

# EDGAR PANGBORN

## The Golden Horn

The late Edgar Pangborn is almost forgotten these days, and is rarely ever mentioned even in historical surveys of the '50s and '60s... which is a pity, since he had a depth and breadth of humanity that have rarely been matched inside the field or out. Although he was never a particularly prolific writer (five SF novels, one or two mainstream novels, and a baker's dozen or so of short pieces), he was nevertheless one of that select crew of underappreciated authors (one thinks of Cordwainer Smith, Fritz Leiber, Jack Vance, Avram Davidson, Richard McKenna) who have had an enormous underground effect on the field simply by impressing the hell out of other writers, and numerous authors-in-the-egg. Pangborn wrote about "little people" for the most part, only rarely focusing on the famous and powerful. He was one of only a handful of SF writers capable of writing about small-town or rural people with insight and sympathy (most SF is urban in orientation, written by city people *about* city people—or, when it *is* written by people from small towns, they are frequently kids who couldn't wait to get *out* of those small towns and off to the bright lights of the big city... which often amounts to the same thing, as far as sympathies are concerned), and he was also one of the few who could get inside the minds of both the very young and the very old with equal ease and compassion.

Pangborn's masterpiece was *Davy*, which, in spite of a somewhat weak ending (or, at least, a final third that doesn't quite live up to the two-thirds that came before it), may well be the finest postholocaust novel ever written—in my opinion, it is seriously rivaled only by Walter M. Miller, Jr.'s *A Canticle for Leibowitz* and John Wyndham's *Re-birth*. In any fair world, *Davy* alone ought to be enough to guarantee Pangborn a distinguished place in the history of the genre, but there were also novels like *A Mirror for Observers*—his International Fantasy Award winner, somewhat dated now, but still powerful, in which alien observers from two opposing philosophical camps vie for the soul of a brilliant human boy—and *West of the Sun*, an underrated novel about the efforts of human castaways to survive on an alien world, as well as beautifully crafted short work such as "A Master of Babylon." "Longtooth." "The World Is a Sphere," and "Angel's Egg."

The story that follows, "The Golden Horn," was probably Pangborn's best short work. Although it was later melded into the novel *Davy*, it stands well on its own, and its intelligence and wit, its eloquence and power and

compassion, its evocation of moments of both raw beauty and raw horror, as well as its slyly satirical touches, make it as good a handling of its theme as has ever been seen in the genre.

Edgar Pangborn's other works include *The Judgment of Eve* and *The Company of Glory*, the mainstream novel *The Trial of Castillo Blake*, the collection *Good Neighbors and Other Strangers*, and the posthumously published collection *Still I Persist in Wondering*. After many years out of print. *Davy* was reissued this year, by Collier—go out and buy it at once, while you still have the chance.

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Moha, where I was born, is mainly a nation of farms, grouped around their stockade village throughout the hill and lake and forest country. I grew up in Skoar, one of Moha's three cities, which lies in a cup of the hills near the Katskil border. Even there things moved with the seasons and the Corn Market trade; wilderness whispers at the city's borders, except where the two roads, the Northwest and the East, carry their double stream of men, mule-wagons, soldiers, tinkers, wanderers.

Farming's heartbreak work in Moha, same as everywhere. The stock give birth to as many mues as anywhere else, the labor's long sweat and toil and disappointment wearing a man down to old age in the thirties, few farmers ever able to afford a slave. But the people scrape along, as I've seen human beings do in places worse than Moha. I'm older, I've traveled, I've learned to write and read in spite of that mystery's being reserved to the priests. Looking back, I sometimes wonder if Moha wasn't the happiest land I ever knew.

The other cities—I've never visited them—are Moha City and Kanhar, both in the northwest on Moha Water. Their harbors can take big vessels up to thirty tons, the ships that trade with Levannon and the Katskil ports on the Hudson Sea. Moha City is the capital and Kanhar is the largest, twenty thousand population not counting slaves. Fifty miles south of Kanhar is Skoar, and there I was born squalling and redheaded in one of those houses that are licensed but still supposed not to exist. In such places they don't have time for kids, but since I was a well-formed chunk of humanity and not a mue, the policers took me from my mother, whoever she was, when I was weaned, and dumped me in the Skoar orphanage, where I stayed until I was nine, old enough to earn a living.

I'm thinking now of a day in middle March when I was past fourteen,

and slipped away before dawn from the Bull and Iron where I worked as yardboy, bondservant of course, two dollars a week and board. I was merely goofing off. We'd gone through a tough winter with smallpox and flu, near-about everything except the lumpy plague, and a real snow in January almost an inch deep—I've never seen such a heavy fall of it before or since. There was even a frost in February; people called it unusual. In the stable loft where I slept I just thought it was damn cold. I remember looking out the loft window one January morning and seeing icicles on the sign over the inn door—a noble sign, painted for Old Jon Robson by some journeyman artist who likely got bed and a meal out of it along with the poverty talk that Old Jon saved for such occasions. A fine red bull with tremendous horns, tremendous everything, and for the iron there was a long spear sticking out of his neck and he not minding it a bit.

The wolves sharpnosed in close that winter. Mostly grays but a pack of blacks wiped out an entire farm family in Wilton Village near Skoar. Old Jon Robson would tell every new guest the particulars of the massacre, and he's probably doing it yet, along with tales about a crazy redheaded yardboy he had once. Well, Old Jon had connections in Wilton Village, knew the family the wolves killed and had to make a thing of it, clickety-yak. I never knew him to keep his mouth shut more than two minutes—one day when he was sick with a sore throat. He wouldn't shut it when he slept, either. He and Mam Robson had their bedroom across the wagonyard from my loft, and in midwinter with the windows shut tight I could still hear him sleep, like an ungreased wagonwheel.

Before sunup that March day I fed the mules and horses. I reasoned that somebody else ought to get his character strengthened by doing the shoveling. It was a Friday anyhow, so all work was sinful, unless you want to claim that shoveling is a work of necessity or piety, and I disagree. I crept into the main kitchen of the inn, where a yardboy wasn't supposed to appear. Safe enough. Everybody would be fasting before church—the comfortable way, in bed. The slave-man Judd who was boss of the kitchen wasn't up yet, and the worst he'd have done would have been to flap a rag and chase me ten steps on his gimp leg. I found a peach pie and surrounded it for breakfast. You see, I'd skipped fasting and church a good deal already—easy because who cares about a yardboy?—and the lightning hadn't located me yet. In the store room I collected a chunk of bacon and a loaf of oat bread, and started thinking. Why not run away for good?

Who'd be bothered? Maybe Jon Robson's daughter Emmia would, a little. Cry, and wish she'd been nicer to me. I worked on that as I stole out of the inn and down the long emptiness of Kurin Street, dawn still half an hour

away. I worked on it hard. I had myself killed by black wolf, changed that to bandits, because black wolf wouldn't leave any bones. There ought to be bones for somebody to bring back. Somebody who'd say to Emmia: "Here's all that's left of poor redheaded Davy, except his Katskil knife. He did say he wanted for you to have that if anything happened to him." But bandits wouldn't have left the knife, rot them. I had a problem there.

Emmia was older than me, sixteen, big and soft like her papa only on her it looked good. How I did cherish and play with that rosy softness in the night—all in my fancy, dumb-virgin as a baby cockerel, alone in my loft.

I was gulping by the time I passed the town green, but as I neared the Corn Market, in North District and not far from the place where I knew I could climb the city stockade with no guard seeing me, most of that flapdoodle drained out of my head. I was thinking sharp and practical about running away for real, not just goofing off the way I'd done other times.

A bondservant, one grade better than a slave, I'd be breaking the law if I ran, and could be made a true slave for it, likely with a ten-year term. I told myself that morning what they could do with the law. I had the bacon and bread in a sack strapped across my shoulder. My Katskil knife hung in a sheath under my shirt, and all the money I'd saved during the winter, five dollars in silver, was knotted into my loin rag. Up in the woods on North Mountain where I'd found a cave in my lone wanderings the year before, other things lay hidden—ten dollars safely buried, an ash bow I'd made myself, brass-tipped arrows, fishlines with a couple of real steel hooks. Maybe I'd really do it, I thought. Maybe today.

I shinnied over the stockade without trouble and started up the mountain. I was being pulled two ways then. The Emmia who talked in my heart wasn't whimpering over bones. I was thinking about the real soft-lipped girl who'd probably want me to turn back, stick it out through my bond-period, get civilized, make something of myself. Who might not mind, might even like it, if I told her or showed her what I felt about her instead of just mooning at her through doorways like a stunned calf. The forest pulled the other way.

Climbing the steep ground from the city in the morning hush, I decided I'd merely stay lost a day or two as I'd done before. Other times it had usually been my proper monthly day off, not always. I'd risked trouble before and talked my way out of it. I'd stay this time, say until the bacon was gone, and spend that time polishing the fresh whopmagullion I'd have to tell, to celebrate my return and soften the action of Old Jon's leather strap on my rump. The decision itself perked me up. When I was well under

cover of the woods and the time was right, I climbed a maple to watch the sunrise.

It was already beyond first-light, the fire not yet over the rim. I'd missed the earliest bird-calls, now their voices were rippling back and forth across the world. I heard a white-throat sparrow in a bush; robin and wood thrush, loveliest of all bird singers, were busy everywhere. A cardinal flew by me, a streak of flame, and a pair of smoky-white parrots broke out of a sycamore to skim over the tree-tops. In a sweet-gum nearby I caught sight of a pair of white-face monkeys who didn't mind me at all. When I looked away from them I saw the golden blaze begin.

For the first time that I can remember, I wanted to know, Where does it come from, the sun? What happens over there when it's set afire every morning? Why should God go to all that trouble to keep us warm?

Understand, at that time I had no learning at all. I'd scarcely heard of books except to know they were forbidden to all but the priests because they'd had something to do with the Sin of Man. I figured Old Jon was the smartest man in the world because he could keep accounts with the bead-board that hung in the taproom. I believed, as the Amran Church teaches everyone to believe, that the earth is a body of land three thousand miles square, once a garden and perfect, with God and the angels walking freely among men, until the time almost four hundred years ago when men sinned and spoiled everything; so now we're working out the penance until Abraham, the Spokesman of God, who died on the Wheel at Nuber in the year 37, returns to judge His people, saving the few elect and sending the rest to fry forever in the caverns of Hell. And on all sides of that lump of land spread the everlasting seas all the way to the rim of the world. The Book of Abraham, said the teacher-priests, doesn't tell how far away the rim is, because that's one of the things God does not wish men to know.

Doubts I did have. I thought it remarkable how the lightning never did arrive no matter how I sinned, even on Fridays. The doubts were small; young grass trying to work up through the brown old trash of winter.

I understood of course—all children far younger than fourteen understood it—that while you might get away with a lot of sinning on the sly, you agreed out loud with whatever the Church taught or else you didn't stay alive. I saw my first heretic-burning when I was nine, after I'd gone to work at the Bull and Iron. In Moha they were always conducted along with the Spring Festival. Children under nine weren't required to attend.

I watched the dawn from my maple, the birth and growing of the light.

Surely I was not watching what happened in my mind, for the thought was living in me, and I not knowing how it could have come; the thought, What if someone traveled all the way to watch the firing of the sun?

Nowadays I understood that thoughts do not come to you. You make them, they grow in you until the time arrives when you must recognize them.

Down out of my maple then, up the long rise of the mountain in deep forest, where the heat of the day is always mild. I walked and climbed slowly, not wishing to raise a sweat, for the smell of it can drift a surprising distance, and black wolf and brown tiger may get interested. Against black wolf I had my knife. He dislikes steel. Brown tiger cares nothing for knives—a flip of his paw is sufficient—though he's said to respect arrows, thrown spears and fire, usually. I've heard tell of brown tiger leaping a fire-circle to make a meal of hunters. It could be true, for his hunger must be immense and compelling in a bad season when moose and deer and bison have gone scarce. I was not thinking much about those ancient enemies when I climbed North Mountain that morning. The question-thought was in me, saying, What if I were to go beyond the rim, where the sun is set afire... ?

My cave was a crack in a cliff, broadening inside to a room four feet wide, twenty deep. The cleft ran up into darkness, and must have broken through to the outside, for a small draft like the pull of a chimney kept the air fresh. Sometimes I wished the entrance was narrower—black wolf could have got in, maybe even tiger. I'd cleared out a few copperheads when I first found the cave, and had to be watchful against them too, or rattlers, slithering back to reclaim it. The approach was a ledge that widened in front of the cave, with enough earth to support a patch of grass, and the cave was located well around the east shoulder of the mountain, so that the city was shut away. I could safely build a fire at night behind the rocks at the cave entrance, and I always did. You need a sleep-fire for safety, and the knack of waking at the right moments to refresh it. I'd long ago lifted a flint-and-steel from the Bull and Iron kitchen where it didn't seem real decorative. I usually doused my fire before dawn. No sense painting smoke on bright sky to stir up the curious.

That morning I first made sure about my bow and arrows and fishing gear. They hadn't been disturbed. And yet I felt a strangeness. Not snakes and not intruders. Some eastern sunlight was entering; I could see as well as I needed to for safety but something nagged me. I stood a long time moving only my eyes. I moistened my nose, but caught no wrong scent.

When I found the trouble at last, far at the back on one of the cave

walls where sunlight didn't reach, and where my glance must have touched it unknowingly while I was looking at my gear, I was no wiser. It was simply a small drawing made by the point of some softer, reddish rock. I goggled at it, trying to imagine it had been there always. No such thing. That cave was mine, the only place on earth I'd ever felt I owned, and I knew it like the skin of my body. This had been done since my last visit, in December before winter set in.

Two stick figures, circles for heads with no faces, single lines for legs and arms and bodies, both with male parts indicated. I'd heard of hunters' sign-messages. But what did this say that a hunter could want to know? The figures held nothing, did nothing, just stood there.

The one on my right was in human proportion, with slightly bent elbows and knees in the right places, all his fingers and toes. The other stood to the same height, but his legs were far too short without a knee-crook, and his arms too long, dangling below his crotch. He had only three toes for each foot, a big one and two squeezed-up little ones. His fingers were blunt stubs, though the artist had gone to a lot of trouble drawing good human fingers for the other jo.

No tracks in the cave or on the ledge. Nothing left behind.

I gave it up—nothing else to do. Somebody'd been here since December, and he was honest because he never touched my gear, and likely meant me no harm. Last year I'd brought a horse-shoe and slipped it into the jumble of rocks before the cave. Now I made certain it was still in place—it was; anyway I'd never heard of a trick like this being pulled by witches or spooks.

I worked awhile, gathering fresh balsam to sleep on, and a supply of firewood against the night. Then I shrugged off shirt and loin rag but not my knife, naturally—and lay out naked in the sunny grass, drowsing, daydreaming, not wondering much now about my visitor because I supposed he was long gone. I let other thoughts range wide, into the open sky and beyond the limits of the day.

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I thought of journeying.

A patch of land three thousand miles square, and the everlasting seas. Hudson Sea, Moha Water, the Lorenta Sea, even the great Ontara Sea in the northwest—all of those, said the teacher-priests, are mere

branches of the great sea, dividing the known world into islands. From travelers' talk—oh, I think all the best of my education up to fourteen came from evenings at the Bull and Iron when I was minding the fireplace in the taproom or lending a hand serving drinks with my ears flapping—I knew that in some places the Hudson Sea is only a few miles wide; small craft cross it readily in good weather. And I knew that some thirty-ton ships of Levannon sail coastwise through Moha Water to the Lorenta Sea, then south for trade with Nuin—Old City and Land's End, the easternmost part of the known world, except for a few of the outlying Cod Islands. Long, dangerous, roundabout, that northern passage, especially bad in the Lorenta Sea, where winds can be hellish or at other times fog may lie thick for days, hiding both shores—and as for the shores, wilderness on both sides, red bear and brown tiger country not meant for man. Yet that route was safer, travelers said, than the southern course down the Hudson Sea and along the Conicut coast, for at the end of that course the Cod Islands pirates with their devilish little scoon-rigged fighter craft were somehow able to smell out every third vessel worth the taking, and they couldn't be bothered with prisoners unless there were women aboard.

I thought, If thirty-tonners of Levannon make that northern passage for the sake of trade, why can't they sail farther, much farther? What's stopping them? Sure, I was ignorant. I'd never seen even the Hudson Sea, and couldn't picture it. Likely I'd never heard the word "navigation" at that time. I had no notion of the terror and the vastness of open sea when the land's gone and there's no mark to steer by unless someone aboard knows the mystery of guessing position from the pattern of the stars. But an ignorant boy can think. And I thought, if nobody dares sail beyond sight of land, and if the Book of Abraham doesn't say, how can anyone, even the priests, claim to *know* what's out there? Can't there be other lands before you come to the rim?

I thought, How do they even know there is a rim? If it goes on forever—

And I thought, If I were to sail east toward the place of sunrise—

Nay, but suppose I traveled at least to Levannon, where a young man might sign aboard one of those thirty-tonners. Suppose I started this morning...

I thought of Emmia.

I'd glimpsed her once at her window, birth-naked for bed-time, prettier than any flower. That was the year before. I'd sneaked out of my loft sore



and angry from a licking Old Jon gave me—a mule got loose in the vegetable patch, not my fault but he wouldn't hear of it. That night I swore I'd run away and the hell with all of them. But from the street my eye caught the glow of candlelight at a window at the side of the inn on the second floor, that I knew was Emmia's. A thick-stemmed jinny-creeper vine ran up that side of the building, spreading leaf patterns over many of the windows, and hers was one, and behind the ghostly dark patches of the pointed leaves her sweet body was moving. I saw her let free red-brown hair to tumble over her shoulders, and she combed it, watching herself no doubt in a mirror I couldn't see. Then she must have suddenly noticed the curtain was still open, for she came to close it. Not in any hurry. She couldn't have seen me, my skinny carcass squinched into the shadow of the next building. She stood gazing out into the dark a short while, long enough to bewitch me as if I'd never seen her before, the slow grace of her motion, her round lifted arm, deep-curved waist and the warm triangle and the division between her big breasts a line of tender darkness.

Naked women weren't news to me, though I'd never had one. Skoar had peep-shows like any civilized city, including penny-a-look ones that I could afford. But this was Emmia, whom I saw every day in her smock or slack-pants, busy at a hundred tasks around the inn and scolded by her ma for laziness half the time, candle-making, mending, dusting, overseeing the slave help when Mam Robson was sick, waiting on table, coming out to the barn and stable sometimes to help me collect hens' eggs, even lend a hand feeding the critters and milking the goats. This was Emmia, and like sudden music I loved her.

I couldn't run away then, nor think of it. She drew the curtain, her candle died, I stole back to my loft forgetting Old Jon's beating and all my wrath. I fell asleep that night imagining the pressure and savor of her beside me on my pallet in the hay-well and part of the time I had myself inheriting the inn and Old Jon's fortune, and Old Jon's dying speech with a blessing on the marriage would have made a skunk weep and forgive all his enemies. Though many times later I risked going out to stare at that window after dark, it never happened again. But the image lived in me, was with me on my ledge before the cave as morning glided toward noon.

My ears must have caught the knowledge first, then my right hand firming on my knife while my mind was still beclouded by love and fancy. Then everything in me said, Look out! Wake up! I opened my eyes and turned my head slowly enough like a creature rousing in the natural way.

My visitor was there, a short way up the ledge, and he smiled.

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Anyway I think he smiled, or wanted to. His mouth was a poor gash no longer than the mid-joint of my forefinger, in a broad flat hairless face. Monstrously dirty he was, and fat, with a heavy swaying paunch. Seeing his huge long arms and little stub legs, I thought I knew who he was.

He did have knees but they scarcely showed, for his lower legs were as big around as his thighs, blocky columns with fat-rolls drooping from the thigh sections. Baldheaded as a pink snake, hairless to the middle, but there at his navel a great thatch of twisty black hair began and ran all the way down his legs to his stubby three-toed feet. He wore nothing at all, poor jo, and it didn't matter. So thick was that frowsy hair I had to look twice before I was sure he was male. He had no ears, just small openings where they should have been. And he had no nose—none at all, you understand? Simply a pair of slits below the little sorrowful black eyes that were meeting my stare bravely enough. He said: "I go away?"

I'd been about to draw my knife and shriek at him to go away. I didn't. I tried to move slowly, getting on my feet. Whatever my face was doing, it made him no more frightened than he was already.

In spite of those legs he stood tall as I, maybe five feet five. He was grief and loneliness standing in the sun, ugly as unwanted death.

A mue.

In Moha, and all countries I've since known, the law of church and state says flat and plain: *A mue born of woman or beast shall not live.*

Well, law is what men make it, and you heard tales. A woman with a devil's aid might bribe a priest to help conceal a mue-birth, hoping (always a vain hope according to the tales) that the mue might outgrow its evil and appear human instead of devil-begotten. I think, by the way, that Nuin and Katskil are the only countries which require that the mother of a mue must be killed. In Moha, I know, the law explains that a demon bent on planting mue-seed is well known to enter women in their sleep and without their knowledge, therefore they aren't to blame unless witnesses can prove the contrary, that they performed the act with the demon awake and knowingly. At the Bull and Iron I'd heard plenty of such tales about mues born in secret—single-eyed, tailed, purple-skinned, monkey-sized, four-armed, or anything else the storyteller cared to imagine, I guess—growing up in secret and finally taking to the wilderness, where it was the duty of any decent citizen to kill them on sight—a dangerous undertaking even if they

seemed defenseless, for the stories claimed that the demon who fathered the mue was likely enough to be watching over his offspring, perhaps in the shape of an animal, a snake or wolf or tiger.

He said again: "I go away?"

His voice was deep, slow, blurred, hard to understand. He didn't move except for an idle swinging of his arms. Sprouting huge out of his soggy body—why, those arms could have torn a bull in quarters.

"No, don't go."

"Man," he said. "Boy-man. Beautiful."

I'm not, of course. I'm puggy-nosed, freckled, knotty-muscled, small but limber. It didn't occur to me at first that he meant me, but he was studying me sharply with those sad little pouch eyes, as I stood there with nothing on but my knife-belt, and there was nothing else he could have meant. I suppose I understand now that anything in the natural human shape would have looked beautiful to him. I knew he could see the bumpy racing of my heart; glancing down, I could see it myself, a crazy bird's-wing flutter below the flare of my bottom ribs. Out of the uproar in my head I could find nothing to say except: "Thanks for the picture. I like it." I saw he didn't know the word "picture". "Lines," I said, and pointed to the cave. "Good."

He understood then; smiled and chuckled and gobbled. "You come me," he said. "I show you good things, I."

Go with him? Father Abraham, no! And maybe meet his father? I should—but I couldn't think. I pulled on my shirt and loin rag, trying to watch not only the mue but the ledge behind him, and the region behind my back too. I said: "W-w-wait!" and I stepped into my cave.

Out of his sight, I was taken with a fit of trembling, sick and silly. Then I had my knife out and was hacking away a good half of that loaf of oat bread. I know I had some notion of buying him off. I recall thinking that if his father was in wolf-shape, maybe the bacon would do some good. But I didn't take it; I set it, and the rest of the loaf, back on the rock ledge with my bow and arrows, and my fingers were reaching for the luck charm at my neck. It wasn't there. I remembered I'd dropped it in my sack because the string had broken the day before and I couldn't find another. Now I slid the sack over my shoulder, and took some comfort from feeling the charm, the little male-female god-thing, lumpy through the cloth of the sack.

A clay trifle. I've learned since then that they carve such trash down in Penn, to sell to travelers for souvenirs, and likely it came from there. It was given me by my mother, or by somebody in the house where I was born, for I'm told it was on a string around my neck when I was taken to the orphanage, and there they laughed at it some but let me keep it. Emmia was often curious about it—such things aren't common in Moha. Once, when we were looking for hens' eggs in the barn loft, she caught hold of it and asked me, a bit red-faced and whispery, if I knew what it meant. I was thirteen; it was before I'd seen her in her window. I knew and didn't know what *she* meant, was scared of the difference in her face and of the queer sweet-smelling warmth that reached me from her nearness, and so nothing came of what might have been a lively hour if my thoughts had grown a little closer toward those of a man. Oh, I don't believe in luck-charms nowadays. Luck, good or bad, simply happens; you can't make it, or push it around with charms and words and all that jibberly-mumble. But in those days I more than half believed in it. And since I did, it helped to stop my trembling, as I carried out that half-loaf to—him. Carried it out, knowing with not a trace of doubt what I ought to do, meant to do, what the law said I must do.

He didn't reach for it. Those nostril-slits flared, though, and his gaze followed my fingers like a dog's when I broke off a small piece of the bread and ate it myself. I held out the rest to him and he accepted it, carried it to his pitiful mouth. I got a glimpse of his teeth, brownish, small, close-set, weak-looking. He gnawed awkwardly. His eyes never left me as he munched, and snuffled, and slobbered. He kept grunting, "Good, good!" and trying to smile with his mouth full. Merciful winds, it was nothing but common oat bread! And with all that fat, he couldn't have been going hungry.

At fourteen I couldn't understand that it wasn't bread he was starved for. I know it now.

The bread gone, he gave his wet mouth a swipe and said: "You come me now? Good things. Show good things, I." He walked a few steps up the ledge, looking back. Like a dog.

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Yes, I followed him.

He walked better than I expected. His knees could bend only a few inches, but the stub legs were powerful to hold up all that weight, and they could pump along at surprising speed. On the level, it was a stiff-legged

waddle. But on the steep ground, as we climbed around toward the northern side of the mountain, his arms would swing forward touching the earth, a four-legged scramble that carried him up the rises about as fast as I cared to walk. And he was quiet, in the same way I'd learned to go quiet in the woods. He knew this country, got his living out of it, must have known it a good while. I couldn't guess his age, however, and hardly tried to.

North Mountain mue, I've got no other name for him. He would never have owned one. What the hell, like other orphanage kids I never had a last name myself, and don't miss it. I'm just Davy.

Don't think my kindness—if it was kindness, that business with the bread—came from anything good in me. It didn't. It came partly from fear, partly from an ugly sort of planning. From the year of teaching by the priests that every child in Moha is required to sweat out before he's twelve, and from the Bull and Iron tales, I knew that mues weren't in the same class with demons or ghosts or elves, but solid flesh in spite of being the get of devils. They couldn't vanish or float through walls; they didn't have the evil eye. If you got near one you'd see and smell him, he couldn't use spells or witch-signs (though his father might) because God wouldn't allow that to a miserable mue, and he would die for good when you put a knife in him. The law said when, not if. It said you must if you could; if you couldn't, you must notify the Church at once, so that he could be hunted down by men properly equipped and with the protection of a priest.

I walked on behind him, up through the deeper forest on the north side of the mountain, and more and more I hated and resented him, cursing the luck that made me the one to find him, imagining his demon father behind every tree, and sickened the way anyone might be sickened by ugliness, terror, strangeness and a foul smell.

We reached a level area, a flanking ridge of the mountain's north side where the trees stood great and old, spaced well apart but casting thick shade from interlacing branches. Most of them were pines, that through the years had built a heavy carpet; here anyone could walk soft as a breeze. My ears, and they are keen, could barely hear the mue a few steps ahead of me as his blobby feet pressed the pine needles. I myself moved more quietly than that. I felt that he didn't like it here. He could shamle along faster on sloping ground. In this place anything could overtake him. He padded on at his best poor speed, with constant glances to left and right—truly like someone who knew nothing more about the shadows than I did.

The stories didn't say there was *always* a demon attending a mue.

It would be easiest, and I knew it, here on the level. Six inches of double-edge Katskil steel, honed to the limit as mine always was, will go through anything made of flesh. I was watching the best spot, below his last rib on the left side. If a no-way human thing, or being, was observing us, he or it might read my thought. It might not be in animal shape at all. But as for the mue—well, if I failed to kill at the first stab, at least I'd have time to dodge his frightful arms, and run faster than he could hope to do, while the blood drained out of him. Mue blood. Devil-fathered blood.

I slid my knife free. I lowered it quickly out of sight inside the mouth of my sack, afraid he might turn suddenly before I was ready, afraid of other eyes. I lessened the distance between us, calculating angles, arm length, the lie of the ground. It would be best if I stooped slightly and drove my knife upward.

He coughed slightly, a little throat-clearing, a completely human sound. It hurt me somehow, angered me too, for surely he had no right to do things in the human way. Anyhow there was no hurry; plenty more of this partly open area where it would be safest to do it. I saw no change in the tree-pattern up ahead. I told myself to wait till I felt more ready. I told myself how easy it would be. Just wait a minute...

I saw myself back at the Bull and Iron telling my true-tale. I wouldn't brag, nay, I'd speak with a noble calm. I could afford it. I'd be the Yardboy Who Killed A Mue.

They would send out a mission, priests, hunters and soldiers, to find the body and verify my story. I'd go along, and they'd find it. A skeleton, with those awful leg-bones, would be enough—and that's all it would be, for in the time it took the mission to argue and get going, the carrion-ants would finish what other scavengers began, the old necessary wilderness housecleaning. The skeleton would do. They'd set out doubting me, snickering behind their hands. Then the laughs would look sick, and I'd be a hero.

It came to me that this was no gaudy daydream of the kind that had filled my head with rosy mists at other times. This was what would happen in sober fact. I'd be questioned and examined afterward by the priests, maybe the Bishop of Skoar, the Mayor, even the Colonel of the army garrison. Why, possibly the Kurin family, absolute tops in the Skoar aristocracy, would hear of me and want to learn more. If they liked me, I'd be a bondservant no longer. With them for my patrons I'd be the same as rich.

I would go to Levannon, on a roan horse. Two attendants—no, three, one to ride ahead and make sure of a room for me at the next inn, never mind who had to be tossed out; and a maid-servant to bathe me and keep the bed warm. In Levannon I would *buy* me a ship, a thirty-tonner. And wouldn't I wear a green hat with a hawk's feather, a red shirt of Penn silk, my loin cloth silken too, none of your damned scratchy linsey rags, maybe white with small golden stars and crosses! Real leather moccasins with ornaments of brass.

I saw Old Jon Robson ashamed of past unkindness but quick to get in on the glory. I'd let him. It would suit my dignity. Clickety-yak, he knew all along the boy had wonderful stuff in him, only needed an opportunity to bring it out, what he'd always said, clickety-clickety, and me looking calm, friendly, a little bit bored. Poor Old Jon!

And Emmia: "Davy, weren't you *terrified*? O Davy darling, what if *he'd* killed *you*?" Maybe not just "darling"; maybe she'd call me "Spice," which girls didn't say in my native city unless they meant come-take-it. "Davy, Spice, what if I'd lost you?"

"Nay, Emmia, it wasn't anything. I had to do it." So, since she'd called me that, it wasn't the taproom where she spoke, but her bedroom, and she'd let down her lovely hair to cover the front of her in make-believe modesty, but I put my hands below her chin—you know, gentle, nevertheless the hands that had killed a mue—parting that flowing softness to let the pink flower-tips peep through...

The mue halted and turned to me. "Bad place," he said, pointing at some of the enormous trees, to remind me how anything might lurk behind them. "No fear, boy-man. Bad thing come, I help, I." He tapped the bulges of his right arm. "Fight big, you, I. You, I—word?—fra—fre -"

"Friends," I said, or my voice said it for me.

"Friends." He nodded, satisfied, turned his broad back to me and went on.

I pushed my knife into its sheath and did not draw it again that day.

\* \* \* \*

The big-tree region ended. For a while our course slanted downhill through smaller growth; now and then a gap in the tree cover let me glance out

across rolling land to the north and east. Then we came to a place where the master growth was no longer trees but the wild grape. Monstrous vines looped and clung in their slow violence throughout a stand of maple and oak, the trees twisted into tortured attitudes by the ceaseless pressure. Many of the trees were dead but still provided firm columns to uphold their murderers. In the upper shadows I saw flashes of brilliance, not birds but the flowers called orchids whose roots grow on the branches never touching earth. Moss hung there too, a gray-green strangeness; I had never seen more than a little of it on the Skoar side of the mountain, but here it grew dense, making me think of dusty curtains swaying to a breeze I could not feel.

In this man-forgotten place, the mue stopped, glanced up into the vine-bound branches and studied my legs and arms, bothered. "You can't," he said, and showed me what he meant by catching a loop of vine and swarming up hand over hand till in a moment he was thirty feet above ground. There he swung, and launched his great bulk across a gap, catching another loop, and another. A hundred feet away, he shifted his arms so quickly I could not follow the motion, and came swinging back above me. Now I'm clever in the trees, but my arms are merely human, not that good. He called down softly: "You go ground? Not far. Bad thing come, I help quick."

So I went ground. It was nasty walking—thicket, groundvines, fallen branches, dead logs where fire-ants would be living. The fat black-and-gold orb-spiders liked this place and had their dainty-looking homes everywhere; their bite can't kill, but will make you wish it would. I had to think of snake and scorpion too, and listen for any noise in the brush that wasn't my own. I struggled through maybe a quarter-mile of that stuff, knowing the mue was near me but often unable to see or hear him, before I came up against a network of cat-brier, and there I was stopped.

Ten-foot elastic stems, tougher than moose-tendon and barbed every inch, growing so close they'd built a sort of basket-weave. Brown tiger himself, with his shoe-leather hide and three inches of fur, would never try it. Then beyond that barricade I saw what could have been the tallest tree in Moha.

A tulip tree twelve feet through at the base and I'm not lying. The wild grape had found it long ago and gone rioting up into the sunshine, but might not kill the giant for another hundred years. My mue was up there, calling, pointing out a place on my side where a stem of the vine thick as my wrist grew up straight for thirty feet and connected with the strands around the tulip tree. Well, that I could manage. I shinnied up, and worked over to the



great tree along a dizzy-sagging horizontal vine. The mue grasped my foot and set it gently on a solid branch.

As soon as he was sure of my safety he began climbing, and I followed—I don't know how far up, call it sixty feet more. It was easy enough, like a ladder. The side-branches had become smaller, the vine-leaves thicker in the increase of sunshine, when we reached an obstruction of crossed sticks and interwoven vine. No eagle's nest as I foolishly thought at first—no bird ever moved sticks of that size.

The mue walked out on the branch below this structure and hoisted himself to the next limb. Up beside him, I could understand it. A nest, yes, five feet across, built on a double crotch, woven as shrewdly as any willow basket I ever saw in the Corn Market, and thickly lined with gray moss. He let himself down into his home and his sad mouth grinned. I grinned back—I couldn't help it—and followed, with more caution than I needed, for the thing was solid as a house. It was a house.

\* \* \* \*

He talked to me.

I felt no sense of dreaming, as people sometimes say they do in a time of strangeness. But didn't you, in childhood, play the game of imaginary countries? Promise yourself, say, that if you passed through the gap of a forked tree-trunk you'd be in a different world? Then if you did in the flesh step through such a tree, you learned that you must still rely on make-believe, didn't you? And that hurt, some. It cut a few of the threads of your fancy. But suppose that after passing through your tree-fork, you had been met in solid truth by—oh, a gnome, dragon, fairy-tale princess... But time moved curiously for me there in the mue's nest, and all the inner life of me—thought, vision, ignorance, wonder—was the life of someone who had not existed before that day. I think we never do know yesterday any better than we know tomorrow.

He was fingering my shirt. "Cloth?" he said, and I nodded. "Is beautiful." A rarely dirty old shirt, I'd patched it myself a dozen times. But he liked that word "beautiful" and to him I suppose it meant many things it wouldn't to you or me. "See you before," he told me. "Times ago."

He must have meant he'd watched me secretly on my other visits to North Mountain, from high in a tree or rock-still in a thicket. To guess it would have scared me gutless; learning of it now I only felt silly, me with my sharp eyes and ears and nose—studied all this time and never a hint of it.

Then he was telling me about his life. I won't try to record much of his actual talk, the jumbled half-swallowed words, pauses when he could find no word at all. Some of it I couldn't understand, gaps that caught no light from my few clumsy questions.

He was born somewhere in the northeast. He waved that way; from our height, it was all a green sea under sunshine. He said "ten sleeps," but I don't know what distance he could have covered in a day at the time he left his birthplace. His mother, evidently a farm woman, had born him secretly in a cave in the woods. "Mother's man die before that"—I think he was speaking of his father, or should I say the man who would have been his father if he had not been devil-begotten?

Describing his mother, all he could say was "Big, good." I could piece it out from Bull and Iron tales. She must have been some strapping stout woman who'd been able to hide her pregnancy in the early months. The law says every pregnancy must be reported to the authorities at once, no pregnant woman may ever be left alone after the fifth month, and a priest must always be present at the birth to do what's necessary if the birth should be a mue. She evaded that somehow—maybe the death of her husband made it simpler and bore him and nursed him in secret, raised him to some age between eight and ten with no help except that of a great dog.

The dog was probably one of the tall gray wolfhounds that farm families need if they live outside the village stockade. The bitch guarded the baby constantly while his mother could not be with him, and grew old while he grew up, his closest companion, nurse, friend.

His mother taught him speech, what he had of it, weakened now by years of disuse. Above all, she taught him that he was different, that he must live always in the woods and forever avoid human beings because they would kill him if they found him. She taught him to get a living from the wilderness, hunting, snaring, learning the edible plants and avoiding the poisonous; how to stalk; more important, how to hide. Then, some time between his eighth and tenth year as I understood it—"she come no more."

He waited a long while. The dog stayed with him of course, hunted with him and for him, never let him out of her sight until—grown old no doubt but unchanging in devotion because the gray wolfhounds are like that—she was killed fighting off a wild boar.

After that he knew or felt that his mother must have died too, and he had to go away. He couldn't explain the need—"I must go, I." So he made

his journey of ten sleeps. I tried to ask him about years. He knew the world dimly, but had never thought of counting the times when the world cooled into the winter rains. Looking back, guessing, I believe he wasn't much more than twenty-five.

During the journey often sleeps a hunter had sighted him, shot an arrow into his back, loosed a dog at him. "I must kill the dog, I." He lifted his stub hands with the fingers curling tightly inward to show me how it had been done. A harsh lesson, and it hurt him to remember it, that proof of his mother's teaching, that dogs can sometimes be almost as dangerous as men. "Then man come for me with sharp-end stick, man beautiful." That word again. And again his hands came up, the fingers squeezing life out of a remembered throat. After which he trembled and covered his face, but was watching me I think through a slit between those same curious fingers.

I said: "I would not kill you."

When his hands fell I thought he looked puzzled, as though he had known that all along, no cause for me to say it.

\* \* \* \*

"I show you good thing." He was solemn, lifting himself from the nest and climbing down the tree, this time all the way to the ground. Here a floor of smallish rocks made a circle spreading five or six feet from the base of the tree to the edge of the complete cat-brier barrier, a little fortress. The rocks were all about a foot in diameter, most of them with a flattened part, overlapping so that the brier had no chance to force its way through them. Nature never builds a rock-pile like that; I knew who had—and what a labor, searching out the size and kind he wanted, hundreds of them, transporting them up and down his grapevine path!

He was watching me more intently, maybe not so trustingly. He said: "Wait here." He stumped off to the other side of the great tree, and I heard the noise of rocks being carefully moved. His body stayed out of sight, but his hands appeared beyond the trunk at my left and set down a slab of stone the size of my head—dull reddish, and I noticed the glint of an embedded quartz pebble. Not then with any ugly intent, just thinking ahead of his poor limited mind the way anyone might, I guessed that would be the marker-stone of some hidey-hole. A moment later he returned to me, carrying a thing whose like I have never seen elsewhere in the world.

Not even in Old City of Nuin, where I later lived awhile, and learned writing and reading, and more about Old Time than it's safe for a man to

know.

I thought when I first saw the golden shining of it in his dirty hands that it must be a horn such as hunters and cavalry soldiers use, or one of the screechy brass things—cornets they're called—that I'd heard a few times when Rambler gangs passed through Skoar and gave us their gaudy entertainments in the town green. But this was none of those poor noisemakers.

The large flared end a foot across, the two round coils and straight sections of the pipe between bell and mouthpiece, the three movable pegs (I call them pegs though it doesn't quite rightly describe them) built with impossible smoothness and perfection into the pipe—all these things, and the heavy firmness of the metal, the unbelievable soft gleaming of it, made this a marvel that no one of our world could build.

Ancient coins, knives, spoons, kitchenware that won't rust—such objects of Old-Time magic metal are upturned in plowing now and then, even today. I knew about them. If the thing is simple and has an obvious use, the rule in Moha is finders keepers, if the finder can pay the priest for his trouble in exorcising the bad influence. Mam Robson had a treasure like that, a skillet-thing four inches deep, of shiny gray metal light and very hard that never took a spot of rust. It had been found in plowing by her grandfather, and handed down to her when she married Old Jon. She never used it, but liked to bring it from her bedroom now and then to show the guests, and tell how her mother did use it for cooking and took no harm. Then Old Jon would crash in with the story of how it was found as if he'd been there, clicket-clickety, the Mam watching sidelong and her gloomy horse-face saying *he* wasn't a man who'd ever find her such a thing, not him, miracle if he ever got up off his ass except to scratch. Well, and if the Old-Time object is something for which no reasonable man can imagine a use—a good many are said to be like that—naturally the priest will keep it, and bury it where it can work no damage, men suppose.

Ignorant as I was, I knew before the mue let me take it in my hands that I was looking on a work of ancient days that might be not for any man to touch. It is not gold of course, but as I've said, a metal of Old Time that has no name in our day. I've seen true gold in Old City; its weight is much greater, the feel of it altogether different. But I still call this a golden horn, because I thought of it so for a long time, and now that I know better the name still seems to me somehow true.

"Mother's man's thing," the mue said, and at length passed it to me. He was not happy while, dazed and afraid and wondering, I turned it about

in my hands. It gathered light from this shady place and made itself a sun. "She bring me. I little, I. I to keep. She said, I to keep, I." He started once or twice to take it back, the motion uncompleted, and I was too deep in bewilderment to let it go. Then he said: "You blow." So he knew at least that it was a thing for music.

I puffed my cheeks and blew, and nothing happened—a breath-noise and a mutter. The mue laughed, really laughed. Expecting it. He took it from me hastily. "Now I blow, I."

His miserable mouth almost disappeared in the cup, and he did something with his cheeks, not puffing them at all but tightening them till his flat face altered with carven lines. And I heard it speak.

There is no other voice like that on earth. Have you seen an icicle breaking sunshine to a thousand jewels of colored light, and can you in a waking dream imagine that icicle entering your heart with no common pain but with a transfiguration so that the light lives within you, not to die until your own time of dying? You see, it is foolish—I have learned something of music since my childhood, even a great deal as such things are measured, but words will not give you what I know. I've heard the viols they make in Old City that are said to follow a design of Old Time. I've heard singers, a few of them with such voices as men imagine for angels. But there's no other voice like that of the golden horn. And the more I know of music, the less able am I to speak anything of it except in music's own language. Words! Can you talk of color to a man blind from birth? Could I know anything of the ocean until the day came when I stood on the beach and my own eyes saw the blue and gold, the white of foam, the green depth and the gray of distance, and I heard the sigh and thunder, the joy and the lamentation of wave on sand and wind on wave?

The one long note the mue first played—soft, loud, soft, low in pitch—shook me with unbelief. As you might be shaken if the curtain of stars and night were swept aside, and you saw—how should I know what you would see? He pressed one of the pegs, and blew another note. Another peg, another note. Two pegs at once, another. All pure, all clear and strong, changing, fading and swelling and dying out. A single note to each breath—he had no thought of combining them, no notion of melody; I think he never even moved one of the pegs while he blew. I understood presently, in spite of my own thick ignorance, that he, poor jo, had no knowledge at all of the thing he held in his hands. How could he?

Mother's man's thing—had his father known more? A miracle of Old Time, found—where? Hidden away—how? Hidden away surely, I thought,

for how could a man play this horn where others heard and not be known at once for a possessor of magic, brought before priests and princes to tell of it, and play it, and no doubt lose it to their itching hands? A miracle of Old Time, carried off to be a toy for a mue-child in the wilderness...

"She said, I to keep, I. Good?"

"Good. Yes, good."

He asked, not happily: "You blow now?"

"I daren't."

He seemed relieved by that. He chuckled, and padded away behind the tree hugging the horn. I stayed where I was, hot and cold within. I watched the slab of reddish rock till his hands reached out for it. I heard the chink as it was set in place, and I knew the golden horn had to be mine.

It had to be mine.

\* \* \* \*

He came back smiling and rubbing his lips, no longer concerned about his treasure, while I could think of nothing else. But a mean sort of caution kept me from saying anything more about it. And there was meanness, calculation, in the friendliness I showed him from then on. Almost certain what I meant to do, pushed toward it (so I excused myself) as if by a force outside of me, I acted a part. I grinned, nodded, made noises like his, stared around me as though his dwelling-place were a wonder of the world, while inside me I could think of nothing except how to get at that rock-pile in his absence.

For one thing I will give myself a small trace of honor. I did not again plan to kill him. The power had burned out of that. The idea was there, yes—was painfully strong at moments when he trustingly turned his back or looked away from me and I remembered how fast my hand was, how quickly I could run, and how I would be praised and honored, not punished, for destroying him. Maybe I understood, without reasoning it through, that I just don't have it in me to kill another being for any reason except hunger or self-defense—anyway I never have, and I've been tempted to it a few times in my travels since that day. Whatever the reason, I did reject the thought of killing him, not purely from cowardice, so for what it's worth, that's my scrap of virtue.

All the same I'm not going to enjoy writing the next page or two. I could lie about what happened—how would you know the difference? Anybody can lie about himself; we all do it every day, trying like sin to show the world an image with all the warts rubbed off. Writing this story for you, some-way I don't want to lie. Merely writing it seems to make the warts your business, so I won't draw myself as a saint or a hero or a wise man. Better just remember, friends, that a lot of the time I've acted almost as bad as you do, and be damned to it.

We climbed up from the cat-brier fortress into the tulip-tree, and I got clever. I asked: "Where is water?"

He pointed off into the jungle. "You want drink? I show you, I."

"Wash too," I said, hoping to get him interested in a brand-new idea. You can see how clever it was—if he ever got serious about washing himself, he had a long project ahead of him. "Washing is good," I said, and touched my arms and face, which happened to be pretty clean. "Dirt comes off in water. Is good, good. Wash."

I think he'd known the word once, though obviously it wasn't one of his favorites. He worked on it, studying my crazy gestures, frowning and mumbling. Then he studied his own skin, what you could see of it through the crust, and all of a sudden the great idea got to him. "Wash!" he said, and chuckled till he drooled, and wiped that away among the other smears. "Wash! I wash *all* me, be like you!"

Well... I did have the decency to feel sick. I'm sure he imagined, for a while at least, that I knew how to work some magic with water which would take away his ugliness and make him man-beautiful. I'd never intended that, and now I didn't see how to change the idea or explain it.

And he couldn't wait. He practically pushed me along the grape-vine route, down outside the cat-briers and off through the woods. This time he stayed with me on the ground instead of swinging ahead above me. I think he wanted to keep close, so that he could go on reminding me with grins and mumbles about our wonderful project.

We walked mostly downhill as I'd expected, and it was bad going until he turned off to follow a deer-trail out of the wild-grape area and into a clearer space, which suited me fine. I wanted distance from his home, lots of it. The trees had become well spaced, no more vines overhead, the ground reasonably clear. In country like this I could run like a bird before the wind. Not too soon, we reached the brook he had in mind, and traveled a

comfortable distance further before arriving at a pool big enough for bathing, a quiet and lovely place of filtered sunlight and the muttering of cool water. We both studied the tracks of animals who had come to drink here, and found no record of danger, only deer, fox, wildcat, porcupine, whiteface monkey. I dropped my clothes on the bank and slipped into the water, slow and noiseless the way I like to go, while he watched me, scared and doubtful, not quite believing anyone could really do a thing like that.

I beckoned to him with grins and simple words, made a show of scrubbing myself to show him how it was done. At last he ventured in, the big baby, an inch at a time. The pool was narrow but long, nowhere deeper than three feet. I'm glad to remember I didn't try to persuade him to try swimming—with his poor legs he'd probably have drowned. But I showed him he could walk or stand in the water and still have his head well above it. Gradually he caught on, found himself all the way in and began to love it.

I frolicked around, burning and impatient inside, my head full of just one thing. When I was sure he was really enjoying himself and wanted to go on with the great washing thing, I let him see me look suddenly and anxiously toward the afternoon sun. He understood I was thinking about time and the approach of the evening. I said: "I must go back. You stay here, finish wash. I must go fast. You stay."

He understood but didn't like it. When I'd nipped out on the bank he started to follow, very slow, clumsy, timid in the water. "No," I said, "you finish wash." I pointed to the plentiful dirt still on him, made motions of sloshing water on my back. "All dirt bad. Washing good, good. You finish wash. I will come back."

"I finish wash, then I be—"

"Finish wash," I said, cutting that off—so I'll never know, and didn't want to know, whether he really imagined that washing would make him man-beautiful. "I must go now before sun go down."

"To smoke-place, big sticks?" He meant Skoar and its stockade.

"Yes." And I said again, as plain and friendly (and treacherous) as I could: "I will come back..."

I don't know if he watched me out of sight, for I couldn't look behind me. Presently I was running, as quickly and surely as I had ever done in my life, remembering all the landmarks without thinking of them. Up across the easy ground, that was hard for him, and into the grapevine jungle, pulled



accurately and fast as if I were bound to the golden horn by a tightening cord.

Up the grapevine into the tulip tree, and down inside the brier fortress, finding that red rock at once and lifting it aside. The horn lay there wrapped in gray-green moss that was like a cloth, and with hardly a glance to delay me I shoved it still wrapped into my sack, and was up over the grapevine, and out, and gone. If the mue had followed me at his best speed, and I'm sure he didn't follow at all, I would still have been gone on my way before ever he came in sight of his home. Yes, I was very clever.

And now, in no danger from him at all, I was running faster than ever. Like a crazed hunted animal without sense or caution. Wolf or tiger could have taken me then with no trouble—but you need to be strangely alive in order to write words on paper; you notice I'm still living. I couldn't escape that driving need to run until I had gone all the way around the east side of the mountain, past the ledge that led to my cave, and had caught sight of the Skoar church-spires. Then I collapsed on a fallen log gulping for air.

The skin of my belly hurt horribly. I twitched my shirt aside and found red-burning skin and the puncture mark. Why, somewhere, during my mad running after I had stolen the horn, I must have blundered through an orb-spider's web, the thing had bitten me, and I hadn't even known it until now.

It wouldn't kill me. I'd had a bite from one of them before, on the arm. Needles were doing a jerking jig all over me, and my guts ached. I wouldn't sleep much, I knew. Tomorrow it would become an infernal itch for a while, and then stop hurting.

I wondered, as if someone had spoken aloud to stab me with the thought, whether I'd ever sleep well again.

I took out the horn with wobbling hands, unwrapping it from the moss. Oh, the clear splendor, and the shining! Forest daylight flowed into it and was itself a silent music. And the horn was mine. Wasn't it?

I raised it to my lips, trembling but compelled. It amazed me—still does—how naturally the body of the horn rests against my body, and my right hand moves without guidance of thought over those three pegs. Did the faraway makers of the horn leave in it some Old-Time magic that even now tells the holder of the horn what he must do?—oh, foolishness; they simply remembered the shape and the needs of a human body, the way the maker of a simple knife-hilt will remember the natural shape of a human

hand. But still, still—that kind of thinking and remembering, planning for necessity but also dreaming your way into the impossible until it changes and becomes true and real in your hand, isn't that a kind of magic? And so, many of us are magicians but have never noticed it; anyway I give you the thought if you'll have it.

I did not dare blow into the horn; then I did so in spite of myself, not puffing or straining but breathing gently and, by accident I think, firming my lips and cheeks in what happened to be the right way. It spoke to me.

It was mine.

Only one note, and soft, so light was the breath I dared to use. But it was clear and perfect, the sunlight and the shining transformed to sound, and I knew then there was music hidden here that not the mue, maybe not anyone since the days of Old Time, had ever dreamed of until it came into my hands. And, sick and scared and miserable though I was, I knew it was for me to bring forth that music, or die.

Then I shook with common fright, for what if even that small sound of the horn could travel by some magic around the mountain where the true owner—

But / was the true owner. It was mine.

I returned it to the sack and stumbled on down the mountain toward the city. The spider-bite was making me dizzy and slow, a bit feverish. Once I had to stop and heave, all blackness surging around me—any hunting beast could have had me for nothing. That cleared, and I went on. Near the edge of the forest, a hundred yards or so from the stockade, I holed up in a thicket, enough sense left in me to know I must wait for dark and the stockade guards' supper-time.

That was a bad hour. I crouched hugging the horn against my middle where the spider-bite jabbed me with fire-lances. I vomited again once or twice. I couldn't stand it to think of the mue, his friendliness, his human ways, for that would start me wondering what sort of thing / was.

There are tales of brain-mues. The most frightful kind of all, for they grow up in the natural human shape, and no one knows they are devil-begotten until, perhaps when they are full-grown, they go through a change that is called madness, behaving like wild beasts, or sometimes forgetting who or where they are, seeing and believing all manner of out-rageous things until their infernal origin becomes known to everyone

and they must be given over to the priests. What if I—

I could not examine nor tolerate the thought then. It stayed, at the fringes of my mind, a black wolf waiting.

Yes, a bad hour. Maybe it was also the hour when I started changing into a man.

\* \* \* \*

The spider-bite was still a blazing misery under my shirt when it grew dark enough for me to move. All I remember about the agony of climbing the stockade is that when I reached the top of it I had to scrounge back out of sight and wait for a patrolling guard to walk on, and then waste my strength cussing his lights and gizzard when he met another guard and they spent ten minutes beating their gums. But that ended, I was in the city, the heavy burden in my sack unharmed, and I sneaked along easily enough to the Bull and Iron, keeping close in the shadow of the buildings.

I saw a light in Emmia's window, though it wasn't late enough for her bedtime, and when I crept into the stable she was there, doing my work for me with a lantern. She'd just done watering the mule team an hour late, and turned to me quick and sore with a finger at her lips. "They think I'm in my room. I swear this is the last time I cover up for you, Davy. What are we going to *do* about you? Don't you live here any more, Mr Independent?" I couldn't answer. It took all I had merely to look at her and try to appear human while I squirmed my sack off and set it on the table floor. I wished there was more shadow. I pulled my shirt open, and even in the dim lantern light she noticed the red patch on my belly. "Davy darling, what happened?" She dropped the water bucket and hurried to me, with no more thought of scolding, or of anything except helping me. "What is it?"

"Orb-spider."

"Davy, *boy!* You silly jerk, the way you go wandering off where all those awful things are, I swear if you was only small enough to turn over my knee—" and she went on so, quite a while, the warm soft-mother kind of scolding that doesn't mean a thing.

"I didn't goof off, Emmia, I thought it was my regular day off—"

"*Oh, shed up,* Davy, you didn't think never any such thing, why've you got to lie to me? But I won't tell, I said I'd covered up for you, only more fool me if ever I do it again, and you're lucky it's Friday, you wasn't missed.

Now look, you go straight up to your bed and I'll bring you a mint-leaf poultice for that nasty bite. The things you get into! Here, take my lantern up with you, I won't need it. Now you—"

"Kay," I said. There was that about Emmia—she was sweet as all summertime, but if you wanted to say anything to her, you had to work a mite fast to get it in. I tried to scoop up my sack without her noticing, but she could be sharp too sometimes, and I was clumsy with the lantern and all.

"Davy, merciful winds, whatever have you got *there*?"

"Nothing."

"Nothing! There you go again, and the thing as big as a house. Davy, if you've gone and taken something you shouldn't—"

"It's nothing!" I was yelling at her, and hurrying for the loft ladder. "If you got to know, it's some special wood I picked up, to carve something for—for your name day, if you *got* to know."

"Davy! Little Spice!" So here she comes for me all in a warm rush. I swung the sack around behind me before a kiss landed—not on my mouth, where I wanted it, because I ducked, but on my eyebrow anyhow, and anyhow a kiss. Well, "little Spice" doesn't mean the same or even half as much as just "Spice." "Please forgive me, Davy, I'm *sorry*! Me scolding you, and all the time you're sick with that awful bite. Here!" I looked up, and she kissed me again, sudden-sweet, full on the mouth.

When my arms tightened around her she pulled away, staring at me deep, her eyes swimming in the lantern-light. She looked surprised, as if nothing like that had ever crossed her mind. "Why, Davy!" she said, dreamy-voiced. "Why, Davy boy..." But then she pulled her wits together. "Now then, straight up to bed with you, and I'll bring you that poultice soon as I can sneak the stuff and slip away with it. I'm not supposed to be here, you know."

I climbed to the loft, not too easily. I was thinking of other things she'd be bringing me, up that ladder. I couldn't make it seem real, yet my heart went to racing and thundering for other reasons than sickness from the bite and memory of what I'd done to a friend.

\* \* \* \*

I hid the sack in the hay near my pallet, carelessly because dizziness and fever from the spider's poison had grown worse. Besides, I had a half-desire to show someone that horn and tell my story. Who but Emmia? Of all the South District boys I knew—few enough, for I never ran with the street gangs—there wasn't a one that I thought would understand or keep quiet about it. I could picture myself being called yellow for not killing the mue and wicked for not reporting it...

A chill shook me as I slipped off my loin rag. I kept my shirt on as I crawled under my blanket, and there's a kind of blank stretch when my wits were truly wandering. I know I was trying to fold the blanket double for warmth and making a slithery mess of it when a second blanket was spread over me. Emmia had come back so softly that in sickness and confusion I hadn't seen or heard her. The blanket was wool-soft, full of the special girl-scent of her. From her own bed, and me a dirty yardboy, and a thief. "Emmia—"

"Hush! You're a bit fevery, Davy. Be a good boy now and let me put on this poultice, ha?" Well, I wouldn't stop her, her hands gentle as moth wings easing down the blankets, pressing the cloth with some cool minty stuff where my flesh was burning. "Davy, what was you raving about? Something about where the sun rises—but it's only evening." She brought the blanket back up to my chin, and pushed my arms under it, and I let her, like a baby. "You was talking about going somewhere, and where the sun rises, and funny stuff. You're real light in the head, Davy. You better get to sleep."

I said: "What if a man could go where the sun rises, and see for himself?" Yes, maybe I was light in the head, but it was clearing. I knew where I was, and knew I wanted to tell her and ask her a thousand things. "You go to church better than I do, Emmia, I guess you never miss—is there anything says a man can't go looking, maybe for other lands, go out to sea, maybe a long way?" I believe I went on that way quite a while.

There was no harm in it. She blamed most of it on the fever, which I wasn't feeling any more, and the rest on a boy's wildheadedness. She sat by me with a hand resting light on the blanket over my chest, and now and then said little things like "You're all right, Davy boy," and "It must be nice to travel a bit. I always wished I could..."

I felt better merely from the talk. When I quit, the fever from the bite was gone. Leaving the other fever, which I understood fairly well for fourteen, enough to realize that something was wrong with it.

I knew what men did with women. Any South District kid knows that. I knew it was what I wanted with Emmia. I knew she knew it, and wasn't angry. My trouble was fear, cold shadow-fear. Not of Emmia surely—who'd be afraid of Emmia, gentle as spring night, and her face in the dim glow of the lantern a little rose? "Are you warm enough now, Davy?"

"I'm warm, I wish—I wish—"

"What, Davy?"

"I wish you was always with me."

She moved quickly, startling me, and was lying beside me, the blankets between us, lying on my right arm so that it couldn't slide around her, and when my other arm tried to she caught my wrist and held it awhile. But her lips were on my forehead and I could feel her breathing hard.

"Davy, Spice, I oughtn't to do this, mustn't. Little Davy..." She let go my wrist. Our hands would wander then, and mine didn't dare. Hers did, straying over the blanket, resting here and there light and warm.

And nothing happened. I knew what ought to happen. It was almost as if someone in deepest shadow was muttering over and over: "I show you good things, I."

And I thought, What if she rolls over and bumps against that horn?—it's right behind her. And, what if Mam Robson, or Judd, or Old Jon—

She sat up brushing a wisp of hay out of her hair and looking angry, but not at me. "I'm sorry, Davy. I'm being foolish."

"We didn't do anything, S-s —"

"What?"

"We didn't do anything, Spice."

"You mustn't call me that. It's my fault, Davy."

"We haven't done anything."

"I don't know what got into me."

“I wanted you to.”

“I know, but... We must forget about it.” Her voice was different, higher, too controlled, scared. “They’d all be after us.”

“Let’s run away, you and me.”

“Now you’re really talking wild.” But at least she didn’t laugh. No, she sat quiet three feet away from me, her smock tucked neat and careful over her knees, and talked to me awhile sweet and serious. About how I was a good, dear boy except for my wildness, and was going to be a good man, only I must prove myself, and remember that being a man wasn’t all fun and freedom, it was hard work too, and responsibility, minding what people said and she meant not only the priests but everybody who lived respectable, learning how to do things the right way, and not dreaming and goofing off. I must work out my bond-period, and save money, and then I’d be free and I could go apprentice and learn a good trade, like for instance inn-keeping, and then some time—why, maybe some time—but right now, she said, why didn’t I set myself something sort of difficult to do, a real task, to prove myself, and stay right with it? Not goofing off.

“Like what for instance?”

“Like—oh, I don’t know, Davy dear. You should pick it yourself. It should be something—you know, difficult but not impossible, and—and good and honest of course. Then I’ll be proud of you. I know I’m right, Davy, you’ll see. Now I’m going to say good night, and you go straight to sleep, you hear? And we won’t talk about any of this in the morning, either. I wasn’t here, understand? You was here all day, and fed the stock yourself.” She took up the lantern. “Good night, Davy.”

“Good night,” I said, and could have tried for another kiss, but instead I lay there like a boy wondering if she’d give me one, which she didn’t. She left the lantern by the top of the ladder, blew it out, and was gone.

\* \* \* \*

I slept, and I woke in a place full of the black dark of horror. The loft, yes—gradually I knew that, as a dream drained away from me. Some of me, though, was still running mush-footed through a house something like the Bull and Iron but with ten thousand rooms, and the black wolf followed me, slow as I was because he could wait, and snuffling in noises like words: “Look at me, look at me, look at me!” If I looked, he would have me, so I went on, opening doors, every new room strange but with no window,

no sunrise-place. Not one of the doors would latch. Sometimes I leaned my back against one, hearing him slobber and whisper at the crack: "Look at me!" He could open it as soon as I took my weight away, and anyway I must go on to the next door, and the next... When I knew I was awake, when I heard my own rustling against the hay and recognized the feel of my pallet, my own voice broke loose in a whimper: "I'm not a brain-mue. I'll prove it, I'll prove it!"

I did get myself in hand. By the time I thought I had courage enough to fumble after the lantern and my flint-and-steel, I no longer needed the light. It was just the loft, with even a trace of moonlight in the one high window. I could wipe the sweat from my body (remembering too late that it was Emmia's blanket) and think awhile.

Something difficult, and good, and honest. I knew soon enough what that had to be. Then it hardly even troubled me that I couldn't tell Emmia of it afterward, for there was much about it that wouldn't seem right to her and so couldn't be explained. I understood there would always be many things I would not be telling to Emmia...

When the square of moonlight began to change to a different gray I was dressed and ready, the sack with the horn over my shoulder. Nothing remained of the spider-bite but a nasty itch, and that was fading out.

I went down the ladder, out and away, across the city in the still heavy dark, over the stockade and up the mountain with barely enough light to be sure of my course. I traveled slowly, but I was passing my cave (not pausing even to see if the ants had got after my bacon) when the first-light glory told me that sunrise would arrive within the hour. I didn't see it—when it happened I was passing through that solemn big-tree region where yesterday I might have killed the mue. If I were the killing kind.

In the tangled ugly passage where the grapevines thickened overhead, I caught a wrong smell. Wolf smell.

My knife came out, and was steady in my fingers. My back chilled and tingled, but I think I was more angry than anything else. Angry that I must be halted or threatened by a danger that had nothing to do (I thought) with my errand. I didn't stop, just worked on through the bad undergrowth watching everywhere, sniffing, as nearly ready as I could be, seeing that no one is ever quite ready to die. All the way to the cat-briers.

The black wolf was directly below the strand of grape-vine that hung down outside the mue's tulip-tree, and she was dead. I stepped up to the



huge carcass and prodded it with my knife. She stretched maybe six feet from nose to tail-tip, an old one, scarred, dingy black, foul. Her neck was broken. I proved to myself, lifting and prodding, that her neck was broken—if you don't believe it, remember you never saw my North Mountain mue, and his arms. The patches and spatters of blood on the rocks, the ground, the dangling grape-stem, were not hers.

Her body was beginning to stiffen, and cold. It must have happened yesterday, maybe when he came back from the pool, careless perhaps, wondering why he hadn't started changing to man-beautiful.

I set down my sack and climbed the tulip-tree. I called to him a few times. It troubled me that I hadn't any name for him. I called: "Friend? I'm coming up, friend. I brought something back to you." He didn't answer. I knew why, before I reached the branch above his nest and looked down. The carrion ants were already at work, earning their living. I said: "I brought it back. I did steal it, friend, but I brought it back."

I don't remember how many other things I said that would never be answered.

\* \* \* \*

I went back through the forest to my cave, with my golden horn, and the day passed over me. Much of the time I wasn't thinking at all, but in other hours I was. About the thirty-tonners that sail out of Levannon for the northern passage, and then eastward—for the safe Nuin harbors, yes, but eastward, toward the place where the sun is set afire for the day. And I would not go to Levannon on a roan horse, with the blessing and the money of the Kurin family and three attendants, and a serving-maid to warm the bed for me in the next inn. But I would go.

In the afternoon, in the strong light on my ledge, I took out my golden horn, and learned a little. Not a great deal—that day I touched only the fringes of it, but I did discover many notes that the mue had not shown me, and when I ceased to be afraid, the cliff rang, and the voice was clearer than any fancied voice of angels, and it was mine.

Late in the day, I did something like what my poor mue had done. I went up the mountainside well away from my ledge, and with a flat rock I scooped out a pocket in the ground, scattering the earth and wiping out my traces, leaving my golden horn with nothing to mark the place except what was written in my memory. My sack, as well as the mue's gray moss, was wrapped around it, for I knew it was only a little while before I would be

coming back for it. In the meantime there was a need.

I waited a long time outside the stockade that night. It must have been midnight, or past, when I climbed it, and crossed the city once more, and stood a foolish while in the darkness watching Emmia's dark window, and the jinny-creeper vine, and hearing the city's last noises dwindle away into nothing. I remember being astonished, so changed was the world (or if you like, myself), that I had never before even dreamed of climbing that vine to her window.

Now it seemed to me that I was afraid of nothing, I was only waiting for a little deeper quiet, a heavier sleep in the old grimy city that had nothing to do with me. Then my hands were on the vine, and I was climbing up through a harmless whisper of leaves, and opening her window all the way, and crossing the sweet-smelling room where I'd never entered before—but her soft breathing told me where she was, and that she slept.

I would have liked to stand there by her bed a long time, feeling her nearness without touching her, just able to make out a little of her face and her arm in the hint of moonlight. I leaned down and spoke her name a few times softly before I kissed her, and she came awake quickly, like a child. "Emmia, it's just me, Davy. Don't be afraid of anything. I'm going away, Emmia."

"No. What—how—what are you doing here? What—"

I closed her mouth, awhile, the best way. Then I said: "I did something difficult, Emmia, and I think it was good and honest too, but I can't ever tell you what it was, so please—please—don't ever ask me."

And so, of course, she asked me, fluttery and troubled and scared but not angry, not pulling away from me. I knew what to do, and words were no part of it, except that many times, after our first plunge into the rainbow, she called me Spice. Other words came later, maybe an hour later: "Davy, you're not going away for true, are you? Don't ever go away, Davy."

"Why, Emmia," I said, "love package, honey spice, what nonsense! Of course I'll never go away."

I think and hope she knew as well as I did that for love's sake I was lying.

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