



The World As Others See It

"What's so special about these spectacles?" The Forger wasn't really looking. Throwing books up in the air and not bothering to check the table tops where they had sat.

"What's so special? Apart from the fact the rims are gold they're a gift from my wife." The Anthologist had misplaced them a second time in two hours.

"I thought she was a sorcerer? Why can't she make you a pair that you'll never lose?"

"She isn't a sorcerer, she's a scientist. Scientists aren't miracle workers and I'll need a miracle to save me if she finds out I've lost them." He found them. "Here they are."

"Where were they?"

"On this shelf, in the space where that book on royal lineage used to be."

"The Queen still going on about her ancestors?"

"Yes. If she finds the book before I do. . . ." he put on his rediscovered spectacles, "she won't tell me."

"I thought you two trusted each other." The Forger paused with two enormous volumes ready to be returned to a display case.

"Trust. Tricky concept, trust. You need trust before you can begin to trust someone. Trust they'll be trustworthy before you start trusting them."

The Forger groaned. "All sounds a bit too deep for me. You know what this library reminds me of?"

"What?"

"A collection owned by a man called Amelargo. Thadeus Amelargo. Lives two valleys away near a village called Schwarzeskreuz."

Spectacles were useful for releasing surprise. Take them off: astonishment. Put them on: conclusion. "Schwarzeskreuz? Black cross? What kind of village is it?"

"One to avoid," said the Forger. "Been plagued by witchcraft for several months. Probably explains why Amelargo never leaves his house." Had the Forger worn spectacles he would have put them on at this point. "That and having no money."

"I know the feeling."

"You're not broke. We all know that. Your wife has money. How else could she afford gold rimmed spectacles."

The conversation was worth having. Amelargo had wealth, lots of it, but his book collecting drained the coffers and gambling got rid of the rest. His collection was, however, noteworthy and every month that passed brought the risk of it falling into decay or being devoured by fire.

The Anthologist made the effort, driven by the need to find a rare manuscript he expected to find in the Queen's library. The title she owned had a similar name and nothing like the value of the one he hoped to find. Amelargo's house had the size and scale to suggest a great book collection and the potential to possess the rarest volumes.

Up close, evidence of Amelargo's lost wealth was all over the stonework, chipped and bruised mullions, frayed door frames, bits that had fallen off the roof. Amelargo, when he answered the door, was not much better. A threadbare man living in a threadbare house, the ruin of his clothes hidden by a butcher's apron.

"I'm sure I know you," he said.

"Do you?"

"Yes, yes, I do know you." He clicked his fingers to summon a name. "You're that librarian,

married to a sorcerer."

"She's not a sorcerer."

"Obersee." He jabbed at the Anthologist's face. "Castle Obersee. You're auditing the Queen's library. That's you, isn't it?"

"It is. I heard about your collection and wondered if I could have a look at it."

"Yes." Amelargo stepped aside. "None of it's for sale mind."

The state of the house gave way to the state of Amelargo's apron. As all butcher's aprons are it was bloodstained. "Not even for the right price. There is a volume I'd be interested in." The door moaned when it closed. "That's if you have it."

"Oh, I'll have it. Whatever it is, I'll have it. Follow me."

The Anthologist paused at the threshold of the library, a vast chasm filled floor to roof with books, the highest examples requiring a vertiginous stepladder to reach them. The Forger's words came back to him: this is where Amelargo's money had gone

At one end of the room a large stained glass window formed the shape of a bull, a vicious looking guardian with eyes that followed the Anthologist everywhere he stepped. "My collection," Amelargo said. "I bought this house to contain it. I lived in the village once. A nosy lot, wanted to know all my affairs and habits, it was like living with the Inquisition. My house there was miniscule, had to move as the collection grew. At first I enjoyed the distance, the walk to the village was long, but pleasant. But now they are down there whilst I am up here. Which is how I prefer it." He asked for the title the Anthologist had come to see.

"The Cultural Significance of Grasses by Anatoly Griezmann."

"Interesting." Amelargo clambered up his stepladder and found the book as if he had been expecting the request to view it. "Griezmann was the only authority on the subject in his day, but superceded by technological advances and the you know what." He descended, blowing non-existent dust off the book's cover. "Of course it is often confused with a lesser known title, The Significance of Grass, a work of poetry, which is here somewhere."

"I know it. There's one in the castle library." The Anthologist put on his spectacles and took hold of the book to gaze at the exquisite illustrations and flip the pages until he found the section he was looking for. "Makes you wonder how anyone could fight with bits of grass. Maybe it's a metaphor."

Amelargo had taken an interest in the spectacles and licked his lips. "Are you a betting man?"

"No."

"Not for any price?"

"Not for any price, no."

"Not even for that book?"

"Name the bet."

The bet required relocating to an adjacent study. "Look out there," Amelargo said. "We live in difficult times, witchcraft stalks the land and I'd go to church if I thought I could get there without being turned into a toad. There was a time when I could see the church spire from here. It gave me comfort. Kept me closer to God. And now it's gone."

"Gone? You don't want me to rebuild it do you?"

"No. I want you to persuade the priest of the parish to rebuild it. I've heard you have influence. Not in the political sense, but by way of charm." Amelargo turned from the window. "My wager is that you can persuade the priest to rebuild the spire."

"Is that all?"

"Yes. Persuade him and the book's yours. I could see it once, but then it vanished. I cut down the trees on the horizon there, but the hill was in the way. I had the hill quarried and there it was, the spire. A week later it blew down in a storm."

"Astonishing."

"Yes. One could accuse God of abandoning me, but I know you can do it. Use that charm of yours to persuade the priest and you can return to Castle Obersee with the book."

The Anthologist waited for the catch and in that moment his mind was more on Amerlargo's horrible apron than the book. "And if I lose?"

"You'll see what I can see when I look out of my window. Nothing. Your eyes, sir. You'll forfeit your eyes."

The wager took a moment to sink in. The Anthologist scanned the horizon which looked pretty clear from where he was stood. The book, on the other hand, was a blur without his spectacles. The priest, wherever he was, wouldn't want to look at his incomplete church every day and Amelargo hadn't visited the village in living memory. The spire could be half way up for all he knew.

"Okay," said the Anthologist. "Leave it to me."

He set off hoping to reach the village before night fall, and hoping to return before midnight; the witching hour. When he met the priest, a long faced man in a constant hurry, the request regarding the spire provoked apoplexy. The priest dashed about the church, his voice ricocheting off the apostles lining the pews.

"The nerve of the man. Hasn't set foot in the village for eight years, hasn't set foot in this church for nine and wants me to rebuild the spire in time for his tea. I'm not made of money. If he pays I'll rebuild it. Let him come down here and hand over the cash, but no. Gambled it away, hasn't he. Do you know, do you know, this village would empty every time he threw a party in his grounds. They'd all march up there for their fill, march back down again and straight into the confession booths. The horrors that went on up there would make your knees buckle. And now it's all gone he wants me to furnish the views from his house by rebuilding the spire at my expense. My expense. To the Devil with him."

And those were his last words. He bounded off, pummelled his way through a door and set off a cacophony of falling tools and furniture. Outside, the Anthologist wondered for the first time where his persuasive reputation came from.

From the grounds of the church most of Amelargo's house was visible on the crest of the farthest hill. Not wanting his eyes ripped out he took his time inspecting the village and checking the sightlines, but at no point of the compass would the stump of the church's spire be visible from any window.

Just as Amelargo's book collection contained most of the answers to every question the facade of his house observed the landscape and everything in it, including the Anthologist, goading him to find the answer, to win the bet.

The word bet inspired the name Fuller, and the Anthologist went back inside the church to inspect an old engraving of the spire before it blew down. He made a sketch of it and rushed to the nearest inn to find a builder.

He had a choice of two and played them off against each other. The first, a man called Jenner, could build a folly out of the cheapest timber and promised it would last more than three nights. Long enough for the Anthologist to take his winnings and get away before the deception was discovered. The spire would be nothing more than a prop, detailed on the side facing Amelargo's house, a timber skeleton on the side facing away. The supports would be stuck in the ground with nothing more than human strength and optimism.

"Perfect. And the price?"

Before Jenner could answer, the door of the inn burst open and a mob tried to push its way inside. In the frantic celebrations someone shouted: "The witch has been captured." The inn emptied leaving the Anthologist alone surrounded by overturned tables and chairs.

Pity and justice moved at a frantic speed, even faster than the priest who offered a token gesture of redemption before the witch was manhandled into a metal cage and hoisted above the ground where two lanes crossed. Not content with jeers and insults, the mob pelted her with fruit and left her to the jackdaws, promising to return later with fire.

Satisfied with the trial the mob headed back to the inn without a backward glance, without noticing the Anthologist's reluctance to join them. He stood beneath the swaying gibbet and called up to her. "They caught you then?"

"Yes. It was my own fault, I suppose."

"Why?"

"Too engrossed in my work. My mother always told me it would be my downfall."

"I see."

The witch chortled. "It's not easy cutting a head off a body."

"I can't imagine it would be, no. Not that I've ever tried. Don't think I'll bother now if this is what happens."

She leaned against the bars of the cage and explained the procedure. "It's an intelligence spell, designed to make you cleverer. Cut off the head of a learned man and boil it in a stew with bay leaves and mandrake root. I had the mandrake root, devil of a job getting it out of the ground. I suppose I felt a bit cocky after that. Found the head I wanted, a judge buried about a month ago. Would his head come off? They caught me when I started getting frantic, made a bit too much noise."

"You'll be conjuring yourself out of that gibbet then?"

"Doesn't quite work like that, sweetheart. They took all my stuff.". Realisation overcame her and a deep sadness crossed her face.

"I can get you down." The Anthologist hauled his way onto the first branch of the tree from where the gibbet was strung. He took out his knife and carved at the rope. "Get ready for when it drops," he said. The cage plunged to the ground, buckled on impact and came to rest in a vertical position. Using a branch as a lever, assisted by the witch's feverish kicks, the lock yielded and she was out.

"Can we just clarify one thing," said the Anthologist, "I'm not as clever as you might think."

The sadness gone, the witch thanked him. "Wouldn't harm a hair of your head, sweetheart. There must be something I can do for you in return."

There were many things and self-interest inspired most of them, but in the distance, succumbing to the darkening sky, Amelargo's house watched them, its terrible fate waiting to play out. The Anthologist took his glasses out of his pocket.

"My wife gave me these, but I keep losing them. Can you do anything, enchant them or something?"

"I can do that."

She lived in a small house no bigger than a horse cart, half buried in the foliage and undergrowth of the forest. Inside, she was within millimetres of cracking her head against pots and pans, scratching her face on bundles of herbs or poking her eyes out with animal bones suspended by string. In a flourish of ingredients and hand waving she concocted a brew that began to steam and in the steam she waved the spectacles before placing them on the Anthologist's head.

"Try taking them off."

He tugged and pulled and no amount of effort would move them. Up close the witch had blue eyes that sparkled in the flickering light of the fire and her smile had the warmth of the longest summer day. She placed her fingers on the spectacles and drew them off without any resistance.

"I'm the only one who can remove them. You'll never lose them now."

He was tempted to put them back on again, but then he'd never find Amelargo's house in the disorientating blur. The man was waiting in his hallway, the apron gone, a large glass beaker in the grip of his bony hands. "You took your time," he said.

"Rebuilding a spire is no easy task, but I persuaded them. They'll start in the morning."

"Good." Amelargo's hand stroked the beaker.

"What's that for?"

"Preservative, the fluids I use can be a bit caustic."

"Lovely. While we wait for them to start work on the spire could I see the book again?"

"Of course." Amelargo led the way and once inside the library locked the door. "I had a visitor," he said. "The priest came by while you were out. Quite disturbed he was, indignant." He stared at the beaker as if imagining some pickled limb or organ inside it. "He's a spiteful man. Told me he won't rebuild the spire unless it's my money funding it. How do explain that?"

The Anthologist hesitated.

"We seem to have a contradiction in our stories."

"I agreed a price with a builder."

"Liar."

"No, I'm not. His name was Jenner."

"Jenner will be preoccupied building the scaffold for that witch they caught." Amelargo placed his beaker on a table and drew a carving knife from his belt. "I think we can agree you have lost the bet."

With no escape the Anthologist edged towards the library window. "You won't see the spire with my eyes, you won't see anything . . . without these." He took his spectacles from his pocket. "If you want to see the world as I see it you'll need these." He placed the gold rimmed spectacles on a pile of books and walked away.

Amelargo couldn't resist them. The gold rims attracting his affections, he held the lenses towards the candlelight and squinted. "Exquisite, but no substitute for the real thing."

"They probably won't fit you anyway. I'll have them back."

"No. You won't be needing them now."

"But they won't fit."

"Won't they?" He put them on. "See."

And then couldn't get them off.

"Told you," said the Anthologist.

Amelargo pulled and snatched, hooked his fingers in front of his ears, but still the spectacles wouldn't come off. Out of breath, he faced the Anthologist and bobbed his head trying to focus, an outstretched arm groped for a table, for reassurance, for his carving knife.

The Anthologist took the book he wanted and unlocked the library door leaving Amelargo stumbling and tripping. Outside the house he started to run, but he was overcome by a deep longing to retrieve his spectacles, a precious gift from his precious wife. But he had no way of taking them off Amelargo's head. Filled with rage he returned to the library where Amelargo, still confused and clumsy, dislodged piles of books and crashed against the stepladder. He wanted the carving knife, but the Anthologist found it first.

The witch's house was easy to find and she was wide awake when she answered the door.

"A favour for a favour?" The Anthologist held up a small sack.

"Explain."

Inside the sack Amelargo's head was still wearing the spectacles. "He's quite a learned man, was quite a learned man. If you could get the spectacles off him, you can keep the rest."