EX TERTIO QUARTUS

Roland Menge

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for Jeanne

One becomes two, two becomes three, and
three becomes one, as the fourth.

Maria Pophetissa

I

I am a cloistered monk in the abbey of Saint Mary, keeper of the sacred scrolls, as such, a scholar of old words and ways. You must forgive me, therefore, if my story, humbly presented, is studious and formal, for my heroine was neither.

My name is Brother Erato. I am 86 years old. With the exception of the journey which I shall describe to you, I have lived my entire life in this abbey on the hill. For, you see, I did not come here, as is the usual procedure, from a childhood in the world. Rather, I am of a particular origin among us, being one of those orphans left by some unknown mother at our monastery gate. Yes, I spent my childhood here in this very setting which lies now before my eyes, within the circle of these walls.

It may be, dear reader, that you imagine a childhood thus circumscribed to be limited, and therefore without joy. Yet, all my younger days I wandered through it as if it had no bounds. The wind bent the acacia trees as it does this very moment. The sun shone here, as in any child's world, and, falling softly on the stones of these buildings, defined for my boy's eye their finest subtlety of grain. These buildings and towers, and the cathedral at their center, all strained with such simple earnestness to God. Yes, looking out the window of this study where I have passed so much of my adult life, I am somewhat taken by this scene. For it is now early morning, and the acacia trees with their yellow blossoms sway lightly in the breeze, as I saw them when I was a child. Watching them now, with the cathedral beyond, my mind fills with memories and images. You must forgive me, I mean to say, for I am an old man; and a monk, when he turns to his heart, should turn to God.

Yes, I spent my childhood among these acacia trees, and I had no mother except these silent men with cowls, with whom I went each morning, when the sun first rose, to lift my voice in prayer. And I must tell you, dear reader, while other children looked to other things, my own young mind centered on one hope. For, you see, although our

brotherhood, in the little islands of affiliated monasteries, stretches far into the regions of the earth; this monastery in which I grew, since it is the abbot's seat, has by tradition always carried a special responsibility. This is to safeguard the sacred scrolls which have come down to us from old time. For this purpose, over the centuries, a cult has risen among us with an elaborate system of discipline and apprenticeship. This apprenticeship involves training in mental attitude as well as learning the skills of language and calligraphy involved in our task. Even as a young child, still unable to read, I sensed the mystery of these scrolls and watched the men, with their special insignias, who belonged to this cult. When I was older and could wander through the library, then from a distance (for this was the most permitted me), I would look toward these yellow rolls of parchment, which somehow carried the wisdom of old times. Yes, in my young pride, I longed to be one of these special men, to carry what seemed to my boy's mind such a solemn and mysterious burden; and I sensed also that I would someday be chosen. It was true. From my fourteenth year, I wore on my robe the red-flamed insignia which said to all my peers, “Here is one marked out, who must keep the sacred word.”

I wish I could convey to you, dear reader, how I held this great task to my heart. I went to my classes each morning in an ordinary way, with boys from the village who lived a normal life. But I needed only to look to my insignia to remember my special calling. There were times, of course, when I mounted the horse-drawn carriage with the rest of the children, and rode, bobbing along, down the winding road to the village below. You may think it odd, but, at that time, these were worlds distinct to me, the abbey and the village. I reached out my young hand to feel the breeze, to know this different world was real. All around me, the children laughed, and smiled. I smiled, too, though with a recognition that I was set apart. Yes, I looked toward these smiles, and toward the little houses with their lighted windows and brick chimneys, from which smoke swirled to the sky, and I felt as a stranger in a foreign land. Returning to the abbey, the toiling horses went more slowly. The village and its few,

flickering lamps faded below me, as between the closing covers of a children's book. Once again I entered the circle of the monastery walls. Far from fearing that this circle would grow yet smaller when I entered the gray building which housed the cult, I looked forward with eagerness to my admission, for I knew the cult would be my home.

It was my habit in those days to rise quite early, while the older men still slept. Then, sitting in this very room, with my candle burning, I surveyed the quiet scene. The acacia branches moved before my window. The dark masses of the buildings rested one against another, like beasts in peaceful sleep.

I remember particularly a morning in mid-winter when new snow swirled softly between the sleeping ground and the low, gray sky. My brothers had just risen and were walking, single file, toward the cathedral, their dark robes distinct against the snow.

Somewhat later, still touched by this image, I stood among them, singing in the candle-lighted cathedral. With my boyish imagination, and in my eagerness to define my loyalties, I fancied, that morning, that I could see my brothers singing in all our monasteries in strange and distant lands. And, looking at this line of singing men, I fancied I could see it extending out this chapel, across the silent snow, thence backwards in time—through years, generations, yes, centuries unbroken to those dark days when my people,—and perhaps yours, too, dear reader,—were nomads, wandering on this earth. In those days, too, it gave my boy's heart joy to reflect on it, in those days, too, the hooded men were singing, as on this morning some 70 years ago they sang, my own young voice so strong among them.

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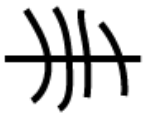
The day came at last when I stood before the building which housed the sacred scrolls, and peered toward the half-lit hallways where I would lead my life.

I was met at the door by my future master, an old man named Brother Gabriel with gray hair and gray eyes.

He did not take me to the library first, as I thought he

would do. Instead, he smiled and led me to the cathedral. There we stood quietly for a moment in the soft light from the stained glass windows, which fell in varying hues on the empty pews and silent statues.

One window in particular he pointed out to me. It portrayed a young woman. She was dressed in a robe of purple, green, and blue. From a torch near her face, a fire, orange and red, was flaming. In the blue sky behind her, the buildings of some village spiraled up, as if carried aloft toward heaven by the illumination of the torch. With one hand, she grasped some symbol which hung from a chain around her neck. It was an odd symbol, a single, horizontal line with four shorter, crossing verticals, as such,



With her other hand, she shielded a plant which cowered from the fire. She stared at this fire as if she feared it, but did not flinch. In her face was a look of soft beauty that affected me greatly; I knew not why.

The intense light of the sun shone through the window, so that all the colors glowed, and seemed to melt, one into another, while the colored light fell on our watching faces.

"You would perhaps imagine," Brother Gabriel said to me, "that this window was fashioned by some master. But, no, his turbulence betrays him. It was, in fact, made by a young monk many centuries ago who, by his own admission—for we have a letter in his hand—knew nothing of this art. Furthermore, he made it at a time when stained glass as a studied art was undeveloped in this land. He made it from his heart, and despite his amusing turbulence, with that patience with which we strive—we in this cult—to reflect the world of God. Yes, perhaps, knowing his shortcomings he strived all the more to compensate. It is this striving which I love, and shall try to impart to you. For, you see, though we take our scrolls from the past and seek to carry them unchanged to the future, yet it is true that each hand which touches them is tied to a human soul, and thus leaves its imprint, good or bad."

We walked silently down the center aisle of the cathedral. The great spires of the church reached high above our heads, disappearing in shadow at the top. There was an immense window near the vestibule, spired like the rest, but with plain glass since it had never been completed.

“Perhaps you will put a window here one day,” he said, smiling at me. “Our monks have been known to go from scrolls to these.”

“I would have nothing to put there,” I said.

He laughed.

“You mean nothing new,” he said. “But I tell you, my son, there is nothing new, only the act of setting free.”

He led me outside. In front of the cathedral was a wide, stone plaza, with steps leading down to a small wooded area where there were trees with orange berries, and twining plants with crescent leaves. In a nook in these woods, there was a statue of the Virgin. The statue was carved from white marble; she was dressed in a hooded robe. Her eyes were turned downward, and she extended her hands, palms-up, to each side.

“She has extended them thus,” he said to me, pointing at her hands, “in a gesture of receptivity. This is the essential posture of all monks. We wish to look toward life with no questions, to receive always. and likewise”—here he smiled—"to give without asking. Thus we turn our face from names. We do not ask, ‘Is this a tree?’ A tree is what it is, and born anew each moment. We strive to take the Lord’s one presence, and accept it as it is, without parceling it into misleading fragments—as words, or symbols, often are.

Precisely for this reason, we regard these symbols, which carry the past, as things of power—almost as living creatures—and our cult has arisen to safeguard their integrity.”

He smiled at this with an afterthought, for he knew he had expressed thereby that dualism between quietism and symbol which lies at the very heart of our cult and which, indeed, has sometimes led the other brothers to regard us with curiosity or mild suspicion.

We then walked toward the gray building of the cult. It

is situated in a wing of the cathedral which extends out around the plaza's eastern side. The base of this building is much higher than the cathedral itself, for our area is actually built on a shelf of rock higher than the surrounding buildings, so that with our wall dividing us only on one side, we have an area totally separate from the rest of the community, with our private cells, and a little garden which is accessible only to members of our cult. Beyond this area is the thick outer wall. It is made of mortar and huge stone and has an inner walkway with Romanesque windows which overlook the village and the eastern valley, and the winding road which leads to our main gate.

We entered the building and walked for a long time through dimly lit hallways which were all quite new to me. We came to a musty room with a high ceiling, and various large tables, each with several lamps. This was the room where the sacred scrolls were kept. Brother Gabriel brought one out from some inner closet for us to see. It was yellow with age, and covered with strange markings, which, of course, I could not understand.

"I have striven to be a good monk," he said, "yet all my life have loved symbols such as these."

Thus went my introduction to the cult; soon thereafter, I began a time of austere meditation. As is our custom, I tried for three years, not speaking, to banish words from my mind. Instead of going to the cathedral for prayers with the others, I met with a small group in our own little chapel and stood in silent prayer. I fasted, and meditated alone, walking back and forth in our enclosed garden, until I looked at the flowers and trees and various plants and insects each day as if I had never seen them before. I had no wish to speak. I wanted only to be attentive to each new moment. Then I was taken again before the scrolls, and took the quill in my hand. I joined my brothers at prayer and sang again at matins and vespers.

These three years of silence were followed by three of study. My master met me with a scroll in his hand.

"We have two systems of notation," he said. "The first is based on sound, with each symbol standing for a certain sound. To understand the markings used in this system, you

must learn the ancient tongues, whose sounds they represent. Our second system of writing is older. In this system, one symbol expresses one idea, independent of the sound which a given language may impart to it. We call these symbols ideograms; they are useful at times, for example, one may communicate with them even if the one addressed speaks a different language."

He took a magnifying glass, and brought it to bear on several symbols.

"As you can see," he said, "the old masters wrote these with care. Calligraphy of this sort is an art, because each symbol is an attempt to reduce some concept to its essential form. I should also tell you this. As you can see, the signs are written one after another, in a sequential, or linear, way. But if one steps back a moment, he can see that the scroll when viewed at once, is itself a picture, a more complex symbol, in which each of the individual ideograms is in a state of interaction, or resonance, with all the others.

"For this reason we take care not only to write the individual signs correctly, but also to preserve the entire configuration of signs as it is in the original, so that nothing of its meaning or spirit is lost."

I grew in the discipline of the cult. I learned to read and write in ancient tongues. I learned how to read the old symbols, and impart them to the parchment with my quill.

A day came when Brother Gabriel bowed low before me. "Little brother," he said, "you no longer need my teaching. You are a master in your own right."

I remember the day when the old master said these words to me. I was sitting alone in my study, and he had made a special trip to visit me, to make it as much of an occasion as austerity allows. Far from feeling satisfaction at his praise, I wished only to excel more, so that the other brothers would likewise pay me their respects. I intensified my studies. Before another year was passed, the abbot himself had bowed before me, and called me venerable scholar.

Yet, I must confess to you, dear reader, some softness left my life. Or perhaps it had never been there, and as I grew

older, I felt its absence. I entered the half-lit hallways each morning, but the scrolls seemed dry and lifeless. I wandered alone at night in the corridor within the eastern wall, looked out toward the dark sky with its million stars. Far below me, the village slept, and sent toward me the light from a few, flickering lamps.

Early one morning, in such a restless mood, I was standing alone at a window near the gate. The sun had just risen; its long, horizontal rays fell on the village below. A woman came up the hill that morning. Thinking no one watched, she left a child at our gate. I watched her approach, watched her set the child there, and give it a last look. She sensed my presence and looked toward me a moment in surprise. This woman was from somewhere beyond our valley. She had strange, dark eyes and dark hair. Her eyes brought from me an upheaval of something hidden, and, ashamed, I looked away.

My restlessness increased thereafter. I longed to leave the abbey and try the world.

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Our abbey stands on a hill at the southern end of a long valley, which extends to north and east. Looking northward from the plaza of our cathedral, one can see this valley stretching below him for a great distance to the northern horizon, where there is a mountain range called the Green Mountains. The land to the west is also mountains. The valley to the east is where most our people live. The Talor River flows southward from the Green Mountains, then winds westward through this eastern valley. This is a land of rolling hills with peasant farms and groves of oak and maple trees. We have three cities in this land, called Kebbur, Amalek, and Gath. They are connected by a stone road which was built centuries ago by those people, called the Elamites, who lived here before us.

We have monasteries in all this land. On the night of winter solstice, it is our tradition for each community of brothers to light a bonfire on the front plaza of their church. It is an impressive sight, on this dark night, to see these fires

flickering all around. Two will glow in the western mountains, several in the valley. Indeed, if one could fly like a bird on this night in any of the three directions, to the west, south, and east, he would see such fires until dawn.

In the North, beyond the Green Mountains, is a land still strange to us. This is a land far different in climate where in mid-winter the red sun barely peeks above the south horizon before she sinks again. The people in this land speak a language unknown to us. Yet, it is said that there is a great city in the North which once was sacred to our people. That was long ago, before we wandered to this more temperate valley.

No fire burns now in the Northland on our feast of winter solstice.

At least we had not thought so until a courier arrived one day, dressed in the leather clothing of the North-people. He brought with him a scroll which, since he did not speak our language, he placed without comment in the abbot's hand. The abbot treated this courier as an equal, and would accept no obeisance. The courier bowed to us all and departed.

We stood around in a circle after he left, wondering at the scroll. Later, it was brought before our cult.

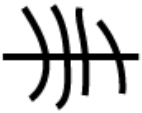
I was one of those who were called to examine it. We spent many weeks at this task. The message was written in finely-painted ideograms, curious in this way, they were similar enough to our own ancient signs to suggest they came from a brotherhood like ours, but different enough so that we could decipher only part, with key symbols unsolved. The scroll spoke of “three elements” and a “fourth cut off.”

We took this as a reference to how our brotherhood extends in three directions, but not to north.

Could it be, we said to one another, that another brotherhood existed in the North, a fragment of our own perhaps, that had been cut off somehow centuries before?

A city was mentioned, “a holy city by white mountains.” We took this to mean our ancient sacred city, whose location no one knew. Two of the unsolved characters always appeared together. One was a horizontal, with two slashes like downward wings, as such,

The other was a sign I had seen before. It was the sign which the fire-maiden held in the window in the cathedral, written as such,



My old master was standing beside me as I looked.

“I have seen this sign before, honorable Father,” I said, “in the window you once showed me, of the fire-maiden.”

“Ah, yes,” he said, remembering.

“It is an old, old sign. We do not know its meaning.”

Our findings, though incomplete, were brought before the abbot. A special meeting was called of all our brothers, with representatives from the other monasteries. The two prelates who ranked second to the abbot also came to this council. As is our custom, these two men, Delmer from the West, and Theron from the East, are simply called good fathers, though they wear a bishop's robes. Theron, the good father of the East, was still a young man at this time. Delmer was much older and regarded as his superior.

We met at dawn and repeated an old ceremony. Six candles burned on either side of the tabernacle. The abbot was seated before the altar on his throne, wearing a robe and miter. Delmer and Theron came forth from the back of the altar, one on each side. They bowed low before the abbot and then, still bowed, moved backward to their smaller thrones on either side.

We other monks followed in two’s, in order of age, likewise bowing before the abbot and receding thus bowed to our pews. Bowed and backwards, I should point out to you, dear reader, not in deference to his person but rather to what he carries for us all, the responsibility of bringing forth the heritage of many hooded men, of whom we there gathered were but a few.

The abbot spoke to us that morning, holding up the scroll. Our scholars had looked at it, he said, but could

decipher only part. He mentioned the “fourth element” and how our brotherhood reached three ways but not to north. Now, he said, we had reason to believe that another brotherhood existed, who had sent this scroll as a message, a brotherhood cut off by the double edge of distance and time from those of us who centered on his throne. It was not right, not as the Lord had wished, as he put it, that two flames of the same fire should burn apart. For we all knew by our individual struggles to keep this fire pure, how dark sought, unceasingly, to quench it.

“So I must tell you, my brothers,” he said, “someone must go from our bosom to the North. Someone must seek these brothers out, and bring them to our throne.”

Saying this, he looked around, and we all waited.

When his eyes met mine, I knew I had been chosen.

“How, good Father?” I said, rising. “I feel confused.”

“You know the first symbols,” he said kindly, “and you are a venerable scholar of our scrolls. Follow these signs, then, one to another.”

Several days later, I stood before the abbot and my brothers at the gate with the scroll tucked away in my pack.

“Keep the flame in your heart, little brother,” the abbot said. “It alone will guide you”

So it was I left.

II

In some of our old songs, the Talor River is a giant. The branchings of the river are his foot-claws and outstretched fingers. It is said that Talor is the god who rules the South and that he has a twin brother who stands behind him and rules the North. For if one climbs northward through the Green Mountains, up low hills with aspen, then up steep slopes with cedar and fir, then upward still through rocks and snow, one reaches, at last, a ridge, beneath which another river can be seen, flowing north to the sea. This is Talor's twin; we call it Tabor.

Yes, these old songs say that Talor and Tabor are twin gods, yet one must observe that they are quite different in temperament. Looking across our Southland with its neatly-sectioned fields of fertile soil, its pleasantly-shaped groves of oak and maple trees, its meadows with white and yellow flowers, one would infer that Talor is a sweet god who coaxes the indolent land with his sweet-winded breath, and brings the earth in due season to proper fruit. Tabor, the northern god, is stern; his land is stark. The wind blows in his northern valley, too, but it is a harsh wind which swirls over silent trees and rocks.

It was this northern valley toward which I headed on the day I left the abbey. My journey would take me northward and eastward through the land of my own people, thence north again across the Green mountains to the Tabor River. From there, I knew not where—the scroll would lead the way.

Life seems always paradoxical, a wise friend once told me, and so, too, that day as I left the monastery gate, dressed in the clothes of the world, with the scroll in my pack. That time is long ago, dear reader, yet I remember my departure quite clearly.

It was autumn, and early morning. Leaves of orange, red, and gold ruffled in the trees, or, dislodged by wind, spun in the sky like children’s kites, and lilted to the ground, which was strewn already with fallen leaves. Far below me in the morning light, the village, with its red-tile roofs and

tiny steeples, floated like an island in this sea of swirling colors.

In the village when I reached it, people scurried about, beginning a new day. Children came laughing by with books. Church bells rang, punctuating the village air. It was the same air toward which I had once as a child so tentatively reached my hand, to be sure that it was real. Now I breathed it in full-lunged, and looked below me to the valley which spread northward toward the mountains on the far horizon.

Yes, the scroll from the North had brought me the freedom which let me stride toward this new and different world. But, when I looked back, there the abbey stood in its simple silence on the hill. I remembered the abbot's parting words. Keep the flame in my heart, I thought—yet, it was true, I had broken my bond with my childhood home.

How strange it is, dear reader, as I sit here now in my austere study, to try to recall the early part of my journey. When I close my eyes and attempt to do so, it seems some great darkness intervenes between that long-lost day and now. I find myself, as it were, in a dark forest, and far ahead of me—or is it far behind?—I can see the sunlight flicker on the yellow aspen trees at the wood’s edge, I can see the blue sky beyond them, brilliant as ever I have seen it. In this poor way, I would describe to you my effort to go back to a time which is now far from me, like those aspens in the distance. Such are the curses of old age, that one’s youth, which once glowed so brightly, is thus removed, like a far-off place. But it is well-said that, to a good monk, place does not matter. For, after all, what is place? Some other arrangement of things, some other consort of sounds, perhaps, but in the end, I know, the rustling of the one robe of that selfsame presence which fills us all, and which we—each one of us—even in moments of distraction or evil, nonetheless still manifest. The glory of the world, I mean to say, is at our fingertips whether the hand which reaches is young or old, because God speaks alike in each moment and place—even to an old man’s heart. Let me, therefore, be done with these proud apologies, and go forward with my story, as best an old monk can.

Yes, I was young that day. The aspect of the world—if I may call it such—which unfolded to my eyes, was one I had never seen before, never imagined could be real. As I followed the downward spiral of the narrow road which led from the village to the valley floor, leaves of every color showered before me. From the ravine beyond the wall which lined the road, I heard the sound of rushing water. It rose in the air and hovered there above the sound of the wind rushing through the trees.

At a buckling of the hill, a stream broke through. What a pretty spot I found where the road met this stream!—a little, wooden bridge covered with green and yellow moss beneath high trees whose branches leaned toward the stream. Along both banks of the stream, roots extended from the giant trees to the water, I sat here awhile on a root which to my amazement was as thick as my arm. This root divided into several branches on its way down the steep bank to the water. Beneath the water's surface, I noticed, each of these branches divided many times more, finally ending in tubules and tiny filaments with long hairs which swayed in the changing current of the stream. Leaves floated on the water like little boats. I watched the water churn amid the moss and roots, carrying these orange and red travelers to the Talor River and the South Sea. I was a traveler like them, I thought, not headed south as they were but instead toward the unknown North. A traveler, indeed, but with no exact idea where to go, or how to make my way.

I was sitting thus, as in a trance, when, above the sound of the swirling water and rushing wind, I heard a high, creaking noise, and, with it, a nasal drone which varied in loudness but not in tone, as someone chanting poorly. This sound was far away, but seemed to be coming nearer.

At length, a cart appeared between the trees in the bend of the road immediately above the bridge. The cart was being pulled by two oxen, and was driven by a little man with a long, white beard which reached nearly to his waist. He continued singing in a loud voice until he saw me by the bridge, then stopped to squint at me beneath his frowning, bushy eyebrows.

Soon I was riding alongside him on the wooden plank which served as a seat, peering above the wide backs of the oxen as each moment brought new sights and sensations.

Yes, luckily enough, I had found a guide; though with his wide straw hat, and baggy pants secured by a rope, and his wooden cross with a rhinestone center hanging from a cord around his neck, I must admit he was a peculiar guide at that. He said very little to me, but kept droning his song, shouting louder whenever he reached a sad or happy part. He had knotty, brown hands with which he reached into a burlap sack, and then giving me a little wink, pulled out a loaf of bread. I sat beside him in great satisfaction, munching on my bread, and watching the valley unfold before me.

We had reached the open farmland now, and came to the stone road which led to our first city, Kebbur, and thence to Amalek and Gath.

Now we saw people for the first time in my journey. There were stone walls on both sides of the road, lined by tall poplar trees; beyond these were peasant dwellings and fields. The dwellings, I should explain to you, are of a common type among our people. They are long and rectangular in shape, with sod walls, and roofs of thatched straw supported by timbers. One roof usually shelters both people and livestock, which enter alike from a center door, but have separate compartments on either side.

These dwellings were widely separate from one another. There were women in the fields beside huge piles of new-mown oats. They had winnowing forks, and were throwing bunches of oats in the wind to separate the light chaff from the heavier grain. Men walked along the road with bundles of oat and wheat. They appeared solemn as they came by but looked to the old man and me with faint smiles on their lips.

I saw children playing here and there. Both boys and girls had long, unkempt hair and wore sleeveless, knee-length shirts, brown in color. They had dirty bodies with mud caked on their feet.

As we passed, my singing, bearded guide and I, they pointed at us and giggled, looking from behind their sod houses or piles of straw.

Some boys came running alongside, pretending we were a royal coach. they cried loud hurrahs and bowed before us, throwing leaves in our path. One poor boy, I noticed, had rotted yellow teeth which were clearly visible as he ran open-mouthed beside us. The old man smiled, and bowed gracefully, as if he were indeed a king. He raised his right hand above the little, shouting faces, as in a blessing. The boys laughed greatly at his antics.

That night we camped on a hill overlooking Kebbur, our first city. It was a city of great size with tiers of buildings rising one above another against a cliff on the east side of the valley. The Talor River passed beneath our encampment, flowing south from Kebbur, and beyond that, from Amalek and Gath.

We made a fire and cooked some soup which we ate with our bread. I slept in the back of the cart on a bed I made of straw. The old man sat by the fire late into the night, whittling on a piece of wood, and droning the same song, it seemed, that he had been singing when I met him by the bridge. I lay in my snug bed and looked at the stars in the dark sky above me.

Thus I traveled for a long time with my bearded companion. We passed Kebbur and went on to a new area of the valley where were orchards and gardens. People smiled more openly as we came by. I soon found out new things about the old man. Though he was sullen in demeanor and seemed for the most part devoid of any feeling toward the world except as he found it in his song; yet, on occasion, as with the peasant boys, he was capable of acting in a grandiloquent manner. Owing to his rude appearance, this was amusing, and endeared him to the people.

One time, for example, a peasant girl gave us four apples. She was a shy, little maiden and did it without fanfare, as a kind, little gesture, thinking, I imagine, that we would respond in kind, with a muted smile of gratitude. The old man, however, was quite taken by her gesture. He stopped the cart and bounded down, bowing low before her. He then proceeded to the front of the cart and while a crowd gathered around him, teased one of the oxen with an apple,

holding the fruit before the poor beast's nose but never letting it take bite. After a large crowd of peasants were gathered by the cart, he made a sweeping gesture and gave the apple to the ox. The beast devoured it with passion, snorting, and licking its chops with its immense purple tongue.The peasants laughed and held their sides.

My bearded friend then took the remaining three apples and began to juggle them, catching one in his mouth and eating it in three gulps, while the other two still whirled before our eyes. Enthusiastic applause followed this performance. Then, taking the final two apples, he pretended to drop them. He searched all around in an exaggerated manner, crying loudly, weeping, and at last falling in a heap to the ground. Several people started forward in concern, but he bounded up again, holding his first finger to his lips, as if he meant to share a secret. Then he searched again, and pretended to find the two apples, shouting loudly, and dancing a joyous jig. This brought a greater howl of laughter.

The peasant girl seemed embarrassed at having caused a sequence of such strange events. She would put her hands before her mouth and giggle, darting her eyes from side to side; then she would drop her hands and stretch forth her little face in amusement at my bearded friend, as if she wished nothing to escape her.

Her father was standing beside her. He was a man of huge bulk with immense legs and arms, and a stomach and chest all together, like a barrel, which shook when he laughed. When the old man had finished dancing, this giant walked to a shed where there were huge baskets of apples. He leaned over one of them as on all fours. I thought for a moment that in the merriment of the occasion he meant to devour an entire basket of fruit, and thus play the comic. But, no, he hefted the basket to his waist and came trudging back with it, heaving it in the back of the cart with a mighty spasm of his huge arms and barrel chest.

As we departed in the cart, the old man turned and winked at me. I looked behind, The giant was still shaking with laughter while his red-faced, little daughter held both

her hands before her nose and mouth, giggling behind them, and looking to both sides. All the peasants smiled at us and were waving goodbye.

We passed Amalek one morning when this second city was shrouded in morning mist. Soon thereafter, we reached the summit of a hill which overlooked the last part of our valley. Here, the river bends to the north, where it has its source in mountain springs. From this hill, we could see our last city, Gath, to the northeast, in the foothills of the Green Mountains. My friend and I stood looking at this scene in silence. It was late in the day. The sun had sunk beneath the western ridge, leaving most the valley in the ridge's shadow, which advanced in a line to the east as the sun lowered in the west. The edge of this shadow was already high on the eastern slopes, where groves of aspen trees were already within it, but the higher tiers of Gath were above it and still caught the muted orange light of the waning day.

It was at the walls of this third city of Gath the next morning that I parted at last with my trustworthy guide. He had business in this town, and I knew in my heart that I had to make my way alone to the Green Mountains. When we were standing quietly by the gate before I departed, the old man reached again into his burlap sack and brought out a lamp which he gave me as a farewell present. It had an urn-shaped bottom filled with oil, and a weblike cloth soaked with wax which served as a wick. The vapors from the oil traveled up this wick and burned when they met the air. There were two other objects which came with this lamp, a clay cask with more oil, and a flat round piece of polished metal. When one applied a thin layer of oil to this piece of metal, it reflected the light of the lamp. One held it behind the lamp on his chest and could thereby increase the light's luminance and direct it like an arrowhead with a never-ending shaft behind it, aiming it toward some suspect shadow or toward some underbrush where eyes might be looking, but not seen.

I left the old man by that city, and stood alone, listening as his strange song faded on the air. I was alone once again, as I turned to muse on the green peaks in the distance—

alone, but not for long, for I soon met another friend who like this first would return again in my journey.

I met this second friend on the day when I arrived at last at the northernmost end of the valley, where the land rose steeply toward the Green Mountains. Gray clouds were massing in the northwest. A light snow was falling. I climbed up and up through woods with bare trees.

Late in the day, the snow was still falling. I stopped for a moment and surveyed the scene. All around me were slender columns of trees with bare branches crossing one another as far as I could see.

Dry grass rustled between the trees. There was a sapling close by me, a puppy of a tree, now bare except for two last, little leaves, which were already brown and dry. They clung stubbornly to their home, crackling in the chilly wind. The tops of the branches of all the trees had taken on a thin covering of sparkling snow. A layer of snow like a gossamer sheet covered the swaying, dry grass and dead leaves. The billowing masses of the gray clouds lumbered like beasts across the darkening sky, which was now aglow with red and purple light. I stood musing on this scene as wind and snow swirled softly round my face.

Looking below me, I saw that in the distance between steep slopes, the valley could still be seen. On one of these was a cabin that had escaped my notice. It was made of rough-hewn logs, piled one on top another. There was a hole in the thatched roof on one side; smoke and glowing sparks swirled from this hole toward the purple sky.

This cabin was built on a small level plot of land on the slope. I must say it was a dismal sight, this little gray-board house standing beneath the darkening purple sky, like an outpost of the people's land through which my journey had thus far taken me, a land which now as I looked at it was already fading in swirling snow and gathering night.

Beyond this cabin was a small shed, about a third its size, with a huge stack of firewood leaning against one side. As I stood watching, a tall, thin woman came walking out. She appeared to be quite old, but walked nimbly to the wood pile, where she began gathering a load of wood. She was

dressed in a long, brown coat which, since it reached all the way to her feet, accentuated her abnormal height. She had wrapped a black scarf around her head and neck and wore black mittens; so, of all her person, only her face was exposed to the cold. She saw me standing above her on the hill and cocked her head at me, placing her hands on her hips like some mother disgusted with her child. Nodding gravely, she pointed to the threatening sky, saying words in a strange dialect. She pursed her lips in the direction of her log house, from which firelight was flickering out the open door. She went inside her cabin, returning shortly with sweet rolls and hot tea, which she set down before me. This skinny woman, as you must guess, was the second friend that I mentioned. I stayed that night in her cabin.

It had a dirt floor and, though only one room, had a separate area for her five cows and two sheep. She had defined the animal's area by laying logs end-to-end across the middle of the dirt floor.

On our side of the cabin, a fire blazed in the midst of a circle of rocks; several black pots were sitting among the rocks. On the other side of the cabin, the animals were lying along the dividing line of logs, facing the fire and watching us silently as we cooked a stew.

When the stew was done, my friend filled eleven plates; she brought seven to her animals, reserving two apiece for us. She had taken off the long, brown coat but continued to wear her black scarf. Beneath the coat, she had a sleeveless, brown dress, equally long. She had long, thin arms like sticks, and sat looking at me while gulping the stew.

It was snowing wildly now; the wind howled around the cabin. That night I nestled in a warm bed that she had made for me beside the fire. The old woman snored, and the animals breathed loudly and snorted in their sleep.

In the middle of the night when the fire had gone out but the glowing embers still emitted a dull light, I sleepily looked around the cabin and was surprised to see the woman's lean figure approaching me in the shadows. She came and lay close to me by the fire, saying nothing.

Somewhat later, turning in her direction, I managed a

quick glance toward her face. She was still wearing the black scarf, and was laying, facing me, with her eyes open. Seeing me look at her, she opened her toothless mouth in a smile. I found her open eyes disturbing, and turned the other way again. In morning, when the first rays of sunlight came through the cracks between the logs, I was up, arranging my pack. My friend moved around in her long, brown dress, building a fire and cooking hot porridge and tea.

After eating together, we went outside. It had stopped snowing. The woods outside our little cabin stood deathly still. The snow which had whirled about us all night as we lay sleeping by the fire had settled in drifts against the woodshed and cabin. The wind had formed the snow into dunes, like giant waves frozen at their crest; they rose higher than the trees and cabin1 and hung, it seemed, in mid-air, menacing but still. The trees were shrouded with snow and looked like white creatures, with their many arms either folded about them, as in fright, or else reaching imploringly toward the silver sky and distant sun. My tall, thin friend smiled in delight at this scene; as for me, I felt impatient, and was waiting to catch her attention so that I might make an appropriate show of courtesy and then depart.

When she finally looked at me, I made a low bow, and pointed toward the quiet, white forest and the giant, green peaks which loomed beyond it, floating in the silver sky.

My friend would have nothing of such dearth of ceremony. Fortunate it was for me, I must admit in retrospect; her farewell instructions and presents—at least the first present—turned out to be quite helpful. First of all, having assured my delay, she began moving about in a near frenzy, gathering armfuls of snow, which she started piling in a circle. Her activity seemed quite senseless to me; nevertheless, to hasten my time of leaving, I set to helping her. At last I discovered she was teaching me to build a little cave from snow. I watched intently as she showed me how to pack the snow firmly at the dwelling's base to prevent the roof from falling in. It was not long before the snow-house stood before us.

My friend once more stepped back, smiling in toothless

delight, and once more I bowed low, pointing to the distant peaks. But apparently she had not noticed my bow. She was already running in the door of her little cabin from which she emerged in the next moment with two presents to give me.

The first present was a tiny mirror which one tied with a cord to his wrist. This mirror could be used to reflect the sunlight and thus give notice from a great distance if one was lost. The second present was a package of provisions. It contained cheese, bread, and unshelled nuts.

I used my lamp that night and ate the bread and cheese from the provisions which the skinny woman had given me. I was camped beneath an overhanging rock high above the valley. It was a clear night and far below me, beneath the starry sky, the lights of Gath flickered, ghostlike, amid a sea of darkness.

I used my lamp the second night, too. On the evening of the third day, snow began to fall again.

I was in a long, narrow valley, following it northward toward the next low spot between the high ridges on all sides. I built a snow-house that night as my brown-coated friend had taught me. I huddled inside while the snow swirled around my cave, lighting my little lamp when I was afraid and wanted to see light.

It seemed the snowstorm would never end. I used all the oil in my lamp and had begun on the spare oil in the clay cask, and so, realizing that I needed to be more sparing, I lit the lamp less often. After many days, I decided to eat the nuts the old woman had given me. I began to eat them in the dark without looking at them. Later I cracked some open in lamplight and discovered the insides were rotten. Tiny, black worms swarmed around in the slimy meat of the nuts.

I was horrified by this sight and began digging a window to throw them out. The snow around my cave had piled thicker than I expected. I had to lay on my stomach and burrow through it to reach the outside.

When at last I broke through and flung the nuts outside, a strange, white world met my eyes. It was a world with no visible horizon, in which tiny, white particles swirled unendingly in monotone light. I grew afraid, and packing

snow in my window again, I withdrew to my cave. I passed my time in musings and reverie. I thought of my small study at the monastery, with, outside its window, the yellow acacia blossoms swaying in the wind, I remembered the statue of the Virgin in the nook below the cathedral among the orange-berried trees.

I lit my lamp again, and in its unsteady light, I studied the mysterious scroll. Taking new heart, I began to plan my journey, how I would use the sun as my reference, remembering that it set in the southwest, and thus keep moving toward the Tabor River Valley. Then, feeling at peace again, I turned off my lamp and fell asleep.

I did not know that day, as I fell so peacefully to sleep, that my journey was just beginning, that it would be seven years before I saw my beloved South again. I woke in a different valley, to a young woman who nursed me with hot broth and tea. I had seen her before, it seemed, in a dream. I was running madly across the snow, unable to find the sun; she called my name as if she knew me.

Yes, I awoke to see this same woman before me. She had a broad face with dark eyes and black hair, such a different face from those of my own people of the South, yet I must admit, it was quite beautiful. She had an orange shawl around her dark hair; she wore a robe, also colored orange, with a rope around her slender waist. Around her neck was a leather cord with a strange amulet or charm attached to it, an oval stone which by some process of nature had been imprinted with a fish's bones. Above us was the brown cloth of a tent; a fire blazed beside us as the wind howled outside.

This woman was Saraph, a priest of the Shibbites, nomads who were headed toward the Tabor Valley, home of the northern giant.

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Yes, dear reader, my journey would take me seven years. How difficult it will be for me to describe these years to you since they happened so long ago and I must confess, they blend together in my old mind. Who knows how long I lay half-sleeping and half-waking in that tent with Saraph’s

face above me? And afterwards, when I was at last strong enough to travel on my own beside my new people, in those long years, now so vague in my memory, when I did not see Saraph and was assigned to our rear guard, routing our herds of sheep with the boys and dogs, when it seemed there were always gray cliffs on both sides of us, and gray clouds low in the sky against them—who can say how long I continued thus, from campfire to campfire?

Indeed, I often had occasion to be thankful for these campfires. Throughout all this vague time in my life, when I was always pushing with my new people through terrain which was unfamiliar to me—forests so thick with underbrush that I could barely see ahead of me in summer, and, in winter, valleys with trees shrouded in snow and unsmiling peaks all around us—throughout all this time, my life centered on these comforting campfires. How I yearned for each strange day to end so that I could gather with my new people again beside such fires, whose glow each night marked our journey northward.

It was at such gatherings by the fire, I should tell you—to begin this part of my story with some semblance of order—that I first learned about my new people and our leaders. It was the custom of our tribe to meet together in such a way at night whenever problems arose. At such meetings, all tribal decisions were made, though not all had an equal voice, I noticed, and, as an outsider, I had none. At these meetings we would gather in a circle around the fire. Looking back on those times now, I can remember this very scene, which in my stay among the Shibbites was repeated so often before my eyes. The flickering light of the fire fell on the faces of all my tribesmen who were struggling to see over one another's shoulders to the area enclosed by our circle where, beside the fire, were two groups of leaders, who sat facing one another.

In the first of these groups was the queen, whose name was Merab. I soon learned that this stately woman was Saraph's mother. Around her was her council of twelve warriors, who were all large men dressed in leathers and furs. In the other group, facing the queen and her warriors,

were the twelve priests of Alsek, the goddess of the Shibbites. The priests were all women, Saraph was among them. They were of various ages; two were mere girls, with small breasts. The twelve priests dressed alike in simple robes and shawls of the type which Saraph had, but each in a different color. Their hair was pulled back and braided behind their necks.

Merab, the queen, dressed like the priests in a simple robe, blue in color, for it is the tradition among the Shibbites that the new queen is chosen from among the priests when the old queen dies. She sat with her legs crossed beneath her and listened with great respect when her people spoke.

Of the warriors, two bore most respect, and were always talking of war. These two were brothers named Elu and Elam, both called of-Jad. I noticed from the first that Elu loved Saraph; his eyes followed her wherever she went, and during the council, when he was seated across from her, he stared at her sullenly.

Elu and Elam were both great warriors. Three years before, in the bitter fight against the Kelsh who were migrating from the south and strayed too far from their course, each of these two brothers had slaughtered 100 men, and brought us women, children, and animals, and spears and axes with iron heads. Both these men were even larger than the other giant warriors, and stood a full two heads taller than I. They had long black hair and beards, and black hair covered their thick legs and arms. They seemed never to smile except in disdain. I must say, looking at them at times when the glow of the fire caught for a moment this disdainful expression on their faces, I reflected to myself that this is how Tabor himself must look, as, from some ridge high in his white mountains, he watches mere mortals struggling through his stark, northern world, and turns aside with a contemptuous smile.

There was another person who from the first had met my eye, a dwarf named Kish whose age and gender I found impossible to determine. This creature was the musician of these people and, in keeping with this role, dressed in long, ceremonial robes and wore long shawls of many colors,

which were always flapping wildly in the wind.

The dwarf played a wooden harp which it carried about in a leather bag. This harp was a peculiar musical instrument. It had a globelike center and long arm, and seven strings of various thicknesses which were strung from the harp's center to the end of the arm.

Often in the evening, when we were by the fire, Kish would come walking from the woods with the leather bag, and smiling broadly, unveil the harp and begin to play. The harp emitted a twanging, dissonant sound which the Shibbites found amusing. Often when they heard it, they began dancing around the fire.

This peculiar, little creature and I had from the start been thrown into an uneasy alliance because for some reason which I could not fathom we were the special targets of Elu and Elam’s scorn. When the giant brothers would walk by and see me standing and watching as Kish played, they would observe the dwarf and me a while in silence and then turn to one another with their disdainful expressions on their faces.

As for Saraph, I seldom saw her after I recovered from my initial weakness. She stayed in a separate tent with the other priests. I saw her sometimes at night, when she listened to the council by the fire. Once, too, I saw her near a stream with some other women; they had been gathering water in leather buckets and were just leaving when I approached. When she saw me, she seemed startled a moment and then smiled. Elu was standing close by; he noticed but said nothing.

In midwinter of one year—I cannot remember which—a feast took place which brought a change in my status in the tribe. This feast was in honor of the goddess Alsek; it fell, as I remember, only once every ten years.

In preparation for this important feast, a great hunt was called; all the men took part, even those as lowly as I. We were divided by the warriors into small groups; I left with one, trotting along beside the others. We departed the camp in early morning long before the sun would rise on this brief winter day, I had been given an unwieldy spear which I held

in one hand and I wore my pack in which I had put provisions and my lamp, for to be truthful with you, dear reader, I was quite afraid. We made our way quietly through a cedar forest in dull moonlight, and then climbed upwards, watching for ravines with half-frozen streams or ponds where deer might be drinking.

I soon grew weary of the hunt and sat on a rock on the side of a slope while the others went ahead. A faint purple glow had appeared in the southeast, where the sun would soon rise. Having nothing to do, I began playing with my lamp, projecting its magic beam into the valley below me where there were trees and large rocks and a stream.

To my surprise, I saw a herd of deer at the far end of the valley, they had noticed the light and were moving toward it inquisitively. By withdrawing the light from them gradually, I managed to coax them further into the valley, until when the last of my oil gave out they stood directly below me in the darkness, still puzzling at the light. Then, standing up, I gave a loud cry. The deer had heard and stood still, with their little heads raised and ears extended.

From my vantage point above the deer, I saw my brothers enclosing them from all sides. We started down together and came running from every direction toward the stream. The deer had bounded toward me at first with a look of horror on their faces, then seeing me with my spear, had reversed toward the stream to seek the shelter of the underbrush on its other side. Little did it avail them—my brothers were waiting with their axes and clubs. We beat these deer to death and then sliced their warm bellies with our knifes. We fastened them to poles and entered the camp to cheers.

That night when we gathered to count our prize, I was given a cup of blood to drink before the people. Merab brought this out and called Saraph, her daughter, to come forth from the priests. Saraph was dressed in her orange robe with her orange shawl around her head and the fishbone amulet attached to a cord around her neck.

As she stood before me with the cup of blood, she removed her shawl. By custom this is done when she acts as

a priest, but she smiled at me when she did it as if she meant it as a special gesture. I drank this blood and thereafter held a voice in the councils.

After this night, an image of the deer's horrified faces remained in my mind. We were camped in the middle of a valley, along a river that was partly frozen. The next morning I walked alone along the river bank, where dry grass, high as my shoulders, emerged from the knee-high snow. The wind was blowing lightly; the grass was rustling softly in the wind. The brief day was already fading. An orange light lingered in the southwestern sky and fell on the slender trunks of the trees and the drifting snow. A channel of water was visible in the center of the river with ice on both sides of it, I walked along the shore, watching the orange light play on the rippling water.

I came to the meadow where the feast would be held. A huge pile of wood had been gathered for a bonfire. Some of the wood had already been arranged for it, piled lengthwise in a circle, and tiered upwards, with large rocks at the circle's edge. I saw a plant growing here with orange berries, like the bushes by the statue in the abbey, but shriveled by the cold.

When I was standing and watching this scene, I heard a voice across from me between the woodpile and the woods. It was Kish the dwarf, standing at the edge of the woods, with its shawls of many colors flapping in the wind. Seeing me, the creature began retiring shyly toward the woods while giving me an incomprehensible smile, perhaps because the word had reached it that I killed the deer.

Then, seeming quite embarrassed, the dwarf bowed obsequiously, and with a skipping step, disappeared into the woods.

That same evening, we gathered together and put a torch to the bonfire. The flames rose slowly from the lower logs, then, gathering in fury, engulfed the higher ones, and rose in a vortex toward the sky.

A strange fire it was, though—the flames were blue and purple and not brilliant orange as I had anticipated. They seemed somber on this silent winter night. Saraph came forward with two other priests, the two who were mere girls.

Each was dressed in her own color, Saraph in orange, the other two in red and gold, Saraph wore her charm with the fish's bones.

Saraph was the first to sing—a sad song about the goddess Alsek, who destroys with one hand and nourishes with the other. Her song portrayed the goddess as a haughty youth who loses her temper, and then laments. The girl in red, now dressed in only a red loin cloth, came forward to dance this role. She wore a mask of carved wood with a black mane above it and on both sides. The mask was of a man's face, it seemed to me, with red eyes with black pupils, and frowning black eyebrows. She leaped about growling and struck down a child who limped before her. Then seeing the child writhing in pain on the ground, the goddess seemed to soften, though the mask still frowned, and danced a dance of sorrow.

When this dance was finished, Saraph and the priest in gold began to dance. They spread the wide sleeves of their robes to look like wings, and danced gracefully, like birds in flight, Then, removing their robes, they danced naked before us.

The children came forward next, long-limbed children, with their black hair newly clean and glossy, and pulled neatly behind their necks. The dwarf Kish had come out with the children. When the children had arranged themselves in a circle between their elders and the fire, the creature looked at them a moment with satisfaction, and then nodding, began to play. The children took with merriment to the twanging, dissonant music, dancing in a single line around the fire. The dwarf played faster and laughed in great glee; a laugh, I must say, quite as peculiar as its music, with all kinds of coughing noises and high wheezes in between. The children skipped about, laughing too, caught in the music's charm, while the creature did a jig beside them, coughing and wheezing, and nodding to the rest of us who clapped as we watched.

I was watching the dwarf in wonder when Saraph took my hand, and motioned to the blue-flamed fire. All the people had begun to dance in two's now, and Saraph pulled me toward the circle of dancers, laughing and smiling at me

with her dark eyes. She had taken off her shawl now; locks of black hair fell softly on her forehead and neck. I felt self-conscious of my awkwardness and pulled backwards, trying to escape. She laughed all the more and held me tightly by both arms, teaching me the pattern of the dance. To my surprise, I learned quickly, sensing her movements. Soon we were dancing and I began to laugh. Indeed, I was beside myself, laughing in great glee as we whirled around.

The others had noticed and stopped their dancing, pointing at us and laughing. They stood around us in a circle, cringing their eyes at us and clapping. The dwarf, too, was beside itself at our laughter. The little creature smiled at us beneath its many-colored shawls, and danced a wild jig beside us as we whirled, laughing its choking-wheezing laugh and nodding back and forth from us to the crowd.

I left with Saraph when the full moon was already low in the purple sky, sinking in the western hills. She had made a lean-to shelter by the river in the tall grass. I stayed with Saraph that night. As a present, she gave me her charm with the fish's bones.

In the morning, I walked alone toward the camp. The first light of the brief sun was falling on the dry, brown grass, and orange-red light that shimmered on the open channel of water in the center of the-frozen river. I paused here a moment and looked up. The branches of the trees above my head crossed one another, dividing the sky between the segments of their pattern, and catching the northward rays of the southern sun. The snow had covered all the earth in silence. Only dead leaves crackled on the trees. I made a campsite, here alone, and built a fire by the bank of the river. I sat watching until the sun was sinking in the trees and the sky had faded from orange to violet again.

The wind was blowing harshly now; I hurried toward the camp. A great fire burned as usual at the camp's center, and Kish was there with his wooden harp. But a grave mood had settled on the people. A group of men was standing by one side. Elu was before them watching my approach, and his brother Elam was close by his side.

As I came near, Elu stepped forward. He had a knife. in

each hand, and was holding them by their blades, with their handles toward me. All the men stood behind him, watching me grimly.

Merab had come forth also. She stood looking while all the people gathered around her, including Saraph, who now appeared among the priests. She was barely visible in the shadowed firelight, but I could see her orange shawl. Kish, too, was in this group, in the forefront, between the men and Merab. The creature wore an odd expression of pity and amusement, and stood amidst the boots of the men, holding the wooden harp, as if ready to play.

Merab called me, and when I stood before her, she called Elu. He came from the group of men and we stood face to face—that is, as nearly as we could. Several men came forward. They placed my left hand directly forward, around Elu's right wrist, and tied it there securely, without removing the reflector which my skinny friend in the South had given me—fortunate for me, I must say; though I do not mean to rush ahead with my story. On the other side, Elu's left hand was placed around my right wrist and was also tied,

Bound in this way, we each had our right hand free to grasp a knife though we could not move without encountering the force of our opponent's left hand. Elu looked toward my face a moment and then seeing Elam beside him, turned toward his brother with his disdainful smile, nodding at me and laughing. Kish meanwhile had climbed to the top of a cart near by and stood with the wooden harp. It was now clear to me that the creature saw this as merely another festive occasion and meant to supply a pleasant background to it with the harp, whatever might be the dour outcome to the participants. Now Merab stepped forward giving us each a knife, and as the creature struck its first note, a group of men gathered around us, and we began a duel to death.

Elu gave a roar which echoed from the ridges of the distant mountains. He was upon me in a fury with all his weight, and in a single thrust sent me flailing to the ground with my head against a rock and the knife closing to my throat. Here Kish's music changed—it was soft music, not fit

for a kill. Elu had been leaning over me with his black beard in my mouth and his red face drawn together in hatred; now he relented, though not so much from compassion as in the manner of a cat playing with a mouse. His big face now smiled at me. He held the knife at my throat and grazed it a little so blood flowed down my shoulders.

The next day we were still struggling; or it would be more accurate to say that my giant friend was still playing with the struggle, while I was taking it quite seriously, pitting all my strength against him in an attempt to force some slip, and ever so grateful for the dwarf, who changed his music again and again to prolong the amusement of the fight. The sun had risen and stood at the height of its low arc, glaring though distant. Once again Elu began a playful lunge toward me, but in tugging on my right arm he positioned it such that my reflector caught the sun's full light and sent it toward his eyes. He was momentarily confused by this sudden flash and stepping backwards to gain his bearings, he stumbled over a log which was lying near the fire. Taking advantage of his fall, which he accompanied with a roar of protest at such unjust indignity, I was on him in a mad rush.

His giant head grazed a rock as he thundered to the ground; it left him for just an instant in a daze. I sliced his throat from ear to ear and, cutting the cords which bound our wrists, stood looking at his blood gush out while the children gawked and the people stared at me in disbelief.

I was from this day counted as a warrior, and Saraph soon became my wife. But I must tell you, dear reader, I was thinking of the South again and the scroll in my pack.

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We have a saying in our cult: Signs may lead one to the door of silence, but in the world beyond this door, they have no use.

My master Gabriel told me this saying in my second year of study at the scrolls. In his characteristic manner, he considered it a moment with respect for its meaning, and then smiled, observing a flaw.

"Or it may be," he said to me, "that in he world beyond

this door, signs do exist, but within such a different system, and requiring such different manner of writing, or conveying, them, that one must start anew—like a child who has lived all his life indoors, then wanders by chance into a garden, where he watches a bee gathering pollen from a flower."

I listened to my kind master's words that morning and walked outside, recalling the lovely silence of my three years of meditation. It was spring. The bare trees were budding. From some of these buds, leaflets were emerging. In the plaza by the cathedral was a garden with white and yellow flowers.

I understood this saying, when I was still a novice, to refer to that "darkness of darkness", as it is called, which the great monks have talked about, in whose cool and formless surroundings one leaves behind the sensations of the material world, and dwells alone in his soul, in union with God, and thus transfigured by grace—much, I would say, like a mussel who has withdrawn to the center of his lustrous shell and dwells in that dark world until he finds there a gold fire, and a lake which reflects the firelight to his eyes, and beside this shimmering lake, a pretty, orange sea-horse who sings a song that is simple and harmonious, yet changes each moment to something which our mussel has never heard before. So, too, it is said, the great monks withdrew to their darkness, as to an inner feast.

In my life with the Shibbites, my situation was quite different from that of monk in meditation, or mussel in his shell. It was a real world of snow and forest and harsh wind, this northern valley. I slept each night with Saraph while the wind howled outside our tent, listened to her soft breathing and gentle sighs, and I knew the smell of her body as I knew my own. A new life had begun for me. I wandered with my tribe northward, herding and hunting every day. In the evenings, I sat with Saraph by the fireside, or watched Kish, the dwarf, who had taken to us both since my fight with Elu. My situation was not filled with grace like that monk's nor closed from outside by a dazzling shell. Yet I felt at times so utterly removed from Saraph and my comrades, that I found

it necessary to assume a complaisant mask—within it, I am ashamed to say, thinking my scholar's thoughts, and keeping in order my scholar's world. I remembered the scroll, as I have said. Late at night when Saraph slept, I looked at it by firelight.

Compared to the pretty, orange seahorse whom I mentioned in my metaphor, this strange creature called Kish was a musician of a different sort, whose notes, if we may call them such, were deliberately flattened, and fought with one another, never consorting in any melodious way. I tell you this, dear reader,—as at the same time I must confess to you that I found these harsh and warring sounds quite interesting, and so—you may smile at this—I became the dwarf's apprentice, learning to play the wooden harp.

Many an evening, this creature stood close at my side, with both its little hands hovering over my left hand as I attempted to finger the seven strings. I soon learned that by means of applying pressure with my finger on a given string, I could shorten it, forcing it thereby to cry out a higher sound when I struck it with the fingers of my right hand. This was only the beginning of my studies. The creature sometimes played only one string, but sometimes two or three, and often four or five at once. Indeed, at times he fingered and struck six or even all seven at once, by covering two or three strings with one tiny but nimble finger. And while the resulting wails and groans could in fairness be called indistinguishably harsh, yet the dwarf stubbornly insisted that certain fingerings were correct, and kept drilling me until I recognized the sound associated with each position of my fingers.

I remember in particular a time when I was experimenting in the creature's presence, while it looked at me, somewhat perturbed. By playing four strings at once with a complex positioning of my fingers, I managed to send forth a sound which to my mind brought an image of a Grecian vase, a round, pure sound, as comes from a flute. The dwarf grimaced in horror and disgust, pulling the harp from my hands, and did not return for several days. When he did, it was with an understanding that I would wander no

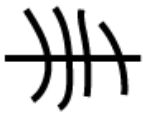
more in my apprenticeship. When I played my first song, the dwarf clapped in delight and Saraph laughed.

To do justice to the creature's music, I must say, I found a logic in it after all. True, the individual sounds were flat and harsh, yet as one learned to distinguish them one from another, various patterns in the flow of these sounds became clear. Certain sounds, or combinations of sounds, were repeated as motifs. Others conjured a certain, predictable reaction from the Shibbites. One could learn these associations of sound and elicited mood as surely as he learned the complex fingering on the wooden harp, and thus could give the motifs an emotional power. Within a particular song, which often was quite long in duration, these motifs and other like associations unfolded in a manner peculiar to that song, as if guided by some distorted but pervasive inner law. If one could manage to picture the song's entire pattern of flow within his mind, one observed that it grew outward from a center, as in many skipping and multi-colored lines, which broke in two's, or separated in many parts, coming together in clever ways. It was the dwarf's idiosyncrasy that it insisted that any given song should not make sense until the last note, with which its entire pattern, and thus meaning, was brought to light. I must admit that after awhile the harsh notes, blending, formed chordic shapes within my mind. Little creatures and goblins danced; I watched, enchanted by their moonlit world.

Winter passed, now spring burst forth. Trickles of water cut gorges in the ice that had covered the hills all winter. These trickles joined in streams and came rushing down.The river swelled. Water swirled over the rocks and covered the tall grass along the banks so that only the tips of their blades extended above the churning water. The sun advanced northward from the south horizon. The wet snow and glittering ice, with its pools of water here and there, reflected the sun's glare toward squinting eyes. Saraph grew larger now; she bore our child.

It was at this time by accident that I came upon the meaning of the first sign. Our tribe had camped in a valley by a little grove of budding trees. A stream ran between

our tents, and in the rocks along the stream, there were tiny, blue flowers with cuplike crowns. It was a day of rest and I was sitting by the morning fire with Saraph. Kish had come to visit us, bringing the harp and some blue flowers for Saraph in a little bouquet. I was studying the scroll half-heartedly, with the amulet beside me which bore the imprint of the fish's bones. Kish stood beside my shoulder, watching inquisitively as I examined the symbols. The creature's eye caught on the fire-maiden's symbol, which, you remember, is written as such,



The dwarf pointed to this sign and then to the oval charm. Indeed, the backbone and larger ribs of the fish's skeleton formed a similar design—the charm was tilted sideways to our line of vision with the backbone pointing up and down.

The little creature thought this resemblance quite funny, or else was quite proud of its discovery, for to be truthful, I think the dwarf was jealous of my knowledge of such mysterious markings. The creature rocked about from foot to foot, grimacing and shaking and laughing its peculiar coughing-wheezing laugh.

Saraph knew nothing of the scroll and regarded it as no more than a sentimental attachment on my part. She looked at it blankly, trying to understand the source of the Dwarf’s amusement; then turning toward Kish, she began laughing at the creature’s hysterics. She was kneeling behind me and held me in a playful hug with her chin resting on my shoulder, while the dwarf stood beside us, laughing still, with its tiny hand on Saraph's arm. Saraph grabbed the creature, laughing and holding it in the air while it laughed and wriggled. The smiling at me, she winked, and kissed the dwarf’s broad forehead which quickly grew red.

I say I thus learned the first sign though it would be more accurate to say I had a premonition. I understood its full meaning on a different day, when I also learned the meaning of the second. It was in early autumn, when we

reached a place where our valley intersected with another, which opened to the south. The narrow valley of the Tabor River behind us was depleted of game and pasture, and another winter was drawing near. We had a council fire and decided to leave the Tabor and try the valley to the south. Saraph and I rose early one morning at this time, and climbed hand in hand to the top of a high hill at the valley's western side, between the wings which broke to north and south. It was a morning of somber weather. There were layers of grey clouds above the eastern horizon; behind them the rising sun glowed in muted orange and gold, while the rest of the sky was still covered by darkness. Our own mood was quite different. Our fingers were moist in one another's grasp. The wind blew softly on Saraph's black hair, and she wore as usual her orange priest's dress.

Along the upward trail were plants and pretty flowers. They were weighted with sparkling dew and listed toward the muted light in the eastern sky. From the top of this hill we watched the line of sunlight come forth at once in both valleys, rousing the earth from its sleep. A herd of deer was drinking by the river in the distance, while a faint, yellow light fell on the water that rippled around their bodies. High on the ridge above us, I saw a stream trickling from the still unmelted snow on the peaks. It cascaded over rocks, joining with a larger stream of water, and went thus downward with many churning junctions until it surged into the river.

Looking to the East I saw another such stream, and then another, and another. This river was gathering these streams like children to her bosom to lead them to the sea. The river, I understood, at· that moment, was the second sign, the one vertical slash, with two joining from the side, like downward wings, written, as you remember, as such,

Looking further to the north, I saw a different sight. We were in the delta of the Tabor, where it entered the North Sea. The sea was faintly visible in the haze by the north horizon, a shimmering plane of blue in the rising morning

sun, with no clear demarcation where it met the turquoise ether of the sky. The river with its branches was the second sign, and I now knew the fish's bones meant the sea. I now understood their combined meaning; there was a third river beyond this North Sea, and there the northern brothers dwelled, in a “holy city by white mountains,” as the scroll described.

Saraph was nestled against me. She looked up at me and nodded with a faint smile of anticipation, toward the new land of the southward-reaching valley where she expected we would be going with our child. The sun had risen now above the clouds in the East. It rose in a triumphant blaze of light, which fell, golden, on Saraph's face as she sat beside me and mused on the peaceful scene.

When we reached the camp again, the tents were down. Our tribesmen were beside them, singing and dancing, with our Kish before them, standing on a cart, playing joyfully on the wooden harp.

That night I camped alone on the banks of the Tabor. An image of Saraph's weeping face filled my mind as I lay all night without sleeping. But I was up at the crack of dawn and trudging northward toward the sea, never looking back.

III

How strange it was, dear reader, so soon thereafter, to find myself on a small ship on that sea, surging north through tumbling water, the seagulls crying at our wake... but only so far, for there is a place where the oriented aura of the land gives way with a sigh to the placeless aura of the sea, and there the gulls turned back.

Yes, I followed the Tabor River to the sea. I found there a tiny village with houses made of weathered, gray logs, and built on hills that faced a bay. Fog covered the city in morning, and ebbed seaward at midday to reveal a low, gray sky, half the time in drizzle or snow. I boarded a ship here, a solid, wooden boat with two masts and orange and purple sails. With a silent crew who watched me with suspicion from the corners of their eyes, I set forth toward the North in early winter. Nothing could deter me now. I had only one wish, to find the Northern brothers as I knew I must before I could go south again.

Three days out, I witnessed a wonder that sailors often talk about, how on the night of the full moon the red sun in one moment descends in the West, when, in the next moment, the moon ascends, violet, in the East. Between these two moments, it seemed to me, this whole world of water and sky hovered between violet and red, and our small ship had lost its bearing. But the moon came up, distant and silver in the violet sky. In its thin, white light, we proceeded north to sea.

That time was long ago, dear reader. I cannot remember how long we continued on this sea. Late at night, I stood alone on the deck and watched the north horizon, where orange and red lights danced like goblins in the dark sky, reflected on the swaying water. This whole world, it seemed to me, was sea. The water and sky were halves of the same sea. They moved in circles above and below, touching where we sailed. The sun still rose, but each day its arc was closer to the south horizon. Then one day it barely rose at all, merely came up from the sea and hovered there, never lifting itself above the water, before it sank again. The sun was red

on this brief day. Sky and water, too, were red. In the water to the south, whales emerged and spouted.

Someone cried out.

We were approaching a rugged shoreline which rose steeply from the water toward white slopes and jagged peaks. There was a bay among the white mountains, and in the bay, a city of stone, half-shrouded in fog and swirling snow.

I stood on the ship's deck and watched as we approached. It was a city of great size, sheltered on three sides by high ridges and the wings of the bay, but open on the south to the sea, where the sun was now sinking. Half the sun’s sphere had already sunk into the water, the other half glowed above it like a creature from an unknown world, sending a column of red light across the water's surface toward the bay which, indeed, seemed cupped to catch it.

This city was built on a steep incline from the water to the mountains behind. Tiers of stone buildings rose from the shore, each higher level set back somewhat from the tier beneath, forming platforms, or ledges, with walls.

Narrow streets wound up and down between these buildings. Lamps glowed in windows and along the winding streets. On some of the darker ledges, people walked with lanterns or torches. The tiers continued upward until they faded in fog and snow. Even in this nebulous area, I noticed, lamps and lanterns flickered, as if suspended in the sky. In the east and west where the wings of the bay extended southward to the sea, the shores were rugged, with great rocks rising from the water amid pounding waves, and behind them, cliffs and more mountains likewise hidden in fog.

We landed in a cove. Here there was a long, wooden dock with lamps, widely separate from one another, hanging from poles and swaying in the wind. High walls rose behind the landing area; above these walls was the first tier of buildings. A small group of North-people had gathered by the dock to watch us land. They were dressed in heavy, leather clothing with wide legged pants and pointed hats. They cheered politely as we descended the creaky platform,

talking to one another in the strange language of the North.

After the natives had left, I stood alone on the dock. The lingering light of the setting sun had faded. The ship groaned against its moorings. Beneath the swaying lamps along the dock, circles of light swayed back and forth. I stood in silence a moment, and looked to the dark sea, saying a prayer of thanks for my safe crossing. Then I turned toward the city. The high walls and dock formed a triangle; at its vertex, a narrow street began. It was made of red brick, and led up a steep ramp with walls on either side, disappearing in the first tier of buildings.

I began to follow this road. It wound upward between the tiers of buildings. Each tier was several stories high. There were windows high above the street, from which people looked out, their faces distorted by the harsh, unsteady lights of the lamps behind them. People walked along the ledges, carrying lanterns and mumbling the strange sounds of their language.

At length I reached a kind of summit where the road was straight and level. There were shops here on both sides of the street, with signs outside of them describing their business. Most of these shops were dark, but in one I could see a lamp burning. There were many odd trinkets in this shop, and a figure walked back and forth in the half-shadows, arranging the wares. At the end of this row of shops, the road grew more narrow. Now I could extend my arms and touch the stone walls of the buildings on either side of me.

I stood here a moment to get my bearings. To the south, toward the sea, the street and shops were visible for only a short distance before the street curved downward to one side beside a high building which prevented a view of the sea and my little ship. Buildings and walls rose on the east and west as if the street was in a pass between higher levels of the city, though in the fog and snow I could not be certain.

To the north, toward which I was heading, there was a valley, though only partly visible. I could see tiers beneath me like giant steps with lamps burning on the ledges. They curved outward, as if following an arc of a circle, in the fashion of an amphitheater, though whether this arrangement

continued on the far side of the valley I likewise could not determine, since even on the near side each lower step was hidden more thickly in the swirling snow and fog.

Continuing on this road, I now discovered that it wound downward even more steeply than it had wound upward on the seaward side, and besides grew more narrow, until what had begun as a road was now no more than a walkway between high walls or buildings—which they were I could no longer tell. I saw more people now. They squeezed past me as they went in the opposite direction on the brick walkway, or else, approaching from my rear, waited impatiently to pass until I stepped aside. It was snowing more heavily now. At last the walkway came to a kind of gate, a Roman archway with a keystone at the apex of its arch. I walked through this doorway to find myself at the valley's center.

Here there was an immense plaza, great enough in area to accommodate ten tribes of the Shibbites; it was bordered by flaming torches and people walked hurriedly in every direction, huddled in fur coats and scarves, with their pointed hats on their heads.

A huge stone temple of some sort commanded the plaza on the north. It had an immense facade with a base as wide as the plaza itself; it rose in arches and columns which were so tall that the temple's overall design was obscured by the low clouds which hung in the valley. The temple blocked my view of the city to the north. On the other three sides of the plaza, beyond the perimeter of torches, the tiers of buildings began. Lamps flickered on the lower tiers and from the nebulous area above them. People with lanterns were walking here and there.

I now set about finding a place to stay. I could find no one who spoke either my own language or Shibbite, and so was forced to attempt communication by making signs with my hands and accompanying them with facial gestures. The people I stopped were impatient and could barely wait until I finished my inquiry. They pointed in a vague direction and went hurrying on. Nevertheless, I kept moving in the direction toward which these various people had indicated

until I found a hostel for strangers. This hostel had no sign of any sort and a plain wooden door. I only came upon it by noticing that there were many strange groups of people in front of it, each one, it seemed, with a different costume and speaking a different language. The plain door opened directly to the plaza which, of course, due to the plaza's immense size, was only vaguely visible beyond a sea of swarming people, inside there was a narrow hallway leading to a counter behind which stood a little man amidst a pile of ledgers. He peered at me a moment as if to focus his sight on me—for he had been studying one large ledger intently with his nose almost resting on the page that he was looking at. When he had seen me to his satisfaction, he pulled out a large copper key marked #2, taking some silver coins as pay.

My tiny room, with the number just mentioned, was on the third story of the hostel. It had a cot, a table and chair with a lamp, and an oval window which overlooked the plaza. I lit this lamp, thinking of my bearded friend in the South and the lamp that I had left on the mountain slope where I deceived the deer. I sat at my table a long while, looking out the window toward the melee of shrouded, swarming people, and the vague form of the temple beyond the burning torches on the other side of the plaza. I placed my pack on the cot and took out the scroll and the amulet with the fish's bones which Saraph had given me.

A solitary period had begun in my life, dear reader, with a solitude far different than that of the three years I had spent in the silent garden of the cult. Each day grew darker until the sun never rose at all. In the south at midday, there was a glow of red and purple, nothing more, and then full dark came back again. I wandered through the city, which was always obscured with snow and fog, or else roamed the plaza among the hordes of hurrying people, returning each evening to my room, where I lay on my cot, listening to the crowd of people on the mall below my window. Finally the darkest part of winter had set in, and not even the purple glow appeared at midday. With no sun to mark the passing of each day, I soon lost track of time.

At last I devised an occupation for myself which put some order in my life. By lamplight in my room, sitting at my table, I copied the scroll over and over, then with the image of the key signs in my mind, I searched the dark city hoping to find traces of a sacred cult like my own.

I soon expanded my schedule to include another activity. It was the custom in this city to have a market once a week on the plaza. People came from all sections of the city to sell food or trinkets they had made. They constructed small booths, lighting them with torches, and hanging banners of many colors from cords to attract the attention of potential buyers. A great horde of people passed among these booths while the market was in process; merchants of every kind and size, wrapped heavily in furs to protect themselves from the cold, stood in the torchlight, hawking their wares. This market soon became my way of marking time. Each week I heard the noise of the builders as the booths ere begun, then, looking out my oval window, I smiled in anticipation of my next emergence from my solitary world. All the time of the market, I walked among the booths examining various trinkets, in hope of finding some sign which resembled the yet unsolved signs of the scroll, and might, therefore, either make clear its message or else provide a clue to the scroll's origins. The people thought me strange, I think, with my Shibbite clothing and my amulet around my neck, and with my needing to communicate with them by means of comic gestures of my face and hands. They gave me suspicious looks or else smiled at me condescendingly as I passed.

One day, on impulse, I walked back to the Roman archway through which I had first entered the plaza, and followed the brick walkway upward until I came to the level section at the top of the hill. Here, I remembered, I had seen a shop with more trinkets.

This shop turned out to be an interesting place. The trinkets were arranged in different small rooms, many of them not large enough to stand up in, and connected by stairways, or, in some cases, ladders or waist-high doors. This shop afforded me a third activity, besides my study and the market. Each week when the market was over, I walked

across the plaza to the Roman archway, and ascended the brick walkway to the shop. Here I moved from room to room, while the proprietor, a little man with patient demeanor, moved behind me with a lantern as I examined the trinkets, searching for relevant signs. One day, opening the door in response to my knock, he threw up his hands, and slammed it in my face.

At last, even the market lost interest, and with the shop no longer accessible to me, I stayed in my room, never going outside, never looking at the scroll, and with no hope that spring would ever come.

Saraph's face came into my mind at times. I saw her on the afternoon I left, weeping and asking me to stay. But her face seemed distant and unreal; I observed it coldly or forced it from my mind.

After laying thus while several markets passed unheeded, I resolved on a new plan to search the temple on the plaza's north side. I arose, packed my bag, and with never a backward look went out to the plaza. A market day had just ended.

A strong wind had extinguished many of the torches among the deserted booths. Scraps of paper or discarded banners, swept up by the wind, somersaulted across the stones. A few people, all wrapped in furs, lingered in a little group by one booth. They smiled and pointed at me. Someone made a joke and they laughed together in a little burst of sound, then stood silently watching as I walked by with my pack. At last, I reached the temple. Torches burned in a row in front of the high double-doors at its center.

There were two giant statues standing here, one on either side of the doors. They were massive figures—whether representing humans or some kind of animal, I could not tell. I looked around to see if anyone was watching me. Even my witty friends had departed. The plaza was empty, with only a few torches still burning and battling the wind.

I walked between the immense statues, and opened the double doors. I had expected they would lead to a chamber of some kind, or at least a vestibule, but behind the doors

was a single hallway. It had bare walls and was lighted by simple lamps which stood on wooden tables, much like the one I had had in my room in the hostel. These lamps were distant from one another, with dark stretches of hallway between them. There was one such lamp by the door, another in the distance down the hallway, then three others at like intervals until at the last lamp the hallway either ended or turned, for no light at all was visible beyond it. I walked down this hallway with my pack. At the last lamp, the hallway seemed to converge with another which ran perpendicular to it, for one could no longer go forward but had to make a choice between left and right. I took the hallway to the left and proceeded down it for four more lamps. Here it again divided and I this time took the turn to the right, thus continuing with no logical choice of turns until, many decisions later, I sat down with my pack beside me.

I sat thus for a long while, and then, with a hopeless sigh, continued. Now the hallways grew more narrow and the lamps more distant, so that the next lamp glowed in the distance like a single star and I could not see the walls around me but had to feel with my hands like a blind-man. I continued from lamp to lamp in this way until, much later again, I paused beside one of them in utter exhaustion. I sat down beside the table with my pack and was surprised to see the walls no longer met the floor at right angles so that someone had leveled the table by putting a piece of wood beneath its two lower legs. This gave me a moment of hope. I placed my head on my pack and fell asleep.

I had a disturbing dream at this time, dear reader, which I will describe to you. I was sitting with Saraph and Kish on the morning when the dwarf had fallen into such laughter at the signs. The creature was standing with the wooden harp in one hand and the blue flowers it had brought for Saraph in the other. Saraph picked up the dwarf and kissed it, causing it to wriggle in embarrassment and laughter. Then picking up the harp, the creature began to play a sad song—about a little flower who is trying hard to grow, until a girl comes skipping along and sees it. She snatches the little flower from

the soil and cups it to her ear, for she has heard that if one does so, she may hear the waves crashing in from sea, or else hear a special secret which only little flowers can tell. The flower is in such horror at its sudden rupture from the soil that it cannot speak. The girl hurls it to the ground, crying, “Liar!”, and stomping it beneath her foot.

Saraph was quite taken by this song. She looked at me with tears in her dark eyes. She placed her lips to mine and sucked my tongue, as if it were a tit and she a little babe. I was caught in her warmth and swirled in madness round and round inside it, while the creature's face smiled above us and it continued its sad song. Then all changed. We were falling and Saraph screamed, looking below us in horror and searching my face for what to do.

I woke from this dream feeling disconcerted and in a panic began to walk again toward the next light which was so distant I could barely see it. I passed it without stopping and went on to another and another. At length, I found myself with no view of any lamp, and, tearing off my pack, fumbled for the scroll, throwing it as far as I could down the dark hallway where it clattered to the floor.

Then I sat down again on the rounded floor beneath me, wondering what to do.

Now I heard a trickle of water somewhere in the distance, perhaps further down the hall, I thought. I got up again and started walking. The sound grew closer as I walked until I felt a stream of water beneath my feet. I crouched down beneath my pack. The trickle of water was not large, but moving toward somewhere. On the side of the wall, the stream had burrowed a tunnel leading down and away from the hall. This tunnel was only waist-high so I had to crawl on all fours as I followed the stream. Yes, the stream was going somewhere for it grew larger in size, but the tunnel around it grew correspondingly smaller until I was crawling along on my stomach in the dark. It was muddy where I was crawling. Slimy creatures like worms or little snakes came crawling across my body as I burrowed. I rested again, lying in this dark world with the water running beneath me and the worms crawling all around me.

I was looking before me in the dark when I noticed a tiny speck of red light. I was beside myself in a frenzy of despair and hope and crawled madly toward it. The red light grew larger and larger, and the tunnel, too, so that at last I could walk again, though still hunched over beneath the tunnel's low roof. My stream had grown larger, I now found myself in a rock cave, and I noticed that what I had taken for a red light was an opening at them far end of the cave.

Running, I came to the portal and looked out. The opening of the cave was on the side of a rock ledge above the sea; the stream rushed down it toward the rocks on the beach where it flowed into the water. The red sun had just risen as I had seen it that day from the ship, and whales were swimming in the sea before it. When I looked to the shoreline where the waves met the rocks, my heart leapt with joy. Saraph was standing on the sand. She was dressed in her orange robe and she pointed down the shore where a river could be seen, emerging from white mountains and tumbling toward the sea.

I ran to hug her, but in the next moment, she was gone. The sea was a great plain of snow. White peaks rose on every side, and a river of ice wound down from the mountains where Saraph had pointed. High on a cliff beside this frozen river, there was a village built in a concave of the rock, and thus protected from the wind. An orange flag was flapping in the wind and a cymbal gonged slowly. I had found the Northern brothers.

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The next day I was in this Northern monastery—high on the cliff on a platform—beside the leader of this order. We were seated together on large wooden chairs, like thrones, he on my left side.

Beneath the platform was a courtyard, covered with snow and surrounded by a wall. Directly across the courtyard was a single door, from which in a moment the monks were expected to come forth and do obeisance to their leader in my honor.

The courtyard before us was in reality the roof of the

village; the other levels of the community were below it, and there was nothing above our heads except the natural ceiling formed by an overhanging shelf of rock from which lanterns hung, swaying in the wind. Our view was toward the south; in other words, we were facing away from the face of the cliff itself, which was on the northern side of a valley. It was, indeed, a spectacular view. There was a level basin immediately beneath our cliff. Here, as you remember, I had imagined seeing Saraph. Beyond this basin, the white land inclined from all sides toward the sea.Yes, it was the same sea that I had crossed to reach this climax of my journey. A red sun had risen, this time high above the south horizon.

As for this ruler, or northern abbot, I must describe him more fully. When I was first ushered in to meet him, he was standing with several attendants in the vestibule before the door which led to the courtyard. He was dressed, as I expected, in a kind of liturgical robe. It was orange, reaching to his ankles, with no sleeves but broadly-caping shoulders, and with two symbols sewn on it, a red sun and a violet moon. On his head he wore an orange miter with the same two symbols. Much as his dress met my expectations, his physical appearance did not. Indeed, I must say he reminded me of someone I had seen before. He had a long, white beard which reached to his waist, knotty brown hands, and wore a plain wooden cross with a rhinestone at its center.

When I saw him, I thought for a moment he was my old friend the juggler from the South. Though I had not yet been properly introduced, I rushed forward, laughing, expecting him to respond with joyful recognition. Instead, he was taken aback by my impulsive informality, and withdrew from my onrush in surprise and shock, while his attendants swooped upon me from all sides as if I had been discovered of intrigue. I bowed low in apology and tried painfully to explain my error with the inadequate means of sign language. He caught my mood of atonement if not my description of my bearded friend in the South who, as I pointed out, resembled him so closely. Looking at me kindly, and with an expression on his face of great dignity, he led me to the courtyard.

While we were seated on the platform together, I attempted further communication. I used sign language to tell him about the two symbols, the sign of the fire maiden, which, I told him, meant the fish's bones, or taking the symbol further, the sea; and the river sign, which had brought me to the river of ice, which I pointed to, for it was visible beyond the wall on the southwest ridge. He watched me attentively for a long time with no expression on his face, then broke into a smile and began laughing and nodding. I was encouraged by his seeming comprehension, and gestured all the more dramatically, feeling quite fluent with my signs. He looked at me with a quizzical look, stopping my hands with his own, then pointed to the courtyard, nodding and smiling once more.

The monks had started coming out the door across from us in a column of two's and were walking slowly toward the platform. They were dressed in orange robes and when they reached us, a pair at a time, they bowed low before their good leader, then me, then once again to him, and receded, still bowed.

The next day I was summoned to meet a master of their cult of the scrolls, which, as in ours, holds a special position in their community. I followed a brother dressed in an orange robe down a long corridor and was escorted to a chamber with ornate chairs and with large double doors across from the single door by which I had entered.

No sooner had I sat down when the double doors opened and an old brother stood before me who, for all his kindness of demeanor and his simple orange robe, looked much like my good master Gabriel in the South. Bowing, he greeted me in the language of the Southland.

"You know my language, good Father," I said in surprise. "Yes, of course," he said, laughing. "Our courier learned it while in the South and, at my request, he taught it to me since my interest in words is much as great as your own, I suspect. It was this same courier who brought you the scroll, as you well remember. Now, my task is to tell you its meaning. But first, come sit down and tell me the story of your journey."

With that we walked together into the larger chamber. There were spired windows here, much like the windows in the cathedral at Saint Mary, but with plain glass which permitted a view of the white mountains and sea.

He listened with great interest while I talked. He had a sadly pensive expression on his face except on occasion when he smiled. He listened to my tale of my life among the Shibbites with concern, nodding thoughtfully when I described my fight with Elu and my last morning with Saraph on the hill above the Tabor Valley.

When I was done, we sat for a moment in silence and then he began to speak.

"First, let me talk about the signs, dear brother," he said. "You interpret the first sign as we do, as a fish's bones. I found your story amusing of Saraph and the dwarf, who pointed out the resemblance between our written sign and a fish fossil which, indeed, it does depict. Also, I am sorry I have never had occasion to see the window that you mentioned—of the fire-maiden—who as you describe her sounds so much like your Saraph, and holds the fossil, or sea-symbol, in her hand as she faces a blazing fire and shelters a plant. It may be, as you and your brothers suspect, that, at the time this window was made, some connection did exist between our two orders. As you know, that time was long ago, my son, when your people wandered like the Shibbites and mine did too."

"As for your maiden's sign, it is our custom to teach it with a story. Begging your leisure, I will tell it to you now.

"A little boy lives in a village by the sea. He is a strange, puny child whom people joke about, and has no friends. He wanders each day by the seashore, watching the waves crash on the black rocks. He loves the tidepools most of all. Here he finds, encircled by rock, a little world of bright fish, mussels, and crabs and other strange creatures, who move about cautiously and devour one another. In one of these tidepools, he finds a fossil like your Saraph's, an oval stone imprinted with a fish's bones. In his loneliness, he pretends that this rock is another child, an imaginary friend. He carries it with him wherever he goes. He fondles it and

speaks to it sweetly in a whispering voice. He brings it with him to his bed.

"Late one night, when a fog has covered the little village and the buoys are groaning on the water, he awakes to see these fish's bones glowing in orange and red, and dancing before his bed. The dancing bones become an orange fish with lustrous scales and with a single red eye which glows like the winter sun. The puny boy watches for just a moment in wonder before he is overcome with a feeling of repugnance and fear. The fish is beside him with a single sweep of its fins and devours him in a single bite.

"Now an even stranger thing occurs. The moment the little boy is eaten, he feels himself as one and the same with the fish. He opens his eyes—which he had closed in horror at the last moment—and he sees again with the fish's glowing red eye. He feels that he has great muscles on his side. He tenses these muscles, and the great fins sweep him forward, pushing him wherever he wishes to go. Swimming thus, he passes through the fluid fog and flies high above the village, which now looks quite tiny and despicable. Then, seeing the broad sea beneath him, he lunges headlong toward the Deep.

"Fish of all colors swim around him now. There are bright yellow fish with black and white stripes, pink fish with purple eyes, green fish with scales that look like yellow stars. Diving deeper, he finds the ocean floor. Here he sees creatures who change forms and colors, never twice the same, lost in a senseless rapture, a listless dance. He sees other creatures like flowers, with eyeballs on waving stocks; they move with their wide-flung roots like spiders with a hundred legs.

"Meanwhile, the village is astir. The villagers have noticed the little boy's absence. In dutiful alarm, they have gathered to the shore. The little boy comes to the surface of the water, smiles from his orange fish's face, and, with his glowing red eye, looks with disdain toward the shore. They are setting out to find him in little boats with lanterns, for somehow they suspect that he has left them for the sea. They come across the water, calling out his name. The boy has

gone to the bottom of the sea again with the green and yellow fish and flower creatures who gather around him and look upward with him toward the lanterns which glow ghostlike above the water's surface.

“The villagers cry out again and again, luring him with promises of friendship and love. All at once, lurking there in his dark, watery bed, the boy feels quite alone. He remembers how often he has been lonely walking by himself among the black rocks by the shore. Encouraged by their offers of affection, he goes to meet their nets. They treat him as a curiosity, gathering round him by the shore, and gawking at him as he dies within their hands.

“For you see, good brother,” the master said—"if we may retire a moment from our story—to learn this sign one must learn to breathe with both gills and lungs."

He smiled and proceeded.

“The next day the villagers are surprised to see the little boy again, playing by the shore. In a matter of moments, the village is astir with a shiver of suspense, and in one body, holding one another's shoulders, they move hesitantly toward the beach.

“The boy sees them approaching and smiles joyfully. He runs to greet his new friends. They shrink from him as from a leper and withdraw with cries of fright to their village where they erect a barricade to keep him out.

“The next day the boy swims out to sea. They can no longer see him from the shore. When the sun is first rising the boy swims and swims. A week later, they find his bloated body by the shore.”

He paused for a moment and got up from his chair. He walked to one of the spired windows and looked out. The sun was high in the south sky above the sea.

“As for your second sign,” he said, sitting down again, “yes, we interpret it to mean a river. We call this sign ‘Zor’, which is the name of the glacial river which flows from the heart of the North to here, the river which, in your dream, Saraph pointed out to you. But we take this sign more generally also, to mean any river, or, indeed, anything which disperses from a single source or gathers to a single bosom.

You have learned this sign as we teach it.

"You may find it of interest that we regard this symbol as quite close in meaning to that of another, which we write as such,

To teach this sign we use another story. Once again, I beg your leisure to tell it to you—for you must understand that to speak in stories is our way of presenting something, which though only one saying, is too complicated to say in a simpler way.

"In the old days, it is said, our people lived in one valley which stretched to the four horizons. We wondered what lay at the edges of the earth, and se we held councils with many fires, and sent forth four bands of our warriors, one each toward East, South, West, and North. Each of these bands traveled to the end of the world, and then turned left—thus our use of this particular character, for, as you can see, this symbol has four lines arising in the center, going outward, and then turning left. In this way, our warriors covered all creation. It is said that they found four mountains which stood like sentinels at the four edges of the earth, and that these mountains were four different colors. The eastern mountain was green, and the other three were yellow, violet, and red. Beyond these mountains was an endless sea, where no birds flew."

At this point, he paused again, looking at me kindly, as my master Gabriel so often had done. He got up from his chair and walked again to one of the spired windows, where he stood a long time, looking out in silence. The sky was a clear cold blue. The snow-covered peaks were defined sharply against it. The sun was still high above the sea in the south. The water of the sea shimmered in the sunlight beside the jagged white rocks near the shore.

"I tell you this as a pleasant story," he said. "We in this northern cult know of no world which is tied down by

mountains nor of any god who holds it from above. We find a comprehensible world quite boring. The sun is our master," he said, pointing, "yet we know she is a creature like us, whose days are likewise numbered. I say this, because I think I hit on an essential difference between your brotherhood and ours."

"Yes, good Father, I think you are right," I said, rising to address him, "though I can only speak for myself. Symbols make no sense to me unless they reflect a higher Order than my own. I have striven to serve this Order, though, as my story indicates, I have often failed. You see, good Father, we hold that the One Presence, as we call it, is present alike in every thing which exists and in every thought. Thus we teach that a symbol is a sacred thing for, as it is written in one of our treasured hermetic tracts, the One Presence informs what a thing or idea is, and thus informs the symbol which represents it."

"We have a similar concept to your One Presence," he said. "It simply speaks less assurance. We call this concept the nameless name. We have a saying about it also: Who seeks the rest of perfect peace must know that nameless name whence all things rise, and bloom, and cease, returning where they came."

"But I will tell you another story. There once lived a man who, though not yet rich, felt himself on the way to becoming so, and was anxious to speed the process as much as he possibly could. Now this man had always heard that the way to be in command of the world—which he regards as one and the same with the way to become rich—is to keep meticulous accounts of everything which transpires. Indeed, next to his large house, he has another building, even larger, which is filled from floor to ceiling with ledgers in which everything is recorded; even, for example, the number of steps which he takes each day, and whether each step has led to his financial gain or loss.

"The particular business which this man has is livestock. He has one herd of cattle, another of sheep, and several chickens. For each kind of animal—indeed, for each individual animal—he has a separate ledger. In order to keep

track of the weight of his animals, and thereby of his net gain or loss, he weighs each one every day. For this purpose, he has an old scale. It is the kind with a balancing beam and a large weighing pan on either side. The animal steps on one of these pans, and in order to calculate the animal's weight, our ambitious merchant piles sandbags in the other pan until the beam is level, recording the number of bags in the appropriate ledger.

"All this goes very well until in the spring of one year the merchant travels to a great city in order to buy grain. Here he sees a marvelous thing. When the grain merchant brings out the grain, he also uses a scale to weigh his merchandise. But this scale is far different than the livestock merchant's. It has, so far as he can determine, only one weighing pan; behind this is a pole with an immense, closed box on top of it. On the face of the box over the pan, various numbers are written in a circle, and there is a pointer, originating at the circle's center. When grain is piled on the pan, the pointer moves to a number which—as the grain merchant explains—is the same number as the number of sandbags that would be needed to level an 'old scale'—this is what the grain merchant calls it—such as our hero has at home.

"The livestock merchant looks at this scale with wonder, thinking of the difference it could make in his ledger in which he records the number of steps he takes each day, and whether to his gain or loss, since he expends a great deal of energy piling and unpiling sandbags as he weighs his animals. In a burst of impulse—which, as you can imagine, is quite rare to him—he offers all the silver he has with him to buy the scale, and is ready to go home with no grain at all, if only he can have the marvelous scale. The grain merchant, however, has only one scale, and so refuses to sell it, for in this whole kingdom, it seems, none other can be found.

"Never has anything so disappointed the man. He drives his cart from the city loaded with grain on which he has made a splendid deal yet feeling hopelessly sad. On the road home, he sees a little, old lady begging by the wayside. Since she alone looks as sad as he feels, he picks her up in his cart,

giving her bread to eat, and offers her a ride wherever she is going. As they reach the town she had indicated, he looks toward her and is surprised to see she has turned into a pretty fairy and is standing on the seat with a magic wand.

"'In your kindness, you helped me,' says the fairy. 'Now I shall help you by granting one wish.'

"'Oh good fairy' says the merchant. 'I have no doubt what to ask for. I want a scale like the one I saw today in the grain shop.'

"'The wish is yours, kind merchant' says the fairy. 'You will find the scale when you reach your house. But you must remember this, the scale is yours to use, but not to examine. If you try to take it apart, I will consider that action a breach of faith, and the minute you touch the scale to do so, it will disappear from your hands. For how the scale works is a fairies' secret and for only us to know.'

"Saying this, the fairy departs. When the man returns home, he runs to look—and just as the fairy has promised, the old scale is gone, and in its place is a new one like the grain merchant's, but even more marvelous, for it measures fractions of bags as well.

"Thanks to the wonderful scale, the man is able to organize himself even more. Soon his riches multiply. He builds a splendid mansion, and the peasants come every Sunday after church, dressed in their best clothes, to marvel at the scale.

"Meanwhile, far from being happy, the merchant is in great distress at not knowing how the scale works, for he would like to enter in an appropriate ledger some description of what lies behind this phenomenon which is contributing so much to his success. He does drawing after drawing of the outside of the scale from every conceivable perspective, meanwhile losing complete track of his business, which he leaves to his sons. Finally by observing various facts of the matter carefully—such as, for example, the girth of the animal which is being weighed—and by devising all sorts of computational symbols, he finds he can, with fair accuracy predict where the pointer will point before the animal mounts the scale. In great excitement he shows this to his sons.

"'Father,' they say, 'you haven't figured out how the scale works. You just know what it will do.'

"The man departs from them feeling very frustrated. Soon the people living nearby are shocked to hear that the man has announced he will kill himself the following Sunday.

"A great crowd gathers on this day while the man stands before them, ready to drink a cup of poison.

"His wife comes running up to him at the last moment, sobbing imploringly. 'But, my husband,' she says to him, 'here we are—finally rich after all these years, and yet you will kill yourself!'

"'Yes,' says the man, 'I know I am rich, but I don't know how, which is worse then being poor.'

"So saying, he drinks the poison and falls dead before them."

The northern master sat back for a moment, looking away from me with a pleasant expression on his face, as if musing on this parable. Then his expression became more serious and he looked at me again.

"I told you this story," he said, continuing, "to illustrate this point: we in the northern cult believe we exist on this side of that scale's face"—he made a sweeping gesture with his hand to indicate our immediate surroundings—"that is," he said, "if we take the marvelous workings of the scale to represent the workings of this world. We know our symbols can do no more than reflect our superficial view of these workings, which view we must regard quite humbly considering how poorly we see. We start, as you do, with a silent world; we bid the world to speak—and it does, in a hundred-thousand words.—Though I must interject here that whether it is the world which speaks or we ourselves or something grander than us both, we do not know. Whatever, much like you, we feel overwhelmed by this hundred-thousand, and seek again to save ourselves in silence. We seek to forget all the ways in which sensations and meanings are connected, and see the world again for the first time, as a child.

"Yet, we always return to our symbols. The world itself,

I am afraid, is not enough. We do this—if you will excuse my pedantry—for three reasons: first, to describe our superficial view; second, to guess what lies beyond it; third, to build for ourselves a world apart, a little world like the puny boy's tidepool, one in which it is we who set the laws and within their framework form hypothetical symbols which follow these laws to fantastic fruition. We find it curious that we yearn to speak in this complex way; it makes us smile at our own presumptuousness; our best efforts are limited and quite amusing. Yet we love symbols as you do and play them as a song or dance one upon other, sometimes in joy, and,—as your Kish did in his sad song in your dream—sometimes in sorrow."

He stopped speaking and got up slowly; he walked again to the spired windows, beyond which the sun watched, silent and aloof, from the southern sky.

"As for the message of the scroll, it is only a greeting between brothers. It bears a homily, which we offer with a smile, a story of a young monk like you who travels much as you have, from river to sea—thus the appearance on it of these two symbols which we have been talking about. I found it interesting that my worthy brothers of the south thought of the 'fourth element' as the one direction, north, which does not answer to their throne. We mean by this 'fourth element' a simple thought, which is, that all dwells at once in a world of space and time which turns back upon itself again and again in a listless dance. This is, after all, not so different from your One Presence—am I right? It enters our homily as something which dawns on our young hero. But, of course, this symbol, too, has wider meaning. For myself, I regard the fourth element as that basic understanding without which all my learning goes dry. As for you, my son, perhaps it was this priest called Saraph, who sang the song of the goddess Alsek, and lay at your side as one flesh. I mean, as you yourself would be quick to point out, the same substance may come in different forms. Whatever, this is not important. The meaning of this scroll is not profound; it is only a greeting from our world to yours, given with a smile."

He stopped speaking. I sensed our meeting was now over. We rose together and bowed to one another.

"Little brother," he said, "I am a monk like you though you wear a black robe and mine is orange; though you live in the honey South and my world is the hostile North. Tell your good abbot that you found a brotherhood that dwells in the North; and tell your master Gabriel and the brothers of your cult that we have no god and yet seek wisdom as they do."

He bowed again and went out. I stood alone a moment and looked out the spired window toward the white peaks and distant sun.

I left the next morning after a silent farewell, hiking through the snow to the Zor River. Not much later I was on the sea again and soon I saw the little gray town under a drizzly sky at the mouth of the Tabor. I headed south with Saraph in my thoughts.

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Yes, dear reader, I saw Saraph once again but it was a different Saraph that I saw.

It was spring once more. I followed the swollen waters of the Tabor River up-current toward the south. Water rushed down in streams from all the ridges, falling from ledge to ledge. There were patches of newly-exposed earth near the river where the snow had melted; green shoots were already breaking from the damp soil. I reached the valley which broke off to the south beneath the hill that Saraph and I had climbed together, and turned into it without stopping, following the route that I imagined the Shibbites had taken.

I found their camp in a grove by the river, a strange setting. It was now well into spring but the trees had no buds. On many of them, the bark had fallen off, revealing rotting wood, which was reddish-brown in color, and covered with pocks. Worms hung from the trees on long threads, which they drew in and out of their wriggling bodies, moving up and down among the bark-less branches as they willed.

The Shibbites saw me coming. Kish was beside them, looking sad. They watched me approach with no word.

Saraph was in her tent lying on a bed of furs and

attended by the two youngest priests. Elam was there also; he looked at me a moment sullenly, and then departed.

Saraph herself did not notice my entrance as she was lying in a kind of half-sleep with brown blankets to her shoulders. Her face was covered with small purple sores. They were cuplike with pustules inside the cups. When she opened her eyes and saw me, she smiled weakly. She took my hand in hers and looked at it blankly for a long time.

I was wearing the oval charm that she had given me. She noticed it and smiled. She kissed it, then gesturing for me to come closer, she kissed my forehead. She was in a fever, it seemed, and kept shaking her head and blinking her eyes as if to clear her vision.

That night I sat in a solemn group by the fire outside her tent, chanting a low song with the others, which the creature led in a nasal, droning voice. My little daughter Raya was there also, in the arms of one of the young priests, looking at me with tiny dark eyes from the wrappings of an orange shawl. Late at night when everything was hushed, Merab wailed, a single, long wail that lingered in the air.

Saraph was dead. I waited three days until her burial, and the very same morning made ready to leave. Kish saw me as I started to go. The little creature intercepted me as I was walking from the camp, weeping and clinging pitifully to my legs, as if its entire world had been shattered by Saraph's death. I had no time for the hideous creature and tried to kick it aside, but it only hung all the more resolutely to my legs, sobbing uncontrollably, and pushing the wooden harp toward me, which it meant for me to have, I understood, as a memento of the time we three had spent together. I took the harp, bowing with all the courtesy I could muster, and left the dwarf, thereby somewhat pacified, as it stood sobbing softly while its many shawls flapped in the wind.

That same night as I camped alone, I had another dream. I saw the creature standing alone beside a blue-flamed fire. It was playing a sad song, and Saraph came up and stood nearby. She was dressed again in her orange robe and looked as beautiful as when I first saw her. She was listening to the song with a thoughtful expression on her face; then looking

up, she saw me watching. Her face lit in recognition. She made as if to run toward me, but could not, as if held in a trance by the creature's song. Meanwhile, another figure had come up into the blue light of the fire. It was my skinny, brown-coated friend from the South. She smiled her toothless smile at me and held a closed hand toward me which she opened, revealing a handful of worms, which began making their way to the ground with their magic threads.

Yet another figure now stepped forward toward the fire, a dancer of some sort with the head of a deer. This deer noticed me, too, and stared at me in horror, as if in great fear.

A sad dream, dear reader, which I could not solve. But whatever questions still lingered surrendered to the rising wind, which, with the first light of day, brought the fragrance of the South.

IV

There is a story in the Good Book about a prodigal son. He wanders forth with his father's endowment. He lingers in a foreign land and lavishes his inheritance. Then, at length, undone, he turns his eyes again to the land where he was born. He remembers those who love him, and not just for selfish cause. He goes home to outstretched arms.

I was not such—I was an orphan, as I have said.—The men with cowls had been my fathers, if I had any. The woman who glanced at me by the abbey wall, the dark-eyed woman who left the child at our gate, of such a mother, if any, was I son. Yet how I yearned for the South again, now that my sojourn was done.

I hiked from the woods one day to see again the skinny woman's little cabin below me, high above the valley of my own people. It was a far different sight than it had been when I first saw it. The little saplings that had looked so forlorn on that winter evening seven years before had now blossomed into green summer leaf. Lush new grass was growing between the trees. Flowers bloomed wherever I looked, and they were of every imaginable color, yellow, orange, blue, and cherry red. My brown-clad friend saw me approaching through the woods and rushed toward me, extending her skinny hands toward me as if I were a long lost son. I shrank from her into the woods and, taking a wide detour, continued past Gath and Amalek.

Another day near sunset, on another, more familiar hill which was also strewn with pretty flowers, I looked up and saw the abbey once again. I climbed the hill quickly, passing the little village with hardly a look in its direction. While still a distance away, I could see my brothers waving and watching my ascent from the wall.

All the brothers were by the gate when I approached, the abbot before them.

"Good Father," I said, looking downward, "I cannot speak."

The abbot put his hands on his hips and grinned at the brothers, who were gathered all around me.

"How like a monk!" he said.

My brothers all laughed, crowding closer, peering over one another's shoulders to watch my embarrassment. They nudged one another, and kept saying among themselves, "Erato."

How glad I was then to see my master Gabriel, aged but still looking healthy, step out from among them. He raised his hand; in respect for him, they silenced.

"My brothers," he said, "as you know, this young man was my apprentice. Yes, he grew before my eyes like a flower among these acacia trees."

He paused, stretching his hand toward me. "Now I see his face again."

The brothers broke into laughter—they had been containing themselves with a great effort while my master spoke. They crowded around me, patting my back. We began walking in a group toward evening meal. All the abbey bells were ringing.

The abbot spoke again as we walked.

"Tonight, my brothers," he said, "make joy. Forget your penitence, and be glad. For, look, our lost son is home again."

Then he came to me and smiled.

"Little brother" he said, "be in no haste for words. If your speech must be 'yea, yea, nay, nay,' then let it be so. Even if you never speak, we shall not care. We love you for what you are."

Then he paused and held up his hand and we all stopped. "Listen!" he said, inclining his head to one side, with a playful expression on his face and his index finger resting on his cheek. "Listen! The other monasteries have heard our bells and are answering with their own—and yes, the village, too!"

It was true. We heard bells ringing in all our people's land.

The next day I was standing alone in the cathedral before the window of the fire-maiden when my master entered.

He came toward me, extending both hands. I was dressed once again in the black robe of my order and wore on my breast the red-flamed insignia of the cult.

We stood in silence for a long time, looking at the window.

"Honorable Father," I said, "I must tell you, I feel ashamed. I have wandered, sometimes without cause."

He looked at me kindly.

Then, with no pause, I told my long story of the Shibbites and the brothers of the North, but I could not bear to tell him that I had breached my celibacy with Saraph, nor of Saraph's death.

"There is no reason for you, brother," he said. "You have wandered, many of these brothers have. We are glad to have you back—and I most of all. I wandered, too, when I was young. As for your wandering, there was a time to feel shame. This time asks for different action. He looked sideways at the window with a mischievous glance.

"And that window still awaits you," he said, "as it did some years ago."

He bowed low before me and turned to leave.

"Father," I said, struggling and stumbling over my words, "in your kindness, you place me too high. It is due to my negligence, for I have not said enough. I lived with Saraph as her husband, and there is a child with dark eyes among the Shibbites who is my daughter. And Saraph, whom I deserted, is dead, fallen to worms that covered her face with purple sores. I saw her before she died.

"She kissed the oval charm with the fire-maiden's sign, and she kissed my brow. Yes, Saraph, once beautiful, is dead; some deep anger lingers in my heart. I mean to say, you are kind in your estimates, my father, but I feel unclean, and well do I know that this chapel is a holy place. Yet rather be unclean, I say, than turn my anger under earth to ferment with no fruit."

He stood for a while in silence, his head bent sideways, as if thinking.

"You have found," he said at last, looking at me, "that our mind has but a humble footing in a humble world. I

discovered this for myself many years ago, when a dear friend died. She suffered great pain, yet what courage and strength she had! In face of fogging senses, what resolve to stay clear! I mean, it must give us pause, and alone deserves our longest toil, that something so lowly, as we human creatures are, yet hopes so high.

"And, little brother," he said, pointing outside the cathedral, "the soft light of the sun falls on stones and flowers this very moment—as it always did, as it always shall. Perhaps this is what our good brothers meant, who have no god and yet seek truth."

He paused for a moment and looked at me with great kindness.

"As for you, my son," he said, "I tell you quite frankly, you are too old to hide in pride or diffidence. Be what you are, and say it with your heart."

He looked sideways at the window, grinned impishly, and left.

I stood alone in the cathedral's center. It was late afternoon. The orange light of the sun was filtering through the stained-glass windows, bathing the high pillars with its dancing, transformed light. I looked again at the window of the fire-maiden, as I had done as a novice. The buildings of the village swirled in the purple sky behind her; the little plant hid like a frightened child behind her one protective hand, and in the other hand she held her strange symbol, which I had brought into the North. I smiled to myself and thought, "a fish's bones." I looked at that face which confronted the fire so peacefully, with such resolve, and I thought of Saraph's dark eyes. I tried to imagine the young monk, centuries ago, who had made this window with such patience and love. I thought of Saraph again, and felt quite sad.

That same summer I began the project that would take me seven years.

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To melt, the sand must be subjected to great heat. It took us a full year, my two young assistants and I, to build a

circular oven of rock in a large room beneath the cathedral. Our oven was nearly as large as the room and had windows on two sides through which the materials could be lowered toward the flames on a long pole. I soon learned how to identify the metals of the earth which, when added to the sand in various measures, imparted color to the glass. My two eager helpers and I set up a camp in the western mountains not far from the monastery of Delmer, the good father of the West.

For weeks at a time, we explored among the trees and rocks for the metals that we needed. Then, returning to our own abbey, we would rouse the slumbering fire, which was never allowed to go out. Our dank room beneath the cathedral would be filled by the blazing fire with orange and red light.

What a sight it was, dear reader, to see my two young friends open the little windows to the oven, wincing from the heat, while the quivering light sent their grotesque shadows dancing on the wall behind them. In such a strangely lighted and heated environment, we worked for another full year, pouring the glowing melt into iron molds.

In the third year we made a workshop for shaping and sanding the glass. In a dark corner beneath an immense archway of the cathedral's foundation, we built another, smaller oven. Here we melted the lead which would hold the pieces of glass together in the window. Then we built a large frame the same size as the outside frame of the window, laying it on an immense flat table, and set to work by torchlight, laying in the colored glass.

I strove in this window, dear reader, to portray the fire-maiden as transfigured by the rigors of the North. My maiden had Saraph’s dark hair and eyes and stood before a fire which sent forth a purple pestilence which had covered half her face. A small village by the sea, dark forests, and white mountains all whirled behind her in the sky, as if spun like a cocoon around a distant red sun. The sky itself was made of many hues of purple, red, and brown. It was my intention in this sky, I should explain, to illustrate the distorted inner logic which I had found in Kish's songs.

This entire scene which I have just described composed a kind of circle, beneath, and surrounded by, another scene which overlapped it from above. In this second scene, a boy knelt over the first as if it were a tidepool surrounded by black rock. He held an oval charm on which fish's bones glowed in orange and red. Behind the little boy, who had a melancholy expression on his face, was the creature Kish, as best I could impart it, with its hideous, sexless face and its shawls of many colors awry in the wind. The dwarf stood with its wooden harp, smiling at the boy, with its tiny hands on the boy's shoulders. Above these two figures was a second sky, with colors of orange, red, purple, and green. Near the boy and the dwarf, strangely suggestive figures hovered in the sky, like goblins or creatures of the deep sea. This sky, too, in arrangement of colors, had a disturbing inner law, which it followed as best it could. But, at the top of the window, this pitiful attempt at arbitrary order failed, and the pattern of the colors fell apart in utter disarray and anarchy of form.

The good abbot saw this window first. It was a sunny day; sunlight came full force through the window so that it glowed, and filled the nave in which we stood with colored light. He stood for a long time looking at the window and saying nothing then, bowing to me, he left.

The other brothers observed it the next morning, also in silence, passing single file before the window. A few looked at it with what appeared to be approval. Most said nothing and a few raised their eyebrows and looked at me with disgust. I met their looks without caring. I had spent seven years at this task, and now was glad to throw it off my shoulders, for good or bad.

I reacted in this same way to the council of all our order which was called the following winter on the night of the solstice fire. I was brought as a prisoner before the assembly which met in the cathedral under the light of torches which had been affixed to the tall pillars which support the roof.

I stood watching as various brothers came forward to testify. All the highest priests were present, including the abbot who sat before the altar on his throne in a yellow robe

emblazoned with a flower, and the two good fathers of the East and West, Theron and Delmer, who sat by the abbot, one on each side.

The brothers filled all the seats in the church; others stood in the aisles beside people from the village who had gathered to watch this special council. I was positioned to one side and could see the solstice bonfire burning on the plaza in front of the church.

My master Gabriel was the first to speak.

"My brothers," he said, "as you well know, this young man, Erato, was my apprentice. It was I who introduced him to the mysterious world of signs, a world which, I know, only the cultists among you appreciate as I do. You others who dwell fully in silence—and believe, as our Savior said, that whatsoever is more than yea and nay cometh of evil—you, perhaps, regard this world of signs with suspicion. Let me say, I have always taught that signs, like all creatures, must do obeisance to God, for surely God's frowning visage glows in all things, be they rocks or flowers or human instruments. But let me say further, at the risk of complicating my statement in a confusing way, that there are two qualities which I have always regarded as showing a depth of religious feeling, and I believe these two qualities should be considered in our judgment of this man who stands before us. The first of these is abhorrence of order. You, my worthy brothers, are familiar with this feeling. It is precisely this feeling which drives us to our inner world, where we find the world of God, as the great monks always have. But this world of God is also ordered—is it not? Indeed, it is the very source of order. Without it, we could not bear the darkness. Is not this the meaning of our solstice fire, which burns this very moment on the plaza, asserting that some glowing point of reference still exists, even on this darkest of our nights? Indeed, a wish for order is the second of these qualities which I describe to you as arising in a religious heart. A paradox—is it not?—that men of God should seek alike to build up and tear down, never resting, it seems, in any finally settled world. This duality of chaos and order, or silence and symbol, has impressed me often in my long

life in the cult. As you know, I have served well, with my eyes and heart to God. I entreat you, my brothers, that taking this service into account, you therefore give heed to my witness. I tell you, this man, my son Erato, is driven by such forces as I have just now described. Yes, he possesses these two qualities of abhorrence of order and desire for order just as we all do, and in just the same way which has given substance to our own religious searching, and, therefore, he deserves our love as one of our own. I have listened to his story of the North and of this strange creature called Kish who twists discordant wails into hideous though logical form. Erato has striven to portray this world, it seems to me, while one moment leaping headlong toward order and grace, and the next moment yielding to his inner darkness—like a lamb to slaughter, I must say, for God does not deign to dwell there, only goblins and hideous creatures, who dance before a blue-flamed fire as we have heard it was in the dark days before our brotherhood began. I ask you, my brothers, who sent him beyond the Green Mountains? Was it not we ourselves—before you, good Father—who placed the scroll in his hands? See, now he does his work, who roars from the blackest regions of the sea, and we leave our servant Erato to his pleasure to be ravished like a screaming girl!"

The abbot rose next.

"You have heard the testimonial of Brother Gabriel," he said. "Now speak, or forever hold your peace. For we must decide how to keep our fire pure. On this above all nights, when our solstice fire is burning, we must remember that this is our central task, to keep this fire pure."

Delmer, the good father of the West, arose from his seat. He was wearing a special robe, befitting his rank as the leading prelate of the West. It was purple with a red sun and green tree with red fruit.

"My dear brothers," he said. "Surely I do not close my heart to my brother Erato. As you know, it was in my mountains that he found the metals that he used to color the glass in this window. Many a day from the window of my small study near the wall, I have seen him in the wilderness

below, climbing in the rocks with his two assistants. And whereas you in the South and East have trouble understanding the harshness of the North, we dwell high in the mountains where the wind wails and the snow swirls, and the winter sun is distant and red—thus this emblem which I wear which has, as you see, a red sun and a green tree with red fruit. I am not the first to wear it. No one in our brotherhood, in fact, was the first to wear this emblem. It was worn long ago by the priestly caste among my people. As you will remember, we in the West come from a different people than you in the South or East. We lived in these mountains before you came to this valley, when the people were here who built the three cities and our stone road. I say all this to point out that because of our long history with the mountains, we can understand this world which Erato has tried to portray; the people of the North are our mountain cousins. Yet, I must tell you directly that we count this image made by Erato, with its inner war and hideous creature—who looks to me like a devil—we count this image as foreign to our mission, and we say, let us therefore cut it from out bosom, before all falls subject to its cancer, and is spun—as in Erato's window—like a cocoon around a little-caring sun."

Now rose Theron, the good father of the East. He was from Amalek, our second city. Various people from the eastern valley had come to watch. I was surprised to see the skinny woman, dressed in her long brown coat standing among a little group from Gath. Some children had come with their parents and stood gawking. I saw a boy like the one who had chased the cart in which I had ridden away from the village with the white-bearded man with the plain wood cross. This little boy, too, had rotten, yellow teeth and stared at me as if I were the devil incarnate.

Theron was dressed in green with a rising sun on his robe. "I am not a scholar as are the master Gabriel and Delmer," he said. "I see no reason to multiply words. Gabriel himself referred to a holy saying, which I think should be remembered in councils like this: 'And let your speech be yea-yea, nay-nay, for whatever is more than these cometh of evil.' In the East, life is more simple. The sun rises each day,

we expect the earth to bear fruit. We know, too, what to do when the fruit is no good. I say ‘not only cut out the image, but also its maker.’ Let him be called anathema—not one of us, but separate from our bosom, as are the devil and his hideous creature.”

No decision was made that night. On the next, also under the light of torches, all assembled to hear my own defense.

I came out in a robe I had made, half black and half orange, with a red sun on the black half of the robe and my red-flamed insignia on the orange half. I also wore the amulet with the fish's bones. I brought the wooden harp which Kish had given me. I played one song only, but it was very long. It was the song I had heard Kish play in my dream in the temple of the North, the song in which a girl snatches a flower from the soil and then stomps it under her foot. The brothers listened to my song with disgust, except for my two young assistants and several young brothers who listened with respect.

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My story hastens to its end. You must forgive me, dear reader—I leave it to you to judge whether it be from pride or from a simple wish for justice—if I begin this last section of my account with a defense of my actions—for which, as you shall learn, I have paid so dearly.

The days I spent with Saraph are long ago, as I have said, and more distant from me than I can tell you. They seem at times like only a dream, or like an island floating somewhere, which, had I the same heart, might still be there awaiting me.

Yes, dear reader, those times are long ago. Yet I have striven to be true to their calling, and in my stained glass window I strove to portray the world as I saw it in their light. Who can say, I ask you—if you will excuse a figurative question—where the sea ends, or where the boy’s tidepool begins? I mean to say, how limited is our attempt to find and define our world!

In my story, despite my awkwardness—or, indeed,

because of it, because the way I fight this awkwardness is my proof—you must grant at least that I try. Those who have spoken against me, who have given the witness which has caused me to be locked in this study, they say I have no sureties, but I have tried to define my world while they are content with another's view. Better, I think, to meet death in one's nakedness than to go burdened with these old beliefs which only my integrity prevents me from readopting. Far from being a challenge to me, these beliefs would be a comfort—for, dear reader, I fear death as much as you.

Yes, those days are long ago, and what does it matter that the years have run together? What does it matter that Saraph died? What does it matter that Elu's blood gushed out on that winter midday in the northern valley? What it matters, or how, dear reader, I do not know. My intention in this story was simply this: to bring this world to you before it fades from my eyes—to bring it to you in my defense, for though it is true that I am an old man, and a monk who has been disowned by his own brothers, yet I have a heart like any person, and I long for the simple decency that should go to decent people. God, indeed, whom my accusers claim as their own, would at least smile at me, would he not? though perhaps with some slight disapproval. For, look, I am 86 years old and yet stand strong before Him holding to what I call true. I am 86 years old, and yet, as the Good Book counsels, what my hand finds to do, it does with all its might.

There have been many ramifications of that day when I played the wooden harp before my brothers—played it, I should explain, not as a deliberate offense but as the honest statement of how the world which God has given me, which includes not only the South but also the North with its distant red sun—of how this world, thus divided, came together in my mind. So many ramifications, dear reader, that it wearies my mind to think of them; and I am afraid it would weary yours if I recount them in full detail. Suffice to say, the song was not all. I was taken away, but my assistants and several young brothers tore their robe in protest at my incarceration and they were also detained. The subsequent arising of the so-called cult of the Orange, so many of whom have met the

burning end which I have thus far escaped—this uprising was not my doing. I have no dealings with such struggles for power. In fact, even if this very day I were made free, this study would be my chosen home, for I am a scholar to the core, and have no heart for the ways of men. The others who are imprisoned, many of whom are still young and lack the patience which age bestows—these men will gain nothing from their prompting that I step forward. I did once, as I told you. Surely once is enough, for of that time in my life, I would still say the same and speak through Kish's song.

Fifty years I have remained in this study which was once no more than a part of my existence. Now it is all to me—now the cathedral, the garden, and the village, all these sweet—yes, I must say sweet—places of my childhood, are gone from the reach of my hand.

Meanwhile, the times have brought changes in the valley of my people. The Northmen have entered in a great horde from the eastern hills, taking Amalek, our middle city, by surprise. This morning from my window, I saw it blazing below me in the valley; smoke and glowing embers swirled toward the sky. They say Theron was taken and burned at the stake while the peasants watched.

The Shibbites are among these invading peoples, in the vanguard of their thrust into our valley. Their leadership has changed—Merab is dead. Elam is their leader now; Raya is his queen. Several rebels from our abbey have escaped and are making their way to Amalek, seeking, I suppose, to find there that orange fury which now has left my tongue.

There is talk that I too will be sent, once again as courier—though this time not so willing—to express our good will, and, as a former warrior, to make offers of peace and cautious obeisance. But Elam is no flower like Saraph, to be snatched from the soil, and heard, and then discarded. Far from retiring in old age as I have, he chooses to pass his last days midst swords and fire.

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