

The Last Known Wizard of Err

By C. A. Walker

Copyright © 2005 Charles A. Walker

Chapter One

The big clock in the downstairs parlor was striking midnight when the tapping began on the front door. Jonathan's bedroom was on the second floor, just above the door, and he was awake immediately. He had been having a strange dream in which he was standing in front of an open door. But it really wasn't a door at all, but some kind of opening in the air. An old man in a strange dark robe was standing on the other side, beckoning to Jonathan. He appeared to be standing on a narrow dirt lane, and in the distance Jonathan could make out a small village. Even further, the lane climbed up a broad hill, and at the top was what looked like a large castle.

The old man was holding something out in his hand, something small and shiny, but Jonathan couldn't see what it was. In his dream, Jonathan was just about to reach out to take whatever it was the old man was offering when the tapping began on the front door. Jonathan sat up and rubbed the sleep from his eyes, the dream still strong in his mind.

The tapping was very soft at first, like someone tapping with only the tip of one finger. It slowly became louder and more insistent, until it was a full-knuckled banging that rattled the pictures on Jonathan's bedroom walls. Within a few moments, Jonathan heard his father coming down the hallway, muttering under his breath about the lateness of the hour and why in the world anyone would be banging on his door at this time of night. He paused at Jonathan's bedroom and slowly closed the bedroom door, hoping that the squeaking hinges would not awaken the boy.

As soon as the door clicked shut, Jonathan jumped out of bed, went to the door, and pressed his ear against the wood. Now he heard his mother coming down the hallway. She, too, was talking to herself, hoping that whoever was at the door was not bringing bad news. Jonathan waited a few moments more, then as quietly as he could, eased his bedroom door open. He

grimaced as the squeaking hinges threatened to give him away, but his father and mother were already downstairs in the parlor, and they didn't hear.

Jonathan crept down the hallway, and stopped at the top of the stairs where he could look down and get a view of the parlor and the front door. The front door was open, and Jonathan strained to press his face past the railing to get a look at the visitor standing in the doorway. But all he could see was a shape outlined by the dim glow of a distant street lamp.

His parents were whispering to each other, and seemed undecided whether to let the stranger in when he suddenly pushed past them and strode into the parlor. He went straight to the fireplace, took off his gloves, and thrust his hands out towards the warmth remaining from the embers of the evening's fire.

Now Jonathan could get a better look at him. He was dressed in some sort of flowing dark robe with the hood thrown back over his shoulders. As he turned to face Jonathan's parents the robe shifted colors, now dark green, now so blue as to be almost black, now deep crimson red. He was a small man, with a long nose, graying hair and a scraggly beard. His eyes were bright, and seemed to take in the whole room in one glance. Jonathan drew back from the railing as he sensed the man's eyes passing his way. But if the man saw Jonathan, he made no sign.

"Why are you here?" Jonathan's father asked. He seemed to know the man!

"I am here on official business," the man replied. "Are you not going to ask me to at least sit and rest a bit? I have come a long way!"

"Yes, yes, of course," Jonathan's mother replied. She motioned to a comfortable chair by the fire.

The man promptly dropped into it and sighed, "Much better! My feet hurt from all that walking about looking for the gate! Would you possibly have some hot tea? Some hot tea would be very nice! It is very cold out, now, you know!"

"Yes, I can make some," Jonathan's mother replied. "Dear, would you get the fire going again?"

"Of course," said Jonathan's father. "But I don't expect this to take long. I will have none of whatever it is that brought you here!" He gave the little man his sternest look, the one with the furrowed brow and frown.

"I told you, I come on official business!" the little man replied. "When my business is finished, I will be on my way. I don't like it here! How you can stand it is a complete mystery to me!"

Jonathan's father added several logs to the fire and stirred the embers until flames began licking at them. In the meantime, his mother returned from the kitchen with a tray loaded with a teapot, three cups, and cream and sugar. She sat the tray on a low table in front of the fire, and poured three cups of tea. She offered the visitor a cup, but he declined to add any cream or sugar.

"Not for me, thanks," he said. "Why ruin good tea with cream or sugar?"

Jonathan's mother shrugged, and added a few drops of cream and two spoons of sugar to her own cup. She then took her cup and sat in a chair opposite the little man. Jonathan's father ignored his cup of tea, and paced about the room.

"Sit down, dear," Jonathan's mother said. "Pacing makes me nervous."

"As if him showing up here and now doesn't?" Jonathan's father scoffed.

"Let's hear what he has to say, and then he can be on his way," she replied.

“That’s more like it!” the little man said. “I’m here on official business, or I wouldn’t be here at all!” He took several sips from his teacup, blowing across the top each time.

“We know that you’re here on official business! You’ve made that clear enough!” Jonathan’s father said testily. He finally stopped pacing and pulled another chair close beside Jonathan’s mother, both facing the little man. “So what is your business? Let’s be done with it!”

The little man pulled his chair closer, fished around in a pocket of his robe, and pulled out a small brown leather pouch. He opened the pouch and pulled out a small shiny object. Jonathan was too far away to see exactly what it was. Now the voice of the little man dropped to almost a whisper. Jonathan strained to hear what he was saying as he held the object out to Jonathan’s father. Jonathan’s father gasped as he recognized the object the little man dropped into his hand.

“What does this mean?” he asked. The color had completely drained from his face.

“He is gone,” the little man said. “He left instructions for me to bring this to the boy! Where is he?”

Jonathan’s father didn’t answer the little man’s question. “Gone?” His voice was barely above a whisper. “What do you mean, gone? Is he dead?”

“Dead?” laughed the little man. “How would I know? He never confided in me, and I know nothing of his business. All I know is that he is no longer where he was, and that he left instructions for me to make this delivery.”

“But why?” Jonathan’s father asked, his whispered voice now shaking.

“I owed him a favor,” the little man replied.

“That’s not what I meant!” Jonathan’s father had now taken on an edge.

“You ask questions for which I have no answers,” the little man replied, somewhat airily, it seemed. “I told you that his business was his, and none of mine! But now I must be going. I have business of my own to tend, and no one else to tend it!”

Neither of Jonathan’s parents were paying any attention to the little man now. “What is he up to?” Jonathan’s father asked, mostly to himself. “I knew I should have gone to see him one more time, to explain myself and make things right. Now it is too late!”

Jonathan’s mother laid her hand on her husband’s shoulder. “I’m sorry. This whole thing is my fault.”

“No, it isn’t,” Jonathan’s father replied. “It was my choice, too, and I’ve had no regrets!”

“All the same,” Jonathan’s mother said, “if it hadn’t been for me, you would have gone back. I was the one who wanted to stay here.”

“Well, now, that’s all water down the river, isn’t it?” the little man chirped, all too cheerily for the mood that had set in. “I must be one my way. You will see to it that the delivery is made, won’t you?” he asked.

“No!” said Jonathan’s father, still in a low voice, but very forcefully. “I will not! He’s only a boy, barely eight years old. He has no part of this! Take it back with you.”

“Now you know I can’t do that!” asserted the little man, in just as low a voice but just as forcefully. “Official business is official business. If I took it back, then I wouldn’t have fulfilled my business!”

No, you must keep it. It belongs to the boy now, and it will be his! You know that as well as I! You can’t keep it from happening!”

The little man rose from the chair. His robe flashed colors in the light from the fire. Now it was green, now red, now blue, then green again. “Thank you for the tea! I must be gone now! I hope the gate is still where I left it!”

“What do you mean?” Jonathan’s father asked. “Didn’t you put holding stones on either side?”

“Well, of course I did!” the little man replied. “Do I look incompetent to you?” He sounded very indignant.

“Then why wouldn’t the gate be where you left it?” Jonathan’s father wanted to know.

“Because we have no wizard, that’s why!” the little man retorted. “And since we have no wizard, the stones have become weak and unreliable. The least thing can disturb them! Why, a child can come along and kick them out of the way! And then there goes your gate!”

With that, he seemed to vanish out the door. One moment he was standing in the parlor, the next, he was gone!

Jonathan’s father dropped wearily into his chair, the small shiny object held away in his outstretched hand like something that would bite him if he let it get too close. Finally, he returned it to the leather pouch and placed it carefully on the table. “Well, what do we do now?” he asked, still in a low voice.

“He’s only eight years old today!” Jonathan’s mother whispered back. “We have plenty of time to think of something. For now, we will just put it away where it can’t cause any mischief.”

“You’re probably right,” Jonathan’s father replied. “That seems to be the best thing to do.” He crossed to the fireplace, and moved several pictures from in front of a spot on the right

side of the mantle. He tapped four stones in a quick, seemingly random pattern, and the largest stone opened outward on hidden hinges, revealing a deep opening in the chimney.

He took the shiny object from the pouch, looked at it one more time, then returned it to the pouch and shoved the whole thing to the back of the hole. He closed the stone and it snapped into place with a sharp click, leaving no hint that it could be opened.

Jonathan's parents continued talking in very low voices for some time. In the meantime, it became harder and harder for Jonathan to hear what they were saying, and harder and harder to keep his eyes open. Finally, he fell asleep, curled up on the floor at the top of the stairs.

Jonathan's parents stayed in their chairs, no longer talking, but staring into the fire until it died back down to embers. Then they slowly got up, and climbed stairs to return to bed. At the top of the stairs, they discovered Jonathan asleep on the floor.

"Oh, no!" Jonathan's father gasped. "How long do you suppose he was up here? Do you think he saw or heard anything?"

"All of it, most likely," Jonathan's mother said. "But let's not worry too much about it. Here, help me get him into bed. By morning, he will think he dreamed the whole thing. If he mentions it, that's what we'll say, that it must have been a dream!"

The next morning, Jonathan was awake and downstairs early. He found his mother in the kitchen preparing breakfast. The smell of frying bacon covered the whole house, and Jonathan was hungry!

"Here, dear, have some milk while I finish up!" his mother told him. "Your father will be down shortly, and then we will have breakfast."

Jonathan took the glass of milk and took a few sips. Then he noticed that his mother was looking at him somewhat strangely. "What is it, Mother?" he asked. "Is something wrong?"

“Oh, no!” she replied. “Nothing at all! How did you sleep last night? Did you have any bad dreams?” Her voice sounded a bit nervous.

“Not that I remember,” Jonathan told her. “I slept well. Why do you ask?”

“Oh, no reason,” his mother replied. “I thought I heard you get up during the night is all.”

“I don’t remember getting up,” Jonathan told her.

“Oh, well, perhaps I was wrong, then,” she said, sounding a bit more relieved. Maybe she should just let it go, she thought. Yes, that’s the best thing to do!

Just then Jonathan’s father came down to breakfast. As usual, he went straight and fixed a cup of strong hot tea. He sat down at the table and sipped it slowly, and he, too, seemed to be eyeing Jonathan with more than the usual interest.

He started to say something, but Jonathan’s mother cut him off. “Dear,” she said, “I only thought I heard Jonathan get up during the night. He says he slept well, and doesn’t remember getting up, so it must have been the tree branches scraping against the house again. We really do need to get them trimmed back, you know!”

Jonathan’s father seemed to take the hint. “Yes, yes, of course,” he answered. “We really should look into that!”

Jonathan finished his glass of milk and began setting out the breakfast plates on the small table by the window in the kitchen. His mother and father both seemed relieved that he had slept well, and did not remember getting up. His mother went back to frying bacon, and his father began reading the morning paper. Every so often his mother would cast a worried glance at Jonathan when she thought he was not looking, but she said nothing.

Jonathan sat and ate his breakfast in silence. He had told his parents that he had slept well, and that he did not remember getting up. But now he was feeling guilty, as he did

remember getting up! In fact, he remembered everything! He remembered the first dream he was having before the tapping began on the front door. He remembered the strange little visitor and the small leather pouch. He knew where it was hidden behind the stones on the fireplace. He wanted to tell his parents the truth, but the strange old man in the first dream had returned later on that night, and had told Jonathan to be patient and say nothing, especially to his parents! You will know what to do when the time comes! Until then, remember what you have seen and heard and what I have told you! And Jonathan did just that!