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OUT THERE WHERE THE BIG SHIPS GO

Richard Cowper

TWILIGHT CONVERSATION

Roger said, "What was it *really* like out there, sir?"

There was a pause so long that Roger was beginning to wonder whether the old man had heard his question, then: "There comes a moment, boy, when for the life of you, you can't pick out the sun from all the rest of them. That's when the thread snaps, and you slip right through the fingers of God. There's nothing left for you to relate to. But if you've been well trained, or you're thick as two planks, or maybe just plain lucky, you come through that and out on the other side. But something's happened to you. You don't know what's *real* anymore. You get to wondering about the nature of Time and how old you really are. You question everything. And in the end, if you're like me, the dime finally drops, and you realize you've been conned. And that's the second moment of truth. . . ."

Books by Richard Cowper

Clone
Out There Where the Big Ships Go
The Road to Corlay

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OUT THERE WHERE THE BIG SHIPS GO

Richard Cowper

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Out There Where the Big Ships Go

IT WAS AT BREAKFAST on the second day that Roger first noticed the gray-haired man with the beard. He was sitting at the far corner table, partly shadowed by the filmy swag of the gathered gauze curtain. It was the ideal vantage point from which to observe whatever might be going on outside the long vista-window or to survey the guests as they came into the hotel dining room. But the bearded man was doing neither. He was just sitting, staring straight ahead of him, as though he could see right through the partition wall which divided the dining room from the hotel bar, and on out across the town and the azure bay to where the giant clippers unfurled their glittering metal sails and reached up to grasp the Northeast Trades.

"Don't stare, Roger. It's rude."

The boy flushed and made a play of unfolding his napkin and arranging it on his lap. "I wasn't staring," he muttered. "Just looking."

A young waiter with a sickle-shaped scar above his left eyebrow moved across from the buffet and stood deferentially at the shoulder of Roger's mother. He winked down at Roger, who smiled back at him shyly.

"You go on cruise today maybe, Señor? See *Los dedos de Dios*, hey?"

Roger shook his head.

Mrs. Herzheim looked up from the menu. "Is the fish real *fresh*?"

"*Sí*, they bring him in this morning."

"We'll have that then. And grapefruits for starters. And coffee."

"*Sí*, Señora." The young waiter flapped his napkin at Roger, winked again and hurried away.

Mrs. Herzheim tilted her head to one side and made a minuscule adjustment to one of her pearl eardrops. "What're your plans, honey?" she inquired lazily.

"I don't know, Mom. I thought maybe I'd—"

"Yoo-hoo, Susie! Over here!"

"Hi, Babs; hi, Roger. Have you ordered, hon?"

"Yeah. We're having the fish. Where's Harry?"

"Collecting his paper."

The dining room was beginning to fill up, the waiters scurrying back and forth with laden trays, the air redolent with the aroma of fresh coffee and hot bread rolls. A slim girl with a lemon-yellow cardigan draped across her shoulders came in from the bar entrance. She was wearing tinted glasses, and her glossy, shoulder-length hair was the color of a freshly husked chestnut. She passed behind Roger's chair, threading her way among the tables until she had reached the corner where the bearded man was sitting. She pulled out a chair and sat down beside him so that her profile was toward the other guests and she was directly facing the window.

Roger watched the pair covertly. He saw the man lean forward and murmur something to the girl. She nodded. He then raised a finger, beckoned, and as though he had been hovering in readiness just for this, a waiter hurried over to their table. While they were giving their breakfast order, Roger's waiter reappeared with the grapefruits, a pot of coffee and a basket of rolls. As he was distributing them about the table, Susie Fogel signed to him.

He bent toward her attentively.

She twitched her snub nose in the direction of the corner table. "Is that who I think it is?" she murmured.

The waiter glanced swiftly round. "At the corner table? *Sí*, Señora, that is him."

"Ah," Susie let out her breath in a quiet sigh.

"When did he arrive?"

"Late last night, Señora."

The waiter took her order and retreated in the direction of the kitchens. Mrs. Herzheim poured out a cup of coffee and handed it to Roger. As he was reaching for it, Harry Fogel appeared. He wished Roger and his mother a genial good morning and took the seat opposite his wife.

Susie lost no time in passing on her news.

Harry turned his head and scanned the couple in the corner. "Well, well," he said. "That must mean Guilio's around too. How's *that* for a turn-up?"

Roger said, "Who is he, Mr. Fogel?"

Harry Fogel's round face transformed itself into a parody of wide-eyed incredulity. *"Oi vai,"* he sighed. "Don't they teach you kids *any* history these days?"

Roger flushed and buried his nose in his grapefruit.

"Aw, come on, son," protested Harry. "Help an old man to preserve his illusions. Sure even a twelve-year-old's heard of *The Icarus?"*

Roger nodded, acutely conscious that his ears were burning.

"Well, there you are then. That's Mr. Icarus in person. The one and only. Come to add luster to our little tourney. Very big deal, eh, Babs?"

Roger's mother nodded, reached out for the sugar bowl and sprinkled more calories than she could reasonably afford over her grapefruit.

Roger risked another glance at the corner table. To his acute consternation the bearded man now appeared to be gazing directly across at him. For a moment their eyes met, and then, in the very act of glancing away, Roger thought he saw the old man lower his left eyelid ever so slightly.

At ten o'clock, Roger accompanied his mother to the youth salon. It was a trip he had been making in innumerable resorts for almost as long as he could remember. Hitherto, it had not occurred to him to resent it any more than it would have occurred to the poodles and chihuahuas to resent their diamanté studded leashes. Had anyone thought to ask him, he would probably have admitted that he genuinely enjoyed the warm, familiar femininity of the salons with their quiet carpets, their scents of aromatic waxes and lacquers, their whispered confessions which came creeping into his ears like exotic tendrils from beneath the anonymous helmets of the driers while, mouselike and unobserved, he turned the pages of the picture magazines. But today, when they reached the portico of the salon he suddenly announced, "I think I'll go on down to the harbor and take a look at the clippers, Mom."

Mrs. Herzheim frowned doubtfully. "All on your *own,* honey? Are you *sure?* I mean it's—well . . ."

Roger smiled. "I'll be fine. You don't have to worry about me."

"But we can go together this afternoon," she countered. "I'm looking forward to seeing those clippers too, honey."

Roger's smile remained inflexible, and suddenly it dawned upon his mother that the only way she would get him inside that salon would be to drag him in by main force. The realization shocked her profoundly. She gnawed at her bottom lip as she eyed askance her twelve-year-old son, who had chosen this moment to challenge, gently, her absolute authority over him. She consulted her Cartier wristwatch and sighed audibly. "Well, all right then," she conceded. "But you're to be right back here on this very spot at noon sharp. You hear that? Promise me, now."

Roger nodded. "Sure, Mom."

Mrs. Herzheim unclipped her handbag, took out a currency bill and passed it over. Roger folded it carefully, unzipped the money pouch on his belt and stuffed the note inside. "Thanks," he said.

They stood for a moment, eying each other thoughtfully; then Mrs. Herzheim leaned forward and kissed him lightly on the forehead. "You're going to tell me all about it over lunch," she said. "I'm counting on it."

Roger grinned and nodded as he watched her turn and vanish through the swing doors of the salon; then he too turned lightly on his heel and began skipping down the cobbled street toward the harbor. After a few seconds he broke into a trot which gradually accelerated into a sort of wild, leaping dance which lasted until he hurtled out, breathless, through the shadow of an ancient arched gateway and found himself on the quayside.

He clutched at a stone stanchion while he got his breath back. Then he blinked his eyes and looked about him. The sunshine striking off the ripples was flinging a shifting web of light across the hulls of the fishing boats. The very air seemed to swirl like the seabirds as they circled and swooped and dived for floating fragments of fishgut. Dark-eyed women in gaudy shawls, brass combs winking in their black hair, shouted to one another across the water from the ornate iron balconies of the waterside tenements. Donkey carts rattled up and down the slabbed causeway. Huge swarthy men, sheathed in leather aprons, their bare arms ashimmer with fish scales, trotted past crowned with swaying pagodas of baskets and flashed white teeth at him in

gleaming grins. A posse of mongrels queued up to cock their legs against a shellfish stall only to scatter, yelping, as the outraged owner swore and hurled an empty box at them. Roger laughed, relinquished his stanchion and began dodging among the fishermen and the sightseers, heading past the dim and echoing warehouses toward the light tower on the inner harbor mole.

When he reached his goal he sat down and drew a deep breath of pure delight. On a rock ledge some ten meters beneath him, two boys of about his own age were fishing. He watched them for a moment, then raised his eyes and looked up at the dark volcanic hills. He noted the scattering of solar "sunflower" generators; the distant globe of the observatory; the tumbling, trade-driven clouds; the lime-washed houses clambering on each other's shoulders up the steep hillside; the great hotels squatting smugly high above. By screwing up his eyes he just managed to make out in one of them the shuttered windows of the rooms which, for the next fortnight, were to be his and his mother's.

Suddenly, for no particular reason, he found himself remembering the old man and the girl with auburn hair. He tried to recall what he had read about *The Icarus,* but apart from the fact that she had been the last of the starships, he could not recall very much. As Mr. Fogel had said, that was history, and history had never been his favorite subject. But there was something about that gray-haired, bearded man which would not let his mind alone. And suddenly he knew what it was! "He just wasn't *seeing* us," he said aloud. "He didn't *care!*"

Hearing his voice, the two boys below glanced up. "*Cigarillo,* Señor?" one called hopefully.

Roger smiled and shook his head apologetically.

The boys looked at one another, laughed, shouted something he could not understand and returned to their fishing.

Far out to sea, sunlight twinkled from the dipping topsails of an eight-masted clipper. Roger thrust out his little finger at the full stretch of his arm and tried to estimate her speed, counting silently to mark off the seconds it took her to flicker out of his sight and back again. Twenty-four. And an eight-master meant at least two hundred meters overall. Two hundred in twenty-four seconds would be one hundred in twelve would be . . . five hundred in a minute. Multiply five hundred by sixty and you got . . . thirty

kilometers an hour. Just about average for the Northeast Trade route. But, even so, six days from now she would be rounding Barbados and sniffing for the Gulf. Very quietly he began to hum the theme of *Trade Winds,* the universal hit of a year or two back, following the great ship with his dreaming eyes as she dipped and soared over the distant swells and vowing that one day he too would be in command of such a vessel, plunging silver-winged along the immemorial trade routes of the world.

He sat gazing out to sea long after the great ship had slipped down out of sight below the horizon. Then with a sigh he climbed to his feet and began making his way back along the harbor, dimly conscious that some part of him was still out there on the ocean but not yet sufficiently self-aware to know which part it was.

A clock in a church tower halfway up the hillside sent its noonday chimes fluttering out over the roofs of the town like a flock of silver birds. Roger suddenly remembered his promise to his mother and broke into a run.

Mrs. Herzheim discovered that the youth salon had given her a headache. So after lunch she retired to her bedroom leaving Roger to spend the afternoon by the hotel pool. He had it to himself, most of the other guests having opted for one or other of the organized excursions to the local beauty spots, or, like Roger's mother, chosen to rest up prior to the ardors of the night's session.

Roger swam the eight lengths he had set himself, then climbed out and padded across to the loafer where he had left his towel and his micomicon. Who was it to be? He sat down, gave a cursory scrub to his wet hair, then flipped open the back of the cabinet and ran his eye down the familiar index. Nelson, Camelot, Kennedy, Pasteur, Alan Quartermain, Huck Finn, Tarzan, Frodo, Titus Groan—his finger hovered and a voice seemed to whisper deep inside his head *"each flint a cold blue stanza of delight, each feather, terrible. . . .* He shivered and was on the point of uncoiling the agate earplugs when he heard a splash behind him. He glanced round in time to see the head of the girl who had shared the old man's breakfast table emerging from the water. A slim brown hand came up, palmed the wet hair from her eyes; then she turned over on her back and began threshing the water to a

glittering froth, forging down the length of the pool toward him.

Five meters out, she stopped kicking and came gliding in to the edge under her own impetus. She reached up, caught hold of the tiled trough, and turned over. Her head and the tops of her shoulders appeared above the rim of the pool. She regarded Roger thoughtfully for a moment then smiled. "Hello there."

"Hi," said Roger.

"Not exactly crowded, is it?"

"They're all out on excursions," he said, noting that she had violet eyes. "Or taking a siesta."

"All except us."

"Yes," he said. "Except us."

"What's your name?"

"Roger Herzheim."

"Mine's Anne. Anne Henderson."

"I saw you at breakfast this morning," he said. "You were with . . ."

She wrinkled her nose like a rabbit. "My husband. We saw you too."

Roger glanced swiftly round. "Is—is he coming for a swim too?"

"Pete? No, he's up at the observatory."

Roger nodded. "Are you here on holiday?"

She flicked him a quick, appraising glance. "Well, sort of. And you?"

"Mom's playing in the tourney. She's partnering Mr. Fogel."

"And what do *you* do, Roger?"

"Oh, I come along for the trips. In the vacations, that is."

"Don't you get bored?"

"Bored?" he repeated. "No."

The girl paddled herself along to the steps and climbed out. She was wearing a minute token costume of gold beeswing, and the sunlight seemed to drip from her. She skipped across and squatted down beside him. "May I see?" she asked, pointing to the micomicon.

"Sure," said Roger amicably. "I guess they'll seem a pretty old-fashioned bunch to you."

She peered at the spool index and suddenly said, "Hey! You've got one of mine there!"

"Yours?"

"Sure. I played Lady Fuchsia in *Titus* for Universal."

Roger stared at her with the sort of absorbed attention a connoisseur might have given to a rare piece of Dresden. "You," he repeated tonelessly. "You're Lady Fuchsia?"

"I *was*," she laughed. "For nine solid months. Seven years ago. It was my first big part. Gail Ferguson. You'll find me among the credits."

"I wiped those off," he said. "I always do."

She glanced up at him sideways. "How old are you, Roger?"

"Twelve and a half."

"You like *Titus*, do you?"

"It's my favorite. Easily."

"And Fuchsia?"

He looked away from her out to where the distant aluminized dishes of the solar generators, having turned past the zenith, were now tracking the sun downhill toward the west. "I wish . . ." he murmured and then stopped.

"What do you wish?"

"Nothing," he said.

"Go on. You can tell me."

He turned his head and looked at her again. "I don't know how to say it," he muttered awkwardly. "Not without seeming rude, I mean."

Her smile dimmed a little. "Oh, go on," she said. "I can take it."

"Well, I just wish you hadn't told me, that's all. About you being Fuchsia, I mean."

"Ah," she said and nodded. There was a long pause, then, "You know, Roger, I think that's about the nicest compliment anyone's ever paid me."

Roger blinked. "Compliment?" he repeated. "Really?"

"Really. You're saying I made Fuchsia come alive for you. Isn't that it?"

He nodded. "I guess so."

"Here. Close your eyes a minute," she said. "Listen." Her voice changed, not a lot, but enough, became a little dry and husky. "Sunflower," she murmured sadly, "Sunflower who's broken, I found you, so drink some water up, and then you won't die—not so quickly anyway. If you do I'll bury you anyway. I'll dig a long grave and bury you. Pentecost will give me a spade. If you don't die you can stay. . . ."

She watched his face closely. "There," she said, in her

own voice. "You see? Fuchsia exists in me and apart from me, in you and apart from you. Outside of time. She won't grow older like the rest of us."

Roger opened his eyes. "You speak about her as if she was real," he said wonderingly.

"*Real!*" There was a sudden, surprising bitterness in the girl's voice. "I don't know what the word means. Do you?"

"Why, yes," he said, puzzled by the change in her tone. "You're real. So am I. And this"—he waved a hand toward the pool and the hotel—"that's real."

"What makes you so sure?"

He suspected that she was laughing at him. "Well, because I can touch it," he said.

"And that makes it real?"

"Sure."

She lifted her arm and held it out to him. "Touch me, Roger."

He grinned and laid his right hand lightly on the sun-warmed flesh of her forearm. "You're real, all right."

"That's very reassuring," she said. "No, I mean it. Some days I don't feel real at all." She laughed. "I should have you around more often, shouldn't I?"

She stood up, walked to the edge of the pool, flexed her coral-tipped toes and plunged in, neatly and without fuss.

Roger watched her slender body flickering, liquid and golden against the tiled floor. Then he snapped shut the micomicon, sprinted across the paved surround and dived to join her.

The tourney was due to start at eight o'clock. Mrs. Herzheim was all aflutter because she had just learned that she and Harry Fogel were drawn against the co-favorites in her section for the first round. "Do you think it's a good omen, Roger?" she asked. "Be honest now."

"Sure, Mom. A block conversion at the very least."

"Wouldn't that be marvelous? Certain sure Harry would muff it though. Like that time in Reykjavik, remember? I could've *died!*" She leaned close to the dressing table mirror and caressed her eyelashes with her mascara brush. "You going to watch So-Vi, honey?"

"I expect so."

Mrs. Herzheim eyed her reflection critically and then sighed. "That's the best you'll do, girl. Can't turn mutton into lamb. How do I look, baby?"

"You look great."

"That's my pet." She restored the mascara brush to its holder and zipped up her toilet case. "Well, all you can do for me now is to wish me luck, honey."

"Good luck, Mom."

She walked over to the bed where her son was lying, bent over and kissed him, but lightly so as to avoid smearing her lips. "I'll mouse in so's not to wake you," she said.

He smiled and nodded and she went out, wafting him a final fingertip kiss from the doorway.

Roger lay there for a few minutes, his fingers laced behind his head, and gazed up at the ceiling. Then he got up from his mother's bed and walked through into his own room. From the drawer of the bedside cabinet he took out his recorder, ran it back for a while and listened to the letter to his father which he had started taping the previous evening. He added a description of his visit to the harbor and was about to move on to his meeting with Anne Henderson when he suddenly changed his mind. He switched off the recorder, went back into his mother's room and retrieved his micomicon. Having slotted home the *Titus* cartridge, he uncoiled the earphones and screwed the plugs into his ears. Then he lay on the bed, reached down, pushed the button which activated the mechanism and, finally, dragged the goggles down over his eyes.

At once the familiar magic began to work. The wraiths of milk-white mist parted on either side; gnarled specters of ancient trees emerged and lolloped past to the slow pacing of his horse. He heard the bridle jingle and the whispering waterdrops pattering down upon the drifts of dead and decaying leaves. At any moment now he would emerge upon the escarpment and, gazing down, behold by the sickly light of a racing moon, the enormous crouching beast of stone that was the castle of Gormenghast. Then, swooping like some huge and silent night bird down over the airy emptiness and up again toward the tiny pinprick of light high up in the ivied bastion wall, he would gaze in through the latticed, candlelit window of Fuchsia's room. He heard the telltale rattle of the pebble dislodged, and the mist veils thinned abruptly to a filmy gauze. He had reached the forest's edge. His horse moved forward one more hesitant pace and stood still, awaiting his command. He leaned forward and was about to peer down into The Valley That Never Was when the vision dimmed

abruptly and, a second later, had flickered into total darkness.

Roger swore, dragged off the goggles and hoisted the machine up from the floor beside the bed. The ruby telltale was glowing like a wind-fanned spark. He pushed the OFF button, and the light vanished. He stared glumly at the all-but-invisible thread, then activated the rewind mechanism and plucked the slender cartridge from its slot. Perhaps he would be able to find a repair depot in the town somewhere. It did not seem likely. He unfastened the earplugs, restored them to their foam-molded cache beside the goggles and closed up the inspection panel. Then he let himself out into the corridor and rode the elevator down to the reception hall.

His spirits revived a little when the desk clerk informed him that there was indeed a Universal Elektronix shop in the town. He added regretfully that, so far as he knew, it ran no all-night service. Roger thanked him and was about to head for the So-Vi lounge when an impulse persuaded him to change his mind and he walked out on to the terrace instead.

The sun had set a quarter of an hour past, but the western horizon was still faintly fringed with a pale violet glow that deepened precipitately to indigo. Directly overhead, the equatorial stars were trembling like raindrops on the twigs of an invisible tree. Roger walked slowly to the edge of the pool and gazed down at the quivering reflections of unfamiliar constellations. The air was soft and warm, balmy with the scent of spice blossom. From somewhere on the dark hillside below him he could hear the sound of a guitar playing and a girl's voice singing. He listened, entranced, and suddenly, unaccountably, he was struggling in the grip of an overwhelming sadness, an emotion all the more poignant because he could ascribe it to no specific cause. He felt the unaccustomed pricking of tears behind his eyelids and he stumbled away toward the dark sanctuary of the parapet which divided the pool area from the steeply terraced flower gardens.

There was a flight of steps—carpeted with some small creeping plant—which he remembered led down to a stone bench where earlier he had seen a small green lizard sunning itself. He scuttled down into the comforting shadows, skirted a jasmine bush and, with eyes not yet fully adjusted

to the deeper darkness, felt his cautious way forward. The bench was occupied.

The shock of this discovery froze the sob in his throat. His heart gave a great painful leap and he stared, open-mouthed, at the suddenly glowing end of a cigar. There was a faint chuckle from the shadows, and a deep voice said, "Well, hello there. Roger, isn't it?"

Roger swallowed. "I'm sorry, sir." He gulped. "I didn't know. . . ."

"Sure you didn't. Why should you? So help yourself to a seat, son. And mind the bottle."

Roger hesitated for a moment, then edged carefully forward and sat down on the very far end of the bench.

"Saw you at breakfast, didn't I?" said the voice, and added, parenthetically: "The name's Henderson, by the way."

"Yes, sir," said Roger. "I know. You're The Master."

"Ah," said the voice thoughtfully. There was a long pause, then: "So, tell me, what brings you out roaming in the gloaming?"

Roger said nothing.

"Me, I come to look at the stars," said the old man. "That sound crazy to you?"

"No, sir."

The cigar flower bloomed bright scarlet and slowly faded. "Well, it does to a lot of people," said the deep voice, once more disembodied.

"Not to me," said Roger, surprised to hear how firm his own voice sounded.

There was a clink of glass against glass, followed by a brisk gurgle. "Care for a mouthful of wine?"

"No, thank you, sir."

There was a moment of silence and then the sound of a glass being set down again. "I gather you met Anne this afternoon."

"Yes, sir."

"You like her?"

"Yes, sir," Roger affirmed fervently.

"Beautiful, isn't she?"

Roger said nothing, partly because he could think of nothing to say, partly because he had just realized that his recollection of touching Anne's sun-warmed arm had been a primal cause of his sudden loneliness.

"Well, she is," said The Master. "And let me assure you, Roger, I know what I'm talking about."

"Yes, she's lovely," murmured Roger, and wondered where she was now.

"Beauty isn't just *shape*, boy. It's spirit too. A sweet harmony. Did you know that?"

"I—I'm not sure I know what you mean, sir."

"Well, take The Game. What grade are you, Roger?"

"Thirty-second Junior, sir."

"Ever make a clear center star?"

"I did nearly. About a year ago."

"How'd it feel?"

"I don't really know, sir. It just sort of happened. I wasn't even thinking about it."

"Of course not. It's a sort of natural flow. You lose yourself in it. That's the secret of The Game, boy. Losing yourself." The cigar tip described a rosy, fragrant arabesque in the air and ended up pointing toward the heavens. "Out there beyond Eridanus. That's where I found that out. Might just as well have stayed at home, hey?" Again the glass clinked. "How old are you, son?"

Roger told him.

"Know how old I am?"

"No, sir."

"Take a guess."

Roger groped. "Sixty?"

The Master gave a brusque snort of laughter and said, "Well, I'm surely flattered to hear you say so, Roger. Tell me, do the names Armstrong and Aldrin mean anything to you?"

"No, sir."

The Master sighed. "And why should they, indeed? But when I was your age, they were just about the two most famous names on this whole planet. '69 that was—the year all the kids in our neighborhood grew ten feet tall overnight!" He gave another little mirthless snort. "We were the ones who bought the dream, Roger, the whole god-damn, star-dream package, lock, stock and barrel. And in the end one or two of us even got there. The chosen few. Hand-picked. Know what they called us? Knights of the Grail!" He spat out into the darkness, and a moment later the tiny furnace of the cigar glowed bright and angry as he dragged hard at the invisible teat.

"Like Sir Lancelot and Sir Gawain?" suggested Roger timidly.

"Maybe," said The Master. "All I know is they told us we'd been privileged to live out man's eternal dream on his behalf. And we believed them! Thirty-nine years old I was, boy, and I still swallowed that sort of crud! Can you credit it?"

Some small creature rustled dryly in the jasmine bush and was silent again. Down below in the scarf of shadow that lay draped across the shoulder of the hill between the hotel and the twinkling lights of the town, the sound of the girl's voice came again, singing sweetly and sadly to the accompaniment of the plucked strings.

Roger said, "What was it *really* like out there, sir?"

There was a pause so long that Roger was beginning to wonder whether the old man had heard his question, then: "There comes a moment, boy, when for the life of you you can't pick out the sun from all the rest of them. That's when the thread snaps and you slip right through the fingers of God. There's nothing left for you to relate to. But if you've been well-trained, or you're as thick as two planks, or maybe just plain lucky, you come through that and out on the other side. But something's happened to you. You don't know what's *real* anymore. You get to wondering about the nature of Time and how old you *really* are. You question everything. But *everything*. And in the end, if you're like me, the dime finally drops and you realize you've been conned. And that's the second moment of truth."

"Conned?"

"That's right, son. Conned. Cheated. Hoodwinked. Look." He took the cigar from between his lips and blew upon the smoldering cone of ash until it glowed bright red. "Now what color would you say that was?"

"Why, red, of course."

"No. I'm telling you you're wrong. That's blue. Bright blue."

"Not *really*," said Roger.

"Yes, really," said The Master. "You only say it's red because you've been told that's what red is. For you blue is something else again. But get enough people to say that's blue, and it *is* blue. Right?"

"But it's still red, really," said Roger, and gave a nervous little hiccup of laughter.

"It's what it is," said The Master somberly. "Not what anyone *says* it is. That's what I discovered out there. Sometimes I think it's all I did discover."

Roger shifted uneasily on the stone bench. "But you said . . ." he began and then hesitated. "I mean when you said before about spirit . . . about its being beautiful. . . ."

"That too," admitted The Master. "But it's the same thing."

Was it? Roger had no means of knowing.

"Spirit's just another way of saying 'quality'—something everyone recognizes and no one's ever defined. You can recognize quality, can't you, Roger?"

"I—I'm not sure, sir."

"Sure you're sure. You recognized it in Anne, didn't you?"

"Oh, yes."

"I suspect it's what you were out looking for down by the harbor this morning. It's what brought you out here tonight when you could have been sitting there snug and pie-eyed in front of the So-Vi with all the rest of the morons."

"My micomicon broke," said Roger truthfully.

The Master chuckled. "You win, son," he said.

"Did you know that Anne was Lady Fuchsia in *Titus Groan?*"

"She was?"

"Yes. She told me this afternoon. I was going to see if it seemed any different now I know."

"Ah," said The Master. "And was it?"

"I don't know. The spool broke before I got to her."

"That's life, son," said The Master, and again gave vent to one of his explosive snorts of laughter. "Just one long series of broken spools. You're here for the tourney, are you?"

"Mom is."

"And your father?"

"He's in Europe—Brussels. He's a World Commodity Surveyor. He and Mom are separated."

"Ah." The sound was a verbal nod of understanding.

"I get to go on vacation with him twice a year. We have some great times together. He gave me the micomicon. He's fixing a clipper trip for us next spring."

"You're looking forward to that, are you?"

Roger sighed ecstatically, seeing yet again in his mind's

eye the silver-winged sea-bird dripping and soaring over the tumbling, trade-piled Atlantic hills, wreathed in spraybows.

"You like the sea?"

"More than anything," avowed Roger. "One day I'm going to be master of my own clipper."

The cigar glowed and a pennant of aromatic smoke wavered hesitantly in the vague direction of far-off Eridanus. "That's your ambition, is it?"

"Yes, sir," said Roger simply.

"And how about The Game?"

Before Roger could come up with an answer, a voice called down from the terrace above them: "Hey! Isn't it time you were getting robed-up, Pete?"

"I guess it must be, if you say so," responded The Master.

"Guilio's in the hall already. Who's that down there with you?"

"A fan of yours, I gather."

"Roger?"

"Hello," said Roger.

With a faint groan The Master rose from the bench, dropped his cigar butt on the stone-slabbed parterre and screwed it out beneath the sole of his shoe. Then he picked up his glass and the almost empty wine bottle. With eyes now fully accustomed to the gloom, Roger saw that the old man was bowing gravely toward him. "I must beg you to excuse me, Roger," he said, "but as you will have realized, duty calls. I have greatly enjoyed our conversation. We shall meet again. Perhaps tomorrow, heh?"

"Thank you, sir. Good luck."

"Luck?" The Master appeared to consider the implications of the courtesy for a moment. He smiled. "It's a long, long time since anybody wished me that, Roger. But thank you, nonetheless."

Mercifully the darkness hid the bright flush of mortification on the boy's cheeks.

The Master and his challenger, Guilio Romano Amato, sat facing each other on a raised dais at one end of the tourney hall, separated from the other players by a wide swath of crimson carpet and the token barrier of a thick gilded cord. On the wall above their heads a huge electronic scoreboard replicated the moves in this, the third session of the Thirty-Third World Kalire Championship.

Besides the two contestants seven other people shared the dais: the Supreme Arbitrator, The Master's two Seconds, Amato's Seconds, and the two Official Scorekeepers, one of whom was Anne. They all sat cross-legged on cushions at a discreet distance from the two principals. If they were conscious that their every movement, every facial expression, was being relayed by satellite to a million Kalire temples around the world, they evidenced no sign of it. They dwelt apart, isolated, enthralled by the timeless mystery and wonder of The Game of Games, the Gift from Beyond the Stars.

Into those silent, fathomless, interstellar reaches, the mere contemplation of which had once so terrified Pascal, Man in the person of The Master had dared to dip his arm. Two full centuries later, long after he had been given up for dead, he had returned to Earth, bearing with him the inconceivable Grail he had gone to seek.

He had emerged to find a world exhausted and ravaged almost beyond his recognition—a world in which the fabulous mission of *The Icarus* had dwindled to little more than an uneasy folk memory of what was surely the purest and most grandiloquent of all the acts of folly ever perpetrated in the whole crazy history of the human race.

When the great starship, scorched and scarred from its fantastic odyssey, had finally dropped, flaming, out of the skies to settle as gently as a seed of thistledown upon its original launching site on the shore of Lake Okeechobee, few who witnessed its arrival could bring themselves wholly to believe the evidence that was so manifestly there before them. The huge, tarnished, silver pillar standing among the rusting debris and the crumbling gantries whispered to them of those days, long since past, when their forefathers still had the capacity to hope.

A hastily convened reception committee had driven out to welcome the wanderers home. Grouped in a self-conscious semicircle on the fissured and weed-ribbed concrete of the ancient launch pad, the delegation stood waiting for the port to open and the Argonauts to descend.

At last the moment came. The hatch inched open, slowly cranking itself back to reveal a solitary figure standing framed in the portal and gazing down upon them.

"Who is it?" They whispered to one another. "Dalgleish? Martin? No, I'll swear that's Henderson himself. God, he hardly looks a day older than the pictures, does he? Are

you *sure* it's him? Yeah, that's Henderson all right. Christ, it doesn't seem possible, does it?"

And then someone had started to clap. In a moment everyone had joined in, beating the palms of their hands together in the dry, indifferent air.

Thirty feet above them, Peter Henderson, commander of *The Icarus,* heard the strange, uncoordinated pattering of their applause and slowly raised his left hand in hesitant acknowledgment. It was then that some sharp-eyed observer noted that beneath his right arm he was carrying what appeared to be an oblong wooden box.

At first practically nobody took Henderson seriously, and who could blame them? Yet the memory banks of *The Icarus* appeared to confirm much of what he said. The gist of it was that out there, beyond Eridanus, on a planet they had called "Dectire III," they had finally discovered that which they had gone forth to seek. The form it took was that of a fabulous city which they called "Eidothea," a city which, if Henderson was to be believed, was nothing less than all things to all men. It was inhabited by a race of gentle, doe-eyed creatures who differed from themselves only in being androgynous and in possessing an extra finger upon each hand. They were also, by human standards, practically immortal. The Eidotheans were the professed devotees of a hermaphrodite deity they called Kalirinos, who, they maintained, held sway over one half of the existing universe. The other half was the ordained territory of her counterpart (some said her identical twin) Arimanos. Kalirinos and Arimanos were locked in an eternal game of Kalire (The Game) whose counters were nothing less than the galaxies, the stars and the planets of the entire cosmos. By reaching Eidothea, humanity, in the persons of the crew of *The Icarus,* had supplied the evidence that their species was ready to join The Game and, by so doing, to take another step up the evolutionary ladder.

There had followed a period of roughly six months devoted to their initiation and instruction in the rudiments of Kalire, at the end of which Henderson alone had gained admission to the very lowest Eidothean rank of proficiency in The Game—a grade approximately equivalent, by our own standards, to the First Year Primary Division. After his victory he had been summoned before the High Council, presented with his robe of initiation, with the board

marked out in the one hundred and forty-four squares, each of which has its own name and ideogram, and with the box containing the one hundred and forty-three sacred counters, colored red on one side and blue on the other, which alone constitute the pure notes from which the divine harmonies of The Game of Games are derived. "And now you shall return to your own world," they had told him, "and become the teacher of your people. Soon, if we have judged correctly, your world will be ready to take its place in the timeless federation, and Kalirinos will smile upon you."

Henderson had protested passionately that he was wholly unworthy of such an honor, but the truth was that he could not bear the thought of having to tear himself away from the exquisite delights of Eidothea, which, like those of the fabled lotus, once they have been enjoyed, must claim the soul forever. However, the Eidotheans had seemingly been prepared for this. The commander was placed in a mild hypnotic trance, carried aboard *The Icarus,* and the ship's robot brain was instructed to ferry him back to his own planet. The rest of the crew were graciously permitted to remain behind in Paradise.

Within the terms of the eternal symbolic struggle between Kalirinos and Arimanos (and certainly against all the odds), the conversion of Earth was accomplished with a swiftness roughly commensurate to the reversal of a single counter upon the Divine Board. Within twenty-four hours of his setting foot once more upon his native soil, Commander Henderson had been interviewed on international So-Vi. There, before the astonished eyes of about a billion skeptical viewers, he had unfolded his board, set down his four opening counters in the prescribed pattern, and had given an incredulous world its very first lesson in Kalire.

The Japanese, with their long tradition of Zen and Go, were the first to become enmeshed in the infinite subtleties of The Game, and within a matter of weeks the great toy factories of Kobe and Nagoya were churning out Kalire sets by the million. The Russians and Chinese were quick to follow. And then—almost overnight it seemed—the whole world had gone Kalire-crazy. It leaped across all barriers of language and politics, demanding nothing, offering everything. Before it armies were powerless, creeds useless. Time-hallowed mercenary values, ancient preju-

dices, long-entrenched attitudes of mind—all these were suddenly revealed as the insubstantial shadows of a childhood nightmare. Kalire was all. But was it a religion, or a philosophy or just a perpetual diversion? The answer surely is that it was all these things and more besides. The deeper one studied it, the more subtle and complex it became. Layer upon layer upon layer of revelation awaited the devotee, and yet there was always the knowledge that however profoundly he delved he would never uncover the ultimate penetralium of the mystery.

Soon international tourneys were being organized, and the champions started to emerge. They too competed among themselves for the honor of challenging Peter Henderson. The first contender so to arise was the Go Master, Subi Katumo. He played six games with Henderson and lost them all. From that point on Henderson was known simply as "The Master." He traveled the world over playing exhibition games and giving lectures to rapt audiences. He also founded the Kalirinos Academy at Pasadena, where he instructed his disciples in those fundamental spiritual disciplines so vital to the mastery of the art of Kalire and into which he himself had been initiated by the Eidotheans. He wrote a book which he called *The Game of Games* and prefaced it with a quotation taken from "The Paradoxes of the Negative Way" by St. John of the Cross:

In order to become that which thou art not,
Thou must go by a way which thou knowest not. . . .

The Game of Games became a world bestseller even before it had reached the bookshops, and within six months of publication had been translated into every language spoken on Earth.

And so Henderson grew old. Now, in the thirty-fourth year of his return, at the physical age of seventy-eight, he was defending his title yet again. His challenger, Guilio Amato, the twenty-eight-year-old Neapolitan, was the premier graduate from the Kalirinos Academy. In his pupil's play The Master had detected for the first time a hint of that ineffable inner luminosity which others ascribe to genius but which he himself recognized as supreme quality. Having recognized it, he dared to permit himself the luxury

of hoping that his long vigil might at last be drawing to its close.

So far, they had played two games of the ordained six: one in Moscow and one in Rome. The Master had won both. But in each, in order to ensure victory, he had had to reach deeper than ever before into his innermost resources for a key to unlock his pupil's strategy. Now the third game had reached its critical third quarter. If The Master won (and who could doubt that he would?), the title would remain his. Even if, by some miracle, Amato managed to win the three remaining games, the resulting draw would still count as a victory for the titleholder. To state the matter in a way wholly foreign to the spirit of the contest—let alone of Kalire itself—to keep his chances alive, Amato had to win this third game.

Such was the situation when The Master, having entered the hall, bowed to the Supreme Arbitrator, sat down, touched hands formally across the board with his challenger and then accepted the envelope containing Amato's sealed move. He opened it, scanned the paper, nodded to his pupil and permitted himself the ghost of a smile. It was exactly the move he had expected. He leaned forward and placed a blue counter upon the designated square. On the display board above their heads a blue light winked on and off. A faint sigh went up from the main body of the hall. The struggle was rejoined.

Immediately after breakfast the following morning, Roger took his micomicon down to the depot in the town and left it for the broken spool to be repaired. Having been assured that it would be ready for him to collect within the hour, he elected to retrace his path of the previous day, wandering out along the stone-flagged quay to where the mole jutted out across the harbor mouth.

The morning sun was shining just as brilliantly upon the flanks of the volcanic hills and scooping up its shimmering reflections from the restlessly lopping wavelets in the inner basin; the brightly shawled women were still crying out to each other in their strange parrot patois from their ornate balconies; the gulls were still shrieking and swirling as they dived for the scraps; ostensibly it was all just as it had been the day before. And yet the boy was conscious that, in some not quite definable way, things were subtly different. Something had changed. Frowning, he scanned the horizon

for signs of clippers plying the trade route but could see nothing. Then, moved by a sudden impulse, he clambered over the parapet and scrambled down the rocks to the ledge where he had last seen the two boys fishing.

There were dried fish scales glinting like chips of mica on the rocks, and he picked one or two of them off with his fingernail. Having examined them, he flipped them into the green, rocking waters below him. Then he squatted down, cupped his chin in his hands and stared down at the flickering shadows of the little fish as they came darting to the surface attracted by the glittering morsels.

He thought of Anne finning her golden way across the bottom of the sunlit pool, and from there his memory winged on to the curious conversation he had had with the old man. As he started to recall it, he began to realize that it was his recollection of their meeting in the darkness which had contrived to insinuate itself between him and the brilliant scene about him. "It's what it *is*, not what anyone *says* it is." What was that supposed to mean? And how could red *be* blue? Even if everyone *called* it blue, it would still *be* red. Or would it? A sharp splinter of sunlight struck dazzling off a wave straight into his eyes. He covered them with his hands, and suddenly, bright as an opal on his retina, he seemed to see again the glowing spark of The Master's cigar and above it the shape of the bearded lips blowing it brighter. Yet, even as he followed the point of light, its color began to change, becoming first mauve, then purple, and finally a brilliant aquamarine. And yet, indisputably, it was still the original spark.

He opened his eyes wide, blinked, and gazed about him. As he did so, he heard a voice calling down to him from above. He looked up and saw the silhouette of a head against the arching blue backdrop of the morning sky. He screwed up his eyes, smiled and shook his head.

The man's voice came again, and Roger guessed it must be one of the waiters from the hotel. He spread his hands helplessly. *"No hablo Español,* Señor," he tried. *"Scusi. Estoy Americano."*

The man laughed. "I was only asking what it was like down there," he said in perfect English.

Roger shrugged. "Well, it's okay. I guess," he said. "If you like sitting on rocks, that is."

"Nothing I like better. Mind if I join you?"

"Sure. Come on down."

The man stepped over the low parapet and descended, surefooted, to the ledge. Once there, he glanced about him, selected a smoothish rock and sat down, letting his long legs dangle over the waters. He drew a deep breath and let it out in a luxurious sigh. "That's great," he murmured. "Just great."

Roger scrutinized him out of the tail of his eye. He was dark-haired, his face was tanned, and he had pale smile creases at the corners of his eyes and mouth. Roger placed him as being in his middle twenties. "Are you here for the tourney?" he asked.

"That's right."

"I thought you must be."

"How so? I speak a pretty fair Español, don't I?"

"Yes. I guess so. But you're not Spanish, are you?"

"No."

"Where are you from?"

"California mostly."

Roger poked his little finger up his nose and scratched around thoughtfully for a moment. Then he glanced sideways at the newcomer, removed his finger and said, "Would you mind if I asked you a question?"

"Well, that all depends, doesn't it? I mean there are questions and questions."

"Oh, it's not personal," said Roger hastily.

"Then I'd say there's just that much less chance of my being able to answer it. But go ahead anyway."

Roger pointed across the inner harbor to where a woman in a flame-colored shawl was leaning over a balcony, engaged in a crackling altercation with a fisherman on the water below her. "Do you see that woman in the red dress?" he asked.

The man followed his pointing finger. "I see her," he said.

"If I said she was wearing a *blue* dress, would I be right or wrong?"

The man glanced at him, and his brown eyes widened in fractional astonishment. "Would you mind repeating that?"

Roger did so.

"Yes, I thought that's what you said." The dark head turned and he stared again at the woman. "A *blue* dress?" he repeated. "What kind of a crazy question is that, for Godsake?"

"I don't know," Roger confessed. "But last night The Master told me that if enough people said red was blue, then it *was* blue."

The young man turned and stared at him. "Come again. *Who* said it?"

"The Master. I was talking to him out in the hotel garden after supper last night. But what I'm wondering is, if there's only *two* people and one says a thing's red and the other says its blue—well, what *is* it?"

The young man lifted his right hand and drew it slowly across his mouth. "He said red *was* blue?"

"Well, not exactly. He said it's what it is. He said it's not *really* red or blue or anything—except itself."

The young man's eyes had taken on a curiously opaque expression, and though Roger knew he was looking *at* him, he also knew he wasn't really seeing him. "I guess it's a pretty dumb sort of question," he said at last. "But, I don't know, somehow it's been bothering me."

"How's that?"

"It's just been bugging me, that's all."

"Yes, I can see that." The young man nodded. "So. What kind of an answer are you hoping for?"

"I don't know."

"What's your name, son?"

"Roger. Roger Herzheim."

"Well, Roger, I don't know that I can help. But how's this for a start? Let's say there are *things* and there are the *names* of those things. Right? Well, it's from the names we derive our *ideas* of the things. D'you follow?"

Roger nodded.

"Okay. Now if we play around with the *ideas* for long enough, then, sure as hell, we'll get to believing that the ideas *are* the things. But they're not. Not really. The things are the things themselves. They always have been and, I guess, they always will be. It's a pretty profound truth really. At least that's what *I* think he was saying. But, hell, Roger, I could be *way* out."

Roger nodded rather doubtfully, and as he did so, his attention was caught by a sudden silver flickering far out on the eastern horizon. "Hey! Look!" he cried. "That's the first today! Just look at her *go!*"

The young men grinned broadly as he turned and gazed out to sea. "Yep, she's a real beauty," he said. "*Leviathan* class, I'd guess."

"Leviathan?" echoed Roger scornfully. "With five t'gallants? Why sure she's an *Aeolian.* And on the Barbados run too. Do you know that bird can *average* thirty knots?"

"Thirty knots, eh?" repeated the young man reverently. "You don't say so? Incredible!"

Half an hour later they strolled back into town to collect Roger's micomicon. As they were walking up the main street, Roger heard someone cry out, "Guilio! Where the helluv you *been,* man? I've been scouring the whole goddamn *town* for you! Tuomati's done a depth analysis of the whole Mardonian sector and he reckons he's found us some real counter chances."

"That's great, Harry," said the young man, with what seemed to Roger rather tepid enthusiasm. "Well, *ciao,* Roger. I'm really glad to have met you. I surely won't ever again mistake a *Leviathan* for an *Aeolian."*

Roger smiled and waved his hand shyly, but Guilio Romano Amato was already striding away up the hill deep in conversation with his Second.

Roger spent the afternoon beside the pool hoping that Anne would reappear. She never did. Nor did she show up in the hotel dining room for the evening meal. Roger accompanied his mother up to their bedroom and, in response to her query as to how he intended to spend his evening, told her that he thought maybe he'd look in at the Spectators' Gallery for a while.

"I'm truly flattered to hear it, honey. But isn't *Clippers* on So-Vi tonight?"

"Sure it is. But not till ten. So I thought I'd finish off my letter to Dad first, then take in a bit of the tourney. You've drawn 58, haven't you?"

"That's right, pet. Board 58, Section 7. I'll give you a wave."

It was not until his mother had wafted him her ritual kiss and left the apartment that it occurred to the boy to wonder why he had not told her of either of his meetings with the two champions.

At nine o'clock he rode the elevator down to the first floor and followed the indicators to the Spectators' Gallery. The sign STANDING ROOM ONLY was up, but Roger contrived to squeeze his way in and found a place to squat down on one of the steep gangways. The general tourney had already been in session for over an hour, but The

Master and his challenger had only just taken their seats on the dais, and the red light which marked The Master's sealed move was still winking on the display board. There was an almost palpable atmosphere of tension in the hall as Amato surveyed the field before him.

Roger glanced across at one of the monitor screens and saw a huge close-up of the young man's face. It could almost have been a death mask, so total was its stillness. Then the picture flicked over to the board itself and showed Amato's hand dipping into his bowl of counters. The whole vast hall had become as silent as though everyone had been buried beneath a thick, invisible blanket of snow.

Beneath Guilio's slim fingers the counter slowly turned and turned again: red, blue; red, blue; red, blue. Then he had reached out and laid it quietly on the board. The tip of the index finger of his right hand lingered upon it for a long, thoughtful moment and then withdrew.

As the blue light sprang out on the display, there came a sound which was part whisper, part sigh, as the spectators let out their pent breath. And then, from somewhere down below out of Roger's view, in the section of the tourney which held the players of the Premier Grade, there came the shocking sound of someone clapping. In a moment it had caught hold like a brush fire, and it was at least a minute before the controller's impassioned pleas for silence could make themselves heard above the unprecedented hubbub.

"What is it?" Roger demanded, shaking the arm of the person beside him. "What's he done?"

"I don't know, son. Frankly it seems crazy to me. But I guess it must be something pretty special to earn that sort of hand from the Premiers."

Roger turned to the monitor screen for enlightenment and was treated to a close-up of The Master's face. He was smiling the sort of smile that might have wreathed the face of a *conquistador* as he emerged from some high Andean jungle to find himself gazing down upon El Dorado. He leaned across the board and murmured something to the impassive Amato. The concealed microphones picked up his voice instantly, and around the world was relayed one single vibrant word, the supreme accolade: *"Beautiful!"*

As he was fully entitled to do under the rules, The Master requested a statutory thirty-minute recess, which

the Arbitrator immediately granted. The clocks were stopped; the two contestants touched hands; and The Master rose from his cushion, beckoned to Anne and vanished with her through the curtained exit at the back of the dais.

The microphones picked up the whisper of conversation between Amato and his Seconds. As the cameras zoomed in on them, Roger saw that the two men were gazing at Guilio with what can only be described as awe. The young man simply shook his head and shrugged as if to signify that what they were saying scarcely concerned him. He was right.

That single move of Amato's has justly earned the title of "The Immortal," though, by today's standards, one must admit that it does have a distinctly old-fashioned air. The fact is that after an interval of close to thirty years, it is all but impossible to convey just how exceptional it was at the time it was first played. To appreciate it fully, one would have to re-create the whole electric atmosphere of that tourney and the seemingly impregnable position that The Master had established for himself in the match. It has been claimed with some substance that Amato's ninety-second move in the third game of the Thirty-Third World Series marked mankind's coming of age. But probably Amato himself came closer to the truth when he remarked to a reporter at the conclusion of the match, "Hell, man, it was just a matter of realizing that you can walk backward through a door marked 'Push.' "

Twelve years later, in the preface to his monumental work *One Thousand Great Games,* Guilio elaborated upon this as follows: "I realized at that moment why The Master had chosen that particular paradox from St. John of the Cross as prefix to his *Game of Games.* Up to that instant in time, my whole approach to Kalire had been based upon the overwhelming desire to win. In order to become that which I was not (in my case, at that time, the winner of that vital third game), I had to go by a way which I did not know. There was only one such way available to me. I had to desire not defeat (that seemed inevitable anyway) but the achievement of a state of mind in which winning or losing ceased to have meaning for me. In other words, I had to gain access to the viewpoint from which Kalirinos and Arimanos are perceived to be one and the same being. In the timeless moment during which I turned

that counter over between my fingers, I understood the significance of The Master's casual observation which I had heard for the first time that very morning: 'There is neither red nor blue, there is only the thing itself.' The thing itself was nothing less than the pure quintessence of The Game—an eternal harmonic beauty which obeys its own code of laws and whose sublime and infinite subtlety we are fortunate to glimpse perhaps once or twice in a lifetime. Let us call it simply 'the Truth of the Game.' At that moment I recognized it, and I laid my counter where I did for no other reason than my overwhelming desire to preserve the pattern forever in my own mind's eye."

So the shapes dissolve and reassemble in the swirl of Time. Everything changes; everything remains the same. We know now what we are, and some of us believe we have an inkling of what we may become.

Thirty-four years have passed since Guilio Romano Amato dethroned The Master and became The Master in his turn. He held the title for seven years, lost it to Li Chang, and then regained it two years later in the epic encounter of '57. In '62 the Universal Grade of Grand Master was established, and The Game moved into its present phase.

It only remains to outline briefly the subsequent histories of those persons who have been sketched in this little memoir.

First, The Master himself. He died peacefully at his home in Pasadena three years after relinquishing his title. At the time of his death his age by calendar computation was 293 years; by physical measurement, 81 years. Despite his insistence that he wished for no ostentatious ceremonial of any kind, his funeral was marked by a full week of mourning throughout the capitals of the world, and the memorial service at the academy was attended by the ambassadors from more than two hundred nations.

Guilio Amato retired from active play in '61 and since then has devoted his energies to supervising the work of the Academy, of which he had been principal since The Master's death. His best known work—apart from the *Thousand Great Games* already mentioned—is undoubtedly his variorum edition of The Master's own *Championship Games*, which in itself probably constitutes the best standard world history of Kalire.

After The Master's death Anne Henderson returned to the theater, where she enjoyed a successful career up until her second marriage in '59. She now lives in Italy with her family. Her delightful *Memories of The Master* was published in '64.

Roger Herzheim never did become a clipper captain. At the age of fifteen he sat for a scholarship to the Academy and soon proved that he had an outstanding talent for The Game. At twenty-one he won his first major tournament, emerging a clear four points ahead of all the other contestants. By twenty-five he was an acknowledged Master and acted as Second to Guilio Amato in his final championship match. He gained his own Grand Master's Robe in '67 and was unsuccessful challenger for the World Title two years later. He won the title conclusively in '71 and has held it ever since. But his days too are surely numbered. *Sic itur ad astra.*

(*This fragment of autobiography was found among the papers of the ex-World Master, Roger Herzheim. He died on March* 23, 2282, *aged* 68 *years.*)

The Custodians

ALTHOUGH THE MONASTERY OF Hautaire has dominated the Ix valley for more than twelve hundred years, compared with the Jurassic limestone to which it clings it might have been erected yesterday. Even the megaliths which dot the surrounding hillside predate the Abbey by several millennia. But if, geologically speaking, Hautaire is still a newcomer, as a human monument it is already impressively ancient. For the first two centuries following its foundation it served the faithful as a pilgrims' sanctuary, then, less happily, as a staging post for the crusaders. By the thirteenth century it had already known both fat years and lean ones and it was during one of the latter that, on a cool September afternoon in the year 1272, a gray-bearded, sunburned man came striding up the white road which wound beside the brawling Ix, and hammered on the Abbey doors with the butt of his staff.

There were rumors abroad that plague had broken out again in the southern ports and the eye which scrutinized the lone traveler through the grill was alert with apprehension. In response to a shouted request the man snorted, flung off his cloak, discarded his tattered leather jerkin and raised his bare arms. Twisting his torso from side to side he displayed his armpits. There followed a whispered consultation within; then, with a rattle of chains and a protest of iron bolts, the oak wicket gate edged inward grudgingly, and the man stepped through.

The monk who had admitted him made haste to secure the door. "We hear there is plague abroad, brother," he muttered by way of explanation.

The man shrugged on his jerkin, looping up the leather toggles with deft fingers. "The only plague in these parts is ignorance," he observed sardonically.

"You have come far, brother?"

"Far enough," grunted the traveler.

"From the south?"

The man slipped his arm through the strap of his satchel, eased it up onto his shoulder and then picked up his staff. He watched as the heavy iron chain was hooked back on to its staple. "From the east," he said.

The doorkeeper preceded his guest across the flagged courtyard and into a small room which was bare except for a heavy wooden trestle table. Lying upon it was a huge, leather-bound *registrum,* a stone ink pot and a quill pen. The monk frowned, licked his lips, picked up the quill and prodded it gingerly at the ink.

The man smiled faintly. "By your leave, brother," he murmured and taking the dipped quill he wrote in rapid, flowing script: *Meister Sternwärts—Seher—ex-Cathay.*

The monk peered down at the ledger, his lips moving silently as he spelled his way laboriously through the entry. By the time he was halfway through the second word a dark flush had crept up his neck and suffused his whole face. "Mea culpa, Magister," he muttered.

"So you've heard of Meister Sternwärts, have you, brother? And what have you heard, I wonder?"

In a rapid reflex action the simple monk sketched a flickering finger-cross in the air.

The man laughed. "Come, holy fool!" he cried, whacking the doorkeeper across the buttocks with his stick. "Conduct me to Abbé Paulus lest I conjure you into a salamander!"

In the seven hundred years which had passed since Meister Sternwärts strode up the long white road and requested audience with the Abbé Paulus the scene from the southern windows of the monastery had changed surprisingly little. Over the seaward slopes of the distant hills, purple-ripe clouds were still lowering their showers of rain like filmy nets, and high above the Ix valley the brown and white eagles spiraled lazily upward in an invisible funnel of warm air that had risen there like a fountain every sunny day since the hills were first folded millions of years before. Even the road which Sternwärts had trodden,

though better surfaced, still followed much the same path, and if a few of the riverside fields had expanded and swallowed up their immediate neighbors the pattern of the stone walls was still recognizably what it had been for centuries. Only the file of high-tension cable carriers striding diagonally down across the valley on a stage of their march from the hydroelectric barrage in the high mountains thirty miles to the north proclaimed that this was the twentieth century.

Gazing down the valley from the library window of Hautaire, Spindrift saw the tiny distant figure trudging up the long slope, saw the sunlight glittering from blond hair as though from a fleck of gold dust, and found himself recalling the teams of men with their white helmets and their clattering machines who had come to erect those giant pylons. He remembered how the brothers had discussed the brash invasion of their privacy and had all agreed that things would never be the same again. Yet the fact remained that within a few short months they had grown accustomed to the novelty and now Spindrift was no longer sure that he could remember exactly what the valley had looked like before the coming of the pylons. Which was odd, he reflected, because he recalled very clearly the first time he had set eyes upon Hautaire and there had certainly been no pylons then.

May 1923, it had been. He had bicycled up from the coast with his scanty possessions stuffed into a pair of basket-work panniers slung from his carrier. For the previous six months he had been gathering scraps of material for a projected doctoral thesis on the life and works of the shadowy "Meister Sternwärts" and had written to the Abbot of Hautaire on the remote off-chance that some record of a possible visit by the Meister might still survive in the monastery archives. He explained that he had some reason to believe that Sternwärts might have visited Hautaire but that his evidence for this was, admittedly, of the slenderest, being based as it was on a single cryptic reference in a letter dated 1274, sent by the Meister to a friend in Basle.

Spindrift's inquiry had eventually been answered by a certain Fr. Roderigo who explained that, since he was custodian of the monastery library, the Abbé Ferrand had accordingly passed M. Spindrift's letter on to him. He was, he continued, profoundly intrigued by M. Spindrift's in-

quiry because in all the years he had been in charge of the Abbey library no one had ever expressed the remotest interest in Meister Sternwärts; in fact, to the best of his knowledge, he, Fr. Roderigo, and the Abbé Ferrand were the only two men now alive who knew that the Meister had spent his last years as an honored guest of the thirteenth-century Abbot and had, in all probability, worked in that very library in which his letter was now being written. He concluded with the warm assurance that any such information concerning the Meister as he himself had acquired over the years was at M. Spindrift's disposal.

Spindrift had hardly been able to believe his good fortune. Only the most fantastic chance had led to his turning up that letter in Basle in the first place—the lone survivor of a correspondence which had ended in the incinerators of the Inquisition. Now there seemed to be a real chance that the slender corpus of the Meister's surviving works might be expanded beyond the gnomic apothegms of the *Illuminatum!* He had written back by return of post suggesting diffidently that he might perhaps be permitted to visit the monastery in person and give himself the inestimable pleasure of conversing with Fr. Roderigo. An invitation had come winging back, urging him to spend as long as he wished as a lay guest of the Order.

If, in those far-off days, you had asked Marcus Spindrift what he believed in, the one concept he would certainly never have offered you would have been predestination. He had survived the war to emerge as a junior lieutenant in the Supply Corps and, on demobilization, had lost no time in returning to his first love, Medieval Philosophy. The mindless carnage which he had witnessed from the sidelines had done much to reinforce his interest in the works of the early Christian mystics with particular reference to the *bons hommes* of the Albigensian Heresy. His stumbling across an ancient handwritten transcript of Sternwärt's *Illuminatum* in the shell-shattered ruins of a presbytery in Armentières in April 1918 had, for Spindrift, all the impact of a genuine spiritual revelation. Some tantalizing quality in the Meister's thoughts had called out to him across the gulf of the centuries and there and then he had determined that if he were fortunate enough to emerge intact from the holocaust he would make it his life's work to give form and substance to the shadowy presence which

he sensed lurking behind the *Illuminatum* like the smile on the lips of the Gioconda.

Nevertheless, prior to his receiving Fr. Roderigo's letter, Spindrift would have been the first to admit that his quest for some irrefutable evidence that the Meister had ever really existed had reaped but one tiny grain of putative "fact" amid untold bushels of frustration. Apparently, not only had no one ever *heard* of Sternwärts, they expressed not the slightest interest in whether he had ever existed at all. Indeed, as door after door closed in his face, Spindrift found himself coming to the depressing conclusion that the Weimar Republic had more than a little in common with the Dark Ages.

Yet, paradoxically, as one faint lead after another petered out or dissolved in the misty backwaters of medieval hearsay, Spindrift had found himself becoming more and more convinced, not only that Sternwärts *had* existed, but that he himself had, in some mysterious fashion, been selected to prove it. The night before he set out on the last lap of his journey to Hautaire he had lain awake in his ex-army sleeping sack and had found himself reviewing in his mind the odd chain of coincidences that had brought him to that particular place at that particular time: the initial stumbling upon the *Illuminatum;* the discovery of the cryptic reference coupling Sternwärts with Johannes of Basle; and, most fantastic of all, his happening to alight in Basle upon that one vital letter to Johannes which had been included as a cover-stiffener to a bound-up collection of addresses by the arch-heretic Michael Servetus. At every critical point it was as though he had received the precise nudge which alone could put him back on the trail again. "Old Meister," he murmured aloud, "am I seeking *you,* or are you seeking *me?*" High overhead a plummeting meteor scratched a diamond line down the star-frosted window of the sky. Spindrift smiled wryly and settled down to sleep.

At noon precisely the next day he pedaled wearily round the bend in the lower road and was rewarded with his first glimpse of the distant Abbey. With a thankful sigh he dismounted, leaned, panting, over his handlebars and peered up the valley. What he saw was destined to remain just as sharp and clear in his mind's eye until the day he died.

Starkly shadowed by the midday sun, its once-red tiled roofs long since bleached to a pale biscuit and rippling

in the heat haze, Hautaire, despite its formidable mass, seemed oddly insubstantial. Behind it, tier upon tier, the mountains rose up faint and blue into the cloudless northern sky. As he gazed up at the Abbey, Spindrift conceived the peculiar notion that the structure was simply tethered to the rocks like some strange airship built of stone. It was twisted oddly askew and some of the buttresses supporting the Romanesque cupola seemed to have been stuck on almost as afterthoughts. He blinked his eyes and the quirk of vision passed. The massive pile re-emerged as solid and unified as any edifice which has successfully stood foursquare on to the elements for over a thousand years. Fumbling a handkerchief from his pocket, Spindrift mopped the sweat from his forehead; then, remounting his bicycle, he pushed off on the last lap of his journey.

Fifteen minutes later, as he wheeled his machine up the final steep incline, a little birdlike monk clad in a faded brown habit fluttered out from the shadows of the portico and scurried with arms outstretched in welcome to the perspiring cyclist. "Welcome, Señor Spindrift!" he cried. "I have been expecting you this half hour past."

Spindrift was still somewhat dizzy from his hot and dusty ride but he was perfectly well aware that he had not specified any particular day for his arrival if only because he had no means of knowing how long the journey from Switzerland would take him. He smiled and shook the proffered hand. "Brother Roderigo?"

"Of course, of course," chuckled the little monk and, glancing down at Spindrift's bicycle, he observed: "So they managed to repair your wheel."

Sprindrift blinked. "Why, yes," he said. "But how on earth . . . ?"

"Ah, but you must be so hot and tired, Señor! Come into Hautaire where it is cool." Seizing hold of Spindrift's machine he trundled it briskly across the courtyard, through an archway, down a stone-flagged passage, and propped it finally against a cloister wall.

Spindrift, following a pace or two behind, gazed about him curiously. In the past six months he had visited many ecclesiastical establishments but none which had given him the overwhelming sense of timeless serenity that he recognized here. In the center of the cloister yard clear water was bubbling up into a shallow limestone saucer. As it brimmed over, thin wavering streams tinkled musically

into the deep basin beneath. Spindrift walked slowly forward into the fierce sunlight and stared down into the rippled reflection of his dusty, sweat-streaked face. A moment later his image was joined by that of the smiling Fr. Roderigo. "That water comes down from a spring in the hillside," the little monk informed him. "It flows through the very same stone pipes which the Romans first laid. It has never been known to run dry."

A metal cup was standing on the shadowed inner rim of the basin. The monk picked up, dipped it and handed it to Spindrift. Spindrift smiled his thanks, raised the vessel to his lips and drank. It seemed to him that he had never tasted anything so delicious in his life. He drained the cup and handed it back, aware as he did so that his companion was nodding his head as though in affirmation. Spindrift smiled quizzically. "Yes," sighed Fr. Roderigo, "you have come. Just as he said you would."

The sense of acute disorientation which Spindrift had experienced since setting foot in Hautaire persisted throughout the whole of the first week of his stay. For this, Fr. Roderigo was chiefly responsible. In some manner not easy to define the little monk had succeeded in inducing in his guest the growing conviction that his quest for the elusive Meister Sternwärts had reached its ordained end; that what Spindrift was seeking was hidden here at Hautaire, buried somewhere among the musty manuscripts and incunabula that filled the oak shelves and stone recesses of the Abbey library.

True to his promise the librarian had laid before Spindrift such documentary evidence as he himself had amassed over the years, commencing with that faded entry in the thirteenth-century *registrum*. Together they had peered down at the ghostly script. "Out of Cathay," mused Spindrift. "Could it have been a joke?"

Fr. Roderigo pulled a face. "Perhaps," he said, "but the hand is indisputably the Meister's. Of course he may simply have wished to mystify the brothers."

"Do you believe that?"

"No," said the monk. "I am sure that what is written there is the truth. Meister Sternwärts had just returned from a pilgrimage in the steps of Apollonius of Tyana. He lived and studied in the East for ten years." He scuttled across to a distant shelf, lifted down a bound folio

volume, blew the dust from it, coughed himself breathless and then laid the book before Spindrift. "The evidence is all there," he panted, smiling shyly. "I bound the sheets together myself some thirty years ago. I remember thinking at the time that it would make a fascinating commentary to Philostratus' *Life of Apollonius.*"

Spindrift opened the book and translated the brief and firmly penned Prolegomenon. *"Being then in my forty-ninth year, Sound in Mind and Hale in Body, I, Peter Sternwärts, Seeker after Ancient Truths; Alerted by my Friends; Pursued by mine Enemies; did set forth from Würzburg for Old Buda. What here follows is the Truthful History of all that Befell me and of my Strange Sojourn in Far Cathay, written by my own hand in the Abbey of Hautaire in this year of Our Lord 1273."*

Spindrift looked up from the page and, as he did so, he gave a deep sigh of happiness.

Fr. Roderigo nodded. "I know, my friend," he said. "You do not have to tell me. I shall leave you alone with him."

But Spindrift was already turning the first page.

That evening, at Fr. Roderigo's suggestion, Spindrift strolled with him up on to the hillside above Hautaire. The ascent was a slow one because every fifty paces or so Fr. Roderigo was constrained to pause a while to regain his breath. It was then that Spindrift became aware that the friendly little monk was ill. Beneath that quick and ready smile were etched the deep lines of old familiar pain. He suggested gently that perhaps they might just sit where they were but Fr. Roderigo would not hear of it. "No, no, my dear Spindrift," he insisted breathlessly. "There is something I must show you. Something that has a profound bearing upon our joint quest."

After some twenty minutes they had reached one of the fallen menhirs that formed a sort of gigantic necklace around the Abbey. There Fr. Roderigo paused and patted his heaving chest apologetically. "Tell me, Señor," he panted. "What is your candid opinion of Apollonius of Tyana?"

Spindrift spread his hands in a gesture that contrived to be both noncommittal and expiatory. "To tell the truth I can hardly be said to have an opinion at all," he confessed. "Of course, I know that Philostratus made some extraordinary claims on his behalf."

"Apollonius made only one claim for *himself*," said Fr. Roderigo. "But that one was not inconsiderable. He claimed to have foreknowledge of the future."

"Yes?" said Spindrift guardedly.

"The extraordinary accuracy of his predictions led to his falling foul of the Emperor Nero. Apollonius, having already foreseen this, prudently retired to Ephesus before the monster was able to move against him."

Spindrift smiled. "Precognition obviously proved a most useful accomplishment."

"Yes and no," said Fr. Roderigo, ignoring the irony. "Have you reached the passage in the Meister's *Biographia* where he speaks of the *Praemonitiones?*"

"Do they really exist?"

The little monk seemed on the point of saying something and then appeared to change his mind. "Look," he said, gesturing around him with a wide sweep of his arm. "You see now how Hautaire occupies the exact center of the circle?"

"Why, so it does," observed Spindrift.

"Not fortuitous, I think."

"No?"

"Nor did he," said Fr. Roderigo with a smile. "The Meister spent a whole year plotting the radiants. Somewhere there is a map which he drew."

"Why should he do that?"

"He was seeking to locate an Apollonian nexus."

"A what?"

"The concept is meaningless unless one is prepared to accept the possibility of precognition."

"Ah," said Spindrift guardedly. "And did he find what he was looking for?"

"Yes," said Fr. Roderigo simply. "There." He pointed down at the Abbey.

"And then what?" inquired Spindrift curiously.

Fr. Roderigo chewed his lower lip and frowned. "He persuaded Abbé Paulus to build him an observatory—an '*oculus*' he called it."

"And what did he hope to observe from it?"

"*In* it," corrected Fr. Roderigo with a faint smile. "It had no windows."

"You amaze me," said Spindrift, shaking his head. "Does it still exist?"

"It does."

"I should very much like to see it. Would that be possible?"

"It might," the monk admitted. "We would have to obtain the Abbot's permission. However, I—" He broke off, racked by a savage fit of coughing that turned his face gray. Spindrift, much alarmed, patted his companion gently on the back and felt utterly helpless. Eventually the little monk recovered his breath and with a trembling hand wiped a trail of spittle from his blue lips. Spindrift was horrified to see a trace of blood on the white handkerchief. "Hadn't we better be making our way back?" he suggested solicitously.

Fr. Roderigo nodded submissively and allowed Spindrift to take him by the arm and help him down the track. When they were about halfway down he was overcome by another fit of coughing which left him pale and gasping. Spindrift, now thoroughly alarmed, was all for going to fetch help from the Abbey, but the monk would not hear of it. When he had recovered sufficiently to continue he whispered hoarsely: "I promise I will speak to the Abbot about the *oculus*."

Spindrift protested that there was no hurry but Fr. Roderigo shook his head stubbornly. "Fortunately there *is* still just time, my friend. Just time enough."

Three days later Fr. Roderigo was dead. After attending the evening Requiem Mass for his friend, Spindrift made his way up to the library and sat there alone for a long time. The day was fast fading and the mistral was beginning to blow along the Ix valley. Spindrift could hear it sighing round the buttresses and mourning among the crannies in the crumbling stonework. He thought of Roderigo now lying out on the hillside in his shallow anonymous grave. *The goal ye seek lies within yourself.* He wondered what had inspired the Abbot to choose that particular line from the *Illuminatum* for his requiem text and suspected that he was the only person present who had recognized its origin.

There was a deferential knock at the library door and a young novice came in carrying a small, metal-bound casket. He set it down on the table before Spindrift, took a key from his pocket and laid it beside the box. "The Father Superior instructed me to bring these to you, sir," he said. "They were in Brother Roderigo's cell." He bowed

his head slightly, turned and went out, closing the door softly behind him.

Spindrift picked up the key and examined it curiously. It was quite unlike any other he had ever seen; wrought somewhat in the shape of a florid, double-ended question mark. He had no idea how old it was or even what it was made of. It looked like some alloy—pewter, maybe?—but there was no discernible patina of age. He laid it down again and drew the casket toward him. This was about a foot long, nine inches or so wide and perhaps six inches deep. The oak lid, which was ornately decorated with silver inlay and brass studding, was slightly domed. Spindrift raised the box and shook it gently. He could hear something shifting around inside, bumping softly against the sides. He did not doubt that the strange key unlocked the casket but when he came to try he could find no keyhole in which to fit it. He peered underneath. By the trickle of waning light through the western windows he could just discern an incised pentagram and the roman numerals for 1274.

His pulse quickening perceptibly, he hurried across to the far end of the room and fetched an iron candlestick. Having lit the candle he set it down beside the box and adjusted it so that its light was shining directly upon the lid. It was then that he noticed that part of the inlaid decoration appeared to correspond to what he had previously assumed to be the handle of the key. He pressed down on the silver inlay with his fingertips and thought he felt it yield ever so slightly.

He retrieved the key, adjusted it so that its pattern completely covered that of the inlay, and then pressed downward experimentally. There was a faint *click* and he felt the lid pushing itself upward against the pressure of his fingers. He let out his pent breath in a faint sigh, detached the key and eased the lid back on its hinge. Lying within the box was a vellum-covered book and a quill pen.

Spindrift wiped his fingers along his sleeve and, with his heart racing, dipped his hand into the casket and lifted out the book. As the light from the candle slanted across the cover he was able to make out the faded sepia lettering spelling out the word *"Praemonitiones"* and below it, in a darker ink, the cynical query—*Quis Custodiet Ipsos Custodes?*

Spindrift blinked up into the candlelight. "Who will watch the watchers?" he murmured. "Who, indeed?"

The wind snuffled and whimpered against the now dark window panes and the vesper bell began to toll in the Abbey tower. Spindrift gave a violent, involuntary shiver and turned back the cover of the book.

Someone, perhaps even Peter Sternwärts himself, had stitched on to the fly leaf a sheet of folded parchment. Spindrift carefully unfolded it and peered down upon what, at first glance, seemed to be an incomprehensible spiderweb of finely drawn lines. He had been staring at it for fully a minute before it dawned on him that the dominant pattern was remarkably similar to that on the lid of the casket and its weirdly shaped key. But there was something else too; something that teased at his recollection; something he knew he had once seen somewhere else. And suddenly he had it: an interlinked, megalithic spiral pattern carved into a rockface near Tintagel in Cornwall; here were exactly those same whorled and coupled S shapes that had once seemed to his youthful imagination like a giant's thumbprints in the granite.

No sooner was the memory isolated than he had associated this graphic labyrinth with the pagan menhirs dotting the hillside round Hautaire. Could *this* be the map Roderigo had mentioned? He held the parchment closer to the quaking candleflame and at once perceived the ring of tiny circles which formed a periphery around the central vortex. From each of these circles faint lines had been scratched across the swirling whirlpool to meet at its center.

Spindrift was now convinced that what he was holding in his hands was some arcane chart of Hautaire itself and its immediate environs, but at the precise point where the Abbey itself should have been indicated, something had been written in minute letters. Unfortunately, the point happened to coincide with the central cruciform fold in the parchment. Spindrift screwed up his eyes and thought he could just make out the words *"tempus"* and *"pons"*—or, possibly, *"fons"*—together with a word which might equally well have been *"cave"* or *"carpe."* "Time," "bridge," or perhaps "source." And what else? "Beware"? "Seize"? He shook his head in frustration and gave it up as a bad job. Having carefully refolded the chart, he turned over the fly leaf and began to read.

By the time he had reached the last page the candle had sunk to a guttering stub and Spindrift was acutely conscious of an agonizing headache. He lowered his face into his cupped hands and waited for the throbbing behind his eyeballs to subside. He had, to the best of his knowledge, been intoxicated only once in his life and that was on the occasion of his twenty-first birthday. He had not enjoyed the experience. The recollection of how the world had seemed to rock on its foundations had remained one of his most distressing memories. Now he was reminded of it all over again as his mind lurched drunkenly from one frail clutching point to the next. Of course it was a hoax, an extraordinarily elaborate, purposeless hoax. It *had* to be! And yet he feared it was nothing of the sort; that what he had just read was, in truth, nothing less than a medieval prophetic text of such incredible accuracy that it made absolute nonsense of every rationalist philosophy ever conceived by man. Having once read the *Praemonitiones* one stepped like Alice through the looking glass into a world where only the impossible was possible. But *how?* In God's name *how?*

Spindrift removed his hands from before his eyes, opened the book at random, and by the vestige of light left in the flapping candle flame, read once more how, in the year 1492, Christobal Colón, a Genoese navigator, would bow to the dictates of the sage Chang Heng and would set sail into the west on the day of the Expulsion of the Jews from Spain. He would return the following year, laden with treasure and "companioned by those whom he would call Indians but who would in truth be no such people." At which point the candle flared up briefly and went out.

Next morning Spindrift requested, and was granted, an audience with the Abbot. He took with him the wooden casket and the mysterious key. His eyes were red-rimmed and bloodshot and the dark rings beneath them testified to a sleepless night.

Abbé Ferrand was in his early fifties—a stalwart man with shrewd eyes, ash gray hair and bushy eyebrows. His upright stance struck Spindrift as having more than a touch of the military about it. He wore the simple brown habit of his Order, and only the plain brass crucifix, slung on a beaded leather thong about his neck, distinguished

him from the other monks. He smiled as Spindrift entered the study, then rose from behind his desk and held out his hand. Spindrift, momentarily confused, tucked the casket under his left arm and then shook the proffered hand.

"And how can I be of service to you, M'sieu Spindrift?"

Spindrift took a breath, gripped the casket in both hands and held it out in front of him. "Abbé Ferrand, I—" he began, and then dried up.

The corners of the Abbot's lips were haunted by the ghost of a smile. "Yes?" he prompted gently.

"Sir," blurted Spindrift, "do you know what's in here?"

"Yes," said the Abbot. "I think I do."

"Then why did you send it to me?"

"Brother Roderigo wished me to. It was one of his last requests."

"The book's a forgery, of course. But you must know that."

"You think so, M'sieu?"

"Well, of course I do. What else could it be?"

"And what makes you so certain?"

"Why," cried Spindrift, "because it *has* to be!"

"But there have always been prophets, M'sieu Spindrift," returned the Abbot mildly. "And they have all prophesied."

Spindrift waved a dismissive hand. "Nostradamus you mean? Vague ambiguities. Predictions of disaster which could be interpreted to fit any untoward circumstance. But this . . ."

The Abbot nodded. "Forgive my asking, M'sieu," he said, "but what was it exactly that brought you to Hautaire?"

Spindrift set the casket down on the desk in front of him and laid the key beside it. As he did so he realized, not for the first time, that the question Abbé Ferrand was posing could have no simple answer. "Principally, I believe, Peter Sternwärts' *Illuminatum*," he said. "I felt a compulsion to learn all I could about its author."

The Abbot appeared to ponder on this reply, then he turned on his sandaled heel, walked over to a wall cupboard, opened it and drew from within another vellum-covered notebook similar in appearance to that which Spindrift had replaced in the casket. Having closed the cupboard door the Abbot stood for a moment tapping the notebook against his finger ends. Finally he turned

back to Spindrift. "I take it you have studied the *Praemonitiones*, M'sieu Spindrift?"

Spindrift nodded.

"Then you will perhaps recall that its forecasts end with the Franco-Prussian war. Unless my memory deceives me, the final entry concerns Bazaine's surrender at Metz in October 1870; the capitulation of Paris in 1871; and the signing of the treaty at Frankfurt-sur-Main on May 10th of that same year?"

"Yes," said Spindrift, "that is perfectly correct."

The Abbot opened the book he was holding, flipped over a few pages, glanced at what was written there and then said, "Would you say, M'sieu Spindrift, that Europe has at last seen the end of war?"

"Why, certainly," said Spindrift. "The League of Nations has outlawed—"

"On September 1, 1939," cut in the Abbot, "Russia and Germany will, in concert, invade Poland. As a direct consequence of this Britain and France will declare war on Germany."

"But that's preposterous!" exclaimed Spindrift. "Why, the Versailles Treaty specifically states that under no circumstances is Germany ever again to be allowed to rearm!"

The Abbot turned back a page. "In 1924—next year, is it not?—Lenin will die and will be succeeded by" (here he tilted the page to catch the light) "Joseph Viss-arionovitch—I think that's right—Stalin. An age of unparalleled tyranny will commence in the so-called Soviet Republic which will continue for fifty-one years." He flicked on. "In 1941, German armies will invade Russia and inflict massive defeats on the Soviet forces." He turned another page. "In July 1945, the fabric of civilization will be rent asunder by an explosion in an American desert." He shrugged and closed up the book, almost with relief.

"You are surely not asking me to believe that those fantastic predictions are the work of Peter Sternwärts?" Spindrift protested.

"Only indirectly," said the Abbot. "Without Meister Sternwärts they would certainly never have come into existence. Nevertheless, he did not write them himself."

"Then who did?"

"These last? Brother Roderigo."

Spindrift just gaped.

The Abbot laid the book down on the desk beside the

casket and picked up the key. "Before he died," he said, "Brother Roderigo informed me that you had expressed a desire to examine the *oculus*. Is this so?"

"Then it really does exist?"

"Oh, yes. Most certainly it exists. This is the key to it."

"In that case I would very much like to see it."

"Very well, M'sieu," said the Abbot, "I will conduct you there myself. But first I should be intrigued to know what makes you so certain that the *Praemonitiones* is a forgery?"

Spindrift looked down at the casket. The whorled inlay on its lid seemed to spin like a silver catherine wheel. He dragged his gaze away with difficulty. "Because I have always believed in free will," he said flatly. "To believe in the *Praemonitiones* would be to deny it."

"Oh," said the Abbot, "is that all? I thought perhaps you had detected the alteration in the script which takes place at roughly fifty year intervals. It is admittedly slight but it cannot be denied."

"The light was not good in the library last night," said Spindrift. "I noticed no marked change in the cursive style of the entries."

The Abbot smiled. "Look again, M'sieu Spindrift," he said. "By daylight." He pressed the key into the lock, removed the *Praemonitiones* from the casket and handed it over.

Spindrift leafed through the pages, then paused, turned back a few, nodded, and went on. "Why yes," he said. "Here in this entry for 1527. 'The Holy City sacked by the armies of the Emperor Charles.' There *is* a difference. How do you account for it?"

"They were written by different hands," said the Abbot. "Though all, I hazard, with that same pen."

Spindrift reached into the casket, took out the cut-down quill and examined it. As his fingers closed round the yellowed shaft it seemed to twist ever so slightly between them as though endowed with some strange will of its own. He dropped it back hastily into the box and flushed with annoyance at his own childishness. "If I understand you, Abbé, you are saying that these predictions were made by many different hands over the past seven centuries."

"That is correct. It would appear that the horizon of foresight is generally limited to about fifty years, though in certain cases—notably Sternwärts himself—it reaches a

good deal further." The Abbot said this in a quiet matter-of-fact tone that Spindrift found distinctly disconcerting. He reached out tentatively for the second book which the Abbot had placed on the desk but, seemingly unaware of Spindrift's intention, the Abbot had casually laid his own hand upon it. "Now, if you are ready, M'sieu," he said, "I suggest we might climb up and pay our respects to the *oculus.*"

Spindrift nodded.

The Abbot smiled and seemed pleased. He placed the two books within the casket and clapped the lid shut. Then he picked up the key, took down another bunch of keys which was hanging from a hook on the wall, and, nodding to Spindrift to follow him, led the way along a cool white corridor, up a flight of stone stairs and along a passage buttressed by slanting sunbeams. They took several turns and climbed yet another flight of stairs. Spindrift glanced out of a window as they passed and observed that they were now almost on a level with the ruin of the prehistoric stone circle. The Abbot's leather sandals slapped briskly against the soles of his bare feet and made a noise like a razor being stropped.

At last they reached a small oak door. The Abbot paused, selected one of the keys from the bunch, thrust it into the lock and twisted it. The hinges groaned and the door squealed inward. "This leads to the dome of the rotunda," he explained. "The *oculus* is actually situated within the fabric of the northern wall. It is certainly an architectural curiosity."

Spindrift ducked his head, passed through the doorway and found himself in a narrow crack of a curved passage-way dimly lit by narrow barred slits in the outer stonework. Thick dust lay on the stone floor which was caked with a crust formed from generations of bird and bat droppings. The floor spiraled upward at an angle of some ten degrees and Spindrift calculated that they had made at least one complete circuit to the rotunda before the Abbot said, *"Ecce oculus!"*

Peering past the broad shoulder of his guide, Spindrift saw a second door, so narrow that a man could have passed through it only with extreme difficulty. The Abbot squeezed himself backward into a niche and allowed Spindrift to edge round him. Then he handed over the key to the

casket, saying as he did so, "You will find that it operates in the normal way, M'sieu."

"Thank you," said Spindrift, taking the key from him and approaching the door. "Is there room for only one person inside?"

"Barely that," said the Abbot. "The door opens outward."

Spindrift inserted the key into the lock and twisted it. The wards grated reluctantly but still allowed the key to turn. Then, using it as a handle, for there was, indeed, no other, he pulled the door gently toward him. A moment later he had started back with a barely suppressed gasp of astonishment. The door had opened to disclose a sort of lidless limestone coffin, bare and empty, standing on its end, apparently cemented fast into the surrounding masonry. "What on earth is it?" he demanded.

The Abbot chuckled. "That is your *oculus*, M'sieu."

Spindrift eyed the coffin uncertainly. "And you say Sternwärts built that?" he inquired dubiously.

"Well, certainly he must have caused it to be built," said the Abbot. "Of that there can be little doubt. See there—" He pointed to some lettering carved on the limestone corbel which framed the "head" of the casque—*Sternwärts hoc fecit*. "Not proof positive, I grant you, but good enough for me." He smiled again. "Well, now you are here, M'sieu Spindrift, are you not tempted to try it?"

Spindrift gazed at the Latin lettering. "Sternwärts made this," he muttered and, even as he spoke the words aloud, he knew he would have to step inside that stone shell, if only because to refuse to do so would be to deny the noble and courageous spirit of the man who had penned the *Illuminatum*. Yet he could not disguise his reluctance. How dearly at that moment he would have liked to say: "Tomorrow, perhaps, or next week, if it's all the same to you, Abbé." But he knew he would be allowed no second chance. It was now or never. He nodded, drew a deep breath, swallowed once, stepped resolutely forward and edged himself backward into the cold sarcophagus.

Gently the Abbot closed the door upon him and sketched over it a slow and thoughtful sign of the cross.

For no particular reason that he was aware of Spindrift had recently found himself thinking about Fr. Roderigo. Once or twice he had even wandered out into the Abbey graveyard and tried to locate the spot where the bones of

the little monk were buried. He had pottered about, peering vaguely among the hummocks, but he found that he could no longer recall precisely where the body of his friend had been interred. Only the abbots of Hautaire were accorded headstones and even Abbé Ferrand's was by now thickly encrusted with lichen.

Spindrift found a piece of dry twig and began scratching at the lettered limestone, but by the time he had scraped clean the figures "1910–1937" he found the impulse had already waned. After all, what was the point? That was the surprising thing about growing old: nothing seemed quite so urgent or important anymore. Sharp edges became blunt; black and white fudged off into comfortable gray; and your attention kept wandering off after stupid little tidbits of memory and getting lost among the flowery hedgerows of the Past. *Quis Custodiet . . . ?*

The old librarian straightened up, released the piece of twig he was holding and began massaging his aching back. As he did so he suddenly recalled the letter. He had been carrying it around with him all day and had, in fact, come out into the graveyard on purpose to try to make up his mind about it. Obscurely he felt he needed the ghostly presence of Roderigo and the Abbé Ferrand to help him. Above all he needed to be *sure.*

He peered around for a convenient seat then lowered himself creakily so that his back rested against the Abbé's sun-warmed headstone. He dipped around inside his woolen habit for his spectacles and the envelope and having at last settled everything to his comfort and satisfaction he extracted the letter, unfolded it, cleared his throat and read out aloud:

Poste Restante
Arles
Bouches du Rhône.

June 21, 1981.

Dear Sir,

I have recently returned to Europe after four years' travel and study in India, Burma and Nepal, during which one of my teachers introduced me to your marvelous edition of the *Biographia Mystica* of Meister Sternwärts. It was a complete revelation to me and, together with the *Iluminatum,* has radically changed

my whole outlook on life. *"The truly aimed shaft strikes him who looses it"* (Ill. XXIV)!!

I could not permit myself to quit Europe and return home to Chicago without having made an effort to thank you in person and, perhaps, to give myself the treat of conversing with you about the life and works of the Meister.

If you could possibly see your way toward gratifying my wish sometime—say within the next month or so?—would you be so good as to drop me a line at the above address and I will come with all speed to Hautaire.

Yours most sincerely,
J. S. Harland.

Spindrift concluded his reading, raised his head and blinked out over the valley. *"Quis Custodiet?"* he murmured, remembering suddenly, with quite astonishing clarity, how once, long ago, Brother Roderigo had handed him a cup of ice-cool water and had then nodded his head in affirmation. How had *he* known?

Hurtling out of the northern sky, three black planes, shaped like assegais, rushed down the length of the valley drowning it with their reverberating thunder. Spindrift sighed, refolded the letter and fumbled it back into its envelope. He reached out, plucked a leaf of wild sage, rubbed it between finger and thumb and held it under his nose. By then the planes were already fifty miles away, skimming low over the distant, glittering sea, but the ripples of their bullying passage still lapped faintly back and forth between the ancient hills.

"Very well," murmured Spindrift, "I will write to this young man. *Ex nihilo, nihil fit.* But perhaps Mr. Harland is not 'nothing.' Perhaps he is something—even, maybe, my own successor as I was Roderigo's and Roderigo was Brother Martin's. There always has *been* a successor—a watcher—an eye for the eye." He grunted, heaved himself up from the grave on which he was sitting and shuffled off toward the Abbey, a slightly dotty old lay brother, muttering to himself as he went.

The counter clerk at the Bureau des Postes sniffed down her nose, glared at the passport which was held out to her

and then, reluctantly, handed over the letter, expressing by every means at her disposal short of human speech her profound disapproval of the younger generation.

The slim, deeply tanned, blond girl in the faded blue shirt and jeans examined the postmark on the letter and chuckled delightedly. She hurried out into the sunny square, sat herself down on a low wall, carefully tore off a narrow strip from the end of the envelope and extracted Spindrift's letter. Her sea-blue eyes flickered rapidly along the lines of typescript. "Oh, *great!*" she exclaimed. "Gee, isn't that *mar*velous?"

Judy Harland who, in her twenty-second year, still contrived to look a youthful and boyish eighteen, had once written on some application form in the space reserved for "Occupation" the single word "Enthusiast." They had not offered her the job but it can hardly have been on grounds of self-misrepresentation. Her letter to Spindrift had been dashed off on the spur of the moment when she had discovered that the Abbey of Hautaire was an easy day's hitchhike down the coast from Arles. Not that the information which she had given Spindrift was untrue—it *was* true—up to a point: that point being that her interest in Meister Sternwärts was but one of several such enthusiasms among which, over the past eight years, she had zoomed back and forth like a tipsy hummingbird in a frangipani forest. She had already sampled hatha-yoga, the teachings of Don Carlos, tarot, Zen Buddhism and the I-Ching. Each had possessed her like an ardent lover to the exclusion of all the others—until the next. The *Iluminatum* and the *Biographia Mystica* represented but the most recent of her spiritual love affairs.

Her signing of her letter with her initials rather than her Christian name had been an act of prudence induced by certain awkward experiences in Persia and Afghanistan. She had survived these unscathed, just as she had survived everything else, because her essential self was hedged about by an inviolable conviction that she had been chosen to fulfill some stupendous but as yet unspecified purpose. The fact that she had no very clear idea of what the purpose might be was immaterial. What counted was the strength of the conviction. Indeed, in certain respects, Judy had more than a little in common with Joan of Arc.

A little deft work on her hair with a pair of scissors and a concealed chiffon scarf wound round her chest soon

transformed her outwardly into a very passable boy. It was as James Harland that she climbed down from the cab of the friendly *camion* driver, shouldered her well-worn rucksack and strode off, whistling like a bird, up the winding, dusty road toward Hautaire. Just as Spindrift himself had done some sixty years before, and at precisely the same spot, she paused as she came within sight of the Abbey and stood still for a moment, staring up at it. She saw a brown and white eagle corkscrewing majestically upward in an invisible funnel of warm air and, as she watched it, she experienced an almost overwhelming impulse to turn around and go back. Perhaps if she had been under the aegis of the I-Ching she would have obeyed it, but Hautaire was now to her what fabled Cathay had once been to Peter Sternwärts—a challenge to be met and overcome. Shrugging aside her forebodings she hooked her thumbs more firmly under the straps of her pack and marched on up the road.

Old age had lengthened Spindrift's vision. From the library window he had picked out the determined little figure when it was still three-quarters of a mile away. Something about it touched his heart like a cold finger. *"Golden-haired like an angel."* Had he not himself written that long, long ago, after his last visit to the rotunda? How many years was it now? Fifty at least. As far as the eye could see. Why then had he not gone back? Was it fear? Or lack of any real religious faith to sustain him? Yet everything he had "seen" had come to pass just as he had described it. Such crazy things they had seemed too. Sunburst bombs shattering whole cities in the blink of an eye; men in silver suits walking on the face of the moon; an assassin's bullet striking down the president who would put them there; the endless wars; the horror and anguish of the extermination camps; human bestiality. Pain, pain, always pain. Until he had been able to endure no more. His last entry in the *Praemonitiones* must be almost due now. Did that mean he had failed in his bounden duty? Well, then, so he had failed, but at least he had given the world the *Biographia* and none of his predecessors had done that. And there was still the marvel of the *Exploratio Spiritualis* to come—that masterpiece which he alone had unearthed, translated and pieced together. Perhaps one day it would be published. But not by him. Let someone else shoulder that burden. He knew what it would entail. And

surely he had done enough. But the chill lay there in his heart like a splinter of ice that would not melt. *"Golden-haired like an angel."* Muttering to himself he turned away from the window, shuffled across the library and began making his way down to the Abbey gate to greet his visitor.

As a child Judy had sometimes toyed with a fanciful notion that people grew to resemble the names they had been born with. She was reminded of it when she first set eyes on Spindrift. His hair was as white and soft as the wisps of foam on a weir-pool and he blinked at her waterily through his steel-rimmed glasses as he shook her by the hand. "You are very young, Mr. Harland," he observed. "But then, to you I daresay I must seem very old."

"Are you?" she asked in that blunt way of hers which some people found charming and others simply ill-mannered.

"I am exactly as old as this century," he replied with a smile. "Which makes me four score and one. A goodly stretch by any reckoning, wouldn't you say?"

"And you've lived here all your life?"

"Most of it, to be sure. I first came to Hautaire in 1923."

"Hey! My *father* was born in 1923!"

"An *annus mirabilis,* indeed," the old man chuckled. "Come along, Mr. Harland. Let me be the first to introduce you to Hautaire."

So saying he led her through the outer courtyard and down into the cloisters where, like ghostly autumnal leaves, a few of the brothers were wandering in silent meditation. Judy's bright magpie glance darted this way and that. "Say," she whispered, "this sure is some place."

"Would you care for a drink?" asked Spindrift, suddenly recalling his own introduction to the Abbey and hoping, vaguely, that by repeating the pattern he would be vouchsafed a sign of some kind.

"I surely would," said Judy. "Thanks a lot." She shrugged off her rucksack and dumped it down beside the basin of the fountain while Spindrift groped around short-sightedly for the cup.

"Here, let me," she said and, scooping up the cup, she dipped it into the basin and took a hearty swig.

Spindrift adjusted his spectacles and peered at her. A solitary drop of water hung for a moment like a tear from

her square firm chin and then she had brushed it away with the back of her hand. "That was great," she informed him. "Real cool."

Spindrift nodded and smiled. "That fountain was here even before the Abbey was built," he said.

"Is that so? Then Meister Sternwärts may have done just what I've done."

"Yes," agreed Spindrift. "It is more than likely."

"That's really something," sighed Judy. "Hey, I've brought my copy of the *Biographia* for you to autograph. It's right here in my pack. I carry it around every place I go."

"Oh, really?" said Spindrift, flushing with pleasure. "I must say I regard th t as a great compliment."

"The *Biographia*'s one of the world's great books," averred Judy stoutly. "Possibly the greatest."

Spindrift felt appropriately flattered. "Perhaps you would be interested to see the original manuscript?" he suggested diffidently.

"*Would* I? You mean you have it right here in the Abbey?"

"It's in the library."

"Well, what are we waiting for?" demanded Judy. "I mean—that is—if it's convenient."

"Oh, yes, yes," Spindrift assured her. "We'll just call in at the guest wing first and I'll show you your quarters. We can go straight on up from there."

Judy's unfeigned enthusiasm for the Meister was all the old man could have wished for. He laid out the original manuscript of the *Biographia Mystica* before her and guided her through it while she gave little gasps and exclamations of wonder and pleasure. "It's just as if you'd known him personally, Mr. Spindrift," she said at last. "You make him come alive."

"Oh, he *is* Mr. Harland. It is a gross error on our part to assume that life is mere physical existence. The *élan vital* lives on in the sublime creations of human genius. One only needs to study the *Exploratio Spiritualis* to realize that."

"And what's the *Exploratio Spiritualis,* Mr. Spindrift?"

"One day, I hope, it will be recognized as the *Biographia Mystica* of the human mind."

"You don't say!"

"But I *do*, Mr. Harland. And, what is more, I have the best of reasons for saying so."

Judy looked up at him curiously. "You don't mean that you've dug up *another* work by Meister Sternwärts?"

Spindrift nodded emphatically.

"Why that's marvelous!" she cried. "Sensational! Can I see it?"

"It would mean very little to you, I'm afraid, Mr. Harland. The *Spiritualis* was written in cipher."

"And you've cracked it? Translated it?"

"I have."

"Wow!" breathed Judy.

"I have spent the last twenty-five years working at it," said Spindrift, with more than a trace of pride in his voice. "It is, I might pardonably claim, my swan song."

"And when's it going to be published?"

"By me—never."

"But why on earth not?"

"The responsibility is too great."

"How do you mean?"

Spindrift lifted his head and gazed out of the open library window toward the distant invisible sea. "The world is not yet ready for the *Spiritualis*," he murmured. "Peter realized that, which is why he chose to write it in the form he did."

Judy frowned. "I'm afraid I'm still not with you, Mr. Spindrift. Why isn't it ready?"

"To accept a determinist universe as a proven fact?"

"Who says we're not?"

Almost reluctantly Spindrift withdrew his gaze from the far horizon and blinked down at her. "You mean you *can* accept it, Mr. Harland?" he asked curiously.

"Well, I certainly accept the I-Ching."

"But you must, surely, believe in free will?"

"Well, up to a point, sure I do. I mean to say *I* have to consult the I-Ching. It doesn't decide *for* me that I'm going to consult it, does it?"

It seemed to Spindrift at that moment that he had reached the final crossroads. But he was still not sure which path was the right one. He stirred the air vaguely with his fingers. "Then tell me, Mr. Harland," he said, "for the sake of the supposition, if you wish—what do you suppose would follow if one succeeded in convincing the human race that everything in life *was* preordained?"

Judy smiled. "But most of them believe it anyway. Astrology, tarot, I-Ching—you name it; we'll believe it. The fault, Mr. Spindrift, lies not in ourselves but in our stars."

"Really?" said Spindrift. "I must say that you astonish me."

"Well, a lot's happened in the last thirty years. We're the post H-bomb generation, remember. We got to see where reason had led us. Right bang up to the edge of the precipice."

Spindrift nodded. "Yes, yes," he murmured. "I know. I saw it."

"Come again?"

"The *Pikadon*. That's what they called it." He closed his eyes and shuddered. A moment later he had gripped her by the arm. "But imagine *knowing* that was going to happen and that you were powerless to prevent it. What then, Mr. Harland?"

"How do you mean 'knowing'?"

"Just that," Spindrift insisted. "Seeing it all happening *before* it *had* happened. Years and years before. What then?"

"Are you serious?"

"It's all there in the *Spiritualis*," said Spindrift, releasing his hold on her arm and gripping the back of her chair with both hands. "Peter Sternwärts rediscovered what Appollonius of Tyana had brought back with him from the East. But he did more than that. He devised the means whereby this knowledge could be handed down to future generations. He was a seer who bequeathed his eyes to posterity."

Judy's eyes narrowed. "Just let me get this straight," she said slowly. "Are you telling me that Meister Sternwärts could actually *see* the future?"

"Yes," said Spindrift simply.

"What? *All* of it?"

"No. Only the biggest storms on the horizon—the crises for civilization. He called them 'Knots in Time.' "

"But how do you know that?"

"He wrote them down," said Spindrift. "In a book he called *Praemonitiones*."

"Holy hemlock!" Judy whispered. "You just *have* to be kidding!"

"Sternwärts' own forecasts extend only as far as the

fifteenth century, but, as I said before, he bequeathed his eyes to posterity."

"And just what does that *mean*, Mr. Spindrift?"

Spindrift drew in his breath. "Wait here a moment, Mr. Harland," he said, "and I will do my best to show you what it means."

A minute later he was back carrying the first volume of the *Praemonitiones*. He opened it at the frontpiece map and spread it out before her. Then he settled his spectacles firmly on his nose and began to explain what was what.

"This was drawn by Peter Sternwärts himself," he said. "There can be no question of that. It represents a bird's eye view of the area within which Hautaire is situated. These dots represent the Neolithic stone circle and the straight lines radiating from the menhirs all cross at this point here. I thought at first that these spirals were some primitive attempt to represent lines of magnetic force but I know now that this is not so. Nevertheless, they do represent a force field of some kind—one, moreover, which was undoubtedly first detected by the ancient race who raised the original stone circle. Sternwärts realized that the menhirs acted as some sort of focusing device and that the area of maximum intensity would probably occur at the point where the intersection of the chords was held in equilibrium by the force field—what he called the *mare temporis*—sea of time."

Judy nodded. "So?" she said.

"He deduced that at this particular point he would find what he was seeking. I have since unearthed among the archives a number of sketches he made of similar stone circles in Brittany. And just off the center of each he has written the same word *oculus*—that is the Latin word for 'eye.'"

"Hey," said Judy, "you don't mean . . . ?"

"Indeed I do," insisted Spindrift. "After an immense amount of trial and error he succeeded in locating the precise point—and it is a very small area indeed—right here in Hautaire itself. Having found it he built himself a time observatory and then proceeded to set down on record everything he saw. The results are there before you. The *Praemonitiones!*"

Judy stared down at the map. "But if that's so, why hasn't anyone else discovered one? I mean there's Stonehenge and Carnac and so forth, isn't there?"

Spindrift nodded. "That mystified Peter too, until he realized that the focal point of each circle was almost invariably situated a good twenty or so meters above ground level. He postulates that in the days when the circles were first raised, wooden towers were erected in their centers. The seer, who would probably have been a high priest, would have had sole access to that tower. In the case of Hautaire it just so happened that the site of the long-vanished tower was occupied by the rotunda of the Abbey."

"And that was why Sternwärts came here?"

"No, Peter came to Hautaire because he had reason to believe that Apollonius of Tyana had made a special point of visiting this particular circle. There was apparently still a pagan shrine and a resident oracle here in the first century A.D."

Judy turned over some pages in the book before her but she barely glanced at what was written there. "But how does it *work?*" she asked. "What do you do in this *oculus?* Peek into a crystal ball or something?"

"One sees," said Spindrift vaguely. "Within the mind's eye."

"But *how?*"

"That I have never discovered. Nor, I hazard, did Peter. Nevertheless, that is what happens."

"And can you choose what you want to see?"

"I used to think not," said Spindrift, "but since I stumbled upon the key to the *Exploratio Spiritualis* I have been forced to revise my opinion. I now believe that Peter Sternwärts was deliberately working toward the goal of a spiritual and mental discipline which would allow him to exert direct influence upon what he saw. His aim was to become a shaper of the future as well as a seer."

Judy's blue eyes widened perceptibly. "A *shaper?*" she echoed. "And did he?"

"It is impossible to tell," said Spindrift. "But it is surely not without significance that he left Hautaire before he died."

"Come again?"

"Well, by the time he left he knew for certain that chance does nothing that has not been prepared well in advance. He must have realized that the only way in which he could exert an influence upon the future would be by acting in the present. If he could succeed in tracing the

thread backward from its knot he might be able to step in and adjust things at the very point where only the merest modicum of intervention could affect the future. Of course, you must understand that this is all the purest supposition on my part."

Judy nodded. "And these disciplines—mental whatsits—what were they?"

"They were expressly designed to enable the seer to select his own particular vision. Having seen the catastrophe ahead he could, if he were successful, feel his way backward in time from that point and, hopefully, reach a *junctura criticalis*—the precise germinal instant of which some far-off tragedy was the progeny."

"Yes, I understand that. But what *sort* of disciplines were they?"

"Ironically, Mr. Harland, they appear to have had a good deal in common with those which are still practiced today among certain Eastern faiths."

"What's ironical about that?"

"Well, surely, the avowed aim of the Oriental sages is to achieve the ultimate annihilation of the self—of the ego. What Peter Sternwärts was hoping to achieve seems to me to have been the exact opposite—the veritable apotheosis of the human ego! Nothing less than the elevation of Man to God! He had a persistent vision of himself as the potter and the whole of humanity as his clay. That explains why, throughout the *Exploratio,* he constantly refers to himself as a 'shaper.' It also explains why I have shunned the responsibility of publishing it."

"Then why are you telling me?" demanded Judy shrewdly.

Spindrift removed his spectacles, closed his eyes and massaged his eyelids with his fingertips. "I am very old, Mr. Harland," he said at last. "It is now over fifty years since I last visited the *oculus* and the world is very close to the horizon of my own visions. Ever since Abbé Ferrand's untimely death forty years ago the secret of the *oculus* has been mine alone. If I were to die this minute it would perish with me and I, by default, would have betrayed the trust which I believe has been reposed in me. In other words I would die betraying the very man who has meant far more to me than any I have ever known in the flesh—Peter Sternwärts himself."

"But why choose *me?*" Judy insisted. "Why not one of the other brothers?"

Spindrift sighed. "I think, Mr. Harland, that it is perhaps because I recognize in you some of my own lifelong reverence for Peter Sternwärts. Furthermore, in some manner which I find quite impossible to explain, I am convinced that you are associated with the last visit I paid to the *oculus*—with my final vision."

"Really? And what was that?"

Spindrift looked down at the parchment which had absorbed so much of his life, and then he shook his head. "There was a girl," he murmured. "A girl with golden hair . . ."

"A *girl?*"

Like a waterlogged corpse rising slowly to the surface the old man seemed to float up from the troubled depths of some dark and private nightmare. His eyes cleared. "Why, yes," he said. "A *girl.* Do you know, Mr. Harland, in all these years that point had never struck me before! A girl, *here in Hautaire!*" He began to chuckle wheezily. "Oh dear, oh dear, oh dear! Why that would be the end of the world indeed!"

In spite of herself Judy was deeply moved by the old man's transparent relief. Instinctively she put out her hand and laid it on his. "I don't know what your vision was, Mr. Spindrift," she said, "but if you feel I can be of help to you in any way . . ."

Spindrift brought his other hand across and patted hers abstractedly. "This is most kind of you, Mr. Harland," he murmured. "Really most kind . . ."

At supper that evening the Abbot stepped up to the lectern in the refectory and raised a hand for silence. The murmur of voices stilled as the brothers turned their wondering eyes toward their Father Superior. He surveyed them all in silence for a long moment and then said, "Brethren and honored guests . . . my friends. Here at Hautaire we live a life whose fundamental pattern was laid down for us more than a thousand years ago. I believe it is a good life, one which has accordingly found favor in the eyes of God. My cherished hope is that a thousand years from now its pattern will have remained, in all essential respects, as it is today—that the spiritual verities enshrined in our Foundation will be what they have always

been—a source of comfort and reassurance to all God-loving men, a harbor of hope and tranquillity in a storm-tossed world."

He paused as though uncertain how to continue and they all saw him close his eyes and turn his face upward in mute prayer for a long, long minute. When at last he looked down upon them again the silence in the hall was almost palpable.

"My friends, I have just learned that certain European powers, acting in concert with Israel and the United States of America, have this afternoon launched an armed invasion of Saudi Arabia and the Trucial States."

There was a concerted gasp of horror and a sudden burst of whispering. The Abbot raised his voice to carry over the hubbub.

"Their avowed aim is to secure for themselves access to the oil supplies which they deem essential to their national, political and economic survival. Under the terms of the Baghdad Treaty of 1979, the Arabs have called upon the Soviet Union for immediate armed assistance, and Russia and its allies have demanded the instant and total withdrawal of the invading forces. Failure to comply with this demand will, they say, bring about inevitable consequences."

He paused again and regarded them somberly. "I shall personally conduct a service for Divine Intercession immediately after compline. It will be held in the main chapel. It goes without saying that all our guests are invited to attend. *Dominus Vobiscum.*" He sketched the sign of the cross over them, stepped down from the lectern and strode swiftly out of the hall.

In the outburst of chattering which erupted immediately after the Abbot had left the hall Spindrift turned to Judy and seized her by the arm. "You must come with me, Mr. Harland," he whispered urgently. "At once."

Judy, who was still groping to come to terms with all the implications of what she had heard, nodded submissively and allowed the old man to shepherd her out of the refectory and up into the library. He unearthed the keys to the *oculus* and the rotunda, then hurried her up the stairs and along the deserted passages to the door which had remained locked for more than half a century. He was possessed by an almost feverish impatience and kept up an incessant muttering to himself the whole way. Judy could

hardly make out a word of what he was saying, but more than once she thought she caught the strange word *"Pikadon."* It meant nothing to her at all.

So much rubbish had accumulated in the narrow passage that they had to lean their combined weight against the rotunda door before they managed to force it open. They squeezed through into the crevasse beyond, and Spindrift lit a candle he had brought with him. By its wavering light the two of them scuffled their way forward to the *oculus.*

When they reached it Spindrift handed the key to Judy and held the candle so that she could see what she was doing. A minute later the door had creaked open to expose the sarcophagus, standing just as it had stood for the last seven hundred years.

Judy gaped at it in astonishment. "You mean you go in *there?"*

"You must, Mr. Harland," said Spindrift. "Please, hurry."

"But *why?"* demanded Judy. "What's the point? What good could it do?"

Spindrift gripped her by the shoulder and almost succeeded in thrusting her bodily into the casque. "Don't you understand, Mr. Harland?" he cried. "It is *you* who must prove my final vision false! *You have to prove me wrong!"*

Into her twenty-two years of life Judy had already packed more unusual experiences than had most women three times her age, but none of them had prepared her for this. Alone with a looney octogenarian who seemed bent on stuffing her into a stone coffin buried somewhere inside the walls of a medieval monastery! For all she knew, once he had got her inside he would turn the key on her and leave her there to rot. And yet, at the very moment when she most needed her physical strength it had apparently deserted her. Her arms, braced against the stone slabs, seemed all but nerveless, her legs so weak she wondered if they were not going to fold under her. "The key," she muttered. "Give me the key. And you go away. Right away. Back to that other door. You can wait for me there."

The pressure of Spindrift's hand relaxed. Judy stepped back and fumbled the key out of the lock. Then, feeling a little more confident, she turned to face the old man. By

the trembling light of the candle she glimpsed the streaks of tears on his ancient cheeks. "Please go, Mr. Spindrift," she pleaded. *"Please."*

"But you will do it?" he begged. "I must *know*, Mr. Harland."

"Yes, yes," she said. "Sure I will. I give you my word."

He shuffled backward a few doubtful paces and stood watching her. "Would you like me to leave you the candle?" he asked.

"All right," she said. "Put it down there on the floor."

She waited until he had done it and then, aloud, she started to count slowly up to sixty. She had reached barely halfway before the rotunda was buffeted by the massive reverberating thunder of war planes hurtling past high overhead. Judy shivered violently and, without bothering to finish her count, stepped the two short paces back into the casque until her shoulders were pressed against the cold stone. "Please, dear God," she whispered, "let it be all—"

She was falling, dropping vertically downward into the bowels of the earth as if down the shaft of an elevator. Yet the candle, still standing there before her just where the old man had left it and burning with its quiet golden flame, told her that her stomach lied. But her sense of vertigo was so acute that she braced her arms against the sides of the coffin in an effort to steady herself. Watery saliva poured into her mouth. Certain she was about to faint she swallowed and closed her eyes.

Like magenta fire balloons the after-images of the candleflame drifted across her retinas. They changed imperceptibly to green, to dark blue, to purple and finally vanished into the velvety darkness. Her eyelids felt as though lead weights had been laid upon them.

Suddenly—without warning of any kind—she found herself gazing down, as if from a great height, upon a city. With the instant familiarity bred of a dozen high school civics assignments, she knew it at once for her own home town. The whole panoramic scene had a strange, almost dreamlike clarity. The air was unbelievably clear, no trace of smoke or haze obscured the uncompromising grid of the streets. Northward, Lake Michigan glittered silver-blue in the bright sunshine while the plum-blue shadows of drifting clouds ghosted silently across its placid waters. But this was no longer the Chicago she remembered. The

whole center of the metropolis was gone. Where it had been was nothing but a vast circular smudge of gray rubble, along the fringes of which green shrubs were already growing. No factory stacks smoked; no glittering lines of automobiles choked these expressways; no freight trains wriggled and jinked through these latticed sidings; all was as dead and as still as a city on the moon. This was indeed Necropolis, City of the Dead.

At last the vision faded and its place was taken by another. She now found herself gazing out across a vast plain through which wound a great river. But the endless golden Danubian wheatfields which she remembered so well had all vanished. The winds which sent the towering cloud schooners scudding across this sky blew only through the feathered heads of weeds and wild grasses which stretched out like a green and rippling sea to the world's end. Of man, or cattle, or even flying bird there was no sign at all.

One after another the visions came and went and it was almost as if the *oculus* itself were searching desperately for some sign of the vanished race that had devised it and given it its purpose. Like a forlorn radar beacon it swept out into the world of the future and found no trace of man at all.

When Spindrift returned some twenty minutes later, it was to discover Judy crouched in the bottom of the sarcophagus, curled up like a dormouse with her head resting on her bent knees. Fearfully, he stooped over her and placed his hand on her shoulder. "Mr. Harland," he whispered urgently. "Mr. Harland, are you all right?"

There was no response. He knelt down, thrust his hands beneath her arms and, by a mighty effort, succeeded in dragging her clear of the casque. She flopped sideways against the door then sprawled forward beside him. He fumbled his hand inside the neck of her shirt, felt for the beating of her heart and so discovered who she was. The last dim flicker of hope died within him.

He patted her deathly cheek and chafed her hands until at last her eyelids fluttered open. "What happened?" he asked. "What did you see?"

She raised a cold hand and wonderingly touched his wrinkled face with her fingertips. "Then it *hasn't* happened," she whispered. "And it was *so* real."

"It *will* happen," he said sadly. "Whatever it was you saw must come to pass. It always has."

"But there was no one," she mourned. "No one at all. What happened, Mr. Spindrift? Where had they all gone?"

"Come, my dear," he urged, gently coaxing her to her feet. "Come with me."

The air on the hillside was still warm, drowsy with the summer scents of wild sage, lavender and rosemary, as the old man and the girl made their way up the dim path toward the ridge where the ancient neoliths still bared themselves like broken teeth against the night sky. Below them the Abbey lights glowed out cheerfully and small figures could be seen moving back and forth behind the chapel windows.

They reached a point where an outcrop of limestone had been roughly shaped into a seat. Spindrift eased himself onto it, drew Judy down beside him and spread out the wide skirt of his habit to cover her. As he did so he could feel her trembling like a crystal bell that, once struck, goes on quivering far below the threshold of audible sound. An enormous, impotent grief seized him by the throat. Too late he saw what he should have done, how he had betrayed the trust that Brother Roderigo and the Abbé Ferrand had laid upon him. But he saw too, with a sort of numb clarity, how he, Spindrift, could not have done it because, within himself, some vital spark of faith in humanity had been extinguished far back in the blood-stained ruins of 1917. He could no longer believe that men were essentially good, or that the miracle which the genius of Peter Sternwärts had created would not be used in some hideous way to further the purposes of evil.

Yet what if he *had* gone that one step further; *had* published the *Exploratio Spiritualis* and given to all men the means of foreseeing the inevitable consequences of their insane greed, their overweening arrogance, their atavistic lust for power? Who was to say that Armageddon might not have been averted, that Peter's miracle might not have succeeded in shaping anew the human spirit? *Quis custodiet ipsos custodes?* Ah, who indeed, if not God? And Spindrift's God had drowned in the mud of Ypres.

The full knowledge of what he had done rose as bitter as bile at the back of the old man's throat. Desperately he sought for some words of comfort for the girl who crouched beside him and could not stop shivering. Some lie, some little harmless lie. "I did not tell you before," he

said, "but I believe you are destined to publish the *Spiritualis* for me. Yes, I remember now. That was how you were to be associated with my final vision. So you see, there *is* still hope."

But even as he spoke the distant eastern horizon suddenly flickered as though with summer lightning. His arm tightened involuntarily around the girl's shoulders. She stirred. "Oh God," she moaned softly. "Oh God, oh God, oh God." A harsh, grating sob shook her, and then another and another.

A second flash threw the low clouds into sharp relief and, a moment later, the whole arching roof of the world was lit up like the day. An urgent bell began tolling in the Abbey.

Something scratched a line like a blood-red stalk high up into the southern sky and a ball of blue-white fire blossomed in strange and sinister silence.

And later a wind began to blow from the north.

Paradise Beach

"WHO?" DEMANDED THE VOICE from the So-Vi speaker, while the features on the screen contorted themselves into a parody of amused incredulity. *"Ketchup?"*

"Kets*koff*. Igor Ketskoff. Don't say you've never *heard* of him, Margot."

"I've never heard of him," said the face on the screen, and laughed. Then, relenting, asked, "What does he *do* exactly, Zeph?"

"Trompe l'oeil illusions. Murals. *You* know."

"Oh. Like Rex Whistler, you mean?"

"Not a bit like Rex Whistler. Well, maybe a *tiny* bit. Igor uses—hang on, I've got it here somewhere—'micro-miniaturized, solid-state, depth fluorescence technology to create his modern miracles of multi-dimensional anamorphosis.' "

"Ana—*what?*"

"Morphosis. That's what it says here, anyway."

"What's it mean?"

"I don't know. Illusion, I suppose. Anyway, Margot, the point is he's doing one for us."

"Us? You mean Hugo's *agreed?*"

"Hugo com*missioned* it! Igor's under contract to some weird little outfit called *Artefax*. S & L got them as part of a blanket take-over in February. When Hugo got round to sorting things out and weeding out what they didn't want he stumbled across *Artefax* and Igor."

"I *see*. Still, I must confess I'm a bit surprised, Zeph. I mean I've never thought of Sir Hugo as a patron of the fine arts exactly."

"Between the two of us, sweetie, he sees it more in the nature of an investment. By the way, you're invited to the private view on the 10th."

"Ah! Now I'm getting warmer! All Hugo's tame tycoons assemble to gawp, then rush back to Lombard Street and order an Igor ana-whatsit to grace their boardrooms. *Artefax* shares go into orbit and Sherwood and Lazarus, Merchant Bankers, stagger home with the loot. Right?"

"What a cynical girl you are, Margot."

"I know. It's all part of my charm, Zeph."

Zephyr Sherwood laughed. "The 10th, then. Seven-thirty. And don't forget."

"Try keeping me away."

The gathering which assembled in Astral Court, W.1. for Sir Hugo and Lady Sherwood's private view contained at least five ex-lovers of Zephyr's and a fair cross-section of the merchant banking fraternity. Margot Brierly coolly appraised the combined capital resources of a mere half dozen guests as being, by 1992 standards, well on the upward slope of five million New Pounds—that is to say five hundred million in Old Sterling. She found the knowledge lent them a charm they would otherwise have lacked. Fortunately, Zephyr had seen fit to leaven the dough with a lavish sprinkling of talents chosen from among her numerous friends and acquaintances. Margot recognized three So-Vi stars, a *very* striking transvestite who ran a syndicated trans-European fashion column, and a remarkably hairy young footballer who, she recalled, had recently been transferred from one club to another for a record-breaking fee. (Could *he* be Zephyr's latest?)

Extricating herself from the predatory tendrils of a lesser Lombard Street gnome, Margot wriggled her way through the throng to where Zephyr was holding court, swinging gently to and fro from a rococo *balançoire*. Having restrained her friend in mid-swoop Margot said, "Well, come on. Which is he, dear?"

"Which is who?"

"Igor Thingummy, of course."

Zephyr beckoned to the perambulating auto-butler, exchanged her empty champagne glass for a full one from the proffered tray and gestured with a bejeweled hand toward a knot of guests among whom Margot recognized

only Sir Hugo Sherwood. "Iggy's the little pet with the mustache," said Zephyr. "Isn't he a dink?"

The little pet in question chose that moment to glance toward his hostess. His teeth flashed like a space beacon. In response to Zephyr's fluttered fingers he came scuttling across to her side.

"Iggy, I want you to meet Margot Brierly," said Zephyr. "She writes those *fabulously* intelligent detective stories."

"Enchanté," said Igor, clicking his heels and bowing from the waist with clockwork precision. He straightened and eyed Margot caressingly up and down. "Ah," he breathed. "But *you* I could im*mor*talize, *madame!*"

Margot restrained an impulse to feel if her dress was still fastened and smiled ingenuously. "I've been wanting to ask you what anamorphosis is, Mr. . . . ?"

"Ketskoff," grinned Zephyr. "Rhymes with Ketskoff."

"Oh, that is simple enough," said Igor airily. "The word itself is derived from the Greek. It means 'to change the form of.' The artists of the Renaissance discovered that by copying faithfully the reflection which they saw in a distorting mirror they could, as it were, encode a vision. Their vision could only be *de*coded by placing before it a similar mirror to that in which they had first viewed the original reflection."

"Like that picture by Holbein in the N.G.?" said Margot brightly. "You know the one—with the two men and the lute."

"The Ambassadors, madame," said Igor, obviously rather impressed. "However, I use the term in a somewhat less restricted sense. The mirror *I* employ is nothing less than the psychokinetic field of the observer himself. No two people see precisely the same Ketskoff. The modulations are infinite and infinitely subtle."

"And infinitely expensive?"

"They are not cheap, certainly. But then you must remember that each one is individually styled and structured round its owner's personal psychoemotive threshold. That demands considerable technical finesse."

"If you're ready, Igor?" Sir Hugo hove up alongside Zephyr's swing, beamed blandly at Margot and raised an interrogative eyebrow.

"Everything is in order, Sir Hugo. I have arranged for the main lighting to be subdued just before we switch on."

"Excellent. I'll shepherd them down, say my few words

and leave the rest to you." The banker consulted his wristwatch. "Kick off in five minutes from now?"

Igor nodded, bowed briefly to Margot and Zephyr and scurried away down the shallow flight of stairs to the mezzanine where one long wall was concealed from view behind heavy, plum-colored velvet drapes.

"Well, what do you make of him?" inquired Zephyr.

"I'm not sure," said Margot pensively. "I think I detect something a shade spooky."

"Little Iggy, *spooky?* For heaven's sake! He's just a pet."

"House trained?"

Zephyr tinkled a laugh. "Come on," she said. "If we want the best view we'd better get downstairs."

Sir Hugo's speech was brief and to the point. For one hundred and fifty years, ever since the invention of the camera, pictorial art and scientific technology had been struggling to come to terms with one another, though without notable success. Theirs had been a genuine love/hate relationship in which both strove for domination. Fundamental to the artist's deep distrust was the realization that what the machine had created once it could create again and again, whereas the artist's vision was essentially unique. The invention of neo-anamorphics had resolved, once and for all, the ancient dilemma. It was, he sincerely believed, the ultimate art form of the twenty-first century, and Igor Ketskoff would inevitably be ranked with such names as Kandinsky and Picasso. Let those present judge for themselves.

The lights dimmed precipitately to total blackout; there was a gentle purring as the drapes parted; and then, with all the nerve-tingling impact of a lightning flash, illumination flooded out of the wall. There was a concerted gasp from the assembled guests; hands rose to shade dazzled eyes; and then, mingled with cries of: "Superb!" "Incredible!" "Formidable!", spontaneous applause erupted.

To Margot the illusion was, indeed, wholly astonishing. It was exactly as if an area some five meters by two had been removed bodily from the penthouse wall and replaced by an unglazed window which looked out upon a curving Caribbean beach. To the left, tall, feathery palms rustled in the gentlest of breezes, dappling a carpet of dusky shadow as they receded into the eye-aching distance

along the silver-white margin of the cove. Pellucid wavelets gamboled in to subside like sleepy kittens on the gently shelving sand. Far out to sea a line of twinkling spray marked where the submerged reef was absorbing the force of the Atlantic rollers. As illusion it was perfect—*too* perfect! It *had* to be real!

Moving hesitantly forward, Margot stretched out her hand and felt—nothing at all! It was exactly as if, at the moment of contact with the invisible barrier which separated her hand from the sandy shore she could see so clearly, all physical sensation was short-circuited, and the reassuring messages no longer flowed through the nerve endings in her fingertips to her brain. She felt totally disorientated, closed her eyes and stepped backward. Had she been a cat every single hair on her body would have been standing upright. She shivered so violently that she all but dropped the glass she was holding.

"Well," murmured Zephyr, "I think we rate this one a genuine *tour de force,* don't you?"

Margot nodded. "Where is it supposed to be?" she asked.

"Paradise Beach, Grenada. Hey, just get an eyeful of *that!*"

Margot turned again to the panorama. The glittering sand ribboned out and rippled away into the azure distance, remote and calm and beautiful. "An eyeful of what?" she asked.

Zephyr was staring fixedly at a point somewhere in the left foreground. On her face was an expression of almost envious curiosity. "Well, I'll be damned," she murmured.

"What is it?" Margot insisted.

"Those two," hissed Zephyr. "Hey, he's *all* man, isn't he?"

Margot screwed up her eyes and saw only a foraging spider crab scuttling sideways across the distant strand. "What are you talking about?" she said. "Who's 'all man'?"

A flush like a faint fingerprint colored Zephyr's cheeks. Her eyes sparkled. "Wow!" she whispered, and again: *"Wow!"*

Margot glanced rapidly round at the other guests. Several of them appeared to be staring as if hypnotized by one point or another of the anamorphic. At that moment a familiar voice breathed in her ear: "Is it not as I said, *madame?* No two people see exactly the same Ketskoff."

She jerked round to find Igor smirking at her. "But what *are* they seeing?" she demanded.

Igor shrugged. "Why ask me? I supply only the canvas and the frame. They paint their own pictures."

"And how about Sir Hugo? I mean, after all, it's *his*, isn't it?"

"Indeed it is. I have here in my pocket his check to prove it."

"Well, what does *he* get out of it?"

Igor sniggered. "He reserves to himself the right to play Prospero. After all, *madame*, it is *his* island." He flashed his teeth at her in a gleaming grin. "And now it is time for me to see how the fat fish are nibbling," he whispered. "*Au revoir, chère madame.*"

"Zeph! I've been trying to get hold of you for *weeks!* Where on earth have you been?"

"Brazil, of course. Where else?"

"Why Brazil, for heaven's sake?"

"Oh, come off it, Margot. *Think.*"

"The coffee?"

"The World Cup, you prune."

"Football? And since when have you . . . *ah-h-h!*"

The beautiful face on the So-Vi gave a smug, lip-licking grin. "Oh, it's a great sport, Margot. The greatest."

"Yes?"

"Well, let's say the second greatest."

"Did you win?"

"I wasn't *playing*, dear. Just watching. We were knocked out in the semifinal. The ref had been got at."

"By you?"

"Ah, if only I'd thought of it!"

"I'm sure you will next time. How's Hugo?"

"Oh, banking away busily as usual. You know Hugo."

"Zeph, doesn't he *mind?*"

"Mind what?"

"*You* know. Your extraconnubial activities. Ball games and so on."

"Well, naturally, I don't make a point of *discussing* it with him, if that's what you mean."

"But he must *know*, Zeph."

"A banker's wife needs her little hobbies, dear."

"Plural?"

"Oh, most singularly plural," agreed Zephyr and pro-

duced one of those tinkling little laughs of hers which always set Margot's teeth on edge. "And what have you been up to, sweetie?"

"Scribbling away," said Margot. "I've just finished the first draft of another Inspector Calloway. Provisional title: 'Quietus in Triplicate.' "

"Well done, you. Been to any parties?"

"A couple. Dull to middling. Oh, I bumped into Igor at one of them."

"Igor Ketskoff?"

"How many Igors do you know, for heaven's sake? He told me he'd got three new commissions. Seemed pretty pleased with himself. How's *Paradise Beach* by the way?"

"Hugo had it moved into his study while I was away. Said it dominated the mezzanine too much. He's probably right."

"I'm surprised you *can* move them."

"*Artefax* handled all that. I daresay it cost a bomb though. Hey, before I forget, Margot, are you doing anything on Friday?"

"Friday? No, I don't think so. Nothing I can't put off. Why?"

"Come down to Hickstead with me."

"*Hickstead!* What on earth for?"

"The show-jumping, idiot."

"*Show-jumping!* I didn't think you knew one end of a horse from the other."

"Strictly between us, dear, I still have to think it out. But I met someone in São Paulo who spends most of his daylight hours sitting on top of one of them."

"Zeph, you are absolutely *incorrigible!*"

"No, dear, just curious."

"Margot, are you frantically busy or can you spare an old friend a few minutes?"

"Hello, Zeph! Where are you calling from?"

"The Continental Club. Fredrico's booked in here for the Royal Show."

"Fredrico? Oh, yes. I remember. Captain Gonzales. We met at Hickstead, didn't we?"

"That's right. Now listen, Margot. You'd say I was a pretty level-headed type, wouldn't you?"

"Oh, to a fault, dear."

"Not prone to imagining things?"

"Not since *I've* known you. Why?"

"Well, there's something very odd going on."

"Odd?"

"I mean I'm quite sure there must *be* a perfectly logical explanation but I just can't think what it is."

"Explanation of *what*, Zeph?"

"Hugo's behavior."

"*Hugo?* What on earth's he been up to?"

"That's just what *I'd* like to know."

"Just a moment, old thing. Why don't you start at the beginning and put me in the picture?"

"What makes you say *that?*"

"Say what, Zeph?"

"About being put in the picture."

"I only mean I'm not *with you!* You start off telling me you think something odd's going on. Then you hint it's something to do with Hugo. I'm only trying to find my bearings, old thing."

"I'm sorry. I suppose the fact is I'm a wee bit jumpy. Where was I?"

"Something odd about Hugo. Well, what *is* it?"

"He's sunburned."

Margot did not say anything but her expression was eloquent.

"You don't believe me?"

"Of course I believe you, Zeph, but I must confess I don't—"

"He's got a tan on him like a lifeguard on Bondi Beach."

"Well, so he's been soaking it up in a solar parlor. What's so odd about—"

"He hasn't. I checked."

"Now why should you do that?"

"Because I had to be *sure*, Margot."

The eyes of the two friends met fair and square on their respective screens. "A u-v lamp?" suggested Margot tentatively.

"No," said Zephyr.

"Well, he can hardly have got it from lying out on the roof. We've barely seen the sun in London for the past month."

"Fifty-two minutes, and all but six of them during banking hours."

"My! You *have* been busy!"

"I checked with the Met Office."

"You're really taking this seriously, aren't you?"

Zephyr nodded. "I wasn't at first," she said. "But then I found the sand."

"Uh?"

"In Hugo's bed."

"Sand in Hugo's bed," repeated Margot feebly.

"Fine *white* sand, Margot. Coral sand!"

Margot fought down an impulse to giggle wildly. "You had it *an*alyzed?"

"I didn't need to. I recognized it at once."

"Ah."

"You see what I'm driving at, don't you?"

"Well, now, Zeph. Since you ask me straight out I must—"

"Paradise Beach!"

"Oh, Zeph! For God's *sake!*"

"I know. It's crazy."

"But surely you've *asked* him about it? What does he—"

"Margot, how *can* I?—it was a wail of distress—"I mean —well, we both know it's *impossible!*"

Being a reasonably perceptive woman Margot had some inkling of why Zephyr could not simply let matters rest. However long a cable Lady Sherwood permitted herself, Sir Hugo was the Rock of Ages into which her anchor was fixed. She *had* to be sure of him, and now, for the first time in the ten years of their marriage, she was not sure. Her world was shaking to its very foundations. She was finding herself in the one place she could never bear to be—outside. Admirably suppressing a desire to say: "It serves you right, my dear," Margot nodded thoughtfully and inquired, "Well, what now?"

Zephyr looked like a gin player whose opponent has just laid down the very card she has been waiting for. "Would you come over for coffee tomorrow morning, Margot? About eleven?"

"To Astral Court?"

"Yes, of course."

"All right."

Zephyr sighed. *"Le estoy muy agradecido."*

"Con mucho gusto," replied Margot, not to be outdone.

Lady Sherwood's greeting to her friend as she opened the door of the Astral Court apartment next morning might, in more normal circumstances, have been considered some-

what eccentric. From behind her back she produced what looked like a golden-brown bootlace and proceeded to wave it before Margot's noise. "Seaweed!" she whispered tragically. "This morning. In the shower."

"No land crabs yet?" inquired Margot weakly.

Zephyr shuddered. "I haven't *dared* to look under the bed."

They drank their coffee on the balcony overlooking Hyde Park. At Zephyr's suggestion they each had a morale-booster in the shape of a stiff peg of Napoleon 5-star cognac. Then from the pocket of her Spocorelli house-coat Zephyr produced a shiny new key which she laid on the Hester Bateman tray beside the Paul Lamarie creamer.

Margot peered down. "You mean to say Hugo keeps his study locked?"

Zephyr nodded. "Ever since I got back from Brazil."

"Did he say why?"

"Something about *Artefax* and the rewiring. I didn't pay much attention."

"But, Zeph, that was over a *month* ago!"

Zephyr shrugged.

"Well, what *did* you find when you went in?"

"I haven't *been* in—yet. I only got that key cut yesterday afternoon. After I'd called you."

"Then how do you know it fits?"

"I tried it this morning."

"And you didn't go in?"

Zephyr shook her head. "I just *couldn't,*" she said. "Not on my own."

"But this is r*idic*ulous," said Margot, picking up the key. "Come on."

She led the way purposefully up the stairs from the mezzanine, along the gallery past the bedrooms and paused outside the door of Sir Hugo's study. "Do *you* want to?" she said. "Or shall I?"

"You," whispered Zephyr.

Margot put her ear to the door, held her breath, and then, somewhat absurdly, knocked. There was no response. She poked the key into the lock, twisted it firmly, turned the porcelain handle and pushed.

The door opened quite silently, and the two women peered into the room. "Well, no land crabs at any rate," said Margot, and gave a sort of nervous hiccup of laughter.

"Look!" whispered Zephyr. "Over there on the chair by the desk."

"What is it?"

"His beach robe."

Abandoning the door knob which she had been clutching Margot advanced into the study, picked up the robe and examined it. It was faintly damp. On an impulse she raised it to her face and sniffed. It smelled rather of stale sweat. But was there something else as well? A faint, tingling aroma of iodine? Or ozone? Or salt? She dropped the garment back on to the chair and looked all round the room. "It's darker than I remember it," she said.

"Well, of course it is," said Zephyr. "He had the third window blocked up to take the anamorphic."

As Margot padded across the deep-piled afghan carpet to where the closed drapes concealed Igor Ketskoff's masterpiece, something crunched faintly under her foot. She stooped and thrust her fingers into the dense wool to disclose the remnants of a small crushed mollusk together with a considerable quantity of fine white sand.

"What is it?" asked Zephyr.

"Nothing," said Margot, straightening up and twitching at the curtain. "Where's the switch for this thing?"

"On the wall over there, I think." Zephyr took a hesitant pace in the direction she indicated and then halted. "You do it, Margot."

Three steps carried Margot to the switch panel. She pushed the top button. The curtains whispered apart to reveal the five-by-two-meter rectangle of opaque and velvet blackness. "Ready?" she said.

Zephyr nodded dumbly.

"Here goes," said Margot and thrust home the second button.

Even in competition with the London daylight the anamorphic still contrived to take their breath away. It was as though the mere act of throwing a switch had transported them both, miraculously and instantaneously, five thousand miles westward across the Atlantic. The sheer perfection of the illusion was utterly uncanny. And yet it was not the familiar wonder of the panorama that held them as if spellbound; rather was it the twin lines of naked footprints which strode so briskly and purposefully outward across the sand to the water's edge and then back again to the very frame of the anamorphic.

The two women, staring in numb and fascinated silence, watched the tide-nudged wavelets come lapping in like lazy tongues to lick away one print after another. Ten minutes later all that was left before their astounded gaze was the smooth silvery flank of the scoured coral and a waste of inscrutable, sparkling waters.

At that moment, with a rather harsh and unpleasant sound, Zephyr began to cry.

The first thing Margot did when she returned home was to try to contact Igor Ketskog on the So-Vi. She managed it eventually and was a little piqued to realize that he had obviously forgotten who she was. Having refreshed his memory for him she saw his face take on the eager but faintly speculative expression of a cat which has heard the familiar sound of the tin opener. "But of *course!*" he cried. *"Chère madame Margot!* The Agatha Christie of our age! To what do I owe this pleasure?"

"It's rather awkward to explain over the So-Vi, Igor. I was wondering if you could possibly meet me for dinner this evening?"

Igor's eyebrows twitched for a calculating second and then the smile flashed on like a strip light. "But that would be de*light*ful, *madame!* And where shall it be?"

"Do you know Angosturo's?"

"Indeed I do."

"I'll book us a table right away. Would about eight suit you?"

"Admirably."

He arrived, brimful of apologies, half an hour late, by which time Margot was already contemplating the olive at the bottom of her second martini. He snatched her hands to his lips and set about them as if they were a pair of pretzels. "A thousand pardons, *chère madame,*" he mourned. "I am desolated."

"And I'm hungry," said Margot.

"That too," agreed Igor and clicked his fingers imperiously for the waiter. "Another martini for *madame,*" he commanded. "And for me a *pastis.*" Then he took his seat opposite her, leaned forward, and, lowering his voice, inquired meaningfully, "And what is too awkward for you to explain to me over the So-Vi?"

"I should perhaps have said 'too complicated,' " replied

Margot, divining that he had almost certainly misconstrued the object of her invitation.

"But Ketskoff thrives upon complexity," said Igor smugly. "He sucked it from his mother's teats," adding by way of explanation, "I am Armenian."

Margot's eyes widened. "An Armenian *and* a genius," she murmured.

Igor purred. "No doubt you are wishing to model for me?"

"Dare I?"

Igor laughed. "Madame Margot, I like you very much. You have style. I too have style."

"And Lady Sherwood?" inquired Margot curiously.

A shadow dusked across the dark eyes. "No," he said. "Zest, yes; flamboyance, yes; style—*true* style—alas, no." The drinks appeared and Igor raised his in a toast. "To style," he said.

"To style," murmured Margot. She took a sip, smiled across at him and decided to try the direct approach. "Igor," she said, "I want to ask you a question. It may sound crazy—*I* think it *is* crazy—but even so I must hear your answer to it."

"So? Go ahead. I like crazy questions."

Margot took another fortifying sip at her drink. "Would it be possible," she said, carefully spacing out her words, "for someone who *owned* one of your anamorphics—the person it was actually *designed* for, I mean—to—" she swallowed—"to well—*enter* it?"

Igor looked genuinely at a loss. "Enter it?" he echoed. "I do not understand. You speak in metaphor, of course."

"No. Quite literally. Could they *actually step into it?* Like you and I walked into this restaurant, say?"

Igor laughed. "What a poetic idea! So we take a stroll through our anamorphics instead of the park! Delicious!"

"But not possible?"

"Oh, utterly impossible. An anamorphic is basically a malleable illusion—nothing more, nothing less."

"You're quite sure of that, Igor? I mean it couldn't somehow be, well, *modified* or something?"

"Madame Margot, that I am an electronics engineer of genius I admit. Perhaps I am even something more. An artist, dare I say? But I am not, alas, a magician. Only think, for one moment, what it is you are implying by your simple question! At the very least the existence of

an enantiomorphic universe and the instantaneous demolition and reconstruction of all our known scientific laws! In short, a physical impossibility. But as an *idea*—wholly enchanting!"

Margot released the breath she was not even aware she had been holding. "And there's not the slightest chance you could be mistaken?"

"None, *madame*, that I do assure you. But tell me, what made you ask?"

Margot laughed. "For a whole afternoon I've been thinking I'd hit on a simply *marvelous* way of disposing of an unwanted corpse."

Aided by a capsule of *sieston*, Margot slept late. On returning from her *tête-à-tête* with Igor she had debated whether to contact Zephyr and pass on her good news, but some mildly feline streak in her character persuaded her that it could wait until the morning. After all, why should she deny Sir Hugo his little bit of fun? If anyone had earned it he had.

It was almost midday when she eventually confronted her So-Vi and tapped out the Sherwoods' code. The screen informed her that the number was temporarily unobtainable. She waited a minute, tried again and got the same result. She was just about to look up the number of the Continental Club when she heard a buzz at her own apartment door. She walked through the minuscule hall and applied her eye to the spy hole. "Who is it?"

"Police." An identity card bearing the name Detective Sergeant Warren was presented to the outside lens.

Mystified, Margot slid back the safety chain and opened the door.

"Just a routine inquiry, Miss Brierly," said the Sergeant. "Is it all right if I come in?"

"Yes, of course." Margot closed the door behind him and led the way into her small, book-lined sitting room.

"I assume you've seen this morning's paper, ma'am."

"No," said Margot. "Should I?"

"Ah," said the Sergeant, "well in that case it looks as if I've come as the bearer of some bad news."

"What bad news?"

"Lady Sherwood is dead."

Margot simply stared at him.

"You were a friend of hers, I believe, Miss Brierly?"

Margot nodded. "Dead," she repeated woodenly. "How?"

"A fall, ma'am. Late last night."

"What sort of a fall?"

"From the roof of Astral Court."

"The roof! What in God's name was she doing up on the roof?"

"I meant from the top floor, actually. From a window. Over a hundred meters anyway."

Margot shuddered.

The sergeant consulted his notebook. "I believe you called on Lady Sherwood yesterday, Miss Brierly?"

"Yes," said Margot. "I had coffee with her. In the morning."

"And was she her normal self, would you say?"

"Well, yes."

"You sound a bit hesitant."

"Well, she *was* a bit anxious—about Sir Hugo."

"Yes?"

"It was nothing. A sort of odd fancy she'd got. Quite absurd really."

"And what sort of a fancy was that, Miss Brierly?"

"About an anamorphic he has—that's a kind of illusion screen—a sort of moving picture. Maybe you've seen it?"

"I think I've seen what's left of it," said the Sergeant flatly. "I assume that's the one."

"In Sir Hugo's study?"

The Sergeant nodded.

"Why? What's happened to it?"

"Lady Sherwood fell through it, Miss Brierly."

"Through it! Oh, but that's quite impossib—"

"Go on."

"The window," murmured Margot. "It was in front of the middle window. But that window's blocked up."

"No," said the Sergeant. "Just painted over black on the inside. Sir Hugo has explained to us how he didn't wish to spoil the symmetry of the façade by having it bricked up."

"Sir Hugo was there when it happened?"

"Oh no. Lady Sherwood was alone in the apartment. Sir Hugo was officiating at a Masonic function in the City. He was actually making his speech when the accident took place."

Margot felt as if ice-cold ants were crawling all over her body. "Then it *was* an accident?"

"There's no question about that. As a matter of fact the

only reason I'm here now is that there is one rather odd feature of the case which Sir Hugo hasn't been able to explain."

"What was that?"

"Lady Sherwood was wearing only a bikini."

Margot stared at him. "Yes," she said slowly. "That would make sense, I suppose."

"I don't follow you."

"And had she been drinking too?"

"Well, officially I can't answer that till they've held the inquest. Unofficially, yes she had."

"Dutch courage, Sergeant."

The Sergeant's eyes went curiously opaque. "You mean you think Lady Sherwood took her own life, Miss Brierly?"

"*Zeph! Kill herself?* Oh, good Lord, no! Not in a million years!"

"Then I'm afraid I don't—"

"You've never seen an anamorphic, have you, Sergeant? Not one that's working?"

Sergeant Warren shook his head.

"Well, you should. Because when you do you'll understand how someone who's taken on rather too much to drink *could* get it into their head that what they were seeing wasn't just an illusion but was reality itself. Providing they had the nerve to try. I believe poor Zeph was the victim of a mirage—a too-perfect illusion—and too much cognac."

The Sergeant pursed up his lips and nodded. "That's more or less what we thought, Miss Brierly." He closed his notebook and slipped it into his pocket. "Believe me, I'm sorry I had to be the one to break the news to you. You've been most helpful. I shouldn't imagine you'd be called on to give evidence at the inquest, but that's not really in my hands."

"I understand, Sergeant. Anyway, if you do need me you know where to find me."

Margot was not called upon. The verdict arrived at was "Acidental Death" and the Coroner went out of his way to express the court's sympathy with the bereaved. The funeral service was private and confined to next of kin. Zephyr's body was cremated. After it was over Sir Hugo left for a holiday in the West Indies and was away for three months.

A fortnight after his return Margot was surprised to receive an invitation to dine with him one evening in Astral Court. Curiosity prompted her to accept and she arrived at the penthouse to be greeted by her sun-bronzed host who introduced her first to a ravishingly beautiful young West Indian whom he addressed as "Blossom," and then to Igor.

The first difference Margot noticed on entering the apartment was that the wall area on the mezzanine was once again occupied. "A new Ketskoff?" she asked.

"Yes and no," said Sir Hugo.

"May I see?"

"Indeed you shall, Margot. It is one of the reasons I asked you along this evening. But let us dine first. My exquisite Blossom has spent all day concocting her Grenadian specialties for us, and who knows better than a Grenadian how to stimulate the jaded palate?" So saying he smiled drily and ushered them to the table.

Blossom's culinary skills fully justified Sir Hugo's advertisement. The meal was as delicious as the wines which accompanied it, and when they eventually rose from the table it was as if they were each surrounded by a private golden aura of sensual gratification.

Sir Hugo directed them to the long sofa which had been drawn round to face the curtained anamorphic and then took his place beside the control panel. "And now, as a reward to Blossom, I intend to waft her home to Grenada." The lights dimmed, the curtains parted. *"Olé!"* cried Sir Hugo and, with an appropriate flourish, pressed the switch.

A cascade of brilliance flooded from the anamorphic like the surge of the Caribbean dawn.

Margot peered about for some sign of the repairs which Igor must have effected but there was nothing visible at all. Try as she would she simply could not visualize what must have happened. Every attempt she made to thrust Zephyr's image bodily into the panorama was frustrated by that incredible perspective. Poor Zephyr simply shrank and vanished into thin air.

As she gazed, fascinated as always by the sheer perfection of the illusion, Margot perceived, far away in the remote distance, a new movement. Shading her eyes with her hand she peered out along the curved, white sickle of the beach, under the nodding, feather-headed palms, and gradually she was able to discern the two tiny figures on horseback cantering toward her out of the distance.

All along the curve of the shore they galloped, coming closer, until she could clearly make out the forms of the riders: the man, swarthy skinned, bare to the waist; the woman, wearing the briefest of bikinis, her long blond hair streaming out along the wind to the rhythm of the ride.

They looked so happy those two, laughing as they rode—free as the sunshine and the sparkling air; the thundering hooves of their ponies—now quite distinct above the background booming of the distant surf—kicking up little shimmering fountains of rainbow spray from the edge of the sea. Right up to the anamorphic's edge they came, Zephyr and Captain Gonzales, and then they were gone, the phantom hoofbeats receding into the stereophonic distance somewhere behind Margot's head. Only the prints were left there in the sand, and the palms nodding above them in perpetual approbation.

Margot glanced sideways at Igor, wondering perhaps whether she alone had seen them, but he grinned at her cheerfully. "Some synchro, hey?"

"*You* did it?"

"Who else? It is my latest. Are you not impressed?"

"My, I'd *love* a swim in there right now!" cried Blossom and jumping up from her place beside Margot she ran across to the wall and reached out for the beach. And, just as Margot herself once had, she drew back, frowning and rubbing her hands, complaining that it was a cheat.

Margot felt an electric tingling all up the nape of her neck. She turned back to Igor. "When it's switched on," she whispered, "you *can't* touch it, can you? There's something stopping you."

"That's right," he said. "The *Kappa* field."

"So it must have been switched off when Zeph . . ."

"Of course."

"But then there wouldn't have been any *reason* for her to—"

Igor put his lips close to her ear. "She was blind drunk, *madame*. Didn't you know?"

Margot sank back into the cushions and stared, first at *Paradise Beach* and then at Sir Hugo who was now standing silhouetted before it, one arm crooked around Blossom's delectable waist, the other proudly indicating familiar features of the panorama. She thought of Zephyr, alone in this very apartment, knocking back glass after glass of

brandy before making her way almost defiantly up the stairs and along the gallery. She imagined her fumbling the key into the study lock, switching on the anamorphic and staring out along that shimmering, sunlit beach. Was it then she had turned away and gone into her bedroom and changed into her costume? Or had she already done it? No, she would first have convinced herself that she hadn't been imagining it all—maybe even taking a final, reassuring look at that scrap of seaweed. Then back to the study again, her mind made up. Walking resolutely but rather unsteadily up to the wall. Taking a chair to climb on, wobbling a bit, leaning forward, pressing with her palms flat against that unyielding field, till in the end all her weight was straining forward. . . . But even so she *still* couldn't have reached the switch herself. Someone else *must* have done it. Someone actually *there* in the room with her. And there had been no one. The inquest had confirmed it. No one at all.

"Coffee, madam? Black or white?"

Deferential as ever, programmed to perfection, the autobutler was standing at her elbow, proffering his tray. Strong, slender metal fingers hovered above the creamer. So unobtrusive. So discreet. A paragon among servants.

"Black, please," said Margot faintly.

The Hertford Manuscript

THE DEATH OF MY Great-Aunt Victoria at the advanced age of ninety-three lopped off the longest branch of a family tree whose roots have been traced right back to the fifteenth century—indeed, for those who are prepared to accept "Decressie" as a bona fide corruption of "de Crècy," well beyond that. Talking to my aunt toward the end of her life was rather like turning the pages of a Victorian family album, for as she grew older the England of her childhood seemed to glow ever more brightly in her mind's eye. In those far-off days it had been fashionable to accept the inevitability of human progress with a wholeheartedness which is almost impossible for us to imagine. In the 1890s life presented *homo sapiens* with a series of "problems" which had to be "solved." It was as simple as that. The Edwardians merely gilded the roof of that towering pagoda of Victorian optimism which collapsed in smithereens in 1914.

James Wilkins—Great-Aunt Victoria's husband—died of trench fever in the Dardanelles in 1916. They had no children and she never married again. I learned later from my aunt that James had been a keen member of the Fabian Society. He had also been an active partner in the antiquarian book business of Benham & Wilkins which owned premises off Old Bond Street.

Shortly after James's death, and much to her family's astonishment, Victoria announced her intention of taking over her husband's share of the business. She very soon proved herself to be an extremely capable businesswoman. She made a speciality of English incunabula and through-

out the twenties and thirties she built up a thriving trade with countless museums and university libraries all over the world. When the vast Hertford Collection was sold off to pay death duties in 1938, Great-Aunt Victoria had her seat reserved in the front row of the auction gallery throughout the two weeks of the sale, and in the price register published afterward the name "Wilkins" was prominent among the list of buyers.

In October 1940 a direct hit from an incendiary bomb destroyed the premises and much of the stock of Benham & Wilkins overnight. It also seemed to destroy something in Aunt Victoria herself. She was close to sixty at the time, living alone in Hampstead, and I remember receiving a letter from her in which she told me that she had decided to sell out. She did not sound particularly regretful about it. "No doubt it had to happen," she wrote, "and I consider myself fortunate that it did not happen to me too." I discounted the unfamiliar note of fatalism in her words as being due to shock.

She lived on in her house in Well Walk, growing perceptibly frailer as the years advanced, but with her mind still alert and sharp. I used to make a point of calling in to see her whenever I was up in town and was invariably offered China tea and caraway seed cake, for which she had a lifelong passion. On one occasion, in the late fifties, she told me she had once been "propositioned" by H. G. Wells.

"I had no idea you knew him," I said. "When was that?"

"Oh, at about the time he and Shaw and the Webbs were squabbling over the future of the Society."

"The Fabian Society?"

"Yes, of course. 1907 I think it was."

"And what was the proposition?"

She laughed. "The usual one, I gathered. He said he wished me to help him with a book he was writing on the emancipation of women." She paused and gazed out of the window. "He was a strangely attractive little man."

"But you didn't accept?"

"No. Perhaps I should have done. Of course I had met him before that—at the Huxleys. Everyone was talking about him." She paused again and seemed for a while to lose herself in reverie, then she remarked, "Did you ever read a story of his called 'The Chronic Argonauts'?"

"I can't recall it," I said. "What was it about?"

"About a man who invents a machine which will carry him through time."

"Oh, you mean 'The Time Machine,' Aunt."

"Indeed I don't. I'm quite sure that was the title. I'd never seen 'chronic' used in that way before. It was a serial he was writing for a magazine. He showed me a copy of the first installment. You see we both knew the man it was based on."

"I'm surprised it was based on anyone," I said.

"Oh, yes," she assured me. "A Doctor Robert Pensley. He lived in Herne Hill. Like all of us in those days he too was a great admirer of Professor Huxley."

I helped myself to another slice of seed cake. "And what did the Doctor make of young Wells's portrait of him?" I asked.

"As far as I know he never read it."

"Oh? Why not?"

"He disappeared."

I blinked at her. "Just like that?"

She nodded. "It created quite a stir at the time. There were rumors that he had skipped off to America."

"And had he?"

"*I* don't think so. And neither did Wells." She chuckled —a strangely youthful sound from lips so old—and added, "I remember H.G.'s very first words to me when he learned what had happened: 'By God, Vikki, don't you see? He's done it!' "

"And what did he mean by that?" I asked.

"Traveled in time, of course," said Aunt Victoria in the matter-of-fact tone she might have employed in saying, "Caught the 10:15 to Portsmouth."

I am ashamed to say I laughed.

She gave me a darting, sidelong glance from her clear, gray eyes. "You think it quite impossible, of course."

"Oh, quite," I said, setting down my teacup and wiping the cake crumbs from my fingers with my handkerchief.

"Wells didn't think so."

"Ah, yes," I said, "but then he wrote science fiction, didn't he?"

"I don't see what that has to do with it."

"Well, I presume he'd just appreciated that he had the material for an excellent story. After all, he wrote it, didn't he?"

"He wrote it *down*," she said.

"Well, there you are then. And no doubt Doctor Pensley's descendants are living happily in America to this day."

Aunt Victoria smiled faintly and let the subject drop.

I was in Melbourne, Australia, right on the other side of the globe, when I received a letter telling me that Aunt Victoria had died. The news did not come as any great surprise because I knew she had been in poor health ever since catching a severe dose of flu in the early spring, but the sense of loss I felt was real enough. Her death seemed to nudge me appreciably nearer to my own grave.

When I returned home to England, some six weeks later, it was to discover that my aunt's mortal remains were nourishing the rose bushes in Highford cemetery and the house in Well Walk had already been sold. I also discovered a letter awaiting me. It was signed by her Bank Manager, who, it appeared, was the Executor of her will, and it informed me that I had been left a legacy of a thousand pounds together with "a particular token of the regard in which the late Mrs. Wilkins held you."

I lost no time in traveling up to Town from my home in Bristol and presenting myself at the Bank Manager's office. After the formal exchange of polite regrets for the sad nature of the occasion I was handed a brown paper parcel, securely tied and sealed, with my own name written upon it in Aunt Victoria's quite remarkably firm hand. I signed the official receipt, was presented with an envelope containing a check for £1,000, and stepped out into the street. I was not consumed by any overwhelming curiosity to discover exactly what "token of regard" the parcel contained. From the shape of it I guessed that it must be a book of some kind and I had a shrewd suspicion that it would prove to be the photograph album which Aunt Victoria and I had often looked at together when I visited her in Well Walk.

There being nothing further to detain me in London I took a taxi to Paddington and caught the first available train back to Bristol. Having decided to invest a modest portion of my windfall on a first-class ticket I had the unfamiliar luxury of a whole compartment to myself and, seated there, relaxed and extremely pleased with myself and the world, I finally got around to untying the string

which, I did not doubt, Aunt Victoria had fastened with her own capable hands.

I soon realized that I had been mistaken in my previous assumption. The book which emerged from beneath the layers of brown paper and newsprint in which it was wrapped had certainly been old long before the invention of photography. It measured roughly twelve inches by nine, was bound in dark brown leather and had a heavily ridged spine of the kind which I believe is known in the antiquarian book trade as "knuckled." There was no tooling of any kind either on the covers or on the spine—in fact nothing at all on the outside of the book to indicate what its contents might be. For the life of me I could not conceive why Aunt Victoria should have left it to me.

As I turned back the front cover I found, lying inside, a sealed envelope, inscribed with my Christian name and bearing at the bottom right hand corner a date—June 4, 1958.

I laid the book down on the seat beside me, slit open the envelope and extracted two sheets of the tinted notepaper which my aunt had always favored. I put on my spectacles and read the following:

Wednesday evening

My dear Francis,

There was a point during our conversation this afternoon when I was sorely tempted to march upstairs and fetch down this book. Though I am sure you don't realize it there was something about the way in which you dismissed the very idea of time travel as being "Quite impossible!" that struck me as almost unbearably smug. However, second thoughts being, as usual, better than first impulses, I have decided instead that I shall leave you the book in my will. So by the time you read this letter I daresay you will already have become accustomed to thinking of me as your late Aunt rather than your Great-Aunt! I confess that it makes me smile even as I write it.

From the ex-libris plate inside the front cover you will see that this book comes from the Hertford Library which was sold up in 1938. It was part of a lot consisting of some half a dozen miscellaneous seventeenth-century Registers which I obtained for the proverbial song simply because no one else seemed

interested in them. It was not until I was going through them to make out entries for our Overseas catalog that I noticed that one of them had stitched into the back of it about twenty flimsy sheets of paper which were quite different in texture from those which make up the rest of the volume. Since the binding itself was indisputably seventeenth-century workmanship and all the other entries concerned the years 1662–1665, I started to examine these odd pages with some interest. I discovered, to my astonishment, that they constituted a sort of rough journal or diary, written in pencil, and covering a period of some three weeks in August and September 1665.

I will not spoil my own pleasure in imagining your expression as you read them by telling you what I believe them to be. All I will *say is that the Register was entered in the Hertford Catalog in 1808 as having been purchased along with two others "from the Estate of Jonas Smiley, Esq." To the very best of my knowledge they lay there in the library of Hertford Castle quietly gathering dust for the next 130 years.*

I trust you will find it as interesting and as instructive as I did.

Yours most affectionately,
Victoria.

I reread the letter from beginning to end in total bewilderment. At first, I confess, I could only assume that I was the victim of some extraordinary practical joke she had chosen to play upon me, but it was so *unlike* Aunt Victoria to do anything of the kind that, in the end, I simply shrugged and picked up the book. Sure enough, pasted inside the front cover was an engraved bookplate depicting two remarkably well-developed mermaids holding aloft a shell in which reclined a grinning skull, a quill pen and an hour glass. Circumscribing this somewhat ill-assorted gathering was a fluttering banner emblazoned with the legend *Ex Libris Hertfordens.* so at least there seemed to be no doubt about that part of Aunt Victoria's story. I turned over the stained flyleaf and found myself contemplating an ornate sepia script which informed me that this was: "ye Register opened on November 20th 1662 for ye Hostel of Saint Barnabas in ye Parish of Wapping of

which ye Recording Clerk was one Tobias Gurney." The first entry on the next page read: *"Decd. at the 4th hr. Agnes Miller, fem. age indet. of ye fev. quot. tert."*

I ran my eye down the column which appeared to consist almost entirely of records of deaths and then flicked on through the yellowed pages till I reached those leaves which Aunt Victoria had spoken about. I saw at once why they had caught her attention. For one thing they measured little more than six inches by four and the paper, besides being badly faded at the edges of the sheets, was ruled with faint lines. But even more striking was the difference in the handwriting. These pages were covered in a minute, cramped, cursive script quite unlike the hand of the Recording Clerk. If I had to select one adjective to describe it the word would be "scholarly." In fact the tiny writing put me immediately in mind of that of J. E. Lawless, my erstwhile tutor at St. Catherine's; there were even some of the identical abbreviations—"tho." for "though"; "wd." for "would"; "shd." for "should"—which I remembered he had favored. Settling myself firmly into the corner closest to the window I raised the book to catch the maximum amount of daylight and began to read.

Some twenty minutes before the train was due at Bristol I had reached the last entry. I find it quite impossible to describe accurately my precise state of mind at that moment. I remember becoming conscious of an acute headache, the onset of which I had, presumably, ignored while I was engrossed in my reading. I remember too that as I unhooked my spectacles and gazed out of the window I experienced a most extraordinary sense of disorientation—perhaps "displacement" would be the better word—as though the green fields and cozy Wiltshire farms beyond the track had become mysterious, insubstantial, illusory things, mere tokens of stasis in some fantastic temporal flux. The moment passed quickly enough—the discipline of a lifetime's ingrained habit of thought soon reasserted itself—but I was left with the same excessively unpleasant sense of inner quivering that I had once endured after experiencing a minor earthquake in Thessalonica. To say that I doubted what I most firmly believed would be putting it too strongly: to say that my philosophical foundations had been temporarily shaken would not be putting it quite strongly enough.

It will, I am sure, be maintained that I am either the

instigator of—or the victim of!—some elaborate hoax. The first contention I shall perforce ignore, since, knowing it to be untrue, it does not particularly concern me. To the second I am forced to return a reluctant verdict of "Not Proven." I have had the Register examined by two separate experts in such matters and both have assured me, to my own total satisfaction, that the notebook pages which have been incorporated within it were stitched into the binding at the time when the book itself was bound up, that is, not later than the middle of the eighteenth century and, in all likelihood, a good half century earlier. *Yet the paper of the notebook itself is, indisputably, of a type not manufactured before 1860!* Ergo, either somebody is lying or the notebook is genuine.

If we assume that some person (unknown) had wished to perpetrate such a hoax, when could it have been done? From the internal evidence certainly not before 1894. Therefore, this anonymous hoaxer must have had access to the Hertford Library, have inserted his spurious material into the Register, have replaced it on the library shelf and then *done nothing at all to draw attention to it.* Since, presumably, the whole point of a hoax is to deceive as many people as possible this strikes me as just about the most pointless hoax ever devised.

That leaves, as far as I am concerned only my Great-Aunt Victoria. She had custody of the Register from the time of the sale in 1938 until the day of her death—ample opportunity certainly in which to have "doctored it" to her heart's content. Furthermore, she, with her professional connections, would have been ideally situated to carry out such a plan had she wished to do so. This would have entailed forging the whole "diary" itself on suitable paper; having the Register broken down and the forged diary incorporated; reassembling the whole and restoring it to its original condition in such a way as to totally deceive two vastly experienced and disinterested professional experts. She would also have had to insert (or have caused to be inserted) two completely spurious entries into the Register proper, doing it in such a way that there was no observable discrepancy between those false entries and the ones which preceded and followed them. The only way in which this could have been done would have been by removing two of the original sheets, obtaining two blank sheets of the identical seventeenth-century rag paper, forg-

ing the entries to correspond *exactly* with those in the rest of the book, and then reassembling the whole. I am prepared to admit that all this *could* have been done, but nothing will ever succeed in convincing me that it was. Nevertheless, since such a thing is conceivably possible, I must to that extent accede to the verdict of "Not Proven" on the second of my two counts.

Having said that, all that remains is for me to transcribe *in toto* the contents of this extraordinary document and to add, by way of an appendix, the relevant entries from the Register itself together with a few concluding observations of my own.

Although the transcript is a faithful word-for-word copy of the original text, I have taken the liberty of expanding the author's abbreviations, inserting the paragraphs and tidying up the punctuation where I think it is called for. The diary commences at the top of the first page and it is possible that a preceding page or pages were lost before the others were incorporated in the Register.

It is, of course, utterly pointless to go on cursing myself for my idiotic complacency, yet has there been a single waking hour in the last forty-eight when I have not done so? To assume, as I did, that the Morlocks* had done no more than carry out an investigation of the superficial structure of my Machine was an inexcusable indulgence in wishful thinking, bolstered, unfortunately, by my successful onward voyage and return. Yet even now I am by no means certain that the Morlocks were responsible for that microscopic fracture of the dexter polyhedron. Could it not equally well have occurred during that final frenzied battle within the pedestal of the White Sphinx? Indeed it seems more than likely. What is utterly unforgivable is that I should have failed to detect the flaw when I carried out my detailed check on the Machine on Friday. Well, few men can ever have paid more dearly for wanton carelessness.

I knew that something was amiss the moment I had recovered sufficiently from my initial vertigo to scan the dials. Instead of circling smoothly around the horologe the indicator arm had developed a perceptible and dis-

* For this and similar references see *The Time Machine* by H. G. Wells.

quieting lurch, first slowing and then accelerating. I realized at once that two of the quartz pillars in the quincunx were out of phase and I suspected some minor fault of alignment which it would be but the work of a moment in the laboratory to correct. Although the dials on the fascia showed that I was already well back into the seventeenth century, a glance at my pocket watch informed me that my journey was less than two minutes old. Very gingerly I coaxed the right-hand lever toward me and was much alarmed to observe that the pulsation of the needle at once became far more pronounced. This, together with that indescribable nausea which is seemingly an unavoidable concomitant of Time travel, produced in me a sensation that was uncomfortably close to panic. Nevertheless, I kept my head sufficiently to observe that I was not about to enter into conjunction with some massive external object and, very gently, I brought the lever back into the neutral position.

The Machine was resting on the bare hillside, its brass runners buried in grass and buttercups. Above me the sun was blazing down out of a cloudless sky and from its position relative to the meridian I judged the hour to be early afternoon. Some way down the slope of the hill below me two brown and white cows were grazing placidly, flicking their tails at the flies. As I glanced away I saw one of them raise its head and regard me with mild curiosity. So much for the seventeenth century, I thought, and with a silent prayer on my lips I thrust forward the left-hand lever which would send me winging forward through the centuries to 1894. *And nothing happened!* I tried again and even risked further pressure on the right-hand lever. The result was exactly the same.

My emotions at that moment were all but identical with those I had experienced when I first looked down from the gazebo on the hillcrest above the Hall of the Eloi and found my Machine was no longer standing where I had left it on the lawn before the White Sphinx. It is the fear that grips the marooned mariner when he sees the topsail finally dip below the horizon. For a minute or two I surrendered to it cravenly and then, thank Heaven! reason reasserted itself once more. I had successfully surmounted the earlier crisis; I should survive this too.

I climbed out of the saddle, stepped down into the grass, unclipped the aluminum cover and peered into the womb

of the quincunx. One glance was sufficient to tell me what had happened. Of the four polyhedral quartz prisms, the second dexter one had *fractured clean in two along its plane of cleavage!*

For a long moment I simply stared at it in disbelief while the full implication of the disaster gradually dawned upon me. With it came an overwhelming awareness of the grotesque and inescapable irony of my predicament. There, a mere ten paces from where I was standing, lay my workbench, and lying upon that workbench were no fewer than *four identical quartz polyhedra* any one of which could have been fastened into place within a matter of moments! Ten paces or two hundred and thirty years! Compared with my previous voyage it was hardly a hairbreadth of Time, and yet, for all that, those vital components might just as well have been engulfed in the swamps of the Jurassic.

I reached into the quincunx, unscrewed the two halves of the broken rod, withdrew them and examined them. I thought I could detect a minute scratch ending just where the fracture began. "Ah, fool," I castigated myself bitterly. "Crass, unmitigated fool!"

I sat down in the grass with my back resting against the framework of the Machine, and tried to marshal my fragmented thoughts. It was plain enough that my only hope of escape was to obtain a replacement for that broken prism. I even derived a mite of consolation from the wry reflection that had it been the neodymium dodecahedron which had shattered I should have been lost indeed since that—chronically speaking—essential element had been discovered only in 1885! But how to set about obtaining a replacement?

I rose to my feet and consulted the fascia dials once more. A brief calculation told me that I was now in the year A.D. 1665. The date did indeed touch some faintly disturbing chord in my memory but I was too concerned with finding a solution to my immediate problem to spare any time on tracking it to its source. Reaching into the pannier below the saddle I next drew out the canvas knapsack and my Kodak. Then, mindful of my experience with the Morlocks, I unscrewed the two control levers thus still further immobilizing my already impotent Machine. That done I carefully removed the second of the dexter prisms, reasoning that, if a replacement were ever to be

obtained, a complete artifact would provide a more satisfactory pattern than a broken one. These practical actions, small enough in themselves, did much to help me take that first imaginative step on the far side of the gulf which is imperative if a traveler in Time is to preserve the full effectiveness of his intellectual faculties.

My next move was to take stock of my useful possessions. I was, it is true, somewhat better equipped than when I had first launched myself so impulsively into the Future, but since I had planned for a brief expedition into the early Holocene it was open to question whether a patent pocket compass, a Kodak, a specimen case or a notebook and pencils would be of very much service to me in my present predicament. Far more to the point was the handful of loose change which, by a fortunate oversight, I was still carrying in one of the thigh pockets of my knickerbockers. It amounted in all to two sovereigns, three florins, a sixpence and some assorted coppers. Apart from my fob watch, the other pockets surrendered little more than a small tin of licorice cashews, my tobacco pouch and pipe, a box of lucifers, a twin-bladed penknife and a brass-sheathed pocket lens. This latter I put to immediate use by verifying what I had already suspected concerning the microscopic cause of the fracture in the prism.

The warmth of the summer sun was striking full upon me so I loosened the belt of my Norfolk jacket, hoisted the knapsack over my shoulder, and, after bidding my Machine a truly heartfelt *au revoir,* settled my cap square on my head and set off, striding out through the buttercups across the flank of the hill in the direction of Camberwell.

The plan of action I had settled upon was simple enough —to get to London as soon as I possibly could. It was there, if anywhere, that I might hope to find a skilled lapidary artificer whom I could prevail upon to fashion me a four-inch polyhedral rod of rock-crystal sufficiently accurate for my needs. An exact replica was obviously too much to hope for, but I reasoned that I had already sufficiently demonstrated how even a flawed rod would serve its purpose long enough to enable me to effect my return to the nineteenth century.

Ten minutes' brisk walking brought me within sight of the Thames basin, though the river itself I could perceive only as a tremulous silver flickering in the distance toward

Rotherhithe some four miles to the northeast. I was astonished by the amount of woodland which clothed the south bank of the river from Battersea to Greenwich. Although it was largely dispersed in the form of small coppices and outgrown hedgerows, the spaces between those closest to me were filled by others yet more distant so that the general effect was to screen the City from my sight. Had I chosen to ascend to the crest of Herne Hill I would doubtless have obtained a view of the whole panorama, but time was too precious. Leaving the hilltop windmill on my left I descended by means of a dry and rutted cart track toward the untidy huddle of houses which I guessed must be ancient Camberwell.

The track led me down into the road which I recognized as connecting Camberwell with Dulwich so I turned to my left and headed in the general direction of Walworth. As I rounded the corner which brought me in full view of the hamlet I was surprised to observe that a rough stockade had been erected across the road. The centerpiece of this makeshift barrier was formed by a large hay wain, on the top of which were seated three men, one of whom appeared to be shouldering a musket. I paused for a moment to take stock of the situation; then, able to make nothing of it, I approached to within hailing distance and called out to ask whether I was on the London road. "Aye!" shouted one of the men, rising to his feet. "And keep a-going, stranger! We're all sound bodies here and by the Lord's grace will stay so."

Perplexed in the extreme I continued moving steadily toward them, whereupon the same man shouted again, "Not one step further upon thy life!"

I halted in my tracks and stared at him—or rather at the musket which he was now pointing directly at my head!—and raised my hands to show that I carried no weapon. "I wish you no harm, good people," I cried.

"Nor we you, mister," responded the spokesman. "So get ye gone."

"But this is most uncivil," I protested. "I have urgent business to transact in London."

"Aye, and the Angel of Death likewise!" cried one of the others. "Four thousand souls been culled at last week's billing."

This extraordinary remark did what nothing else in the exchange had so far achieved. The significance of the

final figure registered upon the dials of my Machine reverberated through my stunned mind like an electric alarum bell. *1665. The year of the Great Plague!*

My hands dropped to my sides as though paralyzed and I stood transfixed, wonderstruck, staring at the three men. One of them raised his fingers to his lips and whistled shrilly. A moment later I caught the excited yelping of dogs. There was an urgent cry of "Sic him! Sic him!" whereat I spun about and fled precipitately with a pack of eager curs snapping at my flying heels.

No sooner had I regained the sanctuary of the cart track than the dogs, with a few backward looks and admonitory snarls, trotted off toward the village, leaving me with a painfully racing heart and the realization that my predicament was far worse than even I could have imagined. My historical knowledge of the effects of the Plague was woefully sketchy, though I did recollect from a childhood reading of Pepys' Diary that commercial life of some sort had continued in the City throughout the visitation. My longing to be quit forever of this benighted age increased a hundredfold. I resolved to strike out at once across the fields in the general direction of Southwark, avoiding, as far as humanly possible, the vicinity of any of the scattered farms or hamlets I might encounter on the way.

An hour (and several wearisome detours) brought me within sight of the Old Kent Road along which I perceived a number of covered carts and several head of cattle being driven in the direction of London Bridge. I skirted around the edge of a cornfield, thrust my way through the hedge and, having gained the highway, set off at my best pace in the wake of this motley caravan. I soon came up with a young cattle drover who eyed me somewhat oddly, no doubt on account of my dress, though in truth my tweed knickerbockers were perfectly recognizable descendants of his own leather breeches and woolen hose. The most obvious anachronism was my checkered cloth cap (all the men I had seen so far had been wearing either the broad-brimmed "wideawake" or the high-crowned "steeple" style of headgear favored by the Puritans) so on the pretense of wiping the sweat from my brow I removed the questionable article, stowed it away in my pocket and gave the youth a "good-day." He returned my greeting civilly enough and inquired what I was traveling in. My look of perplexity led him to say, "Are ye not a pedlar?"

It seemed prudent to agree that I was and I asked him whether he knew of any jewelers or instrument makers still trading in the City.

He shook his head and said he supposed they must all have fled if they had the means to do so. Realizing I should get no useful information from him and anxious to push on with all possible speed I wished him a good journey and strode off in the wake of the carts.

I was by now within plain sight of Southwark Cathedral and the Old Bridge and for the first time since setting foot in this grim century I found myself gazing about me with real curiosity. The great river—sparkling, green, and clear in a manner all but unimaginable in 1894—was crowded with vessels of every conceivable shape and size from tiny skiffs to quite substantial merchantmen. Indeed, further downstream below the Tower I counted no fewer than twenty-three large craft moored out in mid-channel, while a host of small rowing boats fussed around them like water beetles. As to the City itself I think what struck me most forcibly was firstly the grisly row of severed heads adorning the battlements of the Bridge Gatehouse, and, secondly, the gaiety and brightness of the waterfront houses, each decorated individually to its owner's whim. The sight of those bright reflections shimmering on the sunny water affected me so strongly that it was with a real sense of impotence and loss that I suddenly realized how, within a mere twelvemonth, the ravages of the Great Fire would have destroyed forever most of what I was now seeing. That it must be so I acknowledged, but it caused me none the less of a pang for that.

As I approached the Gatehouse I observed a group of watchmen armed with pikes and muskets examining the contents of the incoming carts and questioning the drivers. Since pedestrians did not appear to be attracting the same attention I strode on purposefully only to be halted by one of the guards demanding to know my business. I told him I was a pedlar mechanician seeking out instrument makers in the City and added that I would be obliged if he could assist me with directions.

He looked me up and down, scrutinizing my woolen necktie and my stout Highland brogues with obvious suspicion. "And whence come ye, master pedlar?" he asked.

"Canterbury," I replied glibly, offering the first likely name that came to mind.

"Be ye of sound health?"

"Indeed I am," I said, "and hopeful to remain so."

"Aye," he muttered, "with God's blessing, so are we all. Be advised by me, master, and look to peddle your wares elsewhere."

"I have no choice in the matter," I replied. "My trade is too rare." So saying I slid my hand into my trousers pocket and jingled my coins meaningfully. "Would you happen to know of any jeweler still trading in the City?"

He squeezed his nose thoughtfully between his finger and thumb. "Ludgate's their common quarter. But the sickness lies heavy thereabouts they say. More I know not."

I thanked him for his help, drew out a penny from my pocket and handed it to him. As I hurried on to the bridge I glanced back and saw him turn the coin doubtfully between his fingers before tapping it against the steel blade of his pike.

I crossed the river without further incident, picked out the Gothic spire of Old St. Paul's soaring high above the roofs to my left and knew that Ludgate lay immediately beyond it, hidden from my view. I passed through the gate at the north end of the bridge and stepped down into the City.

No sooner had I done so than the waterside breeze died away and I was assailed by a most terrible stench from the heaps of garbage and human ordure which lay scattered all down the center of the street, baking in the sun and so thick with flies that the concerted buzzing sounded like a swarm of angry bees. I felt my stomach heave involuntarily and clutched my handkerchief to my nose and mouth, marveling how the other pedestrians seemed able to proceed about their business seemingly oblivious to the poisonous stench.

I had covered barely two hundred yards before I came upon a house, securely shuttered and barred, with a clumsy cross daubed upon its door in red paint and the ominous words "Lord, have mercy upon us," scrawled above it. Dozing on a stool beside it was an old man with a scarlet wooden staff resting across his knees. I observed that my fellow pedestrians were careful to give the area a wide berth and, at the risk of fouling my shoes, I too edged out toward the center of the street, glancing up as I did so in time to see a small white face peeping fearfully down at me

from behind one of the high leaded windows. In spite of the heat I shivered and quickened my pace, taking the first available turn to the left and hurrying down what is still, I believe, called Thames Street. As soon as I saw the cathedral spire rising to my right I turned again and headed toward it.

As I made my way along the narrow alley I scanned the signboards on either side and eventually saw one which bore a representation of a pair of compasses. I hurried toward it only to discover that the shop was locked and barred. I squinted in through the leaded window at the selection of terrestrial globes, astrolabes, hourglasses and astronomical rings and felt my heart sink. What earthly hope had I of finding anyone capable of supplying my needs in an age which was only just beginning to emerge from the shadows of the medieval? As I turned dispiritedly away I saw an elderly gentleman emerging from a door further up the street. I waited until he came abreast of me and then accosted him politely and asked whether he knew of any instrument maker or optician still working in the neighborhood.

Perhaps something in my manner of speech or my dress intrigued him because he peered at me shrewdly from beneath the broad brim of his hat and asked me if I would care to specify exactly what it was I was looking for.

Having nothing to gain by not doing so I told him I had urgent need of some skilled artificer capable of fashioning for me a small rod or cylinder of rock crystal. "Why, sir," he said, "if you seek a lens grinder then Master William Tavener is your man. His shop lies hard by St. Anne's in Carter Lane." He indicated with his cane the direction I should take, adding that he could not vouch for it that the man had not fled the City, though he believed not.

I thanked him warmly for his assistance and made haste to follow his directions. Ten minutes later I had found the shop, exactly where he had described it, with a large gilded spectacles frame hanging above it for its sign. I glanced briefly at the small display of reading lenses in the window, realized that this or nothing was what I had been seeking, and with a painfully racing heart reached for the door latch. To my inexpressible relief the door opened and I stepped over the threshold into the shop.

A small brass bell was standing on the wooden counter

and, after waiting for a minute or so, I picked it up and rang it briskly. I heard a door bang somewhere in the back regions of the shop and the sound of approaching footsteps. Finally a young woman appeared holding a baby in her arms. She stood gazing at me somberly for a moment then asked, "What is it ye seek, master?"

"Is Mr. Tavener in?" I asked. "I have some urgent business for him."

A distant voice called out, "Who is it, Bessie?"

"Robert Pensley," I supplied. "*Doctor* Robert Pensley."

I thought I detected a faint quickening of interest in her face as she passed on this information. "He'll be down to you in a minute, sir," she said.

"Does he work alone then?"

"Th' prentices have flown this month past," she said. "I warrant I'd have followed them had it not been for Father. Plague or no plague he'll not budge."

"Have you any rats in your house?" I inquired.

"Aye, some I daresay. What house hereabouts hasn't? They swarm up from the Fleet like black heathens."

"Their fleas are the Plague carriers," I said. "Rid yourself of the rats and you'll be safe."

She laughed. "Lord, sir, the beasts are dying without any help from us! I found two lying stiff in the jakes this very morning."

"You didn't touch them?"

"Not I," she said. "Father hoisted them with the furnace tongs and flung 'em over the wall into the ditch."

"On no account handle them whatever you do," I said. "One bite from an infected flea and that could well be the death of you. Believe me, I know."

"They do say as it's the foul air," she said. "There's orders posted abroad for the Watch to burn night fires at every street crossing—and all day long in the open yards. But Father says the London air's always been as foul even when there was no plague."

"He's right," I insisted. "So do as I say, Bessie, and promise me you'll touch no dead rats, then you and your babe will both live through it safely."

She smiled. "Me, I hate the ugly brutes. Hark ye, here comes Father now."

A middle-aged man with a bald crown to his head and sparse brown hair touched with gray, came shuffling out of the passage at the back of the counter and nodded to

me. "We've not met before, I think, sir," he said. "What is it ye seek?"

I lifted my knapsack onto the counter, unbuckled it and drew out the complete prism and the two broken pieces. "I want you to cut me an eight-faced crystal prism to these identical dimensions, Mr. Tavener," I said. "Can you do it?"

He took the whole crystal from me and held it up, twisting it this way and that as he squinted at it. "May I ask who fashioned this for ye, sir?"

"I had it cut in Italy."

" 'Tis fine workmanship. I've seen none better." And with that he handed it back to me with a smile.

"But you must keep it, Mr. Tavener," I insisted. "It is to be your pattern. The dimensions are vital, I do assure you."

"I'm sorry to disappoint ye, Doctor," he said, "but seemingly that's what I must do. Singlehanded I'm so tardy in my work that it would be the best part of a three-month before I could even consider it. Why, I have grinding in hand upstairs for Master Hooke, due last month, that bids fair to keep me till the middle of next."

"Mr. Tavener," I cried desperately, "I have not traveled all this way to find you, only to be denied! Will you tell me how long it would take to cut such a prism?"

He lifted the rod again and turned it over speculatively between his fingers. "Cut *and* polish?" he inquired.

"Of course."

"Two or three days, maybe. Depending on how fine ye wanted it."

"And what would you charge?"

"A guinea a day for the skilled labor."

"I'll pay you ten," I said, and the words were no sooner out of my mouth than I realized what I had said.

He peered up at me quizzically over the crystal. "Ten guineas?" he repeated slowly. "Ye'd pay me *ten gold guinea pieces?*"

I nodded. "I will. Providing you'll put the work in hand for me at once."

He looked down again at the prism and traced its beveled contours with his fingertips. I could see he was wondering what kind of a man I was to have brought him such a proposition. "D'ye mind telling me why the matter is so urgent, sir?"

"You'd not believe me if I did, Mr. Tavener," I said,

"but I assure you it could well be a matter of life or death. Time is of the essence."

"Well, there again, sir," he said, "I know not whether I even have such a blank to suit. Like all else good crystal's hard to come by in these black days. But perhaps you'd care to step up into the workshop and see what there is."

"Then you *will* undertake it?"

"If I have no satisfactory blank, sir, then no amount of willing on my part will make ye one," he said. "So you'd best come up and see for yourself."

I followed him through the shop, up some dark stairs and into a long, low-beamed workroom which must surely have been cantilevered on to the back of the house. Windows ran around three sides and two of them looked out over the graveyard of the church next door. The early evening sunlight was slanting in through a dusty drapery of cobwebs. An antique wooden treadle lathe stood against one wall. Suspended above it was a rack of tools. Instead of a fireplace there was a charcoal oven-furnace and a glass-making crucible. The whole place was depressingly reminiscent of a Dürer engraving of an alchemist's glory hole, but while Mr. Tavener was routing in the depths of a cupboard I examined two lenses I found lying on a bench and discovered them to be of astonishingly high quality.

Tavener emerged clasping a chunk of quartz which he brought across to the bench and laid before me. "That's Tintagel pebble," he said. "Would it do?"

I picked up the crystal and held it to the light. As far as I could tell it was flawless. I handed it back to him and expelled my breath in a long sigh. "It will do perfectly, Mr. Tavener," I said.

At that very moment the clock in the church began to sound a chime and, without thinking, I pulled my watch from my fob pocket, intending to set it by the prevailing time. I had just clicked open the gold face-guard when I noticed that Tavener's gaze was riveted on the instrument. I smiled. "You will not have seen a watch like this, I daresay, Mr. Tavener?" I detached the chain clip and held the instrument out to him.

He took it from me and turned it round wonderingly in his fingers, rather as the guard at the Bridge Gatehouse had turned over the penny I had given him. Then he lifted it to his ear and a look of the most profound astonishment suffused his face. It is, in truth, a fine timepiece, made by

Jacques Simenon of Paris and given to me to mark my twenty-first anniversary by my dear Mother and Father. I took it back from him, opened the case with my thumbnail and showed him the jeweled precision movement within. "Why, sir," he breathed, "that is a true miracle! God's truth, never in my life did I dream to see such a thing."

"I warrant it is the only one of its kind in the world today," I said.

"That I can well believe, sir. I doubt the King himself hath such a treasure."

"Mr. Tavener," I said slowly, "would *you* like to own that watch?"

He looked at me as if I had gone clean out of my mind and said nothing at all.

"I mean it," I said. "So anxious am I to have the prism cut that I am prepared to give you my watch in exchange for it. It is worth far more than ten guineas. Make for me a perfect copy of that prism, put it into my hand, and I will put the watch into yours. See, here is my hand in pledge of it."

Tavener looked down at the watch ticking away merrily on the bench with the yellow sunlight winking from the jeweled balance. It almost seemed to have hypnotized him. "Well?" I said. "Isn't it a fair bargain?"

"Aye, sir," he agreed at last. "I must suppose ye best know what ye are about," and with that he joined his palm to mine and we shook upon the contract.

"And when can you start?" I asked him.

"Tomorrow, God willing. But I shall have to ride to Edmonton first for pumice powder and rottenstone. I'm clean out of both of them."

"How long will that take?"

"All day, most like. 'Tis ten mile there and no less back."

"And those things you must have?"

"Aye. For cutting pebble. 'Tis not like your whoreson glass. The other grits I have enough of."

"It's not for me to teach you your business, Mr. Tavener," I said. "All I can do now is to wish you God speed."

"Believe me, I'll not tarry, sir. As it is the lass won't care to be left."

I picked up the watch and clipped it back on to its chain. "I am just newly arrived in London, Mr. Tavener," I said, "and as yet have no lodgings. Could you perhaps recommend me to some inn close by?"

He scratched his chin. "*The Three Keys* in Lower Wharf Street is a clean house," he said. "It's just down alongside Paul's Steps. I daresay that would suit ye. The air is more wholesome by the water."

So I took my leave of him with my heart feeling a good deal lighter than it had for many hours. I soon found *The Three Keys* and prevailed upon the landlord to rent me an attic room overlooking the river, paying for one week's rent and board in advance with the first of my two sovereigns. I told him that the coin was a Polish *thaler* —Henderson the numismatist once told me that this coin bore a superficial resemblance to our modern sovereign— and he accepted it cheerfully enough, no doubt on account of his having frequent dealings with sailors from foreign ports. I drank a mug of ale with him and ate an excellent mutton pasty while he regaled me with horrific stories of the ravages the "visitation" was wreaking upon the City. He also told me that the ships I had seen drawn up in midstream were filled with wealthy citizens who had embarked their wives and families and would permit no one else to set foot aboard, all their daily needs being supplied by boatmen who purchased food on shore, rowed out with it, and loaded it into baskets which were then hauled up on deck.

Soon after this I retired to my room intending to take a short nap, but whether from the unaccustomed effect of the strong ale or by simple reaction to the day's exertions, I fell deeply asleep and did not wake until the next morning, though I seem dimly to recall having my dreams invaded by the sound of a handbell being rung in the street below and the jarring clatter of iron-shod cart wheels upon cobblestones.

Apart from a brief excursion this morning along the waterfront, during which I purchased for myself a less anachronistic hat with one of my three florins and a plain-fronted, linen bib shirt with another, I have spent the whole day closeted in my attic writing up this record of what must surely be one of the most extraordinary days ever spent by a nineteenth-century gentleman.

August 28th

To Tavener's early, only to find the shop locked up. I waited for over half an hour hoping that at least his daughter would put in an appearance but saw nobody. I

made my way around to the back of the premises and peered up at the workshop windows. The whole place seemed utterly deserted. The rest of the morning I spent wandering about the City in an agony of apprehension. Finally I returned to Carter Street, knocked on the door of the house adjoining the shop and inquired whether they knew anything of the man's whereabouts. The woman told me that Tavener, accompanied by his daughter and her child, had set out early the previous morning in a small pony cart and had not been seen since. Telling myself they had been delayed at Edmonton and would surely return that afternoon, I wandered into the Cathedral and, despite my own anxiety, was deeply moved by the sight of hundreds of people all kneeling in silent prayer. I read a printed proclamation which I found nailed up in the Cathedral porch. It was signed by the Lord Mayor and the Sheriffs and gave a series of orders to the citizens, some of which explained the odd noises I had heard—hand bells, horns blowing and the rest. Nothing more desperately ironical than the directions *to kill all dogs and cats!* —the one slender hope of keeping some of the rats out of the houses! Returned to Tavener's three times more, then finally back here feeling thoroughly depressed.

August 29th

Spent a wretched night lying awake listening to the melancholy cries of the bellmen—*"Bring out your de-a-a-d! Bring out your de-a-a-d!"* Resolved to try to speak to the Mayor or the Sheriffs and attempt to persuade them to at least rescind the order for the destruction of dogs and cats. Heard the squeaking of mice—or rats!—behind the wainscot and broke out into a cold sweat of pure terror. Would I not be better advised to seek lodgings south of the river?

(Later)

Still no sign or word of Tavener. Wrote him a note which I thrust under his door, urging him to contact me immediately on his return. Found another lens grinder in Cheapside but lacking the prisms which I had left with Tavener I could only give him a rough description of what I wanted. Since he had no suitable crystal anyway it was so much wasted effort. However, he told me that William Tavener was "a true man of his word" and that my business could not be in better hands. Consolation of a sort, I

suppose, if only I could be sure that my business *was* in his hands!

A thoroughly unnerving encounter in a street (Bread St.?) linking Cheapside with Watling Street. Saw a man I took for a drunkard staggering toward me. Just before he reached me he pitched over and fell full length on the cobbles. I hurried up to him—he was lying on his face—turned him over and saw to my horror that he had all the signs of the Plague, gross swellings at the sides of his neck and dark blotches under his skin from internal bleeding. There was a trickle of blood running from the corner of his mouth though this may well have been a result of his fall. He was still breathing—a throaty, rasping sound—and as I bent over him he vomited up a black, evil-smelling bile, shuddered once, violently, and lay still. I looked up and saw that the narrow street which had been busy enough when I entered it was now competely deserted. All round me I heard the staccato sounds of doors and window shutters being clapped to. I felt for the poor devil's pulse and found nothing. I left him lying there in the street and hurried away.

When I had recovered something of my composure I made my way straight to the Mansion House and asked if I could speak to one of the Sheriffs or some other person of authority upon a matter of great urgency. Finally I was granted an audience with a Mr. Robinson, the Private Secretary to Sir Charles Doe. He listened patiently while I poured out my reasons for at least rescinding the order for the destruction of cats and dogs. Having heard me out he thanked me politely and then told me that I was mistaken since it had been proved quite conclusively that the Plague was transmitted by the "evil miasma" which was inhaled by these very animals and then breathed out upon their unsuspecting victims! Besides, he added with a charming smile, did I really suppose that such a tiny creature as a *flea* could carry all the monstrous weight of such appalling infection? Furthermore, if extra proof were needed, could any man deny that fleas had been skipping around London for years before the outbreak of the present calamity? "Bubonic plague," I said, "is carried by the black rat in the form of an invisible bacterium, *bacillus pestis*. When the rats die of the infection their fleas seek out other hosts and by sucking their blood transmit the infection to them. Would you be so good as to record that

fact and see that it is conveyed to Sir John Lawrence? If the authorities act promptly thousands of innocent lives may yet be saved." Mr. Robinson smiled and nodded and scribbled something on a piece of paper. "I will see that your message is conveyed to His Lordship, Doctor Pensley," he said. "And now I really must beg ye to excuse me for I have a great deal of most pressing business to attend to." And that was that.

August 30th

It is now three whole days since I spoke to Tavener and still nothing. Last night, for the first time, I found myself the victim of a most dreadful depression which I could not shake off. All day long a heavy pall of cloud has hung over the City and my eyes are still red and inflamed from the sulphurous smoke of those infernal bonfires they light to *sweeten the air!* This afternoon I was assailed by an ungovernable panic-fear that my Machine had been discovered and removed. I ran down to the waterside, paid a boatman sixpence to ferry me over to Southwark and made my way back across the fields to Herne Hill. My relief at discovering my Machine still standing exactly where I had left it—and, apparently, untouched—quite overwhelmed me. I sank down in the grass beside it and wept like a child. While I was making my return a violent thunderstorm broke and by the time I eventually got back to the inn I was soaked to the skin. The landlord persuaded me to drink a stiff tot of hot Hollands punch which, though it may not be the universal specific he claims, certainly seems to have done something to lift my leaden spirits.

August 31st

Tavener is returned! The serving maid who attends on me in my room brought up my clothes which had been drying overnight in the kitchen and told me that Tavener's daughter had brought word to the innkeeper. My spirits soared like a skylark. I was out of bed, had dressed, and was on my way to Carter Street within minutes of hearing the news. Bessie came to the shop door herself and told me that her father was already at work upstairs on my commission. Not wishing to delay him still further I asked her to tell me what had happened. Whereupon she invited me through into their parlor and told me how they had

been stopped at Stanford by a barrier across the road, similar in all respects to that which I had encountered at Camberwell. Unable to persuade the villagers to let them through they had been forced to make a detour as far westward as Palmer's Green before they could circle back by a maze of by-lanes toward Edmonton. They had spent that night under a haystack and, on resuming their journey next morning, had reached Edmonton around noon only to find, to their dismay, that there a similar barricade had been erected. Her father had spent most of that afternoon parlaying with the constables and had eventually prevailed upon them to allow him through. But their troubles were still not over. The dealer who normally supplied him with materials had shut up his works for the duration of "the visitation" and gone to lodge with his sister in Newmarket! Having got so far the resourceful Tavener was not to be denied. He forced an entry into the store shed, helped himself to whatever he wanted, left some money to pay for it together with a note of explanation and, next morning, the three of them were on their way back to London.

All had gone well until, while they were descending Stanford Hill, the axle of their hired pony-cart broke. Tavener was somehow able to effect a temporary repair which enabled them to crawl back to Wood Green where they had spent the rest of that day finding a wheelwright and persuading him to replace the broken axle. This meant still further delay and by the time the job was finished it was too late to continue to London. They spent that night in Wood Green and had set out the following day, arriving back at Carter Lane at about the same time as I was on my way back from Herne Hill.

I have recounted here briefly what Bessie Tavener spent an animated hour describing, painting a remarkably vivid word picture of the pathetic bands of fugitives from the City whom they had encountered roaming the forest around Woodford—"living like gypsies, poor souls, with nary a scantling of provender to keep their bones from rattling." I was moved to ask her whether she regretted having to return to London but she said there were already many cases of plague in the outlying districts and if she was fated to die of it she would rather draw her last breath in her own house than lost among strangers. I repeated my stern warning about the rats and extracted a solemn

promise from her that she would keep well clear of any-place where fleas might be caught. She gave me her word readily enough, but I suspect it was more to humor me than because she believed me.

I looked in briefly upon Tavener before I left and told him how inexpressibly relieved I was to see him back. He merely nodded, gave me a shy grin and returned to his lathe. As I stepped out into the street, which smelled mercifully sweeter for the deluge yesterday evening, I felt as though a huge and suffocating burden had been lifted from my shoulders.

September 1st

The soaking I received in the thunderstorm seems to have left me with a chill. Hardly surprising. However, I have before me one of the landlord's excellent "Hollands tonics" which is a great source of comfort. Shortly before noon I called around at Tavener's to see how the work was progressing only to find him engaged in packing up a box of lenses for a little hunchbacked fellow in a grubby wig. Tavener introduced him to me as "Master Hooke." As I shook him by the hand I thought, by way of a joke, to say, *ut tensio sic vis,* Mr. Hooke. He gave me a most extraordinary look as if to say, "Who is this madman I have by the hand?" and the thought crossed my mind that perhaps he had not yet formulated that shortest of all Physical Laws which posterity would link to his name. Thereafter we chatted in a desultory way about the Plague until he hobbled off with his box of lenses under his arm.

After he had gone Tavener showed me how the work on the prism was progressing. The blank is already two-thirds shaped in rough and he hopes to have that part of the work completed by this evening. Then the labor of polishing begins. In spite of my pressing him he would not give me a definite date for completion on the grounds that Tintagel pebble was notoriously slow to take a fine polish being "hard nigh unto diamond." He is certainly a most meticulous craftsman who obviously takes a profound—though somewhat inarticulate—pride in the quality of his work.

September 2nd

A violent bout of sweating in the night left me with a feeling of great lassitude and a severe headache. I arose late, dressed myself, went out into the street and was over-

come with a fit of giddiness not unlike the vertigo I have experienced while Time traveling. I have no doubt at all that it is an unwelcome aftereffect of the chill, but I could well do without it. On my returning to the inn the landlord made my blood run cold with a story of some poor pregnant girl in Cripplegate who was nailed up in her house when one of her sisters contracted the Plague. All the rest of the family were stricken down one after the other until finally, when only she was left alive, she gave birth and, with no one on hand to help her, died, not of the Plague, but of a hemorrhage! With her self-delivered infant in her arms! The sheer, wanton cruelty of this policy of sealing up houses is almost beyond belief. No phrase sickens me more than the pious: "'Tis God's will," and I must be hearing it in one form or another twenty times a day.

September 3rd

Little doubt in my mind but that I've caught a really nasty dose of influenza. I have passed all the day lying in bed and, despite the sun beating down on the tiles overhead making this attic as hot as an oven, I have spent much of the time shivering violently. When the servant girl came up to make my bed I told her I had caught a bad chill and asked her to be good enough to fetch me up a mug of strong spiced ale. That was over three hours ago and still she has not returned.

September 9th?
Hostel of St. Barnabas.

Days of nightmare. What is memory? What dream? Gray Morlock figures bending over me, prodding at my chest, thrusting me into my clothes, carrying me downstairs with a rag soaked in brandy stuffed into my mouth. A boat. Stars swirling round in the sky above me. Squeaking of oars. Voices whispering. Waking again to find the sun hammering nails into my naked eyes. My knapsack is lying on the sand beside me. Where am I? My fumbling fingers explore my body as though it is a stranger's. My joints are all on fire and my head feels as though a red-hot gimlet is being screwed into my brain. Beneath my armpit the outline of an unfamiliar lump. Another in my groin. *Buboes!* Pain gives way to sheer, mindless terror. I am falling backward down the black well-shaft that has no bottom. Voices. Hands lifting me. Hands carrying me.

Falling, falling without end. I open my eyes to see a stone vaulted roof arching above me. As I stare up at it a cowled face swims into my field of vision. Its lips move. "Welcome, stranger." "Where am I?" (Is that really my own voice?) "The Hostel of Saint Barnabas." "I have the Plague?" The cowl nods. "Am I dying?" "We think not." Time passes. I sleep; I dream; I wake. Sleep, dream, wake. Strong, firm, gentle hands raise me and prop me back against straw-filled sacks. Soup is spooned into my mouth and a worried voice urges, "Drink, Robert." I swallow and choke. "Again." I swallow. "Again. Good i'faith. Most excellently done." "Who brought me here?" "Who knows, Robert? Friends to be sure. They could have drowned ye in the river like a puppy for all ye could have stayed them." A pause, then, "Who is Weena?" "Weena?" "Aye. Ye called on her by the hour in your raving. Dost wish me to send word to her that ye lie here?" "She's dead." He rises from my bedside and sketches a token blessing over me. "My knapsack," I croak. "Fear not, Robert. 'Tis here." He lifts it onto my bed and then moves off down the ward. I fumble the buckle undone, extract my notebook and force myself to write a note to Tavener. Then I sleep again. When I wake next I make this entry. It has taken me nearly three hours to complete it.

September 11th

Today Brother James trimmed my beard for me and has promised to see that my note is delivered to Tavener. He assures me too that "through God's infinite mercy" I have successfully weathered the worst of the storm. Twenty-four patients have died since I was brought in. The bell in the chapel never seems to stop its mournful tolling.

September 12th

The superstitious fear of infection is presumably what I have to thank for the fact that I still have all my possessions down to the last pencil—that and the fact that the innkeeper's livelihood was at stake. Had word got out that I had the Plague *The Three Keys* would now be a "sealed house."

September 13th

This afternoon I spent half an hour trying to persuade Brother Dominic, the physician, that the infection is trans-

mitted primarily by rats and their fleas. I had hardly more success than I had with Secretary Robinson even though I thought to cite Harvey to illustrate how the bacillus was carried through the bloodstream. B.D. told me he thought it was an interesting theory but that proof was lacking. I told him that if he swabbed out his wards with a 250/1 solution of sulphuric acid he'd soon have all the proof he needed. "And what is sulphuric acid, Robert?" On my telling him it was another name for oil of vitriol he nodded, but I suspect he was really no more convinced than Robinson had been.

September 14th

A message was brought in to me by a walking patient that a Master William Tavener was without and would speak with me but was fearful of entry. He sent word to say that the work was finished and that he had it now upon him. On hearing this I crawled off my bed, staggered the length of the ward like a drunkard and so, by painful degrees, proceeded to the Hostel gate. "Tavener?" I croaked. "Is that you, man?" He stood a little way off and stared in at me. "In God's name, Doctor Pensley, ye are sadly changed!" "I'm recovered now," I said, clutching at the iron rails of the gate for support. "It's quite safe to come close." "That I durst not, Doctor," he called. "Go ye back a way and I'll push them through to ye." I did as he said, though how I contrived to remain standing is a miracle, whereupon he ran to the gate and quickly thrust a bundle wrapped in cloth through onto the flagstones. I picked it up, unwrapped it with shaking hands and found, lying inside, swaddled in lambswool, the two whole prisms together with the two broken pieces. *And for the life of me I could not tell the copy from the original!* My eyes filled with tears I was quite powerless to prevent. "God bless you, William Tavener!" I cried. "You are indeed a master among craftsmen!" Taking out my watch and chain I held them up so that he could see them plainly, then laid them down upon the flagstones. He let the watch lie there while I stepped back, then he darted forward and scooped it into a leather bag he had ready for the purpose. "Farewell, Doctor," he called. "God be wi'ye!" and he was gone. Somehow I managed to stagger back to the ward and there collapsed upon my cot.

September 15th

Feel too weak to write much. Obviously overdid things yesterday. The prism is a true marvel—a perfect replica. No doubt at all it will fulfill its function.

September 16th

Vomiting all last night. Feel v. weak.

September 17th

Diarrhea and vomiting.

disgust

There it ends. The last entry is so faintly penciled that it is very difficult to decipher. The word could possibly be read as "despair." However, the Register itself leaves us in no doubt as to the final outcome. One of the two entries for September 20, 1665 reads: *"Decd. at ye 5th hr, one Rbt. Penly* (sic) *of med. yrs. of ye black flux."* It is matched by a previous entry for September 5: *"Admi. one Penly, sick nigh unto death."*

In the weeks which followed my initial perusal of the Hertford Manuscript I took certain steps to ascertain, for my own satisfaction, whether the journal was in fact nothing more than an elaborate and pointless forgery.

My first problem was to obtain a specimen of the true Doctor Pensley's handwriting. I wrote to Somerset House and inquired whether he had left a Will, only to be informed that there was no one of that name in their probate records for the years 1894–1899. I then thought to try the civil records for Herne Hill and wrote to the Camberwell Town Clerk, but again drew a blank. I could find no Pensley in the London Telephone Directory, and a discreet advertisement placed in the Personal Column of *The Times* proved just as unrewarding. However, these initial disappointments served only to spur my determination. I contacted an old friend of mine in Cambridge and asked him to consult the University Records on my behalf. Within a fortnight I learned that Robert James Pensley had been admitted to Emmanuel College as an Exhibitioner in the year 1868.

I traveled down to Cambridge and there in the College

Records I found at last what I had been seeking. It was not very much certainly—a mere signature—but when I laid it beside an entry in the Hertford text where the author had written out his own name, I was convinced that the writing was by the same hand. My instinctive conviction has since been confirmed by the opinion of a professional graphologist.

My next move was to consult the back files of local newspapers. The only one which still survives is *The Dulwich and District Observer* and there, in the yellowed print of the issue for the week of June 18, 1894, tucked away among advertisements for safety bicycles and patent knife powder, I found: *Puzzling Disappearance of Well-Known Amateur Scientist.* The account, written in an excruciatingly "literary" style, described how Doctor Robert Pensley, the only surviving son of James and Martha Pensley, had vanished from his home in Herne Hill on the morning of June 7th and had not been seen or heard from since. There was a thinly veiled suggestion that the doctor had been suffering from severe mental strain brought on by overwork. His housekeeper, in an exclusive interview with "our Reporter," described how her employer was in the habit of vanishing into his laboratory "for hours on end, bless him, and all night too sometimes." There the article ended and since I could find no further references to the mystery in any later issue, I can only suppose that the matter had been purposely hushed up.

But I could not let the matter rest there. Some strange, haunting quality in that penciled manuscript beckoned to me like a forlorn will-o'-the-wisp, and I resolved to track down as many of the historical references as it was possible to do after an interval of over three hundred years. During the past eighteen months, whenever I have had the opportunity, I have consulted ancient documents in The Guildhall, The Stationers' Hall, The British Museum and The London Records Office in an attempt to verify what I already *felt* to be true, namely that, in some wholly inexplicable manner, Robert Pensley *had* succeeded in transferring himself backward in time to the seventeenth century and had there perished.

My first notable success was in establishing that one William Tavener, a member of the Guild of Spectacle Makers, had occupied premises next to the Church of St. Anne in Carter Lane. The date given was 1652. A further

entry recorded that two apprentices had been bound to the aforesaid Master Tavener at premises in New Cheapside in 1668! So he, at least, seems to have escaped both the Plague and the Fire.

In a Victorian handbook entitled *The Inns of Elizabethan London* I came upon a reference to *The Three Keys* of Lower Wharf Street. Like most of the other establishments mentioned it was destroyed in the Great Fire of 1666.

The Hostel of Saint Barnabas—a Franciscan Charity Foundation—is reasonably well documented. It functioned until the early nineteenth century when it was pulled down to make way for a new dockyard.

Last May, in the archives of The Mansion House, I unearthed the name of one Samuel Robinson, Esq., recorded as having been appointed to the post of *amanuensis privatus* to Sir Charles Doe, Sheriff, in the year 1663.

In 1665 Robert Hooke was certainly in London, working as "Curator of Experiments" for the newly founded Royal Society, and I have no reason to doubt that he would have called upon the services of Master Tavener to supply him with his optical apparatus. Incidentally, it might not be inappropriate to point out that Robert Hooke, as well as formulating his famous Law, has also been credited with a multitude of other discoveries, among them the invention of the spring balance wheel without which the science of horology (not to mention navigation) would doubtless have languished for many years longer in the Dark Ages!

Yet, when all is said and done, such "facts" as I have been able to disinter seem to raise more questions than they answer. I feel I am forever condemned to pace the circumference of a circle which turns out to be not a circle at all but a spiral—my point of arrival is never the same as my point of departure. For to accept the Hertford Manuscript at its face value must surely mean accepting a concept in which Time is both predetermined and yet infinite, an endless snake with its tail in its own mouth, a cosmos in which the Past and the Future coexist and will continue to do so for all Eternity.

How then is it that I both *can* and *do* believe that Robert Pensley's journal, written in his own hand in the year 1665, was already lying there gathering dust on a shelf in the library of Hertford Castle for fifty years be-

fore its author had drawn his first infant breath in the year 1850? Or that he died, most horribly, on a straw pallet in a charity hospital in the district of Wapping, beside the silver Thames, clutching in his stiffening fingers a fragment of polished rock crystal which he had staked his life to obtain, only to lose the wager at the very moment when he must surely have believed that he had won?

The Web of the Magi

I APPROACHED KHAR-I-BABEK AT sundown on a cold Tuesday in November 1886. Since the end of August I had been engaged on the preparation of a Preliminary Survey for the electric telegraph link which is to connect Isfahan with the central Baluchistan/Karachi system. My orders were to map out the most feasible route through the Zagros.

It began to snow as we prepared to pitch camp. Wall-eyed Jamshid set about coaxing a fire out of dried dung and thorn twigs while his brother Parviz hobbled the mules and assisted me to erect the tent in the shelter of an outcrop of sandstone. Both scoundrels appeared surly and ill at ease, an effect which I ascribed to the inclement conditions. However, when I taxed them with it, they muttered that the place was well known to be *djinni*, an observation to which, as Sir R.B. would surely agree, the Occident has no truly adequate response.

At about seven o'clock the wind began to rise. By then it was snowing steadily—a fine, powdery precipitation which every now and again the gusts contrived to force through the ventilation louver in the roof of the tent. It descended upon our heads like puffs of ash as we sat huddled around the brazier, dipping our fingers into the brass dish of lukewarm rice. The meal over, I was moved to offer each of them one of my precious *bhandi* cheroots and would, indeed, have shared the remaining contents of my brandy flask with them had they not flung up their hands in concerted and well-simulated horror at so impious a suggestion. Knowing full well how they had responded to similar

invitations on previous occasions I was able to indulge in a little quiet amusement at their expense.

I was intrigued to observe how, every so often, one or other of them would incline his head as though he were listening to some noise outside. I asked Parviz whether it was the mules they were concerned about, but he shook his head and muttered something in the Pashto dialect that I could not catch.

Having trimmed the lantern, I settled to my nightly task of writing up my log and transferring the day's topographical observations from my field notes to the Russian Imperial map which Colonel Mallows had obtained for me. It was, I suppose, better than nothing—but not much. Already it was becoming evident that I had now climbed well above Major Bobroff's firsthand observations which, for all practical purposes, can be said to have ended at Persepolis. I was coming to the inescapable conclusion that many thousands of square miles between Shiraz and Kerman could well be designated *Terra Incognita*. Yet the terrain, though hardly hospitable, is, I hazard, by no means impossible; and the establishment of a telegraph link between Isfahan and Baluchistan is, unquestionably, of prime military importance.

I finished writing up my log and had just set out my pens and colored inks preparatory to commencing my labors upon the map when, above the moaning of the wind, I heard what sounded exactly like a human voice calling from outside the tent. My immediate reaction was one of utter astonishment. Nor was I vastly reassured to observe that Jamshid and Parviz had flung themselves upon all fours and, with their beards buried in the carpet, were beseeching Allah to have mercy upon their miserable souls.

I rose from my stool and removed my service revolver from its holster. Having unhooked the lantern I thrust aside the tent flap and peered out into the night, thus making myself a perfect target for any rogue who might have felt disposed to take a potshot at me. I then compounded my stupidity by calling out loudly, "Who's there?" first in Persian and next in Arabic.

Receiving no response I stepped out into the swirling snow and proceeded to investigate further. I discovered the mules huddling dolefully in the lee of the rocks and I made a cursory examination of the snow for some sign of human footprints but found nothing. Feeling rather more

confident I executed a rapid circuit of the immediate environs of the tent, using the opportunity to check the security of the guy ropes. Thus, I succeeded in convincing myself that what I had heard was some freakish effect of the wind blowing across the fissures in the sandstone and producing thereby a noise resembling that of a human voice.

I reentered the tent and informed my two brave rascals that all was well and that they had nothing to fear. "It was the wind," I said, "blowing among the rocks. There's no one out there."

"Ahriman is there," whispered Jamshid, darting a quick, sidelong glance at his brother. "*You* cannot see him, Major, but he is there."

I replaced the lantern and restored my revolver to its holster.

"Ahriman, eh?" I replied. "I must say that you surprise me. I understood that the Faithful had long since ceased to pay homage to *angro mainyush.*"

I had purposely chosen the ancient Zend form of the Evil Deity in order to discover how Jamshid would react, and my reward was to see him raise his left hand to his forehead with the little finger crooked outward in the sign of the horn. "So," I said, "Ahriman still lives then?"

Jamshid nodded. "The Old Ones did not die at the coming of the Prophet, Major. They hid themselves away. My grandfather told me how, long ago, up here in the snows of the Zagros a great battle was fought, and the armies of Ahriman were driven back into the *Kaufa.* But they were never destroyed. They cannot be destroyed. Auramazda set *djinni* and *afreeti* to stand guard over them and make sure that they stayed where they are."

Parviz, who had been signifying solemn agreement during this recital, now chipped in with, "We must not go any farther into the mountains, Major. That voice you heard was an *afreet* sent by Ahriman to warn you."

"Oh, yes?" I said. "And for how long has Ahriman been in command of his own jailers?"

This sly observation started them arguing between themselves and finally Jamshid said, "It was not an *afreet,* Major. It was the ghost of a Magian. But Parviz is right. He came to warn us that we must turn back."

I realized that the moment had come for me to put my foot down.

"We shall not turn back," I informed them calmly. "Did you not both swear on the Koran before the *mullah* to accompany me upon this expedition for the most generous wage of one silver *kran* each per day? Do solemn promises mean so little to the Faithful? Shame on you both! Come, we will hear no more of such girlish nonsense."

Having thus delivered myself I resumed my seat and had just taken up my pen when I heard the sound again. Although I had by then fully succeeded in convincing myself as to the true nature of its origin, I could not but marvel at the uncanny resemblance to a human voice. Indeed, by straining my ears, I could almost persuade myself that it was calling to me by my own name—"Or'mond . . . Or'mond . . . Or'mond"—with just that same slight hiatus between the syllables which I have long since grown to expect from the Persians.

Since there was no point in my making a second fruitless foray out into the night I affected a stoical expression, as if defying it to do its worst, and commenced sketching in the fifteen or so miles of the watercourse which I had surveyed during the day. Within a minute the noise ceased, and I celebrated the event by lighting up a fresh cheroot and helping myself to another pull from my flask.

I turned in shortly before midnight. Parviz and Jamshid had by then been snoring for well over an hour. The wind had dropped again—rather to my relief, I must confess—and there had accordingly been no further visitations from any phantom Magi. Then, just as I completed my prayers and was on the point of settling down to a well-earned rest, I heard a voice, close beside my head, whisper, "Or'mond!"

I jerked bolt upright and held my breath. The heavy regular snoring of Parviz and Jamshid was sufficient to convince me that neither of them was responsible, and yet I would almost have staked my life that I had not imagined it.

Very, very cautiously I crept out of my blankets and felt around me in the darkness until I had located my revolver. Gripping it firmly I crawled to the entrance of the tent and peered outside. As I had half expected there was no sign of anyone or anything untoward. I secured the wooden toggles with fingers which were a good deal less steady than I care to recall and made my way back to my

cot. And this time, just to be on the safe side, I took the precaution of slipping the revolver under my palliasse.

I was woken at dawn by the sounds of my two rascals praying noisily outside the tent—a sudden access of piety on their part which I could only ascribe to the fright they had received the previous evening. I donned my boots, stepped out into the early sunshine and went briskly through my Rumbolt exercises—that course of scientific calisthenics which I have striven to follow upon rising every morning for the past twenty years. I observed that the sky had cleared during the night and was now the palest sparrow's egg blue from horizon to zenith. The air was crisp and extraordinarily invigorating. To the north the towering peak of Shir Knh glittered like splintered glass in the bright beams—a sight which would surely have inspired a new verse of the *Rub'i* had old Omar been on hand to witness it.

Over a scratch breakfast I told Jamshid that my plan was to continue due east along the watercourse until I reached the transverse valley which I had observed through my telescope the previous afternoon. If it proved feasible we would strike out up it to the northwest.

In view of their response the night before I was expecting some opposition to this projected itinerary but Jamshid merely shrugged and said, "As the Major wishes." Had I not been so anxious to push ahead with all speed I would probably have given more weight to this sudden change of attitude, but, in the event, I was quite content to seize fortune by the forelock and not go seeking for trouble.

We struck camp shortly after eight o'clock and by half past ten had covered the six or seven miles to the transverse. The thin mantle of snow was already beginning to melt in the warm sunshine though where the mountain shadows fell it was still pure and unsullied. As far as I could judge the rock was mainly granite and crystalline schist with, here and there, traces of sedimentary sandstone. The vegetation was reminiscent of the High Steppes, namely coarse *puszta* grass and the ubiquitous mountain thorn, but there was also a species of brightly berried wild ash which, surprising though it seems, appeared positively to relish the arid soil.

The valley which I had made my goal turned out to be a good deal narrower than I had supposed. It followed a

gentle right-hand curve as it ran in a general northwesterly direction for a distance of some three miles. At that point it appeared to terminate in a curious kind of saddle or swaybacked ridge. Down the face of this, through my glass, I was able to trace the threadlike course of a small cataract.

The presence of this unusual feature placed me in something of a dilemma. I guessed that beyond the ridge I should discover a lake for which the cataract was the overspill. If that were so then there was little point in our attempting to push our way through, since the water would almost certainly form an all but insurmountable barrier when it came to erecting a telegraph. On the other hand, there was a slight though genuine possibility that the ridge was one of those odd geological faults caused by some ancient upheaval in which the whole sedimentary rock bed had been fractured leaving this ridge as the visible edge of a plateau.

By telescopic examination of the visible strata I tried to ascertain which of the two hypotheses was correct but could come to no definite conclusion. Three courses now appeared open to me. I could retrace my steps for thirty or forty miles and strike off toward Abekun, hoping to find some other way through to the north; or I could scale the nearest mountain slope to a point from which I could look down upon the ridge; or I could press on up the valley, clamber to the top of the saddle and discover what lay beyond.

The first option I rejected out of hand—or, rather, thrust to one side as something to fall back on; the second I disposed of by the simple but fundamentally specious argument that it would take me just as long to reach a suitable viewpoint as it would to reach the ridge itself. My mind made up I clapped up my glass and strode over to where Jamshid and Parviz had scratched out a grid on a sandspit and were playing at *zu-zu* with pebbles for counters. "I shall take one of the mules and ride on to find out what lies beyond the ridge," I said. "You will remain here with the baggage. If the route ahead is blocked I shall return at once. If I find there is a way through I shall flash a signal with the heliograph for you to join me. Do you understand?"

"We understand, Major," Jamshid replied. "When you flash the mirror we come. If you do not signal we wait for

you here. Maybe, by the grace of Allah, we shall catch some fish in the pools."

I placed the leather box which held the heliograph, the sextant and the theodolite in one of the panniers and balanced it with the case containing my maps, records and cartographic equipment in its neighbor, then I transferred the load to the saddle of the strongest of our five mules. It was approaching eleven o'clock and I reckoned it would take me roughly an hour and a half to reach the summit of the ridge. I thrust a stick into the sand beside the *zu-zu* grid, gauged what I judged to be a generous hour's span and marked the point with a pebble. "Be sure and watch for my signal when the shadow reaches that stone," I told them.

"And if the sun chooses to hide himself behind a cloud, Major?"

"Then I shall fire two shots from my revolver. But if there is no signal you are to wait for me here."

They both inclined their heads to signify assent, whereupon I led the mule down to the stream, waded over to the far side and headed inland along the margin of the tributary.

I had chosen the right-hand side of the rivulet because, from my previous observations, it had appeared to offer slightly the better traveling, though in truth there was practically nothing to choose between them. However, the slight dexter curve of the valley now meant that I would soon be hidden from the camp and would remain so until I scaled the ridge. Needless to say, at the time, this aspect of the matter never even crossed my mind.

I suppose that I had not been traveling for more than twenty minutes before I became conscious of the extraordinary *quietness* of the place. Had it not been for the faint but ever-present gurgle of the stream and the occasional rattle of the mule's hooves against the stones I really think the loudest sound would have been the noise of my own breathing. There was no wind at all. The leaves on the stunted rowan trees, which grew even more thickly here than elsewhere, hung absolutely motionless above the stream. Nor was there so much as a whisper from the parched *puszta* grass. It was almost as if the whole valley were wrapped around with a thick, invisible quilting of cotton wool. Indeed, the word which best describes the quality of that silence is "wadded."

But there was something else too—something which is far less easy for me to describe because, at the time, I shrugged it off as being wholly fanciful and subjective. To put it in the baldest possible terms I became convinced that I was being spied upon.

I say that I discounted it, yet I had experienced a similar sensation at least once before—indeed, in a very real sense, I owed my life to it. When the Fourth was surprised by the Ayub Khan's men on the Dori River below Kandahar I had known we were being watched for half an hour before the first shot was fired. On that occasion I had seen nothing and heard nothing, and yet such was the strength of my conviction that we were heading straight into an ambush that I confessed my fears to Colonel Wooler. Fortunately for us all he was prepared to listen to me, otherwise I should not be writing this today. So why, then, did I choose to ignore my present premonition? I can only suppose that my curiosity, my determination to see what lay beyond the ridge, had completely overridden my native caution. The only danger to myself that I could conceive of was that I might have the misfortune to slip and twist an ankle.

Shortly before noon I set foot on the lowest part of the ridge and received my first shock. To my astonishment I perceived that the channel of the cataract was not, as I had supposed, a natural formation, but was following a zigzag course down a conduit which had been most skillfully contrived from blocks of crudely dressed granite. Some fifteen feet up from the bottom of the ridge the shooting water plunged roaring into a deep pool among the rocks whence it bubbled away down the floor of the valley to join the larger river.

As I approached, greatly intrigued and excited by my discovery, I observed that one of the huge boulders which ringed the pool had engraved deep into its face an inscription in the antique, cuneiform characters which I had come to associate with ancient Assyrian. I was, of course, unable to decipher its message, but it had the effect of intensifying a thousandfold my already overwhelming desire to see what lay beyond the crest of the ridge.

I tethered the mule to one of the trees which grew beside the pool and began scrambling up the steep, grassy slope. By now the sun had melted the thin mantle of ex-

posed snow, leaving the ground damp and slippery beneath my boots. Twice I lost my footing and fell flat on my face, but I was up again in a moment scrabbling my way upward on all fours like an ape—a posture which, whatever it may have lacked in dignity, served my purpose very well. Even so I was twice forced to pause for breath before I reached the summit which rose to an altitude of some eight hundred feet above the level of the valley floor.

But the "summit" when I gained it proved to be merely the skyline. Beyond it I discovered a further slope, less steep than the first, which in its turn climbed to a height of perhaps a further hundred feet over a distance of about five hundred yards. On the point of setting off once more I caught sight of the source of the cataract. This proved to be a hole in the rocks about halfway up the face of the second slope. I walked toward it and one superficial glance was sufficient to persuade me that I was indeed in the presence of some antique work of hydraulic engineering. Breaking into a run I headed directly up the slope, my heart pounding with excitement.

I do not really know what I expected to discover—perhaps some long-abandoned historical site similar to the temple of Persepolis. What I did find was even more astonishing because it was so totally unexpected. I crested the final ridge and beheld, stretched out below me, a long narrow valley similar to, but considerably shallower than that which I had just left. In shape it resembled a simple leaf—a comparison made the more apt by reason both of its greenness and the series of symmetrically spaced irrigation channels which ran down from the mountainsides at an oblique angle and converged in a slender, reedy lake which occupied the place of the main stem. Along the opposite sides of the valley two larger conduits had been skillfully engineered and these, I assumed, supplied the lateral channels. The two larger canals converged directly beneath the point where I was standing and were then led through the hill to reemerge as that very waterfall which I could still hear thundering faintly at my back.

At the far end of the valley a mountain rose steeply. Nestling in against the towering limestone cliff at its base were a number of red and white stone buildings. Some of these were exceedingly substantial though at first glance it was difficult for me to judge their true stature because the whole of the northern end of the valley was densely

wooded with what appeared to be olive trees. Indeed the greater part of the floor of the valley was forested to a quite astonishing degree and it was obvious to me that at least some of the fields and gardens were still in a state of regular cultivation. Yet there was no sign of a human being. I took out my telescope and swept the whole area from end to end. I found wild fowl in abundance on the lake, goats and sheep grazing in the marginal pastures, even a flock of what looked like turkeys; but of men, women and children there was simply no sign at all.

At that moment, with a curiously heavy heart, I recalled what had brought me where I was. From the point of view of my mission I had reached an absolute dead end. Unquestionably my way lay back along the route I had come and thence westward toward Abekun, for by no stretch of the imagination could I envisage a line of Army telegraph poles striding the length of this valley and clambering up the almost vertical face of the mountain at the far end. And yet I could scarcely endure the thought of turning my back upon it and riding away. The mystery of the place, its isolation, its undeniable antiquity had enthralled me like the Sirens' song.

My struggle with my conscience was brief. We would camp here for the night. Perhaps, should fortune favor us, we would be treated as honored guests. On the morrow we would continue on our way reprovisioned against the ardors of our retreat to the south. Meanwhile I would have uncovered the mystery of the place and, on my eventual return to Albion's shores, would possibly feel moved to pen a modest (and suitably illustrated) account of my adventure which would in due course grace the pages of *The Archaeological Review* or *The Illustrated London News.*

Savoring this heady prospect I turned my steps toward that portion of the ridge from which I could survey our halting place. Only then did I remember how in my haste and excitement to scale the slope I had left the heliograph in the pannier along with the other instruments. I consulted my watch, noted that a full two hours had now elapsed since I had parted from Parviz and his squint-eyed brother, and then proceeded to focus my telescope on the place where I had left them.

It did not take me long to locate the sandspit but nowhere could I see a sign of my two scoundrels. I assumed

that they had given up expecting my signal and had elected to try their luck at fishing in one of the pools upstream. I unholstered my revolver and fired two shots into the air. The sharp double crack echoed back and forth between the mountains and a flock of startled pigeons leaped clattering into the air above the trees. I extracted the spent cartridge cases from the chamber, replaced them with fresh bullets from my bandolier and restored the weapon to its holster. Then I refocused the telescope and waited for my rogues to reemerge.

After five minutes had elapsed and neither one of them had put in an appearance I fired two further shots which I sent winging on their way with a few choice imprecations. I had reckoned that it would take Jamshid and Parviz the better part of an hour and a half to reach me and I had been toying with the notion of occupying the interval by making a panoramic pencil sketch of the valley from the crest of the ridge. Now I had no option other than to retrace my tracks to the confluence, round up the brothers and bring them back with me, an operation which, I estimated, I would be fortunate to accomplish in less than three hours.

As if on purpose to exacerbate my anger and frustration, the sun chose that very moment to vanish behind a thick bank of cloud which, unperceived by me until then, had crept up from the southeast. I spent a further exasperating five minutes trying unsuccessfully to locate the brothers through the telescope, then, thinking some most un-Christian thoughts, I finally descended to the bottom of the slope and untethered the mule.

Even though it took me less than an hour to retrace my route, in that time the cloud bank had advanced right across the valley until the only clear sky remaining was a pale, rapidly diminishing fringe above the mountains to the northwest. With the disappearance of the sun the temperature had dropped precipitately and I guessed that it could not be long before more snow arrived. I urged the mule into a shambling trot while mentally I occupied myself in polishing and perfecting some stinging phrases for the benefit of my prize pair of infidels.

I began shouting for them as soon as I reached the meeting point of the streams but the only audible response was the echo of my own voice. Strangely enough, the facts

of the situation did not immediately occur to me. It was only when I could discover no trace of the mules that the truth finally dawned and I wasted my breath cursing my own folly and damning the brothers Alaghbandzadeh both to the Nethermost Pit.

I used my glass to scan the banks of the watercourse downstream, guessing that to be the direction they would have taken, but already the first flakes of the approaching snowstorm had drawn a gray curtain across the horizon. Besides, if my supposition was correct and they had fled at the very moment when I had first passed from their sight, then by now they were already miles away.

I sat down on a rock and took stock of my situation. The result was, to say the least, profoundly depressing. My sole consolation lay in the fact that they had not decamped with my precious records and that I still had the mule. Curiously enough, I think I felt even more bitter over the loss of my beloved cheroots and my *Kara-Kul* overcoat than I did about the tent. But I had been in far tighter spots than this in my life and had lived to tell the tale.

I tried putting myself in the position of the two rogues. I felt sure they would expect me to launch myself in immediate pursuit and their first aim would therefore be to put as much distance as possible between us. Having succeeded in that, they would then head toward some sizable town—Niriz or Saidabad probably—hoping to dispose of their ill-gotten gains. Nevertheless, sooner or later, they would be bound to return to Bander Abbasi and it was there, where I had originally hired them, that our score would finally be settled, and they would learn, once and for all, that Her Imperial Majesty's subjects are not to be trifled with.

A large flake of snow fluttered down and settled on my hand. It served as a timely reminder that I would be well advised to seek shelter for the night. Since the risks attendant upon immediate pursuit were far too great to warrant more than a token consideration, my only practical option lay in that valley hidden beyond the ridge. So for the third time I forded the stream, and with the snow falling ever more thickly with each passing minute, drove my uncomplaining mule back along the track to the waterfall.

By the time I had regained the foot of the ridge, visibility was restricted to a matter of yards. Since there was

no path of any description I dismounted and set off on a diagonal course up the treacherous slope dragging the long-suffering beast along by its rope halter. As well as being intolerably tedious this method of progression meant that for much of the time I was stumbling backward through a sort of gray, feathery limbo in which my only guides were the drumming of the waterfall and the angle of the slope itself. Several times I altered the direction of my zigzag track and on each occasion I was constrained to shift one or other of the boxes into the pannier adjacent to the incline for fear that otherwise the mule would lose its balance and tumble back to the bottom. When eventually we gained the first crest I was exhausted, but I took comfort from the knowledge that the worst was now behind me. I led my faithful companion across to where the stream issued from the hillside and there let it drink its fill.

My earlier survey of the valley had persuaded me that my best line of approach would be to follow the course of the right-hand marginal channel for as far as was practicable and then to strike off obliquely in the direction of the buildings. Any more direct approach would entail my negotiating several dozen of the minor irrigation ditches at the very real risk of becoming bogged down around the central lake. But the snowstorm had now left me no choice in the matter. I reckoned I would be extremely fortunate just to locate the channel without mishap.

I set a course as close as I could contrive to that which I judged I had taken earlier in the afternoon, my hope being that when I reached the summit my trained memory and my innate sense of direction would combine to direct me toward my goal. The upper slope being a good deal gentler than the lower I was able to walk ahead leading the mule in the normal fashion while I peered into the fog of downward drifting snow.

I estimate that I had covered approximately two-thirds of the distance to the top when I glimpsed what I at first took to be a freak effect of the storm. I paused in my tracks, squinting upward ahead of me. There, as though suspended from the sky were four tall, dim, cloudy figures which by no stretch of the imagination could I relate to anything I had seen there before.

For perhaps half a minute I stood stock still, peering up at them through the haze of sifting flakes, and then I continued cautiously advancing toward them. As I did so it

dawned on me that they were stationed along the ultimate crest and that it was only the whiteness of the intervening snow which had led me to suppose them to be floating in the sky. Immediately I hailed them in Persian, crying out that I was a lost traveler sorely in need of shelter.

They did not answer me directly but one of them raised an arm and beckoned me forward.

As I approached I saw that they were all exceptionally tall and clad exactly alike in long, voluminous garments of white wool which resembled the Arabic burnous except that they were belted about the waist. The deep, scuttle-shaped hoods of these cloaks, projecting forward like visors, made it quite impossible for me to judge either their owners' age or whether their skins were dark or fair.

I spread my right hand, laid it over my heart, and bowed, whereupon they all inclined their heads in unison, and the one who had first beckoned to me, now indicated by signs that I was to follow him.

The snow was still falling as thickly as ever, but they strode off down the far slope without a moment's hesitation and, within minutes, we had crossed over the channel by way of a narrow stone bridge which I did not recollect having noticed before.

In an attempt to engage my guides in conversation I inquired whether it was the sound of my shots which had brought them out to investigate, but they were either unable to understand my Persian or—as it suddenly occurred to me—had perhaps undertaken some strange monastic vow of silence. Nevertheless, absurd though it may seem, I gradually formed the impression that they shared some form of inaudible communication between themselves. On at least two separate occasions, without any word being spoken, they all suddenly turned their heads and gazed out into the falling snow, exactly as if one or the other had drawn their attention to some event which was happening out there in the invisible valley.

It took us perhaps half an hour to reach the lake and to skirt around it. By then the snow had eased off a little and, as we entered the grove which earlier had obscured my view from the crest of the ridge, I was able tentatively to identify the trees as being, in the main, figs, olives and Caucasian mulberries, some of them obviously of a very great age. I was fascinated to observe that each tree appeared to possess its own individual irrigation capillary fed,

presumably, from those distant channels on the hillside. Here too, though without quite knowing why, I was convinced that the system was of enormous antiquity.

As we approached the head of the valley the path between the trees broadened out and became smooth. The carpet of snow which covered the ground disguised the precise nature of the surface beneath, but I guessed that I was walking upon a dressed stone pavement—a suspicion confirmed when, shortly after, we ascended a shallow flight of steps. Three more flights followed at intervals of a few hundred yards, and then we emerged from among the trees and were in sight of the main buildings.

At this point one of my guides turned toward me (all had been striding ahead two abreast during the whole of the journey) and indicated that he would relieve me of the halter by which I was leading the mule. I surrendered it to him with some reluctance, expressing as best I could, my anxiety for the precious contents of the panniers, whereupon, by means of an eloquent and economic hand gesture he succeeded in convincing me that my fears were wholly groundless.

We then proceeded toward the main entrance of the largest of the buildings. The closer I approached the more astonished I became, for I now perceived that the whole towering façade of the building was decorated with an incredibly elaborate series of bas-reliefs, a teeming, superbly sculpted, multitude of human figures, of birds and animals, hardly one of which was larger than a handspan. At a rough estimate there were perhaps ten thousand individual, snow-capped manikins, some scarcely taller than my finger, yet all so marvelously contrived that the plum-colored stone seemed to be in a constant shimmer of movement. So taken was I with this remarkable sight that I scarcely noticed my faithful mule being led away toward one of the other buildings off to the right.

I stepped under the pillared portico wondering what other marvels were in store for me and found myself standing upon a floor of polished limestone. To left and right two doorways confronted each other, and straight ahead the wide entrance passage had been curtained off with a heavy woolen arras.

My guides indicated that I was to enter the left-hand chamber which I discovered was illuminated by a single tall

window set behind an elaborately fretted stone grill. As soon as my eyes had grown accustomed to the gloom I was able to discern an earthenware pitcher and a basin set out upon a table. I availed myself of the opportunity to rid my face and hands of the grime I had acquired during my scrambling on the ridge.

While I was drying myself on the coarse cloth provided for that purpose a curtain was drawn aside in a corner of the room and a small boy emerged from a concealed doorway bearing in his arms a woolen gown. Apart from my silent and enigmatic guides, he was the first human being I had seen since entering the valley and I wondered whether he too was under a vow of silence. I thanked him gravely in my very best oratorical style and was delighted when he responded, first with a shy smile, then a bow, and finally with the words which I must perforce translate as: "O Traveler, honored envoy of Ahuro Mazdao, thou art most truly welcome."

The curiously archaic phrasing and the choice of "Ahuro Mazdao" (the ancient Zend form of the Omnipotent Deity) rather than the modern Persian "Ormuzd" put me suddenly in mind of the odd conversation that had taken place the night before with Parviz and Jamshid.

"Ahuro Mazdao," I repeated. "This then is His temple?"

The lad gave me a curiously opaque look which I could make nothing of, touched me on the sleeve, and then held out his hand for my damp jacket.

Having first transferred my watch to my breeches pocket, I unbuckled my webbing, removed my jacket and passed it across to him. I noticed how his eyes lingered wonderingly upon the butt of my revolver and the leather case containing my telescope but I smiled and shook my head. Then I replaced my harness and permitted him to assist me into the gown. As I had surmised it proved loose enough to conceal my accoutrements, though the presence of the pistol would have remained obvious enough to anyone familiar with modern weaponry.

I was about to question him further when he bowed again and vanished whence he had come bearing my jacket with him. However, I had not long to wait before I heard the sound of footsteps approaching, and a figure, which I presumed to be that of one of my guides, appeared in the doorway. The deep cowl which had previously concealed the face was now thrown back revealing that the person

I had all along assumed to be a man was, in fact, a woman! My reaction was a nice blend of astonishment and confusion, due in no little part to my deeply ingrained reverence for the fair sex and my sensibility regarding the social customs of the country in which I was a guest.

If my escort was aware of my confusion she certainly gave no sign of it. She gazed down at me (she was fully half a head taller than I) with eyes which, I was intrigued to observe, were a devastating shade of deep blue-gray. I noted too a broad forehead; skin paler than I had ever beheld in a Persian; eyebrows a little heavier than the otherwise most delicate cast of the features appeared to warrant; a straight nose; a classically wide, full mouth; and a firm, square chin. It was in truth a noble face, proud as an Amazon queen's, and I was the first to lower my gaze.

"Thou art truly Or'mond?"

The question was simple enough in all conscience but it knocked me clean over the ropes and out of the ring. I heard myself stuttering stupidly, "How can you possibly know my name?" though, had I had my wits about me, I suppose I might have deduced that she had somehow divined it from the box containing my Records.

"Thou art awaited."

"Damn it!" I exploded in English. "Then there *was* somebody out there last night!"

She made a small pouting movement with her lips. "Thou hast been woven clear for many moons, Or'mond. Come."

Turning on her heel she strode off down the hall where she thrust aside the arras and gestured me through.

I emerged into a long high passage from which curtained entrances led off on either side. On the walls between each doorway lamps flared. So highly polished was the limestone floor that the flames were reflected back as though from water. We walked the length of that passage and came to a second arras.

By now I was convinced that this extraordinary building had been quarried out of the heart of the living rock and that I was actually advancing into the very mountain itself. I was puzzled too by the nature of the lamps which gave off an illumination more white than yellow and appeared to flame without visible wicks. Furthermore, the temperature everywhere was astonishingly mild—far too warm to

be natural—yet, apart from the lamps themselves, I could see no signs of fire anywhere.

My guide parted the second arras to disclose a passage similar in every apparent respect to that which we had just left. The place was a veritable warren, yet obviously it had been constructed by human hands working to a sophisticated architectural design. My imagination reeled as I attempted to assess the years of toil it must have taken to excavate such a labyrinth from the bowels of the mountain.

We turned right, climbed several flights of stairs, and finally entered a hall at least twice the height of the corridor along which we had originally passed. The walls were hung with rich tapestries and the floor thickly spread with magnificent carpets, though otherwise it was bare of all furnishings. A series of stone-fretted windows set high up allowed a thin snow-light to filter down and augment the wavering glare of the lamps.

"Rest thou there, Or'mond," directed my Amazon, and let herself out of the chamber through a painted wooden door, the first I had seen in the place.

I took the opportunity to inspect one of the lamps and decided to my own satisfaction that they functioned on some sort of natural gas (I presumed naphtha which is indigenous to Persia) though precisely how it was contrived and controlled I was unable to fathom.

From the faint window light I guessed that I must be somewhere above the building which I had originally entered and I tried without success to recall whether I had observed any windows set high up in the rock face. That I was unable to do so only attested to the manner in which the incredible façade of the building had so absorbed my attention.

I had just begun an examination of the tapestries, which were of a quality far surpassing anything I had ever seen in my life, when my guide reappeared and requested me to follow her once more. I stepped out through the doorway into another smaller antechamber and from there entered a salon of truly noble proportions.

Slender stone pillars supported a vaulted ceiling which was fashioned in a series of small, pointed domes to give an effect of quite magical fragility. It was as though one gazed up into the bell-like mouths of a cluster of incredibly delicate stone flowers. The effect was enhanced beyond

measure by the lacelike tracery of the limestone latticework which served partially to screen off certain areas of the room. Daylight flooded in through six tall, fretted windows. These in their turn gave access to a balcony beyond which, the storm having passed over, I was able briefly to glimpse the snow-shrouded panorama of the valley and the peaks of far distant mountains. Everywhere thick piled carpets muffled the tread and flaring lamps flung a fugitive network of shifting shadows across the silken hangings which lined the walls.

Although I was aware of all this at the time, can indeed recall it vividly to mind in all its bewitching detail, my immediate attention was drawn to the people who were gathered in the room and were regarding me with obvious wonder and curiosity. Apart from two young boys and, of course, myself, all those present were women, and I did not doubt that among them were the four who had ventured out into the storm and had conducted me down the valley from the distant ridge. Nevertheless, as though drawn by an invisible leash, my eyes turned to one who sat slightly apart from the others, surveying me with, I fancied, the faintest hint of amusement in her grave, dark eyes. I judged her to be of middle years—I detected a touch of gray in her dark hair—and truly I think that compared to some of her companions she was not outstandingly beautiful, but there was a fineness about her, an almost ineffable aura of *quality* which I find it quite impossible to convey in words alone. Thus, it was to her that I made my obeisance, bowing from the waist, and wondering as I did so whether I was committing some heinous solecism by failing to fall upon my face and grovel like some medieval suppliant.

If I was, she chose to overlook my barbarism and in response to my brisk and formal courtesy made an almost imperceptible motion of her head. Then she beckoned me forward into the room and said, "Thou art welcome in the House of Anahita, Or'mond."

Her voice was soft, low and musical, perfectly in harmony with her physical presence. Her dress too was in no way ornate, being composed of a sort of short gray tunic worn over a silken undershirt, with soft kneeboots and woolen breeches. The only jewelery about her was a band of silver clasped around her left wrist and a gold medallion, roughly the size of a spade guinea, which she wore on

a chain about her neck. Yet, even so, she was the most richly adorned woman in that room.

I bowed again and did my level best to express my gratitude for the hospitality, though all the while I was conscious that my mind was teeming with questions to which I was longing to learn the answers. Then, without quite knowing why I did it, I elected to round off my excessively flowery speech of thanks with a phrase of gratitude to the grace of Ahuro Mazdao for directing my footsteps to her door.

The words had no sooner left my lips than I became aware of an immediate, almost electric, tension within the assembled group. It manifested itself to me in a series of quick, flickering glances which darted from myself to the woman I was addressing and then back to me again.

She frowned—whether from displeasure or perplexity I could not tell—and murmured something to those nearest to her which I was unable to catch, though I thought I detected a whisper of the name "Ormuzd." Then, turning to me again she said, "Thou speakest wiser than thou knowest, Or'mond. Who schooled thee in our tongue?"

I explained as best I might how I had originally learned my Persian while stationed with the Fourth in Baluchistan and had improved it during the two years I had spent attached to Sir Ronald Thompson's staff in Teheran. My recent secondment to Colonel Mallows' mission had come about because he had needed an officer with the requisite technical skills who was also able to speak the language fluently—two qualifications I happened to possess.

How much she could have understood of my explanation is difficult to say, but she listened to me without interruption, even nodding her head from time to time, until I began to form the ridiculous notion that she was checking off my items of information against some private mental list of her own. Nevertheless, I plowed on gamely to describe the bare outline of my present mission which, after all, was hardly confidential.

When I had concluded my brief history she said, "Thy servants have fled south, Or'mond. But do not think too harshly of them for that."

"Believe me, I'll skin the rogues alive when I catch up with them, ma'am," I growled.

She shook her head and smiled. "Those two are not like thee, Or'mond. They are simple and fearful men. Truly,

they intended thee no harm. They did but do as they were commanded. Thou hast my word upon it."

I stared at her. "Commanded?" I echoed incredulously. "By whom, ma'am?"

"It was done at my orders, Or'mond."

I found myself quite literally lost for words. And yet, in spite of myself, I believed her, even though I could not begin to divine what purpose could lie behind such an act.

She rose to her feet, moved across to the window and motioned me to her side. We stood and gazed out across the white valley. A few lazy flakes still fluttered from the leaden sky and I guessed that more would shortly follow. She raised her right arm, pointed to the south, then swept her hand around to the west. "One day thy voice line will stand there," she said. "Four days march to the south. It will pass through Kupah and along the banks of the Zayendeh Rud. It will never come to Khar-i-Babek. Thus, all thy labors will have been in vain, Or'mond."

I nodded ruefully. "I knew that the moment I set foot on the ridge yonder, ma'am."

She gave me a sideways glance and once again I was conscious of that secret inward smile of hers which so intrigued me. "Was it only then?" she murmured.

"Well, naturally I thought that the ridge might conceal—," I began, and then broke off. She was right of course. The moment I had first glimpsed that ridge I had *known* that there could be no way through, that my route must lie back through Abekun and thence, doubtless, as she herself had suggested, on to Kupah and the northwest. Yet I *had* climbed the ridge, *had* seen the valley, and having seen it had known that I would not rest easy until I had explored it.

She chose not to pursue the matter, saying only, "Well, thou art come, Or'mond. Thou art a guest in the House of Anahita. We shall prepare a banquet with music in thine honor. Doth that please thee?"

"It pleases me greatly, ma'am," I replied, reflecting that not a morsel of food had passed my lips since breakfast.

There ensued a brisk general exodus from the room. I was expecting someone to conduct me to whatever quarters were set aside for uninvited guests, but no one did. Thus it was that I found myself left alone with my hostess who, having resumed her chair, now indicated that I might sit on one of the low cushioned couches beside her.

"So, Or'mond," she said, "hast thou no questions to ask of me?"

"Indeed I have, ma'am," I confessed with a smile. "So many that I know not where to begin. I seem to have beheld nothing but marvels since I entered Khar-i-Babek."

"Marvels? How so?"

"Why, this palace for one. When was it built? By whom? For what purpose?"

She laughed. "The ice melts; the dam breaks; and lo! a flood roars forth! When? Perhaps three thousand years ago. Maybe more. Who by? The *Athravan*—the fire kindlers—those whom thou wouldst call the Magians. For what purpose?" Here she paused and regarded me pensively. "How if I say to thee to enshrine the mysteries of Belit—she who was Ishtar and is Anahita?"

It was my turn to smile. "You speak to me of once upon a time, ma'am, thousands of years ago when our world was still young. But how is it since then?"

"Think thou that Truth's children are fathered only by Time, Or'mond?" she countered.

"Then tell me how else, ma'am."

"By *Khratu.*"

I thought I recognized an archaic form of the Persian word which represents "insight" or "inner vision," and asked her if it were so.

"Yes," she said. "Ahuro Mazdao stole much from us, but that he could not steal."

"And so?"

"And so thou hast come to the last House of Anahita."

I blinked. To tell the truth it crossed my mind that she might be enjoying some elaborate private joke at my expense; yet, she seemed perfectly serious, indeed almost somber. I tried to recall anything I had ever read of the myths and legends of the ancient pre-Zoroastrian cults which had flourished in Babylon a thousand years or more before the coming of Christ and, like a diver bursting to the surface, came up clutching the blazing name of Mithras which I thrust out to her in triumph.

"Mithras is dead," she said.

"So the old gods were not immortal, ma'am?"

"Only Zurvan is immortal, Or'mond. The old gods can live only in us, through our souls. Where is Verethraghna, the dragon slayer? Where is Vohu'Mano? Once they walked the world robed in splendor; temples were built for them;

fires burned day and night. Yet where are they now? Gone like smoke, like the wind. Only their names remain, together with a few poor images scratched upon stones. We are the only gods left now, Or'mond. Thou and I. For at least a little while longer."

"But my God is not dead," I protested, and felt myself coloring even as I said it.

"The Galilean?" She studied me thoughtfully. "How if I tell thee that it was from here, from Khar-i-Babek, that the Magians rode out to seek him bearing The Gods' gifts?"

My amazement must have shown plainly on my face for she laughed and said, "Or'mond, the story is all graven upon the stones beside the gate. Didst thou not note it? They had found thy god's birth woven plain in the loom. Ahuro Mazdao sent a star to guide them."

"I do not understand," I said. "What does 'woven in the loom' mean?"

"Later, Or'mond," she said. "All shall be made clear to thee, I promise. Now I am sending one to conduct thee to where thou mayst rest and prepare thyself for the entertainment."

Hardly had she uttered the words before a boy materialized from some concealed entrance and bowed before me. I rose to my feet, bowed in my turn to my hostess, and was led out of the salon through the portal by which I had entered it. We descended several flights of stairs, and came at last to a heavy carved wooden door. The boy opened it and I stepped through to find myself in a sort of Turkish swimming bath which, to my profound confusion, I discovered to be already occupied by at least a dozen strapping young females, each one of whom was as naked as the day she was born.

There is little point in my dwelling upon the events of the next fifteen minutes other than to say that I trust I conducted myself with the decorum befitting an English gentleman and an officer of Her Majesty. When I found myself once again closeted alone with the lad I asked him where all the other men were, but he just shrugged and smiled and would not be drawn. But the heated bath convinced me that the whole palace had been constructed around or above some natural thermal spring which, I felt certain, was related in some obscure fashion to the production of the gas or the mineral oil which fed the lamps.

I next thought to ask the boy—he was then assisting me

to dress—whether he had attended upon many such guests as myself.

"No, Sire," he piped. "Thou art the first. But I have heard tell that once, long ago, a shaman came out of the mist as thou hast and that he dwelt here among us for a while."

"And have you yourself never been outside the valley?" I inquired.

He looked at me with huge, scared eyes and shook his head.

"But are you not curious to see what lies beyond?"

Again he shook his head as much as to say: What sort of ridiculous question is that?

"But surely others go?" I persisted.

He twitched his shoulders as though to indicate that the very concept was meaningless. Realizing I was dealing with a fool I pursued the matter no further.

From the dressing room he conducted me to a chamber situated on a level slightly below that where I had been given audience—a fact I determined by the simple expedient of glancing out of the window. I judged myself to be almost directly above the gate by which I had originally entered the palace.

The room itself, though somewhat sparsely furnished, was richly carpeted and, to my great relief and delight, I saw that the two cases containing my instruments and my written records had been carried in and placed on the low wooden bench which stood beside the right-hand wall. There was also a bowl of dried figs, of which I at once availed myself to stay the pangs of hunger. That done I lost no time in extracting my journal and, while the day's events were still fresh in my memory, I filled several pages with detailed notes of what had occurred.

By the time I had brought matters up to date the daylight had completely faded and the area immediately beyond the stone grill, illuminated by the lamplight from within, was once again filled with the golden shimmer of downward drifting snowflakes. I restored my pen and notebook to their case, divested myself of my revolver and telescope, and then stood for a while gazing out into the darkness, reflecting upon the curious course of events which had brought me, in my forty-second year, halfway across the world to this remote and mysterious place.

My meditations were interrupted by the reappearance of

the young woman who had first conducted me into the presence of her mistress. She had changed her attire and was now wearing a richly embroidered belted tunic whose high collar was fastened close around her superb throat in the Tartar style. The uniform was completed by silk breeches and boots which were also finely embroidered with gold and scarlet thread. She acknowledged me with a brief nod and informed me that she had come to escort me to the banquet.

"In my country," I said, "it is customary for strangers to exchange names in order that speech may be made the more gracious. You know me as Ormond. How may I address you and your mistress?"

"I am called Sh'ula," she replied indifferently.

"And she you serve?"

Her gray eyes flickered. "The Anahita."

My surprise must have been plainly evident for she frowned, regarded me curiously, and then said, "Thou didst not know?"

Something in her tone warned me to tread warily. "I speak perforce as a man, Sh'ula," I said. "What form of address is prescribed for such as I?"

For some unknown reason this reply appeared to satisfy her but she obviously had no answer ready on the tip of her tongue. "The weavers call her 'Mother,' " she said at last. "But thou, Or'mond . . . ?" She spread her hands, plainly confessing herself at a loss.

"No matter," I said. "You may rest assured that I shall be as duly reverential at all times as befits an envoy of Ahuro Mazdao."

"And art thou truly so?"

I seemed to hear a voice whisper, "We are the only gods left now, Or'mond. Thou and I."

"Has it not been woven in the loom, Sh'ula?" I said gravely.

I saw her tense slightly and a faint touch of color appeared high on her beautiful cheeks. "It has been woven," she murmured. "Come. They await us."

Feeling like an actor who, having forgotten his lines, has just spoken a mouthful of gibberish and somehow got away with it, I followed her out of the room.

For a while I strove to orientate myself by referring back to the room I had just left, but after half a dozen right

and left turns I had completely lost my bearings. For all I knew Sh'ula might have been leading me round in a circle. The place was a veritable labyrinth, and the basic similarity of the corridors might have been expressly designed to confuse a stranger. Not once in our entire journey did I catch so much as a glimpse of another person, though I felt certain that the palace had been designed to house a multitude.

My conviction that this was so was reinforced when we at last reached our destination. That banqueting hall could easily have accommodated two hundred guests. Built around a central pillared nave it had obvious architectural affinities with the state apartment, but it was constructed on an altogether grander scale. At one end there was a balustraded gallery to which access was provided by two graceful flights of stone steps at either end. Immediately below the gallery was a raised dais, partly concealed behind draped curtains. Seated cross-legged in the gallery, a small group of musicians was twanging and tootling away on an assortment of zithers and *ghibis* and reed pipes. I was interested to observe that it appeared to be an all-male ensemble.

In the carpeted central aisle a low, square table had been set out and cushions placed around it. Small groups of women were standing about, conversing in low voices and, I am sure, surveying me covertly. Sh'ula led me to the side of the table which was facing directly down the hall toward the dais. When I had taken up my position, she clapped her hands. The music stopped abruptly, and the assembled guests at once began moving forward into their places.

Just as I was beginning to wonder when our hostess would put in an appearance, the principal pipe player launched himself into a spirited, birdlike obbligato which he sustained with great skill for about a minute and concluded with a virtuoso trill. At this signal the flames in the wall lamps sank to a glimmer, the curtains beneath the gallery were drawn aside, and there was the Anahita.

I had, I suppose, been expecting some more elaborate costume—something, no doubt, on the lines of Sh'ula's—but I was totally unprepared for the transformation I now beheld.

My first, startled, impression was that she had grown at least a foot taller, but this was an illusion created by the elaborate diadem she was wearing. At its crest shone a gold

and jewel-encrusted crescent moon and beneath it a constellation of twinkling silver and diamond stars. The whole effect was made infinitely more magical by the fact that the filigree of wires which must have supported the headdress was virtually invisible to a beholder's eye so that she appeared, almost literally, to be crowned with starlight.

Her own face was concealed behind a mask on which the eyes had been elongated and swept upward at the outer corners by the skillful application of *kohl* and some whitish pigment, while the full line of the lips had been sensuously enhanced with carmine. Around her neck was fastened a jeweled collar from which a single gold chain depended to her corsage. This in its turn was fashioned in such a way as to raise her bosom which, though it was indeed covered with a filmy gauze, appeared almost completely naked, an effect greatly enhanced by the fact that the areola of each breast appeared to have been painted with the same shade of red as the lips of the mask.

The dress itself was truly regal, dark blue in color, full-skirted and magnificently embroidered with silver thread which, in the lowest tiers, had been worked into row upon row of cuneiform characters. In her right hand she held a twisted serpent of gold and in her left a large silver disc engraved with designs which, unfortunately, I was too far away to distinguish.

I was conscious that everyone around me had their heads bowed reverentially, and acting somewhat tardily on the wise precept that when in Rome one does as the Romans do, I followed suit. A few moments later the lamps brightened, the musicians struck up again, and when I raised my head it was to see that the curtains were closed and the goddess had vanished, presumably whence she had come.

Some ten minutes or so later Anahita reentered the hall by a different door. She had discarded her mask and costume and was wearing garments similar to Sh'ula's though rather less colorful. She took her place at my side without fuss and beckoned to one of the male servants to bring us wine.

I debated whether it would be in order to compliment her upon her performance but decided against it. Instead, I asked her whether I was correct in assuming that the palace had once held many more people than it did now.

"That is true, Or'mond," she replied. "In the days of the

Magians every span of the valley was needed to feed the mouths. Now, perhaps no more than a tenth part."

"And why is that, ma'am?" I inquired.

"The seed is poor and thin, our fields no longer fertile as once they were."

As she said this she contrived to gesture at the women around the table, and, understanding her to be using the words in a symbolic sense, I said, "Are there then none willing to set their hands to the plowing?"

"Thou readest me aright, Or'mond. Our heifers are barren because our young bulls are all bewitched by *haoma* and Zurvan's loom."

"Which I have yet to see, ma'am," I reminded her.

She nodded and sipped pensively at her wine. When she spoke again it was to question me about my home in Gloucestershire, my Army career, and the Queen I served. I was astonished not only by the shrewdness of her questions but also by the wide range of knowledge they revealed. Eventually I was moved to ask her when and where she had traveled abroad.

She laughed and brushed aside my query with some obscure remark about my world thrusting itself upon her whether she wished it or no.

We remained at table for well over an hour. The food was adequate but by no means remarkable. Apart from some rather indigestible wild fowl it was almost entirely vegetarian in character. The wine, on the other hand, was delightful—quite unlike any vintage I had previously tasted in Persia—having a most delicate fragrance and leaving a lingering bittersweet aftertaste on the palate which was most attractive. It was also deceptively potent as I discovered when the time came for me to rise from my cushion. I accomplished it only at the second attempt and with the assistance of Sh'ula's strong right arm.

She escorted me to a cloakroom where I was able to effect my toilet and, by liberal use of a pitcher of cold water, to rinse the worst of the alcoholic cobwebs from my brain.

When I reemerged I found that Sh'ula had vanished and that Anahita herself was waiting for me. I attempted some fumbling apology but she dismissed it with a shrug and a smile and asked me if I was now prepared to visit the Great Hall. On my assuring her that I was she laid her hand lightly upon my left arm and set off along the passage.

We walked for several minutes, turning now and again, and twice descending flights of steps. Finally, we reached a wooden door which was set securely into a wall of virgin limestone. Above the architrave a crudely carved figure in the shape of a winged globe had been cut deeply into the face of the stone.

Observing my upward glance Anahitá paused with her hand on the wooden latch and turned to me with a faintly quizzical smile. "Knowest thou whom thou beholdest, Or'mond?"

I shook my head. Some enigmatic quality in that ancient symbol troubled me deeply. For the first time since setting foot in Khar-i-Babek I felt something akin to a chill of apprehension, a gathering in of the skin on my neck and arms. "What is it, ma'am?"

"That is the mark of Zurvan," she replied. "It has been here far longer than the palace has been here. It is older even than the Magians. Older even than Ishtar."

"And who is Zurvan?"

"He is Time itself, Or'mond. The Father of all the Gods." She paused. "Dost thou still wish to enter?"

I nodded.

"So be it."

She thrust open the door and walked ahead of me down a short tunnel which was illuminated only by the light streaming in from a cavern at its far end.

Following a few paces behind her I felt a draft of cool air blowing into my face and emerged to find myself standing in a vast natural cave. In places its roof must have been all of thirty or forty feet above the floor which had been roughly leveled off and paved with limestone slabs. The light was provided by a multitude of flares like those which illuminated the palace and by their glare I beheld one of the strangest sights I have ever seen in my life.

Standing right in the middle of the cave was a colossal loom. From end to end it must have measured a good thirty paces, and in height possibly as much as twenty feet. The main supporting pillars were of mortared limestone block, and the crossbeams, hewn from huge balks of blackened timber, were each twice as thick as the waist of a grown man. Around and above this astonishing machine an intricate scaffolding of wooden ladders and platforms had been erected for the convenience of the weavers.

All over the loom, like a host of industrious bees minis-

tering to their queen, some thirty or forty men were busily at work. They appeared to vary in age from mere youths to ancient, bearded patriarchs. Three of these latter were seated on the platforms high above, whence they appeared to be supervising the work in progress by means of long slender canes which they were employing both as pointers and as instruments with which to chastise the idle or slovenly.

The scene struck me as being so strange that I did not at first take in what was undoubtedly the most extraordinary aspect of the whole astonishing process. Gradually it dawned on me that as fast as one group of weavers succeeded in completing a new part of the pattern, a second equally industrious group was frantically *unmaking the work at the other end!* Shortly after our arrival, a section having been successfully unwoven, a halt was called by the patriarchs and the whole of the lower bed of the loom was laboriously levered backward for a careful inch or two. The freed section of the underframe was swiftly disconnected by the removal of various stout wooden pins and this section was then transferred bodily to the other end of the machine where it was slotted into place and pegged home. That done, new silken threads were immediately laid out and the whole incomprehensible process began all over again.

I had been gazing, spellbound, at the sight for several minutes when Anahita touched me on the arm and directed me toward a stone stairway. This led up to a balcony from which it was possible to see farther into the cavern and also to look down upon the frenzied activity below. As far as I could make out none of those at work on the main loom paid the slightest attention to us, but some other weavers, who were servicing two smaller machines further back in the cavern, halted in their labors as soon as they saw Anahita appear on the balcony and bowed toward her.

I was now in an excellent position from which to observe the surface of the tapestry that occupied the bed of the monstrous loom. It was rectangular and measured—at a rough estimate, some twenty yards by ten. It was quite unlike any carpet I had ever seen in my life, having no obviously detectable pattern though certain parts of it did seem to my untutored eye as if they might conceivably be portions of some much larger design. The colors, though not in themselves outstandingly brilliant, yet gave an

overall impression of a tremendously mellow depth and richness by reason of the subtlety with which they were blended. Predominant among them were deep ultramarine, viridian, ocher (of various shades), crimson, black and white, together with a variety of intermediate tints produced by an intermingling of the basic shades.

The more closely I examined it the more remarkable it appeared. I found that my eyes were wandering restlessly back and forth across the surface as though they were seeking for some hidden key which they knew to be concealed within it. I began to form the odd, unsettling impression that what I was looking at was merely superficial, little more than the visible vortices of some far deeper turbulence, and that the *real* carpet occupied some other dimension below the one which I could see. It seemed to me that parts of the design were shifting about even as I watched them, slipping below the apparent surface like shadowy fish only to rise again elsewhere, mysteriously transformed. I craned forward over the balcony, striving to peer down even further into the depths, and felt distinctly aggrieved when I heard Anahita call out to me.

A moment later I felt hands tugging at my arms and I suddenly returned to my senses to find I was leaning back against the stone wall of that cavern while a phantom carpet seemed to swirl slowly around me like a multicolored merry-go-round. Then she was half leading, half dragging me back down the steps toward the tunnel through which we had entered.

I accompanied her rather like a sleepwalker until I found myself at last back in the state apartments without any very clear notion of how I had arrived there. She thrust me down onto a couch and brought me something to drink in a stone cup, which she held to my lips with her own hands.

Gradually, like sand whispering into an hourglass, my soul began to creep back timorously into my body.

Anahita stared into my eyes and sighed heavily. "So thou wouldst fly into Zurvan's arms like a lover, Or'mond?"

I closed my eyes and then opened them wide. Her face appeared to waver as though I were seeing its reflection in a rippled pool.

"Had the shaman not felt your soul's approach and cried to warn me, then most surely wouldst thou have been lost."

By an immense effort of my will I held her image

steady. "The loom," I muttered. "Tell me. What is it with the loom?"

"For thee, Or'mond, it is the Bridge—*Cinvat.*"

"I don't know what you are talking about."

"And what *dost* thou know?"

"There's some mystery there, isn't there? Is it the pattern?"

"It is what it is," she said.

"What did Sh'ula mean when she said I had been woven in the loom?"

"We are all woven in the loom, Or'mond."

The conversation was taking on many of the qualities of those absurd exchanges one sometimes holds in dreams —it made sense, but only dream sense. I knew perfectly well that tomorrow, or, at the very latest, the day after, I would load up my mule and make my way back down the valley. I would climb the ridge and follow the distant watercourse until I reached the lower plateau and struck out for Abekun. Once there I would find means to send a message back by trotting camel to Colonel Mallows in Bander Abassi. In my mind's eye I could see all these things happening so clearly, so very clearly. . . .

Anahita had been observing me closely. Now she smiled and whispered, "*That* is the dream, Or'mond, this the reality."

So accurately had she read my thoughts that I simply stared at her and could not frame an answer.

She rose from the chair in which she had been sitting, walked across the room to one of the screened-off areas and returned bearing a round brass tray on which were set out a crystal jug and two small glasses. She set the tray down on a low table between us and poured out two brimming measures of the pale golden liquid. One she handed to me and raised the other to her own lips.

"Your health, ma'am," I murmured and, without pausing to consider what it might be, I tossed the liquor down my throat. It was sweet and tasted strongly of honey and peaches.

She took the empty glass from me, refilled it and set it back on the tray beside my hand.

"Thou hast no wife, Or'mond?" she asked.

"No, ma'am," I told her. "In my humble opinion the army's no proper sort of life for a woman."

"But all men desire sons."

"True, ma'am. But there'll be time enough for that when I take my leave of Her Majesty's Service and settle down. That won't be so long now. Father's not as young as he was, and the estate needs taking in hand. Believe me, there's a lot of work in managing a thousand acres. Gloucestershire's not like Persia, you know. You can't just turn Ormond Court over to the goats!"

I prattled on merrily in this fashion for several minutes, my tongue loosened by the drink. And not only my tongue, I must confess. I was, after all, a normal, healthy man, in prime physical condition, and I'd led a life of monkish celibacy for the past three months. Now, in spite of my determination, my confounded memory kept flitting back to that haunting vision I had beheld in the banqueting hall and I realized that I was in very real danger of forgetting where I was and whom I was with. The time had obviously come for me to take my leave graciously while I was still in control of the situation.

But my hostess had other plans. Just as I was about to get to my feet she calmly said, "Art thou prepared to lie with a goddess, Or'mond?"

I felt myself coloring as hotly as any schoolboy caught in the act. The truth of the matter was that I was completely thrown by the realization that it was she and not I who was in command of the situation. In my world the men proposed to the women and not vice versa. And yet, what man standing in my place would not have felt himself blessed above all others?

Some vestige of male gallantry still remained. I rose to my feet, took her hand in mine and raised it to my lips. "We are the only gods, ma'am," I murmured. "Thou and I. I am yours to command."

I have long made it a precept in my life's dealings with the fair sex that merely to take one's own pleasure, even though one is paying for it, is but to proclaim oneself a barbarian and a boor. The more pleasure one gives the more there is for the taking. And never did my practice reap richer reward than in the arms of Anahita. Between us we unlocked the treasure-house of the gods and therein gorged ourselves as though our hunger would never be assuaged. Like that other fabled queen mine knew how to make hungry where most she satisfied. She was by turns imperious and submissive, fire and silk. She blossomed in

the darkness like a rose until the silken chamber where we struggled was aswoon with the fierce musky scent of her passion. Together we plumbed the depths and scaled the dizzy heights and finally, as though the words were being torn from her by the very ecstasy of her abandonment, she cried out wildly, "O mighty Zurvan, I thank thee! For this I thank thee!" and then dissolved into shuddering sobs as if her heart were broken.

I did what I could to console her, but the fact is that the very mention of that name had snapped the spell by which she held me in thrall. When she had calmed down and was lying still by my side I risked her wrath by questioning her further about the nature of the loom. To my surprise she was all meekness and acquiescence.

"How can Anahita hold her secrets from thee, Or'mond?" she sighed. "Between such as we there is only truth. Shall I say to thee that the loom of Zurvan is all ye are and all ye shall ever be?"

"Riddle me no riddles, goddess," I said. "By all that has passed between us tonight I charge you to tell me plain."

She raised herself on one elbow and looked down upon me. By the dim lampglow I beheld her damp and tousled hair, the scarlet paint upon her bosom smudged like a smear of blood, her eyes huge and luminous with their unshed tears. Yet, as I live, I declare that never had I seen any woman one-half so beautiful as was she to me then.

"If I tell thee what I can," she said, "wilt thou promise to remain at my side till the sun sets tomorrow eve?"

"You have my word," I replied, reflecting that one day more or less would make little difference to me now, and besides, mine was no case of Joseph and the wife of Potiphar.

She laid her hand lightly upon my chest, as if to relish the steady beating of my heart. "What knowest thou of the Bridge *Cinvat?*" she murmured.

"Only what you shall tell me, goddess."

"Know then that *Cinvat* is the bridge between this world and the next, the bridge which spans the Stream of Time, that stream where Zurvan rules. All must cross *Cinvat.* Most souls Ahriman claims; some go to join Ahuro Mazdao in the Realms of Light; but others, one or two, are marked out by Zurvan for his service."

"And what service is that, my lady?"

"Combing the Stream of Time to feed the loom."

I frowned. "Then who are those I saw?"

"The *shamani* and the weavers."

"Have *they* crossed this bridge?"

She laughed. "Nay, Or'mond, thou dost not understand. Those who cross *Cinvat* pass from our sight forever. But Zurvan's souls are drawn by invocation and the *haoma* fumes to whisper to the shaman. What they tell is woven in the loom."

"And am I truly woven there?"

"Ah, my heart," she whispered. "Here is the loom where thou art woven," and she lowered her soft, warm lips to mine, thus, most effectively putting an early end to my cross-examination.

Such sleep as I had that night was plagued by troubled, broken dreams, many of which seemed to revolve about that shadowy loom. In one I recall struggling to free myself from the clinging strands of a silken web and I awoke to find a tress of Anahita's hair lying across my face. I lay there listening to the gentle whisper of her breathing and wondered about her and how she passed her days. I knew, none better, that others must have lain where I was lying now, and the knowledge filled me with a vague, uneasy sense of foreboding. So much so, indeed, that had I not given her my word of honor I truly think I might have been tempted to steal from her side and take my chance on finding a way out of the labyrinth and back down the valley. But the thought had no sooner crossed my mind than I dismissed it. When the time came for me to quit Khar-i-Babek I would take my leave as a man of my word, not like a thief in the night. Having thus come to terms with myself I turned once more to sleep.

The morning dawned bright as a bugle. I flung back the coverlet, sprang naked out of bed and launched myself into my calisthenics with a truly spirited abandon. Gone were the mists and sad fancies of the night as I felt the eager blood rush tingling through my veins.

Anahita lay and watched me in silent, wide-eyed wonder, thinking, no doubt, that this was my ritual worship of some deity other than the divine Hygeia. "Truly, thou hast the vigor of a god, Or'mond," she said when at last I stood beside her bed, flushed and panting from my exertions.

"Self-discipline," I replied, "that's all it requires, my lady. Ten minutes each day every day of the year for twenty-

two years. Now if you'll allow me a cold splash and a chance to scrape my chin, I'll be on call for any course of action you care to propose."

The tip of her tongue emerged like a pink petal and lapped deliciously along her upper lip. "Hast thou flown the hawk?"

"Never," I said.

"Then that shall be our pleasure. Now I shall send for one to conduct thee to thy bath." She beckoned me close. "And do not forget that thou art pledged to me till sunset."

"Until tomorrow's dawn if you so will, my lady."

"Ah, would it were so," she sighed. "But Zurvan will not be denied."

Shortly after nine o'clock—by my watch—we issued out into the dazzling, blue-shadowed valley. The hunting party consisted of Anahita, Sh'ula, two other strapping young women, Be'ita and Ra'ani, and four elderly menservants each of whom carried a hooded, long-winged falcon on his gauntleted wrist. A light breeze was blowing into our faces from the distant ridge. It stirred the high twigs of the olives and dislodged feathery wisps of snow which fluttered down upon us as we passed through the grove.

When we emerged into the open ground beyond the trees the men handed over the birds and set off toward the lake. The girls spread out in a wide semicircle and, at a command from Anahita, slipped the leather hoods from their falcons' heads. A moment later the plaited traces had been freed, and the birds tossed into the air. They drove up against the wind and began to circle, gaining height with each powerful downthrust of their saberlike wings, until they were hanging high above the lake, four dark motes against the silvery blue of the November sky. Suddenly one stooped, plunging earthward like a thunderbolt, and Be'ita cried out, "Mine! Mine! See, Azur strikes!"

Two others followed in quick succession, dropping like plummets toward the reed-fringed lake. One, Sh'ula's, missed its strike, and she whistled and waved a yellow cloth until the hawk swooped up and around and finally dived to her gloved wrist.

Only Anahita's stayed, swinging lazily around with the sun glinting from wing and breast while its mistress raged impotently far below.

Then there came a sound of distant shouting. Shading my eyes against the sun's glare I saw a heron rise above the reeds and climb with slow, flopping beats of its gray wings, heading away toward the ridge with its long legs dangling below it like two broken twigs. Almost immediately, Anahita's falcon checked and stooped, dropping like a stone, talons outthrust and wings swept back, so that it almost seemed that one could hear the wind whistling through its plumage as it fell.

In her excitement Anahita clutched at my arm. "Ahh!" she cried exultantly. "See, Or'mond! Shapur kills!"

She spoke a moment too soon. At the instant when it seemed that nothing could save the heron it somehow contrived to twist in the air and the *coup de grace* was missed. The sheer momentum of the falcon's stoop carried it almost to the ground before it was able to recover and race off in pursuit. By then the heron, turning in circles far tighter than I should ever have supposed possible for so large and ungainly a bird, had climbed almost to the level of the distant ridge, aiming no doubt for a sanctuary among the trees in the valley on the other side.

The falcon, sweeping round in wider circles at great speed, strove to regain the altitude it needed for a second attack. By the time it had risen high enough it was far out of earshot and, I judged, roughly above the point where I had first entered the valley. I saw it drop, small and deadly as a bullet, and this time it did not miss. Locked together in a faint puff of gray feathers, hunter and prey fell tumbling through the crystal air and vanished from our sight.

I turned to Anahita and congratulated her, but, to my astonishment, she simply shook her head glumly and said, "Shapur is lost."

"But he's only just over the ridge," I protested. "Somewhere by the waterfall I expect. Send one of your men. They're bound to find him."

"They cannot go," she said. "It is . . ."—she hesitated—"it is not possible."

"I don't follow," I said. "Why can't they go?"

"It is impossible, Or'mond. I cannot tell thee why."

I considered this for a moment and could make neither head nor tail of it. "Very well, my lady," I said. "We'll go. You and I. The falcon will come to you and I warrant I'll soon find the heron. It won't take us long."

She frowned and gazed at me in thoughtful silence for

some seconds. Then she turned her head and glanced back toward the palace as though seeking some sort of reassurance from that quarter. She looked so troubled and ill at ease that I smiled and said, "It would be a great shame to lose so fine a bird for want of a little walking. Come, goddess, put yourself in my hands and I will guarantee your safety."

She looked deep into my eyes and then, all of a sudden, seemed to make up her mind. "We go to seek Shapur," she called out to the others. "Good fortune attend thy hunting."

We followed the same path that I had taken the previous afternoon. The tracks were still faintly visible as shallow indentations in the carpet of fresh snow. When we reached the bottom of the slope Anahita caught hold of me by the arm. "I think it best we go no farther," she said. "I will call to him from here."

She grasped the silver whistle which was looped on a thong about her neck and blew three short, shrill calls.

I scanned the sky hopefully but there was no sign of the bird.

She tried twice more. Finally, I said, "We might just as well go to the top now that we're here. If he's down by the waterfall there'll be much more chance of his hearing your whistle from up above."

She chewed her lower lip, nodded rather reluctantly, and, still following the tracks, we climbed on up to the stone bridge and crossed the canal. Finally, we reached the point where my four guides had met me. I gazed about, fully expecting to see the hawk tearing at the body of its quarry, but there was no sign of it anywhere.

"It can't be far away," I said. "Come on."

"I cannot," she whispered.

"Of course you can," I said. "The going's easy here. The difficult part's over there beyond the edge of the ridge." To lend substance to my words I set off briskly toward the place where the stream issued from the hillside.

I fully expected her to follow me, but she did not. She stood as if rooted to the spot, gazing after me helplessly, not even blowing on her whistle. I waved back and called to her to come and join me but she just stood, staring ahead of her into the distance, lost in a dream.

I soon reached the stream and from there made my way to the edge and peered down the steep incline toward the pool below. Almost at once I saw the birds—a dark patch

starting out of the whiteness about fifty yards down the face of the slope. There appeared to be no sign of any activity. Very gingerly, I began edging my way toward them, expecting the falcon to launch himself into the air at any moment. But when I came up to them I saw why this had not happened. Shapur's talons were locked rigidly in the heron's back and the falcon's breast was impaled upon the heron's beak as neatly as if by a hunter's arrow. It was indeed a strange and melancholy sight, a sort of mutual quietus, from which the blood had mingled to redden the snow. I picked up the carcasses and, with some difficulty, made my way back crabwise across the snowy slope, finally regaining the crest at a point about a hundred yards from where I had descended.

Anahita was still standing exactly where I had left her. I called out to her and saw her turn her head, first in my direction and then back again, for all the world as if she could not see me, though I must surely have been as plain to her as a chimney sweep against the snow.

I held the birds up and called to her again, and again she made that curious, blind, uncertain, hunting motion with her head. "Or'mond?" she called. "Or'mond?"

"Here! Over here!" I halloed and began making my way toward her diagonally across the upper slope.

As I approached her it suddenly struck me that she really could not see me. She was staring fixedly at a point some ten yards to the right of where I actually was. I was so astonished I came to a full stop and gazed at her in disbelief. "What's the matter?" I called. "What is it?"

Her head jerked around at once, relief transfiguring her face. "Ah, there thou art, Or'mond," she cried. "Why didst thou leave me?"

Yet, even as she spoke, I knew she still was not looking at me, though, by then, I could not have been more than fifteen yards distance from her. I walked ten paces across to my right, passing clean across her line of vision, the sound of my footsteps muffled by the snow, and there she was still gazing at the point my voice had last come from.

"Anahita?"

Her head swung around and, seeing her begin to tremble, I stepped forward. The instant I crossed some invisible demarcation line a mere matter of yards ahead of where she was standing, she caught sight of me and the grisly burden I was bearing.

She stumbled forward, gazing at it with mingled horror and fascination. "Shapur," she whispered. "Oh, my proud one! My wild sky-king!"

I dropped the heron in the snow at her feet and caught hold of her by the arms. "So what is it with you, my lady?" I demanded. "Am I no longer visible to your eyes?"

She would not meet my look, and so I took her chin in my hand and turned her face to mine. "Come, tell me, Anahita," I said. "I know what I saw."

I daresay my peremptory handling bridled her for she tossed her head back, freeing her chin from my hand, and cried with sudden, fierce scorn, "Thou knowest *nothing*, Or'mond! *Nothing!* 'Tis thou who art blind, not I!"

"Then you must open my eyes for me, my lady."

She stood before me, feet planted wide in the snow, a fine regal flush mantling her cheek, and her dark eyes ablaze. "Go," she breathed. "Go now if thou canst! Perhaps thy pale Galilean will shield thee from Zurvan's wrath! They say he is partial to fools!"

"Very well, madam," I said, "if that is what you truly wish. Just let me return to the palace to collect my gear and the mule and I'll be on my way."

She shook her head as if in complete despair at such incomprehensible obtuseness. "Oh, Or'mond," she sighed. "Are thine ears blocked with wax that thou canst not hear what I say to thee? *I tell thee thou art marked out for Zurvan!*"

"I'm prepared to take my chance on that," I replied with a confident grin. "I think you'll find my God will prove more than a match for that old pagan. Now, are you going to tell me why you could not see me on the slope?"

She flung her hands up in the air and then let them drop back helplessly to her sides. "For us there *is* no slope, Or'mond," she sighed. *"This* is our world's end. If I were to follow thee into the mist, Ahriman would snatch my soul, and not even Ahuro Mazdao himself could wrest it back from him."

"Mist?" I echoed incredulously. "What mist? There's no mist here, Anahita. See!" and I began walking backward away from her.

This time she did not even bother to look. She stooped, dragged the two birds apart, and set off back down the hill clasping the dead falcon to her breast.

I snatched up the heron and ran after her. "Tell me

more of this, Anahita," I panted as I caught up with her. "Where does the mist lie?"

"There and there and there." She waved an arm vaguely toward the sides of the valley. "All around us."

"And what does it look like?"

"Thou hast never beheld mist, Or'mond?"

"Of course I have," I said. "At Dash t'ab we were pinned down for two days before the fog lifted. But that was real. This is something in your mind, Anahita. In your imagination."

"Yes," she said. "I know it. But what of that?"

Deflated and becalmed I tried another tack. "But if it holds you here, if you cannot pass beyond it, how could you know about the telegraph? You remember how you told me how the line would run from Kupah to the Zayendeh Rud?"

She nodded.

"Well then?"

"But that is of *thy* world, Or'mond, not mine."

"So you admit my world exists?"

"Do you doubt it then?" she countered slyly. "Perhaps there is hope for thee yet."

"If it exists for me, then it exists for you too," I persisted.

By then we had come again to the stone bridge. As we stepped onto it Anahita paused and pointed down at our twinned reflections as they quivered in the quietly rippling water. "I see thee there, Or'mond," she murmured, "and I see the blue sky below thee. Thus is it in thy world. For thee thy world exists. For thee the slope exists whereon thou foundst Shapur. But wherefore thinkest thou that all worlds are but one and that one thine?"

"I assure you my world is no mere reflection, my lady," I replied. "What's more, since you know of the Zayendeh Rud you must know I speak the truth."

"There are so many truths," she replied, "and each world hath its own."

"Yet you know of my world, Anahita. How can that be?"

"How? Hast thou never traveled in thy dreams, Or'mond?"

"Only to places I have already visited in the flesh."

"Ist truly so?"

"Why, yes," I said, "all our dreams are made up out of our memories of the things we have seen in our lives."

"Thy world's dreams, perhaps."

"Yours too," I said. "Everybody's. Anything else is superstitious nonsense."

She glanced around at me with a rebellious flicker in her dark eyes. "Thou art not wise," she said. "Thou only thinkest thou art. Yet I tell thee this, Or'mond, thou knowest less of all that *truly* is than doth my poor Shapur." And with that Parthian shot she turned away and strode off down the hill toward the distant lake.

Anahita's exasperation with me (truly I think it was no more than that) lasted long enough for me to spend an hour or so alone in my own quarters bringing my journal notes up to date. I had almost concluded the task when a boy appeared at the door bearing my own uniform jacket and a message that my presence was requested forthwith in the state apartments.

I put on the jacket and slipped my notebook and a pencil into one of the pockets, hoping there might be an opportunity later to make a few rough sketches of some of the bas-reliefs by the gate and of the loom in the Great Hall.

As I followed the lad along the corridors I noticed how the wall lamps on either side seemed to grow dimmer as I approached though I could detect no corresponding fluctuation in the flames themselves. Finally, I asked the boy if he knew why this should be. His eyes grew until they seemed to roll in their sockets like white marbles. *"Ruban-an"* (souls), he whispered fearfully.

"Ah," I said, suppressing a smile. "And whose souls might they be?"

"Zurvan's."

"Is that so? Then what are they doing here?"

His face set like a mask of brown stone and he scuttled on ahead of me at such a pace that it was all I could do to keep him in my sight.

By the time I had reached the antechamber my timid guide had vanished, so I knocked on the painted wooden door and heard Anahita call out to me to enter.

Inside I found the other members of the hunting party seated on cushions around a low table on which a spread of fruit and cakes had been set out. I bowed to Anahita and then, collectively, to the others.

Anahita poured out a glass of wine and handed it to me. "Be seated, Or'mond. We wish you to tell us more of thy strange country and of the queen who is thy sovereign."

I settled myself at her side and began telling them about the United Kingdom, and our Monarchy and the rule of Parliament. From the expressions on their faces I could tell that they might have been listening to a firsthand account of Gulliver's Travels. One of them—Be'ita I think it was—interrupted to ask me why, since we paid homage to a queen, we had no women in our Parliament.

I explained, laboriously, that our womenfolk ruled in their own homes and had no desire to share in the ardors of government.

She nodded. "Then it is by their own choice, Or'mond?"

"It has always been so," I said. "We think it is for the best."

"The best for men," she laughed.

"For all," I assured her. "Men and women both."

"But thou speakest as a man, Or'mond."

"And you as a woman," I retorted. "I see no men here."

"Why should there be?" she replied, plainly puzzled. "They serve the shaman and the loom; we serve the Anahita."

"But the children, families . . . ?"

"I have had my child," she said, "and Sh'ula likewise."

"Then where are your husbands?"

The Persian word I used seemingly conveyed nothing to her at all, and it was left to Anahita to explain, as best she could, what it was I meant.

To my astonishment they burst out laughing as though the very idea of living together as man and wife was the most ludicrous notion they had ever heard. Even Anahita smiled, though I knew for a fact that she was perfectly familiar with the concept. By whatever means she had acquired her knowledge of the outside world it was obviously far more extensive than theirs, which was, in truth, all but nonexistent. What for them could hardly have been other than fairy tales were, for Anahita, something different, intellectual postulates perhaps, or simply strange foreign customs.

But for all that, the time I spent in their company passed pleasantly enough, and I was able to glean some useful scraps of information about the functioning of their strange

little community. Thus, I learned that the cultivation of the valley was the responsibility of an elderly female *daroga* or overseer, who gave orders as to which crops were to be planted in which fields and generally superintended the vines, the olive groves and the animals. The actual field work was carried out by men who were either not directly involved in Zurvan's service or who had left it (this point was never made entirely clear), and by the youths and young maidens who had not yet been initiated into their respective cults. There was also a third group of men whose occupation was to provide entertainment—music—and "decoration," by which was apparently meant carving in wood and stone. These men also attended to the secondary looms. Complementary to this group was one of women who were only indirectly engaged in the service of the Anahita. Their principal duties were the preparation of food and wine and the production of silk from the worms which fed upon the mulberry leaves.

I did my level best to extract from them more detailed information about Zurvan and his extraordinary loom, but I was totally unsuccessful. Nor were they more forthcoming about the precise nature of their own "service" or about the vanished Magians who, I presumed, had originated their mysterious cult. For them, if not for Anahita herself, an impenetrable wall seemed to divide the two areas of their lives, and, in the end, I was forced to conclude that they simply *could not* tell me what I wished to know. Just as it had been with Anahita up on the ridge, no sooner did I attempt to question them about their "mystery" than I seemed to step clean out of their consciousness into an entirely different world, one in which they could neither see me nor comprehend my questions.

When I was once again alone with Anahita I broached to her the possibility of making some rough sketches of the bas-reliefs while the light still held. She heard me out and then drew my attention to the water clock. "We have scarce three hours left, Or'mond," she said, "but I can show thee pictures if that would please thee."

I pricked up my ears at once. "You have some drawings of the carvings by the gate?"

"I have pictures of all kinds," she said with a smile. "Come. I will show thee."

She led me into an adjoining room the walls of which were lined with shelves of fretted stone. Each shelf held a

single row of scrolls. She pulled out the first she came to, blew the dust from it and handed it to me.

I drew the scroll from its tooled leather case and began carefully to unwind it. The vellum was wonderfully preserved, white as the whitest paper, and the calligraphy was of an "eyelash" quality I had never seen outside the Imperial Archive in Teheran. But it was the illustrations which made me catch my breath. They were absolutely magnificent. The richness of color, the economy of line, were infinitely superior to any Mogul art I had ever set eyes on. Strangest feature of all, the pictures themselves were not obviously Persian. In fact, the first ones I came upon appeared to depict the construction of a Roman aqueduct and various military roads and bridges, all exquisitely accurate down to the smallest detail—so much so that, had I possessed a magnifying glass, I did not doubt that I could have read the very inscriptions that were being chiseled into the foundation stones.

Anahita reached down another from a different shelf. I opened it and found that the first picture was of a portion of the night sky in which Ursa Major was prominent. The second was of a white and blue planet with three small moons circling about it. The third of a shallow, green lagoon, fringed with strange trees which looked like some extraordinary crossbreed between palms and giant grasses. The fourth showed an enormous machine with jointed legs like a silver beetle, and others again depicted yet more astonishing machines, one at least of which appeared to be hanging suspended in the air like a child's windmill.

"What *are* these?" I asked Anahita. "I have never seen anything like them in my life!"

"They were plucked from the loom," she said carelessly. "They are very old."

"They are undoubtedly the work of a master," I averred. "Who can have done them?"

"I know not. The Magians maybe."

I had examined perhaps a dozen different scrolls, some so whimsical and fantastical that I could hardly begin to describe them, when Anahita extracted another from a quite different shelf. Turning to me with a smile she said, "Come, Or'mond. Let us go and peruse this one together at our leisure."

We reentered the salon and, at her invitation, I seated

myself beside her on the couch as she unsheathed the scroll and began to unwind it before me.

I had no prior notion of what it might prove to contain though, had I been a little more alert, I could perhaps have guessed that she was in no mood for discussing the finer points of art. Her fancy had moved on to other, less abstract, pursuits, and she had chosen this way of letting me know where her immediate interest lay. And very charming the studies were too: the youths, without exception, gallant and magnificently endowed; the maidens delectably supple and ingenuous; and all the participants in the *jeux d'amour* seemingly indefatigable in the pursuit of their mutual pleasure.

Since it was clearly a case of "Gather ye rosebuds while ye may" I took the hint and, without further ado, escorted her to the bed chamber.

The rays of the declining sun were turning from orange to rose red when Anahita sighed heavily and said, "Ah, but it grieves me to surrender thee while so many sweet songs still remain unsung. Would that I could stand on *Cinvat* by thy side and go with thee, for thou art indeed a man after my own heart's image."

Her mood perplexed me at least as much as her words flattered me. "I leave you for but an hour, goddess," I said. "It is all I ask."

She looked at me as if she were about to say something and had then changed her mind. Rising from the bed she gathered a silken gown about her and disappeared into the salon. I sat up and began to pull on my clothes.

In a little while she returned. In one hand she carried a cased scroll and in the other a small glass of some milky colored liqueur. She gave me the glass and I sipped the cordial gratefully. I recall that it tasted faintly of peppermint.

When I had drained it off she handed me the scroll saying, "This is a gift from me to thee, Or'mond. May it serve to remind thee of Anahita wheresoever thou goest."

I thanked her profusely and was about to extract the scroll from its case when she stopped me. "No. Not now," she said. "There will be a time. Now thou must make haste to dress thyself, for one already waits without to conduct thee to the Great Hall as is thy wish."

"That's capital, my lady," I said, shrugging on my jacket.

"And will you send someone to fetch me if I should overstay my leave?"

She turned her dark head away, murmuring words I could not catch, and something about her posture seemed to lay a finger on my heart. "Why do you not come with me, Anahita?" I said. "You could introduce me to the shaman and tell me what's what."

"Nay, my heart, I cannot," she murmured. "This time thou must go alone."

It was on the tip of my tongue to say: "Perish the thought. All for love and the loom well lost" but that streak of insatiable curiosity which has so often proved my undoing intervened once again. I fastened up the last button on my tunic, stepped across to her, took her in my arms and tasted brine on my lips.

She walked in silence by my side as far as the exit to the antechamber. As she opened the door she thrust the gift scroll into my hand and let her fingertips brush lightly against my cheek. "Remember, Or'mond," she whispered, "and so shall I remember."

"One brief hour, my lady," I murmured and brought my right hand to my brow in a cheerful salute.

The guide she had chosen for me was an old man with a long white beard whom I did not recall having seen before. He stalked on ahead of me flourishing a striped pole in his right hand. Every now and again he rattled this staff loudly against the walls of the corridors and whenever he did so the lamps seemed to flare up with renewed brightness.

When we reached the entrance to the cavern I halted and took out my notebook and pencil, intending to make a swift sketch of the image of Father Zurvan. Perceiving my intention the rascally old guide turned on me brandishing his staff above his head and making a very eloquent dumbshow of the fact that he strongly disapproved. The message was far too plain to ignore, so I bowed respectfully before the winged image and restored my notebook to my pocket. The old rogue grunted, sniffed suspiciously, then gave me a smart, admonitory rap on the head with his pole, thrust open the door and gestured me through.

I entered the tunnel reflecting that his tetchy reaction did not augur too well for my hopes of making a series of sketches of the loom itself, and I had just resolved that,

if necessary, I would commit as much of the detail as I could to my memory and work it up later in the privacy of my quarters, when I received a sharp and quite painful blow in back from the butt end of his staff. I was, in truth, more surprised than hurt, but when I received a second blow, even harder than the first, I swung around, knocked the pole to one side, and told the old wretch to have a care since I was no mule in need of goading.

"On, dog!" he growled (they were the first words he had spoken to me), "Zurvan waits."

For the first time since entering the palace I seriously regretted the fact that I was unarmed. What had, up to then, been little more than a highly intriguing adventure had now become, through the use of one single uncivil phrase, strangely sinister. I felt a sudden involuntary tightening of the muscles across my stomach and found my fingers gripping the leather case of the scroll as if it were a constable's truncheon. It was thus that I emerged into the cavern and looked about me.

The first thing I noticed was that nobody appeared to be actually working the loom. The weavers were gathered about it and the three old patriarchs were seated, canes in hand, on the platforms above. One and all they were gazing steadfastly in my direction.

I traded them stare for stare; then, turning to my ill-mannered guide I remarked, "The Anahita expects me within the hour."

The old ruffian turned his head to one side and spat upon the stone floor. Then he gripped me by the upper arm and thrust me forward.

As though this were the signal they had all been waiting for, the patriarchs slapped their canes against the gigantic wooden beams of the loom and the weavers sprang into action.

Oddly enough I found this sudden activity reassuring. In a trice I had persuaded myself that my misgivings were totally unfounded, that Anahita had arranged all this for my special benefit and that only the incomprehensible irascibility of my guide was to blame for my unease. Freeing myself from his grip I strode boldly forward and, with all my earlier curiosity rekindled, gazed upward at the rippling web of threads, while all about me the weavers scurried back and forth like demented ants, totally ignoring me.

I made a slow circuit of the immense machine, studying it from every angle, noting the simple but ingenious arrangement of pawls and levers by which the bed was adjusted, and the method of operation of the pulleys and windlasses employed to raise and lower the beam which held the lateral threads. Having satisfied myself that I should be able to reproduce it satisfactorily in my journal, I decided to remount the stone steps to the balcony, and I had taken perhaps half a dozen paces in that direction when I noticed that the old rascal with the striped pole was gesturing me imperiously toward one of the ladders which gave access to the high platform. Since that would obviously allow me the best possible viewpoint, and since nobody appeared to raise any objection, I walked forward, placed my foot upon the bottom rung of the ladder and climbed up.

As my head emerged through the open hatch the three patriachs all nodded approvingly, and one of them indicated with his cane that I might take up a position at his side.

I expressed my profound sensibility of the honor accorded me, stepped onto the platform and settled myself cross-legged upon the wooden boards which had been polished satin smooth through generations of constant use.

For a little while the sheer novelty of the changed perspective absorbed my whole attention for I was now looking almost directly down upon the bent backs of a dozen or so weavers. They were kneeling, as if in devout prayer, side by side across the thick wooden plank which spanned the bed of the loom and their fingers were flickering as nimbly as shuttles along the edge of that incredible arras. Since I could see no evidence of any drawn design I was quite unable to divine the precise nature of their inspiration, though it was clear to me that the aged shaman at my side was, in some arcane fashion, superintending their labors.

It was not long before the woven web began to exert its familiar fascination. As I stared down, ever more intently, I became less and less aware of the distinct activities of the weavers. Indeed they seemed almost to become an integral part of the pattern itself, blending in with the shadows cast across the web's surface by the massive scaffolding, and, even with the click and thump of the ma-

chine itself, to form a hypnotic, lulling, timeless rhythm which entered my head through eyes and ears alike.

I sensed rather than saw that the cavern was gradually growing darker while at the same time the tapestry itself was becoming mysteriously brighter. With mounting excitement I perceived how certain parts of the pattern were beginning to form themselves into coherent, though fugitive, shapes. I glimpsed a tree here, a bird there, an animal somewhere else; yet, all was fluid, shifting, rearranging itself before my wondering eyes.

Then, dimly at first, like mist gradually lifting to disclose a whole new landscape hitherto unperceived, the mystery of the loom slowly began to reveal itself to me. I became racked by an almost unbearably poignant sense of yearning, intense far beyond all breathing human passion. It was as though my very soul were being coaxed gently forth out of my body, drawn upward like some fragile golden flower toward some unimaginably splendid sun. And this time there were no restraining hands to hold me back. All around me, radiating outward to the farthest reaches of the visible horizon, the rippling carpet stretched, a multiplicity of glittering wonders, a dazzling miracle of light and color streaming and streaming forever outward, on and on, beyond infinity itself, into the shadowy kingdom of the Beginning and the End of all things. . . .

I awoke to that sort of inward silence which sometimes afflicts the unwary after the detonation of an explosive mine or the nearby discharge of a piece of heavy field ordnance—a dull, muffled stillness which yet contains the sensation of a colossal, soundless vibration.

Because I could not conceive of any other state which seemed to fit my predicament so well, my first coherent thought was that I must be dead. The extraordinary sensation of numbness afflicting both my body and my mind, the still raw memory of having undergone some tremendous spiritual shock—these both appeared to me to be perfectly feasible aftereffects of death. And yet, even as I speculated tentatively upon the possibility I knew that I was not dead, that my soul was still confined within my body, even though that body appeared to have been deprived of several of its physical senses. Two things combined to convince me that I was still alive: the first was a faint but unmistakable flavor of peppermint on my ton-

gue; the second, the sight of the scroll that Anahita had given me and which I had carried with me during my examination of the loom. I was dimly aware that this scroll was still gripped in my right hand, though I had no corresponding tactile sensation of actually holding it.

Incredible though it may seem I did not know whether I was standing up or lying down. I had no sensation of weight at all, and, to begin with, the range of my vision was limited to the extremities of my own body. Beyond that all was shadow, gray mist in which no varying degree of darkness or brightness was perceptible. Yet the illumination itself was real enough, for when I closed my eyes (which I could do perfectly naturally) I found myself in darkness. Furthermore, my recollection of those events which had immediately preceded my translation into limbo was almost preternaturally vivid. I had no doubt at all that the loom itself had been in some extraordinary (and to me wholly inexplicable) fashion responsible for what had happened. But *how* this might be so I had no means of knowing.

In a curiously detached manner I explored the possibility that I had fainted, fallen from my perch (I had the clearest possible mental image of the tapestry seeming to explode outward all around me), and had then dropped clean through the silken fabric of the web. But if that were so would I not now be lying, possibly concussed, among the fluff and dusty debris which I had seen masking the stone slabs below the bed of the loom? By no stretch of the imagination could I accept that this was where I now was.

How long I remained in this state of spiritual and physical suspension I have no means of judging, and knowing all I do now I do not think it would be either profitable or meaningful to speculate upon it. Let it suffice to say that a moment arrived when I became aware that feeling, of a sort, was beginning to return to my limbs. I experienced it as a faint prickling sensation in my toes and fingertips, a sensation which spread by slow degrees upward along my arms and legs until it reached my trunk. At the same time the gray fog in which I was enshrouded started to clear (perhaps it would be more accurate to say that it was my own vision which started to clear), and I began to perceive the dim, spectral outlines of physical objects surrounding me.

The first thing I discovered was that I was lying in a

sort of net, or hammock, which was suspended between two stone pillars. My immediate supposition was that these were two of those massive stanchions that formed the four corner posts of the great loom, but though there was indeed a superficial resemblance I soon realized that these columns were round whereas the others had been square.

My next thought was that I had been carried here in a state of unconsciousness and that I was now lying in some quarter of the palace which had been set aside for the sick. I at once began feeling my head and body for evidence of injury and could find not even one solitary spot of tenderness.

Oddly enough, up to that point, I had not been conscious of any feelings of fear or even alarm. My state of mind can best be described as vaguely speculative, dreamlike, curiously detached. Now, with the return of bodily sensation, I became both alarmed and perturbed. I pulled myself upright in the hammock, swung my legs over the side and dropped to the floor. I felt the reassuring jar of the flags beneath my boot soles and I heard no sound at all.

I think I shouted out; certainly I stamped down hard with my heels; and I know that I lifted the leather scroll case and slapped the palm of my left hand quite sharply enough to make my skin tingle. For all the noise it made I might have been whipping myself with a feather. And yet, despite such seemingly irrefutable evidence, I was not wholly convinced that I had been struck deaf, though had I been asked to supply a reason I could not have offered one.

I turned my attention to my immediate surroundings. The first thing which struck me was that I could detect no definite source of illumination and, consequently, nothing that could be called a proper shadow. The light seemed to be coming from everywhere at once. It was neither dim nor bright, and if it could have been said to possess any single outstanding quality it was of a pearly, diffuse opalescence which softened outlines and distorted one's perception of space. I peered about me trying to locate some door or window, but all I could see were more pairs of pillars receding into the distance like a double row of petrified masts.

I began wandering down this strange aisle in search of someone or something to give me a clue as to my whereabouts. I must have covered almost half a mile when I saw

ahead of me another hammock similar in every respect to that in which I had been lying. I examined it closely and then, acting on a sudden chill suspicion, I dropped the scroll case into it and continued on my way. Sure enough, when I had covered some eight hundred paces, I beheld, ahead of me, the hammock and, lying within it, the leather case precisely as I had left it.

I stared at it in utter consternation, striving to make some sense out of what I knew must have happened. Then, leaving the case where it was, I walked twenty paces away from it and aligned myself in such a fashion that the two pillars from which the hammock was suspended were standing one behind the other directly in my line of vision. I then began to march slowly away from it, counting off my paces and glancing backward over my shoulder from time to time to make certain that I was still proceeding at an approximate right angle to my previous course.

Gradually the pillar diminished in the distance. At three hundred paces I could no longer clearly distinguish it but I kept walking steadily forward until, as I took my four-hundred-and-eighty-third step I saw, far ahead of me and slightly to my left, the exact point from which I had departed.

Never in my life have I been closer to surrendering to sheer, overwhelming panic than I was at that moment. A cold dew of perspiration broke from every pore and my whole body began to tremble as if I were in the grip of some intolerable malarial ague. I felt as if I were drowning, clutching desperately at one insubstantial mental straw after another, and nowhere finding anything rational to sustain me. And yet I somehow still contrived to count off my paces to the bitter end. They totaled eight hundred and twenty-two.

I sank down on to the stone floor, placed my back against one of the pillars, cupped my chin in my hands and tried to reason some sense out of my predicament. Having failed completely, I took my notebook from my pocket and penciled in a small cross in the center of a blank page. I then drew a circle with one arm of the cross lying along its circumference and wrote the figures "800" above the curving line. Along the second arm of the cross I traced an identical circle and followed this with two others until I had produced a shape resembling a four-leaf

clover made up of two "8"s lying at right angles to each other.

The simple familiar action of drawing did more to restore my confidence than I could have supposed possible. I stared at the design I had produced and carefully circumscribed the four circles with a fifth. Where the circumferences impinged I placed four dots. Using these as my guides I then extended the whole design symmetrically outward and at the outer limits I placed four more crosses.

Struck by the similarity to a basic Mercator projection I carefully tore out the sheet and began bending it this way and that until two of the outermost crosses roughly coincided. I examined the tube I had produced and concluded that the only shape which would satisfy my demands was a true sphere. I was striving to represent in two dimensions that which could only be represented satisfactorily in three.

I restored my notebook to my pocket and, rising to my feet, gazed all about me, endeavoring without success to conceive of myself as upon the surface of a sphere whose circumference measured approximately eight hundred yards. I searched for some signs of curvature on the paved limestone floor and found none; yet, I was certain that I had only to set off in a straight line in any direction and, in due course, I would arrive back at the precise point from which I had started out.

I stared upward to where the tops of the pillars appeared to lose themselves in the soft luminescence some twenty or so feet above my head, and I suddenly found myself recalling Anahita's scornful words. *Thinkst thou that all worlds are but one, and that one thine?"*

No sooner had I recalled it than I remembered the scroll she had given me which was still lying in the hammock where I had dropped it. I picked it up, untied the thong which held the cap in place and drew out the roll of parchment.

Supposing it to be such another morsel of the Oriental erotica we had enjoyed together I was no more than mildly curious, but no sooner had I begun to unroll it than I realized that I was guilty of a grave injustice to Anahita. In my hands I held something which, I guessed, might prove the very key I had been seeking to all that had befallen me since I had first set foot in Khar-i-Babek—or, indeed, if I were interpreting it correctly, even before that.

And yet for me to accept the scroll for what it purported to be was at least on a par with my accepting without question everything that had happened to me since I had awoken to find myself where I now was.

There were only twelve pictures on the parchment, though there was space for fully double that number. The first two showed a British officer with two native servants engaged in taking survey readings in places I immediately recognized as lying on my route into the Zagros. The third showed the same officer (now indisputably identifiable as myself) leading a panniered mule and preceded by four cloaked figures as he made his way through the snow to the palace gateway. The fourth and fifth pictures depicted the banquet and the advent of the Anahita. The sixth represented my first visit to the loom. The seventh and eighth showed Anahita and myself making love together. The ninth was of myself confronting Anahita with a dead heron lying at my feet. The tenth was of Anahita handing me a scroll (whether this or another I could not tell). The eleventh showed me in the act of mounting the ladder on the loom, and the last saw me standing gazing disconsolately out of a ring of pillars which completely surrounded me like the bars of a circular cage.

The anonymous artist who was responsible for the pictures had left six meticulously outlined but otherwise empty rectangles in the places where the series might have been expected to continue. Was I therefore meant to conclude that I had reached my destined end? I did not think so. Whoever had drawn these pictures had known that I would come to this spot and (if I interpreted the study aright) was perfectly familiar with its unique character.

I sat down in the hammock and stared at the first of the blank spaces trying to conjure up the design that might have filled it while at the same time being moved to wonder why the artist had chosen to depict me as peering *out* of the cage, when, if I was correct, this particular prison possessed neither an "out" nor an "in."

I returned my attention to the last picture in the sequence and began to examine it minutely, holding it up to my eyes and scanning each area for its smallest detail.

Almost at once I perceived that, lying at the feet of the prisoner, was a lilliputian scroll, presumably the very one which I was even now holding in my hands. It was unrolled and I did not doubt that had I possessed a strong magnify-

ing glass I would have detected, reproduced in minuscule upon it, the precise picture I was now studying. Even with my naked eye I could still make out enough to realize that the tiny scroll in the picture contained far more drawings than the one I was holding, though, naturally I was quite unable to make out what they might represent.

My vision soon began to blur and, seeking to ease the strain on my eyes, I dropped the scroll into the hammock at my side, raised my hands, and began gently to massage my closed eyelids with the soft flesh at the heels of my palms.

Hardly had I commenced this soothing, kneading action than, as sometimes happens, little twinkling sparks of light began to appear like stars in the darkness before me. But instead of pricking out here and there in the usual haphazard manner, these assumed a definite pattern, like a row of tiny pearls strung out along a necklace.

I removed my hands and opened my eyes, whereupon the lights immediately vanished. As soon as I covered my eyes, there they were back again. I began to experiment, turning my head from side to side while still keeping my eyes tightly closed. Sure enough, I soon discovered yet more points of light stretching out in faint lines all about me like a dim, dew-spangled cobweb, or the pearly spokes of some weird and ghostly wheel.

Unable to imagine what they might portend I opened my eyes, picked up the scroll again and tried to recall anything that Anahita had ever told me about the loom. The words *"Cinvat"* and "Zurvan" hovered over all like nebulous interrogation marks. *Cinvat,* the Bridge between this world and the next. Was this *Cinvat?* This cage which was no cage; this endless procession of identical pillars; this silent, luminous paradox which appeared to exist in some strange underworld of its own? And what of Zurvan? He whom I had challenged in thoughtless bravado to do his pagan worst? *"He is Time itself, Or'mond: the Father of all the gods. . . . Are thine ears blocked with wax that thou canst not hear what I say to thee? I tell thee thou art marked out for Zurvan!"*

I shivered violently and, flinging the scroll to the floor, fell back and closed my eyes, praying with a fervor forgotten since the far off days of my childhood that God the Father and God the Son would hear me and take pity on me in the hour of my need.

No sooner had I surrendered myself into the hands of Divine Providence than a merciful calmness descended upon me, and with it a profound lassitude of mind and body which I found impossible to resist.

I did not sleep, though, at that time, had anyone thought to question me I should certainly have insisted that I had, for I still believed that, in all essentials, I was still the same Major Charles Henry Ormond who had so recently triangulated the length of the Rubeh valley and had leveled his theodolite upon the peak of Shir Knh. All men are the bond slaves of their own physical perceptions and, as Anahita justly remarked, only think that they are wise.

So let me aver that I lay in the state I would once have called "sleep" for a period of time which my watch might well have insisted was two or three hours if it had been functioning correctly. I was still "deaf" when I awoke. I consulted my watch and found that it had stopped with its hands registering the ridiculous hour of ten minutes past three. When I began to wind it up I found that the spring was completely run down. Furthermore, to my profound consternation, I discovered that the mechanism had suffered severe damage, for no sooner had I removed the key from its socket than the hands began to race around the dial like the arms of a whirligig. Ruefully I restored the broken instrument to my fob pocket and tried once again to come to terms with my extraordinary situation.

For want of some better occupation I decided to test out my theory of the physical curvature of the area in which I found myself. To do this I set about pacing out one hundred yards from the hammock and there I placed the scroll case upright upon the flagstones. I then strode back to my starting point, lay down on the ground, and with my eye at floor level attempted some rough estimate of the degree of arcuation. There appeared to be none at all. I moved the case a further hundred paces and tried again. Still there was nothing.

On the point of abandoning my investigation in despair, I decided to continue on outward from my starting point. When I reached a position where the pillars appeared to vanish from my sight I marked the direction of the hammock by means of a penciled arrow on the floor, then I sat down and slowly rotated my body through a full three hundred and six y-degree circle. If my earlier hypothesis was correct, I was now on the other side of the sphere at

approximately the opposite pole to that which I had left. Yet, if that were so, it was absolutely impossible that the curvature would remain imperceptible. *Ergo*, my senses were deceiving me, and I was the victim of an incredible optical illusion.

Having come to this somewhat obvious conclusion I next attempted to ascertain the manner in which the illusion was being contrived. The only possible explanation was that, in some manner, the light was responsible. I stared up at the equable luminosity overhead and then, on a sudden impulse, rose to my feet, retrieved the leather scroll case and hurled it upward as hard as I was able.

Ever since I had first become conscious of the light I had supposed that behind or above it there must exist some sort of a ceiling which corresponded in some sense with the stone floor below. Only in this way could I relate my present situation to that which had immediately preceded it. I was still obstinately convinced that there was a direct physical link between the place I was in and the cavern which contained the loom. Anything else would have been literally unthinkable. Thus, as I flung that leather case upward it was in the confident expectation that it would strike the invisible ceiling and come tumbling back to my feet. What happened was that it simply disappeared.

I was far more deeply shocked than I would have supposed possible. For some minutes I simply stood, gaping foolishly upward, waiting for the thing to reappear. When finally it became obvious to me that this was not going to happen I turned on my heel and walked back toward the hammock. There, lying in the precise center of the net, was the leather case!

I approached it, stared at it incredulously for fully a minute, and then, very gingerly, picked it up and examined it. As far as I could ascertain it was exactly as it had been when it had last left my hand.

As soon as I had sufficiently recovered from my astonishment I tried the experiment again, this time standing only some four or five yards distant from the hammock. I think I was expecting to see the case drop down into the net from above, whereas what happened was that it simply *appeared* there, materialized out of thin air, as though the "ceiling" and the hammock occupied one and the same identical area of space, which I knew full well to be impossible.

But it started me off thinking about the nature of space in a way I had never thought about it before. I repeated the experiment at least a dozen times, always with the same "impossible" result until, in the end, I knew that it was not impossible at all. It happened, and I had no option but to accept that it happened, if for no better reason than that I could not imagine a way in which such an effect could be produced by purely illusory means. But, if this were so, had the same fate befallen me? Had I too simply materialized within that net, scooped up like some hapless salmon from a stream? And, if so, by what power had it been accomplished? And for what purpose? To at least one of those questions I was soon to learn the answer.

I was pacing back and forth along the pillared aisle, sunk deep in melancholy, when I noticed that the quality of the light was altering. Hitherto it had possessed no special color unless it could be described as a sort of pearly gray; now I perceived that it was changing to a grayish blue and that the confines of the horizon were slowly closing in upon me. It was such a very gradual process that it may well have been going on for some considerable time before I became aware of it. I made my way back to the hammock and, with mounting curiosity, sat down to await events.

Two by two, like derelict stanchions sinking beneath a waveless tide, the pillars slowly withdrew themselves from my sight. At last I found myself seemingly suspended in the center of a completely spherical bubble of pale indigo mist which, intensifying moment by moment, had soon achieved the quality of a profound summer twilight. As the darkness grew ever deeper, the faint pinpoints of spectral light that I had detected earlier now began to emerge from amidst the gloom until, like threads of twinkling gossamer, they were stretching out around me, layer upon layer, in every direction. So taken was I by this beautiful and unearthly vision that I experienced little more than a vague twinge of apprehension when the darkness closed in completely upon me, and I found myself an integral part of it.

At once, as though some invisible shackle had been loosed, I sensed that I had been freed from my cage. No command was given; no word spoken; yet, I experienced

an awareness of liberation so profound that it is beyond my power to describe it. All I can say is that in the flicker of an eye I had become volatile, ethereal, one element with the element I moved in.

Rayed out all around me I beheld the tiered strands of the web, an immense and intricately structured net, woven from wispy tendrils of pure light. Wherever the threads intersected, brilliantly colored crystals winked and trembled like sunstruck raindrops. Drawn thither by some fierce new hunger of the spirit I reached out with my shadow hands, plucked the first crystal I came to and peered into its depths.

Suspended within it like some strange barbaric jewel was a tiny silver vessel. Part boat, part bird, part fish, it was winging its way through an ebony emptiness where the stars did not twinkle but burned only with a hard, cold, blue-white light.

By turning the crystal over I was able to examine the mysterious little craft from every angle and to observe that faint lights were glimmering within it. From tubes along the backs of the wings, frail streamers of pale blue fire were issuing forth and it was presumably from these that it derived the motive power which was thrusting it onward through the vacant darkness toward its unknown destination.

I returned the jewel to its setting and moved on, searching for I knew not what, and so came to its neighbor. That too I seized upon avidly only to find myself confronted by a tangled labyrinth of fanged and rusting wires in which a dreadful piece of carrion that had once been a man, flapped and grayly rotted. In a noisome pool below it floated other unspeakable things, things blown up like gross bladders into obscene parodies of the living men they had once been.

I was no stranger to war. A dozen times I had seen Death stalk the field of battle in a hundred different guises. I knew well enough the shape of human pain and suffering. But this was the very sewage of Armageddon—beyond all meaning, shameful, unforgivable. A terrible helpless pity overwhelmed me and I would have hidden the sight from my eyes had I been able to do it. Less than a human eye I lacked the refuge of human tears. All around me other crystals winked and beckoned, but I

shrank away, sick at heart, dreading what I might find lurking within them.

It was then that I realized I was not alone. Along the filaments of the web other shadowy figures were moving. I saw some gathered in faint clusters here and there, drawn like dim moths to share a jewel of particular brightness. By observing these wanderers of the web I learned what I had become.

One and all we lacked those details of form and feature that mark us out as individual members of our species. Our eyes were large and uniformly dark; our mouths, ears, and noses small and of an almost childlike delicacy; and there was no trace of hair upon our heads or our frail, sexless bodies. Our stature, as close as I could judge, approximated to that of a ten-year-old child.

Observing or sensing my distress, one of my companions approached me. Extending its hands it gently touched my face. I felt the caress like a faint, cool breath and found it strangely comforting. I allowed the little creature to take my hand in its own and lead me out along one of the faintly rippling filaments to where a jewel shimmered like a rainbow firefly. Releasing my hand my companion lifted the gem from its resting place and presented it to me, indicating that it wished me to share whatever was within.

I lowered my face to the glittering surface and beheld what I at first supposed to be a swarm of brilliant butterflies, floating and twirling high in the air above a green mountain valley. On closer examination I perceived that what I had taken for insects were, in fact, delicate machines, like huge silken kites, and that each one carried its own rider who, by means of skillful manipulation of rods and wires, controled the graceful antics of his winged steed.

So absorbed was I in observing this strange and fascinating aerial ballet that, until I thought to offer back the jewel, I did not notice my companion had wandered off. Finding myself once more alone I restored the crystal to its place and essayed my first tentative exploration of the nature of the web.

Almost at once I stumbled upon a fact so obvious and yet, to me, so incredible that, upon reflection, it puts me in mind of nothing so much as one of those illusory puzzles with which we tease ourselves in childhood. Viewed

in one way the picture represents a Greek urn; viewed in another it is a pair of symmetrical human profiles. Both are contained within it; only the perception of the beholder has altered. And thus it was with myself and the web. Up to that instant in time I had seen it only as some weird and marvelously luminous reticulation whose origin and purpose were as mysterious as its nature. *Suddenly, I perceived that the jewels in the web corresponded to the lights of Anahita's palace!*

Though I was now aware of—even, in a sense, reconciled to—my own spiritual translation, the effect upon me of the revelation was cataclysmic. As though by a brilliant lightning flash, the whole miraculous interrelation of the two structures was suddenly illuminated and made plain to me. The dark navel of the web—the Bridge *Cinvat,* that mysterious hub of physical paradox through which I had wandered—corresponded to—indeed *was*—the very loom itself! Though contiguous, web and loom existed in separate dimensions. Each was the other's astral twin.

I now understood that those empty, echoing corridors down which I had walked with Anahita and Sh'ula could have been no more than the merest fraction of the true reality. The whole interior of the mountain must have been honeycombed with tunnels, cavern upon cavern, each one bearing along its walls its own chain of wavering flares.

The Web of the Magi! For what strange streams, what currents in what seas, had this wonder been contrived? Spun out of light and air, bedewed with crystals, gleaned by ethereal shadows. For thousands of years it had lain here, mysterious, beautiful, unknown to any but the devotees of its extraordinary cult. But what was its purpose? Had it once been an oracle like that at Delphi? Had the Anahitas been the sibyls to whom the kings and emperors of ancient times had crept in fear and trembling to learn what the Fates held in store for them? Or was it some strange immortal Argus, scanning with its impartial myriad eyes all the infinite works and wonders of God? Those who must once have known the answers to such questions had vanished long ago. Now only the inscrutable miracle remained, itself its own purpose.

And so I too became a gleaner of the web. In that dim twilit world where one knew neither cold nor heat, nor

thirst nor weariness, I floated mothlike from jewel to jewel, sipping the bewildering nectar from the blossoms of future time. The visions I garnered, drained from my memory, were fed to the dark souls of the *haoma* dreamers who supplied the pattern for the fabric in the invisible loom.

But though I carried out my simple tasks like all the others, unlike them I could never accept that the world of flesh and blood was lost to me for ever. Striving to distinguish the substance beneath the shadow I at last discovered that if I allowed myself to glance sideways out of the corners of my eyes, to perceive, as it were, obliquely, without consciously looking, I was still able to trace some of the spectral outlines of the world I had left.

A sad and lingering hunger began to drive me back to haunt those darkest spaces of the web where, faint as if drawn in water, fainter even than the faintest starlight, the ghostly fabric of the palace palely glimmered. I became a phantom wanderer among insubstantial corridors and drifted, less even than a wraith, through once massive walls which now, like veils of barely perceptible smoke, offered not the slightest resistance to my passing.

And there it was that I at last came upon Anahita.

I saw her fainter than mist breathed upon a windowpane. She was standing on the balcony outside the state apartment, gazing out toward the distant valley over the ghostly tops of the flowering mulberry trees. Unable to restrain myself I reached out to her, willing her to turn and acknowledge my presence.

My thin ghost's arms slipped through the vacant air.

A sort of frantic, silent twittering fled out along all the filaments of the web, and I sensed rather than saw a host of anguished gleaners rising up like a gray cloud and bearing down upon me.

Perhaps some faint tremor of my passionate yearning did break through and touch her. All I know for sure is that just as the first of the gleaners reached me and began tugging me away, Anahita turned hesitantly toward me, and in the instant of her turning I saw that she was already many months with child.

As they hurried me off toward the dark center of the web I glanced back. The palace was no longer discernible, but I saw that several of the jewels in the area where I had

been had dimmed to mere shadows of their former brilliance. I felt sure that I was in some way responsible and I did not care. I had seen Anahita and I was convinced, beyond all possibility of a doubt, that the child she was nurturing in her womb was mine.

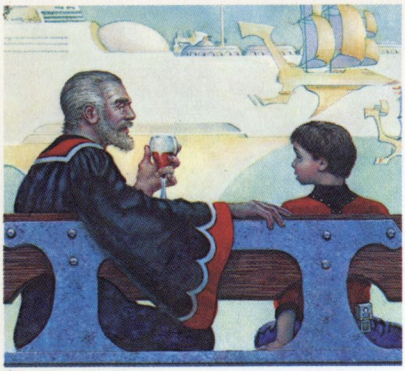
Although I never discovered which law it was that I had broken, I suspect that my transgression had long been prefigured somewhere in the strands of the web and was thus already familiar to them. Or perhaps they saw me as representing that vital flaw which must forever prevent Man from usurping the sole privilege of God. But was I brought to trial? Did I plead my innocence? Did *she* plead on my behalf? Was there a judgment? A sentence? I think I once knew the answers to all those questions but know them no longer. Between what was and what is falls the shadow.

In their own fashion they have been both just and merciful. Although I have been forbidden all further access to the web they have allowed me—have, indeed, encouraged me—to record this account of all that took place, even though I cannot imagine that anyone except myself will ever read it.

And I am sure they have made use of me in their own inscrutable ways, for how else can I account for what has happened to me since? Sometimes I am half convinced that it was but a moment ago that I was standing at Anahita's side gazing up in amazement at the loom in the Great Hall; at others I seem dimly to perceive that eons have passed, that whole civilizations have come and gone around me, blooming and withering like flowers, blown and scattered to the four quarters by the witless winds. Have I not seen mountains rise and sink again beneath the waves? Witnessed the jostling and heaving of huge continents? Beheld the very stars of heaven, broken loose from their moorings, wandering without pattern or purpose about the sky? Cast adrift in the whirlpools of time, drowned in delirium times without number, I struggled to the shore and survived.

Now I have finally reached the end of this history, but not yet the end of my journey. To that there is no end fixed, only a new beginning. Soon they will come for me and lead me out, blind in the darkness, until I am standing once more upon *Cinvat*. In my hands they will place

the cord which will guide me through the throbbing labyrinth to where she will be waiting. And there at last, purged of all recollection, helpless, fearful, naked and alone, I will begin my final struggle to reenter the world of the living through the only gateway left to me: spirit made flesh once more in the dark sanctuary of her blood and pain—the last Gift of the Magi.



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