

THE MAN WHO STOLE THE MOON

(A Story of the Flat Earth)

Tanith Lee

Tanith Lee (tribute website: www3.sympatico.ca/jim.pattison) lives in the south of England. She is one of the leading fantasy and horror writers of the last three decades. Her first professional sale was to The Ninth Pan Book of Horror Stories (1968), and, in 1971, Macmillan published The Dragon Hoard, a children's novel, followed by Animal Castle, a children's picture book, and Princess Hynchatti & Some Other Surprises, a short story collection (both 1972). After receiving numerous

rejections from British publishers for her adult fantasy novel The Birthgrave, she wrote a letter of inquiry to DAW Books, the American publishing firm founded by well-known science fiction fan and editor Donald A. Wolheim. DAW published The Birthgrave in 1975, beginning a relationship that lasted until 1989 and saw the publication of 28 books altogether. Among her most famous works is the series of fantasy stories of Flat Earth, collected in Night's Master (1978), Death's Master (1979), Delusion's Master (1981), Delirium's Mistress (1986), and Night's Sorceries (1987).

"The Man Who Stole the Moon," a Flat Earth story, appeared in Weird Tales, where Lee is a frequent contributor, and which continues a distinguished tradition of publishing fantasy and supernatural horror going all the way back to 1923. In the tradition of Clark Ashton Smith, this is a powerful story of a thief and lover, an overreaching demon, and a magical world of evil.

As so often, from an idea by John Kailne.

Several tales are told concerning the Moon of the Flat Earth. Some say that this Moon, perhaps, was a hollow globe, within which lay lands and seas, having even their own cool Sun. However, there are other stories.

One evening, Jaqir the accomplished thief rose from a bed of love and said to his mistress, "Alas, sweetheart, we must now part forever." Jaqir's mistress looked at him in surprise and shook out her bright hair. "You are mistaken. My husband, the old merchant, is miles off again, buying silk and other stuff, and besides suspects nothing. And I am well satisfied with you."

"Dear heart," said Jaqir, as he dressed his handsome self swiftly, "neither of these things is the stumbling block to our romance. It is only this. I have grown tired of you."

"Tired of me!" cried the lady, springing from the bed.

"Yes, though indeed you are toothsome in all respects. I am inconstant and easily bored. You must forgive me."

"Forgive you!" screamed the lady, picking up a handy vase.

Jaqir ducked the vase and swung nimbly out of the high window, an action to which he was quite accustomed, from his trade. "Although a deceiver in my work, honesty in my private life is always my preferred method," he added, as he dropped quickly down through the vine to the street below. Once there he was gone in a flash, and just in time to miss the jar of piddle the lady that moment upended from the window.

However, three of the king's guard, next second passing beneath, were not so fortunate.

"A curse upon all bladders," howled they, wringing out their cloaks and hair. Then looking up, they beheld the now no-longer mistress of Jaqir, and asked her loudly what she meant by it.

"Pardon me, splendid sirs," said she. "The befoulment was not intended for you, but for that devilish thief, Jaqir, who even now runs through that alley there toward a hiding place he keeps in the House of the Thin Door."

At the mention of Jaqir, who was both celebrated and notorious in that

city, the soldiers forgot their inconvenience, and gave instant chase. Never before had any been able to lay hands on Jaqir, who, it was said, could steal the egg from beneath a sleeping pigeon. Now, thanks to the enragement of his discarded lover, the guard knew not only of Jaqir's proximity, but his destination. Presently then they came up with him by the House of the Thin Door.

"Is it he?"

"So it is, for I have heard, when not in disguise, he dresses like a lord, like this one, and, like this one, his hair is black as a panther's fur."

At this they strode up to Jaqir and surrounded him.

"Good evening, my friends," said Jaqir. "You are fine fellows, despite your smell."

"That smell is not our own, but the product of a night-jar emptied on us. And the one who did this also told us where to find the thief Jaqir."

"Fate has been kind to you. I will not therefore detain you further."

"No, it is you who shall be detained."

"I?" asked Jaqir modestly.

But within the hour he discovered himself in chains in the king's dungeons.

"Ah, Jaqir," said he to himself, "a life of crime has taught you nothing. For have the gods not always rewarded your dishonesty—and now you are chastised for being truthful."

Although of course the indifferent, useless gods had nothing to do with any of it.

A month or so later, the king got to hear that Jaqir the Prince of Thieves languished in the prison, awaiting trial.

"I will see to it," said the king. "Bring him before me."

So Jaqir was brought before the king. But, despite being in jail, being also what he was, Jaqir had somehow stolen a gold piece from one jailor and gifted it to another, and so arrived in the king's sight certainly in chains, but additionally bathed, barbered, and anointed, dressed in finery, and with a cup of wine in his hand.

Seeing this, the king laughed. He was a young king and not without a sense of the humorous. In addition, he knew that Jaqir, while he had stolen from everyone he might, had never harmed a hair of their heads, while his skills of disguise and escape were much admired by any he had not annoyed.

“Now then, Prince of Thieves, may a mere king invite you to sit? Shall I strike off your chains?” added the king.

“Your majesty,” said one of the king’s advisers, “pray do not unchain him, or he will be away over the roofs. Look, he has already stolen two of my gold rings—and see, many others have lost items.”

This was a fact. All up and down the palace hall, those who had gathered to see Jaqir on trial were exclaiming over pieces of jewelry suddenly missing. And one lady had even lost her little dog, which abruptly, and with a smile, Jaqir let out of an inner compartment in his shirt, though it seemed quite sorry to leave him.

“Then I shall not unchain you,” said the king. “Restore at once all you have filched.”

Jaqir rose, shook himself somewhat, and an abundance of gold and gems cascaded from his person.

“Regrettably, lord king, I could not resist the chance to display my skills.”

“Rather you should deny your skills. For you have been employed in my city seven years, and lived like the prince you call yourself. But the punishment for such things is death.”

Jaqir’s face fell, then he shrugged. He said, “I see you are a greater thief, sir, than I. For I only presume to rob men of their goods. You are bold enough to burgle me of my life.”

At that the court made a noise, but the king grew silent and thoughtful. Eventually he said, “I note you will debate the matter. But I do not believe you can excuse your acts.”

“There you are wrong. If I were a beggar calling for charity on the street you would not think me guilty of anything but ill luck or indigence. Or, if I were a seller of figs you would not even notice me as I took the coins of men in exchange for my wares.”

“Come,” said the king. “You neither beg nor sell. You thief.”

“A beggar,” said Jaqir, “takes men’s money and other alms, and gives nothing in return but a blessing. Please believe me, I heap blessings on the heads of all I rob, and thank them in my prayers for their charity. Had I begged it, I might, it is true, not have received so great a portion. How much nobler and blessed are they then, that they have given over to me the more generous amount? Nor do they give up their coins for nothing. For what they buy of me, when it is *I* who steal from them, is a dramatic tale to tell. And indeed, lord king, have you never heard any boast of how they were robbed by me?”

The king frowned, for now and then he had heard this very thing, some rich noble or other reciting the story of how he had been despoiled of this or that treasure by the nimble Jaqir, the only thief able to take it. And once or twice, there were women, too, who said, “When I woke, I found my rings were gone, but on my pillow lay a crimson rose. Oh, would he had stayed a while to steal some other prize.”

“I am not,” declared Jaqir, “a common thief. I purloin from none who cannot afford the loss. I deduct nothing that has genuine sentimental or talismanic weight. I harm none. Besides, I am an artist in what I do. I come and go like a shadow, and vanish like the dawn into the day. You will have been told, I can abstract the egg of a pigeon from beneath the sleeping bird and never wake it.”

The king frowned deeply. He said, “Yet with all this vaunted knack, you did not, till today, leave my dungeons.”

Jaqir bowed. “That was because, lord king, I did not wish to miss my chance of meeting you.”

“Truly? I think rather it was the bolts and bars and keys, the numerous guards—who granted you wine, but not an open door. You seem a touch pale.”

“Who can tell?” idly answered pale Jaqir.

But the king only said, “I will go apart and think about all this.” And so he did, but the court lingered, looking at Jaqir, and some of the ladies and young men came and spoke to him, but trying always not to get near enough to be robbed. Yet even so, now and then, he would courteously hand them back an emerald or amethyst he had removed from their persons.

Meanwhile the king walked up and down a private chamber where, on pedestals of marble, jewel-colored parrots sat watching him.

“He is clever,” said the king, “handsome, well mannered, and decorative. One likes him at once, despite his nefarious career. Why cast such a man out of the state of life? We have callous villains and nonentities enough. Must every shining star be snuffed?”

Then a scarlet parrot spoke to him.

“O king, if you do not have Jaqir executed, they will say you are partial, and not worthy to be trusted with the office of judge.”

“Yes,” said the king, “this I know.”

At this another parrot, whose feathers shone like a pale-blue sky, also spoke out. “But if you kill him, O king, men may rather say you were jealous of him. And no king must envy any man.”

“This is also apt,” said the king, pacing about.

Then a parrot spoke, which was greener than jade.

“O king, is Jaqir not a thief? Does he not brag of it? Set him then a test of thieving, and make this test as impossible as may be. And say to him, ‘If you can do this, then indeed your skill is that of a poet, an artist, a warrior, a prince. But if you fail you must die.’”

Then the king laughed again. “Well said. But what test?”

At that a small gray parrot flew from its pedestal, and standing on his shoulder, spoke in the king’s ear with a jet-black beak.

The king said, “O wisest of all my councilors.”

In the palace hall Jaqir sat among the grouped courtiers, being pleasant and easy with them in his chains, like a king. But then the king entered and spoke as follows:

“Now, Jaqir, you may have heard, in my private rooms four angels live, that have taken another form. With these four I have discussed your case. And here is the verdict. I shall set you now a task that, should you succeed at it, must make you a hero and a legend among men—which happy state you will live to enjoy, since also I will pardon all your previous crimes. Such shall be your fame then, that hardly need you try to take anything by

stealth. A million doors shall be thrown wide for you, and men will load you with riches, so astonishing will your name have become.”

Jaqir had donned a look of flattering attention.

“The task then. You claim yourself a paragon among thieves. You must steal that which is itself a paragon. And as you say you have never taken anything which may be really missed, on this occasion I say you will have to thief something all mankind shall miss and mourn.”

The court stood waiting on the king’s words. Jaqir stood waiting, perforce. And all about, as at such times it must (still must), the world stood waiting, hushing the tongues of sea and wind, the whispers of forests and sands, the thunder of a thousand voiceless things.

“Jaqir, Prince of Thieves, for your life, fly up and steal the Moon from the sky. The task being what it is, I give you a year to do it.”

Nine magicians bound Jaqir. He felt the chains they put on him as he had scarcely felt the other chains of iron, thinking optimistically as he had been, that he would soon be out of them.

But the new chains emerged from a haze of iridescent smokes and a rumble of incantations, and had forms like whips and lions, thorns and bears. Meeting his flesh, they disappeared, but he felt them sink in, painless knives, and fasten on his bones and brain and mind.

“You may go where you wish and do what you will and suffer nothing. But if you should attempt, in any way, to abscond, then you will feel the talons and the fangs of that which has bound you, wrapped gnawing inside your body. And should you persist in your evasion, these restraints shall accordingly devour you from within. Run where you choose, seek what help you may, you will die in horrible agony, and soon. Only when you return to the king, your task accomplished fully, and clearly proven, will these strictures lapse—but that at once. Success, success alone, spells your freedom.”

So then Jaqir was let go, and it was true enough, honesty being the keynote to his tale so far, that he had no trouble, and could travel about as he wanted. Nor did any idea enter his mind concerning escape. Of all he was or was not, Jaqir was seldom a fool. And he had, in the matter of his arrest, surely spent sufficient foolishness to last a lifetime.

Since he was *not* a fool, Jaqir, from the moment the king had put the bargain to him, had been puzzling how he might do what was demanded. In the past, many difficult enterprises had come Jaqir's way, and he had solved the problem of each. But it is to be remembered, on none of these had his very existence depended. Nor had it been so strange. One thing must be said, too, the world being no longer as then it was—Jaqir did not at any point contest the notion on the grounds that it was either absurd or unconscionable. Plainly sorcery existed, was everywhere about, and seldom doubted. Plainly the Moon, every night gaudily on show, might be accessible, even to men, for there were legends of such goings on. Thus Jaqir never said to himself, What madness have I been saddled with? Only: How can I effect this extraordinary deed?

So he went up and down in the city, and later through the landscape beyond, walking mostly, to aid his concentration. Sometimes he would spend the night at an inn, or in some rich house he had never professionally bothered but which had heard of him. And occasionally men did know of him to recognize him, and some knew what had been laid upon him. And unfortunately, the nicest of them would tend to a similar, irritating act. Which was, as the Moon habitually rose in the east, to mock or rant at him. “Aiee, Jaqir. Have you not stolen her *yet*?”

Because the Earth was then flat, the Moon journeyed over and around it, dipping, after moonset, into the restorative seas of chaos that lay beneath the basement of the world. Nor was the Moon of the Flat Earth so very big in circumference (although the size of the Moon varied, influenced by who told—or tells—the tales).

“What *is* the Moon?” pondered Jaqir at a wayside tavern, sipping sherbet.

“Of what is the Moon *made*?” murmured Jaqir, courting sleep, for novelty, in an olive grove.

“Is it heavy or light? What makes it, or she, glow so vividly? *Is* it a she? How,” muttered Jaqir, striding at evening between fields of silver barley, “am I to get hold of the damnable thing?”

Just then the Moon willfully and unkindly rose again, unstolen, over the fields. Jaqir presently lay down on his back among the barley stalks, gazing up at her as she lifted herself higher and higher. Until at length she reached the apex of heaven, where she seemed for a while to stand still,

like one white lily on a stem of stars.

“Oh Moon of my despair,” said Jaqir softly, “I fear I shall not master this riddle. I would do better to spend my last year of life—of which I find only nine months remain!—in pleasure, and forget the hopeless task.”

At that moment Jaqir heard the stalks rustling a short way off, and sitting up, he saw through the darkness how two figures wandered between the barley. They were a young man and a girl, and from their conduct, lovers in search of a secret bed. With a rueful nod at the ironies of Fate, Jaqir got up and meant to go quietly away. But just then he heard the maiden say, “Not here, the barley is trampled—we must lie where the stalks are thicker, or we may be heard.”

“Heard?” asked the youth. “There is no one about.”

“Not up in the fields,” replied the girl, “but down *below* the fields the demons may be listening in the Underearth.”

“Ho,” said the youth (another fool), “I do not believe in demons.”

“Hush! They exist and are powerful. They love the world by night, as they must avoid the daylight, and like moonlit nights especially, for they are enamored of the Moon, and have made ships and horses with wings in order to reach it. And they say, besides, the nasty magician, Paztak, who lives only a mile along the road from this very place, is nightly visited by the demon Drin, who serve him in return for disgusting rewards.”

By now the lovers were a distance off, and only Jaqir’s sharp ears had picked up the ends of their talk after which there was silence, save for the sound of moonlight dripping on the barley. But Jaqir went back to the road. His face had become quite purposeful, and perhaps even the Moon, since she watched everything so intently, saw that too.

Now Paztak the magician did indeed live nearby, in his high, brazen tower, shielded by a thicket of tall and not ordinary laurels. Hearing a noise of breakage among these, Paztak undid a window and peered down at Jaqir, who stood below with drawn knife.

“What are you at, unruly felon?” snapped Paztak.

“Defending myself, wise sir, as your bushes bite.”

“Then leave them alone. My name is Paztak the Unsociable. Be off, or I

shall conjure worse things—to attack you.”

“Merciful mage, my life is in the balance. I seek your help, and must loiter till you give it.”

The mage clapped his hands, and three yellow, slavering dogs leaped from thin air and also tried to tear Jaqir into bite-size pieces. But avoiding them, Jaqir sprang at the tower and, since he was clever at such athletics, began climbing up it.

“Wretch!” howled Paztak. And then Jaqir found a creature, part wolverine and part snake, had roped the tower and was striving to wind him as well in its coils. But Jaqir slid free, kicked shut its clashing jaws, and vaulted over its head onto Paztak’s windowsill.

“Consider me desperate rather than impolite.”

“I consider you *elsewhere*,” remarked Paztak with a new and ominous calm.

Next instant Jaqir found himself in a whirlwind, which turned him over and over, and cast him down at last in the depths of a forest.

“So much for the mage,” said Jaqir, wiping snake-wolverine, dog, and laurel saliva from his boots. “And so much for me, I have had, in my life, an unfair quantity of good luck, and evidently it is all used up.”

“Now, now,” said a voice from the darkness, “let me get a proper look at you, and see if it is.”

And from the shadows shouldered out a dwarf of such incredible hideousness that he might be seen to possess a kind of beauty.

Staring in awe at him then, from his appearance, and the fabulous jewelry with which he was adorned, Jaqir knew him for a Drin.

“Now, now,” repeated the Drin, whose coal-black, luxuriant hair swept the forest floor. And he struck a light by the simple means of running his talonous nails—which were painted indigo—along the trunk of a tree. Holding up his now flaming hand, the Drin inspected Jaqir, gave a leer and smacked his lips. “Handsome fellow,” said the Drin. “What will you offer me if I assist you?”

Jaqir knew a little of the Drin, the lowest caste of demonkind, who were

metalsmiths and artisans of impossible and supernatural ability. He knew, too, as the girl had said, that the Drin required, in exchange for any service to mortals, recompense frequently of a censorable nature. Nor did this Drin seem an exception to the rule.

“Estimable sir,” said Jaqir, “did you suppose I needed assistance?”

“I have no doubt of it,” said the Drin. “Sometimes I visit the old pest Paztak, and was just now idling in his garden, in chat with a most fascinating woodlouse, when I heard your entreaties, and soon beheld you hurled into this wood. Thinking you more interesting than the mage, I followed. And here I am. What would you have?”

“What would *you* have?” asked Jaqir uneasily.

“Nothing you are not equipped to give.”

“Well,” said Jaqir resignedly, “we will leave that for the moment. Let *me* first see if you are as cunning as the stones say.” And Jaqir thought, pragmatically, After all, what is a little foul and horrible dreadfulness, if it will save me death?

Then he told the Drin of the king’s edict, and how he, Jaqir the thief, must thieve the Moon.

When he had done speaking, the Drin fell to the ground and rolled amid the fern, laughing, and honking like a goose, in the most repellent manner.

“You cannot do it,” assumed Jaqir.

The Drin arose, and shook out his collar and loin-guard of rubies.

“Know me. I am Yulba, pride of my race, revered even among our demonic high castes of Eshva and Vazdru. Yulba, that the matchless lord, Azhrarn the Beautiful, has petted seven hundred times during his walkings up and down in the Underearth.”

“You are to be envied,” said Jaqir prudently. He had heard, too, as who had not who had ever heard tales about the demons, of the Prince of Demons, Azhrarn. “But that does not mean you are able to assist me.”

“Pish,” said the Drin. “It is a fact, no mortal thing, not even the birds of the air, might fly so high as the Moon, let alone any *man* essay it. But I am Yulba. What cannot Yulba do?”

Three nights Jaqir waited in the forest for Yulba to return. On the third night Yulba appeared out of the trunk of a cedar tree, and after him he hauled a loose, glimmering, almost-silky bundle, that clanked and clacketed as it came.

“Thus,” said the Drin, and threw it down.

“What is that?”

“Have you no eyes? A carpet I have created, with the help of some elegant spinners of the eight-legged sort, but reinforced with metals fashioned by myself. Everything as delicate as the wings of bees, strong as the scales of dragons. Imbued by me with spells and vapors of the Underearth, as it is,” bragged on the Drin, “the carpet is sorcerous, and will naturally fly. Even as far as the gardens of the stars, from where, though a puny mortal, you may then inspect your quarry, the Moon.”

Jaqir, himself an arch-boaster, regarded Yulba narrowly. But then, Jaqir thought, a boaster might also boast truthfully, as he had himself. So as Yulba undid the carpet and spread it out, Jaqir walked on there. The next second Yulba also bounded aboard. At which the carpet, with no effort, rose straight up between the trees of the forest and into the sky of night.

“Now what do you say?” prompted the Drin.

All the demon race were susceptible to flattery. Jaqir spoke many winning sentences of praise, all the while being careful to keep the breadth of the carpet between them.

Up and up the carpet flew. It was indeed very lovely, all woven of blue metals and red metals, and threaded by silk, and here and there set with countless tiny diamonds that spangled like the stars themselves.

But Jaqir was mostly absorbed by the view of the Earth he now had. Far below, itself like a carpet, unrolled the dark forest and then the silvery fields, cut by a river-like black mirror. And as they flew higher yet, Jaqir came to see the distant city of the king, like a flower garden of pale lights, and farther again, lay mountains, and the edges of another country. “How small,” mused Jaqir, “has been my life. It occurs to me the gods could never understand men’s joy or tribulation, for from the height of their dwelling, how tiny we are to them, less than ants.”

“Ants have their own recommendations,” answered Yulba.

But the Moon was already standing high in the eastern heaven, still round in appearance, and sheerest white as only white could be.

No command needed be given the carpet. Obviously Yulba had already primed it to its destination. It now veered and soared, straight as an arrow, toward the Moon, and as it did so, Jaqir felt the tinsel roots of the lowest stars brush over his forehead.

And what was the Moon of the Flat Earth, that it might be approached and flown about on a magic carpet? It was, as has been said, maybe a globe containing other lands, but also it was said to be not a globe at all, but, like the Earth itself, a flat disk, yet placed sidelong in the sky, and presenting always a circular wheel of face to the world. And that this globe or disk altered its shape was due to the passage of its own internal sun, now lighting a quarter or a half or a whole of it—or, to the interference of some invisible body coming between it and some other (invisible) light, or to the fact that the Moon was simply a skittish shape-changer, making itself now round, and now a sliver like the paring of a nail.

As they drew ever nearer, Jaqir learned one thing, which in the many stories is a constant—that heat came from the Moon. But (in Jaqir's story) it was an appealing heat, quite welcome in the chilly upper sky. Above, the stars hung, some of them quite close, and they were of all types of shape and shade, all brilliant, but some blindingly so. Of the closer ones, their sparkling roots trailed as if floating in a pond, nourished on some unknown substance. While below, the world seemed only an enormous smudge.

The Drin himself, black eyes glassy, was plainly enraptured by the Moon. Jaqir was caught between wonder and speculation.

Soon enough, the vast luminescence enveloped them, and the heat of the Moon was now like that of a summer morning. Jaqir estimated that the disk might be only the size of a large city, so in his story, that is the size of the Moon.

But Jaqir, as the carpet began obediently to circle round the lunar orb, gazed at it with a proper burglar's care. Soon he could make out details of the surface, which was like nothing so much as an impeccable plate of

white porcelain, yet here and there cratered, perhaps by the infrequent fall of a star. And these craters had a dim blue ghostly sheen, like that of a blue beryl.

When the carpet swooped yet nearer in, Jaqir next saw that the plate of the moon had actually a sort of landscape, for there were kinds of smooth, low, blanched hills, and here and there something which might be a carven watercourse, though without any water in it. And there were also strewn boulders, and other stones, which must be prodigious in girth, but they were all like the rarest pearls.

Jaqir was seized by a desire to touch the surface of the hot, white Moon. He voiced this.

Yulba scowled, disturbed in his rapturous trance.

“Oh ignorant man, even my inspired carpet may go no closer, or the magnetic pull of the Moon will tug, and we crash down there.”

As he spoke, they passed slowly around the globe, and began moving across the *back* of the Moon, which, until that minute, few mortals had ever seen.

This side lay in a deep violet shadow, turned from the Earth, and tilted upward somewhat at the vault of the sky. It was cooler here, and Jaqir fancied he could hear a strange sound, like harps playing softly, but nothing was to be seen. His hands itched to have something away.

“Peerless Yulba, in order to make a plan of assault, I shall need to get, for reference, some keepsake of the Moon.”

“You ask too much,” grumbled Yulba.

“Can you not do it? But you are *Yulba*,” smarmed Jaqir, “lord among Drin, favorite of the Prince of Demons. What is there Yulba *cannot* do? And, I thought we were to be friends...”

Yulba cast a look at Jaqir, then the Drin frowned at the Moon with such appalling ugliness, Jaqir turned his head.

“I have a certain immense power over stones,” said the Drin, “seeing my kind work with them. If I can call you a stone from the Moon, what is it worth?”

Jaqir, who was not above the art of lying either, lied imaginatively at

some length, until Yulba lumbered across the carpet and seemed about to demonstrate affection. “*Not* however,” declared Jaqir, “any of this, until my task is completed. Do you expect me to be able to concentrate on such events, when my life still hangs by a thread?”

Yulba withdrew once more to the carpet’s border. He began a horrible whistling, which set on edge not only Jaqir’s teeth but every bone in his body. Nevertheless, in a while, a single pebble, only about the size of an apricot, came flying up and struck Yulba in the eye.

“See—I am blinded!” screeched Yulba, thrashing on the carpet, but he was not. Nor would he then give up the pebble. But soon enough, as their transport—which by now was apparently tiring—sank away from the Moon, Jaqir rolled a moment against the Drin, as if losing his balance. Thereafter the moon-pebble was in Jaqir’s pocket.

What a time they had been on their travels. Even as the carpet flopped, wearily and bumpily now, toward the Earth, a blossoming of rose pink appeared in the east.

This pretty sight, of course, greatly upset Yulba, for demons feared the Sun, and with good reason, it could burn them to ashes.

“Down, down, make haste accursed flea-bag of a carpet!” ranted he, and so they rapidly fell, and next landed with a splashy thump in a swamp, from which green monkeys and red parakeets erupted at their arrival.

“I shall return at dusk. Remember what I have risked for you!” growled Yulba.

“It is graven on my brain.”

Then the Drin vanished into the ground, taking with him the carpet. The Sun rose, and the amazing Moon, now once more far away, faded and set like a dying lamp.

By midday Jaqir had forced a path from the swamp. He sat beneath a mango tree and ate some of the ripe fruit, and stared at the moon-pebble. It shone, even in the daylight, like a milky flame. “You are more wonderful than anything I have ever thieved. But still I do not see how I can rob the sky of that other jewel, the Moon.”

Then he considered, for one rash moment, running away. And the

safeguarding bonds of the king's magicians twanged around his skeleton. Jaqir desisted, and lay back to sleep.

In sleep, a troop of tormenters paraded.

The cast-off mistress who had betrayed him slapped his face with a wet fish. Yulba strutted, seeming hopeful. Next came men who cried, "Of what worth is this stupid Jaqir, who has claimed he can steal an egg from beneath a sleeping bird."

Affronted in his slumber, Jaqir truthfully replied that he had done that very thing. But the mockers were gone.

In the dream then Jaqir sat up, and looked once more at the shining pebble lying in his hand.

"Although I might steal a million eggs from beneath a million birds, what use to try for this? I am doomed and shall give in."

Just then something fluttered from the mango tree, which was also there in the dream. It was a small gray parrot. Flying down, it settled directly upon the opalescent stone in Jaqir's palm and put out its light.

"Well, my fine bird, this is no egg for you to hatch."

The parrot spoke. "Think, Jaqir, what you see, and what you say."

Jaqir thought. "Is it possible?"

And at that he woke a second time.

The Sun was high above, and over and over across it and the sky, birds flew about, distinct as black writing on the blue.

"No bird of the air can fly so high as the Moon," said Jaqir. He added, "but the Drin have a mythic knack with magical artifacts and clockworks."

Later, the Sun lowered itself and went down. Yulba came bouncing from the ground, coyly clad in extra rubies, with a garland of lotuses in his hair.

"Now, now," commenced Yulba, lurching forward.

Sternly spoke Jaqir, "I am not yet at liberty, as you are aware. However, I have a scheme. And knowing your unassailable wisdom and authority, only you, the mighty Yulba, best and first among Drin, can manage it."

In Underearth it was an exquisite dusk. It was always dusk there, or a form of dusk. As clear as day in the upper world, it was said, yet more radiantly somber. Sunless, naturally, for the reasons given above.

Druhim Vanashta, the peerless city of demonkind, stretched in a noose of shimmering nonsolar brilliance, out of which pierced, like needles, chiseled towers of burnished steel and polished corundum, domes of faceted crystal. While about the gem-paved streets and sable parks strolled or paced or strode or lingered the demons. Night-black of hair and eye, snow-frozen-white of complexion, the high-caste Vazdru and their mystic servants, the Eshva. All of whom were so painfully beautiful, it amounted to an insult.

Presently, along an avenue, there passed Azhrarn, Prince of Demons, riding a black horse, whose mane and tail were hyacinth blue. And if the beauty of the Eshva and Vazdru amounted to an insult, that of Azhrarn was like the stroke of death.

He seemed himself idle enough, Azhrarn. He seemed too musing on something as he slowly rode, oblivious, it appeared, to those who bowed to the pavement at his approach, whose eyes had spilled, at sight of him, looks of adoration. They were all in love with Azhrarn.

A voice spoke from nowhere at all.

“Azhrarn, Lord Wickedness, you gave up the world, but the world does not give up you. Oh Azhrarn, Master of Night, what are the Drin doing by their turgid lake, hammering and hammering?”

Azhrarn had reined in the demon horse. He glanced leisurely about.

Minutes elapsed. He too spoke, and his vocality was like the rest of him. “The Drin do hammer at things. That is how the Drin pass most of eternity.”

“Yet how,” said the voice, “do *you* pass eternity, Lord Wickedness?”

“Who speaks to me?” softly said Azhrarn.

The voice replied, “Perhaps merely yourself, the part of you that you discard, the part of you which yearns after the world.”

“Oh,” said Azhrarn. “The world.”

The voice did not pronounce another syllable, but along an adjacent wall a slight mark appeared, rather like a scorch.

Azhrarn rode on. The avenue ended at a park, where willows of liquid amber let down their watery resinous hair, to a mercury pool. Black peacocks with seeing eyes of turquoise and emerald in their tails, turned their heads and all their feathers to gaze at him.

From between the trees came three Eshva, who obeised themselves.

“What,” said Azhrarn, “are the Drin making by their lake?”

The Eshva sighed voluptuously. The sighs said (for the Eshva never used ordinary speech), “The Drin are making metal birds.”

“Why?” said Azhrarn.

The Eshva grew downcast; they did not know. Melancholy enfolded them among the tall black grasses of the lawn, and then one of the Vazdru princes came walking through the garden.

“Yes?” said Azhrarn.

“My Prince, there is a Drin who was to fashion for me a ring, which he has neglected,” said the Vazdru. “He is at some labor for a human man he is partial to. They are *all* at this labor.”

Azhrarn, interested, was, for a moment, more truly revealed. The garden waxed dangerously brighter, the mercury in the pool boiled. The amber hardened and the peacocks shut every one of their 450 eyes.

“Yes?” Azhrarn murmured again.

“The Drin, who is called Yulba, has lied to them all. He has told them you yourself, my matchless lord, require a million clockwork birds that can fly as high as the Earth’s Moon. Because of *this*, they work ceaselessly. This Yulba is a nuisance. When he is found out, they will savage him, then bury him in some cavern, walling it up with rocks, leaving him there a million years for his million birds. And so I shall not receive my ring.”

Azhrarn smiled. Cut by the smile, as if by the slice of a sword, leaves scattered from the trees. It was suddenly autumn in the garden. When autumn stopped, Azhrarn had gone away.

Chang-thrang went the Drin hammers by the lake outside Druhim Vanashta. *Whirr* and *pling* went the uncanny mechanisms of half-formed sorcerous birds of cinnabar, bronze, and iron. Already-finished sorcerous birds hopped and flapped about the lakeshore, frightening the beetles and

snakes. Mechanical birds flew over in curious formations, like demented swallows, darkening the Underearth's gleaming day-dusk, now and then letting fall droppings of a peculiar sort.

Eshva came and went, drifting on Vazdru errands. Speechless inquiries wafted to the Drin caves: Where is the necklace of rain vowed for the Princess Vasht? Where is the singing book reserved for the Prince Hazrond?

"We are busy elsewhere at Azhrarn's order," chirped the Drin.

They were all dwarfs, all hideous, and each one lethal, ridiculous, and a genius. Yulba strode among them, criticizing their work, so now and then there was also a fight for the flying omnipresent birds to unburden their bowels upon.

How had Yulba fooled the Drin? He was no more Azhrarn's favorite than any of them. All the Drin boasted as Yulba had. Perhaps it was only this: Turning his shoulder to the world of mankind, Azhrarn had forced the jilted world to pursue him underground. In ways both graphic and insidious, the rejected one permeated Underearth. Are you tired of me? moaned the world to Azhrarn. Do you hate me? Do I bore you? See how inventive I am. See how I can still ensnare you fast.

But Azhrarn did not go to the noisy lake. He did not summon Yulba. And Yulba, puffed with his own cleverness, obsessively eager to hold Jaqir to his bargain, had forgotten all accounts have a reckoning. *Chung-clungk* went the hammers. *Brakk* went the thick heads of the Drin, banged together by critical, unwise Yulba.

Then at last the noise ended.

The hammering and clamoring were over.

Of the few Vazdru who had come to stare at the birds, less than a few remarked that the birds had vanished.

The Drin were noted skulking about their normal toil again, constructing wondrous jewelry and toys for the upper demons. If they waited breathlessly for Azhrarn to compliment them on their bird-work, they did so in vain. But such omissions had happened in the past, the never-ceasing past-present-future of Underearth.

Just as they might have pictured him, Azhrarn stood in a high window of Druhim Vanashta, looking at his city of needles and crystals.

Perhaps it was seven mortal days after the voice had spoken to him.
Perhaps three months.

He heard a sound within his mind. It was not from his city, nor was it unreal. Nor actual. Presently he sought a magical glass that would show him the neglected world.

How ferocious the stars, how huge and cruelly glittering, like daggers.
How they exalted, unrivaled now.

The young king went one by one to all the windows of his palace. Like Azhrarn miles below (although he did not know it), the young king looked a long while at his city. But mostly he looked up into the awful sky.

Thirty-three nights had come and gone, without the rising of the Moon.

In the king's city there had been at first shouts of bewildered amazement.
Then prayers. Then, a silence fell which was as loud as screaming.

If the world had lost the Sun, the world would have perished and died. But losing the Moon, it was as if the soul of this world had been put out.

Oh those black nights, blacker than blackness, those yowling spikes of stars dancing in their vitriolic glory—which gave so little light.

What murders and rapes and worser crimes were committed under cover of such a dark? As if a similar darkness had been called up from the mental guts of mankind, like subservient to like. While earth-over, priests offered to the gods, who never noticed.

The courtiers who had applauded, amused, the judgment of the witty young king now shrank from him. He moved alone through the excessively lamped and benighted palace, wondering if he was now notorious through all the world for his thoughtless error. And so wondering, he entered the room where, on their marble pedestals, perched his angels.

“What have you done?” said the king.

Not a feather stirred. Not an eye winked.

“By the gods—may they forgive me—what? What did you make *me* do?”

“*You* are king,” said the scarlet parrot. “It is your word, not ours, which is law.”

And the blue parrot said, “We are parrots, why name us angels? We have been taught to speak, that is all. What do you expect?”

And the jade parrot said, “I forget now what it was you asked of us.” And put its head under its wing.

Then the king turned to the gray parrot. “What do you have to say? It was your final advice which drove me to demand the Moon be stolen—as if I thought any man might do it.”

“King,” said the gray parrot, “it was your sport to call four parrots, angels. Your sport to offer a man an impossible task as the alternative to certain death. You have lived as if living is a silly game. But you are mortal, and a king.”

“You shame me,” said the king.

“We are, of course,” said the gray parrot, “truly angels, disguised. To shame men is part of our duty.”

“What must I do?”

The gray parrot said, “Go down, for Jaqir, Thief of Thieves, has returned to your gate. And he is followed by his shadow.”

“Are not all men so followed?” asked the king perplexedly.

The parrot did not speak again.

Let it be said, Jaqir, who now entered the palace, between the glaring, staring guards of the king, was himself in terrible awe at what he had achieved. Ever since succeeding at his task, he had not left off trembling inwardly. However, outwardly he was all smiles, and in his best attire.

“See, the wretch’s garments are as fine as a lord’s. His rings are gold. Even his shadow looks well dressed! And this miscreant it is who has stolen the Moon and ruined the world with blackest night.”

The king stood waiting, with the court about him.

Jaqir bowed low. But that was all he did, after which *he* stood waiting, meeting the king’s eyes with his own.

“Well,” said the king. “It seems you have done what was asked of you.”

“So it does seem,” said Jaqir calmly.

“Was it then easy?”

“As easy,” said Jaqir, “as stealing an egg.”

“But,” said the king. He paused, and a shudder ran over the hall a shuddering of men and women, and also of the flames in all the countless lamps.

“*But?*” pressed haughty Jaqir.

“It might be said by some, that the Moon—which is surely not an egg—has disappeared, and another that you may have removed it. After all,” said the king stonily, “if one assumes the Moon may be pilfered at all, how am I to be certain the robber is yourself? Maybe others are capable of it. Or, too, a natural disaster has simply overcome the orb, a coincidence most convenient for you.”

“Sir,” said Jaqir, “were you not the king, I would answer you in other words that I do. But king you are. And I have proof.”

And then Jaqir took out from his embroidered shirt the moon-pebble, which even in the light of the lamps blazed with a perfect whiteness. And so like the Moon it was for radiance that many at once shed tears of nostalgia on seeing it. While at Jaqir’s left shoulder, his night-black shadow seemed for an instant also to flicker with fire.

As for the king, now he trembled too. But like Jaqir, he did not show it.

“Then,” said the king, “be pardoned of your crimes. You have surmounted the test, and are directly loosed from those psychic bonds my magicians set on you, therefore entirely physically at liberty, and besides, a legendary hero. One last thing...”

“Yes?” asked Jaqir.

“Where have you put it?”

“What?” said Jaqir, rather stupidly.

“That which you stole.”

“It was not a part of our bargain, to tell you this. You have seen by the proof of this stone I have got the Moon. Behold, the sky is black.”

The king said quietly, "You do not mean to keep it."

"Generally I do keep what I take."

"I will give you great wealth, Jaqir, which I think anyway you do not need, for they say you are as rich as I. Also, I will give you a title to rival my own. You can have what you wish. Now swear you will return the Moon to the sky."

Jaqir lowered his eyes.

"I must consider this."

"Look," they whispered, the court of the king, "even his shadow listens to him."

Jaqir, too, felt his shadow listening at his shoulder.

He turned, and found the shadow had eyes.

Then the shadow spoke, more quietly than the king, and not one in the hall did not hear it. While every flame in every lamp spun like a coin, died, revived, and continued burning upside down.

"King, you are a fool. Jaqir, you are another fool. And who and what am I?"

Times had changed. There are always stories, but they are not always memorized. Only the king, and Jaqir the thief, had the understanding to plummet to their knees. And they cried as one, "*Azhrarn!*"

"Walk upon the terrace with me," said Azhrarn. "We will admire the beauty of the leaden night."

The king and Jaqir found that they got up, and went on to the terrace, and no one else stirred, not even hand or eye.

Around the terrace stood some guards like statues. At the terrace's center stood a chariot that seemed constructed of black and silver lava, and drawn by similarly laval dragons.

"Here is our conveyance," said Azhrarn, charmingly. "Get in."

In they got, the king and the thief. Azhrarn also sprang up, and took and shook the reins of the dragons, and these great ebony lizards hissed and shook out in turn their wings, which clapped against the black night and seemed to strike off bits from it. Then the chariot dove up into the air, shaking off the Earth entire, and green sparks streamed from the chariot-

wheels.

Neither the king nor Jaqir had stamina—or idiocy—enough to question Azhrarn. They waited meekly as two children in the chariot's back, gaping now at Azhrarn's black eagle wings of cloak, that every so often buffeted them, almost breaking their ribs, or at the world falling down and down below like something dropped.

But then, high in the wild, tipsy-making upper air, Jaqir did speak, if not to Azhrarn.

“King, I tricked you. I did not steal the Moon.”

“Who then stole it?”

“No one.”

“A riddle.”

At which they saw Azhrarn had partly turned. They glimpsed his profile, and a single eye that seemed more like the night than the night itself was. And they shut their mouths.

On raced the dragons.

Below raced the world.

Then everything came to a halt. Combing the sky with claws and wheels, dragons and chariot stood static on the dark.

Azhrarn let go the jewelry reins.

All around spangled the stars. These now appeared less certain of themselves. The brighter ones had dimmed their glow, the lesser hid behind the vapors of night. Otherwise, everywhere lay blackness, only that.

In the long, musician's fingers of the Prince of Demons was a silver pipe, shaped like some sort of slender bone. Azhrarn blew upon the pipe.

There was no sound, yet something seemed to pass through the skulls of the king and of Jaqir, as if a barbed thread had been pulled through from ear to ear. The king swooned—he was only a king. Jaqir rubbed his temples and stayed upright—he was a professional of the working classes.

And so it was Jaqir who saw, in reverse, that which he had already seen happen the other way about.

He beheld a black cloud rising (where before it had settled) and behind the cloud, suddenly something incandescent blinked and dazzled. He beheld how the cloud, breaking free of these blinks of palest fire (where before it had obscured said fire) ceased to be one entity, and became instead one million separate flying pieces. He saw, as he had seen before when first they burst up from the ground in front of him, and rushed into the sky, that these were a million curious birds. They had feathers of cinnabar and bronze, sinews of brass; they had clockworks of iron and steel.

Between the insane crowded battering of their wings, Jaqir watched the Moon reappear, where previously (scanning the night, as he stood by Yulba in a meadow) he had watched the Moon *put out*, all the birds flew down against her, covering and smothering her. Unbroken by their landing on her surface, they had roosted there, drawn to and liking the warmth, as Yulba had directed them with his sorcery.

But now Azhrarn had negated Yulba's powers—which were little enough among demons. The mechanical birds swarmed round and round the chariot, aggravating the dragons somewhat. The birds had no eyes, Jaqir noticed. They gave off great heat where the Moon had toasted their metals. Jaqir looked at them as if for the first, hated them, and grew deeply embarrassed.

Yet the Moon—oh, the Moon. Uncovered and alight, how brilliantly it or she blazed now. Had she ever been so bright? Had her sojourn in darkness done her good?

End to end, she poured her flame over the Earth below. Not a mountain that did not have its spire of silver, not a river its highlight of diamond. The seas lashed and struggled with joy, leaping to catch her snows upon the crests of waves and dancing dolphin. And in the windows of mankind, the lamps were doused, and like the waves, men leaned upward to wash their faces in the Moon.

Then gradually, a murmur, a thunder, a roar, a gushing sigh rose swirling from the depths of the Flat Earth, as if at last the world had stopped holding its breath.

“What did you promise Yulba,” asked Azhrarn of Jaqir, mild as a killing frost, “in exchange for this slight act?”

“The traditional favor,” muttered Jaqir.

“Did he receive payment?”

“I prevaricated. Not yet, lord Prince.”

“You are spared then. Part of his punishment shall be permanently to avoid your company. But what punishment for you, thief? And what punishment for your king?”

Jaqir did not speak. Nor did the king, though he had recovered his senses. Both men were educated in the tales, the king more so. Both men turned ashen, and the king accordingly more ashen.

Then Azhrarn addressed the clockwork birds in one of the demon tongues, and they were immediately gone. And only the white banner of the moonlight was there across the night.

Now Azhrarn, by some called also Lord of Liars, was not perhaps above lying in his own heart. It seems so. Yet maybe tonight he looked upon the Moon, and saw in the Moon’s own heart, the woman that once he had loved, the woman who had been named for the Moon. Because of her, and all that had followed, Azhrarn had turned his back upon the world—or attempted to turn it.

And even so here he was, high in the vault of the world’s heaven, drenched in earthly moonshine, contemplating the chastisement of mortal creatures whose lives, to his immortal life, were like the green sparks which had flashed and withered on the chariot-wheels.

The chariot plunged. The atmosphere scalded at the speed of its descent. It touched the skin of the Earth more slightly than a cobweb. The mortal king and the mortal thief found themselves rolling away downhill, toward fields of barley and a river. The chariot, too, was gone. Although in their ears as they rolled, equal in their rolling as never before, and soon never to be again, king and thief heard Azhrarn’s extraordinary voice, which said, “Your punishment you have already. You are human. I cannot improve upon that.”

Thus, the Moon shone in the skies of night, interrupted only by an infrequent cloud. The king resumed his throne. The four angels—who were or were not parrots—or only meddlers—sat on their perches waiting to give advice, or to avoid giving it. And Jaqir—Jaqir went away to

another city.

Here, under a different name, he lived on his extreme wealth, in a fine house with gardens. Until one day he was robbed of all his gold (and even of the moon-pebble) by a talented thief. “Is it the gods who exact their price at last, or Another, who dwells farther down?” But by then Jaqir was older, for mortal lives moved and move swiftly. He had lost his taste for his work by then. So he returned to the king’s city, and to the door of the merchant’s wife who had been his mistress. “I am sorry for what I said to you,” said Jaqir. “I am sorry for what I did to you,” said she. The traveling merchant had recently departed on another, more prolonged journey, to make himself, reincarnation-wise, a new life after death. Meanwhile, though the legend of a moon-thief remained, men had by then forgotten Jaqir. So he married the lady and they existed not unhappily, which shows their flexible natures.

But miles below, Yulba did not fare so well.

For Azhrarn had returned to the Underearth on the night of the Moon’s rescue, and said to him, “Bad little Drin. Here are your million birds. Since you are so proud of them, be one of them.” And in this way Azhrarn demonstrated that the world no longer mattered to him a jot, only his own kind mattered enough that he would make their lives Hell-under-Earth. Or, so it would seem.

But Yulba had changed to a clockwork bird, number one million and one. Eyeless, still able to see, flapping over the melanic vistas of the demon country, blotting up the luminous twilight, cawing, clicking, letting fall droppings, yearning for the warmth of the Moon, yearning to be a Drin again, yearning for Azhrarn, and for Jaqir—who by that hour had already passed himself from the world, for demon time was not the time of mortals.

As for the *story*, that of Jaqir and Yulba and the Moon, it had become as it had and has become, or *un-become*. And who knows but that, in another little while, it will be forgotten, as most things are. Even the Moon is no longer *that* Moon, nor the Earth, nor the sky. The centuries fly, eternity is endless.