and many others in the small press have produced fine work, but their poetry is little read outside of a small band of devotees.

Now, however, two relatively young poets have stepped forward to claim the mantle of Sterling, Smith, and Wandrei. Their work in many ways reflects the dichotomy we find in modern poetry in general.

Keith Allen Daniels' *Satan Is a Mathematician: Poems of the Weird, Surreal and Fantastic* is issued by his Anamnesis Press (PO. Box 51115, Palo Alto, CA 94303; their e-mail address is anamnesis@compuserve.com; $12.95), while Brett Rutherford has brought out *Whippoorwill Road* through Grim Reaper Books, a subdivision of his The Poet's Press (175 Fifth Avenue #2424, New York, NY 10010; $24.95). These are not either poet's first book by any means: Daniels made his debut with the exceptional volume *What Rough Book* (Anamnesis Press, 1992), while *Whippoorwill Road* gathers together the weird verse from Rutherford's many previous volumes. They are comparable in many ways, contrasting in others, and perhaps most

interesting in exhibiting both the virtues and the failings of the modern poetic muse.

In his somewhat aggressive introduction Daniels resurrects the argument from C. P. Snow's lecture *The Two Cultures* — lamenting the intellectual cleavage between the humanities and the sciences — and hopes that his work can do its small part to bridge the gap. Daniels himself has a "daylight career in polymer science and engineering," and his back cover boasts a blurb from Roald Hoffmann, a Nobel laureate in chemistry. It is all very good to attempt to infuse the findings of science with poetic feeling, but I am not sure that Daniels has found the proper way of doing it. Consider the opening lines of "Bight of Sonic Blasters":

> In benthic valleys where cetaceans wail, half hidden by the veils of filtered sight, with *gonyaulax* polluting every scale and vesicle inherent in the bight of sonic blasters ...

I suppose Daniels would simply call me ignorant for not knowing the meanings of several of the scientific words used here, but I think there is a greater underlying problem that he fails to see: the plain fact that many scientific terms do not have sufficient poetic resonance to generate a poetic response. Much of Daniels' work in this volume is opaque (thereby *embodying* the *second type* of Modernism I outlined above), not merely because of the abundance of unexplained scientific terms, but because Daniels has resolved upon a tortured and contrived manner of utterance that defies comprehension by even the most alert reader.

I hope I am not revealing my prejudices when I say that almost all the memorable and notable poems in *Satan Is a Mathematician* (and there are many) are those that follow strict metrical schemes. In this book there are some uncommonly fine sonnets, as well as poems written in pentameter blank verse, regular quatrains, and the like. And Daniels has learned the all-important secret of verse: that the message must be conveyed by means of imagery, metaphor, and symbolism rather than by plain statement. Consider a few simple lines from one of the finest of the poems, a series called "Sciomancy Nights." One section, "An Evening with Aldous Huxley," has the following: [he] knew... that dying's just a glitch, a transitory bummer in the now of being.

The range of tone in the book — from pensive reflection to tart satire to cosmic fantasy to outrageous humor and grotesquerie — is notable. If one could prevail upon Daniels to be a trifle less esoteric, then one might confidently predict that he is on the way to becoming a not unworthy successor to his idol, Clark Ashton Smith.

The first thing that strikes us about *Whippor-will Road* is that it is a superlative job of book production, in the finest tradition of Thomas Bird Mosher and Roy A. Squires. Rutherford himself notes: "The binding is done by hand, employing gluing, side sewing, and a cloth-reinforced spine. The outer wraparound covers are made from hand-made or artists' papers." And much of the contents fully equals the meticulous quality of the physical product.

Rutherford embodies the first type of Modernism I enunciated above, in which the rhythmical distinction between prose and verse is muted, and sometimes disappears altogether. Many of the poems are, I regret to say, nothing but prose. But there are enough genuine poems to redeem the volume. In the remarkable "Fete" (Rutherford's own favorite poem) we find not only the striking expression "I am Love's Antichrist" but the following flawless stanza:

> I cough a cloud and let it blot the moon so that no distant star may hear and mock the oath that is sworn in the hidden copse. Here! now even fireflies are dimming out, now ravens avert their ebony orbs, now sputter and die, ye will o' the wisp! Not even a random thought can penetrate this furry arbor of my wretchedness.

Or this from "He's Going to Kill Me Tonight":

> Midnight. The Reaper's shift begins. The minute hand tips past Reason, careens into Murder's tithe of night.

The division of the poems into loosely thematic groupings is singularly felicitous, with the result that each poem strengthens or adds color to the others, and all gain a cumulative power by adroit juxtaposition. Perhaps the only drawback in the book is an unwarrantedly lengthy section at the

back in which Rutherford, telling of the genesis of the poems, leaves himself open to charges of self-praise by the tenor of some of his remarks. Poets should resist the temptation to comment on their own work — at least in the manner that Rutherford does. But this is a small flaw in an otherwise highly creditable volume.

Why is it that poetry is no longer read? Why is it that there are, quite literally, more poets than readers of poetry? Some of it has to do with education: the schools do not teach the appreciation of poetry anymore. A large part of it has to do with the tendencies of modern poetry, which have alienated many potential readers with obscurity or prosiness. But weird verse has been inherently conservative, and appears to draw its greatest strengths from that circumstance. It is perhaps too early to state that poetry is a dying art; but we can at least maintain with confidence that, with poets like Keith Allen Daniels and Brett Rutherford, weird verse will continue to flourish for some time.

Two new books relating to Lovecraft call for some notice. *Lovecraft Remembered* (Arkham House, 1998; $29.95) is Peter Cannon's magisterial compilation of memoirs of the Providence writer, culled not only from previous Arkham House books but many other sources. Containing 65 items divided into seven broad categories, the book also features an incisive introduction and introductory notes to each of the sections by Cannon. No memoir of importance has been left out, and the volume can be regarded as well-nigh definitive. A striking dust jacket by Jason C. Eckhardt is the capstone to a book whose attractiveness in typeface, design, and binding is exemplary.

Still more physically sumptuous is *In Lovecraft's Shadow: The Cthulhu Mythos Stories of August Derleth* (Mycroft & Moran, 1998; $59.95), edited by Joseph Wrzos. Its chief feature is an array of superb illustrations by Stephen E. Fabian, along with a vivid color cover. Of the actual contents of the volume I am not much inclined to speak: Derleth seriously misconstrued the bases, and in some cases the details, of Lovecraft's pseudomythology, and in any event his stories are simply of poor quality as gauged by common standards of plotting, character description, and style.

The title of the book is therefore apt: Derleth is clearly in Lovecraft's shadow and likely to remain there. But Fabian's illustrations are in themselves worth the price of admission. ***Q***

DAGGERS AND A SERPENT

by Keith Taylor illustrated by Stephen E. Fabian

The raiders came out of the desert like a sudden storm that whirled against Anubis's temple. Despite its high walls and pyloned gateways, it was no fortress. The Libyan savages swarmed over the walls of the outer court in moments, avid for plunder. In a moment more they had opened the bronze-hinged cedar gates. The guards who sought to stop them were speared or clubbed down, and their blood flowed in dark streams.

Other raiders rushed through the open gates to join the desert men. This second group sweated in ribbed horsehair corselets and padded caps with swinging tassels. Better disciplined than the naked tribesmen, they trotted forward under the weight of a long bronze-headed ram. From above, on the walls, their ram looked like a stiff-bodied centipede with sixty fateful legs.

Wheels rumbling, a war-chariot drove into the public courtyard. Its naked driver reined the horses back, while his passenger raised a hand and shouted orders. Lean, forceful, he wore a red pleated kilt and headcloth. The bearing of a prince marked him out — but a prince of bandits.

His soldiers swung back the ram, then heaved it forward to crash on the gates of the roofed inner court, which was not accessible to climbers. The whole building boomed like a drum. Within, priests, priestesses, servitors, and scribes milled in confused terror. Most hardly believed it was happening. Temples were not attacked in Egypt ... it never occurred . ..

The second set of gates burst in. Libyans and men-at-arms charged together, yelling. The soldiers had been drugged with a potion that excited them to fury, as well as numbing their souls to fear of the gods; and they had been brutal men before drinking their lord's potion. Here was slaughter, the smell of new blood. Here before them lay victims and loot. The Libyans had their own gods, and in any case were outright bandits to whom anything in Egypt was fair plunder. They would slay and rob their present allies joyfully if a chance ever came. Surging through the smashed gates, they all behaved alike.

Wide-bladed spears sank into bellies, to be twisted and yanked back, spilling gore. Axes swung down on shaven heads. Eyes bleary with sleep and wide with consternation bulged in the horrified realization of death, then saw nothing. The priestesses and other temple women suffered worse. Their screams rose on the night wind and were silenced in the end by knives.

Bloody excitement stirred the man in the chariot as he watched, though he tried to conceal it beneath a haughty bearing. His father had impressed upon him firmly that this was business. He decided, reluctantly, that these creatures had enjoyed themselves for long enough. Driving among them, he swung a long-lashed whip and called harshly for discipline. Soldiers and Libyans alike shrank from the lash as though it was something immeasurably more dreadful, pressing against the courtyard walls to avoid it.

"Empty the store-rooms," the man commanded loudly. "Strip the place of gold and precious stones. I will see to the shrine."

The captain of soldiers saluted. "Yes, lord."

They scurried to obey. Stepping down from his chariot, the leader stalked through the temple's vestibule, a tall figure muscled like a hunter of lions — which he had been from boyhood. Of lions, and women, and power.

At the entrance to the inner shrine, he did not even hesitate before parting the rich hangings.

Murals of Anubis covered the walls. Here he embalmed a body with meticulous patience, there he performed the ceremony of restoring the senses — "opening the mouth" — on an upright mummy, elsewhere he guided the soul to the afterworld. These were his functions as god of the dead, the Lord of Tombs. The man in red smiled scornfully.

His glance moved to the diorite image of Anubis, with its golden kilt and jewelled trappings. The Announcer carried daggers. Around his forearm coiled a viper, the ancient instrument of death for a Pharoah. His head, traditionally, was that of a jackal, with snout and pointed ears.

Before the image stood a lean old priest. He peered like a mole in the yellow lamp-light. The

intruder supposed there was little chance of this one recognising him, despite his noble rank, not that it mattered. Probably all he saw was a blurred figure.

"You are doomed beyond hope," the priest said in a surprisingly steady voice. "Do you not fear?"

"What? This?" The bandit leader waved an arm at the jackal-headed image of black diorite. "None of it has moved me since I was a boy, old priest. I should fear to strike against a temple of Amun-Ra, since he is revered by the Pharoah, and holds the great power of being in fashion. Likewise Osiris, who is both royal and beloved. But the jackals. No one remembers him while the blood runs hot, only when their time comes to die — and his Arch-Priest is not close to the circles of power. I have no fear."

"Then as well as a murderer, you are a fool. The Arch-Priest of Anubis is the greatest magician in all of Kheml. I do not pity your doom; you have earned it. But I pity your ignorance."

"Indeed." The man in red smiled mockingly — but his eyes flashed with stung conceit. He was young.

He shook out the lash of his whip and struck with it. Cubits of thin braided leather coiled around the old priest's body. The intruder uttered the words of a spell that made his throat vibrate, brief though it was. Then he loosened the whip with a motion of his arm and pulled it back.

The priest made a ghastly noise. Worse ones followed, though they did not issue from his mouth. His head began to twist inexorably on his neck. He tottered, then fell, as his legs turned around in the same way, with the hideous cracklings and tearings of complete dislocation at the hips. Muscles stood out in distortion through his skin.

After an excessively long while, he lay still on the floor of the inner shrine. His eyes stared at the dark ceiling, and his skinny toes pointed in the same direction, yet he did not lie on his back. His knobbed spine and shrunken buttocks faced upward, while his belly pressed against the floor, in a disconcerting and abhorrent reversal.

Traces of revulsion even touched the man in red, though morbid curiosity and the thrill of lethal power were far more strongly felt. He worked his shoulders back and forth as though to release tension. Then he briskly tore headdress, armlets, collar, belt, and golden kilt from the statue of Anubis. Quenching the golden lamps, he tore them down, thrusting them into a sack with his other plunder. Leaving, he ordered a minion to take the precious hangings from the doorway.

A plain massive barge waited at the water-side to receive the loot. The brigand-noble supervised the loading to be sure that no one cheated. His whip trailed freely from his hand.

"Greatest magician in all of Khem," he repeated, smiling ironically. "Yes, I have heard that, Kamose, you whom sots and fools call Satni-Kamose. I have heard that and other rumours, too. But what charlatan does not make such claims?"

The barge sat low in the water as it moved out from the temple quay. People who might have come running from nearby villages chose to hide their heads and see nothing. The barge moved down a well-maintained canal towards the Nile. Looking back, the man in red saw the Libyans moving into the desert by the light of the temple's blazing gates. He dryly commended them to the care of their father Set.

A good night's work. My father plans the attack. I lead it. The Libyans, conveniently out of reach, take all the blame but a lesser share of the plunder. Let the upstart Kamose find the truth, if he is such a master of the sorcerous arts.

II.

"Shape of the black crocodile? May their bodies be accursed! May the destruction of Set fall upon them! They shall eat no food in the after-world,their names shall be expunged from life, they shall belong to the Devourer!"

The outburst of passion ended. Kamose, Arch-Priest of Anubis, returned to his ebony chair and sat brooding in anger. His linen robe hung in two parts from his upper body, he having torn

it to the waist when he heard the news of the temple sack. The messenger who had brought those abominable tidings remained kneeling, discreetly quiet.

Kamose repressed his fury to a contained seething. *"Who?"*

"Savages from the west, holy one. Desert men. Libyans.

"So." Kamose looked again at the written report he had been given, his eyes and mind now intent; rage gained nothing. It made a man a fool. "Those children of darkness."

The missive was not in formal heiroglyphs. Kamose deigned to read it anyhow, a sign of his outrage. He twice studied the passage which described the condition of his subordinate priest's body, with the head and legs twisted backwards.

"You may leave," he told the messenger. "Say to my major-domo that I command food, drink, and raiment for you, after a bath."

Sitting alone, he considered the atrocity. Kamose was tall, with an air of sombre but great vitality, muscled more like a soldier than a priest. His hands and skin, however, were definitely those of a scribe. He carried Syrian blood from his grandmother; it showed in his blade of a nose and narrow, somewhat tilted eyes. Kamose shaved his head and observed all the other strictures of his priestly station, except for a little pointed chin-beard. He supposed it was his Syrian strain that led him to prefer it. Besides, it saved trouble. Ritual prescribed a false beard of like size and shape in any case, for certain occasions.

Frowning, he walked out on one of the terraces of his mansion. All around him lay fanes of gods and mortuary temples of former kings, with cemeteries of huge extent in between. Abdu was more a great necropolis than a town. At its western side, among the low desert hills, lay the dark granite temple of Anubis. It was far larger and older than the temple at Bahari which had been looted, but no more sacred to the jackal-headed god, Foremost of the Westerners. That was to say, Lord of the Dead.

Kamose administered all such temples. In addition he held charge over the graceful mortuary temple of Pharoah Seti, the Ramesseum itself, and many others. Their endowments were immense. Having them in his control had made him a number of jealous enemies, such as the entire priesthood of Thoth. Kamose wondered if some of them could be responsible for this horror. The first step in a scheme to discredit him?

Shrugging the torn robe back upon his shoulders, Kamose went thoughtfully to his own chamber. There he found Mertseger, and she was restless. Instead of discreetly keeping to the form of a tall, supple woman, she had let her legs merge into the mottled tail of a large serpent, while her forearms had grown scaly and taloned. Yet the sight was not horrible.

A lethal, ancient fascination invested her, springing, as Kamose well knew, from the most lurid fancies of man.

Half lifting from her couch in the rags of a purple gown, she looked at her master from ophidian eyes and greeted him with a kiss.

"Such transformations are ill in this house," he said harshly. "You know that. I prefer that my servants imagine you to be a mortal woman."

"Then set me free!" Her tail lashed about, found a leg of the couch arid coiled in frustration around it. "To offend me by holding me captive so far from my home is a fatal thing, magician."

"To threaten me before you are able is foolish, too. Freedom? I think not, O Mertseger. Having delivered Buto from your haunting, and increased my fame in the Delta thereby, I would undo my credit if I allowed you to return. Besides," he added, "your needs are too malign, as wives and mothers bereaved can attest."

"What do you care for those mortals?"

"Little, perhaps, and yet I had a wife and children once."

The lamia hissed in mockery, running a forked tongue out between her delectable human lips. The contrast would have appalled a normal man; Kamose felt amused and aroused. Being a magician, he knew that Mertseger's perverse allure was her means of drawing victims to her embrace, and knew equally how they ended, but he stood in no such danger. Rather, peril to the lamia attended *him.* And she could assume a completely human shape when she willed, a socially advantageous power not shared by Kamose's other leman, the she-sphinx Nonmet.

"Once," she said. "As mortals reckon time, it was long ago, Satni-Kamose. You have changed much."

"While you have lived many times longer than I, and in all those millennia changed not, nor learned a thing." He ignored her use of the erroneous nickname bestowed on him by the vulgar.

"I am content," Mertseger answered, coiling. "And you? Did all that you learned from the Scrolls of Thoth increase your felicity?"

A smoking anger kindled in Kamose's eyes. He held his features impassive. "Daughter of serpents, don't seek, to provoke me. You might have the misfortune to succeed. Transform!"

She hissed again.

"Transform, Mertseger, or I deal with you harshly."

Scaly forearms softened. The talons became feminine hands. Mertseger's deadly tail shrank and bifurcated.

Kamose nodded. "You may be able to sate your appetites again. Men have sacked one of my temples with slaughter. When I learn who —"

"My good lord." Mertseger looked melting. She curled her human legs under her, posing in purple tatters. "I regret the gown. But your own robe is conveniently rent."

"So it is."

Kamose took her in his arms. Even Mertseger's serpent-tongue was now human, pink and flat, as the occasion proved perfect for him to discover and appreciate. With the increase of her pleasure her tongue reverted to the ophidian, not that Kamose minded greatly. Later still, her lower body changed back to the coils of a glittering snake, writhing and undulating. This presented her lover with a greater challenge. However, it was not his first experience of that, and he proved equal to the situation. But prudence dictated, even to him, that he should not sleep beside Mertseger. He stayed wakeful while she drowsed until the morning.

In the grey hours, memories hummed around him like gnats. After the tragedies of his youth he had travelled widely, learned to extend his life span, and on returning to Egypt, lived as an ascetic hermit for years — but he had wearied of that, finally. Again he entered human society, became a priest and arch-priest (with a great deal of hidden sardonic amusement) and turned to sensuous pleasures once more (though not quite of the ordinary sort).

Egypt had come to lamentable days. Kamose was not disposed to shudder and wail over this, since he knew how transient are both good and unfortunate times. Still, lawless plunder did not suit him; he had immense estates and wealth in his charge that might be ravaged by such action. He also had a dreadful patron in the shape of the mortuary god, to whom even he must render an account.

The stars grew pale. In his aspect as Khepri the Regenerate, the Sun appeared across the Nile. Mertseger awoke, stretching sensuously. She heard Kamose say firmly, "We travel to Badari, daughter of serpents. Prepare."

"Badari. Is that where — ?"

"Where the temple was despoiled, yes."

Mertseger hurried. Kamose had half-promised the villain responsible would be her prey, once he was exposed. Her heart beat like a young girl's.

III.

Kamose bowed low before the desecrated statue of Anubis. Although he knew well that gods were not perfect beings, and further that many of their attributes and legends were made by the men who worshipped them, he had long been bleakly aware that they existed and held fateful power. The jackal-headed lord of death at least was fair; he treated everyone alike.

Kamose had fasted and ceremonially washed. He wore a robe of seamless linen. In his hands he held a silver bowl filled with Nile water, which he placed on the bare altar.

"O Foremost of the Westerners, Announcer of Death, you who foresee destiny, reveal to your servant who hath done this impious crime! Let judgement and retribution befall them."

Kamose bent forward, staring into the transparent water. Incised at the bottom of the bowl was a picture of Anubis. Under Kamose's unwinking gaze the picture stirred, moved, and walked forward across the surface of polished silver, to vanish from sight and be replaced by other gods in procession. Horus the Living Falcon, son and avenger of Osiris; Sekhmet the Lioness, fierce, unpitying, armed with the scorching heat of the Sun; Isis and Nepthys, the mistresses of magic and mourners of Osiris; Osiris himself, wrapped as a royal mummy but with skin green as the verdure of renewed life; Thoth, vizier of the gods, ibis-headed divine scribe. Kamose's skin prickled coldly as he beheld that limning. Thoth was an even greater lord of magic and prophecy than Anubis, but Kamose had been out of favour with him for many, many years — ever since, as a youth hungry for knowledge, he had stolen from a tomb the master-scrolls of magic which Thoth had written.

Contempt changed the shape of Kamose's mouth as he remembered that young man — a dreamy, studious fool. He was gone now, perished as Crete, lost as Troy, and good riddance. Thoth had punished that theft in full measure. Kamose had to control a boiling of rebellious hatred even now, almost a hundred years later.

The water clouded. Shapes moved murkily through a mist of blood. Libyan tribesmen in tall head-dresses slew, raped, and then plundered. Soldiers of Egypt burst the temple doors. An arrogant figure killed the priest unpleasantly with one light lash of an enchanted whip. His face appeared clearly. Behind it loomed another face, considerably older, austere, cynical, and tired, yet resembling the younger man's to a marked degree.

The water grew transparent again, and for a moment, cut on the bottom of the bowl, Kamose saw a number instead of the formal depiction of Anubis — the number thirteen. The water rippled, the number was gone, and once more Kamose saw a jackal-headed figure bearing daggers and a viper.

"My thanks, great one," he murmured.

The revelation had been clear. Two nobles were the culprits, one senior, one young, very likely related if that strong resemblance was a guide; and the younger had led this blasphemous raid in collusion with Libyan bandits. Thirteen could only mean the Thirteenth Nome — the province of Sawty.

Treading slowly, a deep scowl on his forehead, Kamose went out through the roofed courtyard and the broken, leaning gates. Though the temple had been cleansed with water and sand, it still smelled of blood. The sacrilegious reek stung his nostrils.

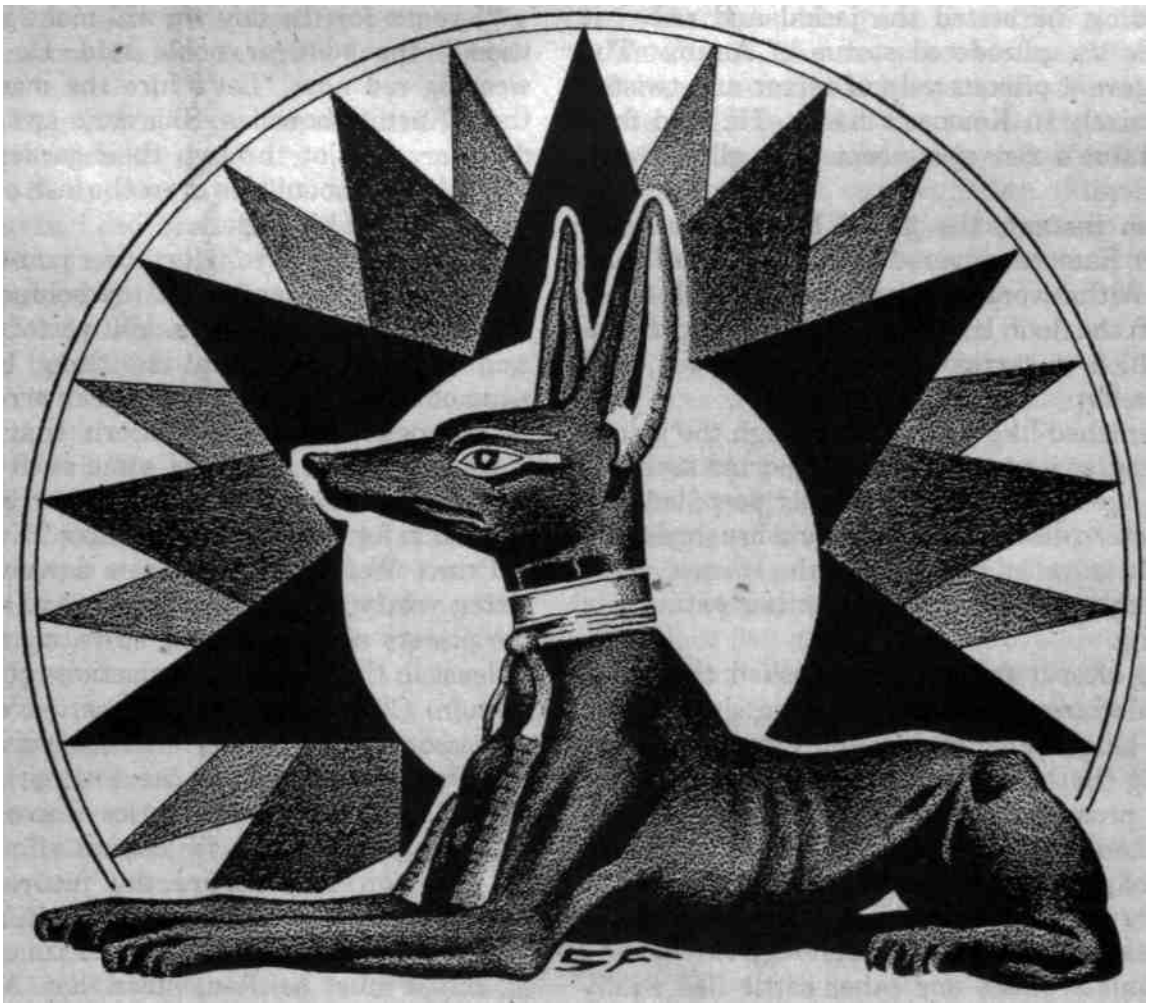
Men shall die, and worse than die, for this act.

With an executioner's look in his eyes, he left the temple and went to the nearby house of embalming. Rows of cadavers which had been his priests and priestesses lay there, dessicating in beds of dry natron. Kamose examined them. He took particular notice of the chief priest's body. The embalmers had turned his wizened head the right way around on his shoulders once more. They had also seen fit to amend the reversal of his legs and fit the dislocated femurs back into his hip-joints, but the torn, distorted muscles told their story to Kamose even before he questioned the undertakers. He remembered what he had seen in the divinatory bowl.

"The whip of Selket," he said aloud. "Very few such lashes exist. When I find one — belike in Sawty—I have found my murderers. But first let me deal with that desert scum."

Kamose kept a vigil in the plundered temple that night, before the statue of Anubis, that would have seared another man's soul to ashes. Holding a viper and a dagger in his naked hands, he invoked his jackal-headed lord. Also, he addressed himself to other gods of the dead: Neith, Wepwawet, and the slain and resurrected Osiris, "He Who Makes Silence." But Thoth's name he did not speak.

A black night wind blew through the outer courts and into the shrine. Bats and owls flew above the roof. Ghouls crept out of their lairs in ancient cemeteries to stare with purulent eyes at the temple, though they dared not come too near. Something they sensed or foresaw seemed to amuse them; now and then, one gave a shout of hideous laughter.



At midnight, a little golden jackal appeared. After circling the temple several times, it came padding through the burst gates, shrinking with each forward step. It showed no fear of the ghouls, which was strange. Nor did one of the vile grey shapes molest it. They allowed it to pass, and it almost crept on its belly through the inner court, whining as though summoned on a journey it would rather not make, by a power it could not resist.

"Welcome, little brother," Kamose said, turning.

Bending, he seized the jackal and raised it towards the plundered statue of Anubis. The beast gave a piteous yelp of terror and twisted convulsively in Kamose's hands. He held fast. The statue's red eyes seemed to glitter with awareness.

In an instant, the jackal became heavy as granite. Kamose quivered with the effort of holding it. With reverent dread he set the little beast back on the floor. It slunk out. Something dreadful, which it carried now like a burden, had possessed it.

It vanished like a shadow through the pylons of the outer gateway. No one reported seeing it again, but its tracks, unnaturally deep, led into the western desert before the wind brushed them away. It travelled deeper into the wastes, night after night, resting by day, neither eating nor drinking.

Long after it should have perished, the jackal reached a large Libyan camp. Music, singing, and festive laughter came to its sharply pricked ears. Looting the temple of Anubis had made these people prosperous. They celebrated freely. They feasted and danced. The jackal crept closer until the firelight gleamed in its eyes.

Then it rushed the camp. A horrible cry of release burst from its throat, enough to make the stars quiver. Asses and other cattle fled wildly into the desert as the jackal raced from hearth to hearth, but not one human creature fled, although there was much screaming. And all human voices in the end were silent.

The jackal was not seen by mortal eyes again.

IV

"O my father, let us repeat this action!" The young man's eyes glittered with anticipation as he swigged beer, the rich dark beer made from barley and dates. "There are temples and to spare, the land abounds in them. Half belong to outworn gods, ill serviced and guarded; and the times are lawless. Who will suspect us? We can do as we please."

"Not yet, my son." Watab, Prince of the Thirteenth Nome, smiled like a crocodile. "There is a war to fight with our accursed neighbours. Have you forgotten that we needed the temple gold only to hire mercenaries? The plunder of the whole Twelfth Nome is more than the wealth of any temple, and we can pass off this private campaign as loyalty to Pharoah. Our old foes have been indiscreet at last. I have waited and planned for this longer than you have been alive."

"I yearn for the day we will make an end of them!" the younger noble said. He was not wearing red now. "Let's hire the mercenaries, then. Kushite bowmen. Shardana sworders. I'll drive my chariot through their gardens in the high blaze of noon!" He drew the lash of his long whip through his fingers.

"All that and more." His father pointed to the whip. "However, leave that toy behind, Paheri. Its effect is too distinctive. You performed your raid well, except for that one thing. Using the whip of Selket on the priest was an error."

"No doubt. I had a concern that I might encounter magic and need some swift magic of my own, but there was none." Paheri shrugged. "So much for the powers of Anubis."

Prince Watab's mouth drew downward in a bitter, weary expression. "I ceased to believe in the powers of any god long since, my son — or at least in their care for the actions of men and women. Clearly they have deserted us. Weak successors of the mighty Usermare contend for the Double Crown, and leave us princes and chiefs to battle likewise. Justice is no more than a feather in the wind. We cannot afford principle. We can only secure the future for our descendants in such ways as are left, and hope that for them there will be better times. This is ill, but it must be. Remember that. Always be cunning, ruthless, wary — but feign virtue well." He held out his hand for the whip. "And do not leave your signature upon any crime you commit."

"I'll remember that, father." Paheri showed a cheerfully cruel smile as he handed over the whip of Selket. "However, if I take alive any of those Twelfth Nome curs who slew my uncle and my brothers, I shall ask for that whip again."

"And shall have it."

"Falcon of the Sun!" Paheri exclaimed suddenly. "A ship is making for our quay! A prince's ship, by its appearance — or —"

Prince Watab shaded his pouched eyes and squinted. From the roof garden, he could see over the high walls of his mansion all the way to the river, though only poorly. Years, and the bright sun of Egypt, had impaired his sight. Not until the ship glided closer did he recognise it as a small galley with its sail spread to the wind. Except that its hull seemed dark, he could not perceive detail. However, his son owned sharp vision. Paheri discerned the emblem of a black jackal couchant upon a pedestal, displayed upon the galley's sail.

"Father," he said with seeming coolness, "a messenger from the temple of the dog presumes to visit us."

"So?" The prince's visage became like a formal mask. "Let us receive him."

Watab sat in haughty state to receive his guest, shaven head bare, body robed and jewelled. Paheri stood arrogantly behind him, bare to the waist except for collar and armlets. His military kilt of stiffened linen hung short on one side, long behind the right leg, in the royal fashion to which strictly speaking he had no right, despite his descent from a Pharoah. A sheathed sword lay nearby on a table. Two women with fans flanked the prince's chair, and a scribe with pen and papyrus sheets sat below the dais. Impassive soldiers guarded the door.

Watab's major-domo, a large and sonorous person, announced the visitor in a voice that cracked unprecedentedly.

"The Most Reverend Kamose, Arch-Priest of Anubis, lord."

Kamose entered, erect and saturnine. The soldiers at the door grew somewhat less impassive as he passed between them. Their eyes shifted uneasily to regard the priest-magician, as though guilt and foreboding had touched their spirits.

Kamose's own gaze remained fixed on the prince's dais. Robed in pleated linen, Kamose did not wear the full regalia of his office that day, neither the artificial leopard-skin nor the gemmed apron; only a broad collar, belt, and armlets of jet and gold. He carried a jackal-headed staff of black wood. Behind him walked lesser priests and scribes — and Mertseger, in spurious human form, robed as a priestess, the image of dedicated beauty. Paheri looked at her with lustful interest, and drew his own conclusions as to why she accompanied Kamose.

The lecherous foreign dog, he thought. Kamose looked at the two nobles. Paheri's rashness and pride was easily read in his bearing. Watab covered his feelings better. His visage slack-skinned, gashed by lines of disillusion, still expressed authority and resolve. Father and son both had the symmetrical features of native Egyptians whose every remotest ancestor had been Egyptian too.

Their disdain for this upstart priest with a Syrian grandam was so complete they took it for granted. As the fact that they breathed air. Kamose had long been accustomed to that attitude. It amused him now. Even from criminals. Watab said, "I make you welcome, holy one." Kamose's tomb-black eyes held an implacable glitter as he regarded the prince. He answered grimly, "Thy welcome is rejected. I bring thee the judgement and condemnation of the lord of sepulchres, even Anubis. The reason is thy plunder and desecration of his temple, thy murder of his servants. I travel to the Delta now in order to place proofs before Pharoah. Therefore I bid thee and thy son Paheri to relinquish thy places in the world, and to accompany me in chains."

His words echoed from the stucco walls as though from the stone slabs of a deep grave-chamber — and the air seemed to darken. Paheri stared in amazement for a long time, then laughed contemptuously. His father's jaded, unscrupulous face showed a surge of furious blood. "Madman! Will you slander us to the Living Horus? That shall mark the end of your priesthood."

"And perhaps of you," Paheri said, sneering.

"I have more proof than I require," Kamose said. "The least of it stands here. This woman is the priestess Mertseger, who survived the vile attack upon the temple wherein she served, and recognised thy son as the leading perpetrator, with his red garments and lethal whip. Also, divination bears out her testimony. The Libyan barbarians who were thy allies shall be brought manacled to witness against thee. Denial, therefore, cannot spare thee the consequences of thy blasphemous carnage."

"You are indeed mad," Watab repeated. "What is the testimony of savage brigands against a nomarch of Egypt? What are the divinations of a priest, one bribed no doubt by icy enemies? Your journey to the mouths of the Nile would be fruitless even if you were to arrive."

"Not that you shall," Paheri added. "Your journey ends here, *holy one.* Your witness, the woman, shall witness to nothing. Not you nor this retinue shall be seen again. Look around you. We keep many soldiers, O Kamose, and they answer to us, not to you or even to the Living Horus. These are evil times, wherein the power of the Double Crown is weak. The worse for you."

"But your enemies in the neighbour nome are strong," Kamose said calmly. "They will be glad of apretext to attack you. If my galley comes to this port and goes no further, they will have their justification."

Paheri laughed aloud. "We have our own plans for those curs of the Hound Nome. Their treachery, not ours, is now established. Let them justify themselves if they can."

"Your galley will proceed downstream," Prince Watab said harshly. "Men dressed as you and your retinue will be seen on her decks. She *will* vanish before reaching the Delta, O fool, but not in my domain. You and your folk will sink with her. Meanwhile you may have accommodations in a strong storeroom. Take him away."

Two soldiers taller and stronger than Kamose converged upon him. He did not even glance at the hands that gripped his arms. His sombre gaze never left Prince Watab's face.

"Instead, depart with me and confess before Pharoah. You would be wise. I make this offer once.

"Twice, as I reckon, now," the prince answered ironically. "You wasted your breath to say it even once."

Kamose disdained a reply. He allowed the soldiers to remove him. As they departed, he heard Paheri say mirthfully, "I will attend to the woman."

V.

Kamose sat composed in subterranean darkness. He set his back against a great jar of oil. No light entered this cool storeroom below the foundations of Watab's mansion. Still, Kamose sensed the progress of the Sun with his sorcerer's perceptions. Twilight had passed, the stars had shone in the sky for a full hour, and Kamose sat in the dust of the storeroom as though at ease in one of his own temples.

His vessel, undoubtedly, had been overrun by the prince's men-at-arms shortly after Kamose had been cast into this dim prison. The priests and acolytes of his retinue would be lying bound in some similar place. Kamose smiled derisively as he thought of it. These rascals had something to learn.

The prince's son would surely be with Mertseger. He had boasted that he would attend to her. He! Attend—to Mertseger? Kamose's smile grew wicked.

The time was ripe.

"O great one, Anubis, Foremost of the Westerners, Lord of Tombs, Announcer, Restorer, God Who Opens the Way, send against this house the ones who have endured your retribution, even the Libyan robbers allied with Watab the Accursed. Send them now, out of the West that is thy realm. Kamose, Arch-Priest of thy temples, calls upon thee. Be it so."

The darkness in the shut storeroom could not have increased. Nevertheless, it seemed to thicken until it pressed on Kamose's skin. Baying from a vast distance, he heard the cry of a titanic jackal. Time flowed by like barely warm pitch. Kamose waited.

With his mind's vision he saw everything that transpired above. Loping, padding shapes moved through the night, standing more or less upright, anthropomorphic yet not human. They prowled through the grain-fields. Reaching Prince Watab's walled mansion, they began to clamber over the walls, just as other shapes had done at the doomed temple. A dozen skulking forms converged upon the gate-lodge facing the river. Kamose could imagine the choked cries, no doubt a wild shriek or two, and then the mortal silence.

I daresay I will soon enjoy release from this storeroom, he thought peacefully.

The door crashed wide before he had drawn another twenty breaths. Armed soldiers bearing lamps and weapons filed among the great sealed jars, the lined storage pits, and Watab himself followed. Rage and consternation warred in his face. Behind both, to Kamose's eyes, lay the beginnings of a ghastly fear. He struck Kamose twice in the face.

"Swine and progeny of swine! What have you done? What have you brought upon me?"

"You have brought it upon yourself. Let us go and see."

When Kamose walked from the storeroom, no one laid a hand upon him, but rather drew back from his presence. None mocked his appearance, either, though stubble had grown on his shaven' scalp and dust thickly fouled his robe. One of Watab's soldiers whimpered, "Holy one — have mercy —"

Watab struck the soldier down, and thrust Kamose violently ahead of him. The priest laughed. They reached a portico that looked out upon Watab's cool gardens, with their fishponds, flower-beds, and costly foreign blooms. They brought no satisfaction to the prince now. He looked on them with bulging eyes and frothing lips, those walks of his that an hour ago had been secure pleasaunces.

Corpses floated in the nearest pond. Others sprawled across crushed iris and asphodel. Monsters with scarlet jowls, red of hand, moved towards the house. They walked bipedally, having the bodies, arms, and thighs of men, but their heads were the heads of golden jackals, with scavenger jaws able to crack heavy bone; and their legs below the knee, also, were as the hind legs of jackals, so that they leaned forward for balance as they came.

"It appears, Prince Watab, that just as did the functionaries of a certain temple, you are receiving guests you did not invite," Kamose observed.

"Send them away, or you die!" Watab brandished the whip of Selket for emphasis. "You

control those devils, do not pretend otherwise."

"You should recognise them," Kamose said. "These are the Libyan warriors you paid to cover the deed of your soldiers. The Lord Anubis burdened a jackal»with the power of his curse and sent it to deliver his judgement. Here it is. They, with their women and children, and all their descendants, shall wear the forms you see. Now they answer his summons, to wreak his will on their former comrades."

"Send them away!" Watab's voice sounded scarcely human.

Kamose shook his head.

"Refuse," the prince whispered, "and before they can advance another step, your whole retinue dies. Look behind you demon."

Kamose turned around with an expression of polite but small interest. Soldiers along the portico held daggers to the throats of his priests and acolytes. Sighing like a man wearied with foolish behaviour, Kamose clapped his hands sharply.

The veiling illusion that had cloaked his retinue vanished. Watab's soldiers recoiled with yells and shudders from standing, ancient mummies. Buried in the desert sand beside clay pots of food and their weapons, long before the first pyramid was raised, they had been kept from decay by dryness only. White ribs showed through flesh like ancient leather. Their eyes had become void pits. Long teeth glinted dry in their jaws, and their hands were claws of bone.

Kamose said ironically, "It is my turn to advise you to look."

Howling, Watab swung his lash at the saturnine priest. One of the mummies stepped between them with dreadful quickness, its bony heel clicking on the tiles. The whip curled around it. Ancient tendons burst as its head and legs turned backwards. Two more liches seized the prince and wrested his whip away. He shuddered uncontrollably in their dead grasp, while his eyes acquired a disordered stare. Kamose took possession of the whip of Selket, coiling up the supple lash with distaste.

"If I required more proof against you, it is here," he said like a judge pronouncing doom. "Your son Paheri partook of your crimes, and he too must answer. Is he hiding?"

Watab said nothing. His mouth had become as numbed as his mind. He looked like a man floundering in a poisoned swamp where soon he must drown.

Kamose looked at him closely. "Ah, yes. He boasted that he would attend to the woman, as I remember. Belike he's oblivious. Let us go and find him."

He turned his back on the gardens, to lead the way through the prince's house. Watab followed, escorted by two lipless corpses, while a third walked behind with a splayed, grotesque gait due to its legs being dislocated and reversed. It seemed to grin with malevolence.

Watab lurched and stumbled as though his will no longer governed his own legs. To him it appeared that what had been his mansion was, in the space of an evening, annexed to hell and overrun by demons. Behind him, the transformed Libyans advanced through corridor and chamber, their jaws seeking the throats of his soldiers. Kamose walked before him, never looking back. Grey dust fell from his robes as he trod. To Watab's half-blind gaze it seemed like the long accumulations of the tomb.

VI.

Kamose knew what they were likely to find when they intruded upon the lamia and the prince's son. He felt untouched by pity for the latter. The harvest of Paheri's own deeds had ripened.

Yet Kamose felt haunted by a sadness which arose from the humanity he had never been able to eradicate, despite his direst efforts. He too had been a father, and lost wife and children to the vengefulness of a god. Each one of Prince Watab's dragging steps behind him was a heavy reminder of grief. He ground his teeth. Curse human feeling that could survive even decades of traffic with demons, and return to haunt him with misgivings!

He halted at the entrance to a chamber from which a sound of low moaning issued.

Kamose shackled every natural response. They would have included grey skin, sweat, and a twisting belly. Instead, he turned an implacably harsh face towards the prince.

"See," he invited.

And Watab saw...

Head hanging limply over the edge, his son lay on a couch strewn with oryx skins. One arm lolled slackly towards the floor. Paheri had lifted the other to touch, to caress as though enthralled, the half-female monster that arched

Author's footnote:

Abdu is better known by its modern name, Abydos; over him. Her long ophidian tail moved on the floor.

Worst of all was the hideous pliant softness of Peheri's ribs and thighs. They were broken as though in the pulverizing coils of a python. Despite those fearful injuries, Paheri continued to embrace the lamia even as he shuddered and died.

Kamose watched coldly. His natural horror at the sight faded, sinking into the past where it belonged, dead and buried with the scholarly youth of a century before. Let all temple-defilers meet such a fate. He stared with contempt at Watab, Prince of the Thirteenth Nome.

Who shook and babbled and clutched his head.

"Fool!" Kamose said. "I offered you a journey to Pharaoh's palace in chains. A kindly proposal. You should have accepted."

Watab turned shuddering away from the sight in the chamber. He began weeping, rough wild sobs that jolted his body in spasms. The withered mummies watched him impassively.

Jackal-headed creatures still bounded and loped through the chambers of his house, killing the last of his soldiers while red pools crept across his floors. Watab's sobs became gulping laughter that rose madly higher. Yes, he would threaten no one any longer.

Turning, Kamose strode from the house, through the garden and the gates, towards the stone quays by Prince Watab's private canal. He preferred not to bid Mertseger follow him. She might join him aboard the galley when she was ... satisfied.

He could wait. ***Q***

Usermare is the pharoah we know as Ramses II.

THE DEAD OF WINTER

by Mike Lange

illustrated by Allen Koszowski

They held to old customs here. A guard did duty at the gate, as likely guards had done through years beyond counting; but the wall that circled the village, twelve feet high, and the sentry neither one could have stopped much that the world had to fling at them today. The man leaned, shivering, on his only weapon, a rusty halberd; Donal, with his pistols, wheel-lock rifle, and borrowed crossbow could have killed him long before being seen, let alone menaced by any polearm.

But he and the villager shared a common enemy — winter. The season had lifted its bitter siege and left the village alone but destitute, storehouses plundered, game driven into hiding where it survived at all, nothing to look forward to but long rain and waiting, somehow grimly surviving, until a crop came to fruit.

Donal was one of the wolves who had ravaged throughout the season, and he was a stranger here, in a land where any stranger was, simply for safety's sake, regarded and dealt with as an enemy. The guard stared bleakly at him a moment, then without immediate comprehension at the soldier's two heavily-loaded pack horses.

"I would say welcome, sir; but you might as well keep moving," the villager greeted him, gaunt with hunger but far more polite than many past who'd met Donal at gates or doors. "We've nothing to offer a guest here but misery, and you look to've had your share of *that.*"

"I didn't think to be a guest," Donal replied with a nod of agreement—he was miserable, and grimaced as he slapped his left leg, his side off from the guard. I was hunting — I came this way by accident, but a lucky chance. ... I think my foot's gotten poxy frostbitten." He jerked his head back at the other two, loaded horses. "If you folk are hungry, I've had a damned good hunt. I'd call it worth half the meat if you could let me in out of this cursed cold before my toes brittle up and break off."

That was a very real concern. Snow was on the ground, still, spring keeping lazily to bed while winter's darkness covered the land; even with a fire to step back to as soon as this rare visitor was dealt with, the guard still felt the bite of cold. He understood how a man might trade food for mere warmth — and he could certainly agree to such a trade, when it was the other man offering the food at the gate of a famine-struck village.

"Go in," he allowed the soldier. "Welcome to you. They'll take care of you inside — and of the food," *he could not help but add, hungrily eying* the tarp-covered, bulky packs. Donal left him watching and went in.

By the time feeling had returned to his gray foot, Donal had drunk two brimming cups of brandy. The surest way of determining the degree of damage done his foot had involved pain, and he had absorbed enough alcohol to distance himself from the probing. Now the warmth spreading from his stomach felt far better than the hunger given a razor's edge by the smell of meat cooking.

He looked sharply up at the young lady who refilled his cup. That she'd come so close without his warily noticing it, who had spent half a lifetime on the lookout for the enemy — Donal reckoned maybe he'd had enough to drink, and she agreed, smiling at him but something like anger glinting in her eyes. She spoke to him through the big but cadaverous man who sat across the firepit from Donal: "You'd better go easy on the drinking, Wolfgar, empty as our bellies are. You'll end too drunk to eat, and our friend," she said with a lingering look at Donal that unsettled him in its sadness, "nearly lost too much for his good work to go wasted."

Then she walked away. Donal stared after her, aware and not caring that the man opposite

watched him and grinned.

"That's Marie, the poor dear," the villager said, and met Donal's sharp glance with a level look and voice: "Pity her. Her husband died just before winter. She meant more than it might have seemed when she mentioned what *you* nearly lost — her man froze to death, afield after game for our larder. It was a cold year past," he mused *in low melancholy.*

Donal meant to speak of soldiers dying in much the same manner, but reckoned Wolfgar would have ample reason not only not to care, but to rejoice; and he almost shrugged, but decided that that wouldn't be overly polite and might be taken for an insult by these very polite, grieving people. He shook his head. "Sad. But you lost more than just him, didn't you? " he asked, knowing more of winter's hardship than of manners. He realized that he had blundered only as the lord stared into his cup for a long moment, scowling slightly.

Then Wolfgar shook himself. "We lost a lot, but each one was of value — not just one more," he said at last, speaking as one not hardened to mass death; and Donal recognized his own callousness too late, in comparison with the other man's capacity for feeling.

"Well, sorry," he muttered. "I expect each one *was* more. I doubt you know — no loss of yours — but I see men killed about every day, it seems, and I don't *like* half of the few I *know."*

"No," Wolfgar admitted in a slow voice, shaking his head; "I can't understand you. It sounds to me to be a poor way of living, my friend."

Now Donal shrugged, and winced, and had a deep taste of brandy. "It is," he finally admitted, finding the bitter truth better than argument. He mused on that for a moment, but then, before he or his host had to speak further, he looked clumsily around at the sound of a woman's laugh. Yes, there was Marie. Auburn hair and slender — maybe *too* slender, and too pale, for they'd been hungry here — but pretty and pleasing to his tastes.

"Soldiering seems it'd be a lonely life," Wolfgar said, and, as Donal looked narrow-eyed at him, smiled knowingly. "I think also a one to teach a man to take what he can, when he can. . . . The other soldiers came this way, this winter, " he much less cheerfully added, "were plainly taught so."

"I plunder the enemy," Donal said warily, "not people I'm going to sit to a meal with. Or their women."

Wolfgar looked at him a moment, then smiled as if nothing of matter or nearly unpleasant had been spoken or thought. "We know about hunger in this village, Donal — and, for what it's worth, Marie is very much her own lady, not anyone else's. I mean only to give my blessing to anyone with the sense to take a gift freely given. More so, when he — or she," he specified for emphasis, "— is so plainly needing."

He did not leave it at that. Perhaps he could not. "The custom here is that no one leaves hungry; that we feed them, see to their needs for the journey. . . . This winter," he said heavily, "made us poor hosts. We couldn't even do that for our own."

"I hope this doesn't burden you too badly," Wolfgar worried again, walking Donal to the hut he was to sleep in.

Old custom once more: a guest house, off aside from the homes of day-to-day. Donal wouldn't have been surprised to be told these people weren't even Christians, with their archaic sense of hospitality and distance in manner from the religious madness engulfing the land. Witch-hunters would have found such tolerance to be highly suspect, Donal reflected.

He was no witch-hunter and would not have been offended to learn they were pagan here. All that mattered was that he walked comfortably on the foot they'd doctored and had had his own food cooked for him, and had been allowed a moment or two of ease all-too-rare in his life. He hastened once more (perhaps lying, but he'd done far worse for far less cause) to reassure Wolfgar: "I could well spare it. Hell, I only gave you *half* 'what I had, where some would have wanted it all from me — and you've met the sorts who'd have given you not a damned thing in return for your welcome." He chuckled — his humor was good tonight. "I would be a poor sort of man to be sorry I gave what I did."

Wolfgar plodded on silently for a moment. Donal felt an unease about the town lord that

ill-fitted a man who'd eaten his fill for perhaps the first time all season, tonight. "Will you do us a favor, then, Donal?" he asked at last.

"If it's within my power," Donal said slowly, haggling, "and not against my orders or good sense — certainly." He was hoping that Wolfgar would ask some sort of service he carried weapons for; he was a sort of whore and made that his business, not a form of gratitude.

"Stay inside tonight," was Wolfgar's whole request; and Donal, who was dead-tired, sluggish with drink, and hoping he was right about the nature of Marie's attention all through the feast, did not care to be told more. Wolfgar explained, though: "You, a Christian soldier, there's much you mightn't understand that's still got to be done tonight." The man was making no apology; simply telling Donal. "We don't want hard feelings of any kind after you've so plainly relaxed."

"You can preach the Black mass, for all you'll bother *my* Christian soul," Donal darkly scoffed. "I won't stir. I've a stronger sense for minding my own business, than for God."

"God wasn't kind to us this winter," Wolfgar said in what seemed to be and yet somehow didn't sound like sympathy. "It was plain custom that carried us through — now you've fed us, tonight there's a thing to be done. Stay in. Please."

He left Donal alone at the hut. A fire had already been built inside, by someone whose pleasant scent lingered. Used to tents and sleeping bags, atop a cot if lucky, and usually too-cramped quarters to boot, Donal could hardly relax in the single spacious room of the house. At least, to that he attributed the knotting in his gut; anxiety — or longing, for all his assuring himself that he had nothing to be nervous of or to anticipate.

Which was why, as he gingerly tugged off his high boots and unlaced his shirt, his teeth caught, his heart leaped. A light tap at the door had startled him; there came a second soft knock.

Half a lifetime's hard-learned habits couldn't be even a bit set aside after just half a day of peace. He went to the door with one of his pistols in hand, his sword still belted on. He opened the door just enough to peer out, his thumb on the cock of the gun in case someone tried to burst in.

Marie only stood there, glancing over her shoulder. Donal opened the door further to stare into her wide eyes — eyes abrim with want and fear and ready defiance even if he hinted at scorn. It was as if he gazed a long moment into a reflection of his own feelings, and he hesitantly beckoned her in to find what else they might share.

"I'm no whore," Marie said quickly, entering gratefully. "Don't think that I am. Please."

"I don't think so," Donal said, and touched her thick, cold hair and delicate shoulder as she stood half-turned away from him. "I think no such thing at all."

She nodded, gave the ghost of a smile and turned to him. It was that same wistful smile she'd shown earlier. "Did they tell you — my husband —?"

"I know about it," Donal said with a slow nod. "He died; was hunting, like me. . . . I'm sorry."

Marie nodded and glanced away, but went on; it was maybe of more importance to her, than to him, but Donal listened: "You've come in — where he didn't come back — you brought us food," she said miserably, "but it's been worse than a hungry winter, for me. I've needed more than just food.... Oh, you *must* think me —"

He cut her off gently, taking her face in his hands and kissing her moving mouth in midword. Then he said, "I think a woman can be just as lonely as I am, that's all. No whore," he pointed out wryly, "would have missed this."

There was really no more need for talk.

He was awake — not pleased to be, still tired, but awake.

With what he'd drunk and his exertions in Marie's arms, it was odd that Donal now roused to know that it was bitterly cold outside the heavy warmth of the bed, the room dimly lit by the red glow of dying coals where a fire had burned. And he was alone.

He rolled over, looking and feeling for certain, swearing softly. Did even a young widow, even here, have to leave and pretend to a decency that wasn't decency at all, in Donal's mind, but only damned narrow-minded stupidity? Why else would Marie have left while he slept?

Then it came to him, with the sudden realization that he was going to have to get up to piss, and quickly, that a woman — Marie — might well have gone out and in exactly that same need. Donal tried to smile, but found his face numbed with alcohol, exhaustion, and the awful cold of the darkness. He was still going to have to get up, though.

He was, after all, used to tents, to being crowded and heeding certain courtesies, and he had long since forgotten his promise to Wolfgar, not to go out. There was a bucket in the hut, but in the darkness he could not have found it and didn't look — the rule of not fouling his and his mates' nest was too much a habit for him to relieve himself within smell of the bed. He limped barefoot out of the hut, yawning and scratching his crotch, an idea in mind that, when he found Marie, she being also awake might enjoy —

Donal stopped dead a single step outside the hut. Before he saw anything, he heard from the nearest houses a weeping in the night, as if most of the village sat up in the darkness to mourn. Belatedly, he recalled that Wolfgar had wanted him to stay in; but he paused on the threshold. He heard the stamp of laboring hooves, the creak of wagon wheels and the crunch of snow beneath the great weight. Next the wagon hove into view, one of the great open-bedded sort of wains that were driven a circuit through towns where the plague had struck.

Wolfgar manned the reins. Donal saw corpses piled in the wagon bed. He stared, shivering, a trickle of urine freezing down his leg as fear shook loose his bladder and self-control. There hadn't been such a supply of corpses or expression of grief even hours earlier tonight — and now the master of the village turned the ponderous wagon toward him....

Marie stepped slowly, seeming to be sleepwalking, from someplace where Donal had not seen her. She clambered stiffly into the rear of the dead wagon. Donal had seen far more than enough death to know now, as she slumped atop the bodies, that the woman he'd known tonight was dead and cold, curled in winter death.

Wolfgar saw him only then, too late for much to be done or said. He reined up the wagon much as would pause a step shy of startling a frightened animal into running — or into attacking by reflex, for Donal tensed dangerously.

"I asked you to stay inside," he reminded Donal, without anger, only grief and exhaustion in his rough voice. "Now go, Donal, go back in. You're not dressed to be out, and you don't belong with these others — do you want to join them tonight?" he asked with a sat nod back at the dead.

Donal would have killed the man who approached the house or him that night. He had seen the dead walk and had no way of knowing if who came could be trusted to be living, so he was primed to shoot, simply aching to be sure. He sat up with the fire raging, his head aching, all sense of easy well-being gone.

The gray light of a new morning finally sifted through the shutters. Only then did Wolfgar come knocking, his tap light, his words spoken softly to soothe rather than scare further: "I'd like to come in, Donal; I'm sure you'd like to be away from here. Will you open the door? Neither of us can —"

Donal flung the door open, pistols poised. There was no mistaking the menace he meant toward anyone who spooked him, even a little, after the icy shocks of the night before.

"No need for the guns," Wolfgar told him. "No one here means you any harm."

"No one —?" Donal said shrilly, his hands shaking so that Wolfgar feared one or the other of the snaphances might go off, as yet unintentionally. "Do you think I care to lay dead women before they're buried? There's no *harm* in that?"

"It's our custom, I told you that — the hungry are fed before they leave. Marie died starved for something more than food. *You* fed that same hunger, yourself, last night. Did you know any difference then?"

"You God-cursed —"

"You call us that, mercenary?" Wolfgar snapped, finally growing angry with his guest, too tired to be unnerved by the whiteness of the fingers curled about the triggers of Donal's guns, "You weren't among the men who came and plundered our winter stores, but I doubt *you* would think that to matter if our places were reversed. They laughed then — to the mighty goes the right. Well, God curse *you*, Donal, all we did here is hold to an old custom. I think," he said coldly, "that I like our way better, caring even for the wants of the dead, rather than not giving a damn who lives or dies. *Your* way!"

Donal felt the urge to kill rise like bile; but that was a violation of the ancient custom forbidding a guest to bring violence into a host's home. He found himself in vast respect and dread of custom's power, and lowered his guns. "You might have told a man," he muttered.

"To have you go back out in the snow and die?" Wolfgar countered wearily. "I was afraid that telling you might have driven you out. I'd no idea you'd have *chosen* that. If death means so little to you, then why do *our* dead bother you?"

Donal could think of nothing to say. It was true; death was so familiar — and small - a thing to him, that he had to wonder what about Wolfgar's reasoning he could not accept. He could not summon an argument, but he still shook his head in bewilderment.

"Is it just that you're unhappy that anyone but yourself — that *Marie* might have gotten anything out of last night?" Wolfgar persisted irritably.

"No," Donal said dully. "I'm glad it was — appreciated." She shrugged, started to speak; then, as best he could, put his first thought in somewhat more charitable words. "I'll leave, then. You people have certainly given—given me as much as I could ever want here." **Q**

THE CLOWN WHO IS A WEREWOLF

My hands grow dark with hair.
Somewhere, my carefree self
dons a clown suit
for the parade,
cheeks yellow and blue,
nose red as blood.
The black around my eyes thickens.
The children test the happiness
like wet fingers in the wind,
dance along with my wobbly cycle,
my fluttering pantaloons.
The bones beneath my brows
push outward, deliver
more flesh to my ears
as they jerk moonward.
The nickelodeon cranks out
the song of candy floss,
of carousels,
of eternal boyhood.

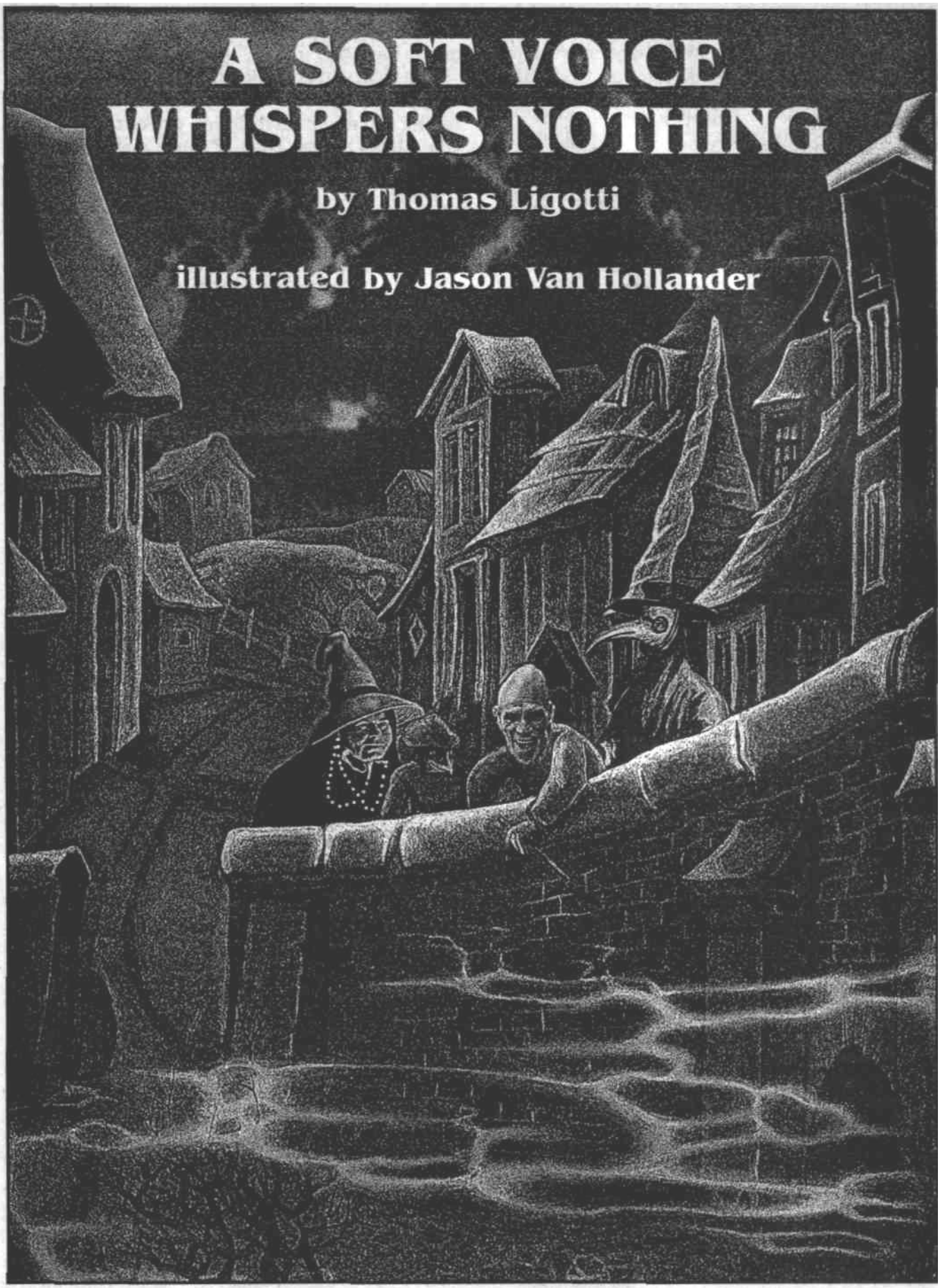
Cracking, stretching, mutating,
my body breaks all its own rules:
shoulder muscles bunched together,
knees bent like gnarled tree roots,
arms reaching to dangerous lengths,
fingers frozen into talons.
The clown mimics, parodies, pokes fun,
cracks smiles from solemn faces.
My passions drive my sinews
like turbines,
blow me out the door
two steps behind
my night-numbing growl.
I hear the marching bands
around the next corner,
a parade headed this way.
Anger rises like bile
to the tip of my knotted throat.
The first thing I wish to kill
is a clown.

— **John Grey**

A SOFT VOICE WHISPERS NOTHING

by Thomas Ligotti

illustrated by Jason Van Hollander



Long before I suspected the existence of the town near the northern border, I believe that I was in some way already an inhabitant of that remote and desolate place. Any number of signs might be offered to support this claim, although some of them may have seemed somewhat removed from the issue. Not the least of them appeared during my childhood, those soft gray years when I was stricken with one sort or another of life-draining infirmity. It was at this early stage of development that I sealed my deep affinity with the winter season in all its phases and manifestations. Nothing seemed more natural to me than my impulse to follow the path of the snow-topped roof and the ice-crowned fence-post, considering that I, too, in my illness, exhibited the marks of an essentially hibernal state of being. Under the plump blankets of my bed I lay freezing and pale, my temples sweating with shiny sickles of fever. Through the frosted panes of my bedroom window I watched in awful devotion as dull winter days were succeeded by blinding winter nights. I remained ever awake to the possibility, as my young mind conceived it, of an "icy transcendence." I was therefore cautious, even in my frequent states of delirium, never to indulge in vulgar sleep, except perhaps to dream my way deeper into that landscape where vanishing winds snatched me up into the void of an ultimate hibernation.

No one expected I would live very long, not even my attending physician, Dr. Zirk. A widower far along into middle age, the doctor seemed intensely dedicated to the well-being of the living anatomies under his care. Yet from my earliest acquaintance with him I sensed that he too had a secret affinity with the most remote and desolate locus of the winter spirit, and therefore was also allied with the town near the northern border. Every time he examined me at my bedside he betrayed himself as a fellow fanatic of a disconsolate creed, embodying so many of its stigmata and gestures. His wiry, white-streaked hair and beard were thinning, patchy remnants of a former luxuriance, much like the bare, frost-covered branches of the trees outside my window. His face was of a coarse complexion, rugged as frozen earth, while his eyes were overcast with the cloudy ether of a December afternoon. And his fingers felt so frigid as they palpated my neck or gently pulled at the un-derlids of my eyes.

One day, when I believed that he thought I was asleep, Dr. Zirk revealed the extent of his initiation into the barren mysteries of the winter world, even if he spoke only in the cryptic fragments of an overworked soul in extremis. In a voice as pure and cold as an arctic wind the doctor made reference to "undergoing certain ordeals," as well as speaking of what he called "grotesque discontinuities in the order of things." His trembling words also invoked an epistemology of "hope and horror," of exposing once and for all the true nature of this "great gray ritual of existence" and plunging headlong into an "enlightenment of inanity." It seemed that he was addressing me directly when in a soft gasp of desperation he said, "To make an end of it, little puppet, *in your own way.* To close the door in one swift motion and not by slow, fretful degrees. If only this doctor could show you the way of such cold deliverance." I felt my eyelids flutter as the tone and import of these words, and Dr. Zirk immediately became silent. Just then my mother entered the room, allowing me a pretext to display an aroused consciousness. But I never betrayed the confidence or indiscretion the doctor had entrusted to me that day.

In any case, it was many years later that I first discovered the town near the northern border, and there came to understand the source and significance of Dr. Zirk's mumblings on that nearly silent winter day. I noticed, as I arrived in the town, how close a resemblance it bore to the winterland of my childhood, even if the precise time of year was still slightly out of season. On that day, everything — the streets of the town and the few people travelling upon them, the store windows and the meager merchandise they displayed, the weightless pieces of debris barely animated by a half-dead wind — everything looked as if it had been drained entirely of all color, as if an enormous photographic flash had just gone off in the startled face of the town. And somehow beneath this pallid facade I intuited what I described to myself as the "all pervasive aura of a place that has offered itself as a haven for an interminable series of delirious events."

It was definitely a mood of delirium that appeared to rule the scene, causing all that I saw to shimmer vaguely in my sight, as if viewed through the gauzy glow of a sick-room: a haziness that had no precise substance, distorting without in any way obscuring the objects behind or within it. There was an atmosphere of disorder and commotion that I sensed in the streets of the town, as if its delirious mood were only a soft prelude to great pandemonium. I heard the sound

of something that I could not identify, an approaching racket that caused me to take refuge in a narrow passageway between a pair of high buildings. Nestled in this dark hiding place I watched the street and listened as that nameless chattering grew louder. It was a medley of clanging and creaking, groaning and croaking, a dull jangle of something unknown as it groped its way through the town, a chaotic parade in honor of some special occasion of delirium.

The street that I saw beyond the narrow opening between the two buildings was now entirely empty. The only thing I could glimpse was a blur of high and low structures which appeared to quiver slightly as the noise became louder and louder, the parade closing in, though from which direction I did not know. The formless clamor seemed to envelop everything around me, and then suddenly I could see a passing figure in the street. Dressed in loose white garments, it had an egg-shaped head that was completely hairless and as white as paste, a clown of some kind who moved in a way that was both casual and laborious, as if it were strolling underwater or against a strong wind, tracing strange patterns in the air with billowed arms and pale hands. It seemed to take forever for this apparition to pass from view, but just before doing so it turned to peer into the narrow passage where I had secreted myself, and its greasy white face was wearing an expression of bland malevolence.

Others followed the lead figure, including a team of ragged men who were harnessed like beasts and pulled long, bristling ropes. They also moved out of sight, leaving the ropes to waver slackly behind them. The vehicle to which those ropes were attached — by means of enormous hooks — rolled into the scene, its great wooden wheels audibly grinding the pavement of the street beneath them. It was a sort of platform with huge wooden stakes rising from its perimeter to form the bars of a cage. There was nothing to secure the wooden bars at the top, and so they wobbled with the movement of the parade. Hanging from the bars, and rattling against them, was an array of objects haphazardly tethered by cords and wires and straps of various kinds. I saw masks and shows, household utensils and naked dolls, large bleached bones and skeletons of small animals, bottles of colored glass, the head of a dog with a rusty chain wrapped several times around its neck, and sundry scraps of debris and other things I could not name, all knocking together in a wild percussion. I watched and listened as that ludicrous vehicle passed by in the street. Nothing else followed it, and the enigmatic parade seemed to be at an end, now only a delirious noise fading into the distance. Then a voice called out behind me.

"What are you doing here?"

I turned around and saw a fat old woman moving toward me from the shadows of that narrow passageway between the two high buildings. She was wearing a highly decorated hat that was almost as wide as she was, and her already ample form was augmented by numerous layers of colorful scarves and shawls. Her body was further weighted down by several necklaces which hung like a noose around her neck and many bracelets about both of her chubby wrists. On the thick fingers of either hand were a variety of large, gaudy rings.

"I was watching the parade." I said to her. "But I couldn't see what was inside the cage, or whatever it was. It seemed to be empty."

The woman simply stared at me for some time, as if contemplating my face and perhaps surmising that I had only recently arrived in the northern border town. Then she introduced herself as Mrs. Glimm and said that she ran a lodging house. "Do you have a place to stay?" she asked in an aggressively demanding tone. "It should be dark soon," she said, glancing slightly upwards. "The days are getting shorter and shorter."

I agreed to follow her back to the lodging house. On the way I asked her about the parade. "It's just some nonsense," she said as we walked through the darkening streets of the town. "Have you seen one of these?" she asked, handing me a crumpled piece of paper that she had stuffed among her scarves and shawls.

Smoothing out the page that Mrs. Glimm had placed in my hands, I tried to read what was printed upon it in the dimming twilight. At the top of the page, in capital letters, was a title: METAPHYSICAL LECTURE I. Below these words was a brief text which I read to myself as I walked with Mrs. Glimm. "It has been said," the text began, "that after undergoing certain ordeals — whether ecstatic or abysmal — we should be obliged to change our names, as we are no longer who we once were. Instead the opposite rule is applied: our names linger long after anything resembling what we were, or thought we were, as disappeared entirely. Not that there

was much *to* begin with — only a few questionable memories and impulses drifting about like snowflakes in a gray and endless winter. But each soon floats down and settles into a cold and nameless void."

After reading this "metaphysical lecture," I asked Mrs. Glimm where it came from. "They were all over town," she replied. "Just some nonsense, like the rest of it. Personally I think this sort of thing is bad for business. Why should I have to go around picking up customers in the street? But as long as someone's paying my price I will accommodate them in whatever style they wish. In addition to operating a lodging house or two, I am also licensed to act as an undertaker's assistant and cabaret stage manager. Well, here we are. You can go inside — someone will be there to take care of you. At the moment I have an appointment elsewhere." With these concluding words, Mrs. Glimm walked off down the street.

Mrs. Glimm's lodging house was one of several great structures along the street, each of them sharing similar features and all of them, I later discovered, in some way under the proprietorship or authority of the same person — that is, Mrs. Glimm. Nearly flush with the street stood a series of high and almost styleless monuments with facades of pale gray mortar and enormous dark roofs. Although the street was rather wide, the sidewalks in front of the houses were so narrow that their roofs slightly overhung the pavement below, creating a sense of tunnel-like enclosure. All of the houses might have been siblings of my childhood home, which I once heard someone describe as an "architectural moan." I thought of this phrase as I went through the process of renting a room, insisting that I be placed in one that faced the street. Once I settled into my apartment, which was actually a single, quite expansive, bedroom, I stood at the window gazing up and down the street of gray houses, which together seemed to form a procession of some kind, a frozen funeral parade. I repeated the words "architectural moan" over and over to myself until exhaustion forced me away from the window and under the musty blankets of the bed. Before I fell asleep I remembered that it was Dr. Zirk who used this phrase to describe my childhood home, a place he had visited often.

So it was of Dr. Zirk that I was thinking as I fell asleep in that expansive bedroom of Mrs. Glimm's lodging house. And I was thinking of him not only because he used the phrase "architectural moan" to describe the appearance of my childhood home, which so closely resembled those high-roofed structures along that street of gray houses in the northern border town, but also, and even primarily, because the words of the brief metaphysical lecture I had read some hours earlier reminded me so much of the words, those fragments and mutterings, that the doctor spoke as he sat upon my bed and attended to the life-draining infirmities from which everyone expected I would die at a very young age. Lying under the musty blankets of my bed in that strange lodging house, with a little moonlight shining through the window illuminating the dreamlike vastness of the room around me, I once again felt the weight of someone sitting upon my bed and bending over my apparently sleeping body, ministering to it with unseen gestures and a soft voice. It was then, while pretending to be asleep as I used to do in my childhood, that I heard the words of a second "metaphysical lecture." They were whispered in a slow and resonant monotone. "We should give thanks," the voice said to me, "that a poverty of knowledge has so narrowed our vision of things as to allow the possibility of feeling something about them. How could we find a pretext to react to anything if we understood . . . everything? None but an *absent* mind was ever victimized by the adventure of intense emotional feeling. And without the suspense that is generated by our benighted state — our status as beings *possessed* by our bodies and the madness that goes along with them — who could take enough interest in the universal spectacle to bring forth even the feeblest yawn, let alone exhibit the more dramatic manifestations which lend such unwonted color to a world that is essentially composed of shades of gray upon a background of blackness. Hope and horror, to repeat merely two of the innumerable conditions dependent on a faulty insight, would be much the worse for an ultimate revelation that would expose their lack of necessity. At the other extreme, both our most dire and most exalted emotions are well served every time we take some ray of knowledge, isolate it from the spectrum of illumination, and then forget it completely. All our ecstasies, whether sacred or from the slime, depend on our refusal to be schooled in even the most superficial truths and our maddening will follow the path of forgetfulness. Amnesia may well be the highest sacrament in the great gray ritual of existence. To know, to understand in the fullest sense, is to plunge into an

enlightenment of inanity, a wintry landscape of memory whose substance is all shadows and a profound awareness of the infinite spaces surrounding us on all sides. Within this space we remain suspended only with the aid of strings that quiver with our hopes and our horrors, and which keep us dangling over the gray void. How is it that we can defend such puppetry, condemning any efforts to strip us of these strings? The reason, one must suppose, is that nothing is more enticing, nothing more vitally idiotic, than our desire to have a name — even if it is the name of a stupid little puppet — and to hold on to this name throughout the long ordeal of our lives, as if we could hold on to it forever. If only we could keep these precious strings from growing frayed and tangles, if only we could keep from falling into an empty sky, we might continue to pass ourselves off under our assumed names and perpetuate our puppet's dance throughout all eternity...."

The voice whispered more words than these, more than I can recall, as if it would deliver its lecture without end. But at some point I drifted off to sleep as I had never slept before, calm and gray and dreamless.

The next morning I was awakened by some noise down the street outside my window. It was the same delirious cacophony I had heard the day before when I first arrived in the northern border town and witnessed the passing of that unique parade. But when I got up from *my* bed and went to the window, I saw no sign of the uproarious procession. Then I noticed the house directly opposite the one in which I had spent the night. One of the highest windows of that house across the street was fully open, and slightly below the ledge of the window, lying against the gray facade of the house, was the body of a man hanging by his neck from a thick white rope. The cord was stretched taut and led back through the window and into the house. For some reason this sight did not seem in any way unexpected or out of place, even as the noisy thrumming of the unseen parade grew increasingly louder and even when I recognized the figure of the hanged man, who was extremely slight of build, almost like a child in physical stature. Many years older than when I had last seen him, his hair and beard now radiantly white, clearly this was the body of my old physician, Dr. Zirk.

Now I could see the parade approaching. From the far end of the gray, tunnel-like street the clown creature strolled in its loose white garments, its egg-shaped head scanning the high houses on either side. As the creature passed beneath my window it looked up at me with that same expression of bland malevolence, and then passed on. Following this figure was the formation of ragged men harnessed by ropes to a cage-like vehicle that rolled along on wooden wheels. Countless objects, many more than I saw the previous day, clattered against the bars of the cage. The grotesque inventory now included bottles of pills that rattled with the contents inside them, shining scalpels and instruments for cutting through bones, needles and syringes strung together and hung like ornaments on a Christmas tree, and a stethoscope that had been looped about the decapitated dog's head. The wooden stakes of the caged platform wobbled to the point of breaking with the additional weight of this cast-off clutter. Because there was no roof covering this cage, I could see down into it from my window. But there was nothing inside, at least for the moment. As the vehicle passed directly below, I looked across the street at the hanged man and the thick rope from which he dangled like a puppet. From the shadows inside the open window of the house, a hand appeared that was holding a polished steel straight razor. The fingers of that hand were thick and wore many gaudy rings. After the razor had worked at the cord for a few moments, the body of Dr. Zirk fell from the heights of the gray house and landed in the open vehicle just as it passed by. The procession was so lethargic in its every aspect now seemed to disappear quickly from view, its muffled riot of sounds fading into the distance.

To make an end of it, I thought to myself—*to make an end of it in whatever style you wish.*

I looked at the house across the street. The window that was once open was now closed, and the curtains behind it were drawn. The tunnel like street of gray houses was absolutely quiet and absolutely still. Then, as if in answer to my own deepest wish, a sparse showering of snow flakes began to descend from the gray morning sky, each one of them a soft whispering voice. For the longest time I continued to stare out from my window, gazing upon the street and the town that I knew was my home. ***Q***

The Case of the Glass Slipper by Ian Watson

illustrated by George Barr

Outside the heavy chintz curtains of those famous rooms in Baker Street the London fog, yellowed by gaslight, crept and probed for entry and hid the world from view.

To Sherlock Holmes, seated within, the fog always seemed to afford a paradoxical image of his own relationship with the world of crime. That world sought to conceal its malignant, insinuating activities from view; activities which he by subtle probing would reveal. It sought to conceal, yet its very smokescreen betrayed its position. This fog was an organism which carried the seeds of its own unmasking, as did any crime of less rank than the hypothetical "perfect crime" — which, Holmes reasoned, would be no crime at all, since crime must necessarily be imperfect. Did not crime represent a flaw in the logical structure of society?

His thought processes were interrupted — if not disarrayed — when the visitor whom he had been expecting was ushered in.

"Your Highness," Holmes said, rising.

The Prince was strikingly handsome despite the muffler he wore to guard his lungs from the fog, and to preserve his incognito. Nodding, he glanced around the room, taking in the roaring fire, the music stand, the leather-bound volumes on pharmacology.

"My colleague Watson has been called away to the bedside of an old friend," Holmes explained. He immediately detected the missing element which puzzled the Prince.

"Excellent! Then there will be no record of this visit, nor of my dilemma." When the Prince unwound his muffler, Holmes noted a very slight scar on the side of the Prince's chin compatible either with an old hunting accident or a boyhood fall from a tree. The poised dancer's — not duellist's — grace with which the Prince moved ruled out the second, maladroit alternative.

"I can assure you of Watson's entire discretion," said Holmes mildly.

The Prince waved his equivocation aside, politely so.

"Mr. Holmes, I come from a neighboring kingdom. Yet my kingdom does not neighbour

Her Britannic Majesty's realm in any ordinary sense ..."

"In my experience the extraordinary usually yields to logical scrutiny."

"Which is why I have come to you. I believe myself to be the victim of a monstrous imposture, though I cannot put my finger upon the betraying detail."

"Pray proceed."

"At a Grand Ball in my palace I fell in love with the most beautiful girl in all the world. She danced with me till midnight; then, as the chimes of twelve sounded, she ran off without telling me her name."

"And what of her appearance, Sire?"

"Delightful, delicate, wonderful! She wore the most elegant gown. On her dainty feet were a pair of glass slippers, not quite size three and a half."

Holmes temporarily dismissed the question of shoe size and of how the dancing Prince determined this feature of his partner. Such a fellow might wall have drunk champagne from the girl's slipper. Indeed such a slipper, made of glass, was the only suitable receptacle for the legendary, chivalrous pouring of bubbly into a partner's footwear.

"She danced in *glass* slippers all night long?"

"Certainly. Ah, how we tripped the light fantastic! Then, so suddenly, she fled from my arms!"

"Of glass, Your Highness? Were they not fragile? If not fragile, how could her tender young feet...?"

The Prince dismissed these suspicions of the sage of Baker Street. "It is nothing unusual in my kingdom to dance in glass slippers. As she fled down the steps of the Royal Palace in apparent panic and disarray she left one of the slippers behind her on the steps. Thus I was able to trace my beloved runaway. It fitted the foot of only one person: Cinderella, a poor oppressed maiden who I believe must have been a changeling for some royal princess. She confessed. She told me how her fairy godmother changed a pumpkin into a fine coach, and white mice into footmen. We married joyously. And yet—"

"And yet?"

"We have only been married for a year and a day. Her temper grows sharp. She shows signs of becoming a shrew. She is constantly indisposed. I cannot think but that my own true Cinderella has been stolen away, abducted from my palace, and that a simulacrum, a golem of her, has been substituted. This imitation will gradually sour my whole life, thus too the life of the kingdom whose well-being — as you know — is intimately connected with the well-being of its prince."

At this point Holmes took out his pipe and placed it in his mouth — though out of deference to his royal visitor he did not actually light the tobacco. Holmes paced to the window and back a few times. Presently he placed the pipe on a walnut table.

"Your Highness, I must know: prior to that last midnight dance, did you by any chance drink champagne from your partner's slipper?"

"Why do you ask?" marvelled the Prince. "I did not. But why do you ask?"

"Champagne may have made your partner's slipper *slippery.* Consequently it fell off when she fled down the steps."

"A slippery slipper? I did nothing to cause such a thing! I believe the consequence of spilt, drying champagne would be a stickiness rather than a slippery condition."

Holmes glanced momentarily at his volumes of pharmacology, his memory searching for a reference in those texts, then he nodded slowly.

"Without intruding too far upon the privacy of the royal bed —"

Gallantly the Prince shook his head. "I may add that Cinderella does not have ... lubricious feet, delightful though they are to behold."

Holmes admired the discretion of the Prince, for he had told Holmes what he needed to know without invoking the vulgar word 'sweaty.' "In that case, Your Highness, there is only one possible answer. We arrive at it logically. Cinderella's slipper slipped off as she ran, yet when your

heralds visited her home that slipper fitted her exactly and perfectly. Is that not singular? She did not deliberately kick the slipper off in order to run more swiftly, otherwise she would have kicked off *both* slippers. Therefore, on the night of the Ball the slipper did not in fact fit Cinderella exactly! It almost fitted her; it was slightly too large. Consequently, the Cinderella who lost her slipper at the Ball and the Cinderella whom your heralds visited are not one and the same."

The Prince held his brow, aghast. "How can that be? The one Cinderella and the other exactly resemble one another!"

"Except in the matter of temper," Holmes reminded the Prince. "And except as regard foot size. You yourself have already harboured the suspicion of a simulacrum, substituted recently, but the true state of affairs is more serious, the Cinderella whom you have married, You Highness, is either an identical twin of the Cinderella who attended the Ball — or much more likely she is a *clone*. Not a golem, no, a clone. There may be a number of Cinderellas. Your Cinderella fled from the Ball because of her lack of uniqueness. She fled to save you — and herself — from the revelation of shame."

"I do not care if she is what you call a clone. I love her. Where is she now? That is all I desire to know." The Prince slapped his brow. "Stop me, but I have married the other, and bedded her. A shrew in the making."

"If so," Holmes pursued sadly, though logically, "she must have a genetic predisposition to shrewishness." He carried on remorsely. "You have already said that her Godmother can transform mice into footmen. I can only conclude that, in addition to clandestine cloning of at least one of your subjects, experiments in recombinant DNA technology are proceeding secretly in your kingdom. Enticingly beautiful and gracious maidens are being created by the Godmother, with a whole range of specific *animal* characteristics. Shrewishness may be one of such!"

"This is a vile conspiracy!"

"Quite so, Your Highness. It is a conspiracy of monsters in beauteous human female form: identical, innocently seductive people with a coding for some bestial characteristic in their very make-up. She will pass this shrewishness on to your offspring, Your Highness."

"Oh, but my bride is expecting a child even now!"

"When she has given birth to a prince or princess of the blood — and of her blood too — a child who is partly a beast... I warrant that this Cinderella whom you innocently married will slip away back to the Godmother. She will not be missed, for another almost identical Cinderella will slip secretly into the palace to take her place, possessing other implanted characteristics which she will pass on to your next child. This new Cinderella may be foxy, a veritable queen. She will present you with a whore of a daughter. The Cinderella who follows her might present you with a *mouse* who will never win any neighboring prince's hand. Your household, Your Highness, will become a menagerie of subtle evil: a zoo very like our own Regents Park — of the Beast *inserted into* Man. The Godmother's plans are more cunning and poisonous than those of the evil Moriarty."

Holmes deeply pitied the stricken Prince.

"All this," the Prince said quietly, "proceeds from a slipper which fell off..."

"By elementary logic, Your Highness."

"What shall I do, Mr. Holmes?"

"I am only an investigator, Your Highness. My final recourse is always the justice of the law. In your land —"

"In my land I am the Law. The love of my subjects for me is the whole of the social contract."

"In your bed, through the agency of love, the state will be brought low through the machinations of the Godmother!"

"Must I kill Cinderella then? Must I stifle my own child, new born? Must I emasculate myself so that my subjects shall not know evil? How can I? The destruction of the capacity for love would destroy the social contract."

"How devious this plot is! How ingenious the Godmother!" Holmes paced the room in anger.

"It is well that the good Watson is not present to hear this. As a medical man he would be stricken to the core by this foul misuse of recombinant DNA and embryology. You are involved in a struggle, Your Highness, against the direst evil in the person of this Godmother. She possesses technology far in advance of your own. Yet she must have some weakness, some flaw. It is my experience that crime always carries the seeds of its own destruction!"

"In the same way that Cinderella carries the ova of my destruction?"

"Indeed. Perhaps the key to the eradication of this beastly crime —" Holmes drew out a key from his fob pocket and opened a locked cabinet. Amidst phials of reagents, bottles of laudanum, hypodermic syringes, and antidotes to poison, there reposed a beautiful tortoise shell comb with a silver handle. This rested across a brandy goblet containing a red apple with bite marks on one side, pickled in clear alcohol. Next to this glass lay a spindle from a spinning wheel, with a spring-blade needle recessed into it. Carefully Holmes removed the comb.

"Your Highness, I have retained this comb as a memento from a previous case. The worthy Dr. Watson was able to ascertain in his small laboratory that it was treated with a certain nerve agent. When the comb is drawn through the hair so that it touches the scalp, it will induce paralysis. Not death, but a suspension of the faculties for at least a century. You must present this to Cinderella. Once she uses it, she will fall into a deep sleep akin to a cryogenic trance. Likewise the child in her womb. That child which she bears must not be born until you have searched out and found the secret laboratory of the Godmother; until you have compelled her — aye, upon pain of dancing on molten glass — to develop a viral DNA agent which will usurp the shrewish traits in your wife and unborn child! This viral DNA will eject the beastliness from all the cells of Cinderella's body, and from those cells gestating in her womb. *Then* you may revive her. *Then* the joyous birth of your heir may proceed."

From the same cabinet Holmes produced a tiny jar of red salve.

"Here is the antidote to the nerve agent. The good Watson was obliged to develop this to revive the victim in the case I mentioned. It may be applied by means of your own lips. It is a binary agent. In contact with human saliva, it becomes effective."

Carefully Holmes wrapped the comb and the jar before presenting them to the Prince. Modestly he acknowledged that nobleman's thanks.

"As to the other Cinderella clones whom you will discover, you must compel the Godmother to inject them also with the viral DNA anti-agent. There will probably be seven Cinderellas in all. Bring the others back to your palace and lock them in the attics. If discreet, you can found a great dynasty — and who will be the wiser? As to your first love, let the glass slipper always be by your bed as a sure way of distinguishing her."

Half an hour after the Prince's departure, Dr. Watson returned. Coughing on account of the fog, he gratefully accepted a medicinal glass of whiskey.

"How is Hodgkinson, poor fellow?" Holmes enquired solicitously.

"Failing fast." Holmes' faithful scribe cleared his throat. "Did anything of note occur during my absence?"

"I received one visitor — whose identity I may not reveal, even to your good self. His was a problem which I could solve by simple deduction without leaving this room." Holmes reached in his fob pocket and displayed an emerald ring. "I may only say that he was suitably grateful."

"Can you say nothing else, Holmes?"

"My dear fellow, it concerned matters of state."

The sage of Baker Street reached for his Stradivarius, and began to play.

Q

PRETEND VAMPIRE

You don't want blood
You want poems about blood
Nosferatu dreams
    & a bloodless life
E.A. Poe short stories
    maybe a house in the suburbs

But what if you find it, blood,
    your own
Pooled, coagulating, messy
A wooden stake, I think,
unnecessary

— **Kendall Evans**

GOT 'ET

My unfortunate cousin, named Steve,
complained that the ghouls would not leave
    him ever alone;
    they gnawed flesh and bone,
without giving hope of reprieve.

— **Darrell Schweitzer**

KISS OF THE HARPY

Volumptous vultures
preened and pecked,
brushed with sagging breasts,

teased with phallic tongues,
and in raptor's raptures
rode him to carrion death.

— **J.W. Donnelly**

A SINGLE SHADOW

by Stephen Dedman

illustrated by Jill Bauman

It was November, which made it nearly two months since I'd arrived in Tokyo, and the local shows had been much funnier when I hadn't really understood them—but the apartment was tiny and my bed was also the Tanii family's sofa, so I sat there and tried to read. Maybe by the time I went home, I'd have learnt the domestic deafness which is the Japanese substitute for privacy — not that I'd need it back in Perth, but what the Hell. When Mrs Tanii ducked back to the kitchen, I turned to Hiroshi and said, as sotto voce as possible, "Saw you with Shimako today. Does this mean you're back together?"

Anyone who thinks the Japanese are inscrutable hasn't seen one jump the way Hiroshi did. He stared at me for a moment, then whispered back, "No! Not me! Haven't seen her in a week!" and hurried out of the room. Miyume, his sister, glanced at him over the edge of her magazine, and then disappeared behind it again.

"Was it something I said?" I muttered, in English.

Miyume looked warily at me, then shook her head. "You must have mistaken someone else for him, Dai-Oni-San," she replied, also in English.

"Please don't call me that." Less than a week after I'd begun teaching, I'd become known as Tony Dai-Oni, Tony the Great Goblin-Demon. I mean, it's hardly my fault I'm red-headed, green-eyed, and nearly two metres tall, neh? "And don't try to tell me you all look the same, either. I know Hiroshi when I see him. He was even wearing my Cerebus T-shirt."

"There are nearly twelve million people in Tokyo, Tony-san," said Miyume, patiently. "There must be more than one Cerebus T-shirt. And if it was Hiroshi you saw, then it was not Shimako you saw him with." I could have corrected her grammar, but didn't. "You do not know her as well as you do Hiroshi."

That was true, but while I'm generally pretty good at remembering faces, I'm excellent at remembering pretty ones, and Shimako, while too young for me, was nearly as stunning as Miyume (whose name, aptly enough, meant 'Beautiful Dream'). Okay, so I've fallen in love with one of my students everywhere I've taught — or so it always seemed at the time. Maybe one day, I'll find some way of knowing when I'm really in love, and settle down instead of hurrying to the next city. "Maybe," I conceded, just to see Miyume smile before she vanished behind her magazine again. I sighed silently, and returned to reading Kwaidan.

I've never been very good at researching the places I visit before I get there, and most of what I knew about Japan came from the Lonely Planet guidebook, a lot of Kurosawa movies, a crash course in the language, and the works of Lafcadio Hearn — a half-Irish half-Greek dishwasher, proof-reader and hack writer turned translator, teacher and folklorist (my sort of person, neh?). He'd written book after book of Japanese exotica ('Kwaidan' is Japanese for 'Weird Tales') a century ago, and written them so beautifully that no-one really cared whether the legends, poems and horror stories they contained were authentic. I lost myself for a few minutes in his story of the Rokuro-Kubi; when I looked up again, Miyume had gone, leaving the magazine on the floor open at the centrefold — a colour picture of a fairly pretty Japanese girl of about Miyume's age, naked except for a strategically placed octopus. Back home, it would have been considered pornographic, but this was a family magazine, with comics and a sports section.

One day, I thought, I might understand the Japanese language — but the Japanese themselves, never.

The next day, I saw Hiroshi and Shimako again — this time, at Shinjuku station. It looked as though he were following her, and she ignoring him, but that might have been some sort of courtship ritual. Suddenly, though, she ducked into the ladies' room, leaving him standing outside, looking foolish. He

hesitated for a moment, then vanished into the crowd ... or maybe into the toilets, or behind one of the vending machines; all I know is that he wasn't there when I looked again, a second later.

I didn't think of it again until I returned home, and found him watching a video of *Terminator 2*. "Done your English homework?" I asked, teas-ingly, as I sat down behind him. He reached down and handed me a sheet of paper. I looked at it, and then up at the TV screen when I heard Hiroshi chuckle. The T2, shape-changed into the brat's foster-mother, had just impaled the foster-father . . . which meant that the movie had been running for at least half an hour. The homework, even if it'd been done with maximum haste and minimal enthusiasm, would have taken another half-hour.. .. "When did you get home?"

"About four-thirty. Why?"

I could've sworn I'd seen him on the other side of Tokyo at a quarter to five, at the earliest. . . and it was barely quarter past. "Any phone calls for me?"

"No," said Miyume, from the kitchen, before Hiroshi could answer.

"Thanks," I said, and started correcting Hiroshi's homework, wondering why he might bother lying to me. Maybe he thought it was none of my business — or none of anyone's business. He was only sixteen, after all, and Shimako already had quite a reputation as a heartbreaker: maybe the affair embarrassed him. But why was Miyume covering for him? Well, she was his sister, as well as a Psych major; she must have known him better than I did, and presumably had her reasons.

I finished correcting the homework, then reached into my day-pack for my battered copy of Hearn's *The Romance of the Milky Way* and turned to the chapter of 'Goblin Poetry'. It was weird, I thought, how many creatures in Japanese mythology were shapeshifters, routinely taking human form to deceive their victims — or maybe not weird, not in a country where gangsters openly wore the emblems of their syndicates on lapel pins, but certainly interesting. I didn't much mind that Hearn had decided not to translate the stories of the Three-Eyed Monk, the Acolyte with the Lantern, the Stone that cries in the night, the Goblin-Heron, or even the Faceless Babe, but I wished he'd been more impressed by the Long-Tongued Maiden and the Pillow-Mover. I also would have liked to have known more about how Goblin-Foxes turned old horse-bones into beautiful girls; it might come in useful —

"Still reading fairy-stories again, Tony-san?" I looked up, to see that Miyume was standing beside me, shaking her head. "Are you ever going to grow up?"

"Sit down and say that. Besides, this is anthropology."

"Anth— ?"

I tried to think of the Japanese word for 'anthropology', without success. "Ah . . . you've heard of Margaret Mead?"

"Yes, of course: didn't she do that book about Samoa, after all of the native girls had lied to her?"

"Touche."

"I suppose you think we turn into cats and foxes when your back is turned?"

I smiled. "Only some of you —you, for example. You're much too beautiful to be human, but you could be a cat, a flower, a tree — no, scratch that one, you're too short." I glanced at Hiroshi. "Maybe Shimako's the tree-spirit," I said, softly. Hiroshi ignored me, but Miyume covered her mouth and laughed.

"I assure you, I'm quite human," she said. "I don't doubt that Shimako is, too. And how many girls have you used that line on, before?"

"I think that one's an original."

"Thank you," she said, too politely. "What line did you use on your girlfriend in Taipei?"

"Mei? I tried writing her a poem, but my Chinese wasn't up to it, and her English ..."

"And the one in Bangkok? Or Mexico City?"

"What are you trying to do, write my biography?"

"I'm trying to understand you, Tony-san. Isn't that what you're trying to do to us?" She leaned closer, and whispered, "Or do you just want to sleep with us?"

"Only you," I whispered back, without any hesitation; Mrs Tanii didn't understand English, and Hiroshi knew how and when to keep his mouth shut, "and only if it's what you want."

"Why only me?"

"Because it's only you I'm in love with. Don't Japanese ever fall in love without burning down

Tokyo?"

In the tiny park near the apartment, there was a memorial to O-shichi, a seventeen-year-old girl who'd been burnt at the stake in 1683 for torching her father's house in an ill-advised attempt to re-unite herself with her samurai lover.

Miyume laughed, loudly enough that Hiroshi turned around to look at us. She glanced at him, and he hastily returned his attention to the television. "Of course we do," she said, in more normal tones. "We haven't always regarded it as the most important thing in the universe, or everyone's inalienable right, but then, neither have Westerners ... and we no longer think of it as the great dragon-demon, either. It's just something that happens."

I shrugged. I grew up on a farm, didn't even see a city until I went away to university, and I've long suspected that romantic love is like traffic jams and good bookshops, something you're much more likely to find in cities and the bigger the better. If you see a thousand women on the subway every morning, you can pick and choose, or at least dream: living in a small country town, you take what you can get. Me, I'd chosen to spend the five years since I graduated in some of the largest cities on Earth, cities so crowded you rarely saw your own shadow.

"What about you, personally?"

"Me?"

"Have you ever been in love?"

She raised her eyebrows innocently, and smiled broadly. "Of course, Tony-san, but love is one thing, and sex another. Please remember, this is not Australia: rents are high here, privacy expensive, and most of us can not afford to leave home until we have been working for many years — often, not even then. Competition for places in the universities is much more intense — you must have heard of Examination Hell — so we have to spend more time studying." She pointedly didn't even glance at Hiroshi. "And our doctors will not prescribe the pills which your teenagers take for granted — perhaps because they believe them to be too dangerous, but possibly because they make too much money out of abortions. I know it's not romantic, but Japanese girls have learnt when and how to say 'no'; the meek little women who do everything men tell them are as mythical as your kitsune, rikombyo and gaki. In truth, we rule our men from birth; that's why they work so hard to keep what power they have, and why they never come home at night." Then she bent over, kissed me quickly on the tip of my nose, and ducked back into the kitchen.

I sat there, rubbing my nose absent-mindedly, Kitsune were goblin-foxes, and gaki were hungry

ghosts, but what the Hell were rikombyo?

I found the answer in Hearn (where else?): a rikombyo, literally 'ghost-sickness', was a doppleganger, an apparition created by unrequited love, or the love for someone now dead. In the poem Hearn quoted, the rikombyo stayed at home with the original, both yearning after the far-journeying husband, but Hearn also stated that 'one of these bodies would go to join the absent beloved, while the other remained at home'.

I looked over at Hiroshi, and shook my head. Sure, I loved ghost stories and old legends, but this was one of the most modern cities on Earth, it was like believing that there were vampires in Washington . . . well, you know what I mean. Besides, Hearn had written that rikombyo were 'of the gentler sex', whatever that meant in Japan....

I continued to stare, until the movie ended and Miyume began setting the table for dinner.

On Saturday night, Miyume took me to a party at Tokyo University, to meet her Psych class. I was suspicious of her motives — Hiroshi had told me that she had at least three boyfriends at the university at any one time and was careful not to show favouritism to any of them, so this may have been just another psych experiment — but what the Hell, I would have followed Miyume into a leper colony or karaoke bar.

Once at the party, Miyume disappeared into the throng, presumably giving equal time to her troika (triad?), and leaving me to dance and converse with a group of students who knew even less about Australia than I did about Japan. It was exhausting, but amusing, and at least no one asked me to sing; more importantly, it gave us a moment of real privacy on the way home, as we walked from the station to the apartment. Miyume had been teasing me about having drawn a crowd, arid I was accusing her of the same. She denied it, and I asked, "So what were they? Rikombyo?"

She laughed unconvincingly, and said, "Of course not; there's no such thing. I told you that —"

I looked at her, and realised she was lying. She tried walking faster to get some distance between us, but it was a wasted effort; I could hop faster than she could run. "Then why do I keep seeing Hiroshi following Shimako when he's supposed to be somewhere else?"

"Then it couldn't have been him; you were mistaken..."

"No I wasn't. Was it a rikombyo?"

"I told you, there's no such thing; you saw someone who looked like Hiroshi..."

"Next time, I'll take a photograph."

"It won't work," she said, as we hurried through the park, and then stopped suddenly at the memorial to O-Shichi, her face white. We stared at each other for a moment, and then I asked, "You knew, didn't you?"

"Knew what?"

"About Hiroshi."

"No," she said, quietly. "I didn't know about Hiroshi until you told me."

"About rikombyo, then."

"Of course; I told you about them, if you remember..."

"They exist?"

"Yes, they exist," she said, heavily. "They're rare, and you can't duplicate them in a laboratory — it's been tried — but yes, they do exist."

We stood there in silence (apart from the passing traffic and the occasional plane from the nearby airport), and then I said, "Laboratory?"

"Psychologists have tried to create them, usually with hypnosis. It's worked sometimes, but not often enough for anyone to risk making a fool of himself by presenting a paper on it."

"Jesus."

"We still don't really know what causes them. What do psychologists know about love, anyway, right?" she said, with a twisted smile. "We know they're rare — but even if they were one in a million, there'd be twelve of them in Tokyo alone. They're real enough to fool anyone in most circumstances,

but they don't cast shadows or show up on film. And we know they're sterile; we managed to get a sperm sample from one, and no, I'm not going to tell you how. There are old stories about men and women having sex with them; they're — said to be very good lovers, because they're eager to please and that's really all they exist for. Rather like butterflies."

"And do they die after a day, too?"

Miyume smiled. "You keep saying how often you've been in love, Tony-san; does that die after a day? However long the love lasts, unrequited and with that sort of intensity, they last. Usually, they just disappear. We've never found a body of one; I suspect a lot of suicide attempts are really rikombyo, but that's just a theory, I can't prove it."

I shuddered. "What'll happen to Hiroshi?"

"I don't know. Probably nothing; usually, they just get over it, find someone else who loves them back, fall sanely in love instead of madly."

The shock hadn't quite worn off by Monday, when the rikombyo followed Shimako into my English class — but Domeki-sensei was too polite to mention it, so what was a humble teaching assistant like myself supposed to do?

A few of the girls giggled behind their hands, but nothing more; Shimako herself remained as poised as ever. I was sufficiently startled that it took me (me!) most of the lesson to recognise the telltale signs of a teenage girl who's just gotten laid and is trying not to be too visibly smug about it.

I stared at the rikombyo while earnestly trying to explain Australian Rules football to the class. He was as inscrutable as the Japanese are supposed to be. I babbled on, wondering if this was a tremendous hoax; perhaps there was no apparition, only an obsessive teenager who'd skipped a class to —

No. I knew the Japanese well enough to know that this being tolerated, especially this near Examination Hell, was much less likely than a ghost in a classroom. The lesson continued harmoniously enough until the siren sounded for the next class — the second-last of the day, I remembered with relief. A moment later, I remembered that Hiroshi was in that class ... and he always rushed there, hoping to see Shimako before she left.

Shimako seemed to be taking forever to pack her bag and leave the room; she was only halfway to the door, with the rikombyo puppy-like at her heels, when Hiroshi walked in.

Back home, it would have been the prelude to a screaming match, maybe even a brawl . . . but Hiroshi merely looked from one face to the other for a few seconds, his expression horrified, then stared straight into the rikombyo's eyes. It looked for all the world like one of those scenes from the Kurosawa films, the contest of wills between two samurai: for a moment, the apparition seemed to fade into the dingy painted wall — and then Shimako took a step forward, and then walked past Hiroshi without looking at him again. The rikombyo followed her out. Domeki-sensei turned to the blackboard, and began writing. .

I was on my way to the station that evening, when I saw Shimako again. The rikombyo was still following her, but this time, he was wearing a Cerebus T-shirt again, with a new pair of Levi 501s and even newer Nikes — way beyond the Taniis' budget. He seemed taller, too, with clearer skin: in fact, I realised, though unmistakeably male, he looked more like Shimako than Hiroshi. ...

I scanned the crowd for the real Hiroshi, but there was no sign of him.

I caught the next train to Shinagawa, and walked to the apartment. He wasn't in the living room, or his bedroom, but the place didn't feel empty. I tried listening, but the traffic noises from outside drowned out any recognisable sounds of movement. "Hiroshi?"

No answer ...

I stood in the living room for a moment, and then noticed that Miyume's bedroom door was closed. I knocked on it softly, and there was a distinct gasp from within.

"Miyume?"

There was a sound inside that might have been scuffling, and then "What is it?"

"Can I come in?"

"No! Don't open the door!"

Despite myself, I smiled. "Okay . . . but I need to talk to you. Hiroshi . . . well, it's about your, uh, psych experiment. Look, I'll be waiting in the living room, okay?"

I collapsed onto the sofa, closed my eyes, and tried to think. Finally, I heard Miyume's door open, and then close again. I recounted the afternoon's events as concisely and dispassionately as I could, and concluded, "I guess the rikombyo's about equal parts Hiroshi's frustration and Shimako's narcissism, now. Is that common?"

"No."

"What'll happen now?"

"I don't know," she said, sitting beside me, smelling unmistakeably of dynamite sex. "It will probably disappear before very long."

"Or Hiroshi will... has he been home?"

"No."

I nodded, and opened my eyes. Despite her obvious worry, she was still glowing and looked even more beautiful than ever. "Your boyfriend — is he a psych student, too?"

"No."

"You might as well bring him out; he can't stay in there forever."

She smiled hesitantly, and something went click! in my brain. I rolled off the sofa, and hurtled down the corridor.

"Tony! NO!"

Opening her bedroom door would have been obscenely rude even in Australia; in Tokyo, it was probably a capital crime. But I had to know —

He was red-headed and nearly two metres tall; I couldn't see what colour his eyes were in the dim light, but I didn't need to.

I don't know how long we stared at each other, but suddenly Miyume was standing behind me. "You said you loved me," she whispered. "Isn't it good to know you were telling the truth?"

I turned around, and then walked out of the apartment without another word.

The youth hostel had a nine o'clock curfew, which was ridiculous for Tokyo, but it gave me time for a few drinks and a decision. I was on contract until the end of the school year, so I couldn't leave Tokyo... but if I stayed in a hostel and stuck to a vegetarian diet, I could save enough for an airline ticket. It only remained to choose somewhere to *go*.

The more Kirin beer I drank, the better Taipei looked. I could spend some time with Mei, maybe get my old job there back ... I changed a few notes for coins, and headed for the phone.

The phone rang five times before being an swered by a man with a faint Australian accent. It took me a moment to recognise my own voice, and then I hung up immediately. Then I went to the bar, had another drink, and my shadow and I went back to the hostel and to bed. **Q**

CURSE OF THE SIREN'S HUSBAND

He watches from the wings
as she takes her final bows.
Hoarse screams fill the rafters.
Bodies roll through the aisles.
They surge against the stage
like lemmings in full flight.
Yet security stands ready
and security holds tight
to repulse her hapless thralls.
This steady wall of deaf men,
who cannot hear her songs,
has saved her more than once.

Her albums all go platinum.
Her concerts fill the halls
When the tickets go on sale
the lines queue for blocks.
The critics praise her artistry
and marvel at her range,
from a virginal soprano
to a rich and knowing bass
that includes a magic mezzo
and a pure contralto scale.

Yet once they are alone
in a sumptuous penthouse suite
— her make-up stripped away,
her gown a wrinkled heap
and the music far behind —
she collapses on the sofa,
a damp cloth across her eyes,
until her real self emerges
and her real voice opines:

"If you'd booked a second show,
we could have upped the gate.
That drum solo was lame,
the bass line somewhat thin,
and the stage was far too small.
Put the flowers over there,
Where *are* my fluffy slippers?
Don't forget to call Chicago,
Bring me more champagne!
Tomorrow I'll sleep in."

As they idolize her photos,
wearing headphones like a vice,
as they hatch erotic fantasies far
beyond their reach, as they multiply
their longing to the sum of their lives,
her addict-fans could never, in their
dark and wildest dreams, imagine
how her siren's song can become a
harpy's screech.

— Bruce Boston

A GOAT IN TROUSERS

by Lord Dunsany

illustrated by Fredrik King

A fog that had been lying over the fields was going away at last along the horizon, with queer weird shapes rising up from it as it went; but for which I might never have troubled with the fancies that what I saw in a field gave rise to, though what I saw was odd in itself.

It was a goat wearing trousers. They were good grey trousers with dark stripes in them, and he had a smart black jacket too, and even a hat, jammed down on one of his horns, which came out through the brim. Boys play all kinds of tricks, with most of which one would have no reason to interfere; but, when I looked close and saw the quality of the trousers, it seemed to me that somebody might be put to loss and considerable expense, and that the unsuitable joke, or whatever it was, should be enquired into.

So with a view to reporting what I had seen I opened the gate of the field, which was the end of an iron bedstead, so that I need hardly say that this was in Ireland, for this convenient use of old broken-down bedsteads, so far as I know, is scarcely found elsewhere.

And, indeed, the far blue shapes of the Dublin mountains looked serenely over the field and that strangely-apparelled goat, and me going up to it to pursue my enquiries. And the first thing that I saw as I entered the field was a boot of patent leather which I supposed had been kicked off. I don't know where the other one was. And when I got near the goat it turned its head towards me. And I looked into its yellow eyes, and it looked right into mine, and seemed for a moment as if it had something to tell me; and then with a sudden shake it turned its head away, as though neither I nor my enquiries could ever be any use to it. And from all the enquiries I made, not only on the spot, but from many men, this is what seems to have happened.

Those pale-blue distant mountains must have looked down also on two statesmen walking along a street in Dublin on one of those days on which their calm grave faces looked clearly all the way down some streets of the city. And, as they went, one statesman said to the other, "It is a shocking thing that, with the great position that Ireland now has, there should be anyone in the country still believing in wise women and witchcraft and all that nonsense, when we should be showing an example to the nations."

"It is indeed," said the other.

"We must frame a bill," said the first statesman, "and get it passed into law as quickly as possible, making it an offence to take any fees for any pretended cures of man or beast, or anything of the sort. I'd like to make it a punishable offence even to talk of such things; but we can't do that. But if we stop those women receiving any fees, we will soon stop the whole nonsense."

And the other statesman was silent awhile, and then he said, "No. We can't do it by laws. The cure for it is education. It's all childish nonsense. But stamp it out in the minds of children, and by the time that they grow up the thing will be done with for ever."

"You're right," said the other. "And it's what we'll do. We'll send down a man, for a start, to give a lecture about it to every school in Leinster, and to explain to them clearly in simple words that wise women are all just nonsense, and witches and all the rest of them, and that they are only helpless old women trying to frighten children."

So a man was sent down from Dublin to go to every school in Leinster, and would lecture for a bit in a school, and go on to another as soon as he had convinced all there. And in the far gaze of the Dublin mountains men were saying, "Isn't it a good thing to have a man down from Dublin teaching the children sense?"

And the answer would come, "Sure it is. Isn't it time they learned?"

And another would say, "It was all very well in the old days, putting horns and tail on a man, or any other queer shape; but a belief in all them things doesn't suit modern ideas, and it is time it was put a stop to."

"It is indeed. Sure, you're right, and it is indeed. At the same time, wouldn't it be a pity to annoy the wise women overmuch? For who is there but they that has any cure for the falling of the palate? Aye, and for other ills and evils. Sure, who would there be to help us in our need, if that man were to incense them so that one night they all went away to wherever such people go? I only ask the question, meaning no harm."

"Isn't there the doctor?" said someone.

"Ah, doctors don't know everything," came the answer.

And heads were nodded at that. And the mood of the men changed, as the mood of the mountains changes, watching from beyond Dublin; and they began to doubt the wisdom of the man who had come to the school of their village to teach the children sense.

But the wise women were troubled. For the rumour ran all through Leinster that all their witchcraft was only to frighten children and that there was nothing in it at all.

The lecturer was a man named Mr. Finnegan; and after speaking to the children of the school of Donnisablane he was put up for the night by Michael Murphy, the young schoolmaster of that village. And the rumour of his coming had run for miles round and told everyone that he would be there. And, there it was that Mrs. Garganey, who was a wise woman, had talked with Mrs. Gallagher, who was another, as soon as the rumour had reached her, and said to her, "What is to be done? What is to be done at all?"

And Mrs. Gallagher had brewed a pound of tea only the day before, and it was simmering in the great kettle on her hearth, which small though her thatched cottage was, had an ampler space than any hearth that you are likely to see in any big house in England.

And Mrs. Gallagher said as they drank their tea, darker than brownest chestnut, "I have answered many queer riddles and read strange destinies. And so have you, Mrs. Garganey. But for this we must send for the Wise Woman of Galway. For there is none but she that can deal with this man from Dublin, who is down here putting wrong ideas into the heads of the children, and telling them that we and all our most secret arts are nothing at all, and that what we learned from our great-grandmothers, and that they learned from the old time and from the great witches of those days, is nothing only mere nonsense. And he, what is he but only a small clerk puffed up

with his self-importance, and knowing no more of where the big winds rise, or of what news they carry, than he knows of the growth of a buttercup. But he has the authority of them that be in Dublin behind him, and there is no one able to deal with him but that great witch, the Wise Woman of Galway. So let us send for her, and see what shape she will put on him." And send for her they did, however their message was carried, and she had harnessed her ass-cart at once and had driven by town and bog and meadow and wood all the way across Ireland, and was now come to Donnisablane. And Mrs. Gallagher said to her whatever such people say when they meet, and made whatever obeisance; and brought her to her house and put her ass in her bit of a stable and gave the great witch a cup of her dark tea. And Mrs. Garganey came to that house too, and the three conferred. And they spoke of strange transformations. And then the Wise Woman of Galway told them what they should do. And about that time a look came over the Dublin mountains, as though they all crept nearer to listen; so that their very hedgerows could be seen below, and their glens and valleys above, as they show when rain is coming.

But it was more than the rain that was coming. For the Wise Woman of Galway had bid summon the wise women from all the province of Leinster, and it was they that were drawing nearer. They harnessed their ass-carts at that summons, and came trotting. And those that had no ass for their journey ran.

And on the night of which I tell, whatever magic may be, there were more of them that make it in Donnisablane than in any other townland in all Ireland. And they came with a great cauldron, and drew all round the house of Michael Murphy, with Mr. Finnegan inside, and lit a fire under their cauldron among the trees of an orchard, and chanted their incantations and made their spells and did whatever witches do. And Michael Murphy looking out of a little window saw what was going on, and he ran to Mr. Finnegan and said, "Mr. Finnegan, sir, clear out of this and change your name and get to foreign parts. For the witches are after you."

And the man from Dublin said, "Now, you know that is all nonsense. Didn't I tell your children so this afternoon?"

"I know, sir. I know," said Michael Murphy. "And you put it very well. But look out of that window now towards the orchard. Look out; only don't let them see you."

And the man from Dublin looked out. "I see," he said. "I see there is something over there in the orchard."

"And it's all round us," said Michael Murphy. "Only there's a little path that runs along under the hedge of my garden, and you could get away by that. Only go quick, and go to foreign parts; for they're after you."

"I see," said the man from Dublin. "Mind you, it's just as I said: witches and cauldrons and spells and all that kind of thing are just nonsense. At the same time, to avoid any unpleasantness, I will perhaps do as you say."

Then he left the house, and that is the last that was ever seen of him.

I have made very thorough enquiries into the case; too thorough, perhaps, for they have established three separate theories. Some believe Mr. Finnegan fled to France, or one of those foreign countries, changing his name and his clothes, however his clothes got on to the goat. And then many believe that the wise women, whose whole profession he threatened, closed round him at the back of the garden and murdered him and put him into the cauldron in the orchard and boiled him, all but his clothes, and then dressed up the goat in the way that I saw. That is a theory that has been put to the police; and it is for them to investigate it, not I. But they seem to have investigated very half-heartedly and with no sympathy from anyone in the townland, where men were heard to say, "Why can't the gardai [police] get on with their work, and leave the wise women alone?" A sentiment with which the gardai almost seemed to agree. For, from all I hear, they questioned very few of the old women, and those politely and briefly.

The third theory, and the one perhaps the most widely held, though men say little about it, is that Mr. Finnegan is still alive and wearing his own clothes in fields around Donnisablane. But that is a theory of which I need say no more, for my readers would never believe it. Nor could I believe it myself anywhere away from the influence of the south-west wind, full of the scent of turf-smoke, blowing by old gnarled willows away over wastes of bog. **Q**

DRACULIMERICK

Said the Count, to Jonathan Harker,
as his prospects grew steadily darker,
"You will have from my wives
pleasures no one survives,
and then get a nice pretty marker."

— **Darrell Schweitzer**

WERELIZARD WARNING

The human-lizard metamorphosis
consists mainly of internal changes.
The only outward signs reveal
themselves as a failure to express
genuine emotion and the absence
of a certain spark that is visible
in the eyes of nearly all mammals,
even squirrels or bats or mice.

The disease is not transmitted
by-means of bites or scratches,
but merely through repeated
or prolonged exposure to those
who have already crossed over
into the chill reptilian realm.

In its final stages the affliction
is not transitory or reversible,
nor is it in any way related to
the changing phases of the moon.
Werelizards remain werelizards
the rest of their unnatural lives.

Werelizards can be all around
without you even knowing it.
At the bank. On the freeway,
Your auto mechanic or plumber
could easily be a werelizard.
Most lawyers are werelizards.
Politicians become werelizards
at some point in their careers.

If you think you are infected
there exist means to reverse
the process in it early stages,
Listen to music. Read poetry,
Surround yourself with those
you care about the most and
the ones who care about you.
Take a derelict to lunch.

The war between humanity
and werelizards is the oldest
of all conflicts and it must
be waged on the rugged and
shifting terrain of the heart where
every battle won or lost can change
the course of life.

— **Bruce Boston**

anybody home?

on the walls
all the mirrors
empty

on the floors
heaps of clothes
empty

in the bedrooms
every bed
empty

in the crawlspace
an eight-foot eggcase
empty

— **Steve McComas**

ONE SUMMER EVENING

by Catherine Mintz

illustrated by Janet Aulisio

Summer was the cruelest season. As the decades passed, the often-thwarted hope that he might heal faded into despair, almost indifference, but when the long golden days came they always reminded him of what he once was and renewed the pain.

He knit his long fingers together and sighed. The girl laughed at him whenever she caught him in this mood, and he had become skilled at concealing it from her, if not from the cats that lounged before the fire kept burning day and night regardless of the weather. They fled to the jungle safety of the garden whenever he unclasped the dark book bound in scaly leather.

So far, of course, the girl — chosen for her sunny personality: he had a horror of clever women — had been right not to take him seriously. The book was as useless as he himself and might as well have gone to start the kitchen fire on some winter morning, except of course that the stove used glass.

He got to his feet to pace. That he had been exhausted when he had placed himself here, at the conclusion of what he once saw as the fitting end of his labors, was no excuse. What had then seemed overwhelmingly desirable — an obscure life filled with simple routines and mundane pleasures — was not not even tolerable. Grief is a bad counselor, he reminded himself.

A siren wailed in the distance, and he frowned. It would take great skill to reverse the process. A delicate balance of influences had to be reached before he, with the — metaphorically speaking— small lever that was all he had allowed himself to retain, could once again move worlds.

He turned and looked out the open French doors.

The mist was forming over the river and the sounds of the works of modern men were dulled. Yet another perfect moment for the testing spell. He smiled bitterly. There had been many such moments and he had done his best every time.

So far nothing had happened. He had sat and waited, listening to the distant rumble of airplanes, until the cats had come home and the girl came in from the kitchen, smelling of herbs, spices, and her own warm self, leaned on the arm of his chair and charmed him into a better mood with wiles older than any man's.

Still, he thought, and took the book from the shelf. He sat down, unclasped the volume, and smoothed the page carefully. One more try before he turned the television on for the evening: he never had been one to simply quit.

Focusing his mind on the task to come, he reread the instructions he had penned so long ago. Magicking from memory without dire need was ostentatious. He preferred discretion when discretion would serve as well or better than showy workings.

Somewhere beyond the garden wall a car hooted urgently

He winced, then spread his hands and spoke.

The spell having been muttered and sighed into the summer twilight, he leaned back and dozed until the scrabble of a cat's claws on the hearth bricks woke him. The gray tabby had caught a mouse — or — he leaned forward in his chair — perhaps it was a bat. His eyes narrowed suddenly. Holding out a hand, he compelled the animal to him with a skill long-disused, then prodded the small carcass with a long forefinger before giving it back to its rightful owner. Head high to keep the wings from dragging, the offended tabby carried the tiny dragon off to her private lair under the rose bushes.

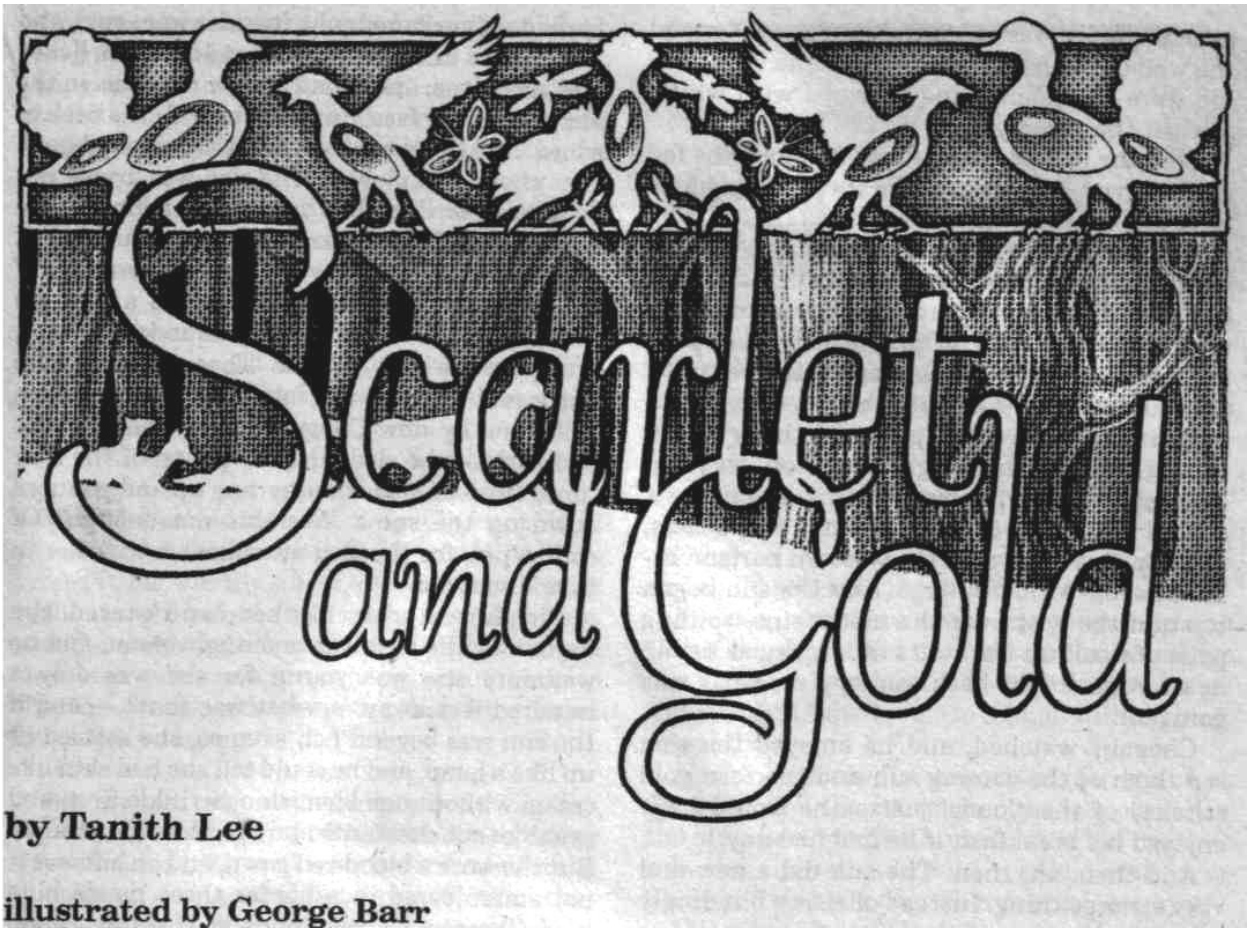
His hands palm up, in his lap, he closed his eyes, felt power begin to fill his hollow self. In the garden, a small wind tentatively stirred the leaves, then a swirl of vapor formed above the beech trees.

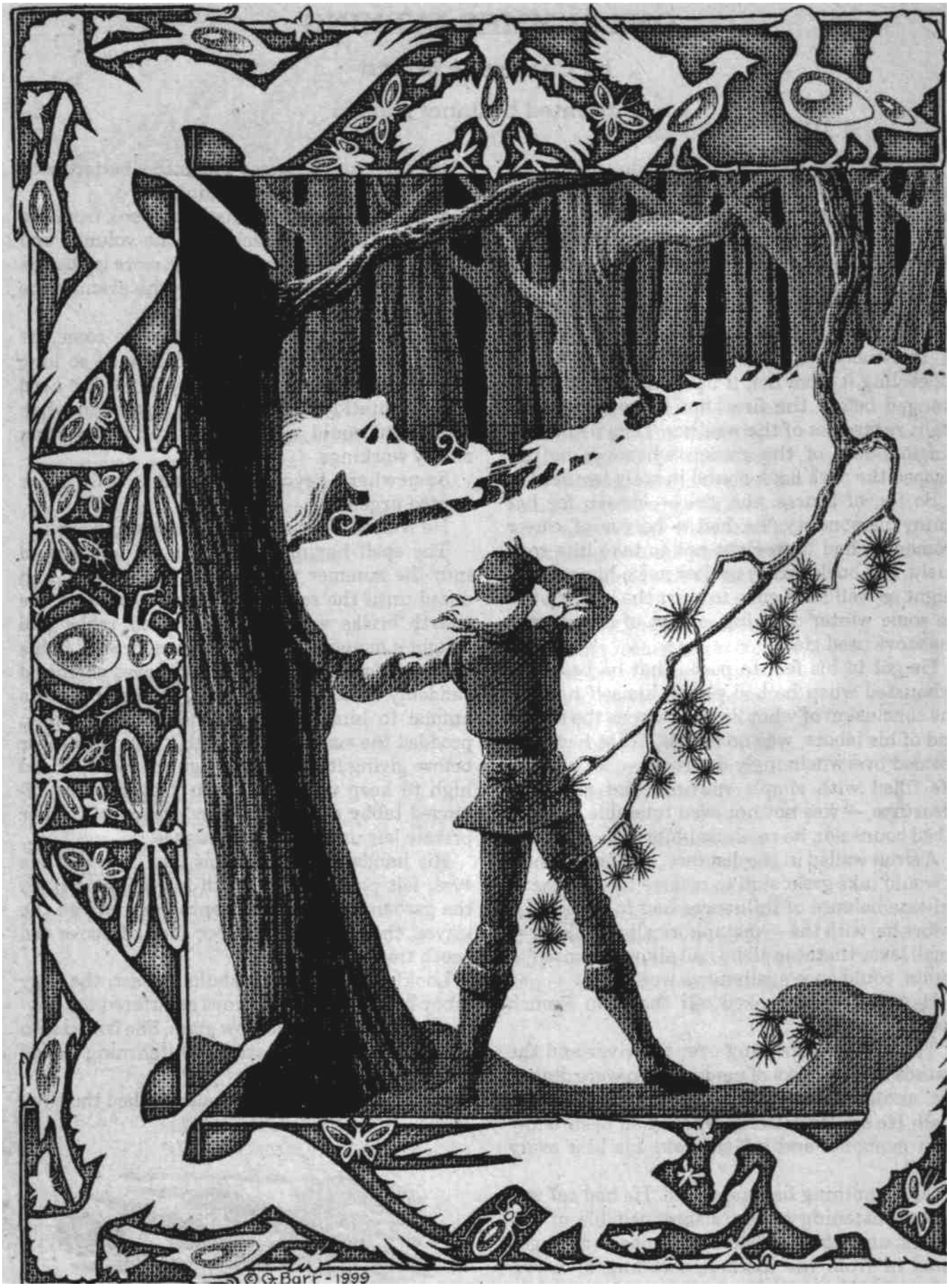
Looking up from its fabulous feast, the gray tabby hissed as fat raindrops splattered the pav-

ing, wept down the window glass. She bolted into the house as the first stroke of lightning lashed the air.

Merlin laughed, and thunder walked the sky.

Q

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There were two brothers. But, as the day is not much like the night, so they were, or were not, to each other. The fact was, they had had the same father, the lord of the great Village of Seven-Willow, but their mothers were different. Chegahr had been got by the lord on a girl little better than a slave, one midwinter's night, in a barn, while the wolves were composing their songs to the moon. Chegahr was strong and square-built, swarthy and dark-eyed, and with the white-blond hair of the North. But Velonin, whom his father had got on his priest-law lady wife, respectably under a sheet in the High House, was slim and tall, with hair like a mountain panther's pelt and blue eyes like the best china plate.

My story does not begin there, however, (or perhaps it does, since without their being born, they would not be in it) but in the hour before sunrise some eighteen, nineteen, or twenty years later.

At this hour, be certain, Velonin was yet lying fast asleep, with his head on swansdown pillows. Chegahr, though, was out on the plain beyond Seven-Willow, dragging along his sled, for which he could afford neither pony nor dog, and loading it where he could with fallen branches which the snow had brought down. Trees grew thick on the plain, and southwards became a forest; but being the son of a slave, he was not permitted to cut any tree, even a dead one. So his share of firewood depended on sloughings.

It was winter again, and the scene was worth a look, if Chegahr had had the space and the spirit to look at it. And he did. When you have not much, there is not much to interrupt you. So he stood and saw, in the narrow, silver light that comes before the dawn, the sweep of the white world, which was like a vellum page in some rich man's book, but a book not yet written on. Unless the woods and forest might be the words of some tale, the firs and the pines, all coated white but here and there with a little of themselves still visible. For miles the plain ran and at its end, which Chegahr had been told — he had never gone so far — was ten days' journey off, stood the wall of the Iron Heart Mountains. And they too were shouldered and crowned with white, against the ghostly sky.

Chegahr looked, and he saw it all, and he fed his hungry eyes. Even on the three white hares he saw playing not much distance off. And if he wondered, should he bring one down quickly with a stone for his dinner, he then thought better of it. He had bread and cheese and a jug of potato beer, which he had earned by his work for others. Let the hares keep their lives until he would lose his without them.

Meanwhile the night got on with its departure. It rinsed the bright stars off the sky, carelessly muddying and fading them as it always did, before stuffing them in its pockets, and slipping away over the western horizon behind Seven-Willow Village. And the sun began to stain the east over the mountains, spilling pails of itself up the stairs of the sky as usual, in its rush to get back and spy on what was going on.

Chegahr watched, and he enjoyed the rich red flush of the coming sun and the torn gold stitches of the clouds, just as he would have enjoyed his breakfast, if he had had any.

And then, ah, then. The sun did a new and very strange thing. Instead of rising blindingly up as always through the gap in the mountains, it shot right through the gap, fast as an arrow, and began to race towards Chegahr.

Chegahr stared, and then he prudently moved himself and his sled some yards to one side. At the same moment the three white hares went leaping away, and Chegahr pondered if he too should take to his heels. But instead he only planted his feet more firmly. For if the sun was running straight towards him, it was yet much smaller than he would have expected, and although it flashed and sparkled, it seemed to burn nothing, not even, properly, his eyes.

After some minutes the actual sun rose in the normal way up from the Iron Heart Mountains. And then the bit of the sun, which seemed to have been fired out of it, began to cast a long blue shadow. And next Chegahr began to see what it really was.

"Well," said Chegahr, "is this less or more wonderful than the sun rolling towards me?"

Just then, the less-or-more-wonderful thing turned sharply sidelong, and Chegahr beheld properly what it was. And what it was, was this: It was a great gambolling sled, and it seemed to be made of hardened gold. Its sides were gold, and its runners, and its high seat, and all its

curlicues and elegances; and it had a prow that was in the shape of a wild face, human, but with the beak of a bird. And this was all gold, as I say, ripe red-gold, that shone and glowed. The sled was drawn not by a horse or dogs, but by a team of snow-white wolves. And Chegahr had no doubt about that at all. They were hitched very oddly in two lines of six, with one enormous one, big as a lion, he thought, at the very front, who bounded forward, dragging the rest behind. These wolves were harnessed in deep red, and hung with golden bells; and by now Chegahr could hear the hiss and rush of the sled, and the pound of the four times thirteen pads that sprang up and pounced down on the snow. Was this not enough? Of course not, for the sled must have a traveller in it, and so it did.

Chegahr stared, blinked, and stared the harder. In the sled was a young woman, and he was sure she was young for she was only a hundred feet away — what was that? — and if the sun was beyond her, even so, she seemed lit up like a lamp, and he could tell she had skin like cream without one blemish or wrinkle in it, and eyes like hot chestnuts and lips like red currants. But she wore a blood-red gown, and oh but was it not embroidered in a border three hands high (and Chegahr's large hands at that) in golden patterns? And at her wrists were golden armlets and round her slender white neck a necklace of hammered gold, and on her head a cap of scarlet velvet trimmed with golden discs. And was not *this* enough? Yes, and too much, indeed. But there was more, for as with most such sights, marvels vulgarly outdo themselves. So, from her pure pale temples sprang out a mane of golden hair, not vivid gold, as the sled and bells and discs and other paraphernalia, but *icy* gold, like the sun gleaming through a milk-glass window. And this hair, believe me or not, (and I hold nothing against you if you refuse, for even Chegahr, who saw it, afterwards partly thought he had not) this hair poured over and down like a wind of light blown out through the top of her head, and swirled on and on behind her, over her gown, out of the sled, over the white snow, over the plain, back as far, it looked, as the mountains. And all the while, the scarlet cap bobbing on it, like a stopper coming loose in a bottle of bubbling wine.

But then the wolves pulled the sled away among the trees, down the aisles of the wood, where the snow-coated pines soon hid it. And after some ten or twenty minutes more, which Chegahr counted out as carefully as he was able, (imagining in his head, the tick of the clock in church) the last of the hair was drawn in too, and vanished after the maiden and her sled, into the wood.

Then Chegahr took up again the ropes of his own sled, and turning, he walked back to the Village, whistling.

Let me assure you, Chegahr had no intention of speaking a word of what he had seen. It is possible that, on Witch Eve or Christmas Eve next, when he might have gone to the church, and next the tavern, if some had begun telling fairy tales and legends of the Village, he might have added this anecdote: One morning I saw . . . But in no other form would he have risked it. He was the son of a slave who had been rash enough, before she died, to boast her baby was the child of the lord in the High House, and that was tale enough to hang about him, as thrown stones, spittle, and other kindnesses had swiftly shown.

However.

As Chegahr was walking across Church Square, to reach the alley behind the cemetery where he had his hut, five men were standing by the church door to smoke their pipes. And they were important men of Seven-Willow, the chair-maker and the horse-doctor, the rat-catcher and the roof-patcher, and the elder of the two priests, whose skin was thin as silk from spirits in a bottle.

As Chegahr came near, generally speaking, they would have paid him no heed. Except one might have muttered something, or one might jeeringly have laughed. Even if any of the nine hundred persons in the Village had work for Chegahr, they tended to send their servants or slaves to tell him so. And even the slaves were impertinent and sullen, for they were owned and had some value. By the by, too, Chegahr's mother's master had died in the year Chegahr was born. And this master had been the Village muck-carrier, who tended the midden and cleaned the privies. Even as a slave, Chegahr would have had no status. But if you are wanting to tell

me that Chegahr would have done better to have left the Village of Seven-Willow the day after his mother's death, when he was just twelve years old, I may say he had often thought so himself. But then, the mountains were ten days away, and crossing them was another matter, more like scaling the vertical air to reach the moon. While south and north were other obstacles, the haunted forest, a vast raging river; and anyway there were everywhere only other villages very like Seven-Willow, which to strangers were reported unfriendly, or treacherous. And though everyone spoke of a city to the north, and another to the west, who ever came from there and could prove it, or going there — returned?

Besides, which is more to the point, now and then Chegahr looked up and saw the rise above the Village where stood the High House, inside its walls. But I shall come to that, as will Chegahr, presently.

Now though the five important men stared at Chegahr. And the rat-catcher gave an oath, and the old priest marked himself with the cross. It was the chair-maker who roared, straight at Chegahr, "Hey, you dog, what do you mean by it?"

Chegahr stopped. He put on his mildest glance. Trouble had no interest for him, for its own sake. It wasted his time, which might be spent in more fruitful ways, such as gazing, thinking, and dreaming. He did suspect this bother might be about some Village girl, for sometimes it was. Although the Village men did not much like him, now and then a young woman might cast him half a look of a different sort. He was too wise to give the look back, but occasionally even modest indifference was not enough. (As with the scholar's wife, who had once stridden up to Chegahr, one summer as he was minding the Village goats on the plain, and slapped his face hard. "I dreamed last night you laid me on my back and straddled me!" had cried this amiable woman. "There's for that!" And then she had fetched him another slap. "And that's for making me like it." Her name was Majlena, but it was not the time for him to find out.)

"How did you get it?" now bellowed the roof-patcher angrily.

"What?" asked Chegahr.

"Behold him stand there and deny it," growled the horse-doctor. "See this, wretch? It's a pill to cleanse thoroughly a horse's bowels. Do you want to try it?"

"My thanks, I decline."

"Then tell your news."

"I have none."

"The scut!" cried the rat-catcher,. "I'll stuff a rat up him, I will!"

"Peace, peace," said the old priest, "we are before God's house. Chegahr, you must tell us the truth."

"It has snowed," said Chegahr. "The sun has risen. This is called the Village of Seven-Willow and I am Chegahr. What other truth is there? Enlighten me. I'll speak it."

Then the horse-doctor and the rat-catcher and *the roof-patcher and almost the chair-maker* — who began, and then decided against it — rushed at Chegahr and grabbed him hard and fast. And Chegahr, who might fairly easily have thrust them off and mashed their noses for them, did not. Because other than they, there were the rest of the eight hundred and ninety-five persons of Seven-Willow, not to mention the immediate chair-maker and priest, and even women, who made love with him in dreams, slapped him twice in daylight.

"What now? Fetch my tongs!" inventively shouted the horse-doctor. And, "I'll nail him on a roof," improvised the roof-patcher, but the priest said, "He must go up to the High House. His lordship must see and decide."

Chegahr was quite in the dark about all this. And stayed in the dark all the way up the path to the top of the rise, during which trek, various other people came to join the procession, including the boot-maker and the tavern-owner, and the scholar (he of the wife), many children, and

sixteen young girls from Seven-Willow's five wells. And it was not until Chegahr got face to face with a glass mirror in his father's house, which was now the house of Velonin, his half-brother, that he knew. But I will explain at once. Chegahr had returned from the snowy winter plain with a most beautiful golden summer tan. It covered, uninterrupted, his face and throat, and had even bleached his blond hair at the front to white.

The High House had high walls; and within was an orchard of cherry and peach trees, now hidden in the snow. But before the house, which was partly of stone and partly timbered, lay an *open snowy space, on which balanced one mournful* statue. It was of a naked boy and two bare-looking dogs, from which the ice had mostly melted off. This statue, a wonder of Seven-Willow, had been brought to the house as a curious bit of the dowry of Velonin's deceased mother. Chegahr, who had heard of it but never seen — this being the first time he had entered his father's gates—thought only that the marble boy looked very cold, and was shut out of the house. But perhaps he had some cause for thinking in that way.

Then the great door was knocked upon and a house servant came, dressed better, of course, than any Villager, save perhaps for the horse-doctor and the boot-maker.

To begin with, everyone waited in a big cold hall, with *tiles underfoot and a long* window *of* coloured glass, showing a scene that looked religious, but not religious enough. In one corner lurked a clock, twice the size of that in the church, and variously about were set a barometer, a musical box (silent), and a ship in a bottle. Then, from up the oak staircase, (imported), came a loud bang and a slither, which was Velonin throwing a large book at the announcing servant in vexation, and the servant falling over.

Then Velonin appeared in person on the carved gallery above the stair.

All but hatless Chegahr doffed their caps and bowed.

"What in the devil's name do you want?" shouted his lordship.

The villagers grovelled. Many began to blame Chegahr, while the priest made a sort of bleating noise, the rat-catcher swore, and the girls from the wells gazed blushing at their lord.

"Devil take you," said Velonin, "cluttering up the place." And he strode down the stair, into the hall, his breakfast napkin still in his hand. There he stood glaring from his best-blue eyes, and in his coat of pale blue satin. There were three gold rings on his fingers — and next down the stair, as if wishing only to stay with him, there wafted the scent of hot white bread and butter, roast chops, and a rare coffee, brought years ago, with cases of wine and champagne, it was said, from one of the mythic cities far away.

"You," said Velonin, pointing at the horse-doctor, whom he slightly knew, having met him now and then in the house stables, "what's up?" But the horse-doctor gave Chegahr a push. "Look; your lordship can see; it's written all over his face."

And it *was then that* Velonin, who *was the* half-brother of Chegahr, stared right into Chegahr's face, and into his eyes. And Chegahr did the same with Velonin.

"Then who the devil are *you?"* demanded Velonin, sensing insolence more than noticing the tan.

So Chegahr told him, "Your father's son."

"Stuff and nonsense. You look nothing like him," declared Velonin, going straight to the point.

"Neither do you," said Chegahr. "You're pale and dark and delicate like your mother. Just as I'm burly and blond like mine. But what's wrong with my face, then?"

And at that Velonin reached into his satin pocket and took out a silvered round of mirror held in a gilded frame.

Chegahr peered. He saw. He gave Velonin once more look for look. "Then I'll tell you," said he, "seeing as you're kin."

And on the gale of gasps at his effrontery, there before them all, and the barometer and the music box and the bottled ship, Chegahr told what he had seen. That was, the sled drawn by thirteen white wolves, the maiden in scarlet and gold, and her golden hair that poured behind her and passed into the wood after her, ten or twenty minutes after *she* was gone from sight.

Throughout Chegahr's recital there was not another sound. Even the clock seemed to give over its ticking to hear. While the young lord, Velonin, sat down on the stair, careless of his coat.

But as Chegahr finished it was the scholar (he of the wife) who cried out, "It is a Soracsh!"

And then the priest said, "Hush, good sir- Such goblins do not exist."

But, "What is a Soracsh?" inquired Velonin. At which Chegahr, not the scholar, thoughtfully answered, "My mother once told me of those. They are common enough in the North, it seems. A Soracsh is a sorceress. She has power over wild beasts, and her hair has abilities all its own."

But the scholar pushed through the other Villagers and stood frowning there, as if he had a quarrel with Chegahr yet did not know quite what the quarrel was.

"More than a sorceress," said the scholar, "for she is related to the wolves. She has their blood in her veins. But, my lord, do not believe this oaf, Chegahr. He is only trying to make dupes of us. He has rubbed grease on his skin and burnt it at the fire to make it brown."

At which Velonin stood up again. "Well," he said, slapped his napkin on his smooth, clean palm for emphasis, "get off with you. But you and you, come upstairs."

At which the scholar and Chegahr exchanged an uneasy glance, and followed the lord up his stair, while two servants ushered the rest out, being only careful to tip the priest and the horse-doctor with enough to buy brandy.

In the dining room above, an elbow of a huge stove, enamelled black, white, and blue, gave heat and cheer. Chegahr and the scholar were seated on two gilded chairs, quite near the servant who had earlier been felled by the book, and still lay prone. Velonin sat back to the table, and picked up his bread, dipped it in the coffee, and ate it.

"Now," said Velonin presently, "what I need is a plan. Put on your thinking-caps."

Chegahr said nothing, but the scholar asked, "A plan, sir? For what? If you valiantly mean to try to be rid of the Soracsh, that would be most unwise because —"

"Be rid of her? What do you take me for? I'm eager to meet the lady. The trouble with this village," added Velonin, turning to Chegahr, "is its lack of cultural excitement. Take a city, now. There would be cafes and loose women and the opera. But here what have you? In summer there is drought and in winter there is snow. What else? A zero. Don't you think so?" Velonin added in a peculiarly familiar way to Chegahr. "What do you say?"

"To what?"

"To what *I* have said, of course."

"I say you'd be happier in a city."

"Oh come," said Velonin, taking a pinch of snuff elegantly, as if sniffing a wayside flower. "In any city I'd be thought a turnip. No, I must make do, lording it over you foul and hapless peasants. But a witch in the forest, now. That fires me up."

"For God's sake," said the scholar, "don't go near her whatever you do. She's not a witch, but a Soracsh, part wolf and part woman and part spirit, and all of her terrible."

"Oh stuff," said Velonin, "get out, you klutz."

So the scholar got up and got out, and outside, to reassure himself he was not a peasant, he took a pinch of his own inferior snuff, and horribly sneezed three times as he went down the stair.

"Well then," said Velonin to Chegahr, "what do you think?"

"I think you are one year older than I," said Chegahr, "but act like a child of six. I think you faultlessly arrogant and perfectly rude, and probably heartless and witless to boot. And I think that God, if God exists, is anxious to call you back to Him that He may beat you soundly and put you to bed in a grave with no supper, which is anyway more than you deserve. I think therefore also, that if you desire to court a Soracsh, which being I now recall my ma told me is quite likely to devour a man alive and raw, then go do it, with my blessing. It won't be the opera, but nor do you deserve the opera. You deserve the Soracsh. And *now* I think I shall *go* home."

At which Chegahr rose. But Velonin burst out laughing. He laughed so hard he knocked over his porcelain coffeecup and it broke. So hard, the stunned servant (who anyway had been shamming) came to and crawled hastily away across the room and left them entirely alone.

"You *are* my father's son," cried Velonin. "Where else did you get such a voice and a

wardrobe of such words?"

"From my mother," Chegahr staunchly replied, "who on her death-bed, called out to the angels, 'Leave preening your wings, you vain creatures, and heft me to the stars.' "

At that Velonin stopped laughing. He said, quietly, "Mine only whimpered. She was afraid God would be like father. You seem to think so, too, with your beatings and supperless graves."

"You care a deal what I think."

"Maybe I do. Come, have some coffee, or there's Aqua Vita, there. What the old priest drinks, but better."

Chegahr only looked at him.

Velonin said, "How's this. You mind my house here. Keep it up to scratch. Kick the servants, sleep in the best bed, and so on. I'll take *your* fate and go after the Soracsh."

"My fate?"

"What else? Who saw the creature? You. And she tanned your hide for you. She left her bookmark in your pages."

Chegahr shrugged, but his heart was banging now like a drum.

Velonin jumped up. He took off his fine coat and dropped it on the floor. "And if I catch the Soracsh I'll make her my wife. That'll set things right."

"Oh, how?" asked Chegahr.

"I don't like unkindness to women," said Velonin. "I've seen plenty. Our dad. (Your mother was spared, not living with the brute.) That scholar who was here starves his wife 'for her own good' and speaks to her only at mealtimes, while she goes hungry and he eats. Even that servant who was lying by your chair gave his wife a black eye last night, which is why I took the opportunity to give him one this morning. Yes, viciousness to the sweeter sex seems natural in a man. Why suppose I'm different? So if I live, I'll have a Soracsh-wife who I won't dare anger."

That said, he strode from the room, and Chegahr was left standing in it, between the still-laden breakfast table with its white cloth and plate of roast chops, and the warm grumbling stove-pipe.

Now Chegahr was left inwardly debating the actions and speeches of his half-brother, as you or I might briefly do (or not), wondering if Lord Vetonin were superficial, thoughtful, careless, caring, rotten — or simply deranged. But we (you and I) must now leave Chegahr to his debate, and to his bizarre possession of that lavish house, and follow Velonin, done up in his fur coat and hat, and his boots, and with, despite all his words, a sharp knife to hand and a gun with an ivory stock, into the woods beyond Seven-Willow.

Naturally Velonin had known the plain and these woods since childhood. He had ridden about them on a horse, or even, sometimes, tramped about them with his father, various servants and hangers-on, or now and then with some party of other rural aristocrats from neighbouring villages. He thought of the woods, and the plain, as belonging rightfully to himself. But not being mad, or not mad in this way, he had the sense to know the southern forest, which the woods soon became, was no more his than the Iron Heart Mountains in the east.

The change from the woods to the forest was very strange, for it was not sudden, and yet it was suddenly felt. One moment the trees were scattered, and sunlight seemed to litter about from a cloudy or clear sky. And then the light was gone, to be replaced by a sort of dim luminescence. But in fact the trees had closed their ranks only gradually. With the loss of light, there came a monumental sense, as of terrific architecture. It was like being shut in some ancient church, among great crowds of tall, thick columns, whose crowns met vastly high up in a beamed and coffered roof without a single window or lamp. This overpowering awareness was the same, both summer and winter, save in summer it was a black-green church, and in winter a white-blue one. That was all the difference. Also the forest was very silent. Among the woods, even in winter, red grouse flickered, birds and hares, sables, ermines, and other animals were to be glimpsed and heard. In deepest winter wolves and ghostly deer foraged even among the thinnest trees. Once into the church of the forest, however, nothing stirred or made any sound. Whatever lived there kept itself hidden — or was invisible. So, with the crushing sense of

enclosure and dimness came the idea of deafness and isolation.

Velonin had entered the forest before, surely, but never alone. And if he had noticed all these sensations, never before had he acknowledged them. Now he did so. And this made him stop quite still, staring about him, and up into the windowless roof of frozen boughs and shadow.

Just then some snow did fall somewhere among the trees. It was like a giant's dull gun being fired, and Velonin jumped in his skin.

Then he only smiled. "What better place for a sorceress who is half wolf?" asked Velonin of the trees.

All this time he had been guided by the spoor of his quarry, for. all over the softer snow the runners of the sled and the paws of the thirteen wolves had left their impress, while from this point he noticed, twined like exquisite gilded thread among the roots and snowy scrub, occasional slender, long, long skeins of shed, pale golden hair.

Velonin now bent and picked up some of this hair. It was fine as silk, yet very strong. Only with difficulty did he snap a single hair, and that across the edge of his knife. It had a faint perfume too, like burning incense, and like peach-blossom, and like fresh cold milk. In fact, it had so many scents, these three and others, he began to think the magical hair had enchanted him and really had no smell at all.

Velonin had come out for adventure. He had come because he was impossibly bored. And because the Soracsh was now his fate, not Chegahr's.

So, quite quickly, he coiled up the strands of hair in his pocket, and went on.

The forest grew more and more grandiose and ponderous, until he felt himself almost bent double under its weight. The trees were very old, hundreds of years, perhaps thousands; and here oily indigo hemlocks loomed among the snow-wrapped pines and spruce, and black firs which also had let the snow slip from them. At last Velonin leaned on a trunk and took out his pocket-watch. He saw from this he had been walking most of the day, and also that the watch had stopped, and then he seemed to realize night was coming or had arrived. Just at that moment, craning his neck, he beheld what seemed an extraordinary sight. In the roof of the forest was motionlessly gliding a huge pitted white lantern, which touched everything to silver fire. It was the moon, risen high up in a patch of coal-blue clouds; and below, before Velonin, there opened a wide clearing.

Even as he grasped this, and wondered if the clearing had been there a moment before, Velonin noticed another arresting thing. The further end of the clearing was not closed by trees but by a sort of stone-piled cliff. And even as Velonin gazed at it, in the cliff wall, one by one, a row of lovely tapering amber lights bloomed up. Then he saw that they were windows, and that the cliff was the side of some great house, which made the High House at Seven-Willow into a cow shed.

On the moon-whitened snow beneath, the amber windows dropped reflections. And then in one flame-lit window, and in its reflection too, came a slender shape, like the slim dark wick dividing a candle-flame.

Out into the night rippled a wordless calling cry that made Velonin's hair stand on end. And yet, it heated his blood at the very same instant.

"There, sure enough, is the Soracsh," said Velonin, "and she is calling to see if anyone is here at last." So he stepped forward boldly into the clearing, swept off his hat, and bowed low to all the windows.

She was only a silhouette, so he could not tell if she was as Chegahr had described her; but then there came a flash of light like three hundred tinders struck all at once, and over the window-sill poured a waterfall of shimmering gold. Only when it slid quivering and gleaming along the snow at his feet, did Velonin see she had thrown down into the forest the ends of some of her sorcerous hair. And then he heard her laugh.

There was no door in the wall. No trees grew near. Velonin looked at the fall of hair, which even a knife had trouble in breaking. Then he asked her, "Do you mean me to be so ungentlemanly as to climb up by your tresses?"

And the Soracsh called down at once in her wild voice, "Do you dare?"

"If it won't hurt you, lady."

"Oh, nor it will," said the Soracsh.

So Velonin put his boot to the wall and gripped the stream of her hair in both hands, and swung himself upward. And but. for being so silken-slippery, the hair proved a serviceable rope, so Velonin climbed on and on, up the rough flints of the wall, up and up to her high lit window, and there she leaned, with her hands on the sill, laughing at him, her lips like red currants and her coffee-coloured eyes that had reminded Chegahr only of chestnuts, and her skin like alabaster. Velonin hung in her hair with his booted feet braced on the wall, and he thought she had only to cut loose this streamer of her crowning glory, she would hardly miss it, and he would tumble and break his neck. But he said cheerfully, "Good evening, fair lady. I hope my weight doesn't pull at your scalp?"

"Not at all," said the Soracsh, "but put your foot now on the sill, and I'll help you in."

So Velonin swung himself up on to the sill, and she gave him her white hand, and he sprang down into the chamber.

I do not know what places you have seen, or what buildings you have ever gone into, but I myself never entered a room like that in the Soracsh's house.

First of all the walls were encased in a glowing gold and bronzy green that seemed at first to be caused by the adherence of thousands of polished gems. But then you saw it was the static carapaces of thousands of beetles, but whether alive or dead, or ensorcelled, or only sleeping, one could not say. The ceiling of the chamber, however, the Soracsh herself presently explained. It was covered — or formed of— hundreds of flying birds, large and small, among which were even bluebirds and canaries, peacocks and swans. They all hung there, static as the beetles, their wings spread wide, and all the shades of emerald and beryl, agate, turquoise and nacre; and seeing Velonin admiring them, (with his mouth open) the Soracsh idly said, "When birds sleep, they dream of flying. These dreams I catch in a net, and there they are." So perhaps the beetles on the walls were likewise meant to be the *dreams* of beetles. Meanwhile lamps floated in the air to illumine all this, and they were distressingly like great burning eyes ... so Velonin did not look at them for long.

The floor of the chamber, though, was more simple. It was solid glass, but in the glass, just below the surface, great fish swam about, tawny pike, and huge carp of brass and coral. Seeing him look, even more idly the Soracsh then remarked, "Oh, it is a lake."

"Indeed," said Velonin, but he sensed her slight displeasure, and realized that, as with many other women he had met, and several men too, she preferred her guest's attention upon herself.

So Velonin gazed at her, raised her hand and kissed it (and when he kissed her hand, it was in some particular way like drinking the best chocolate, or taking a mouthful of roses and cream).

She wore a scarlet gown, but not the gown she had worn for the sled. This one left bare her milk-white shoulders. But her throat and waist were clasped by gold and on her head she wore a tall golden tiara set with scorching diamonds. (It must have been about this time that Velonin for ever mislaid his knife and gun.)

The Soracsh then clapped her hands, and a door, (which seemed to be made of two bears with smouldering eyes) flew open. In walked a pair of beings that Velonin took to be her servants. They were men clothed in black velvet, but for their heads and faces, which were those of wolves.

"Here is my good friend, Velonin," said the Soracsh to the wolf-men. (And how she knew his name is a mystery. But then, she was a Soracsh.) "Is dinner prepared?"

The wolf-men bowed, and stood aside, and the Soracsh took Velonin's arm, and they strolled through the bears into another chamber. And this chamber only had walls made of static water-falls but against them stood gigantic flowers on stalks like birch trees, and in their bells burned unseen lights. There was a table of glass (perhaps), laid with silver and gold cutlery and dishes, and goblets of crystal. For the dinner, it was meats and pastries and puddings and delicacies. And there were hot-house fruits the like of which Velonin had only ever heard described, or seen in books.

The Soracsh sat at one end of the table and Velonin was seated at the other. And he noted that one of the wolf-men stood behind his chair. But then, the other stood behind the chair of the Soracsh, and their prime wolfish purpose seemed to be to help their mistress and her guest to food and drink.

Of course, Velonin was not quite ignorant of uncanny matters. He had had a nurse as a child, and knew from her that to eat or drink anything in the house of a mere sorceress, let alone a Soracsh, would render him her slave. So he toyed with the choice cuts and slices, and did not put them in his mouth, and he pretended to sip the choice wines, and did not swallow any. But every so often, one of the lit flowers would bend towards him, and he would see another of those shining eyes peering at him through the petals, obviously watching. "Well, madam," said Velonin, once they had been at table a while, "you must wonder what my purpose is, in calling on you."

"Not at all," said the Soracsh.

"Then you have read my mind, perhaps?"

"No need."

"I am beneath your interest? That grieves me." The Soracsh smiled, and Velonin became aware that she also did not eat or drink anything from the table, only played with it as he did. And he wondered if she had another dish in mind, which was raw dead man's flesh. And this notion made him smile as well, and he said, "My reason for visiting you, lady, was to ask if I might court you for my wife."

"I am," said the Soracsh, "a great deal older than you."

"Oh come. We are too sophisticated to be upset by such trifles. What are a few hundred years between friends?"

"Also," said the Soracsh, "I am unbelievably wealthy, and you only somewhat rich."

"That's true. But then, if you wed me, by law your wealth comes also to me, and I shall be as well set up as you."

"Besides," said the Soracsh, "we have nothing in common."

"Quite wrong. We have in common one most influencing thing."

"And what is that?"

"We both of us," said Velonin, "adore you."

The Soracsh only nodded. "That's not enough. In any case, you came to me because any who see me must so come. That is my power, or one of my powers."

Velonin said, "I think you may be wrong. But we'll let that go."

"No, no," said the Soracsh, frowning, "are you saying that one has seen me and not come to me?"

"I heard some such tale. Doubtless a lie."

But he realized how close the flowers were leaning now and their eyes popping out at him, while behind his chair the wolf-headed man leaned so close, Velonin could smell his meaty breath.

"Why," said the Soracsh, "will you not eat and drink?"

"Madam, I'm in love. My appetite therefore is gone. Since your beauty is all the feast I desire."

But the Soracsh got to her feet, and when she did this, she seemed very tall, and suddenly the dining room was much darker, and Velonin began to think that he felt most uncomfortable, like a child put in an adult chair too big for it. And it was then he noticed the ceiling, and it was full of faces, but all these faces moved and made mouths at him, screwing up their eyes and wrinkling their noses and poking out their tongues. It was very disagreeable and unaesthetic.

"Velonin," said the Soracsh, "you fear that to eat with me will give me extra power over you."

"Not at all. I already adore you. What power can you gain greater than that?" But when Velonin spoke, his educated and pleasant voice sounded quite odd to him. And then he found himself slipping off the chair on to the floor. And the floor was made of snow. It was cold and silent and he saw how his feet and hands left prints in it, but the prints were of the wrong shape. "Ah now," said Velonin, "I've been a great fool," but he did not hear his voice at all now, only

another noise which he had never made before.

And she, the Soracsh, had become tall as a pillar, tall as a tree, and she stood there and oh, how stupid he thought he had been not to ask himself where all her miles of hair had gone (for it should have been piled up on the floor); but now he saw that hair; and he and she and the two wolf servants were all tangled up in it; and out of it now there dissolved the illusions or maybe the realities she had conjured, the birds and beetles, the flowers and fish and burning eyes. *They had all been made,* thought Velonin, *out of her hair, even the dinner had been made of hair. And now only her hair remained.*

And it was like the web of a ruby and golden spider, and he hung in that web, and heard her say, "Do you think I need such nonsense to entrap you? No. When once you kissed my hand you were mine. And now you're mine for ever."

"I have earned no better," agreed Velonin. But the only thing that came out was a yowl. Then all the colour and eye-lamplight winked away, and there was simply a horrible ruinous white garden under the walls of a cold dark house. And the unkind moon stared pitilessly down, for she had seen everything long ago, nothing was new to her or worth a second look.

For nearly a month, Chegahr lived in the High House at Seven-Willow. One may say he lived like a lord, but also the role did not fit him, just as Velonin's fine coats, breeches and shirts did not — although, perhaps oddly, in boots and shoes they were of a size. A tailor had soon crept from the Village, and brought Chegahr some quite tasteful apparel, ready-made, and Chegahr had chosen a few items. But he would not pay for them from Velonin's money-chest, and had no money of his own beyond a few coins in a broken pot, left at home in his hut by the cemetery. So he was in debt to the tailor. But the tailor only beamed and fawned, sure now Chegahr had gone up in the world. Likewise the others who came to call: the younger priest, with his silver cross a-bump on his chest; the horse-doctor, now leering with would-be friendship; the vintner; the apothecary; and so on. Chegahr sent them all away. He had needed nothing but a few new clothes, so as not to dirty or untidy his brother's house.

And that was how Chegahr thought of it, the house. As his brother's.

Which was itself strange, because all his life until then, if he had been honest, which generally he was, Chegahr would have said, "That house is partly mine, by rights." But of course, he had never thought he would live in it. And now he did, he felt he rattled in it like a die in a box. He was not comfortable, in fact. The rooms were too big and he could not find things in them. Their beauty he did not find beautiful — he preferred mountains, woods and sunsets. He got lost in the corridors and could not discover the indoor privy, which anyway he thought unhygienic. The bed was too soft. The servants seemed to spy on him — they were always underfoot. The luxurious food was over-spiced, too sweet, too complicated. The fine coffee, which is a stimulant to most people, made him bad-tempered and sleepy.

All that disappointed him, as well. Here was the life he had, vaguely, envied. But he had no use for it. The only hours that still pleased him were those when he could escape the servants and pace about, or sit near a window, doing what he always did when he could, dreaming, gazing, thinking.

So, in the end, he dreamed of Velonin, and in the dream Velonin was at the bottom of a long steep place, and howling. And when Chegahr had sat up and lit the candle, the light fell on a book, which had been Velonin's; and it was poetry; but Chegahr could not read it, so he somehow imagined the black print said: "Help! Help! O half-brother, help me or I'm done for!" And then when Chegahr thought about it, he recalled that Velonin had been gone a long while, far longer than he had needed to go into the forest and find the Soracsh, drop on one knee, offer a ring, give her a kiss and bring her back for a priest-law wedding, and the better truer wedding in the wide soft bed.

"But what is he to me or I to him that I should bother myself? When I was in the hut, with only the recollection of a dry crust to eat, did nice Velonin ever trouble himself? If I hadn't seen the Soracsh pass, he and I would never have met, even though we lived only half a hill's

distance from each other."

But then the servants came bursting in, as they always did, and Velonin saw it was morning, the candle had burnt out, and wax had splashed the book. He saw it, as the servants threw wide the silk curtains and the light thundered in. The wax on the book had formed the shape of an animal with four legs and a tail, and its mouth was open howling, as if it cried, "Help! Help! Help!"

"Devil take the pest," shouted Chegahr, who to his dismay had, in the house, begun to speak sometimes rather as Velonin did, as if Velonin's speech had stayed like a haunt. "Devil take him," he added. "Or the devil *has* taken him. I should never have let him go. It was *my* fate. He knew it, and so did I. If I had the wit to resist my fate, the wit even not to know there was anything *to* resist — I had the wit to stop Velonin as well."

Then Chegahr had his breakfast, put on some of the plain new clothes, and going out, walked down through the Village of Seven-Willow, where everyone stared at him, and even dogs trotted at his heels, wagging their tails.

When he reached the scholar's house, in a secluded lane, Chegahr halted. He knocked loudly on the door. The maid opened it and she cried at once, apparently satisfied, "Master's away!"

Chegahr scowled. "When is he back?"

"Not for seven days. He is off to the funeral of another scholar, in the village of Tall-Wheat."

Just then the scholar's wife appeared. She looked thin and pinched, but when she saw Chegahr, her face flamed and her eyes grew very bright. And suddenly Chegahr saw that she was young enough to be the scholar's daughter, and also Chegahr remembered that Velonin had said the scholar starved her 'for her own good.'

"Let me in," said Chegahr.

"Never!" cried the scholar's wife in a shrill excited voice.

Then Chegahr stared at the maid, and as Velonin might have, "Be off, you goose," he said. And the maid ran away. Chegahr then said to the scholar's wife, "Madam, you slapped me twice. You owe me two words in exchange."

At this she stood dumbfounded.

Chegahr said, "The two words are, 'Forgive me.

Her mouth dropped open. He saw it was a pretty mouth. Her eyes were deep as pools and sad as the hearts of dark flowers.

Chegahr said, "What I did in your dream was very wrong. What can I say? None of us can control what we do in our dreams."

Then she blushed, and lowering her long black lashes, the scholar's wife said to Chegahr, "It was my fault. In the dream I made you go and pick poppies with me in a field. And then I flirted. I said, 'My husband is away from home.' And then — I kissed you on the lips. Naturally you felt able to take liberties afterwards."

"I'm sorry I don't remember it as you do," said Chegahr, thinking that perhaps he was, too. "But in that case I must give you the two slaps back."

"Why not," said she. "The scholar is always slapping me.

So then Chegahr stepped inside the house, shut the door, and kissed the scholar's wife gently, first on one cheek, then on the other. Then on her eyelids, and next on her lips.

"Oh, Chegahr," sighed the scholar's wife, "I have loved you wildly for three years." She no longer seemed thin and pinched but only slender, and aflame. "Come up the stairs, and let me show you the bedroom."

So they went upstairs, and Chegahr saw the bedroom, which had a good hard solid bed. And here the scholar's wife flung off her garments, and she was pretty all over, her body like a slim white dress set with two pink pearl buttons, and honey trimmings.

Near afternoon, by which time Chegahr had finally learned her name was Majlena, he put to her the questions he had meant to put to her hus band. And as he had begun to suspect, Majlena knew all the scholar knew, and quite a lot more (as she had recently proved in the bed).

Chegahr left the house after supper, as dusk was coming down, and went up the street whistling. But when he came to the foot of the rise where stood the High House, Chegahr did not turn

that way, but went on walking.

And those that saw him pass said, "There goes the lord's son, Chegahr," and the dogs dribbled and wagged their tails, but Chegahr spared them not a glance, for he had things on his mind.

It had taken all one day for Velonin to get deep into the forest. But then he had not been following his fate, but another's. Chegahr walked for a brace of hours, and then he only sensed that he was in deep enough.

All around the ancient church of trees stood still and silent, but here and there the cold heartless moon pierced through. And to Chegahr she was not heartless at all, only secretive.

He knew now all he had to do, for Majlena had told him, taking care he should memorize everything. This had not been so very hard either, it was as if some part of him had already been lessoned in it.

First Chegahr made a fire. Then he drew all round the fire with a stick a black circle in the snow, and sprinkled it with salt. Then he took off every stitch (just as he had earlier in the day).

Then Chegahr recited the rhyme that Majlena had taught him. He recited its four lines facing all four directions, starting with the west and ending with the south.

When he had done this, a great wind bowled through the forest, and the vast branches and boughs rustled overhead, and snow fell from them. But after the wind was gone, another snow began to fall, straight down from the sky. Chegahr nevertheless felt warm as a cooking potato, and when he glanced at the fire, it was a strange clear yellow. Chegahr felt his eyes drink this colour up, and they turned yellow too. And then he put back his head, and please believe me, he gave such a howl that every wolf in the land may have heard it. After which he crouched down on all fours, and he turned this way and that way, and then he heard it coming, heard it far better than that first time, the hissing of the runners of the Soracsh's sled.

Sure enough, she soon appeared, and she passed, as the wind had done, and through the white lace of the dropping snow he saw her, in her scarlet and gold, and the thirteen white wolves running six by six, with the huge one in front, and the gold bells ringing and the gold sled rushing over the ground with a white spray going up on either side, like two white wings. The Soracsh looked only straight ahead of her.

No sooner was she past, and off between the trees, than Chegahr leapt out of the circle, taking care not to touch it with his feet. And then he ran to where the flowing train of hair was still streaming on in her wake. There he waited, counting, and when he had reached nine or nineteen minutes, he jumped forward and caught hold of some of the hair in both his fists. The speed at which it was going pulled him over, but he landed soft on the hair, and after that he let it pull him on.

Presently the sled ran into a vast clearing, and directly ahead, in the moonlight, was a high wall of piled stones. The sled raced on, and Chegahr, borne so far behind, expected some magic door to open in the wall. But this was not what happened. Instead, the lead-wolf ran straight up the wall, and after it the other twelve, six by six, and next the sled ran up, with the Soracsh upright in it, and standing out now horizontally from the wall like a red and gold nail.

Chegahr may have uttered an oath, I am not sure at this point; but whatever else, he clung on tight to the ropes of hair, and next minute he too was hauled right up the wall, after the sled, and only the silken thickness of the strands saved him from a grazing and, seeing how he was dressed, from rather worse. Over the wall's top had gone the wolves and the sled, and over the wall's top was dashed Chegahr. And there on the far side was a lighted ballroom, such as he had heard of now and then, in those cities far away. But not quite.

Rather than being dragged down into it, Chegahr now found himself all at once lying on a golden staircase, and so he got up and leisurely descended, looking about him all the way.

Chandeliers with flaming roses in them floated in mid air. Below were walls like marble, and a floor like polished silver, and everywhere grew slender blossoming trees, frothy with pink and purple and blue; and golden snakes were coiled in them, with eyes like topazes, and from the boughs hung golden apples and silver pears. Where the snow fell into the ballroom, it became sweets, the fashionable kind called *bonbons.*

In the middle of all this stood the golden sled, but it had altered to a golden chair, and in it sat the Soracsh (and Chegahr wondered where it was that all her hair had gone, for now it only reached her scarlet slippers). As for the thirteen wolves, they had changed, or were changing, into men in black velvet, and it looked very odd as they did this, as if they pulled their bodies up over their heads like a nightshirt. But even though they became men, and had men's faces, this time, they had the eyes of wolves still, intelligent, and far more human than human eyes. And as they laughed and called out to each other, they only barked and yipped and made similar wolf sounds, apparently disdaining speech. Even the lead-wolf, who was brawny, swaggering and tall, did no differently.

Chegahr reached the foot of the stair, and then he noticed that now he wore satin breeches and a shirt of silk and a coat of golden tissue.

"Well, Chegahr," said the Soracsh, "here you are."

Chegahr thought it no surprise she knew his name.

"I am here," said Chegahr, "to ask you about my half-brother, Velonin."

"No. You are here because you are in my power, and I made you be here."

Chegahr felt the fine clothes itch him, and when he looked at the marble walls, he thought he saw mountains and seas and skies inside them. And in the floor under his feet glittered stars; and all at once, there, under his gold-buckled shoes, the priestess moon appeared, veiled in light clouds, at whom now, he might look *down* in wonder.

Just then a great golden table sailed through the air and squatted before the Soracsh, and after that a second golden chair. On the table was a landscape of food the like of which Chegahr had never seen, even in the house of Velonin — no, not even in his hungriest dreams.

Chegahr regarded it, and two of the wolf-men ran up to him; but they ran up on their hands and knees, and panted, with great red tongues hanging out.

Chegahr stepped around them, went up to the table, and stared along it at the Soracsh.

"Eat and drink," said the Soracsh.

"Pardon me," said Chegahr, "I ate supper before I left home."

"Some wine then, Chegahr. See how good it is."

"Your pardon again. Wine makes me bad company," said Chegahr. "I shouldn't like to offend you."

"Well, but already you do," said the Soracsh, getting up now and coming around the table. "Oh, Chegahr, wouldn't you like to give me a kiss?"

"I have had kisses too, before I left home. Enough to last a little while."

Then the Soracsh stood very near to Chegahr, and she smiled at him. "Your eyes are yellow, Chegahr, and I had thought your eyes would be black. Why is that?"

"I have the wolf-blood, lady," said Chegahr, "just as you do. When I was made, the wolves sang loudly. But how this coat itches. I think it's tailored from your hair. Like the table there and the roasts and cakes, and like the magical walls and floor and all the lamps. What do you say?"

"I say I will have you, Chegahr," said the Soracsh, and she suddenly bared her teeth. They were white as the snow, but they were the teeth of a wolf, and her tongue was blue.

"Oh, that," said Chegahr. "Didn't you hear me say, I'm part wolf too? I can't live in a fine house. I can't wear fine clothes. I like to dream and play. I like the woods. Just tell me where you've put my brother, Velonin. He's only a man, and is unhappy here."

The Soracsh snarled. Her chestnut eyes turned red as live coals. She clapped her hands and everything flew up in the air: the table, the blossom-trees, the entire ballroom (even the moon in the floor); and Chegahr and the wolf-men were floundering and staggering in the midst of it, and it was all a writhing mass of golden hair.

"Now," said the Soracsh, "I'll show you your Velonin."

And she gave Chegahr a shove in his (again) naked chest that sent him hurtling: He landed on a cold cushion of snow in an old garden that lay at the foot of a high dank dark towering wall. The Soracsh stood on the wall top, snarling down at him, gnashing her fangs. She looked small as a doll. And in the snow beside him was another tiny toy. It was a little wolf, made perhaps of dark wood. But as Chegahr stared at it, it spoke to him in a little wolf squeak, as if a mouse were

trying to howl. Through this noise, Chegahr plainly heard the words, "Help me, brother!" Here was Velonin.

Generally, in Velonin's life, it had been thought gracious and cultivated to talk. In his childhood, too, he had been given lessons in oratory and debating. So now he began to tell Chegahr, in dramatic detail, all that had occurred to him. But he could only squeak in his little wolf squeak. And all the time, the Soracsh stood on the wall top, gnashing her fangs.

So then Chegahr said, "Be quiet, Velonin. You need only know this. *She* is dangerous as life and death together, but blood is thicker than scarlet and I find I have a heart of gold. Besides, I am mysteriously unhurt after being flung off the wall, which is encouraging. This is what I'll do. I'll put you into my mouth, and you must wrap your front paws round one of my lower canine teeth. And then, with the help of the cunning spells of the scholar's wife, which have already saved me a broken neck, I shall run very fast away."

Velonin may have wished to argue but he had no chance. Into the wide open mouth of Chegahr he was popped — and Chegahr's mouth seemed, even to little Velonin, very much larger than it had been. And the strong teeth stood very tall in it, especially the canines. Velonin therefore had no difficulty in gripping a left one with his wolf paws.

No sooner was this done, than Chegahr gave a huge spring, and up the wall he ran, straight up over the flints and stones, on his bare feet, which were hard and tough as pads on a beast. Only once or twice did he need the use of his hands in this frantic endeavour. And he moved as quickly as a lizard.

The Soracsh to be sure darted back, but at the top he went right by her, and she spat at him, and her spit was fiery stuff, but it missed him and instead burned a hole out of the wall. Meanwhile he was leaping from the wall's other side. Down he sailed, and hit the ground of the clearing as if he had springs in his heels (from all of which we might conclude, you and I, the scholar's wife truly knew a thing or two). And then Chegahr ran in good earnest.

Never in all his days had Chegahr sprinted so fast, nor would he ever have had to sprint so far. But he knew he was no longer quite himself, or perhaps he was more himself, for his yellow eyes showed him all the forest clear as day, and his limbs had muscles of steel.

"Do you hold tight, brother?" he grunted, as the towers of trees roared by.

And Velonin squeaked that he did; but he cowered in fear, clinging to that tooth, now blasted by the icy cold air rushing, in and now by the scalding hot breath (tinted by a hot supper and Majlena's kisses) gushing out, nearly champed as Chegahr spoke, afraid of being swallowed whole, soaked by saliva and bounced up and down.

But Chegahr pounded on, and as he did, he did not know if he were any longer a man, with a wolf in his mouth, or a wolf that bore along a man. Nor did he know if he ran upright on two legs, or parallel to the earth on four. And then he heard the thick plush-slush-ssrrrh of the sled behind him, and the bounding footfalls of the thirteen wolves.

So Chegahr, who had only been running: well, you see, now he *RAN*.

At this new speed the trees disappeared. They became a pouring wave of white-black, that here and there dazzled with the light of the stars which still fell, or maybe it was the softly falling snow. And now and then he leaped high over some narrow streamlet or slight chasm, or some arched root wide as a crocodile shown in one of Velonin's books — but saw none of them.

But he heard *her* behind him, the push and hiss and the thudding of the four times thirteen feet. And he heard her crack a whip, too, and sensed its golden flare across the flying dark, like the striking tongue of a serpent.

Then, what should happen, but Chegahr heard also the lead-wolf calling to him, and now it either spoke in the human language, or he had come to understand its growls.

"Halt, stay, give in! There's nothing to fear. My mistress is charming. Have *I* not served her all this while?" Chegahr knew better than to shout over his shoulder what he thought of that. Besides he did not want to deafen Velonin in his mouth.

But then the lead-wolf began to call in a sort of singing way that matched the rhythm of their running, both the white wolves' and Chegahr's.

"Won't you run with us? Wouldn't you like to? You could even take my place and lead, a fine one like you. Oh, I lived as a man, once. I took a man's pride and pleasures. I smacked my wife soundly and laid her on the bed. I drank my beer and ate my meat and once a year I bathed and read a book. Oh it was a comfortable life, that. But would I now exchange what I have? Ah, what it is *to* feel the kiss of the golden whip. What it is to fawn on her scarlet slippers. She is the fate of all men, Chegahr. But it takes wisdom to know it. Yes, she may belittle you, or throw you down. But in the end you are necessary to pull her through the world."

Chegahr thought, and the thought was like the single wink of a spangle in the whirl of his running, *If you want that, that you may have.*

But he knew by then where it was he ran to, although perhaps he had already known.

I cannot say how long Chegahr cannoned through the forest and the night, with the Soracsh after him, her whip cracking; her tongue blue, and her spit all fire. Possibly it was scores of hours, the night constantly renewing itself, as one might over and over sew up a tear in a sock. Or perhaps he ran for many nights together, all the nights it needed to prove to the Soracsh she had not caught him, or to him that he had not been caught. Then again, he ran so fast, and so speedily did she follow, maybe they reached the brink of the forest in half an hour. For reach its brink they did. And then Chegahr sped through the thin woods, and over the plain, while the snow tinkled down like white china broken and dropped in heaven.

And at last Chegahr saw, (although Velonin did not, for if a wolf can faint, he had done so, though still with his paws locked fast about that great wolf's tooth) Chegahr saw the dull sparse lights of Seven-Willow, some of which always sophisti-catedly burned on through the dark.

Even so, in the east, though Chegahr did not notice it yet, a hollowness had come to indicate night's end.

Accordingly, as he burst across the last distances of the plain, a cock crowed in the Village. It was early, to perhaps be sure, but not by much.

At the cock's alarm, Chegahr sprang again, he sprang among the streets and lanes, under the shadow of the houses. And so stopped running. To any other who had made such speed, and curtailed it so suddenly, it might have seemed the sky fell on his back — but not so, and God bless the scholar's wife.

When Chegahr looked round, his sides merely heaving, and streaming sweat in the white cold of ending night, he beheld the sled too had come to a standstill, there, at the Village's edge, and all the thirteen wolves stamped up and down while their tongues lolled, and in the air, coiling and boiling, was the golden whip, and also billows of the Soracsh's hair, embroidering the dark, weaving between the falling snow, her hair which was running yet to catch up with her. But strangest of all to him in that moment was the beaked prow on the sled, which all at once seemed to have the face of Chegahr's father, the lord of Seven-Willow — but doubtless he imagined it.

And then he forgot, for he heard the Soracsh cry out.

She *screamed,* no less, and in no language he had ever heard, though he had translated the words of her wolf-pack.

But some heard her. Some knew. Oh, indeed.

All through the night-ending Village there was banging and shouting, a bumping and scurrying. And then an unlocking and opening, a slamming and damning and hurry.

Out they came, as Chegahr later said, like rats from a drain.

Some had their lighted candles and some a lit lamp. Some were in their night-attire and some in no attire at all, and some had put on their Sunday best.

There was the horse-doctor, a quarter in his coat, and three quarters not, and there the blacksmith in only his apron. And there came the shepherd too, all unshaven-woolly like a sheep. And there was — but I hope will pardon my not listing everyone. For there were many others — with, however, among them, two servants from the High House, in two of Velonin's own nightshirt; *and,* and here I lay an emphasis, there was the scholar, who very luckily had returned extremely and suspiciously early, by means of a horse and cart.

Chegahr stood aside, and as he did he prized his little wolf-brother out of his teeth, and held him wrapped up for warmth in one hand.

"See, Velonin. Not your fate, nor mine. The fate of Seven-Willow. She gets what she deserves, and so do they. But she was too stupid to know it; it's we that have shown her. She'll hardly miss us now."

Just then the sled spun round and all the thirteen white wolves spun round with it, it pulling them. And with a blood-curdling merry shriek, the Soracsh was flying off again while her golden hair flapped and flew behind her. And so the crowds of men in the streets, and in all there were one hundred and fifty-six of them, pelted after her as fast as they could. As they went, they yelled, they dropped their lights, and hats and shoes put on now fell off, and now and then they pushed each other out of the way, or, at other moments yanked each other forward. Until finally every one of them (again, very luckily including the scholar) had tumbled down among the rolling, retreating wave of the Soracsh's hair. And wound round in it, clutching and clawing at it, like kittens in yarn, they were carried away across the snow. And it seemed to Chegahr that now the direction of the fatal sled was not that of the forest, but straight on, back into the east, towards the paling sky and the stone and flint wall of the Iron Heart Mountains. So he wished them much joy of each other and of it, one and all.

As Majlena threw open the door, which the scholar, bumbling out, had yet possessively closed, she cried, "But Chegahr, how big and yellow your eyes are, how large and sharp your teeth — and I never recall you were so hairy!"

But Chegahr seemed to gaze right through her to her sweet bones, and he said, "What you see is only another side of me."

So then she kissed him. And after that she led him, and his brother Velonin, a curled up wolf that could have sat in a little box, to the bath she had prepared. In the bath were thyme and oliba-num, myrrh and saffron, pepper and aniseed and califrass. Best of all, it was warm.

As she sponged them, Majlena, who was a real scholar, even in her dreams, sang over them old words. And as she sang, she washed off the hair and the yellow stares, she washed off the wolf teeth and the wolf form, and in the very end she washed off Velonin's reduction, so he would no longer fit in a box — unless it was man-size. And so at last in the firelight and the copper bath, there sat crowded the two brothers, two young men white with fatigue, which one could barely see, since the proximity of the Soracsh had tanned them both golden all over.

Then Velonin wept. Chegahr thought, *Now he will start thanking me in flowery phrases, on and on.*

But Velonin only said, "Oh, but I loved her, that Soracsh."

Chegahr answered, "She had a blue tongue."

"It would," said Velonin, "have matched my eyes."

For some while after, in the way of a hero in a play, or an opera, Velonin wrote poems to his lost love, the Soracsh. He wandered forlornly the snowy woods, declaiming, until one day, near evening, he noticed that every tree was strung like a harp with notes of green. And then he went back to the High House and ate a large supper. After which he threw out the skeins of gold hair he had kept — they had faded anyway, and smelled of frogs. Then he wrote to another village lord, at Tall-Wheat, as it happened. This lord had a daughter, and inside the year, she and Velonin were wed. She was a lovely girl, with flawless skin, and sensibilities. He was very kind to her, and became immensely witty. And her word was Law. Yet also she loved him.

But Chegahr and Majlena, they bought a wagon and two strong horses, and wandered away across the world. At night by their wayside fires, they would tell each other stories, and teach each other all they knew. In the end, they were, each one, as clever as the other, equal as two stars that give the same blue light, but they had only one heart between them. As for the Soracsh, I cannot say I have ever seen her, but I have met those who reckon to have glimpsed her sled. They relate how it is made of hard gold, and her hair of filmy, milky gold, and that her red dresses are dyed in the blood of men she has devoured raw.

Once, I did see where the sled had gone by I was shown, in the mud of spring, the tracks of the runners. And of course the prints of huge wolf paws, which in number were then thirteen times thirteen. She had harnessed them in sixteen rows of ten, and two rows of four, with one

huge beast at the front, all alone. Those that have seen it in person, say it runs like a scholar.

Q

CONDO SKELETONS

I walk among the unhaunted skeletons
Of the half-constructed condos,
The timbers opaque white in the macabre light.
The three-quarter moon
Hengs, belly down, in the western sky,
Glowing, unabashed, among the 2 X 4 ribs.

In some other light the workers will come to
Board up the ribs and plaster them over ...
Memories of glowing bone moon light forgotten.

People will move in bringing their own lives,
Mismatched furniture
They will live and die And the
bare bone skeletons Will be
given spirits at last.

—**Blythe Ayne**