

Labyrinth

by James Lynn Smith

Isaac Franks remembered when it was all different. He had stood on a hill overlooking lush forest, grassy meadows, and knolls with colorful wildflowers. The fragrance and sunny crispness in the air was refreshing. Somehow the scene was familiar. At the same time something was different. In the distance, a deer stood, unmoving, looking toward him. Those intense dark eyes seemed to search his soul.

In time, Isaac entered the nearby village and inquired about a place to live. After much searching, he bought a cabin in a forest outside the village. He spent years making it a place of comfort and private innovations. Eventually, his skin creased, his hair whitened, and his movements became slower. His only companionship was an occasional visit from Judy, the child of a loveless family in the village.

“Why do leaves come out green, Mr. Isaac?” she asked.

“Why? Bring your blue eyes over here.” He led her to his table upon which sat an old microscope. “Look through this instrument,” he said, as he placed a fragile leaf underneath adjusted the reflecting mirror. “See the tiny dots in there. Those are cells. All living things are made of tiny particles that do some kind of work. Those cells take the energy from the sun and make green stuff called chlorophyll. The cells also put out a gas that refreshes the air we breathe with oxygen.”

“Wow. I’m glad I have you to ask about things. How do you know this stuff? Did you read a lot of books?”

He hesitated. “I really don’t recall learning it. I just remember it when I have a question to answer.”

She shook her head, causing her blonde, curls to jiggle. “Maybe you were in an accident. I’ve heard some people lose their memory when they fall or a horse throws them.”

“Maybe, child, maybe. I can go back just so far and it seems senseless to think about it anymore.”

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Isaac had tried to fathom the sources of his knowledge, but it was like probing mysterious tunnels that crisscrossed in confusing complexity, much like a labyrinth. After losing his way, the search would fade, and he would find himself back in the present. That present had its rewards and its peril, an entirely different kind of labyrinth. One in solid earth on the other side of the village. If not careful, it was his destiny. Locals would find some reason to condemn him and cast him into a maze of caves and underground pools. Unwanted beasts thrown in there either died or survived by preying on others. Feral dogs would eat him as they had attacked and consumed disabled goats and cattle. People who ventured near that awful place swore to have seen evidence that the canines also ate their own kind.

It was a threat for Isaac because he was different and tried to live a life free of backward social customs and superstition. He also tried to help anyone who was willing to learn and increase their understanding. But most villagers thought him a sorcerer or witch and found reasons to suspect him of fomenting activity among evil spirits when misfortune befell their area.

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“Maybe it’s time to go back to your folks’ place now,” Isaac suggested.

“Aw, do I have to?” she whined. “It’s more fun here. They only want me to stay out of the way or else bring in water or wood.”

“But if you stay too long, they will think something bad has happened to you and come looking. If they find you here, they could punish you and make sure you stay away forever.” *Yes, punish you and kill me.* The backward mindset of most villagers was all too apparent.

He remembered when he first saw Judy. Upon one of his rare trips into the village for supplies, he found her beside the road, crouched against a tree, dirty, abandoned, and whimpering. She wanted to run away, but had no place to go. Her father had beaten her for being too slow fetching eggs for the kitchen. Isaac wanted to wrest her away to his place, but had to be careful. He knew villagers would think the worst. So, he told Judy he would be her friend, but it must be a secret. He would teach her things, despite her parents’ forbidding her to have formal schooling. She proved to be a bright and eager student. Having few books, he nevertheless taught her to write, read, and appreciate nature.

He held the door open for her. “Run along now. Remember, you didn’t see me nor come here.”

“I know, Mr. Isaac. Love you,” she said, scampering away.

He settled into his rocking chair, feeling deep satisfaction at having enlightened a receptive mind. *Next time I’ll bake some cookies, too.* Their relationship gave him the feel of a doting grandfather. In a reading exercise, they once shared a storybook that greatly impressed Judy. It was about a poor little boy who wore rags and was looked down upon by the townspeople. One night the boy had a dream of promise and the next day set out to find a beautiful, utopian city run by generous, kind people. Lost on his way, he encountered a magician who helped him find the sought-after city. The boy prospered in the city, and he and the magician became lifelong friends.

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Several days passed and, unknown to Isaac, events in the village were

becoming grave. Judy's father wanted some rat traps put out and went looking for her. She was nowhere to be found. After two days, he spread word around the village.

"She done run away?" one man asked.

"That's what her old man told," the second villager said. "He needed her and she's gone missin'. I'll bet she's met up with some kind of mischief."

"You know who we think of when somthin' ain't right, don't you?"

"Yeah. old man Franks. Strange bird. You ask Isaac a question, and if he bothers to answer, it's dead on. How's he know stuff about the weather and the way Earth wobbles on its axis? He told about how some people are poisoned by peanuts. Makes 'em strangle for breath. Billy Forbs has always had breathin' problems. He heard about what the old man said and stopped eatin' stuff with peanuts. Problem gone."

"Sayin' things to help folks makes him look good-natured. Actually, he talks weird. He came to the village shop one day, and I was hide-bound to get something out of him. I kept pressing him with a question. 'Do you fear dyin'?' Finally he busts out, 'The world is just a dream. If I die in this one, I'll wake up in another.' I pushed him some more and he told me that probably things on the *other* side were complicated and they didn't want us to know details of the plan. He didn't say who 'they' was."

"That proves he's crazy or in contact with somethin' unnatural," the second villager said. "What's he do in that cabin of his? Never invites anybody. Stays in his secret world. I'll bet he has somethin' to do with that girl's disappearance."

"For all we know, he's cut her apart for some strange concoction he's makin'. Whenever he comes to the village, he asks for all sort of things. Even asked for snake venom once. 'Course, the village shop didn't have none."

A damning conjecture spread throughout the region. No magistrate lived

nearby. What would have been law had often been handled by a mob of incensed locals.

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Isaac heard a commotion outside and went to the window. A group of villagers were gathered, holding pitchforks, hoes, shotguns and torches. They stood at a distance, apparently working up either enough courage or anger to advance. He stepped to the door, opened it, and yelled, “What’s the meaning of this?”

“We know you’ve got Judy in there,” someone answered. “She’s been gone three days and it ain’t natural.”

*Gone? Where could she—*He felt the chill of alarm surge through him. *The utopian city in the story.* Was the impressionable child seeking a better place for them? Stunned, and without planned recourse, he shut the door. Could he share his thoughts with the mob of locals? Would they listen long enough to give him a chance? He heard a loud jolt against the cabin. *It’s Rocks.* Then another. Next, his window broke in and a stone rolled across the floor. Glancing out the window, he saw the crowd approaching.

“He’s evil,” someone shouted. “Shoot his head off and throw him in the labyrinth.”

Finally, thinking an argument for reason was his only hope, Isaac went to the window.

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Having suffered hunger, fatigue and no appearance of a magician to help her find Utopia, Judy had turned back from her trek and was now nearing Isaac’s cabin from the rear. She could not see the group approaching out front. *I’m almost there.* She swallowed noisily from dryness in the throat. *Mr. Isaac will give me water. It’ll be good to see him.* As she came around toward the front of the house, she saw her father among a group of locals raise his shotgun toward Isaac who was visible

in his window. She knew the situation immediately. Screaming, she ran as fast as her tired legs allowed toward the raised gun. “Daddy, don’t, please.”

It was too late. A loud report further shattered the broken window and the figure within it dropped. She froze in disbelief, unable to comprehend the grievous incident.

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The crowd rushed the cabin, reason blinded by passion. One or two thought they may have heard a scream when the gun went off, but it was unimportant. What they wanted was to see what eerie things were in the cabin and the lifeless, bloody body of the strange, malevolent man. Would he have a grimace or evil grin plastered on his face? Was he possibly still struggling to hold on to life as his substance flowed from him? They burst the door in and crowded into a single big room, looking, searching, puzzling.

There were no boiling cauldrons, no jars filled with spiders or bat wings, no human bones or deformed skulls with horns. Also no ancient scroll or volume opened atop a table with devilish designs and strange symbols. There was only the interior of an ordinary cabin with the exception of a simple microscope and a few familiar biological samples.

But *one* thing not there proved to be a most awful surprise. There was no body. No evidence of an old man, sorcerer, or demon. Sensing a clap of silent thunder, they looked upward, mouths agape.

Everything vanished.

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He stood on a hill overlooking lush forest, grassy meadows, and knolls with colorful wildflowers. The fragrance and sunny crispness in the air was refreshing. Somehow the scene was familiar. At the same time something was different. In the distance, a young woman with blond curly hair stood, unmoving, looking toward

him. Those intense blue eyes seemed to search his soul.

The feel of emerging from an ancient miasma swept through him. But, of course, that was ridiculous. He was only thirty-five with a lifetime before him. *Or am I that age?* Strange, he couldn't remember much about the past.

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