

The Arimaspians Legacy

by Gene Wolfe

It is among the Issedonians themselves that the strange tales of the distant north originate -- tales of the one-eyed men and the griffins that guard gold; and the Scythians have passed them on to the rest of us...

-- Herodotus, *The Histories*

Each year at about this time, I make the same resolution; but for you to understand, I must first tell you of my old friend David. I intend to employ that first name since it was his -- there are so many Davids that no ill-intentioned person is apt to guess the David I mean. Certain members of David's family are yet living however (an uncle, an aunt, and several cousins, I believe), so I shall assign to him the surname of *Arimaspian*. Its signification will become clear to you.

David and I were (as I have said) old friends. I might as truthfully have called us boyhood friends, even though I lived on the southern edge of the city and David on the eastern. We were of an age. We were alike in being bookish but unstudious, and in being without sister or brother. We met at a chess club for boys in the YMCA, and though we both soon abandoned chess, we never quite abandoned each other.

The truth is that each of us found the other useful. It was the custom in those days to require a boy to name his best friend. And then, cruelly, to investigate the matter with the boy named. Thus I specified David Arimaspians, and he me; and neither of us lost face.

In part in support of our own testimony, we met regularly once or twice a month to talk, to trifle with chess or Monopoly or some other game, and to read in each other's company. For the city was not so large in those days that a determined boy could not ride his bicycle twice across it in a single evening, and the distance between our homes was considerably less than the full diameter. Soon, indeed, I boasted a motor scooter in place of my bike; and in what now seems a short time, we both owned cars.

I said we met to talk, but I might better have said we met to boast. David began it, I believe. He was always exceedingly proud of whatever he possessed: his geese were every one a swan, as the saying goes. You will protest that if his boasting were objectionable to me, I might have mentioned the matter to him or even ceased to visit him; and you will be correct. The fact was that I did not find it objectionable, though possibly I should have. His latest possessions were often of interest -- for he was something of a collector even then -- and he took so much innocent pleasure in

producing each and recounting to me the way in which it had come into his hands that I enjoyed his crowing nearly as much as he did himself. How well I recall the dubiously ivory chess set -- the magnifying glass whose ebony handle bore *M.H.* in faded gilt, whose chipped and foggy lens David employed to burn his own *D.A.* into the birch grip of an old Finnish knife!

The years rolled by. With the triumphs and disappointments they brought to me, this brief tale has nothing to do; as for my boyhood friend, he became an astronomer -- a discipline admirably suited to his largely nocturnal style of life -- and an acquirer of old books.

I do not call him a collector, for it seemed to me that he followed no plan. Like many professional men, he was attracted to accounts of his own profession, and it sometimes seemed to me that he had a baseless predilection for gold edging. Scientific conferences of one sort or another took him to distant cities, where he rarely missed the opportunity of rummaging through such shops as they afforded. I have heard that he sometimes bought whole stacks of volumes as you or I might a single book, paying a trifle more to have them mailed home; the boxes in which his acquisitions arrived might be stacked in his foyer, unopened, for years. In our city, he haunted garage sales and would buy any number of decayed volumes and toss them into his rusty van. As far as I am aware, that van was emptied only when it became too full to hold more. He had inherited his parents' Victorian house, and it seemed to be his ambition to choke all its many rooms and hallways with old books, papers of his own, and the dusty instruments of science.

At the time of which I speak, he had nearly succeeded, On my increasingly rare visits, we had to clear a chair so that I might sit; and on the last, he grudgingly yielded his own to me and stood. That was three years past, and I never came again.

Thus I was astounded to find him at my apartment door so very early on the morning he died. His long sallow face seemed unchanged, as did his threadbare brown suit; but he carried a narrow carton embellished with golden foil -- surely the kind that distillers of the best class provide at Christmas -- and his eyes held such a light as I had not seen there since they had first met mine across a shabby chessboard.

His knock roused me from sleep; but I opened the door, and he handed me the carton, announcing that we must toast the dawn. "Hah. In glass, too! No plastic. Not for us -- crystal! May I? Sofa's fine. Need a corkscrew? I could show you how to manage without one. No ice -- it's melted, and the mammoth lives!"

I filled our glasses and said I was happy to see him, as quite suddenly I was.

"Course you are," he replied. "Hah! Lord! Have I ever lied to you?"

"Frequently," I confessed.

"Good, good! Then you won't flinch when I tell you I've fulfilled my life's ambition -- that I'm -- hah! Potentially the master of the world."

I admitted it could use one.

"Hah. Right." He gulped half his drink and grew serious. "Know what I've been after? Do you? All my life?"

I did not, yet I could see that he had found it.

"The book. Lord, the book. Hah! What a book! The one no one buys. Know what I mean?"

I shook my head.

"The one you almost buy but don't. The one you haven't got money enough on you for, that's too heavy to lug over to Seventh Street. The one you mean to come back for and don't, hah! The one that's gone, or somewhere else, when you get back."

"Oh," I said weakly. "*That* book."

"Right! Didn't know I was looking till I found it. Eight hundred and sixty-five thousand miles across, but I've reduced it to a little thing, so big." (At this point he gestured with his glass. I think the size he indicated was roughly six inches by eight.) "Blue cover, I had the binder put on a gold griffin. Hah! Know about griffins?"

"Certainly," I told him. "Fabulous beasts with the head, wings, and legs of an eagle, and the hindquarters of a lion."

"Wrong! Not fabulous a bit. Spirits. Haven't you visited Sumer? Hah! Or Akkad? What about Ur?"

I shook my head. "No, David, and neither have you."

"All over the walls. Come midwinter, they fly from the sun with new strength for the Tree, get it? *There's* the gold that griffins guard -- sun -- civilization -- nuclear fusion, too. Hah! Tells everything you've wanted to know all your life. Remember the one-eyed men? Tried to steal the gold, half-blinded by the sun. Hah! Spu's eye, Armia's one. Arimaspians, race of one-eyed thieves. Know about sunspots? Disturb the solar spectrum, *in code*. Lasted eighteen months once -- long chapter. Chaldean, not English. Somebody left it there to get us started. Hah! I ran it through a computer at Rice, put the English in my book."

God forgive me, I thought it was a joke, a game. I asked, "But this book tells you the secrets of life?"

He nodded solemnly. "Teaches you to read -- thought I knew, hah! Didn't. Music in your head, after you read that. How to tie shoes, write a check. How old before you learned?"

"Seventeen, I suppose."

"Liar! Twenty-five a least. How to get the girl, easy as snapping fingers -- all the ways. Make friends, influence people. Sports -- quarterback -- Olympics. Coordination and balance, that's all -- anything your body can do. Hah! Meditation and exercises. Easy, really."

I think my look must have pierced his soul; he was proud, like all lonely men. Lonely men must be proud or die.

"Show you. Have to go anyhow. She's waiting." He stood, swaying a trifle.

"Dave..."

"Don't fret." He opened my window. I live on the seventh floor, and there is no ledge, no balcony or fire escape; yet he stepped over the sill as coolly as a man steps off a bus.

I rushed to look out. A red Jaguar idled at the curb. The lovely woman standing beside it appeared to be waving to me.

"Like it? Hah! Snap." David's voice was at my ear. He was standing beside my window, upon nothing.

"Got to go. Take care."

He descended on steps of air that only he could see; he had reached the third floor when dawn touched the sky and he fell.

His house went to a cousin, but he left his library to me, "my best friend". Was it merely a notebook, written by hand? Did he pay someone to set type, as he surely paid someone else to bind or rebind it? Or did he create his book himself by what is called desk-top publishing? He seems to have owned equipment of that kind. His books are in storage now, for I lack the space for a tenth of them. Sometimes I go to the warehouse to open the crates and poke about -- yes, still, especially at this time of year.

And in my dreams I see him falling, and gniffins bent upon vengeance, bearing the treasures of the sun.

As when the gryphon through the wilderness
With winged course, o'er hill or morry dale,
Pursues the Arimaspians, who, by stealth,
Had from his wakeful custody purloined
The guarded gold; so eagerly the Fiend
O'er bog or steep, through strait, rough, dense, or rare
With head, hands, wings, or feet pursues his way,
And swims or sinks, or wades, or creeps, or flies.
-- Milton, *Paradise Lost*

If I'd made the world, he thought, Christmas would be a good time for everybody.
-- *There Are Doors*
