**Kid Stuff**

Isaac Asimov

The first pang of nausea had passed and Jan Prentiss said, “Damn it, you’re an insect.”

It was a statement of fact, not an insult, and the thing that sat on Prentiss’ desk said, “Of course.”

It was about a foot long, very thin, and in shape a farfetched and miniature caricature of a human being. Its stalky arms and legs originated in pairs from the upper portion of its body. The legs were longer and thicker than the arms. They extended the length of the body, then bent forward at the knee.

The creature sat upon those knees and, when it did so, the stub of its fuzzy abdomen just cleared Prentiss’ desk.

There was plenty of time for Prentiss to absorb these details. The object had no objection to being stared at. It seemed to welcome it, in fact, as though it were used to exciting admiration.

“What are you?” Prentiss did not feel completely rational. Five minutes ago, he had been seated at his typewriter, working leisurely on the story he had promised Horace W. Browne for last month’s issue of Farfetched Fantasy Fiction. He had been in a perfectly usual frame of mind. He had felt quite fine; quite sane.

And then a block of air immediately to the right of the typewriter had shimmered, clouded over and condensed into the little horror that dangled its black and shiny feet over the edge of the desk.

Prentiss wondered in a detached sort of way that he bothered talking to

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it. This was the first time his profession had so crudely affected his dreams. It must be a dream, he told himself.

“I’m an Avalonian,” said the being. “I’m from Avalon, in other words.” It’s tiny face ended in a mandibular mouth. Two swaying three-inch antennae rose from a spot above either eye, while the eyes themselves gleamed richly in their many-faceted fashion. There was no sign of nostrils.

Naturally not, thought Prentiss wildly. It has to breathe through vents in its abdomen. It must be talking with its abdomen then. Or using telepathy.

“Avalon?” he said stupidly. He thought: Avalon? The land of the fay in King Arthur’s time?

“Certainly,” said the creature, answering the thought smoothly. “I’m an elf.”

“Oh, no!” Prentiss put his hands to his face, took them away and found the elf still there, its feet thumping against the top drawer. Prentiss was not a drinking man, or a nervous one. In fact, he was considered a very prosaic sort of person by his neighbors. He had a comfortable paunch, a reasonable but not excessive amount of hair on his head, an amiable wife and an active ten-year-old son. His neighbors were, of course, kept ignorant of the fact that he paid off the mortgage on his house by writing fantasies of one sort or another.

Till now, however, this secret vice had never affected his psyche. To be sure, his wife had shaken her head over his addiction many times. It was her standard opinion that he was wasting, even perverting, his talents.

“Who on Earth reads these things?” she would say. “All that stuff about demons and gnomes and wishing rings and elves. All that kid stuff, if you want my frank opinion.”

“You’re quite wrong,” Prentiss would reply stiffly. “Modern fantasies are very sophisticated and mature treatments of folk motifs. Behind the facade of glib unreality there frequently lie trenchant comments on the world of today. Fantasy in modem style is, above all, adult fare.”

Blanche shrugged. She had heard him speak at conventions so these comments weren’t new to her.

“Besides,” he would add, “fantasies pay the mortgage, don’t they?”

“Maybe so,” she would reply, “but it would be nice if you’d switch to mysteries. At least you’d get quarter-reprint sales out of those and we could “'even tell the neighbors what you do for a living.”

Prentiss groaned in spirit. Blanche could come in now at any time and find him talking to himself (it was too real for a dream; it might be a hallucination). After that he would have to write mysteries for a living-or take to work.

“You’re quite wrong,” said the elf. “This is neither a dream nor a hallucination.” “Then why don’t you go away?” asked Prentiss.

“I intend to. This is scarcely my idea of a place to live. And you’re coming with me.”

“I am not. What the hell do you think you are, telling me what I’m going to do?”

“If you think that’s a respectful way to speak to a representative of an older culture, I can’t say much for your upbringing.”

“You’re not an older culture—” He wanted to add: You’re just a figment of my imagination; but he had been a writer too long to be able to bring himself to commit the cliche.

“We insects,” said the elf freezingry, “existed half a billion years before the first mammal was invented. We watched the dinosaurs come in and we watched them go out. As for you man-things-strictly newcomers.”

For the first time, Prentiss noted that, from the spot on the elf’s body where its limbs sprouted, a third vestigial pair existed as well. It increased the insecticity of the object and Prentiss’ sense of indignation grew.

He said, “You needn’t waste your company on social inferiors.”

“I wouldn’t,” said the elf, “believe me. But necessity drives, you know. It’s a rather complicated story but when you hear it, you’ll want to help.”

Prentiss said uneasily, “Look, I don’t have much time. Blanche-my wife will be in here any time. She’ll be upset.”

“She won’t be here,” said the elf. “I’ve set up a block in her mind.”

“What!”

“Quite harmless, I assure you. But, after all, we can’t afford to be disturbed, can we?”

Prentiss sat back in his chair, dazed and unhappy.

The elf said, “We elves began our association with you man-things immediately after the last ice age began. It had been a miserable time for us, as you can imagine. We couldn’t wear animal carcasses or live in holes as your uncouth ancestors did. It took incredible stores of psychic energy to keep warm.”

“Incredible stores of what?”

“Psychic energy. You know nothing at all about it. Your mind is too coarse to grasp the concept. Please don’t interrupt.”

The elf continued, “Necessity drove us to experiment with your people’s brains. They were crude, but large. The cells were inefficient, almost worthless, but there were a vast number of them. We could use those brains as a concentrating device, a type of psychic lens, and increase the available energy which our own minds could tap. We survived the ice age handily and without having to retreat to the tropics as in previous such eras.

“Of course, we were spoiled. When warmth returned, we didn’t abandon the man-things. We used them to increase our standard of living generally. We could travel faster, eat better, do more, and we lost our old, simple, virtuous way of life forever. Then, too, there was milk.”

“Milk?” said Prentiss. “I don’t see the connection.”

“A divine liquid. I only tasted it once in my life. But elfin classic poetry speaks of it in superlatives. In the old days, men always supplied us plentifully. Why mammals of all things should be blessed with it and insects not is a complete mystery. . . . How unfortunate it is that the men-things got out of hand.”

“They did?”

“Two hundred years ago.”

“Good for us.”

“Don’t be narrow-minded,” said the elf stiffly. “It was a useful association for all parties until you man-things learned to handle physical energies in quantity. It was just the sort of gross thing your minds are capable of.”

“What was wrong with it?”

“It’s hard to explain. It was all very well for us to light up our nightly revels with fireflies brightened by use of two manpower of psychic energy. But then you men-creatures installed electric lights. Our antennal reception is good for miles, but then you invented telegraphs, telephones and radios. Our kobolds mined ore with much greater efficiency than man-things do, until man-things invented dynamite. Do you see?”

“No.”

“Surely you don’t expect sensitive and superior creatures such as the elves to watch a group of hairy mammals outdo them. It wouldn’t be so bad if we could imitate the electronic development ourselves, but our psychic energies were insufficient for the purpose. Well, we retreated from reality. We sulked, pined and drooped. Call it an inferiority complex, if you will, but from two centuries ago onward, we slowly abandoned mankind and retreated to such centers as Avalon.”

Prentiss thought furiously. “Let’s get this straight. You can handle minds?”

“Certainly.”

“You can make me think you’re invisible? Hypnotically, I mean?”

“A crude term, but yes.”

“And when you appeared just now, you did it by lifting a kind of mental block. Is that it?”

“To answer your thoughts, rather than your words: You are not sleeping; you are not mad; and I am not supernatural.”

“I was just making sure. I take it, then, you can read my mind.”

“Of course. It is a rather dirty and unrewarding sort of labor, but I can do it when I must. Your name is Prentiss and you write imaginative fiction. You have one larva who is at a place of instruction. I know a great deal about you.”

Prentiss winced. “And just where is Avalon?”

“You won’t find it.” The elf clacked his mandibles together two or three times. “Don’t speculate on the possibility of warning the authorities. You’ll find yourself in a madhouse. Avalon, in case you think the knowledge will

help you, is in the middle of the Atlantic and quite invisible, you know. After the steamboat was invented, you man-things got to moving about so unreasonably that we had to cloak the whole island with a psychic shield.

“Of course, incidents will take place. Once a huge, barbaric vessel hit us dead center and it took all the psychic energy of the entire population to give the island the appearance of an iceberg. The Titanic, I believe, was the name printed on the vessel. And nowadays there are planes flying overhead all the time and sometimes there are crashes. We picked up cases of canned milk once. That’s when I tasted it.”

Prentiss said, “Well, then, damn it, why aren’t you still on Avalon? Why did you leave?”

“I was ordered to leave,” said the elf angrily. “The fools.”

“Oh?”

“You know how it is when you’re a little different. I’m not like the rest of them and the poor tradition-ridden fools resented it. They were jealous. That’s the best explanation. Jealous!”

“How are you different?”

“Hand me that light bulb,” said the elf. “Oh, just unscrew it. You don’t need a reading lamp in the daytime.”

With a quiver of repulsion, Prentiss did as he was told and passed the object into the little hands of the elf. Carefully, the elf, with fingers so thin and wiry that they looked like tendrils, touched the bottom and side of the brass base.

Feebly the filament in the bulb reddened.

“Good God,” said Prentiss.

“That,” said the elf proudly, “is my great talent. I told you that we elves couldn’t adapt psychic energy to electronics. Well, I can! I’m not just an ordinary elf. I’m a mutant! A super-elf! I’m the next stage in elfin evolution. This light is due just to the activity of my own mind, you know. Now watch when I use yours as a focus.”

As he said that, the bulb’s filament grew white hot and painful to look at, while a vague and not unpleasant tickling sensation entered Prentiss’ skull.

The lamp went out and the elf put the bulb on the desk behind the typewriter.

“I haven’t tried,” said the elf proudly, “but I suspect I can fission uranium too.”

“But look here, lighting a bulb takes energy. You can’t just hold it—”

“I’ve told you about psychic energy. Great Oberon, man-thing, try to understand.”

Prentiss felt increasingly uneasy; he said cautiously, “What do you intend doing with this gift of yours?”

“Go back to Avalon, of course. I should let those fools go to their doom, but an elf does have a certain patriotism, even if he is a coleopteron.”

“A what?”

“We elves are not all of a species, you know. I’m of beetle descent. See?”

He rose to his feet and, standing on the desk, turned his back to Prentiss. What had seemed merely a shining black cuticle suddenly split and lifted. From underneath, two filmy, veined wings fluttered out.

“Oh, you can fly,” said Prentiss.

“You’re very foolish,” said the elf contemptuously, “not to realize I’m too large for flight. But they are attractive, aren’t they? How do you like the iridescence? The lepidoptera have disgusting wings in comparison. They’re gaudy and indelicate. What’s more they’re always sticking out.”

“The lepidoptera?” Prentiss felt hopelessly confused.

“The butterfly clans. They’re the proud ones. They were always letting humans see them so they could be admired. Very petty minds in a way. And that’s why your legends always give fairies butterfly wings instead of beetle wings which are much more diaphanously beautiful. We’ll give the lepidoptera what for when we get back, you and I.”

“Now hold on—”

“fust think,” said the elf, swaying back and forth in what looked like elfin ecstasy, “our nightly revels on the fairy green will be a blaze of sparkling light from curlicues of neon tubing. We can cut loose the swarms of wasps we’ve got hitched to our flying wagons and install internal-combustion motors instead. We can stop this business of curling up on leaves when it’s time to sleep and build factories to manufacture decent mattresses. I tell you, we’ll live. . . . And the rest of them will eat dirt for having ordered me out.”

“But I can’t go with you,” bleated Prentiss. “I have responsibilities. I have a wife and kid. You wouldn’t take a man away from his-his larva, would you?”

“I’m not cruel,” said the elf. He turned his eyes full on Prentiss. “I have an elfin soul. Still, what choice have I? I must have a man-brain for focusing purposes or I will accomplish nothing; and not all man-brains are suitable.”

“Why not?”

“Great Oberon, creature. A man-brain isn’t a passive thing of wood and stone. It must co-operate in order to be useful. And it can only co-operate by being fully aware of our own elfin ability to manipulate it. I can use your brain, for instance, but your wife’s would be useless to me. It would take her years to understand who and what I am.”

Prentiss said, “This is a damned insult. Are you telling me I believe in fairies? I’ll have you know I’m a complete rationalist.”

“Are you? When I first revealed myself to you, you had a few feeble thoughts about dreams and hallucinations but you talked to me, you accepted me. Your wife would have screamed and gone into hysterics.”

Prentiss was silent. He could think of no answer.

“That’s the trouble,” said the elf despondently. “Practically all you humans have forgotten about us since we left you. Your minds have closed;

grown useless. To be sure, your larvae believe in your legends about the 'little folk,' but their brains are undeveloped and useful only for simple processes. When they mature, they lose belief. Frankly, I don’t know what I would do if it weren’t for you fantasy writers.”

“What do you mean we fantasy writers?”

“You are the few remaining adults who believe in the insect folk. You, Prentiss, most of all. You’ve been a fantasy writer for twenty years.”

“You’re mad. I don’t believe the things I write.”

“You have to. You can’t help it. I mean, while you’re actually writing, you take the subject matter seriously. After a while your mind is just naturally cultivated into usefulness. . . . But why argue. I have used you. You saw the light bulb brighten. So you see you must come with me.”

“But I won’t.” Prentiss set his limbs stubbornly. “Can you make me against my will?”

“I could, but I might damage you, and I wouldn’t want that. Suppose we say this. If you don’t agree to come, I could focus a current of high-voltage electricity through your wife. It would be a revolting thing to have to do, but I understand your own people execute enemies of the state in that fashion, so that you would probably find the punishment less horrible than I do. I wouldn’t want to seem brutal even to a man-thing.”

Prentiss grew conscious of the perspiration matting the short hairs on his temple.

“Wait,” he said, “don’t do anything like that. Let’s talk it over.”

The elf shot out his filmy wings, fluttered them and returned them to their case. “Talk, talk, talk. It’s tiring. Surely you have milk in the house. You’re not a very thoughtful host or you would have offered me refreshment before this.”

Prentiss tried to bury the thought that came to him, to push it as far below the outer skin of his mind as he could. He said casually, “I have something better than milk. Here, I’ll get it for you.”

“Stay where you are. Call to your wife. She’ll bring it.”

“But I don’t want her to see you. It would frighten her.”

The elf said, “You need feel no concern. I’ll handle her so that she won’t be the least disturbed.”

Prentiss lifted an arm.

The elf said, “Any attack you make on me will be far slower than the bolt of electricity that will strike your wife.”

Prentiss’ arm dropped. He stepped to the door of his study.

“Blanche!” he called down the stairs.

Blanche was just visible in the living room, sitting woodenly in the armchair near the bookcase. She seemed to be asleep, open-eyed.

Prentiss turned to the elf. “Something’s wrong with her.”

“She’s just in a state of sedation. She’ll hear you. Tell her what to do.”

“Blanche!” he called again. “Bring the container of eggnog and a small glass, will you?”

With no sign of animation other than that of bare movement, Blanche rose and disappeared from view.

“What is eggnog?” asked the elf.

Prentiss attempted enthusiasm. “It is a compound of milk, sugar and eggs beaten to a delightful consistency. Milk alone is poor staff compared to it.”

Blanche entered with the eggnog. Her pretty face was expressionless. Her eyes turned toward the elf but lightened with no realization of the significance of the sight.

“Here, Jan,” she said, and sat down in the old, leather-covered chair by the window, hands falling loosely to her lap.

Prentiss watched her uneasily for a moment. “Are you going to keep her here?”

“She’ll be easier to control. . . . Well, aren’t you going to offer me the eggnog?”

“Oh, sure. Here!”

He poured the thick white liquid into the cocktail glass. He had prepared five milk bottles of it two nights before for the boys of the New York Fantasy Association and it had been mixed with a lavish hand, since fantasy writers notoriously like it so.

The elf’s antennae trembled violently.

“A heavenly aroma,” he muttered.

He wrapped the ends of his thin arms about the stem of the small gkss and lifted it to his mouth. The liquid’s level sank. When half was gone, he put it down and sighed, “Oh, the loss to my people. What a creation! What a thing to exist! Our histories tell us that in ancient days an occasional lucky sprite managed to take the place of a man-larva at birth so that he might draw off the liquid fresh-made. I wonder if even those ever experienced anything like this.”

Prentiss said with a touch of professional interest, “That’s the idea behind this business of changelings, is it?”

“Of course. The female man-creature has a great gift. Why not take advantage of it?” The elf turned his eyes upon the rise and fall of Blanche’s bosom and sighed again.

Prentiss said (not too eager, now; don’t give it away), “Go ahead. Drink all you want.”

He, too, watched Blanche, waiting for signs of restoring animation, waiting for the beginnings of breakdown in the elf’s control.

The elf said, “When is your larva returning from its place of instruction? I need him.”

“Soon, soon,” said Prentiss nervously. He looked at his wristwatch. Actually, Jan, Junior, would be back, yelling for a slab of cake and milk, in something like fifteen minutes.

“Fill 'er up,” he said urgently. “Fill 'er up.”

The elf sipped gaily. He said, “Once the larva arrives, you can go.”

“Go?”

“Only to the library. You’ll have to get volumes on electronics. I’ll need the details on how to build television, telephones, all that. I’ll need to have rules on wiring, instructions for constructing vacuum tubes. Details, Pren-tiss, details! We have tremendous tasks ahead of us. Oil drilling, gasoline refining, motors, scientific agriculture. We’ll build a new Avalon, you and I. A technical one. A scientific fairyland. We will create a new world.”

“Great!” said Prentiss. “Here, don’t neglect your drink.”

“You see. You are catching fire with the idea,” said the elf. “And you will be rewarded. You will have a dozen female man-things to yourself.”

Prentiss looked at Blanche automatically. No signs of hearing, but who could tell? He said, “I’d have no use for female man-th-for women, I mean.”

“Come now,” said the elf censoriously, “be truthful. You men-things are well known to our folk as lecherous, bestial creatures. Mothers frightened their young for generations by threatening them with men-things. . . . Young, ah!” He lifted the glass of eggnog in the air and said, “To my own young,” and drained it.

“Fill 'er up,” said Prentiss at once. “Fill 'er up.”

The elf did so. He said, “I’ll have lots of children. I’ll pick out the best of the coleoptresses and breed my line. I’ll continue the mutation. Right now I’m the only one, but when we have a dozen or fifty, I’ll interbreed them and develop the race of the super-elf. A race of electro-ulp-electronic marvels and infinite future. ... If I could only drink more. Nectar! The original nectar!”

There was the sudden noise of a door being flung open and a young voice calling, “Mom! Hey, Mom!”

The elf, his glossy eyes a little dimmed, said, “Then we’ll begin to take over the men-things. A few believe already; the rest we will-urp-teach. It will be the old days, but better; a more efficient elfhood, a tighter union.”

Jan, Junior’s, voice was closer and tinged with impatience. “Hey, Mom! Ain’t you home?”

Prentiss felt his eyes popping with tension. Blanche sat rigid. The elf’s speech was slightly thick, his balance a little unsteady. If Prentiss were going to risk it, now, now was the time.

“Sit back,” said the elf peremptorily. “You’re being foolish. I knew there was alcohol in the eggnog from the moment you thought your ridiculous scheme. You men-things are very shifty. We elves have many proverbs about you. Fortunately, alcohol has little effect upon us. Now if you had tried catnip with just a touch of honey in it ... Ah, here is the larva. How are you, little man-thing?”

The elf sat there, the goblet of eggnog halfway to his mandibles, while

Jan, Junior, stood in the doorway. Jan, Junior’s, ten-year-old face was moderately smeared with dirt, his hair was immoderately matted and there was a look of the utmost surprise in his gray eyes. His battered schoolbooks swayed from the end of the strap he held in his hand.

He said, “Pop! What’s the matter with Mom? And-and what’s that?”

The elf said to Prentiss, “Hurry to the library. No time must be lost. You know the books I need.” All trace of incipient drunkenness had left the creature and Prentiss’ morale broke. The creature had been playing with him.

Prentiss got up to go.

The elf said, “And nothing human; nothing sneaky; no tricks. Your wife is still a hostage. I can use the larva’s mind to kill her; it’s good enough for that. I wouldn’t want to do it. I’m a member of the Elfitarian Ethical Society and we advocate considerate treatment of mammals so you may rely on my noble principles // you do as I say.”

Prentiss felt a strong compulsion to leave flooding him. He stumbled toward the door.

Jan, Junior, cried, “Pop, it can talk! He says he’ll kill Mom! Hey, don’t go away!”

Prentiss was already out of the room, when he heard the elf say, “Don’t stare at me, larva. I will not harm your mother if you do exactly as I say. I am an elf, a fairy. You know what a fairy is, of course.”

And Prentiss was at the front door when he heard Jan, Junior’s, treble raised in wild shouting, followed by scream after scream in Blanche’s shuddering soprano.

i The strong, though invisible, elastic that was drawing Prentiss out the house snapped and vanished. He fell backward, righted himself and darted back up the stairs.

Blanche, fairly saturated with quivering life, was backed into a corner, her arms about a weeping Jan, Junior.

On the desk was a collapsed black carapace, covering a nasty smear of pulpiness from which colorless liquid dripped.

Jan, Junior, was sobbing hysterically, “I hit it. I hit it with my school-books. It was hurting Mom.”

An hour passed and Prentiss felt the world of normality pouring back into the interstices left behind by the creature from Avalon. The elf itself was already ash in the incinerator behind the house and the only remnant of its existence was the damp stain at the foot of his desk.

Blanche was still sickly pale. They talked in whispers.

Prentiss said, “How’s Jan, Junior?”

“He’s watching television.”

“Is he all right?”

“Oh, he’s all right, but /'// be having nightmares for weeks.”

“I know. So will I unless we can get it out of our minds. I don’t think there’ll ever be another of those-things here.”

Blanche said, “I can’t explain how awful it was. I kept hearing every word he said, even when I was down in the living room.”

“It was telepathy, you see.”

“1 just couldn’t move. Then, after you left, I could begin to stir a bit. I tried to scream but all I could do was moan and whimper. Then Jan, Junior, smashed him and all at once I was free. I don’t understand how it happened.”

Prentiss felt a certain gloomy satisfaction. “I think I know. I was under his control because I accepted the truth of his existence. He held you in check through me. When I left the room, increasing distance made it harder to use my mind as a psychic lens and you could begin moving. By the time I reached the front door, the elf thought it was time to switch from my mind to Jan, Junior’s. That was his mistake.”

“In what way?” asked Blanche.

“He assumed that all children believe in fairies, but he was wrong. Here in America today children don’t believe in fairies. They never hear of them. They believe in Tom Corbett, in Hopalong Cassidy, in Dick Tracy, in Howdy Doody, in Superman and a dozen other things, but not in fairies.

“The elf just never realized the sudden cultural changes brought about by comic books and television, and when he tried to grab Jan, Junior’s mind, he couldn’t. Before he could recover his psychic balance, Jan, Junior, was on top of him in a swinging panic because he thought you were being hurt and it was all over.

“It’s like I’ve always said, Blanche. The ancient folk motifs of legend survive only in the modern fantasy magazine, and modem fantasy is purely adult fare. Do you finally see my point?”

Blanche said humbly, “Yes, dear.”

Prentiss put his hands in his pockets and grinned slowly. “You know, Blanche, next time I see Walt Rae, I think I’ll just drop a hint that I write the stuff. Time the neighbors knew, I think.”

Jan, Junior, holding an enormous slice of buttered bread, wandered into his father’s study in search of the dimming memory. Pop kept slapping him on the back and Mom kept putting bread and cake in his hands and he was forgetting why. There had been this big old thing on the desk that could talk . . .

It had all happened so quickly that it got mixed up in his mind.

He shrugged his shoulders and, in the late afternoon sunlight, looked at the partly typewritten sheet in his father’s typewriter, then at the small pile of paper resting on the desk.

He read a while, curled his lip and muttered, “Gee whiz. Fairies again. Always kid stuff!” and wandered off.