

# The Beloved of Saint Atrocious

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Brother Noam leaned forward a tiny bit, the better to see what the three boys were writing on the floor in front of him. They used the white stone pavement as their writing surface and sticks of charcoal as their instruments. At the end of the lesson they would wash the floor and go to lunch.

Noam was a monk of indeterminate middle age and the boys were young scholars, who might or might not become monks in a year or so, or would become apprentices to a tradesman, or would enter the prince's service, or would "go forth to seek their fortune," by which was not meant wealth but that "fifth 'then' to come" which Noam patiently explained as "random."

The abecedarian hoped that the exercise which he had assigned the boys would lift them above the bare rudiments of the language, and by implication, elevate himself. He had ordered them to write a sentence using the verb "think" in the "sixth-now" form, the form of "the emerging now: the now of springing, seeping or surging forth into being and influence."

The language that Noam was teaching was the only one they knew, or knew existed. There was just one language and so that language did not even have a word for "language", but there were many ways of expressing an idea. There were also five ways of writing, of which three were common and one was very erudite while another was essentially mathematical. The boys were using a combination of pictographic and phonetic expression. The other written way they knew was a straight transliteration of what was said. The disadvantage of that was that what one said was often less accurate, ironically less articulate, and meandering.

"Write some sense using the sixth-now of think," Noam had commanded. The results were slowly blackening the white limestone in front of each of the boys who were sitting back-to-back to reduce the temptation to copy from one another.

The boy to the instructor's left had written, "Think 6-now boy laugh-ful." When Noam got around to inviting him to read what he had written he would say, "The boy cried out in laughter as he was thinking." Noam was mildly disappointed, but not enough to be distraught. Yes, the sixth now of think could easily result in laughter, but the way the writer expressed what he had written was more reflective of something over and done with rather than some thinking that was blossoming, surprisingly, forth.

The boy to Noam's right had written, "Think 6-now □ hunger." So far, so good. But what would it be in everyday talk? "Hunger was all he thought about." Yes and an empty stomach was all the boy was thinking about so close to lunch, but the teacher was less satisfied than with the first boy. The writing indicated that the thinking led to the hunger, not the other way around. The scholar had not written what he intended.

The third boy had to move aside for Noam to see what he had written on the stone floor. "Idea think 6-now change."

"Give me an example," Noam ordered, initially impressed.

The boy blushed, "The thought of sex led to an erection."

"Oh, very good," Noam congratulated the lad. There is no doubt that such thinking leads to all sorts of change, and a boy his age would be very aware of that particular physical alteration. The thought was often the cause of the change. "Now put your written sense into spoken sense," the teacher ordered.

The boy replied, "Thinking provokes change."

“Try again,” Noam said. “Think is the verb.”

“Thinking of ideas is changeful.”

“Transformative,” Noam suggested.

“Now, I presume you can do something like that to all fifteen forms?” It sounded, the way the teacher said it, as if he were unsure of his presumption. He would have written it as “presume 14-now” the “potential now,” expressing his analysis of the scholars’ capabilities as “not yet come to fruition.”

Why in the world were there fifteen standard forms of the now? This multitude beleaguered every generation of students as they began to ascertain how to transcribe thoughts into inscriptions. In classic Rome the scholastic endeavor was centered on the perfection of speech. Eloquence was the goal, and logical precision was the flower being displayed. But not here. In the world of Noam and his scholars it was writing that was the container of precise expression. The elucidation of fifteen forms of “now” resulted in an efficient shorthand of a verb plus an ordinal of now (first now, second now, etc.). It saved a lot of writing. Rather than writing, “(He) cries (his grief out) as if it is boundless and never to end,” it can be written, “cry 13-now” and a reader already acquires the feeling of emptiness and the suspended present where nothing relevant exists except the object: the grief, or the joy, or the hysteria, or the ecstasy. Three or four deft symbols evokes an entire ethos.

That is why, of course, there are fifteen standard forms of now. The People have evolved such a concern for the affective or emotional color of a circumstance that the language is formed by it. The now is predominant. Relevance is in the present. There are two other times, both called “then” or “not now”. The “then that is gone” has one of four links to the now: as the source, the origin (note the difference), the succession, or the memory of something that impacts the now. The other “then” is the “then to come,” which is only going to happen in the not now because of things or influences in the now. The form of the “then to come” reflects the type of probability, whether it is a physical likelihood, a logical one, or a random aptness to happen. There is no similar range of forms to express an unlikelihood or inaptness of some future occurrence, for those are literally *not* in the future of the now.

Glory, how Noam loved that sort of thing.

“All right, flush the floor,” he said, by way of dismissing the class. The monk struggled quickly to his feet to be out of the way of the flood and scrubbing he had commanded.

The third boy was Artabus of Vitocula and Zoar, a couple who lived so far away that no one had heard of them until the day they came down with the boy and a calf, leaving both at the castle keep with barely a word. That had been two years ago. Even then, the boy, young as he was, seemed eager rather than intimidated by the adventure upon which he was embarking. He gave no appearance of being distressed at being abandoned, as it were. Artabus was sociable in a reserved sort of way, outgoing and physically strong, with a fine sense of duty and fairness. But he had his own way of looking at the world and a vocabulary that was sometimes exotic. On only one topic was he reticent, and that was about his background and especially about Vitocula and Zoar. Artabus would not even confirm that these two were his parents. All that was known was that they had signed the priory’s ledger in refined, distinct letters, “Presenting Artabus and a calf. Vitocula & Zoar”. Artabus always wrote his own name Artabus Vitoculanu, following the matrilineal custom of the people...or rather, The People.

Noam caught Artabus by the sleeve as the boys were scurrying past him on the way to the refectory where the lunch of thin soup and thick bread was promised, judging by the smell wafting down the hall and by the fact that this was not a feast day. The other boys gave Artabus a fake-sad glance as they saw him detained.

“What will you write about? The monk asked.

Without a moment’s hesitation Artabus responded, “The Story of Ebinar and Garicea.”

Noam was surprised. No boy had written a story as his “document” that the monk had ever heard about. Most had chosen safe demonstrations of their literary accomplishment. The documents the boys wrote were typically a page long, since writing materials were precious, and they invariably wrote about some simple topic.

“Who are Ebinar and Garicea?” Noam asked.

“I have not found out yet,” Artabus confessed.

Noam was surprised and concerned, by turns. “Why did you choose them to write about?”

“Oh, Master, I did not choose them, they choose me,” Artabus explained with a confident nod of his blond head. He looked at the monk to be sure the older man had understood this profound fact, a fact that meant a great deal more to the boy than he could say.

Noam noticed, not for the first time, that Artabus had very dark eyes. The irises were nearly black, very striking, giving the boy the appearance of very large pupils as if his gaze were especially penetrating. It was this look, even more than the fact they had now reached the refectory and everyone was waiting on them, that persuaded the monk to drop this inquiry for the time being.

None of the conventuals had heard of Ebinar and Garicea when Noam mentioned them. He was careful not to refer to the source of his curiosity. Nor did Noam come across Ebinar and Garicea in his reading over the next few months.

It was now about time for the boys to turn their attention to their documents. For this phase, however long it took, each scholar was assigned to a different monk. Noam made sure that Artabus was his protégé. He was as interested in the mystery of Ebinar and Garicea as he was concerned that his unusual student might be attempting a project that was unnecessarily ambitious. All that was needed was a page in the student’s own handwriting that showed a mastery of literacy principles appropriate to a young adult ending childhood. The document was a rite of passage.

The monk, Noam, and his charge, Artabus, were sitting under an old fruit tree at the edge of the orchard. This tree had been the site of a meaningful event in the life of an abbot a long time ago, so the tree had been spared long past its fruitful phase and it was now almost beyond being a shade tree. It was outside the castle walls and away from interference. That made it the monk’s choice as the place for the interrogation he had planned to get to the bottom of Ebinar and Garicea, and possibly beyond them back to a normal project, one that could be completed in a week or so. Artabus was, of course, aware of what Noam was going to talk about.

As the monk was deciding how to begin, Artabus asked, “Will you go with me?”

It was not at all how the monk had planned to open the discussion, nor had he considered any going to be done. He involuntarily thought, “Go 6-now,” and saw it in his mind’s eye as three written strokes. “Where are you going?” he asked as he regained his presence of mind.

“To find the story of Ebinar and Garicea,” Artabus replied matter-of-factly.

Noam flashed, “Find 8-now, the now of the unknown,” or, on second thought, “Find 15-now, the apparent now that seems to be the case although there is inadequate evidence to arrive at a decision or conclusion.” Writing was *much* more precise than talk. “Where will you find Ebinar and Garicea?”

“At the end of the quest, I imagine. It is their story we will find since they must be dead long ago,” Artabus explained.

“Will the quest take us far?” Noam asked.

Artabus looked at him with an expression of wonder or disbelief that the monk would be

asking such things about a quest. Well, perhaps there were various kinds of quests. Artabus's expression relaxed as he thought this.

Recovering a measure of credibility and dignity, the monk countered (for it seemed they were more evenly matched in this contest than the older man had reckoned), "Most quests are done alone, I believe."

"Certain ones," the boy agreed. "But others take more resources than one person has."

Noam was committed by this time. "I will go with you. When do we start?"

"Master, have we not started already?"

"Start 3-gone, a succession or chain," Noam thought by force of habit, another simple set of brush strokes calling forth the whole idea of an undertaking of which any part is of a much larger whole. Noam felt this must be particularly true of this quest for a story of people long dead who could, nevertheless, command a boy to undertake a search and recruit a full-grown monk to follow along. "Or is there actually a chance the story will not be acquired?" The monk was beginning to think like a questor, which is far different from a pilgrim or a sojourner or a vagabond. "I have never been on a quest," the monk realized, with a tinge of regret, met as he recognized it, by a surge of relief that a quest was now being undertaken, "2-now, the ongoing now of something already started but not close enough to being concluded to see the end."

The act of departing from the priory for an unspecified amount of time required certain formalities, particularly on the part of the monk. He had to be discreet about aspects of the trip they were proposing, such as the fact that it was the boy who was the leader. Abbots cannot be assumed to understand things like that. But the abbot gave his blessing and within an hour, armed lightly with twin baskets of provisions and the clothes on their backs, they set off on the quest for a story.

"What is a pilgrimage?" Artabus asked at one point.

"A pilgrimage is a journey to a sacred destination for the purpose of increasing devotion to the divine. A pilgrimage is usually a reiteration of an original itinerary taken by a holy being."

"Then a quest is not like that," Artabus concluded, as if he had been considering it since some previous time they had discussed it.

"Why do you say that?" Noam asked, to keep conversation going, not because he wanted to know.

"A quest does not duplicate something that has ever been done," Artabus reasoned. "Every quest is unique."

Noam remonstrated with himself, "Egad, this boy is not like the others." The other boys, Noam figured, were content with their discontent. They were happy with their growing up, their anxiety about themselves and others, and about life. But Artabus was discontented with his contentment. He was dissatisfied with merely growing bigger, stronger, older, more potent and more urgent. He was already wiser than he was old, whatever that might mean or however you might measure the right age for a certain level of wisdom.

Before dusk of the third day they were farther than the monk had ever gone and the ascent was becoming steep. From time to time the trail narrowed between rocks or through thickly growing trees, and from time to time it was narrow along the side of cliffs. Noam had no choice but to trust Artabus to lead the way, which, in any event, was more-or-less just one trail without branches. Noam thought he might be imagining it, but the higher they went the more light-hearted the boy was.

"Is this the way to your home?" the monk asked. That had a dampening effect on the boy's attitude so Noam didn't ask again.

They never passed a village and only occasionally was there any sign of other human beings, never sight of them, just signs that they were not the first along this trail. Eventually they passed between two peaks and began to descend. The boy's fair attitude re-emerged. Then the trail leveled out and signs of human presence multiplied.

At last, passing through a small forest with a stream to cross, they emerged onto a meadow or pasture; there were cows with calves there, the same color and markings as the calf (now full grown) that had come to the castle with Artabus. Beyond was a village, or something like a village, but scattered about and with edifices of a type unfamiliar to Noam.

Before long they were passing the first of the buildings. It was distinctly a construction, not just a work of nature, but it had been erected of materials that had not been greatly modified. Rocks, dirt, and logs were much the same as they had always been, just rearranged. Then they passed another mound of the same design and there was a person nearby. Noam expected Artabus to say something, since this person had the same silver-blond hair as Artabus. But Artabus said not a word and the person made not the least indication that the two travelers had been seen. When this happened twice more the monk could not contain himself.

"Do they see us?"

"No, they cannot see us."

"How can we see them?"

"We are from the beyond, from the *then*," Artabus seemed to try to explain it in terms the grammarian would understand.

"Noam considered this for a few paces and then asked, "They are 'gone'?"

"They are not my 1-gone," Artabus replied.

"These are not the source, the matrix from which Artabus is compiled," Noam explained to himself, under his breath. "They are not his ancestors." Then it dawned on Noam, "This is 11-now, the now that cannot be!" The thought sent shivers up his spine.

Artabus never slackened his pace until he came to the last edifice in the cluster. In fact, it was a ways beyond the cluster. Here, at last, Artabus stopped and waited in the shade of a pine tree. A small grey dog came wandering along wagging his tail lazily until he caught Artabus's scent, which greatly animated him. He came bounding over to the boy and the monk and made every sign of being eager for attention, which Artabus gave him. Artabus tired of scratching the mongrel's ears and rump before the dog got tired of being scratched, of course, but the dog seemed to have the sense not to make a nuisance out of himself. So the waiting resumed and the dog wandered off. Just when Noam was growing weary of the wait, it ended.

An older woman emerged from the rock and sod mound by way of what could only be called a tunnel. Then, apparently seeing the two travelers she came quickly over and exchanged a long, animated but entirely silent conversation with Artabus, which he interpreted briefly to the monk periodically in short phrases. Then Artabus said, "Wait here," and he followed the woman back down the tunnel out of sight. He was gone for quite a while but he made the wait worthwhile by returning loaded with new provisions.

"We must leave before we eat," Artabus warned.

"Was she your 1-gone?"

"Yes," Artabus answered simply, glad the monk was beginning to understand, which in fact was not yet the case.

They re-crossed the cow pasture and passed through the small forest with the stream in its midst. When they came out of the trees the sun was shining in a hazy sky, which it had not been, Noam realized, in the village. Here Artabus gave them permission to eat, although the monk's

hunger for food was less than his hunger for explanations. These, however, were in short supply. What Artabus deigned to say about the village or its inhabitants was hardly anything. It was a reluctance that reminded Noam of the boy's reticence to talk about his home or family in all the time he had been in the priory school.

Artabus finally conceded, "The dog is mine. I am glad he is still alive."

Again the monk was afflicted with shakes. This was spooky. He controlled himself by analyzing their visit to the village as into "12-now, the dissipating now where things are waning." Although how they were dissipating in such a physically ambiguous way, he could not imagine.

This was at the heart, actually, of the weakness of The People's thought structure. "The now," so elaborate and nuanced about the subjective was unable to fully comprehend the objective. Things were vague, whereas forms of being and action were sharp and precise, especially when in writing.

They rested where they had eaten. During the night the grey dog joined them.

Next morning they ate more of the woman's strange food.

"Why couldn't we eat it in the village?" Noam asked during the meal.

"Oh, if we eat in one of those places we become part of it," Artabus responded. Then, as if interrupting himself, "Now we go further forward," Artabus explained, obscurely, following the village woman's instructions. First, however, they went back into the steeper hills past the twin peaks and then along the narrow cliff-path. At the end of this precarious trail they turned into a narrow gorge that seemed to have no trail at all, and which led to a dead end with nowhere to go. It was late afternoon by this time. Here the boy and the dog made themselves comfortable while the monk attempted to explore the tight surroundings. There was not much to find. When he got back the boy and the dog were both asleep.

The sun disappeared quickly in the narrow valley. Twilight was prolonged but the monk soon fell asleep, too.

How long he was asleep, or if he actually woke up, he could not later be sure. He certainly seemed to be awake. It was dark. The sky was invisible; clouds, the monk assumed. But Artabus was no longer asleep beside him. Noam found the boy, or saw him, a short distance away. He was not alone. There was an old man holding a tall staff attended by a very young girl. Even in the dark Noam thought he could tell that the girl had the same silver-blond hair as Artabus. She stood very still, but the old man was talking to Artabus. The sounds of the conversation were a blurry murmur, barely perceptible as sounds of speech, more like whispered groans. Toward the end the old man gestured a time or two with his staff. Then, with more muffled grunts the old man and the little girl took their leave, walking back toward the dead end of the gorge.

Artabus came back and was asleep again quickly, but sleep was the last of Noam's concerns. As quietly and as swiftly as he could, he got up to try to find the old man and the girl. As far as the monk was concerned, there was no way out of the gorge the direction they had gone. His search was interrupted when he found his path blocked by a snake of imposing size. The reptile convinced Noam that he did not want to pursue the old man as much as he had thought he did. Even so, the idea of being in the same confined area as the snake cancelled the monk's sleepiness. He was awake until dawn haunted by serpentine shadows.

Dawn was not far away when Artabus and the grey dog came back to their resting place. The monk had dozed off, after all. Artabus appeared fresh, as if he had slept long and well, in contrast to the monk who nursed sore muscles and a headache.

The ample provisions from the woman in the village were barely touched by their having some of them for breakfast, and so they had begun to move again by the time the sun was up above

the line of clouds and haze along the Eastern horizon.

Artabus pointed toward a purple line in the southwest. “We are going there,” he announced. The monk found himself sighing. The destination looked very far away. He was not used to such extended exercise. They walked continuously in the direction Artabus had pointed, moving along open grassland, never seeing a living thing except birds in the distance. Eventually they ate another meal. The supplies they had brought from the castle were gone, and the additional food from the village had been reduced. But around mid-morning of the day of their camping in the gorge they came over a ridge and found a town spread out before them along a small river.

This town was in great contrast to the last village they had visited. It was not at all strange to the monk. It could have been a town near their castle and priory. The houses were of timbers, bricks and plaster with shingled, tiled, or thatched roofs, as the expense of the house might warrant. As they entered the town from the side, which was apparently the way seldom used, the monk was relieved to hear the townspeople talking normally.

They paused in front of an inn, considering what they might use for money, when a portly lady with an apron nearly large enough to serve as a dress noticed them and smiled. “You’ll be welcome in the Cloister,” she told them.

The Cloister was of modest size, with a windowless wall along the main street of the town. There was a gate with a heavy door beyond, both shut. A rope with a knot hung beside the gate and, as expected, it rang a bell when the monk pulled on it. At length a formidable woman in a plain dark grey garment appeared and opened the gate for them. Beside the large door was a small one that they used to enter the compound. Inside was a street with gardens on either side leading to a larger building, surely a chapel. The woman led the way through the right hand garden toward a building along the side. So far she had not said a word beyond a greeting, and the monk did not break the silence either. They walked in single file, the woman, the monk, the boy and the dog whose name turned out to be Ambrose.

Toward the back corner of the compound was one of the larger buildings with an arcade across the front. There was a large double door that led into a spacious room. Down the center of the room was a trestle-table with benches. A dozen men and women all dressed identically were having a meal. The men and women were separate for the most part, with the women at the far end and the men nearer the door. There were half a dozen boys and girls, none younger than Artabus. As they followed the leader into the hall, Ambrose dropped beside the wall and curled up with his chin on his paws.

The woman simply abandoned the guests at this point, but a fellow about Noam’s age got up and waved them to join the men.

Either guests were common, or the group was disinterested, or some unknown courtesy prevailed, because no one paid them the least bit of attention throughout the rest of the meal. After the food was finished and the utensils had been removed by a portion of the residents, there was no rush by the rest to depart, however.

One of the two boys came over to Artabus with a shank bone in his hand. “For your dog,” he offered. Together they went to find Ambrose where he had positioned himself. He was enthusiastic about the shank bone.

“I am Artabus Vitoculanu,” Artabus nodded a bit stiffly.

“Geffry,” the older boy responded. “Where are you going?” he asked as if the thought did not occur that this town might be their destination.

“We are on a quest to get the story of Ebinar and Garicea.”

“Ah,” Geffry assented without indicating which part of the statement was satisfactory, the

idea of being on a quest or the search for the story of Ebinar and Garicea. “Then you will spend the night,” he said as if it were a certainty.

The monks were just as kind to Noam. They were friendly, respectful, and interested in the quest, but no more helpful than Geffry had been. Noam guessed they, too, had no idea who Ebinar and Garicea might have been. The monks shared beer with the traveling monk and let it be known that none of them had ever left this valley. They had no knowledge of the priory or the principate Noam and Artabus had come from.

“This is Saturday,” Geffry said as the sun was preparing to dip behind the cloister wall. In Artabus’s priory school Saturday meant that some of the students went home. Here it turned out to mean bath time. “And wash your clothes,” Geffry ordered. The bathing area was an enclosure around a well. There was a trough that held water. It had been in sunlight all afternoon and the water was tepid, which was nice. The three boys, Geffry, Artabus and another novice all took baths together. This worked out well because Artabus would not have otherwise known just what it was all right to do.

Following the bath Geffry showed Artabus where to hang his clothes to dry and gave him a grey garment like they all wore.

“Now,” Geffry said, “there is a place you want to see.”

The place Geffry and Geremi took Artabus and Ambrose was out of town. It was an island in the river which they approached by boat. The river was not wide, so the distance was not great, but the island was more imposing than it first appeared. It consisted almost entirely of a very great rock and its splinters, several of which were quite tall, larger than a house. There was only one place to dock the boat and climb out, which involved climbing up. The fractures in the rock had created a type of stairway to the top. In three or four places people had added or filled in to make it manageable at least for the fit and able. At one point a ladder was necessary. Artabus carried Ambrose some of the way. He assumed the purpose of this expedition just at sunset was to have a view. The top was basically rounded and perilous but Geffry and Geremi knew the tricks, so they were finally settled just as the sun was going down.

“Wait for it,” Geffry ordered. They all stared toward the purple mountains in the distance, the same horizon Artabus and Noam had been heading for. But the hills were closer now. Gradually the sun disappeared so that only a bit of its umbra and the illusion of rays remained. “Don’t blink,” Geffry warned.

Then it happened. For a few seconds in the middle of the purple hills there was a luminous dot as if a powerful light had been turned on. Then it dimmed and the jagged line of mountains again was solid purple, getting darker as the twilight began.

“Is there a tunnel through the hills?” Artabus asked.

“We’ve never been there,” Geremi admitted.

“Light comes through that hole only a couple of times a year. This week and then again in a couple of months,” Geffry explained.

“We better get down while we can still see,” Geremi suggested.

Back in the Cloister Geffry and Geremi shared a sleeping shelf along one wall of their room with Artabus. After the third bell of evening, a monk came to check on the boys. Content that they were present in the room and that Ambrose was outside where dogs should be, he made a great show and noise of locking the door.

Artabus was distressed, “What if I have to pee?”

“There’s a bucket in the corner,” Geffry informed him. “But the door isn’t really locked. We can get out if we have to.”



All night long Artabus kept seeing the spot of sunlight, which at one point had been so bright that it appeared to erupt out of the hole.

Since the next day was Sunday and a festival day as well, Noam wanted to stay in the Cloister for the day.

Being a feast day, the breakfast was special. Then the front gates of the compound were opened so the townspeople could come in. They nearly filled the chapel.

Geffry and Geremi took Artabus through a back stairway into a tower and then along a walkway between the roof and the chapel ceiling until they got to a tiny balcony above the round window high in the back wall of the chapel. From this angelic vantage point they could see all that was going on without the inconvenience of actually being part of it. Nor did they have to pay strict attention.

Brother Noam was given an honorary role in the festival part of the service. That got him a costume for an enactment of the festival story, which was a tradition some clever monk had instituted to rescue this observance from oblivion. All Noam had to do was to stand on the assigned spot and look significant. The small dramatic production at the end of the regular worship service was really a responsibility of the townspeople, some of whom had been having the same roles for years. A narrator told the story from a venerable book. Other spoken lines were few. Movements were pageant-like and sweeping, the more gifted actors being allowed to actually pause or make a turn in their passage from left to right or right to left.

The birds-nest balcony was perfect for watching this. The performance was most notable for the flowing costumes that were meant to recall an ancient era. Nobody was paying much attention to the narrator, who had had a solid lock on the role for longer than most of the audience had been alive. Her voice was not as powerful and her enunciation nowhere as sharp as it had been. But by an acoustical quirk, her voice was crystal clear up in the birds-nest balcony. Even so, the narrative was the worst sort of historiography of the type that local newspapers are famous for: "Above all, mention every name!" It was, therefore, some miracle that out of the midst of the garble Artabus was sure he heard the names Ebinar and Garicea. He nearly fell out of the tiny loft in his excitement. Geremi pulled him back down, warning him, "Mustn't let anybody see us up here."

Their exit, therefore, was delayed until the service ended and most people had gone out onto the Cloister's street for the festival lunch being served on long tables.

"Did you hear? Did you hear?" Artabus stammered as soon as he caught up to Noam.

"No, I couldn't hear a thing from where I was," the monk replied.

"The pageant mentioned Ebinar and Garicea, I'm sure of it!" Artabus effused.

"Really? What did it say?"

"I couldn't get it all, just the names. Maybe we can find the woman with the script," Artabus suggested.

But they couldn't. By the time they located a monk who knew who the narrator was, she had left.

About the middle of the afternoon Artabus convinced Geremi and Geffry to take him to see the old woman who had narrated the pageant.

"She's deaf as a post!" they protested. "She'll never let anyone touch that book."

But they gave in and convinced the mother superior to take them.

The town was not large, so the walk didn't take long. In fact, the walk from the Cloister to the old woman's house was the shortest part of the whole effort. It took twice as long to get her to understand why they were there, namely to see the script or to have her at least read the part that mentioned Ebinar and Garicea. When she did finally comprehend, Artabus was convinced she was

pretending she still did not. That warned the boy not to be too open about why he wanted this information. At last, she gave up and brought the venerable script out. It was a stage copy, however, impressive to look at, but entirely blank. The narrator had the long script memorized. This shocked everybody, including the mother superior, who had come with them.

“You mean there is no copy of this pageant? What if you....” The mother superior stopped herself before she uttered the fatal word “die”.

For a while that’s where the discussion stalled, but the old woman had been stung by the rebuke that she was being irresponsible with this heritage. So, reluctantly, it seemed, she admitted there was a text. It took another while to convince her to disclose its location, back in the Cloister.

The group trooped back to the chapel and found the canon who found the key that opened the trunk that held the scripts...and again Artabus was frustrated. The text was written in the elegant formal script that was never used any more. By this time the whole cloister had learned of the search and so Noam came along with two monks just as the canon was about to lock everything back up. Noam never taught the boys the formal writing, but he could read it. So, given a few minutes, he found the mention of Ebinar and Garicea buried in the long boring script. The key phrase, however, was at the beginning of the passage, which read:

“So the heritage of Saint Atrocious began with the couple Belstar and Variga, who preceded Thanor and Belusha, who preceded...(skip twenty pairs of names)... and nearly ended in the village of Aftawold with the couple Ebinar and Garicea, who preceded Maginar and Atruchia....”

Again it seemed the search stalled, since nobody believed there was a village of Afterward. It was, they all agreed, a make-believe place with a vague symbolic meaning typical of legends and myths. Before it was too late, however, Noam again came to the rescue.

“No,” he protested. “Not Afterward, but Aftawood. The village in the text was Aftawold, which means a wood of afta trees.” The monk was about to explain some more, but the abbot had joined and intervened, “Afta is a kind of cypress tree. There are no afta trees around here. They would be in lowlands where there’s a swamp or bog.”

Toward sunset, Artabus wanted to take Noam up to the top of the rock to look out, but the monks would not allow it. They pronounced the dangerous climb out of bounds for the boys, too. They did agree, however, that the light show as memorable, which indicated they had all been there at some time.

“Can that spot be seen from anywhere else?” Artabus wanted to know.

“No,” he was assured. “The pinnacle of the rock is the only place. You have to be at just the right height and just the right angle to see it...and just the right time.”

The cook had made soup for supper since there had been such a feast at noon.

The three boys in their room were hardly sleepy when the warden monk pretended to lock them in, but there was no use going out and running the risk of being caught, so they told stories about themselves.

“Are you going to be a monk? Geremi asked Artabus.

“I’m not sure. It depends.”

“Depends on what?”

“Depends on a lot of things.”

“Like what? Name some of them,” Geremi persisted.

“Like what I find out on this quest.”

“About the couple Ebony and Garcia?”

“Ebinar and Garicea. Yeah, about them.”

“Why about them?”

“They were my ancestors...supposedly...somehow,” Artabus disclosed for the first time in his life. He felt trapped into admitting this, but he’d never be seeing these two guys again. Tomorrow he’d be leaving, forever. Maybe.

“Then you are related to Saint Atrocious!” Geremi exclaimed, keeping his voice down so as not to attract the warden monk with his willow switch.

“That might be,” Artabus admitted miserably. After that he could not be coerced into uttering another word on this topic. He had said far more than he wanted to have said as it was.

“Now *you* talk,” Artabus said. “Are you going to be a monk in here all your life?”

Geremi agreed it looked like that would be the way things turned out. He didn’t like farming and had no prospects of having farmland in any case. He was neither industrious enough nor liked children enough to be a teacher. By process of elimination he’d be a monk.

It was Geffry’s turn, but his soft snores called the day to an end.

Monday morning right after breakfast the three questors (counting Ambrose) set off from the Cloister toward the purple hills. The cooks had loaded as many food items as they could into a pack and the abbot and mother superior sent them off with blessings. Geremi and Geffry hiked with them across the river to the low rise on the far side.

Then they were on their own.

Throughout the day their journey took them steadily upward. The land undulated, but on average they ascended. The purple hills disappeared in the mid-day haze, but returned by the time the sun neared the tallest peaks.

Despite having been told in no uncertain terms that he should not expect a recurrence of the sunset phenomenon, Artabus could not control his hope that the miracle might happen. After all, miracles had been accompanying them so far.

Artabus was not surprised, but disappointed nonetheless, when a cloud bank cut off the sunset, ending prospects of seeing the hole in the hill, which had transformed itself in Artabus’s mind into a landmark of importance.

Up to now Artabus had not fully confided in the monk. There were things the boy did not know how to talk about, like the primitive village, for example, and the fact that he did not know where, in those purple hills, they were supposed to go. He was not yet ready to say as much to his traveling companion as he had told Geffry and Geremi about why this quest for the story of Ebinar and Garicea was important, important enough to risk his life.

The visit to the Cloister had been very enjoyable and even perhaps profitable if they ever learned where Aftawood was (or had been). The Cloister had been restful after days of walking and they were on their way with as many supplies as they could carry. They had made friends and were traveling with their good wishes. Yet, strangely, all this made Artabus more disquieted and sad. He had lost most of his confidence about this quest. He was confronted with doubt and confusion. They were walking blindly now. The clue that he had gotten from the woman in the sod mound was no longer potent. And now, out here in the wide open, night was coming as well as a storm.

The day of walking had brought them nearer the purple hills, which loomed in the dark, silhouetted by flashes of lightning. Thunder rolled across the grassy plateau toward them, and then a larger flash and louder crash warned them to make whatever arrangements they could. Noam was better at this. He picked a small mound, explaining that they did not want to camp in a puddle. He tied their two walking sticks into poles for a shelter to hold up a small canvas cloth. The storm was

coming from the hills, so their shelter should face the other way. There was no time to waste. Raindrops were beginning and the smell of rain-soaked dirt was strong. Ambrose quivered at the thunder. The little wire-haired warrior would have stood his ground against a raging bull, but was petrified of thunder. He crouched between Artabus's feet and whined.

Then, as Artabus was holding the poles for Noam to drive in pegs, the most brilliant flash of all exploded behind the hill and it was followed 14 seconds later by a deafening clap of thunder. Ambrose yelped and Noam ducked, but Artabus did not notice the noise. He had seen a miracle. He just happened to be facing exactly the right direction, and their position on the grassy plateau just happened to be at the exact altitude and angle, and the lightning had just happened to strike at the precise spot for the flash to show straight through the hill.

In that flash Artabus knew they were on the right trail.

The rain was not long, although it was a downpour while it lasted. Noam reminded Artabus to refill their water containers. Everything was damp, but they slept well under the circumstances. Before they fell asleep, however, Artabus had a talk with Noam, beginning with his sighting of the passage through the hills.

Dawn came, as after such a cleansing storm, bright and refreshed.

Here and there on the plateau there were shallow lakes that would be drained by noon. The flat land made walking easy. They had only four kilometers to go before they came to the hills.

Artabus had been right and wrong about the hole through the hills. It was not a tunnel, not at all. And his second sighting of it had not been all the way through. The lightning the night before had struck a cottonwood tree in the middle, so Artabus had only seen half the passageway. From where he had been standing he could not have seen all the way through. He was also overly optimistic about how easy the passage might be.

The hole through the hills was an illusion of a tunnel. It was, nevertheless, a special feat of nature to have carved this channel through solid rock. It had all been sculpted by a large stream (or small river as it was on the morning after the rain). Perhaps, long ago, there had been caves and tunnels. If so they had mostly collapsed. Here an arch remained, there the base of a cliff had been rounded away to the left and farther on to the right. Only once, for a short distance was there a tunnel. But the aspect of nature that had done the work was to be their challenge of the day. They were going to follow that stream, more often than not from within its turbulence and rapids.

Noam was not as exuberant as Artabus. It was the monk's turn to be skeptical. As the stream flowed across the corner of the plateau and among the first rocky hills there was little sign of the force it packed when it was funneled into the narrow confines that came farther on. The monk had hiked through enough narrow valleys to recognize the likelihood of danger that surely must be before them.

"Well, my boy," Noam clapped Artabus on the shoulder as they stood surveying the passageway through the first gorge, "we'll get wet again this day."

That did not happen immediately. For the first few hundred yards they walked on pebbles and rocks in water only knee deep. Most days there probably would have been no water at all that high above the shallow stream bed. Then they came to the first rapids. Noam climbed onto a tall rock for a look and decided they would best stay on the rocks. This slowed their progress so that it was noon before they slid back down to the stream.

"We'd better eat before we ruin some of the monks' fine bread," Noam recommended. Some things would survive a dunking, but not the bread. They ate as much as they needed and tried to protect the rest. Their lunch spot was no good for a camp, even if it had been later in the day, so they did not linger.

They were into the heart of the hills now, making their way gingerly over steep polished rocks wet with spray. Any respite along a sand bank was brief.

The first waterfall was a portent of things to come, it turned out. The water cascaded over large slimy boulders and sluiced through gouges in the rocks. Again the two eased themselves carefully along, sometimes crawling and sometimes sliding. Ambrose seemed to be better off, staying higher and leaping from point to point.

Then for another while they had a bit of relief.

In less distance than they might have hoped, however, they came to the main barrier of their trek so far. The little stream, still swollen by the night's run-off fell a hundred feet into a pool. The view from the crest was impressive. Small as it was, the stream thundered as it dropped into space and hit the depths it had carved below.

All Noam could imagine was to scale down beside the water, but he knew it would turn out badly. If either of them were to break a bone it would simply be fatal. On top of everything, Ambrose had disappeared. Noam, who knew less about the dog, was the more worried about him.

In their few supplies they had a rope, but it was not even ten meters long, not enough to do any good on a hundred-foot rock cliff.

Artabus had gone to the precipice and lain down to look over the edge. What he saw was not encouraging until he noticed, off to the side of the pool down below, the grey dog leaping from side to side to aggravate a substantial crab. It did not seem either combatant would tire, admit defeat, or achieve victory, but Artabus thought that the dog might have found a way down that was preferable to leaping over the falls and taking a chance on surviving in the turbulence below. Using his two little fingers in his mouth he produced a whistle that could be heard over the noise of the water. Ambrose looked up, deftly leaping in time to avoid being grabbed by the crab, which then lurched sideways into the pool and disappeared. Without the crab to battle, Ambrose regained interest in his traveling companions and disappeared into a clump of bushes. Moments later, as expected, he emerged, panting, about ten yards behind them.

"Let's try over there," Artabus suggested, pointing to where the dog had reappeared.

Once it became clear what they intended, the dog led the way down a treacherous trail he had probably discerned from the smells of woodland creatures, maybe mountain goats, the monk thought dourly. Bit by bit, the two human travelers followed the many-times more agile canine and arrived at the poolside with no more than scratches from briars.

It was sobering to look up at the cataract descending so relentlessly from so high and to imagine what might be ahead.

Poolside offered no promise of a comfortable rest, so they continued their hike along the stream as it threaded its way through a miniature forest with the rocks high above nearly touching. Not far beyond, the stream entered a valley, but not an ordinary one. The valley floor was cluttered with great slabs of stone, pillars, boulders and monumental rocks in a jumble. The sides of this valley were even more amazing, like the inside of an immense ship or the interior of a huge imaginary whale. The best passage was not down the middle, but nearer the sides, which is the course the stream was taking. On the chance of avoiding water for a while, Noam suggested the other side.

"This was once a great cave," he postulated. "All that rubble is from the roof when it caved in long ago."

They had planned to go farther than the end of this cave-turned-into-valley, but before the end of it there was an excellent, inviting spot to spend the night.

There was enough fuel near their campsite to make a small fire, which was a comfort as the

shadows lengthened. The fire was also used for toasting their supper that consisted of bread and a sausage from the Cloister. Ambrose got half the sausage since he did not have a great taste for bread.

Artabus wondered if Geffry and Geremi had gone to the island and if they could see the sun coming through the hole in the hill and if they were thinking about him. Funny how he had only known them for two days but he felt closer to them than some of the students at the priory school after two years.

Down so far in the ground the twilight faded quickly.

The exertions of the day drained Noam, who felt he was getting old. He was nodding off when Artabus and Ambrose stood up. Instead of walking away as they would have to answer a call of nature, Artabus stood where he was. It was a few moments before Noam caught sight of three shadowy figures moving toward them. This movement did not trigger an adrenalin rush and cause him to bolt awake. He was too numb with fatigue for that. Instead, he watched the scene unfold as if in a dream.

The three figures paused just outside the circle of fire-light. From what Noam could make out there were three men, two older and one Artabus's age. The older men were wearing head-dresses but the boy's head was bare. They wore a type of clothing so out of date it was no longer worn by anyone, but not of an entirely different era. Noam could not hear what they said. He could only pick up occasional words in the flow of sound before he passed out.

The width of the band of sky overhead was narrow, so the moon passed by in an hour. It was a waning crescent late in the night when Noam noticed it and noticed that the fire had gone completely out. It was after dawn when the monk woke up again. The sky was pale blue.

Artabus was sitting cross-legged staring toward their pathway for the day, Noam reckoned. There was no sign of the three men in the night. The dog was nowhere to be seen, either, nor did he come back during their breakfast, which included porridge and tea since they had both fire and water.

Finally Noam asked, "Where's the dog?"

"Gone on ahead," Artabus replied listlessly.

"With them, the men last night?"

"With them."

Artabus, as usual, offered no explanation. But what little he had said told Noam that somehow the visitors had been real, not part of a dream, and because the dog was physical and real, surely the men were not just ghosts of a type that both of them could see. Yet there was certainly something *different* about them, as well as the old man and the little girl, and the woman in the primitive village. Well, Noam was a patient man. Being a monk, being a teacher, and now going with this boy of this quest were all patience-inducing. Otherwise he could not do those things. It was patience, as well as curiosity, a savoring of mystery, that held the monk's attention.

Although the breakfast was over and the sky was light, Artabus had resumed his seat, staring down the valley where they were to go. Noam came over and sat beside him, waiting.

At last he said, "Will they come back?"

"No. No, they are gone on ahead," Artabus replied.

After a long pause Noam tried again, "Will others come, is that what we are waiting for?"

"I seldom know when they are going to come," Artabus admitted. "I usually cannot tell where the places are that they can come."

"Uhhh," Noam hummed. "Then we are waiting not for them, but for you."

"I am afraid to go on," Artabus said, beginning to tremble.

The monk put his arm around the boy's shoulder and Artabus leaned against him. They stayed that way for several minutes. Noam sorted through various possibilities. Surely Artabus was not afraid of the dangers they might encounter or the rough conditions. The boy had shown he was made of sterner stuff. Ah, the fear was about what the quest would produce. It struck Noam then, "He is afraid of the story he is looking for. He is just a boy after all," Noam realized, and used the sleeve of his garment to wipe the boy's tears and his dripping nose.

They could not stay there. If courage were needed, then the monk's courage was called for.

"We will find it together," Noam declared, gently but firmly, matching his words to actions. He left it up to Artabus to pick a noun for the pronoun "it". Whatever people, truth, or destination this quest was leading toward, they would meet *it* together. As Artabus had said, some quests take more resources than one person has. This, apparently, was such a quest.

They had traversed only one third of the distance through the mountains, or "through the hole in the hills" as Artabus continued to think of it. The one third through which they had passed, however, had three quarters of the challenges. The rest was easier.

As they began moving again Artabus perked up. It had been encouraging to have Noam promise to see this quest through with him. Now that they were walking there were more immediate things to think about than what the quest would reveal.

They came to the end of the long, collapsed cave, and that was the one place where a fragment of the roof was still intact. It was the portion that most completely turned this passage into the "hole in the hills" that could be briefly seen twice a year if one had the right vantage point.

Beyond that the sides of the valley were still precipitous and perilous, but the stream no longer descended so steeply, nor was it as full.

Then they confronted their last major hurdle.

At about noon they came to a place where the entire width of the valley was flooded and marshy from side to side. All they could see was a swamp-like lake several hundred yards wide. It looked imposing. Neither Artabus nor Noam said anything, but they silently agreed that swimming across this unknown water was not their first choice, nor did it look possible to hike or wade around it. Flying over it was out of the question. Maybe there was another animal trail through the rocks, but without Ambrose they would not be able to find it.

It was rather soggy where they were standing, so they went back a short distance to a better picnic site and ate their way through a few more of the Cloister's provisions, sitting on a fallen log. The longer they sat the more they thought of the log they were on.

"I wonder if this log would float," Noam ventured.

"It had to get here somehow," Artabus reckoned.

"Indeed, and not long ago." Noam picked at some still-tight bark.

"Do you think we could move it?" Artabus asked.

The difficult part was getting it dislodged from the stones in which it was wedged. That took some leverage and prying. Then the log simply rolled down the slope right to the water.

"Well, we're off," Noam sang out.

They tied their baskets to the log and decided to cross the lake by hanging onto the log and kicking their feet to move it. That way they had more control. So, with the monk on one side and the boy on the other, they launched the log forward and when the water was deep enough they began to float and kick. They were swimming after all. It took practice to keep the log going straight, but in half an hour or so they had gotten as far as the log would go until another heavy rain

raised the water level. When the two had slogged up onto the far bank and cleaned as much muck off as possible they got dressed again and congratulated themselves on their accomplishment.

In another hour and a half they had come within view of the land beyond the mountains.

“Where do we go from here?” Noam asked, yielding leadership of the quest back to young Artabus, who had made all the key decisions about directions so far. This time the boy revealed something of the source of those directions.

“They said to go on toward the sunset and come to the russet bluff,” Artabus recalled. Noam dared not inquire about the mysterious “they” until Artabus was ready to volunteer the information. The monk was satisfied to assume that “they” were, in this case, the three visitors from the night before. That guess was satisfying enough.

From where they stood, however, it looked a long way to any bluffs. In his mind Noam began to inventory their food supplies. They had two day’s supply at the most.

It was no mystery which way the sun would be setting, so rather than delay they began to walk.

“We need to mark our way, to get our bearings,” Noam suggested.

The way ahead was fairly lacking in landmarks at first glance. So Noam suggested they climb higher while they had the chance.

From where they began, it was a short easy climb to a pretty good lookout. The sun was halfway from its zenith to its setting point.

“Now what will we pass if we head toward the sunset?”

Artabus saw a grove of trees about half-way to a shining lake and then a stone hill projecting out of the ground. Beyond that it was too hazy to see.

“How long do you think it’ll take to get to the white stone hill?” Artabus wondered out loud.

“Depends on walking conditions,” the monk replied. “One day, I hope.”

“Well, we had better get some of it done today,” Artabus recommended.

The walk was downhill at first, fairly gradual, with little to trouble them. By sunset they had made it to the grove of trees.

“Time for some creative cooking,” Noam announced.

Artabus said nothing, but wandered off toward a stream that entered the grove of trees. After half an hour Artabus ambled back carrying a foot-size fish on a spear he had fashioned out of a young sapling. The fish became the main item in a little pot of soup Noam was simmering, concocted of morning glory leaves and wild onions, plus a couple of pinches of salt from the Cloister.

When the food was dispatched it was time to rest, but too early to sleep.

“What should I know about Ebinar and Garicea?” Noam asked.

Artabus sighed. Even though the monk had earned both Artabus’s trust and the right to know, Artabus still did not know how to say what he knew.

“Just tell me this, then. Why do you say that they chose you to write their story? Did they come to you like the three travelers the other night?”

“No, Ebinar and Garicea have been dead a long, long time,” Artabus repeated. “It’s just a feeling I have that they sent a message, in a way. I must find the story before it is too late.”

“Many stories are lost,” the monk conjectured. “Some are never even told or thought into stories. They are gone before they are stories.”

“This one can’t be lost,” Artabus declared.

Noam was prepared to let it go at that, but Artabus added, “I must have this story in order



to go on living.”

Noam gasped at the immensity of this notion from such a youngster.

They skirted around the lake and made it to the white stone hill by mid afternoon, right when the heat of the day was strongest. Even from a distance the hill looked inviting with trees at the base that held the promise of water and shade. There was water, as well as vegetation that Noam recognized as edible, so he brewed another soup, adding a slow-moving reptile to give it body.

“Come up here,” Artabus called from a good ways up the rock hill.

“Can’t you just tell me about it?” the monk pleaded.

“No, I need your advice,” Artabus called down, flatly.

As soon as Noam got to him, red-faced and panting, “What color is that?” Artabus asked, pointing off toward the west.

At first it all looked vague and hazy, but then Noam noticed a difference in the middle distance, a line of reddish brown.

“It could be called russet,” he said, assuming Artabus’s real question.

That confirmed the boy’s opinion and showed them the way to go onward.

“How far is it?” Artabus asked.

“Oh, hard to tell. Maybe another day?”

“Will the food hold out?”

“I’ve been stretching it,” Noam admitted.

“Shall we camp here or go on?”

“You’re the leader.”

“Let’s camp here, then. There’s water and you’re finding food,” Artabus reasoned.

After the soup and the last crusts of bread from the Cloister, they explored around the hill to pick the best camping site. They decided that the place where they had eaten was best. So they settled down.

“What can you remember about your childhood?” Noam asked again, hoping that enough time had passed since his last attempt to explore this topic.

“Nothing,” Artabus insisted, interpreting his childhood to be that period of his life before he had any memory. Then he relented. “I remember living in a small stone house high up in the hills raising sheep, goats, and milk cows. I remember learning to milk and having a dog.”

“Ambrose?”

“No, another one, bigger. A sheep dog.” And then, to cut off this line of inquiry, Artabus asked, “What do you remember of your childhood?”

Noam smiled a wry smile that ended almost in a wink of his eye. “Well, I could say I remember nothing, but, like you, I remember some things. I remember living in a town that has a castle.”

“Where the priory is?”

“The very same.”

“Ah, you cheat.”

“Well, I remember it. I am reminded of it every day. That helps, you know.” Then, seeing no more objection, he went on. “I do not remember parents. I was told they died, but that could have just been an excuse for why I was left at the priory.”

“Did you miss them, your parents?”

“One cannot miss what one has never had or known. I do not miss them. But I miss not having had parents. Do you see the difference? I have seen boys with parents. That’s something I

never had. But the priory was good. I was taken care of and given a future as a monk and teacher.”

“Do you think I should become a monk and a teacher?”

“You would be good as a teacher, but I have never seen you expressing any interest in the life of a monk. Are you religious?”

Artabus thought about it and then asked, “What makes a person religious? What made you religious?”

“I had an experience with an angel. After that I have been sure of the existence of holy beings. I accept the rest on faith. It has worked out well for me,” Noam testified.

“Then I guess I am not religious because I have not had any experience with an angel or any holy beings. What’s the difference between saints and angels? Aren’t they about the same?”

“Oh, not the same,” Noam assured him. “Not the same. Saints are created by the Church. That is, the Church controls who can be called a saint, but the Church has never claimed any authority over angels.”

“Doesn’t the Church ever make mistakes in picking saints?”

“The Church tries to be very careful. There are many steps and tests. I think it is unlikely any people that the Church picked as saints were not well qualified to be adored.”

Artabus was not thoroughly enough informed to argue this, but he did have one last question, “Don’t some get missed?”

“Hum, that could be. Yes, I suppose it is possible there are saints that have been overlooked,” Noam agreed with this somewhat disagreeable possibility.

The next day they set off at first light, determined to get to the russet bluff before nightfall.

It was a longer walk than they had hoped, and they were tired from their days of traveling, but they got to the edge of a wide river by sunset. The river was fatter across than any Artabus had ever seen. It was bigger than Artabus believed it was possible for a river to be. Across the river was the palisade they had seen from the rock hill. In the evening time the bluff was not as golden-red as it had appeared with the sun shining directly onto it.

Now they were facing the large challenge of how to cross the river to get to the russet bluffs. They had just agreed to deal with that in the morning, when they saw a thin column of smoke appear from a grove of trees in the valley just below them.

Within ten or fifteen minutes they were near enough to see it was a campsite for eight or ten people, judging from the tents. This was the first human habitation the two travelers had seen in a long time, but they resisted the urge to charge into the camp. Something about this place made them wary. It was too quiet for a camp this big.

Using mostly hand signals, Noam instructed Artabus to hide where they were while the monk went around to come into the camp from the river side, that probably being the main way in.

“If anything happens to me, get out and get across the river any way you can. If everything is OK I will call you and you can come into the camp to join us.”

When Noam had begun to make his wide swing around to the opposite side of the camp, Artabus decided to climb a tree where he could see down into the camp without easily being seen.

It was getting dim by the time Noam was in position to approach the camp.

“What have we here?” a voice said.

Noam spun around to see where the voice had come from and found himself facing five men. Two of them moved away in opposite directions and the three others came slowly forward.

“A monk,” said one of the three, judging Noam’s attire.

“But what’s he doing *here?*” growled the one who had spoken first. “Search him,” he ordered.

“Nothing but scraps of food,” the third man reported. “And this,” he pulled out the monk’s utility knife. The knife was the type that any traveler going very far would have, but the group leader appeared to regard it as a weapon.

“Tie him up,” he ordered.

Using the monk’s own rope they tied his hands behind his back and then the leader kicked him in the back with the flat of his foot to move him toward the camp.

Pretty soon the fourth and fifth men rejoined them and reported, “Nobody else.”

It was only a short distance to the camp. When the group came in with their prisoner all four of the men in the camp came over to see what it was all about.

“What are we gonna do with him?” one of them asked.

“Can’t let him go,” another said.

“Where were you going?” the leader demanded.

Noam thought fast. They must assume he’d been coming from the river and going up onto the open space above. “I’m on a pilgrimage,” he lied, trying to sound monk-like.

“Where to?”

“The Cloister of Saint Agony,” Noam replied, thinking these sorts of men would not know one saint from another.

They did not know anything about saints but they knew about traveling.

“Y’er lying!” the leader barked and kicked Noam in the hip. “Y’er almost outta food. Ye’ weren’t *about* to be goin’ up there. Tie him over there and keep an eye on’im. Don’t let’im get away to spread it around we’re here.”

Artabus saw it all and heard most of it, enough to realize that Noam was in trouble and there was little he could do to help. But he could not get it out of his mind that he was supposed to get to the russet bluff. He did not want to leave the monk with these men, but he felt no need to be a hero either, especially since he had no chance of helping make things better. All he could think of was the russet bluff.

The group in the camp turned their attention to their evening meal and drinking. Artabus waited until they were completely occupied and then began as quietly as possible to ease himself down. Of course, he thought every snapping twig and quivering branch was a dead give-away, but none of the men was paying attention.

Noam’s guard yelled from the other side of the camp, “Gimme some meat!”

That brought a loud response from the group that covered Artabus’s little leap to the ground and his first few steps away into the darkness.

The boy had no plan, of course. He only knew that there was the wide, dark river between him and the russet bluff, now invisible in the darkness. Even on a moonless night like that one, the darkness in a woodland is not absolute. So before too long Artabus found the riverbank and began to walk along the shore. By chance he moved toward the place where Noam had been caught. That is how the boy came upon the rowboat the five men had been using. It was pulled onto the riverbank, but not far. Still it was a large, heavy boat. At first Artabus did not think he could budge it, but inch by inch he slid it until it was afloat and climbed aboard.

The mountain boy was a stranger to rivers and boats, but he learned enough about rowing by trial and error to be able to steer toward the opposite shore. The main current took him downstream faster than he knew, and so he was well past the russet bluff by the time he got to the far shore. He was also very disoriented. It did not help that all he could think about was Noam

being tied to a tree while the gang decided how to kill him.

As the sky lightened a bit Artabus figured it would be dawn soon. He was corrected some minutes later when the moon appeared over the tree tops on the far shore. The moonlight illuminated the stone bluff, however, and it gleamed in the midst of the shadows like a beacon. For a moment Artabus thought about trying to row back upstream the mile or so, but he was too tired and thought the water was too swift. So he set off walking. The moon was half-way toward overhead when Artabus got to the place on the shore where the bluffs were next to the river.

That was the end of his ideas.

He came to the spot he had been told to come, and now what? He was exhausted, hungry, alone and fighting down panic. He lost the fight.

“NOOOM!” he moaned the name of the dearest friend he had. The moan, with the long “oh!” sound, echoed off the water and the stone bluff scaring night birds in their hunt. The long oh sound happens also to be the sound of human speech that carries farthest of all vowels.

A few minutes later Artabus was startled out of his misery by two men coming toward him with a torch. When they saw him they rushed to lift him by the arms up off the wet sand onto which he had sunk. They surprised him again by saying, “We’ve been waiting for you. We didn’t expect you in the middle of the night. Where is your friend?”

By this time the two young men had been joined a boy Artabus’s age with a very excited wire-haired dog that could not be restrained. They were the same three who had visited Artabus in the canyon.

They agreed that the group who had captured Noam were a gang of bandits that had been making life miserable for the people in towns along the river.

By dawn a large party of men from town had formed at three places on the far shore and they were ready to move toward the spot Artabus believed he had found the boat. A number of the men carried a type of hand-held machine that hurled a projectile with stunning force. Artabus had never seen such things before.

Because of their successes, the gang had grown careless and they had no guards around their camp except the one assigned to Noam, who was asleep, and another who was also asleep by the campfire.

The search party advanced toward the camp from three directions, but such a large number could not move noiselessly. So before they got to the camp the bandits were alerted and ready as they could be.

When Artabus and the group coming straight from the river got to the camp they found Noam lying with his hands and feet staked to the ground and the gang leader with the monk’s knife at his throat. Only three other bandits could be seen.

“There are nine of them,” Artabus called out.

“Art...” Noam called back until the knife was pressed harder against his voice box.

“What we have need of here,” the bandit leader announced, “is a deal.”

“No deal,” one of the men from town shouted.

The bandit leader ignored him. “The monk lives if you leave.”

“The monk leaves with us,” the leader of the party from town called back.

“Har!” the bandit retorted and pulled the knife across Noam’s throat intending to draw a little blood. The knife was too dull. The bandit pretended not to notice.

“Now *here’s* the deal,” a little, heavy-set man with a powerful voice and black bushy moustache shouted, “all nine of you gather in a cluster there with your hands in the air and you live another day.”

“Har!” the bandit leader exclaimed and lifted the dull knife as if to hack at his captive.

THWACK! THWACK! THWACK! Three acute slaps cut through the leaves and found three targets. The bandit leader and two others dropped to the ground. The monk’s knife hit the monk in the chest, handle first, and no one moved to retrieve it.

“Come out now,” the man with the moustache called. “You have just ten counts to end this and stay alive. One...two...”

The fourth bandit decided to run.

THWACK!

He fell.

“Six...seven...”

“THWACK! THWACK!” was heard off to the right side, followed by crashing and thrashing. From the other side three bandits emerged with their hands on their heads, eyes glaring, but the fight otherwise gone out of them. The townsmen from the left came behind their three captives, while the group from the right got their two victims trussed up to be carried to the campfire area.

Before long the bandits who had been “thwacked” by the missiles recovered enough to walk to the river and be ferried to the other shore.

The trip down river to the town took an hour. On the way they passed a cypress swamp. The river had widened out so far that Artabus doubted anyone could see from one side to the other. The flotilla pulled toward the right shore. There was a strange smell in the air that he was told was the smell of the sea.

Ambrose and the five men from the russet bluff were waiting for them, along with almost all the people in town.

What’s the name of this town?” Noam asked the man with the moustache.

Two voices announced proudly, “Aftawood.”

The excitement of the capture of the bandit gang died down after the constable and deputies came by boat to take the prisoners away.

Noam took a nap in the house of the short, stout man with the bushy moustache.

Artabus went off with his dog and the three men who had been waiting for him by the russet bluff.

“Who are you?” Artabus asked them bluntly.

“And who are you?” the youngest of the three asked in response, smiling and rumpling the boy’s silver-blond hair. His name was Elain.

“I am Artabus Vitoculanu,” Artabus retorted. His voice had a complex mixture of pugnaciousness and uncertainty.

“But you are on a quest to find out who you are,” Elain said.

“My quest is to get the story of Ebinar and Garicea,” Artabus replied.

Alamor, sitting next to Elain, asked, “So, what do you know of Vitocula and Zoar?”

“How do you know them? They are my mother and father!”

“Then why the quest?” Elain persisted gently.

“Come,” Alamor said soothingly, “it is time for you to leave your past behind you and live in the present. Listen, young Artabus, the truth is never to be feared.”

“I am afraid of the truth,” Artabus mumbled.

Alamor, the oldest of the three, shifted his weight. “Didn’t this quest come to your mind while you were still living in the stone hut in the mountains with Vitocula and Zoar? Didn’t this all

start when you became distraught and confused when you found that Vito and Zoar are both men? Didn't you hear them talking one late night about Ebinar and Garicea? Weren't you then directed by Ebinar and Garicea to set off on this quest?"

"How do you know all that?" Artabus cried. "Who are you? Who are *all* of you?"

"You mean all of the ones who have guided you on this quest, starting with your aunt back where you were born?" Elain asked. "We are all children of Saint Atrocious. And so are you."

Artabus looked a bit wild. "Am I dreaming all this?"

"You are not dreaming, exactly. Don't worry about that. Let's just say that you are in one of the states of 'now' that Brother Noam calls the eleven-now, a state that you have not been in, until this quest."

Elain caressed Artabus's cheek with his delicate but very physical fingertips. "You are afraid. Let us tell you why you do not need to be afraid."

"You are right. Your quest will end with the story of Ebinar and Garicea," Alamor assured him. "But your quest begins to end with us. You will know just how you are the son of Vitocula and Zoar, and how you, too, are a blessed child of Saint Atrocious as we are and as our children will be."

Elain leaned close to Artabus and spoke directly to him. "My parents died in a fire and I was raised by new parents. The day came when I knew these parents were both men and I was not their 'real' son. I was angry and afraid, but they brought me here to Aftawood, one of the only places to remember the story of Ebinar and Garicea. Here is how the people of Aftawood got the story again after forgetting all about it.

It was Linnat's turn. He told the tale:

"In the days of the Great Queen, in the village of Aftawold, close by the awful bog and the wide river and the sea, lived two friends, Ebin and Garic. They had been born two days and two houses apart and they grew up together. For ten years they ran together through the village, climbed the afta trees to spy on the world, and swam in the river. Together, when they dared, they ventured onto the bog, and together they were stripped of their pants and whipped with limber sticks by their mothers, for the bog was a treacherous place that had devoured many a naughty boy and drunken man.

"For the next ten years Ebin and Garic did what young men did in Aftawold. They herded village cows and they cut hay. They gathered berries in one season and nuts in another. They helped harvest the wheat and thresh the grain. They fished in the sea and the river. They looked after chickens and ducks, and they looked after each other.

"In their twentieth year Ebin and Garic sat down in their favorite spot in the shade of the afta trees and wept, spilling their tears on each other's shoulders.

"'What shall we do?' they asked each other. They had no answer. There was no one to console them. After making love one last time, they held hands and walked out onto the awful bog, out onto the sea of moss over the acid lake to join the naughty boys and drunken men.

"No word was heard of Ebin and Garic in Aftawold for ten generations. They were all but forgotten as Aftawold abandoned its old life as the world moved on and none stayed the same.

"Then one day a minstrel came to Aftawold.

"'For a coin and a meal, I'll sing you a reel,' he said, and gave them a sample:

There once lived a pair  
Right over there  
Whose story will whiten y'er hair.

Ye'll say it ain't true.  
But I swear to you  
The couple were people ye' knew.  
I'll tell you much more,  
There's much more in store,  
Of Eb'nar and Gar'cee of yore.

“No one was much interested in helping pay for the troubadour to entertain them that night until an old woman sitting by a big afta tree smoking her pipe said, “They'd be boys of Saint Atrocious.”

“That night every soul in Aftawold came to hear the story of Ebinar and Garicea, for the tales of Saint Atrocious were stories that fascinated them and no one had ever told them they had anything to do with Aftawold.”

Linnat stood up.

“You can't leave it there!” Artabus protested when Linnat gave the appearance of quitting his recitation.

“We should not deprive the people of Aftawood the pleasure of hearing their own bard tell the story,” Alamor explained.

“Besides, Noam will want to hear it too,” Elain interjected.

That night almost the whole village of Aftawood gathered in the center of town.

It turned out that lately Linnat had become the new bard of Aftawood. He, Alamor and Elain had lived in Aftawood ever since they came there so Elain could hear the story of Ebinar and Garicea. They were accepted there in Aftawood, so they had stayed.

Linnat was seated on a tall wooden box with a nine-string musical instrument. His lover Alamor sat below him with a drum and a metal pan and their son Elain played the flute as the bard sang:

For a coin and a meal  
I'll sing you a reel.  
And that, my dear friends, is my deal.  
There once lived a pair  
Right over there  
Whose story will whiten your hair.  
You'll say it's not true;  
But I swear to you  
The couple were people you knew.  
I'll sing you the tale  
For some coins in the pail,  
Of Eb'nar and Gar'cee and Dale.

From all sides there was a shower of coins which little children ran around gleefully collecting in a wooden bucket.

And so, Artabus heard the story that boosted his pride and ended his quest.

Back, at last, in the safe confines of the priory school Artabus handed in his document to demonstrate his competence in the precise writing of The People. Brother Noam smiled as he read the opening, “Ebinar & Garicea live 2-gone & 3-now....”

“Yes,” Noam agreed, “their story is ‘2-gone’ the critical time, the beginning of the sequence

for Artabus, and also ‘3-now’, the nostalgic present, the now that is certainly less radical for young Artabus than it was before.”

But much as he admired the crisp efficiency of the writing of *The People*, in this case the monk secretly preferred the way Artabus told the story in his own words:

“The awful bog of Aftawold leaked acidic puddles here and there and strange flowers found nowhere else flourished in their time. Mists beclouded the bog which undulated menacingly as Ebin and Garic tread upon it to join the naughty boys and drunken men.

“In the midst of a thick fog the two young men were startled to come upon a figure enshrouded in mist who addressed them by name.

“He called to them, ‘Ebin and Garic, my beloved, choose which you will. Take five paces to your left and you will have your destiny. For you stepped onto this awful lake intending that. You can be forever as you are, in the bottom of the lake, preserved for eternity by the acidic water, incorruptibly together, but dead today. Or take five paces toward me and you can have a new life and you can have your heart’s desire, each other, but for just one lifetime.”

“Ebin and Garic had heard many tales of Satan who made such deals and was to be rejected or regretted. But the choice for the two lovers was easy. ‘We come to you for a moment, for a day, or for a lifetime however long it is.’

“The being was not the Devil. He was quite the other sort of angel. He led the young men across the awful bog and then he gave them a new life.

“He declared, ‘One of you shall live as a woman. Thus you will pass as a couple. And here is my promise, I will bring you a child for your own and none shall need to know you have not borne the child. So you will be seen in the eyes of all.’

“From that time on Garic was called Garicea and she was as good a wife as ever was to Ebin who went by the name of Ebinar. They found a place in the highlands above a small village and lived a hard but blessed life.

“Within a year the angel was back with an infant, announcing, ‘His widowed mother died in the forest. He is your child now to love and to raise.’

“Ebinar and Garicea wept for joy and did both those things to tiny Dale.

“They were happy into their old age, and when they died, they did so happily, thinking how blessed they had been to have lived such perfect lives.

“Eventually the stories began to be told of a saint who rescued cursed lovers and blessed them with new lives and orphaned children to love and to raise.

“Just as soon, the story of the saint was blackened by those who would have none of it. They ranted, ‘The very idea that such unions should be called blessed! Atrocious!’

“Thus the nameless angel was called a saint and the saint acquired a name. But the tales of the saint and his pairs of men and women began to fade except for a village or two.

“The saint is still remembered on his day by a cloister here and there, although they cannot tell you what the saint is remembered for, so they just sing the names of the saint’s beloved.

“Yet even these days the angel consoles such couples as Ebinar and Garicea and helps them acquire a child like Dale to love and raise. Those couples are the beloved of Saint Atrocious. Their little ones, like me, are the blessed children of Saint Atrocious.”