

Babylon: 70 M.

By Donald A. Wollheim

"How many miles to Babylon?
Threescore miles and ten.
Can I get there by candlelight?
Yes, and back again.
If your heels are nimble and light,
You may get there by candlelight."

Sitting in his study, by the open window, Barry Kane heard the woman in the garden of the adjoining house reading *Mother Goose* rhymes to her little girl. He hadn't been paying attention consciously; it had just been a part of the noises of everyday living. His mind had been reflecting on the small urn he had just unpacked. But the word 'Babylon' struck his ear and sparked his attention; the little jingle jerked his mind away from the black, time-encrusted relic before him, and onto the woman's clear enunciation outside.

Barry frowned a bit, still idly turning the stone jug in his hand. Now that was an odd one, he thought. It was vaguely familiar; he supposed that he had run across it himself in his own childhood—and, as children do, simply had listened to it for its rhythm and ignored its meaning. Like so many of Mother Goose's poems it seemed to make not much sense.

He tried to focus his attention again on the urn. He'd only unwrapped it a few minutes ago from its careful packings and sawdust. The expedition had shipped it to him from Baghdad, along with other interesting bits they had dug out of Babylon's ruins. An odd coincidence that that particular bit of nursery nonsense should have been overheard at just this time. He wondered idly if the mother outside would be surprised to know that so close to her was a piece that had just arrived from that very Babylon.

Only "threescore miles and ten" too, Barry thought. Why didn't he up and go then? Although he'd rated as an expert on the ancient civilizations of Asia Minor, actually he'd never been abroad. But now that he knew how close it was, why . . .

He shook his head sharply. What *was* he thinking about, he asked himself angrily. Daydreaming of all things! Babylon was perhaps ten thousand or more miles away from where he sat, not the mere seventy of the rhyme. He couldn't get there in a hundred candlelights, nor many times that number. But for a moment it had seemed so clear, so simple, that he'd actually wondered why he'd never made the trip.

He smiled bleakly to himself. *Wish it really were easy.* But back to work. He took a soft brush from his desk and began to dust the little urn gently. An interesting piece. Probably not valuable, for it looked like a fairly common votary urn, as might have been found in any Babylonian household. Well . . . he amended his thoughts, studying its engraved sides, maybe not just any . . . it didn't quite fit the standard designs.

He turned it around in interest. No, it certainly didn't fit the usual patterns after all. And—why should it? If it had, the expedition wouldn't probably have bothered to air-express it to him. It had to be something they hadn't been able to classify properly, and so had hoped that he would be able to look it up in the more detailed library and references available here at the college.

So then what was it? He turned it over and squirmed uncomfortably in his seat, feeling an irritated mood come over him. He suddenly felt restless. The urn could possibly have held a votary light. It might have been possible to put a little oil in it and fire it; but it didn't quite seem to fit that bill. He bent over, looked sharply at the hollowed-out interior, poked a finger into it and scratched the side with his nail.

He looked at his fingernail with surprise. Wax. There was a slight trace of wax inside the stone urn. Maybe it was a candle-holder . . . but that, he told himself immediately, was silly. They didn't have candles in 2500 B.C.

On the other hand there was no reason to believe that the expedition had just dug it up. They might have found it for sale in some dark shop or dingy market place booth in Baghdad. It might have been used by some Iraqi for years before it found a place in the merchant's stall. There were many instances of ancient objects that had been found on the desert by wandering Arabs, who had used them for their own living purposes when they had seemed useful. Of course nowadays the Arabs were on the lookout for such stuff, to sell to the curious Westerners. But years ago, a century or two meant little in those ancient lands . . . Yes, he supposed it might have served sometime during the past four thousand years as a candlestick.

Can I get there by candlelight? Well, by this candlelight, maybe Babylon had indeed been only walking distance. Barry studied the engravings.

They displayed the usual Babylonian bas-relief technique: a bearded god walking stiffly, holding an object in one hand, the other raised to shield it. On the other side of the small cylindrical urn, opposite the walking god, was a giant coiled and winged snake upon whose head rose two curving horns and from whose mouth a flame was emitted. Not unconventional, thought Barry, yet he'd never quite seen the like.

Why—the object the man was carrying was a light. Barry was astonished at this realization. The god was walking with a light in his hand. And there was something else, his expert eyes now noticed: at the back of the god's feet were tiny wings. The artist had meant to convey that the figure was moving rapidly. *If your heels are nimble and light*, Barry's mind interjected idiotically.

"Oh, stuff!" Barry said aloud, surprising himself. What *was* getting into him. He was becoming dreamy. What if the man did have winged heels? That was coincidence; you might find a hundred such examples.

What I need, Barry thought, is a little exercise. I'm getting silly sitting here on a lovely sunny day like this. My mind is falling asleep. He stood up, carefully set the little black urn down, started for the door. At the door he stopped, paused a moment with an odd feeling that there must be something better to do than walking, then finally left his study, closed the door, and went for a walk.

As he passed his neighbor still seated in her yard with her child, Barry nodded politely. She still had the big Mother Goose book open on her lap.

He walked along the sunny streets of the college town with wide strides. He liked to walk, found it good exercise to calm the nerves and steady the thoughts. He began to analyse his irritation.

Somehow that nursery rhyme had got beneath his skin. It had been coincidence of course, but still, it made you think, it did.

Barry had done some work in his own student years on Middle English literature and some of his research had crossed the Mother Goose lore. He knew that many of the apparently pointless verses had once had very definite meanings. Time had erased their references and what now remained were apparently silly jingles.

For instance there was the one about Little Jack Horner, which referred to an actual personage of that name. This person, some sort of minor official in England five hundred years ago, had won

himself a "plum" in the royal Christmas honors for doing some sort of secret toadying never made public. The verse had been made up in mockery by his enemies and popularized around the taverns.

Perhaps more obvious was the one about "Hark, hark, the dogs do bark," and the beggars who came to town, having some among them in *silken gowns*. This was essentially the same deal—nobility coming to beg favors of the king at Christmas-time. The people in inns and marketplaces had a way of disguising their digs at their social betters in such a fashion as to avoid *lese majesté*.

And of course the one about Banbury Cross which referred to Lady Godiva's ride.

Barry remembered his amazement at the grim story behind what had seemed one of the silliest—that about Goosey, Goosey Gander and the old man who "would not say his prayers." This was a memorial of murder most black on a day of great evil. Yet, *How many miles to Babylon . . .*

He walked steadily through the streets, thinking about it. He worked the rhyme over, tore it apart, but still he could not fathom its possible original meaning. Finally he turned back and strode home. Once returned, he felt refreshed from the air and the exercise; he sat down again at his desk, renewed his attack on the little black urn.

He worked on it for the remainder of the afternoon, digging out his files, studying pictures of similar vessels and of Babylonian deities and demons. By nightfall he had to admit he'd not gotten near to solution. Nothing fitted the designs exactly, although several seemed superficially close.

He went in to supper, found himself drifting back in thought to the urn and to the silly rhyme alternately. He was annoyed at his failure to get his mind off the side issue. He could ask some of the Lit. faculty about the verse, he thought. Probably they could tell him its origin and meaning in a minute. But not tonight.

After eating, he read the evening paper, turned on the television, watched a comedian for an hour, found him neither funny nor relaxing, turned off the machine, decided to go to bed. He was still oddly irritated, still keyed up by the obstacle to his intellect. After all, with Babylon only threescore miles and ten away . . . "by candlelight" that is, his mind corrected himself as he entered the bedroom.

What silly thoughts! Maybe by morning he'd get that jingle out of his head and be able to look at the relic in a less clouded light. He undid his tie, hesitated. "Maybe I'd better have another glance at

that thing," he murmured to himself. He left the bedroom, passed through the dark hall, and entered his study.

He switched the desk light on and took the little urn in his hand, studying the figure. The man was indeed walking somewhere by candlelight. And his heels *were* nimble and light.

Yet even so, Barry's mind slipped in a new twist, what man could walk seventy miles in the time it would take a candle to burn down? Assuming even that it was a large candle, it would last at most four or five hours. That meant walking at least fifteen miles an hour. He had heard somewhere that a man could run at that rate for perhaps a few seconds, but certainly not for hours.

And then of course it wasn't really seventy miles—it was twice that, because you have to get back again, too. And by the same candlelight incidentally.

That definitely put it out of possible class.

Another idea struck Barry. Maybe if he put a candle into the black stone relic and lit it, perhaps it would put some sort of special angle on the engravings and bring out some unnoticed secret details. He'd heard of such things in Egyptian statuary. Anyway, it would be an amusing experiment.

He looked around. There was a candle sticking in an ornamental silver holder on the mantel in the study. He took it down, tried the candle into the hollowed space and found it just fit, tight and neat.

He reached into his pocket for his lighter, flicked it, and lit the candle. Then, to complete the effect, he switched off the desk light.

The candlelight flickered in the room, throwing moving shadows all about. Barry stared at the black urn but it was in darkness from the glow above.

"How many miles to Babylon?" he said under his breath. And quick as a flash his mind answered:

"Three score miles and ten."

Why, of course, he thought, *of course!* It should have been *obvious*, but he asked aloud: "Can I get there by candlelight?"

Yes, and back again. It was so certain that he arose from his seat, holding the candle in its black Babylonian container, and, shielding it with his other hand from drafts, strode confidently to the door, out the hall, opened the front door, and walked out into the street.

It was all so incredibly clear now. You could go anywhere you wished if you just saw it the right way. Why, he marveled, there are two ways of getting anywhere—the difficult, ordinary way everyone stuck to—and the *obvious* way.

"If your heels are nimble and light," he said happily to himself,

and increased his pace springily. "My heels are nimble and light—I'm a naturally fast walker," he laughingly told himself. His body was tingling with excitement, his mind seemed clearer than ever before. Why hadn't he ever seen how simple it was, how fast one could go places this way, this simple clear *shortcut* way!

"You may get there by candlelight," he laughed aloud, holding the candle high before him, shielding it with outstretched hand and pacing breathlessly through the night. The flickering yellow flame cast little light about. He could see almost nothing in the blackness about him. Somehow he didn't expect to. Not by the shortcut; you won't get scenery. The idea is to get there and I shall. Only seventy miles, Barry thought, and I must be eating that up fast. I'll get there before this candle is half gone.

He walked faster, the light flickering before him, the opaque dark all about. Beneath his feet was the crunch of dirt and then the swishing resiliency of sand.

Suddenly before him loomed a wall. He stopped, almost bumping into it. His breath was fast; he had been walking hard, but he was in perfect spirits. It was a bit cold out here, he thought, not as warm as it should be.

But it gets cold quickly on the desert, he thought. He held the candle up. The wall was old, it was sandswept and time-worn. It was ancient, and it was—he saw from the faint traceries of weather-worn carvings—Babylonian. He looked up feeling suddenly faint and uneasy.

There were stars above him and in their pale glow he saw that he was standing out on a desert, in the midst of a barren desert, broken here and there by bits of projecting stone, partial walls broken by time, bits of excavated basements. A thin cold wind was blowing from somewhere and there was nothing living in sight.

The candle flickered in his hand. His hand suddenly shook as with the ague, as with terror. He stared about. The candle flickered again. Something, something was breathing on it, breathing over his shoulder from behind him.

If the candle went out, he'd never get back. And as the thought struck him, at that very moment the candle—only half burned—flickered again. A nauseating breath blew past his shoulder and the candle went out.

In a split second Barry Kane remembered the other half of the engraving on the black urn, the half turned away from the walking god with the nimble heels and the light, the thing towards which his nimble steps were surely directed. He turned his head quickly, looked over his shoulder.

Now he knew that there was another significance to the injunction, *if your heels are nimble and light*. It didn't just apply to the getting there; it also meant getting back. And he'd dallied too long in Babylon.

For the ancient Babylonian sculptor had been a good artist. The engraving was true to life.