

## *The Legend of the Stars*

**I**N THE FARAWAY LAND of Zibiah, in the mountainous terrain of Jetu, lived the most ancient of all men, Zuph, the Keeper of the Stars. A mass of snowy white hair tapped his bent and weary frame. The wrinkles on his face deepened when he spoke or smiled, and the lines at the corners of his eyes turned upward, adding to the expression of merriment in his twinkling blue eyes.

Early each morning after the first rays of the Sun had pierced the crevices of the eastern mountains, the cobblestones of the village streets rang beneath the wooden shoes of Zuph as he climbed down the steep hill, homeward.

He was so punctual that housewives would commence their day's work by that sound in the streets, and children, awakening, would look out the windows and call to him as he passed, because he was their friend.

There was a legend, whose beginning was lost in antiquity, that if the Keeper of the Stars should forget to light them, or if for any other reason they should go out, Great Storms and Evil Things would rise out of the south and come over the mountains and destroy their land. Never had the stars ceased to shine, and mothers, when they heard Zuph pass through the streets, would pause

in their tasks silently to bless him for keeping evil from their land.

Their great Holy Season was approaching. Zuph spent most of his spare time making toys of every conceivable sort for the children. No one could remember a time, or their parents or grandparents before them, when this had not been his custom. The children gathered trees, or evergreen vines

which they made into wreaths, on which they placed candles. On the Holiest Night the candles were lighted, and the next morning toys were found by the children beneath the trees or the lighted wreaths when

they awakened. Zuph had planned so many things for the children this year that he was resting less and less each day and working up to the very minute when he left his home to start up the long hill to his tower, where he lighted the stars for the night.

The tower, perched atop one of the highest peaks, was a maze of sidereal clocks, star maps, generators for night sounds and night smells, and scores of switches to put everything into operation. Zuph stayed in his tower all night and when the first rays of the Sun were squeezed over the eastern mountains, Zuph pulled all the switches and hurried down the trail to his home to work on the



Illustration for the Rays by Alan Gregory

vast array of toys and games and gadgets still needing some final touches. Holy Night came almost too soon for Zuph; everything must be finished now. He worked throughout the day and his huge stack of toys was nearly completed. He continued working as the lengthening shadows brought by the setting Sun told him he must work even faster to finish.

Within the homes, as the children were getting ready for their beds, they lighted the candles on their trees and wreaths. As darkness spread over the village they bubbled over with happy thoughts of tomorrow.

It was one of the Tiny Storms who first noticed that the stars were not shining, and he made his way over the mountain with a tiny uproar. Some of the Evil Things saw that the impossible had happened and they too climbed the southern mountains to wreak havoc on the village.

Only Zepho, who had been working so hard to help his parents, was late gathering his tree. As he walked home by a mountain stream, the Sun had already slipped behind the highest ridge. He watched the sky, knowing that one star, then another, would shine above him as they always had. But none appeared. Then he saw the Littlest Storm creeping over the southern mountains. He heard its tiny uproar. Turning off the path he ran to the home of Zuph to see if something had happened. The house was in darkness. He opened the front door and, lighting a candle from the smoldering log in the fireplace, walked quickly through the many rooms full of toys and into the big workroom at the end of the house where he found Zuph asleep, his head resting on his arm on the workbench where he had been working.

“Zuph, Zuph,” he called. “The stars have not been lighted.”

Zuph slowly awakened and looked around in a sleepy manner.

“Zepho, is that you? What is wrong?”

“The stars. They are not lighted.”

Zuph bounded from his stool and ran to the front door. Already the flashing glow of the gathering Great



Illustration for the Rays by Alan Gregory

Storms could be seen over many of the ridges.

“Zepho! Run to all of the homes. Tell everyone to put the lighted trees in front of their homes while I climb to the tower. We may be able to hold them off for awhile.”

As Zuph ran through the streets to the mountain trail, Zepho hurried from house to house knocking at the doors, and soon one after another lighted tree glowed brightly throughout the village.

The Storms, seeing the lights, drew back. At first they thought it was the stars coming out, but the Littlest Storm in a tiny uproar told them that he had seen them coming out of the houses, and so therefore couldn't be the stars. They crept closer and the winds blew the candles causing them to flicker and some went out.

Zepho finally arrived at his own home, nestled at the foot of the Mountain of the Mighty-tower-of-the-Keeper-of-the-Stars. He placed candles on the branches of his tree and lighted them. He looked down over the village and its host of glowing candles was like a starry sky turned upside down; then, looking upward he watched as one star then another appeared in the sky above him. The Storms and the Evil Things retreated to the southern mountains and slid behind them to hide from the brightest Holy Season ever. □

—Mary Fisher