

Michael Alexander: The Children's Crusade

THE FANTASY & SCIENCE FICTION

MAY/JUNE

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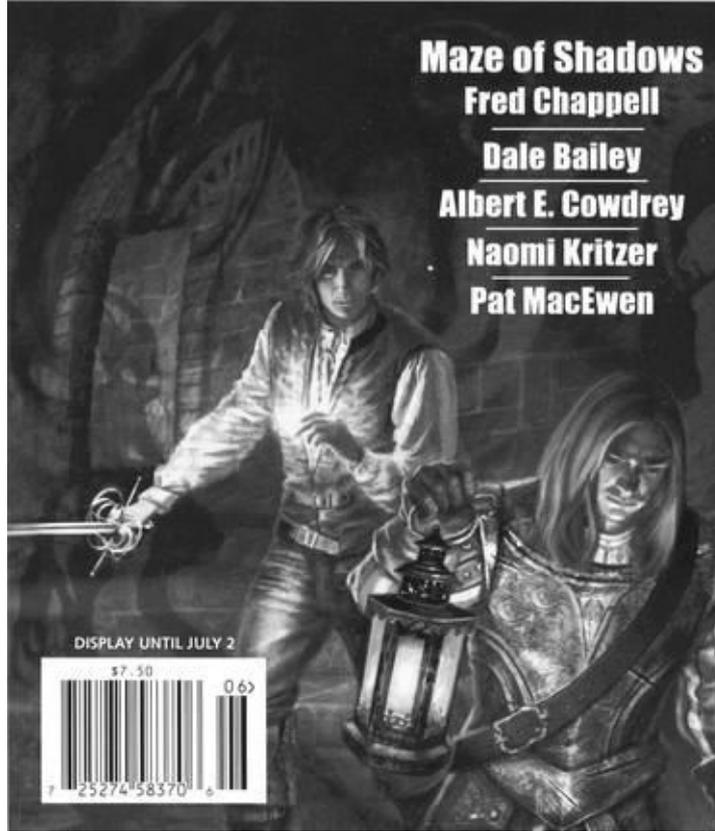
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Maze of Shadows

By Fred Chappell | 25100 words

Fred Chappell's many books include the novels I Am One of You Forever and Dagon and the collections More Shapes Than One and Ancestors and Others. A native of North Carolina, he taught for many years at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro. His tales of Falco the apprentice shadow master began appearing in our magazine in the March 2007 issue. We're pleased to bring you the latest.

1.

"YOU HAVE TOLD ME," MAESTRO Astolfo said, "that you and Mutano made safe the emptied chateau of the baron, Tyl Rendig, that you mounted shadows in his halls and disposed them along his corridors and hung them about his stairways and massed them in cellars and storerooms. You wagered a gold eagle that no thief could get into the innermost room and take what was placed there. Do I recall your words aright?"

"You do," I said.

"And do you recall the valuable that you set upon the marble chessboard in the center of a close, dim room?"

"A ring of silver, it was, with an onyx medallion set in pierced silver."

He stepped to the door of this, the smaller library, and opened the door. There entered a tall, long-faced, gaunt man with a scanty white beard. In his right hand he held a worn staff that stood to the height of his ear and his left hand rested upon the shoulder of a girl. She appeared to be about fourteen years of age and was pale as the winter moon. They were dressed in beggars' threadbare robes, the girl wearing an undershift of coarse white linen. The old man wore sandals; she was barefoot and visibly cold. Her expression was strange and haunted, her dark eyes large in her pale face. Whatever her glance rested upon she gazed at fixedly, as if trying to comprehend its purpose.

"You have heard me speak in time past of my friend the Signor Veuglio and know of his skills in ministering to diseases and ruptures of mind and spirit among the wealthy and the indigent of the city. I have told you of many kindnesses he has performed without reward. Friend Veuglio, wilt'ou please show to my man Falco that bauble?"

The girl disengaged and stepped before me, gazing wide-eyed into my face. Veuglio reached into his sleeve, withdrew the object, and held it in his open palm. When I raised my eyes to his, I saw that they looked past me, not responding. They were gray, clear and bright, but the man was blind.

"Tell, Falco," the maestro said. "Doth he present the ring that you and Mutano hid away?"

I hardly glanced, knowing the answer. "It appears very similar."

"Take it up. Examine closely. Let us try to be certain."

I sighed and took the ring from the old fellow's steady palm. This nettlesome prelude was designed to shame me. If the ring were not the same, this exercise would have no point. "I believe it to be the same."

"How can it be? You and Mutano claimed to have set in place a maze of shadows no intruder could penetrate. Yet Signor Veuglio saith he entered the chateau, walked almost directly to the ring, and came away with it. Is that not so?"

"It is." His voice was firmer and more vibrant than I could have expected in so old a man.

"Now, Falco?"

"Shadow mazes are designed to deceive the eyes. Signor Veuglio, being blind, must have developed faculties that enable him to evade such entrapments. That would not be the case with your ordinary thief."

"Ordinary—meaning that other thieves will possess the use of eyes?"

"The most of 'em," I said.

"Yet may not a person having sound eyesight so discipline himself as to acquire such abilities as our guest possesses? If so, then he too could find his way."

I thought. "Perhaps so," I admitted, "though this feat would require a long and arduous course of discipline. The thief must not be impatient to come at his prize."

"Do you think that you and our other man, Mutano, could acquire such abilities?"

"Mutano is missing from our villa for two days now," I said, "and I shall not venture to answer for him. As for myself, I think that with time and proper instruction I might attain some of these skills, though never any so keenly honed as Signor Veglio's. He must have been without sight for many a season."

"Only three years sightless," he said. "Even so, you would not pay so dear a price. Three years blind seemeth a much longer term."

"Let us make trial," Astolfo said. "Falco, come forth to the signor so that he may examine you."

I stepped to the blind man and he ran his fingers lightly over my face and along the sleeve of my dun tunic. He touched my right hand and then withdrew his. The whole time of his touching me did not consume the space of ten breaths.

"Tell us somewhat of Falco," Astolfo said.

"He is a well-formed jack," said Veuglio, "though not so young these days as he pictures in his fancy. He trims his beard closely so that it will show less gray. He carries a brawn that bespeaks the labors of the field and his accent still bears a rustic note. He has been in your employ here in Tardocco for a longish period, arriving directly from a farm southward. He will disport him in expensive finery; only the tailor Gambe-Casserta keeps such close-woven bolts in stock. Yet though he dresses bravely, he keeps company in low taverns and stews, as the smells upon him declare. His bearing is easy and confident; I do not hear him shift about in his boots or twitch his fingers in the air. So I conclude that he is a swordsman of no common practice."

"Falco?" said Astolfo.

"His describing is just," I said, "insofar as I can judge of myself."

"Essay a little further," Astolfo said.

Veuglio paused for a moment, then spoke hesitantly. "There is a certain contradiction in the timbre of his voice. It seemeth complaisant, but beneath sounds a

subdued hint of mockery. I might name him as one who desires the learning that his master Astolfo has gained and yet is skeptical of its final value."

"Falco?"

"I cannot know how fine is the accuracy of what the signor says," I replied. "Yet I shall not deny his account, for I felt a little abashed as he spoke. He must have pointed up a truth or other I do not wish to own to."

"Very good," Astolfo said. "Now give me back my medallion ring before it is lost to you again."

I handed it over, thinking how he had risked a costly ring merely to display my shortcoming.

The maestro rose from the big soft-leather chair by the fireplace. He was dressed in his wonted outfit of a green jerkin over tan trunks supported by his broad belt with its leopard's-head buckle. He hunched his shoulders and flexed his hands, then slid the ring into an inner pocket. "Our guests are to sup with us this night," he continued, "so I had better acquaint you. Veuglio I have known for many a season. We have undertaken a number of ventures together during which I learned a great deal. You will find him a man of various skills and acute probity. His assistant we call by the name of his daughter Sibylla."

The tall, bony man made a slight, grave bow. When he took his hand from Sibylla's shoulder, she bobbed in an awkward, childish curtsy, never shifting her gaze from my face. I bowed too, though I judged the gesture lost on a blind man, and muttered a polite acknowledgment.

"It will be well for Mutano to dine with us also," Astolfo said. "I believe that he and thee have much to learn from our guests."

"I know not where he may be," I replied. "As I say, he is two days absent. He must have some private affair in hand."

"Our meal is six hours distant," Astolfo said. "See if you cannot search him out. I will have the servants show our guests to quarters and I will speak to our surly cook in regard to the meal. I take it, friend Veuglio, that you still abstain from the eating of flesh?"

"My diet is spare," he said, "but I think that Sibylla may well have tired of roots and herbs and pulse and may welcome a fatter refreshment."

She did not respond to this comment. All this while, she had been staring at me and Astolfo in a most fixed manner and her gaze did not waver when her name was spoken.

"I will have a word with Iratus who prides himself on his sallets as well as on his haunch steaks."

"We are obliged," said Veuglio.

"I too have some business in hand," Astolfo said. "And so, fare well until that hour."

As he left the library, a maidservant entered to escort the blind man and the girl through the corridors to the east wing of the villa and I went away to wander the town.

DRAWN ON A MAP, the city of Tardocco presents a shape something like a chestnut leaf with stem upward. This main stem might represent the River Daia, flowing from various sources in the northward Malvorio Mountains through the center of the town

which spreads from it in all directions. The veins that trace out from the main stem might represent the streets and avenues, while the tiny veinlets might figure as the web of alleyways and narrow corridors through which donkey carts and handcarts and barrows transport stuffs from the loading docks where ships of every kind ride at anchor.

Along the upper edges of this figurative leaf will be the graceful, tree-lined avenues where the houses of the grand perch across the rise that looks down upon the less peaceful parts. The houses become less prosperous as one descends, and in the center of the town a network of busy streets is interrupted at points by spacious plazas, many of which encircle small green parks attractive to lovers and to nursemaids with their charges. The nethermost area is an extended belt that sweeps alongside the bow-shaped harbor and here lie the fiddlers' greens, the greasy taverns, the cockpits and bullrings and fighting-dog kennels, the brothels and flea markets and warehouses and tun cellars. Here there be snatchpurses, ratkillers, coneycatchers, footpads, cloak-twitchers, and drunken soldiers and their chuckaroos.

There is one large area a little westward of the center of the city where wide, crossing boulevards enclose tall-treed estates, and at this point of the city stands Astolfo's villa, as proud in its posture as are the houses of the wine merchants, counting-house proprietors, and well-eagled military commanders which are its neighbors. I hold it a matter of some pride that this villa was built upon the traffic of shadows. It is ever a wonder to me that so much material bulk rests upon so insubstantial a base. Many of those who hold that shadows are but flimsy next-to-nothings, objects little worth consideration, contribute weightily to our coffers by their commerce with umbrae, no matter how smug their protestations.

I had only the barest suspicion where Mutano had betaken himself. In late days he had become more and more despondent, sinking into dark moods that allowed him little of his accustomed cheeriness. I supposed that his disposition might have soured because our enterprise with our Dark Vale shadow-devouring plants was not thriving. Then there was the problem of his voice. He had lost his own voice to the machinations of a foe and it had been supplanted with the voice of a cat. For two long seasons now he had been confined to a cattish dialect. I had learned to comprehend much of it, though I could speak little. The meowing and growling and purring that rose from his throat were bound to try his patience most sorely, and the burden of the feline tongue must soon undermine his naturally sanguine temperament.

The thought had come to me late yestere'en, as I visited a tavern where Mutano and I used often to repair for long tankards of a wheaten beer we relished, that my colleague might be engaged in trying to recover his own voice. He was formerly possessed of a fine tenor, as clear in timbre and nimble in music as a clarino; 'twas an asset in which he took a justified pride and with which he could ardently woo beauty after beauty, supposing each successive one to be a paragon of virtue and modesty and of an ideal comeliness of carcass. A number of bitter disappointments had not halted his quest for his dreamed-of female, but the loss of voice had caused a hiatus.

To our best, last knowledge Mutano's proper voice was lodged within a great orange cat named Sunbolt. This was a feline peremptory of manner, cool of address, and casually unimpressed with humankind. It would be inaccurate to say that Sunbolt ever belonged to a master, but for a long while he had kept company with a

swaggering bravo who suffered a painful humiliation at Mutano's hands and afterward had departed Tardocco to take up, as 'twas rumored, the life of a celibate hermit. Sunbolt was now lost to sight and it was undecided whether that cat kept in his possession Mutano's tuneful voice.

Yet he would try to seek out the orange cat, methought. 'Twould seem a futile essay, Tardocco being a well-catted town, its gentry fond of the feline race and its harbor alleyways plentifully furnished with dark nooks and crannies, wharf rats and mice and scavenging sparrows. A man might spend his life and discover one particular cat no sooner than he would light upon a true sapphire in a street-seller's jewel stock. Even so, desperation is a sharp urgement to enterprise, and Mutano had shown the signs of a desperate man, pacing about nervily, meowing raggedly to himself, and displaying a short temper over such trifles as a misplaced dagger sheath.

He was no featherbrain; he would not roam the pavements. There are two thriving catteries in Tardocco and I assumed he would inquire of them first of all and then ask among the well-known fanciers of the breeds.

At the end of an alley off Chandlers' Lane stood the establishment of Brotero, who captured, trained, and fed cats he let out for hire. Ratkillers they were, bred to the trade and prepared to live up to their brave repute. The rats of the harbor environs are often as large as good-sized terrier dogs and just as eager for combat. A flock of them can in two nights despoil half a cargo of wheat, eat into a bale of silk and hollow out a foul nest, and the ruin they will make of a bin of green pears is as unsightly as it is inedible.

Dogs made much less effective opponents than cats, for they were not sufficiently fleet to keep up when the rats darted along high rafters or wriggled into narrow holes. Rats could pinch their bodies so as to squirm through apertures hardly larger than keyholes; yet when they stood to fight, their bulks swelled like bakers' loaves rising in an oven. An especially hot-blooded rat would not scruple to attack a man, first giving warning with a tooth-baring snarl.

This rat, though, would be no match for Brotero's cats, for he had trained them to work in pairs in ordinary circumstances and in packs when the odds grew large against them. A pair sent to extirpate a champion rodent would consist of a large, deep-chested, yellow-eyed, brawny beast accompanied by a small, lithe, spring-spined specimen, in shape something like a stoat. The large cats Brotero named Maulers; the lesser, swifter sort were Worriers. These harried the big rat flank and tail while the Mauler braced his enemy froward.

If an edifice such as a granary or molasses warehouse were being overrun with the pestilent species, Brotero would stage full raids upon the premises, loosing a good two dozen cats of each size within the walls and letting them scour the walls and niches and crannies rat-less. These squealing, growling, gut-spattered wars made fine spectacle and Brotero gained copper by charging admission and brokering wagers.

Sunbolt, the object of Mutano's quest, bulked not large enough to work as a Mauler nor did he own the quick responses of a Worrier. Falling between the two types, he would not be enlisted in Brotero's armies, but the wily ratter could have intelligence of him. 'Twas rumored he knew of every cat in Tardocco the name, the pedigree, and the abilities; and it was whispered he even knew the secret names of many, the names which, given in antiquity by forgotten gods, passed down through each lineage from the times of primal darkness.

Of Sunbolt, however, he could tell me little. He rubbed his spraggle, gray moustache with a forefinger and peered up into my face. He was a slight, restless, narrow-shouldered knave whose corpus throbbed and jerked with tics and twitches. He resembled much more the prey of his animals than the cats themselves.

"There must be uncommon value in this Sunbolt," he said. "Two others have asked already. One was your amicus, that Mutano fellow."

"Who was the other?"

"He claimed to be a steward for a noble, a Baron Somebody. I forget."

"You spoke with Mutano?"

"He spoke and I with difficulty made out his meaning, though I think that someone not well acquainted with cats might find the trick impossible."

"He chooses to converse in the feline tongue. I know not why."

"Nay-nay. 'Twas evident he had no choice in the matter. I conjecture that Sunbolt hath purloined his language. That is a thing that occurs with very young childer, but it is nigh unheard of among those come of age. Your Mutano appeared to be of about forty years."

"He is on the trace of the cat Sunbolt and I trace the steps of the cat-speaking man. Otherwise, I know naught."

"As he departed, methought his way led toward the house of Nasilia three streets over. Fortune might show a fairer countenance at her cattery. Here our employment is useful and necessary. Nasilia's business may tend more conformable to his—and to yours. For I know that the two of you hire to the shadow-thief Astolfo. But mine is an honest trade and forthright."

"Then long may you thrive," said I, "and I am grateful for your words."

But as I came away, going to Nasilia's place, I reflected that Brotero lacked the physic and comportment of a hearty man of business. His manner was more that of someone you might trust to filch your purse while performing before you his agitated little dance of tics and quivers.

Nasilia's establishment was a squat building with yellow walls of baked clay and a roof of dark red tile, but for all its brightness of color, it appeared sad, with an air of mute misery. I had visited here before, in company with Astolfo when I was early with him. In this place cats were slaughtered to get at the musk pouches. We are closely associate with perfumers, shadows lending influence to scent in countless ways. Nasilia, whose specialties were of the heavier sort wherein muskery was most utilized, was one client for our darker shadows, hues tempering from light mauve to deep purple to the blackness of a midnight grave.

I was long in coming to distinguish such shades of odor. At the beginning, I could smell only the gross corpus, as 'twere, of a perfume and had to spend many hours in a shuttered room, wafting scents to my nose with a poplar-leaf fan, before I learned how a perfume too suggestive of clove can be lightened and freshened by tincturing it with shadow taken from the boughs of an apple tree in bloom; or how a perfume delicate as the scent of an early spring rose may be given keener interest by storing it a fortnight in violet umbrae, from which it will gain force of contrast.

I learned a little too of the character of women, having my suppositions stripped from me by example. The older woman does not always prefer the stronger scent; if

she go forth in a dark blue gown, she may tease the senses of males by wearing a perfume as light in texture as the smell of white clover. If a maiden trip about gaily in a white frock bedecked with intricate frills, she may put on the scent of a red, red rose that has stood a while in magenta shadow, bringing an unexpected contrast to her visual appearance.

Such combinations of scent and shade have been the study of fashion since ever the first female enwrapped herself with cloth. In Astolfo's libraries thick catalogues of scents and shades, herbs and humors, stand ready on the shelves and are often consulted. A man or woman who fancied the possibility of taking up a vocation in shadows will soon discover that it consists of a great deal more than snippery and sharp sundering.

The knocker of Nasilia's door was of heavy iron shaped like a cat's curled tail. I rapped with it seven times before the door was opened by a tall, broad-shouldered woman wearing a leathern apron over a stiff white linen smock. An almost visible cloud of cloying scent boiled out of the dark room behind her, and I stepped back unthinkingly, just as I would avoid the puddle-splash of a passing carriage.

"You are Falco," the woman said. Her voice resounded as if it proceeded from an empty rain barrel. When I admitted to this truth, she told me that my unintelligible friend Mutano had already paid a call here and, receiving no news to his liking, had traveled on.

"Did he chance to say—"

"He did not and I did not stay to ask. I desire no close acquaintance with your unsavory sort, O stealer of shadows."

"And what may you be called?"

"I am Maronda, chiefest assistant to Nasilia, a woman justly famous in the perfume trade."

"You are Maronda, murderess of helpless pussies," I said. "Let not the black iron pot malign the polished brass kettle."

"A fine polish it is your sport. Know you, Falco, that my brother lost his shadow to such a thief as you. He wasted nigh to nothingness before I could afford to replace it."

"What is your brother's name?"

"He was named Quinias and hath been called Quinny since childhood."

"Does he suspicion some person or other?"

"He believes that it was taken from him at a tavern, The Double Hell. Other than that, he can say nothing."

"If you had applied to Maestro Astolfo, we could have aided in his restoration. We provide many similar services which tend to the good of the citizenry."

"Well, he is hale once more, all praise to Asclepius. And now I have no more to do with thee." She clapped to the heavy door, sealing in the musken, unseen fog that had enveloped us.

I went from that place desirous of a river to plunge into, to wash away the smells that I thought must hang upon me like a woolen cloak. Since no river conveniently presented itself, I thought to repair nearby to The Red Stallion, where a tapster named Giorgio would furnish a basin of clean water and a tankard of clear white wine.

So he did, and I carried the basin into the courtyard where a stout bench was set

under a spreading white oak and laved my face and beard and then rinsed and finger-combed my hair as best I could before returning the basin and seating myself at a table. I inhaled the fresh, green-grape smell of the wine and imbibed it in tiny sips, savoring its cleanliness. I had got through a good half of the tankard before discovering that the large fellow at the table in the dim far corner of the room was the man I sought.

I might not have recognized him had I not been seeking. And though he looked directly at me, he seemed not to know me; he seemed, in truth, to take no notice of his surroundings. He sat staring in a black melancholic trance, his gaze fixed upon a moteless point in empty space, his mind sunken in cloudy thought. When I rose to approach him, his eyes did not follow me and when I spoke, he gave a little start before responding.

"Ah, Falco." He spoke cat speech.

"You seem in a dumpish state, old comrade."

"I have grown tired of this world as it corkscrews. Naught keeps its savor in these drear days."

"So I have heard report. I have followed in your track and your despondency hath been remarked."

"You followed me?"

"You have been sent for."

"By Maestro Astolfo?"

"There is a toil afoot," I said and delivered a brief account of the visit of Veuglio and the girl Sibylla. "As you would expect, he is an old crony of Astolfo's. The girl is new to me. They are to share salt with us this evening and we must be present to receive instruction."

"I have no stomach for food nor instruction neither. I have mine own ends to pursue."

"You seek the cat that beareth your voice in its body. I have asked about this beast where you did and received the same empty result."

"I shall not leave off. I detest this cattish tongue I am forced to use. The sound of it curdles my belly juices. It sounds even worse when you essay to use it, as you are doing now."

"I had thought I was finding the custom of it—the music, so to speak."

"If you spoke as born to it, it would still be an ugly brangle, barbarous in every vowel."

"Well, we must away to the villa. The sun hath passed its mid-afternoon mark."

"You shall, if you please, convey my regrets."

"I dare not," I said. "The maestro is already displeased with us for leaving our task at the chateau unfulfilled."

"How so? We took meticulous pains. All was in order."

"This Veuglio marched through our snares, traps, mazes, and dead ends with less trouble than walking through cobweb."

"Then," said he, rising to his feet, "I should like to meet this signor and to learn of him."

AT TABLE, Mutano appeared in a better state than he had in *The Red Stallion*. There

his slovenliness of dress matched his bedraggled spirit, but now he was scrubbed and brushed and combed and togged in a dark green tunic new to my eyes. I had been studious of my ablutions also, washing away the musky perfumes that had engulfed me at the cattery door. I had no doubt, however, that Veuglio would detect the smell of that establishment.

Of the food I made little account, it being fleshless, fowl-less, and fishless. I dutifully made my way through groats, pulse, three different porridges, and an undistinguished cheese. Mutano and I refreshed us plentifully with flagons while Veuglio and Sibylla drank water. The both of our guests fed themselves somdel like herons a-fishing; they sat unmoving for intervals and then would dart their hands into the bowls and platters and take up victual with their fingers. This practice was convenable to blindness, methought, but the girl followed it also.

For a long time there was small converse. If Astolfo had not undertaken a long tale of a princess who had lent her beautiful shadow to a homely lady-in-waiting, silence would have immersed the large dining room with its carmine drapery and ornate silver candlesticks.

At last Astolfo too fell silent and Mutano redoubled his attack upon the wine cellar; and then Sibylla spoke: "It is of no use, Signor Mutano, to try to lave from memory the face of a beloved with drink."

Mutano did not reply but only stared upon this white, thin girl as if she had shied one of the candlesticks at him. She gazed at him steadily with her haunted eyes.

I was alert upon the instant. The child was correct. Why had I not thought how my friend's despair proceeded from the fact that his fancy had lit upon a new beauty while he had not the means of speech to declare his passion, much less to ornament it with poems and songs after his custom?

Who his adored one was, I could not know and it made small difference. In his usual course of love, Mutano would charm some beauty fair of form, delicate of manner, and refined of taste. He would worship her as acolytes of the Moon or of the Spring Goddess worship. Then he would discover that she was no more than a woman like many another, and his adoration would turn into indifference and the sweetness of his dreaming hours to bitter ashes. He had followed this path unchanging some seven or eight times I had knowledge of, and it was likely there had been others of whom he had kept silent.

Now Sibylla had divined his secret and, though it explained much to me about his late comportment, I knew it could not alter Mutano's cast of mind. He would try to regain his voice and if successful would pay devoted court to this unknown female, waylaying her with ballads and springing sonnets upon her as from an ambuscado. She was likely to be burdened with violets and near drowned in roses until some coarse expression flew from her lips or some act of petty treachery betrayed her inmost character. Then my wide-shouldered colleague would sit in heartsore solitude and his ballads would turn acrid and his sugared sonnets degenerate into satires.

This latter stage I secretly welcomed, for his angry lines held four times the wit and savor of his amatory mewling.

"As for Mutano's capacity for wine," I replied to the girl, "there you need not fear. I have seen him down goblets by the dozen without showing effect."

The old man spoke. "What is not shown without wreaketh more direly within. Yet

let that pass and tell how you and he sought to set safeguards upon the baron's chateau with your placement of shades."

I looked to Astolfo, not willing to share the secrets of our trade without his permission. He remained impassive, so I followed my own discretion. "It is difficult to describe. 'Twould be easier and more instructive to demonstrate."

I rose from my place, took up a candelabrum, set it at the end of the table, and advanced to the edge before it. "If a man walk along a corridor with light behind him, he will swerve to a new direction when he sees upon the wall before him the shadow of a mastiff large enough to tear out his throat." With my hands before the candle flame I projected such a shape on the wall. With the fingers of my left hand curled to represent a shaggy mass, I placed my right fist in that palm, wrist bent to form a plausible leonine face. I sounded a growl low in my throat.

Sibylla giggled lightly, but Veuglio frowned. "This is nonsense," he said. "You must be making a shadow-play of the hands that does not deceive even the children whom it amuses. It is lost upon me, though I know what you are doing."

"You must recall the circumstances," I replied. "You are a thief whose life hangs in the balance. You hardly know this dark corridor by daylight and not at all by night. Your senses are over-wary and you fear making the softest sound. Of a sudden on the wall before you appeareth the shape of a lion. You are in a state of mind easily to be misled."

I bent back my wrist so that the lion head lifted and then bent it forward so that the shape fell. There sounded a heavy knocking upon timber. An expression of puzzlement crossed the girl's face.

"What you have taken to be the shadow of an animal was only that of a sculpted door knocker," I said.

"'Twas your accomplice, Signor Mutano, rapping the underside of the table," Veuglio said.

"True, but your young assistant was taken in, though fleetingly."

"She hath the disadvantage of being able to see. It has betrayed her more times than two."

"If all the world were as you, friend Veuglio," said Astolfo, "my table would lack sorely. No one would buy my wares."

"Do not the olden philosophers declare that most men are in my case, blind and without true understanding?" Veuglio said.

"The sages are glad to point out the failings of others," Astolfo said. "Upon the subject of sightlessness, they are wont to say that all who shun their particular wisdom are blind."

"Tomorrow Signor Veuglio will accompany Mutano and me to Baron Rendig's chateau," I said, "and there he will point out to us our failings in regard to the guarding of the treasure, whatever thing it may be. We saw nothing precious there but the ring we ourselves had placed. Can we not let the matter lie until then and strike upon another theme?"

"Perhaps we shall enjoy to have music," said Veuglio. "Sibylla hath a singular voice for tune."

"Let us hear her sing," I said. "What music, child, dost thou know?"

"I have five songs," she said. "'The Dolours of the Faithful Knight,' 'The Ballad of

the Unjustly Hanged,' 'The Queen Who Would and Yet Would Not,' and 'How Jason Came Home from the Thirsty Land.'"

"What is the other?"

"The fifth I do not sing and hope that I never shall."

"Thy choice, then," I said.

She sang out in a fine, thin voice like the trembling of a silver wire: "O Jason was a brave seafarer, And none was fairer than he...."

Forty verses this song entrained and they were sufficient to send us to a bed each and all.

2.

The commission upon which Mutano and I had labored at the baron's chateau was on a vastly different scale from most of our undertakings. Here we did not dispose dribs of shadow to the allurements of Signorina Millifiore's bosom nor tapered curlicues of hued shade to the ringlets of her coiffure. Large spaces confronted us, walls and ceilings and, of our most particular concern, floors. Stairs we studied and corridors and the great drains of courtyard and kitchen and stables. We investigated the two wells, Mutano letting me halfway down on ropes. We traveled the upper stories with their dim hallways and the under-roof space where a pair of red owls nested. The cellars and larders we went through and we made everywhere extensive notes and sketches.

The edifice contained three secret chambers; these were small, windowless, silent rooms hardly furnished at all. One was located off a dank cellar corridor; a shabby little oaken door that looked as if it would open to a little-used storage space was sheathed with steel plate on the inside. This door guarded a room not much larger than the fireplace in Astolfo's main library. In the center of this room stood a small, sturdy table with a low stool beside. The table was bare, but on the single wall shelf opposite sat a short pewter candleholder. It was empty, but three dirty candle stubs lay beside it, along with flint and steel and a tinderbox.

There was another secluded room like this one on the second floor, and on the third and uppermost floor, still another. These doors looked most ordinary, but they too were steel-sheathed, as if shabby tables and dingy candle-ends were handsome treasures.

The one other appurtenance for each room was a small stoneware bowl set unobtrusively in a corner. Mutano lifted one to his nose. "It hath held cow cream," he said.

This then was the domicile we were to protect from intruders and thieves by arranging and disposing everywhere our deceptive shadows. Baron Rendig would not set a troop of guards in his house. He seemed to rate this unknown treasure so precious that he could trust no one to stay by it. Other systems of trapdoors, tripping wires, suspended broadaxes, and the like had proved as ineffective as the shadow-mazes Mutano and I had set in place.

I thought it a useless exercise to go with Veuglio through the chateau. He and Sibylla had already traveled this house before, as he said, and had come to the secret rooms without being misled. That had been in the dark o' the night, and they had walked as stealthy as any jewel thief. He told us that the girl held a lantern before them

as they walked.

"What aid can a lantern lend a blind man?" I asked.

"So that if there be others in the house they may recognize who we are and offer no impediment," he said. "Your Maestro Astolfo advised the baron I would be making a midnight trial of the shadow-tangle to prevent my being taken for a thief, my cranium battered and my guts run through."

"Very well," I said. "We have brought one of our lanterns from our botanical workroom and Sibylla must carry it just as she did at midnight, though it is now only forenoon. I will walk beside her to see how you wend your way and Mutano shall follow thee."

"Let us begin," he said and made straightway for a set of steep stone steps that led to the cellar passageway. I had to go smartly to keep pace with the old man.

Here was a tedious chore and an abashment. When we had completed our commission at this chateau, Mutano and I surveyed our work with no small pride. We had laid shadows athwart shadows and overlaid these with others. A thief who trusted to his eyes would find that an oblong darkness he took to be a corridor was a swift exit to the stony floor below; this passageway that opened to the upper balcony was actually an adit to the empty void around a parapet; that slant of light ahead that promised admission to the largest bedchamber was actually a slanted and shadow-applied mirror that would send one tumbling down a flight of breakneck stairs.

One deception in which we took particular pride presented the sight of a gauzy curtain wafting in the breeze at a casement. Yet it was the rippling umbra of the surface of a stream that we had excised from the underside of a bridge and hung beside the large drain that fell two stories to a rock-ribbed culvert. To step through that imagined window was to step to a painful death.

Many another ingenious illusion we had set in corners, at doorways, inside closets, and along galleries, and Veuglio and Sibylla passed by or through or about each one, finding sure footing at every step. He located each of the three secret rooms, advanced to their small tables, and felt his way to sit upon the stools. In the last one he said, "I detect the smell of tallow, but there is no candleholder on this table."

"The holder with the four stubs beside it sits in a shelf behind you," I told him.

"Ah," he said, nodding.

"And now this exercise is completed. Will you return to the villa?" I said.

"Yes. I am beginning to tire."

We were concluded here for the time, I thought, but just as we were exiting the courtyard gate, Mutano gave a quick *mrrr* and spun round in his tracks and lifted his head to look at the overhanging balcony. On top of the balustrade there sat a great orange cat looking down upon us with piercing gaze. Mutano returned this gaze steadily for a moment before following us outside and pulling shut the wide gate. I saw that he was excited but was trying not to show his agitation.

That cat, I said to myself, must be Sunbolt, the beast within which Mutano's true voice was lodged.

I did not mention my conjecture for a time, thinking it preferable to let Mutano broach the subject, if he desired. We were sitting in the east garden of the villa on a willow-wood bench beneath a great holly tree, nibbling at stalks of orchard grass,

having been denied access to the new beer in the larder by our contrarious cook Iratus. Veuglio had declared that he needed rest and he and Sibylla took to their neighboring rooms.

I spoke to Mutano in his cattish language. "Proof that our network of shadows may yet be efficacious is that there were no servants in the chateau. We have not yet given the baron our plan of the traps, and without it, servants would be tumbling down stairways like barrels and dropping off balconies like walnuts from trees."

"It may be that he will reside there almost alone," Mutano said. "He claims no near kin. He seems to live in such fear of losing his treasure that he will abide no other company."

"He is of no ordinary make," I said. "I have conceived a curiosity about this treasure. What is so precious to a man that he will give over a chateau to contain its secret? Its worth is not to be valued in silver."

"Something touching his very life, is't?"

"It will be of value perhaps only to himself and of little interest to your ordinary thief. But if so, why will he need such protection? We must know more of this baron. What have you heard rumored?"

"Little," Mutano said. "I have not inquired directly, but when he is mentioned, a wariness creeps into the tone of the chat. Some of the lanes and byways know of him and show a fearfulness. He has a troop of armed men who obey his direction. I should call them disciplined and merciless. None of them goes alone to carouse and they do not speak to others than themselves. I have heard darker hints, yet they are but wisps."

"We will follow further. I should also like to know whether Veuglio is the only person with skill in the avoidance of our measures. I am puzzled by his art."

"Some things we may surmise," Mutano said. "Being blind, he is much aware of the differences in the heats o' th' air, the changes in coolth from one place to another. He will also feel the pressures of draughts upon his skin that you and I are oblivious to. Odors he readeth and, as we well know, every kind of shadow bears its own smell."

"All true. Yet mass them all together and they do not account. He and the girl trotted through our mazes and around our pitfalls as if led by the hand."

"You walked by his side through the chateau, but I walked behind and could see the shadows of the pair. Sibylla's umbra it was that informed him of perils."

"Her shadow?"

"I observed clearly that it swiftly recoiled, drawing close to her body when she approached a doubtful spot. At this recoilment, she changed the direction of her going so swiftly and smoothly 'twas difficult to see. Also, her shade would stretch out before her or to either side, as if a light were lowered beside her corpus. The look of it was somdel like a dog sniffing the soil on the trace of a boar."

"He receives intelligence from her shadow?"

"So I believe. At first, I thought this stretching and withdrawing to be illusory, but after watching closely, I was convinced that it is a truth. The thought came to me that this ability might be common to the shades of those who guide blind men, for I have seen them make remarkable turns and recognitions, so cleverly done that they are hardly noticeable."

"As have I. Todow, the blind juggler in Daia Plaza, can distinguish by touch one silver eagle from another though they be minted in the same hour."

"And I thought, as we traced through the hallways, that perhaps for such guides their shadows act as do whiskers on a cat, to guard and guide them in the dark. But 'tis more than that. Some communication passes."

"If such does take place and we could bring to light the nature of it—"

"This theme has much occupied Astolfo of late," Mutano said. "I have suspicioned he hath in hand a momentous project he does not yet unfold to us."

"If shadows had motion and power of thought, they could be led to act. Imagine us, under Astolfo's direction, commanding an army of umbrae. If the girl's shadow spoke in some wise to Veuglio, that is what the maestro desired for us to observe," I said.

He rose and began to make a circuit of the garden, stalking along slowly. I walked beside but kept silent, not wishing to disturb his course of thought. He spoke as if to himself, his feline sounds softened to a near purr, regular and studied. "I have a hard notion. If we could learn the speech and custom of shadows, we could no longer buy and sell and alter their shapes and inner natures. Such cruelties must not be laid upon volitional beings."

"Animals are such beings," I said, "and yet may be brought under our sway."

"Not all of them. The lion, the pard, the python do not bend to my will."

"Nor did your mount, Defender, when first you encountered him. But by patient stages, the two of you have sealed a silent pact from which the both of you obtain much good."

"Yet we do things to animals that perhaps we should not. This thought hath plucked at my mind of late."

"You lost your voice to the cat Sunbolt," I said, "and since that time you have had to speak in the tongue of cats. This has drawn you close to animals. You do not look upon them now as you used to do."

He stopped walking and did not reply for a space. Then he spoke in a tone almost mournful: "That is true."

"And if I mistake not, you saw this Sunbolt at the chateau, perched upon a battlement."

"I saw a cat."

"And I saw the change of your countenance. You shall not dissemble with me."

"It was the one called Sunbolt. But I do not know if he still possesses my voice. I was surprised to see him there, alone upon the parapet. And the thought of him is strange, alone in the chateau, all those rooms empty, including the kitchens and larders that were stocked with only a jug or two of cream. Sunbolt walks a lonely patrol, inhabiting there almost alone."

"Except when the baron and his occasional manservant are present," I said.

"'Tis but another puzzle. We know of houses, chateaux, and even of fortified castles built for the purpose of protecting treasures. Many princes and other nobles have built strong houses in which to lock up their gold and other baubles. Many a house has been constructed to keep a female chastely under key. The Lady Aichele has constructed a curious lattice-walled garden that only she could enter and in it planted the rarest of her many, far-brought plants. But what this baron secludes away, I cannot surmise, for the places most secure within his chateau are mean, dusty little rooms that would not dignify a hound turd."

"We will visit again," I said. "We shall go stealthily and observe what it is like when we are unknown to it. And we shall recover your voice from that cat who can get no good out of it in any way."

"He may find little use for it, but it is not likely he will willingly yield it up," Mutano said. His tone was as glum as a pallbearer's cloak.

"But I have formed a scheme," I said, "and you shall hear it at length."

In truth, I had formed several schemes that had to be joined in overlapping fashion, like tiles on a roof, to be effective. As I outlined the steps, Mutano shook his head slowly, his expression a study in doubtfulness. "This plan you propose is more a maze than our shadow-tangle in the chateau."

"A maze through which a blind man made easy progress," I said. "Let us go at methodical pace, a step at a time. First, if a man were to have his shadow stolen in a tavern called The Double Hell, can we conjecture who the thief might be?"

"'Tis not a dishonest house," he said, "yet sometimes the sly-fingered Mercurius awaits his prey therein. Even so, The Double Hell is where the unskilled go to dice their fortunes away. Thieving, being unnecessary, is uncommon."

"I shall return to the musk-house of Nasilia and speak to the keeper of the door, the woman called Maronda. I shall tell her that I have discovered the culprit responsible for the loss of her brother's shadow. I shall tell her that I will deliver this person to her in return for a vial of the most alluring musk she has in store from a female cat in heat. This vial will cost us a silver eagle, or at least a handful of coppers."

"This suits not."

"Suit it must, if you are to regain your voice. Unless we are willing to part with a little coin, she may not credit our story."

"For what purpose, this vial of musk?"

"We will come to that. During the while that I arrange with Maronda, you are to take the largest of our lanterns from our herbage workshop, polish the mirror inside it to highest degree of clarity, and make certain the shutter works easily and quickly. We must be able to prepare the lantern to emit the narrowest and sharpest of rays and then to snap shut upon the instant."

"I will do as you say," Mutano replied, "but if this flimsy web you weave ravel under your hand, you must replace my coin."

"Well," I said.

3.

THERE IS A STRANGENESS about a great deserted house like the baron's chateau; the emptiness speaks a light sadness to the senses, a kind of longing like that of a young wife, perhaps, whose husband is at sea. The hollowness of such an edifice in this early hour of the night caused me to fancy that if one would strike it on the farther wall with a club the whole of it would resound like a kettledrum.

We needed to enter no farther than the courtyard. Before coming, I had sketched out a hasty diagram showing that we would place our vial of musk, embedded in a nest of velvet, close to the projecting wall that presented the great doorway to the entrance hall. We would station us behind the corner there, out of the cat's line of sight, and

trust that the attraction of the musk would mask our presence.

The device worked as I had hoped. We unstopped the vial and waited patiently as the hour grew longer and darker until at last we could make out the shape of Sunbolt in a lower window and hear him drop from it to the flagstones. We sensed more than observed his progress to the vial and then, just as he halted at the velvet-cloaked tube, I flickered open the shutter of the lantern. Sunbolt's shadow was starkly limned on the wall behind him. Mutano withdrew from his dark nook and sundered the shadow and clapped it into a dark, plush portmanteau.

Sunbolt gave a quick yowl of outrage, profane beyond human capacity, and sped away behind the chateau walls.

Now we had the cat's shadow in our possession and came away to the villa feeling that our task had been neatly accomplished.

We ate, slept, and amused ourselves till past noon of the following day, then returned with light hearts to the chateau. There we sat ourselves on the bench by the well curb and waited for Sunbolt to greet us.

"How shall we manage this exchange?" Mutano asked.

"First, you had best engage in conversation," I said, "for we have not yet heard him speak. It may be that he has lost the use of your voice or that it has been taken from him. Then tell him that we will return his shadow if he will but say a word or two into that device that captured your voice in the beginning." The box with the enclosed, many-curled, membranous trumpet sat on the stones before us. I nudged it with my toe.

"I lack skill in trading," he said.

"'Tis a simple exchange. You have there the device within which your voice was imprisoned before. You have but to persuade the cat to speak into it, and later you may restore it to your own body at your leisure. I doubt not that you shall spout odes and bellow ardent arias within the fortnight."

"I pray it go so easy as you portray."

"He will be wary of the two of us together. I shall withdraw to the farther bench and you shall make your bargain."

As I spoke, Sunbolt appeared from behind an arcade column directly across. He ambled slowly toward us, pausing now and again to display an attitude of nonchalance by sitting and washing his paws and ears and underbelly. This cat carried himself with a posture that proclaimed he knew his worth and held it considerable. If he were a man, he might play the role of a youngish sea captain with a ready and playful sword.

I gave him a courteous nod, then strolled to the yonder bench and sat.

Though the day was mild and sunny with the fleece of milk-white clouds floating here and there in the bluest of skies, the atmosphere of this large, open courtyard, with its marble well curb in the center and its narrow arcade that promised coolness, appeared drab and dispirited, its air in keeping with the general disposition of the chateau. The light fell openly upon Mutano and Sunbolt as they conferred, yet it seemed to me that they stood at a distance farther than the one where they were situated; 'twas almost as if I were reading about them in an old romance poem.

Mutano sat leaning forward, elbows resting upon his knees. He peered into the space before him and took notice of Sunbolt only when the cat crossed his line of