

Mother Hag

Steve Rasnic Tent

Steve Rasnic Tern's first novel was Excavation from Avon Books, but Tern had long established a reputation even before his advent as a novelist, his short stories gracing major anthologies and numerous little magazines for over a decade. David Silva's Horror Show did a special Tent issue, which included a particularly nasty story about teeth. His bleak jewels -- both stories and poems -- have graced Gordon Linzner's Space & Time, Dr. Schiff's Whispers, Crispin Burnham's Eldritch Tales, the British Fantasy Society's Dark Horizons, Dennis Mallonee's Fantasy Book, Paul Ganley's Whispers, Fantasy Macabre, which I edit for Richard H. Fawcett, Publisher, and many more. "Mother Hag" is a prime example, taken from Peggy Nadramia's Grue.

Once there lived a sister and a brother with their father and stepmother on the edge of a great wood. Whenever either of them disobeyed, the stepmother would warn them, "Behave now, or Mother Hag will come and take you!" The she'd smile wickedly and add, "And she's your own true mother, but she's a bad one, and will eat you just the same. You should be thankful you've the likes of me and my husband to look after you."

And the small pair would frown and nod solemnly, and stop their playing or whatever else had been bothering the stepmother. Mother Hag was a famous witch; everyone for miles around knew about her. The two children had memorized all the different descriptions they had heard of her, so that finally they were quite unable to imagine her face and figure, so contradictory the many versions of her seemed.

Mother Hag was described, depending on who you talked to, so tall she rose to the ceiling, so small she was quite invisible and treacherous; black, pale, or quite blue; covered with warts or scabs; wide as a barnyard, narrow as a crack; naked as the winter fields, cloaked in midnight; fingers of clay or fingers of red-iron; drinks blood, tar, or urine; has pointed or blunt teeth, clean-shaven or whiskers, sunken or bulging eyes, wrinkled or gigantic breasts, cracked or a haunting, deep voice.

But all agreed she was very, very wise.

Their father remained silent on the subject of Mother Hag, except once when he had told the brother that he first met Mother Hag when hunting in the dark wood near her castle. She'd captured him mere, and enchanted him somehow, forcing him to marry her. He could never remember how long he spent in her castle; the days seemed like years, but he was very old when he finally came out, escaping with the two young children in a wagonload of hay.

Their father could not remember ever spending any time with his children when they all lived in the castle, so he didn't really

feel like a parent to them at all. That was all he would say on the subject. He stayed quiet and to himself, and let their stepmother handle things. After a time the children felt nothing for him.

The stepmother worked the children long and hard. But the children did not complain-, for they knew someday Mother Hay would indeed come and take them away, and they had their own ideas about what their real and only true mother was like. The brother always pictured a jolly old fat woman, whose face was beautiful just the same. He vaguely remembered a childhood full of mischief, and how his true mother had scolded him each time, but always hugged him deep into her soft, pillowy flesh afterward. She always had advice to give, and games and songs. She was very wise.

The sister knew her true mother had been tall, and broad-shouldered, stronger than any man. Her mother helped her to excel in sports even at such a young age. She taught her to be independent and self-reliant. Her true mother was very wise.

The children's seemingly easy compliance only made the stepmother even stricter. They weren't allowed out to play. They had to spin wool and scrub floors, mend pots and dig mud for bricks. When either was seen to talk to the other, they were separated, as the stepmother had soon realized their true feelings about Mother Hag.

"She'll get you, I tell you!" the stepmother scolded. "Your own true mother or not. She'll grind you into little pieces and devour you with her tea! I wouldn't be running off from this house if I were you."

But the brother and sister only nodded solemnly, without reply, and secretly dreamed their beautiful dream of their true mother.

One day a peddler came to the cottage with his bag full of goods. "Pots, pans, ointments, perhaps a bit of ribbon, madam?" he asked pleasantly when the stepmother answered the door. She slammed the door in his face. The peddler sat down on the front step and began to cry.

The two children were returning from the fields, their arms and legs and faces quite black with the mud, when they saw this happening, and rushed to console the poor peddler without another thought.

"Oh, you poor man," the sister said. "You should break down the door and kick her!" She spat with a fierce gleam in her eye.

"Oh, you poor man," the brother said. "Never a kind word for such a hard-working peddler!"

The peddler stopped his crying and looked up. "And who might you two be? Children of the wicked woman I suppose, poor things."

The children moved together and held hands. "Mother Hag is our true mother!" they both said proudly.

"The witch!" the peddler cried in surprise.

"A very kind, large woman," the boy said.

"And strong and brave," the girl said.

"Oh, certainly!" replied the peddler. "She's also very wise. Why, everyone goes to Mother Hag for advice! As a matter of fact, Mother Hag sent me into this region to look for her lost children. All the peddlers hereabouts work for her. But I must admit you seem nothing as she described."

"Why not!" they exclaimed.

"You're so much darker."

"But it's the mud from the fields and from working so hard out in the sun," the girl said.

"Why that must be it!" the peddler said, and laughed.

"Will you take us to see her?" the boy asked.

"Won't that wicked woman complain and make a loud noise?" The peddler looked doubtful.

"Oh, please!" cried the girl. "You could hide us in your sack. We don't take up very much room."

The peddler smiled. "Why, that just might work." He opened the large sack. The two children looked in; it seemed an enormous cave in there, impossibly dark. They couldn't even see the peddler's pots, pans, and ribbons; it was so spacious and dark. But the children mustered their courage and looked about them in apprehension. Their father and stepmother were nowhere to be seen. They looked at each other quickly, and jumped into the sack together.

Their long, echoing shouts as they drifted deep into the dark interior of the sack brought a smile to the peddler's lips.

"Useful, this sack of Mother Hag's." He chuckled softly to himself, and shouldered the large sack and started on his way again.

The brother and sister remembered little about the time they spent in the great, dark sack. They saw many things there, but most of these were all mixed-up and confusing. The brother remembered a great dark wood where he wandered lost for days. The sister was convinced she had borne children and grown old there. They both recalled memories of their early lives with Mother Hag: her strict discipline, her warm embraces, her beauty, and her strength. They could have been in the sack a long time or a short time. They were never quite sure.

Finally the peddler stopped and dropped the sack from around their bodies. They opened their eyes and looked down at the folds of the sack lying about their feet: it seemed to have shrunk on their journey, and all the peddler's goods had disappeared; they seemed to have been all the sack contained. Then they looked around them.

Mother Hag's castle seemed to grow right out of the side of the hill like some great stained and gnarled tooth. Old tree trunks twisted in and out of holes in the stone speckled with the hardened drips of mortar used to patch those holes. The roof of the castle was formed from century-old trees whose branches hung down and were so interwoven as to make a solid roof.

Although narrow, the castle was long; its crooked chimneys could be seen poking up through the hill from the underground rooms as far as the children could see. A steady line of peddlers with bulging sacks was entering a door on the left

side of the castle. Another line exited from a door on the right, their sacks quite empty.

"Those sacks are squirming!" the sister cried. "Just small animals for Mother Hag's dinner," the peddler said with a smile..

Still another line entered the front gate of the castle. All different kinds of people made up this line: peasants, merchants, old women, youths, even some professional people such as doctors, lawyers, and city officials in their various costumes of office.

"They seek advice," the peddler said. "As you know, Mother Hag is very wise."

The brother could overhear some of the conversation from this line: Her brother has tormented me for years... the crops are failing... one of Mother's love charms and she'll be mine... twice I warned her, twice! Now she'll see... this gold will bring me another ten years I'm sure... and many other things.

"When do we see our mother?" the sister asked. But the peddler swiftly stuffed them back into his pack and joined the line of peddlers with full sacks; his own wiggling and squirming like the others.

The children must have fallen asleep then for the next thing they remembered was someone opening the sack in the darkness and lifting their tired bodies up and putting them to bed. The brother tried to see who it was, but the face was a gray oval in the dim light of the castle. Then he fell asleep once more.

A beautiful woman with golden hair stood over the two, gently rustling the covers to awaken them. The sister was the first to awaken and gasped, "Mother!" for the woman had strong arms and sharp features, and appeared terribly tall to the little girl. When the boy opened his eyes he, too, gasped, "Mother!" as the woman before him appeared quite plump, but had the loveliest face he had ever seen.

They both hugged her fiercely.

"Oh, thank you my children. I'd love to have been your mother, but Mother Hag is your own true mother. I am just her maid."

"Then... you're not Mother Hag?" the sister asked sleepily.

- At that the beautiful woman bellowed with a laughter that seemed to the children much too large for her. She stopped as suddenly and smiled. "Mother Hag is much larger than I, children. Almost a giant. And she dresses all in black and gray and shades mere mortals are not even capable of seeing. She's sent me to bring you to her; she's missed her true children for much too long a time."

Then the beautiful woman took them to a large circular chamber, which looked to be seamless, and left them on a small scarlet rug in the middle of it. She left swiftly through a small door at the back.

The children looked around them, thinking they must be far underground since so tall a chamber could not have fit in that portion of Mother Hag's castle they had first seen. The brother gazed up at the far away ceiling and for a moment thought he

saw an entire landscape suspended there, with people pulling carts and women dancing by a pond, but when he blinked it was gone.

Then Mother Hag walked into the chamber, through the same door the beautiful woman had just left. -

"Oh, she's small," the sister said. And indeed she was, a tiny dark figure standing by the distant doorway. Like an ant, or a cockroach.

"No, no, she's big... enormous... gargantuan!" the brother exclaimed. And she was this, too, for with every step forward she loomed larger, until standing before the little red rug she dwarfed them both, her great blue nose scratching at the ceiling, her bright yellow wooden legs thick as tree trunks, her dress so large and billowy, so pitch-black the children thought for just a second they had suddenly awakened from a dream, and they were peering into the black chamber around their beds.

Children, she whispered, but a whisper so thunderous they both fell to their knees.

My own true children... come to Mother Hag....

And they did. The brother leaping merrily, the sister dancing, both running with arms wide into the deep black of her dress. And both tumbling head over heels as they spun dizzily into the dark.

They awoke inside one of Mother Hag's great pockets, with hundreds of other children.

"Who are you?" the brother asked a tall girl with hair red as cherries.

"I'm Mother Hag's daughter," she piped.

"And you?" the sister asked a small boy with bangs covering one eye.

"I'm her son..." he mumbled.

And there were many more, more than they could count resting in every nook and cranny of the great pocket, all different sizes, shapes, and colors. And all claiming to be a son or daughter of Mother Hag.

There was something about their stories, which made the brother and sister believe them.

The children spent years with Mother Hag. How many, they could not even guess, because there were no clocks or calendars in Mother Hag's castle, and night and day occurred only when she decided they must. Old children disappeared and new children arrived all the time, so after a while the brother and sister stopped trying to remember all the names. Many of the children came with the peddlers, but milkmen with the morning dairy goods delivered some, and others simply appeared in a bed one morning. The older children simply vanished. Only the very old ones, the ones with white hair and wrinkled skin, were seen to leave through the doors. It didn't take the children very long to discover that their own father had been one of Mother Hag's original children.

"I knew him then," the beautiful maid told them one night while tucking them both into bed. "He had eyes like yours," she told

the brother. "And hair like yours," she told the sister. "But how could you have known him?" the sister asked. "You're so young!"

But she only laughed, that deep, loud, haunting laugh, cut short with a smile.

Over the years the children discovered that many people came to Mother Hag for help, more than they could hope to count. They found that she had many magical powers; in fact, she seemed to be able to do most anything she wanted.

She could make herself invisible and move furniture all about. She could sour milk with just a glance. Make her angry and it rained on you, even in the castle. Make her sad and she might turn you into a bird.

Once the brother saw her blasting distant trees with a gesture of her little finger. Once the sister witnessed chairs dancing all about her.

And once both of the children followed the beautiful maid into her chamber. They shivered behind a table as she took off her clothes, her face, her beautiful, soft skin, and what was left was so hideous they were actually happy to see her don Mother Hag's midnight robes, blue nose, and bright yellow wooden legs so they wouldn't have to see that awful thing anymore. Then Mother Hag smiled, and cackled that low, haunting growl of a laugh, and the children somehow knew she had meant for them to see her as she really was.

But what frightened the children most about Mother Hag was the way she seemed to always know what they were thinking, where they had been, and when they were up to any kind of mischief. Mother Hag was their own true mother indeed.

Sometimes she was hateful to them and burned their small toes with fire from her eyes. Other times she held them close and made them safe within her enormous self. But all the same she was always their mother.

But still they had resentments. After giving birth to them, why had she pushed them away? Why did she frustrate their desires so? They wondered if she noticed this resentment in them, as after a while they began seeing less and less of her about the castle. It was rumored among the servants that she had retired to an old wing at the back, deep under the hill.

Finally the brother and sister woke up one morning and discovered they were old, much older than anyone they'd ever known, much older than they ever could have imagined. And then they knew they were her favorites, that she was indeed their one true mother and they her only true children, since no one else was left in the castle. And yet they themselves had not been asked to leave.

They wandered through the castle for days, until finally they found the last great chamber where Mother Hag now lived. When they opened the door they saw her leaning wearily against the far wall, slumped and crumpled, her great wooden legs spread apart, her dress blacker than any night humankind had known, and her body bloated twice as large as ever before.

The brother leaped into the air joyfully, and found himself

thinking like a child again, wanting terribly to be hugged by Mother Hag, to be enveloped by her dark bosom until the world was shut completely from view, and suddenly tired, he made the one last run into her embrace, slipping on the polished chamber floor, slipping, slipping so quickly that before he knew it he had rolled completely under the edge of her black skirt, as if the night itself had slipped him away into sleep.

A broad smile grew slowly across the sister's face as the enormous teeth hidden beneath Mother Hag's dress began to gnaw and strip the flesh from her brother's body, slipping him even further into endless night.

Once there lived a brother who is no more. Once there lived a great and mysterious witch named Mother Hag. But now there is a new Mother Hag. The new Mother Hag is younger, but they say when she dons the midnight dress and the wooden legs and the blue nose she rises almost to the ceiling, her dress filling the cold air until she's the largest woman anyone can remember seeing.

And when she laughs her cold, haunting laugh no more smiles. But still they journey far and wide for advice.