

Plane and Fancy



By P. SCHUYLER MILLER

IT WAS one of those golden autumn days when the air is like crystal and the hills are adrift in sunshine. It was a day when the cliffs of Keer would be smoky purple curtains drawn across the plain, and the hill towns would be white pebbles strewn over the gray moorland. It was a day to be in the saddle, breathing the drift of smoke from the bog fires, hearing the drum of a stallion's hooves on the hard-packed road, feeling the wind sing by. It was no day to be in school.

Tommy Darrow's seat was near the win-

dow, and he could see the hills back of Eastham. They were good hills. He had roamed them, mostly alone, ever since he was old enough to be away. The colors of autumn were painting them—the red fire of a maple, yellow drifts of birches, scarlet lines of sumac tracing the fence rows. The pines were dark forefingers pointing at the sky, and the cedars advanced across the high pastures like a storming army. The window was open, and he could smell leaves burning on the playground outside the school.

He looked at the book which lay open on

Heading by A. R. TILBURNE

The land of Keer is a strange world—certainly not of this earth—in some ways feudal, in others oddly advanced.

his desk. *Plane Geometry* by Tuncliffe, Witherall and Jenkins. He looked at the diagrams of lines and angles printed on its well-thumbed pages. If they had ever had a meaning, it was lost to him.

Somebody was poking him: Jimmy Johnson, in the seat behind. He looked up. They were all looking at him. Mr. Andrews, the new math teacher, was watching him, tapping with his fingernails on a crisper, cleaner copy of the same brown book.

"Well Darrow—we're waiting." Mr. Andrews had come to Eastham from a private school, and he found the atmosphere of public education a little trying. Tommy got slowly to his feet.

"Well, Darrow? I understand this is your third term in this class. Surely you can explain the theorem?"

Tommy licked his lips. It was always the same. There was no meaning in the stuff—it didn't hang together. It had been the same all through grade school. Arithmetic—algebra—they weren't right. His mind rejected them. He'd trained himself to memorize stuff—take it on faith—parrot it out when the teachers asked for it, but this geometry was the worst of the lot. It was twisted—distorted—wrong. He licked his lips.

"Mr. Andrews," he said thoughtfully; "this book—it's 'plain' geometry. Isn't there any fancy geometry?"

Lying in his bed, snug up under the slope of the roof, with the moonlight making ranges of hills across the bed-quilt, Tommy wondered about it. Why shouldn't there be a fancy geometry as well as the plain kind? Why shouldn't there be a kind of geometry that didn't refuse to fit together when he tried to reason it out? Why wasn't there another kind of geometry—*his* kind of geometry?

He was still wondering when his eyes closed and the purple cliffs of Keer rose in the moonlight.

THIS is not a story of Keer or its people. We have Tommy Darrow's own stories to give us some idea of that marvelous realm. His aunt, being a practical woman, never thought much of them, but the teacher who had taught him to write, back in the little district school at Beeman's Cor-

ners, had always saved them. They tell us what little we know of Keer.

It goes back further than that, really. Almost as soon as he could talk, Tommy Darrow would tell his stories. If there was no one to listen, he would slip away behind the barn and babble to himself. His aunt tried to discourage it; she thought it queer, and was afraid that others would agree. There had never been queerness in her family, and she didn't want gossip starting. She might have tried to stop the moon from rising.

In the one-room country school there was no place for much but the regulation three R's, but the new teacher was fresh from normal school and had had a brief contact with some of the newer ideas in education. She asked the children to write little stories of their own about the things they did, and if they couldn't write she let them tell them to the class, and she would write them down. The first stories of Keer are in her writing.

They are a child's stories—stories of little things, things a child would find wonderful. But they are dream stories, of a beautiful far-off land where people and things are as they should be in dreams. They mature quickly, as though the Tommy Darrow who roamed the fabled moors of Keer grew older than the rather quiet little boy who sat in his corner, tongue in his teeth, scrawling his stories painfully on a ten cent pad.

The other children liked them. They recognized that Tommy was queer, but it was a fascinating sort of queerness, and—which is rather strange when one considers the normal savagery of children of their age toward the outlander—they accepted it. When there was a new boy who might have picked on him, they protected him, and I doubt that he ever realized that he was being shielded. In Keer it was he who was the shield—he who rode the night, his cloak flung out behind him, his sword loose in its scabbard. He was glad that they liked to listen when he had a story to tell. He was glad they sometimes asked him to tell one when they were out of school, off in the hills after nuts or squirrels. He would sit on a rock with them sprawled in the grass at his feet, and keep them spellbound

with the magic of his cloud-swept kingdom beyond the purple cliffs. When the five districts were consolidated and they went in to Eastham to the new central school, he was glad that his teacher went with them, because it was she who suggested that they could have a paper of their own—not as fine, perhaps, as the high school journal, but a little mimeographed leaflet which they could plan and print and sell to their schoolmates. In its pages Tommy's chronicles of Keer gained a wider and a more demanding audience.

IN THESE stories, and in the tales which Tommy Darrow's boyhood friends remember, Keer takes shape. It was a strange world, certainly not of this earth—in some ways feudal, in others oddly advanced. It had its sorcerers, black and white, but we might have called them scientists. It had its lords and ladies and pomp and ceremony, but it was a nobility of the common people. Tommy's father in that other world was a smith, a bearded, brawny man who forged swords of miraculous strength and keenness, respected by all, feared by none, with a hearty, roaring laugh that would echo down the glens of a frosty morning. His mother was young and golden haired, with a voice that soared up in the morning like a bird's, and a firm but gentle hand for a horse. His own parents, here in our world, he had never known.

Even when they reached high school, Tommy's schoolmates never tired of his tales, and he was kept busy writing them out in his laborious scrawl for the school paper. One girl, a year younger than Tommy, had tried to illustrate them, but she had never seen Keer. She grew tearful when he tried to explain where the difference lay.

The girls in Keer were not like the girls he knew in Eastham. They were more mature and less concerned with the proper affairs of men. He was a shy boy, or at least a retiring one. He still loved to roam the hills, but it was alone now, or with a dog. He had an irritating way of treating his fellow pupils, boys and girls alike, as though they were children.

It was early October when Tommy Darrow first began to wonder whether there might not be another—a "fancier"—ge-

ometry than the one he struggled to digest in school. He had set his teeth and resolved to swallow the stuff, logic or no logic, and he was getting on better with Damon Andrews, Ph.D. The young teacher recognized that what Tommy was giving him was purely parrot-talk, but he decided that after three terms in the class it was all that anyone could ask of the boy if he passed the Regents with a decent mark. Tommy's aunt, his mother's older sister, was a trustee of the school.

In school Euclid was the law, but out of school, when the chores were done and he could go up to his room or climb up to the open ledges back of town, the other, fancier brand of geometry gradually took shape in his mind. Once it was started it came easily to him. It was not too much different from the "plain" variety of the little brown book, but what differences there were seemed to be fundamental, and he began to see why Euclid seemed alien, and unreasonable. He had all of the simpler theorems in his head before he wrote any of it down, and then he did it in the hieratic script of Keer, which he had never before put on paper. It somehow seemed to fit the odd, non-Euclidian structure which he was building.

It was soon clear to him that this was the geometry of Keer itself that he was setting down—not alone of the misted moorland kingdom with its five towns, but of its world—its entire universe. When he had the rudiments of the geometry down on paper he went back to the algebra, and saw where it was that he had gone astray, and where the altered laws should lead. It all fell together simply and beautifully. His fingers seemed almost to run of themselves, and one afternoon as he sat at his attic window writing he looked up and through the flawed panes saw the purple cliffs of Keer striding away into the twilight behind the patched roof of his uncle's barn.

THE new passion that had gripped him was soon evident to his teachers. Tommy had been a good student, though never a brilliant one save in his writing, and they were on the wild side, tolerated mainly because of the vogue for self-expression which was finding its way into places like Eastham under the impetus of teachers' conventions

and bulletins from Albany. He had, in a literal sense, known the answers—word for word, once he put his mind to it—and had even earned himself a "B" in plane geometry and was doing well in solid. Then had come a change. It was gradual, and it did not affect all his studies at one time. It seemed to be a slow loss of interest—even in his writing—which affected everything but his mathematics. The faculty was at first inclined to accuse Damon Andrews of overworking the boy, and then they joined forces to agree that he must be dealt with according to the precepts of child psychology.

Helen Winship was the teacher who had come with Tommy from the little one room school where she had first taught and he had first listened patiently and politely to her teaching. She was a little older now, but not too old to believe in a kind of magic.

She volunteered to talk with Tommy, to find out what was wrong, before more drastic steps were taken to bring him into line. And so she was the first to see the strange new geometry of fabled Keer.

He took the notebooks out of the hole under the floor boards where he kept them. His aunt would have had no sympathy with such truck had she known of it; even his stories were hidden there, although she was rather proud of the grudging deference which the parents of some of his schoolmates showed her for harboring so "talented" a boy. The characters of the script were, of course, unintelligible to the teacher, and the diagrams were extremely odd, seeming somehow ill-fitted to the flat surface of the paper. Some of them seemed almost to have depth and extension, and even a kind of motion of their own. They meant nothing to her as they were, but she asked to borrow them, and he agreed.

Helen Winship had a great respect, and maybe a little more than respect, for Damon Andrews. He was young; he had made a brilliant record in college; and she had accidentally come across his name in a mathematical journal where one would scarcely look for a paper by a village schoolmaster. She took Tommy Darrow's notebooks to him. When he snorted and pushed them back at her, she smiled her sweetest and sat

patiently opposite him while he turned the pages.

At first she could see that he was skimming—obliging her, but nothing more. She was glad that he wanted to oblige. Then, about a third of the way through the first book, something caught his eye or registered on his brain. He stopped, frowned, bent over the page. He riffled back a few pages and seemed to follow an argument which was developed there. Finally he turned clear back to the beginning, and she could see the muscles of his jaw working slowly as he toiled through the unaccustomed symbols. He never even looked up when she finally slipped away.

THE next day was Saturday. Damon Andrews missed the morning colloquium at the post office, and he wasn't in the ice cream parlor that night at the regular time. He was not in church on Sunday, although he had a class in the boys' department. He came into her homeroom on Monday morning, just after the passing bell, with Tommy's notebooks in his hand. She stepped out into the hall with him.

"This stuff is amazing," he told her. "I don't see why he's had to write it in this gibberish, but what I can follow is real. It's true. It isn't Euclid, God knows. It isn't anything I've ever seen or heard of—"

Tommy calls it fancy geometry," she interrupted.

"Of course, but that's only a name. It's a kind of private joke." He hesitated. "If the kid can do this kind of thing, why can't he get Euclid?"

"I thought you understood that. He doesn't believe in Euclid. It isn't real—not for him."

He snorted. "You mean that crazy stuff he writes? That Flash Gordon—Grustark—Tarzan nonsense? What's that got to do with it?"

She took the notebooks from him. "Let me have these," she said. "The bell will be ringing, and I promised Tommy that he would get them back this morning. Perhaps we can talk about it at lunch."

Winter had gone by, and it was spring. There was a chill in the air, and the ground was frozen along the north slopes, but a thin green gauze was veiling the willows

as they climbed the hill behind the school and picked a sun-warmed boulder to shelter them from the wind while they ate their lunch.

She had the notebooks with her. They unwrapped their packets of sandwiches, uncorked their thermos bottles of coffee, and chewed diligently while somewhere below them a redwing shouted for pure glee. When they had finished he gave her a cigarette, took one himself, and leaned back against the rock.

"Someone who can really understand the stuff should see those books, you know," he told her. "I think they're important. It's beyond me how a kid like Tommy Darrow could have produced them, but I'll take your word for it. I want you to get his permission to take them to a man I know of—a man who lectured at Columbia last summer while I was there. Nobody much was at the lecture, but he said some amazing things. He could tell what this means, if anyone can."

She frowned. "Is that fair, do you think? It's Tommy's work. Shouldn't he present it, rather than some third person?"

Andrews flushed. "I hope you don't think I'd claim credit for it myself! I never taught him this, or anything like it. I couldn't. No one could. But I want Halcyon to see it and pass on it before anyone tries to do anything about it."

She stubbed her cigarette out on the ground beside her and gathered up the papers from her lunch. The noon bell would be ringing soon.

"I'll talk to Tommy," she said. "I think he should go along."

It was a long trip, and there were the school authorities to persuade, because it would take more than a week-end. Then Tommy's aunt had to be convinced that this was something which would bring credit to her line rather than further notoriety to the no-good Darrows, and that there might—there just might—be money in it in the long run. They decided to defy gossip and use Helen's car, because it would save them a day.

It was a glorious drive, the April sunshine warm on their faces, the smell of springtime moist and rich in their nostrils, the soft blue of spring in the sky. Helen

drove and Tommy sat between them, his gaze far away—beyond the woods and mountains—beyond the green expanse of the sea when they came to it—among the hills of Keer.

TWO journeys were made that day in spring. As Helen Winship's car raced on beside the sea, Shannakar of Keer rode over the high plateau beyond the purple cliffs with two tried friends. They were on a mission, and what its nature might be was not entirely clear, even to Shannakar, for there was a wise woman's prophecy mixed up in it, and a message written in gall on soft white silk, and a lock of raven hair. They were not in the livery of Keer, and their skins were stained dark, and their collars pulled up around their chins as they rode down out of the moors into the oak forests beside the black, still sea. Their horses' hooves drummed on the packed sands, and in the distance they heard the deeper thunder where the great breakers which came sweeping out of the east broke against the savage rock of Vrann.

"We'll be there soon," Andrews said over the boy's head. "Hear the surf pounding? His place is out on a headland, with nothing between him and Spain except Atlantis." He glanced down. "The kid asleep?"

She shook her head. "Dreaming, I think, but not asleep. Let him be. Time enough when we're there."

There were no sentries out, and it bothered Shannakar. They had taken the usual precautions, but he wondered whether Sagai's seers might not have a magic which would pierce the veil he had woven. As they drew near to the crag the pattern of his quest began to take shape in his mind. It was a matter of a spell—a ritual of words and diagrams which somehow linked Keer with that other world he often visited in dreams—a formula which would somehow open gates which might not easily be closed. There was a danger to Keer, though what it was he could not precisely say. Enough that he was going alone into the castle of his enemy to seek it—or to use it.

The place was a looming heap of stone, almost a part of the headland on which it was set. No lights were showing in the

arched windows as Helen turned the car into the winding drive which circled round the base of the crag and ran out along the narrow spine of rock which joined it to the mainland.

"Are you sure he's here?" she asked.

"He said he'd be." Andrews leaned out and peered ahead. "Maybe it's the blackout. Gloomy old pile, isn't it?"

THE three companions left their horses at the base of the crag and approached the castle on foot. Shannakar's brain was clearing fast, and a deep fear was growing in him. Was this his secret after all, or was it a ruse of Sagai's—a magic of some kind, luring them hither for purposes of the Black Prince's own? Momentarily a curtain dropped over his eyes, and he could not recognize the faces of the two who strode beside him, their naked swords frosty in the starlight.

Then the high arch of the doorway rose before them, black and empty against the grim gray wall of the castle. The man on his right—was it Hannar or a stranger?—knocked with the pommel of

his sword on the oaken door, setting the echoes ringing.

They stood a moment in the darkness, waiting. Then the door opened and yellow lamplight flooded out into the stone paved vestibule, silhouetting the gaunt black figure of an old man. He stepped aside, and the lamplight played over a hooked beak of a nose, over a straggling white beard, thin lips, and a deep-lined face. Shadows made skull-pits of the hot old eyes.

Shannakar of Keer—Tommy Darrow of Eastham—stepped into the house of the Black Prince Sagai. The two who were with him moved soullessly behind him, trapped by the malign power of those ancient eyes. The little books with their written secrets—the symbols and diagrams of the strange geometry which would link Earth and Keer, and give their master free range and power over both, here in this place where the two worlds were one—dropped from Helen Winship's hand.

And Sagai smiled and picked them up as he closed the great oak door with its carved kingfishers—the halcyon standard of the evil breed of Vrann.

**IF YOU LOVE
WEIRD "THINGS" . . .
Like the Lady at the Right—**



YOU'LL not want to miss a copy of **WEIRD TALES** with its strange and mystic stories of the unnatural and the occult, its vampires and werewolves and monsters and . . . indescribable horrors!

• • •

IT IS true that **WEIRD TALES** is thinner, due to government paper restrictions—and we are glad to comply with any request helping the war effort—but you get the same number of stories, the same number of words and the same amount of top-notch "weird" reading as before.