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The Seventh Fool

by GLEN COOK

Cantanzaro sang as he walked along the road to Antonisen. Occasionally, he glanced back, smirked. The road remained an empty, meandering scar of brown on springtime's green. The Maniarchs of Kortanek hadn't yet picked up his scent.

Then he frowned. He had been compelled to flee without the Jewels of Regot.

He grinned again. The thousand gayly colored spires of Antonisen pricked the sky ahead. The man who had flummoxed Regot's pragmatist priests could, surely, make his fortune in a city ruled by a Council called The Seven Fools.

Springtime was spreading through Zarlenga like a happy disease. The Hundred Cities were opening like bright flowers. Travelers buzzed among them like bees. His reception at Antonisen's Harlequin Gate wasn't the least unfriendly.

Serendipity! he thought moments after penetrating the dusty streets. He had arrived just in time to witness one of Antonisen's fabled elections. A Fool had retired. Half the men of the city were vying for his Chair.

A clever man should be able to find an avenue to profit in that.

Antonisenen reasoned that, since government was evil but necessary, it ought, at least, to be entertaining. Those who wished to become Councilors, therefore, had to convince the voters that they could provide the most amusing show.

There was a clown on every corner. Antoniseners were partial to humorists. The more inspired were winning votes with scandalous libels on the retired Fool's manhood.

Cantanzaro ventured from clown to clown, observing fingers and toes. Theft was the swiftest path to wealth. And in Antonisen it was the custom to flaunt one's fortune in the form of rings.

His natural impulse was to palm a few while shaking hands. But that, he noted, could be tricky business. Antoniseners seemed preternaturally sensitive to such maneuvers. Whenever a foreigner made a try - there were a good many in town for the election - the victim would shriek, a gang would fall on the thief, pummel him senseless, hoist him by the arms and legs, run him to a nearby low, shadowed archway, and chuck him in with a cry of "Hornbostel!"

Whatever it meant, Cantanzaro had no curiosity. He had had his encounters with the mysteries of the Hundred Cities before. Few had been pleasant.

He needed a better idea and one came.

Cantanzaro seldom lacked for ideas, only for means.

He dug into his tattered purse. Still only four green-tinged copper alden of Kortanek, and one useless map.

So he sought a market with an antiquary. All Zarlenga was deep in the rubbish of its ten-thousand year history. Every city had its junk men.

This one was typical, an old man whose place of business was a filthy blanket spread in the square, piled high with history's leavings. He probably went home to a palace. Zarlengans were suckers for anything ancient.

"Your wish, Grace?" The old man wrinkled his nose at Cantanzaro's shabbiness, but at election time one was rude to no man. That he himself was grubbier didn't faze the man. Poverty was part of his act too.

"A book."

"Ah. Yes. I've got a dozen. A hundred. Cook books, romances, histories, journals, magic by the right hand, magic by the left...."

"It should be unreadable."

"Unreadable?" A live one, the merchant thought, rubbing his hands together. "Li Chi." He held up a scroll. "Got caught in the rain...."

"No. In a forgotten tongue." Cantanzaro smiled. The old man kept gawking at his ringless fingers.

"This, then. A genuine antiquity, recovered at great personal risk, by a tomb-miner working the Mountains Dautenhain."

Cantanzaro considered the tide. It was in no alphabet he knew. But he found the tomb-miner story doubtful. The tome was in too fine a shape. Stolen, likely. "Good enough." He tossed a copper, started off.

The merchant shrieked like a scalded cat. A dozen men closed in, already arguing over the quickest route to the nearest low black archway. Cantanzaro turned back, pretending bewilderment.

A half hour later he thundered, "But you admit you can't even read the thing!"

"Can't read anything." The old man went on to mourn about being cheated, robbed, losing money on the deal, but settled for Cantanzaro's remaining three alden.

The most desperate candidate, street talk said, was one Ablan Decraehe, son of a retired Fool who claimed the youth was a bad joke on legs.

While waiting to obtain audience with Decraehe, Cantanzaro worked his map into his scheme. It was a crude thing, but would do.

He had a low opinion of the intellect and morals of anyone who wanted to get into government. The best system, he thought, was that practiced in Immerlagen, where they seized a man off the street, carried him screaming to his inauguration at the Mayoral Palace. As soon as he showed signs of enjoying his post, the Aldermen had him stuffed and put into the City Museum.

"The book is the rare and famous Tales of Arabrant, of which great humorists have whispered for generations. A man of your stature has doubtless heard of it," Cantanzaro told Decraehe, a slim, snobbish man who affected an unnecessary monocle and would not have been caught dead entertaining a commoner outside election time. "The ultimate collection of humorous tales, some with such magic that men have been known to die laughing on hearing them. I heard you tell a censored version of 'The Bureaucrat's Revenge.'" It was the youth's obvious favorite and most successful story and the brightest spot in his leaden monologue. "I thought you'd be a man interested in the original."

Decraehe frowned suspiciously.

"It's always good to have a friend on the Council when one changes cities. One hand washes the other." He made the motions with slim, uncalloused fingers.

Cantanzaro had chosen his mark well. Decraehe was the sort who could admit no shortcoming, especially ignorance. "I've heard of it, of course." He tried to look conspiratorial. "How'd you come by a copy?"

Cantanzaro glanced around, leaned closer. Wishful thinking was doing his convincing. "Accidentally. Gambling with a thief. He left it. as security for a debt. When I saw what I had, I hurried to Antonisen." A mark, he had long ago learned, often could be disarmed by an open admission of knavery. Forewarned, he would relax, sure he could not be had himself.

"Hardly proper, my dear fellow." Decraehe glanced meaningfully at a dark archway.

The things seemed to be everywhere.

This was the tricky part, getting past being robbed and chucked through the opening. Cantanzaro handed him the book.

"But... but...."

"Yes. It's in Old High Trebec. All the copies are. And the Brothers of Allgire guard the three known copies of translation dictionaries with unbreachable spells. But my victim... er, debtor, also knew what he had. And lately had come into knowledge of the whereabouts of a fourth dictionary." He produced the map. "He had taken this off a tomb-miner in the Mountains of Dautenhain, who mentioned the dictionary as he was dying."

"I see. What good does this do me?"

"For a fee I would recover that dictionary. Just enough to establish myself here."

Decraehe frowned.

"The book is yours. A gift from a grateful immigrant. It's useless to me anyway. Being a foreigner, I'm ineligible for public office.

"Never understood why the Brothers worry about it getting out the dictionary is the important thing. With that, a man could make himself King of Antonlsen."

"Those mountains are four days away. Four there, four back, plus time to find and open the tomb. The election's in seven days." The claws of greed kept pulling Decraehe's face into off expressions.

"The tomb is found and open. Given a good horse and suitable incentive fee, traveling round the clock, I could deliver in five days."

"Why didn't you bring it?" Decraehe whined.

Cantanzaro tried to look amazed. "With the streets full of rogues who'd cut my throat to get it? No, begging your pardon, I wanted a firm contract and gold in my purse before I took that risk."

"But if I paid you, what would keep you from running off with my money?"

"The honor of the contract. The value of Cantanzaro's word is known in a dozen cities. Also, you'd hold half the fee for payment on delivery. In fact, I'll leave the map. It's burned on the

back of my brain anyway. Then, if I cheated, you could sell book and map, at a handsome profit, to someone willing to wait till next election. Moneywise, you can't lose."

Cantanzaro settled back in his chair, let the wheels turn. Decraehe would be thinking that he could have him chucked through the archway after relieving him of money.

"Twenty percent advance."

Cantanzaro smiled thinly. Decraehe had swallowed the whole six-legged horse. "Fifty. Against your certitude of becoming Chief Fool."

"But you'll have no time to spend it anyway...."

"A matter of principal. Of having equal amounts to lose. Just a hundred soli...."

"A hundred! Thief! What...."

"Against the certitude of becoming Chief Fool? A bargain at ten times the price. The payoffs from gamblers and thieves' markets would return that in a week. You must realize, a man of my station must establish himself properly in his new land."

"Twenty. Ten now and ten later."

"Ninety now and ninety later."

An hour later, with fifty gold soli practically ripping his belt off, Cantanzaro swung astride Decraehe's best horse. The would-be Fool had saddled the beast himself. With book held tightly in hand, he opened the courtyard gate.

An older man stumbled through. "Any way to greet your father, boy?" he grumbled. He scowled at Cantanzaro, at Decraeh, at the book. "What's this? My first edition Zavadil, that was stolen a month ago! Nursing a thieving viper in my own bosom...."

This Cantanzaro heard as he spurred through the gate, cursing the ill-fortune that dogged his steps. It happened every time, at the moment of triumph. Those old crones, the Fates, must have developed an abiding hatred for him.

Decraehe shrieked like an old woman. Antonisen poured into the streets the warning swifted ahead; Cantanzaro reached the Harlequin Gate only to find it already closed. He swung into a side street, switched back and forth till he had gained a momentary lead, then eased up to the first inn he encountered. To the stableman he called, "Return this animal to the home of Ablan Decraehe immediately," and tossed a solus. The man's eyes grew huge. It was a small fortune to one of his station.

"Instantly, my lord."

Five minutes later, from a rooftop, Cantanzaro watched the protesting stableman being hustled to an archway. "Hornbostel! Hornbostel!" the crowd chanted.

Grinning, Cantanzaro waited till night, then went over the wall.

He kept on grinning till, in Venverloh, he tried spending one of his remaining forty-nine soli, all of which proved to be lead thinly surfaced with gold. The one he had checked by biting, which Decraehe had given for that purpose, had been the one he had tossed to the stable worker.

They had low black archways in Venverloh too.