

THE HESTWOOD

By Rob Chilson

How long, how long, in infinite pursuit Of This and That endeavour and dispute?
Better be merry with the fruitful grape Than sadden after none, or bitter, fruit.
—Omar/Fitzgerald

* * * *

WENTING SONELLIAN SAT crosslegged before his croft, playing the zootibar. The haunting minor-key notes of the long bamboo flute wafted down to the beach and out over the Bay of Repose. To his right, Weary Water slipped soundlessly into the Bay. To his left, beyond the Bay to the west, the Ramping Sea lay sleeping. In the orchard behind his croft, Squatham, the birds were singing “Joy to the Morning” in massed chorus. The air was as warm as milk and as invigorating as wine.

And best of all, Calian dauNinnian, Wenty’s current lover and future wife, was sleeping in his croft.

All was well on this best of all mornings in the sixty million years since man-kin first appeared upon the Prime Mondeign. The only discordant note in all the world was the bickering of the gulls on the beach. But Wenty was too happy to frown at that.

Then Calian dropped her scarf by him and trotted into the bay, startling the gulls, who cursed her. Splashing herself in a quick bath, she rinsed off the salt in Weary Water, tossed back her cascade of golden hair, and padded back. She seated herself before him. Her slanted black eyes with their vertically slit pupils were common here in the Hitherland but no less beautiful for that.

Wenty flung aside the zootibar and spread his arms, his gleaming red crest rising.

“Ah, my poppet, my pet, ha! You have had time to consider my proposal, eh?” Confidently he employed the Executant of inquiry that made a complete sentence of his Utterance. “So, you will be my wife and live forever with me at Squatham and fill my life with joy, eh?”

“No, heh.” Smiling, she employed the Executant of response to inquiry.

“No, eh? No, eh?” Wenty’s crest drooped. “You would turn down all this, eh?” waving his arms about to encompass the croft, the orchard behind, Weary Water and the beach, the milk-warm and wine-invigorating air and — and everything.

“Not you, huh,” he said, turning his head to frown at the gulls raucously

including themselves in that “everything.”

“Think, Caly: you’d forfeit all these pleasures — and in addition the life-long pleasure of my conversation. Having enjoyed it life-long myself, I can tell you that it’s a life-long pleasure indeed, ha! You would forfeit all this, for why, eh?”

Laughing, Calian said, “A great pleasure indeed. But I wish to see more of the Prime Mondeign before I settle down, huh,” using the seldom-employed declarative Executant to indicate her seriousness. “I’ve told you before, but you do not believe I mean it. I’ve never been farther than Kirkilgowock, and you can see that from Skitty.”

“This urge to travel — for why, eh? Even if you travel from now on, think how much there’ll still be that you haven’t seen. Life is too short, ha! And in the meantime you are missing precious days in my company.”

She said, “Oh, Wenty, don’t try to dissuade me. And I’ll be missing none of your tongue, for you shall take me about. I want to see cities and mountains and statues and islands, and — and —”

“A city’s what but a fat village, or an island but a clod surrounded by water, eh? You’ve seen Kirkilgowock, and you’ve been on a picnic to Ealeigh and Wesleigh,” he said, indicating the low grassy islands of the Sea Gate that protected the Bay of Repose from the Ramping Sea.

“Two bits of meadow in the sea, that’s all.” She stood suddenly and passion entered her tones. “I’ve never even been to Iorkonon, ha! And Iorkonon — it’s what, eh? Nothing but another modern seacoast trading center, heh! I’ve never seen a ruin of The Heights — not even a crumbling wall of High Material. I’ve never even seen an exozootic animal, whose ancestors came from the stars.”

She flung her arms wide. “I want to see the Prime Mondeign, ha! Or at least a little bit of it. A cruise to the Farther Islands, perhaps.”

Wenting had risen, and his crest rose too. “But what’s left to see, when you’ve seen Squatham, eh?” He turned her about. “Look: the Heston Hills, and nearest of them Dun Bromgaw and Dun Ullock rearing, dark and portentous, ha! Not mountains, no; not even grand hills; but impressive for all that. And see, over them and spilling down from them, the dark, dangerous, and abysmal forest — the Hestwood, ha!”

Caly smiled tolerantly, tilting her head. “I’ve been in the woods. I only saw trees. I’ve even been in the Hestwood, on a picnic. We saw no dangers. No, no more arguments, ho!” Caly used the commanding Executant sharply. A flock of gorcrows passing overhead were startled into imitation: kha! kha! kha!

“Shut your beaks, ho!” she yelled up at them, tossing her hair, and turned back to Wenty. She tapped his chest. “Tonight, I sleep with Greling, whom I love also. And he has promised me, before we’re wed, to take me at least to Iorkonon. Maybe there we’ll take ship, if he saves enough. Even aerial ships sail to Iorkonon, ha!”

Aghast, Wenty said, “You’d sell yourself to your second-best lover for a mere pleasure trip, ha! But if you do not marry me, then who will damn my socks, eh?”

“Damn your socks, eh?” she cried, with a little shriek of laughter.

“Darn all euphemisms, ha!” he cried.

Still smiling and shaking her head, Calian picked up her scarf and knotted it carefully around her waist, leaving the trademark on her hip exposed: the image of an co-oak leaf in black melanin under her skin. Wenty’s was on his chest.

“No more arguments, Wenting huh. If you really love me, you’ll make an effort. Overcome your Hitherlands sloth, earn some money, and show me about a bit, ho.” With a last kiss and wave, she set off across the low ridge that concealed Skitty to the west, her hips swinging attractively — and very firmly.

The voices of the gulls were harsher than ever, the air now flat and dull, and behind Squatham, the birds had broken up their devotional and were all squawking derisively at him.

“Chance damn it,” Wenty said. “She has been talking this way for a long time, and now — What nonsense, ha! To go hating about like migrating birds but without their purpose, merely to gratify a whim for movement. Better to stay in some salubrious spot — Squatham comes to mind — and if one simply must move, then dance.”

He sighed. “But how rare is the rational mind, ha! How sadly rare. At times I fancy myself quite alone.”

He turned about and checked; his cat was digging a hole amid his flowers.

“Chance damn you, Socks, ha!” he cried. “There’s a muckreed pond down by Weary Water.”

“Too far, huh,” grumbled Socks, squatting over the hole. Her expression became one of concentration and he knew further curses would be futile.

Stamping into his croft, he slammed the door behind him and stood uneasily looking about. Squatham was snugly built, if small; one room. He had glued together

squared stones from some old building brightened inside by yellow and white paint. The roof timbers were driftwood topped with hornstone shingles. There was a cooking and in winter, heating stove in one wall, its firebrick gleaming dully. Also some shelves and wardrobes; a table, three stools, a bundle of bedding on a fold-down shelf. A few clothes, books and sheet music, Calian's spare tambangs, and the zootibar and titibuck Wenty played in their ensemble.

Now he looked at Squatham as Calian might.

Dull, he thought. "Where I see concentration on the task in hand —namely, enjoyment of life — she must see boredom. Most of all, we both see one thing: the same thing every day forever, amen, ha! But I can barely wait to start, where she feels trapped by it."

Shaking his head, he went back out, closed the door gently, and looked around. Squatham, seen from Caly's perspective, was even duller outside. The stones were their natural weathered dun color. Flowers grew about it and vines up on it. Back of it, beautiful and useful too, was his orchard.

"Socks, if she had not been hinting for so long about having not one, but two children, both by the same father, I wonder if my love for her Socks, eh? Yo, Socks! Off without a word, ha! Ignored and dishonored in my own house, ha. But it was ever thus with the great of soul, huh."

Disconsolately he wandered toward the orchard at the back of his fist of land. Socks put her head out from beneath a flowering bush and watched him go, her tongue protruding pinkly. Of her no doubt disdainful thoughts, she spoke no word.

Wenty had set out his now-thriving orchard when he first squatted by Weary Water. He had dairy trees yielding milk, cream, and cheese; eggs came from bushes under them. Sandwiches from the handmeal trees provided quick meals "—the singleton's salvation," he reflected. "Also the breadfruit."

The cereal nut bushes provided storable food — he had all three varieties, a total of twenty-two different kinds of nuts. There were numerous fruit trees, with thick-rinded apples, oranges, purples, and yellows, among others. Spud bushes provided all colors of starchy tubers, also in thick rinds, and densely packed leafy heads. "So many salads on the stem."

Of fruits that didn't store, he had a number of trees. One yielded red, blue, and white grapes. "And bunches of cherries," he added. "Soon it will be time to start the summer's run of our cherry wine, famed from here to Skitty." Another tree gave bunches of strawberries, blackberries, and so on. Four cloth trees marked his boundary to the west. Wooden spools of cotton and linen thread already grew on them, but they were too small to harvest the cheap bark cloth that he mainly wore.

“If I had planted aluminum-seed trees three years ago on that strip of clay soil, I might have a cash crop now,” Wenty mused. “Or sea-silk seareeds on that bar just off Weary mouth.”

Glumly he examined his three tansy trees. “On the other hand,” he said, brightening. “metal nuts delivered at Skitty have a negative value —worth nothing, less the cost of transport to Kirkilgowock. No, medicinals are the prime Chance, ha! Light in weight, and high in value.”

The tansies — the name was derived from *athanatos* — had leaves edged and veined with crimson, with crimson trademarks underneath indicating the nuts each bore. These ranged from simple headache pills, through anesthetics, to powerful symbiotics proof against most transmissible diseases.

“Not much profit in headaches and soporifics,” he said. “Anesthetics and symbiotics alone, then. Leave them in the shell, as longer lasting. and also as less work, ha!”

An hour or two later, carrying his shabby knapsack, he followed Calian’s track over the ridge to Skitty. After a couple of miles he entered “bookland,” where the land was platted into legally registered, taxed, and inheritable plots.

The village hummed with activity: a squatter from a southern fist led a placid Pontid pulling a wagon loaded with brew blooms and mushrooms. The squatter and his Pontid greeted him, and the latter waggled its comblike antlers. Men and women pattered in gardens. Children chased each other around the yard of the little school, unchanged since Wenting went. One man carried a crudely cast plastic jug of cooking fuel from the village’s muckreed marsh.

Wenty paused at the yard of one of his elderly uncles. The uncle sat jawing with his wife about their disreputable roof.

“When it’s a-rainin’, you cain’t fix it,” Wenty said with a country twang, “and when it ain’t a-rainin’, it’s as dry as any man’s house.”

His uncle agreed, laughing, and his wife said, “Long as it drips on your side of the bed, I don’t care.”

A small number of patrons sat under the tree in the innyard, where bulky old Peola sat in state and her patrons helped themselves to her wares, dropping small coins, “sparks,” into a bowl.

Wenty greeted everyone by name, and stopped to speak to Ellian, his mother. It was half an hour past time for the ferry to depart when he reached the wharf. A small group of Skittles stood about, waiting for the ferryman.

Slinging his knapsack behind his back, Wenty approached Greling, slapping the air with his palms, right-left, right-left. Greling's golden crest rose and they slap-sparred for several seconds with blinding speed but without touching each other. A game of great skill and restraint, though no longer played with knives.

"Thought you'd lost your touch by now, playing the zootibar out on Weary Water," said Grely as they caught their breath. "I see Caly's been talking to you," nodding at Wenty's knapsack.

"Yes, heh," said Wenty glumly. "Imagine my delight at being forced to labor like a landowner for the pleasure ha ha of absquatulating all over the Prime Mondeign."

Grely grinned. "Well, if you do acquire the necessary valuta, I'll still have the longer Father. I like the idea of seeing a few things before plating out and starting a family."

"A family of two children, she told you, eh?"

"Yes, heh. When neither of us picked up her hints she upped her offer. I'm taking carvings to Kirkilgowock — a manikin clock, and some windmills and toys and things. You, eh?"

"Medicinals, heh," said Wenty, secretly thinking that even Grely's best carvings would be an unsaleable drug on the market at Kirkilgowock. Fine hand work was common everywhere on the Prime Mondeign, because so little effort was needed to get food, clothing or shelter.

"Hmm," said Grely. "Well — good luck, huh."

His dubiety was so obvious that Wenty had a qualm of doubt about his own choice. After all, medicines grew on trees.

The ferryman appeared and began shepherding his patrons onto the barge. "Rowing, eh?" he asked Wenty glumly.

"Of course, heh," Wenty said, paying half fare. They all did.

Wenting and Greling got seats side by side and the bowman pushed off. Standing melancholy at the steering oar, the ferryman forlornly called the beat, and Wenty glanced over his shoulder to take the distance. Kirkilgowock's silvery hornstone roofs shimmered two miles away across the Bay of Repose.

"Mind you, it may be none too safe to travel," Wenty said, heaving at the oar. "You think the Midlanders will make war on the Mudfeet, eh? That would involve the Sons of Infamy."

The Hitherland was settled in the aftermath of the Octurian Wars by a shock corps called the Sons of Infamy — their ancestors. The Wars had raged across the area for an octury, an octron of years.[a]

Grely dropped his oar into the water. “The last time the Midlanders came against the Sons of Infamy, old delirious Delious lost his Swarthog regiment, his arm, and his baton. He said, quote, The Sons of Infamy are not peaceable; they’re just lazy.”

They rowed two strokes thoughtfully. “For a fact, we’re lazy enough,” Wenty admitted. “And peaceable. I doubt there’s a tetron of weapons in Skitty — and we live not so far from the Hestwood.”

“Still, when the Farther Islands call for help against pirates, they call most on whom, eh?” Grely said. “We’re dangerous enough still —just lazy, huh.”

“Sons of Sloth rather than Infamy, ha.”

“Ho, Gaffer,” Grely said to the old man behind Wenty. “Pull your oar in — we can hear you breathe all over the boat. Wenty will pull for you.”

“Glad to, Gaffer Swanthold,” said Wenty, and put his back into it. The wheezing and gasping behind faded.

“Thank ‘ee, lads, thank ‘ee.”

“You’ll show us what, eh, at the next meeting of the Banana Literary Society,” Grely asked Wenty.

“I’ve been working on a six-line rispetto, a mere trifle, heh,” Wenty said. “The rhyme scheme is one-two, one-two implied, followed by a couplet, three-three stated.”

Implied rhyme was discovered by a Cenozoic girl whose foot had gone to sleep. She cried a couplet in anapaestic monometer with implied rhyme:

“There are stars In my shoe.”

This seminal poem is flawed, in that it is not comprehensible without explication of the situation, and the rhymes, twinkling and tingling, are not perfect. But the technique was noted, and eventually bore fruit.

“Let’s hear your rispetto, then,” said Grely. Wenty delivered his lines between oar-strokes:

“Born as urgent in the Sun as bright-faced flowers, “Striving as if work would bend inflexible Fate, “Yet we dimly see our ends in Future’s haze; “All our effort speeds the grave and — blankness beyond.

“Why then spend our only lives in fasting? “Neither Love, nor Life, is everlasting.”

Omitted Executants — “single-talk” — was much used by poets and philosophers, as it made the work ambiguous.

Grely glanced over at him. “A hackneyed theme, but a good one. Let’s see, your rhymes — flowers imply blooming — and that rhymes with the third line’s ‘looming’ through a haze. Hmm. ‘Fate’ and ‘blankness beyond’ — void — naught — rhymes with ‘lot’ which means Fate. Blooming, lot, looming, naught, fasting, everlasting. Not bad, though far from great.”

That was Wenty’s assessment. “And you’re working on what, eh?”

“A couple of elegiac stanzas with double rhyme, stated and implied, heh. The implied scheme is three, three, four, three. I only have the first stanza finished. More or less finished, ha.” Taking a breath, he said to the rhythm of their strokes:

“We come to Life with tongues like brooks a-babble; “Knowing naught of Whence, much though we’ve dinned, “Though of Why we’re here some will gibble-gabble: “But one in the end with the ignorant wind.”

“Not bad,” Wenty said, trying to work out the implied rhymes. Lines one, two, and four rhymed, and brooks babbling had to be flowing. “A hackneyed theme also, but also a good one, and double rhyme is merely a trick. However — not bad at all.”

“Oh, I’m like you, never wanted to astound the world; just to amuse my own easily amused self.”

Wenty gave him a quick backhand to the chest. “Speak for yourself, poltroon, ha!”

Grely almost caught a crab, laughing.

“I think your rhyme on the second line is too obscure, though,” Wenty said. He hadn’t got it.

Sobering, Grely said, “That’s one of the reasons I haven’t finished the second stanza. Double rhyme is tough.”

Presently they pulled into the mouth of the Silking River and docked at

Kirkilgowock. Wenty fetched a gourd of water from the public fountain for Gaffer Swanthold

Wenty and Grely stood regarding Kirkilgowock. It was the largest, and only, city either had seen. A dodektron of man-kin congregated here two to the twelfth power, or 4,096 in the forgotten decimals of the Cenozoic. On market days, half again, or even twice as many, thronged the streets. Common folk such as themselves were found here; water-breathing Marineers from the Mondalom or “World-Waste” Ocean beyond the Farther Islands; fur-bearing sylvandros with four legs; and hulking ogres from the Tolland Plateau far up Silking River.

“And she wants to see Iorkonon at least, and maybe even Koshkonong on the Farther Islands, ha,” muttered Wenty.

““Ouch, ha!’ cries the sufferer,” Grely said. He grinned and slapped Wenty’s shoulder. “Good luck, ha!” He made off for the market squares.

When Wenty had been to “all both” apothecaries and the fly market and counted his meager earnings, he disconsolantly sought the smaller market square. There he saw Grely’s gold-gleaming crest bending low. Despite himself, he felt a throb of relief, even pleasure, at his rival’s expression. Wryly he noted similar expressions on Grely’s face when the other descried him.

“You need anesthetics, eh?” Wenty asked him ironically.

“Better, a big drink, heh. And you would like to buy a manikin clock that chimes the hours with fantastic capers, eh?”

“I mean to live my life in such a way as never to need a clock, let alone a noisy one, heh,” said Wenty. They slapped each other and parted.

A gloomy cloud threatened the Bay of Repose, but it only broke over Wenty when he saw Calian. So soon as she learned that he had done poorly at Kirkilgowock, she professed great interest in Greling’s fortune.

“He’s such a good carver — he made our windmill, you know.”

Wenty slap-sparred her cheeks, his palms fanning her hair gently; she didn’t blink or abate a jot of her dazzling smile. “You are a heartless, trifling, titivating tabby,” he told her severely. “And you may call that a farewell, ha.”

Still she smiled, and followed him to the door. “Don’t forget, I come to you in three nights,” she called. “The night after you see Harlian. See that the sheets are clean, ho!”

Her mother Ninnian put her head out of the parlor window and called,

“If you tire of her, Wenty dear, look me up, ha!”

“I’ll do that,” Wenty called back. “You at least are an honest tabby.”

“Good night, Wenty, hurry for the storm. Love you, ha!” Caly cried.

“You can do what, when the woman loves you, eh?” he asked himself, hurrying before the storm. “Naught, that’s what, heh.”

NEXT MORNING he awoke to find Socks on his chest, peering enigmatically into his face. His breath came with effort; she was as long as his arm from elbow to fingertip, not counting tail.

“Give me food, ho,” she said immediately he opened his eyes.

“Food, oh,” he said automatically, the Executant of response to command. Fog, the aftermath of the storm, darkened the windows.

“A beautiful day, a salubrious day, a day for savoring,” he said, opening the door and peering out. He saw fog, and let some in, cold, wet, and raw.

“Close the door, ho,” said Socks. She leaped to her favorite shelf and shook her paw disdainfully.

“Of all the animals on the Prime Mondeign, only cats dare give orders to man-kin, huh,” Wenty said. “But cats know no lord.”

He bowed elaborately, too close to her, and received a box on the cheek that was no slap-spar. “Ouch, ha. There are times when you remind me of another woman, huh.”

He set out food for her and hung up his bedding to air. Taking a battered aluminum saucepan, he made an omelette of eggs, cream, cheese, chopped vegetables, and the treemeat and peppery red pods of the jerkypod. He whistled and sang as he worked, aggravating Socks, already irritated by the weather.

He made enough omelette for both of them, and shared with her. “Now,” he said when he was finished, tapping her to get her attention. “We have a problem — to make money.”

Picking up the last mouthful of omelette, Socks carried it across the room and crouched with her back to him. Picking up his tea-cup, Wenty followed her and squatted nearby.

“Now,” he said, tapping her again. “This means of acquiring money, while

preferably legal, must be other than, and faster than, the slow effect of honest toil.”

Socks took the remainder of the omelette beneath the table, but Wenty stretched out on his elbow, head under it: “So, we must simply find the money or other valuta.”

Socks flounced out from under the table, abandoning the last morsel, and sprang onto her shelf. Wenty stood and opened his mouth, but she hissed at him, ears back.

“Be silent, ho!” she cried. “Go away, ho!”

“Silent, eh? You would have me burst, eh? I cannot be silent and live, ha!”

“You always talk, ha! You always make noise, ha! You are always near me, ha! You make so much noise, for why, eh? For no reason, heh!”

Wenty stepped back against the table and struck an attitude with one hand held out.

“O Cat,” he said, “damned Cat, who with specious sagacity speaking, mocks a man-kin’s chat, with haughty reprobations squeaking.”

He approached the hand to her nose, waited while she spat at him and looked angrily away, then swooped on her, rolled her over, and dug his fingers into her large furry tummy. Instantly she whipped her paws onto his hand and dug in, bending her neck to bite as well, and a bloody tussle ensued.

A watery golden beam of light struck through the window and they broke off.

“A better day dawns at last, ha,” Wenty said. “Now you can go out without wetting your paws. You can go down to the muckreed marsh, huh.”

She reluctantly released his hand. “Too far, huh.”

Wenty broke an alcohol-bearing nut from his muckreeds and bathed the wounds on his hand, gasping at the pain.

“So it would seem,” he said over his shoulder, “that our best chance lies with the old tales of treasure to be found in the Hestwood— eh? Gone, eh? O faithless cat, ha! But when did I ever need a cat, eh, or indeed any audience.”

He donned winter pantaloons, long-sleeved shirt, and ankle boots, packed his knapsack with food and a waterproof, slung a short-handled shovel. There was a stubborn look to the haze in the northwest when he stepped out, suggesting they weren’t done with weather yet.

“To the southeast, past the orchard, lie the Heston Hills, covered with the dark-needed, ominous Hestwood. Alas, that great city.”

A now-nameless city of the Heights of Mankind had rolled over the horizon there not less than a tetra-myriad of years ago.[b] For it was reckoned that the Fall from the Heights had occurred so long ago.

“And alas, Heston, hal How are the mighty in turn fallen.”

After the Fall, a mighty city had arisen on the High city’s ruins, falling in its turn many generations ago. The name of that city was unknown, but it was now called Heston, because it was assumed to have been the capital of all the country round. Heston itself had since been mined out.

“Now only the forest keeps its secrets.”

Wenty stood hesitating.

“So small a Chance, ha! And yet, I have what other Chance, eh? To draw the Long Father requires an ante, but to draw the Short Father, none.” Toss-sticks was played with three lengths of sticks. “I shall be back late, if indeed I make it back by tonight. Our ensemble meets tonight. Ah well, Harlian also plays zootibar. And she at least will miss me, if Calian does not.”

Launching his canoe on Weary Water, he paddled with the tide, making good time. The river swung in a great arc around the Hestwood to his left. On his right was a milder, mostly deciduous forest, interspersed with meadows. Fistland, sparsely occupied by squatters. Civilization was returning gradually to the Hitherland, after the Octurian Wars.

“But no one squats him in the Hestwood,” he added ominously.

Nearest of the Heston Hills were Dun Bromgaw and Dun Ullock, from between which came the Hestwater. It too was tidewater, and the tide took him up to the very foot of Dun Bromgaw. He tied up and climbed the hill, staying alert for valuta. High Mondeign cities were rich in iron, copper, even lead, all of which were mined by the appropriate trees.

“Also, and more important,” he added with enthusiasm, “High cities are sources of nonTabular elements, ha!” These were elements not found in nature: scarlet coronium, purple imperex, noble copper, starsilver, among metals; galatium, vionium, and so on, among nonmetals. “Galatium in particular,” he said, looking keenly about for bushes with blue-veined leaves. Galatia buds were extremely valuable as perfume sources.

“Yet, what do I mostly see, eh? Firks, heh,” sadly.

He paused on the top and wiped his brow. The forest stood silently regarding him in the heat of the day.

A rich gloom as of an ancient cathedral hung over him. The glow diffusing between needle and needle above filled all the forest with a faint green mist of light, struck back sharply from the bright green of the moss that covered the soil without a break. Drifts of last year’s dead needles made a brown candlewick pattern on the moss. Down the slopes marched the dark-stemmed ranks of trees, solemn, mysterious, haunted by thoughts no human could think.

Wenty cleared his throat. “And no sign of valuta, huh.”

The city of Heston, whatever its name, had mined these hills for octuries. He hesitated, then descended to the Hestwater again. This stream, running between the hills, had dug more than he could in a lifetime. He fell to examining the banks and bed of the stream. All he found amid the rounded stones were occasional odd bits of fractured glassy High material. Jewelers sometimes carved these things into imitation gems, but they were harder to work than real gems and less flashy. Other bits of High material were opaque; dull white or gray.

The bushes along the stream were ordinary. No galatias here. Nothing, nothing, nothing.

“The trees of generations of miners have drained all valuta from this soil, huh,” he said glumly.

The rest of the day he followed the Hestwater far into the Heston Hills. A dark shadow fell over him. Startled, he looked up. Night had fallen, but he had not noticed, for the overcast sky directly above him still glowed in a broad circle.

“The long-gone streets of the High city still are lit,” he said in awe. He’d seen this glow on the Hestwood from a distance, but had never stood in it, visiting only by day.

Far out in orbit about the Prime Mondeign a celestial lumer had turned its insubstantial, sun-catching mirror toward the site of the Hestwood. The lumers remained faithful to their last commands long after the cities they sought to illuminate were darkened by time beyond any power to brighten.

“And now the lights of the Heights are occulted by the bitter clouds of these unhappy days,” he observed.

A rank of black clouds was blowing between him and the glowing sky. Even as Wenty looked hurriedly around for a suitable camping place, darkness came

down like the lid of a blackened pot.

Except — “This is what, eh?” he murmured. To the east and south, a faint glow of greenish light was visible. Wenty groped cautiously through the darkened forest.

The glow grew, permeating a section of forest, as if a lighthouse beam from behind made every leaf glow greenly. No fyrhs these. Wenty stared. He was looking at a lambent forest of festival trees.

Every leaf glowed green, giving the forest its prevailing tone. But the verdant light was spangled and made festive with twinkling bright reds, yellows, oranges, whites, and blues. These lights came from glowing fruits, flowers, and candies dangling from under the limbs. Also dangled wooden toys and fantastic ornaments — stars and horns and human heads and many others.

“An enchanted forest, indeed, ha,” he breathed.

Wenty had seen noctilucous trees before. But he had never seen — or dreamed of! — a forest of festival trees.

Wondering, he climbed one of them, up through a world of shivering light, till he looked down on the rainbow-spangled pool of glowing emerald that filled a hollow in the dark hills. West rose the mothwing shoulders of the hills, crowned with the distant flicker of the oncoming storm. East still was lit, but the shadow swept over it even as he watched.

“High cities were large as counties,” he murmured. “It must be true that their inhabitants were Lucifexes, and flew, huh.”

Looking down, Wenty saw a dark blotch in the middle of the festival forest. Descending, he wandered bemused in a land of delights. His mother Ellian used to buy small festival trees as centerpieces for Wenty’s birthday parties. He’d only seen one big one, the Municipal Tree in Kirkilgowock, and it would have seemed small here tonight.

The blotch was, he discovered, the foundation-hole of a considerable building, so old it was nearly filled in, overgrown with ordinary eo-oaks and fyrhs. Here and there stood a section of crumbling stone wall. He pondered this ruin. The Octurian Wars had ended an octury ago.

“Someone, famous long ago, planted hedges of lucent trees to light the grounds of his manse on cloudy nights,” he said. “The trees remain though the manse be gone. And no doubt there once were lawns and pleasaunces and game courts, all swallowed now by the festival forest. Famous times they must have had in the evenings, with the celestial lumer above and the festival trees glowing all about.”

More importantly, here was a scrap of shelter. Hastily he gathered armloads of dead wood, wandering dreamlike under the glowing trees, and built a fire on the east side of a bit of wall. Mouth watering, he took a handmeal out of his knapsack and began to strip the husks back.

Motion in the green glowing aisles of the festival forest caught his eye and he paused. A thing stepped out and confronted him, a green-litten chiaroscuro of umber and somber shapes and angles. Some weird thrashing machine, it might have been, or a mangle, or a nameless collection of mechanical oddments on the march.

No: not nameless. “Killoon,” he breathed, staring.

It looked a little like a giant scorpion, two rows of jointed legs, a complicated double head, and four crooked arms with rows of lobsterclaws instead of fingers. The top part of the head was circled with dark, motionless, gem-like eyes; nocturnal, it could see in the dark. Brown it was, and dark, and deadly, and its ancestors came not from the wholesome Earth of the Prime Mondeign, but from some wild far star beyond all kenning.

“You are whom, eh?” it asked, its voice a rasping rattling toothgrinding sound without a trace of breath in it. It was made, he saw faintly, by the rapid chittering and chattering of many tiny maxillae above the complex mouth in its chest.

Clearing his throat, he said, “I am Wenting, heh.”

It had a spear level in one “hand” on each side, and kept moving them mechanically toward and away from him. Now it paused in this movement, to regard him with what might have been dubiety.

Pause, then the rasp: “You where going — going where — you —”

It stopped, and rattled something that sounded like angry words, words Wenty had never heard. Confidently he waited for their meanings to well up from within him, but no meanings came. He stared in amazement. Always before, the meanings had come; every root word of Tellucent was latent in his germ-plasm. He had only to hear them to know them.

The killoon spoke with the seeming of great care: “You — going — where — eh?”

In a sudden illuminating flash Wenty realized that the alien thing spoke another language, a language its ancestors had brought from the stars. Having no instinctive grasp of Tellucent, it had made a simple error on his name.

But it was waiting for an answer, pantomiming throwing its spears at him and

at him, at him and at him. And this was a killoon, terrible beings who had savagely earned their name.

“I am not Going, heh,” he said. “I am Wenting, heh.” Sweating in the heat of the night, he waited. Lightning flashed, muted thunder spoke.

The spears paused again in their incessant motion. “Your name is what. Eh? Eh?”

Wenty stared. After all, he thought, if I am qualified to confuse a cat that also has Tellucent by instinct, can I not confound this alien creature.* Again he must clear his throat. “My name is What, heh.”

The killoon reared backward in some strong, fretful emotion. It began to jab the spears irritably at the ground, and their rhythm was broken, jagged. “That is what I asked, ha! Your — name — is — what — eh?”

“I am Wenting, heh,” he said, throat dry. “My father is Gone, huh.”

It lifted its left front foot and doubled it into a fist, slammed it down into the straggly grass with a thud. Then it similarly stomped the foot behind that, and the one behind that, and so on back, then the back foot on the right side and so forward.

“You — are — going- how — much — farther — eh?” it demanded harshly, continuing to ripple its stomping.

“I am What; you are Whom, heh. ‘Who’ is you, eh?”

Wenty’s hearts were shaking his chest, one-un, two-oo, but his plan seemed to be working. The killoon went from rippling a stomp to dancing sidlingly about, stomping irregularly.

“I am not ‘Who,’ heh! Ha! You am not — not are What, heh! You all confuse, ha! You not know own language, ha! I ask the name of your name, ha! You say nonsenses, ha! Now I asks you going where — you — you where — what you — who —”

It jabbed one spear into the ground and left it there, dancing about and snapping its pincers like castanets.

Wenty leaned forward and aggravated it further: “You talk confusedly, ha! You ask two questions at once, ha! And you don’t listen to answers, ha! My name is What, ha! I am Wenting, ha!”

The killoon’s verbal frustration abruptly became too much for it. Leaving its

spear sticking in the sod, it gave a loud rasping Raa-aa-aaaawk! This furious cry trailed back between the coldly glowing trees in a comet-tail of sound, as it rushed off into the night.

Wenty took a long deep breath.

“I am going to have to sit up all night and watch for it, eh?” he asked himself uneasily.

But then from the east he heard the wailing, roaring cry of a killoon on the hunt. The odds were against its returning.

Still, he slept poorly that night. All through his uneasy dreams, the festival forest glowed, green and spangled with eyes, regarding him through the rain that rattled on his waterproof.

NEXT MORNING, Wenty rose stiffly in the chilly predawn and munched dried fruit and a couple of handmeals. His gaze kept jerking perkily about. But nothing moved except the drip of water.

Packed, Wenty hesitated. But this old manse must have been looted many times.

The killoon’s spear.

He pulled it out and looked at it. Crudely wrapped to a crude haft was a gleaming scarlet point of hammered coronium.

“Coronium, ha!” The first he’d ever seen, but unmistakable. “It came whence, eh?” Wenty hefted it, estimated it as worth a dozen gold stars.

He climbed a tree. Reflexively he looked at the sky to the west; the weather was over. To the east he looked anxiously and saw no sign of the killoon. “Naturally,” he told himself grumpily.

Instead he saw blotches of light green amid the evergreen Hestwood. There must once have been a considerable community here, lost now to history and all memory. A community that, perhaps, had left trees still growing in coronium rich soil

Descending, Wenty turned his steps east. Presently he found an old road — a tunnel through Hestwood. At the far end of it, the rising Sun winked at him. To right and left was a suggestion of cut stone; fences, he thought. Within an hour he saw an indubitable gate and turned in.

The sunlight lanced in over the hills, pitilessly revealing a filled and overgrown

hole, utterly mundane. Around were only fyrhs, co-oaks, and festival trees, wan by daylight.

“Alas, the tabby is impatient, as tabbies always are, and wants her nuptial trip soon,” Wenty said glumly.

He went back to the road, hesitated, and pushed on east for a space. He passed several gates, investigated a couple more ruins.

“Face it, the spearpoint maybe never came from here at all. And if I spend much more time searching,” Wenty added uneasily, “I’ll find myself benighted again in grounds hunted by the killoon.”

Aimlessly he wandered around the grounds of the last ruin. A very substantial place, this, with a huge outer wall. More like a castle, but too big to defend. Possibly the central fort of the forgotten city.

He paused. There was a suspicion of order in the huge mossy eo-oaks. They seemed to have been set in rows.

“One would plant an orchard of co-oaks, for why, eh?”

But eo-oaks don’t have trademarks on the undersides of their leaves. Wenty’s face went pale; blood roared in his ears; his knees shook and almost gave way beneath him. It was an orchard of adama trees.

Wenty came near to fainting. His next coherent thought was, “How lovely they are, huh.” He was looking at goldflakes growing on the massive bole against which he was leaning.

He had not dreamed the orchard. Swelling egg-shaped nodules in the bark grew along the underside of every large limb. Many of these nuts were bigger than his fist.

Numbly, he tottered over to a fallen limb. With hysterical steadiness he cut into the largest nut with the spearpoint. Damp and rotten, it yielded readily and a smooth plum-shaped stone fell out, big as the last joint of his thumb. Wenty held it up to the light. It was a deep transparent blue that smashed a sunbeam into glancing fragments.

Sapphire.

Awed, he looked around. Tetrons, sixteens, of adamas. Ancient adamas. They yielded sapphires and rubies and the transparent adamants. It took a lifetime to grow a single gem the size of this one; generations to grow the big ones. The ground here must be littered with wealth. Bemused, speechless, he wandered through the

orchard, poking at the soil.

One row was different. He puzzled numbly over its trademarks. “Smaragdos, ha!” Rare jewel trees, yielding emeralds, aquamarines, and beryls, Few soils had the constituents of their gems. Their limbs were studded with nuts.

The two outer rows of the orchard were quartzite trees, which yielded all the semi-precious stones based on quartz.

“No matter. There’s enough wealth in the center.”

Wenty’s hearts were racing. He wanted to leap madly on every fallen limb, dig crazily with the spear, see the red and blue and green and clear and rose-colored stones pour into his palm.

He counted them: sixteen rows, originally of sixteen trees each, not counting the quartzites. No wonder the massive wall about this orchard. The thought of all the wealth and beauty here made him want to shout.

He pictured Caly’s face when he presented her with a knapsack of gems of every kind. Her ecstatic delight in them, and joy in him. The journey they would take, to remember the rest of their lives.

Then he pictured Greling’s expression. But before he could feel sorry for his friend’s disappointment, Grely’s expression changed, became determined. He pictured Grely also presenting Caly with a sack of gems, and her delighted confusion over having to choose.

And not just Greling, but all Skitty, rushing to the orchard. And not just Skitty, but all Kirkilgowock. And not just Kirkilgowock, but all the coast of Hitherland would swarm to the orchard.

They’d cut up all the fallen limbs, and kick aside the leaves, and dig up the soil. They’d climb the trees and cut into the larger nuts, then the middle-sized and small ones, mad for wealth. They’d squabble over the limbs, and scuffle over the holes they’d dig. They’d squat in the orchard and claim the trees.

They’d fight each other to squat and claim.

They’d kill each other.

“All for what, eh? Wealth, eh? — All this ridiculous wealth, beyond all reason — avarice has no use for it.”

And Calian — proffered all this. What would it do to her?

“It would destroy her, heh,” he answered, horror-struck. She would change from the open, generous, warm-hearted woman he loved into a grasping, selfish, compliment-seeking, wealth-hoarding termagant.

That was bad enough, but the horrors contined: “And me, eh?” he asked. “I am better than they of the coast of Hitherland, eh? Better than my neighbors of Kirkilgowock, eh? Better than my friends and relatives of Skitty, eh?”

No, no, and no; he drew the Short Father on every question. “At bottom we are all Sons of Infamy.”

He had dropped the sapphire. Wenty looked at his trembling fingers, wiped them on his pantaloons. He wished he had not eaten so much breakfast. He wished he had not eaten breakfast at all — wished he had some cold clear water to drink, now!

In school they had taught him a charming myth about the Fall from The Heights. The Lord of the Abyss had tempted Anthroman to invade the forbidden Fields of the Sun. For his presumption, his wings were burned off and he fell to destruction on the glowing Fields. And ever after, the man-kin had been forced to walk and labor for their food.

He found himself leaning against a huge tree, wiping his eyes and gulping. It will be all right, he thought. But I’d better get back to the Hestwater soon.

He looked around. In his sickness he had stumbled downhill. This was the last of the jewel trees. An adama, he saw, and the biggest of all; the drainage of the slope favored it. Yet it seemed to have no nuts. No, there was one, a small one. And there, a smaller one. But that was all. There was a big dead limb, very old and crumbling. He kicked it and it fell into moist powder. Out of the powder tell a golden stone.

Wenty stared at it for a long time, then breathlessly bent and picked it up. He couldn’t quite close his fingers around it.

“Auron.”

It was the color of transparent gold, a beauty that made him want to weep. The rarest and most valuable gem on the Prime Mondeign.

“Because vionium is a nonTabular element,” he told himself gravely. “Very rare.” The autos tree was an adama that colored its adamant with vionium salts.

In his shock Wenty hadn’t consciously heard anything, but was not surprised to find the killoon behind him. It took the auron from his fingers, held it up.

A golden beam fell on its upper head. It was wearing a thing like a crown

around it. This crown was made of linked fiat plates of smoked plastic, to shield its nocturnal eyes from the light of day.

“Pretty,” it said in its rasping voice. “But of no value.” It tossed the auron aside, dismissively.

It tilted its upper head and he felt its regard on him through the smoked plastic. In a prescient flash, Wenty felt that it was debating opening the subject of his name and destination.

It didn’t. “Man-kin will swarm in and trample all over the forest, eh?” It held a skin sack full of water, and no weapons.

After a moment Wenty said, “No, heh. I will go back there,” pointing with the spear to the north, “and I will not come back.”

It rattled something killoonish, then said, “That is good, huh.” It started off, swinging its sack.

“I have your spear, huh,” Wenty called. “You left it last night, huh. Here, take it, ho.” He proffered it.

After some hesitation it accepted it. “It is mine again, eh?”

“Yes, heh. Beautiful and useful both.”

“Very useful, huh.” For a moment it regarded him through smoked plastic, still, he felt, brooding on the subject of his name. Instead it turned about and made off, soon vanishing in the green and gold of the morning forest.

The auron gleamed amid the leaves.

With me along the strip of Herbage strown
That just divides the desert from
the sown, Where the name of Slave and Sultan is forgot —
And pity Sultan Mahmud
on his golden throne!

— Omar/Fitzgerald

ONE OF SOCKS’S remote descendants attacked Wenty’s large knobby bare foot. He reached over with the other foot and bapped it on the head. The kitten looked up at him wide-eyed. “Mew?” it said, its eyes being open but not its mouth.

“They’ll be talking back to you soon enough,” said Greling.

“Soon enough,” Wenty said.

A beautiful naked young woman ran by them, laughing, and into the Bay of Repose. For a moment, Wenty's hearts hesitated, then beat again. In that moment he had traveled years into the past...he remembered Calian running by him down to the beach for a swim and a wash, on many mornings, many many mornings ago, when he and all the world were young. This was one of her granddaughters.

"Ouch, ha," said Grely, wincing. Another of Socks's descendants climbed his leg, catstep wince, catstep wince, catstep wince. The kitten sat staring on his knee. "Mew?"

Grely glared, and bent its ear backward. "Mew you, ha!"

It shook its head, arighting the ear, and continued to stare at him.

Wenty looked fondly at his old friend. Grely's hair was thin now, even his crest, and that was silver. His own was thicker, but just as pale and lank. Both their faces were nut-brown. They had aged well, Wenty thought complacently. When they were young, he and Grely looked much like those handsome athletic fellows down there in the Bay, being teased by the tabbies With their long red or golden hair.

But now he and his friend looked like nobody else on the Prime Mondeign. Gnarled and crabbed, but individual, distinctive, original.

"Poets age well," Wenty said.

"Poets and musicians," said Grely, rubbing the kitten's head. "You remember the days of our old ensemble, eh? You used to be fair with the zootibar; pity you didn't keep it up."

"I haven't even played the Devotionals for three years; not since —" —Caly's death still unspeakable.

After a bit, Grely said, "You know, it was the greatest stroke of luck in my life, when you found that auron in the Silking River."

That was the story he'd put about. Wenty knew of at least seven auronic expeditions up the Silking, one even up onto the plateau of the Tolland.

"That was luck for me, but for you, eh?"

"Oh, yes, heh. It got for me the best wife a man could have. Harlian consented to be mine the same year you and Caly took your trip to the Farther Islands, you remember."

Wenty could barely remember what he'd seen on that trip, though Caly's perpetually surprised and joyful expression would be with him till he died. She had

never lost it, in all the years of their marriage. Smiling at his own memories, he looked down at the beach, where a vigorous white-haired Harly stirred the pot of sea-food and tubers and shouted spiritedly at the romping youths in the reposeful bay.

Two kittens pounced on his feet, and he scuffled with them.

“Some things never change, thank the Long Father,” he said.

Very little change had come to the Bay of Repose in his lifetime. Squatham behind him was platted now, to be left to his youngest grandson. It was no longer a croft, but a respectable dwelling of five rooms. His oldest son had platted the land just west of the knoll that concealed Skitty from Squatham; another son lived across the Bay.

Caly had found she loved motherhood, and almost alone among the women he knew, had borne a third child. Much as she loved her two sons, her daughter Ylian had become the light of her life, and Wenty’s.

Grely had been following his thoughts. “You’ve become silent; you always used to talk. But there’ve been no other changes so major, aside from our age. We’ve been blessed indeed by the Long Father.”

More than you know, Wenty thought. We Sons of Infamy were tempted, in my person, and did not Fall. So there were a couple of plats this side of Skitty, a few more fists squatted on to the south. But few were the adventurers who prowled the Heston Hills; the Hestwood slept alone.

Wenty quirked a smile at a random thought. Far to the east, at the end of the Bay, was a small complacent village: Fyn. Into Fyn, in broad daylight, a killoon had wandered, years ago. It wore a crown of smoked plastic lenses and carried a bag of copper nuggets from a copperseed tree. It had exchanged them for scissors, needles, thread, and ornamental buttons.

“How wise cats seem,” said Grely, following his own thoughts. “How wise, and how secretive.”

“Yes.”

Generations might well pass before that deadly orchard was discovered again...so, let them pass in peace!

Often, in dreams, Wenty found himself there, and the trees now dangled gems like festival tree ornaments, and they sparkled all over the ground in the light of the glowing leaves. Always again in his dreams he was stunned by the wealth, but more by the beauty.

Often he had yearned to tell someone his wonderful secret. But he had told not even Caly. He would never tell.

He did not talk, he thought, in his sleep; and nowadays he slept alone, but for the cats. It is true cats know no lord. But cats never talk. However much they say, they never talk.

“Soup is served, ha!” Harly cried.

Wenty arose with alacrity, displacing kittens. “Come, ha! My appetite, at least, is as youthful as ever.”

[a] 256 — 2 to the 8th power

[b] 16 myrions, or over a million. Myrion - 65,536

* * * *

By Rob Chilson

Rob Chilson lives in Kansas City, Missouri. His most recent novel is *Black as Blood* and he notes that his story “Acute Triangle” was recently adapted for the *Worlds of Paradox* series on cable television. This new sf story is set in the same well-conceived future as his May 1992 cover story “Far-Off Things,” but you don’t need to reread that tale to enjoy this speculation about what world gene-splicing might bring in the far future.