

AT THE GRASSHOPPER'S HILL

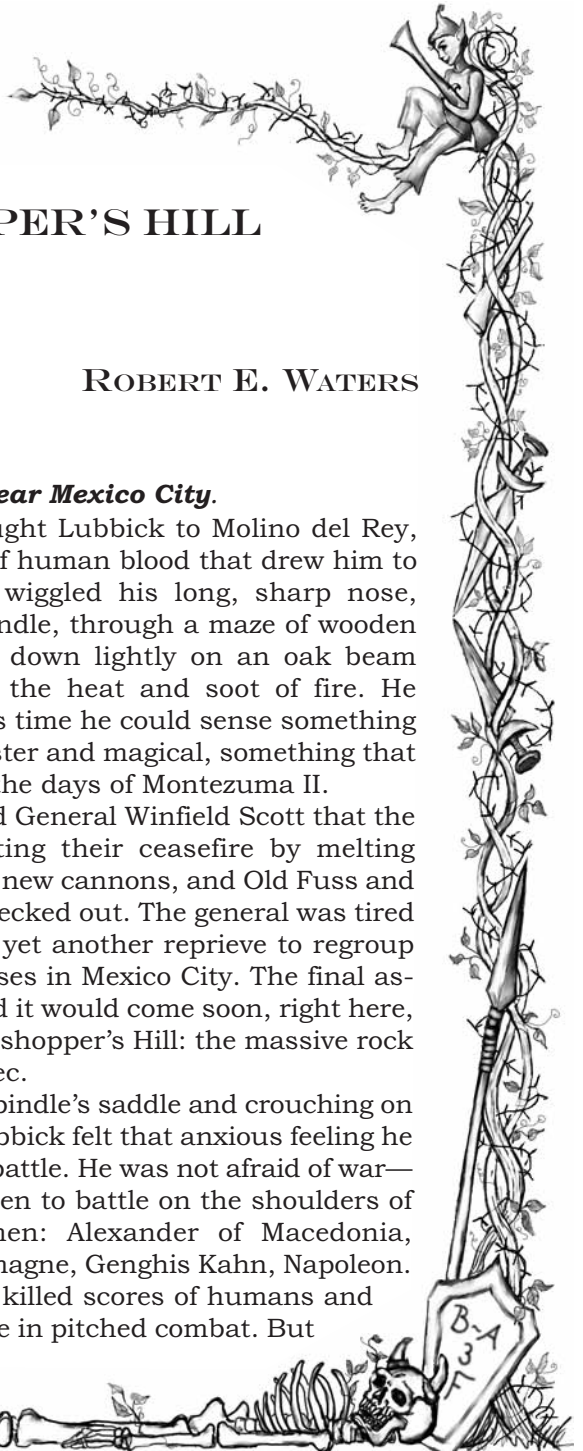
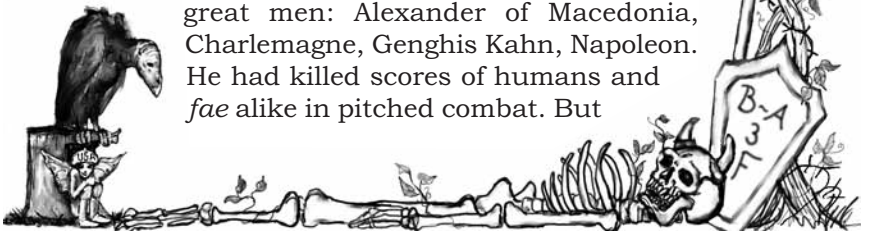
ROBERT E. WATERS

September, 1847. Near Mexico City.

Churchbells brought Lubbick to Molino del Rey, but it was the scent of human blood that drew him to the barn. The pixie wiggled his long, sharp nose, guided his raven, Spindle, through a maze of wooden rafters, and touched down lightly on an oak beam scorched black with the heat and soot of fire. He sniffed again, and this time he could sense something more, something sinister and magical, something that he had not felt since the days of Montezuma II.

Word had reached General Winfield Scott that the Mexicans were violating their ceasefire by melting down church bells for new cannons, and Old Fuss and Feathers wanted it checked out. The general was tired of giving Santa Anna yet another reprieve to regroup and solidify his defenses in Mexico City. The final assault would come, and it would come soon, right here, at the foot of the Grasshopper's Hill: the massive rock fortress of Chapultepec.

Climbing out of Spindle's saddle and crouching on the charred beam, Lubbick felt that anxious feeling he often got right before battle. He was not afraid of war—or death. He had ridden to battle on the shoulders of great men: Alexander of Macedonia, Charlemagne, Genghis Kahn, Napoleon. He had killed scores of humans and *fae* alike in pitched combat. But



what was happening below in the shadows made him angry. He wiped sandy grime from his face, took a deep breath, and leaned forward to view the awful scene.

The barn had been raked clean and a pit dug into its hard, dry ground. Around the pit, humans and *fae*, dressed in rich robes of blood red and gold, with eagle feathers tucked into head-dresses and jaguar pelts over shoulders, stood with arms raised as if they were gathered in a revival tent in Alabama. But the raspy whispers escaping their mouths were not praise to a Christian Almighty. Lubbick strained to hear the faint words as they were spoken. *Nahuatl*. Without question. The ancient language of the Aztecs. What the words meant, however, Lubbick did not know. In his brief time with Hernán Cortez, he had picked up some simple phrases, but that was hundreds of years ago.

In the pit sat a simple stone altar, carved from crude granite. Over it lay an American soldier, dazed and brutalized, his blue coat and white shirt ripped away to expose his chest and stomach. His flesh had been scrubbed and shaved clean, but across his arms and shoulders dozens of tiny cuts leaked blood. He had obviously been bled near death and sustained only for this final moment.

Three other American soldiers knelt beside the altar, huddled in chains on the hard ground, their mouths wrapped tightly in blood-soaked bandanas. Though bruised, starved, and exhausted, they held their heads high in defiance, though Lubbick could see the fear in their eyes. He allowed a smile to cross his mouth. They were fine, *fine* men.

Beside the large stone altar lay another, smaller one, carved from granite and seemingly made for a mouse. On it laid a female pixie, bereft of clothing, her arms and legs tied to the altar base. Over her hovered a small imp, its red skin and horned face glowing with magical zeal and lust. Lubbick moved to the right to get a better look at the figure standing over the American soldier.

A human, certainly, covered head to toe in a pitch black robe, its hood pulled so far over the wearer's head as to obscure the light from a nearby kerosene lamp. The human wavered on sandaled feet, voicing the same *Nahuatl* being chanted around the pit. In its hand was a knife, black-bladed and sparkling like glass. Lubbick's eyes closed to tiny slits as he watched the figure turn and twist to a rhythm that only it could hear. It waved the blade in circles over the American's chest. Then, sharply, the figure stopped, howled the word, "Titlacauan!", and thrust its arms into the air. The thick sleeves of the robe fell down, exposing long,