

ONE SPELL WIZARD

By Andre Norton

In all professions there are not only the inspiring great successes and the forgotten failures, but also those who seem unable to climb the tallest peaks, yet do not tumble hopelessly into the pits in between. There were magicians in High Hallack of whom nobles were quick to speak with reverence when in company; what they said in private remained private if they were lucky. One could never be quite sure of the substance of shadows, nor even of the pedigree of a web-weaving spider. Such uncertainty can be nerve-racking at times.

Near the other end of the scale there were warlocks and wizards who barely made livings in tumbledown cottages surrounded by unpleasant bogs or found themselves reduced to caves where water dripped unendingly and bats provided a litter they could well do without. Their clients were landsmen who came to get a cure for an ailing cow or for a stumbling horse. Cow—horse—when a man of magic should be rightfully dealing with the fate of dales, raking in treasure from lords, living in a keep properly patrolled at night by things which snuffled at the doors to keep all unhappy visitors within their chambers from dusk to dawn—or the reverse, depending upon the habits of the visitor. Magicians have a very wide range of guests, willing and unwilling.

Wizards have no age, save in wizardry. And to live for long in a bat- and water-haunted cave sours men. Though even in the beginning, wizards are never of a lightsome temperament. A certain acid view of life accompanies the profession.

And Saystrap considered he had been far too long in a cave. It was far past the time when he should have been raised to at least a minor hill keep with a few grisly servitors, if not to the castle of his dreams. There was certainly no treasure in his cave, but he refused to face the fact that there never would be.

The great difficulty was the length of Saystrap's spells—they were a hindrance to his ambition. They worked very well for as much as twenty-four hours—if he expended top effort in their concoction. He was truly a master of some fine effects with those; he was labeled a dismal failure because they did not last.

Finally he accepted his limitations to the point of working out a method whereby a short-lived spell could be put to good account. To do this, he must have an assistant. But, while a magician of note could pick and choose apprentices, a half-failure such as Saystrap had to take what he might find in a very limited labor market.

Not too far from his cave lived a landsman with two sons. The eldest was a credit to his thrifty upbringing, a noble young man who was upright enough to infuriate all his contemporaries in the neighborhood to whom he was constantly cited as an example. He worked from sunrise to early dusk with a will and never spent' silver when copper

would do—in all ways an irritating youth.

But his brother was as useless a lad as any father wanted to curse out of house and field. With the mowing hardly begun he could be found lying on his back watching clouds—clouds, mind you! Put to any task, he either broke the tools by some stupid misuse or ruined what he was supposed to be working on. And he could not even talk plain, but gobbled away in so thick a voice that no decent man could understand him—not that any wanted to.

It was the latter misfortune that attracted Saystrap's attention. A wizard's power lies in spells, and most of these must be chanted aloud in order to get the proper effect—even a short-time effect. An assistant who was as good as dumb—who would not learn a few tag ends of magic and then have the audacity to set up in business for himself—was the best to employ.

So one morning Saystrap arrived via a satisfactory puff of smoke in the middle of the cornfield where the landsman was berating his son for breaking a hoe. The smoke curled very impressively into the sky as Saystrap stepped out of its curtain. And the landsman jumped back a step or two, looking just as amazed as he should.

"Greetings," said Saystrap briskly. He had long ago learned that any long build-up was not for a short-spelled wizard. It was best to forego the supposedly awed mumbles and get right to the point.

But he did not overlook the staging, of course. A pass or two in the air produced two apple trees about shoulder height. And, as an additional nice touch, a small dragon winked into existence and out again before the landsman found his voice. "It is a fair morning for field work," Saystrap continued.

"It was," the landsman returned a bit uncertainly. Magic in the woods or a cave now—that was one thing. But magic right out in the middle of your best cornfield was a different matter. The dragon was gone, and he could not really swear it had been here. But those trees were still standing where they would be a pesky nuisance around which to get the plow. "How—how can I serve you, Master—Master—?"

"Saystrap," supplied the wizard graciously. "I am your near neighbor, Master Ladizwell. Though busy as you have been on your very fruitful land you may not be aware of that."

Master Ladizwell looked from the trees to the wizard. There was a hint of a frown on his face. Wizards, like the lord's taxmen, were too apt to take more than they gave in return. He did not relish the thought of living cheek by jowl, as it were, with one. And he certainly had not invited this meeting.

"No, you have not," said Saystrap answering his thought. This was the time to begin to bear down a little and let the fellow know just whom and what he was dealing with. "I have come now to ask your assistance in a small matter. I need a pair of younger feet,

stronger arms, and a stout back to aid me. Now this lad”—for the first time he glanced at the younger son— “has he ever thought of going into service?”

“Him?” The landsman snorted. “Why, what fool would—“ Then he stopped in mid-word. If this wizard did not know of his stupid son’s uselessness, why tell the family shame abroad? “For what length of service?” he demanded quickly. If a long bond could be agreed upon, he might get the lout out from underfoot and make a profit into the bargain.

“Oh, the usual—a year and a day.”

“And his wages, Master Saystrap?”

“Well, now, at this season another pair of knowledgeable hands—“ Ladizwell hurriedly kicked at the broken hoe, hoping the wizard had not seen that nor heard his hot words to his son.

“Will this suffice?” Saystrap waved a hand in a grand, wide gesture, and in the field stood a fine horse.

Ladizwell blinked. “Yes, right enough!” he agreed hurriedly and held out his hand. Saystrap slapped his into it, thus binding the bargain.

Then the wizard gestured again and smoke arose to wreath both him and his newly engaged servant. When that cleared, they had vanished; and Ladizwell went to put a halter on the horse.

At dawn the next day Ladizwell was far from pleased when he went to the stable to inspect his new prize and found a rabbit instead of a horse nibbling the straw in the stall. At least he did not have to feed and clothe that slip-fingered lout for a year and a day, so perhaps he was still better off than he had been yesterday.

Saystrap, back in his cave, was already making use of his new servant. To him Joachim was a tool with neither wit nor will of his own. But the sooner he began to give what aid he could the better. There were brews boiled and drunk—by Joachim. And he had to be led, or pushed and pulled, through patterns drawn in red and black on the rough floor. But in the end Saystrap was satisfied with the preliminaries and went wearily to his hammock, leaving Joachim to huddle on a bed of bracken.

At dawn the wizard was up and busy again. He allowed Joachim a hasty—and to the lad very untasty—meal of dried roots and berries, hurrying him until Joachim was almost choking on the last bite or two. Then they took to the traveling cloud again and emerged from it not too far from the Market Cross of Hill Dallow. That is—there strode out of the cloud a man in a gray wool tunic leading a fine frisky two-year-old colt, as promising an animal as any one would want to lay eye on. And this was sold at the first calling in the horse fair for a bag of silver pieces heavy enough to weight a man’s belt in

a satisfying manner.

The colt was led home by the buyer and shown off as being an enviable bargain. But when the moon rose, Joachim stole out of the barn, dropping stall and door latch into place behind him. He shambled off to the far side of the pasture where Saystrap waited impatiently.

This was a game they played several times over, always with a good gain thereby. Saystrap treated Joachim well enough, though more as if he were really a horse than any man. And this was a mistake on Saystrap's part. Joachim might seem stupid and be too thick of speech to talk with his fellows, but he was not slow-witted. He learned from all he heard and saw his master do. Deep in him a small spark of ambition flared. There had not been anything about his father's land that had ever brought that spark into being. There, no matter how hard he tried, his brother could outdo him without seeming to put forth any great effort. But this was another world.

Then, by chance, he learned something that even Saystrap did not know: spells were not always wedded to the spoken word.

His master had sent him to gather herbs in a wild country men seldom traveled. But furred and four-footed hunters had their own well-trodden trails.

For all the barrenness of the wild land Joachim was glad enough to be alone in the open. He missed the fields more than he would have believed possible. It seemed a very long time since he had had a chance to lie and watch the slow passing of clouds overhead and to dream of what he might do if he had a magician's treasure now or had been born into a lord's family.

But this day he found himself mulling over Saystrap's doings rather than paying attention to clouds and his one-time dreams. In his mind he repeated the words he had heard the wizard use in spells. By now the change spell, at least, was as familiar to him as his own name. Then he heard a sound and looked around—into the yellow-green eyes of a snow cat. It hissed a challenge, and Joachim knew that here stalked death on four paws. So, he concentrated—without being sure of how or on what.

The snow cat vanished! On the rock crouched a barn rat. Joachim shivered. He put out his hand to test the reality of what he saw, and the rat scuttled away squealing. Was this by any chance some ploy of Saystrap's, meant to frighten him into his work? But—there was another way of testing. Joachim looked down at his own body. Did he dare? He thought again.

Soft fur, paws with claws—he was a snow cat! Not quite believing, he leaped up to bound along the ridge. Then he stopped beneath a rock spur and thought himself a man again, more than a little frightened at his own act.

Then that fear became pride, the first time in his life he had cause to feel that. He was a

wizard! But only in part. One spell alone could not make him a real one. He must learn more and more and at the same time try to keep his secret from Saystrap if he could. Doubts about that gnawed at him all the way back to the cave.

The only trouble was that Saystrap no longer tried other spells. And the few scraps Joachim assembled from his master's absent-minded mutterings were no help at all. Saystrap was concentrating on what he intended to be his greatest coup in shape-changing.

"The harvest fair at Garth Haigis is the chance to make a good profit," he told Joachim, mainly because he had to tell someone of his cleverness. "We must have something eye-catching to offer. A pity I cannot change you into a coffer of jewels; I could sell you to more than one buyer. Only then, when the spell faded"—he laughed a little, evilly, and poked Joachim in the ribs with his staff-of-office—"you would be too widely scattered between one keep and the next ever to be put together again." He was deep in thought now, running his long forenail back and forth across his teeth.

"I wonder." He eyed Joachim appraisingly. "A cow is bait only for a landsman. And we have dealt too often in horses; there might be someone with a long memory there." He tapped the end of his staff on the rock. "Ah! A trained hunting falcon—one such as brings a gleam of avarice to any lord's eye!"

Joachim was uneasy. True enough, all Saystrap's tricks had always worked smoothly. He had had no trouble freeing himself from barns and stables when the spell lifted. But keeps were better guarded, and it might not be easy to flee out of those. Then he thought of his own secret. He might in the allotted time cease to be Saystrap's falcon, but that did not mean he had to become an easily recognized man.

The fair at Garth Haigis was an important one. Joachim, wearing falcon shape, gazed about eagerly from his perch on Saystrap's saddle horn. Men in booths remarked on the fine bird and asked its price. But the wizard set such a high one that all shook their heads, though one or two went so far as to count the silver in their belt purses.

Before noon a man wearing the Cross-Key badge of Lord Tanheff rode up to Saystrap.

"A fine bird that—fit for a lord's mews. My lord would like to look at it, Master Falconer."

So Saystrap rode behind the servant to an upper field where tents were set up for the comfort of the nobly born. They summoned to them merchants with such wares as they found interesting.

Lord Tanheff was a man of middle years, and he had no son to lift shield after him. But his daughter, the Lady Juluya, sat at his right hand. Since she was a great heiress, she was the center of a goodly gathering of young lords, each striving to win her attention. It was her way to be fair and show no one favor over his fellows.

She was small and thin. Had she not been an heiress, none perhaps would have found her a beauty. But she had a smile that could warm a man's heart (even if he forgot the gold and lands behind it) and eyes that were interested in all they saw. Once Joachim looked upon her, he could not see anything else.

Neither could Saystrap. It suddenly flashed into his mind as a great illuminating truth that there were other ways of gaining a keep than through difficult spells. One such way was marriage. He did not doubt that, could he gain access to the lady, he would win her. Was he not a wizard and so master of such subtleties that these clods sighing around her now could not imagine?

His planned trickery might also be turned to account. For if he sold Joachim to her father and the bird apparently escaped and returned to him, then he could enter the lady's own hall to bring it back. He could use the pretense of the strayed bird to open all doors.

"Father—that falcon! It is a lordly bird," the Lady Juluya cried as she saw Joachim.

He felt the warmth of pride. Though she saw him as a bird, he was admired. Then he lost that pride. If she could see him as he really was, she would speedily turn away.

Lord Tanheff was as pleased as his daughter and quickly struck a bargain with Saystrap. But the wizard whispered into the bird's ear before he placed it on the gloved hand of the lord's falconer, "Return swiftly tonight!"

Joachim, still watching the Lady Juluya, did not really heed that order. For he was wondering why, at the moment of change, he could not wish himself into some new guise that would bring him close to the lady. He did not have long to watch her, however, for the falconer took him to the keep. Joachim stood on a perch in the mews, hooded now and seeing nothing, left in the dark to get the feel of his new home as was the way with a bird in a strange place. He could hear other hawks moving restlessly and, beyond, the noises of the keep. He wondered how Saystrap thought he could get out of this place in man's shape. Had the wizard some magic plan ready to cover that?

Joachim guessed right. The wizard knew that his falcon-turned-man could not leave the mews as easily as a landsman's barn. He did not trust his assistant to have wits enough to work out any reasonable escape. He himself would move cautiously to effect Joachim's release and not allow magic to be suspected, not when he planned to enchant the Lady Juluya. So Saystrap sat down in a copse near the keep to wait moonrise.

At sunset, however, the clouds gathered, and it was plain that no moon would show. Saystrap could not summon moon magic now, but perhaps he could put the coming storm to account. If he could only be sure when Joachim's change would occur, a matter with which he had never concerned himself before. Had it not been for his new plan to win Lady Juluya, the wizard would not have cared what happened to Joachim.

Stupid lads could always be found, but a wizard was entitled to keep his own skin safe. Lord Tanheff, if he did suspect spells, would be just the sort to appeal to some major sorcerer for protection. Saystrap, for all his self-esteem, was not blinded to his own peril from an encounter of that kind.

He could not sit still, but paced back and forth, trying to measure time. To be too early would be as fatal as being too late. The cloud-traveling spell could not be held long. If Joachim could not take to its cover at once, Saystrap could not summon it again that night. He bit his thumbnail, cursing the rain now beginning to fall.

At the keep that same rain drove men to take cover indoors. Joachim heard footsteps in the mews and the voices of the falconer and his assistant. His time for change was close. He shifted on the perch, and the bells fastened to his jesses rang. The footsteps were closing in, and the change was now!

Suddenly he was standing on his own two feet, blinking into the light of a lantern the falconer held. The man's mouth opened for a shout of alarm. Joachim thought his mind spell.

A snow cat crouched snarling. The falconer, with some presence of mind, threw his lantern at that fearsome beast before he took to his heels, Joachim in great bounds behind. But as the shouting falconer broke one way out of the door, Joachim streaked in the other, trying to reach the outer wall.

That wall was far too high to leap over, but he sped up the stairs leading to the narrow defense walk along its top. Men shouted, and a torch was thrown, nearly striking him. Joachim leaped at a guard aiming a spear, knocked the man down, and was over him and on. Just ahead more men were gathering, bending bows. He thought—

There was no cat on the wall—nothing! The men-at-arms hurried forward, thudding spear heads into every patch of shadow. They were unable to believe that the animal had vanished.

“Wizardry! Tell my lord quickly. There is wizardry here!” Some stayed to patrol by twos and threes, no man wanting to walk alone in the dark with wizardry loose. The storm struck harder, water rushed over the wall. It washed with such force that it swept away a small gold ring no man had seen in that dusk, carrying it along a gutter, tumbling it out and down, to fall to the muddy earth of the inner garden where the Lady Juluya and her maids grew sweet herbs and flowers. There it lay under the drooping branches of a rain-heavy rose bush.

When the Lord Tanheff heard the report of the falconer and the wall guards, he agreed that it was plain the falcon had been enchanted and was some stroke of wizardry aimed at the keep. He then dispatched one of his heralds to ride night and day to demand help from the nearest reputable sorcerer, one to whom he already paid a retaining fee as insurance against just such happenings. In the meantime he cautioned all to keep within

the walls; the gates were not to be opened for any cause until the herald returned.

Saystrap heard the morning rumors at the fair where men now looked suspiciously at their neighbors, bundling their goods away to be on the road again even though the fair was not officially over. With magic loose who knew where it would strike next? Better be safe, if flatter of purse. The lord had sent for a sorcerer—and with magic opposed to magic anything might happen to innocent bystanders. Magic was no respecter of persons.

The wizard did not give up his plan, however, for the Lady Juluya; it was such a good one. Common sense did not even now baffle his hopes. So he lurked in hiding and made this new plan and that, only to be forced to discard each after some study.

The Lady Juluya, walking in her garden, stooped to raise a rain-soaked rose and saw a glint in the mud. Curious, she dug and uncovered a ring that seemed to slip on her finger almost of its own accord.

“Wherever did you come from?” She held her hand into the watery sunshine of the morning, admiring the ring. She was more than a little pleased at her luck in finding it. Since all her maids denied its loss, she finally decided that it must have lain buried for years until the heavy rain washed it free. She would claim it for her own.

Two days passed; and then three. Still the herald did not return. The Lord Tanheff did not permit the keep gates to be opened. The fairground was deserted now. Saystrap, driven to a rough hiding place in the woods, gnawed his nails down to the quick. Only a fanatical stubbornness kept him lurking there.

None in the lady’s tower knew that the ring grew loose and slipped from her finger when she took to her bed at night. It became a mouse feasting on crumbs from her table. Joachim realized that this was a highly dangerous game he played. It would be much wiser to assume wings and feathers once more and be out of the castle with three or four good flaps of his wings. Yet he could not bring himself to leave.

The Lady Juluya was courted and flattered much; yet she was a girl of wit and good humor, wise enough to keep her head. She was both kind and courteous. Time and time again Joachim was tempted to take his true form and tell her his story. But she was seldom alone; when she was, he could not bring himself to do it. Who was he? A loutish clod, so stupid and clumsy he could not even work in the fields nor speak plainly. At his mere appearance he was sure she would summon a guard immediately. And talk! He could not tell anything they would understand.

After the first night he did not remain a mouse, but went out onto the balcony and became a man, squatting in the deepest pool of shadow. He thought about speech and how hard it was for him to shape words to sound like those of others. He practiced saying in whispers the strange sounds he had heard Saystrap mumble, tongue twisters though they were. He did not use them for the binding of spells, but merely to listen to

his own voice. By daybreak of the third day he was certain, to his great joy, that he did speak more clearly than he ever had before.

In the woods Saystrap had at last fastened upon a plan he thought would get him into the keep. If he could then be private with the lady only for a short space, he was certain that he could bind her to his will and that all would be as he wished. He had seen the herald ride forth and knew that it might not be too long before he would return with aid.

Though the gates were shut, birds flew over the wall. And pigeons made their nests in the towers and along the roofs. On the fourth day Saystrap assumed a feathered form to join them.

They wheeled and circled, cooed, fluttered, peered in windows, preened on balconies and windowsills. In her garden the Lady Juluya shook out grain for them, and Saystrap was quick to take advantage to such a summons, coming to earth before her.

There is this about wizardry: if you have dabbled even the nail tip of one finger in it, then you have gained knowledge beyond that of ordinary men. The ring that was Joachim recognized the pigeon that was Saystrap. At first he thought his master had come seeking him. Then he noted the wizard-pigeon ran a little this way, back that, and so was pacing out a spell pattern about the feet of Lady Juluya.

Joachim did not know what would happen if Saystrap completed that magic, but he feared the worst. So he loosed his grip on the lady's finger and spun out, to land across one of the lines the pigeon's feet were marking so exactly.

Saystrap looked at the ring and knew it. He wanted none of Joachim, though he was shaken at meeting his stupid apprentice in such a guise. One thing, however, at a time. If this spell were now spoiled or hindered, he might not have another chance. He could settle with Joachim later, after accomplishing his purpose. So with a sharp peck of bill, he sent the ring flying.

Joachim spun behind the rose bush. Then he crept forth again—this time a velvet-footed torn cat. He pounced, and the wildly fluttering pigeon was between his jaws.

“Drop it—you cruel thing!” Lady Juluya struck at the cat. Still gripping the pigeon, Joachim dodged and ran into the courtyard.

Then he found he held no pigeon, but a snarling dog twice his size broke from his grip. He leaped away from Saystrap to the top of a barrel and there grew wings, beak, and talons. Once more a falcon, Joachim was able to soar above the leaping, slavering hound so eager to reach him.

There was no dog, but a thing straight out of a nightmare— half scaled, with leathery wings more powerful than Joachim's and a lashing tail with a wicked spiked end. The creature spiraled up after the falcon into the sky.

He could perhaps outfly it if he headed for the open country. But he sensed that Saystrap was not intent upon herding an unwilling apprentice back to servitude. He was after the Lady Juluya; therefore there must be fight not flight.

From the monster came such a force of gathered power that Joachim weakened. His poor feat of wizardry was feeble opposed to Saystrap's. With a last despairing beat of wings, he landed on the roof of Lady Juluya's tower and found himself sliding down it, once more a man. While above him circled the griffin, seemingly well content to let him fall to his death on the pavement below.

Joachim summoned power for one last thought.

He fell through the air a gray pebble. So small and so dark a thing escaped Saystrap's eyes. The pebble struck the pavement and rolled into a crack.

Saystrap meanwhile turned to bring victory out of defeat. He alighted in the courtyard and seized upon the Lady Juluya to bear her away. The pebble rolled from hiding, and Joachim stood there. Bare-handed, he threw himself at the monster. This time he shouted words clear and loud, the counterspell which returned Saystrap to his own proper form. Grappling with the wizard, he bore him to the ground, trying to gag him with one hand over his mouth so that he might not utter any more spells.

At that moment the herald rode in upon them as they struggled, ringed around (at a safe distance) by such of the keep folk who were not afraid to be caught in the backlash of any spells from the tangle.

Lord Tanheff shouted an order from the door of the hall to where he had swept his daughter. The herald tossed at the fighters the contents of a box he had brought back with him (price: one ruby, two medium-sized topazes). These caused a burst a light and a clap of thunder. Joachim stumbled out of a puff of smoke, groping his way blindly. A fat black spider sped in the opposite direction, only to be gobbled up by a rooster.

Well pleased now that they had someone reasonably normal in appearance to blame for all the commotion, the men-at-arms seized Joachim. When he tried to use his spell, he found it did not work. Then the Lady Juluya called imperiously:

"Let him alone!" she ordered. "It was he who attacked the monster on my behalf.

Let him tell us who and what he is—"

Let him tell, thought Joachim in despair, but I cannot do that. He looked at the Lady Juluya and knew that he must at least try. As he ran his tongue over his lips, she prompted him encouragingly, "Tell us first who you are."

"Joachim," he croaked miserably.

“You are a wizard?”

He shook his head. “Never more than a very small part of one, my lady.” So eager was he to let her know the truth of it all that he forgot his stumbling tongue and all else but the tale he had to tell. He told it in a flow of words all could understand.

When he was done, she clapped her hands together and cried, “A fine, brave tale. I claim you equal to such acts. Wizard, half-wizard, third or fourth part of a wizard that you may be reckoned, Joachim, I would like to know you better.”

He smiled a little timidly. Though he might be finished with wizardry, anyone the Lady Juluya claimed to be a man had a right to pride. Fortune had served him well this time. If he meddled in magic concerns again, it might not continue to do so.

In that he was a wise man—as he later had chance to prove on numerous occasions. Joachim, his foot firmly planted on the road to success in that hour, never turned back nor faltered.

But the rooster had a severe pain in its middle and was forced to let the spider go. How damaged it was by that abrupt meeting with the irony of fate no man knew thereafter, for Saystrap disappeared.