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A Novel of Tomorrow

by

**RAYMOND Z.
GALLUN**



MOON OF THE UNFORGOTTEN

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STARTLING
STORIES

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Title: The Odyssey of Yiggar Throlg

Date of first publication: 1951

Author: Henry Kuttner (as C. H. Liddell) (1914-1958)

Date first posted: July 19, 2022

Date last updated: July 19, 2022

Faded Page eBook #20220733

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The Odyssey of Yiggarr Throlg

By

Henry Kuttner

Writing under the pseudonym C. H. Liddell.

First published *Startling Stories*, January 1951.

Here is what can happen to a perfectly respectable gnome who has the misfortune to come in contact with human beings!

Every so often—about every seven seconds, say—one of our more hide-bound readers lifts his rufescent proboscis from the volume of Euclid, Einstein, Korzybski or whatever learned authority he is reading and announces with loud and incisive accent that there is no room for fantasy in science fiction. In which, of course, he is stating the most ignoble kind of paradox.

For what is science fiction save the other side of the “if”? If all molecular movement in a given object were suddenly to go into reverse—if the elevator were to run sideways—if some Susan B. Anthony plague were to wipe out all but one of the males in the world—and so on. No matter how gadget-bound you choose to make your conception of it; science fiction is still fantasy.

All of which is by way of prelude to a story which our more nuclear-minded readers will probably insist has no place in a science fiction magazine. And for all we know they may be perfectly right. But when you read of the ghastly chain of events that befell little Yiggarr Throlg—and when you have got your aching stomach muscles back into something approximating their proper place—we have a hunch you’ll agree with us that this is one story we had to run. Incidentally it introduces to our pages a most promising young author whose work we hope soon to serve you again!

—THE EDITOR



The king bellowed at me. "You miserable crawling offspring of a slug!"

CHAPTER I

Why Did It Have to Happen to Me?

I'm just an ordinary gnome and why the thing should have happened to me I can't understand. If I'd been an elemental or a nereid—they're always getting mixed up in water-magic—it'd be different. But, as I say, I'm a plain, down-to-earth gnome of the Middle Kingdom and I had never really believed in humans.

Of course as a *yndling* I'd been told all sorts of fantastic folklore by my nurse. You know the sort of thing, where in-offending vampires are captured by a hobhuman and tortured to death with garlic and stakes and so on. But I'm a materialist. Most gnomes are. We believe in the unalterable laws of physics, such as the First Law—*cold iron is poison*.

But humans—*well!* It's always some other gnome who has known a gnome who's seen one.

I've changed my mind now. That's why I'm considered a little cracked—me, Yiggar Throlg, whose family have been honest diggers and delvers since back in the days of the Norway burrows and beyond that, I've heard, to Yggdrasil.

By Vulcan, I'm no moon-struck werewolf and I know what I saw and what happened to me. Even now sometimes I dream about that haunted spot, with a living green carpet of grass hiding the brown earth, and the moonrays shining on—it!

It must be dreadful to be a human.

Well, I suppose I should start at the beginning. I'd got lost in the burrows. King Breggir was yelling for more rubies and I was behind in my quota. The bag over my shoulder was almost empty and I didn't dare check in without at least a pound of gems.

Breggir was paving Red Street. He's an unreasonable gnome anyway, to my mind, and there wasn't any reason at all why the job should have to be finished in a week. But there it was. If I came back without my quota I'd be turned into a toad for seven hours. If I could have seen the future I'd have welcomed such a punishment rather than get tangled up with the supernatural.

The higher tunnels are seldom visited, you know, and some say they weren't built by gnomes. And that, I believe now, is true. I must have traveled a long way, searching vainly for rubies, when I came without any warning whatsoever upon the inexplicable.

The ground under my feet changed to a hard smooth substance like whitish gritty rock and I found myself in a small tunnel, not much larger than my body. I'm an ordinary-sized gnome but presently I had to squeeze my way forward. I simply couldn't turn back in that narrow space. And at last I found my way blocked by a grating which for a moment I thought was cold iron. Luckily it wasn't, so I wrenched it away and stuck my head out.

There was a park-like expanse all around me, with the moon shining down and trees casting their long shadows. I could hear water rippling far away, and smell it. All at once I felt a hot shudder pass down my spine. Something was—wrong.

There are times, they say, when the Veil wears thin and we can see what lies beyond. This was such a time, I know now. For there was something in the park that should not have been there—something alive and very dreadful. I could sense it.

What I had taken to be a distorted tree near by suddenly stirred. Its shadow swayed on the grass. The moon washed it in white light. And I saw that it was a Horror.

I couldn't move. I was paralyzed. The creature wasn't ten feet away. It looked perfectly tangible and three-dimensional, not unlike a satyr though the legs were straight and it wore clothing.

My reactions were surprising even to me. I didn't faint. I was too scared. I just remained where I was, with my head sticking up out of the hole where the grating had been, and the—being—watched me. The tableau might have lasted for hours for all I know. It was broken when the human—for it was a human—lifted an arm and beckoned to me without making a sound.

Every muscle in my body shrieked protest but I couldn't disobey. I crawled out on the grass and stood there shivering, with the feeling of a hot wind blowing on my face. I faced worse than death, I knew—and then, all of a sudden, I remembered I was Yiggarr Throgl, a gnome of the Middle Kingdom.

Bravado, perhaps, but I squared my shoulders and looked at the human unflinchingly. I hope it isn't vanity that makes me believe I cut a good figure. I'm two feet tall in my sandals and thirty inches wide and my eyes, which look like brown eggs, did not fall or waver.

The human took something—a bottle—out of the folds of his garments. With deliberate, menacing slowness he uncapped it.

"All right," he said. "Get back in."

There was liquid in the bottle, swishing back and forth, and a strong alcoholic odor tainted the air like mead when they feast in Valhalla. But the flagon's innocent appearance didn't fool me. I knew about the djinns and how Suleiman had enslaved them. If I obeyed the bottle would be capped and flung into the ocean.

"I—I *won't!*" I managed to get out through chattering teeth.

"You came out of this bottle," the human told me. "Now, by heaven, get back in!"

"I *didn't* come out of it—" Imagine! I was arguing with a human!

The creature made an impatient sound that was almost gnomish. "Don't give me that," he snapped, swaying slightly. "They all come out of bottles—snakes and mice and sea-serpents. Now—"

"I'm certainly not a sea-serpent," I said, "and as for snakes and mice there aren't any such things."

He smiled, very horribly, but didn't answer. I felt sure that he believed in snakes and mice and might even have seen them. "Anyway," I said, plucking up a bit of courage, "I'm not going into that bottle—please?"

He drank out of it and considered me thoughtfully. "Who are you?"

I told him. He shook his head. "No. I mean *what* are you?"

"I'm a gnome," I said.

I wasn't prepared for the reaction my words had. The being before me let out a wild yell and sprang straight up into the air. I trembled in every limb, expecting to be torn apart and dissolved instanter.

But instead the human pointed a shaking finger at me and yelled, "Hellfire and damnation! It isn't enough that I write about the blasted things, eh? Now they come popping out from under my feet when I take a walk in Central Park.

"Well, by all the pulps and slicks in New York, I'm not going to stand for it, drunk or sober!" He flung the bottle at my head but naturally it didn't hurt. We gnomes are thick-

skinned.

“Sure I’m drunk!” he went on while I cowered before his fury. “If I wasn’t drunk I wouldn’t be seeing you. It’s enough to make a guy split an infinitive! Look, you pot-bellied little rain-barrel!”

And he pulled out an oblong, flat object which I recognized as a tome. It looked like no book I had ever seen, except perhaps the *Brass Tablets of Belial*, but I guessed it was a grimoire of human spells. I shrank back—do you blame me?

“Always the same!” the human screamed, clutching the book in both hands. “Three wishes or a curse! I know the formula backwards—you meet a gnome or a man with white whiskers or the devil himself and he gives you something you regret afterward. Well, I’ll be published in Braille if I let you pull a fast one on me, you miserable exhalation from a rum bottle. I’ve written too much about you.”

He wagged his hideously skinny finger at me. “Try some of your own—urp—medicine for a change. How’d you like that, eh? I know what you’re getting ready to do. Work some of your magic on me so that when I wake up tomorrow I’ll find that everything I touch turns to gold. Or a pudding on my nose. Or whenever I say anything silver dollars fall out of my mouth. *Ha!*”

I could only stare, petrified. The human raved on, glaring down at me. “Okay, gnome! You asked for it. Whenever you say anything from now on cold iron will fall out of your mouth. How do you like that, eh?”

I stumbled back, sick and shaking. My lips formed the word, “No—”

The being’s grin was hideous. “So you don’t like cold iron, eh? I thought so. I’ve written enough about you and your pals. Well, I won’t be too tough. You’ll be immune to the cold iron yourself—it won’t hurt you. Gnomes—oh, my lord! Why don’t I dig ditches for a living?”

He was overcome by fury and fell on his face. Before he could recover I whirled and leaped to safety. The black depths of the hole in the ground swallowed me. I flung myself into the tunnel, my back crawling with fear of attack. Perhaps I went a little insane then for I have no recollection of getting back to the Middle Kingdom.

In my brain two words were throbbing over and over as I raced on—“Cold iron. . . *Cold iron!*”

Somehow I found my den and flung myself down, trying to shut out from my mind all memory of what had happened. The exhaustion of fear overcame me and I slept. But my sleep was broken by grim dreams.

I awoke to find Trocklar, my closest friend, shaking me. “Yiggar,” he said. “The King is furious. You didn’t check in yesterday and the rubies are short. Did you make up your supply?”

Too dazed to answer I could only shake my head. Trocklar’s nose thumped up and down against his chin as he chattered worriedly, “Fafnir and Loki aid you, then. The King has sworn to turn you into a salamander for ten moons. You’d better hide—”

I opened my mouth, to speak, but Trocklar gave me no time.

“Not in the Middle Kingdom, of course. Perhaps Neptune will accept you for a while. Or—or even Hel might give you a haven if you bring her a big enough bribe. But you’ve got to hurry.”

“Trocklar,” I said, “I have seen a human.”

Clink—clink! Trocklar went a pasty green and screamed hoarsely. He jumped back, eyes tightly closed and stumbled toward the door, hands clutching. I heard him gasp, “*Iron!*”

“*Trocklar!*” I followed him, and felt something hard and round under my sandal. Looking down I was just in time to see a small dull object fall out of my mouth and thud on the rock.

It was—*cold iron!*

No wonder Trocklar was clinging to the door jamb, lips twisted in a grin of agony. No wonder his eyes were squeezed shut against the blinding brilliance of iron. But—why didn’t it affect me?

Then I remembered. The human’s curse!

Trocklar peered around the door at me. “A heaven of a joke,” he said sourly, still blinking. “What’s the idea? If the King hears of this—”

“I can’t help it,” I said.

Clink-clink!

Trocklar yelped and jerked back. I ran after him.

“It’s—*clink*—the—*clink*—human—*clink!*” At every word cold iron fell from my mouth. I tried to hold on to Trocklar but he tore free and went yelling away down the corridor and around a bend out of sight. I stood looking after him, feeling sick. Loki! There are things with which gnomes should not meddle!

And what now? I went back into my lair and blinked at the round pebbles on the ground. They seemed quite inoffensive and harmless. But they were as deadly as garlic to a vampire or wolfsbane to a werewolf. Such tiny things to be so packed with the power for evil.

CHAPTER II

In the Clink

My sack wasn't hanging on its peg by the door. I'd forgotten it, lost it above ground in my panic to escape, and it had contained only a dozen rubies anyway. And King Breggir had sworn to turn me into a salamander.

To a gnome, born of the deep earth, the land of the fire-dwellers is ghastly. The Sea Realm isn't so bad and Triton and his gang are a gay lot. Even dark Hel is endurable for a time. But fire—*ugh!* Maybe if I threw myself on Breggif's mercy and apologized he'd forgive me—perhaps help me, somehow. I—well, I was frightened.

I didn't know what to do. I wandered around the lair, looking at the rainbow, cold sparkles of a myriad colors flashing from the jagged walls, the black pool in the corner. It wasn't much but it was home to me. I'm just an ordinary gnome and I confess that cold tears were in my eyes as I stared around.

But that did no good. I slipped out into the passage, wondering whether or not to flee. My decision was taken out of my hands as a couple of guards, armed with barbed spears, came scuttling toward me. Both wore green-and-brown uniforms and the scarlet caps of the royal troops.

"Yiggar Throlg!" one said. "Old Breggir's blowing off lava again. You're under arrest—come along."

Just in time I remembered the curse on me and shut my mouth without saying a word. Things were bad enough, as they were without my scattering cold iron and making them worse. I let the guards grab my arm and pull me along the tunnel under the big shining jewels in the roof.

We went through the Major Caverns—I noticed Red Street had a hundred gnomes working on it—and entered the throne room, where Breggir sat on a diamond larger than himself. He was an imposing figure, with a beard that came down to his knees, mottled becomingly with loam, and like all gnomes he was bald. He was a beautiful gnome.

His mouth stretched around under each pointed ear and his nose was as big as my fist. His eyes bulged so that it seemed as though three large balls had been stuck on his face. He was drinking warm mud out of a silver cup and arguing with his physician, Crog.

"You're a stubborn idiot," Crog was snarling. "I've warned you about your ichor-pressure. Yet you keep on drinking mud, morning, noon and night!"

"Oh, carbon!" Breggir grunted and saw me. His mouth made a square. His voice was earthquake-thunder.

"*Yiggar Throlg!*" he bellowed at me. "You miserable crawling offspring of a slug! You wood-tick on the bark of Yggdrasil!" That was a nasty crack at my ancestors but I let it pass. I couldn't have said anything anyway for the King was still shouting.

"You nasty little lump of anthracite! You short-nosed verminous louse on a harp's tail! I'll have you toasted in Vesuvius and chased by scorpions! I'll tie a millstone to your beard and give you to the Giants! Where in Helvede are those rubies?"

"Don't tell me! You went to sleep in some far cavern and thought you could lie out of your laziness. Well, you can't! There's been too much laxness in the Middle Kingdom lately. I'm

going to make an example of you, Yiggar Thro!g! Just wait!” he promised and waved his sceptre at me.

There were dozens of gnomes all around me now, staring, some of them grinning furtively. I guess they thought it was fun to see somebody else in trouble for a change. Being part of Breggir’s retinue is no bargain. It’s like patting Cerberus on the heads.

The King extended his huge gnarly hands and clutched at the air in my direction. “Speak up!” he bellowed. “What’s your lying excuse, you crawling little cutworm? It doesn’t matter. I passed sentence on you hours ago. A salamander, that’s what you’ll be. Hear that? A salamander!”

“Well? Are you going to speak up or do we use cold pincers on your tongue?” He grinned maliciously. “You don’t like that, do you? Ice-cold pincers, frozen by the Frost Giants. Speak up!”

The last two words came out like levin. Involuntarily my mouth opened. I was so scared I forgot all about the inevitable results. “It wasn’t my fault!” I gasped. “I met a human—”

“Ha! A hu—*yaah!*”

It had happened. Cold iron clinked on the marble at my feet. There were immediate shrieks from all around me as gnomes fell over each other in their anxiety to get away from the vicinity of the deadly metal.

King Breggir fell over backward. His skinny legs were visible from behind the diamond throne, waving frantically. Crog, the physician, shrieked and fled. Breggir scrambled to his feet and followed. But he took time to look back, squinting against the glare of cold iron, and to roar in an agonized voice, “You’ll be minced for this, Yiggar Thro!g!”

I was alone in the splendid cold silence of the throne room.

It was *lèse majesté*, of course, but there was the silver cup standing on a pedestal, almost filled with warm mud. I drank it at a gulp and instantly felt a surge of false courage. I was still scared at heart but I was remembering that even the King had fled from my presence.

Every gnome in the Middle Kingdom would be afraid of me—holy Hecate! For an instant a mad thought entered my mind. Nothing less than revolution. With cold iron I’d be invulnerable—

Oh-oh—no I wouldn’t. Magic would still work on me. And if I were turned into a salamander I’d be in a worse fix than ever.

What to do? I couldn’t explain. With every word I spoke I’d only get deeper into the mess. I longed for the understanding touch of a friendly hand—but even Trocklar, my best friend, had fled from me.

Then I thought of Nigsar Doog. She’d understand. Somehow she had always understood my troubles, ever since we’d been yndlings together. I—well, I was in love with Nigsar. To me she was the most beautiful gnome, under the world.

She wouldn’t run from me. She wouldn’t be afraid. And Nigsar would help me somehow. That I knew.

I ran into a side passage, hurrying toward her lair. A telepathic message quivered through the air, making me gasp. King Breggir had sent it forth.

“All gnomes attention! Calling all gnomes! Yiggar Thro!g is practising forbidden magic! He is armed with cold iron! Enchant him on sight—he is dangerous!”

I quickened my pace, shivering. What a predicament! We gnomes are immortal, of course, but spells can be pretty uncomfortable. I sent up a silent prayer to Fafnir and either through his

intervention or by sheer good luck I encountered no one during my hasty flight. At the door of Nigsar Doog's den I paused, looking around furtively.

There was only silence in the passage. But the sound of voices came through the door. I put my hand on the latch, then hesitated as I caught a few words. Nigsar's soft tones. . . .

"No! You're lying! There must be some explanation."

And the voice of Trocklar, my bosom friend. "He's gone bad, Nigsar, that's all. Cold iron! He's to be enchanted on sight. Breggir will spell him under Vesuvius for eternity."

A soft sob made my heart ache. "No—I don't believe you, Trocklar. I know Yiggar better than that."

"Anyway, the King has spoken. You'd better forget about Yiggar Throlg."

There was subtle meaning in Trocklar's tone. Unbelieving I stood and heard Nigsar ask, "What do you mean?"

"That I want you—I, Trocklar. Yiggar never was good enough for you. And he's doomed now. Take me instead, Nigsar. Where in the Middle Kingdom could you hope to find a better gnome?"

Blind fury surged up within me. I heard Nigsar cry out, heard Trocklar's voice raised in hoarse passion.

"No—don't! *Don't* Nigsar—take your hands off me!"

As I kicked the door open I heard Trocklar mouthing, "You're mine, d'you hear? The King will give you to me if I ask him. I want you—"

He had Nigsar in his arms and she was fighting him off with all her strength. Her tunic was torn, baring one soft hairy shoulder and I went a little mad at the sight. I took one leap forward and clutched Trocklar by the neck, spinning him around to face me.

Nigsar cried, "*Yiggar!*" She pulled out of her attacker's grasp and fled into the adjoining chamber.

Trocklar's face was a study in fear and rage. "*You!* Still at large, eh? Well, you won't be for long. The King has given free leave to use every spell against you."

I couldn't speak. I choked with rage.

He threw a spell at me, and it bounced off harmlessly. I saw his eyes widen. He tried another and that too failed.

"*Loki!*" he cried. "You're invulnerable!"

I smiled, realizing what had happened. Human magic protected me. As long as I was under a human curse no other sorcery could touch me by the law of Precedence of Power, laid down by Odin when Hugin and Munin were hatched.

Then I went cold with fury again. My best friend—*ha!* Well, I had a weapon which he, like every other gnome, feared.

"Cold iron," I said deliberately. *Clink!* "Cold iron. Cold iron. Cold-cold-cold. Iron-iron-iron." *Clink-clink-clink!* At every word small round ingots fell from my mouth, rattling around our feet.

Trocklar's eyes were bulging crescents of agony. He lowered his head till only the dome was visible above his broad hunched shoulders and clawed at the air. He made hoarse choking sounds. "No," he choked. "*No!*"

"Yes," I said. "Yes, yes, yes." *Clink—clink-clink-clink!* I kept on talking, repeating meaningless words, and a small pile of cold iron grew at my feet. I drove Trocklar back into a corner.

Unable to endure the torture longer he fainted. His lumpy gnarled body collapsed in a heap and I felt the anger leave me. Eyeing the cold iron on the ground I remembered the curse upon me.

Nigsar. I entered the adjoining chamber to see her lying unconscious on her couch of pebbles. She was very lovely and I sank to my knees beside her and took her in my arms.

Her soft, muddy eyes opened. She whispered, “Yiggar—you’re all right?”

“Yes,” I said.

By Father Ymir I could have cut out my tongue! You’ve guessed what happened. I was leaning over Nigsar, my face above hers, and before I realized what had happened a lump of cold iron fell out of my mouth and bounced off Nigsar’s nose. I might have stabbed her with an iron stake for the screech she let out. She gave me one glance of unbelieving pained horror and fainted again.

I ground my teeth together, wishing I’d never have to open my lips again. Somehow I got up, brushed the iron away and kicked it into a corner, stumbled out of Nigsar’s apartments into the corridor. There I stood, dazed, and heard that faint whispering in my mind that meant King Breggir was again ordering my capture.

“Enchant him on sight!”

Well, no enchantment could harm me now—I’d found that out. But I was a pariah. No gnome would ever come near me in the future, not even Nigsar. I couldn’t ask it of her. For her own sake I must never see her again.

As I trudged along the tunnel my heart was heavy. I felt like a Gorgon. In all the Middle Kingdom there was not one who would not fear me once I opened my mouth. I was lonely for gnomish companionship, the hammer of picks and shovels in the good brown earth, the happy fights I remembered and the quiet evenings in my den. I was a gnome without a home. My mind sought feverishly for some means of escape.

I tried to summon logic to my aid. First of all I couldn’t tell any gnome what had happened to me—for the moment I spoke my listeners would flee. You may wonder why I didn’t employ telepathy but King Breggir uses a machine of some kind to transmit his thoughts when necessary and not even he can read them. *Wait!* I had an idea!

Remember the little dark pool in my den? It isn’t shallow by any means and connects with an underground sea, which is a territory of Neptune though under a provisional governorship.

The water folk aren’t afraid of cold iron, and I’d sometimes had to throw pebbles into the pool to keep them quiet at night. All the nereids want to be members of the Lorelei and the way they practise singing at all hours is a shame and a caution. But I hoped they’d forget my rudeness now.

Nevertheless I took the precaution of drawing some ichor from a vein in my arm and letting a drop or two of it trickle into the pool as I called. I’d barred the door and had reached my lair by unfrequented tunnels so I didn’t really expect interruption. I waited.

CHAPTER III

Going to Hel

I didn't actually know whether or not the sea folk could help me. Yet I had to tell someone what had happened. I felt so awfully alone. Never until that moment had I realized the necessity of other gnomes' companionship.

The black water bubbled and a green head came up, the gills flushed and quivering with excitement. "Oh, a gnome," the nereid said, staring at me, then fastening a greedy stare on the cup of ichor in my hand. "Give me that, gnome."

I drew back, "Now wait a minute," I hedged, "I want something first."

"Never knew a gnome who didn't," was the reply. "Dissatisfied dirty little wretches. Well? Want your death foretold?" That was a joke, of course, because gnomes don't die.

"I want to find out something about humans—"

"Oh-*ho!*" The nereid's fishlike eyes widened. "There's a spell on you, gnome. King Breggir do it? But no—he'd never fool with cold iron. Maybe Vulcan then?"

"Never you mind," I snapped. "Have you ever seen a human? That's all I want to know."

"Ouch!" the nereid bubbled, sinking below the surface briefly. "Careful where you lean. You're dropping cold iron on my head."

"Sorry," I said, leaning to the side. "But what about humans?"

"They don't exist. You're too old to believe in such things. Next thing you'll be telling me you believe in science."

"All right," I snapped, turning away. "Just forget it." There was a cold lump of hopelessness in my chest.

The nereid splashed excitably. "But the ichor? Don't I get any?"

I shook my head. "Why? You can't help me."

"Well—wait a minute. Maybe some other nereid can help you, gnome. Tell you what. I'll go and see, if you'll give me that ichor."

"I'll give you half," I compromised and let her have it, though I was forced to yank the cup from her hand when she tried to gulp all the contents down at once. I'll say one thing—nereids keep their word. It was scarcely ten minutes before she was back with a bedraggled companion, blind in one eye and with scars all over her. She could only mumble unintelligibly till I showed her the ichor. Then she brightened.

"Gimme! *Gimme!*"

The first nereid said, "This is Sahaya. She's crazy—tried to swim between Scylla and Charybdis a few centuries ago and never had a lick of sense since. But sometimes she'll talk about humans."

"Humans," Sahaya mumbled, scratching her gills. "They're real. *I* know. I know where the Drowned come from too. Before they come out of their chrysalis and come below they're humans."

"Hear that?" the first nereid giggled. "Looney as a sea-urchin." She flipped her tail and dived indignantly as I shushed at her.

Sahaya was still watching my cup of ichor. "For me?" she begged.

"If you can help me. Notice anything funny about me?"

"The cold iron, you mean? An enchantment."

“A human did it,” I said, trying to ignore the continual *clink-clink* at my feet.

Sahaya cackled and blew bubbles. She bobbed up and down gently in the pool. “See? See? There *are* such things!”

It was difficult trying to get Sahaya to understand what I wanted but I managed to at last. She squeezed her eyes shut.

“I don’t know. I used to swim up almost to the Light. I’ve heard things. But where you can go to get a human curse taken away is more than I can tell.”

“You—you’ve heard things?”

“Voices. Some say I’m mad, gnome, but I know what I know. Voices speak to me out of the sea. I hear—humans—talking.”

A little chill went through me at that. But I kept on doggedly. “Maybe you’ve heard them mention something that might help. If a human gets in trouble”—fantastic thought!—“how would he get out of it?”

Sahaya’s answer surprised me. “Ah, trouble, yes. They do. I’ve heard them. Their voices sometimes rise with pain and annoyance but their problems are always solved. It is Hel who aids them.”

“Hel? Loki’s child—the sister of Fenris-wolf?”

“Yes indeed. If a human is in trouble he is advised to go to Hel for aid. I presume he does though—well, I don’t really know.”

My voice shook with excitement. “If I went to Hel now do you suppose she could take off the curse?”

But Sahaya could only shrug her gills for answer. She saw the cup of ichor again and went to pieces. I tried to question her again but all she could say was, “Give me that!” So I did and she sank, drooling and bubbling, back into the depths.

I had made up my mind. I’d go to Hel. The way was known to me, of course, though gnomes do little traveling. But the earth is our domain.

What suitable bribe could I take Hel, queen of the Underworld? I had no idea. Finally I ended up by taking nothing at all, determined to throw myself on her mercy. Not that she had any or she wouldn’t have been Hel—but my brain just wasn’t functioning any more.

I slipped out of my den. The Middle Kingdom was in an uproar. It was a wonder I wasn’t discovered though my way led into an unfrequented district where the Well of Tartarus is. I just climbed over the well-curb and dropped. It’s an interesting descent but too well known to every gnome for me to take the time to describe now.

So at the lower opening I called on Air and Darkness to carry me into the Fields and there they left me before the gates and went wailing back into the under-abyss. The granite walls of Dis rose up to the red lava sky. There was not a sound as I stood before those towering ramparts, watching the iron gates. How could I enter Dis?

Well, before I had a chance to think a gigantic three-headed shaggy monster charged at me, barking like mad, his fangs dripping with saliva, his six eyes glaring. Cerberus is a discomfoting sight always and I’d forgotten to bring him any cakes or bones. He couldn’t injure me seriously but his teeth could hurt a lot, so I waited till he’d come close and then tried a magic spell on myself.

At the last moment I remembered that I was under a human curse but it was too late to do anything about it then. For some reason my own enchantment worked where the spells of

other gnomes had failed. Perhaps I was *inside* the curse and that's why I succeeded in turning myself into a flea.

Cerberus stopped, staring, and I jumped on his back. Perhaps it was pure meanness but I bit and bit hard and then regretted it as Cerberus started to scratch like an earthquake. I shut my eyes and clung to a hair and at last the tremors subsided. Then I settled down to wait.

They feed Cerberus at sundown. It didn't seem very long before the dog turned and pranced back toward Dis. A little door at the bottom of one of the gates opened and closed behind us. Then everything was quite still.

If I'd cared to look around, I could have seen Dis. But I kept my eyes turned down. The stillness affected me unpleasantly and I knew from whose loins Hel's father had sprung in the gray dawn of the Universe when Ymir's roars had not yet died. Dis is not a good place to be in. . . .

Then I knew I was with Hel. I turned back into my own gnomish shape and jumped off Cerberus' back. He turned on me with a snarl but paused instead and slunk into a corner, where he crouched, regarding me balefully out of his six red-rimmed eyes.

I got down very respectfully on my knees before Hel. The vast chamber in which I stood wasn't very long or broad but it went up and up to a tapering cone far above. It was like the interior of a candle-flame.

I heard a voice say, "You may stand, gnome."

I obeyed, but stared at the floor.

"You may look at me, gnome."

Hel is all white, like a woman of lambent snow. Her flowing hair isn't faded at all—it's naturally white and so are her lips and her eyes. She had the sweetly round face of a virgin girl and a very tender smile—but her eyes were far and far away. She sat leaning forward slightly on a plain onyx throne, her hands clasped about one knee. She wore light.

"Do not speak," she said. "Let me read your mind instead. I feel a curse and cold iron. . . ."

I wasn't afraid of Hel somehow. But I felt very little, very much alone, in that vast tall room in Dis.

At last she sighed and shook her head. "I cannot help you, gnome. My power does not reach above the surface of the earth."

She saw my despondency. "Here is one who may help you if he chooses. It is my father."

"Loki?" I thought.

"Loki the Laugher, whose children were his greatest jests. Aye," the dim, soft voice, went on, "sister to the snake and the wolf am I—and child of the traitor god. But not Fenris nor Midgard serpent can help you, gnome. Loki may. Go to him.

"No," she answered my unspoken thought. "You need take him no bribe. None would tempt the Laugher. He does what he wishes and is kind and cruel by turns. You may find him when he is kind. If so he will aid you."

I bowed my head in grateful thanks. And the white woman said, "I give you warning. Beware of Loki's jests. Now I send you to him."

Somehow I knew that Hel's hand hovered over my head. I had a horrible unreasoning dread that those cold fingers might touch me. They would be very soft and gentle, I knew, but I cowered down nevertheless.

Then magic took me and whirled me away. The tall room in Dis was gone. Hel vanished. I stood on yielding gray cloud with a laughing giant who reclined before me, squinting into the

sunlight.

CHAPTER IV

Gno Place Like Gnome

He propped himself up on one elbow and stared at me, a huge redbearded fox of a man with sly eyes and a wide mouth.

“Ho!” he chuckled. “Hel told me you were coming. Well, I am Loki!”

I bowed, but dared not speak with the curse on me. Loki laughed again.

“Do you think I fear cold iron? But you need not say anything—your mind is open to my eyes. You met a human and he cursed you. You wish the curse removed. Well, that is simple enough.”

Loki lifted his great arm in a commanding gesture. For a space nothing happened while I stole surreptitious glances around. But there was nothing to see save the carpet of gray cloud that stretched to the horizon under a blue sky where Apollo rode high.

Silently I wondered. Had I caught Loki in a kind mood or in a cruel one? The red god laughed. He had caught my thought. He nodded to me reassuringly.

“Wait. I’ll take off the curse. Humans exist, gnome, but it’s very seldom that any of them pass the Veil. Sometimes we see them as phantoms, dimly and vaguely. Yet they have their own world.” Loki squinted at me. “Humans shouldn’t practise magic. I don’t like it. Well—”

Somehow I felt a little tug of uneasiness at his words. It was gone immediately as a dark shape rose up through the floor of shifting cloud.

It was a gray woman, a withered ancient crone. She held a spool of threads in one knobby hand. Silently she selected one thread from the rest and gave it to Loki. Then she sank down and vanished without trace. The mists closed above her cowed head.

Loki stretched the thread between his fingers. “The Norns weave the destiny of humans. This thread will lead you to the one who put the spell upon you. But you must take him a bribe or he will not take off the curse.”

“What bribe?” I asked. Cold iron fell down through the floor-clouds.

Loki grinned. “I’ll provide you with that. Just do as I say and you’ll be all right.”

“Well—” I hesitated. “What shall I do with the thread afterward?”

“Eh? Oh—just let go of it. It’ll snap back into its place on the Norns’ spool.” Loki’s squinted eyes held a look I didn’t like. He resembled a fox more than ever. But before I could say another word the god waved his hand and I went spinning and dropping through the gray cloud-masses. I found I had the thread, one end of it, clutched tightly in my fist.

And somehow, I thought I heard Loki’s voice whispering, “Humans shouldn’t practise magic. . .”

The clouds were gone. I felt solid wood under my feet. It was dark but gradually my eyes accustomed themselves to the gloom. The moon was shining through rectangular gaps in what I took to be a wall.

I was in a cavern—a huge square one made of wood. There was the same crawling heat down my spine I had first felt when I encountered the human. This must be one of their dens!

I held the thread in a sweaty palm. Its other end I couldn’t see though it seemed to stretch up and up.

There were big square objects piled up all around me, with lettering on them. And signs in some alien language which nevertheless bore a strange resemblance to Ancient Elf. I couldn’t

understand them but I still recall how they looked, and jotted them down from memory afterward, for curiosity's sake.

They looked like this:

NO SMOKING! DANGER! HIGH EXPLOSIVES!

Loki's disembodied voice said in my mind, "That box beside you—"

"Box?" The word was unfamiliar to me.

"There." My gaze was dragged to a wooden container which held dozens of neatly-packed roundish objects. Cold iron! But they couldn't harm me while I was under the curse.

"Take one," Loki said. I obeyed, examining the thing with curiosity. But I didn't know what it was.

I remember the legend on the side of the box. It looked like *hand grenades*, whatever that meant.

Loki's voice came, with an undercurrent of laughter. "The Norns' thread will lead you to your human. When you face him take out that little pin in the side of the—bribe—and throw it at his feet. After that, you've only to ask him to take off the curse and he'll be glad to oblige. Good luck, little gnome," the red god ended—and his voice fell silent.

I felt almost happy again. Soon I'd be free from the doom of cold iron. Once that curse was removed I could face anything else—even King Breggir's anger. So I shut my eyes and waited.

I felt the destiny-thread jerk me through dimensions. When I looked again, I was in—
A den of humans!

No wonder I clutched the bribe to my breast, shivering with fright. I can't begin to describe the place. It was all square and curves with the most horrible alien colors you can imagine. A place where the blackest sort of science might be practised!

I saw the human at the same time he saw me. He let out a perfectly indescribable sound and dropped the bottle he was holding. "*Again!*" he yelled. "Or is it another one?"

"I'm the same gnome," I said placatingly. "You ought to know that after what you did."

He retrieved the bottle and drank out of it. "Ah—what *I* did? I don't get you."

"The curse. The one you put on me. Cold iron, you know." And now he noticed the round pebbles that were falling from my mouth. His eyes got large.

"I—*ulp*—I did that?"

"Yes."

Clink.

"Oh," he said. "I'm sorry. Drunk or dreaming, I apologize."

"Won't you take it off?" I begged.

He blinked at me. "Take it off?"

"The curse."

"Look," he said. "I'd be glad to after what you did for me but I don't know how."

I let out a squeak of disappointment. "But you've *got* to! I've brought you a bribe."

"Glory," said the human, "I don't want any more. I've got enough now. Those rubies you left were plenty."

I stared—and suddenly remembered the bag of rubies I'd abandoned during my hasty flight from the first interview with the creature. He'd found them then.

“Thousands,” the Man gloated cryptically, waving the bottle. “I’m living in a penthouse now. I’m writing a novel. A good one too—earthy. The old Hemingway touch. Those rubies—well, thanks.”

“You’re quite welcome,” I said politely. “But you must be able to take off the curse. You put it on me just by saying cold iron would drop out of my mouth.”

He took another drink, considered, and nodded. “It’s worth trying. Okay. I take the curse off you.”

“Thank you,” I said experimentally, and then stood with my mouth wide open. *No cold iron had dropped out of it!*

“It—it worked!” I gasped. “It *worked!* Thank Loki!”

Perhaps I was a bit hysterical, but for the moment I really forgot I was talking to a human. It was so wonderful just to be able to speak without iron falling from my lips at every word. I—well, I told the Man everything. And he sat and listened, still drinking out of the bottle. Soon he got out another one and started on that.

Finally he took the bribe out of my hand and considered it thoughtfully. “You’d better let me have that,” he said. “I’ll dispose of this thing. Uh—thanks for bringing it. A grenade’s an unusual present at least.”

“The thread,” I reminded him, holding up the Norn-thread. He didn’t touch it. He looked very white.

“Yes. Just—let it go, will you?”

I obeyed. The thread snapped out of my hand and vanished. The human drew a deep breath and I saw that his lips were bleeding. “Okay,” he said after a second. “I guess I’m safe. What’s next on the program?”

“I’m going back to the Middle Kingdom,” I said. “If I can find my way. Could you, maybe, show me the hole I came out of last time?”

“In Central Park? Sure. But you say King Breggir’s mad at you?”

I shrugged philosophically. “He may forgive me. If not, I’ll just have to be a salamander for awhile.”

But the human was thinking. “Yeah. Maybe I can give you a bribe to take him. Here. . .” He went out, came back with a sack and filled it up with bottles that he took out of a small den in the wall. “This is better than warm mud. It may soften the old so-and-so up a bit.”

“I—I can’t thank you enough,” I said, and my voice trembled with emotion. “Somehow you—you’re almost like a gnome to me.”

He shuddered at that, though I can’t imagine why, and took my hand. “We’ll go down in the service elevator. We’re just across the street from the park so—”

I kept my eyes tightly shut and let the human guide me. It was better, I felt, that I did not see too much of this strange human-world. And at last I stood at the edge of the hole with the sack of bottles over my shoulder.

The Man squeezed my hand. “Good luck,” he said. “I’ll never believe this, of course, but it seems quite real to me just now.” He eyed the sack. “Can you spare one of those bottles?”

I gave it to him and he drank a good deal of the liquid in it. After that he fell on his face and didn’t move so I crawled down into the hole, dragging the sack after me. And hours later I was in the Middle Kingdom. . . .

There isn’t much more to tell. I had to talk fast or I’d have been turned into a salamander like winking—but the minute Breggir found I’d brought him a bribe he softened up. He mixed

a cocktail of warm mud and human-elixir and grinned so widely the top of his head almost came off.

He never believed my story, of course. He thought I'd found the bottles where some ancient godling had buried them but he said the stuff was better than nectar. Not that the old gopher had ever tasted nectar in his life but I didn't contradict him.

Anyway Breggir forgave me and so did my dear Nigsar Doog. We are to be married within the month. It will be a great feast to which all the Middle Kingdom is invited. I have spared no expense and mud will flow like lava.

What if the gnomes whisper that there's insanity in my family—me, Yiggar Throlg, whose ichor has come down from Yggdrasil and Ymir? I don't mind, really.

I'm completely happy with Nigsar, and my recent dreadful experiences have almost faded from my mind.

Well—that isn't exactly true. My dreams have been troubled. I—I dream of—*humans!*

[The end of *The Odyssey of Yiggar Throlg* by Henry Kuttner (as C. H. Liddell)]