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Viriconium

Written by M. John Harrison

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Fantasy Masterworks

VIRICONIUO

M. JOHN HARRISON



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VIRICONIUM KNIGHTS

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The aristocratic thugs of the High City whistle as they go about their factional games among the derelict observatories and abandoned fortifications at Lowth. Distant or close at hand, these exchanges – short commanding blasts and protracted responses which often end on what you imagine is an interrogative note – form the basis of a complex language, to the echo of which you wake suddenly in the leaden hour before dawn. Go to the window: the street is empty. You may hear running footsteps, or a sigh. In a minute or two the whistles have moved away in the direction of the Tinmarket or the Margarethestrasse. Next day some minor prince is discovered in the gutter with his throat cut, and all you are left with is the impression of secret wars, lethal patience, an intelligent manoeuvring in the dark.

The children of the Quarter pretend to understand these signals. They know the histories of all the most desperate men in the city. In the mornings on their way to the Lycee on Simeonstrasse they examine every exhausted face.

'There goes Antic Horn,' they whisper, 'master of the Blue Anemone Philosophical Association,' and: 'Last night Osgerby Practal killed two of the Queen's men right underneath my window, he did it with his knife – like this! – and then whistled the "found and killed" of the Locust Clan...'

If you had followed the whistles one raw evening in December some years after the War of the Two Queens, they would have led you to an infamous yard behind the inn called the Dryad's Saddle at the junction of Rue Miromesnil and Salt Lip Lane. The sun had gone down an hour before, under three bars of orange cloud. Wet snow had been falling since. Smoke and steam drifted from the inn in the light of a half-open door; there was a sharp smell in the air, compounded of embrocation, saveloys, and burning anthracite. The yard was crowded on

three sides with men whose woollen cloaks were dyed at the hem the colour of dried blood, men who stood with 'the braced instep affected only by swordsmen and dancers'. They were quiet and intent, and for the most part ignored the laughter coming from the inn.

Long ago someone had set four wooden posts into the yard. Blackened and still, capped with snow, they formed a square a few metres on a side. Half a dozen apprentices were at work to clear this, using long-handled brooms to sweep away the slush and blunted trowels to chip at the hardened ridges of ice left by the previous day's encounters.

(In the morning these lads sell sugared anemones in the Rivelin Market. They run errands for the card sharps. But by the afternoon their eyes have become distant, thoughtful, excited: they cannot wait for the night, when they will put on their loose, girlish woollen jackets and tight leather breeches to become the handlers and nurses of the men who wear the meal-coloured cloak. What are we to make of them? They are thin and ill-fed, but so devout. They walk with a light tread. Even their masters do not understand them.)

An oldish man sat on a stool among the members of his faction while two apprentices prepared him. They had already taken off his cloak and his mail shirt, and supported his right wrist with a canvas strap. They had pulled the grey hair back from his face, fastening it with an ornamental steel clasp. Now they were rubbing embrocation into his stiff shoulder muscles. He ignored them, staring emptily at the blackened posts waiting for him like corpses pulled out of a bog. He hardly seemed to feel the cold, though his bare scarred arms were purple with it. Once he inserted two fingers beneath the strapping on his wrist to make sure it was tight enough. His sword was propped up against his knees. Idly he pushed the point of it down between two cobbles and began to lever them apart.

When one of the apprentices leaned forward and whispered something in his ear it appeared that he wouldn't answer: then he cleared his throat as if he had not spoken to anybody for a long time and said,

'I've never heard of him. If I had I wouldn't give him the satisfaction. Some little pisser from Mynned?'

The boy smiled lovingly down at him.

'I will always follow you Practal. Even if he cuts your legs off.' Practal reached up and imprisoned the boy's delicate wrist.

'If he kills me you'll run off with the first poseur who comes in here wearing soft shoes!'

'No,' said the boy. 'No!'

Practal held his arm a moment longer, then gave a short laugh. 'More fool you;' he said, but he seemed to be satisfied. He went back to prising at the loose setts.

The Mammy's man came into the yard late, surrounded by courtiers in yellow velvet cloaks who had escorted him down from Mynned. Practal had a look at them and spat on the cobbles. The inn was quiet now. From its half-open door a few-sightseers – mostly costermongers from Rivelin but with a leaven of touts and sharps local to the Dryad's Saddle – watched, placing bets in low voices while smoke moved slowly in the light and warmth behind them.

The Mammy's man ignored Practal. He kicked vaguely at each wooden post as he came to it and stared about as if he had forgotten something, a tall youth with big, mad-looking eyes and hair which had been cut and dyed so that it stuck up from his head like a crest of scarlet spines. He had on a light green cloak with an orange lightning flash embroidered on the back; when he took it off the crowd could see that instead of a mail shirt he was wearing a kind of loose chenille blouse. Practal's clique made a lot of this, laughing and pointing. He gazed blankly at them, then with a disconnected motion pulled the blouse off and tore it in half. This seemed to annoy the court men, who moved away from him and stood in a line along the fourth side of the yard, ostentatiously sniffing pomanders.

Practal said disgustedly, "They've sent a child."

They had. His chest was thin and white; low down, two huge abscesses had healed as conical pits. His back was long and hollow. A greenish handkerchief was knotted round his throat. He looked undeveloped but at the same time broken down.

'No wonder he needed an escort.'

He must have heard this but he went on lurching randomly about, chewing on something he had in his mouth. Then he

scratched his queer coxcomb violently, knelt down, and rummaged through the garments he had discarded until he came up with a ceramic sheath about a foot long. When the crowd saw this there was some excited betting, most of it against Practal; the Locust Clan looked uneasy. Hissing through his teeth as if he were soothing a horse, the Queen's man jerked the power knife out of its sheath and made a few clumsy passes with it. It gave off a dreary, lethal buzzing noise and a cloud of pale motes which wobbled away into the wet air like drugged moths; and as it went it left a sharp line of light behind it in the gloom.

Osgerby Practal shrugged.

'He'll need long arms to use that,' he said.

Someone called out the rules. The moment one of the combatants was cut, he lost. If either of them stepped outside the notional square defined by the posts, he would be judged as having conceded. No-one was to be killed (although this happened more often than not). Practal paid no attention. The boy nodded interestedly as each point was made then walked off smiling and whistling.

Mixed fights were uncommon. Practal, who had some experience of them, kept his sword down out of the way of the power knife, partly to reduce the risk of having it chopped in half, partly so his opponent would be tempted to come to him. The boy adopted a flat footed stance, and after a few seconds of uncoordinated circling began to pant heavily. All at once the power knife streaked out between them, fizzing and spitting like a firework. The crowd gasped, but Practal only stepped sideways and let it pass. Before the boy could regain his balance the flat of Practal's sword had smacked him on the ear. He fell against one of the corner posts, holding the side of his head and blinking.

The courtiers clicked their tongues impatiently.

'Come out of that corner and show us a fight,' suggested someone from the Locust Clan. There was laughter.

The boy spoke for the first time. 'Go home and look between your wife's legs, comrade,' he said. 'I think I left something there last night.'

This answer amused the crowd further. While he was grinning round at them Practal hit him hard in the ear again.

This time the power knife fell out of his hand and started to eat its way into the cobbles an inch from his foot, making a dull droning noise. He stood there looking down at it and rubbing his ear.

The point of Practal's sword rested against the boy's diaphragm. But the boy refused to look at him, so Practal lowered it and went back to his stool. He sat down with his back to the square while his apprentices wiped his face with a towel, murmuring encouragement in low voices, and gave him a dented flask. He held it up.

'Want some?' he called over his shoulder. The crowd appreciated this: there was some cheering even from people who had backed the other corner.

'That piss?' said the boy. 'Soon I'll drink the lot.'

Practal jumped to his feet so quickly he knocked the stool over.

'Fair enough then!' he shouted, his face red. 'Come on!'

But nothing happened. The boy only hacked with his heel at a ridge of hard old ice the apprentices had left sticking to the cobbles in the centre of the square, while the power knife, held negligently close to his right leg, flickered and sent up whitish motes which floated above the crowd giving off a sickly smell. He seemed worried.

"This square has been badly set up,' he said.

The court faction shifted irritably; the crowd jeered.

'I don't care about that,' said Practal and threw himself into a sustained, tight, very technical attack, controlling the momentum of the sword with practised figures-of-eight so that it shone and flashed in the light from the inn door. Practal's faction cheered and waved their arms. The boy was forced into a clumsy retreat, and when his foot caught the ridge of ice in the centre of the square he fell over with a cry. Practal brought the sword down hard. The boy smiled. He moved his head quickly out of the way, and with a clang the blade buried itself between two cobblestones. Even as Practal tried to lever it clear the boy reached round behind his legs and cut the tendons at the back of his knee.

Practal seemed surprised.

'That's not the way to fight with a weapon like that,' he

began, as if he was advising his apprentice.

He let go of the sword and wandered unsteadily about the square with his mouth open, holding the backs of his legs. The boy followed him about interestedly until he collapsed, then knelt down and put his face close to Practal's to make sure he was listening. 'My name is Ignace Retz,' he said quietly. Practal bit the cobbles. The boy raised his voice so that the crowd could hear. 'My name is Ignace Retz, and I daresay you will remember it.'

'Kill me,' said Practal. 'I'll not walk now.'

Ignace Retz shook his head. A groan went through the crowd. Retz walked over to the apprentice who was holding Practal's mail shirt and meal-coloured cloak. 'I will need a new shirt and cloak,' he announced loudly, 'so that these kind people are not tempted to laugh at me again.' After he had taken the clothes, to which he was entitled by the rules, he returned the power knife to its sheath, handling it more warily than he had done during the fight. He looked tired. One of the courtiers touched him on the arm and said coldly, 'It is time to go back to the High City.'

Retz bowed his head.

As he was walking towards the inn door, with the mail shirt rolled up into a heavy ball under one arm and the cloak slung loosely round his shoulders, Practal's apprentice came and stood in his way, shouting, 'Practal was the better man! Practal was the better man!'

Retz looked down at him and nodded.

'So he was.'

The apprentice began to weep. 'The Locust Clan will not allow you to live for this!' he said wildly.

'I don't suppose they will,' said Ignace Retz.

He rubbed his ear. The courtiers hurried him out. Behind him the crowd had gone quiet. As yet, no bets were being paid out.

Mammy Vooley held a disheartening court. She had been old when the Northmen brought her to the city after the War of the Two Queens, and now her body was like a long ivory pole about which they had draped the faded purple gown of her predecessor. On it was supported a very small head which looked as if it had been partly scalped, partly burned, and partly starved to death in a cage suspended above the Gabelline Gate. One of her eyes was missing. She sat on an old carved wooden throne with iron wheels, in the middle of a tall limewashed room that had five windows. Nobody knew where she had come from, not even the Northmen whose queen she had replaced. Her intelligence never diminished. At night the servants heard her singing in a thin whining voice, in some language none of them knew, as she sat among the ancient sculptures and broken machines that are the city's heritage.

Ignace Retz was ushered in to see her by the same courtiers who had led him down to the fight. They bowed to Mammy Vooley and pushed him forward, no longer bothering to disguise the contempt they felt for him. Mammy Vooley smiled at them. She extended her hand and drew Retz down close to her bald head. She stared anxiously into his face, running her fingers over his upper arms, his jaw, his scarlet crest. She examined the bruises Practal had left on the side of his head. As soon as she had reassured herself he had come to no harm, she pushed him away.

'Has my champion been successful in defending my honour?' she asked. When she spoke, lights came on behind the windows, revealing dim blue faces which seemed to repeat quietly whatever she said. 'Is the man dead?'

Immediately Retz saw he had made a mistake. He could have killed Practal, and now he wished he had. He wondered if she had been told already. He knew that whatever he said the courtiers would tell her the truth, but to avoid having to answer the question himself he threw Practal's mail shirt on the floor at her feet.

'I bring you his shirt, ma'am,' he said.

She looked at him expressionlessly. Bubbles went up from the mouths of the faces in the windows. From behind him Retz heard someone say,

'We are afraid the man is not dead, your Majesty. Retz fought a lazy match and then hamstrung him by a crude trick. We do not understand why, since his instructions were clear.'

Retz laughed dangerously.

'It was not a crude trick,' he said. 'It was a clever one. Some day I will find a trick like that for you.'

Mammy Vooley sat like a heap of sticks, her single eye directed at the ceiling.

After a moment she seemed to shrug. 'It will be enough,' she said remotely. 'But in future you must kill them, you must always kill them. I want them killed.' And her mottled hand came out again from under the folds of her robe, where tiny flakes of limewash and damp plaster had settled like the dust in the convoluted leaves of a foreign plant. 'Now give me the weapon back until the next time.'

Retz massaged his ear. The power knife had left some sort of residue inside his bones, some vibration which made him feel leaden and nauseated. He was afraid of Mammy Vooley and even more afraid of the dead, bluish faces in the windows; he was afraid of the courtiers as they passed to and fro behind him, whispering together. But he had made so many enemies down in the Low City that tonight he must persuade her to let him keep the knife. To gain time he went down on one knee. Then he remembered something he had heard in a popular play, *The War with the Great Beetles*.

'Ma'am,' he said urgently, 'let me serve you further! To the south and east lie those broad wastes which threaten to swallow up Viriconium. New empires are there to be carved out, new treasures dug up! Only give me this knife, a horse, and a few men, and I will adventure there on your behalf!'

When tegeus-Cromis, desperate swordsman of *The War with the Great Beetles*, had petitioned Queen Methvet Nian in this manner, she had sent him promptly (albeit with a wan, prophetic smile) on the journey which was to lead to his defeat of the Iron Dwarf, and thence to the acquisition of immense power. Mammy Vooley only stared into space and whispered, 'What are you talking about? All the empires of the world are mine already.'

For a second Retz forgot his predicament, so real was his desire for that treasure which lies abandoned amid the corrupt marshes and foundering, sloth-haunted cities of the south. The clarity and anguish of his own hallucination had astonished him. 'Then what will you give me?' he demanded bitterly. 'It is not as if I failed you.'

Mammy Vooley laughed.

'I will give you Osgerby Practal's mail shirt,' she said, 'since you have spurned the clothes I dressed you in. Now – quickly! – return me the weapon. It is not for you. It is only to defend my honour, as you well know. It must be returned after the combat.'

Retz embraced Mammy Vooley's thin, oddly articulated legs and tried to put his head in her lap. He closed his eyes. He felt the courtiers pull him away. Though he kicked out vigorously they soon stripped him of the meal-coloured cloak – exclaiming in disgust at the whiteness of his body – and found the ceramic sheath strapped under his arm. He thought of what would happen to him when the Locust Clan caught him defenceless somewhere among the ruins at Lowth, or down by the Isle of Dogs where his mother lived.

'My lady,' he begged, 'lend me the knife. I will need it before dawn -'

But Mammy Vooley would not speak to him. With a shriek of despair he threw off the courtiers and pulled the knife out. Leprous white motes floated in the cold room. The bones of his arm turned to paste.

'This is all I ever got from you,' he heard himself say. 'And here is how I give it you back, Mammy Vooley!'

With a quick sweep of the knife he cut off the hand she had raised to dismiss him. She stared at the end of her arm, and then at Retz: her face seemed to be swimming up towards his through dark water, anxious, one-eyed, unable to understand what he had done to her.

Retz clasped his hands to his head.

He threw down the weapon, grabbed up his belongings, and – while the courtiers were still milling about in fear and confusion, dabbing numbly at their cloaks where Mammy Vooley's blood had spattered them – ran moaning out of the palace. Behind him all the dim blue lips in the throne-room windows opened and closed agitatedly, like disturbed pond life.

Outside on the Proton Way he fell down quivering in the slushy snow and vomited his heart up. He lay there thinking.

Two years ago I was nothing; then I became the Queen's champion and a great fighter; now they will hunt me down and I will be nothing again. He stayed there for twenty minutes. No one came after him. It was very dark. When he had calmed down and the real despair of his position had revealed itself to him he put on Osgerby Practal's clothes and went into the Low City, where he walked about rather aimlessly until he came to a place he knew called the Bistro Californium. He sat there drinking lemon gin until the whistling began and his fear drove him out on to the streets again.

It was the last hour before dawn, and a binding frost had turned the rutted snow to ice. Retz stepped through an archway in an alley somewhere near Line Mass Quays and found himself in a deep narrow courtyard where the bulging housefronts were held apart by huge balks of timber. The bottom of this crumbling well was bitterly cold and full of a darkness unaffected by day or night; it was littered with broken pottery and other rubbish. Retz shuddered. Three sides of the courtyard had casement windows; the fourth was a blank, soot-streaked cliff studded with rusty iron bolts; high up he could see a small square of moonlit sky. For the time being he had thrown his pursuers off the scent. He had last heard them quartering the streets down by the canal. He assured himself briefly that he was alone and sat down in a doorway to wait for first light. He wrapped his woollen cloak round him.

A low whistle sounded next to his very ear. He leapt to his feet with a scream of fear and began to beat on the door of the house.

'Help!' he cried. 'Murder!'

He heard quiet ironic laughter behind him in the dark.

Affiliates of the Locust Clan had driven him out of the Artists Quarter and into Lowth. There on the familiar hill he had recognised with mounting panic the squawks, shrieks, and low plaintive whistles of a dozen other factions, among them Anax-Hermax's High City Mohocks, the Feverfew Anschluss with their preternaturally drawn-out 'We are all met', the Yellow Paper Men, and the Fifth of September – even the haughty mercenaries of the Blue Anemone. They had waited for him,

their natural rivalries suppressed. They had made the night sound like the inside of an aviary. Then they had harried him to and fro across Lowth in the sleety cold until his lungs ached, showing themselves only to keep him moving, edging him steadily towards the High City, the palace, and Mammy Vooley. He believed they would not attack him in a private house, or in daylight if he could survive until then.

'Help!' he shouted. 'Please help!'

Suddenly one of the casements above him flew open and a head appeared, cocked alertly to one side. Retz waved his arms. 'Murder!' The window slammed shut again. He moaned and battered harder at the door while behind him the piercing whistles of the Yellow Paper Men filled the courtyard. When he looked up, the timber balks were swarming with figures silhouetted against the sky. They wanted him out of the yard and into the city again. Someone plucked at his shoulder, whispering. When he struck out, whoever was there cut him lightly across the back of the hand. A moment later the door opened and he fell through it into a dimly lit hall where an old man in a deep blue robe waited for him with a candle.

At the top of some stairs behind the heavy baize curtain at the end of the hall there was a large room with stone floor and plastered white walls, kept above the freezing point by a pan of glowing charcoal. It was furnished with heavy wooden chairs, a sideboard of great age, and a lectern in the shape of an eagle whose outspread wings supported an old book. Along one wall hung a tapestry, ragged and out of keeping with the rest of the room, which was that of an abbot, a judge, or a retired soldier. The old man made Retz sit in one of the chairs and held the candle up so that he could examine Retz's scarlet crest, which he had evidently mistaken for the result of a head wound.

After a moment he sighed impatiently.

'Just so,' he said.

'Sir,' said Retz, squinting up at him, 'are you a doctor?' And, 'Sir, you are holding the candle so that I cannot see you.'

This was not quite true. If he moved his head he could make out an emaciated yellow face, long and intelligent-looking, the thin skin stretched over the bones like waxed paper over a lamp. 'So I am,' said the old man. 'Are you hungry?' Without waiting for an answer he went to the window and looked out. 'Well, you have outwitted the other wolves and will live another day. Wait here.' And he left the room.

Retz passed his hands wearily over his eyes. His nausea abated the sweat dried in the hollow of his back, the whistles of the Yellow Paper Men moved off east towards the canal and eventually died away. After a few minutes he got up and warmed himself over the charcoal pan, spreading his fingers over it like a fan, then rubbing the palms of his hands together mechanically while he stared at the lectern in the middle of the room. It was made of good steel, and he wondered how much it might fetch in the pawn shops of the Margarethestrasse. His breath steamed in the cold air. Who was the old man? His furniture was expensive. When he comes back, Retz thought, I will ask him for his protection. Perhaps he will give me the eagle so that I can buy a horse and leave the city. An old man like him could easily afford that. Retz examined the porcelain plates on the sideboard. He stared at the tapestry. Large parts of it were so decayed he could not understand what they were meant to show; but in one corner he could make out a hill and the steep path which wound up it between stones and the roots of old trees. It made him feel uncomfortable and lonely.

When the old man returned he was carrying a tray with a pie and some bread on it. Two or three cats followed him into the room, looking up at him expectantly in the brown, wavering light of the candle. He found Retz in front of the tapestry.

'Come away from there!' he said sharply.

'Sir,' said Retz, bowing low, 'you saved my life. Tell me how I can serve you.'

'I would not want a murderer for a servant,' replied the old man.

Retz bit his underlip angrily. He turned his back, sat down, and began to stuff bread into his mouth. 'If you lived out there you would act like me!' he said indistinctly. 'What else is there?'

'I have lived in this city for more years than I can remember,' said the old man. 'I have murdered no one.'

At this there was a longish silence. The old man sat with his chin on his chest and appeared lost in thought. The charcoal

pan ticked as it cooled. A draught caught the tapestry so that it billowed like a torn curtain in the Boulevard Aussman. The cats scratched about furtively in the shadows behind the chairs. Ignace Retz ate, drank, wiped his mouth; he ate more and wiped his mouth again. When he was sure the old man wasn't watching him he boldly appraised the steel eagle. Once, on the pretext of going to the window, he even got up and touched it.

'What horror we are all faced with daily!' exclaimed the old

man suddenly.

He sighed.

'I have heard the cafe philosophers say: "The world is so old that the substance of reality no longer knows quite what it ought to be. The original template is hopelessly blurred. History repeats over and again this one city and a few frightful events – not rigidly, but in a shadowy, tentative fashion, as if it understands nothing else but would like to learn."

'The world is the world,' said Ignace Retz. Whatever they

say.'

'Look at the tapestry,' said the old man.

Retz looked.

The design he had made out earlier, with its mountain path and stunted yew trees, was more extensive then he had thought. In it a bald man was depicted trudging up the path. Above him in the air hung a large bird. Beyond that, more mountains and valleys went away to the horizon. No stitching could be seen. The whole was worked very carefully and realistically, so that Retz felt he was looking through a window. The man on the path had skin of a yellowish colour, and his cloak was blue. He leaned on his staff as if he was out of breath. Without warning he turned round and stared out of the tapestry at Retz. As he did so the tapestry rippled in a cold draught, giving off a damp smell, and the whole scene vanished.

Retz began to tremble. In the distance he heard the old man say, 'There is no need to be frightened.'

'It's alive,' Retz whispered. 'Mammy Vooley -' But before he could say what he meant, another scene had presented itself.

It was dawn in Viriconium. The sky was a bowl of cloud with a litharge stain at its edge. Rain fell on the Proton Way where, supported by a hundred pillars of black stone, it spiralled up towards the palace. Halfway along this bleak ancient sweep of road two or three figures in glowing scarlet armour stood watching a man fight with a vulture made of metal. The man's face was terribly cut; blood and rain made a dark mantle on his shoulders as he knelt there on the road. But he was winning. Soon he rose tiredly to his feet and threw the bird down in front of the watchers, who turned away and would not acknowledge him. He stared out of the tapestry. His cheeks hung open where the bird had pecked him; he was old and grey-haired, and his eyes were full of regret. His lips moved and he disappeared.

'It was me!' cried Ignace Retz. 'Was it me?'

'There have been many Viriconiums,' said the old man. 'Watch the tapestry.'

Two men with rusty swords stumbled across a high moor. A long way behind them came a dwarf wearing mechanical iron stilts. His head was laid open with a wound. They waited for him to catch up, but he fell behind again almost immediately. He blundered into a rowan tree and went off in the wrong direction. One of the men, who looked like Ignace Retz, had a dead bird swinging from his belt. He stared dispiritedly out of the tapestry at the real Retz, took the bird in one hand, and raised it high in the air by its neck. As he made this gesture the dwarf passed in front of him, his stilts leaking unhealthy white gases. They forded a stream together, and all three of them vanished into the distance where a city waited on a hill.

After that men fought one another in the shadow of a cliff, while above them on the eroded skyline patrolled huge iridescent beetles. A fever-stricken explorer with despairing eyes sat in a cart and allowed himself to be pulled along slowly by an animal like a tall white sloth until they came to the edge of a pool in a flooded city. Lizards circled endlessly a pile of corpses in the desert.

Eventually Retz grew used to seeing himself at the centre of these events, although he was sometimes surprised by the way he looked. But the last scene was too much for him.

He seemed to be looking through a tall arched window, around the stone mullions of which twined the stems of an ornamental rose. The thorns and flowers of the rose framed a room where curtains of silver light drifted like rain between enigmatic columns. The floor of the room was made of cinnabar crystal and in the centre of it had been set a simple throne. Standing by the throne, two albino lions couchant at her feet, was a slender woman in a velvet gown. Her eyes were a deep, sympathetic violet colour, her hair the russet of autumn leaves. On her long fingers she wore ten identical rings, and before her stood a knight whose glowing scarlet armour was partly covered by a black and silver cloak. His head was bowed. His hands were white. At his side he wore a steel sword.

Retz heard the woman say clearly, 'I give you these things, Lord tegeus-Cromis, because I trust you. I would even give you a power knife if I had one. Go to the south and win great treasure for us all.'

Out of the tapestry drifted the scent of roses on a warm evening. There was the gentle sound of falling water, and somewhere a single line of melody repeated over and over again on a stringed instrument. The knight in the scarlet armour took his queen's hand and kissed it. He turned to look out of the window and wave as if someone he knew was passing. His black hair was parted in the middle to frame the transfigured face of Ignace Retz. Behind him the queen was smiling. The whole scene vanished, leaving a smell of damp, and all that could be seen through the rents in the cloth was the plaster on the wall.

Ignace Retz rubbed his eyes furiously. He jumped up, pulled the old man out of his chair, clutched him by the upper arm, and dragged him up to the tapestry.

'Those last things!' he demanded. 'Have they really happened?' 'All queens are not Mammy Vooley,' said the old man, as if he had won an argument. 'All knights are not Ignace Retz. They have happened, or will.'

'Make it show me again.'

'I am only its caretaker. I cannot compel it.'

Retz pushed him away with such violence that he fell against the sideboard and knocked the tray off it. The cats ran excitedly about, picking up pieces of food in their mouths.

'I mustn't believe this!' cried Retz.

He pulled the tapestry off the wall and examined it intently,

as if he hoped to see himself moving there. When it remained mere cloth he threw it on the floor and kicked it.

'How could I live my life if I believed this?' he asked himself. He turned back to the old man, took him by the shoulders and shook him.

'What did you want to show me this for? How can I be content with this ghastly city now?'

'You need not live as you do,' said the old man. 'We make the world we live in.'

Retz threw him aside. He hit his head on the sideboard, gave a curious angry groan, and was still. He did not seem to be dead. For some minutes Retz lutched distractedly to and fro between the window and the wall where the tapestry had been, repeating, 'How can I live? How can I live!' Then he rushed over to the lectern and tried to wrench the steel eagle off it. It would be daylight by now, out in the city; they would be coughing and warming their hands by the naphtha flares in the Tinmarket. He would have a few hours in which to sell the bird, get a horse and a knife, and leave before the bravos began hunting him again. He would go out of the Haunted Gate on his horse, and go south, and never see the place again.

The bird moved. At first he thought it was simply coming loose from the plinth of black wood on which it was set. Then he felt a sharp pain in the palm of his left hand, and when he looked down the thing was alive and struggling powerfully in his grip. It cocked its head, stared up at him out of a cold, violent eye. It got one wing free, then the other, and redoubled its efforts. He managed to hold on to it for a second or two longer, then, crying out in revulsion and panic, he let go and staggered back, shaking his lacerated hands. He fell over something on the floor and found himself staring into the old man's stunned china-blue eyes.

'Get out of my house!' shouted the old man. 'I've had enough of you!'

The bird meanwhile rose triumphantly into the air and flapped round the room, battering its wings against the walls and shrieking, while coppery reflections flared off its plumage and the cats crouched terrified underneath the furniture.

'Help me!' appealed Retz. 'The eagle is alive!'

But the old man, lying on the floor as if paralysed, set his lips and would only answer,

'You have brought it on yourself.'

Retz stood up and tried to cross the room to the door at the head of the stairs. The bird, which had been obsessively attacking its own shadow on the wall, promptly fastened itself over his face, striking at his eyes and tearing with its talons at his neck and upper chest. He screamed. He pulled it off him and dashed it against the base of the wall, where it fluttered about in a disoriented fashion for a moment before making off after one of the cats. Retz watched it, appalled, then clapped his hands to his bleeding face and blundered out of the room, down the narrow staircase, and out into the courtyard again. He slammed the door behind him.

It was still dark.

Sitting on the doorstep, Retz felt his neck cautiously to determine the extent of his injuries. He shuddered. They were not shallow. Above him he could still hear the trapped bird shrieking and beating its wings. If it escaped it would find him. As soon as he had stopped bleeding he backed shakily away across the courtyard and passed through the arch into a place he did not know.

He was on a wide, open avenue flanked by ruined buildings and heaps of rubble. Meaningless trenches had been dug across it here and there, and desultory fires burned on every side. Dust covered the broken chestnut trees and uprooted railings. Although there was no sign at all of dawn, the sky somehow managed to throw a curious filmy light over everything. Behind him the walled courtyard now stood on its own like a kind of blank rectangular tower. He thought he was still looking at the old man's tapestry; he thought there might have been some sort of war in the night with Mammy Vooley's devastating weapons: he didn't know what to think. He started to walk nervously in the direction of the canal, then run. He ran for a long time but could not find it. Acres of shattered roof tiles made a musical scraping sound under his feet. If he looked back he could still see the tower; but it got smaller and smaller, and in the end he forgot where to look for it.

All through that long night he had no idea where he was, but he felt as if he must be on a high plateau, windy and covered completely with the dust and rubble of this unfamiliar city. The wind stung the wounds the bird had given him. The dust pattered and rained against the fallen walls. Once he heard some kind of music coming from a distant house – the febrile beating of a large flat drum, the reedy fitful whine of something like a clarinet – but when he approached the place it was silent again, and he became frightened and ran off.

Later a human voice from the ruins quite near him made a long drawn out ou lou lou lou, and was answered immediately from far off by a howl like a dog's. He fled from it between the long mounds of rubble, and for a while hid in the gutted shell of a cathedral-like building. After he had been there for about an hour, several indistinct figures appeared outside and began to dig silently and energetically in the road. Suddenly, though, they were disturbed; they all looked up together at something Retz couldn't see, and ran off with their spades. While this was going on he heard feet scraping around him in the dark. There was a deep sigh. Ou lou lou sounded, shockingly close, and he was alone again. They had examined him, whoever they were, and found him uninteresting.

Towards the dawn he left the building to look at the trench they had dug in the road. It was shallow, abortive, already filling up with grey sand. About a mile away he found a dead man hidden by a corner of masonry that stood a little over waist high.

Retz knelt down and studied him curiously.

He lay as if he had fallen while running away from someone, his limbs all askew and one arm evidently broken. He was heavily built, dressed in a loose white shirt and black moleskin trousers tied up below the knees with red string he had on a fish-head mask, a thing like a salmon with blubbery lips, lugubrious popping eyes, and a crest of stiff spines, worn in such a way that if he had been standing upright the fish would have been staring glassily into the sky. Green ribbons were tied round his upper arms to flutter and rustle in the wind. Beside him where he had dropped it lay a power knife from which

there rose, as it burned its way into the rubble, a steady stream of poisonous yellow motes.

They had taken off his boots. His naked white feet were decorated with blue tattoos which went this way and that like veins.

Retz stared down at him. He climbed on to the wall and looked thoughtfully both ways along the empty road. Whatever place the old man and the bird had consigned him to, it would have its Mammy Vooley. Ten minutes later he emerged from behind the wall dressed in the dead man's clothes. They were too large, and he had some trouble with the fish head, which stank inside, but he had tied on the red string and the ribbons, and he had the knife. By the time he finished all this dawn had come at last, a lid of brownish cloud lifted back at its eastern rim on streaks of yellow and emerald green, revealing a steep hill he had not previously seen. It was topped with towers, old fortifications, and the copper domes of ancient observatories. Retz set off in the direction the trench-diggers had taken. 'Shroggs Royd' announced the plaques at the corners of the demolished street: 'Ouled Nail'. Then: 'Rue Sepile'.

That afternoon there was a dry storm. Particles of dust flew about under a leaden sky.