

# Contents and Acknowledgments

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- THE FLOWER-WOMEN *by Clark Ashton Smith* . . . . . 3  
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- CHILD'S PLAY *by Alice-Mary Schnirring* . . . . . 110  
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- THE MADNESS OF ANDELSPRUTZ *by Lord Dunsany* . . . . . 118  
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- THE PAINTED MIRROR *by Donald Wandrei* . . . . . 121  
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## Child's Play

by Alice-Mary Schnirring

*Everyone familiar with children knows the phenomenon of the imaginary playmate. The brains of children, being evidently far more imaginatively flexible, carry on the creation and development of invisible companions to an extent adults cannot conceive of. In some gifted cases, such as the Brontës, the creations of childhood encompassed whole worlds of people and events . . . out of which in the case of the authors of "Wuthering Heights" and "Jane Eyre" came great adult literature. In this different story of the operations of this psychological phenomenon comes a sense of growing uneasiness and culminating terror.*

HENRY bent lower over the drawing-board as the twilight deepened. With a dark-red crayon, he filled in the outlines of another city; then, with a pen dipped in India ink, drew—rapidly and with remarkable delicacy and skill for a twelve-year-old—a temple, a palace, and a barracks; and sketched in hastily some ambiguous dwelling places. He muttered to himself as he worked.

"This'll keep old Charley Anderson in his place, I bet," was the tenor of his mumblings. "His barracks only have room for about two hundred warriors, and my Royal Guards can clean them up with one hand tied behind their backs. Anyway, the Thorvians are a bunch of sissies." In large letters, he labeled the city "THORVIA," and sat back with a little smile on his face, wiggling his fingers to uncramp them.

A voice called from somewhere downstairs. "Hen-reeee. Hen-reeee! Your dinner is ready! Why aren't you ever around to help me set the table or anything, instead of sulking up in your room all the time? Why—" the voice trailed off into peevish, whining incoherencies. The boy stood up, scowling; but prepared, laggingly, to go downstairs. He paused, however, for one more look at the map.

It was drawn with remarkable precision. It appeared to be a map of a mountainous country, dominated by one large city, built on the top and upper

slopes of the highest of the mountains. This city, marked "DRACO," was elaborately and painstakingly developed with the little India ink symbols. A truly magnificent palace was at its very heart; and around the palace, cunningly enough, were strong barracks, each with a watch-tower. Beyond these, again, was a very wide, bare, circular road, completely surrounding barracks, palace, gardens and all. Apparently the ruler of this kingdom had a healthy distrust of his subjects, or else expected, but was prepared for, an invasion.

The remainder of the map bore out the second theory; for Draco was the heart of a whole system of smaller cities, or states. Since each city had a palace (though none as impressive as the one in Draco), the effect was that of a feudal overlord, surrounded by lesser rulers. So, in fact, was the case. Henry, who dragged out a dreary existence with his aunt and uncle—an existence complicated by the limp which he would always have, as a souvenir of the accident in which his mother and father had been killed—had found that in order to make life with the other boys of his age bearable, he would have to make himself superior to them. Since any physical superiority was out of the question, his quick mind had found the way out.

As Kirwan, ruler of Draco and its subject states, Henry held a position of unquestioned authority among his fellows. More—the game had captured their imaginations to such an extent that former, and possibly healthier, pastimes were neglected. Billy Daniels (Fiero, Prince of Maglar); Donny Clark (Andrus of Ghuria); Joe Domenico (Horvath of Balcur); and Robin Johnson (Duke Shira, of Friya), lived only for the campaigns against the Dog-Men of the Outer Mountains, the internecine wars that troubled Draconia with scarcely a let-up, and, of course, the political strife that was one of its chief *raison-d'etre*. In turn, each one had tried to out-manuever Henry; but Kirwan, King of Draconia, had maintained his power against each of them, and his ascendancy over their minds at the same time. "The game," however, held even more sway over Henry than over the others. More and more, his life as Henry Booth seemed the game, and a very unpleasant and dull game, at that; while, as Kirwan, he lived in a dangerously brilliant world, of which every corner was twice as familiar to him as the drab surroundings of his Aunt Martha's and Uncle Joe's house.

Aunt Martha and Uncle Joe were not fond of Henry, to start with. He didn't act nicely at *all* to their dear little Charley (about to become ruler of Thorvia); and Charley such a bright little fellow—and so healthy! Imagine—100 pounds, and only eleven years old!

That, of course, was one way of looking at it—the Anderson's way. Henry's way was, quite simply, that Charley was a big overgrown slob of a boy, and a nasty little sneak and bully besides. Henry's views were actually far less biased than those of his aunt and uncle. In fact, the only reason for the creation of "Thorvia" was that Charley had prowled, and sneaked, and opened bureau-drawers, and listened in corners to too good effect. Briefly, Charley knew too much, and, in his inimitable way, could break up the game with

dreadful ease—but even his calculating, disagreeable little mind recognized its pull, and a Dukedom was the price of his cooperation.

All this passed vaguely and hastily through Kirwan's mind, as he lingered in the doorway, still under the spell of his own creation. It was Kirwan who frowned, standing there, foreseeing trouble with his latest vassal-lord; it was Kirwan who suddenly went back to the drawing-board, took up the India ink again, and quickly sketched something in the southeastern corner of Thorvia. But it was Henry who dropped pen and ink, nervously and ran to the door and down the stairs, at a repetition of the whining cry, "Hen-reeeee!" from downstairs.

He sat through an unattractive meal of boiled potatoes, cabbage, and a very poor grade of chopped beef, topped off by a bread-pudding that was mostly bread. What raisins there were, went to Charley: who had also engulfed the lion's share of the chopped beef. Quantity, not quality, was his motto; and glands alone were not responsible for the hundred pounds that were Charley.

The meal was enlivened by Aunt Martha's monologue, mostly based on Henry, and never complimentary to him; with variations on Charley's virtues and good, healthy appetite—so different from Henry, picking at his food, as if he shouldn't be grateful to his dear auntie and uncle who provided his food, at what expense no one knew; and look how Charley likes to play outdoors—not always frowning in his room, when he wasn't in corners with those other boys—and just what was it they did, anyway? Aunt Martha thought that she and Mrs. Daniels and Mrs. Clark and Mrs. Domenico (though Mrs. Domenico was not really a lady, to Aunt Martha's way of thinking, though doubtless a good-hearted woman), and Mrs. Johnson ought to get together and find out just what was going on. You didn't see Aunt Martha's Charley—

Panic, that had been growing in Henry as this speech rose to its crisis, flowered into speech.

"It's—it's just a club, Aunt Martha," he stammered, rashly.

"Just a club!" she sniffed. "And what kind of a club is it that is too good for my Charley?"

Henry's panic subsided. This emergency had already been faced, and dealt with. He even smiled.

"Why, we elected Charley a member at the last meeting, Aunt Martha," he said, looking at Charley. Charley's face, which had worn a greasy, knowing smile, suddenly took on a look of surprise, mingled with disbelief. He stared at Henry.

"Ya did?" Astonishment and—yes, pleasure—even normal, little-boy pleasure, characterized his tone.

"Yes, Charley. You're a full-fledged member of—the club now. Tell you about it after dinner.

Aunt Martha was not going to give up quite so easily, although it was easy to see that she was mollified.

"Well, I want to know more about it before I let Charley join, anyway," she said firmly. But Uncle Joe, for once stood up to her.

"Now, Martha—boys' clubs are secret. Can't expect 'em to tell you about what goes on. Leave the kids alone."

"Well, I can trust Charley," said Aunt Martha, fondly, giving in at last.

"I know Mother's little man wouldn't belong to any club that wasn't nice."

Charley smiled, as unpleasant a smile as Henry ever remembered seeing, even on Charley's face, and replied in a sick-sweet voice, "Yes, Mamma dear."

They rose from the table, and Charley grabbed Henry by the arm and pulled him outdoors, into the spring night.

"Hurry up!" he said, feverishly. "If ya didn't mean it, I'm gonna tell everybody the whole thing. Didja mean it, really? Have I got a kingdom of my own in Draconia? What's its name? Where is it? How big—"

Henry was Kirwan. "Quiet!" he said. "My lords and I meet in conference tonight. You will be inducted into our company as Duke of Thorvia. As is our custom, you may choose your own name by which you will henceforth be known to us in Draconia. Be ready at midnight." Shaking his arm loose from the fat, wet grasp of his newest Duke, King Kirwan limped away down the street.

At a quarter to twelve, Kirwan, King of Draconia, sat in the palace in the heart of Draco, his principal city, surrounded by his liege lords, the Prince Fiero of Maglar, Prince Andrus of Ghuria, Prince Horvath of Balcur, and Duke Shira of Friya. All of them looked troubled; Fiero and Shira downright furious.

"Kirwan," spoke up Fiero. "I crave leave to speak."

"Speak," said Kirwan, not looking up.

"I like not this new dukedom. It bounds Maglar all along my northeastern border, and this new Duke is a trouble-maker."

"And a slimy louse," said Duke Shira, fervently. "As the only other Duke of this company, one who has not yet attained his Prince-ship, I respectfully plead, O Kirwan, that you make him less than a Duke. I would not be akin to him even in title."

Kirwan looked up, finally. It was noticeable that his eyes blazed with excitement, mingled with a look of uncertainty. "Am I not your liege lord," he said, though not angrily. "And do you not trust me?"

"We trust you, Kirwan," said dark-eyed Horvath, who had not spoken before.

"But we know thisa new Duke is trouble-maker. We can control heem in Draconia, yes—but outside?"

For a moment, Kirwan hesitated; then he spoke slowly and hesitantly. "I think—I think I can control him outside, as well. I have a plan—"

The new Duke of Thorvia, Edric by name, was proving a trouble-maker. And Kirwan's liege lords, who had expected this, but believed that Kirwan could handle it, were becoming mutinous. First, Edric had shown a tendency to ridicule the whole secret life of Draconia; but after a couple of weeks, he

had become as absorbed by it as the rest. Then, however, the greed that was the cornerstone of his whole character, had begun to come to the fore. The marvelously intricate details of the whole country—the peasants' huts, the different uniforms of the fighting men in the service of each ruler; their number and character—even their names; the strange flowers in the garden of the palace at Draco; the unpleasant call of a certain bird found only in the unexplored woods of Ghuria; and the revolting characteristics of the pale fawn-colored mink-like animal that the Friyans had tried, unsuccessfully, to exterminate; Edric, with a surprising quickness, had learned them all, and even added to his fellow-lords' knowledge.

What puzzled Edric, sometimes (or, rather, it puzzled Charley Anderson) was the fact that it did not seem to him that he invented the things. It seemed rather as if they had always been there, in the back of his mind, and had just come casually to the fore. Even more strange—and when Charley thought of it, he was uneasy; although to Edric it was more a sullen annoyance than a surprise—was that Kirwan knew still more than Edric and, once or twice, had corroborated Edric's descriptions with certain emendations—*which Edric somehow realized were correct.*

There was the night when Horvath had entertained them in his palace at Balcur. The Dog-Men had been quiescent for some weeks, and conversation was idly turning on the swamp-lands in the southeastern corner of Thorvia, unfamiliar territory, except for such features as Edric's palace, the barracks, and the peasants' huts, to most of the group. Edric was saying, "There must be mineral springs underground in the swamp. It—it sort of churns around, sometimes; but not always in the same place."

Kirwan had a small, secret smile on his face. "Not always the same place, no," he agreed. "But I think you will find always the same *sort* of place."

"Whatta you mean, the same sort of place?" Edric demanded, puzzled; "The whole swamp is the same sort of place. And I don't know why I should have to have a swamp in Thorvia—nobody else has. And this one has a nasty smell, somehow." He stopped short, realizing with an unexplained thrill of fear that it *did* have a nasty smell. But how could it have? And—how did he know it, and know that he wasn't "making it up"? His mind was so absorbed by this rather frightening problem that he almost missed Kirwan's answer.

"It only—er—churns around near those dark-purple waterlilies, doesn't it?" said Kirwan, mildly; yet with a gleam of almost uncontrollable excitement in his eyes. "What?" said Edric, and thought. "Yes," he said, and then with more conviction. "Yes. Only by the purple flowers." Then, jumping up, and with his voice shrill, "Why? What is it? You know what it is. How do you know?"

Kirwan cast down his eyes to the map, which he always took with him to the meetings. "Why, mineral springs, as you suggested," he answered. "That's what makes the swamp smell, probably, too. As for its only being near the

flowers, why, it's the other way around. The flowers grow there because there's some quality in the springs that feeds them."

Edric was almost satisfied with this explanation. But back in his bed, later that night, Charley Anderson still lay awake, and thought, and thought. And his thoughts came to fruition a week later.

It was in the middle of a discussion at the dinner-table—the usual discussion of why Henry wasn't eating his lambstew, but this time flavored with the unusual spice of the fact that Charley was only picking at his.

"It's that dratted club of yours," pronounced Aunt Martha. "It's got to stop. You, Charley, you've been mooning around the house now almost as bad as Henry, for goodness knows how long. Just what is this club, anyway?"

Charley cast a side-long look at Henry, who was looking at him with a strange expression—a waiting sort of look. Charley squirmed in his chair, uneasily. "Oh—it's just a club," he answered, sullenly; "Ya can't tell about it while you're in it. But they haven't been treating me right, and I think I'll resign—and then, Mamma, I'll tell you all about it." As he spoke the last words, he looked straight at Henry, with a sly, triumphant expression, that said even more plainly than words, "See? I have you in a cleft stick. Either you knuckle under to me, or—"

Henry looked back at him, with an unreadable gleam in his eyes. Or was it Kirwan who looked back at him? Charley—Edric—found himself unable to decide, but something made him say, quickly, "Of course, if they're nicer to me, I won't resign—and then I couldn't tell."

"There, Henry," said Aunt Martha. "I *knew* you were being mean to poor little Charley. You're jealous of him, that's what it is; because you're a cripple and he's a big strong, clever boy. Either you treat him right, or I'll break up that club of yours—and I mean it!"

Henry looked at his plate. His nostrils flared, but he said absolutely nothing for a minute. Then he looked up, his expression imitating perfectly that of a twelve-year-old boy who, while still sullen, has been forced into following a course of action repugnant to him. "Oh, all right!" he said. "We'll fix Charley up so he won't kick." And under his breath, he added, "Ever again."

That night Kirwan worked late with his fine-pointed drawing pen and the India ink. And when he had finished, the false dawn was just breaking; and showed, as he switched off his light, the addition he had made to his map in the southeastern corner of Thorvia. It was beautifully executed; a sluggish, somehow oily-looking creature. Drawn to the scale of the map, it was very large—in fact, almost half the size of the swamp itself. It had a disgusting appearance, and was so clearly limned that one could almost see it move. Henry had a distinct talent. He slept, then, with the little smile that had become almost a fixture, on his face.

"King Kirwan," said Duke Shira, "I crave the help of some Draconian fighting-men."

Kirwan's eyebrows shot up. "So? Are not the Friyans content? Surely you do not expect trouble with your people?"

"No," said Shira. "The people are content, except for one thing—the woods are becoming increasingly full of khalders, and—you know why we must keep them down."

Kirwan nodded. Andrus of Ghuria, who had a tendency toward squeamishness, gulped a little, and looked unhappy, since the khalders, those pale fawn-colored animals that looked something like weasels, had habits that were better not thought of.

"The only thing is," said Kirwan, slowly, "That I have reason to believe I will need all my fighting men shortly. Why not ask Duke Edric for some of his forces?"

All eyes turned toward Edric, who sat, fatly, in his chair, with a smug smile. "Sure," he said, pleasantly, "I'll let you have half of them. But—I need more land, an' more influence. In fact, I think Kirwan ought to take over Thorvia, and I'll take Draco—and, of course, whatever goes with it."

The only one apparently unmoved in the middle of the resulting turmoil was Kirwan. "Quiet!" he said, loudly. And under the influence of his voice, they actually did quiet down.

"I have been expecting this," he said, unconcernedly. "But I am prepared for it. Edric—" he turned toward him suddenly. "Have you been down to the marsh lately?"

The fat Duke of Thorvia stirred uneasily. "What's that got to do with it?" he demanded. "Anyway, it's your headache now—Draco has no marsh," and he giggled. "And either I get Draco, and rule the whole bunch, or—you know."

"Know what?" demanded Fiero truculently. But Kirwan held up his hand.

"He means he'll destroy Draconia by—well, exposing it to the light," he said, indifferently; almost with amusement at his own joke. "But—Edric, have you noticed that the dark purple waterlilies have all withered?"

A peculiar look came over Edric's face. "What of it?" he asked, shrilly; "What's that got to do with it?"

Kirwan smiled. "Why, I would suggest that after we disband tonight, you go down to the swamp and—maybe you'll find out why it churns. It might not be mineral springs, you know; and it would be interesting to find out what else it could be—wouldn't it?"

Edric's face looked ghastly. "I won't! You can't make me!" he cried. "I won't go near it!"

"You have to sleep," suggested Kirwan, still smiling. The others looked puzzled and frightened, but Edric looked dreadful. "I won't sleep!" he screamed. "I won't sleep!"

When they broke up, he was still muttering it.

At five o'clock in the morning, Kirwan sat up in bed. A look of anticipation, a listening look, was on his face, making it strangely unpleasant. His



attic room was directly above Charley's large, airy bedroom; and sounds traveled upwards fairly plainly. An anomalous sound was reaching his ears now—a wet, squelchy, crawling sound. Suddenly, he heard a terrible cry.

As the sound of running feet, crying voices, and finally a dreadful scream from Auntie Martha, reached his ears, Kirwan turned over and went to sleep, smiling.