

young vergil
and the wizard

by Avram Davidson

This is the last unpublished short story by Avram Davidson, one of America's great literary fantasists. It tells of an event in the youth of the Mage Vergil, the main character in Avram's lifework, the Vergil Magus stories.

As he was staring at the bottoms of the weathered planks of the moss-encrusted, ragged-eaten door, a foot or so beneath the level of the turfy ground, the door sank as it were backwards: what dread feet he saw, then! At once his eyes flew upwards. Swift, his thought-mind told him, "This is a particularly hideous old man dressed up as a particularly hideous old woman!" In a second, he changed his opinion at once. Later, some, he was to conclude that he had at first been right. More than this, or other than this, he did not for a much longer time suspect.

Getting up his courage to proöde, perceiving certain several things a-hand beside the door, he was in an instant both startled and afeared. But for an instant only: then he relaxed, recognizing them for the masks, simulate faces, which some clever hands were wont to make for this festival, this play, or that; sometimes out of painted cloth, sometimes out of cloth and scraps of trash-parchment glued together, sometimes out of untanned leather, sometimes out of leather, tanned. They were dreadfully like. They stank dreadfully, too.

Down to the door. As in some long-familiar tale, told whilst peeling chestnuts round the winter fire, had "he rapped on the warlock's door and the door opened instantly—" "*—as though someone were standing right behind it?*" "*—as though someone were standing right behind it!*" "*—and a voice spoke, saying—?*" "*—and a voice, spoke, saying—*" But he had instantly forgotten those kitchen congregations and their well-familiar stories. The door had not so much as creaked even a little, on its leathern hinges; he was canny enough to test by the easiest method some sticky traces found afterwards adhering to his clothing; for "with taste and scent, no argument," and taste and scent reported them to have been made by neat's-foot oil. No magic, no sorcery; next to the pressings of the olive itself, or bread or wine, could there be a more common domestic substance? What witchery was here? None; what suspicion of alien herbs or of leaves or fruits of trees growing by Rivers Lethe, Abana, Oxus, or what-so-far-off sites and streams? None, not one.

The person glared at him

