

OLD NATHAN
David Drake

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DEDICATION

To my late friend

Manly Wade Hampton Wellman

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Among the people who made this book possible are my wife Jo; my parents, Earle and Maxine Drake; Janet Morris; and Manly himself. My thanks to all of them.

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 cllop 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 than 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, fainting 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 iffen 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 iffen 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 iffen 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 gibed. "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. . . . Iffen 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 minuscely.

"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 thin 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 thet 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 thet 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, "thet 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 souging 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'boday, 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, blubbering 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 thim."

"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 corn cob 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 rifleshot 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 you'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 handfilling, 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 30° 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 pinte 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 across 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 Üxwmëttapëmpomie."

The candle guttered at his words. The whole clan responded together, "Ek neckroo say mettapëmpomie," 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 that 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 boney!"

"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 carven 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 twinny-siven, 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 personality 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, thet'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 startlinging 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. "Threwed 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 that 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 treetrunks. 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 first 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 jugged-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 shurrif'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

weasellike 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 slab-like 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 yerse'f 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.