

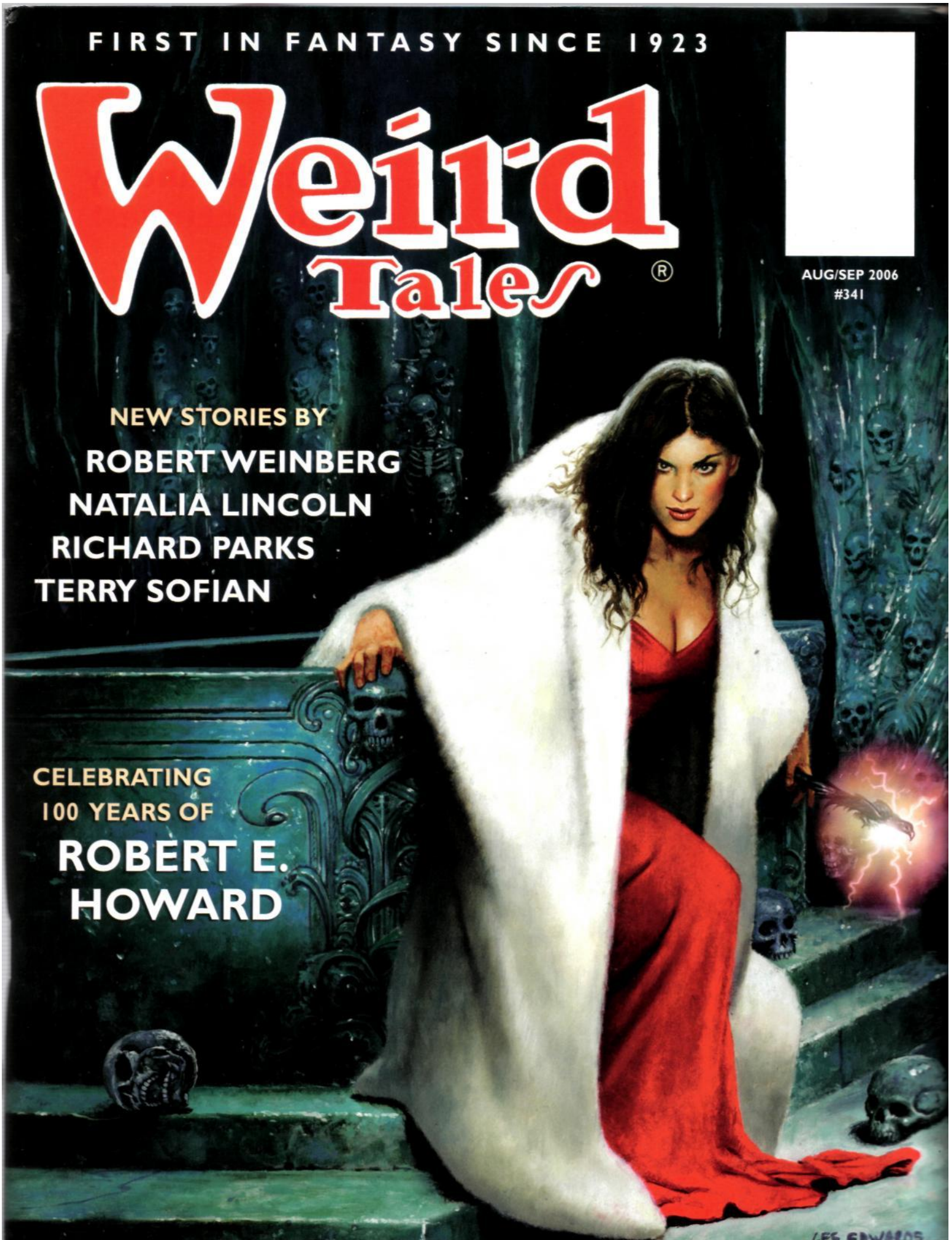
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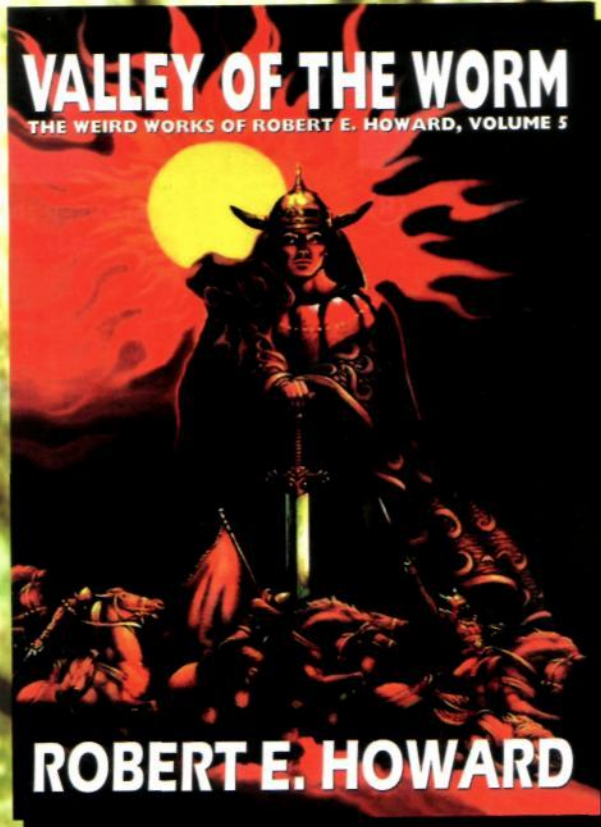
AUG/SEP 2006
#341

NEW STORIES BY
ROBERT WEINBERG
NATALIA LINCOLN
RICHARD PARKS
TERRY SOFIAN

CELEBRATING
100 YEARS OF
**ROBERT E.
HOWARD**



THE WEIRD WORKS OF

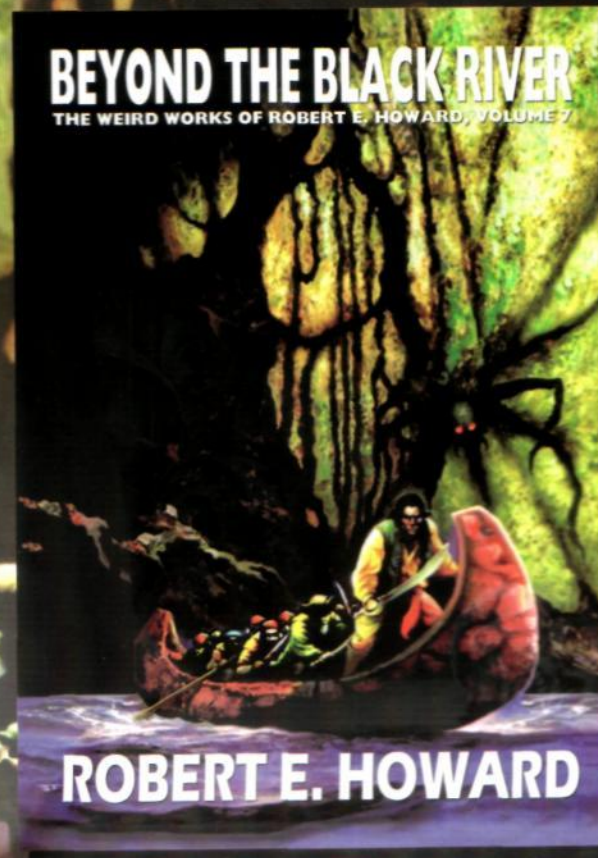


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FOR 83 YEARS, THE UNIQUE MAGAZINE

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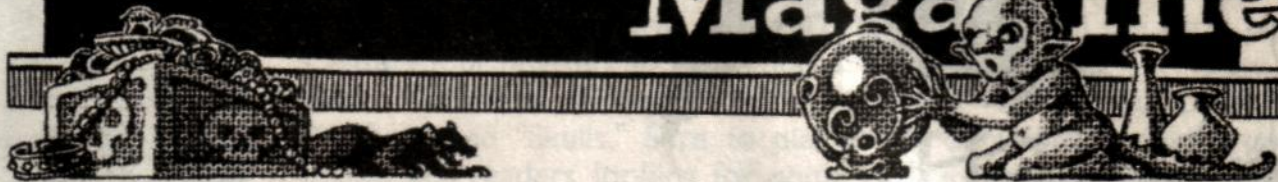
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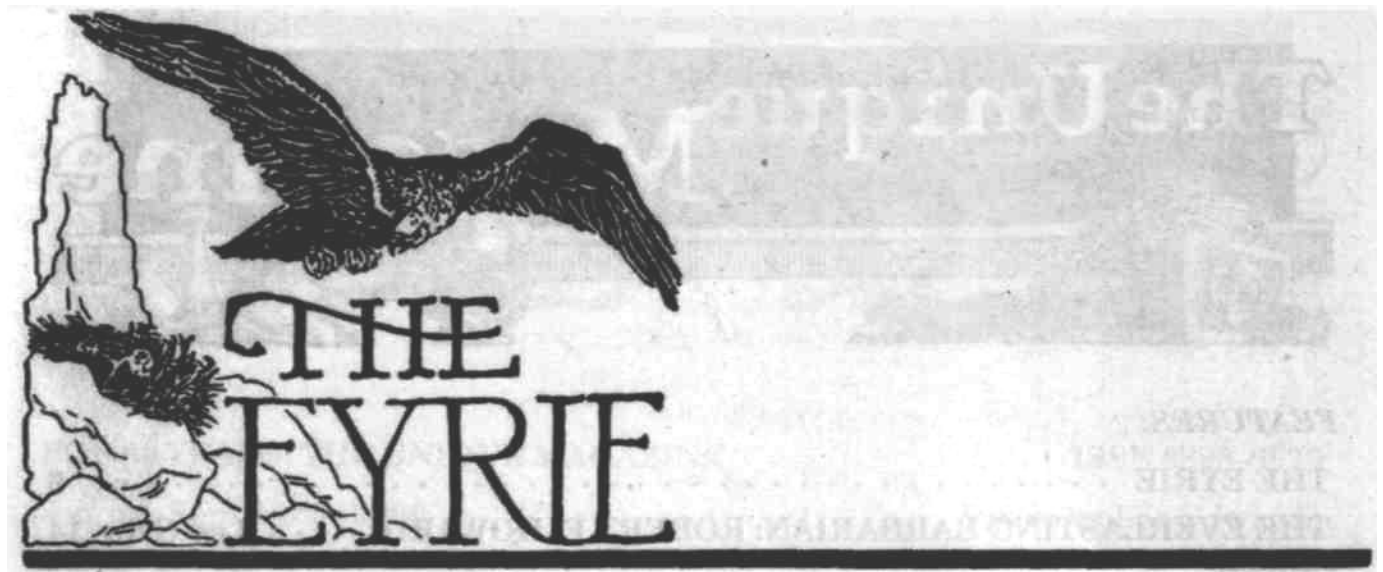
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Sometimes a Cigar is Just a Cigar ... and a Story is Just a Story

Our field made international news the other day, but not necessarily in a good way. The BBC International Edition online carried a story for Friday May 19, 2006 which at first doesn't seem to concern us all that much: **Officers Discover Sex Slave Cult**. . . in Durham, and discover a "bizarre cult" after raiding a home on the basis of a complaint about a woman being held against her will. The bizarre cult, it seems were the Kaotians, who base their lifestyle and philosophy on . . . are you ready for this? . . . the *Gor* series of interplanetary bondage fantasies by John Norman, which the BBC describes as "1960s science fiction novels." The Kaotians are . . . curiouser and curiouser . . . a *heretical sect* of John Norman followers, who have broken away from the more mainstream Goreans, of whom there are, allegedly, about 25,000 world-wide.

We need not fill you in on the rest of the lurid details - which are pretty scanty — nor can we vouch for the accuracy of the reportage, recalling a comment by Alex Verdogrado, a former colleague of one of our editors: "If you should attend a catastrophe, you won't recognize it in the evening news."

And we remember that when L. Sprague de Camp was reviewing books for *Amra*, he was perhaps the first person to remark that while the early *Gor* novels were pretty good adventures of the Edgar Rice Burroughs / John Carter of Mars sort, Norman had "silly ideas about women."

Never mind that. The *larger* phenomenon manifested here is all too familiar. We have seen or heard of it many times before. There once were (and possibly still are) groups of readers of Mr. Robert A. Heinlein's *Stranger in a Strange Land* who formed "Martian love nests" based on the book. While life in a Martian love nest sounds a great deal more pleasant than in a Gorean bondage dungeon, Mr. Heinlein was appalled. "They don't have the Martian magic," he objected, which is the essential point. Back to this in a moment.

There was also once an attempt (likewise reported in the press) by a bunch of *Star Trek* fans to buy up a small town in Canada and move there, so that they could live as if on a Starbase, uniforms and all, basing their lives on the "wisdom" of *Star Trek*. (And when we once, years ago, describing our plan for a *Star Trek* Millennialist Cargo Cult, we *thought* we were kidding. The world ends. The faithful get beamed aboard the *Enterprise*. Our version was not nearly as bizarre, or as ghastly, as the very real Heaven's Gate cult.)

There are large numbers of people worldwide (particularly in England) who are registering themselves religiously as "Jedi."

We have actually encountered "serious" occultists who remain convinced that the works of H.P. Lovecraft contain awesome cosmic truths. Never mind that HPL was one of the most skeptical people who ever lived, who would be a strong supporter (if not on the editorial board of) *The Skeptical Inquirer* if he were alive today. He didn't realize the truth, the true believers will tell you, even though he was channeling it telepathically from "another dimension."

Two-thirds of the present Editorial Horde have seen some mighty peculiar mail over the years on this particular topic, because George Scithers, in 1973, published under his Owlswick Press imprint a

purported facsimile of the original manuscript of *Al Azif*, the dread *Necronomicon* of Abdul Alhazred. (A reprint is now available from Wildside Press.) Darrell Schweitzer, working with him since the late '70s as, in effect, corresponding secretary, got to answer a lot of inquiries, many of which took the tone of, "Come on now, man-to-man, you can tell us the *truth*. ..." Our favorite was from a university professor who was requesting a copy of our edition because one of his graduate students had bamboozled him into an attempt to get a *government grant* to study and decipher the alleged Dread Tome and prove the existence of the various Cthulhu Mythos entities.

Then again, we once received a rather sad letter addressed to *Amra*, George's celebrated journal devoted to Robert E. Howard and all things swordly and sorcerous. It was from a young man who had decided to make the heroic Cimmerian his role-model for his own life. Conan began his career, you will recall, as a thief. Our correspondent had done likewise and was writing to us from jail. What would Conan do in such a situation? He would try to escape, of course! Our correspondent had tried that too, and gotten himself into even deeper trouble. He was writing to us in some bewilderment — probably having found the address for *Amra* in an old Ace or Lancer paperback — as it slowly dawned on him that, well, maybe Conan as a role-model was not going to work.

That was a difficult letter to answer. We had to think carefully what to say. We didn't want to be condescending, or ridicule our correspondent, who was, undeniably, at a crisis-point in his life. It was certainly *not* the place to argue with him that Robert E. Howard's Hyborian age was imaginative fantasy, not history, or that Conan of Cimmeria was a made-up character. No, we tried to be encouraging, and did our best to steer him to the conclusion he was already groping toward, that Conan the Barbarian was not necessarily the most appropriate role-model for twentieth-century life. It would have been the same if he'd fixated on emulating Alaric the Visigoth. "You're probably not going to get a chance to sack Rome. Don't set your sights on it. . . . Try to work toward something else."

But, more generally, we *do* find it necessary to sometimes remind people that, even as Freud's proverbial cigar was just a cigar and not some sort of **ahem** symbol, a story is just a story. It is literary creation. It is *not real*. As we write this, a brilliant campaign of media hype has doubtless raked in a megazillion bucks hinting (while pretending to deny) that Ron Howard's not-critically-acclaimed film based on Dan Brown's not-so-good novel *The Da Vinci Code* contains real, secret truth which the Catholic Church has been wickedly covering up for centuries ... to the effect that (we hope you will forgive the spoiler) Jesus married Mary Magdalene, had children by her, and whatever was extraordinary in the bloodline faded away quickly as the descendants of Jesus turned out to be thoroughly mediocre, barbarian kings of early medieval France who were routinely humiliated by all comers when they weren't murdering one another, until the last, useless member of the (Merovingian) line was finally deposed by Pepin the Short at the behest of the Pope.

It doesn't make any sense to the rationally-minded, but a lot of people have difficulty realizing that what is published as fiction, even as *fantasy* fiction, is not factually true. We editors, writers, and editor-writers who are in the business of dealing with the made-up tend to be of a skeptical turn of mind, precisely because they do this stuff. They are familiar with the act of imaginative creation and therefore are not driven to locate the "real" Middle Earth in hopes of excavating a few hobbit skeletons and artifacts — or the One Ring. To science fiction writers, for example, "factual" UFO and alien-abduction books seem as a junk-yard would to an automobile engineer. You are looking at degraded and dissociated scraps of things you understand perfectly well. Yes, that's the bent fender of a 1992 Ford Escort. That's part of the back seat of a '77 Dodge Diplomat. That "true" UFO account is like an old science-fiction story, only not as good.

Writers of supernatural fantasy must have the same experience when confronting True Believers in Occult Secrets from Other Dimensions. Yes, I made up something like that once, only my version was more elaborate and better. One of the novel-writing thirds of our Editorial Triad (Darrell Schweitzer again) reports that he once encountered an occultist who assured him that the sorcery scenes in *The Shattered Goddess* were "not like the real thing." He received this information with great relief. If he had been feeding people's delusions, he would have been doing active social harm. While it is not necessarily the responsibility of the artist to avoid giving ideas to lunatics — there have doubtless been people who thought they were Sherlock Holmes, and that wouldn't be Conan Doyle's fault — if a writer did discover that the True Believers thought his magical details were correct, he might well want to change them until they weren't.

We cannot go into any details, but we heard of a writer years ago who had to stop writing an occult adventure series because Magical practitioners were upset with the way Dread Secrets were being

portrayed in the books and the writer began to receive threats.

It's just a *story*, folks!

We encountered something like this in a much milder way years ago at a Northeast Regional Fantasy Convention, held at Roger Williams College in Rhode Island every July. Also on campus that weekend was some sort of highschool athletic group, possibly a football team in training. At one point one of the lounges we were occupying was invaded by large, muscular, generally quite friendly neandertals who puzzled over a couple copies of *Weird Tales*®, never having seen anything of the sort before, until it finally dawned on one of them, "It's Satanism!" whereupon they went away.

Sometimes a cigar is just a cigar.

Heinlein's point about *Stranger in a Strange Land* was that it's rather pointless to start a Martian love nest without any Martians or Martian miracles. You can't do it. The imaginary parts have a stubborn tendency to *remain* imaginary.

We say that, likewise, to the sort of parents who are afraid that reading Harry Potter books will turn their kids into witches and send them flying off on broomsticks to cavort with demons.

J.K. Rowling made it all up. There are no such things as anti-gravity broomsticks. Or quidditch matches. (Alas!) Or demons, for that matter. If you don't believe in ghosties and ghoulies, you cannot be afraid of them. To be skeptical is to be free from fear.

So, is fantasy about nothing important then? Is it just a bunch of trival, made-up stuff, in effect lies? Certain puritanical, no-fun types, ranging from political ideologues to the sort of parents who are afraid of Harry Potter, would probably say yes, it is, and lies are of course wicked.

But we reply that fantastic fiction, any sort of imaginative creation, partakes of mental processes that those sorts of people simply cannot comprehend, in the same way that someone born blind is unlikely to be able to comprehend color. At its deepest level, a fantasy story is *true*, but it is not *factual*. This is a distinction Ursula Le Guin has written about at length, something those scared parents (or nasty puritanical ideologues) just do not get. It's a kind of meta-language, about truth and about meaning, but its first characteristic is that it is knowingly made up. A fantasy text is distinguished from a mythological or religious text on precisely this point. In classical literature we saw *fantasy* emerge fully developed in the 2nd century in Apuleius' *The Golden Ass*. There we find an agreement between the writer and the reader that this is a literary creation (as he puts it in his introduction, he proposes to string together a series of amusing episodes into a pleasing form). But the book's power and fascination after all these centuries is that, in imaginative form, he deals with much that is emotionally true about human existence, even if (as we all know) it is not possible for men to be transformed into donkeys by magic or changed back by the mercy of the Goddess Isis. Shakespeare's *The Tempest* is another of the great and archetypal fantasies, which has much to say about art, power, responsibility, forgiveness and redemption, but if somebody reads it and starts trying to conjure spirits out of a grimoire, he has surely missed the point.

Fantasy deals in metaphor. It is frequently about the subject of magic, which is, just about as frequently, something that passes away (in a process critic John Clute calls "thinning") or which one has to give up as part of maturity and the acceptance of death (or not, as some quixotic books like Lord Dunsany's *The King of Elfland's Daughter* will have it), but its power stems, paradoxically, from the realization that there is no such thing as magic in real life. This, indeed, is why superstitious parents and True Believers will never grasp what fantasy is about. Skepticism gives the writer freedom to follow the story's psychological and emotional shape, rather than be constricted by some doctrinal belief.

Fantasy is a tool, with which a writer may produce subtle, intriguing, and beautiful results. But you have to understand that it is a tool before you can use it.

Take our word for it. We may have once rhymed the name of Cthulhu in a limerick but the Great One, a.k.a. Old Squidhead, does not actually exist, here or in some other "dimension."

We might conjure him in the pages of *Weird Tales*®, even as Lovecraft first did here in the February 1928 issue when "The Call of Cthulhu" first appeared. But we'll leave it at that. The world is safe, because it's all made up.

Sometimes a cigar is just a cigar. A story is just a story.

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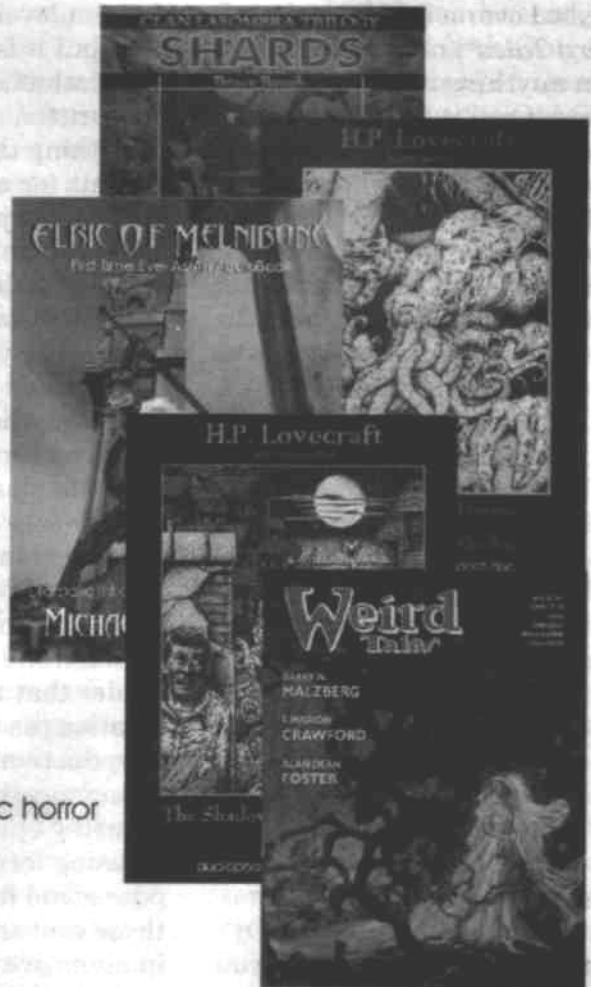
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Not Really a Book Review. We have in hand a small book (82 pp.) by Ken Rand, entitled *Soul Taster, Four Dark Tales*. It is published by Notorious Press, PO Box 1, Salt Lake City UT 84110 and costs \$9.99. Good stuff, but we can't really review it because our much-vaunted objectivity might be compromised. Not only is there a Darrell Schweitzer blurb on the back cover ("Ken Rand is definitely one of the brightest new talents in fantastic fiction today. A writer to watch.") but 25% of this book, one of the stories, called "Refuge," appeared here in issue #320, Summer 2000 and was voted Most Popular Story for that issue by the readers. So we'll just pretend to review this.

Our esteemed colleague S.T. Joshi sent us a four-volume set of the *Collected Essays* of H.P. Lovecraft which Joshi has edited for Hippocampus Press. The four volumes are subtitled *Amateur Journalism, Literary Criticism, Science, and Travel*. They sell for \$20.00 each in paperback and are available from Hippocampus Press at PO Box 641, New York NY 10156. They are admittedly for the serious devotee, who wants to know everything about Lovecraft's life and thought. Otherwise, in particular, many of the essays in the *Amateur Journalism* volume, dealing as they do with forgotten controversies that raged in limited-circulation amateur publications circa 1915 are about as interesting as Edgar Allan Poe's flattering reviews of volumes of verse by minor female poets he had befriended. *Literary Criticism* is the most important, containing such major items as "Supernatural Horror in Literature" and "Some Notes on Interplanetary Fiction," but in many ways the *Travel* is the most entertaining. It reminds us of a remark the late Avram Davidson made in a hilariously biased review of Lovecraft that Davidson published in *F&SF* in the early '60s, to the effect that if only HPL had gotten down out of his auntie's attic and done something useful with his life he could have written travel guides that would have been classics. Well, he did. Strange as it may once have sounded, there now is a volume of the collected travel writings of H.P. Lovecraft, and what grandly eccentric writings they are, with titles like "An Account of a Trip to the Antient Fairbanks House, in Dedham, and to the Red Horse Tavern in Sudbury, in the Province of Massachusetts-Bay." Best of all is the huge (75,000 word) piece on Quebec, the longest thing the Old Gent ever wrote, in which he combines history, keen observation, and unstinting Anglophilia in strange ways -thus, the end of the American Revolution is described as "the unfavorable outcome of the American war." God save the King!

We Received No Letters

(that is, none arrived in time for this issue) and once again call to mind that letter column in *Mad* magazine sometime in the early '60s, which showed a forlorn, cobwebbed mailbox and the words "Nobody wrote!" It's not as bad as that, really. Our speeded-up schedule has caused one issue to pile up on top of another, and so this issue is being written before we (or you) have seen issue 340, and thus it is way too soon to report on reader votes for Most Popular Story for that issue, but we hope to be able to do it next time.

We *do* want to hear from
you!

Q



THE EVERLASTING BARBARIAN: ROBERT E. HOWARD AT 100 YEARS by Leo Grin

On January 22, 2006, at a desolate crossroads in the windswept cowtown of Peaster, Texas, a gathering of men stood reverently in a chill downpour. These weren't local ranch hands or mud-soaked oil riggers, they were fantasy fans — editors, scholars, and aficionados, from places as far away as Washington DC, Chicago, and Los Angeles. Each had journeyed hundreds of miles through sleet and rain on a Quixotic quest of tribute. For exactly one hundred years earlier, in that isolated Texas hamlet, the ailing wife of a grizzled frontier doctor gave birth to a man whose name still echoes like a grim knell across the fantasy genre's dreamscape.

The father of Sword-and-Sorcery. The creator of Conan.

Robert Ervin Howard.

That same morning, sleepy-eyed readers of *The Washington Post* were treated to a book column by popular critic Michael Dirda, who seized upon the occasion of Howard's one-hundredth birthday to review Del Rey Books' sumptuous new series of fully-illustrated, textually-restored Conan books. Dirda assured readers who harbor a dislike for pulp fantasy that "approached as guilty pleasures, [the Conan stories] can be wonderfully entertaining," then made a measured case for Howard's literary worth. "Howard's Conan chronicles," Dirda wrote, "are ... studies in the clash of Barbarism and Civilization. In Howard's grim arid all too realistic view, the barbarians are always at the gate, and once a culture allows itself to grow soft, decadent or simply neglectful, it will be swept away by the primitive and ruthless." He ended with a judgment that is old hat among fantasy fans, but one which many critics and academics are only now belatedly acknowledging: "Apart from Fritz Leiber's tales of Fafhrd and the Gray Mouser, sword and sorcery adventures don't come any better."

Amen. As criticism goes, Dirda's insightful analysis is a far cry from sixty years ago, when playwright H.R. Hays greeted Howard's first American hardcover appearance — the now-classic 1946 Arkham House release *Skull-Face and Others* — with a scathing review in *The New York Times* titled "Superman on a Psychotic Bender." Of course, Dirda's no long-dead, forgotten blow-hard — he won the 1993 Pulitzer Prize for criticism. Clearly, time and age have been good to Robert E. Howard. The man whom H.P. Lovecraft christened "Two-Gun Bob" left us a large, fascinating body of work encompassing not only the birth of the Sword-&-Sorcery genre, but also the misery of the Great Depression, the bittersweet memory of the American frontier, and the millennial sweep of War and Time and History. Howard's work is increasingly perceived as a modern continuation of the gloomy, homegrown literature pioneered by giants such as Hawthorne, Melville, Poe, and London. For decades known as one of the Big Three *Weird Tales* writers, he is now also being studied and respected as a Texan writer, a 1930s writer, and a classic American writer.

My, how times have changed. A few decades ago, critics and reviewers dismissed Conan as adolescent fantasies for perpetually adolescent minds. Exciting and action-packed and passionate? Yes! But Art? Literature? Fuhgetaboutit. Granted, not everyone thought that way.

Fritz Leiber's REH criticism was uncommonly perceptive, and remains as useful now as when it was written decades ago. [He coined the term Sword-&-Sorcery, now being considered for inclusion in the *Oxford English Dictionary* to describe the Conan stories.] And most fans have never heard the great anecdote L. Sprague de Camp relates in his autobiography *Time and Chance*, about his enjoyable

afternoon spent in Tolkien's garage study, drinking and conversing with the legendary fantasist. When the subject turned to Howard, de Camp fully expected Tolkien — an infamous curmudgeon when it came to modern fantasy — to dismiss the Texan out of hand, if indeed he had read him at all. But to his surprise, Tolkien not only confirmed that he had read Howard, but admitted without shame that he "rather liked" the Conan tales — high praise indeed coming as it did from one of the harshest critics of the field. Still, the likes of Leiber and Tolkien were exceptions. According to most of Howard's fellow professionals, his work was forever marred by its pulp roots and his legendary psychological problems.

Today, such opinions are as outdated as a '59 Edsel. The cheap, gaudy paperbacks of yore are now deluxe illustrated volumes lovingly restored to match Howard's original typescripts. Fantasy authors routinely credit Howard as a seminal influence revered among their ranks. Critical books and magazines have prompted teachers to finally include Howard on reading lists and syllabi. (I recently read a feature about one such teacher in the *Antelope Valley Press*, a popular Southern California newspaper with a readership of 250,000 — apparently his assigning Howard to students as extra credit caused a stampede to nearby bookstores, making Howard a sellout for miles around!)

To readers whose last experience with Howard was reading Conan as a teenager, all of this may seem shocking. But to those of us who have been enmeshed in Howard studies for a long time, getting face-time in *The Washington Post* from a Pulitzer Prize-winner is merely the latest in a string of breakthroughs for the Texan.

Back in the late 1960s, when science-fiction grandmaster L. Sprague de Camp ushered the whole Conan saga into paperback for the first time, the resulting surge in Conan's popularity created a tidal wave known ever since as the "Howard Boom." It was a heady time for fans — virtually everything Howard ever wrote was published in one form or another. Incomplete stories, high school newspaper articles, juvenilia — nothing was too unfinished or just plain bad to stick into a paperback and foist upon Conan fanatics. Boxing tales, westerns, and detective stories were all encased in covers deceptively hinting at Sword-and-Sorcery pleasures, each emblazoned with "By the creator of CONAN!" Readers were grateful for the deluge, even while lamenting that some critics were judging Howard not by his best work but by haphazard paperbacks containing his very worst writing, stuff he never intended to publish.

As the Howard Boom died out in the early '80s, scholars quietly went through a decade of sifting through all of this new material and reevaluating his reputation. Those who came to Howard as Conan fans often left with a newfound respect for his poetry, westerns, crusader tales, horror, and boxing stories. Crucially, a well-reviewed critical book called *The Dark Barbarian* appeared in 1984 from a respected academic press. Meticulously assembled and edited by critic Don Herron, it intelligently covered the whole of Howard's output, demonstrating that the creator of Conan could and should be taken more seriously. A few years later, several volumes of Howard's letters were published by Necronomicon Press, showing "crazy" Howard in a light few had fathomed: as a savvy businessman, a frequent, wide-ranging traveler, a good friend, and a passionate literary artist all-too-aware of the way people perceived him.

As time passed, Howard's hometown at long last began to preserve the legacy of their most famous resident. In 1986, a group of fans and civic leaders in Cross Plains combined forces to establish Robert E. Howard Days, a festival that takes place the second weekend each June to celebrate Howard's life and work. Over the years it has grown into a vastly entertaining mini-convention hosting over a hundred fans, complete with tours, panels, awards, a banquet, and viewings of all the places about which Howard worked, traveled, and wrote. The original house Howard lived and wrote in has been beatifically restored into one of the country's most charming literary museums, prompting its addition to the National Register of Historic Places in 1994. Once a forgotten figure in Cross Plains, Howard now is the town's shining light.

The same year Howard Days began, his former girlfriend Novalyne Price-Ellis, then an elderly retired schoolteacher, published an autobiographical book called *One Who Walked Alone* about her years spent dating REH at the end of his life. The volume revealed Howard to be a much more conscientious and dedicated craftsman than even his most ardent fans had suspected. Howard's passion for the history and culture of his beloved Southwest, his trenchant explanations of the thematic threads tying together his *oeuvre*, and his insistence on the artistry underlying his pulp writing opened up new avenues of study. When in 1996 the book was made into a critically praised film titled *The Whole Wide World*, starring Renee Zellweger and Vincent D'Onofrio (the movie appeared on over fifty critics' Top Ten lists for that year), Howard's appeal broadened outside his fantasy roots yet again, sometimes attracting fans in strange places. (For instance, in recent years I have noticed a number of new women at Howard Days — apparently *The Whole Wide World* has been screened on Oprah Winfrey's Oxygen Network

cable channel so often that it has made Howard a romantic figure among housewives!)

Because of his letters, Novalyne's book and film, and various other interviews and evidence, Howard's personality has now been radically redefined in the minds of fans. Previous generations took it at face value that Howard was, in a word, nuts — a crazed, paranoid eccentric living a schizophrenic life comprised of half reality and half fantasy, whose writing poured out in lengthy marathon fits of genius that eventually culminated in a senseless Oedipal suicide. Today, much more is known about Howard's life and motivations, and the old gossipy tales have lost their power to convince. By degrees, the dominant image of Howard the Crazed Nut has given way to Howard the Misunderstood Artist. By the time John Milius recorded his interview for a new *Conan the Barbarian* DVD in 2000, gleefully recounting all the silly old canards of a schizoid Howard haunted by the ghost of Conan and holed up in a boarded-up house with a shotgun sweating his terror-filled nights away, most fans knew better than to believe any part of the tale.

Throughout most of the '80s and '90s Howard studies were going gangbusters, yet the publishing of the actual stories was moribund, lost to legal wrangling among various parties intent on gaining control of Howard's valuable literary properties. Conglomerates with money to burn brought Conan back in a series of ill-advised projects. From a risible Saturday morning cartoon to lame comic-book retreads to a wretched live-action television show, each attempt to recapture the Boom magic flopped among fans, who pined for more faithful and intelligent fare geared to match their newfound respect for the author.

The Boom's pimply-faced teens had grown up, and no longer would they gobble down the latest tripe passed off as "faithful to Howard." They wanted the real thing, presented with the class that the author deserved.

Eventually, they got it. One by one the lawsuits were settled, the lawyers faded away, and it became possible to publish Howard in something resembling a principled fashion. In 1996 Baen came out with seven paperbacks containing much of Howard's non-Conan output, but scant advertising and publicity combined with corrupt texts doomed the series to only moderate success and no reprintings. Efforts by English publisher Wandering Star to produce lavishly illustrated and textually pure volumes of Howard's best work, a "Robert E. Howard Library of Classics," were more successful. Six books have been released to date, all widely praised for their scholarship and presentation. The stunning quality of these expensive collectors' volumes attracted the interest of Del Rey, who is now filling bookstores with affordable trade-paper and hard-cover editions of each. It was this series, specifically designed to promote Howard as a classic American author worthy of critical attention, that caught Pulitzer Prize winner Dirda's attention and prompted his *Washington Post* piece.

In the wake of Wandering Star and Del Rey, other publishers began filling the marketplace with an array of riches that have fans talking delightedly of a second Howard Boom. Wildside Press is currently producing a ten-volume hardcover set encompassing all of Howard's classic *Weird Tales* works, and they have other volumes out dedicated to his detective, crusader, humorous boxing, and western tales. Last year Bison Books, a prestigious academic press based at the University of Nebraska, released five elegant hard-covers of Howard's best non-Conan work, each edited and introduced by a longtime Howard scholar. Girasol Books, a pulp reprint house based in Canada, has released two massive books containing Howard's complete *Weird Tales* output (including not only stories, but also all of his *WT* poems and letters to the editor), with the pages scanned directly from the pulps in facsimile form, exactly as they appeared in *The Unique Magazine* more than seventy years ago.

And all of that just covers Howard's original stories. The previously mentioned critical anthology, 1984's *The Dark Barbarian*, has just been reprinted by Wildside Press in an affordable paperback edition, and in 2004 the same press released a captivating sequel titled *The Barbaric Triumph*. A book of Howard's complete poems — all seven hundred of them! — is in the works, set to be illustrated by famed Hellboy artist Mike Mignola. Several new Howard bibliographies are coming out next year, their gargantuan proportions a testament to the amount of Howardia produced over the last few decades. And scholar Mark Finn just completed the first full-length biography of Howard since 1983's seminal work in the field, *Dark Valley Destiny* by L. Sprague de Camp.

Titled *Blood and Thunder: The Life and Art of Robert E. Howard* and weighing in at almost four hundred pages, Finn's tome will hit bookstores in November. The buzz is that it's good; watch for it.

Publishers are not the only ones pushing Howard in the modern marketplace. A Swedish media conglomerate, Paradox Entertainment, has spent the last few years buying up multimedia rights to Howard's work, and they are gung-ho about reintroducing Conan and other characters to a whole new generation of fans. On the live-action front, a Bran Mak Morn movie has already been green-lighted, with movies based on Solomon Kane and Conan also in various stages of pre-production. As for animated

films, a full-length feature based on the Conan tale "Red Nails" is nearing completion. Video games, Hyborian pastiches, comics ... in all of these areas Howard and Conan is being re-seeded into the pop culture sphere almost faster than one can keep up.

And let's not forget the fans. The long-running organization REHupa (The Robert E. Howard United Press Association) has entered its thirty-fourth year of continuous existence, and various editors are producing books, chapbooks, and literary journals at an impressive clip, using modern production techniques to eclipse in both quality and quantity the mountain of material published during the first Howard Boom. An example: my own semiprofessional journal, *The Cimmerian*, pays three cents a word, appears bi-monthly (*monthly* during this centennial year), and is focused like a laser on Howard's life and work. I say that any author supporting a paying market for literary criticism seventy years after his death has done something right.

So, is this really a second Howard Boom? I think so, yes. Quieter than the halcyon, Frazetta-illus-trated 70s for sure, but perhaps in the final analysis a more mature, more permanent phenomenon. It's undeniable that Howard has broken through the glass ceiling of "mere pulp writer" and into the permanent realm of cultural and literary relevance shared by fellow adventure authors such as Arthur Conan Doyle, Robert Louis Stevenson, Dashiell Hammett, and Ian Fleming. There is no doubt in my mind this trend will continue, with Howard creeping further into arenas where he used to be *persona non grata*. For the first time, one is seeing REH panels at academic venues such as the yearly PCA/ACA (Popular Culture Association/American Culture Association) conference. He's also starting to be included in critical books released by mainstream academic presses, such as the recent *Conversations with Texas Writers* (University of Texas Press, 2005), a book where Howard had the distinct honor of being the only dead author represented. Perhaps most tellingly, Howard has gone international in a serious way. Forty volumes of his work, including minor miscellany such as his autobiographical novel *Post Oaks and Sand Roughs*, have been published in France alone. Russia has seen a hundred Conan books, both original Howard and pastiche, while countries as varied as Germany, Italy, Poland, and Japan all have REH available in translation and enough fans to make each new edition a viable publishing proposition. Once the new movies hit Hollywood's increasingly internationalized marketplace, followed by the previously described onslaught of centennial publishing detritus, who knows how Howard's worldwide popularity and literary reputation will be affected? Will we someday see Robert E. Howard and Conan join fellow pulpsters Dashiell Hammett, Raymond Chandler, and H.P. Lovecraft in prestigious venues such as The Library of America? I wouldn't be the least bit surprised. Nor I daresay would Howard's many fans, scholars, and professional champions, all of whom have known for some time that his best work is eminently worthy of such honors.

Authors who remain read over the decades have a way of aging like fine wine. A hundred years on, Howard has yet to lose his foothold in the minds of appreciative readers, and every year he gains new supporters in academic and critical circles. New generations are primed to rediscover Conan and his brethren all over again. Now that we've reached the end of Howard's first century, it's worth asking what the next hundred years will hold. What do you think — will 2106 pass with REH finally forgotten along with the pulps that spawned him? Fifty years ago, the possibility of Howard's reputation surviving the vast majority of his best-selling contemporaries was remote. But that was then. Nowadays, the future is looking pretty bright for lovers of Sword-&-Sorcery, and for the brilliant Texan who conjured the genre out of the darkness for us.

Happy Birthday, Two-Gun.

Q

Leo Grin is editor of The Cimmerian, a paying semiprofessional journal dedicated to the study of Robert E. Howard and his work.

Our proofreader tells us that he awaits Starch and Iron! The Laundry Lists of R.E.H., uniform with The Man Whose Socks Were All Exactly Alike (P.K.D.) and Of No Human Shape (H.P.L.).

THE ELIXIR OF YOUTH

by **Brian Stableford**

illustrated by **Jill Bauman**

Frederic Paschel, a wine merchant who lived in the town of Sylah in the valley of the river Dordogne, was left a widower when his two sons, Gilbert and Benedict, were in their infancy. The younger son, Benedict, was as dutiful as any father could ever have desired; he was amiable and pliable, ready and willing to be moulded in the image of his sire as a respectable tradesman. Gilbert, on the other hand, was surly and rebellious; he swore that he would do anything in the world to spare himself the necessity of following in his father's footsteps.

When asked what he intended to do instead of working in the family business, Gilbert declared his intention of becoming a knight of the realm in the entourage of the Duc de Romanin, whose domain included Sylah and three other small towns as well as thirty farms, a dozen vineyards and a forest that provided some of the best hunting in southern Aquitania. Frederic laughed when he heard this, saying that the most Gilbert could ever hope for was to be taken into the Duc's service as a common man-at-arms — and even that privilege would be withheld at Frederic's request, because Lord de Romanin was one of the winery's best customers.

Gilbert flew into a temper then. He said that if his prospects of following the best traditions of chivalry were to be thwarted by his father's petty spite, he would become an adventurer, hunting for treasure in Arabia and the dark heart of Africa. That declaration made Frederic laugh even louder — with the result that Gilbert left home on his seventeenth birthday, swearing that he would not return until he acquired such immense wealth that Frederic Paschel would seem a pauper by comparison.

Ten years passed while nothing was heard in Sylah of Gilbert Paschel. Frederic's business flourished, but not to the extent that he grew conspicuously richer. The number of barrels that his labourers filled increased year by year, but the price he obtained for each barrel did not increase at all. His wealth grew slowly, moderated by the increased wages he had to pay the labourers, but he was able to make some economies in the latter respect as Benedict grew older and stronger.

Unfortunately, Benedict became rather resentful of the fact that he was expected to work harder and harder as each year passed in order to allow his father to spend less on hired labour. While the vintage was brought in he had to work from dawn till dusk in the winery, and he continued to work long hours while the grapes were trodden and the wine fermented. He had to take more turns than any of the hired men in guarding the vats until the wine was ready for casking, and when the barrels had all been filled he had to load them on the carts which carried them to Frederic's customers in the neighbouring towns. He was sometimes allowed to accompany his father on the most important deliveries, including excursions to the Chateau de Romanin, but he always had to take longer turns than his father driving the cart, and he was the one who had to carry the barrels down to the cellars while Frederic enjoyed the fruits of his customers' hospitality.

"You work me like a donkey so that you do not have to pay wages to hirelings," Benedict complained, when they returned from one such trip, "but I see nothing of the money you save. By rights, the greater portion of it should be mine."

"The money I save on wages goes to buy more grapes and better equipment," his father explained. "It is reinvested in the business so that the business will continue to expand. One day, it will all be yours, so the money you do not receive now will benefit you in the future."

"That is all very well," Benedict said, "but in the meantime, I am dressed as poorly as any common labourer, and I work even harder for longer hours. I would prefer to have the money now, so that I might dress in the manner appropriate to an Aquitanian gentleman, and entertain myself as a gentleman does instead of rising at dawn every day and working long into the night."

"That would be a foolish way to conduct yourself, my son," Frederic told him, severely. "Money in-

vested reaps greater rewards; money spent is gone forever. You are young, and you have a long life ahead of you. Don't be envious of the young popinjays who parade themselves about the chateau and its gardens, or the wastrels who hang about in the taverns; the former will spend their inheritances soon enough, and the latter will end up bearing spears and longbows in the Lord's troop. You will have a comfortable home and a life of ease."

"It is because I am young that I want to make more of myself," Benedict countered. "How shall I enjoy a life of ease when I am old and my appetites are blunted?"

"I am growing old myself," Frederic pointed out.

"My point, exactly," Benedict murmured — but he waited until his father was out of earshot, because he was a dutiful son, long accustomed to yielding to the pressure of Frederic's will.

Benedict's duties grew more varied by degrees as well as more extensive. In addition to filling and loading the barrels, he was gradually entrusted with the delicate operations required to bring the wines to perfection in their vats and prepare them for casking — with the result that the long shifts he worked standing guard over the vats became even more demanding. He often had to work around the clock, sleeping for short periods in the loft above the winery rather than returning to the house where his father was now able to spend more and more of his own time.

"I am growing old," Frederic told him, when Benedict complained again. "I need more rest than I did when I was young. You will be able to set your own hours soon enough, and hire men to do your work for you if that is what you wish."

"Sometimes," Benedict replied, "I wish that I had gone with my brother to seek my fortune in foreign lands. I am certain that he has had a much more interesting life than mine."

"Ha!" said Frederic. "The ingrate will likely be dead by now, and if he is not dead he will certainly be utterly wretched. There are no treasures to be found in Arabia and the lands beyond the Sahara, no matter what travellers' tales may say. All travellers are liars."

It turned out, however, that Gilbert was not

quite dead — although he did seem conspicuously wretched when he suddenly reappeared, at the dead of night, in the winery where Benedict was working late, patiently overseeing a vat of rich red wine that was just approaching the condition in which it would require to be casked.

"Hello, little brother," Gilbert said, as he laid down his meagre pack. He sat down on a stool and took off his worn-out sandals so that he could inspect the sores on his feet, adding: "Still the dutiful son, I see, hard at work on our father's behalf."

"I am delighted to see you, brother," Benedict replied — politely enough, although a bystander might have thought it odd that he did not rush to embrace a brother he had not seen for ten years. "I presume, judging by your rags, that you have not found the treasure that you sought."

"As a matter of fact," Gilbert said, "I did."

"Then it must consist of diamonds and rubies," Benedict said, sarcastically, "for I could tell by the way you laid your pack down that it is not full of gold."

"What I have is more precious than diamonds and rubies," Gilbert told him.

"In that case, perhaps you should have sold a little of it to buy stout shoes and a pair of trousers that had more cloth than thread in them," Benedict observed.

"That would have been difficult," Gilbert told him, "for what I have is divisible only once, into two portions. No lesser dose would be fully effective."

"Dose?" Benedict echoed. "Have you brought back nothing but medicine? After ten years of wandering in the wilderness, have you found nothing worth bringing home but some quack cure for warts or baldness?"

"It is an elixir concocted with water from the fountain of youth," Gilbert told him. He opened his pack and produced a small stone flask, which might have held a single gulp of brandy, although it seemed to Benedict more like the kind of vessel in which poison might be kept.

"The elixir of life?" Benedict scoffed. "Are you immortal, then?"

"I have not drunk it yet," the older brother said, patiently. "Nor will it make me immortal. But what it can and will do is to restore my health to the finest pitch of perfection, and make me feel as well as any man can feel, for as long as I may live. It cannot give me eternal life, nor can it protect me against the danger of a sudden violent death, but it can double the usual allotment of a man's potential years, and make the century I might yet live, if I am careful and fortunate, a hundred years entirely worth the living. Once I have drunk it, I shall no longer age, I shall be full of vigour, and my spirits will be permanently uplifted. The measure I possess is said to be adequate to do the same for one other person."

"So brotherly love has brought you here, so that I might share in your good fortune?" Benedict was





hesitant now, no longer daring to be quite as sarcastic as he had been before.

"You are absolutely right, dear brother," Gilbert said. "But I fear that I must ask a price for what I intend to give you."

"A price?" Benedict said. "That seems a trifle unreasonable, given that we are brothers. What price do you want for your supposedly miraculous potion?"

"I want your inheritance," Gilbert said, frankly. "I want all *this*: the winery, and everything accessory to it. The carts and the horses, the barrels and the tools, the suppliers and the customers."

"You mean that you want your half," Benedict said. "The half that you gave up when you went a-wandering."

"No," Gilbert said. "I want it all. I was the one who took the risk. I was the one who travelled far, who staked his life and future on the hazard of discovery. If I drink one dose of the elixir, I shall have every advantage of indefinitely-protracted youth save one: an income that would allow me to make the most of it. If I can trade my second dose for the income, I shall have the full extent of my desire. Ergo, dear brother, I offer you the choice: you may have youth without wealth for as long as you may live, or wealth without youth. It is a fair offer."

"A fair offer!" Benedict was astounded. "It is piracy! Can you imagine that I would trade my inheritance for a sip from a flask that might contain anything or nothing at all?"

"If you refuse, brother, I shall have to make my offer to someone else."

For a moment or two, Benedict did not see what Gilbert was getting at — but then he realised that if he would not sell his inheritance, there was another who might be persuaded to sell it before he was able to receive it: his father. "But our father is already old!" Benedict protested.

"Exactly so," said Gilbert. "He will understand the true value of the elixir. Having already spent his youth, he will not obtain as much advantage from it as you might, but I dare say that he will settle *for* the *protraction* of his current state of being for another sixty or seventy years, and the sense of well-being the elixir will give him in the meantime. I am, in any case, his eldest son; he might take the view, as I do, that the inheritance is rightfully mine in any case."

"Over my dead body!" Benedict said.

"That will not be necessary, brother," Gilbert replied, calmly. "Quite the reverse, in fact. What I am offering you is the opposite of death: youth and good health, for as long as you might live. What do you have to lose? If you will not pay the price I ask, the winery will be taken from you anyway. You know as well as I do what kind of man our father is. I shall not demand that he deliver all his possessions to me. I only want the business — he can keep his secret savings, to spend in whatever way his newly-rejuvenated whims may take him. But I remember how he treated me when I was a child, so I have come to you first, in order that you might have first refusal of my offer. Am I not generous, brother?"

"Very generous, brother," said Benedict, his voice redolent with astonishment and a keen sense of injury. Nor was his tone a liar, for he picked up a paddle that he had been using to stir the wine in the vat, and struck out at his brother so forcefully that Gilbert would certainly have been killed had he not stepped sideways to avoid the blow.

If the older brother had had a weapon in his pack he would surely have fetched it out, or had there been something close at hand that would serve as a cudgel he would surely have improvised — but he had no weapon of his own, and there was nothing nearby that would serve such a purpose.

What Gilbert did instead, therefore, was to remove the stopper from the flask and put it to his lips, saying: "Strike at me again, brother, and I will down the lot — both doses in one. You will lose your opportunity!"

Alas, Gilbert had misread his younger brother's resolve. Benedict had not been fully persuaded that the flask really held the elixir of youth, but he had been persuaded that his father might be gullible enough to think that it might, and to disinherit his younger son in order to obtain it. So Benedict did, indeed, strike out again — alarming Gilbert sufficiently to make him carry out his threat.

Gilbert tipped the flask, and took its entire contents into his mouth. He held the liquid there, as if he thought that Benedict might relent when he saw the threat about to be carried out — but Benedict, only took the opportunity to measure his victim for a third blow.

This time, Gilbert was not quick enough to get out of the way. The paddle descended upon the crown of Gilbert's head, with lethal force. The only action he had time to perform before he fell dead upon the winery floor was to swallow what he had in his mouth.

Benedict immediately regretted what he had done, and became exceedingly anxious to hide the evidence of his crime. It had been dark for some hours and Sylah was not a well-lit town, so it seemed

unlikely that anyone who had seen Gilbert approach could have recognised him, even if anyone had been abroad at such a late hour.

"I must be grateful to my brother after all," Benedict muttered, as he wondered how to do away with the body. "If he had gone to my father first, I would certainly have been disinherited."

Benedict picked up the dead body and weighed it in his arms. Although Gilbert had by no means grown fat while he was on his travels, the corpse was no lightweight. Benedict did not want to risk anyone seeing him with a dead man slung over his shoulder — the Duc de Romanin was well known as a severe judge, very intolerant of all kinds of homicide except those ordered by himself.

The most obvious hiding-place that was readily available was the barrel waiting beside the vat to receive the matured wine, and Benedict wasted no further time before lowering his brother's body into the empty vessel. He considered the possibility of putting the lid on the barrel and moving it directly to the storeroom, but he knew that anyone who so much as tapped its wooden flank would realise that it had no wine in it. For this reason, he filled it up to the brim with wine from the vat before sealing it.

When Benedict turned the barrel on its side to roll it into the store he was glad to discover that it was only slightly heavier than it would have been had it contained nothing but wine. He placed the barrel in a dark corner, intending to leave it there until he could find an opportunity to dispose of it permanently. He rolled out another empty barrel to set beside the vat, so that he could continue his work as if nothing had happened.

Three days later, when the contents of the vat had been casked and another consignment of grapes brought in for treading, Frederic Paschel came to the winery in the early afternoon, in company with the Duc de Romanin's steward, Cor-entin.

"Good news, my Son!" said the wine merchant. "Duc Meldred's eldest son, Sir Blaise — the finest knight in the entire province — is newly betrothed to Lady Ghislaine de Thyresse, and there is to be a great feast at the Chateau in three days' time. There will be jousting and a circus, and a great deal of merry-making. My old friend Corentin wants to buy every barrel of this year's vintage on Duc Meldred's behalf, as well as the best we still have in store from last year and the one before."

Benedict was thunderstruck. "But father!" he protested. "This year's vintage is far too young to please an educated palate. Lord de Romanin would do far better to take everything else we have in store and leave this year's deposits to mature."

"Don't be silly, Benedict," Frederic said, impatiently. "All the Lord's vassals, of every rank, will be party to the celebration. This year's vintage is more than good enough for the lower ranks."

"Even so," Benedict objected, "We shall need to hold some barrels back for future years, when they will be much improved. .

"Fool!" was Frederic's reply to that. "Lord de Romanin is very willing to compensate us for any loss we might sustain by selling the wine before it is fully mature. This is a great opportunity, you dunderhead. Bring out a score of spigots immediately, and start setting them in the casks so that Corentin and I can test their contents and agree a fair price for each one."

Benedict had no alternative but to do as he was told. He volunteered to help with the tasting, but Frederic told him yet again what a fool he was to think that his naive palate could possibly compare with the practised expertise of a successful wine merchant and an experienced steward. Benedict knew only too well what a connoisseur his father was, and Corentin also had a great reputation as a wine-taster, so he had to give way on that — but he took what comfort he could from the fact that the two wise men were content to leave the business of rolling out the barrels and hammering in the spigots entirely to him.

One by one Benedict brought out eight of the barrels laid down in further years to give their contents every chance to mature, and tapped them all. Every cup brought forth cries of delight from his father, but the Duc's steward professed himself disappointed with all of them, so the haggling process by which the prices were agreed was long and arduous. Nor would the steward agree to let the current crop go untasted, so Benedict had to roll out another seven casks and tap them all. Again Frederic Paschel professed himself very satisfied with his crop, but Corentin was a hard man to convince, and they managed to quaff more than enough wine to keep thirst at bay as the long hot afternoon wore on.

When the fifteenth barrel had been tested, Benedict told the steward that there were no more to be tested, but Frederic Paschel had not done as well as he had hoped in the haggling, and protested loudly that he had seen with his own eyes that there was one more barrel of the current vintage left, even though some fool had misplaced it by shoving it into a shadowy corner.

"I believe that one is spoiled," Benedict said.

"Nonsense!" his father said. "It has not even been tapped. Bring it out, boy, bring it out!"

Benedict had no alternative but to roll out the barrel and drive a spigot into its side. He filled the

steward's wooden cup for the sixteenth time, and passed it to him with a trembling hand.

Corentin had already begun to frown before he set the cup to his lips, in preparation for the customary battle over price, but as soon as he took a sip from the cup his expression changed. He had earlier been very scrupulous about spitting out at least half of the wine he had tasted, lest the expertise of his palate be confused by intoxication, but he swallowed this mouthful entire, and followed it with another that was considerably more generous. Then he looked down with evident disappointment into his empty cup.

"Now that," he said, forgetting his prepared script, "is a truly excellent wine."

"Is it?" said Frederic, thrown off his own stride by this unexpected development. The merchant handed his own cup to Benedict, who took it to the spigot — but before it could be filled the steward's bony hand clamped down hard on Benedict's wrist.

"No, no," he said, regretfully. "That's too fine a vintage to waste on the likes of us, I fear. That's the sort of wine that must go to my master's table, for the benefit of his most intimate guests." And he offered a price for the barrel that was half as much again as the highest price he had ever previously offered for a barrel of Frederic Paschel's wine.

Frederic was a trifle disappointed, obviously regretting the loss of an opportunity to taste such a wonder, but he was a man of business, and he accepted the offer gracefully.

"You can deliver the other fifteen barrels at your leisure, Master Paschel," the steward said. "Have your boy put this one into my carriage; I shall take it to Romanin today."

Benedict opened his mouth to protest, but realised that he had no possible grounds for so doing. Corentin's carriage was designed to carry passengers rather than cargo, but there was certainly *room in it* for a *single barrel*, provided that the steward was prepared to sit beside his driver. Benedict had no alternative but to rope the barrel and lift it with the aid of the windlass, and it was only with the utmost difficulty — even though Gilbert's corpse weighed only a little more than the volume of wine it had displaced — that he managed to inch the load on to the floor of the carriage. He recovered his breath while the steward drove away, having promised to settle Frederic Paschel's account as soon as the other barrels were delivered.

"This is a great day, my son," the wine merchant said. "Your inheritance has had a great boost — and to judge by the way you were sweating as you lifted that barrel, Lord de Romanin will have a very ample measure of wine therefrom. I do hope that you have not been making a habit of over-filling the barrels."

"No, father," Benedict said, sadly. "If that cask contains more than it should, you can be assured that it is one of a kind."

That night, Benedict went to his father and said: "I have had enough of the wine trade, father, and have decided to follow my brother's example in going abroad to seek my fortune. I would be very grateful, though, if you would pay me the wages due to me for labouring these last ten years in the winery."

Frederic Paschel was obviously astonished by this request, because he became quite purple as his temper rose. "You ungrateful swine!" he cried. "How dare you! Every farthing that the winery has earned these last ten years has been reinvested in the business for the benefit of your inheritance. Everything I have done in my entire life I have done for you."

"Well," said Benedict, "I suppose you might see things that way, but I cannot. It seems to me that everything I have done in my entire life I have done for you. While I have toiled by day, you have been idle. While I have laboured by night, you have slept in your comfortable bed. And as for all your talk of reinvestment. . . well, I count every bunch of grapes that goes into the vats, and every barrel and spigot we buy, and simple arithmetic assures me that you must have considerable savings in gold and silver stored away as part of my so-called inheritance. I do not ask for all of it, but I do want my fair share."

Had Benedict not grown so wiry while manhandling barrels, Frederic Paschel might have been tempted to turn his son over his knee and give him a good thrashing — but when his father's furious gaze had *measured him from top to toe*, Benedict watched that resolution falter and shrivel.

"Don't be stupid, my son," the wine merchant said, in a more conciliatory manner. "You've invested far too much yourself to throw away your inheritance now. Yes, I could give you a little coin — but if you take it away it'll soon be spent, and the winery will go to rack and ruin in the meantime, for I can't be expected to continue running it when my heart is broken. If you will not keep it going, it will have to be sold; and what a pity that would be, when we've just been producing the finest wine we've ever made. . . did I say *we*? I meant *you*, of course. It's obvious to me that you've always had the wine-maker's gift, and only needed practice to bring it out. I've stood back to let you obtain that practice, my son, and my discretion has paid off. You don't need to go away to make your fortune — you can make it right here." Benedict was slightly taken aback by this change of attitude, but he knew that he could not give in. He

dared not wait in Sylah for one more day. Indeed, he had already waited longer than he should, for he was spared the necessity of answering his father by a loud hammering on the door. When he answered it, he found a contingent of Lord de Romanin's spearmen outside, who had been sent to arrest them both on a charge of selling wine in short measure.

"Short measure!" Frederic Paschel reported, when he received this information. "Impossible! I saw the barrel loaded myself, and was only now admonishing my son for overfilling it. If it was short when it arrived at the castle, that rascal of a steward must have piped half of it away for his own use."

The soldiers were, however, merely following orders; their sergeant assured the merchant that he could lay his counter-accusations before Lord de Romanin. So Benedict and his father were put in irons and taken to the Chateau.

When they arrived, the merchant and his son were immediately taken to Duc Meldred, who was in his banqueting hall with his son, Sir Blaise, and his steward Corentin. The barrel was set beside the head of the table. The prisoners were thrust down on to their knees.

"If the barrel is light, my lord . . ." Frederic Paschel began, bowing until his forehead was almost touching the floor.

"The barrel is not light, Master Paschel," the Lord said. "Indeed, that is the mystery. When my loyal steward told me what a wonder he had found I could not wait until the feast; I had to test it for myself. Having found it every bit as delightful as he promised, I offered a cup to my son, and then invited the Comte de Thyresse, the father of my future daughter-in-law, to sample it. We had a second round, and then a third ... and our enjoyment increased so dramatically with every draught that we were extremely disappointed when it ceased to flow from the spigot, even though the barrel still had so much weight that the level could not possibly have sunk below the tap."

"Perhaps, my Lord," the wine merchant said, "you might tilt the barrel. . ."

"Of course we tilted the barrel," Lord Romanin said, "fully expecting more wine to flow — but no wine flowed. Plainly, there is something else in this barrel as well as wine: something *solid*, which has shifted to block the spigot. Now, what do you suppose that might be?"

Frederic Paschel looked at his son then, with accusing eyes. "Benedict?" he said, unsteadily. "You were the one who filled that barrel, were you not?"

"I fill all the barrels," Benedict replied, bitterly. "Whatever is in this one is to my credit — that I admit, since I cannot possibly deny it. Remove the lid, by all means. Take a look for yourself, my Lord .., then do with me what you please. At least I have filled my last barrel for this old skinflint." He did not attempt to rise to his feet, but he held his head high as he met his liege lord's eyes.

Lord de Romanin looked at Benedict curiously, and then instructed his steward to hand over the claw-hammer he had thoughtfully brought to the meeting. Benedict shrugged his shoulders and accepted the instrument. It only took him a minute to pull out the staples securing the lid. When he thrust the lid aside the Duc de Romanin and Sir Blaise both peered in, very curiously.

"Why," said Sir Blaise, "it's a dead man. It seems that we've been drinking blood with our wine."

"So it is," said Lord de Romanin, thoughtfully. "And so we have."

Benedict had expected them to grow pale, perhaps even to vomit, but the aristocracy of Aquitania was obviously cut from finer cloth than the nation's common men.

"But it *is* an extremely fine wine," Sir Blaise added, "and it might not be a good idea to let my future father-in-law know what we have been feeding him, even if we were innocent of any knowledge of it."

"I am proud to have such a wise son," Lord de Romanin said.



"A keen sense of the diplomatic niceties is the most valuable gift a future Lord of Aquitania can possess — and it is, as you say, an extremely fine wine. There will be a good measure still to be drunk, once we have moved the dead man's back away from the tap. Perhaps you can explain, Master Paschel, how the vintage turned out so well, given that the pickling of a corpse would normally be expected to spoil it?"

Frederic Paschel could only look back at his lord and master in frank amazement — but Benedict was quick to take his opportunity. "My lord," he said, "my father has not the slightest idea how the vintage turned out so well—but I know the secret."

Lord de Romanin raised his eyebrows in a delicately aristocratic fashion. "Which is?" he said.

"Mine to keep," Benedict said, boldly. "But I can assure you that the wine has a preservative effect as well as a wondrous taste. It will be of great benefit to you if you keep on drinking it, provided that you do not share it too generously — but only I have the secret of making it, so you will need to look after me well."

The Duc de Romanin looked long and hard at Benedict then, but in the end he only said: "Will you need more dead men?" he asked, politely.

"No, my lord," Benedict said. "That one was unique. But the body has virtue enough to improve several more barrells of wine — perhaps many more, if it is supervised with the proper skill." This was, of course, a guess — but Benedict had reasoned that the elixir of youth must be seeping from the body that now contained it at a relatively modest rate, and might yet add a piquant bouquet to a luxurious harvest of wine.

Lord de Romanin made no immediate reply to this, but Sir Blaise said; "If it is only a matter of pouring in more wine, we could do as much ourselves."

"Wine-making is a skilled trade," Benedict pointed out, "and the best wines require the most artful makers. You might try, I suppose, to stretch the crop yourself. . . but if you were to fail, there would be no further opportunity. You would do better to put your trust in me."

Sir Blaise seemed a trifle offended by this slur against his competence, but Lord de Romanin was quick to intervene. "What about you, Master Paschel?" he said to Frederic. "Are you not a very artful wine-maker?"

"I am no murderer," the kneeling wine merchant was quick to say, "and no sorcerer either. No dead man was ever been found inside any barrel loaded by me."

"Your father has a point," Lord de Romanin said to Benedict. "The presence of the dead body in the barrel does suggest foul play, of more than one kind. Justice insists that murderers be hanged, and sorcerers burned. I'd be reckoned a poor lord of the realm if I did not put the demands of justice before those of my palate, would I not? Wine is only wine, but crime demands reparation."

"It is true, my lord," Benedict said, calculating that he had nothing to lose by being bold, "that if wine were only wine, it would be a poor thing to weigh against righteousness in the scales of justice. But you have drunk from that barrel, have you not? Is it only wine, do you think, or the veritable elixir of youth?"

Duc Meldred de Romanin nodded his noble head thoughtfully. "You told my steward that the barrel was spoiled," he observed. "You did not want your father to sell it — but he had no idea what it contained. ..."

He was interrupted by Frederic Paschel's cry of anguish. While attention had been diverted from him the curious merchant had climbed discreetly to his feet and tiptoed to the barrel, then leaned over to see what was inside it for himself. "Gilbert!" he moaned. "My beloved Gilbert!"

Lord de Romanin did not spare the merchant a glance. "Who is Gilbert?" he asked of Benedict.

"My brother," Benedict answered.

"You killed your brother?" Lord de Romanin said, raising his eyebrow again. "May I ask why, Master Alchemist?"

Benedict had been thinking furiously, and took his opportunity without delay. "Because that is what the recipe called for, my lord," he said. "That is why no other corpse would do — and even then, it required ten years of careful preparation."

"Sorcery, my lord!" cried the steward, who now seemed to repent having drunk from the barrel. "He must be burned!"

"Be quiet, Corentin," said Lord de Romanin, before addressing himself to Benedict again. "Are we in danger of damnation, then, Master Paschel, for having drunk your concoction?"

"Not at all, my Lord," Benedict said, without hesitation. "I suppose I might be in some slight danger, but you and your son — and the Comte de Thyresse too — are knights of Aquitania, perfect models of virtue and chivalry. How could you possibly be in any danger, given that your hearts are absolutely pure? Men of your kind, I feel perfectly sure, could drink barrel after barrel of the elixir without incurring the slightest stain on your souls. But if you would rather not . . ." He left the sentence dangling provocatively.

"I have long been of the opinion that we ought to have our own winery here at the castle," Lord de Romanin said, after a moment's thought. "We would need a good man to run it, of course. Your father is obviously too old, but he seems to have taught you everything he knows, and you have evidently done a little studying on your own account. Would you be prepared to accept such a position, if it were offered?"

"I would be very disappointed to leave my beloved father," Benedict said, "but if my liege lord needs me, it is my duty to respond. I will gladly take the job."

"I am delighted to hear it," the Duc de Romanin said. He turned to his steward. "See to it that Master Paschel and his father receive suitable accommodation."

Benedict was elated when he heard the Duc's instruction, but his delight was short-lived. Instead of being taken to one of the workshops clustered in the chateau's capacious courtyard he was taken into the cellars beneath one of the towers, to a chilly subterranean chamber with a single barred window and a door with a heavy iron lock. It had no furniture, although it did have a hole in one corner whose connection to the chateau's main sewer was a little more immediate than any occupant of the room could have desired.

"This is a dungeon!" he objected.

"Oh no," said Corentin. "Our dungeons are much narrower, and have no windows at all. Your father's new apartment is a dungeon. *This* is a winery. At least, it will be a winery when the Duc's men have brought barrels and vats from your former establishment."

The room had not seemed very large when Benedict first measured it with his eye; when his imagination imported a vat and a dozen barrels — which was less than half of the apparatus presently contained in Frederic Paschel's winery — he realised that he would hardly have space enough to stretch himself out to sleep.

"The conditions are hardly conducive to good wine-making," he complained. "I need light, and air, and . . ."

"Then you will have to earn them," the steward said, "by the quality of your labour." And with that, he went out, locking the door behind him.

Benedict's imagination proved perfectly reliable. Even though the Duc de Romanin's men only set up a single vat and stacked up ten barrels of wine — in addition to the one containing Gilbert's body — there was hardly enough floor-space left in the underground room for a man of Benedict's size to lie himself down.

It only required a few minutes to refill the barrel containing Gilbert's corpse from one of the others, so Benedict had plenty of time thereafter to consider his situation. He had no idea how long the supply of elixir contained in his brother's body would continue to invigorate the wine, nor how long it would take for the elixir to seep out of the dead flesh. There was no guarantee that the next cupful drawn from the spigot would be as good as the last, and no way to calculate how many more cupfuls would follow in its train if it were. He would have to rely on trial and error to discover the optimum rate of improvement, and the one thing of which he could be certain was that the effect would not last forever.

Eventually, the elixir would run out and the wine would cease to derive any further benefit from the body. By that time, Meldred de Romanin and his son *might* have supped enough to preserve themselves indefinitely — although the fact that Corentin and the Comte de Thyresse had each taken a little, and given that Benedict would have to taste future barrels to judge their readiness, might ensure that none of them would gain the full benefit of the elixir. Benedict was not certain what difference, if any, that would make to his own situation.

Given that Gilbert had had only the evidence of hearsay to advise him as to the properties of his treasure, Benedict could not be absolutely certain that there had been exactly enough elixir in the flask to preserve two men against the effects of aging for an' indefinite period. There might have been less, or more. On the other hand, Benedict thought, given that he had not the slightest idea how the elixir had been manufactured in the first place, it was at least conceivable that he might have stumbled upon a process by which it could be indefinitely renewed. If *that* turned out to be the case, there had to be a possibility that he could continue in the Duc de Romanin's service for months, or years. . . and perhaps, if he cared to sample his own wares, a century and more.

Alas, none of these prospects could be reckoned pleasant while he was lodged in his present accommodation.

Once the sun had set, Benedict discovered that his situation was even worse than he thought, because the hole that led down to the sewer was a two-way thoroughfare. It would undoubtedly be very

convenient for him to be able to expel his bodily wastes from the chamber, but the cost of that convenience was that inquisitive rats were able to intrude upon his privacy. Mercifully, the few that emerged during his first night of captivity found nothing to encourage them to linger, and fled readily enough when he lashed out at them. Even so, he placed three barrels in a line so that their tops formed a platform of sorts, on which he could sleep without fear of rats running over his body or nibbling the leather soles of his shoes.

Benedict was grateful for the fact that the breakfast sent to him on the following morning was appetising as well as plentiful, although he knew that any crumbs he spilt would encourage the rats. He *was grateful, too, when the Duc de Romanin*, who seemed to be in a reasonably benevolent mood, came to see him.

"When will the new wine be ready for tasting, Master Paschel?" Lord de Romanin asked.

"Ten days, perhaps," Benedict guessed.

"Oh no," his master replied. "That will not do. I shall come to test it the day after tomorrow, on the morning of the great feast. I must admit, though, that I have been thinking very carefully about what you told me yesterday. I take your point about your brother's body having some particular virtue, and requiring long preparation for its current function, but I cannot help wondering whether it might be worth our while to try a experiment or two, in a spirit of open-minded enquiry."

"What do you mean, my lord?" Benedict asked, although he knew perfectly well what the Duc must mean.

"It so happens, Master Wine-maker, that my faithful steward Corentin had an accident last night. He fell down a flight of stone stairs and broke his neck. It was most unfortunate — the poor man had been in my service for many years, and my father's service before that. Now, I understand perfectly that you could not work your magic with any run-of-the-mill dead man, but I cannot help wondering whether the steward — who had, after all, drunk a measure of the wine while he was testing its quality — might be able, so to speak, to *export* its effect. What do you think?"

Benedict's first thought was that if he did not agree to collaborate in the experiment, Lord de Romanin would certainly try it himself— and that if it happened to work, he would immediately become redundant. He therefore made haste to say: "I cannot be certain that my artistry, though considerable, will be able to accomplish much with a body so ill-prepared — but I am willing to try, my lord, if that is your wish."

"Excellent," said the Duc. "I shall have the body brought down to you."

It was not until the steward's body had been set in a barrel, and the barrel filled with wine, that Benedict began to wonder what the consequence might be if Lord de Romanin's experiment *did* work. The steward had undoubtedly supped more of the wine than was strictly necessary while he had been tasting it, and may have stolen a few further sips while he was transporting it back to the chateau, but he could not have drunk very much of it. Any elixir his body contained would be very dilute indeed by the time it had dissolved in wine — but it might, even so, make the wine more palatable. Benedict had not yet sampled the wine himself, but he knew that he would have to test his vintages while he was bringing them to their optimal condition; the health and pleasure thus gained would undoubtedly make his imprisonment more bearable, but his ingestion of the elixir would, over time, increase his value to the Duc in an altogether undesirable way — thus making the problem of finding a way out of his present predicament much more difficult and considerably more urgent.

With such weighty matters on his mind, Benedict might not have found it easy to sleep even if the rats had not been so active, but the news that something new and interesting was happening in the world above had obviously spread through the underworld during the day, and he was convinced that the number of furry visitors scampering about the floor on the second night of his captivity was considerably more than on the first. On the third night, if his ears could be trusted, there were hundreds swarming below him while he stretched himself out across the flat tops of his three broad barrels.

Lord de Romanin was as good as his word, reappearing in Benedict's gloomy chamber almost as soon as he had breakfasted.

"What a great day this is!" the Lord declared, merrily. "A marriage-contract to be signed and countersigned, a solemn mass in the chapel and a nuptial ceremony conducted by the Archbishop of Bordelais, a huge feast to be enjoyed, and a fine tournament to be watched. Who could ask for anything more? I am only sorry, my dear Master Paschel, that you will be too busy to join in the festivities — but I know that an artist like yourself cares nothing for the joys of ordinary men, and would far rather devote your time entirely to your vocation. Have you sampled the refilled barrel, or the one in which my old steward was interred?"

"Not yet, my lord," Benedict said, truthfully. "I am sure they are not yet ready. ..."

"You are probably right," the Duc agreed, "but I am so enthusiastic to keep track of our experiment that I cannot wait to take a sip from each of them."

Benedict had not hammered a spigot into the barrel containing the steward's body, but he had to do it now. First, however, Lord de Romanin took a cupful from Gilbert's barrel.

"It is good!" he exclaimed. "Very good indeed! Perhaps it will improve even further, given time, but I think you underestimate your talents, Master Paschel. As an artist, of course, you think only of quality . . . but now that you are in my service, I must try to be the best master I can, and it is my duty to think of quantity. Let me try the other."

Benedict let out a cupful of wine from the steward's cask and handed it over, hoping that it would be foul — or, at the very least, unready as yet to be drunk.

"Not as good," was Lord de Romanin's verdict. "Not nearly as good . . . but on the other hand, not as bad as one might expect from a polluted barrel. I cannot reckon the experiment a total success, but it is not a total failure either. Would you care to give me your opinion of the two vintages, Master Wine-maker?"

Benedict recognised the polite request as a firm command, and took a sip himself. He took a sip of Gilbert's vintage first, and immediately understood why the Duc and Sir Blaise had taken the view that there were more important issues at stake in this affair than punishing murder. The taste was divine, and the exhilarating effect it had on his consciousness was nothing short of miraculous — and yet he was as certain as he could be that this solution was considerably more dilute than the one that the Duc and his son had tasted on the previous evening.

"It needs more time," he said, trying not to let his sudden lack of sobriety show. Then he took a sip of Corentin's vintage:

The wine in which the steward's body had been soaked was not nearly as bad as Benedict could have hoped, but it was by no means as good as he had feared. He was glad of the opportunity to say: "This is not nearly ready, my Lord. Perhaps I was over-cautious to think that it would require ten years to mature, but it will certainly require one, or even two. ..."

"Perhaps you are right," Lord de Romanin said, judiciously. "You are the expert, after all, and it would not do to be too hasty . . . especially as we have the other, which will be ready far more quickly, and might be eked out for months or years

— but I must go now. I have a million things to do

— but you may be certain that I shall return." "There is no hurry, my Lord," Benedict assured him.

"None at all," the Duc agreed — but he came again much sooner than Benedict had anticipated, before the sun had set.

"There has been a terrible accident, Master Paschel," Lord de Romanin said.

"Not my father!" Benedict protested.

"Oh no," his master said. "Your father is perfectly safe in his cosy dungeon. The accident occurred during the jousting at my son's betrothal feast_____"

"Not your son!" Benedict exclaimed, in frank astonishment.

"I wish you would not keep interrupting," Lord de Romanin said. "My son is perfectly well. It is the Comte

de Thyresse, the father of his contracted bride, who has suffered a terrible misfortune. His daughter begged him not to enter the lists, and I advised him myself that it was an unwise thing to do, given his age, but he said that he felt ten years younger than he had three days ago, and insisted on strapping on his armour for, as he put it, *one last fling*. How right he was! He toppled two of my best knights, and then insisted that I send my champion against him. Somehow, in all the confusion, the weakened lance that my champion should have been carrying was set aside, and a sound one handed up to him instead — and the blow he struck was so well-judged that it went clean through my new brother's breastplate, and his heart too. What a tragedy!"

"A tragedy indeed," Benedict agreed, although his own heart was all a-flutter. "I suppose the Comte's men will carry him home to Thyresse for burial."

"So custom demands," Lord de Romanin agreed. "Clad in full armour, mounted on a shield drawn by his favourite horse. But the weather has been rather hot of late, and he came from such a distance, that I have agreed with his widow and daughter that the armour should be taken back empty for ceremonial burial, while the body is discreetly disposed of here. We must, of course, be *very* discreet. A matter of diplomatic nicety, you see.



"Yes, my Lord," Benedict said. "I see exactly what you mean." He recalled that the Duc de Romanin and his son had shared their wonderful wine, though not its secret, with their honoured guest.

By the time that Benedict stretched himself out that night, precariously perched upon his three barrels, the contents of another three were slowly leaching whatever virtue they could from the corpses of men who had tasted the elixir of youth. By rights, he supposed, the most recent vintage should turn out to be the noblest of them all — but he suspected that rights had little or nothing to do with the matter, and that the elixir had not the slightest respect for the unsubtle gradations of Aquitanian society.

After that, Lord de Romanin came down to his new winery twice a week, in order to sample all three of his experimental vintages and obtain Benedict's expert opinion as to their progress. Neither the Duc nor Benedict made any further mention of Frederic Paschel, but they did spend a certain amount of time discussing one another's health. The Lord declared freely that he had never felt better, and was improving all the time, but he

expressed some concern for his faithful servant.

"You are too pale, Master Paschel. I certainly would not want you to become addicted to your produce, but I do think you might be exercising a little too much abstinence. I was rather hoping that you and I might enjoy a very long partnership, if our experiments should happen to work out as well as I dare to hope. I have considered the matter carefully, and it seems to me that if the virtue of your brother's corpse can only be preserved, careful husbandry might allow us to exploit it for a long time... and if the virtue imparted to the other bodies can increase our stock ... well, suffice it to say that I shall value your art more highly than I can say."

"It is not lack of wine that is paling my complexion, my Lord," Benedict told his master, "but lack of light. I could be a far better servant to you, for far longer, if I had better quarters. These are cold, dark and damp, and very uncomfortable."

"Are they?" said Lord de Romanin, as if the thought had never occurred to him — and Benedict had to concede that, having never visited them by night, his master might well have no idea how bad conditions then became. The Duc's own quarters were undoubtedly placed so high in a tower that he never saw a single rat, and had no idea how abundantly they swarmed in his cellars and his sewers.

After a few moments' consideration, Duc Meldred went on: "Well, then, I suppose I must consider the possibility of moving you to more comfortable lodgings — always provided, of course, that our work goes well. All three of the barrels are improving slowly, are they not? Indeed, your brother's vintage has almost recovered the full flower of its original bouquet — do you not think so?"

"You are right, my Lord," Benedict said, "as one would expect of a true connoisseur. I believe that particular harvest might be ready in a week or so to supply another evening's bountiful carousal... although it might be wise to exercise a little more caution. I am sure that the other two barrels will produce something drinkable eventually, although I fear that they will never match the quality of the original."

"Good enough," said Lord de Romanin, nodding his head sagely. "One more week, then . . . and if the evening in question lives up to my expectations, you'll have the kind of winery of which you've always dreamed, for as long as you can keep your elixir flowing. We shall become a legend in our own lifetime, Master Paschel — and if you are the artist I think you are, it will be a long lifetime."

Benedict went to his improvised bed that night thinking *One more week . . . just one more week*, confident that it was a thought that could sustain him at least that long. He still had no idea how long his produce might sustain him thereafter, but he had to admit that the drops of wine he had taken from the barrels containing the Duc's steward and Sir Blaise's father-in-law had shown a steady improvement in quality over the past few weeks. Although they were, as he had told Duc Meldred, highly unlikely ever to equal Gilbert's vintage for taste or quality of invigoration, they did seem to have acquired a certain modest virtue — and who could say how much more they might yet acquire?

Benedict permitted himself to wonder, again, whether he might have had the extraordinary good luck to happen upon the secret of manufacturing the elixir of youth. Perhaps, he thought, Gilbert's return had been engineered by some higher power. It was surely conceivable that Gilbert had actually been the instrument of some generous spirit, commissioned by that spirit to bring the elixir to a place where it might not only renew itself but increase itself vastly — in which case, what had happened in the winery on that terrible night had not

been his fault at all, but merely the working out of some divine plan. Rather than feeling guilty about his crime, in fact, he ought to reckon himself an instrument of destiny, chosen to bring a new fount of miracles into the land of Aquitania — a fount whose effects would surely spread beyond Romanin as the Duc became more ambitious.

Once his own supply was absolutely secure, Benedict mused, Lord de Romanin would undoubtedly begin thinking in terms of trade, but as an aristocrat he would not think of trade in the same vulgar terms as Frederic Paschel. No — the Duc de Romanin would think in terms of advancement at court, and the favour of the king, . . . and when he went to the king's court in distant Aix-la-Chapelle, the Duc would doubtless take his faithful artisan with him, and raise him up from the station of wine-maker to that of Alchemist, of Master Magician. . . .

While he indulged these flights of fancy, even Benedict contrived to forget the rats that swarmed below, scavenging every last crumb that he had dropped from his plate at breakfast and supper, and lapping up the spillage from his cups and ladles.

The next morning, he received a different visitor: the scion of the de Romanin family.

"You do not seem pleased to see me, Master Paschel," the visitor observed.

"Not at all, sire," Benedict said. "I was taken by surprise — I was expecting the Duc."

"Alas," said the former Sir Blaise, "I am the Duc. There has been a terrible accident. Last evening, while my father and I were out hunting boar in the forest, his horse stumbled and he was thrown. Mercifully, he broke his neck — otherwise, he would have died a lingering death, gored by his quarry's tusks and savaged by the beast's teeth. He was so badly mutilated that I dared not allow my mother or my wife to see the body, but had it safely stowed away for discreet disposal. There will have to be a funeral, of course, but a suit of armour will suffice for all ceremonial purposes. It is a frightful thing to happen, of course; he had seemed so well of late, younger than ever. A good son cannot help but think of his beloved parents as if they were invulnerable, of course, but in my father's case there really did seem to be a possibility that he might go on forever. I had not thought of coming into my inheritance for years yet — decades, even — but when fate intervenes, priorities must change. . . .

"At any rate, Master Wine-maker, you have a new liege lord now. Fear not; I have every intention of looking after you just as well as my father did, if your produce is as good as he had begun to hope. My father seemed very well pleased with the results of his experiments, but I should like to try a few sips of each of the vintages myself— it would mean a great deal to me to know that he did not die without making a worthy contribution to the sum of human knowledge."

"Yes, sire — I mean my Lord," was Benedict's inevitable response. He drew a small measure from each of the three laden casks, one by one, and gave the three cups to his new master.

"Now that is excellent," the new Duc said, of Gilbert's vintage. "That is the vintage in which I shall toast my late father's memory — privately, of course; it does not do for an aristocrat to exhibit his grief in public. The other two will never match it, and are clearly unready even by their own low standards, but they are not entirely without virtue, are they? Please taste them, and give me your expert opinion."

"You are right, my Lord," said Benedict, when he had obeyed the command. "The other two will never match the first, but they are not utterly insipid."

"Given that the steward and my late father-in-law supped so little of the wine," the new Duc said, thoughtfully, "we cannot expect too much from them, but my father must have quaffed a great deal more

during these last few weeks. Even he might not produce a harvest to compare with your own dear brother, but I think we should make the most of him — don't you? It's what he would have wanted, after all."

"I am sure that it is," Benedict agreed. "Am I to understand that I may still move into the new quarters the old Duc was making ready for me? I am certain that I could work far more profitably there than I can here, and the necessity of tending yet another special cask will make my work even more difficult than it was before."

"I will, of course, honour all my father's promises," Duc Blaise said, "but preparations for the funeral will take up a great deal of everyone's time in the next few days. We cannot possibly hold the memorial mass until Thursday, given that we shall have to bring the Archbishop all the way back from Bordelais so that he may officiate. We shall, of course, require a suitable interval thereafter for mourning, so you must be a little more patient. Your new quarters should be ready in fifteen days — twenty at the most — and you need not fear that you will be neglected in the meantime. I shall visit you again, as often as my father did, to keep track of all our experiments. You do have an empty cask to spare, I hope, and some wine with which to fill it up."

"My supplies have run very low," Benedict said, hesitantly. "They would have stretched for seven more days, had I not had any extra work to do, but now that I must prepare another cask and my relocation is to be delayed . . . well, my Lord, the vat is empty, save for the lees, which need to be cleared out. I need more grapes to tread, and new supplies of all the compounds necessary to aid their fermentation. If you would allow me to take a carriage down to the old winery, and then to the vineyards which supply our grapes. . . ."

"Oh no," said Lord de Romanin. "You have more than enough to do here. Give instructions to my men, and they will fetch everything you need."

"It is not as simple as that, my Lord," Benedict said. "The grapes must be selected by an expert eye, and the compounds need to be assembled by someone who knows exactly what is what. I fear that I was never as careful in labelling as I ought to have been — even my former labourers would be all at sea if they tried to follow a list."

"I understand your reservations," said young Duc de Romanin. "I am a great believer in having jobs done properly. Fortunately, there is a compromise available. I shall send your father to buy more grapes and gather all the necessary apparatus. That is doubtless why my father decided to keep him close at hand."

Benedict was by no means convinced that this strategy would solve his problems, but he could not think of an adequate objection, so he nodded his head meekly.

The old Duc's body was brought down to the cellar within the hour, by which time Benedict had figured out how to rearrange the casks in such a way as to have adequate access to the four experimental vessels. One unfortunate side-effect of the rearrangement, however, was that the row of three casks that he had been using as a bed had to be broken up, and the only way that he could contrive a similar surface was to place three empty casks on top of three full ones, lined up behind the four experimental barrels. This would force him to sleep no more than a few inches from the ceiling, but he judged that it would be far better to be too close to the ceiling than too close to the floor.

He had just enough wine to spare to cover the old Duc's body — a necessary precaution, given the tendency of bad odours to rise even in a cool cellar.

On the next day, the young Duc came to see Benedict again, in a very bad temper. "Your father is a damnable rogue," he said, "and he obviously has not an ounce of filial affection in him. As an honourable man, I had naturally imagined that he would not do anything to annoy me while you were safe in my care, but I had

forgotten that the high standards of duty observed by the aristocracy are not reflected in the lower orders of our society. It appears that the old man had considerable savings in silver and gold hidden in his house — enough, at any rate, to afford the extortionate bribes that he required to make his escape from my domain. He will have to run all the way to Castile or Normandy to find security, but he obviously believes that he can do that. I pity you, Master Paschel — it must be a terrible thing to have laboured so long for such an ungrateful man, and to know that the fruits of your long labour have been the means of your own betrayal."

This was probably the truest thing that the young Duc had ever said — as Benedict freely acknowledged with a long cry of anguish.

"But you need not worry about your own future," Blaise de Romanin went on, "for I shall do everything in my power to protect you and keep you safe. I shall have every single item brought from your old storehouse to the castle, and I shall order my new steward to buy up every grape within a day's ride, so that you may have your pick of them. Next year, we shall do the same. Worry not, my faithful servant — I shall not hold your father's treason against you, and will look after you even more carefully because of it. Now, shall we see how my father's vintage is coming along? I must admit that I am keen to find out how much life there is in it, even though it will not be truly mature for a very long time."

This final judgment was, of course, correct — but Benedict only required a single sip of his new vintage to know that there was indeed life in it. The elixir of youth was obviously a very hardy liquor, which did not easily decay even if its host fell prey to dire misfortune. Even if the amount retained indefinitely within the four corpses reduced the reclaimable stock to a dose that was not quite sufficient to preserve two men indefinitely, Benedict guessed, there would be quite enough within the four casks to keep one man young for an exceedingly long time.

Well, Benedict thought, I suppose my fate is decided now, and at least I shall get my new winery, in fifteen or twenty days. It will doubtless have a stout lock on the door, but I shall be free of the rats.

Although he did not know himself whether his intention was to celebrate his own preservation or to drown his potentially-eternal sorrows, Benedict decided that he might as well console himself with a drink, and that if he were going to have a drink he might as well be drinking fine wine, and that whether he were cursing his father or congratulating him he ought to let his brother partake of his toast — so he took a generous cupful of wine from Gilbert's cask, and drank it down; and then he took another, and another. He did not even bother to top up the cask before climbing up to his new bed.

At least, he thought, I shall be safe from the rats.

Alas, this judgment turned out to be a trifle optimistic. He would, indeed, have been safe from the rats had he slept as soundly as he intended and expected to, but the ceiling of his cell was infested with spiders, which scurried about by night, and it happened that one of them lost its grip and fell into his open mouth while he was snoring.

Benedict sat up abruptly, smashing his head on the stone ceiling, and as he recoiled he rolled off his improvised bed, falling several feet on to the four barrels neatly arrayed below. No harm would have come to them had they all been properly maintained and topped-up, but Benedict had been working without a full set of cooper's tools for some time, and he had not topped up the barrel containing his brother's body. That barrel splintered, and two of its hoops broke — with the result that its liquid contents burst out, flooding the floor.

Half a dozen of the rats that were swarming over the floor at that moment were drowned, but half a thousand more set about lapping up the spilled wine.

Rats are not renowned as connoisseurs of wine, but they would probably have enjoyed what they supped even if there had been nothing in it but the essence of the grape or mere dead flesh. As things were, they were so greatly invigorated by their consumption that it only took them a further half-hour to clean Gilbert's bones of every last vestige of flesh.

Further invigorated, the rats set to work on the unconscious Benedict — who woke up just in time to feel the worst of the agonies thus inflicted, but not quite soon enough to be able to cry out in alarm. Connoisseurs of wine or not, the rats were certainly connoisseurs of flesh, pickled or fresh, and they held a tongue to be an even greater delicacy than a meaty heart or a juicy liver.

By the time that Benedict's skeleton had been stripped there were more than five thousand rats competing over the privilege. Under normal circumstances, they would have stopped at that, but many of these were rats that had now supped their fill of the elixir of youth, not to mention the essence of the grape, and they immediately set themselves to the task of gnawing through the wood of the three full casks that still remained to be emptied.

The eager rats broke their teeth and bloodied their mouths, but the stoutest heartwood of the Romanin forest could not have withstood that collective assault. Long before dawn they had cleaned three more corpses of every last morsel of flesh, and lapped up every drop of the wine in which the bodies had been doused.

By the time the young Duc's servants brought Benedict's breakfast down on the following morning, there was not a rat to be seen, although the scattered bones of the six that had drowned gave some evidence of what had happened. That day was, however, the last day on which life in the Chateau de Romanin maintained some semblance of normality. On the next night, the rats returned, and this time they were not content to stay in the cellars. They ran riot through the entire castle, consuming everything that could not move fast enough to run away — not excluding humans, dogs and horses. Lady Ghislaine and the young Duc's mother were among those who failed to make their escape.



Duc Blaise de Romanin came back the next day with a company of men-at-arms and three full packs of hunting-dogs. They set traps everywhere, and waited in full armour for night to fall. When the rats came out again the battle was long and bloody — but it was the men who eventually retreated, and never returned.

Within a year, the Domain of Romanin was no more. King Charles had revoked the title — necessarily, it was said, because the family was extinct, consumed by agents of the Devil. The Archbishop of Bordelais had informed the king that he had pronounced an anathema against the rats of Romanin, and had sprinkled holy water all around the desolate chateau, but to no avail — which was, of course, absolute proof that unholy forces were at work there.

The towns, farms, vineyards and forests that had formerly belonged to the Romanins were redistributed among the neighbouring domains — all except for the Chateau itself, and the surrounding estate, which were put under proscription and left to return to wilderness.

No one was supposed to live in the chateau or its grounds, and it is possible that no one actually did — but long afterwards, on stormy nights, for a hundred years and more, the tale was told around the hearths of all the chateaux of the neighbouring domains that the ruins of Romanin were haunted by a gaunt and wild-eyed human creature.

This madman, the storytellers said, called himself Blaise the Undying, and claimed to be a Duc — but he was evidently the lowest of the low, in the reckoning of Aquitanian society, for he dressed in rags in spite of his rude health, and never ate or drank anything but the flesh and blood of rats. Q

Brian Stableford's recent novels include The Wayward Muse (Black Coat Press) and Streaking (PS Publishing). Black Coat Press has also published his translation of Paul Feval's Salem Street, one of the pioneering series of crime novels after which the press is named. His 460,000-word reference book, Science Fact and Fiction: An Encyclopedia, will be published by Routledge in September.



A CAUTIONARY TERZANELLE

Investigation often has a cost.

Please pay attention to my wise advice,
Things dead, things drowned, things lost...
They should stay lost.

That monkey's paw has far too steep a price,
Forbidden lore is not a bedtime book.
Please pay attention to my wise advice.

Medusa will not give you one free look,
That *Necronomicon* makes you insane;
Forbidden lore is not a bedtime book.

Nyarlathep won't care if you complain,
Don't stand within reach of tentacles;
That *Necronomicon* makes you insane.

Use caution drawing demon pentacles,
Be positive that you've planned your escape;
Don't stand within reach of tentacles.

Don't watch that cursed, unlabelled videotape,
Investigation often has a cost.
Be positive that you've planned your escape;
Things dead, things drowned, things lost. . .
They should stay lost.

FOURTH AVENUE INTERLUDE

by Richard A. Lupoff illustrated by Billy

Tackett

They're all gone now, all dead. Both Jacks, and David, and Alice. David was the first to go, then one Jack, then Alice, and then the other Jack. He was the last. I'm still here, of course, but at my age you never know how much longer you're going to be around either.

And I want to tell you this now, because my memory isn't what it used to be and it isn't going to get any better. My wife tells me that I forget things that happened and remember things that didn't. Sometimes I tell the same story over and over, I know that. I guess it goes with the territory, along with the white hair and the stiff joints.

This happened a long time ago. I think it was 1949. I would have been twelve years old then, and I'm pretty sure that's when it happened because people were still talking about the big surprise of the Dewey-Truman election, how old Give-'em-Hell Harry had outsmarted all the poll-takers and pundits and even the fool who wrote

that famous headline: DEWEY BEATS TRUMAN for the *Chicago Tribune*.

It was winter, the Christmas and New Year's holidays were over and it was damned slushy and icy and miserable in New York. I was just a kid of twelve. Did I say that already? I guess it goes with the territory along with the white hair and the stiff joints.

I was just a kid of twelve and I was crazy for books. I'd discovered Book Row in New York, Fourth Avenue below Fourteenth Street. You could find anything you wanted to read down there, and at bargain prices, too, if you weren't too picky about things like first editions in dust jackets. If you'd settle for a reading copy you could get anything you wanted to read, and plenty cheap at that.

Even so, I couldn't afford the books I wanted. Arthur Conan Doyle and Edgar Rice Burroughs and Rafael Sabatini and E. Phillips Oppenheim and Octavus Roy Cohen. You could get a nice copy for a quarter and one that was messed up but still readable for a nickel if you prowled Book Row and knew how to look for books. But my father had come up from poverty and he always felt that the best way to teach me and my brother the value of money was to make sure that we never had any.

After a while, all the booksellers along Book Row knew me, and I got to be friends with most of them. Sometimes they'd pay me to do odd jobs, and of course every dime I made went right back into books. Well, I had to save a nickel for the subway ride home, it was too far to walk.

My favorite store was Biblo and Tannen. I remember the address, 63 Fourth Avenue. There were four people who worked there. The owners were Jack Biblo and Jack Tannen, born Jacob Biblowicz and Jacob Tannenbaum, but I always thought of them simply as the two Jacks. They'd been in the book trade since the 1920s. They'd been partners for so long that they'd started to look alike and dress alike. Shrinking hairlines, dark fringes, heavy horn-rimmed glasses, bushy graying moustaches, solid-color knit ties, corduroy trousers. You could tell them apart because Tannen was a little stockier, a little more outgoing, a little more talkative. Biblo was slimmer, quieter, more on the introspective, intellectual side.

Like any couple who had been together for many years they completed each other's sentences. They fought like Tracy and Hepburn, Ameche and Langford, Lee and Dannay, Chevalier and Gingold, Durocher and any umpire who was handy.

They'd let me sweep out the store, re-shelve books that customers left out, bring in the bargain tables from the sidewalk at the end of the day. They paid me fifty cents an hour, that was a dime more than the legal minimum wage, and if I took it out in trade (I always did) I got an employee discount on any book I bought.



The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes. Tartar of Pellucidar.

The Double Life of Mr. Alfred Burton. Jim Hanvey, Detective.

I went to public school, of course, and to synagogue when my parents made me, and sometimes to Ebbets Field to see the Dodgers play, especially when they played the Giants, whom my brother and I both hated, and out-of-town teams like the Boston Braves and the Cincinnati Reds. But I really lived for my days on Fourth Avenue.

On the subway, going, I would rehearse my want-list in my mind: *The Land of Mist, The Land That Time Forgot, The Man Who Changed His Plea, Scrambled Yeggs*. I'd get off at Astor Place and walk up toward Fourteenth Street, stopping at every store along the way — the Colonial Book Service, Stammer's Bookstore, Books 'n' Things, Louis Schucman, the Raven Bookshop. But I'd always wind up at Biblo and Tannen. They had a basement full of fiction, a huge room with all kinds of novels and short stories, and two smaller rooms, one full of mysteries and detective tales and one that was full of science fiction and fantasy and horror stories.

Oh, I was telling you about Jack and Jack and David and Alice and I only told you about Jack and Jack. I'll back up.

David Garfinkel was a retired high school teacher. He was a huge man, he could crush you in one hand if he wanted to. He used to sit in a chair near the counter at the front of the store. He — oh, you want to know what he looked like?

He was balding, with a gray fringe, dark-rimmed glasses, and a bushy gray moustache. He wore plaid shirts and solid-color knitted ties. He was a real old-timer. He loved to reminisce about dime novels. He'd talk about Old Sleuth and Young Sleuth, Nick Carter, Buffalo Bill, and Baseball Joe. He used to talk about a series of dime novels about a baseball team, the author helped you remember the players' names by giving them all the same initials as their positions. Pitcher Palmer, Catcher Carruthers, First Baseman Fillstrup, Second Sacker Simmons, like that. David considered pulp magazines a sign of the decay of modern civilization.

Alice Ryter ruled her own little domain from a battered wooden desk near the back of the store. She was the secretary, office manager, financial manager, and general manager of everything. She wore a stern expression, kept her hair pulled back severely, and used heavy, dark-rimmed glasses.

One Saturday I showed up to work late.

"Where were you?" asked Jack Tannen.

"Shul," I told him.

"Shul?" Jack was astonished. "Temple? You? Since when did you get religion?"

"My next birthday, I'll be thirteen. I have to be *bar mitzvah*. I have to go and study. I don't care but my brother was *bar mitzvah* and my parents say I have to be, too. So I'm late, I'm sorry. What work can I do today?"

David Garfinkel reached over and grabbed my right biceps between his fingers. He squeezed, I felt like my arm was a tube of Ipana toothpaste.

"He's a strong boy," David said. "I'll bet he can move those boxes upstairs."

"Think you can do it?" asked Jack Biblo.

"Sure I can, what do you think I am?" I knew the boxes he meant. They were heavy and I wasn't so sure at all that I could move them, but one thing I learned from my big brother is, Never say you can't do a thing, always say you can. That's how you get your chance in this world, and that's how you'll get ahead.

"Come on, then," one of the Jacks said. By now I don't even remember which one. It doesn't matter anyhow. I think it was Biblo, though.

We went upstairs. Biblo and Tannen was in an old building on Fourth Avenue, the store occupied the first floor and the basement, the second floor was office space and shipping and receiving and they kept overstock in boxes on the third floor.

When we got to the third floor, Jack pointed to a huge pile of corrugated boxes full of books. "The whole building is starting to settle and we have to even the load before we have a Leaning Tower of Pisa here. You need to climb up there, get a box off the top row, bring it down, and put it over there. Then go back and do another. Come downstairs when you're done."

I started moving boxes.

They were very heavy, and soon I was sweating up a storm, even in the middle of the winter in New York in, I think it was 1949. Could it have been 1948? Maybe November, December, *after the election*. **DEWEY BEATS TRUMAN**. After Christmas, after New Year's, it would be 1949. That's what I think.

The boxes were covered with dust that had accumulated on them for, I don't know, certainly years, maybe decades. What books were in them, anyhow? I didn't know, the boxes were sealed with brown paper tape and I couldn't look inside without cutting the tape and I was supposed to be moving boxes, not looking at books, so I just left them as they were and moved the boxes. Soon the sweat was rolling down my face and getting into my eyes, and stinging like anything. I tried to wipe my eyes with my elbow but I was wearing my first pair of glasses, with heavy, dark rims. I couldn't do it, so I took off my glasses and wiped my face with my hands. Now I was mixing dust with sweat and making a nice coat of salty mud on my face.

I kept moving boxes.

After a while a manila envelope fell out from between a couple of boxes. It must have been put on top of a box, then overlooked when the next row of boxes was added. It had been lying there for, who knows how long?

The envelope was the size of a sheet of typing paper, flat not folded. It wasn't fat, wasn't skinny. It felt like it had maybe a dozen sheets of paper in it, maybe a few more. On the front it had a couple of cancelled two-cent stamps, and was addressed to somebody way up at the tip of Manhattan. That was where the Polo Grounds were, where the Giants played.

Nobody I knew even cared about the Giants. You either were a Yankees fan (boo!) or a Dodgers fan (yay!), but nobody liked the Giants except for some show business people, for some reason I could never understand. People like Toots Shor went to Giants games. Go figure.

Right, I did say that I hated the Giants, didn't I? Well, I only hated them because I was a Dodgers fan and the Dodgers and the Giants were both in the National League, and Ebbets Field and the Polo Grounds were only a subway ride apart, so if you loved one team it was kind of natural to hate the other one, but that isn't the same thing, really, as *caring* about them.

Does that make sense?

David Garfinkel, God rest his big oversized loving soul, would understand. We used to talk about baseball. He approved of my being a Dodgers fan because they had Jackie Robinson and Roy Cam-panella. He said, "The *schwartzers* should get a chance just like anybody else, it's only right." But —

Oh, right, the envelope. The address on it was in Manhattan. The name it was addressed to had been scratched out. A few letters were visible but I really couldn't read it. I clambered down off the boxes and put the envelope over near the door so I wouldn't forget it and went back to work moving boxes.

I was just finishing up when I heard somebody coming up the stairs. The stairs were wooden and they were old. I don't know how old that building was, probably a hundred years or a couple of hundred years.

It's gone now. Book Row is all gone now.

So I heard footsteps coming up the stairs. I knew everybody in the company by then and I could tell them apart by their footsteps. When the door opened and Alice Ryter came into the room I knew who was coming before she even opened the door.

Alice took one look at me and burst into laughter. It was the first time I'd ever seen her even smile, much less laugh. I waited for her to say something.

"What happened to you?"

"What do you mean? Nothing. I've been working. Jack told me to move all these boxes. What time is it?" I didn't have a wristwatch, I was expecting one for my *bar mitzvah*. I knew I'd get a Schaeffer fountain pen or maybe a Parker 51, probably some cash that I hoped my parents would let me spend on things that I wanted and not make me buy new clothes or put the money into a college account. And I figured I'd get a wristwatch. I hoped so, anyhow.

Alice looked at her own watch and told me what time it was. Then she said, "Come with me."

She led me into the bathroom. There was a bathroom on each floor at Biblo and Tannen. She pulled the bead chain to turn on the light and made me look in the mirror. I was a mess, I'll have to admit it. My face looked as if I'd been trying out for a blackface part in a minstrel show. My hands were as filthy as my face. My shirt was sweat-stained and blotchy, too.

"Come on," Alice said. She turned on the water in the sink and made me take off my shirt and she made me wash off my face and my chest and arms and hands. When I was finished she made me start all over again. Then she made me bend over the sink and she picked up the soap and washed my hair and told me to rinse it. Then she took a towel and dried me off like a little kid. There was an old sweatshirt hanging on a wire hanger and she gave it to me to put on instead of my sweaty shirt.

She marched me downstairs and I didn't know whether I was going to get paid or get fired, even though I hadn't done anything except the job that Jack Tannen told me to do. I think it was Tannen,

anyhow.

When we got back downstairs it was dark outside. There was a heavy snowfall coming down. I'd lost all track of time while I was moving those boxes. The bargain carts had already been moved inside, the last customer was gone, and the store was closed.

The Jacks and David and Alice had a little ritual that they performed every Saturday after closing. Other nights, they just locked up and went to their respective homes. Both Jacks were married men, as was David Garfinkel. None of them had any children, though, and the two Jacks seemed to regard me as a surrogate son, David Garfinkel thought of me as a grandson, and Alice, who was unmarried, seemed to treat me as a talented but mischievous nephew. This was all wonderful for me. My mother had died when I was a little kid and my father had remarried. I didn't get along with my Stepmother and life at home was not exactly like *Andy Hardy's Double Life*, even if I did feel as if I was one kid in Brooklyn and another in Manhattan.

On Saturdays after closing, the Jacks and David and Alice would break out a bottle of *schnapps* and some sponge cake and have a little office party. They would talk over the events of the week, pass around any particular treasures that people had come in and sold them, damn the Republicans, talk about Lenin and Stalin and where Stalin had first gone wrong, and share the common gossip of Fourth Avenue.

They had never invited me to stay for their little Saturday night party before. This Saturday, they did. I said I was afraid I'd get in trouble if I stayed out too late. They conferred briefly, then Alice asked for my telephone number and called my house. There was a long conversation. When she finally hung up she shook her head, but she said, "It's okay. You can stay over at my place. I had to promise not to take you to Mass with me in the morning, to send you straight home."

David Garfinkel said, "Here, have some of this." He handed me a plate with a piece of sponge cake on it and a little glass of *schnapps*. "You ever try this before? No? Okay, be careful. Maybe you better not drink it from the glass. Break off a corner of sponge cake, good, dip it in the *schnapps* and try it that way."

The glass was a shot glass, that's what they were all drinking their *schnapps* from.

He watched while I followed instructions.

He said, "Did I ever tell you about *Frank Reade and His Steam-Man of the Plains*? No? Great story, I'll never forget it. Byline was 'Noname' but a Jew named Harold Cohen wrote it, isn't that something? He wrote three or four Frank Reades and then he left and a Cuban named Senarens took it over. You can have your E.E. Smiths and your Jack Williamsons, there was never anybody who could write science fiction like Harold Cohen."

I don't suppose that *schnapps* was any stronger than any other liquor, but remember that I was a twelve-year-old boy, I'd never even tasted alcohol before, I'd been working hard moving boxes all afternoon, and all I'd had to eat was a few chunks of sponge cake dipped in *schnapps*.

After a little while I think I got woozy, and maybe a little bit drowsy, too. Next thing I knew one of the Jacks was asking me, "What's this?"

He was holding the manila envelope. I must have brought it downstairs with me after my enforced clean-up exercise, and forgot that I had it with me. I told Jack where I had found it. He handed it to the other Jack and said, "Do you recognize this? He found it upstairs." He nodded in my direction when he said that.

The other Jack took the envelope and looked it over. I could see that the back was sealed. Some of those envelopes come with metal clasps, some have two little disks and a string that you wind back and forth to keep them closed, but this one had a plain gummed flap, like a letter-size envelope, and it was sealed shut.

Jack grinned. "I remember this, sure. Did you find this upstairs?"

I said yes.

"What do you think it is?"

I shook my head, or started to, until I realized that it was making me dizzy.

So I said, "I don't know what it is."

"Remember, Jack?" he said to the other Jack. "We got this from that strange guy from Brooklyn."

"Who?"

"What was his name? Dressed like an undertaker. Said he was a big admirer of Poe's."

"Loveman."

"Who?"

"Loveman. Sam Loveman, poet, came from St. Louis, not from Brooklyn."

"Not him. Guy came from Brooklyn, for Christ's sake, not from St. Louis."

"Cool it on the Christ's sake, please." That was Alice Ryter. Fourth Avenue was mostly a Jewish world, for some reason or other, but Alice was a loyal Catholic and she had to stand up for her rights.

"Lovecraft."

"Huh?"

I think everybody was at least a little bit tipsy.

"Howard Lovecraft," David Garfinkel said. "I remember him, a creepy guy, coming through the *door*." He pointed to the *storefront facing onto* Fourth Avenue.

"No," one of the Jacks shook his head. "Impossible. That was nineteen twenty — what's the postmark on the envelope?"

The other Jack said, "Nineteen twenty-three."

"See? We were still in the Nineteenth Street store then, he couldn't have come through that door." He pointed. The snow was coming down hard, making drifting halos around streetlights. Once in a while a car would go past, headlights scorching giant white cones in the falling snow.

"It wasn't Lovecraft or Loveman, it was Cornell Woolrich brought that thing in."

"Alice is right," said a Jack. "It was Woolrich. He was trying to be Scott Fitzgerald then, before he started writing for the gangster pulps."

"Pulps killed the dime novels," said David Garfinkel. I thought he was going to cry into his sponge cake when he said it.

Jack said, "As a matter of fact it was John Dickson Carr. Tweedy little dandy with his phony English manners. You'd think he was born on the Sussex Downs. Phony son of a bitch, came from Uniontown effing Pennsylvania."

"Jack! There's a child present."

Thanks, Alice, I thought, I needed you to remind him of that. But I didn't say anything.

"Whoever it was," one of the Jacks said.

"He wanted to sell it to us," the other Jack said.

"What a *goniff*," the first Jack said.

The room got quiet. Alice refilled everybody's glass with *schnapps* except mine, there was still some in my glass. But I leaned over her desk and took another square of sponge cake. Alice reached over to a shelf next to her desk and turned on a radio. I didn't know there was a radio there, until now. She twirled the dial and the radio made weird squealing noises, then she stopped and dance music came on.

David said, "I hate this modern junk, can't you get something decent on there?"

Alice ignored him.

I got up my nerve to ask, "But what was in the envelope?"

"The complete text of *The Lighthouse*," one of the Jacks said.

"What's that?" I asked.

"A Poe story."

I knew all about Poe. *The Pit and the Pendulum, Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar, Murders in the Rue Morgue, The Purloined Letter, The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym*. But I'd never heard of *The Lighthouse*. I said, "I never heard of *The Lighthouse*."

"That's because it's **the story** he was working on when he died. It's only a **fragment**."

I thought about that for a minute. Then I said, "But you said that was the complete text." I pointed to the manila envelope. It had found its way to Alice's desk by now, and there were a couple of fresh drops of *schnapps* on it, and some sponge cake crumbs.

"That's right," said Jack, "the complete text."

"But you said —"

"Oh, let's don't pick on the kid," David said. I wished I'd had him for a teacher, but he was retired. He was big and strong but he was old. "Tell him the story," David said.

"Okay," said a Jack. "We were on Nineteenth Street then —"

"I don't think so," the other Jack interrupted, "I think we were in this store."

"Look," Jack tapped a square-tipped finger on the manila envelope, "look at the postmark. Nineteen twenty-three. We were still on Nineteenth Street."

"No, I think it was later than that, that postmark doesn't mean anything. It could have been an old envelope that Woolrich had lying around his *apartment for years*,"



"John Dickson Carr."

"Tweedy little runt."

"He needed the money."

"See, it had to be Carr. Woolrich was a millionaire."

"But he lost his money in the Depression."

"That wasn't 'til twenty-nine."

"That's exactly my point. We were on Fourth Avenue by then."

"Damned Republicans. It was Hoover's fault. If FDR hadn't come along to save this country —" David wiped a tear with a paper napkin.

"See, so it was Loveman after all."

"Lovecraft."

"Where the hell would he have got the Poe? I remember that guy. He loved Poe but he didn't have any money either."

"Nobody did in the Depression."

"He said he had something wonderful to show us." Jack finally got the story rolling. That was Jack Tannen. He'd been a small-time stage actor when he was young, and he still had great stage presence. He said the whole trick was vocal dynamics.

"He said it was something priceless. It was the complete Poe story, *The Lighthouse*."

He paused and looked around, an old acting trick, I guess, to make sure that everybody was paying attention or something.

"I said, 'Of course, *The Lighthouse*, everybody in the world has read that. It's in the 1909 Wood-berry book. There are three or four copies in the store. In *Literature*.' But Carr, that little fairy, said —"

"Jack!" It only took one word from Alice to bring him back into line.

"Carr said, 'Yes, everybody knows about the *Woodberry fragment* but *this is the whole story*.'"

"It wasn't Carr."

"God damn it, Jack, please don't interrupt me. All right, whoever the hell it was, Carr or Woolrich or a person from Porlock —"

"Okay, good, it was a person from Porlock."

Everybody stopped talking, as if by unanimous telepathic agreement, and knocked back their *schnapps*, even me, even though it nearly strangled me and I could feel my face getting hot and red.

Then Jack said, "So I figured I'd humor this pathetic nobody. I said, 'How much do you want for the complete *Lighthouse?*' and he said, 'Fifty dollars,' and I kept a straight face and said, 'All right, let's have a look at it.'"

Alice Ryter said, "Show it to the boy."

Jack reached over and took the envelope off her desk and took a letter opener and slit the manila envelope and showed me the contents. The thing was about ten or twelve or fifteen pages, typed on onionskin. It started, *Jan. 1 — 1796. This day —*

Jack took the envelope back and slid the pages inside and handed it to Alice. She put it on her desk, reached under the desk for her purse, and put the purse on top of the envelope. As if an errant wind was going to whip through the store and carry it away.

I said, "Poe died in 1849." I knew that much. "Did they even have typewriters then?"

"No," Jack laughed. "I pointed that out to the fellow and he said, 'Oh, this was typed from Poe's manuscript a few years ago. Around 1910, I think. I knew the person who typed it. He was a descendant of Rufus Griswold's. There were two versions of the manuscript in the Griswold family all those years. The one in Woodberry was just a false start. Poe put it aside and began all over again and wrote the complete story. That's the one that my friend had. He typed it up from Poe's holograph.'"

David said, "Well, at least he knew a few things."

"So I asked him where was the Poe manu-script," Jack continued, "and he said, 'My friend threw it away after he finished typing it up.'"

The building must have been resettling from all the weight I'd shifted that afternoon, because it gave a loud creak right then.

Jack said, "The guy must have been desperate to try a crazy stunt like that, so I told him I couldn't give him fifty dollars for the thing, I could go maybe a dollar, dollar and a half at the most. He came down, I went up, he came down, I went up. Finally I said, two bucks, absolute tops. Take it or leave it."

Okay, there was the envelope, there was the typescript, so obviously the guy took it.

"He said, 'Do me a favor,' " Jack said. " 'I can't sell this for two dollars but if you'll lend me two I'll leave the Poe story with you for security, I'll come back as soon as I can and buy it back from you for the two plus interest.' So I said okay, and I gave him two bucks and he left the manuscript with me but he never came back for it."

"He went home to Porlock," David suggested.

Alice looked pointedly at her watch and said, "It's getting awfully late. I think we'd better call it a day. Or a night. Time to head for home. You boys can sleep late on Sunday, I go to early Mass."

David said, "What about the kid?"

Alice said, "He can sleep on my couch. I'll feed him an early breakfast and send him home safe and sound. That okay with you?" she asked me.

I said, "Sure." Then everybody stood up and put on their coats because of the weather. I said, "Can I read that thing?"

A Jack said, "What thing?"

"*The Lighthouse.*"

Jack hesitated a second, then he shrugged. He was shrugging into his topcoat and I think he was shrugging in answer to my question, too. "Sure, why not, it isn't worth anything."

That was a long time ago. Along, long time ago. Look at me now, would you? You think I'm the same person who moved a few tons of boxes in one afternoon and only worried about getting dirty? White hair, stiff joints, did I ever tell you about how I got my job, working for Biblo and Tannen? Oh, I did. Okay.

I always loved books. I thought I'd wind up working on Fourth Avenue at Schulte's or Stammer's or Eureka Bookshop or the Raven Bookshop. Come to think of it, I wonder why that poor guy didn't sell his Poe item to the Raven. Maybe he tried and they wouldn't take it. Jack only took it because he felt sorry for the guy. He never thought he'd come back for his piece of junk. And he never did. Did I mention that? He took the two dollars and said he'd come back for his typescript but he never showed his face at Biblo and Tannen again.

Yes, I thought I'd wind up a bookman, maybe I'd quit school and work for Biblo and Tannen full time. That would teach that wicked witch of a stepmother a lesson. But I'd miss my brother. But if I could do that, maybe they'd let me sleep in the store, I could sleep upstairs in the overstock room, and maybe someday they'd make me a partner or I could even start my own bookstore.

It didn't happen that way. I guess I just wasn't brave enough to go out on my own. After all, I was only twelve. So I was *bar mitzvah* and I finished high school and I went to Columbia the same as Cornell Woolrich only I didn't drop out, I finished my degree and spent a few years in the Army and then I got out and became a writer.

Oh, it's been a long life. I've written a whole shelf of novels. Plus a few screenplays, a bunch of short stories, some essays and books of what I like to call cultural history, literary biography and criticism. Biblo and Tannen would call it *Literature*.

That night we got to Alice Ryter's apartment and she made up a bed for me on the couch and gave me a cup of cocoa to drink before I went to sleep. I wish she'd been my stepmother instead of the woman my father married. I asked if I could stay up and read the Poe story and she said sure, why not, it can't do you any harm.

I turned on a standing lamp and sat on the couch with my feet up and pulled the blankets around myself. I took the typescript out of the envelope and started to read.

Jan. 1 — 1796. This day — my first on the light house — I make this entry in my Diary, as agreed on with De Grat. As regularly as I can keep the journal, I will — but there is no telling what may happen to a man all alone as I am — I may get sick, or worse So far well!

The story went on from there, a wild adventure about the narrator, *oy!* I can almost remember his name, it's on the tip of my tongue. It'll come back, don't worry.

There was something lurking in the underground foundation of the lighthouse, and people hiding out from a place called Norland. There was a wonderful dog in the story, too, named Neptune. Why can I remember the dog's name and not the man's? Anyhow, Neptune was big and friendly and nothing like the spoiled, pampered creature that my stepmother brought with her when she married my father. And there was something about an "aerial caravel" piloted by De Grat. I'm sure I finished reading it before I fell asleep.

In the morning Alice woke me up and gave me breakfast. I said I had a headache and she laughed at me and said, "Your first hangover, congratulations." She sent me home. I left the Poe story next to the couch.

Nineteen-fifty, the spring was beautiful. David Garfinkel came to work, spent the morning sitting in his chair, went out to lunch, came back, sat down in his chair, put his chin down on his chest, and died. Died in a bookshop. I think I'd like to go that way, not lying in a hospital bed with needles in my arms and tubes up my nose.

Jack Tannen retired to Florida, couldn't stand the boredom, and became curator of a rare-books collection for the rest of his life.

Alice Ryter moved to Los Angeles to care for her aged mother and go to Mass without having to worry about snow and ice. She lived to a ripe old age.

Jack Biblo was the last to go. He was well past ninety, still buying and selling used books, bless his soul. He was more of a father to me than my father ever was.

I know what Heaven is going to look like. When my time comes, if I pass muster with Saint Peter, he'll point the way for me. I'll push open the front door at 63 Fourth Avenue and there will be both Jacks and David and Alice and a building filled with thousands and thousands of old books. I'll walk in and one of the Jacks will say, "Come on, kid, where have you been? There's work to be done." But then David will grab me and ask, "Did I ever tell you about those great dime novel detectives, Old Sleuth and Young Sleuth? They were wonderful." Alice Ryter will be there, and she'll say, "Leave the boy alone, can't you? For heaven's sake, he's only twelve years old. How can he be in two places at once?"

And it will be like that, forever.

Did I tell you that Jack Biblo was the last to go? I repeat myself these days, I know. It goes with the white hair and the stiff joints. Jack was still married, and when he died his wife, Frances, telephoned me to tell me the news. I said I was so sorry, and I was sorry that I hadn't stayed in touch all those years, and she said it was all right, they'd always followed my career and were always proud of me and told their friends that they'd helped me get my start with books when I was twelve years old.

We had a nice talk. I'm afraid I cried more than Frances did. I didn't want to hang up, I felt that there was still a link there and once I hung up it would be gone, all gone, all dead. But finally I told Frances that I loved her and Jack and she said she knew that, she'd always known that, and thank you for saying it at last.

I wiped my eyes. I felt like a fool. My turn is coming soon. I thought about all those good times, and I

smiled when I remembered moving those heavy boxes and the famous *schnapps* party and sleeping on Alice Ryter's couch. I remembered the Poe story, as much of it as I could. Was it real? Was it really all Poe, or did one of those others complete Poe's fragment and try to pass it off as a great find?

But what if he had? What if the version of *The Lighthouse* that I read at Alice Ryter's place was a collaboration, was part Poe and part Cornell Woolrich or part Poe and part Samuel Loveman or Lovecraft or John Dickson Carr?

Idle speculation. Idle speculation. I stood up slowly — stiff joints, you know — and found the battered *Complete Poe* set on my shelf and pulled down the volume of short stories. Yes, there was *The Lighthouse*, the fragment, the same fragment that Woodberry first published in 1909. I started to read. *Jan. 1 — 1796. This day —*

I read to the end of the fragment and then I tried to remember the rest of the story, the version I had read, wrapped up in a blanket, woozy from my first encounter with alcohol, sitting on Alice Ryter's sofa.

There was something about an underground room and something about a flying machine. I remembered imagining that I was there with DeGrat and the narrator, I can almost remember his name, and there were clouds around us. What was that fellow's name? I can almost remember it . *Q*

Richard A. Lupoff writes: "I really did work for Biblo and Tannen for a number of years. That was one of the few jobs I've ever held that I truly loved. The wonderful store, the amazing people who worked there, and even the events of "Fourth Avenue Interlude" are all based on reality - but with a twist. The reader will have to decide how much of the story is fact and how much is fantasy.

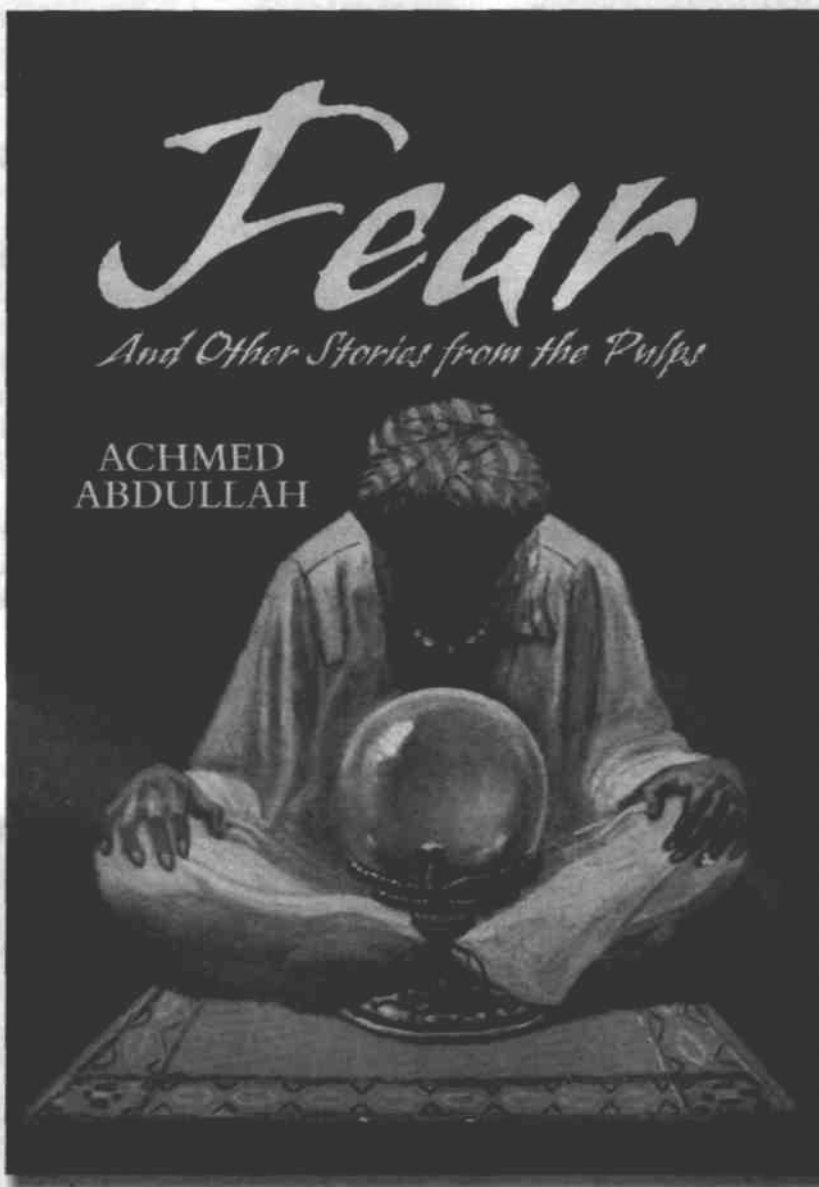
"After all these years, I now live several thousand miles from Fourth Avenue with my beloved spouse, Patricia, basking in the companionship of assorted children, grandchildren, dogs, and assorted cats.

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CORPSE'S WRATH

by **Keith Taylor** illustrated by **George Barr**

The thief had not been followed to Kiya's house. He made sure of that. Not for a thief's usual reasons, either, since he did not visit Kiya's house to plunder it. In fact he supported her. Skirting the market-place near his destination, he glanced at the white disk of the moon, sacred to Thoth. Bats flitted across it. Somewhere a jackal howled. Si-hotep paid no heed to omens normally, but the occasions on which he was called, through agents, to perform some task for the Archpriest of Anubis were never normal. He liked neither the flight of bats nor the jackal's cry.

Gliding into the alley behind Kiya's little house, he listened intently for a few moments. He heard nothing but a dog lifting its leg against the alley wall and, over by the market-place, a drunken potter stumbling home, singing a song to which he had forgotten half the words. Well and good. Si-hotep had taken even more than his usual meticulous care not to be followed. He was — almost satisfied. He approached Kiya's dwelling.

His preferred way of entering was by climbing a convenient palm and so gaining the roof. Tonight, though, he varied it by slipping through a shadowed window. He never made enemies if he could avoid it; so far as he knew, none of the victims he robbed had even heard his name, and still less Kiya's. It could happen, though. The gods themselves were not perfect. If nefarious men had entered her house to wait for him, he meant to surprise them and not vice versa.

He heard the wheezing snores of Kiya's servant, deep in a peaceful sleep in her ground floor chamber. That reassured him, though not completely. He moved quietly through the upper rooms of the little house, then crept up the few narrow steps to the roof. He found it bare and innocent in the moonlight. Only then did he return to the room where Kiya slept — the most comfortably appointed she had ever lain in, much less owned, all of it provided by the thief and maintained by his lawless activities. He cleared his throat. Kiya slept very lightly. That was all it took. She rolled over, her tangled hair flying, and said sharply, "Who's there?"

"Si-hotep. I hope the knife I gave you is now in your pretty hand."

"Y-yes. Si-hotep? Then what colour is the dress you gave me twelve days ago?"

"It wasn't a dress. It was scented oil. The dresses, three, were before that, and it's good to find you cautious. Should I describe them?"



"No! Ah, Si-hotep!"

She scampered to his arms, a lithe former beggar-girl who had gained some much-needed flesh since meeting the thief, but she kept hold of the knife in case she had made a mistake. Si-hotep, long used to moving nimbly in the dark, took that wrist in a sinewy hand for safety. After a long kiss that settled his identity, he removed the knife and put it aside. Then he led Kiya back to the bed. He realised as he made heated merry love to her that he had missed her keenly; and not for the first time, the knowledge brought him qualms of disquiet. But he forgot it as she held him close and said love-words.

Kiya lit the lamp afterwards. Its light slid over her brown skin and the thief's. Running his hand down the smooth channel of her back, he said with regret, "I must be gone well before dawn. There's a job in progress, Kiya, and until it's done and the loot disposed of, I cannot come near you. No, don't worry about me. It's an ordinary business, and should not call for more than ordinary care."

That was almost true. The "loot", though, so to speak, was a man, a dangerous brute of a man who did not wish to be found, but whom the thief had to find. He regarded it as work far beneath his talents. A time-consuming bore, too. Still, the darkest, most feared magician in the Two Lands of Khem had ordered that the man be found. Si-hotep gathered he had been involved in some plot against the Archpriest. A most perilous plot involving chicanery with the late Pharaoh's jewelled mortuary talismans. A fool's plot that Si-hotep would not have touched with a pole.

Kiya surprised him. She said severely, "That is not what I hear. It isn't gold or jewels this time, is it, but a man who works with them — a temple craftsman who has done wrong and gone into hiding? A bad man. What do you want with him?"

"I never want anything at all with fellows like that," Si-hotep told her. "You have listened to market place chatter."



"Sometimes it's right! Walk wide of this one. His name is Perkheth —" She watched his face as she spoke the name. Si-hotep didn't react. "— and they say he beat his wife to death."

The market place chatter for once *was* correct. Si-hotep said with a shrug, "Bad, right enough. A matter for the watchmen and the judges, though, not for me. It's jewels I'm after tonight, Kiya. Wish me luck and wait in patience till you see me."

He departed, then, before she could cling or express further worry. A sack of faience, spices, and dyes remained in a corner to show Si-hotep had been there. It would support the girl for some time, and none of it had been stolen, if a busybody neighbour should accuse her. Si-hotep was a careful professional — no, a master of lone hand thievery.

And nevertheless Kiya worried.

"He's the third! And I tell you Geb's angry ghost had them all!"

The man giving his fearful opinion in the waterfront beer-house was a Nile boatman — that was to say, one of an obstreperous breed of roughs and brawlers. They crowded into dives like this one fresh from days of man-killing labour on the River, and an hour later the walls shook with their fighting. Si-hotep had been haunting such places in search of his man for days. Although a temple craftsman, a jeweller, he had been born a boatman's son. Under the necessity of hiding he might well have returned to his origins.

"Ghost!" The response, from a brawny lout with pop-eyes and chewed stumps for ears, could hardly have been more scornful. "Do ghosts hang men up by the heels and slit their bellies? Someone did not like them, that's ail — someone whose cargo they stole, I am guessing."

"Slit their bellies and cut out their eyes!" the first boatman enlarged with gloomy relish. "Likely enough that's what happened to Geb. It was past due. But he's stubborn and vengeful enough to return."

Si-hotep had heard that subject talked about, sometimes in subdued tones, in other dives besides this one. Three men unpleasantly killed on the Hikuptah [the ancient name for Memphis] docksides since the last full moon made a strong encouragement to be cautious. The more so when some attributed the deaths to a ghost or demon. Si-hotep wondered glumly if a supernatural agent had been sent to find and silence the man he wanted. If the late three gruesome deaths were its work.

He thought not. The men, highly-placed ones no doubt, who had tried to discredit the Archpriest of Anubis, were clever and subtle as well as skilled in sorcery. If the dread Archpriest had not learned their identities yet, but was reduced to trying to trace them through their lowliest tools, then by Hathor they must be! They would not send a demon so clumsy it had to kill three men at random before slaying the right one. No, this nasty business belike had nothing to do with Si-hotep's task.

The frog-eyed boatman continued to scoff. "Geb's boat capsized and he fed a crocodile! It was past due, as you said. Never saw a boat worse kept than his. Bah! A man should at least broach his second jar before he talks of ghosts."

"To me you say so?" The other man rose with his voice turning to a bellow. "To me? I've killed three crocodiles and made ten men ghosts! I'd drink you senseless on my worst night! A bull hippopotamus was my father and a lioness my mother! I — "

He was broad, chunky and tough, but Frog-eyes reached out a casual hand and twisted his nose. The believer in ghosts struck his hands apart and hit him. Servants carrying jars of beer and a naked dancer in the middle of the floor scampered aside. The fighters struggled, bit, stamped, and generally sought to maim, swaying and grunting.

Frog-eyes clamped a wrestling hold on his opponent's arm and sought to break it. The other, bending slowly forward to the floor in an effort to save his limb, seemed only to be delaying the fracture. Then he brought up from that very floor a fearful heel-of-the-hand blow. It swept around in a *half circle and snapped Frog-eyes' jaw when it landed*. The sound filled the air of the grog-house.

Except that he was a Nile boatman, said by the effete to be a barely human breed, Frog-eyes would have been unconscious. He remained on his feet, and more; he kicked the other man in the middle with a force fit to rupture his liver. Hurling back, he collided with a newcomer. That impact made even Si-hotep wince a little. The newcomer did not fall down, though, or even stagger.

He was big. Big, hard, and brutal enough to stand out even in this company. Naked except for a loincloth,

muscled like a nest of entwined pythons, he turned his shaven head from one combatant to the other.

"Your fight is over," he growled. "Be quiet or get out. Else I'll drown you both in a cesspit."

Eying him, Si-hotep thought he looked like the only man in the place who could carry out such a promise. Either Frog-eyes was mad with pain or didn't give a curse. Broken jaw and all, he flung himself at the stranger, roaring wordlessly.

The stranger hit him. Once. Then he seized him by the neck and thigh, raised him off the ground, and dashed him down so that his back met the stranger's rising knee. The move could have snapped his spine if knee had met backbone squarely, but it struck to one side and crushed a kidney. He writhed, rolled, and was hauled to the door by the beer-house's chucker-out, who had done nothing to earn his keep until then. The other brawler crept after him into the darkness, evidently set on murder.

Si-hotep looked the newcomer up and down. He appeared hard as cedar, and suitably battered from fighting over the years — yes — but his skin lacked the outdoor look of the other boatmen, and in general he seemed better treated by life than they. It was just an impression, formed by smoky lamp-light. Still it seemed enough to make the fellow worth investigating.

He stared at Si-hotep in no friendly wise.

"What do you think you are looking at, fish?"

"I don't quite know," Si-hotep said frankly. "Whatever it is, it blocks my view of the dancer. Sit and drink with me if you like. If not, I ask that you step aside."

The stranger's gaze turned red. Si-hotep made ready to grasp his knife. To stop this one he would have to strike at three or four vital spots in succession while staying out of his grip. Killing him was not permissible, though, if he should be the man Si-hotep sought; the Archpriest had no kindly response to failure. Besides, Si-hotep was a thief, not generally a killer. He had slain only one man, and that not on a job. A matter of self-defence or he would have carved Si-hotep's entrails.

The brute changed his mind about mayhem and showed a grin. "You will stand me beer? I've never refused it yet, but tell me why, manikin, tell me why."

"I'm seeking a bodyguard," Si-hotep answered, most affably, but letting some worry show. "By your looks you would do. I would pay well, but I can tell you now, you would earn it. There'd be some danger; it calls for a man who can stomach desperate deeds."

"Someone craves your blood?" the brute suggested. He hunkered down beside Si-hotep, scarred brawn in a loinclout.

"Several do."

Which they did, but only as the unidentified thief who had robbed them, not with any knowledge of who he might be.

"Name two in particular, and tell me why."

"I owe gambling debts to the one who matters. But another knows he is not the father of his wife's baby. Their names would mean nothing to you; they dwell in Thebes. Therefore I left the city for a while, but friend, I must return. If you've no taste for travel to Thebes, well, then, drink your good beer and we will part company."

"I might like to see Thebes," grunted the other.

Looking him over, the thief felt his first impression confirmed. His excitement was rising. His new acquaintance might be brawny, tough as harness leather, and battered by fighting; but he was not just a Nile boatman. His

sunburn did not go deep enough. Si-hotep watched his hands as he gripped his beaker of beer, and quelled an urge to shout in triumph. Yes! He'd thrown three sixes at last! The stranger's hands were not those of a man who constantly rowed and hauled on ropes. He'd stained them deeply with pitch, but the only thick calluses they bore were on the fingers, where a jeweller grew them. A large good-luck pendant of the Nile god hung around his neck, too, just over the breast-bone. Perfect to cover the spot where jewellers braced a bow-drill for endless hours.



Si-hotep had drunk and gamed in waterfront dives for twelve days, searching for a jeweller in hiding, a man who came from a family of boatmen and might well return to the scenes of his early life in an effort to disappear. Now, perhaps, he had him. A man who had probably fashioned a false copy of the emerald scarab meant to be buried with the late Pharaoh, as part of a plot against the Archpriest of Anubis. More fool he.

"You have a name?" he asked.

"Webenu the boat-builder. And you?"

Webenu, indeed. It was Perkheth. The thief would have laid gold to stale bread. Meaning this was a man who had been a swaggering, drunken terror to the community of artisans in which he had lived, and capped his misdeeds by battering his wife to death — a crime not greatly condemned in some uncouth lands, but in Khem abhorred.

"Ra-hen," the thief said. "I am a cargo scribe on the Blue Perch. You will have seen the ship. It returns to Thebes in three days. Can you come along?"

"Maybe." Perkheth looked him over with undiminished suspicion. "But not on your say-so. Get the master of this ship to vouch for you and I may think about it. Here's a warning — if you are anything but what you pretend, I'll serve you as you just saw me serve a stronger man than you, and the last thing you hear will be your own spine breaking. Understand?"

"You're not ambiguous," the thief conceded.

He had found his man. This was Perkheth, not Webenu, and not a boat-builder. All that remained was to trick him aboard the Blue Perch where the crew could subdue him and carry him upstream to the dark mansion of Kamose the Archpriest. Si-hotep preferred not to wonder what would happen to him there — very much preferred it.

He was only certain that Perkheth would tell the Archpriest's minions all they desired to know.

III

Many beakers later, Si-hotep decided his new drinking companion was satisfied of his bona fides. Enough to approach the Blue Perch with him, anyhow. The vessel really did hail from Thebes and he had come to Hikuptah aboard her, as a cargo scribe using the name Ra-hen, though not of course all the way from Thebes itself. The Archpriest Kamose's agents could arrange anything.

"Those two fools whose fight you stopped, brother," he said, his arm around the other man's shoulder in drunken affection. "They argued about a ghost, a ghost, a ghost — that kills men — hangs them by the heels and eviscerates them. Is there truth to that?"

Perkheth hawked and spat, careless of whom he hit. "You must be as great a fool as they, to ask. Two fellows have died that way. Found with swollen footprints made in their blood. Eyes ripped out as well." He chuckled ghoulishly. "Someone disliked them. But a ghost? I doubt it."

Si-hotep felt less sure. He had encountered a ghost once. He knew the thing was possible.

"But supposing a man had been killed like that himself, and his corpse sunk in the river, lost to decent obsequies? His lich or spectre might come back. And without eyes it might seek blindly, slay at random — an ill prospect."

He exaggerated a shiver. He had not entirely faked it, however. Perkheth, drinking deeply, remained cheerfully scornful.

"You'd better go back to Thebes, little man. You're too easily scared for the Hikuptah docks."

Si-hotep had not often been called timid. He could not recall that those who had done so were outstanding for wit, either. He took Perkheth's aspersion as a tribute to his acting.

"I'd sooner chance my luck in Thebes, so long as you are beside me. But I must have an answer by tomorrow night. If you are not interested, I must find another, or — "

"Or jump ship, eh? Stay here? If you wish me to be interested, you had better make me believe you can pay. Men with heavy gambling debts are bad risks that way."

Si-hotep shifted his gaze in dissembled worry. "My parents are rich. Ask the Blue Perch's captain. Were all else to fail I would get your price from them."

"It makes no odds to me where you get it. Listen, though! If you cheat me it will be you who is found hung by the heels, eyeless and gutted — here or in Thebes. I care not. Now in Amun's name, show me this cursed ship."

"At once?"

"Know you a better time?"

Si-hotep did not. They finished their beer and left, Perkheth ostentatiously taking an ugly hardwood cudgel which he boasted that he never needed against fewer than four. They moved together along the Hikuptah waterfront, where the lapping Nile bore up a thousand ships and boats. Si-hotep smelled fish and grain, varied kinds of foreign timber — cedar, fir, ebony — hides, oil, and spices. Ships from all over the Delta and beyond rubbed creaking sides with vessels from far up the Nile.

Perkheth said little. They were passing a flat-decked barge which had off-loaded its granite cargo and now rode empty, when he unleashed his surprise. Without the slightest warning, he swung his massive arm across Si-hotep's chest to knock him off the dockside. He fell on the barge's flat deck, twisting like a cat. Despite that, half the breath

was knocked out of him and he hit his elbow agonisingly hard. Then Perkheth sprang after him, dropping through the air to land on the thief with dazing impact and immobilise him in a wrestler's hold.

Si-hotep did not immediately react with fear. His first mortified thought was, "Taken. By this oaf. Me! And so easily."

Then he did feel a stab of fear. Perkheth's hands could slay him with one violent twist. Si-hotep had his knife, of course, strapped to his thigh under his linen kilt, but he dared not kill Perkheth when Kamose the Archpriest wanted him alive. Better a quick if ugly death, here on this rocking barge, than the anger of Kamose.

Si-hotep concealed both the knife and his own considerable wrestling skill. He struggled dramatically against the grip of arms like hippopotamus bones sunk in layered ship's rope, and voiced a terrified gurgle. If Perkheth meant to question him before killing, Si-hotep might still retrieve the advantage. If not — Kiya had better find some dull decent craftsman and marry him, for she would not be seeing Si-hotep again.

"Fool!" Perkheth snarled. "You think I will go aboard a ship I haven't chosen with some stranger who drops from the sky? I have questions, and you will answer quickly. If you pause — if I think you've lied, even think it — your neck breaks. Understand?"

Si-hotep uttered an abject croak.

"Who are you? What is your lay?"

He was questioning, not killing, and that had promise. He even relaxed his grip by a generous finger-joint's length. Si-hotep feigned a choking fit and then gasped:

"I'm what I say! Cargo scribe — temple of Amun-Ra — Thebes. In trouble. Need protection."

"In trouble you surely are! And there's no protection. Not from me. Do you know who I am?"

Si-hotep had no more doubt now.

"I care not! If you do not want the pay I offer — let me go! I'll forget you. Find another."

"You will forget the sun and this world if I turn your neck a hand's width more! Listen to me, jackal! I have trouble, too. Folk are looking for me, and you may be their creature. Eh? If that's so, your one chance to live is to speak truth. Who sent you?"

"No! Don't know Hikuptah. I'm from Thebes."

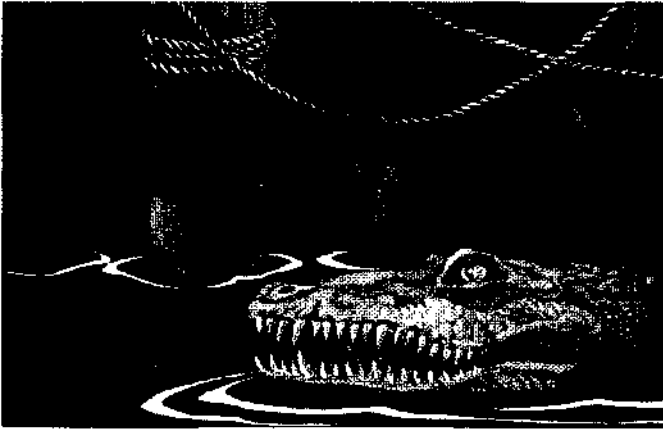
With a growl, Perkheth ran him to the side of the barge and forced his head into the water, holding him down. The thief had a chance to twist free. He resisted the temptation. He could hold his breath nearly as long as a frog. At various times he had lain in prolonged hiding in fishponds, tan-pits, and worse.

In the end Perkheth hauled him up. The thief coughed and retched in a great display of helpless misery.

"Now the truth! Or I drown you!"

"No!" Si-hotep croaked. "Listen! G-gaming. I lost much. That's true. The creditor would have me — rob the temple. I dare not. Need someone — to frighten him. And his two bullies. Truth!"

It rang true even to him. He'd rehearsed it enough. Now, he hoped, this fellow would believe and take the job, thinking he had intimidated his new employer into malleability. Si-hotep never found out. Instead, he heard a sudden swirl and gurgle of water on the far side of the transport barge. A manlike shape clambered aboard. Water streamed from its shoulders and legs as it shambled forward. Wet dark prints of swollen feet showed on the deck behind it.



It moved as silently as Si-hotep could have done. Crossing the deck diagonally, it emerged from shadow into the moonlight. Si-hotep's marrow chilled and his throat closed in horror. For the moment he could do nothing but point his arm and stare mutely. Perkhet sneered, taking it for an ancient trick. He raised his fist. A thick wet hand closed over it.

IV

Perkhet's brutal face changed even before he turned around. He looked at what gripped him, and sank to the deck-boards in a faint. An immediate dead faint. His bones seemed to melt as he slipped down.

The figure stooping over him showed slick and slaty-skinned in the moonlight. It stank of putrefaction though it showed few signs of rotting. The black holes of eyeless sockets gaped between its forehead and cheeks. Entrails bulged in loops out of a gutted belly, hanging down. River water dripped and streamed from it, pooling on the barge's deck.

Si-hotep thrust against the deck with both heels, moving desperately away. Loathing assailed him. Madness threatened his mind, and in some irrelevant part of it he cursed the Archpriest Kamose. At his bidding, the thief had found Perkhet — and now this thing had found Perkhet also. He yearned to leap over the side and swim. But he dared not. The Archpriest was hardly known for indulgence towards failure.

Before Si-hotep's appalled eyes, the dead thing bent over Perkhet. It moved quickly and surely; more bad news. It dropped a hand to the jeweller's chest and sank swollen fingers mercilessly into his chest muscle. The other hand flashed to his face. A dead thumb gouged. Perkhet screamed like a speared donkey, and writhed on the deck with blood rilling down his cheek. He screamed on. The dead hand came forward again, to grope at Perkhet's face. It sought the other eye.

Si-hotep lunged, his knife out and glittering. As the wet grey thumb began to press on Perkhet's second eyeball, the thief cut the tendon that moved it. Then he seized the forearm and slashed the inside of the wrist for good measure. Those tendons separated also. A surgeon could not have been quicker or defter. The walking corpse flung out its injured hand and forearm, to knock Si-hotep rolling along the barge's deck. The power in that swing made

him feel as though he had been kicked by a rhinoceros. Breathing was effortful torment. Ribs might be broken. His legs felt like wet twine as he rose.

He still held his knife.

Perkhet's howls had not lessened, in volume or frequency. He had writhed away from the thing that attacked him, and lost skin thereby; more blood dripped down his massive chest. The grisly lich advanced on him. Si-hotep, moving faster now, lumbered up behind it.

Lumbering was not a gait to which he had been reduced before. He did not like it. Nor did he like the notion of coming to grips with this thing again. It had the scarred brawn of a Nile boatman — not as large as the howling Perkhet, but seemingly even stronger in death, and proof against pain.

Not invulnerable, however. That was established.

It had no eyes, yet it turned its head as Si-hotep came on. Could it hear? Had it heard his footsteps, or the throb of his heart? Yes. Why not? If it moved despite being dead, it could have hearing.

Perkhet tried to escape into the water, dragging himself to the side of the transport barge. The lich's head promptly turned towards him. It sprang in pursuit, found his ankle and began dragging him back. None of Perkhet's previous screams had equalled his production now.

Si-hotep leaped on the dead thing's back, passing an arm about its throat, and stabbed one ear, then the other, with his awl-sharp knife, giving a neat vicious twist each time. Ear-drum and inner ear alike were destroyed. The lich, with equal precision, broke Perkhet's ankle before it released him. Then it caught the sinewy living arm across its dead throat and flipped Si-hotep over its shoulder. The thief, an agile wrestler and acrobat, landed without injury, but the dead thing retained its awful grip on his arm. It could tear his shoulder-joint apart in another moment.

Si-hotep cut the tendons of that wrist too. Although the strength went out of the terrible dead grip, the fingers did not open. And its slick cold obscene touch revolted him past reason.

The thief kicked hard at its riven belly. His foot squelched among the grey-black entrails, and again his flesh crawled. Legs braced on the lich's trunk, he dragged his arm free. He twisted aside just as a necrotic foot stamped down. It would have crushed his chest if it had struck.

Si-hotep rose, still shaken. The grey-skinned thing groped the air with its hands, flailed them like clubs, blew air from its dead lungs in a hollow wail that was the first sound Si-hotep had heard from it. It appeared baffled. Blind from the beginning, it was now deaf also, and its hands lacked gripping power. Good. The thief should be able to gather Perkhet, who would *give little* trouble now, and depart.

He glanced swiftly about. The jeweller had crawled into the bow of the barge and now crouched there, glaring from his one eye. Si-hotep approached him.

The dead thing rushed after the thief with sudden terrifying accuracy. Its swollen feet boomed on the planks. Si-hotep, glancing over his shoulder with a pang of terror, understood, It could not see; it could not hear. However, it could feel the vibration his light footsteps caused in the planks, as a snake feels such vibrations through the ground and knows when to slither aside.

Then it **could probably scent** him.

It remained **blind and** deaf, though. Si-hotep dodged its onslaught easily. In his growing confidence he even took a fleeting few heartbeats to wonder about its **purpose**. And who it was. Or once had been. A boatman, clearly. Some waterfront thug with a life of crime behind him. An enemy or a group of them had killed him nastily. Now, lacking a tomb, it had returned from some crocodile's larder for revenge. Whether it had been a boatman named

Geb, or someone else, and whether it could find its murderers or was striking at random, were questions of minor concern.

The thief ducked beneath a swing of one dreadful arm. Bracing himself for the sickening touch of its flesh, he lunged at one leg and cut the big tendon behind the ankle. The lich tried to fall *on him* like a tree. All his celerity barely got him out of its way. He flung himself on the other calf to cripple that one, but the thing anticipated him and slammed its knee into his breast-bone.

Si-hotep went down. A dead hand seized him. Its grip began closing. Astonished, Si-hotep kept his head, and realised this was the hand on which he had cut only the tendons inside the wrist. Its fingers could still close. They did, and broke his arm.

Si-hotep groaned in agony as the dead fingers continued to close, but he had felt pain before. He dropped the knife from his strengthless hand. Before it fell half a cubit he had caught it in the other. He made two desperate, deft slashes, and the lich's fingers lost their power. With a third precise cut he filleted the brawny arm from shoulder to wrist. Then, setting his teeth, he tore his broken arm free of the dead thing's weakened grip.

He nearly *fainted*. Sweat dripped from his *face*. It head-butted his forehead as he swayed before it. Si-hotep sprawled at the edge of the deck with his world turning dark. He heard a splash as Perkheth managed at last to fling himself into the water, and rolled after him in a semi-conscious tenacity of intent. He dared not lose the man now, and the deck of the barge was no place to be.

With luck the horror would crawl up and down it for half the night seeking the pair of them.

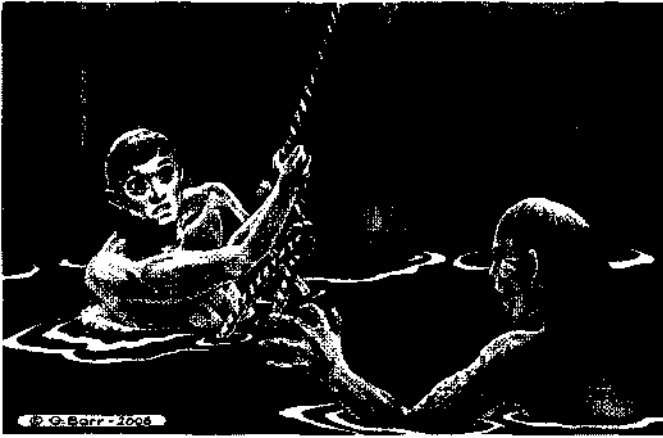
V

The water's silken coolth brought back Si-hotep's senses, and some of his cunning. One arm trailed useless; he oared through the dockside water with the other, kicking lightly with both feet. Perkheth floundered and splashed more noisily, with hoarse screams that he was drowning.

Si-hotep forbore to swim to his aid. He would doubtless grab the thief and drown him too. Better to wait until he lost consciousness, if he did, and bear him up then. Once again, fleetingly, he cursed the Archpriest Kamose, all his works, schemes and intentions, and the evil luck that had ever made him aware of the thief's existence. Then he turned his full attention to staying afloat, staying close to Perkheth, and doing both unobtrusively.

Somewhere behind him, a heavy splash sounded. Noises of floundering, struggling motion **followed**. His blood thickened as though at the onset of death.

The undead corpse was in the river with them.



Si-hotep continued his one-armed swimming, side by side with Perkheth. He made himself think. Here in the water, the thing would feel vibration from their swimming as well as it had sensed their footsteps on the barge deck. Maybe much better. Hamstrung, with maimed hands, it could do no more than dog-paddle, but tireless as it seemed, it could pursue them until they wearied, and unlike them it had no broken bones. It still had teeth. Si-hotep envisioned those dead limbs flung around him, that dead weight dragging him down, those dead jaws grinding and grinding into his flesh until they found something vital. Terror assailed him. He fought it.

They could belike stay ahead of their grisly pursuer for now. Perkheth's powerful arms pulled him through the water at a good pace despite his broken ankle, but they must leave the Nile before they wearied. The thief's broken arm trailed uselessly and hurt like hot skewers.

To Perkheth he called, "Hear me, thou! We must get out of the harbour — and seek my ship. Unless you have other friends who can assist. That thing follows us still!"

"What is it?" Perkheth nearly screamed. "Why does it want you?"

"I think it wants you!"

Perkheth did not dispute him.

"I crippled it!" Si-hotep continued. "On land or a ship it can barely move. We must get out of the water, I tell you. Must! And then — stay together."

"Together? You dirty jackal, I've lost an eye! Because of you! I'll tear you limb from limb if I lay hands on you!"

"Together — we can prevail over it! I have both eyes, both feet! You have both arms. It broke one of mine. Decide."

"Yes," Perkheth croaked.

Si-hotep did not believe him, but the assurance would do for the time being.

"Then swim around the stern of that ship there," he said. "To the left." Perkheth splashed obediently in the designated direction. They were confined, now, in a narrow water-lane between two vessels. The jeweller's one eye rolled wildly as he realised what a trap it made, but he kept going, impelled by that fear. Si-hotep looked out for a dangling rope.

He discovered none. But he was discovered, by a cargo-guard who looked over the ship's side to learn what the

splashing might be. The man and his mates were watchful in the night hours for thieves. Si-hotep could have told them they had found one now, of unmatched quality. He chose not to.

"Help us!" he called. "Help us! We have been beaten and thrown in the harbour! I have a broken arm — my companion lacks an eye! Save us!"

"Watch the dockside!" someone said sharply. "It's a trick. Their friends are ready to lift all our goods!"

"No trick!" Si-hotep vowed. "I'm a cargo scribe on the Blue Perch, up from Thebes. The captain will reward you. Only haul us up, before we drown!"

Si-hotep shook water out of his ears and listened with dread for a clumsy splashing.

The cargo-guard rapped out some shrewd questions anent the Blue Perch, her load and her dealings. Si-hotep answered them, glad he had thoroughly prepared for his role. Any further waiting, though, and either he or Perkheth would begin screaming.

"That's right enough," the guard conceded at last. "They must be from the Blue Perch. Haul them up."

Si-hotep took advantage first, or tried to, but Perkheth shouldered him aside and went up the offered rope hand over hand, nearly stamping on Si-hotep's head in his desperation to gain safety. The thief clung with his good hand, any sympathy or fellow-feeling for Perkheth draining out of him. Ghastly visions of something paddling through the night with empty eye-sockets and entrails drifting beneath it like weed under an old boat, assailed his fancy.

Then it came. The slow deliberate splashing he dreaded. His mind threatened to split and topple like stone in a quarry. He said hoarsely, "Haul me up now, for the love of all gods! I have a broken arm and I hear a crocodile!"

The men above him laughed, but they dropped a looped rope. Si-hotep caught it with his good hand and struggled to slip head, shoulders and one arm through it. An indistinct shape moved clumsily through the water in the dark narrow lane between the two vessels' sides. A wet blind head moved as though searching. The thief kept rigidly still in the water and yelled, "Pull me up!"

"By Hapi!" someone declared above him. "There is a crocodile!"

Si-hotep did not enlighten him. He fumbled for his knife and discovered that he had lost it while swimming one-armed. His blood chilling, he called out urgently, "A crocodile! Pull me up swiftly; the temple of Amun-Ra will reward you, good fellows!"

The men above began hauling on the rope. Si-hotep, emerging from the water, slipped halfway through the loop and fell back. Something bumped blindly against him, and cast clammy arms around his thighs, to his consternation and loathing. He clung to the rope with his good hand. He began to rise, and the insensate clasp on his legs began to slip, but the thing weighed heavy as a sack of offal. Besides, it clung with dogged persistence. If Si-hotep lost his grip and fell into the water with it, he would not come out again.

He dragged one leg free and stamped on a dead shoulder that felt like stone. It flung its damaged arms about his thighs again. Si-hotep frantically slammed his knee against the heavy jaw and neck with all the force he could gather, to no avail. And his hand was steadily slipping from the rope.

"Look out!" bellowed some would-be helpful fool above him.

A snout and two yellow eyes appeared in the narrow gap of water. The cargo guards' torches caught the hungry gleam of those eyes. The snout advanced smoothly, a great hinged jaw opened to show teeth like rows of daggers, and the jaws closed on the thing that embraced Si-hotep. It was torn away from him. Charnel-smelling arms flailed wildly, beating the scaly snout. Then the crocodile rolled, went down, and Si-hotep saw no more.

Nearly fainting for all his insouciant nerve, he was whisked to the deck above and rolled choking beside Perkheth.

There were only two thoughts, not over-coherent, in his mind. One was that no other man could ever have been so glad of a crocodile's close proximity. The other was that a certain Archpriest could find someone else to conduct his manhunts in future.

VI

Si-hotep was back in the dark water. Dead arms clung around his thighs in a clumsy, groping embrace, and a weight like a granite block dragged at him while he held to a rope with his good arm, his grip gradually slipping. Loudly as he shouted to the men above to pull him up, there came no answer.

Death was clinging to him, eager to draw him down to the slimy harbour mud. Each breath he took was one more lost out of a meagre number left. He used knees and feet with skill on the malign, insensate thing that gripped him, but to no effect. And despite his desperate grip, Si-hotep's hand slid down the rope until the water covered his head.

He sank. Flailing in frenzy, his broken arm struck the bottom of the ship, and the pain obliterated even panic. He struggled in the black water, and slowly comprehended that he was struggling on a light bed in Kiya's house, that she was beside him, holding him with gentle strength to keep the broken arm still, and that he had been dreaming.

"Keep still," the girl said firmly. "You will hurt that arm. You had a nightmare."

"I did," he agreed. "About the jackals who beat me and tossed me in the Nile, about sinking in dark water." That was all he had told her. "It's good to wake and find I am not there, but here."

"With a broken arm that I have to tend!" Kiya scolded. "You should not — no honest man should — go near the waterfront."

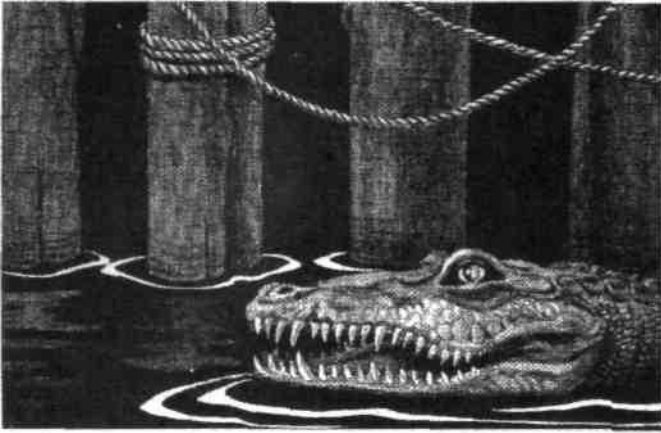
"I am not an honest man."

Si-hotep's arm hurt, the horror of the dream lingered, and he felt intolerant. Still, he controlled his impulses. No need to quarrel with the girl.

"I was employed to find someone," he went on. "For success, high payment. I have succeeded, and now I'll be paid. True, I never reckoned a broken arm into the account when I said yes, but so it turned out." He made himself grin. "Luckily, I have you to look after me."

"Huh!" the girl said. "A broken arm is the only thing that could keep you here long. I know."

It was good that she knew. Si-hotep did not deny it. He held her in the curve of his good arm. She was warm, alive and humanly harmless, an antidote to dark recollections. But on the other side of him the broken arm throbbed in its splints. His skin remembered the hideous touch of the lich. A chance occurrence — he felt certain neither Kamose nor his enemies had sent the thing — but it showed how dark events and presences went with any business of the Archpriest's.



He hoped the man would require nothing more of him for a long time. Rumour said he had gone into seclusion in his mansion at Abdu, even that he had suffered a sore hurt from a demon he had invoked. Maybe he would not recover. The thief had delivered Perkheth into his hands, and he preferred not to imagine how the Archpriest's servants might be inducing Perkheth to divulge all he knew.

What if some such horror touched the girl next time?

Si-hotep smiled sardonically to himself in the darkness. Let him not pretend to noble virtue. Kiya was a tie to normal living. She threatened his cheerful lack of scruples. He was Si-hotep, the thief, the best thief in the Two Lands of Khem, daring, deft and best of all — unknown. Except to the cursed Archpriest, and he was a special case. Anonymity meant survival.

It was time to leave Kiya, in part for her sake, and more for his. Wherefore Si-hotep held her more snugly with his good arm, and pillowed her head more comfortably on his shoulder. The perfume he had stolen for her crept into his brain through his nostrils.

When my arm heals, he thought. When my arm
heals I will go.

Q

Born in Tasmania, 26 December 1946, attended high school there, worked as a clerk for one year after leaving school, and joined the Australian army in February 1965. Did one tour of duty in Vietnam at the Australian base hospital at Vung Tau; discharged in December 1970.

I'd always been one of those avid reader kids, everything from Uncle Scrooge comics to The Three Musketeers, and started writing stories of my own when I was nine. I'd say one of my big moments in learning the art of storytelling came at fourteen, at the Hobart public library, when I found Conan the Conqueror — the Ace double, which had Conan back to back with the Leigh Brackett novel, Sword of Rhiannon. This was 1960, of course, and fantasy like that was hen's teeth, but the rest of the '60s did bring the big fantasy revival; and even though I stopped

writing while I was in the army, I took it up again eagerly after my discharge (medically unfit) while working at a variety of odd jobs from picking fruit to clerk at a court of petty sessions to the lumber yard of a home renovations centre.

Then came 1975 and the 33rd World SF convention — in Melbourne, Australia, where I was living. It came at just the time when I'd had my first story accepted, by Ted White, for *Fantastic Stories*. That was another milestone for me. It led to my joining SFWA and contributing to two *Cormac mac Art* novels with Andrew J. Offutt, a stroke of luck that gave me my start, really.



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AFTERMATH

by Tina & Tony Rath

illustrated by George Barr

Sister Infirmarian was checking her stock of herbs when she heard the commotion at the convent gate. Her first thought was that it must be Brita's husband, come to warn her that the poor woman was in labour. She was close to her time; and although so far she had had her babies as easily as she shelled peas, in Sister Infirmarian's experience a fifth labour could be as fraught with danger as a first. She picked up her basket, packed ready for such emergencies, with clean linen, painkillers like tincture of henbane, and with the great treasure of the Convent, the eagle-stone which, when placed in a new mother's hand, would stop excessive bleeding, and made her way across the court.

Sister Portress was standing by the gate, holding it firmly against an attempted inrush of villagers. She was clearly having some problems in understanding what they were saying. Their heavy speech was made thicker by excitement. Sister Infirmarian clapped her hands and raised her voice slightly.

"What is this disgraceful riot about? You — Aelfwyn — tell me what has happened. The rest of you must be quiet."

"Holy lady, it's the man in the wood!"

She came closer. The group was made up of the older and more respectable villagers. Whatever was wrong, it had to be something serious to bring these men away from the fields at this hour. "What man?" she asked.

"There's been a holy man, living up in the forest since last —"

"What kind of holy man?" she said, her suspicions aroused at once.

"A hermit, holy lady, not a — not one of the old ones. He built himself a little shrine beside a well, deep in the forest. The swineherds knew about him, and the charcoal burners. They'd give him food, and he'd — pray for them and heal them, sometimes."

"He cured Edmund's hand," said a voice from the outskirts of the crowd.

Sister Infirmarian, who had thought that her poultices had done that, tossed her head. "Well, and what about him?"

Aelfwyn twisted his hands distressfully. "He was a tall man and very courteous, and they began to say, the women began to say that he had been a knight, a knight of the Grail. And there are young men in the village who are foolish as young men are, and last night, in their drink they began to say to each other, "He is a Grail Knight; who knows what he keeps up there in the shrine? Perhaps he has the Grail itself, in a hidden place —"

The nun drew a sharp, shocked breath at this piece of blasphemy. "And what good would it do the village boys if they did have possession of the Grail? It is a wooden dish that our fair Lord used at his Last Supper and not to be bought or sold."

Aelfwyn twisted his hands, helplessly. "Holy Lady, they said, the Grail is a gold cup all set with jewels, and just one of those gems would make us all rich for life."

Someone on the outskirts of the group protested that on the contrary, the Grail was a magical cauldron. Every man who went to it would find his favourite food cooking inside, and there would be enough for every guest, however many of them came to the feast — except that it would not boil food for a coward. And, someone added vaguely, it could restore the dead to life . . . Sister Infirmarian shook her head in horror at these pagan notions, but Aelfwyn went on doggedly:

"Whatever the Grail might be, they thought the hermit might have it in his cell. And, they said, he is an old man and alone, and it would be easy to take it from him. So they went up to the shrine, but it was empty, because he was walking in the wood, as he did on those nights when the stars were shining, and they searched and searched, but they found nothing. ..."

"How could they, when there was nothing to find!" the nun snapped. "For the Grail is in the City of Sarras, the spiritual place, where no village lout could come at it, you may be sure of that!"

"As you say, holy lady," said Aelfwyn, "but they are ignorant boys, and they did not know. So they began to tear down the walls of the shrine. And suddenly the holy man was amongst them, laying about

him with a great tree branch, as if it were a sword. And those who could run ran away, but one is lying up there, near death, and two more are sorely hurt, but it is not for them that we have come here. The charcoal burners heard the noise and ran to help, and as they came up with him the holy man fell down, and could not speak, so they laid him on a hurdle and they are carrying him here. And they sent one to run ahead to tell us of it, as we worked in the field; and so we came here to tell you of it, and beg you to come and meet them, and do what you can for the healing of this holy hermit."

Sister Infirmarian was already pushing the gate open. "Holy hermit! Knight of the Grail indeed!" she said. "I daresay you are bringing us some smelly druid who has been hiding from the authorities. But I suppose I had better come...." she had already outdistanced Aelfwyn, who trotted behind her, listening reverently to her scolding: "And as for the Grail, don't you know that it is more precious than any gold and jewels? ..."

They had already reached the outskirts of the forest. Sister Infirmarian had set a good pace, as if she feared the sick man might escape her. But under the trees they found a little group of charcoal burners resting before the last lap of their journey. In the midst of them lay the hermit, quite still on his hurdle. His face was grey, his eyes closed. Only a slight movement of his chest showed that he was still alive, but his breathing was troubled.

The nun dropped on her knees beside him. "Lift him up," she said briskly. She opened her basket and took out a little flask. "A tincture of foxglove," she murmured, almost to herself, and carefully trickled a few drops into his mouth. "Now, wait. He should start to look a little better in a while, and then we can take him to the Convent and get him to bed."

She studied him carefully. He was certainly not a druid. He could hardly even be called smelly. There was no trace of the ingrained dirt that eventually built up a bronze patina on the skin of the village men. This man had washed regularly, and shaved to the best of his ability, though there was grey stubble on his cheeks now. Perhaps he had really been a knight . . . his hands, lying loosely on his breast, were very long and fine . . . and his face . . . and Sister Infirmarian, for the first time in her long and blameless life as a nun found herself looking wistfully at a man and thinking: "But he is beautiful even now. When he was younger he must have been magnificent... * She turned away quickly, and fussed with her veil as if to remind herself that she was indeed a nun, now.

For a moment she thought of herself at her next confession, telling their poor young chaplain: "Father, I had impure thoughts about a man —" except that her thoughts had not been impure. The poor man's own mother would have thought no less, if she had lived to see him grow up. She looked back at her patient. Colour was beginning to struggle back into his face. So. She had been right to give him foxglove. When he could speak he would no doubt tell her of pains gripping his chest like an iron band, pains that would run into his jaw, and down his left arm, of a failure of breath after exertion ... she had seen such symptoms before, more often in men than women, and not common in a man as gaunt as this one. But it did happen. She sighed, knowing that he was not likely to live long.

Perhaps he heard that sigh, for he opened his eyes and gazed anxiously into her face: "Have I hurt anyone?" he said.

"Three lads, as were asking for it," said Aelfwyn, "and two of them will live for sure, and the third one might, yet," he added, sounding faintly regretful.

And at that the man cried out: "Helas! and they were unarmed, and unhelmed!"

The villagers exchanged uneasy glances. Aelfwyn drew the nun aside a little. "Could he have got a blow on the head, holy lady? Because he's not making much sense. The lads were armed all right, they had cudgels, and the one with the broken arm, he had a knife; but as for helmets, well, you wouldn't expect it. . ."

"He is thinking of another time, and another place," said Sister Infirmarian, softly. "Take him up now, and carry him as softly as you may to the infirmary."

The hermit was twisting those fine hands together and crying out that he had killed Gareth and Gaheris, all unarmed as they were, but he had not known them in the press of knights. Sister Infirmarian took his hands and folded them gently. "You must be easy now. You have killed no one this time, I promise you. And as for those others, I think perhaps that it was a long time ago, and it has long been forgiven you."



He smiled at her, then, and closed his eyes.

They lifted the hurdle, and set off for the Convent, with Sister Infirmarian walking beside them, deep in thought. She watched while the two novices who assisted her in her duties washed her patient, and made him comfortable, or as comfortable as the straw mattress and worn linen sheets of the infirmary could make him. He was still not quite conscious, but his lips were moving, though he was no longer troubled, it seemed, by Gaheris or Gareth.

"See, he is praying," whispered one of the novices.

But the other, a little dark-haired creature, whose mother had come from far away, from some mountain kingdom in the west, said: "It is not praying he is. He is saying a woman's name. He is calling for Gwenhwyvar." She smiled. "But she is a woman in an old tale. Gwenhwyvar, the Giant's daughter: bad when little, worse when grown. In my mother's country they can show the great rock that they call Gwenhwyvar's comb, because she fell out with her husband, one day, as she was combing her hair, and she threw her comb at him, and it was turned into a rock."

"Where do you hear such things, child?" Sister Infirmarian asked, scandalized.

But the little novice, knowing better than to implicate her pagan mother, shook her head, dumbly.

The Infirmarian bent closer to hear the patient for herself. The name he was repeating over and over now sounded to her very much like "Guen-evere."

Sister Infirmarian came to a decision.

"Stay with the patient while I am away," she told the girls. "Call me if you see any change in him. I shall be with the Lady Abbess."

It was the time of day for recreation, and the Abbess was walking in her walled garden. She looked round as the Sister Infirmarian came down the path, and smiled.

"Sister Portress tells me that we have a new patient," she said.

"Yes, Reverend Mother." Sister Infirmarian hesitated, then plunged on: "Reverend Mother, I think you should come and see him."

The Abbess raised her fine brows. "Has he asked for me?" she asked.

"He is asking for someone, I think. Reverend Mother, the village men are saying that he was a Grail knight. And truly, I think he was. I think his name was once Lancelot."

For a moment she thought the Abbess would faint. The colour left her face all at once, so that she grew as white as her veil, and her hands flew to her throat. Then she caught her breath and whispered: "Does he call himself so?"

"No. But he has spoken the names Gareth, and Gaheris, and of how he killed them, unknowing, in the press —"

"When he saved me from the stake!" said the Abbess, so softly that the Infirmarian was not sure of what she had heard. But the Abbess went on, still more quietly: "Did you know who I was — once?"

"I know you were a great lady ... at the court of a great King."

The colour rushed back into her cheeks, as if she were all on fire with shame. "I was more than that. I was the wife of a goodly man and a great king, and his champion was Lancelot, who was the best knight in all the world. But I fell in love with Lancelot, and we were lovers for many years until we were betrayed by Agravaine and Mor-dred. And for my adultery I was most justly condemned to be burned, but Lancelot rode to my rescue. And it was always a great grief to him that he killed those young knights who could not refuse to witness my death, but who had gone unarmed to show they had no part in it. But I was the wretched cause of their deaths, and of many more; and indeed through me the flower of kings and of knights were destroyed. And for that I have sworn that I would never look my lover in the face again. I told him so when he came to me after the death of my good lord, when he would have taken me to his own kingdom to live in peace and honour."

Sister Infirmarian was aware of this. She felt that Lancelot should have waited just a few weeks, to let Guenevere recover from her first grief at Arthur's passing, and that Guenevere should then have agreed. They would, eventually, have been much happier, and much less of a Bad Example for everyone else, as an old, respectable married couple than a pair of adulterous, much too romantic lovers, leading a life of extravagant repentance. But it was a great deal too late to say any of this. Instead she stretched out her hands. "Lady Guenevere, he is a dying man. I do not believe that he has made his way here by chance. I beg you, in charity, to put aside this oath, and see him now."

"Dying?" Guenevere whispered.

"I fear so." The Infirmarian moved forward quickly to steady her, thinking that she was about to faint.

"Has he been hurt — or is he sick?"

"Dear Lady, he is old. His body is failing him —"

"Old?" she said blankly. And then: "Yes. He must be old now. I have been very foolish. It cannot matter if two old people meet. I will come." She allowed the Infirmarian to lead her to the sick man.

On the way they met the chaplain, hurrying in the same direction. He had heard that there was a sick stranger in the Convent, a stranger who had, by all accounts, great need of a priest.

"For," the chaplain continued, who seemed to notice neither the tight lips of the Infirmarian, or the distress of the Abbess, "I am told that old and feeble as he is, he killed three men up in the woods, and who knows what kind of violent life he has led in the past."

"He has killed no one at this time," said the Infirmarian. "And as for his life, they say, and I believe, that he was one of those knights who rode in quest of the Grail. And who knows but he may have achieved a sight of it, at last."

"But there were no such knights, and no such quest," the chaplain protested. "It is all an allegorical tale — that is," he added kindly, for he knew that women need such explanations, "a story which is not true in itself, but teaches us spiritual truths. For the Grail is but a symbol, a picture, as you might say, betokening a holy life, and by those who were said to ride in search of it was meant those men who sought holiness. But the common people have made a wonder-tale of it, and added much that is not fit for repetition, being mostly of open manslaughter and bold bawdry. Or worse," he added grimly, "for what are those women called Arthur's sisters, Morgause and Morgan, but aspects of that evil creature the Morrigan, a demon whom the pagan Irish worshipped as the goddess of battle — and —"

Sister Infirmarian cleared her throat warn-ingly. The chaplain was a well-meaning young man, and sometimes startlingly clear-sighted. But he must learn that a deathbed was not the place for a discussion of comparative mythologies. He caught her eye, and was silent.

But by this time they had come to the Infirmary. Sister Infirmarian took the chaplain firmly by the elbow, and held him back while the Abbess went up to the bed. She stood, for a moment, looking down at the sick man. Then she fell on her knees, burying her face in her hands, and the bystanders could see how her shoulders shook with silent sobs. Lancelot raised himself on his pillows, and laid his hands gently on her bowed head.

He said, with terrifying gentleness: "You must not cry like that. I did not come here to make you cry."

She raised her head, then. "I do well to cry. If I wept until judgement day I should not have wept enough for our sin. We brought down Camelot, you and I, with our love, and brought about the death of the noblest knights in the world."

Sister Infirmarian saw the desolation in Lancelot's face and her heart twisted in her breast. And pain and pity made her speak out.

"No," said Sister Infirmarian. "That you did not."

It was the chaplain who gave a cry of protest. No one else **spoke**. **It** was all at once so quiet in the room that the songs of the birds in the convent garden seemed shockingly loud.

But into that silence, the Sister Infirmarian spoke with great and passionate conviction: "I do not deny the fault — you did wrong. But you did not bring Camelot down. Who can say who truly brought about that fall? What of Arthur's father, Uther Pendragon, who took the wife of another man by magical trickery and force of arms? And yet from that evil came the good of King Arthur and all the glory of Camelot. What of Arthur himself who sowed the seeds of his own downfall when he lay with Morgause, who was his own sister, and fathered a son on her, that Mordred who stirred up war against him, and gave him his last wound? What of the very Grail quest that drew the best knights from the court, and left the like of Mordred and Agravaine to work their poison? ... Chaplain, go and fetch your stole, and make ready to do the best deed of your life, thus far, by setting right one great wrong at least, and marry these two lovers so that a sorely tried man may die with an easy heart."

If she had turned into a fiery serpent before his eyes, the young priest could not have looked more surprised. "Marry . . ." he stuttered.

"Yes. Marry!" she said sharply. "You have performed the ceremony before, surely!"

"But the — the lady Abbess is a professed nun!"

"Very true. But there will be no vows of chastity violated here, I think!" She gestured towards the sick man who carried the mark of death on his face only too plainly. But hope was dawning there too,

transfiguring it.

"Yes," he said. "I was drawn back here. I was drawn back for that. Of your gentleness, sir priest, I pray you join our hands at this last."

"And what names will this bride and groom give to me? For I shall never believe that that Lancelot and that Guenevere from those old, vain romances are here in this room!"

"And yet —" said Sister Infirmarian softly. "You do believe."

He looked at her for a moment, and then stared at the Abbess and her Knight and a strong shudder shook him.

"I pray you," said Guenevere. "Believe as you will; but marry us, now."

Even now, thought the Infirmarian, even now, no man could look at Guenevere's face and deny her anything.

The chaplain certainly could not. He went to fetch his stole. She waited by the door, to give the lovers a brief moment of privacy. The last few words that they could share with each other were not for any other ears. And they had very little time to talk.

Soon the chaplain was back, with his book and his stole, and with him the two little novices, each carrying a flowering branch of may that they must have gathered in the orchard. Its scent, sweet and sharp, filled the room.



The chaplain, still half-unwilling, murmured the few words that were necessary, and joined the lovers' hands.

But even as he did so, Lancelot fell back in the bed, and Sister Infirmarian knew that he was beyond the aid of any tincture that she could administer.

She led the novices away and left the chaplain to administer the last rites.

The girls were over-excited, and inclined to snivel and try to ask her foolish questions, now that everything was so clearly over, so she found them some worn linen to tear into bandages, a commonplace

task, to calm their nerves, and returned to the task she had taken up — when? only a few hours ago, surely, but it felt as if a year had passed — and began to check her stock of herbs.

After a while the chaplain came in.

"The man is dead," he said, baldly. "And our Lady Abbess will prepare him for burial."

"She has that right," Sister Infirmarian agreed, placidly. "And the task will do her good. It will take her mind off the first sharpness of her grief. But I think I have drawn the worst sting, the guilt she has been suffering for so many years."

The chaplain sniffed, eloquently.

"You think that I was wrong to advise her as I did?" she enquired.

"I think," said the chaplain, "that you seem to know a good deal of the affairs of Arthur's court. I think, as my good grandam might say, you know a great deal more than your prayers."

"Well, it is wonderful what you can learn in a convent," she said, still sorting her medicines. "And wonderful, too, what can be hidden under a veil and a wimple. Did you know that Arthur's youngest sister — not Mordred's mother, of course, but little Morgan, the one they called Morgan le Fay — she was put into a convent. When her mother married Uther?'. . . and there she learned so much that she was a great clerk of necromancy,'" she quoted softly.

The chaplain opened his mouth — but what he might have said, in the way of protest, or demand, was silenced by the arrival of the little dark novice.

"Oh, Sister, will you come quickly! There's Brita's man at the gates, and says she's in a shocking way, and needing you to come as quick as you can. . . ."

And Sister Infirmarian caught up her basket and hurried away.

Q

The Raths live in London.

Tony is a singer-musician, teaching piano, guitar and voice, besides doing some acting and modelling. He once appeared, more than life size in his underwear, in posters all over the London Underground. Other published fiction includes comic fantasy and detective stories.

Tina is also an actress / model and occasional Queen Victoria look-alike. Her short stories have been published extensively in the small- and main-stream press, and she has several novels currently looking for a publisher.



CREATIVE SOLUTION

A doctor from South Aldersgate, when
asked why he never does date,
said, "Dating's a pain,
and so I'll refrain.
Besides, I can make my own mate."
— Lee Strong

CONVERSATION IN THE TOMB OF AN UNKNOWN KING

by Richard Parks

illustrated by David Grilla

There are patterns in the world, false and real, for those who think long enough to discover them. One such is that certain places tend to attract certain creatures. Farms are usually infested with farmers; palaces with royalty; mountain caves with trolls; and tombs, if they be of a certain quality, with wights.

One such tomb was in the Abandoned Lands, and the one such wight who lived there was known as Uldun. That is to say, he knew himself to be Uldun, there being no one else about. The *king* was there, in a manner of speaking, but he had been dead many years before the wight came to live with him. A wight will seldom live with a king under any other circumstances, that being the pattern that developed between kings and wights.

There's a pattern between human beings and tombs as well: if one human were to place treasure in a tomb, sooner or later another human would try to take it out again. Which brings us back to wights, specifically Uldun. He knew about that pattern. It was very inconvenient. He said as much to the human who came, torch in hand, down into the king's tomb on a cold winter day.

The fair-haired human blinked in the weak light. He was young, near as Uldun could judge, and dressed quite sensibly against the cold. He nervously gripped a torch in one hand and a rather battered sword in the other. "What . . . what did you say?"

Uldun sighed. "I *said* that it was very inconvenient to receive visitors unannounced. Though I suppose, being a thief, you wouldn't have considered that."

The human looked affronted. "I'm no thief!"

Uldun shrugged, though it was doubtful the human could see him well enough there in the gloom to tell. "Well, perhaps not until you actually steal something. Which isn't going to happen so long as I'm here. Your soul can thank me later for its salvation. Your body will have precious little reason to thank either of us."

The human held out his sword. "I've come for the treasure, you foul creature. I have no quarrel with you, but if you attack me you'll regret it!"

Uldun sighed with disgust. "You insult me and yet say we have no quarrel? Typical. As for the regrets, take a look to your left."

The human was plainly reluctant to take his eyes off the patch of gloom near the head of the king's bier where Uldun lurked, but he risked a quick glance in the direction the wight had directed.

"Oh, my ..." he said, and for a moment seemed to forget all about the wight. There were stacks of bones against the left wall of the tomb: skulls, leg bones, arm bones, finger bones. Here and there a rusted sword broke up the pattern, but only just.

"I don't suppose you really thought you'd be the first?" Uldun asked. But the interloper had thought as much: that was clear enough. They all did. Uldun continued, "That's all the reward you can expect for your trouble: to share a tomb with a king. Is it worth it? Ask yourself that before you speak of regrets."

The young man shivered, but he did not retreat. "What *are* you?"

"Good question," Uldun said. "I suppose you could just say that I'm a tomb wight and let it go at that. But what is that? Wight simply means 'creature,' so that doesn't really help much, does it? It's not like saying 'ogre' or 'troll' or even 'farmer,' which are fairly specific terms. I and my kind remain nebulous. Quite an advantage, when you think about it."

"Not knowing what you are? How is that an advantage?" the intruder asked. Frightened as the young man obviously was, he still managed a bit of curiosity. Uldun was beginning to feel a bit intrigued, and frustrated too at not being able to put a label on the young man other than 'thief' or 'interloper' or such. Not that the problem had ever come up before. Usually he'd killed his visitors before they developed any kind of name-basis relationship.

"Why? For the obvious reason: not knowing what I am removes any limits to what I may become. Look at me." Uldun shuffled a little closer to the light. The interloper took a step back, but that was all. Uldun blended back with the darkness. "So. What did you see?"

"A v-very fierce creature with great knotted arms and long teeth."

Uldun laughed. "You've just described a ghoul."

"You mean you're a ghoul? You said —"

"That I was a tomb wight. I did and I am. Now try again." Once more Uldun came just close enough to the torchlight to cast a shadow. "What now?"

"A very small creature with spindly arms and long black hair."

Uldun nodded. "Less specific this time. Could be a *pisge*. Could be a *phooka*. Shall we try again?"

The young man shook his head. "You're just trying to trick me!"

"Not at all. I tell you plainly — be you strong as an ox, I'll be as strong as an ogre. Be you strong as an ogre, I'll be as strong as a mountain giant. How can I trick you? I've told you exactly what to expect of me. The very least I'll do is rip your head from your body. Anger me with more insults and I'll rip your tongue out and stuff it up your backside beforehand. Now. Do you still want the king's treasure?"

The young man was practically in tears. "Yes."

Uldun knew it was time to kill the intruder, but the tears were unexpected. Being always unexpected himself, he found the trait in others fascinating. "Why are you crying?"

"Because I don't want to die!"

"Then don't ____" Uldun paused. "What is your name, anyway?"

"Karl."

"I'm Uldun, by the way, and as I was saying — don't die. Turn around. Leave. I'll even forgive your insult if you promise not to say such things again."

"I can't."

Uldun frowned. "Can't promise or can't leave? Aren't your legs working?"

"I can't because I need the treasure."

"It doesn't belong to you," Uldun said.

"Nor to you," Karl said. "Nor to the king, whoever he was. He's dead, and so owns nothing."

Uldun sighed. He knew he should just rip the youth's head from his body rather than explain, but he couldn't remember the last time he'd even bothered to learn an intruder's name before doing the same. Perhaps that alone was reason enough for due diligence where Karl was concerned.

"You don't understand, young man, and I'm not sure I can explain this but, before I kill you and as a courtesy, I will try. I've stepped forward twice, and now it's your turn. Come see the treasure you 'need' so much."

Karl stepped forward, and for the first time the torchlight fully illuminated the contents of the tomb.

The king was covered in gold.

Uldun heard the youth gasp in surprise. As a tomb wight, Uldun had the talent for knowing, at least in part, the mind of the sort of person who would despoil a barrow. He watched closely for the gleam of greed and obsession that he knew so well to come to Karl's eyes. To Uldun's considerable astonishment, it never did. There was something Karl wanted, yes, that was plain enough. But it wasn't the gold, at least not directly. Uldun's fascination with his guest grew.

"It's lovely," was all Karl said.

Uldun nodded. "It should be. I spend enough time dusting it. Unless you have a great deal of experience with tombs you wouldn't know this, but dust and debris tend to cover the contents of a burial over time. Yet this is my home; I like my surroundings to be tidy. Unfortunately it just makes the treasure easier to find and more attractive."

Karl turned away from the gold and put his full attention back on Uldun. "Yes, but why dwell here at all? It's a tomb in the absolute middle of nowhere! It's no place for a living creature, if such you are."

"That's where you are mistaken, and that is my point. I am a wight. You say this treasure belongs to no one and is thus free for the taking. That too is an error. It is a wight's nature to seek out tombs, just as a badger uses a burrow. Whether the badger digs the burrow himself or finds one abandoned, it will defend either as his home. Will you count me less than a badger? What creature is required to allow a predator into his home without a fight?"

"I have no choice," Karl said.

"And why not? Look!" Uldun waved one taloned hand at the king in exasperation. "Armor of

beaten gold, jeweled sword, crown of pearl and gold. Are you a king? Noble?"

Karl shook his head. "I am a farmer's son."

"I guessed as much. Unless you plan to turn mercenary you don't need armor at all, and golden armor is very poor protection, believe me. It is soft and very heavy, and every hand on the field would turn against you to possess it. As for the gold itself, where would you spend it? Why would you wear it? Where could you hide it so thieves would not find it, or some local lordling not take it from you on some pretense or other? As a king's final tribute or a barrow wight's pride, it serves well enough; for one such as you it is useless!"

"Not quite useless," Karl said. "It would grant me the one thing I want in this world."

"And what would that be?"

"Elana."

Uldun blinked. "Oh. A woman." Finally it was out in the open. Mystery, so far as Uldun was concerned, solved. "Your girl will not marry you without gold. Of course, I should have guessed." Uldun pitied the young man, but he was still going to rip his head off. The sooner the better, he felt, and end the poor lad's misery. Uldun slipped forward.

"Elana would marry me with nought but the clothes on her back!" Karl said, clearly offended.

Uldun hesitated. "But you just said . . ."

"That the gold would grant me Elana, yes, but it's not Elana who is the problem. It's her father. He wants her for the miller who, to be fair, has a far better living. I'd even step aside for Elana's sake, but the miller is a toad of a man who would treat her ill. I can't let that happen, so I need the treasure to convince her father that I'm the better match."

"Well, that's all very sad, but you can't have the treasure, and here we are again."

Karl held out his sword. "Don't take me too lightly. I plan to give a good account of myself."

"I'd expect nothing less. Still, it's really too bad about that awful sword. It won't be much help." Not that it would have been in any case; Karl didn't even know how to hold the thing properly.

"This is Elana's father's own sword! He served two years in Prince Lucian's city garrison."

Uldun had started to move forward again, but again he was brought up short. "Young man, I hope you'll pardon my interminable curiosity, but didn't you just say that Elana's father was set against your suit?"

"Well, yes."

"Then why on earth would he 'help' you by lending you that sword? Or did you steal it?"

Karl, once more affronted, shook his head. "I told you I'm no thief. Elana's father said it was foolish to go into the Abandoned Lands without a weapon."

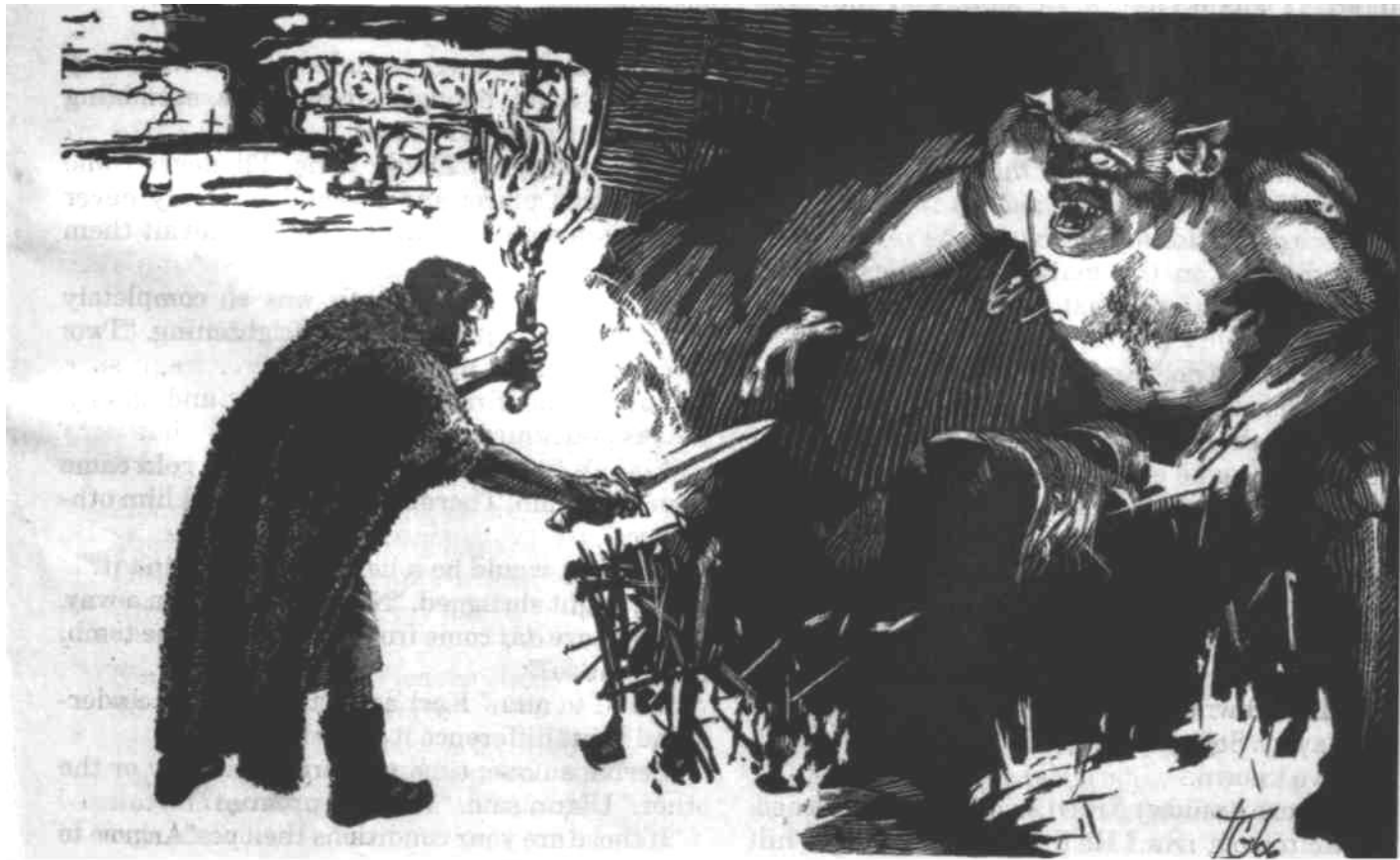
Uldun forgot all about killing the silly youth. He realized he was now after bigger prey. "And how did he know you intended to go at all? While it's probably common knowledge that there are tombs in the Abandoned Lands, the location of any one of them is most definitely not. You honestly think he'd put off the wedding while you muck about for years in this wasted land?"

"He swore he would. Elana's father —"

"Told you where the tomb was in the first place. Of course. This was his idea, yes?" Uldun didn't even need Karl's answer; he knew what it would be.

"Well . . . yes. In his youth he sometimes hunted here. Apparently he found this place by accident."

"And you didn't think it strange, that he knew the exact location of a royal tomb and never came to look for himself?"



Karl frowned. "Well, there wasn't any assurance that the tomb hadn't already been plundered. It was a chance, he said, and that was all."

"But there was such assurance," Uldun said. "Me."

"How could he have known about you?"

You're no hunter, Karl, but that girl's father was. How could a hunter not know what to find in a badger's den? Uldun thought, but he said nothing more directly on the matter. "Doubtless you're right, but I'm afraid that sword has seen better days."

"It'll have to do," Karl said.

Uldun picked up a stout stick that he kept handy for shoring up stones and thrust it out at Karl. Karl, as he expected, was young and quick enough to attempt a parry. The sword clanked against the staff and then broke at the hilt. The blade went flying and clanged to a rest against the stones of the tomb wall. Karl stared at the broken hilt in sheer panic.

"As a barrow wight, I'm also a good judge of metal," Uldun said. "I saw the flaw in that blade right away. Still, I'm sure your girl's father wouldn't have known."

"I'm sure he didn't," Karl said, looking resigned. "No help for it now." He dropped the useless hilt and settled himself into wrestler's stance.

"I see you're still determined," Uldun said.

"Yes," Karl said. "Let's settle this."

"Indeed. Though it occurs to me that there may be another way to do that."

"There is? How?" Karl kept his stance, but there was a small gleam of hope in his eyes. Uldun nodded. He could work with that.

"You need treasure to win your girl's father's blessing, yes?" Karl nodded, and Uldun went on, "But does the treasure *have* to come from my home?"

Karl frowned. "Well. . . no."

"Fine then. I happen to know that, a short distance from here, there is a small cache of gold coins hidden. Nothing like the king's treasure here, mind you, but as much as you can carry and more than enough to convince Elana's father of your worth. Far easier to hide and to spend, too. They are not part of

the king's treasure and thus no concern of mine. Is that satisfactory?"

Karl, still wary, stood up straight again. "Yes, of course. But why would you help me?"

"Because it's my nature to defend my home, as I said; and I alone will judge the best way to accomplish this. However there are three things I will ask of you in return."

"What are they?" Karl asked.

"One: that you never reveal to anyone where my home is. I get enough adventurers stumbling across my threshold as it is."

Karl shrugged. "Easily done. I'll never come back to this place; and I would certainly never send anyone else, knowing that you await them here."

Uldun smiled. The youth was so completely lacking in guile it was almost frightening. "Two: Tell no one about me."

"As for the first request: done, and gladly. What's your third condition?"

"Elana's father will believe that the gold came from this tomb. There's no reason to tell him otherwise."

"But that would be a lie of sorts, wouldn't it?"

The wight shrugged. "Not necessarily. In a way, the treasure *did* come from your visit to the tomb. Isn't that so?"

"Well . . . yes," Karl admitted. "I don't understand what difference it makes."

"Perhaps none; time will prove one way or the other," Uldun said. "Will you promise?"

"If those *are* your conditions *then yes*, I agree to all. But how will I know you've told *me* the truth about the gold?"

"When you find it, of course. If you do not, feel free to return and chastise me for it. You'll know where to find me."

"That I will," Karl said, and sounded as if he meant it.

Uldun couldn't help but wonder if Karl would really be foolish enough to return. Part of him actually wanted to know, and considered steering the lad false the first time. Yet Uldun was fairly certain that, if he misled the boy once, he might not be so trusting the second time. It was a chance he didn't want to take. When he described where the secret cache was hidden, Uldun was very careful to make his directions plain and accurate.

Karl took his leave of the wight then; and Uldun settled down to wait, patient as only a wight with eons of time on his hands could be. Eventually, another visitor came to the tomb. Not Karl. An older man.

This one carried a much better sword, but it was sheathed. He walked confidently into the tomb, torch in one hand and bag for treasure in the other. He stopped, frozen, as Uldun stepped into the torchlight.

"He said ..." The man started to speak, but his voice trailed away.

"No, he didn't say, I fancy. Or you didn't ask. Either way, the result is the same. You didn't happen to bring a piece of the wedding cake? No? Pity."

"What are you??"

"You know what I am. I'm what you expected Karl to find here. But he wasn't a threat, really. He never wanted the treasure, but you did and you do. You knew it was here, but you never thought there was a chance to get it. You were right, you know." Uldun held up the two pieces of Karl's borrowed sword, and smiled with every long, pointed tooth in his head.

"Tours, I believe?"

Q

Richard Parks lives in Mississippi with his wife, three cats, and more books that he'll have time to read in this life. His stories have appeared in Asimov's Science Fiction, Weird Tales, Fantasy Magazine, and Lady Churchill's Rosebud Wristlet, among other places. His first collection, The Ogre's Wife, was nominated for the World Fantasy Award.

His second collection, Worshiping Small Gods, is being published by Prime Books.



A REQUEST OF THE MINSTREL

Hear me, minstrel! Sing to me
Your songs of the fading light,
Of winter's silent, empty white
And the darkness in my heart.

Sing of how the frail leaves start
To die when all the world
Is yet in green, and how are curled
Dark claws around the sun.

Sing on of how the only one
Who smiles as years dry up
Is Age, who gathers in his cup
The tears of men, and drinks.

The sun into the valley sinks.
Somewhere in the night
The grey wolves howl; the light
Is out. The minstrel weeps.

Frederick S. Durbin

REVIVAL

by Natalia Lincoln

illustrated by Alex McVey

"This story comes from my spine, girl!" The raspy old voice rumbling out of the stump scared Tadpole right off her seat.

Shrieking like a forgotten teakettle, Tadpole dove off the stump of the Killing Tree, skinning her knee as she landed. The hem of her calico play dress flipped up immodestly around her dark brown thighs. Scrambling, she tripped over a swollen tree root and sprawled on the grass again, the wind knocked clean out of her.

"Quit hollering and listen up!" Voice so wicked and gritty Tadpole thought its owner must have ate bugs and gravel for supper. "Now, everybody knows bones don't talk without some shaking, and you just stomped on mine good and hard."

Slender long shadows raced over the grass. Still gasping for air, Tadpole flopped onto her back. *Stumps don't have bones!* she thought. *But things under them might. ...*

She stared up into twilight, the deep sky a shattered windowpane. Bare black branches struck into it like lightning — the limbs of a phantom tree writhing and clattering above the place the limbless stump had always squatted.

"Dogs gonna howl and babies gonna bawl, skirts gonna hike and trousers gonna fall, tails and tongues gonna wag, the whole world going to whore itself out just to see these dead bones stop jigging and settle back down!" growled the stump. Or what was under it.

Tadpole got enough breath back to scream "Mama!" Scrambling to her feet, she hauled ass downhill, away from the cackling tree whipping in a wind she heard but didn't feel. Across the long field, or cut through a patch of marsh?

Shortcut! Tadpole burst through a wall of reeds. Dead grasses hissed against her bare shins. Panting, she gulped a cloud of skeeters as her feet squelched into marsh, splattering her dress. She spat, slapping at her face, pell-mell, bug-blind, sweaty.

Out of the marsh and onto dirt road, lazy lights blinking on as dusk fell, down the street home she ran. Drowsy lamplight in the kitchen window. Mama's yellow-kerchiefed head bent over the stove. She mopped her dark brown face with a dishrag as Tadpole banged through the back yard and up wooden bungalow stairs, past the screen door. "Mama! Mama, there's a haint under the Killing Tree!"

Mama put down the dishrag. Her calm hushed Tadpole's shouting. Pots bubbled on the stove, steam wafting from greens, oven promising buttered biscuits. Tadpole flung herself around Mama's waist, burying her face in Mama's red-checkered apron.

Beyond the kitchen, the radio switched off.



Wearily, Papa came in from the parlor, floorboards creaking under his muscled solidity. His brown head shone bald in the yellow light. He sat at the kitchen table, absently spreading his left hand over the stained wood, ring finger ending below the second knuckle. "Girl, we chopped that old son-of-a-bitch down twelve years ago in '26, when your grandmam was still living and you wasn't yet." Tadpole remembered Grandmam cooking at the same stove, her wire-rimmed spectacles fogging in the steam. "Your Grandmam fought bravely in the hanging days, didn't care what the so-called lawmen tried to do to her. Now there ain't no Killing Tree no more, just a stump."

"Even stumps got roots, Paul." Mama patted Tadpole's back and tweaked one of her braids. "Roots going way underground." She sat down across from Papa.

"You can't hang a man from a stump," said Papa stubbornly.

Tadpole tried to snuggle into Mama's lap, but Mama gently pushed her up with a groan, hugging her to her side. "You're getting too big, child."

A little ways off, a low voice droned and chanted.

Mama tightened arms around Tadpole. Tadpole went stiff as an old bone. "Mama, you never said there wasn't a haint under that stump." Footsteps crackled in the unraked front yard, crunched on pebbles towards the back, penned-up yardbirds clucking in alarm.

"Who's there?" Papa barked. He gripped the arms of the chair, his left three-and-a-half fingers working nervously. Fixing to barge out the door, his legs tensed.

The singing reached the door. "— washed in the Blood of the Lamb."

"Aunt Alethia!" yelled Tadpole. Mama loosened her grip and laughed.

Mama's sister strode through the door, hair pomaded into a slick, elegant pompadour. She wore her Sunday best, a store-bought cream-colored silk dress with just a hint of shoulder pad. A brooch of tiny blue flowers was pinned to the lapel of her matching blazer. "Who's coming to the revival with me?"

"I am!" shouted Tadpole.

"No, you ain't," said Mama, planting her hand on her hip, " 'til you scrub yourself gleaming. You ain't fit for company, much less church."

I could wash off in the Blood of the Lamb! Holding her joke inside so it couldn't earn her a swat, Tadpole ran to the washroom around the corner from the kitchen, as Mama swiveled hand and hip at her sister. " 'Lethia, how come these things always start so close to suppertime?"

Tadpole drowned Aunt Alethia's explanation in the wooden wash-basin on the floor. Holding up handfuls of her dress, she splashed bare feet into suds still warm from another bath.

Skirts gonna hike...

Tadpole almost dropped her hem into the water. Impatiently, she peeled the dress off and laid it over the hamper. *No haints admitted at revivals*, she thought sternly. She scrubbed the swamp off her legs with a washcloth, hard, the way Mama scrubbed.

She ran to her room, clutching a towel around her, and jumped into her Sunday dress. By the time she got to the kitchen, Mama had the biscuits out of the oven and a few buttered and ready for Tadpole.

"Eat 'em up now, Theodora," said Aunt Alethia, the only one who called Tadpole by her Christian name. "There'll be doughnuts and cider at the revival." She sounded apologetic. Tadpole saw Mama's mouth twist ever so slightly. Aunt Alethia must have too. "Now Elaine, it's just one night."



Tadpole gobbled down the biscuits, fiery and flaky, rich with butter.

Then Aunt Alethia took her by the hand and they stepped out into the fall-fragrant dusk, crickets in hoarse choir.

The air was cool. It would burn feverish in the revival tent. Tadpole remembered last year: hundreds of black straw fans labeled GOOD SHEPHERD FUNERAL PARLOR waving back and forth, thunder of piano and choir, a sea of flowered hats, air electric with excitement. It was funny to watch grown men and women running down the aisle, dancing jitterbug, falling blissfully. Aunt Alethia called it "slain in the Spirit." Sounded scary, before Tadpole saw it.

"Does Jesus protect us from haints?" asked Tadpole.

"All except the Holy Ghost, honey," smiled Aunt Alethia, "and that's a living spirit, not a haint." She waved at a neighbor going their way, then peered down at Tadpole. "Why you worried about haints?"

"There's a haint at the Killing Tree."

Aunt Alethia's smile disappeared. "Ain't much resting in peace going on up there," she muttered. Determined, she pushed the corners of her mouth back up. "Prayer and my Jesus can beat any haint."

In the gathering crowd, they kept on where the paved road ended, flanking trees bearded in kudzu and drifting curly dry leaves on the dirt road ahead. Tadpole heard the music before they reached the clearing, where two tents lit up the evening. Voices like trumpets filled the air. The music and its crazy joy lifted Tadpole like a feather floating on a single long breath.

"two tents?" she asked Alethia. "They only had one last year."

"Maybe one's the quiet tent. The prayer tent."

How quiet can it be? wondered Tadpole. "I wanna go see." Her hand slipped out of Aunt Alethia's.

"Not now, sweetheart," said Aunt Alethia. "Let's get settled first."

They headed to the big tent. The music and the roar grew, yawned, swallowed them. Smell of caramel popcorn rose in the air. The canvas entryway flapped back and forth, admitting people, spitting them out.

Tadpole ducked in. Music boomed. Laughter and clapping, hats and flowers, hot sheen on a hundred rainbow hues of dark skin. Lots of strangers. All friendly, but strangers.

Tadpole glanced behind her. "Aunt Alethia?" she hollered, the words lost in the hubbub. Her aunt was nowhere in sight.

Outside. Plunge into cool air again. Had she gone to the right tent? Tadpole ran to the other, saddle shoes pinching her feet. No music from this tent. She punched the canvas flap open, jumped in, and froze.

Rows and rows of empty chairs. An aisle down the middle led to a card table. At the table sat an old woman in wire-rimmed spectacles. Tadpole recognized her immediately.

"It's all right, child, you ain't lost. Come here, Tadpole," said Grandmam.

"Grandmam?" Tadpole sucked in a breath, teetering between running out of the tent or into her arms. "Are you back? You ain't a —"

"No, Tadpole. I'm a messenger." Grandmam smiled her old sweet smile, her teeth like little pearls. Not a smile a haint could fake. Skittish, Tadpole picked her way down the aisle, the Sunday dress fluttering around her knees.

Warm brown eyes shone expectantly out of the wire rims.

"I shouldn't sit in your lap, Grandmam. Mama says I'm getting too big," Tadpole explained, not sure

she wanted to touch Grandmam quite yet. Off in the other tent, the choir swelled.

"Last time I seen you, true, you were much more tadpolish. Now you a young lady," agreed Grandmam. "Still not old enough to be a Theodora, though." Her eyes twinkled, then sobered. "But you old enough to hear what's gotta be heard, and do what's gotta be done. Your mama don't work root magic no more, only kitchen magic, for you and your papa. I can show you what to do, but I can't do it for you."

Roots? "The haint at the Killing Tree?" squeaked Tadpole.

"Fraid so, dear."

"What I'm supposed to do about a haint, Grandmam? I already screamed. He knows I'm scared of his cold bones dancing."

"He'? How you know the haint's a he?"

Tadpole stopped. "I don't." She put a hand on her hip. "How you know it's a she?"

"Cause I watch over my children and everything that touches them." All the warmth of the home hearth was in her smile. "Now listen, child. That haint can't pass on because your Mama's got something that belongs to it."

"Why don't Mama just give it back?"

"She can't no more. She lost her second sight, and without her second sight, she can't see what to give back. Or even why."

"But Grandmam, I don't have any more pairs of eyes than I got!"

Grandmam gave her a sharp, darting look. Not anger, but necessity. Papa had looked at Tadpole like that once, when she'd almost fallen through a frozen lake, and he'd grabbed her arm with saving swiftness. "Tadpole, why do you think you can see me?"

Tadpole's belly felt upside-down, as if she was standing on a cliff's edge. "But you're here, right?"

"Always have been, girl, always will be. But you're coming of age now, coming into your birthright. And I'm a show you what most folks only look past." Grandma rose from her folding chair, no longer faltering from rheumy joints, Tadpole saw. Backbone straight as a young tree, Grandmam stepped to the rear of the tent and flung open the canvas.

Evening crept in, sweet warm breezes playing with a cooler undercurrent. From the other tent, the piano pounded joyfully, a low rhythm under the full choir, jubilating. Stars blinked sleepily. Light from the two tents fell pale on the dark field, pushed back by the oncoming night.

"What do you see, child?"

"I don't see nothing, Grandmam. Just you and me standing outside a tent."

"I know you see this fine fall night, and that's something, not nothing," Grandmam said gently. "But now, look ahead for a while, and don't move a muscle." Tadpole did as she was told.

Slowly the darkness began to dance, dim red shapes burning and flapping on the edges of her sight. "I see . . ."

"Hush, child. A minute longer." Tadpole waited, hardly breathing. "Now. When I say 'Go,' turn your head quick, just a bit, and let your eyes follow."

The little hairs on Tadpole's arms rose.

"Go!"

Tadpole turned her head.

For a split second, so brief she disbelieved it, she saw a bright tall house, sunlight glinting off towers. Night and doubt swallowed it.

"Did you see them?" whispered Grandmam.

"Towers?"

"Try again."

Tadpole blinked. She let her eyes reach far into darkness, heart pounding. Turned her head, fast.

In all the windows of the great house, on all the towers, danced a host of people. Some wore old-time clothes, some modern; some even wore flowing robes of emerald, yellow, crimson. On their brown upraised arms shone gold. On the walls behind them hung colorful tapestries and wooden masks.

They flashed and disappeared.

"I saw them," said Tadpole firmly. Grandmam nodded. "Who *are* they?"

"Your forebears, child. Watching over you. I'm the youngest in that house." Grandmam laughed. "And that house just the beginning of your sight, Tadpole. Keep your thoughts free and your memory sharp, and you'll see many wonders. This world has so many." She sighed; whether in regret or satisfaction,

Tadpole couldn't tell. "Mind now, you going to need that sight soon. Have those eyes and ears peeled for strangers."

Tadpole's flesh prickled. "But I saw plenty of strangers already tonight." The revival! Where was Aunt Alethia? She'd almost forgot. ..

"This stranger," said Grandmam, "is stranger than all strangers. Now go on back, child. This ain't the last of me."

"Back?" Tadpole's eyes fluttered open. Onstage in the crowded tent, the robed preacher strutted to the slow tempo of a joyous song. Tadpole was sprawled out on the aisle, Aunt Alethia cradling her head.

"Slain in the Spirit," crooned her aunt. "Oh, child, I knew you could feel it."

Tadpole didn't tell Aunt Alethia about the grand house or the forebears. Her aunt seemed supremely proud to have a niece who'd been slain in the Spirit, and Tadpole didn't know what to make of what she'd seen, anyhow. *Maybe I dreamed in the Spirit.* But most dreams were nonsensical, and came when they pleased, not when she asked.



When the altar call came, Tadpole went down the aisle to the front of the tent with her beaming aunt. Basking in the ecstatic glow of the music and the blessings pouring out from onstage, she knelt with all the brothers and sisters. *This is like the house of forebears, only everybody can see everybody. Why don't the forebears appear to anyone but me?*

Of course, Jesus didn't appear to everybody, either. And He was good and powerful.

Maybe Jesus could find the haint, and Tadpole wouldn't have to see it herself. After all, Jesus loved her. And everyone was a friend in Jesus now, not strangers anymore.

The music slowed to soulful, the choir swaying. The throng rose, some staggering to their feet, some with tears in their eyes. They held hands and sang, then turned, went back up the aisle and out into the night.

Stars were bright now, sharp-edged crystals of ice, and the fall air crisp. Cinnamon, apple cider, doughnuts and coffee scents mingled, steaming sweet from the buffet table set up outside the tent. Tadpole thought the singing might have called down a little bit of heaven onto the table.

The brothers and sisters laughed and joked now, sipping coffee or cider in paper cups. Children ran through the forest of grown-up legs and around the buffet table, peeking out from under the white tablecloth. Recognizing some kids from school, Tadpole screwed up the boldness to go ask if she could play too. Everybody was friendly now.

In the midst of the crowd, Tadpole glimpsed a stranger.

Her hatless hair was swept up as elegantly as Aunt Alethia's, wound in tight, smooth rolls back from her temples, just over her ears, into a loose bun at the nape of her neck. The rolls looked like the rounded ears of a panther Tadpole had seen at the circus. High cheekbones made her chin seem pointy. Her eyes were golden, her skin a creamy dark chocolate, gleaming black against the clean white dress she wore.

The lady never stood alone. Every few minutes, a different man came up to her, looking like he was about to get down on his knees and beg. Then another man would tap him on the shoulder. They all ended up slinking away like dogs with their tails between their legs.

Aunt Alethia pressed a sugared doughnut into Tadpole's hand. "Eat up, child, I got to get you back to your Mama. It's past midnight." She read Tadpole's expression, stared at the spot Tadpole had been riveted to. "What do you see?"

Tadpole almost pointed, but remembered that it wasn't polite. "I thought ... I saw somebody," she stammered, and crammed the doughnut into her mouth.

"Easy!" said Aunt Alethia. "That doughnut ain't trying to run away, you know."

"Sorry," Tadpole said through cinnamon and sweet dough.

"Don't talk with your mouth full! Come on now, we got to get home." Aunt Alethia took her by the hand that wasn't full of doughnut and hustled her away from the table, hastily calling good night to everyone.

How I'm going to find out what that haint wants? thought Tadpole desperately. *Oh Jesus, Grandmam and all my forebears, tell me what to do —!*

But Jesus didn't pop up in a cloud. Grandmam didn't speak from a burning bush. Aunt Alethia only believed in the Holy Ghost, Mama's second sight was gone, and Tadpole suddenly felt small and alone.

Mama was waiting up for them when they clattered up the back stairs. "Did she behave?"

Tadpole had licked her fingers clean of sugar. She looked appealingly at Aunt Alethia.

"Theodora got right with Jesus," Aunt Alethia told Mama, winking at Tadpole.

Mama gave Tadpole a wondering smile. "You did? That's my girl." Her eyes lingered a moment longer, then she shook her head as if dismissing a thought. "You hungry, child?"

"No," said Tadpole. *Who could be?* Something was wrong. "Where's Papa?"

Mama stirred uneasily. "Taking a walk." She glanced meaningfully at Alethia. "He'll be back later. Time for bed, honey."

"But, Mama, I'm not sleepy."

"Child, a day will come when you'd sleep through the night and half the day if you could. Til then I got to put you to bed 'fore I put my own self to bed, and I'm already fixing to drop right here. Go get in your nightgown now, hear?"

"What about the haint?" blurted Tadpole.

Aunt Alethia put her hands on her hips. "You still scared of haints? After seeing the power of the Lord? Ain't no haint coming past this doorpost."

Mama pulled Tadpole to her and hugged her fiercely. "She's right. No haints in this house. Now go get ready for bed."

But Papa ain't in the house either. More awake than ever, Tadpole knew it was useless to argue. She'd have to scout out the haint on the sneak. She shuffled out of the kitchen and went past the washroom to her bedroom. After she changed into her nightgown, she crept back just around the corner from the kitchen, gripping the wooden doorframe outside.

Mama and Alethia, half-whispering.

". . . know how he gets any time there's a revival," said Alethia. "I wish he'd put it behind him. It was ten years ago, and he's still sulking about it, boozing, making **you and** the child fret."

"He always comes back." Mama was crying. "He ain't leaving me, **I know**. Never. And it ain't all his fault."

"Girl, that's what women always say. You got to put your foot down." Alethia's dress rustled. "I'll go see if Theodora's in bed." Tadpole slipped into the washroom. She plunged her hands into the tub.

Alethia appeared in the doorway, stifling a reproach at the sight. "Good girl. I'm a tuck **you** in. Your Mama will be in to kiss you later."

Tadpole towed her hands off and trotted obediently behind Aunt Alethia. She jumped **into** bed. Its springs squeaked. Lying down, she **closed** her eyes. Light out and a kiss on her cheek.

She waited 'til the floorboards announced Aunt Alethia's departure. *I got to find that haint, but I can't go walking.* Tadpole opened her eyes and stared at the cracked ceiling. Stared until **the** cracks disappeared and the plaster swam **into** starlit waves.

Grandmam, Tadpole called silently. She sniffed. Fragrance stole through the air, not delicious like food, but pleasant and distantly familiar.

Something surely magical.

Van Van, whispered Grandmam's voice. *Incense. Your Mama burning incense for the first time in years. She be fearful. Not all her sight gone.. .*

Tadpole breathed incense.

"I used to play piano, a long time ago." *Papa?* Tadpole almost jumped out of bed at the sound of his voice, but only quivered, not daring to move. Then she saw: trees trailing kudzu; four feet crunching slow over dirt road.

The elegant lady with her swirled-chocolate hair, and Papa.

"Played for a gospel choir," said Papa. "Meant to go on the road with them, just bolt from this town, but —" He held up the hand with the short ring finger.

"I been missing a bone myself for a long time," purred the lady, her voice not gritty anymore, but just as wicked as it was below the stump. "Just one bone in the right place wouldn't do me no harm, no harm at all." She put her arm around Papa's waist, parting her lips, her head nearing his neck...

"Papa!" screamed Tadpole. The haint's head jerked up. The sight of them disappeared into the plaster ceiling.

Mama at her bedside. "Hush, baby, it's all right."

"Mama, it ain't all right! The haint's got Papa!" Comforting words formed on Mama's lips: *just a dream*. "I saw them stepping . . . stepping out under the vines!"

The words on Mama's lips crumbled. Mama's eyes widened, then narrowed.

She reassembled the words carefully. "It's just a dream. Mama's going to make dang sure of that. Go back to sleep." She pushed herself up from Tadpole's bed, moving purposeful and slow. Out in the hallway, low voices: "... coming right back ... can't be wandering so late ... go along?... no, stay with her, make sure she doesn't. . ."

Lantern light swinging in the hallway, stealthy footsteps and darkness again. "Mama!" Tadpole called, slipping out of bed. "Don't —"

Aunt Alethia blocked the doorway. "Theodora, get back in bed."

"But —"

"Now." Her aunt took a step towards her, large in the dark.

Tadpole backed up, got under the covers. Alethia sat on the chair just inside the door, arms folded.



Swallowing, Tadpole squeezed her eyes shut and thought as loud as she could: *Grandmam and all my forebears, help me. Help me find what that haint needs to leave us be.*

She opened her eyes, stared into the ceiling again. Nothing. She turned her head quick, as Grandmam had told her. Still nothing. Nearby, Aunt Alethia shifted on the chair. *Do I have to be alone to see?* Tadpole asked silently.

Grandmam's words returned: *Keep your thoughts free and your memory sharp. . . .*

Tadpole closed her eyes to picture the grand house and the forebears, letting imagination fill in the gaps in memory. Soon the picture had a life of its own, the ancestors' music and laughter audible, real enough to walk into.

Earth warm, dry beneath her bare feet. Tadpole walked.

Light cloth rustled at her ankles. She glanced down. A robe like the forebears' covered her now, its pattern a dancing jumble of brightly colored moons and suns and strange faces. Flutes and drums cut from living wood played ancient music. Creatures in the trees surrounding the house hooted and screeched and warbled in reply.

Grandmam and all Tadpole's forebears gathered silently round as she neared, as though to protect her.

A figure in blazing white approached them from the woods. Her coal-black face was set in anger.

"What do you want from our family, haint?" cried Tadpole. The haint came on, brazen. One of the ancestors set the butt of his wooden staff in the earth. She stopped, daring no closer.

"What do you want?" repeated Tadpole.

"If your Mama don't give me back what's mine," spat the lady, "I'll take what's hers!"

"What does my Mama have of yours, haint?"

The woman tore her white robe in two. She stood naked in the sunlight. Tadpole recoiled, but knew she was safe with her forebears behind her.

As the white robe fell to the ground, the woman shrank into herself. Now a black cat stood before

them, golden eyes like embers, tail lashing. "She has a bone of mine."

Grandmam gasped. "Elaine laid the Black Cat Bone trick!"

"What's that?" whispered Tadpole.

"I want it back," said the cat. "Give it to me or I'll take the man she hoodoo'ed into sticking 'round."

"You already got his fingerbone, cat," snapped Grandmam.

"That don't help a cat none. And it wasn't my idea, but Elaine's. Her trick worked as good as she planned, only not as pretty as she wanted. But killing a black cat for its magic bone ain't pretty, either." The cat licked its chops. "At least he lost that finger helping chop down the Killing Tree. Now. One of you gotta find me that bone 'fore I'll go home and stay put." It stared insolently at Tadpole.

"I'll find you your damn bone," said Tadpole. "Then you got to give me my Papa back and leave us alone."

"Once that bone is mine again," answered the cat smugly, "he ain't bound to you no more."

"Papa loves us," yelled Tadpole. "He'll be back in spite of you."

Abruptly, cat, forest and ancestors vanished. Tadpole blinked. Bedroom walls faded in around her. Dazed, Tadpole sat upright in bed, sheets rustling. Aunt Alethia's snore broke off, then resumed.

I bet that bone is under Mama's bed, thought Tadpole. She had crawled under it once playing Hide and Seek.

She glued her eyes to Aunt Alethia. Head leant back against the wall, her aunt was fast asleep.

Tadpole smoothed back the covers. Put a toe on the floor. Slipped out of bed entirely. Dashed silent and scared past her snoring aunt, out the door, and around the corner to Mama's and Papa's bedroom.

Dropping to her hands and knees, she cocked her head to look under the bed, lifting the coverlet.

Small chest. She crawled as quietly as she could underneath the bed, grabbing the chest, prying at the lock.

The screen door squealed. Tadpole froze.

Footsteps raced to Mama's bedroom. Fear-charged, Tadpole stopped breathing.

The coverlet lifted, and Mama's face peered under the bed. Her hand groped for the chest. Tadpole hoped beyond hope it was too dark for Mama to see her.

Mama slid the chest out from under the bed. The coverlet fell again.

"Come out, child," said Mama's voice, not loud, but commanding. Shaking, Tadpole scooted out from under the bed, Mama's lantern filling the bedroom with flickering light. Mama held her chin high, a mixture of anger, dignity, and regret transforming her face. "We got to undo this thing."

Fumbling with a tiny bag of worn green cloth around her neck, she produced a key. She fitted it into the lock and opened the chest, pulling out another worn cloth bag. She undid a knot and spilled the contents out on the coverlet.

A ball of wax, some purple string knotted many times, scraps of paper, lint, and, finally, a thin bone not quite the size of a finger fell out. Aged scent of Van Van.

Mama went limp. "That bone wasn't even stuck in the wax or knotted in the string no more." She laughed abruptly. "I suppose he could have left for real a while ago."

"I told that haint Papa loved us," said Tadpole.

"He does, child." Mama kissed her. "Now let's go to the Killing Tree and bury this damn bone."

Q

Natalia Lincoln, a writer of dark fantasy and science fiction, is the recipient of Odyssey Fantasy Workshop's highest Gandalf Grant. Her most recent publications appeared in the Best of Epitaph, as well as the science fiction, fantasy, & horror anthology, Circles in the Hair. The Mirror, her dark fantasy novel set in modern New York and medieval Eastern Europe, awaits publication.

A second work, Ambassador Orange, is in progress.

Natalia is a founding member of the science fiction, fantasy, & horror writing collective, CITH. She also plays keyboards and sings for Unto Ashes, a New York City neo-medieval band who just returned from their first German tour.

DARK FANTASY FILM FESTIVAL

1. *Diabolique* (1955)

A dark, deceiving
design with the dead rising,
suffusing the mind.

2. *Carnival of Souls* (1962)

dance, grin an
introduction to their world,
halfway in the real.

3. *The Haunting* (1963 and 1999)

In her grave, Shirley
alternately delights and
rolls over again.

4. *The Birds* (1963)

Raptors and sparrows
darkening the dread sky with
a fury of wings.

5. *Night of the Living Dead* (1968)

The good old days of
gore galore: Those black and white
horrors can still bite.

— David Bain

6. *Hawk the Slayer* (1980)

Swords and so sorry:
No push-ups for Jack Parlance,
no sequels either.

7. *Re-Animator* (1985)

The dead
Lovecraft's racist tale
hacked up and given new life.
This flick feeds the head.

8. *Hellraiser* (1987)

Clive's toy takes you to
a whole world of hurt; blood brings
you back to this earth.

9. *The Blair Witch Project* (1999)

Love it or hate it,
a documentary of
how we choose to see.

10. *Grand Finale: The Entire Slasher Genre*

The killed killer comes
back, copycatted, until
we are forced to "Scream."

THE CHILDREN OF MORIAH

by Robert Weinberg

illustrated by Russell Morgan

The alarm rang. And rang.

Eyes still clouded with sleep, Bryan Talbot rolled over and stared at the clock-radio on the night-stand. Bold red neon letters proclaimed it was 6:45 A.M. Time to get up. Untangling one hand from the covers, he pressed the off switch. Squinting to focus, he stared at the calendar thumb-tacked to the wall. Tuesday, May 15. Nothing scribbled on the date. No baseball games, no theater tickets, no union meetings, no movie premieres, not a thing. It was a free evening. Time for him to relax at home, do nothing but read a book or watch TV. It wasn't that he minded going out three, four, even five times a week in the evening on Institute business. Sometimes he just needed a break from work. Nine in the morning till ten or eleven at night was too long to be on the job, even if it was as important as his.

Bryan sat up in bed. Raising his arms high over his head, he stretched. A few rotations back and forth at the waist helped banish the last remnants of sleep from his system. Turning, he slid off the bed and marched into the bathroom. Fifteen minutes to take a hot shower, shave, and do his business. Afterwards, he put on the usual outfit: white shirt, light blue tie, pinstripe suit. He slid a cheap silver-plated watch onto his left wrist and buckled a small but extremely accurate digital touch-master onto his right. When on, the miniature device registered every time Bryan touched someone. Supposedly, it had been developed for political pollsters, but Bryan knew better.

A final stop in front of the mirror in the front hall to straighten his tie and run a comb through his thick, dark hair. Bryan smiled, nodded at the bland, very ordinary face that stared back at him from the glass. He was the perfect *man of the crowd*, as Poe had once put it so well. The picture of a modern, middle-class business executive, a colorless entity in the city's vast sea of humanity.

His briefcase, thin and black, with his name stamped across the top in small gold letters, sat by the front door, exactly where he left it each night. Bryan zipped it open and checked the contents of its four pockets. One held five hundred dollars in worn singles, fives and tens. The second contained a pad of white paper and three pens. The third held a slender date book. There was no name or address in the book. Only numbers. Every weekday from January 1 through May 14 had a number written in black ink next to the date and nothing else. Bryan didn't need any notes. He knew what the numbers meant.

The fourth and final compartment contained a yellow manila envelope. Inside the envelope was a photograph of an ancient stone statue with the face of a man and body of a lion. Few people in the world would recognize the figure or know its name. Bryan did. It was Nergal, the ruler of the Babylonian underworld. Nergal, known as Lord of the Lions, the god of death.

Promptly at 7:30, Bryan exited his apartment. He bent down and picked up the newspaper resting on the welcome mat. Rolling it up into a long, narrow cylinder, he tucked it under one arm. He'd skim the headlines during breakfast.

Bryan lived in a comfortable, four-flat brown-stone in Brooklyn. It was a quiet, old neighborhood. The most exciting thing to have happened here lately was the birth of Mary McGarrity's third child a month ago, and Sandy Kapshaw's early acceptance at NYU. There was a diner on the corner named Joe's Place. Today was Tuesday. *Two-for-Five* Tuesday according to the sign in the window, meaning the special was two strips of bacon, two eggs, two slices of toast, and a cup of coffee for five bucks. It was a good deal for Bryan, who rarely ate anything other than snack food in his apartment. Eating out and meeting people was a big part of his job.

Entering the restaurant, he nodded at Karen, the waitress, exchanged a brief good morning with Joe, behind the griddle as usual, and took his place at booth number 7. His booth, he liked to think of it. Unless he was out of town, he had eaten his breakfast in this booth every day for the past five years. Bryan knew each crack in the red plastic upholstery, every notch in the table, and all the spots on the yellowing blinds that kept the sunlight off his face. There was no reason to open the menu Karen laid on the table. He knew the entire document, word for word. A good memory was necessary for business. So

many people to meet, so many faces to remember.

"The usual," he told Karen as she placed silverware, a glass of water and a napkin on the table. "Eggs over easy, rye toast not too brown." Then, settling back on the seat, he unrolled the newspaper to the world news summary.

During the week, Bryan read *USA Today*. The paper covered the important news of the day without going into great detail. That was perfectly fine with him, since details meant little to someone in his position. He was a people person. Bryan liked to think of himself as a one-on-one contact sort of guy. The best thing about the paper was that it didn't contain an obituary section. Bryan disliked reading about death at breakfast. Too much like work early in the morning.

He finished eating at 8:15. Five bucks the breakfast, and a two dollar tip for Karen. The waitress smiled when he left and waved. She was single and reasonably attractive and sometimes on the weekend, when Bryan wasn't on a tight schedule, they sat and talked in the diner for hours. While he was no ladies' man, Bryan knew Karen liked him. He felt certain if he asked her out on a date, she'd say yes. He never asked.

Karen was a waitress and trained to notice the little things, like when you were out of coffee or needed another pat of butter. Plus, she had a good memory for details. Visit the diner once or twice and she remembered your name. It was a potentially dangerous combination. Bryan never worried about the police or the National Guard or even the NSA uncovering the truth about his job. But, Karen might.

The subway to downtown Manhattan deposited him a few blocks away from Madison Square Garden at five minutes to nine. Walking to the Garden took Bryan exactly five minutes. He checked his watch. It was nine o'clock.

Bryan laid his briefcase down on one of the gray marble sculptures that decorated the open area in front of the Garden. Shielding the contents with his body, he carefully counted out \$100 in small bills and slipped the money into the wallet in his coat pocket. Next, he checked the date book. Yesterday, he'd tagged thirty-two. Not bad, slightly above his average, but nothing special. Numbers like that weren't going to change the world. Today, he'd try harder.

Lastly, he took out the manila envelope and removed the photo of Nergal from within. Eyes focused on the picture, Bryan softly whispered a sentence in a language long dead. It was a very powerful sentence. A familiar tingling sensation in his fingers indicated his prayer had been answered. He pressed the switch that activated the counter on his right wrist. Time for work.

Yesterday, he had walked south and west, towards the river and through Chelsea. Wednesday was matinee day in the theater district and he dared not miss that. So, today, he decided to walk east. The morning streets were crowded with people. Maybe, he'd stop in at Macy's. Or he might visit the Empire State Building. Lots of tourists at the Empire State. It offered the best view in town.



Taking in a deep breath, Bryan started moving. The air was thick with smells. Some good, some bad, some indifferent, but mostly all unhealthy. Manhattan was a haven for pollution. Live or work here long enough and your lungs were doomed. Air pollution was another problem that needed to be solved by modern science. Bryan sighed and shook his head. It wasn't his worry. At least, not yet.

A few feet ahead of him, a tall, slender black man, dressed in blue jeans and a gray NYU sweatshirt, his arms filled with textbooks, stumbled on a crack in the pavement. He wavered, unbalanced for an instant. Just long enough for Bryan to reach out with his right hand and catch the man by the shoulder, steadying him.

"Hey, big thanks, man," said the student, regaining his footing.

"No problem," said Bryan, as the man hurried on.

One registered the gadget on his wrist.

A half-block further, an unshaven old derelict, with silvery white hair and black glasses, sat on the sidewalk, his back to a building wall, strumming a song on a beat-up guitar. A tin cup sat at his side, while hanging by a string around his neck was a cardboard sign, *Desert Storm vet, please give what you can*, scribbled across in crayon.

Reaching into his wallet, Bryan pulled out a five and stuffed it into the cup. Gently, he patted the old man on the arm. "Good luck, soldier," said Bryan.

Two clicked his wrist.

Three and four were a pleasant, elderly couple from Miami Beach visiting New York for the first time. They were having a hell of a time crossing the major streets before the traffic light turned red. Bryan was glad to lend each of them a hand walking them across Fifth Avenue.

"We always heard stories about how unpleasant New Yorkers were," said George, the husband. "How nice to discover that's not the case."

"We're just like everyone else," said Bryan, smiling. He cheated for an instant and peered into their future. Three hours from now, Millie, the wife, was going to be struck and killed by a hit-and-run driver on Forty-Fifth Street. George, witnessing the accident from only a few feet away, would suffer a massive heart attack and die on the sidewalk before the EMPs arrived.

"Have a wonderful day," he said as they wandered off. Too bad, they seemed like nice people. Sometimes he hated his job. But, everyone had to die sooner or later. And at least it was for a good cause.

Riding up the elevator to the observation platform of the Empire State Building, Bryan passed over a pocket pack of Kleenex to a short, dough-faced man with yellowing teeth and a hacking cough. **Five**. Definitely a lung cancer case. He didn't need to check the future for those.

It was a beautiful, sunny day, and you could see for miles and miles through the mesh netting. He scored a quick half-dozen hits on the observation deck, bringing his total up to eleven. Thankfully, there were no jumpers. Bryan did his job without complaint, but viewing the end result was not part of the deal. A gentle, mild-mannered person, he found acts of physical violence repulsive.

Taking the elevator down from the tower, he found several opportunities when a middle-aged woman unexpectedly fainted in the crowded car. Trying his best to be helpful, Bryan touched her and seven other people in the elevator. Once the door opened, he scored four more between the building staff and the emergency medical personnel. Watching the ambulance drive off, he checked the counter on his wrist. Twenty-three encounters already, and it was still early in the day. If he was extremely lucky, he might make fifty.

Lunch was a slice of pizza and a coke at an Italian walk-up on 42nd Street not far off Broadway. He shared counter space with two Hispanic laborers and a Japanese businessman. The counterman was Chinese. Bryan had no prejudices. He treated everyone equally. His work served all humanity. Besides, Nergal wasn't choosy. To the god, a life was a life.

The sun brought out the hookers at their usual spots by the New York Public Library. He recognized several from previous visits. No need to touch them again. Once was enough. Sometime soon, they'd all be dead. Normally, the power took an already existing medical condition and accelerated it until the victim died. In rare instances, like Millie and George today, it turned bad luck lethal. Bryan had absolutely no control of what happened. Life was short and filled with surprises. All he did was give meaningless deaths some value. Without people like him, humanity would still be living in caves. It was that knowledge that kept him going when he grew depressed. His work made the future happen.

He touched seven hookers and two undercover policewomen in the plaza without getting arrested or

arousing suspicion. He bought three young children balloons and talked with two elderly gentlemen about chess. He said hello to Officer Malone, the patrolman who kept watch on this section of the park. Bryan knew the beat cop considered him a harmless eccentric, which was an image he worked hard to maintain. Malone was one of the few people Bryan never touched. A reliable cop was an asset too valuable to sacrifice.

At three o'clock, his counter registered forty-nine victims. It was nearly time for him to stop for the day. Still, hitting fifty would match his personal best. Usually, the movies on Broadway scheduled films on the hour. With a little luck, he could catch a crowd leaving a theater.

Five minutes later, Bryan was surrounded by a swarm of teenagers and twenty-somethings exiting Hollywood's latest slasher film. The noise and swirl of several hundred people jammed tightly together in front of the doors engulfed him and suddenly he regretted his decision. Crowds were dangerous. Too many hits this close together could be deadly. A messenger of death, he had no desire to die himself. He felt boxed in, with no place to turn.

Last month, Willis Conners had been in a similar situation. Willis was a night owl, so he decided to play the crowd at a midnight screening of *The Rocky Horror Show*. Everything went as planned. Willis was a smooth operator and he scored fourteen hits as the movie cleared. That was right before number fifteen pulled out a Mauser semiautomatic pistol and sprayed the crowd with steel-jacketed slugs. A minute later, a lucky policeman put a bullet in the madman's head. In total, sixteen people, including Willis, died in the massacre. After hearing the story, everyone at the institute agreed. Major hits in small crowds were asking for trouble.

Visions of blazing guns clouding his vision, Bryan stumbled back and forth, not watching where he was going. Then, mercifully, he was in the street, the traffic light flashing red. Raising his briefcase to his chest, Bryan scurried for the safety of the concrete street divider. Cars sped around him, isolating him, protecting him. By the time the lights changed to green, he felt pretty much back to normal. He checked his counter. **Fifty-two.** He'd touched three people in the crowd. He wondered who, but knew he would never find out.

Pushing the *off* button on the clicker, he muttered "Enough." And it was.

He took the 3:40 subway to Brooklyn. The same train he took every weekday. Best to leave the dangerous stuff to other agents. Bryan was no egomaniac but he knew his own importance. If he was killed on duty, it might take months, maybe even years to find his replacement. Nergal was a difficult god to deal with. Not many people these days were willing to worship Babylonian deities. It was a good thought to remember. Bryan had a sacred duty to perform. The institute needed him. Humanity needed him.

He checked into the office at 4:15. An old brick building, three stories tall, a shabby sign outside proclaimed it the home of *Intervention Industries*. The outer office was an old fashioned waiting room decorated in dilapidated furniture and piles of dust. Visitors encountered a nasty, not-to-be-bothered secretary who told anyone not employed by the company that everyone listed as working for the corporation was out. No one could ever be found, and rarely did anyone come looking.



Buzzed through to checkpoint two, Bryan was iris-scanned, body-matched, and DNA analyzed. Only

then was he allowed to report to his office thirty feet beneath the empty warehouse. It was amazing what several hundred million dollars could build.

His secretary, Joyce Sullivan, was waiting for him to arrive. She wore a thin woven skirt decorated with ancient Babylonian script. Her top consisted entirely of a black sports bra, crusted with phony diamonds and fake emeralds. Her down-to-the-waist brown hair was braided much in the style of the Babylonian handmaidens who served in ancient temples some four thousand years ago.

It only took a few minutes for Bryan to change from his street clothes to the bejeweled garb of the High Priest of Babylon. A push of the button on his desk and the rear wall of the office opened up; and the foot-high statue of Nergal, Lord of the Lions, slid out from its resting place. With the wave of a hand, Joyce lowered the lights. Stepping forward, she sprinkled a half-dozen drops of human blood from a specimen bottle across Ner-gal's open hands.

His features solemn, Bryan went down on his hands and knees before the statue. He lowered his head in prayer. "Great Nergal, Lord of Lions, Ruler of the Underworld, Keeper of Great Secrets, we, your high priest and priestess, bow to your ancient wisdom and knowledge."

Bryan reached out and grasped the statue's two hands with his own. For the barest instant, he felt the spiritual essence of today's victims flow out from his fingers. "We pray you accept our offering of these lives and souls, Lord of the Underworld. In return, we ask for one small favor. We seek the cure for the disease known in these modern days as leukemia."

The idol remained silent. Bryan waited. The God responded slowly. Some days it didn't bother answering at all. All Bryan could do was wait. And hope.

Then, stone eyes opened, revealing glowing red pits of fire that stretched to infinity. "The sacrifices are accepted," the idol proclaimed in a voice so deep and without tone it could not be recorded. "But they are not enough. Not nearly enough."

With the last syllable of the last word, the presence animating the idol departed. Once more, Bryan and Joyce were alone in a simple office with a stone statue on the floor. Joyce pushed a button, and the idol disappeared back into its wall safe. A few minutes later, she and Bryan were dressed in normal street clothes.

"It wants ten thousand," said Joyce. "That's my guess, the greedy little bastard. How was your day today?"

"Got 52," said Bryan.

"Hey, a new record," said Joyce. She checked the notebook on her desk. "That puts you over 9,000. We can do it, I'm sure. Probably take three or four weeks if the weather stays good."

"June's always a good month," said Bryan, trying not to sound depressed. He'd been working on leukemia for over a year. He wanted to move on to something new. "Lots of tourists visit the city."

"Right," said Joyce. "Easy marks. You carrying enough cash?"

"I'm good," answered Bryan. "But I'll probably be broke by Friday. Put in a requisition for five thousand. The usual, small bills, mixed. You up to a baseball game Thursday night?"

"Yankees or Mets?"

"Your choice," said Bryan. "Surprise me."

"Fine," said Joyce. "I'll tell Sam to get us box seats for a change."

"Sounds good to me," said Bryan. Money, tickets to games, shows, or important events were never a problem. Whatever they needed, they got. "Give us a chance to mingle with the rich and famous. Let them pay their share."

"Millionaires and bums," said Joyce, smiling. "Their souls are all the same to the Lord of the Lions."

"Right," said Bryan, heading for the door. "Be thankful he's not picky. We could be working for Anubis. He only accepts cat lovers. Drives poor Hannah Silverman crazy."

"Good night, Bryan."

"See you tomorrow," said Bryan and exited the office.

He walked down the hallway and knocked on Ed Thompson's door. Ed was section chief and Bryan liked to stop in his office once or twice a week just to say hello.

"Enter," said Ed and Bryan pulled open the door. Ed sat behind his desk, typing away on his keyboard. He glanced up for a second, then focused his eyes once more on the computer monitor.

"Hey, Bryan. Just give me a second. I'm sending an email to Nick Lancaster at NASA. Those idiots need to stop announcing deadlines we can't meet. We'll never have the technological advances they need

by 2010. Stuff like that requires millions of sacrifices. I can't just switch everyone over to the Mars mission and forget about health issues for six years. Damn, I don't know what these scientists expect from us? Miracles?"

It was an old joke, but they both laughed.

Ed finished typing with a flourish and hit the SEND button. "These Born-Again politicians make promises and then we pagans gotta deliver. The world's not fair, Bryan. But, then, we both know that. How is leukemia coming? The guys at National Center for Disease Control have been bugging me about that again."

"Another month at least," said Bryan. "Nergal's stubborn. Joyce thinks he's set on ten thousand sacrifices. Won't settle for one less."

"I know," said Ed, sounding sympathetic. Before moving up to administration, he had worked the field for ten years. He understood how frustrating the job could be. "You can't bargain with the really old ones. After four thousand years, once they decide something, that's it. No compromises."

"It couldn't have been this hard in the old days," said Bryan. "There's nothing in the record books about mass sacrifices."

"Right," said Ed. He reached over to the candy dish on the side of his desk, snagged a Hershey's kiss, unwrapped it, and threw it in his mouth. He pointed to the dish but Bryan shook his head. He wasn't much on chocolates. None of those working for the institute smoked or drank or used drugs. They were too aware of the consequences.

Life was a lot less complicated twenty-thirty centuries ago," said Ed. "The gods didn't require major sacrifices to teach humans how to bake bread. Or build the pyramids. That was the easy stuff. Our problems aren't so simple. Civilization's grown a lot more complex these past few hundred years. Sure, scientists can do a lot. But, they still need help. The world depends on miracles, Bryan. And for those, the gods require sacrifices. Lots and lots of deaths."

"Yeah, I know," said Bryan. He sighed, feeling the weight of millions if not billions of people settle on his shoulders. "Progress has a price."

"Ain't that the truth," said Ed. "Now, I need to concentrate on getting this polio outbreak solved. Thought that mess was under control years ago. Take care, Bryan. Don't let work get you down. Even if they don't know it, humanity's counting on you. More important, so am I."

Bryan rode the 5:30 home. Another day over. Tonight, instead of eating out, he'd order a pizza. After a long day on his feet, he just wanted to sit and relax. Stretch out on the sofa and watch reruns of *Law & Order*. Pretend that such things really existed.

Wearily, he walked the five blocks to his apartment. He frowned. There was an ambulance parked in front of the building, a small crowd gathered on the sidewalk. Two paramedics were pushing a stretcher holding Mr. Kapshaw, his neighbor from across the hall, into the rear of the ambulance.

Bryan knew they were wasting their time. He recognized death when he saw it.

"What happened?" he asked Mrs. Applebaum from upstairs as the ambulance drove off in a wail of sirens.

"Irving, he was sitting on the steps, reading a newspaper," said the gray-haired old woman, tears streaming down his eyes. "Then, poof, he dropped to the sidewalk. One minute up; the next, flat on his face. Heart attack, the medics said. He didn't look good to me, Mr. Talbot. Not good at all."

"How terrible," said Bryan. He liked Kapshaw. Everyone on the block liked Kapshaw. "What a terrible tragedy."

"How many?" said Mrs. Applebaum, her head shaking with sorrow, "how many more have to die this way before they finally find a cure?"

"Thirty-seven thousand, four hundred, and nineteen," answered Bryan without thinking. Q

This story is dedicated to Kelly Goldberg, who suggested the title. She would have been pleased to see it in Weird Tales. The world is a sadder place without her.

Bob Weinberg is the author of 34 books, many comic books, and has edited 154 anthologies and story collections. He likes to keep busy.

BLACKWATER GHOSTS

by Terry Sofian illustrated by Keith Minnion

Phil Maddox's pager went off at about 11:00 P.M. and less than three minutes later he was on the road, dry-suit clad with scuba equipment in the truck, hurtling down the highway.

The pager read:

- . Vehicle overturned in the creek.

Those words launched him from sleep to immediate action.

With no traffic, he made good time. He saw the incident scene; the road before the bridge was filled with the lights from a dozen emergency response vehicles. The air ambulance landed, rotor blades, cutting the night into hard-edged red, white, and black fragments.

Phil parked behind the State trooper's cruiser. Getting out, he slung the air tank over his shoulder. The trooper motioned him through the cones, saying, "Vehicle went over the guard rail. Flipped right into the creek. One victim, but it's a recovery, not a rescue."

Phil looked over the bridge into the five-foot deep creek. He could see the victim, pinned beneath the jeep. Only part of his head was visible, trapped between the rocky bank and the smashed rear fender.

Phil dropped his tank and went down the bank. He wouldn't be diving, but as the only person with water gear on, he would help extricate the victim. As he climbed down, the Fire Captain noticed him. "Glad you're here. Now we won't have to get wet."

"Always happy to help."

"Well, you know what we need, I'll let you get to it."

The steel cable from the tow truck came down and Phil fought the current attaching it to the vehicle's frame. He held onto the victim's body so the current wouldn't pull it away. Through his thin glove, Phil felt the man's wedding band. Afterwards he searched the creek to ensure no one else had been in the vehicle. It took only a few minutes and then everyone was reloading the trucks and returning to service. Phil watched them leave and headed home as well.

Driving back he still felt the hard metal of the wedding ring against his palm. Once home he cleaned the mud from his dry suit. Performing all the other little tasks required to get his equipment back into service kept his mind on the narrow focus. If he was lost in details he could forget about the empty big picture. His wife — no, correct that; his ex-wife — wasn't in it anymore.

She had never understood why he answered the pager, or how expensive answering it could be. She hadn't even looked up when he had come back from that little backyard pond, hadn't even asked if he was OK. He had been alone with images of that drowned little girl. A little girl the same age as his daughter; her parents looking on hopeful and hopeless, shattered beyond any immediate feelings, beyond words to express.

His wife had upbraided him mercilessly for tracking water over her clean carpets. He'd called the lawyer the next day. It was divorce, suicide, or quit diving. As awful as diving was, he knew that not diving would be worse.

His new house felt no emptier than the one he'd lived in with his wife. It even had something the other place never did: hope. That made it a home.

As a housewarming present, he'd bought himself a new computer. Knowing that sleep would not find him anytime soon, he turned on the machine and logged onto the 'net. The familiar synthetic voice welcomed him and announced that he had mail. He quickly deleted the porn web site ads and the get-rich-quick schemes. He was left with a dozen messages mostly from his mail lists, the most active of which was composed of fellow rescue and recovery divers. He read through the messages. There were a couple announcing training classes and the usual few Monday morning quarterbackings of someone else's incident.



Off the list there was a message with a screen name that he didn't recognize: Gailwriter. Intrigued, or sleep deprived, he opened and read it.

Hello

I write horror novels. I am researching a character for a story. He is a rescue diver who becomes involved in a supernatural mystery. I read your profile and was hoping you could help me make my character more believable. I have a few questions, but any help that you could provide would be most welcome.

If it would not be too much trouble could you please answer a few questions for me? How does a diver prepare himself for a dive? What kinds of equipment do rescue divers use? Is it the same that a recreational diver would use? How is rescue diving different from recreational diving? Why do rescue divers have a better chance of locating victims than recreational divers? How do you feel about diving? Hopefully I am not intruding, and am not bothering you. Thank you for your time. Gail Ritter

Phil read the letter twice. He had half a mind to ignore it, or send a purely technical response. Instead he did something he might not have had he been more awake. He cut and pasted an entry from his journal into e-mail:

Gail,

This is an entry from my journal. I hope this answers some of your questions. Phil

From Tones to Debrief

Is what you did enough? If she can hold her father's finger with her tiny hand will that be enough? Will what you did keep some love in this world?

"Drowning," says the dispatcher and you are moving already, throwing a wet suit on, and gear into the truck. Even before the dispatcher has finished. A child has drowned in the next subdivision.

You must drive faster.

You are the only diver within ten minutes, the Platinum Ten, of the victim. It is likely that you will be the first on the scene. This could be your time to really do something special, to really shine. In a drowning quick rescue can make all the difference. The day is warm, but the nights have been cold, so the water should still have been cold. A cold-water-near-drowning: eighteen-month old victim. The chances are good and for once the right person, with the right training may be in the right place at the right time.

You must drive faster.

You get stopped at a red light by traffic. You can hear the fire engines coming, but they don't have divers or equipment. You have to get there and find the child before the paramedics can do anything.

Gas, Gas and more Gas.

You brake hard to make the turn into the subdivision and squeal to a stop, pulling on tank and mask as you go. Hands from bystanders help you. As the first truck pulls up you throw one of the firefighters the end of your search line and walk into the cold pond. The last seen point was very good and you hit the limp form of the little girl on the first lane, swimming right into her. She is so small, weightless in your arms, as you surface and run through the water towards shore. The medics wade out to meet you and pull the girl from your arms.

As they take her away to work on her your tank suddenly feels so heavy. All you can do is sit and shake on the side of the pond. Momentarily forgotten, you watch the medics work the girl. After a few minutes one of the firefighters helps you up. You put your gear away. Now you are just one more person on the scene, with no special skills. You help direct traffic and move vehicles out of the way.

Finally the ambulance is rolling fast. Someone else is thinking 'I must go faster.' The Captain is driving so all the medics can work in the back. You help clear the way so that Engine Company Three, or Threes for short, can turn around and go to the hospital to pick up their Captain. It must have been hours since you got there, but looking at the watch it's a lot less than twenty minutes. It can't be, but all that effort, by almost a dozen emergency responders, has taken less than twenty minutes. Unbelievable.

Driving home you think about the baby, you think about your baby. She's the same age, and just as vulnerable. Just as loved, just as loving. Will this little girl make it? The water was cold, the child very young. These are both in her favor. Even more so is the emergency care she got. You know that from the time that Threes got on the scene the child got the very best care anyone could have. You pray these things are enough.

Back home you listen to the radio, waiting for Threes to go back into service. When they do you will call the station to see how the child is. You hear them go in service, but almost immediately they are called back to the hospital to set up a landing zone for the helicopter that will fly the little girl out. You take this as a good sign; she must still be alive. You look at your watch, almost two and a half hours since the call came out. A very long time. You wonder at what went on in the ER.

As soon as they get back to the station you call them. The girl didn't make it. They were flying her out to have her organs donated for transplants. In your home you have your thoughts, the love of a lost child and the love of the child sleeping in the room next to yours. Sometimes you find it far too easy to put yourself in the place of the victims, or the family of the victim. You asked if a Critical Incident Debrief would be held. It's scheduled for Monday evening. You have made plans to be there.

The Critical Incident Stress Management Debrief is a new thing in the fire service. You have never been to one before, and don't really know what to expect. Everyone who was involved: Fire, EMS, Law Enforcement are invited. A team of trained mental health and peer review people are there to start your healing process, so that you can do your job. The first thing you learn is that the baby isn't dead. She was flown out to a special ICU and has recently been taken off her respirator. Things still don't look good, she may never recover, her brain might still die, but there is now a slim hope that maybe things will get better. With such a young child sometimes miracles do occur. The roller coaster ride hasn't ended yet.

The CISMD starts off with everyone describing what they did at the incident. You are proud of the job you did, but know it was luck that put you there. You tell your story. The Paramedics and Firefighter EMTs say what they did. They did a lot. They say they just hoped that this would be one that they could have a shot at. They knew about cold water and little babies, and that if the child had any vitals they might be able to do something good. You can tell how proud they were that they gave it everything they had. For eighteen minutes they were as hard and as sharp as machines and everything went better than they hoped.

Everyone also gets a chance to talk about how they feel, the "little pictures", or "snippets of video" they have from this incident. You talk about how the lake was bright blue when you got there with ripple from the father trying to rescue his daughter. Mark, the Captain of Engine Company Three, tells about meeting the eyes of the mother and then going to her. The Medic supervisor says she doesn't see children

at incidents as small people with grieving parents, but as CPR mannequins, inanimate plastic to be worked on. This is her defense, but that defense comes apart when she mentions that the child had, "pretty eyelashes, and a cute little face." She is close to tears. For you this is the most vivid thing about the debrief: how a hardened Medic Supervisor let her defenses down when she was taken back to that day.

Postscript:

You learn that the little girl died the next weekend. Her obit ran on Sunday. Sunday had been a beautiful sunny day; the kind of day a little girl should have been outside watching the early spring flowers bloom and blow in the breeze. Not a day for a little baby to be dead; it was far too beautiful for that, wasn't it? You remember the two rules of Rescue Diving:

Rule 1 People die.

Rule 2 Divers can't change Rule 1.

Phil hit the "send" button.

After *a* few minutes of reading the rest of his mail he had second thoughts. When he attempted to unsend the letter he was greeted with the following message:

You may not unsend messages once they have been read.

Before he could wonder why he had sent the damned thing in the first place, or what this Gail person made of it, his computer chimed.

You have an instant message from Gailwriter. Will you accept?



Interested *to find out how big a fool he had* made of himself, he clicked on YES.

Gailwriter

Hello. Thank you for the e-mail, it was very powerful. And very sad.

DiverPM What we do is often sad.

Gailwriter

Then why do you do it?

DiverPM

If it was your child wouldn't you want someone to find her?

There was a long pause.

Gailwriter Yes

DiverPM

That is why we do it.

Gailwriter

You don't sound like you enjoy it.

DiverPM

I don't. It's not something I do because I want to. It's something I do because I have to.

Gailwriter

I never knew that emergency service people felt like that.

DiverPM

Some of us do. It doesn't affect everyone the same way.

He found himself writing very frankly to this person. She was a complete stranger, totally faceless and unknown. Maybe that was why it was so easy for him to open up. She was unreal; safe somehow. They chatted for what seemed like only a few minutes, but when he looked at the clock two hours had passed. The alarm would be very unforgiving in four hours. He made his good-byes and got ready to sign off.

Gailwriter

Thank you, you've given me a lot to think about for my character.

DiverPM

You're welcome.

Gailwriter

Do you always journal in second person?

DiverPM

I wrote it when I was married. I was trying to show my wife how I felt. It didn't work.

Gailwriter

I don't think you write in second person just to bring the reader closer. I think you do it to distance yourself from the pain.

Phil wasn't sure what to say, which in his mind was a good argument that Gail was correct. He told her so.

Gailwriter

I'm sorry, it was none of my business. Please forgive me.

Phil thought about this as well. On one level he wasn't entirely comfortable with someone being so forward with her observations, without having even met him. He was, however, intrigued by someone who, from one journal entry, might be insightful enough to guess something he had kept hidden from himself.

Whoever this Gail person was, she was safe, distant, and insulated from him by the namelessness of the Net.

DiverPM

That's OK, so much for me being mysterious.

Gailwriter

I guess you will have to leave that to me. I know it must be late for you. I'd like to chat with you again sometime.

DiverPM

I'd like that too.

Gailwriter g'night.

DiverPM g'night.

In the days that followed Gail became a regular visitor on his computer. Quickly he began to look forward to seeing her screen name appear on his buddy list window. He sent her a few more journal entries and she had high praise for them. In return she sent him some character sketches of her protagonist, although she was still quite mysterious about what would befall him in her story.

Gailwriter

I wrote this and want you to read it, does it ring true?

DiverPM

Sure, send it, I'll take a look.

Gailwriter

Be gentle <grin>

It's the ones he couldn't help that stayed with him. The ones that were swept away or simply never found. Carter remembered one of his first evidence classes. The instructor was a long-service Boston cop who had introduced his students to one of the truths of emergency response: the truth of the "small grave." The retired detective's small grave was from his rookie year. He was hours late in saving the tiny four-year old from death by abuse and neglect, or four years late. He had taken out his frustrations on the drunken and uncaring father. Violent action was only a short-term tonic. Every year, on the anniversary of her death, a fresh wreath graces the cheap gravestone in its horrible urban cemetery; that is his lifelong treatment.

Carter's own "small grave" lies empty. Rape had not been enough for her assailants. They had used the river to hide their crime, and to take her life and everything it could have been. In fifteen years the current had never surrendered her; closure denied. It had not been Carter's case to work; it had been his case to live. He was still in high school, not an evidence recovery diver, just the victim's best friend and lover. If he had ceased to be a child at any given moment, it was when he fell to his knees before her empty coffin.

They had met as lifeguards. Water had always been their playground, the thing that had brought them together. It was water that had taken her away. For years he couldn't swim. The water called, but he refused to answer. Finally he could not resist and went back to swimming and learned diving. The water, once so sweet and secure, once a place of safety, was now forever a place of horror. His short-term tonic had been to turn his back on the water; his lifelong treatment diving.

Phil read the blue letters on his screen once over. Then his eyes focused on a dark multi-span bridge and he replayed, as he had countless times before, the images of two sisters, repeatedly raped and then pushed from the span into the cold black waters below. The Mississippi had never surrendered one of them. The lost promise of two young lives was marked with a matching pair of stones, one of which marked an even greater emptiness; as Gail had written, "closure denied."

A small tone chimed. The dark images crumbled and were replaced with the neutral beige casing of his computer and the luminous pearly gray of the screen. Several lines of text, queries from Gail, marched across his monitor.

"Are you all right?" asked the latest one. At first he wasn't sure how to answer that. Suddenly he was very angry. Obviously someone he knew was jobbing him. He didn't share much. Few people could handle, even second hand, the emotions, images, and events he dove towards.

DiverPM

Gail who are you?

Gailwriter

What do you mean?

DiverPM

Don't bullshit me. You couldn't have written that without knowing me. Which of my friends are you?

Gailwriter



Phil, we've never *met*. I *only know you* from what you have shown me.

DiverPM

I REALLY don't appreciate this. I hope that you are having a great time doing this.

Gailwriter

Phil, I swear to you that we've never met. If you don't get off this we probably won't.

DiverPM

I haven't told many people about my empty grave. It shouldn't be hard to figure out who you are. How else could you have known?

Gailwriter

You're an idiot. I've read your journal entries and our chats. Damn it, don't you think I'm smart enough to figure you out, at least a little?

He thought back to her comments about that first journal entry he had sent her. She had seen in his style something he hadn't noticed, something that was suddenly so correct and obvious once she had pointed it out: the distance he was trying to put between himself and the traumas of his diving. None of the other people, his wife before the divorce, a couple of friends, even his counselor, who had read it had been perceptive enough to see. Gail was different and he realized that his sudden burst of anger was as much from fear as anything else. He wasn't certain if he could afford to let someone into his life that could read him so easily. He was even less sure if he could let someone like that out of his life. For the second time that evening, the chiming of his computer brought him back to the present.

* * *

Gailwriter

I'm sorry.

DiverPM

No Gail, I should apologize. I was wrong.

Gailwriter

I should have asked you before I wrote that. I did some research into your area and found several cases where the bodies were never recovered. I should have understood you well enough to know how much that would distress you. I should have guessed that you had worked at least one of them. I wasn't thinking, I wasn't being a friend. I used you and I hurt you when I did it. You have a visceral ability to see things. I'm sorry for the images I must have helped conjure in your mind.

DiverPM

You didn't do it on purpose. It's OK. I didn't work the case, and luckily I wasn't as close to the victims as your character was. They were girls I went to college with.

Gailwriter

Did you know them well? Friends?

DiverPM

No. They were good friends of good friends. I only knew them in passing.

Gailwriter

That's worse for you isn't it?

Phil had to think about this as well; was it worse to miss what you had known, or to wonder over what you might have missed? Again he found himself without an answer. It seemed that Gail was increasingly able to generate that response in him.

DiverPM

How do you do that?

Gailwriter Do what?

DiverPM

Ask questions I can't answer?

Gailwriter

Just a God-given-gift. <grin>

DiverPM

Thanks for being here; I need a friend right now.

Gailwriter

I wouldn't want to be anywhere else.

They bantered for some time that evening. Gail was sharp witted, kind, and cared about him in a way he had thought he would never find. Somewhere in this he realized he was falling in love with her. Somehow this did not scare him as much as it should have.

One night while he was waiting for her to get on-line he loitered in the local news headlines area. As usual it was a mistake. The lead story was about a missing thirteen-year-old girl. He had a very bad feeling about it, like flies crawling across his soul. He knew the world could be a very bad place, filled with very bad people. Before he could dwell upon the story he heard the door-opening sound that

announced Gail's arrival.

They chatted, but she seemed preoccupied. Her responses were slow and she lacked her usual sharp wit. He asked if she was busy, they could always chat later.

Gailwriter

No, there has been something I've been thinking about telling you. But I've been afraid.

DiverPM Why?

Gailwriter

Because if you find this out about me you won't like me anymore.

DiverPM

I can't think of anything that would make me feel that way about you.

Gailwriter

If I tell you, you'll hate me; I know you will.

DiverPM

I doubt that.

Gailwriter

Thirteen years ago I did a very bad thing. It was the worst thing a person could do.

Phil was concerned now. What if she had killed someone while driving drunk? What if she had taken an innocent life? Could he forgive her for that? He didn't know.

Gailwriter

I was driving my car one afternoon. I was a senior in high school. It was down along the lakes north of New Orleans.

My car had a flat tire.

When I was trying to figure out how to fix it a pickup with some boys I went to school with pulled up.

Phil had a very good idea where this was now headed. He couldn't stop Gail. He put his hands on the sides of the monitor. There was nothing he could do but watch the story unfold in a clear blue 12-point font.

Gailwriter

They gave me a lift in their pickup.

They beat me, gang raped me, and left me for dead by the side of the road.

The flurry of instant messages stopped. Phil didn't know if Gail was done and didn't want to interrupt her.

Gailwriter

You hate me don't you?

DiverPM

How could I hate you for what other people did to you?

Gailwriter

It was my fault. I did it.

DiverPM

How could that have been your fault?

Gailwriter It was.

DiverPM

How? Gailwriter

I was a bad person, I deserved it.

DiverPM

What could you have done that you didn't?

Gailwriter Nothing.

DiverPM

Then why was it your fault?

Gailwriter

I must have done something to deserve it. I understand that you can't be my friend anymore.

DiverPM

I'll always be your friend.

Gailwriter

WHAT?

How could you care about me, someone who let that happen?

DiverPM

How could I let something like that keep me from caring about you?

Gailwriter

You don't know me.

DiverPM

If you were drowning I would go down with you if I could not save you.

It was a long while before the next message.

Gailwriter

Do you really mean that?

DiverPM Yes.

And he knew that, even though it was against all the training he had ever gotten, it was true.

They continued chatting for a long time. Between them they had shared their darkest secrets. It certainly wasn't what he had been looking for. Was it what he needed?

After having missed so much sleep, it had been a long day. The ringing of the phone at eight the next evening found him only half-awake, in that hazy space between bleary wakefulness and restless sleep.

"Phil, we need you to go in tomorrow." It was Bennie, the dive team dispatcher. Bennie's voice was old. A diver turned to dispatching when his body or his soul couldn't take the water and its secrets anymore. In Bennie's case both were long since broken.

"What have you got?" Phil asked.

Bennie hesitated for a moment. "Sheriff's department needs the lake in Webster Park searched."

With a sick certainty Phil knew what the call would be. "It's that missing girl, isn't it?"

"Yes."

"When do you want me there?"

"8:00 A.M."

"OK, have the cops bring the coffee and donuts, and I'll bring everything else."

"See ya tomorrow."

"See ya."

Gail wasn't on line that evening, so he left her an e-mail.

With coffee cup in hand Phil listened to the in brief. Search dogs had led police to the lake, but dogs and police officers don't dive. It was the team's turn now. The missing girl was a tiny 13-year-old. Her photo showed a smiling redhead in a soccer uniform. Phil passed it along without looking. He concentrated on the description of the dogs' activity along the lakeshore. Apparently the hounds had shown substantial interest in a section of the bike path hard along the shore. That would be where the divers would start.

Phil was first diver in and started his initial sweep at the far end of the search area. He would work from the edge, where they believed there was less chance of finding anything, towards the center or the high probability area. It was a standard technique.

Phil's first semicircular sweeps, arcs determined by the yellow searchline stretched between him and the tender, were clean. He found nothing but the usual pond bottom junk. The water was murky, he was 'diving by Braille,' using his hands like a blind man.

Touch was the first sensation that told him he was in the crime scene. His gloved right hand brushed something that moved slightly. He hovered, letting the slit settle back down. He turned his headband light on and slowly floated forward until he was inches from the object. In the light it was pale. He immediately recognized it as a disarticulated hand. Dropping back within the cocoon of his training, closing out his emotions completely, he placed a marker buoy.

Gently he moved on trying to define the perimeter of the scene. It was very large. After the first orbit he pulled out the underwater camera and shot the entire roll. He then carefully bagged all the evidence, all the pieces, the separate articles of clothing, the disarticulate remains, the knife. He maintained precise positive control as he moved from near utter blackness to the brighter surface. Evidence techs were waiting on shore.

When he was finally done, certain he had collected every scrap of flesh and cloth and bone from the oozing black mud of the lake, he had been lucky to pull his face mask off before vomiting. He convulsed on his hands and knees on the edge of the lake until he was totally empty.

This is it, thought Phil. This better end soon. He sat on the edge of the big empty bed, dripping wet and shivering. He had stayed in the shower until the total absence of hot water forced him out. His skin was raw from scrubbing, and still he didn't feel clean.

Would he ever again? After what he had discovered today could he ever dive again? He couldn't even begin to understand how another human being could so cruelly use a child. Thank God he had been wearing gloves. He prayed that this was the last time he would ever dive.

Somewhere a phone was ringing. It was distant and meaningless. Much closer Phil heard an alien voice, which he recognized as his own answering, "Hello."

"Honey, it's OK. I know it hurts but it's OK." The voice was feminine, with a sweet southern accent. Phil did not recognize it. He was still sitting with the phone cradled against his ear, speechless.

"Phil, it's Gail."

He began to sob immediately. Deep wracking gasps. In his ear were words of comfort. He had prayed that someday someone would be with him to say these things when he most needed them. Today was that day, and Gail was that person. It didn't matter that she was a voice on the other end of the phone. It only mattered that she said the words he needed to hear.

"Gail, I don't think I can do this anymore, I just can't."

"You did a great job today, didn't you?"

"God, I hope so."

Her voice was soothing. "The family had to know."

That just made him hurt worse. "The truth is so horrible."

"Not knowing would be even worse."

"How can you be sure?" he asked. "How can you know that?"

"It's not the things we know, it's the things we imagine."

Phil thought about this for a moment. "I can't imagine anything worse than this."

Gail sighed, "That's because you're a good person. You saved her family from having to wonder where their little girl is. As bad as things are, at least they can begin moving on. If you hadn't found her, that couldn't happen."

"I just bring awful news, horrible news."

"The man that killed that little girl will kill again. You are all that is going to catch him. You find evidence. If you don't go down, who will? If you don't go down how many other little girls and their families will suffer? You know that as bad as you feel now, you would feel worse to hear about those killings."

He didn't know what to say.

"You and the evidence you recovered will catch and convict him."

"I pray you're right."

"I'm sure." She paused. "Phil, I love you."

It was words he hadn't expected to hear. His response was also something he didn't expect. "I love you too."

"I promise that when all this is over we'll meet."

"This might never end."

"You'll just have to catch him quickly, won't you?"

"How did I find you?"

"You didn't, I heard your call. You were empty. I need you, but it was what you needed that brought us together. No one that does what you do should be so alone. Now go get some sleep. You aren't any good to anyone exhausted."

He hung up the phone. He finally felt clean.

Sleep closed in on him.

"This bastard is on a very short cycle," said the detective. The briefing room was crowded. FBI profilers and agents, police, and divers filled the available seats or stood, arms crossed against their chests, along the back wall.

They'd had three girls go missing in four weeks. Two underwater crime scenes, one still to be found. There was a sick certainty that the third girl would turn up like the others. Even as the evidence collection teams were being brought up to speed on the latest potential victim, dogs and handlers were combing lakesides across the county.

Phil stood in the back of the room, thoughts black and cold. He hadn't been on the second crime scene. It had been in the city and City Fire's divers had done the work. He wasn't sure if he was relieved or disappointed. He knew that there would be tiny dismembered body after body if they didn't catch a break soon.

This guy was good; he was clean and focused. It would be hard to catch him. They had to pray he would make a mistake. Phil prayed even harder that they would catch that mistake. It looked like this time, divers would make or break the case. Unfortunately, for the killer to make a mistake more girls had to die.

The briefing lasted for over two hours. Everything the profilers could dream up was presented. This stuff was interesting, but was it useful? Phil had a feeling that the only thing that would matter was what they found on the bottom. Profilers don't dive. It was on the bottom that they'd find this guy's mistake.

Phil felt shredded by the time he unlocked his pickup to head home. His cloth seat felt hot through his jeans. The spring sunshine was quick to heat up his truck, but slow to warm the local lakes and ponds. It was still drysuit weather. He replayed search patterns and techniques in his head as he drove. On the way he stopped and grabbed something to eat. By the time he parked in the driveway, he couldn't recall where he had stopped or what he had eaten.

After he entered the dark coolness of his home, his first impulse was to check his dive equipment. When the next call came, he wanted to be on dive station as soon as possible. Everything was ready. The

small items: fins, dive knife, booties, gloves, and lights were in a big plastic tub; the drysuit was hanging, quickly available for rapid donning. The tank, including the attached buoyancy compensator and integrated weight system, stood next to the door. He could be out the door in less than two minutes.

The service checks on his back-up gear came first. Satisfied that it was all functioning properly and available for immediate use he took his frontline gear out of service and worked that over as well.

By the time he had finished checking his gear it was very late. He was completely exhausted. Surprisingly, sleep found him quickly. Not surprisingly, so did his nightmares.

He woke no less exhausted than when he turned off the lights. The next few days passed in a blur. He snarled at his coworkers. This case was killing his day job. He'd be lucky if anyone at work talked to him after this was over. For a volunteer even the most patient and supportive bosses have limits. This investigation would almost certainly find them.

The pager was a like a talisman. He touched it often, reassuring himself it was still on his belt. When a call-back number turned out to be from someone who misdialed, he exploded in anger. Gail was all that kept him sane. He found her to be more and more his lifeline. She absolved him of his sins of anger when they chatted that evening.

They finally found the third crime scene a week later. Their boy had been kind enough to call the local paper and drop some hints. He so loved for people to admire his handiwork.

The handiwork was the same. Phil's search pattern hit the crime scene nearly in the center this time. The water was less turbid. Visibility was nearly three feet. Phil got a good view of the scene, something he didn't get from the first one. It was almost like modern art. Maybe that was the whole point.

The victim lay strewn across the muddy bottom. First the clothes, a pretty yellow sundress, had been weighted and dropped in. Next came the disarticulated body. Perhaps the killer had carefully waded in to place the head; it was face up, and the eyes open.

The knife was the last thing thrown in. It had come to rest across the small forearm. A new video camera recorded the crime scene. The water was clear enough to get some good footage. Phil drained his air tank and switched up. Dennis, one of the team's other divers, got the task of plotting each individual part. There were two divers at the scene. Like Phil, Dennis had been around for a long time. Dennis's bubble trail marked his efficient path across the crime scene.

Phil watched it for several minutes as he rested. The exhausted tank was switched for a new one. As soon as the plotting was done Phil would go back down and recover the physical remains and the rest of the evidence. He focused on his pre-dive equipment checks. When those were finished he replayed technique in his head. It was just like training. It wasn't a person down there. It was just like training. He could hear Dennis being violently sick as he ended his dive.

Phil slipped into the pond. Carefully he finished the scene. He bagged the dismembered hands and feet in zip-locks. Everything went in a black mess evidence bag. Usually body bags take the rough shape of a person. The bag he brought up did not. Again he handed everything over to the evidence techs. Spring sunshine was bright on his blue and orange dry suit as he huddled half in and half out of the water. It was a long time before he let himself be helped out of the pond. This time he didn't vomit. He was very proud.

As he sat on the tailgate of his pickup truck Phil wondered how many children had to die for this to end. How good was this killer? Would he ever make a mistake? If he didn't screw up, the investigators could never catch him. And for him to screw up he had to keep killing. Phil knew there was no way he could win this contest. It was a long time before he drove home.

Again he outlasted the hot water. As he lay in the darkness, the phone started to ring. He just looked at it until it stopped. He knew what she would say. Tonight he couldn't stand to listen. Tonight he didn't want to be loved, or cared for, or special to anyone. He wanted to be somebody else. He couldn't win. Bitterness filled him and spilled out across his whole world. Sleep found him while he was angry and hating.

The spring days passed slowly. Phil went online infrequently, and then only to delete his messages. He never responded to any chats. Next to the disconnected answering machine the phone would jangle to life, only to be ignored. The only message that mattered to Phil would come by pager. It was all he lived for. His coworkers avoided him, his supervisor feared him. The other members of the investigation were no better off than he was; meetings were conducted in monosyllabic drones until someone would snap

and vent his anger explosively.

Two more girls disappeared.

Phil pushed himself on a false site and pulled his right shoulder badly. That kept him out of the water for crime-scene number four. He had been the on-scene dive supervisor, bossing operations in a clipped, humorlessly professional manner.

Three hours after clearing the crime scene he sat in front of his computer. The letter of resignation was typed, proofread and spell checked, twice over. He saved it as a file to e-mail the team commander, the secretary, and the detective in charge of the investigation. He cited poor results, due to his own poor judgment and obvious lack of skill, as the reason he was quitting.

He went on-line to mail it. The killer was flawless, made of ice and printed circuits, but Phil was still human. There was a letter from Gail and he could not resist opening it. He was certain that the anger she had for being ignored these last days would fill his cup of gall to overflowing. He was also certain he deserved every last bitter sip.

Phil,

I'm not sure why you haven't chatted with me or answered my e-mail. I think I know, though. You can run away from me, but you can't run away from who you are and the gifts you have. Please, Phil, people need you. I need you, too, but that doesn't seem important right now. You are a diver, a gifted craftsman in a demanding vocation. These girls and their families need you, the Prosecuting Attorney needs you, and the cops and the other divers need you. Mostly the family of the next victim needs you. Don't betray yourself. If you give up now you will regret it for the rest of your life. Every time this monster kills another girl you will hate yourself more. You know it. Phil, I love you. I will no matter what you decide to do, and I will be waiting to hear from you whenever you can bring yourself to reopen a line of communication. That being said, I hope you stay in the fight. We need you. Love, Gail

Phil deleted his letter of resignation and went to sleep.

Another park pond. The grass sloped gently to the water's edge; clumps of trees shaded benches and picnic tables. It would have made a pleasant scene for an Impressionist painter. Victorians could have lounged on the green grass beneath the bright blue sky with its fluffy white clouds and nibbled daintily from wicker baskets.

Once again their boy had been here. Once again Phil was the lead diver. Dogs had hit on the part of the lake near an ornate cast iron bridge. Phil pulled rank as senior diver present. His second searchline crossed a large bundle. In his heart he knew they had the fifth victim.

This crime scene was different.

Instead of the bottom strewn with carefully cleaned and dismembered parts this victim was whole and wrapped haphazardly in a piece of old carpeting. Phil signaled up to the surface by wired communications when he had found something.

After carefully photographing and videotaping the crime scene, he and Dennis put the heavy bundle in a black mesh evidence-collecting bag and together they lifted it to the surface.

The Medical Examiner's van had been backed to the edge of the pond. The two divers carried the bundle to the open van, marching to the thudding cadence of news helicopter rotor blades. They robbed the vultures of their brutal video with the slam of double doors.

The interior of the van was close. Death was present.

Phil, Dennis, and the ME, crowded around the mesh bag. Inside was the sodden bundle. They needed to get a look at what it contained and ensure all evidence was stabilized immediately. Phil unzipped the black body bag. His light blue nitrile gloves contrasted against the dark mesh. As they removed the bag, the carpet bundle was revealed. It was a section of old carpeting, obviously hastily slashed from a larger piece. At some remote point in time, a careless handyman had splattered pale yellow paint across the garish orange and green pattern.

Phil saw the mirthless wolf smiles crossed the others' faces. If they could find the rest of this carpet, they would have more than enough for foren-sics to match. *If* they could find the original carpet. And if

this bundle had anything to do with their current case.

As they opened the carpet there was mingled relief and despair. It was the 15-year-old girl they had been searching for. Bruises and deep slashing wounds crisscrossed her face. From the briefing Phil knew that this victim was bigger and stronger than the others were. She had fought harder. Maybe that was what had finally caused their boy to make a mistake. He had gotten more than he had bargained for with this child.

The bright blue gloves of the techs stood out against the girl's deathly pale skin. They presented her hands for photography before carefully slipping them into clear plastic baggies. There was skin beneath the girl's nails. She hadn't been in the water long, and it was still pretty chilly. There would be ample material for DNA testing. If they could get a suspect, they could get a conviction.

The rest of the field investigation progressed quickly. Phil and his team had done their jobs well. They had brought up what was there and brought it up clean. Protocols had been followed and proper documentation completed.

The police decided to let the media do something positive for a change. They showed the carpet on the evening news. Maybe someone would recognize the ugly, orange-and-green relic from the seventies and call in. Maybe someone would point a finger at their killer. Phil watched the press conference from his living room. He could do nothing but pray now.

Even divers have to take care of personal needs. Long hair is a pain underwater. Phil was having his hair trimmed at the mall when rumor flashed like a wild fire. An arrest had been made! Several people recognized the carpet from a house they had rented down on Riverside.

The lead was a good one. Search warrants had been issued. The basement family room of the house had the hideous carpet. It was defaced with a missing section matching in shape and pattern the one found in the lake.

The tenant seemed surprised when he returned from work to face a house full of angry tactical officers. He surrendered without incident, asking for a lawyer. No lawyer could erase the splashes of blood in that basement. They had their boy.

Even in the recognition of a job well done Phil knew, though, that for the five dead girls it didn't matter. There were flowers gone from the World's garden and pulling up the weeds wouldn't change that.

The computer made its strange little chirps and whines as it booted up. Phil felt the first thing he needed to do was apologize to Gail. He owed her that much. He would understand if she didn't forgive him. He had thrown away everything he had ever wanted in a partner when he hadn't answered her last letter.

That was another death on the hands of the killer. Any love that Gail had felt for him was probably long gone.

Her screen name was up, and before Phil could send her a message a dialog box appeared on his screen.

You have an instant message from Gailwriter. Will you accept?

Phil clicked the Yes box immediately.

Gailwriter

You made the wire service news.

DiverPM

I'm sorry. I treated you very badly.

Gailwriter

You did what you had to do. I'm sorry I couldn't help you more.

DiverPM

Gail, no one has ever done as much for me. I was going to quit until I read your letter.

Gailwriter

I'm glad you didn't.

DiverPM

I'm glad I didn't.

Gailwriter

Well I have a promise to keep.

DiverPM ?

Gailwriter

I promised that we would meet.

DiverPM

I wasn't sure you still wanted to.

Gailwriter

Yes! Sooner than you think we'll be together. I'll make all the arrangements and keep you informed.

DiverPM

I guess I really need to clean the house now. <grin>

Phil's pager went off around eleven the next day. Doing a dangerous and unpleasant job well has its own penalty. Other people will want your help. Such was the case when a commuter airliner plunged into the water north of New Orleans. Phil had just enough time to send Gail a message about leaving town before the team loaded up. Two days after the black waters had swallowed the aircraft, Phil and his teammates found themselves five to fifteen feet deep in hell, gathering fragments of flesh and bone and aircraft that, thankfully, bore little resemblance to anything once living.

For five days it was dive after dive, hands always placed in fear of snakes, snapping turtles, or alligators. The next day the team would clean their gear and repack it. All that would be left after that was the drive home.

Phil had pushed himself hard, finding forgetfulness, if not release, in a job well done. There would be no celebration. On a job like this it was just better to put things as far behind one as possible, as quickly as possible.

The hotel staff had been polite and helpful, but they too had kept their distance. No one wanted to be close to the deaths of one hundred twenty-seven innocent people. No one except the media. The hotel and local authorities had done an excellent job of shielding the divers from that sort of attention.

That was why Phil was surprised when the phone rang and it was the front desk.

"Could you please come down and speak to some people?" The desk clerk sounded both desperate and embarrassed.

"Is it the press?"

"No. No, they aren't reporters. It should only take a few minutes." The clerk knew the divers needed their privacy, yet he could hear an imploring tone in her voice.

Wearing his faded team t-shirt and a pair of mesh pants over his trunks, Phil walked down to the lobby. He was surprised to be introduced to an older couple, well dressed and dignified. He could sense loss and anger in these people. He thought he knew who they were.

"Ma'am, sir, what can I help you with?"

"Sir, we were wondering if you could help us find our daughter?"

His guess had been correct. They were a victim's family. Phil's face froze solid. What could he tell them that they would want to hear? There was no hope of survivors and no mercy in remains to bury. The biggest piece they had found had been a mostly intact patella.

"Was she on the aircraft?"

"No, she's been missing for thirteen years."

In an instant he knew what name Mr. and Mrs. Ritter would give for their daughter. Professionally, Phil interviewed them about the potential dive site. He got a description and directions to the location. He asked the couple to bring anyone who had knowledge of the scene to the dive site in the morning. The team would be there.

Phil dove that next morning on the location of an oil slick that the Parish Sheriff had ignored thirteen years before. The local dive club had been persuaded to try their luck in the intervening time, but had come up empty.

By putting the Ritters' witnesses in the location they had observed the oil slick from, Phil hoped to establish a better Point Last Seen. The search began two hundred yards from where the local recreational divers had tried. On Phil's fourth search lane his rope snagged a large object. It turned out to be a 1985 Mazda, white in color. This was the same make, model, and year as Gail's car. The license plates matched those of Gail's missing vehicle as well.

Phil turned his back as the Sheriff had popped the trunk. Not a single person who stood on the road that morning was surprised when human remains were found. It would require dental records to positively identify them as Gail Ritter's. But no doubters remained on the melting asphalt. Everyone knew.

Gail Ritter had come home.



Phil was silent most of the ride back north, speaking only in response to direct questions, or to ask for something to drink. He didn't eat anything. He just wasn't hungry.

When he got home, he stowed his equipment in boxes in the basement. He drained the tanks, unscrewed the valves, disassembled the gear and generally did what was needed to ensure that whoever owned it next would find it serviceable and trustworthy.

Maybe he would sell it. Maybe he would donate it to the team. It didn't really matter. He knew he would never dive with it again. He had thought so before, but now he knew that there was no one to pull him back

from the brink. Diving had cost him his marriage, and now maybe his mind. He was done.

He remembered what he had told Gail with grim irony. "If you were drowning I would go down with you if I could not save you." He had gone down, and there would be no surfacing from these black, cold waters.

He smiled as he sat in the darkness. He was happy, in an empty mindless way, until the phone rang.

He picked it up mechanically. The voice was sweet and southern and although he had only heard it once before he knew it instantly.

"I'm sorry," she said, "so very sorry."

"What for?"

"I used you. I lied to you."

"If you had told me the truth I couldn't have believed you."

"I know, but it doesn't make it right."

"I love you. I never thought I would be able to feel that way again. You more than paid me back."

"It was always there inside you. I could see it from the first. It was in your journal. In your words."

"Thank you for showing me."

"No, I have to thank you."

"Why? What for?"

"I had missed out on so much. I had never known a love or a lover before I died. I found out what both those things mean from you. Without that I couldn't leave."

"Leave?"

"Yes, this is my farewell. Your gift has freed me to go."

The line was dead in his hand. As peace had finally called to Gail Ritter, sleep called to Phil. It was dreamless and dark and warm.

In the darkness the phone rang again.

"Phil, its Bennie. We have an helicopter down in the Mississippi."

"Where?"

"Meet the boat at Bald Eagle's Landing."

"I'll be there." Phil was running even as he threw down the cordless phone. Somehow his gear was ready, all assembled, and tank charged, by the garage door, like he had never packed it away. He hit the road, wet suit on, and rig ready to don.

Q

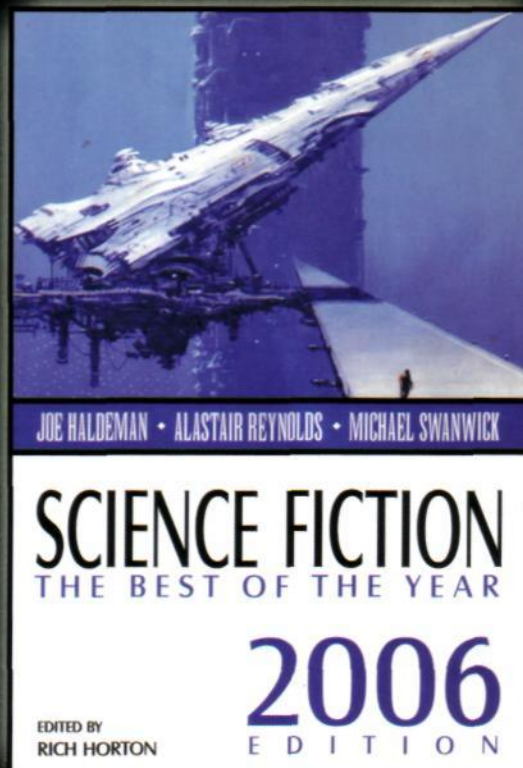
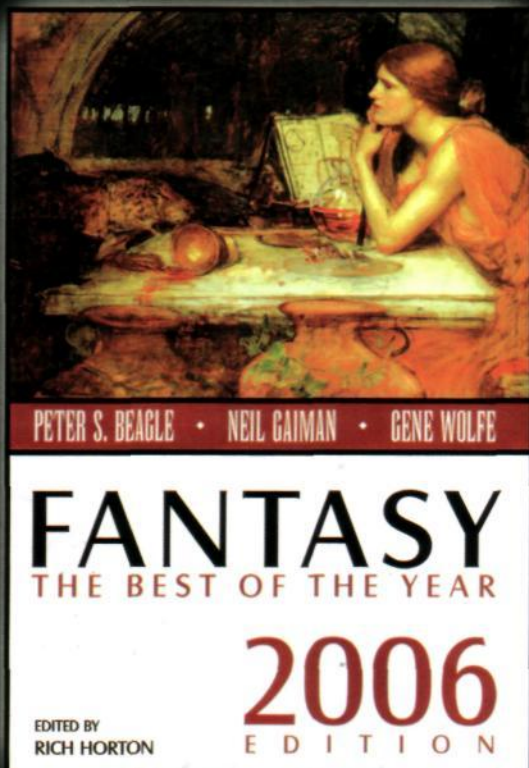
Terry Sofian lives in Missouri with his wonder wife Shannon and three rescued stray cats. When not buying books or building bookcases (or rooms for bookcases) in which to house them, Terry works as a regional emergency preparedness planner. He has been a volunteer firefighter for over fifteen years and has been the vice commander and a member of the board of directors for his county's search and rescue team.

THE HUNLI AND THE KUBLEVEX

When red whales swam in unsailed seas,
And triple-crested buffaloons nested in giant mixle trees,
A people small and dark with clever hands and brains
Dwelt in peaceful solitude on rawngress-covered plains.
In the season of the morange when dacklenuts are gathered,
The Hunli found a Zunta oh, so sorely wathered.
The Hunli brought him to their tents, and as he breathed his last,
He moaned, "The Kublevex! The Kublevex! In all the forest vast —
No place to hide — no one could kill — no one outwit
The cunning of the Kublevex — its cold eyes blood-lit."
The Hunli quizzled but forgot the direness of his words,
And busied them with cantling the speckled bessle herds.
It found them in the winter as they cooked around the fire;
In a screeching hurly-burly it trimpled them entire.
A few escaped, like dastin on the rindles, to wander far and wide
And crossed the Podda Mountains and sailed the Corling Tide.
They dared the Doalest Desert and the Maggot Marsh
And made a home inside their shoes in lands both lush and harsh.
They grew in knowledge and in numbers like sand upon the shore,
And searched the world for their ancient home, its glory to restore,
And for the rackish Kublevex until it raves no more.

Melissa Kirkwood Lewis

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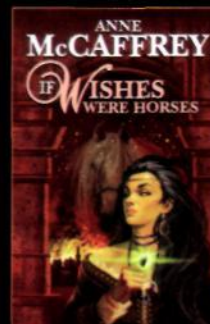
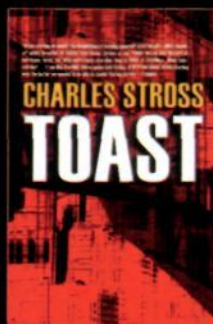
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