

The Golem

by Avram Davidson

The grey-faced person came along the street where old Mr. and Mrs. Gumbeiner lived. It was afternoon, it was autumn, the sun was warm and soothing to their ancient bones. Anyone who attended the movies in the twenties or the early thirties has seen that street a thousand times. Past these bungalows with their half-double roofs Edmund Lowe walked arm-in-arm with Leatrice Joy and Harold Lloyd was chased by Chinamen waving hatchets. Under these squamous palm trees Laurel kicked Hardy and Woolsey beat Wheeler upon the head with a codfish. Across these pocket-handkerchief-sized lawns the juveniles of the Our Gang comedies pursued one another and were pursued by angry fat men in golf knickers. On this same street—or perhaps on some other one of five hundred streets exactly like it.

Mrs. Gumbeiner indicated the grey-faced person to her husband.

"You think maybe he's got something the matter?" she asked. "He walks kind of funny, to me."

"Walks like a *golem*," Mr. Gumbeiner said indifferently.

The old woman was nettled.

"Oh, I don't know," she said. "I think he walks like your cousin Mendel."

The old man pursed his mouth angrily and chewed on his pipestem. The grey-faced person turned up the concrete path, walked up the steps to the porch, sat down in a chair. Old Mr. Gumbeiner ignored him. His wife stared at the stranger.

"Man comes in without a hello, goodbye, or howareyou, sits himself down, and right away he's at home ... The chair is comfortable?" she asked. "Would you like maybe a glass of tea?"

She turned to her husband.

"Say something, Gumbeiner!" she demanded. "What are you, made of wood?"

The old man smiled a slow, wicked, triumphant smile.

"Why should *I* say anything?" he asked the air. "Who am I? Nothing, that's who."

The stranger spoke. His voice was harsh and monotonous.

"When you learn who—or, rather, what—I am, the flesh will melt from your bones in terror." He bared porcelain teeth.

"Never mind about my bones!" the old woman cried. "You've got a lot of nerve talking about my bones!"

"You will quake with fear," said the stranger. Old Mrs. Gumbeiner said that she hoped he would live so long. She turned to her husband once again.

"Gumbeiner, when are you going to mow the lawn?"

"All mankind—" the stranger began.

"*Shah!* I'm talking to my husband . . . He talks *eppis* kind of funny, Gumbeiner, no?"

"Probably a foreigner," Mr. Gumbeiner said complacently.

"You think so?" Mrs. Gumbeiner glanced fleetingly at the stranger. "He's got a very bad color in his face, *nebbich*, I suppose he came to California for his health."

"Disease, pain, sorrow, love, grief—all are nought to—"

Mr. Gumbeiner cut in on the stranger's statement.

"Gall bladder," the old man said. "Guinzburg down at the *shule* looked exactly the same before his operation. Two professors they had in for him, and a private nurse day and night."

"I am not a human being!" the stranger said loudly.

"Three thousand seven hundred fifty dollars it cost his son, Guinzburg told me. 'For you, Poppa, nothing is too expensive—only get well,' the son told him."

"*I am not a human being!*"

"Ai, is that a son for you!" the old woman said, rocking her head. "A heart of gold, pure gold." She looked at the stranger. "All right, all right, I heard you the first time. Gumbeiner! I asked you a question. When are you going to cut the lawn?"

"On Wednesday, *odder* maybe Thursday, comes the Japaneser to the neighborhood. To cut lawns is *his* profession. *My* profession is to be a glazier—retired."

"Between me and all mankind is an inevitable hatred," the stranger said. "When I tell you what I am, the flesh will melt—"

"You said, you said already," Mr. Gumbeiner interrupted.

"In Chicago where the winters were as cold and bitter as the Czar of Russia's heart," the old woman intoned, "you had strength to carry the frames with the glass together day in and day out. But in California with the golden sun to mow the lawn when your wife asks, for this you have no strength. Do I call in the Japaneser to cook for you supper?"

"Thirty years Professor Allardyce spent perfecting his theories. Electronics, neuronics—"

"Listen, how educated he talks," Mr. Gumbeiner said admiringly. "Maybe he goes to the University here?"

"If he goes to the University, maybe he knows Bud?" his wife suggested.

"Probably they're in the same class and he came to see him about the homework, no?"

"Certainly he must be in the same class. How many classes are there? Five *in ganzen*: Bud showed me on his program card." She counted off on her fingers. "Television Appreciation and Criticism, Small Boat Building, Social Adjustment, The American Dance . . . The American Dance—*nu*, Gumbeiner—"

"Contemporary Ceramics," her husband said, relishing the syllables. "A fine boy, Bud. A pleasure to have him for a boarder."

"After thirty years spent in these studies," the stranger, who had continued to speak unnoticed, went on,

"he turned from the theoretical to the pragmatic. In ten years' time he had made the most titanic discovery in history: he made mankind, *all* mankind, superfluous; he made *me*."

"What did Tillie write in her last letter?" asked the old man.

The old woman shrugged.

"What should she write? The same thing. Sidney was home from the Army, Naomi has a new boyfriend—"

"*He made ME!*"

"Listen, Mr. Whatever-your-name-is," the old woman said, "maybe where you came from is different, but in *this* country you don't interrupt people while they're talking ... Hey. Listen—what do you mean, he *made* you? What kind of talk is that?"

The stranger bared all his teeth again, exposing the too-pink gums.

"In his library, to which I had a more complete access after his sudden and as yet undiscovered death from entirely natural causes, I found a complete collection of stories about androids, from Shelley's *Frankenstein* through Capek's *R.U.R.* to Asimov's—"

"Frankenstein?" said the old man with interest. "There used to be a Frankenstein who had the soda-*wasser* place on Halstead Street—a Litvack, *nebbich*."

"What are you talking?" Mrs. Gumbeiner demanded. "His name was Frankenthal, and it wasn't on Halstead, it was on Roosevelt."

"—clearly shown that all mankind has an instinctive antipathy towards androids and there will be an inevitable struggle between them—"

"Of course, of course!" Old Mr. Gumbeiner clicked his teeth against his pipe. "I am always wrong, you are always right. How could you stand to be married to such a stupid person all this time?"

"I don't know," the old woman said. "Sometimes I wonder, myself. I think it must be his good looks." She began to laugh. Old Mr. Gumbeiner blinked, then began to smile, then took his wife's hand.

"Foolish old woman," the stranger said. "Why do you laugh? Do you not know I have come to destroy you?"

"What?" old Mr. Gumbeiner shouted. "Close your mouth, you!" He darted from his chair and struck the stranger with the flat of his hand. The stranger's head struck against the porch pillar and bounced back.

"When you talk to my wife, talk respectable, you hear?"

Old Mrs. Gumbeiner, cheeks very pink, pushed her husband back to his chair. Then she leaned forward and examined the stranger's head. She clicked her tongue as she pulled aside a flap of grey, skinlike material.

"Gumbeiner, look! He's all springs and wires inside!"

"I *told* you he was a *golem*, but no, you wouldn't listen," the old man said.

"You said he *walked* like a *golem*."

"How could he walk like a *golem* unless he *was* one?"

"All right, all right . . . You broke him, so now fix him."

"My grandfather, his light shines from Paradise, told me that when MoHaRal—Moreynu Ha-Rav Löw—his memory for a blessing, made the *golem* in Prague, three hundred? four hundred years ago? he wrote on his forehead the Holy Name."

Smiling reminiscently, the old woman continued, "And the *golem* cut the rabbi's wood and brought his water and guarded the ghetto."

"And one time only he disobeyed the Rabbi Löw, and Rabbi Löw erased the *Shem Ha-Mephorash* from the *golem*'s forehead and the *golem* fell down like a dead one. And they put him up in the attic of the *shule*, and he's still there today if the Communisten haven't sent him to Moscow . . . This is not just a story," he said.

"Avadda not!" said the old woman.

"I myself have seen both the *shule* and the rabbi's grave," her husband said conclusively.

"But I think this must be a different kind of *golem*, Gumbeiner. See, on his forehead; nothing written."

"What's the matter, there's a law I can't write something there? Where is that lump of clay Bud brought us from his class?"

The old man washed his hands, adjusted his little black skull-cap, and slowly and carefully wrote four Hebrew letters on the grey forehead.

"Ezra the Scribe himself couldn't do better," the old woman said admiringly. "Nothing happens," she observed, looking at the lifeless figure sprawled in the chair.

"Well, after all, am I Rabbi Löw?" her husband asked deprecatingly. "No," he answered. He leaned over and examined the exposed mechanism. "This spring goes here . . . this wire comes with this one . . ." The figure moved. "But this one goes where? And this one?"

"Let be," said his wife. The figure sat up slowly and rolled its eyes loosely.

"Listen, Reb *Golem*," the old man said, wagging his finger. "Pay attention to what I say—you understand?"

"Understand . . ."

"If you want to stay here, you got to do like Mr. Gumbeiner says."

"Do-like-Mr.-Gumbeiner-says . . ."

"*That's* the way I like to hear a *golem* talk. Malka, give here the mirror from the pocketbook. Look, you see your face? You see the forehead, what's written? If you don't do like Mr. Gumbeiner says, he'll wipe out what's written and you'll be no more alive."

"No-more-alive . . ."

"*That's* right. Now, listen. Under the porch you'll find a lawnmower. Take it. And cut the lawn. Then come back. Go."

"Go ... " The figure shambled down the stairs. Presently the sound of the lawnmower whirred through the quiet air in the street just like the street where Jackie Cooper shed huge tears on Wallace Beery's shirt and Chester Conklin rolled his eyes at Marie Dressler.

"So what will you write to Tillie?" old Mr. Gumbeiner asked.

"What should I write?" old Mrs. Gumbeiner shrugged. "I'll write that the weather is lovely out here and that we are both, Blessed be the Name, in good health."

The old man nodded his head slowly, and they sat together on the front porch in the warm afternoon sun.

The End

Author Biography and Bibliography

Avram Davidson was one of the great masters of short fiction of the twentieth century, a writer who won the major awards in the science-fiction, fantasy, and mystery genres—the Hugo, Edgar, and World Fantasy Awards—while constantly pushing at the boundaries of those genres. Davidson (1923–1993) published seventeen novels and wrote more than 200 stories and essays during his lifetime. Among his best-known stories are "Or All the Seas with Oysters," "The Necessity of His Condition," "The Affair at Lahore Cantonment," "The Golem," and "Naples," all collected in *The Avram Davidson Treasury* (Tor, 1998).

Davidson was born on April 23, 1923, in Yonkers, New York. He was educated in the local public schools, and briefly studied anthropology at New York University before joining the U.S. Navy in 1942. He served as a hospital corpsman, first with the Naval Air Corps, and then with the Fifth Marines, and saw overseas duty in the South Pacific. He was in China at the time of the Japanese surrender in September 1945. He continued his formal education after the war but never took a degree. Davidson was in Palestine just before the creation of Israel in May 1948, and apparently served as a medic in the newly-formed Israeli armed forces, and then worked for a while as a shepherd.

Davidson began publishing short stories and essays in *Orthodox Jewish Life* in 1949, and then in *Commentary*, under the name A. A. Davidson. In July 1954, *The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction* published its first story by Davidson, "My Boyfriend's Name is Jello." Over the next several years, stories in *Fantasy & Science Fiction*, *Galaxy*, and elsewhere earned Davidson recognition as an original new writer in science-fiction circles. At the same time his work appeared in *Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine*, *Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine*, and other detective and men's magazines. He was living in New York City at this time. In 1961, he met Grania Kaiman, and they were married not long after, in early 1962, at the Milford, Pennsylvania home of Damon Knight. Davidson assumed the editorship of *Fantasy & Science Fiction* in April 1962, and published his first three books that year. Soon after the birth of a son, Ethan, Davidson and his family moved to Milford, which had already become something of a gathering place for science fiction writers. There Davidson wrote two Ellery Queen detective novels and first began thinking of a series of works involving the figure of Vergil Magus, a character derived from late medieval European accounts of Vergil not as poet but as sorcerer. In mid-1963, the Davidsons moved to Amecameca, Mexico, a remote and exotic town near Mount Popocatepetl. Davidson continued as editor of *Fantasy & Science Fiction*, and began publishing a string of science-fiction adventure novels. The couple's marriage did not, however, survive the stresses of expatriate life. Even after their divorce, relations with his

former wife remained cordial, and Davidson lived in the Bay Area in order to be near his son.

Davidson travelled to British Honduras in the mid-1960s, and lived there on two occasions; more than a decade later he drew on his experiences there in the series of novellas featuring Jack Limekiller in the fictional colony of British Hidalgo. The first of his Vergil Magus novels, *The Phoenix and the Mirror*, was published in 1969, and during the much of the 1970s he published short fiction, including *The Enquiries of Doctor Eszterhazy*, which won the World Fantasy Award in 1976. During this time, Davidson had a few brief stints in the academic world, lecturing at the University of Texas, El Paso; as visiting professor at the University of California, Irvine; and at the English Department of the College of William and Mary in Williamsburg, Virginia.

In 1982, Davidson moved to Washington State, as his son was now older and the rents cheaper. He initially came to house-sit for his good friend and fellow science fiction writer Alan E. Nourse, and then stayed on, living at various times in Bellingham and Bremerton. In later years his health problems increased, and for a time Davidson lived in a Veterans Home.

In 1986, Davidson received the World Fantasy Award for Lifetime Achievement. Despite this recognition, the next years were extremely lean ones. *Vergil in Averno* was published by Doubleday in 1987; just after its publication, the company's science fiction imprint was discontinued, and the book received only minimal promotion. A third Vergil novel remains in manuscript. The small press continued to be an important outlet for Davidson's work. Owlswick Press published *The Adventures of Doctor Eszterhazy* and a volume of essays, *Adventures in Unhistory: Conjectures on the Factual Foundations of Several Ancient Legends*, collecting Davidson's examinations of such matters as mermaids, dragons, werewolves, mandrakes, unicorns, and the extinction of passenger pigeons and other birds. This was the last book published during his lifetime. He died in Bremerton, Washington, on May 8, 1993.

The past three years have seen the publication of several collections of Davidson's short stories, including *The Avram Davidson Treasury*, *The Investigations of Avram Davidson*, *Everybody Has Somebody in Heaven*, and the short novel *The Boss in the Wall* (with Grania Davis). A further volume of short fiction, *The Other Nineteenth Century*, is forthcoming from Tor Books.

—Biographical notes by Henry Wessells

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