

The King of the Elves

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IT was raining and getting dark. Sheets of water blew along the row of pumps at the edge of the filling station; the tree across the highway bent against the wind.

Shadrach Jones stood just inside the doorway of the little building, leaning against an oil drum. The door was open and gusts of rain blew in onto the wood floor. It was late; the sun had set, and the air was turning cold. Shadrach reached into his coat and brought out a cigar. He bit the end off it and lit it carefully, turning away from the door. In the gloom, the cigar burst into life, warm and glowing. Shadrach took a deep draw. He buttoned his coat around him and stepped out onto the pavement.

‘Darn,’ he said. ‘What a night!’ Rain buffeted him, wind blew at him. He looked up and down the highway, squinting. There were no cars in sight. He shook his head, locked up the gasoline pumps.

He went back into the building and pulled the door shut behind him. He opened the cash register and counted the money he’d taken in during the day. It was not much.

Not much, but enough for one old man. Enough to buy him tobacco and firewood and magazines, so that he could be comfortable as he waited for the occasional cars to come by. Not very many cars came along the highway any more. The highway had begun to fall into disrepair; there were many cracks in its dry, rough surface, and most cars preferred to take the big state highway that ran beyond the hills. There was nothing in Derryville to attract them, to make them turn toward it. Derryville was a small town, too small to bring in any of the major industries, too small to be very important to anyone. Sometimes hours went by without—

Shadrach tensed. His fingers closed over the money. From outside came a sound, the melodic ring of the signal wire stretched along the pavement.

Dinggg!

Shadrach dropped the money into the till and pushed the drawer closed. He stood up slowly

and walked toward the door, listening. At the door, he snapped off the light and waited in the darkness, staring out.

He could see no car there. The rain was pouring down, swirling with the wind; clouds of mist moved along the road, and something was standing beside the pumps.

He opened the door and stepped out. At first, his eyes could make nothing out. Then the old man swallowed uneasily.

Two tiny figures stood in the rain, holding a kind of platform between them. Once, they might have been gaily dressed in bright garments, but now their clothes hung limp and sodden, dripping in the rain. They glanced half-heartedly at Shadrach. Water streaked their tiny faces, great drops of water. Their robes blew about them with the wind, lashing and swirling.

On the platform, something stirred. A small head turned wearily, peering at Shadrach. In the dim light, a rain-streaked helmet glinted dully.

‘Who are you?’ Shadrach said.

The figure on the platform raised itself up. ‘I’m the King of the Elves and I’m wet.’

Shadrach stared in astonishment.

‘That’s right,’ one of the bearers said. ‘We’re all wet.’

A small group of Elves came straggling up, gathering around their king. They huddled together forlornly, silently.

‘The King of the Elves,’ Shadrach repeated. ‘Well, I’ll be darned.’

Could it be true? They were very small, all right, and their dripping clothes were strange and oddly colored.

But *Elves*?

‘I’ll be darned. Well, whatever you are, you shouldn’t be out on a night like this.’

‘Of course not,’ the king murmured. ‘No fault of our own. No fault...’ his voice trailed off into a choking cough. The Elf soldiers peered anxiously at the platform.

‘Maybe you better bring him inside,’ Shadrach said, ‘My place is up the road. He shouldn’t be out in the rain.’

‘Do you think we like being out on a night like this?’ one of the bearers muttered. Which

way is it? Direct us.'

Shadrach pointed up the road. 'Over there, just follow me. I'll get a fire going.'

He went down the road, feeling his way onto the first of the flat stone steps that he and Phineas Judd had laid during the summer. At the top of the steps, he looked back. The platform was coining slowly along, swaying a little from side to side. Behind it, the Elf soldiers picked their way, a tiny column of silent dripping creatures, unhappy and cold.

'I'll get the fire started,' Shadrach said. He hurried them into the house.

Wearily, the Elf King lay back against the pillow. After sipping hot chocolate, he had relaxed and his heavy breathing sounded suspiciously like a snore.

Shadrach shifted in discomfort.

'I'm sorry,' the Elf King said suddenly, opening his eyes. He rubbed his forehead. 'I must have drifted off. Where was I?'

'You should retire, Your Majesty, one of the soldiers said sleepily, 'It is late and these are hard times.'

'True,' the Elf King said, nodding. 'Very true. He looked up at the towering figure of Shadrach, standing before the fireplace, a glass of beer in his hand. 'Mortal, we thank you for your hospitality. Normally, we do not impose on human beings.'

'It's those Trolls,' another of the soldiers said, curled up on a cushion of the couch.

'Right,' another soldier agreed. He sat up, groping for his sword. 'Those reeking Trolls, digging and croaking—'

'You see,' the Elf King went on, as our party was crossing from the Great Low Steps toward the Castle, where it lies in the hollow of the Towering Mountains—'

'You mean Sugar Ridge,' Shadrach supplied helpfully.

'The Towering Mountains. Slowly we made our way. A rainstorm came up. We became confused. All at once a group of Trolls appeared, crashing through the underbrush, We left the woods and sought safety on the Endless Path—'

‘The highway. Route Twenty.’

‘So that is why we’re here.’ The Elf King paused a moment. ‘Harder and harder it rained. The wind blew around us, cold and bitter. For an endless time we toiled along. We had no idea where we were going or what would become of us.’

The Elf King looked up at Shadrach, ‘We knew only this: Behind us, the Trolls were coming, creeping through the woods, marching through the rain, crushing everything before them.’

He put his hand to his mouth and coughed, bending forward,
All the Elves waited anxiously until he was done. He straightened up

‘It was kind of you to allow us to come inside. We will not trouble you for long. It is not the custom of the Elves—’

Again he coughed, covering his face with his hand. The Elves drew toward him apprehensively. At last the king stirred. He sighed.

‘What’s the matter?’ Shadrach asked. He went over and took the cup of chocolate from the fragile hand. The Elf King lay back, his eyes shut.

‘He has to rest,’ one of the soldiers said. ‘Where’s your room? The sleeping room,
‘Upstairs,’ Shadrach said. ‘I’ll show you where.’

Late that night, Shadrach sat by himself in the dark, deserted living room, deep in meditation. The Elves were asleep above him, upstairs in the bedroom, the Elf King in the bed, the others curled tip together on the rug.

The house was silent. Outside, the rain poured down endlessly, blowing against the house. Shadrach could hear the tree branches slapping in the wind. He clasped and unclasped his hands. What a strange business it was—all these Elves, with their old, sick king, their piping voices. How anxious and peevish they were!

But pathetic, too; so small and wet, with water dripping down from them, and all their gay

robes limp and soggy.

‘The Trolls—what were they like? Unpleasant and not very clean. Something about digging, breaking and pushing through the woods

Suddenly, Shadrach laughed in embarrassment, What was the matter with him, believing all this? He put his cigar out angrily, his ears red. What was going on? What kind of joke was this?

Elves? Shadrach grunted in indignation. Elves in Derryville? In the middle of Colorado? Maybe there were Elves in Europe. Maybe in Ireland. He had heard of that. But here? Upstairs in his own house, sleeping in his own bed?

‘I’ve heard just about enough of this,’ He said, ‘I’m not an idiot, you know.’

He turned toward the stairs, feeling for the banister in the gloom. He began to climb.

Above him, a light went on abruptly. A door opened.

Two Elves came slowly out onto the landing. They looked down at him. Shadrach halted halfway up the stairs. Something on their faces made him stop.

‘What’s the matter?’ he asked hesitantly.

They did not answer. The house was turning cold, cold and dark, with the chill of the rain outside and the chill of the unknown inside,

‘What is it?’ he said again. ‘What’s the matter?’

‘The King is dead,’ one of the Elves said. ‘He died a few moments ago.’

Shadrach stared up, wide-eyed. ‘He did? But—’

‘He was very cold and very tired.’ The Elves turned away, going back into the room, slowly and quietly shutting the door.

Shadrach stood, his fingers on the banister, hard, lean fingers, strong and thin.

He nodded his head blankly.

‘I see,’ he said to the closed door. ‘He’s dead.’

The Elf soldiers stood around him in a solemn circle. The living room was bright with sunlight, the cold white glare of early morning.

‘But wait,’ Shadrach said. He plucked at his necktie, ‘I have to get to the filling station. Can’t you talk to me when I come home?’

The faces of the Elf soldiers were serious and concerned.

‘Listen,’ one of them said, ‘Please hear us out. It is very important to us,

Shadrach looked past them. Through the window he saw the highway, steaming in the heat of day, and down a little way was the gas station, glittering brightly. And even as he watched, a car came up to it and honked thinly, impatiently. When nobody came out of the station, the car drove off again down the road.

‘We beg you,’ a soldier said.

Shadrach looked down at the ring around him, the anxious faces, scored with concern and trouble. Strangely, he had always thought of Elves as carefree beings, flitting without worry or sense—

‘Go ahead,’ he said. ‘I’m listening.’ He went over to the big chair and sat down. The Elves came up around him. They conversed among themselves for a moment, whispering, murmuring distantly. Then they turned toward Shadrach.

The old man waited, his arms folded.

‘We cannot be without a king,’ one of the soldiers said. ‘We could not survive. Not these days.’

‘The Trolls,’ another added. ‘They multiply very fast. They are terrible beasts. They’re heavy and ponderous, crude, badsmelling—

‘The odor of them is awful. They come up from the dark wet places, under the earth, where the blind, groping plants feed in silence, far below the surface, far from the sun.

‘Well, you ought to elect a king, then,’ Shadrach suggested. ‘I don’t see any problem there.’

‘We do not elect the King of the Elves,’ a soldier said. ‘The old king must name his successor.’

‘Oh,’ Shadrach replied. ‘Well, there’s nothing wrong with that method.’

‘As our old king lay dying, a few distant words came forth from his lips,’ a soldier said. ‘We bent closer, frightened and unhappy, listening.’

‘Important, all right,’ agreed Shadrach. ‘Not something you’d want to miss.’

‘He spoke the name of him who will lead us.’

‘Good. You caught it, then. Well, where’s the difficulty?’

‘The name he spoke was—was your name’

Shadrach stared. *‘Mine?’*

‘The dying king said: ‘Make him, the towering mortal, your king. Many things will come if he leads the Elves into battle against the Trolls, I see the rising once again of the Elf Empire, as it was in the old days, as it was before—

‘Me!’ Shadrach leaped up. ‘Me? King of the Elves?’

Shadrach walked about the room, his hands in his pockets. ‘Me, Shadrach Jones, King of the Elves.’ He grinned a little. ‘I sure never thought of it before.’

He went to the mirror over the fireplace and studied himself. He saw his thin, graying hair, his bright eyes, dark skin, his big Adam’s apple.

‘King of the Elves,’ he said. ‘King of the Elves. Wait till Phineas Judd hears about this. Wait till I tell him!’

Phineas Judd would certainly be surprised!

Above the filling station, the sun shone, high in the clear blue sky.

Phineas Judd sat playing with the accelerator of his old Ford truck. The motor raced and slowed. Phineas reached over and turned the ignition key off, then rolled the window all the way down.

‘What did you say?’ he asked. He took off his glasses and began to polish them, steel rims between slender, deft fingers that were patient from years of practice. He restored his glasses to

his nose and smoothed what remained of his hair into place.

‘What was it, Shadrach?’ he said, ‘Let’s hear that again.’

‘I’m King of the Elves,’ Shadrach repeated. He changed position, bringing his other foot up on the running board. ‘Who would have thought it? Me, Shadrach Jones, King of the Elves.’

Phineas gazed at him. ‘How long have you been—King of the Elves, Shadrach?’

‘Since the night before last.’

‘I see. The night before last.’ Phineas nodded. ‘I see. And what, may I ask, occurred the night before last?’

‘The Elves came to my house. When the old king died, he told them that—’

A truck came rumbling up and the driver leaped out. ‘Water!’ he said, ‘Where the hell is the hose?’

Shadrach turned reluctantly. ‘I’ll get it,’ He turned back to Phineas. ‘Maybe I can talk to you tonight when you come back from town. I want to tell you the rest. It’s very interesting.’

‘Sure,’ Phineas said, starting up his little truck. ‘Sure, Shadrach. I’m very interested to hear.’ He drove off down the road.

Later in the day, Dan Green ran his flivver up to the filling station.

‘Hey, Shadrach,’ he called. ‘Come over here! I want to ask you something.’

Shadrach came out of the little house, holding a waste-rag in his hand.

‘What is it?’

‘Come here.’ Dan leaned out the window, a wide grin on his face, splitting his face from ear to ear. ‘Let me ask you something, will you?’

‘Sure.’

‘Is it true? Are you really the King of the Elves?’

Shadrach flushed a little. ‘I guess I am,’ he admitted, looking away. ‘That’s what I am, all right.’

Dan’s grin faded. ‘Hey, you trying to kid me? What’s the gag?’ Shadrach became angry. ‘What do you mean? Sure, I’m the King of the Elves. And anyone who says I’m not—’

All right, Shadrach,’ Dan said, starting up the flivver quickly. ‘Don’t get mad. I was just

wondering.’

Shadrach looked very strange.

‘All right,’ Dan said. ‘You don’t hear me arguing, do you?’

By the end of the day, everyone around knew about Shadrach and how he had suddenly become the King of the Elves. Pop Richey, who ran the Lucky Store in Derryville, claimed Shadrach was doing it to drum up trade for the filling station,

‘He’s a smart old fellow,’ Pop said. ‘Not very many cars go along there any more. He knows what he’s doing.’

‘I don’t know,’ Dan Green disagreed. ‘You should hear him, I think he really believes it.’

‘King of the Elves?’ They all began to laugh. ‘Wonder what he’ll say next.’

Phineas Judd pondered. ‘I’ve known Shadrach for years. I can’t figure it out,’ He frowned, his face wrinkled and disapproving. ‘I don’t like it,’

Dan looked at him. ‘Then you think he believes it?’

‘Sure,’ Phineas said. ‘Maybe I’m wrong, but I really think he does.’

‘But how could he believe it?’ Pop asked. ‘Shadrach is no fool. He’s been in business for a long time. He must be getting something out of it, the way I see it. But what, if it isn’t to build up the filling station?’

‘Why, don’t you know what he’s getting?’ Dan said, grinning, his gold tooth shone,

‘What?’ Pop demanded.

‘He’s got a whole kingdom to himself, that’s what—to do with like he wants. How would you like that, Pop? Wouldn’t you like to be King of the Elves and not have to run this old store any more?’

‘There isn’t anything wrong with my store,’ Pop said. ‘I ain’t ashamed to run it. Better than being a clothing salesman,’

Dan flushed, ‘Nothing wrong with that, either.’ He looked at Phineas. ‘Isn’t that right? Nothing wrong with selling clothes, is there, Phineas?’

Phineas was staring down at the floor. He glanced up. ‘What? What was that?’

‘What you thinking about?’ Pop wanted to know. ‘You look worried,’

‘I’m worried about Shadrach,’ Phineas said. ‘He’s getting old. Sitting out there by himself all the time, in the cold weather, with the rain water running over the floor—it blows something awful in the winter, along the highway—’

‘Then you *do* think he believes it?’ Dan persisted. ‘You *don’t* think he’s getting something out of it?’

Phineas shook his head absently and did not answer. The laughter died down. They all looked at one another.

That night, as Shadrach was locking up the filling station, a small figure came toward him from the darkness.

‘Hey!’ Shadrach called out. ‘Who are you?’

An Elf soldier came into the light, blinking. He was dressed in a little gray robe, buckled at the waist with a band of silver. On his feet were little leather boots. He carried a short sword at his side.

‘I have a serious message for you,’ the Elf said, ‘Now, where did I put it?’

He searched his robe while Shadrach waited. The Elf brought out a tiny scroll and unfastened it, breaking the wax expertly. He handed it to Shadrach.

‘What’s it say?’ Shadrach asked. He bent over, his eyes close to the vellum. ‘I don’t have my glasses with me. Can’t quite make out these little letters,’

‘The Trolls are moving. They’ve heard that the old king is dead, and they’re rising, in all the hills and valleys around. They will try to break the Elf Kingdom into fragments, scatter the Elves—’

‘I see,’ Shadrach said, ‘Before your new king can really get started,’

‘That’s right.’ The Elf soldier nodded. ‘This is a crucial moment for the Elves, For centuries, our existence has been precarious. There are so many Trolls, and Elves are very frail and often

take sick—’

‘Well, what should I do? Are there any suggestions?’

‘You’re supposed to meet with us under the Great Oak tonight. We’ll take you into the Elf Kingdom, and you and your staff will plan and map the defense of the Kingdom.’

‘What?’ Shadrach looked uncomfortable. ‘But I haven’t eaten dinner. And my gas station—tomorrow is Saturday, and a lot of cars—’

‘But you are King of the Elves,’ the soldier said. Shadrach put his hand to his chin and rubbed it slowly. ‘That’s right,’ he replied. ‘I am, ain’t I?’

The Elf Soldier bowed.

‘I wish I’d known this sort of thing was going to happen,’ Shadrach said. I didn’t suppose being King of the Elves—’

He broke off, hoping for an interruption. The Elf soldier watched him calmly, without expression.

‘Maybe you ought to have someone else as your king,’ Shadrach decided. ‘I don’t know very much about war and things like that, fighting and all that sort of business.’ He paused, shrugged his shoulders. ‘It’s nothing I’ve ever mixed in. They don’t have wars here in Colorado. I mean they don’t have wars between human beings.’

Still the Elf soldier remained silent.

‘Why was I picked?’ Shadrach went on helplessly, twisting his hands. ‘I don’t know anything about it. What made him go and pick me? Why didn’t he pick somebody else?’

He trusted you, the Elf said. ‘You brought him inside your house, out of the rain. He knew that you expected nothing for it, that there was nothing you wanted, He had known few who gave and asked nothing back.’

‘Oh.’ Shadrach thought it over. At last he looked up. ‘But what about my gas station? And my house? And what will they say, Dan Green and Pop down at the store—’

The Elf soldier moved away, out of the light. ‘I have to go. It’s getting late, and at night the Trolls come out. I don’t want to be too far away from the others.’

‘Sure,’ Shadrach said.

‘The Trolls are afraid of nothing, now that the old king is dead. They forage everywhere. No one is safe.’

‘Where did you say the meeting is to be? And what time?’

‘At the Great Oak. When the moon sets tonight, just as it leaves the sky.’

‘I’ll be there, I guess,’ Shadrach said. ‘I suppose you’re right. The King of the Elves can’t afford to let his kingdom down when it needs him most,’

He looked around, but the Elf soldier was already gone.

Shadrach walked up the highway, his mind full of doubts and wonderings. When he came to the first of the flat stone steps, he stopped.

‘And the old oak tree is on Phineas’s farm! What’ll Phineas say?’ But he was the Elf King and the Trolls were moving in the hills, Shadrach stood listening to the rustle of the wind as it moved through the trees beyond the highway, and along the tar slopes and hills.

Trolls? Were there really Trolls there, rising up, bold and confident in the darkness of the night, afraid of nothing, afraid of no one?

And this business of being Elf King.

Shadrach went on up the steps, his lips pressed tight. When he reached the top of the stone steps, the last rays of sunlight had already faded. It was night.

Phineas Judd stared out the window. He swore and shook his head. Then he went quickly to the door and ran out onto the porch. In the cold moonlight a dim figure was walking slowly across the lower field, coming toward the house along the cow trail.

‘Shadrach!’ Phineas cried. ‘What’s wrong? What are you doing out this time of night?’

Shadrach stopped and put his fists stubbornly on his hips. ‘You go back home,’ Phineas said. ‘What’s got into you?’ ‘I’m sorry, Phineas, Shadrach answered. ‘I’m sorry I have to go over your land. But I have to meet somebody at the old oak tree.

‘At this time of night?’

Shadrach bowed his head.

‘What’s the matter with you, Shadrach? Who in the world you going to meet in the middle of the night on my farm?’

‘I have to meet with the Elves. We’re going to plan out the war with the Trolls,’

‘Well, I’ll be damned,’ Phineas Judd said. He went back inside the house and slammed the door. For a long time he stood thinking. Then he went back out on the porch again. ‘What did you say you were doing? You don’t have to tell me, of course, but I just—’

‘I have to meet the Elves at the old oak tree. We must have a general council of war against the Trolls.’

‘Yes, indeed. The Trolls. Have to watch for the Trolls all the time

‘Trolls are everywhere,’ Shadrach stated, nodding his head. ‘I never realized it before. You can’t forget them or ignore them, They never forget you. They’re always planning, watching you—’

Phineas gaped at him, speechless.

‘Oh, by the way,’ Shadrach said. ‘I may be gone for some time. It depends on how long this business is going to take. I haven’t had much experience in fighting Trolls, so I’m not sure. But I wonder if you’d mind looking after the gas station for me, about twice a day, maybe once in the morning and once at night, to make sure no one’s broken in or anything like that,’

‘You’re going away?’ Phineas came quickly down the stairs. ‘What’s all this about Trolls? Why are you going?’

Shadrach patiently repeated what he had said.

‘But what for?’

‘Because I’m the Elf King. I have to lead them.’

There was silence, ‘I see,’ Phineas said, at last, ‘That’s right, you *did* mention it before, didn’t you? But, Shadrach, why don’t you come inside for a while and you can tell me about the Trolls and drink some coffee and—’

‘Coffee?’ Shadrach looked up at the pale moon above him, the moon and the bleak sky. The world was still and dead and the night was very cold and the moon would not be setting for some

time.

Shadrach shivered.

‘It’s a cold night,’ Phineas urged. ‘Too cold to be out. Come on in—,’

‘I guess I have a little time,’ Shadrach admitted. ‘A cup of coffee wouldn’t do any harm. But I can’t stay very long.’

Shadrach stretched his legs out and sighed. ‘This coffee sure tastes good, Phineas.’

Phineas sipped a little and put his cup down. The living room was quiet and warm. It was a very neat little living room with solemn pictures on the walls, gray uninteresting pictures that minded their own business. In the corner was a small reed organ with sheet music carefully arranged on top of it.

Shadrach noticed the organ and smiled. ‘You still play, Phineas?’

‘Not much any more. The bellows don’t work right. One of them won’t come back up.’

‘I suppose I could fix it sometime. If I’m around, I mean. ‘That would be fine,’ Phineas said, ‘I was thinking of asking you.’

‘Remember how you used to play “Vilia” and Dan Green came up with that lady who worked for Pop during the summer? The one who wanted to open a pottery shop?’

‘I sure do,’ Phineas said.

Presently, Shadrach set down his coffee cup and shifted in his chair,

‘You want more coffee?’ Phineas asked quickly. He stood up. ‘A little more?’

‘Maybe a little. But I have to be going pretty soon.’

‘It’s a bad night to be outside,’

Shadrach looked through the window, It was darker; the moon had almost gone down. The fields were stark. Shadrach shivered. ‘I wouldn’t disagree with you,’ he said.

Phineas turned eagerly. ‘Look, Shadrach. You go on home where it’s warm. You can come out and fight Trolls some other night. There’ll always be Trolls. You said so yourself. Plenty of time to do that later, when the weather’s better. When it’s not so cold,’

Shadrach rubbed his forehead wearily. 'You know, it all seems like some sort of a crazy dream. When did I start talking about Elves and Trolls? When did it all begin?' His voice trailed off. 'Thank you for the coffee.' He got slowly to his feet. 'It warmed me up a lot. And I appreciated the talk. Like old times, you and me sitting here the way we used to,' 'Are you going?' Phineas hesitated. *'Home?'*

'I think I better. It's late.'

Phineas got quickly to his feet. He led Shadrach to the door, one arm around his shoulder.

'All right, Shadrach, you go on home, Take a good hot bath before you go to bed. It'll fix you up. And maybe just a little snort of brandy to warm the blood.'

Phineas opened the front door and they went slowly down the porch steps, onto the cold, dark ground.

'Yes, I guess I'll be going,' Shadrach said. 'Good night—'

'You go on home.' Phineas patted him on the arm. 'You run along home and take a good hot bath. And then go straight to bed.'

'That's a good idea. Thank you, Phineas. I appreciate your kindness.' Shadrach looked down at Phineas's hand on his arm. He had not been that close to Phineas for years.

Shadrach contemplated the hand, He wrinkled his brow, puzzled.

Phineas's hand was huge and rough and his arms were short. His fingers were blunt; his nails broken and cracked. Almost black, or so it seemed in the moonlight.

Shadrach looked up at Phineas. 'Strange,' he murmured, 'What's strange, Shadrach?'

In the moonlight, Phineas's face seemed oddly heavy and brutal. Shadrach had never noticed before how the jaw bulged, what a great protruding jaw it was. The skin was yellow and coarse, like parchment. Behind the glasses, the eyes were like two stones, cold and lifeless. The ears were immense, the hair stringy and matted.

Odd that he never noticed before. But he had never seen Phineas in the moonlight.

Shadrach stepped away, studying his old friend. From a few feet off, Phineas Judd seemed unusually short and squat. His legs were slightly bowed. His feet were enormous. And there was

something else—

‘What is it?’ Phineas demanded, beginning to grow suspicious.

‘Is there something wrong?’

Something was completely wrong. And he had never noticed it, not in all the years they had been friends. All around Phineas Judd was an odor, a faint, pungent stench of rot, of decaying flesh, damp and moldy.

Shadrach glanced slowly about him. ‘Something wrong?’ he echoed. ‘No, I wouldn’t say that.’

By the side of the house was an old rain barrel, half fallen apart.

Shadrach walked over to it.

‘No, Phineas, I wouldn’t say there’s something wrong.’

‘What are you doing?’

‘Me?’ Shadrach took hold of one of the barrel staves and pulled it loose. He walked back to Phineas, carrying the barrel stave carefully. ‘I’m King of the Elves. Who—or what—are you?’

Phineas roared and attacked with his great murderous shovel hands.

Shadrach smashed him over the head with the barrel stave. Phineas bellowed with rage and pain.

At the shattering sound there was a clatter and from underneath the house came a furious horde of bounding, leaping creatures, dark bent-over things, their bodies heavy and squat, their feet and heads immense. Shadrach took one look at the flood of dark creatures pouring out from Phineas’s basement. He knew what they were.

‘Help!’ Shadrach shouted. ‘Trolls! Help!’

The trolls were all around him, grabbing hold of him, tugging at him, climbing up him, pummeling his face and body.

Shadrach fell to with the barrel stave, swung again and again, kicking Trolls with his feet, whacking them with the barrel stave, There seemed to be hundreds of them. More and more

poured out from under Phineas's house, a surging black tide of pot-shaped creatures, their great eyes and teeth gleaming in the moonlight.

'Help!' Shadrach cried again, more feebly now. He was getting winded. His heart labored painfully. A Troll bit his wrist, clinging to his arm. Shadrach flung it away, pulling loose from the horde clutching his trouser legs, the barrel stave rising and falling.

One of the Trolls caught hold of the stave. A whole group of them helped, wrenching furiously, trying to pull it away. Shadrach hung on desperately. Trolls were all over him, on his shoulders, clinging to his coat, riding his arms, his legs, pulling his hair—

He heard a high-pitched clarion call from a long way off, the sound of some distant golden trumpet, echoing in the hills.

The Trolls suddenly stopped attacking. One of them dropped off Shadrach's neck. Another let go of his arm.

The call came again, this time more loudly.

'Elves!' a Troll rasped. He turned and moved toward the sound, grinding his teeth and spitting with fury.

'Elves!'

The Trolls swarmed forward, a growing wave of gnashing teeth and nails, pushing furiously toward the Elf columns. The Elves broke formation and joined battle, shouting with wild joy in their shrill, piping voices. The tide of Trolls rushed against them, Troll against Elf, shovel nails against golden sword, biting jaw against dagger.

'Kill the Elves!'

'Death to the Trolls!'

'Onward!'

'Forward!'

Shadrach fought desperately with the Trolls that were still clinging to him. He was exhausted, panting and gasping for breath. Blindly, he whacked on and on, kicking and jumping, throwing Trolls away from him, through the air and across the ground.

How long the battle raged, Shadrach never knew. He was lost in a sea of dark bodies, round and evil smelling, clinging to him, tearing, biting, fastened to his nose and hair and fingers. He fought silently, grimly.

All around him, the Elf legions clashed with the Troll horde, little groups of struggling warriors on all sides.

Suddenly Shadrach stopped fighting. He raised his head, looking uncertainly around him. Nothing moved. Everything was silent. The fighting had ceased.

A few Trolls still clung to his arms and legs. Shadrach whacked one with the barrel stave. It howled and dropped to the ground. He staggered back, struggling with the last Troll, who hung tenaciously to his arm.

‘Now you!’ Shadrach gasped. He pried the Troll loose and flung it into the air. The Troll fell to the ground and scuttled off into the night.

There was nothing more. No Troll moved anywhere. All was silent across the bleak moon-swept fields.

Shadrach sank down on a stone. His chest rose and fell painfully. Red specks swam before his eyes. Weakly, he got out his pocket handkerchief and wiped his neck and face. He closed his eyes, shaking his head from side to side.

When he opened his eyes again, the Elves were coming toward him, gathering their legion together again. The Elves were disheveled and bruised. Their golden armor was gashed and torn. Their helmets were bent or missing. Most of their scarlet plumes were gone. Those that still remained were drooping and broken.

But the battle was over. The war was won. The Troll hordes had been put to flight.

Shadrach got slowly to his feet. The Elf warriors stood around him in a circle, gazing up at him with silent respect. One of them helped steady him as he put his handkerchief away in his pocket.

‘Thank you,’ Shadrach murmured. ‘Thank you very much,’

‘The Trolls have been defeated,’ an Elf stated, still awed by what had happened.

Shadrach gazed around at the Elves. There were many of them, more than he had ever seen before. All the Elves had turned out for the battle. They were grim-faced, stern with the seriousness of the moment, weary from the terrible struggle.

‘Yes, they’re gone, all right,’ Shadrach said. He was beginning to get his breath. ‘That was a close call. I’m glad you fellows came when you did. I was just about finished, fighting them all by myself’

‘All alone, the King of the Elves held off the entire Troll army, an Elf announced shrilly.

‘Eh?’ Shadrach said, taken aback. Then he smiled. ‘That’s true, I *did* fight them alone for a while. I *did* hold off the Trolls all by myself. The whole darn Troll army.

‘There is more, an Elf said.

Shadrach blinked. ‘More?’

‘Look over here, O King, mightiest of all the Elves. This way. To the right.’

The Elves led Shadrach over.

‘What is it?’ Shadrach murmured, seeing nothing at first, He gazed down, trying to pierce the darkness. ‘Could we have a torch over here?’

Some Elves brought little pine torches.

There, on the frozen ground, lay Phineas Judd, on his back. His eyes were blank and staring, his mouth half open. He did not move. His body was cold and stiff,

‘He is dead,’ an Elf said solemnly.

Shadrach gulped in sudden alarm. Cold sweat stood out abruptly on his forehead. ‘My gosh! My old friend! What have I done?’

‘You have slain the Great Troll,’

Shadrach paused.

‘I *what?*’

‘You have slain the Great Troll, leader of all the Trolls.’

‘This has never happened before,’ another Elf exclaimed excitedly. ‘The Great Troll has lived for centuries. Nobody imagined he could die. This is our most historic moment.’

All the Elves gazed down at the silent form with awe, awe mixed with more than a little fear.

‘Oh, go on!’ Shadrach said. ‘That’s just Phineas Judd.’

But as he spoke, a chill moved up his spine. He remembered what he had seen a little while before, as he stood close by Phineas, as the dying moonlight crossed his old friend’s face.

Look. One of the Elves bent over and unfastened Phineas’s blue-serge vest. He pushed the coat and vest aside. ‘See?’

Shadrach bent down to look.

He gasped.

Underneath Phineas Judd’s blue-serge vest was a suit of mail, an encrusted mesh of ancient, rusting iron, fastened tightly around the squat body. On the mail stood an engraved insignia, dark and time-worn, embedded with dirt and rust. A moldering half obliterated emblem. The emblem of a crossed owl leg and toadstool.

The emblem of the Great Troll.

‘Golly,’ Shadrach said. ‘And *I* killed him.’

For a long time he gazed silently down. Then, slowly, realization began to grow in him. He straightened up, a smile forming on his face.

‘What is it, O King?’ an Elf piped.

‘I just thought of something,’ Shadrach said. ‘I just realized that—that since the Great Troll is dead and the Troll army has been put to flight—’

He broke off. All the Elves were waiting.

‘I thought maybe I—that is, maybe if you don’t need me any more—’

The Elves listened respectfully. ‘What is it, Mighty King? Go on.’

‘I thought maybe now I could go back to the filling station and not be king any more.’

Shadrach glanced hopefully around at them. ‘Do you think so? With the war over and all. With him dead. What do you say?’

For a time, the Elves were silent. They gazed unhappily down at the ground. None of them said anything. At last they began moving away, collecting their banners and pennants.

‘Yes, you may go back,’ an Elf said quietly. ‘The war is over. The Trolls have been defeated. You may return to your filling station, if that is what you want.’

A flood of relief swept over Shadrach. He straightened up, grinning from ear to ear. ‘Thanks! That’s fine. That’s really fine. That’s the best news I’ve heard in my life.’

He moved away from the Elves, rubbing his hands together and blowing on them.

‘Thanks an awful lot.’ He grinned around at the silent Elves. ‘Well, I guess I’ll be running along, then. It’s late. Late and cold. It’s been a hard night. I’ll—I’ll see you around.’

The Elves nodded silently.

‘Fine, Well, good night.’ Shadrach turned and started along the path. He stopped for a moment, waving back at the Elves. ‘It was quite a battle, wasn’t it? We really licked them.’ He hurried on along the path. Once again he stopped, looking back and waving. ‘Sure glad I could help out. Well, good night!’

One or two of the Elves waved, but none of them said anything.

Shadrach Jones walked slowly toward his place. He could see it from the rise, the highway that few cars traveled, the filling station falling to ruin, the house that might not last as long as himself, and not enough money coming in to repair them or buy a better location.

He turned around and went back.

The Elves were still gathered there in the silence of the night. They had not moved away.

‘I was hoping you hadn’t gone,’ Shadrach said, relieved. ‘And we were hoping you would not leave,’ said a soldier. Shadrach kicked a stone. It bounced through the tight silence and stopped. The Elves were still watching him.

‘Leave?’ Shadrach asked, ‘And me King of the Elves?’

‘Then you will remain our king?’ an Elf cried.

‘It’s a hard thing for a man of my age to change. To stop selling gasoline and suddenly be a king. It scared me for a while. But it doesn’t any more.’

‘You will? You *will*?’

‘Sure,’ said Shadrach Jones.

The little circle of Elf torches closed in joyously. In their light, he saw a platform like the one that had carried the old King of the Elves. But this one was much larger, big enough to hold a man, and dozens of the soldiers waited with proud shoulders under the shafts.

A soldier gave him a happy bow. ‘For you, Sire.’

Shadrach climbed aboard, It was less comfortable than walking, but he knew this was how they wanted to take him to the Kingdom of the Elves.