

## Thirteen O'Clock

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I

PETER PACKER folded the carpenter's rule and rose from his knees, brushing dust from the neat crease of his serge trousers. No doubt of it-the house had a secret attic room. Peter didn't know anything about sliding panels or hidden buttons; in the most direct way imaginable he lifted the axe he had brought and crunched it into the wall.

On his third blow he holed through. The rush of air from the darkness was cool and sweet. Smart old boy, his grandfather, thought Peter. Direct ventilation all over the house-even in a false compartment. He chopped away heartily, the hollow strokes ringing through the empty attic and down the stairs.

He could have walked through the hole erect when he was satisfied with his labors; instead he cautiously turned a flashlight inside the space. The beam was invisible; all dust had long since settled. Peter grunted. The floor seemed to be sound. He tested it with one foot, half in, half out of the hidden chamber. It held.

The young man stepped through easily, turning the flash on walls and floor. The room was not large, but it was cluttered with a miscellany of objects-chests, furniture, knick-knacks and what-nots. Peter opened a chest, wondering about pirate gold. But there was no gold, for the thing was full to the lid with chiffons in delicate hues. A faint fragrance of musk filled the air; sachets long since packed away were not entirely gone.

Funny thing to hide away, thought Peter. But Grandfather Packer had been a funny man-having this house built to his own very sound plans, waiting always on the Braintree docks for the China and India Clippers and what rare cargo they

might have brought. Chiffons! Peter poked around in the box for a moment, then closed the lid again. There were others.

He turned the beam of the light on a wall lined with shelves. Pots of old workmanship-spices and preserves, probably. And a clock. Peter stared at the clock. It was about two by two by three feet-an unusual and awkward size. The workmanship was plain, the case of crudely finished wood. And yet there was something about it-his eyes widened as he realized what it was. The dial showed thirteen hours!

Between the flat figures XII and I there was another-an equally flat XIII. What sort, of freak this was the young man did not know. Vaguely he conjectured on prayer-time, egg-boiling and all the other practical applications of chronometry. But nothing he could dredge up from his well-stored mind would square with this freak. He set the, flash on a shelf and hefted the clock in his arms, lifting it easily.

This, he thought, -iwould bear looking into. Putting the light in his pocket he carried the clock down the stairs to his second-floor bedroom. It looked strangely incongruous there, set on a draftsman's table hung with rules and T squares. Determinedly Peter was beginning to pry open the back with a chisel, when it glided smoothly open without tooling. There was better construction in the old timepiece than he had realized. The little hinges were still firm and in working order. He peered into the works and ticked his nail against one of the chimes. It sounded sweet and clear. The young man took a pair of pliers. Lord knew where the key was, he thought, as he began to wind the clock. He nudged the pendulum. Slowly it got under way, ticking loudly. The thing had stopped at 12:59. That would be nearly one o'clock in any other timepiece; on this the minute hand crept slowly toward the enigmatic XIII.

Peter wound the striking mechanism carefully, and watched as a little whirl sounded. The minute hand met the Roman numeral, and with a click the chimes sounded out in an eerie, jangling discord. Peter thought with sudden confusion that all was not well with the clock as he had thought. The chimes grew louder, filling the little bedroom with their clang.

Horried, the young man put his hands on the clock as though he could stop off the noise. As he shook the old cabinet the peals redoubled until they battered against the ear-

drums of the draftsman, ringing in his skull and resounding from the walls, making instruments dance and rattle on the drawing-board. Peter drew back, his hands to his ears. He was foiled with nausea, his eyes bleared and smarting. As the terrible clock thundered out its din without end he reached the door feebly, the room swaying and spinning about him, nothing real but the suddenly glowing clock-dial and the clang and thunder of its chimes.

He opened the door and it ceased; he closed his eyes in relief as his nausea passed. He looked up again, and his eyes widened with horror. Though it was noon outside a night-wind fanned his face, and though

he was on the second-story landing of his Grandfather Packer's house dark trees rose about him, stretching as far as the eye could see.

For three hours-by his wristwatch's luminous dial-Peter had wandered, aimless and horrified, waiting for dawn. The aura of strangeness that hung over the forest in which he walked was bearable; it was the gnawing suspicion that he had gone mad that shook him to his very bones. The trees were no ordinary things, of that he was sure. For he had sat down under one forest giant and leaned back against its bole only to rise with a cry of terror. He had felt its pulse beat slowly and regularly under the bark. After that he did not dare to rest, but he was a young and, normal male. Whether he would or not he found himself blundering into ditches and stones from sheer exhaustion. Finally, sprawled on the ground, he slept.

Peter woke stiff and sore from his nap on the bare ground, but he felt better for it. The sun was high in the heavens; he saw that it was about eleven o'clock. Remembering his terrors of the night he nearly laughed at himself. This was a forest, and there were any number of sane explanations how he got here. An attack of amnesia lasting about twelve hours would be one cause. And there were probably others less disturbing.

He thought the country might be Maine. God knew how many trains or busses he had taken since he lost his memory in his bedroom. Beginning to whistle he strode through the woods. Things were different in the daytime.

There was a sign ahead! He sprinted up to its base. The thing was curiously large, painted in red characters on a great slab of wood, posted on a dead tree some twelve feet from the ground. The sign said ELLIL. He rolled the name over in his

mind and decided that he didn't recognize it. But he couldn't be far from a town or house.

Ahead of him sounded a thunderous grunt.

"Bears!" he thought in a panic. (They had been his childhood bogies.) But it was no bear, he saw. He almost wished it was. For the thing that was veering on him was a frightful composite of every monster of mythology, menacing him with sabre-like claws and teeth and gusts of flame from its ravening throat. It stood only about as high as the man, and its legs were long, but it seemed ideally styled for destruction.

Without ado he jumped for a tree and dug his toes into the grooves of the bark, shimyng up it like a child. With the creature's • flaming breath scorching his heels he climbed, stopping only at the third set of main branches, twenty-five feet from the ground. There he clung, limp and shuddering, and looked down.

The creature was hopping grotesquely about the base of the tree, its baleful eyes en him. The man's hand reached for a firmer purchase on the branch, and part came away in his hand. He had picked a sort of coconut-heavy, hard, and with sharp corners. Peter raised his eyes. Why not? Carefully noting the path that the creature below took around the trunk he poised the fruit carefully. Wetting a finger, he adjusted the placing. On a free drop that long you had to allow for windage, he thought.

Twice more around -went the creature, and then its head and the murderous fruit reached the same point at the same time. There was a crunching noise which Peter could hear from where he was and the insides of its head spilled on the forest sward.

"Clever," said a voice beside him on the branch.

He turned with a cry. The speaker was only faintly visible- the diaphanous shadow of a young girl, not

more than eighteen, he thought. Calmly it went on, "You must be very maniac to be able to land a fruit so accurately. Did he give you an extra sense?" Her tone was light, but from what he could see of her dim features they were curled in an angry smile.

Nearly letting go of the branch in his bewilderment he answered as calmly as he could, "I don't know who you mean. And what is maniac?"

"Innocent," she said coldly. "Eh? I could push you off this

branch without a second thought. But first you tell me where Almarish got the model for you. I might turn out a few myself. Are you a doppelganger or a golem?"

"Neither," he spat, bewildered and horrified. "I don't even know what they are!"

"Strange," said the girl. "I can't read you." Her eyes squinted prettily and suddenly became solid, luminous wedges in her transparent face. "Well," she sighed, "let's get out of this." She took the man by his elbow and dropped from the branch, hauling him after her. Ready for a sickening impact with the ground, Peter winced as his heels touched it light as a feather. He tried to disengage the girl's grip, but it was steel-hard.

"None of that," she warned him. "I have a blast-finger. Or didn't he tell you?"

"What's a blast-finger?" demanded the engineer.

"Just so you won't try anything," she commented. "Watch." Her body solidified then, and she pointed her left index finger at a middling-sized tree. Peter hardly saw what happened, being more interested in the incidental miracle of her face and figure. But his attention was distracted by a flat crash of thunder and sudden glare. And the tree was riven as if by a terrific stroke of lightning. Peter smelled ozone as he looked from the tree to the girl's finger and back again. "Okay," he said.

"No nonsense?" she asked. "Come on."

They passed between two trees, and the vista of forest shimmered and tore, revealing a sort of palace-all white stone and maple timbers. "That's my place," said the girl.

II

"Now," she said, settling herself into a cane-backed chair. Peter looked about the room. It was furnished comfortably with pieces of antique merit, in the best New England tradition. His gaze shifted to the girl, slender and palely luminous, with a half-smile playing about her chisled features.

"Do you mind," he said slowly, "not interrupting until I'm finished with what I have to say?"

"A message from Almarish? Go on."

And at that he completely lost his temper. "Listen, you snip!" he raged. "I don't know who you are or where I am but I'd like to tell you that this mystery isn't funny or even mysterious-just downright rude. Do you get that? Now-my name is Peter Packer. I live in Braintree, Mass. I make my living as a consulting engineer. This place obviously isn't Braintree, Mass. Right? Then where is it?"

"Ellil," said the girl simply.

"I saw that on a sign," said Packer. "It still doesn't mean anything to me. Where is Ellil?"

Her face became suddenly grave. "You may be telling the truth," she said thoughtfully. "I do not know yet. Will you allow me to test you?"

"Why should I?"

"Remember my blast-finger?"

Packer winced. "Yes," he said. "What are the tests?"

"The usual," she smiled. "Rosemary and garlic, crucifixes and the secret name of Jehovah. If you get through those you're okay."

"Then get on with it," he said, confusedly.

"Hold these." She passed him a flowery sprig and a clove of garlic. He took them, one in each hand. "All right?" he asked.

"On those, yes. Now take the cross and read this name. You can put the vegetables down now."

He followed instructions, stammering over the harsh Hebrew word. In a cold fury the girl sprang to her feet and leveled her left index finger at him. "Clever," she blazed. "But you can't get away with it! I'll blow you so wide open-

"Wait," he pleaded. "What did I do?" The girl, though sweet-looking, seemed to be absolutely irresponsible.

"Mispronounced the Name," she snapped. "Because you can't say it straight without crumbling into dust!"

He looked at the paper again and read aloud slowly and carefully. "Was that right?" he asked.

Crestfallen, the girl sat down. "Yes," she said. "I'm sorry. You seem to be okay. A real human. Now what do you want to know?"

"Well-who are you?"

"My name's Melicent," She smiled deprecatingly. "I'm a sorceress."

"I can believe that. Now why should you take me for a demon, or whatever you thought I was?"

"Doppelganger," she corrected him. "I was sure-well, I'd better begin at the beginning.

"You see, I haven't been a sorceress very long-only two years. My mother was a witch-a real one, and first-class. All I know I learned from her-never studied it formally. My mother didn't die a natural death, you see. Almarish got her."

"Who's Almarish?"

She wrinkled her mouth with disgust. "A thug!" she spat. "He and his gang of half-breed demons are out to get control of Ellil. My mother wouldn't stand for it-she told him right out flat over a Multiplex Apparition. And after that he was gunning for her steady-no letup at all. And believe me, there are mighty few witches who can stand up under much of that, but Mother stood him off for fifteen years. They got my father

-he wasn't much good-a little while after I was born. Vampires.

"Mother got caught alone in the woods one morning without her tools-unguents, staffs and things-by a whole flock of golems and zombies." The girl shuddered. "Some of them

-well, Mother finished about half before they overwhelmed her and got a stake of myrtle through her heart. That finished her-she lost all her magic, of course, and Almarish sent a plague of ants against her. Adding insult to injury!" There were real tears of rage in her eyes.

"And what's this Almarish doing now?" Peter was fascinated.

Melicent shrugged. "He's after me," she said simply. "The bandur you killed was one of my watchdogs. And I thought he'd sent you. I'm sorry."

"I see," he breathed slowly. "What powers has he?" "The usual, I suppose. But he has no principles about using them. And he has his gang-I can't afford real retainers. Of course I whip up some simulacra whenever I hold a reception or anything of that sort. Just images to serve and take wraps. They can't fight."

Peter tightened his jaw. "You must be in a bad way." The girl looked him full in the eye, her lip trembling. She choked out, "I'm in such a hell of a spot!" and then the gates opened and she was weeping as if her heart would break. He

froze, wondering how he could comfort a despondent sorceress. "There, there," he said tentatively.

She wiped her eyes and looked at him. "I'm sorry," she said sniffing. "But it's seeing a friendly face again after all . these years-no callers but leprechauns and things. You don't know what it's like."

"I wonder," said Peter, "how you'd like to live in Brain-tree."

"I don't know," she said brightly. "But how could I get there?"

"There should be at least one way."

"But why-what was that?" shot out the girl, snatching up a wand.

"Knock on the door," said Peter. "Shall I open it?"

"Please," said Melicent nervously, holding up the slender staff. He stood aside and swung the door wide. In walked a curious person of mottled red and white coloring. One eye was small and blv^e, the other large and savagely red. His teeth were quite normal-except that the four canines protruded two inches each out of his mouth. He walked with a limp; one shoe seemed curiously small. And there was a sort of bulge in the trousers that he wore beneath his formal morning-coat.

"May I introduce myself," said the individual, removing his sleek black topper. "I am Balthazar Pike. You

must be Miss Melicent? And this-ah-zombie?" He indicated Peter with a leer.

"Mr. Packer, Mr. Pike," said the girl. Peter stared in horror while the creature murmured, "Enchanted."

Melicent drew herself up proudly. "And this, I suppose," she said, "is the end?"

"I fear so, Miss Melicent," said the creature regretfully. "I have my orders. Your house has been surrounded by picked forces; any attempt to use your blast-finger or any other weapon of offense will be construed as resistance. Under the laws of civilized warfare we are empowered to reduce you to ashes should such resistance be forthcoming. May I have your reply?"

The girl surveyed him haughtily, then, with a lighting-like sweep of her wand, seemed to blot out every light in the room. Peter heard her agitated voice, "We're in a neutral screen, Mr. Packer. I won't be able to keep it up for long. Listen! That

was one of Almarish's stinkers-big cheese. He didn't expect any trouble from me. He'll take me captive as soon as they break the screen down. Do you want to help me?"

"Of course!"

"Good. Then you find the third oak from the front door on the left and walk widdershins three times. You'll find out what to do from tr^em."

"Walk how?" asked Peter.

"Widdershins-counterclockwise. Lord, you're dumb!"

Then the lights seemed to go on again, and Peter saw that the room was filled with the half-breed creatures. With an expression of injured dignity the formally-attired Balthazar Pike asked, "Are you ready to leave now, Miss Melicent? Quite ready?"

"Thank you, General, yes," said the girl coldly. Two of the creatures took her arms and walked her from the room. Peter saw that as they stepped over the threshold they vanished, all three. The last to leave was Pike, who turned and said to the man: "I must remind you, Mister-er-ah-that you are trespassing. This property now belongs to the Almarish Realty Corporation. All offenders will be prosecuted to the fullest extent of the law. Good day, Mister-er-ah-". With which he stepped over the door and vanished.

Hastily Peter followed him across the line, but found himself alone outside the house. For which he was grateful. "Third oak from the left door," he repeated. Simple enough. Feeling foolish he walked widdershins three times around and stopped dead waiting for something.

What a sweet, brave kid she had been! He hoped nothing would really happen to her-before he got there.

He felt a sort of tugging at his serge trousers and stepped back in alarm. "Well?" shrilled a small voice. Peter looked down and winced. The dirtiest, most bedraggled little creature he had ever seen was regarding him with tiny, sharp eyes. There were others, too, squatting on pebbles and toadstools.

"Miss Melicent told me to ask you what I should do," said Peter. As the little leader of the troop glared at him he added hastily, "If you please,"

"Likely tale," piped the voice of the creature. "What's in it for us?"

"I dunno," he said bewildered. "What do you want?"

"Green cloth," the creature answered promptly. "Lots of it. And if you have any small brass buttons, them too."

Peter hastily conducted an inventory of his person. "Tin sorry," he said hesitantly. "I haven't any green. How about blue? I can spare my vest." He carefully lowered the garment to the ground among the little people.

"Looks all right," said the leader. "Jake!" One of the creatures advanced and fingered the cloth. "Hmm-" he said. "Good material." Then there was a whispered consultation with the leader, who at last shouted up to Peter: "Head East for water. You can't miss it!"

"Hey," said Peter, blinking. But they were already gone. And though he widdershin-walked for the next half hour and even tried a few incantations remembered from his childhood they did not come back, nor did his vest.

So, with his back to the sinking sun, he headed East for water.

III

"Mahoorra City Limits," said the sign. Peter scratched his head and passed it. He had hit the stretch of highway a few miles back once he had got out of the forest, and it seemed to be leading straight into a city of some kind. There was a glow ahead in the sky; a glow which abruptly became a glare.

Peter gasped. "Buildings-skyscrapers!" Before him reared a sort of triple Wall Street with which were combined the most spectacular features of Rockefeller Center. In the sudden way in which things happened in Ellil he turned a blind corner in the road and found himself in the thick of it.

A taxi roared past him; with a muttered imprecation he jumped out of the way. The bustling people on the sidewalks ignored him completely. It was about six o'clock; they were probably going home from their offices. They were all sorts of people—women and girls, plain and pretty, men and boys, slim, fat, healthy and dissipated. And striding along in lordly indifference Peter saw a cop.

"Excuse me," said Peter elbowing his way through the crowd

to the member of Mahoorra's finest. "Can you tell me where I can find water?" That was, he realized, putting it a bit crudely. But he was hopelessly confused by the traffic and swarms of pedestrians.

The cop turned on him with a glassy stare. "Water?" he rumbled. "Would yez be wantin' tap, ditch, fire-or cologne?" Peter hesitated. He didn't know, he realized in a sudden panic. The elves, or whatever they had been, hadn't specified. Cagily he raised his hand to his brow and muttered, " 'Scuse me—previous engagement—made the appointment for today—just forgot—" He was edging away from the cop when he felt a hand on his arm.

"What was that about water?" asked the cop hoarsely, putting his face near Peter's. Desperately Peter blurted: "The water I have to find to lick Almarish!" Who could tell? Maybe the cop would help him.



"What?" thundered M.P.D. Shield No. 2435957607. "And me a loyal supporter of the Mayor Almarish Freedom Peace and Progress Reform Administration?" He frowned. "You look subversive to me-come on!" He raised his nightstick suggestively, and Peter meekly followed him through the crowds.

"How'd they get you in here?" asked Peter's cell-mate.

Peter inspected him. He was a short, dark sort of person with a pair of disconcertingly bright eyes. "Suspicion," said Peter evasively. "How about you?"

"Practicing mancy without a license, theoretically. Actually because I tried to buck the Almarish machine. You know how it is?"

"Can't say I do," answered Peter. "I'm a stranger here."

"Yeah? Well-like this. Few years ago we had a neat little hamlet here. Mahoora was the biggest little city in these parts of Ellil, though I say it myself. A little industry-magic chalices for export, sandals of swiftness, invisibility cloaks, invincible weapons-you know?"

"Um," said Peter noncommittally.

"Well, I had a factory-modest little chemical works. We turned out love-philtres from my own prescription. It's what I call a neat dodge-eliminates the balneum mariae entirely from the processing, cuts down drying time-maybe you aren't familiar with the latest things in the line?"

"Sorry, no."

"Oh. Well, then, hi came those plugs of Almarish. Flying goonsquads that wrecked plants and shops on order; spies, provocateurs, everything. Soon they'd run out every racketeer in the place and hi-jacked them lock stock and barrel. Then they went into politics. There was a little scandal about buying votes with fairy gold-people kicked when it turned into ashes. But they smoothed that over when they got in.

"And then-! Graft right and left, patronage, unemployment, rotten food scandals, bribery, inefficiency-everything that's on the list. And this is their fifth term. How do you like that?"

"Lord," said Peter, shocked. "But how do they stay hi office?"

"Oh," grinned his friend. "The first thing they did was to run up some imposing public works-tall buildings, bridges, highways and monuments. Then they let it out that they were partly made of half-stuff. You know what that is?"

"No," said Peter. "What is it?"

"Well-it's a little hard to describe. But it isn't really there and it isn't really not there. You can walk on it and pick it up and things, but-well, it's a little hard to describe. The kicker is this. Half-stuff is there only as long as you-the one who prepared a batch of it that is-keep the formula going. So if we voted those leeches out of office they'd relax their formula and the half-stuff would vanish and the rest of the buildings and bridges and highways and monuments would fall with a helluva noise and damage. How do you like that?"

"Efficiency plus," said Peter. "Where's this Almarish hang out?"

"The mayor?" asked his cell-mate sourly. "You don't think he'd be seen in the city, do you? Some disgruntled citizen might sic a flock of vampires on his honor. He was elected in absentia. I hear he lives around Mal-Tava way."

"Where's that?" asked Peter eagerly.

"You don't know? Say, you're as green as they come! That's a pretty nasty corner of Ellil-the nastiest anywhere, I guess. It's a volcania region, and those lava-nymphs are tough molls. Then there's a dragon-ranch around there. The owner got careless and showed up missing one day. The dragons broke out and ran wild. Anything else?"

"No," said Peter, heavy-hearted. "I guess not."

"That's good. Because I think we're going to trial right

now." A guard was opening the door, club poised. "His honor, Judge Balthazar Pike will see you now," said the warden. Peter groaned.

The half-breed demon, his sartorial splendor of the preceding afternoon replaced by judiciary black silk, smiled grimly on the two prisoners. "Mr. Morden," he said indicating the erstwhile manufacturer, "and Mr.-er-ah?"

"Packer!" Peter shouted. "What are you doing here?"

"Haw!" laughed the judge. "That's what I was going to ask you. But first we have this matter of Mr. Morden to dispose of. Excuse me a moment? Clerk, read the charges."

A cowed-looking little man picked an index-card from a stack and read: "Whereas Mr. Percival Morden of Mahoora has been apprehended in the act of practicing mancy and whereas this Mr. Morden does not possess an approved license for such practice it is directed that His Honor Chief Judge Balthazar Pike declare him guilty of the practice of mancy without a license. Signed, Mayor Almarish. Vote straight Peace and Progress Reform Party for a clean and efficient administration." He paused for a moment and looked timidly at the judge who was cleaning his talons. "That's it, your honor," he said.

"Oh-thank you. Now Morden-guilty or not guilty?"

"What's the difference?" asked the manufacturer sourly. "Not guilty, I guess."

"Thank you." The judge took a coin from his pocket. "Heads or tails?" he asked.

"Tails," answered Morden. Then, aside to Peter, "It's magic, of course. You can't win." The half-breed demon spun the coin dexterously on the judicial bench; it wobbled, slowed, and fell with a tinkle. The judge glanced at it. "Sorry, old man," he said sympathetically. "You seem to be guilty. Imprisonment for life in an oak-tree. You'll find Merlin de Bleys in there with you, I rather fancy. You'll like him. Next case," he called sharply as Morden fell through a trapdoor in the floor.

Peter advanced before the bar of justice. "Can't we reason this thing out?" he asked hopelessly. "I mean, I'm a stranger here and if I've done anything I'm sorry-"

"Tut!" exclaimed the demon. He had torn the cuticle of his left index talon, and it was bleeding. He stanching the green liquid with a handkerchief and looked down at the man.

"Done anything?" he asked mildly. "Oh-dear me, no! Except for a few trifles like felonious impediment of an officer in the course of his duty, indecent display, seditious publication, high treason and unlawful possession of military and naval secrets-done anything?" His two odd eyes looked reproachfully down on the man.

Peter felt something flimsy in his hand. Covertly he looked and saw a slip of blue paper on which was written in green ink: "This is Hugo, my other watchdog. Feed him once a day on green vegetables. He does not like tobacco. In haste, Melicent."

There was a stir in the back of the courtroom, and Peter turned to see one of the fire-breathing horrors which had first attacked him in the forest tearing down the aisle lashing out to right and left, incinerating a troop of officers with one blast of its terrible breath. Balthazar Pike was crawling around under his desk, bawling for more police.

Peter cried, "You^can add one more-possession of a bandur without a license! Sic 'em, Hugo!" The monster flashed an affectionate look at him and went on with the good work of clearing the court. The man sprang aside as the trapdoor opened beneath his feet and whirled on a cop who was trying to swarm over him. With a quick one-two he laid him out and proceeded to the rear of the courtroom, where Hugo was standing off a section of the fire-department that was trying to extinguish his throat. Peter snatched an axe from one and mowed away heartily. Resistance melted away in a hurry, and Peter pushed the hair out of his eyes to find that they were alone in the court.

"Come on, boy," he said. Whistling cheerily he left the building, the bandur at his heels, smoking gently. Peter collared a cop-the same one who had first arrested him. "Now," he snarled. "Where do I find water?"

Stuttering with fright, and with two popping eyes on the bandur, the officer said, "The harbor's two blocks down the street if you mean-"

"Never mind what I mean!" Luxuriating in his new-found power Peter strode off pugnaciously, Hugo following.

#### IV

"I beg your pardon-^are you looking for water?" asked a tall, dark man over Peter's shoulder. Hugo growled and let loose a tongue of flame at the stranger's foot. "Shuddup, Hugo," said Peter. Then, turning to the stranger, "As a matter of fact I was. Do you-?"

"I heard about you from them," said the stranger. "You know. The little people."

"Yes," said Peter. "What do I do now?"

"Underground Railroad," said the stranger. "Built after the best Civil War model. Neat, speedy and efficient. Transportation at half the usual cost. I hope you weren't planning to go by magic carpet?"

"No," Peter assured him hastily. "I never use them."

"That's great," said the stranger swishing his long black cloak. "Those carpet people-stifling industry. They spread a whispering campaign that our road was unsafe! Can you imagine it?"

"Unsafe," scoffed Peter. "I'll bet they wish their carpets were half as safe as your railroad!"

"Well," said the stranger thoughtfully, "perhaps not half as safe . . . No; I wouldn't say half as safe . . ." He seemed likely to go on indefinitely; Peter asked, "Where do I get the Underground?"

"A little East of here," said the stranger. He looked about apprehensively. "We'd better not be seen together," he muttered out of the corner of his mouth. "Meet you over there by the clock-tower-you can get it there."

"Okay," said Peter. "But why the secrecy?"

"We're really underground," said the stranger, walking away.

Peter rejoined him at the corner of the clock-tower; with an elaborate display of unconcern the stranger walked off, Peter following at some distance. Soon they were again in the forest that seemed to border the city of Mahoorā. Once they were past the city-limits sign the stranger turned, smiling.

"I guess we're safe now," he said. "They could try a raid and drag us back across the line, but they wouldn't like to play with your bandur. Here's the station."

He pressed a section of bark on a huge tree; silently it slid open like a door. Peter saw a row of steps leading down into blackness. "Sort of spooky," he said.

"Not at all! I have the place ghostproofed once a year." The stranger led the way, taking out what looked like a five-branched electric torch. "What's that?" asked Peter, fascinated by the weird blue light it shed.

"Hand of glory," said the stranger casually. Peter looked closer and shuddered, holding his Stomach. Magic, he thought, was all right up to the point where it became grave-robbery.

They arrived at a neatly tiled station; Peter was surprised to find that the trains were tiny things. The one pulled up on the tracks was not as high as he was. "You'll have to stoke, of course," said the stranger.

"What?" demanded Peter indignantly.

"Usual arrangement. Are you coming or aren't you?"

"Of course-but it seems strange," complained Peter climbing into the engine. Hugo climbed up into the coal car and curled up emitting short smoky bursts of flame which caused the stranger to keep glancing at him in fear for his fuel.

"What's in the rest of the train?" asked Peter.

"Freight. This is the through cannonball to Mal-Tava. I have a special shipment for Almarish. Books and things, furniture, a few cases of liquor-you know?"

"Yes. Any other passengers?"

"Not this month. I haven't much trouble with them. They're usually knights and things out to kill sorcerers like Almarish. They take their horses along or send them ahead by carpet. Do you plan to kill Almarish?"

Peter choked. "Yes," he finally said. "What's it to you?"

"Nothing-I take your money and leave you where you want to go. A tradesman can't afford opinions. Let's get up some steam, eh?"

Amateurishly Peter shoveled coal into the little furnace while the stranger in the black cloak juggled with steam-valves and levers. "Don't be worried," he advised Peter. "You'll get the hang of things after a while." He glanced at a watch. "Here we go," he said, yanking the whistle-cord.

The train started off into its tunnel, sliding smoothly and almost silently along, the only noise being from the driving rods. "Why doesn't it clack against the rails?" asked Peter.

"Levitation. Didn't you notice? We're an inch off the track. Simple, really."

"Then why have a track?" asked Peter.

The stranger smiled and said, "Without-" then stopped abruptly and looked concerned and baffled. And that was all the answer Peter got.

"Wake up," shouted the stranger nudging Peter. "We're in the war zone!"

"Zasso?" asked Peter, blinking. He had been napping after hours of steady travel. "What war zone?"

"Trolls-you know."

"No, I don't!" snapped Peter. "What side are we on?"

"Depends on who stops us," said the stranger, speeding the engine. They were out of the tunnel now, Peter saw, speeding along a couple of inches above the floor of an immense dim cave. Ahead the glittering double strand of the track stretched into the distance.

"Oh-oh!" muttered the cloaked stranger. "Trouble ahead!" Peter saw a vague, stirring crowd before them. "Those trolls?" he asked.

"Yep," answered the engineer resignedly, slowing the train. "What do you want?" he asked a solid looking little man in a ragged uniform. "To get the hell out of here," said the little man. He was about three feet tall, Peter saw. "What happened?" he asked.

"The lousy Insurgents licked us," said the troll. "Will you let us on the train before they cut us down?"

"First," said the engineer methodically, "there isn't room. Second, I have to keep friends with the party in power. Third, you know very well that you can't be killed."

"What if we are immortal?" asked the troll. "Would you like to live forever scattered in little pieces?"

"Second," said Peter abruptly, "you get out of it as best you can." He was speaking to the engineer. "And first, you can dump all the freight you have for Almarish. He won't want it anyway when I'm through with him." "That right?" asked the troll.

"Not by me!" exploded the engineer. "Now get your gang off the track before I plough them under!"

"Hugo," whispered Peter. With a lazy growl the bandur scorched the nape of the engineer's head.

"All right," said the engineer. "All right. Use force-all right." Then, to the leader of the trolls, "You tell your men they can unload the freight and get as comfortable as they can."

"Wait!" said Peter. "Inasmuch as I got you out of this scrape-I think-would you be willing to help me out in a little affair of honor with Almarish?"

"Sure!" said the troll. "Anything at all. You know, for a surface-dweller you're not half bad!" With which he began to spread the good news among his army.

Later, when they were all together in the cab, taking turns with the shovel, the troll introduced himself as General Skald-berg of the Third Loyalist Army.

Speeding ahead again at full speed the end of the cavern was in sight when another swarm of trolls blocked the path. "Go through them!" ordered Peter coldly.

"For pity's sake," pleaded the stranger. "Think of what this will do to my franchise!"

"That's your worry," said the General. "You fix it up with the Insurgents. We gave you the franchise anyway-they have no right of search."

"Maybe," muttered the engineer. He closed his eyes as they went slapping into the band of trolls under full steam. When it was all over and they were again tearing through the tunnel he looked up. "How many?" he asked brokenly.

"Only three," said the general regretfully. "Why didn't you do a good job while you were at it?"

"You should have had your men fire from the freight-cars," said the engineer coldly.

"Too bad I didn't think of it. Could you turn back and take them in a surprise attack?"

The engineer cursed violently, giving no direct answer. But for the next half hour he muttered to himself distractly, groaning "Franchise!" over and over again.

"How much farther before we get to Mal-Tava?" asked Peter glumly.

"Very soon now," said the troll. "I was there once. Very broken terrain-fine for guerilla work."

"Got any ideas on how to handle the business of Almarish?"

The general scratched his head. "As I remember it," he said slowly, "it's a funny tactical problem-practically no fortifications within the citadel-everything lumped outside in a wall

of steel. Of course Almarish probably has a lot on the ball personally. All kinds' of direct magic at his fingertips. And that's where I get off with my men. We trolls don't .even pretend to know the fine points of thaumaturgy. Mostly straight military stuff with us."

"So I have to face him alone?"

"More or less," said the general. "I have a couple of guys that majored in Military Divination at Ellil Tech

Prep. They can probably give you a complete layout of the citadel, but they won't be responsible for illusions, multiplex apparitions or anything else Almarish might decide to throw in the way. My personal advice to you is-be sceptical."

"Yes?" asked Peter miserably.

"Exactly," said Skaldberg. "The real difficulty in handling arcane warfare is in knowing what's there and what ain't. Have you any way of sneaking in a confederate? Not a spy, exactly-we military men don't approve of spying-but a sort of-ah-one-man intelligence unit."

"I have already," said Peter diffidently. "She's a sorceress, but not much good I think. Has a blast-finger, though."

"Very good," grunted Skaldberg. "Very good indeed. How we could have used her against the Insurgents! The hounds had us in a sort of peninsular spot-with only one weak line of supply and communication between us and the main force -and I was holding a hill against a grand piquet of flying carpets that were hurling thunderbolts at our munitions supply. But their sights were away off and they only got a few of our snipers. What a blast-finger would have done to those bloody carpets!"

The engineer showed signs of interest. "You're right!" he snapped. "Blow 'em out of the sky-menace to life and limb! I have a bill pending at the All Ellil Conference on Communication and Transportation-would you be interested?"

"No," grunted the general. The engineer, swishing his long black cloak, returned to his throttle muttering about injunctions and fair-play.

V

"Easy, now!" whispered the general.

"Yessir," answered a troll going through obvious mental strain while his hand, seemingly of its own volition, scrawled lines and symbols on a sheet of paper. Peter was watching, fascinated and mystified, as the specialist in military divination was doing his stuff.

"There!" said the troll, relaxing. He looked at the paper curiously and signed it: "Borgenssen, Capt."

"Well?" asked General Skaldberg. "What was it like?"

The Captain groaned. "You should see for yourself, sir!" he said despondently. "Their air-force is flying dragons and their infantry's a kind of Kraken squad. What they're doing out of water I don't know."

"Okay," said the general. He studied the drawing. "How about their mobility?"

"They haven't got any and they don't need any," complained the diviner. "They just sit there waiting for you-in a solid ring. And the air-force has a couple of auxiliary rocs that pick up the Krakens and drop them behind your forces. Pincher stuff-very bad."

"I'll be the judge of that!" said the general. The captain saluted and stumbled out of the little cave which the general had chosen to designate as GHQ. His men were bivouacked on the bare rock outside. Volcanoes rumbled and spat in the distance. There came one rolling crash that set Peter's hair on end.

"Think that was for us?" he asked nervously.

"Nope-I picked this spot for lava drainage. I have a hundred men erecting a shut-off at the only exposed point. We'll be safe enough." He turned again to the map, frowning. "This is our real worry-what I call impregnable, or damn near it. If we could get them to attack us-but those rocs smash anything along that line. We'd be cut off like a rosebud. And with our short munitions we can't afford to be discovered and surrounded. Ugh! What a spot for an army man to find himself in!"

A brassy female voice asked, "Somep'n bodderin' you, shorty?" The general spun around in a fine purple rage. Peter

looked in horror and astonishment on the immodest form of a woman who had entered the cave entirely unperceived- presumably by some occult means. She was a slutty creature, her hair dyed a vivid red and her satin skirt an inch or two above the knee/ She was violently made up with flame-colored rouge, lipstick and even eye-shadow.

"Well," she complained stridently, puffing on a red cigaret, "wadda you joiks gawkin' at? Aincha nevva seen a lady befaw?"

"Madam," began the general, outraged. "Can dat," she advised him easily. "I hoid youse guys chewin' da fat. I wanna help youse out." She seated herself on an outcropping of rock and adjusted her skirt upward.

"I concede that women," spluttered the general, "have their place in activities of the military-but that place has little or nothing to do with warfare as such! I demand that you make yourself known-where did you come from?"

"Weh did I come from?" she asked mockingly. "Weh, he wansa know. Lookit dat!" She pointed one of her bright-glazed fingernails at the rocky floor of the cave, which grew liquid in a moment, glowing cherry-red. She leered at the two and spat at the floor. It grew cold in another moment. "Don't dat mean dothin' to youse?" she asked.

The general stared at the floor. "You must be a volcano nymph."

"Good fa you, shorty!" she sneered. "I represent da goils from Local toity-tree. In brief, chums, our demands are dese: one, dat youse clear away from our union hall pronto; two, dat youse hang around in easy reach-in case we want youse fa poiposes of our own. In return fa dese demands we-dats me an' de goils-will help youse guys out against Almarish. Dat lousy fink don't give his hands time off no more. Dis place might as well be a desert fa all de men around. Get me?" "These-ah-purposes of your osvn in clause two," said the general hesitantly. "What would they be?"

She smiled and half-closed her eyes. "Escort soivice, ya might call it, cap."

The general stared, too horrified even to resent being called 'cap."

"Well?" demanded the nymph. "Well-yes," said the general. "Okay, shorty," she said, crushing out her cigaret against

her palm. "Da goils'l be aroun' at dawn fa de attack. I'll try to keep 'em off yer army until de battle's over. So long!" She sank into the earth, leaving behind only a smell of fleur-de-floozy perfume.



"God!" whispered General Skaldberg. "The things I do for the army!"

In irregular open formation the trolls advanced, followed closely by the jeering mob of volcano nymphs.

"How about it, General?" asked Peter. He and the old soldier were surveying the field of battle from a hill in advance of their forces; the hideous octopoid forms of the defenders of Almarish could be plainly seen, lumbering onward to meet the trolls with a peculiar sucking gait.

"Any minute now~^~any second," said Skaldberg. Then, "Here it comes!" The farthest advanced of the trolls had met with the first of the l^rakens. The creature lashed out viciously; Peter saw that its tentacles had been fitted with studded bands and other murderous devices. The troll dodged nimbly and pulled an invincible sword on the octopoid myth. They mixed it; when the struggle went behind an outcropping of rock the troll was in the lead, unharmed, while the slow-moving Kraken was leaking thinly from a score of punctures.

"The dragons," said Peter, pointing. "Here they are." In V formation the monsters were landing on a far end of the battlefield, then coming at a scrabbling run.

"If they make it quicker than the nymphs-" breathed the general. Then he sighed relievedly. They had not. The carnage among the dragons was almost funny; at will the nymphs lifted them high in the air on jets of steam and squirted melted rock in their eyes. Squalling in terror the dragons flapped into the air and lumbered off Southward.

"That's ocean," grinned the general. "They'll never come back-trying to find new homes, I suspect."

In an incredibly short time the field was littered with the flopping chunks that had been hewed from the Krakens. Living still they were, but powerless. The general shook his hand warmly. "You're on your own now," he said. "Good luck, boy. For a civilian you're not a bad egg at all." He walked away.

Glumly Peter surveyed the colossal fortress of Almarish. He walked aimlessly up to its gate, a huge thing of bronze and

silver, and pulled at the silken cord hanging there. A gong sounded and the door swung open. Peter advanced hopelessly in a sort of audience chamber. "So!" thundered a mighty voice.

"So what?" asked Peter despondently. He saw on a throne high above him an imposing figure. "You Almarish?" he asked listlessly.

"I am. And who are you?"

"It doesn't matter. I'm Peter Packer of Braintree, Mass. I don't even expect you to believe me. The throne lowered slowly and jerkily, as if on hydraulic pumps. The wizard descended and approached Peter. He was a man of about forty, with a full brown beard reaching almost to his belt.

"Why," asked the sorcerer, "have you come bearing arms?"

"It's the only way I could come," said Peter. "Let me first congratulate you on an efficient, well-oiled set of political machinery. Not even back in the United States have I seen graft carried to such a high degree. Secondly, your choice of assistants is an eye-opener. Your Mr. Pike is the neatest henchman I've ever seen. Thirdly, produce the person of Miss Meli-cent or I'll have to use force."

"Is that so?" rumbled Almarish. "Young puppy! I'd like to see you try it. Wrestle with me-two falls out of three. I dare you!"

Peter took off his coat of blue serge. "I never passed up a dare yet," he said. "How about a mat?" - "Think I'm a sissy?" the sorcerer jeered.

Peter was stripped for action. "Okay," he said. Slowly Almarish advanced on him, grappling for a hold. Peter let him take his fore-arm, then shifted his weight so as to hurl the magician over his shoulder. A moment later Peter was astonished to find himself on the floor underneath the wizard. "Haw!" grunted Almarish, rising. "You still game?" He braced himself. "Yep!" snapped Peter. He hurled himself in a flying tackle that began ten feet away from the wizard and ended in a bone-crushing grip about the knees. Peter swarmed up his trunk and cruelly twisted an arm across his chest. The magician yelped in sudden agony, and let himself fall against the floor. Peter rose, grinning. "One all," he said cheerfully.

Almarish grappled for the third fall; Peter cagily backed away. The wizard hurled himself in a bruising body-block against Peter, battering him off his feet and falling on the

young man. Instinctively Peter bridged his body, arcing it off the floor. Almarish, grunting fiercely, gripped his arm and turned it slowly, as though he were winding a clock. Peter snapped over, rolling on the wizard's own body as a fulcrum. He had his toe in his hand, and closed his fist with every ounce of muscle he had. The sorcerer screamed and fell over on his face. Peter jammed his knee in the wizard's inside socket and bore down terribly. He could feel the bones bend in his grip.

"Enough!" gasped the wizard. Peter let him loose.

"You made it," said Almarish. "Two out of three."

Peter studied his face curiously. Take off that beard and you had-

"You said it, Grandfather Packer," said Peter, grinning.-

Almarish groaned. "It's a wise child that knows its own father-grandfather, in this case," he said. "How could you tell?"

"Everything just clicked," said Peter simply. "You disappearing-that clock-somebody applying American methods in Ellil-and then I shaved you mentally and there you were. Simple?"

"Sure is. But how do you think I made out here, boy?"

"Shamefully. That kind of thing isn't tolerated any more. It's gangsterism-you'll have to cut it out, gramp."

"Gangsterism be damned!" snorted the wizard. "It's business. Business and common-sense."

"Business maybe, certainly not common-sense. My boys wiped out your guard and I might have wiped out you if I had magic stronger than yours."^

Grandfather Packer chuckled in glee. "Magic? Ill begin at the beginning. When I got that dad-blamed clock back in '63 I dropped right into Ellil-onto the head of an assassin who was going for a real magician. Getting the set-up I pinned the killer with a half-nelson and the magician dispatched him. Then he got grateful, said he was retiring from public life and gave me a kind of token, good for any three wishes.

"So I took it, thanking him kindly, and wished for a palace and bunch of gutty retainers. It was in my mind to run Ellil like a business, and I did it the only way I knew how-force. And from that day to this I used only one wish and I haven't a dab of magic more than that!"

"I'll be damned!" whispered Peter.

"And you know what I'm going to do with those other two wishes? I'm going to take you and me right back into the good ole U.S.A.!"

"Will it only send two people?"

"So the magician said."

"Grandfather Packer," said Peter earnestly, "I am about to ask a very great sacrifice of you. It is also your duty to undo the damage which you have done."

"Oh," said Almarish glumly. "The girl? All right."

"You don't mind?" asked Peter incredulously.

"Far be it from me to stand in the way of young love," grunted the wizard sourly. "She's up there."

Peter entered timidly; the girl was alternately reading a copy of the Braintree Informer and staring passionately at a photograph of Peter.

"Darling," said Peter.

"Dearest!" said Melicent, catching on almost immediately.

A short while later Peter was asking her: "Do you mind, dearest if I ask one favor of you-a very great sacrifice?" He produced a small, sharp pen-knife.

And all the gossip for a month in Braintree was of Peter Packer's stunning young wife, though some people wondered how it was- that she had only nine fingers.