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Science Fantasy

THOMAS BURNETT SWANN's

fantastic new mythic novel

THE WEIRWOODS

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SCIENCE FANTASY

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Contents

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Editorial . . . . . J. Parkhill-Rathbone

Mr. Bonfiglioli is in Venice observing heavenly bodies from a little observatory on the Lido.

I once hung upside down from the branch of a tree, in my youth, attempting a re-entry experiment with a cardboard rocket and two large handkerchiefs stitched together for a parachute. The latter was strictly intended for the rocket and not for myself, but in the event (or, as one might put it more accurately, as it fell out), it had to serve for both. At this distance in time I remember little of the data of take-off and landing, though they seemed to follow one another fairly rapidly. Anyhow, this is not the autobiography of a Newtonian apple. It was what I saw in free fall that was important: a building with towers at each corner, upside down. Why don't they build them like that, I thought, so that the traffic can get underneath?

This momentary vision was remembered recently when I was motoring along the Chiswick flyover. Londoners will remember that part of this knot in the highway is mounted on single piers; the next step, taken already in modern flat design, is to build over the lot. Science fiction readers will recognise an idea lifted straight from sf illustrations of a certain period.

In the thirties, when the Italian Futurist movement had been dissipated, as all such movements are, among the lower echelons of the arts and crafts, its influence combined with another from the design side of the aircraft industry, and it was thought ultra smart to own bookcases and other furniture of a streamlined design, presumably so that they might travel at speeds of over 100 m.p.h. Cinema façades and Wurlitzer organs took up the "futurist" trend. For a reason possibly not unconnected with my earlier rocket flight this kind of décor pleased me enormously: I felt that the sf future had already come, and I wallowed in it. I don't remember whether or not it was comfortable to live with. For me, that wasn't its point.

The tide of this has, however, receded, and left us living among Victorian bric-à-brac, which has become fashionable again, with "natural" wood finishes on our furniture. The press-button future predicted by the architect Le

Corbusier in the twenties is to some extent with us, but in a heavy disguise. I confess to owning an electric stove with a console like a spaceship, and have a haunting notion that one of these days a turn of one of the dials will cause the place to reverberate to the sound of take-off, bringing the ancient walls about my ears. But most of the stuff I like to live with is not modern at all. The same is true of most of us.

Le Corbusier believed, as do many modern designers, that the function of an article should determine its shape. From this idea sprang his Modulor principle, a unit of building based on the proportions of the human figure. It was no sooner adopted by some architects, however, than it began to undergo modifications, since domestic architecture is intended primarily to be lived in, and human beings having individual lives (and able to afford architect-designed houses) tend to have individual needs. Our homes are, of course, a major part of our environment, and they not only affect the way we live but they reflect some of our qualities. They are a reflection of our continuing lives, our place in time as well as in space, and we ourselves live only approximately by principles if we live by them at all. It follows that all attempts by designers and architects to make us conform to a kind of functionalism are bound to fail: we will have our funfairs and our gewgaws and our china dogs because, at the moment, that's what we're like.

What I am getting at, of course, is that lack of logic in the way we live makes accurate prediction of future trends virtually impossible in many spheres. But it also widens the areas of speculation for sf writers, and makes their job more fun. For one thing, there is much to be said, science-fiction-wise, for a blatantly imperfect society such as was mid-Victorian England, in which there was increasing technological expansion, cheap print, the perpetual stimulation of half-baked ideas, and scepticism rather than cynicism. Pack all that up and transfer it to somewhere else in the Galaxy, add a few twists, and you have something more fascinating, and considerably less naïve, than the sword-and-sorcery stories that are based on what we don't know about the Dark Ages.

—*continued on page* 106

A novel of ancient Etruria by the master of myth—

THE WEIRWOODS

by Thomas Burnett Swann

PART ONE

CHAPTER I

Etruscan Sutrium: the city beside the forest. She crowned a cliff which became an island in spring, when torrents of melting snow descended from blue Mount Cimini and clawed at her base with icy talons; and in summer she remained an island, but ringed with verdure —bracken and tangling ivy—which licked the wounds of spring with healing tongues. To the north, the forest crouched like a cat. The Cimian Forest, it was called on the maps of the region, but the townspeople whispered another, more sinister name: the Weirwoods. Weird Woods? Werewolf Woods? No one remembered the origin of the name, but everyone felt the threat in those cryptic, joined words, and the Sutrii girdled their city with walls of square tufa blocks; with battlemented towers; and with three arched gateways, the largest of which opened to the south, the fortunate region, the abode of the rural gods. Basalt roads descended in sweeping curves from each of the three gateways and joined, below the southern gate, at a drawbridge which spanned the moat. At the north of the town there stood not a gate but a watchtower whose square, stone-lidded eye eternally fixed the forest in its unblinking gaze.

Actually, Sutrium was a town and not a city, neither Veii of the fiery forges nor Caere of the bronze chariots nor many-streeted Tarquinia, but a town whose affluence nonetheless glittered in its temples—the circular shrine to Tages, the Divine Infant—the great orange rectangle to

Jupiter, Juno, and Minerva (or, as the Etruscans called them, Tinia, Uni and Menerva); and in the vigour of its people, the men in loin cloths, their sun-bronzed shoulders more beautiful than any cloth; the women swathed to their feet by linens and wools embroidered with Gorgon's head and winged Chimera, she-wolf and bird of prey. Surely we are blessed by the gods, they seemed to boast, striding like sunbeams to show our scorn of the forest; attended by slaves whose sleek, splendid nakedness testifies that they are generously fed and yet without possessions, that they live well by our bounty but live to serve our whims.

Even the cats of Sutrium were glossy with bee-coloured fur; golden, with ebony spots and rings. They were not the domestic cats of Egypt, but the large serval cats of Africa, trapped in the jungle by the Carthaginians, who sent them as gifts to their Etruscan allies. They followed their masters into the marketplace and sniffed disdainfully at the barbarous country folk who came to trade, with starved, thin-legged dogs pattering at their heels. They drowsed on stone couches in courtyards where soft-padding slaves with tiny, leaf-shaped trays of beaten silver served them the cheese of snow-white heifers or the wings of carefully plucked pheasants.

In truth, the dwellers in the forest, the Weir Ones, appeared to offer no threat to this town of affluent citizens, obedient slaves, and pampered cats. Every ninth day, the Sutrii allowed the Weir ones to enter the town and make purchases in the market place: red-figured vases imported from the kilns of Athens; figured brocades from the looms of Miletus; bronze daggers smelted in the forges of Veii. The Sutrii tolerated these unwashed rustics because of the chestnuts which they brought from the forest in wicker baskets; the fresh venison and the pots of honey; the tender eels from Lake Ciminus.

In return for the right to trade in the market place, the Weir Ones allowed the Sutrii access through the Weir-woods to Viterbo and Volsinii and other Etruscan cities of the north. Long ago, it was said, they had also offered access to the heart of the forest and their own sylvan cities. But the ancestors of the present Sutrii had scorned

the offer and passed through the forest with the look of aristocrats in a foul-smelling compound of slaves. Thus, the Weir Ones no longer sought them as friends. Still, they allowed them to follow the one path—the Road, it was called—and claimed in return the right to trade.

In the market place, the Weir Ones seemed shy, halting, and clumsy; in the forest, when glimpsed from the road, they seemed to have put on strength, like a god who had donned a mantle of invulnerability. The backs of the Centaurs arched in manly pride and their clattering hooves became the beat of drums; the horns of the Fauns curved like daggers of bone. Such glimpses were not reassuring to those who travelled the road. If riding on horseback, they spurred their mounts to a gallop. If riding in carriages, they shut their eyes and imagined the forest to be inhabited solely by naked and compliant nymphs. As a matter of fact, there were many nymphs in the forest, the female Water Sprites, usually naked, always compliant to males of their own race, but liking the Etruscans no better than a dolphin likes a shark.

Lars Velcha of Spina was bringing his daughter and his slaves to live in Sutrium, where his late brother, Appius, had bequeathed a villa to him. His wife and his son were dead, slain two years ago by a raiding party of Gauls. He had tried to forget them; or, since forgetting was plainly impossible, to avenge them by driving the red-haired raiders back to their mountains and offering the heads of captives to the dark-winged Vanth, goddess of death. But vengeance was not an opiate for grief. In the town of his birth, boyhood, marriage, and fatherhood, he met the loss of love with every turn of a street where his wife had walked like a phoenix in her robes of fire; with every field where his young son had wrestled or drawn a bow or hurled a discus. Sutrium offered, if not forgetfulness, at least the dulling of unfamiliarity.

Having followed the course of the Tiber for three days, he had halted his party at an inn in Viterbo to spend the night.

"You must pass through the Weirwoods tomorrow," the innkeeper had said, visibly awed by the presence of so

great a nobleman and, at the same time, wishing to impress him with a knowledge of the countryside. "Take care not to leave the road. The Weir Ones are vigilant, you know."

Lars Velcha had laughed: "You think I'm afraid of a few scurvy Fauns? My brother has told me about them straggling into the market. Barefoot. Broken horns. Chunks of copper to spend instead of coins, like the peasants we rule in Rome."

But Lars, if sometimes a foolhardy man on the battlefield and a boastful man with a cup of wine in his hand, was not a father to risk his daughter's life. Once he had entered the forest, he was careful to keep his party on the road. Two naked slaves, armed with clubs, rode at the head of the column; he, with Tanaquil dreaming at his side, drove a carriage—*carpentum*, it was called—with bronze wheels and rounded leather hood; and three wagons driven by slaves and laden with tripods, braziers, candelabra, scrolls, clothing, and weapons brought up the rear. There was no temptation to stray from the path. The bordering trees made barbed palisades which bore their greenery as if with reluctance, as if they expected to wrestle it from their limbs and fling it down like a netting over the path. Elms and chestnuts, beeches and oaks, and trees of ill omen too: buckthorn, black elder, and butcher's broom. In places, the road grew dishevelled with grapevines, which ground under the wheels like human limbs, and with spiky branches, split and charred by Tinia's lightning.

Placid Tanaquil rode in silence. Nothing, it seemed, could shake her, not trees of ill omen nor lightning-blackened limbs. Sleepy-eyed, soft-voiced, rounded of arm and breast to the point of voluptuousness, she combined a woman's body with a child's indolence. She was seventeen; since the death of her mother and brother, she had almost ceased to grow except in her body. She lived, it seemed, in a long and rarely broken dream from which she emerged with reluctance to eat or speak or sit at the loom, and to which she returned like the sheep in Sappho's poem, "Back to the Welcome Fold". Now, in her stillness, she might have been an image of Persephone, the Maiden,

crowning a wooden temple. If she saw the forest at all, it was only to watch a sunbeam alchemizing the leaves or a blue-eyed owl drooping among the branches.

"Tanaquil," he said at last. "Hand me the flask. The sun has given me a thirst."

Nodding, she handed him a silver flask encased in wicker and filled, presumably, with muscatel, the favourite Etruscan drink.

"Tanaquil," he sighed, upending the flask.

"You've drunk it already," she smiled.

"There was none to drink. You forgot to fill it at the inn."

Her lazuli-coloured eyes widened with remorse. "Father, forgive me!"

"Never mind. We're sure to cross a stream before long. I will drink then."

"The slaves have flasks. Borrow one of theirs."

He looked at her with stern reproval. "Slaves' flasks are for slaves' lips." Sometimes her democratic fancies, dropped on the air as innocently as dew from leaves, disturbed and astonished him—fancies, no doubt, imbibed from Athens. A gifted race, the Athenians—their sculpture was second to none—but newfangled in their politics. Democracy indeed! They would soon yearn for a tyrant.

But the mention of flasks increased his thirst.

In a little he said, "I think I hear running water. To the left."

"But you mustn't leave the road," she cried.

Her vehemence startled him. "Why not?"

"You know what the innkeeper said."

"Charun take the innkeeper!"

"Send one of the riders."

"They can never find anything. Remember, they are Roman peasants. Ask them to find the brand on the back of their hands, and they'll point to a mole on their feet. I'll go myself." He patted her reassuringly on the wrist, where a bracelet coiled in the shape of a leopard. As always, her beauty stirred him to pride that he, with his rugged, sword-scarred face, his black beard—black as the prow of a pirate's penteconter—and his aquiline, thrice-broken nose, had sired so flower-like a child. A net of fine-

spun silver enclosed her hair, which rivalled the purple-blackness of wild grapes, and three scarlet poppies flared in the clustering curls. Poppies belonged to Vanth, the lady of death. But their redness was vital with life like Tanaquil's cheeks, which needed no touch of carmine to heighten their flush. Like her flowers, thought Lars, my daughter is dead and alive at the same time, a passionate being wrapped in sleep. But when she wakes—

He roared to the slaves on horseback: "Ho there, Marcus and Caelius. I am going to look for water. Keep an eye on my daughter." Marcus and Caelius grunted acquiescence. "Roman peasants," he muttered. "Stolid as pigs, stupid as sheep."

"Father," Tanaquil called after him as he hit the path, his sheathed dagger rattling at his side. He stopped and somewhat impatiently turned to face her.

"There is something in there."

"Of course," he laughed. "Birds, animals, Weir Ones."

"Something—not kind."

"Nothing in the forest is kind. But neither am I. Thus, I have nothing to fear."

But Lars, like most of his race, was superstitious and intuitive, and Etruscan men respected their women's intuitions. He paused in spite of himself. "Something—not kind." But he was thirsty, and proud.

He plunged up a ride through thickets of trees and blackberry brambles which tore at his bare calves and arms—Etruscan tunics covered only the torso—and lodged in the linen fabric of his upturned shoes (womanish shoes, made for show, not wear! He ought to have worn his boots). Arboreal darkness engulfed him as volcanic ashes engulf a town; the thrusting branches lashed his face. When he stumbled into a path, he felt as if lava had spewed him, scorched and gasping, into an aisle of refuge. Prints were visible in the crushed grass. Hoofprints. Of goat—or Faun? Of horse—or Centaur? The sound of water had become an importunate gurgling. Thirst, furry and sharp, pawed at his throat. He followed the prints.

And came to a lake. The sound he had heard was the lapping of water against the bank. He stood, transfixed by the spirit of the place, the genius loci. And troubled.

Stretched like the tarnished silver of an old shield, it was not a lake for men. It was one of those places where divinity seemed to brood, articulate in the wind and ruffling the waters with giant fingers; scornful of all things human—weak, puny, and mortal.

But he was thirsty, and proud.

He could see, across the lake, the undulating rise of Mount Cimini, her sienna-coloured gorges rising into a smoke-blue peak. He could see the marshy shoreline to his left. But his view to the right was blocked by a wooded promontory jutting into the water like a huge fallen tree. The lake, he had heard—its name was Lake Ciminus—was inhabited by Water Sprites, and beyond that promontory, no doubt, lay boats and habitations.

Almost stealthily he knelt on the bank. Black eels bent with the current; fat pike drowsed among spear-straight reeds. He cupped his hands and drank of the water: acrid with sulphur but clean and quenching. He lowered his flask.

At the same time he saw the boy. At first he mistook him for a human boy, asleep on his back in the sun. Then, with the fascination of discovery, he discerned the copper skin, the pointed ears, the soft fins at the temples, the webbed feet, the thickness of silken fur on stomach and loins. A Water Sprite. A god, a credulous man would have said, but gods did not allow themselves to be surprised. He slept on the deck of a crude boat, which was little more than a log flattened on top, with a raised canopy of boughs and wattle and a prow in the shape of an owl. It was partially hidden now; blended against the promontory like a natural extension. And yet the concealment was probably an accident. The sleeper would have no reason to fear invaders. He slept with confidence on his own lake, in his own land.

How old was he? Perhaps sixteen. The close-cropped hair on his head looked fine and soft. Flaxen, you might have said, except that its brilliance demanded a sumptuous adjective: silver. Not the lifeless silver of an old man's hair, but the bright electric burning of a dragonfly's wing or a thinly hammered goblet held to the sun. Slender and silver-gold, he lay like a tiger lily bent on its

back. His lips curled to a smile; he seemed to be dreaming of sweet and sensuous things, his radiant boyhood poised, in memory or anticipation, on the threshold of maturity.

Tanaquil must see him too, thought Lars. He will charm her out of her dream. I will take him back with me!

He had always been served by slaves, and it seemed to him right and inevitable that some should rule and some should serve. When Etruscans—or Greeks—or Egyptians—required new slaves, they simply launched a war against their neighbours. In the case of a Water Sprite, it was really a kindness to snatch him from the forest, with its quick lightnings and its foul-breathed wolves, to the safety of Sutrium; to feed and tend him in the bosom of a pleasant house.

Lars was a muscular man: the calves of his legs were as broad as coconuts. A seasoned warrior, however, he could move with the stealth of a lynx. He glided into the water and toward the boat. The bottom was soft beneath his slippered feet, and the cool currents eased his travel-sore limbs.

He leaned to the boy as a father leans to his son, reluctant to break his sleep. The boy opened his eyes; their tawny, speckled gold held nothing of fear. Surprise, yes; that someone should dare to wake him. Surprise, and rage. Before the accusing eyes could shake his purpose, Lars enclosed him with rigid arms.

Never had he felt such strength in such slender limbs! He might have been wrestling a shark. He staggered, reeled, and, just as the sprite was wriggling out of his grasp, he struck the base of his neck with a quick, sharp blow. The sprite collapsed in the water, floating on his stomach and looking, pathetically, like an empty wine bladder. Lars lifted him onto his shoulder—how light he felt for one who had struggled so hard!—and headed for his carriage. With such a burden and without the use of his arms, it was hard to negotiate the blackberry thickets. He tore his legs on the thorns and once he raked a thorn across the sprite's bare shoulder but left no mark; the skin must be very tough—water resistant, no doubt. He looked at the sprite's closed eyes, their revulsion

masked by the lids. It was only a boy after all. Of course he had been enraged; of course he had fought like a shark! What boy wouldn't? But once in Sutrium, Tanaquil would gentle him into a docile companion. Before her unfailing calm, the harshest weapons must blunt and yield.

Tanaquil slipped from the carriage and, lively for once, ran to meet him. Eagerness flushed her face.

"Father," she cried. "You have found a Weir One! Has he hurt himself?"

"He is only stunned."

"*You* stunned him, didn't you?"

"I brought him back to be your playmate."

By now they had reached the carriage. Together they settled the boy in a nest of linen hangings which were destined to grace the doors of their villa in Sutrium. Tanaquil knelt beside him and placed a pillow, curled like a sleeping cat, under his head.

"A playmate," she repeated, her eyes travelling nervously over his naked limbs. "But—he is more than a boy. I think you should take him back to the forest."

"Nonsense. If not a playmate, then your personal slave. We're doing him a kindness. What sort of life do you think he leads in the woods? Threatened by wolves and hunters?"

"There are no hunters in these woods. Till now."

The sprite began to stir. Coughing a little to rid his lungs of water, he blinked at Tanaquil. In the shadows of the carriage, the gold had left his eyes. Iron had taken its place: the iron of a Roman spear.

He spoke in a curiously accented but recognizable Latin, an ancient tongue familiar to Lars and Tanaquil because it belonged to Rome and other tributary cities of the Etruscan League. He said:

"You have stwayed."

"Stwayed?" said Lars, puzzled.

"Strayed, he means," said Tanaquil. "He seems to have trouble with his 'r's.'"

"But why strayed?" demanded Lars. "We're right on the road to Sutrium."

"I think he means," said Tanaquil, "that you strayed

from the road when you went to the lake. You broke the agreement with the Weir Ones."

"Agreement? But that was centuries ago!"

The boy smiled: "My name is Vel." But his smile was not kind.

Tanaquil said, as if from a great distance: "Vel, you have the eyes of a cat."

CHAPTER II

Before his death, Tanaquil's uncle had shared her love for poppies. His garden in Sutrium burned with them; they branded the rocks, the narrow mouth of the grotto sacred to Lavis, god of underground springs, and the ridge of tufa stone which formed the back of the house. Red flowers and brown rocks; brightness and sombreness: they seemed the measure of Sutrium and its people —of all Etruscans, moody, mercurial, who laughed at funerals and wept at banquets. Tanaquil sat on a three-legged bench of stone and watched a dragonfly as it shot from a purple cyclamen with white-veined leaves to poise above a tangle of star-shaped clematis. Her mind seemed awash with a saffron haze which was scarcely distinguishable from the sun-washed afternoon, the tinkle of cowbells echoing from the fields below the town, and the cries of children rolling hoops in the street. Shut in the garden by a wall of bricks, she had shut herself in the smaller garden of her dream. She watched the dragonfly; became him, whirring above the incandescence of the flowers, the lifted scarlet chalices of the poppy, the prodigal constellations of the clematis.

She was not alone. She shared the garden with a serval cat, a languid, middle-aged male given to her by a friend of her late uncle. Bast, though twice the size of his Egyptian cousin, the temple cat, was no more inclined to movement than his mistress; like Tanaquil he appeared to enjoy a dream, though its nature was hard to guess from his yellow, expressionless eyes. Perhaps he was dreaming of pheasant wings and cheese. Tanaquil stroked him

slowly, drowsily, and felt the fur, smooth like the pelt of a unicorn, ripple beneath her fingers.

A door croaked on its wooden hinges. Tanaquil raised her head and blinked with surprise. For an instant it seemed as if her dead brother, Aulus, were striding to meet her as he had two years ago when the party of Gauls had infiltrated Spina by way of the underground sewer.

Slim and boyish he had looked—he was just sixteen—but affecting a warrior's stride and bound on a warrior's mission. He had come to tell her that she must take refuge with the slaves in the atrium, while he went in search of their mother, who had gone to market with a single attendant. The Gauls, it seemed, were raging at large in the streets and scattering death with their big-bladed swords.

Just as he turned to leave her, she held him and kissed his cheek.

"You're only a boy," she said. "Don't go."

He looked at her with hurt eyes. "I'm a year older than you, and a soldier."

He had found their mother and died defending her.

"Aulus," she gasped.

"Vel," he said.

His features, blurred with sunlight, hardened into clarity.

The Water Sprite. The slave. She had feared him from the day of his capture a month ago in the forest. He had never threatened her; he had rarely spoken her name, and yet she had made her father assign him to the kitchen—to serve red wine and pasta, black grapes and thrushes garnished with olives, to scour the floor with fuller's earth or barter for chickens in the market place; but never to enter her room or her father's room, in the way of personal attendants. In a house of a dozen slaves and as many rooms, it was not difficult to avoid him.

She turned her eyes from his offending nakedness. Etruscan women were used to the nudity of male slaves. But Vel disturbed her. Perhaps it was the soft fur which downed his stomach: the fur of a cat. Perhaps, the brown triangular fins which sprouted from his temples like misplaced horns, or the webbed feet which did not walk but padded wetly across the ground with a faint, unnerving

squish. Once she had caught him wading in the compluvium, the small, square pool in the atrium which caught and stored the rain from the roof and served the family for drinking purposes; but at other times, when he could not possibly have wet his feet, he walked with the same oozing steps and one half expected him to leave a slimy trail.

He extended a goblet of purple Phoenician glass. Its base was the fish-god Dagon; its curving stem, his tail.

"Your father has gone to the market. He asked me to bwing you some hot wine and honey." His childish lisp invariably startled her; though at times he looked like a child, his voice was deep and guttural, and old like his eyes.

She took the goblet without looking at him.

He spun to leave the garden. There was something childlike about his narrow shoulders and slender flanks, and yet at the same time sexual. He made her think of the blatantly phallic Fauns which, young, grinning, sculptured in bronze, supported the tables in the triclinium or dining room.

It was wrong, however, to hurt him because of her fear.

"Vel," she said.

He turned to face her.

"Vel, I am sorry."

"For what?"

"For my father bringing you here. He meant to please me. But I never wanted you taken from your lake."

She searched her mind for something to say to him; to ease his loneliness. It did not occur to her to pity a slave, but Vel seemed less a slave than a prisoner. He always had the look of wearing a cage around his shoulders. He seemed to be straining against invisible wires.

"I was watching the dragonfly," she said, pointing to the cyclamen. "Earth and heaven—he has the best of both."

"Earth is best," said Vel—he pronounced it "uhth".

Quick as a cat, he caught the insect between his fingers and held him to Tanaquil as if he wished to make her a present. She had hunted dragon-flies as a child. She bent her fingers to grasp the black, stiff body and spare the

fragile wings, but Vel, as if he were shelling beans, snapped the body, peeled off the wings, and presented the pathetic remnants to Tanaquil in his open palm.

"Uhth is best," he said.

Hot ashes of anger exploded in her brain. She struck his hand and sent the fragments fluttering to the ground.

"Why did you do it?" she cried.

Her outburst seemed to surprise him. Perhaps he had grown accustomed to her lethargy.

"I do not know," he shrugged. "I meant to give him to you unbwoken. But you angered me."

"But how?" She almost wanted him to accuse her of slights and insults and thus to justify his cruelty.

"You never look at me. I wanted to shake your dweam."

"But I need my dream," she gasped. "Without it I feel —naked."

She did not see him move; or rather, she felt before she saw him: the coppery hardness of his mouth and body, the webbed toes snaking around her ankles, capturing her like tendrils of seaweed. Except for his toes, there seemed no softness anywhere in that slender, boyish body. Only a bruising, implacable hardness.

And yet she desired him. Words, images, glimpses out of her past, ignored at the time, returned to her now with bruising immediacy. The songs of the Fescennine singers, those bawdy players who travelled from town to town and sang the infidelities of the gods. The harvest festival of Liber, the earth-god, when a giant phallus was wreathed with ivy and carried in a procession through the streets. The look on the face of a slave girl watching a naked boy as he worked in the fields. She had listened and seen but, lost in her dream, she had failed to understand. Through the frank sexuality which permeated all phases of Etruscan life—the home, the theatre, the circus, and the countryside—she had moved with the open but sightless eyes of a sleepwalking child.

The musky scent of him, acrid and sweet at once, assailed her nostrils and seemed to course through her blood like the hot borax hurled from the earth in the gorges near the coast. Her gentleness cried that he was hard and cruel, but her body solicited his cruelty.

Incredibly, it was her brother who saved her. When Vel had entered the garden, he had seemed to be Aulus, returned from the nether lands. Now, he seemed to her a caricature, a desecrating mockery of the boy she had loved. With a strength belied by the soft roundness of her limbs, she flung him away from her; or rather, flung herself out of his arms and toward the rock which enclosed the grotto; stumbling backwards, trampling poppies under her sandals; falling at last to her knees, ready to fend him off with upraised fists. He stood above her, hands on his hips, laughing. A phallic demon, proud of his manhood.

"You thought I was only a child," he said.

"No," she said. "I thought you were a cat."

"A cat," he mused, as if he considered the comparison to be a compliment. "Like him?" He pointed to Bast, drowsing among the cyclamen.

"No. A cat in the jungle."

"You have lost your flowers," he said, kneeling beside her to snap a black-hearted poppy from its stem and place it teasingly in her hair.

A gay, sudden music rang in the streets: the pipe of a double-flute, the rhythmical rolling of wheels, the thudding feet of a heavy animal. Vel straightened and peered at the garden well. His pointed ears quivered like maple leaves in a gust of wind. His face, so recently cruel, softened to radiance. He looked as if he were going to purr. Instead, he raced to the edge of the garden and, catching the wall with his hand, vaulted onto the top and sat on his haunches, hushed and listening.

Tanaquil also felt the power of the music, which gentled her out of fear and stirred not her ears but her feet, until they began to prickle as if they would like to dance or run or splash in the surf. She ran to the oaken gate, raised the latch, and stepped into the street.

At first she was disappointed. Expecting a parade, she saw a single cart, wooden, with large stone wheels and green canopy, and drawn by an old, mottled, and mangy bear with a patch over one of his eyes. In the cart rode the flutist, a young man who, in order to play with both

hands, had dropped the reins at his side. Fortunately, the bear seemed to know where he was going and indeed looked much too stubborn to be guided anywhere he did not wish to go.

Such a merry youth! His fox-red hair was adrift with wind, his oval eyes were the green of young acorns—she could see their colour even from the gate. And what a tune he piped! Big, freckled fingers danced rapidly over the twin shafts which joined before they met his lips.

His hair looked as if a tousled fox cub had crawled onto his head and fallen asleep. A rustic he seemed, and yet a god, a young Aristaeus straight from his bee hives and his vineyards who had come to town piping airs of the field and the forest. He wore not a loin cloth but a shaggy green tunic which enveloped his not very tall body rather like an unkempt bush. A home-made tunic for sure, muddied here, ravelled there; just such a tunic as a country god, not one of the great celestials, might stitch for himself without a goddess to help him, and wash now and then in a muddy mountain stream. Last of all, she noticed his little feet, girl's feet almost, which were cumbered with sandals much too big for them, as if he hoped to disguise their littleness.

No longer did the bear look decrepit. His master's music seemed to be taking years from his back. Clippity-clop went his paws as he lifted them high in the air like the hooves of a horse performing in an Etruscan circus. Such a beast, of course, drawing such a musician, had inevitably attracted children, who paraded behind the cart like the fabled pygmies on their way to fight the cranes. A small, bow-legged girl, dressed in a piece of fisherman's net, attempted to hitch a ride and almost lost her balance. Dropping his flute, the flutist pulled her to safety and ensconced her at his side. She took the reins, snapped them vigorously, received a disdainful backward look from the bear, and settled into being a contended passenger and flaunting her pre-eminence over her friends on foot.

As the cart and procession vanished down the street, the flutist looked over his shoulder and sighted Vel; between pipings, he smiled. It was the kind of smile which made you want to spring onto the cart beside him, and

Tanaquil thought wistfully, he *could* have smiled at me, I was looking right at him.

The smile, however, was not wasted on Vel, who leaped from the wall and loped after the cart.

"Vel!" Tanaquil called. Did he hope to follow the flutist out of the town? On the back of his hand he bore the brand of a slave, a crimson ring like the link of a chain, and no gatekeeper would allow him to pass without his master. Nor could he hide for long in Sutrium. Captured, he might be whipped or even executed by being tied to a corpse and thrown in a field to starve and rot. She thought of running after him. No, she decided. He was much too bright to attempt an escape. He would surely come back to the house when he tired of the music.

She closed the gate and returned to her bench. The honey of afternoon lingered in the garden, but as soon as she shut her eyes and tried to dream, she saw not the sunlight of imagination but the dark, shadowing wings of Vanth, the lady of death. Two years ago in Spina she had met the goddess and fled from her into the shadowless avenues of her dream. But Vanth was known to be grave, courteous, and very patient.

Vel returned in an hour. Tanaquil heard him from her room. She lay on a couch beneath a rock-cut wall where scarlet poppies whirled in a mural of mythological beasts: a horse with the spots of a leopard, a dog with the face of a cat, a lion with a tail like a two-headed serpent. She heard her father talking to him in the atrium. Scolding him? No, his voice was loud but kind. In the middle of the afternoon, even slaves enjoyed a measure of freedom, and there was no reason why Vel should not have followed the musician. In fact, it sounded as if the musician had returned with him. At least she heard an unfamiliar and pleasantly rustic voice. She stirred from the couch, pausing to look at herself in a mirror of polished bronze and to smooth her hair with a comb of ivory. Bast, coiled on a smaller couch exactly suited to his long, lean dimensions, watched his mistress with golden indolence.

"Bast," she smiled. "You have caught your mistress in a moment of vanity. But we have a guest——"

With a flush of confidence inspired by the mirror, and

making a valiant effort to walk instead of run, she followed the hallway to the atrium.

She found her father attended by Vel and talking to the flutist, whose bee-swarm of freckles, she noticed, extended even to his feet. She did not acknowledge either Vel or his friend, but addressed her father with the nervous enthusiasm of one who, confronted by two young men caught at a loss for words, solves her dilemma by addressing an older man. But even while she talked to her father, she watched Vel watching the flutist with a proud, proprietary eye, and she wished that this lecherous rascal of a Water Sprite were watching *her* with such an eye. Had her mirror not told her that she was—well, pleasing? Having given no thought to beauty for seventeen years, she suddenly felt impatient for men to confirm the image in her mirror.

Vel looked warm from his chase, and Tanaquil wanted to say to him, "Vel, you are tired. Cool your feet in the pool." Could anything be more heartless than to keep a Water Sprite away from his lake? Home-sickness, no doubt, was the whole explanation for his cruelty to dragon-flies—and girls. A fancy came to her of a gracious Tanaquil leading a grateful Vel back to his lake; Tanaquil serene with poppies and Vel in a decorous tunic.

Her father spoke. "My dear, the lad's name is Arnth." (Lad! she thought. Why, he must be twenty-two!) "He's a histrion, a travelling player, and he has no place to spend the night. Vel has offered to make him a bed in the slaves' quarters. In return, he has promised to play for us after dinner."

How typical of her father to remind the young man that he was a travelling player, who must sing for his supper and then bed with the slaves! She was learning to resent the notion that every man, from birth to death and even into the Underworld, must keep his allotted station of slave, musician, farmer, soldier, or prince. Why, Tarquin Priscus, it was said, before he emigrated to Rome and became the king, was scorned in Etruria because his father had been a Greek slave!

Ignoring her father she addressed herself directly to the

flutist. "If you don't wish to play, you will *still* be our honoured guest."

Lars Velcha stiffened at his daughter's implied rebuke. Before he could speak, however, Arnth said:

"Playing is my job. It is also my pleasure." But he flashed a grateful smile to Tanaquil. (At last, she thought, he has smiled at *me*). "Now, I must see to my bear."

"Vel," said Lars, "see that the bear is taken to the stable. Mind you, though, don't let him eat the horses." Then, with a bland, patronizing nod, he withdrew from the room.

The bear and cart waited beside the road. The bear, one of those huge, brown brutes which could kill a horse with the blow of a paw, glared at Tanaquil through his single good eye, as if to chide her for detaining his master.

"He bites," grinned Arnth without apology, and Tanaquil ducked into the protective embrace of the gate. The little spindly girl who had hitched a ride was still waiting in the cart. Rummaging under the canopy, Arnth found a honey cake, placed it in her hand, and sent her scurrying home. Then he unhitched the bear and patted the scruff of his neck.

"Ursus, will you go with our friend Vel? He's going to feed you and give you a place to sleep."

Invited instead of commanded, the animal followed Vel without protest.

"But I thought you said he bites," Tanaquil cried. "Won't he bite Vel?"

"Only women," said Arnth cheerfully. "He's a man's bear."

"Did you train him?"

"He's intelligent but untrainable. Ever since we took up with each other in the woods—that was four years ago—he's taken me on my travels. I'm not really his master. We travel together as friends."

"How did he get his patch?"

"He lost an eye in a fight with a wolf. He was very sensitive about it till he saw a circus horse with a patch. Nothing would do but I must get him one too. Now he's as vain of that patch as a woman with a new hair dye." He rummaged again in his cart and this time emerged with

a basket of large, succulent figs ("For your slaves") and, of course, his flute.

"But where is your nightdress?" asked Tanaquil.

"I don't wear one."

"But how can you sleep in a tunic?"

"I don't. I sleep in the buff."

The image of Arnth in the buff, constellated with freckles, was so wickedly agreeable that she muttered to herself, "If he belonged to *me*, I would insist on a nightdress, as well as a change of clothes for tomorrow, to say nothing of a comb," though she had to admit that, in spite of his looking like an unkempt bush, he had an extraordinary freshness about him, a fragrance of holly leaves and wild thyme.

They re-entered the gate. "Your house is like a big orange mushroom," he said. "It seems to grow right out of the earth."

"It does, in a way. Or right into the earth. My room is cut from rock."

The house was of wood and tile as well as rock. Wooden columns supported the walls, wooden beams the roof. But the walls were faced with tiles of orange terra cotta, and the tiled, gabled roof, flattened on top by a small, square platform to catch the rain, was as red as the sea when it drinks the setting sun.

They followed the roofless entrance hall to the atrium which opened to further hallways on every side: to the west, connecting with the slaves' quarters; to the east, with the kitchen and pantries; to the north, with the triclinium for dining, the tablinum for study and conversation, and various smaller rooms for sleeping, bathing, and storage.

"Now," said Tanaquil. "You will want to rest and refresh yourself for tonight."

Lars Velcha and Tanaquil sat on sea-blue couches of citrus wood which swam with cushions like little white-capped waves. Beside each couch was drawn a table supported by three phallic Fauns; and three slaves, Vel among them, formed an almost continuous procession to and from the hallway which led to the atrium and thence to the kitchen, and heaped the tables with ewe cheese and ripe olives, sow's udder baked in tunny sauce, and

venison smoked with silphium imported from Carthage. Pretending to wipe her fingers on a piece of bread, Tanaquil covertly watched Vel, who never raised his eyes from the rush-strewn floor. Though he seemed to be lost in thought, he glided among the tables with the ease of a cat; of Bast, for example, who had flowed under Tanaquil's table to wait, without impatience, for morsels spilled or dropped from his mistress' fingers.

Arnth did not appear for his performance until Lars and Tanaquil had ended their final course, a large honey cake in the form of a seahorse. Presumably he had eaten with the slaves in the kitchen. His earlier deference, however, had yielded to an actor's confidence. No longer a menial before a lord, he smiled at Lars and Tanaquil with perfect familiarity, paused until the slaves were out of the room and with them the clatter of feet and dishes, and announced a monologue about the Olympian gods. Tanaquil stopped him by raising her hand.

"Father," she said, slipping a piece of cake to Bast. "It was Vel who introduced us to Arnth. Can't he join us now?"

Lars smiled with paternal indulgence. "Certainly, my dear. I'm glad you're looking a little more kindly on the fellow. After all, it was for you I caught him." Black ringlets dangled along his forehead, like worms in a row, and his oiled, pointed beard looked sharp enough to puncture the skin of an apple. It was not surprising, thought Tanaquil, that the enemies of the Etruscans called them the Sea Hawks. Proud and predatory they were, and yet at the same time the most affectionate parents in all the lands of the Great Green Sea. A Greek father looked upon his daughter as an unmitigated burden, to be married off as quickly as possible and with the least dowry acceptable to the groom. An Etruscan father looked upon his daughter as a good companion whom he gave in marriage with the greatest reluctance.

He clapped his hands and Vel appeared from the kitchen.

"Vel, my daughter has requested your presence. Stand in the door, if you like, while your friend performs."

Arnth's performance was more than a monologue. It

was a dialogue in which he took all of the parts and accompanied them with gestures of hands and body or notes on his flute. The story concerned the blacksmith god Sethlans, whom the Greeks called Hephaestus, and how he had made a net to capture his faithless wife Turan (Aphrodite) in the arms of her lover Maris (Ares). Catching them in the very act of love, he summoned the other gods to observe their shame. Up to the moment of their capture, Arnth recounted the familiar story without embellishments. But no Etruscan could tell a Greek myth without a change, an addition or subtraction to make it livelier and usually naughtier, and Arnth's addition declared that when Turan and Maris discovered their audience, they smiled brazenly and performed in the net with a skill both nimble and abandoned. The gods who had come to mock ended by applauding. Sethians was laughed from the room, and everyone agreed that any man was lucky to have such a beautiful and resourceful wife.

Arnth omitted no gesture or detail to convey his story. Now he was Sethlans, canny and vengeful; now Turan, shameless and intoxicating; now Maris, lover as well as warrior. But he kept his highest artistry for the last. When he reached the climax of his bawdy tale, he mimicked the very motion of the love act and tootled happily on his flute.

Lars was hugely amused. He slapped his knee and the black ringlets quivered like shaken worms above his forehead. Tanaquil was hugely indignant. He's a Fescennine singer, she thought. A shameless rascal whose place is a low tavern or an army barracks. And it does not trouble my father that his virginal daughter should be submitted to such obscenities!

She rose stonily on her couch and thrust a foot to the floor with the expectation of stalking from the room. Then she caught Arnth's eye. Before making his appearance, he had tucked the shapeless tunic around his waist with a sash; he had tidied his hair. Now, he was smiling directly to Tanaquil, and his smile was anything but lecherous. He was an actor waiting for deserved applause. He had not attempted to shock her; only to amuse and entertain. To Etruscan men, even husbands, adultery was an indiscre-

tion rather than a crime, and the adulterous gods were thought more laughable than indiscreet. With a suddenness which left her shaken, she realized that the true reason for her anger was neither Arnth nor the lusty gods, but her own unmaidenly desire. In a word, she had envied the goddess in the net.

She answered Arnth's smile and lifted her foot from the floor. In turn, he lifted his flute and began the tune which he had played in the afternoon. Forests were in it, brown with fawns and playful with bear cubs, and country roads which wound through blackberry thickets and wild hawthorn, and vineyards purpling with grapes and peppered with bees, and all the waters of the countryside—lakes, rivers, streams; gentle or turbulent, wizening into a trickle with the heat of summer or galloping down from the mountains with melting snow. At first he seemed to be playing only for her. Then, he was also playing for Vel, who had slithered out of the doorway and started to dance.

Lars raised his hand. Slaves did not dance without their master's permission.

"No," whispered Tanaquil. "Let him dance."

He seemed to have flowed into a tide of clear, buoyant wine. His webbed toes hardly touched the floor. His serpentine arms floated above his head. He sank in the feathery depths; he shot toward the surface like a startled pike; he slept and dreamed. The silver-dusted loins, the slim, copper-coloured torso became a wavering candle under the sea.

A sinuous shape joined him on the floor. What oceanic jungle had spawned this curious beast, with his leopard spots and serpent throat and his black-ringed, lashing tail? What currents flung him into the upper sea, whirling, twisting, flashing his savage claws in the light of a candelabrum shaped like a sphinx?

"Bast," she whispered, hating the dance, the beautiful bestiality of the dancers.

Bast ignored her; Bast and the dancer heard no mortal sounds, but only the piping of the sweet musician; the sweet, inhuman music of pipes which birds had taught, thrush and nightingale and fiery-throated phoenix; and Pan, who had taught the birds.

The music died; the clear, sustaining wine, as if it had lost the moon which governed its flux, sank and dwindled and dried, and left the dancers drained on the ocean floor: Vel, crouched on his knees, head bent, eyes closed, arms at his sides and touching the floor; Bast beside him.

Arnth, sliding the flute in his sash, went to them and placed a hand on Vel's bowed head. With wordless gratitude—less for the gesture, it seemed, than for the music—Vel embraced his legs, worshipping him, the magic musician.

Arnth spoke without embarrassment, without condescension: "We make a good team, don't we, Vel?"

Tanaquil stepped from her couch and, usurping the function of a slave, filled two cups from a flagon of wine and held them out to the flutist and the dancer.

"You have both earned them," she said, forcing herself to smile; wanting, with a strange, fierce ache, to be a part of their music, their trust, their comradeship.

Lars loomed tipsily above his couch. "Another mime!" he clamoured. "Phaedra and Hippolytus? But they didn't do anything, did they? He wouldn't—or couldn't. Europa and the bull then—"

"Father, Arnth is tired," said Tanaquil with finality. "You forget, he played in the town before he came to us. He will drink his wine in the atrium and then retire."

Flushed by her boldness in standing up to her father, she turned to Vel: "Have you prepared a comfortable couch for him?"

Vel looked at her with venom. "In the slaves' quarters, there is only stwaw."

"Take the pillows from my couch here," she said and, turning from him before he could answer or Lars could demand another mime, she conducted Arnth into the atrium. Behind them, a linen hanging rustled into silence, and the hoarse voice of Lars, summoning a slave to conduct him to his bed, fell to a rasp of weariness.

"He suffers gout," she explained, "and drinking aggravates it. I usually help him to bed. But tonight—"

"Tonight he is drunk. He won't know the slave from his daughter. My own father had gout. He cured it by eating a boiled tree frog, touching the ground three times,

and repeating, 'Let the earth keep my pain, let health remain in my feet.'"

But Tanaquil was not interested in the gout of fathers. She pointed Arnth to a couch beside the pool. In the light of a cat-shaped lamp, the frescoed walls glinted with fishermen in a boat; they were dropping weighted lines while a dolphin leaped beside them and birds, incredibly red and blue, fluttered above them.

"Your house is like out-of-doors," Arnth said. "The birds on the wall might really be flying. Even your little shrine is like the ones you see at the crossroads in the country." He pointed to the shrine of the household gods, a small, portable temple, constructed of bricks no larger than a robin's egg, which held the silver effigies of the Lar, the Genius, and Tages, the Divine Child. "It makes me feel like playing on my flute. It has been easy to play here."

"You've come a long way?" Her conventional question concealed a profound and growing interest. She half expected him to say that he had come from Arcadia and the haunts of Pan and Aristaeus, those pranksome godlings of the countryside.

"From Tarquinia. Before that, Clusium."

"Where are you going?"

"In a circle," he laughed. "The point is, always to keep going. Never to stop long enough for—"

"For what?"

"For the net to drop."

"What do you mean by the net?"

"A town can become one very quickly. Or marriage."

She thought: many a woman must have wanted to marry him. And some women must have settled for less than marriage.

She said: "Have you ever been caught in a net?"

"My grandmother was an Etruscan lady," he explained. "A young widow who lived in a villa near Felsina. She was raped by a Gaul, one of a raiding party who seized and burned her villa and left her, bruised and unconscious, in the ruins. People tried to be kind when she bore the Gaul's son, but the child—my father—was born with red hair which in those parts branded him as a barbarian.

It was hard for him in the towns. No one could quite forget his origin and people looked as if they expected him to commit a rape or a murder at any moment. As a young man he went to live in the country—married a rustic girl and became a farmer. The town he had come from had been a net. So was the farm, he found, where he had to fight off wolves and try to get along with rustics who forgave his red hair but held it against him that he had come from a town. I loved him. And my mother. But not the net. When they died in an earthquake six years ago, I deserted the farm—what was left of it—and took up with some travelling players who taught me what I know about miming. I was sixteen. Two years later they settled in a town, but gave me their best possession, a canopied wagon. Ever since I have travelled and played."

"And laughed," she said. "I will never forget your laugh. It's like the melting snow when it fills up a dry stream bed. It sings and booms at the same time."

He laughed. "I am happy when I'm moving."

"Happier than now?"

"I'm moving now. Meeting you. Every person is a strange country at first."

"And when she becomes familiar?"

"I move again, but take the look of her with me."

"What will you take of me?"

"The way you have of dreaming and then bursting out of the dream like a lamp from a dark wine cellar, all bright and shining."

"A memory is poor company," she said. "It's like the pool in this atrium. Today it's full. Tomorrow it may be as dry as a river bed in fall."

"I have my bear," he said defensively. "He's the best of company."

"He can't talk to you, can he?"

"You mean I need human love." He looked at her with something akin to fear in his acorn-green eyes; they were oval eyes and not almond-shaped like those of most Etruscans. But then, his grandfather had been a Gaul. "Did you know that hunters have a net so fine that they can roll it into a ball no larger than an apple? But when they

unfold it, it can hold a wild boar. That's human love. A fine-spun net which is quite inescapable."

"I know what you mean," she admitted, feeling as if she had lectured him to the point of rudeness, and now it was time to agree. "You don't even know when the net has fallen. Not till the strands cut you around the neck."

"Yes," he said. "And the goddess Turan ties up the ends."

"That was why you sang about *her* getting caught in a net. To get even with her."

"Yes. But of course I had to let her make the best of it. After all, she is a goddess."

"She'll still be angry with you. For getting her trapped at all."

"There's a worse net than love," he said. "There's slavery. That poor slave of yours, Vel. How did your father happen to catch him?"

She told him briefly and yet with a warmth which surprised her and sent prickles running up and down her back like baby squirrels. It was strangely pleasant, she found, to speak of Vel. She did not mention his behaviour in the garden. In fact she had shut the incident into a nook of her mind, as a woman, fresh from the market with new purchases, may crowd an old pair of sandals into a chest.

"You are wrong to keep him."

"He belongs to my father. What can I do?"

He thought before he spoke. "Nothing, I expect. But someone else might help him. Someone who wouldn't have to stay around to face your father's anger."

"You realize that Vel isn't one of us. I don't think his feelings are quite human." At the risk of sounding heartless, she had to warn him. The garden incident, it seemed, could not be left in its nook.

"Neither are Ursus's feelings. They're ursine. But he feels all the same."

"I mean, even if someone should help Vel, he might not be grateful. He might be—hurtful."

"Vel?" laughed Arnth. "Why, he's little more than a child. Did you see how he crouched at my feet? A puppy looking for warmth."

She touched his hand, his big-knuckled hand with its fine sprinkling of freckles; touched the innocence of him and felt that at seventeen she was older in some ways than Arnth at twenty-two. At least she knew that Vel was not a child.

"Perhaps," she said slowly, "Perhaps someone will help him." She knew, of course, that she was acquiescing in Vel's escape, but whether she wished to free him or to be free of him, she could not say.

CHAPTER III

It was not a squalid room by any means, Arnth saw. Etruscans did not build squalidly even for their slaves. The walls were painted with reeds and water fowl, dimly visible in the light of the crescent-shaped lamp which hung, moonlike, above the door. A window admitted the breezes of the night, pungent from the vineyards around the city, the grain mills and olive presses. But even a large room grows cramped when a dozen pallets are spread on the floor. He twisted his way among the reclining slaves—they looked like bodies after a battle, scattered at random—and found the pallet which Vel had reserved for him. Vel smiled happily and pointed to the cushions from Tanaquil's couch.

"Yours is the best," he said. "You will sleep like a swallow in its nest." As always, he spoke in Latin, and Arnth answered him in the same tongue:

"Not yet. I want to talk to you." He motioned Vel to follow him out of the room.

In the atrium, Vel looked furtive and frightened. The least sound would have startled him into flight. At this late hour, slaves were expected to sleep. The fins at his temples quivered, antenna-like, as if to alert him of dangers missed by his ears and eyes.

They sat on the bench which Arnth had shared with Tanaquil. He looked at Vel in the glow of the cat-shaped lamp, still burning fitfully, and wondered how Tanaquil could have thought him dangerous, this frightened lake-

boy caged in a town and a house. Tenderness flooded him like warm olive oil. He could resist anyone except the weak and the helpless. He whispered:

"Can the hall porter hear us?"

Vel smiled: "Not unless he wakes up. He has learned to lean against the door and sleep on his stool." Except when he lisped, his Latin was measured and stately. He spoke without contractions.

"I'm going to help you back to your lake," said Arnth.

Vel looked at him with surprise. "Help me?" he said suspiciously. His eyes, yellow and faintly slanted, shone with their own light. "I am only a slave. Why should you help me?"

"And I am only a player. But you would help me, wouldn't you?"

"If you played for me, I would."

"Well, you danced for *me*. Don't I owe you something in return?"

Vel's face brightened. "Yes," he said, "I did, did I not? If you help me, I can dance for you again!"

"And never serve any master in any town!"

Vel captured his hand. "Never," he cried, and licked Arnth's knuckles like a grateful puppy.

As unobtrusively as possible, Arnth rescued his hand from the feathery tongue and touched the boy's head, whose close-grown hair felt damp and mossy. "Tomorrow I will hide you in my wagon."

Vel sighed. "No. Sometimes they search the wagons at the gate. In case the countwy folk have stolen anything."

"They don't always search, do they? I'm willing to take a chance."

"If we were caught they would whip both of us. Perhaps bind us to corpses and leave us to wot in a field. No, you must not hide me." He paused. "But if you want to help me another way—"

"How?"

"Go to my fwiends on the lake and tell them where I am. No one saw me captured. No one has seen me since. I am not allowed in the stweets on the Ninth Day, when my people come to market. Tell Vegoia."

"How can she help you?"

"That is for her to say." He appeared to draw a web across his eyes, to dim their light and conceal whatever strategems flickered behind them. His eyes had become disquieting and curiously old, like the eyes in the images of the Egyptian cat goddess, Bast. But Arnth was fond of cats, and he could not blame a slave for keeping a secret. Secrecy was the one weapon of the weak.

"How shall I find Vegoia?"

Vel recovered his earnestness. "Enter the forest by way of the woad. Leave the woad at the lightning-blackened oak twee which looks like the comb of a wooster. You will find a path which leads to the lake. *Do not leave the path.* If anyone twies to stop you, give my name. At the lake, turn to the wight and walk until you see the Town of Walking Towers. Ask for Vegoia. My fwiends will hurt you if you do not speak my name *at once.* They do not like Etwuscans. Even with wed hair."

"I'll leave in the morning."

Early the next morning, while Tanaquil and her father slept the silken sleep of aristocrats, Arnth rode on his mission, winding through cobbled streets behind a drowsy and disgruntled bear, and jiggling the undigested bread, olive oil, and cheese which Vel had brought him from the kitchen. Ursus was petulant at having been roused from a warm bed of straw. Deliberately, it seemed to Arnth, he bumped the wheels against the cobbles raised for the crossing of pedestrians. But Arnth was happy. He was on the road. True, he was going to miss Vel and Tanaquil. He had thought of asking the boy, once he was free, to travel with him in the wagon—to dance for audiences while he, Arnth, played on his flute. No, he decided. A lake boy needed his lake. As for Tanaquil—well, he had liked her far too much to linger in Sutrium.

He had also liked her town. Where the newer towns—Marzabotto, Pompeii, Spina—were designed as regularly as a pyramid, venerable Sutrium hugged the irregular terrain, like a natural growth of earth-hugging mushrooms. Streets followed declivities and buildings clung to hillocks. How the Etruscans loved the colours of earth! Though they lived in towns, they found their hues in the ochre,

sienna, and umber of river banks and hillsides. Browns, reds, and oranges shone in the plaster faces of their wooden-walled houses and the tiled façades of their wooden-beamed temples. Here, to the right, was the circular shrine of Tages, the Divine Child, with a circus of grinning demons on its roof. The god himself, a small, wise boy with grey hair to denote his ancient wisdom, crowned the highest pinnacle and received obeisance from the demons. And there, to the left, was the palace of the King, flanked by a loggia with small, squat columns, jaunty rather than kingly, and roofed with a garden of spilling honeysuckle.

The shops in the market place had yet to open. The canvas stalls were shut like morning glories. A few animals—a mule, a goat, a stray serval cat—drowsed fitfully between the columns of the stoa. A few people were adventuring into the streets. A merchant was hanging robes of Milesian linen on hooks in front of his shop. A young woman, abroad on questionable business, smiled to Arnth. Her blonde hair was dyed, teased, and frizzed in the latest style; she flaunted a gold tooth as if to advertise the skill of Etruscan dentists; and her kohl-darkened eyes were as saucy as her upturned slippers. Before beginning his journey, Arnth had exchanged his baggy green tunic for a brief loin cloth, white with large green polka dots the colour of his eyes, and he had perched a domed, leaf-green cap precariously on his head. The woman of questionable business ran her eyes so avidly from cap to polka dots that she seemed to be counting his freckles. He knew her look. "Linger," it said, but his feet said, "Go!" He smiled pleasantly and signalled Ursus to increase his pace; and the bear, observing the feminine nature of the provocation, produced a burst of speed.

At the southern gate to the town, the guard was amiable if sleepy. A little fellow with a big sword, he crept out of the watchtower like a rabbit clutching a carrot between his paws. At the drawbridge, however, which stood at the lower end of a tortuous ramp, the guard was both sleepy and dour. Arnth could easily have waded across the dwindled summer stream, but his cart required the lowering of the bridge. The guard insisted on a thorough search,

muttering under his breath that only thieves left the town at such an hour—why, the cocks had hardly crowed!

Rumbling across the oaken planks of the bridge, Arnth looked over his shoulder at the town, Tanaquil's town, which orangely, jauntily enfolded the cliff, and thought: It is time to travel. A few more days and I might have wanted to stay.

In the morning mist the town seemed suspended above the lake like low-lying clouds. Then, before Arnth's eyes, sunlight cut through the mist and revealed the slender pilings which held the towers: circular towers, with walls of green-painted reeds and oval windows abrim with geraniums and pointed roofs of big water lily pads in overlapping rows. Long-legged birds, roseate-white with scarlet shoulders and black-edged wings, flapped gracelessly but fierily above the houses and perched, from time to time, on a single leg to observe the people with whom they lived in harmony. Flamingoes. Flame Birds.

Dugout canoes, geranium-red, darted as briskly as water bugs between the pilings, while swimmers festooned their prows with garlands of water lilies and music reverberated from house to house—the pipe of a flutist perched atop a roof, the molten trembling of an unseen lyre. There were neither children nor old people; only youths and maidens, young men and young women. One canoeist was piping forlornly on a flute and allowing his craft to drift with the current. A swimming nymph erupted in his path, seized a garland, and draped him around the neck. Gratefully he dropped his flute and pulled her into his craft for several frenzied kisses and a long, consummating embrace. Gay, idyllic, and amorous: here were Vel's people. Arnth liked them.

He had parked his bear and his wagon beside the road. Ursus, free to fend for himself during his master's absence, had squinted reproaches at him when he entered the forest. But Arnth had mollified him with a promise of blackberries. Waving farewell from the tree with the rooster's comb, he had found the path to the lake without difficulty. No one had tried to stop him. He had met and frightened a small, tipsy-looking bear which had prob-

ably eaten fermented berries, but neither Centaurs nor Fauns had crossed the path. Now, emboldened by the ease with which he had reached the lake, he called out to the swimmers:

"Ho, there! I want to visit your town."

The splashing stopped. The swimmers sank with the quickness of frogs. The canoeists raised their paddles like weapons. As quickly, the heads reappeared, the paddles were lowered. A canoe, then a second, separated itself from the flotilla and began a meandering course in Arnth's direction.

He waded into the water between the pads of water lilies, as big around as wheels of his wagon, and the truncated mud cones of flamingo nests, now deserted. He noticed with approval that the canoeists were young women of splendid and unselfconscious nudity. In fact, they had started to wave with what could only be called an invitation.

The canoes bore down on him like frolicsome red dolphins. He opened his mouth to announce that Vel had sent him. He was not allowed to complete his announcement. Something captured his ankle and, squid-like, snaked him into the depths. It seemed that some of the boys had swum under water ahead of the girls' canoes. He felt that domed hat fly from his head. Water invaded his lungs. . . .

His own coughing awoke him. He lay on his stomach. His hands were tied to his feet behind his back. He had lost his loin cloth, and a reed floor bruised his stomach. He looked, he supposed, like an acrobat contorted into a ring, but he felt like a wheel supporting a heavy chariot. Grinning Water Sprites surrounded him—slender boys like Vel; girls with boyish flanks and piquant though modestly proportioned breasts. Both boys and girls exhibited the same pointed ears, the silvery down of fur against a copper skin, and the slanted, feline eyes. Before he could finish his observations, he was jerked from the floor by his joined hands and feet and swung over an opening into the lake.

"Vel sent me," he gasped just as whatever apparatus supported him—a boom of sorts—dropped him into the

lake. Water slapped at his face; he expelled his breath to protect his nose. Much more slowly than they had lowered him—reluctantly, it seemed—the sprites raised and swung him back over the reeds and dropped him none too gently to the floor.

"*Who* sent you?" demanded the boy in charge of the boom. His left ear looked as if it had been nibbled by a fish. He was wearing Arnth's hat.

"Vel," he gasped. "To find Vegoia." Inverted and waterlogged, he found phrases difficult and sentences impossible.

"Where is he?"

"Sutrium. A slave."

The boy looked undecided.

One of his friends lisped: "He is lying. Go on and dwown him. Evewybody is *waiting*." To emphasize everybody's impatience, he prodded Arnth with a paddle. "Hard like a wock. Most of them have soft bellies."

"Get Vegoia," sighed the boy with the nibbled ear.

Vegoia was not long in arriving. A splash announced her emergence from the lake, and a ladder groaned with her rapid ascent. Staring side-long from his upturned position, Arnth saw that she looked about fifteen; a singularly knowing fifteen. Her body had the svelte lines of an otter, and her breasts were hard and exquisitely tipped with strawberry-coloured nipples. Though her feet were webbed like Vel's, she walked soundlessly, and her eyes, though yellow and slanted, were those of a playful kitten instead of a cat. She was not human, of course, but what she lacked in humanity she more than compensated in unabashed and glowing animality. While in build and colouring she resembled the other nymphs, she surpassed them in a quality which he could only call radiance: her honied skin, her hair the colour of a spider's web in the sunlight, and her smile, which totally lacked innocence but also guile and coyness.

With a slightly imperious nod, she dismissed her friends from the room; she seemed to occupy a position of authority. They lisped and grumbled at being deprived of a drowning, and the boy with the nibbled ear insisted that

she recall them if the prisoner had not after all been sent by Vel.

"You must not keep him for yourself, Vegoia," he pouted, tilting his hat—Arnth's hat—to a rakish angle. "That would be gweedy."

Alone in the room with Arnth, she smiled: "Tell Vegoia about Vel." The nymphs, it seemed, though they lacked the lisp of the males, often referred to themselves in the third person.

"Unhook me," he choked, smiling back at her in spite of his awkward inversion. She released him from the boom, which seemed intended for raising canoes, and unbound his hands. His numbed members throbbed into pain. He gasped in spite of himself, and Vegoia, kneeling beside him, massaged his wrists and ankles with quick little fingers which drew his pain like a soothing plaster of mud and aniseed. It never occurred to him, an Etruscan male with a dash of Gaul, and a farm boy at that, to be embarrassed by his nakedness.

He told her about Vel. She listened attentively, then angrily. When he mentioned the crowded room which Vel must share with eleven other slaves, she cried, "They will smother the boy. He hates to be caged." And when he had finished, she growled, "May Tinia blast that town with a thunderbolt. Or," she added, "maybe Vegoia will."

"He said you could help him."

"Yes. She will bring him the cat's-eyes—" Her pause was ominous.

"Cat's-eyes?"

She ignored his question. "Vegoia will go to him tomorrow. On the Ninth Day, as you know, her people are allowed in the town. Now, she shall take you to her house. This, you see, is the council chamber. Shall she get a canoe for you?"

He said gallantly, shaking the water from one of his ears: "I suppose I can swim."

"Follow Vegoia." She dived into the water, and Arnth, still a trifle liquified, cautiously followed her by means of the rope ladder. He saw that she used her arms like fins and swam with a deft wriggling of her entire body.

Then he lost her. Dismayed, he searched for ripples to

mark the place of her dive. The water around him lay as smooth and unwrinkled as a goddess in repose.

At a distance, the lake was less tranquil. A water sprite, identical for all he could see with Vegoia, waved furiously from her canoe and paddled in his direction, as if she intended to offer him a ride or run him down (one never knew with a sprite).

"Vegoia?" he called, blinking his water-reddened eyes and wondering if she had found a canoe for him after all. Or was this a stranger? From a distance they all looked alike!

Indeed, it was not Vegoia. "Begoe!" she shrilled, and swung at him with her oar.

He dived like a duck but not before Begoe's oar smacked his bottom. Surfacing at what he hoped was a safe distance, he prepared to swim for his life, or at least his health, but Begoe chose to ignore him and pursue her business in other directions.

But where was Vegoia?

She rose at his side, spluttering with laughter. "Vegoia watched everything from under water! Your bottom is as red as your hair. Come now, she will protect you from Begoe."

They approached a house which stood to the other houses as Vegoia to the other nymphs: shapelier, brighter, prettier. A weary Arnth followed her up a wooden ladder through the inevitable opening in the floor, the Port it was called. The interior, with its single undivided room, proved small but charming. A railing of dried grapevines, entwined with fresh honeysuckle, ringed the Port. A lyre of tortoise shell hung from the reed-and-wattle wall. A hammock woven of rushes and painted to look like a dolphin, even to the small, mischievous eyes, swung from the ceiling. There were willowy chairs which seemed to be made from the tough stems of palm trees, and which, he found, accommodated his body far more willingly than did the stone benches in most Etruscan houses. A table of similar material held a sieve and a bowl of bucchero, a black Etruscan pottery which she had doubtless bought in Sutrium; and the bowl in turn held pomegranates and small cheeses shaped like fish. There were windows cut in

the walls, their sills ablaze with geraniums and redolent with a herb called cicely. The air was fresh and sweet, not only with the pungent herb but with Vegoia's body. She could hardly be perfumed after their swim. It must be an exhalation, he decided, a musky fragrance which quickened his already rapid heartbeat and gave him the feeling that he had drunk deeply of unmixed wine.

Vegoia pointed him to the hammock. "You are certain that Vel is safe for the moment? He will not try to escape on his own?"

"No. He said he would wait for you."

"Well then. There is nothing Vegoia can do for him now." She joined him in the hammock as easily as a fish sliding into a net. He felt the wetness of her, the warmth; smelled that frank and irresistible scent of musk. He sat up and all but tossed her out of the hammock.

"But you are Vel's girl . . . Aren't you?"

"Sometimes. But Vel is in Sutrium and, no doubt, pleasuring himself with the Tanaquil you mentioned."

"Oh, no, not with Tanaquil. She wouldn't permit it."

"No? What is she, a Sapphist? Well, even if Vel were here, he would want Vegoia to give you your guest-rights."

There was something decidedly pleasant about the prospect of claiming his guest-rights. But he made it an inflexible rule never to accept the more compromising favours of young women, who, he had learned to his sorrow, held out a cornucopia with one hand and with the other, a net. If a girl became importunate—and many were fascinated by his red hair and freckles, the Gaul in him—he simply hit the road. He had hit the road for such reasons at least twenty times. Now, he tried to escape from the hammock, but Vegoia, it seemed, preferred him prone. No sooner had he eased her out of his arms than she returned to them, like water filling a basin.

"Perhaps you prefer those citified ladies with dyed hair and plucked eyelashes," she said with some asperity.

"Actually, I've always preferred the rustic type."

"Is it curves and voluptuousness you want? Breasts like Begoe's? An older woman, and lots of her?"

"Quantity leaves me cold."

"Then," she cried, "you *do* like Vegoia after all. You are just being shy!" She paused. "Unless you are a"—she approached the word with caution—"*eunuch*. Have you dedicated anything important to that dreadful goddess, Cybele?"

"No," he snapped. "I have never worshipped Cybele, and if I had, I would not have dedicated anything important to her."

"Arnth," she asked with scarcely concealed amusement, "are you a virgin?"

"Of *course* not," he snorted. "You don't think that for twenty-two years, with all my travels—all the girls I've met, all the invitations I've had—in the towns, in the country—*everywhere*—that never once have I——" But how could he lie to those laughing, truth-divining eyes? "Yes," he sighed, like a small child admitting a theft of cookies. "I'm a virgin. But," he hurried to add, "only through choice. It's not that I don't know how. You might say, I know and forego."

Her laughter peeled like a tree full of thrushes. He was sure that all of her friends—the boy with the nibbled ear, Begoe, and the rest—could hear her, and it seemed to him that everyone in the town must suspect what had prompted her to laugh.

"Vegoia's first virgin," she mused and, crouching above him rather like a watchful cat, unsure of its perch, subjected his body to a hard scrutiny. "Well, she does not see any ill effects *yet*. But it is getting late, you know."

He tried to bury himself in the furthest folds of the hammock; to escape her scrutinizing eyes. She patted his shoulder, where four small freckles curved in a crescent.

"Listen," she said. "Eyes are useless unless you see with them, are they not? Ears are made for listening. Tongues for talking. Legs for walking. Every member has its purpose, useful or pleasurable. If you fail to use it, what happens?"

"It atrophies."

"Exactly."

It was time to explain his philosophy. "Everyone knows that women exact a price for their favours. They can't help it—it's the way they're made. In the market place or

in the bedroom, they're always making bargains. That's their privilege. As for me, I'm too poor to pay in coins and too free to pay with my liberty. I travel. I intend to keep on travelling. In a word, I don't buy."

She dismissed his argument with a sniff. "You are used to Etruscan girls. Or Roman perhaps, those raw-boned virgins who scream rape if a man so much as winks an eye. Who is that ox all the fuss has been about lately? Lucretia, I think she is called. Here on the lake, we are not so serious about everything. If Vegoia gives you her hospitality, she is acting the part of a gracious hostess, nothing more. If you enjoy her, so much the better. Perhaps you will return. Perhaps not. But *marriage*. Why, we hardly know the word in the Town of Walking Towers."

He had to admit the strength of her arguments. "But what about love?" he asked desperately. "That's more binding than marriage. There's always the danger that gracious hospitality will tempt a guest into over-staying his welcome."

She looked at him almost wistfully. "Love," she mused. "Vegoia has heard about love, but does it really exist? Or is it a word you Etruscans made up to use in place of copulate? You are so fastidious. You do everything we do but call it by prettier names."

"What do you feel for Vel?"

"Vegoia does not love Vel. She likes him. He plays with her. Swims, fishes, sleeps. She likes the feel of his arms around her like grape-vines, and the way his eyes shine in the dark and never leave her body. She likes the *zest* of him. She is going to help him but not because of love. Now then, have you talked enough for one day? Vegoia is not a conversationalist."

"I have your word then? No consequences—tears, promises, nets?"

"Vegoia swears."

"You realize that I am inexperienced in these things. Coming after Vel, I may prove a disappointment."

"Inexperience," she said, "can be a novelty. You have the wherewithal, and that is what matters."

He found, as he had long suspected, that he was an ex-

ceptionally hot-blooded and lusty young man, and therefore a dexterous pupil for Vegoia's instruction. To his instructress he brought the wherewithal of firm young limbs—of legs hardened by walks in the forest; arms which had pulled a plough and swung a sword; thighs as strong and limber as the trunk of a young maple tree—and turned their strength to a new, difficult, and delightful test of prowess, as if his body had become a bow, taut to eject its arrows. Hesitant at first, fearful of hurting, now he gains confidence, striving toward mastery, wanting desperately to please as he is being pleased, to imitate the gods who frolic in his songs and mimes!

In return, Vegoia imitates a young pantheress, a fury of grace and motion. Far from lying quiescent in his arms, she matches his passion with hands like wind-devils whirling across his body, as if to pluck his sinews, his freckles, the fine red hair on his chest and arms, to grasp and devour the manly savours of him. Her mouth is as sweetly avaricious as that of Turan when she devours her lover, Maris, in Sethians' net.

And yet, what a curious thing! She has no pulse to answer his own furiously agitated heart. She is—heartless . . .

He lay with her in the mute aftermath of love. He could not restrain a quiet little laugh of contentment and yes, satisfaction. What man could? In spite of his inexperience, he had not proved inadequate. Might he not even call himself a distinct success rather than a mere adequacy? He began to calculate: If I had begun at twelve like the usual farm boy, I would have enjoyed ten long years in which to improve my skills!

At any rate, he need no longer celebrate the affairs of the gods. He could celebrate himself and Vegoia. It was as if he had taken his first swim in the sea when the waves were boisterous after a storm, and then eaten his first meal—breast of pheasant, pomegranates, and venison, all of his favourites—and drunk his first wine, a savoury muscatel. Surprisingly, though, his hunger was not yet appeased.

"Vegoia," he whispered, "have you exhausted your hospitality?"

She opened her eyes. She glared at him with red and tearful anger.

"Vegoia!" he cried. "What's the matter?" I must have hurt her, he thought. Underestimated the savagery of my passion!

"You were laughing," she said. "I heard you. Just then!" (Vaguely he noticed that she spoke of herself in the first person: "I" instead of "Vegoia.")

"Because you pleased me so much. And because I hoped that I had pleased you. Was I mistaken, Vegoia?"

"Is pleasure all you can talk about? After such a solemn and beautiful thing?"

"But you said——"

"I know what I said. But I was thinking of Vel and the other sprites. With you, it was different. You were so earnest and gentle." (Gentle! He had thought himself positively unbridled!) "Your eyes stared down at me like questing moons and—promised me things."

"They didn't know what they were promising," he muttered.

"What?"

"Nothing. I was just breathing heavily."

"And another thing," she cried. "I have started to speak of myself with familiar address. And you did not even notice."

"I did notice but I didn't know what it meant."

"That I had honoured you with my favours. What else?"

"How should I have acknowledged your, er—favours?"

"By respectful silence. Or, if you *had* to talk, by little intimate compliments whispered in my ear. *At the very least.*"

He had met her again, it seemed, the eternal woman driving her eternal bargain; demanding payment for her so-called gift. It would not surprise him if her friends arrived to enforce a wedding.

"Oh, you *are* a beast, like all the Etruscans. You come into the forest, and I befriend you and save your life, and then you seduce me and expect to ride off into the woods and leave me forsaken. I *know* you have had other women. I know you have. You were not a virgin at all. You are

an experienced lecher, and I am just one of your conquests."

She sprang from the hammock, giving it a violent push and spilling him onto the floor. Before he could get to his feet, she dived into the Port and vanished with a splash which drenched the ring of honeysuckle and left the flowers askew and bedraggled. He considered giving chase but decided that, in her present mood, she would probably drown him. He selected a ripe pomegranate from the table —several were hard and several were starting to rot—and sat down in a wicker chair to ponder the vagaries of a Water Sprite's heart. Well, whatever they had in place of a heart. It was not long until he fell asleep.

CHAPTER IV

Splat!

A heavy, rotten object collided with his face and licked down his cheeks and chest. He blinked oozily to clear his eyes and saw Vegoia beside the table and brandishing a second pomegranate. He lunged backward so abruptly that he overturned his chair and sprawled onto the floor with a thud which shook the house.

Temple-bells of laughter agitated the room. "You look like a burst melon," she said, looming above him with another missile poised for descent. "It is hard to tell the seeds from the freckles."

"I don't need more of either," he said, in a voice which he hoped was subdued enough not to antagonize her but strong enough not to sound plaintive.

She tossed the second pomegranate into the Port. It struck squashily and disintegrated on impact.

"Come now," she said. "Give me your hand. I promise not to drop you."

Restored to his feet, he faced her with wary expectation, rather like a convict in the arena as he waits to fight a trained dog.

"When I saw you sleeping—sleeping, mind you, after *everything*—and looking like a satisfied country boy who

had just stolen a pig, I could not resist the pomegranate. It was rotten anyway. It was not as if I were wasting it." But her mood, he observed, was whimsical rather than recriminatory. Either she had forgiven him or she was feigning forgiveness with a poise which would have done credit to a lady of worldly Corinth or wicked Sybaris. "Take a dip now and clean yourself off, and I will fix your supper."

He dived through the Port and, paddling out from under Vegoia's house, cleansed himself of the fruit. He saw that most of the sprites had retired to their houses. Smoke curled from the roofs and brought to his nose the aromatic scents of supper. He was not long in climbing the ladder.

Vegoia had kindled a fire in a small clay oven. Assorted mussels, caught no doubt in the lake, browned on the shelf like diminutive bathers stretched in the sun. And a round loaf of bread, elephant-sized in contrast to the mussels, vied with them for the heat.

It was then that he saw Vegoia's company, a bird-like creature fluttering around the oven and looking, for all the world, as if he had come to supervise the meal. On closer scrutiny, Arnth recognized a Corn Sprite, one of those sylvan beings who helped the bees to scatter pollen and fertilize the crops. Grateful farmers repaid them with pots of honey suspended from olive trees. If you rode through the country around Sutrium, you could see the sprites by the dozen as they filled their cheeks from the pots and flitted back to their town in the forest. In spite of their size and gold, black-tipped wings, they were vaguely human in their faces and pink-skinned bodies.

Vegoia said simply: "This is Arnza. He has come to have supper with us."

Arnth smiled to Arnza, who acknowledged the smile with a slight dip of his head and continued to flutter helpfully above the oven, as if, by sniffing the smoke, he could gauge the time required to bake the mussels and bread.

"Pasta," Vegoia explained, pointing to the loaf. "Wheat grains and honied wine. When Arnza dips, I will know it is done. You see, it was he who gave me the recipe."

Arnth beamed his approval of Arnza's recipe. A day of exceptionally strenuous activities had whetted his appetite. He sat down in the chair which he had recently over-

turned and watched the preparations. It occurred to him to ask if he could help. Bachelor that he was, he was used to preparing meals for himself and Ursus. But he knew how women liked to wait on a man, to coddle and baby him and feed him delicacies from the kitchen. Far be it from him to interfere with an established domestic routine, especially since he was comfortable in the chair and, what with near drownings and hyserical outbursts, felt as if he deserved his measure of comfort. Anyway, Arnza was all the help she could use. What was the old adage? Too many cooks spoil the pasta.

She served him in a plate which was no more than the pad of a water lily with upturned edges. The mussels, browned and tenderized with olive oil, readily divulged their meat, which went with the bread like Castor with Pollux. The Corn Sprite, he noticed, did not partake of the bread, but lit on the back of his chair to observe his reaction, an over-solicitous cook eager for compliments.

For dessert Vegoia served some strong but not unpalatable cheeses.

"Sow's cheese," she said, and Arnth felt a bite lodge stubbornly in his throat and refuse to descend. But he managed to ease its course with a swallow of milk (cow's he hoped), and decided that, all in all, he had rarely tasted a more satisfying meal. Inelegant, to be sure, but much to the taste of a rustic like himself.

As Vegoia served him, she moved with a lissome ease which was all the more provocative because (he assumed) she was not trying to provoke him. No longer the irate mistress, she had become, as it were, a graceful domestic waiting on a favoured lord. He was charmed by her manner of walking, the way her webbed toes feathered along the floor, and most of all, the way her flanks looked trim and shapely from every angle, and not, as most women's, even young women's, like shapeless cauliflowers. Had the food been less alluring, he could not have taken his eyes off of her undulations. As it was, he alternated between large bites and lingering looks.

After they had finished—she and Arnza ate sparingly, but Arnth disposed of seventeen mussels, six cheeses, and the whole pasta—she threw the dishes into the Port and

trusted the current to dispose of the scraps. On Arnth's plate, at least, there were only empty mussel shells.

"It is time for bed," she announced as casually as one might announce the temperature on a day in spring when it was neither hot nor cold.

The Corn Sprite took the hint. He flew at Vegoia as if he meant to attack her, but veered in time to avoid a collision, tapped her nose, and fluttered out of a window, pausing above a pot of cicely to sniff the air. Vegoia did not comment on his departure. She seemed to take it for granted that everyone received visits and culinary advice from Corn Sprites.

She occupied the hammock with the air of one who expects a joint occupation.

Since the sun had scarcely set, Arnth assumed that it was not sleep which she had in mind. This time, he hoped to avoid a repetition of tears and accusations. A few compliments and an earnest rather than a satisfied demeanour were a small enough price for the utmost in hospitality. With the solemn glide of a priest entering a temple, he moved to join her in the hammock.

But what was this? A knotted and stubborn fist did not exactly thump him in the chest, but it held him irresistibly at bay.

"But where am I to sleep?" he wailed.

"In the chair."

"A man can't sleep in a chair!"

"You did when you took your nap."

"But then I was tired. Now I'm refreshed."

"Try the floor. You may use your loin cloth for a pillow. I got it back from my friends while you slept."

She returned the loin cloth as if she were making him a princely gift, though the dye from the green polka dots had run and faded.

"And your hat." His hat had shrunk to the size of a sand dollar.

Making the prescribed pillow, he stretched on the floor and unrolled his not very long frame as if he were seven feet tall and each bare inch were intimidated by the reeds.

"You know," he sighed, "my skin is very fair and tender.

It goes with my red hair. Gallic hair. Tomorrow I'll be a mass of welts."

"No one will notice them among your freckles."

It was almost dark now. Through a window he watched the lights flickering on in the other houses.

"Vegoia," he said. "In those other houses, are there several hammocks?"

"One to a house."

"But what if there are *two* people?"

"They share the hammock."

"Nobody sleeps on the floor?"

"Except Etruscans."

"Vegoia, will you fetch me a coverlet to put under my back?"

"Look in the chest."

"Which chest?"

"The only chest."

"Where?"

"Behind the chair in which you turned over."

Obviously, she enjoyed reminding him of his mishap with the pomegranate. Was he mistaken or did she utter a low, silvery laugh which merged with the laughter tinkling from the other houses and the other, cosier hammocks? Sighing, he rose and stumbled to the chest. He raised the heavy lid, rummaged among the contents—net, sandals, fishing spear—and found a coverlet, furry and rather odorous. Bear's pelt, he supposed. It helped to soften the floor, but the smell of bear was as rank as Ursus in the winter when he refused to bathe. After a little, he said:

"Vegoia, I can't sleep."

"No?"

"There are lumps in the floor. And a draught." It was more a plea than a whine.

"You are a farm boy, are you not? You must have slept on the ground many times. When a frost threatened. When wolves were harrying your flocks."

"Never after such a hard day."

"But a little while ago you said you were refreshed."

"Not *that* refreshed. Besides . . . I'm lonesome."

"An old bachelor like you?"

"It was very upsetting being almost drowned today. My rescue has made me feel—well, convivial."

He heard her rise from her hammock and come, he hoped, to investigate his situation on the floor. He twisted himself into an attitude of pained endurance and followed the glow of her eyes through the dark. They moved toward him like astral bodies and then, directly above him, paused; a waterfall of fragrance fell to his nostrils. He sat up and reached vainly to catch her hand, like a tired swimmer who gropes for a raft and splashes it out of his reach. He heard the hammock receive her returning weight. Then, silence stifled the room, punctuated after a time by the cry of a night-jar, the low laughter rippling from the other houses, the murmur of water under the house.

"All right," she said at last. "You may share the hammock."

He bounded into the hammock and scooped her into his arms as an iron-tipped plough scoops a stubborn rock.

"Share, I said. Not visit. Early to bed, early to boat."

"I'm not sleepy."

"I am." She arranged herself in the crook of his arm, her head against his shoulder, her hair as soft as the fur of a cat, and rebuffed all efforts to kiss or fondle her.

"Are you really going to sleep?" he demanded.

"That is what I said."

"At least talk to me, Vegoia."

"My dear," she said, "what you mean is, 'Listen to me'. You have made love, you have eaten a large supper, and now, if I will not make love to you again, you want me to listen to you."

And of course he did. About his red-haired father, who loved the country but could never quite forget the rumble of chariots in the city, the blithe little temples painted like courtesans; and his mother, who had never learned to read scrolls or inscriptions, but who could interpret flashes of lightning and the entrails of a sheep and divine the will of the ancestral spirits which hovered, restless and sometimes malicious, at every threshold and envied the living their loves. Yes, he wanted to talk about himself and his dead parents, but he wanted equally to listen. Traveller, wanderer, player with flute and song, he had listened for

six years to the voices of the forest, which spoke to each other but not to him; not, at any rate, to show that they recognized his identity as a youth and then a young man, hot-blooded, longing, and sometimes lost. Now, he wanted someone to answer him, longing for longing, lostness for lostness. What did he know about her? That she was as bright and pretty as a tiger moth; quick to love and to take offence; and highly skilled as a cook. He did not know her heart, or rather, what it meant for her to have no heart. He wanted—what was the word?—communion.

"Vegoia," he said. "Why don't you have a heart?"

She did not answer him at first. When she spoke, it was a thin wraith of a voice which made him think of her eyes and how they had shone in the dark and seemed to be disembodied.

"When the Builder made us—"

"Builder?" he said. "Do you mean Tinia?"

"Older than Tinia. The Power who made the gods, and then made men. When the gods die, the Builder will abide. It is said that he made us late in the fifth day, the fifth thousand years of creation, after he had tired himself with the birds and reptiles and mammals. Already he was thinking of the sixth day, when he must make man—thinking and saving his strength for his most difficult task. Thus, tired and preoccupied, he forgot to finish us; forgot to give us hearts. He thought of it later, of course. But already we moved and we spoke. It hardly seemed worth his while to discard us and try again. So he put us into the woods beside this lake and taught us to fish and swim, to build boats and eventually houses which seemed to walk on the water. In order to survive, we had no need for hearts. What good was a heart against a cave-bear or a tiger as big as an ox? And then, when the fiercer beasts were gone and it was not a question of survival but of being happy, we had the woods and the waters and our swift, beautiful bodies.

"At first, when there were few of us, we bore children to increase our numbers and fight our enemies. Then, not very long ago, we had no further need of children, and something changed in us. Our wombs forgot to swell. Our breasts ran dry of milk. Even now, some believe that the

goddess Turan is punishing us for having made light of love. But never mind. We live long lives and keep our beauty almost to the last. Did you know that I am thirty? Yet in Sutrium, I am sometimes taken for a child. 'For shame,' a merchant once said to me. 'What do you want with carmine to stain your lips? Here is a ribbon to tie in your hair!' In a century or so, when I am old and withered, I shall go to the Great Mundus in the forest and join my ancestors. It is the way of my people. The old, the lame, the homely—they go of their own accord. We have no place for them in the Town of Walking Towers."

"And you never miss having a heart?"

"I think," she said, "that it is better to have no heart, than to have one and not use it."

Early the next morning, Arnth and Vegoia paddled ashore and took the path to the Road. Some of the Sprites had accompanied them in canoes and now, lingering on the bank, talked volubly of Vel's return and how they would deck his houseboat with flowers and make him forget his weeks of slavery. No one seemed to doubt Vegoia's success. Without exception, they showed her a subtle deference. It was not that she frightened or cowed them; rather, they seemed to be children deferring to a wise sister.

"But why aren't any of them coming with us?" Arnth asked. "This is their market day."

"Not today," she said, with cryptic brevity.

He was wearing his loin cloth and his shrunken hat, and she, because of her mission in town, had donned a dapper tunic of fur which made a pretence of hiding her breasts. In her hand she carried a plate of hornbeam wood, raised at the edge, and around her neck she wore a bulla, a hollow sphere which opened on a spring and which rattled with stones or coins. He wanted to ask her about them—amulets were they, to ward off demons?—but her silence did not encourage questions.

Ursus was waiting for them beside the wagon. The burrs in his coat suggested adventures in the woods. He greeted them with his usual ominous growl.

"He doesn't like women," began Arnth, but Vegoia was already stroking his massive head. Ursus subsided into—for him—a benign mood and ceased to growl, though his single red eye and his rakish patch implied that a bear's benignity, this bear's at any rate, could be short-lived.

"He usually bites women," said Arnth with a trace of disappointment.

"Etruscan women," corrected Vegoia. "Not sprites, I think."

They were not alone on the road. The woods, like black waves humping onto a beach, had begun to eject a curious flotsam of Weir Ones. A Centaur, old and halting, ambled past them in the direction of Sutrium.

"He is going to get himself shod," whispered Vegoia. "And there—do you see the Paniscus?" She pointed to a little hairy chap—horns, tail, cloven hooves—who was clutching a chunk of copper in his paw. "He will go to a depilator and have some of that hair removed from his tail. In the town, they use a mixture of pitch and dead frogs." One or two of the Weir Ones nodded to Vegoia; the others ignored her and, for that matter, ignored each other, unless of the same race, and Arnth concluded that the various tribes of Weir were staunchly, irritably independent except in their common disregard for the race of men.

"Get in," he said, pointing to his wagon. "I'll drive you to the gate. In fact, I might just drive you into the town. I would like to see Vel again."

"No," she said. "Not to the gate, and certainly not into the town. The guards would wonder if they saw you drive up with a Weir One. We are not supposed to like each other, you know."

"I can follow you in later."

"No," she repeated. "If we met in the streets, you would give me away. Your eyes are so naked. They show everything."

"Then—we must say good-bye?" She was smiling to him; a little girl in a fur, with tow-coloured hair which she had valiantly combed with a comb of tortoise shell but which the wind on the lake had shaken to a sweet wilderness. She might have been bound for market to buy

ribbons for her hair. Yesterday he had desired her. Now, he pitied her—the slightness of her body, the childish air of confidence which seemed to ignore the danger of her mission. At the word "good-bye," sadness stuck in his throat like a twig.

"Arnth," she said, taking his hand. "I want to tell you something."

"Yes, Vegoia?"

"I forbid you to forget me."

He read in her smile the strength and authority which her people acknowledged with their quiet deference. It was as if the little girl had grown up before his eyes.

"I don't want to forget you."

"You want to. But you cannot. Any more than you can rid yourself of freckles."

"Vegoia," he cried. "There is something about you now. A difference. A power. You really can save Vel, can't you?"

"Yes."

"How can you be so sure?"

"Surely you know who I am!" she said with amazement. "Why Vel sent you to me!"

"Because you are his friend."

"Because I am the town's sorceress."

CHAPTER V

Every ninth day, the market of Sutrium not only contained the bright canvas stalls of the local merchants, but the stone-wheeled wagons of farmers from the surrounding countryside: and finally, the lone, straggling figures of the Weir Ones, who owned neither stalls nor wagons, but wandered up and down the lanes with baskets under their paws, exchanging lumps of copper or fresh fish for the artifacts and services of the town. As always, Tanaquil walked the streets with absolute confidence and without the modest misgivings of a Grecian girl, who, if she visited a market at all, would have veiled her face and travelled with an escort of slaves. Tanaquil, in fact, wel-

comed the stares of the men to reassure her that she had dressed becomingly: a tunic of oak-leaf-green which fell to her ankles; a silver mantle, embroidered with green seahorses; a multitude of bracelets jangling from wrist to elbow and flaunting Phoenician scarabs of deep blue smalt, entrapped by Egyptian lotus-leaves of fine-spun gold; and on her fingers, three ivory rings which coiled like olive leaves. In her hair, she wore her customary poppies, arranged in the shape of a fillet.

"Like scarlet hands," a household slave, Athenian and therefore eloquent, had said to her, "offering the blackness of your hair to the gods in sacrifice." (But Vel had said nothing; Vel, to whom she had smiled as she left the house.)

Inarticulate with shyness—they had not yet visited the wine-shops—the Weir Ones lumbered between the stalls, stepping on outspread merchandise and wincing beneath the imprecations of angry merchants. A Centaur trod on a bunch of grapes and slid with a whinny onto his haunches. Poor old beast, she thought, his hooves were never intended for cobbled streets.

She scanned the faces and bodies of the Weir Ones, looking for silver hair and webbed feet. If Arnth had visited the Water Sprites as she suspected, perhaps Vel's countrymen were even now in the town, eager to help him return to the lake; to smuggle him through the gate, across the drawbridge, and into the forest. Odysseus himself would envy such a feat! Suppose, thought Tanaquil, I myself conspired to help him escape. Suppose I should drive a carriage up to the gate, with Vel under the canopy!

"Destination?" the guard would ask.

"Viterbo."

"What's in the carriage?"

A sweet, disarming smile. "Why, robes and slippers—and a basket of poppies."

"Pass."

Pass. To forest and lake. With Vel. A Vel whom gratitude had eased of carnal threats and cold indifference.

She approached a female Faun who was selling bouquets of flowers. Many a human woman had lost her heart—and more—to the mischievous charm and un-

abashed virility of a male, but never, as far as she knew, had a human man succumbed to a female. The one in question resembled a large quail, squat, squashed, one could almost say, with hair everywhere, even on her chin. She wore a goatskin around her trunk, but what she needed was an ankle-length robe to hide her legs. Tanaquil handed her a gold coin, an *as*, and took in exchange a pathetic bunch of asphodels, whose blossoms in the country opened with sharp little cracks so that travellers sometimes thought themselves under attack by slings or blowguns. The blossoms presented to Tanaquil, however, by a fist like a big black spider, had long since opened and now seemed poised to close and wilt. Feeling affable and generous, she smiled to the woman, bade her a gracious good-bye, and looked for a child to whom she could give the flowers. Behind her, she heard in broken Latin:

"Fine lady with all them airs! Charun roast her soul!"

Her spirits dampened if not drowned, she skirted the stall of a depilator, who was toiling to rid a Paniscus of excess hair.

"More off the tail," the fellow chided. "But watch the tip, mind you. I want it to fluff."

And then she came on a girl whom she recognized instantly as one of Vel's people. A web-toed girl with a trim fur tunic—warm for summer, it looked, but flattering to her figure—and the prettiest heart-shaped face she had ever seen. Her skin had the smooth glaze of amber, the kind which came from the far northern river called the Danubius. She seemed to be demonstrating a trick, in return for which the watchers, five young swains who clearly preferred the magician to her magic, would drop some coins in a wooden plate which lay at her feet. There was also a circle of watching cats: big, glossy fellows with yellow fur and black spots. Cousins to Bast, but much less civilized, she would say. Closer to their African heritage.

Tanaquil saw that the girl had cast a spell on a certain young man with an ochre cloak. His eyes looked glazed; he stood as still and wooden as the figurehead of a becalmed ship. She was telling him to extend his hand. At first she spoke in Latin; the hand remained at his side.

Not all Sutrii were bi-lingual, it seemed. Then, she spoke in Etruscan. Out shot the hand, open and trusting. Casually the girl removed from her tunic a fibula, a pin with a coral head, and drove it up to the head in the man's palm. He gave no sign of pain. The crowd suspected a trick. One of the watchers, a youth with large feet which were housed in wooden sandals, cried:

"You didn't really stick him, did you, Spritey?"

Smiling, the girl withdrew the point, which glistened with blood and left a small red wound, the size of a gnat, in the victim's palm. Tanaquil winced. The young swains cheered and filled the plate with gold, but shook their heads when asked if they cared to volunteer as subjects. The victim, awakened by a slap to his cheek, looked down ruefully at his palm and followed the others to the nearest wine shop.

But the cats lingered, drawing around the magician as if she had promised them a dinner of quails and cream. She knelt in their midst and held out a handful of small, greenly glittering jewels and seemed to address them. At any rate, her lips began to move, though Tanaquil could hear no words. The cats responded with frightening vehemence. Fur rose on their backs. They slashed the air with their tails. They snarled and hissed and tensed their long bodies. Then, before they could vent their ferocity, the girl dismissed them with a nod of her head. They neither slunk nor scurried, but strode with pride and arrogance, heads high on the tall necks, ebony spots flashing like black pearls.

Tanaquil shuddered. She had never seen Bast in such a mood. She felt as if she had intruded on an arcane ritual. It was best to announce her presence.

"Are you a sorceress?" she asked politely.

The girl looked at her with surprise. "Yes."

"From the lake?"

"Yes. The Town of Walking Towers." Her answers were brief but not unfriendly. She stared at the poppies in Tanaquil's hair.

"I think I know one of your people," Tanaquil continued. "Here in the town."

"None of my people live in Sutrium."

"This one is a slave. His name is Vel."

"And you must be Tanaquil!"

"Arnth sent you, didn't he? Where is he now?"

"I left him in the forest."

"Are you related to Vel?"

"I am his friend."

Friend? thought Tanaquil. No, his woman. Jealousy stung her like black henbane.

Vegoia took her hand. "His friend—like you. Together we shall help him. No?"

How small were Vegoia's fingers! A child's fingers, exigent, not to be denied, touching her heart as well as her hand; probing gentleness to the very roots of her being, like an antidote for the henbane of jealousy.

"People can watch us here," said Tanaquil. "You see the temple over there, the one with the statues on top—the demons and little Tages? It ought to be empty now; the priest goes to market like everyone else. I just saw him. Follow me there in a few seconds."

The temple to the child-god Tages perched on its platform like a big clay toy which was painted with all the colours of a rainbow shell—orange for the tiles which covered the wooden walls—purple for the low triangle of the pediment—and *every* colour, green and black, lemon and blue and rose, for the grinning, prancing demons on the roof. It might have been painted by the god himself. Only a child, thought Tanaquil, Etruscan at that and very knowing, could have splashed his colours with such a disregard for Athenian harmony, and modelled such young, outrageous, and irresistible imps, who were bent on mischief even while they seemed to attend their master, Tages.

They were phallic imps, of course. Like Vel.

She climbed the tall steps and passed between the columns of the porch and into the cella or room of worship. She had to watch her step. The temple was a sanctuary for unwanted kittens. The priest fed them from the offerings and, once they were grown, found homes for them with Etruscan families. A little speckled fellow clung to her sandal and allowed himself to be ridden across the

tiles of the floor. Tanaquil dislodged him with difficulty. Being a serval kitten, he had strong claws. Then she examined the room, which never failed to enchant her.

The walls were decorated, childishly and touchingly, with little boys climbing into chariots made of sea shells, and a terracotta statue of Tages, smaller than the one on the roof, stood on a pedestal and looked down at her with boyish roguery. He was clumsily done, to be sure. The Etruscans had yet to overtake the Greeks, who had learned, after centuries of stiff Egyptian frontality, to capture the natural grace of the human form. The eyes were exaggerated in their slant, the limbs were loose and awkwardly attached to the body. Nevertheless, he radiated life; in fact, he looked uncomfortable on his pedestal and as if he might clamber down on those loose limbs and ask—or demand—a ride in one of the shell chariots. Her own brother Aulus had also been a stocky, fearless, and energetic boy, and Tages had always been her favourite god. She loved him infinitely more than his quarrelsome grandparents, Tinia and Uni, or the bleak and sinister Vanth.

Vegoia followed her silently into the cella and stopped, marvelling, beneath the statue; then, with affecting deference, she bent and kissed the sandalled feet of the god. Really, thought Tanaquil, the girl is incapable of a false or awkward movement. Anyone else would have looked as if she were parading her piety.

"And the pictures on the wall!" Vegoia cried. "Those dear little boys! They are going to race their chariots."

"They really do, you know. Right here in Sutrium. Once a year, the market is cleared of stalls, and the little boys hitch wagons to assess and race each other for the prize of a red cart with copper wheels."

"How I would love to see them race! Do they ever get hurt?"

"Never. Though sometimes they do get tummy aches from all the sweets fed to them after the race. But the boys on your lakes must have races too—with boats."

"They did," said Vegoia. "So did Vel, once. But that was years ago. They have all grown up, and there is no one to take their place."

"No children at all?"

"It is not as if we really needed them," she said quickly. "We live for a very long time and when the last of us die —well, let the flamingoes have our lake. Now we must talk about Vel."

"You've come to help him escape?"

"Yes."

"What can I do?"

Vegoia looked at her searchingly, and Tanaquil felt as if the yellow eyes were probing into her heart; or perhaps even the soul which, she hoped, would survive the death of her body and dwell in the after-life of love, games, and banquetings. Vegoia's eyes looked immeasurably older than her slight girl's body. Not that they were tired; but they looked as if they could not be fooled.

Vegoia opened her bulla and drew out several of her brilliantly green gems with yellow stripes. Cat's eyes. Stones from the East reputed to possess powers as a talisman. The kittens, at least a score of them, began to press at her ankles.

"Give these to Vel," she said.

"He will know what to do?"

"Yes. Quickly now. Hide them under your cloak." She stooped to caress the kittens, one of which had clambered up the fur of her tunic.

"I'm glad you've come," said Tanaquil. "Vel has been caged for too long."

"You like him, Tanaquil?"

"Yes. Very much. Though I'm afraid of him too."

"I *told* Arnth that Vel would have his way with you."

Tanaquil flushed. "He has not had his way with me."

Vegoia looked sceptical. "And yet you say you like him."

"But I do."

"Why deny him then? His pleasures are few, I think, in your father's house."

"He would have taken me without kindness."

"You are perhaps a virgin?"

"Yes."

Vegoia laughed. "Two in as many days."

"What do you mean?"

"Arnth."

"Arnth a virgin? But he sang such wicked songs. As if he understood *everything*."

"*Now* he understands."

Honestly, it looked as if every young man who crossed Tanaquil's path had been enjoyed by Vegoia. Not that anyone expected virginity in a man. In fact, Tanaquil had come to accept, even to savour the worldly image of Arnth. But to hear that he had been a virgin when she met him, and then lost his virginity to Vegoia—well, it seemed such a waste. Vegoia was not a girl to appreciate the rarity of his gift.

But she saw that Vegoia was not boasting. The nymph was speaking naturally about a matter which to her was very natural.

"I will take your stones to Vel," said Tanaquil.

Vegoia was looking at the pictures on the walls. "Have you ever wished, Tanaquil, that they always stayed like that? Little boys, mischievous but not really—wounding?"

"And not having to go away to fight wars and *be* wounded," said Tanaquil. "Yes, I certainly have."

"But they do grow up," said Vegoia. "And their boyish bodies harden to the sinews of a man, and they grow desirous and desirable as well as mischievous. But they keep their little boys' hearts. Quick. Merry. Forgetful." She turned from Tanaquil as if to study the pictures, gasped, and pressed a hand to her heart.

"You have a pain in your heart?"

She removed the hand and shrugged. "My heart? I have no heart. Like Vel."

Tanaquil was puzzled. "I don't think you are heartless at all. Either of you. Only wild. I think I could learn to be wild myself."

"Not in our way. Wild to you means living in the woods. Wearing a fur like mine—or nothing at all. Hunting, fishing, talking to the birds. Wild to us means—not caring. Go to Vel now. Take him the stones. But I think you were wise to deny him his way. Yes, he would surely have hurt you."

Vel, on his knees, was scrubbing the floor with fuller's earth. His movements were spry and quick, and the red

tiles of the atrium glowed like embers in the slanting light from the roof. But he seemed bemused; as if the ladder of light could carry him out of the house. Another slave was working with him, the Athenian who had complimented Tanaquil's beauty; a minikin fellow with black, inquisitive eyes which looked as if they loved to spy secrets.

"Vel," said Tanaquil. "Come into the garden with me, will you?"

The Athenian stared at her as if he had just spied a secret; his eyes seemed round black olives sparkling with brine. Vel followed her at a distance; she could hear the slap, slap, slap of his feet.

In the garden there were no dragonflies, and no poppies in the mouth of the shrine to Lavis—Tanaquil had cut them for her hair. There was only Bast, asleep among the flowerless poppy stalks. Tomorrow, perhaps there would be no Vel to enter the garden with her. Now, she was not afraid of him. She had talked with Vegoia; she understood his wildness.

She opened her palm to display Vegoia's cat's-eyes.

"Vegoia has come!" he cried.

"Yes. I saw her in the market place. She told me to bring you the stones. That was all."

He snatched them out of her hand and clutched them jealously between his long, narrow fingers.

She waited for a word or a gesture of gratitude. "You will be going with her?"

"Yes."

"Can you tell me when?"

"Soon."

"Vel, you understand that I never meant you harm." She laid her hand on his moist shoulder.

He did not acknowledge the touch. "It was for you your father caught me."

"But I never told him to."

"It was for you." He pointed to the crimson ring on the back of his hand; the indelible brand of a slave.

She caught his hand and pressed it against her cheek. "Vel, Vel. May I come to visit you on the lake and meet your people? I liked Vegoia. Truly I did. I'm sure I will like the others. You see, I—I am very fond of you."

"Where is Arnth?" he asked. "He did not come with her, did he?"

She dropped his hand. "She left him in the forest."

"Arnth has no love for towns," Vel said proudly. "He will come to see me on the lake."

"And play for you? That's why you love him, isn't it? His music."

"Arnth *is* music." His face seemed a burst of sunlight. "When he plays, he is all a shining and a sweetness, and I want——"

"What?"

"To dance for him."

"And me?"

"You? You are a *woman*. What would I want except to——" He laughed and caught her wrists with vicious fingers; talons.

"No," she said. "First you must respect me. As you respect Arnth."

And then they heard Arnth's flute, and the big-wheeled cart, rumbling up the street.

Vel released her as if a scorpion had stung him. "You said—*he was safe in the fowest.*"

CHAPTER VI

He watched her, a small, resolute figure with a wooden bowl in her hand, follow the road until she was lost in the company of Weir Ones—towering Centaurs, hairy Panisci—and hidden by the green meanderings of the trail. "The town's sorceress." Sorceress, he wondered, or little girl playing at spells and incantations? And yet there had always been a strangeness about her, an intimation of angers and anguishes which were anything but childlike. He had seen her wrath. He could guess her power.

Meanwhile, Ursus had grown impatient. He began to paw the ground and crackle the dry leaves.

"All right, Ursus," Arnth said softly. "It's time to go."

Harnessed at last, Ursus lifted his stalwart legs, which, rolling like water wheels, powered him into motion until he belaboured the road as if he were driving before the

blast of the wind-god, Boreas. Going—where? Arnth did not know. Viterbo. Volsinii. Spina perhaps, and even one day the towns of the red-haired Gauls, his grandfather's people. Somewhere, anywhere, away from his three perplexing friends: the child who was thirty years old and had no heart; the web-toed boy whom she hoped to rescue with the help of sorceries; and the girl who, inadvertently, like a dazed sleeper stumbling out of a cave, had crossed their path.

Vegoia, Vel, Tanaquil. Water Sprites and human girl. He saw their faces, like brilliant lilies against the green opacity of a pool. Which would remain afloat and which would drown, its petals shredded in the obliterating waters? Etruscans did not easily relinquish their slaves, and enslaved Weir Ones did not easily forgive their masters.

He knew, as suddenly and certainly as he had liked Vel and Tanaquil and desired Vegoia, that he must return to Sutrium. Return, help, heal. *Be* there, that was the thing.

He shouted, he jerked on the reins, he felt like Hippolytus in his runaway chariot; and then he waited. Ursus could not be hurried; first, he acknowledged Arnth's message with a growl of aggravation. Then, with a casualness which approached insolence, he slowed, paused, turned, and jogged toward Sutrium at the pace of a superannuated mule.

Once he had changed his course, Arnth was not in a hurry. He had no wish to overtake Vegoia on the road and risk her wrath and even her sorceries. She had more reasons than one to punish him. Multiply the number of his freckles. Turn him into a fish or a bear or even an overripe pomegranate. Or, with peculiarly appropriate justice (so she would think), subtract him into a eunuch.

He sighed. "The net. Do you hear me, Ursus? We're riding into the net." Ursus continued his lethargic advance, raising his feet heavily as if they were caked with mud.

"Don't tell *me*," he seemed to say. "It was you who turned us around."

"But you know," said Arnth, "at least it's a silken net."

Here was the house at last, Tanaquil's house, with its

orange-tiled face and its saddle roof as red as Tanaquil's poppies. A red-headed house, thought Arnth with a surge of affection. Like me, poor thing. But no freckles.

It was afternoon. He had paused in the fields beyond the town to find food for himself and Ursus. At a prosperous farm house a kindly woman had fed both of them on grapes, mash, and cheese, and allowed Ursus to lick the pot of a Corn Sprite. Then, they had driven to the foot of Sutrium and hailed the keeper of the drawbridge, the same ill-mannered chap who had searched Arnth's wagon on his recent departure. Admitted with the observation that bridges were not intended for heavy wagons and fat bears, they had clattered up the ramp and into the town.

Perhaps they would find Vegoia at Tanaquil's house. Spying out the place? Or, Tinia forbid, plying her spells? Precisely the nature of her spells, Arnth could not predict. Sorceresses were highly versatile: they could read the future. They were rustic physicians, healing fever with gentian roots and headaches with willow bark; they manufactured potions for unrequited love and poison for disposing of a rival; and according to hearsay, they could change their shape at will and fly through the air or creep along the ground.

He thought it best to announce his coming. He had no wish to surprise anyone, certainly not Vegoia. He blew a cheerful blast on his flute. Ursus' walk became a gallop, and they rolled down the street as if they were hungry and the house was the world's largest honey cake. Soon, he felt like his music and the rush of his cart, swift, gay, and careless. He played of love opening like an African lotus, to shelter lovers in its blue, willowy walls. The music seemed spell and amulet. Nothing of evil could mar such an afternoon.

The gate flew open as if the garden had expelled its breath, and a hot and angry Vel exploded into the street. Oblivious to the wounded gate behind him, which hung like a broken wing on a single hinge, he sprang onto the cart, his toes scurrying up the side like fiddler crabs, and began to shout at Arnth:

"You were not supposed to weturn! You were not supposed to weturn!"

Arnth was dismayed by the boy's outburst. He dropped the reins and clapped Vel's shoulder. "But Vel, I thought you'd *like* to see me!"

Vel's anger evaporated and left him dour and subdued; somehow reduced in size. Arnth expected him to cry.

"Sweet musician," he wailed, "I told you not to weturn," and Arnth realized that Vel was not so much angry with him as afraid for him. Before he could ask the reason and learn the whereabouts of Vegoia, Tanaquil burst from the gate. Then, she was running beside the cart and crying, "Wait, Arnth, let me on," while Ursus was looking back with a crafty eye, as if he intended to stop so quickly that Tanaquil's momentum would carry her into his clutches. Arnth leaned from the cart and lifted her up beside him on the opposite side from Vel, who glared at her with the ferocity of an Ursus with two good eyes. She wore a tunic of saffron-coloured linen imported from Lydia. Her dark hair had burst from its knot and spilled onto her shoulders, like black-skinned grapes clustering down a vine. Running had heightened the redness in her cheeks. For the first time, she did not look like the cultivated product of a town garden. She looked, thought Arnth, both flushed and delectable, a perfect dish for a hungry man's repast. Not his, however. Vegoia had totally spoiled him for lesser feasts. Who is content with chicken after pheasant?

"Arnth," she gasped. "You've come to help Vel, haven't you?"

They drove down a street where orange, red, and blue houses alternated with rocky, rose-tangled hillocks. It was as if the earth had grown the houses as well as the roses, and the men and women, fluttering in their robes from door to door, were hawk moths gathering pollen. People waved at the cart and its colourful occupants, and the ragged girl, the one whom Arnth had previously given a ride, hurried down the street to alert her friends that flutist and bear were back in town.

Briefly Arnth explained to Tanaquil about the arrival of Vegoia. Briefly Tanaquil replied that she had met Vegoia and heard about the evening on the lake.

"I expect she told you about the dinner she fixed," said

Arnth lamely. "The pasta was delicious. A Corn Sprite gave her the recipe."

"She told me about dessert," said Tanaquil. "Never mind, you don't have to explain. I know all about young men and their needs. A good dinner and a saucy bedmate. Does that sum it up?" Before he could argue with her addition, she changed the subject. "Tell me what Vegoia plans to do here in town."

Arnth, who was no more informed than Tanaquil, turned to Vel, who, between his glares at Tanaquil, was beaming at him with naked adoration as if to say: Look at *me* riding beside my hero.

"Vel, tell me what is going to happen. How is Vegoia going to get you out of the town?"

"Through the gate."

"I didn't think you were going *over* the gate. I mean, how will you slip past the guards?"

Vel shook his head. "Who knows?"

"Don't you?"

"Vegoia knows."

"Is she going to use her spells?"

"Who knows?"

"Where is Vegoia now?"

Vel evaded the question. "Leave the town, Arnth!"

"You're afraid someone will be hurt?"

Vel said nothing.

"But I can't leave town. Not without Tanaquil. You must promise me that no harm will come to her."

Vel said: "My friends will not be hurt."

Supper that night was ludicrous and foreboding. Tanaquil had asked that Arnth be allowed to dine with the family instead of the slaves. Lars was divided between the wish to please his daughter and the wish to observe the customary formalities of aristocrats with travelling players.

"Otherwise, he won't play for us," said Tanaquil. "Will you, Arnth?"

Arnth was ready to say yes, he would play anyway, at such times he always ate in the kitchen with the slaves, but Tanaquil proceeded:

"I told you, he won't play. You want another mime, don't you, Father? What about the escapades of Zeus? Europa and the bull, for instance? I'm sure Arnth knows a good one about *them*."

Arnth opened his mouth to say no, but he could sing a good one about Pasiphaë and *her* bull, but Tanaquil closed the discussion. "It's all settled then. He eats with us."

Vel, together with the acquisitive Athenian, served a platter of roebuck garnished with chestnuts, along with a deceptively bland-tasting wine which inspired Arnth not only to sing his song about Pasiphaë and the bull, but to improvise details which would have shocked a bawdy Gaul. As for Tanaquil, she carefully mixed her wine with three portions of water, but the mixture remained potent.

"I'm Pasiphaë," she said in the midst of the mime, adding thoughtfully, "*Enamoured*. And Vel is the bull." The sprite was approaching the table with a tray of lemons imported from Africa. She rose to her feet and with perfect confidence, if slightly erratic movements, took his hand and led him around in a circle, using her free hand to seize a lemon and raise it to her lips.

"You are not very—*taurine*," she said, releasing him at last, returning to her couch, and looking pleased with herself for producing such an epithet. Lars was also pleased. Throughout the mime, he had clapped loudly and quivered as if he would like to join the players, perhaps in the role of Minos, the cuckolded husband. But inebriation had prevented performance.

When Arnth had finished his song, he suffered a moment of troubling clarity: like a spectator at an Etruscan circus, he saw himself and Tanaquil playing the fool in a ring which was soon to resound with nameless perils—fire, gladiators, beasts—in a word, with Vegoia's spells. Tomorrow the nymph was certain to be discovered and expelled from the town, if not imprisoned, for breaking the inflexible law that Weir Ones were only tolerated on the Ninth Day. Tonight, then, she would have to act; perhaps already had acted to drug the wine.

He studied Vel for a clue to Vegoia's intentions. The boy, surly when Tanaquil had told him to play the bull,

had now grown excessively gay. He flickered in and out of Arnth's dazed consciousness, a white, naked wraith from a Bacchic throng, refilling the krater of wine and the cups of the three drinkers. His arms seemed entangling grapevines; and his grinning face, its mouth parted to reveal a thin, pink tongue, had become the mask of a devouring sphinx. When the boy loomed toward him, Arnth threw up his arms to make a shield.

Vel caught his hand and steadied it around a replenished cup, which he pushed to Arnth's lips.

"Sweet musician," he said. "Dwink. It is good for your music."

Arnth did not drink. Angrily he struck at the persistent hand and overturned the cup against Vel's body. Wine enveloped the sprite like blood from a wound. Repentant and somewhat steadied, Arnth removed a handkerchief from a pouch in his tunic, a white linen square aswarm with blue seahorses. Against the boy's chest, he pressed the cloth to a wet, clinging flatness, through which his fingers felt for the beat of a heart.

"You have no heart," he said, not as an accusation but as an expression of sympathy. Tears welled in his eyes: for Vel, wine-stained as if with blood; for Vegoia, the little girl pretending to be a sorceress; and for all their beautiful, heartless, childless friends on the lake. "Vegoia told me but I wished to be sure." Somehow he felt to blame for the heartlessness of the sprites. "Does it hurt you, my friend, having no heart?"

Vel removed the handkerchief, crimson with wine, from Arnth's fingers and clutched it in his hand.

"Never mind," he said. "Never mind, sweet musician."

After supper, Lars retired to bed, attended by the Athenian; Vel remained in the kitchen; and Arnth and Tanaquil walked in the streets to clear their heads. They found the market place in silent pandemonium. The Weir Ones had left the town, tipsy, no doubt, and clutching their newly acquired treasures: bracelets to grace a horn, ribbons to bind a mane, and a few practical items like flies and adzes and shoes with wooden soles. For nine days they would not return. The merchants had closed their stalls and retired to their houses on the perimeter of town. No one had

bothered to clean the streets; there were wine cups—Athenian red and Etruscan black—in broken abundance. There were empty wine skins and fly-ridden, rotting figs; and gross evidence that the Weir Ones—the Centaurs at least, were no more fastidious in their toilet than the horses they resembled. Sutrium prided itself on cleanliness; tomorrow the market place would be scoured by slaves with enormous brooms and buckets who would wash the refuse into the drainage ditches which ran beside the streets and joined the intricate sewer under the town. But tonight, the refuse remained as a visible reminder of the Ninth Day, when the town and the forest met with mutual suspicion and parted with mutual relief.

"Even the serval cats have gone to bed," said Tanaquil. "Usually they forage around the fish stalls. It looks as if we have the streets to ourselves."

"It's just as well," said Arnth, "or we might step on them. I still feel a trifle light-headed. Where did your father get his wine?" His tunic, he noticed, was stained with red; the sash at his waist was threatening to slide over his hips; and one of his sandals, its strap broken, barely clung to his foot. Dionysus, he thought, would take me for one of his Satyrs.

"From the vineyards around Sutrium. It did taste potent, didn't it? Did I misbehave?" She still had about her the air of a Maenad. Whatever flowers had adorned her hair survived in a single petal—rose, not poppy—which bent precariously above her left ear.

"Not really," he said. "You couldn't misbehave. You're not the sort."

She looked injured rather than complimented, but managed to buoy a smile. "Well, *you* misbehaved. Honestly, Arnth, when you started singing about the bull—"

"I suspect," said Arnth, "that the wine was drugged. Or—bewitched."

"Vegoia?"

"Yes."

"But why? Nothing happened while we were drinking, did it? She didn't make off with Vel."

"Maybe it was supposed to knock us out, but it only

made us foolish. Anway, there may be an aftermath. I think it might be better if we didn't go back to your house."

"Where else can we go?"

"To an inn."

Tanaquil looked at him with surprise. "An inn?"

"Separate rooms, of course."

"You would have said *one* room if I had been Vegoia, wouldn't you?"

"I might," he admitted. "But then, you're not that sort, are you?"

"You keep saying that," she snapped. (He seemed to have an art for bringing out the worst in women). "No, I suppose I'm not. Sometimes I wish I were, or that people at least thought so. And sometimes I wish I didn't have to be either *that* sort, or the other, but some of both, depending on how I felt and who I was with. I wish I made a man feel—*ungovernable*."

"How do you mean?" he asked nervously.

"The way you felt with Vegoia."

There seemed no end to what Vegoia had confessed in the temple. Talk about *men* who kissed and told!

"Seriously," he said, "we should go to an inn. Or better, I could take you out of town. To Viterbo or anywhere you like."

"Father would never forgive you. He would misunderstand your motives and have you hounded out of all the Etruscan cities, if not shut in a chest like a criminal and thrown in the sea. It isn't my virginity he's worried about, but how I lose it. A nobleman's son would be permissible.

"On the other hand, if we went back to the house, woke father, and told him everything—how Vegoia is coming to make off with one of his slaves—he would quite likely call on the king for soldiers, and Vel and Vegoia would end up in irons. All we can do is to go back and say nothing. Whatever Vegoia does, I don't think she will hurt me. I liked her, you know. And I certainly don't think she will hurt you. Not after last night."

"Especially after last night," he muttered.

"Besides," said Tanaquil. "I want to know what happens to Vel."

"So do I. He needs his lake. Do you love him, Tana-

quil?" Now that his own affairs were not in question, he felt like an older brother inviting a sister's confidence and ready to give advice.

"I don't think so," she said. "But he stirs me."

"I know what you mean. Sprites have a way about them."

"How do they do it, Arnth?"

"I think they take the town out of us. With a sprite, it's always as if we were naked in the sun, and no part of us were less than good and beautiful."

"Vel makes me feel naked all right, but then I want to go and put on a robe. I feel ashamed."

"You shouldn't. He's just a healthy boy looking at you with admiration. I've looked at many a girl that way. He ought to make you feel like *that* sort of woman."

"It isn't his lust I mind so much. It's between his lusts. He doesn't even seem to like me."

"Possibly," suggested Arnth, "he's the same as Ursus, my bear, who doesn't like women till he gets to know them." ("If then," he started to add.)

They found the house as silent as the streets. At the entrance the porter rose drowsily from his stool.

"What should I tell him about Vegoia?" whispered Tanaquil.

"Tell him nothing," said Arnth. "It won't matter anyway. If she wants to get in, no porter will stop her."

Handing Arnth a lamp, the porter opened the door. "The master is asleep," he said, a thin, stooped fellow with bony shoulder blades, and added reproachfully, "Everyone is asleep. Or ought to be."

They found that Tanaquil's room had been invaded by the moon. The four walls sparkled with wintry light, the squat-legged couch loured like a wolf in the snow. They kindled a lamp in the niche above the couch and added a roseate warmth to the moon's chilling frost. Then they examined the room for other, more tangible invaders.

Tanaquil smiled. "You see, there are no sorceresses except the Lady Moon. You may leave me without misgivings."

"By the way," he said, "where is Bast? I thought he slept in your room, on his own little couch."

"Sometimes," she said. "Other times he likes to roam. I try not to interfere with his peregrinations."

"Let him peregrinate, but I'm coming back."

He went to the room of the slaves and exchanged his tunic for a loin cloth. The room resounded with snores, and he noticed Vel among the sleepers. He knelt beside him, remembering that other night when Vel had prepared a bed for his "sweet musician" with cushions from the triclinium. Here again was the bed, with the same pillows hiding the same hard straw. He took a pillow and pressed it against Vel's cheek; when the boy awoke he could slide it under his head.

Stepping nimbly among the recumbent bodies, he left the room and returned to Tanaquil. Though she lay on her couch with a coverlet over her feet, she had not extinguished the lamp, which shared its niche with a bronze figurine of Tages and a stone waterclock imported from Athens.

"I'll sleep at the foot of your bed," he announced. "I'm a light sleeper, when I set my mind to it. If anyone opens the door or climbs in the window, Tinia help her!"

"Her? Him is more likely."

"Vel wouldn't hurt anyone with malice. At worst, he's a hot-tempered boy."

"Do you think Vegoia would?"

"I don't know," he confessed. "There are—angers—in her." It was strange how suspicion heightened his desire. Somehow, he feared and loved her at the same time, and loved her the more because of his fear.

"You look uncomfortable," said Tanaquil, rising from bed to fetch him a cushion from a chest of olive wood. "Or perhaps you would rather—"

She meant, he supposed, to offer him half of her bed, but her look and voice were free of provocation, and her body, shapeless now in a woollen nightdress, epitomized sisterly innocence.

"No," he said. "The floor will make me a better watchman. I think, though, we should leave your lamp burning. After the moon sets, the Weir Ones will have an advantage. They can see in the dark."

"I always leave it burning. Otherwise, I have nightmares.

I have them anyway, but I wake up and see the lamp and the image of Tages, and it's all right."

"Tonight it will be all right. Remember, I come from the country. I have even wrestled a wolf."

"You can't wrestle sorceries."

He started to say, "What about sorceresses?" but thought the remark indelicate in the circumstances. That was the trouble with women. Once you became involved with them, in his case *two* of them, you had to watch your tongue. They were always ready to jump down your throat. He said: "Tages guard your sleep."

Hardly had he closed his eyes when he felt the assaults of sleep, a quick stealing lethargy in his legs, a tiny prickling along his arms, like the feet of marching ants. He froze his eyes into a taut openness.

He heard the monotonous drip of the water clock. Athenian, like most of the best inventions. Better than the old sun-dial, which lost its usefulness at night or on cloudy days. He began to count the drips. One, two, three . . . thirty-six . . . sixty . . . No, that was dangerous.

Counting would put him to sleep.

He tried to shake his head; to sit up; to kick his feet. Then he knew that he was paralysed; drugged by the wine from supper. Immediate drunkenness had been the first and the least of its consequences. He tried to speak. "Tanaquil" poised on his tongue but refused to leave his lips. He could only move his eyes, which he fixed on the door to watch for Vegoia's coming.

Strangely, he wanted her to come, alone or with Vel; kind or threatening. To come with quiet steps and whisper his name like an incantation—or a curse; to die into his arms—or bind him with painful thongs. Lover or victim, he waited.

The lamp pulsed and expired. The moon dwindled and drained the light from the room; the lucent snow melted into grey. The dark smothered him like an airless sheepskin, and the drip of the water clock seemed the slow, continual tap of advancing feet.

Till the feet advanced in truth.

The door whispered on its wooden hinges. He saw the eyes, luminous, yellowly slanting, in the almost-darkness,

and knew the slap, slap, slap of the webbed feet before he saw the eyes.

Vel paused, wary in silence. Behind him a score of ovals repeated in miniature his own slanted eyes; hovered beyond the door while Vel advanced, listening, into the room and stopped without surprise above the prostrate Arnth.

"Sweet musician," Vel said, "I made a couch for you in the room with the slaves. It would have been better had you stayed with them. Still, you will not be harmed. I will see to that." He fell to his knees, gathering Arnth in his arms, and rose unbowed by the weight; and Arnth, though he could not move, could feel the thin, strong limbs which held him with loving tyranny.

"I will see to that," repeated Vel, and left the room without a glance at Tanaquil.

The corridor writhed with cats. In the darkness, Arnth could only guess their sleekness and gold. But he saw their following eyes, and heard the agile flutterings of their feet. One of them grew impatient; hissing, sprang from the ground and tore at his arm, which dangled helplessly above the floor. He could feel the clawing pain; the limp swinging of his struck limb. He tried to scream.

"Bast, get back!" cried Vel, and aimed a vicious kick at the head on the long neck. A snarl died in the animal's throat; cowed, he sought the anonymity of the pack.

At last they reached the atrium. Vel did not seem tired. He paused to wade in the pool, luxuriatingly, and then he deposited Arnth on the couch and knelt beside him with solemn tenderness.

"Has the cat hurt you, my fwiend? Ah, he has left a wound on your hand. Now we are bwothers."

The cats circled the couch, scratching the legs, pawing the air, staring up at Arnth. Was this not their promised victim, carried before them, tantalizingly, through the corridor? Years ago in the forest, Arnth and his friends, the travelling players, together with some small trained animals—a monkey named Liber, a dog, a parrot—had met a pack of wolves, large, grey fellows with eyes the colour of water in a swamp. But the wagon in which they travelled, the one which Arnth now owned, was slow and cumbersome with its load of passengers. One of the players

had suddenly snatched up the monkey, a genial fellow dressed in a hat and tunic, and thrown him to the wolves. The wagon had made its escape while the wolves quarrelled for the small sacrifice and shreds of his tunic flew above the carnage. Now it, seemed to Arnth that the liberated cats surpassed the bloodlust and cruelty of the wolves. Sudden freedom was not enough for them; they wanted revenge for their long captivity.

But Vel did not allow them a sacrifice—not yet. He brandished the same mysterious stones which Vegoia had sent to him by way of Tanaquil. His lips moved soundlessly and the cats responded as if he had cracked a whip over their backs. They flowed from the couch, assuming a single shape beside the pool, like an octopus drawing in its tentacles, and slithered out of the room and into corridor.

"For a moment I feared for you," said Vel. "Even with my stones. There is much anger in those—"

With the silence of a moonbeam, Vegoia entered the room; a whiteness beneath the open, starry roof.

Her voice was sharp and imperious: "Have you hurt him, Vel?"

"No, but he may hurt Tanaquil!" Arnth would have liked to shout. But his tongue was an icicle in his mouth.

Vel's answer was petulant. "He has not been harmed. I have shielded him from the cats."

"Where are the cats?"

"They have gone about their business."

She seemed to grow large with anger. The little girl had become the Lady Moon, inexorable goddess of the night's black pits.

"I meant you to use them only against the guards—here and at the gate of the town. Have you turned them on the house?"

"The house?" he laughed. "The whole town! I have sent them to find their friends—and their masters."

"And Tanaquil?"

"Some I have sent by way of her room."

—to be concluded

RAGTIME

by Pamela Adams

There are still at least four hours to wait and I am already so frightened that my hands are trembling. I have laid my tea on the little table by the window overlooking the creek ; I keep looking out over the mud-coloured water, past the marshes, beyond the second, deeper channel, until I can make out the low outline of One Tree Island. Then I have to look away again quickly, before I panic. I must try to eat. It would be stupid to faint when the time comes, and perhaps lose my chance for another year.

I am writing this, the full account of what happened, and of what I believe is about to happen, partly to steady my nerves, but mostly for you, Colin. I think you—and Betsy, of course—are the only ones who are still concerned about me ; and your patience has been tried pretty hard. You will have heard a lot of it before. But I couldn't accept it myself at first, and then, after my breakdown I felt that everyone only listened to me to humour me. Even you, my only brother, though you did your best, bless you. Anyway, I'll leave this in a stamped addressed envelope on the table for Mr. Dunkworth to post on to you. Of course, if I'm wrong and I'm still here tomorrow I'll destroy it. If you can find anyone who has made a serious study of this sort of thing, try to persuade them to help ; that will be our only hope now.

The evenings are drawing in fast. I'll just light the oil lamp and then I'll set it all down for you, from when it began a year ago.

Fraser and I arrived in Bentwater and got permission from Mr. Dunkworth, who owns most of the houseboats in the Bay, to camp in a field near his own boat which he runs as a kind of café-cum-grocery store. I was helping to unload the camping gear from the car, caught my foot in a rabbit hole and ended up with a badly sprained ankle. The local doctor bound it up for me, gave me some pain-killing tablets, and advised us to give up any idea of camp-

ing for a few days. I was all for trying it anyhow but Fraser wouldn't let me, so we went back to Mr. Dunkworth and ordered coffee and told him our troubles, hoping he would be able to rent us one of his boats.

It was rather pleasant, sitting there on the deck with the sea sparkling in the sun and the seagulls calling. But it appeared that nearly all Mr. Dunkworth's boats were already let. The only vacant one was the *Darnley*, moored about half a mile away against the earth-built sea wall which snakes its way up the estuary, protecting the low grazing lands from the muddy waters of a creek.

"And to tell you the truth I don't like renting the *Darnley* to anyone for this particular week in the year," Mr. Dunkworth said. "Call me daft if you like, but that's the way I feel."

His wife, setting down the coffee cups, muttered darkly, "Lot of dratted nonsense. Superstition, that's what it is."

"It would save my wife a very uncomfortable journey if we could hire the houseboat, Mr. Dunkworth. Janie really isn't fit to travel yet. We'd be very grateful."

"Ah, maybe you would and maybe you wouldn't. There's been some queer goings-on on that boat—yes, you can laugh, Sarah, but it's only fair to warn these youngsters."

Fraser and I exchanged glances. It sounded entertaining.

"What sort of goings-on, Mr. Dunkworth?"

"Lot of old nonsense," Mrs. Dunkworth cut in again impatiently. "All that's actually happened is that a man disappeared while he was staying on the *Darnley* about five years ago. And for all we know he might have had his own good reasons for wanting to disappear."

"That's all, very well, Sarah—there's more to it than that, and you know it. There's the music folks have heard, coming from nowhere, for one thing."

"What music?" I asked.

" 'Hold That Tiger'," he said solemnly. It was too much for us, and we laughed. Mr. Dunkworth took offence and would tell us no more after that, saying huffily that if we liked to take the risk it was our own affair, and here were the keys, and he washed his hands of the whole business.

Half an hour later we had moved into the *Darnley*. It's

a converted barge, bright with black and yellow paint, and looks like a child's Noah ark. By the time we had finished unpacking, and had cooked ourselves an enormous high tea, we were beginning to feel that it was going to be a good holiday after all. My ankle was improving and I hoped that after a night's rest it would be better still.

Later that evening Fraser set up come canvas chairs on the deck and made a pile of cushions for my foot (somebody once called him "that great, clumsy red-haired giant", but he is a very gentle man really). We sat there in the warm darkness drinking the brown ale that he had taught me to like during our three years of marriage. The tide was out, and the moon was shining on the smooth mud banks of the empty creek; to our right the creek narrowed and lost itself in a maze of marshes; in the opposite direction, past the Bay and towards the open sea, we could pick out the distant lights of some seaside town. It was peaceful, perfect. We were very happy.

It must have been about an hour later that it turned suddenly cold, and we became aware that the sea was slapping against the side of the houseboat. Fraser got up to look over the side.

"Phew! I didn't think the creek would fill up as quickly as that—it must be high tide already."

"I thought the Dunkworths said the next high tide was five o'clock in the morning. Anyway, I'm freezing, let's go to bed."

We started gathering up our things. I was the first to hear the music, faint but quite distinct. It was a scratchy version of the Charleston and I giggled and said that for a ghastly moment I'd been afraid it was the dreaded "Hold That Tiger". A few minutes later we heard the sound of oars and creaking rowlocks, and then a bump against our hull.

"Company? At this time of night?" Fraser moved across to the side again, and I hobbled after him. In the bright moonlight we saw a dinghy with six or seven people in it. They were laughing and chatting normally enough, and yet there was something queer about them. Something off-key. But I had no time to analyse it because one of the men was calling up to us.

"We're picking up everyone who wants to go to the party we're having on One Tree—that island over there. We've got a gramophone there and plenty to eat and drink. This is our third boatload, and everyone's welcome. Would you like to come?"

Several of the others chimed in, urging us to go, then. They were a friendly, happy-go-lucky crowd. And apparently none of them minded the deadly chill that was seeping up from the water.

Fraser thanked them, and told them we couldn't come because of my ankle—I could never have climbed the ladder down to the dinghy, for a start. But I knew how he loved parties and, stupid, self-sacrificing martyr that I was, I insisted that he went without me.

"I need an early night, and I'm dying to know what it's like over there," I urged him. The people in the boat joined in, and he was persuaded. He went inside for a thick pullover, kissed me, and climbed down the *Darnley*'s ladder and into the dinghy. They shoved off with one of the oars and then pulled out into the creek. I watched them, waving, as they crossed the creek and rowed up one of the narrow inlets that wound through the bank of marshes. I could still just see them as they cleared the marshes and pulled away up the other deeper channel towards the island. But then the moon clouded over and I lost sight of them, and I turned away feeling childishly "left out", and then laughing at myself for being such a baby.

I went to bed in the small cabin that leads off this saloon and lay awake for a while, listening to the tinny music that drifted across the water. They even played "Hold That Tiger" once, and I smiled, thinking I'd tell Mr. Dunkworth where the music came from when his wife wasn't about to jeer at him. All the music seemed to come from the same period—the twenties, I supposed, and I suddenly realised why the people in the dinghy had looked queer. It was their clothes. Beaded dresses, striped blazers, straw boaters. It must be an elaborate fancy dress party, I thought. I was pleased that I had got it all sorted out, and then I drifted off to sleep.

It was daylight when I awoke and realised that I was still alone in the double bunk. Fraser's pyjamas were still

neatly folded on the chair where I had left them; his pillow was plump and smooth. I limped through the saloon, the galley, the other cabin, and then I pulled on a coat and searched the deck. As a last hope I went up the gangway to the sea wall and checked that the car was still parked in the field on the other side.

All right, all right, so he's got stranded on One Tree Island, I told myself. The dinghy must have broken loose from its moorings. I looked across the glittering water at the island, but it was too far away and too low-lying for me to see very clearly. I tried cupping my hands and shouting, but no-one answered; there was just me there, and the water and the marshes and the early morning sky.

Mr. Dunkworth would have a dinghy. He would take me across. I pulled on slacks and a jersey and set off at an uneven trot along the path which had been worn over the years on the top of the sea wall. Mrs. Dunkworth was still in bed when I reached their boat, but her husband was just finishing his breakfast. I gave him the bare outline in a few jagged, panting sentences, and the furrows in his leathery face deepened as he listened. He made me drink a cup of his tea while he stamped into his big waterboots, and then he helped me into his dinghy—it had an outboard motor—and we were chugging up against the tide towards One Tree. We spoke very little. I was too tense and Mr. Dunkworth was intent on steering the little boat round the small craft that were moored in the Bay.

We beat our way up the creek and threaded through the banks of marshes and came out into the deep channel. As we drew near One Tree I saw that the island was protected by another sea wall and I looked up at it, willing someone to appear over its top. We tied the boat to an iron ring set in a flight of slimy concrete steps, but before we had climbed them I knew we were on a fool's errand; if there had been anyone marooned there they would have heard our motor by now.

We stood on top of the wall and looked across the island. Just a large field surrounded by the twisting wall, with an oak tree in the middle; to me it seemed an oddly withdrawn, desolate place. There was no-one there, of course. Just tall, waving grasses rustling in the breeze.

"He's not here, girl," Mr. Dunkworth said.

I shook my head, not daring to speak for a moment.

"I'd like to go across to the tree, just to make sure, if you don't mind."

"Have to be quick, then. Tide's going out."

We slithered down the grassy bank of the wall and made our way through knee-high grass to the tree. It was a waste of time, of course. There was nothing there. And there were no traces of the party, either. No trampled grass, no cigarette ends. Nothing.

Mr. Dunkworth touched my arm, and we went back to the dinghy. We were nosing our way through the marshes before he spoke.

"Look, girl," he said, "you could say this is my fault. I tried to warn you, and then I got riled because you and your hubby laughed. Like I said before, another bloke disappeared off the *Darnley* five years ago—third week in September, it was, like it is now. He was there on his own, though. One day he was there, right as ninepence, the next day he was gone. The police came down, asking questions, and I told them straight they didn't ought to be surprised, not after the queerness there's been about the wall since the night of the party."

He paused here, so I asked, dully, "What party?"

"The party that was fixed to be held on One Tree nearly forty years ago. There were about a dozen houseboats moored up along the wall in those days—fancy affairs, most of 'em, owned by a lot of giddy young folk from London. They used the boats for weekends and holidays, and a right old merry time they used to have, too. Well, some of them fixed to have this end-of-season party. Took over any amount of food and drink, and a gramophone. Then they ferried over all the folk who wanted to go; called on each houseboat along the wall, strangers or friends, it was all one to them. It was a full moon and the water was dead calm. But none of those folk was ever seen again."

"Well—what happened? Were they drowned?"

"That's what it was put down to in the end. But no bodies were ever recovered. And neither was the boat. Now—I'm not saying any more about it; not to the police,

nor anyone else. I was jeered at enough when I dragged it all up last time. People have to laugh at things they don't understand, seemingly, to stop themselves being scared. But I reckoned you had a right to know about it."

Even then I dismissed it. I was intent on hoping, illogically, that Fraser would be waiting for me on Mr. Dunkworth's houseboat.

"Thanks for telling me. But I don't think it's got anything to do with my husband. This was a real, solid, boat that he went off in—when he got in it it rocked and banged against the *Darnley*. I heard it."

We were nearly at Mr. Dunkworth's boat then, and he looked at me and said,

"When did you say the boat called for your husband?"

"Half-past nine—I remember looking at my watch."

There was real pity in his voice as he told me, gently,

"Then it couldn't have been a real boat, girl. The tide was right out then. There wouldn't have been enough water in that creek to float a matchbox."

It's past nine o'clock, Colin, and I've lit a hurricane lamp and taken it out on deck. I'll wait here now. I'm so frightened. Frightened the boat will come, even more frightened that it won't. I may be with Fraser in half an hour's time, that's what I must concentrate on.

You know the rest that happened, during the past year. The police decided the pills I'd been taking for my ankle had confused me, because there was no boat missing, and no other people. The sergeant saw himself as a father figure and told me kindly that husbands often leave their wives, and had we had a quarrel? Then there was my breakdown, and after that nobody took any notice of what I said; everyone was sorry for me, I know, but I was written off as "Unbalanced".

So I didn't talk much about it to anyone, except Mr. Dunkworth. I've made several visits down here during the last few months, and I've got a working theory now. That's all I've got, and I'm acting on it. Those people that called for Fraser—they weren't dead, they weren't ghosts. They were just in the wrong time. I believe that somehow at that first party those people hit upon a snag in time—like

a knot in a piece of wood. Maybe the island itself caused it, there have been superstitions linked with One Tree since the 17th century, according to a book in the local library. But whatever triggered it off time didn't flow on for them in a straight line any more. Everyone else in the world keeps strict pace with each other, second after second, hour after hour, week after week; the people on One Tree have been jerked out of step, and so, to us, they have disappeared. Maybe that's what happened on the *Marie Celeste*—and there have been other unexplained mass disappearances, too.

I believe they've switched to an infinitely slower time scale, but one that crosses ours once a year, on the anniversary of the party. Possibly Fraser thinks he's only been away a few minutes. And if so he wouldn't attempt to come back for perhaps another twenty years. And then I've the feeling that he wouldn't be able to get back anyway, or some of those "giddy young folk" would have made their reappearance by now.

There is only one thing for me to do now, of course. Mr. Dunkworth knows about it and has lent the *Darnley* to me for this night, bless him. There is a moon again, and the tide is going out, and the mud banks curve smoothly down to the water. I wish we were children again, Colin, back in our blue and white bedroom with Mum coming in to tuck us up.

Colin—the music. I can hear the music again, thin, scratchy ragtime music. And the water—it's swirling back up the sides of the creek, bringing that deathly coldness with it; it's washing against the houseboat already. It's all happening again, Colin, and you're my last link with the safe world. Do your best for us. Get someone to help us if you can.

This is it, now. I can hear the splash of oars, and voices. And the Island's out there waiting. Be there, Fraser. Please be there.

— PAMELA ADAMS

GREEN GOBLINS YET

by W. Price

We ain't very scientific down at Kate's Grill and we don't dig this outer space lark, like flying saucers and little green men from Venus and that jazz. So when this bod comes in, gabbling about goblins, we give him the cold eye.

"Gobble off," says Spike, "Me an' Jigsy ain't interested. Go peddle your vacuum cleaners somewhere else."

But this character acts like he ain't heard. He plonks down at our table and fixes me and Spike with two great peepers, bulging wide and innocent-like, behind thick-lensed glasses. Pale blue they are, his eyes I mean, and sorta far away, as if his wits have gone wandering and ain't home yet. A real egghead.

"I am not selling vacuum cleaners," he says, in a voice all Network Three and rich Abernethy biscuits, "I am wondering if you gentlemen can help me."

Like I say, a real egghead.

"Sure we can," says Spike, who is real quick on the uptake. "Me an' Jigsy will have a coffee."

So we are drinking his coffee and it seems only polite to listen. I mean, we ain't morons.

"I am looking for a goblin," says Egghead, solemn and mysterious, like he is forbidding the banns or something.

"A goblin?" says Spike, tipping me the wink. "How are we on goblins, Jigsy boy?"

"It's been a bad season," I chuckle. "Not a single goblin to be found north of a line drawn from Chipping Sodbury to the Wash."

Spike stutters and splutters and I think he is spitting in his coffee. Then he gets it out. "Statistics," he says, "is Jigsy's strongpoint."

Egghead don't turn a hair. "I know where *my* goblin

is," says he, "but I am a stranger here and need help to find it."

Me and Spike exchange glances. This is a genuine, full-rigged, ocean-going headcase, and no mistake. Complete with a squadron of bats in his number one size belfry. A nut to end all nuts.

Spike glims his watch and jumps up. "I gotta blast off," he cries. "Pancakes for tea. If I'm late, the old queen will pin my ears to the mantelpiece."

He shoots out of the caff and I feel sorta forlorn. There ain't no pancakes waiting for me, and no old queen either. Just me and Egghead, goggling at each other across the table. He is looking at me, kinda hopefully, like I am a column of cavalry coming to save the wagon train.

"Tell me then," I say, "about this goblin."

"It is a green goblin."

"It would be," I mutter to myself, and I am wondering if he thinks I am green too.

"We should not have separated, of course," he goes on, "but it was in the nature of an experiment."

"So you dropped a clanger?"

He looks at me like I am speaking an unknown tongue. He ain't no more with me than I am with him. He fishes a newspaper from his pocket and thrusts it into my hands, stabbing his finger on a news headline: TERROR IN THE PEAK.

The paper is two days old and I remember the story well. A handful of sheep had been torn to pieces on the high moors about Kinder Scout. At first it was thought some big cat had escaped from a circus and was holed up in the hills. Local farmers suggested a pack of dogs, running wild. But the expert who was called in, Professor Somebody-or-Other, said the damage indicated a large carnivore, something in the order of a sabre-toothed tiger. That's what education does for you, I suppose.

"Personally, I'm for the dogs," I say, tossing the paper back to Egghead."

"Not dogs," says he, "Goblins."

"Goblins?"

"One goblin."

I laugh in his face. I ain't wearing that. Goblins are

funny little men, fairy tale creatures. Bad-tempered maybe, but who ever heard of a goblin with the table-manners of a sabre-toothed tiger? And there ain't no such thing in any case.

But Egghead is dead serious. "So you see," he blabs, "it is most important that I find my goblin."

Well, there's a long evening in front of me and I ain't got anything special to do, so I string along with him.

"Okay then. How can I help?"

He beams all over me and springs up from the table. "Excellent, excellent," he babbles. "You have a machine outside, I believe? How long will it take you to transport me to this Kinder Scout area?"

"An hour, maybe less, if the roads are clear," I reply, following him out of the caff. I think perhaps I am dreaming, so I pause in the doorway. Everything seems ordinary. A few customers have their nosebags on, Kate herself, enormous in an off-white overall, is drifting through steam and tobacco smoke, like a greasy iceberg in a fog. Normal as beans on toast; there ain't nothing to suggest goblins, sabre-toothed tigers or even wild dogs.

The hill roads are quiet on account of it being midweek and we make good time. I feel like I can do the ton, but my insides ain't built for high speed and I turn chicken at eighty-five.

Now and then I turn round to see how my passenger is making out. He is no more concerned than if he is dozing in grandma's rocking chair. Old Egghead may be the Lord Mayor of Nutsville, but he certainly plays it cool and I am beginning to like him.

All the same, I am wondering what I am doing on this crazy caper; I am all mixed up menagerie-wise. I can't help thinking this goblin hunt might end up as a wild goose chase and our green goblin turn out to be a white elephant. A mare's nest, so to speak.

In next to no time we are in Hayfield and I take the top road from the village, which runs out at a reservoir lying in the shadow of Kinder itself. From here on it is all leg work and I ain't enthusiastic. No more is Egghead. He lurches up the rough track, flinging his arm and legs

about as if they didn't belong to him, and I suspect he is some sorta backroom boffin who ain't used to exercise.

After a lot of puffing and blowing we scramble up to the bridle path which leads over the top to the Snake Inn on the Sheffield road. Bloody rough going it is too, and we are both bushed. So we squat for a spell and I put a fag on.

It is late summer and already the nights are drawing in. The great mass of Kinder looms in front of us, dark and sullen in the deepening light. There is a chill on the air and I am wishing I was back in Kate's Grill.

Just as I am deciding to ditch Egghead and get back to my jigger, a short, fat man comes tumbling along the path. He is falling over himself with haste and as he gets nearer, I see his eyes are lit with fear in his pale, sweating face. He looks like a man who has escaped from Dracula's castle and bumped into Frankenstein on the way out.

He is in reach-me-down russet sportswear and when he reaches us, he stands for a minute, quivering all over like a Harris tweed jelly. Then he sinks to the ground, boneless as a thornproof blancmange.

I ain't ever seen such a bag of nerves.

"Get a grip on yourself, Dad," I say, "You are safe enough here."

"Safe?" He laughs, sardonic like. "There ain't a blade of grass safe where that thing is. With my own eyes I seen it polish off a couple rams, like they was spam sandwiches."

Egghead yanks him to his feet, with surprising strength.

"Where?" he bellows, "Where did you see it?"

I see the bloke struggling to pull himself together. He manages to steady his arm long enough to point across to the mountain. "Cherry Tree Clough, that's where I seen it. All green and sorta leathery it was. A gobling—s'help me—a bloody great gobling."

He breaks free of Egghead's grasp and stumbles headlong down the path towards Hayfield. I guess he's got the right idea and I am with him all the way. Things are taking a nasty turn and I ain't happy.

"Let's get down," I say to Egghead, "We can't do any

good here. It'll be as black as the hobs of hell in another half hour."

But Egghead ain't listening. His great eyes are yearning towards the black mass of Kinder. "It is over there, Jigsy," he breathes, in that cut-glass voice of his. "We have got to find it—we have got to."

"Not this kind."

He looks at me and I see a curious mixture of gentleness and strength in his face. "Of course," he says, "You don't need to come any farther. You have been a great help already. I daresay I can find this Cherry Tree Clough on my own."

I think of him floundering about in the dark and I feel a giant-sized heel. I know Cherry Tree Clough very well. Me and Spike took a coupla birds there, one time. A disastrous venture it was too. What with all the fresh air and exercise, me and Spike were too tired to perform.

"Lead on, Egghead," I say, "I'm with you."

All right, so I'm a sucker; but I ain't going to be made chicken by any old goblin.

There's more to this night rambling than meets the eye, and by about one o'clock in the morning we are not only well into the Clough, but right up the bloody creek. We are dog-tired, up to the eyes in mud, and as for seeing goblins, it is so dark we couldn't see a rhinoceros if it was standing on our feet.

I flop down and rest my back against a tree I have just bumped into. The ground is wringing wet and I am wondering if there is such a thing as teenage rheumatism.

"It's no use, Egghead," I say, "We can't do any good until it gets light. Let's kip down for an hour or two."

Egghead's voice comes out of the dark, a little tired but still all vintage port and good cigars. "Yes Jigsy, old chap, I am afraid you are right. Try to get some sleep. The goblin is not nocturnal and in any event you will be safe enough while the sheep last out."

Charmin', ain't it? Anyway we settle down, and I never spent such a miserable night. Half the time I ain't sure if I'm asleep or not. But I must have dropped off, for suddenly it is daylight and I am wide awake, all my senses

on the alert. Primitive instincts I suppose, like I am a caveman who suspects there is a dinosaur at his front door.

I look round in a panic. Egghead is gone, and I am real concerned. He is a decent sorta bod and I hate to think of him wandering about unprotected. Then I recollect he is kinda clued up on this goblin lark and I feel better.

There is a stream hard by and I am swilling the sleep outa my face when a large sheep comes bounding out of a thicket of low trees. I am startled half outa my wits; but it ain't nothing to what follows. A Thing bounces out of the trees and seizes the poor sheep. It stands for a moment with the animal held in two long arms and I see it is a sorta goblin, about the size of a gorilla. It is as green as meadow grass, all over, and it has a skin like a crocodile. There ain't a stitch of clothing on it, but I am not embarrassed 'cos there ain't no embarrassing parts to be seen, dangling or otherwise. Now I understand why goblins are bad-tempered; and no wonder there ain't many of them about.

I am taking all this in during a coupla seconds, while the goblin is licking its great lips and drooling over the sheep. It has an enormous head, with big round eyes, pointed ears and a mouth about eighteen inches wide, full of vicious-looking teeth, like a man-eating shark. Then there is a great outcry from the sheep, a tremendous gnashing of teeth and a sickening slobbering sound as the goblin rends the living flesh from its victim, wool and all.

Trees and rocks whirl round, I am violently sick, and when my eyes are back in focus, about ten seconds later, I see the goblin wiping blood from its mouth and picking odd bits of wool from its teeth. A heap of clean white bones is all that remains of the sheep, and I am reminded of them South American fish that are all teeth.

All at once I find myself face to face with the goblin and I am rooted in a sorta frozen fascination. I see knives and forks flashing in its great orbs and I read its mind, like an open book: *Jigsy for afters.*

My spirit is doing a four minute mile towards Hayfield, but my flesh won't budge an inch. The goblin takes a step towards me and I summon up enough wit to run, but

my bowels are ahead of me and I stand there like a small boy who has put his hand up, too late.

Then I remember I am a human being. I draw myself up to my full five-feet-four-and-five-eights and turn the full power of my human eye on the goblin. But it don't seem to have any effect and I am thinking bitter things about white hunters and lion tamers.

"Here—you horrible monster," I say, imperious like, "What have you done with old Egghead?"

The goblin grins all over its ugly face.

"Sorry to have startled you, Jigsy old chap," it says, in a voice all Network Three and rich Abernethy biscuits, "I have found my goblin and I am going home. If you ever get to Venus, look me up. I will be glad to have you for lunch."

My grey matter is racing at full throttle and I am afraid it might leave the road altogether. Like in a nightmare, I see a shining metallic disc slide over the rim of Kinder and glide down into the clough. The goblin waves its hand to me and climbs aboard. The flying disc slips silently into the mountain mist and I am left wondering if I have dreamt it all.

Full of nameless horrors and forebodings, I turn away and begin to walk down, feeling like I am carrying Kinder Scout on my shoulders. Then I remember Venus is 36,000,000 miles away. And it is a great comfort.

— W. PRICE

STATE OF MIND

by E. C. Tubb

Just when it had happened he couldn't tell.

It was strange, when he thought about it, this lack of certainty. When a man has lived with a woman for more than fifteen years she should have no secrets. In that time he should have learned her every gesture, every idiosyncrasy, each eccentricity. He should know her every mannerism, the way she put thoughts into words, the phrases which triggered emotion and the way that emotion was displayed. He should know her every thought.

Well—perhaps not her every thought. There had to be something left between them if they were to remain two, distinct personalities.

Grudgingly he admitted that but, having admitted it, reached the end of his tolerance. So she could have her thoughts but the rest of her, all the little things which made her what she was, he should know them. Know them so well that any trifling divergence from her established pattern of behaviour would have been a flashing alarm and a shouted warning.

And yet, somehow, he had missed that warning.

He watched her as she sat beneath the lamp. She was knitting; she had, he remembered, been fond of knitting but now she seemed to be knitting all the time. He watched the deft way she managed her needles, the efficiency with which her fingers managed the wool, the abstract, almost withdrawn expression on her face.

What was she thinking?

He coughed and sought for something to say. He found it increasingly difficult to make conversation, the words seemed forced, unreal, and yet he couldn't be blamed for that. It was hard to talk to someone all the time. Hard to talk when they never said anything, volunteered anything. It was, he thought, like shouting into an empty room and hearing only an echo. A man grew tired of echoes.

"What are you knitting?" His voice, he knew, was full of interest and enthusiasm.

"Only a jumper." Her voice, like her eyes, was dull and empty.

"Another jumper?" Lightness, a touch of humour, a growing interest. "Why don't you knit something else for a change?"

"I'll think about it." The needles clicked busily for a while then: "Anything interesting happened today, Henry?"

Forced, he thought. My God, how forced! What the hell did she care what had happened to him during the day?

"Nothing much." He picked up the evening paper and hid his face behind its pages. "Just the usual round. You?"

"The same as usual."

He didn't comment. The conversation was over. The clicking of her needles punctuated the silence.

When had it happened? It was the when, not the how which worried him. The how was unimportant, it had happened, that was a fact. But when?

There was that incident a few weeks ago. They had gone to a movie, a Western, he thought. It had been a good film with plenty of shooting and lots of fast action. The men were rugged and the women beautiful and he had enjoyed himself for a change. It was, he thought bitterly, one of the few occasions when he had enjoyed himself. He had even, for a little while, managed to forget the nagging worry of trying to keep a basically unsound business solvent for a while longer.

And then had come the incident of the ice cream.

He didn't like ice cream. He hadn't been able to enjoy it for years and Susan knew damn well that he didn't like it. But she had bought some, two portions, and had offered him one.

The utter thoughtlessness of it had driven him into a rage.

"You know that I can't stand the stuff!" From her expression he knew that he was shouting but he didn't care. "What do you mean offering it to me?"

"Henry, please!" She had looked embarrassed, or so he had thought. People were staring at them and an usherette walked their way. He had thrust aside the ice cream, left his seat, stormed from the cinema. Susan, of course, had followed him and they had travelled home together without exchanging a word. The silence had lasted three days.

But had it been embarrassment—or fear?

He thought about the incident again, the newspaper shielding his face, his eyes blank as he stared into the past.

Embarrassment—or fear?

It was important, that question. A woman could be embarrassed by the shouted refusal of a gift. Add to that the fact that she was known, that people who were her friends watched the incident and you could arrive at a logical answer. But Susan knew that he detested ice cream. She should never have offered it to him.

Susan, the real Susan, would never have offered it to him.

So—had it been fear?

He lowered the newspaper and watched her as she sat there so patiently industrious with her knitting. Had she always been so industrious? She had been fond of knitting, agreed, but as fond as all that?

It was an item. He added it to other items.

The total made him feel inwardly sick.

There had been that time at the store. They had gone shopping together and there had been that young assistant. He had served her, cracking jokes and acting the fool and she had liked it. That was the incredible part—she had liked it. Watching them, noticing how their hands had touched, reading the secret messages in their eyes, he had known a sudden rush of anger.

Did she think him a fool?

Outside he had been unable to contain his rage. He had faced her with what she had done and, incredibly, she had defied him.

"What else do you expect me to do?" He had hated the expression on her face. "You don't treat me as a human being. You don't talk to me or take me out or anything."

"That's a lie!" The blatantness of it shocked him. "We're out now, aren't we? We're talking, aren't we?"

"I don't mean like this." Her eyes were swimming with tears. She rested her hand on his arm. "Can't you see what you're doing to me, Henry? It's getting so that I'd talk to strangers just to have someone say a kind word to me. Laugh at their jokes just to see them smile."

"You—!" He snatched his arm away. He saw her turn white at the word. He didn't regret using it.

He seized her arm and shoved her roughly towards the car. "Now get home and stop acting like a common whore!"

She struck him then, slashing his face with her open hand before she ran to the bus stop. For a moment everything had turned misty, his rage was so intense that it affected his vision. He started after her; had he caught her he would have killed her. But he didn't get the chance.

"Slow down, Henry." Doctor Melhuish had him by the arm. "What's the matter with you?"

He tried to speak, to explain, but an iron hand was around his throat and he couldn't speak.

"Sit down." The doctor was suddenly concerned. "Here, let me ease your collar." He turned and smiled as he saw Susan coming towards them. She had seen what had happened.

"Is he——?"

"He'll be all right." Melhuish looked at Henry. "You ought to be ashamed of yourself," he said, and he meant it. "Shouting after Susan like that. You've got a good wife there. A damn good wife."

Then everything had dissolved in roaring and redness and his screamed denial was lost in the noise.

They said that he'd had a stroke, nothing serious but he had to take things easy. He took them easy for ten days before worry drove him back to the desk, to the books, to employees who couldn't be trusted and bills that couldn't be paid.

He worked twenty hours a day and was glad of it. Work numbed his brain, kept him from thinking, kept him from wondering just when it had all began. He had no doubts

now, only a cold, bitter certainty. And yet he hid it. He was, he thought, clever and cunning and, by God, he could act too. But he was forewarned and watchful.

He would be fair, he decided. He would fall over backwards to be fair. It was possible, remotely possible, that he was wrong. He saw nothing wrong in his attitude, nothing that couldn't be explained as being due to work and preoccupation and worry over the business but he would be fair. He would be normal, forget his worries, give Susan no chance to blame his attitude for her own.

But, all the time, he would watch. One day, inevitably, she would betray herself.

And betray herself she did.

He thought about it sitting behind his newspaper, staring at print with eyes which did not see the columns of type. How cunning she had been. How cleverly she had explained away the inexplicable. How smooth her words, how glib her rationalisation. But she had wasted her time. She had gone too far. Now, as never before, he had no doubt.

He looked at her sitting beneath the lamp. It was night and, aside from the hum of passing cars, silent. They had a radio but it wasn't on. They had a television but the screen remained blank. The stupid sounds and stupid pictures annoyed him with their banality and he could no longer tolerate them. So they sat, man and wife, she with her knitting and he with his newspaper. They would sit until they went to bed, there to lie almost touching but worlds apart.

They would sleep, or pretend to, and then they would rise and he would go out to work and she would stay in the house and . . .

And do—what?

Once he had sneaked back after he had left and stared at her through a window. She had been sitting in that same chair, her hands in her lap, her eyes staring blankly before her. He had the impression that she had sat that way ever since he had left, that she would continue to sit there until he returned.

Was that the action of a normal woman?

And was it the action of a normal woman to put salt in the coffee?

She had done that only this morning. She had set out the cup and he had tasted it and then had spat the mouthful across the room.

"Salt!" He had screamed the accusation. She had cringed, her eyes huge in her face.

"No, Henry!"

"Don't lie to me!" His throat was sore from shouting. "You tried to poison me you—!"

She hadn't struck him, not this time. Instead she had picked up his cup and swallowed the coffee and had looked at him with what others would have called pity but which he knew to be triumph.

The bitch had destroyed the evidence!

Later Melhuish had dropped in at the office, ostensibly to exchange idle gossip. Henry had been cunning. He said nothing about the coffee, had even talked casually of Susan, had promised to drop in at the doctor's for a medical. He had smiled and lied as he smiled and had felt pride that he could do so.

On the way out Melhuish paused.

"You know, Henry," he said, "you're a very sick man."

"I'm fine."

"You only think you are. That stroke threw you back quite a bit." Melhuish hesitated. "The brain's a funny thing, you know, Henry. Sometimes it gets its wires crossed. If that happens don't let it throw you."

Henry had promised that it wouldn't. He had kept smiling instead of calling the man a fool but, behind that smile, he hid naked fear.

For now he knew what it was all about.

She was going to kill him.

She was going to take his life and take it because only then could she be really safe. The salt in the coffee had been a mistake—or had it? She couldn't know everything and could have taken the salt for a poison. It was logical enough. Salt is composed of two poisons and she couldn't know that, together, they are harmless.

A natural mistake?

An attempt at murder?

Who could follow the processes of an alien mind?

It was better now that it was out in the open.

Sitting behind the shield of his newspaper he didn't have to hide the expression on his face, the loathing he felt whenever he looked at the woman who pretended to be his wife. If he only knew just when—but he didn't know, he doubted if he would ever know.

Not that it mattered, not now. Susan, his Susan, was gone and this thing had taken her place. If she had been a better actor, had known a little more, had been more willing to learn—

He sighed, tormenting himself with thoughts of what-might-have-been. He had loved his wife—God how he had loved her. He had lived through an agony of tormenting doubt as he had watched her change, seen the subtle alteration from a happy, carefree woman into what now sat silently knitting in that chair.

The alien thing which had come to share his life.

The unknown creature which wanted to destroy him.

He was surprised that he felt so calm. His rages had passed, his storming angers, his insane, uncontrollable accusations. He had been foolish there, but he had done no real harm. He had never faced her with the truth, the real truth, and she had been quick with her denials and explanations.

And that, now he came to think of it, was the biggest betrayal of all.

For it hadn't been his fault as she had hysterically claimed. His attitude towards her hadn't altered. He had been worried, sure, but he was working for her, wasn't he? What normal woman would blame a man for working hard to provide her with the things she wanted?

No normal woman, that was for sure.

And she had tried to kill him.

He thought that he could have borne everything but that. So it had stolen his wife, killed her perhaps, taken her body. So it had made mistakes and been thoughtless and, for all he knew, unfaithful. It had forgotten important things and made him feel a fool and thrown him into rages. But did it have to kill him?

A bead of sweat fell to the paper in his hands. It made a damp patch which widened as he watched it. The silence of the night grew oppressive, the sense of waiting, of mounting tension, of anticipation. How long could a man continue waiting to be killed? How long did he have to sit and wait and all the time knowing that the thing which had taken over his wife was hating him and watching him and wanting to get rid of him so that it could carry on without fear of discovery?

He rose and went out into the kitchen. "It" looked at him as he passed but he didn't say anything; he had nothing to say. He took a drink of water, not because he wanted it but so as to satisfy its curiosity as to what he was doing.

He found what he wanted almost at once.

Back in the room he stood behind its chair. He simply stood and waited and he was quite calm, quite relaxed, quite certain as to what he had to do. He watched the needles falter, their movement cease. He saw the face look at him, the eyes wide and peculiar. He even found it possible to smile.

"Henry!" The name rose to a scream. *"Henry!"*

He raised his arm, lifting it high before swinging it and what he held down hard against the face with the terrified eyes.

The cleaver was very sharp.

— E. C. TUBB

A thumping good yarn

THE FOREIGNER

by Johnny Byrne

There was this thudding. It came from the room upstairs and sounded like a loosely filled sack of potatoes being regularly dropped from a considerable height. It was happening directly over my head. It went on and on. And on. I snapped. I broke out into a sudden sweat. I vaguely remember flinging away whatever it was I held in my hands and tearing up the stairs with all kinds of hot lights blinking in my mind. I paused somewhat less than a moment outside the door of the offending room and then broke in without ceremony.

I stopped just inside the door.

My eyes took in instantly the incredible confusion of the room and came to rest on the action that was taking place about six inches below the ceiling. Two high step-ladders supported a wide heavy board on which a figure lay rocking gently from side to side. On my entrance the figure jerked up startled, caught its head smartly on the ceiling, lost its balance and with a shriek of fear and surprise toppled to land awkwardly on the floor. It groaned once and lay still. There was a nasty silence.

From what I could see I judged it to be a man. He appeared to be dressed only in a mattress. It was wrapped around him under the arms and reached to just below the knee. It was held in place by a profusion of straps, buckles and hooks. From inside the mattress a long snarl of cheap, plastic-covered flex ran to a plug in the skirting-board. A faint sound of radio crackle came from the mattress and, from time to time, a blue spark.

The man was out cold. The exposed parts of his body were a mass of bruised flesh. His face, especially, was in bad shape. I remember thinking he must have had powerful reasons for wanting to roll off that platform the way he'd been doing—mattress or no mattress.

The room was cluttered with gear of all kinds but the only thing whose function was readily apparent was the bed. The rest was mostly electronic stuff, the guts, presumably, of the pile of TV and radio cabinets stacked in one corner. There was flex everywhere, miles of it. In one part of the floor stood a heavy wooden packing-case full of bricks. It was lashed with ropes which led to a block-and-tackle arrangement on the ceiling. Great gaping holes in the plaster work overhead testified to numerous relocations of the pulleys.

Explanations eluded me temporarily. A good few years spent in boarding-houses up and down the country have made me a connoisseur of eccentric neighbours. I began to have a vague feeling this character was going to take some beating.

A sound and he was sitting up shaking his head and muttering. "Ho!" he said when he finally saw me.

I began somewhat confusedly to explain, and apologise for, my presence in his room. He just sat there shaking his head slowly from side to side in a sad and thoughtful kind of way. He either didn't hear me or didn't understand. When I had finished he began a mumbled harangue in what sounded like broken English. I understood precisely nothing. I was just about as shaken as he was. His intonation was distinctly foreign; his voice sibilant and high pitched. I guessed he was a German because I knew there were a lot of them about. He had fair hair, too.

"I live below . . . " I was just starting to go through my spiel again when he jerked to his feet like some kind of weird beetle out of Kafka. He went over to the wall-socket and unplugged his ridiculous cable. Then he beckoned me over to the window. "Down there," he said, pointing to the street, "am I fatal?"

It took me a moment to realise that he was asking my opinion as to the suitability of his rolling off the window-ledge to the pavement forty feet below.

"Absolutely," I said, moving imperceptibly between him and the window. It looked like I'd got myself involved in things best steered clear of.

He decided not to try it. He stared longingly at the pavement and clucked regretfully. Then he introduced him-

self. His name was Gulleteer or Gunnetheer or something like that, I didn't quite catch it. An alarming adjunct of the introduction was the typically Teutonic way in which he gripped me fiercely by the shoulder, ignoring my outstretched hand and staring fixedly at his feet.

Introduction over, we moved to the centre of the room. I studiously kept my eyes away from the mattress. It upset me. The flex trailed from it like a cold spilled gut.

He began to tell me something. His language was rapid and, at best, hovered just above the threshold of intelligibility.

"You wonder?" he said, indicating his roomful of contraptions and confusion. "A problem of impacting now that I am astray. Difficulties now are my lack of suitable projecting. Force and area of impacting known—" he patted the front of his mattress, "—but difficult to manifest, difficult to manifest. Dangerous. Without Sonals painful albeit." He paused, rubbing his shoulders tenderly and then added more brightly as if remembering something important: "I am unearthly!"

I agreed wholeheartedly with this but didn't say so. "Example," he went on, moving over to the crate of bricks and beckoning me to follow. He gripped a rope and began to strain mightily. The heavy box rose slowly into the air. Flakes of plaster showered down from the ceiling. When the crate was as high as it would go, almost against the ceiling, he made me take the rope. Bemused, almost dragged off my feet I managed to hold on. "Impossible to calculate area of drop when alone," said Gunnetheer earnestly. "You hold now I lie." He patted me on the back and bustled about gibbering maniacally. "Hold, hold," he shouted and, swiftly plugging in his mattress once more, extended himself on the floor directly beneath the dangerously swaying crate. He held up one hand. "Steadying," he appealed. "Steadying now . . ."

I felt intolerably hot. My arms were aching. The rope slipped a little in my sweating hands. I tried to remonstrate with him, to urge him to abandon these bone-crushing and lunatic experiments, but what with his gibbering and my need to concentrate my whole being on holding the rope, my pleas went unheard. I remember thinking as the

rope and I parted company that he'd probably been doing this kind of thing for years and maybe one more time wouldn't hurt him any.

Pulley squealing, plaster showering, the crate landed squarely on his chest. There was a horrible thud and, almost simultaneously a gasp like a dying zeppelin. Then silence. I ran to pull the box off and helped him to his feet. "A question of impacting, you see," he wheezed painfully, brushing the dust from his mattress. He seemed a bit shaken but otherwise all right. There was an abstracted look in his eyes and he began to mutter to himself in his own language. Then he pointed to the wall socket. I went and took the plug out. "You are helping me," he said. He began to struggle out of the mattress. "There is the question of nodal points. Difficult to calculate. There are adjustments." I kept silent and helped him with his buckles and fasteners. He sighed and seemed old suddenly. "Never be astray," he warned me sadly. "The life is not good here. Barbarous."

"That's it," I thought, "a death-wish." I didn't want to aggravate it so I restrained my impulse to inquire why he chose such a complicated way to go.

He was wearing shorts under the mattress. The part of his body that it had covered was swollen, covered with bruises and criss-crossed with angry red weals. He spread the mattress on the floor and unzipped a sort of panel on the inside. When he opened it I could see that most if not all of the original stuffing had been replaced by coils, wires, condensers and, of course, the inevitable miles of flex. He started fiddling with what he called the Nodal Points and telling me about the difficulties he was having trying to imitate a Sonal. I lay down beside him and watched him work. He didn't seem to mind. All the time, he kept up his horribly garbled surrealist monologue about Nodes and Questions of Impact with occasional references to the Barbarity of the Life. Sometimes his voice became wistful when he spoke of what I took to be his home town—a place with an unpronounceable middle-European name.

"That!" he said at last, straightening up wearily. "We are again attempting." I thought it was about time I made

a serious effort to direct his thoughts into healthier avenues, when suddenly there was an appalling noise from the street below. A loud explosion was followed by the searing sound of brakes applied at speed and then the tearing crash of a collision. A shocked pause, and then we ran to the window. A car was wrapped untidily around the lamp-post across the street. The lamp-post was bent. People were hurrying from all parts to admire the spectacle. Something was being lifted from the wreck and placed gingerly on the pavement, to be covered a moment later by a hasty overcoat.

"That's impact for you," I said with a nervous attempt at humour, unable to think of anything better at the time.

"Yes, impact," he replied, taking in the scene. Then he stiffened. "Impact!" he said. "Yes!" He looked at me. There was a sort of crazy hope in his eyes. "IMPACT!" he shouted, and let loose a burst of squealing laughter. "Ho!" he said, pointing to the wreck, "that is impacting. Thanking. Thanking." He seized my shoulder and squeezed it painfully several times. He began to pace the room with short agitated steps. "Look," I began nervously, "forget what I said. That's not impact out there, that's . . ."

He took not the slightest notice of me. He was mumbling again in his own language and counting on his fingers. "THAT WAS DESTRUCTION OUT THERE!" I yelled. "FORGET WHAT I JUST SAID, WILL YOU?"

He went right on mumbling and pacing.

"Look," I said soothingly, "it's much better with the platform, don't you think? Here, I'll even help you with the crate." I dashed over to the rope to show I was in earnest. "I'll haul your bloody box up for you as often as you like," I shouted, really scared, "BUT STAY AWAY FROM THAT STREET OUTSIDE!"

"Ho!" he said, as if seeing me for the first time. He came over and peered into my sweating face. "I am not forgetting you. And now the thanking." He gripped me painfully by the shoulder again and started to edge me towards the door, muttering something once more about Nodes and Sonals.

"Don't do it!" I warned weakly.

There was still that same look of crazy hope in his eyes when he closed the door gently behind me.

So that was that. I went back to my room and tried, but failed, to dismiss him as a potentially dangerous manic-depressive with an eccentric flair for electronic invention. I didn't mind too much what damage he did to himself provided he did it in private and stopped short of actual self-immolation. I'd been mixed up once before in a similar scene and found that The Law was unwearying in its demands for explanations even when it was painfully obvious that there were nothing to be explained and/or no one left to explain it.

Immediately prior to my dashing upstairs in a fit of maddened rage I had been trying to prepare a delicately-flavoured curry sauce on my gas ring. What had been the beginnings of a mushroom *bhaji* was now a charred and evil-looking mess. That didn't please me. Worse—I found that the object I had been holding in my hands and had flung from me with such mindless violence at the moment of my departure was none other than my precious supply of cardamom seeds. These were now scattered like goat droppings all over the floor. I felt an urgent desire to indulge in really loud vituperation of the irresponsible foreigner upstairs. I restrained my impulses, half afraid of provoking another outburst of crate-dropping. "Meal wrecker!" I hissed between clenched teeth. "Thud-pig!" I could hear the ceaseless slap-slap of his feet across the linoleum of his room. What lunacy was he planning? I organised precautions designed to forestall if not remedy any acts of public self-destruction that might be imminent. I opened all the windows in order to hear better the thud of any impacting that might be happening in the street. I also opened my door a little in case he thought of creeping down the stairs and dashing out the front door in his outlandish mattress to pit bone and sinew against motorised steel.

I rationalised this last act of deliberate interference by going to the top of the stairs and saying loudly, "There! that should let the smell out!" I don't know if he heard me.

Then I cleaned up the room and found I had no appetite left. I made some coffee and got into bed. I tried to read, listening anxiously with one ear to the slap-slap of naked feet which continued above.

Noises woke me. A sort of swishing sound was coming from the passage in the hall. I got out of bed swearing horribly in a mumbly voice. As I was pulling on my jeans I heard a loud yell from the street. Then there was a frantic squeal of brakes followed by the sound of a car accelerating rapidly into the distance. I charged out into the hall. Through the open front door I could see the lumpy, nightmarish figure of Gunnetheer raging with upraised clenched fists at the back of the retreating motorist who, by skill and good fortune, had just managed to avoid smashing him.

I started forward but immediately collapsed in the arachnid snarl of the flex complex which was all over the hall, looping and coiling down the stairs from his room. As I tried desperately to fumble free, I could hear the approaching thunder of a heavy vehicle.

"No!" I shouted. "Hold on!" But there was no holding the impact-maddened foreigner. I saw him leap back to the pavement and crouch by a lamp-post. I shouted again, almost clear of the wire. He acknowledged with a brief turn of the head. His face was set in a fierce grimace of concentration. "Be clear!" I heard him shout above the noise of a lorry, almost level now. "I am impacting!"

"Christ no!" I yelled, and tore through the door. I froze on the steps and saw it all happen in slow motion. The wagon was an eight-wheeled articulated and didn't have a snowball's chance in hell of avoiding him. Above the gasp and hiss of the air-brakes came Gunnetheer's triumphant shout of "THAT!" as the lorry hit him.

At the moment of impact there was, I remember, a blue crackle that flashed around the mattress and then—nothing. Only a pile of wires in the road and a smell of burning in the air. He had vanished under my eyes.

The lorry came pounding to a halt twenty or thirty yards down the road and moments later a white-faced

fear-shaking truckie was on the scene. "You saw it?" he gibbered. "A bloody nut. He done it on purpose, jumped right out at me. A bloody nut." Then, "Where is it?" he asked, meaning the body. He began to stumble about, looking in the gutter. "Where is he then?" he asked again.

"You tell me," I whispered, and then louder, pointing to the squashed mass of coils and fibres that had been the mattress: "There he is." The driver went over and examined it. "It's a bloody mattress," he said.

"Exactly," I said.

I turned and went back to my room, beginning to understand at last. [Wherever it was you wanted to get back to, Gunnetheer, I thought, I certainly hope you made it.]

— JOHNNY BYRNE

EDITORIAL—*continued from page* 3

On the face of it, though, it doesn't look as though the shape of things in the world of A.D. 3000 is anything easy to imagine nowadays, presuming, of course, that there will be people on that world at all. The cult of comfort may go (you don't think it is a cult?) for economic reasons, but there is no reason to suppose that what might replace it would be regarded as austerity. One may reasonably suppose the development of more flexible building techniques, but considering our predilection for "cosy" bungalows in an age of over-crowding and road congestion, it is difficult to imagine the ways in which they may be applied. Not, please note, impossible to imagine . . .

One thing is certain: there will be no Wurlitzer organ architecture. They won't have everything.

— JAMES PARKHILL-RATHBONE

GOODNIGHT, SWEET PRINCE

by Philip Wordley

"Yes, yes, I know. But what I want is *colour*. Get that? *Colour*." And Art Kirbitz's horny little mitts grabbed a handful of none-too-fresh Tudor air and flung it skywards. His director, Harry Gorrin, followed it with his eyes, as if expecting it to burst into iridescent bubbles and float over the lousy thatched roofs in a glory of Kirbitz-Kolor. If it had, it wouldn't have surprised Harry.

"But, leader," he ventured diffidently. "Surely authenticity is more——"

"Authenticity Schmorthenticity," snorted Art, adroitly dodging a hurtling mess of ullage from a bedroom window. "That's a hunk of fruit salad and you know it. So we should be authentic? You want we should play the art-houses with this one? We're playing to *people*, boy, not crumbs who grow hair on their nuts and still read books."

"But, leader," said Harry again. It was the phrase he used a hundred times a day, and was about all Kirbitz Motto:—"Art for Art's sake—get it, boy?") ever allowed him to say. "But, leader, surely the point of bringing a unit on time location is to catch the period as it really was, else what's the point?" And he stopped, abashed at the sound of his own voice. It was the most he had said in months.

"Turtle-trotters," jeered Kirbitz. "The point of bringing a unit on time location is to fill the theatres. So the mugs think they've got history as it was, so they're happy. So they unload the credits at the little plastic windows, then *we're* happy. O.K., so maybe they *do* get a bit of what it was—the stink, the queer lingo, the bedroom capers in the rushes, but you can't make a tri-vid outa *that*. Stands to reason. Real life ain't never enough, else who'd watch the tri-vids? There's gotta be an Art Kirbitz to jet it up, give it a touch of Art—Art, get it, boy?"

Harry got it. He'd got it a few score times before, not

that Kirbitz ever remembered saying it. He just hoped if he plugged on long enough, he'd get the old nut groggy.

"Now take this Shakespeare," orated Art. "He's just gone into the Globe, right? So we should follow him and waste our tape on that heap of hams? We got real actors —*actors* boy—that can lose 'em. So we've shot the Globe outside, we've shot the Globe inside. That's all we need for your authentic fairy-fodder. Now we make it *live,* right? Real life ain't never enough." And he leered absently at a hopeful little whore who was playing the river bank that day. She leered back and Art flicked on his lapel mike.

"Memo," he said to his belt-recorder. "Test that dame for Mary Queena Scots."

Then he turned his back on the disgruntled doxy and trundled off to find the unit, leaving Harry to make out as best he could.

Two tragedies together are too much for a man, even if he writes one and lives the other. Our tragedy is over now, Anne, so I can write you this letter ; the tragedy I wrote—the play founded on Kydd's old "Hamlet"—is finished too. Richard, Gus and all the dear lads (Ned too, Anne) are learning their scripts in the tiring-room as I write this. I can hear Hal Condell's stutter, Gus's sage Polonius, and dear Dick (who longs to see you again, by the bye)—his voice soars into the rafters and comes down full of sunbeams. "O what a rogue and peasant knave am I!" he says, and if he speaks it so, none will believe him. He is a kingly man, Anne, and a kindlier one than the brash lad who sat at table in Warwickshire. Something has happened to Dickon ; but he will have us all damned before he tells us what.

So, my darling and my wife, one tragedy comes to the boards as the other leaves the bed. You have long known how it was with me, Anne, even though you have been so silent. You are a comely grave thing, wife, and when you say nothing, it is because there is too much to say. What was in your heart Anne, sitting at home and knowing? Did you feel the stranger in your bed? When Hamlet died, did you think I would draw to you again? God knows I

tried ; but I could not weep and gather you to me, and God forgive me, I could not love. Did you know that, Anne? I think you did, and knowing it, did you sit like Penelope in the fable, loving and waiting? There is a queen in my play, Anne ; when her husband is murdered she marries the killer and takes him to her bed. Who killed me, Anne? Do you know? And if you had known, would you have opened your arms to my murderer? My murderer has been a woman, Anne, black as lust, white as leprosy and hot and rank as hell. I am telling you this, to show you her true picture ; or have you seen it in my eyes as we were abed? She killed me, Anne ; she killed you and me, and I went gladly to death, cursing to death, fighting, yielding, I know not what. You went to your death, the death of our love, because you had to. You had no choice.

Now, I am back from the grave like stinking Lazarus, hot from a black bed, and I must turn Orpheus and fetch you into the light again—if you wish to share it with me. Anne, may you and God forgive me, for this is a heavy tale and harder to tell as I know not what ending you will give it for me. I have wished for death to stay my telling you this ; but I am alive, as you see, and I must do this act with all the purpose and fixed intent of that other act which brought us both to Hell gate and took me through.

"I knew I wouldn't dig this century," complained Kirbitz. He was sweating through his false beard and the drops were staining his ruff. "All this hair. Why these guys didn't shave like men kayoes me to the ground. So we wear these toupées and cover our chins with gravy-traps." He warmed to his subject. "And there's these drapes, too. The props department coulda done better than that damn museum at New Stratford. Sure we smell like everyone else does, but we *know* we smell, right? And there ain't no showers, and there ain't no laundomat, and this codpiece is killing me. Why did Shakespeare hafta get himself born *here*?" He glared at Harry. "*You* dig this place," he accused. "You're a dreamer. How'm I to know you didn't come here before the unit and father this guy?"

Harry sighed. "Time doesn't work like that," he said soothingly. "And we've been to worse periods than this."

"Tell me just one," invited Art, sticking his chin out. A cutpurse lifted his script and flickered off into an alley to divvy out with the little whore from the river-side.

"Well, leader," said Harry, wondering if he ought to mention it, "There was the murder of Caesar."

Art's little eyes brightened, then rolled to heaven. "Yeah, there was that, I guess. We nearly didn't make it back."

"And whose fault was that?" asked Harry. The truculence of his voice amazed even him, and made Art's ruff rise over his whiskers.

"You been hitting the sack, boy?" he enquired. "Waja mean, whose fault? That beefy cat tried to skewer me when I wanted the steps he was stood on for Albron Sackwell to give Mark Antony's famous speech. Who in hell did he think he was, anyway?" Harry explained it, very patiently. "That beefy cat happened to be Mark Antony," he said, "And he wanted to make his speech."

"Oh," grunted Art, and was quiet for at least three seconds. Then he bounced back, "But Sackwell did it better, ain't that so, boy? Whatta scene that made! Whatta picture!"

"We can never go back to Rome again," said Harry, musing aloud. "That's something, I reckon."

"Not go back?" Art stopped hunting fleas in his doublet. "We've made progress since those days, feller. Why, on that location, the cameras was big enough for any jerk to see a yard away. Now we got thumb-nail size boxes, we can mingle. Think of that, boy—size of equipment halved since 'Caesar', and that was only last year. Or was it next year? This charging through time's got me buffaloed."

He went into an alley to relieve himself, and Harry squatted on the steps of Paul's church and watched the teenage gangs overturning the market stalls in the cloisters. Some day, he reflected hopefully, somebody would come up with a cure for guys like Art Kirbitz. He knew all Art's life history, because Art had told him a few hundred times. Born to a canned foods millionaire, young Art had thus been given a blank cheque as to his future, and having scanned the field with that innate shrewdness God seems to give to the truly illiterate as compensation, had fixed

his sights on the tri-vids. After his first production "Son of the Ten Commandments" had met with what it deserved, he had shrugged, said "That's show business" and hopped back a century to study under Goldwyn. There, under cover as a clapper-boy, he had mastered all the great man's mannerisms, and a veneer of his language, without ever coming within light-years of the root of Sam's real greatness. This did not deter him. He now could talk and act like a movie magnate, couldn't he? He had the dough, hadn't he? He had the vision, the epic way of thinking, hadn't he? Well then, cut the camel curd and let's make movies—er, tri-vids. It worked, too, Harry admitted sourly. His next epic, "The Lust of Bloody Caesar," smashed all known records, and to hell with what the critics wrote. Who read nowadays, anyway? Harry looked up, and met the gaze of the little whore. She met his stare boldly and launched into her patter.

"Come with me, cuz, and I will show you a sight will cost you an English crown but no French one," she said.

Harry yawned with annoyance. She was the fourth that day. "An I had stockfish to spare, there are better rivers," he said equably, lapsing automatically into the Tudor intonation, which for all it baffled Art, was not unlike his own. The idiom was easy if you had studied it, which Art, of course, never had.

She was not in the least disconcerted, but took up his metaphor as if she had been dealing with literate gallants all her fourteen years, which was not far short of the facts.

"Aye, but you will cross much land to find 'em," she said, eyeing him prettily. "And a fish cannot live unwatered long. This river flows clean, my lord ; and if you think not, come to mumchance with me, and laugh on a venture. Is not life a thing of chance?"

"Indeed, young mistress," Harry said gravely, "but only a fool chances for chance sake." And he smiled and prepared to go. God knew where Kirbitz had gone to. He hadn't come out of the alley ; maybe the cut-purse had tapped him for his shoe-buckles, or his sword.

She caught his arm, and looked up into his face. Sud-

denly she looked fourteen, and the patter dropped from her like a film.

"I must eat, my lord. My father is abed and my mother is big i' the belly and craves new bread. Have pity. A penny 'twill cost, no more."

Harry put two crowns into her hand. They bore next year's mint marks, but they were gold. He hurried off, not that he cared what happened to Kirbitz, but the raw unbelieving gratitude on the kid's face, as she blessed him by Jesu and all the saints, shattered him, and he could not trust his tongue. Poor little swine, he thought, I hope she makes some young courtier while she's still got her looks. Some made it, he knew; the country houses of the Queen's élite crawled with them. Maybe with the crowns she could buy a new outfit and catch a big fish like Essex or Raleigh —or was he married? Anyway, she had a chance now; unless her story of her family was true, and he fancied it was.

"Merry England," he said, and ducked into the urine-smelling alley in search of Kirbitz.

He found him at the other end, leaning on a bollard and furtively taping a couple of fishwives trying to outdo each other in verbal garbage.

"Where the hell you been?" he muttered. "I'm doing your work for you. Here's life, here's authenticity for you."

"Those words we have in our time already," said Harry shortly and walked straight on, leaving Art gaping at his back. He found a fairly clean ordinary and got stinking drunk by three in the afternoon. Then he found a bed above the taproom and slept it off. When he woke up there was a smell of new silk in the room and a small loaf of bread on his pillow. He cried for a full ten minutes, then he went downstairs and walked down toward the river.

It began with our theatre in the fields; no, in fact it was before that; the theatre in the fields brought the tragedy to me, but your tragedy began when the Globe was no more than a dream of great voices ringing in the meadows. Your tragedy began in the summer of '97. Were you aware that hot evening when I came back from London to find peace to revise my second play of Henry—were you aware

that I had altered? Was I more attentive, closer in bed, jocular in our little endearments, showing, in fact, all the marks of a guilty man?

We had played the country around town with Henry. Falstaff had gone well with the rustic general who thought him a buffoon, and the rejection scene was always a sure hit with Dick's cold shrug and Hal's stammer. Then we brought it hot to town to play the Curtain at Shoreditch. That was when I met her, my love; I met my lust face to face in her person, and my love went to summer dust.

You have never been with me to London, Anne. If you had this might never have happened. I say 'might', for the ache which took my guts would have likely come with or without your presence. You don't know London, my love, and pray God you never will. London is a bolting-hatch, a great stews in the heart of the fields. There is a stink of sick bodies and dead minds, and the blazonries of silken cloak and slashed doublet blow along the dirty streets like false flowers on a dunghill. They blew into the Curtain that summer night, fluttering shyly in with brightly tarnished wings, out of the shadows of the real world, the day's world, to the light of the players' world, which though it be candle-lanthorn light, is truer yet than the sun.

There was Rutland, and there was Essex, dark and gaudy. There were a parcel of lordlings leaping for the stage stools, and there was he whom I thought my friend. And there was She. She had no name, just a presence, a habitation. She was a white blur of face, a black mat of hair, a smile from the shadows of the gallery. And my heart turned to offal, wife, and my legs to muddy water. I stood there in the arch of the tiring-room and wanted her.

Have I ever wanted like that, Anne? If anyone should know, you should. If ever I did, perhaps it was in the corn-fields around Shottery, when a maid of nearly thirty was tumbled by a lad of eighteen under a harvest moon. And what that lad of eighteen wanted was all bound up in the scent of hair among the cornstalks and velvet skin under a velvet sky. A crying urgency it was, an ache of legs, stomach and heart that found its cure in your soft moan of fulfilment on that magic summer's night. Lust it was then Anne, for all my fine words and my wistful eyes. I

had a body, young, strong and untried; you were the woman who lived in the fields, coming up to thirty and the despair of your father. The lads in the fields used to tell dirty stories about you, that were all wishful thinking. You were on the edge of middle age then, Anne, and somehow you were without a man; and that made them stop and wonder, in the days when any village girl who wanted a man went out and got one, and if she had not one, it was a sign no-one would have her. You waited, Anne, for someone to come to you. And there I came, I of all people, full of brash swagger with my little schooling gone to my head and my mind full of high-flushed dreams of God knows what. Along I came in my first new clothes for years (too tight under the arms and slack about the codpiece—remember?) and you came to me without protest. And what I found in the fields that night grew to love. It had to, or we had died of growing old in a year. You were pregnant, and I was full of my own noble generosity. I married you, thinking I would grow to love you in time—that was the truth of it. And love you I do; believe that if you will.

Now Ned, who was just being born then, is a man, or thinks he is; the same age as I was then, but not the man his brother was! Dark and sullen he is, with a young and unrazored beard, and the whores call him "Mandrake". But he has been my conscience in this whole affair. Poor Ned! As if I had not enough conscience already.

"But we can't use Sackwell for this one," insisted Art. They were sitting on a bank overlooking the coalwharf, and Harry was watching the barges coming and going and the colliers' wagons sticking in the churned-up mud round the jetty. Kirbitz was just sitting talking. He was sitting because he had been on his feet since dawn, and he was talking because he always did.

"Why not?" Harry asked tiredly. "He's as good as anybody else, I should think."

Art bristled. "Why not?" he demanded. "Boy, ain't you learnt to assess an actor? Sackwell's the greatest for kings and them guys, but he's a big boy with a big voice. He's got *presence*. He's big, an' he's noble. An' he's sane. The

All-American boy. Now this Hamlet's a nut. Right? He's always seeing ghosts and he's got a thing on with his old woman. Right? So we can't have Albron. He just wouldn't fit."

"Burbage seems to be doing all right at rehearsals," said Harry drily. "And he's got enough hair on his chest."

"Burbage!" sneered Kirbitz. "They couldn't find anybody better in this goddamn age. We can be selective. We got the talent." And he got up and looked down at Harry thoughtfully.

Harry felt a growing panic. "Not *me*, leader," he pleaded. "I'm a director."

"Sure," soothed Art, "sure. But you were an actor before I picked you outa the gutter. And you look the type. You're a dreamer, like I said, and you've got the lean looks the women buffs go for. I'm testing you for Hamlet, boy, so like it."

Harry got up. He was too tired to argue. Not that it would have achieved anything. Far better to go along with Kirbitz. Then when it penetrated through the layers of bone surrounding Art's ego what a lousy Hamlet his director would make, sanity would be restored. There were subtler ways than arguing if you wanted to lick Art. You just had to find them when the need arose, because until it did arise you didn't know what you were fighting. Never the same twice.

"Right, leader," he said, "Anything you say." And he fell into step with the scuttling Kirbitz, who threw him a look of suspicious puzzlement. He hadn't reckoned on having it this easy.

"Would it be in order to ask where you propose to stage this authentic first production of Hamlet?" Harry enquired. "The Globe's used for rehearsals during the day and performances at night. Or have you the answer to that too?"

"I got the answer to everything," declared Art modestly. "The audiences will want to see it in the Globe, right? So in the Globe it'll be." And chuckling at Harry's mystification he led the way into the inn yard, where the rest of the unit sat glumly in the saddles of hired horses and wished they were dead.

"The Globe?" asked Harry weakly. "We don't need horses to get there."

"To *our* Globe we do," chortled Kirbitz. "Our Globe's down river in a little dead and alive patch of brambles called Chees-wick or sump'n."

Harry, who thought he had heard everything, had to admit that life still had its little surprises.

"You mean you've had your own Globe built?" he burbled inanely. "At *Chiswick*?"

"Sure, why not?" retorted Art. "Get a bit of peace there. Only a few peasants and cows to bother us. See, boy, while you're dreamin' Art's schemin'. I knew right away the real Globe wouldn't be no good, so I got the boys back at Time Transport to mock up a full-scale copy and ship it in sections through the transmitter with a crew to erect it. That was yesterday. They oughta have the roof on by now."

They had. Harry had to admit they'd done Art proud. It was an exact replica even to the wooden pins that secured the joints. Even the site was perfect. Just the right distance from the river, it could have been the real thing in its own surroundings if you just looked one way. The other way were fields and trees, but that side would be replaced on film with readymade shots of the city if Art wanted a panoramic take. It was all very clever; a stupendous waste of money, but very clever.

"Now, boy," breathed Kirbitz as he capered around in the wood-shavings. "Ain't this sump'n? Ain't this better'n creeping in that flea-hole back there an' taping Bird-cage or whoever he is making love to a boy in a mask? Nothing's too much trouble for Art. Art for—"

"Yes, I know," muttered Harry, gloomily surveying a full-bosomed Ophelia trying to lure one of the carpenters into the tiring-room. "Art for Art's sake."

He leaned against a chunky pillar (adze-smoothed, he noted; those lads hadn't missed a detail) and watched the cast assemble on the apron. "You as well, boy," Kirbitz reminded him.

"Hold on," said Harry. "I'm checking them out against the cast list."

"The cast list I got," said Art shortly. "Now you're playing Hamlet, I'm directing this part."

"What about the assistant director?" asked Harry. This was going to be bad enough, without Kirbitz directing.

"He's the grave-digger an' Hamlet's old man," said Art tersely, and switched on the taped cast list. Harry mounted the stage and braced himself. For what Art was paying him he supposed he might as well go along——

"Hamlet—that's you Harry. Claudius—who's he?" Harry told him. "Oh, yeah, that's you, Clyde, ain't it? Gertrude—where is that goddamn woman? Oh there you are, Sadie. Albron, I want you to play this Horatio guy—Hamlet's buddy, an' give it plenty of muscle d'you hear?" And so on, till the 'original' cast of Hamlet stood grouped on stage, a sight to make Henslow shudder, if that father of all the smart agents had been there. Women playing women!

"Okay, now let's run it through," commanded Art over his shoulder as he breezed to the back of the auditorium. "How's this 'Hamlet' start, boy?" Harry woke up and looked at him bewildered.

"With Act 1, Scene One," he said, trying and failing to sound respectful. "Most plays do."

"The words, boy, the words," ground Art blackly. "THE WORDS!"

After a long ten seconds, Harry found his voice.

"You mean you haven't got a tape of the script?" he enquired hollowly.

Kirbitz snapped his fingers. "There, I *knew* I'd forgotten sump'n," he said.

Chaos.

Gus had just come in to see if I am ready to leave. The rehearsal is over and there is good booze in the tavern across the fields. I told him I would stay here till it got too dark to write. He gave me a long and probing look (dear Gus, my one real friend!) and went. The others are packing to go. Dickon is just looking through the door with his script stuck into his jerkin. He wants to tell me a dirty tale, I think; but my own tale is dirtier than that, and doesn't end in laughter. If anyone laughs at this, it

will be us two, Anne, when we are old and without passion, and all the pantings and strivings will be a comedy of flames burning themselves in the hearth with much smoke and crackle, and little meaning when they are ash in the morning. When all our minds and muscles, all our efforts, cheatings, urges and disasters are ashes in the fireplace, then maybe we can laugh. Or will we share the same hearth then, Anne my wife?

After the play of Henry was over there was the usual fight. Three of the groundlings were killed and a lordling who had been pushing his scabbard into Falstaff's belly throughout the play got his sconce bent with a stool for it. Dickon and Gus held off his friends while Hal did it. Then the watch arrived and the house cleared. The watch carried out the bodies, Dick whooped like a Turk and danced the rest off to the tiring-room at the point of a wooden sword, and I was left on the quiet stage. The floorboards were worn smooth by the long scuffling of buskins, and I sat down and ran my hands over the joins, trying to find a splinter. I found one. That was when she laughed. She was still in the gallery, a pale and eager face with her mouth half-open and her eyes burning into my cod-piece like coals.

There was a young bright lord with red hair and a pink fool's face standing behind her. He seemed to want to go, but she would not. And how could she? We were joined by an invisible chain, and must stay where we were or draw nearer. My eyes locked with her black gaze and my heart was offal again, as before the play, stinking dead meat alive with worms of sheer naked hunger.

She came down to the stage. I followed the ripple of her thighs under the farthingale as she held it up and back in mock modesty to climb the steps to me.

"The lone player. Where is your speech? Give it to me," she said. There was laughter in her voice and her mouth turned up at one corner. Her teeth were blackened, her face blotched, bosom too full and head too small. Her nose was too upturned and her hair was black straw, tousled as if straight from a pillow. And every movement and every look of her unwinking black eyes reeked of lust. I desired her more than any woman made by God, and I

still do. Foolishly I stood there. The young kneebender turned on his heel and went. He said something, but I don't know what.

I started the first thing that came into my head, a speech of Hieronymo's when he plays mad. Up and down I strutted. Will Hemmynges came up to see what the noise was, said "Sweet Jesu!" and went back. Higher and higher, faster and faster, the whirling words came. She never moved her eyes from me. There was contempt in them. There was greed and want in them. I was nothing and she wanted me. I was a hired player. Give the word and I ranted. Put away the props and I was done. But it pleased her to hire me, and have me as well. I drew my lath sword and had at the air in my madness (mine, not Hieronymo's now). She had stepped nearer and it caught the lacing of her bodice. I tore it away unthinking and her breasts were bare. Oh Anne, in God's name why do I tell you this to murder you still more? She was a whore, I am a fornicator, and there's an end to it. Must I twist your guts as she twists mine? I am trying to purge myself, Anne, and there is no-one but you and God who can shrive me. God won't if you don't.

I took her there on the stage, and neither of us cared who saw.

"Wady'a mean, you only remember the soliloquies?" fumed Art. "You're the scholar, aincha? You spend hours readin' them old books in the museums, doncha? You oughta know the whole of goddam Shakespeare by heart."

Harry held himself in. Poking Kirbitz would prove nothing. "Well I don't, so what are you going to do now?"

Kirbitz stiffened and turned slowly. The cast and technicians took cover.

"What am *I* going to do?" he cooed gently. "I tell you what *I'm* going to do, boy. I'm going to wait just twenty minutes—twenty minutes not twenty-one—and if *you* ain't come up with a copy of this lousy play in that time, *I'm* going to kick your can way out to the thirty-fourth century. Is, that, understood?" Harry was shaken. It was the first time he had ever heard Kirbitz lower his voice; God,

he thought, the old goat's good and mad for once. He means it.

Without a word Harry turned and went out of the door. Art watched him go, and his chin went up. He squared his shoulders and swivelled round to face the subdued unit. "Now you bums," he whispered, and the floor-boards stopped creaking. "You got twenty minutes to kill. An' while you're killing it, I'm gonna tell you how you gonna act these parts. I don't need no script for that. Now, you listening?"

Harry heard them listening as he set off along the river-bank. This was certainly a new Art; just as impossible as the old one for sure, but new. He wondered how long it would last. For ever, he reckoned, if Art thought it made his minions grovel a mite lower. This was one hell of a time for a man to find his real self, especially if his real self was worse than his false one.

He was still thinking about real selves, and wondering which of Shakespeare's characters were *his* real self, or if any of them were, or if an artist ever showed his real self at all, when he realised he was heading his horse towards the city. What he had intended to do when he walked out of Kirbitz' presence he had not been quite sure; Art's face-about had so stampeded him that he just jumped. Now the river wind had blown the mist from his brain, and it had just hit him what he had promised to do. Why the hell did it have to be him? Whose damn responsibility was the script, anyway? Then he grinned and shook himself. As if it mattered. Somebody had to sweat, and it might as well be him.

Now all he had to do was to get hold of the script of Hamlet in—what was it now?—fifteen minutes. Just one script, that was all.

Nothing easier. Slip into the time booth in the vaults of Paul's church, put a call through to Transport, and he'd have one in seconds. That was the beauty of time travel; even if it took them a week to find it, they could send it to the pin point in time where he was waiting. Hell, they might even send it *before* he asked!

Nothing easier, yes; but Harry didn't want to do it the easy way. Kirbitz had at long last stung him; he had

flung out a challenge too many, and by God he was going to get more than he asked for. Much more. He wasn't just going to get any script. He was going to get the Original, in Shakespeare's own hand; and let him try to ride me after that! Dusk was falling as he reached the outskirts of the city. The higgledy-piggledy of houses in the shadow of the walls seemed to be huddling together for comfort and protection against the night, and the mud and cobble path wound between them like a meandering brook. That's the way to build roads, thought Harry. Build the houses first, where you want 'em, and then plan your road to suit the houses. And to hell with the drainage. You couldn't have sewer pipes that shape anyway.

Everything was quiet. Too early for the roisterers and too late for the shoppers. Queer to think people went shopping even in this age, Harry thought as he took the field gate down towards the Globe. He wondered what they bought. Not vegetables anyway. They all seemed to grow their own. How did they manage without potatoes? The tables of the rich had them but here they were simply unknown. He shook himself. He had a job to do, and here he was wandering on about sewer pipes and potatoes. Harry, you've been working too hard, he told himself; and dismounting stiffly he walked up towards the entrance of the theatre.

There was one light showing at a window, flickering fitfully because glass was as rare as potatoes. So much for the neat rows of diamond-paned cottages he had seen in the history books.

Why the hell do I keep going off the track like this? he thought irritably. Then he supplied the answer himself. His heart wasn't in this snatch, and his mind was throwing up all manner of driftwood to block his purpose. Why do I have to do it, anyway? he asked the candle-light wavering a few yards away. Then he thought of Kirbitz, and his jaw set.

The room with the candle was no more than a hutch, with a low ceiling, and bare wooden walls like the rest of the building. There was just space enough for a table and a stool, and if the door was shut you could move from one to the other pretty easily. The door was shut, and the man

all the fuss was about sat at the table with his back to the window.

Even if he'd turned, it would still have been too dark to make out his features.

But it was the right man. Harry had seen him a score of times—gone out of his way to see him, while Kirbitz was totting up the expenses—and would know him anywhere. He was bent over the table writing, with his head almost touching the candle, and from the grunts and sighs that came out through the window he was making pretty heavy going of it.

Altering the script, thought Harry. Burbage mustn't like something.

Then he ducked rapidly as Shakespeare got up. He heard a creaking and the scrape of a chair, and when he looked up again the room was empty—the table wasn't, though.

The vellum sheets lay slap in the middle of it, with the candle dripping wax on them.

What a great time to go to the can, thought Harry happily. He was in, out and slithering down to his horse before the wind of his passage blew the candle out.

Once back into the maze of houses he stopped to take stock. To thunder with Kirbitz and his twenty minutes, he decided. I need another drink.

Ducking into the smoky beer-house, he got the feeling that all eyes were on him. Conscience working overtime, he guessed. If they'd known he'd just pulled the grab of all time they wouldn't have cared. From the look of the faces here, most of them would regard the theft of a play with glassy indifference. They all looked as if they'd handled bigger game than that. Gallows-bait the whole smelly bunch.

He unrolled his loot and straightened it out on the table. He rifled through the mass of sheets, starting at the end. It all seemed to be here, stage directions and all. It was when he got to the top section that he realised he'd got something beside "Hamlet". Something very different.

Damning himself for a thief of a man's privacy, he began to read. He couldn't help himself.

There was a garden, later. I remember a garden, and a great house, too, with sniggering servants. I was in the

glory of the body, and cared not ; she never cared anyway. I came to that garden when she called, and when she had her fill of me, I slunk away to wait for the next summons. I am a poet, Anne, God knows, and maybe a great one. I see men's hearts, and women's too, and on still nights I talk with the angels and they give me words. And she knew none of this. I amused her, and she wanted my fine words to hang on her walls. I was a man, a new man, and she wanted my flesh. My mind was no use to her, except that it drove my bursting body to fresh and novel ecstasies.

And I lost her. My friend, in high places, wanted one place higher, and took it. He commanded, as he always had, and she squealed with delight—God damn them both! And after that, after she was his, I could sit down and write:

"Let me not to the marriage of true minds
Admit impediment. Love is not love
That alters when it alteration finds
Or bends with the remover to remove."

Jesus! What a crawling soft sweetmeat of a man I was! What did he or she know of love? Or I, for that matter? He smiled at my gilded little words and called me "Good Will, prince of poets". He had what he wanted. He could afford to be kind.

And when he had gamed with her and tired of shuffling, she sent for me again, and I bent my body to her will. Her Will, she called me ; and that was all I was. No will of my own.

Now she is with child and wedding a fool who can keep her father's house. The child may be mine, but I will never see it. Now I cannot see her, I am free. He keeps her close, this old lord ; and when the season ends, I will come to you.

Anne, you are old, but true. I am upon my downward years, and I have been false as hell. If you can take these fragments of a man, these sweepings from a dusty summer's heat, and tell yourself you have a man again, then I am yours, God hear me as I say it. I have no pride, no passion ; if your pride can lose itself to take the sinner in, and find new pride in welcome and forgiveness, then

take me, Anne, for I am yours for always. If, in your quiet old age, you can forgive a man who loved you in the harvest time, and gave you summer days these many years, I will thank God, and He will thank us both.

It will be autumn when I come home, Anne; if you will still be wife to me, we will lie in that first bed of ours, our second-best now, and that bed will be a promise like God's rainbow to Noah, a promise of peace and fair weather now the floods are past. Until then, dear wife, think of me, and of how you have always been faithful. My shame can have no death; but if your love can rise above my foulness, my love can live again and so can I. Think of this until the autumn, Anne, and give me your answer when you greet me home.

The sousers on the benches were far gone by the time Harry finished reading. After the first sentence he had realised this was not for public eyes; but he had come six hundred years to find Shakespeare the man, not Shakespeare the name, and here he was.

The letter must go back, of course. So must the script; too bad he couldn't return one without the other. Not so bad on second thoughts; Will was a person to him now, almost a friend, and Kirbitz's wants seemed even more unreasonable than ever in the face of that, and so did Harry's spite in wanting to score off the old fool. No, they must both go back. He emptied the rest of his flat beer into the rushes and pushed his way out into cleaner air.

The Globe was quite dark now, and he had difficulty in finding the right window. Feeling absurd and more than a mite ashamed he swung himself furtively over the ledge.

He was just replacing his bundle on the table when he realised he was not alone. Will was still sitting on the stool, quite still, and for a moment Harry thought he was asleep. Then he stirred, and their eyes met across six feet and as many centuries; and in the presence of this man, Harry was a small boy again, caught pilfering.

"I've brought back your play," he said foolishly, and Will nodded without shifting his gaze.

"And the letter also?" he asked. His voice was deep for such a small man.

"That too," said Harry, and dragged his eyes away.

"Hast read it," Will said. It was a statement, not a question.

A pause, then Harry looked back and bowed his head. "Aye, I read it," he answered.

"'Twas not thine to read," went on the voice, gently. "What was thy purpose, and why hast returned?"

"I am no thief," said Harry slowly, "though in action I seem so. I took thy play in jest, and thy letter in error; and as for the reading, I am mortal man."

"So are we all," said Will, and suddenly grinned. "Letters draw everyone's eyes, though meant for one pair only. I had done thus, had the letter been thine, and I the finder."

Harry stood and fidgeted. "It was an ill jest," he said at last.

"Had a fair end, no matter," Will returned. "The ending is all."

"I am not of your age," said Harry suddenly, and could have bitten out his tongue; but the man at the table merely looked at him with interest.

"Time is truly a road, then," he said with a rueful smile, "and I must go ever forwards. Was thy journey long?" Harry told him, and Will whistled like a boy. "So far, and not weary," he remarked. "'Tis a smooth road then, with many inns." His ready acceptance of the idea shook Harry; then he remembered that, after all, this was no common Tudor mind.

"Six hundred years. Where thy home is, I am dust," said Will slowly, and for an instant he looked very old and shrunken. Then he shook himself like a spaniel.

"And in that time," he said very carefully, "am I remembered?"

Harry met his look squarely. "There lives not a man who knows not thy name," he said, and Will's smile lit the dark room like summer sunlight. He let out a long breath.

"To few is such intelligence given in their lifetime," he said slowly. "Friend, I forgive thee a theft which gives so much. And am I then remembered?" Again the smile, impish now. "With joy or sorrow?" And his smile was gone again, as he gazed up at his visitor; under the trivial words was an anxiety so deep that it left Harry groping

for words. How did you tell Shakespeare he was—well, Shakespeare?

He did his best, lamely, getting hotter and more discomfited by the second. But Will listened gravely and intently; and when Harry was through he sat quite still and studied his fingertips.

"And is it so, then?" he murmured, then he stretched and stood up. "Why then, it is so." He faced the young director across the table, and his eyes were ablaze with a fierce joy that Harry could hardly bear to look upon. Then their hands were joined in a hard grip, and the centuries fell away. They were friends, and nothing else mattered.

They stood like that for a full minute, neither saying a word where none were needed. Then, "What is thy name, lad?" Will asked, freeing his hand.

"Harry."

"Harry. 'Tis a good name and fits thee. Why then, Harry, wilt take my letter to Stratford?" He asked in the same tone as he would have asked an old friend to go to the other side of town, and Harry answered as if he had.

"I will, and gladly," he said, and their hands met again. Then Will moved past him. "The door is the better way to leave," he said with humour. "Come, I will show thee."

At the door, they stood for a moment and looked over the fields at the city lights and the moon on the river.

"God b'ye," Harry," said Will. "Speed my words home."

Harry mounted his horse and looked down at the little playwright as he stood, hand on the bridle. "Goodnight, sweet prince," he said, and Will's laugh of delight rang after him down the road.

When light came, he must find the road to Stratford. But first he had another task, one he had ached to perform for a long, long time. His heart quickened in happy anticipation as he spurred his horse through the city gates towards the Leopard tavern.

Kirbitz was still awake, which meant the whole unit had to be too. He was pacing the taproom floor like a mad metronome. He opened his mouth, and Harry beat him to the punch for the first and final time. He had prepared long for such a moment, and he gave it all he had. Skilfully, explicitly, with care and precision, he unburdened

himself of his opinion of Kirbitz and all fat ignorant little men like him. He cursed him long, fluently and with a punctilious regard for detail, while the empurpled Art gobbled, sat down and quietly had a series of seizures. He cursed him in American to the full limits of that comprehensive tongue, then he switched to the Tudor idiom with an ease and vigour which drew a thunder of applause from the innkeeper and drawers. It was just as good as he had hoped it would be. It was like plunging at last into a long promised ice-cream on a sweltering day, and it purged Harry's soul and brought peace surging into the depths of his bowels.

When he had finished, he turned on his heel, not even waiting to see the awe-struck and delighted unit removing what was left of Kirbitz to his bed in the attic.

He rode around to the ordinary where he had spent the afternoon, and lay there awake but relaxed till daybreak. After breakfast he saddled up and left the city before the streets came alive with the shouts of the vendors. It was going to be a long ride to Stratford.

The letter sat snugly in his pouch, and he wished the distance shorter. Anne would be waiting, he knew, to hear some word of her fine mad husband who quit the peace of the country to peddle his plays in the sweat of the cities. She would plough through the scrawled pages of news, gossip and homesick longing with a full heart and loving tolerance; and to her the mundane chatter would live, and be her husband's voice. He wanted her to hear that voice without delay; and the sun smiled from a cloudless sky as he threaded his way along the murderous track between the cornfields.

Up in the hills, he looked back at London basking in the haze. It was going to be a glorious day, and he wondered what Will would make of it.

And at the window of his lodging in Eastcheap, Will looked up over the rooftops at the distant hills, and thanked God he had not written as he had thought.

Turning his gaze to the bright sky, he wondered who would shrive him now. No matter, seeing that Anne, his darling, would sleep secure.

— PHILIP WORDLEY

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