

THE
CRYSTAL
EMPIRE

THE CRYSTAL EMPIRE

L. NEIL SMITH

PHOENIX PICK

an imprint of



Rockville, Maryland

***The Crystal Empire* copyright © 1986, 2010 L. Neil Smith.** All rights reserved. This book may not be copied or reproduced, in whole or in part, by any means, electronic, mechanical or otherwise without written permission from the publisher except by a reviewer who may quote brief passages in a review. Cover copyright © 2009 Arc Manor, LLC. Manufactured in the United States of America.

Tarikian, TARK Classic Fiction, Arc Manor, Arc Manor Classic Reprints, Phoenix Pick, Phoenix Rider, Manor Thrift and logos associated with those imprints are trademarks or registered trademarks of Arc Manor Publishers, Rockville, Maryland. All other trademarks and trademarked names are properties of their respective owners.

This book is presented as is, without any warranties (implied or otherwise) as to the accuracy of the production, text or translation.

ISBN: 978-1-60450-452-1

**www.PhoenixPick.com
Great Science Fiction at Great Prices**

**Visit the Author's Website at:
<http://www.lneilsmith.org>**

**Visit the Author's Page at Phoenix Pick:
<http://www.E1Neil.com>**

Published by Phoenix Pick
an imprint of Arc Manor
P. O. Box 10339
Rockville, MD 20849-0339
www.ArcManor.com

Printed in the United States of America / United Kingdom

The phrase in Chapter XXIII, “The Sword of God”, is used with the consent of my friend, colleague, and so-far-unindicted co-conspirator, J. Neil Schulman.

FOR PHILIP B. SULLIVAN,
wherever you are

γ

CONTENTS

PROLOGUE: a.d. 1349 The Rat Crusade	11
SURA THE FIRST: 1395-1400 A.H. The Land-Ship	21
I: Young Sedrich	23
II: Mistress of the Sisterhood	28
III: The Cult	35
IV: Frae Hethristochter	44
V: <i>Murderer</i>	57
VI: The Twisted Sails	59
VII: The Sacred Heart	66
VIII: The Fiery Cross	73
IX: Fire-Tithe	81
SURA THE SECOND: 1410-1418 A.H. The Agreement of Islam	87
X: Ayesha	89
XI: Rumors of War	93
XII: Mochamet al Rotshild	99
XIII: The Artichoke	104
XIV: A Suitable Token	112
XV: By Arrangement of the Caliph	119
XVI: A Party of Every Section	127
SURA THE THIRD: 1420 A.H.— Sedrich Fireclaw	129
XVII: The Silver Chest	131
XVIII: The Pillar of Fire	139
XIX: The Ship of the Desert	148
XX: The Botherhood of Man	155
XXI: Delicate Negotiations	162
XXII: Oswald	170
XXIII: The Sword of God	181
XXIV: Knife Thrower	190
SURA THE FOURTH: 1420 A.H.— The Voyageurs	197
XXV: The Great Blue Mountains	199
XXVI: Traveling Short Bear	204
XXVII: Smoke Upon the Wind	212
XXVIII: Factions of the Ancients	218

XXIX: Blood-Haze	223
XXX: Lishabha	228
XXXI: The Aspen Grove	235
XXXII: The Breath of God	243
SURA THE FIFTH: 1420 A.H.— The Saw-Toothed Sword	249
XXXIII: The Copper-Kilts	251
XXXIV: Imperial Captive	258
XXXV: Audience with the Sun	264
XXXVI: Ship of the Cloud-Tops	274
XXXVII: The Wanderer	282
SURA THE SIXTH: 1420 A.H.— The Crystal Empire	293
XXXVIII: The Ice-Mountain	295
XXXIX: The Enlightenment of Oln Woeck	304
XL: In the Palace of the Sun	313
XLI: Spire of Dreamers	321
XLII: The Tree of Might-Be	329
XLIII: Resonance	335
XLIV: Bribery	342
XLV: The Spy	351
SURA THE SEVENTH: 1420 A.H.— The Hollow-Handled Knife	359
XLVI: The Bride of God	361
XLVII: The Blinded Eye	367
XLVIII: Flowery Death	374

PROLOGUE: A.D. 1349
THE RAT CRUSADE

“And he that owneth the house shall come and tell the priest, saying, it seemeth to me there is as it were a plague in the house. Then the priest shall command that they empty the house...that all that is in the house be not made unclean.... And he shall cause the house to be scraped within round about, and they shall pour out the dust...into an unclean place.”—*Leviticus 14:35-41*

THEY OBLIGED THE CARPENTERS to watch.

Gathering his robe against the January cold, Wilhelm of Glarus was likewise an unwilling witness, the prisoner of his own eyes. They refused to tear themselves from the fine new house—a remarkable, windowless structure of two stories’ height—standing, daubed with pitch instead of plaster and unpainted, upon a rocky islet where the Rhine bent itself toward the faraway ocean. Neither were the scraps and shavery of its making cleared away, instead being swept beneath its open foundation, augmented with many a wicker basket of forest-gathered kindling.

Snowflakes, impelled by savage, pine-laden gusts, stung exposed flesh. Wilhelm’s rough-woven garment afforded scant protection. Yet the marketplatz above the river overran with a multitude little better clothed, under no such compulsion as the house-carpenters suffered—save, perhaps, of the variety that tormented Wilhelm.

Before the Rathaus, which dominated the wind-drifted square, city fathers, arrayed in heavy furs and ornate necklaces, nodded. A ring-mailed officer shouted; armsmen lowered long-shafted pikes, shepherding a clot of shivering, bedraggled forms—not members of the waiting throng—toward the century-old stone bridge. The bridge was the city’s proudest achievement, the first in history to span the Rhine.

The community of Basle’s unbelievers would this day make penitence for the Great Mortality.

Even as a third part of the town’s inhabitants—indeed, a third of all

Christendom—were being thrown into shallow common trenches, warning had arrived from Savoy, in the form of confessions extracted by torture. Messengers from Toledo, the tale was told, bore poison in little leather packets for sprinkling in the wells and springs of Europe. In the Rathaus, a decree was passed forbidding Jews to settle in the town for two hundred years. The problem, it was understood, was what to do with those hundreds whose fathers had been born here, who possessed shops, tools, property—and a wealth of gold and silver.

Wilhelm shuddered. He was a small man, of fragile build, with awkward hands and feet, a narrow, bony chest. His pale blue eyes, watering in the cold, were set too close beside the prominence of his nose. Yet there was kindness in them, wisdom beyond his twenty-three years. Almost he regretted his tonsure, which hadn't been required of him absolutely. His head ached where the freezing wind rasped across his shaven scalp.

In Avignon, Pope Clement VI, in the sternest of promulgations, had forbidden, upon pain of excommunication, measures like the one this moment transpiring before the young priest's horrified eyes. Still, Clement was just one Pope of two, and Avignon further away than the ocean.

The march across the ancient span began.

It was difficult to stand against the merciless wind, which roared unimpeded along the water, without leaning into it. The cold was terrible, the armsmen ungentle. Yet only the children cried as pike-points pricked them, as frozen stone cut unshod feet. Their mothers made to quiet them, but it was effort wasted.

Reaching a point where rough siege ladders slanted against the footings, they were compelled to climb in their hundreds onto the barren surface of the island. Several lost their grip upon the crude-lashed poles, falling to the cruel rock. The armsmen forced the living to drag the shattered dead until they came to the house, into which, by pairs and dozens, many were already crowded. When it was full, and none save armsmen and a single carpenter stood visible upon the rock, that unlucky artisan raised his hammer and let it fall, again and again, nailing the one door shut.

Some armsmen had brought torches, wind-whipped and showering sparks against the pitch-daubed windowless walls. These they thrust beneath the foundation, amidst the scraps and kindling. The house caught, flame lashing out and upward. Even across this distance, and the river, Wilhelm could feel the heat of it upon his face.

More than the wind was moaning now. He could hear the victims calling upon their god. Their prayers sounded distressingly like his own (and were received with the same divine indifference). Noise—the shrilling

sound of hundreds of trapped men, frightened women, helpless children, screaming out their last breath as muscles shriveled, twisted, hair singed into glowing beads upon their scalps, burning its way to the bone, their very eyes bursting in the furnace—

2

“Willi! Willi!”

Rough hands shook his shoulders. Drenched with foul-smelling sweat and a fatigue untouched by stolen sleep, Wilhelm sat up on a narrow pallet, propping his elbows beneath him. He blinked—standing over him was an armsman, like the ones who had...but that had been a year ago, he realized with returning consciousness. He’d been suffering again through one of his recurring nightmares.

This wasn’t his familiar cell, but a broad, high-ceilinged chamber which in the daytime would fill with light from arch-topped many-colored windows. At present they tossed back scattered shards of candlelight, absorbed by the amorphous writhing forms which covered the flagging of the minster nave. The place reeked of burnt tallow, fevered bodies, incense, and death. To think how he’d complained within himself when it had merely smelled of mildew!

Weight settled upon his chest. These lumps were people, his parishioners, now Father Albert was gone. Sounds of doomed souls suffering and dying filled his every waking hour, as well as every moment of his sleep. Yet there was naught he could do for the still-living whose plague-racked bodies surrounded him, crowding the ancient church. He had tried. Having fallen at last into a guilty and exhausted sleep, during frantic attempts to comfort victims of this freshened onslaught of the Mortality, he admitted to himself that his limited strength would have been best spent attempting to dispose of the mounting dead.

There was a cough.

He looked up at the travel-stained warrior who’d awakened him. “What wish you of me, soldier?”

The nightmare had evaporated, giving way to the horror of reality. Still, this was no faceless, obedient murderer. He knew this man, and well. Despite their mutual weariness, each afforded the other a grin.

“By the good God, Willi, I’ve ground five horses into butcher-bait getting here. You’d damned well better recognize me!”

“Profaning in a sanctuary,” answered Wilhelm, shaking his head. “So this is what has become of my big brother Emil. Like every young Swiss youth he longed to go away from his native Glarus years ago, questing for wealth and glory. Unlike most, he managed to accomplish it—the leaving, anyway. Now he is a mercenary, spreading death and destruction in a world already overflowing with it.”

Wilhelm wasn’t certain whether he spoke in seriousness or in jest. He was too tired to decide.

Pulling a soiled helmet-coif over his sweaty head, Emil responded, “For the moment, good friar, I’m a simple messenger—though ’tis mine to wonder what’s become of my *little* brother. ’Twould seem I’ve been sent here, bearing personal regards—for him alone—from none other than the Pope in Avignon. Nor shall he—Willi, not the Pope—receive the least syllable of them till he explains—to the head of his family, I might add—how such a thing can come to pass!”

It was an old joke between them. Emil was elder by less than a year. Their father had died before the younger brother had been born, his death a gangrenous agony from a woodcutter’s accident.

With great effort, Wilhelm climbed to his feet, muscles stiff not so much from overuse as from months of working their owner’s will against a steady burden of futility. He felt terrible. Nor, despite deepest wishes to the contrary, could he keep from examining himself, minute to minute, tongue, throat, armpits, and groin, for the signs of incipient disease. He supposed it was more commendable than fleeing to a country villa, refusing, as many priests and doctors were doing elsewhere, to enter the presence of victims of the Mortality.

Emil at his side, he left the cavernous nave, at last finding a quiet alcove. Here they could talk.

Unlike his brother, Emil was a big man, hardened by combat, his height and breadth exaggerated by soldier’s trappings. Bits and pieces of the uniform Wilhelm recognized as French. A scabbarded two-handed sword—another sacrilege in this place—slapped at Emil’s thigh. A crescent-guarded basilard, insignia of the Swiss mercenary, spanned the small of his back.

He was dirty; also, he smelled of the last animal he’d ridden to death getting here.

The monk was too exhausted for much curiosity about the message from Clement VI, too exhausted to explain it had been unexpected only in its means of being delivered. But he was too exhausted for many of the things which each day he’d accomplished nonetheless.

PROLOGUE: THE RAT CRUSADE

Relating to his brother the events upon the island in the Rhine, he complained, "I was cursed, Emil! Although I prayed for no more than to be a humble servant to my God, I was burdened with a selfish lust to *know*. I returned from the fire with two strange notions. The first was that the Great Mortality represented neither the curse of God upon Man, nor a Jewish 'well-poisoning' plot against Christians, but a natural affliction of some kind.

"The second was that there ought to be some way to prove it."

3

Old Father Albert had never uttered a word of protest. He, too, had been horrified by the mass incineration of the canton's Jews, against the specific injunction of the Holy Father.

In the next days, Wilhelm spent much time meditating upon the Mortality. The boys' mother had always hated rats, believing them a source of illness and corruption. It was, at the least, a place to begin. Wilhelm resolved to put his mother's belief to trial.

With the greatest imaginable pains, he caused the minster to be sealed, flushing the cellars with fire and water, following in the wainscoting with vinegar and pungent incenses, bribing small boys to maintain a constant vigilance against the rodents, killing a few which had escaped the purge—the many which chewed their way back in—with their little crossbows, burning the remains without touching them.

The building was scoured after each Mass. During this time, not one soul who resided upon the minster site—other friars, the sexton's family, servants and retainers—was afflicted.

Realizing some would claim it was the holiness of the church which protected its inhabitants, he persuaded others in the town—some few who suffered the same pangs of conscience he and Father Albert did—to repeat the prophylaxis upon their own houses, quoting Scripture where plain argument failed. The results, save those whose occupations took them into buildings unprotected, were the same as at the minster.

With the approval of his abbot, he wrote a letter to the Holy Father in Avignon. The reply Wilhelm received exceeded his most sanguine expectations. Having tried in vain to stem the tide of anti-Jewish sentiment himself, Clement was overjoyed to receive Wilhelm's suggestion that, whatever its unknown fundamental nature, the Mortality was transmitted

neither by Jews nor evil spirits, but somehow by rats.

By that time, Wilhelm, suspecting fleas rather than the rodents who carried them—*“And he that is to be cleansed...shall shave all his hair off his head and his beard and his eyebrows, even all his hair he shall shave off, and he shall wash his clothes, also he shall wash his flesh in water, and he shall be clean”*—had begun to devise experiments afresh.

4

“Our mother is dead, Willi, three weeks since. The house lies empty, the door swinging upon a single hinge.”

Emil coughed again, spat upon the floor.

“This sheds some light upon one mystery, at least.” He rubbed his temple. “Not much. Willi, I was instructed by the Pope himself to tell you a peculiar story of my own.”

The corridor of which their alcove was a part was still in darkness. At its ends, however, Wilhelm discerned the light of the coming dawn. Together, they rose and walked, coming to an unglazed window which overlooked the flagstones of a parapet-walk below, and, past it, the valley of the Rhine.

The air was clean and cold. Wilhelm needed it.

Almost a year had gone by since the fire, since the nightmare began coming. He’d labored toward its exorcism, yet still it came. Perhaps it always would.

But perhaps what Emil had to say might banish it.

“A private army—of which your big brother happened to be part—was called upon July last to ring the wicked port of Marseilles. D’you know where that is? You do? You surprise me with your worldliness, little brother. Anyway, we marched inward with great clamor, beating weapons upon shields, with the object of driving rats, hundreds of ’em, thousands, numbers which I in my ignorance don’t know how to name, through cunning wicker chutes into the hold of an ancient-hulled old tub at the quayside.”

He leaned out the window to spit.

“We were paid off and dispersed, but some time afterward your Clement requested of our captains lists of men among the Free Companies at Marseilles who were from Switzerland, in particular Basle or Glarus.

“There was I, of course, and here I am.”

Lifting his leg with an effort, he tucked thumb and forefinger into an age-darkened boot-top, levering out a folded scrap of soiled parchment.

PROLOGUE: THE RAT CRUSADE

"I can attest," he told his brother, "this is a letter from Clement, for he wrote it as I stood before him, there, 'twixt those great blasted braziers he keeps going day and night to fend off the plague. He gave it thus into my hand to give to you.

"Here it is."

There was no signature, no salutation. Wilhelm recognized the writing:

I eschew certain proprieties, valued friend, with an intention to preserve the sanctity of our converse from prying eyes—also, as you'll see, your esteemed person. My messenger will relate a tale of the Marseilles "campaign." Others of my court discerned in your inquiries the opportunity of accomplishing what no Crusade has.

The vessel, I've determined by distasteful methods, was crewed with convicts who'd survived the Pest and were thought immune. Its destination was the Saracen shore, the object to bring the Pest upon the people there. The vessel itself was no great loss, a derelict, its keel full of Cornish ballast, the detritus of ages in the tin trade.

Yet, once put to sea, in some mysterious fashion the character of the Pest malevolently altered. Each soul aboard perished in the most horrible manner—I've seen their dead faces. Storm-driven, the death-ship fetched up on the Genoese coast, its nonhuman passengers escaping to sow new terror which we suffer in increased numbers.

Wilhelm paused.

Before this evil intervention, the Mortality, what Clement called "the Pest," had been slaying between a third part and half of the population. Sometimes it seemed that rats and fleas had naught to do with it, that one could breathe it in and die before the victim one took it from. There were rumors of calamity from Iceland to the farthest eastern reaches of the known world.

Wilhelm, struggling now to save a pitiable handful of villagers, knew the New Death, unlike the old, was killing horses, cattle, even housecats, emptying the land.

I've excommunicated the instigators [Clement continued], cursing their souls to eternal damnation. Too late it is to prevent the perversion of your discoveries, my son, but from what I believe to be my deathbed I've ordained publication of our correspondence, of the truth concerning the attempted extermination, not of the Saracens alone, but of Christendom, of the known world, and beyond.

The universe we know disintegrates about us. Those "Crusaders" beyond my reach spin superstitious fantasies that such things as the use of clockworks, waterwheels, and gunpowder are responsible for the raging Pestilence. Every

manner of tale is being placed in currency to oppose the truth. Of those who still care, many prefer the lies.

I caution you, friend, against the possibilities of assassination. Those there are who wouldn't have their story contradicted. They may have followed my messenger to you, but I believed it important you hear the truth from me.

"Know you the contents of this letter, Emil?" Wilhelm asked after he had read it through twice.

Looking up as if just awakened, his brother shook his head. "When have I'd time to learn reading? What's it say—or ought I ask?"

Wilhelm read the letter to his brother, the grim expression on his face soon matched by strain upon Emil's countenance.

"If this be true," the friar mused, "it would explain why so many more are afflicted than was the case ere now."

Emil coughed. "The land's passing empty, Willi, 'tween Avignon and this place, with naught but ragged penitents whipping themselves from town to town."

Wilhelm frowned. Flagellants appeared everywhere, trying to expiate the sin of all mankind—and perhaps the Mortality itself—through self-mortification. Authorities considered it heresy, an attempt at direct intercession, rather than through offices of the Church.

"In truth," Emil continued, "Basle's well off by comparison. 'Tis as if an invisible army's murdered all of Christendom. The world's dying. 'Tis the end."

Wilhelm shook his head. "Yet the world began once with a single man and woman. If a single man and woman should survive, my brother, it can begin again, can it not?"

The soldier pushed away from the window.

"Don't speak to me of such things, brother. I left a woman—did you know I'd married?—I left Jeannette to do this errand for your Pope. I don't know whether she or our two small children yet live. Knowing's more important than you can imagine."

Wilhelm placed a hand upon his brother's shoulder. "I did not know that you had married." He shook his head. "But I am a man, am I not? Though I be bound by vows of celibacy, I can imagine—"

"No, Wilhelm, you can't." Steadying himself against the window casement, Emil looked into his brother's eyes. "You see, I'm hoping—for I'll no longer pray—that they're safely *dead*!"

Wilhelm stepped backward, aghast. "May god forgive you, Emil! Why?"

"Because"—Emil peered up the corridor and down, left hand reaching for the crescent pommel of his basilard—"your friend Clement's correct.

PROLOGUE: THE RAT CRUSADE

'Twas a near thing, my making it here. An assassin's indeed come with the intention of silencing you.

"God be damned!"

In a single fluid motion, Emil thrust his broad-bladed dagger upward, to the bar-guard, through the arch of his brother's lower jaw. Wilhelm was almost relieved when the blow fell.

Emil spoke to one who could no longer hear him. "You see, Willi, 'twas his own messenger, this assassin. Jeannette and our babies're prisoners of his enemies, threatened with torture."

Tears streaming down his face, Emil gave one more cough, spat blackened blood.

He fell across his brother's body and was still.

It was the *last* Year of Our Lord, 1349.

SURA THE FIRST: 1395-1400 AH.
THE LAND-SHIP



“...so let those who go against His command beware,
lest a trial befall them...”—*The Holy Koran*, Sura XXIV, *Light*

I: YOUNG SEDRICH

“Prosperous are the believers who in their prayers are humble...and who preserve their trusts and their covenant....Those are the inheritors....”

—*The Koran*, Sura XXIII

“**I** *WON’T!*”

The boy stood half inside the rowboat, one bare foot within the green translucent hull, the other on the dampened planking where the little craft lay canted. Scattered about him on the dock were his father’s tools. Like a quarterstaff clutched in his hands—one anchored at his left hip, the other outthrust before him—he wielded the long sculling oar he’d hoped his idea might make unnecessary.

The still air smelled rich with salt and iodine, the spicy stench of marine decay. The sun was hot, for a summer morning with the dew just off the sparse sand grass. Skipping from unrippled water, it assaulted unprotected eyes. The boy’s fair skin was reddened by it, lightly blistered and peeling, as seemed natural to him.

Better than the fish-belly pallor of this foul-odored old man who confronted him.

Answer there came, crack-voiced and wheedling: “Here, boy, stay thy hand! Too young thou art to pay the penalty thou beg’st for!”

The speaker was an undersized, wizened individual, his bony figure draped in unbleached fabric. His narrow-crested skull, with its ink-and-needle imprints at the temples, was scraped smooth. Where his simple garment left a shoulder bare, a crosshatch of ancient scars offended the eye. Two others, likewise swathed, tattooed, and shaven, stood behind him. They were younger, differing in their greater bulk—as well as in the lesser number of their scars.

Their leader leaned forward, stretched out a ropy-veined hand. “Give me that oar!”

Overhead a gull wheeled, mocking them both with its squeals.

Sedrich Sedrichsohn was big for a boy of eleven. He complied with the order—after his own fashion—thrusting the blade-edge into his tormentor's solar plexus. Making retching noises, the small man folded, staggering backward, his hands clutched over the insulted portion of his anatomy.

The man's companions each took a threatening step forward.

Sedrich recovered from the thrust, assumed a firmer stance straddling the gunwale.

He let the oar whistle in a defiant circle over his head.

They stopped.

Still doubled, the man looked up, hatred burning in his yellow eyes. "Why," he gasped, "you young—"

Behind them, heavy footsteps vibrated through the pier.

"What in the name of Exile d'you think you're about, Oln Woeck?"

It was a rich, rasping bass which interrupted them, followed by the whispery ring of hammered steel leaving a brass throat. Making more noise with his moccasin-shod feet than necessary, a giant form strode past the corner of the village boatshed. The wolfhide shoulder band of an empty half-scabard crossed his shaggy chest.

From one huge fist he swung a length of polished metal, high as a tall man's breastbone, broad as a big man's hand, sharp-edged as an old man's memories of yesterday.

Beside him trotted a pair of huge black curly-pelted dogs.

Scar-backed Oln Woeck straightened with visible effort.

"I greet thee, Sedrich Oswaldsohn, renowned slayer of Red Men, *and* thy greatsword *Murderer*. This contraption of thy son's devising"—he indicated the boat, upon which young Sedrich had begun to work some alterations—"is forbidden by the mandate of His suffering."

Ignoring the formal salutation, Old Sedrich ran a free hand through his curly gray-blond mane, where a pair of eagle feathers, bound at their bases with bright thread, replaced the warrior's braid he'd once worn. His nose was a great sunburned hook, his eyes the color of the frozen hearts of icebergs which sometimes passed this coastline in the springtime.

They flared, now, at the robe-draped man.

"What pigshit nonsense is this, skinny one?"

Like his younger namesake, he wore only a leather breechclout with matching vest, the latter decorated with buttons fashioned from the points of deer horn.

"Forbidden? Tell me where you see its fire-burning machinery, Oln Woeck!"

THE LAND-SHIP

Both canines sat, tongues lolling, their faces curiously intelligent and ironic. Keeping a wary eye on the animals, as well as the end of Sedrich's makeshift weapon. Oln Woeck stepped toward the boat.

He pointed at a black iron shaft which lay among the clutter of tools and parts.

"This was fashioned in thy forge, was it not, blacksmith, by *fire*?"

Owaldsohn laughed. "As well you know! Each moon-quarter I pay fire-tithe for the privilege! You ignorant dung-ball, there's no more forbidden art in this thing than's to be discovered in a cart-axle!"

He slammed the greatsword back into its half-scabbard, a gesture more intimidating than its unsheathing.

One of the dogs gave a good-natured bark.

"Be hush, Willi! Leave the boy to his tinkering, Oln Woeck—or, by my forge, *you'll* pay a tithe, in bone and blood!"

"How darest thou speak to me thus!"

Oln Woeck's face flushed red, veins standing out upon his forehead. Foam formed upon his lips, whence sprayed small gobbets.

"I care not a whit that this be no combustible machine," he spat. "Ask the boy thyself, Oswaldsohn—what is it for, boy, what purpose doth it serve?"

Still braced, Sedrich looked down at the boat, perplexity wrinkling his features. Across the gunwales stretched the iron bar which seemed to be the focus of the older man's objections, bent at right angles in four places to produce a two-handed crank. Where it passed outboard, at the previous locations of the rowlocks, small wooden paddle wheels of four blades each were attached.

"Why, no more than to make the rowing easier, Oln Woeck."

The old man grinned as if this were a confession, looking back over his disfigured shoulder at his companions, then at Oswaldsohn.

"And why should rowing be made easier, young Sedrich?"

Perplexity turned to exasperation.

"So more can be accomplished in a given time, that the livelihood of fisherfolk—"

Oln Woeck stamped a callused, naked foot.

"Thou'st no calling to make life easier, impious brat! 'Tis the purpose of our lives to ease His suffering in Hell, by sharing it with Him on this earth!"

"So you say, *priest!*" the boy retorted.

One of the great hounds growled.

The three robed figures stepped backward, mouths agape, eyes widened at the insult.

"This new idea is *mine*, old man, not yours to dispose of!" the boy continued. "Before I let you interfere, I'll smash this boat and burn the splinters!"

Oln Woeck eyed first the fearsome father, then the brace of war-dogs, then the boy. He peered down at the rowboat with its half-finished innovations.

"*Thy* new idea, eh? What makest thee think we want new ideas? 'Tis new ideas've brought on every calamity a sinful mankind's suffered for a thousand years!"

Wry humor danced in Sedrich's eyes, the image of his father's.

"All the better to 'ease the suffering' of your precious..."

The boy let it end there, feeling he had gone too far.

Indeed, the word "blasphemy" had begun to form upon Oln Woeck's lips, but he silenced it.

A calculating look appeared in the old man's yellow eyes.

"Tell me, boy, who first thought of rowboats? Who first thought of iron cranks? Who first thought of thee? This idea of thine resteth upon the inventions of others. It belongeth to the community who made boats and iron and thyself.

"Destroy it, thou committest theft, since thou've invented naught!"

Once again the boy was puzzled. He remembered well conceiving of the idea, persuading his father to help him with it at the forge, testing it for the first time across a barrel in the shop.

Unable to answer, he let the oar drop, until its blade-end rested on the pier.

Owaldsohn laughed, thrusting Oln Woeck's companions aside. Dogs trotting behind him, he covered the distance between him and his son in an easy stride. Bending, he took hold of the paddle-crank at its center, strained, and, iron straps and nails flying, wrenched it from its attachments to the gunwale. Straightening, he gave it a casual toss.

It sailed far out upon the mirror-surfaced estuary and disappeared with a splash.

"Now," the big man declared, "Sedrich's dangerous idea's gone forever from your 'community.'

"Gather up the tools, boy—if we've your permission, Oln Woeck. Willi! Klem! Let's be going."

As he followed his father's instructions, the boy watched Oln Woeck's hands clenching into fists, the veins of his forehead threatening to explode. The boy knew what was going on in his mind. Sedrich Oswaldsohn was a hero of the western wars, a pillar of the community. He was even famous

for a new idea of his own—folding two grades of steel under the hammer to create a sword unequaled elsewhere in the New World.

They daren't make trouble with him.

At present.

As the two Sedrichs left the end of the dock, setting foot on solid turf, Oswaldsohn laid a gentle hand upon his son's shoulder.

"You did well with that sculling oar. You've learned the lesson well, that aught about you is a weapon.

"Howe'er..."

"Yes, Father?"

The older man ruffled the boy's dark hair, bleached at the ends by exposure to sea and sun.

"If that muttonhead upon Master Thee-thou's right hand had brought his wits with him, you'd be fishbait. Children're too rare and valuable to waste by neglecting their instruction. And you're too right-handed. You must put some work into your off-side."

Sedrich grinned up at the shaggy giant. "Yes, Father."

There was a long pause. "Father, about my idea being lost..."

Owaldsohn growled. "I'll speak a word with Hethri Parcifal. A good idea's rare and valuable, too. The village won't permit the Cult to have its way in this."

"Tis all right, Father." The boy smiled craftily. "I needs must start all o'er again, anyway."

The big man stopped, stared at his son, a puzzled expression on his broad, bearded face.

Sedrich's eyes were calculating. He reached down to tousle one of the animals between the ears.

He didn't have to reach far.

"Yes, Father, the paddle wheels need to rotate independent of each other, so the boat may be steered.

"I'll make a drawing after supper."

II: MISTRESS OF THE SISTERHOOD

“We have charged man, that he be kind to his parents; his mother bore him painfully, and she gave birth to him; his bearing and his weaning are thirty months.”—*The Koran*, Sura XLVI

SEDRICH OWALDSOHN WAS A blacksmith, as anyone could tell from the ebon lines imprinted upon his palms, his fingertips, underneath his stubby fingernails.

Had the man purified himself ten times a day, instead of the required five—Owaldsohn was ne'er one to permit cleanliness to lapse into empty ritual, as his son would attest, presenting well-chafed skin as evidence—his vocation would have marked him nonetheless. It had been thus since he was himself a boy. When yellow iron bellows in the quenching bath, be it oil or water or icy brine, the outer layer is transformed into ink, giving the blacksmith his name.

By the time the pair were hungry for the evening meal, Young Sedrich's arms were black from the shoulder down—a first intimation he'd follow in his father's profession. They'd spent the remainder of the day heat-treating steel billets for shoulder-bow prods, replacement parts for hunting weapons fashioned from hair-fine glass, bound together with tree sap hardened with a substance which was a secret of the village resiner. The stock would be of bonded wood, even linen.

There had been talk of renewed trouble with the Red Men. The canton was in the throes of grim preparation.

Owaldsohn claimed his greatsword from a nail driven in the shed-rafter where it hung when he was working. Whistling up the dogs, they began walking the hundred yards separating the smithy from their family home.

It was a warm evening in the summer. Oswaldsohn's claimstake, defined on this side by a sea-cliff, overlooked the eastern ocean, upon whose surface the slanting sun, low over fields and forests to the west, picked out an

occasional whitecap. Partway to the house they paused, hoping to glimpse an iceberg, or, perhaps, to catch the rarer sighting, even more fascinating, of a spouting whale.

“Father, *look!*” the boy shouted. “A *ship*, at the edge of the world! It must be passing tall! It twinkles, flashing and fading in a rhythm, as if...as if—”

“I see it, son, although just.”

Owaldsohn put a hand on Sedrich’s shoulder, peering with middle-aged eyes in the direction his son was pointing.

“As if what?”

“As if the sails were somehow turning like...like windmill blades, only—”

He paused, lacking words to continue.

“Horizontal,” his father supplied. “As if in the same plane as a gristmill. I believe you’re right, now you point it out.”

He looked at the boy.

“To what purpose, d’you suppose?”

Sedrich screwed his face up, concentrating.

He shook his head.

“Think about your own boat, Sedrich.”

The boy laughed. “Why, you could gear such a contrivance to a pair of paddle wheels, Father! You could—”

Owaldsohn joined his son in laughter. “And what a stench old tattooed Woeck would raise o’er that!”

The glittering alien vessel disappeared.

They resumed walking.

“*Hello, the house! Ilse, we’re home!*”

As they trod the walkstones leading to the long log structure, Sedrich saw what his father had. His mother had arrived already. Her staff lay propped against the doorframe, a sign she was available if needed.

The staff was as tall as she, a finger’s width in breadth, fashioned of copper. His father would have given much to learn its secret, brought by Mistresses of the Sisterhood from the Old World, sacred to ceremonies of forging from which all save Mistresses were excluded. Ilse herself had fashioned it, as was required. At one end it tapered for some distance to a needle-sharp point. At the other, a crook, also sharp-ended, presented a broad surface, back of the bend, which could be used, and often was, as an effective club.

Sometimes Oswaldsohn would, with a grin, offer to fashion her a better one. In equal humor she would, of course, refuse. Annoying, for a blacksmith to see butter-soft alloy ensorcelled into something rivaling honest metal in steel-hard durability. It wouldn’t have been impossible to learn its secret. Yet, not for immortality itself would Oswaldsohn have violated the

trust which lay between them.

Just now, both crook and pointed end were lacquered with dried blood. Both dogs sniffed curiously and growled.

"Mother'll be in a bad mood," Sedrich observed.

His father grimaced in agreement, reaching for the latch-rope.

The stoop-stone had been scrubbed and was already drying. Thus Sedrich understood that little Frae Hethristochter had already gone for the day. He surprised himself by feeling disappointed. Frae was a neighbor-girl who helped Ilse with the house. An unusual arrangement it was, a potential source of jealousy among the village women had it not been for his mother's sacred duties. The child's widowed father, for all he was closer to Sedrich's age than Oswaldsohn's, acted by mutual consent as a local arbiter. He often spoke for the village in regional councils.

"He is also a cheap son of a bitch," Oswaldsohn growled as if in answer to Sedrich's unspoken comment. "Willing to put an infant to profitable labor!" He shook his head.

Sedrich knew what he was thinking. Apprenticeship was one thing—any child must learn a trade. However, in this village of a hundred houses, Sedrich and Frae were the only children between babyhood and marriageability. Of all the loose confederation upon the eastern shoreline—or at least those hundred villages within a week's energetic walk—this one was considered fortunate. Neighbors were inclined to offer an opinion—if they did nothing else—regarding how a child was raised.

Owaldsohn laughed as he perceived that Sedrich's thoughts paralleled his own. "Well, son, it could be worse. To a man of Oln Woec's beliefs, for example—Fiery Cross and Sacred Heart—our practices of cleanliness are empty rituals, imposed by a community which would burn him out did he not make some visible concession to them."

"*Thou shalt not suffer a rat to live,*" intoned Sedrich, echoing the teachings of an admittedly brief lifetime.

Ah, well. Hethri Parcifal held to the customs. Mother esteemed Frae a bright girl, learning the way of the Sisterhood from simple exposure to Sedrich's family. She'd turn out proper e'en if she lacked a mother of her own to teach her.

"*As in the days of our fathers,*" Oswaldsohn responded, "*so ne'er mote it be again.*"

They entered.

The small house was spotless, walls scrubbed until, had the bark not been peeled in the building of the place, there would have been none left in any case. Curtains, clothing, bedding were changed each morning. De-

spite the day's warmth, flames rolled in an enormous hearth.

Sedrich scarcely noticed.

Twin models of decorum, Willi and Klem took places flanking the great door. They were as clean as the house itself, having spent most of the day, as was the wont of their breed, bathing in the salt-surf.

Hanging the greatsword on the wall beside a massive shoulder-bow—from this weapon's cranequin had young Sedrich got the idea for his boat-crank—Owaldsohn strode across the polished hardwood floor to embrace his wife.

"Put this day aside," he murmured, "now we're home together."

"How is it you always anticipate my mood?"

Ilse Sedrichsfrau, initiated Ilse Olavstochter, was a small woman, slender, dark-haired with a tracery of gray, her cheekbones high and prominent. Unlike the blue eyes which marked her husband, hers were dark, set like those of Red Men, slanted, with foldless lids in oval framing. She wore a homespun shift, her flower-decorated hair bound back with patterned ribbon in anticipation of the evening ritual. She was more often visible to neighbors in robes of the Sisterhood, her hair unbound, flowing over her shoulders toward the small of her back.

"Your staff outside," replied her husband, peeling off his work-stained vest, "wants cleaning."

She shook her head, a sour look on her face.

"Let the night air cleanse it first. Perhaps then 'twill be fit to touch."

"Gunnarsohn's house blessing?" Sedrich asked.

She nodded. "I don't understand what people think about."

"You speak of Ivarsohn, the house-carpenter?" Oswaldsohn sneered. "A Pest upon him!"

Ilse chuckled. Used to her husband's language, she didn't flinch at the obscenity.

Owaldsohn skinned off his knee-length moccasins, placed them in a cabinet on an outside wall with vest and breechclout. Ilse put in Sedrich's garments before she closed the door.

Sedrich himself, bare and shivering, padded off to another room.

From a table candle—dinner was already laid but would wait until after the ritual—she lit a stick of pungent incense, placing it before a grille below the cabinet. A draft drew it, through the wire racks and the clothing they held, out into the evening stillness to mingle with incense from other dwellings. Compounded by the Sisterhood, people could breathe it with the mildest discomfort. Yet no insect could live within its fragrant embrace.

Owaldsohn growled, pulled the eagle feathers from his tangled hair.

Holding his breath, he tossed them into the cabinet, slamming the door behind them.

The puff of smoke he released thus dissipated.

Ilse laughed. "Ivarsohn left the place with open spaces along the walls and under the roof. Gunnarsohn failed to notice. The house is sawdust new, Husband, yet I killed three large rats before the blessing could be completed!"

He wrinkled his nose. "Hence the stains upon your crook. Well, isn't it what the blessing—and the Sisterhood—are for, my love?"

"Ivarsohn's a Cultist," she replied with ill humor. "Each year grow they in number and influence. 'Tis a bad omen."

"A pox," Oswaldsohn roared, "upon Thor Ivarsohn, Oln Woeck, the whole smelly gaggle of superstitious shave-pates!"

He told her of Sedrich's morning confrontation.

She shook her head. "No Mistress ought to criticize the Cult, nor would the Cult in theory take issue with the Sisterhood. 'Tis no matter of choosing 'tween them. Each has its place in the way of things, preserving tradition, protecting the present—"

"Caring not a fart for the future!"

"*Sedrich!*"

He laughed a wicked laugh. Heaping more charcoal into the already blazing fireplace, which jutted, open upon three sides, into the broad room, the naked blacksmith climbed five tiled steps, easing his grimy body into the tub above it. The younger of the massive canines, Willi, whistled wistfully. It had taken the family months to discourage both dogs from joining in the family bath.

Owaldsohn groaned with pleasure as the near-boiling water sloshed about him.

"Did you speak to me, Mother?"

The boy had reappeared, a towel wound about his loins, displaying a recent adolescent modesty. His father sometimes teased him, threatening to invite Frae to bathe with them some evening.

The boy's blushes were soon lost in the color the hot bath brought to his skin.

"No, dear." Ilse was the last to join them, bearing a tray of colorful tumblers beaded with condensation. "To your father, who often says things in haste he oughtn't." Her vocation wouldn't permit her to partake of fermented or distilled beverages, and Sedrich, she maintained, was too young. Nor would Oswaldsohn drink alone. Thus did they imbibe—the blacksmith in a grudging spirit—of cold peppered fruit juice, as steam from the

heated waters rose about their shoulders.

As always, when there were rumors about the sighting of a ship—today's was the first he'd himself seen—Sedrich begged to hear again of the Invaders of the Elder World. It had been his favorite bedtime tale in infancy. Now it was his favored conversation at the evening time.

"We've no way of telling truly whether they be Invader vessels," Ilse cautioned, "or those fashioned by some other stranger."

Fumbling beneath the scalding water, Sedrich produced the towel he'd worn, wrung it out, and set it on the tile beside the bath.

"This I know, Mother, for they ne'er make landfall in the New World."

"So 'tis said...." She pursed her lips, thinking, Sedrich knew, of those two items which, more than any others, made life as it was lived in their village possible—cotton cloth and iron pipe—and of the generally accepted explanation that they originated in villages much like this one, "far to the south."

"Likeliest"—his father turned the tap to cool the tub, watching his son from the corner of his eye—"they be not Invaders, for then they'd come ashore, wreaking conquest as of old."

Sedrich wriggled in the hot water, delightful shivers of terror traveling up his backbone.

His mother continued. "All we possess are legends, Sedrich, of which the Sisterhood—"

She looked to her husband. "Yes, and the Cult, after its own fashion—are custodian."

Owaldsohn gazed through the steam, out the great windows to the sea beyond.

"Those legends speak of times in Eldworld when great men dared greater deeds."

"Yet," answered Ilse, "they were cut down in their pride, nine hundred nine and ninety out of every thousand. In weakened numbers, those remaining could venture naught but to retreat before unnamed and numerous Invaders from the south."

"Unnamed," repeated Sedrich, almost to himself.

His mother heard.

"No tale or book I know of names them."

She nodded toward a case of volumes across the room, each hand-lettered, passed down to fewer heirs each generation by their predecessors.

"See for yourself, young sir."

Sedrich made a face.

"I am a blacksmith, Mother. I want naught to do with books."

"Yet you show a talent for them 'twould be sinful to neglect. Pity poor

Frae who, unmothered and unlettered, must needs learn to read and write from me five years later than she ought.”

“Frae is a girl!”

Owaldsohn chuckled, then assumed serious aspect.

“Would I had time for learning, son, though most men cannot.” ’Twould be a help in the forge—fashioning springs, for instance. As is, I need remember size and heat and quench and draw for a thousand which were better marked down.

“Should something e’er happen to me—”

All three rapped on the resin-impregnated tub-edge.

“—you’d at least possess the writing of it.”

Ilse spoke. “Sedrich, you should value Frae more. She is intelligent, no ordinary barren female falling into the Sisterhood for aught else better. Hers is a powerful gift.”

She mused, “’Twould be a merry thing to induct my own marriage-daughter.”

Owaldsohn made a noise which was half laugh, half growl.

“Sedrich is too young by far for such discussion to be decent, Ilse!”

“Ne’er any harm in discussing, dear,” his wife replied. “Plans for Sedrich’s future are important. He was such a long time coming! We won’t be with him long to guide his footsteps.”

Young Sedrich’s ears reddened as his parents spoke of him thus in his presence. As before, the embarrassed reaction was disguised by the heat of the bath.

“Nor should we be, woman, for, by St. Willem and St. Klemmet”—by the doorway, both dogs perked their ears at mention of their names—“he’ll soon be a man in his own right!”

“Which was my point.” Ilse overlooked Oswaldsohn’s self-contradiction. “Husband, always you force me to consider truths I might not otherwise confront. I’ll return the favor: I see no reason not to begin learning letters, e’en for one of your venerable years!”

Bested, Oswaldsohn made a sour face.

Sedrich laughed.

Spilling both their drinks in the doing of it, his father seized the boy and pressed his head beneath the water, holding him there as he flailed. Of a sudden, Sedrich fell limp, lying thus, face below the surface, for a long time.

Owaldsohn, in alarm, hauled him up and shook him.

A moment passed.

Then Sedrich’s breath exploded into his father’s face. He laughed until his own turned redder even than it had been.

III: THE CULT

“I take refuge with the Lord of the Daybreak from the evil of what He has created, from the evil of darkness when it gathers, from the evil of the women who blow on knots, from the evil of an envier when he envies.”—*The Koran, Sura CXIII*

BENEATH THE SLANTED BEAMS of a loft he'd claimed as his own upon first leaving his baby crib, Sedrich pondered his parents' words as he prepared for sleep.

The room was small, cluttered with the many artifacts of imaginative boyhood.

From the center joist dangled an artful miniature rowboat equipped with crank and paddle, which he'd pieced together from parchment scraps and bits of wire.

Where one wall was vertical the boy had hung a dozen facsimiles of knives, swords, axes, edged weapons customers had ordered, which Owaldsohn had first try-fashioned out of wood. One or two more fanciful in form young Sedrich had carved out, which had not yet found a life in steel.

That would wait until his eye and hand were surer.

No thought had he given to marriage, being but eleven—although precocious. This last he understood with an unmodest certainty few adults carry away from childhood. He was aware no Helvetian was allowed to marry until a child of the union-to-be had been conceived. From a boy's point of view, marriageable girls were mercifully rare. In their village of a hundred houses, but two families boasted of children Sedrich's age—Owaldsohn and Parcifal. Of families with younger infants there were perhaps another three or four.

The full moon, orange on the horizon, poured itself through the round leaded window set into the other vertical end-wall. Sedrich blew the candle out and slid between the worn, familiar blankets of the low pallet he

was accustomed to sleep upon. He lay back, arms folded behind his head, and thought about his village as if it were the dwelling-place of strangers he, a visitor from far away, must strive to understand.

Rather a lot of couples, he knew—and knew he wasn't supposed to know—had conceived, married, and suffered disappointment which the village women gossiped of afterward, but which Sedrich couldn't quite fathom. What was a "stillbirth"?

One or two households had grown children yet unmarried.

One or two there were whose children had found mates.

He knew of various widows and widowers—of these, Old Roger the resiner was crossing customary barriers by teaching Sedrich something of his arcane craft.

He reminded himself also of the arrangements made for Sisters—likewise, he supposed, for Cult Brothers—who, despairing at last of finding someone to love, or of making a child, had given themselves to their beliefs. They were many, living in open compounds, one at the west end of the village, another at the south, rows of simple cabins centered about common structures of gathering and meditation. Each cabin door faced outward, for the sake of privacy, from the center of the compound.

No one, Sedrich realized with sudden insight, ever gave up entirely.

His own mother had been one such before the surprise of Sedrich's quickening.

Thus the population of the world which Sedrich knew lay somewhere between an uncounted four hundred and five hundred. When the proper time arrived—oh, but that was a long way off yet!—did he show interest in some one someone (for well he understood his parents, never expecting at their hands an arrangement against his own inclinations), this "someone" would be invited for visits, at first family dinners, then the bathing ritual which preceded the meal (he blushed again to contemplate his father's threat regarding Frae), and then at last, did all proceed aright, for the entire night.

The colloquial expression, Sedrich squirmed to recall, was "bundling," every precaution taken to assure that the young couple was left unattended, undiverted save by one another's presence. The tasteless hazing would come later, when a young man led his pregnant bride before a Sister who would sanctify what already existed.

The whole idea filled him with foreboding—with the oddest feelings, like a deep-down itch, somehow pleasant, somehow demanding, somehow mysterious.

It made sleep difficult.
Yet not impossible...

2

He awoke a while later to a rattle-pounding which shook the house.
“*Sedrich! Sedrich! Wake up! Wake up!*”

At their posts beside the door downstairs, Willi and Klem began barking.

The cries were for his father.

He recognized the voice.

Wrapping a blanket about him, Sedrich seized his dagger—this being no mere wooden model—where it lay beside his pallet, and placed a foot upon the folding ladder. The steps swung beneath his weight, coming to rest in the hallway below.

Already his mother and father were descending the short fixed flight to the ground floor.

Tossing aside the small pillow-sword he'd carried from their bedroom, Oswaldsohn took his great blade *Murderer* from the wall. As he quieted the animals, his free hand reached to give his wife the shoulder-bow.

“Yes, yes,” he shouted at the ironbound door, more from annoyance than lack of recognition. “Who is it?”

“Your neighbor!” came a muffled voice. “Let me in! I bear ill tidings!”

“’Twas e’er true,” the blacksmith muttered.

He let his hand drop to the latch, which he unfastened.

“What cause have you to rouse us up this late, Hethri Parcifal?”

The oaken door swung to reveal a night-robed figure somewhere between the two Sedrichs in years, tall, and—thought the younger—odd-shaped. From stooped, narrow shoulders Parcifal tapered under purple draping to wide-set hips and plump behind. With the old green scarf about his neck, he resembled an eggplant, although he lacked, as yet, a belly to match the hips. The green-wrapped neck was skinny, the narrow head balding.

Parcifal blinked as he stepped inside. The candle-lantern Ilse carried dazzled him.

“Speak of rousing,” he began, “whate’er have you done to rouse the Brotherhood?”

Listening, Ilse carried candle to hearth and began laying a fire. She

fetches a kettle, hanging it on a hook as flames crackled up to reach its blackened bottom.

Owaldsohn answered, "Whene'er did those blotchheads want something to rouse them, Hethri?"

He tossed a glance at his son, whose hands still gripped the dagger, then looked back to Parcifal.

"Tell me what they're doing, and I'll tell you, if I can, what we have done."

As if from exhaustion, Parcifal sat upon a chair Ilse kept by the door. He ran a hand across his forehead and looked up at the blacksmith.

"Oln Woeck," he groaned, glancing in apology at Sedrich, "has been sowing hints about the character of your son."

Owaldsohn shook his shaggy head. "Also, no doubt, about those who are bringing him up."

He found a chair of his own, placing the scabbarded *Murderer* between his knees as if it were a cane. The strap crossed his hairy thigh, trailing to the floor.

Both dogs arose, settling themselves again at his feet.

"But 'tis naught new. Why the midnight visit, Hethri?"

The man opened his mouth to speak. He was interrupted by a low rolling growl from Klem. Willi shambled to the door, where he began pacing uneasily back and forth.

Parcifal stopped, cocking an ear toward the door.

"Too late!" he whispered, eyes focused somewhere other than the room he sat in. "It has begun!"

It could indeed be heard before it could be seen. No night-bird sang, no insect chirped in the dew-wet grass. The still air carried a dull thrumming which might at first have been mistaken for no more than the rush of blood through straining ears.

Soon, however, there was no misinterpreting it, a deep rumbling, more felt than heard, and more by the feet than by the ears, pulsing through the earth in an unhuman rhythm. Even across the sleeping village, through the forest at its margin, greasy smoke and wind-fanned flames were visible half a mile away, sparks wafting into the now-moonless sky like condemned souls fleeing corrupted bodies.

The apparition drummed nearer, a colossal fire-exhaling serpent winding toward them, relentless, unstoppable.

Next came real noise: hissing, shuffling, groaning, all in a cadence timed to the clash of metal against naked metal, multiplied ten thousand-fold until a river of moving steel racketed by their door.

THE LAND-SHIP

The flames grew brighter, the very windows rattling as if with the passage of some infernal forbidden engine.

*“We believe— (Clash! Clash!)
We believe— (Clash! Clash!)
We believe in the Father,
Maker of heaven and earth,
Who hath turned His face away. (Clash!)
We believe— (Clash! Clash!)
In Jesus Christ, His only son,
Born of the Virgin Mary,
Crucified, dead, and buried....
He descended into Hell. (Clash!)
There shall he suffer
Till he be redeeméd,
And sitteth on the right hand
Of God the Father Almighty,
Whence shall he come— (Clash!)
To judge the quick and the dead! (Clash!)”*

Yet, if it were an engine of some kind, it fueled itself on human blood, flagellants, marching in their hundreds from house to house, sometimes from village to village, as ever they had since the legend-misted centuries of the Old World.

Together, the family and their visitor crowded into the open doorway.

Blood was all Sedrich noticed at first, glistening black in the torchlight, sprayed upon the face and forehead, down the arms, breast, and thighs of each marching flagellant. Each splashed the man behind him with his steel-linked whip as it cut his flesh. Even the man in front was covered with it, as, at regular intervals, he'd migrate to the rear of the column, leaving someone else to lead it.

To one side of the gore-stained horde Oln Woeck strode, unsullied by any blood save his own, the thumb-sized markings upon his temples blackly visible in the torchlight.

As if one being, the Brothers halted at his shouted command in the road between the houses of Owaldsohn and of his neighbor, Harold Bauersohn, the fletcher.

Silence crashed down about them.

Oln Woeck separated himself from the others, advancing to Bauersohn's threshold. The arrow-maker, a fellow veteran, with Sedrich's father,

in the wars with the Red Men, came not to the door. It was opened to the leader of the Brotherhood by Helga Haroldsfrau, the man's wife.

Even at this distance across the road, Sedrich could make out the whine and buzz of Oln Woeck's voice.

It spoke.

It paused.

It spoke again.

At each utterance, the nightclothed woman in the torch-lighted doorway bobbed her head.

Sedrich seized Ilse's sleeve.

"She's informing, Mother! Upon her own husband!"

"Hush, son," Ilse replied, a grim expression making her face look like a stranger's.

She stroked Willi's head to calm him as well.

"Tis the custom of our people."

The talking continued. Whine-buzz, the unheard murmur of Helga's answers.

Another whine-buzz.

Toward the end, she gave a loud sob.

As if this were a signal, half a dozen of the flagellants broke from the column, rushing past into the house. There was a shout, the unexpected sound of muffled thunder. One of the robed figures reeled backward, howling like a kicked dog, carrying his mates with him, the bent shaft of a shoulder-bow quarrel hanging where the fleshy part of his upper arm had been. Now there was naught save charred bone and sinew, smoldering. He was replaced by half a dozen more.

The augmented force charged back into the house.

Silence.

Amidst a flurry of shouted curses, Harold was dragged out by the Brothers, flung into the dirt at the feet of Oln Woeck. The fletcher tried to push himself upward, into a sitting position. It was all the man could manage. He had been crippled, captured by the Red Men and tortured, long before young Sedrich had been born. He'd spent his days since sitting in the cross-legged pose his wife put him in each morning, fashioning arrows with a small, flywheel-operated lathe.

He turned the best quarrels, bolts, and arrows in the canton.

Oln Woeck kicked the man's hand from under him. The fletcher fell forward upon his face. Some decision having been come to, Harold's wife screamed, "No!"

From the house one of the Brothers brought an ax. Another seized Har-

old's right wrist, twisted a bit of cord about it, stretched it out before him, while a third kept a bare, bloodied foot in the middle of the victim's back.

In their own doorway, Willi and Klem growled.

Sedrich Oswaldsohn took a step forward, the iron tendons of his wrists flexing along the handle of the greatsword.

Ilse placed a gentle hand upon his naked bicep.

"No, Husband, we can't interfere."

Oln Woeck himself swung the ax.

The cord flew free, carrying some terrible cargo. One of the Brothers put the torch to Harold's mutilated arm.

The fletcher uttered not a sound. His wife continued sobbing.

Casting the ax aside, the Cult leader strode, without a backward look, across the road to the threshold of Sedrich Oswaldsohn. The boy could smell him, ancient body odor mixed with the fresher iron tang of blood, where he stood, Fiery Cross imprinted upon the right side of his naked skull, flame-enveloped Sacred Heart upon the left.

Without preamble, at the top of his lungs, he gloated, "Harry Bauer-sohn hath paid the price for dabbling where the blessed daren't. Be there one among thy number who hath grinded good charcoal fine as flour?"

Parcifal shrank back into the shadows of the room.

Owaldsohn strode forward, flanked by his great bearlike dogs, *Murderer* still in his hand, as much to bar the way as greet a visitor. This nightmarish parade was no routine occurrence—although they'd been known to happen in the past—but was intended for his benefit.

Lips compressed with rage, red color showing in his face, Oswaldsohn answered, "No."

His wife stood by him, crook-bent staff in hand, no implication in her manner, or the way she held the copper shaft, that its Mistress was a shepherdess of any kind.

Oln Woeck spoke again. "Be there one among thy number who hath pitchforked beneath dungheaps for the evil crystals to be found there?"

Owaldsohn lifted an elbow, exposing a hand's width of razor steel at the scabbard throat.

"A petty way to even up the morning's confrontation, Oln Woeck. And dangerous—"

Ilse placed a hand again on Oswaldsohn's huge-muscle arm.

"Hush, Husband, mind the ritual."

"Answer, *blacksmith* Sedrich, son of Oswald! Be there *any* one among thy number who hath pitchforked beneath dung-heaps for the evil crystals to be found there?"

"No, Goddess blind you!"

Oln Woeck ignored the epithet.

"Be there one among thy number who hath delved in the earth in search of brimstone ore?"

"No!"

"Be there one among thy number who hath mixed the three together, leavening with water?"

"No!"

"Be there one among thy number who hath dried the black cakes, breaking them asunder and, so doing, sifting them?"

"No! Go away, you scabrous creature! We're no practitioners of your cursed Cult, attempting to take the weight of what you imagine to be the world's sin upon your own self-lacerated shoulders! We don't belong—"

The spatter-visaged baldpate sneered.

"Have a care for public utterances of heresy, blacksmith! No one 'belongs,' yet everybody doth—to his neighbors and fellowmen who must be protected from the likes of thy vile little—"

Klem gave a mind-curdling snarl.

Steel rang as it leapt from brass-lined leather. Oswaldsohn hurled the wolfskin scabbard aside.

"Have a care yourself, loosemouth! Are you saying because my son has found a better way to row a boat, he's the sort to play at compounding the forbidden substance?"

"On the contrary, Oswaldsohn, 'tis just the other way round!"

Forgetting the sword in his right hand, Oswaldsohn lunged forward, wrapping a black and mighty left about the Cult leader's throat, lifting him from the ground. As a pair of Brothers stepped out of the column to assist their leader, they were met at the front margin of the yard by a pair of slaving, curly-pelted guards who brought them to a halt.

Oln Woeck's eyes bulged, but there was no terror to be found in them, only derisive laughter which, shut off, could not escape his lips.

Ilse pounded her husband's back with the copper staff before he flung the robed man away.

Oln Woeck staggered back but didn't fall.

He coughed long and rackingly.

For his part, Sedrich had listened carefully to the ritual questions. His mother had been wrong, he thought, very wrong to hold his father back. If only someone would stand up to these crazy-men—and great Oswaldsohn was just the man to do it—life would be different. Better.

It was the first time it had occurred to Sedrich that his mother could

THE LAND-SHIP

be wrong about anything. He didn't much welcome the revelation, nor what it told him of the Sisterhood she was sworn to.

Still, she had been right, after all, about reading and writing.

Charcoal...easy enough, "ground fine as flour," the man had said. And dungheap crystals—mother called it nitre, keeping a supply for healing purposes, along with what Oln Woeck in his ignorance had referred to as brimstone ore.

He wondered about the proportions. He knew he could expect no help from his mother or from anybody else. They were all too frightened of Oln Woeck and of the Brotherhood of the Cult of Jesus in Hell. He could only depend upon himself. As soon as these meddlesome old men had gone along their way, he'd take advantage of what they'd unintentionally given away. Perhaps he'd borrow a little from the fear which froze everyone about him into inaction, transforming it into appropriate precautions. Most of all, he'd take advantage of what his mother had insisted he learn.

Exploding shoulder-bow quarrels—what an idea!

Some hiding places—that's what he'd need for the experimental materials he would assemble, for the notes and drawings which must precede them. He'd hurry upstairs to his loft and write down the ingredients the Brotherhood had so thoughtfully listed for him!

IV: FRAE HETHRISTOCHTER

“No man can change the words of God...and if their turning away is distressful for thee...so be not thou one of the ignorant. Answer only will those who hear...”—*The Koran*, Sura VI

“COMMON WISDOM”—SEDRICH LOWERED HIS preadolescent voice to a timbre he imagined sagelike—“when it speaks upon such matters, has it they were sorcerers who drove the real human beings out of Eldworld long ago.”

Dust coiled itself in hair-thin sheets in the narrow rays of afternoon sunlight pouring through the rafter-gaps at the front of the shed. Sedrich, for the moment, had been left alone with his dangerous dreams. Oswaldsohn had departed with the dawn, leading a two-dog cart laden with fresh-finished shoulder-bow prods for a neighboring village.

Nine-year-old Frae Hethristochter sneezed, blinking tears, and took a step backward, out of Sedrich’s dust cloud. The little girl shaded her blue eyes, a faint chill nuzzling the back of her neck as she looked toward the ocean, imagining the squat vessels of evil magicians lurking just beyond her safe, familiar horizons.

At last she turned toward her grime-covered friend with something resembling benediction. “What manner of people are they, Sedrich, d’you think?”

Sedrich set the bonded glass container, huge as a pumpkin, down on the bench. He stepped round the piled-up parts of what someday might become a spare dogcart. Somehow, they set a nagging tingle loose inside his mind. He’d thought of trying to apply his boat-crank to the thing—the reason for its having been reduced to constituent components—but the effort he foresaw, of propelling the resulting contrivance, was matched solely by the mechanical difficulty of fitting a high-mounted crank-shaft to a low-mounted axle.

This had been no problem with the little boat; its gunwales had been just the right height above the waterline.

He frowned, dismaying Frae. Why, whenever he tripped over this

junkheap, did he think upon the ocean—and of rippling yellow prairies westward, where his father's name had become known to all Helvetii? It was a region of forbidding, blood-soaked reputation.

Sedrich covered his consternation with a gruffness learned from Oswaldsohn, his adolescent maladroitness adding insult to an injury he'd no idea he inflicted.

Over his shoulder he observed, "Mother says in Eldworld the Cult of Jesus, or something like unto it, was that powerful—all must belong, or else—and the Sisterhood small and powerless and hidden."

"In olden days," Frae agreed (she, too, echoing what Ilse had taught her), "there were a lot more people. The world was crowded."

In absent concentration, she picked at a splinter in one of the weathered shed uprights, watching with big eyes as the boy went about his mysterious boylike business.

From the corner of his own eye Sedrich watched the only friend he owned of his approximate age. Had he thought to, he'd have admitted—with reluctance—in the end he'd likeliest find himself wedded to her. That she pleased his eyes—though such be true—no one might have extracted from him with red-hot pliers. He was curious—shy to the point of paralysis—about the way of men with women.

Frae might satisfy his curiosity, and more.

Yet he resisted such thoughts, not for his age alone, but because it was natural to resent being forced, by circumstance or other people.

In particular, by other people.

In general, he'd learned—was learning, there was still this silliness with the rowboat—to keep wary silence regarding his ambitions. That he shared a bit of them with Frae betrayed beginnings of a certain feeling toward her which, in truth, confused him. It, too, might prove a mistake—or lead to one.

Ah, well, even great grim Oswaldsohn had embarrassing failures, did he not, as was the fate of all who aspired to new things? The gravest of the ropy scars which marked his massive torso came not from mortal encounters with the Red Men westward but from an ill-fated attempt to accustom an unwilling whitetail to dogcart harness.

Not looking up again, Sedrich said, "And there were all kinds of strange animals: horses—sort of like a big deer without horns, so big you could climb on—unicorns, cats..."

Frae wrinkled her brow. "Cats?"

"Sure. They killed rats we have ourselves to kill now. Something bad happened to them—I don't know as I believe what books say of them, anyway. But oxen there were, and gryphons..."

All of these existed now, both children knew, only in Ilse's many illustrated

volumes and in talismanic carvings venerated by the superstitious. Sedrich wasn't certain he believed any such had ever in truth existed.

On a block of granite which served as one of his father's anvils he began making circular motions with the pumice he'd been using to sand the resin smooth. Before long, the softer stone was flat again. Not quite aware how closely his companion watched him, Sedrich went back to the jar, hoping this time he'd finish, the curved walls of the lightweight container would be uniform and smooth, before the pumice block, growing hollow in his hand, needed truing up again.

There wasn't much left.

It was expensive.

Sedrich knew his curious aptitudes were frowned upon, not by the Cult alone, but by most Helvetii. His parents—each for a particular reason—had encouraged him since first he'd shown interest in tinkering. Oswaldsohn himself was bothered in the middle of the night by more ideas than ever he would, in his lifetime, have opportunity to explore. Ilse felt, among a people dominated by legends of the long ago, it was time something new got written into her books and those of her Sisters—and, of course, there was the visible joy with which the doing of these things filled her son.

"But how," asked Frae, thinking Sedrich something of a sorcerer himself, "can you catch lightning in that thing?"

Motherless, with her father being the sort he was, the little girl had been neglected in the matter of her education. Unconsciously she twisted her fingers in the front of her simple shift. It was an honest question, without a trace of whine, disbelief, or disapproval. If Sedrich said he could do a thing, he could do it. Frae simply wanted to know how such a thing was possible.

Meanwhile, if he, at age eleven, sometimes demonstrated an outward, boyish indifference, even unwitting cruelty, toward her, neither realized it consciously.

He inspected his handiwork. "I don't know. Last winter did my blankets crackle with a faint blue light when shaken in a dark room. Yesterday morning I awoke with an idea that I might make miniature lightning thuswise."

He looked up, his dark eyes intent upon a sky he couldn't see within the shed. "Perhaps the clouds are like blankets. They look woolly enough. And the greater lightning they make as they tumble can be trapped."

He shook his head, returned attention to his work. "Anyway, I mean to try."

Frae nodded meekly, golden curls bobbing. She remembered that peo-

ple struck by lightning perish, at the least fall deaf or blind. Should aught ill befall *her* Sedrich—she pushed the thought away, and with it the incriminating possessive.

At the quenching bath the boy washed the last of the sanding dust off the big jar which Old Roger had given him. It had come off the mandrel a bit lopsided, with odd bumps and sticky patches where the trade-secret hardener hadn't been mixed into the resin evenly. Sedrich would have been well pleased to have it, experiment or none.

There were always uses for such.

While the jar dried by the forge, he turned to a pile of soft-tanned doe leather upon another bench. Unfolding it, he peeled up a corner of the lead-tin alloy he'd beaten to paper thinness inside its folds—this trade secret being one of his father's—with a rawhide hammer whose rounded face was near the size of his own.

"Anyhaps, when all those olden people died, the few left—those the Invader didn't slaughter, I guess—discovered the New World. Don't ask me how. In the year 1078, it was, o'er three hundred years ago."

"And what," asked Frae, "happened thirteen hundred ninety-five years ago? Why count we the years thus?"

"'Twas not the Goddess' birthday, for She is timeless and forever young, the Sisters say. Nor e'en of the Brotherhood's Lord Jesus, whom they reckon came into the world more than two millennia ago. Father avows 'tis the way that the Invader calculates the years, from some event significant to them and no one else—that having lost everything first to the Death and then to them, our people took their calendar and brought it with them here. Nobody knows for certain," the boy concluded. "Not e'en my mother. Perhaps 'twas then the world began."

Planting a loose confederation of settlements upon the eastern shoreline of the new continent, the survivors, Sedrich knew, of the Mortality, of the Invasion, and of the desperate journey across the great ocean, had come to owe much, for their initial survival and eventual prosperity, to the teachings of another people they'd found here, Iroquois and other nations of Red Men.

"Not those we Helvetii fight with now upon occasion," he told the little girl, "but others, with whom we trade, from whom we first obtained our plainest, most wholesome foods."

When the pliant hide was spread upon the bench, he began with care to separate it from the foil he'd made. Enough was there to cover his jar twice over, just as he'd planned.

He began applying it to the inside of the container, molding and

smoothing as he went.

There were, indeed, other Red Men. As the Helvetii trickled westward toward a legendary range of Great Blue Mountains no white man had seen and lived to tell of, they'd discovered—the discovery resulting in a series of violent small-scale wars—the presence of another culture.

“Native tribes,” Sedrich explained, mimicking Oswaldsohn now. “Their mechanic arts are superior to our own—though none could stand long before my father’s war-dogs or his greatsword *Murderer*.”

Having covered the inside of the jar, Sedrich applied foil to the outside. He’d turned a wooden stopple for it on his father’s lathe. Into this he now inserted a short, thick bit of wire to which he’d fastened a length of copper chain.

“Father’s told me there are rough, peculiar tracks across those plains, well worn. Frae, I am most curious about those, for, by description, they were beaten out neither by human feet nor by dogcarts.”

He assumed a crafty expression. “And I think I know what made them.”

He set the foil-covered container on the bench nearest the same lathe upon which he’d fashioned its cover. In its jaws he’d clamped a stranger contraption, a pair wooden dowels glued into a cross. At the ends of its arms were rods of the same resinous material the jar was fashioned from. These were hidden by a yard of wool he’d stitched into a broad, circular band, now hanging from the rafters.

Copper wire ran from the rods, down the wooden arms to the center, along the central shaft toward the chuck. A stiff length of copper lay on the shaft where it came into occasional contact with the revolving wire.

Its other end he fastened to the jar-chain.

“This won’t work quite as well as in the wintertime,” he observed, putting his foot on the treadle. “The air seems to need to be dry. Perhaps it won’t work at all in the daytime.”

The lathe began to spin, rubbing the resin rods round in their belt of homespun wool. To Sedrich’s satisfaction, he heard the fabric crackle. At least he was making *miniature* lightning—and in a more efficient manner than by shaking blankets. He hoped he was capturing it in his jar. It ought to work, he thought, with two layers of foil to ensure it couldn’t leak out.

Resting his hand upon the great iron anvil of the smithy, Sedrich reached across the complicated apparatus, making sure of its connection to the jar. A fat blue spark flashed from the container to his outstretched fingers. With a scream of convulsed muscles, he was tossed across the shed like a toy, slamming against the splintered wall where he slid to the dirt floor.

"*Sedrich!*" Frae shouted, running to him. She seized his hand, laying her cheek upon it. "Are you still alive?" she asked in a small voice, tears streaming down her face.

Sedrich grunted.

He fluttered his eyelids.

He looked up at her.

He shook his head.

"Methinks"—he grinned—"I've discovered a new means of transportation."

As a timid smile began to creep into her expression of concern, a shadow fell across the front of the shed.

"'Twould be thought you were more capable of learning, young Sedrich." Hethri Parcifal's voice was deep and apologetic. "Not a week has passed since Oln Woeck led his followers through our village on your account. Your family's troubles with the Cult continue e'en now!"

Confusion wrote itself upon young Sedrich's countenance. He knew his mother was away this afternoon—as was usual. Had there been another incident of some kind with Oln Woeck?

Parcifal passed a weary hand over his eyes. "I see you don't know what I speak of. Ilse takes the Sisterhood's part in conflict 'tween her maternal, nurturative vocation and the paternalistic Cult, concerning a colony of rats discovered upon the latter's unsanitary compound."

He shook his head. "'Twould *be* no dispute, were her authority not compromised by the mischief you think of to be doing."

Sedrich levered himself to his feet. Involuntarily his eyes went to the deep-shadowed back of the shed where, beneath a tarp, he'd hidden the mortar and pestle in which he'd ground a mixture of charcoal, sulfur, and nitre. There'd been no time, yet, to carry that experimentation further.

"But I was only—"

Parcifal sighed. "It has come to me—believe me, son, I didn't look for it—to be a go-between in life, disputes to resolve among my fellows and to keep the peace. 'Tis a path of moderation."

Bending, he took Frae's elbows, gently lifting the child to her feet.

"I've imperiled my reputation—not to mention my neck, boy—interfering with the Brotherhood on your account and on your father's. Ne'er mind. Like him, 'tis a mad bare-chester you are, boy, a seer of the blood-haze. In the Brotherhood you've earned an enmity which must culminate in disaster, for yourself, your family, for anyone else unfortunate enough to be present when it arrives.

"Come, daughter, we'll leave this young demon—and his corrupting

influence—to himself for the time being.”

He turned, almost tripping over the pile of dogcart parts. Regaining his balance, to Sedrich he said, “And your *dreams*, boy—yes, I heard you speaking of them ere now—your dreams would accomplish naught save disturb an unspoken truce ’tween our people and the Red tribesmen west. A truce won in your father’s time, at a price beyond your powers of imagining.”

They left the shed.

As the boy watched their backs diminishing in the twilight, one young and upright, the other bent beyond its years, his eye lighted upon his mother. Ilse Sedrichsfrau stood apart, thin hands folded across the top of her staff, an expression of pain upon her face as she contemplated what had transpired between the man Hethri and her son.

For the first time in Sedrich’s memory, she, too, looked old.