

The Fall of the City

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Outside, rain fell with such violence that great, pulsating sheets of water seemed to hang suspended between earth and sky. Squatting in the attic, Teddy watched raindrops roll like beads of quicksilver down the glass of the high, diamond-shaped window, and listened to the muted banjo twanging on the roof.

Blinking, he shifted his position and transferred his attention to the things that lay around him on the floor. In the centre of the room stood a fort and a palace, painstakingly constructed from corrugated cardboard cartons. These were surrounded by humbler dwellings made from matchboxes and the covers of exercise books. The streets and alleys were full of nobles, peasants and soldiers, their two-dimensional bodies scissored from paper, their faces and clothing drawn in crayon and lead pencil. From the turreted roof of the palace, hung a green, white and gold tricolour, the flag of the Kingdom of Upalia . . .

Sombre gray eyes glinted in teddy's pale, triangular face. He shoved his hands deeper in the pockets of his worn khaki shorts. He decided that what he heard was not the rattle of rain on the roof and window, but the muffled roar of distant cannon. The armies of the Emperor Kang of Danova were attacking the fortifications on the Upalian frontier!

Teddy inhaled deeply and held his breath, his thin chest pressing against his sweat shirt. His Majesty King Theodore I, resplendent in the red and black uniform of a generalissimo, emerged on the balcony of his winter palace in Theodoresburg, capital of the Kingdom of Upalia.

Through the square below rode squadrons of lancers, dragoons and hussars, batteries of horse artillery; behind them marched regiments of infantry. grasping the diamond-studded hilt of his sword. King Theodore watched his army march out to give battle to the enemy.

This would be the third war between Danova and Upalia. The first had been fought in the year 2032 and had ended in the defeat of the Emperor Kang and his imprisonment on the Isle of Hawks. But he had escaped through the treachery of Zikla, Duke of Anders, a general in the Upalian army, and in 2043 the Danovans had invaded Upalia a second time, aided by the renegade force under the command of Zikla. This time, they conquered Theodoresburg and massacred the populace before being routed by King Theodore. On the day of victory, the Duke of Anders was brought to Theodoresburg in chains and hanged in the city square.

The Emperor Kang was as evil and cunning as the Fu Manchu about whom Teddy had read in books. Tow, astride a black war-horse, he directed his troops as they besieged For Lion on the Carian River. Hopelessly outnumbered, the defenders rallied behind their commander, Duke Lani of Caria, and prayed for the coming of King Theodore . . .

“Teddy!”

He sighed. This was his aunt, shouting from the foot of the stairs.

“Teddy!”

He opened the door. “Yeah?” he called sulkily.

“Come down here this minute and get ready for supper! How many times do I have to call you?”

“Okay, okay, I’m comin’!”

“—And be quick about it!”

“I’m comin’, I told yuh!”

She stood in the hall, a tall, stooped woman with tired, suspicious eyes.

“Seems to me that you’re spending a lot of time in that attic.” She wiped red, swollen hands on her apron. “You been into some mischief up there?”

He shrugged impatiently. “I ain’t been doin’ nothin’ — just playin’,” he told her sullenly.

“Well, young man, you better wipe that scowl off your face and march to the bathroom and get ready for supper.”

“Yes, ma’am,” he enunciated carefully.

During supper, he was scarcely aware of what he ate; he was so deep in thought that his pork chop tasted no different from his whipped cream and jello. Mechanically, he obeyed his aunt when she told him to take smaller bites and to take his elbows off the table. He was pondering on the tactics that would have to be used by King Theodore in relieving the siege of the fort by the river.

If the Upalian army crossed the Tabelian marshes, they might succeed in encircling the Danovans, but there was the risk that their cannon would founder in the morass. On the other hand, if they scaled the Theodoran mountains . . .

“Look what you’re doing, for heaven’s sake!”

“Huh?”

His aunt glared at him. “Don’t say ‘huh’ when you answer me. Look what you’ve done! You’ve spilled cream all over yourself.”

Blushing, he rubbed at his sweat shirt with a paper napkin.

“He’s got his head in the clouds again.” His uncle laughed mirthlessly. “Half the time, he doesn’t know whether he’s living on earth or on Mars.” Out of the corner of his eye, Teddy looked at his uncle’s round, florid face and reflected on the resemblance to Zikla, Duke of Anders.

“Well, he’d better smarten up if he knows what’s good for him,” his aunt grated.

“If he doesn’t, I know something that will smarten him,” his uncle said. He laughed again and reached for another helping of potatoes. Behind him, cloudy white marbles of rain slid down the window. Suddenly, a cold shiver ran down Teddy’s spine. What if the Danovans attacked Theodoresburg while the king and his army were in the mountains? Old Kang was cunning as a serpent. If . . .

“He spent most of the afternoon in the attic,” his aunt said.

His uncle gave him a disdainful look. “He just about lives up there, doesn’t he?”

“Yes. I think it’s about time that one of us went up there and found out what he’s been doing.”

“No!” Teddy cried sharply.

His uncle laid down his knife and fork. “Look here mister, I don’t like your tone of voice. Have you been up to some of your monkey-shines up there?”

Teddy looked up. “No,” he repeated. “I ain’t been doin’ nothin’.”

“You better not be, not if you want to be able to sit down the rest of the week.” The man resumed eating. “After supper, I’ll take a look and see just what you have been doing,” he said.

As his aunt gathered up the dishes, his uncle went into the living room and sat down in his easy chair to read his newspaper. Teddy sat by the window and looked out at the rain. The sodden grass of the lawn had turned a darker green and foaming rivers of rainwater ran down the street. He shut his eyes. Here in the kitchen, he could not hear the strumming of the rain on the roof. There was no rumble of Danovan cannon. He frowned and rested his chin in an upturned palm. Anyhow, the cannons were only playthings: scraps of cardboard held together with cellophane tape. What did it matter if his uncle saw them, or even destroyed them? But it did matter. Theodorburg had been growing for a year and, often, it seemed more real that the town, the street and the home in which he lived with his uncle and aunt.

"You'd better get at your homework. You won't get it done by sitting there mooning out the window," his aunt told him.

"Yeah." He fetched exercise books and spread them on the table. His aunt and uncle did not mean to be cruel, he knew. From time to time, by their acts and words, they showed that they were fond of him. Twice that summer, his uncle had taken him trout fishing and on both occasions there had been something subtly warm between them. And sometimes he detected a hint of affection in his aunt's voice even as she nagged him. But . . .

His uncle stood in the doorway between kitchen and living room, his shoulders shaking with laughter.

"You'd never guess what that kid has been doing up there!" He shook his head in wonder and amusement.

Teddy flushed and stiffened. His aunt turned from the sink where she was drying the last of the supper dishes.

“What’s he been up to, now?”

“You’d never believe it, but that great big lummoX has been playing with paper dolls!”

“Paper dolls!” his aunt laughed dubiously.

“They ain’t paper dolls,” Teddy mumbled. He pushed his chair back from the table and stood up.

“They looked pretty much like paper dolls to me. Paper dolls and doll houses. And eleven-year-old boy!” The man choked, trying to restrain his laughter. “The next thing we know, you’ll be wanting us to put skirts on you!”

“I never heard of such a thing. Paper dolls!”

“They ain’t dolls, I told you!” Teddy’s fists were clenched, his arms stiff by his sides, his voice shaking.

His uncle pointed a warning finger. “Don’t get saucy now, mister. I know paper dolls when I see ‘em.” Once again he burst into laughter. His cheeks were the colour of a tomato.

“Sit down and finish your homework, Teddy,” his aunt said. To his surprise, her voice was not harsh: it contained a suggestion of weary sympathy. He resumed his seat and tried to focus on the blue lines in his exercise book. His uncle, still chuckling, returned to the living room and picked up his newspaper.

Paper dolls! His uncle had said that he should be dressed in skirts and hair ribbons. And he could never explain; they would never let him explain. Theodore, King of Upalia, and all his armies — paper dolls! He slumped, doodling on the paper before him so that his aunt would think he was working. Yes, they were paper dolls. There was no king Theodore, no Emperor Kang, no Theodoresburg, no Upalia, no

Danova. There was only an attic full of preposterous cardboard buildings and ridiculous paper people.

It was still daylight when he finished his homework. The rain had stopped, but water still poured from the elms along the street. When Teddy went through the living room, his uncle did not speak, but he glanced up from his newspaper and grinned slyly. The boy was blushing to the roots of his hair as he opened the hall door and started up the stairs.

The city was as he had left it. Yet everything had changed. Always before when he had come here, his flesh had tingled, his eyes had shone with excitement. Now there was only a taste like that of a spoiled nutmeat.

He bent and seized the cardboard palace. Gritting his teeth and grunting, he tore at its walls. The corrugated board was sturdy: he was crying by the time he finished tearing it to shreds.