

Likely Tales

by

tukolor



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Likely Tales by Tukolor

Published by Tukolor

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MOONWHITE

They say it is precious, is moonwhite. It is not solid, nor is it liquid. It comes from far away, from the lamp of the night our moon.

You can hold it in your hands. It will not break. You cannot break it. It is soft as silk but strong. So strong.

It seems to guide your hands when you hold it as if it believes it is holding you. But it never struggles, does moonwhite. I am sure I feel a spirit when I hold a piece of it. Moonwhite shines and in its shining is its feeling.

You cannot make anything out of it. It does not want that. I tried to but it resisted and pushed back at me. I laid it gently back down on the table where it gleamed contentedly like a river in a cloudless night.

You can't piece moonwhite together. It is too independent and too fond of its freedom. Why shouldn't moonwhite be free? I would never lay a trap for it. I hold it and it holds me and that is as it should be with moonwhite. It never quite is for it is always almost becoming something. Yet moonwhite is always moonwhite.

I do not collect my moonwhite. It comes to me. It flows to me and then it rests as if waiting. Perhaps it is waiting for me.

Of course, it does not belong to this earth, it belongs to the moon. I sometimes wonder if it has it escaped and what it might be escaping from.

Moonwhite is more precious than anything else, yet whenever I hold it no matter how firmly, it always extends far beyond mere grasp.

THE MOUNTAIN

EDITOR'S NOTE. The following text is a curious item from my collection found in a battered notebook deep in a cave at the foot of the Treheri Mountain Pass. How the notebook came to be there I do not know. The date of the artefact is unknown and equally unknowable. As for the quality of the paper in this notebook — it is quite luminescent, a little like a glowworm — as if made of matériel not found otherwise upon this earth. The words appear to move as you read them, though to the distant onlooker they remain fixed as a post. What this means I do not venture to say. The truth of a text is its own truth. Truth is always what the seer sees and I am clear in my mind no mortal has seen sights such as this before. Dr. Jackson Eatwell, 12 September, 1895.

Under the mountain stands the great city they once built, close to the centre of the Earth. Roiling and boiling waves of molten iron made up the sea of my city, this empty city that I had entered into so unwittingly.

It was the cave I first entered into. God is my witness. It was a normal, musky and dusky cave but from the far end there emanated an unearthly glow — can a glow *whirr* or *swerve* or *hover*?

I approached the strange glow and I stretched out my hand toward it. God! I had no fear of it. I was curiosity itself. A perfect monster of curiousness.

And I was swallowed, like a fly by a spider. I was swallowed and then where was I? Here, in the middle of the great city under the mountain they once built.

I was at the centre of the Earth, inside the relentless furnace of the fires of Hell — or so it seemed to me — within the molten iron core of Earth's belly — and this was to be my new home. It was dry as dust, this city. Silent as a sincere prayer. How it towered! It was all tower! A terrifying tale of towers. The Gigantes of ancient Greece were voles and weasels to these. Where was I? How could I find myself in such a place as this? Each step I made was a dot on the map of its creators. Who were its creators? Dare I imagine? Who could build such a beautiful city on the banks of such molten hell? The pure force of molten iron bore down on me and yet I felt quite safe. Did the builders themselves feel such a force? Or was it invisible to them?

At the centre of the Earth all things are possible, yet all I perceived was law and measurement. Protection. These gigantic streets — built for what giants? — stretched on before me like rivers of the cosmos itself. Was I at the centre of the Earth or the cosmos itself?

I looked around me. Eyes were no use. What I could see was beyond me. I do not mean beyond in mere space. Just — beyond. First far — then farther — at last farthest. Everything I knew was beyond me. Beyond touch, beyond comprehension, almost beyond my mortal gaze.

I set out to explore this strange city. Step by step a miserable distance as it was. I set out to explore and though it took a long time — yes yes many years — what could I do but explore? The colours were what

began to destroy me. They went beyond colour. I saw that they spread themselves like — they spread wide, I think I say it true — and they shook and waved and heated my brain until it was a simmered sauce of colour seasoned by the unwavering woof of light that entered me and caused me weariness.

I was so weary. The city was so huge. I so small. Were they streets I was walking? Or plains of — of what? Stone, no, not nor marble. It felt soft, soft as felt, yet unbreakable. It moved to your step, stroking your feet as you walked. It swallowed your footsteps as if starving for silence. In all this wonder, that was the thing — the silence of the city. The molten roar of the Earth's centre, so near, so silent. Colour, silence and space. Endless, it seemed, as I walked, each step nearer to both nothing and everything at the same time.

And who was I, now? And who were they, those who built this place? A place so beautiful and so empty and yet — allow me the paradox — so full of space.

Three days later — or three years, how long who knows? — I reached it. The 'Hall'. I called it that. It seemed to stretch for miles — hundreds, thousands of miles. I could not see a ceiling, nor the walls I knew had to exist somewhere far beyond me. I could now feel a presence near, ghastly and ghostly. All was silence still, but there was a vibration, a to and a fro. The power of the centre of the Earth married to something far greater.

'Who are you?', I cried.

That I am sure was the first real sound heard in the 'Hall' since it was built. The sound of my voice became a colour, weaving about space, painting the space, mixing in with itself, expanding and contracting and overall growing and filling the 'Hall' like a memory of all that was gone that now is found again. The 'Hall' filled itself

with the colour of memory and as it did so I saw them. I had spoken it aloud — who are you? and here they were before me.

What are words but crumbs on an empty table? Must I use these crumbs to describe all I saw? No, that I cannot do. The awe, the horror, the malice fed down to the marrow of what we call being and then beyond what we can imagine.

They did not build this. That much I knew. They were its prisoners. What was a face I saw or a limb or a mouth or a void or a heart — that is not for me to say. They were many, I guessed, but all in a tangle, like light all tangled up, like evil light dwelling within evil colours. Flowing, weaving, powerful. A pure power in a prison that enclosed it like a veil. It gave out a sense that was utterly malicious to the marrow of its being.

I am writing this sat down before them as they writhe in agony or ecstasy. Which I do not know. They see me. They can I think see me. They watch me, they are watching me. They cannot escape. What force can it have been that built this place to trap devils such as these? I wonder this as I watch them full of awe and they watch me full of malice.

I feel like I am becoming them, an impotent atom of them. I seem to disappear. I write this for no one and everyone. I watch they who watch me. I am vanishing into their colour. I still hold this notebook. I still clasp this pencil. I still write. I still see what I write as they watch me write. Who am I to them, these gods? Writhing and weaving in agony or ecstasy. Ecstasy I think. Where am I? I seem to — I cannot write now. My

pencil i cannot Hold

they watch me i Wat

GHOSTS

Very few people know this, but when we go to sleep, our ghosts wake up. Although one or two are able to see these ghosts, no one can talk to them, though they themselves are able to talk. Some even argue that we ourselves are the dreams of our ghosts or that ghosts are made out of dreams.

What if you cannot get to sleep? Do ghosts die? What if a ghost cannot sleep? A ghost's pillow must be a delicate thing.

They say ghosts wail terrifyingly and I say they are just trying to speak. They have the right to speak, surely? Just like us. But though they look like us they are not like us, I think. They are like an us made out of mist or smoke that floats in the air. To see your ghost is to look at your reflection in a raging stream. A ghost is bits of you fast by. You call out to them. They whisper back with the whispers of the wind.

Ghosts hate graves the most and would never live there, contrary to the belief of many. Recall too that they have forgotten how to read and as they cannot read their tombs they have no idea where they came from.

Ghosts can never return home.

Night is their time as day is ours. The sky is their world as the earth is ours. They are clouds amongst the clouds; we are stones amongst the stones.

Then why fear them? It is when our ghosts wake up we are most alive.

Too few people know that.

OLD SHOPS

I like to go to the old shops. It is a deserted place, where the old shops lay in rest. I think I wake them up. No one else is ever there, at least I have never seen anyone else there. The old shops are stocked with things people used to be fond of, things long-forgotten now. No one likes to be tickled these days, but they did once. The old shops sell fine-crafted tickle benefixes. It is a delight to be tickled by these. Who likes a fit of sneezes these days? The old shops sell cakes that are quite delicious and, after you have finished one (and not before), you sneeze a sneeze so powerful it blasts any and every trouble that had been lurking inside of you.

The keepers are never old but never young and they never seem to age. They will not say where they come from and they never seem to leave their shops. But they are always friendly and happy and courteous. One day though when I went to the old shops, I found only despondency. It was saddening to see the keepers as sad as this. Their heads were buried deep into their arms and it looked as if their lives had been pulverized into a hundred pieces.

Each shop now stood empty. There were no sneeze cakes or dance wands or fiddle-scratchers or

soothkerchiefs or sun-ray mats or colorcasters. Their ear harps, foot-mates and story chairs — all were gone. “The ghosts have taken them!”, they cried out in their misery. “They have found us. They saw all the old things in our old shops and they wanted them for themselves. But what use are laugh beans to those who do not laugh?”

I could not bear to see the keepers of the old shops like this. They are so kind and so generous. It was my duty to find these ghosts and recover the old things.

‘I will find the old things,’ I told them. As I left the keepers I saw them look up, and smile.

II

Ghosts only come out at night so I decided to first go where it is always night. Near to the old shops lies an even older forest. It is dark and cold and brooding in the old forest. The sound of cracking twigs accompanied me as I fought my way through this pathless place. Pewees and redwings and veeries and chickadees rustled and poked all around me. Scuttlings across the old forest floor made me wonder what was scuttling. At times I sensed eyes glaring at me, but I never saw them. The old forest led me on and on and on. Trackless. Pathless. I felt as if there was no north or south or east or west anymore. All was dark as pitch and moonless and sunless. It was an army of trees. It was as if I were a prisoner in a great vault made out of branches. Each branch was like an arm reaching out to grab me and hold me there and never let go. Brambles cut me and berries fed me.

On and on and on I went through this pathless eternal night, all the while towards the ghosts. At length I perceived a glow. The first light I had seen for days. But, and I use the word cautiously and carefully, it was a truly unearthly glow. It seemed at the same time

haunted and haunting. No bird sang now. Even the mighty arms of the trees drew back as on I went towards the perplexing glow.

The glow was the glow of a great castle that suddenly appeared before me, parked within a gigantic clearing. It was a ghost castle full to the brim with ghosts. Approaching the sally port, I slipped in.

III

There in the castle I watched the host of ghosts swaying and stooping and sweeping and shooting through every nook of its enceinte. Each wall glowed mysteriously and each ghost returned its glow. This was a very *particular* light. It was pinched yet smooth even as it seemed to waggle and wobble. What seemed at first like a perfect sphere was, when you looked at it closely, a wondrous weft of waves that spun themselves into a mysteriously beautiful ball.

I approached the nearest of these ghosts and asked — ‘Do you know the old shops? Did you take their precious goods? Why did you take them?’

‘A fine sequence of words,’ she replied. ‘You began with a question and ended up in an accusation. It was neatly done.’

‘I am sorry if I offended. But the old shops — they are empty. Everything in them has been stolen, I am told by ghosts.’

‘Not we,’ she said. ‘We are the old ghosts and because we are so old we forget everything. We are always forgetting. We have no need for old shops or old things. We do not remember the old days. We would not steal from the old shops. We have no use for old things.’

‘But ghosts did steal them. The old shops lie empty. The old things were taken by ghosts.’

‘Not we,’ she repeated. ‘We are the old ghosts, we who are forgotten and who forget. It must be the new ghosts who stole these things. They are still curious. They have not yet learned to forget. New ghosts often like old things. Not we.’

Politely as I could I said ‘Thank you for your help’, but soon as I turned away she had forgotten me.

IV

Back I went through the trackless forest away from the unearthly glow of the castle and its inhabitants, back to the old shops and the baleful keepers.

‘It is the new ghosts and not the old ghosts who have stolen the old things,’ I told the keepers. This did not cheer them up, so I added — ‘Let me go find the new ghosts.’

I walked along the road away from the old shops and kept walking for a long time. Eventually I saw a man with the biggest smile I have ever seen.

‘You look happy,’ I said to him.

‘I am. I just found the secret of happiness, too. Amazing stuff, this cake I just got. Took a bite, not delicious I would say, but so what? Half a minute later and whoosh! Sneeze like a thunderstorm and the head is cleared up like it’s been spring-cleaned by a magic broom. You’d be happy if that happened to you, friend.’

The new ghosts were near.

V

I found them in a small field just outside town. They were sitting together, these new ghosts. They looked bored and irritated. Rather than any obvious specific cause, it seemed to be everything that irritated them.

All around them were old things, the goods they had stolen from the old shops.

I approached them saying, 'Cheer up it'll never happen'

'What won't?', they asked sulkily.

'Whatever is bothering you,' I smiled kindly.

The new ghosts thought about this a moment. 'What you doing here?'

'The old ghosts sent me,' I white-lied.

'Them ghosts? They sent you? Give us a break. They're too dumb even to put a letter in a letterbox, that's what we say.'

The new ghosts didn't seem to like the old ghosts much. Nevertheless, I pursued my enquiry, trying to be as subtle as I could. 'Lot of stuff lying about here. Pretty crazy looking stuff too, I reckon.'

'Useless. Stupid old stuff. Boring waste of time.'

'Where did you get it all from? It looks really interesting if you ask me. Which I know you didn't.'

'These dumb doss-pits selling junk over there in town. Wastes of space.'

That was when I heard a noise behind me. I looked round and saw the keepers of the old shops arrayed in a line at the edge of the field.

VI

'We are the keepers of the past, the guardians of memory. How can there be a past if there is no memory? Death is not dying, death is forgetting. To forget is to die. Ghosts do not die until they forget. Only a ghost who forgets is truly dead. You — you new ghosts — you have betrayed your memory. You have desecrated the past. You have stolen its testament, and that is the old

things. The old things of the old shops are the food of life. They are the nurture and nourishment of our memories. You have betrayed and desecrated memory itself and thereby life itself. The Watcher has found you. Your desecration is now discovered and you are done, you new ghosts.'

It was the dead of night and heaven was a sky full of cloud that entirely covered the moon and her stars. Within this darkness an eerie glow lit up and began to grow. The glow emanated from the new ghosts. The new ghosts almost raised themselves up from their lethargy and incuriosity, but I think only a little. Little good too it would have done them. Each new ghost now glowed like the old ghosts and, like wisps of smoke, their forms rose and floated away towards the direction of the ghost castle in the middle of the old forest. There they would live and there forget, to live in a perpetual nothingous void.

The old things were taken back home to the old shops and I too made my own slow way back.

VII

I like to go to the old shops. I am I suppose the Watcher. I watch over the keepers. I watch over their memory. I see the old things. They are I suppose our memory. It is our past too that is kept by the keepers in the old shops.

Let the new ghost who forgets the old things be themselves forgotten, the keepers tell me. This is their great curse and as I am I suppose the Watcher it is my curse too, though I do find within it a scintilla of blessing.

THE ARNAQUE

As I was furtively carrying the stolen jewel through the streets of Paris, the arnaque broke out. Immediately there were gendarmes everywhere, whistling and waving sticks. Barricades were imminent. The worst thing for my own good self was that suddenly papers were being aggressively checked. *Who goes there?*, the gendarmes wanted to know. The one thing I did not want anyone to find out.

I looked around and scurried up to the house set back a few steps behind. Locks being nothing to me I opened the door and was now inside. I was in luck, so I thought. All was empty and silent. What to do? The noise outside showed no signs whatever of abating. 'Le roi!', they cried. 'La République!', they shrieked. Shots were fired and then more shots. 'Roi! République!' in basso profundo and contralto both.

Again I looked around. Where to hide? I saw a cellar door and opened it. Down I went into the cellar, I and the stolen jewel.

It was dark down there. The stairs were steep and long. They gave off a curious feeling of being ancient. They seemed to be made of wood and yet far older than

wood should ever be. I continued my descent. The noise of the streets was now far way. I could no longer hear it. All that remained was the silence of the house I had entered and that too, I now reflected, was curious enough. The house had seemed *silent*. Yet how? Howso in the midst of such a great ruckus *outside* could a house seem silent *inside*? It was if, and here I shuddered a little, the house was somehow separate. Paris on the one side, this house on the other.

Still, down I went. Where to? I now wondered. One thing I concluded was that the cellar door led to no cellar. How could I see, then, you may ask? That is another curious thing, for it was the jewel that I carried gave me light. Still more strange, the light was that of a brand that left flickering orange patterns on the walls of the shaft — for I was I now knew in a *shaft* — down which I was making my descent.

I had gone so far now there was only one reasonable path and so further and further down I went. Where to? was what I wondered, and dreaded.

II

After many hours — five at least, I am sure ten or more — the steps came to their conclusion. I found myself in a passage dug deeper into the earth than anyone would sensibly imagine. There was no silence now, for I heard a whirring in the distance. Something was there. I suspected that the something was what the passage before me led to. I could not go back, so I made my way towards the curious noise, my jewel-brand lighting my way all the while.

Soon I was arrived at what I would have to call a room, though I am unsure if that is what it would call itself. It seemed to be — and now I think of it, there is an uncanny similarity to the room I had just now stolen

into — in this world but not at all part of it. The room was itself quite small and filled with strange contraptions that whirred and hummed. Yet at the far side of this barely *mondain* place was, I would describe it as a *window* that looked out over an absolutely gigantic — room, should I again term it? The contraptions in my little room were clearly linked to an enormous number of other contraptions in the great room. There I observed much movement. All around I saw metal boxes and tanks, almost like a city of metal tanks laid out in a neat grid of streets and paths. All around this metal city I saw metal people floating around about above it, while others just as metal were gliding along and through these streets. The metal people seemed to interact with the great tanks. You might believe at first they were simply bumping into them, yet soon it became clear to me they were somehow *connecting* with them, both the flying and gliding metal people. The longer I looked, the more I convinced myself they were in a sense ‘people’. I have no better word for these *autre-monde* things. These *au-delà-terre* creatures. The moving metal people I think were monitoring and mending the metal tanks that, though they apparently could not move, seemed to me also to be in some sense living and thinking creatures. I was looking at a living city of metal! To make a homely analogy, this was like a city of bee and pollen in which busy bees flew and glided about their precious garden of flowers.

III

At this point I suddenly noticed a new development — the light in my jewel was now stridently blinking on and off. As soon as I noticed this I saw hovering before me one of the metal people. I am unable to even guess at how it had entered the room.

As if from nowhere, a thin metal ‘arm’ appeared, extending from its body and towards me. At the end of the ‘arm’ was a sort of paw, but made out of a softer and it seems infinitely pliable material. In fact, the ‘arm’ reached out to my jewel and not so much to me. I allowed it to take the jewel and the arm retracted and disappeared, along with my jewel. The metal person had no eyes but I could tell it was ‘looking at’ me in some sense.

Suddenly I saw a white light — or rather, I *felt* a white light — and experienced a sharp pain. It was as if everything, but only for a brief moment, had entirely disappeared and now there was nothing left of the cosmos. Next moment I saw I had moved, or been moved. I was now in the metal city itself, at the far end of one of its ‘streets’. I did not know in which part of the city this was but it was obvious it was some distance — maybe very far away — from the area I had just been observing. Up close as I was now to them, I could see the metal tanks were huge in size and that the ‘streets’ were equally so. The humming dinned about me magnificently.

I was now at the far end of a ‘street’ and stood at the crest of some sort of ‘central square’. From all directions streets emptied here creating a square space in the middle of which stood a towering construction. It was flattish and I would say could be compared to something like a massive window or mirror. But it could not be seen through and it did not reflect. Rather, there were drawn upon it endlessly moving pictures, rows and rows of them all up and down this unreflecting mirror. Nearest to me — I assumed this was for my benefit — the moving pictures showed all that was now happening exactly where I had been standing not so long ago. I stared in awe as picture traced event in a perfect copy.

The image it made was, I sensed, in two places at once, there at its source and again as if projected into me in such a way that I could *feel* it within me — yes, I could both see and feel everything that was happening, yes, where I had been standing. The gendarmes were still there. They still wetted their whistles and shook their sticks. I could *feel* shots being fired. Vive le roi! Vive la République! Still they all cried and shrieked. I felt it as if I were there and I saw it too.

All up and down the picture-window were similar moving images, though these others I could not ‘feel’. How many myriads there were I do not know, they were too many to count. But in each I saw a scene located somewhere in what was once my world. I think in fact it was as if I was *watching the world* as I gazed up at this miracle of images, these kinetic shadow plays of light. ‘How unworldly the world is!’, I exclaimed to myself. ‘How unlike the world it is when you actually see it as it is!’

IV

I was a long time there. My feet were fixed, it was my eyes that travelled. Again and again round the world and back again in a blink or two.

Then came the blast of white light that brought me here. I do not know where ‘here’ is. It is very far though, that I am sure of. This ‘here’ is comfortable but it will never be home. I am free to move in my cell — I call it my cell though it is more like a garden, or better perhaps a park. It is open to the sky but it never rains here. Two suns shine above me within what I would never dare to call heaven. These suns never set. It is always summer here, for the suns always shine. The grass is yellow and the trees are red, but I say at least there is grass and there are trees. Food? Water? I do not

know from where it comes, but there is always food and water here. The food is perfectly edible, pleasant even.

I do not know where I am, but here I am. There is no one else. I see no metal city. I think the metal people, the ones who fly, are here. I have never seen them, but at night — it is always day here but when I sleep I call it night — I say to myself I can hear, or feel, a faint humming.

I cannot leave my garden, for when I reach the edge of it I — how may I put it? — *return to it*. Imagine a room with two doors, east and west. Step into the east door, you find yourself stepping *out* the west door. Here east is west and west is east.

I feel sure I am being observed and studied, perhaps by the metal people or perhaps even their creators. I have never seen the metal people however and the existence of their creators is mere inference.

‘I am here and therefore I am’, I say to myself again and again. ‘I am here and here I am,’ is my variation of that witty little gobbet of ontology.

What else do I have to do but write? I have a table, I have a pen. So I write. What else can I do? I am here and here I am.

I am sure they — though I do not know who they are or if they exist — I am sure they read all I write. I am convinced that is why I am here, why they keep me.

Well, let them study me. I am worth a study. I think so. No, I *say* so. I will say it. Long live the King! Long live the Republic! Let me say that, for here I *am* the king and I *am* the republic.

I am here and here I am, I being Alphonse Beauregard, *gentilhomme*, place and date unknown, c. 1871.

TARINA

Tarina woke to a beautiful sun, the sort of sun that plants itself in your gut and fills the void with an almost superhuman power. Tomorrow was her day. Tomorrow was Misimuwah day in Ukasha and Lonsheer. It was the day when Utu peaked, the day Yarut was filled with the immense power of Utu, the day when it was as if the waters of the Nurcia itself might flow into the rivers of Ukasha to make them queens. She, Tarina — only she knew their deepest secrets. It was she who could communicate with the *kuduwas* and tomorrow was the day she would begin to serve them.

It was the day she had been preparing for all her life. Only her mother Tarisha had a power as great as hers. It was a dangerous power, to be able to speak to the *kuduwas*, the mightiest of all the *kudus* — the most *kuduwa*, the Three. Smerta rose in the east and was male. Suwil set in the west and was female. At noon every day — at Midduwah — their power was at its peak and together they became Utu the three-in-one. The east of Angilon — Ukasha — belonged to Smerta and the west — Lonsheer — to Suwil.

No one from the east dared step over to the west and likewise no one from the west would think of profaning

Ukasha *yarut* (or ‘garunda’ in their own language). If The *Kudus* did not strike them down, they would be torn into pieces by anyone who saw them. Such a sacrilege no *kudu* would ever forgive and likewise any failure to avenge it.

Worship of the *kuduwās*, however, was the link between east and west. In the land that belonged to Smerta, women who could communicate with him formed a class apart from the rest. These women were the Gallasen. In Suwil’s half of Angilon, it was a group of men who spoke to her — the Kassenti. Tarina was the most powerful Gallasen. Tomorrow was her day, the day she was to become Manaj.

Each *gallasen* possessed the power to call to Smerta and her power was the ability to prophesy and to evoke. The *kassenti* had a similar power. Tarina’s own status lay with her *suwilfauen* (for *pauuem* means both ‘prophesy’ and ‘evocation’). Her *suwilfauen* was the very token of her power with which she could speak to Suwil. She and she alone could speak to both Suwil and Smerta. To be Manaj was to be a *gallasen* who commanded a *suwilfauen* or a *kassenti* who carried a *smertapauuem*.

This was the glory of tomorrow — Tarina would be Manaj of Lansher and a *kassenti* named Eadawudu Manaj of Ukasha. Today was the day of the Tarnispur and Tarina was excited and nervous and the new sun warmed her and filled her with his power.

* * * * *

At Midduwah, Tarina was at the border between Ukasha and Lansher. She would never, she knew, get to see her home again. Not even a Manaj could survive the crossing a second time. Eadawudu greeted her in his language —

‘Elawa. Yamma kelad t’aramet-uwu, Tarina. O’wiss-uwu gudu.’

She replied in her own —

‘Illa. Yeyeh cohpa yiloh ko kud f’yough, Eadawudu. Kudlugh.’

Then Tarina and Eadawudu each stepped into their new and alien home.

* * * * *

Next day, her first day in Lansher, in the *yarut* (or *garunda* as she must now call it) of Suwil, the sun that woke her was still finer and even more mighty than the utuwa of the previous day. She was prepared for her task. She would serve Utu; she would serve Suwil; she would represent Smerta. She would do her duty to the temple.

When the time approached — the holy time of Midduwah on Misimuwah — holier still by being the day of a new Manaj — she adorned herself with the holy *dassiya* flower and the emblem of the *igili*, whose broad span of wings was the very symbol of Utu. She looked out of her hut. It was time. Misimuwah over both Lansher and Ukasha. This was now her day. The couple standing there in the Kassenter Eshku, the sacred centre of the temple, looked nervous but were trying to hide their fear.

She gripped the *suwilfauen* firmly, picked up her knife, then stepped out to make her first sacrifice.

SEASAW

Enmebarasee and Enmebarasor were twins. With very long names. So most people called them Sea and Saw. Together, and as twins they were always together, they were Seasaw.

One terrible day though, Sea and Saw forgot who they were. All of a sudden it happened. One moment Sea was Sea and Saw was Saw and the next it was all, *Who was Sea and who was Saw?* No matter how many times we asked, no one ever knew the answer and — because Sea answered for Saw and Saw for Sea — we gave up trying to ask *them*. Saw's wife ran off and Sea's wife took to drink. It was not a good time.

We tried asking them something only Sea would know or only Saw would know but all that Sea knew Saw knew and Saw knew all that Sea knew. We tried dressing them in different colours — red and yellow we thought was about right — but though now one was always one and the other always the other, still no one knew who was Sea and who was Saw. Least of all Sea and Saw.

This went on a long time until one bright and sunny July afternoon. Hot, very hot it was that day. We were

strolling along in the park with Sea and Saw (or Saw and Sea) and suddenly we heard a little voice. A funny voice, it was. Sort of like it had been thrown out, not breathed out. It was flat and squashed, as if there was no resonance to it at all.

“You never asked me,” intoned the flat voice.

“Or me.” This was another similar voice, just as flat and thrown out.

We all looked around and about us. There was no one there. The park was empty and silent. There was no breeze and no leaves bustled and no bees buzzed and no birds chattered. We saw no one.

“You should have asked us,” we heard. It was two voices now, almost in unison, flat as before. We stood stock still, us and Seasaw.

“Who are you?”, we suddenly blurted out. “And *where* are you?”, we added.

“Down here.” We looked down. Nothing. But the voices *did* seem to come from some sort of ‘down here’.

“We can’t see you,” we sighed.

“Yes you can.”

“Where?”

“Along the ground. Look. Here we are.”

And there, we now realised, they were. They were shadows. The shadows of Sea and Saw.

“I am Sea,” said one.

“I am Saw”, said the other.

“At last”, said Sea and Saw in perfect sync. Their shadows had remembered who they were but we had rudely never thought to ask them.

So, from that day to this, Sea and Saw have been back to their old selves and Saw’s wife is with him again and Sea’s will only drink tea or coffee or grapefruit juice.

There is no more dressing in red and yellow, grey does the job. Yes, the old Seasaw is back and our Sea is Sea and our Saw is Saw again.

At least on sunny days.

THE MAP

The map looks magical; just like it is made out of magic. Instead of islands there are circles; circles marked off from the sea, or what we call the sea.

We have examined the map in the minutest detail, my team and I. In each circle there are shapes of an almost unbelievable smallness. These move around. Only our most sophisticated instruments can see them. What appears to be merely a circle contains an enormous amount of activity. The extraordinary thing is that, as these small shapes move around, they unmistakably have a purpose. Their interactions with each other indubitably indicate high levels of intelligence.

Early on we noticed how three or so shapes — not much more than dots even at the highest resolution of our equipment — often approach each other and then cluster together for five, ten minutes, even maybe an hour. They bob and sway while they are clustering, which they do not otherwise do. We have concluded they must be communicating with each other. Talking, if you will. Even at this point we conclude that the communication is likely to be intelligent on account of the length of time involved in the clustering. But a

further thing we have often observed is that a shape may fly off in the direction of another shape or shapes after it has participated in a Cluster (our term for these 'conferences'). It then initiates a new Cluster and we believe this process involves relaying ideas, or even gossip, originating from the first Cluster. A second outcome of a Cluster occurs when a shape approaches a number of other shapes and we observe each of these shapes subsequently move to a single meeting-point. After ten or fifteen minutes quite a number of shapes have gathered at the meeting-point. We infer in this case that the initial cluster has generated an Order.

One of the most extraordinary things we have observed is when many shapes, many thousands at times, gather at a single meeting-point with no sign of a previous clustering. A single shape clearly drawn off from the 'crowd' so to say 'lectures' them. We call this a Meeting. The single shape — the Speaker in our terminology — now bobs and sways but our most sensitive instruments suggest this is done in an astonishingly supple and complex manner. A familiar point of comparison might be our Bee Dance; however, a 'Shape Dance' is infinitely more sophisticated and clearly capable of expressing the most complex of ideas. We have also closely studied how the Audience responds to the Speaker. For most of the performance it is utterly still, but throughout the 'performance' there is always a simple bob and sway of individual audience members. Because there is no 'line of sight' available to the 'audience', we infer their reaction indicates the shapes communicate through some other type of sense, perhaps vibration or a warping of space. This form of communication is clearly effective, for at certain points the entire Audience bobs and sways vigorously. We term this action Applause. The movements of the Audience, it

must be emphasized, are far simpler than that of the Speaker. This is broadly similar, of course, to a human performance before a crowd.

At many points on the map, and within the circles, we see lines. Our measurements make it likely but not certain these lines have been *constructed* — we infer, if this is the case, they were built by the shapes. Lines appear to represent a different type of force or matter to that of the shapes. Our measurements indicate that it is as if physics itself has been bent into a different form. We believe therefore the map is home to an extraordinarily advanced civilization.

The lines within each circle seem to have at least two functions. First, they may *delimit* territory. When we study activity in and around a line, we see almost no movement across it. Shapes nearly always stay within what seems to be their Homeland. We have identified a very large number of these homelands. A second function of the lines appears to be as a sort of *path*. In this case, rather than separate and divide, these path-like lines are almost certainly a marker that the shapes follow. We do not know why the shapes require such markers but speculate that the map is in some regions ‘difficult’ or even ‘faulty’. These regions, we suggest, the shapes find problematic to navigate.

To return to the boundary lines, it was stated above that the shapes very rarely cross these boundaries, but we have observed them doing so. In all the observed instances of a crossing, only very large groups of shapes are involved. In every observed instance this large group is met by an equally large group from the other side of the boundary. This, we believe, is an unmistakable indication of warfare amongst the shapes. When two large groups encounter each other, it looks at first as if the participating shapes simply bounce into and off each

other. Our instruments prove this is not so, or at least does not tell the whole story. During all such 'battles' space in and around the 'combat' wobbles — that is, it expands and contracts. Some of these wobbles are very violent and invariably at this point we see shapes in the vicinity 'erased', just as if a pencil marking has been rubbed out upon a sheet of paper. In a 'battle' involving a hundred or so shapes on each 'side' — larger numbers have never been observed — it is common for between twenty and fifty to be erased in this manner.

The physical structure of the map itself remains a mystery. Due to the fact that it can be observed, we infer its matériel shares some points of reference with our own physical laws but it does not appear to originate in our 'conventional' universe. In a sense, it does not exist at all, for our measurements, inaccurate as they are, indicate it has zero dimensions. It clearly has width and breadth in some sense, for these are visible even to the naked eye. But we measure zero height and therefore if we apply the known laws of physics, the map cannot exist. We can only suggest that the map represents a pure two-dimensional space that has 'broken into' our own three-dimensional universe. This 'dimensional compounding' (our term) does not appear to be dangerous. We stress however, we do not understand the nature of this 'compounding'.

In general, we can only say that the map seems simply to 'exist'. It can be observed, as we have stated, both by the naked eye and by our more advanced instruments. However, it does not interact with the space surrounding it. It is unresponsive to touch and, notwithstanding the activity contained within it, it is absolutely immobile. Those who have seen it invariably claim that it is 'floating' but in fact it is simply not reacting with the surrounding space. It does not react to

either to gravity or any other force in any measurable way. Although we do not believe the map is a threat in itself and although we are convinced the shapes are unaware of us — we have not observed any evident attempts to observe space outside of the map — we are concerned the shapes will at some point detect our presence and we cannot confirm or deny their capability to find a way to ‘leak out’ into our three-dimensional space. We do consider this a remote but conceivable threat.

Now to the general geography of the map. To the naked eye it is covered in circles. These are by far the largest structures we can find in it. Analysis reveals that the matériel of each circle is comparable to that of the lines. We believe however the circles were not built by the shapes. They are too vast. We suggest each circle is the equivalent to one of our own galaxies. If our universe is a sea of galaxies, the map is a sea of circles. While navigation from one galaxy to another is theoretically possible, each circle in the map is closed. The shapes cannot navigate between circles.

Finally, we have observed that each circle is identical in structure, though only similar in size. Shape types within each circle do appear to be identical. We conclude both circles and shapes were created at the same time as the map and that the location of each circle is fixed within the map, just as the shapes are fixed within each circle.

Many who have observed the map have claimed that it must be made out of magic. Morally and imaginatively, we do not dispute this claim. However, here we have to the best of our abilities offered our own attempt at a more reasoned and scientific approach.

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THE WILD BOY

No one liked the Wild Boy though he fascinated everyone. He had no manners but was clearly possessed of great intelligence. He stared at things he could not understand as if he understood them in a different way to us. He created his own world and that was why no one liked him but he lived here with us and here we tolerated him.

‘Fhthukka ghuvassah,’ he’d snort if he saw you puzzling over how to lift a bale of hay up to the top of the barn when your men hadn’t turned up. A stranger might consider the Wild Boy to be a mere animal. But all of a sudden, he’d rush towards you and dive into the barn and after a brief whirr of activity all of a sudden there you’d see an elaborate system of pulleys and levers that would enable you to hoist your bale with barely a sniff of effort.

Extraordinary.

Books no, arithmetic no. How did he do it? All we cared is that he did it. You’d hear a guttural and bestial splutter like ‘Chtheggher mththween’ and before you knew it some marvellous contraption stood before you, all ready to use. Worked first time, nearly always. Kept

on working too, usually. Our village was unusually full of these wonderful things and we, I suppose, were grateful to the Wild Boy even though we never came to like him. 'Nechhchhem bethethen', he'd say and never much more. No, we could not like him.

One day our wizard came to our village. We were not sure why. He had never done so before, at least as far as back as the collective memory of our village went. I remember our wizard had a ridiculously tall hat inscribed with funny patterns and squiggles. Agnes nearly laughed. Luckily, she stopped herself. I have never heard anyone laughing at a wizard coming off well. Our wizard's stride was remarkably sure for someone so old. Rumour said he was in his 160's, I don't know on what basis but he was very old, but very strong. His voice was high and piercing and strident. Let me tell you, it was a powerful voice. But it was not unpleasant. There was a soothing element to it, a mellifluous aspect. Strong yet soft, then. I think all wizards need to be strong and soft. Goes with the job.

Our wizard is named Perpendicularus. I think that is Latin rather than Greek. I think it means 'Upright'. It certainly fit, looking at him. No stoop whatsoever. A perfectly straight posture. Even his silly hat stood straight as anything on top of his head. Wags give him the epithet 'the Ridiculous' but from what I saw of him that day, that's just words.

'Where is the boy?', he enquired.

'Over yonder in Hallowsfield,' answered Agnes and she pointed out the direction with her pipe. I am sure she was stifling a giggle but our wizard was engrossed in what was obviously a very important task for him. So off he marched to Hallowsfield and we all trudged a little way behind him, bemused yet fascinated.

Perpendiculus approached the Wild Boy, his posture and his stride as straight and strong as ever. 'Boy, what is your name?', he enquired. 'Piooththenich feeyeedee,' came the reply. 'Kitaniko fides,' muttered the wizard. 'The weather is fine today.' 'Shendeper djoore.' At that, Perpendiculus muttered, 'Sandiq toor.' At this point, I will skip all the details. All that needs saying is that the Wild Boy would say something and then our wizard would say something that sounded slightly like what the Wild Boy just said. *Piooththenich feeyeedee* and then *Kitaniko fides* and so on and on.

All of a sudden, our wizard cried out, 'Ethchual malatha!'. The Wild Boy went crazy. 'Ethchual malatha! Ethchual malatha! Ethchual malatha!'. He repeated this again and again under the steady gaze of Perpendiculus. After a few minutes of this, our wizard cried out in the most piercing and jarring tone of voice he could — 'ATHACHAL MARGHA!'. The Wild Boy stopped in his tracks at that just like a lazy mule at a ford. Then, in the softest and kindest voice you could ever imagine, our wizard added, 'Cughaji nephessa'. The Wild Boy looked at him with such a profound sense of love and joy that I swear I shall never see the like again.

Perpendiculus now strode away — upright and sure as before — and the Wild Boy followed him I was going to say like a dog. Yes, it was like a dog in a sense, but the Wild Boy was not like a dog. Not everything the ear receives as nonsense is nonsense. The guttural sounds of the Wild Boy were not nonsense. It was the language of the Forgotten People who once held our land. All the Wild Boy did was speak guttural remains of a forgotten tongue. The Forgotten People knew everything, at least so legend says. I do not know that much about wizards or wiccans or even much about what they know. I do know, however, that most of what they know is

inherited from the Forgotten Times in the days of the Forgotten People. The Wild Boy, we at once understood, was a precious survivor of the Forgotten People.

I do not know if the fate of the Wild Boy was kind because I do not know if Perpendiculus feared him or revered him. I doubt a wizard or a wicca will ever grace our village with a visit again no matter how long our walls remain standing. We in the village though often think back on the Wild Boy and how he was special and that, while he lived among us, our village was special. We all like to believe we are special.

We also must recognise to our shame that we never liked him and that we were only ever reluctantly grateful to him.

BEGGING BOWL

Once upon a time, a ragged little girl was happily playing when she suddenly saw a begging bowl. Because it looked interesting, she picked it up; because it was filthy she rubbed it with the sleeve of her ragged gown. At once, a giant man appeared in a flash of smoke. 'Thou art my servant if thou wilt be mine!', he boomed. 'If thou shalt beg me, I shall give thee.' The ragged little girl fell to her knees and begged. At once, the begging bowl was filled with the brightest gold imaginable. The giant man disappeared. The ragged little girl ran off to the market and spent the gold on bright gowns and fine food. When she had spent all her gold, she remembered the begging bowl. It was still filthy, so she rubbed it once more. The giant man appeared again and the girl, now dressed in the most beautiful finery, begged once more. Once more, the begging bowl filled itself with shining gold. Once more, the little girl bought herself the finest luxuries and trinkets. This went on until one day, when the little girl had spent her last gold, she returned to the begging bowl. By now the begging bowl was itself shining bright, with a mere speck of dirt upon it. The little girl rubbed away the last speck of dirt. As usual, the giant man appeared in a flash of smoke. 'Thou art my servant if

thou wilt be mine!', he boomed. 'If thou shalt beg me, I shall give thee, but this time I shall die, for my power is almost gone.' The little girl thought for a moment, but then her greed overcame her, and she fell to her knees and begged. At once, the begging bowl disappeared and the giant man collapsed to the ground with an almighty crash. A single, tarnished, gold coin fell down before her feet. The little girl looked at the dead giant man, then looked at where her begging bowl had been. 'My begging bowl!', she wailed! 'My begging bowl is dead!'

THE TOOTH CASTLE

Back in the time of the Two Empires a long-long while ago, a man called Oaf lived and breathed. He was a man stronger than anyone else who had ever existed. No one had heard Oaf utter a word and he was big and he was clumsy. No one liked him very much. So he, tired of being called stupid (and he was a most gentle soul), left them as they were and off he went. When it rained he was soaked, when the wind blew he was frozen and under the stars at night he rarely slept well. So, he built a home for himself. He drew up plans; lifted; carved; joined and fluted — his home grew and grew.

When he had finished, it was huge and beautiful, a tall white tower surrounded by less tall towers with strong walls. It had gigantic bastions, its windows were finely cut and commanded splendid views. It shone day and night, bright white, white as a king's horse. And on the walls and on the towers was one of every kind of tooth (and more than one of some, for some of these teeth had very special qualities). Some found the building eerie and macabre, but no one denied its great beauty, and from the five regions of the world, people came to gaze upon it and to see Oaf.

But Oaf let no one and took nothing inside the white building. He roamed the tubular passages, frozen in time. From the deepest depth to the highest height he prowled, day after day.

That is, until Nayqui Qaam, emperor of all the north, heard about the building. Nayqui Qaam at once set off with a huge army to capture Oaf and sack his palace. People at his court had been eloquent about its grandeur, and Nayqui Qaam could not allow the slightest hint of a rumour of anything that would detract from his own grandeur. 'It is unheard of, a fool, a rough dirty boor - a common serf having such finery! Bah! Pah!', he cried as his army marched. He bit his tongue in anger. 'Pah!'

The emperor had to travel a long way to reach Oaf, and the journey took two or three years. All to kill poor Oaf and destroy his home. At last they arrived, and surrounded the white castle. Tens and tens of thousands of men, the furthest of whom, twenty miles away, could not even see the tall building. The local king quivered in his bed, afraid they might attack him for a bit of sport. Nayqui Qaam tried every means to break down Oaf's home. Break down the door, break down the walls, climb through the windows — they tried fire, water, burning oil, burning straw, iron, steel, digging tunnels, building platforms and towers. Nothing worked, nothing at all.

Oaf sometimes stared at them from one of his huge windows, but he wasn't really interested in them. They stayed around his home for a year, Nayqui Qaam now hysterical for vengeance. Vengeance for what, you may ask? For Oaf had done nothing. Well, you do not have to do a thing to hurt an emperor's pride. And Oaf had done that. Nayqui Qaam had commanded, and no one could carry out his commands.

On the three hundred and seventy fourth day, Nayqui Qaam cried out, 'Why doesn't he let us in?'.

And with that the huge doors opened and Oaf stood there. At once there was a frenzied rush of men leaping and pushing and clambering, with their swords thrusting and their shields clattering, a greedy swarm of giddy hearts rushing to claim their prize. Oaf looked at them sadly, with his grey eyes, and walked back inside. The echoes of a hundred thousand warriors flooded through the once silent castle. And through them all stepped Nayqui Qaam, nearly tripping over his fine long gown as he went.

'You dumb creature,' he cried, 'You ridiculous sot of a boor! You are mine! Your castle is mine!'

Then Oaf spoke. 'Go,' he murmured, as if he had rewarded them for their patient vigil by admitting them in for a few minutes. And as soon as he spoke, the carpet of men went silent and shuffled away and Nayqui Qaam followed them like a dog. And once outside they fled, blindly running in all directions, descending like vultures on the neighbouring lands.

They say that, for a hundred years afterwards, the swords and shields the army left behind lay as a terrible reminder of that day; and they say also that amongst the swords and shields laid a long while the cold bones of Nayqui Qaam.

A CAT'S TALE

Cats, you know, are nocturnal beings and this all happened in the dead of night. Me, I jumped up onto the wall in the greatest leap I ever did and as I was sat on my wall, I saw the new thing and I hissed loud as I could at it. It was bang in the middle of my world. I saw it turn towards me and I was ready to attack. But I could not. I felt a pain all over me and woke up in another place that was not my world at all.

The new thing was making sounds I did not like. It was so bright in there. My eyes pick up the light like anything. I almost could not see because the new place was so bright. I do not like too much light. I did not like this new place.

Then I felt a change. It was no longer meaningless noise the thing was making. The noise was something I understood. 'Who are you?', the thing noised out to me. What kind of noise is that? I am me. Everything else is some other thing, just like this new thing in front of me. 'What do you want?', it noised again. What do I want? I am me. All I want is to be fed and when I am fed I want to sleep. If I don't want to be fed or to sleep I want to catch the small things that pass into my world for my pleasure and to play with the ones I catch. I also want to

make my world safe for me and so I patrol it to keep me safe. There is a brute lives at the edge of my world and he likes to enter into it. I look out for him. What do I want *then*? I want him out of my world. That's what I want *then*. I patrol my world to keep him out of it. I sleep, I eat, I patrol, I watch, I chase. I am me and that is what I want. These questions.

I looked at the thing that was not me. The light was unbearable. How could I ever sleep in this new place? I wished I was back in my own place with the things that feed me and so I hissed at the thing. I bared my teeth. I made my tail as large as it would go. This would surely get the message across.

The new thing had huge eyes that did not blink. I tried not to be scared. I hissed again and it still stood there bold as brass. The thing was a moving thing and moving things are a threat and this new thing was far bigger than me. I sensed it was not going to feed me and also that it would not let itself be chased.

'What are you?', it noised. What am I who is of course me? What a nonsense this was.

The new thing approached me slowly. I sensed it was trying not to frighten me but how could I not be frightened? The thing was neither feeding me nor allowing me to sleep. Where was my world and what was this it was noising? The new thing came up near me and paused. I yowled at it. 'What do you *mean*?', it noised. I yowled again.

A small new thing grew out of the other new thing and the small thing flew towards me. I felt it enter the back of my head. It went into me. I yowled. 'What you say means nothing,' noised the other new thing. The sound of its noising had become louder and harsher. 'We do not understand.'

Let me go, I thought. I want my world back. There are too many new noises here and there is nothing for me to chase. My world is gone.

Then I felt a pain as bad as the first one and all at once I find myself back in my own world. I can no longer see the new thing. I am back up here on my wall. All that is left is me and my world. In the distance I sense the brute I must conquer every day to save me and my world and I hear the bustling of the small things placed in my world for my pleasure.

THE ESCUTCHEON

I

It was not an ideal morning for such an outing, but the slanting figure nevertheless struggled through the sleet much as a polar explorer might. His beige raincoat provided a dull backcloth to the murky shapes environing the rain-soaked road. The wind had hands that seemed to yowl and howl all around and about — ‘Back, before it is all too late!’. The hands of the wind grappled and grasped the little man but, no matter what, he still went forward. He adored superstition, this man of unenlightenment and antiscience. He pressed his hands against the blandness of his coat and sighed — he still had the money! And here he recognised the old Market Street, and he knew it would be soon, for he was nearly there.

Market Street was a narrow cracked thing that looked back to better times. Once upon a time it led to the very heart of Woodwich. Back then people met to buy and barter, as moochy or merry as things took. But now, in these days when there is no centre, just tangled edges drawn to wherever seems to be found the middle — now things were dark and strange. It was here the

figure, not much more than a tiny shadow, stepped towards the chosen door and knocked.

The door opened. A line of light loaned to the street a dissipated ambrosial tungsten glow. The figure took a deep breath and plunged into a modest hallway.

‘Mr Calico, this way! Let me take your coat. You are soused to the bone!’ The speaker was a bespectacled gentleman dressed in scruffy slacks and an off-green cardigan. His bone-white hair was grown long and a spooky beard was cut into a lengthy v-shape. The old gentleman beckoned Mr Calico sit down in the threadbare living room.

The gentleman said. ‘Mr Calico, think I can guess what it is you want.’ Then a silence. Then the old gentleman continued: ‘You have come to claim the prize, my prize possession, the summit of all I have ever been or done.’ A pause to examine Mr Calico, then silence. ‘Well? The escutcheon!’

Mr Calico’s eyes were put to flame and he waved his arms about. ‘You have it? You have the escutcheon?’

‘Yes I do have it. But for a price — is the price a price you’ll pay?’

Not too many moments after, a small figure clutching a package left the dilapidated house, departing into the mucinous night.

II

Mr Calico’s house was almost unbearably crammed with oddments. There were paintings and musty tomes and papers and artefacts and gargoyles and statuettes and dolls and (blessed or not) shaped stones, and so on and on. And on the wall above the fireplace the prize over all — Lord Woodbind’s escutcheon.

The escutcheon was enamelled with thickly painted layers of gold and studded with diamonds set round about the eyes of small creatures staring into vacant space. And there were scenes of demons brandishing rubies in their teeth, with fierce creatures at their feet, and noble men of the Woodbind breed kneeling before it all. And there were swords broke in two above the scales of justice. And wolves and sharp-tusked wild boars appeared to be skewered upon stakes bristling with white hot fires. In the centre of the frame was an image of the last of the Woodbind line: an elderly bearded gentleman whose mouth seemed forever about to utter words that it could not.

Mr Calico roamed around his room like a lord, like a lion after a kill. His eye alighted on his prize, and his hands moved hungrily towards it, but never to touch, never reach into its unworldly depths.

His life became a single round of research into the escutcheon and the Woodbind line, but the information he sought was always, it seemed, a step or two away from him. Whatever word he came upon proved to be brief and elusive, enigmatic as a Kabuki mask.

One of the few coherent passages that he found cut like a knife: 'The Woodbind Escutcheon, renowned the world over by the shadowy illuminati, possesses a reputation that its lost-forever status does nothing to prevent. The Woodbind name is said to originate with an obscure figure of the barony dating to the earliest Middle Ages. (Stories of a prehistoric origin involving the powerful older gods must be discounted.) All supposed knowledge of this escutcheon remains hearsay, except perhaps the reports of its entrancing beauty. All in all, we can say nothing of worth about it or its origin.'

'Cannot?' or 'will not?', Mr Calico often thought to himself. And there, hung on his wall lit by the glow of

his comfortable fire, it was — Lord Woodbine's escutcheon.

III

It's two years now since that day that Lord Woodbine's escutcheon was hung up upon the wall above the fire. Now much has changed and there is now not much further to go. Mr Calico had become too much enclosed within the little world of his long sought after prize. He — Christopher William Calico — was to be the one to bring to the world the first real knowledge of the escutcheon. He travelled and researched and interviewed and jotted and photographed — he read essays and histories in all kinds of languages and in all seasons. Never was he idle for a day or even a moment. At first this exhaustive effort was undertaken for himself, but after time had passed it became more and more for the escutcheon itself, for its national and even international fame and prestige. For after all this time, Mr Calico knew beyond all else that Lord Woodbine could not be kept waiting!

And all this while Mr Calico saw too well the changes the escutcheon took on. The old man he had killed gave way to younger and prouder men, whose faces betrayed the tocks of time. Their beards and their moustaches, their wigs and their hats, their ruffs and their jewels, were like the face of a mirror of time. Out of the picture they stared as the fires roasted the creatures of the demons drooling in their commitment to wild orgies of pain and pleasure. Like dervishes they span faster and faster. It seemed as if everything whirled and screeched and spun. The kneeling men, these devotees — each one possessed an aspect of some pre-divine awe. Their eyes like diamonds at the first, growing darker and darker with each turning of the seasons, of the years, of the

decades and centuries — of the millennia. And the fire spread its heat like a wild storm.

And all the while Mr Calico devoted himself to his work, his book, his chronicle, his tale that he told himself must be told. As he hacked his mind, sluiced passages of prose into the light, he smiled. He held his pen before him, his paper flat beneath his arm: but both were still as craters of the moon. Mr Calico looked into the fire with vacant eyes, and was proud. Then he looked up at the escutcheon.

Lord Woodbind was young, and noble, and savage. His hair grew immensely to his shoulders, and his eyelashes distorted the pale eyes which gazed from out of his ancient face. They did not — could not — see, but only sense. The nostrils tasted the scent, the atmosphere of now. Lord Woodbind could feel the air. And he smiled.

And the demons danced and danced. Some took wing, others crackled in the flames and tore the wolves and wild boars with their drooling teeth. And their claws! Drums beat impatiently. The skies were dashed with flecks of blood. There were so many, now: the Woodbind brood gathered together to receive poor Mr Christopher William Calico.

The room, unlit in the wild Winter night, glowed in the unearthly fires. Warm orange and cool yellows revelled in the scarlet dance that rattled to the tune of distant drums. As Mr Calico sat with his nerves captured in this fateful spell, Lord Woodbind summoned Time. He brought the hours to a close. The noble book of Mr Calico was brought to its end and he himself was sucked into the fire.

IV

It is all past now. History.

I, like Mr Calico, am a writer. I write history. In the broadest sense, I simply tell the time for people, and what I have told you is what has just happened. This I know and swear.

I sit now in Mr Calico's room, before his papers. And Mr Calico wrote down all what happened before the final fire. He knew.

I came here this morning to see a friend. A friend now gone to this world and all its light and darkness.

I saw the escutcheon upon the wall, timid today, and silent. I smelt the smell of roasting. But never was the escutcheon burnt— it is now as whole as when — whenever? — it first was made.

Mr Calico is not here now, not in this room. He is gone forever, taken to a place outside time, beyond the hours and beyond his life's works.

And his death's.

And how do I know this? Look! — see the escutcheon! See who stares from within! Whose face is it who stares? I see who it is, and it is he!

MURDER ON THE MOON

I

It is generally – and mistakenly – believed that the first man on the moon was named Neil Armstrong, but I can reveal in the following little story that has never before been told, that this is not so. In fact, the first man on the moon set foot there long ago, on June 11 1930, and it happened like this.

One warm and perfectly calm night, Colonel Elidur Lloyd was visiting his friend Ironwood Manning, the famous Detective. They both sat staring at the sky, cigar in one hand and a glass of fine malt whiskey in the other.

‘My friend,’ whispered the detective, ‘The stars shine like little jewels in the sky and the moon is looking down on us all. It would most surely please me to visit there. It is a true marvel Lloyd, is it not?’

‘It is regrettable, but I think there are places man can never hope to go, not even you,’ the Colonel mused. Manning was certainly a most brilliant man, solver of the most difficult cases, but he was a bit of a dreamer.

‘Little jewels in the sky,’ repeated Manning, puffing little beads of smoke from his cigar.

Then the unearthly crash occurred.

II

The two friends looked back behind then, in the general direction of the crash. Both men started violently. Before them stood a most curious creature. It had arms and legs and a head, but all in the wrong sort of shapes. It also appeared to be going in and out of focus, all the while making a sort of gurgling sound.

Suddenly the creature seemed to explode and almost as immediately implode in an action that obviously enabled it to stay in focus. The Gurgler began to speak. 'Stabilised!', it exclaimed. 'Always a tricky business, this sort of travel. You have to stabilise yourself, you see. Anyway, please don't be alarmed, gentlemen, for I come in peace.'

Manning looked at the Gurgler intently. 'You say that you come in peace, but what I should like to know is from where? I am sure the answer will intrigue.'

The Gurgler appeared to be composing itself. 'Please, I say, do not be alarmed. I come from up there.' It pointed up at the sky. 'The moon?', asked Manning in his drollest tone. 'I believe that is what you call it, yes. From the moon.' 'Good heavens!', exclaimed Colonel Elidur Lloyd. And, 'Good grief!'

'Colonel, you appear to be having trouble believing what you see,' said Manning in a soothing voice. 'I am quite convinced the evidence points to the truth of this fellow's claim.'

The Gurgler piped up, 'I knew I could depend on you, Mr Ironwood Manning. As to the purpose of my sudden — and I hope not too distressing — visit, we have decided to ask for your help. You are our only hope.'

'We?', Manning shot back. 'Who, may I ask, is 'we'?'

‘Why, we of the moon. It is unprecedented in all of our history. There is a tremendous hue and cry up there, all day, every day and everywhere.’

‘Why, though, do you require my help?’

‘There’s been a murder!’

III

Travelling to the moon is not like travelling to the Elephant and Castle on the omnibus. But it is quicker. At least if you use the contraption invented by the Gurglers. It looked as if it was made out of light, for all of its components glowed like light and not one of them appeared to be solid. The Gurgler made a sudden rapid movement at which all what might be termed focus was lost. It was as if you were in the middle of nothing, but only for a brief moment. The next thing you knew is you were somewhere else. This place could be near or far from where you were originally and it wouldn’t make a difference how far or near. The detective and the Colonel in any event now found themselves standing on the moon.

Before them stood the race of people who had summoned them, whom we call the Gurglers. There are not so many Gurglers as there are human beings, even bearing in mind the difference in size between our earth and its satellite. There seem to be around a thousand or so all told. A major difference between a Gurgler and a human is that the former’s body constantly renews itself. Gurglers can sicken and die and they can be killed, but otherwise they are effectively immortal. As they renew over time, they become a new being with new thoughts and new memories. A Gurgler is immortal but its self and its memories are not. Although they have forgotten their origins, they are without doubt a people long-established on the moon.

If Ironwood Manning could ever be faced with a more difficult challenge, it was beyond even him to imagine it. Apart from his unfamiliarity with an alien culture and the impossibility of blending in with the natives, his most difficult problem was that all Gurglers are identical. They do not even have names as we do. Of course, the Gurglers themselves don't see things like that. They have their senses and we have ours. Gurglers can tell each other apart in ways that are incomprehensible to a mere human being, even Ironwood Manning.

He could however imagine the reason for the horrible hue and cry among the Gurglers. He did not understand the ways of the of Gurgler race in detail but was sure that murder was almost inconceivable to them.

'Bit of a fix, eh Manning! ', sighed the Colonel.

'Not a bit of it, Lloyd old friend. I intend to solve this case in a jiffy. You see if I don't,' said Manning.

He rose to his full height — somewhat above the Gurglers, who are a rather small race — and began to declaim in his most oratorical manner.

'Gentlemen! May I have your attention? I am very much aware of the appalling tragedy that has just befallen your people. It is clear to me such an event is without precedent in your traditions that I am sure extend back so much further than those of we humans. I may state definitively that an earthling such as myself can never comprehend the depths of horror you have been enduring over these past few terrible days. It is a manner of pain — at least I imagine it must be — so unexpected and so immediate and so, dare I say? — undeniable — for who would deny the fact of murder? — which is the most final yet most undeniable of all crimes — the fact of which is always as unexpected as it is immediate — and who would dare admit themselves to

deny such a fact? Murder is the most undeniable of all facts. Murder cannot be remoulded into a fiction. Murder is most foul. Murder is most plain. Murder is plain fact. Now, gentlemen — may I call you friends? — we earthlings in these times, we see the warp and weft of society — those strange rules of behaviour by which we live — within our traditions and our history and in particular our present. We see within any society both dominion and decadence. We see in our day National Socialism and Fascism. We see dominion and decadence lurk within all societies of Man. Decadence is to dominion as a fall is to a rise. Whatever must rise must soon fall. Friends, are you any different to Man? I do not claim to know in detail the ways of thinking amongst your race, but are they not — look into your hearts — are they not the ways of Man? Does not your rise beget a fall? Is this not your Fall? Is it not your Decadence? Murder most foul and most plain. Murder! Murder! I say this is your Fall and I declare your guilt! I accuse you all and I affirm my accusation! Each one of you is guilty, my friends. Gentlemen...' (a pregnant pause) '*you* are guilty. All of you — guilty! Guilty of...' (a second, briefer, pause) '*...murder!*'

Colonel Elidur Lloyd had a great deal of difficulty believing what he had just heard and witnessed. Here he was, standing on the moon in front of an alien race of Gurglers — and *that speech* was what he could not believe.

A chorus of gurgling started to rise up, like a river thinking of bursting its banks. However little you understood the ways of these Gurglers, this was the sound of affront, of anger, of pain — and to what action would it lead?

Ironwood Manning was observing the scene for a different reason and he was smiling with satisfaction. He had just solved the case. As he had said, in a jiffy.

‘Gentlemen! My friends!’, he cried out in his most magnificent manner. ‘Friends, I must apologise profusely for my deception against you. But I now know the identity of the murderer — *you!*’ He pointed to one among a thousand identical beings. The Colonel almost fainted with shock and the Gurglers milled about in confusion and surrounded the unfortunate soul who had been the target of Ironwood Manning’s accusing finger.

A Gurgler approached the detective, presumably to speak for the others. ‘You make this accusation why?’ There was a good deal of hurt in the voice. ‘I accused each of you of murder yet only one of you is a murderer. As I accused you, I examined carefully each of your reactions. I was searching for the reaction of a murderer and this fellow’s reaction was as clear as daylight. You must not doubt my conclusion. I apologise again for my deception, but I devised this extraordinary situation so that I might distinguish the one from the rest, for I am afraid I cannot tell you apart ordinarily.’

The Colonel looked on open-mouthed as his friend spoke.

All he could say at the end of it was, ‘*Bravo, Manning! Bravo!*’

IV

Although Neil Armstrong was not the first man on the moon — that was Colonel Elidur Lloyd, closely followed by his good friend Ironwood Manning — no record remained of the visit. We know now that the Gurglers removed all memories of what had happened from the two friends. Ironwood Manning never got to remember his most difficult case. Of course, since the

Protocols, the Gurglers have provided us with full access to their archives and it is within these we discovered this extraordinary story as these records began to be translated satisfactorily by our experts.

It is interesting to note the reason for committing such a deed so unexpected for these creatures. It seems the murderer had observed another Gurgler regenerating at a very fast rate and so becoming exceptionally 'new'. This is a highly desirable Gurgler trait. The 'renewing' induced strong feelings of jealousy over an extended period of time and it was these feelings that ultimately drove the murderer to commit the crime.

To conclude, I can think of no better way of ending this report than by quoting Ironwood Manning himself — 'I do not claim to know in detail the ways of thinking amongst your race, but are they not — look into your hearts — are they not the ways of Man?'

EVERYWHERE HAS GONE

Gillian Lossie, 43

‘Everywhere has gone. I was running in the park and it was sunny and the ducks were in the lake and suddenly it’s all gone. The ducks, the lake, the park. Now it’s just me in a big nothing. Where am I? I’m still running — might as well keep on — but I’m running into nothing. I never get hungry or thirsty, however long I remain here, but I do want to know where I am. Everyone wants to know where they are.’

Stephen Temple, 21

‘Everywhere has gone. I just started a new job. Typical me. Where’s my prospects now? Typical. It’s not a room I’m in. It’s space. Seems big. Huge really. I just want to do my job. Why don’t they let me do my job?’

Rachel Lenz, 28

‘Everywhere has gone. Including my car. I wish I had my car, then I could go nowhere faster. I’m not bothered Bethnal Green is gone. Just my car. Even if you’re going nowhere you always want to get there faster.’

Dilwyn Henderson, 68

‘Everywhere has gone. I didn’t expect that. I thought things would last a bit longer. I never thought they’d disappear. Why didn’t I disappear? Unless I did. I never really thought about what it’s like to actually disappear. What do you look like after you do? I wouldn’t know and there’s no mirrors here. I can see my arms and legs so I suppose they’ve not disappeared. But really, what is it like to really disappear?’

Guy Spencer, 44

‘Everywhere has gone. I miss day and night most. One then the other in sequence. There’s no pattern to life here I’ve found. This place might as well be endless, I’ve gone so far and yet found nothing. Time here seems endless as well. I find there’s no pattern to space and no pattern to time. I don’t like it here.’

Melanie Spencer, 46

‘Everywhere has gone. I miss Guy, but he’s gone. Everything gone. I often wonder if I’ll meet him if I go on long enough. But I’ve never seen a soul in here. I’m sure I’ve gone a very long way and that I’ve been here a long time. Never seen a soul.’

Arnt Frearson, 33

‘Everywhere has gone. I see nothing. When I reached the peak of the mountains I used to climb — these were superb sights! At the top of a mountain the sun looks like it is bursting out of the sky and there are no clouds above you. You are above the clouds. The air is pure. You feel pure yourself when you breathe it in. You feel ecstatic. You have overcome danger and your own fear.

You feel more alive than you have ever been. The world is underneath you and you are on top of the world. Now I am here, I feel nothing.'

Iolanthe West, 92

'Everywhere has gone. I expected to go. I thought it would be like falling. It wasn't. I lie here and think. I wait. For what? I don't know. This room is so bright. There is too much light. How long have I been lying here?'

Deirdrie Young, 29

'Everywhere has gone. I had a novel in me I'm sure. I travelled to Thailand, Bondai Beach, Soweto, Las Vegas. I even got arrested once, even if it was a mistake. I still spent a night in the cells. Somewhere inside me there was a novel. I just had to get the story out, even if it was like drawing blood from a stone. How difficult is it to write a novel? In this place though, no chance. There's literally nothing here.'

Dr. Mary Macy, 31

'Everywhere has gone. Just before all this whatever it is, I at last finished my PhD. All that cosmology and ontology! The Universe, then. It is full of space. Without this space we'd be nothing or at least squashed flat as a pancake. So I know we need space but Jesus H Christ we need the other stuff as well. Here it is just space and nothing else. I think that is the most frightening thing in the world.'