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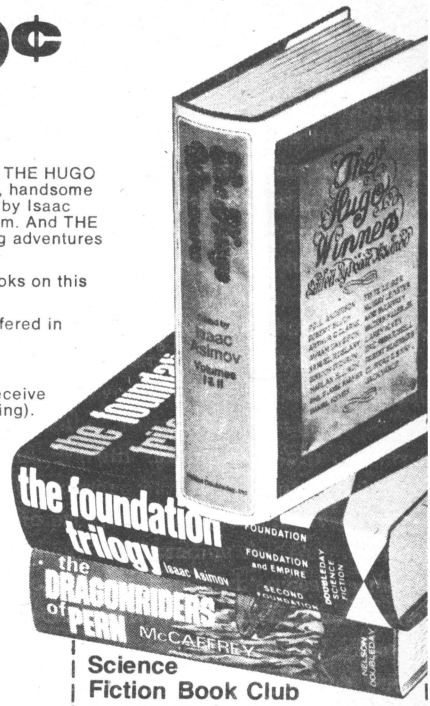

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The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction (ISSN: 0024-984X), Volume 57, No. 6, Whole No. 343, Dec. 1979. Published monthly by Mercury Press, Inc. at $1.25 per copy. Annual subscription $12.50; $14.50 outside of the U.S. Postmaster: send form 3579 to Fantasy and Science Fiction, Box 56, Cornwall, Conn. 06753. Publication office, Box 56, Cornwall, Conn. 06753. Second class postage paid at Cornwall, Conn. 06753 and at additional mailing offices. Printed in U.S.A.

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Wives

BY

LISA TUTTLE

A smell of sulfur in the air on a morning when the men had gone, and the wives, in their beds, smiled in their sleep, breathed more easily, and burrowed deeper into dreams.

Jack's wife woke, her eyes open and her little nose flaring, smelling something beneath the sulfur smell. One of those smells she was used to not noticing, when the men were around. But it was all right, now. Wives could do as they pleased, so long as they cleaned up and were back in their proper places when the men returned.

Jack's wife — who was called Susie — got out of bed too quickly and grimaced as the skintight punished her muscles. She caught sight of herself in the mirror over the dressing table: her sharp teeth were bared, and she looked like a wild animal, bound and struggling. She grinned at that, because she could easily free herself.

She cut the skintight apart with scissors, cutting and ripping carelessly. It didn't matter that it was ruined — skintights were plentiful. She had a whole boxful, herself, in the hall closet behind the Christmas decorations. And she didn't have the patience to try soaking it off slowly in a hot bath, as the older wives recommended. So her muscles would be sore and her skintight a tattered rag — she would be free that much sooner.

She looked down at her dead-white body, feeling distaste. She felt despair at the sight of her small arms, hanging limp, thin and useless in the hollow below her ribs. She tried to flex them but could not make them move. She began to massage them with her primary fingers, and after several minutes the pain began, and she knew they weren't dead yet.

She bathed and massaged her new-

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ly uncovered body with oil. She felt terrifyingly free, naked and rather dangerous, with the skintight removed. She sniffed the air again and that familiar scent, musky and alluring, aroused her.

She ran through the house — noticing, in passing, that Jack's pet spider was eating the living room sofa. It was the time for building nests and cocoons, she thought happily, time for laying eggs and planting seeds; the spider was driven by the same force that drove her.

Outside, the dusty ground was hard and cold beneath her bare feet. She felt the dust all over her body, raised by the wind and clinging to her momentary warmth. She was coated in the soft yellow dust by the time she reached the house next-door — the house where the magical scent came from, the house which held a wife in heat, longing for someone to mate with.

Susie tossed her head, shaking the dust out in a little cloud around her head. She stared up at the milky sky and around at all the houses, alien artifacts constructed by men. She saw movement in the window of the house across the street and waved — the figure watching her waved back.

Poor old Maggie, thought Susie. Old, bulging and ugly, unloved, and nobody's wife. She was only housekeeper to two men who were, rather unfortunately Susie thought, in love with each other.

But she didn't want to waste time by thinking of wives and men, or by feeling pity, now. Boldly, like a man, Susie pounded at the door.

It opened. "Ooooh, Susie!"

Susie grinned and looked the startled wife up and down. You'd never know from looking at her that the men were gone and she could relax — this wife, called Doris, was as dolled-up as some eager-to-please newlywed and looked, Susie thought, more like a real woman than any woman had ever looked.

Over her skintight (which was bound more tightly than Susie's had been) Doris wore a low-cut dress, her three breasts carefully bound and positioned to achieve the proper, double-breasted effect. Gaily patterned and textured stockings covered her silicone-injected legs, and she tottered on heels three centimeters high. Her face was carefully painted, and she wore gold bands on neck, wrists and fingers.

Then Susie ignored what she looked like, and her nose told her much more. The smell was so powerful now that she could feel her pouch swelling in lonely response.

Doris must have noticed, for her eyes rolled, seeking some safe view.

"What's the matter?" Susie asked, her voice louder and bolder than it ever was when the men were around. "Didn't your man go off to war with the others? He stay home sick in bed?"

Doris giggled. "Ooooh, I wish he would, sometime! No, he was out of

here before it was light."

Off to see his mistress before leaving, Susie thought. She knew that Doris was nervous about being displaced by one of the other wives her man was always fooling around with — there were always more wives than there were men, and her man had a roving eye.

"Calm down, Doris. Your man can't see you now, you know." She stroked one of Doris' hands. "Why don't you take off that silly dress, and your skintight. I know how constricted you must be feeling. Why not relax with me?"

She saw Doris' face darken with emotion beneath the heavy make-up, and she grasped her hand more tightly when Doris tried to pull away.

"Please don't," Doris said.

"Come on," Susie murmured, caressing Doris' face and feeling the thick paint slide beneath her fingers.

"No, don't ... please ... I've tried to control myself, truly I have. But the exercises don't work, and the perfume doesn't cover the smell well enough — he won't even sleep with me when I'm like this. He thinks it's disgusting, and it is. I'm so afraid he'll leave me."

"But he's gone now, Doris. You can let yourself go. You don't have to worry about him when he's not around. It's safe, it's all right, you can do as you please now — we can do anything we like and no one will know." She could feel Doris trembling.

"Doris," she whispered and rubbed her face demandingly against hers.

At that, the other wife gave in, and collapsed in her arms.

Susie helped Doris out of her clothes, tearing at them with hands and teeth, throwing shoes and jewelry high into the air and festooning the yard with rags of dress, stockings and undergarment.

But when Doris, too, was naked, Susie suddenly felt shy and a little frightened. It would be wrong to mate here in the settlement built by men, wrong and dangerous. They must go somewhere else, somewhere they could be something other than wives for a little while, and follow their own natures without reproach.

They went to a place of stone on the far northern edge of the human settlement. It was a very old place, although whether it had been built by the wives in the distant time before they were wives or whether it was natural, neither Susie nor Doris could say. They both felt that it was a holy place, and it seemed right to mate there, in the shadow of one of the huge, black, standing stones.

It was a feast, an orgy of life after a season of death. They found pleasure in exploring the bodies which seemed so similar to men's, but which they knew to be miraculously different, each from the other, in scent, texture, and taste. They forgot that they had ever been creatures known as wives. They lost their names and forgot the language of men as they lay entwined.

There were no skintights imprisoning their bodies now, barring them from sensation, freedom and pleasure, and they were partners, not strangers, as they explored and exulted in their flesh. This was no mockery of the sexual act — brutishly painful and brief as it was with the men — but the true act in all its meaning.

They were still joined at sundown, and it was not until long after the three moons began their nightly waltz through the clouds that the two lovers fell asleep at last.

"In three months," Susie said dreamily, "we can...."

"In three months we won't do anything."

"Why not? If the men are away...."

"I'm hungry," Doris said. She wrapped her primary arms around herself. "And I'm cold, and I ache all over. Let's go back."

"Stay here with me, Doris. Let's plan."

"There's nothing to plan."

"But in three months we must get together and fertilize it."

"Are you crazy? Who would carry it then? One of us would have to go without a skintight, and do you think either of our husbands would let us slop around for four months without a skintight? And then when it's born how could we hide it? Men don't have babies, and they don't want anyone else to. Men kill babies, just as they kill all their enemies."

Susie knew that what Doris was saying was true, but she was reluctant to give up her new dream. "Still, we might be able to keep it hidden," she said. "It's not so hard to hide things from a man...."

"Don't be so stupid," Doris said scornfully. Susie noticed that she still had smears of make-up on her face. Some smears had transferred themselves to Susie in the night. They looked like bruises or bloody wounds. "Come back with me now," Doris said, her voice gentle again. "Forget this, about the baby. The old ways are gone — we're wives now, and we don't have a place in our lives for babies."

"But someday the war may end," Susie said. "And the men will all go back to Earth and leave us here."

"If that happens," Doris said, "then we would make new lives for ourselves. Perhaps we would have babies again."

"If it's not too late then," Susie said. "If it ever happens." She stared past Doris at the horizon.

"Come back with me."

Susie shook her head. "I have to think. You go. I'll be all right."

She realized when Doris had gone that she, too, was tired, hungry and sore, but she was not sorry she had remained in the place of stone. She needed to stay awhile longer in one of the old places, away from the distractions of the settlement. She felt that she was on the verge of remembering something very important.

A large, dust-colored lizard crawled out of a hole in the side of a fallen rock, and Susie rolled over and clapped her hands on it. But it wriggled out of her clutches like air or water or the wind-blown dust and disappeared somewhere. Susie felt a sharp pang of disappointment along with her hunger — she had a sudden memory of how that lizard would have tasted, how the skin of its throat would have felt, tearing between her teeth. She licked her dry lips and sat up. In the old days, she thought, I caught many such lizards. But the old days were gone, and with them the old knowledge and the old abilities.

I'm not what I used to be, she thought. I'm something else, now — a 'wife,' created by man in the image of something I have never seen, something called 'woman.'

She thought about going back to her house in the settlement and of wrapping herself in a new skintight and then selecting the proper dress and shoes to make a good impression on the returning Jack; she thought about painting her face and putting rings on her fingers. She thought about burning and boiling good food to turn it into the unappetizing messes Jack favored and about killing the wide-eyed "coffee fish" to get the oil to make the mildly addictive drink the men called "coffee." She thought about watching Jack, and listening to him, always alert for what he might want, what he might ask, what he might do. Trying to anticipate him, to earn his praise and avoid his blows and harsh words. She thought about letting him "screw" her and about the ugly jewelry and noisome perfumes he brought her.

Susie began to cry, and the dust drank her tears as they fell. She didn't understand how this had all begun, how or why she had become a wife, but she could bear it no longer.

She wanted to be what she had been born to be — but she could not remember what that was. She only knew that she would be Susie no longer. She would be no man's wife.

"I remembered my name this morning," Susie said with quiet triumph. She looked around the room. Doris was staring down at her hands, twisting in her lap. Maggie looked half-asleep, and the other two wives — Susie didn't remember their names; she had simply gathered them up when she found them on the street — looked both bored and nervous.

"Don't you see?" Susie persisted. "If I could remember that, I'm sure I can remember other things in time. All of us can."

Maggie opened her eyes all the way. "And what would that do," she asked, "except make us discontented and restless, as you are?"

"What *good* ... why, if we all began to remember, we could live our lives again — our *own* lives. We wouldn't have to be wives, we could be ... ourselves."

"Could we," said Maggie sourly. "And do you think the men would watch us go? Do you think they'd let us walk out of their houses and out of their lives without stopping us? Don't you — you who talk about remembering — don't you remember how it was when the men came? Don't you remember the slaughter? Don't you remember just who became wives, and why? We, the survivors, became wives because the men wouldn't kill their wives, not if we kept them happy and believing we weren't the enemy. If we try to leave or change, they'll kill us like they've killed almost everything else in the world."

The others were silent, but Susie suspected they were letting Maggie speak for them.

"But we'll die," she said. "We'll die like this, as wives. We've lost our identities, but we can have them back. We can have our world back, and our lives, if we only take them. We're dying as a race and as a world, now. Being a wife is a living death, just a postponement of the end, that's all."

"Yes," said Maggie, irony hanging heavily from the word. "So?"

"So why do we have to let them do this to us? We can hide — we can run far away from the settlement and hide. Or, if we have to, we can fight back."

"That's not our way," said Maggie.

"Then what *is* our way?" Susie demanded. "Is it our way to let ourselves be destroyed? They've already killed our culture and our past — we have no 'way' anymore — we can't claim we do. All we are now is imitations, creatures molded by the men. And when the men leave — *if* the men leave — it will be the end for us. We'll have nothing left, and it will be too late to try to remember who we were."

"It's already too late," Maggie said. Susie was suddenly impressed by the way she spoke and held herself, and wondered if Maggie, this elderly and unloved wife she once had pitied, had once been a leader of her people.

"Can you remember why we did not hide or fight before?" Maggie asked. "Can you remember why we decided that the best thing for us was to change our ways, to do what you are now asking us to undo?"

Susie shook her head.

"Then go and try to remember. Remember that we made a choice when the men came, and now we must live with that choice. Remember that there was a good reason for what we did, a reason of survival. It is too late to change again. The old way is not waiting for our return, it is dead. Our world has been changed, and we could not stop it. The past is dead, but that is as it should be. We have new lives now. Forget your restlessness and go home. Be a good wife to Jack — he loves you in his way. Go home and be thankful for that."

"I can't," she said. She looked around the room, noticing how the eyes of the others fell before hers. So few of them had wanted to listen to

her, so few had dared venture out of their homes. Susie looked at Maggie as she spoke, meaning her words for all the wives. "They're killing us slowly," she said. "But we'll be just as dead in the end. I would rather die fighting, and take some of them with me."

"You may be ready to die now, but the rest of us are not," Maggie said. "But if you fought them, you would get not only your own death, but the deaths of all of us. If they see you snarling and violent, they will wake up and turn new eyes on the rest of us and see us not as their loving wives but as beasts, strangers, dangerous wild animals to be destroyed. They forget that we are different from them now; they are willing to forget and let us live as long as we keep them comfortable and act as wives should act."

"I can't fight them alone, I know that," Susie said. "But if you'll all join with me, we have a chance. We could take them by surprise, we could use their weapons against them. Why not? They don't expect a fight from us — we could win. Some of us would die, of course, but many of us would survive. More than that — we'd have our own lives, our own world, back again."

"You think your arguments are new," said Maggie. There was a trace of impatience in her usually calm voice. "But I can remember the old days, even if you can't. I remember what happened when the men first came, and I know what would happen if we angered them. Even if we managed somehow to kill all the men here, more men would come in their ships from the sky. And they would come to kill us for daring to fight them. Perhaps they'd simply drop fire on us, this time being sure to burn out all of us and all life on our world. Do you seriously ask us to bring about this certain destruction?"

Susie stared at her, feeling dim memories stir in response to her words. Fire from the sky, the burning, the killing.... But she couldn't be certain she remembered, and she would rather risk destruction than go back to playing wife again.

"We could hide," she said, pleading. "We could run away and hide in the wilderness. The men might think we had died — they'd forget about us soon, I'm certain. Even if they looked for us at first, we could hide. It's our world, and we know it as they don't. Soon we could live again as we used to, and forget the men."

"Stop this dreaming," Maggie said. "We can never live the way we used to — the old ways are gone, the old world is gone, and even your memories are gone, that's obvious. The only way we know how to live now is with the men, as their wives. Everything else is gone. We'd die of hunger and exposure if the men didn't track us down and kill us first."

"I may have forgotten the old ways, but you haven't. You could teach us."

"I remember enough to know what is gone, to know that we can't go back. Believe me. Think about it, Susie. Try—"

"Don't call me that!"

Her shout echoed in the silence. No one spoke. Susie felt the last of her hope drain out of her as she looked at them. They did not feel what she felt, and she would not be able to convince them. In silence, still, she left them, and went back to her own house.

She waited for them there, for them to come and kill her.

She knew that they would come; she knew she had to die. It was as Maggie had said: one renegade endangered them all. If one wife turned on one man, all the wives would be made to suffer. The look of love on their faces would change to a look of hatred, and the slaughter would begin again.

Susie felt no desire to try to escape, to hide from the other wives as she had suggested they all hide from the men. She had no wish to live alone; for good or ill, she was a part of her people, and she did not wish to endanger them nor to break away from them.

When they came, they came together, all the wives of the settlement, coming to act in concert so none should bear the guilt alone. They did not hate Susie, nor did she hate them, but the deadly work had to be done.

Susie walked outside, into their midst. To make it easier for them — to act with them, in a sense — Susie offered not the slightest resistance. She presented the weakest parts of her body to their hands and teeth, that her death should come more quickly. And as she died, feeling her body pressed, pounded and torn by the other wives, Susie did not mind the pain. She felt herself a part of them all, and she died content.

After her death, one of the extra wives took on Susie's name and moved into her house. She got rid of the spider's gigantic egg-case first thing — Jack might like his football-sized pet, but he wouldn't be pleased by the hundreds of pebble-sized babies that would come spilling out of the egg-case in a few months. Then she began to clean in earnest: a man deserved a clean house to come home to.

When, a few days later, the men returned from their fighting, Susie's man Jack found a spotless house, filled with the smells of his favorite foods cooking, and a smiling, sexily dressed wife.

"Would you like some dinner, dear?" she asked.

"Put it on hold," he said, grinning wolfishly. "Right now I'll take a cup of hot coffee — in bed — with you on the side."

She fluttered her false eyelashes and moved a little closer, so he could put his arm around her if he liked.

"Three tits and the best coffee in the universe," he said with satisfaction, squeezing one of the bound lumps of flesh on her chest. "With this to come home to, it kind of makes the whole war-thing worthwhile."

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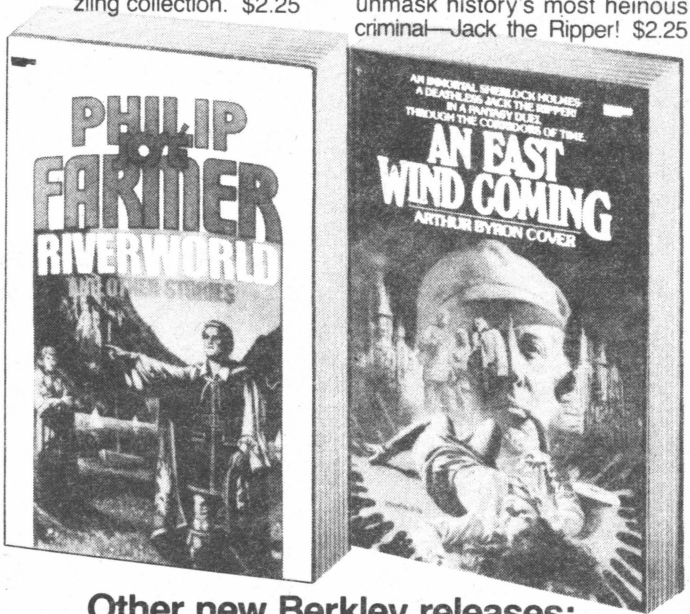

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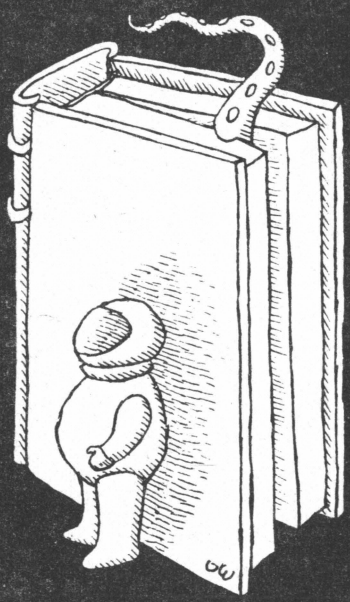


Self-Discovery, Vladimir Savchenko ,Macmillan, $9.95

The End of Summer: Science Fiction of the Fifties, Barry N. Malzberg and Bill Pronzini, editors. Ace, $1.95

The Secret Sea, Thomas F. Monteleone, Fawcett Popular Library, $1.75

I've figured out what it is about Soviet SF. What it is is that the inevitable pressure toward patent excellence is as much at work there as it is here. But whereas this has led English-speaking writers to evolve from "Modern" science fiction into conscious attempts to write the kind of story fostered by contemporary western academe, it has led Soviet authors to adopt the manner of the classical novelist/playwrights of the Russian nineteenth century.

If we look back some months, for instance, at Arkady and Boris Strugatsky's *Definitely Maybe,* which many praise though I do not, what we see is a stage play. Picture it produced by a road company in Kharkov. Knockabout actors stagger back and forth under the proscenium, delivering overblown lines in the jolly-pompous manner of the swacked academic, hoisting a glass at moments timed to arouse the risibilities of the audience. What have you got? Gogol, that's what you've got.

There's a couple of poods of difference between the sharpness of wit and

social comment in *The Inspector General* and the comparatively muffled thing one finds in *Definitely Maybe*. But the echoes are there; the archetypes are the same, the gestures are familiar.

Or consider — as you should — Vladimir Savchenko's *Self-Discovery*, which is a major science fiction novel few American readers will push themselves through. Why won't they make the effort? Because it's an effort, and most SF readers in the West are accustomed to considering a book "good" if it carries them along through smooth action, and "dull" if it forces them to read through long dialogue exchanges. This happens to be the approximate reverse of the situation in many other parts of the world, specifically in Slavic cultures.

Self-Discovery's SF premise is of big league caliber. Valentin Krivoshein, admittedly a bit of the mad scientist so beloved as a figure of fun in European fiction, finds a way to get a computer to duplicate people from information, plus a supply of the necessary chemicals vatted up by the servomechanisms it directs. Krivoshein is young, impetuous, still searching for his proper road in life, still buffeted about by his academic superiors (who are all pompous asses of various lengths of ears and tail), and not too sure about his love life. What more natural result than to have several Krivosheins, each equally headlong, but going off in different directions?

Promising? Indeed. Now set this tale in a culture which wants desperately to know where each of its inhabitants is at any time, and you get that added bit of relevant social extrapolation which is what SF is for. Should be dynamite. Is dynamite — Savchenko is no mean talent, and the further developments which spring from this opening situation are worked out with at least as much skill as you find in John Varley's *Titan* or the Robinsons' *Stardance*, to name two other recent SF books of considerable noteworthiness.

But many of you will probably never know that. Two questions arise: Why, and So What.

The why of it, we have already touched on to some extent. After an initial action sequence which matches anything even A.E. van Vogt ever sprang on us, except that it's in (translated) English, the major part of the story then turns to dialogue ... long expository passages. Some of them are excerpts from a journal and thus are even more verbose. During these verbal exercises, characters do move about physically and even experience little moments of quick activity, but they move only within the confines of a stage. There are scenic backdrops suggesting distant locales, and occasional noises and voices off, but what we are seeing is Chekhov. Out beyond the window is a cherry orchard, but the important stuff is what the characters say to each other. One Krivoshein goes to Vladivostok and then returns

to Russia, a distance it would take two years to walk, but he does it in no more steps than are required to reach center stage from the wings. Another goes from the banks of the Volga to Moscow and back again; a five minute intermission. Which is followed of course by the equivalent of maid-and-butler dialogue explaining what happened there.

It is dull, dull stuff, and so what is the point of attempting to forge through it? The world is full of good SF or (gasp!) other forms of entertainment, and, in truth, no one but a promotion copywriter has ever even attempted to prove that a book is really "must reading." Will reading *Self-Discovery* stop falling hair and arches? Will it affect property values or better equip you to confuse your enemies? Probably not; it's just a book — a work of art, better than most, not as good as some, I suppose; and in any case not essential to the living of a full, good life.

Well, I have pondered these points, not for the first time in connection with this particular book. And the essential thing is that it is not dull, but that it displays all the signs which readers in the West have been trained to recognize as the signs of dullness.* But what we over here have been trained to recognize as skillful storytelling is, over there, fraught with the signs of less than serious auctorial intention. A story told primarily through fluid action — the screenplay technique — may be enjoyed and can certainly be wildly popular, but it is what it is ... a diverting trifle. A true, serious artist of literature engages in discourse, through the mouths of his characters, or in satire, or both simultaneously; he is a commentator, and must be seen to be a commentator. There must be a certain artificiality in the fiction.

There is not really that much difference between what has happened in SF over here and in England and what has happened to it over there. We went through "Modern" science fiction in the 1940s; they were visibly going through it in the 1960s. (Early Strugatsky is remarkably like *Astounding* science fiction). When it became clear that this was a limited metier and that the limits had been reached, we and they became literary in the sense that we could be seen to be literary, in accordance with approved models. Only the models are somewhat different.

It *is* interesting, this process. Can we suppose that Soviet SF writers grew tired of being asked if they had brought their rayguns to the monthly meeting of the Writers' Guild? Were their books reviewed in an obscure special section tucked into the back pages of *Komsomolskaya Pravda?* Did it gall them to endure the presence of "real" writers, many incompetent except for their wisdom in choosing

*Which of course leads to the classical question: If a tree falls unobserved in a forest, is it exciting?

some "serious" format? Did they, almost unconsciously, shuffle their minds toward the production of work displaying the signs of artistic merit?

An interesting supposition. But what of our central point? Should you read *Self-Discovery* from cover to cover? Yes. Why? Because it is good SF. And because it is always of value to discover more about what you use to judge value.

Speaking of "Modern" science fiction, typical and rather good work of its waning days in the U.S. is to be found in *The End of Summer: Science Fiction of the Fifties*. Only two writers of the "Golden Age" are represented — Isaac Asimov with "Darwinian Pool Room" and Fritz Leiber with "Try and Change the Past." Old hands will recognize that neither story is classically Campbellian. Some of the others, by such authors as Damon Knight, Poul Anderson, C.M. Kornbluth, and Algis Budrys, are by writers whose *floreat* was postauric. Alfred Bester was never a Campbell man, James E. Gunn might have been an important Campbell discovery if he had come along five years sooner, Richard Wilson is, if classifiable, a Futurian*, and Laurence M. Janifer belongs to the very late '50s.

Ironically, most of the stories here come from *Astounding*. But their central commonality is that they are mostly stories by people who were ASF *readers* during the Golden Age; second-generation Campbellians, so to speak. Another feature is that not a one of these writers ever seriously pursued any profession except writing, granting that some of them were editors, some became academics, several worked at fiction outside SF, Dick Wilson was a newsman and then a PR man, and so forth. There is no one here, with the weak exception of Asimov,* who is the classical engineer-turned-fiction-hobbyist of SF's earlier generations. At the time most of these stories were written, most of these authors had no intention of being anything but SF writers.

We were the first of that kind and, speaking for myself, most of the deviations from Golden Age Campbellianism were not intentional. It was my earnest desire to some day be Don A. Stuart, and I judged my printed work by the degree to which it resembled what Stuart would have done with the same theme. In fact, most of my story situations evolved from an incessant round of talks with Campbell, although the idea for "The End of Summer" did not and it was written for

I prefer to think of Dick Wilson as an intelligent, perceptive, rather poetic person without much of a push to write much fiction, who would have written like Richard Wilson under any intellectual circumstances. His story here, "Love," from a 1952 F&SF, was an ornament to this publication's early days.

The modifier applies to the nature of the exception, not to the nature of the Good Doctor, to whom no modifiers apply.

another market. (However, ASF published it in the end.) I could not conceive, as a lad of 24 chronological years and the maturity of a preadolescent, that there was anything beyond "Modern" SF, nor did I put quotation marks around it.

I drifted into other ways of looking at the world. People like Damon Knight and Poul Anderson are intellectuals accustomed to analyzing such matters, and in that sense their work develops in consequence of thought-out decisions. Not me. Certainly not in those days. I found my way in the dark by bouncing off sharp objects, as I suppose I still do despite all. I wrote in accordance with what gave me a sense of having done something difficult and beautiful, and that sense changed rather constantly. In due course I looked around, and not only was I no longer a "Modern" SF writer by even the loosest definition but there was no longer only one general definition of what was good SF. Now I was throwing ideas at Campbell, and they were landing with dull thuds. Other editors seemed to respond better.

And for one reason or another, most of the writers in this anthology drifted away from ASF in the fifties or early sixties. It was, in fact, the End of Summer, and as I write this I find the title so apt that I am no longer incensed at Malzberg and Pronzini for appropriating it without so much as a by your leave.*

The stories are stories from a literature in transition ... toward literature. They include such classics as Knight's "The Analogues," Anderson's "Sam Hall," Bester's "Disappearing Act," and Kornbluth's "The Altar at Midnight."

There are the required editorial prefaces, notes, and afterwords. The editors think that Wilson is the author of "The Tunnel Under the World" by Frederik Pohl, that my story "Wall of Crystal, Eye of Night" (title by Frederik Pohl) is called something else, and Bill Pronzini, honest soul, is clearly unaware that Campbell had a lifelong flirtation with witchcraft, culminating in Psionics. In other words, once again the scholarly material in one of these anthologies is unreliable except as a guide to the quirkiness of memory and the advisability of avoiding the appearance of research when research has not been done.

But I think the stories are good reading — great reading, some of them — and I think the editors have done us all a service. Even me. I look back — I'm forty-eight at this writing, and not through; no, not through — and it was half a lifetime ago I sat at a typewriter in Fred Pohl's house from noon 'til just in time to miss the last train out of Red

**There will, I think, be a collection of my earlier novelettes sometime in 1980 or '81. It will probably be called "The Executioner," or perhaps "We Are Here," or just possibly "Death March," unless I call it by some other of my story titles. This note serves notice.*

Bank, and I heard a midnight local. Halt, passenger! Or, putting it another way, how many miles we've come, and not yet slept.

Every so often a book arrives which is perfect of its kind. Such a book is Thomas Monteleone's *The Secret Sea*.

If it is true that thorns are essential to the perfection of roses, it is equally true that for something to be perfectly awful, it must contain a fatal flaw of excellence. That essential flaw in this case is the idea, which is that there are time fluxgates opening and closing at random, leading to parallel Earths, and that somewhere Captain Nemo and Robur the Conqueror are engaged in a duel to the death. Having devoted this much energy to thinking, Monteleone, like the genius he is, cuts short its practice and never returns to it. With instinctive faith, he knows that any additional intelligence injected into his work would have dulled it toward mediocrity.

His viewpoint character, an incredible smirking nebbish,* stumbles into the secret and is rescued by Nemo after Robur sinks the yacht in which he has penetrated a gate. Most of the story is set at sea, as one might expect.

In a masterstroke, Monteleone has made his character not only illiterate — he describes a vessel on calm waters as lying there "restively" — but totally ignorant of nautical appurtenances. For example, he thinks "brightwork" has something to do with metal, and believes that destroyers have gunsights on their cannon barrels. To be impartial, Monteleone also has Nemo vitally interested in transponders as aids to navigation, since our hero has brought one along on his trip into worlds without radio. Nemo, much impressed by the hero's intelligence and sophistication, also takes him deep down into an undersea trench, where, from a lost Lemurian city, Nemo learned the secret of building a submarine capable of reaching the lost Lemurian city. Nemo also plays a Bach cantata on the organ — or, to be fair, Monteleone's character says he does.

There is a fair amount of military action. Nemo, for instance, has militia teams among his crew, and one presumes they go home to their families every night. The hero — who often expresses delight at being a soldier of fortune, but has no military training and no prospective employer, finally produces a hunting rifle which, with its telescopic sight, has been lying in the bottom of a trunk since he brought it home new from the store. It has never been fired. With that weapon, instantly borrowed, the hero's companion unerringly picks off members of Robur's deck gun crew some hundreds of yards away while both submarines are tossing on the surface.

**He drinks Amoretto by the case and feels obliged to harbor carnal thoughts about his housekeeper.*

One might almost suspect that Monteleone does not know the meaning of half the terms he tosses into a story, does not visualize the objects and actions he catalogues, and has serious misapprehensions of many common English words. And that his capacity for logic is seriously impaired. But this is not possible in a John Campbell Award nominee, nor in someone who has been frequently touted as one of SF's brightest new stars. No, the alternative is that Monteleone is consciously, devotedly exploring a mode of SF writing that has lain neglected since Hall & Flint's *The Blind Spot*, Stanley Mullen's *Kinsmen of The Dragon*, and Jerry Sohl's *Point Ultimate*.

The virtues of these famous predecessors were meticulously detailed in the critical work of Damon Knight. It has been my hope, following in Knight's footsteps, that some day I would be privileged to unearth a similar find. Now that the day has come, I feel a little sadness that it can never again come for the first time for me. Reading *The Secret Sea* has left me weak with pride. My strength barely suffices for the necessary task of nominating Monteleone to the 1979 Damon Award, and for entering *The Secret Sea* in the lists as this entire decade's worthiest candidate for the Vargo Statten Memorial Hall of Fame. There, as you know, certain works are reverently placed and then ceremoniously walled up for all time. Young writers are brought to this ediface from time to time, and allowed to sharpen their fingertips on the cement.

ABOUT THE COVER: 'Forced Landing' by David Hardy (from a painting in his book THE NEW CHALLENGE OF THE STARS, Mitchell Beazley UK/Rand McNally USA, 1978). A spacecraft undergoes repairs on a planetoid in a strange star-system — an orange giant with a Black Hole as a companion. Material from the giant star is drawn into this cosmic whirlpool; the environment is saturated by deadly X-radiation, which is why repairs are made only by robots.

Linz, Austria, 1898

The boy could not sleep. It was hot and he had been sick for so long. All night his head had throbbed. Finally he sat up and managed to get out of bed. He went down the stairs without stumbling.

Elated at his progress, he slipped from the house without waking either his mother or father. His goal was the river bank. He had not been there in a month.

He had always considered the river bank his own. No one else in the family ever went there. He liked to set his feet in the damp ground and make patterns. It was like a picture, and the artist in him appreciated the primitive beauty.

Heat lightning jetted across the sky. He sat down on a fallen log and picked at the bark as he would a scab. He could feel the log imprint itself on his backside through the thin cotton pajamas. He wished — not for the first time — that he could be allowed to sleep without his clothes.

The silence and heat enveloped him. He closed his eyes and dreamed of sleep, but his head still throbbed. He had never been out at night by himself before. The slight touch of fear was both pleasure and pain.

He thought about that fear, probing it like a loose tooth, now to feel the ache and now to feel the sweetness,

Jane Yolen's latest book is a collection of fantasy stories titled DREAM WEAVER (Collins). It is illustrated by Michael Hague and is a beautiful book in every way.

Angelica

BY

JANE YOLEN

when the faint came upon him and he tumbled slowly from the log. There was nothing but river bank before him, nothing to slow his descent, and he rolled down the slight hill and into the river, not waking till the shock of the water hit him.

It was cold and unpleasantly muddy. He thrashed about. The sour water got in his mouth and made him gag.

Suddenly someone took his arm and pulled him up onto the bank, dragged him up the slight incline.

He opened his eyes and shook his head to get the lank, wet hair from his face. He was surprised to find that his rescuer was a girl, about his size, in a white cotton shift. She was not muddied at all from her efforts. His one thought before she heaved him over the top of the bank and helped him back onto the log was that she must be quite marvelously strong.

"Thank you," he said, when he was seated again, and then did not know where to go from there.

"You are welcome." Her voice was low, her speech precise, almost old-fashioned in its carefulness. He realized that she was not a girl but a small woman.

"You fell in," she said.

"Yes."

She sat down beside him and looked into his eyes, smiling. He wondered how he could see so well when the moon was behind her. She seemed to light up from within like some kind of lamp. Her outline was a golden glow and her blonde hair fell in straight lengths to her shoulder.

"You may call me Angelica," she said.

"Is that your name?"

She laughed. "No. No, it is not. And how perceptive of you to guess."

"Is it an alias?" He knew about such things. His father was a customs official and told the family stories at the table about his work.

"It is the name I...." she hesitated for a moment and looked behind her. Then she turned and laughed again. "It is the name I travel under."

"Oh."

"You could not pronounce my real name," she said.

"Could I try?"

"Pistias Sophia!" said the woman and she stood as she named herself. She seemed to shimmer and grow at her own words, but the boy thought that might be the fever in his head, though he hadn't a headache anymore.

"Pissta...." he could not stumble around the name. There seemed to be something blocking his tongue. "I guess I better call you Angelica for now," he said.

"For now," she agreed.

He smiled shyly at her. "My name is Addie," he said.

"I know."

"How do you know? Do I look like an Addie? It means...."

"Noble hero," she finished for him.

"How do you know *that?*"

"I am very wise," she said. "And names are important to me. To all ... of us. Destiny is in names." She smiled, but her smile was not so pleasant any longer. She started to reach for his hand, but he drew back.

"You shouldn't boast," he said. "About being wise. It's not nice."

"I am not boasting." She found his hand and held it in hers. Her touch was cool and infinitely soothing. She reached over with the other hand and put it first palm, then back to his forehead. She made a "tch" against her teeth and scowled. "Your guardian should be Flung Over. I shall have to speak to Uriel about this. Letting you out with such a fever."

"Nobody *let* me out," said the boy. "I let myself out. No one knows I am here — except you."

"Well, there is one who *should* know where you are. And he shall certainly hear from me about this." She stood up and was suddenly much taller than the boy. "Come. Back to the house with you. You should be in bed." She reached down the front of her white shift and brought up a silver bottle on a chain. "You must take a sip of this now. It will help you sleep."

"Will you come back with me?" the boy asked after taking a drink.

"Just a little way." She held his hand as they went.

He looked behind once to see his footprints in the rain-soft earth. They marched in an orderly line behind him. He could not see hers at all.

"Do you believe, little Addie?" Her voice seemed to come from a long way off, further even than the hills.

"Believe in what?"

"In God. Do you believe that he directs all our movements?"

"I sing in the church choir," he said, hoping it was the proof she wanted.

"That will do for now," she said.

There was a fierceness in her voice that made him turn in the muddy furrow and look at her. She towered above him, all white and gold and glowing. The moon haloed her head, and behind her, close to her shoulders, he saw something like wings, feathery and waving. He was suddenly desperately afraid.

"What are you?" he whispered.

"What do you think I am?" she asked, and her face looked carved in stone, so white her skin and black the features.

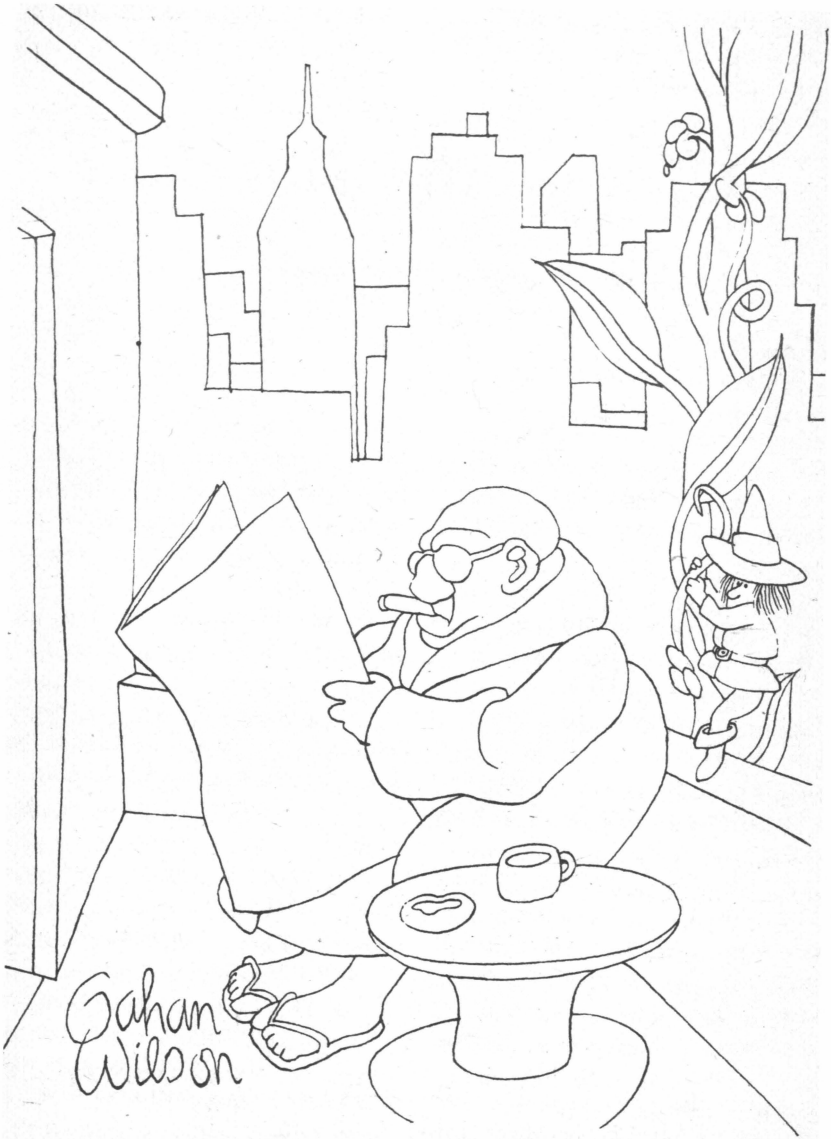
"Are you ... the angel of death?" he asked and then looked down before she answered. He could not bear to watch her talk.

"For you, I am an angel of life," she said. "Did I not save you?"

"What kind of angel are you?" he whispered, falling to his knees before her.

She lifted him up and cradled him in her arms. She sang him a lullaby in a language he did not know. "I told you in the beginning who I am," she murmured to the sleeping boy. "I am Pistias Sophia, angel of wisdom and faith. The one who put the serpent into the garden, little Adolf. But I was only following orders."

Her wings unfurled behind her. She pumped them once, twice, and then the great wind they commanded lifted her into the air. She flew without a sound to the Hitler house and left the boy sleeping, feverless, in his bed.


Gahan
Wilson

Orson Scott Card is a prolific young writer who won the 1978 John W. Campbell Award as best new writer; his latest novel is HOT SLEEP. Here, Mr. Card takes us to a bizarre party of the future, at which the main entertainment is time-travel.

Closing the Timelid

BY

ORSON SCOTT CARD

Gemini lay back in his cushioned chair and slid the box over his head. It was pitch-black inside, except the light coming from down around his shoulders.

"All right, I'm pulling us over," said Orion. Gemini braced himself. He heard the click of a switch (or of someone's teeth clinking shut in surprise?), and the timelid closed down on him, shut out the light, and green and orange and another, nameless color beyond purple danced at the edges of his eyes.

And he stood, abruptly, in thick grass at the side of a road. A branch full of leaves brushed heavily against his back with the breeze. He moved forward, looking for —

The road, just as Orion had said. About a minute to wait, then.

Gemini slid awkwardly down the embankment, covering his hands with dirt. To his surprise it was moist and soft, clinging. He had expected it to be hard. That's what you get for believing pictures in the encyclopedia, he thought. And the ground gave gently under his feet.

He glanced behind him. Two furrows down the bank showed his path. I have made a mark in this world after all, he thought. It'll make no difference, but there is a sign of me in this time when men could still leave signs.

Then dazzling lights far up the road. The truck was coming. Gemini sniffed the air. He couldn't smell anything — and yet the books all stressed how smelly gasoline engines had been. Perhaps it was too far.

Then the lights swerved away. The curve. In a moment it would be here, turning just the wrong way on the curving mountain road until it would be too late.

Gemini stepped out into the road, a shiver of anticipation running through him. Oh, he had been under the timelid several times before. Like everyone, he had seen the major events. Michelangelo doing the Sistine Chapel. Handel writing the *Messiah* (everyone strictly forbidden to hum *any* tunes). The premiere performance of *Love's Labour's Lost*. And a few offbeat things that his hobby of history had sent him to: the assassination of John F. Kennedy, a politician; the meeting between Lorenzo de Medici and the King of Naples; Joan of Arc's death by fire — grisly.

And now, at last, to experience something in the past. Experience something he was utterly unable to live through in the present.

Death.

And the truck careened around the corner, the lights sweeping the far embankment and then swerving in, brilliantly lighting Gemini for one instant before he leaped up and in, toward the glass (how horrified the face of the driver, how bright the lights, how harsh the metal) and then

agony. Ah, agony in a tearing, smashing that made him feel, for the first time, every particle of his body as it screamed (silently, crunchingly) in pain. Bones shouting as they splintered like old wood under a sledge hammer. Flesh and fat slithering like jelly up and down and sideways. Blood skittering madly over the surface of the truck.

Eyes popping open as the brain and skull crushed forward, demanding to be let through. No no no no no, cried Gemini inside the last fragment of his mind. No no no no no, make it stop!

And green and orange and more-than-purple dazzled the sides of his vision. A twist of his insides, a shudder of his mind, and he was back, snatched from death by the inexorable mathematics of the timelid. He felt his whole, unmarred body rushing back, felt in every particle, yes, as clearly as when it had been hit by the truck, but now with pleasure (the absence of pain), pleasure so complete that he didn't even notice the mere orgasm his reproductive organs added to the general symphony of joy.

The timelid lifted. The box was slid back. And Gemini lay gasping, sweating, yet laughing and crying and longing to sing.

What was it like? the others asked eagerly, crowding around. What is it like, what is it, is it like —

"It's like nothing. It's —" Gemini had no words. "It's like everything God promised the righteous and Satan promised the sinners rolled into one." He tried to explain about the delicious (what a weak word) agony, the joy passing all joys, the —

"Is it better than fairy dust?" asked one man, young and shy, and Gemini realized that the reason he was so retiring was that he was undoubtedly dusting tonight.

"After this," Gemini said, "dusting is no better than going to the bathroom."

Everyone laughed, chattered, volunteered to be next ("Orion knows how to throw a party"), as Gemini left the chair and the timelid and found Orion a few meters away at the controls.

"Did you like the ride?" Orion asked, smiling gently at his friend.

Gemini shook his head. "Never again," he said.

Orion looked disturbed for a moment, worried. "That bad for you?"

"Not bad. Strong. I'll never forget it. I've never felt so — alive, Orion. Who would have thought it. Death being so —"

"Bright," Orion said, supplying the word. His hair hung loosely and clean over his forehead — he shook it out of his eyes. "The second time is better. You have more time to appreciate the dying."

Gemini shook his head. "Once is enough for me. Life will never be bland again." He laughed. "Well, time for somebody else, yes?"

Harmony had already lain down on the chair. She had removed her clothing, much to the titillation of the other party goers, saying, "I want nothing between me and the cold metal." Orion made her wait, though, while he corrected the setting. While he worked, Gemini thought of a question. "How many times have you done this, Orion?"

"Often enough," the man answered, studying the holographic model of the timeclip. And Gemini wondered then if death could not, perhaps, be as addictive as fairy dust, or cresting, or pitching in.

Rod Bingley finally brought the truck to a halt, gasping back the shock and horror. The eyes were still resting there in the gore on the windshield. Only they seemed real. The rest was road-splashing, mud flipped by the weather and the tires.

Rod flung open the door and ran around the front of the truck, hoping to do — what? There was no hope that the man was alive. But perhaps some identification. A nuthouse freak, turned loose in weird white clothes to wander the mountain roads? But there was no hospital near here.

And there was no body on the front of his truck.

He ran his hand across the shiny metal, the clean windshield. A few bugs on the grille.

Had this dent in the metal been there before? Rod couldn't remember. He looked all around the truck. Not a sign of anything. Had he imagined it?

He must have. But it seemed so real. And he hadn't drunk anything, hadn't taken any no-doze — no trucker in his right mind *ever* took stay-awakes. He shook his head. He felt creepy. *Watched.* He glanced back over his shoulder. Nothing but the trees bending slightly in the wind. Not even an animal. Some moths already gathering in the headlights. That's all.

Ashamed of himself for being

afraid at nothing, he nevertheless jumped into the cab quickly and slammed the door shut behind him and locked it. The key turned in the starter. And he had to force himself to look up through that windshield. He half expected to see those eyes again.

The windshield was cleared. And because he had a deadline to meet, he pressed on. The road curved away infinitely before him.

He drove more quickly, determined to get back to civilization before he had another hallucination.

And as he rounded a curve, his lights sweeping the trees on the far side of the road, he thought he glimpsed a flash of white to the right, in the middle of the road —

The lights caught her just before the truck did, a beautiful girl, naked and voluptuous and eager. Madly eager, standing there, legs broadly apart, arms wide. She dipped, then jumped up as the truck caught her, even as Rod smashed his foot into the brake, swerved the truck to the side. Because he swerved she ended up, not centered, but caught on the left side, directly in front of Rod, one of her arms flapping crazily around the edge of the cab, the hand rapping on the glass of the side window. She, too, splashed.

Rod whimpered as the truck again came to a halt. The hand had dropped loosely down to the woman's side, so it no longer blocked the door. Rod got out quickly, swung himself around the open door, and touched her.

Body warm. Hand real. He touched the buttock nearest him. It gave softly, sweetly, but under it Rod could feel that the pelvis was shattered. And then the body slopped free of the front of the truck, slid to the oil-and-gravel surface of the road

and disappeared.

Rod took it calmly for a moment. She fell from the front of the truck, and then there was nothing there. Except a faint (and new, definitely new!) crack in the windshield, there was no sign of her.

Rodney screamed.

The sound echoed from the cliff on the other side of the chasm. The trees seemed to swell the sound, making it louder among the trunks. An owl hooted back.

And finally Rod got back into the truck and drove again, slowly, but erratically, wondering what, please God tell me what the hell's the matter with my mind.

Harmony rolled off the couch, panting and shuddering violently.

"Is it better than sex?" one of the men asked her. One who had doubtless tried, but failed, to get into her bed.

"It *is* sex," she answered. "But it's better than sex with *you*."

Everyone laughed. What a wonderful party. Who could top this? The other hosts and hostesses despaired, even as they clamored for a chance at the timelid.

But the crambox opened then, buzzing with the police override. "We're busted!" somebody shrieked gaily, and everyone laughed and clapped.

The policeman was young, and she seemed unused to the forceshield, walking awkwardly as she stepped into the middle of the happy room.

"Orion Overweed?" she asked, looking around.

"I," answered Orion, from where he sat at the controls, Gemini beside him, looking wary.

"Officer Mercy Manwool, Los Angeles Timesquad."

"Oh, no," somebody muttered.

"You have no jurisdiction here," Orion said.

"We have a reciprocal enforcement agreement with the Canadian Chronospot Corporation. And we have reason to believe you are interfering with timetracks in the eighth decade of the twentieth century." She smiled curtly. "We have witnessed two suicides, and by making a careful check of your recent use of your private timelid, we have found several others. Apparently you have a new way to pass the time, Mr. Overweed."

Orion shrugged. "It's merely a passing fancy. But I am not interfering with timetracks."

She walked over to the controls and reached unerringly for the cold-switch. Orion immediately snagged her wrist with his hand. Gemini was surprised to see how the muscles of his forearm bulged with strength. Had he been playing some kind of *sport* (just like Orion, of course, behaving like one of the lower orders) —

"A warrant," Orion said.

She withdrew her arm. "I have an official complaint from the Timesquad's observation team. That is sufficient. I must interrupt your activity."

"According to law," Orion said, "you must show cause. Nothing we have done tonight will in any way change history."

"That truck is not robot driven," she said, her voice growing strident. "There's a man in there. You are changing his life."

Orion only laughed. "Your observers haven't done their homework. I have. Look.'

He turned to the controls and played a speeded-up sequence, focused always on the shadow image of a truck speeding down a mountain road. The truck made turn after turn, and since the hologram was centered perpetually on the truck, it made the surrounding scenery dance past in a jerky rush, swinging left and right, up and down as the truck banked for turns or struck bumps.

And then, near the bottom of the chasm between mountains, the truck got on a long, slow curve that led across the river on a slender bridge.

But the bridge wasn't there.

And the truck, unable to stop, skidded and swerved off the end of the truncated road, hung in the air over the chasm, then toppled, tumbled,

banging against first this side, then that side of the ravine. It wedged between two outcroppings of rock more than thirty feet above the water. The cab of the truck was crushed completely.

"He dies," Orion said. "Which means that anything we do with him before his death and after his last possible contact with another human being is legal. According to the code."

The policeman turned red with anger.

"I saw your little games with airplanes and sinking ships. But this is cruelty, Mr. Overweed."

"Cruelty to a dead man is, by definition, not cruelty. I don't change history. And Mr. Rodney Bingley is dead, has been for more than four centuries. I am doing no harm to any living man. And you owe me an apology."

Officer Mercy Manwool shook her head. "I think you're as bad as the Romans, who threw people into circuses to be torn by lions —"

"I know about the Romans," Orion said coldly, "and I know whom they threw. In this case, however, I am throwing my friends. And retrieving them very safely through the full retrieval and reassembly feature of the Hamburger Safety Device built inextricably into every timelid. And you owe me an apology."

She drew herself erect. "The Los Angeles Timesquad officially apologizes for making improper allegations about the activities of Orion Overweed."

Orion grinned. "Not exactly heartfelt, but I accept it. And while you're here, may I offer you a drink?"

"Nonalcoholic," she said instantly and then looked away from him at Gemini, who was watching her with sad but intent eyes. Orion went for glasses and to try to find something nonalcoholic in the house. Officer Manwool continued watching Gemini.

"You performed superbly," Gemini said.

"And you, Gemini," she said softly (voicelessly), "were the first subject to travel."

Gemini shrugged. "Nobody said anything about my not taking part."

She turned her back on him. Orion came back with the drink. He laughed. "Coca-cola," he said. "I had to import it all the way from Brazil. They still drink it there, you know. Original recipe." She took it and drank.

Orion sat back at the controls.

"Next!" he shouted, and a man and woman jumped on the couch together, laughing as the others slid the box over their head.

Rod had lost count. At first he had tried to count the curves. Then the white lines in the road, until a new asphalt surface covered them. Then stars. But the only number that stuck in his head was nine.

9

NINE

Oh God, he prayed silently, what is happening to me, what is happening to

me, change this night, let me wake up, whatever is happening to me make it STOP.

A grey-haired man was standing beside the road, urinating. Rod slowed to a crawl. Slowed until he was barely moving. Crept past the man so slowly that if he had even twitched Rod could have stopped the truck. But the grey-haired man only finished, dropped his robe, and waved gaily to Rod. At that moment Rod heaved a sigh of relief and sped up.

Dropped his robe. The man was wearing a robe. Except for this gory night men did not wear *robes*. And at that moment he caught through his side mirror the white flash of the man throwing himself under the rear tires. Rod slammed in the brake and leaned his head against the steering wheel and wept aloud, wracking sobs that shook the whole cab, that set the truck rocking slightly on its heavy-duty springs.

For in every death Rod saw the face of his wife after the traffic accident (not my fault!) that had killed her instantly and yet left Rod to walk away from the wreck without a scratch on him.

I was not supposed to live, he thought at the time, and thought now. I was not supposed to live, and now God is telling me that I am a murderer with my wheels and my motor and my steering wheel.

And he looked up from the wheel.

* * *

Orion was still laughing at Hector's account of how he fooled the truck driver into speeding up.

"He thought I was conking into the bushes at the side of the road!" he howled again, and Orion burst into a fresh peal of laughter at his friend.

"And then a backflip into the road, under his tires! How I wish I could see it!" Orion shouted. The other guests were laughing, too. Except Gemini and Officer Manwool.

"You can see it, of course," Manwool said softly. Her words penetrated through the noise, and Orion shook his head. "Only on the holo. And that's not very good, not a good image at all."

"It'll do," she said. And Gemini, behind Orion, murmured, "Why not, Orry?"

The sound of the old term of endearment was startling to Orion, but oddly comforting. Did Gemini, then, treasure those memories as Orion did? Orion turned slowly, looked into Gemini's sad, deep eyes. "Would you like to see it on the holo?" he asked.

Gemini only smiled. Or, rather, twitched his lips into that momentary piece of a smile that Orion knew from so many years before (only forty years, but forty years was back into my childhood, when I was only thirty and Gemini was — what? — fifteen. Helot to my Spartan; Slav to my Hun) and Orion smiled back. His fingers danced over the controls.

Many of the guests gathered

around, though others, bored with the coming and going in the timelid, however extravagant it might be as a party entertainment ("enough energy to light all of Mexico for an hour" said the one with the giddy laugh who had already promised her body to four men and a woman and was now giving it to another who would not wait), occupied themselves with something decadent and delightful and distracting in the darker corners of the room.

The holo flashed on. The truck crept slowly down the road, its holographic image flickering.

"Why does it do that?" someone asked, and Orion answered mechanically, "There aren't as many chronons as there are photons, and they have a lot more area to cover."

And then the image of a man flickering by the side of the road. Everyone laughed as they realized it was Hector, conking away with all his heart. Then another laugh as he dropped his robe and waved. The truck sped up, and then a backflip by the man figure, under the wheels. The body flopped under the doubled back tires, then lay limp and shattered in the road as the truck came to a stop only a few meters ahead. A few moments later, the body disappeared.

"Brilliantly done, Hector!" Orion shouted again. "Better than you told it!" Everyone applauded in agreement, and Orion reached over to flip off the holo. But Officer Manwool stopped him.

"Don't turn it off, Mr. Overweed," she said. "Freeze it, and move the image."

Orion looked at her for a moment, then shrugged and did as she said. He expanded the view, so that the truck shrank. And then he suddenly stiffened, as did the guests close enough and interested enough to notice. Not more than ten meters in front of the truck was the ravine, where the broken bridge waited.

"He can see it," somebody gasped. And officer Manwool slipped a lovecord around Orion's wrist, pulled it taut, and fastened the loose end to her workbelt.

"Orion Overweed, you're under arrest. That man can see the ravine. He will not die. He was brought to a stop in plenty of time to notice the certain death ahead of him. He will live — with a knowledge of whatever he saw tonight. And already you have altered the future, the present, and all the past from his time until the present."

And for the first time in all his life, Orion realized that he had reason to be afraid.

"But that's a capital offense," he said lamely.

"I only wish it included torture," Officer Manwool said heatedly, "the kind of torture you put that poor truck driver through!"

And then she started to pull Orion out of the room.

* * *

Rod Bingley lifted his eyes from the steering wheel and stared uncomprehendingly at the road ahead. The truck's lights illuminated the road clearly for many meters. And after five seconds or thirty minutes or some other length of time that was both brief and infinite, he did not understand what it meant.

He got out of the cab and walked to the edge of the ravine, looking down. For a few minutes he felt relieved.

Then he walked back to the truck and counted the wounds in the cab. The dents on the grille and the smooth metal. Three cracks in the windshield.

He walked back to where the man had been urinating. Sure enough, though there was no urine, there was an indentation in the ground where the hot liquid had struck, speckles in the dirt where it had splashed.

And in the fresh asphalt, laid, surely, that morning (but then why no warning signs on the bridge? Perhaps the wind tonight blew them over), his tire tracks showed clearly. Except for a man width stretch where the left rear tires had left no print at all.

And Rodney remembered the dead, smashed faces, especially the bright and livid eyes among the blood and broken bone. They all looked like Rachel to him, Rachel who had wanted him to — to what? Couldn't he even remember the dreams anymore?

He got back into the cab and gripped the steering wheel. His head spun and ached, but he felt himself on the verge of a marvelous conclusion, a simple answer to all of this. There was evidence, yes, even though the bodies were gone, there was evidence that he had hit those people. He had not imagined it.

They must, then, be (he stumbled over the word, even in his mind, laughed at himself as he concluded:) angels. Jesus sent them, he knew it, as his mother had taught him, destroying angels teaching him the death that he had brought to his wife while daring, himself, to walk away scatheless.

It was time to even up the debt.

He started the engine and drove, slowly, deliberately toward the end of the road. And as the front tires bumped off and a sickening moment passed when he feared the truck would be too heavy for the driving wheels to push along the ground, he clasped his hands in front of his face and prayed, aloud: "Forward!"

And then the truck slid forward, tipped downward, hung in the air, and fell. His body pressed into the back of the truck. His clasped hands struck his face. He meant to say, "Into thy hands I commend my spirit," but instead he screamed, "no no no no no," in an infinite negation of death that, after all, didn't do a bit of good once he was committed into the gentle, unyielding hands of the ravine. They clasped and enfolded him, pressed him tightly, closed his eyes and pillowed his head between the gas tank and the granite.

* * *

"Wait," Gemini said.

"Why the hell should we?" Officer Manwool said, stopping at the door with Orion following docilely on the end of the lovecord. Orion, too, stopped, and looked at the policeman with adoring eyes.

"Give the man a break," Gemini said.

"He doesn't deserve one," she said. "And neither do you."

"I say give the man a break. At least wait for the proof."

She snorted. "What more proof does he need, Gemini? A signed statement from Rodney Bingley that Orion Overweed is a bloody hitler?"

Gemini smiled and spread his hands. "We didn't actually *see* what Rodney did next, did we? Maybe he was struck by lightning two hours later, before he saw anybody — I mean, you're required to show that damage did happen. And I don't feel any change to the present —"

"You know that changes aren't felt. They aren't even known, since we wouldn't remember anything other than how things actually happened!"

"At least," Gemini said, "watch what happens and see whom Rodney tells."

So she led Orion back to the controls, and at her instructions Orion lovingly started the holo moving again.

And they all watched as Rodney Bingley walked to the edge of the ravine, then walked back to the truck, drove it to the edge and over into the chasm, and died on the rocks.

When it was over, Hector hooted in joy. "He died after all! Orion didn't change one damned thing!"

Manwool turned on him in disgust. "You make me sick," she said.

"The man's dead," Hector said in glee. "So get that stupid string off Orion or I'll sue for a writ of —"

"Go pucker in a corner," she said, and several of the women pretended to be shocked. Manwool loosened the lovecord and slid it off Orion's wrist. Immediately he turned on her, snarling. "Get out of here! Get out!"

He followed her to the door of the crambox. Gemini was not the only one who wondered if he would hit her. But Orion kept his control, and she left unharmed.

Orion stumbled back from the crambox rubbing his arms as if with soap, as if trying to scrape them clean. "That thing ought to be outlawed. I actually loved her. I actually loved that stinking, bloody, son-of-a-bitching cop!" And he shuddered so violently that several of the guests laughed and the spell was broken.

Orion managed a smile and the guests went back to amusing themselves. With the sensitivity that even the insensitive and jaded sometimes exhibit, they left him alone at the controls of the timelid with Gemini.

Gemini reached out and brushed a strand of hair out of Orion's eyes. "Get a comb someday," he said. Orion smil-

ed and gently stroked Gemini's hand. Gemini slowly removed his hand from Orion's reach. "Sorry, Orry," Gemini said, "but not anymore."

Orion pretended to shrug. "I know," he said. "Not even for old times' sake." He laughed softly. "That stupid string made me love her. They shouldn't even do that to criminals."

He played with the controls of the holo, which was still on. The image zoomed in; the cab of the truck grew larger and larger. The chronons were too scattered and the image began to blur and fade. Orion stopped it.

By ducking and looking through a window into the cab, Orion and Gemini could see exactly where the outcropping of rock crushed Rod Bingley's head against the gas tank. Details, of course, were indecipherable.

"I wonder," Orion finally said, "if it's any different."

"What's any different?" Gemini asked.

"Death. If it's any different when you don't wake up right afterward."

"The one thing left that you haven't tried, isn't it?"

"How could I do it?" Orion asked, half seriously (only half?). "They'd only clone me back."

"Simple enough," Gemini said. "All you need is a friend who's willing to turn off the machine while you're on the far end. Nothing is left. And you can take care of the suicide yourself."

"Suicide," Orion said with a smile. "Trust you to know the technical term."

And that night as the other guests slept off the alcohol, Orion lay on the chair and pulled the box over his head. And with Gemini's last kiss on his cheek and Gemini's left hand on the controls, Orion said, "All right. Pull me over."

After a few minutes Gemini was alone in the room with a disconnected machine and an empty chair. The crambox buzzed with the police override, and Mercy Manwool stepped out. She went straight to Gemini, embraced him. He kissed her, hard.

"Done?" she asked.

He nodded.

"The bastard didn't deserve to live," she said.

Gemini shook his head. "You didn't get your justice, my dear Mercy."

"Isn't he dead?"

"Oh, yes, that. Well, it's what he wanted, you know. I told him what I planned. And he asked me to do it."

She looked at him, angrily. "You would. And then tell me about it, so I wouldn't get any joy out of this at all."

Gemini only shrugged.

Manwool turned away from him, walked to the timelid. She ran her fingers along the box. Then she detached her laser from her belt and slowly melted the timelid until it was a mass of hot plastic on a metal stand. The few metal components had even melted a little, bending to be just a little out of shape.

"Screw the past anyway," she said. "Why can't it stay where it belongs?"

This, the second part of Robert Silverberg's marvelous new novel, is the Book of the Metamorphs, the strange shapeshifters who are native to the planet Majipoor. If you missed part one, the author's synopsis will bring you quickly up to date. Or, send us $2.00, and we'll rush you a copy of the November issue.

Lord Valentine's Castle

BY

ROBERT SILVERBERG

SYNOPSIS OF PART ONE: The giant world of Majipoor, settled by colonists from earth in the early years of interstellar travel, is an airy and pleasing place, short of heavy elements and therefore having light gravitational pull despite its enormous mass. On its three enormous continents food is abundant, the environment is clean and beautiful, and a population of many billions lives peacefully and happily. Though humans are the dominant stock, Majipoor is the home also of large numbers of six or seven of the galaxy's other intelligent species, as well as its own native race, the Metamorphs or Shapeshifters, now reduced to a minority and largely confined to a reservation.

This vast, wealthy, and diverse planet is governed by regional bureaucracies that owe allegiance to a pair of ruling figures: the Pontifex, an aloof and all but unknowable emperor who spends most of his time immured in a labyrinth on the continent of Alhanroel, and the Coronal, a younger and more active man, who is the chief executive officer of the realm and makes himself highly visible in constant tours of the world. Under a system thousands of years old, the Pontifex, upon succeeding to the throne, chooses a Coronal from a cadre of carefully trained princes; the Coronal is regarded as the adoptive son of the Pontifex, and will succeed him at his death. The Coronal's seat of power is an age-old castle of almost incomprehensible size atop Castle Mount, a thirty-mile-high

outcropping in eastern Alhanroel.

The chief spiritual figure of the realm is the Lady of the Isle of Sleep, mother of the Coronal and high priestess. From her sanctuary on the Isle, midway between the continents of Alhanroel and Zimroel, she and her millions of acolytes employ telepathic transmitters to appear in dreams to the inhabitants, offering guidance, consolation, and gentle direction. Her darker counterpart is the King of Dreams, who rules from the wasteland southern continent of Suvrael: using thought-amplifying equipment far more potent than the Lady's, the King sends troublesome and disturbing visions to sleepers, and is capable of punishing transgressors against the law by afflicting them with intolerable nightmares. The office of King of Dreams is hereditary and has remained in the family of the Barjazids since its establishment late in the history of Majipoor.

The story opens outside the city of Pidruid, a provincial capital near the western coast of Zimroel. A young wanderer named Valentine, without purpose or prospects, arrives there to find the city in great excitement, for Lord Valentine the Coronal is making a grand administrative procession through the region. Valentine, an amiable and good-natured man, is unimpressed by the presence of his mighty namesake, but, drawn by mild curiosity, goes into Pidruid anyway to enjoy the festival. He is accompanied by a boy named Shanamir, an animal-herder whom he has met near Pidruid.

At the inn to which Shanamir takes him, Valentine meets a company of jugglers — six giant four-armed creatures known as Skandars, and two humans, a wry little man named Sleet and a lithe young woman called Carabella. Valentine shows some rudimentary talents for juggling; and, since a law promulgated by the new Coronal requires a certain proportion of human performers in every entertainment troupe, he is offered a juggling job by Zalzan Gibor, the gruff-mannered leader of the company. Valentine, having no other employment and attracted to the jugglers' itinerant life, accepts the offer, though stipulating that they must hire his young friend Shanamir also.

After several days of intensive training by Sleet and Carabella, Valentine is deemed fit to join the jugglers in a performance at the grand festival in the Coronal's honor. They go before Lord Valentine — a dark, intense, disturbing figure — in the stadium at Pidruid and Valentine, though a novice, acquits himself honorably enough. That night all of Pidruid is the scene of frenzied revelry, which Valentine attends in Carabella's company; and before dawn they become lovers. Afterward, as Valentine sleeps, he is smitten by a dream that brings him piercing pain. Dream-interpretation is central to self-understanding on Majipoor, but he is baffled by the terrifying images that came to him. In conversation with Carabella it emerges that Valentine has almost no trustworthy memories of his past against which the dream can be examined; he is in fact in a kind of amnesia.

When the festival is over the troupe leaves Pidruid to seek employment in marketplaces and theaters inland. Aside from the jugglers, the group includes Autifon Deliamber, a diminutive wizard of the Vroon species, who serves as guide and adviser, and an unattractive person of the Hjort kind, Vinorkis, a sort of business manager. They all travel in a huge and resplendent wagon owned by Zalzan Gibor. Valentine continues to be plagued

by troublesome dreams, and in the town of Falkynkip consults a dream-speaker, who interprets his dreams as implying that he has fallen from some high place and must begin to climb back to it. The wizard Deliamber, who has telepathic powers and who already perceives many things about Valentine that Valentine himself is incapable of seeing, now begins to maneuver and nudge Valentine toward self-understanding. Through dream analysis, telepathic communion, and blunt confrontation, Deliamber forces Valentine to see the truth: that he is in fact Lord Valentine the Coronal, robbed of his throne by some usurper and cast into another man's body. This is the essence of the dreams Valentine has been having, but he has rejected the idea as wildly implausible, and he continues to reject it until Deliamber leads him to a point where he can no longer deny his true rank.

But Valentine is horrified. He has been robbed, too, of all desire to wield power. He much prefers the simple life of an easy-going juggler, and shrinks from the responsibility of governing. He confides in Carabella, who is appalled by her intimacy with one so great, and draws back from him; with difficulty he soothes her fears and pledges her to secrecy. One particularly intense dream seems to tell him that the usurper is Dominin Barjazid, the son of the King of Dreams. He awakens in dismay, knowing that if he is indeed Coronal his sense of honor and obligation will compel him to seek to undo the usurpation, even though he has no hunger for the job. Gigantic incomprehensible demands loom before him, and he is bewildered and distressed. Carabella asks him what he will do.

"Travel with the Skandars," he says. "Continue to juggle. Master the art more thoroughly. Keep close watch on my dreams. Bide my time, seek to comprehend. What else can I do, Carabella? What else can I do?"

TWO: THE BOOK OF THE METAMORPHS

The Ghayrog city of Dulorn was an architectural marvel, a city of frosty brilliance that extended for two hundred miles up and down the heart of the great Dulorn Rift. Though it covered so huge an area, the city's predominant thrust was vertical: great shining towers, fanciful of design but severely restrained in material, that rose like tapered fangs from the soft gypsum-rich ground. The only approved building material in Dulorn was the native stone of the region, a light, airy calcite of high refractive index, that glittered like fine crystal, or perhaps like diamond. Out of this the Dulornese had fashioned their sharp-tipped high-rise structures and embellished them with parapets and balconies, with enormous flamboyant flying buttresses, with soaring cantilevered ribs, with stalactites and stalagmites of sparkling facets, with lacy bridges far above the streets, with colonnades and domes and pendentives and pagodas. The juggling troupe of Zalzan Gibor, approaching the city from the west, came upon it almost exactly at noon, when the sun stood straight overhead and streaks of white

flame seemed to dance along the flanks of the titanic towers. Valentine caught his breath in wonder. Such a vast place! Such a wondrous show of light and form!

Fourteen million people dwelled in Dulorn, making it one of the larger cities of Majipoor, although by no means the largest. On the continent of Alhanroel, so Valentine had heard, a city of this size would be nothing remarkable, and even here on the more pastoral continent of Zimroel there were many that matched or surpassed it. But surely no place could equal its beauty, he thought. Dulorn was cold and fiery both at once. Its gleaming spires insistently claimed one's attention, like chill, irresistible music, like the piercing tones of some mighty organ rolling out across the darkness of space.

"No country inns for us here!" Carabella cried happily. "We'll have a hotel, with fine sheets and soft cushions!"

"Do you think Zalzan Gibor will be so generous?" Valentine asked.

"Generous?" Carabella laughed. "He has no choice. Dulorn offers only luxury accommodations. If we sleep here, we sleep in the street or we sleep like dukes: there's nothing between."

"Like dukes," Valentine said. "To sleep like dukes. Why not?"

He had sworn her, that morning before leaving the inn, to say nothing to anyone about last night's events, not to Sleet, not to any of the Skandars, not even, should she feel the need to seek one, to a dream-speaker. There was to be total silence on the subject of all that had been said and dreamed, until he realeased her from that pledge, and he had demanded the oath from her in the name of the Lady, the Pontifex, and the Coronal. Furthermore he had compelled her to continue to behave toward him as though he had always been, and for the rest of his life would remain, Valentine the wandering juggler and nothing more. Implied in this was the understanding that he might in fact once have been a good deal more than a mere juggler, and might be again; and in extracting the oath from her Valentine had spoken with force and dignity worthy of a Coronal, so that poor Carabella, kneeling and trembling, was as frightened of him all over again as if he were wearing the starburst crown. He felt more than a little fraudulent about that, for he was far from convinced that the strange dreams of the previous night were to be taken at face value. More substantial proof was needed before he could allow himself to believe so far-fetched a notion as that he might be a deposed Power of Majipoor roaming the western provinces under cloak of amnesia; but, still, the evidence of her dream and his could not lightly be dismissed, and so precautions must be taken, secrecy, guile. They came strangely to him, such maneuvers. He swore Autifon Deliamber also to the oath, wondering as he did so how much he could trust a Vroon and a sor-

cerer, but there seemed to be utter sincerity in Deliamber's voice as he vowed to keep his confidence.

Deliamber said, "And who else knows of these matters?"

"Only Carabella. And I have her bound by the same pledge."

"You've said nothing to the Hjort?"

"Vinorkis? Not a word. Why do you ask?"

The Vroon replied, "He watches you too carefully. He asks too many questions. I have little liking for him."

Valentine shrugged. "It's not hard to dislike Hjorts. But what do you fear?"

"He guards his mind too well. His aura is a dark one. Keep your distance from him, Valentine, or he'll bring you trouble."

The jugglers entered the city and made their way down broad, dazzling avenues to their hotel, guided by Deliamber, who seemed to have a map of every corner of Majipoor engraved in his mind. The wagon halted in front of a tower of splendid height and awesome fantasy of architecture, a place of minarets and arched vaults and shining octagonal windows. Descending from the wagon, Valentine stood blinking and gaping in awe.

"You look as though you've been clubbed on the head," Zalzan Gibor said gruffly. "Never seen Dulorn before?"

Valentine made an evasive gesture. His porous memory said nothing to him of Dulorn, but who, once having seen this city, could forget it?

Some comment seemed called for. he said simply, "Is there anything more glorious on all of Majipoor?"

"Yes," the gigantic Skandar replied. "A tureen of hot soup. A mug of strong wine. A sizzling roast over an open fire. You can't eat beautiful architecture. Castle Mount itself isn't worth a stale turd to a starving man." Zalzan Gibor snorted in high self-approbation and, hefting his luggage, strode into the hotel.

Valentine called bemusedly after him, "But I was speaking only of the beauty of cities!"

Zalzan Gibor's brother Thelkar, usually the most taciturn of the Skandars, said, "Zalzan Gibor admires Dulorn more than you would believe. But he'd never admit it."

"He admits admiration only for Piliplok, where we were born," Gibor Haern put in. "He feels it's disloyal to say a good word for anyplace else."

"Shh!" cried Erfon Gibor. "He comes!"

Their senior brother had reappeared at the hotel door. "Well?" Zalzan Gibor boomed. "Why are you standing about? Rehearsal in thirty minutes!" His yellow eyes blazed like those of some beast of the woods. He growled, clenched his four fists menacingly, and vanished again.

An odd master, Valentine thought. Somewhere far beneath that shaggy hide, he suspected, lay a person of civility and even — who could tell? —

of kindness. But Zalzan Gibor worked hard at his bearishness. Perhaps a racial trait, Valentine decided, although the younger Skandars seemed fractionally more charming.

He entered the hotel.

The jugglers were booked to perform at the Perpetual Circus of Dulorn, a municipal festivity that was in progress during every hour of the day and on every day of the year. The Ghayrogs, who dominated this city and its surrounding province, slept not nightly but seasonally, for two or three months at a time mainly in winter, and when they were awake were insatiable in their demand for entertainment. According to Deliamber, they paid well and there were never enough itinerant performers in this part of Majipoor to satisfy their needs.

When the troupe gathered for the afternoon practice session, Zalzan Gibor let it be known that tonight's engagement was due to take place between the fourth and sixth hours after midnight.

Valentine was unhappy about that. This night in particular he was eager for the guidance that dreams might bring, after last night's weighty revelations. But what chance could there be for useful dreams if he spent the most fertile hours of the night on stage?

"We can sleep earlier," Carabella observed. "Dreams come at any hour. Or do you have an appointment for a sending?"

It was a sly teasing remark, for one who had trembled in awe of him not so much earlier. He smiled to show he had taken no offense — he could see self-doubt lurking just beneath her mockery of him — and said, "I might not sleep at all, knowing that I must rise so early."

"Have Deliamber touch you as he did last night," she suggested.

"I prefer to find my own path into sleep," he said.

Which he did, after a stiff afternoon of practice and a satifying dinner of wind-dried beef and cold blue wine at the hotel. He had taken a room by himself here, and before he entered the bed — cool smooth sheets, as Carabella had said, fit for a duke — he commended his spirit to the Lady of the Isle and prayed for a sending from her, which was permissible and frequently done, though not often effective. It was the Lady now whose aid he most dearly needed. If he were in truth a fallen Coronal, then she was his fleshly mother, as well as his spiritual one, and might confirm him in his identity and direct him along his quest.

As he moved into sleep, he tried to visualize the Lady and her Isle, to reach out across the thousands of miles to her and create a bridge, some spark of consciousness over that immense gap, by which she could make contact with him. He was hampered by the empty places in his memory. Presumably any adult Majipooran knew the features of the Lady and the geography of the Isle as well as he did the face of

his own mother and the outskirts of his city, but Valentine's crippled mind gave him mainly blanks, which had to be filled by imagination and chance. How had she looked that night in the fireworks over Pidruid? A round smiling face, long thick hair. Very well. And the rest? Suppose the hair is black and glossy, black like that of her son Lord Valentine and dead Lord Voriax. The eyes are brown, warm, alert. The lips full, the cheeks lightly dimpled, a fine network of wrinkles at the corners of the eyes. A stately, robust woman, yes, and she strolls through a garden of lush floriferous bushes, yellow tanigales and camellias and eldirons and purple thwales, everything rich with tropical life; she pauses to pluck a blossom and fasten it in her hair, and moves on, along white marble flagstones that wind sinuously between the shrubs, until she emerges on a broad stone patio set into the side of the hill on which she dwells, looking down on the terraces upon terraces descending in wide sweeping curves toward the sea. And she looks westward to far-off Zimroel, she closes her eyes, she thinks of her lost wandering outcast son in the city of the Ghayrogs, she gathers her force and broadcasts sweet messages of hope and courage to Valentine exiled in Dulorn —

Valentine slipped into deep sleep.

And indeed the Lady came to him as he dreamed. He encountered her not on the hillside below her garden, but in some empty city in a wasteland, a ruined place of weatherbeaten sandstone pillars and shattered altars. They approached one another from opposite sides of a tumbledown forum under ghostly moonlight. But her face was veiled and she kept it averted from him: he recognized her by the heavy coils of her dark hair and by the fragrance of the creamy-petaled eldiron flower beside her ear, and knew that he was in the presence of the Lady of the Isle, but he wanted her smile to warm his soul in this bleak place, he wanted the comfort of her gentle eyes, and he saw only the veil, the shoulders, the side of her head. "Mother?" he asked uncertainly. "Mother, it's Valentine! Don't you know me? Look at me, mother!"

Wraithlike she drifted past him and disappeared between two broken columns inscribed with scenes of the deeds of the great Coronals, and was gone.

"Mother?" he called.

The dream was over. Valentine struggled to make her return, but could not: his sleeping mind had succeeded in invoking her, but calling her back was beyond him. He awakened and lay peering into the darkness, seeing that veiled figure once more and searching for meaning. She hadn't recognized him. Did that mean he was so effectively transformed that not even his own mother was able to perceive who lay hidden in this body? Or that he had never been her son, that there was no reason at all for her to know him? He

lacked answers. If the soul of dark-haired Lord Valentine was embedded in the body of fair-haired Valentine, the Lady of the Isle in his dream had given no sign of it, and he was as far from understanding as he had been when he closed his eyes.

What follies I pursue, he thought. What implausible speculations, what madnesses!

And almost at once, so it seemed, a hand touched his shoulder and someone rocked him until he came reluctantly into wakefulness. Carabella.

"Two hours after midnight," she told him. "Zalzan Gibor wants us down by the wagon in half an hour. Did you dream?"

"Inconclusively. And you?"

"I remained awake," she answered. "It seemed safest. Some nights one prefers not to dream." She said timidly, as he began to dress, "Will I share your room again, Valentine?"

"Would you like to?"

"I have given oath to act with you as I acted before — before I knew — oh, Valentine, I was so frightened! But, yes, Yes, let's be companions again, and even lovers. Tomorrow night!"

"What if I am the Coronal?"

"Please. Don't ask such questions."

"What if I am?"

"You've ordered me to call you Valentine and to regard you as Valentine. This I'll do, if you'll let me."

"Do you believe I'm Coronal?"

"Yes," she whispered.

"It no longer frightens you?"

"A little. Just a little. You seem human to me."

"Good."

"I've had a day to get used to things. And I'm under an oath. I must think of you as Valentine. I swore by the Powers to that."

She grinned impishly. "I swore an oath to the Coronal that I would pretend you are not Coronal, and so I must be true to my pledge, and treat you casually, and call you Valentine, and show no fear of you, and behave as though nothing has changed. And so I can share your bed tomorrow night?"

"Yes."

"I love you, Valentine."

He pulled her lightly to him. "I thank you for overcoming your fear. I love you, Carabella."

"Zalzan Gibor will be angry if we're late," she said.

2.

The Perpetual Circus was housed in a structure altogether opposite from those most typical of Dulorn: a giant flat unadorned drum of a building, perfectly circular and no more than ninety feet high, that stood by itself on a huge tract of open land on the eastern perimeter of the city. Within, a great central space provided an awesome setting for the stage, and around it ran the seating ring, tier upon tier in concentric circles rising to the roof.

The place could hold thousands, perhaps hundreds of thousands, and Valentine was startled to see how nearly full it was, here at what was for him the middle of the night. Looking outward into the audience was difficult, for the stage lights were in his eyes, but he was able to perceive enormous numbers of people sitting or sprawling in their seats wherever he glanced. Nearly all of them were Ghayrogs, though he caught sight of the occasional Hjort or Vroon or human making a late night of it. There were no places on Majipoor entirely populated by one race — ancient decrees of the government, going back to the earliest days of heavy nonhuman settlement, forbade such concentrations except on the Metamorph reservation — but the Ghayrogs were a particularly clannish lot and tended to cluster together in and around Dulorn up to the legal maximum. Though warm-blooded and mammalian, they had certain reptilian traits that made them unlovable to most other races: quick-flicking forked red tongues, grayish scaly skin of a thick, polished consistency, cold green unblinking eyes. Their hair had a medusoid quality, black succulent strands that coiled and writhed unsettlingly, and their odor, both sweet and acrid at once, was not charming to non-Ghayrog nostrils. On Majipoor many races lived in complete harmony, but not necessarily in total communion, and the Ghayrogs, more than most others, were a people apart.

Valentine's mood was subdued as he moved out with the troupe onto the stage. The hour was all wrong: his body cycles were at low ebb, and though he had had enough sleep, he had no enthusiasm for being awake just now. The scent of Ghayrogs was oppressive to him. And once again he carried the burden of a difficult dream. That rejection by the Lady, that inability to make contact with her, what did it signify? When he was only Valentine the juggler, significance was insignificant to him: each day had a path of its own, and he had no worries about larger patterns, only to increase the skill of hand and eye from one day to the next. But now that these ambiguous and disturbing revelations had been visited upon him, he was forced to consider dreary long-range matters of purpose and destiny and the route on which he was bound. He had no liking for that. Already he tasted a keen nostalgic sorrow for the good old times of the week before last, when he had wandered busy Pidruid in happy aimlessness.

But the demands of his art quickly lifted him out of this brooding. There was no time, under the glare of the spotlights, to think of anything except the work of performing.

The stage was colossal, and many things were happening on it at once. A team of Vroon magicians was doing a routine involving floating colored lights and bursts of green and red smoke; an animal trainer just beyond

them had a dozen fat serpents standing on their tails; a dazzling group of dancers with grotesquely attenuated bodies sprayed in many-faceted silver glowstuff did austere leaps and carries; several small orchestras in widely separated regions played the tinny and tootling woodwind music beloved of the Ghayrogs; there was a one-finger acrobat, a high-wire woman, a levitator, a trio of glassblowers engaged in fashioning a cage for themselves, an eel-eater, and a platoon of berserk clowns, along with much more beyond Valentine's range of vision. The audience, slouching and lounging out there in the hazy half-darkness, had an easy time watching all this; for, Valentine realized, the giant stage was in gentle motion, turning slowly on hidden bearings; and in the course of an hour or two would make a complete circuit, presenting each group of performers in turn to every part of the auditorium. "It all floats on a pool of quicksilver," Sleet whispered. "You could buy three provinces with the value of the metal."

With so much competition for the eyes of the onlookers, the jugglers had brought forth some of their finest effects, which meant that the novice Valentine was largely excluded, left to toss clubs to himself and occasionally to feed knives or torches to the others. Carabella was dancing atop a silver globe two feet in diameter that rolled in irregular circles as she moved: she juggled five spheres that glowed with brilliant green light. Sleet had mounted stilts and rose even taller than the Skandars, a tiny figure far above everyone, coolly flipping from hand to hand three huge red-and-black speckled eggs of the moleeka-hen, that he had bought at market that evening. If he dropped an egg from so great a height, the splash would be conspicuous and the humiliation enormous, but never since Valentine had known him had Sleet dropped anything, and he dropped no eggs tonight. As for the six Skandars, they had arranged themselves in a rigid star-pattern, standing with their backs to one another, and were juggling flaming torches. At carefully coordinated moments each would hurl a torch backward over his outer shoulder to his brother at the opposite side of the star. The interchanges were made with wondrous precision, the trajectories of the flying torches were flawlessly timed to create splendid crisscrossing patterns of light, and not a hair on any Skandar's hide was scorched as they casually snatched from the air the firebrands that came hurtling past them from their unseen partners.

Round and round the stage they went, performing in stints of half an hour at a stretch, with five minutes to relax in the central well just below the stage, where hundreds of other off-duty artists gathered. Valentine longed to be doing something more challenging than his own little elementary juggle, but Zalzan Gibor had forbidden it:

he was not yet ready, the Skandar said, though he was doing excellently well for a novice.

Morning came before the troupe was allowed to leave the stage. Payment here was by the hour, and hiring was governed by silent response-meters beneath the seats of the audience, monitored by cold-eyed Ghayrogs in a booth in the well. Some performers lasted only a few minutes before universal boredom or disdain banished them, but Zalzan Gibor and his company, who had been guaranteed two hours of work, remained on stage for four. They would have been kept for a fifth if Zalzan Gibor had not been dissuaded by his brothers, who gathered around him for a brief and intense argument.

"His greed," Carabella said quietly, "will lead him to embarrass himself yet. How long does he think people can throw those torches around before someone slips up? Even Skandars get tired eventually."

"Not Zalzan Gibor, from the looks of it," Valentine said.

"*He* may be a juggling machine, yes, but his brothers are mortal. Rovorn's timing is starting to get ragged. I'm glad they had the courage to make a stand." She smiled. "And I was getting pretty tired too."

So successfully were the jugglers received in Dulorn that they were hired for four additional days. Zalzan Gibor was elated — the Ghayrogs gave their entertainers high wages — and declared a five-crown bonus for everyone.

All well and good, Valentine thought. But he had no wish to settle in indefinitely among the Ghayrogs. After the second day, restlessness began to make him chafe.

"You wish to be moving on," Deliamber said — a statement, not a question.

Valentine nodded. "I begin to glimpse the shape of the road ahead of me."

"To the Isle?"

"Why do you bother speaking with people," Valentine said lightly, "if you see everything within their minds."

"I did no mind-peeking this time. Your next move is obvious enough."

"Go to the Lady, yes. Who else can truly tell me who I am?"

"You still have doubts," Deliamber said.

"I have no evidence other than dreams."

"Which speak powerful truths."

"Yes," Valentine said, "but dreams can be parables, dreams can be metaphors, dreams can be fantasies. It's folly to speak them literally without confirmation. And the Lady can give confirmation, or so I hope. How far is it to the Isle, wizard?"

Deliamber briefly closed his large golden eyes.

"Thousands of miles," he said. "We are now perhaps a fifth of the way across Zimroel. You must make your way eastward through Khyntor or Velathys, and around the territory of

the Metamorphs, and then perhaps by riverboat via Ni-moya to Piliplok, where the pilgrim-ships leave for the Isle."

"How long will that take?"

"To reach Piliplok? At our present pace, about fifty years. Wandering with these jugglers, stopping here and there for a week at a time —"

"What if I left the troupe and went on my own?"

"Six months, possibly. The river journey is swift. The overland section takes much longer. If we had airships as they do on other worlds, it would be a matter of a day or two to Piliplok, but of course we do without many devices on Majipoor that other people enjoy."

"Six months?" Valentine frowned. "And the cost, if I hired a vehicle and a guide?"

"Perhaps twenty royals. You'll juggle a long time to earn that much."

"When I get to Piliplok," Valentine said, "what then?"

"You book passage to the Isle. The pilgrim-ships depart three or four times a year. The voyage is a matter of weeks. When you reach the Isle you take lodging on the lowest terrace and begin the ascent."

"The ascent?"

"A course of prayer, purification, and initiation. You move upward from terrace to terrace until you reach the Terrace of Adoration, which is the threshold to the inner temple. You know nothing of any of this?"

"My mind, Deliamber, has been meddled with."

"Of course."

"At the inner temple, then?"

"You are now an initiate. You serve the Lady as an acolyte, and if you seek an audience with her, you undergo special rites and await the summoning dream."

Uneasily Valentine said, "How long does this entire process take, the terraces, the initiations, the service as acolyte, the summoning dream?"

"It varies. Five years, sometimes. Ten. Forever, conceivably. The Lady has no time for each and every pilgrim."

"And there's no more direct way of gaining audience?"

Deliamber uttered the thick coughing sound that was his laugh. "What? Knock on the temple door, cry out that you are her changeling son, demand entry?"

"Why not?"

"Because," the Vroon said, "the outer terraces of the Isle are designed as filters to keep such things from happening. There are no easy channels of communication to the Lady, and deliberately so. It would take you years."

"I'd find a way." Valentine stared levelly at the little wizard. "I could reach her mind, if I were on the Isle. I could cry out to her, I could persuade her to summon me. Perhaps."

"Perhaps."

"With your assistance it could be done."

"I feared that was coming," said Deliamber drily.

"You have some skill at making sendings. We could reach, if not the Lady herself, then those close to her. Step by step, drawing ourselves closer to her, cutting short the interminable process on the terraces —"

"It could be done, possibly," Deliamber said. "Do you believe I'm minded to make the pilgrimage with you, though?"

Valentine regarded the Vroon in silence for a long time.

"I'm certain of it," he said finally. "You play at reluctance, but you've engineered my every motive to impel me toward the Isle. With you at my side. Am I right? Eh, Deliamber? You're more eager to have me get there than I am myself."

"Ah," the sorcerer said. "It comes out now!"

"Am I right?"

"If you resolve to go to the Isle, Valentine, I will be at your side. But are you resolved?"

"Sometimes."

"Intermittent resolutions lack potency," said Deliamber.

"Thousands of miles. years of waiting. Toil and intrigue. Why do I want to do this, Deliamber?"

"Because you are Coronal, and must be again."

"The first may be true, though I have mighty doubts of it. The second is open to question."

Deliamber's look was crafty. "You prefer to live under the rule of a usurper?"

"What's the Coronal and his rule to me? He's half a world away on Castle Mount and I'm a wandering juggler." Valentine extended his fingers and stared at them as though he had never seen his hands before. "I could spare myself much effort if I remained with Zalzan Gibor and let the other, whoever he may be, keep the throne. Suppose he's a wise and just usurper? Where's the benefit for Majipoor, if I do all this work merely to put myself back in his place? Oh, Deliamber, Deliamber, do I sound like a king at all, when I say these things? Where's my lust for power? How can I ever have been a ruler, when I so obviously don't care about what's happened?"

"We've spoken of this before. You have been tampered with, my lord. Your spirit as well as your face has been changed."

"Even so. My royal nature, if ever I had one, is altogether gone from me. That lust for power —"

"Twice you've used the phrase," Deliamber said. "Lust has nothing to do with it. A true king doesn't lust for power: responsibility lusts for him. And takes him, and possesses him. This Coronal is new, he has done little yet but make the grand processional, and already the people grumble at his early decrees. And you ask if he will be wise and just? How can any usurper be just? He is a criminal, Valentine, and he rules already with a criminal's guilty

fears eating at his dreams, and as time goes on, those fears will poison him and he will be a tyrant. Can you doubt that? He will remove anyone who threatens him — will kill, even, if needs be. The poison that courses in his veins will enter the life of the planet itself, will affect every citizen. And you, sitting here looking at your fingers, do you see no responsibility? How can you talk of *sparing yourself much effort?* As if it hardly matters who is the king. It matters very much who is the king, my lord, and you were chosen and trained for it, and not by lottery. Or do you believe anyone can become Coronal?"

"I do. By random stroke of fate."

Deliamber laughed harshly. "Possibly that was true nine thousand years ago. There is dynasty, my lord."

"An adoptive dynasty?"

"Precisely. Since the time of Lord Arioc, and maybe even earlier, Coronals have been chosen from among a small group of families, no more than a hundred clans, all of them dwellers on Castle Mount and close participants in the government. The next Coronal is already in training, though only he and a few advisers know who he is, and two or three replacements for him must also have been chosen. But now the line is broken, now an intruder has pushed his way in. Nothing but evil can come of that."

"What if the usurper is simply the heir-in-waiting, who grew tired of waiting?"

"No," said Deliamber. "Inconceivable. No one deemed qualified to be Coronal would overthrow a lawfully consecrated prince. Besides, why the mummery of pretending to be Lord Valentine, if he is another?"

"I grant you that."

"Grant me also this: that the person atop Castle Mount now has neither right nor qualification for being there, and must be cast down, and you are the only one who can do it."

Valentine sighed. "You ask a great deal."

"History asks a great deal," said Deliamber. "History has demanded, on a thousand worlds across many thousands of years, that intelligent beings choose between order and anarchy, between creation and destruction, between reason and unreason. And the forces of order and creation and reason have been focused always in a single leader, a king, if you will, or a president, a chairman, a grand minister, a generalissimo, use whatever word you wish, a monarch by some name or other. Here it is the Coronal, or more accurately the Coronal ruling as the voice of the Pontifex who was once Coronal; and it matters, my lord, it matters very much, who is to be Coronal and who is not to be Coronal."

"Yes," Valentine said. "Perhaps."

"You'll go on wavering from *yes* to *perhaps* a long while," said Deliamber. "But *yes* will govern, in the end. And you will make the pilgrimage to the Isle, and with the Lady's blessing you

will march on Castle Mount and take your rightful place."

"The things you say fill me with terror. If ever I had the ability to rule, if ever I was given the training for it, these things have been burned from my mind."

"The terror will fade. Your mind will be made whole in the passing of time."

"And time passes, and here we sit in Dulorn, to amuse the Ghayrogs."

Deliamber said, "Not much longer. We'll find our way eastward, my lord. Have faith in that."

There was something contagious about Deliamber's assurance. Valentine's hesitations and uncertainties were gone — for the moment. But when Deliamber had departed, Valentine gave way to uncomfortable contemplation of certain hard realities. Could he simply hire a couple of mounts and set off for Piliplok with Deliamber tomorrow? What about Carabella, who had suddenly become very important to him? Abandon her here in Dulorn? And Shanamir? The boy was attached to Valentine, not to the Skandars: he neither could nor would be left. There was the cost, then, of a journey for four across nearly all of vast Zimroel, food, lodging, transportation, then the pilgrim-ship to the Isle, and what then of expenses on the Isle while he schemed to gain access to the Lady? Autifon Deliamber had guessed it might cost twenty royals for him to travel alone to Piliplok. The cost, for the four of them, or for the five if Sleet were added, though Valentine had no idea if Sleet would care to come, might run a hundred royals or more, a hundred fifty perhaps to the lowest terrace of the Isle. He sorted through his purse. Of the money he had had upon him when he found himself outside Pidruid, he had more than forty royals left, plus a royal or two that he had earned with the troupe. Not enough, not nearly enough. Carabella, he knew, was almost without money; Shanamir had dutifully returned to his family the hundred sixty royals from the sale of his mounts; and Deliamber, if he had any wealth, would not in old age be hauling himself through the countryside under contract to a crowd of ruffian Skandars.

So, then? Nothing to do but wait, and plan, and hope that Zalzan Gibor intended a generally eastward route. And save his crowns and bide his time, until the moment was ripe for going to the Lady.

3.

A few days after their departure from Dulorn, purses bulging with the generous Ghayrog pay, Valentine drew Zalzan Gibor aside to ask him about the direction of travel. It was a gentle late-summer day, and here, where they were camped for lunch along the eastern slope of the Rift, a purple mist enfolded everything, a low

thick clammy cloud that took its delicate lavender color from pigments in the air, for there were deposits of skuvva-sand just north of here and the winds were constantly stirring the stuff aloft. Zalzan Gibor looked uncomfortable and irritable in this weather. His gray fur, purpled now by droplets of mist, was clumped in comic bunches, and he rubbed at it, trying to restore it to its proper nap. Probably not the best moment for such a conference, Valentine realized, but it was too late: the issue had been broached.

Zalzan Gibor said hollowly, "Which of us is the leader of this troupe, Valentine?"

"You are, beyond question."

"Then why do you try to govern me?"

"I?"

"In Pidruid," the Skandar said, "you asked me to go next to Falkynkip, for the convenience of your herdsman squire's family honor, and I remind you that you forced me to hire the herdsman boy in the first place, though he is no juggler and never will be. In these things I yielded, I know not why. There was also the matter of your interfering in my quarrel with the Vroon —"

"My interference had benefit," Valentine pointed out, "as you yourself admitted at the time."

"True. But interference of itself is unfamiliar to me. Do you understand that I am absolute master of this troupe?"

Valentine shrugged lightly. "No one disputes that."

"But do you understand it? My brothers do. They are aware that a body can have only one head — unless it's a Su-Suheris body, and we're not talking of those — and here I am the head, it is from my mind that plans and instructions flow, and mine alone." Zalzan Gibor flashed an austere smile. "Is this tyranny? No. This is simple efficiency. Jugglers can never be democrats, Valentine. One mind designs the patterns, one alone, or there is chaos. Now what do you want with me?"

"Only to know the shape of our route."

With barely suppressed anger Zalzan Gibor said, "Why? You are in our employ. You go where we go. Your curiosity is misplaced."

"It doesn't seem that way to me. Some routes are more useful to me than others."

"Useful? To you? You have plans? You told me you had no plans!"

"I do now."

"What do you plan, then?"

Valentine took a deep breath. "Ultimately to make the pilgrimage to the Isle and become a devotee of the Lady. Since the pilgrim-ships sail from Piliplok, and all of Zimroel lies between us and Piliplok, it would be valuable to me to know whether you plan to go in some other direction, let's say down to Velathys, or maybe back to Til-omon or Narabal, instead of —"

"You are discharged from my service," Zalzan Gibor said icily.

Valentine was astounded. "*What?*"

"Terminated. My brother Erfon will give you ten crowns as your settlement. I want you on your way within an hour."

Valentine felt his cheeks growing hot. "This is totally unexpected! I merely asked —"

"You merely asked. And in Pidruid you merely asked, and in Falkynkip you merely asked, and next week in Mazadone you would merely ask. You annoy my tranquillity, Valentine, and this cancels out your promise as a juggler. Besides, you are disloyal."

"Disloyal? To what? To whom?"

"You hire on with us, but secretly mean to use us as the vehicle to get you to Piliplok. Your commitment to us is insincere. I call that treachery."

"When I hired on with you, I had nothing else in mind but to travel with your troupe wherever you went. But things have changed, and now I see reason to make the pilgrimage."

"Why did you allow things to change? Where's your sense of duty to your employers and teachers?"

"Did I hire on with you for life?" Valentine demanded. "Is it treachery to discover that one has a goal more important than tomorrow's performance?"

"That diversion of energy," said Zalzan Gibor, "is what leads me to be rid of you. I want you thinking about juggling every hour of the day, and not about the departure date of pilgrimships from Shkunibor Pier."

"There would be no diversion of energy. When I juggle, I juggle. And I'd resign from the troupe when we approached Piliplok. But until then —"

"Enough," Zalzan Gibor said. "Pack. Go. Take yourself swiftly to Piliplok and sail to the Isle, and may you fare well. I have no further need of you."

The Skandar seemed altogether serious. Scowling in the purple mist, slapping at the soggy patches in his pelt, Zalzan Gibor swung heavily around and began to walk away. Valentine trembled in tension and dismay. The thought of leaving now, of traveling alone to Piliplok, left him aghast; and beyond that he felt part of this troupe, more so than he had ever been aware, a member of a close-knit team, and would not willingly be sundered. At least not now, not yet, while he could remain with Carabella and Sleet and even the Skandars, whom he respected without liking, and continue to increase his skills of eye and hand while moving eastward toward whatever strange destiny Deliamber seemed to have in mind for him. Zalzan Gibor had precipitously hastened him toward that destiny, or so it appeared.

"Wait!" Valentine called. "What about the law?"

Zalzan Gibor glared over his shoulder. "Which law?"

"The one requiring you to keep three human jugglers in your employ."

"I will hire the herdsman boy in your place," Zalzan Gibor retorted, "and teach him whatever skills he can learn." And he stalked off.

Valentine stood stunned. His conversation with Zalzan Gibor had taken place in a grove of small golden-leafed plants that evidently were psychosensitive; for, he noticed now, the plants had folded their intricate compound leaflets in the course of the quarrel and looked shriveled and blackened for ten feet on all sides of him. He touched one. It was crisp and lifeless, as though it had been torched. He felt abashed at being a party to such destruction.

"What happened?" Shanamir asked, appearing suddenly and staring in wonder at the withered foliage. "I heard yelling. The Skandar —"

"Has fired me," said Valentine vacantly, "because I asked him which way we were going next, because I admitted to him that I intended eventually to journey on pilgrimage to the Isle and wondered if his route would suit my purpose."

Shanamir gaped. "You are to make the pilgrimage? I never knew!"

"A recent decision."

"Why, then," the boy cried, "we'll make it together, won't we? Come, we'll pack our things, we'll steal a couple of mounts from these Skandars, we'll leave at once!"

"Do you mean that?"

"Of course!"

"It's thousands of miles to Piliplok. You and I, and no one to guide us —"

"Why not?" Shanamir asked. "Look, we ride to Khyntor, and there we take a riverboat to Ni-moya, and on from there down the Zimr to the coast, and at Piliplok we buy passage on the pilgrim-ship, and — what's wrong, Valentine?"

"I belong with these people. I'm learning an art from them. I — I —" Valentine broke off in confusion. Was he a juggler-in-training, or a Coronal-in-exile? Was it his purpose to plod along with shaggy Skandars, yes, with Carabella and Sleet also, or was it incumbent on him to move by the fastest means toward the Isle and then with the Lady's help toward Castle Mount? He was confounded by these uncertainties.

"The cost?" Shanamir said. "Is that what worries you? You had fifty royals in Pidruid. You must have some of that left. I have a few crowns myself. If we need more, you can work as a juggler on the riverboat, and I could curry mounts, I suppose, or —"

"Where are you planning to go?" said Carabella, coming abruptly upon them out of the forest. "And what has happened to these sensitivos here? Is there trouble?"

Briefly Valentine told her of his talk with Zalzan Gibor.

She listened in silence, with her hand to her lips; and when he was done, she darted off abruptly, without a word, in the direction Zalzan Gibor had taken.

"Carabella?" Valentine called. But already she was out of sight.

"Let's go," said Shanamir. "I was getting bored with things anyway. We can be out of here in half an hour, and by nightfall we'll be miles away. Look, you pack our things. I'll take two of the mounts and lead them around through the woods, down the slope toward the little lake we passed when we came in, and you meet me down there by the grove of cabbage trees." Shanamir waved his hands impatiently. "Hurry! I've got to get the mounts while the Skandars aren't around, and they might come back at any minute!"

Shanamir vanished into the forest. Valentine stood frozen. To leave now, so suddenly, with so little time to prepare himself for this upheaval? And what of Carabella? Not even a goodby? Deliamber? Sleet? He started toward the wagon to gather his few possessions, halted, plucked indecisively at the dead leaves of the poor sensitivo plants, as though by pruning the withered stalks he could instantly induce new growth. Gradually he compelled himself to see the brighter side. This was a disguised blessing. If he stayed with the jugglers, it would delay by months or even years the confrontation with reality that obviously lay in store for him. And Carabella, if any truth lay in the shape of things that began to emerge, could be no part of that reality anyway. So, then, it behooved him to shrug away his shock and distress and take to the highway, bound for Piliplok and the pilgrim-ships. Come, he told himself, get moving, collect your things. Shanamir's waiting by the cabbage trees with the mounts. But he could not move.

And then Carabella came bounding toward him, face aglow.

"It's all fixed," she said. "I got Deliamber to work on him. You know, a little trick here and there, a bit of a touch with the tip of a tentacle — the usual wizardry. he's changed his mind. Or we've changed it for him."

Valentine was startled by the intensity of his feeling of relief. "I can stay?"

"If you'll go to him and ask forgiveness."

"Forgiveness for what?"

Carabella grinned. "That doesn't matter. He took offense, the Divine only knows why! His fur was wet. His nose was cold. Who knows? He's a Skandar, Valentine, he has his own weird sense of what's right and wrong, he's not required to think the way humans do. You got him angry and he discharged you. Ask him politely to take you back, and he will. Go on, now. Go."

"But — but —"

"But what? Are *you* going to stand on pride now? Do you want to be rehired or don't you?"

"Of course I do."

"Then go," Carabella said. She seized him by the arm and gave a little tug, to budge him as he stood there faltering and fumbling, and as she did so

it must have occurred to her whose arm it was she was tugging, for she sucked in her breath and let go of him and moved away, hovering as if on the verge of kneeling and making the starburst symbol. "Please?" she said softly. "Please go to him, Valentine? Before he changes his mind again? If you leave the troupe, I'll have to leave it too, and I don't want to. Go. Please."

"Yes," said Valentine. She led him over the spongy mist-moistened ground to the wagon. Zalzan Gibor sat sulkily on the steps, huddling in a cloak in the damp, close warmth of the purple mist. Valentine approached him and said straightforwardly, "It was not my intent to anger you. I ask your pardon."

Zalzan Gibor made a low growling sound, almost below the threshold of audibility.

"You are a nuisance," the Skandar said. "Why am I willing to forgive you? From now on you will not speak to me unless I have spoken to you first. Understood?"

"Understood, yes."

"You will make no attempt to influence the route we travel."

"Understood," said Valentine.

"If you irritate me again, you will be terminated without severance pay and you will have ten minutes to get out of my sight, no matter where we are, even if we are camped in the midst of a Metamorph reservation and nightfall is coming, do you understand?"

"I understand," Valentine said.

He waited, wondering if he would be asked to bow, to kiss the Skandar's hairy fingers, to grovel in obeisance. Carabella, standing to one side, seemed to be holding her breath, as though expecting some explosion to come from the spectacle of a Power of Majipoor begging forgiveness from an itinerant Skandar juggler.

Zalzan Gibor regarded Valentine disdainfully, as he might have regarded a cold fish of uncertain vintage presented to him in a congealed sauce for dinner. Acidulously he said, "I am not required to provide my employees with information of no concern with them. But I will tell you, anyway, that Piliplok is my native city, and I return there from time to time, and it is my purpose to arrive there eventually. How soon it will be depends on what engagements I can arrange between here and there; but be informed that our route lies generally eastward, although there may be some departures from that path, for we have a livelihood to earn. I hope this pleases you. When we reach Piliplok, you may resign from the troupe if you still have it in mind to undergo the pilgrimage, but if you induce any members of the troupe other than the herdsmen boy to accompany you on that voyage, I will ask an injunction against it in the Coronal's Court and prosecute you to the fullest. Understood?"

"Understood," said Valentine, though he wondered whether he would

deal honorably with the Skandar on this point.

"Lastly," said Zalzan Gibor, "I ask you to remember that you are paid a good many crowns a week, plus expenses and bonuses, to perform in this troupe. If I detect you filling your mind with thoughts of the pilgrimage, or of the Lady and her servants, or of anything else but how to throw things into the air and catch them in a theatrically suitable manner, I'll revoke your employment. In these last few days you've already seemed unacceptably moody, Valentine. Change your ways. I need three humans for this troupe, but not necessarily the ones I have now. Understood?"

"Understood," Valentine said.

"Go, then."

Carabella said, as they walked away, "Was that terribly unpleasant for you?"

"It must have been terribly unpleasant for Zalzan Gibor."

"He's just a hairy animal!"

"No," said Valentine gravely. "He's a sentient being equal to ourselves in civil rank, and never speak of him as anything else. He only *looks* like an animal." Valentine laughed, and after a moment Carabella laughed with him, a trifle edgily. He said, "In dealing with people who are enormously touchy on matters of honor and pride, I think it's wisest to be accommodating to their needs, especially if they're eight feet tall and provide you with your wages. At this point I need Zalzan Gibor far more than he needs me. It wasn't hard to accept his terms."

"And the pilgrimage?" she asked. "Are you really planning to undergo it? When did you decide that?"

"In Dulorn. After conversation with Deliamber. There are questions I must answer about myself, and if anyone can help me with those answers, it's the Lady of the Isle. So I'll go to her, or try to. But all of that's far in the future, and I've sworn to Zalzan Gibor not to think of such things." He took her hand in his. "I thank you, Carabella, for repairing matters between Zalzan Gibor and me. This episode has taught me much. I wasn't at all ready to be discharged from the troupe. Or to lose you so soon after I had found you."

"Why do you think you would have lost me," she asked, "if the Skandar had insisted on letting you go?"

He smiled. "I thank you for that, too. And now I should go down to the cabbage-tree grove and tell Shanamir to return the mounts that he's stolen for us."

4.

In the next few days the landscape began to grow surpassingly strange, and Valentine had more cause for gladness that he and Shanamir had not tried to go on ahead by themselves.

The district between Dulorn and the next major city, Mazadone, was

relatively thinly populated. Much of it, according to Deliamber, was a royal forest preserve. That bothered Zalzan Gibor, for there was no employment for jugglers to be had in forest preserves, nor, for that matter, in low-lying swampy farmland occupied mainly by rice paddies and lusavender-seed plantations; but there was no choice other than to follow the main forest highway, since nothing more promising lay to the north or south. On they went, in generally humid and drizzly weather, through a region of villages and farms and occasional thick stands of the fat-trunked comical cabbage trees, short and squat, with massive white fruits sprouting directly from their bark. But as Mazadone Forest Preserve drew closer, the cabbage trees gave way to dense thickets of singing ferns, yellow-fronded and glassy of texture, that emitted piercing discordant sounds whenever they were approached, shrill high-pitched bings and twangs and bleeps, nasty screeches and scrapes. That would not have been so bad — the unmelodious song of the ferns had a certain raucous charm, Valentine thought — but the fern thickets were inhabited by bothersome small creatures far more disagreeable than the plants; little toothy winged rodents known as dhiims, that came flapping up out of hiding every time the proximity of the wagon touched off the fern song. The dhiims were about the length and breadth of a small finger and were covered by fine golden fur; they arose in such numbers that they clouded the air and swarmed about indignantly, sometimes nipping with their tiny but effective incisors. The thickly furred Skandars up front in the driver's seat largely ignored them, merely swatting at them when they clustered too close, but the usually stolid mounts were bothered and balked in the traces several times. Shanamir, sent out to placate the animals, suffered half a dozen painful bites; and as he scurried back into the wagon, a good many dhiims entered with him. Sleet took a frightening nip on his cheek near his left eye, and Valentine, beset by dozens of infuriated creatures at once, was bitten on both arms. Carabella methodically destroyed the dhiims with a stiletto used in the juggling act, skewering them with single-minded determination and great skill, but it was an ugly half hour before the last of them was dead.

Beyond the territory of the dhiims and the singing ferns, the travelers entered into a region of curious appearance, a broad open area of meadows out of which rose hundreds of black granite needles just a few feet wide and perhaps eighty feet high, natural obelisks left behind by some unfathomable geological event. To Valentine it was a region of delicate beauty; to Zalzan Gibor it was merely one more place to pass quickly through, en route to the next festival where jugglers might be hired; but to Autifon Deliam-

ber it seemed something else, a place giving sign of possible menace. The Vroon muttered and leaned forward, staring keenly for a long moment through the wagon's window at the obelisks. "Wait," he called finally to Zalzan Gibor.

"What is it?"

"I want to check something. Let me out."

Zalzan Gibor grunted impatiently and tugged on the reins. Deliamber scrambled from the wagon, moving in his supple ropy-limbed Vroonish glide toward the odd rock formations, disappearing among them, coming occasionally into view as he zigzagged from one thin pinnacle to the next.

When he returned, Deliamber looked glum and apprehensive.

"See there," he said, pointing. "Do you make out vines far up, stretched from that rock to that, and from that to that, and on over to there? And some small animals crawling about on the vines?"

They stared. Valentine could just barely discern a network of slender glossy red lines high on the pinnacles, forty or fifty feet or more above the ground. And, yes, half a dozen slim ape-like beasts moving from obelisk to obelisk like acrobats, swinging freely by hands and feet.

"It looks like birdnet vine," said Zalzan Gibor in a puzzled tone.

"It is," Deliamber said.

"But why do they not stick to it? What are those animals, anyway?"

"Forest-brethren," the Vroon answered. "Do you know of them?"

"Tell me."

"They are troublesome. A wild tribe, native to central Zimroel, not usually found this far west. The Metamorphs are known to hunt them for food or perhaps for sport, I'm not sure which. They have intelligence, though of a low order, something greater than dogs or droles, less than civilized folk. Their gods are dwikka-trees; they have some sort of tribal structure; they know how to use poisoned darts, and cause problems for wayfarers. Their sweat contains an enzyme that makes them immune to the stickiness of birdnet vine, which they employ for many purposes."

"If they annoy us," Zalzan Gibor declared, "we will destroy them. Onward!"

Onward they went, and once past the region of the obelisks they saw no further traces of forest-brethren that day. But on the next, Deliamber once again spied ribbons of birdnet vine in the treetops, and a day after that the travelers, now deep in the forest preserve, came upon a grove of trees of truly colossal mass, which, the Vroonish wizard said, were dwikkas, sacred to the forest-brethren. "This explains their presence so far from Metamorph territory," said Deliamber. "These must be a migrating band, come west to pay homage in this forest."

The dwikkas were awesome. There were five of them, set far apart in

otherwise empty fields. Their trunks, covered with bright red bark that grew in distinct plates with deep fissures between, were greater in diameter than the long axis of Zalzan Gibor's wagon; and though they were not particularly tall, no higher than a hundred feet or so, their mighty limbs, each as thick as the trunk of an ordinary tree, spread out to such a distance that whole legions might take shelter under the dwikka's gigantic canopy. On stalks as thick as a Skandar's thigh sprouted the leaves, great leathery black things the size of a house that drooped heavily, casting an impenetrable shade. And from each branch hung suspended two or three elephantine yellowish fruits, bumpy irregular globes a good twelve or fifteen feet in width. One of them had recently fallen, it appeared, from the nearest tree — perhaps on a rainy day when the ground was soft, for its weight had dug a shallow crater in which it lay, split apart, revealing large glistening many-angled black seeds in the mass of scarlet pulp.

Valentine could understand why these trees were gods to the forest-brethren. They were vegetable monarchs, imperious, commanding. He was quite willing to sink to his knees before them himself.

Deliamber said, "The fruit is tasty. Intoxicating, in fact, to the human metabolism and to some others."

"To Skandars?" asked Zalzan Gibor.

"To Skandars, yes."

Zalzan Gibor laughed. "We'll try it. Erfon! Thelkar! Gather pieces of the fruit for us!"

Nervously Deliamber said, "The talismans of the forest-brethren are embedded in the ground before each tree. They've been here recently and might return, and if they find us desecrating the grove, they will attack, and their darts can kill."

"Sleet, Carabella, stand guard to the left. Valentine, Shanamir, over there. Cry out if you see even one of the little apes." Zalzan Gibor gestured at his brothers. "Collect the fruits for us," he ordered. "Haern, you and I will defend the situation from here. Wizard, remain with us." Zalzan Gibor took two energy-throwers from a rack and gave one to his brother Haern.

Deliamber clucked and muttered in disapproval. "They move like ghosts, they come out of nowhere —"

"Enough." said Zalzan Gibor.

Valentine, with Shanamir, took up a lookout position ahead of the wagon, and peered warily beyond the last of the dwikka-trees into the dark forest. He expected to have a fatal dart come winging toward him at any moment, and it was an uncomfortable feeling. Erfon Gibor and Thelkar, carrying a big wicker basket between them, made their way apprehensively toward the fallen fruit, pausing every few steps to look in all directions. When they reached it, they began cautiously to edge around to the far side of it, perhaps to see what might be hidden there.

"What if a bunch of forest-brethren are sitting behind that thing right now," Shanamir asked, "having a little feast? Suppose Thelkar stumbles over them and —"

A tremendous and terrifying whoop and a roar, such as might come from an outraged bull-bidlak interrupted in its mating, erupted from the vicinity of the dwikka-fruit. Erfon Gibor, looking panic-stricken, came galloping back into view and rushed toward the wagon, followed a moment later by an equally daunted Thelkar.

"Beasts!" cried a ferocious voice. "Pigs and fathers of pigs! Rape a woman enjoying her lunch, will you? I'll teach you to rape! I'll fix you so you'll never rape again! Stand your ground, hairy animals! Stand, I say, stand!"

Out from behind the dwikka-fruit came the largest human woman Valentine had ever seen, a creature so vast she was a proper companion to these trees and seemed perfectly in scale with them. She stood close to seven feet tall, perhaps more, and her gigantic body was a mountain of flesh rising on legs as sturdy as pillars. A close-fitting shirt and gray leather trousers were her garments, and the shirt was open nearly to the waist, revealing huge jouncing globes of breasts the size of a man's head. Her hair was a mop of wild orange curls; her blazing eyes were pale piercing blue. She carried a vibration-sword of imposing length, which she swung about her with such force that Valentine could feel the breeze it stirred, even from a hundred feet away. Her cheeks and breasts were smeared with the scarlet juice of the dwikka-fruit's meat.

In weighty strides she thundered toward the wagon, crying rape and demanding vengeance.

"What is this?" Zalzan Gibor asked, looking as bemused as Valentine had ever seen him. He glared at his brothers. "What did you do to her?"

"We never touched her," said Erfon Gibor. "We were looking for forest-brethren back there, and Thelkar came upon her unexpectedly, and stumbled, and caught her arm to steady himself —"

"You said you never touched her," Zalzan Gibor snapped.

"Not *that* way. It was only an accident, a stumble."

"Do something," Zalzan Gibor said hastily to Deliamber, for the giant woman was almost upon them now.

The Vroon, looking pale and cheerless, stepped in front of the wagon and lifted many tentacles toward the apparition that towered, almost Skandar-high, above him.

"Peace," Deliamber said mildly to the onrushing giantess. "We mean you no harm." As he spoke he gestured with manic purposefulness, casting some sort of pacifying spell that manifested itself as a faint bluish glow in the air before him. The huge woman appeared to respond to it, for she slowed her advance and managed to come to a

halt a few feet from the wagon.

There she stood, sullenly whipping the vibration-sword back and forth at her side. After a moment she pulled her shirt together in front, fastening it inadequately. Glowering at the Skandars, she indicated Erfon and Thelkar and said in a deep booming voice, "What were those two planning to do to me?"

Deliamber replied, "They had simply gone to collect pieces of the dwikka-fruit. See the basket they were carrying?"

"We had no idea you were there," Thelkar murmured. "We walked around behind the fruit to check for hidden forest-brethren, is all."

"And fell upon me like the oaf you are and would have violated me if I hadn't been armed, eh?"

"I lost my footing," Thelkar insisted. "There was no intention of molesting you. I was on guard for forest-brethren, and when instead I encountered someone of your size —"

"What? More insults?"

Thelkar took a deep breath. "That is to say — it was unexpected when I — when you —"

Erfon Gibor said, "We had no thought —"

Valentine, who had been observing all of this in gathering amusement, but who also found his post at the edge of the forest distressingly exposed, now came over and said, "If they were minded for rape, would they have attempted it in front of so large an audience? We are of your kind here. We wouldn't have tolerated it." He indicated Carabella. "That woman is as fierce in her way as you are in yours, my lady. Be assured that if these Skandars had tried to do you any injury, she alone would have prevented it. It was a simple misunderstanding, nothing more. Put down your weapon and feel no peril among us."

The giantess looked somewhat soothed by the courtliness and charm of Valentine's speech. Slowly she lowered the vibration-sword, allowing it to go inert, and fastened it at her hip.

"Who are you?" she asked querulously. "What is all this procession traveling here?"

"My name is Valentine, and we are traveling jugglers, and this Skandar is Zalzan Gibor, the master of our troupe."

"And I am Lisamon Hultin," the giantess responded, "who hires as bodyguard and warrior, though there's been little of that lately."

"And we are wasting time," said Zalzan Gibor, "and should be on our way, if we are properly forgiven for having intruded on your repose."

Lisamon Hultin nodded brusquely. "Yes, be on your way. But are you aware this is dangerous territory?"

"Forest-brethren?" Valentine asked.

"All over the place. The woods are thick with them, just ahead."

"And yet you feel no fear of them?" Deliamber remarked.

"I speak their language," Lisamon Hultin said. "I have negotiated a private treaty with them. Do you think I'd dare be munching on dwikka-fruit otherwise? I may be fat, but not between the ears, little sorcerer." She stared at Zalzan Gibor. "Where are you bound?"

"Mazadone," replied the Skandar.

"Mazadone? Is there work for you in Mazadone?"

"We hope to learn that," Zalzan Gibor said.

"There's nothing for you there. I come from Mazadone just now. The duke is lately dead and three weeks of mourning have been decreed in the entire province. Or do you jugglers perform at funerals?"

Zalzan Gibor's face darkened. "No work in Mazadone? No work in the whole province? We have expenses to meet! We have already gone unpaid since Dulorn! What will we do?"

Lisamon Hultin spat out a chunk of dwikka-fruit pulp. "That's no sorrow of mine. Anyway, you can't get to Mazadone."

"What?"

"Forest-brethren. They've blocked the road a few miles ahead. Asking tributes of wayfarers, I think, something absurd like that. They won't let you through. Lucky if they don't fill you with their darts."

"They'll let us through!" Zalzan Gibor exclaimed.

The warrior-woman shrugged. "Not without me, they won't."

"You?"

"I told you, I speak their language. I can buy you a way through, with a little haggling. Are you interested? Five royals ought to do it."

"What use do forest-brethren have for money?" the Skandar asked.

"Oh, not for them," she said airily. "Five for me. I'll offer other things to them. Deal?"

"Absurd. Five royals is a fortune!"

"I don't bargain," she said evenly. "There is honor in my profession. Good luck on the road ahead." She favored Thelkar and Gibor Haern with a frigid stare. "If you wish, you may have some of the dwikka-fruit before you go. But better not be munching on it when you meet the brethren!"

She turned with massive dignity and walked to the great fruit beneath the tree. Drawing her sword, she hacked off three large chunks and shoved them disdainfully toward the two Skandars, who somewhat uneasily nudged them into the wicker basket.

Zalzan Gibor said, "Into the wagon, all of you! We have a long way to Mazadone!"

"You won't travel far today," said Lisamon Hultin, and released a gale of derisive laughter. "You'll be back here soon enough — if you survive!"

5.

The poisoned darts of the forest-brethren preoccupied Valentine for the

next few miles. Sudden horrible death held no appeal for him, and the woods here were thick and mysterious, with vegetation of a primordial sort, no leafy flowering plants whatever but only fern trees with silvery spore-sheaths and glassy-textured horsetails a dozen feet high and thickets of bunch-fungus, pale and pocked with brown craters. In a place of such strangeness anything might happen, and probably would.

But the juice of the dwikka-fruit eased tensions mightily. Sleet sliced up one huge chunk and passed cubes of it around: it was piercingly sweet of flavor and granular in texture, dissolving quickly against the tongue, and whatever alkaloids it contained went swiftly through the blood to the brain, faster than the strongest wine. Valentine felt warm and cheerful. He slouched back in the passenger cabin, one arm around Carabella, the other around Shanamir. Up front, Zalzan Gibor evidently was more relaxed as well, for he stepped up the pace of the wagon, pushing it to a rollicking speed not much in keeping with his dour, cautious practices. The usually self-contained Sleet, slicing up more dwikka-fruit, began to sing a rowdy song:

Lord Barhold came to Belka Strand
With crown and chain and pail.
He meant to force old Gornup's hand
And make him eat his -

***

The wagon pulled suddenly to a halt, so suddenly that Sleet lurched forward and came close to falling into Valentine's lap, and a slab of soft wet dwikka-fruit smacked into Valentine's face. Laughing and blinking, he wiped himself clean. When he could see again, he found that everyone was gathered at the front of the wagon, peering out between the Skandars on the driver's seat.

"What is it?" he asked.

"Birdnet vine," said Sleet, sounding quite sober now. "Blocking the road. The giantess told the truth."

Indeed. The sticky, tough red vine had been laced from fern tree to fern tree at a dozen angles, forming a sturdy and resilient chain both broad and thick. The forest flanking the road was altogether impenetrable here; the birdnet vine sealed the highway. There was no way the wagon could proceed.

"How hard is it to cut?" Valentine asked.

Zalzan Gibor said, "We could do it in five minutes with energy-throwers. But look there."

"Forest-brethren," Carabella said softly.

They were everywhere, swarming in the woods, hanging from every tree although getting no closer to the wagon than a hundred yards or so. They seemed less like apes at close range, more like savages of an intelligent species. They were small, naked beings with smooth blue-gray skin and thin limbs. Their hairless heads were

narrow and long, with sloping flat foreheads, and their elongated necks were flimsy and fragile. Their chests were shallow, their frames meatless and bony. All of them, both men and women, wore dart-blowers of reeds strapped to their hips. They pointed at the wagon, chattered to one another, made little hissing whistling sounds.

"What do we do?" Zalzan Gibor asked Deliamber.

"Hire the warrior woman, I would think."

"Never!"

"In that case," said the Vroon; "let us prepare to camp in the wagon until the end of our days or else go back toward Dulorn and find some other road to travel."

"We could parley with them," the Skandar said. "Go out there, wizard. Speak to them in dream-language, monkey-language, Vroon-language, any words that will work. Tell them we have urgent business in Mazadone, that we must perform at the funeral of the duke and they will be severely punished if they delay us."

Deliamber said calmly to Zalzan Gibor, "*You* tell them."

"I?"

"Whichever of us steps out of the wagon first is apt to be skewered by their darts. I prefer to yield the honor. Perhaps they will be intimidated by your great size and hail you as their king. Or perhaps not."

Zalzan Gibor's eyes blazed. "You refuse?"

"A dead sorcerer," Deliamber said, "will not guide you very far on this planet. I know something of these creatures. They are unpredictable and very dangerous. Pick another messenger, Zalzan Gibor. Our contract doesn't require me to risk my life for you."

Zalzan Gibor made his growling sound of displeasure, but he let the issue drop.

Stymied, they sat tight for long minutes. The forest-brethren began to descend from the trees, remaining at a considerable distance from the wagon. Some of them danced and cavorted now in the roadway, setting up a ragged, tuneless chanting, formless and atonal, like the droning of huge insects.

Erfon Gibor said, "A blast from the energy-thrower would scater them. It wouldn't take long for us to incinerate the birdnet vine. And then —"

"And then they'd follow us through the forest, pumping darts at us whenever we showed our faces," said Zalzan Gibor. "No. There may be thousands of them all around us. They see us: we can't see them. We can't hope to win by using force against them." Moodily the big Skandar wolfed down the last of the dwikka-fruit. Again he sat in silence for a few moments, scowling, occasionally shaking fists at the tiny folk blocking the path. At length he said in a bitter rumble, "Mazadone is still some days' journey away, and that woman said there was no work to be

had there anyway. So we'll have to go on to Borgax or maybe even Thagobar, eh, Deliamber? Weeks more before we earn another crown. And here we sit, trapped in the forest by little apes with poisoned darts. Valentine?"

Startled, Valentine said, "Yes?"

"I want you to slip out of the wagon the back way and return to that warrior-woman. Offer her three royals to get us out of this."

"Are you serious?" Valentine asked.

Carabella, with a little gasp, said, "No! I'll go instead!"

"What's this!" said Zalzan Gibor in irritation.

"Valentine is — he is — he gets lost easily, he becomes distracted, he — he might not be able to find —"

"Foolishness," the Skandar said, waving his hands impatiently. "The road is straight. Valentine is strong and quick. And this is dangerous work. You have skills too valuable to risk, Carabella. Valentine will have to go."

"Don't do it," Shanamir whispered.

Valentine hesitated. He had not much liking for the idea of leaving the relative safety of the wagon to travel on foot alone in a forest infested with deadly creatures. But someone had to do it, and not one of the slow, ponderous Skandars. To Zalzan Gibor he was the most expendable member of the troupe; perhaps he was. Perhaps he was expendable even to himself.

He said, "The warrior-woman told us her price was five royals."

"Offer her three."

"And if she refuses? She said it was against her honor to bargain."

"Three," Zalzan Gibor said. "Five royals is an immense fortune. Three is an absurd enough price to pay."

"You want me to run miles through a dangerous forest to offer someone an inadequate price for a job that absolutely must be done?"

"Are you refusing?"

"Pointing out folly," said Valentine. "If I'm to risk my life, there must be the hope of achievement. Give me five royals for her."

"Bring her back here," the Skandar said, "and I'll negotiate with her."

"Bring her back yourself," said Valentine.

Zalzan Gibor considered that. Carabella, tense and pale, sat shaking her head. Sleet warned Valentine with his eyes to hold his position. Shanamir, red-faced, trembling, seemed about ready to burst forth with anger. Valentine wondered if this time he had pushed the Skandar's always volatile temper too far.

Zalzan Gibor's fur stirred as though spasms of rage were contorting his mighty muscles. He seemed to be holding himself in check by furious effort. Doubtless Valentine's latest show of independence had enraged him almost to the boiling point; but there was a glint of calculation in the Skandar's eyes, as though he were weighing the impact of Valentine's open defiance against the

need he had for Valentine to do this service. Perhaps he was even asking himself whether his thrift might be foolishness here.

After a long tense pause Zalzan Gibor let out his breath in an explosive hiss and, scowling, reached for his purse. Sourly he counted out the five gleaming one-royal pieces.

"Here," he grunted. "And hurry."

"I'll go as fast as I can."

"If running is too great a burden," said Zalzan Gibor, "go out the front way and ask the forest-brethren if you may have leave to unhitch one of our mounts and ride back to her in comfort. But do it quickly, whichever you choose."

"I'll run," Valentine replied and began to unfasten the wagon's rear window.

His shoulderblades itched in anticipation of the thwock of a dart between them the moment he emerged. But no thwocks came, and soon he was running lightly and easily down the road. The forest that had looked so sinister from the wagon looked much less so now, the vegetation unfamiliar but hardly ominous, not even the pock-marked bunch-fungus, and the fern trees seemed nothing but elegant as their spore-sheaths glistened in the afternoon sun. His long legs moved in steady rhythm, and his heart pumped uncomplainingly. As he set out, Valentine found himself annoyed by Zalzan Gibor's stubbornness and greed, as well as his blithe willingness to risk the life of others; for none of this run was at all necessary. But his essential good nature soon obliterated such thoughts, and in any event the running itself was relaxing, almost hypnotic, as soothing to him as juggling.

He ran a long while, paying no heed to time and distance, until it seemed he surely must have gone far enough. But how could he have run unknowingly past anything so conspicuous as five dwikka-trees? Had he carelessly taken some fork in the road and lost the path? It seemed unlikely. So he simply ran on, and on and on, until eventually the monstrous trees, with the great fallen fruit beneath the closest of them, came into view.

But where was Liasmon Hultin? The giantess seemed nowhere around. He called out her name, he peered behind the dwikka-fruit, he made a circuit of the entire grove. Nothing. In dismay he contemplated running onward, back halfway to Dulorn, maybe, to find her. Now that he had stopped, he felt the effects of his job: muscles were protesting in his calves and thighs, and his heart was thumping in an unpleasant way. He had no appetite for more running just now.

But then he caught sight of a mount tethered a few hundred yards back of the dwikka-tree grove — an oversize beast, broad-backed and thick-legged, suitable for carrying Lisamon Hultin's bulk. He went to it and looked beyond and saw a roughly hacked trail leading toward running water.

Valentine followed it. The ground sloped off sharply and gave way to a jagged cliff. He peered over the edge. A stream emerged from the forest here and tumbled down the face of the cliff to land in a rock basin perhaps forty feet below; and alongside that pool, sunning herself after a bath, was Lisamon Hultin. She lay face down, her vibration-sword close beside her. Her vast body was bare. Valentine looked with awe at her wide muscular shoulders, her powerful arms, the massive columns of her legs, the great dimpled globes of her buttocks.

He called to her.

She rolled over at once, sat up, looked about her.

"Up here," he said. She glanced in his direction and discreetly he turned his head away, but she only laughed at his modesty. Rising, she reached for her clothing in a casual, unhurried way.

"You," she said. "The gentle-spoken one. Valentine. You can come down here. I'm not afraid of you."

"I know you dislike being disturbed at your repose," Valentine said mildly, picking his way down the steep rocky path. By the time he had reached the bottom, she had her trousers on and was struggling to pull her shirt over her mighty breasts. He said, "we came to the roadblock."

"Of course."

"We need to get on to Mazadone. The Skandar has sent me to hire you." Valentine produced Zalzan Gibor's five royals. "Will you help us?"

She eyed the shining coins in his hand.

"The price is seven and a half."

Valentine pursed his lips. "You told us five, before."

"That was before."

"The Skandar has given me only five royals to pay you."

She shrugged and began to unfasten her shirt. "In that case, I'll continue to sunbathe. You may stay or not, as you wish, but keep your distance."

Quietly Valentine said, "When the Skandar tried to beat down your price, you refused to bargain, telling him that there is honor in your profession. My notion of honor would require me to abide by a price, once I quoted it."

She put her hands to her hips and laughed, a laugh so vociferous he thought it would blow him away. He felt like a plaything beside her: she outweighed him by more than a hundred pounds and stood at least a head taller. She said, "How brave you are, or how stupid! I could destroy you with a slap of my hand, and you stand her lecturing me about faults of honor!"

"I think you wouldn't harm me."

She studied him with new interest. "Perhaps not. But you take risks, fellow. I offend easily and I do more damage than I intend, sometimes, when I lose my temper."

"Be that as it may. We have to get to Mazadone, and only you can call off the forest-brethren. The Skandar will

pay five royals and no more." Valentine knelt and put the five brilliant coins in a row on the rock by the pool. "However, I have a little money of my own. If it'll settle the issue, I'll add that to the fee." He fished in his purse until he found a royal piece, found another, laid a half-crown beside it, and looked up hopefully.

"Five will be enough," Lisamon Hultin said.

She scooped up Zalzan Gibor's coins, left Valentine's, and went scrambling up the path.

"Where's your mount?" she asked, untethering her own.

"I came on foot."

"On foot? On *foot?* You ran all that way?" She peered at him. "What a loyal employee you are! Does he pay you well, to give such service and take such risks?"

"Not particularly."

"No, I suppose not. Well, climb on behind me. This beast would never even notice a little extra weight."

She clambered onto the mount, which, though large for its kind, seemed dwarfed and frail once she was on it. Valentine, after some hesitation, got on behind her and clamped his hands around her waist. For all her bulk, there was nothing fat about her: solid muscle lay girdling her hips.

The mount cantered out of the dwikka-tree grove and down the road. The wagon, when they came to it, was still shut up tight, and forest-brethren still danced and chattered in and around the trees behind the blockade.

They dismounted. Lisamon Hultin walked without sign of fear to the front of the wagon and called something to the forest-brethren in a high, shrill voice. There was a reply of similar pitch from the trees. Again she called; again she was answered; then a long, feverish colloquy ensued, with many brief expostulations and interjections.

She turned to Valentine. "They will open the gate for you," she said. "For a fee."

"How much?"

"Not money. Services."

"What services can we render for forest-brethren?"

She said, "I told them you are jugglers, and I explained what it is that jugglers do. They'll let you proceed if you'll perform for them. Otherwise, they intend to kill you and make toys of your bones, but not today, for today is a holy day among the forest-brethren and they kill no one on holy days. My advice to you is to perform for them, but do as you wish." She added, "The poison that they use does not act particularly quickly."

6.

Zalzan Gibor was indignant — perform for monkeys? perform without fee? — but Deliamber pointed out that the forest-brethren were somewhat higher on the evolutionary scale than monkeys, and Sleet observed that they

had not had their practice today and the workout would do them some good, and Erfon Gibor clinched the matter by arguing that it would not in any way be a free performance, since it could be looked upon as being traded for free passage through this part of the forest, which these creatures effectively controlled. And in any case they had no choice in the matter: so out they came, with clubs and balls and sickles, but not the torches, for Deliamber suggested that the torches might frighten the forest-brethren and cause them to do unpredictable things. In the clearest space they could find they began to juggle.

The forest-brethren watched raptly. Hundreds upon hundreds of them trooped out of the forest and squatted alongside the road, staring, nibbling their fingers and their slender prehensile tails, making soft chittering comments to one another. The Skandars interchanged sickles and knives and clubs and hatchets, Valentine whirled clubs aloft, Sleet and Carabella performed with elegance and distinction, and an hour went by, and another, and the sun began to slink off in the direction of Pidruid, and still the forest-brethren watched, and still the jugglers juggled, and nothing was done about unwinding the birdnet vine from the tres.

"Do we play for them all night?" Zalzan Gibor demanded.

"Hush," said Deliamber. "Give no offense. Our lives are in their hands."

They used the opportunity to rehearse new routines. Presumably the forest-brethren would not be critical of occasional bungles; and so Valentine worked with Sleet and Carabella on the interchange of clubs, not without drawing close scrutiny from Zalzan Gibor. The Skandars polished an interception number, stealing throws from one another in a way that was comical in beings so huge and fierce. Sleet and Valentine threw clubs rapidly at one another while first Carabella and then Shanamir turned handsprings daringly between them. And so it went, on into a third hour, "These forest-brethren have had five royals' worth of entertainment from us already," Zalzan Gibor grumbled. "When does this end?"

"You juggle very capably," said Lisamon Hultin. "They enjoy your show immensely. I enjoy it myself."

"How pleasant for you," Zalzan Gibor said sourly.

Twilight was approaching. Apparently the coming of darkness signaled shift in mood for the forest-brethren, for without warning they lost interest in the performance. Five of them, of presence and authority, came forward and set about ripping down the barricade of birdnet vine. Their small sharp-fingered hands dealt easily with the stuff, that would have tangled anyone else hopelessly in snarls of sticky fiber. In a few minutes the way was clear, and the forest-brethren, chattering, faded into the darkness.

"Have you wine?" Lisamon Hultin asked, as the jugglers gathered their gear and prepared to move along. "All this watching has given me a powerful thirst."

Zalzan Gibor began to say something miserly about supplies running low, but too late: Carabella, with a sharp glare at her employer, produced a flask. The warrior-woman tipped it back, draining it in one long lusty gulp. She wiped her lips with the sleeve of her shirt and belched.

"Not bad," she said. "Dulornese?"

Carabella nodded.

"Those Ghayrogs know how to drink, snakes that they are! You won't find anything like it in Mazadone."

Zalzan Gibor said, "Three weeks of mourning, you say?"

"No less. All public amusements forbidden. Yellow mourning-stripes on every door."

"Of what did the duke die?" Sleet asked.

The giantess shrugged. "Some say it was a sending from the King, that frightened him to death, and others that he choked on a gobbet of meat, and still others that he indulged in an excess with three of his concubines. Does it matter? He's dead, that's not to be disputed, and the rest is trifles."

"And no work to be had," said Zalzan Gibor gloomily.

"No, nothing as far as Thagobar and beyond."

"Weeks without earnings," the Skandar muttered.

Lisamon Hultin said, "It must be unfortunate for you. But I know where you could find good wages just beyond Thagobar."

"Yes," Zalzan Gibor said. "In Khyntor, I suppose."

"Khyntor? No, times are lean there, I hear. A poor harvest of clennet-puffs this summer, and the merchants have tightened credit, and I think there's little money to be spent on entertainments. No, I speak of Ilirivoyne."

"*What?*" Sleet cried, as though he had been struck by a dart.

Valentine sorted through his knowledge, came up with nothing, and whispered to Carabella, "Where's that?"

"Southeast of Khyntor."

"But southeast of Khyntor is the Metamorph territory."

"Exactly," she said.

Zalzan Gibor's heavy features took on an animated cast for the first time since encountering the roadblock. He swung round and said, "What work is there for us in Ilirivoyne?"

"The Shapeshifters hold festival there next month," Lisamon Hultin replied. "There'll be harvest-dancing and contests of many kinds and merry-making. I've heard that sometimes troupes from the imperial provinces enter the reservation and earn huge sums at festival time. The Shapeshifters regard imperial money lightly and are quick to dispose of it."

"Indeed," Zalzan Gibor said. The chilly light of greed played across his

face. "I had heard the same thing, long ago. But it never occurred to me to test its truth."

"You'll test it without me!" Sleet cried suddenly.

The Skandar glanced at him. "Eh?"

Sleet showed intense strain, as though he had been doing his blind juggling routine all afternoon. His lips were taut and bloodless, his eyes were fixed and unnaturally bright. "If you go to Ilirivoyne," he said tensely, "I will not accompany you."

"I remind you of our contract," said Zalzan Gibor.

"Nevertheless. Nothing in it obliges me to follow you into Metamorph territory. Imperial law is not valid there, and our contract lapses the moment we enter the reservation. I have no love for the Shapeshifters and refuse to risk my life and soul in their province."

"We'll talk about this later, Sleet."

"My response will be the same later."

Zalzan Gibor looked about the circle. "Enough of this. We've lost hours here. I thank you for your help," he said without warmth to Lisamon Hultin.

"I wish you a profitable journey," she said and rode off into the forest.

Because they had consumed so much time at the roadblock, Zalzan Gibor chose to keep the wagon moving through the night, contrary to his usual practice. It mattered very little to Valentine; exhausted by a lengthy run and hours of juggling, and feeling some lingering haziness from the dwikka-fruit he had eaten, he fell asleep sitting up in the back of the wagon and knew nothing more until morning. The last he heard before consciousness left him was a forceful discussion of the notion of venturing into Metamorph territory: Deliamber suggesting that the perils of Ilirivoyne had been exaggerated by rumor, Carabella noting that Zalzan Gibor would be justified in prosecuting Sleet, and expensively, if he broke his contract, and Sleet insisting with almost hysterical conviction that he dreaded the Metamorphs and would not go within a thousand miles of them. Shanamir too expressed fear of the Shapeshifters. Valentine was unconcerned: he knew little of the Metamorphs, other than that they were reputed to be a sullen and resentful folk who practiced all sorts of trickery against those who had conquered their planet; but in any case he was bound by treaty with Zalzan Gibor to make no further interferences in the Skandar's choice of a route, and thought it unwise to test that treaty.

He woke, aware of having had a few vague and formless dreams, to find himself nestled cozily in Carabella's lap. Bright sunlight streamed into the wagon. They were camped in some broad and pleasant park, a place of sweeping blue-gray lawns and narrow sharp-angled trees of great height. Low rounded hills surrounded everything.

"Where are we?" he asked.

"Outskirts of Mazadone. The

Skandar drove like a madman all night long." Carabella laughed prettily. "And you slept like one who has been dead a long time."

Outside, Zalzan Gibor and Sleet were engaged in heated argument a few yards from the wagon, undoubtedly over the Ilirivoyne proposal. The small white-haired man seemed half again his normal size with rage. He paced back and forth, pounded fist into palm, shouted, scuffed at the ground, once seemed at the verge of launching a physical attack on the Skandar, who seemed, for Zalzan Gibor, remarkably calm and forbearing. He stood with all his arms folded, looming high over Sleet and making only an occasional quiet cold reply to his outbursts.

Carabella turned to Deliamber. "This has continued long enough. Wizard, can you intervene, before Sleet says something really rash?"

The Vroon looked melancholy. "Sleet has a terror of the Metamorphs that goes beyond all reason. Perhaps it's connected with that sending of the King that he had, long ago in Narabal, that turned his hair white in a single evening. Or perhaps not. It may be wisest for him to withdraw from the troupe, whatever the consequences."

"But we need him!"

"And if he thinks terrible things will befall him in Ilirivoyne? Can we ask him to subject himself to such fears?"

"Perhaps I can calm him," Valentine said.

He rose to go outside, but at that instant Sleet, face dark and set, stormed into the wagon. Without a word the compact little juggler began to stuff his few possessions into a pack; then he swept out, his fury unabated, and, striding past the motionless Zalzan Gibor, began to march at a startling clip toward the low hills to the north. In moments he was far from the wagon.

Helplessly they watched him. No one made a move to pursue until Sleet was nearly out of sight. Then Carabella said, "I'll go after him. I can get him to change his mind."

She ran off toward the hills.

Zalzan Gibor called to her as she went past him, but she ignored him. The Skandar, shaking his head, summoned the others from the wagon.

"Where is she going?" he asked.

"To try to bring Sleet back," said Valentine.

"Hopeless. Sleet has chosen to leave the troupe. I'll see to it that he regrets his defection. Valentine, greater responsibilities now will fall upon you, and I'll add five crowns a week to your salary. Is this acceptable? Carabella will train you to do some of Sleet's numbers."

Valentine nodded. He thought of Sleet's quiet, steady presence in the troupe, and felt a pang of loss.

The Skandar continued, "Deliamber, I have, as you might suspect, decided to seek work for us among the Metamorphs. Are you fam-

iliar with the routes to Ilirivoyne?"

"I have never been there," the Vroon answered. "But I know where it is."

"And which is the quickest way?"

"To Khyntor from here, I think, and then eastward by riverboat some four hundred miles, and at Verf there's a road due south into the reservation. Not a smooth road, but wide enough for the wagon, so I believe. I will study it."

"And how long will it take for us to reach Ilirivoyne, then?"

"Perhaps a month, if there are no delays."

"Just in time for the Metamorph festival," said Zalzan Gibor. "Perfect! What delays do you anticipate?"

Deliamber said, "The usual. Natural disasters, breakdown of the wagon, local disturbances, criminal interferences. Things are not as orderly in midcontinent as they are on the coasts. There are risks involved in traveling in those parts."

"You bet there are!" boomed a familiar voice. "Protection is what you need!"

The formidable presence of Lisamon Hultin suddenly was among them.

She looked rested and relaxed, not at all as though she had ridden all night, nor was her mount particularly spent. In a puzzled voice Zalzan Gibor said, "How did you get here so quickly?"

"Forest trails. I'm big, but not so big as your wagon, and I can take back ways. Going to Ilirivoyne, are you?"

"Yes," said the Skandar.

"Good. I knew you would. And I've come after you to offer my services. I'm out of work, you're going into dangerous parts — it's a logical partnership. I'll escort you safely to Ilirivoyne, that I guarantee!"

"Your wages are too high for us."

She grinned. "You think I always get five royals for a little job like that? I charged so much because you made me angry, tromping in on me while I was trying to have a private feed. And because you had no choice but to pay me. I'll get you to Ilirivoyne for another five, no matter how long it takes."

"Three," said Zalzan Gibor sternly.

"You never learn, do you?" The giantess spat almost at the Skandar's feet. "I don't haggle. Get yourselves to Ilirivoyne without me, and good fortune attended you. Though I doubt it will." She winked at Valentine. "Where are the other two?"

"Sleet refused to go to Ilirivoyne. He went roaring out of here ten minutes ago."

"I don't blame him. And the woman?"

"She went after him, to talk him into returning. Up there." Valentine pointed to the path winding up into the hills.

"There?"

"Between that hill and that."

"Into the mouthplant grove?"; There was disbelief in Lisamon's voice.

"What is that?" Valentine asked.

"The park is dedicated to them," the giantess declared. "But there are warning signs at the foot of the hills. They went up that trail? On foot? The Divine protect them!"

Exasperated, Zalzan Gibor said, "They can eat him twice, for all I care. But I need her!"

"As do I," said Valentine. To the warrior-woman he said, "Possibly if we rode up there now, we could find them before they enter the mouthplant grove."

"Your master feels he can't afford my services."

"Five royals?" Zalzan Gibor said. "From here to Ilirivoyne?"

"Six," she said coolly.

"Six, then. But get them back! Get her, at least!"

"Yes," said Lisamon Hultin in disgust. "You people have no sense, but I have no work, so we deserve each other, perhaps. Take one of those mounts," she said to Valentine, "and follow me."

"You want him to go?" Zalzan Gibor wailed. "I'll have no humans at all in my troupe!"

"I'll bring him back," the giantess said. "And, with luck, the other two also." She clambered onto her mount. "Come," she said.

7.

The path into the hills was gently sloping, and the blue-gray grass looked soft as velvet. It was hard to believe that anything menacing dwelled in this elegant park. But as they reached the place where the path began to rise at a sharper angle, Lisamon Hultin grunted and indicated a bare wooden stake set in the ground. Beside it, half hidden in the grass, was a fallen sign. Valentine saw only the words

DANGER
NO FOOT TRAFFIC
BEYOND THIS

in large red letters. Sleet, in his rage, had not noticed; Carabella, perhaps in her urgent haste, had failed to see the sign also, or else had ignored it.

Quickly now the path climbed, and just as quickly it leveled off on the far side of the hills, in a place that was no longer grassy but densely wooded. Lisamon Hultin, riding just ahead of Valentine, slowed her mount to a walk as they entered a moist and mysterious copse where trees with slender, strong-ribbed trunks grew at wide intervals, shooting up like beanstalks to create a thickly interlaced canopy far overhead.

"See, there, the first mouthplants," the giantess said "Filthy things! If I had the keeping of this planet, I'd put the torch to all of them, but our Coronals tend to be nature-lovers, so it seems, and preserve them in royal parks. Pray that your friends have had the wisdom to stay clear of them!"

On the bare forest floor, in the open spaces between the trees, grew stemless plants of colossal size. Their leaves, four or five inches broad and

eight or nine feet in length, sharp-toothed along their sides and metallic of texture, were arranged in loose rosettes. At the center of each gaped a deep cup a foot in diameter, half filled with a noxious-looking greenish fluid, out of which a complex array of stubby organs projected. It seemed to Valentine that there were things like knife-blades in there, and paired grinders that could come together nastily, and still other things that might have been delicate flowers partly submerged.

"These are flesh-eating plants," Lisamon Hultin said. "The forest floor is underlain by their hunting tendrils, which sense the presence of small animals, capture them, and carry them to the mouth. Observe."

She guided her mount toward the closest of the mouthplants. When the animal was still at least twenty feet from it, something like a live whip suddenly began to writhe in the decaying forest duff and broke free of the ground to coil itself with a terrifying snapping sound around the animal's pastern just above the hoof. The mount, placid as usual, sniffed in puzzlement as the tendril began to exert pressure, trying to pull it toward the gaping mouth in the plant's central cup.

The warrior-woman, drawing her vibration-sword, leaned down and sliced quickly through the tendril. It snapped back as the tension was released, almost to the cup itself, and at the same time a dozen other tendrils rose from the ground, flailing the air furiously on all sides of the plant.

She said, "The mouthplant lacks the strength to tug anything so big as a mount into its maw, especially if I happen to be sitting astride it. But the mount wouldn't be able to break free, and in time it would weaken and die, and then it might be pulled in. One of these plants would live for a year on that much meat."

Valentine shuddered. Carabella, lost in a forest of such things? Her lovely voice stilled forever by some ghastly plant? Her quick hands, her sparkling eyes — no. No. The thought chilled him.

"How can we find them?" he asked. "It might already be too late"

"How are they called?" the giantess asked. "Shout their names. They must be near."

"Carabella!" Valentine roared with desperate urgency. *"Sleet! Carabella!"*

A moment later he heard a faint answering shout; but the giantess had heard it first and was already going forward. Valentine saw Sleet ahead, down on one knee on the forest floor, and that knee dug in deep to keep him from being dragged into a mouthplant by the tendril that encircled his other ankle. Crouching behind him was Carabella, her arms thrust through his and hooked tight around his chest in a desperate attempt to hold him back. All about them excited tendrils belonging to neighboring plants snapped and coiled in frustration. Sleet held a knife,

with which he sawed uselessly at the powerful cable that held him; and there was a trail of skid marks in the duff, showing that he had already been drawn four or five feet toward the waiting mouth. Inch by inch he was losing the struggle for his life.

"Help us!" Carabella called.

With a stroke of her sword Lisamon Hultin severed the tendril grasping Sleet. He recoiled sharply as he was freed, toppling backward and coming within an eyeblink of being seized around the throat by the tendril of another plant; but with an acrobat's easy grace he rolled over, avoiding the groping filament, and sprang to his feet. The warrior-woman caught him about the chest and lifted him quickly to a place behind her on her mount. Valentine now approached Carabella, who stood shaken and trembling in a safe place between two sets of thrashing tendrils, and did the same for her.

She clung to him so tightly that his ribs protested. He twisted himself around and embraced her, stroking her gently, nuzzling her ear with his lips. His relief was overwhelming and startling: he had not realized how much she had come to mean to him, nor how little he had cared about anything just now except that she was all right. Gradually her terror subsided, but he could feel her still quivering at the horror of the scene. "Another minute," she whispered. "Sleet was starting to lose his foothold — I could feel him slipping toward that plant —" Carabella winced. "Where did she come from?"

"She took some shortcut through the forest. Zalzan Gibor has hired her to protect us on the way to Ilirivoyne."

"She's already earned her fee," Carabella said.

"Follow me," Lisamon Hultin ordered.

She chose a careful route out of the mouthplant grove, but for all her care her mount was seized twice by the leg, and Valentine's once. Each time, the giantess cut the tendril away, and in moments they were out into the clearing and riding back down the path toward the wagon. A cheer went up from the Skandars as they reappeared.

Zalzan Gibor regarded Sleet coldly. "You chose an unwise route for your departure," he observed.

"Not nearly so unwise as the one you've picked," said Sleet. "I beg you excuse me. I will go on toward Mazadone by foot and seek some sort of employment there."

"Wait," Valentine said.

Sleet looked at him inquiringly.

"Let's talk. Come walk with me."

Valentine laid his arm over the smaller man's shoulders and drew him aside, off into a grassy glade, before Zalzan Gibor could provoke some new wrath in him. Sleet was tense, wary, guarded. "What is it, Valentine?"

"I was instrumental in getting Zalzan Gibor to hire the giantess. But for that, you'd be tidbits for the mouthplant now."

"For that I thank you."

"I want more than thanks from you," said Valentine. "It could be said that you're indebted to me for your life, in a way."

"That may be."

"Then I ask by way of repayment that you withdraw your resignation."

Sleet's eyes flashed. "You don't know what you ask!"

"The Metamorphs are strange and unsympathetic creatures, yes. But Deliamber says they're not as menacing as often reported. Stay with the troupe, Sleet."

"You think I'm being whimsical in quitting?"

"Not at all. But irrational, perhaps."

Sleet shook his head. "I had a sending from the King, once, in which a Metamorph imposed on me a terrible fate. One listens to such sendings. I have no desire to go near the place where those beings dwell."

"Sendings don't always bear the literal truth."

"Agreed. But often they do. Valentine, the King told me I would have a wife that I loved more dearly than my art itself, a wife who juggled with me the way Carabella does, but far more closely, so much in tune with my rhythms that it was as if we were one person." Sweat broke out on Sleet's scarred face, and he faltered and almost did not go on, but after a moment he said, "I dreamed, Valentine, that the Shapeshifters came one day and stole that wife of mine, and substituted for her one of their own people, disguised so cunningly that I couldn't tell the difference. And that night, I dreamed, we performed before the Coronal, before Lord Malibor that ruled then and drowned soon after, and our juggling was perfection, it was a harmony unequaled in all of my life, and the Coronal feasted us with fine meats and wines and gave us a bedchamber draped with silks, and I took her in my arms and began to make love, and as I entered her she changed before me and was a Metamorph in my bed, a thing of horror, Valentine, with rubbery gray skin and gristle instead of teeth and eyes like dirty puddles, who kissed me and pressed close against me. I have not sought the body of a woman," Sleet said, "since that night, out of dread that some such thing might befall me in the embrace. Nor have I told this story to anyone. Nor can I bear the prospect of going to Ilirivoyne and finding myself surrounded by creatures with Shapeshifter faces and Shapeshifter bodies."

Compassion flooded Valentine's spirit at Sleet's ghastly story. In silence he held the smaller man for a moment, as if with the strength of his arms alone he could eradicate the memory of the horrific nightmare that had maimed his soul. When he released him, Valentine said slowly, "Such a dream is truly terrible. But we are taught to use our dreams, not to let ourselves be crushed by them."

"This one is beyond my using, friend. Except to warn me to stay clear of Metamorphs."

"You take it too straightforwardly. What if something more oblique was intended? Did you have the dream spoken, Sleet?"

"It seemed unnecessary."

"It was you who urged me to see a speaker, when I dreamed strangely in Pidruid! I remember your very words. The King never sends simple messages, you said."

Sleet offered an ironic smile. "We are always better doctors for others than for ourselves, Valentine. In any event, it's too late to have a fifteen-year-old dream spoken, and I am its prisoner now."

"Free yourself!"

"How?"

"When a child has a dream that he is falling, and awakens in fright, what does its parent say? That falling dreams are not to be taken seriously, because one doesn't really get hurt in dreams? Or that the child should be thankful for a falling dream, because such a dream is a good dream, that it speaks of power and strength, that the child was not falling but flying, to a place where he would have learned something, if he had not allowed anxiety and fear to shake him loose of the dream-world?"

"That the child should be thankful for the dream," said Sleet.

"Indeed. And so too with all other 'bad' dreams: we must not be frightened, they tell us, but be grateful for the wisdom of dreams, and act on it."

"So children are told, yes. Even so, adults don't always handle such dreams better than children. I recall some cries and whimpers coming from you in your sleep of late, Valentine."

"I try to learn from my dreams, however dark they may be."

"What do you want from me, Valentine?"

"That you come with us to Ilirivoyne."

"Why is that so important to you?"

Valentine said, "You belong to this troupe. We are a whole with you and broken without you."

"The Skandars are masterly jugglers. It hardly matters what the human performers contribute. Carabella and I are with the troupe for the same reason as you, to comply with a stupid law. You'll earn your pay whether I'm with you or not."

"I learn the art from you, though."

"You can learn from Carabella. She's as skilled as I am, and is your lover besides, who knows you better than I ever could. And the Divine spare you," said Sleet in a sudden terrifying voice, "from losing her to the Shapeshifters in Ilirivoyne!"

"It isn't something I fear," said Valentine. He extended his hands toward Sleet. "I could continue my training with Carabella alone, yes. And you aren't essential to the quality of the troupe, I suppose. But I would have you remain with us."

"*Why?*"

"I value you.'"

"And I value you, Valentine. But it would give me great pain to go where Zalzan Gibor would have us go. Why is it so urgent for you to insist on my enduring that pain?"

"You might be healed of that pain," said Valentine, "if you go to Ilirivoyne and find that the Metamorphs are only harmless primitives."

"I can live with my pain," Sleet replied. "The price of that healing seems too high."

"We can live with the most horrible wounds. Buy why not attempt to cure them."

"There is some other thing not being spoken here, Valentine."

Valentine paused and let his breath out slowly. "Yes," he said.

"What is it, then?"

With some hesitation Valentine said, "Sleet, have I figured in your dreams at all, since we met in Pidruid?"

"You have, yes."

"In what way?"

"How does this matter?"

"Have you dreamed," said Valentine, "that I might be somewhat unusual on Majipoor, someone of more distinction and power than I myself comprehend?"

"Your bearing and poise told me that at our first meeting. And the phenomenal skill with which you learned our art. And the content of your own dreams that you've shared with me. But, yes — I have had dreams of you."

"And who am I, in those dreams, Sleet?"

"A person of might and grace, fallen through deceit from his high position. A duke, maybe. A prince of the realm."

"Or higher?"

Sleet licked his lips. "Higher, yes. Perhaps. What do you want with me, Valentine?"

"To accompany me to Ilirivoyne and beyond."

"Do you tell me that there's truth in what I've dreamed?"

"This I'm yet to learn," said Valentine. "But I think there's truth in it, yes. I feel more and more strongly that there must be truth in it. Sendings tell me there's truth in it."

"My lord —" Sleet whispered.

"I remain Valentine the juggler."

"I am frightened now, my lord. I came within a minute of a foul death today, and this frightens me more, to stand here quietly talking with you about these things."

"Call me Valentine."

"How can I?" Sleet asked.

"You called me Valentine five minutes ago."

"That was before."

"Nothing has changed, Sleet."

Sleet shook the idea away. "Everything has changed, my lord."

Valentine sighed heavily. He felt like an impostor, like a fraud, manipulating Sleet in this way, and yet

there seemed purpose to it, and genuine need. "If everything has changed, then will you follow me as I command? Even to Ilirivoyne?"

"If I must," said Sleet, dazed.

"No harm of the kind you fear will come to you among the Metamorphs. You'll emerge from their country healed of the pain that has racked you. You don't believe that, do you, Sleet?"

"It frightens me to go there."

"I need you by me in what lies ahead," said Valentine. "And through no choice of mine, Ilirivoyne has become part of my journey. I ask you to follow me there."

Sleet bowed his head. "If I must, my lord."

"And I ask you, by the same compulsion, to call me Valentine and show me no more respect in front of the others than you would have shown me yesterday."

"As you wish," Sleet said.

"*Valentine.*"

"Valentine," said Sleet reluctantly. "As you wish — Valentine."

"Come, then."

He led Sleet back to the group. Zalzan Gibor was, as usual, pacing impatiently; the others were preparing the wagon for departure. To the Skandar Valentine said, "I've talked Sleet into withdrawing his resignation. He'll accompany us to Ilirivoyne."

Zalzan Gibor looked altogether dumbfounded. "How did you manage to do that?"

With a cheerful smile Valentine said "It would be tedious to explain, I think."

8.

The pace of the journey now accelerated, for there would be no reason to stop again until the land of the Metamorphs. All day long the wagon purred along the highway, and sometimes well into the evening. Lisamon Hultin rode alongside, though her mount, sturdy as it was, needed more rest than those that drew the wagon, and occasionally she fell behind, catching up as opportunity allowed: carrying her heroic bulk was no easy task for any animal.

On they went through a tamed province of city after city, broken only by modest belts of greenery that barely obeyed the letter of the density laws. This province of Mazadone was more heavily populated than most on Zimroel, especially in the central part of the continent. It was a place where commercial pursuits kept many millions employed, for Mazadone was gateway to all the territories of northwestern Zimroel for goods coming from the east, and the chief transshipment point for overland conveyance of merchandise of Pidruid and Til-omon heading eastward. In these long days of travel they passed quickly in and

out of a host of interchangeable and forgettable cities, Cynthion and Apoortel and Doirectine, Mazadone city itself, Borgax and Thagobar beyond it, all of them subdued and quiescent during the mourning period for the late duke, and strips of yellow dangling everywhere as a sign of sorrow. It seemed to Valentine a heavy thing to shut down an entire province for the death of a duke. What would these people do, he wondered, over the death of a Pontifex? How had they responded to the premature passing of the Coronal Lord Voriax two years ago? But perhaps they took the going of their local duke more seriously, he thought, for he was a visible figure, real and present among them, whereas to people of Zimroel, thousands of miles separated from Castle Mount or Labyrinth, the Powers of Majipoor must seem largely abstract figures, mythical, legendary, immaterial. On a planet so large as this, no central authority could govern with real efficiency, only symbolic control; Valentine suspected that much of the stability of Majipoor depended on a social contract whereby the local governors — the provincial dukes and the municipal mayors — agreed to enforce and support the edicts of the imperial government, provided that they were ordinarily allowed to do as they pleased within their own territories.

How, he asked himself, can such a contract be upheld when the Coronal is not the anointed and dedicated prince, but some usurper, lacking in the grace of the Divine through which such fragile social constructs are sustained?

He found himself thinking more and more upon such matters during the long, quiet, monotonous hours of the eastward journey. Such thoughts surprised him with their seriousness, for he had grown accustomed to the lightness and simplicity of his mind since the early days of Pidruid, and he could feel a progressive enrichment and growing complexity of mental powers now. It was as if whatever spell had been laid upon him was wearing thin and his true intellect was beginning to emerge.

If, that is, any such magic had actually befallen him as his gradually forming hypothesis required.

He was still uncertain, but his doubts were weakening from day to day.

In dreams now he often saw himself in positions of authority. One night it was he, not Zalzan Gibor, who led the band of jugglers; on another he presided in princely robes over some high council of the Metamorphs, whom he saw as eerie foglike wraiths that would not hold the same shape more than a minute at a time; a night later he had a vision of himself in the marketplace at Thagobar, dispensing justice to the cloth sellers and vendors of bangles in their noisy little disputes.

"You see?" Carabella said. "All

these dreams speak of power and majesty."

"Power? Majesty? Sitting on a barrel in a market and expounding on equity to dealers in cotton and linen?"

"In dreams many things are translated. These visions are metaphors of high might."

Valentine smiled. But he had to admit the plausibility of the interpretation.

And not all that is seen in dreams has the form of metaphor and parable. One night, as they were nearing the city of Khyntor, there came to him a most explicit vision of his supposed former life. He was in a room paneled with the finest and rarest of woods, glistening strips of semotan and bannikop and rich dark swamp mahogany, and he sat before a sharp-angled desk of burnished palisander, signing documents. The starburst crest was at his right hand; obsequious secretaries hovered about; and the enormous curving window before him revealed an open gulf of air, as though it looked out upon the titanic slope of Castle Mount. Was this a fantasy? Or was it some fugitive fragment of the buried past that had broken free and come floating up in his sleep to approach the surface of his conscious mind? He described the office and the desk to Carabella and to Deliamber, hoping they could tell him how the office of the Coronal looked in reality, but they had no more idea of that than they did of what the Pontifex had for breakfast. The Vroon asked him how he had perceived himself when sitting at that palisander desk: was he golden-haired, like the Valentine who rode in the jugglers' wagon, or dark, like the Coronal who had made grand processional through Pidruid and the western provinces?

"Dark," said Valentine immediately. Then he frowned. "Or is that so? I can't be sure. I was sitting at the desk, not looking at the man who was there because I *was* the man. And yet — and yet —"

Carabella said, "In the world of dreams we often see ourselves with our own eyes."

Valentine nodded distantly. "I could have been both fair and dark. Now one, now the other — the point escaped me. Now one, now the other, eh?"

"Yes," Deliamber said.

They were almost into Khyntor now, after too many days of steady, wearying overland travel. This, the major city of northcentral Zimroel, lay in rugged, irregular terrain, broken by lakes and highlands and dark, virtually impassable forests. The route chosen by Deliamber took the wagon through the city's southwestern suburbs, known as Hot Khyntor because of the geothermal marvels that abounded there — great hissing geysers, and a broad steaming pink lake that bubbled and gurgled ominously, and a mile or two of gray rubbery-looking fumaroles from which, every few minutes, came

clouds of greenish gases accompanied by comic belching sounds and deeper, stranger subterranean groans. Here the sky was heavy with low big-bellied clouds the color of dull pearls, and although the last of summer still held the land, there was a cool autumnal quality to the thin, sharp wind that blew from the north.

The great River Zimr, largest in Zimroel, divided Hot Khyntor from the city proper. When the travelers came upon it, the wagon emerging suddenly from an ancient district of narrow streets to enter a broad esplanade leading to Khyntor Bridge, Valentine gasped with amazement.

"What is it?" Carabella asked.

"The river — I never expected it to be as big as this!"

"Are rivers unfamiliar to you?"

"There are none of any consequence between Pidruid and here," he pointed out. "I remember nothing clearly before Pidruid."

"Compared with the Zimr," said Sleet, "there are no rivers of any consequence anywhere. Let him be amazed."

To the right and left, so far as Valentine could see, the dark waters of the Zimr stretched to the horizon, and the river was so broad here that it looked more like a bay. He could barely make out the square-topped towers of Khyntor on the far shore. Eight or ten mighty bridges spanned the waters here, bridges so vast that Valentine wondered how it had been possible to build them at all. The one that lay directly ahead, Khyntor Bridge, was four highways wide, a structure of looping arches that rose and descended and rose and descended in great leaps from bank to bank; a short way downstream was a bridge of entirely different design, a heavy brick roadbed resting on astounding lofty piers, and just upstream was another that seemed made of glass, and gleamed with a dazzling brightness. Deliamber said, "That is Coronal Bridge, and to our right the Bridge of the Pontifex, and farther downstream is the one known as the Bridge of Dreams. All of them are ancient and famous."

"But why try to bridge the river at a place where it's so wide?" Valentine asked in bewilderment.

Deliamber said, "This is one of the narrowest points."

The Zimr's course, declared the Vroon, was some seven thousand miles, rising northwest of Dulorn at the mouth of the Rift and flowing in a southeasterly direction across all of upper Zimroel toward the coastal city of Piliplok on the Inner Sea. This happy river, navigable for its entire length, was a swift and phenomenally broad stream that flowed in grand sweeping curves like some amiable serpent, and its shores were occupied by hundreds of wealthy cities and many major inland ports, of which Khyntor was the most westerly. On the far side of Khyntor, running off to the northeast and only dimly visible in the cloudy

sky, were the jagged peaks of the Khyntor Marches, nine great mountains on whose chilly flanks lived tribes of rough, high-spirited hunters. These people could be found in Khyntor much of the year, exchanging hides and meat for manufactured goods.

That night in Khyntor, Valentine dreamed he was entering the Labyrinth to confer with the Pontifex.

This was no vague and misty dream, but one with sharp, painful clarity. He stood under harsh winter sunlight on a barren plain and saw before him a roofless temple with flat white walls, which Deliamber told him was the gateway to the Labyrinth. As he approached it, the Vroon and Lisamon Hultin were with him, and Carabella too, walking in a protective phalanx; but when Valentine stepped out onto the bare slate platform between those white walls, he was alone, and a being of sinister and forbidding aspect confronted him. This creature was of alien shape, but belonged to none of the nonhuman forms long settled on Majipoor — neither Liiman nor Ghayrog nor Vroon nor Skandar nor Hjort nor Su-Suheris, but something mysterious and disturbing, a muscular thick-armed creature with cratered red skin and a blunt dome of a head out of which blazed yellow eyes bright with almost intolerable rage. This being demanded Valentine's business with the Pontifex in a low, resonant voice.

"Khyntor Bridge is in need of repair," Valentine replied. "It is the ancient duty of the Pontifex to deal with such matters."

The yellow-eyed creature laughed. "Do you think the Pontifex will care?"

"It is my responsibility to summon his aid."

"Go, then." The guardian of the portal beckoned with sardonic politeness and stepped aside. As Valentine went past, the being uttered a chilling snarl and slammed shut a gateway behind Valentine that had not been evident before. Retreat was impossible; before him lay a narrow winding corridor, sourcelessly lit by some cruel white light that numbed the eyes. For hours Valentine descended on a spiral path, without any awareness that his surroundings were changing; and then the walls of the corridor widened, and he found himself in another roofless temple of white stone, or perhaps the same one as before, for the pockmarked red-skinned being again blocked his way, growling that unfathomable anger.

"Behold the Pontifex," the creature said.

And Valentine looked beyond it into a darkened chamber and saw the imperial sovereign of Majipoor seated upon a throne, clad in robes of black and scarlet and wearing the royal tiara, and the Pontifex of Majipoor was a monster with many arms and many legs, and the face of a man but the wings of a dragon, and he sat shrieking and roaring upon the throne like a madman. A terrible whistling sound

came from his lips, and the smell of the Pontifex was a frightful stink, and the black leathery wings flailed the air with fierce intensity, buffeting Valentine with cold gales. "Your majesty," Valentine said, and bowed, and said, again, "Your majesty."

"Your lordship," replied the Pontifex. And laughed, and reached for Valentine and tugged him forward, and then Valentine was on the throne and the Pontifex, laughing insanely, was fleeing up the brightly lit corridors, running and flapping wings and raving and shrieking, until he was lost from sight.

Valentine woke, wet with perspiration, in Carabella's arms. She showed a look of deep concern bordering on fear, as if the terrors of his dream had been only too obvious to her, and she held him a moment, saying nothing, until he had had a chance to comprehend the fact that he was awake. Tenderly she stroked his cheeks. "You cried out three times," she told him.

"There are occasions," he said after gulping a little wine from a flask beside the bed, "when it seems more wearing to sleep than to remain awake. My dreams are hard work, Carabella."

"There's much in your soul that seeks to express itself, my lord."

"It expresses itself in a very strenuous way," Valentine said and nestled down against her breasts. "If dreams are the source of wisdom, I pray to grow no wiser before dawn."

9.

In Khyntor, Zalzan Gibor booked passage for the troupe aboard a riverboat bound toward Ni-moya and Piliplok. They would be journeying only a short way down the river, though, to the minor city of Verf, gateway to the territory of the metamorphs.

Valentine felt regret at the thought of having to leave the riverboat at Verf, when he could easily, for another ten or fifteen royals, sail all the way to Piliplok and take ship for the Isle of Sleep. That, after all, and not the Shapeshifter reservation, was his most urgent immediate destination: the Isle of the Lady, where perhaps he might find confirmation of the visions that tormented him. But that was not to be, just yet. He was bound by loyalty to his companions to take the route that Zalzan Gibor chose; and Zalzan Gibor had chosen to go to Ilirivoyne.

Destiny, Valentine thought, could not be rushed. Thus far, things moved with deliberate speed but toward some definite, if not always understandable, goal. He was no longer the cheerful and simple idler of Pidruid, and, although he had no sure knowledge of what it was he was becoming, he had a definite sense of inner transition, of boundaries passed and not to be recrossed. He saw himself as an actor in some vast and bewildering drama, the climactic scenes of which were still far away in space and time.

The riverboat, first such vessel that Valentine had beheld in his present awareness, was a grotesque and fanciful structure, but not without a beauty of sorts. Ocean-going ships such as had been in port at Pidruid were designed for grace and sturdiness, since they would face journeys of thousands of miles between harbors; but the riverboat, a short-haul vessel, was squat and broad-beamed, more of a floating platform than a ship, and as if to compensate for the inelegance of its design, its builders had festooned it with ornament — a great soaring bridge topped with triple figureheads painted in brilliant reds and yellows, an enormous central courtyard almost like a village plaza, with statuary and pavilions and game parlors, and, at the stern, an upswept superstructure of many levels in which the passengers were housed. Belowdecks were cargo holds, steerage quarters for the less fortunate, dining halls, and cabins for the crew, as well as the engine room, from which two gigantic smokestacks sprouted that came curving up the sides of the hull and rose skyward like the horns of a demon. The entire frame of the ship was of wood, metal being too scarce on Majipoor for such large-scale enterprises and stone being generally deemed undesirable for maritime use; and the carpenters had exerted their imaginations over every square foot of the surface, decorating it with scrollwork, dadoes, outjutting joists, and similar flourishes of a hundred kinds.

Zalzan Gibor's wagon was secured by chocks to the deck, amid fifty or seventy other vehicles not nearly so grand. The jugglers had dormitory accommodations below, since the Skandar, ever thrifty, did not care to buy cabin tickets. Departure was scheduled for early on a Twoday afternoon; they would be in Verf by Fourday, and comfort was a small consideration in such a short voyage.

The riverboat seemed a vast and teeming microcosm all in itself. As they waited for sailing, Valentine and Deliamber and Carabella strolled the deck, which was thronged with citizens of many districts and of all the races of Majipoor. Valentine saw frontiersmen from the mountains beyond Khyntor, Ghayrogs in the finery affected in Dulorn, people of the humid southlands in cool white linens, travelers in sumptuous robes of crimson and green which Carabella said were typical of western Alhanroel, and many others. The ubiquitous Liimen sold their ubiquitous grilled sausages; officious Hjorts, fond of taking minor administrative posts, strutted about in uniforms of the riverboat line, giving information and instructions to those who asked and to many who did not; a Su-Suheris family in diaphanous green robes, conspicuous because of their unlikely doubleheaded bodies and aloof, imperious mien, drifted like emisaries from the world of dreams through the crowds, who gave way in automatic deference. And there was one small

group of Metamorphs on deck that afternoon.

Deliamber saw them first. The little Vroon made a clucking sound and touched Valentine's hand. "See them? Let's hope Sleet doesn't."

"Which ones?" Valentine asked.

"By the railing. Standing alone, looking uneasy. They wear their natural form."

Valentine stared. There were five of them, perhaps a male and a female adult and three younger ones. They were slender, angular, long-legged beings, the older ones taller than he, with a frail, insubstantial look to them. Their skins were sallow, almost green in hue, and their faces approached the human pattern in construction, except that their cheekbones were sharp as blades, their lips were almost nonexistent, and their noses were reduced to mere bumps, and their eyes, set on angles that sloped inward toward the center, were tapered and without pupils. Valentine was unable to decide whether these Metamorphs bore themselves with arrogance or with timidity: certainly they must regard themselves as in hostile territory aboard this riverboat, these natives of the ancient race, these descendants of those who had possessed Majipoor before the coming of the first Earthborn settlers fourteen thousand years ago. He could not take his eyes from them.

"How is the changing of shape accomplished?" he asked.

"Their bones are not joined like those of most races," answered Deliamber. "Under muscular pressure they will move and take up new patterns. Also they have mimicry cells in their skins, that allow them to alter color and texture, and there are other adaptations. An adult can transform itself almost instantaneously."

"And what purpose does this serve?"

"Who can say. Most likely the Metamorphs ask what purpose there was in creating races in this universe that are unable to shift shape. It must have some value to them."

"Very little," said Carabella acidly, "if they could have such powers and still have their world snatched away from them."

"Shifting shape is not enough of a defense," Deliamber replied, "when people travel from one star to another to steal your home."

Valentine continued to study the Metamorphs in fascination. To him they represented artifacts of Majipoor's long history, archaeological relicts, survivors from the era when there were no humans here, nor Skandars nor Vroons nor Ghayrogs, only these fragile green people spread out across a colossal planet. Before the settlers came — the intruders, ultimately the conquerors. How long ago it had been! And how sad for the Metamorphs now to be thrust into a single pocket of their marvelous world! Valentine imagined that by staring at the Shapeshifters he would draw from

them some sense of contact with the earliest roots of civilization on Majipoor; he who had lost all history of his own hungered for knowledge of theirs. He wished they would perform a transformation as he watched, perhaps turn into Skandars or Liimen before his eyes. But they remained unwavering in their identities.

Shanamir, looking agitated, appeared suddenly out of the crowd. He seized Valentine's arm and blurted, "Do you know what's on board with us? I heard the cargo-handlers talking. There's a whole family of Shape—"

"Not so loud," Valentine said. "Look yonder."

The boy looked and shivered. "Oh. Right there! Scary things, they are."

"Where's Sleet?"

"On the bridge, with Zalzan Gibor. They're trying to get a permit to perform tonight. If he sees them —"

"He'll have to confront Metamorphs sooner or later," Valentine murmured. To Deliamber he said, "Is it uncommon for them to be seen outside their reservation?"

"They are found everywhere, but never in great numbers, and rarely in their own form. There might be eleven of them living in Pidruid, say, and six in Falkynkip, nine in Dulorn —"

"Disguised?"

"Yes, as Ghayrogs or Hjorts or humans, whatever seems best in a certain place. They provide information for the use of the main settlement in Piurifayne Province."

"Information? What information?"

Deliamber shrugged a Vroonish shrug. "Whatever Metamorphs need, I suppose, to keep abreast of political currents in our society. They have reason to be wary of us."

The Metamorphs, as though becoming aware they were being discussed, now began to leave the deck. They moved with great dignity, but, unlike the little Su-Suheris group, there was nothing imperious about them; they seemed rather to give an impression of wishing they were invisible.

Valentine said, "Do they live in their territory by choice or compulsion?"

"Some of each, I think. When Lord Stiamot completed the conquest, he forced them to leave Alhanroel entirely. But Zimroel was barely settled then, just the coastal outposts, and they were allowed most of the interior. They chose only the territory between the Zimr and the southern mountains, though, where access could easily be controlled, and withdrew into that, leaving the rest for settlers to occupy. As rapidly happened. By now there's a tradition that the Metamorphs dwell only in that territory, except for the unofficial few living out in the cities, but I have no idea whether that tradition has force of law. Certainly they pay little attention to the decrees that emerge from the Labyrinth or Castle Mount," Deliamber said.

"If imperial law matters so little to them, are we not taking great risks in

going to Ilirivoyne?"

Deliamber laughed. "The days when Metamorphs attacked outsiders for the sheer love of vengeance are long over, so I am assured. They are a shy and sullen people, but they will do us no harm, and we'll probably leave their country intact and well laden with the money that Zalzan Gibor loves so much. Look, here he comes now."

The Skandar, with Sleet beside him, approached, wearing a self-satisfied look.

"We have arranged the right to perform," he announced. "Fifty crowns for an hour's work, right after dinner! We'll give them our simplest tricks, though. Why exert ourselves before we get to Ilirivoyne?"

"No," Valentine said. "We should do our best." He looked hard at Sleet. "There's a party of Metamorphs aboard this boat. If we show our fullest skills, perhaps they'll carry the word of our excellence ahead of us to Ilirivoyne, and make bookings more lucrative."

"Wisely argued," said Zalzan Gibor.

Sleet was taut and fearful. His nostrils flickered, his lips compressed, he made holy signs with his left hand at his side. Valentine turned to him and said in a low voice, "Now the process of healing begins. Juggle for them tonight as you would for the court of the Pontifex."

Hoarsely Sleet said, "They are my enemies!"

"Not these. They are not the ones of your dream. Those have done you all the damage that lay in their power, and it was long ago."

"It sickens me to be on the same boat."

"There's no leaving it now," Valentine said. "At least there are only five of them. A small dose — good practice for meeting what awaits us in Ilirivoyne."

"Ilirivoyne —"

"There is no avoiding Ilirivoyne," said Valentine. "Your pledge to me, Sleet —"

Sleet regarded Valentine in silence a moment.

"Yes, my lord," he whispered.

"Come, then. Juggle with me: we both need practice. And remember to call me Valentine!"

They found a quiet place below-decks and worked out with the clubs; there was an odd reversal in their roles at first, for Valentine juggled flawlessly, while Sleet was as clumsy as a tyro, dropping the clubs constantly and on several instances bruising his fingers. But in a few minutes his disciplines asserted themselves, and fear became an irrelevancy as Sleet gave his entire being over to his art. He filled the air with clubs, interchanging them with Valentine in patterns of such complexity that it left Valentine laughing and gasping, and finally he had to beg a halt and ask Sleet to return to more manageable cascades.

That night at the deckside performance — their first since the impromptu event staged for the amusement of the forest-brethern — Zalzan Gibor ordered a program that they had planned over the past few weeks, and rehearsed a few times, but never had done in public. The jugglers divided into three groups of three — Sleet, Carabella, and Valentine; Zalzan Gibor, Thelkar, and Gibor Haern; Heitrag Gibor, Rovorn, and Erfon Gibor — and engaged in simultaneous triple exchanges in the same rhythm, one group of Skandars juggling knives, the other flaming torches, and the humans silver clubs. It was one of the most severe tests of his skills that Valentine had yet experienced, possibly the most severe, for even when he performed solo before the Coronal, he had been doing only elementary maneuvers and the attention of the Coronal was elsewhere. But this was no elementary maneuver. The symmetry of the routine depended on perfection. One dropped implement by any of the nine would ruin the total effect. He was the weakest link; on him the entire impact of the performance depended, therefore.

But he dropped no clubs, and the applause, when the jugglers had ended their act in a flurry of high throws and jaunty catches, was overwhelming. As he took his bows Valentine noticed the family of Metamorphs seated only a few rows away. He glanced at Sleet, who bowed and bowed again, ever more deeply.

As they skipped from the stage, Sleet said, "I saw them when we started, and then I forgot about them. I forgot about them, Valentine!" He laughed. "They were nothing at all like the creature I remember from my dream."

10

The troupe slept that night in a dank, crowded hold somewhere in the bowels of the riverboat, sharing quarters with several hundred fellow passengers. Valentine found himself jammed in between Shanamir and Lisamon Hultin on the thinly cushioned floor, and the proximity of the warrior-woman seemed to be the final guarantee that he would have no sleep, for her snoring was a fierce insistent buzz, and more distracting even than the snore was the fear that as her vast body rolled and thrashed about beside him he would be crushed beneath it. Several times indeed she fetched up against him, and he was hard put to extricate himself, but soon she lay more quietly, and he felt sleep stealing over him despite everything.

A dream came to him in which he was Coronal, Lord Valentine of the olive skin and black beard, and sat

once more in Castle Mount wielding the seals of power, and then somehow he was in a southern city, a moist steaming tropical place of giant vines and gaudy red blossoms, a city that he knew to be Til-omon at the far side of Zimroel, and he presided there over a grand feast in his honor. There was another high guest at the table, a somber-eyed man with coarse skin, who was Dominin Barjazid, second son of the King of Dreams, and Dominin Barjazid poured wine in honor of the Coronal and offered toasts, crying out long life and predicting a glorious reign, a reign to rank with those of Lord Stiamot and Lord Prestimion and Lord Confalume. And Lord Valentine drank, and drank again, and grew flushed and merry, and offered toasts of his own, to his guests and to the mayor of Til-omon and to the duke of the province, and to Simonan Barjazid the King of Dreams, and to the Pontifex Tyeveras, and to the Lady of the Isle, his own beloved mother; and the goblet was filled and filled once again, amber wine and red wine and the blue wine of the south, until finally he could drink no more and went to his bedchamber and dropped instantly into sleep. As he slept, figures moved about him, the men of Dominin Barjazid's entourage, lifting him and carrying him wrapped in silken sheets, taking him somewhere, and he could give no resistance, for it seemed to him that his arms and legs would not obey him, as if this were a dream, this scene within a dream. And Valentine beheld himself on a table in a secret room, and now his hair was yellow and his skin was fair, and it was Dominin Barjazid who wore the face of the Coronal.

"Take him to some city in the far north," said the false Lord Valentine, "and turn him loose, and let him make his own way upon the world."

The dream would have continued, but Valentine found himself smothering in his sleep and came up into consciousness to discover Lisamon Hultin sprawled against him with one of her beefy arms over his face. He freed himself with some effort, but then there was no returning to sleep.

In the morning he said nothing to anyone of his dream: it was becoming time, he suspected, to keep the informations of the night to himself, for they were starting to border on affairs of state. This was the second time he had dreamed of having been supplanted as Coronal by Dominin Barjazid; and Carabella, weeks ago, had dreamed that enemies unknown had drugged him and stolen his identity. All these dreams might yet prove to be nothing but fantasy or parable, but Valentine inclined now to doubt that. There was too strong a consistency to them, to frequent a repetition of underlying structures.

And if a Barjazid now wore the starburst crown? What then, what then?

The Valentine of Pidruid would have shrugged and said, No matter,

one overlord is the same as another; but the Valentine now sailing from Khyntor to Verf took a more thoughtful view of things. There was a balance of power in this world, a balance carefully designed over a span of thousands of years, a system that had been evolving since Lord Stiamot's time, or perhaps earlier, out of whatever forgotten polities had ruled Majipoor in the first centuries of the settlement. And in that system an inaccessible Pontifex ruled through the vehicle of a vigorous and dynamic Coronal of his own choosing, with the official known as the King of Dreams functioning to execute the commands of the government by virtue of his entry into the minds of sleepers, and the Lady of the Isle, mother of the Coronal, contributing a tempering of love and wisdom. There was strength to the system, or else it could not have endured so many thousands of years; under it, Majipoor was a happy and prosperous world, subject true, to the frailties of flesh and the vagaries of nature, but mainly free of conflict and suffering. What now, Valentine wondered, if a Barjazid of the King's blood were to put aside a lawfully constituted Coronal and interpose himself in that divinely ordained balance? What harm to the commonwealth, what disruption of public tranquility?

And what might be said of a fallen Coronal who, made aware of the truth by messages from his own slumbering soul of perhaps from the Lady his mother, chooses to accept his altered destiny and leaves the usurper unchallenged? Was that not an abdication, and had there ever been an abdication of a Coronal in Majipoor's history. Would he not thereby become a co-conspirator in Dominin Barjazid's overthrow of order?

The last of his hesitations were going from him. It had seemed a comical thing, or a bizarre one, to Valentine the juggler when the first hints had come to him that he might be truly Lord Valentine the Coronal. That had been an absurdity, a lunacy, a farce. No longer. The texture of his dreams carried the weight of plausibility. A monstrous thing had happened, indeed. The full import of it was only now coming clear to him. And it was his task, his task that he must accept without further question, to set things right.

But how? Challenge an incumbent Coronal? Rise up in juggler's costume to claim Castle Mount?

He spent the morning quietly, giving no hint of his thoughts. Mostly he remained at the rail, staring at the far-off shore. The river's immensity was beyond his understanding: at some points here it was so wide that no land could be seen, and in other places what Valentine took to be the shore turned out to be islands, themselves of great size, with many miles of water between their farther sides and the riverbank. The flow of the river was strong, and the huge riverboat was being swept

rapidly along eastward. Valentine imagined that a rowboat would be carried willy-nilly down to Piliplok without the need of touching an oar, but traveling upstream might be a serious enterprise.

The day was bright, and the vast river rippled and glinted in the sparkling sunlight. In the afternoon a light rain began to fall, out of clouds so compact that the sunlight remained bright around them, but the rain increased in intensity and the jugglers were forced to cancel their second performance, to Zalzan Gibor's great annoyance. They huddled under cover. Valentine noticed Sleet covertly staring about, as if worried about Metamorphs nearby, but the white-haired man seemed otherwise calm.

That night Valentine took care to sleep beside Carabella and left the snores of Lisamon Hultin for the Skandars to cope with. He waited almost eagerly for revealing new dreams, but what came to him was useless, the ordinary formless hodgepodge of fantasy and chaos, of nameless streets and unfamiliar faces, of bright lights and garish colors, of absurd disputes, disjointed conversations, and unfocused images; and in the morning the riverboat arrived at the port of Verf on the river's southern bank.

11.

"The province of the Metamorphs," said Autifon Deliamber, "is named Piurifayne, after the name by which the Metamorphs call themselves in their own language, which is Piurivar, It is bounded on the north by the outlying suburbs of Verf, on the east by the Velathys Scarp, on the south by the substantial range of mountains known as the Gonghars, and on the east by the River Steiche, an important tributary of the Zimr. I have beheld each of those boundary zones with my own eyes, though I have never entered Piurifayne itself. To enter is difficult, for the Velathys Scarp is a sheer wall a mile high and three hundred miles long; the Gonghars are stormswept and disagreeable; and the Steiche is a wild unruly river full of rapids and turbulence. The only rational way in is through Verf and down through Piurifayne Gate. The Metamorphs live an isolated life and seem to prefer it that way."

The jugglers now were only a few miles north of Piurifayne Gate, having left the drab mercantile city of Verf as quickly as possible. The rain, light but insistent, had continued all morning. Rain, according to Deliamber, was not uncommon in the province of light sandy soil and dense stands of dwarf trees with pale green bark and narrow, twittering leaves. There was little conversation in the wagon. Sleet seemed lost in meditation; Carabella juggled three red balls obsessively in the midcabin space; the Skandars who were not driving engaged in some intricate

game played with slivers of ivory and packets of black drole-whiskers; Shanamir dozed; Vinorkis made entries in a journal he carried; Deliamber entertained himself with minor incantations, the lighting of tiny necromantic candles and other wizardly amusements; and Lisamon Hultin, who had hitched her mount to the team drawing the wagon so that she could come in from the rain, snored like a beached sea-dragon, awakening now and then to gulp a globelet of the cheap gray wine she had bought in Verf.

Valentine sat in a corner, up against a window, idly casting his thoughts eastward toward Castle Mount. What could it be like, a mountain thirty miles high? He had no picture of it in his mind. A single stone shaft rising like a colossal tower into the dark night of space? If Velathys Scarp, a mile high, was as Deliamber said an impassable wall, what sort of barrier was a thing thirty times as tall? What shadow did Castle Mount cast when the sun was in the east? A dark stripe running the length of Alhanroel? And how were the cities on its slope provided with warmth and air to breathe, so far above the plains on which most of the people of Majipoor dwelled? Some machines of the ancients, Valentine had heard, that manufactured heat and light and dispensed sweet air, miraculous machines of that forgotten technological era of thousands of years ago, when the old arts brought from Earth still were widely practiced here; but he could no more comprehend how such machines might work then he understood what forces operated the engines of memory in his own mind to tell him that this dark-haired woman was Carabella, this white-haired man Sleet. He thought too of Castle Mount's highest reaches, and that building of forty thousand rooms at its summit, Lord Valentine's Castle now, Lord Voriax' not so long ago, Lord Malibor's when he was a boy in that childhood he no longer remembered. Lord Valentine's Castle! Was there really such a place, or was the Castle and its Mount only a fable, a vision, a fantasy such as comes in dreams? Lord Valentine's Castle! He imagined it clinging to the mountaintop like a coat of paint, a bright splash of color just a few molecules thick, or so it would seem against the titanic scale of that impossible mountain, a splash that coursed irregularly down the flank of the summit in a tentacular way, hundreds of rooms extending on this face, hundreds more on that, a cluster of great chambers extending themselves pseudopod-fashion here, a nest of courtyards and galleries over there, and in its innermost place the Coronal in all grandeur, dark-bearded Lord Valentine, except that the Coronal would not be there now, he would still be making his grand processional through the realm, in Ni-moya by now or some other eastern city, or possibly already back in Alhanroel, pausing to visit the Pontifex in his

Labyrinth before continuing on to his own domain. And I, thought Valentine, I once lived on that Mount? Dwelled in that Castle? What did I do, when I was Coronal — what decrees, what appointments, what duties? The whole thing was inconceivable, and yet, and yet, he felt the conviction growing in him, there was fullness and density and substance to the phantom bits of memory that drifted through his mind. He knew now that he had been born not in Ni-moya by the river's bend, as the false recollections planted in his mind had it, but rather in one of the Fifty Cities high on the Mount, almost at the verge of the Castle itself, and that he had been reared among the royal caste, among that cadre from which princes were chosen, that his childhood and boyhood had been one of privilege and comfort. He still had no memory of his father, who must have been some high prince of the realm, nor could he recall anything of his mother except that her hair was dark and her skin was swarthy, as his once had been, and — a memory rushed into his awareness out of nowhere! — and that she had embraced him a long while one day, weeping a little, before she told him that Voriax had been chosen as Coronal in the place of the drowned Lord Malibor and she would go thenceforth to live as Lady on the Isle of Sleep. Was there truth to that, or had he imagined it just now? He would have been — Valentine paused, calculating — twenty-two years old, very likely, when Voriax came to power. Would his mother have embraced him at all? Would she have wept, on becoming Lady? Or rather rejoice, that she and her eldest son were chosen Powers of Majipoor? To weep and to rejoice at once, maybe. Valentine shook his head. These mighty scenes, these moments of potent history: would he ever regain access to them, or was he always to labor under the handicap placed upon him by those who had stolen his past?

There was a tremendous explosion in the distance, a long low ground-shaking boom that brought everyone in the wagon to attention. It continued for several minutes and gradually subsided to a quiet throb, then to silence.

"What was that?" Sleet cried, groping in the rack for an energy-thrower.

"Peace, peace," Deliamber said. "It is the sound of Piurifayne Fountain. We are approaching the boundary."

"Piurifayne Fountain?" Valentine asked.

"Wait and see," Deliamber told him.

The wagon came to a halt a few minutes later. Zalzan Gibor turned round from the driver's seat and yelled, "Where's that Vroon? Wizard, there's a roadblock up ahead!"

"We are at Piurifayne Gate," said Deliamber.

A barricade made of stout glossy yellow logs lashed with a bright emerald twine spanned the narrow roadway, and to the left of it was a

a guardhouse occupied by two Hjorts in customs-official uniform of gray and green. They ordered everyone out of the wagon and into the rain, though they themselves were under a protective canopy.

"Where bound?" asked the fatter of the Hjorts.

"Ilirivoyne, to play at the Shapeshifters festival. We are jugglers," said Zalzan Gibor.

"Your permit to enter Piurifayne Province?" the other Hjort demanded.

"No such permits are required," Deliamber said.

"You speak too confidently, Vroon. By decree of Lord Valentine the Coronal more than a month past, no citizens of Majipoor enter the Metamorph territory except on legitimate business."

"Ours is legitimate business," growled Zalzan Gibor.

"Then you would have been given a permit."

"But we knew nothing of the need for one!" the Skandar protested.

The Hjorts looked indifferent to that. They seemed ready to turn their attention to other matters.

Zalzan Gibor glanced toward Vinorkis as though expecting him to have some sort of influence with his compatriots. But the Hjort merely shrugged. Zalzan Gibor glared at Deliamber next and said, "It falls within your responsibilities, wizard, to advise me of such matters."

The Vroon shrugged. "Not even wizards can learn of changes in the law that happen while they travel in forest preserves and other remote places."

"But what do we do now? Turn back to Verf?"

The idea seemed to bring a glow of delight to Sleet's eyes. Reprieved from this Metamorph adventure after all! But Zalzan Gibor was fuming. Lisamon Hultin's hand strayed to the hilt of her vibration-sword, as if she had some plan to cut this bureaucratic snag in a violent way. Valentine stiffened at that.

He said quietly to Zalzan Gibor, "Hjorts are not always incorruptible."

"A good thought," the Skandar murmured.

Zalzan Gibor drew forth his money pouch. Instantly the attention of the Hjorts sharpened. This was indeed the right tactic, Valentine decided.

"Perhaps I have found the necessary document," said Zalzan Gibor. Ostentatiously removing two one-crown pieces from the pouch, he caught one of the Hjorts' rough-skinned puffy hands in each of his other hands, and with the other pressed the coins into their palms, and smiled his most self-satisfied smile. The Hjorts exchanged glances, and they were not glances of bliss. Contemptuously they allowed the coins to fall to the muddy ground.

"A crown?" Carabella muttered in disbelief. "He expected to buy them with a *crown*?"

"Bribing an officer of the imperial government is a serious offense," the fatter Hjort declared ominously.

"You are under arrest and remanded for trial to Verf. Remain in your vehicle until appropriate escort can be found for you."

Zalzan Gibor looked outraged. He whirled, began to say something to Valentine, choked it off, gestured angrily at Deliamber, made a low growling voice, and spoke in a low voice and in the Skandar language to the three nearest of his brothers. Lisamon Hultin again began to finger her sword-hilt. Valentine felt despair. There would be two dead Hjorts here in another moment, and the jugglers would all be criminal fugitives at the edge of Piurifayne. That was not likely to speed his journey to the Lady of the Isle.

"Do something quickly," Valentine said under his breath to Autifon Deliamber.

But the Vroonish sorcerer was alreay in motion. Stepping forward, he snatched up the money and offered it again to the Hjorts, saying, "Your pardon, but you must have dropped these small coins." He dropped them into the Hjorts' hands and at the same time allowed the tips of his tentacles to coil lightly about their wrists for an instant.

When he released them, the thinner Hjort said, "Your visa is good for three weeks only, and you must leave Piurifayne by way of this gate. Other exit points are illegal for you."

"Not to mention very dangerous," added the other. He pressed a button and the barricade slid sideways fifteen feet along a buried track, so that there was room for the wagon to proceed.

As they entered the wagon, Zalzan Gibor said furiously to Valentine, "In the future, give me no illegal advice! And you, Deliamber: make yourself aware of the regulations that apply to us. This could have caused us great delay, and much loss of income."

"Perhaps if you had tried bribing with royals instead of crowns," Carabella said beyond the Skandar's range of hearing, "we would have had a simpler time of it."

"No matter, no matter," Deliamber said. "We were admitted, were we not? It was only a small sorcery, and cheaper than a heavy bribe."

"These new laws," Sleet began. "So many decrees!"

"A new Coronal," said Lisamon Hultin. "He wants to show his power. They always do. They decree this, they decree that, and the old Pontifex goes along with everything. This one decreed me right out of a job, do you know that?"

"How so?" Valentine asked.

"I was bodyguard to a merchant in Mazadone, much afraid of jealous rivals. This Lord Valentine placed a new tax on personal bodyguards for anyone below noble rank, amounting to my whole year's salary; and my employer, damn his ears, let me go on

a week's notice! Two years, and it was good-bye Lisamon, thank you very much, take a bottle of my best brandy as your going-away gift." She belched resonantly. "One day I was the defender of his miserable life, the next I was a superfluous luxury, and all thanks to Lord Valentine! Oh, poor Voriax! D'ye think his brother had him murdered?"

"Guard your tongue!" Sleet snapped. "Such things aren't done on Majipoor."

But she persisted. "A hunting accident, was it? And the last one, old Malibor, drowned while out fishing? Why are our Coronals suddenly dying so strangely? It never happened before like this, did it? They went on to become Pontifex, they did, and hid themselves away in the Labyrinth and lived next to forever, and now here we have Malibor feeding the sea-dragons and Voriax taking a careless bolt in the forest." She belched again. "I wonder. Up there on Castle Mount, maybe they're getting too hungry for the taste of power."

"Enough," Sleet said, looking uncomfortable with such talk.

"Once a new Coronal's picked, all the rest of the princes are finished, you know, no hope of advancement. Unless, unless, unless, unless the Coronal should die, and back they go into the hopper to be picked again. When Voriax died and this Valentine came to rule, I said —"

"Stop it!" Sleet cried.

He rose to his full height, which was hardly belly-high to the warrior-woman, and his eyes blazed as if he planned to chop her off at the thighs to equalize matters between them. She remained at her ease, but her hand again was wandering toward her sword. Smoothly Valentine interposed himself.

"She means no offense to the Coronal," he said gently. "She is fond of wine, and it loosens her tongue." And to Lisamon Hultin he said, "Forgive him, will you? My friend is under strain in this part of the world, as you know."

A second enormous explosion, five times as loud and fifty times as frightening as the one that had occurred half an hour earlier, interrupted the discussion. The mounts reared and squealed; the wagon lurched; Zalzan Gibor shouted ferocious curses from the driver's seat.

"Piurifayne Fountain," Deliamber announced. "One of the great sights of Majipoor, well worth getting wet to see."

Valentine and Carabella rushed from the wagon, the others close behind. They had come to an open place in the road, where the forest of little green-boled trees fell away to create a kind of natural amphitheater of great size, completely without vegetation, running perhaps half a mile back from the highway. At its farther end a geyser was in eruption, but a geyser that was to the ones Valentine had seen at

Hot Khyntor as a sea-dragon is to a minnow. This was a column of frothing water that seemed taller than the tallest tower in Dulorn, a white shaft rising five hundred feet, six hundred, possibly even more, roaring out of the ground with incalculable force. At its upper end, where its unity broke and gave way to streamers and spouts and ropes of water that darted off in many directions, a mysterious light appeared to glow, kindling a whole spectrum of hues at the fringes of the column, pinks and pearls and crimsons and pale lavenders and opals. A warm spray filled the air.

The eruption went on and on — an incredible volume of water driven by incredible might into the sky. Valentine felt his entire body massaged by the subterranean forces that were at work. He stared in awe and wonder, and it was almost with shock that he realized that the event was ending, the column now was shrinking, no more than four hundred feet, three hundred, now just a pathetic strand of white sinking toward the ground, now only forty feet, thirty, and then gone, gone, vacant air where that stunning shaft had been, droplets of warm moisture as its only revenant. Even Zalzan Gibor looked moved by the impact of that heroic natural wonder.

"Every thirty minutes," Autifon Deliamber informed them. "As long as the Metamorphs have lived on Majipoor, so it is said, that geyser has never been a minute late. It is a sacred place to them. See? There are pilgrims now."

Sleet caught his breath and began making holy signs. Valentine put a steadying hand to his shoulder. There were indeed Metamorphs, Shapeshifters, Piurivars, a dozen or more of them, gathered at a kind of wayside shrine not far ahead. They were looking at the travelers, and, Valentine thought, not looking in a particularly friendly way. As Valentine watched, several of the aborigines who had been in front of the group stepped briefly behind others, and when they reappeared they looked strangely blurred and indistinct, but that was not all, for they had undergone transformations. One had sprouted great cannonballs of breasts, in caricature of Lisamon Hultin, and another had grown four shaggy Skandar arms, and another was mimicking Sleet's white hair. They made a curious thin sound which might have been the Metamorph version of laughter, and then the entire group slipped away into the forest.

Valentine did not release his grip on Sleet's shoulder until he felt some of the tension ebb from the little juggler's rigid body. Lightly he said, "A good trick that is! If we could do that — perhaps, grow some extra arms in the middle of our act — what do you say, Sleet, would you like that?"

"I would like to be in Narabal," Sleet said, "or Piliplok, or someplace else very far from here."

"And I in Falkynkip, feeding slops to my mounts," said Shanamir, who

looked pale and shaken.

"They mean us no harm," Valentine said. "This will be an interesting experience, one that we will never forget."

He smiled broadly. But there were no smiles about him, not even on Carabella, Carabella the inextinguishably buoyant. Zalzan Gibor himself looked oddly discomforted, as if perhaps he might now be having second thoughts about the wisdom of having pursued his love of royals into the Metamorph province. Valentine could not, by sheer force of optimistic energy alone, give his companions much cheer. He looked toward Deliamber.

"How far is it to Ilirivoyne?" he asked.

"It lies somewhere ahead," the Vroon replied. "How far, I have no idea. We will come to it when we come to it."

It was not an encouraging reply.

12.

This was primordial country, timeless, unspoiled, an outpost of time's early dawn on otherwise civilized and housebroken Majipoor. The Shapeshifters lived in rain-forest land, where daily downpours cleansed the air and let vegetation run riot. Out of the north came the frequent storms, down into that natural funnel formed by Velathys Scarp and the Gonghars; and as the moist air rose in the ascent of the Gonghar foothills, gentle rains were released, that soaked the light spongy soil. Trees grew tall and slender-trunked, sprouting high and forming thick canopies far overhead; networks of creepers and lianas tied the treetops together; cascades of dark leaves, tapering, drip-tipped, glistened as if polished by the rain. Where there were breaks in the forest, Valentine could see distant green-cloaked mist-wrapped mountains, heavy-shouldered, forbidding, great mysterious bulks crouching on the land. Of wildlife there was little, at least not much that let itself be seen: an occasional red-and-yellow serpent slithering along a bough, an infrequent green-and-scarlet bird or toothy web-winged brown aeorlizard fluttering overhead, and once a frightened bilantoon that scampered delicately in front of the wagon and vanished into the woods with a flurry of its sharp little hooves and a panicky wigwagging of its upturned tufted tail. Probably forest-brethren lurked here, since several groves of dwikka-trees came into view. And no doubt the streams were thick with fish and reptiles; the forest floor teemed with burrowing insects and rodents of fantastic hue and shape; and, for all Valentine knew, each of the innumerable dark little lakes held its own monstrous submerged amorfibot, that arose by night to prowl, all neck and teeth and beady eyes, on whatever prey came within reach of its massive body. But none of

these things made themselves apparent as the wagon sped southward over the rough, narrow wilderness road.

Nor were the Piurivars themselves much in evidence — now and then a well-worn trail leading into the jungle, or a few flimsy wickerwork huts visible just off the road, or a party of half a dozen pilgrims or so heading on foot up toward the shrine at the Fountain. They were, said Deliamber, a folk that lived by hunting and fishing, and collecting of wild fruits and nuts, and a certain amount of agriculture. Possibly their civilization had once been more advanced, for ruins had been discovered, especially on Alhanroel, of large stone cities thousands of years old, that might have dated from early Piurivar times before the starships arrived, although, said Deliamber, there were some historians who maintained that the ruins were those of ancient human settlements, founded and destroyed in the turbulent pre-Pontifical period twelve to thirteen thousand years ago. At any rate the Metamorphs, if they had ever had a more complex way of life, now preferred to be forest-dwellers. Whether that was retrogression or progress Valentine could not say.

By midafternoon the sound of Piurifayne Fountain could no longer be heard behind them, and the forest was more open, more thickly settled. Perhaps they were approaching Ilirivoyne, the larger of the two Metamorph towns. But the road was unmarked, and, unexpectedly, it forked in a place where no clues were to be had to anything beyond. Zalzan Gibor looked for guidance to Deliamber, who looked to Lisamon Hultin.

"Damn my gut if I could say," the giantess boomed. "Pick one at random. We've got a fifty-fifty chance of getting to Ilirovoyne on it."

But Deliamber had a better idea and knelt down in the mud to cast an inquiry-spell. He took from his pack a couple of cubes of a wizardy incense and, shielding them from the rain with his cloak, ignited them to create a pale brown smoke. This he inhaled, while waving his tentacles in intricate curlicues.

The warrior-woman snorted and said, "It's only a fraud. He'll wiggle his arms for a while and then he'll make a guess. Fifty-fifty for Ilirivoyne."

"The left fork," Deliamber announced eventually.

It was good sorcery or else lucky guessing, for shortly the signs of Metamorph occupation increased. There were no more isolated scatterings of lonely huts, but now little clumps of wickerwork dwellings, eight or ten or more close together every hundred yards, and gradually the density of them increased even further. There was much foot traffic too, mainly aboriginal children carrying light burdens in slings dangling from their heads. Most of them stopped as the wagon went by, and stared and pointed and made little chittering sounds be-

tween their teeth, somewhat similar to the sounds the forest-brethren made. It occurred to Valentine that these Metamorphs, elongated and fragile of body, were not all that different from forest-brethren, perhaps as closely related to them as humans were to apes or monkeys. Then he remembered that the Metamorphs hunted forest-brethren for amusement or maybe for their meat, and he found the thought displeasing.

Definitely they were approaching a large settlement now. The road was crowded with children and older Metamorphs, and dwellings were numerous here. The children were an unsettling crew. They seemed to be practicing their immature skills at transformation as they walked along, and took many forms, most of them bizarre: one had sprouted legs like stilts, another had tentacular Vroonish arms that dangled almost to the ground, a third had swollen its body to a globular mass supported by tiny props. "Are we the circus entertainers," Sleet asked, "or are they? These people sicken me!"

"Peace," Valentine said softly.

In a grim voice Carabella said, "I think some of the entertainments here are dark ones. Look."

Just ahead were a dozen large wicker cages by the side of the road. Teams of bearers, having apparently just put them down, were resting beside them. Through the bars of the cages small long-fingered hands were thrust, and some prehensile tails coiling in anguish. As the wagon drew alongside, Valentine saw that the cages were full of forest-brethren, jammed three and four together, on their way to Ilirivoyne for — what? To be slaughtered for food? To be tormented at the festival? Valentine shivered.

"Wait!" Shanamir blurted, as they rode past the final cage. "What's that in there?"

The last cage was bigger than the others, and what it held was no forest-brother, but rather some other sort of captive, a being of obvious intelligence, tall and strange, with dark-blue skin, fierce and desolate purple eyes of extraordinary intensity and luminosity, and a wide, thin-lipped slash of a mouth. Its clothing — a fine green fabric — was ripped and tattered and splotched with dark stains, possibly blood. It gripped the bars of its cage with terrible force, shaking and tugging at them, and cried out hoarsely at the jugglers for help in an odd, totally unfamiliar accent. The wagon went on.

Chilled, Valentine looked at Deliamber and said, "That is no being of Majipoor!"

"No," Deliamber said. "None that I've seen before."

"I saw one once," Lisamon Hultin put in. "An offworlder, native to some star close by here, though I forget the name of it."

"But what would offworlders be doing here?" Carabella asked. "There's little traffic between the stars these

days, and few ships come to Majipoor."

"Still, some do," Deliamber said. "We're not yet totally cut off from the starlanes, though cetainly we're considered a backwater in the commerce of the worlds. And —"

"Are you all mad?" Sleet burst out in exasperation. "Sitting here like scholars, discussing the commerce between the worlds, and in that cage is a civilized being crying for help, who probably will be stewed and eaten at the Metamorph festival? And we pay no attention to its cries, but ride blithely onward into their city?" He made a tormented sound of anger and went rushing forward to the Skandars on the driver's seat. Valentine, fearing trouble, went after him. Sleet tugged at Zalzan Gibor's cloak. "Did you see it?" he demanded. "Did you hear? The offworlder in the cage?"

Without turning Zalzan Gibor said, "So?"

"You'll ignore its cries?"

"This is no affair of ours," the Skandar replied evenly. "Shall we liberate the prisoners of an independent people? They must have some reason for arresting that being."

"Reason? Yes, to cook him for dinner! And we'll be in the next pot. I ask you to go back and release —"

"Impossible."

"At least let's ask of it why it's caged! Zalzan Gibor, we may be riding blithely to our deaths! Are you in such a hurry to reach Ilirivoyne that you'll ride right past someone who knows much more than we do about conditions here and who is in such a plight?"

"What Sleet says has wisdom in it," Valentine remarked.

"Very well!" Zalzan Gibor snorted. He pulled the wagon to a halt. "Go and investigate, Valentine. But be quick about it."

"I'll go with him," Sleet said.

"Stay here. If he feels he needs a bodyguard, let him take the giantess."

That seemed sensible. Valentine beckoned to Lisamon Hultin, and they got down from the wagon and strode back toward the place of the cages. Instantly the forest-brethren, sensing their approach, set up a frantic screeching and banging on their bars. The Metamorph bearers — armed, Valentine noticed now, with effective-looking short dirks of polished horn or wood — unhurriedly formed themselves into a phalanx in the road, keeping Valentine and Lisamon Hultin from a closer approach to the large cage. One Metamorph, plainly the leader, steeped forward and waited with menacing calmness for inquiries.

Valentine said quietly to the giantess, "Will he speak our language?"

"Probably. Try it."

"We are a troupe of roving jugglers," Valentine said in a loud, clear voice, "come to perform at the festival we hear you hold at Ilirivoyne. Are we near Ilirivoyne now?"

The Metamorph, half a head taller

than Valentine, though much flimsier of build, seemed amused.

"You are in Ilirivoyne," was the cool, remote reply.

Valentine moistened his lips. These Metamorphs gave off a thin, sharp odor, acrid but not disagreeable. Their strangely sloped eyes were frighteningly expressionless. He said, "To whom would we go to make arrangements for performing in Ilirivoyne?"

"The Danipiur interviews all strangers who come to Ilirivoyne. You will find her at the House of Offices."

Valentine paused. The Metamorph's frosty self-contained manner was disconcerting. After a moment he said, "One thing more. We see that in the large cage you keep a being of an unfamiliar sort. May I ask, for what purpose?"

"Punishment."

"A criminal?"

"So it is said," the Metamorph replied distantly. "Why does this concern you?"

"We are strangers in your land. If strangers are placed in cages here, we might prefer to find employment somewhere else."

There was a flicker of some emotion — amusement? contempt? — around the Metamorph's mouth and nostrils. "Why should you fear such a thing? Are you criminals?"

"Hardly."

"Then you will not be caged. Pay your respects to the Danipiur and address further questions to her. I have important tasks to complete."

Valentine looked toward Lisamon Hultin, who shrugged. The Metamorph walked away. There was nothing more to do but return to the wagon.

The bearers were lifting the cages and fastening them to poles laid across their backs. From the large cage came a roar of anger and despair.

13.

Ilirivoyne was neither a city nor a village, but something intermediate, a concentration of many low, impermanent-looking structures of withes and light woods, arranged along irregular unpaved streets that seemed to stretch for considerable distances into the forest. The place had a makeshift look, as though Ilirivoyne might have been located elsewhere a few years ago and might be in an altogether other district a few years hence. There was a forlorn, impoverished look about it, but Valentine recognized that the constant misty rainfall could be coloring his opinion, and besides what might be deemed impoverished in Pidruid or Dulorn could well seem appropriate and adequate to forest-dwellers living a life of voluntarily chosen simplicity. That it was festival-time in Ilirivoyne was signaled, apparently, by fetish-sticks of some sort planted in front of almost every house, thick shaven stakes to which bright

ribbons and bits of fur had been attached; also on many streets scaffolding had been erected, as for performances, or, thought Valentine uneasily, for tribal rites of some darker kind.

Finding the House of Offices and the Danipiur was simple enough. The main street opened into a broad plaza bordered on three sides by small domed buildings with ornately woven roofs, and on the fourth by a larger structure, the first three-story building they had seen in Ilirivoyne, with an elaborate garden of globular thick-stemmed gray-and-white shrubs in front of it. Zalzan Gibor drew the wagon into a clearing just outside the plaza.

The Skandar scowled at Lisamon Hultin. Plainly he held the warrior-woman responsible for having led him into this backward and drizzly place. Zalzan Gibor seemed bleak and dejected, lacking even enough spirit to express his usual crochety anger. It must be a bitter disappointment to him, Valentine thought, to have come deep into the forest in search of rich purses, and to find only gloomy aborigines, mysterious strangers penned in cages, and a general air of poverty and menace.

"Come with me," Zalzan Gibor said to Deliamber. "We'll see what we can arrange."

They were inside the House of Offices a long while. When they emerged, a female Metamorph of great presence and authority was with them, doubtless the Danipiur, and the three stood together by the garden in elaborate conversation. The Danipiur pointed; Zalzan Gibor alternately nodded and shook his head; Autifon Deliamber, dwarfed between the two tall beings, made frequent graceful gestures of diplomatic conciliation. Finally Zalzan Gibor and the Vroon returned to the wagon. The Skandar's mood seemed brighter.

"We've come just in time," he announced. "The festival has already begun, and tomorrow night is one of the major holidays. Their chieftain says that it has been many years since performers from outside have attended."

"Will they pay us?" Sleet asked.

"So it would seem," said Zalzan Gibor. "But they will supply us with no food, and no lodging either, for Ilirivoyne is without hostelries. And there are certain specified zones of the city that we may not enter. I have had friendlier welcomes in other places. But also less friendly ones now and then, I suppose."

Crowds of solemn, silent Metamorph children trailed after them as they moved the wagon from the plaza to an area just back of it where they would be allowed to park. In late afternoon they held a practice session behind the wagon, and though Lisamon Hultin did her formidable best to clear the young Metamorphs from the scene and keep them away, it was impossible to prevent them from slipping back, emerging between trees and out of

bushes to stare at the jugglers. Valentine found it unnerving to work in front of them, and he was plainly not the only one, for Sleet was tense and uncharacteristically awkward, and even Zalzan Gibor, the master of masters, dropped a club for the first time in Valentine's memory. The silence of the children was disturbing — they stood like blank-eyed statues, a remote audience that drained energy and gave none in return — but even more troublesome was their trick of metamorphosis, their way of slipping from one shape to another as casually as a human child might suck its thumb. Mimicry was their apparent purpose, for the forms they took were crude, half-recognizable versions of the jugglers, such as the older Metamorphs had attempted earlier at Piurifayne Fountain. The children held the forms only briefly — their skills seemed feeble — but in the pauses between routines Valentine saw them now sprouting golden hair for him, white for Sleet, black for Carabella, or making themselves bearish and many-armed like the Skandars, or trying to imitate faces, individual features, expressions, everything done in a distorted and unflattering way.

The jugglers slept crammed aboard the wagon that night, one packed close upon the other, and all night, so it seemed, a steady rain fell. Valentine only occasionally was able to sleep; he dropped into light dozes, but mainly he lay awake listening to Lisamon Hultin's lusty snoring or the even more grotesque sounds coming from the Skandars. Somewhere in the night he must have had some real sleep, for a dream came to him, hazy and incoherent, in which he saw the Metamorphs leading a procession of prisoners, forest-brethren and the blue-skinned alien, up the road toward Piurifayne Fountain, which erupted and rose above the world like a colossal white mountan. And again toward morning he slept soundly for a time, until Sleet woke him by shaking his shoulder a little before dawn.

Valentine sat up, rubbing his eyes. "What is it?"

"Come outside. I have to talk."

"It's still dark!"

"Even so. Come!"

Valentine yawned, stretched, got creakily to his feet. He and Sleet picked their way carefully over the slumbering forms of Carabella and Shanamir, went warily around one of the Skandars, and down the steps of the wagon. The rain had stopped, but the morning was dark and chilly, and a nasty fog rose from the ground.

"I have had a sending," Sleet said. "From the Lady, I think."

"Of what sort?"

"About the blue-skinned one, in the cage, that they said was a criminal going to be punished. In my dream he came to me and said he was no criminal at all, but only a traveler who had made the error of entering Shapeshifter territory and had been captured be-

cause it's their custom to sacrifice a stranger in Piurifayne Fountain at festival time. And I saw how it is done, the victim bound hand and foot and left in the basin of the Fountain, and when the explosion comes he is hurled far into the sky."

Valentine felt a chill that did not come from the morning mist. "I dreamed something similar," he said.

"In my dream I heard more," Sleet went on. "That we are in danger too, not perhaps from sacrifice but in danger all the same. And if we rescue the alien, he will help us to safety, but if we leave him to die, we will not leave Piurivar country alive. You know I fear these Shapeshifters, Valentine, but this dream is something new. It came to me with the clarity of a sending. It ought not be dismissed as more fears of foolish Sleet."

"What do you want to do?"

"Rescue the alien."

Valentine said uneasily, "And if he really was a criminal? By what right do we meddle in Piurivar justice?"

"By right of sending," said Sleet. "Are those forest-brethren criminals too? I saw them also go into the Fountain. We are among savages, Valentine."

"Not savages, no. But strange folk, whose way is not like the ways of Majipoor."

"I'm determined to set the blue-skinned one free. If not with your help, then by myself."

"Now?"

"What better time?" Sleet asked. "It's still dark. Quiet. I'll open the cage; he'll slip off into the jungle."

"You think the cage is unguarded? No, Sleet. Wait. This makes no sense. You'll jeopardize us all if you act now. Let me try to find out more about this prisoner and why he's caged, and what's intended for him. If they do mean to sacrifice him, they'd do it at some high point of the festival. There's time."

"The sending is on me now," Sleet said.

"I dreamed a dream something like yours."

"But not a sending."

"Not a sending, no. Still, enough to let me think your dream holds truth. I'll help you, Sleet. But not now. This isn't the moment for it."

Sleet looked restless. Clearly in his mind he was already on the way to the place of the cages, and Valentine's opposition was thwarting him.

"Sleet?"

"Yes?"

"Hear me. This is not the moment. There is time."

Valentine looked steadily at the juggler. Sleet returned his gaze with equal steadfastness for a moment; then, abruptly, his resolve broke and he lowered his eyes.

"Yes, my lord," he said quietly.

During the day Valentine tried to gain information about the prisoner. but with little success. The cages, eleven holding forest-brethren and the

twelfth holding the alien, now had been installed in the plaza opposite the House of Offices, stacked in four tiers with the alien's cage alone on high, far above the ground. Piurivars armed with dirks guarded them.

Valentine approached, but he was only halfway across the plaza when he was stopped. A Metamorph told him, "This is forbidden for you to enter."

The forest-brethren began frantically to rattle their bars. The blue-skinned one called out, thickly accented words that Valentine could barely understood. Was the alien saying, "Flee, fool, before they kill you too!" or was that only Valentine's heightened imagination at work? The guards held a tight cordon around the place. Valentine turned away and attempted to ask some children nearby if they could explain the cages to him; but the children looked at him in obstinate silence, giving him cool blank-eyed stares and murmuring to one another and making little partial metamorphoses that mimicked his fair hair, and then they scattered and ran as though he were some sort of demon.

All day long, Metamorphs entered Ilirivoyne, swarming in from the outlying forest settlements. There seemed to be many thousands of them, and all had brought decorations of one kind or another, wreaths and buntings and draperies and mirror-bedecked posts and tall poles carved with mysterious runes; everyone seemed to know what to do, and everyone was intensely busy. No rain fell after sunrise. Was it by witchcraft, Valentine wondered, that the Piurivars provided a rare dry day for their high holiday, or only coincidence?

By midafternoon the festivities were well under way. Small bands of musicians played heavy, pulsating, jangling music of eccentric rhythm, and throngs of Metamorphs danced a slow and stately pattern of interweavings, moving almost like sleepwalkers. On certain streets races were run, the competitors mainly women, and judges stationed at points along the course engaged in intricate arguments as the racers went past them. Booths apparently constructed during the night dispensed soups, stews, beverages, and grilled meats.

Valentine felt like an intruder in this place and wanted to apologize to the Metamorphs for having come among them at their holiest time. Needless guilt, probably, for no one but the children seemed to be paying the slightest attention to them, and the children evidently regarded them as curiosities brought here for their amusement. Young shy Metamorphs lurked everywhere, flashing jumbled imitations of Deliamber and Sleet and Zalzan Gibor and the rest, but never allowing anyone to get close to them.

Zalzan Gibor had called a rehearsal for late afternoon, back of the wagon. Valentine was one of the first to arrive, glad of an excuse to remove himself from the crowded streets. He found

only Sleet and two of the Skandars.

Zalzan Gibor, it seemed to him, was eying him in an odd way. There was something new and disturbing about the quality of the Skandar's attentiveness, and after a few minutes Valentine was so troubled by it that he said, "Is something wrong?"

"What would be wrong?"

"You seem out of countenance."

"I? I? Nothing's the matter. A dream, is all. I was thinking on a dream I had last night."

"You dreamed of the blue-skinned prisoner?"

Zalzan Gibor looked baffled. "Why do you think that?"

"I did, and Sleet."

"My dream had nothing at all to do with the blue-skinned one," the Skandar replied. "Nor do I wish to discuss it. It was foolishness, mere foolishness." And Zalzan Gibor, moving away, picked up a double brace of knives and began to juggle them in an edgy, absent-minded way.

Valentine shrugged. It had not even occurred to him that Skandars had dreams, let alone that they might have troublesome ones. But of course: they were citizens of Majipoor, they shared in all the attributes of people here, and so they must live full and rich dream-lives like everyone else, with sendings from King and Lady, and stray intrusions from the minds of lesser beings, and upwellings of self from their own deeper reaches, even as humans did, or, Valentine supposed, Hjorts and Vroons and Liimen. Still, it was curious. Zalzan Gibor was so guarded of emotion, so unwilling to let anything of himself be seen by others save greed and impatience and irritation, that Valentine found it strange that he would admit something so personal as that he was pondering a dream.

He wondered if Metamorphs had meaningful dreams, and sendings, and all of that.

The rehearsal went well. Afterward the jugglers made a light and not very satisfying dinner of fruits and berries that Lisamon Hultin had gathered in the forest, and washed it down with the last of the wine they had brought from Khyntor. Bonfires now were blazing in many streets of Ilirivoyne, and the discordant music of the various bands set up weird clashing near-harmonies. Valentine had assumed the performance would take place in the plaza; but, no, Metamorphs in what perhaps were priestly costumes came at darkness to escort them to some entirely other part of town, a much larger oval clearing that already was ringed by hundreds or even thousands of expectant onlookers. Zalzan Gobor and his brothers went over the ground carefully, checking for pitfalls and irregularities that might disrupt their movements. Sleet usually took part in that, but, Valentine noticed abruptly, Sleet had vanished somewhere between the rehearsal place and this clearing. Had his patience run out, had he gone off to do something rash?

Valentine was just about to set out in search when Sleet appeared, breathing lightly as though he had just been jogging.

"I went to the plaza," he said in a low voice. "The cages are still piled up. But most of the guards must be off at the dancing. I was able to exchange a few words with the prisoner before I was chased."

"And?"

"He said he's to be sacrificed at midnight in the Fountain, exactly as in my sending. And that tomorrow night the same would happen to us."

"What?"

"I swear it by the Lady," said Sleet. His eyes were like augers. "It was under pledge to you, my lord, that I came into this place. You assured me no harm would befall me."

"Your fears seemed irrational."

"And now?"

"I begin to revise my opinion," Valentine said. "But we'll get out of Ilirivoyne in good health. I pledge you that. I'll speak with Zalzan Gibor after the performance, and after I've had a chance to confer with Deliamber."

"It would please me more to get on the road sooner."

"The Metamorphs are feasting and drinking this evening. They'll be less likely to notice our departure later," said Valentine, "and less apt to pursue us, if pursuit is their aim. Besides, there's no time now. Do you think Zalzan Gibor would agree to cancel a performance merely on the rumor of danger? We'll do our act, and then we'll begin to extricate ourselves. What do you say?"

"I am yours, my lord," Sleet replied.

14.

It was a splendid performance, and no one was in better form than Sleet, who amazed the entire troupe by doing his blind juggling routine and carrying it off flawlessly. The Skandars flung torches at one another with giddy abandon, Carabella cavorted on the rolling globe, Valentine juggled while dancing, skipping, kneeling, and running. The Metamorphs sat in concentric circles around them, saying little, never applauding, peering in at them out of the foggy darkness with unfathomable intensity of concentration.

Working to such an audience was hard. It was worse than working in rehearsal, for no one expects an audience then, but now there were thousands of spectators and they were giving nothing to the performers; they were statue-still, as the children had been, an austere audience that offered neither approval nor disapproval but only something that had to be interpreted as indifference. In the face of that, the jugglers presented ever more taxing and marvelous numbers, but for more than an hour they could get no response.

And then, astoundingly, the Meta-

morphs began a juggling act of their own, an eerie dreamlike counterfeit of what the troupe had been doing.

By twos and threes they came forward from the darkness, taking up positions in the center of the ring only a few yards from the jugglers; and as they did so, they swiftly shifted forms, so that six of them now wore the look of bulky shaggy Skandars, and one was small and lithe and much like Carabella, and one had Sleet's compact form, and one, yellow-haired and tall, wore the image of Valentine. There was nothing playful about this donning of the jugglers' bodies: to Valentine it seemed ominous, mocking, distinctly threatening, and when he looked to the side at the nonperforming members of the troupe, he saw Autifon Deliamber making worried gestures with his tentacles and Lisamon Hultin rocking evenly back and forth on the balls of her feet as if readying herself for combat.

Zalzan Gibor looked disconcerted also by this development.

"Continue," he said in a ragged tone. "We are here to perform for them."

"I think," said Valentine, "we are here to amuse them, but not necessarily as performers."

"Nevertheless, we are performers, and we will perform."

He gave a signal and launched, with his brothers, into a dazzling interchange of multitudinous sharp and dangerous objects. Sleet, after a moment's hesitation, scooped up a handful of clubs and began to throw them in cascades, as did Carabella. Valentine's hands were chilled; he felt no willingness in them to juggle.

The nine Metamorphs alongside them were beginning to juggle now too.

It was only counterfeit juggling, dream-juggling, with no true art or skill to it. It was mockery and nothing more. They held in their hands rough-skinned black fruits, and bits of wood, and other ordinary things, and threw them from hand to hand in a child's parody of juggling, now and again failing to make even those simple catches and bending quickly to retrieve what they had dropped. Their performance aroused the audience as nothing that the true jugglers had done had managed to do. The Metamorphs now were humming — was this their form of applause? — and rocking rhythmically and clapping hands to knees, and, Valentine saw, some of them were transforming themselves almost at random, taking on odd alternate forms, human or Hjort or Su-Suheris as the whim struck, or modeling themselves after the Skandars or Carabella or Deliamber. At one point he saw six or seven Valentines in the rows nearest him.

Performing was all but impossible in such a circus of distractions, but the jugglers clung grimly to their routines for some minutes more, doing poorly now, dropping clubs, missing beats,

breaking up long-familiar combinations. The humming of the Metamorphs grew in intensity.

"Oh, look, look!" Carabella cried suddenly. She gestured toward the nine mock jugglers and pointed at the one who represented Valentine.

Valentine gasped.

What the Metamorph was doing defied all comprehension, and struck him rigid with terror and astonishment. For it had begun to oscillate between two forms. One was the Valentine-image, the tall, wide-shouldered, big-handed, golden-haired young man.

And the other was the image of Lord Valentine the Coronal.

The metamorphosis was almost instantaneous, like the flashing of a light. One moment Valentine saw his twin before him, and the next instant there was, in his place, the black-bearded fierce-eyed Coronal, a figure of might and presence, and then he was gone and the simple juggler was back. The humming of the crowd became louder: they approved of the show. Valentine ... Lord Valentine ... Valentine ... Lord Valentine ....

As he watched, Valentine felt a trail of icy chill go down his back, felt his scalp prickle, his knees quiver. There was no mistaking the import of this bizarre pantomime. If ever he had hoped for confirmation of all that had swept through him these weeks since Pidruid, he was getting it now. But here? In this forest town, among these aboriginal folk?

He looked into his own mimicked face.

He looked into the face of the Coronal.

The other eight jugglers leaped and pranced in a nightmarish dance, their legs rising high and stamping down, the false Skandar-arms waving and thumping against their sides, the false Sleet-hair and Carabella-hair wild in the night wind, and the Valentine-figure remained still, alternating one face and the other, and then it was over; nine Metamorphs stood in the center of the circle, holding out their hands to the audience, and the rest of the Piurivars were on their feet and dancing in the same wild way.

The performance was ended. Still dancing, the Metamorphs streamed out into the night, toward the booths and games of their festival.

Valentine, stunned, turned slowly and saw the frozen, astonished faces of his companions. Zalzan Gibor's jaw sagged, his arms dangled limply. His brothers clustered close behind him, their eyes wide in awe and shock. Sleet looked frighteningly pale; Carabella the opposite, her cheeks flushed, almost feverish. Valentine held out a hand toward them, and it was Zalzan Gibor who came stumbling forward, dazed, all but tripping over his own feet. The giant Skandar paused when he was a few feet from Valentine. He blinked, he ran his tongue over his lips, he seemed to be working hard to make his voice function at all.

Finally he said, in a tiny, preposterous voice: "My lord...?"

First Zalzan Gibor and then his five brothers dropped hesitantly and awkwardly to their knees. With trembling hands Zalzan Gibor made the starburst symbol; his brothers did the same. Sleet, Carabella, Deliamber, all knelt as well. The boy Shanamir, looking frightened and baffled, stared open-mouthed at Valentine. He seemed paralyzed with wonder and surprise. Slowly he bent to the ground also.

Lisamon Hultin cried out, "Have you all gone crazy?"

"Down and pay homage!" Sleet ordered her hoarsely. "You saw it, woman! He is the Coronal! Down and pay homage!"

"The Coronal?" she repeated in confusion.

Valentine stretched his arms out over them all in a gesture that was as much one of comfort as blessing. They were frightened of him and of what had just befallen; so too was he, but his fear was passing quickly, and in its place came strength, conviction, sureness. The sky itself seemed to cry at him, You are Lord Valentine who was Coronal on Castle Mount, and you shall have the Castle again one day, if you fight for it. Through him now flowed the power of his former imperial office. Even here, in this rainswept remote hinterland, in this ramshackle aboriginal town, here with the sweat of juggling still on his body, here in these coarse common clothes, Valentine felt himself to be what he once had been; and although he did not understand what metamorphosis had been worked on him to make him what he now was, he no longer questioned the reality of the messages that had come in dreams. And he felt no guilt, no shame, no deceitfulness, at receiving this homage from his stupefied companions.

"Up," he said gently. "All of you. On your feet. We must get out of this place. Shanamir, round up the mounts, Zalzan Gibor, get the wagon ready." To Sleet he said, "Everyone should be armed. Energy-throwers for those who know how to use them, juggling knives for the rest. See to it."

Zalzan Gibor said heavily, "My lord, there is in all this the flavor of a dream. To think that all these weeks I traveled with — to think I spoke roughly to — that I quarreled with —"

"Later," Valentine said. "We have no time for discussing these things now."

He turned to Lisamon Hultin, who seemed busy in some conversation with herself, moving her lips, gesturing, explaining things to herself, debating these bewildering events. In a quiet, forceful voice Valentine said, "You were hired only to bring us as far as Ilirivoyne. I need you to give us your strength as we escape. Will you stay with us to Ni-moya and beyond?"

"They made the starburst at you," she said puzzledly. "They all kneeled. And the Metamorphs — they — "

"I was once Lord Valentine of Cas-

tle Mount. Accept it. Believe it. The realm has fallen into dangerous hands. Remain at my side, Lisamon, as I journey east to set things right."

She put her huge meaty hand over her mouth and looked at him in amazement.

Then she began to sag into an homage, but he shook his head, caught her by the elbow, would not let her kneel. "Come," he said. "That doesn't matter now. Out of here!"

They gathered up their juggling gear and sprinted through the darkness toward the wagon, far across town. Shanamir and Carabella had already taken off and were running far ahead. The Skandars moved in a single ponderous phalanx, shaking the ground beneath them; Valentine had never seen them move so quickly before. He ran just behind them, alongside Sleet. To the rear was Lisamon Hultin. She had scooped up Deliamber and was carrying the little wizard perched in the crook of her left arm; in her right she bore her unsheathed vibration-sword.

Few Metamorphs were about. Most had gone in other directions, toward the center of the festival area. Those that remained paid little heed to the jugglers.

As they neared the wagon, Sleet said to Valentine, "Shall we free the prisoner?"

"Yes. Let's go."

He beckoned to Lisamon Hultin. She put Deliamber down and followed him.

With Sleet in the lead, they ran toward the plaza. To Valentine's relief it was all but empty, no more than a handful of Piurivar guards on duty. The twelve cages still were stacked in tiers at the far end, four on the bottom, then rows of four and three, and the one containing the blue-skinned alien perched on top. The guards were slow to react, and before they could do anything Lisamon Hultin was among them, seizing them two at a time and hurling them far across the plaza.

"Take no lives," Valentine warned.

Sleet, monkey-swift, was scrambling up the stack of cages. He reached the top well ahead of Valentine and began to cut through the thick withes that held the cage door shut. With brisk sawing motions of the knife he slashed while Valentine held the withes taut. In a moment the last of the fibers was severed, and Valentine hoisted the door. The alien clambered out, stretching his cramped limbs and looking questioningly at his rescuers.

"Come with us," Valentine said. "Our wagon is over there, beyond the plaza. Do you understand?"

"I understand," said the alien. His voice was deep, harsh, resonant, with a sharp clipped edge to each syllable that made his speech hard to comprehend. Without another word he swung himself down past the cages of the forest-brethren to the ground, where Lisamon Hultin had finished dealing with the Metamorph guards and was piling them tidily in a heap.

Impulsively Valentine sliced through the lashings on the cage of forest-brethren nearest to him. The busy little hands of the creatures reached through the bars and pulled the latch without waiting for them, and out they came. Valentine went on to the next cage. Sleet had already descended.

"One moment," Valentine called. "The job's not quite done."

Sleet drew his knife and set to work. In moments all the cages were open, and the forest-brethren, dozens of them, were disappearing into the night.

As they ran to the wagon, Sleet said, "Why did you do that?"

"Why not?" Valentined asked. "They want to live too."

Shanamir and the Skandars had the wagon ready to go, the mounts hitched, the rotors turning. Lisamon Hultin was the last one in; she slammed the door behind her and yelled to Zalzan Gibor, who took off immediately.

And just in time, for half a dozen Metamorphs appeared and began running frantically after them, shouting and gesticulating. Zalzan Gibor stepped up the wagon's speed, and gradually the pursuers fell behind and were lost to sight as the wagon entered the utter darkness of the jungle.

Sleet peered worriedly back. "Do you think they're still following us?"

"They can't keep up with us," said Lisamon Hultin. "And they travel only by foot. We're safely out of there."

"Are you sure?" Sleet asked. "What if they have some side route to take in catching up with us?"

"Worry about that when we must," said Carabella. "We're moving quickly." She shuddered. "And let it be a long while before we see Ilirivoyne again!"

They fell silent. The wagon glided swiftly onward.

Valentine sat slightly apart from the others. It was inevitable, yet it distressed him, for he was still more Valentine than Lord Valentine, and it was strange and disagreeable to set himself up above his friends. But there was no helping it. Carabella and Sleet, learning privately of his identity, had come to terms with it privately in their own ways; Deliamber, who had known the truth before Valentine himself, had never been overly awed by it; but the others, whatever suspicions they may have had that Valentine was something more than a happy-go-lucky wanderer, were dumfounded by the open acknowledgment of his rank that had come out of the grotesque Metamorph performance. They stared; they were speechless; they sat in stiff, unnatural postures, as if afraid to slouch in the presence of a Coronal. But how did one behave in the presence of a Power of Majipoor? These people had no training in court etiquette; such training as Valentine had had was all gone from his mind; the starburst gesture was a popular custom, probably not practiced among

the nobility to any great extent, and in any case they could not sit here constantly making starbursts at him. The gesture seemed absurd to Valentine anyway, a comical outpoking of the fingers and nothing more: his growing sense of his own importance did not seem to include much spirit of self-importance yet.

The alien introduced himself as Khun of Kianimot, a world of a star relatively close by Majipoor. He seemed a dark and brooding sort, with a crystalline anger and despair at his core, something integral to his being, that expressed itself, Valentine thought, in the set of his lips and the tone of his voice and particularly in the intense gaze of his strange, haunted purple eyes. Of course it was possible, Valentine conceded, that he was projecting his own human notions of expression onto this alien being and that perhaps Khun was, as Kianimot folk went, a person of total jollity and amiability. But he doubted that.

Khun had come to Majipoor two years before, on business that he chose not to explain. It was, he said bitterly, the greatest mistake of his life, for among the merry Majipoorans he had been parted from all his money; he had unwisely embarked on a journey to Zimroel unaware that there was no starport on that continent from which he could depart for his home world, and he had even more foolishly ventured into Piurivar territory, thinking he could recoup his losses in some sort of trade with the Metamorphs. But they had seized him instead and thrust him in the cage and held him prisoner for weeks, meaning to give him to the Fountain on the high night of their festival.

"Which would perhaps have been best," he said. "One quick blast of water and all this wandering would be at an end. Majipoor makes me weary. If I am destined to die on this world of yours, I think I would prefer it to be soon."

"Pardon us for rescuing you," Carabella said sharply.

"No. No. I mean no ingratitude. But only —" Khun paused. "This place has been grief for me. So too was Kianimot. Is there any place in the universe where life does not mean suffering?"

"Has it been that bad?" asked Carabella. "We find it tolerable here. Even the worst is tolerable enough, considering the alternative." She laughed. "Are you always this gloomy?"

The alien shrugged. "If you are happy, I admire and envy you. I find existence painful and life meaningless. But these are dark thoughts for one who has just been rescued. I thank you for your aid. Who are you, and what rashness brought you to Piurifayne, and where do you go now?"

"We are jugglers," said Valentine, with a sharp glance at the others. "We came to this province because we thought there was work for us here.

And if we succeed in getting away from this place, we'll head for Ni-moya and down the river to Piliplok."

"And from there?"

Valentine gestured vaguely. "Some of us will make the pilgrimage to the Isle. Do you know what that is? And the others — I can't say where they'll go."

"I must reach Alhanroel," Khun said. "My only hope lies in going home, which is impossible from this continent. In Piliplok perhaps I can arrange passage across the sea. May I travel with you?"

"Of course."

"I have no money."

"We see that," said Valentine. "It makes no difference."

The wagon moved on swiftly through the night. No one slept, except in occasional quick naps. A light rain was falling, now. In the darkness of the forest dangers might lie on any side, but there was a paradoxical comfort in not being able to see anything, and the wagon sped on unmolested.

After an hour or so Valentine looked up and saw Vinorkis standing before him, gaping like a gaffed fish and quivering with unbearable tension.

"My lord?" he said in a tiny voice.

Valentine nodded to the Hjort. "You're trembling, Vinorkis."

"My lord — how do I say this? — I have a terrible confession to make —"

Sleet opened his eyes and glared bleakly. Valentine signaled him to be calm.

Vinorkis said, "My lord —" and faltered. He began again. "My lord, in Pidruid a man came to me and said 'There is a tall fair-haired stranger at a certain inn and we believe he has committed monstrous crimes.' And this man offered me a bag of crowns if I would keep close by the fair-haired stranger and go wherever he went and give news of his doings to the imperial proctors every few days."

"A spy?" Sleet blurted. His hand flew to the dagger at his hip.

"Who was this man who hired you?" Valentine asked quietly.

The Hjort shook his head. "Someone in the service of the Coronal, by the way he dresed. I never knew his name."

"And you gave these reports?" Valentine said.

"Yes, my lord," Vinorkis murmured, staring at his feet. "In every city. After a time I hardly believed that you could be the criminal they said you were, for you seemed kind and gentle and sweet of soul, but I have taken their money, and there was more money for me every time I reported —"

"Let me kill him now," Sleet muttered harshly.

"There'll be no killing," Valentine said. "Neither now nor later."

"He's dangerous, my lord!"

"Not any longer."

"I never trusted him," Sleet said. "Nor did Carabella, nor Deliamber. It wasn't just that he was Hjort. There

was always something shifty about him, sly, insinuating, all those questions, all that sucking around for information —"

Vinorkis said, "I ask pardon. I had no idea whom I was betraying, my lord."

"You believe that?" Sleet cried.

"Yes," Valentine said. "Why not? He had no more idea who I was than — than I did. He was told to trail a fair-haired man and give information to the government. Is that so evil a thing? He was serving his Coronal, or so he thought. His loyalty must not be repaid by your dagger, Sleet."

"My lord, sometimes you are too innocent," Sleet said.

"Perhaps true. But not this time. We have much to gain by forgiving this man, and nothing at all by slaying him." To the Hjort Valentine said, "You have my pardon, Vinorkis. I ask only that you be as loyal to the true Coronal as you've been to the false."

"You have my pledge, my lord."

"Good. Get yourself some sleep, now, and put away your fear."

Vinorkis made the starburst and backed away, settling down in midcabin beside two of the Skandars.

Sleet said, "That was unwise, my lord. What if he continues to spy on us?"

"In these jungles? Messages to whom?"

"And when we leave the jungles?"

"I think he can be trusted," said Valentine in a low voice. "I know, this confession may have been only a double ruse, to lull us into casting aside our suspicions. I'm not as naive as you think, Sleet. I charge you to keep private watch over him when we reach civilization again — just in case. But I think you'll find his repentance is genuine. And I have uses for him that will make him valuable to me."

"Uses, my lord?"

"A spy can lead us to other spies. And there'll be other spies, Sleet. We may want Vinorkis to maintain his contacts with the imperial agents, eh?"

Sleet winked. "I see your meaning, my lord!"

Valentine smiled, and they fell silent.

Yes, he told himself, Vinorkis' horror and remorse were genuine. And provided much that Valentine needed to know; for if the Coronal had been willing to pay good sums to have an insignificant wanderer followed from Pidruid to Ilirivoyne, how insignificant could that wanderer actually be? Valentine felt a weird prickling along his skin. More than anything else, Vinorkis' confession was a confirmation of all that Valentine had discovered about himself of late. Surely, if the technique that had been used to cast him from his body was new and relatively untried, the conspirators would be uncertain about how permanent the mind-wiping would be and would hardly dare to allow the outcast Coronal to roam about the land free and unobserved. A spy, then, and

probably others close by; and the threat of quick preventive action if word got back to the usurper that Valentine was beginning to recover his memory. He wondered how carefully the imperial forces were tracking him and at what point they would choose to intercept him on his journey toward Alhanroel.

Onward the wagon moved in the blackness of night. Deliamber and Lisamon Hultin conferred endlessly with Zalzan Gibor about the route; the other main Metamorph settlement, Avendroyne, lay somewhere to the southeast of Ilirivoyne, in a gap between two great mountains, and it seemed likely that the road they were on would take them there. To ride blithely into another Metamorph town hardly seemed wise, of course, since there was quite probably communication between Ilirivoyne and Avendroyne and word must have gone on ahead of the freeing of the prisoner and the escape of the wagon. Still, there was even greater peril in trying to go back toward Piurifayne Fountain. The only hope was to go ahead and get safely around Avendroyne somehow.

Valentine, not at all sleepy, reenacted the Metamorph pantomime a hundred times in his mind. It had the quality of a dream, yes, but no dream was so immediate: he had been close enough to touch his Metamorph counterpart, he had seen, beyond all doubt, those shifts of features from fair to dark, dark to fair. The Metamorphs knew the truth, more clearly than he himself. Could they read souls, as Deliamber sometimes did? What had they felt, knowing they had a fallen Coronal in their midst? No awe, certainly: Coronals were nothing to them, mere symbols of their own defeat thousands of years ago. It must have seemed terribly funny to them to have a successor to Lord Stiamot tossing clubs at their festival, amusing them with silly tricks and dances, far from the splendors of Castle Mount, a Coronal in their own muddy wooden village. How strange, he thought. How much like a dream.

15.

Toward dawn huge rounded mountains became visible, with a broad notch between them. Avendroyne could not be far. Zalzan Gibor with a deference he had never shown before, came aft to consult Valentine on strategy. Lie low in the woods all day, and wait until nightfall to try to get past Avendroyne? Or attempt a bold daylight passage?

Leadership was unfamiliar to Valentine. He pondered a moment, trying to look far-seeing and thoughtful.

At length he said, "If we go forward by day, we are too conspicuous. On the other hand, if we waste all day hiding here, we give them more time to prepare plans against us."

"Tonight," Sleet pointed out, "is

the high festival again in Ilirivoyne, and probably here also. We might slip by them while they're merrymaking, but in daylight we have no chance."

"I agree," said Lisamon Hultin.

Valentine looked around. "Carabella?"

"If we wait, we give the Ilirivoyne people time to overtake us. I say go onward."

"Deliamber?"

The Vroon delicately touched tentacle-tips together. "Onward. Bypass Avendroyne, double back toward Verf. There'll be a second road to the Fountain from Avendroyne, surely."

"Yes," Valentine said. He looked to Zalzan Gibor. "My thoughts run with Deliamber and Carabella. What of yours?"

Zalzan Gibor scowled. "Mine say, let the wizard make this wagon fly and take us tonight to Ni-moya. Otherwise, continue on without waiting."

"So be it," said Valentine, as if he had made the decision single-handedly. "And when we approach Avendryone, we'll send scouts out to find a road that bypasses the town."

On they went, moving more cautiously as daybreak arrived. The rain was intermittent, but when it came now it was no gentle spatter, more an almost tropical downpour, a heavy cannonade of drops that rattled with malign force against the wagon's roof. To Valentine the rain was welcome: perhaps it would keep the Metamorphs indoors as they went through.

There were signs of outskirts now, scattered wicker huts. The road forked and forked again, Deliamber offering a guess at each point of division, until finally they knew they must be close to Avendroyne. Lisamon Hultin and Sleet rode out as scouts and returned in an hour with good news: one of the two roads just ahead ran right into the heart of Avendroyne, where festival preparations were under way, and the other curved toward the northeast, bypassing the city entirely and going through what looked like a farming district on the farther slopes of the mountains.

They took the northeast road. Uneventfully they passed the Avendroyne region.

Now, in late afternoon, they journeyed down the mountain pass and into a broad, thickly forested plain, rainswept and dark, that marked the eastern perimeter of Metamorph territory. Zalzan Gibor drove the wagon furiously onward, pausing only when Shanamir insisted that the mounts absolutely had to rest and forage; tireless they might be, and of synthetic origin, but living things was what they were, and now and then they needed to halt. The Skandar yielded reluctantly; he seemed possessed by desperate need to put Piurifayne far behind him.

Toward twilight, as they went in heavy rain through rough, irregular country, trouble came suddenly upon them.

Valentine was riding in midcabin, with Deliamber and Carabella; most of the others were sleeping, and Heitrag Gibor and Gibor Haern were driving. There came a crashing, crackling, smashing sound from ahead, and a moment later the wagon jolted to a stop.

"Tree down in the storm!" Heitrag Gibor called. "Road blocked in front of us!"

Zalzan Gibor muttered curses and tugged Lisamon Hultin awake. Valentine saw nothing but green ahead, the entire crown of some forest giant blocking the road. It might take hours or even days to clear that. The Skandars, hoisting energy-throwers to their shoulders, went out to investigate. Valentine followed. Darkness was falling rapidly. The wind was gusty, and shafts of rain swept almost horizontally into their faces.

"Let's get to work," Zalzan Gibor growled, shaking his head in annoyance. "Thelkar! You start cutting from down there! Rovorn! The big side branches! Erfon —"

"It might be swifter," Valentine suggested, "to back up and look for another branch in the road."

The idea startled Zalzan Gibor, as if the Skandar would never in a century have conceived such a notion. He mulled it for a moment. "Yes," he said finally. "That does make some sense. If we —"

And a second tree, larger even than the first, toppled to the ground a hundred yards behind them. The wagon was trapped.

Valentine was the first to comprehend what must be happening. "Into the wagon, everyone! It's an ambush!" He rushed toward the open door.

Too late. Out of the darkening forest came a stream of Metamorphs, fifteen or twenty of them, perhaps even more, bursting silently into their midst. Zalzan Gibor let out a terrible cry of rage and opened fire with his energy-thrower; the blaze of light cast a strange lavender glow over the roadside and two Metamorphs fell, charred hideously. But in the same instant Heitrag Gibor uttered a strangled gurgle and dropped, a weapon shaft through his neck, and Thelkar fell, clutching at another in his chest.

Suddenly the rear end of the wagon was ablaze. Those within came scrambling out, Lisamon Hultin leading the way with her vibration-sword high. Valentine found himself attacked by a Metamorph wearing his own face; he kicked the creature away, pivoted, slashed a second one with the knife that was his only weapon. That was strange, to inflict a wound. He watched the bronze-hued fluid begin to flow in a weird fascination.

The Valentine-Metamorph came at him again. Claws went for his eyes. Valentine dodged, twisted, stabbed. The blade sank deep and the Metamorph reeled back. Valentine trembled in shock, but only for an instant. He turned to confront the next.

This was a new experience for him, this fighting and killing, and it made his soul ache. But to be gentle now was to invite a quick death. He thrust and cut, thrust and cut. From behind him he heard Carabella call, "How are you doing?"

"Holding — my — own —" he grunted.

Zalzan Gibor, seeing his magnificent wagon on fire, howled and caught a Metamorph by the waist and hurled it into the pyre; two more rushed at him, but another Skandar seized them and snapped them like sticks with each pair of hands. In the frantic melee Valentine caught sight of Carabella wrestling with a Metamorph, forcing it to the ground with the powerful forearm muscles years of juggling had developed; and there was Sleet, ferociously vindictive, pounding another with his boots in savage joy. But the wagon was burning. The wagon was burning. The woods were full of Metamorphs, night was swiftly coming on, the rain was a torrent, and the wagon was burning.

As the heat of the fire increased, the center of the battle shifted from the roadside to the forest, and matters became even more confused, for in the darkness it was hard to tell friend from foe. The Metamorph trick of shape-shifting added another complication, although in the frenzy of the fight they were unable to hold their transformations for long, and what seemed to be Sleet, or Shanamir, or Zalzan Gibor, reverted quickly to its native form.

Valentine fought savagely. He was slippery with his own sweat and the blood of Metamorphs, and his heart hammered mightily with the furious exertion. Panting, gasping, never still an instant, he waded through the tangle of enemies with a zeal that astonished him, never pausing for an instant's rest. Thrust and cut, thrust and cut —

The Metamorphs were armed with only the simplest of weapons, and though there seemed to be dozens of them, their numbers soon were dwindling rapidly. Lisamon Hultin was doing awful destruction with her vibration-sword, swinging it two-handed and lopping off the boughs of trees as well as the limbs of Metamorphs. The surviving Skandars, spraying energy-bolts wildly around the scene, had ignited half a dozen trees and had littered the ground with fallen Metamorphs. Sleet was maiming and slaughtering as if he could in one wild minute avenge himself for all the pain he fancied the Metamorphs had brought upon him. Khun too was fighting with passionate energy.

As suddenly as the ambush had begun, it was over.

By the light of the fires Valentine could see dead Metamorphs everywhere. Two dead Skandars lay among them. Lisamon Hultin bore a bloody but shallow wound on one thigh; Sleet had lost half his jerkin and had taken several minor cuts; Shana-

mir had claw marks across his cheek. Valentine too felt some trifling scratches and nicks, and his arms had a leaden ache of fatigue. But he had not been seriously harmed. Deliamber, though — where was Deliamber? The Vroon wizard was nowhere to be seen. In anguish Valentine turned to Carabella and said, "Did the Vroon stay in the wagon?"

"I thought we all came out when it burst afire."

Valentine frowned. In the silence of the forest the only sounds were the terrible hissing and crackling of fire and the quiet mocking patter of the rain. "Deliamber?" Valentine called. "Deliamber, where are you?"

"Here," answered a high-pitched voice from above. Valentine looked up and saw the sorcerer clinging to a sturdy bough, fifteen feet off the ground. "Warfare is not one of my skills," Deliamber explained blandly, swinging outward and letting himself drop into Lisamon Hultin's arms.

Carabella said, "What do we do now?"

Valentine realized that she was asking him. He was in command, not merely by virtue of his rank but because Zalzan Gibor, kneeling by his brothers' bodies, seemed stunned by their deaths and by the loss of his precious wagon.

He said, "We must cut through the forest. If we try to take the main road we'll meet more Metamorphs. Shanamir, what of the mounts?"

"Dead," the boy sobbed. "Every one. The Metamorphs —"

"On foot, then. A long wet journey it will be, too. Deliamber, how far do you think we are from the River Steiche?"

"A few days' journey, I suspect. But we have no sure notion of the direction."

"Follow the slope of the land," Sleet said. "Rivers won't lie uphill from here. If we keep going east we're bound to hit it."

"Unless a mountain stands in our way," Deliamber remarked.

"We'll find the river," Valentine said firmly. "The Steiche flows into the Zimr at Ni-moya, is that right?"

"Yes," said Deliamber, "but its flow is turbulent."

"We'll have to chance it. A raft, I suppose, will be quickest to build. Come. If we stay here much longer we'll be set upon again."

They could salvage nothing from the wagon, neither clothing nor food nor belongings nor their juggling gear — all lost, every scrap, everything but what had been on them when they came forth to meet the ambushers. To Valentine that was no great loss, but to some of the others, particularly the Skandars, it was overwhelming. The wagon had been their home a long while.

It was difficult to get Zalzan Gibor to move from the spot. He seemed paralyzed, unable to abandon the bodies of his brothers and the ruin of

his wagon. Gently Valentine urged him to his feet. Some of the Metamorphs, he said, might well have escaped in the skirmish; they could soon return with reinforcements; it was perilous to remain anywhere near here. Quickly they dug shallow graves in the soft forest floor and laid Thelkar and Heitrag Gibor to rest. Then, in steady rain and gathering darkness, they set out in what they hoped was an easterly direction.

For over an hour they walked, until it became too dark to see; then they camped miserably in a little soggy huddle, clinging to one another until dawn. Valentine slept only in brief snatches. He kept expecting Metamorphs to spring upon them out of the blackness.

At first light they rose, cold and stiff, and picked their way onward through the tangled forest. The rain, at least, had stopped during the night. The forest here was less of a jungle, and gave them little challenge, except for an occasional swift rushing stream that had to be forded with care. At one of those, Carabella lost her footing and was fished out by Lisamon Hultin; at another it was Shanamir who was swept downstream and Khun who plucked him to safety. They walked until midday and rested an hour or two, making a scrappy meal of raw roots and berries. Then they went on until darkness.

And passed two more days in the same fashion.

And on the third came to a grove of dwikka-trees, eight fat squat giants in the forest, with monstrous swollen fruits hanging from them.

"Food!" Zalzan Gibor bellowed.

"Food sacred to the forest-brethren," Lisamon Hultin said. "Be careful!"

The famished Skandar, nevertheless, was on the verge of cutting down one of the enormous fruits with his energy-thrower when Valentine said sharply, "No! I forbid it!"

Zalzan Gibor stared incredulously. For an instant his old habits of command asserted themselves, and he glared at Valentine as if about to strike him, before remembering what a transformation of the roles had occurred at Ilirivoyne. He hesitated, under tight control.

"Look," Valentine said.

Forest-brethren were emerging from behind every tree. They were armed with their dart blowers; and seeing the slender ape-like creatures encircling them, Valentine in his weariness felt almost willing to be slain. But only for a moment. He recovered his spirits and said to Lisamon Hultin, "Ask them if we may have food and guides to the Steiche. If they ask a price, we can juggle for them with stones or pieces of fruit, I suppose."

The warrior-woman, twice as tall as the forest-brethren, went into their midst and talked with them a long time. Zalzan Gibor, as the conference went on, muttered and kicked at the

ground; he seemed still angry with the forest-brethren for the barricade they had imposed on him back near Dulorn. But Lisamon Hultin was smiling when she returned.

"They are aware," she said, "that we are the ones who freed their brothers in Ilirivoyne!"

"Then we are saved!" cried Shanamir exultantly.

"News travels swiftly in this forest," Valentine said.

Lisamon Hultin went on, "We are their guests. They will feed us. They will guide us."

That night the wanderers ate richly on dwikka-fruit and other forest delicacies, and there was actually laughter among them for the first time since the ambush. Afterward the forest-brethren performed a sort of dance for them, a monkeyish prancing thing, and Sleet and Carabella and Valentine responded with impromptu juggling, using objects collected in the forest. Afterward Valentine slept a deep, satisfying sleep. In his dreams he had the gift of flight and saw himself soaring to the summit of Castle Mount.

And in the morning a party of chattering forest-brethren led them to the River Steiche, three hours' journey from the dwikka-tree grove, and bade them farewell with little twittering cries.

The river was a sobering sight. It was broad, though nothing remotely like the mighty Zimr, and it sped northward with startling haste, flowing so energetically that it had carved out a deep bed for itself bordered in many places by high rocky walls. Here and there in its course ugly stone snags rose above the water, and downstream Valentine could see white eddies of rapids. Running this river would be taxing even for experts. Nevertheless, they had no choice. They might otherwise wander for weeks in the dangerous Metamorph land; this river; if it did not kill them, would sweep them onward to Ni-moya in a matter of days.

The building of rafts took a day and a half. Sleet supervised; he seemed to have some skills at construction. They cut down the young slim trees that grew by the riverbank, trimmed and trued them with knives and sharp stones, lashed them together with vines. The results were hardly elegant, but the rafts, though crude, did look reasonably riverworthy. There were three altogether — one for the four Skandars; one for Khun, Vinorkis, Lisamon Hultin, and Sleet; and one occupied by Valentine, Carabella, Shanamir, and Deliamber.

"We will probably become separated as we go downriver," Sleet said. "We should choose a meeting place in Ni-moya."

Deliamber said, "The Steiche and the Zimr flow together at a place called Nissimorn. There is a broad, sandy beach there. Let us meet at Nissimorn Beach."

"At Nissimorn Beach, yes," Valentine said.

He cut loose the cord that bound his raft to the shore and was carried off into the river.

For the first day the journey was uneventful. There were rapids, but not overly difficult ones, and they poled safely past them. Carabella showed skill at handling the raft, and that skill grew with experience as she deftly steered them around the occasional rocky patches. There was little rain, and the river, though swift, was not so wild that they could not stop occasionally to gather fruit. This vegetarian diet was beginning to bore Valentine, and he felt thin and a little weak, but somewhere ahead was the grand metropolis of Ni-moya, and he still had a purse full of royals against his belt, so there would be fine feasting when at last they returned to civilized territory.

After a time the rafts became separated, Valentine's taking some subcurrent and moving rapidly ahead of the other two. In the morning he waited, hoping the others would catch up. But there was no sign of them, and eventually he decided to depart.

On, on, on, for the most part swept easily along, with occasional moments of anxiety in the white-water stretches. By afternoon of the second day the course was becoming rougher. The land seemed to dip here, sloping downward as the Zimr drew near, and the river, following the line of descent, plunged and bucked. Valentine began to worry about waterfalls ahead. They had no charts, no notion of dangers: they took everything as it came. He could only trust to luck that this swift water would deliver them safely to Ni-moya.

And then? By boat to Piliplok, and by pilgrim-ship to the Isle of Sleep, and somehow procure an interview with the Lady his mother, and then? And then? How did one claim the Coronal's throne, when one's face was not the face of Lord Valentine the rightful ruler? By what claim, by what authority? It seemed to Valentine an impossible quest. He might do better remaining here in the forest, ruling over his little band, his Skandars and his giant warrior-woman and his friends the jugglers and Shanamir. They, readily enough, accepted him for what he thought himself to be; but in that world of billions of strangers, in that vast empire of giant cities that lay beyond the edge of the horizon, how, how, how would he ever manage to convince the unbelievers that he, Valentine the juggler, was —

No. These thoughts were foolish. He had never, not since he had appeared, shorn of memory and past, on the verge overlooking Pidruid, felt the desire to rule over others; and if he had come to command this little group, it was more by natural gift and by Zalzan Gibor's default than out of any overt quest on his part for power. And yet he was in command, however tentatively and delicately. So it would be

as he traveled onward through Majipoor. He would take one step at a time, and do that which seemed right and proper, and the Lady would guide him if it was appropriate for her to do so, and if the Divine so willed it, he would one day stand again on Castle Mount, and if that were not part of the great plan, why, that would be acceptable also. There was nothing to fear. The future would unroll serenely in its own true course, as it had done since Pidruid. And —

"Valentine!" Carabella shouted.

The river seemed to sprout giant stony teeth. There were boulders everywhere, and monstrous white whirlpools, and, just ahead, an ominous tumbling descent, a place where the Steiche leaped out into space and went roaring down a series of steps to a valley far below. Valentine gripped his pole, but no pole could help him now. It caught between two snags and was ripped from his grasp; a moment later there was a ghastly grinding sound as the flimsy raft, caught between submerged rocks, swung around at right angles to its course and split apart. He was hurled into the chilly stream and swept forward like a cork. For a moment he grasped Carabella by the wrist; but then the current pulled her free, and as he clutched desperately for her, he was engulfed by the swift water and driven under.

Gasping and choking, Valentine struggled to get his head above water. When he did, he was already far downstream. The wreckage of the raft was nowhere in sight. Nor could he see the others. He imagined he had a glimpse of Shanamir clinging to a boulder, but it could well be illusion.

"Carabella?" he yelled. "Shanamir? Deliamber? Hoy! Hoy!"

He roared until his voice was ragged, but the booming of the rapids so thoroughly covered his cries that he could scarcely hear them himself. A terrible sense of pain and loss numbed his spirit. All gone, then? His friends, his beloved Carabella, the wily little Vroon, the clever, cocky boy Shanamir, all swept to death in an instant? No. No. Unthinkable. That was an agony far worse than this business, still unreal to him, of being a Coronal thrust from the Castle. What did that mean? These were beings of flesh and blood, dear to him; that was only a title and power. He would not stop calling their names as the river threw him about. *"Carabella!"* he shouted. *"Shanamir!"*

Valentine clawed at rocks, trying to halt his willy-nilly descent, but he was in the heart of the rapids now, buffeted and battered by the current and by the stones of the riverbed. Dazed and exhausted, half paralyzed by grief, Valentine gave up struggling and let himself be carried along, down the giant staircase of the river, a tiny plaything spinning and bouncing along. He drew his knees to his chest and wrapped his arms over his head, attempting to minimize the surface he presented to

the rocks. The power of the river was awesome. So here is how it ends, he thought, the grand adventure of Valentine of Majipoor, once Coronal, later wandering juggler, now about to be broken to bits by the impersonal and uncaring forces of nature. He commended himself to the Lady whom he thought to be his mother, and gulped air, and went heels over head, head over heels, down and down and down, and struck something with frightening force and thought this must be the end, only it was not the end, and struck something again that gave him an agonizing blow in the ribs, knocking the air from him, and he must have lost consciousness for a time, for he felt no further pain.

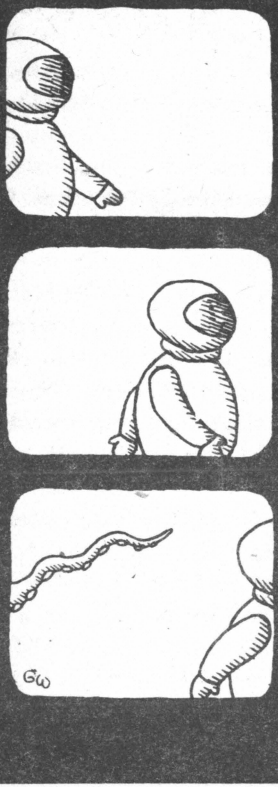
And then he found himself lying on a pebble-strewn strand, in a quiet sidestream of the river. It seemed to him that he had been shaken in a giant dice-box for hours and cast up at random, discarded and useless. His body ached in a thousand places. His lungs felt soggy when he breathed. He was shivering and his skin was covered with goosebumps. And he was alone, under a vast cloudless sky, at the edge of some unknown wilderness, with civilization some unknown distance ahead and his friends, the only people who truly mattered to him on this entire gigantic world, perhaps dashed to death on the boulders.

But he was alive. That much was sure. Alone, battered, helpless, grief-stricken, lost ... but alive. The adventure, then, was not ended. Slowly, with infinite effort, Valentine hauled himself out of the surf and tottered to the riverbank and let himself carefully down on a wide flat rock and with numb fingers undid his clothing and stretched out to dry himself under the warm, friendly sun. He looked toward the river, hoping to see Carabella come swimming along, or Shanamir with the wizard perched on his shoulder. No one. But that doesn't mean they're dead, he told himself. They may have been cast up on farther shores. I'll rest here for a time, Valentine resolved, and then I'll go searching for the others, and then, with them or without, I'll set out onward, toward Nimoya, toward Piliplok, toward the Isle of the Lady, onward, onward, onward toward Castle Mount or whatever else lies ahead of me. Onward. Onward. Onward.

(to be continued next month)

Films

BAIRD SEARLES



VAMP 'TIL READY

But is the world ready for another Dracula movie? Does the world *need* another Dracula movie?

Well, students of the horror film, let's review the cinema of the vampire. There have been, at this point, literally hundreds, most of them using the character of Dracula while having precious little to do with Bram Stoker. Of all these, how many have been memorable in any way? In vaguely chronological order:

Nosferatu, the silent one, of couse; hard to watch now because it *is* silent, and the human characters are unbearably frumpy in a Victorian sort of way. But the vampire himself is singularly terrifying, as are some of the effects.

Then the first sound *Dracula*, with Bela Lugosi. It makes a hash of the novel (derived, as it was, second hand from the play from the book), but Lugosi is inhumanly reptilian as the Count, and it has some fine visual moments. Of all the spin offs from this one, the only one worth noting is *Dracula's Daughter*, and that because of Gloria Holden's stylish performance in the title role.

Then a long hiatus, up to and including all those Hammer films from across the water. I find them undistinguished, unfrightening, unartistic, and worst of all, unfunny. (This raises again the ongoing question of the problem of color and the horror film.

Certainly the color in these movies, strident and unsubtle as it was, is a good part of their lack of success.)

The only possible exceptions in this period are the European Karnstein trilogy, all loosely based on Le Fanu's *Carmilla*, rather than Stoker. Though a shade less than subtle, they offered some variety in the female as protagonist vampire, with more than a hint of lesbian overtones.

Offering some comic relief was Roman Polanski's *The Fearless Vampire Killers*. Though butchered by MGM when it was released here, it still took full advantage of the comic potential of the vampire legend; it also had some strikingly beautiful scenes, such as the ball of the vampires.

But as the genre of the horror film descended more and more into trying to achieve its effects through blood and violence rather than artistry, it seemed we'd lost the possibility of a good, serious modern attempt to go back to basics.

The answer came from an unexpected quarter, the little screen, in the form of a British made-for-TV *Dracula*, starring Louis Jourdan in the title role.

It was literate; in fact, it followed the myriad convolutions of Stoker's novel with astonishing fidelity. (The fact that it was three hour-long episodes gave the time for this; the miniseries is indeed the best form for translating the novel to screen.) And what was added had style and wit (one delightful in joke had the Count make passing reference to the Karnstein sisters).

It was beautiful, filmed with that British eye for period, and with a use of color that at least suggested that it could be used for atmosphere rather than against it. And it was well-acted; Jourdan was marvelous, with the remains of a splendid male beauty and the slightly sinister, just-right Continental manner. And here was a Mina you could really cheer for, spunky, intelligent and beautiful.

And now, for heaven's sake, we have yet *another* major film of *Dracula*, this one by way of the recent production of the play and starring, as did the play, Frank Langella.

One can see this movie being done if it had something new to add, some variation on the theme. But it doesn't; it seems to be trying for the straightforward approach of the TV production, which was far superior.

(Though I didn't see it, I gather the Broadway production achieved a freshness of approach by being slightly tongue-in-cheek; the sets and costumes were by the Count of Camp himself, Edward Gorey.)

So one ends up with a feeling of redundancy, of one too many Draculas, and with really very little to say. Which is why, patient reader, we have taken such a circuitous route to get to the point; in musical terms I've been vamping (sorry).

What *is* there to say? Well, let's see. There is some extraordinarily beautiful photography here. Most of the exteriors (shot, I would guess, along the Cornwall coast) have the look of very early morning or very late afternoon, if not taking place at night. Carfax Abbey seems several sizes larger than Mont St. Michel, and set in rather the same circumstances, on a rocky island. The interior looks like the castle of *Beauty and the Beast* crossed with the ship from *Alien*.

Several special effects are very — er — effective, one in particular of the Count transforming himself into a wolf as he leaps head foremost through a window. And one awful boner, so blatant that I can't believe it in the generally intelligent script. In this version, Mina gets it early, and she is first seen as a vampire *reflected in a pool of water!* And it's not as if the scriptwriters were ignorant of this particular unnatural law, since there are several references to it.

Laurence Olivier is a marvelous Van Helsing, but then, of course, he'd be a marvelous Mrs. Wiggs of the Cabbage Patch if he chose to play it.

Langella is a curiously soft Count. He has the requisite sort of good looks, and a beautiful voice, but somehow there isn't that implication of age-old evil that Jourdan and Lugosi captured, though he speaks of centuries and generations. It may just be that he is too young for the role.

And simply in content, this film seems highly truncated, since it only covers a few days in time, and is set entirely in Whitby, the seaside town where Dracula's ship runs aground. Worst of all, the great "children of the night" line has been altered to "what *sad* music they make," apparently to work in a bit of sympathy, which is more deadly to the vampire image than any stake.

All in all, though this version is beautiful and middling intelligent, there's only one word for it. I'm afraid this *Dracula* is anemic.

THE FASTEST GROWING CHURCH IN THE WORLD

by Brother Keith E. L'Hommedieu, D.D.

It's quite safe to say that of all the organized religious sects on the current scene, one church in particular stands above all in its unique approach to religion. The Universal Life Church is the only organized church in the world with no traditional religious doctrine. In the words of Kirby J. Hensley, founder, "The ULC only believes in what is right, and that all people have the right to determine what beliefs are right for them, as long as they do not interfere with the rights of others."

Reverend Hensley is the leader of the worldwide Universal Life Church with a membership now exceeding 7 million ordained ministers of all religious beliefs. Reverend Hensley started the church in his garage by ordaining ministers by mail. During the 1960's, he traveled all across the country appearing at college rallies held in his honor where he would perform mass ordinations of thousands of people at a time. These new ministers were then exempt from being inducted into the armed forces during the undeclared Vietnam war.

In 1966 Reverend Hensley was fighting the establishment on another front. The IRS tried to claim the ULC wasn't a legal church and proceeded to impound the ten thousand dollars in the church bank account. The feisty Hensley filed suit against the IRS in federal district court for return of the funds and to permanently establish the ULC as a legal tax exempt entity. On March 1, 1974 Judge James F. Battin ruled against the IRS in his decision which stated, "Neither this court or any branch of this government will consider the merits or fallacies of a religion. Nor will the court praise or condemn a religion. Were the court to do so, it would impinge upon the guarantees of the First Amendment." The judge then ordered the IRS to return the impounded money and to grant the Universal Life Church its tax exempt status.

Reverend Hensley has stated that he believes a church is people and not just a fancy building. He also believes in total freedom and equality for all people. The ULC will ordain anyone without regard to religious beliefs, race, nationality, sex or age.

The ULC's success formula is both effective and unquestionably legal. After a person has become an ordained minister, he or she can join with two other people and form their own Universal Life Church. These three people then make up the Board of Directors consisting of a Pastor, a Secretary and a Treasurer. The ULC will then grant the group the use of its legal church charter complete with both federal and state tax exempt numbers. The newly formed church may then open a bank account in the church's name. Any member of the church can legally donate up to 50% of his or her outside income to the church and take a corresponding tax deduction. The church in turn can pay the complete housing cost of its minister including rent or mortgage payment, insurance, taxes, furnishings and repairs. The church can also provide the minister with full use of an automobile as well as pay for travel and educational expenses. None of these expenses are reported as income to the IRS. Recently a whole town in Hardenburg, New York became Universal Life ministers and turned their homes into religious retreats and monasteries thereby relieving themselves of property taxes, at least until the state tries to figure out what to do.

Brother L'Hommedieu is Chairman of the Board of Trustees of the Sacerdotal Order of the Universal Life and serves on the Board of Directors of the International Universal Life Church, Inc.

Churches enjoy certain other tax benefits over the common man on the street. For instance, a church can legally buy and sell real estate or stocks and bonds completely tax free. It can receive tax free income from bank deposits or mortgages. Many churches own large publishing, recording, or other related businesses like hospitals, clinics and schools without paying any income tax.

A church can sponsor any kind of fund raising event such as a concert, play or even bingo. Churches are also exempt from paying inheritance taxes. When the pastor of the church dies, the Board of Directors simply appoints a new pastor and the church goes on.

Reverend Hensley has stated that he personally doesn't believe in the tax exempt status of churches. However, if the government is going to give a free ride to Billy Graham and the Pope, then why not let everybody participate in these blessings. Furthermore, he backs his words up by offering to defend in court the tax exempt status of his congregations.

Since the church was founded in 1962, it has attracted members who are movie and TV personalities, businessmen, government officials, lawyers, and doctors as well as all types of regular working people. During the last 15 years the Universal Life church has blossomed into a full blown grass roots populace movement. Reverend Hensley is ordaining ten thousand new ministers a week and predicts that the church will have over 20,000,000 members by the early 1980's. In addition, requests for interviews and TV appearances continue to pour in.

Anyone who is a member of the ULC will tell you that the ULC is destined to change the world. By unifying mankind into a brotherhood of freedom orientated individuals, each respecting the other's right to live life as they see fit, the Universal Life Church hopes to put an end to all wars. Reverend Hensley admits that this is a pretty monumental task to accomplish, but he also points out that he is already well on the way to reaching his goal.

Rev. Hensley invites all those interested in becoming an ordained minister and receiving complete information and Minister's Credentials, to send a $10.00 tax deductible donation to the Universal Life Church, 1335 Seabright Ave., Dept. 196, Santa Cruz, CA 95060.

Dragons and Dimwits

or

There and Back Again: a Publishers' Holiday

or

Why Did I Do It?

or

Much Ado About Magic

or

Lord of the Royalties

or . . . .

or . . . .

or . . . .

by JOANNA RUSS

Peace lay over the Wide Land. Vashi, the evening star, was setting in one part of the sky while Helga, the morning star, was rising in another. Crayola, the Moon Goddess, was slipping swiftly down yet another part, but in the wrong direction.

It was a confusing time in the history of The People.

Only two persons were awake among the tents and herd-beasts and weaving looms and miniature golf-courses of The People. (These last — enigmatic religious emblems — had been given to The People ages ago by a culture-hero whose name no one could remember.) One was Thomas of Cornwall, a strange foreigner known as Thomas the Tubercular, who lay awake in agony in the largest tent of all, buried under rich snoods of yak hair (the tent, not Thomas).

His agony was spiritual.

Every time a warrior of The People knelt before him and loudly declared him to be the Redeemer, or a matron of The People approached him to offer herself as compensation for his spiritual suffering, he would cry, "I am tubercular! I am tubercular!"

It didn't seem to help much. They kept on doing it.

Tonight his feet were pillowed on the body of a young matron of The People. His head reposed on the bosom of another. His flesh was covered

warmly with the rich garments and richer hair of yet others.

Thomas coughed hollowly, and muttered, "I am tubercular! I am tubercular!" under his breath, but none of the matrons moved.

They were asleep.

The other person who was awake was May the Unpregnant, so called to distinguish her from all the other women, both young and old, of The People. May had seen her mother die of puerperal fever, her cousin of an ectopic pregnancy, her sister of venereal disease, and her aunt of a birth-induced hemorrhage.

May rejected the blessings of a woman's life. She scorned the gifts of the Goddess (Crayola).

Her very dreams were strange. She dreamed of not catching venereal disease, of not dying in childbirth, of not contracting puerperal fever, of not suffering from varicose veins. At night when Herman, the sun, had fled and the Wide Land lay drowned in shadow, she would prowl between the primitive, cone-shaped yashmaks of The People, driven by her restless spirit and her misery. She was miserable because in her heart she cherished a longing for the strange foreigner, Thomas of Cornwall, but she knew if they were to do the Goddess' bidding, the evil spirit that dwelt within him might fly out through his lips and into hers, not to mention all those other things.

Nobody else seemed to worry about it.

As Crayola slid beneath the Northern horizon and Plinlimmon, her greenish brother, rose in the South, Thomas of Cornwall stepped between matrons and out into the cool night air.

He too dreamed of the forbidden, but what he dreamed of was forbidden knowledge.

The meeting of these two was to be fateful for The People.

Under the drooping potiphars which surrounded the tents of The People and which elsewhere dotted the Wide Land with their tall, smooth trunks and wide, purple branches, Thomas met May the Unpregnant.

Actually he ran into her.

It was very dark.

Grasping the alarmed maiden by the tail of the embroidered yellow dimlet all maidens of The People wore (in homage both to Vashti, the evening star, and Ivan, the Spirit of the Land), Thomas whispered:

"Maiden, stay!"

"No!" whispered back May the Unpregnant, mistrusting the beating of her own heart. She wished that in the ritual spring circle, held on the festival of Enid the tenth (or the first day of April), Thomas would let fall upon her dimlet his armload of hay and herdbeast's dung, thus claiming her for his own. Yet she feared.

She touched the end of her thumb to her nose and spread her fingers wide in an ancient, sacred gesture to signify as much.

"Fear not," said he. "I mean you no harm. But keep your distance, for I am tubercular and I wish only knowledge."

May marveled that any man could covet so strange a thing. "Say on then," said she, Crayola the Moon Goddess making her heart beat like anything.

"Maiden," said Thomas, "be not afeard but tell me sooth: from whence get your people the food with which they refresh themselves and create their life anew?"

"From trade," said May with elemental simplicity, for she wished to please her lover.

"Trade," said Thomas, "have I never seen yet, and I have tarried with The People for, lo, these fourscore days. Besides, the nearest other tribe, according to thy chief, is a thousand days' ride from hence. I ask again: Whence cometh your food?"

"From our herd-beasts?" said May hopefully. She really did not know, for such knowledge was not of women's learnings. She wondered if it was of men's, either.

"Herd-beasts I see," said Thomas, "but labor upon them see I none, save for ritual and brideprice and throwing garlands thereupon and dancing around at the full moon. I say again: Make plain to me your oeconomy."

"From little men in the ground?" said May.

"Now by Saint Marx, and by Saint Engels," said Thomas, "and by Saint Common Sense, I declare that neither thou nor thy people eatest or drinkest in the least (for I have never seen them do it) but subsisteth upon fancies and fooleries magicked out of thin air, which is not a meet company for an serious man like myself, especially one whose temperature (Fahrenheit) reacheth one hundred degrees or more each afternoon. I will from hence into an sanitorium where I will be fed upon honest potatoes and lamb chops and peaches and grapes and they will see that I get ten hours of sleep a night on a good bed (which is not lumpy and bumpy like a mattress of matrons) that I may return to Seacaucus a well man. For I have done with literature."

And so saying, Thomas the Tubercular (with a cough) vanished away before her eyes.

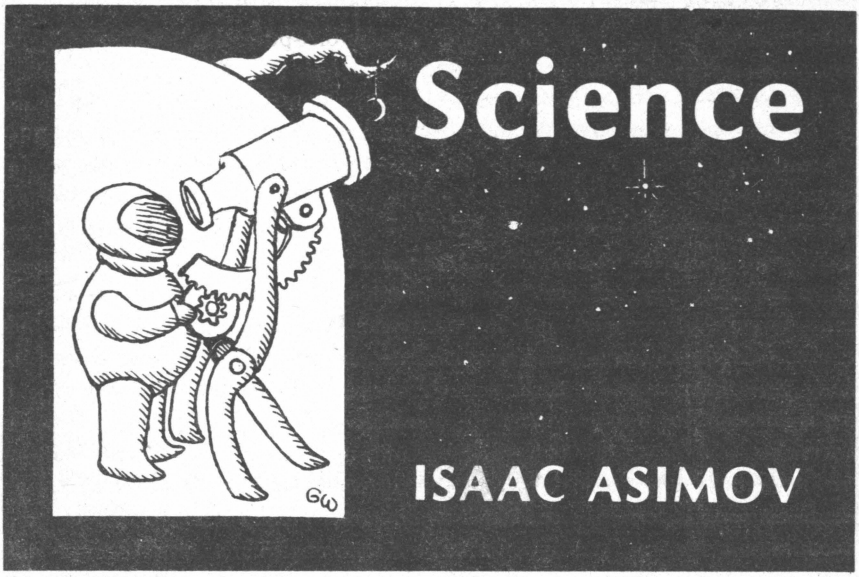
Long wandered May the Unpregnant that night, over hummocks and clummocks, as one tormented in spirit. As Plinlimmon dipped towards the North and Crayola rose again in the West (it *was* a confusing time), her proud spirit was broken and she gained wisdom. Kneeling, she plucked a bunch of the springing peristyle from the earth and waved it in uncharacteristic prayer. Her dream had gone into Elbert, the night, which houseth both the dead and gone and those who just up and leave, but something she still might save. Undoing her long hair and casting upon the ground her ivory pluft (emblem of maidenhood), she prayed, while the heavenly bodies car-

omed around all over the place.

"Oh, coming Herman," (she cried) "patron of knowledge, hear my prayer. Light up the ignorance of this thy worshipper. Enlighten me, oh Herman. Answer my plea. Let me have the memory of my beloved's wonderful knowledge, although he is gone from me. Tell me, oh Herman —

"What is food?"[1]

[1]*The discovery of food (made originally by May the Unpregnant) was to change the life of The People beyond recognition. Readers wishing to trace the effect of this remarkable discovery upon tribal life will find the consequences best set forth in* Chronicles of an Even More Elemental Land, The Collective Unconscious: Its Habits, Customs, and Currency, *and* Foul! (Three Balls, Eight Strikes), *Vols 8, 19, and 77 (respectively) of this series.*



THE USELESS METAL

When the Three Mile Island nuclear power plant went wrong, I came to certain conclusions and found, as often happens, that I was out of step with the world.

The predominant sentiment seemed to be: "Aha! Scientists told us it couldn't happen, but it *did*. So much for those smarty-pants scientists. Now let's tear down the nuclear age."

And yet that's not what really happened. Scientists never said things couldn't go wrong. They said enough safety measures had been taken to make the chance of real damage extraordinarily small.

What the anti-nuclear people said was something like this: "Wait! An accident will take place and hundreds of thousands of people will be killed outright and millions will get cancer and thousands of square miles of land will be forever useless."

So? Three Mile Island seems to have been poorly designed to begin with. People in charge seem to have disregarded certain warning signals and to have been unnecessarily careless. There were mechanical failures followed by human error. There was even theoretical insufficiency since a

hydrogen bubble formed that no one had ever predicted.

In other words, it was practically a worst-possible-case kind of accident. What were the consequences?

The power station was put out of action and will stay out of action for a long, long time, but — not one person was killed and there is no clear evidence that anyone was hurt, for radiation escape was low. There may be an additional case of cancer or two as a result. While I don't want to minimize this, the number of cancer cases will be far less than will be caused in the same area by tobacco smoking and automobile exhaust.

It seemed to me, then, that the Three Mile Island incident was a case where the scientists' predictions proved correct and those of the anti-nuclear people incorrect. And yet the incident was instantly labelled a "catastrophe" by the media and the anti-nuclears. What would they have called it, I wonder, if one person had been killed?

In any case, when the *Philadelphia Inquirer* asked me to write a piece stating my views on the matter, I wrote a sardonic article for the 15 April 1979 issue. My pro-nuclear views ran side-by-side with an anti-nuclear article by George Wald.

Two weeks later, I was in Philadelphia and a young woman stopped me and said, rather sadly, "I was *sure* that you of all people would be on the anti-nuclear side. You're so liberal."

That saddened me. I am certainly a liberal, but that doesn't mean I automatically plug in to the official liberal viewpoint. I like to think for myself — a prejudice of mine of long standing.

Still, all that brooding on the subject reminded me at last that I have never written an F&SF essay on uranium. So here goes:

To begin at the beginning, there is a mineral called "blende" from a German word meaning "to blind" or "to deceive." (Many mineralogical terms are German because Germany led the world in metallurgy in the Middle Ages.) The reason for the use of the word is that blende looks like galena, a lead ore, but it yields no lead and therefore it deceives miners.

Actually, blende is mostly zinc sulfide, and it has become an important zinc ore. It is now more commonly called "sphalerite" from a Greek word meaning "treacherous," which still harps on its deceitful nature.

There are other varieties of blende, differing among themselves in appearance in one way or another. One is called "pitchblende," not because it is in any way pitchy or tarry, but only because it is a glossy black in color, black as pitch, in other words.

Pitchblende is met up with in conjunction with silver, lead and copper ores in Germany and Czechoslovakia. The early mineralogists considered it an ore of zinc and iron.

One place where pitchblende occurs is at the silver mines in St. Joachimsthal (St. Joachim's Valley) in Czechoslovakia, 120 kilometers (70 miles) west of Prague, just at the East German border. (The place is now called Jachymov by the Czechs.)

The spot is of particular interest to Americans because about the year 1500, coins were struck that were made out of the silver from the mines there and that were therefore called Joachimsthalers, or Thalers for short. Other coins similar in size and value were also called that and eventually the name was used, in 1794, by the infant United States for its unit of currency — which we call "dollars." (Saint Joachim, if you want to know, was according to legend the father of the Virgin Mary.)

One person who interested himself in pitchblende was the German chemist Martin Heinrich Klaproth (1743-1817). In 1789, he obtained a yellow substance from pitchblende which he rightly decided was an oxide of a new metal.

At that time, the tradition of associating the metals and the planets was still strong. In one case, the metal quicksilver was so closely associated with the planet Mercury that it actually received the planetary name as its own, at least in English.*

As it happened, eight years earlier, the German-British astronomer William Herschel (1738-1822) had discovered a new planet and had named it Uranus, after Ouranos, the god of the sky in the Greek myths, and the father of Kronos (Saturn). Klaproth decided to name the new metal after the new planet and he named it "uranium."

As it turned out, pitchblende is largely a mixture of uranium oxides, and it is now called "uraninite."

Klaproth then tried to react the yellow uranium oxide (actually uranium trioxide, UO_3) with charcoal. The carbon atoms of the charcoal, he expected, would combine with the oxygen in the uranium trioxide, leaving behind metallic uranium. He did obtain a black powder with a metallic luster and assumed that was uranium metal. So did everyone else at the time. Actually, the carbon had combined with only one oxygen atom from each molecule, leaving behind the blackish uranium dioxide, UO_2.

In 1841, a French chemist, Eugène Peligot (1811-1890), realized there

**See THE SEVENTH METAL (January 1968)*

was something odd about the "uranium metal." When he conducted certain chemical reactions, the uranium at the beginning and at the end didn't add up correctly. Apparently, he was counting in some non-uranium atoms as uranium. He grew suspicious that what he considered uranium metal was really an oxide and contained oxygen atoms in addition to uranium.

He therefore decided to prepare uranium metal by a different procedure. He started with uranium tetrachloride ($UC1_4$) and tried to tear the chlorine atoms away by using something a good deal more active than charcoal. He used metallic potassium, not at all a comfortable substance to deal with, but the cautious Peligot performed the experiment carefully enough to suffer no harm.

The chlorine atoms were successfully removed, all of them, and left behind was a black powder with properties quite different from those of Klaproth's black powder. This time, the powder was the metal itself. Peligot was the first to isolate uranium — a half century after it had been *thought* to have been isolated.

No one cared much about this, however, except a few chemists. Uranium was a thoroughly useless metal, and no one, except for those same few chemists ever thought of it — or even heard of it.

In the early 19th Century, it came to be accepted that the various elements were made up of atoms, and that those atoms had characteristic differences in mass. By following the events in various chemical reactions it was possible to judge the relative masses of the different kinds of atoms ("atomic weights"), but it was also possible to make mistakes.

Counting the mass of the hydrogen atom (the lightest one) as 1, the atomic weight of uranium was taken to be about 116 around the middle of the 19th Century.

This meant that uranium atoms were fairly massive, but by no means unusually so. Uranium atoms, it was thought, were a little more massive than silver atoms and a little less massive than tin atoms.

The most massive atoms were, at that time, thought to be those of bismuth, the atomic weight of which was 209. The bismuth atom, in other words, was thought to be 1.8 times as massive as the uranium atom.

In 1869, however, the Russian chemist Dmitri Ivanovich Mendelèev (1834-1907) was working out the periodic table. He was arranging the elements in the order of their atomic weight and in a system of rows and columns that divided them into natural families, with all members of a given family showing similar properties.

In some cases, Mendeléev came across an element that didn't fit this neat family-arrangement. Rather than assume his whole notion was wrong, he wondered if the atomic weights might in those cases be mistaken. For instance, uranium's properties didn't fit if it were pushed into the atomic-weight-116 slot. If its atomic weight were doubled, it did fit.

Starting from this new slant, it was easy to reinterpret the experimental findings and show that it actually did make more sense to suppose the atomic weight of uranium to be in the neighborhood of 240 (the best current figure is 238.03).

This was about 1871, and for the first time, the useless metal, uranium, gained an interesting distinction. It had the highest atomic weight of any known element. Its atoms were 1.14 times as massive as those of bismuth.

For over a century now, it has retained that distinction, in a way. To be sure, atoms more massive than those of uranium have been dealt with, but they were all formed in the laboratory and they don't survive for long, certainly not for geological periods.

We can put it this way. Of all the atoms present in the Earth's crust at the time of its formation, the most massive that are still to be found in the Earth's crust today in more than vanishing traces are those of uranium. What's more, they are the most massive that *can* exist (though, of course, this was not understood in 1871).

The position of uranium at the end of the list of elements was interesting — to chemists. To the world generally, it remained a useless metal and of no account.

So things stood until 1896.

The year before that, Wilhelm Konrad Roentgen (1845-1923) had discovered x-rays and had suddenly become world-famous. X-rays became the hottest thing in science, and every scientist wanted to investigate the new phenomenon.

Roentgen's x-rays had issued from a cathode-ray tube, and the cathode rays (streams of speeding electrons, it was soon discovered) produced fluorescent spots on the glass, and it was from those spots that the x-rays were given off. Furthermore, the x-rays were detected by the fact that they induced fluorescence in certain chemicals. Therefore, there might be some connections between x-rays and fluorescence generally.

(Fluorescence, by the way, takes place when atoms are excited in some way and are raised to a higher energy level. When the atoms fall back to normal, the energy is given off as visible light. Sometimes the fall to normal

takes time and visible light is given off even after the exciting phenomenon is removed. The light is then called "phosphorescence.")

As it happened, a French physicist, Antoine Henri Becquerel (1852-1908), was particularly interested in fluorescent substances, as his father had been before him. It occurred to him that fluorescent substances might be emitting x-rays along with visible light. It seemed to him to be worth checking the matter.

To do that, he planned to make use of photographic plates, well wrapped in black coverings. Light could not get through the coverings, and even exposure to sunlight would not succeed in fogging the plates. He would put the fluorescent substance on the covered plate, and if the fluorescence was ordinary light only, the plate still would not be fogged. If, however, the fluorescence contained x-rays, that had the property of passing through a reasonable thickness of matter, they would pass through the covering and fog the photographic plate.

Becquerel tried this on a number of different fluorescent substances with negative results; that is, the photographic plates remained resolutely unfogged. One fluorescent substance, in which Becquerel's father had been particularly interested, was potassium uranyl sulfate, a substance made up of complex molecules that contained one uranium atom in each molecule.

That alone, of the fluorescent substances Becquerel tried, seemed to give a positive result. After some exposure to the Sun, the photographic plate, on development, showed some fogging. Becquerel's heart beat faster and his hopes climbed. He hadn't had a chance to do much exposing because it had been a largely cloudy day, but as soon as the weather cleared, he planned to do a better job, give it a good slug of exposure and check the matter beyond all doubt.

Of course you know what had to happen. Paris settled down for a long siege of wet weather and there was no sunlight. Becquerel had obtained new photographic plates, well-wrapped, and he had no chance to use them. So he put them in the drawer, put the potassium uranyl sulfate in the drawer with them and waited for the Sun.

As the days passed and the clouds persisted, Becquerel got so upset that he decided he had to do something. He might as well develop the new plates and see if he had had some lingering phosphorescence that included x-rays. He developed the plates and was stupefied. They were tremendously fogged, almost as though he had exposed them, uncovered, to sunlight.

Whatever was coming out of the potassium uranyl sulfate, it could pass through black paper and it didn't require prior excitation by the Sun. In

fact, it didn't require fluorescence, for samples of potassium uranyl sulfate that had been on reagent shelves away from sunlight for indefinite periods also fogged the plates. What's more, uranium compounds that were *not* fluorescent at all also fogged the plates. What was still more, the amount of fogging depended on the amount of uranium present and not on that of any of the other atoms.

It was uranium, and uranium specifically, that gave rise to these x-ray-like radiations.

Almost at once, a brilliant Polish-French chemist, Marie Sklodowska Curie (1867-1934), began to study the phenomenon, and she termed it "radioactivity." Uranium, in other words, was radioactive. Curie discovered that another element, thorium, with atoms nearly as massive as those of uranium (the atomic weight of thorium is 232) was also radioactive.

The fact of radioactivity was glamorous. Nothing like that had ever been detected before.

The implications were even more important than the fact itself.

Radioactive atoms were giving off some radiations that were like x-rays, but were even more penetrating. These were "gamma rays."

But radioactive atoms were also giving off something else, streams of particles that were much smaller than any atoms. This was the final proof of something that was just coming to be suspected, that atoms were not the ultimate particles of matter they had been taken to be since they were first proposed in 1803 (and, in fact, since they had first been conceived by the ancient Greeks twenty-two centuries earlier). Atoms were made up of still smaller "sub-atomic particles."

When uranium atom or a thorium atom gave off a subatomic particle, that changed its structure and made of it an atom of a new element. It was, after all, possible to transmute one element into another, as the old alchemists had thought, but under far different conditions than any that the alchemists could have imagined.

Uranium and thorium, as it happened, changed spontaneously into lead. (The alchemists had tried to transmute lead into gold, and here was the new transmutation doing the job of *forming* lead, for goodness sake.)

The change took place, however, very slowly. Half of all the uranium in existence on Earth (or half of any portion of it which one was dealing with) was converted to lead only after 4.5 billion years, and so on. To express this, we say that the "half-life" of uranium is 4.5 billion years.

In the case of thorium, the half-life is 14 billion years.

Consequently, of the uranium or thorium that had existed on Earth when the planet was just formed, half of the uranium and four-fifths of the thorium is still in existence today.

Through researches involving radioactivity, the New Zealand born physicist Ernest Rutherford (1871-1937) was able to show, in 1906, that an atom consisted of a tiny, massive nucleus at the core, surrounded by one or more relatively light electrons. The nucleus carried a positive electric charge, and the electrons negative electric charges. The charges balance so that the atom, as a whole, was electrically neutral.

In 1913, the English physicist, Henry Gwyn-Jeffreys Moseley (1887-1915) showed from the radiation produced by bombarding various metals with x-rays that every element had a characteristic positive electric charge on its nucleus. These were whole number multiples of the charge on the hydrogen nucleus and it was called the "atomic number."

It turned out that thorium had a high atomic number of 90 and uranium a still higher one of 92. Uranium had, in fact, the highest atomic number of any element found naturally on Earth.

This seemed to make sense. Positive electric charges repelled each other, and if enough were piled onto a single nucleus it might cause the nucleus to break apart through the mutual repulsion of the charges. Thorium and uranium could just barely hold their nuclei together and broke down slowly. Any element with an atomic number greater than 92 would break down more quickly. If any had been present when the earth was formed, all would be gone by now.

In fact, a number of elements with atomic numbers less than 90 and 92 might be too short-lived to exist. At the time the radioactivity of uranium was discovered, the element of the highest atomic weight known, other than uranium and thorium, was bismuth, and, as it eventually turned out, it had an atomic number of 83.

Could it be that no element with an atomic number greater than 83 was stable, and that of those beyond-bismuth elements, only thorium and uranium were sufficiently close to stability to last through all of Earth's history so far?

The answer to that is: Yes.

It might be thought, then, that uranium, starting with 1896, would be *the* glamor element of the list, sharing the spotlight just a bit with thorium. After all it was radioactive, it underwent spontaneous transmutation, it was the most complex of all the atoms and had a record high atomic number. What more could one ask?

And yet uranium, after a very short stay in the limelight, sank downward into comparative oblivion once again.

It happened this way —.

Since uranium has such a long half-life, very few atoms are breaking down at any one particular moment, and the amount of radioactivity it produced should be very low. Yet if uranium minerals were tested for radioactivity, it was found that the radioactivity detected was far higher than could be accounted for by the uranium present.

What's more, if uranium compounds were separated from the minerals and refined to a high degree of purity, the radioactivity of those uranium compounds was found to be low, about as low as it ought to be.

That means that present in the uranium minerals were substances that were more radioactive than uranium, much more radioactive. But how could that be? If those substances were that radioactive, they should have broken down long ago and be all gone. What were they doing in the minerals? What's more, it turned out that the pure uranium compound, freshly isolated from the minerals and hardly radioactive at all, grew steadily more radioactive as it stood.

What was happening was that the uranium (atomic number 92) wasn't being converted to lead (atomic number 82) in one fell swoop. Instead, the uranium was converted through a series of steps to lead, by way of a whole series of elements of intermediate atomic number. It was these intermediate elements that were more radioactive than uranium, and they *would* break down and vanish if fresh supplies weren't formed continually from the further breakdown of uranium.

Of course, if an element is formed very slowly and breaks down very rapidly, there is very little of it present at any one time. Under ordinary circumstances there would be far too little of it present to be detectable or isolatable.

The circumstances are not ordinary. The intermediate elements are giving off radiation that makes it possible to detect even infra-small quantities.

Curie and her husband, Pierre (1859-1906), set about isolating some of these radioactive intermediates. They subjected pitchblende to chemical reactions that would separate the different elements present, and always followed the trail of the radioactivity. Whenever the reaction succeeded in producing a solution, or a precipitate, in which the radioactive radiation seemed to be concentrated, they worked on that solution or that precipitate.

Step by step, they worked their material down to smaller and smaller quantities of more and more richly radioactive material. In July, 1898, they isolated a few pinches of powder containing a new element hundreds of times as radioactive as uranium. This they called "polonium" after Curie's native land, and its atomic number is 84.

Working on, they detected, in December 1898, a still more radioactive substance with an atomic number that eventually proved to be 88. They named it "radium" because of the overwhelming strength of its radioactivity. Its half-life is 1622 years, and it is 3,000,000 times as radioactive as uranium and 8,700,000 times as radioactive as thorium.

The Curies had so small a quantity of radium to begin with, that they could detect its presence only by the radiations. That was enough, in theory, but they wanted an actual quantity that they could weigh and show in the time-honored way of establishing the existence of a new element.

For that they had to start with tons of waste slag from the mines of St. Joachimsthal. The mine owners were delighted to let the crazy chemists have all they wanted, provided those chemists paid the shipping costs. The Curies got eight tons.

By 1902, they had succeeded in producing a tenth of a gram of radium after several thousand steps of purification and, eventually, they obtained a full gram.

Radium stole the show. For forty years, when one mentioned radioactivity, one thought of "radium." It was the wonder substance, *par excellence*, and people or institutions who could gain a tiny quantity to experiment with felt themselves fortunate indeed.

As for uranium, it instantly dropped back out of the limelight once more. It was only the dull parent substance, interesting (if at all) only for the sake of its glamorous daughter.

And yet who hears of radium today? Who cares for it? It is utterly uninteresting and it is uranium that is the wonder of the world.

The ugly duckling had become a vulture.

I'll explain next month.

Here is a first-rate fantasy from a writer new to F&SF. Michael McNamara was born in Limerick, Ireland in 1940 and came to the U.S. in 1958. He is a naturalized United States citizen and served in the U.S. Air Force. He is the author of several novels, most recently THE SOVEREIGN SOLUTION, and lives in Colorado, where he is teaching and at work on a new novel, THE FEAST.

The Boy Who Dreamed of Tir na n-Og

BY

MICHAEL M. MC NAMARA

It was in the hollow of the year when Seanin Beag found himself so dreadfully poor in the farmhouse beyond Green Wood. Many years had passed since the death of his father, Sean Mohr, a grand round and jovial man, whose laughter had filled their little house and spouted itself up the chimneys and into the starry night. But more recently, the small boy's mother had passed into the Darkness. He remembered only the grayness of her face. He lived alone with the red cows and the fawn-tailed chickens and the donkey, Ned, as his companions.

Having eaten the last bowl of mush from the pot on the hob, Seanin pulled his jersey over his head and walked in the direction of the stable. If the donkey were to shoulder the heavy burden of kelp to the market, he would have to be fed the few remaining fistfulls of oats. The chickens would devour the leftovers. Seanin was grateful that the cows, at least, were capable of sustaining themselves without much attention. He had often heard his father say, "The cows could go on forever on the same half acre of grass and never know that the sun had fled or the moon had taken its place. They are like the Faeries, knowing no one or thing and caring the less." But Seanin rather doubted his father's estimation of Nuala, Deirdre, and Ulna. He had felt their warm breath on his neck. He knew that all three were envious of his touch.

As he fed the brown donkey, Seanin rubbed the rough oats into the saliva of the animal's mouth. It whinnied in gratitude, and he suspected that there was an old tooth in there somewhere that needed soothing. He rubbed all the more.

From where he stood under the

thatch of the stable, he could see the waters of Kinvara Bay below him, and he watched the mists drift inward from far out in the Other Place. They danced across the crystal face of the bay, touching ever so delicately its margin of sand and stones. He knew that they came from that part of the sea that was forbidden to even the bravest fishermen. Their long fingers were like fine threads of silver. He longed to touch them.

Soon he would lead the donkey to the beach and begin the piling of the kelp. But before that, as was usual to him, he would dream for a moment. "Oh," he whispered, "that the tables of our township might be full of wonderful things to eat, that the churns overflow with cream, that the fires blaze high with wood." And at last, with some guilt, he added, "that there be a little more time for pleasure and not so much work." But the dream had to be put aside. The chill and dampness of the night brought him back to his senses as he faced into them.

On his way to the strand, Seanin ran afoul of his neighbor's two boys, Taig and Paud, eagerly playing rugger in the pasture. "Come on, Seanin," they shouted. "Come and play with us."

He hated to refuse the rambunctious lads, but their responsibilities were at an end for the day. His had merely begun. "No. No," he called to them. "I'll play a match or two with you on Saturday, after the fair. There'll be plenty of time."

The boys seemed disappointed. Seanin knew that in their hearts they relished the time he spent with them, as he savored the many nights he had spent by the hob with their father, Seamus Dubh. He was a man of many whiskers and as many stories. Seamus had cried like a child at the death of Seanin's father. And since his mother's death, Seanin owed much to the willing man who helped him daily with the heavy work of the farm.

"Ah, come on," the boys said. "We'd love you to play."

It bothered his heart that he was obliged to wave and pretend that he had not heard their pleas.

Once on the strand, Seanin began immediately the tormenting labor. He strained to raise the heavy pitchforks of kelp above his head and into the wicker basket on Ned's shoulders. It was a grueling task, but he kept up the ritual, singing a schoolroom song as he worked:

Oh, my little boat,
That brings the fish to shore...

He had not finished the verse when he heard a voice from below him call out in alarm.

"Ocon! Ocon!" It lamented.

He dropped his pitchfork and ran in the direction of the sound. Perhaps it is a child who is afraid of the waves, he thought. Or a lad bitten by a silent jelly-fish. He would know for certain when he mounted the remaining rise of sand and seaweed.

To his surprise, he faced, instead, a young girl of less than his own age. Her face shone like the evening star. Her long golden curls danced in the late breeze from the bay, and her clothing was of a cut that he had never seen before.

"Who are you?" he asked in amazement.

"I am Ainne Ni Glorin," the young girl said, "and I have become entangled in these vines. I fear that they will be my downfall."

"Here," he said. "I will help you."

"No. No," she insisted. "I am fully capable of helping myself.

Seanin was not used to such curtness. He stood back and watched. It was curious to him that she made no physical effort to unleash herself. Instead, she merely cried out, "Free me! Free me!"

"Aw, that will do you no good," he said at length. "The kelp will not hear you? It obeys only the work of the fingers."

"No. Please do not assist me. I must free myself. Otherwise, I will be in your debt. I cannot have that."

"You will be in no one's debt," Seanin said, and with that he bent down and loosed the black kelp from her ankle.

She was dumfounded. "You should not have done that," she said. "Now I am deeply obliged to you. You have saved my life."

"From the clutches of a vicious seaweed," he laughed aloud. "There is no compliment." He made to return to his work.

"Oh, no, you do not understand. With the falling of the sun and the rising of the moon into its heaven, I would have perished here on this shore. You see, I am from Tir na n-Og."

"The Land of the Young," he translated.

"Yes. And it is forbidden for me to remain in this place beyond nightfall."

"And so you would rather have perished than be helped?"

"No. I must secretly admit that I am glad that you came along. But, you see, in Tir na n-Og, there is no need of help from anyone else. All desires are granted, all wishes fulfilled."

"If you have no power here, why did you risk coming?"

"Because of my foolishness, I strayed from my companions and rode the enchanted mists too close to this Land of Tears. And now I must go before the moth-hour falls upon the fields and I am destroyed by my carelessness."

"Must you," Seanin said without thinking, for he had warmed to her in their short encounter.

"I must, for I already hear the sparrows chirp their warnings. But why not come with me and spend your days in Tir na n-Og?"

Seanin looked back towards the farm. He saw the house silhouetted against the dark clouds, the barn dilapidated against its shoulder, the living things clinging desperately to its mar-

gins. And it seemed to cry out to him to remain, to light its fires, to shield its breaches against the wind, to scatter seed on the face of its earth, to pass gentle words to its few kind neighbors and friends. But in his heart, also, he knew the loneliness of the place. He could not forget the bite of frost when there was no fire, or the clutch of hunger in his belly. At last, he said, "I will go, if Ned may come, too."

Ainne looked down at the donkey, who was nuzzling the sleeve of her tunic. "I think that Ned will have no objections," she laughed.

Where, at first, they ventured, Seanin could not later recall, but he knew that he and Ned and the golden-haired girl tumbled through clouds of mist and fog. At times, he caught glimpses of green plashy places and heard the laughter of many children. When, at last, the velvet brume withdrew, they sat together in an open field of daisies. Seanin touched the flowers with his fingers. He knew that their season had come and gone in the Land of Tears.

"And now," Ainne said, "you are on your own, for in Tir na n-Og, you will have little use of friends."

"But," Seanin cried, "I have never been without friends. I will be lost on my own."

Ainne merely smiled and was then gone.

For a moment, Seanin was bewildered. Then he noticed that Ned had strayed towards the open gate of the field, and he ran through the house-high grass to halt him before he became lost. But Ned knew his own whereabouts. He had wandered towards something familiar to him. Seanin saw what it was as he neared the donkey. It was the sea — a great sea of billowy waves and before it an expanse of iridescent sand. It was as though the stars of the heavens had been gathered and spread out before the surging face of the sea. On this strand, played many children, their voices raised in merriment.

Seanin stood apart from it all and leaned on Ned. He looked down at his ragged clothing and felt ashamed. Stroking the animal's fur gently, he confided, "If only we were as they are."

Immediately, his wish was granted. His dull clothing was replaced by a gaily colored tunic much like that of Ainne's. About his neck hung a medallion of pure gold. Ned, too, had undergone a transformation. His fur was brushed to a silvery sheen. His mane was clipped short.

Seanin grasped Ned's collar and led him down the path of stones, which did not bruise the feet but felt like so many downy feathers. When he reached the shore, the Faeries called out their greetings and invited him to participate in their game. Then they became absorbed again in the ritual of the sport. Seanin watched with interest. It seemed that the entire frolic consisted of heaping the sweet-smelling

kelp into great mounds and then diving into its depths. But the kelp was of a texture that Seanin had never seen before. It neither stung with its sharp bristles nor tore the flesh, burning it with its brine. In great delight, he threw himself into the game.

After a time, he became hungry and decided to try some of the fare which was spread out on tables adjoining the beach. He had never seen so much to eat! Cakes, tarts, pies, and cordials were neatly arranged on tablecloths of pure white. He sampled one and then another and still another, and yet there were more not tasted. "What a wonderful feast," he said to a boy next to him who was stuffing a raspberry tart in his already gorged mouth. "Who is the host of this celebration and who are the workmen who gathered the seaweed? I would like very much to give them my thanks."

The Faery boy laughed. "Host? Workmen? Are you mad? There are no such things in Tir na n-Og."

"But who...?"

"We are all and everything. We merely wish and our desires are immediately realized. It is a game that goes on forever. Watch."

Seanin looked on in amazement as the Faery closed his eyes and said aloud, "I wish this instant for a polished seashell, so that I may listen to the sea when it is not in sight."

Almost at the same moment, his wish was granted. He held in his hand the most beautifully formed shell that Seanin had ever laid eyes on.

"There," said the Faery. His eyes showed no awe or astonishment.

Seanin, when he came out of his stupor, began to explain to the boy the lack of such wonderment in the Land of Tears, where, he said, each thing had to be earned, each pleasure drawn at the cost of labor and hardship. But after a few minutes, the Faery turned his heel and walked slowly away.

Suddenly, Seanin heard a loud thrashing of water and a voice raised to a high pitch. He looked towards the sea. There, not twenty feet from him, was a small child, bobbing up and down in the great waves. But nobody else seemed to hear the cries. The other Faeries continued to dive into their mountains of kelp or to sample the pastries of the table.

Seanin threw his food to the ground and rushed into the deep water. With a few powerful strokes, he reached the now unconscious child. He bent his arm about the pale neck and struck out for shore.

By the time he reached shallow water, the Faeries had abandoned their diversion and were gathering at the edge of the sea. Their faces were perplexed and questioning. But no one moved to help him. Seanin laid his burden on the sand and began to press with all his strength on the child's chest. He had seen his own father do this when fishermen had been hooked from the sea.

The Faeries drew nearer. One said,

"Why did you rescue him?"

"He was drowning," Seanin said between strokes. "He must have hit his head and was knocked senseless."

"But now he will be your servant in some degree because of what you have done."

"Servant?"

"Yes. Here it is frowned on to receive aid. It is an admission of weakness. You see, we are a most perfect race."

"But he was unconscious. He had no time to save himself...."

The Faeries would not argue further. Each in his turn backed away and drifted silently along the water's edge. It was as if they refused to look upon the child for fear that they would in some way be contaminated by him.

Though Seanin could not clearly see their reasoning, he felt, nonetheless, that his staying could only help to complicate matters. He looked down at the boy. He was beginning to regain consciousness. It would only be a matter of minutes before he was fully in control and capable of wishing himself perfect again. It was time to be gone. The boy would surely imagine that he had been buffeted ashore by the gentle waves.

As Seanin reached the summit of the rise above the strand, he noticed the thatched roof of a farmhouse, much like his own, protrude over the black reeds. His curiosity was aroused, and he decided to pay the farmer a visit.

He reached the barnyard and tied Ned to a trough which overflowed with grain of every color of the harvest. The donkey sniffed at the feast. Seanin wandered off towards the brightly lit building that was situated to the north of the cobblestoned yard. Before entering, he called aloud to the farmer, but nobody came. He decided to enter.

What met his gaze, dazzled the eyes in his head. Not on the richest farm of his homeland had he seen such plenty. Bins spilled over with grain. Lofts spread their straw in fine showers of gold. Great wooden pails dripped with the thickest cream. Seanin fell to his knees and scooped up several fingerfulls. It tasted as fresh as the green clover of the hillock above his house. He ate until his stomach touched his throat.

A blazing fire burned in a hob that was as immaculate as the cream itself. To its right stood a deep chair stuffed like a kind of soft old grandfather. And Seanin, wishing only at that moment to dream of all that was past and yet to come, fell into its cozy arms. The wind was coming up outside. He could hear its raucous voice in the gables. He would sleep for a while.

When he awoke, a strange sound met his ears. At first, he mistook it for the wind, but then he recognized its melody. It was the music of fiddles and melodeons. The energetic notes soothed his mounting fears. Ned, too, had noticed. As he unchained the donkey,

its great woolly ears perked with inquisitiveness.

Seanin and Ned began walking through the dew-wet grass. Their feet seemed not to touch the ground, and the air was filled with the scent of lavender and wild bulrush.

Before them lay a clearing which was flooded in brilliant light. Within the blinding circle danced row after row of Faery children. Each of them spun desperately around the raised platform at the center, where several musicians tore out their music from ancient instruments. On and on the music played. Seanin himself was bewitched by its cadence. He pushed cautiously forward and into the swaying crowd.

How long he danced he was not sure. Sometimes he stepped to the music for three reels in succession. At other times, when the constant whirling became monotonous, he merely waited out the set, and took refreshment at one of the tables on the perimeter of the clearing. Dance. Rest. Dance. Rest. Dance. Rest. So it went. He seemed incapable of breaking the ritual and leaving the place.

Towards midnight, as the great yellow moon peeked over the horizon, he noticed a commotion at the other end of the crowd. At first, he decided to ignore it, being absorbed in the rhythm of his dance, but he thought that once or twice he had seen Ned's ears above the heads of the Faeries. He moved lazily in the direction of the hysterical laughter.

Sure enough, it was Ned. The donkey had been trapped in the center of the small group and spun round and round in confusion. The Faeries were enthralled with the animal's dilemma and cheered in delight. Seanin watched the donkey's head follow its tail. Or was it the other way around? How foolish Ned looked. He began to laugh.

Suddenly, Ned lost his balance and fell heavily to the ground. He whinnied in great pain, unable to rise again on his feet. The Faeries clapped their hands in glee.

In the shutting of an eyelid, Seanin was beside his companion. He looked into the old eyes. They were filled with terror and sadness. The Faeries crowded in upon them, suffocating them both with their chant, "Down boy, down donkey. Down boy, down donkey. Down...."

Seanin threw his arms about the cherished woolly head. "Oh, Ned, I am sorry to have neglected you," he said. "I was thinking only of myself. I wish that we were far from this horrid place."

In an instant, the bright clearing had fled, and they sat together in the heart of a seamless meadow. The darkness of night enveloped them as they huddled close against each other. Seanin was dreadfully lonely. "I may conjure up all that one can imagine," he said, "and yet I am unhappy."

He turned to Ned and said, "Look!"

No sooner were the words out of his mouth than before them lay plates

of sweets and custards and other delights. He had attended to Ned's wants, also. A stack of fresh hay took shape out of the night. And, yet, neither of them had a mind to touch a morsel.

Seanin began to cry, his tears running down his face and onto the fur of the donkey. He wished for the company of Seamus Dubh and Taig and little Paud and the old shattered faces of the township, for the warm hands across the hearth, for the kettle singing on the hob, for the chatter of loving voices.

Ainne Ni Glorin stood before them. "Seanin," she said, "have you found your heart's content?"

Seanin bowed his head. "No," he answered.

"Have you thought of home?" she continued.

"Yes."

"All is well there. Only a few short hours have elapsed since you left."

"But I have been gone for such a long time."

"Our time is not like yours."

"Has my absence caused anyone distress?"

"Yes. An old man with a crooked stick searches for you on the strand."

"Seamus Dubh."

Ainne looked across at him. "And so you wish to leave Tir na n-Og," she said.

"Yes."

"I do not understand your displeasure. Here there is so much, and there lies nothing but sadness and strain with few moments to enjoy uninterrupted pleasure."

Seanin was silent.

"There is no persuading you to stay?"

"No."

Ainne sighed deeply. "Well, then," she said, "I must say goodbye. I will not forget that you saved my life."

"Goodbye, Ainne Ni Glorin."

"Goodbye, Seanin Beag."

Before he could count the fingers on his hand or the buttons on his tunic, Seanin and the donkey were thrown gently into the air, all vision of Ainne gone, all compass of place and time withdrawn. It was as though a heavy sleep fell upon him, a sleep of troubled dreams. When he opened his eyes, he found himself and Ned on the strand below the farmhouse. The sun was rising in its path. The cold morning air drifted mercilessly across the waters of the bay.

Suddenly, a voice shouted, "Seanin! Heaven save us, I found you. The whole township has not slept a wink, worrying about you."

It was Seamus Dubh. As the old man rushed down the strand, Seanin could see the tears in his eyes and the laughter on his lips. He threw his arms about the boy. "Where on earth have you been?" he said. "I searched all night for you. Someone reported having seen you walk far out into the tide. It was by sheer luck that I chanced to find this little cove and you asleep in it."

"I had a vision of Faeryland."

"Ah, don't we all dream of Faeryland. It's what keeps us going."

"Maybe you're right."

"Well, let's be about getting that kelp up on the donkey, or we'll never get you to market. Were to God that the rotten old weeds were gold. They're saying that there's no knowing to the price of *that* princely stuff, these days. But sure, what would we know about such fancy goings on, we, poor kelp gatherers?"

Seanin remembered. He reached inside his ragged jersey. The gold medallion was still there, close against his heart.

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(Continued from page 162)

INDEX TO VOLUME 57, JULY-DECEMBER 1979

(Continued on page 161)

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