

ORPHANS *of*

Chaos

The Golden Age

Phoenix Exultant

The Golden Transcendence

The Last Guardian of Everness

Mists of Everness

Orphans of Chaos

ORPHANS *of*

Chang

John C. Wright



A TOM DOHERTY ASSOCIATES BOOK
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This is a work of fiction. All the characters and events portrayed in this novel are either fictitious or are used fictitiously.

ORPHANS OF CHAOS

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To the memory of Harry Golding, a man of sterling moral character, generous wit and charm, endless patience, and titanic intellect, ~~this tutor of St. John's College in Annapolis had many students who~~ admired him with a profound love, of whom this author's is not the least.

Let it be not imagined by any reader that the rather sinister educational institution depicted in this fantasy is meant to resemble the author's *alma mater*, for the spirit of St. John's is one in bitter enmity to tyranny; the task of St. John's is to make free men out of youths by means of books and balanced judgment: *Facto liberos ex liberis libris libraque.*

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ORPHANS *of*

Chaos

1.

The estate grounds were, at once, our home, our academy, and our prison. We were outnumbered by the campus staff, and by the imposing old Georgian and Edwardian edifices. There were more mares in the stables than there were students in the classrooms. It was only the five of us.

The estate was bound to the North by the Barrows, to the West by the sea cliff, to the East by the low, gray hills of the Downs. What bound us to the South is a matter of dispute.

2.

Colin claimed the forest was the only boundary to the South. His story was that the wood had no further side, but extended forever, with the trees growing ever taller, the shade ever darker, and beasts within it ever more dangerous, huge, and savage. He said that beyond the world's end the trees were titanic, the darkness was from Tartarus, and the beasts were vast enough to swallow the sun and moon.

When the two of us broke into the Headmaster's library, I climbed up to wipe with my skirt the dust from the glass-covered map that stood above the volumes and antique folios of the oak bookshelf. The map showed Wales to the North and Cornwall to the South. To the East were English towns famous from history and legend: Bristol and Bath, Hastings and Canterbury and Cambridge. There was London, queen of all cities. Beyond the White Cliffs of Dover was the Channel and Calais on the coast of France, gateway to the continent, to places rich and bright and beautiful and ever so far away.

Colin rolled his eyes, which were large, startlingly blue, and very expressive. "And you believe our world is the one depicted on *that* map?" His voice dripped silky contempt.

He ducked his head to peer up at my under-things, but scampered back when I aimed a kick at his head.

3.

Quentin, on the other hand, implied the Old Road (which ran through the forest) constituted the boundary to the South. He argued that the Straight Tracks were older than the Roman road built at the same time; older than the standing stone we found among the gray hills of the downs; older than the great mound on the South lawn.

He spoke of ley lines, and energy paths and mysterious connections between certain hilltops and standing stones, the crumbled ruins of the tower on a rock in the bay we all called the "lighthouse." He had charts to show their alignments with various rising and setting stars on certain dates. He used an astrology chart from the back of one of Mrs. Wren's magazines to show, with some plain geometry,

why the Straight Tracks defined the transition point between different astral domains. The argument was incomprehensible, and that made it easier to believe.

Where Colin was loud, Quentin was quiet, indrawn, unassuming. He never claimed to be a warlock, and therefore we all thought he was.

Vanity and I saw him on the Manor House roof tiles one October midnight, talking to a winged shape too large to be a crow. It took flight, and we saw its outline against the moon.

4.

Victor was more logical. He argued that the Southern boundary was the new highway B-4247, which led from the coast to Oxwich Green. This new highway was on our side of the forest, and cut through it in places. Following the highway toward the bay led to the fishing village of Abertwyi, from which the island of Worm's Head could be seen. Victor said the highway right-of-way followed the legal boundary as defined in the courthouse records for Shire of West Glamorgan, which listed the metes and bounds of the Estate.

We knew Victor had disappeared when the group all went to Mass one Sunday in Abertwyi-town. We did not know how he got over the stone wall surrounding the churchyard and courthouse unseen, or picked the lock on the massive iron grate, forged into fanciful shapes of leaves and black roses, which blocked the courthouse doors. Victor just was able to do things like that.

We know what he had been looking for, though. We all knew: records of our parents.

"I was naïve to expect our records to be there," he confided in me curtly. "The adoption records and genealogies only apply to men."

I cocked an eyebrow at him, and gave him an arch look. "And what about women, then?"

"The word refers to both sexes."

"Does it, really? You'll never talk me into going with you to the Kissing Well, if you sit there and say I look to you like a man."

"Define your terms. We are certainly human. We are certainly not *Homo sapiens*."

And, after a moment, he said, "Actually, I do not recall asking you about going to the Kissing Well. Your comment seems to be based on a false assumption."

Victor was, in some ways, the smartest one of the five of us. In other ways, he was just so stupid.

I should explain that, during that summer, the chapel attached to the estate had been undergoing repairs for water damage from the rains. When Mr. Glum, the groundskeeper, brought Victor, dragged by his ear, back to stand before the Headmaster, there was a consultation in the library among the Board of Trustees. The next Sunday we went to Mass in our own chapel, water-streaked walls behind the saints covered with tarp, scaffolding blocking the stained-glass windows, and everything. Further expeditions to Abertwyi were canceled.

Victor's argument was brief and solid. A boundary was a fiction defined by law; there were documents reciting the applicable law; and they named the new highway as the boundary. Q.E.D.

5.

Vanity was of the opinion that if we did not know where the boundary was, it could not affect us.

Her argument ran along these lines: we had been warned something bad would happen to us if we went over the boundaries, or tarried too long on the far side. But boundaries do not exist in the material world. A rock or a tree on one side or the other of an imaginary line is still a rock or a tree, is it not?

Therefore the boundaries only exist, as Vanity put it, "in our fancy."

"Think of it this way," she would say, between various ejaculations and digressions. "If everyone woke up tomorrow and agreed we should spell 'dog' C-A-T, why, dogs would be cats as far as we could tell. But the dogs would not care what we called them. If everyone woke up and said, 'Vanity, the Queen of England!' why, then, I'd be the Queen of England, provided the army and the tax gatherers were among the people who said it. If only half the army said it, we'd have a civil war."

The boundary to the South was no different. As one moved South there were trees upon the southern lawn, a few, and then more, and then scattered copses, then thick copses. At some point, you would find yourself in a place with no grass underfoot, where no one had stepped before, and see trees which had never felt the bite of an axe. But where exactly was the dividing line?

The trees were thick around the servants' quarters, the stables, and the pump house. They were thicker beyond the old brick smithy. They were thicker still beyond the even older green mound connected with local King Arthur tales; but that mound was bare of trees itself, and one came from the shadows of silent leaves into a wide round area of surprising sunlight, where four standing stones held a tilted slab high above wild grass. The stones were gray, and no moss grew on them, and no sunlight ever seemed to warm them.

Vanity said that Arthur's Table clearly could not be in the forest, because there were no trees there. A forest, by definition (Vanity would exclaim) was a place full of trees, wasn't it?

So (she would conclude triumphantly), there was no Southern boundary, provided we all agreed that there was none. What other people said amongst themselves was their own affair.

Colin would ask sarcastically, "And when they send Mr. Glum and his savage dog to hunt us down and maul us, does it then, at some point, become our affair?"

Vanity would roll her eyes and say, "If the dog mauls us on this side of the boundary, we could still say he was on the other side, couldn't we? Things like boundaries don't exist if you don't see them when you look for them, do they?"

"And I guess dog fangs don't exist if you don't feel it when your arm gets ripped off, right?"

"Exactly! Suppose the dog only *thought* he mauled us, but we did not see him nor feel him when he came to attack us! How do you know the dog hadn't just dreamed or imagined he attacked us? We could agree he hadn't done it, couldn't we? We could even agree the dog had agreed not to hunt us!"

Colin would respond with something like, "Why bother arguing with me? Why don't you just agree that I agree, so that, in your world, I have?"

Vanity would rejoin, "Because I prefer to agree that you argued and you lost, as anyone who hears the dumb things you say would agree."

Colin was not one to give up easily. "If you merely dreamed you had found a secret way out of here, that would not let you walk through a solid stone wall, would it?"

"Of course not. But no one knows which walls are solid and which are hollow because no one can see the inside of the solid ones, can they? The ones you can see inside aren't hollow, are they? No one else has any proof one way or another."

Vanity's argument was as incomprehensible as Quentin's, and as brief (when pared down) as

Victor's. Apparently as long as she, Vanity, in her solipsistic purity, did not believe the Southern boundary existed, then, for all practical purposes, it would not.

6.

Vanity was short, redheaded, with a dusting of freckles on her cheeks. Her eyes were the most enormous emerald, and they sparkled. She had a little upturned snub nose I always envied just a bit. She was fair skinned and always wore a straw skimmer to keep the sun off her face.

With her lips so pale a rose color, and her eyebrows so light, I always thought she looked like a statue of fine brass, held in a furnace of flame so hot as to be invisible, so that she seemed to glow. Even when frowning, she seemed to be smiling.

She was curvy and she took wry amusement at the fact that the boys, the male teachers, even Mr. Glum, could have their gazes magnetized by her when she walked by.

I always thought Vanity was a little sweet on Colin, because she yelled at him and called his names. In the romances I read, that was a sure sign of growing affection.

As I grew older, I noticed how carefully she noticed everything Quentin did, Quentin the quiet one, and I realized she doted on him. And I began to realize Vanity actually was annoyed and exasperated by Colin.

That was when I realized, for the first time, that the five of us were not the tightly knit band of Three Musketeers Plus Two that Victor said we were, one for all and all for one, and all that.

It was not until I was around an age which, in a human being, would be between sixteen and eighteen or so, when I had the thought that with two girls and three boys, one of the boys in our merry band would end up a bachelor, or married to a stranger.

I remember where I was when this thought came to me. I was sitting on the lip of the Kissing Well, with my skirts flapping in the gusts coming from the bay, quite alone. I had just come from the infirmary, and was still seasick from Dr. Fell's most recent round of vaccinations. We were usually allowed to skip lessons any afternoon when Dr. Fell worked on us, provided we made up the lessons later. The well was high on a hillside, and overlooked the water. Sea mews were crying, and the same sound lingered in the air.

It was spring, I remember, and two male birds were fighting. That was what prompted my thought.

That was also when I started wondering what my future would be. I wanted to be a pilot, an explorer. A cowgirl with a pistol. Anything that got me away from here. The idea of being a housewife seemed intolerably dull and lacking in glamour. On the other hand, the idea of never having a child was like death.

And then I said aloud to the well, "But what if they never let us go?"

The voice in the well said back softly, "... never let us go ... ?"

7.

My name is Amelia Armstrong Windrose. I should say, I call myself that; my real name was lost with my parents.

We chose our own names when we were eight or ten or so. It was not until we started sneaking on the estate grounds that we realized that other children in the village were christened at birth, and kept anniversaries of their birthdays, and knew their ages.

We knew about birthdays from various readings, of course. There were references to such things from histories, where boy kings had to be killed before they ascended the throne, or from gothic romances, where girl heirs had to be wedded before they came into their majority. We knew, in a general way, what a birthday party was.

Mrs. Wren started holding them for us, with snappers and bakers and wrapped gifts, and candles on cake with icing, and toasts and games, when we complained. But her notion was to have them two or three times a year, usually during months with no other holidays of note. And the number of candles she put on the cake could be anywhere from one to one score, depending on her mood, or the success of her shopping.

The gifts we got from her did not seem odd at the time, for we had no other basis of comparison. Once I got a wrapped roast duck, which had turned cold in the cardboard box, and lay amid its own congealed grease. Another time, a box of nails.

Colin got one of Mrs. Wren's shoes at that same party; Vanity got a drawer from the kitchen with knives and spoons in it. And yet, other times, her gifts were things of wonder and pleasure: a wooden rocking horse, painted fine, brave colors; a toy train set with an electric motor and a cunning little chimney that puffed real smoke; a dress of breathtaking beauty, made of a soft scarlet fabric, perhaps satin; an orb of pale crystal that glowed like a firefly when you held it in your hand and thought war thoughts; a walking stick with a carved jackal head with silver ears, which Quentin was convinced could find buried streams and fountains underground.

One birthday party, the Headmaster simply announced we were to choose names for ourselves, and put our baby-names behind us. Only Quentin refused to choose, and kept his original name. I, who had been Secunda, used the chance to name myself after my heroine, the American aviatrix, Amelia Earhart. My family name I took from that eight-pointed star which decorates maps and determines North.

You see, I had always felt closed-in and trapped by the walls and boundaries of our estate. No matter how handsome and fine the grounds, it was still a cage to me. My dreams were for far-unguessed horizons, hidden springs of unknown rivers, unclimbed mountains shrouded in cloud. The edges of maps interested me more than the middles.

Naturally, such dreams led me to admire that breed of men who sailed those horizons, found those springs, conquered those mountains. Roald Amundsen was my idol, along with Hanno, Leif Erickson, and Sir Francis Drake. My favorite books from Edgar Rice Burroughs were those where the lost city of Ophir appeared.

Amelia Earhart seemed so brave and gay, her smile so cheerful and fearless, in the one picture in the little encyclopedia entry I found of her, that only she could be my namesake.

I told myself she had not been lost at sea, but had discovered some tropic island so fair and so like Eden, that she landed her plane at once, knowing no one else would ever be daring and cunning enough to find the route she had flown. All the years that had gone by, with her still not found, seemed to confirm my theory.

My name, invented when I was perhaps a twelve-year-old, may seem silly now. But I consoled myself that young Tertia named herself after a novel by William Makepeace Thackeray, so that she could be called Miss Fair. We are lucky she did not end up called Miss Pride N. Prejudice.

I cannot describe myself except to say that I am either very vain or very beautiful, and that I hope I am the latter, while suspecting I may be the former. My hair is blond, beyond shoulder length, and I like to wear it queued up and out of the way. My complexion has been tanned by spending much time out of doors in the wind and weather.

I always had the idea, when I was young, that if I stared in the mirror long enough at some feature—my lips or eyes, some sun freckles I did not care for, or a mole, I could somehow, by force of will “stare” my face to a more perfect shape—clearer skin, higher cheekbones, eyes greener, or more long-lashed, perhaps slightly tilted and exotic.

And because this does indeed describe me, then as now, I had always had the unspoken, haughty assumption that plain girls either lacked willpower, or lacked imagination. It is my least attractive feature, this prejudice against the unsightly, and it is based on a very wrong notion of what life is like for normal people. It gives me no pleasure to notice that many normal people have the selfsame prejudice against the plain, but with far less reason than I.

I am tall. Rather, I should say, I am tall for a girl, but I hope you will understand me if I say I was taller when I was younger. Everyone but Primus, who became Victor Invictus Triumph, was smaller than me, and I could outrun and outwrestle my two younger brothers.

9.

I remember the day when Quartinus, who turned into Colin Iblis mac FirBolg, proved he could master me. There was some quarrel over who was to pluck apples from the tree, and I threw one at his head hard enough to raise a bruise. He grinned, as he did when he was angry, and chased me down. You see, I laughed because the last time we had raced, I had beaten him. Now he tackled me, rolled me on the ground, and took my hair in one hand to yank my head back—something he would never have done to a boy. Still, I grinned, because the last time we fought, I had toppled him downhill.

And so I struck and I wrestled and I pushed and I kicked, but my blows seemed, by some magic, to have been robbed of their force. Just one year before, he had been a child, and I could bully him. Where had my strength gone?

He pinned my wrists to the ground, and knelt on my legs to prevent me from kicking. Suddenly the game turned into something serious, mysterious, and somehow horrible. I writhed and struggled in his grasp, and I somehow knew, knew beyond doubt, that I would never be stronger than a man again. Not ever.

Colin smiled, and ordered me to apologize, and he bent his head forward to stare into my eyes. I wonder if he was trying to awe me with his frowning gaze, to hypnotize me with his luminous blue eyes.

If so, he succeeded beyond his dreams. This boy, whom I had never really liked, now seemed inexpressibly powerful to me: manly, potent, confident. I will not tell you all my wild thoughts at that moment. But I wanted him to kiss me. Worse yet, I wanted *not* to want it, and to have him steal a kiss from me nonetheless.

I did not apologize, but snapped defiantly at him, “Do your worst!” And I tossed my head and yanked at my wrists in his grip. My fists seemed so little compared to his, and his grip seemed

strong as manacles. I felt entirely powerless, but the sensation seemed oddly intoxicating, rather than
dreadful.

He did not do his worst. Instead, baffled, he stood up suddenly, releasing me and seemed suddenly
a boy again, a child I could defeat.

I remember we raced back toward the house, apples in our hands. We had just enough that we
could throw one or two at each other, trying to bruise shins and legs.

And I won that race, that time, but he grinned and tried to make me believe he had allowed me
win.

Strangely enough, I knew he thought he was lying. And I knew he had not been.

I do not know how young I was when I performed the experiment that required me to conclude that something was wrong in my life.

Victor—so I may call him, though he was still called Primus at the time—had grown a trace of hair down on his upper lip, finer than the fuzz of a peach. With even this small hint of manhood, he seemed more our leader than before, and there was a newfound glamour to him that touched my heart and troubled my dreams.

We had crept by stealth from the orphanage grounds, and stood among the rocks and bald hills of the West. Below us and to the East, we could see the lights from the Main House, the servant quarters, the outbuildings, the stables.

Dr. Fell had bought Victor the instrument he was using for his experiment from a scientific catalogue. At the time, I thought it normal and unexceptional. Now, I realize that such an instrument was fabulously expensive: a piece of precision machinery even an observatory would envy.

The moon rose not long after sunset, and we pointed the lenses of the instrument to the East. Victor held his eye to the eyepiece and made minute adjustments to the vernier dials. He thumbed a red switch with a grimace of satisfaction.

He said, “An internal computer will track the path of the moon as it rises, and send out periodic pulses. We want to gather a number of samples, to correct for the different cords of atmosphere the signal passes through. The return signal is received by the large dish on the tripod over there, whose motors are slaved to these wheels here. And voila!”

A numerical readout lit up. It was two point something something. 2.8955. Almost three seconds.

I said, “What now?”

He said, “And now we wait four hours.”

“Did you bring anything to read?”

He just looked at me oddly.

“Or smoke?” I said.

“You are too young to smoke. Besides, it’s bad for you.”

“Quentin said you tried it. You experimented with it.”

He shook his head. “It wasn’t me. Trying things common sense abundantly demonstrates are bad for you is not an experiment; such things show you nothing but what your own tastes are. That does not constitute knowledge. *This* is an experiment!”

“Then who was it?”

“Who was what?”

“Quentin said he smelled smoke in the boys’ bathroom. Cigarette smoke.”

He looked at me with scathing condescension, but said nothing.

“What?” I said.

“Logic. If it wasn’t me, and it wasn’t Quentin, and it wasn’t a girl, who was it?”

“Oh,” I said, feeling sheepish.

Hours passed. I fidgeted. I paced. I complained about the cold. I sat on the ground, which made no

colder. I asked him for his down jacket, which he doffed without a word and tossed to me. I rolled up and used it as a pillow.

I must have slept.

I dreamed that I was on a boat. A man held me roughly in one arm, dangling me over the side. The boat pitched and tossed terribly; rain pelted my face and ran in icy ribbons down my flesh. The man held some sharp, horrible thing near my face: a knife, or something larger than a knife.

In the dream, the water, which had been black and rolling, webbed with white foam and sprays, suddenly grew clear as crystal. A figure that was so large as to make our ship seem the size of a lifeboat was gliding beneath the waves, parallel to our course. The figure had his hands back along his sides and his head down; he did not kick his feet. Instead, the water streamed past him, like wind streaming past a man falling effortlessly through the air.

“Tell him to quell the storm,” said the voice of the doctor in my ear.

The figure turned its head and regarded us both. Its eyes were lamps, eerie with a greenish light, and it had a third eye, made of metal, embedded in its forehead.

Instead of being terrified that I was going to be pitched overboard or stabbed, I was overcome with a painful embarrassment to realize that the gigantic figure was utterly nude and that, as he kept turning, I would soon see a penis larger than the member of an elephant, rippling through the water like a periscope. What made it more embarrassing was that the figure had Victor’s features.

The third eye, the metal one, seemed to be the only one with a soul in it. In the senseless way things are known in dreams, I know that the mere fact that it could see me with this eye meant it could speak to me, despite all the water between us, and the noise and wrack of the storm. *“I am embedding this message by means of cryptognosis into a preconsciousness level of your nervous system. The paradigms of chaos have agreed only on this one point. We will wait for you . . .”*

“Tell him to make the clouds move.”

“What?”

“I said, I hope the clouds move. We need to get a clear reading when the moon reaches zenith.”

I was awake again, with Victor, on the cold hillside. A knotted texture of charcoal-black and gleaming silver hung like a ship out of fairyland high above us. The cloud covered the moon, and limned the edges with swirls of argent.

Victor was still standing.

“How long have I been asleep?”

“Two hours, fourteen minutes.”

“Oh.”

Silence.

Then I said, “Why are you doing this? We could get caught. It’s not as if Michelson and Morley hadn’t done this experiment one hundred years ago.”

He said, “One hundred eight. They’ve been saying untrue things to us. The teachers. The readings we got from the interferometer in lab class had been meddled with. When I did the experiment under controlled conditions, I got results consistent with the theory that light is conveyed via luminiferous aether.”

I sat up. “Are you saying there’s no Einsteinian relativity? But there have been other experiments. The procession of the axis of Mercury. Cesium clocks in a fast-flying airplane. Light was seen to bend around the sun during an eclipse.”

“We have only hearsay for that.”

I was astonished. The sheer magnitude of his skepticism was beyond words. It was like an elephant I had seen once during a rare field trip to Swansea Zoo. As soon as you think you understand how big it is, you look again, and it is bigger.

He said, “Picture this. According to relativity, objects compress in the direction of motion, right? And yet it also says that the same objects and events appear from each other’s ‘frames of reference’ to be symmetrical, right?”

“Right.”

“Take a cup with a tight-fitting lid. The cup and lid fit together, correct? Now move the lid and cup away at right angles, the lid horizontally, the cup vertically. Got the picture?”

“Got it.”

“What happened when you bring the lid and cup back together at near light speed?”

“Um . . . I am sure you are about to tell me . . .”

“From the point of view of the lid, the cup is compressed in its direction of motion, horizontally. The cup is shorter, but still a cylinder. The lid, to itself, suffers no distortion, of course. When the two meet, the lid will fit on the cup. But from the point of view of the cup, the lid is foreshortened in its direction of motion, vertically. Which means the lid is now an oval. The cup still appears round to itself. When the two meet, the lid cannot fit on the cup. The same event has two different results from two different points of view.”

I looked at him sidelong, wondering if he were kidding. For the first time, I wondered whether other people have more trouble visually picturing things in their imagination than I did. I mean, it was not as if I could look into their heads to see.

I opened my mouth to say that both observers would see the motion vector as a diagonal, but then I closed it again. I did not like arguing with Victor.

“What in particular happened?” I said.

For a moment I thought he was going to ask me what I meant, but then he said, “You know Mrs. Lilac from the village, whom Mrs. Wren uses to carry burdens and packages when she has done too much shopping?”

“Sort of the way you do me,” I said archly. I had carried the equipment up the slope from the hedges behind the lab shed.

“I don’t see the analogy.”

“Go on with your story.”

“Mrs. Lilac passed me in the hall. She said her daughter Lily was going to graduate from upper school soon and, seeing as how I had helped Lily learn her letters when she was in grammar school, would I care to attend the graduation ceremony? You know who Lily is, don’t you?”

“Yes. I know who she is,” I said shortly.

I was thinking that Victor had been to see Lily Lilac on every occasion that the Headmaster would allow. She was fair haired and fine boned, with a breezy, insincere manner I found exasperating.

Her father owned the fish cannery, and was counted as being one of the more influential people among the working class, in town. Lily owned her own outboard motor, and she went boating on every possible occasion.

From time to time I had seen Victor watching Lily Lilac from the sea cliff. He would stand among the rocks with a telescope, and watch her fly by, her boat bouncing along the waters of the bay, her

blond hair bouncing in the wind. She was always with a different boy each time. She seemed to be able to do what she liked, and go where she liked, when she liked. I do not recall hating any other living being so fiercely.

“I know her,” I said with a sniff. “So you’ve been invited to a graduation. I doubt Headmaster will allow you off the grounds.” I remember I was being fiercely loyal to Headmaster Boggin in those days, and thought he could do no wrong.

Victor favored me with another one of his withering glances.

“What?” I said, “What?”

“Logic. How young do you think a person has to be to not know her letters and numbers? And you must have been old enough to know mine. Let’s assume I was unduly precocious, and she was unduly slow.”

“Yes, let’s do,” I said, perhaps with a note of venom in my voice.

“I could have been what, three? Have you ever heard a child know his letters at two? How late could she live and not know her letters? Let’s say five. She would be nineteen when she graduated. She skipped a grade, eighteen. That makes me how old now?”

“Fifteen.”

“But suppose the numbers were reversed. What if I had been around five when I taught a two- or three-year-old? How old does that make me?”

I said, “If you were twenty-and-one, you’d be an adult. They would have let you out of here. They’d have let you out three years ago.”

“Would they have?”

“Why would they keep you?”

“Perhaps they get money from the trust for my upkeep. Who knows?”

“But how could they tell such a lie, and not get caught?”

“Who is to catch them? The townspeople are afraid of the Headmaster.”

The idea that anyone could be “afraid” of the kindly old headmaster, with his gentle smile and mild humor, was beyond belief. Had it been anyone other than Victor, I would have laughed aloud.

But I didn’t laugh. “Someone would tell. They can’t just go on keeping us here forever.”

“Who is to tell?” he said. “Who will question their statements? Suppose they say I am fifteen. Don’t I look it? Who questions them? Who doubts them? Who is skeptical enough to go to the trouble to check?”

At that moment, a timer on the instrument beeped.

Victor leaned in and looked at the eyepiece. He clicked the red button with his thumb. A moment later the LED readout lit up. 3.3214 . . .

He said grimly, “The difference between the reading now and the reading at dusk is merely the tangential velocity of the turning of the Earth. Light shot forward, tangentially to the turn, has the velocity of the Earth added, and travels faster. Light shot at a right angle, away from the axis, has the velocity added, and is slower. If we wait till dawn, the component of Earth’s rotation will be subtracted, and the velocity will be slower yet.”

“There must be a mistake,” I said slowly. “The instrument must be off.”

“Is that the most reasonable explanation?”

He turned and squinted. The light in the boys’ bathroom off the dormitory was flickering off and on, off and on. That was the signal that Mr. Glum had been seen leaving his little house on the back

grounds, no doubt to pull a surprise inspection of the boys' dorm.

There was no light in the girls' bathroom. Either Mrs. Wren had not stirred and the girls' dorm was safe, or else Vanity had fallen asleep at her post.

Victor stood. "I must run. Don't let the equipment get damaged when you carry it back down the rocks."

"Yes, master," I said sarcastically. But he did not hear me, because he was already jogging down the slope.

Now I was alone, in the cold, with no one but the moon to look after me.

Well, there was no need to delay. I started doing, in my mind, that trick I had learned that made all burdens seem lighter than they were when I hoisted them, and I put my hands out toward the instrument.

I was thinking: it was impossible.

The angular momentum of the Earth's rotation was so small a fraction of the speed of light, I know, that no possible instrument could detect a difference; and surely not a difference of nearly half a second over the (relatively) short distance between Earth and Moon. To be a valid experiment, the second reading would have to be taken half a month later, not half a day later, so that the velocity component added would have been that of the Earth's motion around the sun.

So, instead of lifting the instrument just yet, I put my eye to the eyepiece, made sure the instrument was still centered on the same crater of the moon as it had been at dusk, reached, and hit the red switch.

The dish hummed as a radar beam was sent out, bounced off the moon, came back.

The LED readout lit up. 2.8955.

I had little trouble getting the tripod folded and the instrument case packed up, and getting the whole thing hidden under the bushes, where Victor would sneak them back into the lab in the morning while he had cleanup duty.

But I had a great deal of trouble falling asleep that night. Surely it was just a quirky reading from a misaligned instrument, right?

Either that, or the speed of light acted differently when I was watching it than it did when Victor was watching it. Which is impossible, isn't it? That is not what the Theory of Relativity means. Our notions of reality can change as we learn more; but reality itself, the great unknown, cannot change.

But if reality was unknown, how did I know it could not change?

I had a dream about the ship again that night. The man holding me overboard, holding a sword to my throat, was Dr. Fell.

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