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## Was Rasselt im Stroh

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## Was Rasselt im Stroh?

BY CAROL DUGLE

Tar oozed between the pebbles and stuck to the old man's shoes. Perspiration etched the lines in his withered face. His humpback was conspicuous as he stopped above the cans lining the sides of the street. A fat woman in a dirty bathrobe leaned out of a second-story window and shouted, "Get out of there." He shuffled on, stopping to add his collection of paper to the stack at the corner. A pack of teenagers eyed the curved shaft of steel protruding from the limp sweater sleeve and the street echoed a screeching, "Hey—Captain Hooke!" A bundle of paper under his arm, he trudged behind the stores and through the alley to the garage. He spat; the dark brown juice ran down the wall, leaving a flecked stain. Awkwardly he tied the papers with a piece of burlap cord a neighbor had thrown away. He picked up the bundle with his hook and carefully placed it next to the stack of paper he had collected last week.

The dull heat of mid-afternoon crept through his sweater, and the sunshine, bouncing off gleaming, silver blocks of cement, came to rest in his dark eyes. The air was still and he drank in the silence. "Hello," said a tiny voice from far down the humming, beating path of reality. The towhead who lived up the street and his frail mousey sister were crouching near his feet.

"Hello," he replied.

"Tell us a story."

"Eia, popeia, was rasselt in Stroh?"

Die Katze ist fort, die Mause sind froh?"

The children laughed and laughed at the words and the old man, caught in the spirit of things, wiggled his ears.

The girl's high voice piped, "What's wrong with your arm?"

"Well—I was working out in Washington. Do you know where that is? It's right next to the blue Pi--cific Ocean. The forests were filled with lions and tigers and bears and even kangaroos. One day I was chopping down a tree wider than this porch when a fierce lion, the King of the Jungle, attacked me. He bit off my left arm, but I strangled him with one hand. Just as the government gives medals to soldiers for service beyond the call of duty, my friends gave me this hook for bravery."

A slender finger crept out and felt the shining smoothness of the hard metal.

"Supper time, Jimmy!" called a woman's voice. "Marcia!"

As quickly as they came, they went.

The gray-white blur of the present drifted over him. Slowly he turned to the stacks of papers and his eyes took on a calculating gleam. He would collect paper next Tuesday, and next Thursday, and the Tuesday after that and the Thursday after that, until the bloody thistle in the western sky speared him and pulled him into the burning beyond.



JL