

The Dagger

ARAKI slowly brought himself from the black mists of unconsciousness to the cold grayness of reality. The rough, cold stones of the floor of the cell scratched his young body as he tried to rise. He strained to sit up, but the biting of the ropes cut into his flesh and made him bite his mouth to keep from crying. After all, he was too old to cry and blubber as smaller boys often did. But his face, straining to keep its composure, betrayed his years. His eyes still had the childish roundness, and his cheeks the tender plumpness of youth. Under his rope his body stretched long and lean, and his shoulders were still narrow. His arms were bruised and streaked with dirt, his hair was in a wild array about his head.

As Araki leaned against the stone wall, his breath coming in gasps after his exertion, he became conscious of the damp, sour smell of the cell. He wrinkled his nose in disgust and turned his face toward the doorway for any air that might enter. It was then he noticed the fire in the courtyard casting weird reflections on the dark-skinned men grouped around it. The thought of the decision to be made came again to him.

The men were drunk with wine and the joy of their plunder of the day. One of them, in a dirty loincloth, was twirling aloft a woman's arm bracelet that sparkled in the light. His guttural talk and ugly gestures told the way in which he had gotten it. His comrades slapped their legs in mirth and rolled on the ground in drunken laughter. Araki saw that one of the group was no older than he. The boy was sitting astride an inlaid casket and fingering a length of pure linen. He draped it over one shoulder, and seizing a gold handled sword, he swaggered before the group with cheers and applause, some slapping him on the shoulder to show that he was one of them.

"I could be like that boy," thought Araki. "I've been asked to join them and live as they do. They said they would teach me the secret words and symbols, and let me do as they do, for they are strong men. Their life must be a good one,

for they seem happy, and they have so much." His face brightened at the thought of not having to attend school any more.

Araki thought again of the beautiful gold and copper dagger they had held before him, as a present if he stayed with them. The handle had jade and turquoise stones in a circular pattern with gold twined about the edges. The blade glittered and was so sharp it split one of Araki's own hairs. How he would love to have a dagger such as that! At home he would—

Araki gasped. How could he have forgotten all this time about his family? The events of the previous night came crowding down upon him. Home seemed so far away . . .

The night had been as peaceful as other nights until suddenly the harsh yells of the Gadiantons had startled him from sleep. Things happened so fast: the torches reflecting from the brown skins and painted faces of the men, their cries and noise as they went from house to house of the village; pilfering, ravaging and ruining. They trampled over plants and knocked down furniture in their search for valuables. A woman's high, terrified scream, and sounds he didn't understand. Acrana! He ran toward the room, only to be caught and held by strong, rough hands. "Here now, you're too young for that, small one, you come with me," the owner of the hands laughed in an odd way, and half carried and half dragged him out of the house.

Then they left behind the village and lowlands and he was taken into the wilderness. If he slipped on the moss or stumbled over the vines he was prodded on. Slipping, sliding, muscles aching, eyes burning. Hurry. Walk faster. Get up. Don't fall. Hurry. Keep moving. Hurry.

Araki kept his eyes on the ground until the group slackened their pace, then he looked up. His mouth dropped agape—he was in the Lost City! That forbidden place where people said his ancestors once lived many hundreds of years ago. They stood on a high plateau looking across a huge plaza, gray-white in the moonlight, strewn with rubble and fallen columns of former buildings. The terraced pyramids rose in dark, majestic forms on either side, and at one end the shadow of a large flat-topped pyramid fell on the

cluttered stones of the plaza. Araki had never in all his life seen anything such as this, and he stared, taking in everything. The broken columns, the broad stairway leading down into a sunken court, the low altar in the center of the court, and the carvings! Such wonderful things in stone he had never seen. Walls of stone mosaics in graceful spiral designs, beautiful statues of a forgotten god, and sculpture on the sides of the buildings. Intricate designs worked by artists now gone from their city; skilled hands that would never again be present among the inhabitants of this desolated and decaying place.

Here the robbers stayed when not out pillaging. Here they lived from other men's wealth and possessions, here they enjoyed stolen wine and women, in a city that they had wrested from the jungle's strangling hold.

Araki was led into a long, narrow room in one of the decaying buildings. There some of the robbers talked to him with persuasive words. They brought the dagger before him and let him hold it in his own hands.

"You like it, eh?"

Araki's eyes glistened with eagerness. "Oh, yes."

"It will be yours. But you must stay here so we can teach you to use it as a man does."

"Stay here? Not go home?"

"You would live with us. We have many things to make lads happy," the robber chuckled, "Many things."

"I—I'm not sure."

"You must decide." His voice was harsh.

"I don't know. I would like to . . ."

"Make up your mind. Either be one of us, or . . ." but the robber didn't say what he was going to. They talked a long time, but Araki's confused indecision tried their patience. Finally they put him in a small room and said that he must decide by morning.

Araki was bewildered and exhausted, not understanding and too tired to worry . . .

Now he sat dumbly, his decision looming before him. Whether or not to become one of the Gadiantons. He was staring out the doorway when a low moaning sound came from the darkest corner of the cubicle. Araki's eyes grew

round and his body trembled. He had been told of evil spirits that inhabited the ruins. Perhaps this was one come to do harm to him. But he recognized words were coming with the moans. Someone was speaking as if to a person very near, kindly yet beseechingly. Araki twisted his body across the floor until he could see the speaker.

He was an old man, whose white hair hung long and matted closely to the sides of his head. His face was turning toward the wall, pillowed by a roll of old cloth. The man's body was stretched very stright over the rough stones. Araki wondered why he would lie this way, it would be better if he drew himself into a ball. The harsh floor would at least seem softer.

Araki was searching for something to say when the old man turned his face toward him. His eyes caught and held Araki in their steady gaze. They seemed to look through him, to pierce into his very thoughts. Yet they were kind and sad somehow as he said, "You are awake early, my son."

Araki gulped and continued to be held in the man's gaze. "Ye-yes, I couldn't sleep." He half-smiled shyly.

"It is no wonder with the noise outside," Shadar smiled kindly and sighed, stretching his body as if it were a comfort to lie on the hard floor.

"Sir, may I ask you something?"

"Of course, my son."

Araki hesitated and then blurted in childish inquisitiveness, "Why do you lie so straight on these stones?"

The old man suddenly seemed to grow older and shrink within himself. He shifted his gaze from Araki's face to the open doorway. After a moment he said, "Those men, out there, want me to do something I cannot do. They want me to reject my God. They thought that by putting me in a pit, too small to stand straight and so narrow that I could not rest by sitting, that I would do as they want. Two days I was there until tonight without water or food." He turned back to Araki's unbelieving face. "It gives one much time to think," he smiled. "This floor feels to me like the softest feather pallet."

"Why are you here now?"

Shadar's mouth drew to a thin line. "They thought that treatment was too mild. Tomorrow they have something else they wish to try." His voice was bitter.

Araki drew his knees up to his body and leaned against the wall. "How can this be? Why is it that the Gadiantons do this?"

A sigh, long and drawn, came from the old man's lips. "It is because of the Evil One in them. They have shut out Good. They want me, and others like me, to give up the God we worship and accept theirs. Their minds have been poisoned, they cannot see goodness any more." The old man seemed lost in thought for some time, then he said softly, "But it was not always thus. Once this land of your ancestors was peaceful; there were no men seeking the destruction of others."

Araki's eyes grew wide. "When was this? I don't remember."

"No, my son, you would not remember. It was many hundreds of years before your birth, or mine. But the story has been told from that time until now by father telling son. Many of the learned men wrote it, but they do not read of it today." The old man stirred, settling his body more comfortably, and raised his eyes to the fading stars showing in the corner of the door. "I will tell you the story as it was told to me by my father."

"Many, many years ago there came upon the land a terrible storm. So great was the storm, and the thunderings and lightnings that the earth was shaken. Even the cities toppled on their foundations and fell; the sea came over great cities and buried them, drowning all the inhabitants; mountains appeared where there was plain, and plain where mountain had been. Many people were killed; drowned, buried in earth and rock, carried out by the sea, or swept away by whirlwinds. The fury of the storm was great while it lasted. Then the storm stopped, and a deep darkness covered the land. Nor was there fire by which to see; and great was the wailing and moaning of the people for their lost ones. All over the face of the land was wailing and crying unto the God. This darkness lasted for three days."

"And the fourth day the sun shown and great was the re-

joicing of the people unto their God. And as the people gathered about their temple, there came unto them, out of the eastern sky, a man, descending in a white robe with a long beard. He came to the people and taught them all manner of things concerning life and the way to happiness. He taught them to love their neighbor and to do good toward him, not to stir up the hearts of men to anger one against another; to treat all men as brothers and not to raise a sword against one another. Many things did he say to the people of his doctrine, but now much has been lost by word of mouth and writing. But the people believed and remembered in their hearts these things which he taught. Many believed, and obeyed his doctrine, even to the fullest. The god stayed only awhile and then departed into the sky, promising to return again when the time should be right. And his name was known as Kukulkan among the people."

"The inhabitants of this land prospered, for the wealth that comes of the earth is great when people are willing to share with another. And the doctrine caused the people to be creative, and to build fine buildings. Beautiful works of art and great cities appeared in the land. Every man did deal justly with another. The teachings linked the hearts of the people together and formed a barrier against the Evil One."

"But after many years the people began to be proud, and to claim their prosperity to be of their own making; and they did boast of their powers. Many began to wear costly apparel, and to keep unto themselves their wealth, and to oppress their neighbor. The people formed secret organizations and combinations of Gadianton. They sought to bring those who believed in Kukulkan into their power, and to make them reject the teachings of their fathers."

The old man fell silent for a moment. "This is why it is done, my son. Because of their hatred, they are evil men and their hearts are hardened by wickedness. They cannot see good. They want others to join in their scheme, to be evil as they are."

Araki spoke slowly at first then faster as if to change the words of Shadar. "I have been spoken to by them. They offer many wonderful things. All the gold I can carry, rich and

wonderful foods, fine robes, and even a gold and copper dagger!" Araki became thoughtful. "They truly offer many things. They cannot be so evil that they offer these."

The old man's eyes blazed and he started to rise when a shadow appeared in the doorway. "Get up! Your rest is finished." The guard leered at Shadar.

"No," he breathed wearily, "my rest is yet to come."

"Out!" The guard seized the man by a frail shoulder and sent him sprawling over the doorstep.

* * *

It was morning and yet the heat of summer could be felt. The sun was strong and hot as Araki stood in the plaza. The sides of the pyramids wavered in the shimmering heat. Araki looked straight forward, his eyes squinting, perspiration tracing the lines of his cheeks down to the firm-set mouth. He looked older somehow, and well he might, for he had seen many things, and many thoughts had raced through his head since leaving the cell. Yet there was the decision. The decision.

The robbers had tried many things to make the old man reject his god. They had talked slowly at first, then insultingly; they screamed and sneered at him and made obscene remarks about his god. But so far the old man had remained silent or had only spoken quietly to his tormentors. A fire was laid on the platform and set blazing. The heat of it forced some of the robbers to abandon their places on the ground.

The leader, Laman, stood in front of Shadar regarding him in menacing silence, his arms akimbo, the muscles bulging in his neck and his shaved head glistening with sweat. Swaggering up and down in front of the standing old man, he suddenly turned on him and screamed, "Reject your god. Say he is false, deny that he was more than a man. Say it! Say it, say it! Reject him and you shall have the wealth that I can give you."

Shadar raised his eyes to meet those of the thief. "I cannot." Laman struck at the old man's face, causing him to wince but not fall. He raised his arm to strike again but stopped mid-way. His face twisted into a smile. "Sit!"

Araki leaned forward, not daring to breathe, wondering

why Laman was allowing Shadar to sit. The old man sat wearily on a fallen column, his legs stretched in front of him, his chin touching his chest in exhaustion. At a signal from Laman two of the robbers ran toward Shadar with drawn swords. Before he could move they had sliced off his toes and the front part of his feet. Shadar groaned and slouched to the ground only to be roughly hauled to standing position by two robbers, his head pulled back so that he had to look at the fire. There, the butchers, their faces twisted in fanatic joy, danced about, holding the feet pierced by the swords over the flames.

Araki felt a sudden terrible disgust and retched violently. But he had not seen all the evil the minds of these men could invent. For as the robbers held Shadar between them Laman drew a dagger and advanced toward him. Araki's eyes widened in horror and unbelief; that was the dagger, the one they had promised to him! The copper glinted in the sun as if it had come to a burning life of its own.

Just as Laman raised the dagger Shadar lifted his face to the sky and smiled as if recognizing someone he knew and loved. His head fell forward and he was dead before the blade cut his flesh. Laman in a fit of anger at being deprived of his murder, slashed and cut at the body until he held the bleeding heart in his hands. He threw in on the altar as a sacrifice to his idol. The limp remains of the old man were thrown upon the fire as the robbers danced with wild frenzy, their shrieks and yells echoing from the buildings, creating a scene of grisly bedlam.

Araki, sickened and bewildered, turned and ran blindly away from the scene. The robbers in their hysteria did not see him flee and continued their grotesque rite of sacrifice.

Araki's mind had only one thought. Run! Get away. Evil, evil, evil! Before his eyes was the vision of the old man's face as it was mutilated, the eyes staring, yet not seeing.

He ran, falling over stones, stumbling, slipping until he reached the cool, dark jungle. He threw himself on the ground sobbing in fear and horror. His stomach heaved and he was sick.

His sobs dwindled and finally came to intermitant sniffing. His thoughts went back to the cell and he could hear

Shadar's voice speaking softly, telling the story of his god.

"He taught kindness . . . That man should love his brother . . . Do unto others as you want them to do unto you . . . And the people lived in peace and happiness over the face of the land."

Then he remembered the old man's face just before he died, the curious expression not of fear, but love, almost as if he were really happy.

He rose, brushing the leaves and moss from his tattered robe. He looked back toward the Lost City. The fire still burned making the ruins glow red. Araki looked for a long time, and then he turned his back to it. His shoulders were thrown back and his head high as he walked down the path toward the village. To home and his people.

—*Barbara Hands, H. Ec. Sr.*



The Verdict

THEY WERE OUT in the fields again; the same boy, the same battered old 12-gauge shotgun and the same dog. It was all just as it used to be, but still different. And one of the different things was that Mom was not sitting in the car watching them hunt. Mom never really had approved of his hunting. Not that she minded the idea of killing animals—some people do, you know, it was just that hunting was a little too dangerous.

The dog perked up his ears and listened for the boy. When he located the boy's sound movements he went back to snuffling through the brush. The boy looked at the small dog—delightfully, primitively happy to be hunting again. And the boy saw how eagerly the tail wagged as the dog's nose searched for bird scent. That tail always seemed to wag with the perpetual motion of life, especially when the dog was happy.

The boy looked at the dog, the wagging tail and tried to feel some of the happiness that the dog felt. But it was no good. The boy remembered the last time that he'd seen the dog with Mom. The dog had been happy then, just as he was