

Mountain Magic

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Mountain Magic

David Drake,
Eric Flint,
Ryk E. Spoor &
Manly Wade Wellman

This is a work of fiction. All the characters and events portrayed in this book are fictional, and any resemblance to real people or incidents is purely coincidental.

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**To Henry Kuttner (1914–1958) and
C.L. Moore (1911–1987)**

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An Apology

Unfortunately the Kuttner estate does not allow publication of electronic versions of his works. So we had to remove all of the Kuttner stories from the WebScriptions version. In their place we've added Manly Wade Wellman's *John the Balladeer* stories.

Certainly they fit the books theme of *Mountain Magic*.

DIAMONDS ARE FOREVER

Eric Flint and Ryk E. Spoor

1. Calling Mamma

"You're getting MARRIED?!"

I had to pull the receiver away from my ear. Father always said if Mamma was in full voice she could break window glass over in the next county. "Yes, Mamma. I asked Jodi yesterday and she accepted."

"Well, that's WONDERFUL!" Another ear-saving reaction. Her voice shifted to *No Nonsense* mode. "Now you've put this off long enough, Clinton Jefferson Slade. You're bringin' that girl home to meet your family this very week, you hear? I know you can take that time off if'n you try, in that big fancy job that you're so important at."

When Mamma uses your whole name, there isn't anything for it but you'd better do as you're told. "Yes, Mamma. It's just . . . Mamma, she's city."

"Well, now, I know that, boy. What other kind of girl would you be meetin' in New York? We're not

completely uneducated out here, you know."

I lowered my voice. "Mamma, I'll come. I'll bring her, okay. But . . . is everything okay there?"

"Well, of COURSE it—" Mamma cut off short, then sighed. "Oh. Yes, Clinton, ain't been none of *that* in quite a while. Daddy Zeke said you might be tryin' to hide *that* from this girl and that was why we hadn't met her."

"From anyone, Mamma, not just Jodi. Family's never told anyone, and I didn't aim to change that." I was slightly embarrassed to hear the Kentucky accent getting stronger; it always did when I talked to family. Not that I was really *embarrassed* about my family, not really, but . . . sometimes they were so weird. "So everything is okay?"

"Just FINE, dear. Now, we'll be expecting you when?"

I did a quick calculation in my head. "Say, Monday evening? We'll be driving and I'll have to make some arrangements before we go."

"That will be just fine, Clint dear." I was back to Clint now, so that was good. I hadn't been at all sure how they'd take me marrying a city girl, even though they really thought I was more than half city myself now. "We'll do you proud, boy, because we really are all proud of you, first Slade to finish college this century and all, and you done so well."

I blushed, and I know darn well Mamma could tell, even over the phone. "Aw, Mamma, ain't any big deal, really. Anyone in the family coulda done it."

"Don't you go selling yourself short, Clint dear. Even Evangeline knows perfectly well you're the genius in our family, and she's no dummy herself. Take care, and the whole family will be looking for you!"

We exchanged kisses over the phone, silly though that sounds, and I hung up.

"So," Jodi said, coming over, "were those bellows of fury, or was she happy to hear about it?"

"You could hear her?"

"Oy vey, Clint," she said, smiling. "Thought she'd break your eardrums with a couple of those."

Jodi was something of an anachronism. Her grandparents were immigrants who still spoke more Yiddish than English and had maintained an intimidatingly firm emphasis on the link between the old and new traditions. Linguistic traditions, anyway, if not religious ones. Jodi's grandfather had been active in the needle trade unions, a follower of Max Shachtman's brand of socialism. He had no use for religions of any kind, but that hadn't stopped him from maintaining a number of Jewish habits and customs. Jodi's family was almost a time capsule of clichés from the '40s and '50s, and Jodi had inherited enough to sound like a near-parody of the New York "Jewish American Princess." So why did I find her Yiddish, of all things, endearing? Especially when spoken with that New York accent that reminded me of nails on a chalkboard?

Probably just the blindness of love, I had to admit. I'd known Jodi Goldman for four years, though, so hopefully the blindness (or, in this case, deafness) would last for many years yet. "She was ecstatic," I said, answering her question. "I guess I should have more faith in my family, but they are still, well . . ."

"About as rustic backwoods as you were when you first showed up?"

I laughed. "Worse, sweetheart. I'd gone through college before that, remember. First Slade—"

"—this century, yes, I know, my *favenebbish*. You mentioned it a time or two, probably because your whole family mentions it every time you go home, yes?"

"And on the phone. Look, I sorta committed us to go visit. You don't argue with Mamma."

"Yeah, sounds like my mother. When are we supposed to get there, so they can get a good look at what a horse you're bringing home?"

Jodi's sensitive about her height—she's taller than me by two inches or so, and I'm almost six feet tall. This doesn't bother me, but when she's nervous she tends to fret about it. As well as her weight, which for her height is just fine. "Don't you worry about that, Jodi. When they get a look at you, Father'll be tellin' me how lucky I am, and I'll have to watch so Adam doesn't try to steal you. Next week."

"What? Are you totally *meshuggeh*? What about work?"

"Mamma knows I can take the time off. What about you?"

She made a sort of growling noise in her throat, and then hummed several bars of a Streisand tune—a sign she was both thinking and calming herself down. "Okay, yeah, I think I can do that. They won't be thrilled, but if we want to make your Mamma happy, I can live with it. Oy, I have packing to do! Do you have electricity where you live?"

I managed to keep from laughing. "Yes. We have our own generators, actually. Every month Father or Adam trucks in to town to buy the fuel. Had to have the phone line run in special; these days I suppose we'd have done something like get a satellite link, but not back when the family first decided to get one."

Jodi blinked. "Running out a phone line just for you? That's pretty pricey, Clint."

"I said we was backwoods," I drawled, emphasizing my Kentucky accent. "Didn't say we was *poor* backwoods. If the Slades ain't the richest family in Crittenden County, it's only 'cause we've spent a lot of it the last few decades."

"I never knew, Clint." Jodi looked at me with surprise. "How'd your family get rich?"

I realized my big mouth had me dangerously close to the secret. Time to follow the honorable Slade tradition of ducking the truth. "One of my ancestors, Winston Slade, made a ton of money mining, and brought it with him to the homestead when he settled down." That was, as one of my online friends would put it, "telling the truth like a Jedi"—it was true "from a certain point of view." If I'd done the casual voice right, though, she'd never suspect a thing. Once we were married, we'd be living near New York and just visit the family homestead once in a while, so the chances were she'd never have to know.

"Well, that'll be a relief for my more cynical relatives," Jodi said, throwing back her long black hair. "They were kinda worried about just what your background was, especially with your nickname."

I wasn't very surprised. "I suppose 'Crowbar' Slade does sound either like a real honest-to-god Good Ole Boy, or like a wannabe wrestler." Truth was, I'd gotten the nickname in college because my roommates noticed I had a crowbar in my baggage when I moved in, and that I had that particular bag

with me most of the time.

"Look," Jodi said, "if we're leaving to get there Monday like I think I heard you say, I gotta get moving. We just got tomorrow to get ready. And like I didn't already have a busy schedule tomorrow? You know what sort of planning I have to do for the wedding, and now we have to schlep all the way to Kentucky." She leaned slightly down and we both shut up for a while for the good-bye kiss, which lasted for several kisses as usual before she finally got out the door.

I sighed and grinned. Hey, maybe this would be fun.

2. Meet the Slades

"Ow! I see why you have this oversuspended monster now." A larger bump than normal jolted Jodi against the harness. "And boy am I glad we put the equipment in those transport cases."

"I wouldn't have pulled out of the driveway if you hadn't. You want to keep doing work on our vacation, I'm at least going to make sure you can't wreck half the lab's equipment getting there. 'Sides, that one weren't nothing. Right after winter you should see the potholes we get and have to fill in afore—I mean, *be* fore—we can really drive the road well." I kicked myself mentally. One night sleeping over in a southern West Virginia motel on the way and a few stops at regional gas stations and I was already falling back into dialect. Pretty soon Jodi wouldn't even understand me.

"No bigger than the one on Seventeenth last month," Jodi said dismissingly. I had to remember that New Yorkers are like Texans: their potholes are worse, their taxicab drivers more dangerous, and their people tougher than anyone else, damn what the facts might be.

"Construction areas don't count as potholes." I responded. "*Holy—!*"

I slammed on the brakes just in time to keep from going over into the ravine that now cut squarely across the packed and oiled rock-dirt roadway leading to the Slade homestead. Last time I'd been here there hadn't been a sign of such a thing; now it yawned, a raw gash in the earth, fully forty feet from the edge I sat on to the other side, eight feet deep on the right dropping to ten or twelve on the left as it passed out of sight into the old-growth forest.

We sat there for a few moments in silence, me waiting for my heart to stop pounding before I slowly backed the truck a few more feet from the edge, just in case. Jodi turned to me. "So you *had* to prove me wrong. Okay, that is bigger than the one on Seventeenth." She looked at the ravine with slightly wide eyes, the only sign she was going to let this disturb her New York sangfroid. "So, what, are we supposed to fill that in with our bare hands?"

"Stay here a minute." I reached down into the bag and grabbed the crowbar.

I walked to the edge, so I could look to the left and right. I could see, down below, the mound of jumbled dirt, trees, and rocks which marked the slide. The thing that bothered me—really, *really* bothered me—was how straight and selective this was. The slide started about fifty feet up the slope, cut across the road in a perfect right angle, and ended about a hundred feet below. I poked at the dirt with the crowbar; it crumbled like normal, not too wet, packed hard where the road was. There wasn't any sign of the usual slumping you get when the earth's moving because it's gotten too soggy and all. The road

looked like someone had just cut a piece out of it with a giant knife, like a Bunyan-sized slice of earth pie. I listened. Not a sound except some water dripping off the trees in the fog—and the fog wasn't common this time of year, either. Seemed like the air was colder here than ought be. No animal sounds, the critters were quiet.

Maybe Mamma had been premature. This sure 'nuff looked like *that* kind of trouble to me.

Well, no help for it now. I studied the lay of the land. Awfully steep in parts but . . . I could probably make it around the upper end. Old-growth forest has some advantages, like usually bigger distances between the trees. I got back into the truck. "Jodi, get out and wait a ways down. I'll try and drive around."

"If you aren't scared to drive it, I'm not scared to ride it. And it's chilly out there."

"*I*am scared to drive it, but I ain't leavin' the truck parked here neither!" I heard my voice head all the way back home. Shoot, this wasn't good. "Look, Jodi, sweetheart, this kind of driving's really tricky, and I'll do better if I'm not worrying about you as a passenger while I'm trying to hold her steady on the slope."

Jodi rolled her eyes, then kissed my cheek and got out. I knew she would if I put it that way; it made practical sense, sure, but more importantly, it told her I didn't doubt her courage, just my concentration.

There was one really sticky moment when the earth near the top of the gouge started to give, but I gave her the gas and bounced clear before I could get dragged sideways. With only a couple of minor scratches to the side panels, I made it to the far side of the road. "YEEAH! Try 'n' stop a Slade that way, willya?*Ha!*" I shook the crowbar at the silent woods. "Okay, honey, you can come on over. Walk around the way I drove."

"Walk? You need sidewalks here, Clint! This isn't walking, this is an obstacle course!" Despite her complaints, Jodi was making her way through the woods at a respectable clip. She'd done hiking before. "I—*yow!*" Her figure seemed to vanish into the earth.

"Jodi!" I shouted in horror. Damnation, I should have made *her* take the crowbar! I had the whole car to protect me!

"Calm down, Clint!" Relief flooded me as I saw her rise back into sight, brushing leaves and dirt off. "I was just being *aschlemiel* and looking at you instead of where I was putting my big feet. Honestly, you worry like my grandmother." She emerged from the forest and got back into the car. "Well, so much for my perfect grooming."

"Don't worry none about that." I dropped the crowbar back into the bag and put the car in gear. "It's their fault for not watching for the slide and preventing it." That wasn't true, of course, if it was really what I suspected, but either way the family wouldn't blame Jodi for not looking her best. And as far as I was concerned, she'd look as good in jeans and a dirty T-shirt as in a formal gown.

There were no more incidents on the way up. We crested the last hill, came around the much smoother bend that led to Slade's Hollow, and came down through the woods into the open. "Whoa!" said Jodi involuntarily.

I couldn't repress a grin. "Yeah, y'all expected a couple log cabins and an outhouse, didn't you? Admit it, the Slades don't have a half-bad spread."

The Slade House really is something of a mansion, even if it is more spread out than up. Every generation adds a room or two somewhere, sorta like Lord Valentine's Castle. We try to keep a sort of style to it, but you can still tell where one generation left off and another started. The main part used for living these days was a massive mansion whose architecture was natural-looking logs and hewn stone—sort of a magnified version of what the earlier stuff had been, but if you knew anything about building you could tell that this thing hadn't been raised up by two farmers and their families; serious construction work had gone into the three-story, semicircular building.

"The original house is that small squarish part, off-center," I told Jodi, pointing. "That's where Winston Slade put his house back in 1802. It's used mostly for storage now. The funny addition over there is our generator shed, and on the other side's storage for tools, stuff like that. Got farm equipment in the barn there, even though we don't use it all that much—don't have to do much farming, so it's mostly just for the family."

"It's a mishmash all right, but pretty, you know? And this valley!"

"Yeah, the Hollow's pretty. One reason old Winston chose it was because it was already clear for building; figured it was a sign and built his house smack in the middle of the Hollow, on this little rise. And here we are."

I killed the engine and got out, Jodi doing the same on the other side. Our feet barely touched the ground before the front doors burst open and the Slade clan came running out, Mamma in the lead as usual. She was wearing her best dress, which was a pretty lace-embroidered blue and white affair that she'd only had to let out a size or two since she got married to Father and which set off her complexion and dark brown hair. There still wasn't a trace of gray in that thick hair. Either she just aged well or used dye that no one caught her at, but no one would have the guts to ask her.

"CLINT! Clinton! Welcome home, boy!" She gave me the usual huge hug and a kiss on the cheek, and turned to Jodi. "And this must be your Jodi! Welcome t' the Hollow, dear. Come on in, come on in, you're just in time for dinner!"

Adam clapped me on the back. "Quite a looker!" he murmured in my ear. "What's she see in you, Clint?"

I stuck my tongue out at him and crossed my eyes the way we used to when we were kids. "Maybe someday I'll tell you my secret. After I've got her safely tied down with a ring!"

Adam chuckled at that. The girls have always loved Adam. Standing six foot four and built like Conan the Barbarian, with the best of Mamma's softer rounded features tempering the edges and planes of the typical Slade face, he practically had to beat the girls off with a stick. I glanced towards my fiancée, to find that Mamma had taken charge of Jodi—well, as much as anyone can take charge of Jodi—and had her inside already.

I noticed that the gate had now rolled across the entrance to the Hollow, and heard the faint change in sound from the generators. Someone—probably Father—had engaged the electric fence.

Father was in the big family room when Adam and I got in, trailing behind everyone else. He gave me one of his usual nods. "Clint."

"Father." I gave him a hug, which he returned, then clasped hands for a moment.

"Been a while."

"Sorry, Father. I try to keep in touch."

He nodded. Not angry. Just quiet, as usual. Father didn't talk much, thought a lot, and acted when he had to. He was actually a tad shorter than me, but built as solid as the rock of the mountain; Father didn't have an ounce of fat on him but still outweighed me by about thirty pounds. Still, almost no one paid him mind when they first met him, on account of his being so quiet.

A booming laugh momentarily silenced everyone else. Grandpa Marlon was Father's opposite—he filled a room with his voice and his figure, standing taller even than Adam, with snow-white hair hanging to his shoulders and a rough-hewn face that reminded almost everyone of Charlton Heston. Evangeline, all long dark hair and pale face, was in the corner curled up on the padded armchair as usual, reading and watching. I didn't see Nellie or Helen, but that didn't really surprise me. Helen was going to be married herself soon, so she was probably out, and Nellie was trying to match her stride for stride, so to speak. Jonah was staring a bit too much at Jodi, but I remembered being fourteen myself, and in her New York getup Jodi was a pretty stareable sight.

I looked at Father again. "Road was out, Father. Down near Snake Rock."

His lips tightened. "Not the weather for slides."

"My thought, too."

"Fence is up. Don't worry for now." He looked at the dining room and started to head in that direction.

Mamma noticed. "Zeke! Ezekiel Slade! No one at the table yet!" Father stopped immediately; you didn't trifle with Mamma's directions. "Evangeline, could you be a treasure and help me set the table?" She noticed Jonah. "And stop standing around like a lump, Jonah Winston Slade! You and Adam go out and get Clint's truck unpacked and get their things to their rooms."

Jonah shook himself, looked at me enviously, and then nodded. "Yes, Mamma."

Jodi followed them out. "Whoa, boys, there's special equipment in there!"

Mamma seemed to think about protesting that she shouldn't do any work, but thought better of it. This was the opening I'd been hoping for. I went with Mamma into the kitchen to help her with the food—as usual, there was enough to feed an army. "Mamma . . ." I said, letting a warning tone creep into my voice.

She blinked up at me. "Something wrong, Clint dear?"

"The road was out. And it wasn't no landslide, neither."

She busied herself with the roast.

"You told me there wasn't any of that going on."

"Well, dear . . ." she said, in the voice she used when she was trying to get around Father, " . . . there *wasn't* any of that when I told you *then* . Just seems to have started in the last couple of days."

"I know that voice, Mamma! Don't try no dancin' around this one! Just what—"

"Clinton! Don't take that tone of voice with me! I can still tan your hide, boy, and I won't need no help to do it, neither!"

I backed down; getting Mamma mad wouldn't help. "Sorry, Mamma. Did anything happen that might have . . . started it again?"

"Clint, we've got your wedding and Helen's, and ain't going to be no surprise if Nellie's and even Adam's come pretty quick. And of course we're going to do you proud, son."

For a minute I was completely befuddled. What the heck did all that have to do with . . . "Oh, for the love of—Mamma Bea, you *didn't* !"

"I just sent Adam down for a little extra."

I couldn't believe this. "Mamma, you can't possibly be telling me we were broke again?"

She was slicing the roast in perfectly even slices—something I never did learn how to do, even though I was in some ways a better cook than Mamma. "Broke? Clint, darling, of course not. But ain't nothing wrong with thinkin' ahead, is there? Takes a powerful lot of money to keep the Slades running, and what with building Helen her new house—"

I closed my eyes and rubbed my temples. I could see where this was going. The Slades had always been rich, but never learned to keep it. Spend it like water, that was the Slade way. Why learn about investment and things like that? Need more money, just go get some. I suppose I should have expected something on those lines—the last time the family refilled the vault was, as Mamma said, when Grandpa Marlon took his last trip, and besides all the living expenses there'd been additions and enhancements to the house, all the gadgets that the Slade clan loved—Mamma couldn't get enough of the home theater and DVDs (she had just about the complete *Dark Shadows* collection, an expense big enough to show up in the budget of any third-world country), and even Father seemed to enjoy his own time with a computer almost as much as he liked doing his woodworking—and of course putting the first Slade in a century or more through a real expensive college with no scholarship.

". . . so you see, Clint dear, weren't much choice. And no point putting things off, so I sent Adam off."

"You knew I was worried about this happening! Couldn't you have waited a week or so, until after me and Jodi left?"

"Clint. Enough, now."

I hadn't heard Father enter. "Yes, Father."

Father took up one platter, I took up another and followed him out. "Your Mamma is who she is. Works hard to be a Slade even though she weren't born one. Sometimes that's not all to the good. 'Taint no point worryin'. Trouble usually doesn't come here, even bad times. Scared of the Hollow. Keep her busy here, shouldn't see anything. Right, son?"

I smiled reluctantly. Father always reminded me of Unc Nunkie from the Oz books; this was a long and involved conversation for him. "Right, Father."

Mamma's voice suddenly boomed from the intercom she'd had strung through the whole house. "Dinner! Come an' get it!"

Even though Jodi was an extra, Mamma had taken out one leaf from the table since Nellie and Helen weren't here, so it wasn't hard to join hands to say Grace. Jodi looked slightly uncomfortable, but the Slades knew a lot of people who weren't of the Faith, so it didn't cause a bad moment like it might with some families—no pressure on her to follow along with the prayer.

Then we all got to eat, which was what we'd all been waiting for. The roast, as should have been obvious, was only the centerpiece. Potatoes, green beans, salad (which didn't used to be a fixture, but me and the girls pushed for it), sweet potato pie, biscuits, well, just so much food we had to eat fast before the table broke. And then there were the desserts! When Mamma set out to show off her cookin' skills, she didn't stop until you surrendered. Luckily, one thing Jodi wasn't traditional about was food; I hadn't had to face the horror of tryin' to tell Mamma that she'd have to change the way she cooked.

Jodi had done the wise thing, and eaten small servings of everything. I just plowed ahead and ate from one end of the table to the other, and paid the price with pain in my stomach later. Then again, I always eat more when I'm nervous, and damn-all but I was nervous tonight. Bad enough I was watching them decide what to think about my fiancée, but I had to worry about what Adam had stirred up at Mamma's orders.

I started to relax as the dinner wound down. Jodi got up and insisted on helping Mamma clean up. Even though cleanup's a lot easier with an industrial-sized dishwasher, there's still work to be done after a king-sized feeding like that one, and Jodi was scoring big points with Mamma by showing that, city girl or not, she'd do her share. I just hoped she didn't end up washing the actual pots and pans. Willing Jodi might be, good at cleaning dishes she wasn't. I always ended up having to rewash the ones she thought she'd scrubbed. And if Mamma found a spot of food left on one of her big pans . . . well, it'd be the Big Lecture for me.

Apparently that passed without incident, because Jodi and Mamma came out with Mamma reeling off her recipe for the sweet potato pie and leading Jodi into the big family room, where the instruments were being dragged out from the huge closets on the sides or taken down from the dark-paneled walls. The family room was just about large enough to play tennis in, but what with all the little tables, big comfy chairs and couches and all, it seemed right cozy.

"I hear tell from Clint you're a damn fine singer," Grandpa Marlon said. "The Slades always been a musical family too; mind if we indulge?"

"No, please do," Jodi said.

"Join in if you feel like it, dear."

I sat down to watch and join in the singing. I liked listening, and I felt too rusty to just join in right away. Mamma was on the piano—Nellie was better than she was, but of course Nellie wasn't here—Grandpa had his banjo, Father a guitar, Adam the big standup bass, and of course Jonah had an electric guitar, as might've been expected. Without Helen, we were short our main vocals. The family did several numbers Jodi didn't know, though I could hear her start to hum along with the choruses, but when we started up "Amazing Grace," she sat up; I knew she liked that song. I'd wondered about that, like how she could perform in Handel's *Messiah* with her background—to which she'd replied: "Oy, don't be silly. First, I'm a terrible Jew—I eat *trayf* sometimes. Second, beautiful music is beautiful music. I even like Wagner, which my grandfather would be like to explode over if I said it to his face. But Wagner was a great musician,

just a complete *schmendrick* as a person."

I've always liked "Amazing Grace" myself; but once Jodi started singing it, you could see that even the rest of the Slades hadn't heard anything like it before. That voice, that could fill a concert hall without a single bit of electronic assistance, took the old spiritual and made it Jodi's own song of joy and thankfulness. There was a hush in the family room when the song ended, everyone else having stopped playing to hear her last notes. Grandpa spoke, finally. "Young lady, if'n I were wearin' a hat, I'd take it off to you. As it is, I have to say Clint didn't do you justice. Sing just like the angels, you do."

This time it was Jodi who blushed crimson. "More like a bellowing angel. I'm a belter, not a real singer."

"Don't sell yourself short," I said. "You're the best singer I know, Jodi."

"Can she do the glass trick?" Mamma wanted to know.

"Mamma!"

Jodi laughed. "Don't worry, Clint. Believe it or not, singers like me do sometimes get that question. I could, Mamma Slade, but it usually only works with pretty good glasses, and I wouldn't want to break anything valuable."

"Nonsense! I can always get more glasses—why, with all these young 'uns I've had through the years, I've gone through more'n one set of them anyways. But I've always thought that was just some fancy trick on stage."

"Well, it takes just the right pitch, and if your voice is off, it won't work. But if you really want . . ."

Mamma went to the cabinet and got out one of the leftover glasses from the set she'd had when I was young; yeah, I remembered breaking one of those. Only two left. "That one good enough?" she asked.

Jodi tapped the rim of the glass while everyone was silent. "B-sharp," I said automatically. She nodded. "In my higher range. But I think I'm loosened up enough . . ."

She put the glass down on the table, took a deep breath, and then opened her mouth wide, letting a single note build upward from a gentle hum to an almost deafening single-toned sound that escaped being a shriek only by sheer purity. As it built, you could hear an answering undertone, as the glass's resonant frequency was found, building, rebuilding upon itself, a positive feedback loop that caused the crystal to vibrate, blur, and with an abruptness that startled all of us even though we knew what was happening, it virtually exploded in a shimmer of transparent shrapnel.

"HooooEEE!" Grandpa and Mamma said at the same time.

"Wow!" Jonah exclaimed.

Jodi giggled. I grinned. "Luckily you use your powers for good and not evil."

"What about you, Clint?" Father said, as Mamma and Evangeline set about cleaning up the shattered glass; they wouldn't let Jodi help, of course, since Mamma had asked her to do the trick in the first place. "Haven't made a note yet."

"Aww, I'm too rusty, Father."

"Fiddlesticks, Clinton!" Mamma retorted, going to the trash bin. "Jonah, you get Clinton his fiddle."

Jodi looked at me. "That's right, you mentioned you used to play violin some."

"Some?" Adam laughed. "You know that song about the Devil? If'n the Devil came to Kentucky, it'd be Clint he'd be after."

"And he'd whip me good, too," I said, taking the fiddle from Jonah since Mamma weren't taking no for an answer. "But what the heck."

The lights flickered. A moment later I heard the backup generator come online. The family relaxed, but I could see Jodi was surprised by the change; for a moment, she'd seen the family in a completely different way. Every single Slade had stood, poised for action, and both Grandpa Marlon and Father had long iron bars in their hands—taken from concealed locations under their chairs. "Dang it all, Adam!" Grandpa said. "Who's forgotten to make sure the main generator's supplied again?"

It had broken the mood, for the time at least. I went to help Adam put more fuel into the generators. "Grandpa forgot that we drew almost twice normal load all day," Adam grumbled. "Mamma's been working everyone overtime. Shouldn't have had to refill until tomorrow."

" 'Don't think ahead, can't keep ahead,' " I quoted at him, checking the oil levels; I noticed that one of the generators was a new model, put in since last year; Father wasn't taking any chances.

"Yeah, yeah, I know. No excuses, just results." He tightened the cap down. "Okay, now we're done."

We went back inside, where Mamma had gotten Jodi to take her on in chess. I hoped she wasn't suckered into a bet; the only person who ever beat Mamma was Grandpa Marlon, and I more than half suspected that she let him win sometimes because his pride couldn't take the constant humiliation of having his daughter-in-law take him to the cleaners every time they played. I'm not that bad, but Mamma could beat me while she was busy watching TV. I studied the board, realizing that I'd actually never played Jodi. They were already past the point where I tended to concede to Mamma; looked like either Jodi was a heck of a lot better than I'd guessed, or Mamma didn't want to embarrass her by beating her too soon. Seeing the way Mamma was pursing her lips, though, I had to grin. Nope, she wasn't taking it easy; Jodi was making her work for it.

"Mate in five moves," I joked; Mamma knew I couldn't see more than three moves ahead even if I worked at it.

"Six," Jodi said absently. Mamma blinked and stared at her, then bent over the board with renewed concern. I repressed a snort of laughter, as I could see the little twitch at the corner of Jodi's mouth that she always got when she was having someone on.

As that game was probably going to last a while, I went and joined Evangeline and Jonah at the entertainment center for a bit, taking turns beating the heck out of each other in the latest *Virtual Fighter* game. Just as Evangeline kicked me out of the ring, I heard Mamma's clear voice: "Well, now, I know when I'm beaten," followed by the clicking sound of her king being tipped over.

"Well, if that don't beat all," Marlon muttered from his armchair.

Evangeline finally spoke. She generally was even quieter than Father. Turning to me, she said, "You

keep her."

"Oh, believe me, I mean to."

3. Night Movements

"Usually I'm up for a nosh before bed, but your mamma stuffed me so much I think I'm like to roll down the hall." Jodi stared at the three-decker BLT I was eating. "Clint, you keep eating like that and you'll look like Elvis."

"Thank yuh. Thankyuhverramuch," I said, with the proper accent. "I've been eatin' like this all my life. I exercise a lot, you know. And I know we'll be doing a lot of luggin' equipment around tomorrow, right?"

"Right. This is actually a good place to test. The New Madrid zone runs right through part of this county."

Jodi's current project was based on acoustic engineering research funded partly by NYU and partly by some interested commercial firms with some government backing. My main skills lay outside of that—I was a dual major, geology and compsci—but they intersected perfectly with the intent of the project, which was actually what had brought us together. It'd long been noted that some animals can apparently sense approaching earthquakes, and some work had been done showing that the Earth emitted varying levels of sound at different wavelengths ranging from infrasound—acoustic waves below about 20 cycles—and up to a bat-level ultrasound in the hundreds of thousands of cycles. Our team had modeled a number of possible interactions of the layers of soil, stone, and so on involved in fault systems, and it seemed to indicate that you should be able to detect both the main movement of an earthquake, and some of the precursors to it, through sound waves (rather than the related shockwaves recorded on seismographs). If the precursors could be detected, we'd have a possible way of actually predicting earthquakes. So if Jodi's sensor packages seemed to be getting reasonable readings, she'd probably just leave a set of them operating here; it was, as she said, a good potential location, with the fault system responsible for the greatest quake in the history of the United States passing by this very area.

"I notice," she continued, "we've got separate rooms."

"You had better believe it."

She grinned. "Hey, I'm not really *kvetching* ; you wouldn't be getting the same room as me if we were staying at my house either." She looked out into the darkness. "Your family seems really nice, Clint. Okay, they are kinda weird, with this strange combination of hick and twenty-first-century gadget freaks, but they're trying to make me feel welcome, and I can tell they love the hell out of you. So why didn't you bring me here earlier?"

I looked down. Part of it of course was *that* problem, but it wasn't the only thing. "I guess I should've had more faith in them. I wasn't sure how they'd react to you. I mean, let's be honest, you're a—"

"JAP. Jewish-American Princess. I know, you can't say it because I'd knock your block off, but I can say it, because it's true. But I'm not like some of the others, and you know it. We work good together as a team, and did before we started dating. You do the modeling work and I do the tinkering and we and the rest do the brainstorming. So what's to worry about?"

"Some of the family's still pretty . . . fundamentalist. I didn't know how they'd take a Jewish

daughter-in-law."

"You're right, you should have had more faith in them," she said tartly. Then she shrugged. "But I guess I wasn't sure how I'd introduce you to my family at first, either, and if they'd been like seven hundred miles away maybe I wouldn't have taken you to meet them yet."

I suspected she would have anyway, but I wasn't going to argue about this—since it might then get back around to *whatother* reasons I might have for not bringing her to meet the folks.

"Well, you may still be hungry, but me, I'm just tired."

I walked her to her room, which was just down from Mamma and Father's. They might be being friendly, but they weren't taking any chances on anything happening under their roof.

Afterward, I went outside to take a look around the homestead. The lights from the house and the ones dotted around the property nearby let me make my way. Let me tell you, if you're from the city, you have no clue as to what dark is. The only thing darker than an overcast Kentucky night is a cave, and having been in both many times since I was a kid, there isn't much difference. Without the faint light from the homestead, I could've gotten lost fifteen feet from the front door.

A darker shadow against the night showed me where Adam was standing.

"Hey, Adam."

"Clint. Congratulations again."

"Thanks. Look, I hear Mamma sent you down."

"Yeah. S'pose that was a mistake?"

I shrugged, but nodded. "I think she should've waited until after we'd left. Nothing that desperate."

"Well, you know Mamma; once she gets an idea in her head, three wild bulls couldn't drag it outta her."

"Hadn't the place moved?"

"Well, sure 'nuff, but you know almost as much as me about that. Only so many places it gets moved to. Won't no one need to go down for a time now, anyway."

"You got a lot?"

He chuckled. "Grandpa Marlon was a little jealous. Got more than he did, last trip."

That startled me. "You got the biggest haul in our whole history?"

"Sure 'nuff. Three double handfuls. Stuffed the bag I had."

"Jesus!" The word was shocked out of me involuntarily. "Sorry, Adam. But . . . Jeez. That's going to actually take serious time to convert."

He laughed. "Not hardly. Sure, in the older days it was kinda hard but now with the markets open an'

all? And the Internet connections and international market? I'd placed 'em with potential buyers 'fore you ever got here. Only a few left for us to keep for jewelry 'n' such."

I blinked. Yeah, things had changed that much. "Two things for Grandpa to be jealous over, then."

"Yep." He stared out at the fence. So did I. Was that movement?

"Father said something about the road," Adam said after a minute.

"Have to get it fixed. Forty feet got taken out by a slide."

"*They* did that."

I did the shrug-and-nod again. "That's my guess."

"Damn. Sorry, Clint."

"Guess we'll have to just hope nothing happens we can't explain to her."

"Or that we can hide it fast."

We both knew how important it was. If anyone else knew, the Slade gravy train would probably come to a screeching halt.

"Well," I said finally. "Guess I should head to bed."

"Me too. Forty feet of road . . . good thing we've got the equipment and supplies already. Might even need some cement to make concrete with, reinforce it you know."

"Might could. Won't protect the rest of it, but the whole area might be in need of that kind of stability. I'll help."

"If your lady'll let you off, we won't turn down another pair of hands."

"Heck, she'll help herself. She's got her own calluses."

Adam followed me in. "Guess she might, at that. Sure didn't have trouble carryin' her bags herself."

I went to my room. Undressing with the light off as usual, I kept an eye out the window. The moon showed now through an occasional ragged break in the clouds. Suddenly I saw movement.

Yeah. They were there, looking at the house almost as though they could see me looking back, two of them. Looked like they might be armed. But still, they didn't try to pass the fence. Not yet, anyway. I saw other movement near them, but didn't look too closely. There are things that give me the creeps when I see them, so I try not to. I pulled the steel shutters over the window and locked them. Even with that and the door locked, it was a while before I fell asleep.

4. Echoes of the Present

"Are we getting a signal now?" Jodi asked, having adjusted the reception parameters again and checked

the fifth probe's functioning.

"We get signal," I said in a monotone. "Main screen turn on."

"You run through that stupid routine once more, wise guy, and all your mouth is belong to duct tape."

"What you say???"

"I mean it!"

"Anybody want a peanut?"

"C'mon, Clint, stop the comedy, I want to see if this works!"

"So do I," I said seriously. "I was making the last adjustments. You do the honors."

It had been, for me, a tense couple of days, as she'd seemed almost on the edge of asking questions I couldn't have dodged well, and *they* had assuredly been active. Like asking about the steel shutters, which we'd explained with older history about local feuds and some later paranoia born of the Cold War and survivalist themes. Fortunately she'd been with Mamma, talking nonstop about dresses and color schemes, when Jonah had come running in to me and Father to give us the news about the hole in the storage shed and the concrete all going missing. I'd made a virtue of that necessity, heading into town with Jodi so we could be together while picking up the concrete—and while Father and Adam fixed the shed so it looked okay. After getting the road repaired the last two days—well, making new road, really—Jodi and I had finally gotten around to setting up SUITS, the Subterranean Ultra-Infrasonic Tracking System.

"Here goes," she said. "Igor, throw the switch!"

The screen flickered, then began to show a multicolored jumble of lines and dots all over the place. There was a big central blob, some dark and light areas, and so on. To a layman, it would look like a modern art piece, but we could tell there was some kind of structure there. "*Oooooooy vey*," Jodi moaned. "Look at that, the signal's such totalschmootz I can't make out anything."

"Hey, don't worry. That's the raw signal. Looks like the gadget's working just fine. I just have to clean up the signal. I could do averaging, but if we're looking for individual signals that might really screw up things."

"We're sampling at two GS," she pointed out. "We could probably take five, ten and average them without losing too much, unless all the signal we want is on the really high limit."

I nodded. "Probably. And it's already sorting by band . . . maybe I can take each band separately and focus on individual strong-signal regions."

We started fiddling with the various algorithms I'd already coded into SUITS. Slowly a more clear-cut image began to appear on the screen, although it would have been no less arcane to a layman.

Jodi stared at it. "What sort of cockamamie signal is that?"

I had to admit it had me stumped too. There was a huge zone under the Hollow that was . . . different. Signals changed going through it. I tried some analysis on it. "Dense. Really, really, really dense, Jodi."

Specific gravity over five, at least."

"Totally *meshuggeneh*, Clint. There's almost no natural rock even close to that density, except—" Suddenly she stood and stared around her. Then she bent back to the display. "Clint, look—gimme a better look at some of the signals coming in from here. Yeah. Now, what's that say to you?"

I was starting to get her drift. "I think I see. That's why the Hollow looks like it does."

"One big mass of nickel-iron. Your Hollow is a meteor crater."

"Darned if you ain't right." I caught myself before commenting on how much sense everything made now.

"And look here, around the area—these deader spots. Clint, I think you've got caves running through your property!"

Ice seemed to pierce my heart. I tried to act casual. "Where?"

"Look. You know there's karst all over around here, it isn't unlikely. Isn't this part over near the road? Maybe that's why it slid, some kind of small cave-in or sinkhole."

She wasn't far wrong, of course. "Yeah, that would make sense."

"Maybe there's even an entrance around somewhere!"

"I'd think we'd have found it in the past few centuries."

She looked crestfallen. "I guess you would, yeah. Darn, but I would've loved to see a new cave! Well, at least we're stopping by Mammoth Caves on the way back, right?"

"I promised, didn't I? Didn't I know you were a caver? Just didn't want to stop on the way up, we'd have spent a day and a half there, I know you."

She nodded, grinning sheepishly.

"Anyway, this isn't helping us check out the real signals. I'll have to clean 'em up from the interference here, start trying to sort out different patterns, all that, and then correlate them with tremors in the area."

"Right, right. It's running good now."

"Sure is."

We left SUITS to gather data for a while, and went to join Adam, who'd invited us to go fishing. While fishing wasn't Jodi's favorite thing, she was a good sport about it. Me, I was just glad to have a distraction while I recovered from yet another near miss.

That evening, I filled in Father, Helen, Grandpa, and Adam on our discovery.

"By thunder, that explains it! No wonder they almost never tread on the home ground!"

Father nodded. "Good thing."

Couldn't argue with that. I'd seen what the back of the storage shed looked like. If that was what they could manage in a desperate raid, half blind and stretched to the limit, I hated to think what would have happened if they hadn't been slowed up.

After everyone went to bed that evening, I had my own portable crunching away at the signals. There were some interesting patterns turning up. I was trying various signal envelopes, filters, and so on to see if I could make any sense of them. They were clearly signals, not random noise, but it's always hard to figure out what a given signal is if you don't have a prior reference point. And these were pretty faint; processing could pull them out of the noise floor, but they weren't big, clear signals that I could rely on correlating with something else. Something about their general patterns seemed vaguely familiar, but the familiarity just wouldn't gel. Oh, well, I'd figure it out eventually.

It was the middle of the next morning that Jodi came running out of the house to where Adam, Father, and I were doing maintenance on the generators. "Clint! Clint, come on! You have to see this!"

"What?"

"Come on! You'll love it! I was looking over the whole signal plot and I think—well, never mind, we'll see when we get there!"

I looked at Father and Adam. They'd looked interested when she first came over, but their eyes started to glaze over when she said "signal plot." Father gave a tolerant nod and let Jodi drag me off.

To my surprise, we went straight past the house and started up Cold Breeze Hill. "Hey, I thought you found something on the plot!"

"I did!"

I followed her, a sense of foreboding building as we went up. Her footsteps slowed as she found herself walking a well-defined path, worn by feet that had climbed those very stones hundreds—maybe thousands—of times since the dawn of the nineteenth century.

Her eyes narrowed and I swallowed. "I found a signal pattern that seemed to indicate that a cave came very near the surface here," she said quietly as she continued to walk.

I was silent. We rounded the last corner, passing between Winston's Gap—two huge boulders that forced you to walk single-file.

And there it was, a yawning hole in the ground with the massive iron grate secured across it with a heavy steel bar and chained with a hardened steel padlock. The big metal sign across it blazoned Slade Family Property. Keep Out.

Jodi stared at the barrier, large enough to make a decent bank vault, and finally turned to me. "Okay, Clint. What in hell is going on here?"

I closed my eyes. Was there any way . . . ?

Not a chance, I answered myself. Too many mysteries, and this one just couldn't be explained away. Not with her caving enthusiasm and my evasion of the subject only yesterday.

"I think you'd better come back to the house. We've got a lot of talking to do."

Jodi followed me. It was not a companionable silence.

5. Wealth of History

Father started out. "All begins with Winston Slade."

Winston Slade had been quite a character. Son of a butler for one of the English nobility (family legend differed on just who), he'd run away and ended up in Holland, where he made a sort of living performing odd jobs until one of the local jewelers gave him a chance to apprentice. Winston didn't mind the work, but after a while his restlessness got the better of him, and he took his accumulated savings—what little there was—and got a boat to America. He arrived in 1795 and immediately started working his way across the country, doing whatever jobs came to hand. He had a reputation as a man who'd try anything once, and never complain no matter how hard, dirty, or dangerous. He fought Indians in the mountains, caught at least one outlaw himself, was suspected of smuggling activities, and joined a traveling group of performers (who might, some said, be a fancy group of thieves) for a few months. Finally he reached the interior of Kentucky and decided that now, at the age of thirty-three, he was getting tired of the constant movement. He found a girl who could put up with him—Genevive Vandemeer—and the two of them packed up everything they owned and set out to find a homestead. When Winston found the Hollow, he knew he had arrived. He built the house with his own hands and started working on becoming a settled farmer.

"Winston weren't exactly a wanderer," Grandpa said. "He wandered because he wanted excitement. When he settled down, he meant to do it. But it wasn't easy on him."

This made the cave he found some years after they settled a godsend. It gave him a dangerous and challenging place to explore that nonetheless kept him near home. Genevive didn't like it, of course, but it was better than Winston either forcing her to move every few years, or just running off into the sunset.

By the end of 1811, Winston Slade had explored a considerable stretch of cave, methodically working his way inward, taking different sources of light and taking far fewer chances than might be expected. He enjoyed doing his explorations especially during the winter, as the underground passages were actually warmer than the air above. On December 2, 1811, Winston descended into the darkness for a two-day exploration jaunt. By this time, Genevive had grown accustomed to his periodic explorations. She was no shrinking violet and as long as he left her a gun, plenty of firewood, and food for the time, she was perfectly content to take care of things for a few days. On at least one occasion Winston had come back to find a bear laid out for skinning, Genevive having shot it when it got too close to the family holdings.

Winston took a new path downward which, after a short steep run, led into a number of magnificent caverns whose extent he could hardly grasp. While exploring the side passages, he came across a cave dotted with fascinating pools filled with various types of stones. This puzzled Winston. He had seen "cave pearls" before, but this wasn't the same thing; each pool had a particular sort of stone in it, rounded as though from water flow. He wondered what sort of process would sort out minerals like that.

It didn't occur to him at that point that there was anything intelligent behind the pattern. While he'd occasionally heard odd sounds and movements in his explorations, he'd never seen anything to give evidence that there was really anything down there. He was the only man who'd ever descended this far into the earth that he knew of.

One particular pool, filled with translucent pebbles, attracted his attention. With the shimmering, pure

cave water pouring down into the pool, the stones seemed almost like landborne clouds or ghosts of pebbles. Idly he reached in and picked up a few, rolling them around in his hand.

It was at that moment that he noticed something—a particular glint of light, a feel, he was never quite sure—that tugged on memories from twenty years before. Hardly able to believe it, he tried the pebbles on his jackknife; the knife scratched. The file he carried in his pocket, hardened in his own hand-forged, couldn't make a mark on them.

Winston let out a whoop which could have been heard for miles in the caves, had there been anyone to hear it, and scooped out the pebbles, stuffing them into his pockets. He considered checking the rest of the pools, but he was too eager to get out and show Genevive.

As he turned to go, Winston suddenly felt his blood run cold. He saw something moving at the edge of his light, where nothing should move at all. If he could have, he would have extinguished the torches, but he knew that if he ever lost the light, he'd never get it back. And did he want to be alone in the dark with the shape he could barely see?

So he tried to hide behind a large stalagmite. The shape came on, carefully stopping at each pool and waiting a moment before moving on. It paid no immediate attention to the torches or Winston, and it dawned on the ancestor of the Slade clan that the thing was blind in the normal sense. Clearly it could make its way around without help, but it wasn't using sight or smell. Winston began edging slowly away from it, and received confirmation that it could not, in fact, see him. Winston still moved very carefully, as he suspected the thing had other senses—possibly hearing, or something more outlandish.

The creature was making its way methodically along the array of pools, and Winston realized it wouldn't be long before it reached the pool he'd just emptied. It was then that it dawned on him that these pools must be something special to this creature. Maybe it was a miner, as well. What it might do when it found one of its pools emptied was something Winston didn't care to find out. The thing might be shorter than him, but its color and the way it moved gave him the impression of something with the solidity of stone. Winston grabbed up one of the torches, made sure the rest of his equipment was secure, and headed for the exit as quickly as he dared.

His foot struck a pebble just as he reached the tunnel, and the rattling, clicking sound echoed like thunder around the cavern. Instantly the creature's head turned in his direction, and it began walking purposefully towards him.

Seeing that stiff-limbed mockery of a man shambling towards him, Winston panicked. He spun and dashed off, hearing something like an uncoiled gate screech behind him.

"Winston got out, of course, or we wouldn't be here to talk about it," I finished. "He and Genevive darn near moved out that day, momentarily wondering if he was atop a stairway to Hell, but the lure of money was stronger. Plus, with the relief born of escaping the things, Winston's curiosity returned."

"Whoa, whoa, whoa!" Jodi said. "What, is this the reverse of the old bit where the city slickers play tricks on the country rube? Are you serious?"

For answer, Adam pulled on one of the fireplace bricks, which opened a concealed vault. He reached in and tossed what he found to Jodi.

Jodi looked at the rough pebble. "Diamonds? Here? Isn't that crazy talk?"

I shook my head. "Turns out there's three places you find kimberlite pipes in Kentucky. One of them is in this county, not far from here. No one's ever found a diamond in Kentucky, but as near as I can figure it, the Nomes can dig into 'em at a level no one's ever reached before and there's diamonds down there."

Jodi looked at me. " 'Nomes'?"

I blushed while the rest of the family laughed. "Ayup, Nomes indeed!" Grandpa Marlon boomed. "Old Winston called 'em kobolds, or somethin' close to that, but when little Clint saw 'em first he was readin' them Oz books an' so he started callin' them Nomes, and their leader, assumin' they got one, Ruggedo."

"Okay, so it's silly. Still the way I think of them."

"So," Jodi said, "these 'Nomes' or 'kobolds' have been after you guys ever since for stealing their diamonds, like a leprechaun and his gold or something?"

"Something like that," I said. "Winston figured out a lot of stuff about them in the next few years. The reason they had a hard time tracking him was because he carried iron with him. Cold iron, he remembered, was one of the ways of dealing with the faerie folk. Most of their senses didn't do well around iron and steel. I guess they're doing some kind of electromagnetic sensing. They could hear some things and make sounds—pretty creepy ones. They don't do their tunneling themselves, they've got some kind of rockworms that do that for them. And their tunneling creates things that look just like natural caverns, complete with the formations. We're not sure yet what they actually want all those minerals for; maybe they eat them or something."

Mamma handed me the secret album, and I flipped to the centerpiece. Jodi sucked in her breath. The things in the picture could be faked by modern technology, but the picture was clearly from twenty, thirty years ago. The thin-looking legs and arms attached to the more massive body were very like Baum's Nomes, while at a distance the head with its mass of crystals atop and fluted tube below could look like something with a head of hair and pointed beard. The crystalline "eyes" were located about where a human's would be, so overall the effect was very bizarrely humanoid, in a creepy way. The thing had a braided crystalline harness around its body, holding what looked like a sword sheath and some other crystal-and-stone accoutrements.

Next to it was a low-slung thing, apparently of the same general order of living creatures by its gray-rock luster, but otherwise unrelated. It was much more reminiscent of centipedes in general construction, but the head glittered with points and tubes and glints of grinding structures. It was a clearly alien thing with an even more alien purpose.

"I took that shot," Mamma said proudly. "Second time down, first time seeing them, never let out a peep."

"Developed it herself too," Father said. "Mamma Bea insisted we get pictures."

"Oy!" Jodi shook her head. "So, these things are real. I believe you. So what did you mean 'something like that,' when I asked you that question?"

"The Nomes lost track of Winston when he ran away, and for a while nothing happened. Winston found he could sneak around and spy on them, sometimes, without them noticing. For the next few years Winston didn't go down much, though, because there were the New Madrid Quakes which made anyone going underground awfully nervous. About 1816 he started regular trips again, this time focused on scouting out the Nome territory. Either he got clumsy or they got lucky, but this time they followed him

to the exit. They don't seem particularly inclined to violence, but they seemed to want something from him and made a nuisance of themselves for a few days, though they never seemed able to actually approach the homestead."

"After the second time Winston got himself some diamonds, though," Helen continued, "they changed their approach. Even tried to get into the house, though they clearly were almost blind here. Winston found he could bash them senseless with an iron bar and they were almost unable to hit back."

Jodi glanced at me. She'd finally made the connection between my habit of carrying a crowbar and the family history. "So, you've been dropping in on these poor people every few years and stealing their diamonds, and then you have the *chutzpah* to beat them over the head when they object? Have I got this straight, now?"

The family stared at her open-mouthed. While, upon reflection, I agreed with her assessment, I don't think anyone else had ever put it that way before.

Father got his voice back first. "Point," he admitted.

"I'm impressed," she said sarcastically. "And here I'd thought all the eminent domain conquests and oppression of the native population had been finished years ago."

"It wasn't as if they were doing anything with the stones, girl!" Grandpa objected. "Just leavin' them sit in pools o' water. We had better use for 'em."

"And if someone decided you weren't making use of your furniture, what, you think they could just come in and take it?"

"Hold on, let's not get in a big argument here," I said, to head off an explosion by Grandpa. "For what it's worth, Jodi, I agree with you. I didn't think it through before. So what do you think we should do?"

"Have you geniuses ever thought of talking to them?"

"Not recently," I admitted. "But several times people have tried to communicate. They don't seem to be able to see writing the way we do, and admittedly both sides are either mad or scared whenever they meet, which doesn't dispose them towards expending lots of effort to understand us. On our side, well, if they've got a language we haven't noticed it yet. They carry some things that look like tools, but darned if anyone's ever seen them making one, so we don't even know how they do things in their civilization."

Jodi frowned. "Well, it's *afurblungit* mess, I'll say that. But Clint, you tell me: is that picture one of an animal or a person?"

"Person," I said without hesitation.

"Well, then?"

The family was silent for a long moment. Then Grandpa heaved a long sigh. "Girl, you have a tongue for sure, and I don't know whether I envy Clint now. But damn-all, I guess you're right. Can't keep going down there takin' a man's stuff without even askin'. Even if the man's made of stone."

Jodi failed miserably to hide a look of superior triumph. "So you'll go return this last batch, right? Maybe that will start a communication going with them!"

We winced, and Adam bit his lip. "Um, Jodi? Can't rightly do that. Don't have them any more."

"What?"

"Most of 'em are already sold. We kept some as a reserve, but given the way they work it's not like we're gonna try to hide 'em in the cellar. They're in the safety deposit down to the bank."

She grabbed my keys off the table. "Okay, then, Clint, let's head on down to the bank and make that withdrawal."

There was a distant rumble of thunder. I opened the door, expecting to see clouds, but the sky was clear blue. "What in—?"

Then I saw the cloud of gray-brown dust rising from the trees. "Father!" I started running towards the forest. Jodi and the rest of the family followed.

I skidded to a halt a hundred yards into the forest. "Holy Mother!"

The prior damage to the road had been nothing. A yawning pit over a hundred feet wide dropped straight into the earth, edges surrounded somehow by upthrust rock that formed a barrier that even my truck would never pass. It would take weeks to make a new way around.

Grandpa came puffing up behind everyone else, his bum leg having slowed him up. "Kids! Kids! Get back to the house now!" He caught sight of the hole in the mountainside and cursed. "Listen!"

We listened. The forest was as silent as a grave.

Then we heard faint, deliberate movement. Heading towards us.

Slades aren't cowards, but we're not stupid either. The Nomes couldn't drop the homestead, sitting on that massive, unsuspected foundation of nickel-iron, but they could take the ground where we stood out from under us. And they were aboveground, in force, in the daytime.

"Something about this last raid," I said, "seems to have really pissed them off!"

"Never done this before?" Jodi asked.

"Nothing on this scale," said Mamma Bea, handing Jodi a length of steel bar.

As we rounded the bend towards the gate, something burst from the underbrush, a shining stone weapon leveled at Jodi, screeching like a berserk set of rusty springs running over potholes. In bright daylight, there was little human about it—sparkling crystals on its head, faintly fluorescent violet eye-crystals, and that howling screech from the tube in its face which made me and Father jump back.

Jodi didn't even flinch. Her steel bar parried the stone sword and carried it around in a disarming arc that sent the weapon spinning away.

"What, don't get pushy with me! I've seen taxi drivers scarier than you!" Her New York accent was strong enough to cut, the only sign of how scared she really was. Jodi poked her bar in its stony chest, making it shrink back in disorientation, holding its arms up defensively. "Back off!"

It stumbled backward, bumping into another one that had belatedly decided to try to back up its buddy. We took advantage of the delay to make it through the gate and lock it.

"Power on, boy!" shouted Grandpa.

"Way ahead of you, Grandpa!" Jonah shouted, outsprinting me as he streaked towards the house. We saw a dozen—two dozen—gray figures at the fence, pulling at it. Strong and well fastened as we'd made it, I could see that they'd be through it in minutes.

Then tearing-metal shrieks echoed from stone throats and the Nomes leapt away from the now-electrified fence. A few of them shook weapons in our direction, but I swore that I heard a note, not of fury, pain, or anger, but desperation in the voices.

Voices?

We all collapsed to the ground, catching our breath. Finally I turned to Jodi. "It looks like we go to Plan B."

She drew a very shaky breath. "Okay, yeah, we're now surrounded, the road's gone, and they're waving sharp stone things at us. Let's do that Plan B." She looked at me. "Just what's Plan B?"

"Talk to them," I said, grinning. "I think we just might be able to do it now."

6. Voices of the Earth

"Tell me again just how this is supposed to work, Clint?"

I should have expected Mamma to ask again. I was never sure how much of her cluelessness was an act and how much was sincere lack of understanding. I compiled the subroutine, tested it with the main one, started running it on some test data. "It's what I do, Mamma. Signal processing is, well, it's teaching a machine to do some of the same stuff that we do naturally. If you figure out how, sometimes you can eventually get the machine to do it better than we do."

She continued making sandwiches for Jodi and me. "Can you give an example your silly mother could understand, dear?"

"You're not silly, Mamma." I thought for a minute. "Okay, try this. There's a big party here, everyone making a lot of noise. Evangeline spills hot water on herself and gives a holler. Do you think you'd notice?"

"Well, sure enough I would! Don't you think I could tell when one of my own children might be in trouble?"

"I know you could, Mamma. That's what we can do with our built-in signal processing. You've got twenty voices, all making a ton of noise, but somehow our brains can sort out the different voices and notice when one specific voice is doing something unusual, like shouting in pain, even if the actual volume in the room should, by rights, be drowning that voice out."

She nodded slowly. "Never thought of it that way, but you're right. A mother can hear even a small

sound by her baby over a powerful lot of noise."

"Right. So we can program a computer to do that, too, if we know how to tell it the tricks of the trade. Turns out there's a lot of different ways to do that.

"For what we're doing, the important thing is that there's different kinds of sound, what we call frequencies; high-frequency sound's high-pitched, low-frequency's low-pitched. I had a project I was on, once, that had to sort out human voices that were whispering at a distance of, oh, about three hundred yards. The kinds of signals I got from that looked a lot like some of the ones I was getting from Jodi's sensors, except that these were up in frequencies you only see bats screeching on. So I'm guessing the Nomes talk way up out of our hearing range. This converter setup will shift ultrasonic frequencies down to our range, and kick ours up to the ultrasonic."

"And I hope you've got everything set, because I don't think our neighbors are going to wait much longer." Jodi set down the heavy packs.

"Got everything?"

"Steel weapons in case they stay hostile, three sources of light—caver's lamps, flashlights, candles and matches—radio relays, walkie-talkies, food, clothing change, rope and climbing gear, hey, you name it, plus the stuff we cobbled together out of our gear. This isn't the first of these hikes I've been on, you know. Just that this *mishigas* changes some of the extras we need to bring. You got the code for our little universal translators, Geordie?"

"Mr. Scott, please. You know Next Gen was a weak, pale imitation. Yeah, the code should work. It's not all that complex and I could adapt a lot of the code I already had. But it ain't really a translator, remember; we're not going to understand them." I took two smooth alloy cases in rubberized jackets from her. "Oh, that's right, we already had some of these set up for long-term monitoring."

"What else could I use? We don't know how long we'll be out or where we'll be, so it's a good thing we had ruggedized, sealed cases for this kind of thing." Jodi was right—in the cave environment we expected, the gadgets we brought had darn well better be awfully tough.

"I've got the code just about set. You've got extra battery packs?"

She patted me on the shoulder. "Hey, have a little faith in your techie fiancée, *neh* ? I pirated all the batteries from our stuff. Taking no chances."

She glanced over at the rest of the family. "I admit, all the gadgets you people have not only surprised me, they'll come in handy. Wouldn't have expected you to have short-range radio repeaters."

Grandpa laughed. "Hain't much difference twixt this adventure of yours and some of the ones we've thought 'bout doing over the years. Never had to use 'em yet, but Adam durn near did for this last trip. If most of us come with you an' provide relays with our own radios, those relays should take y'all a good long ways in before we gets out of contact."

Radio, of course, would be attenuated real fast through all that water-soaked rock, but relays could really stretch that, especially if we used the family to stretch it farther. Evangeline, Grandpa, Mamma, and Helen would be staying topside; the rest would follow us down. We knew the Nomes hadn't—and couldn't—come up through the Slade entrance, not with all the iron around and below the entrance. The only question was whether they'd try to kill us when we got out of that area.

I transferred the code into our equipment and spoke into it. There was a faint sideband of whining high-pitched noise, but the instruments showed most of the output centered around the same waveband as the signals I thought were the Nomes' voices. I put the outdoor headphones on and walked out into the night, pointing a parabolic mike in the direction of the besieging force.

"*Choura mon tosetta. Megni om den kai zom tazela ku,*" I heard, or something very much like that. The voice was tenor, with an odd, scraping quality to it.

"*Zom moran! Zettamakata vos bin turano,*" replied another, deeper voice. Chills went down my spine. It was one thing to have figured it out intellectually, another to actually hear the voices of nonhuman creatures. I pulled the headphones off and turned back. "I was right. Voices. Damn!"

Jodi nodded. "Didn't have any doubt myself, love."

Jodi and I each clipped one of the little boxes that contained the signal processors, memory, and whatnot that did the conversion to our belts, ran compact headphone wires up inside our clothing, and put on the slim-profile headphones that fit under our caving helmets. No one goes caving with a bare head, unless they want to end up with lumps or worse. We tested all the connections, made sure all the power packs and other gadgets—repeaters, lights, and so on—were well distributed, and then turned towards the door. "Let's do it. Time's getting short. They've started testing the fence again."

I led, Jodi followed, with Father, Jonah, Nellie, Adam, and Grandpa bringing up the rear. In the darkness the huge grating seemed even more grim and forbidding, and opening it was like watching a mouth opening up in the earth. We turned on our lights, checked all our equipment again, and descended the iron ladder set into the living rock; as agreed, Grandpa stayed topside to keep the exit secure, just in case, and to be the topside relay.

It's a long, solemn climb at the best of times; the iron ladder drops straight down into pitch blackness that first muffles the sounds of the outside and then starts amplifying the echoes of your descent into a cadence of solemnly echoing drumbeats. Ninety feet down, my feet touched stone. I looked around, saw nothing in the immediate vicinity, and stepped away to let everyone else get down. The sounds of people and equipment echoed through the tomblike silence of Winston's Cave, silence normally only broken by water dripping from the ceiling.

"Okay. Everyone ready?"

"Ayup," Father answered. "Nellie?"

"Yes, Father. I'm first relay. I'll be right here at the base of the ladder." She took out her iron truncheon, swung it around, and leaned back against the iron ladder. We heard her checking reception with Grandpa topside as we moved down the Snake's Belly, a twisting passageway with scalloping where swift-moving water had carved it out. The lights glinted brightly off water-slick rock, giving back highlights of yellow, brown, and white from the flowstone that coated parts of the wall. We moved cautiously, waiting to make sure we could see as far ahead as possible.

A flash of light ahead. I stopped, then turned one of our Mag-Lites on and aimed it down the corridor.

Across the tunnel, just where the Snake's Belly exited into the Crossroads, five Nomes stood, weapons aimed at us, rockworms waiting at their feet. By now, only Adam and Father were with us, Jonah having stayed back about halfway down the Belly because the signal was starting to fade. We'd probably have

to leave Adam at the beginning of the Crossroads. I took a deep breath. "Guess this is it."

I put on the headphones; Jodi did the same. We walked forward, Father and Adam following some distance back. As we approached, I heard "*Turano! Turano zom ku!*" in a sort of whispered voice, and the figures tightened their grip on their weapons.

When we were within twenty feet, I stopped. My heart was pounding awfully fast, and for a minute I couldn't convince my hands to let go of my trusty iron bar. At this range, in this light, the Nomes and their rockworms were too eerie to contemplate for long. I forced my grip to relax and handed the weapon to Jodi, then took another slow couple of steps forward. They muttered something and gathered themselves. Something about the tone of voice and the way they almost bunched together actually heartened me. Why, they were afraid of us too!

"We don't want to fight you," I said, the microphone taking my normal voice and catapulting its sound to seventy-five thousand cycles higher.

The reaction was everything I could have hoped for. They literally jumped backward in startlement, and I couldn't even sort out separate word-sounds from the gabble of Nome-talk that erupted from the headphones. Finally they settled down and one of them stepped slightly forward, stone sword still in his hand but lowered to a much less threatening position. "*Rennka ku? Mondu okh wendasa hottai rennka?*"

I shrugged. "Hey, I don't understand you, but I get the idea you're surprised I talk. We just found out that you did ourselves." I reached very carefully inside one of my pockets and took out a small bag. I put the bag down on the ground and backed up a few paces to where Jodi waited.

Whatever senses they had, they'd been able to tell I did something there, at any rate. The spokesman came hesitantly forward and stopped, staring at the bag with his weird crystal eyes. Then his face snapped up, looking at me with a very human startlement visible in his pose despite the stony immobility of his features. "*H'adamant! H'adamant huran zom!*"

Jodi and I looked at each other, startled. "Adamant?"

It clapped fists together in what was somehow an exultant or agreeing motion. "*H'adamant! H'adamant!*" It scooped up the bag and emptied the three diamonds into its palm—last of Winston Slade's original cache, saved for sentimental reasons in our safe—and held the palm out to us. "*H'adamant, vu!*"

"I'll be damned," I said. "Wonder if they got that word from us, or we got it from them?"

Jodi shrugged. "Don't have any idea. But he looks like he's coming down from his ecstasy."

Indeed, the spokesman was now looking in his palm, and loosed a steady stream of words which included "*H'adamant*" as a frequent occurrence.

"Sorry, sir, but we don't have any more of them." I tried gestures to get the point across. "Maybe we can reach some kind of understanding?"

He finally seemed to realize no more diamonds were forthcoming. He then pointed down the corridor—clearly, whatever senses they had must have some analogy to sight, at least when used for that purpose—and made emphatic motions that I couldn't interpret as anything except "Come with us."

"Well, it's what we wanted," I said, not feeling all that comfortable with the idea.

"So long as what they want isn't to cut us open to see if we have the rocks inside us."

"You just had to bring that idea up, didn't you?"

"Clint. Best get along now."

"Yes, Father." We started following the Nomes. Adam stayed behind at the beginning of the Crossroads. When we reached the entrance to the Corkscrew, Father knew he would have to stay behind also. He gave me an unexpected hug. "Be careful."

"We will, Father."

The Nomes talked with themselves in low undertones. They'd clearly realized we didn't understand them, and at this point had stopped trying to talk to us. We followed farther into the bowels of the earth. After a while, I keyed in the radio. "Father?"

The Nomes and the rockworms spun around at that, staring at me again.

"Hear you, son. Getting faint. Figure a few dozen more yards."

The Nomes relaxed slowly, then continued on, but they were now talking with great intensity and animation. "Something about the radio really set them off."

Jodi nodded. "Well, makes sense, doesn't it? You said they must sense things in the electromagnetic, and that's why the iron throws them off. That radio might be like a flashbulb or something to them."

I dropped one of the relays. The rearmost Nome stopped, turned, and came back towards us. It picked up the relay. I stepped towards it, it backed up, studied the relay for a moment, then put it back down and glanced at me. I let it move away and then continued walking.

Soon we were entering areas of the cave that even Winston had never seen, past the Hall of Mysteries and obviously deep into what was the Nomes' territory. Now I really started to get worried. We were seeing other Nomes around us, who would stop and point and start to gabble amongst each other, just as prisoners being marched through a city would start to see the citizens point and whisper.

There were only two of our eight relays left. We were now in an immense cavern that I couldn't even see across. The Mag-Lite hinted at its great expanse, reaching the roof overhead, bearded with stalactites that were twenty feet long or more and still ended with well over a hundred feet of air between them and the ground. When we lowered the light it touched on more wonders: gargantuan columns, dozens of tunnel openings, flowstone curtains that glittered translucently, a shaggy forest of helictites beneath a high-up opening that obviously vented air into this area.

Since the cavern was effectively open air, we wouldn't need a relay until we were all the way across it. As we reached the far side, surrounded by the eerie rusty-gate hissing and screeching that was the audible-edge component of the Nomes' speech, something massive came slowly into view. We slowed down and stared for a moment in awe.

If we'd had any remaining doubt that this was a civilized species, we would have lost it then. For the first

time we saw an undeniably artificial construct in the depths of Winston's Cave. Towering before us, over sixty feet high, were a pair of what could be nothing but titanic doors. In a way they still seemed to belong here, their surface as smooth yet naturally flowing as the rest of the caverns. They were composed of what looked like marble, but with strange, almost interwoven components of a semitransparent black stone which looked like obsidian. They were covered with shimmering alien symbols that appeared to have been grown there as a natural part of the stone. We could not grasp what the symbols meant, though they were clearly the work of intelligence.

None of our guides made any attempt to open the door. There was a sound of rushing water, and the great slabs simply pivoted up and rose smoothly out of sight as we approached; almost noiselessly, without any visible sign of the truly impressive force that must be needed to move. I saw the thickness as I passed . . . four-foot-thick slabs of stone. I did a quick mental calculation. Mother Mary, together those doors must mass over a thousand tons! I dropped the next-to-last relay just outside the doors.

Jodi evidently decided that it was time for a clearer look, because she pulled out the big electric lantern and turned it on.

Beyond the huge doors was . . . the Throne Room.

Even if I hadn't been half expecting it since I was a kid, there was no way I could have called it anything else. The penetrating beam of the portable lantern barely made its way across the room, maybe over a thousand feet in diameter. Circle upon circle of Nomes, each with its weapon and companion rockworm, stood in what looked like a military attention pose, with a narrow gap through which we marched. The great domed cavern sparkled everywhere with the same alien designs. I wondered, vaguely, how they saw such designs, and what they "looked" like to their eyes; surely what we saw was at best only a part of their symbology. In the center of the cavern, a series of concentric terraces were laid, with rough-surfaced ramps curving in a spiral fashion to each level. And at the top of this raised formation, on a perfectly circular polished dais of stone over fifty feet wide, was a throne, hewn from the living rock it sat upon, with a single Nome seated in it.

This was the meeting I'd half dreamed about, half feared for almost twenty years. I couldn't think of *this* Nome as "it." He looked down at us from an elevation of fifteen feet, counting the height of the throne itself. His crystalline crest seemed finer and higher, the fluting on his chin longer, and he looked to me to be somewhat larger than the others around the room, or those escorting us. In the shadowy light of the stupendous throne room, with my overexcited imagination working at double time, I could almost see the halo of white hair and long beard. This was Ruggedo, sometimes called Roquat, the Red—the Nome King.

I shook my head to clear it. I might not be able to keep from giving him the name in my mind, but there wasn't any other connection. This was a first contact between humans and whatever this race really was, and I wouldn't help matters any by letting kids' stories influence my behavior. And whatever they were, they had a lot of things in their civilization that we hadn't the faintest clue about. Behind the throne we could see bizarre and distorted shapes; things that looked like they might have been living things of the same general sort as the Nomes and rockworms, but jammed together, intertwined and almost sculpted in ways that hurt my eyes to look at.

"Father," I said into the radio. "We're about to meet the Nome King."

"Then mind your manners, son."

Ruggedo (as my mind still insisted on calling him, lacking any better name) had leaned forward with

interest as I talked with my father. He leaned back slowly and studied us as we were brought up the ramps until we stood before him, a mere twenty feet from the being who was clearly in charge of this entire underground world. His head tilted slightly, as though he were a bird trying to see us with one eye, and then another. Now I could see there was, in fact, one strong similarity between the real and the fictional Nome King: Ruggedo did, indeed, hold a heavy, elaborate scepter with a great glittering red crystal at its end.

"That thing gives me the creeps, Clint." Jodi spoke in an undertone, having wisely shut off her high-frequency transducer.

I just nodded. She wasn't talking about the King, but about the shapes behind the throne which we could now see much more clearly. This was not a good thing. It was something inherently unsettling, seeming a blend of the living and the living rock, shapes almost like attenuated Nomes blending into rockworms and other . . . things of even less familiar outline, like an unholy blending of Bosch and Giger. My earphones hummed and murmured with whispered sounds of the Nome language and with other things, like barely audible whines, interference, and subliminal voices.

We stood there a moment, each side regarding the other in motionless silence, broken only by the sounds that even our transducers couldn't render into recognition. I took the time to study the King closely. Even though he was clearly larger than his subjects, the Nome King still wouldn't stand taller than Evangeline; I guessed him at no more than five feet tall. The body was almost spherical, with variegated geometric patterns of black, green, brown, and yellow making it look almost as though he wore clothing, at least from a distance; up close, it was much more a natural mottling of the skin. Round, slender arms and legs, with rocky sheathing that had the appearance of thin clothing on their bodies, completed the resemblance to Baum's Nomes, as envisioned by John R. Neill. The crystal growths on the head, up close, didn't really bring hair to mind. They shimmered with multiple colors—the King's seemed predominantly violet, amethyst perhaps—and the immobile eyes and stony tube jutting from the chin emphasized the alien nature of the creature.

Finally, the Nome King leaned forward on his scepter and spoke.

"So, *you* are the people who speak in the air!"

7. Underground Understandings

Neither Jodi nor I really know precisely what we did in that moment. That clearly spoken English sentence stunned me so much that all I know for certain is that we stood there for a while, staring at him with our mouths literally hanging open. Just as we started to recover, the King suddenly began to emit a series of whooping noises which, after a moment, we realized must be laughter.

"Hooo Hooo Hooo Hooo! OOOoohooohooohoo! You really do appear that way! Pardon, I mean, look like that—when surprised."

"You speak English?!" I finally got out, rattled enough to slide into dialect. "What th' hell's goin' on here? Weren't four hours ago I first heard a word of your language, an' from their reactions I'd thought was the first time y'all had heard ours!"

That sent him into another fit of laughter. Jodi and I exchanged glances. This wasn't even vaguely what we'd expected. It didn't help that I actually recognized the voice. Well, not really recognized it, exactly, but I knew I'd heard that voice before many times.

Finally he settled down. "In a way, you are quite right. And in another way, no, I do not speak your language. That"—he gestured to the twisted structure behind him—"speaks your language, through me."

That brought all sorts of icky possibilities to mind, just looking at the thing.

"Are you the ruler here, or is it?"

The shrieking snort seemed equal parts amusement and annoyance. "I am the High Spirit here. That is a . . ." He seemed at a loss, finally saying, "*makatdireshkovi*. There are several words in your language which seem to partly apply, none of them actually meaning what I am trying to say."

"So what do you mean by saying you hadn't heard our language before?" Jodi asked.

"Never before have we heard your voices speaking in our manner," the Nome King—well, High Spirit—said. "But there were those of us who ventured into *Tennatu* —the Land of Fast Changes—who, in past cycles, began *toturan* certain signals which we realized were not natural. We made this *makatdireshkovi* to help us understand what we sensed, and eventually did. But we never realized it was your people who were doing the speaking."

It took some considerable back-and-forth exchanges before we finally realized that they'd managed, over a period of many years, to derive our language from television broadcasts. That explained the voice—it was a combination of several TV anchormen, most notably Peter Jennings and Tom Brokaw, with a hint of Walter Cronkite. They had realized that part of the transmissions could represent a depiction of objects in some way. But because they didn't see at all the way we did, and within their own "sight" spectrum had a different arrangement of seeing intensities and "colors," they could translate the signal but the "image" they got did not resemble the "image" their regular senses got of us at all. So they had no idea that the babbling in the air came from the same people that sometimes raided their caverns. That was also why it had taken the King several moments to verify that we really did look "surprised" in the same way as the images they had previously extracted from the signals. The *makatdireshkovi* and he had needed to find the translation between the signal-images and what he was seeing.

"Okay," I said finally, realizing how much time had passed, "I think we need to at least cover a little business before we go back to this discussion, sir. We came down here to see if we could try to fix up the bad blood that's been built up between us over the years."

He sat still for a moment, head tilting in that birdlike fashion again, and then gave a nod. The gesture was clearly deliberate, something he must have learned from the transmissions they monitored. "I had hoped this was true. You do not seem to be suicidal or hostile, despite the formidable reputation you have among my people. What do you propose?"

"Well, first off, you've got us in your power, so if you'd be so kind as to pull your people back off our land topside, and then I can tell my folks to relax—that we're talkin'?"

He considered that for a moment, then raised his staff and barked out several commands in their own language. "It is done. Tell your people that mine shall bother them no more, at least so long as we remain in council."

I keyed up the mike. "Father?"

He responded instantly, even though it must've been a good hour and a half, maybe two hours of nothing

but waiting before he heard anything. "Yes, Clint?"

"We're having a good conversation here and might be here a long time. But we're able to talk together—don't ask me to explain the ins-and-outs right now—and the King has agreed to pull back his people. Can you check that for me?"

"Hold on, son." A few minutes passed, then: "Clint, all disappeared a short time back. Looks like everyone's playing on the level."

I relaxed. The situation could still get bad, but it looked like we were past the worst. "Good, Father. You guys pull back too, then. Me and Jodi can find our way back if we have to, and I don't think we're in any danger here."

"Will do. Be back every few hours to check on you, though."

"Okay, Father. Take care."

"You take care of that girl, hear me?"

"Yes, Father."

"Good luck."

I put the transmitter away. "You know, I think we've forgotten all our manners. I'm Clinton Slade. This is my fiancée, Jodi Goldman."

The Nome King had apparently seen plenty of introduction scenes. He rose up on his slender pipestem legs and gave a low bow. "A pleasure, Mr. Clinton Slade, Miss Jodi Goldman. I am *Rokhasetanameathetal*, the High Spirit of the *Nowëthada*."

We returned his bow. "Rokasta . . . ?"

"*Rokhasetanameathetal*," he repeated. Jodi frowned, and I caught the impression of sounds involved in that name that I couldn't even describe.

"I'm not sure I can even say that properly, sir," Jodi said.

"Ah, yes. I recall that the vibrations that formed your language did seem to have, relatively speaking, great simplicity. We can reproduce any such vibration very easily, but you seem to be more limited. Choose another name for me, if you wish. I will see if it suits me."

I was strongly tempted to call him Ruggedo and see if he'd take it, but it was time to drop that line of thinking. "Let's just shorten it a bit, sir. How about Rokhaset?" The name sounded vaguely Egyptian, said that way, and the tube-beard did kinda look like the tight little beards you saw on the Egyptian statues.

"That will do well enough. Come then. You have stood long before my throne, and in the images your people send through the air *themakatdireshkovi* has noted that you prefer to sit, as do we if the time is overly long."

He gestured with his great scepter, and the other Nomes parted along the line of the gesture. It was a smooth and well-practiced movement that simultaneously gave me great respect for their attentiveness

and reaction time, and a bit of wariness about our so-far genial host. That kind of coordinated, instant obedience I'd only seen in humans when the boss was a pretty hard-assed tyrant . . . or in a very heavily drilled military establishment.

At the far end of this pathway, a passage was visible in the light of our lantern. Noticing the beam again for the first time in a while brought something urgently to mind. "High Spirit, sir?"

"Just call me Rokhaset, as you have named me. Might I call you Clinton Slade and your friend Jodi Goldman, instead of by formal terms? Yes? Very well, then. What is it?" The High Spirit led us down this new course.

"Your people see using senses we don't—I guess the word you're using for it is '*turan*'—and we see using ones you don't. The problem is that our light's going to go out in not too many hours, and we'll really be pretty helpless without it." This was something of an exaggeration, as we had several light sources on us which would enable us to manage some kind of illumination for quite a while, but I wanted to see what his reaction was.

He tilted his head. "Rather as I *ammatturan* near you and your iron and steel, eh? Give me this lantern of yours for a moment."

"Be careful with it," Jodi admonished him.

"As though it were a child, I assure you."

Reluctantly she handed him the lantern. He took the hard-plastic-cased giant flashlight and examined it carefully, running his fingers across it. "How do you activate it?"

Jodi indicated the on/off switch, then had to physically place his fingers on it, as he couldn't actually see the gesture. While his people often gave the impression of sight like our own, things like this constantly reminded us that what we were seeing wasn't what they saw.

Rokhaset moved forward. As we went to follow, he stopped and held out a hand. "Wait a moment, please. I wish to be able to examine this clearly, and your presence with all of your iron makes that impossible."

We waited as he moved about thirty yards on, then stopped and examined the light again. There was a click and we were in darkness. "Hey!" I said.

"Just testing. So it is now no longer giving you illumination?"

"It's off."

He verified this by switching it on and off several times, then brought it back to us. "I believe I can arrange something, if I understand the operation correctly." Rokhaset screeched some orders to his people, and then gestured for us to follow. "There are many things for us to discuss, I believe, but first it is time for us to speak together as friends. It has been a very, very long time indeed since my people and yours spoke as one people."

"I wondered about that. There are legends among our people about spirits who live in the earth and who fear the sunlight or who are vulnerable to iron."

"The 'sunlight,' as you call it, merely confuses some of us, and can damage our eyes over time by causing them to fog. There are some beings that avoid your sunlight for more pressing reasons." Rokhaset spoke those words as we passed along a polished-looking corridor. "But I am surprised by your people even having legends, for the time when the *Nowëthada* and the *Tennathada* walked and spoke together is many generations past even for my people. Indeed, it was thought to be no more than legend by many of the *Nowëthada*, as none of them could even tell whether your people spoke at all."

We emerged now into another large hall, but this one seemed oval and had what appeared to be a long table and chairs of odd designs in it, with many Nomes going back and forth. The others formed into an honor guard as we approached. The High Spirit seated himself in the center of one long side of the table, and indicated we were to sit directly opposite him on the other side. The table was about five feet wide, allowing for plenty of room. The chairs were a bit short for us—not unexpected—but after a few minutes of sitting in them seemed surprisingly comfortable, though my legs did feel that they had very little clearance below the top of the table.

"I've been thinking about what you just brought up, Rokhaset," Jodi said finally. "The problem is that there's no way you could have talked with us before. It wasn't until the past, oh, fifty years or so that we could've built gadgets that would let us hear you, and you hear us."

"'Gadgets'?" Rokhaset repeated, puzzled. "Gadgets . . . Do you mean these 'machines' like the ones you carry that make your voices sound like ours?"

"Yes."

"Ah. Well, in those days, there was no need of such things. As our legends and histories relate it, we were a much closer people in the ancient time; that is, you and I would have seemed less alien to one another, and we would have had ways of speaking together that would be considerably more simple. But then came the *Makurada Demagon* . . . the, hmm, what would make sense in your language . . . the 'Senseless Shattering'? Ah, no . . . Darkness? Hmmm . . . Perhaps the best expression would be something like 'Plague of Blindness.' But that implies a disease, which this was not; it was a disaster which struck the whole world and affected it in different ways for each of the peoples who then inhabited it. The *Nowëthada* lost contact with *Nowë*, who was sore injured by the *Makurada*, and with your people, and while apart, we changed."

"Who is *Nowë*?"

"You would call *Nowë* our patron deity, god or goddess of the Earth. That is what *Nowëthada* means, the People of *Nowë*. It is at *Nowë*'s will that we exist. We are the servants of the Earth, made to oversee the interaction of the living rock with those other things that live upon it." He sat up a bit straighter. "Ah, tell me how this seems to you."

Light began to fill the room, shining out from several stafflike objects being carried into the room by other Nomes. It was light of a brilliant blue-white color, not exactly what I'd have chosen for lighting; but it saved on batteries and our host had apparently had this whipped together just for us. "That's just great, Rokhaset!"

"You had your people do that up now?" Jodi asked. "Well, I'm impressed. Can I take a look?"

"By all means, Jodi." It was still pretty strange to hear such courteous and very well-spoken English coming out of that unmoving mouth. The only oddity to the sound was a slight hollow resonance, but in this cavern setting it was hardly noticeable.

Jodi studied the twisted stony shaft, which ended in a crystal that produced the light. "How do you turn it on and off?"

"I suppose I could instruct it to turn off, but do you not still require the light?"

"Oh, sure, sure. What do you mean, instruct it? Is this gadget voice-activated?"

Rokhaset tilted his head a few times. "There you are, using these words oddly. Tell me, would you call our pets gadgets?"

"You mean those things we call rockworms? No, they're creatures."

"Then what you hold there is not a gadget either, if I understand you correctly."

Jodi nearly dropped the rod. "Are you saying that this thing *is* alive?"

"As alive as I am," the High Spirit agreed. "Not, I confess, nearly as capable of other activities as I. We grew that very quickly for one purpose only, to make that crystal *hevrat* in the same *gos* as your 'lights' . . . how would that be in your language . . . hmm . . . Yes, we made it to glow in the same way as your lights do. It provides little for us to sense, but for you it appears to suffice quite well."

I shifted uncomfortably, then glanced down at the chair. "And what about . . ."

I almost got the impression of a broad smile. "Ah, you have noticed that they grow, have you? Yes, certainly! How else could we have chairs that all would be comfortable in, for my people vary in size as do yours?"

Jodi and I exchanged glances. I could see her mind following the same path. We kept getting deceived by the Nome's human-sounding voice and his—or, to be more accurate, *themakatdireskovi*'s—grasp of our language, derived from the past forty years of broadcasts. Clearly we had much in common with the Nomes, and there was no reason we couldn't be friends. But, just as clearly, there were some very, very alien aspects to their civilization. The thought that even the furniture I was sitting on, the lights I was seeing . . . "Is everything here alive?"

Surprisingly, that made Rokhaset pause; almost I could see him frowning in thought. "In a sense, yes . . . but not in the same sense as these things, no. The Earth itself is alive in its own way, but certainly there is a difference between the ordinary stone about us and ourselves, or these chairs or your new lights."

Servant Nomes moved to the High Spirit, and other Nomes came in and seated themselves—leaving a respectful, and possibly fearful, distance between us and their leader. The servants placed several stony bowls, plates, and platters on the table. There was a quick discussion with some glancing at us, which Rokhaset resolved with a gesture. "I presume you have brought at least some of your own food, Mr. Slade, Ms. Goldman? For it is time for me to eat, but I suspect our food is not to your taste."

"We've brought some stuff, yeah."

Five huge covered platters were carried to the table, heavy enough to require two Nomes each, and placed carefully in front of the diners. The one in front of the High Spirit unfolded its top like a flower at his touch.

In the brilliant blue-white glow, the dishes within shimmered with the colors of the rainbow. There were slices of some rich brown and yellow rippled stuff that looked almost like a chocolate and yellow swirled cake, some brilliantly red fruitlike things, some really peculiar transparent sticks, and other things like noodles, puddings, and crumbled croutons.

"Are those . . . rocks?" Jodi asked tentatively.

The High Spirit gave us a deliberate nod. "Properly prepared by the finest chefs, of course."

"How do you cook a rock?"

"Not using the trivial methods shown in your media, if I understand them correctly. Your people lost, in some ways, far more than we in the *Makurada Demagon*."

"So," I said, studying his plate, "What are those? The reds . . . garnets, maybe. The stuff that looked like cake slices at first must be layered limestone—the main rock around here."

"You have an excellent eye for one of your people," Rokhaset said. "Though I am not sure of your first identification, your second is quite correct."

Suddenly Jodi began laughing almost hysterically.

"What's so durn funny?"

She finally got a grip on herself. "You . . . you Slades! And the Nomes! All this time, you big, strong frontiersmen have been sneaking in and robbing the Nomes' pantries! You're nothing but overgrown mice with iron bars!" She went off into another fit of laughter.

I blinked. Now there was a completely humiliating thought. "Is she right, sir? Have we been stealing your caviar—special food or something?"

"In a manner of speaking, yes. I admit to having a fondness for *H'adamant* when I can afford to have some prepared. But I would hardly have sent out a legion of warriors to Tennatu just for my stomach!"

"So why did you send your warriors after the diamonds?"

"Not diamonds—*H'adamant*."

"Same thing."

He shook his head, emphasizing his disagreement by using our own gesture. "Ridiculous. I have seen these 'diamonds' in your television advertisements. They are nothing like *H'adamant*."

"We weren't anything like what y'all got out of those broadcasts either," I pointed out. "There, Jodi's got herself a big diamond on her hand, you tell me that ain't the same thing."

Jodi held out her engagement ring. Rokhaset studied it for a few minutes, then slowly raised his head and gazed at us with those weird crystal eyes for a long time in silence. Finally he reached out and placed one of the stones we'd returned to the Nomes on the table between us. "I return your question, Clinton Slade. You tell me that these two things *are* the same."

"Shoot, I know they are. I've studied geology for years, and hell, it ain't hard to tell a diamond. Jodi's ring was cut from one of the ones we got down here."

He stood bolt upright and shrieked out something that I couldn't make out because the transducer's volume cutoff killed it. Jodi and I jumped back, fumbling for the iron bars, sure that we were about to get mobbed.

But no one else moved in a way that seemed hostile. If anything, they huddled together a bit more. Finally Rokhaset got himself under control. He sat down slowly and selected another morsel off the plate. I could see now that the mouth was located under the sound-tube he used for speaking—sort of where the chin-neck juncture would be in a human. He didn't seem to eat this with enthusiasm, but more like a man doing something while thinking.

Finally he looked back at us. "I must beg your pardon. It is hard for someone such as myself to suddenly realize how alien your people are. I had foolishly permitted myself to think that because your words are translated to ones I understand by the *makatdireshkovi* that we are really essentially the same, aside from a few minor differences." I got the impression of a long, shaky breath being drawn, though all I could see was a faint movement of the stony skin on the rounded torso. "To give you something you might understand, telling me that the . . . stone in the ring that Ms. Goldman is wearing is the same as this *H'adamant* would be the same as my holding out one of your skeletons and telling you, in all seriousness, that I could not tell the difference between the skeleton and the living, breathing *Tennathada* before me."

He shuddered, a movement rather similar to our own. "Your people have lost more than I had ever imagined. This"—he indicated the natural diamond—"is a living stone, Clinton Slade, Jodi Goldman. The *H'adamant* is precious because of that living essence within it. Now that I know your people cannot see the difference, and that you call both by the name 'diamond' . . ." He shook his head again. "What a terrible waste. You cannot even see what it is that you destroy by cutting the stone in the way you do. We had foolishly thought that you needed the . . . diamonds for the same reasons we did, for their special properties."

"Well, since we're on the subject," I said, after a moment's pause, "we'd like to come to a more peaceable arrangement. Maybe a trade, something you'd like for stuff we'd like. Maybe we can bring you stones like aren't around here?"

Rokhaset nodded thoughtfully. "Yes, there are ossibilities—many crystals and minerals that we know of, yet cannot find here. But we would have to give you some way of making sure you brought us live stones, not ones whose essence had been damaged or destroyed. However, there are more pressing matters. You returned these few stones as a gesture of your goodwill, and so I have accepted it. But it is essential that you return the ones you took recently."

I shifted in my living chair. "Well, sir, we can't exactly do that. For two reasons."

"That would be extremely unfortunate. What reasons are these?"

"Well, firstly, your people kinda wrecked our road. Really bad, this time. It'll take a week, at least, before we have a chance of getting out of here and making it to the bank where we keep the stones."

Rokhaset's eyes flickered—literally—but the tone of his voice was warm and perhaps slightly amused, so I guessed that the flicker might be something like a smile. "What the *Nowëthada* can destroy, the *Nowëthada* can rebuild, and just as swiftly, Clinton Slade. If that is all that stands between us and the

H'adamant , lay your fears to rest."

I sighed. "Sorry, sir, but that's the smaller problem. Y'see, most of them are already sold. We've got some left, but not even a tenth of what was took."

The whole room seemed to go silent. Rokhaset sat utterly immobile, as did the other Nomes, and for a few minutes it looked like we were stuck in some lunatic sculptor's workshop, surrounded by macabre statues.

When the silence broke, it was by a hurricane of sound, gabbling Nomish voices all talking at once, with one alien word repeated so often as to be recognizable even in the Babel of noise: *lurizata* . The Nomes had risen from their seats and were now shouting back and forth at each other, sometimes gesturing unsettlingly in our direction.

Just as it reached a new crescendo, Rokhaset's voice boomed out: "*RATCHOTAI!*"

Dead silence fell again. It only lasted a split second, however, because the quiet was instantly broken by the High Spirit talking to his people. Well, I say "talking," but it sounded more like a lecture—or a tongue-lashing. He laid into them but good. We couldn't understand it, of course, but we could pick out "*lurizata*," "*H'adamant*," and some of the other words we'd heard before. His people shrank back, just like humans getting bawled out by the boss, as he continued his tirade. It must've lasted a full five minutes before he stopped, seemed to take a breath, and turned back to us.

"My apologies, Clinton Slade, Jodi Goldman. Your news is very disheartening, and it seems some of my people were unready for such bad news. We had always believed you kept the *H'adamant* on your property. With all the *H'kuraden* that underlies it, we could not of course sense the crystals at any distance to see if they were in fact there. I should have realized the truth once I understood the diamonds of your transmissions were what became of our *H'adamant* . Unlike some of my less courageous subjects, however, I refuse to view the situation as hopelessly lost."

"I think," Jodi said, "it's about time you told us just what the real problem is, *neh* ? What's so vital about this particular batch of diamonds that you've just got to have them?"

The High Spirit looked over at her, then gave one of his deliberate nods. "Yes, you are correct. But let us finish our meal first. A few more minutes should make little difference, and the story is long and not entirely pleasant."

I was never so anxious for a meal to be over.

8. Assault of the Earth

"Ours," began Rokhaset, "is not the only city of the *Nowëthada* in the Earth."

We were seated in another set of chairs, which were slowly adjusting to become more comfortable in their creepy way, in a smaller and obviously more private room, a circular cave about thirty feet across and twenty high, hung with hundreds of delicate straw stalactites dripping water on most of the area; we'd pointedly stood near the two dry spots in the room and waited for the Nomes to move the chairs for us. While we were getting seated, I'd finally asked Rokhaset why he was excluding the other Nomes, which

seemed to amuse him.

"Few of my subjects can hear what the *makatdireshkovi* sings to me, Clint. It was designed for me alone. Therefore, any with us cannot understand you, nor speak to you, and would thus be of little use in our deliberations. The only reason they understood some of what we discussed while dining is that one of those who can, somewhat, hear the *makatdireshkovi* was summarizing what he heard, something as one of your reporters or sports announcers. This would be somewhere between clumsy and useless at this point in our discussion. Now that it has become clear that the signals involved are important we shall have to make something which will speak to—or perhaps to be more accurate, translate for—all our people as the *makatdireshkovi* does to me. But that is a project far more complex than simply making you lights." This relieved me to some extent. Rokhaset didn't seem to be the tyrant type, although military leader still seemed likely.

"Yes," Jodi said, returning to the subject, "I wouldn't expect you were the only city."

"The problem is that the *Nowëthada* are no longer the unified race we were. Those who survived the *Makurada Demagon* . . . all of us changed. But some changed more than others. Our task was always one of balancing the way of the Earth with the way of the life on its surface. But as we became less like you, and the powers of *Nowë* faded, the old senses which used to tell us how to perform this duty also weakened and faded." He rubbed his hands, a gesture which seemed like a slow shaking of the head. "To allow your form of life to survive and prosper, of course, it was always important that the world remain overall peaceful. But changes must happen to the world as well, and so it was our job to ensure that these changes were sufficient for the world's purposes, and to minimize the injury to people such as yourself. This task we continue to this day."

I could not help but be tremendously impressed by the *makatdireshkovi*'s work. Oh, now I could understand how it was possible; the thing was a living construct, probably with the brainpower of a hundred Nomes but all focused on the single task of translating. Still, the way it was taking two separate languages and even apparently conveying accurate nuances of emotion . . . hell, there are career actors who can't handle that job in their own language!

"Like all spirits, however, we had our opposites, those charged with the release of destructive impulses from the Earth, the eradication of other life through disasters, and so on. While *Nowë* was active, both sides had the great Senses that told us when each approach was correct or incorrect. And so we cooperated with each other and with your people in ensuring that the great dance of *Nowë* was carried out properly. Over the span of millennia, however, that was lost, and the *Lisharithada* were changed horribly by the *Makurada Demagon* into a race of creatures who enjoyed the destruction they could create and sought ways to make it worse, if possible."

"So you're at war with them, then?" I asked.

Rokhaset began another of those sudden shrieks, but cut it off. His voice was heavy with sadness when he continued. "War? By *Nowë*'s heart, never! We try to negate their efforts. We are made to cooperate, to assist, Clinton Slade. Killing and fighting is tremendously hard for us. We have warriors, yes, and they are formidable in their own way. But they do not kill except in self-defense or by accident, even such creatures as yourself. Kill our own people? It is not even to be imagined easily."

"So you try to sabotage their efforts, sorta undoing their work, but you can't fight them directly?"

"In most cases, yes. We can directly fight them, in small numbers, under very specific circumstances—when what they are trying to do is of sufficient destructive scale that it is not merely our

lives, but those of countless others involved. It is then that we truly need the *H'adamant* ."

"For . . . ?" Jodi prompted.

"In your language, I suppose the best term would be 'potion' or 'elixir.' Your own people understand certain symbolisms with *H'adamant* , now that I realize you call them by the name 'diamond.' The basic symbolism is not far from correct. If the Earth wills it, we can extract the essence of *H'adamant* and preserve it in an elixir which will make us stronger in virtually all ways—more capable of withstanding injury, and quicker, physically and mentally. In this way we are able to utilize small numbers of our people to oppose their vastly larger forces, to cut through their defenses, and to neutralize the rituals in which they invoke such massive powers of destruction."

"They can fight you, right?"

Rokhaset nodded deliberately. "Oh, yes, Jodi Goldman. Enough of our old instinctive accord survives that even they will not attack us for no reason—there will be no genocide here, despite our opposition. But if we are actually intruding on their territory and interfering with their work, they most assuredly will fight us, and can and will kill our people. As you can see, this places us at a grave disadvantage without *H'adamant* ."

"Okay, I get you. And right now they're planning one of their big parties, right?"

"One which, if you will pardon the use of one of your own idioms, will assuredly bring down the house." Rokhaset seemed grim. "And for the second time, your people, Clinton Slade, have made it impossible for us to stop it . . . and both your people and mine will pay the price."

"Second time?" Now, I was getting really nervous, as I started to get a glimmer of the horror that was waiting behind Rokhaset's account.

"Second time, Clinton Slade. When your ancestor first entered our caverns and stole our entire cache, cloaked by the *H'kuraden* he carried, he did so at the worst possible moment; the times and powers had aligned so that the *Lisharithada* could carry out one of their greatest destructive rituals, and suddenly we were powerless to stop it. For a time we believed that somehow they had found a way to bypass the mystical defenses that surrounded our most secure caches. It was almost a relief when the next theft's source was traced to your forefather. But that did not repair the damage from the first theft. For a while, we had convinced them to moderate their behavior, but then your people truly began your intrusions upon the Earth, and their anger grew. Now the same forces have aligned once more, and the *Lisharithada* prepare to unleash them with even more fury than they did a short time after your ancestor had robbed us for the first time."

"Holy Mother of God." I heard myself whisper, unable to stop myself. "You're talking about the New Madrid Earthquakes!"

What Jodi said at that point I can't repeat. Rokhaset simply bowed his head.

"Look, Rokhaset, we gotta try to stop 'em at least! We'll head topside and you guys will help us get the road back, so's we can get you the diamonds that're left. We could try to buy some more back."

Rokhaset nodded. "We shall try, Clinton Slade. We shall hope the *H'adamant* you still have shall suffice, but I have grave doubts. We do not have the time for you to buy some more, I am afraid. To make the elixir will take two and a half days, as you measure time. They will strike in four days, as that is when the

forces will be at their peak of alignment. Do you truly believe you shall be able to locate so many *H'adamant*, arrange for their purchase, and deliver them to us, in time for us to make the elixir and then carry the battle to them? Even as things are, it will be difficult, leaving aside the fact that, as your people do not know or respect *H'adamant* for what it is, there would be no way of telling whether the ones you purchased retained their true virtue until they had actually arrived."

There wasn't any arguing that. Four days . . .

I tried not to think about it, but anyone in my profession has already visualized the consequences of a Richter 8+ quake east of the Mississippi, and the New Madrid fault has always been the chief suspect. The area of effect of a major quake in this area would be monstrous: ten, fifteen times that of a comparable quake on the West Coast. It would level almost everything manmade in at least three or four states, cause heavy damage in adjoining ones, and be felt from the Rockies all the way to Vermont, maybe even Maine.

"Waitaminnit!" I said, suddenly thinking of something. "These *Lisharithada*, they live underground like you do, right? Well, if they set off a Richter eight quake right here, what's gonna keep 'em—and you, for all of that—from being squished when the quake brings the caverns down?"

"We are spirits of the Earth, Clint. We have our ways of preventing our own homes from breaking. Unfortunately, this is not true of your homes, or of caverns which we no longer inhabit."

I stood up. "Well, sir, seems to me we've both got work to do. We need to get topside so's we can get the *H'adamant* back, and you'll need to get your people to rebuild our road."

"Indeed." He stood as well and after a moment offered his hand, another gesture he had clearly been shown by the *makatdireshkovi*. I took it; the skin was cool and hard, like shaking the hand of a rough-hewn statue, but no statue ever squeezed back that way. "Clinton Slade, Jodi Goldman, it has been a pleasure, truly. I regret we have met in these circumstances, yet perhaps *Nowë* shall smile upon us and somehow we shall stop the coming disaster." He shook Jodi's hand as well. "Shall I send an escort with you?"

"No offense, sir, but you people don't seem to be the fastest sorts. I remember the route, and I think me and Jodi can make it back a lot quicker on our own."

Jodi nodded. The route was long, but it was actually pretty direct, and we had blazed our way with more than just dropped relays whenever there was a doubtful intersection.

"As you will. My people can move quickly, but not for long distances. There you have the advantage of us."

* * *

We left the throne room with hundreds of Nomes lining our path, holding their weapons in a very different manner. Clearly the word had spread that there was now an accord between us, and they were expressing their understanding as clearly as they could without their ruler's peculiar advantage.

Once out of the throne room, we made time, pushing as fast as safety would allow. "Father, I don't know if anyone's listening, but we're on our way out."

"Clint!" came Jonah's voice. "Y'all okay?"

"We're fine, and the Nomes are right nice folks, but we've got ourselves a powerful lot of trouble. Tell you about it once we're up."

Jonah said he'd get the family, so I signed off. The next four days were sure going to be interesting, but like in the old Chinese proverb way.

9. Too Little. Too Late?

"We might be 'bout four days from Armageddon, or leastwise that's how it's going to seem around here," I started out.

The whole family was gathered around the table this time, from Evangeline through Helen and Adam on through Grandpa.

"But you said the Nomes isn't our enemies, right, Clint?" Mamma asked anxiously.

"Right, Mamma. But it turns out they've got relatives of their own that there's a feud with. These boys play on a bigger scale than we ever figured, and we Slades have gummed up the works but bad." Jodi and I went on to summarize what Rokhaset had told us. "So unless we can do something to help 'em out, in four days the New Madrid's going to cut loose with a Big One and ain't nothing going to be left standin' for hundreds of miles, least of all the Slade homestead."

The family sat there in silence. It was an awful lot to take in at once. And somehow it sounded a lot more fantastic here, in the comfortable electric lights of the family room, than it had in the blue-white glow of Rokhaset's domain.

"You think they can do that?" Father said finally.

I exchanged glances with Jodi. "It's hard to say, Father. But . . . yes, I guess I have to believe it. What reason would they have to concoct such a silly story if they had a more reasonable motive for wanting the diamonds? We sure didn't show any sign of needing anything that outlandish."

"Well," Evangeline pointed out, "y'all did say they learned how to talk with us from listenin' to the TV and radio. Lord only knows what they think is normal, Clint."

I chuckled despite my worries. "You got a point there, Evvie. Jodi?"

She tossed her dark hair back, then shook her head. "I think Rokhaset's pretty clear on how we think. No way he'd waste his time making up some *bobbe maisse* like that one; he's got more important stuff to do."

"Well, then, we give 'em all the diamonds we have left and hope it's enough." Mamma said.

"Do more than hope, Mamma. Pray. If this doesn't work, those destructive cousins of the Nomes are going to cause the biggest disaster the States have ever seen."

"What can we do, Clint?" Adam demanded.

"Grab our tools and get out there for when they start trying to get the road back. It's easy enough to wreck something, but they don't drive cars, and I'm not sure they'll know what has to be done to really

make it driveable. And shut off the fence. They're not going to come after us now that they know us." I felt my eyes trying to shut. "But me and Jodi have to get some rest."

"Lord, of course you do," Mamma said. "Why, it's been almost twenty-four hours you've been up, and most of that either hiking the caves or facing Mr. Rokhaset, which must have been about as scary as anything!"

"Get up to bed," Father agreed. "Need your strength later."

Jodi and I didn't argue. We knew there wasn't any way we were staying awake much longer. I stumbled up to bed, feeling my feet get heavier with every step. The clothes I peeled off seemed to be made of lead, and I don't really remember hitting the mattress.

* * *

I woke up with a hoarse shout, as the ground quivered underneath the house. "*JODI!*"

"*ACHORBN!*" I heard the Yiddish curse echo all the way down the hall. "*What?* Did they move up the schedule?"

By then, I was out of bed and down the hall, bursting through Jodi's door. The shaking was already over. "No, no, that was just a little one. But Holy Mother, did that scare me!"

"And I was calm, you think?*Oy!*" She was still in the bed, nude from the waist up since the sheets had slid down when she sat up abruptly. The view was on the spectacular side. Her long, curly, lustrous black hair was spilling over her shoulders, framing her chest. Jodi was basically a slender woman, but not everywhere. I was a little transfixed, for a moment. Memories . . .

She looked me up and down, suddenly grinning. "You look as nice as I remember, too,*neshomeleh* . But you might want to put some clothes on before your family decides *we* caused all that shaking and bouncing around."

I looked down. I was nude from the soles of my feet up.

"Oops. Hey, look, I was startled. Gimme a second."

By the time I got back to her room, with my bathrobe on, Jodi was already out of bed and wearing her own robe. In that respect, if nothing else, she certainly didn't fit the stereotype of a Jewish-American Princess. Jodi was always punctual and could get dressed faster than a fireman. How she manages that, I'll never know, because the end result was never sloppy. Every item of clothing was on right, buttons square, zippers zipped, hair brushed, the works. Even the many times I'd watched her do it, I'd never really been able to figure out her secret. She just seemed to pour herself into her clothes, shoes and all—hell, *work boots* and all—and she had the kind of magic hair that, despite its length and thickness, immediately fell into place at the touch of her fingers.

When I walked in, she was muttering something to the effect that the much-vaunted stability of the nation's conservative inner regions compared to decadent Manhattan was obviously a be-damned lie. About a third of the words were in Yiddish so I didn't catch all of it. But the last phrase came through clear as a bell: "—least the *ground* doesn't mug you!"

"C'mon," I chided, "what's the big deal?" I imitated her accent. "The trucks on Fifth shake my apartment harder than that!"

She giggled despite herself. "Okay, wisenheimer, you'll get yours. But only after I get a shower."

We both needed showers badly after the last day. If I hadn't been so dog-tired I'd have showered before going to sleep, but collapsing in a shower isn't the best idea.

So, half an hour later, we met downstairs. A frustrating half hour, since Jodi and I like to take showers together which maybe accounts for why we usually take such long ones. I was finding this *be-proper-before-the-family* routine was getting old really fast. Even the prospect of continental catastrophe in four days wasn't enough to squelch all my normal *I-want-Jodi* enthusiasms.

I guess I muttered something to that effect. "Stop whining, Clint," Jodi instructed me, as we headed for the kitchen. "Look at it this way. Soon enough we'll either be dead or we'll be married and either way you won't have to worry about it any more. Getting laid, I mean. You'll still have to scrub my back—don't think for a moment I'll let you off the hook on that just 'cause you're my husband. Or a corpse."

Her stern and stoic words would have been more effective if she hadn't goosed me as I started through the kitchen door.

Mamma was in the kitchen, looking exhausted herself, but with enough food to feed four of me laid out. "Nice to see both of you up, Clint dear, Jodi. Father and Adam are up to the road, along with Helen and Evangeline. Everyone else just went to bed, which is where I'm going now."

"How's it going up there?"

She gave a tired smile. "Lord, they're devilish looking things, but those rockworms and their keepers can work miracles. We just might get this done in time, Clint. Might could. Best eat up and go see for yourselves."

I gave Mamma a hug, which she returned—a little tighter than usual. She kissed Jodi on the cheek and then headed upstairs. I turned to the table and dug in.

"We slept ten hours, Clint. Down to three and a half days or less now. We have to get into town, get back with the diamonds in less than a day."

I nodded, wolfing down some ham. "I know, I know. Let's get up to the road, see what they're up to."

It wasn't a long hike, and in the sunlight it was less eerie, though no less strange, to see the hurrying pipestem-limbed Nomes and their centipedal assistants. As we came to the edge of the huge scar in the earth, I sucked in my breath. Buttresses of limestone were forming, curving in rippling bands to create supports for the stone that would lie atop them. It was the rockworms which were doing most of the work, chewing up rock in one place and depositing it, changed and molded, in another. I looked around and saw Adam, Father, and Rokhaset under a large spreading oak at the far edge.

We hiked around to them. Looking down, I could see that the rockworms came in differing sizes, from the little ones about two feet long up to one nightmare-inducing monster nearly twenty feet long, with horns and spikes of crystal adorning its head and a mouth that looked more like a rock-crusher than anything living.

"Father, Adam, Rokhaset." I said in greeting.

"It is good to see you again, Clinton Slade, Jodi Goldman," Rokhaset acknowledged us.

"Clint. Jodi. Work's going."

"And fast, too," Adam said. "Their . . . what was the name again, sir?"

"*Seradatho H'a min*, or you might call them simply *seradatho* for short."

"*Seradatho*, yep, they just make the rock as we stand here. Ain't maybe as fast as a full construction crew, but it's plenty fast enough. I think."

"Is it safe for me to go down and look?"

Rokhaset gave a deliberately human shrug. "These *seradatho* will not harm you on purpose, Clint. But some may not notice you immediately, even with their handlers present, so take care."

I slid down into the pit and walked carefully up to one of the medium-sized *seradatho*, which was starting to put some kind of joining stone between some of the buttresses. I examined the resulting stone carefully, then climbed back up. "Sir, that looks just like standard cavern limestone! I swear, if I took that back to a lab I wouldn't be able to tell the difference!"

"And nor should you. We are part of the Earth, Clint. How many times must I say this before you truly understand? Nothing that we do may be apart from her. Except in our own dwellings, it must not even be recognizable as our work, but be fully in harmony with *Nowë*, as much a part of her as we are."

I shook my head, still trying to comprehend it. "But it looks like standard flowstone—deposited over thousands and thousands of years. How the hell can you possibly replicate that?"

"I could attempt to explain it," Rokhaset said, after some consideration, "but in truth, without taking much time indeed to instruct you, all that I could tell you would boil down to saying 'it's magic,' a most unsatisfactory explanation. Suffice to say that this is the way it must be for us."

"So some of those natural-seeming caverns we see around the world are really your doing?"

"Undoubtedly. Sometimes your people intrude upon us by exploring what you think are natural caves and are, instead, our dwelling places. Only in the great cities and central places of the Earth do we build places such as the throne room and its nearby environs."

I rubbed my temples. Running into the Nomes themselves, well, I'd always known they were there. So it was more like just meeting some aliens. This, though, was magic—a kind of magic that affected stuff I really did know a lot about, and direct enough to hit me in the gut. The threat of the *Lisharithada*'s great quake was real enough, but too huge to grasp, really. Seeing stone that, by rights, ought to have taken a million years to form be spat out in seconds by some crawling centipede-thing, that was different.

I remembered, suddenly, the rushing water I'd heard when the great doors to the Throne Room opened. "You don't even use machines like we do. You just channel water and maybe use levers or something to move those doors and other things."

"Correct. In nature, sometimes water does move great boulders, so we can construct a device that takes advantage of that."

"Well, Clint, now we know why we've never seen any traces of these things before in caves around the world."

I nodded to Jodi. "Ayup. We did see traces, more'n likely. Problem is that there was no way to tell the traces from the original stone. Y'all even make stalactites and stalagmites and all the trimmings, right, and make sure the water's there to keep it alive?"

Rokhaset seemed pleased that I'd picked up on the last part. "Exactly right, Clint. I see you have finally penetrated the significance of your original ancestor's find."

"In a cave, water flowing represents life to you just like to us. So you keep your diamonds and other stones in those pools so they stay a part of *Nowë*'s essence, right?"

"Very good. Yes, precisely so."

I noticed Rokhaset was staying carefully in the deepest shadows under the tree, and remembered his prior comments. "Hey, you said your eyes might suffer in the sun. I could get you something that probably will help."

"Indeed?"

"Yeah. I've done some work with multispectral optics, off and on, and you mentioned your eyes get messed up slowly. I'll bet the crystals are being affected by the ultraviolet rays, which you'll never run into underground." I handed him a pair of UV-blocker sunglasses.

He put them on and glanced around with his odd sight. "Extraordinary. There is minor interference from these glasses in how well *Ituran*, but I can tell that the faint pain from the light here is considerably lessened."

"I wasn't sure if the plastic would interfere with your own senses, but the fact that it blocked UV made it worth a try. UV's generally the culprit in most damage sunlight does."

"I believe you are correct in this case. Thank you." Rokhaset glanced into the pit. "I do not suppose you have a few dozen pairs of these?"

I chuckled ruefully. "Nope, and can't get any until we get to town."

"Then let us arrange that as swiftly as possible."

* * *

The next few hours passed quickly. Rokhaset drove his people and their *seradatho* twice as hard, pausing only to listen when we clarified how the terrain would have to run in order to permit the cars to pass. Before our eyes, the landscape healed; it was the only way to describe that incredible sight. Stone and soil literally growing up out of the bowels of the Earth, a foundation of limestone covered by soil, and trees and brush somehow moving in over the scar through careful manipulation of the soil and roots.

Finally, the hillside was solid again. "Now, Clinton Slade, it is time for you to fulfill your part of this bargain."

"I'm on it. C'mon, Jodi, we've got a withdrawal to do up to the bank, and darn little time to do it in."

We've gotta get to town in less than an hour or the bank will close!"

We dashed to the truck and got in. "Strap in tight, Jodi—y'all's in for a hell of a ride!"

Fountaining gravel, we pulled out of the gateway and thundered downhill, plowing over the newly-laid earth and leaving its first set of tire tracks. The new road around the first gash slowed me down some, being as it had to make a sharp curve, but I opened her up again and had all four wheels off the ground at the first drop on the straightaway. We jolted against the harnesses and even with the heavy shocks she nearly bottomed out. "Oy, Clint, slow down! We can't make any withdrawals if we're dead!"

"Ain't no slowin' down, sweetheart. If'n you remember when we drove through last time, takes all of an hour and ten minutes to get to town. And we can't take that long nohow."

"Your accent's getting worse, Clint."

"Yeah, I know. It's 'cause o' th'truck," I said stoutly. "A pickup jest naturally brings out th' inner hillbilly in a man."

Pavement, albeit pretty crappy, was now under the wheels and I opened her up as much as I dared. There's places where you can make over 70, and others where even a nutcase wouldn't go past 30 on those roads, unless he was stone drunk. I drove like a stone-drunk nutcase and Jodi just hung on to the doorframe and said nasty words in Yiddish.

We came screaming down the main street with me riding the brake to get down below the limit as we passed the town line; I think Sheriff McCloskey almost lit off his lights before he saw it was me. I skidded us into a spot in the parking lot and jumped out for the doors, just as I heard the soft but final *click* of the bank door being locked for the day.

"Son of a—" I couldn't quite stop in time to keep from whomping the doors. Arlene Ebsen, the manager, gave me a stern look, but turned around. "Clinton Jefferson Slade, I've known you since you were in diapers, and I know your mamma raised you better'n that!"

"Sorry, Miss Arlene, really sorry, but I've just gotta get into the deposit vault. Please!"

She pursed her lips. "Clint, you know we like the Slades as our customers, but I can't just go openin' and closin' at someone else's convenience."

"*Please*, Miss Arlene, I'm beggin' you. I'm right here on my knees, I mean it." And I was. We just couldn't miss it by this much, we just couldn't!

She rolled her eyes. "Well, Lord, if it's *that* all-fired important . . . just this once. But don't try this again!"

The sound of the door unlocking was like the whole weight of my truck lifting off my back. "Hurry up, y'hear?" Arlene said. "That there vault's on a time lock. Locks itself down in half an hour after closing, less'n someone's in it, but if someone is in it, it screams fit to wake the dead."

"Don't you worry!" I said, racing ahead of her, key already out. "Be gone so fast you'll think I wasn't even here."

Jodi waited back by the doors. After Arlene took my key, matched it with hers and opened the safety deposit box, she marched out of the vault heading for the phone. She was probably going to call Father

to make sure there wasn't some reason I might be trying to make off with the family treasures in secret. It didn't take me long to get out the diamonds, since they weren't loose but stashed in three little bags. I slammed the box shut again, locked it hastily, and hurried out of the vault towards the outside door. Passing Arlene, who was just hanging up with a slightly bemused expression, I said: "Thanks a million, Miss Arlene!"

I took a bit more time on the drive back. It'd be awfully stupid to get us both killed now that we actually had the diamonds Rokhaset needed and weren't racing against a specific deadline. But it wasn't easy, because my foot kept wanting to hammer the gas, and from her expression I think Jodi felt the same way. We were going to be in good time overall, but still, it felt like every second counted. It was getting dark by the time we made it back to the homestead. I parked the truck and jogged to the front door.

I then faced what might have been the oddest sight I'd ever seen in my life: Rokhaset was sitting at Mamma's big table, everyone else eating her cooking and him with slices of some kind of stone on his plate, as though he was no stranger a dinner guest than some new neighbor. Strange, yeah, but I felt a huge swell of pride in my family. Okay, so we Slades had been barbarians to these people, but damned if you could call us barbarians now. I wouldn't bet that one in a thousand families could have a Nome at the table and treat it—him—like proper company.

Rokhaset stood as we entered. "The *H'adamant*—do you have it?"

"Right here. Hope it's still alive, like you call it."

As I put the bags in his hand, he nodded. "I can hear it. Weakened slightly by time away from the heart of *Nowë*, but still there." He fumbled with the bags a bit, examining what was inside; he didn't need to open them. I wasn't an expert in Nome body language, but it seemed to me he slumped a bit.

"My thanks to you for a valiant effort, Clinton Slade," he said finally. "But it is as I feared. There is not enough here—not nearly enough—to provide us with a force to overcome what the *Lisharithada* will have to defend them. We shall do our best, of course; it is our calling and destiny. But we shall never triumph."

I stared at Rokhaset. "No. We can't let it end like that."

"Of course we can't, Clint dear. And we won't," Mamma said tartly. "Mr. Rokhaset, we've come invisibly into your homes and taken your diamonds; it's about time we made it up to you. How do you think a few Slades might change the odds, down there in your little war?"

The High Spirit turned around to face her. "You would fight for us?"

"Well, it's for my family too, isn't it? And it's our fault, as Jodi showed us. Now, I only married into the Slades, but what I was taught was that a Slade admits when he's wrong and fixes it until it's right."

"And that's the God's honest truth," Grandpa said forcefully. "Damn this bum leg! I'd come if I could, but I'd slow y'all down."

"Only a few," Father said. "Not like Nomes; can't live without light, need lots of spares."

"I'm going," I said.

"And so am I." At the reaction of the others, Jodi snorted. "What? You think I'm not tough enough? I've

lived in New York for years, that's more than tough enough to take care of some *shlemiels* who think they can just start an earthquake whenever they want to. I'm tough enough to keep Clint here in line. You just try me."

Debate in this argument wasn't going to last long. We knew we had to field a pretty strong team, but a lot of the family had to stay behind, both because of the limits on equipment and because if we failed, the rest of the family had to stay behind to get everything out of the house and save as much of the homestead as possible when the Big One hit. So it was me, Jodi, Father, and Adam.

Rokhaset nodded slowly. "It may work. Never in all these centuries have your people helped us, and with your ability to use the *H'kuraden* as both weapon and cloak . . . yes, it could be enough. I—"

He froze suddenly. I was puzzled for a moment, then realized that he must be getting news through the same kind of link he had with the *makatdireshkovi*. A few moments later, he looked back at us, and I could tell just by the way he stood that it wasn't good news.

"It appears that the *Lisharithada* want to make sure we are not able to interfere." Rokhaset sat down slowly. "They have deliberately sealed off *Nowëmosdet* between our area and theirs. While we can, especially with the power of *H'adamant*, pass through, they will doubtless have forces waiting there to slow and harass us. There is no way that a *Tennathada* could possibly reach them."

The room that had been optimistic a moment ago now seemed utterly sunk in gloom. After a few moments in silence, Rokhaset forced himself to his feet. "I must take the *H'adamant* to my people. It may not suffice, but I must at least make the attempt, and none of my people can come here to fetch it. It requires quite extraordinary efforts by myself and the *makatdireshkovi* to maintain my communication at all. Others of my people would be crippled in the attempt. Farewell, Clinton Slade, Jodi Goldman, and all of your kin."

Something was nagging at me as he left, but it refused to gel. The door closed.

Grandpa slammed a hand on the table so hard it upset three glasses. "Damnation! So close!"

Mamma sighed. "I suppose we shall have to prepare for the worst now. If only there was another way."

Suddenly it clicked. *Another way!* I raced out the door. "Rokhaset! Wait!"

He turned, a dark shadow with faintly glowing eyes. "What is it, Clint?"

"Listen, some people have had a theory for a while now that most if not all of the caverns in this state, maybe farther, are connected somehow. Would you know if that's true?"

He nodded. "It is true, Clinton Slade, though finding the connections could be difficult for your people, and not all connections are direct. Why?"

"Then we come at them from a different direction, if you can tell us the right route to take! Mammoth Caves, Rokhaset—if there's a route through there, we can hit 'em from behind!"

He stood very still for a moment. "It is possible. Barely possible, Clinton Slade, for the route shall be long even if I can find such a route that you can pass, but . . . it is worth a try. Get out all the information you have on these 'Mammoth Caves' while I deliver the *H'adamant*. I shall return and we will see if, perhaps, there is one last chance for us all."

10. Paging Arne Saknussem . . .

"*Really* don't know about this," I found myself saying for the twentieth time.

Rokhaset waved a hand at me to be quiet, so I shut off the transducer that bounced my voice into his range and turned to Jodi. "I meant Mammoth Caves as an example, I guess. I mean, look how far away it is. You know how long it takes to get through anything except a tourist section of a cave—a lot of the time you wouldn't measure things as miles per hour, but more like hours per mile. Or hours per hundred yards, in really hairy terrain."

Jodi nodded. "But Rokhaset has some idea of what we're able to handle, I'm sure. He's not *narish*. Maybe he knows something we don't and that's why he asked for more maps."

"Maybe. But I think I'd best make sure." I got up and went over to where the High Spirit was standing, seeming to look into thin air, and turned the transducer back on. "Rokhaset—"

"A few more moments, Clinton Slade, and then I will answer your questions."

Rokhaset was actually looking at our maps, which hadn't been easy to arrange. Once more, the fact that *themakatdireshkovi* allowed us to talk as though we both actually understood each other's language had tripped us up. We'd gathered all the info we had on Mammoth and other, more nearby, caves, only to realize—the next day, when he arrived—that Rokhaset could neither see the pictures and diagrams nor read the words on paper. It had taken a couple hours of panicked discussion, and then a few more of hours of jury-rigging by Jodi, to arrive at a solution. But with the help of an old video camera and some low-power broadcast kit-bashing, Jodi had made it possible for Rokhaset to receive images of the books and maps in the same way they had been intercepting transmissions all along. Another hour had been required to help Rokhaset interpret the diagrams in a way analogous to our own so that he could then try to coordinate what he was seeing with what his people knew about the underground world. Now the High Spirit was trying to put together what he knew with what we knew and see if there was, indeed, any chance of us reaching the *Lisharithada*'s domain in time via another route.

A few moments later he turned. "I believe it can be done."

"Are you sure?" I asked. "No offense, sir, but you gotta remember that we're surface people, and makin' our way through underground passages takes time. Hell, that's something like a hundred miles from here. Even topside I'm not sure we could cover that distance on foot, an' that's straight-line distance, which ain't what you're dealin' with underground."

He made a weird sound I interpreted as laughter. "True and more than true, Clinton Slade; and yet it can be done, I think, though it shall be far from easy." He turned to Jodi, who was testing connections on her latest improvisation. "Are you ready, Jodi Goldman?"

"Try it, Rokhaset. If you can duplicate the transmission pattern, we should be set."

Given the manner in which Rokhaset and *themakatdireshkovi* communicated, and the fact that the *makatdireshkovi* received and interpreted TV and radio broadcasts, Jodi had wondered if it could, through Rokhaset, replicate the transmission in the other direction. After some consulting with the semisentient geobiomystical device and his advisors, Rokhaset had announced that it should in fact be possible; if so, he would have an ideal way of communicating the chosen route to us.

For a moment, the TV in the room just showed wavering patterns of static. Then, so suddenly we jumped, a test pattern and sound appeared, just like on any standard broadcast station. Except, of course, this was on one of the channels that shouldn't show anything but dead air.

I swore I could almost see Rokhaset grin. "Ah, so it works. Excellent. Then I can show you and you can record this into your portable computers."

We hooked our laptops up through the RF modulator and checked to make sure the signal was being recorded. "Let 'er rip, Rokhaset."

A map of Kentucky appeared, with purple highlighting the Slade homestead and bright green marking Mammoth Caves. The highlighting was shaped like an octagon instead of a circle, the way we usually do it, but aside from that and Rokhaset's apparent preference for using our colors in painful ways, it looked just like one we would produce.

A bright red dot came into view, looking to be somewhere in Muhlenberg County. "The *Lisharithada* are based here, very nearly halfway between the great cavern complex you call Mammoth Caves and our own homes. You must disrupt their operations here in order to prevent the ritual from being carried out.

"Now, I fully realize the distances involved, and if you indeed had to travel in the normal fashion through ordinary caverns, there would be no way for this to work. However, one of the reasons both we and the *Lisharithada* have remained in this area for so many ages is simply that more remnants of the Old Ways have survived here than in nearly any other part of the world. One of these remnants is a portion of *Nowëmosdet*."

I remembered the word from earlier, but I'd presumed it was just a term for cavern. "What's that?"

"You might call it 'Nowë's Road,' I suppose. In the old days there were many interconnected tunnels, like cities, and passage between them was made easier by a sort of network of canals invested with *Nowë*'s power—the *Nowëmosdet*. Two long segments of it still exist in this area. One connects our area with that of the *Lisharithada*, and this is of course what they have closed off to make it difficult to traverse. The other section was traditionally used only by the *Lisharithada* as it goes in the other direction. It is ironic, in a way."

Jodi and I looked at each other. "What do you mean?"

"One could say that it is the *Nowëmosdet* that is responsible for our current emergency. You will recall that I did not question you as to what 'Mammoth Cave' was; this is because I am all too familiar with that system of caverns, at least in general. While the *Lisharithada* are, as I have described, now very hostile towards your people, the thing that finally pushed them into action is that your people's exploration of the great cave system is fast approaching the point where you might discover *Nowëmosdet*, which would be potentially disastrous even though you could not normally use it as we would. No matter how natural looking, your people would become curious about a straight-line cavern so long and even in design, and would quickly arrive at the *Lisharithada*'s domain. Thus, despite the fact that parts of what you call Mammoth Cave are of historic significance to us, the *Lisharithada* have determined that they will destroy it all to prevent your continued intrusions."

"And just incidentally kill thousands—maybe tens or hundreds of thousands—of us along with it. Nice people."

Rokhaset gave a humming sound that carried the same force and tone as a sigh. "Once they were. In some ways, they are still very much like us. But without *Nowë*'s guidance . . . No matter." The image zoomed in, showing the network of caverns that made up the longest, if not the deepest, cave system known to man, a duplicate of one of the maps we'd shown him. Suddenly, an entirely new network of caverns spread across the map, filling in areas never explored by humans, extending across most of the state and beyond into every area that had stone to support caves—and some, near as I could tell, into areas that normally shouldn't have caves at all.

Rokhaset didn't need to tell us where *Nowë*'s Road was. Even without his highlighting it was sharply obvious, a geometrically perfect line running from near the intersection of Flint and Mammoth's networks directly to the west-northwest almost half the distance to the homestead. It terminated in another tangle of caverns, and then started again on the other side to end somewhere below our feet.

"As you can see," Rokhaset said, "if you can reach *Nowëmosdet* , you will be able to proceed straight to the realm of the *Lisharithada* . Taking into account your size and what I have been able to deduce of your abilities, I here trace the path you must take to reach the Road of *Nowë* ."

We watched as the route started at the Historic Entrance, following the route for the now-defunct Echo River tour through the Rotunda and the Historic Tour route to River Hall before diverting to pick up the River Styx and the Echo River. Then it suddenly jagged off towards the connection to Flint Ridge, which was near the middle of Cascade Hall.

"Wait up there," Jodi said. "Looks like the connection that leads to the Road is more over to the Flint side, Rokhaset. Why come in through Mammoth?"

"Two reasons, Jodi Goldman. Firstly, if I am not mistaken, Mammoth is more open and will permit you to make better time in all likelihood, even if you must approach over a somewhat longer route. Secondly, the approach from the Mammoth direction will make it easier for you to reach the tunnel here, which is unexplored by your people and eventually leads you to *Nowëmosdet* . This tunnel will be found at the very top of the chamber. While maps such as this are terribly inadequate for showing elevation, on the Flint side you would be ascending quite steeply before you even reach the level of this known passage. And then you would have a further difficult climb to reach the critical tunnel."

"Whee. Abandoning the tour in mid-stride. That'll liven up the tour, sure 'nuff."

"Get ourselves banned from the cave too. Oh, well, not much we can do about that, *nu* ? Just remember to have everything packed and move fast. It'd be embarrassing to have the whole state devastated because we were too slow and some well-meaning tourists caught us." She studied the map. "Still, I don't want to be *anudje* , but that stretch of *Nowëmosdet* is like to be forty miles long. And filled with water. What, you think we're fish? We're not doing that in two days, that's for sure."

The High Spirit nodded. "I understand this completely. There is a way to give you the endurance and speed needed. But it may not be entirely safe."

"Give us endurance and speed? How—" I broke off, staring at him. "Are y'all out of your mind? I don't doubt the stuff works on your people, but it's prob'ly pure poison to us! 'Sides, y'all need it, right?"

"You are quick in grasping the idea, Clinton Slade. Yet you are not entirely correct. The elixir, made according to the ancient recipes, is said to have been the same for your people as well as my own. It is born of the power of the world that sustains us both." He shifted his stance slightly. "It is true that the Powers have changed, so there may be some difference in effect, which is why I say there may be some

risk. Yet I sincerely believe it shall produce the requisite effect, and, most importantly, surround you with the aura of one who belongs in the Earth, so that *Nowëmosdet* will accept you and assist you."

"And the fact that you won't have time to make it before we have to leave—which will have to be in very few hours, to be honest—and that y'all need it for your people?"

"If you can be of assistance at all, Clinton Slade, it will be because one of your people, wielding *H'kuraden* and striking from invisibility, will be worth many of my warriors combined. But the true drawback is this: I have but two elixirs at this time, for as you have so correctly noted we shall need far more time to finish making any from your own *H'adamant*. So only two of you may go, and no more."

"That's gonna be me and Jodi, then," I said, before she could say anything.

She looked surprised. Pleased, but surprised. "Hey, look," I continued, shrugging, "I've given up trying to keep you out of it, Jodi. And to be honest, you're probably better at the caving end of things than anyone else here. Ours is a pretty specialized knowledge of how to rob Nomes, not explore caves. That was Winston's gig, more or less, and he's been dead quite a stretch."

"Well, what do you know. Maybe you can be domesticated after all," Jodi said smugly.

Ignoring the gibe, I turned back to Rokhaset. "Okay, let's say we get there. Where, exactly, do we go in this area they obviously control, and what'll we be fighting? How many, what's their weaknesses, that kind of thing. Jodi's done some fencing, as one of your warriors found out, and I'm not too bad in a scrap, but we still probably ain't going to be taking on a whole army at once."

"In the main, their troops will be very much like our own in appearance, but more willing to inflict injury. Still, they have avoided your people over the years, while we have grown used to you. They will be very disoriented by the fact that you cannot be sensed easily, if at all, with *H'kuraden*, and you have advantages of reach and height which, in the caverns they favor, you will be able to exploit."

He fingered the Egyptian beardlike tube on his chin. "Your goal, as I mentioned earlier, is to disrupt their ritual. You must work your way inward along this path from *Nowëmosdet*; in one way this route works in our favor, as the center of their mystic workings is located considerably closer to this branch of *Nowëmosdet*. Once there, you must shatter all crystalline items you see with your iron. This will completely negate the ritual and their power will be broken for many years to come, in which period perhaps we shall, together, find some means of returning sanity to *Nowë*'s realm. It is of course possible that they can overwhelm you if you are slow or unfortunate, but I think you have an excellent chance. The only thing that might stop you . . ." He trailed off, evidently having thought of something quite unpleasant.

"Go on, might as well know the worst."

"The *Lisharithada*, Jodi Goldman, like ourselves, are capable of *wëseraka*—life-shaping, causing the life of the Earth to take the form which best suits our purposes. Alas, in this as in all other things they have turned their power to destruction. They have developed the *seradatho* into efficient creatures of war. Most of these will still pose little greater threat to you than their masters; many of their offensive abilities are designed to deal with our people, not yours. However, if by bad fortune you encounter a *Magon* . . ."

"If we do, how will we know?"

Rokhaset gave one of his eerie laughs. "I assure you, Clinton Slade, you will know. *Aseradatho* *H'a*

magon is more than twice the size of the greatest of the *seradatho* you saw rebuilding the road, and is a being bred purely for destruction. It can strike us *matturan* at its approach, leaving us helpless before it. Even if its powers cannot directly affect you, it is huge, armored, equipped to tear and break and dissolve. Flee if one approaches."

That was a nasty image. "And why shouldn't we expect one?"

"Because they are extremely difficult to breed, and even more difficult to control, given their temperament and peculiar abilities. I do not believe they have more than one or two *Magon*, and they will almost certainly concentrate these major weapons at the area they expect us to attack, not the opposite direction. With any luck whatsoever, you should reach the ritual center and destroy it before they could even decide to redeploy the *Magon*, let alone have it reach you."

I winced. "I don't like trustin' to luck. I'm bringin' everything I can."

"We can't bring too much with us, Clint. That's a long hike, with a war at the end."

"Sure 'nuff, but I ain't goin' to a war unarmed. May not be able to smuggle a rifle past the entrance staff, but might could do some other stuff."

Rokhaset shrugged. "I have seen the power of some of your . . . gadgets, Clinton Slade. But the problem will be to have the chance to bring them to bear. Still, if it does not slow you down, there is no harm in bringing whatever you think might aid you." He reached into a pouch in his woven harness and extracted two octagonal crystal vials and a blue crystal, broken in half. "*Themikhsteri H'adamant*—the diamond elixir. Save it until you arrive at the entrance to *Nowëmosdet*, for we do not know how long it will last for a human, in this age of the world."

Jodi and I took a vial each and stowed them away in side pockets of our packs. Rokhaset then handed Jodi the broken crystal. "Keep this with you; it is attuned to its other half, and with it I can follow your progress and time the arrival of my forces to coincide with yours; perhaps we shall even meet in the domain of the *Lisharithada* and see victory together."

"I sure hope so." I shook his stony hand again, then turned to my fiancée. "C'mon, Jodi. Let's do this thing."

11. Three-Hour Tour

"You sure they'll let us take this stuff in?" Jodi asked.

"F'cryin'—Jodi, stop askin' the same question again every few minutes. I wore a pack the last time I went in, no one said nothing."

"Yeah, yeah, I know, but I'm nervous! Me, okay, I'm not carrying anything all that bad except a couple nasty iron bars, but you—*oy*, if you trip—"

"It's not nitroglycerine, Jodi. It won't blow up without the right trigger. I could carve little doggie statues out of it if I wanted to. No one's gonna search me—unless y'all look so nervous that they think there is somethin' wrong, and then we're in big trouble. I got a permit for my gun, so that shouldn't be a problem. Not that I wanna use either if I don't have to, seein' as how big noises in caverns could lead to cave-ins which would ruin our party right quick."

"Right, right."

Leaving had been hurried. We had to pack everything we could fit into a reasonable space—we couldn't afford to draw too much attention—and picking and choosing while arguing with Grandpa, Mamma, and everyone else about why we were going and no one else hadn't been easy. Easier than the goodbyes, though, since none of us knew if we'd see them again. Even Father had gotten pretty choked up, which doesn't happen, and so that'd set me going, which got Jodi to start in, and I guess pretty much everyone ended up with sniffy noses and red eyes before it was all over and we drove off.

Fortunately for our hoped-for future, Jonah had asked what I was going to do about my car. Given that we were planning on violating federal law in breaking off on our own and all that, it would probably be pretty stupid to leave my truck parked overtime in the lot. Father and Adam would be coming after us about an hour later to pick up the truck and bring it home; if we lived through this, we'd come back home with Rokhaset and the others, rather than suddenly show up back at Mammoth anyway.

Mammoth Caves wasn't hard to find, at least. Major parks get good publicity like signs and all, which I appreciated, as it wasn't going to be likely we'd find anything like that down in the caves. In fact, we'd have to move fast through areas we only knew from tour maps and photos at first. While lagging behind might get us the chance to split off from the tour group at the right point, we didn't dare take the chance that someone might catch us. Put bluntly, if someone *did* try to catch us, Jodi and I would have to stop them instead.

The whole situation was really pretty annoying. If this disaster had happened back around 1991, we'd have been able to get right down to Cascade on the tour, but economics and conservation concerns had put an end to that one. At least one thing was in our favor: the past month or so had been pretty dry and the Green River was low. That meant we'd have dry path to run down for most of it before the splashing started. According to what I could gather, we probably wouldn't hit water much over five or six feet, leastwise not in too many places, which was good; not that me and Jodi couldn't swim, but in hiking clothes with packs, that was a different story.

I ran my finger around my neck; it was getting hot in here, even though I had the air conditioner on. We both had wetsuits underneath the hiking clothes. Any serious caver has them, though I'd only needed mine once. The water in caves at this latitude averages down around 55 degrees, and that's more than cold enough to give you hypothermia right quick.

We pulled into the parking lot, found the entrance and schedules, paid our tickets, then had to sit around for twenty nerve-racking minutes as the next tour prepared for departure. No one questioned our packs, which I thought was a near miracle, given that Jodi looked so jumpy. Maybe they just thought she was claustrophobic or something. Finally, the guide called us together and we all started the long hike—down a path, the two of us trying to hide how hot we were getting now while the guide pointed out the occasional squirrel. About the point when I felt like I was getting set to melt, we started down the stairs through the huge, vegetation-fringed opening that yawned darkly to swallow the staircase and us tourists whole: the Historic Entrance to Mammoth Cave.

Despite our hurry, I had to appreciate the sights. Mammoth is a damn impressive place. The Rotunda, a massive hall, opened up before us, and Colin Blair, the guide, began describing the operation that had taken place in the early 1800s to extract saltpeter for gunpowder from the mines. It seemed a bit ironic to me that the operation began somewhere around the time old Winston had grabbed his first big score from the Nomes. I resisted the temptation to ask how the quakes had affected the cave; the last thing Jodi and I needed was to draw attention to ourselves.

After a monologue that seemed, to my stressed psyche, to be hours long, Blair finally turned and began leading us along through Broadway—only to pause almost immediately to describe the Methodist Church. This was a large cavern with a pulpitlike formation which actually had been used as a church in the past. Jodi and I were slowly permitting others to pass us. Eventually we intended to end up at the very back, fall behind, and hopefully make our getaway without anyone noticing until it was too late to catch us.

"Look at that!" Jodi exclaimed.

As we neared Gothic Avenue, one of the weird phenomena Mammoth was famous for had materialized. Within this giant confluence of caverns, a genuine sheet of clouds had formed and was trailing into the Avenue overhead. I pulled out the camera and took a couple of shots; we might be on our way to save the world, but what the heck.

We continued, past the Giant's Coffin, over the yawning mouths of the Sidesaddle and Bottomless Pits, and then through the maze of the Fat Man's Squeeze. By now we were used to the cavern's impressiveness; it was too thoroughly tamed here to continue to carry the impact, and some of the features we had seen in Rokhaset's domain overshadowed it. Now we were approaching the moment of truth. As we passed through the Great Relief Hall, Jodi and I fell back even farther, finally reaching the very tail end of the group. We lagged to look at some of the features in River Hall, then appeared to head towards the group again as Mr. Blair did the usual glance backwards to make sure all his sheep were following him in the direction of Sparks Avenue. He turned the corner, and we slowed down. No one was looking at us.

Jodi turned and walked quickly towards the pathway that led towards the River Styx. A moment later, still with an eye on the tour group continuing on, so did I. Then we both ran lightly down the path until we were out of sight of River Hall.

"Whew!"

"Shh!" Jodi put a finger to her lips. "We're not nearly out of it yet. Sound carries and they can chase us down fast. Keep moving!"

Move we did, heading farther and farther down. But when we got near Cascade Hall we encountered two things: water, which we expected . . . and voices, which we hadn't.

"Clint? What's going on?"

Belatedly, I remembered one of the National Speleological Society articles I'd come across. "Damn, damn, damn. Must be the NSS team that's helping remove all the old stuff left by the tours over the years. Didn't know they were down here now." I was, like Jodi, whispering to keep from being overheard.

"Well, now what, genius?"

"We go forward, what else?"

Go forward we did. Lights ahead of us showed where the team was working; somewhere quite a ways out in the hall. "Maybe we can make it. We have to angle over that way, through the water. Try not to splash."

Jodi put her foot in, winced as the cold hit her clothes and the wetsuit. "Fun, this isn't. The things I do for love."

"Well, and for the sake of all mankind too."

"To heck with mankind!"

"Shh!"

The water got steadily deeper, until we were both hopping on the bottom with our toes to keep our heads above water. So far, though, no one seemed to have noticed anything. I would've crossed my fingers, but I needed everything I had to keep my balance and keep moving forward. The cold prickled on my hands and neck, but at least the wetsuit had now adjusted and was keeping me from really getting chilled.

Halfway there. In the reflected glow of the lights I could make out the entrance to the tunnel that led to the Flint Ridge cave system. We just might make it!

Just as I thought that, my foot found nothing at all under it and I plunged completely underwater, bouncing back up after having hit a pothole that dropped to eight feet. But that had been enough; my ungraceful entry had made a splash even a deaf man would have had a hard time ignoring.

"What?"

"Who's there?"

"What the hell was that?"

Flashlight beams were probing the darkness and sweeping over us.

"Go, Jodi, move it!" I snapped. "No more point in sneakin'."

"Hey, you! Stop! You can't go in there!"

Some of the NSS team were heading in our direction. I found myself standing a bit higher now—a low ridge of rock was under my feet. Good enough. I reached into the top of my pack, unzipped it. "Y'all just go back to what you were doin'. What we're doin' is our business."

"Look, Jack, you can't come down here! Now both of you get back—*holy shit!*"

His lapse into bad language was probably excusable, as I'd just hauled out an old .45, still nice and dry from inside the sealed pack and the Ziploc I'd put it in. "I said, y'all really do want to just go right back to what y'all were doin' and y'all *sure* don't want to follow me."

"Clint?!" hissed Jodi from behind me. "Are you completely *meshuggeh*?"

"C'mon, man, what's the matter with you? There's nothing worth getting out a gun for here!"

I aimed and fired. The thunder of the Colt was like the voice of the Lord telling Moses to get down off the mountain, and a fountain of white water exploded between the two in the lead; one of them jumped

back and went under for a moment, while the other just froze. "Maybe y'all are right on that, but ask yourselves if there's anything worth getting shot for here."

"Christ, David, let the fucking lunatic go wherever the hell he wants!" said an older man from further back. "The cops can catch 'em when they come out."

The NSS people backed off. I grinned, bowed, and followed Jodi into the Flint Ridge connection.

12. The Road of Nowë

"Ow!"

This had been a pretty standard refrain for the past couple of hours. The passages were often tight, some so filled with water that there were only a few inches of breathing space between the water and solid rock. I don't normally get claustrophobic, but there were a few moments there where I got the willies thinking of the millions of tons of rock overhead, waiting to fall on us.

This time it was Jodi saying the "Ow!" and I looked up at a view that I was unfortunately way too tired to appreciate, as I was crawling right behind her. "You okay?"

"Just another rock in the way of my head."

"Is it opening up ahead?"

"Looks like it. It should be, from the map we have . . . yes, there it is. Flattening out."

"I say we take a break for lunch. No one's chasing us, that's for sure." We'd been going for a long time, and even if the NSS team had decided to try pursuit later—which I doubted very much—they hadn't been prepared for a long-term caving expedition and would've had to give it up a while back.

Jodi nodded, though I could barely make that out, and a few minutes later we emerged into a room large enough to stand in, with some flat spots to sit down. "Whew. That'll be a relief."

"I'm starved," Jodi admitted, shrugging off her pack and turning. "I—oy, Clint, your face!"

I flushed, which probably didn't make me look any better. "Just my dumb feet. Went under again and tried to come up for air a little fast. Which would've been fine if there'd been two feet of air instead of four inches."

"Are you all right? Jeez, you look terrible!"

I didn't really mind Jodi fussing over my face. It probably did look pretty bad, and it actually felt better after she was done cleaning it off, maybe just because it was her doing it. "Thanks, Jodi. Hey, I love you."

That got one of her best smiles. "I love you too, Clint. Hell, you sure know how to show a girl an . . . interesting time."

"We Slades are never boring." I killed the LED-based light I'd been using—sealed, efficient, waterproof—and got out a few candles to light us during the meal. We didn't talk much for a while,

seeing as we were both tuckered out. Finally I put away the sandwich wrappers and drink bottles and put the pack back on. "Not too much farther to go, eh?"

"To the *Lisharithada* ? A long, long way. To *Nowēmosdet* ? A couple more crawls and then we have to make it to the top of a tall, skinny room. After that, we'll be in pure virgin cave for a ways, and then we get to the Road of *Nowē* ."

"Let's do it. Either we're past the worst of it, or we'll find out we're completely screwed. But we'll be done with this stuff in any case."

The "tall, skinny room" was the worst of it. We had to ascend nearly forty feet, some of it chimneying. I had to put in some pitons, just to be sure we wouldn't fall. Finally I reached the top.

Blank rock greeted my gaze.

"Shit! There's nothing here!"

Jodi gave a little sound halfway between a sigh and a groan. "There has to be something!"

I shook my head, raised the light higher. Nothing, nothing . . .

Wait. That shadow up on the side didn't seem to move much.

What looked like a shadow was a dark, narrow opening that took us another five minutes to reach. We finally wiggled into it, crawling down a tunnel that Jodi said reminded her of the Gun Barrel in Knox Caverns for about fifty yards. This dropped out into an almost perfectly circular cavern with completely bare walls, with the large scalloping of slow-running water showing on the limestone. At this point I pulled out the laptop and checked the map, because there were three exits from this circular cave. Taking the leftmost one, we entered a chimney that sloped downward and, with water trickling constantly, was utterly treacherous. I backed up, with my white face reflected on the nearby rock, to hammer in several pitons to secure our descent. There was no way we could've made that descent alive otherwise, and I'd been lucky I could even back up when I did.

Fifty feet or more down we finally hit a sloping floor and were able to relax a bit. This tunnel had a small stream running along one side in a channel about three feet deep, and as the rest of the tunnel got lower we started wading through the stream for extra headroom. After a while this degenerated to our having to wriggle through pretty tight, mostly water-filled spaces; believe me, ordinary claustrophobia is nothing compared to the fear you have to fight back when you're hundreds of feet under solid rock, possibly about to get stuck in a water-filled passageway miles from any help. Without warning, I rounded a corner—it was my turn to lead—and dropped over the edge of a small waterfall, plunging into an icy pond over nine feet deep. I heard Jodi splash down about the time I came up and felt the water of that impact douse me again. Fortunately our sealed lights still worked, so we were able to flounder our way to mostly dry rock and get our bearings.

"We've got a ways to go." I said wearily.

Jodi flopped down beside me. "Well, I'm beat. If we don't rest, it won't matter if we get there or not. Time for dinner and some rest."

I couldn't disagree with that, so we took the time, and gave ourselves a few hours' rest. When the electronic whine of the alarm went off, I painfully dragged myself upright, seeing Jodi do the same. My

face ached terribly, and from Jodi's expression I knew it must actually look worse now than it had before; bruising often works that way. "Once more unto the breach."

We passed through several caves filled with subtle ornamentation of flowstone and stalactites, waded a shallow underground lake with green water as clear as glass, climbed a twenty-foot chimney, followed a set of narrow crawlways for a long distance, then scrambled up a huge dome and wriggled through a short passage into a winding tunnel just far enough across for us to walk single-file.

With a startling suddenness, the tunnel opened onto a wide, flat shoreline of a watercourse that extended, ruler-straight, as far as our lights could see. *Nowēmosdet* was huge—a great semicircular hallway nearly two hundred feet wide, with even, flat banks about thirty feet wide on either side of the glassy-smooth emerald-glinting water. It felt slightly warmer here, and there was a hint of air moving.

We stared at it for long minutes, our breathing steadying after all the effort we'd gone through. Then I reached into the pocket of my pack. "Guess it's time."

Jodi got out her vial.

We struggled a bit with figuring out just how they opened, but eventually realized they had to be squeezed and then twisted before pulling off. That over, we stared at each other for a moment. Then I shrugged and tossed the elixir down my throat in one swallow.

I immediately regretted that. Not that it felt bad—it was in fact the opposite. The taste of *mikhsteri H'adamant* was like nothing I'd ever tried before, and I tipped the vial back again, letting the last drop of it linger on my tongue. Sweet, cool, sharp, subtle, cold and warm at the same time . . .

"Clint . . ." Jodi's voice held something close to awe. "Your face!"

I touched my face. I could literally feel the scabs falling away, leaving new skin where there had been raw wounds minutes ago. More than that, I felt exhaustion falling away from me as well, as though I had just put down a hundred-pound backpack. I felt I could jump across that entire giant reflecting pool. "Yeee—*ha!* Try it, Jodi, you'll love it! Shoot, now I'll have to see if Rokhaset's got any other goodies like this in his recipes!"

Jodi swallowed her elixir, and now I got to gape. You could literally see the change, the head lifting, eyes shedding their tiredness, cuts and scrapes fading away like bad dreams. Jodi looked more gorgeously alive than she'd ever looked before, worry lines smoothed away, uncertainty lifted. I knew that I must look the same way—confident, happy, and ready for anything.

"*Oy!* I'd start a war to get more of this stuff. I'm surprised you Slades didn't get yourselves killed."

I couldn't help but grin, and stepped forward. We hugged, kissed, then I laughed and spun her around with another whoop. "*Allright!* Jodi, let's see what the Road is like!" I jumped off the ledge towards the water two feet below.

And I didn't sink into the water. It supported me, Jodi goggling wide-eyed while I stared back at her. Then, as though a decision had been made, I began to descend, but as though it were transparent quicksand. The feeling was something entirely different, though.

If you were lucky, you had a wonderful, loving mother who was never too busy for you, who always knew the right thing to say whenever you were sad, or scared, or hurt. If you weren't, you probably

wished you did. And if you had a mother like that, you might remember a morning or two when you, as a little child, were scared or lonely and crawled into bed when mommy was sleeping. And mommy, even though still asleep, somehow knew you were there, and her arm reached sleepily out and hugged you close, and you knew everything was completely and utterly right with the world, and nothing could hurt you as long as she was there.

That was what *Nowëmosdet* was like. The presence here slept . . . yet She knew us, and somehow we knew Her, and Her Road was ready for us.

Jodi stood next to me in the water, both of us standing on the bottom, our heads just above the surface, and once more we just stared at each other. Then we took a step forward.

It was as though there was no water there at all—except that we seemed to be somehow supported by it. Walking together, we seemed not to walk really, but to float, carried onward by our intent, not by muscles. We didn't really move very fast at all, but it was without effort. No matter how far we traveled this way, we sensed we would arrive completely rested and ready. Even more odd . . . I didn't feel wet. The dirt had washed from us both, yet otherwise we seemed as dry as if we were walking on the bank.

"Rokhaset, you've steered us right so far," I muttered under my breath. "Let's hope this last leg works out the way you planned it too."

We continued on, through the darkness, towards the enemies we had never met . . . yet.

13. Stone and Steel

"I just keep noticing weirder and weirder things."

"What is it this time, Clint?"

"Ripples. We're not leaving any."

Jodi looked down, then behind us. "You're right. No wake. Like we're not even here."

I thought a moment. "No, more like we're just a part of the water. The Road is taking us along just like we were part of the flow. Unless we hit something to cause the flow of the water to be upset, there won't be ripples."

"That makes . . . hold it."

"What?"

Jodi's forehead furrowed as she stared ahead. "The echoes. Something's different. I think we might be finally getting to the end."

I glanced at my watch and received a bit of a shock. We'd been following *Nowëmosdet* for nearly ten hours—which seemed to be no more than fifteen minutes or so to me. "I guess so!"

"Shh. They can't hear most of our talk, but some of the high harmonics might get through."

Ahead, the darkness seemed to thicken, then lighten up into the yellow-gray of limestone. The water of

Nowē's Road continued on into the wall, through a passage completely filled with water, but we felt the impetus which had carried us along weakening. The water still supported us, but clearly this was the end of the road.

On the right-hand side the walkway opened up into a huge tunnel, and on either side of the tunnel—*Lisharithada*.

They looked very much like the Nomes, but as I studied them, I could see some differences. The crystal crests which served as hair grew in a subtly three-ridged pattern. Their faces were slightly broader and more sharply pointed towards the chin. And they wore stony armor and carried weapons in a much more . . . comfortable fashion than the *Nowēthada* .

I glanced at Jodi, who nodded. We turned towards the bank.

Even as we made the decision, the Road sensed it. We rose up out of the water and found ourselves stepping easily to the stone above, gripping the iron bars which seemed strangely light now.

As we had hoped, the *Lisharithada* seemed as oblivious to our presence as the Nomes had been when first we met. Rokhaset's people had learned ways of sensing us to some extent—maybe, if by no other way, by paying careful attention to pockets of "air" that seemed even emptier than usual—but the *Lisharithada* apparently didn't have knowledge of, or use, such tricks. Anyway, why would they? No human being could possibly come down this far without them knowing it.

Neither Jodi nor I saw any point in conflict when it wasn't needed. Before we passed between them, though, Jodi caught my arm and pulled me back up the walkway some distance. "Check our route."

I nodded, and we got out the portable. Rokhaset's map glowed up at us from the screen. The *Lisharithada* city was large and complex. I carefully compared the version on the screen with the printed version and made a couple annotations to be sure I could tell which ones were supposed to be above the others, tracing the route in highlighter and checking to make sure Jodi agreed with me. Then I shut the machine down again. While so far there was no sign we were being sensed, given how little we knew about their senses I didn't want to take any chances with having more electronic equipment running near them than I had to.

We passed between the two guards, maximizing the distance between us by entering the large corridor directly in the center. After that, though, we moved to one side, figuring that, like most people, the *Lisharithada* wouldn't generally crowd into the side of the corridor unless they had to and therefore wouldn't be likely to bump us.

As we moved onward, this became a very real concern. The tunnel leading from the Road was empty, but soon it joined with another, and there were many of the city's natives using it. The *Lisharithada* were a busy people. Maybe preparing for this destructive ritual demanded a hell of a lot of work, or maybe they just liked to keep busy, but whatever it was, there were dozens—hundreds—of them in the main corridors. It would have been funny if it weren't so deadly serious—watching how we contorted, jumped, and twisted keeping out of the way of hurrying contingents of rock people. Once one of them passed within inches of me and stumbled, barely catching itself before hitting the ground. Its companion helped it up. "*Pokil mondu ku?*"

The fallen one responded with a quick spurt of language that I couldn't catch, but I did get the word *matturan* , which made me hustle out of there. Clearly he'd gone momentarily blind near me, and that was something we definitely didn't want anyone thinking about too much.

Jodi was more worried about their *seradatho*. Some of the creatures were clearly more formidably designed than those of the *Nowëthada*—guard dogs, so to speak, rather than work dogs. It seemed that these *seradatho* also didn't have any clue we were there, but I made a point of tracking their whereabouts more closely as we moved farther inwards.

"So far, so good." I muttered. "We're about halfway there. Maybe we can make it all the way into their inner sanctum without them catching on. Then we can trash the equipment and get the hell out of Dodge."

Jodi shook her head. "I wouldn't bet on it."

Another great cavern opened up before us, this one similar to the one we had seen back in the Nome's area—clearly a living or gathering place, with lots of traffic. It might have been my imagination, but I thought I could see some of the patterns in their movements and the shapes of the natural-stone areas that served them as . . . what, shop stands? Houses, without roofs because of the lack of weather? Offices?

"Y'know, I think I'm seeing better."

"You only noticed already? I'm like to be seeing twice as far as I usually can."

"I just hope this stuff doesn't wear out too soon."

We came into sight of the next intersection. "Aw, shit."

The free ride had evidently come to a halt. Probably the next area belonged to their ruling class. Whatever the reason, this one had a door on it, and the door was guarded by three *Lisharithada*, who were being given a wide berth by the others. Even if the direction they were going would make it sensible to cut close by the doors, the others—civilians, I supposed—would detour quite a distance around instead.

"Can you see how to open the damn thing?"

Jodi and I studied the area for a few minutes. Then she pointed; after a moment, I nodded. Like their less warlike brethren, the *Lisharithada* tried to use natural approaches even to technological problems. There were, barely visible from where we stood, a pair of channels in the stone floor where water could run down and into holes in the wall. The channels actually connected with each other, but there was a stone that sat—perfectly fitted—in the connection area, preventing water from the one channel from reaching the other. Just moving that stone would divert the water from the first channel to the second, presumably causing something to fill with water and lever the door aside.

There was no way we could avoid causing some kind of stir here, but maybe we could still avoid combat. Moving carefully around the guards, I positioned myself near the door, while Jodi walked over and considered the fitted stone. I saw her shrug, then stick the claw end of her crowbar in and lever the stone out. To my surprise, she then picked the stone up and carried it over, joining me by the door. Jodi's a big woman, and because of her very active lifestyle she's a lot stronger than her slender build would lead you to think. Still, I wouldn't have thought she could handle that large a stone so readily.

I didn't give it much thought, however, because I was watching to see how the *Lisharithada* would react. As far as I could tell, we weren't so much invisible as just effectively a blind spot in their field of vision. Humans have a blind spot in each eye, but we virtually never notice them. Our brains cover up their existence, filling in the area with appropriately non-distracting "stuff" so we perceive our field of view

as being complete and uninterrupted even though there's a significant hole in it. Apparently the same phenomenon applied here. They simply weren't *taware* that anything was happening where we were.

"Why didn't you just move it to the 'open' position?"

"Because I could just see the comedy routine if I did! They can't see me, right? So they see the water going, come over to check it out, I back away so they don't go blind and realize what's up, they push it back in place, door doesn't finish opening, I schlep back over and push the rock: lather, rinse, repeat."

By now the guards had noticed the water flow had shifted and were gathering around the valve area. I couldn't understand the words, but the tones were so very familiar I could almost interpret it anyway.

What the heck's going on? Hey, where's the damn rock? Who's the joker? Dammit, that's going to stick the door open!

And open was exactly what the door was doing, rising up smoothly on its unseen lever arm which was now weighted down by the water pouring into some hidden bucket. I had to concede Jodi had done the right thing. Given how ponderously slow these doors opened, we'd never have gotten it open wide enough to get through without Jodi's tactic, at least not without ending up having to lay the guards out. "Good call, Jodi."

Jodi looked smug. She does "smug" awfully well, too; it's probably her worst major character flaw.

The new tunnel branched out to left and right; we took the right-hand branch, which was narrower than the tunnels we'd been in earlier. Jodi stowed away the crowbar and got the longer, straighter rod of steel that she'd made up for a weapon—like a blunt sword with a wooden and leather-wrapped handle. There weren't quite as many *Lisharithada* in this corridor as there had been in the other, but it was enough smaller that neither of us had much hope we could continue undetected for very long. We were getting close to the ritual area, though. Just maybe we'd get away with it.

Suddenly a mob of fifteen of them came charging down towards us, weapons out.

I was in the lead. They were coming so fast I figured I could hurdle the first line of them and sow confusion in the middle, so I jumped just as they got to me.

I damn near cracked my head open on the cavern roof, which wasn't less than twenty feet up. I was so completely stunned that I landed like a sack of potatoes. I had to be helped up by Jodi, who had followed my example but kept her head a bit more.

I looked back; we had leapt completely over the entire troop, which was continuing on its headlong charge. Whatever they were after, it wasn't us. "Son of a . . . How the hell did we *do* that?!"

"Well, isn't it obvious, genius? That *H'adamant* stuff works! How else do you think I could have hauled that bloody great stone. What? Do I look like a lady weightlifter?"

The look of chagrin combined with outrage on Jodi's face was comical, even under the circumstances. With her elegant, fine-boned features, she looks about as far removed from "lady weightlifter" as possible.

But I didn't dare even crack a smile. "This could take some getting used to," I said gruffly. "We'd better be careful about really pushing ourselves."

"Wonder where those guys were going?"

I thought about it. "Only one real possibility, I'd guess: Rokhaset's kept his word and followed our timing. They're drawing off the *Lisharithada*'s forces. Who else could be down here that they'd be chasing with armed men?"

"Point. Unless they have really tough mice."

The hallway curved around a bit farther to the right. As we rounded the corner, we could see our luck had just run out.

The next room—a pretty darn large one, decorated with flowstone and helictites in one corner—was filled with *Lisharithada*, all armed, ready for the Nomes to try their assault. There was no way we could cross that room without fighting. Even with the superhuman strength the *H'adamant* elixir seemed to have conferred on us, we couldn't even jump halfway across, and we'd get way too close to a lot of them on the way for them to ignore it.

"This is it, Jodi."

She took a firm grip on the handle of her weapon. "You know, we don't actually have any proof that these are the bad guys."

"What?"

"Rokhaset seems nice and all, but he could still be handing us a line. Or even just turning things around. His people could be the ones making the quakes, and these guys the poor schmucks he's setting up for the fall."

I stared at her with my mouth open for a moment. "Well, goddamnit, girl, y'all chose a hell of a time t' come up with that theory!"

She shook her head. "I don't really believe it myself, Clint . . . but, *oy vey*, we're here about to declare war on a bunch of people we've never met, all on the say-so of someone we just met day before yesterday."

I guess I wouldn't have been so aggravated if I didn't share her worry, somewhere deep down. We really didn't have any proof of what Rokhaset said, and with the *makatdireshkovi*'s demonstrated ability to interpret and help Rokhaset express our language like a native-born actor . . .

"So what th' hell do y'all want to do? Sorry, Jodi, but—damnation! Ain't we kind of committed now?"

We dodged a couple runners coming from the other direction. Jodi bit her lip. "I guess we are. I just . . . it hit me, when we were about to walk in and start beating up these poor *schlemiels* who can't even see us."

We'd been so focused on our dilemma that we'd only subconsciously noted the increase in the gabbling language around us. Now it reached a crescendo that broke through our indecision as, suddenly, another detachment of *Lisharithada* burst out of the room in front of us.

There was no chance to dodge or jump. They plowed straight into Jodi and me, knocking us down

before they tumbled to the ground themselves in blinded consternation. Scrambling to my feet, I swung my steel at the next *Lisharithada* soldier with all my strength.

The bar bent on impact as though it'd been a willow wand instead of a half-inch of spring steel, picked up the rock-man and flung him a full ten feet backward. A crumpled, oozing line showed where the steel had caught him, as my weapon rebounded into straightness again. Jodi's matching blow knocked over her opponent and the two behind him. Crystal-edged swords chopped blindly at us. I parried one so hard it shattered, raining stone fragments everywhere, but a second one, swung flat and hard, got through my guard.

I staggered sideways, my side on fire. "That hurt!" I snarled, and backhanded the *Lisharithada* who'd hit me hard enough to send him tumbling head over heels. They were trying to crowd in and find us, and I figured giving them that advantage would be bad. "Jodi—into the big cave!"

"Got you!"

We could maneuver better in there, even though there were more opponents. With our height, reach, and effective invisibility—not to mention our magnified strength—our weapons started to take an awful toll. Every swing I made put one of the enemy down—broken legs, shattered chests, crushed skull or arms—and Jodi matched me swing for swing. Worse for them, even when they hit us it didn't smash our bones or cut our limbs off. The blows stung, sometimes really hurt, and I could feel bruises, but nothing at all like the damage they ought to be doing. Two of their guard-*seradathos* scuttled towards me, met the steel coming the other way and flew twisting through the air, shedding pieces as they went.

There was something utterly macabre and horrid about it all. These rock-men were desperately fighting something they couldn't see, something even stronger and tougher than they were—that killed and maimed them, broke their weapons, moved like lightning, and smashed aside any defense. I felt a little sick as we continued to fight our way towards the far side of the room, where just one door stood between us and the ritual room Rokhaset had told us we would find. Even if we were fighting enemies of our people, this was their home, and we were the invaders, slaughtering them without warning, without even showing them the faces of their adversaries. It was as if Jodi and I were the monsters in some kind of underground legend—the rock-people's equivalent of trolls or werewolves.

Still, sheer numbers count for an awful lot. For every one I took down, I could see another one running forward—sometimes two. And while one blow from their weapons wasn't enough to take us down—or even five—in the end you can beat a man to death with a rolled-up newspaper if you hit him often enough.

Two more *Lisharithada* went down, then three of them jumped me and I staggered. A fourth, knocked reeling by Jodi, fell down and tripped me. The three on top were blind, but now they could feel someone under them. They were punching and kicking for all they were worth, their shrieks carrying terror and revulsion along with anger.

"*Clint!*" I heard Jodi scream, and a barrage of impacts erupted from her direction. Two of the ones on me suddenly departed involuntarily, and the third let go and backed off. I got painfully to my feet and smacked a *seradatho* into its handlers.

Jodi's eyes held a desperation I'd never seen before. "We're not going to make it, *tei-yerinkeh* ." She almost never used that word; it meant "sweetheart" or "dearest one," but it was a private thing, a silly little private word we used only alone together.

I looked over my shoulder. We weren't even halfway across the room, and in the dimming light—half the LEDs on our lights were broken now—it looked like even more *Lisharithada* were coming in to reinforce the others. She was probably right . . . The ring of *Lisharithada* that had drawn away for a moment was gathering itself for another lunge.

I shook my head. "Maybe, but damn-all if I'm givin' up." I hit the transducer switch. "YEEE-HA! C'mon, then, let's see if y'all can take a Slade!"

And in the stunned moment as the *Lisharithada* heard our voices for the first time, another voice boomed out from across the great cavern:

"Well said and well met again, Clinton Slade!"

14. The Sound of Music

No sound had ever been so welcome as that deep, reassuring voice. "Rokhaset! You made it!" Jodi shouted triumphantly, taking three *Lisharithada* out with the accompanying swing.

"Indeed, Jodi Goldman." I could now make out that at least part of what I'd taken for reinforcements of the *Lisharithada* were Rokhaset's assault forces, driving towards us like a wedge against the increasingly desperate *Lisharithada*. "And it gives me great joy to see that not only have you arrived, but that also the *mikhsteri H'adamant* has worked surpassingly well on you."

"OW!" I shoved the one that had just hit me out of the way. "Yeah, and without it we'd have been dead before we got here. Great stuff."

The enemy were now in serious disarray. They couldn't decide whether the two invisible slayers or the larger number of *Nowëthada* were the biggest threat, and that made them hesitate at the wrong time. Jodi and I turned and started plowing our way towards the door on the far side, knowing that Rokhaset and his troops were backing us up and if the ones behind us tried to drag us down, he'd carve right through them and get 'em off our backs.

Now there wasn't any mistaking the panic in the voices of the *Lisharithada*. The situation had gone from bad to impossible. There just weren't enough of them left to deal with Rokhaset's forces on top of the unknown, invisible killers that had devastated their guarding force. Seeing how Rokhaset and his people proceeded onward—steadily, but nowhere near as fast or efficient as our devastating attack—it was pretty clear that he'd told the truth about just how little chance he and his people had stood alone. That, to me, confirmed we'd chosen right to take his word on this mission. There wasn't any way he'd expected events to take the turn they had, but he'd clearly planned on this assault anyway. Plus, his people had had several chances to do us in at different points, and hadn't.

Suddenly, the *Lisharithada* morale broke. The ones in front of us threw down their weapons and sprang aside, running for the exits—there were, I could see, three ways out of here besides the sealed door we were headed for. And even the ones behind us and around Rokhaset's people were now fleeing, stampeding out the doors with desperate speed.

"Well, I think they've decided that's enough."

Rokhaset joined us. His posture had not relaxed. "They do not usually retreat even when being beaten."

"And how often have you had invisible, superhuman, apparently invincible assistance? C'mon, Rokhaset, everyone has a breaking point."

"True enough, Clinton Slade. I find your presence unnerving, and you are my ally. Perhaps indeed it is that invisible assistance which overwhelms their courage."

"Last door. I hope we can get it open from this side."

Rokhaset nodded deliberately. "I assure you it can be opened, especially by those assembled here. Be prepared; the interior guard will have been alerted, and they will fight to the end."

"Let 'er rip. Let's blow this joint and see if we can get home in one piece."

The Nomes gathered around the door, poking at the mechanism, which was apparently jammed. After a jabbering conference, Rokhaset turned back to us. "The door is not entirely disabled. They did not have the time to do so, and those inside cannot do so without considerable effort. Stand by; we shall open the door—now!"

Something broke inside the wall—we could hear it and feel the vibration through the soles of our boots—and the door ground its way upwards. The doorway to our destination was open.

Stepping forward, Jodi and I peered in. It was a low but tremendously wide room, maybe ten feet high but with regular buttress columns supporting a span so large that our weakened lights couldn't reach the other side, even with the increased sensitivity of our eyes. At regular intervals around the room were crystalline shapes of bizarre design. The nearest one was a sort of curved double-trumpet shape rising from one side of a six-foot-high dais, thirty feet across, carved in a spiral fashion with rippled indentations along it. I started for it, raising my bar and watching for the interior guard.

No one came forward, no attackers, nothing. "Rokhaset? Where's the welcome wagon?"

"I admit my bewilderment, Clinton Slade. I cannot—"

But at that moment, the dais began to uncurl. The crystalline shape sat at the crest of a head fully five feet long, armed with black-shining spines, cutting blades of blue stone, a crushing maw, and grasping talons. It gave voice to a grinding screech like the uncoiled hinges of Hell and turned towards us.

"*Magon!*" Rokhaset gasped. His shocked cry was echoed by his fellows, all of whom, the Nome King included, began backing away as fast as they could.

"Figures." I stared at the monstrous thing as it continued to uncoil. "They brought one here as a last-ditch defense."

The *Magon* shrieked again, and a steady humming began to emanate from it as it stalked towards us on many sets of legs.

"*Matturan!*" I heard Rokhaset shout. "Run, all of you, for we cannot fight if we cannot see!"

"Well, I can see perfectly—what the . . . *YOW!*"

My steel weapon had brushed my hand; that fleeting contact had burned me.

"*Gevalt!*" Jodi cursed.

The zipper on my wetsuit was heating up. If you have never experienced the sensation of a rapidly-heating zipper, my advice is simple: avoid it at all costs.

Jodi grabbed me and dragged me backward, away, running as fast as we could from the *Magon*. We both tore the earphones from our heads, as they were starting to burn our ears.

"The damn thing's radiating electromagnetic waves!" Jodi said disbelievingly. "That's why it makes the Nomes blind—it's overloading their senses on some level. But for us, it's inducing eddy currents and heating every bit of metal on us!"

"Damn! Damn, damn, *damn*! No wonder the *Lisharithada* bugged out. They knew this thing was waiting back there as a last-ditch weapon." We stopped for a breather on the far side of the cavern we'd been fighting in for so long. Two of the exits had been closed off, but one was still open. That gave me an idea.

"Hey, Rokhaset! Our real goal's to get inside that room and break up all the crystal things, right?"

"Correct."

"Well, that being the case, why don't we have one group of us keep the thing chasin' us, and the other group runs inside? That *Magon* thing sure doesn't look up to opening doors, so if we can all get inside ahead of it and close the door, we're set."

"A worthy plan," Rokhaset said after a pause.

"Why isn't Rokhaset answering?" Jodi demanded. "Is he okay?"

"He is answering. I guess my electronics survived, but yours fried."

"Some of them, anyway. Lights and all are still working."

I glanced in the direction we'd come from. Nothing was moving in the range of the lights. "Speaking of that, I'm swapping out for the spare lights and new batteries. I can't see the thing at all."

That did the trick nicely, but I didn't like what I saw. "Shoot. The darn thing's stopped with its head right in the doorway. Rokhaset, y'all said these things were hard to control, but looks to me like this one understands 'guard dog' just fine."

Jodi gazed at it speculatively. "Wonder what its range is?"

"We should probably find out. Though to be honest I dunno what we're going to do. My pistol's just a popgun to something like that, and no way I'm gonna get close enough to hit it with the explosives—hell, I was lucky the detonators and my pistol rounds didn't go off when it started doing its metal-heating trick."

"Well, I don't have any explosives on me, and most of my stuff that's going to fry is already toasted." Jodi dashed forward before I could stop her.

The *Magon* raised its head a bit as she got closer, and that eerie, high-pitched, monotonous hum began

again. Jodi snatched up her weapon, which was about thirty feet from the thing, and ran back, juggling it like a hot potato until she got back to me and dropped it on the floor to cool.

"Oy! Looks like it's got a range around seventy-five feet. At least, it didn't seem to be cooling off until I got out about that far. You didn't feel anything back here, did you?"

I shook my head. "Nothing. Though I'd bet the range for just blinding our Nome friends is much longer."

"You are correct, Clinton Slade. We dare not get even as close as you are now to the *Magon*. Although . . . Perhaps, if we were to all rush it at once, we might still defeat it. There are twelve of us all told, plus the two of you."

"No, you're outta your mind, Rokhaset! That thing's even bigger'n you said; I think I eyeballed it at something close on eighty feet long. It'd kick our asses even if y'all weren't blind, which you will be." I studied the thing from our current distance, about a hundred and fifty feet away. "Jodi, do you want to try that run again and see if you can get my weapon too?"

She looked at me. "You've got something else in mind, haven't you?"

"Maybe. More a matter of I need to get a better look at something." I moved forward until I was about a hundred feet away from the thing.

"Here goes nothing." Jodi sprinted back in. The grotesque head rose, the humming started up again, and Jodi gave vent to Yiddish curses as her clothing started to heat up. She had to get within twenty feet of the *Magon* to get my weapon, and at her closest approach the thing stirred uneasily, almost began to move forward, jaws and grinder working.

But I'd noticed something else. I focused my flashlight squarely on the crystalline growth on the *Magon*'s forehead as Jodi sprinted back. Sure enough, the light looked vaguely defocused until she got far enough out and the humming sound faded, and then the reflection was as sharp as could be.

"I think I've found its transmission antenna."

"The things I do for love! What? Where?"

"That crystal thing on its head. That humming noise coincides with its vibration." I shook my head. "I suppose I could try to shoot the thing off, but it's a sucky target in this light and at this distance."

Jodi stared at it with a look of revelation that startled me.

"Jodi? Sweetheart, what is it?"

"Clint, tell me: doesn't that thing look almost exactly like a couple of wineglasses from here?"

I looked. "Well, yeah, it does. So?"

"I'd put that hum right up around my high B."

My mouth dropped open and stayed that way. "You can't be serious!"

"I'll bet you twenty bucks it'll work."

"You're nuts! You'd need to get right up to it—twenty, thirty feet at the outside—and it's looking kinda antsy already."

"So, like you have a better idea, Mr. Genius?"

I thought about it. "No," I finally muttered. "But hold on a second. I'd better get stuff ready, in case this crazy idea of yours does work."

I pulled stuff from the pack, sorted it out, fitted things together, checked the connections. "Okay." I looked over at the monstrous creature and turned, grabbing Jodi tight. "You be damn careful, y'hear? I ain't lookin' to see you eaten by some rockworm."

The slight quiver in her voice answered my concern. "Hey, don't worry, it's no big deal. You should see the rats on a New York subway."

"*I* have seen the rats on a New York subway. They aren't anywhere near as bad as—"

She clucked her tongue disparagingly. "That was just Manhattan, you tourist. I'm talking about Queens. Now stop distracting me."

She took a deep breath and hummed to herself for a few moments, running scales up and down, loosening her throat and lungs so they could deliver when needed. As she did so, she started stripping off all the extraneous metal. Her backpack hit the floor as she started a run of *do-re-mi* and her shirt and pants (with metal rivets) joined it a few moments later as she ran back down the scale, followed by the wetsuit.

Being human—okay, male human—I could at least appreciate the view, which was magnificent even if stopping *just* short of being indecent. Jodi's sports bra and panties had no metal in them, so she left them on. Still, there was a definite exotic charm in the setting, especially with the waiting monster in the background. Any fantasy illustrator in the world would have been in seventh heaven.

Jodi stood still for a moment, muscles just a bit too tense, then took a deep breath and started walking forward.

As before, once she got within seventy feet, the creature raised its head and started humming. But this time Jodi wasn't wearing anything metal to be affected. She kept moving forward slowly, forty feet, thirty, twenty-five, twenty . . .

At twenty feet, the *Magon* hissed and moved slightly. Jodi stopped and opened her mouth. A pure note issued forth, one matching the eerie hum precisely in pitch. The hum instantly sounded louder than ever, and Jodi's voice responded, increasing volume steadily.

The *Magon* must have encountered caverns in which it had heard feedback. The hum started to fade for a moment as it stopped generation. But nothing had ever tried this trick on it before; as Jodi made a step forward, its instincts forced it to begin the defensive signal generation again.

Jodi's face was as set as a marble statue, giving out an unending, unwavering tone that I knew could not be sustained much longer, a crescendo of echoing sound that was answered in the swiftly-building hum that she was trying to drive out of control. The *Magon* moved jerkily, trying to shake its head and drive away an indescribable sensation, starting a lunge forward but drawing back as the movement increased

the resonance. Even from this distance I saw Jodi's face changing color slightly, reddening from the effort of wringing the last dregs of air from her lungs to maintain the feedback cycle. She was running out of air, it wasn't going to work—

And then the sound of her own pure voice echoed out from behind me, doubled and redoubled, as the *Nowëthada*, having caught on to her plan, all joined together to imitate the same precise sound. Though they were much farther away, there were twelve of them, and they were putting all the strength into it they could; with their ability to imitate other sounds perfectly, they did exactly what was needed. They maintained the resonance as the *Magon* gave a frustrated whine and finally moved, in fits and starts, towards Jodi.

But by maintaining the resonance, the Nomes had given Jodi a breather. She backed up two steps, her lungs refilled, and this time her voice seemed to split the room with a single note of high-pitched thunder. The resonant hum from the *Magon* rose with her volume, becoming louder, the creature scrabbling now to reach its own forehead with claws just a bit too short—and the crystal antenna exploded with enough force to send shards flying thirty feet.

The *Magon* gave a shriek that pierced my ears like an icepick and lunged at Jodi; no longer under control, just berserk and out to kill the one that hurt it. Jodi ran.

I stood still and let her run past me. As the *Magon* followed—ignoring me completely in its mania to get Jodi—I swung the iron at one of its legs hard enough to break it. There was no heating; Jodi's trick had ended that problem. The monstrous centipedal creature skidded to a halt and whipped around, screaming at me—and that's when I pitched the ball in my other hand down its throat.

For a moment only I saw it, sparkling silvery in the LED light with its duct-taped surface. Then I flung myself flat behind a low, domelike stalactite.

The blast deafened me and shattered helictites sixty feet away. When I rose up, I could see that the *Magon* was writhing on the floor, headless and dying. All Jodi and I had to do was dance like madmen to stay out of the way of the rocky coils until they juddered slowly into stillness. Two pounds of C-4 makes for a hell of a case of indigestion.

Rokhaset and the other Nomes moved forward slowly. Even though they didn't have expressions, everything about the way they moved shouted out their incredulity. "Clinton Slade, Jodi Goldman . . . you have defeated a *Magon*. I did not think it possible."

"*Nishtkefelecht*, it's nothing. Without you singing backup, my main performance would've bombed. We did it together."

"Perhaps, perhaps. Still, such a thing has not been done in my memory."

"Enough time to congratulate later. Let's finish this job and get out of here before they come back to check on us."

As we turned towards the door, a quiver ran through the floor. Then another, stronger shake that jangled the remaining helictites.

"*Jh'amos!* They know we have won out here. They seek to complete the ritual now, though it will be slightly weakened!"

"Oh, no they don't!"

Into the room we ran. There were some guards now, running to stop us in these last desperate minutes, but this time I had the pistol out and was shooting. It probably wouldn't kill them, but the impact of the slugs startled them, knocked them off balance, broke armor where it hit. I ran past, kicking over a tall stone with an intricate crystal atop it, and then I saw him—like Rokhaset, bigger than his subjects, surrounded by crystalline structures, mumbling incomprehensible sounds. His personal guard swung at me, but I bowled him over and grabbed the *Lisharithada* ruler, swinging him right up against the wall. "Rokhaset!" I shouted. "Tell 'em to cut it out right now, or I'm about to break their king in half!"

Rokhaset and the *Lisharithada* exchanged hurried words. "They say it is all over for them in any case, now that you monsters have found them. They might as well take us all with them."

"It's all over! Tell 'em, Rokhaset—we only got here because you showed us, and we ain't told anyone else!"

A shattering sound told me Jodi was finishing off the crystals. The *Lisharithada* king struggled desperately in my grip; then, as the sound of crashing crystal faded, went limp.

"It would seem, Clinton Slade, that he has recognized a losing position, now that Jodi Goldman has destroyed the channeling crystals."

I dropped the king. "Okay. So they can't do the earthquake now?"

"No, Clint. It will be a long time before they can regrow such a mass of channeling crystals and even attempt such a ritual again."

"Good. Let's go get your stuff, Jodi, and go home."

The *Lisharithada* king suddenly whirled around, yanking a long staff of stone capped with a green-glowing gem from its hiding place in the depression from which I'd yanked him. I threw up my hands instinctively, but the gem hit me like a wrecking ball combined with a cattle prod. Concussion and seething energy catapulted me backwards, twitching.

The room erupted in renewed combat as the king directed his next attack, a sickly emerald bolt of energy, straight at Jodi. She tried to block it with her steel rod and had no more success than I had. Seeing her collapse, I tried desperately to get up, but my legs and arms wouldn't move.

Rokhaset roared something I couldn't make out, and there was a confused exchange of lightnings, red and green clashing as though the rainbow was having an internal debate. A glittering, three-crested head loomed above me, then fell as Rokhaset's own scepter came down on it.

Everything was dim, silent. I wondered why it was growing so dark, realized that I must be losing consciousness.

"Clinton Slade! Can you hear me?"

I made a supreme effort, managed to force out the word, "Yes."

"It is over. Their ruler is dead, they will have to select a new one, and we can escape."

"Guess . . . over for us . . . too."

"No, Clinton Slade. We shall bring you home."

I felt strong, slender rods of stone . . . Nome arms . . . slide under me. "Jodi . . ."

"We have her too. Save your strength."

I tried to tell him that I wasn't lying down here while Jodi might be hurt, but my lips wouldn't move. The light faded, and then everything was dark and I fell away into nothingness.

15. Some Slight Side-Effects.

Consciousness returned in fits and starts. I vaguely remembered shouting Nomish voices, and a feeling of sudden comfort overwhelming me as we entered *Nowēmosdet* again. Darkness giving way to light and Mamma crying. Being forced to drink something that stank like rotten eggs and tasted . . . well, it was a good thing I couldn't fight it then or someone woulda gotten hurt.

I opened my eyes. It was dim in the room. Shades were pulled over the windows. I tried to get up, but just getting to a sitting position took the wind out of me. "Hello?" I called.

The door flew open and Mamma ran in. "Clint? Oh, thank the Lord, Clint, you're awake! How do you feel, boy?"

"Like I've been pulled through a knothole and wrung out. And like I could eat a bear whole, without salt."

Tears glinted in her eyes. "Well, I'm sure we can find something to eat for you! Just stay there and take it easy and I'll be right back!"

"Jodi, Mamma! What about Jodi?"

Mamma hesitated. "She hasn't woken up yet, Clint, but now that you've come back to us I'm sure she'll be up and about in no time."

"But she's alive?" I felt a huge weight lift off my chest.

"She is indeed alive, Clinton Slade." Rokhaset entered the room. "Did I not give my word that we would get you home and that we had Jodi as well?"

"Yeah, and I didn't doubt you meant it . . . but sometimes the world can make liars of the best of us." Mamma, seeing that I had someone to talk to, headed on out, presumably to round up some food.

It suddenly dawned on me that I was not wearing any transducers. I glanced around and saw speakers on the bedside table. Obviously someone had decided to distribute the ability to talk to the Nome King around the house. Probably Adam, I guessed.

"She is recovering, I assure you. Though it was indeed a near thing for you both. It took the medicine of both worlds to bring you back from the edge of death."

"So you were the one making me drink that stuff."

"You needed the *Nowë H'wadalo* , the True Fire of Her spirit, and the elixir gave it to you. *Mishtarkistekh' orametanerala* intended for both Jodi Goldman and yourself to never return from the paths below the Earth, and tried to extinguish the fire of life within you. Had you been of our people, you would have died on the spot; had you been ordinary *Tennathada* , I doubt it would have affected you any more than an ordinary blow. But by being brought closer to *Nowë* by the *H'adamant* elixir, you were in a unique state and his attempt to destroy you neither entirely failed nor entirely succeeded."

"Dang. Slades don't usually do anything halfway. Well, better half dead than all dead, that's what I say."

"That would be my assessment as well."

"So . . . no big quakes then?"

Rokhaset nodded slowly. "For now, no. Yet it is true that the *Lisharithada* shall recover in time, and the Earth still builds its tensions which will need careful release if they are not to harness its strength for destruction. But that will be a problem for a later day. Your deeds this time have struck fear and confusion into them, and there is no need to worry; I shall know when they begin to think of the great rituals again."

Mamma came in with a tray piled with everything from soup to drumsticks. "Now that's enough jawing, Rokhaset. Let my boy eat."

I ate, as directed; by the time I was done, my eyelids were sagging again. I don't really remember putting the tray down.

* * *

When I woke again, it was nighttime, the moon shining through the slits in the window and lighting the room up so it looked almost like daylight. I tried to move and found I could get up, though I felt like Grandpa on a bad day. I tottered across the room and almost fell over Evangeline, who steadied me. "Careful, Clint. Nice to see you up, though. You wanna see Jodi, I bet."

"You'd win that bet."

"Well, c'mon. Mamma would probably try to keep you in bed, but that wouldn't be fair."

Evangeline led me down the hall—which seemed 'round about five times longer than usual—and opened the door to Jodi's room.

Jodi's eyes were open, and I felt tears suddenly well up in my own. I staggered to her bed and hugged her tight. "Jesus, Jodi, I thought we were dead."

"You weren't the only one, boychik. That nasty green light laid me right out."

We sat there for a few moments, just holding each other and absorbing the fact that we were still alive.

"Hey. It just hit me. We saved the world."

"Oy, don't go exaggerating. Just part of the country. Not even the most important part. Manhattan wouldn't have been touched."

I laughed. "Okay, yeah, but . . . in a way, it might not be exaggerating. A big enough disaster to the USA . . . I'm sure the rest of the world economy wouldn't like it either."

"They'd get by. Hey, are you saying it's not enough?"

"Heck no. It's just a lot more impressive to say 'I saved the world' than 'I saved Kentucky, Tennessee, Missouri, southern Illinois, and chunks here and there of a few other states in the area.' "

Jodi thought about it. "Especially where I come from. Most New Yorkers think Kentucky and Tennessee—forget Missouri—are just suburbs of Hoboken."

* * *

Over the next few days, Jodi and I got better. Finally we felt like ourselves again and Mamma threw a heck of a party, which Rokhaset attended, wearing his sunglasses and bringing two of his court along—*Tordamilatakaturanavasaiko* and *Mesh'atarasamthimajistolath* , whose names were promptly shortened in our *Tennathada* way to Tordamil and Meshatar.

The new arrivals were the first of their people given a connection to the expanded *makatdireshkovi* so as to be able to talk with us. It was nice to hear new voices; Meshatar sounded like Lauren Bacall, which certainly helped us remember she was female, as there weren't any clear visible indications of sex among the Nomes. Tordamil had evidently selected Richard Dean Anderson as his voice model, making it occasionally sound as though MacGyver had come to dinner.

The Nomes brought their own food with them, to the family's great interest. Though Mamma realized that making *Nowēthada* dinners would probably be impossible for any of us, she still ended up talking to Tordamil after dinner, trying to understand just what it was that the Nomes did when they "cooked." As Tordamil turned out to be Rokhaset's head *sirakster H'ista* , which apparently meant something between "master chef" and "head shaman or alchemist," he was definitely the one to ask about these things. He was just as interested in our methods of cooking—or at least convincingly faked an interest in it—so the two were kept happily occupied for a long time.

We went out to look around the grounds with Rokhaset after dinner.

"Man, it's nice to be outside again."

"I like caves, but after that long trek, okay, yeah, I'm glad to be aboveground again too."

"I will admit, Clinton Slade, that there are enjoyable aspects to *Tennatu* . You will forgive me, I trust, if I still prefer *Nowētu* ."

"Wouldn't expect anything else, Rokhaset. A man should always love his home best, no matter what sights there are to see elsewhere." I glanced at him. "Speakin' of sights, I thought you people were damn near blind here in the Hollow?"

"We are indeed *matturan* to some extent whenever we are here, Clinton Slade. But other senses can be used to appreciate the world; and it is, I think, not entirely a bad thing for myself and my people to accustom themselves to this, in case they must deal with your people."

"Can't hurt to be ready to deal with it, I guess. But we ain't planning to spread the word about your people around."

Rokhaset nodded emphatically. "As individuals your people have proven to be, as you would say, decent folk. I am however very much afraid that were your country as a whole to become aware of us—and especially of the *Lisharithada*—that it would become a matter for politicians of your sort . . . and eventually for warriors, once they realized what the *Lisharithada* were capable of."

"Oy, no doubt about that one, Rokhaset. They'd be dragging half of you to the labs and declaring war on the other half. Clint may be a backwoods boy, but he's pretty enlightened. There's plenty of other people that'd be perfectly willing to ignore the fact you can talk and just call you monsters."

I didn't want to get off discussing the flaws of the entire human race which Rokhaset, having derived his understanding of us from forty years of TV, was undoubtedly all too aware of. "Besides," I said, "it'd be just plumb stupid of us. The Slades have got some tradin' to do with your people, right?"

We had gotten past the edge of the Hollow now, and Rokhaset was moving a bit more easily. "That is a matter I have been discussing with your family during your convalescence, Clinton Slade. While the initial problem was certainly caused by your blind thievery, even the most reactionary of my people—and make no mistake about it, Jodi Goldman, the *Nowëthada* are just as capable of anger, deliberate prejudice, and judgmental behavior as your own—as I say, even the most reactionary of my people must admit that the two of you risked everything—your lives, your freedom, and your souls—to atone for the involuntary wrongdoings of Winston Slade and his descendants.

"We are, accordingly, quite interested in establishing a peaceful trade between the Slade clan and our own. Yet we still find ourselves at the same impasse that we encountered when first we spoke of this problem."

"What d'you . . . oh, yeah."

"You grasp the issue, Clinton Slade. We have no need for the devices your people manufacture, at least not in any significant quantity, and many of your machines would have to be specifically redesigned to make them worth our while. So the only reasonable trading goods we have are crystals—we supply you with diamonds, as we can, and you bring us gemstones and other crystals which cannot be found in this part of the world. Yet your people are as blind in this area as we are in what you call the visible spectrum. You cannot tell whether a crystal is *hevrat* with life, or is as dead"—he gestured at the brilliantly-sparkling diamond on Jodi's finger—"as that. And clearly you cannot afford to purchase many rough stones, hoping they will be worthwhile, and have them rejected—at least not often."

"Well . . . depends. If your people can shape stones like I've seen, you ought to be able to cut gems to order. That'd raise the value of the reject gems an' we could still recoup."

"Sure he could, Clint," Jodi said, with the air of a teacher explaining something to a really slow student, "but to make it worth his people's while we'd have to, well, make it worth their while . . ."

"D'oh!" I smacked my forehead. "Okay, yeah, that was dumb."

"Alas, Clinton Slade, mine are a busy people indeed and truly we cannot perform much labor for you unless we can establish equitable exchange. I do, however, have one thing to give you."

"Oh?"

He withdrew from the woven-crystal pouch at his side what looked like two medallions suspended from

strings made of the same material as his pouch. "As, I suspect, nearly all people, the *Nowëthada* recognize and honor bravery, willingness to aid others, strength in battle, and so on. It took considerable courage for the two of you to come to us, into our stronghold, and hope to make peace—perhaps, if I read your personalities aright, more than it took to face the *Lisharithada* and the *Magon*."

"Well, I don't rightly know about that. Even walking into your throne room wasn't as scary as fighting a stone monster the size of a house. But still, we appreciate the kind words."

"To recognize you for bringing our people together, and standing with us against a common foe, I have had fashioned these amulets. They have little mystical significance to one such as yourself, but similar devices mean a great deal to my people, and I know that you award similar, um, medals, to courageous members of your own species. So take these, at least, as . . . what is the phrase? Ah, yes, as a token of our esteem and gratitude for bringing our sundered peoples together. May we one day find a way to bring peace to the *Lisharithada* as well."

"I'm all for that, though I admit to not bein' overly hopeful." We each stooped low to let Rokhaset, who once more had clearly watched the similar rituals on movies and TV shows, put the medallions around our necks. Straightening up, we then got a chance to look at them.

"*Oooy!*" Jodi breathed. "Rokhaset, these are just beautiful!"

I had to agree. The medallions were shaped—or maybe grown—transparent crystals with traces of glittering metal in them that looked like gold, surrounding a core of what had to be solid silver, covered with intricate designs that looked like completed versions of the symbols we'd seen on the Throne Room walls. I wondered if silver gave them problems to work, or if it was just the ferromagnetics that did. Overshadowing all the other features, though, was the crystal set in the very center. It, too, was transparent, but it didn't merely pass light; it radiated light, a soft but unmistakable polychromatic glow that pulsed and flickered gently like a candle in the gentlest of breezes. As I admired it in the slowly-gathering dusk, I realized the whole medallion had a faint glow to it, though nothing like the glorious luminance from that central stone.

"What *is* that stone, Rokhaset? It's incredible!"

"I am surprised, Jodi Goldman, Clinton Slade. How can you not recognize the stones over which we nearly shed blood? They are *H'adamant*, of course. The only appropriate choice."

"Okay," I said, "but what'd you do to 'em to make 'em glow like that?"

Rokhaset froze, looking almost comical. "Glow? Clinton Slade, I assure you—we have done nothing to them at all, save to shape them so they are faceted in a way that would reflect the light pleasingly for your eyes."

"But . . . these look nothing at all like Jodi's diamond! Well, yeah, they're both transparent, but . . ."

I trailed off, a chill going down my spine as I realized what I was saying.

"Clinton Slade," Rokhaset said, with a quiet intensity that showed how serious he was, "Look carefully at me and tell me what you see."

We stared at Rokhaset. "Oh, my," Jodi whispered.

In the dimming light, looking hard at Rokhaset, we could see that he glowed like our medallions. It was dim, yet with a sense of being contained—like being in a dark room and seeing the glow under the door from the brightly-lit hall beyond.

It was only then that I glanced at my watch, remembering just when we'd started eating. Twilight? At this time of night it ought to be damn near pitch black. Yet it only seemed to be late twilight—easy enough to see in, even if the shadows were pretty thick under the trees.

"*Nowë Ro'vahari*," Rokhaset said in a tone of reverence. "Such things are mentioned in legends, from before the *Makurada Demagon*, but how they happened none could say. Perhaps the *themikhsteri H'adamant*, combined with the change in our peoples, has done this itself; perhaps the treacherous attack of the *Lisharithada* ruler, or our desperate treatments of its effects on you, has wrought this transformation. But somehow *Nowë* has seen fit to make you *turan*, at least in some way, as we do."

"Then I gotta apologize, Rokhaset. I thought you were overreacting when you realized we couldn't see what happened when *H'adamant* died. Now . . . I think maybe y'all almost didn't get mad enough."

I wondered what else had changed about us. "I sure hope there aren't any nasty side-effects waiting. Don't want to go blind around metal, that's for sure."

"It is as *Nowë* wills it, Clinton Slade. Yet it would seem to me that her blessing is, for you, working as your normal sight, only . . . more so. It should, therefore, not be so sensitive to *H'kuraden* as ours, if at all."

"I'm going to have to get to the lab!" Jodi exclaimed. "Clint, an entirely new sensing modality—even if we're the only ones with it, just imagine what we could learn this way!"

"Whoa, whoa. One thing at a time. The important thing is that this solves our trading problem."

Rokhaset laughed. "We spoke and the World heard us, and answered. So it has ever been, Clinton Slade, in the times when it was crucial. *Nowë* is pleased with you, Jodi Goldman, Clinton Slade. It is important to Her that we be friends. So She has provided."

I was starting to realize that our pragmatic friend was also about as religious as a preacher. But if he wanted to see this as a miracle, what'd it matter? Heck, he might even be right! "Let's just hope it doesn't wear off."

Rokhaset nodded slowly. "Yet this, in itself, gives us an answer. If the effects of the elixir remain with you for this long—even if only the senses are affected—then at the worst you merely need take one before you go on a . . . shopping trip. With careful planning, even taking into consideration the costs we would have to charge you for the *themikhsteri H'adamant*, I am sure it would remain a very profitable venture on both sides."

He tilted his head in that birdlike fashion. "Clinton Slade, I must return home now. In the wake of our battle I have spent far too much time here, though I do not regret that time. I have informed Meshatar and Tordamil that we must go; they are taking their leave of your family. Send them my apologies, but I can no longer ignore my people. Please, come visit us soon, however. I would be honored to entertain your family in my home."

We shook hands and went with him to Winston's Cave—where the iron grid had been removed and the handholds down replaced by *Nowëthada* stone-shaping. Meshatar and Tordamil came hurrying up just

as Rokhaset entered, so we got to say goodbye to them too. Then we headed back down the path.

"So, Clint . . ."

"What?"

"We'll have to be pretty careful."

"You mean to not let people know we can see in the dark—and maybe see other things, too? Yeah."

"More than that."

I turned to see what she was talking about, as we emerged from Winston's Gap. "Holy Mother of God!"

Jodi was carrying the gate, which had been left way off to the side as no one had wanted to carry it down the hill at the time. It weighed in at something like five hundred pounds.

"You just better hope that it doesn't wear off while you're pulling stunts like that, girl!"

"I'd bet I'd feel it happening."

I reached out, wondering if I had the same ludicrous strength. She relinquished her hold, and I hefted the mass of steel. The gate felt more like forty, fifty pounds, if that. "Well, shit fire and save matches. You know, this is even weirder'n it looks. I haven't felt like Superman at home, an' the chairs I was draggin' into place before dinner didn't feel any lighter, so what gives?"

Jodi the scientist answered. "We'll just have to experiment and find out. Maybe Rokhaset's a little off—maybe these abilities *will* go away when we're around a lot of iron."

I lifted the gate a bit higher. "Counterpoint: just what is it I'm holding, then?"

Jodi studied it, frowning. "Okay," she admitted a bit grudgingly, "I'd say that counts as a falsified theory. Maybe it's expectations; we don't get the high-end strength and toughness unless we're either trying to use it, or maybe panicked into using it. We can test that. And see whether it's decreasing or staying steady. Remember, we never had any chance to test out exactly how strong we were back in the *Lisharithada* caverns. So it may be—probably is—slowly fading in effect. We just need to know how long it'll take."

I chuckled suddenly. "Nope. I can tell you it's going to be staying steady. However it happened, we've got 'em for the rest of our lives."

"What? Clint, how can you say that?" She stared at me as my smile widened.

"Because it comes from the *H'adamant* elixir."

"And? What's your point?"

I couldn't help letting my smile turn into an evil grin. "Why, Jodi, everyone knows that."

I paused for dramatic effect.

"Diamonds are forever."

Introduction to the Electronic Publication of *John the Balladeer*

Manly Wade Wellman was one of the most successful fantasy and SF writers of the '30s and '40s. His SF was generally of a juvenile nature, popular at the time but of limited interest today. His fantasy, however, was thoroughly adult. While Lovecraft and Howard were writing, Manly was in the second rank of *Weird Tales* authors; after they died, he became one of the magazine's mainstays.

Despite the high quality of his earlier fantasies, Manly didn't really hit his stride in the field until in 1949 appeared *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction*—a digest magazine which would publish fantasy of the highest literary quality. For *F&SF* Manly created John the Balladeer, drawing on his existing knowledge of folk music and folklore and his growing love of the North Carolina mountains.

The stories of John the Balladeer are some of the best American fantasies ever written. They were powerful influences on me before I moved to North Carolina and met Manly; and it was in conscious and deliberate awareness of them that I wrote *Old Nathan* as my homage and memorial to my friend after his death.

Dave Drake
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Foreword

Manly in the Mountains

Music brought Manly to the North Carolina mountains.

Folk music—the old songs, real songs—had been an interest of Manly's since the 1920s when he tramped the Ozarks with Vance Randolph, the famed folklorist. He was drawn by the folk festival that he found when he moved with his family to Chapel Hill in 1951; became a friend of the organizer, Asheville native Bascom Lamar Lunsford; and traveled with Lunsford to meet "the best banjo player in the country."

That was Obray Ramsey of Madison County, high in the Smokies where they divide North Carolina from Tennessee. It was the start of a life-long friendship, and the genesis as well of this book: the tales of John the Balladeer, hiking the hills of North Carolina with his silver-strung guitar.

Manly and his wife Frances visited the mountains staying in the Ramseys' house when they were alone and in a tourist cabin father down on the French Broad River if they had their son or another friend with them. By the early '60s they had a little cabin of their own, next to the Ramseys and built in fits and starts over the years by them and their friends.

It wasn't fancy, but it was a place to sleep and eat; and a place to have friends in to pick and sing and pass around a bottle of liquor, tax-paid or otherwise. That was where they were when my wife and I visited the mountains with them and with Karl Wagner in the Fall of 1971.

The Ramseys' house is close by the road, Highway 25-70, which parallels the course of the French Broad River snaking through hard rock. The mountains lowered down behind the house, and the river dropped away sharply on the other side of the road.

One statistic will suffice to indicate the ruggedness of the terrain. There were seven attorneys in practice in Madison County when 25-70 was the direct route from Asheville to Knoxville. Shortly after Interstate 40 was completed, cutting off the business that had resulted from auto accidents on 25-70, six of the lawyers left.

The seventh was the District Attorney.

Manly's cabin was a little farther back from the road and a little higher up the mountain he called Yandro. The water system was elegant in its simplicity, a pipe that trailed miles from a high, clear spring to a faucet mounted four feet up above a floor drain in the cabin. There was a pressure-relief vent and settling pond partway down the mountainside. The vent could become blocked with debris, especially if the water hadn't been run for a time. The way you learned that it was plugged was—

"Let me fix you a drink, Dutch," Manly said to Karl as we settled into the cabin. He poured bourbon into a plastic cup, held it under the spigot, and just started to open the tap.

The water, with over a thousand feet of head, blew the cup out of his hand to shatter on the drain beneath.

Nobody said anything for a moment.

We stumbled up the Mountainside in the dark—there was a moon, but the pines and the valley's steep walls blocked most of its light as they did the sun in daytime. Manly went part way, but when Obray guided Karl and me off the road-cut, he decided he'd wait. Wisely: he was 68 even then, though that was hard to remember when you saw him.

He had fresh drinks waiting for those as used it when we got back—and fresh laughter as he always did, this time because Karl had slipped off the catwalk into one of Obray's trout ponds as we neared the cabin.

Manly was in his element that evening, watching the incredible fingerings of Obray and a neighbor while lamplight gleamed from the gilded metalwork of the banjo and guitar; pouring drinks; singing "Will the Circle be Unbroken" and "Birmingham Jail" and "Vandy, Vandy." . . .

Which brings up a last point about Manly and the mountains. I said he called the mountain Yandro, but I don't know you'd find that name on a map. Manly blended past reality with new creations in his life as well as his writing. Many of the songs he sang and quoted in this volume are very old; he once claimed to have written "Vandy, Vandy" himself.

And that may be part of the magic of these stories. They were written by a man who knew and loved the folkways he described so well that he became a part of them, weaving in his own strands and keeping the fabric alive instead of leaving it to be displayed behind the sterile glass of a museum.

May you read them with a delight as great as that of the man who wrote them.

Dave Drake
Chapel Hill, North Carolina

Introduction

Just Call Me John

There are moments in literature—very rare and very marvelous—when a writer creates a unique character. One such moment occurred in 1951 when Manly Wade Wellman began to write stories about John the Balladeer.

He had no last name, no other name: he was known only as John. Some reviewers suggested that Wellman intended John to be a Christ figure. Manly firmly denied this, but he often hinted that there might exist some mystic link to John the Baptist (cf. Mark 1. 2-3).

We never knew a lot about John's past. He was born in Moore County, North Carolina, and Manly said he sort of pictured John as a young Johnny Cash. He also told us that John was a veteran of the Korean War, and that he could hold up his end of things in a barroom brawl. John had a profound knowledge of Southern folklore and folksongs—as did Manly. John had a guitar strung with silver strings, a considerable knowledge of the occult, and his native wit. He needed all three as he wandered along the haunted ridges and valleys of the Southern Appalachians—sometimes encountering supernatural evil, sometimes seeking it out.

John first appeared in the December 1951 issue of *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction*, but Wellman had given us foreshadowings. He sometimes liked to claim that two stories from *Weird Tales*, "Sin's Doorway" (January 1946) and "Frogfather" (November 1946), were stories about John before he got his silver-strung guitar, but usually he grouped them instead with his other regional fantasies. Not coincidentally, following his move from New Jersey to Moore County, North Carolina after the War, Wellman began to make use of Southern legends and locales in his stories. When he moved to Chapel Hill in 1951, his subsequent acquaintance with folk musicians of the Carolina mountains combined with

Manly's lifelong interest in folklore to generate the stories of John. The transition can be seen in Wellman's abandonment of his then-popular series character, John Thunstone, an urbane occult detective who worked the New York night-club set. Thunstone's final appearance in *Weird Tales* ("The Last Grave of Lill Warran" in the May 1951 issue) finds him in hiking gear and stomping through the Sand Hills in search of a backwoods vampire. Seven months later John the Balladeer made his first appearance in "O Ugly Bird!" The difference was the mountains-and the music.

There hadn't been anything like the John stories at that time, and there hasn't been since. No one but Manly Wade Wellman could have written these stories. Here his vivid imagination merged with authentic Southern folklore and a heartfelt love of the South and its people. Just as J. R. R. Tolkien brilliantly created a modern British myth cycle, so did Manly Wade Wellman give to us an imaginary world of purely American fact, fantasy, and song.

Between 1951 and 1962 Wellman wrote eleven stories about John, in addition to a grouping of seven short vignettes. These were collected in the 1963 Arkham House volume, *Who Fears the Devil?*. The original magazine versions were somewhat revised (Manly grumbled that this was done to give the collection some semblance of a novel), and four new vignettes were added. When I first met Manly in the summer of 1963, he gave me the grim news that he was all through writing about John. Fortunately, this wasn't to be true. Manly loved his character too much.

John would next appear on film, with folksinger Hedge Capers miscast as John. The film was partially shot in Madison County, North Carolina (the general setting for the John stories) in October 1971. Despite a surprisingly good supporting cast and the incorporation of two of the best stories "O Ugly Bird!" and "The Desrick on Yandro"), the film was an embarrassment-largely due to its shoestring budget and stultifying script. It was released in 1972 as *Who Fears the Devil* and flopped at the box office. It was then re-edited and re-released the following year as *The Legend of Hillbilly John*, with equal success. Sometimes it turns up on videocassette.

But it would take more than a bad film to finish off John. Renewed interest in his earlier fantasy work coupled with summer trips to his cabin in Madison County soon had Wellman writing about the mountains again. John returned—this time in a series of novels.

In 1979 Doubleday published *The Old Gods Waken*, the first of five John novels. This was followed by *After Dark* (1980), *The Lost and the Lurking* (1981), *The Hanging Stones* (1982), and *The Voice of the Mountain* (1984). A sixth John novel, *The Valley So Low*, was planned but never started due to Wellman's final illness; instead it was published by Doubleday in 1987 as a collection of Wellman's recent mountain stories.

But there was more to be heard from John. Wellman always maintained that he preferred to write about John in short-story form rather than in novel length. And to prove he could still do both, Manly wrote six new John stories in between work on his novels. Shortly after completing his final novel for Doubleday (Cahena, 1986), Manly wrote a new John story, "Where Did She Wander?". This was to be his final story. A few days after completing it, Wellman suffered a crippling fall, shattering his shoulder and elbow. Despite the weakness and pain, he managed to revise and polish the final draft of "Where Did She Wander?"

Five years before Manly would have been back at his desk before the plaster cast hardened, but at age 82 complication followed complication. Death came on April 5, 1986, a few weeks short of his 83rd birthday.

John will live on, as long as there are readers who love good stories—and good storytelling.

John the Balladeer is the complete collection of all of the short stories of John. All of the stories in this book are Manly Wade Wellman's original versions, reprinted from their initial magazine or anthology appearances. To approximate as closely as possible the order in which they were written, I have arranged these stories according to date of original publication. I regret a certain awkwardness in the clustering of the vignettes between two stories which are directly connected (albeit having been written twenty-one years apart). Think of this as an interlude, perhaps, between the old and the new.

While the John stories can be read in any order one wishes, I chose this method of presentation deliberately. John is one of the most significant characters in all of fantasy literature. For thirty-five years John lived in the marvelous imagination of Manly Wade Wellman, one of fantasy's foremost authors. As such it is desirable to provide a definitive, orderly text so that we may consider the growth and development of both character and creator over those three-and-one-half decades.

On the other hand, if you're simply looking for a good read, you're holding one of the best. Dip into it anywhere. These stories are chilling and enchanting, magical and down-to-earth, full of wonder and humanity. They are fun. They are like nothing else you've ever read before.

Savor this book. Treasure it to reread in years to come.

I wish you the joy and wonder I have found here.

Karl Edward Wagner
Chapel Hill, North Carolina

O Ugly Bird!

Manly Wade Wellman

I swear I'm licked before I start, trying to tell you all what Mr. Onselm looked like. Words give out—for instance, you're frozen to death for fit words to tell the favor of the girl you love. And Mr. Onselm and I pure poison hated each other. That's how love and hate are alike.

He was what country folks call a low man, more than calling him short or small; a low man is low otherwise than by inches. Mr. Onselm's shoulders didn't wide out as far as his big ears, and they sank and sagged. His thin legs bowed in at the knee and out at the shank, like two sickles point to point. On his carrot-thin neck, his head looked like a swollen pale gourd. Thin, moss-gray hair. Loose mouth, a bit open to show long, even teeth. Not much chin. The right eye squinted, mean and dark, while the hike of his brow twitched the left one wide. His good clothes fitted his mean body like they were cut to it. Those good clothes were almost as much out of match to the rest of him as his long, soft, pink hands, the hands of a man who never had to work a tap.

You see what I mean, I can't say how he looked, only he was hateful.

I first met him when I came down from the high mountain's comb, along an animal trail—maybe a deer made it. Through the trees I saw, here and there in the valley below, patch-places and cabins and yards. I hoped I'd get fed at one of them, for I'd run clear out of eating some spell back. I had no money. Only my hickory shirt and blue duckin pants and torn old army shoes, and my guitar on its sling card. But I knew the mountain folks. If they've got ary thing to eat, a decent spoken stranger can get the half part of it. Towns aren't always the same way.

Downslope I picked, favoring the guitar in case I slipped and fell, and in an hour made it to the first patch. Early fall was browning the corn out of the green. The cabin was two-room, dog-trotted open in the middle. Beyond was a shed and a pigpen. In the yard the man of the house talked to who I found out later was Mr. Onselm.

"No meat at all?" said Mr. Onselm. His voice was the last you'd expect him to have, full of broad low music, like an organ in a town church. I decided against asking him to sing when I glimpsed him closer, sickle-legged and gourd-headed and pale and puny in his fine-fitting clothes. For he looked mad and dangerous; and the man of the place, though he was a big, strong old gentleman with a square jaw, looked afraid.

"I been short this year, Mr. Onselm," he said, begging like. "The last bit of meat I fished out of the brine on Tuesday. And I don't want to have to kill the pig till December."

Mr. Onselm tramped over to the pen. The pig was a friendly one, it reared its front feet against the boards and grunted up to him. Mr. Onselm spit into the pen. "All right," he said, "but I want some meal."

He sickle-legged back to the cabin. A brown barrel stood in the dog trot. Mr. Onselm lifted the cover and pinched some meal between his pink fingertips. "Get me a sack," he told the man.

The man went indoors and brought out the sack. Mr. Onselm held it open while the man scooped out meal enough to fill it. Then Mr. Onselm held it tight shut while the man lashed the neck with twine. Finally Mr. Onselm looked up and saw me standing there.

"Who are you?" he asked, sort of crooning.

"My name's John," I said.

"John what?" Then, without waiting for my answer, "Where did you steal that guitar?"

"It was given to me," I replied. "I strung it with silver wires myself."

"Silver," he said, and opened his squint eye by a trifle.

With my left hand I clamped a chord. With my right thumb I picked a whisper from the silver strings. I began to make a song:

*Mister Onselm,
They do what you tell 'em—*

"That will do," said Mr. Onselm, not so musically, and I stopped playing. He relaxed. "They do what I tell em," he said, half to himself. "Not bad."

We studied each other a few ticks of time. Then he turned and tramped out of the yard in among the trees. When he was out of sight the man of the place asked, right friendly, what he could do for me.

"I'm just walking through," I said. I didn't want to ask right off for some dinner.

"I heard you name yourself John," he said. "So happens my name's John too, John Bristow."

"Nice place you've got," I said, looking around. "Cropper or tenant?"

"I own the house and the land," he told me, and I was surprised; for Mr. Onselm had treated him the way a mean boss treats a cropper.

"Then that Mr. Onselm was just a visitor," I said.

"Visitor?" Mr. Bristow snorted. "He visits everybody here around. Lets them know what he wants, and they pass it to him. Thought you knew him, you sang about him so ready."

"Shucks, I made that up." I touched the silver strings again. "I sing a many a new song that comes to me."

"I love the old songs better," he said, and smiled, so I sang one:

*I had been in Georgia
Not a many more weeks than three,
When I fell in love with a pretty fair girl,
And she fell in love with me.*

*Her lips were red as red could be,
Her eyes were brown as brown,
Her hair was like' the thundercloud
Before the rain comes down.*

You should have seen Mr. Bristow's face shine. He said: "By God, you sure enough can sing it and play it."

"Do my possible best," I said. "But Mr. Onselm don't like it." I thought a moment, then asked: "What way can he get everything he wants in this valley?"

"Shoo, can't tell you way. Just done it for years, he has."

"Anybody refuse him?"

"Once Old Jim Desbro refused him a chicken. Mr. Onselm pointed his finger at Old Jim's mules, they was plowing. Them mules couldn't move ary foot, not till Mr. Onselm had the chicken. Another time, Miss Tilly Parmer hid a cake when she seen him come. He pointed a finger and dumbbed her. She never spoke one mumbling word from that day to when she died. Could hear and understand, but when she tried to talk she could just wheeze."

"He's a hoodoo man," I said, "which means the law can't do anything."

"Not even if the law worried about anything this far from the county seat." He looked at the meal back against the cabin. "About time for the Ugly Bird to fetch Mr. Onselm's meal."

"What's the Ugly Bird?" I asked, but he didn't have to answer.

It must have hung over us, high and quiet, and now it dropped into the yard like a fish hawk into a pond.

First out I saw it was dark, heavy-winged, bigger than a buzzard. Then I saw the shiny gray-black of the body, like wet slate, and how it seemed to have feathers only on its wide wings. Then I made out the thin snaky neck, the bulgy head and long stork beak, the eyes set in front of its head—man-fashion in front, not to each side.

The feet that taloned onto the sack showed pink and smooth with five graspy toes. The wings snapped like a tablecloth in a wind, and it churned away over the trees with the meal sack.

"That's the Ugly Bird," said Mr. Bristow. I barely heard him. "Mr. Onselm has companioned with it ever since I recollect."

"I never saw such a bird," I said. "Must be a scarce one. You know what struck me while I watched it?"

"I do know, John. Its feet look like Mr. Onselm's hands."

"Might it be," I asked, "that a hoodoo man like Mr. Onselm knows what way to shape himself into a bird?"

He shook his head. "It's known that when he's at once place, the Ugly Bird's been sighted at another." He tried to change the subject "Silver strings on your guitar—never heard of any but steel strings."

"In the olden days," I told him, "silver was used a many times for strings. It gives a more singy sound."

In my mind I had it the subject wouldn't be changed. I tried a chord on my guitar, and began to sing:

*You all have heard of the Ugly Bird
So curious and so queer,
That flies its flight by day and night
And fills folks' hearts with fear.*

*I never come here to hide from fear,
And I give you my promised word
That I soon expect to twist the neck
Of the God damn Ugly Bird.*

When I finished, Mr. Bristow felt in his pocket.

"I was going to bid you eat with me," he said, "but—here, maybe you better buy something."

He gave me a quarter and a dime. I about gave them back, but I thanked him and walked away down the same trail Mr. Onselm had gone. Mr. Bristow watched me go, looking shrunk up. My song had scared him, so I kept singing it.

*O Ugly Bird! O Ugly Bird!
You snoop and sneak and thief!
This place can't be for you and me,
And one of us got to leave.*

Singing, I tried to remember all I'd heard or read or guessed that might help toward my Ugly Bird study.

Didn't witch people have partner animals? I'd read and heard tell about the animals called familiars—mostly cats or black dogs or the like, but sometimes birds.

That might be the secret, or a right much of it, for the Ugly Bird wasn't Mr. Onselm's other self. Mr. Bristow had said the two of them were seen different places at one time. Mr. Onselm didn't turn into the Ugly Bird then. They were just close partners. Brothers. With the Ugly Bird's feet like Mr. Onselm's hands.

I awared of something in the sky, the big black V of a flying creature. It quartered over me, half as high as the highest woolly scrap of cloud. Once or twice it seemed like it would stoop for me, like a hawk for a rabbit, but it didn't. Looking up and letting my feet find the trail, I rounded a bunch of bushes and there, on a rotten log in a clearing, sat Mr. Onselm.

His gourd-head sank on his thin neck. His elbows set on his knees, and the soft, pink, long hands hid his face, as if he was miserable. His look made me feel disgusted. I came toward him.

"You don't feel so brash, do you?" I asked.

"Go away," he sort of gulped, soft and sick.

"Why?" I wanted to know. "I like it here."

Sitting on the log, I pulled my guitar across me. "I feel like singing, Mr. Onselm."

*His father got hung for horse stealing,
His mother got burned for a witch,
And his only friend is the Ugly Bird,*

The dirty son of—

Something hit me like a shooting star from overhead. It hit my back and shoulder, and knocked me floundering forward on one hand and one knee. It was only the mercy of God I didn't fall on my guitar and smash it. I crawled forward a few scrambles and made to get up, shaky and dizzy.

The Ugly Bird had flown down and dropped the sack of meal on me. Now it skimmed across the clearing, at the height of the low branches, its eyes glinting at me, and its mouth came open a little. I saw teeth, sharp and mean, like a garpike's teeth. It swooped for me, and the wind of its wings was colder than a winter storm.

Without stopping to think, I flung up my both hands to box it off from me, and it gave back, flew backward like the biggest, devilishest humming bird ever seen in a nightmare. I was too dizzy and scared to wonder why it gave back; I had barely the wit to be thankful.

"Get out of here," moaned Mr. Onselm, who hadn't stirred.

I shame to say that I got. I kept my hands up and backed across the clearing and into the trail beyond. Then I half realized where my luck had been. My hands had lifted the guitar toward the Ugly Bird, and somehow it hadn't liked the guitar.

Just once I looked back. The Ugly Bird was perching on the log and it sort of nuzzled up to Mr. Onselm, most horrible. They were sure enough close together. I stumbled off away.

I found a stream, with stones to make steps across. I turned and walked down to where it made a wide pool. There I knelt and washed my face—it looked pallid in the water image—and sat with my back to a tree and hugged my guitar and rested. I shook all over. I must have felt as bad for a while as Mr. Onselm looked like he felt, sitting on the log waiting for his Ugly Bird and—what else?

Had he been hungry? Sick? Or just evil? I couldn't say which.

After a while I walked back to the trail and along it again, till I came to what must have been the only store thereabouts.

It faced one way on a rough road that could carry wagon and car traffic, and the trail joined on and reached the door. The building wasn't big but it was good, made of sawed planks well painted. It rested on big rocks instead of posts, and had a roofed open front like a porch, with a bench where people could sit.

Opening the door, I went in. You'll find a many such stores in back country places through the land. Counters. Shelves of cans and packages. Smoked meat hung one corner, a glass-front icebox for fresh meat another. One point, sign says U. S. POST OFFICE, with half a dozen pigeonholes for letters and a couple of cigar boxes for stamps and money-order blanks. The proprietor wasn't in. Only a girl, scared and shaking, and Mr. Onselm, there ahead of me, telling her what he wanted.

He wanted her.

"I don't care if Sam Heaver did leave you in charge here," he said with the music in his voice. "He won't stop my taking you with me."

Then he swung around and fixed his squint eye and wide-open eye on me, like two mismated gun muzzles. "You again," he said.

He looked hale and hearty. I strayed my hands over the guitar strings, and he twisted up his face as if it colicked him.

"Winnie," he said to the girl, "wait on him and get him out of here."

Her eyes were round in her scared face. I never saw as sweet a face as hers, or as scared. Her hair was dark and thick. It was like the thundercloud before the rain comes down. It made her paleness look paler. She was small, and she cowered for fear of Mr. Onselm.

"Yes, sir?" she said to me.

"Box of crackers," I decided, pointing to a near shelf. "And a can of those sardine fish."

She put them on the counter. I dug out the quarter Mr. Bristow had given me, and slapped it down on the counter top between the girl and Mr. Onselm.

"Get away!" he squeaked, shrill and mean as a bat.

He had jumped back, almost halfway across the floor. And for once both of his eyes were big.

"What's the matter?" I asked him, purely wondering. "This is a good silver quarter." And I picked it up and held it out for him to take and study.

But he ran out of the store like a rabbit. A rabbit with the dogs after it.

The girl he'd called Winnie just leaned against the wall as if she was tired. I asked: "Why did he light out like that?"

She took the quarter. "It doesn't scare me much," she said, and rung it up on the old cash register. "All that scares me is—Mr. Onselm."

I picked up the crackers and sardines. "He's courting you?"

She shuddered, though it was warm. "I'd sooner be in a hole with a snake than be courted by Mr. Onselm."

"Why not just tell him to leave you be?"

"He'd not listen. He always does what pleases him. Nobody dares stop him."

"I know, I heard about the mules he stopped and the poor lady he dumbled." I returned to the other subject. "Why did he squinch away from money? I'd reckon he loved money."

She shook her head. The thundercloud hair stirred. "He never needs any. Takes what he wants without paying."

"Including you?"

"Not including me yet. But he'll do that later."

I laid down my dime I had left. "Let's have a coke drink, you and me."

She rang up the dime too. There was a sort of dry chuckle at the door, like a stone rattling down the well. I looked quick, and saw two long, dark wings flop away from the door. The Ugly Bird had spied.

But the girl Winnie smiled over her coke drink. I asked permission to open my fish and crackers on the bench outside. She nodded yes. Out there, I worried open the can with my pocket knife and had my meal. When I finished I put the trash in a garbage barrel and tuned my guitar. Winnie came out and harked while I sang about the girl whose hair was like the thundercloud before the rain comes down, and she blushed till she was pale no more.

Then we talked about Mr. Onselm and the Ugly Bird, and how they had been seen in two different places at once—

But," said Winnie, "who's seen them together?"

Shoo, I have," I told her. "Not long ago." And I told how Mr. Onselm sat, all sick and miserable, and the confer bird crowded up against him.

She heard all that, with eyes staring off, as if looking for something far away. Finally she said, "John, you say it crowded up to him."

"It did that thing, as if it studied to get right inside him."

"Inside him!"

"That's right."

"Makes me think of something I heard somebody say about hoodoo folks," she said. "How the hoodoo folks sometimes put a stuff out, mostly in dark rooms. And it's part of them, but it takes the shape and mind of another person—once in a while, the shape and mind of an animal."

"Shoo," I said again, "now you mention it, I've heard the same thing. It might explain those Louisiana stories about werewolves."

"Shape and mind of an animal," she repeated herself. "Maybe the shape and mind of a bird. And they call it echo—no, ecto—ecto—"

"Ectoplasm," I remembered. "That's right. I've even seen pictures they say were taken of such stuff. It seems to live—it'll yell, if you grab it or hit it or stab it."

"Could maybe—!" she began, but a musical voice interrupted.

"He's been around here long enough," said Mr. Onselm.

He was back. With him were three men. Mr. Bristow, and a tall, gawky man with splay shoulders and a black-stubbed chin, and a soft, smooth-grizzled man with an old fancy vest over his white shirt.

Mr. Onselm acted like the leader of a posse. "Sam Heaver," he crooned at the soft, grizzled one, "can tramps loaf at your store?"

The soft old storekeeper looked dead and gloomy at me. "Better get going, son," he said, as if he'd memorized it.

I laid my guitar on the bench. "You men ail my stomach," I said, looking at them. "You let this half-born, half-bred hoodoo man sic you on me like hound dogs when I'm hurting nobody and nothing."

"Better go," he said again.

I faced Mr. Onselm, and he laughed like a sweetly played horn. "You," he said, "without a dime in your pocket! You can't do anything to anybody."

Without a dime . . . the Ugly bird had seen me spend my silver money, the silver money that ailed Mr. Onselm. . . .

"Take his guitar, Hobe," said Mr. Onselm, and the gawky man, clumsy but quick, grabbed the guitar from the bench and backed away to the door.

"That takes care of him," Mr. Onselm sort of purred, and he fairly jumped and grabbed Winnie by the wrist. He pulled her along toward the trail, and I heard her whimper.

"Stop him!" I bawled, but they stood and looked, scared and dumb. Mr. Onselm, still holding Winnie, faced me. He lifted his free hand, with the pink forefinger sticking out like the barrel of a pistol.

Just the look he gave me made me weary and dizzy.

He was going to hoodoo me, like he'd done the mules, like he'd done the woman who tried to hide her cake from him. I turned from him, sick and afraid, and I heard him giggle, thinking he'd won already. In the doorway stood the gawky man called Hobe, with the guitar.

I made a long jump at him and started to wrestle it away from him.

"Hang onto it, Hobe," I heard Mr. Onselm sort of choke out, and, from Mr. Bristow:

"There's the Ugly Bird!"

Its wings flapped like a storm in the air behind me. But I'd torn my guitar from Hobe's hands and turned on my heel.

A little way off, Mr. Onselm stood stiff and straight as a stone figure in front of a courthouse. He still held Winnie's wrist. Between them the Ugly Bird came swooping at me, its beak pointing for me like a stabbing bayonet.

I dug in my toes and smashed the guitar at it. Full-slam I struck its bulgy head above the beak and across the eyes, and I heard the polished wood of my music-maker crash to splinters.

And down went the Ugly Bird!

Down it went.

Quiet it lay.

Its great big wings stretched out on either side, without a flutter. Its beak was driven into the ground like a nail. it didn't kick or flop or stir once.

But Mr. Onselm, standing where he stood holding Winnie, screamed out the way you might scream if something had clawed out all your insides with a single tearing grab.

He didn't move, I don't even know if his mouth came open. Winnie gave a pull with all her strength and tottered back, clear of him. And as if only his hold on her had kept him standing, Mr. Onselm slapped over and down on his face, his arms flung out like the Ugly Bird's wings, his face in the dirt like the Ugly Bird's face.

Still holding my broken guitar by the neck like a club, I ran to him and stooped. "Get up," I said, and took hold of what hair he had and lifted his face up.

One look was enough. From the war, I know a dead man when I see one. I let go his hair, and his face went back into the dirt as if it belonged there.

The others moved at last, tottering a few steps closer. And they didn't act like enemies now, for Mr. Onselm who had made them act so was down and dead.

Then Hobe gave a scared shout, and we looked that way.

The Ugly Bird all of a sudden looked rotten mushy, and was soaking into the ground. To me, anyhow, it looked shadowy and misty, and I could see through it. I wanted to move close, then I didn't want to. It was melting away like snow on top of a stove; only no wetness left behind.

It was gone, while we watched and wondered and felt bad all over.

Mr. Bristow knelt and turned Mr. Onselm over. On the dead face ran sick lines across, thin and purple, as though he'd been struck down by a blow of a toaster or a gridiron.

"The guitar strings," said Mr. Bristow, "The silver guitar strings. It finished him, like any hoodoo man."

That was it. Won't a silver bullet kill a witch, or a silver knife a witch's cat? And a silver key locks out ghosts, doesn't it?

"What was the word you said?" whispered Winnie to me.

"Ectoplasm," I told her. "Like his soul coming out—and getting struck dead outside his body."

More important was talk about what to do now. The men decided. They allowed to report to the county seat that Mr. Onselm's heart had stopped on him, which it had. They went over the tale three or four times to make sure they'd all tell it the same. They cheered up as they talked. You never saw gladder people to get rid of a neighbor.

"And, John," said Mr. Bristow, "we'd sure enough be proud if you stayed here. You took this curse off us."

Hobe wanted me to come live on his farm and help him work it on shares. Sam Heaver offered me all the money out of his old cash register. I thanked him and said no, sir, to Hobe I said thank you kindly, I'd better not. If they wanted their story to stick with the sheriff, they'd better forget that I'd been around when Mr. Onselm's heart stopped. All I was sorry for was my broken guitar.

But while we'd talked, Mr. Bristow was gone. He came back, with a guitar from his place, and he acted honored if I'd take it in place of mine. So I tightened my silver strings on it and tried a chord or two.

Winnie swore she'd pray for me by name each night of her life, and I told her that would sure see me safe from any assaults of the devil.

"Assaults of the devil, John!" she said, almost shrill in the voice, she was so earnest. "It's you who drove the devil from this valley."

The others all said they agreed on that.

"It was foretold about you in the Bible," said Winnie, her voice soft again. "There was a man sent from God, whose name was John."

But that was far too much for her to say, and I was that abashed, I said goodbye all around in a hurry. I strummed my new guitar as I walked away, until I got an old song back in my mind. I've heard tell that the song's written in an old-time book called *Percy's Frolics*, or *Relics*, or something:

*Lady, I never loved witchcraft,
Never dealt in privy wile,
But evermore held the high way
Of love and honor, free from guile*

And though I couldn't bring myself to look back to the place I was leaving forever, I knew that Winnie watched me, and that she listened, listened, till she had to strain her ears to catch the last, faintest end of my song.

The Desrick on Yandro

Manly Wade Wellman

The folks at the party clapped me such an encore, I sang that song.

The lady had stopped her car at the roadside when she saw my thumb out and my silver-strung guitar under my arm. Asked me my name, I told her John. Asked where I was headed, I told her nowhere special. Asked could I play that guitar, I played it as we rolled along. Then she invited me most kindly to her country house, to sing to her friends, and they'd be obliged, she said. And I went.

The people there were fired up with what they'd drunk, lots of ladies and men in costly clothes, and I had my bothers not getting drunk, too. But, shoo, they liked what I played and sang. Staying off wornout songs, I smote out what they'd never heard before—*Witch in the Wilderness* and *Rebel Soldier* and *Vandy, Vandy, I've Come to Court You*. When they clapped and hollered for more, I sang the Yandro song, like this:

*I'll build me a desrick on Yandro's high hill,
Where the wild beasts can't reach me or hear my sad cry,
For he's gone, he's gone away, to stay a little while,
But he'll come back if he comes ten thousand miles.*

Then they strung around and made me more welcome than any stranger could call for, and the hostess lady said I must stay to supper, and sleep there that night. But at that second, everybody sort of pulled away, and one man came up and sat down by me.

I'd been aware that, when first he came in, things stilled down, like with little boys when a big bully shows himself. He was built short and broad, his clothes were sporty, cut handsome and costly. His buckskin hair was combed across his head to baffle folks he wasn't getting bald. His round, pink face wasn't soft, and his big, smiling teeth reminded you there was a bony skull under that meat. His pale eyes, like two gravel bits, prodded me and made me remember I needed a haircut and a shine.

"You said Yandro, young man," said this fellow. He said it almost like a charge in court, with me the prisoner.

"Yes, sir. The song's mountainy, not too far from the Smokies. I heard it in a valley, and the highest peak over that valley's called Yandro. Now," I said, "I've had scholar-men argue me it really means yonder—yonder high hill. But the peak's called Yandro. Not a usual name."

"No, John." He smiled toothy and fierce. "Not a usual name. I'm like the peak. I'm called Yandro, too."

"How you, Mr. Yandro?" I said.

"I never heard of that peak or valley, nor, I imagine, did my father before me. But my grandfather—Joris Yandro—came from the Southern mountains. He was young, with small education, but lots of energy and ambition." Mr. Yandro swelled up inside his fancy clothes. "He went to New York, then Chicago. His fortunes prospered. His son—my father—and then I, we contrived to make them prosper still more."

"You're to be honored," I said, my politest; but I judged, with no reason to be sure, that he might not be too honorable about how he made his money, or used it. The way the others drew from him made me reckon he scared them, and that kind of folks scares worst where their money pocket's located.

"I've done all right," he said, not caring who heard the brag. "I don't think anybody for a hundred miles

around here can turn a deal or make a promise without clearing it with me. John, I own this part of the world."

Again he showed his teeth. "You're the first one ever to tell me about where my grandfather might have come from. Yandro's high hill, eh? How do we get there, John?"

I tried to think of the way from highway to side way, side way to trail, and so in and around and over. "I fear," I said, "I could show you better than I could tell you."

"All right, you'll show me," he said, with no notion I might want something different. "I can afford to make up my mind an a moment's notice like that. I'll call the airport and charter a plane. We leave now."

"I asked John to stay tonight," said my hostess lady.

"We leave now," said Mr. Yandro, and she shut right up, and I saw how it was. Everybody was scared of him. Maybe they'd be pleased if I took him out of there for a while.

"Get your plane," I said. "We leave now."

He meant that thing. Not many hours had died before the hired plane set us down at the airport between Asheville and Hendersonville. A taxi rode us into Hendersonville. Mr. Yandro woke up a used car man and bought a fair car from him. Then, on my guiding, Mr. Yandro took out in the dark for that part of the mountains I pointed out to him.

The sky stretched over us with no moon at all, only a many stars, like little stitches of blazing thread in a black quilt. For real light, only our headlamps—first on a paved road twining around one slope and over another and behind a third, then a gravel road and pretty good, then a dirt road and pretty bad.

"What a stinking country!" said Mr. Yandro as we chugged along a ridge as lean as a butcher knife.

I didn't say how I resented that word about a country that stoops to none for prettiness. "Maybe we ought to have waited till day," I said.

"I never wait," he sniffed. "Where's the town?"

"No town. Just the valley. Three-four hours away. We'll be there by midnight."

"Oh, God. Let's have some of that whiskey I brought." He reached for the glove compartment, but I shoved his hand away.

"Not if you're going to drive these mountain roads, Mr. Yandro."

"Then you drive a while, and I'll take a drink."

"I don't know how to drive a car, Mr. Yandro."

"Oh, God," he said again, and couldn't have scorned me more if I'd said I didn't know how to wash my face. "What is a desrick, exactly?"

"Only old-aged folks use the word any more. It's the kind of cabin they used to make, strong logs and a door you can bar, and loophole windows. So you could stand off Indians, maybe."

"Or the wild beasts can't reach you," he quoted, and snickered. "What wild beasts do they have up here in the Forgotten Latitudes?"

"Can't rightly say. A few bears, a wildcat or two. Used to be wolves, and a bounty for killing them. I'm not sure what else."

True enough, I wasn't sure about the tales I'd heard. Not anyway when Mr. Yandro was ready to sneer at them for foolishment.

Our narrow road climbed a great slant of rock one way, then doubled back to climb opposite, and became a double rut, with an empty, hell-scary drop of thousands of feet beside the car. Finally Mr. Yandro edged us into a sort of nick beside the road and shut off the power. He shook. Fear must have been a new feel in his bones.

"Want some of the whiskey, John?" he asked, and drank.

"Thank you, no. We walk from here, anyway. Beyond's the valley."

He grumped and mad-whispered, but out he got. I took a flashlight and my silver-strung guitar and led out. It was a downways walk, on a narrow trail where even mules would be nervous. And not quiet enough to be easy.

There were mountain night noises, like you never get used to, not even if you're born and raised there, and live and die there. Noises too soft and sneaky to be real murmuring voices. Noises like big flapping wings far off and then near. And, above and below the trail, noises like heavy soft paws keeping pace with you, sometimes two paws, sometimes four, sometimes many. They stay with you, noises like that all the hours you grope along the night trail, all the way down to the valley so low, till you bless God for the little crumb of light that means a human home, and you ache and pray to get to that home, be it ever so humble, so you'll be safe in the light.

I've wondered since if Mr. Yandro's constant blubber and chatter was a string of curses or a string of prayers.

The light we saw was a pine-knot fire inside a little coop above the stream that giggled in the valley bottom. The door was open, and someone sat on the threshold.

"Is that a desrick?" panted and puffed Mr. Yandro.

"No, it's newer made. There's Miss Tully at the door, sitting up to think."

Miss Tully remembered me and welcomed us. She was eighty or ninety, without a tooth in her mouth to clamp her stone-bowl pipe, but she stood straight as a pine on the split-slab floor, and the firelight showed no gray in her tight-combed black hair. "Rest your hats," said Miss Tully. "So this stranger man's name is Mr. Yandro. Funny, you coming just now. You're looking for the desrick on Yandro, it's still right where it's been," and she pointed with her pipe stem off into the empty dark across the valley and up.

Inside, she gave us two chairs bottomed with juniper bark and sat on a stool next to the shelf with herbs in pots, and one or two old paper books, *The Long Lost Friend* and *Egyptian Secrets*, and *Big Albert* the one they say can't be thrown away or given away, only got rid of by burying with a funeral prayer,

like a human corpse. "Funny," she said again, "you coming along as the seventy-five years are up."

We questioned, and she told us what we'd come to hear. "I was just a little pigtail girl back then," she said, "when Joris Yandro courted Polly Wiltse, the witch girl. Mr. Yandro, you favor your grandsire a right much. He wasn't as stout-built as you, and younger by years, when he left."

Even the second time hearing it, I listened hard. it was like a many such tale at the start. Polly Wiltse was sure enough a witch, not just a study-witch like Miss Tully, and Polly Wiltse's beauty would melt the heart of nature and make a dumb man cry out, "Praise God Who made her!" But none dared court her save only Joris Yandro, who was handsome for a man like she was lovely for a girl. For it was his wish to get her to show him the gold on top of the mountain named for his folks, that only Polly Wiltse and her witching could find.

"Certain sure there's gold in these mountains," I answered Mr. Yandro's interrupting question. "Before ever the California rush started, folks mined and minted gold in these parts, the history-men say."

"Gold," he repeated, both respectful and greedy. "I was right to come."

Miss Tully said that Joris Yandro coaxed Polly Wiltse to bring down gold to him, and he carried it away and never came back. And Polly Wiltse pined and mourned like a sick bird, and on Yandro's top she built her desrick. She sang the song, the one I'd sung, it was part of a long spell and charm. Three quarters of a century would pass, seventy-five years, and her lover would come back.

"But he didn't," said Mr. Yandro. "My grandfather died up north."

"He sent his grandson, who favors him," said Miss Tully. "The song you heard brought you back at the right time." She thumbed tobacco into her pipe. "All the Yandro kin moved away, pure down scared of Polly Wiltse's singing."

"In her desrick, where the wild beasts can't reach her," quoted Mr. Yandro, and chuckled. "John says they have bears and wildcats up here." He expected her to say I was stretching it.

"Oh, there's other creatures, too. Scarce animals, like the Toiler."

"The Toiler?" he said.

"It's the hugest flying thing there is, I guess," said Miss Tully. "Its voice tolls like a bell, to tell other creatures their feed's near. And there's the Flat. It lies level with the ground, and not much higher. It can wrap you like a blanket." She lighted the pipe. "And the Bammat. Big, the Bammat is."

"The Behemoth, you mean," he suggested.

"No, the Behemoth's in the Bible. The Bammat's something hairy-like, with big ears and a long wiggly nose and twisty white teeth sticking out of its mouth—"

Oh!" And Mr. Yandro trumpeted his laughter. "You've got some story about the Mammoth. Why, they've been extinct—dead and forgotten—for thousands of years."

"Not for so long, I've heard tell," she said, puffing.

"Anyway," he went on arguing, "the Mammoth—the Bammat, as you call it—is of the elephant family."

How would anything like that get up in the mountains?"

"Maybe folks hunted it there," said Miss Tully, "and maybe it stays there so folks will think it's dead and gone a thousand years. And there's the Behinder."

"And what," said Mr. Yandro, "might the Behinder look like?"

"Can't rightly say, Mr. Yandro. For it's always behind the man or woman it wants to grab. And there's the Skim—it kites through the air—and the Culverin, that can shoot pebbles with its mouth."

"And you believe all that?" sneered Mr. Yandro, the way he always sneered at everything, everywhere.

"Why else should I tell it?" she replied. "Well, Sir, you're back where your kin used to live, in the valley where they named the mountain for them. I can let you two sleep on my front stoop tonight."

"I came to climb the mountain and see the desrick," said Mr. Yandro with that anxious hurry to him that I kept wondering about.

"You can't climb up there until it's light," she told him, and she made us two quilt pallets on the split-slab stoop.

I was tired and glad to stretch out, but Mr. Yandro grumbled, as if we were wasting time. At sunup next morning, Miss Tully fried us some side meat and slices of hominy grit porridge, and she fixed us a snack to carry, and a gourd to put water in. Mr. Yandro held out a ten dollar bill.

"No, I thank you " said Miss Tully. "I bade you stay, and I won't take money for that."

"Oh, everybody takes money from me " he snickered, and threw it on the door-sill at her feet. "Go on, it's yours."

Quick as a weasel, Miss Tully's hand grabbed a stick of stove wood.

"Lean down and take back that money-bill, Mister," she said.

He did as she told him. With the stick she pointed out across the stream that ran through the thickets below us, and up the height beyond. She acted as if there wasn't any trouble a second before.

"That's the Yandro Mountain," she said. "There, on the highest point, where it looks like the crown of a hat, thick with trees all the way up, stands the desrick built by Polly Wiltse. You look close, with the sun rising, and you can maybe make it out."

I looked hard. There for sure it was, far off and high up, and tiny, but I could see it. It looked a lean sort of a building.

"How about trails going up?" I asked her.

"There's trails up there John, but nobody walks them."

"Now, now," said Mr. Yandro, "if there's a trail, somebody must walk it."

"May be a lot in what you say, but I know nobody in this valley would set foot to such a trail. Not with

what they say's up there."

He laughed at her, as I wouldn't have dared. "You mean the Bammat," he said. "And the Flat, and the Skim, and the Culverin."

"And the Toller," she added for him. "And the Behinder. Only a gone gump would go up there."

We headed away down to the waterside, and crossed on logs laid on top of rocks. On the far side a trail led along, and when the sun was an hour higher we were at the foot of Yandro's high hill and a trail went up there, too.

We rested. Mr. Yandro needed rest worse than I did. Moving most of the night before, unused to walking and climbing, he had a gaunted look to his heavy face, and his clothes were sweated, and dust dulled out his shoes. But he grinned at, me.

"So she's waited seventy-five years, he said, "and so I look like the man she's waiting for. And so there's gold up there. More gold than my grandfather could have carried off."

"You believe what you've been hearing," I said, and it was a mystery.

"John, a wise man knows when to believe the unusual, and how it will profit him. She's up there, waiting, and so is the gold."

"What when you find it?" I asked.

"My grandfather was able to go off and leave her. It sounds like a good example to me." He grinned wider and toothier. "I'll give you part of the gold.

"No thanks, Mr. Yandro."

"You don't want your pay? Why did you come here with me?"

"Just made up my mind on a moment's notice, like you."

He scowled then, but he looked up at the height. "How long will it take to climb, John?"

"Depends on how fast we climb, how well we keep up the pace."

"Then let's go," and he started UP the trail.

It wasn't folks' feet had worn that trail. I saw a hoofmark.

"Deer," grunted Mr. Yandro; and I said, "Maybe."

We scrambled up on a rightward slant, then leftward. The trees marched in close around us, with branches above that filtered only soft green light. Something rustled, and we saw a brown, furry shape, big as a big cat, scuttling out of sight.

"Woodchuck," wheezed Mr. Yandro; again I said, "Maybe."

After an hour's working upward we rested, and after two hours more we rested again. Around 11

o'clock we reached an open space where clear light touched the middle, and there we sat on a log and ate the corn bread and smoked meat Miss Tully had fixed. Mr. Yandro mopped his face with a fancy handkerchief, and gobbled food for strength to glitter his eye at me. "What are you glooming about?" he said. "You look as if you'd call me a name if you weren't afraid."

"I've held my tongue," I said "by way of manners, not fear. I'm just thinking about how and why we came so far and sudden to this place."

"You sang me a song, and I heard, and thought I'd come to where my people originated. Now I have a hunch about profit. That's enough for you."

"It's not just that gold story," I said. "You're more than rich enough."

"I'm going up there," said Mr. Yandro, "because, by God, that old hag down there said everybody's afraid to do it. And you said you'd go with me."

"I'll go right to the top with you," I said.

I forebore to say that something had come close and looked from among the trees behind him. It was big and broad-headed, with elephant ears to right and left, and white tusks like bannisters on a spiral staircase. But it was woolly-shaggy, like a buffalo bull. The Bammat. How could such a thing move so quiet-like?

He drank from his whiskey bottle, and on we climbed. We could hear those noises in the woods and brush, behind rocks and down little gulleys, as if the mountain side thronged with living things as thick as fleas on a possum dog and another sight sneakier. I didn't let on I was nervous.

"Why are you singing under your breath?" he grunted after a while.

"I'm not singing," I said. "I need my breath for climbing."

"I hear you!" he charged me, like a lawyer in court.

We'd stopped dead on the trail, and I heard it, too.

It was soft, almost like some half-remembered song in your mind. It was the Yandro song, all right:

*Look away, look away, look away over Yandro,
Where them wild things are flyin'
From bough to bough, and a-mating with their mates,
So why not me with mine?*

"That singing comes from up above us," I told Mr. Yandro.

"Then," he said, "we must be nearly at the top."

As we started climbing again, I could hear the noises to right and left in the woods, and then I realized

they'd quieted down when we stopped. They moved when we moved, they waited when we waited. There were lots of them. Soft noises, but lots of them.

Which is why I myself, and probably Mr. Yandro too, didn't pause any more on the way up, even on a rocky stretch where we had to climb on all fours. It may have been an hour after noon when we came to the top.

Right there was a circle-shaped clearing, with the trees thronged around it all the way except an open space toward the slope. Those trees had mist among and between them, quiet and fluffy, like spider webbing. And at the open space, on the lip of the way down, perched the desrick.

Old-aged was what it looked. It stood high and looked the higher, because it was built so narrow of unnotched logs, set four above four, hogpen fashion, as tall as a tall tobacco barn. The spaces between the logs were clinked shut with great masses and wads of clay. The steep pitched roof was of shingles, cut long and narrow, so that they looked almost like thatch. There was one big door, made of an axe-chopped plank, and the hinges must have been inside, for I could see none. And one window, covered with what must have been rawhide scraped thin, with a glow of soft light coming through.

"That's it," puffed Mr. Yandro. "The desrick."

I looked at him then, and knew what most he wanted on this earth. He wanted to be boss. Money was just something to greaten him. His idea of greatness was bigness. He wanted to do all the talking, and have everybody else do the listening. He had his eyes hung on that desrick, and he licked his lips, like a cat over a dish of cream.

"Let's go in," he said.

"Not where I'm not invited," I told him, as flatly as anybody could ever tell him. "I said I'd come to the top. This is the top."

"Come with me," he said. "My name's Yandro. This mountain's name is Yandro. I can buy and sell every man, woman and child in this part of the country. If I say it's all right to go into a house, it's all right to go into a house."

He meant that thing. The world and everybody in it was just there to let him walk on. He took a step toward the desrick. Somebody hummed inside, not the words of the song, but the tune. Mr. Yandro snorted at me, to show how small he reckoned me because I held back, and he headed toward the big door.

"If she's there, she'll show me the gold," he said.

But I couldn't have moved from where I stood at the edge of the clearing. I was aware of a sort of closing in all around the edge, among the trees and brushy clumps. Not that the closing in could be seen, but there was *agong-gong* farther off, the voice of the Toiler norrating to the other creatures their feed was near. And above the treetops sailed a round, flat thing, like a big plate being pitched high. A Skim. Then another Skim. And the blood inside my body was cold and solid as ice, and my voice turned to a handful of sand in my throat.

I knew, plain as paint, that if I tried to back up, to turn around even, my legs would fail and I'd fall down. With fingers like twigs with sleet stuck to them, I dragged around my guitar, to pluck at the silver strings, because silver is protection, against evil.

But I didn't. For out of the bushes near me the Bammat stuck its broad woolly head, and it shook that head at me once, for silence. It looked me between the eyes steadier than a beast should look at a man, and shook its head. I wasn't to make any noise. And I didn't. When the Bammat saw that I'd be quiet, it paid me no more mind, and I knew I wasn't to be included in what would happen then.

Mr. Yandro was knocking at the axe-chopped door. He waited, and knocked again. I heard him growl, something about how he wasn't used to waiting for people to answer his knock.

Inside, the humming had died out. After a moment, Mr. Yandro moved around to where the window was, and picked at the rawhide.

I could see, but he couldn't, as around from behind the corner of the desrick flowed something. It lay out on the ground like a broad, black, short-furred carpet rug. But it moved, humping and then flattening out, the way a measuring worm moves. It moved pretty fast, right toward Mr. Yandro from behind and to one side. The Toller said *gong-gong-gong*, from closer in.

"Anybody in there?" bawled Mr. Yandro. "Let me in!"

The crawling carpet brushed its edge against his foot. He looked down at it, and his eyes stuck out all of a sudden, like two door knobs. He knew what it was, and named it at the top of his voice.

"The Flat!"

Humping against him, it tried to wrap around his foot and leg. He gasped out something I'd never want written down for my last words, and pulled loose and ran, fast and straight, toward the edge of the clearing.

Gong-gong, said the Toller and Mr. Yandro tried to slip along next to the trees. But, just ahead of him, the Culverin hove itself half into sight on its many legs. It pointed its needle-shaped mouth and spit a pebble. I heard the pebble ring on Mr. Yandro's head. He staggered against a tree. And I saw what nobody's ever supposed to see.

The Behinder flung itself on his shoulders. Then I knew why nobody's supposed to see one. I wish I hadn't. To this day I can see it, as plain as a fence at noon, and forever I will be able to see it. But talking about it's another matter. Thank you, I won't try.

Then everything else was out—the Bammat, the Culverin, and all the others. They were hustling him across toward the desrick, and the door moved slowly and quietly open for him to come in.

As for me, I was out of their minds, and I hoped and prayed they wouldn't care if I just went on down the trail as fast as I could set one foot below the other.

Scrambling and scrambling down, without a noise to keep me company, I figured that I'd probably had my unguessed part in the whole thing. Seventy-five years had to pass, and then Mr. Yandro come there to the desrick. And it needed me, or somebody like me, to meet him and sing the song that would put it in his head and heart to come to where his granddaddy had courted Polly Wiltse, just as though it was his own whim.

No. No, of course, he wasn't the man who had made Polly Wiltse love him and then had left her. But he was the man's grandson, of the same blood and the same common, low-down, sorry nature that wanted

money and power, and didn't care who he hurt so he could have both. And he looked like Joris Yandro. Polly Wiltse would recognize him.

I haven't studied much about what Polly Wiltse was like, welcoming him into the desrick on Yandro, after waiting inside for three quarters of a century. Anyway, I never heard of him following me down. Maybe he's been missed. But I'll lay you anything you name he's not been mourned.

Vandy, Vandy

Manly Wade Wellman

That valley hadn't any name. Such outside folks as knew about it just said "Back in yonder," and folks inside said, "Here." The mail truck dropped a few letters in a hollow tree next to a ridge where a trail went up and over and down. Three, four times a year bearded men in homemade clothes and shoes fetched out their makings—clay dishes and pots, mostly, for dealers to sell to tourists. They carried back coffee, salt, gunpowder, a few nails. Things like that.

It was a day's scramble on that ridge trail, I vow, even with my long legs and no load but my silver-strung guitar. No lumberman had ever cut the thick, big old trees. I quenched my thirst at a stream and followed it down. Near sunset, I heard music jangling.

Fire shone out through an open cabin door, to where folks sat on a stoop log and frontyard rocks. One had a guitar, another fiddled, and hands slapped so a boy about ten or twelve could jig. Then they all spied me and fell quiet. They looked, and didn't know me.

"That was pretty, ladies and gentlemen," I said, but nobody remarked.

A long-bearded old man with one suspender and no shoes held the fiddle on his knee. I reckoned he was the grandsire. A younger, shorter-bearded man with the guitar might be his son. There was a dry old mother, there was the son's plump wife, there was a younger yellow-haired girl, and there was that dancing little grandboy.

"What can we do for you, young sir?" asked the old man. Not that he sounded like doing anything—mountain folks say that even to the government man who's come hunting a still on their place.

"Why," I said, "I sort of want a place to sleep."

"Right much land to stretch out on yonder," said the guitar man.

I tried again. "I heard you all playing first part of *Fire in the Mountains*."

"Is they two parts?" That was the boy, before anyone could silence him.

"Sure enough, son," I said. "Let me show you the second part."

The old man opened his beard, likely to say wait till I was asked, but I strummed my own guitar into second part, best I knew how. Then I played first part through, and, "You sure God can pick that," said the short-bearded one. "Do it again."

I did it again. When I reached second part, the old man sawed fiddle along with me. We went around *Fire in the Mountains* once more, and the ladyfolks clapped hands and the boy jiggled. Still nobody smiled, but when we stopped the old man made me a nod.

"Sit on that rock," he said. "What might we call you?"

"My name's John," I told him.

"I'm Tewk Millen. Mother, I reckon John's a-tired, coming from outside. He might relish a gourd of cold water."

"We're just before having a bite the old lady said to me. "Ain't but just smoke meat and beans, but you're welcome."

"I'm sure honored, Mrs. Millen," I said. "But it's a trouble."

"No trouble," said Mr. Tewk Millen. "Let me make you known to my son Heber and his wife Jill, and this here is boy Calder."

"Proud to know you," they all said.

"And my girl Vandy " Mr. Tewk finished.

I looked at her hair like yellow corn silk and her eyes like purple violets. "Vandy?" I said after her father.

Shy, she dimpled at me. "I know it's a scarce name, Mr. John, I never heard it anywhere but among my kinfolks."

"I have," I said, "and it's what brought me here."

Mr. Tewk Millen looked funny above his whiskers. "Thought you said you was a young stranger man."

"I heard the name outside in a song, sir. Somebody allowed the song's known here. I'm a singer. I go far after a good song." I looked around. "Do you all know that Vandy song, folks?"

"Yes, Sir," said little Calder, but the others studied a minute. Mr. Tewk rubbed up a leaf of tobacco into his pipe.

"Calder," he said, "go in and fetch me a chunk of fire to light up with. John, you certain you never met my daughter Vandy?"

"Certain sure," I made reply. "Only I can figure how ary young fellow might come a far piece to meet her."

She stared down at her hands where she sat. "We learnt the song from papa," she half-whispered, "and he learnt it from his papa—"

"And my papa learnt it from his," Mr. Tewk finished for her. "It goes a way back, that song, I figure."

I'd sure enough relish hearing it," I said.

"After you heard it," said Mr. Tewk. "After you learnt it, what would you do?"

"Why," I said, "I reckon I'd go back outside and sing it some,"

I could see that's what he wanted to hear.

"Heber," he told his son, "you pick it out and I'll scrape this fiddle, and Calder and Vandy can sing it for John."

They played the tune once without words. The notes were put together strangely, in what schooled folks call minors. But other folks, better schooled yet, say such tunes sound strange and lonesome because in old times folks had another note scale from our do-re-mi-fa today. And little Calder piped up, high and young but strong:

*Vandy, Vandy, I've come to court you,
Be you rich or be you poor,
And if you'll kindly entertain me,
I will love you forever more.*

*Vandy, Vandy, I've gold and silver,
Vandy, Vandy, I've a house and land,
Vandy, Vandy, I've a world of pleasure,
I would make you a handsome man.*

He got that far, singing for the fellow come courting, and Vandy sang back the reply, sweet as a bird:

*I love a man who's in the army,
He's been there for seven long year,
And if he's there for seven year longer,
I won't court no other dear.*

*What care I for your gold and silver,
What care I for—*

She stopped, and the guitar and fiddle stopped, and was like the death of sound. The leaves didn't rustle in the trees, nor the fire didn't stir on the hearth inside. They all looked with their mouths half open, where

somebody stood with his hands crossed on the gold knob of a black cane and grinned all on one side of his toothy mouth.

Maybe he came up the down-valley trail, maybe he'd dropped from a tree like a possum. He was built spry and slim, with a long coat buttoned to his pointed chin, and brown pants tucked into elastic-sided boots, like what your grandsire had. His hands on the cane looked slim and strong. His face, bar its crooked smile, might be handsome. His dark brown hair curled like buffalo wool, and his eyes were the shiny pale gray of a new knife. Their gaze crawled all over the Millens and he laughed a slow, soft laugh.

"I thought I'd stop by," he crooned, "if I haven't worn out my welcome."

"Oh, *nosir!*" said Mr. Tewk, standing up on his two bare feet, fiddle in hand. "No sir, Mr. Loden, we're proud to have you, mighty proud," he jabber-squawked, like a rooster caught by the leg. "You sit down, sir, make yourself easy."

Mr. Loden sat down on the seat-rock Mr. Tewk had left and Mr. Tewk found a place on the stoop log by his wife, nervous as a boy stealing apples.

"Your servant, Mrs. Millen," said Mr. Loden. "Heber, you look well, and your good wife. Calder, I brought you candy."

His slim hand offered a bright striped stick, red and low. You'd think a country child would snatch it. But Calder took it slow and scared, as he'd take a poison snake. You'd think he'd decline if he dared.

"For you, Mr. Tewk," went on Mr. Loden, "I've fetched some of my tobacco. An excellent weed." He handed Mr. Tewk a pouch of soft brown leather. "Empty your pipe. Enjoy it, Sir."

"Thank you kindly," said Mr. Tewk, and sighed and began to do what he'd been ordered.

"And Miss Vandy." Mr. Loden's croon petted her name. "I wouldn't venture here without hoping you'd receive a trifle at my hands."

He dangled it from a chain, a gold thing the size of his pink thumbnail. In it shone a white jewel, that grabbed the firelight and twinkled red.

"Do me the honor, Miss Vandy, to let it rest on your heart, that I may envy it."

She took the jewel and sat with it between her soft little hands. Mr. Loden turned his eye-knives on me. "Now," he said, "we come around to the stranger within your gates."

"Yes, we come around to me," I agreed, hugging my guitar on my knee. "My name's John, Mr. Loden."

"Where are you from, John?" It was sudden, almost fierce, like a lawyer in a courtroom.

"From nowhere," I said.

"Meaning, from everywhere," he supplied me. "What do you do?"

"I wander," I said. "I sing songs. I mind my own business and watch my manners."

"*Touché!*" he cried in a foreign tongue, and smiled on that same side of his mouth. "You oblige me to

remember how sometimes I err in my speech. My duties and apologies, John. I'm afraid my country ways seem rude at times, to world travellers. No offense."

"None taken," I said, and kept from adding on that real country ways were polite ways.

"Mr. Loden," put in Mr. Tewk again, "I make bold to offer you what poor rations my old woman's made—"

"Sir," Mr. Loden broke him off, "they're good enough for the best man living. I'll help Mrs. Millen prepare them. After you, ma'am."

She walked in, and he followed, What he said there was what happened.

"Miss Vandy," he said next, "you might help us."

She went in, too. Dishes clattered. Through the open door I saw Mr. Loden put a tweak of powder in the skillet on the fire. The menfolks sat outside and said nothing. They might have been nailed down, with stones in their mouths. I studied about what could make a proud, honorable mountain family so scared of a guest and I knew there was only the one thing. And that one thing wouldn't be just a natural thing. It would be a thing beyond nature or the world.

Finally little Calder said, "Maybe we can finish the song after a while," and his voice was a weak young voice now.

"I recollect about another song from here," I said. "About the fair and blooming wife."

Those closed mouths all snapped open, then shut again. Touching the guitar's silver strings, I began:

*There was a fair and blooming wife
And of children she had three.
She sent them away to Northern school
To study gramaree.*

*But the King's men came upon that school,
And when sword and rope had done,
Of the children three she sent away,
Returned to her but one. . . .*

"Supper's made," said Mrs. Millen from inside.

We all went in to where there was a trestle table and a clean homewoven cloth and clay dishes set out. Mr. Loden, by the pots at the fire, waved for Mrs. Millen and Vandy to dish up the food.

It wasn't smoke meat and beans I saw on my plate. Whatever it was, it wasn't that. Everyone looked at their helps of food, but not even Calder took any till Mr. Loden sat down, half-smiling.

"Why," he said, "one would think you feared poison."

Then Mr. Tewk forked up a big bait and put it into his beard. Calder did likewise, and the others. I took a mouthful and it sure enough tasted good.

"Let me honor your cooking, sir," I told Mr. Loden. "It's like witch magic."

His eyes came on me, as I knew they'd come after that word. He laughed, so short and sharp everybody jumped.

"John, you sang a song from this valley," he said. "About the blooming wife with three children who went north to study gramaree. John, do you know what gramaree means?"

"Grammar," spoke up Calder. "The right way to talk."

"Hush," whispered his father and he hushed.

"I've heard, sir," I replied to Mr. Loden; "gramaree is witch stuff, witch knowledge and magic and power. That Northern school could be only one place."

"What place, John?" he almost sang under his breath.

"A Massachusetts Yankee town called Salem, sir. Around 300 years back—"

"Not by so much," said Mr. Loden. "In 1692, John."

I waited a breath and everybody stared above those steaming plates.

"Sixteen ninety-two," I agreed. "A preacher man named Cotton Mather found them teaching witch stuff to children. I hear tell they killed twenty folks, and mostly the wrong folks, but two, three were sure enough witches."

"George Burroughs," said Mr. Loden, half to himself. "Martha Carrier. And Bridget Bishop. They were real. Others got away safely, and one of the young children of the three. Somebody owed that child the two lost young lives of his brothers, John."

"I call to mind something else I heard," I said. "They scare young folks with the story outside here. The one child lived to be a hundred years old. And his son had a hundred years of life, and his son's son had a hundred years more. Maybe that's why I thought the witch school at Salem was 300 years past."

"Not by so much," he said again. "Even give the child that got away the age of Calder there, it would be only about 270 years."

He was daring any of Mr. Tewk's family to speak up or even breathe heavy, and nobody took the dare.

"From 300, that leaves 30 years," I figured. "A lot can be done in 30 years, Mr. Loden."

"That's the naked truth," he said, his eye-knives on Vandy's young face, and he got up and bowed all around. "I thank you all for your hospitality. I'll come again if I may."

"Yes, sir," said Mr. Tewk in a hurry, but Mr. Loden looked at Vandy, waiting.

"Yes, sir," she told him, as if it would choke her.

He took up his gold-headed cane and gazed at me a hard gaze. Then I did a rude thing, but it was all I could think of.

"I don't feel right, not paying for what you all gave me," I allowed, getting up myself. From my dungaree pocket I took a silver quarter and dropped it on the table, almost in front of Mr. Loden.

"Take it away!" he squeaked, almost like a bat, and out of the house he was gone, bat-swift and bat-sudden.

The others sat and gopped after him. The night was thick outside, like black wool around the cabin. Mr. Tewk cleared his throat.

"John, you're better brought up than that," he said. "We don't take money from nobody we bid to eat with us. Pick it up."

"Yes, sir," I said. "I ask pardon, sir."

Putting away the quarter, I felt a trifle better. I'd done that once before with a silver quarter. I'd scared a man named Onselm almost out of his black art. So Mr. Loden was another witch man, and so he could be scared, too. I reckon I was foolish to think it was as easy as that.

I walked outside, leaving Mrs. Millen and Vandy doing up the dishes. The firelight showed me the stoop log to sit on. I touched my silver guitar strings and began to pick out the *Vandy, Vandy* tune, soft and gentle. After while, Calder came out and sat beside me and sang the words. I liked best the last verse:

*Wake up, wake up! The dawn is breaking,
Wake up, wake up! It's almost day.
Open up your doors and your divers windows,
See my true love march away . . .*

Calder finished, and then he said, "Mr. John, I never made out what divers windows is."

"An old time word," I said. "It means different kinds of windows. Another thing proves it's a mighty old song. A man seven years in the army must have gone to the war with the English, the first one. It lasted longer here in the south than other places, from 1775 to 1782. I figured a moment. "How old are you, Calder?"

"Rising onto ten."

"Big for your age. A boy your years in 1692 would be 90 in 1782 if he lived, what time the English war was near done and somebody or other had served seven years in the army."

"In Washington's army," said Calder, to himself. "King Washington."

"King who?" I asked.

"Mr. Loden calls him King Washington. The man that hell-drove the English soldiers and rules in his own name town."

That's what they must think in that valley. I never said that Washington was no king but a president, and that he'd died and gone to rest when his work was done and his country safe. I kept thinking about somebody 90 years old in 1782, courting a girl with her true love seven years marched away in the army.

"Calder," I said, "don't the *Vandy*, *Vandy* song tell about your own folks?"

He looked into the cabin, where nobody listened, then into the black-wool darkness. I struck a chord on the silver strings. Then he said, "Yes, Mr. John, so I've heard tell."

I hushed the strings with my hand and he talked on.

"I reckon you've heard lots of this, or guessed it. About that witch child that lived to a hundred—he came courting a girl named Vandy, but she was a good girl."

"Bad folks sometimes come to court good ones," I said.

"But she wouldn't have him, not with all his money and land. And when he pressed her, her soldier man came home, with his discharge writing in his hand, and on it King Washington's name, he was free from soldiering. He was Hosea Tewk, my grandsire some few times removed. And my own grandsire's mother was Vandy Tewk, and my sister is Vandy Millen."

"How about the hundred-year witch man?"

Calder looked around again. Then he said, "He had to get somebody else, I reckon, to birth him a son before his hundred years was gone and he died. We think that son married at another hundred years, and his son is Mr. Loden the grandson of the first witch man."

"I see. Now, your grandsire's mother, Vandy Tewk. How old would she be, Calder?"

"She's dead and gone, but she was born the first year her pa was off fighting the Yankees."

Eighteen sixty-one, then. In 1882, end of the second hundred years, she'd be ripe for the courting. "And she married a Millen," I said. "Yes, sir. Even when the Mr. Loden that lived then tried to court her. But she married Mr. Washington Millen."

"Washington" I said. "Named after the man who whipped the English."

"He was my great-grandsire and he feared nothing, like King Washington."

I picked a silver string. "No witch man got the first Vandy," I reminded him. "Nor the second Vandy."

"A witch man wants the Vandy that's here now," said Calder. "Mr. John, I'm right sorry you won't steal her away from him."

I got up. "Tell your folks I've gone for a night walk."

"Not to Mr. Loden's." He got up, too. His face was pale beside me. "He won't let you come."

The night was more than black, it was solid. No sound in it and no life. I won't say I couldn't have stepped off into it, but I didn't. I sat down again. Mr. Tewk spoke my name, then Vandy. We all sat in front of the cabin and spoke about weather and crops. Vandy was at my one side, Calder at the other. We sang—*Dream True*, I recollect, and *Rebel Soldier*. Vandy sang the sweetest I ever heard, but as I played I couldn't but think somebody listened in the blackness. If it was on Yandro Mountain and not in that valley, I'd have figured the Behinder sneaking close, or the Flat under our feet. But Vandy sounded happy, her violet eyes looked at me, her rose lips smiled.

Finally Vandy and Mrs. Millen said good night and went into a back room. Heber and his wife and Calder laddered up into the loft. Mr. Tewk offered me a pallet bed by the fire.

"I want to sleep at the door," I told him.

He looked at me, at the door, and, "Have it your way," he said.

I pulled off my shoes. I said a prayer and stretched out on the quilt he gave me. But when all others slept, I lay and listened.

Hours afterward, the sound came. The fire was just a coal ember, red light was soft in the cabin when I heard the snicker. Mr. Loden stooped over me at the door sill, and couldn't come closer.

"You can't get in," I said to him.

"Oh, you're awake," he said. "The others are asleep. They'll stay so, by my doing. And you won't move, any more than they will."

I couldn't sit up. It was like being dried into clay, like a frog or a lizard that must wait for the rain.

"Bind," he said to someone over me. "Bind, bind. Unless you can count the stars, or the drops in the ocean, be bound."

It was a spell-saying. "From the *Long-Lost Friend*?" I asked.

"Albertus Magnus," he answered, "or the book they say he wrote."

"I've seen the book."

You'll stay where you lie till sunrise. Then—"

I tried to get up. It was no use.

"See this?" He held it to my face. It was my picture, drawn true to me. He had the drawing gift. "At sunrise I'll strike it with this."

He laid the picture on the ground. Then he brought forward his gold-headed cane. He twisted the handle, and out of the cane's inside came a blade of pale iron, thin and mean as a snake. There was writing on it, but I couldn't read in that poor light.

"I touch my point to your picture," Mr. Loden said, and you won't bother Vandy or me. I should have done that to Hosea Tewk."

"Hosea Tewk," I said after him, "or Washington Millen."

The tip of his blade wiggled in front of my eyes. "Don't say that name, John."

"Washington Millen," I said it again. "Named after George Washington. Why don't you like George Washington's name? Did you know him?"

He took a long, mean breath, as if cold rain fell on him. "You've guessed what these folks haven't guessed, John."

I've guessed you're not a witch man's grandson, but a witch woman's son," I said. "You got away from that Salem school in 1692. You've lived near 300 years, and when they're over, you know where you'll go."

His blade hung over my throat, like a wasp over a ripe peach. Then he drew it back. "No," he told himself. "The Millens would know I stabbed you. Let them think you died in your sleep."

"You knew Washington," I said over again. "Maybe—"

"Maybe I offered him help, and he was foolish enough to refuse it. Maybe—"

"Maybe Washington scared you away from him," I broke in the way he had, "and maybe he won his war without witch magic. And maybe that was bad for you, because the one who gave you 300 years expected pay—good folks turned into bad folks. Then you tried to win Vandy for yourself. The first Vandy."

"Maybe a little for myself," he half sang, "but mostly for—"

"Mostly for the one who gave you 300 years," I finished another sentence.

Tightening and swelling my muscles, trying to pull loose from what held me down. I might as well have tried to wear my way through solid rock.

"Vandy" Mr. Loden's voice touched her name. "The third Vandy, the sweetest and best. She's like a spring day and like a summer night. When I see her with a bucket at the spring or a basket in the garden, my eyes swim, John. It's as if I see a spirit walking past."

"A good spirit. Your time's short. You want to win her from a good way to a bad way."

"Her voice is like a lark's," he crooned, with the blade low in his hand. "It's like wind over a bank of roses and violets. It's like the light of stars turned into music."

"You want to lead her down to hell," I said.

"Maybe we won't go to hell, or heaven either. Maybe we'll live and live. Why don't you say something about that, John?"

"I'm thinking," I made answer.

And I was. I was trying to remember what I had to remember.

It's in the third part of the Albertus Magnus book Mr. Loden mentioned, the third part full of holy names he sure enough wouldn't read. I'd seen it, as I'd told him. If the words would come back—

Something sent part of them. "The cross in my right hand," I said, too soft for him to hear, "that I may travel the open land. . . ."

"Maybe 300 years more," said Mr. Loden, "without anybody like Hosea Tewk, or Washington Millen, or you, John, coming to stop us. Three hundred years with Vandy, and she'll know the things I know, do the things I do."

I'd been able to twist my right forefinger over my middle one, for the cross in my right hand. I said more words as I remembered:

". . . So must I be loosed and blessed, as the cup and the holy bread. . . ."

Now my left hand could creep along my side as far as my belt. But it couldn't lift up just yet, because I didn't know the rest of the charm.

"The night's black before dawn," Mr. Loden was saying. "I'll make my fire. When I've done what I'll do, I can step over your dead body, and Vandy's mine."

"Don't you fear Washington?" I asked him, and my left fingertips were in my dungaree pocket.

"Will he come from where he is? He's forgotten me."

"Where he is, he remembers you," I allowed.

He was on his knee. His blade point scratched a circle around him on the ground of the dooryard. The circle held him and the paper with my picture. Then he took a sack from his coat pocket, and poured powder into the scratched circle. He stood up, and golden-brown fire jumped around him.

"Now we begin," he told me.

He sketched in the air with his blade. He put his boottoe on my picture. He looked into the golden-brown fire.

"I made my wish before this," he spaced out the words. "I make it now. There was no day when I did not see my wish fulfilled." His eyes shone, paler than the fire. "No son to follow John. No daughter to mourn him."

My fingers in my pocket touched something round and thin. The quarter he'd been scared by, that Mr. Tewk Millen made me take back.

He spoke names I didn't like to hear. "Haade," he said. "Mikaded. Rakeben. Rika. Tasarith. Modeca."

My hand worried out and in it the quarter.

"Tuth," Mr. Loden said. "Tumch. Here with this image I slay—

I lifted my hand, my left hand, three inches and flung the quarter. My heart went rotten with sick despair,

for it didn't hit him—it fell into the fire—

And then up shot white smoke in one place, like a steam-puff from an engine, and the fire had died around everywhere else. Mr. Loden stopped his spellspeaking and wavered back. I saw the glow of his goggling eyes and of his teeth in his open mouth.

Where the steamy smoke had puffed, it made a shape, taller than a man. Taller than Mr. Loden or me, anyway. Wide shouldered, long legged, with a dark tail coat and high boots and hair tied back of its head. It turned, and I saw the big, big nose to its face—

"King Washington!" screamed Mr. Loden, and tried to stab.

But a long hand like a tongs caught his wrist, and I heard the bones break like sticks, and Mr. Loden whinnied like a horse that's been hurt. That was the grip of the man who'd been America's strongest, who could jump twenty-four feet broad or throw a dollar across the Rappahannock or wrestle down his biggest soldier.

The other hand came across, flat and stiff, to strike. It sounded like a door slamming in a high wind, and Mr. Loden never needed to be hit the second time. His head sagged over sideways, and when the grip left his broken wrist he fell at the booted feet.

I sat up, and stood up. The big nose turned to me just a second. The head nodded. Friendly. Then it was gone back into steam, into nothing.

I'd been right. Where George Washington had been, he'd remembered Mr. Loden. And the silver quarter, with his picture on it had struck the fire just when Mr. Loden was conjuring with a picture that he was making real. And there happened what happened.

A pale streak went up the black sky for the first dawn. There was no fire left and no quarter, just a spatter of melted silver. And there was no Mr. Loden, only a mouldy little heap like a rotten stump or a hummock of loam or what might be left of a man that death had caught up with after two hundred years. I picked up his iron blade and broke it on my knee and flung it away into the trees. I picked up the paper with my drawn picture. It wasn't hurt a bit.

I put that picture inside the door on the quilt where I'd lain. Maybe the Millens would keep it to remember me by, after they found I was gone and Mr. Loden didn't come around any more to court Vandy.

I started away, carrying my guitar. I meant to be out of the valley by noontime. As I went, pots started to rattle—somebody was awake in the cabin. And it was hard not to turn back when Vandy sang to herself, not thinking what she sang:

*Wake up, wake up! The dawn is breaking,
Wake up, wake up! It's almost day.
Open up your doors and your divers windows,
See my true love march away. . . .*

One Other

Manly Wade Wellman

Up on Hark Mountain I climbed all alone, by a trail like a ladder. Under my old brogans was sometimes mud, sometimes rock, sometimes rolling gravel. I laid hold on laurel and oak scrub and sourwood and dogwood to help me up the steepest places. Sweat soaked the back of my hickory shirt and under the band of my old hat. Even my silver-strung guitar, bouncing behind me, felt weighty as an anvil. Hark Mountain's not the highest in the South, but it's one of the steepest.

I reckoned I was close to the top, for I heard a murmuring voice up there, a young-sounding woman's voice. All at once she like to yelled out a name, and it was my name.

"John!" she said, and murmured again, and then, "John. . ."

Gentlemen, you can wager I sailed up the last stretch, on hands and knees, to the very top.

On top of Hark Mountain's tipmost top was a pool. Hush, gentlemen, without a stream or a draw or a branch to feed it, where no pool could by nature be expected, was a clear blue pool, bright but not exactly sweet-looking. That highest point of Hark Mountain wasn't bigger, much, than a well-sized farmyard, and it had room for hardly the pool and its rim of tight rocks. And the trees that grew between those tight rocks at its rim looked leafless and gnarled, but alive. Their branch-twigs crooked like claw nails.

Almost in reach of me, by the pool's edge, burned a fire, and tending it knelt a girl.

She was tall, but not strong-built like a country girl. She was slim-built, like a town girl, and she wore town clothes—a white blouse-shirt, and blue jeans fold-rolled high up on her long legs, and soft slipper-shoes on her feet. Her arms and legs and neck were brown as nutmeat, the way fashiony girls seek to be brown. She put a tweak of stuff in the fire, and I saw her long, sharp, red fingernails. My name rose in her speech as she sang, almost:

". . . it is the bones of JOHN that I trouble. I for JOHN burn his laurel."

She put in some laurel leaves. "Even as it crackles and burns, even thus may the flesh of JOHN burn for me."

In went something else. "Even as I melt this wax, with ONE OTHER to aid, so speedily may JOHN for love of me be melted."

From a little clay pot she dripped something.*Drip* , the fire danced.*Drip* , it danced again, jumping up. *Drip* , a third jumpup dance.

"Thrice I pour libation. Thrice, by ONE OTHER, I say the spell. Be it with a friend he tarries, a woman he lingers, may JOHN utterly forget them."

Standing up, she held out something red and wavy that I knew.

"This from JOHN I took, and now I cast it into—"

But quietly I was beside her, and snatched the red scarf away.

"I've been wondering where I lost that," I said, and she turned and faced me.

Slightly I knew her from somewhere. She was yellow-haired, blue-eyed, brown-faced. She had a little bitty nose and a red mouth. Her blue eyes widened almost as wide as the blue pool itself, and she smiled, with big, even white teeth.

"John," she sang, halfway, "I was saying it for the third time, and you came to my call." She licked her red lips. "The way Mr. Howsen promised you would."

I didn't let on to know Mr. Howsen. I stuffed the red scarf into the hip pocket of my blue duckins. "Why were you witch-spelling me? What did I ever do to you? I disremember even where I've met you."

"You don't remember me? Remember Enderby lodge, John."

Of course. A month ago I'd strolled through with my guitar. Old Major Enderby bid me rest my hat awhile. He was having a dance, and to pleasure him I sang for his guests.

"You must have been there," I said. "But what did I do to you?"

Her lips tightened, red and hard and sharp as her nails. "Nothing at all, John. You did nothing, you ignored me. Doesn't it make you furious to be ignored?"

"Ignored? I never notice such a thing."

"I do. I don't often look at a man twice, and usually they look at me at least once. I don't forgive being ignored." Again she licked her mouth, like a cat. "I'd been told a charm can be said three times, beside Bottomless Pool on Hark Mountain, to burn a man's soul with love. And you came when I called. Don't shake your head, John, you're in love with me."

"Sorry. I beg your pardon. I'm not in love with you."

She smiled in pride and scorn, like at a liar. "But you climbed Hark Mountain."

"Reckoned I'd like to see the Bottomless Pool."

"Only people like Mr. Howsen know about the Bottomless Pool. Bottomless pools usually mean the ones near Lake Lure, on Highway 74."

"Those aren't rightly bottomless," I said. "Anyway, I heard about this one, the real one, in a country song. Slinging my guitar forward, I strummed and sang:

*Way up on Hark Mountain
I climb all alone,*

*Where the trail is untravelled
The top is unknown.*

*Way up on Hark Mountain
Is the Bottomless Pool.
You look in its waters
And they mirror a fool.*

"You're making that up," she charged me.

"No, it was made up before my daddy's daddy was born. Most country songs have truth in them. The song brought me here, not your witch-spell."

She laughed, short and sharp, almost a yelp. "Call it the long arm of coincidence, John. You're here, anyway. Look in the water and see whether it mirrors a fool."

Plainly she didn't know the next verse, so I sang that

*You can boast of your learning
And brag of your sense,
It won't make no difference
A hundred years hence.*

Stepping one foot on a poolside rock, I looked in.

It mirrored neither a fool nor a wise man. I could see down forever and ever, and I recollected all I'd ever heard narrated about the Bottomless Pool. How it was blue as the sky, but with a special light of its own; how no water ran into it, excusing some rain, but it stayed full; how you couldn't measure it, you could let down a sinker till the line broke of its own weight.

Though I couldn't spy out the bottom, it wasn't rightly dark down there. Like looking up into blue sky, I looked down into blue water, and in the blue was a many-color shine, like deep lights.

"I didn't need to use the stolen scarf," she said at my elbow. "You're lying about why you came. The spell brought you."

"I'm sorry to say, ma'am," I replied, "I don't even call your name to my mind."

"Do names make a difference if you love me? Call me Annalinda. I'm rich. I've been loved for that alone, and for myself alone."

"I'm plain and poor," I told her. "I was raised hard and put up wet. I don't have more than 60 cents in my old clothes. It wonders me, Miss Annalinda, why you need to bother."

"Because I'm not used to being ignored," she said again.

Down in the Bottomless Pool's blueness wasn't a fish, or a weed of grass. Only that deep-away sparkly flash of lights, changing as you spy changes on a bubble of soap blown by a little child.

Somebody cleared his throat and spoke, "I see the spell I gave you worked, ma'am."

I knew Mr. Howsen as he came up the trail to Hark Mountain's top.

He was purely ugly. I'd been knowing him ten years, and he looked as ugly that minute as the first time I'd seen him, with his mean face and his big hungry nose and the black patch over one eye. When he'd had both his eyes, they were so close together you'd swear he could look through a keyhole with the two of them at once.

"Yes," said Miss Annalinda. "I want to pay you what I owe you."

"No, you pay One Other," said Mr. Howsen, his hands in the pockets of the long black coat he wore summer and winter. "For value received, ma'am. I only passed his word along to you."

He tightened his lips at me, in what wasn't any smile. "John," he said, "you relish journeying. You've relished it since you were just a chap, going what way you felt like. You've seen a right much of this world. But she tolled you to her, and you'll stay with her, and you're obliged to One Other."

"One other what?" I asked him.

Though that was just a defy. Of course, hearing of Hark Mountain and the Bottomless Pool, I'd heard of One Other. That mountain folks say he's got the one arm and the one leg, that he runs on the one leg and grabs with the one arm and what he grabs goes with him into the Bottomless Pool; that it's One Other's power and knowledge that lets witches do their spells next to Bottomless Pool.

"Be here with the lady when One Other asks payment," he said. "That spell was good a many years before Theocritus written it down in Greek. It'll be good when English is as old as Greek is now. It tolled you here."

For the life of me, I couldn't remember seeing Miss Annalinda at Major Enderby's. "My will brought me, not hers," I said. "I wanted to see the Bottomless Pool. I wonder at the soap bubble color in it."

"Ain't any soap in there, John," said Mr. Howsen. "Soap bubbles don't get so big as to have that much color."

"You're rightly sure how big soap bubbles get, Mr. Howsen? Once I heard a science doctor say this whole life of ours, the heaven and the earth, the sun and moon and stars, hold a shape like a big soap bubble. He said it stretched and spread like a soap bubble, all the suns and stars and worlds getting farther apart as time passed."

"Both of you stay where you are," said Mr. Howsen. "One Other will want to find the both of you here."

"But—" Miss Annalinda made out to begin.

"Both of you stay," Mr. Howsen said again, and with his shoe toe he scuffed a mark across the trail. He hawked, and spit on the mark. "Don't cross that line. It would be worse for you than if fire burned you behind and before, inside and out."

Like a lizard he had bobbed over the edge and down the trail.

"Let's go, too," I said to Miss Annalinda, but she stared at the mark of Mr. Howsen's shoe toe, and the healthy blood had paled out from under the tan on her face.

"Pay him no mind," I said. "Let's start, it's toward evening."

"He said not to cross the mark," she reminded me, scared.

"I don't care a shuck for his saying. Come on, Miss Annalinda," and I took her by the arm.

That quick she was fighting me. Holding her arm was like holding the spoke of a runaway wheel. Her other hand racked hide and blood from my cheek, and she tried to bite. I couldn't hang on without hitting her, so I let her go, and she sat on a rock by the poolside and cried into her hands.

"Then I'll have to go alone," I said, and took a step.

"John!" she called, loud and shaky as a horse's whinny. "If you cross that mark, I'll throw myself into this Bottomless Pool!"

Sometimes you can tell a woman means her words. This was such a time. I walked back, and she looked to where the down-sunk sun made the sky's edge red and fiery. It would be cold and dark when the sun went. With trembling brown hands she rolled the blue jeans down her long legs.

"I'll build up the fire," I said, and tried to break a branch from a claw-looking tree.

But it was tough and had thorny stickers. So I went to the edge of the clearing, away from where Mr. Howsen had drawn his mark on us, and found an armful of dead-fallen wood to freshen the fire she'd made for her witching. It blazed up, the color of the setting sun. High in the sky, that grew pale before it would grow dark, slid a big buzzard. Its wings flopped, slow and heavy, spreading their feathers like long fingers.

"You don't believe all this, John," said Miss Annalinda, in a voice that sounded as if she was just before freezing with cold. "But the spell was true. The rest of it's true, too—about One Other. He must have been here since the beginning of time."

"There's one thing peculiar enough to the truth," I answered her. "Nothing's been norrated about One Other until the last year or so. Nothing about his being here at the Bottomless Pool, or about folks being able to do witch stuff, or how he aids the witches and takes payment for his aid. It's no old country tale, it's right new and recent."

"Payment," she said after me. "What kind of payment?"

I poked the fire. "That depends. Sometimes one thing, sometimes another. You notice Mr. Howsen goes around with only one eye. I've heard it sworn that One Other took an eye from him. Maybe he won't want an eye from you, but he'll want something. Something for nothing."

"What do you mean?" and she frowned her brows.

"You witched me to love you, but you don't love me. It was done for spite, not love."

"Why—why—"

Nothing flurries a woman like being caught in the truth. She laid hold on a poolside rock next to her.

"That will smash my head or either my guitar," I gave her warning. "Smash my head, you're up here alone with a dead corpse. Smash my guitar, I'll go down the trail."

"And I'll jump into the pool."

"All right, jump. I won't stay where people throw rocks at me. Fair warning's as good as a promise."

She let go the rock. She was ready to cry again. My foot at the edge, I looked down in the water.

The sky was getting purely dark, but low and away down was that soap bubble shiny light. I remembered an old tale they say came from the Indians that owned the mountains before white folks came. It was about people living above the sky and thinking their world was the only one, till somebody pulled up a big long root, and through the hole they could see another world below, where people lived. Then Miss Annalinda began to talk.

She was talking for company, and she talked about herself. About her rich father and her rich mother, and her rich aunts and uncles, the money and automobiles and land and horses she owned, the big chance of men who wanted to marry her. One was the son of folks as rich as hers. One was the governor of a state, who'd put his wife away if Miss Annalinda said the word. One was a nobleborn man from a foreign country. "And you'd marry me too, John," she said.

"I'm sorry," I said. "Sorry to death. But I wouldn't."

"You're lying, John."

"I never lie, Miss Annahnda."

"Well, talk to me, anyway. This is no place for silence."

I talked in my turn. How I'd been born next to Drowning Creek and baptized in its waters. How my folks had died in two days of each other, how an old teacher lady taught me to read and write, and I taught myself to play the guitar. How I'd roamed and rambled. How I'd fought in the war, and a thousand fell at my side and ten thousand at my right hand, but it hadn't come nigh me. I left out things like meeting up with the Ugly Bird or visiting the desrick on Yandro. I said that though I'd never had anything and never rightly expected to have anything, I'd always made out for bread to eat and sometimes butter on it.

"How about girls, John?" she asked me. "You must have had regiments of them."

"None to mention," I said, for it wouldn't be proper to name them, or the like of that. "Miss Annalinda, it's full dark."

"And the moon's up," she said.

"No, that's the soap bubble light from down in the pool."

"You make me shiver!" she scolded, and drew up her shoulders. "What do you mean with that stuff

about soap bubbles?"

"Only what I told Mr. Howsen. The science man said our whole life, what he called our universe, was swelling and stretching out, so that suns and moons and stars pull farther apart all the time. He said our world and all the other worlds are inside that stretching skin of suds that makes the bubble. We can't study out what's out side the bubble, or either inside, just the suds part. It sounds crazyish, but when he talked it sounded true."

"It's not a new idea, John. James Jeans wrote a book *The Expanding Universe* . But where does the soap bubble come from?"

"I reckon Whoever made things must have blown it from a bubble pipe too big for us to figure about.

She snickered, so she must be feeling better. "You believe in a God Who blew only one lone soap bubble." Then she didn't snicker. "How long must we wait here?"

"No time. We can go."

"No, we have to stay."

"Then we'll wait till One Other comes. He'll come. Mr. Howsen's a despicable man, but he knows about One Other."

"Oh!" she cried out. "I wish he'd come and get it over with."

And her wish came true.

The firelight had risen high, and as she spoke something hiked up behind the rocks on the pool's edge. It hiked up like a wet black leech, but much bigger by a thousand times. It slid and oozed to the top of a rock and as it waited a second, wet and shiny in the firelight, it looked as if somebody had flung down a wet coat. Then it hunched and swelled, and its edges came apart.

It was a hand, as broad in the back as a shovel, with fingers as long as a hayfork's tines.

"Get up and start down trail," I said to Miss Annalinda, as quiet and calm as I could make out to be. "Don't argue, just start."

"Why?" she snapped, without moving, and by then she saw, too, and any chance for escape was gone.

The hayfork fingers grabbed the rock, and a head and shoulder heaved up where we could see them.

The shoulder was a cypress root humping out of water, and the head was a dark pumpkin, round and smooth and bald, with no face, only two eyes. They were green, not bright green like cat eyes or dog eyes in the night. They were stale rotten green, like something spoiled.

Miss Annalinda's shriek was like a train at a crossing. She jumped up, but she didn't run. Maybe she couldn't. Then a big knee lifted into sight, and all of One Other came out of the water and rose straight up above us.

Miss Annalinda wilted down on her knees, almost in the fire. I dropped the guitar and jumped to pull her clear. She mumbled a holy name—not a prayer or either a curse, just the tag end of a habit most of us

almost lose, the reminding of Someone that we're hurting for a little help. I stood, holding her sagging slim body against me, and looked high up at where One Other loomed.

One Other was twice as tall as a tall man, and it was sure enough true that he had only one arm and one leg. The arm would be his left arm, and the leg his left leg. Maybe that's why the mountain folks named him One Other. But his stale green eyes were two, and both of them looked down at us. He made a sure hop toward us on his big single foot, big and flat as a table top, and he put out his hand to touch or to grab.

I dragged Miss Annalinda clear around the fire. I reckon she'd fainted, or near to. Her feet didn't work under her, she only moaned, and she was double heavy, the way a limp weight can be. My strength was under tax to pull her toward where I'd dropped the guitar. I wanted to get my hands on that guitar. It might be a weapon—its music or its silver strings might be a distaste to an unchancey thing like One Other.

But One Other had circled the fire the opposite way, so that we came almost in touch again. He stood on his one big foot, between me and my guitar. It might be ill or well to him, but I couldn't reach it and find out.

Even then, I never thought of running across Mr. Howsen's mark and down the mountain in the night. I stood still, holding Miss Annalinda on her feet that were so limp her shoes were like to drop off, and looked up twice my height into what wasn't a face save for the two green eyes.

"What have you got in mind?" I asked One Other, as if he could understand my talk; and the words, almost in Miss Annalinda's ear, brought back her strength and wits. She stood alone, still shoving herself close against me. She looked up at One Other and said the holy name again.

One Other bent his big lumpy knee, and sank his bladdery dark body down and put out that big splay paw of his. The firelight showed his open palm, slate gray, with things dribbling out in a clinking, jangling little strew at our feet. He straightened up again.

"Oh!" And Miss Annalinda dropped down to grab. "Look—he's giving us—"

Tugging my eyes from One Other's, I looked at what she held out. It shone and lighted up, like a hailstone by lantern light. It was the size of a hen egg, and it had a many little edges and flat faces, all full of fire, pale and blue outside and innerly many-colored like the soap bubble light in the Bottomless Pool. She shoved it into my hand, and it felt sticky and slippery, like soap. I let it fall on the ground again.

"You fool, that's a diamond!" she squeaked at me. "It's bigger than the Orloff! Bigger than the Koh-i-noor!"

She scrabbled with both hands for more of the shiny things, that lighted up with every color you could call for. "Here's an emerald," she yipped, "and here's a ruby! John, he's our friend, he likes us, he's giving us things worth more money than—"

On her knees before One Other, she gathered two fistfuls of those things he'd flung down for her to pick up. But I had my eyes back on him. He looked at me—not at her, he was sure of her. He knew human-kind's greed for shiny stones. About me he wasn't sure yet. He studied me as I've seen folks study an animal, to see where to hit with a stick or slice with a skinning knife. The shiny stones didn't fetch me. He'd find something that would.

I know how like a crazy tale to scare young ones this sounds. But there and then, One Other was so plain to see and make out, the way you'd see him if I was to make a clay image of him and stand it up on one leg in your sight, and it grew till it was twice as tall as you, with stale green eyes and one hayfork paw and one tabletop foot. In a moment with no sound, he and I looked at each other. Miss Annalinda, down on the ground between us, gopped and goggled at the stones she gathered in her hands. Then the silence broke. A drip of water fell. Another. *Drip, drip, drip*, like what Miss Annalinda had dripped into the fire—water from the Bottomless Pool, dripping off of One Other's body and head and his one arm and one leg.

Then he turned his eyes and mind back to Miss Annalinda, for long enough to spare me for a jump past him at my guitar.

He turned quick and swung down at me with his paw, but I had it and was running backward, I got the guitar across me, my left hand on the frets, and my right hand clawing the silver strings. They sang out, and One Other teetered on his broad sole, cocked his head to listen.

I started the Last Judgment Song, that in my boyhood old Uncle T. P. Hinnard had said was good against evil things:

*Three holy kings, four holy saints,
At heaven's high gate that stand,
Speak out and bid all evil wait,
And stir no foot or hand . . .*

But he came at me. The charm didn't serve against One Other, as I'd been vowed to it'd serve against any evil in the world. One Other wasn't of this world, though just now he was in it. He was from the Bottomless Pool, and from whatever was beyond, below, behind where its bottom should be.

I ran around the fire and around Miss Annalinda still crouched down among those jewels. After me he hopped, like the almightiest big one-legged rabbit in song or story. He had me almost headed off, coming alongside me, and I ran right through the fire that was less fear to face than he was. My shoes spurned its coals as I ran through, On the far side I made myself stop and look back. I still had to face him somehow. I couldn't just run from him and leave Miss Annalinda to pay, all alone for her foolishness.

He'd stopped, too, in his one track. The fire, scattered by my feet, blazed up in scattered chunks, and he was sort of pulling himself together, back away from it. *Drip, drip*, the water fell from him. I felt I couldn't stand that dripping noise, and I sang another verse of the Last judgment Song:

*The fire from heaven will fall at last
On wealth and pride and power,
We will not know the minute, and
We will not know the hour . . .*

One Other hopped a long hop back, away from the fire and from me and from the song.

Something whispered me what I'd needed to know.

From out of the water he'd come. If I didn't want him to get me, to make me sell out at a price I'd never redeem—as jewels beyond all reckoning could buy Miss Annalinda—I'd have to fight him like any water-thing.

Fight fire with water, the wise folks say for a saying. Fire and water are enemies. Fight water with fire.

He circled around again, and I didn't flee this time. I grabbed toward the scattered fire. One Other's flat hand slapped me spinning away, but my own fist had snatched a burning chunk. When I staggered back onto my feet, I still held my guitar in one hand, and the chunk in the other.

I whipped that fire around my head, and it blazed up like pure lightwood. As One Other stooped for me again, I rushed to meet him and shoved the fire at him.

He couldn't face it. He broke back from it. I jumped sidewise, myself, so he was between me and the fire, and sashayed the burning stick at him again. He jumped back. His foot slammed down into the fire.

I hope none of you all ever hear such a sound as he made, with no mouth to make it. Not a yell or a roar or a scream, but Hark Mountain's whole top hummed and danced to it. He flung himself out of the fire again, and I dashed my torch like a spear for where his face should be, and made a direct hit.

I tell you, he couldn't face fire, he couldn't stand it. He spun around and dived into the water from which he'd come, into the Bottomless Pool, with a splash like a wagon falling from a bridge. Running to the rocks, I saw him cleave down below there into the deep clearness like a diving one-legged frog—among the soap bubble colors, getting so small he looked a hand's size, a finger's size, a bean's size. And then light gulped him. Then I stepped back to the scattered fire.

Miss Annalinda still huddled on the ground. I question whether she'd paid any attention to what had gone on. Her hands were full of jewels, shining green, red, blue, white.

I put out my hand and pulled her to her feet. "Give those to me," I said.

Her eyes stabbed at me like fish-gigs. She couldn't believe that I'd said such words. I took her right wrist and pried open her right hand, trying not to hurt her, and got the jewels out of it. Into the Bottomless Pool I plugged them, one by one. They splashed and sank like pebbles.

"Don't!" she screamed, but I took her other hand and pried away the rest of them. *Plop* . I threw one after the first bunch. *Plop* . I threw another. *Plop, plop, plop* , more.

"They were a fortune," she whimpered, clawing at my arm. "The greatest fortune ever dreamed of."

"No, not a fortune," I said. "A misfortune. The greatest misfortune ever dreamed of."

"But—no—"

I threw the rest in. *Plop, plop* , the rest of the jewels. What would you have given for them?" I asked her.

"Anything—anything—"

"You mean everything. If he paid high for us, he meant to have his worth from us. He needs folks to serve him, more folks than Mr. Howsen." I waved for her to look into the pool. "I hope he stays where things are more comfortable than what I gave him to taste."

She looked down to where the pool should have a bottom. "John, you're right," she said, as if she dreamed. "Those colors do look like soap bubble tints, stretched out, with nothing we can imagine beyond the film of suds. A great big soap bubble, like the one you say the Creator blew."

"Maybe," I said, "there's more than one soap bubble. Maybe there's a right many. Each one a life and universe strange to us."

The pain of that new thought made her silent. I went on.

"Maybe there's two soap bubbles touching. Maybe the spot where they come together is where something can leave one sort of life and come into another."

She sat down. The new thought was weight as well as pain. "Oh," she said.

"Maybe some born venturer would dare try to move into the new bubble," I said, "through whatever maybe matches the Bottomless Pool on the far side, in that other world. Maybe, I say. There's a God's plenty of maybes."

"They aren't maybes," she said all of a sudden. "You saw him. No such creature was ever born in our world. A creature looking like that must be—"

"You still don't understand," and I shook my head. "I don't reckon he looks like that in his own soap bubble. He made himself look like that, to be as much as possible like our kind, here in this world. We can't guess what he looks like naturally."

"I don't want to guess," she said, as if she was about to cry.

"A stranger like that needs friends and helpers in the strange place. Some of the things he knows from his own home are like power here, power we don't understand and think is witch stuff. But he'd pay high for helpers, like Mr. Howsen and like us."

"Will he come back?" she asked.

"Not right away." I picked up my guitar. "Let's head down trail as far as we can grope in the dark, and if he does come back he won't find us. If we can't grope all the way down, we'll build a fire somewhere below and wait for light to show us the rest of the way."

"You were right about me, John," said Miss Annalinda, starting to gabble fast. "You saw all through me, my spell was to get you up here for spite. But it's not spite any more, John, it's love, it's love—I love you, John—"

"You know," I right away changed the subject, "there's one more thing about this soap bubble idea. The soap bubble we live in keeps stretching and swelling. But a soap bubble can't last forever. Some time or other, it stretches and swells so tight, it just bursts."

That did what I was after. It stopped her flood of words. She stared up and away and all around. I saw the whites of her eyes glitter in the last of the fireglow.

"Bursts?" she said slowly. "Then what?"

"Then nothing, Miss Annalinda. When a soap bubble bursts, it's gone."

And we had silence to start our climb down Hark Mountain.

Call Me From the Valley

Manly Wade Wellman

Down it rained, on hill and hollow, the way you'd think the sky was too heavy to hold it back. It fell so thick and hard fish could have swum in it, all around where we sat holed up under the low wide porch of the country store—five of us. A leather-coated deputy sheriff with a pickup truck. A farmer, who'd sheltered his mule wagon in a shed behind. The old storekeeper, and us two strangers in that part of the hills, a quiet old gentleman and me with my silver-strung guitar.

The storekeeper hung a lantern to the porch rafters as it got dark. The farmer bought us all a bottle of soda, and the storekeeper broke us open a box of cookies. "Gentlemen, you'll all be here for a spell, so sit comfortable," he said. "Friend," he said to me, "did I ask your name?"

"John," I named myself.

"Well, John, do you play that there guitar you're a-toting?"

I played and sang for them, that old song about the hunter's true love:

*Oh, call me sweetheart, call me dear,
Call me what you will,
Call me from the valley low,
Call me from the hill . . .*

Then there was talk about old things and thoughts. I recollect what some of them said:

Such as, you can't win solitaire by cheating just once, you've got to keep cheating; some animals are smarter than folks; who were the ancients who dug mine-holes in the Toe River country, and what were they after, and did they find it; nobody knows what makes the lights come and go like giant fireflies every night on Brown Mountain; you'll never see a man exactly six feet tall, because that was the height of the

Lord Jesus.

And the farmer, who next to me was the youngest there, mentioned love and courting, and how when you true-love someone and need your eyes and thoughts clearest, they mist up and maybe make you trouble. That led to how you step down a mullein stalk toward your true love's house, and if it grows up again she loves you; and how the girls used to have dumb suppers, setting plates and knives and forks on the table at night and each girl standing behind a chair put ready, till at midnight the candles blew out and a girl saw, or she thought she saw, a ghosty-looking somebody in the chair before her, that was the appearance of the somebody she'd marry.

"Knew of dumb suppers when I was just a chap," allowed the storekeeper, "but most of the old folks then, they didn't relish the notion. Said it was a devil-made idea, and you might call in something better left outside."

"Ain't no such goings-on in this day and time," nodded the farmer. "I don't take stock in them crazy sayings and doings."

Back where I was born and raised, in the Drowning Creek country, I'd heard tell of dumb suppers but I'd never seen one, so I held my tongue. But the deputy grinned his teeth at the farmer.

"You plant by the moon, don't you?" he asked. "Above-ground things like corn at the full, and underground things like 'taters in the dark?"

"That ain't foolishness, that's the true way," the farmer said back. "Ask anybody's got a lick of sense about farming."

Then a big wiggling three-forked flash of lightning struck, it didn't seem more than arm's-length off, and the thunder was like the falling in of the hills.

"Law me," said the old gentleman, whose name seemed to be Mr. Jay. "That was a hooter."

"Sure God was," the farmer agreed him. "Old Forney Meechum wants us to remember he makes the rain around here."

My ears upped like a rabbits. "I did hear this is the old Meechum-Donovant feud country," I said. "I've always been wanting to hear the true tale of that. And what about Forney Meechum making the rain—isn't he dead?"

"Deader than hell," the storekeeper told me. "Though folks never thought he could die, thought he'd just ugly away. But him and all the Meechum and Donovan men got killed. Both the names plumb died out, I reckon, yonder in the valley so low where you see the rain a-falling the lavishest. I used to hear about it when I was just a chap,"

"Me, too," nodded the deputy. "Way I got it, Forney Meechum went somewheres west when he was young. Was with the James boys or the Younger boys, or maybe somebody not quite that respectable."

"And when he come back," took up the storekeeper again, "he could make it rain whenever it suited him."

"How?" I asked, and old Mr. Jay was listening, too. "Ain't rightly certain how," said the farmer. "They tell he used to mix up mud in a hole, and sing a certain song. Ever hear such a song as that, John?"

I shook my head *no*, and he went on:

"Forney Meechum done scarier things than that. He witched wells dry. And he raised up dead ghosts to show him where treasure was hid. Even his own kinfolks was scared of him, and all the Meechums took orders from him. So when he fell out with Captain Sam Donovan over a property line, he made them break with all the Donovants."

"Fact," said the storekeeper, who wanted to tell part of the tale. "And them Meechums did what he told them, saving only his cousin's oldest girl, Miss Lute Meechum, and she'd swore eternal love with Captain Ben Donovan's second boy Jeremiah."

Another lightning flash, another thunder growl. Old Mr. Jay hunched his thin shoulders under his jeans coat, and allowed he'd pay for some cheese and crackers if the storekeeper'd fetch it out to us.

"Law me," said the farmer. "I ain't even now wanting to talk against Forney Meechum. But they tell he'd put his eye on Lute himself, and he'd quarreled with his own son Derwood about who'd have her. But next court day at the county seat, was a fight betwixt Jeremiah Donovan and Derwood Meechum, and Jeremiah stuck a knife in Derwood and killed him dead."

Mr. Jay leaned forward in the lantern light. It showed the gray stubble on his gentle old face. "Who drew the first knife?" he asked.

"I've heard tell Derwood drew the knife, and Jeremiah took it away and stuck it into him," said the farmer. "Anyway, Jeremiah Donovan had to run from the law, and down in the valley yonder the Meechums and the Donovants began a-shooting at each other."

"Fact," the storekeeper took it up again as he fetched out the cheese and crackers. "That was 50 years back, the last fight of all. Ary man on both sides was killed, down to boys of ten-twelve years. Old Forney called for rain, but somebody shot him just as he got it started."

"And it falls a right much to this day," said the farmer, gazing at the pour from the porch eaves. "That valley below us is so rainy it's a swamp like. And the widows and orphans that was left alive, both families, they was purely rained out and went other places to live."

"What about Miss Lute Meechum?" I asked next.

"I wondered about her, too," said Mr. Jay.

"Died," said the storekeeper. "Some folks say it was pure down grief killed her, that and lonesomeness for that run-off Jeremiah Donovan. I likewise heard tell old Forney shot her when she said for once and all she wouldn't have him."

The deputy sipped his soda. "All done and past now," he said. "Looks like we're rained in here for all night, gentlemen."

But we weren't. It stacked off while we ate our cheese, and then it was just a drip from the branches. The clouds shredded, and a moon poked through a moment, shy, like a girl at her first play-party. The deputy got up from the slab bench where he'd been sitting.

"Hope my truck'll wallow up that muddy road to town," he said. "Who can I carry with me?"

"I got my mule," added the farmer. "I'll follow along and snake you out when you got stuck in one of them mud holes. John, you better ride with me, you and Mr. Jay."

I shook my head. "I'm not going to town, thank you kindly. I'm going down that valley trail. Swore to an old friend I'd be at his family reunion, up in the hills on the yonder side, by supper time tomorrow."

Mr. Jay said he'd be going that way, too. The storekeeper offered to let us sleep in his feed shed, but I said I'd better start. "Coming, sir?" I asked old Mr. Jay.

"After while," he told me, so I went on alone. Three minutes down trail between those wet dark trees, and the lantern light under the porch was gone as if it had never shone.

Gentlemen, it was lonesome dark and damp going. I felt my muddy way along, with my brogan shoes squashy-full of water. And yet, sometimes, it wasn't as lonesome as you might call for. There were soft noises, like whispers or crawlings; and once there was a howl, not too far away, like a dog, or a man trying to sound like a dog, or maybe the neither of them. For my own comfort I began to pick the guitar and sing to myself, but the wrong tune had come unbidden:

*In the pines, in the pines,
Where the sun never shines,
And I shiver where the wind blows cold! . . .*

I stopped when I got that far, it was too much the truth. And it came on to rain again.

I hauled off my old coat to wrap my guitar from it, Not much to see ahead, but I knew I kept going down slope and down slope, and no way of telling how far down it went before it would start up to go to the hills where my friend's kinfolks would gather tomorrow. I told myself I was a gone gump not to stay at the store the way I was so kindly bid. I hoped that that old Mr. Jay had the sense to stay under cover. But it was too far to go back. And I'd better find some place out of the wet, for my guitar more than me.

Must have been a bend to that trail, because I came all at once in view of the light in the cabin's glass window, before I notioned there was any living place around. The light looked warm yellow through the rain, and I hastened my wet feet. Close enough in, I could judge it was an old-made log house, the corners notch-locked and the logs clay-chinked, and the wide eaves with thick-split shakes on them, but I couldn't really see. "Hello, the house!" I yelled out.

No sound back. Maybe the rain was keeping them from hearing me. I felt my way to the flat door-stone and knocked. No stir inside.

Groping for a knob, I found none, only a leather latch string, old style. And, old style, it was out. In my grandsire's day, a latch string out meant come in. I pulled, and a wooden latch lifted inside and the door swung in before me.

The room was lit from a fireplace full of red coals, and from a candle stuck on a dish on a table middleway of the puncheon floor. That table took my eye as I stepped in. A cloth on it, and a plate of old white china with knife and fork at the sides, and a cup and saucer, yes and a folded napkin. But no food

on the table, no coffee in the cup. A chair was set to the plate, and behind the chair, her hands crossed on its back, stood a woman, young and tall and proud-standing.

She didn't move. Nothing moved, except the candle flame in the stir of air from the open door. She might have been cut from wood and put up there to fool folks. I closed the door against the hard drum of the rain, and tracked wet marks on the puncheons as I came toward the table. I took off my old hat, and the water fell from it.

"Good evening, ma'am," I said. Then her dark eyes moved in her pale face, her sweet, firm-jawed face. Her short, sad mouth opened, slow and shaky.

"You're not—" she started to mumble, half to herself. "I didn't mean—"

There was a copper light moving in her hair as she bent her head and looked down into the empty plate, and then I remembered that talk under the store porch.

"Dumb supper," I said. "I'm right sorry. The rain drove me in here. I reckon this is the only house around, and when nobody answered I walked in. I didn't mean to bother you."

And I couldn't help but look at how she'd set the dumb supper out. Knowing how such things weren't done any more, and hearing that very thing said that night, I was wondered to find it. Through my mind, kept running how some scholar-men say it's a way of doing that came over from the Old Country, where dumb suppers were set clear back to the beginning of time. Things that old don't die easy after all, I reckoned.

"He'll still come and sit down," she said to me in her soft voice, like a low-playing flute heard far off. "I've called him and he'll come."

I hung my wet coat by the fireplace, and she saw my guitar.

"Sing to help guide him," she said to me.

I looked at her, so proudly tall behind the chair. She wore a long green dress, and her eyes were darker than her copper hair, that was all in curly ringlets.

"Sing," she said again. "Tole him here."

I felt like doing whatever she told me. I swung the guitar in front of me, and began the song I'd given them at the store:

*Oh, call me sweetheart, call me dear,
Call me what you will,
Call me from the valley low,
Call me from the hill.*

*I hear you as the turtle dove
That flies from bough to bough,
And as she softly calls her mate,
You call me softly now. . . .*

One long hand waved me to stop, and I stopped with the silver strings still whispering to both of us. I felt my ears close up tight, the way they feel when you've climbed high, high on a mountain top.

"There's a power working here," I said.

"Yes," she barely made herself heard.

The fire, that had been just coals, found something to blaze up on. Smoke rose dark above the bright flames. The rain outside came barreling down, and there was a rising wind, too, with a whoop and shove to it that made the lock-joints of the cabin's logs creak.

"Sounds like old Forney Meechum's hard at work," I tried to make half a joke, but she didn't take it as such. Her dark-bright eyes lifted their lids to widen, and her hands, on the chair back again, took hold hard.

"Forney doesn't want me to do this," she told me, as if it was my ordinary business.

"He's dead," I reminded her, like to a child.

"No," she shook her copper head. "He's not dead, not all of him. And not all of me, either."

I wondered what she meant, and I stepped away from the fire that was burning bright and hot.

"Are you a Meechum or a Donovan?" I asked.

"A Meechum," she told me. "But my true love's a Donovan."

"Like Lute Meechum and Jeremiah Donovan?"

"You know about that." Her hands trembled a mite, for all they held so hard to the chair. "Who are you?"

"My name's John." I touched the strings to make them whisper again. "Yes, I know the tale about the feud. Old Forney Meechum, who could witch down the rain, said Lute Meechum mustn't have Jeremiah—"

"He's here!" she cried out, with all her loud voice at last.

The wind shook the cabin like a dice-box. The shakes on the roof must have ruffled worse than a hen's feathers. Up jumped the fire, and out winked the candle.

Jumpy myself, I was back against the logs of the wall, my free hand on a shelf-plank that was wedged there. The rain had wetted the clay chinking soft between the logs, and a muddy trickle fell on my fingers. I was watching the fire, and its dirty gray smoke stirred and swelled, and a fat-looking puff of it came crawling out like a live thing.

The smoke stayed in one bunch. It hung there, a sort of egg-shaped chunk of it, hanging above the stones of the hearth. I think the girl must have half fallen, then caught herself, for I heard the legs of the

chair scrape on the puncheons. The smoke molded itself, in what light I could make out, and looked solid and shapy, as tall as me but thicker, and two streamy coils waving out in the air like arms.

"Don't!" the girl was begging something. "Don't let him—"

On that shelf at my hand stood a dish and an empty old bottle, the kind of bottle the old glassmakers blew a hundred years ago. I took up the dish in my right fist. I saw that smoke-shape drifting sort of slow and greedy, clear from the hearth, and between those two wavy streamy arm-coils rose up a lumpy thing like a head. There was enough firelight to see that this smoke was thicker than just smoke; it must have soot and ash-dust in it, solid enough to choke you. And in that lumpy head hung two dull sparks, for the eyes.

Gentlemen, more about it than that you'd not care to have me tell you.

I flung the dish, and it went singing through the room and it went straight for where I threw, but it didn't stop. It sailed right on past and into the fireplace, and I heard it smash to pieces on the stones. Where it had hit the smoke-shape, there showed a notchy hole all the way through, where the cheek would be on a living creature. And whatever it was I'd thrown at, it never stopped its slow drift over toward the table, gray and thick and horrible. And in the chimney the wind stomped up and down, like a dasher in a churn.

"No," the girl wailed again, and moved back, dragging the chair along with her.

Then at once I saw what was in whatever that thing had for a mind, and I ran at the table too, passing so close to one of the smoke-streamers that the wind I made fluttered it like a rag. Just as it slid in toward the chair, bending to sit down, I slapped my guitar across the seat with the silver strings up.

I'd figured right. It couldn't touch the silver, being an evil haunt. It moved behind the table, and its sparks flickered at us both. I felt a creeping hot smelly sense, like dirty smoke. It made me feel sick and shake-legged, but I made my eyes look back at those two glaring sparks.

"Are you Forney Meechum?" I asked at it. "Want to sit down at this dumb supper? Think it was laid out for you?"

It swayed back and forth, like a tree-branch, and outside the rain fell in its bucketfuls.

I moved quick around the table, with the guitar held toward it. I'd thought it moved slow, but it was across the room to the other side the way a shadow flings itself when you move the lamp. I ran after it, quick, and got to the door first.

"Not out this way," I yelled at it, and jabbed a finger into wet clay chinking between logs. I quick marked a cross on the inside of the door planks. Then the Forney Meechum thing was sliding at the window.

"Not that way, either!" I shoed it back with the guitar, and sketched a cross on the glass pane. Then the waving arm-streaks and the lumpy cloud of head and body were sliding back toward the table.

"Light that candle!" I hollered to the girl. "Light it!"

She heard, and she grabbed the candle up from the table. She ran across the floor, the cloud hovering after her, and then she was down on one knee, shoving the candle into the fireplace, and that quick it lighted up.

And there wasn't any smoke-shape anywhere in the room we now saw plain.

"Where did he go?" she asked me.

I looked around to see. He hadn't left by the door or the window, for I'd made my crosses there.

"He ran," I said. "Ran before us like a scared-out coward.

"But he was strong—" she started to say.

"He was bad," I put in, not very mannerly. "Badness thinks it's strong, but it's scared—of lights and crosses, and silver."

Taking my guitar, I picked at the silver strings, and in the music I made I walked around the room, and around again, looking. For what was left of Forney Meechum must be somewhere, hiding. And we'd better find out where he hid, or he might be out at us again when we weren't ready.

I glanced in the corners, up in the rafters. Then at the shelf Then I glanced at the shelf twice.

The old bottle that stood there, it was dark-looking, like muddy water. Or like muddy water, and in the muddy water maybe a hiding thing, like what can hide in such a place; a snake or a worse thing than a snake, waiting its time.

I didn't want her to see then, so I made up something quick.

"Look over in the corner yonder," I said to her. "Take the candle."

She moved to look, and I moved to follow her. Close against a wall, I scooped a lump of clay from the chinking, a wet gob as big as my thumb. I was within a long reach of the shelf.

"The corner," I said, pointing.

And, quick as I could make it, I jammed that clay down on top of the open bottle neck and shoved it in like a cork.

"What—" she began to say.

I picked up the bottle. It felt warm and tingly. In the candlelight we could see the thick dark boiling cloud inside, stirring and spinning and fighting every which-away, with no way out. I took the candle and dripped wax on the clay, and in the wax I marked a cross with my thumb nail.

"Remember the Arabian Nights book?" I asked.

She shook her head. "No. It's foreign, isn't it?"

"Has a thousand and one stories," I said, "and one of them tells how a haunt was tricked in a bottle like this and sealed away forever. Forney Meechum's safe in there."

She moved with the candle and put it on the table. She pushed the chair back into place and stood behind it in her green dress, straight and tall and proud, the way I'd first seen her.

"Now he can come," she said to me, very sure. "Jeremiah."

"Jeremiah Donovan?" I bubbled out.

"Who else?" she asked "He's coming back to me, after all these years. I felt him coming."

"Then—" I said, but I didn't have to say it. I knew who she was by now.

"I told you I wasn't all dead," reminded Lute Meechum. "Forney shot me in the heart and flung me in a grave, but I couldn't all die. I just lay there till I knew Jeremiah was heading back here for me."

I got my coat from beside the fireplace. It felt funny to be in that cabin, with one haunt inside the bottle and one standing behind the chair.

"Thank you for everything, John," she said, old-folksy mannerly. "Thank you kindly. You can go now, its all right."

The door squeaked open.

In out of the night came one of the wettest people you ever could call for. His shoulders and pant legs were soaked, water dripped from his white hair and his old man's chin.

"Mr. Jay," I greeted him.

"Jeremiah," Lute Meechain greeted him.

He walked across, paying me no mind. "I had to come," he said to her, and the candle went out again.

But I could see him sink down in the chair, and the light from the fireplace made his face took all of a sudden not old any more.

He put up his face, and she put hers down. He went all slack and limp. Restful.

I was outside, with the bottle and guitar. There was nary cloud in the sky, and the moon shone down like a ball of white fire.

The cabin was dark inside now, and I could see by the moon that it was a ruined wreck. The roof fallen in, the window broken, the logs rotten—you'd swear nobody had set foot there for fifty years back. But inside, Jeremiah Donovan and Lute Meechum were together at last, and peaceful. So peaceful most folks would think they were dead and gone.

On along the trail that was now so clear, I found a tree that looked hollow. Down in its dark inside I put the bottle, and left it there.

It seemed to me I ought to be shaky and scared, but I wasn't. I felt right good. That dumb supper, now—the way I'd heard it said, sometimes a dumb supper calls up things that oughtn't be there; but now I'd seen a dead haunt, setting a dumb supper to tole a living man to her. And it wasn't bad. It wasn't wrong. They were happy about it, I knew that.

Walking in the bright moonlight, I began to strum my guitar, and, gentlemen, the song I sang is really an

old song:

*Beauty, strength, youth, are flowers and fading seen—
Duty, faith, love, are roots and ever green . . .*

The Little Black Train

Manly Wade Wellman

There in the High Fork country, with peaks saw-toothed into the sky and hollows diving away down and trees thicketed every which way, you'd think human foot had never stepped. Walking the trail between high pines, I touched my guitar's silver strings for company of the sound. But then a man squandered into sight around a bend-young-like, red-faced, baldy-headed. Gentlemen, he was as drunk as a hoot. I gave him good evening.

"Can you play that thing?" he gobbled at me and, second grab of his shaky hand, he got hold of my hickory shirt sleeve. "Come to the party, friend. Our fiddle band, last moment, they got scared out. We got just only a mouth-harp to play for us."

"What way was the fiddle band scared?" I asked him to tell.

"Party's at Miss Donie Carawan's," he said, without replying me. "Bobbycue pig and chicken, bar'l of good stump-hole whisky."

"Listen," I said, "ever hear tell of the man invited a stranger fiddler, he turned out to be Satan?"

"Shoo," he snickered, "Satan plays the fiddle, you play the guitar. I don't pay your guitar no worry. What's your name, friend?"

"John. What's yours?"

But he'd started up a narrow, grown-over, snaky-turny path you'd not notice. I reckoned the party'd be at a house, where I could sleep the night that was coming, so I followed. He nearly fell back top of me, he was so stone drunk, but we got to a notch on the ridge, and the far side was a valley of trees, dark and secret looking. Going down, I began to hear loud laughing talk. Finally we reached a yard at the bottom. There was a house there, and it looked like enough men and women to swing a primary election.

They whooped at us, so loud it rang my ears. The drunk man waved both his hands. "This here's my friend John," he bawled out, "and he's a-going to play us some music!"

They whooped louder at that, and easiest thing for me to do was start picking "Hell Broke Loose in Georgia"; and, gentlemen, right away they danced up a storm.

Wild-like, they whipped and whirled. Most of them were young folks dressed their best. One side, a great big man called the dance, but you couldn't much hear him, everybody laughed and hollered so loud. It got in my mind that children laugh and yell thataway, passing an old burying-ground where ghosts could be. It was the way they might be trying to dance down the nervouses; I jumped myself, between picks, when something started moaning beside me. But it was just a middling-old fellow with a thin face, playing his mouth-harp along with my guitar.

I looked to the house—it was new and wide and solid, with white-washed clay chinking between the squared logs of it. Through a dog-trot from front to back I saw clear down valley, west to where the sunball dropped red toward a far string of mountains. The valley-bottom's trees were spaced out with a kind of path or road, the whole length. The house windows began to light up as I played. Somebody was putting a match to lamps, against the night's fall.

End of the tune, everybody clapped me loud and long. "More! More!" they hollered, bunched among the yard trees, still fighting their nervouses.

"Friends," I managed to be heard, "let me make my manners to the one who's giving this party."

"Hi, Miss Donie!" yelled out the drunk man. "Come meet John!"

From the house she walked through the crowded-around folks, stepping so proud she looked taller than she was. A right much stripy skirt swished to her high heels; but she hadn't such a much dress above, and none at all on her round arms and shoulders. The butter yellow of her hair must have come from a bottle, and the doll pink of her face from a box. She smiled up to me, and her perfume tingled my nose. Behind her followed that big dance-caller, with his dead black hair and wide teeth, and his heavy hands swinging like balance weights.

"Glad you came, John," she said, deep in her round throat.

I looked at her robin-egg blue eyes and her butter hair and her red mouth and her bare pink shoulders. She was maybe 35, maybe 40, maybe more and not looking it. "Proud to be here," I said, my politest. "Is this a birthday, Miss Donie Carawan?"

Folks fell quiet, swapping looks. An open cooking fire blazed up as the night sneaked in. Donie Carawan laughed deep.

"Birthday of a curse," and she widened her blue eyes. "End of the curse, too, I reckon. All tonight."

Some mouths came open, but didn't let words out. I reckoned that whatever had scared out the fiddle band was nothing usual. She held out a slim hand, with green-stoned rings on it.

"Come eat and drink, John," she bade me.

"Thanks," I said, for I hadn't eaten ary mouthful since crack of day.

Off she led me, her fingers pressing mine, her eye-corners watching me. The big dance-caller glittered a glare after us. He was purely jealous up that she'd made me so welcome. Two dark-faced old men stood at an iron rack over a pit of coals, where lay two halves of a slow-cooking hog. One old man dipped a stick with a rag ball into a kettle of sauce and painted it over the brown roast meat. From a big pot of fat over yet another fire, an old woman forked hush-puppies into pans set ready on a plank table.

"Line up!" called Donie Carawan out, like a bugle. They lined up, talking and hollering again, smiles back on their faces. It was some way like dreams you have, folks carrying on loud and excited, and something bad coming on to happen.

Donie Carawan put her bare arm through my blue-sleeved elbow while an old man sliced chunks of barbecued hog on paper plates for us. The old woman forked on a hush-puppy and a big hobby of cole slaw. Eating, I wondered how they made the barbecue sauce—wondered, too, if all these folks really wanted to be here for what Donie Carawan called the birthday of a curse.

"John," she said, the way you'd think she read what I wondered, "don't they say a witch's curse can't work on a pure heart?"

"They say that," I agreed her, and she laughed her laugh. The big dance-caller and the skinny mouth-harp man looked up from their barbecue. "An old witch cursed me for guilty twenty years back," said Donie Carawan. "The law said I was innocent. Who was right?"

"Don't know how to answer that," I had to say, and again she laughed, and bit into her hush-puppy.

"Look around you, John" she said. "This house is my house, and this valley is my valley, and these folks are my friends, come to help me pleasure myself."

Again I reckoned, she's the only one here that's pleased, maybe not even her.

"Law me," she laughed, "it's rough on a few folks, holding their breath all these years to see the curse light on me. Since it wouldn't light, I figured how to shoo it away." Her blue eyes looked up. "But what are you doing around High Fork, John?"

The dance-caller listened, and the thin mouth-harp man. "Just passing through," I said. "Looking for songs. I heard about a High Fork song, something about a little black train."

Silence quick stretched all around, the way you'd think I'd been impolite. Yet again she broke the silence with a laugh.

"Why," she said, "I've known that song as long as I've known about the curse, near to. Want me to sing it for you?"

Folks were watching, and, "Please, ma'am," I asked her.

She sang, there in the yellow lamplight and red firelight, among the shady-shadowy trees and the mountain dark, without any slice of moon overhead. Her voice was a good voice. I put down my plate and, a line or two along, I made out to follow her with the guitar.

*I heard a voice of warning,
A message from on high,
"Go put your house in order
For thou shalt surely die.*

Tell all your friends a long farewell

*And get your business right—
The little black train is rolling in
To call for you tonight."*

"Miss Donie, that's a tuneful thing," I said. "Sounds right like a train rolling."

"My voice isn't high enough to sound the whistle part," she smiled at me, red-mouthed.

"I might could do that," said the mouth-harp man, coming close and speaking soft. And folks were craning at us, looking sick, embarrassed, purely distasted. I began to wonder why I shouldn't have given a name to that black train song.

But then rose up a big holler near the house, where a barrel was set. The drunk man that'd fetched me was yelling mad at another man near-about as drunk, and they were trying to grab a drinking gourd from each other. Two-three other men on each side hoorawed them on to squabble more.

"Jeth!" called Donie Carawan to the big dance-caller. "Let's stop that before they spill the whisky, Jeth."

Jeth and she headed for the bunch by the barrel, and everybody else was crowding to watch.

"John," said a quiet somebody—the mouth-harp man, with firelight showing lines in his thin face, salty gray in his hair. "What you really doing here?"

"Watching," I said, while big Jeth hauled those two drunk men off from each other, and Donie Carawan scolded them. "And listening," I said. "Wanting to know what way the black train song fits in with this party and the tale about the curse. You know about it?"

"I know," he said.

We carried our food out of the firelight. Folks were crowding to the barrel, laughing and yelling.

"Donie Carawan was to marry Trevis Jones," the mouth-harp man told me. "He owned the High Fork Railroad to freight the timber from this valley. He'd a lavish of money, is how he got to marry her. But," and he swallowed hard, "another young fellow loved her. Cobb Richardson, who ran Trevis Jones's train on the High Fork Railroad. And he killed Trevis Jones."

"For love?" I asked.

"Folks reckoned that Donie Carawan decided against Trevis and love-talked Cobb into the killing; for Trevis had made a will and heired her all his money and property—the railroad and all. But Cobb made confession. Said Donie had no part in it. The law let her go, and killed Cobb in the electric chair, down at the state capital.

"I declare to never," I said.

"Fact. And Cobb's mother—Mrs. Amanda Richardson—spoke the curse."

"Oh," I said, "is she the witch that—"

"She was no witch," he broke me off, "but she cursed Donie Carawan, that the train that Cobb had engine-drove, and Trevis had heired to her, would be her death and destruction. Donie laughed. You've heard her laugh. And folks started the song, the black train song.

"Who made it?" I asked him.

"Reckon I did," he said, looking long at me. He waited to let me feel that news. Then he said, "Maybe it was the song decided Donie Carawan to deal with the Hickory River Railroad, agreeing for an income of money not to run the High Fork train no more."

I'd finished my barbecue. I could have had more; but I didn't feel like it. "I see," I told him. "She reckoned that if no train ran on the High Fork tracks, it couldn't be her death and destruction."

He and I put our paper plates on one of the fires. I didn't look at the other folks, but it seemed to me they were quieting their laughing and talking as the night got darker.

"Only thing is," the mouth-harp man went on, "folks say the train runs on that track. Or it did. A black train runs some nights at midnight, they say, and when it runs a sinner dies."

"You ever see it run?"

"No, John, but I've sure God heard it. And only Donie Carawan laughs about it."

She laughed right then, joking the two men who'd feathered up to fight. Ary man's neck craned at her, and women looked the way you'd figure they didn't relish that. My neck craned some, itself.

"Twenty years back, the height of her bloom," said the mouth-harp man, "law me, you'd never call to look at anything else."

"What does she mean, no more curse?"

"She made another deal, John. She sold off the rails of the High Fork Road, that's stood idle for twenty years. Today the last of them was torn up and carried off. Meanwhile, she's had this house built, across where the right of way used to be. Looky yonder, through the dog-trot. That's where the road ran."

So it was the old road bed made that dark dip amongst the trees. Just now it didn't look so wide a dip.

"No rails," he said. "She figures no black train at midnight. Folks came at her invite—some because they rent her land, some because they owe her money, and some—men folks—because they'll do ary thing she bids them."

"And she never married?" I asked.

"If she done that, she'd lose the money and land she heired from Trevis Jones. It was in his will. She just takes men without marrying, one and then another. I've known men kill themselves because she'd put her heart back in her pocket on them. Lately, it's been big Jeth. She acts tonight like pick-herself a new beau lover."

She walked back through the lamplight and firelight. "John," she said, "these folks want to dance again."

What I played them was "Many Thousands Gone," with the mouth-harp to help, and they danced and

stomped the way you'd think it was a many thousands dancing. In its thick, Donie Carawan promenaded left and right and do-si-doed with a fair-haired young fellow, and Jeth the dance-caller looked pickle-sour. When I'd done, Donie Carawan came swishing back.

"Let the mouth-harp Play," she said, and dance with me."

"Can't dance no shakes," I told her. "Just now, I'd relish to practice the black train song."

Her blue eyes crinkled. "All right. Play, and I'll sing."

She did. The mouth-harp man blew whistle-moanings to my guitar, and folks listened, goggling like frogs.

*A bold young man kept mocking,
Cared not for the warning word,
When the wild and lonely whistle
Of the little black train he heard.
"Have mercy, Lord, forgive me!
I'm cut down in my sin!
O death, will you not spare me?"
But the little black train rolled in.*

When she'd sung that much, Donie Carawan laughed like before, deep and bantering. Jeth the dance-caller made a funny sound in his bull throat.

"What I don't figure," he said, "was how you all made the train sound like coming in, closer and closer."

"Just by changing the music," I said. "Changing the pitch."

"Fact," said the mouth-harp man. "I played the change with him."

A woman laughed, nervous. "Now I think, that's true. A train whistle sounds higher and higher while it comes up to you. Then it passes and goes off, sounding lower and lower."

"But I didn't hear the train go away in the song," allowed a man beside her. "It just kept coming." He shrugged, maybe he shivered.

"Donie," said the woman, "reckon I'll go along."

"Stay on, Lettie," began Donie Carawan, telling her instead of asking.

"Got a right much walking to do, and no moon," said the woman. "Reuben, you come, too."

She left. The man looked back just once at Donie Carawan, and followed. Another couple, and then another, went with them from the firelight. Maybe more would have gone, but Donie Carawan snorted, like a horse, to stop them.

"Let's drink," she said. "Plenty for all, now those folks I reckoned to be my friends are gone."

Maybe two-three others faded away, between there and the barrel. Donie Carawan dipped herself a drink, watching me over the gourd's edge. Then she dipped more and held it out.

"You drink after a lady," she whispered, "and get a kiss."

I drank. It was good stump-hole wlusky. "Tasty," I said.

"The kiss?" she laughed. But the dance-caller didn't laugh, or either the mouth-harp man, or either me.

"Let's dance," said Donie Carawan, and I picked "Sourwood Mountain" and the mouth-harp moaned.

The dancers had got to be few, just in a short while. But the trees they danced through looked bigger, and more of them. It minded me of how I'd heard, when I was a chap, about day-trees and night-trees, they weren't the same things at all; and the night-trees can crowd all round a house they don't like, pound the shingles off the roof, bust in the window glass and the door panels; and that's the sort of night you'd better never set your foot outside . . .

Not so much clapping at the end of "Sourwood Mountain." Not such a holler of "More!" Folks went to take another drink at the barrel, but the mouth-harp man held me back.

"Tell me," he said, "about that business. The noise sounding higher when the train comes close."

"It was explained out to me by a man I know, place in Tennessee called Oak Ridge," I said. "It's about what they call sound waves, and some way it works with light, too. Don't rightly catch on how, but they can measure how far it is to the stars thataway."

He thought, frowning. "Something like what's called radar?"

I shook my head. "No, no machinery to it. Just what they name a principle. Fellow named Doppler—Christian Doppler, a foreigner—got it up."

"His name was Christian," the mouth-harp man repeated me. "Then I reckon it's no witch stuff."

"Why you worrying it?" I asked him.

"I watched through the dog-trot while we were playing the black train song, changing pitch, making it sound like coming near," he said. "Looky yonder, see for yourself"

I looked. There was a streaky shine down the valley. Two streaky shines, though nary moon. I saw what he meant—it looked like those pulled-up rails were still there, where they hadn't been before.

"That second verse Miss Donie sang," I said. "Was it about—"

"Yes," he said before I'd finished. "That was the verse about Cobb Richardson. How he prayed for God's forgiveness, night before he died."

Donie Carawan came and poked her hand under my arm. I could tell that good strong liquor was feeling its way around her insides. She laughed at almost nothing whatever. "You're not leaving, anyway," she smiled at me.

"Don't have any place special to go," I said.

She upped on her pointed toes. "Stay here tonight," she said in my ear. "The rest of them will be gone by midnight."

"You invite men like that?" I said, looking into her blue eyes. "When you don't know them?"

"I know men well enough," she said. "Knowing men keeps a woman young." Her finger touched my guitar where it hung behind my shoulder, and the strings whispered a reply. "Sing me something, John."

"I still want to learn the black train song."

"I've sung you both verses," she said.

"Then," I told her, "I'll sing a verse I've just made up inside my head." I looked at the mouth-harp man. "Help me with this."

Together we played, raising pitch gradually, and I sang the new verse I'd made, with my eyes on Donie Carawan.

*Go tell that laughing lady
All filled with worldly pride,
The little black train is coming,
Get ready to take a ride,
With a little black coach and engine
And a little black baggage car,
The words and deeds she has said and done
Must roll to the judgment bar.*

When I was through, I looked up at those who'd stayed. They weren't more than half a dozen now, bunched up together like cows in a storm; all but Big Jeth, standing to one side with eyes stabbing at me, and Donie Carawan, leaning tired-like against a tree with hanging branches.

"Jeth," she said, "stomp his guitar to pieces."

I switched the carrying cord off my neck and held the guitar at my side. "Don't try such a thing, Jeth," I warned him.

His big square teeth grinned, with dark spaces between them. He looked twice as wide as me.

"I'll stomp you and your guitar both," he said.

I put the guitar on the ground, glad I'd had but the one drink. Jeth ran and stooped for it, and I put my fist hard under his ear. He hopped two steps away to keep his feet.

Shouldn't anybody name me what he did then, and I hit him twice more, harder yet. His nose flatted out under my knuckles and when he pulled back away, blood trickled.

The mouth-harp man grabbed up my guitar. "This here'll be a square fight!" he yelled, louder than he'd spoken so far. "Ain't a fair one, seeing Jeth's so big, but it'll be squarer just them two in it, and no more!"

"I'll settle you later," Jeth promised him, mean.

"Settle me first," I said, and got betwixt them.

Jeth ran at me. I stepped sidewise and got him under the ear again as he went shammocking past. He turned, and I dug my fist right into his belly-middle, to stir up all that stump-hole whisky he'd been drinking, then the other fist under the ear yet once more, then on the chin and the mouth, under the ear, on the broken nose—ten licks like that, as fast and hard as I could fetch them in, and eighth or ninth he went slack, and the tenth he just fell flat and loose, like a coat from a nail. I stood waiting, but he didn't move.

"Gentlemen," said the drunk man who'd fetched me, "looky yonder at Jeth laying there! Never figured to see the day! Maybe that stranger-man calls himself John is Satan, after all!"

Donie Carawan walked across, slow, and gouged Jeth's ribs, with the pointy toe of her high-heeled shoe. "Get up," she bade him.

He grunted and mumbled and opened his eyes. Then he got up, joint by joint, careful and sore, like a sick bull. He tried to stop the blood from his nose with the back of his big hand. Donie Carawan looked at him and then she looked at me.

"Get out of here, Jeth," she ordered him. "Off my place."

He went, cripply-like, with his knees bent and his hands swinging and his back humped, the way you'd think he carried something heavy.

The drunk man hiccupped. "I reckon to go, too," he said, maybe just to himself.

"Then go!" Donie Carawan yelled at him. "Everybody can go, right now, this minute! I thought you were my friends—now I see I don't have a friend among the whole bunch! Hurry up, get going! Everybody!"

Hands on hips, she blared it out. Folks moved off through the trees, a sight faster than Jeth had gone. But I stood where I was. The mouth-harp man gave me back my guitar, and I touched a chord of its strings. Donie Carawan spun around like on a swivel to set her blue eyes on me.

"You stayed," she said, the way she thought there was something funny about it.

"It's not midnight yet," I told her.

"But near to," added the mouth-harp man. "Just a few minutes off. And it's at midnight the little black train runs."

She lifted her round bare shoulders. She made to laugh again, but didn't.

"That's all gone. If it ever was true, it's not true any more. The rails were taken up—"

"Looky yonder through the dog-trot," the mouth-harp man broke in. "See the two rails in place,

streaking along the valley."

Again she swung around and she looked, and seemed to me she swayed in the light of the dying fires. She could see those streaky rails, all right.

"And listen," said the mouth-harp man. Don't you all hear something?"

I heard it, and so did Donie Carawan, for she flinched. It was a wild and lonely whistle, soft but plain, far down valley.

"Are you doing that, John?" she squealed at me, in a voice gone all of a sudden high and weak and old. Then she ran at the house and into the dog-trot, staring down along what looked like railroad track.

I followed her, and the mouth-harp man followed me. Inside the dog-trot was a floor of dirt, stomped hard as brick. Donie Carawan looked back at us. Lamplight came through a window, to make her face look bright pale, with the painted red of the mouth gone almost black against it.

"John," she said, "you're playing a trick, making it sound like—"

"Not me," I swore to her.

It whistled again, *wooooooeeeeee!* And I, too, looked along the two rails, shining plain as plain in the dark moonless night, to curve off around a valley-bend. A second later, the engine itself sounded, *chukchukchukchuk*, and the whistle, *wooooooeeeeee!*

"Miss Donie," I said, close behind her, "you'd better go away."

I pushed her gently.

"No!" She lifted her fists, and I saw cordy lines on their backs—they weren't a young woman's fists. "This is my house and my land, and it's my railroad!"

"But—" I started to say.

"If it comes here," she broke me off, "where can I run to from it?"

The mouth-harp man tugged my sleeve. "I'm going," he said. "You and me raised the pitch and brought the black train. Thought I could stay, watch it and glory in it. But I'm not man enough."

Going, he blew a whistle-moan on his mouth-harp, and the other whistle blew back an answer, louder and nearer.

And higher in the pitch.

"That's a real train coming," I told Donie Carawan, but she shook her yellow head.

"No," she said, dead-like. "It's coming, but it's no real train. It's heading right to this dog-trot. Look, John. On the ground."

Rails looked to run there, right through the dog-trot like through a tunnel. Maybe it was some peculiar way of the light. They lay close together, like narrow-gauge rails. I didn't feel like touching them with my

toe to make sure of them, but I saw them. Holding my guitar under one arm, I put out my other hand to take Donie Carawan's elbow. "We'd better go," I said again.

"I can't!" She said it loud and sharp and purely scared. And taking hold of her arm was like grabbing the rail of a fence, it was so stiff and unmoving.

"I own this land," she was saying. "I can't leave it."

I tried to pick her up, and that couldn't be done. You'd have thought she'd grown to the ground inside that dog-trot, sprang between what looked like the rails, the way you'd figure roots had come from her pointy toes and high heels. Out yonder, where the trackmarks curved off, the sound rose louder, higher, *chukehukchukchuk—wooooooeeeeee!* And light was coming from round the curve, like a headlight maybe, only it had some blue to its yellow.

The sound of the coming engine made the notes of the song in my head:

*Go put your house in order
For thou shalt surely die—*

Getting higher, getting higher, changing pitch as it came close and closer—

I don't know when I began picking the tune on my guitar, but I was playing as I stood there next to Donie Carawan. She couldn't flee. She was rooted there, or frozen there, and the train was going to come in sight in just a second.

The mouth-harp man credited us, him and me, with bringing it, by that pitch-changing. And, whatever anybody deserved, wasn't for me to bring their deservings on them. I thought things like that. Also:

Christian Doppler was the name of the fellow who'd thought out the why and wherefore of how pitch makes the sound closeness. Like what the mouth-harp man said, his name showed it wasn't witch stuff. An honest man could try . . .

I slid my fingers back up the guitar-neck, little by little, as I picked the music, and the pitch sneaked down.

"Here it comes, John," whimpered Donie Carawan, standing solid as a stump.

"No," I said. "It's going—listen!"

I played so soft you could pick up the train-noise with your ear. And the pitch was dropping, like with my guitar, and the whistle sounded *wooooooeeeeee!* Lower it sounded.

"The light—dimmer—" she said. "Oh, if I could have the chance to live different—"

She moaned and swayed.

Words came for me to sing as I picked.

*Oh, see her standing helpless,
Oh, hear her shedding tears.
She's counting these last moments
As once she counted years.
She'd turn from proud and wicked ways
She'd Leave her sin, O Lord!
If the little black train would just back up
And not take her aboard.*

For she was weeping, all right. I heard her breath catch and strangle and shake her body, the way you'd look for it to tear her ribs loose from her backbone. I picked on, strummed on, lower and lower.

Just for once, I thought I could glimpse what might have come at us.

It was little, all right, and black under that funny cold-blue light it carried. And the cars weren't any bigger than coffins, and some way the shape of coffins. Or maybe I just sort of imagined that, dreamed it up while I stood there. Anyway, the light grew dim, and the *chukchukchukchuk* went softer and lower, and you'd guess the train was backing off, out of hearing.

I stopped my hand on the silver strings. We stood there in a silence like what there must be in some lifeless, airless place like on the moon.

Then Donie Carawan gave out one big, broken sob, and I caught her with my free arm as she fell.

She was soft enough then. All the tight was gone from her. She lifted one weak, round, bare arm around my neck, and her tears wet my hickory shirt.

"You saved me, John," she kept saying. "You turned the curse away."

"Reckon I did," I said, though that sounded like bragging. I looked down at the rails, and they weren't there, in the dog-trot or beyond. Just the dark of the valley. The cooking fires had burned out, and the lamps in the house were low.

Her arm tightened around my neck. "Come in," she said. "Come in, John. You and me, alone in there."

"It's time for me to head off away," I said.

Her arm dropped from me. "What's the matter? Don't you like me?" she asked.

I didn't even answer that one, she sounded so pitiful. "Miss Donie," I said, "you told a true thing. I turned the curse from you. It hadn't died. You can't kill it by laughing at it, or saying there aren't such things, or

pulling up rails. If it held off tonight, it might come back."

"Oh!" She half raised her arms to me again, then put them down.

"What must I do?" she begged me.

"Stop being a sinner."

Her blue eyes got round in her pale face.

"You want me to live," she said, hopeful.

"It's better for you to live. You told me that folks owe you money, rent land from you and such. How'd they get along if you got carried off?"

She could see what I meant, maybe the first time in her life.

"You'd be gone," I minded her, "but the folks would stay behind, needing your help. Well, you're still here, Miss Donie. Try to help the folks. There's a thousand ways to do it. I don't have to name them to you. And you act right, you won't be so apt to hear that whistle at midnight."

I started out of the dog-trot.

"John!" My name sounded like a wail in her mouth. "Stay here tonight, John," she begged me. "Stay with me! I want you here, John, I need you here!"

"No, you don't need me, Miss Donie," I said. "You've got a right much of thinking and planning to do. Around about the up of sun, you'll have done enough, maybe, to start living different from this on."

She started to cry. As I walked away I noticed how, further I got, lower her voice-pitch sounded.

I sort of stumbled on the trail. The mouth-harp man sat on a chopped-down old log.

"I listened, John," he said. "Think you done right?"

"Did the closest I could to right. Maybe the black train was bound to roll, on orders from whatever station it starts from; maybe it was you and me, raising the pitch the way we did, brought it here tonight."

"I left when I did, dreading that thought," he nodded.

"The same thought made me back it out again," I said. "Anyway, I kind of glimmer the idea you all can look for a new Donie Carawan hereabouts, from now forward."

He got up and turned to go up trail. "I never said who I was."

"No, sir," I agreed him. "And I never asked."

"I'm Cobb Richardson's brother. Wyatt Richardson. Dying, my mother swore me to even things with Donie Carawan for what happened to Cobb. Doubt if she meant this sort of turn-out, but I reckon it would suit her fine."

We walked into the dark together.

"Come stay at my house tonight, John," he made the offer. "Ain't much there, but you're welcome to what there is."

"Thank you kindly," I said. "I'd be proud to stay."

Shiver in the Pines

Manly Wade Wellman

We sat along the edge of Mr. Hoje Cowand's porch, up the high hills of the Rebel Creek country. Mr. Hoje himself, and his neighbor Mr. Eddy Herron who was a widowman like Mr. Hoje, and Mr. Eddy's son Clay who was a long tall fellow like his daddy, and Mr. Hoje's pretty-cheeked daughter Sarah Ann, who was courting with Clay. And me. I'd stopped off to hand-help Mr. Hoje build him a new pole fence, and nothing would do him but I'd stay two-three days. Supper had been pork and fried apples and pone and snap beans. The sun made to set, and they all asked me to sing.

So I picked the silver strings on my guitar and began the old tuneful one:

*Choose your partner as you go,
Choose your partner as you go.*

"Yippee-hoo!" hollered old Mr. Eddy. "You sure enough can play that, John! Come on, choose partners and dance!"

Up hopped Clay and Sarah Ann, on the level-stamped front yard, and I played it up loud and sang, and Mr. Eddy called figures for them to step to:

"Honor your partner! . . . Swing your partner! . . . Do-si-do! . . . Allemand right!" Till I got to one last chorus and I sang out loudly:

*Fare thee well, my charming gal,
Fare thee well, I'm gone!
Fare thee well, my charming gal,
With golden slippers on!*

"Kiss your partner and turn her loose!" whooped out Mr. Eddy as I stopped. Clay kissed Sarah Ann the

way you'd think it was his whole business in life, and Sarah Ann, up on her little toes, kissed him back.

"Won't be no better singing and dancing the day these young ones marry up," said Mr. Hoje. "And no fare thee wells then."

"And I purely wish I could buy you golden slippers, Sarah Ann," said Clay as the two sat down together again.

"Gold's where you find it," quoted Mr. Eddy from the Book. "Clay, you might ransack round them old lost mines the Ancients dug, that nobody knows about. John, you remember the song about them?"

I remembered, for Mr. Eddy and Mr. Hoje talked a right much about the Ancients and their mines. I sang it:

*Where were they, where were they,
On that gone and vanished day
When they shoveled for their treasure of gold?
In the pines, in the pines,
Where the sun never shines,
And I shiver when the wind blows cold . . .*

As I stopped, a throat rasped, loud. "Odd," said somebody, walking into the yard, "to hear that song just now."

We didn't know the somebody. He was blocky-made, not young nor either old, with a store suit and a black hat, like a man running for district judge. His square face looked flat and white, like a face drawn on paper.

"Might I sit for a miinute?" he asked, mannerly. "I've come a long, long way."

"Take the door-log, and welcome," Mr. Hoje bade him. "My name's Hoje Cowand, and this is my daughter Sarah Ann, and these are the Herrons, and this here's John, who's a-visiting me. Come a long way, you said? Where from, sir?"

"From going to and fro in the world," said the stranger, lifting the hat from his smoke-gray hair, "and from walking up and down in it."

Another quotation from, the Book; and if you've read Job's first chapter, you know who's supposed to have said it. The man saw how we gopped, for he smiled as he sat down and stuck out his dusty shoes.

"My name's Reed Barnitt," he said. "Odd, to hear talk of the Ancients and their mines. For I've roved around after talk of them."

"Why," said Mr. Hoje, "folks say the Ancients came into these mountains before the settlers. Close to four hundred years back."

"That long, Mr. Hoje?" asked young Clay.

"Well, a tree was cut that growed in the mouth of an Ancients' mine, near Horse Stomp," Mr. Hoje allowed. "Schooled folks counted the rings in the wood, and there was full three hundred. It was before the Yankee war they done that, so the tree seeded itself in the mine-hole four hundred years back, or near about."

"The time of the Spaniards," nodded Reed Barnitt. "Maybe about when de Soto and his Spanish soldiers crossed these mountains."

"I've heard tell the Ancients was here around that time," put in Mr. Eddy, "but I've likewise heard tell they wasn't Spanish folks, nor either Indians."

"Did they get what they sought?" wondered Reed Barnitt.

"My daddy went into that Horse Stomp heading once," said Mr. Eddy. "He said it run back about seven hundred foot as he stepped it, and a deep shaft went down at the end. Well, he figured no mortal soul would dig so fae, saving he found what he was after." He had hold of Mr. Hoje's jug, and now he pushed it toward Mr. Ramitt. "Have a drink?"

"Thank you kindly, I don't use it. What did the Ancients want?"

"I've seen only one of their mines, over the ridge yonder," and Mr. Hoje nodded through the dusk. "Where they call it Black Pine Hollow—"

"Where the sun never shines," put in Mr. Barnitt, "and I shiver when the wind blows cold." His smile at me was tight.

"I was there three-four times when I was a chap, but not lately, for folks allows there's haunts there. I saw a right much quartz laying around, and I hear tell gold comes from quartz rock."

"Gold," nodded Reed Barnitt. He put his hand inside his coat.

"You folks are treating me clever," he said, "and I hope you let me make a gift. Miss Sarah Ann, I myself don't have use for these, so if you'd accept—"

What he held out was golden slippers, that shone in the down-going sun's last suspicions.

Gentlemen, you should have heard Sarah Ann cry out her pleasure, you should have seen the gold shine in her eyes. But she drew back the hand she put out.

"I couldn't," she said. "wouldn't be fitting to."

"Then I'll give them to this young man." Reed Barnitt set the slippers in Clay's lap. "Young sir, I misdoubt if Miss Sarah Ann would refuse a gift at your hands."

The slippers had high heels and pointy toes, and they shone like glory. Clay smiled at Sarah Ann and gave them to her. To see her smile back, you'd think it was Clay, and not Reed Barnitt, had taken them from nowhere for her.

"I do thank you kindly," said Sarah Ann. She shucked off her scuffy old shoes, and the golden slippers fitted her like slippers made to the measure of her feet. "John, she said, "was just singing about things like

this."

"Heard him as I came up trail from Rebel Creek," said Reed Barnitt. "And likewise heard him sing of the Ancients in Black Pine Hollow." His square face looked at us around. "Gentlemen," he said, "I wonder if there's heart in you all to go there with me."

We gopped again. Finally Clay said, "For gold?"

"For what else?" said Reed Barnitt. "Nobody's found it there, because nobody had the special way to look for it."

Nary one of us was really surprised to hear what the man said. There'd been such a story as long as anybody had lived around Rebel Creek. Mr. Hoje drank from the jug. Finally he said, "In what respect a special way, Mr. Barnitt?"

"I said I'd roved a far piece. I went to fetch a spell that would show the treasure. But I can't do it alone." Again the white face traveled its look over us. "It takes five folks—men, because a woman mustn't go into a mine."

We knew about that. If lady-folks go down a mine, there'll be something bad befall, maybe a miner killed.

"You've been kindly to me," said Reed Barnitt. "I feel like asking you, will you all come help me? Mr. Cowand, and Mr. Herron, and you his son, and you

John. Five we'd seek the treasure of the Ancients and five ways we'd divide it."

Sarah Ann had her manners with her. "I'll just go do the dishes, she said to us. "No, Clay, don't come help. Stay and talk here."

Reed Barnitt watched her go into the house. She left the door open, and the shine from the hearth gave us red light after sundown.

"You're a lucky young rooster," Reed Barnitt said to Clay. "A fifth chunk of the Ancients' treasure would sure enough pleasure that girl."

"Mr. Barnitt, I'm with you," Clay told him quick.

"So am I," said Mr. Eddy, because his son had spoken.

"I don't lag back when others go forward," I added

"Count on me," finished Mr. Hoje for us. "That makes five, like you want it, sir. But you studied the thing out and got the spell. You should have more than a fifth of whatever we find."

But the white square face shook sideways. "No. Part of the business is that each of the five takes his equal part, of the doing and of the sharing. That's how it must be. Now—we begin."

"Right this instant?" asked Clay. "Yes," said Reed Barnitt. "Stand round, you all."

He got up from the door-log and stepped into the yard, and the rest of us with him. "The first part of the

spell," he said. "To learn if the Ancients truly left a treasure."

Where the hearth's red glimmer showed on the ground in front of the door, he knelt down. He picked up a stick. He marked in the dirt.

"Five-pointed star," he said. It was maybe four feet across. "Stand at the points, gentlemen. Yes, like that."

Rising, he took his place at the fifth point. He flung away the stick, and put a white hand into the side pocket of his coat. "Silence," he warned us, though he didn't need to.

He stooped and flung something down at the star's center. Maybe it was powder, though I'm not sure, for it broke out into fire quick, and shone like pure white heat yanked in a chunk from the heart of a furnace. I saw it shine sickly on the hairy faces of Mr. Hoje and Mr. Eddy, and Clay's young jaws and cheeks seemed dull and drawn. Reed Barnitt needed no special light to be pale.

He began to speak. "Moloch, Lucifer," he said in a voice like praying. "Anector, Somiator, sleep ye not, awake. The strong hero Holoba, the powerful Ischiros, the mighty Manus Erohye—show us the truth! Amen."

Again his hand in his pocket, and he brought out a slip of paper the size of a postcard, whiter than white in the glow. He handed it to Clay, who was nearest him. "Breathe on it," said Reed Barnitt, "and the others do likewise."

Clay breathed on it, and passed it to Mr. Hoje. Then it came to me, and to Mr. Eddy, and back to Reed Barnitt. He stooped again, and held it above that sick-white heat. Back he jumped, quick, and yelled out loud, "Earth on the fire! Smother it before we lose the true word!"

Clay and his father flung on dirt. Mr. Hoje and Reed Barnitt walked side by side to the porch, whispering together. Then Mr. Hoje called in to Sarah Ann, "Fetch out the lamp, honey."

She did so. We gathered round to look at the paper. Writing was on it, spidery-looking and rough, the way you'd think it was written in mud instead of ink. Reed Barnitt gave it to Sarah Ann.

"Your heart is good," he said. "Read out what it says for us."

She held the lamp in one hand, the paper in the other.

"Do right, and prosper," she read, soft and shaky, "and what you seek is yours. Great treasure. Obey orders. To open the way, burn the light—"

"We put out the light," said Clay, but Reed Barnitt waved him quiet.

"Turn the paper over, Miss Sarah Ann," said Reed Barnitt. "Looks like more to read on the other side."

She looked at more muddy-looking scrawl on the back. She went on:

"Aram Harnam has the light. Buy it from him, but don't tell him why. He is wicked. Pay what he asks. The power is dear and scarce."

She looked up. "That's all it says," she told us, and gave the paper back to Reed Barnitt.

We all sat down, the lamp on the porch floor among us. "Anybody know that man, what's-his-name?" asked Reed Barnitt.

"Yes," answered Mr. Hoje. "We know Aram Harnam." At least, I'd heard what others along Rebel Creek said about Aram Harnam, and it wasn't good.

Seems he'd gone to a college to be a preacher. But that college sent him to be tried, with a sermon to some folks in another county. His teachers went to hear. When he had done, as I heard it told, those teachers told Aram Harnam that from what he'd said under name of a sermon they wanted him to pack his things and leave the college before even another sun rose.

So he came back to Rebel Creek. One night he went up on a bald hill most folks stayed away from, and put his hand on his head and said that all beneath his hand could be Satan's property. After that, he did witch-doctoring. Nobody liked him but any man, woman and child in the Rebel Creek county feared him.

"I take it that Arm Harnam's a bad man," Reed Barnitt suggested.

"You take it right, sir," allowed Mr. Eddy. "So does whoever wrote on that paper."

"Wrote on the paper?" Reed Barnitt said after him, and held it out to the light. It was white and empty; so was the other side when he turned that up.

"The writing's been taken back," he said, nodding his pale face above it. "But we all remember what it said. We must buy the light, and not let Aram Harman know why we want it."

"When do we go see him?" asked Mr. Hoje.

"Why not now?" said Reed Barnitt, but Mr. Hoje and Mr. Eddy spoke against that. Neither of them wanted to be trucking round Aram Harnam's place in the dark of night. We made it up to meet tomorrow morning for breakfast at Mr. Eddy's, then go.

Mr. Eddy and Clay left. Mr. Hoje and Sarah Ann made up pallets for Reed Barnitt and me just inside the front door. Reed Barnitt slept right off quick, but I lay awake a good spell. There was a sight of hoot owls hooting in the trees round the cabin, and a sight of thoughts in my head.

Way I've told it so far, you might wonder why we came in so quick on Reed Barnitt's spell and scheme. Lying there, I was wondering the same thing. It came to mind that Clay had first said he'd join. That was for Sarah Ann, and Clay without land or money, wanting to marry her and have enough to make her happy. After Clay spoke, Mr. Eddy and Mr. Hoje felt bound to do the same, for with them the kingdom and the power and the glory tied up to their young ones, and they wanted to see them wed and happy. Mr. Hoje special. He worked hard on a little place, with corn patches on terraces up slope you had to hang on with one hand while you chopped weeds with the other, and just one cow and two hogs in his pens.

I reckoned it was hope, more than belief, that caused them to say yes to Reed Barnitt. And me—well, I'd gone a many miles and seen a right much more things than any of my friends, and some of the things not what you'd call everyday things. I reckon I was hoping, too, for a good piece of luck for Clay and Sarah Ann. Never having had anything myself, or expecting to, I could anyhow see how he and she wanted something. So why not help out? Maybe, one or two things I'd watched happen, I could know to help out more than either of their fathers.

Figuring like that, I slept at last, and at the dawn gray we up to meet at Mr. Eddy's.

My first look at Aram Harnam, sitting in front of his low-built little shanty, I reckoned I'd never seen a hairier man, and mighty few hairier creatures. He had a juniper-bark basket betwixt his patched knees, and he was picking over a mess of narrow-leafed plants in it. His hands crawled in the basket like black-furred spiders. Out between his shaggy hair and his shaggy beard looked only his bright eyes and his thin brown nose, and if he smiled or frowned at us, none could say. He spoke up with a boom, and I recollected how once he'd studied to preach.

"Hoje Cowand," he said, "you're welcome, and your friends, too. I knew you all was coming."

"Who done told you that?" asked Mr. Hoje.

"Little bird done told me," said Aram Harnam. "Little black bird with green eyes, that tells me a many things."

It minded me of the Ugly Bird, that once I killed and freed a whole district of folks from the scare of it.

"Maybe your little bird told you what we want," said Mr. Eddy, standing close to Clay, but Aram Harnam shook his head.

"No sir, didn't say that." He set down the basket. "I'm a-waiting to hear."

Mr. Hoje introduced Reed Barnitt and me, and neither of us nor yet Aram Harman made offer to shake hands.

"It's a light we want of you, Aram Harnam," said Mr. Hoje then. "A special kind of light."

"Oh." Aram Harnam leaned back against the logs of his shanty. "The light that shows you what you'd miss else? I can fix you such a light."

"How much?" asked Clay.

Aram Harman's furry hand fiddled in his beard. "It's a scarce thing, that light. Cost you five hundred dollars."

"Five hundred dollars!" whooped out Mr. Eddy.

The eyes among all Aram Harnam's hair came to me. "Hear that echo, son?" he asked me. "Right clear today—these hills and mountains sure enough give you back echoes." Then, to Mr. Eddy. "Yes, sir. Five hundred dollars."

Mr. Hoje gulped. "We ain't got that kind of money."

"Got to have that kind of money for that kind of light," said Aram Harnam.

"Step aside with me, gentlemen," said Reed Barnitt, and Aram Hamam sat and watched us pull back a dozen or twenty steps to talk with our heads together.

"He knows something," Reed Barnitt whispered, "but not everything, or I judge he'd put his price higher still. Anyway, our spell last night told us there's treasure, and we need the light to find it."

"I ain't got but forty dollars," said Mr. Eddy. "Anybody else got enough to put with my forty dollars to make five hundred?"

"Twenty's all I have," Reed Barnitt told us, and breathed long and worried. "That's sixty so far. John?"

"Maybe the change in my pockets would add up to a dollar," I said. "I'm not right sure."

Aram Harnam laughed, or coughed, one. "You all make a big thing out of five hundred dollars," he called to us.

Mr. Hoje faced around and walked back toward him. "We don't have it."

"Cash," said Aram Harnam after him. "I might credit you, Hoje Cowand."

"Five hundred dollars' worth?" asked Mr. Hoje. "What on?"

"We-ell . . ." The word came slow out of the hair and whiskers. "You've got a piece of land, and a house, and a cow and a pig or two . . ."

"I can't give you those," Mr. Hoje put in.

"You could put them up. And Mr. Eddy could put up his place, too."

"The two places are worth plenty more than five hundred dollars," Mr. Eddy started to argue.

"Not on the tax bills, the way I hear from my little green-eyed black bird."

Reed Barnitt beckoned us round him again. "Isn't there any way to raise the money?" he whispered. "We're just before finding a fortune."

Mr. Hoje and Mr. Eddy shook their heads. "Gentlemen, we've as good as got that Ancients' treasure," Reed Barnitt said, and rummaged money from his pocket— a wadded ten, a five and some ones. "I'll risk my last cent, and take it back from off the top of whatever find. You others can do the same."

"Wait," said Mr. Hoje.

He put his arm around Mr. Eddy's neck, and the two of them mumbled together a while, and we others watched. Then they turned, both of them, and went back to Aram Harnam.

"We'd want a guarantee," said Mr. Hoje.

"Guarantee?" repeated Aram Harnam. "Oh, I'll guarantee the light. Put it in writing that it'll show you what you seek."

"Draw us up some loan papers," said Mr. Eddy. "Two hundred and fifty dollars credit to each of us, against our places, and a guarantee the light will work, and sixty days of time."

Mr. Eddy spoke sharp and deeply. Aram Harnam looked at him, then went into the shanty. He brought out a tablet of paper and an ink bottle and an old stump of a pen. He wrote two pages, and when Mr. Hoje and Mr. Eddy read them over they signed their names.

Then Aram Harnam bade us wait. He carried the papers back inside. What he did in there took time, and I watched part of it through the open door. He mixed stuff in a pot—I thought I smelled burning sulphur, and once something sweet and spicy, like what incense must smell like. There was other stuff. He heated it so it smoked, then worked it with those furry hands. After while he fetched out what he'd made. It was a big rough candle, as big around as your wrist and as long as your arm to the elbow. Its wick looked like gray yarn, and the candle wax was dirty black.

"Light it at midnight," he said, "and carry it forward. It'll go out at the place where you'll find your wish. Understand?"

We said we understood.

"Then good day to you all", said Aram Harnam.

Nobody felt the need of sleep that night. At eleven o'clock by Mr. Hoje's big silver turnip watch, we started out to cross the ridge to Black Pine Hollow. Clay went first, with a lantern. Reed Barnitt followed, with the candle. Then me, with my guitar slung on my back because I had a notion to carry it along, and a grubbing hoe in my hand. Then Mr. Hoje with a spade, and Mr. Eddy last of all with a crowbar. Sarah Ann watched us from the door, until we got out of her sight.

Not much of a trail led to Black Pine Hollow, for folks don't go there much. Last night's hoot owls were at it again, and once or twice we heard rattlings to right and left, like things keeping pace with us among the bushes. Down into the hollow we went, while a breeze blew down on us, chill for that time of year. I thought, but didn't sing out loud:

*In the pines, in the pines,
Where the sun never shines,
And I shiver when the wind blows cold*

"Where's this mine?" asked Reed Barnitt,

"I can find it better than Clay," called Mr. Hoje. He pushed ahead and took the lantern. The light showed duller and duller, the deeper we went into the hollow; it showed a sort of dim brown, the way you'd think that moonless night was trying to smother it. Around us crowded the black pines the hollow was named after. For my own comfort I reached back and tweaked a silver guitar-string, and it rang so loud we all jumped.

"Now," said Mr. Hoje, after a long, long while, "I think this must be it."

He turned off among a thick bunch of the blackest-looking pines, and held the lantern high. Hidden there behind the trees rose a rock face like a wall, and in the rock was a hole the size of a door, but uneven.

Vines hung down around it, but they looked dead and burnt out. As we stood still and looked, there was a little timid foot-patter inside.

"Let's pray that's no rat," said Clay. "Rats in mines are plumb bad luck."

"Shoo," said his daddy, "let's hope it's nothing worse than just a rat."

Reed Barnitt shoved forward. "I'm going in," he said through his teeth, "and I sure enough don't want to go in alone."

We went in together. Gentlemen, it was so black in that mine, you'd think a hunk of coal would show white. Maybe the lantern was smoking; it made just a pool of dim glow for us. Reed Barnitt struck a match on the seat of his pants and set it to the yarny wick of that five hundred dollar candle. It blazed up clean and strong, like the light Reed Barnitt had made in the middle of the star when it cast the spell. We saw where we were.

Seemed as if once there'd been a long hallway cut in the brown rock, but rocks had fallen down. They lay one on top of the other before us, shutting us away from the hall, so that we stood in a little space not much bigger than Mr. Hoje's front room. To either side the walls were of brown stone, marked by cutting tools—those Ancients had made their way through solid rock—and underfoot were pebbles. Some were quartz, like Mr. Hoje had said. Everything was quiet as the inside of a coffin the night before judgment.

"The flame's pointing," Reed Barnitt called to us. It did point, like a burning finger, straight into the place. He stepped toward those piled rocks, that made something like steps to go up, and we moved with him. I don't think anybody wanted to go over the rocks and beyond. The blackness there made you feel that not only nobody had ever been in there, but likewise nobody could ever go; the blackness would shove him back like a hand.

I moved behind Reed Barnitt with the others. The light of the candle shone past his blocky body and wide hat, making him look like something cut out of black cloth. Two-three steps, and he stopped, so quick we almost bumped him. "The light flutters," he said.

It did flutter, and it didn't point to the piled rocks, but to the wall at their right. When Reed Barnitt made a pace that way, it winked out. We all stood close together in the dim lantern light.

Reed Barnitt put his hand on the rock wall. It showed ghost white on the brown. His finger crawled along a seamy crack.

"Dig there," he said to us. By what light the lantern showed, I shoved the pick end of the grubbing hoe into the crack and gouged. Seemed to me the whole wall fought me, but I heaved hard and the crack widened. It made a heavy spiteful noise somewhere. Mr. Eddy drove in the point of his bar and pulled down.

"Come help me, Clay," he called. "Put your man on this."

The two pulled down with their long bodies, then together they pushed up. My heart jumped inside me, for a piece of rock the size of a table top was moving. I shoved on the hoe handle. Reed Barnitt grabbed the free edge of the moving piece, and we laid into it—then jumped back just in time.

The big loose chunk dropped like the lid of a box. Underneath was dark dirt. Mr. Eddy drove the bar point into it.

"Light that candle thing again," he asked Reed Barnitt. Reed Barnitt struck another match and tried. "Won't light," he said. "We've got our hand right on the treasure."

I reckoned that's the moment we all believed we had it. So far we'd worried and bothered, but now we stopped, and just worked. Clay took the spade from Mr. Hoje, and I swung my hoe. He scooped out the dirt I loosened. We breathed hard, watching or working. Suddenly:

"John," said Clay, "didn't I hear that hoe-blade hit metal?"

I slammed it into the dirt again, hard as I could. Clay scooped out a big spadeful. Bright yellow glimmered up out of the dark dirt. Clay grabbed into it, and so did his daddy. I had my mouth open to yell, but Reed Barnitt yelled first.

"God in the bushes! Look up there!" We looked. Reed Barnitt had turned away from our work, and he pointed up those step-piled rocks. On the top rock of them stood something against the choking blackness.

It stood up the height of a man, that thing, but you couldn't make sure of its shape. Because it was strung and swaddled over with webby rags. They stirred and fluttered around it like gray smoke. And it had a hand, and the hand held a skull, with white grinning teeth and eyes that shone.

"It's an Ancient!" Reed Barnitt yelled, and the thing growled, deep and hungry and ugly.

Clay dropped his spade. I heard the clink and jangle of metal pieces on the floor pebbles. He gave back, and Mr. Hoje and Mr. Eddy gave back with him. I stood where I was, putting down my hoe. Reed Barnitt was the only one that moved forward.

"Stay away from us," he sort of breathed out at the ragged-gray thing.

It just pushed out the skull at him, and the skull's eye-lights blinked and glared. Reed Barnitt backed up.

"Let's get out of here," he choked, "before that Ancient—"

He didn't know we'd found the treasure, his eyes had been on whatever the thing was. He was for running, but I wasn't.

In my mind I saw the peculiar things I'd faced before this. The Ugly Bird . . . One Other . . . Mr. Loden who might have lived three hundred years but for me . . . Forney Meechum whose dead ghost had fled from me. I'd even seen the Behinder that nobody's ever reckoned to see, and I'd come back to tell of it. I wouldn't run from that gray-raggedy thing that held a skull like a lantern.

I shrugged my guitar in front of me. My left hand grabbed its neck and my right spread on the silver strings, the silver that's sure sudden death to witch-stuff. I dragged a chord of music from them, and it echoed in there like a whole houseful of guitar-men helping me. And I thought the thing up there above shuddered, and the skull it held wobbled from side to side, trying maybe to say no to me.

"You don't like my music?" I said to it, and swept out another chord and got my foot on the bottom step-stone.

"John!" came Reed Barnitt's sick voice. "Take care—"

"Let that thing take care!" I told him and moved up on the rocks.

The gray thing flung the skull at me. I dodged, and felt the wind of the skull as it sailed grinning past, and I heard it smash like a bottle on the floor behind me. For a moment that flinging hand stuck out of the gray rags.

I knew whose hand it was, black-furry like a spider.

"Aram Harnam!" I yelled out, and let my guitar fall to hang by its string, and I charged up those stairs of stones.

Reed Barnitt was after me as I got to the top.

"It's a put-up show!" I was shouting, and grabbed my hands full of rags. Reed Barnitt clamped onto my arm and flung me down the step-stones so I almost fell flat on the floor. But rags had torn away in my grip, and you could see Aram Harnam's face, all a thicket of hair and beard, with hooked nose and shining eyes.

"What's up?" hooted out Mr. Eddy.

"Aram Harnam's up!" I yelled to him and the others. "Sold us that candle-thing, then came here to scare us out!" I pointed. "And Reed Barnitt's in it with him!"

Reed Barnitt, on the top stone beside Aram Harnam, turned around, his eyes big in his white face. I got my feet under me to charge back up at those two.

But then I stopped, the way you'd think roots had sprung from my toes into the rock. There were three up there, not two.

That third one looked at first glimpse like a big, big man wearing a fur coat; until you saw the fur was on his skin, with warty muscles bunching through. His head was more like a frog's than anything else, wide in the mouth and big in the eye and no nose. He spread his arms and put them quiet-like round the shoulders of Reed Barnitt and Aram Harnam, and took hold with his hands that had both webs and claws.

The two men he touched screamed out like animals in a snap-trap. I sort of reckon they tried to pull free, but those two big shaggy arms just hugged them close and hiked them off their feet. And what had come to fetch them, it fetched them away, all in a blink of time, back into that darkness no sensible soul would dare.

That's when we four others up and ran like rabbits, dropping the lantern.

We got back to Mr. Hoje's, and lighted a lamp there, and looked at those two handfuls of metal pieces Clay and Mr. Eddy had grabbed and never turned loose.

"I reckon they're money," said Mr. Hoje, "but I never seen the like."

None of us had. They weren't even round. just limpy-edged and flattened out. You could figure, how

they'd been made, a lump of soft gold put between two jaws of a die and stamped out. The smallest was bigger and thicker than a four-bit piece. They had figures, like men with horned heads and snaky tails, and there were what might be letters or numbers, but nothing any of us could name in any language we'd ever heard tell of.

We put all those coins into an old salt-bag, and sat up the rest of the night, not talking much but pure down glad of each other's company. We had breakfast together, cooked by Sarah Ann, who had the good sense not to question. And after that, came up a young man who was sheriff's deputy.

"Gentlemen," he said to us, "has ary one of you seen a fellow with a white face and a broad build?"

"What's up with such a one?" asked Mr. Hoje.

"Why, Mr. Hoje," said the sherffs deputy, "they want him bad at the state prison. He was a show-fellow, doing play-magic tricks, but he took to swindling folks and got in jail and then got out again, and the law's after him."

"We've seen such a man," allowed Mr. Eddy, "but he's gone from here now,"

When we were left alone again, we told each other we could see how it was. Reed Barnitt did his false magic tricks, like setting the light on the star and making words show on the white paper by heating it. And he'd planned it with Aram Harnam to furnish us that black candle, to get hold of the property of Mr. Hoje and Mr. Eddy—scaring them afterward, so bad they'd never dare look again, and forfeit their home places.

Only: Therewas treasure there, the way those two swindlers never guessed. And there was something left to watch and see it wasn't robbed away.

I don't call to mind which of us said that all we could do was take back the gold pieces, because such things could never do anybody good. We went back that noon to Black Pine Hollow, where the sun sure enough didn't shine. We shivered without ary wind blowing.

Inside the mine-mouth, we picked up the lantern and lighted it. Clay had the nerve to pick up the broken skull Aram Harnam had flung, and we saw why the eyes had shone—pieces of tin in them. We found our spade and hoe. Into the hole we flung the gold pieces, on top of what seemed a heap more lying there. Then we put back the dirt, tamped it down hard, and we all heaved and sweated till we put the piece of rock in place again.

"There, the Ancients got their treasure back," said Mr. Hoje, breathing hard.

Then, noise up on those stepstones. I held up the lantern.

Huddled and bent they stood up there, Reed Barnitt and Aram Harnam.

They sort of leaned together, like tired horses in plow harness, not quite touching shoulders. Their hands—Reed Barnitt's white ones, Aram Harnam's shaggy ones—hung with the fingers bent and limp. They looked down at us with tired eyes and mouths drooped open, the way you'd think they had some hope about us, but not much.

"Look," said Clay, just behind my neck. "We gave back the gold. They're giving back those two that they dragged away last night."

But they looked as if they'd been gone more than a night.

The hair on Reed Barnitt's hatless head was as white as his face. And Aram Harnam's beard, and the fur on his hands—black no more, but a dirty, steamy gray. Maybe it had changed from fear, the way folks say can happen. Or maybe there'd been time for it to change, where they were.

"Go fetch them, John," Mr. Hoje asked me. "And we'll get a doctor for them when we get them to my house."

I started up over the stones with the lantern.

Their eyes picked up the lantern light and shone green, like the eyes of dogs. One of them, I don't know which, made a little whimpering cry with no words in it. They ran from me into the dark, and I saw their backs, bent more than I'd thought possible.

I ran up to the top stone, holding out the lantern.

As I watched they sort of fell forward and ran on hands and feet. Like animals. Not quite sure of how to run that way on all fours; but something told me, mighty positive, that they'd learn better as time went by. I backed down again, without watching any more.

"They won't come out," I said.

Mr. Hoje spit on the pebbles. "From what I saw, maybe it's just as well. They can live in there with the Ancients."

"Live?" repeated Clay. "The Ancients are dead. Way I figure, what's in there isn't Ancients—just something Ancients left behind. I don't want any part of it."

From Black Pine Hollow we went to Aram Harnam's empty shanty and there we found the papers he'd tricked Mr. Hoje and Mr. Eddy into signing, and we burned them up. On the way back, the two old men made it up between themselves to spare Clay and Sarah Ann a few acres from both places. As to the cabin, neighbors would be proud to help build it.

"One thing wonders me," said Clay. "John, you didn't have any notion night before last of singing about the girl with golden slippers?"

"Not till I struck the strings and piped up," I told him.

"Then how did Reed Barnitt just happen to take them from under his coat for Sarah Ann?" Clay asked us. "Stage-show magician or not, how did he just happen to do that?"

None of us could guess.

But Sarah Ann kept the golden slippers, and nobody could see any reason why not. She wore them to marry up with Clay, and danced in them while I played song after song—"Pretty Fair Maid," and "Willie From the Western States," and "I Dreamed Last Night of My True Love, All In My Arms I Had Her." Preacher Miller said the service, what God hath joined together let no man put asunder. I kissed the pretty-cheeked bride, and so did many a kind friend, but the only man of us she kissed back was long tall Clay Herron.

Walk Like a Mountain

Manly Wade Wellman

Once at Sky Notch, I never grudged the trouble getting there. It was so purely pretty, I was glad outlanders weren't apt to crowd in and spoil all.

The Notch cut through a tall peak that stood against a higher cliff. Steep brushy faces each side, and a falls at the back that made a trickly branch, with five pole cabins along the waterside. Corn patches, a few pigs in pens, chickens running round, a cow tied up one place. It wondered me how they ever got a cow up there. Laurels grew, and viney climbers, and mountain flowers in bunches and sprawls. The water made a happy noise. Nobody moved in the yards or at the doors, so I stopped by a tree and hollered the first house.

"Hello the house!" I called. "Hello to the man of the house and all inside!"

A plank door opened about an inch. "Hello to yourself," a gritty voice replied me. "Who's that out there with the guitar?"

I moved from under the tree. "My name's John. Does Mr. Lane Jarrett live up here? Got word for him, from his old place on Drowning Creek."

The door opened wider, and there stood a skimpy little man with gray whiskers. "That's funny," he said.

The funnyness I didn't see. I'd known Mr. Lane Jarrett years back, before he and his daughter Page moved to Sky Notch. When his uncle Jeb died and heired him some money, I'd agreed to carry it to Sky Notch, and, gentlemen, it was a long, weary way getting there.

First a bus, up and down and through mountains, stop at every pig trough for passengers. I got off at Charlie's Jump—who Charlie was, nor why or when he jumped, nobody there can rightly say. Climbed a high ridge, got down the far side, then a twenty-devil way along a deep valley river. Up another height, another beyond that. Then it was night, and nobody would want to climb the steep face above, because it was grown up with the kind of trees that the dark melts in around you. I made a fire and took my supper rations from my pocket. Woke at dawn and climbed up and up and up, and here I was.

"Funny, about Lane Jarrett," gritted the little man out. "Sure you ain't come about that business?"

I looked up the walls of the Notch. Their tops were toothy rocks, the way you'd think those walls were two jaws, near about to close on what they'd caught inside them. Right then the Notch didn't look so pretty.

"Can't say, sir" I told him, "till I know what business you mean."

"Rafe Enoch!" he boomed out the name, like firing two barrels of a gun. "That's what I mean!" Then he appeared to remember his manners, and came out, puny in his jeans and no shoes on his feet. "I'm Oakman Dillon," he named himself. "John—that's your name, huh? Why you got that guitar?"

"I pick it some," I replied him. "I sing." Tweaking the silver strings, I sang a few lines:

*By the shore of Lonesome River
Where the waters ebb and flow,
Where the wild red rose is budding
And the pleasant breezes blow,*

*It was there I spied the lady
That forever I adore,
As she was a-lonesome walking
By the Lonesome River shore. . . .*

"Rafe Enoch!" he grit-grated out again. "Carried off Miss Page Jarrett the way you'd think she was a banty chicken!"

Slap, I quieted the strings with my palm. "Mr. Lane's little daughter Page was stolen away?"

He sat down on the door-log. "She ain't suchy little daughter. She's six foot maybe three inches—taller'n you, even. Best-looking big woman I ever seen, brown hair like a wagonful of home-cured tobacco, eyes green and bright as a fresh-squeeze grape pulp."

"Fact?" I said, thinking Page must have changed a right much from the long-leggy little girl I'd known, must have grown tall like her daddy and her dead mammy, only taller. "Is this Rafe Enoch so big, a girl like that is right for him?"

"She's puny for him. He's near about eight foot tall, best I judge." Oakman Dillon's gray whiskers stuck out like a mad cat's. "He just grabbed her last evening where she walked near the fall, and up them rocks he went like a possum up a jack oak."

I sat down on a stump. "Mr. Lane's a friend of mine. How can I help?"

"Nobody can't help, John. It's right hard to think you ain't knowing all this stuff. Don't many strangers come up here. Ain't room for many to live in the Notch."

"Five homes," I counted them with my eyes.

"Six. Rafe Enoch lives up at the top." He jerked his head toward the falls. "Been there a long spell—years, I reckon, since when he run off from somewhere. Heard tell he broke a circus man's neck for offering him a job with a show. He built up top the falls, and he used to get along with us. Thanked us kindly for a mess of beans or roasting ears. Lately, he's been mean-talking."

"Nobody mean-talked him back? Five houses in the Notch mean five grown men—couldn't they handle one giant?"

"Giant size ain't all Rafe Enoch's got." Again the whiskers bristled up. "Why! He's got powers, like he can make rain fall—"

"No," I put in quick. "Can't even science men do that for sure."

"I ain't studying science men. Rafe Enoch says for rain to fall, down it comes, ary hour day or night he speaks. Could drown us out of this Notch if he had the mind."

"And he carried off Page Jarrett," I went back to what he'd said.

"That's the whole truth, John. Up he went with her in the evening, daring us to follow him."

I asked, "Where are the other Notch folks?"

"Up yonder by the falls. Since dawn we've been talking Lane Jarrett back from climbing up and getting himself neck-twisted. I came to feed my pigs, now I'm heading back."

"I'll go with you," I said, and since he didn't deny me I went.

The falls dropped down a height as straight up as a chimney, and a many times taller, and their water boiled off down the branch. Either side of the falls, the big boulder rocks piled on top of each other like stones in an almighty big wall. Looking up, I saw clouds boiling in the sky, dark and heavy and wet-looking, and I remembered what Oakman Dillon had said about big Rafe Enoch's rain-making.

A bunch of folks were there, and I made out Mr. Lane Jarrett, bald on top and bigger than the rest. I touched his arm, and he turned.

"John! Ain't seen you a way-back time. Let me make you known to these here folks."

He called them their first names—Yoot, Ollie, Bill, Duff, Miss Lulie, Miss Sara May and so on. I said I had a pocketful of money for him, but he just nodded and wanted to know did I know what was going on.

"Looky up against them clouds, John. That pointy rock. My girl Page is on it."

The rock stuck out like a spur on a rooster's leg. Somebody was scrouched down on it, with the clouds getting blacker above, and a long, long drop below.

"I see her blue dress," allowed Mr. Oakman, squinting up. "How long she been there, Lane?"

"I spotted her at sunup," said Mr. Lane. "She must have got away from Rafe Enoch and crope out there during the night. I'm going to climb."

He started to shinny up a rock, up clear of the brush around us. And, Lord, the laugh that came down on us! Like a big splash of water, it was clear and strong, and like water it made us shiver. Mr. Oakman caught onto Mr. Lane's ankle and dragged him down.

"Ain't a God's thing ary man or woman can do, with him waiting up there," Mr. Oakman argued.

"But he's got Page," said Mr. Lane busting loose again. I grabbed his elbow.

"Let me," I said.

"You, John? You're a stranger, you ain't got no pick in this."

"This big Rafe Enoch would know if it was you or Mr. Oakman or one of these others climbing, he might fling down a rock or the like. But I'm strange to him. I might wonder him, and he might let me climb all the way up."

"Then?" Mr. Page said, frowning.

"Once up, I might could do something."

"Leave him try it," said Mr. Oakman to that.

"Yes," said one of the ladyfolks.

I slung my guitar behind my shoulder and took to the rocks. No peep of noise from anywhere for maybe a minute of climbing. I got on about the third or fourth rock from the bottom, and that clear, sky-ripping laugh came from over my head.

"Name yourself!" roared down the voice that had laughed.

I looked up. How high was the top I can't say, but I made out a head and shoulders looking down, and knew they were another sight bigger head and shoulders than ever I'd seen on any mortal man.

"Name yourself!" he yelled again, and in the black clouds a lightning flash wiggled, like a snake caught fire.

"John!" I bawled back.

"What you aiming to do, John?"

Another crack of lightning, that for a second seemed to peel off the clouds right and left. I looked this way and that. Nowhere to get out of the way should lightning strike, or a rock or anything. On notion, I pulled my guitar to me and picked and sang:

*Went to the rock to hide my face,
The rock cried out, "No hiding place!". . .*

Gentlemen, the laugh was like thunder after the lightning.

"Better climb quick, John!" he hollered me. "I'm a-waiting on you up here!"

I swarmed and swarved and scrabbled my way up, not looking down. Over my head that rock-spur got

bigger, I figured it for maybe twelve-fifteen feet long, and on it I made out Page Jarrett in her blue dress. Mr. Oakman was right, she was purely big and she was purely good-looking. She hung to the pointy rock with her both long hands.

"Page," I said to her, with what breath I had left, and she stared with her green eyes and gave me an inch of smile. She looked to have a right much of her daddy's natural sand in her craw.

"John," boomed the thunder-voice, close over me now. "I asked you a while back, why you coming up?"

"Just to see how you make the rain fall," I said, under the overhang of the ledge. "Help me up."

Down came a bare brown honey-hairy arm, and a hand the size of a scoop shovel. It got my wrist and snatched me away like a turnip coming out of a patch, and I landed my feet on broad flat stones.

Below me yawned up those rock-toothed tops of the Notch's jaws. Inside them the brush and trees looked mossy and puny. The cabins were like baskets, the pigs and the cow like play-toys, and the branch looked to run so narrow you might bridge it with your shoe. Shadow fell on the Notch from the fattening dark clouds.

Then I looked at Rafe Enoch. He stood over me like a sycamore tree over a wood shed. He was the almightiest big thing I'd ever seen on two legs.

Eight foot high, Oakman Dillon had said truly, and he was thick-made in keeping. Shoulders wide enough to fill a barn door, and legs like tree trunks with fringe-sided buckskin pants on them, and his big feet wore moccasin shoes of bear's hide with the fur still on. His shirt, sewed together of pelts—fox, coon, the like of that—hadn't any sleeves, and hung open from that big chest of his that was like a cotton bale. Topping all, his face put you in mind of the full moon with a yellow beard, but healthy-looking brown, not pale like the moon. Big and dark eyes, and through the yellow beard his teeth grinned like big white sugar lumps.

"Maybe I ought to charge you to look at me," he said.

I remembered how he'd struck a man dead for wanting him in a show, and I looked elsewhere. First, naturally, at Page Jarrett on the rock spur. The wind from the clouds waved her brown hair like a flag, and fluttered her blue skirt around her drawn-up feet. Then I turned and looked at the broad space above the falls.

From there I could see there was a right much of higher country, and just where I stood with Rafe Enoch was a big shelf, like a lap, with slopes behind it. In the middle of the flat space showed a pond of water, running out past us to make the falls. On its edge stood Rafe Enoch's house, built wigwam-style of big old logs leaned together and chinked between with clay over twigs. No trees to amount to anything on the shelf—just one behind the wigwam-house, and to its branches hung joints that looked like smoke meat.

"You hadn't played that guitar so clever, maybe I mightn't have saved you," said Rafe Enoch's thunder-voice.

"Saved?" I repeated him.

"Look." His big club of a finger pointed to the falls, then to those down-hugged clouds. "When they get

together, what happens?"

Just at the ledge lip, where the falls went over, stones looked half-way washed out. A big shove of water would take them out the other half, and the whole thing pour down on the Notch.

"Why you doing this to the folks?" I asked.

He shook his head. "John, this is one rain I never asked for." He put one big pumpkin-sized fist into the palm of his other hand. "I can call for rain, sure, but some of it comes without me. I can't start it or either stop it, I just know it's coming. I've known about this for days. It'll drown out Sky Notch like a rat nest."

"Why didn't you try to tell them?"

"I tried to tell her." His eyes cut around to where Page Jarrett hung to the pointy rock, and his stool-leg fingers raked his yellow beard. "She was walking off by herself, alone. I know how it feels to be alone. But when I told her, she called me a liar. I brought her up here to save her, and she cried and fought me." A grin. "She fought me better than any living human I know. But she can't fight me hard enough."

"Can't you do anything about the storm?" I asked him to tell.

"Can do this." He snapped his big fingers, and lightning crawled through the clouds over us. It made me turtle my neck inside my shirt collar. Rafe Enoch never twitched his eyebrow.

"Rafe," I said, "you might could persuade the folks. They're not your size, but they're human like you."

"Them?" He roared his laugh. "They're not like me, nor you aren't like me, either, though you're longer-made than common. Page yonder, she looks to have some of the old Genesis giant blood in her. That's why I saved her alive."

"Genesis giant blood," I repeated him, remembering the Book, sixth chapter of Genesis. "'There were giants in the earth in those days.'"

"That's the whole truth," said Rafe. "When the sons of God took wives of the daughters of men—their children were the mighty men of old, the men of renown. That's not exact quote, but it's near enough."

He sat down on a rock, near about as tall sitting as I was standing. "Any giant knows he was born from the sons of the gods," he said. "My name tells it, John."

I nodded, figuring it. "Rafe—Raphah, the giant whose son was Goliath, Enoch—"

"Or Anak," he put in. "Remember the sons of Anak, and them scared-out spies sent into Canaan? They was grasshoppers in the sight of the sons of Anak, and more ways than just size, John." He sniffed. "They got scared back into the wilderness for forty years. And Goliath!"

"David killed him," I dared remind Rafe.

"By a trick. A slingshot stone. Else he'd not lasted any longer than that."

A finger-snap, and lightning winged over us like a hawk over a chicken run. I tried not to scrouch down.

"What use to fight little old human men," he said, "when you got the sons of the gods in your blood?"

I allowed he minded me of Strap Buckner with that talk.

"Who's Strap Buckner? Why do I mind you of him?"

I picked the guitar, I sang the song:

*Strap Buckner he was called, he was more than eightfoot tall,
And he walked like a mountain among men.
He was good and he was great, and the glorious Lone Star State
Will never look upon his like again.*

"Strap Buckner had the strength of ten lions," I said, and he used it as ten lions. Scorned to fight ordinary folks, so he challenged old Satan himself, skin for skin, on the banks of the Brazos, and if Satan hadn't fought foul—"

"Another dirty fighter!" Rafe got up from where he sat, quick as quick for all his size. "Foul or not, Satan couldn't whup me!"

"Might be he couldn't," I judged, looking at Rafe. "But anyway, the Notch folks never hurt you. Used to give you stuff to eat."

"Don't need their stuff to eat," he said, the way you'd think that was the only argument. He waved his hand past his wigwam-house. "Down yonder is a bunch of hollows, where ain't no human man been, except maybe once the Indians. I hoe some corn there, some potatoes. I pick wild salad greens here and yonder. I kill me a deer, a bear, a wild hog—ain't no human man got nerve to face them big wild hogs, but I chunk them with a rock or I fling a sharp ash sapling, and what I fling at I bring down. In the pond here I spear me fish. Don't need their stuff to eat, I tell you."

"Need it or not, why let them drown out?"

His face turned dark, the way you'd think smoke drifted over it.

"I can't abide little folks' little eyes looking at me, wondering themselves about me, thinking I'm not rightly natural."

He waited for what I had to say, and it took nerve to say it.

"But you're not a natural man, Rafe. You've allowed that yourself, you say you come from different blood. Paul Bunyan thought the same thing."

He grinned his big sugar-lump teeth at me. Then: "Page Jarrett," he called, "better come off that rock before the rain makes it slippery and you fall off. I'll help you—"

"You stay where you are," she called back. "Let John help."

I went to the edge of that long drop down. The wind blew from some place—maybe below, maybe

above or behind or before. I reached out my guitar, and Page Jarrett crawled to where she could lay hold, and that way I helped her to the solid standing. She stood beside me, inches taller, and she put a burning mean took on Rafe Enoch. He made out he didn't notice.

"Paul Bunyan," he said, after what I'd been saying. "I've heard tell his name—champion logger in the northern states, wasn't he?"

"Champion logger," I said. "Bigger than you, I reckon—"

"Not bigger!" thundered Rafe Enoch.

"Well, as big."

"Know ary song about him?"

"Can't say there's been one made. Rafe, you say you despise to be looked on by folks."

"Just by little folks, John. Page Jerrett can look on me if she relishes to."

Quick she looked off, and drew herself up proud. Right then she appeared to be taller than what Mr. Oakman Dillon had reckoned her, and a beauty-looking thing she was, you hear what I say, gentlemen. I cut my eyes up to the clouds; they hung down over us, loose and close, like the roof of a tent. I could feel the closeness around me, the way you feel water when you've waded up to the line of your mouth.

"How soon does the rain start falling?" I asked Rafe.

"Can fall ary time now," said Rafe, pulling a grass-stalk to bite in his big teeth. "Page's safe off that rock point, it don't differ me a shuck when that rain falls."

"But when?" I asked again. "You know."

"Sure I know." He walked toward the pond, and me with him. I felt Page Jerrett's grape-green eyes digging our backs. The pond water was shiny tarry black from reflecting the clouds. "Sure," he said, "I know a right much. You natural human folks, you know so pitiful little I'm sorry for you."

"Why not teach us?" I wondered him, and he snorted like a big mean horse.

"Ain't the way it's reckoned to be, John. Giants are figured stupid. Remember the tales? Your name's John—do you call to mind a tale about a man named Jack, long back in time?"

"Jack the Giant Killer," I nodded. "He trapped a giant in a hole—"

"Cormoran," said Rafe. "Jack dug a pit in front of his door. And Blunderbore he tricked into stabbing himself open with a knife. But how did them things happen? He blew a trumpet to tole Corinoran out, and he sat and ate at Blunderbore's table like a friend before tricking him to death." A louder snort. "More foul fighting, John. Did you come up here to be Jack the Giant Killer? Got some dirty tricks? If that's how it is, you done drove your ducks to the wrong puddle."

"More than a puddle here," I said, looking at the clouds and then across the pond. "See yonder, Rafe, where the water edge comes above that little slanty slope. If it was open, enough water could run off to keep the Notch from flooding."

"Could be done," he nodded his big head, "if you had machinery to pull the rocks out. But they're bigger than them fall rocks, they ain't half washed away to begin with. And there ain't no machinery, so just forget it. The Notch washes out, with most of the folks living in it—all of them, if the devil bids high enough. Sing me a song.

I swept the strings with my thumb. "Thinking about John Henry," I said, half to myself. "He wouldn't need a machine to open up a drain-off place yonder."

"How'd he do it?" asked Rafe.

"He had a hammer twice the size any other man swung," I said. "He drove steel when they cut the Big Bend Tunnel through Cruze Mountain. Out-drove the steam drill they brought to compete him out of his job."

"Steam drill," Rafe repeated me, the way you'd think he was faintly recollecting the tale. "They'd do that—ordinary size folks, trying to work against a giant. How big was John Henry?"

"Heard tell he was the biggest man ever in Virginia."

"Big as me?"

"Maybe not quite. Maybe just stronger."

"Stronger!"

I had my work cut out not to run from the anger in Rafe Enoch's face.

"Well," I said, "he beat the steam drill. . . ."

*John Henry said to his captain,
"A man ain't nothing but a man,
But before I let that steam drill run me down,
I'll die with this hammer in my hand. . . ."*

"He'd die trying," said Rafe, and his ears were sort of cocked forward, the way you hear elephants do to listen.

"He'd die winning," I said, and sang the next verse:

*John Henry drove steel that long day through,
The steam drill failed by his side.
The mountain was high, the sun was low,
John he laid down his hammer and he died. . . .*

"Killed himself beating the drill!" and Rafe's pumpkin fist banged into his other palm. "Reckon I could have beat it and lived!"

I was looking at the place where the pond could have a drain-off.

"No," said Rafe. "Even if I wanted to, I don't have no hammer twice the size of other folks' hammers."

A drop of rain fell on me. I started around the pond. "Where you going?" Rafe called, but I didn't look back. Stopped beside the wigwam-house and put my guitar inside. It was gloomy in there, but I saw his home-made stool as high as a table, his table almost chin high to a natural man, a bed woven of hickory splits and spread with bear and deer skins to be the right bed for Og, King of Bashan, in the Book of Joshua. Next to the door I grabbed up a big pole of hickory, off some stacked firewood.

"Where you going?" he called again.

I went to where the slope started. I poked my hickory between two rocks and started to pry. He laughed, and rain sprinkled down.

"Go on, John," he granted me. "Grub out a sluice-way there. I like to watch little scrabbly men work. Come in the house, Page, we'll watch him from in there."

I couldn't budge the rocks from each other. They were big-like trunks or grain sacks, and must have weighed in the half-tons. They were set in there, one next to the other, four-five of them holding the water back from pouring down that slope. I heaved on my hickory till it bent like a bow.

"Come on," said Rafe again, and I looked around in time to see him put out his shovel hand and take her by the wrist. Gentlemen, the way she slapped him with her other hand it made me jump with the crack.

I watched, knee deep in water. He put his hand to his gold-bearded cheek and his eye-whites glittered in the rain.

"If you was a man," he boomed down at Page, "I'd slap you dead."

"Do it!" she blazed him back. "I'm a woman, and I don't fear you or ary overgrown, sorry-for-himself giant ever drew breath!"

With me standing far enough off to forget how little I was by them, they didn't seem too far apart in size.

Page was like a small-made woman facing up to a sizable man, that was all.

"If you was a man—" he began again.

"I'm no man, nor neither ain't you a man!" she cut off. "Don't know if you're an ape or a bull-brute or what, but you're no man! John's the only man here, and I'm helping him! Stop me if you dare!"

She ran to where I was. Rain battered her hair into a brown tumble and soaked her dress snug against her fine proud strong body. Into the water she splashed.

"Let me pry," and she grabbed the hickory pole. "I'll pry up and you tug up, and maybe—"

I bent to grab the rock with my hands. Together we tried. Seemed to me the rock stirred a little, like the drowsy sleeper in the old song. Dragging at it, I felt the muscles strain and crackle in my shoulders and arms.

"Look out!" squealed Page. "Here he comes!"

Up on the bank she jumped again, with the hickory ready to club at him. He paid her no mind, she stooped down toward where I was.

"Get on out of there!" he bellowed, the way I've always reckoned a buffalo bull might do. "Get out!"

"But—but—" I was wheezing. "Somebody's got to move this rock—"

"You ain't budging it ary mite!" he almost deafened me in the ear. "Get out and let somebody there can do something!"

He grabbed my arm and snatched me out of the water, so sudden I almost sprained my fingers letting go the rock. Next second he jumped in, with a splash like a jolt-wagon going off a bridge. His big shovelly hands clamped the sides of the rock, and through the falling rain I saw him heave.

He swole up like a mad toad-frog. His patchy fur shirt split down the middle of his back while those muscles humped under his skin. His teeth flashed out in his beard, set hard together.

Then, just when I thought he'd bust open, that rock came out of its bed, came up in the air, landing on the bank away from where it'd been.

"I swear, Rafe—" I began to say.

"Help him," Page put in. "Let's both help."

We scrambled for a hold on the rock, but Rafe hollered us away, so loud and sharp we jumped back like scared dogs. I saw that rock quiver, and cracks ran through the rain-soaked dirt around it. Then it came up on end, the way you'd think it had hinges, and Rafe got both arms around it and heaved it clear. He laughed, with the rain wet in his beard.

Standing clear where he'd told her to stand, Page pointed to the falls' end.

Looked as if the rain hadn't had to put down but just a little bit. Those loose rocks trembled and shifted in their places. They were ready to go. Then Rafe saw what we saw.

"Run, you two!" he howled above that racketty storm. "Run, run—quick!"

I didn't tarry to ask the reason. I grabbed Page's arm and we ran toward the falls. Running, I looked back past my elbow.

Rafe had straightened up, straddling among the rocks by the slope. He looked into the clouds, that were almost resting on his shaggy head, and both his big arms lifted and his hands spread and then their fingers snapped. I could hear the snaps—*Whop! Whop!* like two pistol shots.

He got what he called for, a forked stroke of lightning, straight and hard down on him like a fish-gig in

the hands of the Lord's top angel. It slammed down on Rafe and over and around him, and it shook itself all the way from rock to clouds. Rafe Enoch in its grip lit up and glowed, the way you'd think he'd been forge-hammered out of iron and heated red in a furnace to temper him.

I heard the almightiest tearing noise I ever could call for. I felt the rock shelf quiver all the way to where we'd stopped dead to watch. My thought was, the falls had torn open and the Notch was drowning.

But the lightning yanked back to where it had come from. It had opened the sluiceway, and water flooded through and down slope, and Rafe had fallen down while it poured and puddled over him.

"He's struck dead!" I heard Page say over the rain.

"No," I said back.

For Rafe Enoch was on his knees, on his feet, and out of that drain-off rush, somehow staggering up from the flat sprawl where the lightning had flung him. His knees wobbled and bucked, but he drew them up straight and mopped a big muddy hand across his big muddy face.

He came walking toward us, slow and dreamy-moving, and by now the rain rushed down instead of fell down. It was like what my old folks used to call raining tom-cats and hoe handles. I bowed my head to it, and made to pull Page toward Rafe's wigwam; but she wouldn't pull, she held where she was, till Rafe came up with us. Then, all three, we went together and got into the tight, dark shelter of the wigwam-house, with the rain and mind battering the outside of it.

Rafe and I sat on the big bed, and Page on a stool, looking small there. She wrung the water out of her hair.

"You all right?" she inquired Rafe.

I looked at him. Between the drain-off and the wig-wam, rain had washed off that mud that gaumed all over him. He was wet and clean, with his patch-pelt shirt hanging away from his big chest and shoulders in soggy rags.

The lightning had singed off part of his beard. He lifted big fingers to wipe off the wet, fluffy ash, and I saw the stripe on his naked arm, on the broad back of his hand, and I made out another stripe just like it or the other. Lightning had slammed down both hands and arms, and clear down his flanks and legs—I saw the burnt lines on his fringed leggings. It was like a double lash of God's whip.

Page got off the stool and came close to him. Just then he didn't look so out-and-out much bigger than she was. She put a long gentle finger on that lightning lash where it ran along his shoulder.

"Does it hurt?" she asked. "You got some grease I could put on it?"

He lifted his head, heavy, but didn't look at her. He looked at me. "I lied to you all," he said.

"Lied to us?" I asked him.

"I did call for the rain. Called for the biggest rain I ever thought of. Didn't pure down want to kill off the folks in the Notch, but to my reckoning, if I made it rain, and saved Page up here—"

At last he looked at her, with a shamed face.

"The others would be gone and forgotten. There'd be Page and me." His dark eyes grabbed her green ones. "But I didn't rightly know how she disgusts the sight of me." His head dropped again. "I feel the nearest to nothing I ever did."

"You opened the drain-off and saved the Notch from your rain," put in Page, her voice so gentle you'd never think it. "Called down the lightning to help you."

"Called down the lightning to kill me," said Rafe. "I never reckoned it wouldn't. I wanted to die. I want to die now."

"Live," she bade him.

He got up at that, standing tall over her.

"Don't worry when folks look on you," she said, her voice still ever so gentle. "They're just wondered at you, Rafe. Folks were wondered that same way at Saint Christopher, the giant who carried Lord Jesus across the river.

"I was too proud," he mumbled in his big bull throat. "Proud of my Genesis giant blood, of being one of the sons of God—"

"Shoo, Rafe," and her voice was gentler still, "the least man in size you'd call for, when he speaks to God, he says, 'Our Father.'"

Rafe turned from her.

"You said I could look on you if I wanted," said Page Jarrett. "And I want."

Back he turned, and bent down, and she rose on her toetips so their faces came together.

The rain stopped, the way you'd think that stopped it. But they never seemed to know it, and I picked up my guitar and went out toward the lip of the cliff.

The falls were going strong, but the drain-off handled enough water so there'd be no washout to drown the folks below. I reckoned the rocks would be the out-doingist slippery rocks ever climbed down by mortal man, and it would take me a long time. Long enough, maybe so, for me to think out the right way to tell Mr. Lane Jarrett he was just before having himself a son-in-law of the Genesis giant blood, and pretty soon after while, grandchildren of the same strain.

The sun came stabbing through the clouds and flung them away in chunks to right and left, across the bright blue sky.

On the Hills and Everywhere

Manly Wade Wellman

"John, the children have opened their presents, and I want them to have some hot rations inside them before they start in on that store-bought candy you fetched them. So why don't you tell us a Christmas story while Mother's putting dinner on the table?"

"Be proud to do so. And this won't be any far-away tale—it happened to neighbor-folks you know."

You all and I and everybody worried our minds about Mr. Absalom Cowand and his fall-out with Mr. Troy Holcomb who neighbors with him in the hills above Rebel Creek. Too bad when old friends aren't friends my more. Especially the kind of friend Mr. Absalom can be.

You've been up to his place, I reckon. Only a man with thought in his head and bone in his back would build and work where Mr. Absalom Cowand does in those high hills up the winding road beyond those lazy

creek-bottom patches. He's terraced his fields up and up behind his house on the slope, growing some of the best-looking corn in this day and time. And nice cow-brutes in his barns, and good hogs and chickens in his pens, and money in the bank down yonder at the county seat. Mr. Absalom will feed any hungry neighbor, or tend any sick one, saving he's had a quarrel with them, like the quarrel with Mr. Troy Holcomb.

"What for did they quarrel, John?"

"Over something Mr. Troy said wasn't so, and Mr. Absalom said was. I'll come to that."

That farm is Mr. Absalom's pride and delight. Mr. Troy's place next door isn't so good, though good enough. Mr. Absalom looked over to Mr. Troy's, the day I mention, and grinned in his big thicketty beard, like a king's beard in a history-book picture. If it sorrowed him to be out with Mr. Troy, he didn't show it. All that sorrowed him, maybe, was his boy, Little Anse—crippled ever since he'd fallen off the jolt-wagon and it ran over his legs so he couldn't walk, couldn't crawl hardly without the crutches his daddy had made for him.

It was around noon when Mr. Absalom grinned his tiger grin from his front yard over toward Mr. Troy's, then looked up to study if maybe a few clouds didn't mean weather coming. He needed rain from heaven. It wondered him if a certain somebody wasn't witchin it off from his place. Witch-men are the meanest folks God ever forgot. looking up thataway, Mr. Absalom wasn't aware of a man coming till he saw him close in sight above the road's curve, a stranger-fellow with a tool chest on his shoulder. The stranger stopped at Mr. Absalom's mail box and gave him a good day.

"And good day to you," Mr. Absalom said, stroking his beard where it bannered onto his chest. "What can I do for you?"

"It's what can I do for you," the stranger replied him back. "I had in mind that maybe there's some work here for me."

"Well," said Mr. Absalom, relishing the way the stranger looked.

He was near about as tall as Mr. Absalom's own self, but no way as thick built, nor as old. Maybe in his thirties, and neat dressed in work clothes, with brown hair combed back. He had a knowledge look in his face but nothing secret. The shoulder that carried the tool chest was a square, strong shoulder.

"You ain't some jack-leg carpenter?" said Mr. Absalom.

"No. I learned my trade young, and I learned it right."

"That's bold spoken, friend."

"I just say that I'm skilled."

Those words sounded right and true.

"I like to get out in the country to work," the carpenter-man said on. "No job too big or too small for me to try."

"Well," said Mr. Absalom again, "so happens I've got a strange-like job needs doing."

"And no job too strange," the carpenter added.

Mr. Absalom led him around back, past the chicken run and the hog lot. A path ran there, worn years deep by folks' feet. But, some way past the house, the path was chopped off short.

Between Mr. Absalom's side yard and the next place was a ditch, not wide but deep and strong, with water tumbling down from the heights behind. Nobody could Call for any plainer mark betwixt two men's places.

"See that house yonder?" Mr. Absalom pointed with his bearded chin.

"The square-log place with the shake roof? Yes, I see it."

"That's Troy Holcomb's place."

"Yes."

"My land," and Mr. Absalom waved a thick arm to show, "terraces back off thataway, and his land terraces off the other direction. We helped each other do the terracing. We were friends."

"The path shows you were friends," said the carpenter. "The ditch shows you aren't friends any more."

"You just bet your neck we ain't friends any more," said Mr. Absalom, and his beard crawled on his jaw as he set his mouth.

"What's wrong with Troy Holcomb?" asked the carpenter.

"Oh, nothing. Nothing that a silver bullet might not fix." Mr. Absalom pointed downhill. "Look at the field below the road."

The carpenter looked. "Seems like a good piece of land. Ought to be a crop growing there."

Now Mr. Absalom's teeth twinkled through his beard, like stars through storm clouds. "A court of law gave me that field. Troy Holcomb and I both laid claim to it, but the court said I was in the right. The corn I planted was blighted to death."

"Been quite a much of blight this season," said the carpenter.

"Yes, down valley, but not up here." Mr. Absalom glittered his eyes toward the house across the ditch. "A curse was put on my field. And who'd have reason to put a curse on, from some hateful old witch-book or other, but Troy Holcomb? I told him to his face. He denied the truth of that."

"Of course he'd deny it," said the carpenter.

"Shoo, John, is Mr. Troy Holcomb a witch-man? I never heard that."

"I'm just telling what Mr. Absalom said. Well."

"If he was a foot higher, I'd have hit him on top of his head," grumbled Mr. Absalom. "We haven't spoken since. And you know what he's done?"

"He dug this ditch." The carpenter looked into the running water. "To show he doesn't want the path to join your place to his any more."

"You hit it right," snorted Mr. Absalom, like a mean horse. "Did he reckon I'd go there to beg his pardon or something? Do I look like that kind of a puppy-man?"

"Are you glad not to be friends with him?" the carpenter inquired his own question, looking at the squared-log house.

"Ain't studying about that," said Mr. Absalom. "I'm studying to match this dig-ditch job he did against me. Look yonder at that lumber."

The carpenter looked at a stack of posts, a pile of boards.

"He cut me off with a ditch. If you want work, build me a fence along this side of his ditch, from the road down there up to where my back-yard line runs." Mr. Absalom pointed up slope. "How long will that take you?"

The carpenter set down his tool chest and figured in his head. Then: "I could do you something to pleasure you by supper time."

"Quick as that?" Mr. Absalom looked at him sharp, for he'd reckoned the fence job might take two-three days. "You got it thought out to be a little old small piece of work, huh?"

"Nothing too big or too small for me to try," said the carpenter again. "You can say whether it suits you."

"Do what I want, and I'll pay you worth your while," Mr. Absalom granted him. "I'm heading up to my far corn patch. Before sundown I'll come look." He started away. "But it's got to suit me."

"It will," the carpenter made promise, and opened his chest.

Like any lone working man, he started out to whistle.

His whistling carried all the way to Mr. Absalom's house. And inside, on the front room couch, lay Little Anse.

You all know how Little Anse couldn't hardly stand on his poor swunk up legs, even with crutches. It was pitiful to see him scuff a crutch out, then the other, then lean on them and swing his little feet between. He'd scuff and swing again, inching along. But Little Anse didn't pity himself. He was cheerful-minded, laughing at what trifles he could find. Mr. Absalom had had him to one doctor after another, and none could bid him hope. Said Little Anse was crippled for life.

When Little Anse heard the whistling, he upped his ears to hear more. He worked his legs off the couch, and sat up and hoisted himself on his crutches. He clutched and scuffed to the door, and out in the yard, and along the path, following that tune.

It took him a time to get to where the carpenter was working. But when he got there he smiled, and the carpenter smiled back.

"Can I watch?" Little Anse asked.

"You're welcome to watch. I'm doing something here to help your daddy."

"How tall are you?" Little Anse inquired him next.

"Just exactly six feet," the carpenter replied.

"Now wait, John, that's just foolish for the lack of sense. Ain't no mortal man on this earth exactly six feet tall."

"I'm saying what the stranger said."

"But the only one who was exactly six feet—"

"Hold your tater while I tell about it."

"I relish that song you were whistling, Mr. Carpenter," said Little Anse. "I know the words, some of them." And he sang a verse of it:

*I was a powerful sinner,
I sinned both night and day,
Until I heard the preacher,
And he taught me how to pray:*

Little Anse went on with part of the chorus:

*Go tell it on the mountain,
Tell it on the hills and everywhere—*

"Can I help you?"

"You could hand me my tools."

"I'll be proud to."

By then they felt as good friends as if they'd been knowing each other long years. Little Anse sat by the tool chest and searched out the tools as the carpenter wanted them. There was a tale to go with each one.

Like this: "Let me have the saw."

As he used it, the carpenter would explain how, before any man knew a saw's use there was a saw-shape in the shark's mouth down in the ocean sea, with teeth lined up like a saw's teeth; which may help show why some folks claim animals were wise before folks were.

"Now give me the hammer, Little Anse."

While he pounded, the carpenter told of a nation of folks in Europe, that used to believe in somebody named Thor, who could throw his hammer across mountains and knock out thunder and lightning.

And he talked about what folks believe about wood. How some of them knock on wood, to keep off bad luck. How the ancient folks, lifetimes back, thought spirits lived in trees, good spirits in one tree and bad spirits in another. And a staff of white thorn is supposed to scare out evil.

"Are those things true, Mr. Carpenter?"

"Well, folks took them for truth once. There must be some truth in every belief, to get it started."

"An outlander stopped here once, with a prayer book. He read to me from it, about how Satan overcame because of the wood. What did he mean, Mr. Carpenter?"

"He must have meant the Tree of Knowledge in the Garden of Eden," said the carpenter. "You know how Adam and Eve ate of the tree when Satan tempted them?"

"Reckon I do," Little Anse replied him, for, with not much else to do, he'd read the Book a many times.

"There's more to that outlander's prayer," the carpenter added on. "If Satan overcame by the wood, he can also be overcome by the wood."

"That must mean another kind of tree, Mr. Carpenter."

"Yes, of course. Another kind."

Little Anse was as happy as a dog at a fish fry. It was like school, only in school you get wishing the bell would ring and turn you loose. Little Anse didn't want to be anywhere but just there, handing the tools and hearing the talk.

"How come you know so much?" he asked the carpenter.

"I travel lots in my work, Little Anse. That's a nice thing about it."

Little Anse looked over to Mr. Troy Holcomb's. "You know," he said, "I don't agree in my mind that Mr. Troy's a witch." He looked again. "If he had power, he'd have long ago cured my legs. He's a nice old man, for all he and my daddy fussed between themselves."

"You ever tell your daddy that?"

"He won't listen. You near-about through?"

"All through, Little Anse."

It was getting on for supper time. The carpenter packed up his tools and started with Little Anse toward the house. Moving slow, the way you do with a cripple along, they hadn't gone more than a few yards when they met Mr. Absalom.

"Finished up, are you?" asked Mr. Absalom, and looked. "Well, bless us and keep us all" he yelled.

"Don't you call that a good bridge, daddy?" Little Anse asked.

For the carpenter had driven some posts straight up in the ditch, and spiked on others like cross timbers. On those he'd laid a bridge floor from side to side. It wasn't fancy, but it looked solid to last till the Day of Judgment, mending the cutoff of the path.

"I told you I wanted—" Mr. Absalom began to say.

He stopped. For Mr. Troy Holcomb came across the bridge.

Mr. Troy's a low-built little man, with a white hangdown moustache and a face as brown as old harness leather. He came over and stopped and put out his skinny hand, and it shook like in a wind.

"Absalom," he said, choking in his throat, "you don't know how I been wanting this chance to ask your humble pardon."

Then Mr. Absalom all of a sudden reached and took that skinny hand in his big one.

"You made me so savage mad, saying I was a witch-man," Mr. Troy said. "If you'd let me talk, I'd have told you the blight was in my downhill corn, too. It only just spared the uphill patches. You can come and look—"

"Troy, I don't need to look," Mr. Absalom made out to reply him. "Your word's as good to me as the

yellow gold. I never rightly thought you did any witch-stuff, not even when I said it to you."

"I'm so dog-sorry I dug this ditch," Mr. Troy went on. "I hated it, right when I had the spade in my hand. Ain't my nature to be spiteful, Absalom."

"No, Troy, Ain't no drop of spite blood in you."

"But you built this bridge, Absalom, to show you never favored my cutting you off from me—"

Mr. Troy stopped talking, and wiped his brown face with the hand Mr. Absalom didn't have hold of.

"Troy," said Mr. Absalom, "I'm just as glad as you are about all this. But don't credit me with that bridge-idea. This carpenter here, he thought it up."

"And now I'll be going," spoke up the carpenter in his gentle way.

They both looked on him. He'd hoisted his tool chest up on his shoulder again, and he smiled at them, and down at Little Anse. He put his hand on Little Anse's head, just half a second long.

"Fling away those crutches," he said. "You don't need them now."

All at once, Little Anse flung the crutches away, left and right. He stood up straight and strong. Fast as any boy ever ran on this earth, he ran to his daddy.

The carpenter was gone. The place he'd been at was empty.

But, looking where he'd been, they weren't frightened, the way they'd be at a haunt or devil-thing. Because they all of a sudden all three knew Who the carpenter was and how He's always with us, the way He promised in the far-back times; and how He'll do ary sort of job, if it can bring peace on earth and good will to men, among nations or just among neighbors.

It was Little Anse who remembered the whole chorus of the song—

"Shoo, John, I know that song! We sung it last night at church for Christmas Eve!"

"I know it too, John!"

"Me! Me too!"

"All right then, why don't you children join in and help me sing it?"

*Go tell it on the mountain,
Tell it on the hills and everywhere,
Go tell it on the mountain
That Jesus Christ was born!*

Old Devlins Was A-Waiting

Manly Wade Wellman

All day I'd climbed through mountain country. Past Rebel Creek I'd climbed, and through Lost Cove, and up and down the slopes of Crouch and Hog Ham and Skeleton Ridge, and finally as the sun hunted the world's edge, I looked over a high saddleback and down on Flornoy College.

Flornoy's up in the hills, plain and poor, but it does good teaching. Country boys who mightn't get past common school else can come and work off the most part of their board and keep and learning. I saw a couple of brick buildings, a row of cottages, and barns for the college farm in the bottom below, with then a paved road to Hilberstown maybe eight, nine miles down valley. Climbing down was another sight farther, and longer work than you'd think, and when I got to the level it was past sundown and the night showed its stars to me.

Coming into the back of the college grounds, I saw a light somewhere this side of the buildings, and then I heard two voices quarreling at each other.

"You leave my lantern be," bade one voice, deep and hacked.

"I wasn't going to blow it out, Moon-Eye," the other voice laughed, but sharp and mean. "I just joggled up against it."

"Look out I don't joggle up against you, Rixon Pengraft."

"Maybe you're bigger than I am, but there's such a thing as the difference between a big man and a little one."

Then I was close and saw them, and they saw me. Scholars at Flornoy, I reckoned by the light of the old lantern one of them toted. He was tall, taller than I am, with broad, hunched shoulders, and in the lantern-shine his face looked good in a long, big-nosed way. The other fellow was plumpy-soft, and smoked a cigar that made an orangey coal in the night.

The cigar-smoking one turned toward where I came along with my silver-strung guitar in one hand and my possible-sack in the other.

"What you doing around here," he said to me. Didn't ask it, said it.

"I'm looking for Professor Deal," I replied him. "Any objections?"

He grinned his teeth white around the cigar. The lantern-shine flickered on them. "None I know of. Go on looking."

He turned and moved off in the night. The fellow with the lantern watched him go, then spoke to me.

"I'll take you to Professor Deal's. My name's Anderson Newlands. Folks call me Moon-Eye."

"Folks call me John," I said. "What does Moon-Eye mean?"

He smiled, tight, over the lantern glow. "It's hard for me to see in the night-time, John. I was in the Korean war, I got wounded and had a fever, and my eyes began to trouble me. They're getting better, but I need a lantern any night but when it's full moon."

We walked along. "Was that Rixon Pengraft fellow trying to give you a hard time?" I asked.

"Trying, maybe. He—well, he wants something I'm not really keeping away from him, he just thinks I am."

That's all Moon-Eye Newlands said about it, and I didn't inquire him what he meant. He went on: "I don't want any fuss with Rixon, but if he's bound to have one with me—" Again he stopped his talk. "Yonder's Professor Deal's house, the one with the porch. I'm due there some later tonight, after supper."

He headed off with his lantern, toward the brick building where the scholars slept. On the porch, Professor Deal came out and made me welcome. He's president of Flornoy, strong-built, middling tall, with white hair and a round hard chin like a water-washed rock.

"Haven't seen you since the State Fair," he boomed out, loud enough to talk to the seventy, eighty Flornoy scholars all at once. "Come in the house, John, Mrs. Deal's nearly ready with supper. I want you to meet Dr. McCoy."

I came inside and rested my guitar and possible-sack by the door. "Is he a medicine doctor or a teacher doctor?" I asked.

"She's a lady. Dr. Anda Lee McCoy. She observes how people think and how far they see."

"An eye-doctor?"

"Call her an inner-eye doctor, John. She studies what those Duke University people call ESP—extra-sensory perception."

I'd heard of that. A fellow named Rhine says folks can some way tell what other folks think to themselves. He tells it that everybody reads minds a little bit, and some folks read them a right much. Might be you've seen his cards, marked five ways—square, cross, circle, star, wavy lines. Take five of each of those cards and you've got a pack of twenty-five. Somebody shuffles them like for a game and looks at them, one after another. Then somebody else, who can't see the cards, in the next room maybe, tries to guess what's on them. Ordinary chance is for one right guess out of five. But, here and there, it gets called another sight oftener.

"Some old mountain folks would name that witch-stuff," I said to Professor Deal.

"Hypnotism was called witch-craft, until it was shown to be true science," he said back. "Or telling what dreams mean, until Dr. Freud overseas made it scientific. ESP might be a recognized science some day."

"You hold with it, do you, Professor?"

"I hold with anything that's proven," he said. "I'm not sure about ESP yet. Here's Mrs. Deal."

She's a comfortable, clever lady, as white-haired as he is. While I made my manners, Dr. Anda Lee McCoy came from the back of the house.

"Are you the ballad-singer?" she asked me.

I'd expected no doctor lady as young as Dr. Anda Lee McCoy, nor as pretty-looking. She was small and slim, but there was enough of her. She stood straight and wore good city clothes, and had lots of yellow hair and a round happy face and straight-looking blue eyes.

"Professor Deal bade me come see him," I said. "He couldn't get Mr. Bascom Lamar Lunsford to decide something or other about folk songs and tales."

"I'm glad you've come," she welcomed me.

Turned out Dr. McCoy knew Mr. Bascom Lamar Lunsford and thought well of him. Professor Deal had asked for him first, but Mr. Bascom was in Washington, making records of his songs for the Library of Congress. Some folks can't vote which they'd rather hear, Mr. Bascom's five-string banjo or my guitar; but he sure enough knows more old time songs than I do. A few more.

Mrs. Deal went to the kitchen to see was supper near about cooked. We others sat down in the front room. Dr. McCoy asked me to sing something, so I got my guitar and gave her "Shiver in the Pines."

"Pretty," she praised. "Do you know a song about killing a captain at a lonesome river ford?"

I thought. "Some of it, maybe. It's a Virginia song, I think. You relish that song, Doctor?"

"I wasn't thinking of my own taste. A student here—a man named Anderson Newlands—doesn't like it at all."

Mrs. Deal called us to supper, and while we ate, Dr. McCoy talked.

"I'll tell you why I asked for someone like you to help me, John," she began. "I've got a theory, or a hypothesis. About dreams."

"Not quite like Freud," put in Professor Deal, "though he'd be interested if he was alive and here."

"It's dreaming the future," said Dr. McCoy.

"Shoo," I said, "that's no theory, that's fact. Bible folks did it. I've done it myself. Once, during the war—"

But that was no tale to tell, what I dreamed in war time and how true it came out. So I stopped, while Dr. McCoy went on.

"There are records of prophecies coming true, even after the prophets died. And another set of records fit in, about images appearing like ghosts. Most of these are ancestors of somebody alive today. Kinship and special sympathy, you know. Sometimes these images, or ghosts, are called from the past by using diagrams and spells. You aren't laughing at me, John?"

"No, ma'am. Things like that aren't likely to be a laughing matter."

"Well, what if dreams of the future come true because somebody goes forward in time while he sleeps or drowns?" she asked us. "That ghost of Nostradamus, reported not long ago—what if Nostradamus himself was called into this present time, and then went back to his own century to set down a prophecy of what he'd seen?"

If she wanted an answer, I didn't have one for her. All I said was: "Do you want to call somebody from the past, ma'am? Or maybe go yourself into a time that's coming?"

She shook her yellow head. "Put it one way, John, I'm not psychic. Put it another way, the scientific way, I'm not adapted. But this young man Anderson Newlands is the best adapted I've ever found."

She told how some Flornoy students scored high at guessing the cards and their markings. I was right interested to hear that Rixon Pengraft called them well, though Dr. McCoy said his mind got on other things—I reckoned his mind got on her; pretty thing as she was, she could take a man's mind. But Anderson Newlands, Moon-Eye Newlands, guessed every card right off as she held the pack, time after time, with nary miss.

"And he dreams of the future, I know," she said. "If he can see the future, he might call to the past."

"By the diagrams and the words?" I inquired her. "How about the science explanation for that?"

It so happened she had one. She told it while we ate our custard pie.

First, that idea that time's the fourth dimension. You're six feet tall, twenty inches wide, twelve inches thick and thirty-five years old; and the thirty-five years of you reach from where you were born one place, across the land and maybe over the sea where you've traveled, and finally to right where you are now, from thousands of miles ago. Then the idea that just a dot here in this second of time we're living in can be a wire back and back and forever back, or a five-inch line is a five-inch bar reaching forever back thataway, or a circle is a tube, and so on. It did make some sense to me, and I asked Dr. McCoy what it added up to.

It added up to the diagram witch-folks draw, with circles and six-pointed stars and letters from an alphabet nobody on this earth can spell out. Well, that diagram might be a cross-section, here in our three dimensions, of something reaching backward or forward, a machine to travel you through time.

"You certain sure about this?" I inquired Dr. McCoy at last. And she smiled, then she frowned, and shook her yellow head again.

"I'm only guessing," she said, "as I might guess with the ESP cards. But I'd like to find out whether the right man could call his ancestor out of the past."

"I still don't figure out about those spoken spell words the witch-folks use," I said.

"A special sound can start a machine," said Professor Deal. "I've seen such things."

"Like the words of the old magic square?" asked Dr. McCoy. "The one they use in spells to call up the dead?"

She got a pencil and scrap of paper, and wrote it out:

**S A T O R
A R E P O
T E N E T
O P E R A
R O T A S**

"I've been seeing that thing a many years," I said. "Witch-folks use it, and it's in witch-books like *The Long Lost Friend*."

"You'll notice," said Dr. McCoy, "that it reads the same, whether you start at the upper left and work down word by word, or at the lower right and read the words one by one upward; or if you read it straight down or straight up."

Professor Deal looked, too. "The first two words—SATOR and AREPO—are reversals of the last two. SATOR for ROTAS, and AREPO for OPERA."

"I've heard that before," I braved up to say. "The first two words being the last two turned around. But the third, fourth and fifth are all right—I've heard tell that TENET means *faith* and OPERA is *works*, and ROTAS something about wheels."

"But SATOR and AREPO are more than just reversed words," Professor Deal said. "I'm no profound Latinist, but I know that SATOR means a sower—a planter—or a beginner or creator."

"*Creator*," Dr. McCoy jumped on his last word. "That would fit into this if it's a real sentence."

"A sentence, and a palindrome," nodded Professor Deal. "Know what a palindrome is, John?"

I knew that, too, from somewhere. "A sentence that reads the same back and forward," I told him. "Like Napoleon saying, *Able was I ere I saw Elba*. Or the first words Mother Eve heard in the Garden of Eden, *Madam, I'm Adam*. Those are old grandma jokes to pleasure young children."

"If these words are a sentence, they're more than a palindrome," said Dr. McCoy. "They're a double palindrome, because they read the same from any place you start—backward, forward, up or down. Fourfold meaning would be fourfold power as a spell or formula."

"But what's the meaning?" I wanted to know again.

She began to write on a paper. "SATOR," she said out loud, "*the creator*. Whether that's the creator of some machine, or the Creator of all things . . . I suppose it's a machine-creator."

"I reckon the same," I agreed her, "because this doesn't sound to me the kind of way the Creator of all things does His works."

Mrs. Deal smiled and excused herself. We could talk and talk, she said, but she had sewing to do.

"AREPO," Professor Deal kind of hummed to himself. "I wish I had a Latin dictionary, though even then I might not find it. Maybe that's a corruption of *repo* or *erepo* —to crawl or climb—a vulgar form of the word—"

I said nothing. I didn't think Professor Deal would say anything vulgar in front of a lady. But all Dr. McCoy remarked him was: "AREPO—wouldn't that be a noun ablative? By means of?"

"Write it down like that," nodded Professor Deal. "By means of creeping, climbing, by means of great effort. And TENET is the verb to hold. He holds, the creator holds."

"OPERA is *works* , and ROTAS is *wheels* ," Dr. McCoy tried to finish up, but this time Professor Deal shook his head.

"ROTAS probably is accusative plural, in apposition." He cleared his throat, long and loud. "Maybe I never will be sure, but let's read it something like this: *The creator, by means of great effort, holds the wheels for his works* ."

I'd not said a word in all this scholar-talk, till then. TENET Might still be *faith* , " I offered them. "Faith's needed to help the workings. Folks without faith might call the thing foolishness."

"That's sound psychology," said Professor Deal.

"And it fits in with the making of spells," Dr. McCoy added on. "Double meanings, you know. Maybe there are double meanings all along, or triple or fourfold meanings, and all of them true." She read from her paper. "*The creator, by means of great effort, holds the wheels for his works* ."

"It might even refer to the orbits of planets," said Professor Deal.

"Where do I come in?" I asked. "Why was I bid here?"

"You can sing something for us," Dr. McCoy replied me, "and you can have faith."

A knocking at the door, and Professor Deal went to let the visitor in. Moon-Eye Newlands walked into the house, lifted his lantern chimney and blew out his light. He looked tall, the way he'd looked when first I met him in the outside dark, and he wore a hickory shirt and blue duckins pants. He smiled, friendly, and moon-eyed or not, he looked first of all at Dr. McCoy, clear and honest and glad to see her.

"You said you wanted me to help you, Doctor," he greeted her.

"Thank you, Mr. Newlands," she said, gentler and warmer than I'd heard her so far.

"You can call me Moon-Eye, like the rest," he told her.

He was a college scholar, and she was a doctor lady, but they were near about the same age. He'd been off to the Korean War, I remembered.

"Shall we go out on the porch?" she asked us. "Professor Deal said I could draw my diagram there. Bring your guitar, John."

We went out. Moon-Eye lighted his lantern again, and Dr. McCoy knelt down to draw with a piece of chalk.

First she made the word square, in big letters:

S	A	T	O	R
A	R	E	P	O
T	E	N	E	T
O	P	E	R	A
R	O	T	A	S

Around these she made a triangle, a good four feet from base to point. And another triangle across it, pointing the other way, so that the two made what learned folks call the Star of David. Around that, a big circle, with writing along the edge of it, and another big circle around that, to close in the writing. I put my back to a porch post. From where I sat I could read the word square all right, but of the writing around the circle I couldn't spell any letter.

"Folks," said Moon-Eye, "I still can't say I like this."

Kneeling where she drew, Dr. McCoy looked up at him with her blue eyes. "You said you'd help if you could."

"But what if it's not right? My old folks, my grandsires—I don't know if they ought to be called up."

"Moon-Eye," said Professor Deal, "I'm just watching, observing. I haven't yet been convinced of anything due to happen here tonight. But if it should happen—I know your ancestors must have been good country people, nobody to be ashamed of, dead or alive."

"I'm not ashamed of them," Moon-Eye told us all, with a sort of sudden clip in his voice. "I just don't think they were the sort to be stirred up without a good reason."

"Moon-Eye," said Dr. McCoy, talking the way any man who's a man would want a woman to talk to him, "science is the best of reasons in itself."

He didn't speak, didn't deny her, didn't nod his head or either shake it. He just looked at her blue eyes with his dark ones. She got up from where she'd knelt.

"John," she spoke to where I was sitting, "that song we mentioned. About the lonesome river ford. It may put things in the right tune and tempo."

Moon-Eye sat on the edge of the porch, his lantern beside him. The light made our shadows big and jumpy. I began to pick the tune the best I could recollect it, and sang:

*Old Devlins was a-waiting
By the lonesome river ford,
When he spied the Mackey captain
With a pistol and a sword. . . .*

I stopped, for Moon-Eye had tensed himself tight, "I'm not sure of how it goes from there," I said.

"I'm sure of where it goes," said someone in the dark, and up to the porch ambled Rixon Pengraft.

He was smoking that cigar, or maybe a fresh one, grinning around it. He wore a brown corduroy shirt with officers' straps to the shoulders, and brown corduroy pants tucked into shiny half-boots worth maybe twenty-five dollars, the pair of them. His hair was brown, too, and curly, and his eyes were sneaking all over Dr. Anda Lee McCoy.

"Nobody here knows what that song means," said Moon-Eye.

Rixon Pengraft sat down beside Dr. McCoy, on the step below Moon-Eye, and the way he did it, I harked back in my mind to something Moon-Eye had said: about something Rixon Pengraft wanted, and why he hated Moon-Eye over it.

"I've wondered wasn't the song about the Confederate War," said Rixon. "Maybe *Mackey captain* means Yankee captain."

"No, it doesn't," said Moon-Eye, and his teeth sounded on each other.

"I can sing it, anyway," said Rixon, twiddling his cigar in his teeth and winking at Dr. McCoy. "Go on picking."

"Go on," Dr. McCoy repeated, and Moon-Eye said nothing. I touched the silver strings, and Rixon Pengraft sang:

*Old Devlins, Old Devlins,
I know you mighty well,
You're six foot three of Satan,
Two hundred pounds of hell. . . .*

And he stopped. "Devils—Satan," he said. "Might be it's a song about the Devil. Think we ought to go on singing about him, with no proper respect?"

He went on:

*Old Devlins was ready,
He feared not beast or man,
He shot the sword and pistol
From the Mackey captain's, hand. . . .*

Moon-Eye looked once at the diagram, chalked out on the floor of the porch. He didn't seem to hear Rixon Pengraft's mocking voice with the next verse:

*Old Devlins, Old Devlins,
Oh, won't you spare my life?
I've got three little children
And a kind and loving wife.*

*God bless them little children,
And I'm sorry for your wife,
But turn your back and close your eyes,*

I'm going to take your—

"Leave off that singing!" yelled Moon-Eye Newlands, and he was on his feet in the yard so quick we hadn't seen him move. He took a long step toward where Rixon Pengraft sat beside Dr. McCoy, and Rixon got up quick, too, and dropped his cigar and moved away.

"You know the song," blared out Moon-Eye. "Maybe you know what man you're singing about!"

"Maybe I do know," said Rixon. "You want to bring him here to look at you?"

We were all up on our feet, We watched Moon-Eye standing over Rixon, and Moon-Eye just then looked about two feet taller than he had before. Maybe even more than that, to Rixon.

"If that's how you're going to be—" began Rixon.

"That's how I'm going to be," Moon-Eye told him, his voice right quiet again. "I'm honest to tell you, that's how I'm going to be."

"Then I won't stay here," said Rixon. "I'll leave, because you're making so much noise in front of a lady. But, Moon-Eye, I'm not scared of you. Nor yet the ghost of any ancestor you ever had, Devlins or anybody else."

Rixon smiled at Dr. McCoy and walked away. We heard him start to whistle in the dark. He meant it for banter, but I couldn't help but think about the boy whistling his way through the graveyard.

Then I happened to look back at the diagram on the porch. And it didn't seem right for a moment, it looked like something else. The two circles, with the string of writing between them, the six-point star,

and in the very middle of everything the word square:

**S
A
T
O
R**
**A
R
E
P
O**
**T
E
N
E
T**
**O
P
E
R
A**
**R
O
T
A
S**

"Shoo," I said. "Look, folks, that word square's turned around."

"Naturally," said Professor Deal, plain glad to talk and think about something besides how Moon-Eye and Rixon had acted. "The first two words are reversals of the—"

"I don't mean that, Professor." I pointed. "Look. I take my Bible oath that Dr. McCoy wrote it out so that it read rightly from where I am now. But it's gone upside down."

"That's the truth," Moon-Eye agreed me.

"Yes," said Dr. McCoy. "Yes. You know what that means?"

"The square's turned around?" asked Professor Deal. "The whole thing's turned around. The whole diagram. Spun a whole hundred and eighty degrees—maybe several times—and stopped again. Why?" She put her hand on Moon-Eye's elbow, and the hand trembled. "The thing was beginning to work, to revolve, the machine was going to operate—"

"You're right." Moon-Eye, put his big hand over her little one, "Just when the singing stopped."

He moved away from her and picked up his lantern. He started away.

"Come back, Moon-Eye!" she called after him. "It can't work without you!"

"I've got something to see Rixon Pengraft about," he said.

"You can't hit him, you're bigger than he is!" I thought she was going to run and catch up with him.

"Stay here," I told her. "I'll go talk to him."

I walked quick to catch up with Moon-Eye. "Big things were near about to happen just now," I said.

"I realize that, Mr. John. But it won't go on, because I won't be there to help it." He lifted his lantern and stared at me. "I said my old folks weren't the sort you ruffle up for no reason."

"Was the song about your folks?"

"Sort of."

"You mean, Old Devlins?"

"That's not just exactly his name, but he was my great-grandsire on my mother's side. Rixon Pengraft caught onto that, and after what he said—"

"You heard that doctor lady say Rixon isn't as big as you are, Moon-Eye," I argued him. "You hit him and she won't like it."

He stalked on toward the brick building where the scholars had their rooms.

Bang!

The lantern went out with a smash of glass.

The two of us stopped still in the dark and stared. Up ahead, in the brick building, a head and shoulders made itself black in a lighted window, and a cigar-coal glowed.

"I said I didn't fear you, Moon-Eye!" laughed the voice of Rixon Pengraft. "Nor I don't fear Old Devlins, whatever kin he is to you!"

A black arm waved something. It was a rifle. Moon-Eye drew himself up tall in the dark.

"Help me, John," he said. "I can't see a hand before me."

"You going to fight him, Moon-Eye? When he has that gun?"

"Help me back to Professor Deal's." He put his hand on my shoulder and gripped down hard. "Get me into the light."

"What do you aim to do?"

"Something there wasn't a reason to do, till now." That was the last the either of us said. We walked back. Nobody was on the porch, but the door was open. We stepped across the chalk-drawn diagram and into the front room. Professor Deal and Dr. McCoy stood looking at us.

"You've come back," Dr. McCoy said to Moon-Eye, the gladdest you'd ever call for a lady to say. She made a step toward him and put out her hand.

"I heard a gun go off out there," she said,

"My lantern got shot to pieces," Moon-Eye told her, "I've come back to do what you bid me do. John, if you don't know the song—"

"I do know it, Moon-Eye," I said. "I stopped because I thought you didn't want it."

"I want it now," he rang out his voice. "If my great-grandsire can be called here tonight, call him. Sing it, John."

I still carried my guitar. I slanted it across me and picked the strings:

*He killed the Mackey captain,
He went behind the hill,
Them Mackeys never caught him,
And I know they never will. . . .*

Great-grandsire!" yelled out Moon-Eye, so that the walls shook with his cry. "I've taken a right much around here, because I thought it might be best thataway. But tonight Rixon Pengraft dared you, said he didn't fear you! Come and show him what it's like to be afraid!"

"Now, now—" began Professor Deal, then stopped it.

I sang on:

*When there's no moon in heaven
And you hear the hound-dogs bark,
You can guess that it's Old Devlins
A-scrambling in the dark. . . .*

Far off outside, a hound-dog barked in the moonless night.

And on the door sounded a thumpety-bang knock, the way you'd think the hand that knocked had knuckles of mountain rock.

I saw Dr. McCoy weave and sway on her little feet like a bush in a wind, and her blue eyes got the biggest they'd been yet. But Moon-Eye just smiled, hard and sure, as Professor Deal walked heavy to the door and opened it.

Next moment he sort of gobbled in his throat, and tried to shove the door closed again, but he wasn't quick enough. A wide hat with a long dark beard under it showed through the door, then big, hunched shoulders like Moon-Eye's. And, spite of the Professor's shoving, the door came open all the way, and in slid the long-bearded, big-shouldered man among us.

He stood without moving inside the door. He was six feet three, all right, and I reckoned he'd weigh at two hundred pounds. He wore a frocktail coat and knee boots of cowhide. His left arm cradled a rifle-gun near about as long as he was, and its barrel was eight-squared, the way you hardly see any more. His big broad right hand came up and took off the wide hat.

Then we could see his face, such a face as I'm not likely to forget. Big nose and bright glaring eyes, and that beard I tell you about, that fell down like a curtain from the high cheekbones and just under the nose. Wild, he looked, and proud, and deadly as his weight in blasting powder with the fuse already spitting. I

reckon that old Stonewall Jackson might have had something of that favor, if ever he'd turned his back on the Lord God.

"I thought I was dreaming this," he said to us, deep as somebody talking from a well-bottom, "but I begin to figure the dream's come true."

His eyes came around to me, those terrible eyes, that shone like two drawn knives.

"You called me a certain name in your song," he said. "I've been made mad by that name, on the wrong mouth.

"Devilins?" I said.

"Devil Anse," he nodded. "The McCoy crowd named me that. My right name's Captain Anderson Hatfield, and I hear that somebody around here took a shoot at my great-grandboy." He studied Moon-Eye. "That's you, ain't it, son?"

"Now wait, whoever you are—" began Professor Deal.

"I'm Captain Anderson Hatfield," he named himself again, and lowered his rifle-gun. Its butt thumped the floor like a falling tree.

"That shooting," Professor Deal made out to yammer. "I didn't hear it."

"I heard it," said Devil Anse, "and likewise I heard the slight put on me by the shooter."

"I—I don't want any trouble—" the Professor still tried to argue.

"Nor you won't have none, if you hear me," said Devil Anse. "But keep quiet. And look out yonder."

We looked out the open door. Just at the porch stood the shadows of three men, wide-hatted, tall, leaning on their guns.

"Since I was obliged to come," said Devil Anse Hatfield, and his voice was as deep now as Moon-Eye's, "I reckoned not to come alone." He spoke into the night. "Jonce?"

"Yes, pa."

"You'll be running things here. You and Vic and Cotton Top keep your eyes cut this way. Nobody's to go from this house, for the law nor for nothing else."

"Yes, pa."

Devil Anse Hatfield turned back to face us. We looked at him, and thought about who he was.

All those years back, sixty, seventy, we thought to the Big Sandy that flows between West Virginia and Kentucky. And the fighting between the Hatfields and the McCoy's, over what beginning nobody can rightly say today, but fighting that brought blood and death and sorrow to all that part of the world. And the efforts to make it cease, by every kind of arguer and officer, that couldn't keep the Hatfields and the McCoy's apart from each other's throats. And here he was, Devil Anse Hatfield, from that time and place, picking me out with his eyes.

"You who sung the song," he nodded me. "Come along,"

I put down my guitar. "Proud to come with you, Captain," I said.

His hand on my shoulder gripped like Moon-Eye's, a bear-trap grip there. We walked out the door, and off the porch past the three waiting tall shadows, and on across the grounds in the night toward that brick sleeping building.

"You know where we're going?" I inquired him.

"Seems to me I do. This seems like the way. What's your name?"

"John, Captain."

"John, I left Moon-Eye back there because he called for me to come handle things. He felt it was my business, talking to that fellow. I can't lay tongue to his name right off."

"Rixon Pengraft?"

"Rixon Pengraft," he repeated me. "Yes, I dreamed that name. Here we are. Open that door for us."

I'd never been in that building. Nor either had Devil Anse Hatfield, except maybe in what dreams he'd had to bring him there. But, if he'd found his way from the long ago, he found the way to where he was headed. We walked along the hallway inside between doors, until he stopped me at one. "Knock," he bade me, and I put my fist to the wood.

A laugh inside, mean and shaky. "That you, Moon-Eye Newlands?" said Rixon Pengraft's voice. "You think you dare come in here? I've not locked myself in. Turn the knob, if you're man enough."

Devil Anse nudged my shoulder, and I opened the door and shoved it in, and we came across the threshold together.

Rixon sat on his bed, with a little old twenty-two rifle across his lap.

"Glad you had the nerve, Moon-Eye," he began to say, "because there's only room for one of us to sit next to Anda Lee McCoy—"

Then his mouth stayed open, with the words ceasing to come out.

"Rixon," said Devil Anse, "you know who I am?"

Rixon's eyes hung out of his head like two scuppernong grapes on a vine. They twitchy-climbed up Devil Anse, from his boots to his hat, and they got bigger and scarer all the time.

"I don't believe it," said Rixon Pengraft, almost too sick and weak for an ear to hear him.

"You'd better have the man to believe it. You sang about me. Named me Devil Anse in the song, and knew it was about me. Thought it would be right funny if I did come where you were."

At last that big hand quitted my shoulder, and moved to bring that long eight-square rifle to the ready.

"Don't!"

Rixon was on his knees, and his own little toy gun spilled on the floor between us. He was able to believe now.

"Listen," Rixon jibber-jabbered, "I didn't mean anything. It was just a joke on Moon-Eye."

"A mighty sorry joke," said Devil Anse. "I never yet laughed at a gun going off." His boot-toe shoved the twenty-two. "Not even a baby-boy gun like that."

"I—" Rixon tried to say, and he had to stop to get strength. "I'll—"

"You'll break up that there gun," Devil Anse decreed him.

"Break my gun?" Rixon was still on his knees, but his scared eyes managed to get an argue-look.

"Break it," said Devil Anse. "I'm a-waiting, Rixon. Just like that time I waited by a lonesome river ford."

And his words were as cold and slow as chunks of ice floating down a half-choked stream in winter.

Rixon put out his hand for the twenty-two. His eyes kept hold on Devil Anse. Rixon lifted one knee from the floor, and laid the twenty-two across it. He tugged at barrel and stock.

"Harder than that," said Devil Anse. "Let's see if you got any muscle to match your loud mouth."

Rixon tugged again, and then Devil Anse's rifle stirred. Rixon saw, and really made out to work at it. The little rifle broke at the balance. I heard the wood crack and splinter.

"All right now," said Devil Anse, still deep and cold and slow. "You're through with them jokes you think are so funny. Fling them chunks of gun out yonder."

He wagged his head at the open door, and Rixon flung the broken pieces into the hall.

"Stay on your knees," Devil Anse bade him. "You got praying to do. Pray the good Lord your thanks you got off so lucky. Because if there's another time you see me, I'll be the last thing you see this side of the hell I'm six foot three of."

To me he said: "Come on, John. We've done with this no-excuse for a man who's broke his own gun."

Back we went, and nary word between us. The other three Hatfields stood by Professor Deal's porch, quiet as painted shadows of three gun-carrying men. In at the door we walked, and there was Professor Deal, and over against the other side of the room stood Moon-Eye and Dr. McCoy.

"Rixon named somebody McCoy here," said Devil Anse. "Who owns up to the name?"

"I do," said she, gentle but steady.

"You hold away from her, Great-grandsire," spoke up Moon-Eye.

"Boy," said Devil Anse, "you telling me what to do and not do?"

"I'm telling you, Great-grandsire."

I looked at those two tall big-nosed men from two times in the same family's story, and, saving Devil Anse's beard, and maybe thirty-some-odd years, you couldn't have called for two folks who favored each other's looks more.

"Boy," said Devil Anse, "you trying to scare me?"

"No, Great-grandsire. I'm not trying to scare you."

Devil Anse smiled. His smile made his face look the terriblest he'd looked so far.

"Now, that's good. Because I never been scared in all my days on this earth."

"I'm just telling you, Great-grandsire," said Moon-Eye. "You hold away from her."

Dr. McCoy stood close to Moon-Eye, and all of a sudden Moon-Eye put his hickory-sleeved arm round her and drew her closer still.

Devil Anse put his eyes on them. That terrible smile crawled away out of his beard, like a deadly poison snake out of grass, and we saw it no more.

"Great-grandboy," he said, "it wasn't needful for you to get me told. I made a mistake once with a McCoy girl. Jonce—my son standing out yonder—loved and courted her. Roseanna was her name."

"Roseanna," said the voice of Jonce Hatfield outside.

"I never gave them leave to marry," said Devil Anse. "Wish I had now. It would have saved a sight of trouble and grief and killing. And nobody yet ever heared me say that."

His eyes relished Dr. McCoy, and it was amazing to see that they could be quiet eyes, kind eyes.

"Now, girl," he said, "even if you might be close kin to Old Ran McCoy—"

"I'm not sure of the relationship," she said. "if it's there, I'm not ashamed."

"Nor you needn't be." His beard went down and up as he nodded her. "I've fit the McCoy set for years, and not once found ary scared soul among them. Ain't no least drop of coward blood in their veins." He turned. "I'll be going."

"Going?" asked Professor Deal.

"Yes, sir. Goodnight to the all of you."

He went through the door, hat, beard and rifle, and closed it behind him, and off far again we could hear that hound-dog bark.

We were quiet as a dead hog there in the room. Finally:

"Well, God bless my soul!" said Professor Deal.

"It happened," I said.

"But it won't be believed, John," he went on. "No sane person will ever believe who wasn't here."

I turned to say something to Moon-Eye and Dr. McCoy. But they were looking at each other, and Moon-Eye's both arms were around that doctor lady. And if I had said whatever I had in mind to say, they'd not have been hearing me.

Mrs. Deal said something from that room where she'd gone to do her sewing, and Professor Deal walked off to join her. I felt I might be one too many, too, just then. I picked up my silver-strung guitar and went outside after Devil Anse Hatfield.

He wasn't there, nor yet those who'd come with him. But on the porch was the diagram in chalk, and I had enough light to see that the word-square read right side up again, the way it had been first set down by Dr. Anda Lee McCoy.

McCoy. Mackey. Devlins. Devil Anse. Names change in the old songs, but the power is still there. Naturally, the way my habit is, I began to pick at my silver strings, another song I'd heard from time to time as I'd wandered the hills and hollows:

*Up on the top of the mountain,
Away from the sins of this world,
Anse Hatfield's son, he laid down his gun
And dreamed about Ran McCoy's girl. . . .*

Nine Yards of Other Cloth

Manly Wade Wellman

High up that mighty steep rocky slope with the sun just sunk, I turned as I knelt by my little campfire. Looking down slope and down to where the river crawled like a snake in the valley bottom, I saw her little black figure splash across the shallow place I'd found an hour back. At noontime I'd looked from the mountain yonder cross the valley and I'd seen her then, too, on another height I'd left behind. And I'd thought of a song with my name in it:

*On yonder hill there stands a creature,
Who she is I do not know . . .
Oh no, John, no, John, no! . . .*

But I knew she was Evadare. I'd fled from before her pretty face as never I'd fled from any living thing, not even evil spell-throwers nor murder-doers, nor either from my country's enemies when I'd soldiered in foreign parts and seen battle as the Bible prophet-book tells it, confused noises and garments rolled in blood. Since dawn I'd run from Evadare like a rabbit from a fox, and still she followed, climbing now along the trail I'd tried not to leave, toward the smoke of the fire I'd built before I knew she was still coming.

No getaway from her now, for night dropped on the world, and to climb higher would be to fall from some steep hidden place. I could wait where I was or I could head down and face her. Wondering which to do, I recollected how first we'd come on each other in Hosea's Hollow.

I'd not rightly known how I'd wandered there—Hosea's Hollow. I hadn't meant to, that was certain sure. No good-sensed man or woman would mean to. Folks wished Hosea's Hollow was a lost hollow, tried to stay out of it and not think about it.

Not even the old Indians relished to go there. When the white folks ran the Indians off, the Indians grinned over their shoulders as they went, calling out how Kalu would give white men the same hard times he'd given Indians.

Kalu. The Indian word means a bone. Why Kalu was named that nobody could rightly say, for nobody who saw him lived to tell what he looked to be. He came from his place when he was mad or just hungry. Who he met he snatched away, to eat or worse than eat. The folks who'd stolen the Indians' country near about loaded their wagons to go the way they'd come. Then—and this was before the time of the oldest man I'd heard tell of it—young Hosea Palmer said he'd take Kalu's curse away.

Folks hadn't wanted Hosea to try such. Hosea's father was a preacher—he begged him. So did Hosea's mother and so did a girl who'd dreamed to marry Hosea. They said if Hosea went where Kalu denned,

he'd not come back, but Hosea allowed Kalu was the downright evil and couldn't prevail against a pure heart. He went in the hollow, and true he didn't come out, but no more did Kalu, from that day on. Both vanished from folks' sight and knowledge, and folks named the place Hosea's Hollow, and nary path led there.

How I myself had come to the hollow, the first soul in long years as I reckoned, it wondered me. What outside had been the broad open light of the day was cloudy gray light here among funny-growing trees. Somewhere I heard an owl hoot, not waiting for night. Likewise I half-heard music, and it came to me that was why I'd walked there without meaning to.

Later, while I watched Evadare climb up trail to me, I recollected how, in Hosea's Hollow, I'd recollected hearing the sure enough music, two days before and forty-fifty miles off.

At Haynie's Fork, hunters had shot a hog that belonged to nobody, and butchered it up while the lady-folks baked pones of corn bread and sliced up coleslaw, and from here and yonder came folks carrying jugs of beady white liquor and music instruments. I was there, too, I enjoy to aid at such doings. We ate and drank and had dancing, and the most skilled men gave us music. O Bray Ramsey picked his banjo and sang *O where is pretty Polly, O yonder she stands, with rings on the fingers of her lily-white hands*, on to the last line that's near about the frighteningest last line any song had. Then they devilled me to play my silver-strung guitar and give them *Vandy, Vandy* and *The Little Black Train*. That led to tale-tellings, and one tale was of Hosea's Hollow and fifty different notions of what might

could have gone with Hosea and whatever bore the name of Kalu. Then more music, with Byard Ray fiddling his possible best, the way we never thought to hear better.

But a tall thin stranger was there, with a chin like a skinny fist and sooty-colored hair. When Byard Ray had done, the stranger took from a bag a shiny black fiddle. I offered to pick guitar to harmony with him, but he said sharp, "No, I thank you." Alone he fiddled, and, gentlemen, he purely fiddled better than Byard Ray. When he'd done, I inquired him his name.

"Shull Cobart," he replied me. "You're John, is that right? We'll meet again, it's possible, John."

His smile was no way likeable as he walked off, while folks swore no living soul could fiddle Byard Ray down without some special fiddle-secret. That had been two days before, and here I was in Hosea's Hollow, seeming to hear music that was some way like the music of Shull Cobart's black fiddle.

The gray air shimmered, but not the least hot or bright, there where owls hooted by day. I looked at a funny-growing tree, and such flowers as it had I'd not seen before. Might be they grew from the tree, might be from a vine scrabbled up. They were cup-shape, shiny black like new shoes—or like Shull Cobart's shiny-black fiddle, and I felt I could hear him still play, could see him still grin.

Was that why I half-heard the ghost of his music, why I'd come to these black-flowered trees in the shimmery gray air? Anyway, there was a trail, showing that something moved in Hosea's Hollow, between the trees so close-grown on each side you wondered could you put a knife blade among them. I headed along the trail, and the gray dancing shimmer seemed to slow me as I walked.

That tune in my head; I swung my guitar around from where it hung with my soogin sack and blanket roll, and tweaked the music from the silver strings. The shimmer dulled off, or at least I moved faster, picking up my feet to my own playing, around a curve bunched with more black flowers. And there, under the trees to one side, was a grave.

Years old it had to be, for vines and scrub grew on it. A wooden cross showed it was sure enough a grave. The straight stick was as tall as my chin and as big around as my both hands could grab, and the crosspiece wasn't nailed or tied on, it grew on. I stopped.

You've seen branches grown to each other like that. Two sorts of wood, the straight-up piece darker than the crosspiece. But both pieces looked alive, though the ends had been cut or broken so long back the raw was gone and the splinters rubbed off. Little-bitty twigs sprouted, with broad light-green leaves on the cross-piece and narrow dark laurel-looking ones on the straight pole. Roots reached into the grave, to sprout the cross. And letters were carved on, shaky and deep-dug and different sizes:

PRAY
foR
HosEA PALMeR

So here was where Hosea Palmer had lain down the last time, and some friend had buried him with the word to pray for him. Standing alone in the unchanciness, I did what the cross bade. In my heart I prayed, *Let the good man rest as he's earned the right and when it's my time, O Lord, let me rest as I've earned the right; and bless the kind soul who made and marked a long home for Hosea*

Palmer, amen.

While always my hands moved to pick that inner-heard tune, slow and quiet like a hymn. Still picking, I strolled around another curve, and there before me was a cabin.

I reckoned one main room with clay chinking, with a split-plank door on leather hinges and a window curtained inside with tanned hide. A shed-roofed leanto was tacked to the left, and it and the main cabin had shake shingles pegged on.

The door opened, and I popped behind a tree as a girl came out.

Small-made; yet you saw she was grown and you saw she was proud, though the color was faded from her cotton dress till it was gray as a dove. Her bright, sun-colored hair was tied behind her neck with a blue ribbon. She brought a rusty old axe with her, walking proud toward a skimpy woodpile, and on her feet were flat, homemade shoes with the hair still on the cow-hide. The axe was wobble-handled, but there was strength in her little round arms. She made the axe chew the wood into pieces enough for an armful, carried the wood back into the cabin, and came out again with an old hoe on her shoulder.

From the dug well she drew the bucket—it was old, too, with a couple of silver trickles leaking from it. She dipped a drink with a gourd dipper and lowered the bucket again. Then she went to the cleared patch past the cabin, and leaned on the hoe to look at the plants growing.

There was shin-high corn, and what looked like cabbages. She studied them, and her face was lovely. I saw that she yearned for her little crop to grow into food for her. She began to chop the ground up along a row, and I slid off down trail again, past the grave to where I heard water talking to itself.

I found a way through the trees to the waterside. Lay flat and took a big drink, and washed my face and hands. I dropped my gear on a flat rock, then unlaced my shoes and let the water wash my feet. Finally I cut a pole, tied on a string and hook and baited it with a scrap of smoke meat.

Fishing was good. Gentlemen, fresh fish are pretty things, they show you the reason for the names they've earned—shiner, sunfish, rainbow trout. Not that I caught any such, but what I caught was all right. When I had six I opened my knife to clean them, and built a fire and propped a stone beside it to fry meat on and then a couple of fish for supper. They ate good, just as the sun went down across the funny trees, and I wondered about the bright-haired girl, if she had a plenty to eat.

Finally, in the last dim light, I took my handaxe and chopped as much dry wood as I could tote. I wrapped the four other fish in leaves. I slung on my guitar, for I never walk off from that. Back I went along the trail to the cabin. Firelight danced in the window as I sneaked through the door-yard, and bent to stack the wood by the threshold log and lay the fish on it.

"What are you doing?"

She'd ripped the door open, and she had the axe in her hand. I took a long jump away before she could swing that rusty blade.

She stood with feet apart and elbows square, to fill the door as much as her small self could. Her hair was down around her shoulders, and shone like gold fire in the light from inside.

"Oh," she said, and let the axe sink. "You're not—"

"Whom am I not?" I inquired her, trying hard to sound laughy.

She leaned tired on the axe. "Not Shull Cobart," she said.

"No, ma'am," I said. "You can say for me that I'm not Shull Cobart, nor I wouldn't be. I saw him once, and I'm honest to tell you he doesn't suit me." I pointed at what I'd brought. "I'm camped by the branch yonder. Had more fish and wood than I needed, and figured you might like them." I bowed to her. "Good night."

"Wait." There was a plea in that, and I waited. "What brought you here, Mr.—"

"I'm named John. And I just roamed in here, without thought of why."

"I'm wondered, Mr.—"

"John," I named myself again.

"I'm wondered if you're the man I've heard tell of, named John, with a silver-strung guitar."

"Why," I said, "I'd not be amazed if I had the only silver-strung guitar there is. Nobody these days strings with silver but me."

"Then I've heard you called a good man." She looked down at the wood and the fish. "You've had your supper?" she asked, soft.

"Yes, ma'am, I've had my supper."

She picked up a fish. "I've not eaten. If you—maybe you'd like some coffee—"

"Coffee," I repeated her. "I'd mightily relish a cup."

She picked up the rest of the fish. "Come in, John," she bade me, and I gathered the wood in my arms and walked in after her.

"My name's Evadare," she told me.

The inside of the cabin was what I might expect from the outside. Chinked walls, a stone fire-place with wood burning in it, a table home-pegged together, two stools made of split chunks with tough branches for legs. In a corner was a pallet bed, made up on the floor with two old patch quilts. A mirror was stuck to the wall chinking—a woman purely has to have a mirror. Evadare took a fire-splinter from the hearth and lighted a candle stuck on the table in its own tallow. I saw by the glow how pinky-soft her skin was, how young and pretty; and bigger, bluer eyes than Evadare's you couldn't call for. At last she smiled, just a little hopeful smile.

I laid more wood to the fire, found a skillet and a chunk of fat meat. I rolled two fish in cornmeal and commenced frying them. She poured coffee from a tin pot into two tin cups. Watching, I had it in mind that the bottom of the pot was as sooty black as Shull Cobart's hair.

Finally I forked the fish on to an old cracked white plate for her. She ate, and I saw she was hungry.

Again she smiled that little small smile, and filled my cup again.

"I'd not expected any soul to come into Hosea's Hollow," she finally said.

"You expected Shull Cobart," I told her to recollect. "You said so."

"He'd come if anybody would, John."

"He didn't," I said. "And I did. Do you care to talk about it?"

She acted glad to talk about it, once she started. She'd worked at weaving for Shull Cobart, with maybe nine-ten others, in a little town off in the hills. He took the cloth to places like Asheville and sold at a high mark to the tourists that came there. Once or twice he made to court Evadare, but she paid him no mind. But one day he went on a trip, and came again with the black fiddle.

"And he was different," she said. "He'd been scared and polite to folks before that. But the fiddle made him somebody else. He played at dances and folks danced their highest and fastest, but they were scared by his music, even when they flocked to it. He won prizes at fiddle-playing. He'd stand by the shop door and play to us girls, and the cloth we wove was more cloth and better cloth—but it was strange. Funny feel and funny look to it."

"Did the tourists still buy it?" I inquired her.

"Yes, and payed more for it, but they seemed scared while they were buying it. So I've heard tell from folks who saw."

"And Shull Cobart made you run off."

"It was when he said he wanted me to light his darkness."

I saw what those words meant. An evil man speaking them to a good girl, because his evil was hungry for good. "What did you reply him?"

"I said I wanted to be quiet and good, he wanted to be showy and scary. And he said that was just his reason, he wanted me for my goodness to his scariness." She shivered, the way folks shiver when ice falls outside the window. "I swore to go where he'd not follow. Then he played his fiddle, it somehow made to bind me hand and foot. I felt he'd tole me off with him then and there, but I pretended—"

She looked sad and ashamed of pretending, even in peril.

"I said I'd go with him next day. He was ready to wait. That night I ran off."

"And you came to Hosea's Hollow," I said. "How did you make yourself able?"

"I feared Kalu another sight less than I fear Shull Cobart," Evadare replied me. "And I've not seen Kalu—I've seen nothing. I heard a couple of things, though. Once something knocked at the door at night."

"What was it knocked, Evadare?"

"I wasn't so foolish for the lack of sense that I went to see." She shivered again, from her little toes up to

her bright hair. "I dragged up the quilt and spoke the strongest prayer I remember, the old-timey one about God gives His angels charge over us by day and by night." Her blue eyes fluttered, remembering. "Whatever knocked gave one knock more and never again, that night or any night since."

I was purely ready to talk of something else. "Who made this cabin for you?" I asked, looking around.

"It was here when I came—empty. But I knew good folks had made it, by the cross."

I saw where her eyes went, to the inside of the half-shut door. A cross was cut there, putting me in mind of the grave by the trail.

"It must have been Hosea Palmer's cabin. He's dead and buried now. Who buried him?"

She shook her head. "That wonders me, too. All I know is, a good friend did it years ago. Sometimes, when I reckon maybe it's a Sunday, I say a prayer by the grave and sing a hymn. It seems brighter when I sing, looking up to the sky."

"Maybe I can guess the song you sing, Evadare." And I touched the guitar again, and both of us sang it:

Lights in the valley outshine the sun—

Look away beyond the blue!

As we sang I kept thinking in my heart—how pretty her voice, and how sweet the words in Evadare's mouth.

She went on to tell me how she hoped to live. She'd fetched in meal and salt and not much else, and she'd stretched it by picking wild greens, and there were some nuts here and there around the old cabin, poked away in little handfuls like the work of squirrels; though neither of us had seen a squirrel in Hosea's Hollow. She had planted cabbages and seed corn, and reckoned these would be worth eating by deep summer. She was made up in her mind to stay in Hosea's Hollow till she had some notion that Shull Cobart didn't lie in wait for her coming back.

"He's waiting," she felt sure. "He laughed when I spoke of running off. Said he'd know all I meant to do, all he needed was to wonder a thing while he played his fiddle and the answer was in his mind." Her pink tongue wet her lips. "He had a song he played, said it had power—"

"Was it maybe this one?" I asked, trying to jolly her; and again I touched the strings. I sang old words to the music I heard inside:

*My pretty little pink, I once did think
That you and I would marry,
But now I've lost all hope of you,
And I've no time to tarry.*

*I'll take my sack upon my back,
My rifle on my shoulder,
And I'll be off to the Western States
To view the country over . . .*

"That's the tune," she said, "but not the words." Again she shivered. "They were like something in a dream, while he played and sang along, and I felt I was trapped and tangled and webbed."

"Like something in a dream," I repeated her, and made up words like another thing I'd heard once, to fit the same music:

*I dreamed last night of my true love,
All in my arm I had her,
And her locks of hair, all long and fair,
Hung round me like a shadow . . .*

"That's not his song, either," said Evadare.

"No, it isn't," a voice I'd heard before came to agree her.

In through that half-open door stepped Shull Cobart, with his sooty hair and his grin, and his shiny black fiddle in his hand.

"Why don't you say me a welcome?" he asked Evadare, and cut his eyes across at me. "John, I counted on you being here, too."

Quick I leaned my guitar to the wall and got up. "Then you counted on trouble with me," I said. "Lay aside that fiddle so I won't break it when I break you."

But it was to his chin, and the bow across. "Hark before we fight," he said, and gentlemen, hush! how Shull Cobart could play.

It was the same tune, fiddled beyond my tongue's power to tell how wild and lovely. And the cabin that had had red-gold light from the fire and soft-gold light from Evadare's hair, it looked that quick to glow silver-pale, in jumping, throbbing sweeps as he played. Once, a cold clear dry winter night, I saw in the sky the Northern Lights; and the air in that cabin beat and throbbed and quivered the same way, but pale silver, I say, not warm red. And it came to my mind, harking helpless, that the air turned colder all at once than that winter night when I'd watched the Northern Lights in the sky.

I couldn't come at Shull Cobart. Somehow, to move at him was like moving neck-deep against a flooding river. I couldn't wear my way a foot closer. I sat on the stool again, and he stripped his teeth at me, grinning like a dog above a trapped rabbit.

"I wish the best for you, John," he said through the music. "Look how I make you welcome and at rest here."

I knew what way he wanted me to rest, the same way Hosea Palmer rested out yonder. I knew it wouldn't help to get up again, so I took back my guitar and sat quiet. I looked him up and down. He wore a suit of dark cloth with a red stripe, a suit that looked worth money, and his shoes were as shiny

as his fiddle, ready to make manners before rich city folks. His mean dark eyes, close together above that singing, spell-casting fiddle, read my thoughts inside me.

"Yes, John, it's good cloth," he said. "My own weaving."

"I know how it was woven," Evadare barely whispered, the first words she'd spoken since Shull came in.

She'd moved halfway into a corner. Scared white—but she was a prettier thing than I'd ever seen in my life.

"Like me to weave for you?" he inquired me, mocking; and then he sang a trifly few words to his tune:

*I wove this suit and I cut this suit,
And I put this suit right on,
And I'll weave nine yards of other cloth
To make a suit for John . . .*

"Nine yards," I repeated after him.

"Would that be enough fine cloth for your suit?" he grinned across the droning fiddle strings. "You're long and tall, a right much of a man, but—"

"Nobody needs nine yards but for one kind of suit," I kept on figuring. "And that's no suit at all."

"A shroud," said Evadare, barely making herself heard, and how Shull Cobart laughed at her wide eyes and the fright in her voice!

"You reckon there'll be a grave for him here in Kalu's own place, Evadare?" he gobbled at her. "Would Kalu leave enough of John to be worth burying? I know about old Barebones Kalu."

"He's not hereabouts," Evadare half-begged to be believed. "Never once he bothered me."

"Maybe he's just spared you, hoping for something better," said Shull. "But he won't be of a mind to spare all of us that came here making a fuss in his home place. That's why I toled John here."

"You toled me?" I asked, and again he nodded.

"I played a little tune so you'd come alone, John. I reckoned Kalu would relish finding you here. Being he's the sort he is, and I'm the sort I am, it's you he'd make way with instead of me. That lets me free to take Evadare away."

"I'll not go with you," Evadare said, sharper and louder than I thought possible for her.

"Won't you, though?" Shull laughed. His fiddle-music came up, and Evadare drew herself tight and strong, as if she leaned back against ropes on her. The music took on wild-sounding notes to fit into itself. Evadare's hands made fists, her teeth bit together, her eyes shut tight. She took a step, or maybe she was

dragged. Another step she took, another, toward Shull.

I tried to get up, too, but I couldn't move as she was moving. I had to sit and watch, and I had the thought of that saying about how a snake draws a bird to his coil. I'd never believed such a thing till I saw Evadare move, step by step she didn't want to take, toward Shull Cobart.

Suddenly he stopped playing, and breathed hard, like a man who's been working in the fields. Evadare stood still and rocked on her feet. I took up my muscles to make a jump, but Shull pointed his fiddle-bow at me, like a gun.

"Have sense!" he slung out. "You've both learned I can make you go or stay, whichever I want, when I fiddle as I know how. Sit down, Evadare, and I'll silence my playing for the time. But make a foolish move, John, and I might play a note that would have the bones out of your body without any bit of help from Kalu."

Bad man as he was, he told the truth, and both of us knew it. Evadare sat on the other stool, and I put my guitar across my knees. Shull Cobart leaned against the door jamb, his fiddle low against his chest, and looked sure of himself. At that instant I was dead sure I'd never seen a wickeder face, not among all the wicked faces of the wide world.

"Know where I got this fiddle, you two?" he asked.

"I can guess," I said, "and it spoils my notion of how good a trader a certain old somebody is. He didn't make much of a swap, that fiddle for your soul; for the soul was lost before you bargained."

"It wasn't a trade, John." He plucked a fiddle-string with his thumbnail. "Just a sort of little present between friends."

"I've heard the fiddle called the devil's instrument," said Evadare, back to her soft whisper; and once again Shull Cobart laughed at her, and then at me.

"Folks have got a sight to learn about fiddles. This fiddle will make you and me rich, Evadare. We'll go to the land's great cities, and I'll play the dollars out of folks' pockets and the hearts out of folks' bodies. They'll honor me, and they'll bow their faces in the dirt before your feet."

"I'll not go with you," she told him again.

"No? Want me to play you right into my arms this minute? The only reason I don't, Evadare—and my arms want you, and that's a fact—I'd have to put down my fiddle to hold you right."

"And I'd be on you and twist your neck around like the stem on a watch," I added onto that. "You know I can do it, and so do I. Any moment it's liable to happen."

As he'd picked his fiddle-string, I touched a silver string of my guitar, and it sang like a honey-bee. "Don't do that any more, John," he snapped. "Your guitar and my fiddle don't tune together. I'm a lone player."

To his chin went that shiny black thing, and the music he made lay heavy on me. He sang:

*I'll weave nine yards of other cloth
For John to have and keep,
He'll need it where he's going to lie,
To warm him in his sleep . . .*

"What are we waiting for?" I broke in. "You might kill me somehow with your fiddling, but you won't scare me."

"Kalu will do the scaring," he said as he stopped again. "Scare you purely to death. We're just a-waiting for him to come."

"How will we know—" began Evadare.

"We'll know," said Shull, the way he'd promise a baby child something. "We'll hear him. Then I'll play John out of here to stand face to face with Kalu, if it's really a face Kalu has."

I laughed myself, and heaven pardon me the lie I put into my laugh, trying to sound as if naught pestered me. Shull frowned; he didn't like how my laugh hit his ear.

"Just for argument's sake," I said to him, "How do you explain what you say your music can do?"

"I don't do any explaining. I just do the playing."

"I've heard tell how a fiddler can be skilled to where he plays a note and breaks a glass window," I recollected. "I've heard tell he might possibly even make a house fall down."

"Dogs howl when fiddles play," said Evadare. "From pain it makes."

Shull nodded at us both. "You folks are right. There's been power-music long before this. Ever hear of a man named Orpheus?"

"He was an old-timey Greek," I said.

"He played his harp, and trees danced for him. He played his way down to the floor of hell, and back out again. Maybe I've got some of that power. A fiddle can sing extra sharp or extra sweet, and its sound's solid—like a knife or club or rope, if you can work it."

I remembered in my mind that sound goes in waves like light, and can be measured; and a wave is power, whether of sound or light. Waves can wash, like the waves of the sea that strike down tall walls and strong men. Too bad, I decided, that educated folks couldn't use that black fiddle, to make its power good and useful. In devil-taught hands, it was the devil's instrument. Not like my silver-strung guitar, the way harps, certain harps in a certain high place, are said to be strung with gold . . .

Shull listened. You could almost see his ears stick up, like the ears of an animal. "Something's out there," he said.

I heard it, too. Not a step or a scramble, but a movement.

"Kalu," said Evadare, her eyes the widest yet in the firelight.

"Yes, it's Kalu," said Shull. "John, wouldn't it be kindlier to the lady if you met him outside?"

"Much kindlier," I agreed him, and got up.

"You know this isn't personal, John," Shull said, fiddle at his chin. "But Kalu's bound to have somebody. It won't be Evadare, because some way he's let her be. And it won't be me, with you here. You've got a reputation, John, for doing things against what Kalu stands to represent. I figure he wants something good, because he's got plenty of the strong evil."

"The way you think you've got to have Evadare," I said.

"That's it. You're in the line of what he wants to devour." He began to play again. "Come on, John."

I was coming. I'd made up my mind. The weight of the music was on me, but not quite as deadening and binding as before. Shull Cobart walked out, fiddling. I just winked at Evadare, as if I figured it would be all right. Then I walked out, too.

The light was greeny-pale, though I saw no moon. Maybe the trees hid it, or the haze in the sky.

"Where will you face him?" asked Shull, almost polite above his soft playing.

"There's a grave down yonder—" I began to say.

"Yes, just the place. Come on."

I followed after him on the trail. My left hand chorded my guitar at the neck, my right-handed fingers found the strings. What was it Evadare had told me? . . . *I say a prayer by the grave and sing a hymn. It seems brighter when I sing . . .*

Then there could be two kinds of power-music.

I began to pick the tune along with Shull, softer even than Evadare's whisper. He didn't hear; and, because I followed him like a calf to the slaughter-pen, he didn't guess.

Around the bend was the grave, the green light paler around it. Shull stopped. All of a quick, I knew Kalu was in the trees over us. Somewhere up there, he made a heaviness in the branches.

"Stand where you want to, John. I vow, you've played the man so far."

I moved past him, close to the cross, though there wasn't light enough to see the name or the prayer.

"Drop that guitar!" Shull howled at me.

For I began to play loud, and I sang to his tune, changing the rhythm for my own quick-made-up words:

I came to where the pilgrim lay,

*Though he was dead and gone,
And I could hear his comrade say,
He rests in peace alone—*

"Hush up with that!"

Shull Cobart stopped playing and ran at me. I clucked away and around the cross, and quick I sang the second verse:

*Winds may come and thunders roll
And stormy tempests rise,
But here he sleeps with a restful soul
And the tears wiped from his eyes—*

"Come for him, Kalu!" Shull screamed.

Kalu drop-leaped out of the branches between us.

Gentlemen, don't ask me to say too much what Kalu was. Bones, yes—something like man-bones, but bigger and thicker, also something like bear-bones, or big ape-bones from a foreign land. And a rotten light to them, so I saw for a moment that the bones weren't empty. Inside the ribs were caged puffy things, like guts and lungs and maybe a heart that skipped and wiggled. The skull had a snout like I can't say what, and in its eye-holes burned blue-green fire. Out came the arm-bones, and the finger-bones were on Shull Cobart.

I heard Shull Cobart scream one more time, and then Kalu had him, like a bullfrog with a minnow. And Kalu was back up in the branches. Standing by the grave, still tweaking my strings, I heard the branches rustle, and no more sounds after that from Shull Cobart.

After while, I walked to where the black fiddle lay. I stomped with my foot, heard it smash, and kicked the pieces away.

Walking back to the cabin seemed to take an hour. I stopped at the door.

"No!" moaned Evadare, and then she just looked at me. "John—but—"

"That's twice you thought I was Shull Cobart," I said.

"Kalu—"

"Kalu took *him*, not me."

"But—" she stopped again.

"I figured the truth about Kalu and Hosea Palmer, walking out with Shull," I began to explain. "All at

once I knew why Kalu never pestered you. You'll wonder why you didn't know it, too."

"But—" she tried once more.

"Think," I bade her. "Who buried Hosea Palmer, with a cross and a prayer? What dear friend could he have, when he came in here alone? Who was left alive here when it was Hosea Palmer's time to die?"

She just shook her head from side to side.

"It was Kalu," I said. "Remember the story, all of it. Hosea Palmer said he knew how to stop Kalu's wickedness. Folks think Hosea destroyed Kalu some way. But what he did was teach him the good part of things. They weren't enemies. They were friends."

"Oh," she said. "Then—"

"Kalu buried Hosea Palmer," I finished for her, "and cut his name and the prayer. Hosea must have taught him his letters. But how could Shull Cobart understand that? It wasn't for us to know, even, till the last minute. And Kalu took the evil man, to punish him."

I sat on the door-log, my arms around my guitar. "You can go home now, Evadare," I said. "Shull Cobart won't vex you again, by word of mouth or by sight of his face."

She'd been sitting all drawn up, as small as she could make herself. Now she managed to stand.

"Where will you go, John?"

"There's all the world for me to go through. I'll view the country over. Think me a kind thought once in a while when we're parted."

"Parted?" she said after me, and took a step, but not as if a web of music dragged her. "John. Let me come with you."

I jumped up. "With me? You don't want to go with me, Evadare."

"Let me come." Her hand touched my arm, trembling like a bird.

"How could I do that, take you with me? I live hard."

"I've not lived soft, John." But she said it soft and lovely, and it made my heart ache with what I hadn't had time before to feel for her.

"I don't have a home," I said.

"Folks make you welcome everywhere. You're happy. You have enough of what you need. There's music wherever you go. John, I want to hear the music and help the song."

I wanted to try to laugh that thought away, but I couldn't laugh. "You don't know what you say. Listen, I'll go now. Back to my camp, and I'll be out of here before sunup. Evadare, God bless you wherever you go."

"Don't you want me to go with you, John?" I couldn't dare reply her the truth of that. Make her a

wanderer of the earth, like me? I ran off. She called my name once, but I didn't stop. At my camp again, I sat by my died-out fire, wondering, then wishing, then driving the wish from me.

In the black hour before dawn, I got my stuff together and started out of Hosea's Hollow. I came clear of it as the light rose, and mounted up a trail to a ridge above. Something made me look back.

Far down the trail I'd come, I saw her. She leaned on a stick, and she carried some kind of bundle—maybe her quilts, and what little food she had. She was following.

"That fool-headed girl," I said, all alone to myself, and I up and ran down the far side. It was hours until I crossed the bottom below and mounted another ridge beyond. On the ridge I'd left behind I saw Evadare still moving after me, her little shape barely bigger than a fly. Then I thought of that song I've told you before:

*On yonder hill there stands a creature,
Who she is I do not know,
I will ask her if she'll marry . . .
Oh, no, John, no, John, no!*

But she didn't stand, she came on. And I knew who she was. And if I asked her to marry she wouldn't answer no.

The rest of that day I fled from her, not stopping to eat, only to grab mouthfuls of water from streams. And in the dusky last end of the day I sat quiet and watched her still coming, leaning on her stick for weariness, and knew I must go down trail to meet her.

She was at the moment when she'd drop. She'd lost her ribbon, and the locks of her hair fell round her like a shadow. Her dress was torn, her face was white-tired, and the rocks had cut her shoes to pieces and the blood seeped out of her torn feet.

She couldn't even speak. She just sagged into my arms when I held them out to her.

I carried her to my camp. The spring trickled enough so I could wash her poor cut feet. I put down her quilt and my blanket for her to sit on, with her back to a big rock. I mixed a pone of cornmeal to bake on a flat stone, and strung a few pieces of meat on a green twig. I brought her water in my cupped hand.

"John," she managed at last to speak my name.

"Evadare," I said, and we both smiled at each other, and I sat down beside her.

"I'll cease from wandering," I vowed to her. "I'll get a piece of land and put up a cabin. I'll plant and hoe a crop for us—"

"No such thing, John! I'm tired now—so tired—but I'll get over that. Let's just—view the country over."

I pulled my guitar to me, and remembered another verse to the old song that fitted Shull Cobart's tune:

*And don't you think she's a pretty little pink,
And don't you think she's clever,
And don't you think that she and I
Could make a match forever?*

Wonder as I Wander:

Manly Wade Wellman

Some Footprints on John's Trail Through Magic Mountains

Then I Wasn't Alone

Reckoning I had that woodsy place all to myself, I began to pick *Pretty Saro* on my guitar's silver strings for company. But then I wasn't alone; for soft fluty music began to play along with me.

Looking sharp, I saw him through the green laurels right in front. He was young. He hadn't a shirt on. Nary razor had ever touched his soft yellowy young beard. To his mouth he held a sort of hollow twig and his slim fingers danced on and off a line of holes to make notes. Playing, he smiled at me.

I smiled back, and started *The Ring That Has No End*. Right away quick he was playing that with me, too, soft and sweet and high, but not shrill.

He must want to be friends, I told myself, and got up and held out a hand to him.

He whirled around and ran. just for a second before he was gone, I saw that he was a man only to his waist. Below that he had the legs of a horse, four of them.

You Know the Tale of Hoph

The noon sun was hot on the thickets but in his cabin was only blue dim light. His black brows made one streak above iron-colored eyes' "Yes, ma'am?" he said.

"I'm writing a book of stories," she said, and she was rose-faced and butter-haired. "I hear you know the tale of Hoph. How sailors threw him off a ship in a terrible storm a hundred years ago, but the sea swept him ashore and then he walked and walked until he reached these mountains. How he troubled the mountain people with spells and curses and sendings of nightmares."

His long white teeth smiled in his long white face. "But you know that story already."

"No, not all of it. What was Hoph's motivation in tormenting the people?"

"His food was the blood of pretty women," was what he replied her. "Each year he made them give him a pretty woman. When she died at the year's end, with the last drop of her blood gone, he made them give him another."

"Until he died too," she tried to finish.

"He didn't die. They didn't know that he had to be shot with a silver bullet."

Up came his hands into her sight, shaggy-haired, long-clawed.

She screamed once.

From the dark corner where I hid I shot Hoph with a silver bullet.

Blue Monkey

"I'll turn this potful of pebbles into gold," the fat man told us at midnight, "if you all keep from thinking about a blue monkey."

He poured in wine, olive oil, salt, and with each he said a certain word. He put the lid on and walked three times around the pot, singing a certain song. But when he turned the pot over, just the pebbles poured out.

"Which of you was thinking about a blue monkey?" They all admitted they'd thought of nothing else. Except me—I'd striven to remember exactly what he'd said and done. Then everybody vowed the fat man's gold-making joke was the laughingest thing they'd seen in a long spell.

One midnight a year later and far away, I shovelled pebbles into another pot at another doings, and told the folks: "I'll turn them into gold if you all can keep from thinking about a red fish."

I poured in the wine, the olive oil, the salt, saying the word that went with each. I covered the pot, walked the three times, sang the song. Then I asked: "Did anybody think about a blue monkey?"

"But, John," said the prettiest lady, "you said not to think about a red fish, and that's what I couldn't put from my mind."

"I said that to keep you from thinking about a blue monkey," I said, and tried to tip the pot over.

But it had turned too heavy to move, I lifted the lid. There inside the pebbles shone yellow. The prettiest lady picked up two or three. They clinked together in her pink palm.

"Gold!" she squeaked. "Enough to make you rich, John!"

"Divide it up among yourselves," I said. "Gold's not what I want, nor yet richness."

The Stars Down There

"I mean it," she said again. "You can't go any farther, because here's where the world comes to its end."

She might could have been a few years older than I was, or a few years younger. She was thin-pretty, with all that dark hair and those wide-stretched eyes. The evening was cool around us, and the sun's last edge faded back on the way I'd come.

"The world's round as a ball," and I kicked a rock off the cliff. "It goes on forever."

And I harked for the rock to hit bottom, but it didn't.

"I'm not trying to fool you," she said. "Here's the ending place of the world. Don't step any closer."

"Just making to look down into the valley," I told her. "I see mist down there."

"It isn't mist."

And it wasn't.

For down there popped out stars in all their faithful beauty, the same way they were popping out over our heads. A skyful of stars. No man could say how far down they were.

"I ask your pardon for doubting you," I said. "It's sure enough the ending place of the world. If you jumped off here, you'd fall forever and ever."

"Forever and ever," she repeated me. "That's what I think. That's what I hope. That's why I came here this evening."

Before I could catch hold of her, she'd jumped. Stooping, I saw her failing, littler and littler against the stars down there, till at last I could see her no more.

Find the Place Yourself

It might be true that there's a curse on that house. It's up a mountain cove that not many know of, and those who do know won't talk to you about it. So if you want to go there you'll have to find the place yourself.

When you reach it, you won't think at first it's any great much. Just a little house, half logs and half whip-sawed planks, standing quiet and gray and dry, the open door daring you to come in.

But don't you go taking any such a dare. Nor don't look too long at the bush by the door-stone, the one with flowers of three different colors. Those flowers will look back at you like hard, mean faces, with eyes that hold yours.

In the trees over you will be wings fluttering, but not bird wings. Round about you will whisper voices, so soft and faint they're like voices you remember from some long-ago time, saying things you wish you could forget.

If you get past the place, look back and you'll see the path wiggle behind you like a snake after a lizard. Then's when to run like a lizard, run your fastest and hope it's fast enough.

I Can't Claim That

When I called Joss Kift's witch-talk a lie, Joss swore he'd witch-kill me in thirteen days.

Then in my path a rag doll looking like me, with a pin stuck through the heart. Then a black rooster flopping across my way with his throat cut, then a black dog hung to a tree, then other things. The thirteenth dawn, a whisper from nowhere that at midnight a stick with my soul in it would be broken thirteen times and burnt in a special kind of fire.

I lay on a pallet bed in Tram Colley's cabin, not moving, not speaking, not opening my mouth for the water Tram tried to spoon to me. Midnight. A fire blazed outside. Its smoke stunk. My friends around me heard the stick break and break and break, heard Joss laugh. Then Joss stuck his head in the window above me to snicker and say. "Ain't he natural-looking?"

I grabbed his neck with both hands. He dropped and hung across the sill like a sock. When they touched him, his heart had stopped, scared out of beating.

I got up. "Sorry he ended thataway," I said. "I was just making out that I was under his spell, to fool him."

Tram Colley looked at me alive and Joss dead. "He'll speak no more wild words and frightful commands," he said.

"I reckon it's as I've heard you say, Grandsire," said a boy. "Witch-folks can't prevail against a pure heart."

"I can't claim that," I said.

For I can't. My heart's sinful, and each day I hope it's less sinful than yesterday.

Who Else Could I Count On

"I reckon I'm bound to believe you," I admitted to the old man at last. "You've given me too many proofs. It couldn't be any otherwise but that you've come back from the times forty years ahead of now."

"You believe because you can believe wonders, John," he said. "Not many could be made to believe anything I've said."

"This war that's going to be," I started to inquire him, "the one the nobody's going to win—"

"The war that everybody's going to lose," he broke in. "I've come back to this day and time to keep it from starting if I can. Come with me, John. We'll go to the men that rule this world. We'll make them believe, too, make them see that the war mustn't start."

"Explain me one thing first," I said.

"What's that?" he asked.

"If you were an old man forty years ahead of now, then you must have been young right in these times." I talked slowly, trying to clear the idea for both of us. "If that's so, what if you meet the young man you used to be?"

So softly he smiled: "John," he said, "why do you reckon I sought you out of all men living today?"

"Lord have mercy!" I said.

"Who else could I count on?"

"Lord have mercy!" I said again.

Farther Down the Trail

Manly Wade Wellman

JOHN'S MY NAME

Where I've been is places and what I've seen is things, and there've been times I've run off from seeing them, off to other places and things. I keep moving, me and this guitar with the silver strings to it, slung behind my shoulder. Sometimes I've got food with me and an extra shirt maybe, but most times just the guitar, and trust to God for what I need else.

I don't claim much. John's my name, and about that I'll only say I hope I've got some of the goodness of good men who've been named it. I'm no more than just a natural man; well, maybe taller than some. Sure enough, I fought in the war across the sea, but so does near about every man in war times. Now I go here and go there, and up and down, from place to place and from thing to thing, here in among the mountains.

Up these heights and down these hollows you'd best go expecting anything. Maybe everything. What's long time ago left off happening outside still goes on here, and the tales the mountain folks tell sound truer here than outside. About what I tell, if you believe it you might could get some good thing out of it. If you don't believe it, well, I don't have a gun out to you to make you stop and hark at it.

WHY THEYRE NAMED THAT

If the gardinel's an old folks' tale, I'm honest to tell you it's a true one.

Few words about them are best, I should reckon. They look some way like a shed or cabin, snug and rightly made, except the open door might could be a mouth, the two little windows might could be eyes. Never you'll see one on main roads or near towns; only back in the thicketty places, by high trails among tall ridges, and they show themselves there when it rains and storms and a lone rarer hopes to come to a house to shelter him.

The few that's lucky enough to have gone into a gardinel and win out again, helped maybe by friends with axes and corn knives to chop in to them, tell that inside it's pinky-walled and dippy-floored, with on the floor all the skulls and bones of those who never did win out; and from the floor and the walls come spouting rivers of wet juice that stings, and as they tell this, why, all at once you know that inside a gardinel is like a stomach.

Down in the lowlands I've seen things grow they name the Venus flytrap and the pitcher plant, that can tole in bugs and flies to eat. It's just a possible chance that the gardinel is some way the same species, only it's so big it can tole in people.

Gardinel. Why they're named that I can't tell you, so don't inquire me.

NONE WISER FOR THE TRIP

Jabe Mawks howdied Sol Gentry, cutting up a fat deer in his yard. Sol sliced off enough for a supper

and did it up in newspaper for Jabe to carry home, past Morg McGeehee's place that you can see from Sol's gate, and from where you can see Jabe's cabin.

Jabe never got home that day. As if the earth had opened, he was swallowed up. Only that wrapped-up meat lay on the trail in front of Morg's. The high sheriff questioned. Jabe's wife sought but did not find. Some reckoned Jabe to be killed and hid, some told he'd fled off with some woman. Twenty-eight long years died.

When one day Morg hollered from his door: "Jabe Mawks!"

"Where's the meat?" Jabe asked to know. "Where's it gone?"

He looked no older than when last he was there. He wore old wool pants, new checked shirt, broad brown hat, he'd worn that other day. "Where's the meat?" he wondered Morg.

Jabe's wife was dead and gone, and he didn't know his children, grown up with children of their own. He just knew he didn't have that deer meat he'd been fetching home for supper.

Science men allow maybe there's a nook in space and time you can stumble in and be lost beyond power to follow or seek, till by chance you stumble out again. But if that's so, Jabe is none wiser for the trip.

Last time I saw him, he talked about that deer meat Sol gave him. "It was prime," he said, "I had my mouth all set for it. Wish we had it now, John, for you and me to eat up. But if twenty-eight years sure enough passed me on my way home, why, they passed me in the blink of an eye."

NARY SPELL

Fifty of us paid a dollar to be in the Walnut Cap beef shoot, and Deputy Noble set the target, a two-inch diamond out in white paper on a black-charred board, and a cross marked in the diamond for us to try at from sixty steps away.

All reckoned first choice of beef quarters was betwixt Niles Lashly and Eby Coffle. Niles aimed, and we knew he'd loaded a bat's heart and liver in with his bullet. Bang!

Deputy Noble went to look. "Drove the cross," he hollered us. "The up-and-down-mark, just above the sideways one."

Then Eby. He'd dug a skull from an old burying ground and poured lead through the eye-hole into his bullet mold. Bang!

Deputy Noble looked and hollered; "Drove the cross, too, just under that there line-joining."

Eby and Niles fussed over who'd won, while I took my turn, with Luns Lamar's borrowed rifle. Bang! Deputy Noble looked, and looked again.

"John's drove the cross plumb center!" he yelled. "Right where them two lines cross, betwixt the other two best shots!"

Niles and Eby bug-eyed at me. "Whatever was your spell, John?" they wondered to know.

"Nary spell," I said. "But in the army I was the foremost shot in my regiment, foremost shot in my brigade, foremost shot in my division. Preacher Ricks, won't you cut up this quarter of beef for whoever's families need it most round Walnut Gap?"

Trill Coster's Burden

Manly Wade Wellman

After Evadare caught up with me on that high mountain, her poor feet were worn so sore that we stayed there all next day. I snared a rabbit for dinner and dried its sinews by the fire and sewed up her torn shoes with them. Our love talk to one another would have sounded stupid to air other soul on earth. Next morning we ate our last smoked meat and corn pone, and Evadare allowed, "I can walk with a staff, John." So I bundled our two packs behind my back and slung my guitar on top. Off southwest, we reckoned, was another state line. Across that, folks could marry without a long wait or a visit to the county seat.

For hours we made it slantways down the mountain side and then across rocks in a river. We climbed a ridge beyond, midway towards evening, and saw a narrower stream below. There was a wagon track across and cabins here and yonder and, on the stream's far side, a white-steepled church and folks there, little as ants.

"We'll head there," I said, and she smiled up from under the bright toss of her hair. Down we came Evadare a-limping with her staff. At the stream I picked her up like a flower and waded over. Not one look did the folks at the church give us, so hard they harked at what a skinny little man tried to say.

"Here's sixty dollars in money bills," he hollered, "for who'll take her sins and set her soul free."

I set Evadare down. We saw a dark-painted pine coffin among those dozen ladies and men. Shadow looked to lie on and around the coffin, more shadow than it could cast by itself. The man who talked looked pitiful, and his hair was gravel-gray.

"Who'll do it?" he begged to them. "I'll pay seventy-five. No, a hundred—my last cent." He dug money from his jeans pocket. "Here's a hundred. Somebody do it for Trill and I'll pray your name in my prayers forevermore."

He looked at a squatty man in a brown umbrella hat. "Bart, if—"

"Not for a thousand dollars, Jake," said the squatty man. "Not for a million."

The man called Jake spoke to a well-grown young woman with brown hair down on her bare shoulders. "Nollie," he said, "I'd take Trill's sins on myself if I could, but I can't. I stayed by her, a-knowing what she was."

"You should ought to have thought of that when you had the chance, Jake," she said, and turned her straight back.

In the open coffin lay a woman wrapped in a quilt. Her hair was smoky-red. Her shut-eyed face had a proud beauty look, straight-nosed and full-lipped. The man called Jake held out the money to us.

"A hundred dollars," he whined. "Promise to take her sins, keep her from being damned to everlasting."

I knew what it was then, I'd seen it once before. Sin-eating. Somebody dies after a bad life, and a friend or a paid person agrees the sin will be his, not the dead one's. It's still done here and there, far back off from towns and main roads.

"I'll take her sins on me, John," said Evadare to me.

Silence then, so you might could hear a leaf drop. Jake started in to cry. "Oh, ma'am," he said, "tell me your name so's I can bless it to all the angels."

Somebody laughed a short laugh, but when I turned round, nair face had nair laugh on it.

"I'm called Evadare, and this is John with me."

"Take it." Jake pushed the money at her.

"I wouldn't do such a thing for money," Evadare said. "Only to give comfort by it, if I can."

Jake blinked his wet eyes at her. The squatty man shut the coffin lid. "All right, folks," he said, and he and three others took hold and lifted. The whole bunch headed in past the church, to where I could see the stones of a burying ground. Round us the air turned dull, like as if a cloud had come up in the bright evening sky.

Jake hung back a moment. "Better you don't come in," he mumbled, and followed the others.

"I do hope I did right," said Evadare, to herself and me both.

"You always do right," I replied her.

We walked to where some trees bunched on the far side of the wagon road. I dropped our bundles under a sycamore. We could see the folks a-digging amongst the graves. I got sticks and made us a fire. Evadare sat on a root. Chill had come into the air, along with that dimness. We talked, love talk but not purely cheerful talk. The sunset looked bloody-red in the west.

The folks finished the burying and headed off this way and that. I'd hope to speak to somebody, maybe see if Evadare could stay the night in a house. But they made wide turns not to come near us. I looked in my soogin sack to see if we had aught left to eat. But nair crumb.

"There's still some coffee in my bundle," said Evadare. "That'll taste good." I took the pot to the stream and scooped up water. Somebody made a laughing noise and I looked up.

"I didn't get your name," said the bare-shouldered woman, a-smiling her mouth at me.

"John," I said. "I heard you called Miss Nollie."

"Nollie Willoughby."

Her eyes combed me up and down in that last light of day. They were brown eyes, with hard, pale lights behind them.

"Long and tall, ain't you, John?" she said. "You nair took Trill Coster's sins—only that little snip you're with did that. If you've got the sense you look to have, you'll leave her and them both, right now."

"I've got the sense not to leave her," I said.

"Come with me," she bade me, a-smiling wider.

"No, ma'am, I thank you."

I walked off from her. As I came near the trees, I heard Evadare say something, then a man's voice. Quick I moved the coffeepot to my left hand and fisted up my right and hurried there to see what was what.

The fire burned with blue in its red. It showed me the Jake fellow, a-talking to Evadare where she sat on the root. He had a bucket of something in one hand and some tin dishes in the other.

"John," he said as I came up, "I reckoned I'd fetch youins some supper."

"We do thank you," I replied him, a-meaning it. "Coffee will be ready directly. Sit down with us and have a cup," and I set the pot on a stone amongst the fire and Evadare poured in the most part of our coffee.

Jake dropped down like somebody weary of this world. "I won't stay long," he said. "I'd only fetch more sins on you." He looked at Evadare. "On her, who's got such a sight of them to pray out the way it is."

Evadare took the bucket. It was hot squirrel stew and made two big bowls full. We were glad for it, I tell you, and for the coffee when it boiled. Jake's cup trembled in his hand. He told us about Trill Coster, the woman he still loved in her grave, and it wasn't what you'd call a nice tale to hear.

She'd been as beautiful as a she-lion, and she'd used her beauty like a she-lion, a-gobbling men. She could make men swear away their families and lives and hopes of heaven. For her they'd thief or even kill, and go to jail for it. And not a damn she'd given for what was good. She'd dared lightning to strike her; she'd danced round the church and called down a curse on it. Finally all folks turned from her—all but Jake, who loved her though she'd treated him like a dog. And when she'd died on a night of storm, they said bats flew round her bed.

Jake had stayed true to her who was so false. And that's how come him to want to get somebody to take her sins.

"For her sins run wild round this place, like foxes round a hen roost," he said. "I can hear them."

I heard them too, not so much with my ears as with my bones.

"I promised I'd pray them away," Evadare reminded him. "You'd best go, Jake. Leave me to deal with them."

He thanked her again and left. Full dark by then outside the ring of firelight, and we weren't alone there. I didn't see or hear plain at first, it was more like just a sense of what came. Lots of them. They felt to be a-moving close, the way wolves would shove round a campfire in the old days, to get up their nerve to rush in. A sort of low crouch of them in the dark, and here and there some sort of height half-guessed. Like as if one or other of them stood high, or possibly climbed a tree branch. I stared and tried to reckon if there were shapes there, blacker than the night, and couldn't be sure one way or the other.

"I'm not about to be afraid," said Evadare, and she knew she had to say that thing out loud for it to be true.

"Don't be," I said. "I've heard say that evil can't prevail against a pure heart. And your heart's pure. I wish mine was halfway as pure as yours."

I pulled my guitar to me and touched the silver strings, to help us both. "They say there are seven deadly sins," said Evadare. "I've heard them named, but I can't recollect them all."

"I can," I said. "Pride. Covetousness. Lust. Envy. Greed. Anger. Gluttony. Who is there that mustn't fight to keep free from all of them?"

I began to pick and sing, words of my own making to the tune of "Nine Yards of Other Cloth":

*And she's my love, my star above,
And she's my heart's delight,
And when she's here I need not fear
The terror in the night.*

"Who was that laughed?" Evadare cried out.

For there'd been a laugh, that died away when she spoke. I stopped my music and harked. A different noise now. A stir, like something that tried not to make a sound but made one anyway, the ghost of a sound you had to strain to hear.

I set down my guitar and stood up. I said, loud and clear:

"Whoever or whatever's in sound of my voice, step up here close and look at the color of my eyes."

The noise had died. I looked all the way round.

Deep night now, beyond where the fire shone. But I saw a sort of foggy-muddy cloud at a slink there. I thought maybe somebody had set a smudge fire and the wind blew the smoke to us. Only there was no wind. The air was as still as a shut-up room. I looked at the sky. There were little chunks of stars and about half a moon, with a twitch of dim cloud on it. But down where I was, silence and stillness.

"Look at those sparks," said Evadare's whispery voice. First sight of them, they sure enough might could have been sparks—greeny ones. Then you made out they were two and two in that low dark mist, two and two and two, like eyes, like the green eyes of meat-eating things on the look for food. All the way round they were caught and set by pairs in the mist that bunched and clotted everywhere, close to the ground, a-beginning to flow in, crowd in.

And it wasn't just mist. There were shapes in it. One or two stood up to maybe a man's height, others made you think of dogs, only they weren't dogs. They huddled up, they were sort of stuck together—jellied together, you might say, the way a hobby of frog's eggs lie in a sticky bunch in the water. If it had been just at one place; but it was all the way round.

I tried to think of a good charm to say, and I've known some, but right then they didn't come to mind. I grabbed up a stick from the pile for whatever good might come of it. I heard Evadare, her voice strong now:

"Thou shalt not be afraid for the terror by night."

The dark things churned, the eye-sparks blinked. I could swear that they gave back for the length of a step.

"Nor for the arrow that flieth by day," Evadare said on. "Nor for the pestilence that walketh in darkness."

They shrank back on themselves again. They surrounded us, but they were back from where they'd been.

"What did you say to them?" I inquired Evadare, still with the stick ready.

"The Ninety-first Psalm," she said back. "It was all I could think of that might could possibly help."

"It helped," I said, and thought how I'd stood like a gone gump, not able to call up one good word to save us. "If those were sins a-sneaking in " I said, "there was a sight of them, but good words made them wait."

"How long will they wait?" she wondered me, little and huddled down by the fire. She was scared, gentlemen; and, no I reckon about it, so was I.

Those many sins, a-taking shape and hungry to grab onto somebody. One might not be too bad. You'd face up to one, maybe drive it back, maybe get it down and stomp it. But all of those together all sides of you, gummed into one misty mass. Being scared didn't help. You had to think of something to do.

Think what?

No way to run off from Trill Coster's sins, bunched all round us. Maybe the firelight slowed them some, slowed the terror by night, the pestilence in darkness. Evadare had taken them on her, and here they were. She kept whispering prayers. Meanwhile, they'd pulled back some. Now their eye-sparks showed thirty or forty feet away, all directions. I put wood on the fire. The flames stood up, not so much blue in the red now.

I took up my guitar and dared sit down. Old folks allow the devil is afraid of music. I picked and I sang:

*The needle's eye that doth supply
The thread that runs so true,
And many a lass have I let pass
Because I thought of you.*

*And many a dark and stormy night
I walked these mountains through;
I'd stub my toe and down I'd go
Because I thought of you.*

Then again a loud, rattling laugh, and I got up. The laugh again. Into the firelight there walked that bare-shouldered woman called Nallie Willoughby, a-weaving herself while she walked, a-clapping her hands while she tossed her syrupy hair.

"I call that pretty singing, John," she laughed to me. "You aim to sleep here tonight? The ground makes a hard bed, that's a natural fact. Let me make you up a soft bed at my place."

"I mustn't go from here right now," said Evadare's soft voice. "I've got me something to do hereabouts."

Nollie quartered her eyes round to me. "Then just you come, John. I done told you it'll be a soft bed."

"I thank you most to death," I said, "but no, ma'am, I stay here with Evadare."

"You're just a damned fool," she scorned me.

"A fool, likely enough," I agreed her. "But not damned. Not yet."

She sat down at the fire without being bid to. There was enough of her to make one and a half of Evadare, and pretty too, but no way as pretty as Evadare—no way.

"All the folks act pure scared to come near youins," she told us. "I came to show there's naught to fear from Trill Coster's sins. I nair feared her nor her ways when she lived. I don't fear them now she's down under the dirt. All the men that followed her round—they'll follow me round now."

"Which is why you're glad she's dead," Evadare guessed. "You were jealous of her."

Nollie looked at her, fit to strike her dead. "Not for those sorry men," she said. "I don't touch other women's leavings." She put her eyes to me. "You don't look nor act like that sort of man, John. I'll warrant you're a right much of a man."

"I do my best most times," I said.

"I might could help you along," she smiled with her wide lips.

"Think that if it pleasures you," I said. I thought back on women I'd known. Donie Carawan, who'd sweet-talked me the night the Little Black Train came for her; Winnie, who'd blessed my name for how

I'd finished the Ugly Bird; Vandy, whose song I still sang now and then; but above and past them all, little Evadare, a-sitting tired and worried there by the fire, with the crowd and cloud of another woman's sins she'd taken, all round her, a-trying to dare come get hold of her.

"If I'd listen to you," I said to Nollie. "If I heeded one mumbling word of your talk."

"Jake said you're named Evadare," said Nollie across the fire. "You came here with John and spoke up big to take Trill's sin-burden and pray it out. What if I took that burden off you and took John along with it?"

"You done already made John that offer," said Evadare, quiet and gentle, "and he told you what he thought of it."

"Sure enough," Nollie laughed her laugh, with hardness in it. "John's just a-playing hard to get."

"He's hard to get, I agree you," said Evadare, "but he's not a-playing."

"Getting right cloudy round here," Nollie said, a-looking over that smooth bare shoulder of hers.

She spoke truth. The clumpy mist with its eye-greens was on the move again, like before. It hung close to the ground. I saw tree branches above it. The shapes in it were half-shapes. I saw one like what children make out of snow for a man, but this was dark, not snowy. It had head, shoulders, two shiny green eyes. Webbed next to it, a bunch of the things that minded you of dogs without being dogs. Green eyes too, and white flashes that looked like teeth.

Those dog things had tongues too, out at us, like as if to lap at us. Evadare was a-praying under her breath, and Nollie laughed again.

"If you fear sin," she mocked us, "you go afraid air minute of your life."

That was the truth too, as I reckoned, so I said nothing. I looked on the half-made hike of the man shape. It molded itself while I looked. Up came two steamy rags like arms. I wondered myself if it had hands, if it could take hold; if it could grab Evadare, grab me.

One arm-rag curled up high and whipped itself at us. It threw something—a whole mess of something. A little rain of twinkles round the root where Evadare had sat since first we built the fire.

"Oh," she whispered, not loud enough for a cry.

I ran to her, to see if she'd been hit and hurt. She looked down at the scatter of bright things round her. I knelt to snatch one up.

By the firelight, I saw that it was a jewel. Red as blood, bright as fire. I'm no jeweler, but I've seen rubies in my time. This was a big one.

Evadare bent with both hands out, to pick the things up. From the mist stole out soft noises, noises like laughter—not as loud as Nollie could laugh, but meaner, uglier.

"Don't take those things," I said to Evadare. "Not from what wants to give them to you." I sent myself to throw that big ruby.

"No," said Evadare, and got up, too. "I must do it. I'm the one who took the sins. I'm the one to say no to them."

She made a flinging motion with her arm, underhand, the way girls are apt to throw. I saw those jewels wink in the firelight as they sailed through the air. Red for rubies, white for diamonds, other colors for other ones. They struck in among the misty shapes. I swear they plopped, like stones flung in greasy water.

"Give me," she said, and took the big ruby from me. She flung it after the others. It made a singy sound in the air. Back from the cloudy mass beat a tired, hunting breath, like somebody pained and sorrowed.

"All right," said Evadare, the strongest she'd spoken since first we'd made out camp. "I've given them back their pay, refused all of it."

"Did you?" Nollie sort of whinnied.

"You saw me give them back," Evadare said, "All of them."

"No, not all of them, look at this."

Nollie held out her open palm. There lay a ruby, big as a walnut, twice the size of the one I'd taken up.

"How many thousands do you reckon that's worth?" Nollie jabbered at us, her teeth shining. "I got it when it fell, and I'm a-going to keep it."

"Miss Nollie," I said, "you should ought to have seen enough here tonight to know you can't keep air such a thing."

"Can't I?" she jeered me. "Just watch me, John, I'll take it to a big town and sell it. I'll be the richest somebody in all these parts."

"Better give it to Evadare to throw back," I said.

"Give it to little half-portion, milky-face Evadare? Not me."

She poked the ruby down the front of her dress, deep down there.

"It'll be safe where it's at," she snickered at us. "Unless you want to reach a hand down yonder for it, John."

"Not me," I said. "I want no part of it, nor yet of where you put it."

"John, said Evadare, "look at how the cloud bunches away."

I looked; it drew back with all its shapes, like the ebb tide on the shore of the sea.

"Sure enough," I said. "It's a-leaving out of here."

"And so am I," spoke up Nollie. "I came here to talk sense to you, John. You ain't got the gift to know sense where you hear it. Come visit me when I get my money and put up my big house here."

She swung, she switched away, a-moving three directions at once, the way some women think they look pretty when they do it. She laughed at us once, over her shoulder so bare. Evadare made a move, like as if to try to fetch her back, but I put my hand on Evadare's arm.

"You've done more than your duty tonight," I said. "Let her go."

So Evadare stood beside me while Nollie switch-tailed off amongst the trees. I reckoned the misty shapes thickened up at Nollie, but I couldn't be dead sure. What I did make out was, they didn't fence us in now. I saw clearness all the way round. The moon washed the earth with its light.

Evadare sat down on the root again, dead tired. I built up the fire to comfort us. I struck a chord on the guitar to sing to her, I don't recollect what. It might could as well have been a lullaby. She sank down asleep as I sang. I put my soogin sack under her head for a pillow and spread a blanket on her.

But I didn't sleep. I sat there, awaiting for whatever possibly happened, and nothing happened. Nothing at all, all night. The dawn grayed the sky and far off away I heard a rooster crow. I put the last of our coffee in the pot to brew for us, all we could count on for breakfast. While I watched by the fire, three men came toward us. Evadare rose up and yawned.

"John," said Jake in his timid voice, "I bless the high heavens to see you and your lady all safe here. This here is Preacher Frank Ricks, and here's Squire Hamp Dolby, come along with me to make your acquaintance."

Preacher Ricks I'd met before. We shook hands together. He was thin and old, but still a-riding here and there to do what good was in his power. Squire Dolby was a chunk of a man with white hair and black brows. "Proud to know you, John," he said to me.

"I hurried in here just at sunrise," said Preacher Ricks. "I'd heard tell of poor Trill Coster's death, and I find she's already buried. And I heard tell, too, of the brave, kind thing your lady agreed to do to rest her soul."

"I hoped it would be merciful," said Evadare.

"How true you speak, ma'am," said Squire Dolby. "But the sins you said you'd take, they never came to you. They fastened somewhere else. Nollie Willoughby's gone out of her mind. Round her house it's all dark-shadowy, and she's in there, she laughs and cries at one and the same time. She hangs onto a little flint rock and says it's a ruby, richer than all dreams on this earth."

"Isn't it a ruby?" I inquired him.

"Why," he said, "the gravelly path to my house is strewed with rocks like that, fit for naught but just to be trod on."

"I fetched these folks here on your account, John," said Jake. "You done told me you and Evadare hoped to be married."

"And we can do that for you," allowed Preacher Ricks, with a smile to his old face. "Squire Dolby here has the legal authority to give you a license here and now."

"It's sure enough my pleasure," said Squire Dolby.

He had a pad of printed blanks. He put down Evadare's name and mine, and he and Jake signed for the witnesses.

"Why not right now, under these trees and this sky?" said Preacher Ricks, and opened his book. "Stand together here, you two. John, take Evadare's right hand in your right hand. Say these words after me when I tell you."

The Spring

Manly Wade Wellman

Time had passed, two years of it, when I got back to those mountains again and took a notion to visit the spring.

When I was first there, there'd been just a muddy, weedy hole amongst rocks. A young fellow named Zeb Gossett lay there, a-burning with fever, a-trying to drink at it. I pulled him onto some ferns and put my blanket over him. Then I knelt down and dragged out the mud with my hands, picked weeds away and bailed with a canteen cup. Third time I emptied the hole to the bottom, water came clear and sweet. I let Zeb Gossett have some, and then I built us a fire and stirred up a hoecake. By the time it was brown on both sides, he was able to sit up and eat half of it.

Again and again that night, I fetched him water, and it did him good. When I picked my silver-strung guitar, he even joined in to sing. Next day he allowed he was well, and said he'd stay right where such a good thing happened to him. I went on, for I had something else to do. But I left Zeb a little sack of meal and a chunk of bacon and some salt in a tin can. Now, returned amongst mountains named Hark and Wolter and Dogged, not far from Yandro, I went up the trail I recollected to see how the spring came on.

The high slope caved in there, to make a hollow grown with walnut and pine and hickory, and the spring showed four feet across, with stones set in all the way round. Beside the shining water hung a gourd ladle. Across the trail was a cabin, and from the cabin door came Zeb Gossett. "John," he called my name, "how you come on?"

We shook hands. He was fine-looking, young, about as tall as I am. His face was tanned and he'd grown a short brown beard. He wore jeans and a home-sewn blue shirt. "Who'd expect I'd find Zeb Gossett here?" I said.

"I live here, John. Built that cabin myself, and I've got title to two acres of land. A corn patch, potatoes and cabbages and beans and tomatoes. It's home. When you knelt down to make that spring give the water that healed me, I knew this was where I'd live. But come on in. I see you still tote that guitar."

His cabin was small but rightly made, of straight poles with neat-notched corner joints, whitewash on the clay chinking. There was glass in the windows to each side of the split-slab door. He led me into a square room with a stone fireplace and two chairs and a table. Three-four books on a shelf. The bed had a

blazing-star quilt. Over the fire bubbled an iron pot with what smelled like stewing deer meat.

"Yes, I live here, and the neighborhood folks make me welcome," he said when we sat down. "I knew that spring had holy power. I watch over it and let others heal their ills with it."

"It was just a place I scooped out," I reminded him. "we had to have water for you, so I did it."

"It's cured hundreds of sick folks," he said. "I carried some to the Fleming family when they had flu, then others heard tell of it and came here. They come all the time. I don't take pay. I tell them, 'Kneel down before you drink, the way John did while he was a-digging. And pray before you drink, and give thanks afterwards.'"

"You shouldn't ought to give me such credit, Zeb."

"John," he said, "that's healing water. It washes away air bad thing whatsoever. It helps mend up broken bones even. Why, I've known folks drink it and settle family quarrels and lawsuits. It's a miracle, and you did it."

I wouldn't have that. I said, "Likely the power was in the water before you and I came here. I just cleaned the mud out."

"I know better, and so do you," Zeb grinned at me.

Outside, a sweet voice: "Hello, the house," it spoke. "Hello, Zeb, might could I take some water?"

He jumped up and went out like as if he expected to see angels. I followed him out, and I reckon it was an angel he figured he saw.

She was a slim girl, but not right small. In her straight blue dress and canvas shoes, with her yellow curls waterfalled down her back, she was pretty to see. In one hand she toted a two-gallon bucket. She smiled, and that smile made Zeb's knees buck.

"Tilda"—he said her name like a song—"you don't have to ask for water, just dip it. Somebody in your family ailing?"

"No, not exactly." Then her blue eyes saw me and she waited.

"This is my friend John, Tilda," said Zeb. "He dug the spring. John, this is Tilda Fleming. Her folks neighbor with me just round the trail bend."

"Proud to be known to you, ma'am," I made my manners, but she was a-looking at Zeb, half nervous, half happy.

"Who's the water for, then?" he inquired her.

"Why," she said, shy with every word, "that's why I wondered if you'd let me have it. You see, our chickens—" and she stopped again, like as if she felt shamed to tell it.

"Ailing chickens should ought to have whatever will help them, Zeb." I put in a word.

"That's a fact," said Zeb, "and a many a fresh egg your folks have given me, Tilda. So take water for

them, please."

She dropped down on her knees and bowed her head above the spring. She was a pretty sight, a-doing that. I could tell that Zeb thought so.

But somebody else watched. I saw a stir beyond some laurel, and looked hard thataway.

It was another girl, older than Tilda, taller. Her hair was blacker than storm, and her pointy-chinned, pale face was lovely. She looked at Tilda a-kneeling by the spring and she sneered, and it showed her teeth as bright as glass beads.

Zeb didn't see her. He bent over Tilda where she knelt, was near about ready to kneel with her. I walked through the yard toward the laurel. That tall, black-haired girl moved into the open and waited for me.

She wore a long dress of tawny, silky stuff, hardly what you'd look for in the mountains. It hung down to her feet, but it held to her figure, and the figure was fine. She looked at me, impudent-faced. "I declare," she said in a sugary-deep voice, "this is the John we hear so much about. A fine-looking man, no doubt in the world about that. But that's a common name."

"I always reckoned it's been borne by a many a good man," I said. "How come you to know me?"

"I heard you and Zeb Gossett a-talking. I can hear at a considerable distance." Her wide, dark eyes crawled over me like spiders. "My name's Craye Sawtelle, John. You and I might could be profitable acquaintances to each other."

"I'm proud to be on good terms with most folks," I said. "You come to visit with Zeb, yonder?"

"Maybe, when that little snip trots her water bucket home." Craye Sawtelle looked at Tilda a-filling the pail, and for a second those bright teeth showed. "I have business to talk with Zeb. Maybe he'll find the wit to hark to it."

Zeb walked Tilda to the trail. Craye Sawtelle had come into the yard with me, and when Tilda walked on and Zeb turned back, Craye said, "Good day to you, Zeb Gossett," and he jumped like as if he'd been stuck with a pin.

"What can I do for you, Miss Craye?" he said.

She ran her eyes over him, too. "You know the answer to that. I'll make you a good offer for this house and this spring."

He shook his head till his young beard flicked in the air. "You know the place isn't for sale, and the spring water's free to all."

"Only if they kneel and pray by it." She smiled a chilly smile. "I'm not a praying sort, Zeb."

"Nobody's heart to kneel before God," said Zeb.

"I don't kneel to your God," she said.

"What god do you kneel to?" I inquired her, and her black eyes blazed round to me.

"You make what educated folks call an educated guess," she said to me. "If you know so much, why should I answer you?"

She turned back to Zeb. "What if I told you there's a question about your title here, that I could gain possession?"

"I'd say, let's go to the court house and find out."

"You're impossible," she shrilled at him. "But I'm reasonable. I'll give you time to think it over. Like sundown tomorrow."

Then she went off away, the other direction from Tilda. In that tawny dress, air line of her swayed.

Just then, the sun looked murkier over us. Here and there amongst the trees, the leaves showed their pale undersides, like before a storm comes.

"Let's go in and have something to eat," Zeb said to me.

It was a good deer-meat stew, with cornmeal dumplings. I had two helps. Zeb said he'd put in onions and garlic and thyme and bay leaf, with a dollop of wine from a bottle he kept for that. We finished up and drank black coffee. While we sipped, a sort of lonesome whinnying sound rose outside.

"That's an owl," said Zeb. "Bad luck this time of day."

"I figured this was the sort of place where owls hoot in the daytime and they have possums for yard dogs." I tried to crack the old joke, but Zeb didn't laugh.

"Let me say what's been here," he said. "The trouble's with that witch-girl, Craye Sawtelle. She makes profit by this and that—says strings of words supposed to make your crops grow, allows she can turn your cows or pigs sick unless you pay her. What she wants is this spring, this holy spring. Naturally, she figures it would make her rich."

"And you won't give it over."

"It's not mine to give, John. I reckon it saved my life—I'd have died without you knelt to scoop it clear for me. So I owe it to folks to let them cure themselves with it. Oh, Craye's tried everything. You've seen what sort she is. First off, she wanted us to be partners—in the spring and other things. That didn't work with me, and she got ugly. I'll banter you she's done things to the Flemings, like those sick chickens you heard tell of from Tilda. And she told me she'd put a curse on my corn patch. Things don't go right well there just now."

I picked my guitar. "Hark at this," I said:

*Three holy kings, four holy saints,
At heaven's high gate that stand,
Speak out to bid all evil wait
And stir no foot or hand . . .*

"Where'd you catch that song, John?"

"Long ago, from old Uncle T. P. Hinnard. He allowed it was a good song against bad stuff."

Zeb crinkled his eyes. "Like enough it is, but it sort of chills the blood. You know one of a different kind?"

The owl quivered its voice outside as I touched the strings again.

*Her hair is of a brightsome color
And her cheeks are rosy red,
On her breast are two white lilies
Where you long to lay your head.*

"Tilda," said Zeb, a-brightening up. "You made that song about Tilda."

"It's older than Tilda's great-grandsire," I told him, "but it'll do for her. I saw how she and you lean to one another."

"If it wasn't for Craye Sawtelle—" And he stopped.

"Tell me about her," I bade him, and he did.

She'd lived thereabouts before Zeb built his cabin. She followed witchcraft and didn't care a shuck who knew it. Some folks went to her for charms and helps, others were scared to say her name out loud. When Zeb began a-letting sick folks drink from the spring, she tried air way she knew to cut herself in. She'd tried to sweet-talk Zeb, even tried to move into his cabin with him. But by then he'd met Tilda Fleming and couldn't think of air girl but her.

"When she saw I wouldn't love her, she started in to make me fear her," he said. "She's done that thing, pretty much. You wonder yourself why I don't speak up to Tilda. I've got it in mind that if I did, Craye would do something awful to her. I don't know what it would be, likely I don't want to know."

I made the guitar string whisper to drown out the owl's voice. "What would she do with the spring if she had it?"

"Make folks pay for its water, I told you. Maybe turn its power round to do bad instead of good. I can't rightly say."

I leaned my guitar on the wall. "Maybe I'll just go out and walk round your place before the sun goes down."

"Be careful, John."

"Shoo," I said, "I'll do that. I may not be the smartest man in these mountains, but I'm sure enough the

carefullest."

I went out at the door. The sun had dropped to a fold of the mountains. I walked back and looked at Zeb's rows of corn, his bean patch with pods a-coming on, the other beds of vegetables. Past his garden grew up trees, tall and close together, with shadowy dark amongst them.

"We meet again, John," said a voice I'd come to know.

"I reckoned we might, Miss Craye," I said, and out she came from betwixt two pines. She carried a stick of fresh wood, its bark peeled off.

"If I pointed this wand at you and said a spell," she said, "what would happen?"

"We'll never know without you try it."

She tossed her hair, black as a yard up a chimney on a dark night. Her teeth showed, bright and sharp. "That means you figure you've got help against spells," she said. "I'm not without help myself. I don't go air place without help."

"Then you must be hard pushed when it's not nigh."

I felt the presence of what she talked about. Back in the thicket, I knew, were gathered things. I couldn't see them, just felt them. A stir and a sigh back yonder.

"John," she said, "you could go farther and fare worse than by making a friend of me. You understand things these country hedges nair dreamt of. You've been up and down the world and grabbed onto truths here and there."

"I've done that thing," I agreed her, "and the poet wasn't right all the time when he said beauty was truth and truth was beauty. Truth can be right ugly now and then."

"Suppose Zeb Gossett was shown a quick way out of here," she said. "Suppose you and I got to be partners in the spring and other matters."

"What kind of partners?"

She winnowed close then. I made out she didn't have on air stitch under her silky dress. She was proudly made, and well she knew it. She stood so close she near about touched me.

"What kind of partners would you like us to be?" she whispered.

"Miss Craye," said I, "no, thank you. No partnerships in the spring or in you, either one."

If she'd had the power to kill me with a look, I'd have died then and there. For hell's worst fury is a woman scorned, says another poet.

"I don't know why I don't raise my voice and set my pack on you," she breathed out in my face, and drew off a step.

"Maybe I can make one of those educated guesses," I said. "Your pack might not be friendly to you, not when you've just failed at something."

"You're the failure!" she squeaked like a bat.

"A failure for you, like Zeb Gossett. Isn't the third time the charm? If it doesn't work the third time, where will the charm put you?"

"I gave you and Zeb Gossett till sundown tomorrow," she gritted out with her pointy teeth. "Just about twenty-four hours."

"We'll be here," I said.

She backed off amongst the trees. They tossed their branches, like as if in a high wind. I turned and went back to the cabin. As I helped Zeb do the dishes, I related him what had passed.

"You bluffed her out of something she might try on you," said Zeb.

"I wasn't a-bluffing. If she's got the power of evil, I've been up against that in my time, and folks will say evil nair truly won over me. I hope some power of good is in me."

"Sure it is," he said. "Look out yonder at that healing spring. But she says bad will fall on us by sundown tomorrow. How can we go all right against that?"

"I don't rightly know how to answer that," I made confession. "We'll play it by ear, same as I play this guitar." And I picked it up to change the subject.

Out yonder was a sound, like a whisper, but too soft and sneaky to be a real voice. And a shadow passed outside a window.

I stopped my picking. Zeb had taken a dark-covered book from the shelf and was opening it. "What's that?" I asked.

"The Bible." He flung the covers wide and stabbed down his finger. "I'm a-going to cast a sign for us."

I knew about that, open the Bible anywhere and put your finger on a text and look for guidance in it.

"Here, the last verse in thirteenth Mark." Zeb read it out: "'And what I say unto you I say unto all, Watch.'"

"Watch," I repeated. "That's what we'll do tonight."

Shadows at the window again. Zeb looked in the Bible, but didn't read from it anymore. I picked my guitar, the tune of "Never Trust a Stranger." Outside rose a rush of wind, and when I looked out it was darkened. Night, and, from what I could judge, no moon. The owl hooted. On the hearth, the fire burnt blue. Zeb got up and lit a candle. Its flame fluttered like a yellow leaf.

Then a scratchy peck at the door. Zeb looked at me, his eyes as wide as sunflowers. I put down the guitar and went to the door.

It opened by hiking the latch on a string. I cracked it inward a tad and looked at what was out there. A dog? It was as big as a big one, black and bristly-haired. Its eyes shone, likewise its teeth. It looked to be a-getting up on its hind legs, and for a second I thought its front paws were hairy hands.

"Thanks," I said to it, "whatever you got to sell, we don't want any."

I closed the door and the latch fell into place. I heard that big body a-pressing against the wood. A whiney little sound, then the wind again. Zeb put more wood on the fire, though it wasn't cold. "What must we do?" he asked.

"Watch, the way the Bible told us," I replied him.

Things moved heavily all round the cabin. A scratch at a windowpane. Feet tippy-toed on the roof.

"I reckon it's up to you, John," said Zeb, his Bible back in his hand. "Up to you to see us through this night. You've got good in you to stand off the bad."

I thought of saying that Craye had given us to sundown the next day, which should ought to mean we'd last till then. As to the good in me, I hoped it was there. But it's not a right thing to claim aught for yourself, just be thankful if it helps.

Zeb gave us both a whet out of a jug of good blockade, and again I picked guitar. He joined in with me to sing "Lonesome River Shore" and "Call Me from the Valley," and wanted me to do the one that had minded him of Tilda. Things quietened outside while we sang. The devil's afraid of music, I'd heard tell from a preacher in a church house one time.

But when I put the guitar by, I heard another kind of singing. It was outside, it was a moanish tune and a woman's voice a-doing it. I tried to make out the words:

*Cummer, go ye before, cummer, go ye,
Gif ye not go before, cummer, let me . . .*

And I'd heard that same song before. It was sung, folks said, near about four hundred years back, at North Berwick, in Scotland, to witch a king on his throne and the princess he wanted to marry. I didn't reckon I'd tell Zeb that.

"Sounds like Craye Sawtelle's voice," he said as he listened. "What does cummer mean, John?"

"I think that's an old-timey word for a chum, a friend," I replied him.

"Then what cummers are out there with Craye?" His face was white—so white I never mentioned the dog-thing that had come to the door.

"She'd better not fetch her cummers in here," I said to hearten him. "They might could hear what wouldn't please them."

"Hear what?"

I had to tell him something, so I took the guitar and sang:

*Lights in the valley outshine the sun,
Look away beyond the blue . . .*

He looked to feel better. Outside, the other singing died out.

"Would it help if we had crosses at the windows?" he asked, and I nodded him it wouldn't hurt. He tied splinters of firewood crosswise with twine string and put two at the windows and hung another to the latch of the door. Out yonder, somebody moaned like as if the somebody had felt a pain somewhere. Zeb actually grinned at that.

Time dragged by, and the wind sighed round the cabin, or anyway something with a voice like wind. I yawned and stretched, and told him I felt like sleep.

"Take the bed yonder," Zeb bade me. "I'll sit up. I won't be able to sleep."

"That's what you think," I said. "Get into your bed. I'll put down this blanket I fetched with me, just inside the door."

And I did, and wropped up in it. I didn't stay awake long, though once it sounded like as if something sniffed at where the door came down to the bottom. Shoo, gentlemen, you can sleep if you're tired enough.

What woke me up was the far-off crow of a rooster. I was glad to hear that, because a rooster's crow makes bad spirits leave. I rolled over and got up. Zeb was at the fireplace, with an iron fork to toast pieces of bread. A saucepan was a-boiling eggs.

"We're still here," he said. "It wonders me what Craye Sawtelle was up to last night."

"Just a try at scaring us," I said. "She gave us till sundown tonight, you recollect."

Somehow, that pestered him. He didn't talk much while we ate. I said I'd fetch a pail of water, and out I went with it to the spring. There, at the spring but not right close up beside it, stood Craye Sawtelle. This time she wore a long black dress, with black sandals on her bare feet, and her hair was tied up with a string of red beads.

"Good day, ma'am," I said. "How did you fare last night?"

"I was a trifle busy," she answered. "A-getting ready for sundown."

I dipped my bucket in the spring. The water looked sweet.

"I note by your tracks that you've been round and round here," I said, "but you nair once got close enough to dip in the spring."

"That will come," she promised me. "It will come when the spring's mine, when there's no bar against me. How does that sound to you, John?"

"Why, since you ask, it sounds like the same old song by the same old mockingbird. Like a try at scaring us out. Miss Craye, I've been a-figuring on you since we met up yesterday, and I'll give you my straight-out notion. There's nothing you can do to me or Zeb Gossett, no matter how you try."

"You'll be sorry you said that."

"I'm already sorry," I said. "I hate to talk thisaway to

lady-folks, but some things purely have to be said."

"And yonder comes Zeb Gossett," she said, pointing. "He'll do like you, try to talk himself out of being afraid."

Zeb came along to where I stood with the bucket in my hand. He looked tight-mouthed and pale under his brown beard.

"Have you come to talk business?" Craye inquired him, and showed him her pointy teeth.

"I talk no business with you," he said.

"Wait until the sun slides down behind the mountain," she mocked at him. "Wait until dark. See what I make happen then."

"I don't have to wait," he said. "I've made my mind up."

"Then why should I wait, either?" she snarled out, "Why not do the thing now?"

She lifted up her hands, crooked like claws. She began to say a string of wild words, in whatever language I don't know. Zeb gave back from her.

"I hate things like this, folks," I said, and I upped with the bucket and flung that water from the spring all over her.

She screamed like an animal caught in a trap. I saw yellow foam come a-slathering out of her mouth. She whirled round and whirled round again and slammed down, and by then you couldn't see her on account of the thick dark steam that rose.

Zeb ran back off a dozen steps, but I stood there to watch, the empty bucket in my hand.

The steam thinned, but you couldn't see Craye Sawtelle. She was gone.

Only that black dress, twisted and empty, and only those two black sandals on the soaked ground, with no feet in them. Naught else. Not a sigh of Craye Sawtelle. The last of the steam drifted off, and Zeb and I stared at each other.

She's gone," Zeb gobbled in his throat. "Gone. How did you—"

"Well"—I steadied my voice—"yesterday you said it washed away air bad thing whatever. So I thought I'd see if it would do that. No doubt about it, Craye Sawtelle was badness through and through."

He looked down at the empty dress and empty sandals. "Blessed water," he said. "Holy water. You

made it so."

"I can't claim that, Zeb. More likely it was your doing, when you started in to use it for help to sick and troubled folks."

"But you knew that if you threw it on her—"

"No." I shook my head. "I just only hoped it would work, and it did. Wherever Craye Sawtelle's been washed to, I don't reckon she'll be back from there."

He looked up along the trail. Yonder came Tilda Fleming.

"Tilda," he said her name. "What shall I tell Tilda?"

"Why not tell her what's in your heart for her?" I asked. "I reckon she's plumb ready to hark at you."

He started to walk toward her and I headed back to the cabin.

Owls Hoot in the Daytime

Manly Wade Wellman

That time back yonder, I found the place myself, the way folks in those mountains allowed I had to.

I was rough hours on the way, high up and then down, over ridges and across bottoms, where once there'd been a road. I found a bridge across a creek, but it was busted down in the middle, like a warning not to use it. I splashed across there. It got late when I reached a cove pushed in amongst close-grown trees on a climbing slope.

An owl hooted toward where the sun sank, so maybe I was on the right track, a path faint through the woods. I found where a gate had been, a rotted post with rusty hinges on it. The trees beyond looked dark as the way to hell, but I headed along that snaky-winding path till I saw the housefront. The owl hooted again, off where the gloom grayed off for the last of daylight.

That house was half logs, half ancient whipsawed planks, weathered to dust color. Trees crowded the sides, branches crossed above the shake roof. The front-sill timber squatted on pate rocks. The door had come down off its old leather hinges. Darkness inside. Two windows stared, with flowered bushes beneath them. The grassy yard space wasn't a great much bigger than a parlor floor.

"What ye wish, young sir?" a scrapy voice inquired me, and I saw somebody a-sitting on a slaty rock at the house's left corner.

"I didn't know anybody was here," I said, and looked at him and he looked at me.

I saw a gnarly old man, his ruined face half-hid in a blizzardy white beard, his body wrapped in a brown robe. Beside him hunkered down what looked like a dark-haired dog. Both of them looked with bright, squinty eyes, a-making me recollect that my shirt was rumpled, that I sweated under my pack straps, that I had mud on my boots and my dungaree pant cuffs.

"If ye nair knowed nobody was here, why'd ye come?" scraped his voice.

"It might could be hard to explain."

"I got a lavish of time to hark at yore explanation."

I grinned at him. "I go up and down, a-viewing the country over. I've heard time and again about a place so far off of the beaten way that owls hoot in the daytime and they have possums for yard dogs."

An owl hooted somewhere.

"That's a saying amongst folks here and yonder," said the old man, his broad brown hand a-stroking his beard.

"Yes, sir," I agreed him, "but I heard tell it was in this part of the country, so I thought I'd find out."

The beard stirred as he clamped his mouth. "Is that all ye got to do with yore young life?"

"Mostly so," I told him the truth. "I find out things."

The animal alongside him hiked up its long snout.

It was the almightiest big possum I'd ever seen, big as a middling-sized dog. Likely it weighed more than fifty pounds. Its eyes dug at me.

"Folks at the county seat just gave me general directions," I went on. "I found an old road in the woods. Then I heard the owl hoot and it was still daytime, so I followed the sound here."

I felt funny, a-standing with my pack straps galled into me, to say all that.

"I've heard tell an owl hoot by daytime is bad luck," scraped the voice in the beard. "Heap of that a-going, if it's so."

"Over in Wales, they say an owl hooting means that a girl's a-losing her virginity," I tried to make a joke.

"Hum." Not exactly a laugh. "Owls must be kept busy a-hooting for that, too." He and the possum looked me up and down. "Well, since ye come from so far off, why don't me bid ye set and rest?"

"Thank you, sir." I unslung my pack and put it down and laid my guitar on it. Then I stepped toward the dark door hole.

"Stay out of yonder," came quick warning words. "What's inside is one reason why nobody comes here but me. Set down on that stump acrost from me. What might I call ye?"

I dropped down on the stump. "My name's John. And I wish you'd tell me more about how is it folks don't come here."

"I'm Maltby Sanger, and this here good friend I got with me is named Ung. The rest of the saying's fact, too. I keep him for a yard dog."

Ung kept his black eyes on me. His coarse fur was grizzled gray. His forepaws clasped like hands under his shallow chin.

"Maybe I'd ought to fix us some supper while we talk," said Maltby Sanger.

"Don't bother," I said. "I'll be a-heading back directly."

"Hark at me," he said, scrapier than ever. "There ain't no luck a-walking these here woods by night."

"There'll be a good moon."

"That there's the worst part. The moon shows ye to what's afoot in the woods. Eat here tonight and then sleep here."

"Well, all right." I leaned down and unbuckled my pack. "But let me fix the supper, since I came without bidding." I fetched out a little poke of meal, a big old can of sardines in tomatoes. "If I could have some water, Mr. Sanger."

"Round here, there's water where I stay at."

He got off his rock, and I saw that he was dwarfed. His legs under that robe couldn't be much more than knees and feet. He wouldn't stand higher than my elbow.

"Come on, John," he said, and I picked up a tin pan and followed him round the house corner.

Betwixt two trees was built a little shackly hut, poles up and down and clay-daubed for walls, other poles laid up top and covered with twigs and grass for a roof. In front of it, in what light was left, flowed a spring. I filled my pan and started back.

"Is that all the water ye want?" he asked after me.

"Just to make us some pone. I've got two bottles of beer to drink."

"Beer," he said, like as if he loved the word.

He waddled back, a-picking up wood as he came. We piled twigs for me to light with a match, then put bigger pieces on top. I poured meal into the water in the pan and worked up a batter. Then I found a flat rock and rubbed it with ham rind and propped it close to the fire to pour the batter on. Afterward I opened the sardines and got my fork for Maltby Sanger and took my spoon for myself. When the top of the pone looked brown enough, I turned it over with my spoon and knife, and I dug out those bottles of beer and twisted off the caps.

We ate, squatted on two sides of the fire. Maltby Sanger appeared to enjoy the sardines and pone, and he gave some to Ung, who held chunks in his paws to eat. When we'd done, not a crumb was left. "I relished that," allowed Maltby Sanger.

It had turned full dark, and I was glad for the fire.

"Ye pick that guitar, John?" he inquired. "Why not pick it some right now?"

I tuned my silver strings and struck chords for an old song I recollected. One verse went like this:

*We sang good songs that came out new,
But now they're old amongst the young,
And when we're gone, it's just a few
Will know the songs that we have sung.*

"I God and that's a true word," said Maltby Sanger when I finished. "Them old songs is a-dying like flies."

I hushed the silver strings with my palm. "I don't hear that owl hoot," I said.

"It ain't daytime no more," said Maltby Sanger.

"Hark at me, sir," I spoke up. "Why don't you tell me just what's a-happening here, or anyway a-trying to happen?"

He gave me one of his beady looks and sighed a tired-out sigh. "How'll I start in to tell ye?"

"Start in at the beginning."

"Ain't no beginning I know of. The business is as old as this here mountain itself."

"Then it's right old, Mr. Sanger," I said. "I've heard say these are the oldest mountains on all this earth. They go back before Adam and Eve, before the first of living things. But here we've got a house, made with hands." I looked at the logs, the planks. "Some man's hands."

"John," he said, "that there's just a housefront, built up against the rock, and maybe not by no man's hands, no such thing. I reckon it was put there to tole folks in. But I been here all these years to warn folks off, the way I tried to warn ye." He looked at me, and so did Ung, next to him. "Till I seen ye was set in yore mind to stay, so I let ye."

I studied the open door hole, so dark inside. "Why should folks be toled in, Mr. Sanger?"

"I've thought on that, and come to reckon the mountain wants folks right into its heart or its belly." He sort of stared his words into me. "Science allows this here whole earth started out just a ball of fire. The outside cooled down. Water come in for the sea, and trees and living things got born onto the land. But they say the fire's still inside. And fire's got to have something to feed on."

I looked at our own fire. It was burning small and hot, but if it got loose it could eat up that whole woods. "You remind me of old history things," I said, "when gods had furnaces inside them and sacrifices were flung into them."

"Right, John," he nodded me. "Moloch's the name in the Bible, fifth chapter of Amos, and I likewise

think somewheres in Acts."

"The name's Molech another place," I said. "Second Kings; Preacher Ricks had it for a text one time. How King Joash ruled that no man would make his son or daughter pass through the fire to Molech. You reckon this place is some way like that?"

"Might could be this here place, and places like it in other lands, gave men the idee of fiery gods to burn up their children."

I hugged my guitar to me, for what comfort it could give. "You wouldn't tell me all this," I said, "if you wanted to fool me into the belly of the mountain."

"I don't worship no such," he snapped. "I told ye, I'm here to keep folks from a-meddling into there and not come out no more. It was long years back when I come here to get away from outside things. I wasn't much good at a man's work, and folks laughed at how dwarfished-down I was."

"I don't laugh," I said.

"No, I see ye don't. But don't either pity me. I wouldn't like that no more than I'd like laughter."

"I don't either pity you, Mr. Sanger. I judge you play the man, the best you can, and nobody can do more than that."

He patted Ung's grizzled back. "I come here," he said again, "and I heard tell about this place from the old man who was here then. I allowed I'd take over from him if he wanted to leave, so he left. It wonders me if this sounds like a made-up tale to ye."

"No, sir, I hark at air word you speak."

"If ye reckon this here is just some common spot, look on them flowers at the window by ye."

It was a shaggy bush in the firelight. There were blue flowers. But likewise pinky ones, the color of blood-drawn meat. And dead white ones, with dark spots in them, like eyes.

"Three different flowers on one bush," he said. "I don't reckon there's the like of that, nowheres else on this earth."

"Sassafras has three different leaves on one branch," I said. "There'll be a mitten leaf, and a toad-foot leaf next to it, and then just a plain smooth-edged leaf." I studied the bush. "But those flowers would be special, even if there was just one of a kind on a twig."

"Ye done harked at what I told, John," said Maltby Sanger, and put his bottle up to his beard to drink the last drop. "Suit yoreself if it makes sense."

"Sense is what it makes," I said. "All right, you've been here for years. I reckon you live in that little cabin round the corner. Does that suit you?"

"It's got to suit somebody. Somebody's needed. To guard folks off from a-going in yonder and then not come out."

I strummed my guitar, tried to think of what to sing. Finally:

*Yonder comes the Devil
From hell's last bottom floor,
A-shouting and a-singing,
There's room for many a more.*

"I enjoy to hear ye make music, John," said Maltby Sanger. "It was all right for ye to come here tonight. No foolishness. I won't say no danger, but ye'll escape danger, I reckon."

I looked toward the open door. It was all black inside—no, not all black. I saw a couple of red points in there. I told myself they were reflected from our fire.

"I've been a-putting my mind on what's likely to be down yonder," I said. "Recollected all I was told when I was little, about how hell was an everlasting fire down under our feet, like the way heaven was up in the sky over us."

"Have ye thought lately, the sky ain't truly up over us no more?" he inquired me. "It's more like off from us now, since men have gone a-flying off to the moon and are a-fixing to fly farther than that, to the stars. Stars is what's in the sky, and heaven's got to be somewheres else. But I ain't made up my mind on hell, not yet. Maybe it's truly a-burning away, down below our feet, right this minute."

"Or either, the fire down in there is what made folks decide what hell was."

"Maybe that," he halfway agreed me. "John, it's nigh onto when I go to sleep. I wish there was two beds in my cabin, but—"

"Just let me sleep out here and keep our fire a-going," I said. "Keep it a-going, and not let it get away and seek what it might devour."

"Sure thing, if ye want to." He got up on his stumpy legs and dragged something out from under that robe he wore. "Ye might could like to have this with ye."

I took it. It was a great big Bible, so old its leather covers were worn and scrapped near about away.

"I thank you, sir," I said. "I'll lay a little lightwood on the fire and read in this."

"Then I'll see ye when the sun comes up."

He shuffled off to his shack. Ung stayed there and looked at me. I didn't mind that, I was a-getting used to him.

Well, gentlemen, I stirred up the fire and put on some chunks of pine so it would burn up strong and bright. I opened the Bible and looked through to the Book of Isaiah, thirty-fourth chapter. I found what I'd recollected to be there:

It shall not be quenched night nor day: the smoke thereof shall go up for ever, from generation to generation it shall lie waste . . .

On past that verse, there's talk about dragons and satyrs and such like things they don't want you to believe in these days. In the midst of my reading, I heard something from that open door, a long, grumbling sigh of sound, and I looked over to see what.

The two red lights moved closer together, and this time they seemed to be set in a lump of something, like eyes in a head.

I got up quick, the Bible in my hand. Those eyes looked out at me, and the red of them burned up bright, then went dim, then bright again. Ung, at my foot, made a burbling noise, like as if it pestered him.

I put down the Bible and picked up a burning chunk from the fire. I made myself walk to the door. My chunk gave me some light to see inside. Sure enough it was a cave in there; what looked like a house outside was just a front, built on by whatever had built it for whatever reason. The cave was hollowed back into the mountain and it had a smooth-looking floor, almost polished, of black rock. Inside, the space slanted inward both ways, to narrowness farther in. It was more like a throat than anything I could say for it. A great big throat, big enough to swallow a man, or more than one man.

Far back hung whatever it was had those eyes. I saw the eyes shine, not just from my flashlight. They had light of their own.

"All right," I said out loud to the eyes. "Here I am. I look for the truth. What's the truth about you?"

No answer but a grumble. The thing moved, deep in there. I saw it had, not just that black head with red eyes, it had shoulders and things like arms. It didn't come close, but it didn't pull back. It waited for me.

"What's the truth about you?" I inquired it again. "Might could your name be Molech?"

It made nair sound, but it lifted those long arms. I saw hands like pitchforks. It was bigger than I was, maybe half again bigger. Was it stronger?

A man's got to be a man sometime, I told myself inside me. I'd come there to find out what was what. There was some strange old truth in there, not a pretty truth maybe, but I'd come to see what it was.

I walked to where the door was fallen off the leather hinges. The red eyes came up bright and died down dull and watched me a-coming. They waited for me, they hoped I'd get close.

I put my foot on where the door-log had been once. It was long ago rotted to punk, it crumbled under my boot. I took hold of the jamb and leaned in.

"You been having a time for yourself?" I asked the eyes.

There was light from the chunk I carried, but other light, a ghost of a show of it, was inside. It came from on back in there. It was a kind of smoky reddish light, I thought, you might have called it rosy. It made a glitter on something two-three steps inside.

I spared a look down there to the floor. Gentlemen, it was a jewel, a bunch of jewels, a-shining white

and red and green. And big. They were like a bunch of glass bottles for size. Only they weren't bottles. They shone too bright, too clear, strewed out there by my foot.

There for the picking up—but if I bent over, there was that one with the red eyes and the black shape, and he could pick me up.

"No," I said to him, "you don't get hold of me thattaway," and I whirled my chunk of fire, to get more light.

There he was, dark and a-standing two-legged like a man, but he was taller than I was, by the height of that round head with the red eyes. And no hair to his black hide, it was as slick as a snake. Long arms and pitchfork hands sort of pawed out toward me, the way a praying mantis does. The head cocked itself. I saw it had something in it besides eyes, it had a mouth, open and as wide as a gravy boat, wet and black, like a mess of hot tar.

"You must have tricked a many a man in here with those jewels," I said.

He heard me, he knew what I said, knew that I wouldn't stoop down. He moved in on me.

Those legs straddled. Their knees bent backward, like a frog's, the feet slapped flat and wide on the floor of the cave, amongst more jewels everywhere. Enough in there to pay a country's national debt. He reached for me again. His fingers were lumpy-jointed and they had sharp claws, like on the feet of a great big hawk. I moved backward, I reckoned I'd better. And he followed right along. He wanted to get those claws into me.

I backed to the old door-log and near about tripped on it. I dropped the burning chunk and grabbed hold of the fallen-down door with both hands, to stay on my feet. I got hold of its two edges and hiked it between me and that snake-skinned thing that lived inside. I looked past one edge of the door, and all of a sudden I saw him stop.

There was the rosy light in yonder, and outside my chunk blazed where it had fallen. I could see that door rightly for the first time.

It was one of those you used to see in lots of places, made with a thick center piece running from top to bottom betwixt the panels, and two more thick pieces set midpoint of the long one to go right and left to make a cross. In amongst these were set the four old, half-rotted panels. But the cross stood there. And often, I'd heard tell, such doors were made thattaway to keep evil from a-coming through.

So, in the second I did my figuring, I saw why the front had been built on the cave, why that door had been hung there. It was to hold in whatever was inside. And it had worked right well till the door dropped down.

It was a heavy old door, but I muscled it up. I shoved on back into the cave, with the door in front of me like a shield.

Nothing shoved back. I took one step after another amongst those shining jewels, careful to keep from a-tripping on them. I cocked my head leftways to look past the door. That big black somebody moved away from me. I saw the flicker of the rose light from where it came into the cave.

The cross, was it a help? I'd been told that there were crosses long before the one on Calvary, made for power's sake in old, old lands beyond the sea. Yes, and in this land too, by Indian tribes one place and

another. My foot near about skidded on a rolling jewel, but I stayed up.

"In this sign we conquer," I said, after some king in the olden days, and I believed it. And I went on forward with the door for my sign.

For as long as a breath I shoved up against him. I felt him lean against the other side, like high wind a-blowing. I fought to keep the door on him to push him back, and took a long step and dug in with my foot.

And almighty near fell down a hole all full of the rosy light.

He'd tricked me there where his light came up from. I hung on its edge, a-looking down a hole three-four feet across, deeper than I could ask myself to judge, and away down there was fire, a-dancing and a-streaming—a world, it looked to me, of fire.

On the other side of the door he made a noise. It was a whiny buzz, what you'd expect from a bee as big as a dog. His long old arm snaked round the edge of the door, a-raking with its claws. They snagged into my shirt—I heard it rip. I managed to sidestep clear of that hole, and he buzzed and came again. I shoved hard with the door, put all I could put into it. Heat come in all round me, it was like when you sit in a close room with a hot stove. I smelt something worse than a skunk.

The pressure was there, and then the pressure was all of a sudden gone. I went down, the door in front of me, to slam on the floor with a rattly bang.

I got up quick, without the door. I wondered how to face him. But he wasn't there. Nowhere.

I stood and trembled and gulped for air. Sweat streamed all over me. I looked up, all 'round me. Sure enough, he was gone. I was all alone in that dark cave, me and the door. And the rosy light was gone.

For the door had fallen whack down on top of it.

I put a knee down on the panel. I could feel a tremble and stir underneath.

"By God Almighty, I've got you penned in!" I yelled down to what made the stir in that fiery hole.

It was a-humping to me there. I reached out and grabbed a shiny green jewel. It must have weighed eight pounds or so. I put it on a plank of the cross. I got up on my feet, found more jewels. I laid them on, one next to another, along both arms, to make the cross twice as strong.

"You're shut up in there now," I said down to the hole it covered.

The door lay still and solid. No more hum below.

I headed out toward the gleam of the cooking fire. My feet felt weak under me. Ung sat out there and looked at me. I wondered if I should ought to get a blanket. Then I didn't bother. I must have slept.

It was morning's first gray again, with the stars a-paling out of the sky, when I sat up awake. Maltby Sanger was there, a-building up the fire. "Ye look to have had ye a quiet night," he said.

"Me?" I said, and he laughed. Next to the fire he set a saucepan with eggs in it.

"Duck eggs," he told me. "Ung found them for our breakfast. And I got parched corn, and tomatoes from my garden."

"And I've got a few pinches of coffee, we can boil it in my canteen cup," I said. "Looky over yonder at the cave."

He looked. He pulled his whiskers. "Bless my soul," he said, "the door's plumb gone off it."

"The door's inside, to bottle up what was the trouble in there," I said.

While he was a-cooking, I told him what I'd met in the cave. He got up with a can of hot coffee in his hand and stumped inside. Out again, he filled one of his old buckets with dirt and stones and fetched it into the cave. Then back for another bucketful of the same stuff, and then another. Finally he came out and washed his hands and served up the eggs. We ate them before the either of us said a word.

"Moloch," Maltby Sanger said then. "Ye reckon that's who he is?"

"He didn't speak his name," I replied him. "All I guess is, he'll likely stay under that door with the cross and the weight on it, so long as it's left to pen him in."

"So long as it's left," he agreed me. "Only ye used them jewels for weight. If somebody comes a-using 'round here and sees them, he might could wag them off. So I put a heap of dirt over them to hide them best I could. Nobody's a-going to scrabble there so long's I'm here to keep them from it."

He stroked his beard and grinned his teeth at me. "My time's been long hereabouts, and it'll be longer. Only after I'm gone can somebody stir him up in yonder. Then the world can suit itself about what to do about him."

He squinted his eyes to study me. "Now," he said, "ye'll likely be a-going yore way."

"Yes, sir, and I'm honest to thank you for a-letting me found out what I wanted to know."

I stowed my pack and strapped on the blanket roll.

"Last night," he said from across the fire, "I'd meant

to ask ye to stay on watch here and let me go."

"Ask me to stay?"

"That's what. And ye'd have stayed, John, if I'd asked ye the right way. Stayed and kept the watch here."

I couldn't tell myself for certain if that was so.

"I aimed for to ask ye," he said again, "but if I was to go, where'd I go? Hellfire, John, I been here so long it's home."

Ung twinkled an eye, like as if he heard and understood.

"I'll just stay a-setting here and warn other folks off from a-messing round where that door is," said

Maltby Sanger.

I slung my pack on my shoulders and picked up my guitar. "Sunrise now," I said.

"Sure enough, sunrise. Good-bye, John. I was proud to have ye here overnight."

We shook hands. He didn't seem so dwarfish right then. I found the path I'd come in by, that would take me back to people.

The sun was up. Daytime was come. Back on the way I went, I heard the long, soft hoot of an owl.

Can These Bones Live?

Manly Wade Wellman

I'd dropped my blanket roll and soogin sack and guitar and sat quiet on the granite lump as those eight men in rough country clothes fetched their burden along. It was a big chest of new-sawed planks, pale in the autumn afternoon, four men on each side.

As they tramped, they watched me. I got to my feet. I reckoned I was taller than any of them, probably wider through the shoulders. I wore old pants and boots and rumple hat, but I'd shaved that morning and hoped I looked respectable.

They came close to me amongst those tree-strung heights, and set the chest down with a bump. I figured it to be nine feet long and three feet wide and another three high. Rope loops were spiked to the sides for handles. The lid was fastened with a hook and staple, like what you use on a shed door. One of the eight stared me up and down. He was a chunky, grizzled man in a wide black hat, bib overalls and a denim jacket.

"Hidy," he drawled, and spit on the ground. "What you up to here?"

"I was headed for a place called Chaw Hollow," I replied him.

They all stared. "How you name yourself?" asked the one who had spoken.

"Just call me John."

"What do you follow, John?" asked another man.

I smiled my friendliest. "Well, mostly I study things. This morning, back yonder at that settlement, I heard tell about a big skeleton that had been turned up on a Chaw Hollow farm."

"You a government man?" the grizzled one inquired me.

"You mean, look for blockade stills?" I shook my head. "Not me. Call me a truth seeker, somebody who wonders himself about riddles in this life."

"A conjure man?" put in another of the bunch.

"Not me," I said again. "I've met up with that sort in my time, helped put two-three of them out of mischief. Call that part of what I follow."

"My name's Embro Hallcott," said the grizzled one. "If you came to poke round them bones, you're too late."

I waited for him to go on, and he went on:

"I dug them bones up on my place, a-scooping out for a fish pond. Some of us reckoned that, whoair he was, he should ought to be buried in holy ground, yonder at Stumber Creek church house. So we made him a box, and that's where we're a-going with him now."

"Let me give you a hand," I said, and slung my guitar and other things to my shoulders.

"He's a stranger man, Mr. Embro," said the scrawny man.

"Sure, but he looks powerful for strength." Hallcott raked me with his eye. "And you feel puny today, Oat. All right, John, grab a hold there where Oat's been a-heaving on this here thing."

I shoved my hand through the loop and we hoisted the coffin. It was right heavy, at that. I heard the others grunt as we took the trail through the ravine. On the trees, autumn leaves showed yellow, different reds and so on, like flowers. Half a mile, maybe, we bore our load along.

"Yonder we are, boys," said Halleott.

We came out into a hollow amongst shaggy heights that showed rocky knobs. One, I thought, looked like a head and shoulders. Another jabbed up like a finger, another curved like a hawk bill. The lower ground into which we tramped was tufted with trees, with a trickle of water through it. Beside this stood a grubby white house with a steeple. Stumber Creek Church, I figured it to be.

Hallcott, at a front loop, steered us into a weedy tract with gravestones here and yonder. "Set her down," he wheezed, and we did so. "Yonder comes Preacher Travis Melick. I done sent him the word to meet up with us here."

From the church house ambled a gaunt man in a jimswinger coat, a-carrying a book covered with black leather. Hallcott walked toward him. "Evening, Preacher," he said. "Proud to have you here."

"The grave's been made ready," said the other in a deep-down voice, and nodded to where a long, dark hole gaped amongst the weeds. Then he faced me. "Don't believe I know this gentleman."

"Allows he's named John," grated the scrawny one called Oat.

"I've heard of John," said Preacher Melick, and held out his skinny hand. "Heard of good things you've done, sir. Welcome amongst us."

Hallcott's crinkly face got easy. "If you say he's all right, Preacher, that makes him all right," he said. "I'll tell you true, he made better than a good hand, a-wagging this coffin the last part of the way."

We hiked the coffin to the side of the grave. On the bank of fresh dirt lay three shovels. Oat touched the hook on the lid.

"Ain't we supposed to view the body?" he wondered us. "Ain't that the true old way?"

"I've done seen the thing," snapped out Hallcott.

"Open it for a moment if you feel that's proper," said the preacher man.

Oat worked the hook out of the staple and hoisted the lid. The hinges creaked. "Wonder who he was," he said.

The bones inside were loose from one another and half-wrapped in a Turkey Track quilt, but I saw they were laid out in order. They were big, the way Hallcott had said, big enough for an almighty big bear, I had a notion that the arms were right long; maybe all the bones were long. Thick, too. The skull at the head of the coffin was like a big gourd, with caves of eyeholes and two rows of big, lean teeth. Hallcott banged the lid shut and hooked it again.

"That there's enough of a look to last youins all day and all night," he growled round at the others.

"Brothers," said Preacher Melick, a-opening his book, "we're here to bury the remains of a poor lost creature. We don't even know his name. Yet I've searched out what I hope is the right text for this burying."

He put his knobby finger to the page. "Book of Ezekiel," he said. "Thirty-seventh chapter, third verse. 'And he said unto me, Son of man, can these bones live? And I answered, O Lord God, thou knowest.'"

He closed his book. "The Lord God knoweth all things. We're taught that after death will come the life we deserve. Let us pray."

We bowed our heads down. Preacher Melick said, "In the midst of life we are in death," and so on. When he finished, I said, "Amen," and so did Hallcott and two-three others.

"Now lower the coffin," said Preacher Melick. We took hold and set it in the grave. It fitted right snug, its lid was just inches below surface. Preacher Melick sprinkled a handful of dirt. "Ashes to ashes, dust to dust," he repeated, and then we all said the Lord's Prayer together. Finally the preacher man smiled round at us. The service was over.

Three men shoveled in the earth. It took just minutes to fill the grave up.

Hallcott offered some crumpled money bills to Preacher Melick, who waved them away.

"You took it on yourselves to make the stranger a coffin and bring him here to rest," he said. "The least duty I can do is speak comfortable words without expectation of pay. John, to judge from the gear you brought, you're a-looking for lodging for the night. Will you be my guest?"

"Thanks, maybe later," I said. "I reckon I'll wait here a spell."

"If you come later on, it's half a mile up the trail the far side of the church."

He walked away with his book. The coffin-makers headed the other direction. The sun was a-dropping red to the edge of the western heights.

One of the shovels had been fetched to lean under a fair-sized walnut tree. I put down my stuff next to the roots and sat with my back against the trunk. On the silver strings of my guitar I made a few chords to whisper. The air got gloomy.

"It's kindly creepy a night," said a voice at my elbow.

That quick I was up on my feet. Embro Hallcott stood there, his crinkly face a-smiling.

"For a man your height, you move quick as a cat, John," he said. "I done heard you tell Preacher Melick you 'd stay round, so I decided myself to stay too, for whatever's up."

"What do you reckon's up?" I inquired him.

"If you don't know how to answer that, neither do I."

I sat down under the tree again, and Hallcott hunkered down beside me. He dragged out a twist of home-cured tobacco and bit off a chunk the size of half a dollar.

"I was right interested by Preacher Melick's text from Ezekiel," I said. "All that about could these bones live."

"Ezekiel," Hallcott repeated me, a-folding his ridgy hands on the knees of his overalls. "I done read in that, some time back. Strange doings in Ezekiel—the wheels in the wheels. Some folks reckon that means what they call UFOS."

"They were unknown and they flew, so they were UFOs all right," I nodded him. "And all those prophecies about nation after nation, and the brass man a-walking round to measure Jerusalem. And I've heard it explained that the four faces of the living creatures meant the Four Gospels. But the strangest of all the thing is the Valley of Dry Bones, where the bones join together and come to life."

A moon rose up and shone down on the burial ground. Hallcott moved to pull together some pieces of wood and light them with a match. I went to the stream and dipped water in my canteen cup and set it on a rock where it could heat. "I don't reckon you brought aught for supper," I said.

"I've done without no supper before this."

"I've got something left from my noon lunch." I pawed through my soogin and came up with two sandwiches wrapped in foil. "Home-cured ham on white bread."

Hallcott took one and thanked me kindly. As the water grew hot, I trickled in instant coffee and stirred it with a twig. We ate and passed the cup back and forth.

"I appreciate this, John," said Hallcott as he swallowed down his last bite. "How long you aim to stop here?"

"That depends."

"I reckon you'll agree with me, them bones we buried were right curious. Great big ones, and long arms, like on an ape."

"Or maybe on Sasquatch," I said. "Or Bigfoot."

"You believe in them tales."

"I always wonder myself if there's not truth in air tale. And as for bones—I recollect something the Indians called Kalu, off in a place named Hosea's Hollow. Bones a-rattling round, and sure death to a natural man."

"You believe that, too?"

"Believe it? I saw it happen one time. Only Kalu got somebody else, not me."

"Can these bones live?" Hallcott repeated the text. "Ain't there an old song about that, the bones a-coming together alive?"

"I've sung it in my time," I said, and picked up my guitar and struck out the tune. "It goes like this:

*Connect these bones, dry bones, dry bones,
Connect these bones, dry bones, dry bones,
Connect these bones, dry bones, dry bones,
Hear the word of the Lord."*

Hallcott sang the verse with me, his voice rough and husky:

*The toe bone's connected to the foot bone,
The foot bone's connected to the heel bone,
The heel bone's connected to the ankle bone,
Hear the word of the Lord.*

And we sang the rest of it together, up to the end:

*The shoulder bone's connected to the neck bone,
The neck bone's connected to the jaw bone,
The jaw bone's connected to the head bone,
Hear the word of the Lord.*

Connect these bones, dry bones, dry bones,

Connect these—

Hallcott broke off then, and so did I. "John," he said, "looky yonder where we buried him. What's that there white stuff?"

I saw it, too. In the shine of the moon above the grave stirred a pale something or other.

It made just a sneaky blur, taller than a tall man. It came toward us with a ripple in it.

"Mist," Hallcott stuttered. "Comes from that there fresh-dug-up dirt—"

"No," I said, "that's no mist."

I leant my guitar to the walnut tree and got up on my feet as whatever it was came nearer, started to make itself into a shape.

I heard Hallcott say a quick cuss word, and then there was a scrambly noise, like as if he was a-trying to make his way off from there on hands and knees. I faced toward whatair the shape was, because I reckoned I had to.

As it came slowly along, the moonlight hit it fair. It looked scaffolded some way. That was because it was just bones. I could see a sort of baskety bunch of ribs, and big, stout arm bones with almighty huge hands a-hanging down below crooked knees. The shallowy skull had deep, dark eyeholes. The long-toothed jaws sank itself down and then snapped shut again. The skull turned on its neck bone and gave me a long, long look.

Then it reached out its right hand with fingerbones the size of table knives, and laid hold on a young tree and yanked it out by the roots, without air much a-trying. It stood and tore off branches, easy as you'd peel the shucks from an ear of corn. It made itself a club thattaway, and hiked it over the low skull and moved to close in on me again.

No point in it for me to try to run away from such a thing, and well I knew it. Turn and run from a hant or a devil, it runs after you. If it catches you, then what? I quick grabbed up the shovel where it leant on the walnut trunk. Compared to that club the bony thing had, it was like a ball bat against a wagon tongue.

"What you want of me?" I said, but I felt I didn't have to be told that.

Bones like those, long worn bare and scattered apart and now joined and made to live by words of power, they'd wake up hungry. They'd be starved for food. If they got food, maybe they'd put flesh back on themselves, be themselves as they'd been once before. What food was closer to hand than I was?

Man-eaters—such things were told of by old Indians, wise men who'd sworn to them. The wendigo, up in Northern parts. The anisgina, recollected in Cherokee tales to make you shiver. Supposed to be all died out and gone these days, but when bones rise up . . .

The bones came a-slaunching close. I heard them click.

I hiked up the shovel with both my hands, and held the blade edge forward like an axe. I'd chop with that. The bones stood a second, the whole skeleton of them, tall over me. In the glow of the moon those

bones looked like frosty silver. My head wouldn't have come put to those big cliffs of shoulders. The jaws opened and shut. They made a snapping sound.

Because they wanted to bite a chunk out of me. Those teeth in the jaws, they were as long and sharp as knives. They could break a man's arm off if they jammed into it.

But I didn't run. To run nair had helped me much in such a case. I'd stand my ground, fight. If I lost the fight, maybe Hallcott could get away and tell the tale. I bent my knees and made my legs springly, I hoped I could move faster and surer than those big, lumbering bones.

Preacher Melick had said the Bible words to make them live, had said them without a-thinking. And that song, I'd have been better off if I'd nair sung it. I watched the thick, bony arms rise up and fetch the club down to bust my head.

That quick, I sidestepped and danced clear, and down came the big hunk of tree, so hard on the ground it boomed there like a slamming door. I made a swing with my own shovel, but the club was up again and in the way. My blade bounced off. Again the club hiked up over me, it made a dark blotch against the moon. I set myself to dodge again.

Then it was that Embro Hallcott, come back up just behind me, started in to sing in his husky voice:

*The toe bone's connected from the foot bone,
The foot bone's connected from the heel bone . . .*

And quick on from there, about the shin and thigh and hip bones, about the back bone and the shoulder bone. I stood with my shovel held up in both hands, and watched the thing come apart before my eyes.

It had dropped that club that would have driven me into the ground like a nail. It swayed in broken-up moonlight that shone through tree branches. It fell to pieces while I watched.

I looked at the bones, down and scattered out now. The skull stared up at me, and one more time it gave a hungry snap of those jaws. I heard:

*The neck bone's connected from the jaw bone,
The jaw bone's connected from the head bone,
Hear the word of the Lord.*

The jaw bone snapped no more. It rolled free from the skull.

Hallcott was up beside me. I could feel him shake all over.

"It worked," he said, in the tiredest voice you could call for.

"That song built him up," I said back. "And that song, sung different, took him back down again. Though it appears to me the word should be 'disconnected'."

"Sure enough?" he wondered me. "I don't know that word, that disconnected. But I thought on an old tale, how a man read in a magic book and devilish things came all round him, so he read the book backward and made them go away."

His eyes bugged as he looked at a big thigh bone, dropped clear of its kneecap and shin. "What if it hadn't worked, John?"

"Point is, it did work and thank the good Lord for that," I told him. "Now, how you say for us to put him back in his coffin again, and not sing air note to him this time?"

Hallcott didn't relish to touch the bones, and, gentlemen, neither did I. I scooped them in the shovel, all the way along to where the grave was open and the coffin lid flung back. In I shoved them, one by one, in a heap on top of the Turkey Track quilt. I sought out air single bone, even the little separate toe bones that come in the song, a-picking them up with the shovel blade. Somewhere I've heard tell there are two hundred and eight bones in a skeleton. Finally I got all of them. I swung the lid down, and Hallcott fastened the hook into the staple. Then we stood and harked. There was just a breath of sweet, cool breeze in some bushes. Nair other sound that we made out.

Hallcott picked up another of the shovels, and quick we filled that grave in again. We patted it down smooth on top. Again we harked. Nair sound from where we'd buried the bones a second time.

"I reckon he's at rest now," I felt like a-saying. "Leastways, all disconnected again thattaway, he can't get up unless some other gone gump comes here and sings that song to him again."

"For hell's sake, whatever was he?" Hallcott asked, of the whole starry night sky.

"Maybe not even science folks could answer that," I said. "I'd reckon he was of a devil-people long gone from this country—a people that wasn't man nor either beast; a kind of people that pure down had to go, but gets recollected in ugly old tales of man-eating things. That's all I can think to say to it."

I flung down the shovel and went back to where my stuff lay against the walnut tree. I slung my blanket roll and soogin on my back, and took my guitar up under my arm. Right that moment, I sure enough didn't have a wish to play it.

"John," said Hallcott. "Where you reckon to head now?"

"Preacher Melick kindly invited me to his house. I have it in mind to go there."

"Me, too, if he's got room for me," said Hallcott. "Money wouldn't buy me to go nowheres alone in this night. No sir, nor for many a night to come."

Nobody Ever Goes There

Manly Wade Wellman

That was what Mark Banion's grandparents told him when he was a five-year-old with tousled black hair, looking from the porch and out across Catch River to a big dark building and some small dark ones clumped against the soaring face of Music Mountain, rank with its gloomy huddles of trees.

His grandparents towered high to tell him, the way grownups do when you're little, and they said, "Nobody ever goes there," without explaining, the way grownups do when you're little. Mark was a good, obedient boy. He didn't press the matter. And he sure enough didn't go over.

The town had been named Trimble for somebody who, a hundred and forty-odd years ago, had a stock stand there, entertainment for man and beast. In those old days, stagecoaches and trading wagons rolled along the road chopped through the mountains, and sometimes came great herds of cattle and horses and hogs. Later there had been the railroad that carried hardly anything anymore. Trucks rumbled along Main Street and on, northwest to Tennessee or southeast to Asheville. Trimble was no great size for a town. Maybe that was why it stayed interesting to look at. It had stores on Main Street, and Mark's grandfather's chair factory, the town hall and the Weekly Record. On side streets stood the bank, the high school where students came by bus from all corners of the rocky county, and three churches. All those things were on this side of Catch River.

But over yonder where nobody went, loomed the empty-windowed old textile mill, like the picture of a ruined castle in an outlawed romantic novel. Once it had spun its acres of cloth. People working there had lived in the little houses you could barely see from this side. Those houses had a dusky, secret look, bunched against Music Mountain. When Mark asked why it was called Music Mountain, his grandparents said, "We never heard tell why." So once, in his bed at night, Mark thought he heard soft music from across Catch River to his window. When he mentioned that next day, they laughed and said he was making it up.

He stopped talking about that other side of the river, but he kept his curiosity as he grew older. He found out a few things from listening to talk when he played in town. He found out that a police car did cruise over there two or three times a week on the rattly old bridge that nobody else used, and that the cruise was made only by daylight. When he was in high school, tall and tanned and a hot-rock tight end on the football team, he and two classmates started to amble across one Saturday. They were nearly halfway to the other side when a policeman came puffing after them and scolded them back. That night, Mark's grandparents told him never to let them hear of doing such a fool thing again. He asked why it was foolish, and his grandmother said, "Nobody ever goes there. Ever." And shut up her mouth with a snap.

One who did tell Mark something about it was Mr. Clover Shelton, the oldest man in Trimble, who whittled birds and bear cubs and rabbits in his little shop behind the Worley Cafe. Once a month he sold a crate of such whittlings to a man who carried them to a tourist bazaar off in another county. Mr. Glover was lamed so that he had an elbow in one knee, like a cricket. He wore checked shirts and bib overalls and a pointed beard as white as dandelion fluff. And he had memories.

"Something other happened there round about seventy-five years back," he said. "I was another sight younger than you then. There was the textile mill, and thirty-forty folks a-living in them company houses and a-working two shifts. Then one day, they was all of a sudden all gone."

"Gone where?" Mark asked him. "Don't rightly know how to answer that. Just gone. Derwood Neidger the manager, and Sam Brood the foreman, and the whole crew on shift-gone." Mr. Clover whittled at the bluejay he was making. "One night just round sundown, the whistle it blowed and blowed, and folks over here got curiosed up and next day some of 'em headed over across the bridge. And nair soul at the mill, nor neither yet in the houses. The wives and children done gone, too. Everybody."

"Are you putting me on, Mr. Glover?"

"You done asked me, boy, and I done told you the thing I recollect about it."

"They just packed up and left?"

"They left, but they sure God nair packed up. The looms was still a-running. Derwood Neidger's fifty-dollar hat was on the hook, his cigar burnt out in a tray on his desk. Even supper a-standing on the stoves, two-three places. But nair a soul to be seen anywheres."

Mark looked to see if a grin was caught in the white beard, but Mr. Glover was as solemn as a preacher. "Where did they go?" Mark asked.

"I just wish you'd tell me. There was a search made, inquiries here and yonder, but none of them folks air showed theirself again."

"And now," said Mark, "nobody ever goes there."

"Well now, a couple-three has gone, one time another . . . from here, and a hunter or so a-cooning over Music Mountain from the far side. But none air come back no more. Only them policemen that drives over quick and comes back quick—always by daylight, always three in the car, with pistols and sawed-off shot-guns. Boy," said Mr. Glover, "folks just stays off from that there place, like a-staying off from a rocky patch full of snakes, a wet bottom full of chills and fever."

"And now it's a habit," said Mark. "Staying out."

"Likewise a habit not to go a-talking about it none. Don't you go a-naming it to nobody I told you this much."

Mark played good enough football to get a grant in aid at a lowland college, about enough help to make the difference between going and not going. Summers, he mostly worked hard to keep in condition, in construction and at road mending. By the time he graduated, his grandparents had sold the chair factory and had retired to Florida. Mark came back to Trimble, where they hired him to coach football and baseball and teach physical education at his old high school.

And still nobody ever went across Catch River. He felt the old interest, but he quickly became more interested in Ruth Covell, the history teacher.

She was small and slim, and her hair was blonde with a spice of red to it. She wore it more or less the length Mark wore his own black mane. She came up to about his coat lapel. Her face was round and sweet. She gave him a date, but wanted to sit and talk on the porch of the teacherage instead of driving to an outdoor movie.

It was a balmy October night. She fetched them out two glasses of iced tea, flavored with lemon juice and ginger. They sat on bark-bottomed chairs, and Ruth said it was good to be in Trimble.

"I've liked it here from the first," she said, "I've thought I might write a history of this town."

"A history of Trimble?" Mark repeated, smiling. "Who'd read that?"

"You might, when I finish it. This place has stories worth putting on record. I've been to the town hall and the churches. I've found out lots of interesting things, but one thing avoids me."

"What's that, Ruth?" Mark asked, sipping.

"Why nobody ever goes across the river, and why everybody changes the subject when I bring it up."

From where they sat they could see a spattery shimmer of moonlight on the water, but Music Mountain beyond was as black as soot.

"Ruth," Mark said, "you're up against a story that just never is told in Trimble."

"But why not?" Her face hung silvery in the moonglow.

"I don't know. I never found out, and I was born here. Old Mr. Clover Shelton told me a few things, but he's dead now." He related the old man's story. "I'm unable to tell you why things are that way about the business," he wound up. "It's just not discussed, sort of the way sex didn't used to be discussed in polite society. I suspect that most people have more or less forgotten about it, pushed it to the back of their minds."

"But the police go over," she reminded him. "The chief said it was just a routine check, a tour in a deserted area. Then he changed the subject, too."

"If I were you, I'd not push anyone too hard about all this," said Mark. "It's a sort of rule of life here, staying on this side of the river. As an athletic coach, I abide by rules."

"As a historian, I look for the truth," she said back, "and I don't like to have the truth denied me."

He changed the subject. They talked cheerfully of other things. When he left that night, she let him kiss her and said he could come back and see her again.

Next Saturday evening, Ruth finished grading a sheaf of papers and just before sundown she walked out in the town with Mark. She wore snug jeans and a short, dark jacket. They had a soda at Doc Roberts's drug store and strolled on along Main Street. Mark told her about his boyhood in Trimble, pointed out the massive old town hall (twice burned down, once by accident, and rebuilt both times inside its solid brick walls), and led her behind Worley's Cafe to show her where Glover Shelton once had worked. The door of the little old shop was open. A light gleamed through it, and a voice from inside said, "Hidy."

A man sat at the ancient work bench, dressed in a blue hickory shirt and khaki pants and plow shoes, carefully shaping a slip of wood with a bright, sharp knife. He was lean, and as tall as Mark, say six feet. His long, thoughtful face was neither young nor old. In his dark hair showed silver dabs at the temples and in a brushed-back lock on top.

"Glover Shelton and I were choice friends, years back," he said. "I knew the special kinds of wood he hunted out and used here, and his nephew loaned me a key so I could come work me out a new bridge for my old guitar."

It was an old guitar indeed, seasoned as dark brown as a nut. The man set the new bridge in place, with a dab of some adhesive compound. "That'll dry right while we're a-studying it," he said. Then he laid the strings across, threaded them through the pegs, and tightened them with judicious fingers. He struck a chord, adjusted the pegs, struck and struck again. "Sounds passable," he decided.

"Those strings shine like silver," offered Ruth.

"It just so happens that silver's what they are," was the reply, with a quiet smile. "Silver's what the oldest old-timers used. Might could be I'm the last that uses it."

He achieved a chord to suit him. Tunefully, richly he sang:

*She came down the stair,
Combing back her yellow hair,
And her cheek was as red as the rose . . .*

Mark had made up his mind to something.

"Sir," he said, "I knew Mr. Glover Shelton when I was a boy. This young lady wishes he had lived for her to talk to. Because he was the only man I ever heard speak of the far side of Catch River yonder, the Music Mountain side."

"I know a tad of something about that," said the guitar-picker, while the strings whispered under his long, skilled fingers. "An old Indian medicine man, name of Reuben Manco—he mentioned about it to me one time."

"Nobody here in Trimble talks about it," said Mark. "They just stay away from over there. Nobody ever goes there."

"I reckon not, son. The way Reuben Manco had it, the old Indians more or less left the place alone, too. What was there didn't relish to be pestered."

"Some other kind of men than Indians?" suggested Ruth.

"Better just only call them things. The way the old story comes down, they didn't truly look like aught a man could tell of at first. And they more or less learnt from a-studying men—Indians—how to get a little bitty bit like men, too."

"They sound weird," said Mark, interested.

"I reckon that's a good word for them. The Indians were scared of how they made themselves to look. So sometimes the Indians got up on the top of the mountain yonder and sang to the things, to make sure they wouldn't try to come out and make trouble." The long, thoughtful face brooded above the guitar's

soft melody. "I reckon that's how it come to be named Music Mountain. The Indians would sing those things back off and into their place, time after time. I reckon all the way up to when the white men came in."

"Came in and took the Indians' land," said Mark. "That happened here."

"Shoo, it happened all over America—the taking of the land. All right, I've given you what Reuben Manco gave me. Music Mountain for the music the Indians used against those things."

"Why won't anybody in town tell about this?" Ruth asked.

"I don't reckon folks in town much heard of it. Especially when they might not want to hear tell of it."

"I'm glad to hear it," declared Ruth. "I'm someone who wants to know things."

"There's always a right much to get to know, ma'am," was the polite rejoinder.

Mark sat down on the work bench. "Music," he repeated. "Could the Indians control something like that—something frightening, you said—with music?"

"Well, son, with Indians the right song can make the rain to fall. An Indian hunter sings to bring him luck before he goes after game. Medicine men sing to cure a sick man or a hurt man. One time another, music's been known to do the like of such things."

Mark asked for the story of the mill that had been built under Music Mountain. It seemed that Derwood Neidger had interested some Northern financiers and had built his mill, with Trimble's townspeople shaking their heads about it. But there was good pay, and families came from other places to live in the houses built for them and to spin the cloth. Until the night they all vanished.

"What if there had been music at the mill?" Mark wondered. "In the houses?"

"Doesn't seem like as if there was much of that, so we can't rightly tell. And it's too late to figure on it now."

The sun sank over the western mountains. Dusk slid swiftly down into the town. Mark listened as his companion struck the silver strings and sang again:

*She came down the stair,
Combing back her yellow hair . . .*

He muted the melody with his palm. "Sounds like that beauty-looking young girl that came here with you. Where's she gone off to?"

Mark jumped up from where he sat. Ruth was nowhere in sight. He hurried out of the shop, around the cafe and out into the street.

"Ruth, wait—"

Far along the sidewalk, in the light of a shop window, he saw her as she turned off and out of view, where the old alley led to where the bridge was.

"Wait!" he yelled after her, and started to run.

It was a long sprint to the alley. One or two loungers gazed at Mark as he raced past. He found the alley, headed into it, stumbled in its darkness and went to one knee. He felt his trousers rip where they struck the jagged old cobbles. Up again, he hurried to the bridge.

It was already too dim to see clearly, but Ruth must be there. She must be moving along, almost as fast as he. "You damned fool," he wheezed into the darkening air as he ran. "You damned little fool, why did you do this?" And in his heart her voice seemed to answer him, *I'm someone who wants to know things*.

The old, old boards of the bridge rattled under his feet. He heard the soft, purling rush of Catch River. There she was now, at the far end, a darker point in the night that came down on them. "Ruth," he tried to call her once more, but his breath wasn't enough to carry it. He ran on after her.

Now he had come out on the other bank, where nobody ever went. He turned to his left. A road of sorts had been there once, it seemed. Its blotchy stones were rank between with grass. His shoe skidded on what must have been slippery moss and he nearly went down again. To his right climbed the steep face of Music Mountain, huddled with watching trees as black as ink. On ahead of him, small, dark houses clung together at the roadside. Farther beyond them rose the sooty pile of the old mill. He stood for a moment and wheezed to get his breath. Something came toward him. He quivered as he faced it.

"I knew you'd come too, Mark," said Ruth's merry voice.

At that moment, the moon had scrambled clear of the mountain and flung pale light around them. He saw that Ruth smiled.

"Why ever did you—" he began to say.

"I told you, Mark, I want to find things out. Nobody else here wants to. Dares to."

"You come right back to town with me," he commanded.

She laughed musically.

On into the sky swam the round, pallid moon, among a bright sprinkling of stars. Its light picked out the mill more clearly. It struck a twinkle from the glass of a window; or could there be a stealthy light inside? Ruth laughed again.

"But you came across, at least," she said, as though happy about it.

The glow of the moon beat upon her, making her hair pale. And something else moved on the road to the mill.

He hurried toward Ruth as the something drifted from between those dubious houses, a murky series of puffs, like foul smoke. He thought, for a moment hoped, that it might be fog; but it gathered into shapes as it emerged, shadowy, knobby shapes. Headlike lumps seemed to rise, narrow at the top, with, Mark

thought, great loose mouths. Wisps stirred like groping arms.

"Let's get out of here," he said to Ruth, and tried to catch her by the hand.

But then she, too, saw those half-shaped things that now stole into groups and advanced. She screamed once, like an animal caught in a trap, and she lost her head and ran from them. She ran toward the mill in the moonlight that flooded the old paving stones.

Mark rushed after her because he must, because she had to be caught and hustled back toward the bridge. As the two of them fled, the creatures from among the houses slunk, stole after them, made a line across the road, cut off escape in that direction.

Ruth ran fast in her unreasoning terror, toward where a great squat doorway gaped in the old mill. But then she stopped, so suddenly that Mark nearly blundered against her as he hurried from behind.

"More—" she whimpered. "More of them—"

And more Of them crept out through that door. Many more of them, crowding together into a grotesque phalanx. Ruth pressed close against Mark. She trembled, sagged, her pert daring was gone from her. He gathered his football muscles for a fight, whatever fight he could put up. They came closing in around him and Ruth, those shapes that were only half-shapes. They churned wispily as they formed themselves into a ring.

He made out squat bodies, knobs of craniums, the green gleam of eyes, not all of the eyes set two and two. The Indians, those old Indians, had been right to fear presences like these. Everything drew near. Above the encircling, approaching horde, Mark saw things that

fluttered in the air. Bats? But bats are never that big. He heard a soft mutter of sound, as of panting breath.

Even if Ruth hadn't been there to hold on her feet, Mark could never have run now. The way was out off. It would have to be a battle. What kind of battle?

Just then, abrupt music rang out in the shining night. And that was a brave music, a flooding burst of melody, like harps in the hands of minstrels. A powerful, tuneful voice sang words to it:

*The cross in my right hand,
That I may travel open land,
That I may be charmed and blessed,
And safe from any man or beast . . .*

The pressing throng ceased to press around Mark and Ruth. It ebbed away, like dark water flowing back from an island.

The song changed, the guitar and the voice changed:

*Lights in the valley outshine the sun,
Lights in the valley outshine the sun
Lights in the valley outshine the sun—
Look away beyond the blue.*

Those creatures, if they could be called creatures, fell back. They fell back, as though blown by the wind. The singing voice put in words of its own, put in a message, a guidance:

*Head for the bridge and I'll follow you,
Head for the bridge and I'll follow you,
Head for the bridge and I'll follow you—
Look away beyond the blue.*

Ruth would have run again. Mark held her tightly by the arm, kept her to a walk. Running just now might start something else running. They stumbled back along the rough stones with the grass between the edges. The moonlight blazed upon them. Behind them, like a prayer, another verse of the song:

*Do, Lord, oh do, Lord, oh do remember me,
Do, Lord, oh do, Lord, oh do remember me,
Do, Lord, oh do, Lord, oh do remember me—
Look away beyond the blue.*

But this time, a confident happiness in that appeal. Mark felt like joining in and singing the song himself, but he kept silent and urged Ruth along by her arm. He thought, though he could not be sure, that soft radiances blinked on and off in the shantylike old houses strung along the road. He did not stop to look more closely. He peered ahead for the bridge, and then the bridge was there and thankfully they were upon it, their feet drumming the planks.

Still he panted for breath, as they reached the other side. He held Ruth to him, glad that he could hold her, glad for her that he was there to hold her. He looked across. There on the bridge came something dark. It was the guitar-picker, moving at a slower pace than Mark and Ruth had moved. He sang, softly now, softly. Mark could not make out the song. He came and joined them at last. He stood tall and lean with his hair rumped, holding his guitar across himself like a rifle at the port.

"You all can be easy now," he said gently. "Looky yonder, they can't come over this far."

Over there, all the way over there at the far bridge head, a dark cluster of forms showed under the moon, standing close together and not coming.

"The fact about it is," said the guitar-picker, "they don't seem to be up to making their way across a run

of water."

Mark was able to speak. "Like *Dracula* ," he said numbly. "Like the witches in *Tam O'Shanter* ."

"Sure enough, like them. Now, folks," and the voice was gentler than ever, "you all see they'd best be left alone on their side yonder, the way folks have mostly left them alone, all the way back to when the whole crew of the mill went off to nowhere. Old ways can be best."

"Mark, I was such a fool," Ruth mumbled against Mark's shirt.

"I told you that, dear," he said to her.

"Did you call me dear?"

"Yes."

"It makes me feel right good to hear talk like that with nice young folks like you two," said the guitar-picker.

Mark looked up above Ruth's trembling golden head. "You were able to defeat them," he said. "You knew music would hold them back."

"No, I nair rightly knew that." The big hand swept a melody from the silver string. "I hoped it, was all, and the hope wasn't vain."

Mark held out a shaking hand. "We'll never be able to thank you, Mr.—I don't even know your name."

"My name's John."

"John what?" Mark asked.

"Just call me John."

Where Did She Wander?

Manly Wade Wellman

That gravelly old road ran betwixt high rocks and twiny-branched trees. I tramped with my pack and silver-strung guitar past a big old dornick rock, Wide as a bureau, with words chopped in with a chisel:

THIS GRAVE DUG FOR
BECKY TIL HOPPARD
HUNG BY THE TRUDO FOLKS
AUG THE 12 18 & 49
WE WILL REMEMBER YOU

And flowers piled round. Blue chicory and mountain mint and turtlehead, fresh as that morning. I wondered about them and walked on, three-four miles to the old county seat named Trudo, where I'd be picking and singing at their festival that night.

The town square had three-four stores and some cabin-built houses, a six-room auto court, a jail and courthouse and all like that. At the auto court stood Luns Lamar, the banjo man who was running the festival, in white shirt and string tie. His bristly hair was still soot-black, and he wore no glasses. Didn't need them, for all his long years.

"I knew you far down the street, John," he hailed me. "Long, tall, with the wide hat and jeans, and your guitar. All that come tonight will have heard tell of you. And they'll want you to sing songs they recollect—Vandy, Vandy, 'Dream True,' those ones."

"Sure enough, Mr. Luns," I said. "Look, what do you know about Becky Til Hoppard's grave back yonder?"

He squinted, slanty-eyed. "Come into this room I took for us, and I'll tell you what I know of the tale."

Inside, he fetched out a fruit jar of blockade whiskey and we each of us had a whet. "Surprised you don't know about her," said Mr. Luns. "She was the second woman to get hung in this state, and it wasn't the true law did it. It was folks thought life in prison wasn't the right call on her. They strung her up in the square yonder, where we'll sing tonight."

We sipped and he talked. Becky Til Hoppard was a beauty of a girl with strange, dark ways. Junius Worral went up to her cabin to court her and didn't come back, and the law found his teeth and belt buckle in her fireplace ashes; and when the judge said just prison for life, a bunch of the folks busted into the jail and took her out and strung her to a white oak tree. When she started to say something, her daddy was there and he hollered. 'Die with your secret, Becky!' and she hushed and died with it, whatever it was."

"How came her to be buried right yonder?" I asked him.

"That Hoppard set was strange-wayed," said Mr. Luns. Her father and mother and brothers put her there. They had dug the hole during the trial and set up the rock and cut the words into it, then set out for other places. Isaiah Hoppard, the father, died when he was cutting a tree and it fell onto him. The mother was bit by a mountain rattler and died screaming. Her brother, Harrison, went to Kentucky and got killed stealing hogs. Otway, the youngest brother, fell at Chancellorsville in the Civil War."

"Then the family was wiped out."

"No," and he shook his head again. "Otway had married and had children, who grew up and had children, too. I reckon Hoppards live hereabouts in this day and time. Have you heard the Becky Til Hoppard song?"

"No, but I'd sure enough like to."

He sang some verses, and I picked along on my silver strings and sang along with him. It was a lonesome tune, sounded like old-country bagpipes.

"I doubt if many folks know that song today," he said at last. "It's reckoned to be unlucky. Let's go eat some supper and then start the show."

They'd set up bleachers in the courthouse square for maybe a couple thousand. Mr. Luns announced act after act. O Bray Ramsey was there with near about the best banjo-picking in the known world, and Tom Hunter with near about the best country fiddling. The audience clapped after the different numbers, especially for a dance team that seemed to have wings on their shoes. Likewise for a gold-haired girl named Rilla something, who picked pretty on a zither, something you don't often hear in these mountains.

When it came my turn, I did the songs Mr. Luns had named, and the people clapped so loud for more that I decided to try the Becky Til Hoppard song. So I struck a chord and began:

*Becky Til Hoppard, as sweet as a dove,
Where did she wander, and who did she love?*

Right off, the crowd went still as death, I sang:

*Becky Til Hoppard, and where can she be?
Rope round her neck, swung up high on the tree.*

And that deathly silence continued as I did the rest of it:

*On Monday she was charged, on Tuesday she was tried,
By the laws of her country she had to abide.
If I knew where she lay, to her side I would go.
Round sweet Becky's grave pretty flowers I would strow . . .*

When I was done, not a clap, not a voice. I went off the little stage, wondering to myself about it. After the show, Rilla, the zither girl, came to my room to talk.

"Folks here think it's unlucky to sing that Becky Hoppard song, John," she said. "Even to hark at it."

"I seem to have done wrong," I said. "I didn't know."

"Well, those Hoppards are a right odd lot. Barely come into town except to buy supplies. And they take pay for curing sickness and making spells to win court cases. They're strong on that kind of thing."

"Who made the song?" I asked.

"They say it was sung back yonder by some man who was crazy for Becky Til Hoppard, and she never even looked his way. None of the Hoppard blood likes it, nor either the Worral blood. I know, because I'm Worral blood myself."

"Can you tell me the tale?" I inquired. "Have some of this blockade. Mr. Luns left it in here, and it's good."

"I do thank you." She took a ladylike sip. "All I know is what my oldest folks told me. Becky Hoppard was a witch-girl, the pure quill of the article. Did all sorts of spells. Junius Worral reckoned to win her with a love charm."

"What love charm?" I asked, because such things interest me.

"I've heard tell she let him have her handkerchief, and he did something with it. Went to the Hoppard cabin, and that's the last was seen of him alive. Or dead, either—he was all burnt up except his buckle and teeth."

"The song's about flowers at her grave," I said. "I saw some there."

"Folks do that, to turn bad luck away."

I tweaked my silver guitar strings. "Where's the Hoppard place?"

"Up hill, right near the grave. A broken-off locust tree there points to the path. I hope I've told you things that'll keep you from going there."

"You've told me things that make me to want to go."

"Don't, John," she begged to me. "Recollect what happened to Junius Worral."

"I'll recollect," I said, "but I'll go." And we said goodnight.

I woke right soon in the morning and went to the dining room to eat me a good breakfast with Mr. Luns. Then I bade him good day and set out of Trudo the same way I'd come in, on the gravelly road.

Rilla had said danger was at the Hoppard place, but my guitar's silver strings had been a help against evil time and time again. Likewise in my pocket was a buckeye, given me one time by an Ozark fellow, and that's supposed to guard you, too—not just against rheumatics but all kinds of dangers. No man's ever found dead with a buckeye in his pocket, folks allow. So I was glad I had it as I tramped along with my pack and my guitar.

As I got near to the grave rock, I picked me some mountain laurel flowers. As I put those round the stone, I noticed more flowers there, besides the ones I'd seen the day before. Beyond was the broken-off locust, and a way uphill above it.

That path went through brush, so steep I had to lean forward to climb it. Trees crowded close at the sides. They near about leaned on me, and their leaves bunched into unchancey green faces. I heard a rain crow make its rattly call, and I spied out its white vest and blotchy tail. It was supposed to warn of a storm, but the patch of sky above was clear; maybe the rain crow warned of something else than rain. I kept on, climbed a good quarter mile to where there was a cabin amongst hemlocks.

That cabin was of old, old logs chinked with clay. It must have been built before the last four wars. The roof's split shakes were cracked and curly. A lean-to was tacked on at the left. There were two smudgy windows and a cleated plank door, and on the door-log sat a man, watching me as I climbed into his sight.

He was dressed sharp, better than me in my jeans and old hat. Good-fitting pants as brown as coffee and a bright-flowered shirt. He was soft-pudgy, and I'd reckon more or less fifty years old. His cheeks bunched out. His bald brow was low and narrow. He had a shallow chin and green eyes like grape pulps. His face had the look of a mean snake.

"We been a-waiting for you," he said when I got there.

"How come you to know I'd come, Mr. Hoppard?" I asked him.

He did a creaky laugh. "You know my name, and I don't know yours yet," he said, "but we been a-waiting on you. We know when they come." He grinned, with mossy-green teeth. "What name might I call you?"

"John."

We were being watched. Two heads at one of the windows. A toss-haired woman, a skinny man. When I looked at them they drifted back, then drifted up again.

"You'll be the John we hear tell about," said Hoppard. "A-sticking your nose in here to find out a tale."

"The tale of Becky Til Hoppard," I agreed.

"Poor Becky. They hung her up and cut her down."

"And buried her below here," I added on.

"No, not exactly," he said. "That stone down yonder just satisfies folks away from the truth. They don't ask questions. But you do—ask questions about my great-great aunt Becky." He turned his ugly head to the house. "All right, youins," he bawled, "come out there and meet John."

Those two came. The young man was tall, near about my height, but so ganted he looked ready to bust in two. He wore good pants and shirt, but rumpled and grubby. His eyes were green, too. The girl's frock looked to be made of flowered curtain cloth, and it was down off one rounded bare shoulder. Her tousled hair was as red as if it had been dipped in a mountain sunset. And she looked on me with shiny green eyes like Hoppard's, like the young man's.

"These is my son and daughter," said Hoppard, a-smirking. "I fetched them up after my fashion, taught them what counts and how to tell it from what doesn't count. She's Tullai. I call the boy Herod."

"Hidy," I told the two of them.

Hoppard got up from the door-log, on crooked legs like a toad's. "Come on in the house," he said, and we went in, all four.

The front room was big, with a puncheon floor worn down with God alone knows how many years, and hooked rag rugs on it. The furniture was home made. I saw a long sofa woven of juniper branches at back and seat, and two stools and an arm chair made of tree chunks, and a table of old planks and trestles. At the back, a sort of statue stood on a little home-made stand. It looked to be chipped from dark rock, maybe three feet high, and it had a grinning head with horns on it. Its eyes were shiny green stones, a kind I didn't know, but the color of Hoppard's eyes.

"Is that a god?" I inquired of Hoppard.

"Yes, and it's been worshipped here for I can't tell how many generations," he said. "Walk all round the room and them eyes keep a-looking on you. Try it."

I tried it. Sure enough, the eyes followed me into every corner. But I'd seen the same thing to happen with a picture of George Washington in a museum, and a photograph of a woman called Mona Lisa. "You all pray to that idol?" I asked.

"We do, and he answers our prayers," said the girl Tullai, soft-voiced. "He sent you to us."

"Pa," said the boy Herod, "you should ought to tell John about us."

"Sit down," said Hoppard, and we sat here and there while he told the tale. Tullai sat next to me.

Hoppard allowed that his folks had always been conjure folks. Way back yonder, Becky Til Hoppard had been foremost at it. Some things she'd done was good—cures for sick folks, spells to make rain fall, all like that. But about Junius Worrall, he said, what I'd heard wasn't rightly so.

"They told you he'd had a charm to win Becky?" said Hoppard. "It was more the other way round. She charmed him to fetch him here."

"What for?" I asked.

"He was needed here," said, Hoppard; and Tullai repeated, "Needed here," and her green eyes looked at me sidelong, the way a kitten looks at a bowl of milk.

"To help Becky to a long life," Hoppard went on. "The hanging nair truly killed her, so her folks just set her head back on its neckbone and fetched her home." He nodded to a door that led to the lean-to shed. "She's in yonder now."

"You a-telling me she's alive?" I asked him.

"Her folks did things that fetched her back. In yonder she waits, for you to talk to her."

"John's got him a guitar," spoke up Tullai all of a sudden, her green eyes still cut at me. "Can't we maybe

hear him pick it?"

"Sure enough, if you all want to hark at me," I said.

I did some tuning, then I sang something I'd been thinking up:

*Long is the road on which I fare,
Over the world afar,
The mountains here and the valleys there,
Me and this old guitar*

*The places I've been were places, yes,
The things that I've seen were things,
With this old guitar my soul to bless
By the sound of its silver strings.*

"Hey, you're good!" squeaked out Tullai, and clapped her hands. "Go on, sing the rest."

"That's all the song so far," I said. "Maybe more later."

"But meanwhile," said Hoppard, "Becky's a-waiting on you in yonder." He looked me up and down. "Unless you're scared to go see."

"I got over being scared some while back," I said, and hoped that was more or less a fact. "I came here to find out about her."

Herod stomped over to the inside door and opened it, and I picked up my pack and guitar and went over and into the lean-to room. The door shut behind me. I heard a click, and knew I was locked in.

The room was a big one. It was walled, front and sides, with up-and-down split slabs, with bark and knots, and as old as the day Hell was laid out. The rear wall was a rock face, gray and smooth, with a fireplace cut in it and a blaze on the hearth, with wood stacked to the side. Next to the hearth, a dark-aged wooden armchair, with above it the biggest pair of deer horns I'd ever seen, and in the chair somebody watching me.

A woman, I saw right off, tucked from chin to toes in a robe as red as blood, and round her neck a blue scarf, tight as a bandage. Her face was soft-pale, her slanty Hoppard green eyes under brows as thin as pencil marks. Her lips were redder than her red robe. They smiled, with white teeth.

"So you're John," and her voice was like flowing water. "Come round where I can look on you."

"How do you know my name?"

"Say a little bird told me," she mocked me with her smile. "A bird with teeth in its beak and poison in its claws, that tells me what I need to know. We waited for you here, John."

"You know my name, and I know yours, Miss Becky Til Hoppard. Why aren't you in your grave down

by the road, Miss Becky?"

"They told you. I nair went in it. I was toted off here and my folks said some words and burnt some plants, and here I am. They left that grave for a blind. My old folks and my brothers died in right odd ways, but I do fine with these new kinfolks."

Blood-red lipped, she smiled.

"What next?" I inquired.

"You," and she kept her smile. "You're next, John. Every few years I find somebody like you, somebody with strong life in him, to keep my life going. This won't be like poor Junius Worral, my first helper—he was traced here. Nobody knows you came. But why don't you play on your pretty guitar?"

I swept my hands on the silver strings. I sang:

*Becky Til Hoppard, as sweet as a dove,
Where did she wander, and who did she love? . . .*

All the way through, and she smiled and harked at me. "You sang that in town last night. I could hear you. I'm able to hear and see things."

"You've got you a set of talents."

"So have you. When you sang that song, I did spells to fetch you here."

"I don't aim to stay," I said.

"You'll stay," she allowed, "and give me life."

I grinned down at her, with my guitar across me. "I see," I nodded to her. "You took Junius Worral's life into you to keep you young. And others . . ."

"Several," she said. "I made them glad to give me their years."

"Glad?" I repeated, my hand on the silver strings. "Because they loved me. You'll love me, John."

"Not me, I'm sorry. I love another."

"Another what?" She laughed at her own joke. "John, you'll burn up for love of me. Look."

The fire blazed up. I saw a chunk of wood drop in on the blaze.

She quartered me with her gleamy green eyes. "I could call out just one word, and there's two Hoppard men out yonder would come in here and bust your guitar for you."

"I've seen those two men," I said, "and neither of them looks hard for me to handle."

"There'd be two of them . . ."

"I'd hit them two hard licks," I said. "Nobody puts a hand on my guitar but just me myself."

"Then take it with you, yonder to the fire. Go to the fire, John."

One hand pointed a finger at me, the other pointed to the fire. It blazed high up the chimney. Wood had come into it, without a hand to move it there. It shot up long, fierce, bright tongues of flame. The floor of Hell was what it looked like.

"Look on it," Becky Til Hoppard bade me again. "I can send you into it. I made my wish before," and her voice half-sang. "I make it now. I nair saw the day that the wish I made was not true."

That was a kind of spell. I had a sense that hands pushed me. I couldn't see them, but I could feel them. I made another step into the hot, hot air of the hearth. I was come right next to her, with her bright green eyes watching me.

"Yes," she sang. "Yes, yes."

"Yes," I said after her, and pushed the silver strings of my guitar at her face.

She screamed once, shrill and sharp as a bat, and her head fell over to the side, all the way over and hung there, and she went slack where she sat.

For I'd guessed right about her. Her neck was broken; her head wasn't fast there, it just balanced there. And she sank lower, and the flames of the fire came pouring out at us like red-hot water. I fairly scuttled away toward the door, the locked door, and the door sprang itself open.

I was caught behind the door as Hoppard and his son Herod came a-shammocking in, and after them his daughter Tullai. As they came, that fire jumped right out of its hearth into the room, onto the floor, all round where Becky Til Hoppard sunk in her chair.

"Becky!" one of them yelled, or all of them. And by then I was through the door. I grabbed up my pack as I headed out into the open. Behind me, something sounded like a blast of powder. I reached the head of the trail going down, and gave a lookback, and the cabin was spitting smoke from the door and the windows.

That was it. Becky Til Hoppard ruled the fire. When her rule came to an end, the fire ran wild. I scrambled down, down from that height.

I wondered if they all burnt up in that fire. I nair went back to see. And I don't hear that anybody by the Hoppard name has been seen or heard tell of thereabouts.

OLD NATHAN

David Drake

The Bull

The cat slunk in the door with angry grace and snarled to Old Nathan, "Somebody's coming, and he's bringing a great blond bitch-dog with 'im." Then he sprang up the wall, using a chink in the logs at the height of a man's head to boost himself the last of the way to the roof trestle.

"She comes close t' me, I'll claw'er eyes out," muttered the hunching cat. "See if I don't."

"Just keep your britches on," snapped Old Nathan as he rose from the table at which he breakfasted on milk and mush.

Despite the chill of the morning, he wore only trousers tucked into his boot-tops and held up by galluses. The hair of his head and bare chest was white with a yellow tinge, but his raggedly cropped beard was so black that he could pass for a man of thirty when he wore a slouch hat against the sun.

There was nothing greatly unusual about an old man's beard growing in dark; but because he was Old Nathan the Cunning Man—the man who claimed the Devil was loose in the world but that he was the Devil's master—that, too, was a matter for fear and whispering.

Even as Nathan stepped to the door, he heard the clop of shod hooves carefully negotiating his trail. The cat hadn't mentioned the visitor was mounted; but the cat made nothing of the difference between someone on foot who hoped to barter for knowledge, and a horseman in whose purse might jingle silver.

Spanish King smelled the visitors and snorted in the pasture behind Old Nathan's cabin. A man or a dog was beneath the notice of the huge bull, save on those days when the motion of even a sparrow was sufficient to draw his fury. A horse, though, was of a size to be considered a potential challenger. King wasn't afraid of challenge, or of anything walking the earth. The blat of sound from his nostrils simply staked his claim to lordship over all who heard him.

The horse, a well-groomed bay gelding, stutter-stepped sideways, almost unseating his rider, and whickered, "No, I'm not goin' close to that. D'ye hear how mean he is?"

"Damn ye, Virgil!" shouted the rider as he hauled on the reins. The gelding's head came around, but his body continued to slide away from the cabin.

"Now jist calm down!" Nathan snapped as he stepped onto the porch. "That bull, he's fenced, and he wouldn't trifle with you noways if he got a look. Set quiet and I might could find a handful uv oats t' feed you."

"Hmph!" snorted the horse. "And what'd you know?" But he settled enough to let his rider dismount and loop the reins around the hitching rail pegged to the porch supports.

"I find speakin' with 'em helps the beasts behave, sometimes," said Old Nathan, truthfully enough, to the man who watched him in some puzzlement and more pure fear. He didn't know the fellow, not truly, but from his store-bought clothes and the lines of his smooth-shaven face he had to be kin to Newt Boardman. "Reckon you're a Boardman?" the cunning man prompted.

"There's a cat here, too," said the shaggy, blond-haired dog who had ambled out of the woods to intersect with the more deliberate horse at the porch rail. The dog sniffed the edge of the puncheon step to the porch and wagged her tail.

"I'm John Boardman, that's a fact," said the visitor with a hardening of his face muscles that made him look even younger. "But I'm here on my own account, not my daddy's."

Old Nathan knelt and held out the clenched knuckles of his right hand for the dog to sniff. "You leave the cat alone and we'll be fine, hear me?" he said to the bitch firmly.

"Sure, they're not the fun uv squirrels t' chase nohow," the dog agreed.

The old man stared at the visitor. Boardman's ramrod stiffness gilded the fear it tried to conceal.

"Scared to death, that one," said the dog and licked the offered knuckles.

"Come in and set, then, John Boardman," Old Nathan said with enough of a pause that his visitor could see there had been one. "I got coffee."

The coffee boiled on the coals in an enameled iron pot. Old Nathan had roasted the green beans in his frying pan the night before and had ground them at dawn when he rose. He lifted the pot's wire handle with a billet of lightwood while the dog padded in quickly to snuffle the interior of the cabin and the Boardman boy followed more gingerly.

"I will claw yer eyes out!" shrieked the cat from the roofbeam, reaching down with one hooked paw in a pantomime of intention.

"Bag it, now, damn ye!" snarled Old Nathan from the chimney alcove, twisting to face the cat and add the weight of his glare to his tone, as savage as that of the animal itself.

The cat subsided, muttering. Boardman's bitch slurped water from the tub in the corner of the single room and curled herself beside the rocking chair.

Five china cups with a blue pattern about the rim rested upside down on the mantelpiece. Boardman got a hold of himself enough to fetch two of the cups down so that the older man did not have to straighten to get them. They were neither chipped nor cracked, and the visitor said approvingly, "Fine as we have at home," as he watched Old Nathan pour.

"Fine as your daddy has," Old Nathan corrected. He gestured Boardman toward the straight chair, near the table which still held the remains of breakfast. He himself took the rocker and reached down absently to stroke the dog's fur with his long knobby fingers.

Boardman seated himself on the front of the chair like a child preparing for an interrogation with a whipping at the end of it. "I thought you didn't like dogs," he ventured with a doubtful glance at his bitch, lifting to nuzzle the hand that rumbled her fur. "I'd heard that."

"Don't doubt ye heard worse damned nonsense 'n that about me," Old Nathan replied, his green eyes slitting and the coffee cup frozen an inch short of his lips. "I don't choose t' eat red meat nor keep it in the house. That 'un"—he lifted his black beard to the cat, now licking his belly fur on the beam with all his foreclaws extended—"fetches his own, as a dog would not . . . so I don't keep a dog."

All that was the truth, and it concealed the greater truth that Old Nathan would no more have hunted down the animals he talked with than he would have waylaid human travellers and butchered them for his larder. There were fish in good plenty, with milk, grains, and his garden. Enough for him, enough for any

man, though others could go their own way and the cat—the cat would go the way of his kind, in grinning slaughter as natural as the fall of rain from heaven.

"Hit may be," the old man continued as he sipped his coffee, hot and bitter and textured with floating grounds, "thet ye've come fer yer curiosity and no business uv mine. In sich case, boy, you'll take yerself off now before the toe t' my boot helps ye."

"I have business with ye," Boardman said, setting his cup on the table so sharply that the fluid sloshed over the rim. "You may hev heard I'm fixin' to be married?"

"I may and I may not," said Old Nathan, rocking slowly. He wasn't as much a part of the casual gossip of the community as most of those settled hereabouts, but when folk came to consult him he heard things from their hearts which a spouse of forty years would never learn. He recalled being told that Sally Ann Hewitt, the storekeeper's daughter from Advance, was being courted by rich Newt Boardman's boy among others. "Say on, say on."

"Sally Ann wouldn't have a piece from my daddy's cleared land," said the boy, confirming the name of the girl—and also confirming the intelligence and strength of character Old Nathan had heard ascribed to Hewitt's daughter. "So I set out to clear newground, the forty acres in Big Bone Valley, and I did that."

"Hired that done," said Old Nathan, rocking and sipping and scratching the dog.

"Hired Bully Ransden and his yoke uv oxen to help me," retorted Boardman, "fer ten good silver dollars—and where's the sin uv thet?"

"Honest pay fer honest work," agreed Old Nathan, turning his hand to knuckle the dog's fur. Ridges of callus bulged at the base of each finger and in the web of his palm. "No sin at all."

"So I fixed to plant a crop afore raisin' the cabin, and in the Fall we'd be wed," the boy continued. "Only my horses, they wouldn't plow. Stood in the traces and shivered, thin they'd bolt."

Boardman tried a sip of his coffee and grimaced unconsciously.

"There's milk," his host offered with a nod toward the pitcher on the table beside the bowl of mush. "If ye need sweetnin', I might could find a comb uv honey."

"This here's fine," the boy lied and swallowed a mouthful of the coffee. He blinked. "Well," he continued, "I hired Bully Ransden t' break the ground, seein's he'd cleared it off. But his oxen, they didn't plow but half a furrow without they wouldn't move neither, lash'em though he did. So he told me he wouldn't draw the plow himself, and best I get another plot uv ground, for what his team wouldn't do there was no other on this earth thet could."

"Did he say thet, now?" said the cunning man softly. "Well, go on, boy. Hev you done thet? Bought another track uv land?"

"Sally Ann told me," said Boardman miserably to his coffee cup, "thet if I wasn't man enough to plow thet forty acres, I wasn't man enough t' marry her. And so I thought I'd come see you, old man, that mayhap there was a curse on the track as you could lift."

Old Nathan said nothing for so long that his visitor finally raised his eyes to see if the cunning man were even listening. Old Nathan wore neither a smile nor a frown, but there was nothing in his sharp green eyes

to suggest that he was less than fully alert.

"Well?" Boardman said, flexing back his shoulders.

"There's a dippin' gourd there by the tub," said Old Nathan, nodding toward that corner. "Fetch it back to me full from the stream and I'll see what I kin do."

"There's water in the tub already," said Boardman, glancing from the container to his host.

"Fetch me living water from the stream, boy," the older man snapped, "or find yer own way out uv yer troubles."

"Yessir," said Boardman—Boardman's son—as he came bolt upright off the chair and scurried to the dipper. It was thonged to a peg on the wall. When the boy snatched hastily, the leather caught and jerked the gourd back out of his hand the first time.

The cunning man said nothing further until his visitor had disappeared through the back door of the cabin. The cat gave a long glower at the bitch, absorbed in licking her own paws, before leaping to the floor and out the swinging door himself.

"Hope the boy's got better sense'n to cut through Spanish King's pasture," Old Nathan muttered.

"Oh, he's not so bad for feeding," said the dog, giving a self-satisfied lick at her own plump side.

"You were there at the newground, weren't ye, when the plow team balked?" asked the old man. He twisted to look down at the bitch and meet her heavy-browed eyes directly.

"Where the bull is, you mean?" the dog queried in turn.

"Bull? There's a bull in thet valley?"

"Oh, you won't catch me coming in hornsweep uv that 'un," said the dog as she got up and ambled to the water tub again. "Mean hain't in it, and fast. . . ." Anything further the dog might have said was interrupted by the sloppy enthusiasm with which she drank.

"Well, thet might be," thought the cunning man aloud as he stood, feeling the ache in the small of his back and in every joint that he moved. Wet mornings. . . . "Thet might well be."

Old Nathan set his coffee cup, empty save for the grounds, on the table for later cleaning. He frowned for a moment at the mush and milk remaining in his bowl, then set it down on the floor. "Here," he said to the bitch. "It's for you."

"Well, don't mind if I do," the animal replied, padding over to the food as Old Nathan himself walked to the fireboard.

The soup plate there had the same pattern as the five cups. The cunning man took it down and carried it with him out the back door.

Boardman was trudging up the slope from the creek, a hundred yards from the cabin. His boots were slipping, and he held the dipper out at arm's length to keep from sloshing his coat and trousers further. Old Nathan's plowland was across the creek; on the cabin side he pastured his two cows and Spanish

King, the three of them now watching their master over the rail fence as their jaws ratcheted sideways and back to grind their food.

"Not so bad a day, King," said Old Nathan to his bull while his eyes followed the approach of his stumbling, swearing visitor.

"No rain in it, at least," the bull replied. He watched both Boardman and the cunning man, his jaws working and his hump giving him the look of being ready to crash through the hickory rails. The fence wouldn't hold King in a real rage. Most likely the log walls of the cabin would stop him, but even that was a matter of likelihood rather than certainty.

"Any chance we might be goin' out, thin?" Spanish King added in a rumble.

"Maybe some, maybe," Old Nathan admitted.

"Good," said the bull.

He wheeled away from the fence, appearing to move lightly until his splayed forehooves struck the ground again and the soil shook with the impact. King stretched his legs out until his deep chest rubbed the meadow while his tail waved like a flagstaff above his raised haunches. His bellow drove the cows together in skittish concern and made Boardman glance up in terror that almost dumped the gourdful of water a few steps from delivering it.

"You hev'n't a ring in thet bull's nose," said the visitor when he had recovered himself and handed the gourd—still half full—over to Old Nathan. "D'ye trust him so far?"

"I trust him t' go on with what he's about," said the cunning man, "though I twisted the bridge out'n his nose t' stop it. Some folk er ruled more by pain thin others are."

"Some bulls, you mean," said Boardman.

"Thet too," Old Nathan agreed as he emptied the gourd into the soup plate and handed the dipper back to his visitor. "Now, John Boardman, you carry this back to its peg, and then go set on the porch fer a time. I reckon yer horse is latherin' hisself fer nervousness with the noise." A quick nod indicated Spanish King. The bull had begun rubbing the sides of his horns, one and then the other, on the ground while he snorted.

"Well, but what's yer answer?" Boardman pressed.

"Ye'll git my answer when I come out and give it to you, boy," said the cunning man, peevish at being questioned. Some folk 'ud grouse if they wuz hanged with a golden rope. "Now, go mind yer affairs whilst I mind mine."

* * *

Nathan's cat reappeared from the brushplot to the west of the cabin, grinning and licking his lips. The old man walked over to the pasture fence, spinning the water gently to the rim of the shallow bowl to keep it from spilling, and the cat leaped to a post. "He thinks he's tough," said the cat, ears back as he watched King's antics.

"Now, don't come on all high 'n mighty and git yerself hurt," the cunning man said. "Never did know a tomcat with the sense t' know when to stop provoking things as could swaller'em down in a gulp."

He paused at the fence and closed his eyes with his right hand open in front of him. For a moment he merely stood there, visualizing a pocketknife. It was a moderate-sized one with two blades, light-colored scales of jigged bone, and bolsters of German silver. Old Nathan had bought it from a peddler and the knife, unlike the clock purchased at the same time, had proven to be as fine a tool as a man could wish.

As the cunning man pictured the knife in his mind, his empty hand curled and he reached forward. He saw his fingers closing over the warm bone and cooler metal mountings . . . and when after a moment he felt the knife in his hand also, he withdrew it and opened his eyes. There the knife was, just as it should be.

Old Nathan let out the breath he had been holding unconsciously and set down the soup plate so that he could open the smaller blade. There was a spot of rust on it, which he polished off on his trousers. No help for that: good steel rusted, there were no two ways about it.

"King!" the old man called. "Come over here!"

The bull twisted his forequarters with the speed and grace of a cat taking a mockingbird from the air. "Says who?" he snorted.

"Mind this, damn ye, or we'll go nowhere!" the man retorted in exasperation. As bad as the Boardman boy. Nobody'd let Old Nathan get along with his business without an argument.

Grumbling threats that were directed as much against the world as they were the cunning man specifically, King strode deliberately to the fence and his master. Flies glittered against his hide, many of them clumped in chitinous rosettes instead of scattering evenly over the whole expanse. There was a matting of sweat on the bull's withers from anticipation rather than present exercise, and his tail lashed to emphasize the swagger of his hindquarters.

"Three hairs from your poll," said Old Nathan, reaching deliberately between the horns of the big animal whose muzzle bathed him in a hot sweet breath of clover. He kept a wire edge on the knife's shorter blade, and it severed three of the coarse hairs of King's with no more drag than a razor would have made on so many whiskers.

"And a drop of blood from me," the cunning man continued, stepping back and grimacing at the three long hairs before he chose his location—the back of his left index finger, not the calloused pad—and pricked himself with the point of the blade.

While the blood welled slowly, Old Nathan wiped the steel clean on his trousers and closed the knife. Closing his eyes again, he mimed putting the knife away on an invisible shelf. He saw it there, saw his fingers releasing it—and they did release it, so that when he withdrew his hand and opened his eyes, the well-kept tool was nowhere to be seen.

There was enough blood now on the back of the finger which pressed the bull hairs against his thumb. Sighing, Old Nathan settled himself on his haunches in front of the bowl he had placed on the ground. One of his splayed knees touched the lowest rail of the fence, giving him a little help in balancing when his mind had to be elsewhere.

Spanish King made a gurgling sound in his throat as he watched over the fence, and his breath ruffled the surface of the water. That would be beneficial to the process, if it made any difference at all. Old Nathan was never sure how the things he did came about. Some things—techniques—felt right at a given time

but the results did not always seem to require the same words and movements.

The cunning man dipped the tips of his left index finger and thumb in the shallow basin and whisked the bull hairs through the water. The blood on the back of his finger trailed off in a curve like a sickle blade, dispersing into a mist too thin to have color.

Old Nathan closed his eyes, visualizing the soup plate in which now drifted the blood and the hairs he had released. The water in his mind clouded abruptly—first red as blood, then red as fire, and finally as white as the sun frozen in a desert sky.

The white flare did not clear but rather coalesced like curds forming in cultured milk. The color shrank and gained density, becoming a great piebald bull that romped in a valley cleared so recently that smoke still curled from heaped brush. Tree stumps stood like grave markers for the forest which had covered the ground for millennia.

The bull's hide was white with a freckling, especially on the face and forequarters, of black and russet spots. Its horns curved sharply forward from above the beast's eyes, long and sharp and as black as the Devil's heart. The bull raised its short, powerful neck and bellowed to the sky while its hooves spaded clods from the loam.

The vision shattered. Spanish King was bellowing in fury, rattling the shakes with which the cabin was roofed. Old Nathan shivered back to present awareness, flinging out his arms to save him from toppling backward.

For an instant, the real soup plate trembling on the ground seemed as full of blood as the one which the cunning man had imagined.

King stamped through a narrow circle, feinting toward invisible foes. His own horns flared more broadly from his head than did those of the piebald giant in the vision, but Old Nathan would not have sworn that King's weapons were really longer from base to point.

The bull calmed, though with the restive calm of a high-mettled horse prepared to race. He paced back to the fence, raising his hooves high at each step, and demanded, "Where is he? Where is that one?"

Old Nathan stood, aiding himself with one hand on the nearest fencepost. Before answering, he stooped to pick up the soup plate and sluice the hairs and water from it. There was no trace of blood, only one drop spread through a pint. The cat had vanished again also, whether through whim, King's antics, or what he had seen Old Nathan conjure in the water.

"What in damnation!" shouted John Boardman as he burst through the back doorway of the cabin. His dog loped ahead of him and yapped, "A fight, is there a fight?"

"I don't know we want any truck with this, big feller," said the cunning man to his bull. Memory of the beast glimpsed on the newground was blurring already, but though the details faded, they left a core of brutal power that could not be forgotten.

"What in damn-nation are ye about?" the visitor repeated as he paused just outside the cabin. "I never in all my born days heard a bellerin' like thet!"

"Why, old man, I'll knock this poor farm t' flinders ifen you cross me!" roared Spanish King, and suited action to his words with a sweep of his head. Old Nathan jerked his hand away just in time. A horn

struck the stout cedar fencepost and skewed it so badly from its socket in the soil that the top rails fell to the ground.

"God'n blazes!" cried the Boardman boy as he hopped back within the sturdy cabin.

"King, damn ye!" Old Nathan shouted as he slapped the bull hard on his flaring nostrils. "Did I say we'd not go? D'ye think I care ifen yer neck's broke fer yer foolishness?"

"Hmph!" snorted the bull as he calmed again. "See thet you're straight with me, old man." He walked away from the bedraggled fence, throwing his head back once over his powerful shoulder to repeat, "See thet you are."

No lack of damn fools in the world, thought the cunning man as he trudged back to the house and his visitor. Human damn fools and otherwise.

"Oh, there'll be a fight!" yelped the bitch in cheerful anticipation of carnage. She jumped up against Old Nathan from behind, the mud on her paws icy against the bare skin above his waistband. He swatted her away awkwardly, because the dog was to his left and he did not want to break the plate he carried in that hand. The bitch ran back to her master and smudged his fawn-colored waistcoat as he too tried to thrust her off.

"Here, damn ye, here," said Old Nathan to the dog in a coaxing voice as he knelt, embarrassed to have lost his temper with the animal. She sprang back to him, calming somewhat as he kneaded the fur over her shoulders and prevented her from jumping further.

Boardman walked forward again. "Well?" he said, fluffing back the tails of his coat with his hands behind him. The gold chain of his watch stood out in the sunlight, as did the muddy pawprints on his vest. "Well, what am I t' do?"

"Now hush," Old Nathan said firmly to the bitch. He rose to his full height, topping his visitor's average frame by a full hand's breadth.

"I kin make it so's ye kin plow yer newground," the cunning man went on. "If thet's what ye want. And the cost of it to you is a hundred minted dollars."

"What?" the younger man blurted, stepping back as if his bitch had leaped up in his face. "Why, I paid Bully Ransden only ten to clear it, and he thought himself paid well."

"I ain't sellin' ye forty acres, John Boardman," the cunning man replied with his jaw and black beard thrust out. "What I hev to offer is Sally Ann Hewitt, and whether er no she's a hundred dollars value is a question ye'll answer yerself."

"You think I cain't pay thet," the younger man said in flat anger, meeting Old Nathan's eyes.

"I think yer daddy kin," said the cunning man. "But it makes no matter to me, yea 'r nay."

"Then ye'll hev yer silver money," said his visitor. "Though I reckon you're humbug, and we'll hev that money back outen yer hide if ye fail us."

"'Us,'" Old Nathan repeated with a sneer. "Oh, aye, you'd do wonders, boy. But I'll not fail."

In the pasture behind him, Spanish King bawled a challenge to the world.

* * *

When Old Nathan saw him, Bully Ransden was plowing on a hilltop a furlong from the road. Unlike horses, bulls have no certain gait between ambling and a panic rush, so the younger man easily had time to outspan his plow oxen and trot down the hill. He met Old Nathan and King in front of the cabin Ransden shared with a black-haired woman. The homeplace, where Ransden's mother still lived, was a quarter mile away on the far side of the acreage.

"So-o-o . . ." said Bully Ransden, arms akimbo and his legs spread to put one boot just within each of the road's single pair of wagon ruts. "Where d'ye think you wuz goin', old man?"

"You know me, Cullen Ransden," Old Nathan replied. He laid an arm over the neck of Spanish King and murmured, "Whoa, now, old friend, we'll have us t' drink and a bit uv rest here."

He was a fine figure to look at, was Bully Ransden. He stood as tall as Old Nathan and supported with his broad shoulders a bulk of muscle that the older man could never have matched at the height of his physical powers long decades before.

Ransden's long hair was bright blond, the sole legacy he had received from the father who had beaten the boy and the boy's mother indiscriminately . . . until the night the eleven-year-old Cullen proved that fury and an axe handle made him a better man than his father. The elder Ransden had bolted into the night, streaming blood and supplications, never to be seen since in the county.

Cullen Ransden had now spent a decade reinforcing the lesson he had taught himself that night: that his will and his strength would gain him aught in the world that he wanted. All the county knew him as Bully, but no one as yet had shown that wisdom of his to be false.

"Oh, I know the humbug what skins fools worse'n a Yankee peddler," Ransden said in mock agreement.

He took a step forward and Old Nathan stepped also, halving the distance between them to little more than the reach of a fist. It was a dangerous choice, putting his back to the horns of Spanish King. If he did not step forward, however, it would look as though he were trying to shelter in the bull's strength—a challenge that Ransden would likely meet with a blow of his ox-driving whip to King's nose.

Besides, Old Nathan was as little willing to crouch away from trouble as the bull was, or Bully Ransden.

"Well, where's the water, then?" King grumbled as he sidled to the hitching post before Ransden's door and began rubbing his black hide on it.

"I'd thank'ee fer a bucket uv water, as the day's a hot'un," said the cunning man. His shirt of homespun wool, gray where it was dry, was black with sweat in the middle of the back and beneath his armpits. As he stood, he lifted his hat and fanned himself with it, smelling nervousness and anger in his own perspiration.

"Cull, what—" called a clear voice.

As both men turned to look over the back of Spanish King, a woman appeared at the open door of the cabin. She wore a gingham dress over a shift, and the body beneath was so youthfully taut that it had shape despite the loose garments. Her hair was black and might have fallen to her ankles had it not been caught up with pins and combs. Amazingly, it was clean and shone like strands of burnished metal when

the sunlight past the edge of the porch touched it.

"Well," she continued, "what do we hev?"

"We got the liar as says he'll plow Boardman's newground when I couldn't," said Bully Ransden. He glanced back at the cunning man with the eye of a butcher for a hog squealing in the chute. "It's what he does, milk old women and boys with no more balls 'n old women."

"Ransden, leave this be afore—" Old Nathan began, his mind white with the fear of the thing Bully was about to say and what would come when he replied.

"Ye know, Ellie," Bully Ransden continued, still astraddle the center of the path, "his own balls, they wuz shot off by the Redcoats at New Or-leens."

"Did your mother tell you that, Cullen Ransden?" Old Nathan said softly. His skin formed layers, hot and prickly on the outside while the inner surface froze against his flesh as hard as the ice on which Satan shivered in Hell. "And did she tell ye besides how thet came t' be her business?"

The younger man could have been blasted by a thunderbolt without the hair prickling up more sharply on his head and arms. He struck with the suddenness of reflex and the skill of long years' practice with the blacksnake whip in his hand.

It was a measure of what lay at Ransden's core that the target his instinct chose was the ton of muscle that was Spanish King rather than the sparse old man who looked unable to stand the very wind of a blow.

The whip, long enough to drive a team of four span, curled out and around Old Nathan as if it were really the snake its braided leather mimicked. Ransden could flick a fly from an oxen's ear without touching the beast itself, but this time he aimed to cut. The crackling end of the whip touched Spanish King at the base of the tail, where the hair gave way to the bare skin of the bull's anus.

Rather than bolting like a startled cow or an ox broken to the whip and yoke, Spanish King reacted as a predator might have. The bull spun, questing for the presumed horsefly with a clop of his square incisors. Old Nathan ducked and lurched sideways to avoid the bull's sweeping horns. The four-inch hickory hitching post that Spanish King swatted in the other direction with his haunches broke off even with the ground and clubbed Ellie on its way to thudding against the cabin's log forewall.

King danced back, hooves splaying, as his eyes searched for the horsefly which had escaped him at the first attempt. "When I find her!" the bull bellowed, referring to the horsefly. "When I find her!" His tail lashed. Blood welling from the whip-cut began to dribble along the appendage in dark red streaks.

As the old man and the woman sprawled, Bully Ransden dropped his whip. He lunged for the porch but had to back hastily away as Spanish King stepped between, tossing his head over either of his shoulders in turn.

The cunning man took a pinch of dust between his right thumb and forefinger as he lay on his opposite hand and hip. "Ransden!" he called.

* * *

The younger man glanced instinctively toward his name. Old Nathan blew the dust at his face, though at four yards distance none could actually have reached the Bully. He sprang back anyway and fell,

clutching his eyes and shouting, "I'm blind, damn ye!"

The cunning man scrambled to his feet, sweeping up the hat he had dropped in dodging. His bull was pacing smartly down the road, striding at a rate half again that of his normal walk. He kept switching his tail and looking behind him, searching for the horsefly he was still convinced had stabbed him.

Old Nathan followed the bull at a rate just enough short of a trot to save his dignity. Ransden was up on his feet, thrusting his arms out before him as he stumbled in the direction of his cabin.

"Ellie?" he called, his voice rising in fear on the second syllable. He would regain his sight within minutes, perhaps less, but all he could know for the moment was that his eyes felt as if they had been plucked out and their sockets filled with sand.

Ransden's black-haired woman was gripping the doorjamb with one hand to help pull herself upright, while the other hand clamped against her side where the hickory post had struck. Under other circumstances, Old Nathan might have helped her—but under other circumstances, King wouldn't have bolted, and the cunning man had no wish to be present when Bully Ransden found he could see again.

For that matter, there were men not so touchy as the Bully who would sooner see their woman die than watch another man lay hands on her. The couple would do well enough without the cunning man's ministrations, and Old Nathan himself would do far better by getting out of the way.

The road curved, skirting the base of the hill which Ransden had been plowing, so by the time Old Nathan caught up with his bull they were out of sight of the cabin. A creek, nameless and at present shallow, notched the road and Spanish King stood there fetlock-deep in the water, drinking. He ignored the cunning man's approach.

There was no ford proper, since the stream could be stepped across at any point save when it was in spate—and then it became uncrossable for its full length. The steep banks were a barrier to most beasts and all vehicles, so here, where the road crossed, they had been trampled down by use with little intention toward the road's long-term improvement.

Rather than squelch through the mud into which the main path had been churned, Old Nathan gripped the stem of one of the mimosas which grew as thick as a man's arm. He lowered himself cautiously down the bank to the smooth-washed stones of the streambed. Only then did King look up at him and grunt, "Well?" from lips that still slobbered the water he had been drinking.

There was neither anger nor skittishness in the bull's tone. He had forgotten the whip-cut or filed it at the almost instinctual level which warned that horseflies bit like coals from the floor of Hell.

Bully Ransden would likely be less forgetful about the incident, but not even hindsight offered the cunning man a view of a more desirable resolution. Ransden could be a bad enemy, if he chose; but so could Old Nathan, the Devil's Master. Perhaps the boy would let bygones be bygones.

"Come on, thin, big feller," said the cunning man, embracing the bull's humped shoulders before readjusting the slung panniers holding a day's food for both of them. "Savin' ye'd rather go back home thin go on with all this?"

"Humph!" Spanish King snorted. He gathered himself and sprang lightfootedly out of the stream, his forehooves planted solidly on the bank top and his hind legs crossing them neatly in the same motion, like the feet of a horse at a gallop. "I'll fight that one. Sure as the sun rises."

And he bellowed a challenge that silenced for a fearful moment the birds whose chattering made the woods a living place.

* * *

"I misdoubted you," said John Boardman. His saddle blanket was folded as a pad at the base of an oak tree, but he had been pacing restively for some time before King and Old Nathan appeared around the bend in the road. "It's late in the day, and I thought ye might not come."

"Said I would," Old Nathan replied, wrinkling his nose in disgust at a man who was surprised when another man kept his word. "Long about evenin', I said." He wagged his beard toward the west, where the sun would have been visible near the horizon were it not for the forest that stretched in all directions from the winding road.

"Well, I thought—" temporized Boardman as he tried to find some useful way to continue the sentence. One of his hands held the heavy saddlebag he had carried even as he paced alone on the road. His free hand played with the butt of the six-barreled pistol thrust between his belt and waistband instead of loose in his pocket. His gelding tugged its reins to browse more leaves from the sapling to which it was tethered.

"Well, I brought the money," Boardman began again, hefting the leather bag, "but you'll not have it till ye've done as ye claim. Laid the curse."

Old Nathan snorted. He and Spanish King had continued to saunter forward as the men talked. The bull's cleft hooves spread under his weight at every step, and he placed them with greater care than would a horse shod against the stones which rain and traffic had brought to the surface of the narrow road. Despite his size, King's step was so quiet that his approach had gone unremarked by Boardman who had been awaiting it desperately.

"Oh, I guess ye'll pay for the work I do ye," the cunning man said. He paused, his arm across the back of Spanish King whose tail-tip flicked like a pendulum. "I don't guess yer sech a fool as ye'd face the powers I'd bring onto yer head ifen ye played me false."

That was more bluster than not. Mere money was unlikely to be worth the trouble it would take to bring a major sending onto a man as well protected as the wealth and servants of Boardman's father made the boy. Nonetheless, the threat was useful . . . and not wholly empty. Old Nathan flew hot frequently, and the anger puffed away like flame from thistledown. But he was capable of cold rages also; and they, like glaciers, ground inexorably to a conclusion.

"Well," said Boardman, "I'll take ye into the valley."

He began to resaddle the gelding. It was a comment on his focus and nervousness that he tried to spread the saddle blanket with one hand for some moments before he thought to set down the satchel with the money. Old Nathan waited, his strong, knobby fingers massaging the bull's hide while Spanish King rumbled in pleasure and anticipation.

* * *

The track to Big Bone Valley meandered a quarter mile from the public road, through forest which had remained unaffected by white settlement of the region. Custom and Boardman's deed both gave him the right to lay out a fifteen-foot cartway through the intervening land, the waterless side of a tilted rockshelf. Instead, someone—perhaps Bully Ransden—had hacked down so straight a path through the sparse

undergrowth that Old Nathan only with difficulty could walk abreast of his bull.

The work of clearing the newground had not been skimped, however.

The track debouched on the valley head and a scene of devastation which suggested natural disaster rather than human agency. There was still a tang of smoke in the air, though the fires that devoured the piled cuttings had been cold a month. Rain had beaten down the ashes and carved long gouges through the red clay beneath. Though the spring-fed stream in the valley's heart had cleared, the moss and crevices of its bed were stained by heavier particles of clay that would not wash away until another storm renewed them.

Ransden and his oxen had dragged the tree boles together at the far end of the valley, but the stumps would remain until rot and termites dissolved their roots enough that a team could tug them free. There was no evident reason the shallow valley should not have been plowed despite the stumps, but the one straggling attempt at a furrow was shorter than the rain-cut gulleys it intersected.

The sun was by now beneath the horizon and the sky, though bright, cast a diffuse illumination which softened the scene. Nonetheless, the valley's starkness was so evident that John Boardman muttered, "Sally Ann would have this and not forty acres uv bottom as good as any land in the county. And we'd hev lived at the homeplace till our first crop was in the store, besides."

The cunning man looked at the boy who had hired him and said, "Sally Ann Hewitt may be able t' carve ye into a man yit, but I don't know I think much of what yer daddy's left her t' work with."

"He ain't here, now," said Spanish King, striding deliberately down the slope with his nose high and his tail vertical. "But he's been here, yes, he's been here."

"I said I didn't like this place!" interjected the gelding on a note that rose close to panic. The horse curvetted with a violence which took his rider unaware.

"Virgil!" cried Boardman, glad enough for an excuse to ignore the insult he had just received. He sawed the gelding's reins and pounded his boot heel into the outer flank of the rotating horse. "Virgil, I'll flay the hide offen ye!"

"Steady, ye fool horse," Old Nathan put in, understood but just as likely as Boardman to be ignored. With animals as with humans, being heard was a far cry from being listened to. "Settle yerself and ye'll be out uv here in no time, seein's it flusters ye so much."

For whatever reason, the gelding calmed enough for Boardman to dismount and lash his reins to a deadfall too heavy for the horse to drag. Panting with exertion, the young man followed Old Nathan on foot as the cunning man walked slowly into the newground. The shadows thrown eastward by the taller stumps were beginning to merge and drain the color from the soil.

Old Nathan tapped a stump with his toe-tip when Boardman had caught up with him. "Eight inches," he said. "Not so very big fer a pine. This track's been cut over before, thin?"

"Vance Satterfield held it all on a Spanish patent," the younger man said, holding his arms tight and crossed on his chest as if he feared something would poke him in the ribs. Down near the creek, Spanish King's black hide was almost lost in the gathering darkness. The bull's white horns danced like fairy wands, tossing and sweeping through the empty air while the beast explored the newground.

"Could be," the younger man continued with a shudder at something in his imagination, "that Satterfield er kin t' him cleared the valley forty years back er so. Reckon somebody found bones, thet they give it the name they did."

"Reckon they didn't settle long neither, thin," said the cunning man grimly.

Though to look at, it was a tolerable tract or even better. Well watered, and though the valley was aligned east and west, it was shallow enough that the north slope would get enough sun to bring corn to fruition.

"Hit's good land," Boardman said with a frustrated whine in his voice. "It must be there's an Injun curse on it." His tone became one of potentous certainty. "I reckon that's hit, all right. Injuns."

Spanish King was trotting up toward the two men. His hooves clopped like splitting mauls when they struck on stumps or unburnt timber.

"Stick to yer own affairs, boy," Old Nathan giped. "That is, effen ye hev sich. There's no curse onto this valley, not Injun nor white neither."

"You say that now thet the sun's down," responded Boardman without, for a wonder, either bluster or whimpering. "Come back by daylight'n tell me then there's no curse on my newground."

"I'll tear 'im up!" bellowed Spanish King, making the younger man jump. "I'll gore and I'll stomp 'im!"

"Tain't a curse, fer all thet," the cunning man explained. "This track, this's been forest fer a long time. Onct, though, it wuz in grass. When ye cut the timber off 'n sun got t' the ground agin, ye brought back somethin' as wuz here aforetimes."

Old Nathan hacked and spat into the darkness before he concluded, "Hain't a curse yer lookin at, John Boardman. Hit's a ghost. And we figger t' stay here till we lays it, King 'n me."

"Tear 'im and toss 'im and gouge 'im t' tatters!" rumbled the black bull, and the night trembled.

* * *

The shadows thrown down the valley by the morning sun were sharper than those of evening, and the unshadowed clay was red as blood.

Old Nathan stood slowly and faced the sun. His shirt bosom and his hat were wet with dew, but the night had not chilled him because he had slept against the flank of Spanish King. His joints ached, but that was as much a fact of life in his own cabin as here on Boardman's newground.

King snorted to his feet, hunching his downside—right-side—legs before he rolled left and stood. The whole maneuver was as smooth and as complex as the workings of a fine clock. He looked toward the dawn sky and said, flicking his ears, "Well, shan't be long."

Turning, the black bull stepped toward the nearby creek, carrying his head high. He seemed disinterested in the sparse browse, even though he had finished the grain from his panniers.

A mockingbird flew past on the left. Spanish King drowned its cries with a challenge to the world.

"Hit ain't here," said Old Nathan, placing a hand on the bull's rib cage so that the distracted animal did

not turn suddenly and crush him by accident.

"He'll come to me," rumbled Spanish King. "Er I'll go t' him. Hit makes no nevermind." He stepped deliberately into the creek and lowered his head to drink.

"There's blood in the water," said the cunning man, feeling his soul freeze within him.

"No, hit's the red sun," replied Spanish King, but his muzzle paused a hand's breadth from the surface. His tongue sucked back within his lips without touching the water.

"Runnin' with blood," said the cunning man, aware of his words as he would have been aware of words spoken by another whom he could not control. "Heart's-blood pourin' out like spring water."

"There's blood red clay in this stream," said the bull. "That's what you're seein'." But he backed out of the creek, two short steps and a hop that brought his shoulder even with Old Nathan as the man stood transfixed beside him.

Another bull bellowed from the foot of the valley, where the sun would just be touching the spring that fed the creek through a fissure in the limestone.

"Well," said Spanish King quietly, and then he bawled back, "There's none my like on this earth!"

The black bull began to stride along the stream, his broadly spreading horns winking with the ruddy light of dawn.

* * *

The waste that was Boardman's newground was three furlongs in length, valley head to valley foot. Old Nathan, tramping beside King, could see the other bull before they had covered a quarter of that distance. It was the piebald brute he had scryed in the plate of water, pacing toward them as they approached him.

"Big 'un," muttered Spanish King. "Well, we'll show 'im."

"Run, little one!" roared the strange bull. "I've crushed your like into the stone beneath this clay!"

The piebald bull was a match in size for King, but they were not twins. The stranger was higher at the shoulder than the black bull, and the difference was in the length of his legs as well as his pronounced hump. His horns thrust forward where King's spread widely, and they were as black and wicked as the creature's eyes.

"Well, reckon I kin take 'im," Spanish King murmured.

He paused a hundred feet short of the piebald stranger and lashed his tail vertical, then down again as sharply as a railroad semaphore. "You walk on my earth!" bellowed Spanish King, and he launched himself toward his rival at a trot that snatched him away from the supportive touch of Old Nathan.

The stranger's roar and the hammer of his hooves shook the sunstruck clay. The bulls met head to head, with no more finesse than icebergs grinding together in the swell of Ocean. Both of them recoiled onto their haunches, the thud of their foreheads overlaid by the sharper clack of the horns striking against one another.

The piebald bull, the aurochs, bellowed with the wild fury of which the Biblical prophets had spoken. He shook himself and got his hindquarters solidly beneath him again by pivoting to his left around his firmly planted forelegs. He snorted angrily, tossed his head, and lunged again at his rival.

Spanish King's hooves shoveled deep into the clay with his effort, but nonetheless he was marginally slower than the piebald beast—and a battle of this sort had narrow margins. King twisted to face the aurochs, but he did not have his hind legs anchored when their horns clashed again. He went down, his left flank skidding on the ground.

The piebald bull trumpeted victory and surged forward, very nearly losing the battle in that moment.

When Spanish King went down, he and the aurochs pivoted around their locked horns. King's left horn was so long that it touched the piebald bull between his shoulder and the base of his neck. When the stranger advanced, it was by impaling himself on the cruel point.

Blatting in shock and pain, the aurochs stumbled backward. The black bull scrambled up and followed, snorting deep breaths through nostrils which were already flared to their widest extent. Six inches of the left horn were blood-smeared, and the blood dripping down the aurochs' right shoulder was richer and brighter than the orange clay on King's black flank.

"Mine!" snorted Spanish King, and he strode toward his rival with a deliberation that seemed gentle until the two of them again crashed head to head.

Both bulls had learned caution and a respect for the present rival as for no other in their experience. They locked horns, and all obvious motion stopped.

Old Nathan found the stump of a beech forty inches in diameter, a survivor of the valley's first clearing, and settled himself on it regardless of the layer of soot from brush burned nearby. He was not a participant in this battle, though he had made it possible. The aurochs would not have had sufficient material form in this world—and Spanish King would not have had form in the valley the aurochs trod in life—save for the rent between their existences which the cunning man had opened with his scrying glass.

Even without Old Nathan's intervention, animals would have known of the presence of the great piebald bull. Smaller ones, like Boardman's bitch and the rabbits who would come to crop flowers springing from the newground, would skulk and remain beneath notice—even as their kin had done during the aurochs' proper life. Perhaps even deer would browse in the waste which would become meadow and then forest again, as it had done in the past.

But no animal large enough to drag a plow through roots and half-burnt saplings could coexist with the aurochs' fury. Horses and oxen would panic at the challenge and the glowering phantom of the piebald bull, even if it were no more than a memory in the soil itself. . . .

The aurochs was no phantasm now. He and Spanish King both pawed forward without moving, as if they were trying to pull stoneboats too heavy for even their huge muscles. Clay heaped behind each of the bulls' forehooves as the thrust which could not drive the beasts forward began to force the ground back.

King's tail lashed in a circular motion, rising to the top slowly and then cutting through the remainder of the arc with a snap like that of the whip which had cut him the day before. The aurochs' brushier tail was almost still, but his ears popped repeatedly against the base of his horns as if to add even their weight to the force mustered against Spanish King.

The bulls' first contact had been like the lightning, a cataract of sudden power that would slay or fail but could not last. This second struggle mimicked the thunder in its rumbling omnipresence, shaking the world without changing it; but not even thunder rolls forever.

The rivals sprang apart as if by concert, each of them pivoting their hindquarters left and keeping their heads low to face a renewed attack by the other. When they had backed till twenty yards separated them, each began to sidle toward the creek. The blood which would otherwise have matted the fur of the aurochs' right shoulder had been washed away by sweat.

Old Nathan got up and followed his bull to the nearby stream. He kept a wary eye on the aurochs, splay-legged and already slurping water. Though the cunning man knew that he could neither affect nor be affected by the phantom, the piebald bull had a savage reality which penetrated to grosser planes of existence. Big Bone Valley would not become plowland so long as the aurochs' ghost walked it.

And that mattered not a whit to Old Nathan now.

The cunning man stepped down into the shallow creek and laid a hand on the shoulder of Spanish King. The black bull was shuddering as his muscles strove to throw off fatigue poisons accumulated in the nearly motionless struggle, and the air reeked with hormones saturating the sweat which foamed across his torso as far back as the last ribs. King's deep exhalations roiled the surface of the creek in counterpoint with his slobbering gulps of water.

"Ye've whipped 'im, boy," said Old Nathan earnestly, trying to keep the fear out of his voice. "Hain't another bull on this earth could've done what you did. Now, let's ussens go off and leave him t' his business. Hit ain't no affair of ours if some triflin' daddy's boy lays in a stand uv corn here er no."

"Ain't finished, old man," said the bull as he paused in drinking and got his breath enough under control that he could rumble out the words. "You know thet." The creek curled around his fetlocks, and his black hide steamed with sweat.

"What call do we hev t' stay here, damn ye?" the cunning man demanded.

The piebald bull pranced out of the stream, his tail lifted so that the center of it curved higher than his rump though the brush of long black hairs still hung down. Mud his hooves had stirred upstream began to drift past Old Nathan's boots.

"Come away," the man cried.

"And give him best?" murmured Spanish King. "Don't reckon so." He poised himself. "Watch yerself, old man," he warned, and he launched himself from the creek to charge his rival.

"Blood and dust!" thundered the aurochs as he pounded with his head high toward the black bull.

"King, he's hook—" cried Old Nathan, but the warning would have been too late even if it could have been heard over the competing bellows of the bulls.

The aurochs ducked so low that he seemed almost to have stumbled, his lower jaw sweeping dust from the clay. Neither the feint nor the piebald bull's attempt to hook him low took Spanish King by surprise, but his reflexes played him false for all that.

King twisted to block the thrust of a long-horned bull like himself, and the aurochs' right horn stabbed over King's guard and deep into his throat.

The black bull grunted in shock, and his legs stiffened as if the blow had been to the cortex of his brain. The aurochs rumbled in triumph and backed a step to give his rival time to die. Beads of arterial blood stained the right horn like rubies in black onyx.

Spanish King strode forward as the piebald bull stepped away. Their horns met and locked again with the sound of lightning striking a tall tree, and the aurochs gave back a further pace with surprise that the struggle had not ended. Blood rolled down King's black chest, and the stream lifted from the fur around the wound every time his heart beat.

Old Nathan fell to his knees in the dirt beside the trampling bulls, his hands clasped as if for prayer . . . but it was too late to pray, even if he had not forsworn the god, the God, of his father long years before. The blood that trailed from King's deep chest splashed on the clay like molten metal.

The aurochs kicked out against his black rival. When he kicked again with the other foreleg, Old Nathan realized that the piebald bull was lifting his forequarters from the ground in order to avoid being thrown down by the turning force King was applying through their locked horns.

"No!" the aurochs said. "No, you can't—" he thundered, and his forehooves lashed out together. They wagged short of Spanish King, though they splashed in the bloodstream as the piebald bull twisted to the right despite himself.

The crack of the aurochs' spine was as sharp as a pistol shot, but it was far too loud for that.

The piebald bull did not sprawl limp with his tongue thrusting in a vain effort to drive out sounds that his lungs no longer knew to power. Instead he vanished, uncanny only in the moment of his end.

Spanish King stumbled to the ground when the aurochs disappeared. His forelegs folded under him, and the gouting neck wound rubbed the furrow his lower jaw gouged in the dirt.

Old Nathan thought the black bull had died in the moment of victory, but when he ran to the beast, cursing the Devil in whom he believed as he could not God, King wallowed up from the side on which he had fallen. The bull got his forelegs beneath him, but instead of trying to rise he let his haunches down as well so that he lay on the ground in a parody of relaxation.

The cunning man knelt beside the black bull and pressed his right hand to the wound, muttering the words by which he marshalled the forces within himself to staunch the blood. It wasn't any good. On the lids of his closed eyes he could see the form of Spanish King wasting away like a salt carving in water, and his palm burned as if he held it in a stream of liquid rock.

"No, let it go, old man," the bull said in a voice gentler than any his master had ever heard come from his throat.

"Damn ye!" Old Nathan snarled, his eyes pressed closed because the tears would wash down even harder if he opened the lids. "You hold hard er I'll crack yer neck fer ye!"

"A big 'un," said Spanish King slowly. "But we showed 'im, old man. We showed that 'un who rules here."

"There was never yer like, big feller," murmured Old Nathan with his face pressed against the steaming neck of the bull. "There'll never be yer like, not till the sun goes cold."

The great black head lowered to the ground. " . . . showed 'im," whispered Spanish King as he died.

* * *

John Boardman rode his bay gelding slowly through the newground, coming from the west end as the piebald bull had done earlier that morning. His bitch gamboled about the man and horse, rushing from stump to charred brush pile, yapping enthusiastically at the small birds he put up. When the blond dog noticed Old Nathan, she trotted over to him a hundred yards in advance of her master. Her head was thrown back and her tail held high, giving the impression that she was already in flight after a rebuff.

"G'day t' ye," said the bitch, well back from the arc Old Nathan could sweep with the knife he wielded. She could smell his mood, and she had no way of telling that it was not directed at her or the world of which she was one of the nearer parts.

"I've knowed better," said the cunning man. He wiped the knife's longer blade on the bull's hide to clean the steel, then cocked up the sole of his left boot and stropped the edge on it, two strokes to a side with a metronome's precision. He paused and added with the same lack of anything but a desire to be precise, "And worse, I reckon. Maybe worse."

"Chased off t'other bull, did he?" the bitch remarked, stretching her muzzle out to snuffle Spanish King. Her right forepaw began a cautious step forward as she continued, "Wouldn't hev believed it, but he's gone sure 'nuff. Mean 'un, thet. Too mean t' live nor die, seemed t' me."

"Whoa, Virgil!" John Boardman called to his gelding, who had stopped twenty feet from the carcass anyway. The odors of blood and death threw the horse into a shivering panic not far short of driving him off in a mad stampede back up the way he had come. The gelding calmed somewhat when his rider dismounted, knotted the reins on an upturned tree root, and stepped between him and the scene of slaughter.

"Well, I reckon ye did it," said Boardman as he approached Old Nathan as cautiously as his dog had done a moment before. The landowner could not scent fiery rage in the cunning man's sweat, but he could watch and wonder at the knife and the sinewed, capable hands flaying a strip of hide from the bull's back.

"I rode all the way from the west boundary cut t' here," the younger man continued—standing out of knife range. "And Virgil shied nary onct but when a pigeon flapped up in 'is face. Couldn't hev rid 'im here this time yestiddy."

"Said I'd do it," Old Nathan muttered, then wrinkled his face in embarrassment. This boy couldn't know it, but success had never been more doubtful than in the moment it came . . . and the cunning man had no heart now for bluster, when his hands were red to the elbows with the blood of Spanish King.

Old Nathan did not stand up or even uncross his legs, but he paused in what he was doing to give Boardman his attention and a full answer. "What wuz here," he said, "hit's gone and won't be back. Ye kin plow here er pasture, whatever you please."

The cunning man resumed his work. He had already removed a hand's breadth of hide from Spanish King's nose to his croup. The horns were included by a strip of the poll.

"There's a thing I wonder, though," said Boardman, squatting down on his haunches with care not to let the tails of his frock coat brush the bloody soil. "The spring, ye see, it's closed up. The rock's cracked down all around it, and hain't no water come out at all."

He pointed toward the creek, as if Old Nathan would not already have noticed. The slime of finely divided clay particles gleamed between stones where it was still damp. Higher up on the rocks, the mud was cracking and lifting its edges toward the naked sun.

The cunning man ignored him, making the final cuts at the base of the dead bull's tail.

"Well," continued Boardman, disconcerted both by the older man's activity and his lack of response to the implied question, "I reckon thet's no affair of yourn. I'll hire Bully Ransden en his team t' grub out the landslip and get the spring t' flowing agin."

Old Nathan stood up slowly, lifting with his left hand the strop he had just cut and still holding in his right the knife which the coating of blood joined to his flesh. "He kin grub t' Hell, I reckon," the cunning man said, "and he'll not strike water there. What lived through the flow uv that spring, it's gone now and the water besides."

Boardman overbalanced as he tried to stand up and had to brace his right fingertips on the ground. His face had a queasy expression as he straightened, and he neither looked at that hand nor allowed the splayed fingers to touch one another for some moments.

"I see," he said in a voice that made it clear he understood nothing of what he had just been told. "Well, I reckon the Bully'll grub till he fetches water somehow."

The cunning man began to coil the bloody strap he held, starting from the back but letting the tail stick out to one side because it was too stiff to roll. The fresh hide made a fat bundle as well as a heavy one.

The younger man waited for Old Nathan to add something further, until it became evident that he had said all he cared to say. "Well," began Boardman. He paused to clear his throat, starting to shield the cough with his right hand. Then he thrust the member with its charnel slime back down at his side, a safe distance from his pants leg.

"Rub it in clean earth," said Old Nathan unexpectedly. His hands were occupied, but he twisted his neck so that his beard gestured up the slope where the ground was loose and dry. "Better'n water t' clean thet, evens if there wuz water."

"Well," said Boardman. "Well, thank . . ." He trudged a few steps away, scuffing his boots to find suitable soil and clear it of ash and soot. "Oh," he added as if by afterthought as he turned. "Reckon we might pay you yer price . . . though I don't know we ought to"—his gaze glinted away from Old Nathan's hard green eyes like lamp oil dripping from ice—"seeins as we don't want it put about that we wuz sacrificin' bulls 'r any sich heathen thing."

He did not realize that Old Nathan still held the open jackknife until the cunning man carefully set the roll of hide back on the ground. The horns, connected by a strip of skin but removed from their bony cores, flopped loose.

"Don't you dare t' threaten me!" the younger man bleated. He scuttled backward two steps with his hands out in prohibition toward Old Nathan, then tumbled over a stump in mewling panic.

"What's that?" his dog barked, leaping to her feet and baring her teeth. "Don't touch him now, don't touch him!"

Old Nathan raised the knife beside his ear and flicked the blade closed with his thumb. The blood on it and his forearm were already black. He made a motion that young Boardman's eyes could not follow, and the weapon vanished somewhere.

"Boy," the cunning man whispered, "we hev a bargain you and me, and ye'll keep yer part of it as I did mine."

He paused. Though Old Nathan's face was shaded by the brim of his hat, it seemed to Boardman, looking up from his sprawl, that the old man's eyes spit green sparks like pinches of copper salts thrown in a lamp flame.

"But . . ." continued the cunning man in the same whisper which carried as if his lips were an inch from the hearer's ear, "if I ever hear you've told anyone thet I killed a friend fer you, who hain't enough man t' hev rubbed the scale from 'is hoofs. . . . Ifen I ever hear thet, John Boardman, I'll cut a strop offen you as I done with him, and ye'll scream while I do it."

Old Nathan snapped his fingers above his head . . . but the sound was loud as a thunderclap, and Boardman thought he saw looming behind the cunning man the shape of a great black bull.

The Gold

"Might save a few fer the rest of us," squawked the mockingbird as Old Nathan dropped another blackberry into his poplar-bark basket.

Old Nathan looked up from what he was doing and snagged his hand in the thorns. "Go 'way, bird," the cunning man grumbled as he detached himself from the brambles. "Ye don't look ill-fed—and if ye did starve, the world 'd be a better place without your screechin'."

He eased a half step farther. The blackberry vines grew out from the margin of the woods into his oats. They'd need to be cut back before Old Nathan cradled the grain—but first he'd have berries.

"Tsk!" said the bird. "Now thet's a lie if ever I heard one! Why"—he half-spread his black-and-white barred wings to examine the interlocking edges of the flight feathers—"ifen I wish to, there's no prettier tune in all the world 'n mine."

Old Nathan grunted and collected three more of the ripe black fruit. The fingertips of his right hand were stained purple.

The strap supporting the basket over Old Nathan's left shoulder was cloth, gray linsey-woosey worn soft as soft from the days it was a shirt. Though the fabric didn't bite flesh the way a bail of split white oak would have done, there was nigh a gallon of blackberries in the bucket already. That, plus the weight of the long rifle in the cunning man's left hand, had about convinced him that it was time to traipse back to the cabin.

He reached out once more. The mockingbird got to the berry first and twisted his neck quickly to pluck

it.

"Git on with you!" the cunning man said in irritation. He prodded with his rifle muzzle. The bird flew to the top branches of a dogwood growing up beside the cleared field.

Old Nathan scowled, mostly at himself. He hadn't needed the berry . . . and the bird was right, his best call was as pretty as anything on earth. Finer 'n a nightingale, said the English beau who'd heard both.

Purple juice squirted from both sides of the mockingbird's beak. It lifted its throat and swallowed, keeping one sharp black eye on Old Nathan.

"Tsk!" the bird repeated. "Don't know why you carry thet old smoke-pole anyhow. You don't hunt."

Old Nathan found a ripe berry and twisted it off the vine. He popped it into his mouth instead of the bucket. Sweet and tart together, and gritty from the tiny seeds. Better 'n the all-sweet of honey, lessen you had a perticular notion for sweet.

"Don't eat meat," the cunning man corrected. "Thet don't mean I choose t' find a bear in my own patch and hev nothin' to go on but a bear's good natur."

The mockingbird trilled merrily at the ridiculous notion of a bear having a good nature. "Tain't no bears hereabouts," the bird sang. "There's a couple folk up t' your cabin though, waitin' you. People's worse nor bears, most times."

Old Nathan glanced north reflexively, in the direction of his cabin. There was nothing to be seen through the heads of his grain and the swell of the ground. Even if he'd been in a treetop like the bird, he didn't guess he'd have been able to tell much. His old eyes were sharp enough still, at a distance; but he wasn't a mockingbird for vision, no more than he was a bull for strength.

"Reckon I better go see 'em, thin," the cunning man muttered. "Reckon they've come t' consult me, not t' raise trouble."

But he checked the priming of his long rifle first; because what the mockingbird had said about humans and bears was pretty much Old Nathan's opinion too.

* * *

When the cunning man came up to the back door of his cabin, past the greetings of his two cows and the mule, the visitors were standing, but they hadn't been on their feet long. The cane-bottom rocker still tapped back and forth, and the straight chair had been moved to a corner where a man sitting in it could face out with solid logs behind him.

The man who'd gotten up from the rocker was Bascom Hardy. Hardy might not be the richest man in the county as he claimed, but he was right enough the richest man who'd made his money here.

"Earned his money" was another matter. Hardy dealt in loans and land—and in the law, to enforce those dealings.

Old Nathan couldn't put a name to the other man, but the type was frequent enough. The fellow had smallpox scars on the left side of his face and a knife-track trailing from below his right ear across his nose. From his hair and features, he was a half-breed.

No sin in that. White women had been mighty thin on the ground when Europeans settled the Tennessee Territory. Old Nathan himself had Cherokee blood. There was good and bad in any race, though, and the scarred man standing in the corner didn't appear to have been fortunate in the mixture he'd gotten from his parents.

The half-breed wouldn't meet Old Nathan's eyes, but his fingers played with the stock of his short-barreled caplock musket while he looked sidelong at the cunning man. Old Nathan figured the weapon was loaded with buck and ball, several heavy shot wadded down on top of a ball the size of the barrel's diameter. A wasteful load for hunting.

Unless you were hunting men.

Another time, the cunning man would have pulled the charge from his flintlock as soon as he came in the door. This time he did not, and he leaned the long rifle against the wall instead of hanging it over the chimney board where it would be closer to the half-breed than to its owner across the room.

Not that he figured there'd be that sort of trouble.

"Hope you don't mind me waiting for you here," said Bascom Hardy, saying and not asking, and talking as if the half-breed didn't exist at all. "I reckon you know who I am."

Old Nathan dipped a gourd of water from the barrel on the back porch. He drank some and splashed the rest over his face and neck. The cool liquid soaked the front of his shirt and dripped onto the puncheon floor with the irritated sound of frying grease.

"You're a man needs my he'p," the cunning man said. "Thet's why you're here."

He kneaded his face with strong, sinewy fingers. Another time he'd have gotten a dipper of buttermilk from the jug cooling in the creek; but that would mean offering some to his visitors, and just now he didn't care t' do so.

Bascom Hardy's face stiffened. "I don't need no man," he said sharply. "You'd best remember thet."

Hardy was a tall, hollow-cheeked man, near as tall as Old Nathan himself. He wore good store-bought clothes, but he seemed to have wizened up after the garments were fitted; now they hung loose. A gold chain with several gold seals swung across Hardy's narrow chest to a pocket of his waistcoat.

Old Nathan looked his visitor up and down. There were those who accused the cunning man of hating all mankind; but there were sure-God some folk easier t' hate than others.

"Thin I guess," Old Nathan said, "thet you kin leave, for I druther have your space thin your presence."

The cat sauntered in, licking cobwebs from his fur. He'd hidden under the cabin when the strangers arrived, showing that he didn't care any more for the folk than his master did.

"Wouldn't mind a bowl of milk," the cat yowled. "Seein's as you won't fetch me a dollop of good bloody meat."

Old Nathan bent sideways to scratch the ears of the big yellow tom. He kept his eyes on the human visitors and didn't answer the animal.

For a moment, the two men were all stillness and silence. Then Bascom Hardy shook the tension loose with a laugh and said, "Didn't mean to start off on the wrong foot. My name's Bascom Hardy, and I've come t' make a business offer t' you. Ned"—he didn't look around at the half-breed—"whyn't you set on the porch while me 'n Mister Nathan, here, we talk business."

"No more juice to either of 'em thin woods rats," the cat remarked scornfully. "Though they might be fun t' kill, specially"—he eyed the half-breed slouching onto the porch as ordered—"the squatty one."

"Set, then," the cunning man said grudgingly. He gestured his visitor to the straight-backed chair and sat in the rocker himself. "What is it you come t' see me for?"

Hardy lifted the offered chair closer to the table in the center of the single room. He glanced around with a false smile as he seated himself.

The cabin had few amenities, though they were all the owner required. Two chairs—the rocker to set in, and the straight chair by the table for when he ate, wrote, or did figures. Chests along one sidewall with stored clothing and a handful of personal items—nothing that would tempt a thief. On the table, an alcohol lamp; and on the chimney board above the walk-in fireplace, five fine porcelain cups, a plate, and a few knickknacks of less obvious purpose.

Hardy focused again on the cunning man's hot green eyes. "Waal," he said, "I guess you're a man wouldn't be feared of a spook, now, would ye?"

He thought nothing of the sort. His voice cajoled, encouraging Old Nathan to create a fearless self-image which would agree to do whatever the rich man wanted done—but feared to do himself.

"Say yer piece," Old Nathan said flatly. The chair rocked minutely beneath him, scritch-scratch; the high pine back moving no more than an inch at a stroke.

A pair of titmice, blue-gray with a black tip to their crests, flew in the cabin's open front door and perched for a moment—one on the underside of a roof pole and the other on the muzzle of the cunning man's rifle.

"My brother Bynum died over t' Maury County nigh three months ago," Bascom Hardy said. "A day past the new moon. He was a rich man, rich as rich."

"Tsk! There's a cat here," chirped one of the titmice as it fluttered from the gun to the roof, then out the back door in concert with its companion. "Tsk! But he can't ketch us!"

"Like you are yerse'f," Old Nathan stated flatly. He knuckled his beard, black despite his age, with his knobby right hand.

The cat's head turned to watch the birds. His tail beat twice. The second time it made a soft thump against the puncheon floor. The big tom got up from beside the rocker and walked toward the visitor's chair with an evil look in his eyes.

"That's true, I am," Bascom Hardy said. His tone was half between irritation at being interrupted and pride at what he took for flattery. "But that's not a speck t' do with my brother, and my brother Bynum's the reason I'm here."

He glanced around again, unable or unwilling to keep his lip from lifting in a sneer.

The cat rubbed firmly against the visitor's ankles, leaving a track of hair against the fabric of the black trousers. Hardy squawked, jerking his legs aside as though his boots had slid him into a cesspool.

"Cat!" Old Nathan snapped, coming up off the rocker. "You git back from there!"

The cat lifted his nose. "Hmpf," he said. "That un don't half hate cats, don't he?"

The cunning man's left index finger pointed. A spark of static popped in the air between Old Nathan and the animal.

"All right, all right," the cat grumped. "Keep yer britches on." He padded across the floor, then disappeared out the back door in a single fluid bound.

Bascom Hardy settled himself again in his chair. "That's better," he growled. He indicated the roof poles with a lift of his clean-shaven chin. "If thet dirty beast comes up t' me again, I'll kick him right through yer shakes."

Old Nathan remained standing. "Did you hear thet I don't eat meat, Bascom Hardy?" he asked.

Hardy raised an eyebrow. "I heard thet," he said. "I don't see how it signifies."

"But," the cunning man rasped, "ye never heerd I was a Quaker as wouldn't larrup a man to an inch of his life ifen he kicked my cat in my home. Did ye now?"

He grinned at his visitor. His eyes flashed like sparks of burning copper.

"I beg your pardon," said Bascom Hardy. His voice was sincere, at least in its undertone of fear.

Old Nathan relaxed and walked again to the water barrel. "Tell yer tale, Mister Hardy," he said. "Tell yer tale."

"I reckon Bynum knew his time or purty close to it," Bascom Hardy resumed. "For nigh a month, he'd been sellin' his notes and his land holdins—at a discount to shift 'em fast, like he'd gone out of his head!"

Hardy's voice lowered from its tone of shrill disbelief. He bent forward and added, "But he turned it into gold, all his paper and land into gold; and there must 've been a mort of it, rich as Bynum was!"

Old Nathan felt his skin tingling. There was nothing he could put a name to, no image or echo from the words his visitor had spoken; but there was something here waiting, and mayhap waiting for the cunning man himself. . . .

Old Nathan saw the image of gold coins tumbling across the surface of the rich man's mind, as though the brown eyes were windows to Hardy's thoughts. "Go on," he said. "Tell yer tale, Bascom Hardy."

The rocker still nodded from the vehemence with which the old man had risen from it; back and forth, a skritch and a squeal against the wear-polished pine floor.

Hardy blinked and returned to the present moment, but his voice was husky with memory as he said, "Bynum 'n me, we didn't git on, never had from childhood. We split Pappy's holdings when he died, and I don't mind tellin' ye that Bynum would hev cheated me on the settlement—but I was too sharp fer him!"

"You were full blood kin, you and your brother?" Old Nathan asked suddenly.

Bascom Hardy blinked again. "Eh?" he said. "The same mother, you mean? Thet's so, but I don't see how it sig . . ."

His voice trailed off as he heard it echoing previous words.

Old Nathan reached into the air above and behind his head. His eyes were open but fixed somewhere far beyond the solid log walls of his cabin. He felt . . . and it was there, his fingers closing on the bone-scaled jackknife as they always did when he twisted them just right.

He wasn't sure where the knife was or how he found it; but he did find it, this time and each time before, and perhaps the next time as well.

His visitor's eyes narrowed. Hardy was sure that the knife had come from Old Nathan's sleeve, or perhaps had been hidden all the time by the cunning man's long knobby fingers . . . but it looked as though—

Old Nathan handed the knife to Hardy and said, "Take it, take it. There's no magic t' this."

No more was there; but wherever the knife had been was cooler than the late-August air of the cabin.

Bascom Hardy frowned as he took the knife. It was an ordinary two-blade jackknife, with German-silver bolsters and scales of jigged bone. The shield in the center of one yellow scale was the only thing to differentiate it from thousands of other knives brought into the territory in peddlers' packs. The inset was true silver, which Old Nathan himself had hammered from a section of ten-cent piece and fixed to the knife by a silver rivet.

"Rub the silver plate with yer thumb 'n hand it back to me," the cunning man directed. Hardy obeyed, but he frowned both at the brusque tone of the command and his inability to tell what the older man had in mind.

"Tell your tale, Bascom Hardy," Old Nathan repeated quietly. He held the knife with the shield facing him. When he whispered a few words under his breath, the silver became a clouded gray.

"When I heard the discounts Bynum was takin', I rid right over to him," Hardy said. "Fust time I'd seen him since we settled Pappy's estate, but blood's thicker 'n water."

"And gold's thicker nor both," the cunning man muttered, his eyes on the shield.

"Lived in a little scrape-hole cabin not so big as this," Bascom Hardy said scornfully. "Bynum never knew thet if money was power, then power was money too. You got to put out to bring in, the way I do. He was the elder by a year, but I'm the one who got the sense."

"Some families," said Old Nathan, "the one child's as big a durned fool as the next." If he had glanced up as he spoke, the comment would have been pointed, but the cunning man continued staring at the knife in his hand.

"He'd took to his bed," Hardy continued. "He knowed he was failin', thet was sure. Didn't own a thing no more but the cabin and a few sticks o' furniture—" The visitor's eyes danced around the room in

which he sat. "And gold. He'd sold all thet land and all them notes-of-hand for gold. And he wouldn't tell me where it was he kept the gold."

A figure formed, on the silver shield or in Old Nathan's mind; he couldn't be sure, nor did it matter. A crab-faced man, his skin stained yellow by the lingering death of his liver, lying on a corn-shuck mattress with a threadbare blanket pulled up to his throat. The man was bald and aged by sickness, so that he might as easily have been Bascom Hardy's father as brother.

"He warn't able t' care for that gold!" Bascom Hardy added bitterly. "He warn't able t' care fer nothin, him a-layin' there on the bed and not a servant in the house. Couldn't get up to fetch a dipper of water, Bynum couldn't!"

"Hadn't any neighbors in t' he'p him, then?" Old Nathan asked.

Bascom's voice had caught when he mentioned the dipper of water. The cunning man did not need his arts to imagine the hale brother at the bedside, tempting the sick man with sight of a cool drink that could be his if only he spoke where his wealth was hidden. . . .

"Bynum didn't hold with neighbors pokin' their noses in his business," Bascom Hardy said sharply.

Old Nathan smiled at the silver. "No more do you," he said.

"Thet's as may be!" his visitor snapped. "I told you once, it's not me thet's your affair, d'ye hear?"

"Say on, Bascom Hardy," the cunning man said.

Hardy settled back in his chair, though he couldn't have been said to relax. "He said he'd come back and tell me of the gold whin the moon was new again," Bascom said.

On or through the knife's silver window, Bynum's jaundiced image mimed the words Bascom spoke aloud.

" 'Come back here', that was how he put it," Bascom continued, "and then he died." Hardy frowned at the memory. "Didn't even ask fer a drink, though I had the dipper right there."

He looked up, his brown eyes full of purpose and as hard as polished chert. "I want you t' set up in Bynum's old cabin when the moon goes in, three nights from now. You listen t' what he says and you won't be the loser fer it, you hear me?"

Old Nathan was in a dream state where all knowledge was bounded by the blurry walls of the tunnel which linked him to the shield on the knife scale. It was broad daylight in the world of the cabin, but formless gray in his mind.

Bascom Hardy's voice penetrated with difficulty to the cunning man's consciousness. The cries of birds and animals going about the business of their lives were lost in the shadows.

"Hit's been nigh three months since your brother died," Old Nathan said. The face on the silver was changing to that of a hard, square man of middle age. His front teeth were missing. "Who did ye put t' setting up afore me?"

"I don't see it signifies," Bascom Hardy grumbled. His host's blurred consciousness disturbed him,

though he had no idea of what was going on behind Old Nathan's hooded eyes.

After a moment, Hardy said, "Gray Jack it was. I have enemies, you kin see thet. He looked out fer me, the way Ned does now. I figgered when the new moon come again, Jack could spend a night in the cabin. If anybody come by t' speak—waal, he was a brave man, so he told me."

Old Nathan's lips twisted into an expression that could have been a smile or a sneer, whichever way a man wanted to read it. "You didn't say to him thet it was your dead brother would come t' speak, did ye?" he said. His voice echoed from the gray tunnel of his mind.

"How did I know it was?" the rich man blazed in defensive anger. "Anyhow, Jack didn't ask me, did he? And there's an all-fired mess of gold thet my brother hid somewhur, a mess of gold, I tell ye!"

"There's a well in front of yer brother's cabin," Old Nathan said as images streamed across the silver and through his mind.

"There's nothin' to the well but water 'n a rock floor," Bascom Hardy said dismissively. "D'ye think I didn't try thet the first thing out whin Bynum died?"

"Sompin come out of the well," the cunning man said. "What I cain't tell, because my mirror's silver and there's things silver won't show . . . but I reckon it was yer brother."

"Gray Jack said nobody come," Bascom said harshly. "I knowed he was lying. Shook like an aspen, he did, whin he tole me in the morning. I figger he run away soon as he seen Bynum."

"You figger wrong," Old Nathan said, too flat to be an argument. "The cabin has one door only, and Bynum was to thet door afore yer man heard him. He'd hev run if he could, but he hid under the bed. And yer brother, he et the supper and went out t' the well again."

"There's nothing in thet well, I tell you!" Bascom shouted. "Nor in the cabin neither! I warrant I searched it like no cabin been searched afore."

He swallowed, then continued more calmly, "Bynum, he's burried t' the back of the plot, not the front. I'd hev put him in the churchyard down t' Ridley, but the Baptists wouldn't hev him. I reckon they figgered I oughta pay them—but how was I t' do thet, I ask you, whin I haven't found airy cent of Bynum's money?"

Old Nathan smiled again. "Don't guess money was the problem, them not wanting yer t' bury yer brother," he said. The distance from which he spoke took the edge off the words. "What happened t' Jack, Bascom Hardy?"

The rich man looked up at the roof poles. A strip of bullhide dangled from them, the horns at the top and the coarse hairs of the bull's tail-tip brushing the floor. "I reckon," he lied, "Jack went off on his own."

"He hung hisself," said the cunning man.

"And what if he did?" Bascom Hardy shouted. "Hit was his own choice, warn't it? Just like the poor folk, they don't hoe their crop 'n thin they blame me when I buy their land at the sheriff's sale!"

"Was a woman the next time," said Old Nathan as the images in his silver-washed mind changed. "Old Mamie Fergusson from Battle Branch down Columbia way."

Bascom Hardy had come to Old Nathan because of the cunning man's reputation, but he squirmed nonetheless at proof of the reality behind that reputation. "Guess hit might hev been. She come t' me. I reckon she thought she'd find the gold herse'f, but what she said was she'd sit up fer me."

"Calls herse'f a witch," Old Nathan said quietly. "There's other folks as call her worse."

"What's thet to me?" his visitor demanded. "Anyhow, who're you to speak?"

"The Devil's loose in the world, Bascom Hardy," Old Nathan said without emotion, staring into the silver pool. "But I'm the Devil's master, depend on it."

Hardy grimaced, upset by the thought and the turn of conversation. "Don't signify," he muttered. "Anyhow, she didn't he'p neither. Guess she run off too."

"Guess she would hev chose to," said Old Nathan, "but she didn't get thet pick. Hit was at the door, and she hid in an old chest while hit et her supper. Your brother Bynum did."

"Warn't nothing in thet chest worth hauling off," Bascom Hardy said uncomfortably. "Nor the chest itself, neither."

Forestalling the next question, he added, "The old woman, she went off with her daughter. I reckon they'll put her in the State Farm if she don't quit shoutin' and carryin' on, but thet's not my business neither!"

Layers of thick gray felt peeled back one by one from around the cunning man. Sunlight streamed into his consciousness, but for a moment he could only shiver despite its warming impact. The knife trembled in his hand, but he didn't trust his control to put it away just yet.

Birds chirped in fear and anger. One of Old Nathan's heifers complained loudly at a rabbit which had hopped across the meadow and startled her.

"What's the matter with you?" Hardy demanded. He was concerned not with his host's condition, but that the condition might somehow threaten him.

Old Nathan shook himself. He gripped the back of the rocking chair. The solid contact was all that had kept him upright for a moment. "You mind yerself," he muttered. "Nothin's the matter with me."

The yellow tomcat stepped into the cabin again with his head high. There was a titmouse in his jaws. It peeped and fluttered one wing minusculely.

"Whyn't you set up fer your brother yerse'f, Bascom Hardy?" the cunning man asked.

His visitor looked away from the probing green eyes. "Bynum 'n me, we didn't git along when he was alive," Hardy said. "Don't guess him bein' dead ud change thet fer the better now—ifen it is him comin' back, the way he said he would."

Hardy lost the aura of discomfort which had momentarily softened his angular body. "Look here," he said. "Thet gold's mine now, not some dead man's. Mine by law and mine by right. I mean t' have it!"

He leaned forward again. "Now, you know about spooks, I reckon. Nothing there t' skeer you. You set

up in Bynum's cabin when the moon's dark these three nights from now, and I'll see you right of it. D'ye hear me?"

I hear more 'n you think you're saying', Bascom Hardy, the cunning man thought as he looked down at the other man. Aloud he said, "Reckon I kin git a neighbor t' milk the cows fer a few days."

When he smiled, as now, Old Nathan's mouth looked like an axe-cut in a block of walnut heartwood. "I don't know thet I'd claim t' hev friends hereabouts. But airy soul knows I pay my debts . . . and there's none so sure of hisse'f thet he don't think he might need what I could do fer him one day."

Bascom Hardy stood up. "Waal," he said, though the words were flummery, "I'm a businessman and I like t' see another businessman. Will ye come with me now t' Bynum's cabin?"

"I reckon I kin find it myse'f," Old Nathan said. "I'll be there afore the new moon."

"I'll look for ye," Hardy said in false joviality.

He opened the front door wider to leave. The motion pulled a breeze that scattered a slush of gray pinfeathers across the cabin floor. It was always amazing to see how many feathers a bird had, even a small bird.

"He had his say," muttered the cat past a mouthful of titmouse, "'n I had mine."

Old Nathan scowled—at the cat's ruthlessness, and at the image of that same set of mind which he knew was within his own soul.

* * *

"Thur's horses waitin' up around the next bend," said the mule as his shoes click-clicked down the loose stones of the sloping trail. "Thur's men with 'em too, I reckon."

"Thankee," said Old Nathan.

He shifted his flintlock so that it lay crossways to the saddle horn, not slanting forward. The undergrowth springing from this rocky clay soil was open enough that the long barrel wouldn't catch; and it was neither polite nor safe to offer a stranger his first view of you over a rifle's muzzle.

"Thet mean we're goin' t' set a piece, thin?" the mule asked.

"I reckon it does," the cunning man agreed.

The mule blew its lips out. "'Bout damn time," it muttered.

It was a good beast. Always grumbling, but no worse than any other mule; and always willing to do its job, though never happy about it.

Bascom Hardy scrambled to his feet when he saw Old Nathan mounted on the mule. His bodyguard Ned was a step slower, but that was because the half-breed's first thought was to point the musket toward the sudden sound. Ned had a hard man's instincts, but he warn't sharp enough nor quick enough t' be a problem if he decided to try conclusions at the small end of a rifle.

Folk hereabouts hed got soft. Back in the days when he followed Colonel Sevier to King's Mountain,

then men were men.

The hillside had never been cut for planting. Bynum Hardy's cabin was just out of sight among pines and the dogwoods which had grown up where the narrow clearing let in the sun. Old Nathan knew the building was there, though, because he'd seen it in the silver shield of his knife. The well that he'd seen also, just downslope of the dwelling, set right there next the trail where Bascom Hardy and his man waited.

Hardy tugged out his watch, gold like the chain on which it hung, and flipped up the cover of its hunter case. "I figgered I'd come t' make sure you kept your bargain," he said irritably. "I'd come t' misdoubt thet you would."

"You keep yer britches on," snapped the cunning man. A feller who used a watch t' tell time in broad daylight spent too much of his life with money in tight-hedged rooms. . . . "I said I'd be here, 'n here I am—"

He looked pointedly up at the sky. The sun was below the pine-fringed rim of the notch, but the visible heavens were still bright blue "—well afore time."

"Could use a drink," the mule grumbled. It kept walking on, toward the well. There wasn't a true spring house, but the well had a curb of mud-chinked fieldstones and a shelter roof from which half the shingles had blown or broken.

"Us too," whickered Bascom Hardy's walking horse, tied by his reins to a trailside alder. He jerked his head and made the alder sway. "Didn't neither of 'em water us whin we got here, 'n thet was three hours past."

"Lead yer horses t' me," Old Nathan grunted as he swung off the mule. "I'll water the beasts like a decent man ought."

The curb's chinking was riddled with wasp burrows. The well rope had seen better days, but it was sound enough and the wooden bucket was near new. The old one must uv rotted clean away, for a man as tight as Bynum Hardy to replace it.

Old Nathan looked down into the well.

"There's nothing there, I tell ye," Hardy said. A tinge of color in his voice suggested the rich man wasn't fully sure he spoke the truth—and that it might be more than callous disregard for his horse which kept him away from the well.

"There's water," said Old Nathan. He leaned his rifle carefully against the well curb and released the brake to lower the bucket.

The same two poles that held up the shelter roof supported a pivot log as thick as one of the cunning man's shanks. The crank and take-up spool, also wooden, were clamped to the well curb. The pivot log squealed loudly as it turned, but it kept the rope from rubbing as badly as it would have done against a fixed bar.

"Ned, take our horses over," Hardy ordered abruptly.

The well was square dug and faced with rock. When the bucket splashed against the water a dozen feet

below ground level, the sky's bright reflection through missing shingles shattered into a thousand jeweled fragments. The white-oak bucket bobbed for a moment before it tipped sideways and filled for Old Nathan to crank upward again.

He took a mouthful of water before tipping the rest of the bucket into the pine trough beside the well curb. It tasted clean, without a hint of death or brimstone . . . or of gold, which had as much of Satan in it as the other two together, that was no more 'n the truth.

"You wait yer turn," the mule demanded as Hardy's horse tried to force its head into the trough first. "Lessen you want a couple prints the size uv my hind shoes on yer purty hide."

"Well!" the horse said. "There's room for all I'd say—ifen all were gentlemen." But he backed off, and the mule made a point of letting the bodyguard's nondescript mare drink before shifting himself out of the walking horse's way at about the time Old Nathan spilled the third bucketful into the trough.

Old Nathan looked up to the cabin, dug into the backslope sixty feet up from the well. It squatted there, solid and ugly and grim. The door in the front was low, and the side windows were no bigger than a man's arm could reach through.

The cabin's roof was built bear-proof. Axe-squared logs were set edge to edge from the walls to the heavy ridgepole, with shingles laid down the seams t' keep out the rain. The whole thing was more like a hog barn than a cabin; but it warn't hogs nor people neither that the sturdy walls pertected, hit was gold. . . .

"Well, ye coming in with me?" Old Nathan said in challenge.

"I bin there," Bascom Hardy said without meeting the cunning man's eyes. "Don't guess there's much call I should do that again, what with it gettin' so late."

Hardy's hand twitched toward his watch pocket again, but he caught himself before he dipped out the gold hunter. "I reckon I'll be going," he said, tugging the reins of his horse away from the water trough. "I'll be by come sun-up t' see that you've kept yer bargain, though."

The rich man and his bodyguard mounted together. If Ned had been the man he was hired t' be, he'd hev waited so they weren't the both of 'em hanging with their hands gripping saddles and each a leg dangling in the air.

Bascom Hardy settled himself. "I warn ye not t' try foolin' me," he called. "I kin see as far into a millstone as the next man."

"Hmpf," grunted Old Nathan. He took his rifle in one hand and the mule's reins in the other. "Come along, thin, mule," he said as he started walking toward the cabin. No point in climbin' into the saddle t' ride sixty feet.

"Ye'd think," he muttered, "that if they trust me not t' hie off in the night with the gold, they oughtn't worry I'd come where I said I'd come."

The mule clucked in amusement. "Whur ye goin' t' run?" it asked. "Past them, settlin' a few furlongs up the road, er straight inter the trees like a squirrel? The trail don't go no further thin we come."

The cunning man looked over his shoulder in surprise. The two horsemen had disappeared for now; but,

as the mule said, they wouldn't go far. Just far enough to be safe from whatever came visiting the cabin.

And Bynum Hardy's cabin really was the end of the trail that led to it. "Broad as the trail was beat, I reckoned there was more cabins 'n the one along hit," Old Nathan muttered.

Gold had beaten the trail. Need for money had brought folk to Bynum Hardy's door, even back here in a hollow too steep-sided to be cleared while there was better land still to be had. A cheap tract, where a cheap man could settle and sow the crop he knew, gold instead of corn.

And when the loans sprouted, they brought folk back a dozen times more. People bent with the effort of raising the payments until they broke—and Bynum Hardy took their land and changed it in good time to more gold.

"You'll feed me now, I reckon," the mule said at the door of the cabin.

Much of the clay chinking had dropped out from between the logs. It lay as a reddish smear at the base of the walls. The cabin was still solid, but it had deteriorated badly since the day it was built for want of care.

Old Nathan looked upward. The sky was visibly darker than it had been when he met Bascom Hardy. "I figger," he said, "I'll get a fire going whilst there's daylight. Like as not I'll need t' cut wood, and I only packed a hand-axe along."

"Reckon you'll feed me now," the mule repeated. "Thur's no stable hereabouts, and I don't guess yer fool enough to think the reins 'll hold me ifen I'm hungry."

The cunning man leaned his rifle against the wall, then turned to uncinch the saddle. Most of the load in the saddlebags was grain and fodder for the mule. He hadn't expected to find pasture around the dead miser's cabin. . . .

"You're nigh as stubborn as a man, ye know thet?" he said to the mule.

The beast snorted with pleasure at the flattery. "What is it ye need t' do here?" it asked.

Old Nathan lifted off the saddle with the bags still attached to it. "Set till somebody comes by," he said. "Listen t' what they say."

The mule snorted again. "Easy 'nuff work," it said. "Beats draggin' a plow all holler."

"Easy enough t' say," Old Nathan said grimly as he unbuckled one of the bags. "How easy hit is t' do, thet we'll know come morning."

There were no clouds in the sky, but the blue had already richened to deep indigo.

* * *

The soil round about the cabin had been dug up like a potato field, and the fireplace within was in worse shape yet. All the stones of the hearth had been levered out of their mud grouting and cast into a corner.

Somebody since, Gray Jack or the witchwoman Mamie Fergusson, had set a fire on the torn clay beneath the flue. Recently cut wood lay near the fireplace where the bodyguard tumbled it the day he watched and waited—for Bynum Hardy, though he didn't know that at the time.

Old Nathan got to work promptly, notching feathers from the edge of a split log with his hand-axe. He made a fireset of punk and dry leaves to catch the sparks he struck from a fire steel with a spare rifle flint, then fed the tiny flames with a blob of pine pitch before adding the wood. When that log had well and truly caught, he added others with care.

The process was barely complete before the hollow's early dark covered the cabin. The cunning man stepped back, breathing through nostrils flared by the mental strain of his race with the light. There were other ways Old Nathan could have ignited a fire . . . but though some of those ways looked as easy as a snap of the fingers, they had hidden costs. It was better to struggle long in the dark with flint and steel than to use those other ways.

The orange flames illuminated but did not brighten the interior of the cabin. The single room was bleak and as dank as a cave. The furnishings were slight and broken down—but most likely as good as they had been while Bynum Hardy lived in this fortified hovel. There was a flimsy table and a sawn section of tree bole, a foot in diameter, to act as a stool.

The bed frame was covered with a corn-shuck mattress and a blanket so tattered that Bascom Hardy had abandoned it after his brother's death. The cunning man remembered the image of Gray Jack cowering beneath the low bed, hopelessly slight cover but all there was . . . and sufficient, because the one/thing who entered the cabin the night of the new moon wasn't interested in looking for whoever might be hiding.

The leather hinges had rotted off the chest by the sidewall. The lid hung askew to display a few scrappy bits of clothing. Gray Jack was too big to fit into the chest, but it had been just the right size for Mistress Fergusson.

Neither of Bascom Hardy's two watchers had escaped, not in the end. One hanged and one raving; and a third, Old Nathan, waiting for his fire to burn down so that he could make ash cakes with the coals.

The cunning man sighed. He'd been afraid before, plenty of times; but he'd never been so fearful that he didn't stand up to it. If there was a thing on earth he was sure of, it was that running didn't make fear less, and standing couldn't make it greater.

But that didn't mean the thing you feared and faced wouldn't eat you alive. There were false fears; but some were true enough, and there was nothing false about whatever came to this cabin for the bodyguard and the witch a month ago, and a month before that.

Old Nathan added more wood to the fire, then began a task to keep his hands full and his mind calm. As he worked, he clucked his tongue against the roof of his mouth and called softly, "Hey there! Anybody t' home?"

"Who's thet you're speakin' to, then?" the mule demanded from the other side of the closed door. Like everything else about the cabin, the door panel was crude but massively strong. It had wrought iron hinges and crossed straps of iron on the outer face.

"I reckon there might be somebody as could tell me about Bynum Hardy," Old Nathan answered. "A squirrel, maybe, er a mouse."

The mule snorted. "Naught here t' bring airy soul," the beast said. "'Cept a man, I reckon, 'n they ain't got the sense God gave a rock."

Old Nathan opened his mouth to snarl a reply; but when he thought through the mule's comment, it was all true enough. No food, and shelter worse nor a log rotted holler. . . .

He went on with his task.

"Whut is hit you're doin' in thur, then?" the mule asked.

It occurred to the cunning man that his animal was uneasy, though there was little chance of a bear or a painter hereabouts. Bynum Hardy's cabin was strengthened against human enemies, not beasts. . . .

"I'm pulling the charge from my rifle gun," Old Nathan said. He tipped down the flintlock's muzzle. The powder charge dribbled along the bore and out onto a square of hard-finished leather. From there he would transfer the powder back to the polished cowhorn whose wooden stopper measured the charge proper to this weapon.

"Whutever possessed ye t' do sich a durn-fool thing as that?" the mule demanded in outrage. "Whut sort uv place d'ye think this is, anyhow?"

On the table before Old Nathan lay the ball and the patch lubricated with a mixture of butter and beeswax. He would not use tallow, anymore than he would eat meat; from a bird, a beast, or a human, it was all the same in his mind.

"Ifen I leave the charge in the bore overnight," he said softly, more to himself than the mule, "hit'll draw water 'n rust. And besides . . ."

Firelight winked from fresh, unoxidized lead where the screw in the back of the cunning man's ramrod had dug in to withdraw the ball. When he returned home, Old Nathan would recast the bullet; but—needs must and the Devil drove—he could use the ball as it was. Seated with the screw gouge down against the powder, it would fly true enough for the purpose.

"And besides," the old man said, "I don't reckon whativer comes 'll be much fazed by a rifle ball, so mebbe hit's best I don't put temptation in my way."

The mule grunted, but it said nothing more.

Old Nathan set the empty flintlock in a corner beside the door, away from the smoke and sparks of the fire. There weren't any pegs to hang a rifle up properly, though he didn't guess a man as rich and fearful as Bynum Hardy had done his business without a gun to hand.

He set the cloth-wrapped paste of corn meal on the hearth and raked coals over it to cook the batter into ash cakes. It wasn't so very late, but it felt late.

The Devil himse'f knew it felt late.

* * *

The sauce pan was full of leather-britches beans boiled with hot peppers. Old Nathan set the container on the table, then stepped back to the fireplace to fetch the ash cakes.

"Hey!" the mule snorted. "Ye've comp'ny comin', old man!"

Old Nathan poised for a moment, hunched over the hearth with his eyes closed. Well, he hadn't come all this way not t' meet Bynum Hardy. He straightened and walked to the door, opening it wide.

Something—somebody—was climbing out of the well. The figure was almost over the curb, but Old Nathan had time Gray Jack and the witchwoman didn't have. Time to run . . . except there was never a good time to run.

The mule snorted restively. The beast was a warm presence, but Old Nathan could see nothing of it beyond the glint of starlight on one wide, staring eyeball.

Bynum Hardy wore a suit of rusty black with a collarless shirt. The soles of his ankle boots were patched with patterned cowhide. He and his garments were as clear as though a living man stood in broad daylight, but whatever illuminated the figure cast no glow on the solid objects around it.

"I'm not so durned a fool thet I'll wait here!" the mule muttered as it moved off at a shambling trot. The animal's course was marked by occasional sparks from its shoes on quartz and the crash of undergrowth at the edge of the clearing.

Bynum Hardy began walking up the short trail to the cabin.

Old Nathan went back inside. He left the door open. His fire had burned down, but its orange flames had a cheerful character that he hadn't imagined in them until after he saw the cold gray light dripping onto the surface of the figure from the well.

He recollected how much afraid he'd been at King's Mountain—after the bullet hit him. His buckskin breeches wet with hot blood, and him unwilling to look down to see what the bullet had done. Though he knew where the bullet passed—and what it passed through on its way.

Old Nathan spilled the layers of ash and burned-out coals from the cloth over his cakes. Before he placed the ash cakes on the table, however, he added a fresh log to the fire.

When he turned with the cakes, Bynum Hardy was at the door.

"Howdy do," Old Nathan said in a voice as gruff and clear as that with which he'd greet any benighted traveller. He put the hot corn cakes down on a slab of bark and peeled the cloth off the top of them. "How ye gettin' on?"

"All right, I guess," said Bynum Hardy. He sounded as though he were still calling up out of the well, but it might be he always sounded that way—alive as well as now that he was dead.

He looked at the cunning man and added, "I hope you're well?"

"About like common," Old Nathan said. He flicked his bearded chin to indicate the food on the table. "Set 'n eat with me, won't ye? Hain't much, but it's hot."

"No thankee," said the cabin's dead owner. He walked around the table to the hearth. His feet did not sound on the puncheon floor. "Reckon I'll jist warm myse'f at yer fire, ifen ye don't mind."

Old Nathan stared at the dead man's back. "Suit yerse'f," he said; and sat on the sawn round of treebole; and began to eat.

The food had no taste in his mouth, for all the pepper in the beans and a touch of onion in the ash-cake batter.

When the cunning man finished his meal, using his hands and the spoon from his budget, he looked at Bynum Hardy again. Mostly the fellow held his palms out to the fire, but occasionally he turned his hands to warm the backs. His body appeared solid as a living man's, but the cold internal glow defined parts which should have been in shadow.

Old Nathan took another swig from his water bottle. The last bite of ash cake hed like t' stuck in his throat. . . .

He got up and stepped to the hearth, carrying the slab of poplar bark he'd cut for a plate. Bynum Hardy moved aside in a mannerly fashion, making room for the living man. His figure had no temperature Old Nathan could feel, neither as warm as life, nor cold like a corpse buried three months in the wet clay.

The fire had sunk to a few sawteeth of flame and coals reflecting back from white ash. The cunning man tossed the bark in and watched it flare into bright popping yellow. Bynum Hardy folded his arms, but he did not back away.

"If ye like," Old Nathan said, "I'd throw another stick er two on the fire fer ye."

No response. "Er you kin fix it the way ye choose, I reckon."

The bark burned away to a twisted black scrap. The room seemed darker than before the quick flames had lighted it.

Bynum Hardy turned and said, "Thankee, but I reckon this'll do me. You jist go about yer business."

Old Nathan met the dead man's eyes. "Myse'f," he said, "I figger I'll turn in. Hit's been a long day."

He opened his blanket roll, took off his boots, and settled down against a sidewall, away from both the fire and the rotten scraps of Bynum Hardy's bed.

He didn't guess he'd be able to sleep. Bedding down was the best way to keep from showing the fear that would otherwise consume him.

But sleep the cunning man did, looking back toward the settling fire and the crisply illuminated figure standing in front of it.

* * *

Old Nathan awoke.

It was nigh about midnight from the fire's state. The hearth cast a patch of warmth into the air, but only the faintest glow suggested coals were still alive.

Bynum Hardy was walking toward the door, and his boots made no sound.

"Howdy," the cunning man said.

The ghost image turned and looked at him. "Reckon I'll go off, now," he said in hollow tones. "Thankee fer the fire. I been mighty cold the past while."

Hardy took another step toward the open door.

"I thought there was maybe a message ye wanted t' speak," Old Nathan said, supporting his torso with one arm. "Fer yer brother, it might be."

Bynum Hardy turned again. "Not here," he said. "You foller me t' home, then I'll give you a word t' take t' Bascom."

"I understood this t' be yer cabin," Old Nathan said. He fetched his left boot forward in the dark and began to draw it onto his foot.

"Hain't mine now," said Bynum Hardy. "You foller me, and ye'll git the word ye come fer."

He went out the door. The cunning man hopped after him, pulling on his right boot.

It wasn't a surprise, not really, to see Bynum Hardy disappear back into the well.

Old Nathan paused at the curb. He gripped the well rope, wishing he were younger; wishing—

No. He was where he chose to be, and he was the man he chose to be. He wouldn't have it otherwise.

Hand over hand, Old Nathan climbed down into darkness.

* * *

Old Nathan's head dropped below the level of the well curb. The world above him became a handful of gray blotches cast on greater blackness: patches where shingles missing from the shelter roof showed the sky. Some hint of light must remain to the heavens, though there had been no sign of it when the cunning man looked up before grasping the well rope.

He waited for the splash that meant Bynum Hardy had reached the surface of the water. He heard nothing but his own breath wheezing in the square stone confines of the well shaft.

He waited for his boots to touch the water. Wondered what he would do then, go on like a blame fool till he was soaked and cold, or haul up again and tell Bascom Hardy that he'd failed. . . .

He didn't come to a conclusion. The choices kept walking through his mind as his strong old hands lowered him further—until he realized that if this rope led anywhere, it was not to the water from which Old Nathan drank and drew for the horses.

The cunning man's mouth worked, but he said nothing aloud. He'd not been able to pray since King's Mountain; and this was no place for a man to curse.

His arms ached. He sweated with the effort of the descent, but the droplets runneling down the troughs beside his spine were cold by the time they soaked the waistband of his trousers.

Abruptly, Old Nathan began to laugh. He wheezed from exhaustion, but the humor was real enough. It wasn't every durn fool who had time to see what an all-mighty durn fool he'd been for the last time in his life!

There was Zeb Frawley, who thought he could call down lightning, which was maybe right—and thought

he could direct that lightning's path, which was wrong as wrong, and his bloated body to prove it the next morning. There was John Wesley Ives who'd witched Leesha Tazewell into his bed—and forgot that while Rufe Tazewell didn't know a lick of magic, he could shoot out a squirrel's eye at thirty paces; or shoot through the bridge of John Wesley Ives' nose at a hundred, as it turned out.

Then there was—

The weight came off the cunning man's arms. The distant echo of his laughter rumbled back to him, as if from the walls of an immense cavern. He felt nothing under his feet to support him, but neither was he falling.

The air around the cunning man was not black but gray, a gray so dense that he could not see his own hands when he raised them to his face. His calloused palms felt rough and loose from the pull of the rope.

"Bynum Hardy!" he called. "I've come t' ye. Now show yerself!"

He didn't know what he expected; only that he was no longer afraid. He'd faced this one till he beat the part of it that was in him; and for the rest, well, every man had his time, and if this was his time—so be it.

The gray cleared like fog streaming in a windstorm. A long tunnel with a figure at the end of it, then up close enough to touch: Bynum Hardy, twisting like a pat of butter across a hot skillet, and nowhere to go however it turns.

"I played yer games," Old Nathan said harshly. "Now I'll hev my side of the bargain. Give me the word t' take t' your brother."

"D'ye know where I am, wizard?" Bynum Hardy said. He spoke through tight-clenched lips, like a man tensing against the pain of a gunshot—knowing that his blood and life ran out regardless.

"Thet makes no matter t' me," Old Nathan replied harshly. "Hit's between you 'n whoever it was put ye here. Just answer me where yer brother's gold is at."

"The gold's in the pivot log of the well," Hardy said. "But it hain't Bascom's gold."

Vague figures reached up from behind the dead man, or they may have been wisps of fog. Something constrained and tortured Bynum Hardy, but there was no sign of it to the cunning man's eyes.

"Tain't your'n anyways," Old Nathan snapped. His conscious mind had only loathing for the tortured figure, but the skin of the cunning man's arms pricked up in goosebumps from the sight. It warn't fright; only the way his body was contending.

But the righteous truth was, he wanted no more part of this wherever place.

"I've told you what Bascom wants t' hear," Bynum Hardy said, twitching and grimacing between the words. "Now I'll tell ye what he must hear. He's t' take thet gold and give it t' them poor folk I wronged when I was alive. Tell him!"

"If bein' poor meant bein' virtuous," Old Nathan said in sudden anger, "thin there'd be a sight less wickedness in the world. D'ye think scatt'ring money on good folk 'n bad alike is going t' buy you out uv this here place?"

"Don't you be a greater fool 'n God made ye, Nathan Ridgeway," said the dead man, speaking a name Old Nathan thought there wasn't a soul in the county to remember or care.

Bynum Hardy leaned forward, against the pull of invisible, flamingly-cold bonds. He gasped with pain, then went on, "Hit don't signify what they were, good men nor bad. Hit's what I did thet put me here. I squeezed, 'n whin they cried out I squeezed the harder, fer thet meant they were weak. Bascom's to give the gold t' them as I took it from, their crops 'n their land . . . and if I could, the very clothes they wore."

The skin of Bynum Hardy's cheeks drew out to either side, as though men with tongs had gripped him. He sobbed wordlessly with his eyes closed for a moment. "All the gold, all the prayers on earth, wizard . . ." Hardy managed to whisper.

His eyes opened, filled with pain, as he continued, "None of it's airy good t' me now. Hit's all too late. I never done a speck uv good t' airy soul while I was alive—but I'll do this now fer my brother Bascom, ifen he'll only listen. Tell him t' give my gold away, and maybe he'll find a better place whin he follows me."

A spasm of something unendurable dragged a scream from the dead man's throat. "Tell him thet . . ." he rasped, and the smoke-gray emptiness swept over Old Nathan again.

The cunning man felt movement, but he could not tell how or whither. There were moans, but they might have been the blood soughing in his ears—

And the clammy fingers that twice plucked Old Nathan's garments could have come from his imagination alone. . . .

* * *

"Thur's a couple horses comin' down the trail," called the mule. "Reckon thur's men with 'em too."

It was dawn, thought barely. Old Nathan was wrapped in his blanket, but he felt as stiff and cold as if he'd spent the night in the rain on a barn roof.

He threw his cover back. His feet were bare, and his boots stood upright at the foot of the blanket.

The mule stuck its head in the cabin's open door. "Wouldn't turn down some breakfast," it said. "Say, whur was it ye went last night?"

Old Nathan drew his boots on. "Don't know thet I did," he said as he stood up.

The mule snorted and backed away to allow the cunning man to pass him. "Don't give me thet," the beast said. "What d'ye take me fer, a horse? I watched fum the trees whilst you went down the well with thet feller. Didn't see ye come back, though."

Old Nathan kneaded the mane and neck muscles of his mule. The beast butted him and muttered contrarily, "Naow, thur's no cause fer this." It was happy for the attention nonetheless.

"If I was down thet place . . ." the cunning man said. He looked toward the well, but he thought about somewhere far more distant. "Thin I'm right glad I did come back, however thet was."

He strode toward the well.

"Hoy!" called the mule. "Ye forgit my breakfast!"

"I forgit nothing!" Old Nathan growled without turning around. "Ifen you come down here, yer majesty, I'll pull ye some water, though."

He had the third bucketful in the trough and the mule was drinking, when Bascom Hardy and his half-breed companion came around the bend in the trail. The bodyguard led. When Hardy saw that the cunning man was up and about, he pushed his horse past his servant's and trotted the short distance to the well.

"Waal, what did ye see, old man?" Bascom Hardy demanded.

He wore the same clothes he'd wore yesterday, and he'd slept in them. There was a wild look in his eyes that reminded Old Nathan of Hardy's brother Bynum; and reminded him also that there was more than hot iron as could torture a man.

"I seen yer brother," the cunning man said simply. "He's in a right bad place—"

"Told ye he tried t' cheat me of Pappy's prope'ty, didn't I?" the rich man crowed. He swung out of the saddle. "But where's the gold, thin, tell me thet?"

Hardy's horse, with a patch of mud on its side that hadn't been curried off, would have bumped Old Nathan on the way to the water if the cunning man hadn't stepped back. The mule raised its huge, bony head from the trough and said, "Tsk! Watch it, purty boy, er they'll find yer ribs in the middle uv next week."

"But I'm parched!" the horse whinnied.

"Let the poor feller drink, mule," the cunning man said. "He's jist the way he was born. Hain't nothin' he kin help."

"What's thet?" demanded Bascom Hardy. "What's thet you say?"

"Hit don't signify," Old Nathan said tiredly.

He rubbed his eyes, then met the rich man's nervous glare. Hardy shifted from one leg to the other, ready to bust with frustration.

"Bynum said where the gold was," the cunning man continued, "and ye'll hev thet in a moment, so don't git yer bowels in an uproar. But he said you're t' pay the money out t' all the folk he took it from. You would've took his papers off first thing whin he died, so I reckon you kin find a few of them folks, anyways."

Bascom Hardy's mouth gawped open and let out something between a snort and a hoot of laughter. "Bynum was a fool airy day he lived," the rich man said. "But he warn't no sich fool as thet!"

His face hardened into fury. "What I figger," Hardy rasped, "is thet you reckon t' keep the gold fer yerse'f, old man. Well—"

He lifted his left hand and snapped his fingers. The half-breed cocked the hammer of his musket, though he kept the muzzle pointed down on the far side of his mare. Hardy's own walking horse skittered

sideways in panic at the metallic warning.

"Oh, yer a fine brave crew," Old Nathan whispered. His voice sounded like a file setting up sawteeth. "Ye want the gold, d'ye? Well, I reckon you kin hev it."

Anger sluiced the stiffness out of the old man's joints. He stepped onto the well curb, then gripped the pivot log with both hands as he shouldered the nearer of the support poles aside.

"What's thet you're doin'?" Hardy demanded.

The pole gave enough for Old Nathan to spring the turned-down end of the pivot from the auger hole in the support. He pulled the log free, letting the well rope tumble down the shaft.

The pivot log was red oak. A heavy wood in all truth, but this was far heavier than wood.

The cunning man turned. Ned swung his musket over the mare's neck to half-point in the old man's direction.

"You do thet, boy," Old Nathan said. "And you better be quick with the way you use it."

"Ned," said Bascom Hardy. "There's no call . . ."

But the bodyguard had already hidden the weapon again, behind his body and the horse's.

Old Nathan reached over his head. His fingers touched, gripped . . . came out into open air with the bone-scaled case knife. He stood on the stone curb, smiling coldly and staring at Ned. The half-breed refused to meet his eyes.

The cunning man used the knife's larger blade to pry at the faint seam in the end of the pivot log. The plug dropped. The cavity within was the diameter of a man's fist. Bascom Hardy's breath drew in.

Old Nathan tilted the log and slid out the long leather poke that filled the hollow. It was so heavy that it clanked with a sound more like a smithy than a banker's till.

Hardy snatched the sack from the trampled dirt. "Ned," he gabbled in a high-pitched voice as he trotted up to the cabin, "you watch the door, ye hear me?"

The cunning man tossed the empty oak cylinder away and stepped to the ground. He didn't reckon Bascom Hardy meant him to follow to see what was in the poke; but—he smiled grimly at Ned, who twisted his face away to avoid the hard green eyes—he didn't reckon there'd be anyone try to stop him, neither.

He folded the blade and put his knife away.

The rich man trotted up the trail, but the sack's weight slowed him. Anyhow, Old Nathan's long legs had covered more miles in their time than Bascom Hardy had rode over. The two men reached the cabin together.

Hardy reached to close the door. The cunning man held the panel open with an arm as thin and hard as a hickory pole.

"Reckon you'll want light," Old Nathan said. "Lessen ye brung a tallow dip?"

The fury left the rich man's face. "No," he said. "I reckon the door kin stay."

The poke was folded three times at the neck, but it had no drawstring tie. Hardy opened the end and gently fed its contents onto the table like a farmer squeezing milk from a cow's udder.

The contents were gold, all gold but for one thin Spanish dollar.

"Oh . . ." the rich man sighed as he laid a glittering worm of coins across the surface of the rickety table.

There were twenty-dollar double eagles and every manner of other gold coins of the United States, but that was no more than half the assemblage. British guineas gleamed beside broad coins bearing the image of Maria Theresa, and the gold of a score of other nations and dynasties spilled across the table with them.

The folk who settled central Tennessee came from every part of Europe and from the world beyond. Those who had wealth brought it with them; and a part of that wealth had stuck to the fingers of Bynum Hardy. . . .

Old Nathan looked at the gold and looked at the face of Bascom Hardy; and began to pack his traps.

The rich man's fingers moved with the precision of a clock's escapement as he ordered the mingled coins into stacks and rows. Old Nathan rolled and tied his blanket, then gathered loose items and packed them in his budget.

He saved the sauce pan out. He'd scour that with water and sandy clay when he reached the well.

Gold chinked and whispered across the tabletop. Bascom Hardy did not look up.

"There's the matter uv my pay," the cunning man said.

Hardy started upward. For the first instant, his face bore the snarl of a fox surprised in a henhouse; but that passed as quickly as a lightning flash, leaving behind the stony haughtiness of a banker in his lair.

"Your pay, old feller?" Hardy said. "Show me the writing! I s'pect you know there's no contract between us, not so's any court 'ud find."

Old Nathan said nothing; only stared.

Bascom Hardy met the cunning man's eyes, then looked away.

"I'm a generous man," the rich man said. His fingers played across his stacks of gold, touching them as lightly as wisps of spidersilk trailing from the grass. "I wouldn't hev it said I didn't treat a man better thin the law requires."

He glanced up, meeting Old Nathan's eyes briefly, then looking down again. On the table before Hardy were eleven guineas in stacks of five and five and one. His sallow index finger touched the lone piece, then raised again to hover above the sheen of pale African gold.

With a convulsive movement, Bascom Hardy slid the Spanish dollar instead across the table toward the

cunning man.

"There," the rich man said. "Take it 'n thankee. I'll tell all I come to thet you're a clever man. Thet'll be money in yer pocket so long as ye live."

Old Nathan took the eight-real coin between two fingers and turned it over. He set the silver piece back on the table.

"I tell ye!" Hardy said, his voice rising. "There's no contract! You cain't force me t' pay you airy a cent!"

Old Nathan picked up his saddlebags and pan in one hand, then paused in the doorway to take his rifle from where he'd leaned it.

"Hain't loaded," he said with a tiny smile. "Don't guess there's ought I'll meet t' worry me on the road back."

He walked out of the cabin. Hardy's bodyguard had dismounted by the cabin. He watched the cunning man sidelong, nervously lipping his moustache.

"Wait!" Bascom Hardy called from the doorway. "Take your pay. It's good silver!"

Old Nathan turned and looked at the rich man. "I reckon," the cunning man said, "hit may take a heap of money fer ye to get where ye deserve t' be. I wouldn't want ye to come up short."

As Old Nathan walked toward his mule, he whistled the air of a grim old ballad between his smiling teeth.

The Bullhead

"That don't half stink," grumbled the mule as Old Nathan came out of the shed with the saddle over his left arm and a bucket of bait in his right hand.

"Nobody asked you t' like it," the cunning man replied sharply. "Nor me neither, ifen it comes t' thet. It brings catfish like it's manna from hivven, and I do like a bit of smoked catfish fer supper."

"Waal, then," said the mule, "you go off t' yer fish and I'll mommick up some more oats while yer gone. Then we're both hap—"

The beast's big head turned toward the cabin and its ears cocked forward. "Whut's thet coming?" it demanded.

Old Nathan set the bucket down and hung the saddle over a fence rail. He'd been raised in a time when the Tennessee Territory was wilderness and the few folk you met liable to be wilder yet—the Whites worse than the Indians.

But that was long decades ago. He'd gotten out of the habit of always keeping his rifle close by and loaded. But a time like this, when somebody crept up so you didn't hear his horse on the trail—

Then you remembered that your rifle was in the cabin, fifty feet away, and that a man of seventy didn't move so quick as the boy of eighteen who'd aimed that same rifle at King's Mountain.

"Halloo the house?" called the visitor, and Old Nathan's world slipped back to this time of settlement and civilization. The voice was a woman's, not that of an ambusher who'd hitched his horse to a sapling back along the trail so as to shoot the cunning man unawares.

"We're out the back!" Old Nathan called. "Come through the cabin, or I'll come in t' ye."

It wasn't that he had enemies, exactly; but there were plenty folks around afraid of what the cunning man did—or what they thought he did. Fear had pulled as many triggers as hatred over the years, he guessed.

"T'morry's a good time t' traipse down t' the river," the mule said complacently as it thrust its head over the snake-rail fence to chop a tuft of grass just within its stretch. "Or never a'tall, that's better yet."

"We're goin' t' check my trot line t'day, sooner er later!" Old Nathan said over his shoulder. "Depend on it!"

Both doors of the one-room cabin were open. Old Nathan liked the ventilation, though the morning was cool. His visitor came out onto the back porch where the water barrel stood and said, "Oh, I didn't mean t' take ye away from business. You jest go ahead 'n I'll be on my way."

Her name was Ellie. Ellie Ransden, he reckoned, since she'd been living these three years past with Bully Ransden, though it wasn't certain they'd had a preacher marry them. Lot of folks figured these old half-lettered stump-hole preachers hereabouts, they weren't much call to come between a couple of young people and God no-ways.

Though she still must lack a year of twenty, Ellie Ransden had a woman's full breasts and hips. Her hair, black as thunder, was her glory. It was piled now on top of her head with pins and combs, but if she shook it out, it would be long enough to fall to the ground.

The combs were the only bit of fancy about the woman. She wore a gingham dress and went barefoot, with calluses to show that was usual for her till the snow fell. Bully Ransden wasn't a lazy man, but he had a hard way about him that put folk off, and he'd started from less than nothing. . . .

If there was a prettier woman in the county than Ellie Ransden, Old Nathan hadn't met her.

"Set yerse'f," Old Nathan grunted, nodding her back into the cabin. "I'll warm some grounds."

"Hit don't signify," Ellie said. She looked up toward a corner of the porch overhang where two sparrows argued about which had stolen the thistle seed from the other. "I jest figgered I'd drop by t' be neighborly, but if you've got affairs . . . ?"

"The fish'll wait," said the cunning man, dipping a gourd of water from the barrel. He'd drunk the coffee in the pot nigh down to the grounds already. "I was jest talkin' t' my mule."

Ellie's explanation of what she was doing here was a lie for at least several reasons. First, Bully Ransden was no friend to the cunning man. Second, the two cabins, Old Nathan's and Ransden's back some miles on the main road, were close enough to be neighbors in parts as ill-settled as these—but in the three years past, Ellie hadn't felt the need to come down this way.

The last reason was the swollen redness at the corners of the young woman's eyes. Mis'ry was what brought folks most times t' see the cunning man, t' see Old Nathan the Witch. Mis'ry and anger. . . .

Old Nathan poured water into the iron coffeepot on the table of his one-room cabin. Some of last night's coffee grounds, the beans bought green and roasted in the fireplace, floated on the inch of liquid remaining. They'd have enough strength left for another heating.

"Lots of folks, they talk t' their animals," he added defensively as he hung the refilled pot on the swinging bar and pivoted it back over the fire. Not so many thet hear what the beasts answer back, but thet was nobody's affair save his own.

"Cullen ain't a bad man, ye know," Ellie Ransden said in a falsely idle voice as she examined one of the cabin's pair of glazed sash-windows.

Old Nathan set a knot of pitchy lightwood in the coals to heat the fire up quickly. She was likely the only soul in the county called Bully Ransden by his baptized name. "Thet's for them t' say as knows him better 'n I do," he said aloud. "Or care t' know him."

"He was raised hard, thet's all," Ellie said to the rectangles of window glass. "I reckon—"

She turned around and her voice rose in challenge, though she probably didn't realize what was happening. "—thet you're afeerd t' cross him, same as airy soul hereabouts?"

Old Nathan snorted. "I cain't remember the time I met a man who skeerd me," he said. "Seeins as I've got this old, I don't figger I'll meet one hereafter neither."

He smiled, amused at the way he'd reacted to the girl's—the woman's—obvious ploy. "Set," he offered, gesturing her to the rocking chair.

Ellie moved toward the chair, then angled off in a flutter of gingham like a butterfly unwilling to light for nervousness. She stood near the fireplace, staring in the direction of the five cups of blue-rimmed porcelain on the fireboard above the hearth. Her hands twisted together instinctively as if she were attempting to strangle a snake.

"Reckon you heerd about thet Modom Taliaferro down t' Oak Hill," she said.

Old Nathan seated himself in the rocker. There was the straight chair beside the table if Ellie wanted it. Now that he'd heard the problem, he didn't guess she was going to settle.

"Might uv heard the name," the cunning man agreed. "Lady from New Orleans, bought 'Siah Chesson's house from his brother back in March after thet dead limb hit 'Siah."

Oak Hill, the nearest settlement, wasn't much, but its dozen dwellings were mostly of saw-cut boards. There was a store, a tavern, and several artisans who supplemented their trade with farm plots behind the houses.

Not a place where a wealthy, pretty lady from New Orleans was likely to be found; but it might be that Madame Francine Taliaferro didn't choose to be found by some of those looking for her.

Ellie turned and glared at Old Nathan. "She's a whore!" she blazed, deliberately holding his eyes.

Pitch popped loudly in the hearth. Old Nathan rubbed his beard. "I ain't heard," he said mildly, "thet the lady's sellin' merchandise of any sort."

"Then she's a witch," Ellie said, as firm as a tree-trunk bent the last finger's breadth before it snaps.

"Thet's a hard word," the cunning man replied. "Not one t' spread where it mayn't suit."

He had no desire to hurt his visitor, but he wasn't the man to tell a lie willingly; and he wasn't sure that right now, a comforting lie wouldn't be the worse hurt.

"Myse'f," the cunning man continued, "I don't reckon she's any such a thing. I reckon she's a purty woman with money and big-city ways, and thet's all."

Ellie threw her hands to her face. "She's old!" the girl blubbered as she turned her back. "She mus' be thutty!"

Old Nathan got up from the rocker with the caution of age. "Yes ma'm," he agreed dryly. "I reckon thet's rightly so."

He looked at the fire to avoid staring at the back of the woman, shaking with sobs. "I reckon the coffee's biled," he said. "I like a cup t' steady myse'f in the mornings."

Ellie tugged a kerchief from her sleeve. She wiped her eyes, then blew her nose violently before she turned again.

"Why look et the time!" she said brightly. "Why, I need t' be runnin' off right now. Hit's my day t' bake light-bread fer Cullen, ye know."

Ellie's false, fierce smile was so broad that it squeezed another tear from the corner of her eye. She brushed the drop away with a knuckle, as though it had been a gnat about to bite.

"He's powerful picky about his vittles, my Cull is," she went on. "He all'us praises my cookin', though."

Ellie might have intended to say more, but her eyes scrunched down and her upper lip began to quiver with the start of another sob. She turned and scampered out the front door in a flurry of check-patterned skirt. "Thankee fer yer time!" she called as she ran up the trail.

Old Nathan sighed. He swung the bar off the fire, but he didn't feel any need for coffee himself just now. He looked out the door toward the empty trail.

And after a time, he walked to the pasture to resume saddling the mule.

* * *

The catfish was so large that its tail and barbel-fringed head both poked over the top of the oak-split saddle basket. "It ain't so easy, y'know," the mule complained as it hunched up the slope where the track from the river joined the main road, "when the load's unbalanced like that."

Old Nathan sniffed. "Ifen ye like," he said, "I'll put a ten-pound rock in t'other side t' give ye balance."

The mule lurched up onto the road. "Hey, watch it, ye old fool!" shouted a horseman, reining up from a canter. Yellow grit sprayed from beneath the horse's hooves.

Old Nathan cursed beneath his breath and dragged the mule's head around. There was no call fer a body t' be ridin' so blame fast where a road was all twists 'n tree roots—

But there was no call fer a blamed old fool t' drive his mule acrost thet road, without he looked first t' see what might be a'comin'.

"You damned old hazard!" the horseman shouted. His horse blew and stepped high in place, lifting its hooves as the dust settled. "I ought t' stand you on yer haid 'n drive you right straight int' the dirt like a tint-peg!"

"No, ye hadn't ought t' do thet, Bully Ransden," the cunning man replied. "And ye hadn't ought t' try, neither."

He muttered beneath his breath, then waved his left hand down through the air in an arc. A trail of colored light followed his fingertips, greens and blues and yellows, flickering and then gone. Only the gloom of late afternoon among the overhanging branches made such pale colors visible.

"But I'll tell ye I'm sorry I rid out in front of ye," Old Nathan added. "Thet ye do hev a right to."

He was breathing heavily with the effort of casting the lights. He could have fought Bully Ransden and not be any more exhausted—but he would have lost the fight. The display, trivial though it was in fact, set the younger man back in his saddle.

"Howdy, mule," said Ransden's horse. "How're things goin' down yer ways?"

"I guess ye think I'm skeered of yer tricks!" Ransden said. He patted the neck of his horse with his right hand, though just now the animal was calmer than the rider.

"'Bout like common, I reckon," the mule replied. "Work, work, work, an' fer whut?"

"If yer not," Old Nathan replied in a cold bluster, "thin yer a fool, Ransden. And thet's as may be."

He raised his left hand again, though he had no intention of doing anything with it.

Now that Old Nathan had time to look, his eyes narrowed at the younger man's appearance. Ransden carried a fishing pole in his left hand. The ten-foot length of cane was an awkward burden for a horseman hereabouts—where even the main road was a pair of ruts, and branches met overhead most places.

Despite the pole, Bully Ransden wasn't dressed for fishing. He wore a green velvet frock coat some sizes too small for his broad shoulders, and black storebought trousers as well. His shirt alone was homespun, but clean and new. The garment was open well down the front so that the hair on Ransden's chest curled out in a vee against the gray-white fabric.

"Right now," the mule continued morosely, "we been off loadin' fish. Whutiver good was a fish t' airy soul, I ask ye?"

"Waal," Ransden said, "I take yer 'pology. See thet ye watch yerse'f the nixt time."

"I'm headed inter the sittlement," said the horse in satisfaction. "I allus git me a feed uv oats there, I do."

"Goin' into the settlement, thin?" Old Nathan asked, as if it were no more than idle talk between two men who'd met on the road.

The cunning man and Bully Ransden had too much history between them to be no more than that, though. Each man was unique in the county—known by everyone and respected, but feared as well.

Old Nathan's art set him apart from others. Bully Ransden had beaten his brutal father out of the cabin when he was eleven. Since that time, fists and knotted muscles had been the Bully's instant reply to any slight or gibe directed at the poverty from which he had barely raised himself—or the fact he was the son of a man hated and despised by all in a land where few angels had settled.

Old Nathan's mouth quirked in a smile. He and Ransden were stiff-necked men, as well, who both claimed they didn't care what others thought so long as they weren't interfered with. There was some truth to the claim as well. . . .

"I reckon I might head down thet way," Ransden said, as though there was ought else in the direction he was heading. "Might git me some supper t' Shorty's er somewhere."

He took notice of the mule's saddle baskets and added, "Say, old man—thet's a fine catfish ye hev there."

"Thet's right," Old Nathan agreed. "I figger t' fry me a steak t'night 'n smoke the rest."

"Hmph," the mule snorted, looking sidelong up at the cunning man. "Wish thut some of us iver got oats t' eat."

"I might buy thet fish offen ye," Ransden said. "I've got a notion t' take some fish back fer supper t'morry. How much 'ud ye take fer him?"

"Hain't intersted in sellin'," Old Nathan said, his eyes narrowing again. "Didn't figger airy soul as knew Shorty 'ud et his food—or drink the pizen he calls whiskey. I'd uv figgered ye'd stay t' home t'night. Hain't nothin' so good as slab uv hot bread slathered with butter."

Bully Ransden flushed, and the tendons of his bull neck stood out like cords. "You been messin' about my Ellie, old man?" he asked.

The words were almost unintelligible. Emotion choked Ransden's voice the way ice did streams during the spring freshets.

Old Nathan was careful not to raise his hand. A threat that might forestall violence at a lower emotional temperature would precipitate it with the younger man in his current state. Nothing would stop Bully Ransden now if he chose to attack; nothing but a bullet in the brain, and that might not stop him soon enough to save his would-be victim.

"I know," the cunning man said calmly, "what I know. D'ye doubt thet, Bully Ransden?"

The horse stretched out his neck to browse leaves from a sweet-gum sapling which had sprouted at the edge of the road. Ransden jerked his mount back reflexively, but the movement took the danger out of a situation cocked and primed to explode.

Ransden looked away. "Aw, hit's no use t' talk to an old fool like you," he muttered. "I'll pick up a mess

uv bullheads down t' the sittlement. Gee-up, horse!"

He spurred his mount needlessly hard. As the horse sprang down the road with a startled complaint, Ransden shouted over his shoulder, "I'm a grown man! Hit's no affair of yourn where I spend my time—nor Ellie's affair neither!"

Old Nathan watched the young man go. He was still staring down the road some moments after Ransden had disappeared. The mule said in a disgusted voice, "I wouldn't mind t' get back to a pail of oats, old man."

"Git along, thin," the cunning man said. "Fust time I ever knowed ye t' be willing t' do airy durn thing."

But his heart wasn't in the retort.

* * *

The cat came in, licking his muzzle both with relish and for the purpose of cleanliness. "Found the fish guts in the mulch pile," he said. "Found the head too. Thankee."

"Thought ye might like hit," said Old Nathan as he knelt, adding sticks of green hickory to his fire. "Ifen ye didn't, the corn will next Spring."

The big catfish, cleaned and split open, lay on the smokeshef just below the throat of the fireplace. Most folk, they had separate smokehouses—vented or chinked tight, that was a matter of taste. Even so, the fireplace smokeshef was useful for bits of meat that weren't worth stoking up a smoker meant for whole hogs and deer carcasses.

As for Old Nathan—he wasn't going to smoke and eat a hog any more than he was going to smoke and eat a human being . . . though there were plenty hogs he'd met whose personalities would improve once their throats were slit.

Same was true of the humans, often enough.

Smoke sprouted from the underside of the hickory billet and hissed up in a sheet. Trapped water cracked its way to the surface with a sound like that of a percussion cap firing.

"Don't reckon there's an uglier sight in the world 'n a catfish head," said the cat as he complacently groomed his right forepaw. He spread the toes and extended the white, hooked claws, each of them needle sharp. "A passel uv good meat to it, though."

"Don't matter what a thing looks like," Old Nathan said, "so long's it tastes right." He sneezed violently, backed away from his fire, and sneezed again.

"Thought I might go off fer a bit," he added to no one in particular.

The cat chuckled and began to work on the other paw. "Chasin' after thet bit uv cunt come by here this mornin', are ye? Give it up, ole man. You're no good t' the split-tails."

"Ye think thet's all there is, thin?" the cunning man demanded. "Ifen I don't give her thet one help, there's no he'p thet matters a'tall?"

"Thet's right," the cat said simply. He began licking his genitals with his hind legs spread wide apart. His

belly fur was white, while the rest of his body was yellow to tigerishly orange.

Old Nathan sighed. "I used t' think thet way myse'f," he admitted as he carried his tin wash basin out to the back porch. Bout time t' fill the durn water barrel from the creek; but thet 'ud wait. . . .

"Used t' think?" the tomcat repeated. "Used t' know, ye mean. Afore ye got yer knackers shot away."

"I knowed a girl a sight like Ellie Ransden back thin . . ." Old Nathan muttered.

The reflection in the water barrel was brown, the underside of the shakes covering the porch. Old Nathan bent to dip a basinful with the gourd scoop. He saw his own face, craggy and hard. His beard was still black, though he wouldn't see seventy again.

Then, though he hadn't wished it—he thought—and he hadn't said the words—aloud—there was a woman's face, young and full-lipped and framed in hair as long and black as the years since last he'd seen her, the eve of marching off with Colonel Sevier to what ended at King's Mountain. . . .

"Jes' turn 'n let me see ye move, Slowly," Old Nathan whispered to his memories. "There's nairy a thing so purty in all the world."

The reflection shattered. The grip of the cunning man's right hand had snapped the neck of the gourd. The hollowed body fell into the barrel.

Old Nathan straightened, wiping his eyes and forehead with the back of his hand. He tossed the gourd neck off the porch. "Niver knew why her folks, they named her thet, Slowly," he muttered. "Ifen it was them 'n not a name she'd picked herse'f."

The cat hopped up onto the cane seat of the rocking chair. He poised there for a moment, allowing the rockers to return to balance before he settled himself.

"I'll tell ye a thing, though, cat," the cunning man said forcefully. "Afore King's Mountain, I couldn't no more talk t' you an' t' other animals thin I could talk t' this hearth rock."

The tomcat curled his full tail over his face, then flicked it barely aside.

"Afore ye got yer knackers blowed off, ye mean?" the cat said. The discussion wasn't of great concern to him, but he demanded precise language nonetheless.

* * *

"Aye," Old Nathan said, glaring at the animal. "Thet's what I mean."

The cat snorted into his tail fur. "Thin you made a durned bad bargain, old man," he said.

Old Nathan tore his eyes away from the cat. The tin basin was still in his left hand. He sighed and hung it up unused.

"Aye," he muttered. "I reckon I did, cat."

He went out to saddle the mule again.

* * *

Ransden's cabin had a single door, in the front. It was open, but there was no sign of life within.

Old Nathan dismounted and wrapped the reins around the porch rail.

"Goin' t' water me?" the mule snorted.

"In my own sweet time, I reckon," the cunning man snapped back.

"Cull?" Ellie Ransden called from the cabin. "Cullen?" she repeated as she swept to the door. Her eyes were swollen and tear-blurred; they told her only that the figure at the front of her cabin wasn't her man. She ducked back inside—and reappeared behind a long flintlock rifle much like the one which hung on pegs over Old Nathan's fireboard.

"Howdy," said the cunning man. "Didn't mean t' startle ye, Miz Ransden."

Old Nathan spoke as calmly as though it were an everyday thing for him to look down the small end of a rifle. It wasn't. It hadn't been for many years, and that was a thing he didn't regret in the least about the passing of the old days.

"Oh!" she said, coloring in embarrassment. "Oh, do please come in. I got coffee, ifen hit ain't biled dry by now."

She lifted the rifle's muzzle before she lowered the hammer. The trigger dogs made a muted double click in releasing the mainspring's tension.

Ellie bustled quickly inside, fully a housewife again. "Oh, law!" she chirped as she set the rifle back on its pegs. "Here the fust time we git visitors in I don't know, and everything's all sixes 'n sevens!"

The cabin was neat as a pin, all but the bed where the eagle-patterned quilt was disarrayed. It didn't take art to see that Ellie had flung herself there crying, then jumped up in the hope her man had come home.

Bully Ransden must have knocked the furniture together himself. Not fancy, but it was all solid work, pinned with trenails rather than iron. There were two chairs, a table, and the bed. Three chests held clothes and acted as additional seats—though from what Ellie had blurted, the couple had few visitors, which was no surprise with Bully Ransden's reputation.

The windows in each end wall had shutters but no glazing. Curtains, made from sacking and embroidered with bright pink roses, set off their frames.

The rich odor of fresh bread filled the tiny room.

"Oh, law, what hev I done?" Ellie moaned as she looked at the fireplace.

The dutch oven sat on coals raked to the front of the hearth. They'd burned down, and the hotter coals piled onto the cast iron lid were now a mass of fluffy white ash. Ellie grabbed fireplace tongs and lifted the lid away.

"Oh, hit's ruint!" the girl said.

Old Nathan reached into the oven and cracked the bread loose from the surface of the cast iron. The

loaf had contracted slightly as it cooled. It felt light, more like biscuit than bread, and the crust was a brown as deep as a walnut plank.

"Don't look ruint t' me," he said as he lifted the loaf to one of the two pewter plates sitting ready on the table. "Looks right good. I'd admire t' try a piece."

Ellie Ransden picked up a knife with a well-worn blade. Unexpectedly, she crumpled into sobs. The knife dropped. It stuck in the cabin floor between the woman's bare feet, unnoticed as she bawled into her hands.

Old Nathan stepped around the table and touched Ellie's shoulders to back her away. Judging from how the light played, the butcher knife had an edge that would slice to the bone if she kicked it. The way the gal carried on, she might not notice the cut—and she might not care if she did.

"I'm ugly!" Ellie cried as she wrapped her arms around Old Nathan. "I cain't blame him, I've got t' be an old frumpy thing 'n he don't love me no more!"

For the moment, she didn't know who she held, just that he was warm and solid. She could talk at the cunning man, whether he listened or not.

"Tain't thet," Old Nathan muttered, feeling awkward as a hog on ice. One of the high-backed tortoiseshell combs that held and ornamented Ellie's hair tickled his beard. "Hit's jest the newness. Not thet he don't love ye. . . ."

He spoke the words because they were handy; but as he heard them come out, he guessed they were pretty much the truth. "Cullen ain't a bad man," the girl had said, back to the cunning man's cabin. No worse 'n most men, the cunning man thought, and thet's a durned poor lot.

"Don't reckon there's a purtier girl in the county," Old Nathan said aloud. "Likely there's not in the whole blame state."

Ellie squeezed him firmly, this time a conscious action, and stepped back. She reached into her sleeve for her handkerchief, then saw it crumpled on the quilt where she'd been lying. She snatched up the square of linen, turned aside, and blew her nose firmly.

"You're a right good man," Ellie mumbled before she looked around again.

She raised her chin and said, pretending that her face was not flushed and tear-streaked, "Ifen it ain't me, hit's thet bitch down t' the sittlement. Fer a month hit's been Francine this 'n Francine that an' him spendin' the ev'nins out an' thin—"

Ellie's upper lip trembled as she tumbled out her recent history. The cunning man bent to tug the butcher knife from the floor and hide his face from the woman's.

"She witched him, sir!" Ellie burst out. "I heerd what you said up t' yer cabin, but I tell ye, she witched my Cull. He ain't like this!"

Old Nathan rose. He set the knife down, precisely parallel to the edge of the table, and met the woman's eyes. "Yer Cull ain't the fust man t' go where his pecker led," he said, harshly to be able to get the words out of his own throat. "Tain't witch'ry, hit's jest human natur. An' don't be carryin' on, 'cause he'll be back—sure as the leaves turn."

Ellie wrung her hands together. The handkerchief was a tiny ball in one of them. "Oh, d' ye think he will, sir?" she whispered. "Oh, sir, could ye give me a charm t' bring him back? I'd be iver so grateful. . . ."

She looked down at her hands. Her lips pressed tightly together while silent tears dripped again from her eyes.

Old Nathan broke eye contact. He shook his head slightly and said, "No, I won't do thet."

"But ye could?" Ellie said sharply. The complex of emotions flowing across her face hardened into anger and determination. The woman who was wife to Bully Ransden could either be soft as bread dough or as strong and supple as a hickory pole. There was nothing in between—

And there was nothing soft about Ellie Ransden.

"I reckon ye think I couldn't pay ye," she said. "Waal, ye reckon wrong. There's my combs—"

She tossed her head; the three combs of translucent tortoiseshell, decorative but necessary as well to hold a mass of hair like Ellie's, quivered as they caught the light.

"Rance Holden, he'd buy thim back fer stock, I reckon. Mebbe thet Modom Francine—" the viciousness Ellie concentrated in the words would have suited a mother wren watching a blacksnake near her chicks—"—'ud want thim fer her hair. And there's my Pappy's watch, too, thet Cullen wears now. Hit'll fetch somethin', I reckon, the case, hit's true gold."

She swallowed, chin regally high—but looking so young and vulnerable that Old Nathan wished the world were a different place than he knew it was and always would be.

"So, Mister Cunning Man," Ellie said. "I reckon I kin raise ten silver dollars. Thet's good pay fer some li'l old charm what won't take you nothin' t' make."

"I don't need yer money," Old Nathan said gruffly. "Hain't thet. I'm tellin' ye, hit's wrong t' twist folks around thet way. Ifen ye got yer Cullen back like thet, ye wouldn't like what it was ye hed. An' I ain't about t' do thet thing!"

"Thin you better go on off," Ellie said. "I'm no sort uv comp'ny t'day."

She flung herself onto the bed, burying her face in the quilt. She was sobbing.

Old Nathan bit his lower lip as he stepped out of the cabin. "Hit warn't the world I made, hit's jest the one I live in."

"Leastways when ye go fishin'," the mule grumbled from the porch rail, "thur's leaves t' browse."

Wouldn't hurt him t' go see Madame Taliaferro with his own eyes, he reckoned.

Inside the cabin the girl cried, "Oh why cain't I jes' die, I'm so miser'ble!"

* * *

For as little good as he'd done, Old Nathan guessed he might better have stayed to home and saved himself and his mule a ride back in the dark.

The sky was pale from the recently set sun, but the road was in shadows. They would be deeper yet by the time the cunning man reached the head of the track to his cabin. The mule muttered a curse every time it clipped a hoof in a rut, but it didn't decide to balk.

The bats began their everlasting refrain, "Dilly, dilly, come and be killed," as they quartered the air above the road. Thet peepin' nonsense was enough t' drive a feller t' distraction—er worse!

Just as well the mule kept walking. This night, Old Nathan was in a mood to speak phrases that would blast the bones right out of the durned old beast.

Somebody was coming down the road from Oak Hill, singing merrily. It took a moment to catch actual phrases of the song, "... went a-courtin', he did ride ..." and a moment further to identify the voice as Bully Ransden's.

"... an' pistol by his side, uh-huh!"

Ransden came around the next bend in the trail, carrying not the bottle Old Nathan expected in his free hand but rather a stringer of bullheads. He'd left the long cane pole behind somewhere during the events of the evening.

"Hullo, mule," Ransden's horse whinnied. "Reckon I ate better'n you did t'night."

"Hmph," grunted the mule. "Leastways my master ain't half-shaved an' goin' t' ride me slap inter a ditch 'fore long."

"Howdy, feller," Bully Ransden caroled. "Ain't it a fine ev'nin'?"

Ransden wasn't drunk, maybe, but he sure-hell didn't sound like the man he'd been since he grew up—which was about age eleven, when he beat his father out of the cabin with an ax handle.

"Better fer some thin others, I reckon," Old Nathan replied. He clucked the mule to the side, giving the horseman the room he looked like he might need.

Ransden's manner changed as soon as he heard the cunning man's voice. "So hit's you, is it, old man?" he said.

He tugged hard on his reins, twisting his mount across the road in front of Old Nathan. "Hey, easy on!" the horse complained. "No call fer thet!"

"D'ye figger t' spy on me, feller?" Ransden demanded, turned crossways in his saddle. He shrugged his shoulders, straining the velvet jacket dangerously. "Or—"

Bully Ransden didn't carry a gun, but there was a long knife in his belt. Not that he'd need it. Ransden was young and strong enough to break a fence rail with his bare hands, come to that. He'd do the same with Old Nathan, for all that the cunning man had won his share of fights in his youth—

And later. It was a hard land still, though statehood had come thirty years past.

"I'm ridin' on home, Cullen Ransden," Old Nathan said. "Reckon ye'd do well t' do the same."

"By God," said Ransden. "By God! Where you been to, old man? Hev you been sniffin' round my Ellie? By God, if she's been—"

The words echoed in Old Nathan's mind, where he heard them an instant before they were spoken.

The power that poured into the cunning man was nothing that he had summoned. It wore him like a cloak, responding to the threat Bully Ransden was about to voice.

"—slippin' around on me, I'll wring the bitch's—"

Old Nathan raised both hands. Thunder crashed in the clear sky, then rumbled away in diminishing chords.

The power was nothing to do with the cunning man, but he shaped it as a potter shapes clay on his wheel. He spread his fingers. The tree trunks and roadway glowed with a light as faint as foxfire. It was just enough to throw each rut and bark ridge into relief, as though they were reflecting the pale sky.

"Great God Almighty!" muttered Bully Ransden. His mouth fell open. The string of small fish in his left hand trembled slightly.

"Ye'll do what to thet pore little gal, Bully Ransden?" the cunning man asked in a harsh, cracked voice.

Ransden touched his lips with his tongue. He tossed his head as if to clear it. "Reckon I misspoke," he said; not loud but clearly, and he met Old Nathan's eyes as he said the words.

"Brag's a good dog, Ransden," Old Nathan said. "But Hold-fast is better."

He lowered his arms. The vague light and the last trembling of thunder had already vanished.

The mule turned and stared back at its rider with one bulging eye. "Whut in tar-nation was that?" it asked.

Bully Ransden clucked to his horse. He pressed with the side, not the spur, of his right boot to swing the beast back in line with the road. "Don't you think I'm afeerd t' meet you, old man," he called; a little louder than necessary, and at a slightly higher pitch than intended.

Ransden was afraid; but that wouldn't keep him from facing the cunning man, needs must—

As surely as Old Nathan would have faced the Bully's fists and hobnailed boots some moments earlier.

The rushing, all-mastering power was gone now, leaving Old Nathan shaken and as weak as a man wracked with a three-days flux. "Jest go yer way, Ransden," he muttered, "and I'll go mine. I don't wish fer any truck with you."

He heeled the mule's haunches and added, "Git on with ye, thin, mule."

The mule didn't budge. "I don't want no part uv these doins," it protested. "Felt like hit was a dad-blame thunderbolt sittin' astride me, hit did."

Ransden walked his nervous horse abreast of the cunning man. "I don't know why I got riled no-how," he said, partly for challenge but mostly just in the brutal banter natural to the Bully's personality. "Hain't as

though you're a man, now, is it?"

He spurred his horse off down the darkened trail, laughing merrily.

Old Nathan trembled, gripping the saddle horn with both hands. "Git on, mule," he muttered. "I hain't got the strength t' fight with ye."

Faintly down the road drifted the words, "Froggie wint a-courtin', he did ride . . ."

* * *

Bright midday sun dappled the white-painted boards of the Isiah Chesson house. It was a big place for this end of the country, with two rooms below and a loft. In addition, there was a stable and servant's quarters at the back of the lot. How big it seemed to Madame Francine Taliaferro, late of New Orleans, was another matter.

"Whoa-up, mule," Old Nathan muttered as he peered at the dwelling. It sat a musket shot down the road and around a bend from the next house of the Oak Hill settlement. The front door was closed, and there was no sign of life behind the curtains added to the windows since the new tenant moved in.

Likely just as well. The cunning man wanted to observe Madame Taliaferro, but barging up to her door and knocking didn't seem a useful way to make her introduction.

Still. . . .

In front of the house was a well-manicured lawn. A pair of gray squirrels, plump and clothed in fur grown sleekly full at the approach of Fall, hopped across the lawn—and over the low board fence which had protected Chesson's sauce garden, now grown up in vines.

"Hoy, squirrel!" Old Nathan called. "Is the lady what lives here t' home?"

The nearer squirrel hopped up on his hind legs, looking in all directions. "What's thet? What's thet I heard?" he chirped.

"Yer wastin' yer time," the mule said. "Hain't a squirrel been born yet whut's got brain enough t' tell whether hit's rainin'."

"He's talkin' t' ye," the other squirrel said as she continued to snuffle across the short grass of the lawn. "He says, is the lady home t' the house?"

The male squirrel blinked. "Huh?" he said to his mate. "What would I be doin' in a house?" He resumed a tail-high patrol which seemed to ignore the occasional hickory nuts lying in the grass.

"Told ye so," the mule commented.

Old Nathan scowled. Boards laid edgewise set off a path from the front door to the road. A pile of dog droppings marked the gravel.

"Squirrel," the cunning man said. "Is there a little dog t' home, now?"

"What?" the male squirrel demanded. "Whur is it? Thet nasty little monster's come back!"

"Now, don't ye git yerse'f all stirred up!" his mate said. "Hit's all right, hit's gone off down the road already."

"Thankee, squirrels," Old Nathan said. "Git on, mule."

"Ifen thet dog's not here, thin whyiver did he say it was?" the male squirrel complained loudly.

"We could uv done thet a'ready, ye know," the mule said as he ambled on toward the main part of town. "Er we could uv stayed t' home."

"Thet's right," Old Nathan said grimly. "We could."

He knew he was on a fool's errand, because only a durned fool would think Francine Taliaferro might be using some charm or other on the Ransden boy. He didn't need a mule to tell him.

Rance Holden's store was the center of Oak Hill, unless you preferred to measure from Shorty Hitchcock's tavern across the one dirt street. Holden's building was gable-end to the road. The store filled the larger square room, while Rance and his wife lived in the low rectangular space beneath the eaves overhanging to the left.

The family's space had been tight when the Holdens had children at home. The five boys and the girl who survived were all moved off on their own by now.

"Don't you tie me t' the rail thur," the mule said. "Somebody 'll spit t'baccy at me sure."

"Thin they'll answer t' me," the cunning man said. "But seeins as there's nobody on the porch, I don't figger ye need worry."

Four horses, one with a side-saddle, were hitched to the rail. Usually there were several men sitting on the board porch among barrels of bulk merchandise, chewing tobacco and whittling; but today they were all inside. That was good evidence that Madame Francine Taliaferro was inside as well. . . .

The interior of Holden's store was twelve foot by twelve foot. Not spacious by any standard, it was now packed with seven adults—

And a pug dog who tried to fill as much space as the humans.

"Hey, you old bastard!" the dog snapped as the cunning man stepped through the open door. "I'm going to bite you till you bleed, and there's nothing you can do about it!"

"Howdy Miz Holden, Rance," Old Nathan said. "Thompson—" a nod to the saddler, a cadaverous man with a full beard but no hair above the level of his ears "—Bart—" another nod, this time to the settlement's miller, Bart Alpers—

"I'm going to bite you!" the little dog yapped as it lunged forward and dodged back. "I'll do just that, and you don't dare to stop me!"

Nods, murmured howdies/yer keepin' well from the folk who crowded the store.

"—'n Mister M'Donald," the cunning man said with a nod for the third white man, a husky, hard-handed man who'd made a good thing of a tract ten miles out from the settlement. M'Donald looked even sillier in

an ill-fitting blue tailcoat than Bully Ransden had done in his finery the evening before.

Madame Taliaferro's black servant, on the other hand, wore his swallowtail coat, ruffed shirt, and orange breeches with an air of authority. He stood behind his mistress, with his eyes focused on infinity and his hands crossed behind his back.

"Now, Cesar," the woman who was the center of the store's attention murmured to her dog. She looked at Old Nathan with an unexpected degree of appraisal. "Baby be good for ma-ma."

"Said I'm going to bite you!" insisted the dog. "Here goes!"

Old Nathan whispered inaudible words with his teeth in a tight smile. The little dog did jump forward to bite his pants leg, sure as the Devil was loose in the world.

The dog froze.

"Mum," Old Nathan said as he reached down and scooped the dog up in his hand. The beast's mouth was open. Sudden terror filled its nasty little eyes.

Francine Taliaferro had lustrous dark hair—not a patch on Ellie's, but groomed in a fashion the younger woman's could never be. Her face was pouty-pretty, heavily powdered and rouged, and the skirt of her blue organdy dress flared out in a fashion that made everyone else in the store stand around like the numbers on a clock dial with her the hub.

But that's what it would have been anyway; only perhaps with the others pressing in yet closer.

Old Nathan handed the stiffened dog to Madame Taliaferro. "Hain't he the cutest li'l thing?" the cunning man said.

The woman's red lips opened in shock, but by reflex her gloved hands accepted the petrified animal that was thrust toward her. As soon as Old Nathan's fingers no longer touched the animal's fur, the dog resumed where it had stopped. Its teeth snapped into its mistress's white shoulder.

Three of the men shouted. Madame Taliaferro screamed in outrage and flung Cesar up into the roof shakes. The dog bounced down into a shelf of yard goods, then ran out the door. It was yapping unintelligibly.

Old Nathan smiled. "Jest cute as a button."

There was no more magic in this woman than there was truth in a politician's heart. If Ellie had a complaint, it was against whatever fate had led a woman—a lady—so sophisticated to Oak Hill.

And complaint agin Bully Ransden, fer bein' a durned fool; but folks were, men 'n women both. . . .

"By God!" M'Donald snarled. "I oughter break ye in two fer thet!"

He lurched toward the cunning man but collided with Alpers, who cried, "I won't let ye fall!" as he tried to grab the woman. Rance Holden tried to crawl out from behind the counter while his wife glared, and Thompson blathered as though somebody had just fallen into a mill saw.

"Everyone stop this at once!" Madame Taliaferro cried with her right index finger held upright. Her voice

was as clear and piercing as a well-tuned bell.

Everyone did stop. All eyes turned toward the woman; which was no doubt as things normally were in Madame Taliaferro's presence.

"I'll fetch yer dog," blurted Bart Alpers.

"Non!" Taliaferro said. "Cesar must have had a little cramp. He will stay outside till he is better."

"Warn't no cramp, Francine, honey," M'Donald growled. "Hit war this sonuvabitch here what done it!" He pushed Alpers aside.

"What d'ye reckon happint t' Cesar, M'Donald?" Old Nathan said. The farmer was younger by thirty years and strong, but he hadn't the personality to make a threat frightening even when he spoke the flat truth. "D'ye want t' touch me 'n larn?"

M'Donald stumbled backward from the bluff—for it was all bluff, what Old Nathan had done to the dog had wrung him out bad as lifting a quarter of beef. But the words had this much truth in them: those who struck the cunning man would pay for the blow, in one way or another; and pay in coin they could ill afford.

"I don't believe we've been introduced," said the woman. She held out her hand. The appraisal was back in her eyes. "I'm Francine Taliaferro, but do call me Francine. I'm—en vacance in your charming community."

"He ain't no good t' ye," M'Donald muttered bitterly, his face turned to a display of buttons on a piece of card.

The cunning man took Taliaferro's hand, though he wasn't rightly sure what she expected him to do with it. There were things he knew, plenty of things and important ones; but right just now, he understood why other men reacted as they did to Francine Taliaferro.

"M' name's Nathan. I live down the road a piece, Columbia ways."

Even a man with a woman like Ellie waiting at home for him.

"I reckon this gen'lman come here t' do business, Rance," said Mrs. Holden to her husband in a poisonous tone of voice. "Don't ye reckon ye ought t' he'p him?"

"I'll he'p him, Maude," Holden muttered, trying—and he knew he would fail—to interrupt the rest of the diatribe. He was a large, soft man, and his hair had been white for years. "Now, how kin—"

"Ye are a storekeeper, ain't ye?" Mrs. Holden shrilled. "Not some spavined ole fool thinks spring has come again!"

Holden rested his hands on the counter. His eyes were downcast. One of the other men chuckled. "Now, Nathan," the storekeeper resumed. "Reckon you're here fer more coffee?"

The cunning man opened his mouth to say he'd take a peck of coffee and another of baking soda. He didn't need either just now, but he'd use them both and they'd serve as an excuse for him to have come into Oak Hill.

"Ye've got an iv'ry comb," he said. The words he spoke weren't the ones he'd had in mind at all. "Reckon I'll hev thet and call us quits fer me clearin' the rats outen yer barn last fall."

Everyone in the store except Holden himself stared at Old Nathan. The storekeeper winced and, with his eyes still on his hands, said, "I reckon thet comb, hit must hev been sold. I'd like t' he'p ye."

"Whoiver bought thet thing!" cried the storekeeper's wife in amazement. She turned to the niche on the wall behind the counter, where items of special value were flanked to either side by racks of yard goods. The two crystal goblets remained, but they had been moved inward to cover the space where the ornate ivory comb once stood.

Mrs. Holden's eyes narrowed. "Rance Holden, you go look through all the drawers this minute. Nobody bought thet comb and you know it!"

"Waal, mebbe hit was stole," Holden muttered. He half-heartedly pulled out one of the drawers behind the counter and poked with his fingers at the hairpins and brooches within.

The cunning man smiled grimly. "Reckon I kin he'p ye," he said.

He reached over the counter and took one of the pins, ivory like the comb for which he was searching. The pin's blunt end was flattened and drilled into a filigree for decoration. He held the design between the tips of his index fingers, pressing just hard enough to keep the pin pointed out horizontally.

"What is this that you are doing, then?" Francine Taliaferro asked in puzzlement.

The other folk in the store knew Old Nathan. Their faces were set in gradations between fear and interest, depending on the varied fashions in which they viewed the cunning man's arts.

Old Nathan swept the pin over the counter. Midway it dipped, then rose again.

"Check the drawers there," the cunning man directed. He moved the hairpin back until it pointed straight down. "Reckon hit's in the bottom one."

"Why, whut would that iv'ry pin be doin' down there with the women's shoes?" Mrs. Holden demanded.

"Look, I tell ye, I'll pay ye cash fer what ye did with the rats," the storekeeper said desperately. "How much 'ud ye take? Jest name—"

He was standing in front of the drawer Old Nathan had indicated. His wife jerked it open violently, banging it against Holden's instep twice and a third time until he hopped away, wincing.

Mrs. Holden straightened, holding a packet wrapped with tissue paper and blue ribbon. It was of a size to contain the comb.

She started to undo the ribbon. Her face was red with fury.

Old Nathan put his hand out. "Reckon I'll take it the way i'tis," he said.

"How d'ye guess the comb happint t' be all purtied up 'n hid like thet, Rance?" Bart Alpers said loudly. "Look to me like hit were a present fer som'body, if ye could git her alone."

Francine Taliaferro raised her chin. "I know nothing of this," she said coldly.

Rance Holden took the packet from his wife's hands and gave it to Old Nathan. "I figger this makes us quits fer the rats," he said in a dull voice. He was slumped like a man who'd been fed his breakfast at the small end of a rifle.

"Thankee," Old Nathan said. "I reckon thet does."

The shouting behind him started before the cunning man had unhitched his mule. The timbre of Mrs. Holden's voice was as sharp and cutting as that of Francine Taliaferro's lapdog.

* * *

Taking the comb didn't make a lick of sense, except that it showed the world what a blamed fool God had made of Rance Holden.

Old Nathan rode along, muttering to himself. It would have been awkward to carry the packet in his hand, but once he'd set the fancy bit of frippery down into a saddle basket, that didn't seem right either.

Might best that he sank the durn thing in the branch, because there wasn't ought he could do with the comb that wouldn't make him out to be a worse fool than Rance. . . .

The mule was following its head onto the cabin trail. Suddenly its ears cocked forward and its leading foot hesitated a step. Through the woods came, "Froggie wint a-courtin', he did ride. . . ."

"Hey, thur!" called the mule.

"Oh, hit's you come back, is it?" Bully Ransden's horse whinnied in reply. "I jest been down yer way."

Horse and mule came nose to nose around a bend fringed by dogwood and alders. The riders watched one another: Old Nathan stiff and ready for trouble, but the younger man as cheerful as a cat with a mouse for a toy.

"Glad t' see ye, Nathan old feller," Bully Ransden said.

He kneed his mount forward to bring himself alongside the cunning man, left knee to left knee. The two men were much of a height, but the horse stood taller than the mule and increased the impression of Ransden's far greater bulk. "I jest dropped by in a neighborly way," he continued, "t' warn ye there's been prowlers up t' my place. Ye might want t' stick close about yer own."

He grinned. His teeth were square and evenly set. They had taken the nose off a drover who'd wrongly thought he was a tougher man than Bully Ransden.

This afternoon Ransden wore canvas breeches and a loose-hanging shirt of gray homespun. The garment's cut had the effect of emphasizing Bully's muscular build, whereas the undersized frock coat had merely made him look constrained.

"I thankee," Old Nathan said stiffly. He wished Bully Ransden would stop glancing toward the saddle basket, where he might notice the ribbon-tied packet. "Reckon I kin deal with sech folk as sneak by whin I'm gone."

He wished he were forty years younger, and even then he'd be a lucky man to avoid being crippled in a rough and tumble with Bully Ransden. This one was cat-quick, had shoulders like an ox . . . and once the fight started, Bully Ransden didn't quit so long as the other fellow still could move.

Ransden's horse eyed Old Nathan, then said to the mule, "Yer feller ain't goin' t' do whatever hit was he did last night, is he? I cain't much say I liked thet."

"Didn't much like hit myse'f," the mule agreed morosely. "He ain't a bad old feller most ways, though."

"Like I said," Ransden grinned. "Jest a neighborly warnin'. Y' see, I been leavin' my rifle-gun t' home most times whin I'm out 'n about . . . but I don't figger t' do thet fer a while. I reckon if I ketch someb'dy hangin' round my cabin, I'll shoot him same's I would a dog chasin' my hens."

Old Nathan looked up to meet the younger man's eyes. "Mebbe," he said deliberately, "you're goin' t' stay home 'n till yer own plot fer a time?"

"Oh, land!" whickered the horse, reacting to the sudden tension. "Now it'll come sure!"

For a moment, Old Nathan thought the same thing . . . and thought the result was going to be very bad. Sometimes you couldn't help being afraid, but that was a reason itself to act as fear warned you not to.

Ransden shook his head violently, as if he were a horse trying to brush away a gadfly. His hair was shoulder length and the color of sourwood honey. The locks tossed in a shimmering dance.

Suddenly, unexpectedly, the mood changed. Bully Ransden began to laugh. "Ye know," he said good-humoredly, "ifen you were a man, I might take unkindly t' words like thet. Seeins as yer a poor womanly critter, though, I don't reckon I will."

He kicked his horse a step onward, then reined up again as if to prove his mastery. The animal nickered in complaint.

"Another li'l warning, old man," Ransden called playfully over his shoulder. "Ye hadn't ought t' smoke meat on too hot uv a fire. You might shrink hit right up."

Ransden spurred his mount forward, jerking the left rein at the same time. The horse's flank jolted solidly against the mule's hindquarters, knocking the lighter animal against an oak sapling.

"Hey thur, you!" the mule brayed angrily.

"Sword 'n pistol by his side!" Bully Ransden caroled as he trotted his horse down the trail.

"Waal," said the mule as he resumed his measured pace toward the cabin, "I'm glad that's ended."

"D'ye think it is, mule?" the cunning man asked softly. "From the way the Bully was talkin', I reckon he jest managed t' start it fer real."

The two cows were placidly chewing their cud in the railed paddock behind the cabin. "Thar's been another feller come by here," the red heifer offered between rhythmic, sideways strokes of her jaws.

"Wouldn't milk us, though," the black heifer added. " 'Bout time somebody does, ifen ye ask me."

"Don't recall askin' ye any blame thing," Old Nathan muttered.

He dismounted and uncinched the saddle. "Don't 'spect ye noticed what the feller might be doin' whilst he was here, did ye?" he asked as if idly.

"Ye goin' t' strip us now?" the black demanded. "My udder's full as full, it is."

"He wint down t' the crik," the red offered. "Carried a fish down t' the crik."

Old Nathan dropped two gate bars and led the mule into the enclosure with the cows. His face was set.

"Criks is whur fish belong," the black heifer said. "Only I wish they didn't nibble at my teats whin I'm standing thur, cooling myse'f."

"This fish don't nibble airy soul," the red heifer explained in a superior tone. "This fish were dead 'n dry."

Old Nathan removed the mule's bridle and patted the beast on the haunch. "Git some hay," he said. "I'll give ye a handful uv oats presently. I reckon afore long you 'n me goin' t' take another ride, though."

"Whyever do a durn fool thing like that?" the mule complained. "Ye kin ride a cow the next time. I'm plumb tuckered out."

" 'Bout time," the black heifer repeated with emphasis, "thet you milk us!"

The cunning man paused, halfway to his back porch, and turned. "I'll be with ye presently," he said. "I ain't in a mood t' be pushed, so I'd advise ye as a friend thet y'all not push me."

The cows heard the tone and looked away, as though they were studying the movements of a late-season butterfly across the paddock. The mule muttered, "Waal, I reckon I wouldn't mind a bit uv a walk, come t' thet."

The cat sauntered through the front door of the cabin as Old Nathan entered by the back. "Howdy, old man," the cat said. "I wouldn't turn down a bite of somp'in if it was goin'."

"I'll hev ye a cup uv milk if ye'll wait fer it," the cunning man said as he knelt to look at the smoke shelf of his fireplace. The greenwood fire had burnt well down, but there was no longer any reason to build it higher.

The large catfish was gone, as Old Nathan had expected. In its place was a bullhead less than six inches long; one of those Ransden had bought in town the day before, though he could scarcely have thought that Ellie believed he'd spent the evening fishing.

"What's thet?" the cat asked curiously.

Old Nathan removed the bullhead from the shelf. "Somethin' a feller left me," he said.

The bullhead hadn't been a prepossessing creature even before it spent a day out of water. Now its smooth skin had begun to shrivel and its eyes were sunken in; the eight barbels lay like a knot of desiccated worms.

"He took the fish was there and tossed hit in the branch, I reckon," he added in a dreamy voice, holding

the bullhead and thinking of a time to come shortly. "He warn't a thief, he jest wanted t' make his point with me."

"Hain't been cleaned 'n it's gittin' good 'n ripe," the cat noted, licking his lips. "Don't figger you want it, but you better believe I do."

"Sorry, cat," the cunning man said absently. He set the bullhead on the fireboard to wait while he got together the other traps he would need. Ellie Ransden would have a hand mirror, so he needn't take his own. . . .

"Need t' milk the durn cows, too," he muttered aloud.

The cat stretched up the wall beside the hearth. He was not really threatening to snatch the bullhead, but he wasn't far away in case the cunning man walked out of the cabin and left the fish behind. "Whatever do you figger t' do with thet ole thing?" he complained.

"Feller used hit t' make a point with me," Old Nathan repeated. His voice was distant and very hard. "I reckon I might hev a point t' make myse'f."

* * *

"Hallo the house!" Old Nathan called as he dismounted in front of Ransden's cabin.

He'd covered more miles on muleback recently than his muscles approved. Just now he didn't feel stiff, because his blood was heated with what he planned to do—and what was likely to come of it.

He'd pay for that in the morning, he supposed; and he supposed he'd be alive in the morning to pay. He'd do what he came for regardless.

The cabin door banged open. Ellie Ransden wore a loose dress she'd sewn long ago of English cloth, blue in so far as the sun and repeated washings had left it color. Her eyes were puffy from crying, but the expression of her face was compounded of concern and horror.

"Oh sir, Mister Nathan, ye mustn't come by here!" she gasped. "Cullen, he'll shoot ye sure! I niver seen him so mad as whin he asked hed you been by. An' my Cull. . . ."

The words "my Cull" rang beneath the surface of the girl's mind. Her face crumpled. Her hands pawed out blindly. One touched a porch support. She gripped it and collapsed against the cedar pole, blubbing her heart out.

Old Nathan stepped up onto the porch and put his arms around her. Decent folk didn't leave an animal in pain, and that's what this girl was now, something alive that hurt like to die. . . .

The mule snorted and began to sidle away. There hadn't been time to loop his reins over the porch railing.

Old Nathan pointed an index finger at the beast. "Ifen you stray," he snarled, "hit's best thet ye find yerse'f another hide. I'll hev thet off ye, sure as the Divil's in Hell."

"Fine master you are," the mule grumbled in a subdued voice.

Though the words had not been directed at Ellie, Old Nathan's tone returned the girl to present

circumstances as effectively as a bucket of cold water could have done. She stepped back and straightened.

"Oh, law," she murmured, dabbing at her face with her dress's full sleeves. "But Mister Nathan, ye mustn't stay. I won't hev ye kilt over me, nor—"

She eyed him quickly, noting the absence of an obvious weapon but finding that less reassuring than she would have wished. "Nor aught t' happen to my Cull neither. He—" she started to lose control over her voice and finished in a tremolo "—ain't a bad man!"

"Huh," the cunning man said. He turned to fetch his traps from the mule's panniers. He was about as embarrassed as Ellie, and he guessed he had as much reason.

"I ain't goin' t' hurt Bully Ransden," he said, then added what was more than half a lie, "And better men thin him hev thought they'd fix my flint."

Ellie Ransden tossed her head. "Waal," she said, "I reckon ye know yer own business, sir. Won't ye come in and set a spell? I don't mind sayin' I'm glad fer the comp'ny."

Her face hardened into an expression that Old Nathan might have noticed on occasion if he looked into mirrors more often. "I've coffee, an' there's a jug uv good wildcat . . . but ifen ye want fancy French wines all the way from New Or-leens, I guess ye'll hev t' go elsewheres."

With most of his supplies in one hand and the fish wrapped in a scrap of bark in his left, Old Nathan followed the woman into her cabin. "I'd take some coffee now," he said. "And mebbe when we've finished, I'd sip a mite of whiskey."

Ellie Ransden took the coffee pot a step toward the bucket in the corner, half full with well water. Without looking at the cunning man, she said, "Thin you might do me up a charm after all?"

"I will not," Old Nathan said flatly. "But fer what I will do, ye'll hev to he'p."

He set his gear on the table. The bark unwrapped. The bullhead's scaleless skin was black, and the fish had a noticeable odor.

Ellie filled the pot and dropped in an additional pinch of beans, roasted and cracked rather than ground. "Reckon I'll he'p, thin," she said bitterly. "All I been doin', keepin' house 'n fixin' vittles, thet don't count fer nothing the way some people figgers."

"I'll need thet oil lamp," the cunning man said, "but don't light it. And a plug t' fit the chimley end; reckon a cob 'll suit thet fine. And a pair of Bully Ransden's britches. Best they be a pair thet ain't been washed since he wore them."

"Reckon I kin find thet for ye," the woman said. She hung the coffee over the fire, then lifted a pair of canvas trousers folded on top of a chest with a homespun shirt. They were the garments Bully Ransden wore when Old Nathan met him earlier in the day. "Cull allus changes 'fore he goes off in the ev'nin' nowadays. Even whin he pretends he's fishin'."

She swallowed a tear. "An' don't he look a sight in thet jacket he had off Neen Tobler fer doin' his plowing last spring? Like a durned ole greenbelly fly, thet's how he looks!"

"Reckon ye got a mirror," Old Nathan said as he unfolded the trousers on the table beside the items he had brought from his own cabin. "If ye'll fetch it out, thin we can watch; but hit don't signify ifen ye don't."

"I've a hand glass fine as iver ye'll see," Ellie Ransden said with cold pride. She stepped toward a chest, then stopped and met the cunning man's eyes. "You won't hurt him, will ye?" she asked. "I—"

She covered her face with her hands. "I druther," she whispered, "thet she hev him thin thet he be hurt."

"Won't hurt him none," Old Nathan said. "I jest figger t' teach the Bully a lesson he's been beggin' t' larn, thet's all."

The young woman was on the verge of tears again. "Fetch the mirror," Old Nathan said gruffly. That gave her an excuse to turn away and compose herself as he proceeded with the preparations.

The words that the cunning man murmured under his breath were no more the spell than soaking yeast in water made a cake; but, like the other, these words were necessary preliminaries.

By its nature, the bullhead's wrinkling corpse brought the flies he needed. The pair that paused momentarily to copulate may have been brought to the act by nature alone or nature aided by art. The cause didn't matter so long as the necessary event occurred.

Old Nathan swept his right hand forward, skimming above the bullhead to grasp the mating pair unharmed within the hollow of his fingers. He looked sidelong to see whether the girl had noticed the quickness and coordination of his movement: he was an old man, right enough, but that didn't mean he was ready for the knacker's yard. . . .

He realized what he was doing and compressed his lips over a sneer of self-loathing. Durned old fool!

The flies blurred within the cunning man's fingers like a pair of gossamer hearts beating. He positioned his fist over the lamp chimney, then released his captives carefully within the glass. For a moment he continued to keep the top end of the chimney covered with his palm; then Ellie slid a corncob under the cunning man's hand to close the opening.

The flies buzzed for some seconds within the thin glass before they resumed their courtship.

The woman's eyes narrowed as she saw what Old Nathan was doing with the bullhead, but she did not comment. He arranged the other items to suit his need before he looked up.

"I'll be sayin' some words, now," he said. "Hit wouldn't do ye airy good t' hear thim, and hit might serve ye ill ifen ye said thim after me, mebbe by chance."

Ellie Ransden's mouth tightened at the reminder of the forces being brought to bear on the man she loved. "I reckon you know best," she said. "I'll stand off till ye call me."

She stepped toward the cabin's only door, then paused and looked again at Old Nathan. "These words you're a-speakin'—ye found thim writ in books?"

He shook his head. "They're things I know," he explained, "the way I know . . ."

His voice trailed off. He'd been about to say, "—yer red hen's pleased as pleased with the worm she jest grubbed up from the leaves," but that wasn't something he rightly wanted to speak, even to this girl.

"Anyhow, I just know hit," he finished lamely.

Ellie nodded and walked out onto the porch of her cabin. "I'll water yer mule," she called. "Reckon he could use thet."

The beast wheezed its enthusiastic agreement.

Old Nathan sang and gestured his way through the next stage of the preliminaries. His voice cracked and he couldn't hold a key, but that didn't seem to matter.

The cunning man wasn't sure what did matter. When he worked, it was as if he walked into a familiar room in the dead dark of night. Occasionally he would stumble, but not badly; and he would always feel his way to the goal that he could not see.

He laid the bullhead inside the crotch of Ransden's trousers.

In between snatches of verse—not English, and not any language to which he could have put a name—Old Nathan whistled. He thought of boys whistling as they passed through a churchyard; chuckled bitterly; and resumed whistling, snatches from Mossy Groves that a fiddler would have had trouble recognizing.

* * *

"How would ye like, my Mossy Groves,
T' spend one night with me?"

* * *

Most of the life had by now crackled out of the extra stick of lightwood Ellie had tossed on the fire. Beyond the cabin walls, the night was drawing in.

The pair of trousers shifted on the table, though the air was still.

A familiar task; but, like bear hunting, familiarity didn't remove all the danger. This wasn't for Ellie, for some slip of a girl who loved a fool of a man. This was because Bully Ransden had issued a challenge, and because Old Nathan knew the worst that could happen to a man was to let fear cow him into a living death—

And maybe it was a bit for Ellie.

* * *

The ver' first blow the king gave him,
Moss' Groves, he struck no more. . . .

* * *

Life had risks. Old Nathan murmured his spells.

He was breathing hard when he stepped back, but he knew he'd been successful. Though the lines of congruence were invisible, they stretched their complex web among the objects on the table and across the forest to the house on the outskirts of Oak Hill. The lines were as real and stronger than the hard steel of a knife edge. The rest was up to Bully Ransden. . . .

Old Nathan began to chuckle.

Ellie stood beside him. She had moved back to the doorway when the murmur of the cunning man's voice ceased, but she didn't venture to speak.

Old Nathan grinned at her. "Reckon I'd take a swig uv yer popskull, now," he said. His throat was dry as a summer cornfield.

"Hit's done, thin?" the girl asked in a distant tone. She hefted a brown-glazed jug out from the corner by the bed and handed it to the cunning man, then turned again to toss another pine knot on the fire. The coffee pot, forgotten, still hung from the pivot bar.

Old Nathan pulled the stopper from the jug and swigged the whiskey. It was a harsh, artless run, though it had kick enough for two. Bully Ransden's taste in liquor was similar to Madame Taliaferro's taste in the men of these parts. . . .

"My part's done," the cunning man said. He shot the stopper home again. "Fer the rest, I reckon we'll jest watch."

He set the jug down against the wall. "Pick up the mirror," he explained. "Thet's what we'll look in."

Gingerly, Ellie raised the mirror from the table where it lay among the other paraphernalia. The frame and handle were curly maple finished with beeswax, locally fitted though of the highest craftsmanship. The bevel-edged four-inch glass was old and European in provenance. Lights glinted like jewels on its flawless surface.

Ellie gasped. The lights were not reflections from the cabin's hearth. They shone through the curtained windows of Francine Taliaferro's house.

"Won't hurt ye," Old Nathan said. "Hain't airy thing in all this thet could hurt you."

When he saw the sudden fear in her eyes, he added gruffly, "Not yer man neither. I done told ye thet!"

Ellie brought the mirror close to her face to get a better view of the miniature image. When she realized that she was blocking the cunning man's view, she colored and held the glass out to him.

Old Nathan shook his head with a grim smile. "You watch," he said. "I reckon ye earned thet from settin' up alone the past while."

Bully Ransden's horse stood in the paddock beside the Taliaferro house. Madame Taliaferro's black servant, now wearing loose garments instead of his livery, held the animal by a halter and curried it with smooth, flowing strokes.

"He's singin'," the woman said in wonder. She looked over at the cunning man. "I kin hear thet nigger a-singin'!"

"Reckon ye might," Old Nathan agreed.

Ellie pressed her face close to the mirror's surface again. Her expression hardened. Lamplight within the Chesson house threw bars of shadow across the curtains as a breeze caressed them.

"She's laughin'," Ellie whispered. "She's laughin', an' she's callin' him on."

"Hain't nothin' ye didn't know about," Old Nathan said. "Jest watch an' wait."

The cunning man's face was as stark as the killer he had been; one time and another, in one fashion or other. It was a hard world, and he was not the man to smooth its corners away with lies.

The screams were so loud that the mule heard them outside and snorted in surprise. Francine Taliaferro's voice cut the night like a glass-edged saw, but Bully Ransden's tenor bellows were louder yet.

The servant dropped his curry comb and ran for the house. Before he reached it, the front door burst open. Bully Ransden lurched out onto the porch, pulling his breeches up with both hands.

The black tried to stop him or perhaps just failed to get out of the way in time. Ransden knocked the servant over the porch rail with a sideways swipe of one powerful arm.

"What's hap'nin'?" Ellie cried. Firelight gleamed on her fear-widened eyes. "What is hit?"

Old Nathan lifted the lamp chimney and shook it, spilling the flies unharmed from their glass prison. Mating complete for their lifetimes, they buzzed from the cabin on separate paths.

The trousers on the table quivered again. The tip of a barbel peeked from the waistband.

"Hain't airy thing hap'nin' now," the cunning man said. "I figgered thet's how you'd choose hit t' be."

Bully Ransden leaped into the paddock and mounted his horse bareback. He kicked at the gate bars, knocking them from their supports.

Madame Taliaferro appeared at the door, breathing in great gasps. The peignoir she wore was so diaphanous that with the lamplight behind her she appeared to be clothed in fog. She stared in horror at Bully Ransden.

Riding with nothing but his knees and a rope halter, Ransden jumped his horse over the remaining gate bars and galloped out of the mirror's field. Taliaferro and her black servant watched him go.

"I'll be off, now," Old Nathan said. There was nothing of what he'd brought to Ransden's cabin that he needed to take back. "I don't choose t' meet Bully on the road, though I reckon he'll hev things on his mind besides tryin' conclusions with me."

He was shivering so violently that his tongue and lips had difficulty forming the words.

"But what's the matter with Cull?" Ellie Ransden begged.

"Hain't nothin' the matter!" Old Nathan gasped.

He put a hand on the doorframe to steady himself, then stepped out into the night. Had it been an ague, he could have dosed himself, but the cunning man was shaking in reaction to the powers he had summoned and channeled . . . successfully, though at a price.

Ellie followed him out of the cabin. She gripped Old Nathan's arm as he fumbled in one of the mule's panniers. "Sir," she said fiercely, "I've a right to know."

"Here," the cunning man said, thrusting a tissue-wrapped package into her hands. "Yer Cull, hit niver was he didn't love ye. This is sompin' he put back t' hev Rance Holden wrap up purty-like. I told Rance I'd bring it out t' ye."

The girl's fingers tugged reflexively at the ribbon, but she paused with the packet only half untied. The moon was still beneath the trees, so there was no illumination except the faint glow of firelight from the cabin's doorway. She caressed the lines of the ivory comb through the tissue.

"I reckon," Ellie said deliberately, "Cullen fergot 'cause of all the fishin' he's been after this past while." She tilted up her face and kissed Old Nathan's bearded cheek, then stepped away.

The cunning man mounted his mule and cast the reins loose from the rail. He was no longer shivering.

"Yer Cull, he give me a bullhead this forenoon," he said.

"We goin' home t' get some rest, naow?" the mule asked.

"Git up, mule," Old Nathan said, turning the beast's head. To Ellie he went on, "T'night, I give thet fish back t' him; an fer a while, I put hit where he didn't figger t' find sech a thing."

As the mule clopped down the road at a comfortable pace, Old Nathan called over his shoulder, "Sure hell thet warn't whut Francine Taliaferro figgered t' see there!"

The Fool

"Now jest ignore him," said the buck to the doe as Old Nathan turned in the furrow he was hoeing twenty yards ahead of them.

"But he's looking at us," whispered the doe from the side of her mouth. She stood frozen, but a rapidly pulsing artery made shadows quiver across her throat in the evening sun.

"G'wan away!" called Old Nathan, but his voice sounded half-hearted even in his own ears. He lifted the hoe and shook it. A hot afternoon cultivating was the best medicine the cunning man knew for his aches . . . but the work did not become less tiring because it did him good. "Git, deer!"

"See, it's all right," said the buck as he lowered his head for another mouthful of turnip greens.

Old Nathan stooped for a clod to hurl at them. As he straightened with it the deer turned in unison and fled in great floating bounds, their heads thrust forward.

"Consarn it," muttered the cunning man, crumbling the clod between his long, knobby fingers as he watched the animals disappear into the woods beyond his plowland.

"Hi, there," called a voice from behind him, beside his cabin back across the creek.

Old Nathan turned, brushing his hand against his pants leg of coarse homespun. His distance sight was as good as it ever had been, so even at the length of a decent rifleshoot he had no trouble in identifying his

visitor as Eldon Bowsmith. Simp Bowsmith, they called the boy down to the settlement . . . and they had reason, though the boy was more an innocent than a natural in the usual sense.

"Hi!" Bowsmith repeated, waving with one hand while the other shaded his eyes from the low sun. "There wuz two deer in the field jist now!"

They had reason, that was sure as the sunrise.

"Hold there," Old Nathan called as the boy started down the path to the creek and the field beyond. "I'm headed back myself." Shouldering his hoe, he suited his action to his words.

Bowsmith nodded and plucked a long grass stem. He began to chew on the soft white base of it while he leaned on the fence of the pasture which had once held a bull and two milk cows . . . and now held the cows alone. The animals, startled at first into watchfulness, returned to chewing their cud when they realized that the stranger's personality was at least as placid as their own.

Old Nathan crossed the creek on the puncheon that served as a bridge—a log of red oak, adzed flat on the top side. A fancier structure would have been pointless, because spring freshets were sure to carry any practicable bridge downstream once or twice a year. The simplest form of crossing was both easily replaced and adequate to the cunning man's needs.

As he climbed the sloping path to his cabin with long, slow strides, Old Nathan studied his visitor. Bowsmith was tall, as tall as the cunning man himself, and perhaps as gangling. Age had shrunk Old Nathan's flesh over its framework of bone and sinew to accentuate angles, but there was little real difference in build between the two men save for the visitor's greater juiciness.

Bowsmith's most distinguishing characteristic—the factor that permitted Old Nathan to recognize him from 200 yards away—was his hair. It was a nondescript brown in color, but the way it stood out in patches of varying length was unmistakable; the boy had cut it himself, using a knife.

The cunning man realized he must have been staring when Bowsmith said with an apologetic grin, "There hain't a mirror et my place, ye see. I do what I kin with a bucket uv water."

"Makes no matter with me," Old Nathan muttered. Nor should it have, and he was embarrassed that his thoughts were so transparent. He'd been late to the line hisself when they gave out good looks. "Come in 'n set, and you kin tell me what brought ye here."

Bowsmith tossed to the ground his grass stem—chewed all the way to the harsh green blades—and hesitated as if to pluck another before entering the cabin. " 'Bliged t'ye," he said and, in the event, followed Old Nathan without anything to occupy his hands.

The doors, front and back, of the four-square cabin were open when the visitor arrived, but he had walked around instead of through the structure on his way to find the cunning man. Now he stared at the interior, his look of anticipation giving way to disappointment at the lack of exotic trappings.

There were two chairs, a stool, and a table, all solidly fitted but shaped by a broadaxe and spokeshave rather than a lathe. The bed was of similar workmanship, with a rope frame and corn-shuck mattress. The quilted coverlet was decorated with a Tree-of-Life applique of exceptional quality, but there were women in the county who could at least brag that they could stitch its equal.

A shelf set into the wall above the bed held six books, and two chests flanked the fireplace. The chests,

covered in age-blackened leather and iron-bound, could bear dark imaginings—but they surely did not require such. Five china cups and a plate stood on the fireboard where every cabin but the poorest displayed similar knick-knacks; and the rifle pegged to the wall above them would have been unusual only by its absence.

"Well . . ." Bowsmith murmured, turning his head slowly in his survey. He had expected to feel awe, and lacking that, he did not, his tongue did not know quite how to proceed. Then, on the wall facing the fireplace, he finally found something worthy of amazed comment. "Well . . ." he said, pointing to the strop of black bullhide. The bull's tail touched the floor, while the nose lifted far past the rafters to brush the roof peak. "What en tarnation's thet?"

"Bull I onct hed," Old Nathan said gruffly, answering the boy as he might not have done with anyone who was less obviously an open-eyed innocent.

"Well," the boy repeated, this time in a tone of agreement. But his brow furrowed again and he asked, "But how come ye keep hit?"

Old Nathan grimaced and, seating himself in the rocker, pointed Bowsmith to the upright chair. "Set," he ordered.

But there was no harm in the lad, so the older man explained, "I could bring him back, I could. Don't choose to, is all, cuz hit'd cost too much. There's a price for ever'thing, and I reckon that 'un's more thin the gain."

"Well," said the boy, beaming now that he was sure Old Nathan wasn't angry with him after all.

He sat down on the chair as directed and ran a hand through his hair while he paused to collect his thoughts. Bowsmith must be twenty-five or near it, but the cunning man was sure that he would halve his visitor's age if he had nothing to go by except voice and diction.

"Ma used t' barber me 'fore she passed on last year," the boy said in embarrassment renewed by the touch of his ragged scalp. "Mar' Beth Neill, she tried the onct, but hit wuz worser'n what I done."

He smiled wanly at the memory, tracing his fingers down the center of his scalp. "Cut me bare, right along here," he said. "Land but people laughed. She hed t' laugh herself."

"Yer land lies hard by the Neill clan's, I b'lieve?" the cunning man said with his eyes narrowing.

"Thet's so," agreed Bowsmith, bobbing his head happily. "We're great friends, thim en me, since Ma passed on." He looked down at the floor, grinning fiercely, and combed the fingers of both hands through his hair as if to shield the memories that were dancing through his skull. "Specially Mar' Beth, I reckon."

"First I heard," said Old Nathan, "thet any uv Baron Neill's clan wuz a friend to ary soul but kin by blood er by marriage . . . and I'd heard they kept marriage pretty much in the clan besides."

Bowsmith looked up expectantly, though he said nothing. Perhaps he hadn't understood the cunning man's words, though they'd been blunt enough in all truth.

Old Nathan sighed and leaned back in his rocker. "No matter, boy, no matter," he said. "Tell me what it is ez brings ye here."

The younger man grimaced and blinked as he considered the request, which he apparently expected to be confusing. His brow cleared again in beaming delight and he said, "Why, I'm missin' my plowhorse, and I heard ye could find sich things. Horses what strayed."

Lives next to the Neill clan and thinks his horse strayed, the cunning man thought. Strayed right through the wall of a locked barn, no doubt. He frowned like thunder as he considered the ramifications, for the boy and for himself, if he provided the help requested.

"The Bar'n tried t' hep me find Jen," volunteered Bowsmith. "Thet's my horse. He knows about findin' and sichlike, too, from old books. . . ." He turned, uncomfortably, to glance at the volumes on the shelf there.

"I'd heard thet about the Baron," said Old Nathan grimly.

"But it wuzn't no good," the boy continued. "He says, the Bar'n does, must hev been a painter et Jen." He shrugged and scrunched his face up under pressure of an emotion the cunning man could not identify from the expression alone. "So I reckon thet's so . . . but she wuz a good ol' horse, Jen wuz, and it don't seem right somehows t' leave her bones out in the woods thet way. I thought maybe . . . ?"

Well, by God if there was one, and by Satan who was as surely loose in the world as the Neill clan—and the Neills good evidence for the Devil—Old Nathan wasn't going to pass this by. Though finding the horse would be dangerous, and there was no need for that. . . .

"All right, boy," said the cunning man as he stood up. The motion of his muscles helped him find the right words, sometimes, so he walked toward the fireplace alcove. "Don't ye be buryin' yer Jen till she's dead, now. I reckon I kin bring her home fer ye."

A pot of vegetables had been stewing all afternoon on the banked fire. Old Nathan pivoted to the side of the prong holding the pot and set a knot of pitchy lightwood on the coals. "Now," he continued, stepping away from the fire so that when the pine knot flared up its sparks would not spatter him, "you fetch me hair from Jen, her mane and her tail partikalarly. Ye kin find thet, cain't ye, clingin' in yer barn and yer fences?"

Bowsmith leaped up happily, "Why, sure I kin," he said. "Thet's all ye need?"

His face darkened. "There's one thing, though," he said, then swallowed to prime his voice for what he had to admit next. "I've a right strong back, and I reckon there hain't much ye kin put me to around yer fields here ez I cain't do fer ye. But I hain't got money t' pay ye, and since Ma passed on—" he swallowed again "—seems like ever' durn thing we owned, I cain't find whur I put it. So effen my labor's not enough fer ye, I don't know what I could give."

The boy met Old Nathan's eyes squarely and there weren't many folk who would do that, for fear that the cunning man would draw out the very secrets of their hearts. Well, Simp Bowsmith didn't seem to have any secrets; and perhaps there were worse ways to be.

"Don't trouble yerself with thet," said Old Nathan aloud, "until we fetch yer horse back."

The cunning man watched the boy tramping cheerfully back up the trail, unconcerned by the darkness and without even a stick against the threat of bears and cougars which would keep his neighbors from travelling at night. Hard to believe, sometimes, that the same world held that boy and the Neill clan besides.

A thought struck him. "Hoy!" he called, striding to the edge of his porch to shout up the trail. "Eldon Bowsmith!"

"Sir?" wound the boy's reply from the dark. He must already be to the top of the knob, among the old beeches that were its crown.

"Ye bring me a nail from a shoe Jen's cast besides," Old Nathan called back. "D'ye hear me?"

"Yessir."

"Still, we'll make a fetch from the hair first, and thet hed ought t'do the job," the cunning man muttered; but his brow was furrowing as he considered consequences, things that would happen despite him and things that he—needs must—would initiate.

* * *

"I brung ye what ye called fer," said Bowsmith, sweating and cheerful from his midday hike. His whistling had announced him as soon as he topped the knob, the happiest rendition of "Bonny Barbry Allen" Old Nathan had heard in all his born days.

The boy held out a gob of gray-white horsehair in one hand and a tapered horseshoe nail in the other. Then his eyes lighted on movement in a corner of the room, the cat slinking under the bedstead.

"Oh!" said Bowsmith, kneeling and setting the nail on the floor to be able to extend his right hand toward the animal. "Ye've a cat. Here, pretty boy. Here, handsome." He clucked his tongue.

"Hain't much fer strangers, that 'un," said Old Nathan, and the cat promptly made a liar of him by flowing back from cover and flopping down in front of Bowsmith to have his belly rubbed.

"Oh," said the cat, "he's all right, ain't he," as he gripped the boy's wrist with his forepaws and tugged it down to his jaws.

"Watch—" the cunning man said in irritation to one or the other, he wasn't sure which. The pair of them ignored him, the cat purring in delight and closing his jaws so that the four long canines dimpled the boy's skin but did not threaten to puncture it.

Bowsmith looked up in sudden horror.

"Don't stop, damn ye!" growled the cat and kicked a knuckle with a hind paw.

"Is he . . . ?" the boy asked. "I mean, I thought he wuz a cat, but . . . ?"

"He's a cat, sure ez I'm a man—" Old Nathan snapped. He had started to add "—and you're a durn fool," but that was too close to the truth, and there was no reason to throw it in Bowsmith's face because he made up to Old Nathan's cat better than the cunning man himself generally did.

"Spilesport," grumbled the cat as he rolled to his feet and stalked out the door.

"Oh, well," said the boy, rising and then remembering to pick up the horseshoe nail. "I wouldn't want, you know, t' trifle with yer familiars, coo."

"Don't hold with sich," the cunning man retorted. Then a thought occurred to him and he added, "Who is it been tellin' ye about familiar spirits and sechlike things?"

"Well," admitted the boy, and "admit" was the right word for there was embarrassment in his voice, "I reckon the Bar'n might could hev said somethin'. He knows about thet sort uv thing."

"Well, ye brung the horsehair," said Old Nathan softly, his green eyes slitted over the thoughts behind them. He took the material from the boy's hand and carried it with him to the table.

The first task was to sort the horsehair—long white strands from the tail; shorter but equally coarse bits of mane; and combings from the hide itself, matted together and gray-hued. The wad was more of a blur to his eyes than it was even in kinky reality. Sighing, the old man started up to get his spectacles from one of the chests.

Then, pausing, he had a better idea. He turned and gestured Bowsmith to the straight chair at the table. "Set there and sort the pieces fer length," he said gruffly.

The cunning man was harsh because he was angry at the signs that he was aging; angry that the boy was too great a fool to see how he was being preyed upon; and angry that he, Old Nathan the Devil's Master, should care about the fate of one fool more in a world that already had a right plenty of such.

"Yessir," said the boy, jumping to obey with such clumsy alacrity that his thigh bumped the table and slid the solid piece several inches along the floor. "And thin what do we do?"

Bowsmith's fingers were deft enough, thought Old Nathan as he stepped back a pace to watch. "No we about it, boy," said the cunning man. "You spin it to a bridle whilst I mebbe say some words t' help."

Long hairs from the tail to form the reins; wispy headbands and throat latch bent from the mane, and the whole felted together at each junction by tufts of gray hair from the hide.

"And I want ye t' think uv yer Jen as ye do thet, boy," Old Nathan said aloud while visions of the coming operation drifted through his mind. "Jest ez t'night ye'll think uv her as ye set in her stall, down on four legs like a beast yerself, and ye wear this bridle ye're makin'. And ye'll call her home, so ye will, and thet'll end the matter, I reckon."

"'Bliged t' ye, sir," said Eldon Bowsmith, glancing up as he neared the end of the sorting. There was no more doubt in his eyes than a more sophisticated visitor would have expressed at the promise the sun would rise.

Old Nathan wished he were as confident. He especially wished that he were confident the Neill clan would let matters rest when their neighbor had his horse back.

* * *

Old Nathan was tossing the dirt with which he had just scoured his cookware off the side of the porch the next evening when he saw Bowsmith trudging back down the trail. The boy was not whistling, and his head was bent despondently.

His right hand was clenched. Old Nathan knew, as surely as if he could see it, that Bowsmith was bringing back the fetch bridle.

"Come and set," the cunning man called, rising and flexing the muscles of his back as if in preparation to

shoulder a burden.

"Well," the boy said, glumly but without the reproach Old Nathan had expected, "I reckon I'm in a right pickle now," as he mounted the pair of steps to the porch.

The two men entered the cabin; Old Nathan laid another stick of lightwood on the fire. It was late afternoon in the flatlands, but here in the forested hills the sun had set and the glow of the sky was dim even outdoors.

"I tried t' do what ye said," Bowsmith said, fingering his scalp with his free hand, "but someways I must hev gone wrong like usual."

The cat, alerted by voices, dropped from the rafters to the floor with a loud thump. "Good t' see ye agin," the animal said as he curled, tail high, around the boots of the younger man. Even though Bowsmith could not understand the words as such, he knelt and began kneading the cat's fur while much of the frustrated distress left his face.

"Jen didn't fetch t' yer summons, thin?" the cunning man prodded. Durn fool, durn cat, durn nonsense. He set down the pot he carried with a clank, not bothering at present to rinse it with a gourdful of water.

"Worsen thet," the boy explained. "I brung the ol' mule from Neills', and wuzn't they mad ez hops." He looked up at the cunning man. "The Bar'n wuz right ready t' hev the sheriff on me fer horse stealin', even though he's a great good friend t' me."

The boy's brow clouded with misery, then cleared into the same beatific, full-face smile Old Nathan had seen cross it before. "Mar' Beth, though, she quietened him. She told him I hadn't meant t' take their mule, and thet I'd clear off the track uv newground they been meanin' t' plant down on Cane Creek."

"You figger t' do thet?" the cunning man asked sharply. "Clear canebrake fer the Neill clan, whin there's ten uv thim and none willin' t' break his back with sich a chore?"

"Why I reckon hit's the least I could do," Bowsmith answered in surprise. "Why, I took their mule, didn't I?"

Old Nathan swallowed his retort, but the taste of the words soured his mouth. "Let's see the fetch bridle," he said instead, reaching out his hand.

The cunning man knelt close by the spluttering fire to examine the bridle while his visitor continued to play with the cat in mutual delight. The bridle was well made, as good a job as Old Nathan himself could have done with his spectacles on.

It was a far more polished piece than the bridle Eldon Bowsmith had carried off the day before, and the hairs from which it was hand-spun were brown and black.

"Where'd ye stop yestiddy, on yer way t' home?" Old Nathan demanded.

Bowsmith popped upright, startling the cat out the door with an angry curse. "Now, how did you know thet?" he said in amazement, and in delight at being amazed.

"Boy, boy," the cunning man said, shaking his head. He was too astounded at such innocence even to snarl in frustration. "Where'd ye stop?"

"Well, I reckon I might uv met Mary Beth Neill," Bowsmith said, tousling his hair like a dog scratching his head with a forepaw. "They're right friendly folk, the Neills, so's they hed me stay t' supper."

"Where you told thim all about the fetch bridle, didn't ye?" Old Nathan snapped, angry at last.

"Did I?" said the boy in open-eyed wonder. "Why, not so's I kin recollect, sir . . . but I reckon ef you say I did, thin—"

Old Nathan waved the younger man to silence. Bowsmith might have blurted the plan to the Neills and not remember doing so. Equally, a mind less subtle than Baron Neill's might have drawn the whole story from a mere glimpse of the bridle woven of Jen's hair. That the Neill patriarch had been able to counter in the way he had done suggested he was deeper into the lore than Old Nathan would have otherwise believed.

"Well, what's done is done," said the cunning man as he stepped to the fireboard. "Means we need go a way I'd not hev gone fer choice."

He took the horseshoe nail from where he had lodged it, beside the last in line of his five china cups. He wouldn't have asked the boy to bring the nail if he hadn't expected—or at least feared—such a pass. If Baron Neill chose to raise the stakes, then that's what the stakes would be.

Old Nathan set the nail back, for the nonce. There was a proper bed of coals banked against the wall of the fireplace now during the day. The cunning man chose two splits of hickory and set them sharp-edge down on the ashes and bark-sides close together. When the clinging wood fibers ignited, the flames and the blazing gases they drove out would be channeled up between the flats to lick the air above the log in blue lambency. For present purposes, that would be sufficient.

"Well, come on, thin, boy," the cunning man said to his visitor. "We'll git a rock fer en anvil from the crik and some other truck, and thin we'll forge ye a pinter t' pint out yer horse. Wheriver she be."

* * *

Old Nathan had chosen for the anvil an egg of sandstone almost the size of a man's chest. It was an easy location to lift, standing clear of the streambed on a pedestal of limestone blocks from which all the sand and lesser gravel had been sluiced away since the water was speeded by constriction.

For all that the rock's placement was a good one, Old Nathan had thought that its weight might be too much for Bowsmith to carry up to the cabin. The boy had not hesitated, however, to wade into the stream running to mid-thigh and raise the egg with the strength of his arms and shoulders alone.

Bowsmith walked back out of the stream, feeling cautiously for his footing but with no other sign of the considerable weight he balanced over his head. He paused a moment on the low bank, where mud squelched from between his bare toes. Then he resumed his steady stride, pacing up the path.

Old Nathan had watched to make sure the boy could handle the task set him. As a result, he had to rush to complete his own part of the business in time to reach the cabin when Bowsmith did.

A flattened pebble, fist-sized and hand-filling, would do nicely for the hammer. It was a smaller bit of the same dense sandstone that the cunning man had chosen for the anvil. He tossed it down beside a clump of alders and paused with his eyes closed. His fingers crooked, groping for the knife he kept in a place he could "see" only within his skull.

It was there where it should be, a jackknife with two blades of steel good enough to accept a razor edge—which was how Old Nathan kept the shorter one. His fingers closed on the yellow bone handle and drew the knife out into the world that he and others watched with their eyes.

The cunning man had never been sure where it was that he put his knife. Nor, for that matter, would he have bet more than he could afford to lose that the little tool would be there the next time he sought it. Thus far, it always had been. That was all he knew.

He opened the longer blade, the one sharpened to a 301 degree angle, and held the edge against a smooth-barked alder stem that was of about the same diameter as his thumb. Old Nathan's free hand gripped the alder above the intended cut, and a single firm stroke of the knife severed the stem at a slant across the tough fibers.

Whistling himself—"The Twa Corbies," in contrast to Bowsmith's rendition of "Bonny Barbry Allen" on the path ahead—Old Nathan strode back to the cabin. The split hickory should be burning to just the right extent by now.

"And I'll set down on his white neck bone," the cunning man sang aloud as he trimmed the alder's branches away, "T' pluck his eyes out one and one."

The Neill clan had made their bed. Now they could sleep in it with the sheriff.

* * *

"Gittin' right hot," said Bowsmith as he squatted and squinted at the nail he had placed on the splits according to the cunning man's direction. "Reckon the little teensie end's so hot hit's nigh yaller t' look et."

Old Nathan gripped the trimmed stem with both hands and twisted as he folded it, so that the alder doubled at the notch he had cut in the middle. What had been a yard-long wand was now a pair of tongs with which the cunning man bent to grip the heated nail by its square head.

"Ready now," he directed. "Remember that you're drawin' out the iron druther thin bangin' hit flat."

"Wisht we hed a proper sledge," the boy said. He slammed the smaller stone accurately onto the glowing nail the instant Old Nathan's tongs laid it on the anvil stone.

Sparks hissed from the nail in red anger, though the sound of the blow was a clock! rather than a ringing crash. A dimple near the tip of the nail brightened to orange. Before it had faded, the boy struck again. Old Nathan turned the workpiece 90° on its axis, and the hand-stone hit it a third time.

While the makeshift hammer was striking, the iron did not appear to change. When the cunning man's tongs laid it back in the blue sheet of hickory flame, however, the workpiece was noticeably longer than the smith had forged it originally.

Old Nathan had been muttering under his breath as the boy hammered. They were forging the scale on the face of the nail into the fabric of the pointer, amalgamating the proteins of Jen's hoof with the hot iron. Old Nathan murmured, "As least is to great," each time the hammer struck. Now, as the nail heated again, the gases seemed to flow by it in the pattern of a horse's mane.

"Cain't use an iron sledge, boy" the cunning man said aloud. "Not fer this, not though the nail be iron hitself."

He lifted out the workpiece again. "Strike on," he said. "And the tip this time, so's hit's pinto like an awl."

The stone clopped like a horse's hoof and clicked like a horse's teeth, while beside them in the chimney corner the fire settled itself with a burbling whicker.

As least is to great . . .

* * *

Eldon Bowsmith's face was sooty from the fire and flushed where runnels of sweat had washed the soot away, but there was a triumphant gleam in his eyes as he prepared to leave Old Nathan's cabin that evening. He held the iron pointer upright in one hand and his opposite index finger raised in balance. The tip of his left ring finger was bandaged with a bit of tow and spiderweb to cover a puncture. The cunning man had drawn three drops of the boy's blood to color the water in which they quenched the iron after its last heating.

"I cain't say how much I figger I'm 'bliged t' ye fer this," said Bowsmith, gazing at the pointer with a fondness inexplicable to anyone who did not know what had gone in to creating the instrument.

The bit of iron had been hammered out to the length of a man's third finger. It looked like a scrap of bent wire, curved and recurved by blows from stone onto stone, each surface having a rounded face. The final point had been rolled onto it between the stones, with the boy showing a remarkable delicacy and ability to coordinate his motions with those of the cunning man who held the tongs.

"Don't thank me till ye've got yer Jen back in her stall," said Old Nathan. His mind added, "And not thin, effen the Neills burn ye out and string ye to en oak limb." Aloud he said, "Anyways, ye did the heavy part yerself."

That was true only when limited to the physical portion of what had gone on that afternoon. Were the hammering of primary importance, then every blacksmith would have been a wizard. Old Nathan, too, was panting and worn from exertion; but like Bowsmith, the success he felt at what had been accomplished made the effort worthwhile. He had seen the plowhorse pacing in her narrow stall when steam rose as the iron was quenched.

The boy cocked his head aside and started to comb his fingers through his hair in what Old Nathan had learned was a gesture of embarrassment. He looked from the pointer to his bandaged finger, then began to rub his scalp with the heel of his right hand. "Well . . ." he said. "I want ye t' know thet I . . ."

Bowsmith grimaced and looked up to meet the eyes of the cunning man squarely. "Lot uv folk," he said, "they wouldn't hev let me hep. They call me Simp, right t' my face they do thet. . . . En, en I reckon there's no harm t' thet, but . . . sir, ye treated me like Ma used to. You air ez good a friend ez I've got in the world, 'ceptin' the Neills."

"So good a friend ez thet?" said the cunning man drily. He had an uncomfortable urge to turn his own face away and comb fingers through his hair.

"Well," he said instead and cleared his throat in order to go on. "Well. Ye remember what I told ye. Ye don't speak uv this t' ary soul. En by the grace uv yer Ma in heaven whur she watches ye—"

Old Nathan gripped the boy by both shoulders, and the importance of what he had to get across made

emotionally believable words that were not part of the world's truth as the cunning man knew it "—don't call t' Jen and foller the pinter to her without ye've the sheriff et yer side. Aye, en ef he wants t' bring half the settlement along t' boot, thin I reckon thet might be a wise notion."

"Ain't goin' t' fail ye this time, sir," promised the boy brightly. "Hit'll all be jist like you say."

He was whistling again as he strode up the hill into the dusk. Old Nathan imagined a cabin burning and a lanky form dangling from a tree beside it.

He spat to avoid the omen.

* * *

Old Nathan sat morosely in the chimney corner, reading with his back to the fire, when his cat came in the next night.

"Caught a rabbit nigh on up t' the road," the cat volunteered cheerfully. "Land sakes didn't it squeal and thrash."

He threw himself down on the puncheon floor, using Old Nathan's booted foot as a brace while he licked his belly and genitals. "Let it go more times thin I kin count," the cat went on. "When it wouldn't run no more, thin I killed it en et it down t' the head en hide."

"I reckon ye did," said the cunning man. To say otherwise to the cat would be as empty as railing against the sky for what it struck with its thunderbolts. He carefully folded his reading glasses and set them in the crease of his book so that he could stroke the animal's fur.

"Hev ye seen thet young feller what wuz here t'other day?" the cat asked, pawing his master's hand but not—for a wonder—hooking in his claws.

"I hev not," Old Nathan replied flatly. He had ways by which he could have followed Bowsmith's situation or even anticipated it. It was more than the price such sources of information came with that stayed him; they graved an otherwise fluid future on the stone of reality. He would enter that world of knowledge for others whose perceived need was great enough, but he would not enter it for himself. Old Nathan had experienced no greater horror in his seventy years of life than the certain knowledge of a disaster he could not change.

"Well," said the cat, "reckon ye'll hev a chanct to purty quick, now. Turned down yer trail, he did, 'bout time I licked off them rabbit guts en come home myself."

"Halloo the house!" called Eldon Bowsmith from beyond the front door, and the cat bit Old Nathan's forearm solidly as the cunning man tried to rise from the rocking chair.

"Bless en save ye, cat!" roared the old man, gripping the animal before the hind legs, feeling the warm distended belly squishing with rabbit meat. "Come in, boy," he cried, "come in en set," and he surged upright with the open book in one hand and the cat cursing in the other.

Bowsmith wore a look of such dejection that he scarcely brightened with surprise at the cunning man's incongruous appearance. A black iron pointer dangled from the boy's right hand, and the scrap of bandage had fallen from his left ring finger without being replaced.

"Ev'nin' t' ye, sir," he said to Old Nathan. "Wisht I could say I'd done ez ye told me, but I don't reckon I

kin."

When the cat released Old Nathan's forearm, the cunning man let him jump to the floor. The animal promptly began to insinuate himself between Bowsmith's feet and rub the boy's knees with his tailtip, muttering, "Good t' see ye, good thet ye've come."

"Well, you're alive," said Old Nathan, "en you're here, which ain't a bad start fer fixin' sich ez needs t' be fixed. Set yerself en we'll talk about it."

Bowsmith obeyed his host's gesture and seated himself in the rocker, still warm and clicking with the motion of the cunning man rising from it. He held out the pointer but did not look at his host as he explained, "I wint to the settlemint, and I told the sheriff what ye said. He gathered up mebbe half a dozen uv the men thereabouts, all totin' their guns like they wuz en army. En I named Jen, like you said, and this nail, hit like t' pull outen my hand it wuz so fierce t' find her."

Old Nathan examined by firelight the pointer he had taken from the boy. He was frowning, and when he measured the iron against his finger the frown became a thundercloud in which the cunning man's eyes were flashes of green lightning. The pointer was a quarter inch longer than the one that had left his cabin the morning before.

"En would ye b'lieve it, but hit took us straight ez straight t' the Neill place?" continued the boy with genuine wonderment in his voice. He shook his head. "I told the sheriff I reckoned there wuz a mistake, but mebbe the Bar'n had found Jen en he wuz keepin' her t' give me whin I next come by."

Bowsmith shook his head again. He laced his fingers together on his lap and stared glumly at them as he concluded, "But I be hanged ef thet same ol' spavined mule warn't tied t' the door uv the barn, and the pinter wouldn't leave afore it touched hit's hoof." He sucked in his lips in frustration.

"Here, I'd admire ef you sleeked my fur," purred the cat, and he leaped into the boy's lap. Bowsmith's hands obeyed as aptly as if he could have understood the words of the request.

"What is it happened thin, boy?" Old Nathan asked in a voice as soft as the whisper of powder being poured down the barrel of a musket.

"Well, I'm feared to guess what might hev happened," explained Bowsmith, "effen the Baron hisself hedn't come out the cabin and say hit made no matter."

He began to nod in agreement with the words in his memory, saying, "The Bar'n, he told the sheriff I wuzn't right in the head sometimes, en he give thim all a swig outen his jug uv wildcat so's they wouldn't hammer me fer runnin' thim off through the woods like a durned fool. They wuz laughin' like fiends whin they left, the sheriff and the folk from the settlement."

Bowsmith's hands paused. The cat waited a moment, then rose and battered his chin against the boy's chest until the stroking resumed.

"Reckon I am a durn fool," the boy said morosely. "Thet en worse."

"How long did ye stop over t' the Neills after ye left here yestiddy?" Old Nathan asked in the same soft voice.

"Coo," said Bowsmith, meeting the cunning man's eyes as wonder drove the gloom from his face. "Well,

I niver . . . Wuzn't goin' t' tell ye thet, seein's ez ye'd said I oughtn't t' stop. But Mar' Beth, she seed me on the road en hollered me up t' the cabin t' set fer a spell. Don't guess I was there too long, though. The Baron asked me whin I was going t' clear his newground. And then whin he went out, me en the boys, we passed the jug a time er two."

He frowned. "Reckon hit might uv been longer thin I'd recollected."

"Hit wuz dark by the time ye passed the Neills, warn't it?" Old Nathan said. "How'd Mary Beth see down t' the road?"

* * *

"Why, I be," replied the boy. "Why—" His face brightened. "D'ye reckon she wuz waiting on me t' come back by? She's powerful sweet on me, ye know, though I say thet who oughtn't."

"Reckon hit might be she wuz waitin'," said the cunning man, his voice leaden and implacable. He lifted his eyes from Bowsmith to the end wall opposite the fireplace. The strop that was all the material remains of Spanish King shivered in a breeze that neither man could feel.

"Pinter must hev lost all hit's virtue whin I went back on what ye told me," the boy said miserably. "You bin so good t' me, en I step on my dick ever' time I turn around. Reckon I'll git back t' my place afore I cause more trouble."

"Set, boy," said Old Nathan. "Ye'll go whin I say go . . . and ye'll do this time what I say ye'll do."

"Yessir," replied Bowsmith, taken aback. When he tried instinctively to straighten his shoulders, the chair rocked beneath him. He lurched to his feet in response. Instead of spilling the cat, he used the animal as a balancer and then clutched him back to his chest.

"Yessir," he repeated, standing upright and looking confused but not frightened. And not, somehow, ridiculous, for all his ragged spray of hair and the grumbling tomcat in his arms.

Old Nathan set the book he held down on the table, his spectacles still marking his place against the stiff binding which struggled to close the volume. With both hands free, he gripped the table itself and walked over to the fireplace alcove.

Bowsmith poured the cat back onto the floor as soon as he understood what his host was about, but he paused on realizing that his help was not needed. The tabletop was forty inches to a side, sawn from thick planks and set on an equally solid framework—all of oak. The cunning man shifted the table without concern for its weight and awkwardness. He had never been a giant for strength, but even now he was no one to trifle with either.

"Ye kin fetch the straight chair to it," he said over his shoulder while he fumbled with the lock of one of the chests flanking the fireplace. "I'll need the light t' copy out the words ye'll need."

"Sir, I cain't read," the boy said in a voice of pale, peeping despair.

"Hit don't signify," replied the cunning man. The lid of the chest creaked open. "Fetch the chair."

Old Nathan set a bundle of turkey quills onto the table, then a pot of ink stoppered with a cork. The ink moved sluggishly and could have used a dram of water to thin it, but it was fluid enough for writing as it was.

Still kneeling before the chest, the cunning man raised a document case and untied the ribbon which closed it. Bowsmith placed the straight chair by the table, moving the rocker aside to make room. Then he watched over the cunning man's shoulder, finding in the written word a magic as real as anything Old Nathan had woven or forged.

"Not this one," the older man said, laying aside the first of the letters he took from the case. It was in a woman's hand, the paper fine but age-spotted. He could not read the words without his glasses, but he did not need to reread what he had not been able to forget even at this distance in time. "Nor this."

"Coo . . ." Bowsmith murmured as the first document was covered by the second, this one written on parchment with a wax seal and ribbons which the case had kept a red as bright as that of the day they were impressed onto the document.

Old Nathan smiled despite his mood. "A commendation from General Sevier," he said in quiet pride as he took another letter from the case.

"You fit the Redcoats et New Or-Leens like they say, thin?" the younger man asked.

Old Nathan looked back at him with an expression suddenly as blank as a board. "No, boy," he said, "hit was et King's Mountain, en they didn't wear red coats, the most uv thim."

He paused and then added in a kindlier tone, "En I reckon thet when I was yer age en ol' fools wuz jawin' about Quebec and Cartagena and all thet like, hit didn't matter a bean betwixt them t' me neither. And mebbe there wuz more truth t' thet thin I've thought since."

"I don't rightly foller," said Bowsmith.

"Don't reckon ye need to," the older man replied. "Throw a stick uv lightwood on the fire."

Holding the sheet he had just removed from the case, Old Nathan stood upright and squinted to be sure of what he had. It seemed to be one of his brother's last letters to him, a decade old but no more important for that. It was written on both sides of the sheet, but the cuttlefish ink had faded to its permanent state of rich brown. The paper would serve as well for the cunning man's present need as a clean sheet which could not have been found closer than Holden's store in the settlement—and that dearly.

He sat down on the chair and donned his spectacles, using the letter as a placeholder in the book in their stead. The turkey quills were held together by a wisp of twine which, with his glasses on, he could see to untie.

After choosing a likely quill, Old Nathan scowled and said, "Turn yer head, boy." When he felt the movement of Bowsmith behind him, obedient if uncertain, the cunning man reached out with his eyes closed and brought his hand back holding the jackknife.

Some of Old Nathan's magic was done in public to impress visitors and those to whom they might babble in awe. Some things that he might have hidden from others he did before Bowsmith, because he knew that the boy would never attempt to duplicate the acts on his own. But this one trick was the cunning man's secret of secrets, and he didn't want to frighten the boy.

The knife is the most useful of Mankind's tools, dating from ages before he was even human. But a knife

is also a weapon, and the sole reason for storing it—somewhere else—rather than in a pants pocket was that on some future date an enemy might remove a weapon from your pants. Better to plan for a need which never eventuated than to be caught by unexpected disaster.

"Ye kin turn and help me now, Eldon Bowsmith," the cunning man said as he trimmed his pen with the wire edge of the smaller blade. "Ye kin hold open the book fer me."

"Yessir," said the boy and obeyed with the clumsy nervousness of a bachelor asked to hold an infant for the first time. He gripped the volume with an effort which an axehelve would have better justified. The shaking of his limbs would make the print even harder to read.

Old Nathan sighed. "Gently, boy," he said. "Hit won't bite ye."

Though there was reason to fear this book. It named itself Testamentum Athanasii on a title page which gave no other information regarding its provenance. The volume was old, but it had been printed with movable type and bound or rebound recently enough that the leather hinges showed no sign of cracking.

The receipt to which the book now opened was one Old Nathan had read frequently in the months since Spanish King had won his last battle and, winning, had died. Not till now had he really considered employing the formula. Not really.

"Boy," lied the cunning man, "we cain't git yer horse back, so I'll give ye the strength uv a bull thet ye kin plow."

Bowsmith's face found a neutral pattern and held it while his mind worked on the sentence he had just been offered. Usually conversations took standard patterns. "G'day t' ye, Simp." "G'day t' ye Mister/Miz. . . ." "Ev'nin', Eldon. Come en set." "Ev'nin' Mar' Beth. Don't mind effen I do." Patterns like that made a conversation easier, without the confusing precipices which talking to Old Nathan entailed.

"Druther hev Jen back, sir," said the boy at last. "Effen you don't mind."

The cunning man raised his left hand. The gesture was not quite a physical threat because the hand held his spectacles, and their lenses refracted spitting orange firelight across the book and the face of the younger man. "Mind, boy?" said Old Nathan. "Mind? You mind me, thet's the long and the short uv it now, d'ye hear?"

"Yessir."

The cunning man dipped his pen in the ink and wiped it on the bottle's rim, cursing the fluid's consistency. "Give ye the strength uv a bull," he lied again, "en a strong bull et thet." He began to write, his present strokes crossing those of his brother in the original letter. He held the spectacles a few inches in front of his eyes, squinting and adjusting them as he copied from the page of the book.

"Ever ketch rabbits, feller?" asked the cat as he leaped to the tabletop and landed without a stir because all four paws touched down together.

"Good feller," muttered Bowsmith, holding the book with the thumb and spread fingers of one hand so that the other could stroke the cat. The trembling which had disturbed the pages until then ceased, though the cat occasionally bumped a corner of the volume. "Good feller. . . ."

The click of clawtips against oak, the scritch of the pen nib leaving crisp black lines across the sepia

complaints beneath, and the sputtering pine knot that lighted the cabin wove themselves into a sinister unity that was darker than the nighted forest outside.

Yet not so dark as the cunning man's intent.

When he finished, the boy and the cat were both staring at him, and it was the cat who rumbled, "Bad ez all thet?" smelling the emotions in the old man's sweat.

"What'll be," Old Nathan rasped through a throat drier than he had realized till he spoke, "will be." He looked down at the document he had just indited, folded his spectacles one-handed, and then turned to hurl the quill pen into the fire with a violence that only hinted his fury at what he was about to do.

"Sir?" said Bowsmith.

"Shut the book, boy," said Old Nathan wearily. His fingers made a tentative pass toward the paper, to send it the way the quill had gone. A casuist would have said that he was not acting and therefore bore no guilt . . . but a man who sets a snare for a rabbit cannot claim the throttled rabbit caused its own death by stepping into the noose.

The cunning man stood and handed the receipt to his visitor, folding it along the creases of the original letter. "Put it in yer pocket fer now, lad," he said. He took the book, closed now as he had directed, and scooped up the cat gently with a hand beneath the rib cage and the beast's haunches in the crook of his elbow.

"Now, carry the table acrosst t' the other side," the cunning man continued, motioning Bowsmith with a thrust of his beard because he did not care to point with the leather-covered book. "Fetch me down the strop uv bullhide there. Hit's got a peg drove through each earhole t' hold it."

"That ol' bull," said the cat, turning his head to watch Bowsmith walk across the room balancing the heavy table on one hand. "Ye know, I git t' missin' him sometimes?"

"As do I," Old Nathan agreed grimly. "But I don't choose t' live in a world where I don't see the prices till the final day."

"Sir?" queried the boy, looking down from the table which he had mounted in a flat-footed jump that crashed its legs down on the puncheons.

"Don't let it trouble ye, boy," the cunning man replied. "I talk t' my cat, sometimes. Fetch me down Spanish King, en I'll deal with yer problem the way I've set myself t' do."

The cat sprang free of the encircling arm, startled by what he heard in his master's voice.

* * *

It was an hour past sunset, and Baron Neill held court on the porch over an entourage of two of his three sons and four of the six grandsons. Inside the cabin, built English-fashion of sawn timber but double sized, the women of the clan cleared off the truck from supper and talked in low voices among themselves. The false crow calls from the look-out tree raucously penetrated the background of cicadas and tree frogs.

"'Bout time," said the youngest son, taking a swig from the jug. He was in his early forties, balding and feral.

"Mar' Beth," called Baron Neill without turning his head or taking from his mouth the long stem of his meerschaum pipe.

There was silence from within the cabin but no immediate response.

The Baron dropped his feet from the porch rail with a crash and stood up. The Neill patriarch looked more like a rat than anything on two legs had a right to do. His nose was prominent, and the remainder of his body seemed to spread outward from it down to the fleshy buttocks supported by a pair of spindly shanks. "Mar' Beth!" he shouted, hunched forward as he faced the cabin door.

"Well, I'm comin', ain't I?" said a woman who was by convention the Baron's youngest daughter and was in any case close kin to him. She stepped out of the lamplit cabin, hitching the checked apron a little straighter on her homespun dress. The oil light behind her colored her hair more of a yellow than the sun would have brought out, emphasizing the translucent gradations of her single tortoise-shell comb.

"Simp's comin' back," said the Baron, relaxing enough to clamp the pipe again between his teeth. "Tyse jist called. Git down t' the trail en bring him back."

The woman stood hipshot, the desire to scowl tempered by the knowledge that the patriarch would strike her if the expression were not hidden by the angle of the light. "I'm poorly," she said.

One of the boys snickered, and Baron Neill roared, "Don't I know thet? You do ez I tell ye, girl."

Mary Beth stepped off the porch with an exaggerated sway to her hips. The pair of hogs sprawled beneath the boards awakened but snorted and flopped back down after questing with their long flexible snouts.

"Could be I don't mind," the woman threw back over her shoulder from a safe distance. "Could be Simp looks right good stacked up agin some I've seed."

One of her brothers sent after her a curse and the block of poplar he was whittling, neither with serious intent.

"Jeth," said the Baron, "go fetch Dave and Sim from the still. Never know when two more guns might be the difference betwixt somethin' er somethin' else. En bring another jug back with ye."

"Lotta durn work for a durned old plowhorse," grumbled one of the younger Neills.

The Baron sat down again on his chair and lifted his boots to the porch rail. "Ain't about a horse," he said, holding out his hand and having it filled by the stoneware whiskey jug without him needing to ask. "Hain't been about a horse since he brung Old Nathan into hit. Fancies himself, that 'un does."

The rat-faced old man took a deep draw on his pipe and mingled in his mouth the harsh flavors of burley tobacco and raw whiskey. "Well, I fancy myself, too. We'll jist see who's got the rights uv it."

* * *

Eldon Bowsmith tried to step apart from the woman when the path curved back in sight of the cabin. Mary Beth giggled throatily and pulled herself close again, causing the youth to sway like a sapling in the wind. He stretched out the heavy bundle in his opposite hand in order to recover his balance.

"What in tarnation is that ye got, boy?" demanded Baron Neill from the porch. The air above his pipe bowl glowed orange as he drew on the mouthpiece.

"Got a strop uv bullhide, Bar'n," Bowsmith called back. "Got the horns, tail, and the strip offen the backbone besides."

He swayed again, then said in a voice that carried better than he would have intended, "Mar' Beth, ye mustn't touch me like thet here." But the words were not a serious reproach, and his laughter joined the woman's renewed giggle.

There was snorting laughter from the porch as well. One of the men there might have spoken had not Baron Neill snarled his offspring to silence.

The couple separated when they reached the steps, Mary Beth leading the visitor with her hips swaying in even greater emphasis than when she had left the cabin.

"Tarnation," the Baron repeated as he stood and took the rolled strip of hide from Bowsmith. The boy's hand started to resist, but he quickly released the bundle when he remembered where he was.

"Set a spell, boy," said the patriarch. "Zeph, hand him the jug."

"I reckon I need yer help, Bar'n," Bowsmith said, rubbing his right sole against his left calf. The stoneware jug—a full one just brought from the still by the Baron's two grandsons—was pressed into his hands and he took a brief sip.

"Now, don't ye insult my squeezin's, boy," said one of the younger men. "Drink hit down like a man er ye'll answer t' me." In this, as in most things, the clan worked as a unit to achieve its ends. Simp Bowsmith was little enough of a problem sober; but with a few swallows of wildcat in him, the boy ran like butter.

"Why, you know we'd do the world for ye, lad," said the rat-faced elder as he shifted to bring the bundle into the lamplight spilling from the open door. It was just what the boy had claimed, a strop of heavy leather, tanned with the hair still on, and including the stiff-boned tail as well as the long, translucent horns.

Bowsmith handed the jug to one of the men around him, then spluttered and coughed as he swallowed the last of the mouthful he had taken. "Ye see, sir," he said quickly in an attempt to cover the tears which the liquor had brought to his eyes, "I've a spell t' say, but I need some 'un t' speak the words over whilst I git thim right. He writ thim down fer me, Mister Nathan did. But I cain't read, so's he told me go down t' the settlemint en hev Mister Holden er the sheriff say thim with me."

He carefully unbuttoned the pocket of his shirt, out at the elbows now that his mother was not alive to patch it. With the reverence for writing that other men might have reserved for gold, he handed the rewritten document to Baron Neill.

The patriarch thrust the rolled bullhide to the nearest of his offspring and took the receipt. Turning, he saw Mary Beth and said, "You—girl. Fetch the lamp out here, and thin you git back whar ye belong. Ye know better thin t' nose around whin thar's men talkin'."

"But I mustn't speak the spell out whole till ever'thing's perpared," Bowsmith went on, gouging his calf again with the nail of his big toe. "Thet's cuz hit'll work only the onct, Mister Nathan sez. En effen I'm not wearin' the strop over me when I says it, thin I'll gain some strength but not the whole strength uv the

bull."

There was a sharp altercation within the cabin, one female voice shrieking, "En what're we s'posed t' do with no more light thin inside the Devil's butthole? You put that lamp down, Mar' Beth Neill!"

"Zeph," said the Baron in a low voice, but two of his sons were already moving toward the doorway, shifting their rifles to free their right hands.

"Anyhows, I thought ye might read the spell out with me, sir," Bowsmith said. "Thim folk down t' the settlemint, I reckon they don't hev much use fer me."

"I wuz jist—" a woman cried on a rising inflection that ended with the thud of knuckles instead of a slap. The light through the doorway shifted, then brightened. The men came out, one of them carrying a copper lamp with a glass chimney.

The circle of lamplight lay like the finger of God on the group of men. That the Neills were all one family was obvious; that they were a species removed from humanity was possible. They were short men; in their midst, Eldon Bowsmith looked like a scrawny chicken surrounded by rats standing upright. The hair on their scalps was black and straight, thinning even on the youngest, and their foreheads sloped sharply.

Several of the clan were chewing tobacco, but the Baron alone smoked a pipe. The stem of that yellow-bowled meerschaum served him as an officer's swagger stick or a conductor's baton.

"Hold the durn lamp," the patriarch snapped to the son who tried to hand him the instrument. While Bowsmith clasped his hands and watched the Baron in nervous hopefulness, the remainder of the Neill clan eyed the boy sidelong and whispered at the edge of the lighted circle.

Baron Neill unfolded the document carefully and held it high so that the lamp illuminated the writing from behind his shoulder. Smoke dribbled from his nostrils in short puffs as his teeth clenched on the stem of his pipe.

When the Baron lowered the receipt, he removed the pipe from his mouth. His eyes were glaring blank fury, but his tongue said only, "I wonder, boy, effen yer Mister Nathan warn't funnin' ye along. This paper he give ye, hit don't hev word one on it. Hit's jist Babel."

One of the younger Neills took the document which the Baron held spurned at his side. Three of the others crowded closer and began to argue in whispers, one of them tracing with his finger the words written in sepia ink beneath the receipt.

"Well, they hain't words, Bar'n," said the boy, surprised that he knew something which the other man—any other man, he might have said—did not. "I mean, not like we'd speak. Mister Nathan, he said what he writ out wuz the sounds, so's I didn't hev occasion t' be consarned they wuz furrin words."

Baron Neill blinked, as shocked to hear a reasoned exposition from Simp Bowsmith as the boy was to have offered it. After momentary consideration, he decided to treat the information as something he had known all the time. "Leave thet be!" he roared, whirling on the cluster of his offspring poring over the receipt.

Two of the men were gripping the document at the same time. Both of them released it and jumped back, bumping their fellows and joggling the lantern dangerously. They collided again as they tried unsuccessfully to catch the paper before it fluttered to the board floor.

The Baron cuffed the nearer and swatted at the other as well, missing when the younger man dodged back behind the shelter of his kin. Deliberately, his agitation suggested only by the vehemence of the pull he took on his pipe, the old man bent and retrieved the document. He peered at it again, then fixed his eyes on Bowsmith. "You say you're t' speak the words on this. Would thet be et some particular time?"

"No sir," said the boy, bobbing his head as if in an effort to roll ideas to the surface of his mind. "Not thet Mister Nathan told me."

As Baron Neill squinted at the receipt again, silently mouthing the syllables which formed no language of which he was cognizant, Bowsmith added, "Jist t' set down with the bullhide over my back, en t' speak out the words. En I'm ez strong ez a bull."

"Give him another pull on the jug," the Baron ordered abruptly.

"I don't—" Bowsmith began as three Neills closed on him, one offering the jug with a gesture as imperious as that of a highwayman presenting his pistol.

"Boy," the Baron continued, "I'm going t' help ye, jist like you said. But hit's a hard task, en ye'll hev t' bear with me till I'm ready. Ain't like reg'lar readin', this parsin' out things ez ain't words."

He fixed the boy with a fierce glare which was robbed of much of its effect because the lamp behind him threw his head into bald silhouette. "Understand?"

"Yessir."

"Drink my liquor, boy," suggested the man with the jug. "Hit'll straighten yer quill for sure."

"Yessir."

"Now," Baron Neill went on, refolding the receipt and sliding it into the pocket of his own blue frock coat, "you set up with the young folks, hev a good time, en we'll make ye up a bed with us fer the night. Meanwhiles, I'm goin' down t' the barn t' study this over so's I kin help ye in the mornin'."

"Oh," said Bowsmith in relief, then coughed as fumes of the whiskey he had just drunk shocked the back of his nostrils. "Lordy," he muttered, wheezing to get his breath. "Lordy!"

One of the Neills thumped him hard on the back and said, "Chase thet down with another, so's they fight each other en leave you alone."

"Thet bullhide," said the Baron, calculation underlying the appearance of mild curiosity, "hit's somethin' special, now, ain't it?"

"Reckon it might be," the boy agreed, glad to talk because it delayed by that much the next swig of the liquor that already spun his head and his stomach. "Hit was pegged up t' Mister Nathan's wall like hit hed been thar a right long time."

"Figgered thet," Baron Neill said in satisfaction. "Hed t' be somethin' more thin ye'd said."

Bowsmith sighed and took another drink. For a moment there was no sound but the hiss of the lamp and a whippoorwill calling from the middle distance.

"Reckon I'll take the hide with me t' the barn," said the Baron, reaching for the rolled strop, "so's hit won't git trod upon."

The grandson holding the strip of hide turned so that his body blocked the Baron's intent. "Reckon we kin keep it here en save ye the burden, ol' man," he said in a sullen tone raised an octave by fear of the consequences.

"What's this, now?" the patriarch said, backing a half step and placing his hands on his hips.

"Like Len sez," interjected the man with the lamp, stepping between his father and his son, "we'll keep the hide safe back here."

"Tarnation," Baron Neill said, throwing up his hands and feigning good-natured exasperation. "Ye didn't think yer own pa 'ud shut ye out wholesale, did ye?"

"Bar'n," said Eldon Bowsmith, emboldened by the liquor, "I don't foller ye."

"Shet your mouth whin others er talkin' family matters, boy," snapped one of the clan from the fringes. None of the women could be seen through the open door of the cabin, but their hush was like the breathing of a restive cow.

"You youngins hev fun," said the Baron, turning abruptly. "I've got some candles down t' the barn. I'll jist study this"—he tapped with the pipestem on the pocket in which paper rustled—"en we'll talk agin, mebbe 'long about moonrise."

Midnight.

"Y'all hev fun," repeated the old man as he began to walk down the slippery path to the barn.

The Neill women, led by Mary Beth with her comb readjusted to let her hair fall to her shoulders, softly joined the men on the porch.

* * *

In such numbers, even the bare feet of his offspring were ample warning to Baron Neill before Zephaniah opened the barn door. The candle of molded tallow guttered and threatened to go out.

"Simp?" the old man asked. He sat on the bar of an empty stall with the candle set in the slot cut higher in the end post for another bar.

It had been years since the clan kept cows. The only animal now sharing the barn with the patriarch and the smell of sour hay was Bowsmith's horse, her jaws knotted closed with a rag to keep her from neighing. Her stall was curtained with blankets against the vague possibility that the boy would glance into the building.

"Like we'd knocked him on the head," said the third man in the procession entering the barn. The horse wheezed through her nostrils and pawed the bars of her stall.

"Why ain't we done jist thet?" demanded Mary Beth. "Nobody round here's got a scrap uv use fer him, 'ceptin' mebbe thet ol' bastard cunning man. En he's not right in the head neither."

The whole clan was padding into the barn, but the building's volume was a good match for their number. There were several infants, one of them continuing to squall against its mother's breast until a male took it from her. The mother cringed, but she relaxed when the man only pinched the baby's lips shut with a thumb and forefinger. He increased the pressure every time the infant swelled itself for another squawl.

"Did I raise ye up t' be a fool, girl?" Baron Neill demanded angrily, jabbing with his pipestem. "Sure, they've a use fer him—t' laugh et. Effen we slit his throat en weight his belly with stones, the county'll be here with rope and torches fer the whole lot uv us."

He took a breath and calmed as the last of the clan trooped in. "Besides, hain't needful. Never do what hain't needful."

One of the men swung the door to and rotated a peg to hold it closed. The candleflame thrashed in the breeze, then steadied to a dull, smoky light as before.

"Now . . ." said the Baron slowly, "I'll tell ye what we're going' t' do."

Alone of the Neill clan, he was seated. Some of those spread into the farther corners could see nothing of the patriarch save his legs crossed as he sat on the stall bar. There were over twenty people in the barn, including the infants, and the faint illumination accentuated the similarity of their features.

Len, the grandson who held the bullhide, crossed his arms to squeeze the bundle closer to his chest. He spread his legs slightly, and two of his bearded, rat-faced kin stepped closer as if to defend him from the Baron's glare.

The patriarch smiled. "We're all goin' t' be stronger thin strong," he said in a sinuous, enticing whisper. "Ye heard Simp—he'd gain strength whether er no the strop wuz over his back. So . . . I'll deacon the spell off, en you all speak the lines out after me, standin' about in the middle."

He paused in order to stand up and search the faces from one side of the room to the other. "Hev I ever played my kinfolk false?" he demanded. The receipt in his left hand rustled, and the stem of his pipe rotated with his gaze. Each of his offspring lowered his or her eyes as the pointer swept the clan.

Even Len scowled at the rolled strop instead of meeting the Baron's eyes, but the young man said harshly, "Who's t' hold the hide, thin? You?"

"The hide'll lay over my back," Baron Neill agreed easily, "en the lot uv you'll stand about close ez ye kin git and nobody closer thin the next. I reckon we all gain, en I gain the most."

The sound of breathing made the barn itself seem a living thing, but no one spoke and even the sputter of the candle was audible. At last Mary Beth, standing hipshot and only three-quarters facing the patriarch, broke the silence with, "You're not ez young ez ye onct were, Pa. Seems ez if the one t' git the most hed ought t' be one t' be around t' use hit most."

Instead of retorting angrily, Baron Neill smiled and said, "Which one, girl? Who do you pick in my place?"

The woman glanced around her. Disconcerted, she squirmed backward, out of the focus into which she had thrown herself.

"He's treated us right," murmured another woman, half-hidden in the shadow of the post which held the

candle. "Hit's best we git on with the business."

"All right, ol' man," said Len, stepping forward to hold out the strop. "What er ye waitin' on?"

"Mebbe fer my kin t' come t' their senses," retorted the patriarch with a smile of triumph.

Instead of snatching the bullhide at once, Baron Neill slid his cold pipe into the breast pocket of his coat, then folded the receipt he had taken from Bowsmith and set it carefully on the endpost of the stall.

Len pursed his lips in anger, demoted from central figure in the clan's resistance to the Baron back to the boy who had been ordered to hold the bullhide. The horns, hanging from the section of the bull's coarse poll which had been lifted, rattled together as the young man's hands began to tremble with emotion.

Baron Neill took off his frock coat and hung it from the other post supporting the bar on which he had waited. Working deliberately, the Baron shrugged the straps of his galluses off his shoulders and lowered his trousers until he could step out of them. His boots already stood toes-out beside the stall partition. None of the others of the clan were wearing footgear.

"Should we . . . ?" asked one of the men, pinching a pleat of his shirt to finish the question.

"No need," the Baron said, unbuttoning the front of his own store-bought shirt. "Mebbe not fer me, even. But best t' be sure."

One of the children started to whine a question. His mother hushed him almost instantly by clasping one hand over his mouth and the other behind the child's head to hold him firmly.

The shirt was the last of Baron Neill's clothing. When he had draped it over his trousers and coat, he looked even more like the white-furred rodent he resembled clothed. His body was pasty, its surface colored more by grime and the yellow candlelight than by blood vessels beneath it. The epaulettes on the Baron's coat had camouflaged the extreme narrowness of his shoulders and chest, and the only place his skin was taut was where the pot belly sagged against it.

His eyes had a terrible power. They seemed to glint even before he took the candle to set it before him on the floor compacted of earth, dung, and ancient straw.

The Baron removed the receipt from the post on which it waited, opened it and smoothed the folds, and placed it beside the candle. Only then did he say to Len, "Now I'll take the strop, boy."

His grandson nodded sharply and passed the bundle over. The mood of the room was taut, like that of a stormy sky in the moments before the release of lightning. The anger and embarrassment which had twisted Len's face into a grimace earlier was now replaced by blank fear. Baron Neill smiled at him grimly.

The bull's tail was stiff with the bones still in it, so the length of hide had been wound around the base of that tail like thread on a spindle. Baron Neill held the strop by the head end, one hand on the hairless muzzle and the other on the poll between the horns, each the length of a man's arm along the curve. He shook out the roll with a quick jerk that left the brush of the tail scratching on the boards at the head of the stall.

The Baron cautiously held the strop against his back with the clattering horns dangling down to his knees. The old man gave a little shudder as the leather touched his bare skin, but he knelt and leaned

forward, tugging the strop upward until the muzzle flopped loosely in front of his face.

The Baron muttered something that started as a curse and blurred into nondescript syllables when he recalled the task he was about. He rested the palm of one hand on the floor, holding the receipt flat and in the light of the candle. With his free hand, he folded the muzzle and forehead of the bull back over the poll so that he could see.

"Make a circle around me," ordered the patriarch in a voice husky with its preparations for declaiming the spell.

He should have been ridiculous, a naked old man on all fours like a dog, his head and back crossed by a strip of bullhide several times longer than the human torso. The tension in the barn kept even the children of the clan from seeing humor in the situation, and the muzzled plowhorse froze to silence in her curtained stall.

The Neills shuffled into motion, none of them speaking. The man who held the infant's lips pinched shut handed the child back to its mother. It whimpered only minutely and showed no interest in the breast which she quickly offered it to suck.

Two of the grandsons joined hands. The notion caught like gunpowder burning, hands leaping into hands. In the physical union, the psychic pressure that weighted the barn seemed more bearable though also more intense.

"Remember," said the Baron as he felt his offspring merge behind him, two of them linking hands over the trailing strop, "Ye'll not hev another chance. En ye'll git no pity from me effen ye cain't foller my deaconin' en you're no better off thin ye are now."

"Go on, ol man," Mary Beth demanded in a savage whisper as she looked down on Baron Neill and the candle on the floor between her and the patriarch.

Baron Neill cocked his head up to look at the woman. She met his eyes with a glare as fierce as his own. Turning back to the paper on the ground, the old man read, "Ek neckroo say Üxwmettappompomie."

The candle guttered at his words. The whole clan responded together, "Ek neckroo say mettappompomie," their merged voices hesitant but gaining strength and unity toward the last of the Greek syllables like the wind in advance of a rainstorm.

"Soy sowma moo didomie," read the Baron. His normal voice was high-pitched and unsteady, always on the verge of cracking. Now it had dropped an octave and had power enough to drive straw into motion on the floor a yard away.

"Soy sowma moo didomie," thundered the Neill clan. Sparrows, nested on the roof trusses, fluttered and peeped as they tried furiously to escape from the barn. In the darkness, they could not see the vents under the roof peaks by which they flew in and out during daylight.

Baron Neill read the remainder of the formula, line by line. The process was becoming easier, because the smoky candle had begun to burn with a flame as white as the noonday sun. The syllables which had been written on age-yellowed paper and a background of earlier words now stood out and shaped themselves to the patriarch's tongue.

At another time, the Baron would have recognized the power which his tongue released but could not control. This night the situation had already been driven over a precipice. Caution was lost in exhilaration at the approaching climax, and the last impulse to stop was stilled by the fear that stopping might already be impossible.

The shingles above shuddered as the clan repeated the lines, and the candleflame climbed with the icy purpose of a stalagmite reaching for completion with a cave roof. Jen kicked at her stall in blind panic, cracking through the old crossbar, but none of the humans heard the sound.

"Hellon moy," shouted Baron Neill in triumph. "Hellon moy! Hellon moy!"

Mary Beth suddenly broke the circle and twisted. "Hit's hot!" she cried as she tore the front of her dress from neckline to waist in a single hysterical effort.

The woman's breasts swung free, their nipples erect and longer than they would have seemed a moment before. She tried to scream, but the sound fluted off into silence as her body ran like wax in obedience to the formula she and her kin had intoned.

The circle of the Neill clan flowed toward its center, flesh and bone alike taking on the consistency of magma. Clothing dropped and quivered as the bodies it had covered runneled out of sleeves and through the weave of the fabrics.

The bullhide strop sagged also as Baron Neill's body melted beneath it. As the pink, roiling plasm surged toward the center of the circle, the horns lifted and bristles that had lain over the bull's spine in life sprang erect.

The human voices were stilled, but the sparrows piped a mad chorus and Jen's hooves crashed again onto the splintering crossbar.

There was a slurping, gurgling sound. The bull's tail stood upright, its brush waving like a flag, and from the seething mass that had been the Neill clan rose the mighty, massive form of a black bull.

Eldon Bowsmith lurched awake on the porch of the Neill house. He had dreamed of a bull's bellow so loud that it shook the world.

Fuddled but with eyes adapted to the light of the crescent moon, he looked around him. The house was still and dark.

Then, as he tried to stand with the help of the porch rail, the barn door flew apart with a shower of splinters. Spanish King, bellowing again with the fury of which only a bull is capable, burst from the enclosure and galloped off into the night.

Behind him whinnied a horse which, in the brief glance vouchsafed by motion and the light, looked a lot like Jen.

* * *

When Eldon Bowsmith reached the cabin, Old Nathan was currying his bull by the light of a burning pine knot thrust into the ground beside the porch. A horse was tethered to the rail with a makeshift neck halter of twine.

"Sir, is thet you?" the boy asked cautiously.

"Who en blazes d'ye think hit 'ud be?" the cunning man snapped.

"Don't know thet 'un," snorted Spanish King. His big head swung toward the visitor, and one horn dipped menacingly.

"Ye'd not be here, blast ye," said Old Nathan, slapping the bull along the jaw, "'ceptin' fer him."

"Yessir," said Bowsmith. "I'm right sorry. Only, a lot uv what I seed t'night, I figgered must be thet I wuz drinkin'."

"Took long enough t' fetch me," rumbled the bull as he snuffled the night air. He made no comment about the blow, but the way he studiously ignored Bowsmith suggested that the reproof had sunk home.

"Summer's nigh over."

He paused and turned his head again so that one brown eye focused squarely on the cunning man. "Where wuz I, anyhow? D'ye know?"

"Not yet," said Old Nathan, stroking the bull's sweat-matted shoulders fiercely with the curry comb.

"Pardon, sir?" said the boy who had walked into the circle of torchlight, showing a well-justified care to keep Old Nathan between him and Spanish King. Then he blinked and rose up on his bare toes to peer over the bull's shoulder at the horse. "Why," he blurted, "thet's the spit en image uv my horse Jen, only thet this mare's too bone-y!"

"Thet's yer Jen, all right," said the cunning man. "There's sacked barley in the lean-to out back, effen ye want t' feed her some afore ye take her t' home. Been runnin' the woods, I reckon."

"We're goin' back home?" asked the horse, speaking for almost the first time since she had followed Spanish King rather than be alone in the night.

"Oh, my God, Jen!" said the boy, striding past Spanish King with never a thought for the horns. "I'm so glad t' see ye!" He threw his arm around the horse's neck while she whickered, nuzzling the boy in hopes of finding some of the barley Old Nathan had mentioned.

"Durn fool," muttered Spanish King; but then he stretched himself deliberately, extending one leg at a time until his deep chest was rubbing the sod. "Good t' be back, though," he said. "Won't say it ain't."

Eldon Bowsmith straightened abruptly and stepped away from his mare, though he kept his hand on her mane. "Sir," he said, "ye found my Jen, en ye brung her back. What do I owe ye?"

Old Nathan ran the fingers of his free hand along the bristly spine of his bull. "Other folk hev took care uv thet," the cunning man said as Spanish King rumbled in pleasure at his touch. "Cleared yer account, so t' speak."

The pine torch was burning fitfully, close to the ground, so that Bowsmith's grimace of puzzlement turned shadows into a devil's mask. "Somebody paid for me?" he asked. "Well, I niver. Friends, hit must hev been?"

Spanish King lifted himself and began to walk regally around the cabin to his pasture and the two cows who were his property.

"Reckon ye could say thet," replied Old Nathan. "They wuz ez nigh t' bein' yer friends ez anybody's but their own."

The cunning man paused and grinned like very Satan. "In the end," he said, "they warn't sich good friends t' themselves."

A gust of wind rattled the shingles, as if the night sky were remembering what it had heard at the Neill place. Then it was silent again.

The Box

"What 'm I bid what 'm I bid what 'm I bid?" Sheriff Tillinghast rattled out like a squirrel complaining. "Come on, fellers, a nice piece like this could set in the finest parlor in New Orleans."

What a grotesquely carved chest like the one at auction would be doing in any kind of parlor in New Orleans was an open question, but a rough-hewn man ahead of Bully Ransden and Ellie in the crowd called, "I'll give ye a dollar fer the blame thing!"

"Bid a dolla bid a dolla bid a dolla!" the sheriff caroled. "Who'll gimme two gimme two?"

He paused for breath and a practiced glance around the gathering, checking for anyone who might be on the verge of raising the bid. Nobody. . . .

The sheriff lifted the jug of whiskey from the table beside him, where his clerk marked down the winning bids against the lot numbers. "Who'll gimme two?" the sheriff repeated. "A dram uv good wildcat fer the man as bids two dollars!"

"Two dollars!" cried a fellow down in front. He probably didn't have the money to his name, much less in his pocket, and the auction was for ready cash . . . but the bidding was already too slow for the auctioneer to dare risk stifling the little life it had finally gathered to itself.

"Two dolla two dolla two dolla, who'll gimma three?" prattled the sheriff.

"Ugh!" said Ellie as she hugged herself closer to Bully Ransden. "Who'd hev thet ugly ole thing in their house noways?"

The Bully grunted without enthusiasm. He was present because Ellie had wanted to come, "t' pick up a purty fer the house," and he wasn't going to have his woman going to an auction alone. Next time, though, she could stay to home. . . .

The chest finally sold for three dollars and a half. Taxes had accumulated for many years on the Neill property, but neither Sheriff Tillinghast nor any of his predecessors had chosen to bring matters to a head while the Baron was in possession. When Baron Neill and his whole clan vanished—no one knew or cared where, so long as the Neills were gone for good—the sheriff had promptly set the tax sale.

There was a good crowd, 300 at least, swirling around the run-down cabin and sheds, but the bidding was slow. At the current rate, the auction wouldn't bring enough to cover the accumulated tax bills.

"I don't like this place airy bit," Ellie murmured, more to herself than to Bully. He grunted noncommittally and, though he didn't draw away from her touch, neither did he circle her with his strong right arm.

The sheriff wiped his brow with a kerchief. His assistants were Mitch Reynolds and Jeb Cage, a pair of idlers working for the promise of whiskey after the auction. Tillinghast motioned them to bring up the next lot.

This place had an atmosphere even after the Neills themselves were gone. It made folk uneasy and weighed down the bidding. Even the sheriff, spurred by the knowledge that part of the taxes he collected went directly into his pocket by law—and another portion arrived there by other means—was unable to raise a proper enthusiasm for his task.

Tillinghast's assistants grunted as they lifted a small travelling case containing a uniformly bound set of books. "Here we go!" the sheriff said. "Must be nigh twinty books right here, 'n a real jam li'l chest besides. Who'll start the bid at five dollas?"

"What're the books?" someone called from the crowd.

"Hit don't signify!" snapped Sheriff Tillinghast. "Why, they's so many I reckon thar's one uv airy thing a man might wish t' read!"

"They're Frinch," Jeb Cage said unexpectedly. If Tillinghast had known the blamed drunken fool could read, he would have told Cage to keep his mouth shut on pain of losing the promised popskull.

The crowd burst out laughing. A number of the folk here spoke French from keelboat journeys down the Tennessee, Ohio, and Mississippi to New Orleans. The vocabulary learned in the cribs of the French Quarter was not the language of Voltaire; and anyway, speaking was not the same as reading.

"Hey, Shuruff!" somebody called. "I figger you know now whur thet Frinchman disappeared on the way from Columbia back in twinnysiven, don't ye?"

"Some of the books, they may be Frinch, I don't know," Tillinghast said loudly in an attempt to retrieve the situation. He wiped his forehead again. "Now, this is a right fine chest. Who'll start the bidding at a dolla a dolla a dolla, who gimme a dolla?"

"Why, I reckon the Frenchman, he give the durn thing t' Baron Neill fer free!" a heckler called from the crowd.

"Aye!" another chimed in. "An' he fed their hogs fer 'em in a neighborly way too er it's a pity!"

"Cull, I don't reckon I want t' stay much longer," Ellie Ransden murmured to the man at her side.

She'd dragged him to the auction for a change, and in the vague hope that something pretty for the cabin might be going at the slight price she and Bullie could afford. She'd ignored who—and what—the Neills were, though. You couldn't separate an object from its past, any more than you'd eat pork from a sow been grubbing in a grave. . . .

"I give ye a dolla," offered a farmer named Murchison. "Reckon the case, hit's worth sompin."

Tillinghast glanced around the personalty waiting for sale. He saw his chance to keep the bidding alive by

throwing in an item he hadn't a prayer of selling by itself. He raised a cubical box some six inches to a side and placed it atop the chest of books.

"Hyar!" the sheriff called. "We'll sweeten the pot fer all you bettin' men out thar. This here box, hit goes with the books t' boot."

Ellie felt Bully Ransden stiffen as though he had been changed to a statue of oak. She looked at him in surprise. His mouth was slightly open.

"Waal, what's in the durned box, Shurrif?" someone demanded from the back of the crowd.

"Don't rightly know, Windell," Tillinghast replied smugly. "Don't rightly see how hit opens, neither. Reckon airy man with a drap uv sportin' blood'll want the box t' larn fer himse'f, though."

The box made no sound when it was shaken. Either it was empty or, just possibly, it wasn't a box at all: merely a block of wood less dense than it seemed from its hard surface to be.

The cube's base and top were smooth. A band around the center of the four sides was undercut in a pattern of vertical half-round sections. The patterning might have been sliced from lathe-turned dowels, but equally they could have been carved from the block's surface by an expert.

There was nothing in the box, or there was no box—but the object would do to spur the bidding.

"Thet's mine," said Bully Ransden. He pushed forward as though the people in front of him in the crowd were no more than stalks of barley sprouted ankle high. "I'll take hit."

"Cullen?" Ellie said. She caught at the big man's leather vest, more to stay attached than to restrain him. He hunched his shoulders and pulled away, oblivious to her touch.

"Cull, what're ye—"

Sheriff Tillinghast drew himself up stiffly, but he did not protest aloud. Murchison didn't face the specter of Bully Ransden, cold-eyed and broad-shouldered, bearing down on him like a landslide. He cried, "Hey naow, what's this? We're biddin' fer riddy cash, we are!"

Bully reached the front of the crowd. He shrugged, clearing a space with his elbows the way an angry bull sweeps his horns across the ground.

"I'll give ye cash," Ransden said in a husky voice that ripped like a saw through pinewood. His great, calloused hand dragged out the purse hanging by a thong on the inside of his waistband. He opened the throat and poured the contents of the purse, all coin and the savings of a lifetime, out onto the clerk's table.

Ellie gasped and covered her mouth with her hands. Her teeth bore down firmly on the first knuckle of her right index finger.

Bully Ransden took the box. Tillinghast quivered with a desire to assert his own authority, but he noticed how easily Bully's hands spanned six inches to grip the box between thumb and forefinger.

"Waal, what's the bid, thin, Shurrif?" Murchison demanded. "Might be I'd choose t' raise my own!"

Ransden turned and faced the farmer before Sheriff Tillinghast formed a response. "This box is mine, Murchison," he said in a voice hard as millstones.

"Three dollar and thutty-sivin cents," announced the clerk who had counted the spill of coins while the others concerned themselves with the human elements of the incident.

"Now, that's a right good bid, boys," Tillinghast said in false camaraderie.

"You say airy word more, Murchison," Ransden promised, "en ye won't see t'morry dawn."

He struck his muscular right arm out to the side and raised his thumb as if he were gouging an eye. Nobody who had seen Bully Ransden fight doubted the truth of the threat.

The crowd swayed back from Bully Ransden the way a horse shies when he comes upon a corpse in the trail. From the rear of the gathering, a voice called, "Shurrif, hit's time 'n past ye did sompin about these carryins on!"

"There's enough here fer you too, Jake Windell, ifen ye want it!" Ransden boomed. He held the small box against his chest protectively as he glared out over the crowd. His eyes flashed, and his long blond hair caught a sunbeam to halo him.

"Bids closed," Tillinghast said. He rapped his gavel down. "And a right good bid hit was, too. The next item, now—"

Ransden strode back through the crowd that parted for him as the waters before Moses. Ellie managed to swiggle to his side, but Ransden gave every indication of having forgotten completely about her.

"Hey, Bully!" the sheriff called. "Them books, they're yours now too."

Ransden ignored him. After a moment, Tillinghast began calling out the next lot, a pair of European chairs on which the Neill clan had whittled with their knives.

Bully Ransden unhitched his horse and mounted. He blinked in surprise when Ellie finally caught his attention by tugging on his leg. He pulled her up onto the crupper behind him, then turned the horse's head toward home.

"Cull, sweetest?" Ellie asked in a small voice. "What's the box thet ye wanted hit so bad?"

Ransden carried his prize instead of giving it to the woman to carry as he would normally have done. He said nothing for a moment, then admitted, "I don't know quite what hit is. But it war my pappy's box en the thing he loved afore all others. And I reckon I'll larn why soon enough."

* * *

Two cardinals were plucking pokeberries near where Old Nathan sat with his back against a warm rock overlooking the valley. "Waal, is she goin' to make trouble?" one bird demanded of other.

"How 'n tarnation 'ud I know?" the second bird answered in the same harsh, peevish tones; not that anybody was likely to mistake a cardinal on the best day of his life for a songster. "Don't guess she is. They ain't ginerly, humans ain't."

Old Nathan turned his head. The outcrop was in the way of him seeing anything behind him unless he

stood up. If the birds hadn't said "she," the cunning man might have been concerned enough to rise. As it was—he didn't much care to be disturbed, but he didn't guess any woman was likely to try for his scalp when she found him here.

From the outcrop on which Old Nathan sat, he could see the smoke of six chimneys. The valley was open and sunlit. The cleared fields had been harvested, and much of the foliage had fallen from the woodlots and thickets.

"Hmph!" said a cardinal. "Don't even look et us. Does she think she's sech a beauty herse'f?"

Old Nathan's thoughts had been meandering down pathways in which alternate pasts shimmered as if behind walls of glass; untouchable now because of the decisions the cunning man had made, and the decisions fate had made for him. Some beautiful, some bleak; all void, and after seventy-odd years, all too many of them stillborn.

He didn't want to move, but if someone was coming, he had to. He rose to his feet, straightening his lanky limbs; carefully, because he was an old man and stiff, but with a certain grace yet remaining to him.

Sarah Ransden, coming around the rock with her head lowered, gasped and drew back at the motion.

"Hain't a bear, Miz Ransden," the cunning man said dryly. "En I was jest leavin' anyhow."

" 'Sarah' was a good enough name sixty years ago, Nathan Ridgeway," the old woman snapped, embarrassed at her instinctive surprise. "Reckon hit still might be."

She looked down into the valley. Sarah Ransden—Sarah Carmichael as she'd been when she and Old Nathan were children together—was a tall woman, though age had made her stoop. She had never been beautiful, though she might have been called handsome and indeed still was. Sarah hadn't married in her youth, which was a pity; and late in life she'd wed Chance Ransden, which was far worse.

The old woman shivered and drew her blue knitted shawl more closely about her. "Hit's goin' t' storm, I reckon," she muttered.

Old Nathan frowned. The only clouds were some wisps of mare's tails standing out against a background of high-altitude haze.

The cunning man's index finger drew a figure in the lichen of the outcrop. He kept his eyes on the simple character as he muttered a phrase beneath his breath, then gestured Sarah's attention upward toward the sky.

Clouds shifted and began to chase one another with mad enthusiasm across the heavens. Light pulsed into darkness and gleamed again. The mare's tails thickened into a mackerel sky, ridge after ridge of gray-white against pale blue; but that cleared with a rush eastward toward the foot of the valley, leaving the air with a sheen as smooth as that of a knifeblade when the racing images darkened again.

Old Nathan rubbed his thumb across the lichen, eliminating the character. The sky reverted to the bright afternoon normalcy from which the cunning man's art had dragged it briefly.

"Thet's t'day and t'morry," Old Nathan said. "Don't reckon we need fear a storm fer thet while."

"You know what you know, Nathan," the old woman said. She shivered again. Her hand rested on the

rock as she gazed out over the valley.

Old Nathan settled his broad-brimmed hat. "Waal . . ." he said.

Sarah looked at him sharply. "Ye needn't t' go, Nathan Ridgeway," she said. "I jest cloomb up t' look from a high place. Hit's a thing I do . . . but I don't see you here, ez a rule."

The cunning man shrugged. The cardinals had resumed their feeding, commenting in griping tones on the quality of the late pokeberries. The humans had shown themselves to be no threat, and therefore of no interest. . . .

"Sometimes," Old Nathan said in the direction of the far horizon, "I think I might move on west. No pertikaler cause. Don't reckon I'll iver do it."

"Thet girl you had back along b'fore ye went off t' the war," Sarah said, also facing the western end of the valley. "Slowly, her name was. Ye think on her, iver?"

"Mebbe," said Old Nathan. "Sometimes, I reckon. But thet's over and done long since."

The sun was still near zenith, but its rays had little warmth now in late fall. When Old Nathan left the shelter of the outcrop to walk back to his cabin—he hadn't saddled the mule, hadn't wanted the beast's company or any company—the trail would be chilly.

Darkness would not be long in coming.

"My datter-in-law, Ellie . . ." Sarah Ransden said. She glanced at Old Nathan. "I b'lieve ye've met her?"

Old Nathan nodded toward the horizon. "I hev."

"Ellie reminds me a powerful lot uv Slowly," Sarah continued. Her tones were flat.

She turned her head away. "I don't see Ellie much." Bitterness tinged her voice. "Nor my son neither, not since he moved out. He allus figgered I should uv left Chance Ransden myse'f, 'stid uv waitin' till Cullen druv him out with an axe handle an' him jest a boy. Cull don't understand what hit is fer a woman married to a feller like Chance Ransden—"

She turned to meet Old Nathan's eyes, for the cunning man had turned also. "—and it could be thet I did do wrong, fer Cull and myse'f both. The good Lord knows I hain't been lucky with men, Nathan Ridgeway."

Old Nathan snorted. "I hain't been lucky with people, Sary," he said. "But I reckon the most of thet's my own doing."

His thumb had rubbed a patch of limestone free of lichen. He wanted to leave, but that would mean moving past the woman and he didn't much care to do that either. In the forest above, a squirrel berated a crow for startling him, and the crow offered to shit in the squirrel's mouth if the critter didn't shut it. Life went on.

"Chance warn't a bad man," Sarah Ransden said in a tone that reminded Old Nathan of the days when they had been children together. "Only thar was a divil in him. I thought I was blest ez an angel that he picked me, him so handsome and a sight younger. But the divil rode Chance Ransden, harder an' harder

iver' day till the last time he tried t' take a strap t' Cull . . ."

She stiffened. In a flat, age-cracked voice she concluded, "Thet war the last I saw Chance Ransden, ten year since. Figgered he run off t' the Neills, he were thick ez thieves with thim. But I niver heard word one uv him agin. Nowadays, I don't reckon I will."

"I reckon I'll be movin' on now," Old Nathan said. He paused to clear his throat. "Good t' see you agin, Sary."

He stepped toward the woman. Instead of edging back to let him by, she put a hand on Old Nathan's arm. Her fingers, tanned and sinewy, stood out against his faded homespun shirt like tree roots crawling over gray rock.

"You don't need a young gal, Nathan Ridgeway," she said. "Ye need an old one what's worn inter the same ruts ez you."

"I don't need airy woman, Miz Ransden," the cunning man said harshly. He lifted her hand away from his arm. Their fingers were much of a kind, dark-tanned and knobby at the joints. "You know thet."

"Thar's companionship," Sarah said. "Thar's hevin' somebody t' say howdy to in the mornin'!"

Old Nathan pushed past her. His boots scuffed bits of stone down the slope until they pattered to a halt among the fallen leaves and pine straw.

"I niver figgered thet was enough t' offer airy soul, Sary," he said gruffly. "Thet's why I sint Slowly away whin I come back from King's Mountain."

He paused and looked westward again. "Thet's as fur as I've been, King's Mountain. Reckon the way thet turned out, I kin see why I hain't been travelin' since. . . . But I should hev gone, Sary. Comin' back here t' lick myse'f where iverbody knew me, thet was wrong. I should hev gone."

Old Nathan started up the trail. Nuthatches disputed sharply over a pine cone. The birds were not so much angry as asserting their kinship and mutual interests.

"Thar's a storm comin', Nathan Ridgeway," the old woman called from the overlook. "You know what you know . . . but my bones tell me thar's a storm coming."

* * *

"Cullen, honey?" Ellie said in a plaintive voice. "Hain't ye comin' to bed, sweetest?"

Bully Ransden sat at the table with his shoulders hunched. Though he faced in her direction, he didn't bother to look up to where his wife lay under the quilt's protection.

The threat of the season's first snow hung in the chilly night, but it was more than the temperature that caused Ellie to shiver.

"G'wan t' sleep," Bully said. He held the simple box he had purchased at the auction. His fingers moved over its surface like the blunt, questing heads of serpents. The fire had sunk to a glow, but an alcohol lamp on the table threw its pale, clean light over Bully's face and the object in his hands.

"Cull . . . ?"

"Shet it, will ye?" Ransden snarled. "Or I'll shet it fer ye!"

Three nights before, a strip along the bottom of the box had slipped sideways to display a hollow base. Inside was a key, shaped from apple wood instead of metal and so cunningly fashioned that it hadn't rattled against its compartment when Ransden shook the box.

The key sat on the table beside him. He had still not found any sign of a keyhole.

Ellie began to cry softly.

Bully Ransden put the box down and pressed the knuckles of his two great fists together. "Ellie, honey," he muttered to his hands, "I'm right sorry I spoke t' ye thet way. But you jest get t' sleep 'n leave me be fer the while."

"Cull," the woman said, "why don't ye jest break hit open and come hold me? Hit's only a scrap uv wood."

"Hit's the only thing I've got uv my Pappy's, girl!" the Bully snapped in a barely controlled voice. "I hain't a-goin' t' smash it t' flinders!"

Ellie Ransden sat up in the simple bed and shrugged the quilt aside. She wore only a linen shift, but she had let her hair down for the night. It hung across her shoulders and bosom in a lustrous black veil. "Cull," she said, "you hated Chance Ransden, an' you were right t' hate him. You oughter take thet box and throw hit right straight into the hearth."

Bully looked up with anger bright in his eyes. His mouth formed into a snarl. The woman faced him, seated like a queen on her couch and for the moment as proud and fearless.

"Ye know what I'm sayin's no more thin the truth," she added in a tone of trembling calm.

He gave a shudder and looked at his hands again. "Tarnation, Ellie," he said. "Hit's jest a puzzle. Whin I figger it, I'll be over 'n done with the blame thing."

He spoke without conviction. Ellie's upper lip trembled minutely, though for the moment she retained her regal pose.

"I thought Ma, she hed done jest thet," Bully said softly. His fingers began playing again with the box. "Threw hit int' the fire, 'long with airy other thing thet was Pappy's whin I druv him out. Cain't figger how the Neills got aholt uv it. Pappy didn't have it whin . . ."

The young man swallowed. "Whin he left, thet is. And nobody seed him since."

Ellie got up from the bed and stepped toward her man.

"This box, hit set on the fireboard," Ransden murmured. "Time t' time, Pappy took it down and looked inside, but he niver let me nor Ma see what hit was there. . . ."

"Cull, honey—"

The upper portion of the box slipped smoothly for a quarter inch across the hollow base. As if a voice

had whispered the secret to him, Bully thumbed down one of the half-round ornamentations now that it could clear the base.

Beneath the ornament was a keyhole.

"Oh, hon," Ellie Ransden whispered. She reached out as if to touch the box or the man; withdrew her arm and wrung her hands together instead. "Oh, Cull, don't do thet. . . ."

Bully Ransden inserted the key and turned it. As he did so, a gust of cold air raked through the cabin without disturbing the dim fire. The alcohol lamp flared wildly. The flame touched the thin glass chimney and shattered it an instant before the light blew out.

Silver radiance flooded across Bully Ransden as he lifted the lid of the puzzle box. It was gone in an instant.

Ellie screamed and tossed a knot of lightwood onto the hearth. The pitchy wood crackled into an honest yellow glare.

The box lay open on the table. It was empty. But when the man turned to look at her, Ellie saw a glint of cold light in his eyes.

* * *

Old Nathan woke up when his roan heifer bawled, but he didn't catch the words. A moment later the cat yowled at the cabin's front door, "Hey old man! Ye got somebody messin' round yer shed with a gun!"

Old Nathan swung out of bed. He was wearing his breeches and a shirt. The quilt on his bed with its gorgeous Tree of Life pattern was down-filled and thick, but on a cold night a thin old man didn't generate enough heat to adequately warm the cavity his body tented within the cover.

His breath hung in the air. He stepped silently to the flintlock rifle on pegs above the fireboard.

"I don't think thet feller oughter be here," the black-patterned heifer called, speaking to her roan-patterned partner but in a voice loud enough for all the world to hear.

Spanish King was in the far pasture. The great bull bellowed a question that was almost lost in the wind.

There was a full moon this night, but it rode above the overcast. The sash windows were gray rectangles which scarcely illuminated the dusting of snow that had slipped in beneath the cabin doors.

"Come on, old man!" the tomcat demanded. "He's markin' yer patch!"

The hearth was cold, though the coals banked beneath sloped ashes would bring the fire to life in the morning . . . if there were need for a fire.

Old Nathan loaded his rifle with controlled care. He poured the main charge of powder into the bore and followed it with a ball wrapped in a linen patch to take the shallow rifling. Cold had stiffened the lubricant of beeswax and butter, so the cunning man eased the hickory ramrod home so as not to snap it in his haste to have a weapon in his hands.

He replaced the ramrod in its tubular brackets beneath the barrel instead of dropping the lathe-turned stick on the floor to save time. He might need to reload. . . .

Old Nathan's final act of the operation was to measure the smaller priming charge into the pan. Now it was ready to flash from the sparks the flint struck from the steel frizzen whenever the cunning man pulled the trigger.

When the task was complete, Old Nathan began to shiver with the cold.

He pulled on his boots one-handed. The cold leather scraped his heel and ankles, but the cunning man was scarcely aware of the contact. He would need the boots if he had to run any distance through the snow, hunting or hunted.

If there was only the one man his animals had warned of, Old Nathan expected to be the hunter.

With the rifle in his hands, cocked, and the bullet pouch and powder horn slung over his left shoulder, the old man slipped out by the cabin's front door to avoid warning the intruder in back. Snow swirled in crystals too tiny to have obvious shape. The cat had gone off into the night, though the marks of his paws remained on the drifted porch.

The night was gray rather than black, but trees were indistinct blurs from only a few feet away. Old Nathan moved away from the cabin so that the prowler would have no clue to the cunning man's whereabouts should terror cause him to shoot in desperation—

As Old Nathan intended that he should.

The gusting wind drowned any sounds the intruder might make in the creak of branches and moaning air. The heifers continued to complain but in lowered voices, and the mule chose to be silent for reasons of its own.

Old Nathan knelt, murmuring words under his breath. He picked up a pinch of snow between his left thumb and forefinger, spinning it into the air before it could melt. The tiny vortex grew into a loose, twisting funnel of snow. It glowed with the moonlight which would have fallen on it had the night not been overcast.

The ragged cone slid off among the trees. It moved in a pattern of arcs and reverse arcs, like a hound following a scent trail.

Grinning at the proof of his art, the cunning man sent two more snowy will-o'-the-wisps to follow the first. They were man height but as soundless as the transferred light that illuminated them.

Old Nathan squatted among the roots of a century-old oak whose shade had cleared a considerable circle in surrounding woods. Winter had stripped the undergrowth to blackened stems which would not interfere with the cunning man's shot when his prey came in view. . . .

The intruder's bawl of fear was as high-pitched as the scream of a rabbit with its hind legs snared. A gun banged an instant later, the sharp crash of a rifle rather than the snap of a pistol's smaller charge. Even so, the night muted the sound to merely another forest noise.

Wind-whipped snow crystals melted before they reached Old Nathan's flushing cheeks. Anger and the powers he had summoned warmed the cunning man's flesh, though he knew there would be a price to pay when the struggle was over. He trembled with anticipation.

There was a flicker through the tree trunks. A whorl of moonlit snow reappeared, drifting like a ghost toward its creator. Another funnel glimmered thirty feet to the side, while the third was still hidden deeper in the woods where it prevented the intruder from breaking back.

The will-o'-the-wisps were only patterns of snow and cold light, but the purposeful way they moved regardless of the wind gave them an ambiance still more chilling than the night. They drove their quarry like hounds after a raccoon; and, as with coon hounds, a human gunman waited to finish the job the pack began.

Twenty feet away the prowler crashed through the brittle undergrowth like a panicked doe. His breath wheezed in and out. Old Nathan could still not see him for the gloom.

The cunning man muttered a command. A will-o'-the-wisp drifted directly toward the intruder. The third twist of frozen moonlight was now visible through the trees beyond.

The prowler screamed again and swung his empty rifle like a club. The butt slashed through the snow funnel with no more effect than it would have had in a running stream. On the other side of the target, the rifle stock hit a pine and shattered.

The swirl of snow and moonlight quivered closer yet, illuminating its quarry.

Old Nathan sighted across the silver bead of his front sight.

He did not fire. The face of the prowler was that of Bully Ransden, but its bestial expression was not that of anything human.

Ransden hurled away the remains of his rifle. His eyes were too fear-glazed to take in his surroundings, neither the cunning man nor even the will-o'-the-wisps which had driven him to what a finger's pressure would have made his last instant of life. The barrel clanged on a tree.

The funnels of snow settled because the cunning man no longer had the will to maintain them. Bully Ransden blundered off in the darkness, bleating with fear every time he collided with a tree trunk.

Old Nathan shivered with cold and reaction. There was something badly wrong. The prowler wore the flesh of Bully Ransden, but Bully wasn't the man to skulk and flee. . . .

Old Nathan searched until he found the intruder's rifle. The barrel was kinked, and the stock had broken off at the small. Farther back along the prowler's trail in the fresh snow lay a saddle which the cunning man had hung out of the weather in his shed. The mule saddle was not quite valueless, but it would bring a thief little more than a couple drams of popskull from a crooked buyer.

Old Nathan stared at the saddle and the broken rifle. The yellow tomcat drew himself across the back of the cunning man's boots. "I'm not the one t' tell ye not t' play with things afore ye kill thim," the cat said. "But they hadn't ought t' git plumb clear. 'Specially—"

The cat twisted to look off in the direction Bully Ransden had fled. "—whin they're the size 'n meanness t' tear yer throat clean out the nixt time, old man."

"Whin I want yer advice," the cunning man growled, "I'll ask fer it."

When Old Nathan returned to his cabin, he didn't pull the load from his rifle as he usually would have

done. Instead, he emptied the priming pan and refilled it with fresh powder, just in case snow had dampened the original charge.

* * *

When they came in sight of the Ransden cabin, the mule snorted, "Hmph!" and blew an explosive puff of breath into the chill, dry air. "Whutiver happened t' the horse whut used t' live here?"

Old Nathan frowned at the dwelling a furlong down the road ahead. Ransden's cabin seemed abnormally quiet, but a line of gray smoke trembled up from the chimney. "I reckon Bully Ransden rid off already this mornin'," he said. "Mebbe he figgered we'd come a-callin'."

Or the Shuriff would.

The mule snorted again. "Hain't no horse lived here these months gone," it said. "Don't smell sign uv airy stock a'tall, neither, though thar used t' be a yoke uv oxen."

The mule's forehoof rang against a lump of quartz beneath the inch of powdery snow. The cabin door quivered open a crack wide enough for a man to peer out and down the road.

There was a cry and a blow from within the cabin.

The cunning man's face hardened. "Git up, mule," he said and tapped back with both heels to show that he was serious.

Bully Ransden bolted from the cabin. His galluses dangled behind him and he had to hop twice on his own porch before his foot seated in his right boot. He ran across the road, into the unbroken forest which faced his tract of cleared land.

The mule had obeyed—for a wonder! The beast's racking trot precluded the slightest chance of hitting anything but air from a hundred and fifty yards. Even so, Old Nathan rose momentarily in his stirrups and sighted down the long, black-finished barrel of his rifle, obedient to the predator's instinct that always urged chase when something ran.

He settled again into the jouncing saddle. The muscles of his upper thighs were already reminding him that he wasn't as young as he once had been.

"Waal?" the mule demanded as it clopped heavily along the frozen ruts. "What naow, durn ye?"

"Pull up, thin," the cunning man muttered. He drew back on the reins with his left hand, though he continued to hold his rifle with the butt against his hipbone and the barrel slanted forward at an angle. "I don't figger we need t' go messin' through the breshwood lookin' fer sompin I don't choose t' shoot nohow."

"I don't figger we needed t' go harin' over the ice fit t' break a leg, neither," the mule grumbled as it slowed to a halt in front of Ransden's cabin. "Might hev thunk on thet afore ye roweled me all bloody, mightn't ye?"

* * *

"Mule . . ." Old Nathan said as he rose again in his stirrups to peer into the woods. The Bully was gone past the use of mere eyesight to follow. . . . "Ifen ye keep grindin' thet mill, I'll sell ye t' some fella who'll treat ye jest as you say I do."

The beast's complaint and the old man's threat were both empty rhetoric: the litany and response of folk who'd worn into one anothers' crotchets over the course of years.

The cabin door creaked. Old Nathan turned, swinging the rifle reflexively. Ellie Ransden stood in the doorway with her left hand to her cheek and a shocked expression on her face. She wore only a shift, and her fine black hair was tied back with a twist of tow.

Old Nathan swung his leg over the saddle, pretending that his threatening reflex was merely the first stage in dismounting. "Howdy, Miz Ransden," he called. "Thought I might hev a word with yer man, but I reckon I just missed him."

After a moment he added, "I could come back later ifen this time don't suit."

Ellie straightened. "Oh, law," she said, "I hain't got a thing t' offer ye, sir, but do—"

She looked down at the threadbare cotton shift that was her only garment. "Oh law!" she repeated.

She stepped back and pushed the door to. "Shan't be two flicks uv a cat's tail," she called through the closed panel.

"If I leave you be," the cunning man said to his mule, "you kin find a sunny patch in the lee of a wall 'n mebbe grub up some grass. But ifen ye wander off on me, I'll blister ye good er it's a pity. D'ye hear me, mule?"

"Hmph," said the mule. "I reckon with you runnin' the shoes offen me, up 'n down the high road, I got better things t' do than go gallivantin' somewhar er other on my own."

The barrel and splintered stock of Bully Ransden's rifle were strapped to the mule's saddle. By the time Old Nathan had them loose, Ellie threw the door open again. She wore a check-printed dress; an ornate ivory comb set off the supple black curves of her hair.

The girl's usual complement of additional tortoise-shell combs was missing. The red patch on her left cheek would become a serious bruise before the day was out.

"Come in, Mister Nathan," she said making a pass at a formal curtsy. "I'm all sixes 'n sivins, b-but—"

Her control broke. She didn't blink or avert her eyes, but tears started from the corners of them. "—the good Lord knows thet I'm glad t' see ye!"

Old Nathan mounted the porch steps with his own rifle in one hand and the remains of Bully Ransden's in the other. He paused in the doorway and eyed the trees again. No doubt the Bully was watching from concealment like a fox circling to eye the hounds on his scent, but if he'd been willing to meet the cunning man he could have done so from the protection of his own walls.

Had the thing that looked like Ransden been Bully Ransden in fact, he would have died on his porch before he ran from any hundred men.

Old Nathan shut the door behind him.

The cabin was a wreck. All the furnishings had been damaged to some degree. The chairs' slatted backs

were punched in, a boot had smashed the face panels of the storage chests, and the bed frame was missing so that the straw tick and blankets lay on the floor in a pile that Ellie had just attempted to arrange.

Someone had with systematic brutality broken the sturdy legs of the table. It stood upright due to repairs made with twine and splints of leather.

Bully Ransden was a better-than-fair journeyman carpenter. Repairs to the table were Ellie's work.

"Where's yer cattle, Miz Ransden?" the cunning man asked with calculated brutality. He set the broken weapon down on the table carefully, but the splints were firmer than he had feared.

Ellie faced him. "Drunk up er gambled away," she said bluntly. There warn't no point tryin' t' put a fine face on the bus'ness, not ifen ye wanted a cure fer hit. . . .

"Hain't like Bully," Old Nathan said aloud.

"Hit's like Cull these three months past," Ellie replied. Her face twisted into an expression Old Nathan had not seen on it before when she talked about her man. "Hit's like the Bully."

The porcelain plate that had held the place of honor on the Ransden's fireboard was gone. The only ornament there above the hearth was a nondescript wooden box with no evident hinges or keyhole.

For the first time, Ellie took in the shattered rifle which the cunning man had returned to its owner's cabin. "Oh," she whispered. "Oh, Mister Nathan, did he . . . ?"

The cunning man frowned in concern. When Ellie saw the gun, her mind had turned to ambush and murder.

"Naow," he said, "nothin' so turrible ez what yer thinkin' on. I heerd some noise in my shed last night, and the feller makin' it dropped this behind him. I thought yer man might know sommat about hit."

"I reckon he might," Ellie Ransden agreed coldly. She daubed unconsciously at the fist print on her cheek, trying it the way one might try a scab. In the same controlled voice she continued, "Last month, whin thet feller from Saint Louie was clubbed down on the Columbia road. . . . ?"

Old Nathan nodded. A traveller had stopped to relieve himself while the other men in his party rode on. One of his friends had gone back when he decided the night was too dark to leave a man alone on an unfamiliar trail. The sound of the companion's hoofbeats drove away a figure crouching with a knife raised to finish what a blow from behind had begun.

"Cull war out thet night," the girl continued. "Like he is most times now. Nixt day he come in 'n he hed a watch 'n chain. He—"

Her voice began to break. "He saw me look at it," she said, speaking faster and louder to finish the story before she lost control completely. "He a'mos' hit me thin, an' he told me not t' tell a soul what it was he had—" tumbling, word over word "—but I've tolt you now, Mister Nathan!"

Ellie turned so that her back was to her visitor. She was sobbing. In a small voice she continued, "Wax Talbot, he took a shot at Cull when his wife screamed out t' the barn whin Cull war s'posed t' be he'pin' butcher some hogs."

The cunning man still held his rifle. He was uneasy about many things. The only one to which he could put a name was the possibility that the cabin's owner would burst through the doorway with an axe raised, so the rifle's familiar touch was that of a raft to a drowning man.

He wanted to put a hand on Ellie's shoulder to comfort her, but he wasn't sure that wouldn't be a worse idea than any he'd had before.

"This been goin' on three months, Miz Ransden?" Old Nathan asked. "Why hain't ye been t' see me? Might be I could he'p."

Ellie wiped her face on her sleeve. When the cuff, decorated with home-style embroidery, slid up, Old Nathan saw that her wrists were bruised also. His face didn't change, but it was already set in the lumpy gray lines of a thundercloud.

"I don't guess no woman magicked my Cull this time, Mister Nathan," the girl said wearily. Her expression hardened momentarily. "Though I hear tell some uv the sluts hereabouts, they hain't so perticular as Adele Talbot was."

She shook herself. "He's changed, right enough. He ain't my Cull no more. He's jest comin' out like his pappy, the way folks allus warned me he'd do and I paid thim no nivermind."

"I knew Chance Ransden," the cunning man said uneasily. "Bully hain't no frind t' me, but he hain't noways his pappy."

The thing uv it was, Chance Ransden would hev acted exackly the way Bully acted now—cunning and cruel and as petty as he was deceitful. . . .

"I thought he warn't like thet," Ellie said. "But I was wrong, an' I'm payin' fer it, Mister Nathan, payin' fer bein' a f-f-fool!"

She put her hands to her face again, and this time he did put his knobby old arm around her, holding the rifle out to the side and him no kind of man since the Tory bullet gelded him like a shoat at King's Mountain back in '79. . . .

"Thet blamed old box!" Ellie sobbed against the cunning man's coat. "Thet's what set him off rememb'rin' his Pappy. I'd throw hit in the fire but hit's too late naow. . . ."

Old Nathan looked at the box on the mantelpiece. His face slowly lost its anger. He disengaged himself carefully from the young woman.

"This is the thing ye mean?" he said, leaning his rifle against the cabin wall so that he could take the box in both hands.

"Thet's so," Ellie agreed. The preternatural calm in the old man's voice stilled the trembling of her own.

"Thin mebbe," Old Nathan said softly, "you're wrong about the cause. . . . And hit might happen thet you're wrong t' think I couldn't be airy he'p besides."

* * *

The cunning man stared at the box in his hands. His concentration was so deep that though he heard the

sound of a foot on the half-log floor of the porch, the possible meaning of the noise didn't register for an instant.

Ellie Ransden looked at Old Nathan, realized that he had slid beneath the immediate present, and snatched his flintlock rifle from where it leaned against the wall. "I hear ye there!" she called in a clear, threatening voice as she sighted down the barrel toward the door.

Old Nathan tore himself free of the walls of his trance like a beetle emerging from its chrysalis. The girl and the cabin's interior had both been present in his mind; now focus and solidity returned to them the way dough fills a biscuit mold.

"Ellie?" a woman called through the closed panel. "Hit's Sarah Ransden, and I'd admire t' speak with you fer a bit."

The cunning man rolled his shoulder muscles to loosen them. For a moment, it had seemed that his fingertips were growing into the box; that they were becoming roots or that the knife-carved wood changed to flesh and began to pulse with a life of its own. . . .

"Who's with ye, Sarah?" Ellie demanded. She lowered the stock from her shoulder to her waist, but the gunlock was still roostered back and the muzzle aimed toward the door.

"She's alone, child," Old Nathan murmured. Something had broken—or turned—in Ellie Ransden since the time the Bully struck her face this morning.

"I'm alone, child," Sarah said bitterly. "I been alone these ten years gone, since my son left me. As you should know."

"Come in an' set, thin," Ellie replied. "Tain't barred."

She lowered the hammer and replaced the rifle where Old Nathan had set it. "I beg pardon, sir," she muttered sheepishly without meeting the cunning man's eyes. "I shouldn't hev took hit on myse'f t' do thet."

The cunning man sniffed. "En why not?" he said.

Sarah Ransden recoiled as she saw Old Nathan, though he was looking past her toward the empty forest across the roadway. "Mister Ridgeway," she said formally from the doorway. "I come t' speak with my datter, but I don't mean t' intrude."

"Come in er go out, Miz Ransden," Ellie said with evident hostility. "Thar's some uv us here warn't born in a barn."

Sarah flinched. The cunning man stepped to her and drew her into the cabin with his free hand. His boot pushed the door to until the latch clicked.

"I hain't yer datter," the younger woman said. "You let me know right plain thet I warn't good enough fer yer boy the one time I come callin' on ye. He turnt his back on you years ago, but I warn't good enough!"

"Ellie," Old Nathan said quietly, "thar's no call fer thet. Sarah, what is it brings ye here?"

"Yer Cull ain't good enough fer me now, Miz Ransden!" Ellie cried. Her right cheek was bone white, but

the swollen print on the left flared like an August rose. "Ifen he don't hang afore he comes back, I'll leave."

The anger that had kept Ellie ramrod straight poured out through a memory, leaving her suddenly vulnerable. She touched her left cheek, then lowered her hand and stared at the fingertips.

"He niver hit me," she whispered. "He niver hit me afore naow."

"Oh, child," Sarah Ransden said. "I felt the storm comin' in my bones, an' the good Lord knows hit was true."

Sarah hesitated, from fear of being rejected rather than calculation, then put her arms around the younger woman's shoulders anyway. They hugged one another, both with their eyes closed and on the verge of tears.

Old Nathan looked away uncomfortably. His fingers began to probe the box again. A thin panel slid aside; the cunning man shook a wooden key out into his palm.

"Whar did ye git thet box, Nathan Ridgeway?" Sarah asked from behind his shoulder. Her tone was controlled and distant, the sort of voice one used to inquire of a stranger found staring over one's garden fence.

"Happen I found hit here on the fireboard, Sarah," the cunning man replied calmly. "What is it ye know about this thing, thin?"

The women stood side by side; both of them tall and striking, though Sarah forty years younger had never been the beauty Ellie Ransden was now. Their clothing, Ellie's check dress and the blue shawl Sarah wore over homespun, was worn and had been inexpensive when new, but there was an unmistakable pride in the women—at what they were, and in the fact that they were surviving.

"Chance had a thing like thet," Sarah said. "Hit opens up, though I niver knew how."

Old Nathan's paired thumbs slid the base of the box rearward. His eyes were on Sarah. In his mind trembled like a tent of shadows the joints and planes of the object with which he had almost merged.

"Like thet, I reckon," the older woman continued. She licked her dry lips. "The one time I asked, he told me his Pappy hed give it to him whin he come of age . . . en he hit me, which warn't new by thin."

Ellie put her arm around Sarah's shoulders.

"I burnt it," Sarah said softly. "I burnt hit whin Cullen run him off, but I swear t' God thet hit war the same box ez ye've got in yer hands."

Old Nathan uncovered the keyhole. As the women silently watched him, he inserted the key and opened the box.

The box was empty. He upended it. Ellie and Sarah relaxed palpably.

"We ain't out uv the woods," the cunning man murmured. "Not jest yet. . . ."

He set the box on the table and reached into the air above him. It was like fumbling on a shelf in the

dark. If he looked up there would be nothing to see, only his knobby old fingers closing on—

The familiar, solid angles of a jackknife. The German silver bolsters were cool to his touch, and the shield of true silver set into one jigged-bone scale was cold.

He lifted the knife down without meeting the eyes of the women. There were things the cunning man did for show, when impulse or perceived need drove him, but he felt uncomfortable at the notion of showing off before this particular pair. The only reasons he could imagine for doing that were so childish—and so foolish in a not-man like him—that his mind danced around their edges like a pit.

Old Nathan held the knife between his thumb and forefinger so that the polished silver plate reflected down into the box. It showed—

Nothing. No hidden object, but not the coarse grain of the wood, either. It was as if the silver were mirroring a gray void . . . except that when the cunning man stared at the plate without blinking, he seemed to see flames flicker at the corners of his eyes.

He stepped away from the table and drew in a deep breath.

"No," he repeated, "we hain't out uv the woods. . . ."

Sarah slid a chair beneath the cunning man. He settled into it heavily, straining Ellie's jury-rigged repairs. What was there hed teeth, en it hed took a bite whilst he scouted hit out.

"What is it?" Ellie asked, looking from the box to the door as if undecided as to whence the danger could be expected. "What is it thet you see?"

Old Nathan rubbed his right biceps with his left hand, then raised his arm to put the jackknife away. There wasn't any wonder about the knife. Its blades were good steel, with a working edge on the larger one and on the smaller a wire edge that could serve as a razor at need.

The wonder of the place where Old Nathan kept the knife was another question, but it was a question to which the cunning man himself had no answer. It was like all the rest of his art, a pattern of things known but not studied; the way a clockwork toy moves without understanding in its spring.

And if the toy should cease to move, the spring would be none the wiser for that result either. . . .

Old Nathan sighed and ran a fingertip across the interior of the box. The wood felt as it should: vaguely warm because the cunning man's flesh was cold, and slightly rough because the board had been planed smooth but not polished.

"He found hit et the shurri's sale," Ellie murmured, not so much to inform as to fill the silence in which she and Sarah Ransden stood with Old Nathan stepped along the pathways of his mind, open-eyed but unseeing. "I was a fool t' take him thar. The Neills was evil on the best day uv thar lives."

"They was evil," Sarah said grimly. "But Chance Ransden had Satan hisse'f livin' in his skull, en I know thet t' my cost."

"Earth 'n air . . ." the cunning man murmured.

He blinked, then shook himself fully alert. His eyeballs felt as though someone had ground sand into

them. He rubbed them cautiously. There were risks going into a waking trance with his eyes open. One day the lids would stick that way and he would be blind as a mole; but it hadn't happened yet. . . .

The cabin door opened and closed; Sarah had gone out. Old Nathan looked at the panel, confused and still uncertain. He had dropped back into reality as though it were an icy pond.

Ellie threw another stick of wood onto the hearth. The billet looked chewed off rather than chopped. The axe had gone the way of the Ransden's cattle and seedcorn. The girl was reduced to cutting logs with the handaxe she had concealed in her mulch pile to keep it from being traded for liquor as well.

"Fire and water?" she offered to prompt the cunning man to say more.

"Did I speak?" Old Nathan asked in surprise. "Reckon I did. . . ."

Sarah came back inside. She carried the kitchen knife she had used as a trowel and a cupful of dirt gathered into her lifted dress. She spilled the soil onto the table near the little box. "There's snow mixed in along with this," she said. "Or I reckon there's water in the jug by the fire."

Old Nathan looked from the older woman to the young one. Most folk he worked magic for, they were afraid of what he did and the fellow who did it besides. This pair was rock steady. Their minds moved faster than the cunning man was consciously able to go; and if they were afraid, it was nowhere he could see by looking deep into their eyes.

On the cabin eaves, chickadees cracked seeds and remarked cheerfully about the sunlight.

Mebbe the wimmen 'ud be afeerd if they knew more; but mebbe livin' with the Ransden men hed burnt all the fear outen thim already.

Ellie rose from the hearth with a long feather of hickory, lighted at one end. It burned back along the grain of the wood with a coiled pigtail of black waste above the flame. "This do ye fer fire?" she said as she offered the miniature torch.

"Aye," agreed the cunning man. "Hit'll do fine."

His right index finger traced characters on the table. They were visible only where they disturbed the pile of sodden earth or the wisps of ash which dropped from the hickory. The room began to rotate around the focus of Old Nathan's vision, but the walls and all the objects within them remained clear.

A driblet of mud and melt water curled from the table like a thread being drawn from a bobbin. The ribbon of flame from the hickory attenuated and slanted sideways, as though the strip were burning in a place where "up" was not the same direction as it was in central Tennessee.

There was a keening sound like that which the wind makes when it drives through a tiny chink in a wall.

Old Nathan spoke in a soft, monotonous voice, mouthing syllables that were not words in a language familiar to his listeners. His eyes became glazed and sightless. His tongue stumbled. It was shaping itself to the sounds not by foreknowledge but the way a hiker crosses a shallow stream: hopping from one high rock to the next, then searching for a further steppingstone.

The elemental strands—earth and air, fire and water—wove together as do fibers in a ropewalk, coiling and interweaving into a single tube. It curved into the box, probing the wooden bottom—

And slid away, broken into its constituent parts, its virtue dissipated.

Old Nathan awoke with a start, jolting backward in his chair. His arms spread with the fingers clawed in readiness to meet a foe. His spasm flung the feather of wood toward the pile of bedding.

Sarah snatched up the burning splinter. In her haste she gripped it too close to the flame, but she carried it without flinching back to the hearth.

Ellie Ransden cried, "Sir!" and grasped Old Nathan's right arm, both to control it and to prevent the cunning man from tipping over with the violence of his reaction.

He glared at her. His face for a moment was a mask of fury; then he calmed and softened as though all the bones had been drawn from his flesh.

"Tarnation, gal," the old man gasped, pillowing his head against his left arm on the table. He seemed oblivious to the slime of ash and damp earth left on the surface by his attempt.

Old Nathan lifted himself again. He gave Ellie a squeeze with his left hand before he drew his right from her support. "I figgered with all creation t' push, I'd hev thet gate open lickity-split . . . but hit warn't ready t' open."

The cunning man smiled wryly at the miscalculation he had barely survived. "I was betwixt the gate en' the push thet I'd drawed up myse'f."

"The bottom's false, thin?" Ellie asked, glancing toward the little box beside Old Nathan's hand. Her lips curled. "Cain't we chop hit open?"

"Hain't like thet, child," the cunning man said. Sarah Ransden eyed them without expression from beside the fireplace. "Thar's a gate, so t' speak, but not . . ."

He gestured, rubbing his fingertips together as if attempting to seize the air. "Not on this world. Not all this world—" his index finger drew a line across the dirt on the tabletop "—has airy bit t' do with what's on t' other side uv thet gate, so I couldn't force hit."

Without speaking, Sarah reached into the bosom of her dress. She drew a locket up and over her head. The ornament was suspended on a piece of silk ribbon so faded that its original color was only a pink memory.

Sarah opened the spring catch and held the locket out to Old Nathan. Inside was the miniature portrait of a man, painted on ivory. "Thet's Chance Ransden," she said in a distant voice. "Thet was my husband whin I married him."

Old Nathan set the locket down on the table and examined it. The artist had been skillful, not so much in the depiction of physical features—the face on the miniature was thinner than that of the Chance Ransden the cunning man remembered from ten years past—but rather in the sheen of the spirit glinting through the skin. No single detail in the painting was objectively right, but the result had the feel of Chance Ransden.

And the feel of hot, soulless evil.

Old Nathan stood up, moving with an exaggerated care. I'm too durn old fer sech goins-on. . . . "Blame

lucky thing I hain't bruck yer table down, me threshin' about thet way," he grumbled aloud.

He stretched, feeling the tenderness of his muscles. They had locked rigidly against one another while the vortex of power the cunning man summoned tried to crush his mind against immovable blackness.

Mebbe there was a better feller somewhars t' do this thing; but less'n he showed hisse'f right pert, Nathan Ridgeway meant t' do whatever an old man could.

"Thankee, Sarah," Old Nathan said. "I reckon it might serve."

He touched the painted face softly, then raised the locket by its loop of ribbon. This time he would stand.

The locket twisted over the interior of the box while the cunning man mumbled not-words. The face glinted—spun behind the unpainted back—spun again. . . .

To the women facing one another across the table, it seemed as though the corners of the portrait's mouth were rising into a sneer.

Old Nathan saw nothing. Streaks like the beams of sunlight drawing water through the clouds slid blindingly across the surface of his mind.

The latch rattled an instant before the cabin door burst open. The women looked up. Ellie's hand thrust out, then froze. The long rifle leaned against the far wall.

Bully Ransden stood in the doorway, wild and disheveled. There was a glitter of madness in his eyes, and his powerful arms hung down like the forelegs of a beast.

Beams of light rotated and rotated back. The cunning man raced past them like a fish rushing along the in-slanting walls of a weir.

None of the four figures in the cabin moved. The locket ticked against the bottom of the puzzle box.

And vanished.

* * *

Old Nathan was naked. The damage wreaked on his privates at King's Mountain by a Tory musketball was starkly evident.

He stood at a portal whose upper angles stretched beyond conception. The surface beneath his feet was wood, coarsely finished but seamless. The gigantic door that stood ajar before him was patterned with the same grain as that of the lid of the puzzle box in another place and time.

When the cunning man glanced back over his shoulder, he saw a forest like that on the site where his cabin now stood—but from the time before young Nathan Ridgeway began girdling trees and clearing undergrowth with a brushhook.

"Come t' be comp'ny t' me, Nathan?" called Chance Ransden from across the threshold. He giggled in a fashion that Old Nathan remembered from life—

For wherever this was, it was not life.

Chance was naked also. His appearance was that of a powerfully built man in the prime of life, the way he had looked the night he disappeared. Allus hed the luck uv the devil, Chance did. Nairy a one uv the scars, not even the load of small shot Jose Miller put into what he thought war a skunk in his smoke shed, showed whin Ransden hed clothing on. . . .

"I hadn't airy scrap uv use fer ye whin ye were alive, Ransden," Old Nathan said coldly. He stood straight, facing forward. He could not conceal the ancient injury to his manhood, and to attempt the impossible would be a sign of weakness. "I'll be no comp'ny t' ye now, 'cept t' tell ye t' be off whar ye belong. Leave yer son be!"

Chance giggled again. "D'ye want to see my boy Cull naow, Nathan?" he asked.

The portal opened slightly. Hunched behind the elder Ransden was the naked, cringing figure of his son. The image of Bully Ransden was bruised and bloody, as though he had tried to fight a bear with empty hands. He threw Old Nathan a furtive, sidelong glance past the legs of his father.

"Ain't he the dutiful lad?" Chance cackled. "He warn't whin I last wore my body, but he's larned better naow."

"Git up an' fight him, boy!" the cunning man snarled. He felt sick in the pit of his stomach to see a proud man like Bully reduced to this. "He don't belong here. Drive him out!"

Instead of fighting, Bully Ransden launched himself at the crack between the doorpanel and the jamb, trying to reach Old Nathan's side of the portal. His father kicked him aside with contemptuous ease.

The landscape across the threshold was a lifeless gray. The occasional quiver of movement was only heat-spawned distortion.

"Cull, he war a very divil fer strength, warn't he, Ridgeway?" Chance Ransden said. His lips were fixed in a cruel sneer. "Whin strength warn't enough, he bruk like a China cup. He hain't airy more spunk thin a dog since I bruk him."

He dug his toes into the ribs of his son. The younger man whimpered and cringed away.

Old Nathan licked his lips. "Aye, you're jest the bold feller I recollect, Ransden. Come acrost here en do thet, why don't ye?"

"No, old man," Chance said, "you ain't gitting me over whur you stand."

He opened the portal a hand's breadth wider. "But you kin come t' me—ifen ye dare. And I'll let my Cull here go across t' thet side. A soul fer a soul. Thet's fair, ain't hit jest?"

He began to laugh. Behind him, Bully Ransden huddled with his arms about his knees. He eyed Old Nathan through the opening with a look of desperate appeal.

"Cullen Ransden," the cunning man said. "Listen t' me, boy! What is it thet ye want t' do?"

"I want t' get shet uv this place," the Bully whispered. "Please God, git me shet uv here."

He was afraid to look up as he spoke. As his father had said, Cullen Ransden had broken. There was

no sign of the former man who crushed every opponent with his fists and masterful will.

"Git me out, sir," Bully begged. "I swear, there hain't nuthin' I won't do fer ye ifen ye only git me free."

"A soul fer a soul," Chance repeated. "I'll let him go across, s' long ez you pay him clear. Are ye thet much uv a man, Nathan Ridgeway?"

The cunning man shuddered with desire for what he knew he had no right to hope. The boy couldn't know the price. Only the old man who had lived that price for so many decades could understand it—

But Cullen Ransden knew what he was paying now; and it was too much for him.

"Listen, boy," Old Nathan said. He tried to speak gently, but his voice was full of too many emotions—hope, fear, and the anger of years. Fate had played a cruel trick on him when he was a youth younger still than Bully Ransden. "Listen. If you come through that door, you'll live out the rist uv yer life ez an old man. As no man a'tall, by some ways uv lookin' et it. D'ye hear me?"

Bully Ransden did not speak. His body trembled as he readied himself for another dash toward the opening—which Chance would stop as surely as his weasel-like smile was cruel.

"Boy, ye won't niver git back," Old Nathan said with desperate emphasis. "You cain't know what a weak, pulin' thing ye'll—"

Bully sprang for the portal. His father's foot thrust him back. Chance's long toenails gouged like a beast's talons.

Old Nathan felt the calm of a decision made for him, in the clearest possible manner. Warn't right, but warn't my choice neither.

"Let him go, Chance Ransden," he said. "I'm comin' to ye, since thet's what ye think thet ye want."

Old Nathan stepped forward. The portal and the forest behind him vanished, leaving him alone on a lava plain with Chance Ransden.

* * *

The sky was pale and yellowish. The air was bitterly cold, with a tang of brimstone.

Chance Ransden stood arm's-length distant, grinning like a neck-chained monkey. He backed slightly away when the cunning man appeared before him. Bullets had puckered Ransden's flesh in a dozen different places, and a long pink scar snaked up the right side of his rib cage where a knife had just failed to let out his evil life; but he looked a fine, muscular specimen of a man for all that.

If he was still a man. If he had ever been a man.

"Cull, he made me a good dog, Ridgeway," Chance said. "You'll make me a better one."

The cunning man tested the surface with the toes of his right foot. The plain on which he stood was formed by ropes of lava spilling out to cool in arcs across the axis of the advance. Individual ropes lay one against the next in a series of six-foot hillocks, with sharp valleys between ready to break the ankle of an incautious man.

There was no animal life visible anywhere on the plain, and no vegetation save scales of lichen—white and gray and rusty orange—which slowly powdered even raw stone. Plumes of vapor marked cabin-sized potholes where rock bubbled, and the wind occasionally burned instead of cutting with cold.

"What I'll make you, Chance Ransden," the cunning man said softly, "is glad t' git off t' whar ye belong."

"You thunk I was afeerd uv ye, back t' thet world, didn't ye, Nathan?" Chance said. "Waal, I'm another guess chap thin ye took me fer."

Old Nathan stepped across the V-shaped trench between his hillock and the one on which Ransden stood.

Ransden hopped back. He raised his hand in the air. "Ye say ye're the Divil's master, old man?" he asked.

Old Nathan stared at the image of the younger, stronger man. "Aye," he said.

Chance snapped his fingers.

The rim of a fuming pothole ten yards behind Ransden began to move. Minerals deposited by steam shivered away in blue-green and saffron patches. Something was coming to life, the way the first rains cause toads to break free of the capsule of hardened slime in which they have survived summer and drought.

"Waal, Ridgeway," said Chance Ransden. "I say I'm the Divil's sarvint. Let's see who's the wiser uv us, shall we?"

The thing from the rock cocoon was gray and looked somewhat like an ape. It would have been taller than most men if it walked upright; instead it shambled forward in a crouch, occasionally touching down the knuckles of a slablike hand. Its upper canines were the size of a man's thumbs, and each finger bore predatory claws.

"Thar's nowhere t' run, old man!" Chance cackled. "Ye kin run till Hell freezes over, en ye still cain't git away!"

The creature shambling forward was no ape nor any other living thing. The eye sockets beneath its deep brows were pools of lambent flame.

There were fears in the heart of every man. Chance Ransden's soul stood as naked as those of his son and the cunning man, but his master had offered him an ally. . . .

"I'm too old t' run, Ransden," Old Nathan said. He reached into the air. "B'sides, I warn't niver airy good at it."

His fingers crooked and—

—closed on the hard angles of his knife. There when he needed it, and he hadn't been sure.

But he was sure he would not have run. He'd known since the day the bullet struck and passed on at King's Mountain that there was nowhere to run from the worst fears, the true fears. . . .

The backspring clicked with assurance as Old Nathan opened the main blade. There was a faint sheen of oil on the steel.

Ransden looked startled and backed again. For the first time he may have realized that there was content to the cunning man's boast to be the Devil's master.

But steel wouldn't win this fight, any more than Bully Ransden's strength had done.

"C'mon thin, durn ye," Old Nathan muttered, to himself rather than to the ape hulking toward him. He stepped over a trough in the rock, then stretched his long shanks in a leap to close with the creature.

The ape lifted onto its hind legs to meet the attack, but the cunning man was already within the sweep of the long arms before they could grasp him. He held the knife with the cutting edge up. The creature's hide plucked at the point before giving way. Its breath reeked with an unexpectedly chemical foulness, like that of stale urine.

Old Nathan started to rip upward against the resistance of the gray skin and the belts of muscles beneath it. The ape bit into the top of his skull with a pain like nothing the cunning man had ever before experienced.

He was on his back. The creature was twenty feet away, patting at the gash in its belly and roaring like the fall of a giant tree. There was blood on its fangs, speckling the froth bubbling across the broad lips.

Old Nathan couldn't see out of one eye and his hands were empty. He sat up and only then realized how much his shoulders hurt. The ape's claws had raked furrows across him before the creature flung the cunning man away.

He wiped his left eye with the back of his hand, then blinked. That cleared enough blood from the eyesocket that his vision, though dim, was binocular again. He needed the depth perception of two eyes. . . .

The jackknife, slimed with a greenish fluid that was not blood, lay beside his right hand. The ichor crusted and turned black where it touched the silver set into one bone scale.

Old Nathan picked up the knife. The tacky ichor would give him a better grip. Despite dazzling flashes of pain, he got to his feet before the monster started toward him again.

The ape bellowed and spread both arms. There was blood on the creature's foreclaws also. Old Nathan stumbled when he tried to leap forward. That worked to his advantage, because his opponent's great hands clapped together above the cunning man so that he was free to stab home again within an inch of the first wound.

This time the sound the ape made was more a scream than a bellow. It drove its clawed fingers into Old Nathan's sides like the tines of a flesh fork lifting meat to the fire. The cunning man shouted hoarsely, but he used the twisting power of the ape's own arms to tear the blade through rib cartilage that would have daunted mere human strength.

The creature flung Old Nathan over its head. For a moment the cunning man twisted in a kaleidoscope of yellow sky and gray stone, picked out occasionally by the sight of one of his own flailing limbs.

He hit the lava on his left side. His hip and hand took the initial impact, but his head struck also.

Old Nathan lay on the rock. He saw two apes turn toward him, but one image was only a faint ghost. The flap of skin torn from his forehead had almost bled his right eye closed again.

The creature's mouth was open. The cunning man could not hear the sounds directly, but he felt the lava tremble beneath him.

He sat up. The tear in the ape's belly was the size of a man's head. Coils of intestine dangled from the opening, and the fur of the creature's groin and upper thighs was matted by sour green ichor.

The ape lowered its forelimbs and knuckled toward its opponent.

Old Nathan found the knife beside him. The main blade had broken off at the bolsters when it struck the lava. He tried to open the smaller blade and found that his left hand had no feeling or movement.

The cunning man's vision cleared, though it remained two dimensional. He could hear the monster roar.

He gripped the jugged bone scales of the knife in his teeth and snicked out the smaller blade with his right thumb. When Old Nathan took the knife from his mouth, the taste of the monster's body fluids remained on his lips, but that could not be allowed to matter any more than the pain did.

The tiny blade winked in the jaundiced light. Old Nathan had honed its edge too fine to make a weapon, but it would serve until it broke.

"C'mon, thin," he whispered as he tried to lurch to his feet. His left leg would not support him. He fell back.

C'mon, ye ole fool. . . .

Old Nathan began to crawl forward on his hands and knees. The crystalline surface of the lava was bright with blood that leaked through his abraded skin.

The ape rose onto its hind legs again. It was trying to stuff loops of gut back into its belly, but each handful squeezed additional coils out of the knife-cut opening.

" . . . whar ye b'long," Old Nathan whispered through the slime coating his lips. He had no peripheral vision. He could see nothing but the figure of the ape standing gray against the lighter gray background of a fumarole, and the edges of even that image were blurred and drawing inward.

"C'mon . . ."

The ape turned away.

"No!" screamed Chance Ransden from where he stood behind the monster. "Ye dassn't leave—"

The ape shambled on in its new direction. Chance leaped away.

Old Nathan transferred the knife to his teeth again. He needed his right hand to drag himself forward. White light pulsed at the center of his field of view.

Chance Ransden turned to run, then screamed as the ape caught him in the crook of one hairy arm. The

creature stumbled over its trailing intestines. It took two further steps, then looked over its shoulder toward the cunning man.

The ape and Chance Ransden, howling like a stuck pig, plunged into the heart of a pothole crater. Mud so hot that it glowed plopped up, then sank again beneath a curtain of its own steam.

"C'mon . . ." a voice whispered in Old Nathan's mind as he lost consciousness.

* * *

Old Nathan woke up. He could hear the straw filling of a mattress rustle beneath him when he turned his head.

There was a quilt over him as well. Ellie Ransden sat in a chair beside the bed made up on the floor in lieu of a proper frame. It was morning. . . .

But not the same morning. Beside the bed was a pot with a scrap of tow burnt at the bottom of it. Ellie had melted lard into the container, then floated a wick in it as a makeshift candle by which to watch the cunning man's face while he slept.

Old Nathan tried to sit up. Ellie knelt beside the bed with a little cry and helped to support his shoulders.

His hands were bigger than they should have been, and the hairs along his arms were blond. He had awakened in Bully Ransden's body, as he knew he would do—if he awakened.

"Sarah took the—old man back t' the homeplace," Ellie said. "He'll be right ez rain, she says."

"Gal, gal . . ." Old Nathan said. "I—"

He stood up in a rush. Ellie scrambled, flicking the bedding out of the way so that it would not tangle the cunning man's feet.

Sparrows quarreled on the window's outer ledge. Their chirping was only noise, as devoid of meaning to him as it was empty of music. Nathan Ridgeway was no longer a wizard—

And no longer an old man.

Ellie Ransden put her arms around him. Her touch helped to support Old Nathan while he got his legs under him again, but it was offered with unexpected warmth. "Child, listen," Old Nathan said. "I ain't yer Cull. He changed place with me."

"Hush, now," Ellie murmured. "You jest hold stiddy till ye've got yer strength agin."

Old Nathan looked down at the supple, muscular arm that was part of his body. "Warn't right what I did," he whispered. "But Bully begged fer it . . . en' I warn't goin' t' leave Chance Ransden loose in the world no longer."

Chance Ransden loose, or Chance Ransden's master.

Old Nathan wore the dungarees and homespun shirt with which Bully Ransden had fled the cabin the morning before, and a pair of Ransden's boots stood upright at the foot of the bed. He detached himself from the girl and began to draw on one of the boots.

"Sarah said she'd keep yer animals, ye needn't worry," Ellie said. "She said she knew how ye fussed yerself about thim all."

Old Nathan looked at the young woman. Ellie had plaited her hair into a loose braid. Now she coiled it onto the top of her head, out of the way. Sarah Ransden knew more thin he'd thought airy soul did uv his bus'ness.

He hunched himself into the other boot. His head hurt as though someone were splitting it with the back side of an axe, but the easy, fluid way in which his young joints moved was a wonder and delight to him.

"What is hit thet ye intend, sir?" Ellie asked from where she stood between the cunning man and the door.

Old Nathan snorted. "With the repetation thet Bully, pardon me, thet Cullen hed aforetimes, en' the word thet's going on about him these last months whin his pappy rid him—I figger I'd hev to be plumb loco t' stay hereabouts, wearing the shape thet I do now."

Memories flooded in on him the way a freshet bursts a dam of ice during the spring thaw. His body began to shake uncontrollably with recollections of what had been and what might have been.

"Might be," he said softly, "thet I should hev gone off after King's Mountain, 'stid uv settlin' back here en' fixin' a fence round me, near enough."

Ellie gripped his hands firmly. "Take me along," she said.

"I ain't Cull Ransden!" Old Nathan shouted as he drew himself away. What he wanted to do . . .

"I know who you are," Ellie said. She stepped close but did not touch him. "I know ye treated me decent whin others, they didn't. D'ye think I kin stay hereabouts, sir? Or thet I want to?"

Old Nathan turned away. There was a rifle on the pegs over the fireboard; his own. His mule gave its familiar brassy whinny from the shed, though there was no certain meaning in the sound.

Sarah Ransden en' her son 'ud be set up right purty, what with the two farms—

Or three, ifen Ellie wint off with the man who wore her husband's shape.

"I ain't special t' the beasts no more," he said musingly. "Reckon hit's better I try my possibles t' git along with men now, anyways."

He looked at the young woman. "I reckon if I warn't all et up with bitterness whin I come back from King's Mountain," he added, "I might hev thunk a man could be ez good a frind thin a cat. A man er a woman."

"I packed a budget," Ellie said. "Hit seemed t' me thet ye'd feel thet way whin ye come around."

She looked out the window. The sun was already high in the sky. "We kin wait till ye're stronger . . . ?" she said.

"Sooner we're away, the better," Old Nathan replied. The pain in his head was passing as he moved;

and for the rest of his body—he hadn't felt so good in fifty years. . . .

Ellie handed him a sheepskin coat, cracked at the seams but warm enough to serve until his youthful strength earned him better. Soon—

He frowned, then took Ellie by both shoulders and held her until she met his eyes. "Thar's no more magic, girl," he said. "I'm a man en no more. I want ye t' understand thet."

She hefted the bundle of household essentials she had prepared. "Thet's what I wish fer," she said. "A man as treats me decint."

They walked outside into bright brilliant sunlight reflecting from the snow. Old Nathan left the cabin door open. Sarah could deal with the place whenever she chose; Sarah Ransden and the son who now kept her company. . . .

He saddled and bridled the mule, then rubbed its muzzle. The beast gave a snort of satisfaction and made a playful attempt to bite him.

"Git on up," Old Nathan said to the girl. "I reckon I'll walk."

He hefted the rifle he had leaned against the sidelogs of the shed, then crooked it into his left arm. He glanced to see that Ellie was in the saddle, then made a cautious pass through the air with his free hand.

Nothing happened. Old Nathan sighed and said, "Gee up, mule. We've got a passel uv country t' ride through afore we find airy place thet wants t' see us."

"We'll be all right," Ellie said.

She looked back once from the road. In the shadow of the shed, there was a faint glimmer as of fairy lights . . . but very faint, and the young couple had many miles yet to ride.

THE END

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