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Talking Sword

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Mythcon 51: The Mythic, the Fantastic, and the Alien

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THREE BLESSINGS

by Joe R. Christopher
(for Vandy Maria Christopher)

Once upon a time, in the far country of South Africa, in the area that was then the Orange Free State, a boy was born. His parents thought him good and made plans for his christening. But the night before he was to be baptized, a strange thing happened. Three small women stole in and looked at the baby in his crib. All three had long hair, which hung down over their shoulders; all three dressed in peasant blouses and full skirts with many touches of green in the patterns.

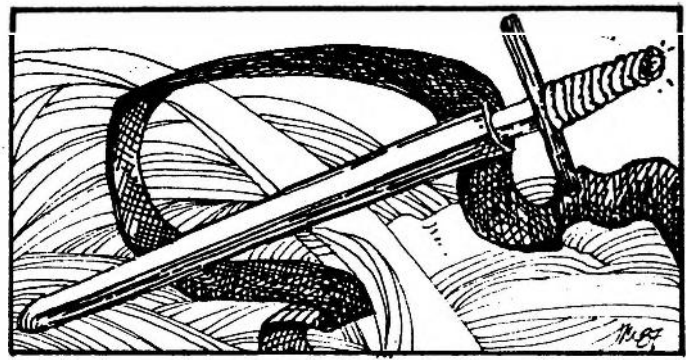
The first woman was wizened of feature, dark skinned compared to the others, and, despite her wrinkles, raven-haired. She said, "It has been a long journey just to look upon this child, but my! how significant is his birth." Her sister, she of red cheeks and red lips, she of reddish-brown hair, replied, "Among these mortals, few things last longer than their writings. Buildings come and go, they are built and then burnt, constructed and then destroyed, but poems and stories are like seeds cast widely." The third sibling, whose hair was so blonde it was almost white, but whose skin was fair and unwrinkled, as if she had never felt a woe, then said, "Yet this gift will be his only if we choose not to curse him."

The dark-haired woman, as if stirred by her sister's words into acting, leant over the crib. "My choice of gifts," she said, "is between introversion and extroversion. If I cursed you, I would give you the gift of many friendships, of an inability to be happy alone; but I will give my blessing--the gift of introversion, of few friendships but deep, of happiness in your own thoughts." She opened her right hand above the sleeping baby, and something like the darts of fire from a sparkler settled down over the child--but where they touched him, he was not burnt.

Then the brown-haired woman stepped to the crib. "My choice of gifts," she said, "is that of sensing or of intuition. If I were to curse you, I would give you a life of sensation. You would be satisfied, to be sure; you would take pleasures from the many things around you--but you would never see beyond them. Instead, I give you the gift of intuition. You will find primordial images will rise from you-know-not-where into your consciousness; you will be like the dreamer who sleeps his life away, except that your dreams will come to your conscious mind--and there you can, in your way, study them."

Finally, the fair-haired woman stepped up, after her sister had scattered her gift on the sleeping boy. "I too have a choice of gifts," she said; "I can give either thinking or feeling." (Did she smile, she the youngest? Her sisters had been serious in what they said and gave.) "If I imparted you great skill at thought, you would be a judge of ideas; indeed, you would spend your adult time as a critic and be much more successful as a professor than you will be. But instead I give you the gift of feeling: you will be able to judge if something is pleasant or distasteful, if it is beautiful or ugly. A simple gift, but not all that common." She too opened her hand and a shower of fiery sparks descended on the baby.

Then the three women, standing around the crib, raised their hands high over the baby, their left and right hands joining with the right and left hands of their sisters; with one voice they chanted in an ancient language. But quickly, very quickly it seemed, they stopped, lowered their hands, and, after a final glance at the sleeping boy, left as silently as they had come.



TALKING SWORD

by
C.R. Schabel

After an especially hard day at the agency, Jake needed some relaxation and a good stiff drink. Both were available at his Uncle Rad's house. He loved to putter around the numerous archaeological samples his uncle garnished from digs the world over.

Rad (who hated the name 'Randy') was piecing together some astonishing finds uncovered in England when he saw the familiar headlights of his nephew's BMW pull into the vacant driveway of his Lodi home.

Jake didn't even have to ring the doorbell. "Ah, Jake, come in; I have something to show you." They proceeded through his clean but cluttered house to Rad's study. The door was partly blocked and they had to squeeze inside. The latest samples, yet to be fully dated and catalogued, were on a central table. Outstanding among them was an ancient broadsword in a jeweled scabbard.

"Awesome!" Jake exclaimed and gingerly picked it up.

"This was found in the boney grip of an unknown knight who, by his royal insignia, must have fancied himself a king. The untarnished blade was found thrust between the ribs of another skeleton, dressed in the robes and conical hat of a wizard, and all were found twenty feet below the heel-stone of Stonehenge."

The phone rang and Rad went to answer it, promising to return with a good belt of Chivas Regal.

Jake couldn't resist strapping on the sword. "Zounds! 'Tis good to feel life again!"

Jake heard a new voice in his head. He attributed it to overwork and set his mind on the weapon. Wielding it was remarkably easy, despite its length and thickness. It hardly moved like ancient iron, more like a sleek, modern aluminum-magnesium alloy. He got so carried away that he nearly ruined a shelf full of pottery and almost tore the arm seams of his navy blue blazer.

Rad returned with a decanter of whiskey; Jake went to put the sword down. But when he went to grab his glass, the sword was still in his hand. His uncle had to duck to avoid decapitation.

"Gosh, I must have a cramp in my hand; I can't seem to let go." Jake was embarrassed. He turned around and shook the sword violently. "Hey, I can uncurl my fingers but the handle is still stuck to my palm!"

"I can't imagine any adhesive . . ." Rad fell into deep thought, mid-sentence.

Jake fell onto the sword. He pinned it under his knees, encircled his right wrist with his left hand, and pulled for all he was worth.

"Godfrey Daniels!" he exclaimed (his boss was

a pious man who frowned on swearing so Jake replaced all obscene expressions in the manner of W.C. Fields). "Even if the thing was stuck on with crazy glue, I still should be able to tear the skin free. It feels like the sword has become part of my arm."

"Right you are, laddy, and no enemy can take it from yea."

"What did you say, Uncle Rad?"

"Nothing, why?"

"I'm hearing voices!"

"Be not alarmed at that, laddy, it is I talkin' to yea, the spirit of thy blade, the finest length of steel ever forged in mountain fire, doused in the holy waters of the river Styx, spelled by a hundred powerful warlocks and wizards and blessed by Pagan and Christian priest alike. The blood of a thousand villains has not tarnished me sheen. Mail and plate armor of the highest quality, even enchanted, cannot resist me cut or dull me edge. And no enemy can wrest me from thy person, until yea die."

"I think I'm about to die!" Jake grew very pale.

"Try putting the sword back into the scabbard," Rad advised.

Jake did, and found he could release the weapon. "Thank God." Then he went to unbuckle it. "Oh great! Now this seems to be stuck. Hey, there's no buckle!"

"This reminds me of a parchment found in the same area about twenty years ago," Rad said. "It told of a Druid king who so loved his magic sword and so feared that it would be stolen that he had it 'spelled to him.' I didn't know what that meant then, but I think I do now."

Jake got the idea, too. "No ancient Druid's spell can defeat the purposes of modern man: I'll get this thing off if it takes a blow-torch!"

"By the blood of Beowulf, what means yea this?"

"Don't sell the Druids short; they were pretty smart people," said Rad.

"No doubt. Particularly since they were able to make a sword that talks."

"Really? It must be some form of telepathy; I can't hear it talk."

"Lucky you."

"Mind if I ask it some questions?"

If looks could cripple then Uncle Rad would have been wheel-chair bound thereafter.

"I realize, my dear uncle, that as an archaeologist this sword's ability to communicate must be of enormous interest to you. You're practically drooling. But my only concern is getting the damn thing off. A junior executive at Saberja Inc. can't go around with a sword. Particularly tomorrow when we're having our yearly board meeting followed by the Executive Soiree, which is black-tie."

"Worry not, laddy. When Merriroth, King of the Goths, came to visit me former master he was very impressed with me looks and he as fastidious a man that ever clothed a table before dining."

"I have a blow-torch in the basement," Rad said. "If I promise to use it, will you first let me ask the sword some questions?"

"Deal."

"Don't waste your fire, laddy, no torch, whether it blows or not, can burn me dressing."

Three pots of coffee later, Rad was still inquiring information from the sword through Jake. His nephew had to practically threaten to use the sword on him before he would go get the blow-torch.

Though protected by two plates of sheet-metal and a double-folded piece of asbestos, Jake still

got blisters. The sword-belt was untouched.

"Too bad your little party isn't costumes; you could go as Sir Arthur."

Jake slumped on the couch, totally dejected. "I know a junior executive who missed the board meeting because of pneumonia. He was passed over for promotion for five years!"

"Couldn't you tell them that the sword is symbolic? That yours is 'The Knight among Advertising Agencies'?"

"I don't think so." Jake looked at his watch. "Yeow, it's four-fourteen. I've got to shower, shave, and get some rest!"

"Yea needn't bath, sire, and risk illness from it. And why shave and chance a cut when yer face be as smooth as an unbedded maiden. It's a warriors want to die in battle, not in a grooming accident."

"Keep your advice to yourself!" Jake had one more coffee before he left.

* * *

"Zounds, this chariot is swifter than a mountain hawk. What moves it so?"

"A 3.5 liter, fuel injected engine, if that means anything to you."

"Not today perhaps, but may-be tomorrow."

Doing his best to ward off conversation (if Jake kept quiet, the sword kept talking), he quickly made the Lincoln Tunnel, had some trouble reaching the toll booth with the encumbering sword, zipped through the nearly-empty tunnel (the sword nearly panicked, thinking it was the gates of Hell), then spun up-town to his mid-town apartment.

* * *

"Does ya really think we should be in this neighborhood, Angi? I mean we's can be seen by the cops real easy here."

"To get money, you have to go where it's at."

"Yeah, but none of these rich folks carry cash; they all got credit cards."

"There's an all night cash machine just a block from here. All we got to do is catch some creep and make him use it for us, and it's pay day."

"Good thinking, An--"

"Quiet! Here comes our victim."

When he exited the parking lot, Jake didn't notice the two shadowy figures come out of the alley behind him.

"Alright, Bozo, hand it over, this is the tax man!"

"Bounders, roughs! Let's give these black-hearted whore-sons a good cutting!"

"I think we should just give them what they want," Jake said, but found he had drawn the sword reflexively. The mugger had a .357 magnum.

"O.K., Sir Galahad, drop the meat cleaver before I air condition your armour!"

"Be unafraid of the villains fire-lock, laddy, I'm spelled against such a weapon."

"Yes, but I'm not!" whimpered Jake.

"Knee cap 'em, Angi," said the other mugger. "I likes to see 'em get knee-capped."

"Thanks for telling the clown my name; now I gotta neutralize him."

Jake looked down at the gaping maul of the weapon, as terribly irresistible as fate, his breath reduced to short gasps, his hands grew slick on the sword's handle. He saw every muscle, every hair on the finger that tensed around the gun's trigger as the mugger-murderer expertly squeezed it. He heard nothing.

The sword lurched in his grip.

Jake unconsciously searched himself for wounds, blood.

"I knocked the pellet away from yea, 'tis one of me skills. 'Twas work with this one. Fire-locks have improved some."

Twice more Angi shot. The sword whipped around in Jake's hand so rapidly that he thought it would tear his shoulder out. The bullets didn't reach him.

"By the beard of Odin, three shots on a load!"

Jake didn't bother saying that the gun had six.

Angi didn't bother using them and ran away.

Jake recovered his composure and went inside.

* * *

Ten minutes after his nephew left, Rad got another visitor. The distinguished looking, impeccably dressed, middle-aged man he saw through the peek-hole hardly impressed him as a burglar.

"I am Mardrex," he said through the door, somehow knowing that Rad was looking at him. "Let me in."

Unhesitatingly, Rad opened the door.

Mardrex pushed his way inside, backed Rad into a chair, and trapped him there by gripping the chair's arms. "I believe you have a sword, taken from a dig at Stonehenge. I want it."

Rad said nothing, sensing danger.

"Do you know anything about the sword?" Mardrex seemed impatient, fearful. He scrutinized Rad closely; by his reactions Mardrex knew the archaeologist had the information he wanted. "You'd soon deduce for yourself my relationship to that sword, so I don't mind telling you about it. I've quite literally come back from Hell, and I intend to stay. When your fellow scientists removed that blasted blade from my heart, I was able to reconstruct my form. My magic forges my soul to my body, so I can never die. And only an enchanted weapon, like that sword, can incapacitate me. I traced it here, hoping to dispose of it before some fool tries it on."

Rad reacted involuntarily.

"So, someone you know has tried it on and they cannot take it off. That's most regrettable."

Acting on sudden inspiration, Rad struck upward with the heel of his hand under Mardrex's chin, staggering the larger man backward. Then he looped his foot around the wizard's ankle and sat him hard onto the floor. Thanking God that he watched 'The Karate Kid' four times, he bound for the door. But as soon as his hand touched the knob, Rad found himself encased, motionless, in a cold blue light!

"Damn, you broke my tooth!" Mardrex walked over to his prisoner. "You modern agers amaze me. The tricks you know, and none of them involve the sacrifices required of magic. Your technology is far more reliable than the supernatural, and one doesn't need to give up his soul to use it. We never came up with anything as destructive as napalm, much less atomic weapons. I can fly through the air via levitation, but not with near the speed of even your crudest airplane. And it gives me such a headache! However, there are a few tricks we old wizards could teach you, like the containment field you're in. Interesting, isn't it?"

Rad couldn't breathe. Nearly unconscious.

"I'll release it from around your head so you can talk. Will you tell me where the sword is, please?"

Rad said nothing.

"My containment field is also good for loosening tongues!"

As if he had been dressed in a raw-hide jumpsuit that shrunk uniformly around him, the force-field squeezed him, painfully, slowly.

"Alright, I'll tell you. I'm too old to take torture!" Rad was immediately ashamed of himself. He told Mardrex where to find the sword and his nephew.

"It's unfortunate that I must kill your nephew, but there's no other way to get that blasted broadsword away from him," Mardrex reflected. "Do you have any idea what it is like to be trapped in a rotting body, yet totally aware of it?! My magic doesn't permit my soul to leave my physical form, even if it were reduced to ashes. But worse than the rotting, worse than the immobility, and even worse than the feasting worms, was the continual reprimanding by that sword! It talks and talks and talks! In a thousand years it gave me not one moment of silence, of peace! I cannot enjoy this wonderful age of yours, nor relax for even a second until that moralistic metal menace is encased in mortar and sunk in the deepest seas on earth!"

Mardrex released Rad from the blue light, then left. The archaeologist felt completely drained, but developed an idea. Something the sword had told him about magic always having a counter-pole, and that they could be used to nullify each other. He called for a taxi.

* * *

Jake limped, like Chester of the old 'Gunsmoke' series, into his office.

"What's wrong with your leg, sir?" asked his secretary.

"Nothing, really, just had a little run-in with some muggers; I'll have to wear this brace for awhile."

"That it should come to this! Me, the finest weapon of my time reduced to play-acting a brace for a fake cripple!"

"Shut up, will you!"

"What, sir?" his secretary asked.

Jake smiled meekly. "The leg hurts me some; it's got me a bit grumpy. I think it best to cancel my appointments . . ."

"Mr. Saberja wants to see you." Miss Lillian seldom interrupted, so Jake knew it must be important. Grinning unconvincingly, he stiff-legged it into his boss's office.

"Jake . . . God, what happened to your leg?" asked Saberja.

Jake repeated his lie, though Saberja, one of the ten wealthiest men from Asia, a self-made man who rose by his own wits and effort from the slums of Calcutta, would not be easily fooled.

"That's dreadful!" He was genuinely concerned. "I'll have my own physician look after you. he can refer you to the best specialist."

"I appreciate it, sir . . ."

"Nonsense, you're far too valuable to leave limping about."

Saberja demanded perfection-plus from his staff. If he got what he wanted, however, he was strong in praise and paid well.

"Who is this wag-tongued foreign potentate yea cower to? Draw thy blade and show him he's no king to a good Christian warrior!"

"I don't think that would be advisable!"

"I realize you're too proud for charity, Jake," said Saberja, "but for the good of the company I insist you get the best care . . ."

There was a loud scream from the secretary's office, suddenly muffled as if a pillow were forced over the screamer's mouth. Then, before they could investigate, the connecting door was blown off its hinges by a brilliant blue flame. Garbed as an ancient wizard and surrounded by translucent light, Mardrex walked slowly through the door.

"Zounds! 'Tis me old adversary, back from Hell!" The sword was in Jake's hand before he could think, aflame with silver fire.

Jake felt an electric heat surge through his tissues, far more intensely than when the muggers attacked. He took a stance like Tyrone Power in 'The Mark Of Zorro' and braced himself to meet the wizard.

"Lower thy sword, fool, and I'll grant you a painless death!" coolly commanded Mardrex.

Saberja tried to rise but was immediately rendered unconscious with a minor movement of Mardrex's left hand.

Jake was nervous, confused. If some knowledge of the wizard wasn't imparted to him by the sword, he might have complied with his orders.

"Keep close to him, lad! His magic bolts have more reach than me blade!"

Partially like a dancer, somewhat like a boxer, and a little like an epileptic hippopotamus, Jake double-stepped towards Mardrex. The wizard responded with a blast of red power that nearly twisted Jake's wrist into breaking. The sword shattered the bolt, its sparks sent in all directions like fireworks, igniting the walls.

Seeing Jake close in, Mardrex produced a two-foot long rod of blue metal from under his robes and used it to parry his blows.

The fighting fell into a dynamic equilibrium: Mardrex was the better fencer, supplemented with magic; Jake had a better weapon. The violent rotations of Jake's arm tore his navy blue blazer at the shoulder, the scabbard ripped the seam of his pants from ankle to hip, freeing his leg. The heat and exertion caused him to soak his elegant rags with sweat.

The wizard tried to trip his adversary by throwing furniture over in front of him. Jake bashed it away and kept close. The young executive backed him into a corner, gripped the sword's long handle with both hands and worked to overpower Mardrex. From the right, left, overhead, underneath, and every other angle, Jake struck faster, faster, until all was blurred to the senses.

Then Jake saw that the room was filling with smoke.

He backed away from the nearly-defeated wizard.

"We must get out!" he yelled.

"I won't burn!" Mardrex took advantage of the brief reprieve to conjure an intensely powerful sphere charged with brimstone and flame. He threw it at Jake, it broke against the sword and exploded, knocking the young man back over some upset office furniture. He was stunned.

Stunned.

When he awoke, very much surprised that he could still do so, he heard uncle Rad talking to the wizard.

"One side, fool, and let me finish him!" ordered Mardrex, "or you'll join him!"

"Even if you kill Jake and get rid of the sword, it doesn't make you safe. Some other enchanted weapon might be discovered and used against you. That could mean another thousand years trapped in a rotting corpse. The best solution would be to neutralize the sword's magic and your own."

"And live as mortals do. And die as mortals do?" He sneered as if contemplating living as vermin.

"Death seems preferable to the sort of immortality you've had. You'd find a short life in our age quite enjoyable. You must be wearing several hundred thousand dollars' worth of jewels on you now. The way the stock market is and with your wits that could be parlayed into millions. You praised our technology. If it is more reliable than your magic, why not use it?"

Mardrex considered and didn't notice Jake creeping up on him, sword raised.

"Jake, stop!" Randy called. "If you slay Mardrex then you'll be stuck to that sword forever!"

"God, no! I'd rather die!"

"The only way both of you are going to get out of this mess is to neutralize everyone's magic," Randy concluded.

"Must we discuss this in the middle of a fire?" said Jake.

Mardrex raised both his hands, shouted something in an ancient tongue, and the flames immediately expired. "And you want me to give up such powers?"

"A good fire extinguisher could do the same job, without the cost of one's soul."

"Even if I should agree with your idea, there's still the sword to consider. It would have to agree also, and you'd have to find a place for its soul to reside."

"Could it come into my body, without my having to leave it?" asked Rad.

"I think your personalities could be blended."

"I'm willing to take the chance; are you?" asked Rad.

"Aye and me too!" said the sword, though only Jake and Mardrex heard it. "Would be good to feel a man's body again."

"I might as well do it. Magic has no place in this age." Mardrex sighed, then rubbed his hands together and grinned impishly. "I can hardly wait to cruise your Forty-Second Street!"

The rites of neutralization took most of the afternoon and ended with a huge spark gapping between the wizard and the weapon. Then a ghost-like figure left the sword and entered Rad's body.

* * *

Rad shocked the archaeological world when his brazen new concepts were verified by subsequent digs. Mardrex became the latest "Wizard of Wall Street" and entered into an invincible partnership with R.F. Saberja. Jake was made their youngest vice president.

One Sunday Jake, wearied by his new position, visited his uncle again. Rad's personality was noticeably changed by the sword's spirit and he became engaged to a lovely young woman from the Philippines via a mail-order service.

Jake sat on an overstuffed chair and right on an elaborate-looking hand-sledge.

"The most comfortable chair in your house and you have to use it to store your tools." Jake picked the hammer up and gently lobbed it towards another chair.

It rocketed from his hand like an anti-tank weapon, smashed the target chair to matchwood, then it gracefully rose from the rubble and gently drifted back into Jake's grip.

"That was not one of my tools," Rad said, "but a very interesting artifact we dug up in Scandinavia. It formerly belonged to someone named Thor."

Jake fainted.