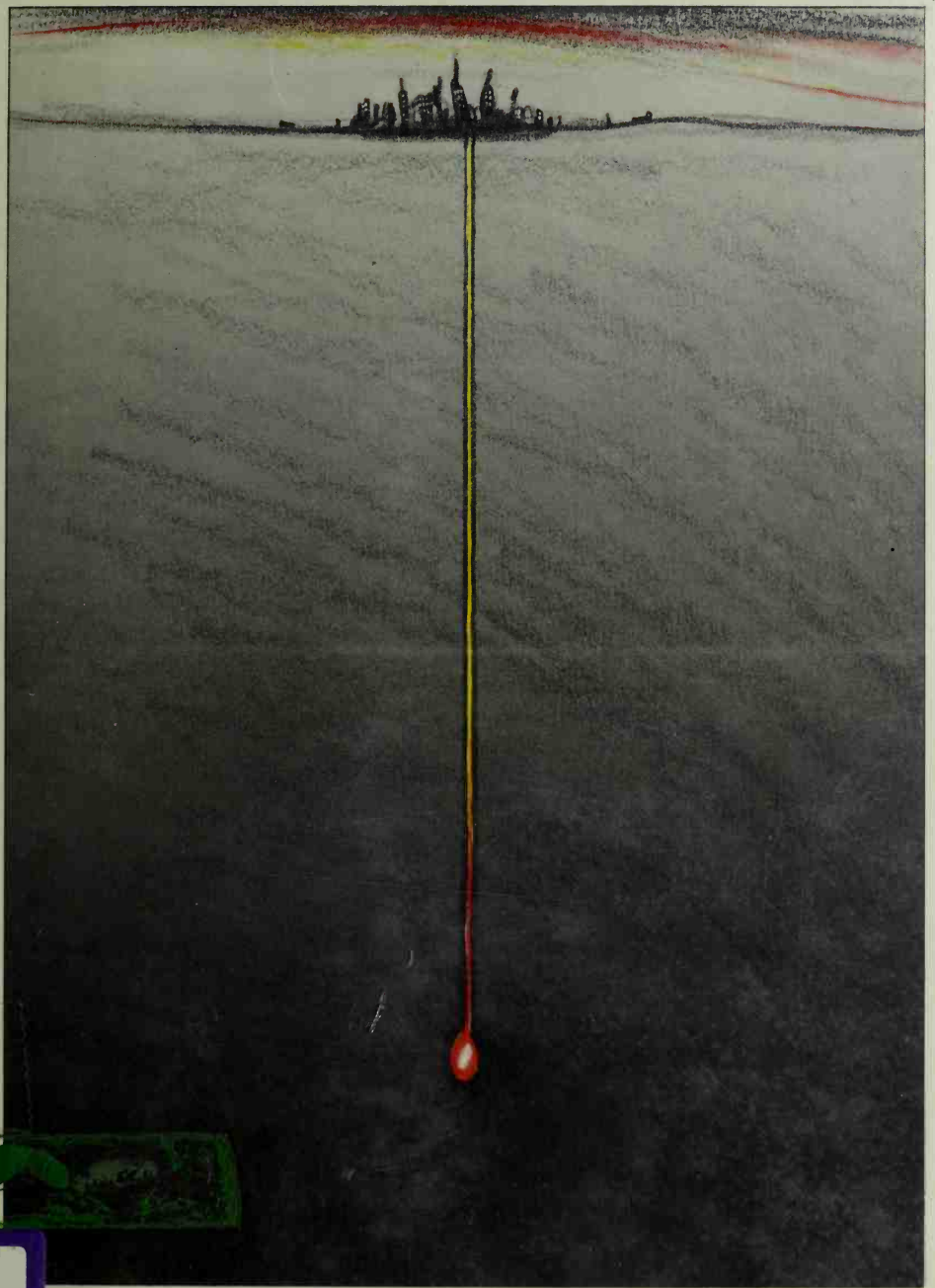
VERGIL IN AVERNO

THE SEQUEL TO THE PHOENIX AND THE MIRROR



DOUBLEDAY SCIENCE FICTION

AVRAM DAVIDSON

VERGIL IN AVERNO

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Now Vergil Magus, the powerful sorcerer-poet, returns in the long-awaited sequel to Avram Davidson's bestselling novel of fable and magic, *The Phoenix and the Mirror.* Here, Vergil's extraordinary adventures continue as he journeys into the hideous heart of evil and darkness . . .

Enter the Very Rich City of Averno and discover a place of untold riches and untamed lusts, of orgies and drunken revelries, of madness and human corruption. Here is a decaying metropolis of wizards and warlocks, where old crones spin webs of cruelty and deceit, and hell lurks in a labyrinth of underworld caves. Vergil has come to Averno to uncover the secret of its eternal fires, the very center of its wealth and prominence. But as he explores the inner sancta of this ancient and heartless inferno, he finds, too, the

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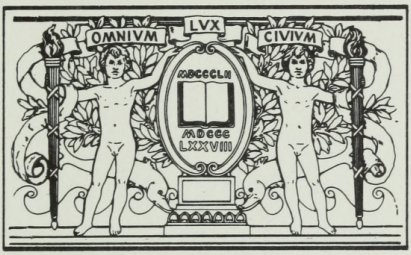

Vergil in Averno

By Avram Davidson

THE BEST OF AVRAM DAVIDSON
THE REDWARD EDWARD PAPERS
THE PHOENIX AND THE MIRROR

Vergil in Averno

AVRAM DAVIDSON

DOUBLEDAY & COMPANY, INC.
GARDEN CITY, NEW YORK
1987

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are fictitious, and any resemblance
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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Davidson, Avram.
Vergil in Averno.

Sequel to: The phoenix and the mirror.
I. Title.
PS3554.A924V57 1987 813'.54 86-16622
ISBN 0-385-19707-1

Printed in the United States of America
First Edition

Vergil in Averno

Whereas in other cities they had taken him to see the bears and lions, the dancing girls and dancing boys, or the chambers with the painted walls, all quite commonly done, and in one city they had done a thing by no means common: they had shown him the treasury, crammed with rubies of Balas and of Balas-shan, male spider rubies and females of the same, diamonds and adamants and pearls the size of babies' fists, ancient golden anklets and amulets and silver newly brightly minted, chryselephantine with turquoise and sapphire and stone of lapis lazuli—here they had taken him, with every mark of respect and favor, to see the torture-chambers instead.

He had gone.

Had he not gone, would they not have tortured?

Besides: Are not the pains of the few to be preferred to the pains of the many? Did not the distant Idumaeans say, "Pray for the welfare of the Empire, for were it not for fear of it, men would swallow one another up alive"? And yet the Idumaeans loved the Empire not.

But as for torture . . . still . . . In Rome, the Consul Pretorius, who "kept the king's sword" *(King!* as though the title had not long ago been subsumed into a vaster one!) was able with his words and ways alone to wring secrets out of the most forsworn to silence, and in Athens old Illyriodorus did as much with dreams (though these were different secrets, clean different ones indeed), but in Averno different ways were kept (and clean different ones they were, too; if not precisely clean). They took Vergil to see the torture chambers, as one would go to see the bears.

There were no such chill dungeon deeps as had caused the captive in the *Histories* to exclaim, "How cold are your baths, O Romans!" All was well warmed, all along the deep stone steps (deeper, even, in the center of each, worn, probably, by the passage of many feet over the passing of many years) all along the deep stone steps and long stone corridors, and, indeed, well lighted as well. His host had paused to take up a wax tablet which stood upon a stand, as though

he were taking up a menu; his host was the Magnate Brosa Brosa. "Hm," said he, "this morning they have someone named"—the name meant nothing to Vergil, whatever it was—"who stands accused of conspiracy and interloping." He raised his eyebrows. " 'Conspiracy *and* interloping,' " he repeated thoughtfully with slight change of emphasis. "Can't have *that.*"

He stood aside and gestured courteously, asked, "Shall we go in, master?"

They went in.

Vergil had gone in first, with some polite murmur, but he did not at first go in very far; for, the door closing behind them with a heavy thud that for some reason somewhat sickened him (as some sounds do), it was at first dim-dark. But even before his eyes regained full vision—he had with him, always, of course, a source of light of his own, but did not care always, or even often, to make use of it—even then he was able to see that, first, there was some glow of light from somewhere; next he saw, in that dim glow, evidently the man being "put to the question"—horrid obliquity of phrase!—a man, a young man, well muscled and unclad and arms upraised and wrists in chains; but—

"At least he does not barber his armpits," said the magnate-host . . . hanging, thus, that beautiful body, and face intent and in pain, the young man naked and in chains: Vergil pitied him with all his heart, what matter for the moment all philosophy and polity and prating of the welfare of the Res Publica, the Public Thing: the State? The muscles of the arms and breast and belly moved and played and writhed, the upper body bent forward and moved, the chain moved somewhat; somewhere near, a bellows sighed and sounded: and, gods! what mattered where he shaved or not?

"Else we had not hired him." The soft voice of the host in Vergil's ear. "We want no perverts for this work, you know."

Light.

The young man all naked and all sweat was not the victim. He was the torturer. The chains were not those of bondage, he had merely wound them round his wrists for purchase as he forced the bellows to force the fire, working it to heat his instruments. It was, of sorts, a shock. The young man's pain was merely that of effort.

And when the actual prisoner, uncomely in body and in face, was

lifted forward and fixed upon the frame, white hairs crawling upon bosom and belly—even then attention and favor, even pity, certainly sympathy, once fast-centered, moved and changed with difficulty. For one long, unlovely moment it had seemed right to Vergil, and proper, that youth and beauty should torture old age and ugly . . . and, or . . . at least . . . wrong that it should be obliged to tarry there to do so, for, clearly (from the torturer's straining muscles and concerned face—scarcely observed, the commencement of the question . . . the questions . . . *When last did you conspire to admit interlopers unlicensed to the trade and commerce of the Very Rich City of Averno in violation of its strict and meritorious laws?)* clearly, youth could take and took no pleasure in this association with age, and surely beauty would prefer the sunlight and the cooler air outside, the sweet smells of gardens and of fields to this hot room, dark, and fetid with sweat and fear. Clearly, surely, then (it seemed), age, ugly age, should at once confess and die and set youth free, unchained, to go forth once more into the light and air to play. . . .

Then, suddenly, *simul* and *semel* with the first groan and scream, it came to him, Vergil, that there was "outside" no cooler air, no sweet smells, no gardens and no fields, little better light, and certainly little in the way of play: He was in Averno.

The very rich city.

How came he there?

"Master in Philosophy. Master in Arts Magical. Adept of the First Three Grades at Grammarie. Passed Master on the Astrolabe. Astrologue, West of Corinth, and *Astrologue, East of Corinth."* The voice paused, continued. "But not yet *Incantor et Magus."* The voice ceased. It had not asked a question; it had made a statement.

Vergil said, "Not yet." Also a statement.

The man of the voice had entered the hot-wine shop a half-moment ahead of him, and only in that half-moment had Vergil half-realized (realized, that is, with half his mind) that the other's striped robe had already been in the wine-shop lane when he himself turned into it. As for turning, the man had not turned up his face when Vergil had come to stand next to him . . . indeed, could have stood

nowhere much else, there being but that much little room at the small counter where the wine-pots squatted in their hot-water baths above the charcoal glow. Giving their orders as the dramster looked at each in turn, "White and sweet," said one, "Red and spicy," said the other. Vergil was that other, and this was no pre-arranged signal, to be responded to with some phrase such as *I have the key to Memphis,* countered with (perhaps) *And I, to Mizraim,* such sports as boys employ to obtain entrance to clandestine gatherings of boys who cannot yet get girls. Had the dramster stood a bit nearer in offering the steamy cup with one hand and holding out the other for the two groats—an ancient buffoonery among street-players: *Spare two groats for the bath, boss?* What bath? *The one in Lucu's wineshop* . . . Change the name for every street, it still drew its laugh from loiterers—had this dramster's stance not made it necessary for Vergil to turn a bit to the left, he would not even have seen the other wine-drinker's face in profile: no extraordinary face, say of not quite three decades, with a sparse beard and large white teeth.

Vergil had raised his cup and lowered his face and, while he blew and sipped, this other, this one in the striped robe, as though murmuring a libation-prayer, began that recitation of titles which, after a mere moment, Vergil recognized as his own. Had this other, whoever he was, and no memory of this other moved Vergil's mind, not even as the lightest of breezes moves the surface of a pool, had he expected some show of surprise or even curiosity? None was forthcoming. He might as well have been Vergil's aunt, asking "Has your sister come back from market?"

"Not yet."

It was a tiny dram-shop, Vergil had been in privies that were larger, and it announced its wares with a reek as strong, though of course different. He had, in a sudden urge, desired a cheap sip: as cheap in quality as price, he could afford better now, but old tastes have a way of returning. Though you expel Nature with a pitchfork, she will always return. And now out of nowhere, as he drank the rough and raffish wine, was a stranger murmuring degrees and titles as though reading them off a tablet or a scroll. As though they had been gained as easily as they were being recited. As easily as a child gains names.

Vergil blew and sipped and sipped and swallowed. Spicy, it was

not very spicy, some infusion of something much-infused had tinctured it, no more; probably the other's chosen dram was not more than the very least sweet, had been mixed with the water washed through a much-washed honey-pot.

The pleasures of the poor.

But . . . two groats. Price of admission to the bath, any bath, a mere token, of course, public baths being supported by public funds. The drink was worth what one paid for it. Somewhat it warmed him, somewhat it refreshed him, somewhat it brought back memories of times when there had been an adventure in buying a dram in a wineshop. The voice next to him now: "From Sevilla to Averno"—still the same casual mutter—"is a rather far journey. The dyer Haddadius might be pleased to learn of some of the many things discovered on such a journey. He might be prepared to." The man set down the cup, belched politely, walked out. Vergil did not look up. The dramster took the empty cup, sloshed it in a wide basin of the coarse-painted pottery used for the purpose, set it back on the shelf.

"Another, boss?"

Boss shook his head. After a moment took his own leave. Sevilla. Sometimes called city of the sundry secret schools. Sometimes called sewer of a thousand different devils. Vergil did not constantly think of Sevilla, but to have heard it mentioned in the way he had, there in that dirty concrete cell with its pots of half-vinegar cooking at the counter (on the walls, rough-scratched graffitti: *Polonio for President of the Lousepickers' Guild . . . Julia pisses better stuff than what they sell here . . .*)—well, it was rather a surprise. And as to what it meant, who knew? Everything meant something, still, some meanings were revealed sooner than others. And that some were seemingly never revealed in no way disproved the fact.

Averno. And the dyer Haddadius.

". . . *might be prepared to* . . ." . . . to what? If the last word had not been *"pay,"* and it was not entirely clear what it had been, then *what* had it been? He did not bother to note down in his tablets, but he toyed with some half-formed fancy about the dyer's hand, which, proverbially, proclaimed its owner's trade.

And then, having other things to remember, this one he very easily forgot.

That night he could not sleep.

There is a certain book that is of hard-seeking, and, it is said, if found and opened by one who does not deserve to know what it contains, the book does not allow itself to be read. Evidently Vergil had, without wanting to, found it, here in his small library in this small port, the book disguised in the binding of some other and well-familiar work, for as often as he blinked, and trimmed the wick of the lamp once more, and examined the half-eggshell suspended above it and filled with oil to see if the hole was clear and the oil still dripping drop by drop by slow slow drop into the well of the lamp below and as often as he returned his gaze to the page, as often the letters melted and flowed. He would never get his lesson this way. Indeed, when his preceptor, old Vlaho, that good man, said to him, "Recite the syllogism which I set for you to learn," he had to confess that, sir, he had not learned it. Old Vlaho shook his bald head, rimmed with soft short gray hairs, and raised his hand to hit him a reproving slap: the hand, from nails to wrist, was blue as woad.

A cock crew. It was near to dawn. He had fallen asleep anyway, and so, with a sigh, he turned over in his bed in the wall-niche. It was some while before he remembered that night's dream.

Away, away, the Isle of Goats in the hazy distance, it thrust upward like any mountain, save in being surrounded by waves instead of clouds. Aurelio the freedman arose and bowed as Vergil came up. Aurelio did not point, but he moved his hand to where Naples glittered on its hills, also far off, but not near so far as the Isle of Goats. "Well, sir, we have the horsehair, as you ordered. Apollo! how they wanted to charge me for it, there in the city!" He wagged his head in wonder, but it was a contented wag. And a contented wonder. They may have wanted to charge . . . whatever it was they had wanted . . . but it was clear that the price Aurelio had paid was not the one asked. "All because I insisted it should be white horsehair only. But any excuse will do them. 'Why does it need be pure white?' the man said. 'Dark horsehair is stronger, anyway.' Well, I dunno it is or *not,*

but I say, 'In that case, all the more why the white should be cheaper.' " He chuckled. "And so, Master Vergil, sir, we are ready to begin mixing the plaster; there is the lime, and over here is the sand, sir."

Vergil thrust his hand into the opened bales of hair, lifted, sifted, let it drop. Then he stooped and did the same with the sand, but this time he put some on his tongue; and this he did several times. "Yes, this will do," he said. "We won't want more than this much horsehair, just enough to give a certain roughness so it will grip and hold the coating."

Aurelio had evidently been about to ask the question to which Vergil, unrequested, had supplied the answer; and now seemed satisfied, pleased. But now another question came into the freedman's mind, and, thence, across his face. And this time too, Vergil answered it first.

"I tasted it to be sure it had not been mixed with sea-sand, because the salt would, for one thing, attract and hold the moisture and you would have damp and dripping walls at times . . . at times when you would least want them, too: in wet weather . . . and, also, the plaster would be less likely to hold firm upon the walls. And then, too . . . salt . . . the principal savor of mankind, though some things it preserves, yet, some things it destroys. . . ." Vergil waved his hands a bit and raised his brows a bit, and made . . . a bit . . . a certain gesture that Aurelio understood; repeated. Salt. Sorcery.

Aurelio's face, which had for just a moment clouded, cleared, and he grunted with gratification. "One has to have learned many things in philosophy, sir, in order to build a house correctly, sir."

Vergil was undoing the strings of a dark bag of rich, soft samite. He nodded. The knots were not simple, but he had tied them himself. As the last one fell slack, he said, "Yes. Principles. Proportions. Mathematics. Materials. And more. Much more. Even"—he lifted out an instrument—"how to space and set and tune the five chords of this lute." And he ran his fingers over them all five: yellow the first, for bile; red for blood, and twice as thick the chord, white for sperm, and thrice as thick the chord; the black chord, for the black bile, was the fourth, and was one-fourth the thickness of the first and the highest in pitch. These four had long been traditional; to them Vergil had ventured to add a fifth: This was of a color between rose

and purple, and it represented that aspect of man higher than any humor, and this, though his own idea, had been suggested to him by some word or other in the *Great Antiphonal* of the Saracen, Syryabus, which nicked and clicked—as it had so seemed at the time—with some lines, a few, not more, from the nameless books of the music played at the courts of Asoka and Chandragupta, the Great High Kings of Ind. Then there was Vitruvius, and before him, Amphion; excellent exempla. And again he now ran his fingers over the strings. The workmen began to rise and to look at him more closely, even, than before. He tightened pegs a trifle, here and there; considered loosening them a trifle, there and here; decided not to. The day was clean, the air was clear, he lifted his eyes, gathered the gaze of all, gave a nod of his head, and began to play.

The name of his song was "The Walls of Thebes."

The work of building went on, as it had begun, to the sounds of, and the rhythms of, music.

After a while the music began to enter a slower phase, and, the movements of the workmen, slowly, in time with it, gradually ceased. And, after some pause, Vergil said, "Ser Aurelio—"

"*Aurelio, Aurelio.* It is kind of you and I am not of a rank to gainsay what a learned master such as yourself is pleased to utter, but if you please, sir: plain *Aurelio.* There are others who have not your gracious nature and much they would resent hearing I suffered meself to be called *Ser* Aurelio. Me. A freedman."

The haze had burned away from off all the water. The Isle of Goats stood proud and high and blue and distant, like the haunt of a peri or of many a faun. Naples glittered brightlier than ever. "Your former master, Aurelio, then—"

"The late and honored Aurelio Favio, Master Vergil. Whose name he was good enough to bestow when he manumitted me. And what of him, sir?"

Vergil stroked his short black beard, and then, as though stretching his fingers from their long stint at the lute, gave a stroke to each side of the short black hair that fitted his head like a cap. "Yes, just what I was going to ask. What of him? What sort of man?"

"The best sort. Worked hard, dealt honest, and I worked hard and honest with him, down there in the old wharf where we had the first warehouse." Gestured. "He lived in a simple, frugal way, my master,

and a chaste one; no boys, sir, and just the one woman, Julia by name she was, as kind as he was, and even quieter. Then she died, then he freed me, then he went to join her, sir, as they do say. And as we must hope. And left me his heir."

Heir to no small property, or, from a small one Aurelio had by the same diligence and thrift made a large one; else he would not be building him a house of this size and on a piece of land of this value.

"And his business was—?"

"Everything at first, you know, though in a small way. As for, we did used to go along the wharf and buy seamen's private trade adventures, such as they was allowed to carry free aboard—not much: a sack or a box or a bale of this-and-that at a time. Then one year he chartered the fruit harvest at one of the orchards. That was good, I liked that; hard we worked in the open sun and air all day, but the fruit was sweet to smell and eat; hard we worked, the day, but at night, sir, ah, how we young people used to dance on the threshing-floor, the grain harvest not being on at the same time. Folk playing music, like as you've done, sir . . . the bright moon . . . A look of quiet came across the freedman's broad and sallow face. "And the next year the people made him an offer to charter the wheat harvest, and we did so well that after that it was mostly wheat we dealt in . . . oh, yes, sometimes oil, yes, sometimes oil. But mostly wheat."

It was almost as though Aurelio were acting the role of chanter for some mimetic play; even as he said these words the workmen were breaking into pieces the bread they had for the day's first meal, and dipped the pieces of it into the dish of oil carefully propped on a heap of sand. Vergil was prompted to quote the old proverb of the Aegypts, "Water and the wheat plant are equal to the throne of God," and Aurelio said, indeed. Indeed, indeed, sir, indeed. His old master, Aurelio Favio, then, he was not . . . and his freedman Aurelio was not, then . . . a dyer?

"No, sir, never. A dyer, Master Vergil? Why—"

"But isn't that madder, Aurelio, in the lines of your right hand?"

The freedman's mouth opened. He turned his hand over, stared hard. Those lines of which the chiromancers make much were indeed a deeper red than anything but madder could supply. Aurelio looked. Puzzlement. Then a jerk of his head, a click of his teeth. Recollection. He nodded. "It was the other day sir, as I went indeed to the

dye-house to see about the curtains for my bed. And the master workman poked his stick into the vat to show me how it was going and he hauled the cloth up and it began to slip and I, like a fool—as though he didn't know his own craft!—I grabbed ahold of it. Well! And so the dye still stays there yet, in the lines of my palm. Sharp eyes you have, as well, Master Vergil, sir." Respect, and perhaps just a touch of something more.

Not wanting it to be given the chance, just then, to become too much more, Vergil said, "We are making you a good house here, Aurelio. Will you live alone, just you and your servants?" No more encouragement was needed, the freedman opened his heart and spoke of his plans. He was, he felt, too old to marry. "If I need a woman for a night, I know where to find one. But what's meet for a night is not meet for a lustrum," he said. The vine might well be wedded to the elm, as anyone could see for himself who walked out into the countryside and saw the one, trained, draped round the other, so to speak: but old age and maidenhood, not so well. And to marry an older woman meant to marry all her family, ". . . some of which I might like and might like me, and some of which, well . . ." And had she no family, none, then to marry all her sorrow and bitterness as well.

But.

There was something else on the man's mind and Vergil felt some sense of what it was, and a stronger sense of not wishing to show anything of what he sensed. He nodded. Waited. "There's a young girl, oh, maybe eleven, twelve, or so, in the new wharf part of town, whom I been looking on for a while, you see, sir. And I see she's a good girl and as clean as they leave her be, where she was before with some family, not a slave, no, just a servant-drudge. So I spoke a word here and there and I put a few pieces of silver into a few hands and I got her in with a better family where she can do more than scrub and carry—where she can learn the ways of a good family house and a good family housewoman: buying, spinning and weaving, cooking good food as she has bought, managing servants, and to read and write and keep accounts, and all such things as I needn't enumerate. And in a while, Master Vergil, I shall adopt her and dower her. And then, without no haste, sir, then I'll go cautiously inquiring around in the workshops of the good crafts, of the best of the crafts, sir, of

promising young men who've about finished their journeyman time: and then I am going to pick the best of them as don't have family to set them up well in trade and then I'll marry the two of them off, if so be they'll have each other, for I don't believe in forcing such a match if they won't. With the dowry, then, the young man, my son-in-law as he'll be, he'll be able to open a good shop and we'll all be a-living here together in this good house which you're a-building for me, and I shall have children then, you see, and grandchildren, and I shan't be alone no more, then, nor in my ancient age . . ."

Quiet joyful anticipation for a moment, then, hastily: "If such be my fate, absit omen." He spat three times and thrice he rapped upon a balk of timber.

"Absit omen," Vergil repeated. It was a bad thing to boast or vaunt, it would attract the envy of others . . . other people . . . others who and which were not people; it was a risk, but, being a risk which it was inevitable sooner or later at one time and another anyone would take, there was a remedy provided: one invoked the protection of the spirits of the trees, which resided, residually, at least, in any piece of wood; one spat, for spittle was deemed potent surrogate for potent semen. "Avert the omen . . . Yes. Such be your fate. It is written in your palm, the lines outlined in madder. Yes, it *will* be a good house that we are building for you. So you do not go to Averno, then, for your dye-work?"

Pleasure in this prophecy, confirmant of his own chief hopes, made the freedman almost speechless for a moment, and he was slow to take the last question into his mind. It was with a sudden movement, almost a convulsive one, that he reacted to it in a moment; and his face twisted. "That black pit? That stinking hole? *No,* master! Oh, I've been, more often than I've wanted to, for every time I've been there I *haven*'t wanted to, but business sometimes obliged me—why else?—for as for them hot baths supposedly good for the health, why, rather sicken at home than go *there* for a cure! However, beg the master's pardon, whilst it *is* true that they *do* dye-work and iron-work and in fact *all* such work as involves heats and fires, which is what keeps 'em all alive and makes 'em rich (besides from thievery and murder or worse)—why, *no* sir! 'Averno-Inferno' is what we calls it. If so it be as I can possibly help it, I prefer to pay higher price and breathe cleaner air. . . ." Some sudden thought interrupted this

not-quite-tirade. "They say there is a king there now, King Kakka I suppose it must be, a king of shit." Contempt and disgust, and something more, struggled a moment more upon the fat face with its clear, if faded, blue eyes. Then: "Begging the master's pardon for my rough words."

Next, with no more than a twitch, this all was gone. "So my palm-lines say I'm to live here in peace as I've desired, master, you say . . . ?"

Vergil reached for his lute, to take it up again; made of wood, it was, and inlaid with that mother-of-pearl fetched up from the rich ocean-mines of the Erythraean Sea. "As far as the lines say *me,* yes. And as for further information, why . . . one would not wish to go to Averno for it, would one?" He ran his fingers over the lute-strings, and then, seeing that the older man was troubled at this last remark, which (he thought) it would have been better not to have made, Vergil asked, "And how did you meet this young girl whom you plan to adopt?"

Aurelio's face cleared once more. "How? Why, let me think. Ah. It was a hot day and I was toting a sack of good wheat to miller's, to save the cart, it being but the one sack. And I pause to wipe my sweaty face, and she come over and offered me a cup of water, you see, sir . . ."

"Yes, I see. Well . . . 'Water and the wheat plant,' eh?"

He began to stroke the lute; and the men arose again and the work went on again. And went on well.

The last to leave, of those who left the building site, Vergil bade good evening to the watchman (by special permission of the municipium, armed: not all knew about spells and such safeguards, nor did Vergil wish to make his own knowledge of them a subject for public clamor), and—some small devil entering into him—with a gesture indicated the signs deeply scored in the sand and dirt with his staff. "Don't disturb my circles."

But the man did not catch a reference one would have thought well known even to schoolboys; exclaimed, "The gods forbid, sir!"

Times had changed. For the better. For the worse.

Night. He had of course the standing invitation to dine with Claudio Murcio, but the thought of having to hear once more the standard bill of fare deprecated by the inveterate modesty of the host seemed just that much too much. Another time, then, Claudio Murcio. And there was the invariable reading from Homer at the salon the Matron Gundesilla, followed, invariably, by refreshments of high quality; again, no. Plutarco had, not two days since, suggested that Vergil might find his collection of charts interesting, and Vergil very well might. On the other hand, he would probably not find very interesting the long walk thither in the fast-fading light; and, even less, the long walk back, accompanied by a servant with a torch yawning for his bed. So, so much for that.

Home.

Someday he would be able to afford to keep his own horse or mule. Someday he would have his own litter and litter-bearers. Someday he would give his own entertainments and have other people come to *him.* Someday *home* would be so well furnished, so well supplied with books and devices, that the thought of home would never seem even faintly disappointing. Someday . . . home would be . . . somewhere else.

Until then, and meanwhile, then, at any rate: home.

Supper, supplied by the cookshop-tavern two doors down, was no surprise. Barley and cheese. Almost he regretted after all the table of Claudio Murcio, where, in between the eggs at the beginning and the apples at the end, there would be lettuce and snails and roast kid and —And also: *The lettuce is not very crisp, I fear, Master Vergil. The oil is not, alas, the best oil; it is merely local oil, I fear, Master Vergil. The eggs are not . . . I fear the kid . . . I wish the apples could have been . . .* Ah no. Better the barley and cheese, which the cookhouse crone had not waited to deprecate, but had simply put down on the table and taken her leave. There was wine, his own wine; there was no old moss on the amphora, there was not even new moss on the amphora, it was a small amphora of what wine-snobs would call a small wine; the wine would never travel, and who the hell cared. It was not bad wine. He ate, drank, washed his hands, dried them. Considered: What next?

A woman? No wife, no concubine, no mistress kept elsewhere any more than here, and—currently—no loves, no intrigues. But there

was Luvia, a few doors past the tavern, her person clean, her fee affordable, her purple gown (Averno-dyed) would look bright enough by lamplight. And then, the gown removed, a half hour in dalliance, the gown put on again; then Luvia would rattle and chatter and laugh . . . and sulk if he did not laugh and chatter and rattle as well. Well, no matter if he did or did not, and tonight he did not wish to, then she would be off. And *then* what? Many men would then, simply, sleep. Vergil would not. At least, not after Luvia. Although old Tiresias had suffered much for frankly answering Juno's question with *Women, nine times as much as men,* it was doubtful if, really, Luvia enjoyed their strokings and his delvings in any such proportion; as for the arithmetical reverse . . . Enough that, though it left him in much measure satisfied in one respect, in another it left him restless. So. *Then* he would look to his books . . . and so, all things reflected on and considered, he might as well look to them now.

Instead.

Someday he would have all the books he wanted. Theophrastus' *On Herbs,* illustrated in good colors. *The Pharmacon of Pseudo-Theophrastus.* The *Cookbook* of Apicius, full of ghastly recipes for nightingales' tongues in garum, elephant's trunk farced with truffles, scuttlefish, and mustard sauce made with hippocras: he would need the entire *Pharmacon* to physic himself after such a supper. Someday he would have the complete *Astronomica* of Manilius, mistakes and all; Firmicus's *Liber Mathesus;* the *Parthian Mansions* of Isidore of Charyx Spasini; Marsi's *Arts Magical* (he had only the digest now); Vitruvius *De Vitriae /?/.* He would have the *Catalogue* of Ptolemy, with golden clasps and a silken cover, and a new *Almagest* in bright black letters (his own was faded, and half-illegible with interlineations and erasures); the *Similitudes* of Aristotle and the *On the Formulae* of Zoroaster—no! His mind had wandered: it was of course the other way around!

Meanwhile, what did he have which would bear reading tonight? He had Ctesias, that delightful liar, both the *Persica* and *Indica.* He had part of Proclus (though, *some*day—), and the *Thrasyllicon* and Sicander's *Of Mesopotamia Septentriona.* Yet the one book that he took down was none of these, but the *Patterns* of Parthenopius, and for one full passage of the larger sandglass he went through every

single one of the labyrinthine mazes there delineated . . . went through them in his mind, of course; merely he checked them with those in the book when he had done.

He had done them all correctly.

He always did.

But it was well to be in practice, and besides: such splendid practice! such splendid exercises! And such splendid, splendid patterns!

After that he simply selected a scroll at random, raised the upper part of his jointed bed and fixed it fast with the rod behind and beneath, saw that the lamp was well, and retired. He folded the scroll as he unrolled it, so that each column was folded full-face clear, back-to-back with another column, so as to save the trouble of rolling (and unrolling) the scroll whilst he was reading it; began to read.

. . . *unexpectedly they were invited, in fact constrained, to join in a procession to the temple of Jove in Alexandria Olympia, where the Thunderer was worshiped under the Syrian name of Haddad. The procession had been organized at the first sign of bad weather by the local dyers' guild, for, they say, the thunder affects the dyes in the great pots if the mordant has not already been*— He was seized with a great start, in fact really something like a brief convulsion; the scroll shot from his hands and he sat bolt upright, the coverlet kicked off—

Asleep? Certainly he had not fallen asleep, out of habit he had turned the sandglass over as he began reading and the first few grains were just trickling through. *What book was this?*

He examined the label attached to the scroll's tubular case. Seneca *On the Four Cardinal Virtues? Hardly;* clearly a mistake. . . . He got up and collected the fallen scroll, of course he had lost his place, well, well, he would find it again, and. . . . It was certainly not Seneca on *any*thing, it was a fragment of, well, the gods knew what it was a fragment of, of something he had never seen before, so how came it *here?* Its text was not on the first wooden roller ever supplied it. Its text had been clipped and trimmed and glued and not recently, for the few marks left of the last letters on the part clipped off were quite impossible to decipher, by reason of who knew how many years of fingers—often greasy, often heavy, laboriously tracing the lines; how did it begin? It began, *so the Esthish people who dwell by the Wendland Sea in a corner of the North, when they begin to winnow*

grain, address these words to the wind, O Wind, O Wind, O Heavenly Child. O Wind, O Wind, O Heart of Great Joy . . .

Vergil fairly hastily yet fairly carefully went through the rest of the scroll; it was the memoir of travel of a Roman knight who had gone north after some precious commodity, amber, perhaps, and who had recorded not only every ounce purchased, and the price, but also, seemingly, every proverb he had ever heard and every way station at which he had heard it. But as to those other lines which Vergil had read but a moment before, lo! not once did they appear . . .

Nor anything like them.

Nor did he find them in any other book in his cabinet nor on his shelf. And neither could he recollect ever having read them before in his life. Anywhere.

He set aside the scroll and its case with the errant label, let the bed-rod down and got into bed again, drew the cover up, blew out the light, snuffed the smoldering wick with moistened fingers, murmured a prayer, and slept without waking once, and without a single dream.

Averno was not very far as the crow flies, but it was a byword that not even a crow, scarcely the most delicate of birds, would wish to fly to or even near there; for "They be smudged black already" and "Them folk there begrudge them corby-crow a carcass, even"; and suchlike sayings, and more. But men went to Averno, and went often, even if not all men; and some came thence, too. It was but a short time after finishing the house of Aurelio (the mortar, made specially after Vergil's own new-formed formula, might indeed prove better than the one commonly made; it would certainly prove as good, he would check it from time to time . . . decade to decade . . . for he had, he hoped, built the house to last forever: and so it might: barring quakes of the instable earth or some immense great overblast of Old Vesuvio . . . or the Death of Rome come flying down upon it)—it was but a short time after finishing the house that Vergil had encountered a certain street scene of a morning. It was in between the old and the new wharf sections of the town port that he saw the man with a string of pack animals, laden down with, no doubt, madder and carmine and saffron and woad, indigom and hyacinth. Some fool of a lean-shanked fellow with stubbly cheeks had

given a hoot, and, *"Averno! Pho!"* had cried. And held his nose. The crowd guffawed.

The Avernian merchant or dye-master (they were often the same) might have passed for a caricature of himself and his class in an open-air burlesque at a festival: fleshy, in travel-stained clothes he had not bothered to get washed, and mounted on a dark and dingy mule. He showed no anger, but, pressing his knees against the beast's flanks, he had raised his massive rump a trifle from the saddle, and, having said the while, "Since you hold your nose at me, here is something to hold it for," broke wind with a great noise.

The crowd's mood changed in an instant; they were all (for once) on the Avernian's side, roared their approval loud, and hooted the holder of the nose, who growled and sneered, but all the same took care to slink away at once. As it all pleased the populace and had certainly hurt him not, Vergil would no more than have shrugged, had this not brought the matter into his mind yet one time more. The prospect of Averno did not attract him, had never attracted him, and even now (he thought) very much did not attract him. But many things were not attractive that nevertheless needed to be done; it seemed to him, fairly of a sudden, that he might as well go to Averno, for, as witness this last incident, Averno seemed prepared to come to him.

And this prospect pleased him even less.

Much, much less.

"A horse? For sure a horse," said Fulgence the liveryman. "For how long, a horse, the master?"

Vergil considered. "Surely not more than a fortnight." He hoped.

The liveryman's face, all expectation at his answer, whatever his answer might be, now changed. Brows flew up, eyes bulged, mouth flew open, hands flew out. "Ah, then the master will not want . . ." He paused, he licked his lips. Again scanned his customer, decided that perhaps after all he would not try to impress by a guess. "So. Is it that the master may want a nice bright filly for ambling up and down the streets? Or maybe the master wants something . . . for show, *not* . . . not a filly; a good sturdy mare, mayhap? or a gelding? For, maybe, the mud and dirt, the roads to trudge, the farms to see?"

"I am going to Averno."

One more slow lick the liveryman gave his lips, the while he looked from side to side as though for witnesses to this incredible statement; but witnesses there were at the moment none, for the swipes and hostlers were gathered round a handsome stallion in a corner of the yard. The man took a breath. He held it. Let it out. Looked about once more. Shrugged. Gazed up as though the god-actor, descending from the hoist-machine in the amphitheater, would yet come down to save him. But—as he himself might have put it—a god from the machine there was not.

"Well, what is it, Fulgence, man, what is it?" Vergil was becoming impatient at this play.

"What is it? What it is? Heh-hem! Is going to Averno, says the master, says, and wants to know"—here control began to slip and voice to rise—"*Jove,* Apollo, and Poseidon! 'What is it?' asks he! Is this: For one, for Averno, not a horse would be, but a mule. Is this, for another, so here are no mules, none. Mules, here, are not. Childs of whoring mares are mules, and in my stable have, I wouldn't." Several of the children of the whoring mares lifted their heads in adjoining stalls just then, displaying their characteristic ears, as though astonished to hear the morals of their mothers impugned and indeed their own very presence denied. Vergil grinned. The liveryman cursed. "The mules (some hangman stable boy brought in against my willing)—the mules I curse." He broke off to explain and to excuse, and stooped as though for a stone to sling at them, a search somewhat handicapped by the fact that his hands, being both clenched into the position called the fig, with each thumb thrust between the next two adjacent fingers—a gesture sovereign and remedial against the evil eye in general, as well as specific spells and cantrips—his hands thus arranged were hardly capable of picking up stones to cast at mules, existent or otherwise. And at this moment when he was realizing this himself, and his dismay at the position becoming fast impossible to conceal, and the position itself already impossible to conceal—at this moment, concealed in yet another stall nearby, an ass began to bray: perhaps an epithalamion. The liveryman danced up and down in a hysterical ecstasy of helplessness and rage.

Vergil began to laugh, his head thrown back so far that his tar-

black beard jutted straight out. "Bawd, pimp, and punk!" the man screamed, cursing the still-invisible though hardly inaudible jackass, kicking dust and dung toward its stall. "May devils ride your rod and may it dwindle! May your stones—"

In a voice still weak from laughter, Vergil urged him to desist. "—for suppose your curse came true?" he asked. "What of the jack's stud-fees, man?"

A look of absolute horror expelled all other emotions from the face of Fulgence. "Twenty ducats cost me the beast, and me, I curse his rod!" He smote his forehead with the flat of his hand. "On *me* let it befall, on me, on me, and not on thee. . . ." It was his voice that dwindled as he considered what he had just said, and his face seemed to writhe in a whirlpool of contradictory feeling, as the last bray ebbed off into silence. Very, very weakly, he said, "For Averno to go, a deposit the most immense it would be essential. A deposit—"

The stallion gave a scream of pain, the liveryman at once forgot deposits, jackasses, mules, customer, and all; and in an instant was there with the stallion and its agony. "What!" he exclaimed. "Still he didn't pass? Two days, what, and still no— The louse?" he cried, looking wildly and fiercely at the group of men and boys, some stroking and speaking to it, one holding it at the head, others standing carefully away from the great hooves. The beast was a bay, huge, and a beauty, and it quivered in pain.

Vergil asked, "He has a stricture?" Mostly they gaped at him, but one, the senior hostler by his looks and manner, nodded.

"Yes, master, he—"

"The louse? *The louse?"* shouted Fulgence the liveryman.

"—he hasn't passed no water for anyway two days. Maybe two 'n' a half. The boss he sends out for to get a louse, you know, master—"

"Ah. Yes, I know." He knew, Vergil knew, the homely if uncomely remedy: If a louse was placed in the fundament of a horse afflicted with stricture, the crawling of the tiny parasite should produce a shudder that would relax the tautened or tightened orifice.

"—but we couldn't *get* no louse, boss," a young stable boy grumbled. "Some days beggars be so thick, and everywhere you looks, a scratchin' of theyselves, till you wants to leap away. Therefore. Dunno where they'm gotten to, today, we see only one, is all, old No Nose, but he—"

But Fulgence would be butted no buts. "A handful of coppers, I give! Even, I told you, what do they want of me, the filthy, *gold?* Silver, a silver piece, even. Two hundred ducats cost Hermus, a price for a king! Oh, the gods! Jove, Apollo, Poseidon!" This mixture of the Roman and the Grecian was too common locally even to be noticed by those locally denizened. The great stallion Hermus . . . and in truth he did seem a fine beast and perhaps fit for a king and perhaps too fine a beast for a livery stable; some story that one would never, likely, hear, lay behind his presence there . . . the bay, Hermus, gave a moan. His master put his hands to his own head. The horse's health was surely more worth than one piece of gold, but he could not bring himself to pay it; nor was it pure parsimony, either. "They would sneer me forever, upon may I spit; 'Ha, ho, who, Fulgence! Who for a louse a gold piece did give!' *Hermus. Piss for me!*" And no doubt they would, too.

Vergil meanwhile had himself replaced the man by the horse's head, stroked its neck, stroked its belly, once, twice, thrice, murmured, "Hermus, Hermus, turbid with gold . . ." And stepped one pace back.

Had a demigod been then and there begotten, as upon Danaë the daughter of the Argive king through Jove's assuming the rather unexpected form of a golden rain to circumvent the locks upon the bronzen tower, there would have been no greater commotion.

Most of the credit at first, however, went to the horse.

But only at first.

And after a while the liveryman Fulgence bethought him of his other business; grateful he must have been, his words of thanks could not have been entirely insincere, but like many another person in many another (and some might think, more exalted) station in life, he was somewhat chary, somewhat leery, of showing overmuch gratitude: and he looked at his customer with a somewhat slanting glance, no longer straight into the face. Gratitude, appreciation, these were all very fine things: but business was, after all, business. Fear of his appreciation and gratitude costing him something was evident; so was his fear of losing the customer's custom. A nice balance . . . and a mixed one . . . rather, coming down to specific examples, rather like a mule. "A mule, a mule," he murmured, waving his hands as though to wave away any reminder that he had ever

denied he had a mule, let alone mules, in his place. "The best of mules the master shall to have, a gentle mouth how it has, a back so kindly, the how clever on by craggy roads its feet! As for the deposit . . ." Here he stopped suddenly. "Averno," he whimpered, whispered. "Who goes to Averno, does they always come back? *De-posit . . .*"

The senior hostler said, low, respectful, but how charged with significance his words, "Hermus be's the deposit, what me think."

Fulgence hissed. Fulgence writhed. Slantingly he looked at Vergil. Appeal, greed, fear were in his look. Vergil, saying nothing, showing nothing in his face, merely looked straight on ahead. As it, however, happened, it was the great stallion Hermus who stood right straight ahead where Vergil was looking.

And so Vergil therefore looked straight at Hermus.

Fulgence gave one single short hoot of fear. Then he wilted. "It must be no mule," he said, after several long and audible swallows. He gestured to his senior hostler, the gesture—toward some more distant stall—meant nothing to Vergil, but it evidently meant something to the senior hostler. And, it was clear, to the junior ones as well. Relief showed, and even respect. The older man bowed to Vergil, bowed to his own master, went off, nodding his head as he went. Another gesture, and Hermus was led away and into his own stable. Back came the senior, leading another horse, a roan, led it to the place where Vergil's eyes still looked.

"This one be a good one, sir," he said.

His voice placed a slight emphasis on *good.* The liveryman perhaps did not like the implication, his lips moved, then he shrugged, then he looked at his purse hanging at his belt over his slight paunch. He swallowed again. "I leave to the master his choice. Should he choose this Prima, he choose a good mare, no filly, no maiden-mare all so skittish, but he choose a matron-mare: steady, secure, strong, she. If she would have a sometime a little humor, just a little and no more would it be, to go a little right, or a little left to go, or to over her shoulder to look, well." He shrugged again. "The master is no cruel and he would allow and it would all right be."

"This one be a good one, sir."

Vergil now allowed, first his eyes, then his hands, to move over the mare. All seemed true. She gave her head a slight toss. She seemed

already to have accepted him. He seemed already to have accepted her. Already, in this short moment, they seemed familiar with each other. Vergil gave a long, slow nod. And once again he saw and heard the liveryman swallow. The only slightly protuberant eyes besought him somewhat more. Vergil waited.

"I leave to the master his generous, he would compassion have. Like a nobleman, he would wish the payings for two weeks in advance to pay." Vergil thought this, from his own acquaintance with nobility, perhaps the very last thing a nobleman would wish; but he let the thought pass by, and, the purse being now open in Fulgence's slightly trembling hands, he put money in it.

And Fulgence bowed. And Fulgence said no more.

Vergil and the mare were a ways down the street when he realized that there were three of them. The youngest stable boy had helped put on the horse-furniture, and then withdrew; now here he was again. "Thank you, boy, I shan't need you," Vergil said, sifting out a small coin.

"Ah, master, but I shall need *you,*" the stable boy said firmly. "He've kicked me out, old popeyes have, for that I didn't bring him back no louse." Likelier (thought master), likelier Fulgence, having still some small matter in the debit column, had paid it by this small act of anger—and better than to have kicked a horse. Or . . . but . . . "I suppose he'd've liked me to fetch it back in me armpit or me crouch. And I shan't get no other job in no other stable, sir, for they've got as it be a guild, and without the old boss gives his leave no new boss durst take you on. Leastly such a young chap as me. Therefore."

He said no further word, but marched sturdily along by the side of the mare. Nor did Vergil.

If the lad had not already learned that they were going to Averno, soon he would.

The famous sunshine of the great Bay was absent the morning of their departure, veiled in a sour drizzle of rain and smoke. The boy Iohan sniffed, and liked it not, despite the felt capes provided for them both. "The gods might have waited a bit," he said. "For we shall soon enough have much such weather, where we go. As master

knows, I'm sure." He was a moment silent, then added, in a flat voice, "Very rich."

Vergil understood. It was said that the city of Averno had two unofficial mottoes; one was *Money Never Stinks,* a mere pleasantry (for Averno, a mere pleasantry); but the other, *Thou Shalt Want Ere I Shall Want,* gave pause for much thought. And there was also the matter of its official municipal appellation. The descriptives of cities were customarily twofold, with both adjectives preceded by the word *very;* there were exceptions, of course, and Rome, of course, had none . . . needed none . . . and Avignon, the co-capital, was termed the *Imperial and Pleasant.* There might perhaps be a distinction between "pleasant" and "very pleasant," but none between "imperial" and "very imperial." Amalfi was the *Very Free and Very Faithful,* perhaps a contradiction in terms; and Sevilla was termed *Very Ancient and Very Wise.*

And so on. And so on.

But Averno was, very simply, *Very Rich.*

Which nobody would deny.

For a moment the mare, Prima, paused at the crest of the surrounding hills. The mare turned her head to look at the Bay of Naples, then it rolled an eye and looked at Vergil: and the look in that eye reminded him at once so strongly of the Matron Gunsedilla that he had to check himself—there on the sun-warmed summit—from murmuring, "Yes, madam. It was very well done, madam." The mare rolled the eye back, hunched a bit, plodded on. Vergil smiled. They had told him that the mare had her little humors.

The Matron Gunsedilla, who was she? she was a knight's widow. She was also a witch. There were those who, having devoted more time to old wives' tales than to wives, old or young, believed that every witch had a white chin-beard and dwelt in a clearing in the woods, crouching by midnight over a caldron on a fire. Gunsedilla was still on the brighter side of thirty, her middle age a bit more than a lustrum off, and she had no children; neither had she a beard, though to be sure there was a very slight dark down upon her upper lip, not enough to attract Spaniards, though. Her late husband had left her a mansion in the city, a villa in the suburbs, three latifundia in the country, olive orchards and an oil-press, as well as such other legacies as interests in several ships and some blocks of tenements.

Her only appearance at a clearing in the woods would be to pick mushrooms on a picnic. She needed, of course, neither spin nor weave, nor wash wool and linen by the brook. In part she spent her time in pious devotions at home and at the temples, she brought soup and sop to the pauper sick, and broken victuals as well; and her readings from Homer were a feature of the town, her reader being a learned Greek with a mellifluous voice and a keen sense of grammar and rhythm. And what she did if she crouched at midnight was her own affair. As at midafternoon.

Still, time hung heavy on her hands, and, not wishing to fall into idle ways, she had some while since betaken herself to studies such as would stimulate her supple mind: first geometry, then geomancy; then, by a natural progression, sorcery—of, of course, the benevolent sort, the other sort being naturally illegal. She was of great help in recovering lost objects, she would be of no help at all in helping them in getting lost. Her command over the contents of Macer's *Concerning Those Made Impotent Through Sorcery* was profound, though she would herself do nothing to cause anyone to become impotent through sorcery. As for her efforts in moon-constructs, gentle and sweet Selena must have smiled on them and her as she bent close to the lunar reflection in the burnished mazer and the dark-bottomed wooden pan; rustics who would not have known a burnished mazer had one bitten them in the buttocks would murmur at sight of the matron or even mention of her name, "Ah, the Madame Gunsedilla, she can draw down the moon from the heavens! Aye, haul it down from the starry skies!"

Now and then Vergil would not mind a short visit of an afternoon to discuss this work and that with her, and she was very far from minding, either; and now and then he would take a seat at the reading from Homer. Why only now and then in either matter? Why, that the matron was inclined to be just a bit, just the slightest bit, importunate; she did not exactly fish for compliments, rather did she slightly nudge for them; how well he knew the roll of those large eyes . . . and how well he knew that, did he not at once bow a bit and smile a bit and look impressed a bit and murmur, "Yes, madame. It was very well done, madame," rather (he had once thought) like a butler approving the catering arrangements—why, then see that fine and mobile mouth with its slightly downy upper lip draw out and

draw down in discontent, see that still-supple body give a rather unpleasant hunch of annoyance. A twitch. A shrug.

Life contained enough of toil, of pain, and folly, and he felt that these echoes or simulacra of such, however faint and petty, were hardly worth . . . well, experiencing. Often.

All this had passed across his mind like the faintest of shadows, and whither he now turned his eyes he saw a deeper shadow yet.

Averno lay beneath them, so near that they could identify individual houses, yet so far by reason of the wandering way through the craggy hills that it might be near sundown before they arrived. And some such thought evidently being in the mind of Iohan, he muttered, "Smell thee in the dark . . ." and broke off to break off a piece of his bread and scatter a crumble, and mumble, "Hither for this offering, ye genius loci." He who has cautioned us that art is long and life is brief has also reminded us that airs, waters, and places have powers of their own.

The genius loci did not at once visibly smile, and it would have been difficult to say how such a sign of favor would be manifest in that region, but at least at no time as they wound round and round and sometimes, briefly, up, but mostly always down—at any rate, at no time did any rock fall upon them, nor any lip nor barm of a tight trail give way beneath them. For a while yet there stayed some trace in their nostrils of what the poet Andersius has called "the sweet salt air;" scarcely were they aware of this when the wind went tepid and dull, and then a warm sullen slap of stale breeze in their faces gave notice of what was to come . . . and, fortunately, it came slowly and in stages. The heat and stench were Averno's curse, yes, but they were the inevitable results of Averno's blessing, too, for the hot places of the earth, elsewhere buried deeply, were here very near the surface. Here waters bubbled boiling up with no fuel placed beneath them, and here mounds rose anvil-high and anvil-iron-red and hot-white-hot without the need for charcoal, wood, or bellows—

Often.

To be sure there were places, manywhere, whither flame and fire came not and whither firewood or charcoal was brought, places where the bellows plied and puffed; if the city were one vast hot spring or fumarole or one immense blacksmith-fire, there would have

been no place, no inch nor ell, for the foot of man or woman safely to tread. But it was the presence of the other places—there, below, in that smoky bowl below, the places where flames either broke the sullen surface of the soil or lay so close thereto that the soil itself steamed and smoked—this was the reason for the existence of Averno as a city. Endlessly, no doubt, before the appearance of man thereby, these phenomena had been displayed therein: uselessly, as it were; wastefully, as it seemed. But now in all this valley-bowl "the arts of fire and metal" might be practiced without much real need to bring much fuel for fire. The artisans of Averno were not better artisans than those elsewhere, indeed, often, they were not as good; few swords or shares or scythes or axes or other tools of iron were made there: but many and many were the such-shaped blanks of iron formed to be exported, elsewhere to be sharpened for keen use. And these were invariably cheaper than those exported from elsewhere. The dyed garments of Averno were not so brightly colored, so fastly, nor so subtly as those of Tyre; not even as well done as those of Naples. But, though coarser, they were cheaper. Coarse metal, coarse cloth, coarse leather, coarse wool, these were the products of Averno. Or, reading from the other end of the line: cheap wool, cheap leather, cheap cloth, cheap metal. Had there been birds in Averno—which, save here and there a one or two or few sickening in cages, there were not; the very hens and cocks and capons were slaughtered on arrival—but had there been birds in Averno, this might have been their song: cheap-cheap, cheap-cheap, cheap-cheap.

The slow destruction and retreat of the forests of the Empire (indeed, of the whole oeconomia), with the resultant slow rise in the prices of firewood and charcoal, might work ill with the commerce of the arts of fire and metal elsewhere, but in Averno where one, so to speak, lived ill anyway, this was a blessing, a blessing and not a curse. A blessing, that is, for the magnates of Averno. They needed no skill in sales, were obliged to transport their wares to no distant shores, nor offer discounts nor sell on credit nor break themselves on racks to deal with competitors. Where they worked, there they sold. Others came to them, or did not come at all.

The magnates of Averno did not care.

They were cheap, cheap, cheap.

And so of course they had become rich, rich, rich.

Averno took no toll on private bag and baggage coming in, and it had long ago secured (and maintained) an exemption from the Imperial Imposts usually, elsewhere, levied (and collected) at city gates . . . another reason for its being Very Rich. As Vergil wore no sword, there was no discussion over that; as for knives, every man, everywhere, carried at least one knife: how else would he cut his food?

"Write the book," directed the gateskeeper, with a bored belch. He had already sized up Vergil as one who could do his own writing and so the services of a scribe were not required and there would be no fee to split. Vergil signed for himself and servant. The titles, in their abbreviations, did not impress the custos, nor would they have if indited in full; the man did not read. "Where you go?" he asked. He did not really care, but he had his reasons for asking.

Two of them.

The deeper shadow of the Great Gate encompassed them; shadow always lay deep on part of Averno. Set so deep as it was, the sun coming late and departing early, it was more shadowy there in the Great Gate, and pho! how it stank. "The house of Haddadius the dye-master," said Vergil. The keeper looked at him and looked past him and held up two fingers. A trace of a grimace lifted one corner of his great grim mouth; the ghost of a rictus; hardly even that, of a smile. And he clicked his mouth, twice.

"Two birdies," he said. The tiny coins being produced, he stuffed one into the purse deep in his grimy bosom, sent another one spinning across the tunnel-mouth of the gateway. It rang against the dripping wall, fell on the wet ground where a number of figures crouched. Most of them raised their heads, but only one . . . the nearest . . . raised his body. He got to his feet, after he had picked up the miserable money-bit, came over in a shuffle and a shudder. The gatesman said, *"Addadi."* The man gave neither beckon nor nod, started off in a lurching stumble and stagger, pausing and doubling over in a cough that seemed to churn his lungs and cripple his limbs. As Vergil, and Iohan holding the mare, started to follow, the keeper called to the shambling guide, "An when y'pass the bones-pit, drop in.—You, too," he added, to man and manservant. Hawked and spat. Returned to his stand.

Such was charity in Averno.

And welcome, as well.

Would Haddadius the dye-master be more welcoming? Vergil considered, as they passed through the filthy streets, as different from the cleanly thoroughfares of the small port town as the glowing sunsets there were from this filthy dusk, if it might not be better to seek an inn first. But some thought that Haddadius, having in effect sent for him by such devious ways, might have something else in mind for his accommodations, kept him from doing so. And so he followed after the lurching wreck of what had once been a fine large man; and when this one paused and leaned against a wall, though Vergil thought it was from weakness, on coming along up he saw there was a gate set into the wall. And on this the guide placed his hand. He did not even knock. He patted it once. He stroked it, once. Then he merely stayed there. And looked at Vergil from running, sunken eyes. Even when the man took the coin, and a bigger one it was than a "birdy," Vergil was not sure if he was nodding thanks, or if it was merely the trembling movements of his diseased condition. By and by, he was gone.

If Haddadius had something at all in mind for Vergil's accommodations it was not evident, nor was anything else that might have been on Haddadius's mind. The magnate was hardly more welcoming than the gateskeeper, but he did not engage in open insult, possibly because this might have required him to rise from his bath, where Vergil found him after having been (dilatorily, sullenly) led thither by a slave with a cast in one eye. Massive, mute, and shaggy, Haddadius listened in silence to Vergil's polite words. Though the words were polite, yet Vergil felt they were mere forms, for he did not care to state exactly his reasons for having come to Averno; surely they must be and had been known? If so, Haddadius gave no sign of it. What Haddadius gave, eventually, was a grunt, and the sign which he next gave was to a secretary who appeared so suddenly from the shadows that one less disciplined than Vergil might have started; to himself he said that shadows seemed appropriate to a secretary, by definition, even, the one who kept the secret things. The magnate muttered, the scribe scribbled, the mutter ceased.

The secretary handed over the set of tablets on whose wax-inlaid inner surfaces he had made his notations. They were well-made tab-

lets, of precious wood and inset in mother-of-pearl with a rather beautiful picture of Ganymede bearing the cup. Where had this been crafted? Not in Averno. How came it there? Avernians were not known to fancy beauty. He opened the small wooden sheets; inside, on the scented wax (did it serve to refresh the sense of smell, in Averno so much-abused?) were written a number of names.

"One of these may have use for you," was what the secretary said. And that was all the secretary said. Was it for merely this that Vergil had come here?—Had so (he thought) smoothly and with polite intimation made mention of the fact that "from Sevilla to Averno was a rather far journey and that many things have been learned on such journeys"? And . . . for that matter . . . was it for such curt congees, dismissals, even from an audience consisting of a barbarian in a bath, that he had himself made those long journeys? From Brundusium to Athens, Athens to Brundusium, Brundusium to Naples, Naples to this place, to that place and thence to Sevilla, and so, eventually *here?* In Averno? No, but then, for what purpose *had* he made them? In order to attain mastery over many things, and the first of these had been his own self and soul and pride and patience; and over them, well. And then, too, to what purpose all those dreams? Things were seldom simple; this was no exception.

Vergil expressed his thanks, neither magnate nor man made a reply, and he was left with nothing to do but follow the same slave who had led him in . . . still dilatory, still sullen, and still with the cast in one eye. The door in the gate closed swiftly behind the parting guest. For all Vergil's pains, what were his gains? The tablets. "And I am lucky the fellow did not snatch them back," he said ruefully. He had felt his cloak catch in the gate, so swiftly closed it shut; now he turned to tug it loose, hoping it was neither so fast-snared that he must needs either knock once more to be released or else cut it loose and spoil the cloak and perhaps also make him a figure of mockery to the mob; but it had in fact been caught so slightly that the mere movement as he turned had got it free.

The tablets, worth no small sum even had the wax been smooth and blank, the tablets had yet some message graved upon them doubtless more worth than the precious covers. Vergil had indeed begun to extract his own set (of sturdy, worn-smoothed boxwood bearing no other design than monogram or rune-sign formed by the

V and *M* woven each through the other) and stylus to copy the notations, but the magnate's secretary, with a gesture of hand and an expression of mouth had indicated he was to keep the ones handed him, a gesture so curt and an expression so scornful as to make the recipient of the gift wish to throw it back in the giver's face.

And now he stood with it in hand, and with nought else in hand, outside the giver's gate, and in the street again.

"Thankful to see you safe, sir," said Iohan, and indeed he did look thankful; and even the mare nuzzled him briefly, as though thankful herself.

A sort of heavier twilight had settled over everything. Westward, a delayed and brighter light, dull-red glowering through dull gray haze, showed what to the rest of the world was still the undying and unconquerable sun. Sulfurous smell, mixed with the stink of rotting indigo and the thick reek of tanyards and the fetor of putrescent fat and flesh clinging to the blue-green undersides of sheep fells at the wool-pulleries, all mingled in the haze and fume; this, then, was the "sweet breeze of Averno," a phrase muttered elsewhere when a public urinal or cloaca gave evidence of badly needing cleaning. But the thump-thud of hammers and mallets beating all about did not slow down in the slightest, nor did traffic slacken in the street; only the torch-lighter passed by, bundle of tarry sticks under one arm and lighted link in one hand. He set in a stick wherever a holder hung on a wall, set it afire, and passed on—all this in a half-trot. As he showed no sign of swerving, the two newcomers drew back. "He might have run us down, else," said Iohan, half in anger, half in wonder.

"Yes . . . they all might . . . may. . . . We must find an inn."

But something else happened to intervene before they found one.

Somewhat *(some*what?) belatedly, the City's Official Orator and a very youthful assistant—like a great-nephew learning the trade (if not, by present tokens, learning it well)—appeared, to offer the only semblance of a civic welcome which, Vergil felt, he was likely to get: the Orator, in a fusty purple robe, local weave and local dye for sure, doing his best to read an official welcome and amend it ad-lib . . . as it had never been intended for sage or mage . . . and the lad at his side shifting from hand to hand, whenever he desired to scratch his pubescent crotch, the hand-brazier indeed full (well, partly full)

of glowing charcoal on which it was intended someone should from time to time strew incense. But no one performed the role of "someone," the lad gaped when he was not scratching, the Orator waved his free hand as he skipped not too smoothly over words intended to be laudatory of Vergil's (nonexistent) military conquests and waved his free hand (not always the same hand, as sometimes he endeavored to pound the stripling on the pate, perhaps to discourage open and notorious crotch-scratching) to indicate he would delineate more particularly the details of "the most learned and honored visitor," his learning and his honor, if only he had more than a hasty toehold on the matter. Suddenly Vergil to his vast, and then his less than vast, surprise, heard the words *"Master in Philosophy, Master in Arts Magical, Adept of the First Three Grades at Grammarie, Passed Master on the Astrolabe; Astrologue, West of Corinth* and *Astrologue, East of Corinth*—at which time he perceived, firstly, that someone had slipped, not a spoon of olibanum onto the charcoal, but a piece of papyrus into the Orator's hand, which the Orator did not entirely successfully succeed in concealing behind the tattered and greasy official scroll of welcome; and, secondly, exactly *who* it was who had done so: a man with a light sparse beard and with rather prominent front teeth.

Though this time he wore no striped robe, but tunic and hose of solid hue.

—And all this while and, he, Vergil, now stopped his thoughts full stop and harked him back a ways, and yet a ways, and yet a ways beyond that, and all this while and he could not say for how long a while, save that it was and had been long. He now bethought him that he had heard at all times, now near, now far, not alone the incessant poundings of the forge-hammers and the fulling-mallets; he had heard in addition the endless cries of this as of all cities; but gradually now and at last swiftly it seemed to him that all the while he had heard also music, and not the formal strains of some solemn hymn processional nor the like of shrine or temple—gay, brash, Dionysic, now dim, now clear; he had declined to think on it.

Now, for one long moment (he could not say how long a moment), he had thought on nothing else.

His mind, stopped short, like the passage of a dog on a chain, was caught off-balance; soon enough it recovered. Where was the oddly

knowing fellow who—? He was nowhere to be seen, was where? What was to be seen were the Civic Orator and assistant-boy, the small crowd that had collected, and on every face a meaning that Vergil required no divination to grasp. The small crowd, sensing it was time, set up a rusty growl of *"Boons! Boons! Boons!"* such as he had heard before, but now and here they were accompanied by no pretenses, no mention of *Lord,* "great," or otherwise: nothing. A demand it was, no more. So Vergil slipped a piece of silver swiftly into one of the Orator's hands (who, doubtless desiring to have both hands free, had already slipped his scroll into the presently free hand of his boy, who was now unable to scratch at all), and into the other a handful of birdies. Orator, with a few feints indicating in which direction he intended the distribution to be thrown, the crowd gathered thither—the Orator threw and, with a nod and a word of thanks, got him thence at no slow crawl. The crowd uglied each other as they sprawled and grappled for the small coins, and the few who muttered anything to Vergil muttered nothing kind. Had he given more, more they had demanded; had he given much, they had rabbled him for all.

He mounted the mare. The sight of him on horseback seemed to end the matter for the crowd, which at once ceased to be a crowd at all. "And I had to kick one away," said Iohan, "for that he'd growed some extra little hands and was groping by the saddlebags, and a other I believe Prima woulda trod upon, but fall away so fast he did."

Vergil nodded. He had been about to say something, some while back. No. He had said it. What was it? He knew only when he heard himself saying it again.

"We must find an inn."

And, whilst the boy was in the stable attending to the mare, there in the taproom, someone else was found. "Ah," said Vergil softly. "So here you are."

"Yes, Master Vergil. The wine is better here."

The wine is better here. Of what did this at once remind him, other than that the wine had been the common wine of poor folk's daily diet? . . . Where last (and first) they'd sipped . . . for remind him of something else at once, most certainly it did. As though a pole

were thrust into a murky pool and touched some . . . something . . . which had by the mere touch been shifted; little would one's sense of what it might be be conveyed through the gross medium of the pole; and yet . . . and yet . . . *The wine is better here.* That is, better than *there.* What was there about the wine there which . . . *No.* Here *or* there. The wine. Warmed in a crude hot-water bath, over a small charcoal brazier. Bath. *Bath.* A voice in his ear said, *Wash.*

Wash! the voice had said.

But there was no one at his ear.

There had *been* no one at his ear.

Here.

Or there.

So it had not happened. So it was yet to happen.

As Iohan would have put it: *Therefore*—one could only wait for it to happen.

"The wine is better here," the man said, but said it with no hint that it was much better, here. "It would have to be. *There,* one may at least now and then stroll a few paces and look at the Bay. No matter how wretched one's life, how hard one's work, *there,* surely one may steal a moment now and then and see the Bay. Here one may only drink." He drank. "And work."

Vergil felt no need to wonder which the man did most.

An inn, almost by definition, is mostly for the convenience of travelers, which is to say . . . usually . . . people from elsewhere. Avernians, having doubtless their own taverns and wineshops, evidently did not much patronize this particular inn; and although the man sitting across the table spoke with distinct traces of the thick local accent, he did not in any other way resemble the mass of local people whom Vergil had seen about in the streets, or, for that matter, elsewhere. Perhaps the man had read this in his mind or perhaps Vergil's thoughts had been as clearly written on his face as by a style upon wax. Or even perhaps all this had happened to the man before, and he was thus able to anticipate questions unasked simply because they had been asked so often before that he knew they would be asked again. And when.

"There is little old blood in Averno," he said; "but to the extent there is, I am of it. My father thought me puny, and yet I lived."

Saying this, he shrugged. "More than one warlock or practitioner of divination in its various forms has offered to discern how long I shall continue to, but I have declined. I have been afraid. Of what?" He shrugged. "Of being perhaps told that my life will be long. To live in Averno, *old?* Horrible!" He shuddered, and he shook his head.

"Old people seem rather scarce here," Vergil murmured.

"Children are scarcer. Well! But we are very rich. And rich men may buy that which is beautiful even if they themselves are ugly, and among that which is beautiful which such men sometimes buy are beautiful women. They do not particularly buy beautiful men, even those some who favor men for partners in that act which has been called *love.* No, slaves fetched here are fetched for brawn. Endurance. Do you know what the foreman in any workplace here is called? Not the overseer or the manager or the captain, as in other places. No, he is called the Big Slave, even if he is not particular big or even if he is not a slave. Usually, though, he is both. Sometimes he is ugly, sometimes not, this is of no importance, it is important that he have a broad back and large arms and know well the work and be indefatigable in carrying it out. Well, it fairly frequently happens that such a man is freed by his master and adopted by his master (who, recall, will usually be childless). Though now and then one knows of a master, magnate or not, who has bothered both to take a wife and maintain her elsewhere. So he will have had his children there, if he has children, and sometimes they come back when they are grown, and—"

There was an interruption. Men drinking and talking at another table raised their voices. "Cadmus is king!" said one.

"King of fools . . ."

"King. He is king."

"King of mud."

"King of mud or king of gold: king."

"King of shit—"

I have heard those words before; where?—

Before Vergil could recollect where, the first man, half-rising, struck the other down. And down he stayed. In a moment the talk and babble resumed, no one paying the matter any further attention. If the fallen one was living or dead, dead drunk, or only stunned,

Vergil did not observe, as he had fallen into the shadows cast by the small and flickering lamps.

"—and take up the trade, whichever trade it be. And sometimes they put it into the hands of the Big Slave. And sometimes, of course, they find it simpler to sell the works. And who buys it, generally? Another Big Slave, past or present. White or Black. So most of the magnates who govern this colony of hell have themselves been slaves. And of those who have spent a generation, at least, toiling at the stinking forge or the stinking dye-pots or the stinking tan-vats, one need not, must not, expect a great measure of delicacy. You will take this into account when you make your calls."

Vergil said, "I have already made one call. One whom you mentioned—the only one whom you mentioned, the dyer Haddadius—says he has no need for such things wherein lie my skills."

Two tables over someone, by his looks an Avernian, grunted and spread his legs and lifted his tunic and made water on the floor. No one gave it any notice. No one attempted to remedy the matter by emptying bucket or jug.

"So said Haddadius? So. No doubt he had his reasons, he—"

Things were being pounded on the surface of another table: fists, mugs, dice-boxes, providing some arrhythmic accompaniment to the constant thuddings from the fire-fields. Vergil waited till the noise had somewhat abated. "And you, sir, no doubt have yours." He perceived a degree of glaze upon the other's eyes, was it drink alone? He had seen a one rather alike it on the eyes of bridegrooms; others, still akin, on the eyes of those who have been to uncheerful physicians. He spoke on. "What may your reasons have been, to send . . . or bring . . . me here by the methods which you have used . . . you alone? others? you and others? . . . methods, which, by the way, imply a measure of the same skills. . . . Eh? Why?"

A woman then passed by, stopped, stroked Vergil's head once, twice, said, "How pale your face. How black your hair and beard." He had begun, slowly, to look up, to extend his hand—too slowly. Some rough voice from another table hailed her, Vergil felt no more than his hand touch the edge of her sleeve as she moved away. He looked back to his host, who shrugged without ceasing to drink, then said, "Why? Well, in part to pique your interest. Was it piqued? Oh. so. And in part . . . well, had it been simply suggested that you

come here because a contract might be obtainable, would you, considering the place and its repute? Probably not, I think. So—"

Of a sudden the heavy doors were flung open and a man, a young man, who seemed far too slight to have done this, came in. He came in dancing, dancing he came in, and singing and clapping his hands, and he had small bells upon his hands and he had a crown upon his head. All rose and bowed. Despite the shock of the novel scene Vergil was able to concentrate attention upon the singing—it could not really have been called a song—but though now and then he made out words, and even, less often, sentences, the words together, even such of them as were not gibberish, made no sense. There was no coherency to them. There—

Vergil put his mouth close to the ear of the other man at his table. *"Who?"*

"That is Cadmus."

"Who is he?"

"He is king."

"King of Averno. King of here."

The King of Averno, whoever he might really be, he so called, suddenly took hold of one of the posts that supported the roof of the taphouse and began to swing about it as he sang; he slipped, staggered, ceased not to sing, but the crown had been jarred from his head and fell, and Vergil caught it. In a moment it was taken from his hands, and, still singing and dancing, jinging and ringing, Cadmus went away. Leaving some thoughts ringing, at least, in Vergil's mind. King. Well. They were indeed in the Very Great Empire of Rome, and an emperor is by definition a king over kings; indeed, the Greeks had yet not formed a word for "emperor" and called the supreme ruler, still, *basil,* king, prefaced and followed of course by very many appellations. There were, it went for granted, kings with the Empery; some by treaty of annexation (a politer name for surrender), some by Imperial creation; seven kings elected the Emperor himself. And there were, going to the other extreme and passing by such as titular kings who, whilst living within the Empire, bore the titles of kingdoms outside of it, and passing over such as (not often) bore the curious and singular title of King Without Country, the traveling tribes of tinkers who had their kings. In more than one place was here one and there one who was called King of the Woods

and taught by night beneath the great oaks such things as were never taught by light beneath the colonnade of the stoa. And there was of course in almost every city and town and at least once a year one who was acclaimed and called the King of Fools at the Feast of Fools (or, alternately, at the Feast of Unreason, the King of Unreason; in one or two, the Mad Feast and the Mad King), when much license was allowed—slaves free from fixed task, students wearing proctors' gowns, prentice-boys a-playing the master . . . so on. If such feast, however named, was in season here, it might well be named the Mad Feast, for certainly if Cadmus was not mad; it was a most effective pretense, that.

The mood in the tavern, which had been lighter by far than before the Fool King's coming, lapsed now again into the previous one of either raucous noise or sullen stupor. Gazing now into his own drink, Vergil said, "Those were not real jewels."

"What, not? Assuredly they were real jewels. It is a real crown. He is a real king. He visited the Sicilian Sibyl and she told his fate. He was proclaimed and he was crowned." So said the young Avernian. Vergil began to feel a slight bit in liquor. He gazed into his cup, and there he saw the face of Cadmus. The face of Cadmus was dark, but his eyes were light . . . so light, in fact, that almost one might have thought him blind, which he was not. But Vergil had for one full moment, as Cadmus took swiftly back his crown, gazed into those eyes: and although the eyes were light, the eyes had no light in them. "But," said Vergil, "surely he is mad."

"Assuredly he is mad," said the other. "A man may be mad and may be king." He drank again.

And drank again.

Later. Lurching slightly, into each other, as they walked the stinking streets preceded by a surly link-bearer—for not every sullen alley was graced by street-torches in fixtures—provided by the tavern for a fee, which, however small, was yet not so small as the fee he himself would get; and who much preferred, and let this be well known, to have sat in his kennel tossing down the heel-taps which the tapster collected for him on the dog-lick-dog principle. "This is not the night of the night market," said Vergil's companion. "And, truly, it is not a very interesting night market, anyway. No wonderful things are sold

there, though often one wonders, next day, how one could have bought them. . . . Stop!" He stopped Vergil easily enough, but the troll with the torch affected not to hear, and stumped on. "Stop, you turd!"—this, high-pitched in a sudden drunken rage—"Shall I have you *flogged,* you sow-sucking son of a serf?"

The question, rhetorical or not, brought the link-man not merely to a halt, but, in a moment, brought him, slowly, back. He hadn't heard master clearly. Them forges had fair foxed his ears this lustrum past. He hoped master wouldn't— "Stop right there," said master. "Don't move, even if the fire burns your filthy fingers. Till I say so." Then he turned to Vergil. Gestured. "Behind those doors there is the shop of our famous blind jeweler. Have you heard of our famous blind jeweler? Have not heard. I'll tell. He comes from Agysimba or Golconda or some such damnably distant place with *a-g* in its name. And he can tell by smell what jewels are what. *Which.* Tomorrow, if you like, we will call upon him. Make him show.—But some say he tells by touch, really, and his talk of scent is but a play. *Morrow?"*

A thought struck Vergil like a soft, swift blow. "But let us pause a moment *now* and see this marvel . . . if we may."

The Avernian teetered back and forth as though either he had not heard, or was considering the matter. Suddenly started, said at once, " 'May.' To be sure. If you wish it, it is not *may* but *must."* So saying, he began to beat upon the door; at once to see the (momentarily) servile-stooping thrall commence to kick it and to hullow.

Vergil, in wine, and deeper in than he fully realized, burst forth of a sudden, "Am I to continue thus civil and elliptical and all but uninformed? You who first moved to move me here? Can you say nothing? Am I forever to go on creeping from door to door, like a beggar seeking boon and dole?"

At the exact moment his outburst ceased, one half of the upper half of the door (they were not notably trusting in Averno) was opened; there stood a man with a lamp in his hand and in the other he held a polished plate to magnify and reflect the light. "Come now, Messer Armin," said this one, "is all this clamor and commotion needed? Will not morning—"

Armin (at last! the man's *name!* Vergil had had a sort of shyness in asking to begin with, and then the longer the time had passed with-

out his being told it . . . ah well: "Armin." So.), if he did not at once become sober, at once became the image of sobriety. "We are honored by a learned visitor," he began. Hardly had he begun when the man at the door, giving the learned and distinguished visitor one keen look, made a certain sign; Vergil returned it; the door at once was unbolted even whilst Armin went on saying, ". . . who wishes to see your famous uncle at his mysterious work . . ." Armin suddenly stopped, said quite soberly, "If he *is* at work now, that is. I wouldn't wish to disturb—"

Nephew, dark and wrapped in white, replied, "He is at work. Day or dark or dim, it is all the same to him. Come." The door bolted behind them. A several few more doors were unlocked and locked before they came at last to a chamber, unlighted till they entered it, wherein an old, very old man, also wrapped in white, with sunken sightless eyes, sat upon a stool, fingers moving from one to another of a series of boxes. . . . The light and reflector coming a bit nearer, the contents of the boxes began to sparkle and to glow. Some rainbow had emptied itself.

Without much moving his head, the old man said, "These are none of them of quite first-chop quality." An odd and singsong style of speech had he. Continually he moved his fingers to his nose. And while the nephew was saying "They were not paid for at first-chop prices, Uncle," Vergil moved forward and placed his hands, open-palmed, before the blind man's face. Who, ceasing the movements of his fingers a moment, murmured, "Beryls, emeralds, a star ruby large . . . and . . . three diamonds, small ones, I should say, though good, quite good. . . ."

Armin, all eyes at the work of sorting the jewel-stones, and at the show of the sparkles themselves, seemed to have heard nor seen nothing of this brief scene. Visitor learned and distinguished, and nephew, exchanged glances. Nephew gestured a diadem round about his head. Visitor gestured yes. Nephew gestured silence. Visitor gestured assent.

After a moment more, visitor said, "I am quite convinced."

Armin blinked, tugged his glance away and over. "You see. Wonderful. Well. Thank you, merchants, we would stay longer, save it is quite late."

"How regrettable; still, I must yield," the nephew murmured. In a

few moments the doors and their lockings and unlockings lay behind them; and before, the street.

Often Vergil was to ponder, does a true king of fools wear a crown of true jewels? He could find not one reason to say *yes;* when he said *no,* upon the heels of that answer came yet another question, equally brief: *why?*

It was long and long till answer came to him.

Vergil paced up and down his private room, charts here and lists there. He had no need of globes, and had he, there were (back in his place in the port) only small ones. Automatically, as this thought recurred, came the dream. Someday I shall have one as large, quite as large, as that of Crates of Miletus . . . *if not larger!* . . . But this, as other dreams, went fading away. It was preposterous—was it not? Was it not absurd?—it was! It had been so simple, though he had not then considered it so simple: Aurelio had come to him and said, "Master Vergil, if so be your rules and practice don't forbid you should work for a freedman, I should like to ask you, Master Vergil: Will you build me a house?"

Here he seemed under the control of a severalty of freedmen. Nothing was simple, no one condescended to him, few were even barely civil, he scarcely knew what it was that was wanted, or what the chances were of accomplishing even what he thought might be wanted . . . or, at any rate, what might be done. Could be done. Might be. *Might. If* . . .

He might build for them an aqueduct, an eighth wonder of the world, through which might run hot water instead of cold. *Might.* Did, really, the magnates want him to study such things as the flow, the times, the force, of the up-gush of the steamy jets and gusts? Or did they want, and only want, some way to bribe . . . or did they, even, think: *trick?* . . . "The good gods of hell" . . . Were they as scholars who truly wanted to learn *how* a thing be done, that they might do it *(might)?* or were they as those who desired only that others do a thing, that they themselves receive a benefit? Regardless of *how* . . . could . . . would . . . might. *Might.*

That night the king could not sleep. These words Vergil clearly recalled having read somewhere, in a text whose Greek was a bit

different from the usual; he recalled, too, having had reason to believe it to have been a translation, but no more did he remember.

That night the madman whom populace and magnates alike together had declared to be their king danced and chanted as he danced in the mud and muck of the mule market, and danced with golden armils; and danced as never had Vergil seen man dance before. And the harlots of the place and the (supposedly) chastest matrons did not hold back from dancing with him when he mimed and beckoned them to do so.

"This is life, Master Vergil!" A voice, Armin's voice, spoke, so near his neck he could feel the warmth of the breath. White slaves and black held links and torches to enlighten the scene, magnates black and magnates white shook the sistrum, and the shrill chittering of the instrument, elsewhere sounded only for some sacred ceremony, and the shriller piping of the rude reed flutes seemed to send shocks through Vergil's limbs and joints, urging him on to join the insane dance. But he felt he somehow must not, he thought of Ulysses bound to the mast whilst the sirens sang (and what song had the sirens sung? was it beyond conjecture? was it not, must it not have been, much like this? who knew but what the sirens might have danced as well . . . as well as sung . . .): no, no: he must not dance.

Shut his eyes, he might, shut his ears he could not do; he did what he might and therefore shut his eyes, conjectured vision of things other. Clouds floated past mountains, and the dark trees raked them as the spikes of teasels combing fleeces of white wool, and—

"Life! Life!" the voice in his ear. "The Emperor may tax, and build ships and roads and wage war and make peace and mint coins and be carried in a litter from one palace or one temple to another; can he dance like this? Eh?"

"No."

The answer gave, evidently, great satisfaction. "Then we need him not! For what? Not! Away with him, and off with his—" The last word was not heard, perhaps was not uttered; Armin with a great shout tore off his outer robe (it was crimson, and woven with a pattern of stars and flowers in gold and white and in an off-white), which fell at once into the thick mire and stench of the market ground, and Armin leapt forward, and snapping his fingers and

prancing high, he advanced before the king and took a hand of the woman dancing with the king and took the hand of the king and they danced, and they all danced and the tambours beat. The sistrum chittered and the reed flute shrilled and the tambours beat. And the tambours beat.

But Vergil very slowly withdrew. He had tried to think of other things, and, in much measure, he had. Consider the powers of the winds. What were winds but airs in motions, might not the very airs be harnessed? What was sailing, else? Molded? Might one not make a mill empowered by air? Might one not make a bridge of air? A wall? He cast his thoughts abroad into the fetid nightlike sounds; echo answered: *might.* Vergil very slowly withdrew and clum a flight of stairs and went along an upper colonnade away. This *(these,* for they proceeded quite a ways) system of walkways was not deserted, late though was the hour, but all who were there were leaning over the balustrade and looking, singing, shouting, clapping with their hands a distinctive rhythm; no one noticed one who walked slowly along and away.

In his room. "This is madness. To assume a royal title without Imperial permission, this is treason. Cadmus is mad, this is no thing new; but now half the city seems mad as well."

"Yes."

Vergil turned; he saw Armin stepping through the low window that he had just now opened for a last breath of (what locally passed for) air—he saw the same man who had not a half a sandglass ago gone leaping out to dance insanely. Armin looked nothing as he said one syllable, that *yes,* then he grinned, and it was neither a madman's grin nor was it nothing. Vergil could not really bring himself to grin, nor even smile, but somewhat he relaxed. And, almost, he smiled. "Well, my guest, how may I serve?"

His guest muttered, "I should have sate upon the sill, and not . . . How serve? With water to wash my filthy feet. You need not—I hasten—think I mean you to wash them yourself, neither ought you, really, to call a servant, for they are surely by now all a-dancing in the mule market; may I take your consent for me to pour myself water?—this time I *shall* sit upon the sill!" He stooped, ladled, poured. His face puckered. "Hercules! Me Herc, how it stinks! No mud and no stench like the mud of our mule market . . . and then

. . . I do presume, but . . . and then I should be grateful for something to toss over my tunicle, for my garment I did not truly care to retrieve."

Vergil tossed him a robe of local cut (a gift, one among many), and Armin caught it and threw it on. "Why did you dance there, then?" asked Vergil.

The two men gazed calmly at each other. They were of an age, about, and of a weight, about; save that Vergil was thick in the chest and slender in the legs and narrow in the loins. The other's form was more of a symmetry, more equal in proportions. Outside in the colonnade a cresset flared, then dwindled. No one was there to replace it, but a few lamps burned in the room, and the room was not much dimmer now than in the daylight once the shutters were closed, for no thin-pared panels of horn, none of lucent shell nor of oiled cloth pierced their solid panels. Vergil: "Why?"

Armin scarce shrugged one shoulder, scarce twisted one side of his mouth. "Because it amused me. Ah, me Herc! How it amused me! That is why I, too, hallooed loud *Long Live King Cadmus!* when they set the crown upon his curls. Nor did he disappoint me, that one. He has put bright tappeties—'tapestries,' you call them—hanging on our black walls, and flung bright garlands round the necks of our black horses. And—you saw, you heard!—there in the open place where the black mules spilled their black piss and passed their black dung, he danced! Me Herc, me Hercules! how he danced! What will you tell them when you go to Rome?"

The swift transition did not catch Vergil unprepared. He stroked his short beard, and, as it, too, was black, he wondered (passing-swift and wry the thought!) how it would look offset with flowers. "I? I do not go to Rome," he said.

Armin looked at him, head a-cant, eye a-slant. "Ah? No? But, you know, you know . . . Rome may come to you," said he.

But though long later men were to speak both of what they called, fearfully and darkly, *The Death of Rome* (some said, one man; some said, three men; none could agree on the names of any), and to speak, brightly and cheerfully *(some* men, at any rate) of what they called *The Salvation of Rome,* describing this as a series of mirrors in or through which the Emperor might see, and in good time, the

advance of any army of rebels or of alien invaders—that morning, that is, the morning next, Vergil for one saw in no mirror any sign or signs of Rome advancing toward him.

So he looked into his tablets to see what names the secretary of Haddadius had at his master's whisper engraved therein.

The first name on the list was that of M. Cnaeus Grobi, and at that magnate's gate the door was not even opened for Vergil at all, merely a slat slid back to disclose a peephole behind it (Grobi, it seemed, was even less trusting than the nephew of the blind jeweler!), and through this an eye looked at him. Vergil stated his purpose, the eye did not blink and the door did not move; he showed his tablets with their inscribed list, the eye moved a bit, and then the eye went away. Dignity be damned! Thus thinking, Vergil applied his own eye to the peephole's other side: naught he saw but some screen or buffer standing or hanging back a way . . . not much farther back, he thought, than to allow a man to stand between it and the gate. No more he saw; did he hear more? . . . more than the usual clamor from the nasty street at the lane's end? He heard something like a growl from deep within what might be the chest of a rather large dog. Sign, *Cave canem,* there was none; who came upon the canine came without having been forewarned, such warning being evidently here at least regarded as an indulgence not the least necessary. But, by and by, Vergil, having withdrawn his eye (he had applied it very briefly), by and by there came the sound of slow and heavy steps, and the sound of slow and heavy breathing. . . . *I should like, at least for a moment, to listen closely to those lungs* (thought Vergil) *and to inform their owner what said Hippocrates and what said Galen and what said such a one and such a one: and to advise him* . . . and then an eye again looked out at him through the chink in the door.

It was not the same eye.

The heavy breathing continued a moment, the slat slid shut, the heavy footsteps departed. Vergil waited and he paced, and he paced and he waited; but there was no further response from behind the heavy dark door (it seemed, though, that perhaps the dog behind its wall paced him on his side step for step), and presently he went away. *Those lungs shall not long continue to labor breathing this thick, foul air,* he thought. But he thought this without malice, and without particular pleasure. And he thought, too, that if this was the

way one was treated in The Very Rich City, he might another time prefer to hazard his chances in silted-up Parva Porta, so proverbial for poverty; where, it was said, pigeon soup was made by boiling pigeon feathers, and the very dogs were so weak that they had to lean against the trees to bark.

Trees! He saw none here at all.

The doors, however, of the house of Lars Melanchthus opened wide enough, and wide they must needs open if Lars Melanchthus himself had to pass through, for Lars Melanchthus was a wide man indeed. "Ho, you are a wizard!" said he. "You are a wizard. You are a wizard?"

"Yes, Magnate." Clearly this was no time to ask if they should first define their terms. Nor, for that matter, had Socrates had to define the bowl of hemlock.

"Ho," said Lars Melanchthus. He gazed at Vergil with large and reddened eyes. The eyes seemed respectful. But they also seemed to hold a look of what might be called shrewdness. Particularly by Lars Melanchthus. Who now looked round about his table, then picked up one of those jointed figures of a skeleton, made of ebony and ivory, which were usually passed around the banquet-board after the finger bowl as a memento of man's mortality. First he picked it up, then he set it down, well away from the reach of Vergil's hands. "So, Wizard. Make it dance. Make it dance, Wizard, so."

Was it for *this—?*

Vergil made it dance. He made it caper, tread on its toes, he made it fling its arms up, and he made it dance the classic dance of Attic grace. Magnate Melanchthus was delighted, clapped his huge hands, summoned sundry members of his household, gestured them to look at the jiggling anatomy, and joined in their amusement. And when, after a while, the dance of death slowed and the skeleton sank down and lay at full length in repose, the magnate announced his own conclusion. "Yes," he said. "You are a wizard. Oh yes! Yes."

The wizard bowed. In what audience of what school of enchantment the magnate had discovered this singular, though simple, test of wizardhood, Vergil would have liked to ask, but he forbore. Melanchthus snapped his fingers, gestured. The magnate's butler approached and handed Vergil a new robe and a single coin. A silver

ducat. "Those are for you," said Lars Melanchthus. "For *you,* for *you.* So. Thank you."

"On the contrary, Magnate, it is really for me to thank *you.*"

"Yes," said the magnate. He nodded his acknowledgment, looked all around, gathered the nods of others. Then he said, "All right to go now, Wizard."

And the wizard went.

Was it for this—?

Someone had told him this: that, traditionally, and where circumstance permitted, in the sundry workplaces among the fire-fields of Averno, the day's work began with the Big Slave, be he owner or the chief workman, tossing a red coal at, seemingly, nowhere in particular; there followed a sound like a gasp (so it was described in the account), followed by a jet of fire. The Big Slave had known whereat he tossed, and his red coal had found some fumarole whose foul breath was no merely foul breath, but inflammable air, called *gas.*

It was not that Vergil would not have wished to see this happening (vaguely he recalled having heard that somewhere this was involved with a lump of incense: surely not here!), and see it happen he might yet: but not here, now, yet; the day's work had long ago begun, and, by the sound, was in no way slackening. At the home (which he had next sought) of a listed magnate, they had without either civility or incivility sent him with some young house-thrall as guide through a long lane into the open area where, for the first time clear, he beheld the fire-fields being worked. He stood for a while merely looking, thinking, appraising, calculating. When he looked for his guide to ask a question, the guide was gone.

Vergil shrugged. He would ask another one, then: this one coming up with an armful of iron rods.

"Magnate Boso?" The man bobbed his polled, scarred head at an angle, said, "Two-bib"; passed along. The syllables, immediately, made no sense. Only sight made sense of them. There, following the angle of the canted head, at one of many forges: two men, one holding with tongs the white-hot bar, one the hammer. This last was naked save for his thick sandals and his leather apron; the other wore a leather apron behind, as well. The odor of body sweat and singed body hair was very strong. He who held the softened iron continually

turned it, and continually said he, *"Strike! . . . Strike! . . . Strike! . . ."* With each command, down came the hammer: at each blow, the softened iron splayed wider; was, at the next blow—

But he who held the iron in the tongs did not call for, by and by, a next blow; instead he did not even turn the bar: merely, he looked at it. Yet the striker, catching sight of Vergil, did not catch lack of command. Down his hammer came, too late he tried to stop himself; in the process was caught off balance, fell against the fire-hot forge, swerved back, screamed, managed to bring the hammer down to the ground and to lean upon it. There would be another scar, by and by. His breath sobbed. Yet it was not at his seared flesh that he looked. He looked at the smith.

Who said, "Bugger. Punk. Son of a sow. The Big says, *Strike,* you strike. The Big don't say *Strike,* you don't strike. Sometime the iron got to rest, even just a little, from the taste of the fire. And sometime the fire got to rest, too, even just a little, from the taste of the iron. Sometime even the smith, Big or other, got to rest, even just a little. And sometime the striker, too. Pig's pizzle. Whistle-brain. You want taste more fire? You want take rest with the iron up your— *What you look?"*

For the striker, despite dismay, despite pain, despite even fear, had let his eyes wander to the source of his miscalculation. And the eyes of the smith, first, next his head, last his entire upper body, turned, and so for the first time he saw Vergil standing there. How level was his gaze, the smith's. How cold (in all these heats) his look. How deep, yet deeply contained, the scorn. As if to ask, "How dared you come here? Who are you? I care not." Vergil said no word. A sudden start, a movement swift, well-trained body (well trained for *this)* sensing a change in temperature which no else could sense, the smith swerved back to the forge, spat upon the bar up by the forge, drew from the very steam and vapor to which the spittle had in an instance turned, the knowledge which now made him cry, "Meherc! Miscarried monstrel! Too cold, now! *Too cold!"*

Before the smith had finished words, Vergil had, so swift, opened his pouch and taken from it a short length of wood of the thickness (and somewhat the shape, for fully symmetrical it was not) of his index finger, and of perhaps twice that length (and still from every forge the heats and smokes arose, the air was thick and murk); he

twisted it, let some small part drop back, and saying calmly, clearly, "Ash . . . Ash . . . *Aysh* . . . *Aysh* . . ." he leaned forward, his other hand closing his garments tighter to his body, and blew once, twice, thrice, toward the bar in the tongs. This had been ashen, next dull red, next it whitened, next it rippled with many colors, next—

The smith's hands tightened on the tongs, he gave them the slightest of turns. *"Strike!"*

And the striker seized his hammer and with all full-measured strength he struck.

"Done," said the smith. And drew the bar back once more.

Then he turned, sweeping his arm across his brow, to Vergil, who, with a movement too calculated to be called haste, had replaced the hollow rod. The smith asked, "Fellow, where you learned fire?"

"In Sidon, me ser." Only after having said it did he bethink him he had answered in the tongue of Sidon. *And from this place to that place . . .*

"You be the mage we—?"

"Yes, Magnate."

Boso cupped his huge hands around his huge mouth, shouted something. Waited. One would not have said that any voice could have carried over the noise and clamor of those forges; and this one needed not, for its burden was taken up and passed along. Very soon indeed a figure appeared through the murk and haze. "Go thither, Wise One," said Boso, still in Sidonian. "To him, to him, to that one; he will prepare for you, and I shall come . . . I shall come . . ." He gazed around and all about his works, his words fallen, stopped. Almost Vergil felt that the man would have wished to have been at every single forge at once. The face returned to look at him. Quite gone that freezing, contained scorn of short moments before. "I shall come presently." He strode away to another forge, where even then the smith had taken one short step backward and seemed, though slightly, to totter. The magnate seized from him the tongs and turned the iron . . . not much did he turn the iron, almost plastic in the smolder, but then he would know, as any master smith must know, just how much to turn it; and *"Strike!"* he cried.

As Vergil followed the one figure designated to "prepare" for him, ever behind him he heard that voice, heard indeed other voices from and at all other forges: *"Strike! . . . Strike! . . . Strike! . . ."*

And, after all, presently he did come, both "bibs" flapping. To Vergil he gestured an obeisance, omitted at their first meeting, one which the guest had seen before, though not locally: Brosa stooped, but did not stoop low, he dropped his hand, but did not drop it far; he brought it up toward the top of his head, but he did not bring it up to the top of his head—and all this very fast. He had, in effect, bowed to the ground and gathered up its dust and strewn it upon his poll. In fact, of course, he had done nothing of the sort. And whilst doing (and not doing) all this, he growled something that was clearly intended to be a respectful greeting, though certainly not intended to be a prolix one.

And the while he stole a glance at Vergil's pouch.

But of what he thought might be in it, and of what he knew was certainly in it, of this he said no word.

Then he addressed himself to the meats upon the table. By and by, his mouth only partly filled, he said, "This a very rich city."

"Indeed, Magnate."

"It been richer."

"Indeed, Master?"

"Could be *richer,* could richer *be,* than ever was. But how?"

"Indeed. Magnate."

Magnate Boso poured into his goblet a draft of something thick and dark, poured on top of that something thin and light, swirled the goblet, once, twice, raised, and in an instant drained it, set it down. "Rich. Richer. Very rich. Riches." Barely he paused, he looked at Vergil from beneath his hedge-thick eyebrows. *"Interested?"*

The possibility of gaining, and gaining swift and soon, the means of supplying all he ever had desired to supply for that place, as yet set no place, which his dreams termed *home,* lit up Vergil's mind. And in the light, like the brief and fitful shimmer of a sheet of heat-lighting, something else he saw there illuminated as well.

At the Secret Sacred School, filing past Putto, the obscenely fat, who stood with a large and sagging sack in each swollen paw. Every student, by instruction (and one did not dally in obeying instruction; this was already the eighteenth lesson . . . or . . . it might prove to be; one did not always know . . . till after) and without looking, peering, peeping, groping, fumbling, was to place one hand into each

sack and withdraw one, only one . . . whatever. The student ahead of Vergil was an Illyrian named Lustus, one with a clever way of seeming not the least clever, of lurching into one of his fellows, if not always (though often) to his own profit, then to the other's loss, and similar tricks of which one could hardly or not decently complain. Lustus had taken hold of . . . *whatever* . . . with each hand; perhaps Lustus did not like the feel of what he had hold of by his left hand, clearly Vergil saw the wrist-tendons move, knew that Lustus was—Lustus, slightly, feigned a stagger, murmured apology—was letting go of . . . whatever . . . and taking hold of another. Lustus gave a short, sick, and sickening grunt. Lustus drew up his hand as though it was afire. Vergil could not clearly (thank the *gods!)* make out what it was that clung to the left hand of Lustus, it was too large for an insect and had too many limbs for an animal or reptile, and it writhed, writhed, and Lustus screamed, screamed—

—two of the proctors swiftly seized him, one from each side—

—if Lustus was still screaming or if what rang in Vergil's ears was an echo, Vergil did not know; he knew that Lustus was no longer in front of him—

"In with them. *Draw."* Said Putto, the obscenely fat.

Vergil without hesitation obeyed. The things did not feel, really, pleasant, but nothing seemed about to bite or burn or writhe; sweating, not looking, Vergil passed along. By and by they stood, the students, in front of the elaboratory tables. "Set 'em down. *Down."* Another voice, but no strange one; whence? Not moving his head and only slightly rolling up his eyes, Vergil got a glimpse of Calimicho, the gaunt, the gray, the grim, looking down from a gallery; it was not that Vergil would have sworn there had been no gallery there a moment before, he would have sworn—although he saw it—that no gallery was there *now.*

But that was not the lesson.

"Look at 'em." All looked. Before each was a fungus from the two bags. Two. Slightly cool, one; slightly warm, one; slightly moist . . . or dry . . . here or there upon it . . . them. . . . Having not been forbidden to do so, swiftly Vergil raked his eyes from left to right; mostly all the students were doing the same. No two fungi, he was sure, were quite alike. What— "Looked at 'em? You've studied Theophrastus, you've studied Dioscorides, Hippocrates, Galen, you've

talked with the simples-women and you've walked with the witches of the woods. You may—*when I give you leave*—look some more, you may poke and pare and peer and smell and taste. *Don't touch!* . . . yet . . ." He held between thumb and forefinger the smallest of sandglasses, such as the frugal housewife uses to time the boiling of a pigeon's egg. "When you've made up your mind. If it's medicine, throw it before you, off the table. If it's poison, throw it well behind you. If it is neither, but just fit for the pot, *leave it where it is.* Prepare." He turned the tiny glass, set it down on the railing (who failed to hear that tiny click?). *"Now."*

Seldom had Vergil passed oh-so-short a moment, yet ah such a busied one before there came that second slight click: "Stop." The last word was not emphasized, but no hand moved more.

"That one which now remains in front of you. Pick it up. Eat."

Later he heard that same Northishman, he whose father was an earl, ask, "Ser Proctor, was it needful that those who erred did die?"

Said the proctor, "Their clients will not die."

Even as the vision of what this intimated share of richnesses might secure for him was fading quite away, Vergil heard himself reply, "I have no doubt, Magnate, that the Very Rich City will deal with me generously. In wares and merchandise, I myself do not deal."

Boso's brows, like unpruned shrubbery, came together, paused, parted. "Wise one, we shall meet again. *Aysh. Aysh."* Fire. Fire.

G. Rufus Rano was, clearly, nervous. He had a singular lack of any personal charm, but his clear and evident nervousness was almost sufficient to make that overlooked. He began to say things, stopped with the things unsaid. He looked at Vergil, from Vergil he looked away, and from looking away, again he turned and looked at Vergil. The most complete thing he said was what might have been a suggestion that the two of them should meet in Rano's warehouse; on the other hand, it might have been an apology that they could not meet there, or a ban on their meeting there at all. Now and then, as his eyes fled here and there, and his wide mouth stumbled on this word and that, he looked sometimes at his wife, as though perhaps for help; perhaps, for something not the least to do with help; she, in

any event, sat silently spinning her wool. The silence became at last infectious, and feeling that perhaps it might become permanent, the visitor suggested that he would, if welcome, return another time.

Disappointment, irresolution, relief mingled. Relief won. Rano arose, Vergil arose, the matron remained as she was. "Again. Again. Master. Yes."

It had not been precisely a fruitful meeting, but it had been a long one, and by the time that Vergil arrived at the house of the last-named on the list in the Ganymede tablets, Magnate Brosa Brosa (and a mental note not to confuse same with Magnate Boso), he found Magnate Brosa Brosa at dinner. Or perhaps it was not precisely dinner, but there were precisely about it anyway some of the niceties of the rest of the world. Vergil was at once gestured to a place, and at once there was placed before him an excellent soup of cock and veal with leeks and small dried plums, followed by lampreys cooked in blood and wine, followed by songbirds in grape leaves, followed by Magnate Brosa Brosa giving several absolutely enormous eructations. And there was another simulated skeleton, which Vergil was, however, not asked to make dance, which followed finger bowls scented far more strongly than was elsewhere considered in good taste.

But few places elsewhere had to contend with the airs, the sweet breezes of Averno.

Once again the butler was signaled, and once again Vergil was handed a coin . . . followed by a new robe . . . G. Rufus Rano's butler (if that was indeed the troll's title) had issued him two new robes, but no coin. . . . This coin was of gold.

"Come see us early tomorrow morning," said Brosa Brosa, "and we will show you some sights. And we will talk some more." Considering that this was all the talking they had done, it would clearly not take much more talk to talk some more.

Vergil returned to his inn, ordered (and paid for) other and larger rooms on the upper floor of the annex off the colonnade, saw to it that Iohan had been taken care of. Asked, by and by, "What is all that sound all this late and where is it all coming from?"

Answer: It was coming from the forum.

And that was the third time that Vergil was to see the mad king dance.

In the morning they did indeed show him some sights, videlicet the torture chambers. And after that they did talk some more.

As they passed through part of the city Vergil observed in daylight, with the eyes, that which had in the obscurity of the nights commanded the attention of the nose alone—namely the shallow canal that went from the Portus Julius, adjacent to the coast, to the equally shallow canal basin of Averno. *Black walls, black mules, black dogs, black hearts*—had he heard this? read this? conjured it, as a summing up, himself? To which, whichever, he now added, *black canal.*

It stank, and it stank not alone from the sea-sludge that traveled sluggishly along it in the slight eddies caused by the passage of the mule-drawn boats *(black boats!),* nor from, as well, the sulfurous emanations inseparable from Averno and all its fumes; it stank in addition with a distinctive and horrible feculence caused by its being the repository of all the night-buckets of the city and all the watery runoff of the rotting matter of its leather- and dye-works. The Midland Sea had scarcely any tides of its own, and this canal had none at all to scour it clean. Vergil, considering, wondered if the canal were to be dredged—not merely cleaner, but deeper—as the Emperor Julius had caused to be dredged the port that bore his name—just a bit deeper, even, and at just a slight slope . . . provided with a sluice at one point and a sluiceway at another and a lock at the end. . . . But probably the Avernians would see no reason to bother. In Manjay, near far Cathay, the lands of the so-called Thinae or Sinim, whence came silk-substance combed from floss deposited on trees by (so, incredibly, it was reported) *worms,* it was also the practice to dump the outscouring of canals onto compost heaps; thence to gardens. But in Averno there were no gardens. In Averno grew nothing green . . . save slime.

Stinking and sluggish the canal was, and narrow and shallow and slime, provided with more than one portcullis to check any possible use in either invasion or escape (and, for that matter, *interloping),* and used only for the transportation of cargo too heavy or too bulky or too otherwise unsuitable (crushed sea-nail for the dye-vats: example) for the winding and narrow overland route through the crags that surrounded the city—city without as well as within its walls.

The canal as it was and long had been probably suited its masters exactly so it was. So, envision as he might (and did) some swifter, cleaner current come gliding in via, perhaps, a mountain stream or two, soon and swift he dismissed the thought.

Hiring masters and hireling mage . . . "But not yet *Incantor et Magus*" . . . *"Not yet"* . . . echoes, echoes . . . but, still, if not magus *de jure,* mage *de facto* . . . and as he had been, in effect, hired: hireling . . .) all in an atrium.

Brosa had brought him thither. It was not Brosa, however, who was about to speak: *Boso* was. Brosa and "they" had brought him, Vergil, earlier, to see the torture chambers, as elsewhere, some other "they" had taken him to see the bears and lions, the dancing girls, the chambers with the painted walls. Boso had been there as well, one or two others. Three? Had the same number left as entered? Did one or two remain to see the sport? Was it sport alone? Some particular taste for witnessing unspeakable pain, intense and shameful agony? Had the trade of any one or two or even three of the magnates been particularly rather than generally affected by the "conspiracy and interloping" of which that wretched fellow had stood accused? Was it that this magnate or that or those as individuals felt their commerce and industry risked loss if outsiders were allowed to buy without license? Was it particular details that he or they wished to hear? Or—

These questions in turn had not been slow in raising at least one other question in Vergil's mind: Could the visit to the torture chambers have been no mere showing of a certain sight, but a caution? A warning? And if so: to whom? Vergil was not a resident, a denizen of the city Rome. But he was a Roman citizen, *a Citizen of Rome.* Mere birth within the Empire did not confer this right and status. Status and right were of immense protection. But although Averno was under the rule of Rome, Averno was not Rome. He was not in Rome now. He was in Averno. Averno was not Rome.

Boso was the first, after some small silence, to speak. "Now see thee here, Master Vergil," he began, in his stolid way; stolid or not: an enormous change. Yesterday, face-to-face the two of them, it had been "Wise One." Today, here, here in the company of his fellow-magnates, it was merely "Master Vergil": well. In this Boso was

perhaps merely conforming to local usage, discarding the semblance of great respect which something from his own past, perhaps; perhaps the brief use between them of the tongue of Sidon, had prompted. But—*See thee here . . . !* Why, Vergil's own servant would apologize for addressing him in the *thou*-form! Was the hired man, citizen or no, to be shown his place? Or . . . or was this, this over-familiarity, the semblance? The dissembling?

One would see.

Boso, squatting, was drawing in the sand of a part of the atrium with his finger. "Them fires which are the gifts to us of the good gods of hell, they are, like here"—he scratched—"and here . . . and here, and here . . ."

As for the "rogues, retainers, henchmen, partisans, thieves, runaways, and gamblers," such as were alleged to frequent the places of notables everywhere, he saw no sign here. Neither did he see any likenesses of the urban great in marble or even in wax, as he did sometimes in other cities. The magnates were not there and then as Vergil had seen some of them (and was to see, eventually, all of them) elsewhere. Of course no torches were needed in level daylight, but neither did they wear crimson to show they were rich, nor dingy black ("It shows no dirt") to show they cared naught for being rich. One of them in fact wore close to nothing at all, and this was Haddadius, in a breechclout. Now and then he raised a thick and hairy arm and examined his armpit; the gods knew how many years in filth and foulness had laid the foundations for a gesture that had become a lifelong habit. Haddadius now found nothing in his oxters, he (as Vergil had seen) had his own baths, and used them and was clean. But ever and again: the telltale gesture. As for Grobi, whom Vergil knew at once, before even seeing his eye, by his heavy breathing—Grobi was dressed in the lightest of silks, the lightest and the costliest, but his hard and heavy hands continually rubbed his marked and marred wrists and ankles, and perhaps that was why Grobi always did move so slow: Grobi still felt the shackles and the chains. Lars Melanchthus was silent and sober-faced this time, but his eyes still full-red, perhaps from years of peering into the smoke of forges. Perhaps his eyes would never be clear again, perhaps his vision neither.

Boso went on scratching and speaking; gradually Vergil put a pic-

ture together, as the mosaic-maker does from fragments of colored glass.

The fire and steam and smoke engirdled the city round like a fiery zone, irregular in shape, and sometimes varying: now a circle; and now extending and also narrowing: an oval. From a fumarole whence last year spouted flame, this year perhaps came nothing but a hot and sulfurous stink; sometimes areas larger than an urban "island" of tenements might be affected; then there would be a laborious moving of forges, vats, workshops, and bloomeries to areas where the fires and fiery gasses freshly escaped the rents and fissures of the tortured earth.

". . . and some . . . *here.* . . ." Boso grunted. He finished his scrabbling and sketching and stared a moment. Then he sighed. *"This* day," he said. *"This* year. They don't stay still," he said. "And that is the kernel in the nut and the nut in the hull, Master Vergil. Them fires wander a-roundabout, and this cause us the worst kind of troubles. And of lately years they wander roundabout all more than before. Fewer. And weaker. Which is why we have had you here. We've put you to test. You've passed test. You've read certain, like, secret message. Given right answer. All so. Now, Ser. Master. What's to be done about all this?"

And he sat back on his haunches, evidently convinced that he had made everything as clear as it could possibly be, and gazed at Vergil with his bull-like eyes.

But before Vergil could speak, someone else spoke.

"Hecatombs," said someone, in a thick, slow, heavy, halting voice. Repeated it.

"Hec . . . a . . . tombs . . ."

Paradox.

Illyriodorus, once, when asked, "Master, what is it that you seek?" had answered, stroking his classical beard, "I do not seek. I find." A moment's silence, in some measure awed, in all measure respectful, followed this epigram.

And the moment was followed by Vergil's (audacious youth!)—by Vergil's asking, nonetheless, "And . . . Our Sage . . . When you do not find?"

The silence this time was a shocked one. Illyriodorus, however,

seemed not shocked. One more stroke he gave his beard. "Ah, then," he said, quite calmly, "then I seek."

But that was in Athens. And Vergil was now in Averno. They were nothing like. Nor was either the least like Sevilla. Sevilla. Why did he think of Sevilla now, the Very Ancient and Very Wise City?

Sevilla. Often it was hot there, though never of course was the heat of such a quality as here, *here,* in the fire-fields of Averno. Oft, when then wearied, had he walked with slow steps to a certain space round the ramparts of Sevilla, where once he had watched a cafila of strange beasts: they were called camels. Awkward and splay-footed their walk, and their upper lips, split like those of giant hares, writhed, groaning, perhaps in pain. And each beast bore upon its back a great hunch. Now, as he passed the fire-fields of Averno and saw among the fumes and fumaroles a line of slaves, staggering and lurching through smoke and steam, each with just such a hunch or puckel on his back—though these were leather sacks filled with, as it might be, lumps of ore—he was reminded of those camel-beasts. The necks of these men who bore the burdens here were of course not longer than other men's, but like camels they twisted them from side to side, like camels their upper lips were split, and like camels they writhed their lips; indeed, like camels, too, they groaned. Too clearly why: Some canny Avernian had gathered for himself a stable of hare-lipped slaves, for such sold always cheaper. Of course here and for such labor it mattered not the slightest that they could not, their palates being cleft, speak distinctly. No one needed them to speak. Damn their *speak.* Let them slave.

And when any of them staggered too much, imperiling his load, or slowed as if to pause, the whipper-in, who in fact carried no whip, merely a stick, merely swiftly thrust his stick into one of the glowing holes all round about and between which the cafila struggled. At once the stick burst into flame, see then the driver swing the stick sufficient to reduce the flame to a mere glowing coal-end, and press it against the slave's heaving side. Swiftly. Slightly. Only slightly. One would not wish the man-camel to drop his humpy burden . . . of course. Although sometimes, if the sides of the slave were greatly scarred and toughened from other burns or galls or floggings, then the warder would press the stick a bit harder.

In Sevilla, called though it was by some a sewer of a thousand different devils, Vergil had seen no such sight.

Sevilla. In Sevilla, young Vergil and an Apulian of the same short age (what was his name? how could he have forgotten it? he had forgotten it because although the young Apulian was of great importance, his name was of none) had after no small wait been admitted to the lodge of the beadle of the school, a slender man with a small head. "What have you learned?" asked he. The Apulian, before Vergil could more than wet his lips in preparation, had said that he had studied trivium and quadrivium.

"And here are my certificates," he added, making to display them, but the beadle waved them off.

"The boys without a hair on their bollix, who play with themselves when the proctors are not looking, have studied trivium and quadrivium. What have you *learned?*"

There was a pause. Then, a shade sullenly, the Apulian said, "I have been in the woods"—an elliptical reference to the Wild Schools.

Beadle said softly, "Ahh . . ." He seemed impressed. The Apulian took a breath, caught it, stood straighter. Then and without any warning the figure of the beadle swelled, changed beyond recognition, became that of something worse than any demon; and it opened its hideous mouth and it screamed with a noise that Vergil had never heard before, producing sounds alien to a human ear. The sound echoed forever, the sight went swirling in a great concentric circle, the air was instantly cold, something struck the side of Vergil's face, and he did not even know it was the floor, for before he could feel pain he had from feeling terror fainted quite away.

However, not for long. Vaguely he was ware of his young fellow-aspirant tossing him over his shoulder and carrying him . . . the prickle of straw . . . he made to get up . . . he fell back. . . .

"One of you has failed the first test." The beadle's voice.

"Silly kid. Couldn't take it, huh, Ser Beadle." The Apulian's.

"And the second test too. Where is your gear and baggage, boy?"

"At the door. Where do I bring it?"

"Wherever you like. Back the way you came. Or any other way as pleases you. But not in. Out. Now. So, go." Soft the voice. But firm.

A pause. Eyes clearer now, Vergil saw his fellow stare bepuzzled,

then grow angry as well. "Say, Ser Beadle. What you mean? He was the coward. I stuck brave. Didn't I? So—"

With, it seemed, no more than one finger, the beadle turned the boy around. "When you reach the exit gate you will find a caravan about to start. Say to its master, 'There is a beast reserved for me,' and he will point it out. Your charge and victuals are paid at no cost to you. And when you reach the port, there you will hear the drummers announcing the departure of a ship for Africa. Its voyage purpose is to find, capture, and bring back wild beasts for the arena. You need not join, though I expect you will. Do not tarry. Go." The finger prodded, the Apulian moved. He moved unwillingly, still he questioned.

"You say 'one of us failed the first and second test'—how come it's *me?*"

By this time they had passed from Vergil's sight, he lying on the straw, sick with shame. The beadle's voice drifted back.

"The first lesson is to know fear. The second lesson is to feel humility. It may be that you will learn them both. Not, I believe, very soonly. Meanwhile my finger grows weary, so I adjure: Begone."

When the beadle returned, Vergil was on his knees, watching the vapor arising from a tub of water that had certainly not been there a moment before. Said the beadle, "Wash."

Gladly would the young Vergil have drowned in it; "I have soiled myself."

Something not even faintly like compassion, something faintly like impatience, tinged the beadle's voice. "Another good reason, then, to wash. *Wash.*" And, when Vergil had done so, he was shown a certain door, one of several. "Go through that one. That one. Mark it well. It won't be pointed out again. Now . . . go . . ."

That young aspirant also had a question, but he asked it as he went.

"What of my baggage?"

"It will follow," said the beadle.

And so it did; whenever the lad's feet lingered, lagging along that long corridor, longer than any he had ever walked before, he could hear it following; once he looked behind. Only once.

But as to how it had been made to follow, this was not the third lesson. It was not even the thirty-third.

It was twelve months and several before he saw the beadle once again.

The Apulian boy, though whenever (seldom) Vergil went to the arena he looked for him, he never saw more.

Armin had come to visit Vergil again. He seemed tired, had little to say as they sat by the slatted window-shutters, though Vergil tried to play the casually cheerful host. "Hecatombs," the host repeated, taking up the note on which, more or less, the meeting with the magnates had closed. "Hecatombs can only help, for, after all—" He paused to pour drink. "This is called beer," he said. "Curious. It is much drunk in Egypt, so far south and east of here; and it is much drunk past the Alps, so far north of here. But it is not drunk much here. Is it that our grapes are better? Our barley not as good? What is that dreadful noise?"

They peered through the slats. Some throng had turned a corner. "It is nothing," Armin said, dispiritedly. "A coiner. A false-coiner." Below, a man was being dragged along behind a cart to which he was bound. At every fourth step, the local beadle gave his whip a flourish and lashed the malefactor across his naked back. Someone, perhaps a friend, had stepped forward and thrust a piece of wood between the condemned man's teeth. It could only have been a last gesture of friendship, pity would not be encountered at such a scene. For one single stroke more the counterfeiter bit deep into the wood to muffle his own cry. But the effort was not to be made more. The gag dropped at the next stroke of the whip, the lashed flesh bled, the criminal shrieked. He did not wish to be brave. The Spartan virtues did not flourish here. And at every shriek the mob howled, mocked, imitated, flung stones, pelted with mud. Why not? He had made false coin; had any one of them found such a one in his purse or till, he must need either have borne the loss himself, or else risked the same fate, for the penalty for passing was the same as that of forging. The grim procession passed slowly out of sight and, somewhat later, out of sound. Fairly soon enough the forger would be burned beside the same dung heap where his ashes would be scattered. *Burned to death,* the sentence was uttered.

But before that time the man would already be dead.

Stern and meritorious law.

Host and guest sipped beer in silence.

Vergil did not resume his comments on hecatombs, but his thoughts continued. A hundred magnates (at the most, a hundred) and their wives and households could hardly eat a hundred oxen, even after the prescribed parts of the sacrifices had been burned upon the altars; victims offered in such profusion would inevitably yield up festive meats for slaves, and slaves seldom got to eat flesh-meat. Usually they must count themselves lucky when they had wheaten bread to eat, instead of spelt; often enough their diet must have been heavy in spoiled spelt, at that.

"I confess I miss the views of the Bay," Vergil said, by and by. "The Isle of Goats . . . and others. The gardens . . . I confess I have a passion for islands, gardens, trees—I see you wonder at that."

Armin said, "Not in particular, no. Merely I wonder that anyone should have a passion for anything."

Vergil raised his eyebrows. "But that dance you danced . . . surely, a passion?"

Armin shook his head. "Ah no. Merely a sudden lust." Equally sudden now, his tired eyes changed. "You wonder. Such excitement for a madman. But you can't know how different his madness and gaiety is from the madness which is daily life in Averno." His gesture took in the scene that had just passed. "Day after day: heat, fire, sound, stench, coarseness, cruelty, picking pennies with one's teeth from dung heaps; no gardens, not a tree, not a blade of grass—the fumes would kill them off—all but those painted, and painted badly, on some walls . . . and them the stinking airs, the sweet breezes soon discolor, and mostly no one bothers to paint them fresh.

"Life in Averno—a contradiction in terms! This is a hell, death is our daily fare, we moil in the muck for money, and try to forget it by gorging instead of seemly dining, and sousing instead of decent drinking! One speaks with respect, with awe, of the *Senate and the People of Rome,* but never, ever, of the *Magnates and the People of Averno!* Ha, 'the *people* of Averno'—!" And suddenly, he wept, and his weeping spilled over on his cheeks.

Vergil murmured, moved, "Ah, 'the tearfulness of things . . .' "

Armin, checking his tears with his sleeve, asked, "What?"

"Oh, only a phrase from somewhere. I forget. No—I don't. From the *Oracles of Maro.*"

With a laugh still half a sob, Armin said, "You have seen their wives, the magnates'—is that not tearful enough?"

Victory over pride? Victory over arrogance. The Nine Muses the matrons of Averno, as he had seen them, certainly were not. Need they have been? He thought for some tactful comment, but even as he sought, he found one question had now formed itself: "Only one, I did notice, spun. The classical duty of a Roman matron." Vergil did not look at his visitor, he poured him drink, wondered about his own work here, and how he would next get on with it. His visitor spoke.

Spoke in a tone that indicated he wished his emotions, immediately past, to be not spoken of. "Ah, that was Rano's wife. The Matron Poppaea. Of her some stories are told."

Vergil said merely, flatly, "Ah."

"Some stories are told that Rano for a while maintained her in another city, some say Potuoli, some say Naples, others say it was in a villa in the country. Some say he had reason to doubt her fidelity. It is said that he had no other reason to doubt except his own ugliness, however. It is said otherwise. And also, it is said, that, as he sent her there to live, so he brought her here to die. . . ."

"Many things, in short, 'it is said.' "

"Yes. Exactly."

"Putuoli made me, Averno unmade me. He who—"

"It has not unmade her. Anyway, not yet. What? 'Potuoli—'? Another citation from those *Oracles?* I don't know them well."

"No. Another source. Not cited; rather, paraphrased. So—"

But Armin would not wait on *So.* He got up. "Master Vergil, as I was one of the means of bringing you here, I hope that neither you nor I will regret it. I am not always clear in speech; forgive me. Neither am I always clear in mind. May I bid you civilly good night? And feel as free as ever to call on you again? Whenever . . ."

"Whenever. Yes. Certainly. I share that hope. Are there lights still?"

Armin, brushing his face again with his sleeve, brushing his scant beard, murmured that there were lights enough. A formal word or two more, and he had gone.

At once upon the man's departure, Vergil's boy appeared, rather

as though he had but been waiting. Master looked at him, looked him over quickly. Well fed enough, well clad and well clean enough he seemed. Well content he did not seem. "Iohan. Time enough to bid you, too, good night. I'll have some hard work for you, soon enough. Therefore don't wear yourself down with trivial things in the meanwhile. Avoid provocation, fights, and all the like."

The lad's look seemed troubled, but not markedly so; he expressed his assent, made an attempt to begin an accounting for some small sum allotted him for some small purpose, was waved aside in this until another time, made his brief respectful bow; then, too, was gone.

That night the king could not sleep? E'en king, e'en queen. . . . But this night would Master, Adept, Astrologue, and all the rest of all of it, sleep. He could have done it by arcane means with full ease enough; suddenly he did not wish to. He took a small flask from his kit, subjected its stopple to a few sundry twists that an observer would have found too complex to follow . . . and would have been meant to . . . dropped scarce a scruple, by no means a dram, into the remnants of his cup of drink; downed it in two drafts; swift he sought his bed; let the lamp smolder to a dull-red smoky coal. The room contracted, the bed enlengthened, he felt his body change, expand, felt his spirit leave it but leave it by but a span of a hand; and hover there, content. He felt content, he did not feel asleep; he knew that he slept, he heard the cocks crow, bade them be still, knew there were no cocks in Averno, dwindled, faded, ebbed.

Felt himself at rest. At rest.

Something beat. His pulse? The anvils, hammers, fulling-mallets and the ceaseless pulse of here? Not any matter.

Sleep.

He slept.

The Matron Poppaea Rano was sapling-thin, and she sat with wool and distaff and spun and spun, and—as Vergil had observed before—she spun rather badly. It was certainly not the coarse wool commonly worked in Averno, and he wondered why she alone should be working expensive fleece and yarn when she worked it so ill. But it was a subject for wonder, the whole thing: First a message had been brought to him inviting him to call once more at the house of Magnate Rano; next, another message had directed him to go

instead to the magnate's warehouse. And whilst he was in the broad street and inquiring more precisely the way, crying, "Ser! Ser! Master!," there came running Iohan.

"He've changed his mind again, Master," said the boy. "Wants you to go to his house, after all. I'm not sure, do he mean to join you there, or what, and this old besom, she won't say aught to me."

The old woman was indeed as lean and rugged as a rustic broom, and she said no more to master than she had to man, merely she indicated by an inclination of her head the direction intended; then she walked off. Vergil gave a half-rueful shrug, told Iohan to get him back to their inn in case yet another change of plan on the part of Rano might be forthcoming; then he followed after the old she. Who did not indeed lead him to the main rooms via the kitchen, but she gave some shrill call as she—as they—came in, and, before they had gone more than the length of another anteroom (the ill-fitting tiles, their mortar not replaced for . . . for who could say how long, going click-click beneath their feet), a squat and ugly servant of no particular sex brought her a bag of what was soon revealed to be beans, and a few pans; this house-thrall then returned . . . wherever. And the "old besom" by and by simply sat herself down, squatting on her withered haunches, and began to sift through the dried beans, handful by half-a-handful, separating pebbles and clumpets of earth, a task he had times past seen the women of his own family doing so often—and, more than merely sometimes, he had helped, he felt he could here and now fall to and do it once again. And do it quite as well.

However.

After merely a moment, a manservant appeared, one whom Vergil had seen before; this one gave him the sort of ridiculous bow of the sort seen in pantomimes and street-plays, the *spare-two-groats-for-the-bath-boss* sort. At first the visitor felt he was being mocked, almost at once he thought that perhaps the man had never in his life seen any real sort of bow performed; this was, this *was* Averno. And so, the lumpkin having straightened up and made an equally absurd gesture, Vergil, following it, entered the room where the woman sat and spun.

She rose as he entered, then, the spindle dropping, she lurched to catch it, caught it, gazed down at it a moment as though not sure

what it was. Then she sat down again. After a moment she said, "Poppaea. I am called Poppaea. Did you know? Poppaea Rano." ("Matron," he said, with a bow she did not see.) "Rano sent to tell me you were coming." Her voice was clear and had no particular accent; neither did it seem to have any particular weight of meaning.

After a moment, as she stayed still, clumsily working her wool, and did not ask him to seat himself, he looked about, and seeing, at a respectable distance, to be sure a bad chair—but still, a chair—he seated himself. Another slow-passing moment. There seemed nothing wrong with her slender fingers, there were no marks of shackles on her wrists, merely this was an art which she had not. "Will Magnate Rano be returning presently?" he asked.

"I don't know," she said simply, and with the slightest air of surprise that he might think she should. Well, here there would be no discussion of readings from Homer; Sappho had woven her violets in vain as far as any analysis of her or anyone else's poems was concerned. It was up to him to close the gate against silence, if the gate was to be closed at all. And so, with an inward sigh, he asked, by and by, "Do you have children, Matron?" At once he felt his words as a scalding draft in his mouth, but he could not call them back again.

"Children die young here," she said. "Not many children are born here." Her fingers flexed the supple thread, the thread broke and she gathered the fiber again. "I have had two children here . . . well, they were born here and they died here. The air was too thick for the older, I think, she had trouble breathing it. And the second had a disease . . . what do they call it? Anthrax? It is worse with some. At least mine did not fall into a pool of boiling water or stumble into a fire-hole." She gave him no chance to change the conversation, nor even to think of how it might be changed; the clear voice, devoid of passion, it seemed, and even concern, went on. The gate had been closed against silence. "When he died, my second one, I recollected and felt I understood that story, oh, I don't recall where it is from, of a place where people weep when a child is born and they rejoice when it dies. But until then I thought, how horrible. Of course I didn't really rejoice. 'Sleep well, now,' is what I said. And since then Rano says he asks nothing more of me, only to spin. 'A woman must spin,' he says. Rano says."

She repeated this as her fingers gathered and the spindle whirled.

"I don't do it well, but one must do something, and—" She broke off.

She sighed a very small sigh. A thin sigh, he thought it might be called—appropriately: she was so thin herself. "We are rich here, we magnates and matrons, and so we may afford amusements. But we don't spend money on them, really, we women here. *Brosa.* Do you know what *her* amusement is? She abuses her servants. Really." Not likely, Vergil thought, that Poppaea could abuse the grim figure whose dirty toes were just within his sight, as she rattled her dried beans from pan to pan. And an odd duenna *she* was. . . . "Well, to be less delicate, she tortures them. Oh, not too heavily, no. They are always able to go back to work afterward. I know what Melanchthus's matron does, she does her hair, she has wax-pictures of different hairstyles, and she copies them and does her hair and she looks in her mirrors and then she undoes and then she does it all over again. Grobi, *she* keeps the accounts; fancy me keeping Rano's accounts! Do you know who does? You don't. You will. And Haddadius's woman, what's-her-name, takes care of her children. Ask her if she has children." Again he felt that scalding draft in his mouth, but she was not trying to punish him, the glancing look she cast at him at once after saying this was merely quizzical. "She has quite a lot of them, and she dresses and feeds them and talks with them and plays games. . . . Actually, of course, no. She has no real children. They are of course all mommets, dolls. Mommets are dolls and poppets are dolls, too; isn't that curious?"

He had been looking down, half trying to make out the designs in the mosaic-tiled floor; now he looked up. She had been looking at him, but her gray eyes fled direction as he lifted his own.

He said, "And you do nothing, then, save spin? Have you no amusements? Even inexpensive ones?"

She nodded, and gathered wool from the distaff. "I read. That is, I am read to. Rano allows me to sell the thread and yarn, and, well, they aren't really very good, but it's good wool, *that*'s good, it can be used again to make better thread and yarn, and I have no need for money, so there is someone who takes away my basketful and in return brings me books and I am read to. While I spin. When one of the Greeks can be spared to do it, who can read Latin, too, you know. And after they are read, the books go back. In that box there

is the one the Greek, Demou he's called, was reading to me, but he was called to the warehouse for work and he hasn't yet come back."

The house of Rano was one of the older ones, black and squat and reeking, although attempts had been made to give it some sort of gloss, as witness the floor—at this exact moment the she-troll cleaning beans cleared her nose and throat and spat upon the floor adjacent her—and the furnishings (as though furnished from some captured town, the troops having had their three-day plunder, the followers allowed three days more before the torch was set and all these furnishings gathered in haste late upon the afternoon of the sixth day). As for the box indicated, it was the sort of box that a yeoman farmer might have purchased in some good year, long ago, the taxes being paid and for once the larder and the corn-cribs full. He knew that sort of box full well.

"Would you like me to read to you?" asked he. Where *was* Rano? Was he never coming back?

And she answered, her eyes so low cast down, "If the master wishes. It would be very kind."

He opened the box, it contained the usual jumble of broken fibulae and bracelets sans catches, here a charm and there a bauble; and set aside from all of that a smallish book, a codex in form and binding and not a scroll. "Where shall I begin?"

"Where you may be pleased. Perhaps he marked where he left." She pinched off a bit of wool and was about to add it to the thread, and it broke; she caught the spindle and, with a sigh, made to mend the work. The servant, likely slave, had indeed left a bookmark; thither Vergil turned. A glance showed him the book was entitled *The New Anabasis,* and he was sure that he had never heard of it and that it deserved no such grand titule. The calligraphy lacked the cunning of the professional book-copyist; whichever old soldier had passed declining years in composing the work had probably pressed his own servant into use: whichever one could, as it chanced, belike, write: to scratch and scribble with a stylus into cold wax was one art, but to make and mend a pen and write cleanly with slow-drying ink —this was another art yet. And a harder one.

Vergil cleared his throat. *"Here they were invited, in fact constrained, to join a procession to the Temple of Jove in Alexandria Olympia, where the Thunderer was worshiped under the Syrian name*

of Haddad." He was mistaken, he *had* read this before: where? *"The procession had been organized, at the first sign of bad weather, by the local dyers' guild, for . . ."* He heard his voice growing slower and slower as, incredulous, he recollected where . . . and when . . . he had read this before. . . .

About to beg pardon for interrupting the reading and to ask more precisely whence she had this book, he looked up: Their eyes met again, this time met full on, and such a flash glittered from hers that he had, even while he gave the motion no thought, to lunge and save the volume from falling to the floor.

"Who are you, then, Poppaea?" he demanded. "Who is it that you really are? And what is it, then, that you are really doing here?" He did not touch her.

The eyes that had glittered a moment before now flowed with tears, and she wiped them clumsily with the wool-full distaff. "It does not matter," she said, weeping. "Oh, it does not matter, not at all. I am the matron of a magnate of Averno, and I sit in his house and I spin. The spinning is worthless, but a Roman matron spins, she spins, and when Rano remembers that he has a wife at home who sits and spins, it makes him feel that he is something like a Roman patrician. And as for me . . . it occupies my hours and even when no one is reading to me, the labor of it soothes my mind, and helps the time to pass. How white your skin is, and how black your hair and beard."

"But, Poppaea, if it was you who—"

She shook her head, the tears still flowed, she took up now a gauzy stole and wiped them, and they ceased. "It doesn't matter. Don't speak of it, please."

Half, he rose. "Shall I not go then?"

She said, somewhat in haste, almost in alarm, "Oh no. No. At least not yet. Rano has told me to show you high respect. He instructed the servants, when the clepsydra strikes—" She paused. He hearkened. In an inner part of the house, a single hollow ring. The hollow metal ball within one of the chambers of the clock had, as the last of the water dripped away, struck against the floor of the chamber. A murmur, followed by the bustle of things being moved, feet sounding, and the rustle of garments; the dirty toes meanwhile vanished, the dried beans rattled in the pans, their selectrix gave a horta-

tory squall or two: In came servants bearing wine and water and plates of cakes, olives, nuts, fruits, and sweetmeats and tables to set them on; and scented water to wash hands and fingers and napkins with which to dry them. The settings did not match, but what matter, they were heavy and rich, and looked as though they might have come from the plunder of the first three days in several cities.

". . . and I hope, Master Vergil," said Poppaea, "that you will especially try these pears conserved in mustard and honey, for it is a very especial honey and comes from far away, far across the Indoo Sea, and it is a honey that flows from a sort of reed, called saccharum."

Gravely he thanked her, tasted with an air of judgment, nibbled in silence; then praised. She smiled faintly. The clod servants grunted, lolled their thick tongues in their mouths; one of them actually shoved the conserves closer. "Take more," said this impertinent hobgoblin. "Take more, Wizard Man. Master very rich." Doubtless his and the other thick tongues would help lick the platters clean of whatever costly syrups could not be scraped back into the jars. It would add a relish to the beans.

And the spelt.

Master very rich.

I am the matron of a magnate of Averno, and I sit in his house and I spin.

Very true. Very true. But not only did she know that the honey called saccharum came from beyond the great isle Taprobane, from the other side of the Erythraean Sea, farther than which no Roman ship had ever fared, she knew that no bees produced this novel and fantastically costly syrup; what else did she know? She knew how to send him in dreams the text of a book that she herself could not even read. She spun, as a matter of form and status alone, her woollen yarn and her oft-breaking thread. What else did she spin? he wondered. And the answer, not spoken aloud, was, a web.

And one that now seemed sure to hold him fast.

To hold him fast indeed.

As always, when he began, had begun, to be attracted by a particular woman, the air seemed full of little flecks of gold; so, even here, in the thick, hazy, stinking air of Averno. But. Even so. So or not so.

The work, *his* work in Averno, continued—and he reflected once, quickly and with some small wry amusement: If it continued at its present pace he would be here longer than the two weeks for which he had hired the mare; the likelihood of Fulgence the liveryman following him was, however, extremely slight—and as it seemed not unlikely that the work would pay more than had been hinted (however slight those hints), Vergil moved yet once again; and this time to what passed in Averno for a better neighborhood. How much better went up in his estimation when he saw a litter and its bearers in the street outside—though some second thoughts he had when he saw that not a litter alone stood there, but a lictor as well.

The fasces was there, that grim bundle of rods with which to flog the condemned, from which protruded the ax with which to behead. Neither rod nor ax had been used to work affliction upon the wretched false-coiner, although his own more dreadful punishment was not alone legal but even customary; perhaps rods and ax dated from a time before coinage, full or false, had reached Rome. Technically this symbol belonged most properly to the chief magistrate of a city, but Averno was a special case in this as in almost all other things; the fasces and lictor meant most likely something else—

He hoped the litter did, too. . . .

The lictor was *(highly* improperly!) holding the bundle under one arm, and applying to his nose a pouncet box. He tried to come to an attention when he saw Vergil, but first the one thing slipped, and then the other. Vergil seized the pouncet box, this at least seeming in no way a form of lèse-majesté; from it arose the strong and fragrant medicinal odor of the pomander; and it was he who stood to something like an attention until the lictor had gotten himself in order. Then—

"Master Vergil, a Citizen of Rome?"

"Yes, Lictor."

"I greet you in the name of the Senate and the People of Rome."

"Stinking place, this, isn't it?" Vergil did not feel in a mood of much formality; neither, by his look, did, much, the lictor. Who—

"Oh, the gods! *Well,* sir. As you were kind enough to save the medicine from falling to the muck, I take liberty to offer that you bear it yourself, and I of course must bear the fasces, and lead on as —Oh . . . Forget me own agnomen, next. Ser Vergil, his Honor the

Legate presents his compliments and sends his litter and hopes that Master Vergil is to find it convenient to honor his Honor by taking some very good wine with his Honor."

The Legate. That meant, of course, the Legate Imperial; in such a special case as Averno's, he would be part governor, part ambassador, part viceroy . . . all, very much for the most part, pro forma. For the most part, then, the Legate Imperial was locally the Imperial official of highest rank. Mostly his duties were such as could be reduced to no simplistic legal formula. Had he the power to compel Vergil's acceptance of the so courteously worded invitation? Very likely. Was Vergil's position honorable enough and his conscience clear enough to persuade himself to acceptance of the invitation without more ado and less mental quibbling? Very likely.

"Of course, Lictor. I am honored by his Honor's invitation and by your own kindly offer. However"—he delved into his pouch and disclosed his own pouncet box. Its classification as "medicine" was, in his own opinion, doubtful: but the stinking and maleficent air was less afflictive when strained through the dried spice-studded fruits and fragrant herbs. He had gotten into the litter even while the lictor murmured his appreciation at getting his own pomander back. Dignity did not perhaps allow him to bear it openly in one hand as he marched holding the fasces, so he thrust it high into his tunic and bowed his head so that his nose was almost next to it.

"Litter-bearers! Up, litter! *March.*"

March they did, through the grimy streets. It might well be that money did not stink. But it was not money that Vergil saw through the slightly parted curtains. He saw garbage and slag and slops which had not waited the collectors of the night soil, and people with cutpurse (and, for that matter, cutthroat) looks; and—endlessly—slaves crouching and stumbling beneath every sort of burden; bundles and bales of rags awaiting the sole washing ever they were likely to get before being dyed and clipped and resewn; saw the as-yet-uncollected recently dead, and the as-yet-unrelieved-by-death, animal and human. Saw faces sullen and faces scornful and faces devoid, seemingly, of capacity for expression; saw faces all filthy and glances grim. He saw the steamy tipped-out rank residue of the reeking dye-pots, and smelled, above even the sulfurous and omnipresent breath of "the good gods of hell," the rotting offscrape of the inner,

fleshy sides of pelts in the wool-pulleries; used-up wads of foul, fetid tanbark—

In short: all, or most of all, of the characteristic sights of the Very Rich City. He did not, though, as they marched, and at no slow pace, see the torture chambers.

But then, of course, he had already seen them.

Sissinius Apponal Casca was the gray-faced shadow of what had been a large and healthy man, as witness his own bust in a niche in the wall. Since those days he had lost most of his hair, most of his teeth, most of the flesh beneath his skin, and most of that sense of firm control of life that the bust (and it alone) presently commemorated. He did, however, both look up and, somewhat, cheer up, as Vergil entered. The Emperor Julius had of course been bald, and the Emperor Sulla, *that famous* Sulla, entirely edentulous, in their days of command, victory, and glory: neither of them had looked a tithe of a tithe as bad as this Legate Imperial, nor would they, had their losses in one countenance been combined.

"One doesn't dare attempt to keep wine, once it's been opened," Casca said, formulas of greeting and respect done with; "not here. My butler is opening the best jug right now. Also I have fresh spring water brought twice a day . . . from a spring well outside this horrid place, that is . . . to use the local water to mix even the worst wine, let alone the best, well . . ."

Understanding looks were passed, the wine was decanted and mixed, libations poured, and the wine tasted. "It *is* good," said Vergil.

The Legate's next words almost caused Vergil to spill the wine, good as it was. "What of this fellow who is called King Cadmus?" asked S. Apponal Casca. And suddenly Vergil had an image of those rods lacerating the dancing madman's back, of that ax severing the curly head from its wounded shoulders.

He obliged himself to speak carelessly. "Why, he is mad, that's all."

"There was a certain madman who claimed to be a certain emperor, after the real emperor was dead, and kept half of Little Asia in turmoil for two years and more."

"Ah, but that fellow was merely mad enough to believe his masquerade could succeed. *This* fellow—Cadmus—is utterly mad.

Doesn't know the calends from the ides. Surely you have seen that . . . if you have seen him."

"I have seen him. Yes."

"Well, then."

But beneath the gray and wasted skin some muscle twitched; the flabby mouth suddenly became, somehow, firm. "I haven't asked you here for you to say, *'Well, then,'* I have asked you here to ask you what you can tell me. And by that, I mean *everything."*

In the brief instant of fear that shot through him, Vergil now recalled something which had flashed through his mind as he was getting into the litter and as swiftly had flashed out of it. A brief exchange of words, that time past, with Armin, the young Avernian . . . Avernian so different from almost every other Avernian, young or old, whom he had so far met.

What will you tell them, when you go to Rome?

I do not go to Rome.

Ah, no? But you know . . . Rome may come to you. . . .

Rome, in the form of the lictor and the litter, *had* gone to him.

And so, of course, in effect, he had now gone to Rome.

"Well, your Honor, as I understand it—merely, I have heard, this happened before my arrival—the man was elected as a King of Fools at the local Feast of Unreason. As such he was crowned. Surely a greater fool, in the old and real sense of the word, could scarce be found. And so he wore his crown, why not, and so he danced. I must say he dances uncommonly well."

The Legate stared at him, gray and wasted face unmoving. "The Feast of Unreason was over some while since. Yet, still he dances. And still, he wears his crown." Vergil said nothing. A silence fell between them. Neither was trying to stare the other down. Then, again: "What can you tell me?"

Vergil cleared his throat. "Have the taxes been collected, paid?"

"If you mean the Imperial tributes, they have all been collected and paid. If you mean the municipal taxes, they are no official concern of mine, but I assume that if they had not been gathered all as usual, I should certainly have heard. No, no. In this you are of course correct: a place on the verge of rebellion—"

"Rebellion!" Vergil made to rise; the Legate gestured him down.

"—does not bother to pay its tributes and its taxes promptly. No

. . . again you are right. Rebellion, no. O Apollo! this is a perfidious place! I have served in every corner of the Empire, even have been beyond the farthest realms of the oeconomia. What haven't I seen! Villages, two of them each claiming to worship the evil god and each full of hatred because each had a different evil god; when a man from one town was rash and ventured near to the other, they would catch him and eat him alive: *fact!* Travelers' tales about 'the blessed Ottocoronae,' you've heard about the 'Blessed'—indeed, fellows are so filthy and crawling with lice a civilized man daren't go near them. The Melanchlanae, do you know what *they* do, those supposedly oh-so-sage fellows in their long black robes? Eat their *own* dead is what *they* do! *Fact!* Filial piety, they call it. Ha!

"I've been in places where one might perish with the cold if one stepped outside between autumn and spring, and I've been in places where the very houses are built of salt, and skin sloughed off and left a man looking and feeling raw and flayed. And one place, you know, near the Great Zeugma, richest toll bridge in the world, men are so pretty you'd think they were girls, and the women, O Apollo! the women are ugly as sows and have beards as black as yours: *Facts! Facts,* Master Vergil!"

He paused and drew thirstily at his wine. He began to wave his hand while his mouth was still full. Then, having swallowed, said, "But this place may be worst of all. How near it is to the sunlight and the beauty of the Parthenopean Bay . . . how ugly it is, how it stinks, what a moiling mob of brutes the people are, one can scarcely breathe. . . . Well, well, I know they do needed work. And though they are savages and swine, they know well enough I've only to send one signal, and"—he blew an imaginary trumpet—"down comes the legion. And that's the end of *that.* —What do you have to tell me?"

Slowly some thought had been working its way up through Vergil's mind, came, at last, into clear compass. It both troubled and comforted him. "But surely, Legate," he said, "even if this man Cadmus should be charged with lèse-majesté, he would draw the Fool's Pardon?" But Casca was not concerned with that. He was thinking of beginnings, not of ends.

A silence fell for long enough for Vergil to become aware once again of the din caused by the clashing of hammers at factory and forge and the thumping of mallets as the fullers expressed from the

coarse wool cloth the urine in which it had been steeped to dissolve the suint. At length the legate said, "Tell me then . . . yourself . . . here . . . what . . . ?"

Vergil told him as much of his task as he felt he could without much wearying the man. Casca nodded, but it was a slow, fatigued, nod.

"Not my sort of thing. I don't know about such . . ." He failed to find his word, simply surrendered the attempt. "I know you are the —what do they call you in my signals here"—he rummaged among the documents on his desk—" *'Immensely Honorable'*—where is it? Ah, but I remember: *Master, Mage, Leader, Lord.* . . . What?"

His guest had shaken his head, face confused between amusement, amazement, confusion, respect. " *'Master'* alone, Ser Legate. Nothing more. Ah, no."

But the half-dead face was obstinate. *"Yes,* I say. 'Immensely Honorable . . .' And *Magister, Magus, Dux et Dominus.* Where is it? Here is it." He picked it up, read in a mutter, put it down with a shake of his head. "No. Wrong one. *No.* Right one. Here's my monogram, just where I scribbled to show I'd read it. *Master, Magus, Leader, Lord,* can't find it, tell you it was *there;* going out of my mind. Averno. Averno."

A moment he sat, blank, sick, silent. A servant appeared, poured more wine, more water, mixed it, poured the water into cups, removed the used ones.

Vergil spoke—so he hoped—soothingly. "A mere flux in the light, Ser Legate. The light here, my ser, is very changeable. It no doubt affected the perception of the words so as to remind you of something you had read at another time. Pray dismiss it from your mind. This has happened to me too." But this thought, once spoken, did not soothe himself. He repeated, nonetheless, "Dismiss it from your mind."

But there was that which did not dismiss so easily. Said the old proconsul, "There is something wrong of now, Messer Vergil. It is in the air, I smell it. The air is too thick and murk, I cannot see the matter clear. The hammers beat and beat and beat—somehow even so I almost hear it. . . . Whatever it is. It is not good. Not for Averno, not for Rome. And not for you, ser, and least of all for me. What can you tell me? Eh? What can you tell me?"

But Vergil, though he felt more troubled, Vergil could tell him nothing more.

Though Vergil had already observed exceptions, he had observed the general usage in that the magnates of Averno usually found the cheap woven stuffs of their own manufacture good enough to wear themselves. He had learned that sometimes, though certainly not all times, they liked to swathe their wives and women in apparel the most gorgeous the world could afford; and for such times and purposes they bought such stuffs by the bolt. In one foreign-owned shop in Averno, where cloth of foreign weave was sold in shorter lengths than the magnates deigned to buy it, Vergil fell into idle talk with another outsider, one waiting for his doxy to make her choice of brightly colored kerchief-stuffs. The fellow was a sailing man, come thither to Averno to make purchase for his own private trade-adventure, one who had made many navigations into the farthest reaches of the Erythraean Sea; teeth whitely agleam in a darkly colored beard, he spoke of Tambralinga and the Golden Chersonesus and an island at the end of that peninsula where lions come down to the beach-shore and roar at passing ships; and he spoke of M'Amba the daughter of the Serpent-King, and of all the rich merchantry of those vasty Indoo Seas and all their circumjacent coasts: spicery, perfumery, gems and pearls and golds; he was about to speak of more (and Vergil to ask of the honey-reed, the thought having sudden-come to him), but then the sailor's wench had made her choice and he paid up and got them gone, leaving with no farewell; leaving Vergil to reflect a moment more on those bright images—and to make the transition, for a moment difficult—to the present place outside the shop: dim, dull, hot, stinking, cruel. And in a moment the merchant had queried him, and all else faded as he described his need for cloth that was at one and the same time translucent, pale, and strong. He left with it done up in a roll of unsized papyrus fit for wrapping though not writing; faint glimmering reflection of enchanted seas . . . then all was gone.

For now.

Not even the plea of "being upon the public business of the municipium" could obtain leave for the lad Iohan to take water and

leave or return via the canal; this was reserved purely (or impurely) for the magnates' cargoes, for themselves, or for their servants. Vergil was vexed. Iohan was not. He shrugged. " 'Twould save but small time, master," he said, "and 'twill stink less by the road." It was surely true that this single waterway of the Very Rich City received the effluent of the single cloaca which sluggishly flowed into it, when it flowed at all; and equally it was true that the overfill or overstow of such cargo as the crushed sea-snails from which a pseudo-purple dye was boiled added nothing like the scented offshake of a ship of spices to the canal. When the rains somewhat washed the cut cleaner, it merely stank abominably. So Vergil replied to Iohan's shrug with one of his own, put money in the lad's purse, repeated directions and instructions, and saw him off. Meanwhile—

It was essential to begin making charts—in time, in space. As he was in effect measuring a circle, even if an immensely imperfect circle, it did not matter where he began. However, after considering it both ways, he concluded it would be easier to chart the matter of time, of times, if he had already charted the space and the spaces. The Etruscans and others, they charted the heavens above the earth; he would chart where beneath-the-earth broke through upon land between. He asked, therefore, for a map of the city. Was met with blank faces, slightly open mouths. Any map of the city, he said. In the Chamber of Magnates they said, *What he means, a map?* In the barrack room of the City Guard, they said, *We needs no map.* There was—one might not have thought so, but there was—a Civic Library; thither, briskly, Vergil went.

The building was a sorry, a very small and very sorry, imitation and on a very minor scale, not of the one in Alexandria! but of one in some new-colonized town on a far frontier. Working from standard plans, a library would be erected the same as a bath and a temple and a this and a that. It was not well furnished with books, but the books took up all the space for books there was. An aging man, wattles wobbling, looked up from whatever shabby sheet he had been looking down on, and stared in amazement so great that Vergil wondered when last someone else had entered. "I have come about a map of the city," Vergil said.

The librarian hissed. He stood, he actually stood upon his toes and peered to see if someone was to enter following. No one was. Next he

beckoned Vergil close, quite close, and—and still looking over Vergil's shoulder—whispered, "Ser, my ser, I will give you what I have, I will give you all I have, I will give you *three pieces of silver!*—

"—if you will let me copy a map from you. I will even give you *one* piece of silver, good silver, old and pure, messer, old silver and pure and full weight and neither sweated nor clipped, if you will merely let me *see* your map of the city! Eh? Do you want to see my silver? Here!"

And stop him Vergil could not, see the silver he must, and so he did. And watched the man sag as he listened to hear that Vergil wanted such a map as much as he himself did: and had none. "Though I shall try and let you see, and . . . if I have time . . . and let you take a copy of my own, when I make it. And your silver you may keep."

Finally, in a sort of not-yet desperation, and acting upon what the librarian mentioned as a wild hope, he took the way to the tax office, where he was, reluctantly, and after several applications and armed with orders and permits, reluctantly allowed to copy a copy of the cadastral map. "Who knows who mayn't begin to complain about taxes if he get a chance to see where his own property lines be drawn; ah, well!"

And with this as his prime material he began his next stage of work. After he had made sketches, after he had checked and rechecked the sketches, next Vergil drew more orderly copies. He made grids. He brought to play all he had learned from Euclid and Apollonius and Ptolemy. He did not of course have to show latitude; it was enough if he was able to show scale, and—of equal importance—keep the same scale on each of the maps.

Which is where, space having been established, time entered. And this took even more time than had the matter of space.

Regretting the present absence of his servant, he had perforce to carry on by himself; with his wax-inlaid tablets in one hand and his style or stylus in the other (its well-worn handle, of nondescript wood, had by long usage almost become fitted to his hand; its iron point had been sharpened more than once, though its use upon the wax would hardly ever exemplify the old principle that "the anvil wears the hammers out." Unceasingly, hour to hour, from day to day, he went about the city, questioning not the magnates alone but

their foremen and servants and slaves; when the tablets were on both sides filled up, he transcribed the data into a book he kept always with him, and with the blunt end of the style rubbed out the former notes and rubbed the waxy surfaces smooth, then began again. He dragged up ancient hulks and wrecks of human refuse from gutters, from under the arches of the aqueducts where the cold water dripped upon them, from the ash-tips next to whose heaped hot refuse those without homes kept warm, he asked them,

"Where were the flames when you worked?"

"When did you work?"

"Where did you work?"

"How do you remember?"

"How do you know what year it might have been?"

Clear and crisp the questions might have been, but clear and crisp the answers could not be; not, considering, who was being asked. Much watered wine—cheap, bad, the worst, nonetheless welcome, nonetheless essential—was supplied, gulp by gulp; and much broken bits of bread—also cheap, and, as sometimes, if it was too stale, into the watered wine it went to soften—was supplied, before minds could bethink them and mouths mumble answers.

"What other events happened in such and such a year?"

"Do you recall having heard the number of the year of the Reign?"

"You are quite sure that was the Emperor then?"

"Who was consul?"

"When your master's works was moved because the flames 'went sick,' was there news of war? With whom, war?"

"Heard you anyone speak, those years, you do not remember exactly which years, of prices rising or falling? Which prices?"

Understanding of what he intended there was probably none, it was to none of their immediate advantage to figure what it might be or to guess at it; likely beyond capacity, for that matter. Interest? At first, none . . . save for the wine and the small coin and the bread. How did Vergil, how could Vergil know, that they were not merely inventing, filling a vacant mouth with lies in order to fill a vacant belly? Had he begun with them, those, the castoffs, he could not have known. By having begun with those whose interest it was he should know the truth—the magnates—he had therefore somewhat of a list

to check against. And . . . among those at the bottom . . . or as near to the bottom as they could get without getting to the top of the bone-pit . . . it was curious to see how indifference of one would sometimes, often, increasingly often, change to interest when hearing what some other outthrown had to say—

"Nuh! Nuh, master! Julius was Emp'ro' when they move them work to South Gorge. Him's wrong"—gesturing to another.

And: "War! I say, was war!" was the other's reaction, he having said nothing at all about war till then, and who ignored his possible error in re the name of the then-emperor. "War in Parth'a, was, 'en they move them Magnate Muso work, South Gorge!" And his vehemence died off into a cough, a trickle of some inclement ichor oozing from his protruding and pendulous lip, down upon his trembling chin; nor was it wiped away.

Whilst Vergil rapidly scrawled all this, yet a third, who till now had but stared vacantly, moving slowly round and round and gazing only at the refreshments, as though he knew not what substances they might be or what purpose to serve, this yet-a-third would crick back his head and look down his nose from wide-rolled red thick-rimmed eyes in order to add emphasis to what he had just recalled from the fragments of hell that made up his past—"Feast! 'Ey gived a feast! T'Big Slave 'e comed out an' 'e gived us each a piece o' *meat!*" (He repeated this memory of a phenomenon.) "A why? . . . piece o' *meat* . . . big as . . . big as my *hand!* A why? . . . T'Big, 'e say, master gived a feast wit' Consul Livio, come from *Rome.* As we 'feated t'Parth'ans! Oh, whudda 'feat we gived 'em! By 'Cbatan'! So, yeah, uh . . . uh . . ." The light of his recollection dimming fast, he turned to the stranger who had quickened it. Something else seemed now about to emerge. Vergil waited, marveling much that after—how long? twenty years? twenty-five?—the memory of a dusty battle on a distant frontier should remain in the mind of this human ruin because he had received, of the leftovers from a feast in joy of it, a piece of meat as large as his hand.

And as he waited to hear what else be forthcoming, the rembrancer said, "Master . . . 'as y' got a nub o' garlic witcha?"

This modest relish Vergil was obliged to disavow, but gave the yet-a-third his dole, and then scribbled a line or two more in the fragrant wax. Eventually this might emerge as *Fires at Magnate Muso's works*

diminished, requiring said works to remove to South Gorge; Julius was Emperor: check year of Livio's consulate with defeat of the Parthians at Ecbatana; and, *Fires in South Gorge;* and, *Muso's Works—where previously?* . . . And so on. And so on. And as for those who might not remember the names of monarchs, consuls, wars, defeats, of foes in Asia Magna—or who, as likely, had never known—it was useful to have learned, from some scrap picked up by the dripping water-bridge, some incident that had burned like fire into even the most eroded mind; to be able, thus, to inquire, "Was this before or after Vitolio murdered his wife, his daughter, his steward, and his son?"

Presently Vergil was to take out the carefully prepared translucent sheets and to draw grids great and small upon them, to make his designations, and to make them in the heaviest and darkest of inks, that prepared from scuttlefish, fashioned after the manner of India. And when one sheet was placed upon another, what lay beneath would be (when desired to be) visible even through what lay on top. And so eventually he would have his master map prepared, and painted in sundry colors.

And he would point.

And he would show.

But before that time.

Vergil was pleased to see Iohan return well before the end of the time he had been prepared to wait without worrying. The mare (Vergil was pleased to see her, too, and she returned his pat with a nuzzling that seemed to show that she was pleased as well, had not forgotten him, and— But before he could quite recall what else it had seemed to him that she seemed, he observed her quite laden down with close-woven basketry; even they were stacked upon the saddle; and Iohan had arrived on foot, with a story as well.

"Now, master, certain you suggested that the matter might best be tooken care of by such as hunt truffles, and so it might. Might be tooken care of, that is. But I have learned wisdom from you, and—"

They were in the yard behind their lodgings; Iohan had swept it clean even before Vergil arrived to look. Who now said, "Flattery is not always wisdom, and I hope you have not learned it from me—"

The boy merely patted his own curly pate, and said on. "It came

to me mind, ser, as truffles are rare, which same reason is one why'm they costly. Truffles are rare, and rarer are the swine as hunts 'em. And it do follow as rarer yet, the ones as leads such swine on leash. Whereas common swineherds of common swine be . . . well . . . *common.* Numerous, as you might say. Therefore."

Once again, that *therefore!* But the fellow had reasoned well.

The fellow now carefully spread out a clean and wide cloth of coarse weave on the ground of the yard, opened one of the baskets tied with wisps of straw-grass he must have braided himself and, reaching in a hand, brought out a quantity of loam and leaf mold and broken twigs and shells, which he loosely but carefully emptied. "You have been in the beechwoods, then!"—Vergil.

"Aye, ser master. And"—he gestured to a bale of baskets of a different weave—"in the chestnut woods as well. And on t'other side of the she-beast be evidence I were in the oaks, too: Where there was mast, I went on master's business. I hasn't sense enough to know as there mayn't be them small creatures in a numerouser quantity, even, in other woods and groves. All as me mind say to me was, if no swine-food on the forest floor, no swineherds, either; and so what sense nor profit for me alone to stoop and squat and pick the fallen twigs up, and leaves and such, in hopes of plucking here a salmandel and there a salmandel. . . . Hark!" Vergil looked up, listened—nothing unusual. Was Iohan's *hark!* like Iohan's *therefore:* a usage peculiar to himself? Not quite. "Hark, ser, as what a Sar'cen merchant says to me as I rides upon me way. 'What has thee there in them baskets, oh son?' I says, 'Salmandels, but same is not for sale.' —He laughs a-scorn, says he, what he wants with sammandal chicks? *'Sammandal.'* Iohan chuckled at the Saracen's accent. "And *'chicks'!* He says, what you mayn't believe, ser, save I tells it you, he says the sammandal (as *he* calls they) be *birds!* A four-leg'd *bird?* So he *claim.* But he haven't time to raise they from, as he figure, chicks, the baskets being so small; they need be bigger or their hides ben't worth the taking for to make sandals as will cross fire. What's he call such a skin? A bestos. Well. Iohan twisted his face and his brows into an expression of more than mere incredulity, of—almost—concern; reverted to the immense oddity of the Saracen's notion. "But . . . a *bird!"*

Vergil said, with a smile that slightly acknowledged the antic qual-

ity of the idea, "There is a connection, and a fearful one, between them and certain birds—or *bird*—but it need not concern us now." And he looked down at the small, small, very small young salamanders, creatures rather resembling lizards in appearance, yet not lizards at all.

Iohan let him look a moment before asking, "Be they of the right sort, ser?"

Vergil assured him that the salamanders were of the right sort. "And of the right size, too. 'Chicks,' just so. Of the first year. If they were older and larger, they would not suit. *No!*" Dim in the daylight, the creatures moved but slowly in the comparative cool of the shadowed yard. "You've done well, Iohan. And here's a silver piece of money for you, too."

The curly head dipped a bit. "I thank you, ser, you're very kind. Nor has I forgot a special something for you, neither—I coulda worked a lustrum, full, for Fulgence, nor he'd of give me no present, such—ser. Not but what laboring for him hadn't had its comic side. But hark!" He drew out a small bell of rustic craftsmanship and rang. Sweet, no one could have called it. An odd gift, still—

"Iohan, I thank you."

"For when you might want me, ser, as I ben't near to call: but ring, ser."

Vergil gravely told him that he would.

And so, night following night, the stench no less than by day, the forges resounding to the hammers' blows at midnight as at noon, for sundry nights the two went, master and man, from blasted waste to blasted waste; Iohan carrying the baskets, Vergil the rolls and scrolls and a few other items to be used with them. Each part of each waste he had already marked upon a grid-worked chart, and given a number; some were entire squares, others were mere parts thereof, the wastelands not always accommodating themselves to clean geometrical division, but shaped as each section might be, it had its coded equivalent upon the chart. And as they passed along in the semi-lurid gloom, Iohan carefully set down, at Vergil's word, a single small salamander in each "square", Vergil marked off each place so "planted" with but a touch of lead upon the gridded chart, and on they went, to do it again . . . and again . . . and again . . . and on and on . . . and on. . . . Sometimes they required the aid of

Vergil's special lamp within its box windowed with lumps of glass like burls (though he had a better way of enhancing light, he chose not, for sundry reasons, to use it, lest, for one, he attract attentions not desired); and sometimes they did not, the light of the natural fires spurting up from far and near often being quite enough.

The wasteland was far from often smooth beneath their feet. At times it was merely uneven, at times there were small holes, other times far from small, gaping and sunken; now and then was encountered such rubble as was left when one works was abandoned, its fire having "gone sick," died down: timbers too tired or rotten to be moved, iron too rusted for salvage, shreds of rags worn beyond reuse even to test a dye upon . . . and other stuff serving only to stumble over, had they not moved cautiously. Nowhere, indeed, did he see any such line as that one said to have been engraved upon a galley slave's oar washed ashore somewhere in Ultima Thule or akin far-off place beyond ken, *Oft was I wearied when I worked at thee,* though the thought came to him that such would not be amiss here.

Toward the waning hours of each night so passed and spent, they moved their own wearied bodies to some high place or hill, whence they might spy down upon the wastes. For the most parts all was dark and dim. Sometimes they saw a glowing light, sometimes they saw one argent-pale. Iohan had known the story of the salamander, who had not? Could Iohan have been trusted to select only those in their first year? Possibly not. Therefore Vergil had counseled him—and him, to counsel others: those forest herdsmen of swine—to select, and to select only, the salamanders no bigger than his, Iohan's, index finger. The young man was stalwart, but he had not reached his full growth yet at all (almost he seemed to be growing from day to day, to have grown a bit, perceptibly, during his absence); who could know, how could Vergil have known, how large the swineherds' hands might be, or how long their fingers? Suppose any of them to be older or larger, either way to have fingers longer than Iohan's? If any of them should have index fingers longer than the lad's, say, as long as Iohan's next finger, the so-called "digit of infamy," well, it would still not be too long. Salamanders of such a size would still be within the proper length. So Vergil mused.

For the most part, there below, all was as dark or as dim as when they had walked across those parts, stooping, marking. But as with

tired eyes they peered, in other parts, not so. Now and then Iohan gave his master a slight tap on arm or shoulder; pointed. There, then, where he gestured, would be seen some spot of light, like that of a glowworm, though less intermittent, or not at all. Sometimes they saw one golden-bright, sometimes they saw one argent-pale. Sometimes a mere single spot, and this, Vergil knew, was that of a single small salamander that had sought and found some nearby bit of warmth, signaling by its now-glowing presence some fire beneath. This he would mark in the (approximate, if not better) proper space upon the grid-worked chart. This he did regardless. Many a pickle makes a mickle. But what gave him (and Iohan) the greater satisfaction was when a number of such fiery spots was seen, sometimes moving slowly, sometimes swiftly, sometimes appearing, as 'twere, one glowing mass of fire . . . yet different, clean and clear different, from the greater blazes whence were shooting forth the subterranean fires that constituted the real riches of the Very Rich City . . . or, even, merely, smoldering. For such sights meant that more than a few small salamanders had found out where a greater heat lay beneath the surface, though that heat be nowhere ordinarily observed above.

And this place, too, was marked. By night, with a certain sign in dark lead. By day, when day came, refreshed with paint of bright-red minium.

Sometimes, of course, as they had known would happen, the salamanders merely found their ways (naturally, but now, to Vergil, uselessly) to some of those many fires already visible and known and worked, and there would crawl quite fast into the glowing, roaring heart of such, there themselves to glow the selfsame fire color as the flames themselves; though from above unseen.

As for others, whenas either Iohan or Vergil or both came the following day to check, it happened more than once he or they found a trail as though left by some influorescent slug or snail; and would trace and follow, only to see the shining line disappear into the tiniest of tiny holes or the slimmest of cracks or fissures. Sometimes their feeling the ground thereat was rewarded with a feeling of fire or heat: a seal upon the chart, of a different sort than the other marks. Sometimes, of course, the temperature of the ground round about such cracks told them nothing to the touch. But the trail was there, the

trail of the salamander, that creature born for fire as the frog is born for water. And they would know that some sense stronger by far than any sense of man had informed the salamander, had, as it were, beckoned it, had tempted and drawn it thither and in and down: and that, though they saw this not, they would know that somewhere in caverns below, in fires so far beneath and below the surface that the surface told no man aught, in the flaming depths of hell that lay beneath Averno those creatures reveled, awaiting their own transformation into fire and flame. These deepest places they had sought as certain fish seek the deepest pools.

But it was of the utmost importance that the salamanders being used were no older than their first year, for at that age, though their inclination toward the fire was fully developed, it was an inclination that must result in every one of them being gradually subsumed into the fire; within much less than one year would each atom of flesh be replaced by an atom of fire, and so, atom by atom, these fingerlings would, glowing, vanish into fire and flame. A salamander of the third year, however, though still provided with the same instinct, would have already passed a climacteric, visible to the eye (this climacteric) chiefly only as to the salamander's size; prior to that the salamander "chick" would be to the true salamander as the tadpole to the true frog; only after that time would it be a true salamander: And the salamander, the true salamander, its skin by now proof against the searing flames, its inner heat transformed, contrarities clean reversed, *sympathies* changed into *antipathies*—the salamander thus transformed, in contrarity to all folk belief would not start a fire; it would by its mere presence, and weight for weight, atom for atom, put the fire out. And all this he had learned in Sidon, where he had studied fire.

And now and again on such nights, was the wind in the right quarter, or was the night quieter than most, or were they in some sound-pocket, kith to an echo chamber . . . or whatever and whyever . . . they might hear the tambours beat and the cymbals clash and such other sounds and cries betimes they might hear as told them that Cadmus the King, Mad Cadmus, King of Averno and King of Fools, still danced in the mule market—

—and sometimes they would learn, by the direction of the cries

and sounds of song and music, that not there alone did he dance. Not only there. At all.

At length:

Another look Vergil took at the master map. All was in order as it had been when last he looked not a second or so before; why had he so suddenly looked again that he could feel his head snap? What had he so suddenly seen, which he had either not seen before, or had not noticed, or—

There was Averno, there Baiae, there the Portus Julius, Cape Misenum, the Bay, down there Naples, Cumae not far off, off there the Isle of Goats, over here . . .

He heard that voice now among all voices men could ever hear, echoing as from a thousand chambers forth, and, echo ceasing as swift as if it had never been, voice speaking in that awful and awesome crooning that surely no man durst stand to listen to, save his heart was at least at that moment clean; he saw the words limned upon the map: *Cumae.* . . . How had he dared not have thought to visit *her* before daring to think, even, of coming *here?* Every tiniest hair he felt distinctly rise upon his flesh, large parts and small. Had they noticed, the magnates, looking at him there, whilst from every side the hammers smote the white-hot iron upon the hundred and the thousand anvils? . . . whilst he stood here, here in this sullen mockery of a council chamber, the absurd and ugly frescoes peeling from the sullen walls?

"Have you—I suppose you have—must have—have you? The Sibyl . . . consulted? You have, you, of course you have." Did they see his lips a-tremble? Hear his voice quivering? ". . . consulted the Cumaean Sibyl?" One who had presented her prophetic Books to Tarquin the Proud when he had been king above the Senate and the People of Rome. He who had refused to pay her price. As if he had been haggling over the cost of a lard-sow. She who had without one complaint consigned all but one of the Books into her fire. He who had presently asked her present price. She who had told him what she had done and had told him that the price was for the one sole remaining Book what it had been for all the Books. He who had started from his chair so it fell crashing back, and in utmost haste pushed forth to pay it.

Vergil asked, the magnates answered. "Oh yes. Of course. This was almost the first thing." Almost their voices seemed to grumble, *How dare thee ask,* there in the dingy hall on whose walls the dingy devils of Etruscany leered at malefactors, beaks like those of raptor-birds, and lunged and threatened with the tines of hay-forks. What artist had done this? Was he free or captive? What did it matter?

How the hot and sulfur-tainted air parched his tongue and dried his mouth. With his teeth he scraped spittle enough to swallow, and swallowed that he might ask another question. Before he could, however, one magnate fixed him with a low and lingering look. *"She was not cheap,"* said that one. With a lowering look, and one which accused.

"Ah. And . . . Magnate . . . what said the Sibyl . . . ?"

The magnate now looked at him again. All the magnates looked up. Scribes and secretaries looked up, the scribes from their scrivening, the secretaries from their secrets—all looked at him. A pause.

He ventured, "What . . ." He fell silent.

Then, "What said the Sibyl? You ask us, Master, what the Sibyl said? What . . ." Some faced some others, asked among themselves. "He asks? He asks what the Sibyl said. . . ." They shook their heavy heads, as though in bepuzzlement, befuddlement; they rumbled a bit together, more. Then they gestured one to be their spokesman, who half-arose, sat down. His face and gurgling voice seemed more to defend than accuse.

"Did indeed Master Vergil ask . . . *You* ask *us,* Master: *'What did the Sibyl say?'* "

"Yes."

The gurgling voice seemed some troubled, but it answered, right then.

"Why, Master, *she* said to ask *you."*

He heard that voice among all voices, then, as though echoing from a thousand chambers forth. *Dux, Dominus, Magister, Magus.*

The litter of the Legate Imperial had carried Vergil that time to the latter's chambers; afterward it had carried him back. Now and then, not often, some magnate or other had lent him another, other, litter, litters; it had not seemed to him that they had done so ungrudgingly; furthermore, their litters smelled evil. There were times,

places, he had needs go afoot. But now this day he remembered that there was the mare; he had of course never taken her to the fire-fields or slag-heaps or to any of the smoky or the stinking-steamy works; scarcely had he remembered her than he looked out his window and saw horse and horse-boy coming out into the street below.

Iohan. Mostly, as they had walked and worked together, as they visited not the wastes alone but the manufacturies, the boy had been silent, perhaps in awe, perhaps from fear. Now and then he had made some comments, some few. Once, for instance: "They be clever, mighty things, master, these arts of fire and metal. Canny things, they be."

Absently, yet with some touch of playful scorn, Vergil had asked if the boy might like to stay and study them. There. The young face, which had lit up for a moment, sank into some show of contempt not the least bit playful. " 'Study them'? Mayhap, master. That might be, ser. But . . . ser . . . *here?* Were I lingered here, 'twould be my death I'd study."

Vergil had said nothing more of that. Now he came down, greeted his servant, looked at the mare. *Still,* she looked familiar—*had* he ever mounted her before her hiring? She looked, also, in good fettle. "They care for her well, then, boy?"

The boy flung his head back, looked at his employer eyes-to-eyes, though the eyes of one of them looked up and the other's eyes looked down. " *'They'?* Ser, *I* cares for her. *'Well'?* Didn't I feed her, she'd go ill-fed. Didn't I sleep in her stall, like that they'd cut her tail off to sell the hairs; belike worse they'd do to her . . . though she's a canny beast, master, ser. Seems this morning she wants to be the better for a ride about, and thus, ser, I have taked the liberty. For perhaps you, too, ser. Therefore."

Iohan's *therefore* included a good deal more than a rhetor might allow. But it was full understood. He had laced his fingers and was about to bend and help Vergil mount when suddenly he stopped. He did say nothing, but his eyes moved, and Vergil's followed their direction. It was Cadmus they saw, and this the second day in a row that Vergil had seen him. Whether the King of Fools still danced in the muddy market or hung bright tapetties upon the black walls or flung garlands round the necks of black mules, Vergil had lately neither heard nor inquired. But yesterday he had seen him close.

Yesterday he had seen him close. The madman had walked along heavily, looking neither up nor down; his madness lay well-heavy upon him and in this burden there was no room for gaiety and abandon. His lips had moved and muttered, but the tone of voice was thick, and his very color was not as it had been before; there were no roses in his cheeks, no frenzy, fine or otherwise, played round about his eyes and mouth; but his face was the color of slate, and the instant thought in Vergil's mind had been, *This man looks as though he were already dead. . . .*

But today, today again came Cadmus, walking close next to Vergil. This was yet another Cadmus: swift his speech, pale his lips and face, but not, today, corpse-pale; the words came forth jerkily. "What will he do, what will he do, what will he—"

Vergil had not thought to interrupt him, for to interrupt a madman was notoriously as dangerous as to interrupt a sleepwalker; no such information burdened the mind of Iohan. "What will *who* do, me sire?" asked he.

And Cadmus answered, without anger, without surprise, "He whose life I am obliged to live." The stop at the end of this was the only full stop in all his speech; instantly after it he resumed his "What will he do?" and this changed to "What will be done, what will be done, what, what, what?" And then he passed out of their hearing and, rounding a corner, out of their seeing as well.

Iohan gave his head a quick shake. His hands had stayed clasped. He said, "Be pleased to mount up, ser, for if we tarry, one of them local brutes will fling an insult at or a turd at me, and I shall be obliged to fight him, ser."

Vergil placed his ankle in the clasped hands and mounted. The mare gave what seemed to be a gratified sigh, but Vergil's mind was not on this. "Slavery at the forge does not produce good manners," he said. And rode.

Iohan seemed moody. "Ah, ser, the freedmen here are worse than the slaves . . . and the citizens, worse than the freedmen."

As if to prove a point, by and by someone rough-hailed them from a small upper window. Vergil did not know the house, but he knew the face; rough-skinned, warty, pop-eyed though it was, still it brought a rush of thoughts far from ugly with it; still . . . "Magnate Rano," Vergil said politely. "If you are well—"

But Magnate Rano did not seem to desire the complimentary salutation completed; perhaps, in fact, he never had heard it completed. It was in fact not impossible (Vergil thought) that the man had never before even heard it begun. "Come up!" said Magnate Rano. His head withdrew, an order was barked, was heard repeated by a second voice, by and by the small door in the large gate opened. A surly servant appeared, gestured, said sourly, "In!" He cleared his throat, pursed his lips, seemed about to spit. Did not. Iohan unclenched his fists.

But, Vergil not dismounting, the doorkeeper, mantling his annoyance very little, repeated, "In! In!"

"Open the gates."—Vergil.

The doorkeeper, now more astonished than sullen, and realizing that the visitor intended to ride in, exclaimed, "Nuh! Nuh! In! Down!"

Perhaps it was the rough tones of Rano (different, certainly, from his previous manner when in his own home), perhaps the presumption of yet another troll-thrall, perhaps fatigue exhibiting itself in the form of pride, perhaps all of these and more of these than he could have then and there said in words or even formed in thoughts; whatever: Vergil turned to Iohan (who had clenched his fists again, perhaps unwise, but he was still quite young), said, "As you are the servant of a wizard, you may wish to observe how one turns a man into a toad." And lightly he struck against his leg the light stick he carried; it was not the willow wand of the Order, but perhaps the inhospitable Janus did not know that. For a second or so the man stared at the slight rod as though curious why anyone should think he feared its sting; then, as Vergil began simultaneously to make an odd sound in his chest or throat and to cause the stick to make little jumps, the doorkeeper's eyes bulged, his mouth gaped and showed its filthy teeth; the odd sound became audible as a low, slow croaking: the man vanished.

In an instant the bolts were heard grating, and then, first one side, then the other, of the great iron-bound gates were swung open. The doorkeeper bowed so low that not alone his scurfy scalp but his scabby neck was displayed.

"You are to treat my servant well," said Vergil, riding into the courtyard. "And my horse."

Bows, grunts, groans.

Vergil dismounted.

A servant of quite a different sort was there to guide him to the upper story; grave, silent, composed: a Greek perhaps, or Syrian. Any nostalgia for the groves of Arcadia or the rivers of Damascus that wrenched his heart (and how could it not?) his face well concealed. This house was not Rano's, but besides Rano there were gathered there most of the magnates Vergil had met before, and some whom he had not. Though the day was still young, preparations for what elsewhere would have been an evening's entertainment had been made. On the side tables were set out such eatables as roasted goat-lung, boiled owls' eggs, bitter almonds, and a huge cabbage cut in slices; also parsley and watercress: sure signs that an occasion of serious bibbling lay ahead. There were also crowns of ivy, but though meant for the same purpose, namely the avoidance of drunkenness, they were meant to be worn and not eaten. Broad gestures invited the visitor to take part, some of the gestures so broad as to indicate that participation had begun without him. Vergil set a garland on his head and he nibbled, and, for a while, said nothing.

"My lord seems pensive," said someone strange to him, perhaps one of the outsiders who had inherited a business in Averno and returned now and then to show he was still liable to return now and then, in hopes of minimizing the inevitable peculation for which prolonged absence from business gives such excellent opportunity to those who remain present at the business scene. A flaccid fellow, this, with sense enough to be dressed neither negligently nor ostentatiously; but this was perhaps due to his valet, and his valet could not provide him with sense in conversation . . . or, for that matter, much in anything else.

"Perhaps my lord is thinking of this important matter now before us." The immediate matter now before them consisted of an enormous quantity of wine, so spiced and honeyed and fruited as to lead one to suspect the quality of the vintages whose tastes were thus disguised. "Great heat, what we might term, I ask my lord's opinion, intense heat? Eh—not only produces great effects when produced on the surface, but performs very wonderful transformations among things below the surface, as we may see in *De Natura Fossilium* . . . in *De Natura Fossilium* we may see that—but surely my lord will

know of all this, of course, being a Consul of Philosophy, as I do perceive."

Vergil thought it likely that the man perceived very little, but instead he said, "Hardly. No. Nor am I to be honored as 'lord' "—some old echo in this thought here; but he did not pause. "Neither am I nor was I ever a Consul in Philosophy; I was a student and sat at the feet of more than one. But I am not one." The fellow heard him out politely. But he was clearly dubious about the disclaimer; it may be that he was dubious about anyone's disclaiming an honor, for it was less than dubious that he would disclaim any himself. Somewhere he had picked up the title of *De Natura Fossilium,* and the being able to mention it and the scrap or two of something contained in it was for him a merchandise or coinage that would never wear out. A fortunate man (thought Vergil), to have so little and to be so rich.

They were saved by Lars Melanchthus from any further need to discuss any sentence in *De Natura Fossilium.* Lars Melanchthus shouted, "Well, you have eat enough salad and such now, Wizard, needn't fear getting slop-slop; so, now, Wizard, *drink!*" Vergil did usually not require shouts in order to drink, the drink need not be "the best Falernian," but this time it might have been that without the shout he would have done without the drink. Still, the shout had come. A single word came to his mind, and said more than a volume of elaborate Stoic philosophy. *Therefore.* One of the butlers came forward and dispensed for Vergil, who bowed, poured his libation-drops, and sipped. The wine was, alas, just as he feared. But dally as he would, he was from time to time summoned to drink more. The magnates needed no shouts to urge themselves on. Again Melanchthus called out, wiping his oozy chin. "We were sending to send for you, Wizard, yes! Yes! Only, being wizard, you knew, ha-ho!"

Ha-ho, indeed, thought Vergil. What he knew was that there was enough strong spice and crushed fig in this ghastly mixture, this hideous hippocras, to physic a horse sicker than Hermus had been. Perhaps if he drank enough of it, it might numb his taste . . . or distaste. So . . . *therefore* . . . he did drink more. In any civilized city the leading men would regard drunkenness with abhorrence; hence the customary precautions against it. But here, here the alexipharmic salad herbs, the roasted goat-lung, the boiled owls' eggs, the

ivy wreaths, and all of that was evidently a mere show: They did not wish to use these to prevent becoming drunk, they were determined to become drunk in spite of having used them. A mere show. As was so much in Averno. Ah, well . . . His mind thought and sought another saw or wise-word or . . . Ah. When in Averno . . .

When in Averno, *what?* This time the arriving of the answer was interrupted, for when one of the servants stumbled slightly and spilled somewhat more than a few libation-drops upon the costly robe of Grobi, Grobi, without even rising, struck the cupbearer such a blow below the navel that, with one sick shriek, he fell, doubling up, and crashed to the floor, where he lay, still writhing, and bleeding among the shattered shards of the mixing bowl which his fall had brought crashing down with him. Much laughter among the magnates. Grobi next performed an action closely similar to one that Vergil had already seen locally performed before: Hoisting his robe, he urinated . . . not, to be sure, directly onto the floor, but onto the man who lay there. *Immense* laughter among the magnates.

And so the rank ritual continued. There being neither water-clock nor sandglass in sight, Vergil did not know how long it had continued, when, by the arrival of steaming goblets which, from their vile odor, did not contain hot wine however bad, he was given notice that the first stage of the gathering was coming to a close. The goblets held that horrid black brew, broth of Sparta, made of pigs' bones, vinegar, sows' wombs, and salt; by some account a general staple of that ever-dangerous kingdom; by other accounts merely the sole sustenance provided for the Spartan striplings during their long term of semi-secluded training. Here in Averno it was regarded as a cure for the drunkenness against which the cabbage, parsley, cress, and so on and on had been no prophylactic at all, nor even the eggs of owls, sacred to Athenian Minerva who had ever from ancient times been the adversary of Asian Dionysus and thus of all drunkenness.

" 'Twould have been better to have cooked the salad in the soup," croaked Vergil. The magnates bellowed loudly at this, then—many of them—vomited into the broad basins held for them by the servants, gulped more of the black hell-broth—and on *that* went. And on. And on.

By and by the next stage of the session was reached. And even by the standards of stinking Averno, by that time the chamber stank.

The same silent Levantine (if Levantine he was) who had shown Vergil up to the chamber on the second story materialized with a miraculously clean table, and—

—and the case containing Vergil's carefully made maps. Who now asked, demanded, "How came those here, Magnates?" For, certainly, he had not brought them with him.

There were a few grunts of *"Uh!"* of surprise, not . . . it seemed . . . of surprise that the maps were there as that he should ask how they came to be there. One who spoke better Latin than the others took it upon himself to answer. "You made them, Master Wizard, for us. Not so? It will be that we have bought, and so . . . and so we have brought." The still-silent Greek or Syrian, or be he whatever he was (he was or had been, surely, a slave: that was the substance . . . and the essence . . . of his condition), carefully removed the maps from the cylindrical case of cow's leather; set them on the table. The man was as one who makes motions behind a sheet at a shadow-play, whilst the dialogue is pronounced by others. On the side.

There was a very curious locution in the phrase *It will be that we have bought,* one that the grammarians likely could not approve (for one thing, it was not found in the books of Homer or the speeches of Cato); but, no possible model for good common usage or rhetoric though it was, it was as full of reminder as an egg was of meat. By the magnates' having commissioned the work, the work was theirs to command and to bring and fetch—rather, to have it brought and to have it fetched—*but they had not yet paid for it!*—and should they, for any reason, eventually decide *not* to pay for it, what was he to do? —Though they had used it as though they *had* paid for it—what was he to do? No lawyer back in the small port where he was still so new in both residence and practice would seriously engage a suit against the *Very Rich City,* though, to be sure, some one or two or three might not object to mulcting him for out-of-pocket expenses . . . at the least . . . and if he were to seek more serious counsel in, say, Naples, why, what could they advise him there save to proceed to Rome and try to interest one of the great jurisconsults at Apollo's Court. No. He bowed, a very slight bow, one of civil acknowledgment, as though having received a civil reply. And he said nothing.

Most of the maps were transparencies: very difficult to prepare.

Some were on membrane, some on parchment scraped very thin, a devilishly hard thing to achieve the right degree of thinness and yet make no hole. He had, as an experiment, made one on that cloth—translucent, pale, and strong—purchased in the foreign shop. And some few others were on that new and wonderful kind of papyrus which, made all in one piece and sheet, unlike the cross-strips of common papyrus that were glued and pressed together, offered one single complete flat surface every single part of which might be writ upon; this had come from some source unknown, far along the Great Silk Road. It was not as costly as silk but it was to Vergil's mind incomparably more utile.

"And so now, Master Wizard. Please show. Explain. Advise."

From somewhere in the gathering came a sole grumble. "What need? Hecatombs." And, again, that slower, grumbling repetition of *"Hec-a-tombs . . ."*

With the belief that all the problems of the shifting, waning natural fires of Averno might be solved by sacrificing oxen in hundreds to Demogorgon, Vergil had no desire to argue. Religion could be sometimes, not often, was, a touchy subject. What else should he do now? Invite the magnates to leave their chairs or couches and come gather round the table? Had there been but a few, this is exactly what he would have done. But there were too many. And then . . . too . . . he felt, somewhat . . . well, truthfully . . . more than somewhat . . . that he had been disparaged. They looked upon him, it seemed, as some mere hawker of trifles, one whose peddler's pack might be removed from his quarters and glanced over in their own, at their leisure and their pleasure. Again he asked himself, was it for this that he had made that long, *long* and more than circuitous journey "from Sevilla to Averno"? Well. Let them see who else and what else he was and might be. And what he could do.

A long way from Sevilla to Averno; yes it was. And it was a long race they had run on that one certain day there, in the Second Secret School. There was no business of: present your thesis, declaim your thesis, defend your thesis, pay your fee, receive your gold ring, your hood, and all the rest of that. Vergil had done that, of course, done all of that. Later. Elsewhere. Hence, *Master* Vergil.

But not in Sevilla. In Sevilla, on that one certain day, they had done none of that.

Out had come the duumvirs of the School: Calimicho, the gray, the gaunt, the grim; and Putto, the obscenely fat. With voices so in unison that absolutely what was heard was in effect one voice, they two then had called, in ringing tones (literally, the tones had rung, as though two bells, one bass and one treble, had sounded with insistent, consistent precision), "Leave that which you are now doing, and leave it undone. There comes now the last lesson, *now, now, now"* (bell, bell, bell); "the final test, the last ordeal, and then the time of payment. You are to run now the Petrine Race." Half, the students shuddered; half, they cast eyes about to see whence, *if,* they might escape, knowing every one of them at once that escape there could be none: either victory or . . . not death. Certainly not. Not altogether, death. (What, they knew not. Not at all.) Calimicho flexed his rope-wire limbs; who, the gods! could hope to outrun Calimicho? Putto took a few ponderous waddling-quaking steps to one side, as though the better to position himself to see the race from vantage best, Calimicho made an odd gesture; sun-rays appeared.

"Take ten steps backward. . . ." The students did. "At the count of four: Turn. Run. *One.*

"Two."

Every eye was on Calimicho.

"Three."

Calimicho was not there.

"Four. Turn. *Run."*

It is said that inside every fat man there is a thin man, struggling to get out. Vergil had heard it said a hundred times. Suddenly he had known that, in this at least one case, it was no mere saying. Between the word *Four* and the word *Turn,* Putto had split open. That monstrous carapace of folds and fat simply fell, asunder, on the pitted floor: there stood for that one second's fraction before their horrified eyes someone young and slim and strong and naked, oiled and dusted red as any athlete "waiting for the trumpet beneath the portico." Who gave—*once*—that same inhuman scream that Vergil had heard but once before. What came instantly next was not the trumpet but the word *Turn:* They needed it not, they would have turned, so total was their terror, had no word come, and—*Run . . . ?* Prob-

ably none of them could afterward have said if or not he had actually heard that command pronounced; of course they had run.

Ahead of them at the far end of that suddenly sunlit hall there stood Calimicho, gray and gaunt and grim. Toward him they ran, not knowing for certain sure what he would do to any of them when they reached him, but pausing in no way to wonder, they, racing, ran.

And the runner, slim, who had all this while been embodied inside of Putto—ah, how fat! and now one knew why!—this runner, racing, ran behind them.

Ran, that is, behind all but one of them.

Somehow, Vergil himself knew then not how, by what twist of his body and his mind and the light and . . . or . . .

Vergil ran behind the one who ran who had been hidden, all this while, inside of Putto, the obscenely fat.

Vergil's mind and matter were all intent against some sudden stop and turnabout on this runner's part, he did not concentrate at all on what the other students were doing: who was first, who neck-and-neck, who this or who that; but half-dimly he did note one who was running quite a number ahead of last, a Thracian, thick and swart and strong; they had not called him by his half-forgotten name, but "Thrax" they had called him; it befell that Thrax made the dread mistake as Orpheus and one other: Thrax turned and looked behind. Thrax stumbled. Thrax did not fall, but Thrax had lost his place. Calimicho stepped forward as Thrax raced frantic across the slanting sunlights on the pitted floor, Calimicho snarled a single word, Calimicho stamped down his foot as one would upon a snake but it was no snake down upon which came his stamping tread, it was on Thrax's shadow. Thrax yet ran hard panting one more second fore, the shadow parted from his frantic feet with a sound so strange and horrid Vergil hoped ne'er to hear it ever again or more.

A frightful sound.

But not so frightful, was it—? More frightful, was it—? the frightful shriek of Thrax, which he uttered even before he knew the cause of this swift-sudden and never-felt-before, never-to-be-free-from more, unknown and dreadful pain. Thrax stumbled again. Calimicho seized the severed shadow up from where it lay flopping and writhing on the floor; Calimicho, by some trick no wrestler Vergil had ever

seen do, Calimicho threw the shadow up and caught the nape of it between his teeth: ah, Calimicho's most frightful grin! And, holding it thus secure between his clenching teeth, he turned and twisted and tied it fast. Then he folded it, still asquirm, still flapping, and he placed it in his sack. And tied one knot with his thong of human skin (it had a tuft of human hair upon each end of it).

All knew, ah! that sack of gaunt Calimicho's! Many a thing they had seen go into it, but not one had they ever seen go out.

By now even Thrax knew what had happened.

By now the nameless runner had slacked his pace, the race was done, he allowed himself a glance at Vergil as he, the unnamed runner, cantered on at an angle before finally coming to a stop. The dust was red upon his oiled and sweaty limbs, odd blue-green was the eye with which he gave Vergil a single glance. Thrax began again—for he had for one second ceased, and gasped, and began again to scream. He flung himself upon the pitted floor a-front of Calimicho, his back heaving; repeatedly he raised his head and as he gibbered and drooled repeatedly he bowed it down again and banged it before Calimicho; soon, the gibbering became words: "Ruler, Augur, Satrap, Lord . . . my shadow . . . shadow . . . shadow . . ."

"It is done!" said Calimicho. He did not address Thrax. To the other students he said *It is done.* He flung up an arm and made an odd gesture, flinging up and forward, outward, the fingers that had been clenched. The light bedimmed. "The fee is paid. The course is finished. Go, go. Do not tarry: *go.*"

Thus it was. It was (thought Vergil) the entire cost and charge of six-and-sixty students—teaching and materials and lodging, food, and all, for more than twelve months and several: paid, paid in full with one single captive shadow!

And still Thrax groveled and still he wept and begged. "Basil. Turan. Magus. Rex . . . my shadow . . . shadow . . . shadow . . ." He beat his head upon the floor and flung his head from side to side; his blood and snot and slaver sprayed the other students, all.

Calimicho gave one faint grin. Then he yawned. Then there stepped forward another student, a Northish one, who had early boasted *(once)* that his father was an earl. "Warlock," said he, "this is not just. It was not Thrax who ran up last. It was"—his glance met

Vergil's, eyes to eyes, the Northishman's mouth closed, opened—"another," said he.

Calimicho at leisure finished his yawn. Then he said, and, ah! how matter-of-factly, "It's not a matter of who runs first or who runs last. It's merely a matter of who gets caught." He teetered a bit on his toes. Very quietly he said, "Begone. All."

As Vergil passed, in his turn, down along the long, long corridors, he thought much of Thrax, and, less, of Thrax's shadow. Never more might Thrax dare venture out on any sunlit day, save at noon, when no man casts a shadow: that therefore fearsome, fearful hour of terror sacred to Great Pan. (As for those who said, "Great Pan is dead," had they never witnessed panic?) Thrax must henceforth even fear a moonlit night, and an even moonless one if lamps and torches might betray him. Thrax might indeed skulk, hide, dart swiftly and in pain from one dark place to another, sidling along dim walls and into dimmer corners. He might. He might try. To what avail? The man without a shadow was like a man with leprosy, save he needed neither cloak nor bell. No.

There was but one thing (Vergil realized) that Thrax could really do. He could stop on at the Second Secret School, and do the bidding of its principals. In all things. *In all.* He might there and thus at least hope someday to get his shadow back. Or to get, perhaps . . . what dread *perhaps!* . . . another's. And as to what might perhaps be done with Thrax's shadow—

And Thrax's blood and snot and slaver not yet dry—

At this point in Vergil's thoughts he found that he had reached the beadle's lodge. There was a vat of water, hot, and a towel. The beadle gazed at him, gazed away, as bored as he had seen him ne'er before and ne'er would see him more; and cared full not. Said the beadle, "Wash."

Tact was wasted in Averno.

With a sweep of his arm Vergil dashed clear of everything the table nearest to him. There was more than one grunt of *"uh!"* But not one single one of *"nuh!"* And the Magnate Borsa gave another one of his enormous eructations, but as no words followed, it indicated, probably, slight surprise rather than even slight irritation. Vergil next appropriated from an adjacent table a bottle, one of the few glass ves-

sels in the room; long-necked, round-bellied, new enough to be not even slightly iridescent; and he set it down so that a beam of sunlight passed through it, to be reflected, in refraction, on the opposite wall: a small circle. Not enough. Not by far enough.

Beams of sunlight were not so abundant there in crag-girt Averno as elsewhere on and near the Parthenopean Coast; Vergil, with an odd, quick gesture, gathered together what there were of them. The rest of the room grew darker. ("Uh! . . . Uh! . . . Uh!") Into the glass vessel he poured water . . . more . . . a little bit more . . . he wished it could have been from some special spring but there was not time for any of that. "Hold up the map marked Alpha," he said, and snapped his fingers. It was not, perhaps, so very remarkable that the slave could read the leading letter of the Greek characters; what was rather remarkable was that he held the map up, not next to his body, that is, not in front of it, as he could hardly have been blamed for doing: he held it up, but away, to his right side, one arm quite above it and the other quite beneath it. *This man knows what I mean to do!* thought Vergil. But he had little time for the thought.

The small, dim, irregular circle of light on the wall now became larger, brighter, more regular, and rectangular. This produced from the magnates merely a few listless grunts . . . from one, a quite audible yawn.

Vergil's hand went to his pouch, came out with something that glittered and glimmered. It had come from a long way off, where, as sang Mimnermus,

> *There dwells AEtes in the farthest east*
> *Upon the banks of Ocean Stream*
> *Where the rays of the sun are stored*
> *In a golden chamber*
> *In that far-distant land whence the*
> *Sun doth rise . . .*

This he thrust into the neck of the glass bottle. It did not fit; he clasped his hands roundabout, brought his lips close, murmured a moment, then turned the container on its side; a tendency to roll he quickly checked by sliding slices of cabbage partly underneath it to right and left. Then, there on the wall (fortunately it was a wall that

contained no painting, though evidently preparations for one had once begun, for there was a whitened area surrounded by a border of Attic fret)—there, on the wall, contained within the border, there appeared, quite bright, and quite distinct, something that produced from the audience not a single, single, sound, not even *"uh!"* For a long moment Vergil thought that they were overpowered by what they saw. In another instant he realized that they had no notion at all of what they were seeing, for they had never seen anything of its sort before, not in any form at all. Most people, for that matter, had not.

"This," he said, speaking somewhat slowly, "is what is called a *map.* . . ." A grunt or two, or three. Then again silence.

"This is what Averno might look like from one of the hilltops, if . . ." His voice trailed off; from the audience had come a *"nuh!"* part-puzzled, part emphatic. The *might* had made no impression; in truth, what was displayed on the wall, the light magnified, reflected, refracted, expanded and projected along the long neck of the glass bottle and its stopper and passed through the transparent charts onto the whitened wall-space, was *not* "what Averno might look like from one of the hilltops." Not without the automatic exercise of an imagination already enriched by a knowledge of, and experience with, maps or charts. Absorbed in the tasks of, first, preparing the diagrams, and, secondly, now, illuminating them upon the wall surface, Vergil had neglected, had forgotten, that neither such knowledge nor such experience was common enough to be taken for granted. Should he now try to explain? Begin to try to explain?

Almost without considering, he said, "Hippocrates, who reminds us that waters, airs, and places have their special powers, also reminds us, in his *Aphorisms,* that *'Life is short, and art long; the crisis fleeting; experience perilous, and decision difficult. The physician must not only be prepared to do what is right himself, but also to make the patient, the attendants, and—'* "

But many mutters, much mumbling, and a general restiveness all informed him that quotations from learned sources, however apposite, were not what were now required. There was not time, and so he had perforce to use an easier way.

Slowly, but not so slowly as to lose the audience's attention, the lines and marks and spots, circles, squares, triangles, grids began to

change . . . blur . . . melt . . . shift . . . take shape . . . shapes. . . .

"There is on the wall a picture!" someone suddenly cried, high-voiced.

The magnates, as with one sudden motion, moved forward, stirred, gave a shuddering, muttering sigh. And one of them, and well did Vergil know which one of them, said, *"See! He is a wizard!"* It was not that there was, now, suddenly, a picture on the wall where a moment ago there had not been one; not this, alone. It was not that it was, now really was "what Averno might look like from one of the hilltops"; not this, alone. It was not even that the smokes rose and the fires flared (as those in common pictures did not); not this, alone. It was something else and more, something for which they, the great magnates of Averno, the city *Very Rich,* not in conception nor vocabulary very rich at all, had no word, for they had no conception of it: It was that the picture, with its moving smokes and flaring fires, was not drawn—if in fact they thought of it as being "drawn"—in the two dimensions of length and breadth alone. They were looking at something that had depth as well. It was as though someone or something had suddenly transported them in one body to the top of one hill, and showed them what might be seen, lying there below. As though they, feeling chairs and couches beneath them, were somehow somewhere else in a dark night . . . and, looking down, saw the familiar city, *Very Rich,* which they so much controlled, there beneath them in what passed in Averno for brightest day.

Some of them groaned, as though, being aboard a storm-shaken ship, they felt not so much the oft-jested-of nausea but that grim seasick vertigo that may so painfully affect every atom of the body. One kept asking, in a tone both sharp and high, *"What? What? What?"* Others moaned. And one sole magnate, Vergil did not bother trying to discover which one (neither, it seemed, did any other one), without one spoken sound, fell with a massively heavy thud to the floor.

But the servant, the slave, he who held the map that was marked Alpha, scarcely moved a sinew.

". . . and somewhat to the right of the upper left corner," Vergil said, feeling rather like a docent in an art school, "is what was called the Old Works. . . ."

This had an immediate and calming effect upon the magnates; a picture, suddenly visible upon a blank wall, parts of which moved, and in three dimensions, was something for which *unfamiliar* was a weak description. But—*the Old Works?*—they had all heard of the Old Works, this was something with which minds could grapple. "Torto! Torto! He was there—Torto, he been there, when they was working the Old Works! Not so, Torto Magnate?"

And a voice, still deep, but with a trace of quaver, said, as though coming awake with a start, "Uh! Yuh! The Old Works . . ." And indeed, somewhat to the right of the upper left corner, a part of the picture now sprang into detail. It was disproportionate to the picture as a whole, but no one minded that, perspective was not one of the arts of Averno (scarcely was it one of the arts anywhere else, largely it had yet to be moved from the mage's elaboratory to the artist's studio and surface). And in this new and moving image one saw men at work, toiling, sweating, mixing the ore with the charcoal on the open-hearth bloomery in one place, raking the molten mass in another; elsewhere the smith holding the crude ingot with his tongs and turning it, white-hot, as the striker smote it with his hammer, not pausing to brush off the sparks that flared briefly in the thickets of their shaggy breasts. . . . All this. And more.

Vergil had never seen the Old Works, abandoned long before he was born. But Torto had seen it, old Magnate Torto; and it was from his memories (clear as cloudless day as to this past, though doubtless not so clear as to the events of even yesterday) alone that the scene took and kept form, shape, mingled with the light, upon the wall. As sudden as appeared, this, sudden, vanished. Torto had forgotten. Or wished no longer to remember.

If Torto had found it a strain, Vergil found it not much less of one: controlling the sunlight, concentrating it, projecting it, causing an image in three dimensions to appear—and *maintaining that appearance.* "Magnates," he said, "pray pay close attention to what I am now going to tell you, for *you are paying me to tell it to you.* . . ." He had them, there. In Averno, one did not pay for nothing; if one paid for something, one made use of it. As the farmer, appraising the old crone ewe, teeth so gone she can scarce eat grass, considers if he may still get one more lamb from her before she is given over to that butcher's knife unto which every sheep is born, so in Averno every

slave who labored (and every slave labored, one way or another) was closely appraised as age took toll and wearing wastage claimed its tax: Was the thrall's labor worth another year's victualing? For if not, out with him, out upon him, he might live by free labor—if he could—he might beg in the streets, though who, in Averno, save perhaps the occasional foreigner, would give alms? . . . He might slump his way to the city gate and wait turn and chance to guide for a penny . . . he might well not bother, but merely crawl and thraw his way to the common bone-pit. Thus and so reminded that they had, in effect, commissioned Master Vergil to delve and to devise answers, the magnates prepared to attend closely and to pay heed. True: They had paid him nothing yet (save for the few courtesy coins and the courtesy few robes), but, true, it was assumed that they were going to do so.

They paid, now, close heed to what he was about to tell them. *Therefore.*

"I will shortly change the picture back into what is called a *map.* On this, sirs, symbols take the place of pictures . . . or, we may say, sometimes: Very small pictures take the place of very large ones; else there would not be room. For example of a symbol, on each piggett of iron forged in this very rich city is stamped the letter *A,* and *A* is in this case a symbol for Averno. . . ." Still on its side the long-necked glass vessel, it struck him now how this vessel might be used in occamy, or alchemy, as some called it, but he did not even try to remember by what name the ampulla might be called in that other discipline. It lay, still, on its side, still a-point toward the wall, light issuing from its stoppered mouth and (it seemed) some vapors playing round about that—like, almost, steam, or fume. In a small second's pause he became aware, again, of the incessant *thump*-thum-*thump* of the thousand forges; in a second more he had forgotten it again. He explained to the magnates how a small *trident* symbolized *fire* upon his map: One by one the fires blazing in the picture faded and were replaced by symbols of flame. He told them how a *triangle* symbolized a *forge:* See then the forges fade off the wall and the triangles take their places. Dye-vats? Before their eyes the vats changed and ebbed and for each *vat* a small *circle* appeared. The sheds which sheltered, the warehouses which stored, the houses great and hovels small one by one were dissolved and replaced by symbols;

sometimes the symbol *was* "a very small picture." Streets became thick lines and alleys mere thin ones; all round about the crenellated "wall" were ringed the outlined humps that were the craggy mountains. He pointed out the thin double-lines that represented the canal from the Portus Julius, and he emphasized the difference between the small tridents that were fires which could be, when expedient, stifled by dropping a wet hide upon them, and the larger tridents that blazoned fires too large for putting out. . . .

"It is as though, Magnates, there are channels beneath the surface of your ground as there are channels beneath the surface of your skin, and some, if they bleed, will soon stop and some may be, as it were, tied off, and some are too deep to be tied. . . ."

From time to time Vergil said Beta, he said Gamma; he asked a once or twice for Alpha again, he said Delta. In every case the correct map was produced at once and held at the correct angle. Had (Vergil thought) he been expecting this particular session, at which he had arrived early merely because his mare had wanted exercise; had he been prepared, he would have provided a sort of frame which he had had in mind: a trifle to arrange, to hold the maps and charts, even to turn them, like the so-called walking tripods that moved around the symposia of the Consuls of Philosophy, dispensing wine and water as they moved. Being mostly intent upon, for one, explaining the details of the transparencies, and, for another, on the work of concentrating the light; he gave not much further thought to the silent servitor who held the maps and charts, no more than he did to the sun itself, the sole primal source of the light; ". . . and thus, Magnates, I have shown you what most of you already indeed know far better than I, how over the course of the past few decades there has been both a shifting of the active fire-holes all round about, as well as a general waning of the full force of fire. . . ."

He said Omega. He could not remember how long he had been speaking. "This final diagram, Magnates, shows that, however much the areas in which the fires spring from the earth have changed and shifted, there is nevertheless what I shall term an overlap: In longer words, there is one area, limited in comparison with the others, in which the fires have never, ever, during the periods which—"

"The father-fire!"

Who had burst forth with this interruption?—cried out three

words, and struck the table three times as though hammering an ingot on a forge? Vergil did not know, thought best to get on. ". . . in which the fires have never, ever, during the periods which my studies cover, either shifted, changed, or waned. In this one area—which a magnate has just suggested may be called that of the Father Fire—" But he had already lost the attention of his audience.

Were these ponderous grandees a-drunk again?—So suddenly? Why were they rolling from side to side, facing first one fellow, then another? Whence this sudden upburst of babblement? What reason for the intensely odd faces he now saw them pull? A tiny bell sounded; none attended. It grew louder, sweeter, was joined by another, by another; here and there an iron-forger or a wool-puller brushed absently or even (with some slight aware vexation) pulled at his own thick and shaggy ear: vain. The bells grew louder, they sounded from every corner of the room, and yet, still, they sounded sweet. Perhaps after all they were not bells but rare exotic birds. Perhaps after all they were not birds, birds notoriously did not live long in Averno; if a capon lived long enough to become fat enough for the spit or the pot, that was the long of it. But be they what they were, ringing and singing, eventually they overcame the sound of the magnates bellowing—a bellowing in which Vergil was able only to make out some references to *the father-fire,* to *hecatombs, hec-a-tombs,* and some few other words which, rather like the common converse of Cadmus, might be intelligible as single words but made no sensible connection to communication.

Not, at least, to Vergil.

And so at length the magnates became silent.

And so did the ringing and the singing.

"I would point out, Magnates," Vergil went on, calmly as before, and as though these singular tintinnabulations had never occurred and as though he had had no part in them; "I would point out that the area of the overlap, that area of, if you wish, *the Father Fire,* is not large enough to contain all the present manufacturies of your city. But I would also wish to point out that there is one thing, which, although you know it well, perhaps do not well appreciate. And those are the malodorous breaths which escape from the clefts of your rocks, there, deep in your valley. It is well known to you, I have seen, that these stinking airs are sometimes inflammable. And I

have been drawing up a scheme, one which is indeed not yet finished, whereby these bad vapors may be put to good uses. Each crack and cleft and pit from which they issue may be covered with a sort of iron helmet, and the fumes conveyed thence through pipes, much as the aqueducts for which our Empire is famous conduct water through pipes to public fountains and even sometimes to private homes. I am certain, Magnates, that it is possible for the hot waters which bubble up here and there around us to be thus conveyed as well. It should certainly be possible, Magnates, by such methods to have a source of fire at any point desired, for one need only touch a burning brand or a glowing coal to the end of the pipe from which those airs would issue—and furthermore I have the means of making devices which will extinguish such fires when desired and without the use of wet hides or anything so cumbersome—thus it would never again be necessary, that immense labor of moving forges and bloomeries, workshops and dye-shops, boiling-vats and all the rest of it, for—"

Again the babble, the tumult, the tumultuous talk broke out; this time he made no attempt to interrupt or draw away attention from their discordant discourse to his own (he thought) well-ordered address. He merely waited. He might as well not have been there. Presently he said, in that Greek whose roughness had been first smoothed in Athens and then polished at Cumae, "Put the maps down, then." The words must have been heard over and through the rumble-rumble-mumble, for the chart marked Omega vanished from the wall, and only there remained within the bordering of Attic fretwork a spread-out light, which, no longer even slightly dimmed by having passed through membrane, gauze, and thin-scraped parchment or that odd new papyrus from behind the far Pamir, shone just that much more brightly as perhaps to quicken at least one pair of eyes, and at least one magnate's thoughts, for from the mass of murmuring magnates there now sounded a voice that Vergil had heard before, and saying words that Vergil had also before heard.

"All right to go now, Wizard," it said.

With this videlicet he had gone. The vessel through which, via its long neck, the sun rays had played, indeed he did not take; it was not his; but he had once again placed his hands round about the stop-

pered part and with his mouth up close had murmured words: The stopple came cleanly and clean out, a moment it dazzled (as perhaps it had dazzled long ago from amidst the golden fleece), then it was back again in his pouch. The blank wall now went dimmer, though —not yet—dim. None else noticed. Once again the silent servitor was by his side, showed him down the stone stairs and was showing him through the courtyard—the "garden" one could scarcely call it, no plants grew therein. "What is your name, then? You have done me well, up there. Whose man, are you, then? . . ." Meanwhile he reached into his purse for a coin.

Now for the first time he heard the fellow's voice; soft it was, as—however unusual for this roughshod hole in hell—as befit a house-servitor's . . . for surely one would find it hard to picture him shoveling slag or beating bronze, even . . . perhaps, (though he hoped not), plucking the clumps of stinking wool from the blue-putrefying sheep-fells before they were dipped to pickle in the tan-tubs; and the voice said (softly), "Master Mage, it is Magnate Torto's freedman, Aymon Blandus ["Blandus, we must talk—"], and here, ser master, is ser master's horse." Saying this, he so gently guided the hand in which Vergil held the coin over to the mucky palm of the hobgoblin doorkeeper that, almost, Vergil could have believed it had been his own intent to reward the latter, instead. The troll bowed and scraped, rolling his eyes, seemed undisposed to linger, and, bowing some more, backed and was gone, hiding behind the already opened gate. Up came Vergil's boy, holding the mare.

"Have they taken care of you well, Iohan?"

"Yes, ser. Gave me some good thick wine and thick victuals, too. And offered me the kitchenmaid, but she was so stinking damnable dirty that almost I heaved the grub up; still, I says to meself, ser, 'Food is food and I ben't no dog to gobble up me own vomit.' Therefore."

Vergil nodded at this sound philosophy, was nuzzled by the mare, absently stroked her muzzle; began to turn his head, saying the while, "Now, Blandus, we must . . ." His words faded away.

As had Blandus.

Iohan joined palms and stooped for Vergil's mounting, neither yielding nor grunting as his master went up into the saddle. In Thrace, it was said *(Who* had said it? *Thrax.* O Apollo! Thrax!), the

horses were trained to kneel, as he had seen the camels kneel, afar off in Sevilla, for ease of riders' mounting. But . . . But enough of "but." Out they stepped. "Uncommon dark it be, master, even for *this* dim-pit, o' the time o'day," the boy observed.

And indeed it was. Even after leaving the extremely frustrating termination of the session behind, still Vergil felt strained; now and suddenly he knew why. He looked up. Brighter was the window of the great Magnates' chamber than anywhere else in sight. He relaxed, dismissed control. Flung outward the fingers of his upraised arm.

"There!" exclaimed Iohan. "Speak of Phoebus, he may soon appear!"

The street was now not so dun and dim; from above, a sudden silence, then a sudden outcry. *"Lights! Lamps! Torches!"* Whatever they were up to, up there, they would have to be up to it in the dark for yet a small while. What *were* they up to, up there? Suddenly he felt too tired to care.

"The mare seems to require no further much attention," said Vergil. "Just take her tackle off, wipe her just a bit with hay, and give her a little of grain . . . and then . . . and then . . . if we have four groats between us, shall we go to the baths?"

Iohan said, "Therefore."

In the warehouse of Rano.

Vergil had been in warehouses before: many and many. Some were really open courtyards roofed over with reed mats. Some were larger than the great vast halls of some palaces, and, some of those, far more secure. Some were like temples, some had *been* temples, and in some instances—not always the same—the resemblances had been magnified by the presence for sale of sacred images of marble people or shrines of silver. There were splendrous things in the warehouses of silk merchants, and to walk through them was like walking through gardens in which all the flowers of the world and many flowers of worlds other than this one were in bloom, in blossom, all. And flowering at one and the same time, gardens of delight to the eyes . . . though to the eyes alone. Sundry times he had been led almost by the hand, at one actual time actually by both hands, someone holding his right hand and someone else his left, through ware-

houses of spiceries: No mere casual stroller could after all toss a bale of precious silk-weft over a shoulder or under an arm and hope to walk off with it; but it was not beyond a physical impossibility that someone might, particularly in such trading posts where things were stored in rooms like castlements and the thicky walls of which were made for defense and the windows mere slits for archers, it was not impossible in places by necessity dim-lighted for someone to reach out a hand here or steal forth a hand there and transfer a palmful of cardamoms into a pouch or slip mirobolans or cloves into a compartment of a tunic perhaps even prepared for such a purpose. In one such place he had been led through by either hand as though he'd been a child. The hands rested gently enough in his own, but there came a moment when, forgetful, he had begun to move a hand his own; instantly the other had drawn it back and down, ah so firmly! "My hosts, I would but take my pocket-cloth and touch my nose; 'tis dusty here and I might sneeze. . . ."

"Ah, dusty *'tis* in here, serreverence, and as you are our guest and guests are sacred, for the gods send guests, take no thought for the matter, and we shall do it for you." And so, with the right hand of the custos on the right-hand side (for the left hand of this one held the right hand of Vergil), he had had his nose wiped for him. . . .

. . . and had a strong persuasion that, had he need perform perhaps another and more urgent office, another's hand or hands would do that for him as well. . . .

It was odd how the flowering silk-weaves, so gorgeous to the sight, had conveyed nothing to the nose; whereas as in the bale-stores of all balms and spices, some open and some closed, though these rich-stored items were dull and dingy to the eyes—enough! what scents, what odors there came forth from them! And from the custos on his left a semicontinuous drone, as, "These be dried rose-peels, 'petals' they be called in common speech, and these be violets and sweet clover for weaving garlands for the Indoo-folk, and here is citron-skin and thander bales have cinnamon-rinds, as the Sarcens tell us is took from the nests of great birds which do build they nests of cinnamon-stalk, and this is zedoary of the best sort and its next is zedoary of the second sort and last is zedoary of the third sort as sells for mere silver, and in the aft row—" And now for the first time the

voice of this one ceased its automatic drone. "Drag him hence," it said, "he swoons. . . ."

Something odd and rough, and pungent beyond belief, was held before his face. They were outside. "Oft the visitors do swoon and faint," said one, "for us, we be used to it. Does my serreverence be feeling some better now?" (Yet still they held his hands, yet still they held his hands! High the price of freedom. And high the price of spice.)

"Yes," he'd said. And—"But what is this you have here under my nose? Never such a commingling of scents have I—"

And one looked wry and one looked solemn, and one then said, "It be a beard shorn from a goat in Spicy Araby, my ser . . . snuff it up, serreverence, 'twill clear the nase and clear the brains a-well. . . ."

"A beard shorn from a—?" Astonishment as well as giddiness *(was* the weakness worse than the remedy?) held the question incomplete.

"From a goat in Spicy Araby, my ser. Foras though 'tis death, my ser, serreverence—keep well in mind be-case ever you are there—'tis *death* in Spicy Araby for an outsider, an interloper, a strange or foreigner, for to walk two paces off the stated roads in the regions where grow the precious frankincense and the rich myrrh trees. But though men may be kept off, who may wall the world against goats? The goats roam and the goats rut, and when they roam they browse upon they shrubs of frankincense and myrrh, and the gum it stick upon their beard. So the season come when the gum don't run from tree nor shrub, and if it run not it be not gathered, then have the Arab-folk (who be first cousin to the Sarcen-folk) time and season to herd up them he-goats and they play the barber upon them and shear they beards and same send hence by the merchant ships."

Vergil murmured that 'twas more than merely myrrh and frankincense he smelled, and, feeling better, looked up to catch the wry smile from one. "And when the buck-goats do rut, serreverence, saving your presence, they piss upon their long-beards—ah, yes! For the she-goats seemingly like that fragrance even more than t'others. —But by and by, as even now and then, we boil the beards down and strain them off and make sic use of the residual as we know how and none other may have our leave to know. And when this is done, we

do sell the mere hairs to such as weave cloth for tents; and now I see my serreverence be better, and for his pleasure." While still speaking they led him off to a room apart, where others gave him refreshment:

And where, at last, he was suffered to use his own hands to take it.

And that warehouse was not in Averno.

But in the warehouse of Rano—

In the warehouse of Rano (whither at long and at last the magnate had summoned him) it was neither frankincense nor myrrh which lay thick as smudge clouds round about. There was the inevitable, ineffable stench of the Very Rich City itself. The top-broken amphora urinals were perched all about, lest a single drop of the substance (so useful in dying, tanning, and fulling) should go to waste if someone in haste be tempted to use the floor. . . . It would have been merely the thought of the waste and not the thought of there being anything foul about the use of the floor that would bring instant and loud complaint. . . . But the very profusion of these conveniences had resulted in many of them being far from full, though full enough to allow their rotting contents to taint the air. If "air" was indeed the right word for what one was obliged to breathe. The beards of the goats of Spicy Araby were fragrant in comparison.

It was fairly dim in the warehouses of Rano as Vergil wandered his way through. No one bothered to hold his hands here, though now and then some fellow informed enough to know that Vergil was no mere common visitor and purchaser and barely informed enough to know (or guess . . . or even suspect) him for a mage . . . Perhaps, it was not impossible, such a one had heard reports, had had Vergil pointed out to him here or there . . . would now and then make the sign of the fig or of the horns with the fingers of his own hands, *confusing cause, precaution, and effect,* Vergil thought. They thought him a nigromancer, some of them, surely; not at all aware the difference—ah, that immense, that infinite difference!—for a nigromancer *must* use his powers, and must use them almost constantly, being either employing the dark forces or being used by the dark forces or else always in a struggle with them; knowing no more peace for long than Thrax (poor Thrax!) without his shadow; but surely no such subtle thoughts entered the minds of any here, dim for the most part. It was but that, seeing him and so imagining that something about

him was otherwise, automatically they feared him. Thus, the fingers they employed to feed their mouths and pick their noses and, commonly, for fouler uses yet, they now employed to ward off possible power to which they applied the same sad word: *Caca.* Bad. Hence, thus, the thumb thrust between the index and the middle fingers. *Fig.* Summoning the power of the potent pudenda, another place that had, always, fire pent in it. Or, folding back the two middle fingers and holding them down with the folded thumb, thrusting out the index and the little fingers: *Horns* (the name of that sign). The upthrust weapon of the bull, the upthrust phallus of the man, each strong to gore, to bore, sometimes in either case to draw blood: *power.* Sometimes those who made these signs (or other signs; he did not always know these others, for those who labored in Averno as well as those who bought and sold the products of that labor so often came, had come, from far and far away) made them covertly, either fearing his resentment or thinking his awareness of what they were doing might dilute its effect. A few times it was done defiantly; not often. It was done sometimes as artlessly as an animal lifts ears or tail. Or leg.

Vergil did not admit to noticing. Always, he walked on.

On one side as he walked he saw all manner of iron-work stacked.

On one side as he walked he saw, not all manner of dyed goods, for the delicate stuff was not worked in Averno, but much. Strong sunlight would not affect the iron, but would certainly do no good to the cheap cloth and its equally cheap colors. Here a "Sarcen" muttered as he turned over iron bangles and iron knife- and hatchet-blanks certainly destined for some lone sandbank where the immemorial mute- or dumb- or silent-trade still flourished: Equally the buyers and the sellers had to trust each other, for equally the sellers and the buyers feared each other. Merchandise was set out on a mat and signals made by smoke or drum (why, as he thought of this, did some other drumbeats come full-sudden and full-strong into his mind: and *which?),* or both; then see the merchants retire to their ships offshore, and well offshore, well out of spear- and arrow-range. Presently the autochthons would come forth from their forest . . . desert . . . bog . . . examine the ware, then set down beside it what they thought its worth in what they themselves had to barter: grains of gold; pearls, perhaps; tortoiseshell. An elephant's tooth.

Then come again the merchants and they assess the proffered goods. If they are content, they take and depart. If not, they return awhile to their ship, and another while they wait, then once return more. Sometimes more has been placed beside the trade goods. Sometimes not.

It would be possible, of course, for one side to cheat the other, simply to take all, and speed away.

But if so, then there is never again that trade on that beach. Only the waiting arrow, the poised spear, and the silent, poisoned point.

Was it the incessant thumping of hammer on forge that brought Vergil to a full stop? Why now? The beat of the pounding mingled in his mind with the, imagined but a moment ago, beat of drums on a distant shore. What? *Which?* He shook his head impatiently, the image would not come; deep it lay, and it would not rise. With one short sigh he walked on. And up a rough ramp. And up a few rough steps. And up a short, very short wooden ladder. And then in, or on, the platform before the room that was the countinghouse of Rano. Even as he came up he heard the professional mumble from within, such as, with copious variation according to circumstance and situation, he might hear in any countinghouse:

". . . fifth day of the month . . . of the year of the Reign . . . second indiction . . ."

". . . such-and-such a quantity of packing-straw and so many and so many canvas packing-cases . . ."

". . . to hire of six mules for two days at thus-and-so a rate per mule per day, and thus much more for fodder per mule . . ."

". . . and three score plus one-half one score of lance-head blanks made after the fashion of Florence, per accompt of a Saracen merchant of Málaga . . ."

". . . this ink is too thick, my ser . . ."

". . . piss in it, then . . ."

". . . ten sheets of tin from Beritinia, alike beknownst as Tinland, of the quality costing 12 florins per quintal . . ."

"Where is the bill for the accompt of Mahound? Not yet ready? Why always tell they me, 'Not yet ready?' A score I have me, clerks, yet, always, always, 'Not yet ready: Ready? Not.' *Me Herc! Me Herc!"*

"If you would listen, Frog. To me, Frog, if you would listen. The

system of numbers and of algorithm, new, new, new! A tithe of the time 'twould take, O Frog. Thy Herc! Thy Herc!"

"Clerks can no learn your new numbers. Talk me not of such.— Who? Is coming, *who?"*

And there within was Rano.

Vergil entered. *"Get out,"* Rano said at once. The command was not meant for the visitor, for at once the clerks arose, and left tablet and stylus, abacus and record-rolls, talley-sticks and ledger-books; thus, three men left in that space, not closed but closable. The third remained with pen poised over papyrus as though he had not heard his master speak; any moment Vergil expected the command to be repeated; it did not come. But when this sole servant raised his head and looked, all was clear. All was clear from the deep-seamed skin and hairless cheeks and chin and indeed from the very folds about the very eyes. It was death to make eunuchs in the Empire. But it was not death to buy and own those already made. As such had no families and could have none, they were deemed safest of servants, not alone in regard to women, but in regard to money as well . . . and did not both temptations go so often together? This one looked a moment at Vergil and for that moment in that look Vergil had some strong intimation that he was seeing and being seen by something not entirely human; the face and gaze, perhaps, of some ancient and immensely sapient being, but one whose sapience was of a clean different order than those of men and women. Then the eunuch's look went back to his book, and the pen descended and the voice began again to mutter, voice as high as a woman's yet as strong as a man's.

One thousand florins per annum per physician Adserovio, payable quarterly and due the third day instant, videlicet 250 florins plus monies laid out for medications by said physician as follows: for zedoary . . . aloes . . . liquid of myrrh. . . . And the voice became as low as the buzzing of bees and perhaps no longer represented so much individual words as a mere sound ancillary to the process of calculation and thought.

Rano was on his feet, facing Vergil, facing him close, "Master Mage," said Rano, "if you will do something for me that you will don't do for any other, then I will give you golds." He made an odd, abrupt gesture. Vergil followed its direction. And indeed he did see

"golds," scores and scores he saw of them; they lay upon the worn and checkered cloth surface of the table where the eunuch sat and wrote, and now and then, with his humming rising to an odd and singular singsong mutter, the eunuch swept some into one column and some into another, swept to one side, one, and to another side, another; he paid them no more especial attention than had they been counters in a game. And why should he? Perhaps they were. What else were they to him? What, for that, was anything? Eunuchs were said to love arithmetic, and it was well they did and could: for what else could they love which asked no more of them than that it be put and kept in order?

"What one thing had you in mind to have done, Magnate—"

This far had Vergil gotten, and time had had to savor some different scent and odor (fainter, though) than the smoke and stench and the sweet airs, to realize, if only half-realize, it was the papyrus and the parchment and the ink (not, certainly, the golds anymore than the silvers and the coppers; suddenly he understood that *pecunia non olet,* "money's got no smell," was not merely an expression of an economic attitude, it was a statement of physical fact). Thus far had he gotten with question and with thought, when the magnate broke in on both. Rano grimaced, but it was not with anger, not even so much as impatience, as of simple earnestness. *"It* is not some one thing I have in mind, in *my* mind, no! Master Mage! Wizard! You see, seen, will see . . ." Was the man reciting some paradigm or declension? No, he was trying, striving, he was struggling, to bring his own thoughts into order, and an order that would cover all possibilities. ". . . things I don't. Can't. See. *I* cannot know. *You* can. Know. And when you will be knowing, if you don't tell some others, if you tell only me, if you will do this for me, for *me:* I will, I *will* give you golds. *Not* a coin and a robe. Not two coins, two robes. But many, master. *Man*-y. Many golds—"

And the eunuch said, sans even looking up, in his strange and rich and, yes, even so: his sweet voice (now one had time and chance to think on it, strong and sweet): "There are many. Oh yes. There are many. Frog has many. Many many. Many manies of manies. Many golds, has Frog." And his pen dipped and scratched.

"You *see,*" said Rano. Toad or frog, there was certainly something batrachian about him; were there a family Rano, what a chorus they

might croak, creek, crack; but he had no children, only the one wife. Suddenly thinking of Rano's wife, a rictus took hold of Vergil's mouth; he swallowed, felt his throat dry, could not stop the movement. Visible, audible. Rano saw and heard.

"Eh? Sir?" The magnate moved, ugly face eager. "Agreed? On account? A purse of twenty? A purse of sixty? *Make up a purse!*" He turned to . . . turned upon, almost . . . the eunuch. Who did so with not so much as a struggle or a shrug, merely a gesture, neither whose beginning nor end did Vergil clearly follow; somewhere the man's hand had moved, suddenly it was not moving: The palm sat open on the table with its checkered cloth on which gold coins moved from square to square, and in the palm sat one of those purses (contents already arranged) used in high commerce, long and narrow and sealed with sundry seals, one of them surely Imperial. "Weigh," urged Rano. "Put it in your hand. Or—trust me *not, break* seals and *count* and *then* weigh—" If this was not passion, it was something so very close to it that it would serve its place.

Vergil stepped back one step and one step away, held up his own hand, palm facing out and up, and one hand he thrust behind his back: without thought his fingers writhed, making, first, the *fig;* and then: *the horns.* Could Rano see either? Rano saw *some*thing, for Rano stopped.

"Magnate, Magnate." Vergil ceased. Why was he so affected? He could hear his pulses beating in his ears, he had been offered bribes before, though not here—*was* this a bribe? "The Very Rich City of Averno has engaged me to give an answer to a certain problem. The answer to this problem would be the best thing I could do for all of you, and so, for any of you. Details await further discovery, and application requires much work. But every thing which I see, have seen, if not indeed all that I may yet see, either I have presented to all of you of the Magnatery, or, having in the future come to see it, *must* present to the Magnatery. To *all* of you. You offer me much gold, and I hope to receive much gold. I have already deserved that. But whatever I may find and see about how best to cap and to pipe and to conduct the fires and heats and fireable gasses, the hot spring waters, from wherever they may be or may come to be, to every magnate's works . . . why . . . ser . . . Magnate Rano . . . there is no

way that this, or any of this, could be told to you alone. And not to others."

If there had been some thought, had there *been* some thought, very likely there *had* been some thought in Rano's mind at first that Vergil was willing to bargain: that Vergil would not accept the first set of iron bangles, knives and hatchets, ruddy cloth, set down upon the sand. But as Vergil went on speaking, he saw that Rano realized this was not the case. Rano had not understood Vergil. Vergil had not understood Rano. "Ah, that. *That.* No." His warty, webby hand swept it away behind him. "Some other thing. Some thing, other. Some new. Different, a different thing. A thing, *else.* You, Wizard, but not one thing only, to see. You will, you will." He struggled with his wide mouth, his eyes bulged more, he paddled his hands; he looked for help; he looked at the eunuch.

"—discover—" the eunuch said.

Not even looking up, nor stopping the scritch-scrotch of his pen *(what* was the pen writing?—*what* odd signs?), the moving of the golden coins across the checkered table.

The word was accepted without further examination; Rano swept on, "And this when you discover, you will not tell an, you will tell not others. *Only* me *you will tell, you will tell* me . . . *me* . . . *me* . . ."

Thoughts moved dimly at that moment in Vergil's mind, but they moved swiftly. It was far from impossible that he might indeed make some discovery aside and apart from the one central thrust of his intent so far. Something not covered by his engagement to the Very Rich City. *Something else.* In which case— What came to his mind, *in which case,* was something that almost swept him off his feet; literally, off his feet—almost. For a thought moved him, and as he moved he set a foot forward and the foot somehow stumbled and *he* stumbled. Rano at once moved forward and reached and took hold of him; they came together in an instant, hand in hand and body against body. Rano's face moved, too, something glittered in his eyes, *his* mouth changed, something was moving the outlines of the mouth and reshaping the outlines of the eyes; Rano was about to move mouth closer to ear, and to offer. *What,* to offer?

The eunuch began to rise. He rose and rose and still he was rising, he was on his feet, hands pushing away from desk as he began to

straighten up, *and still it was not over.* The eunuch was not eunuch-fat, that was mostly myth; the man was eunuch-tall, it was no myth, he was far closer to seven feet tall than to merely six. And as he stretched to his full height he said, in a rich and ringing voice, *"The King!"* All about, the tambours beat, and Cadmus entered with a train of state. The gaze was steady and the color clear. He was not mad today. He was not mad at all.

The robes and the chains of linked medallions worn by some of those who had come in with Cadmus would have led Vergil at once to assume, had this all been elsewhere, that such men were members of a greater or a lesser Grand Council of some municipium, or leaders of guilds, if not both. But in Averno there was no Grand Council, lesser or greater, there were only the magnates; there were not even any guilds. The power of the magnates covered the ground, and they and it allowed no room for anything else . . . not even for the Lousepickers' Guild as mentioned in the graffito at the tiny tavern in the port town where Vergil had first met Armin. Thought before thinking caused Vergil's eyes to scan the group: yes. Armin was there. And very grave and dignified he looked, too. And he too wore a robe and chain . . . as though holding office, though there was, in Averno, no such office he could hold. And then, Vergil and Rano standing side by side, still, though no longer face to face, Cadmus came close up to them. His clear eyes considered Vergil, but he did not change expression. What he had to say was to be said to another.

"Rano. Magnate. Man Hear Our Royal will. We have consulted. We have advised and been advised. Very soon We intend to speak with Our Liege, the Emperor; meanwhile, thus it is: All born here, and all held to service or labor here for the space of twenty year, are to be citizens of here. The benefits, and *all* the benefits, of Citizens of *Rome,* Rano, are to be holden . . . here . . . by such citizens of Averno. And *all* those thus worn by labor are to receive *bread,* Rano, for they are *men,* Rano. And when you and all your fellow-magnates have assented, Rano . . . magnate . . . man . . . then we shall speak again and further, Rano. Meanwhile, and at once, Rano: Let it be done."

He turned and he went down the ladder, the steps, and the ramp,

and along the long passageway that led to the warehouse's outer door.

Meanwhile all the trumpets sounded and all the tambours beat.

Rano looked, after some long bemusement, once again at Vergil. Whatever had been in his eyes and in his mouth before was not there. His face moved, though. His mouth moved. His manner showed neither secret confidence nor anger, not even scorn. It did not even show amazement. "You see?" he said. "You hear? You . . ." Words failed him. One word, next, did not. "Mad," he said, shaking his head. "Mad, mad, mad, mad, mad . . ."

Although it might seem that Averno was inhabited chiefly by masters and slaves, with many of the masters themselves once-slaves; as well as a surly rabble depending perhaps less on their daily dole of rather bad bread (with SPQR roughly indented on it just before baking) . . . and this only if, rabble or not, they were Roman citizens . . . than on either employment of a sort small different from outright theft, or on outright theft itself.—Still, in Averno, there were other sorts of people, of the sorts found elsewhere, almost every elsewhere. There were merchants, physicians, astrologers, superior craftsmen who produced detailed work (jewelers, blind or sighted, for example) such as the workshops of Averno's magnates did not know. If there were no architects, if there were but a few who might be termed engineers in that they worked in such crude engines as the regular work of Averno need must have: presses, stamps, drills, looms, or what; if there were no painters, hardly, not counting those who spread white lime on walls with vast brushes or, often, merely mops; still, still, from the world outside Averno—how! was there still a world outside Averno? more than once, thus, Vergil bethought himself—came some small and unsteady influx of such arts as, principally, aliens denizened in Averno might desire.

So one day, he having chosen to go alone some short way on what proved to be a bootless errand, strolling idly (idle was his stroll, but not his mind) back to his apartments, he heard the familiar sounds of a trio of music sounding the sort of strains which advertise that a troop of traveling players is about to begin its show; to listen was to look, and so, rounding a corner—a process that occupied all his attentions, lest he slip on the stepping-stones and bemire himself in

the filth and sludge—at last he lifted his eyes. Flute and lute and cymbals ceased almost at that moment, and prepared to go within whatever rented room was to be their theater . . . and where, no doubt, they would also play . . . one of them sounding a last call to the "citizens and residents and visitors in the Very Rich City who are very welcome to pay the most modest of prices and enter here to attend at *The Great Play of Troy.* . . ." A woman, one of two, cast an eye at him ere she and her companion and the musics, all, turned and went in. He followed.

Such cheap and popular theater, if it did not take too long, often amused him, if (as often) for no other reason than the immense difference between the classical readings from Homer and the bawdy buffoonery, half-improvised at the best, usually interlarded with such popular allusions as had most lately been thrust into the script. Several considerations worked at his mind; one was that his mind might well be the better for some little rest from the restless chores with which he had been so deeply engaged; other considerations? For some reason, and he could just then say no more than *some,* the woman who had looked at him reminded him of a very curious story being told about Simon Magus and the woman whom he called (was said to call) Helen of Tyre . . . or of Troy. Third and last of the considerations was that there had been that something in this one's look at him, before she turned and went inside, which had more in it than the mere automatic look at any man as any man has had more than once from any such a woman, half a strolling player and half a whore. Or did he flatter himself? Did he or did he not, in he went, the price was indeed very modest and he paid for three seats in order that he might be free of perhaps unwanted, say unpleasant, company in the seats to right or left.

The play itself was nothing. Mingled with lines from Homer such as not alone every schoolboy knew but many who had never been inside a schoolroom, and lines introduced now and then rather less because the play required them as to allow those who knew them to show they knew by reciting them half-aloud along with the actors; mingled with those were abridgments of entire scenes compressed into a paragraph; now and then touches for the popular taste, if "taste" was quite the word, such as an obsequious actor, if actor was quite the word, declaiming, "O Hail Great King Priam! Great and

glorious art thou, O King! I tell that thou art indeed a god!" At which time see "King Priam" make his eyes grow large, rise from his throne, extract from beneath it a vessel of an obvious utility, scan it closely, and respond, "That's not what me night-pot tells me!"

Raucous laughter from the cheapest seats, chuckles from the others, though ancient (and, indeed, rather honorable) the jest . . . jest now repeated with appreciation . . . many people could not at all appreciate a jest in silence (most, Vergil recalled, with an inner sigh, could not even read in silence; his own, to some, arcane, ability to do so had more than once been remarked upon).

However. Nothing new. Half, Vergil was minded to leave and get on with things, half he waited in hopes he would by and by hear from the musicians a song, either old or new. . . . Vergil dearly loved a good song, or any good music e'en sans singing. . . . Quickly the action shifted, Priam lumbered offstage; enter his son Prince Paris, and with the Prince the Lady Helen of Troy; she was the woman who had so lightly, briefly, looked at him outside. A fine, full figure of a woman.

Paris: *Come now, my Lady Helen! Why are you so bored? I know! It must have been the damned dull life you led, wedded to that oaf Menelaus! But come with me, and I shall show you that despite the fatigues of battle I am a better man than he*—et cetera, et cetera, several bawdy declarations introduced as evidence to back his claim; chuckles from almost all the seats.

Helen: (Faces audience as she is tugged along, bedchamberward, by Paris, who, presumably deafened by passion, of course hears not one syllable) Helen: *O Gods! These Trojan trolls! At least when as a chastely wedded, bedded wife I was from time to time assuaged and solaced of my boredom now and then by some* good *man . . . not always Menelaus, to be sure. . . .* She rolls her eyes, laughter from below; Paris, to emphasize the efforts he is making to drag her offstage, lifts his knees high and plants his feet down exactly where they were before; more laughter; cries of "Get a move on, Prince!" and "Want some help up there?" . . . *but at least there, across the wine-dark, the dolphin-torn, the gong-tormented sea . . .* a full half of the audience, catching on quickly to its cue, echoes: *". . . dolphin-torn . . ."* And so on with the rest of it. *". . . one heard at least, however cloaked in darkness, now and then* some *words in* decent *Greek!"*

Many laughters, doubtless for many different reasons. And Paris triumphed at last, off the two went, leering and winking, and then the music began to play an epithalamion, and not at all a bad one, with muffled amorous noises and now and then a small shriek from offstage-right.

She who played Helen, was it her full form that affected Vergil?—for affected he was—her face, fair enough? Or merely some deep and primal response to the little-or-no-nonsense, despite the nonsense, sexuality of the stage business? When had he last been in a woman's arms? Since how long? Too long. Too long. In whose arms, in which woman's arms would he now wish to be? Poppaea's, came the true reply. Of beauty as determined by fashion and as delineated by the sculptor's wedge or painter's brush, of such Poppaea had near none. Her skin was unblemished and her large gray eyes were fine: what more? Her face was nothing memorable, not even could he entirely have said as he had heard one veteran legionary say of an eastern queen, "She was so uncommon ugly it fair hurt your teeth at first to look upon her, but my Herc, boy! after one week of but standing a-guard inside her door, I'd have sold meself to sit by her feet." Ugly, Rano's wife was not, for all that she had a figure like an undernourished boy's; would Vergil have sold himself to sit by her feet? *One Vergil, a Citizen of Rome,* no more: *yes.* But as *P. Vergilius Marius, Master in Philosophy,* and all the rest of it, who had made long journeys and endured hard studies in order to attain mastery over many things, the first of which class of things had been his own self and soul and pride and patience and over them, well . . . *no.* Much would he give, but he would not give himself to be in further thrall.

Besides (one voice said within him now, calm as a sage in the stoa), you have your duties to those who have engaged them. Besides (one voice said, cold, and with a touch of contemptuous surprise), it would be madness even to think of an intrigue with the wife of a magnate of Averno.

Would it?

—what voice was *that?* And yet another voice said but one word. And said it often.

Poppaea. Poppaea. Poppaea . . .

And there was, at last as at first, another voice yet, which had a

more simple and a more accessible message, and in the end it was to this one that he hearkened.

The play concluded to Helen's ringing screams as she watched, Homeric canonical text or no Homeric canonical text, Paris being slain in combat *beside the reedy river of the Trojan shore*—located, conveniently, offstage-right—*curtain.* A moment for the audience to taste the aftertaste. And then followed what critics were fond of calling, it being after all an easy call and one that required little resort to Aristotle or others, "a knockabout farce"; this subsided into a song and dance and a collection taken up in hopes that at least a few patrons would have forgotten having paid on their way in.

By then Vergil was backstage, "backstage" having the geographical reality of the Plain of Troy. A man, perhaps the manager, who had been leaning against the wall, whence he could see the "stage," turned his head and looked at Vergil with the same look of contained sardonic amusement with which he had been watching the scene; merely raised his eyebrows in inquiry. "I thought," said Vergil, "that I might be allowed to have a few words in private with the Lady Helen . . . and I should try to put them all in decent Greek."

The man said, briefly, *"Haw!"* managing to get into the one syllable all the emotions of his look; then, "I am sure she would be very pleased." The tone was civil, even sincere; some slight glance he let show which indicated that he himself would, would some slight circumstance be different, be pleased to have a visit in private with the visitor, be this with what tongue might be; but this was as brief as the single syllable. A coin changed hands, discreetly, politely, with no change of expression on either face. Vergil found himself in a curtained cubicle. He had been in such before. Presently, in came the actress, gave him a pleasant-enough look, if a slightly appraising one.

"You *seem* decent," she said, "but you are not Greek."

"Neither, I trust, am I a Trojan troll."

The woman chuckled. Clapped her hands. In came an older one with a basin of hot water, sponge, soft and scented soap, and a few cloth-pieces worn and washed till they were soft enough to serve as towels. "Let me get this muck off," and, proceeding to remove her stage-paint, asked, "Well, what did you think of the play?"

Barely he hesitated. "Evocative," he said.

This time she laughed outright. Then she murmured to the other woman, who put upon a tray most of the items which she had brought in, and went out. The woman "Helen" placed both hands upon his shoulders. "Are you going to give me a nice present?" she asked.

"More than one, I hope."

She did not laugh now. "I believe you. I trust you. We won't haggle. We will . . ." A moment she paused. "We will play our own play. This time I shall really be Helen. You will really be Paris. And now we are really together." And added, "And alone." It had grown dark. He did not ask nor linger thinking why, but moved closer to her. And what happened next between them was nothing, really, like anything that had ever happened between him and any courtesan or trull before. What he felt was no mere assuagement of need or indulgency in satisfying a simple, essential lust; what he received with her was certainly none of the imitation passion, be it perfunctory or most highly skilled, that anyone may obtain for pay; however pay be made. He had rapted her away, in what guise he could not recall, from her kingly husband's court, though not far off the martial camp-fires gleamed; she had been briefly fearful and fear at once gave way to relief and relief to wonder and to quiet joy; now and then the scented forest breathed for them and the faint smoke ebbed away.

He scarcely gave thought, presently, to the heated scented water and the soap and the soft cloth and the ministrations performed with them. He was hardly aware of dressing or of being dressed. He was faintly sensible that there was more light, and, this being so, he moved again toward her and bent to place a parting kiss; slightly she turned her head, one of her eyes only could he clearly see, and there was that in the corner of that eye which was not her, which was not "Helen," whoever "Helen" really was; who was someone else: in that sole gray glint, gone as fast as it appeared, was that which told him all, yet told him nothing.

"Poppaea," he said, faintly. The scene somehow shifted. The stage was bare. He stood alone. The door was open, he saw the street outside. "Poppaea," he said. He moved his lips. No sound came forth. His legs trembled, yet they held him up, as he moved. He would have turned, he could not have turned, he no longer wished to turn.

And in his silent heart his voice said, as his heart beat, beat, beat: Poppaea. Poppaea. Poppaea. Poppaea.

Rain in Averno. It came down in drops as hot, almost, as the waters of the bath, though much less cleanly. It came down slowly, as if it had paused to embrace the smokes and stinks and to absorb a measure of the "sweet airs," it refreshed no one and nothing, it left soot streaks and stench of sulfur. It oozed down the pitted sides of the buildings like oil and, it may be, left them even more pitted than before. It thickened the filth in the streets and turned it into a sort of paste, a black paste perhaps fit, very fit, to use upon the binding of some evil and feculent grimoire. Rain in Averno.

Although the entire city stank notoriously, except in limited spaces for limited times, when someone had a room sprinkled with an attar from the rose-red vales beyond Ragusa, or burned opobalsamum or some similar gum in a brazier; notorious though it was that all the city stank, this area through which he now picked his way was notorious even within the city for its own evil odors: its name, *Canales,* offered perhaps explanation enough, though none was offered for the plural form when there was but one canal. And that one for the most part hidden from sight by the moldering, bulking sides of warehouses. An ancient jest was much told by the magnates: "An' he says, 'Torto, why you don't shore 'em up, the sides o' your warehouses, be bulging out already, you don't see?' An' he say—" Here the heavy face of the teller would play a series of grimaces intended to imitate that of "Old Torto," and these alone always brought heavy chuckles. "—he say, 'Why shore 'em up? It ain't falled down, yet.' " *Great* laughter; the point of which, it was often explained, being that if Torto (or anyone) had shored up the tottering walls, it would need have been at his own expense, whereas were they actually to fall, and thus constitute an obstacle, the cost of repairs by reason of some ancient legal quibble grown to the status of a municipal privilege would be paid for out of the taxes levied on the property of such aliens whom a particularly hard fate decreed should die in the Very Rich City. This too-often tale was, Vergil by and by realized, not intended merely to indicate commercial acumen as it was to delineate certain aspects of the character of "Old Torto."

But the warehouses, however nasty, belonged to the magnates

(however nasty), and thus were under the protection of their city's "stern and meritorious laws"—laws intended largely to protect the trade and commerce, not all the city as such, as of the magnates in particular, whereas *these* streets (so-called), these lean lanes and mean alleyways and passages: into these would no great magnate venture. Much danger, little reason. The only legitimate trade carried on seemed to be that in the dung-locks shorn from around the scuts of sheep, a trade considerably less lucrative than that in goat's-beards from Spicy Araby; now and then from some dusty doorway came evidence that anyway one heap of filth-clots was deemed dry enough to be beaten under some pliant substance with cudgels, to loose the dung from the locks, or partly so—else the process of washing such "wool" would be even more tedious. And more costly. Perhaps the rain, slow and sullen, had driven this trade indoors. Nasty as it was—some sight quickly glimpsed of thralls with heads wrapped up in cloth beating and thrashing piles from which arose a thick dust—the trade was legitimate. It was, presumably, even useful. Probably the stuff of which coarse carpets, floor-druggets, donkey-pads were woven had their sources there. He coughed as the dust reached his nose and throat, walked more quickly on.

Did not slow down nor answer the swift-flung taunt, "Hey, Gypa! Like the 'sweet'?"

Not long before that morning, in a rare unguarded moment, he, allowing his thoughts to come aloud, had murmured, "Wisdom, guidance, vision, truth . . ."

And Iohan, who had been engaged in some small task or other there, up in Vergil's rented rooms, promptly said, "Why, ser, you might try scrying for them things: pour ink-squid in my palm and sleepify me, ask me what I see. If you like."

Briefly Vergil considered; briefly he said, "Such could only be of use, I believe, with some lad younger than you, pure of life by reason of youthful innocence."

His servant, sans so much as a boastful smirk, a look of abashment, shame, even a wry smile not, had said, simply, "Ah, I has forgotten that. To be sure, ser, them hands has held things other than master's foot. Well. Therefore." And to his tasks returned.

It was after, later that day, day having descended into night, serious considerations as to which form of divination might be best, and

no conclusion reached, that Vergil had with a sigh or so retired for sleep. The fierce fat flies of Averno, so tormentful of mornings, had by night flitted themselves into corners and so were silent, all. All, that is, all save one, so absolutely enormous that Vergil exclaimed, almost dismayed, "This fly is big enough to have a name!" He heard the voice a-close to him mutter, "It have a name, bold boy," in a throaty, Saracen accent; "it have a name: and it name be Baalzebub. And it be lord of flies." Vergil gave a scornful snort, considered that some would surely try to kill said fly. He captured it instead, placed it in a bottle, and stuffed the neck with cloth. Only then did he turn to see what Saracen this was: saw no one, Saracen or other. Shrugged. Would have made urgent effort to kill it (some would)—there in the bottle, still, might it not die? He did not arise from bed; it did not die, from time to time it buzzed and thrumbled. He bethought him of its proper name, not that other name, he conceded that it had another name indeed, another sex indeed, he did not care to call the matter into clarity. He slept, he woke, he woke, he slept. Later that night, as he watched by the flickering wick he'd thought best to keep burning, he saw an equally enormous spider come spinning down from the ceiling on invisible thread; fly bumbled and buzzed and flung itself about. The spider, finding no way in, had determined to set snares if ever the fly found its way out; had spun and spun and spun. Something exceedingly odd about the lay of the net had called Vergil's attention. There seemed some pattern in it more than mere reticulation, there seemed some thing in it, in it or about it, of which he was meant to be sensible.

Of which he was.

But *what?*

And, indeed, as the wick smoked and flickered its tiny flame and the shadows danced their fitful measures, it did seem to him as he lay between his own clean sheets on the horsehair bed-pad, sheets for the moment at least cool against his flesh, that there was something not merely slightly familiar in the pattern of the spinning: but something which he absolutely knew.

This being so, it was not bafflement he felt, but some odd sort of satisfying comfort and contentment. Intermittently the massy fly thrumbled the night through. But Vergil did not hear it. Vergil slept.

Now as he walked through this the wretched-most section of the wretched and Rich City, slowly Vergil became aware, first, that something was bothering him, and, second, that something had been bothering him. He was not sure if it was or was not the certain uncertainty of his position here in hell . . . or its suburbs. He had been through something like this the night before. He had slept, yes, but he had not slept well. There had been, so it seemed, some weight upon him. He turned, it shifted; he relaxed, disposed himself, it returned. What was bothering him and had been a while bothering him as he walked now through this dirty district which lay the other side of "the fiftieth gate of corruption" was much the same. It was not sharp. It was . . .

"The black weasel sits upon his shoulder," a voice said nearby.

And another voice added, "Aye, and squats upon his breast." Even as he turned to look, Vergil realized that both voices spoke the truth. And then, so slowly that he seemed to himself to be miming, as though an actor deliberately prolonging some stylized motion, he did turn, and wondered how, even, how he could . . . how he would even pick up one foot now and set it down in front of the other . . . how he was with effort turning his body to look: he knew that the black bile, it was—he thought, suddenly, for the first time, sharply, of the lute's strings—which had been rising and spreading through his body the morning long, of all the four humors perhaps most to be feared. It was indeed the *black weasel* which squatted on his breast, though he was not lying down, that sadly familiar weight upon his heart, the woefully well-known sucking-away of his very breath: he knew it now, but knowing did not help, it did not help at all; it may have been in some measure the result of being in this hideous section of this hideous city, but it had been the same elsewhere: The gods be thanked, though often, not always. It was as though he were drowning, and yet if the one hand which could save were to have been stretched out direct in front of him and in the easiest reach . . . in respect to physical distance, easiest . . . yet he could not have lifted his own hand to take hold. Was it perhaps *not* the black bile, the humor now overbalanced and overbalancing, but was it the black choler, that evil humor, that other string upon the lute which was man's body: the melancholia of which the old country Greeks spoke? They who still called the cat the weasel?

It seemed as though all was useless, all futile: his having come, his having tried, his being here now; and in the name of all: *why* here? . . . all for no purpose.

And still he, slowly, slowly, turned.

There was no one there.

From another corner came a laugh.

It was not a laughter bursting forth, neither was it some evil scorn. Merely . . . what it was. And so, with immense effort, now, here in this empty place of filth and rubble between other places of rubble and filth in the form of buildings crumbling into further filth, and yet more rubble, and further rubble; once again he began that difficult and painful turning. Was it some curse, sudden or slow? The weight of all the world lay upon him; still he turned.

And then he saw him. *Him.* Not *them.* A figure filthy even for this rat's nest of filth, robed in rags ragged even for this ragged quarter. The face was so besmeared, the mask had even a sort of sheen or gloss upon it, and this cracked as the laughter lines responded to the chuckle. *If this may find some folly at which to smile and sport, why may I not as well?* he thought. And the thought welled up and out into a sound more like a snort of someone clearing a throat than into any sane man's laugh.

And Vergil's slow turning ceased. And he looked full into the face of someone he had certainly seen before. And so in that second he recognized him. Said the outcast clad in outcast clouts, "It is your turn now to say it. And why say it not?" And, as Vergil, amazed, stood silent, the creature said it. *"Wash."*

"O Apollo! Beadle! What brings you . . . here . . . so low?"

As he had cried the word *Beadle* the one who sat before him in the muck formed by rain and dust and grime did not precisely spit but his dry lips opened along some thin, thin line of slime, and a sound he made, perhaps a word, *"Peh!"* And again chuckled. His face seemed to gleam with glee at the fools and follies of all mankind, the sons and daughters of Deucalion's stones; and no more than stones, sticks: or things worse than useless. What upheavals in the schemes of things spun and woven, cut, by the Sister Fates—what wars, riots, what commotions, conspiracies, tyrannies, scandals, plots or shipwrack, barratries of masters or of mates, decretals of exile, times

toiling perhaps in quarries or in mines, what collapses outward or inward—what *had* brought him here?

Said the beadle, "I am here that you be here. I saw it clear when first I saw you . . . *there.* Inescapable decrees, inscrutable, inexorable: and such, such piss-worth words. Had my pipe not droned you had not danced. Had I not fifed for you." The lips now closed.

Vergil murmured . . . something. He could not a half second later have repeated what he said, presumably it was a question. From behind he heard one of the voices of a moment before; it said, "Sissie summoned thee. And cruel Erichtho." Again Vergil murmured. And now the other voice: "She our sister who asked either one favor too many or one too few." And there sounded in that narrow space a far-distant echo of that voice among all voices, of she who had become but voice alone. As sounding from a thousand caverns.

Or from within a bottle, stoppered, closed.

" 'Wheels within wheels.' "

"What?"

"Some Hebrew seer . . . or was it 'a wheel within a wheel . . .'? Of no import."

"Is that a sieve?"

"Is that a question for the Pythonissa at Delphi? *Quaere.* What sort of sieve? *Responsum.* Not the sort in which the suspected Vestal Virgin carries water for to prove her chastity. . . ." The fellow took a handful of dirt, and, though the gods of hell knew there was dirt aplenty there, he had seemed just a bit selective, for his hand had hesitated, then moved on, before in a moment more dipping to scoop. The handful was sifted, dropped upon a heap in which dirty chicken feathers, bits of broken shells, twigs, and wisps and clots and potshards lay mingled. From out of nowhere the scarecrow figure produced three reeds, thrust them in between the fingers of Vergil's right hand: "Close eyes," said he. Vergil did, felt himself being turned around withershins once and twice and thrice (in his ears again, sight being sundered, the *thum*-thump-*thum* of the eternal anvils wearing out the hammers which *beat* beat *beat)*— "Bend a bit. Ah. Enough. Thrust your paw down. Open."

Vergil had but felt the reeds encounter the slightly resistant surface when the word *Open* came. Did this mean open hands or open eyes?

—He opened both. The once-beadle of the Second Secret School in Sevilla was scanning the imprints, the three shallow piercings of the dirt atop the rubble-tip. There was no smile upon his face, no scowl, either; face expressionless as when he had held that middling office so far away, lower than the proctors, higher than the porters. "Fire, wind, and water," he said; the same slight sound as his cracked lips parted.

"What?"

"Water, wind, and fire. No demand here in the web for the sovereign science of astrology, they none of them know when they were born. But dirt! the gods save us! how they know dirt! Geomancy, the doctrine of dirt! Ah, what fees it fetch me here!"

Was the mummy-ragtatter japing again. "What do you do with the fees? Hoard them in a pot?—No, forgive me, I—"

"Wind, fire, and water. Thrice have I said so, once for each vatic hole. Follow." The man moved off stiff-legged, lurching yet spry, the stinking winds seemed to bear some distinctive taint from him in addition. Follow? Why not? " 'Hoard them in a pot'? Ha-ha. In a pot, yes. Hoard? No. Hast ever heard of the fifth essence, the quintessential, of wine? of the art of estillation? of a pot-still? No. Not likely. Follow."

Things had changed. The weight, immense, was off Vergil's chest and off his shoulders. Joy? Certain not. Things were merely as before . . . as far as his own inner self was, that was. But . . . somehow, other . . . things had changed. The lines were different. There was no longer, as he followed the figure (he had seen corpses exhumed that looked better), the nightmare figure which had once indeed extruded a nightmare as a snake extrudes its tongues, and done it simply (simply!) as a test; this sticklike stalking horror teetered along down lanes which had some semblance to geometry, from which the general scramble of the unclean canals district could not have been farther removed. Were they still in Averno? Had the way been gathered up, were they somewhere else? If so: where?

"Ser Beadle—" *("Peh!")* "Elder one, what mean you, 'here in the—' "

They scrambled along angles strange and yet not without logic. He had not known and never would have suspected such a place as this in Averno . . . or, for that matter, anywhere else . . . and yet

. . . and yet . . . was there not something familiar here? It nagged at his mind, but with no clamorous nagging.

Suddenly they were somewhere else. Somewhere inside. Somewhere inside of something which was itself inside of something. Very suddenly this had happened. It was clean underfoot. It was neither dim-dank-dark nor bright-dry-light. Then they came to a wall and in the wall, not flush with the floor nor reaching to the ceiling, was a door; the door was made of bronze and the bronze was devoid of ornament and its surface was polished. It seemed to catch even the once-beadle by surprise, for he stopped short. He looked and peered. Squinted. A slight sound broke through his cracked lips. He said, but this time low and quiet, "Wash."

And this time he seemed to speak, indeed, to himself alone.

The door opened, they entered, the door closed. There was a source of light high up, the air was cloudy—no. The air was steamy. They were in a small bath. Vergil was as suddenly glad there was space for them to bathe apart; and sluiced and soaped and sluiced and scraped and sank into his own small pool without lifting his eyes to watch the other. But in his mind he saw the filth coming off under the strigil like some roll of . . . no simile was supplied. But of a sudden, seeing the fresh clothing (he had not noticed it before) neat-folded in their recesses, and thinking shame to himself for (perhaps) having felt too much shame . . . and too little sympathy . . . for his former superior, in the man's decay; so, abruptly, Vergil said, "Well does Homer speak well of the pleasures of the warm bath and the clean garment—" And then he could have bitten his tongue.

For the other did no more than to cite some other singer, with " 'Seven cities claimed blind Homer, dead, Through which blind Homer, living, begged his bread.' "

His once not-quite-pupil looked up. What more the older man may have meant by this perhaps too often quoted line, he wondered. But did not wonder long, for, very, very near to him he saw some others; and he was not surely certain he had seen all of them before.

As, sometimes, the sky being clouded almost over, yet the moon is seen unclouded and in the midst of a wide circle where its light meets the clouds and superimposes upon them; just so, or almost so, in the midst of the clouds of steam there was an area quite clear of them. And in the midst of this stood sundry men, Armin amongst them;

they bowed to Vergil. And he, naked as when the midwife washed him first in water and next in wine, bowed back.

Said one, "We would ask the Lord Vergil if he would be kind enough, of his own mere grace and favor, to shake out the robes he wore when he entered."

Vergil, saying, "I am not 'the Lord Vergil,' " complied.

Said another, "We thank the Noble Mage, and further tax his condescendence by requesting that he raise his arms and turn round, rather slowly."

Vergil, saying, "I am not 'the Noble Mage,' " complied.

Said another, "Although we have doubtless asked of the Duke Vergil more than may be forgiven, still, we do venture to ask one thing more: Has he with him, upon him, within him, or anywhere accompanying him at present, any amulet and talisman? Or any item of wax, parchment or papyrus, metal, bone, stone, ivory, or any other substance upon which any sign, sigil, or symbol may be or might have been inscribed?"

Vergil said, "I am not 'the Duke Vergil,' and the answer to your question is no. —"Duke, duke," Mount Blanco holds the rank of duke, you might as well address your questions to the mountain as to me: better, I should think."

They bowed, and, in unison, thanked him; then, as though his last comment had not been made, then yet another asked, "Would the *magister, magus, dux et dominus* employ those arts and talents which are known to him and not to us, and endeavor to discover and ascertain if there might not be here along with him such things of such nature, the presence of which he may either have forgotten, or—"

Lips continued a moment more to move, but Vergil heard not what they said; he had gathered his forces within himself, deeply so, and then he sent them outward again, but slowly, and in a certain special way. Nothing. He drew them back, considered them, sent them forth again, again returned them. Again examined. Then relaxed. "Again, sers: no. And again I tell you: those titles which— But mind that not. I had thought I was merely entering a private baths. Am I about to enter a court upon some charge of *lèse-majesté* against the Emperor, his crown and staff, that you should seek and

search after items that might harm him or the judges or unfairly provide me with some advantage against the cause of justice?"

But this time it was Armin who answered. Saying, "It is not that they suspect *you,* against *them.* It is that they suspect *others.* Against *you.*"

And Vergil—somehow, somewhat, humbled—said, "I see. I see. I see."

He turned to speak to these men. But the vapors had closed in. And next the vapors vanished. And the air grew cold. Another door had opened. And his strange companion said, "If you will take your things, let us enter the cooling chamber."

"This bath, then, was not that I might be refreshed, but that I might be examined," Vergil said.

No answer to this was made. And perhaps none was required.

And after the two had cooled them, they dressed and moved on; and, though ever the way seemed to grow more narrow, they came into a broader place.

There the same men sat before him, ranged in a crescent. He said, "I am listening."

For a moment it seemed that everyone was listening. But there was no sound, save the distant drip and tinkle of water from the frigidarium. Then one of them spoke; one who sat on the farthest right.

"Doctor," he began.

Vergil felt an impatience which he attempted to restrain. He felt some sense of having gone through these experiences of modest denial before, and in another place, but did not try to recollect when or where. "Enough of these titles, my men. I will accept a simple courteous 'ser.' And no more."

"Ser."

Again the silence. Again, from not very close by, the drip and drop. Was it indeed water? For one single second he thought it was a water-clock, drip-dripping away the hours of his life; for another second he thought it might be the blood of a bull: They were deep down somewhere: Could the Taurobolium, the Mithraeum, be deeper?

"Ser." A second man spoke, the second from the right. "Ser, you have come here to encompass the death of the king."

Astonishment the most absolute swept over Vergil. And some chill fear. There came to him the account of how, every second year, the Archiflaman of Rybothe, distant even from the far-distant Pamirs, played at dice with someone chosen by lot to personate Death. The forfeit: the fate of Rybothe. And as the fate of Rybothe was far too important to be risked upon the cast of a die, the Archiflaman always played with loaded dice. "I 'came here to—'? What? I *am* on trial! What 'king'? No, my men. Me sers, no, I assure you. What is this? It is quite false. No man's death has—"

Some faint savor of some other conference (if such this was) he had attended here . . . but yet how different this tarrying silence (and these men gathered here) from the gross clamor of the magnates . . . !

Then: "Cadmus!" cried Vergil, the word bursting from his startled lips. "It is Cadmus whom you mean! No—"

To say that their faces were calm was to understate. Their faces seemed fixed, frozen. Said the one seated third from right, "It is certainly Cadmus whom we mean. And we certainly see that you do not know. Then . . . But . . ." He turned first one way, then the other, looked at his fellows. "How can we ask him? If he does not know?"

An endless moment passed. Then the fourth raised his eyes as though at something well above, then brought them down and, gazing straight at Vergil, said, "I do not know if my lord . . . pardon . . . my ser . . . I do not know if he has seen the rose."

Vergil's eyes they were which now looked up, up. Sure enough, although the table that stood between him and them was such a small one it seemed pro forma, still: there was the form. A fifth fellow said, "My ser need not accept the constraint, the faith. The trust. He has but to say, and he will be taken, with all conceivable courtesy, to another place, whence he may find his way witherso he will. We ought," he added, having briefly paused, "perhaps have pointed out the rose at the very first. But we have . . . we have had . . . much upon our minds."

There it hung, though how it hung he could not clearly see, and how this freshly blooming rose (he thought, almost infinitely briefly, of the famous "twice-blooming roses of Paestum," dismissed it: the bush bloomed twice, but not the rose) came even to be hanging here

in this city where no flowers bloomed and no birds sang, he could not imagine. No: He *could* imagine, but it required some exercise of imagination. And it would have, must have, required some exercise of arts other than mere gardening. The rose hung over the table and they sat around the table and so they were sitting *sub rosa,* underneath the rose.

And the rose pledged secrecy. When it did not indeed pledge silence.

Silence there certainly was, it was already springing from the situation itself, from those who, caught up in the situation, sat around the . . . almost . . . secret, the sacred . . . almost . . . table. And silence it was that spun round Vergil like a web. Who at length said, "Me sers, you know I have been brought here by the Very Rich City of Averno to perform a task. A compact unwritten subsists between myself and this city, and the agentry and polity of this city are the magnates. This you must all know. But there is something I do not know, and that is how far I may bind myself to secrecy—if that secrecy may also bind me to some action—or, for that matter, some inaction—against the magnates."

Silence. And the drip-drop of water. If water it was.

And then the last of the men sitting across from him on the other side of the table said, "He does not know."

And, speaking once again in his turn, the first of them said, very quietly, very simply, and very tiredly, "Tell him."

Someone who had this while been standing somewhat behind Vergil, though at a slight angle, stepped forward. The air was flat and still. But it did not stink, there was no omnipresent beat and thump. Were they really in Averno? The one who stepped forward Vergil had known from some several years before. It only now occurred to him that never had he known the man's name. He who had once been the beadle of the Second Secret School in Sevilla, so very far away, now gently moved his hand and slowly opened it and he laid one languid finger on the edge of the so small table. "Look, then, student," he said.

And in the polished surface of the table the student (and was he not still a student? was he not still learning? now, at this moment, even now?) saw himself running a race he had thought long forgotten by he himself and so (as so one thinks) by most of all the world:

though of course most of all the world had never known of it. He recognized himself. He knew why the fear upon his face. He knew the trick whereby he had, if not indeed won the race, for there could be no one winner, had avoided being the one loser. He saw, though, that there was something different now. Deep in the polished surface of the table, deep below the table's surface, he saw himself dodging, panting, turning here and turning there, and never ceasing to run—it had not *been* so, that way, at all— Wait. Was this the same race? One which he had already run? Or one which he was yet to run?

(Behind, this time, whom to hide?)

A race already run? A race yet to be run? Or one which he, though he had known it not, was already running.

The table. *Look, then, student.* . . . A man stood beneath an arch, outlined by light, though else was dim. A figure brutal, strong, and coarse, watching the approach of the runner with a steady eye. This one's broad, blunt face had something of the look of an experienced gladiator, but there was in it no element of that caution akin to fear. And in his huge hands (huger, yet, his arms! his shoulders!) a huge hammer.

Said the once-beadle, "Borbo is his name. A butcher is what he is. He stuns the oxen. And when they stumble, then he plunges in the knife."

And then Vergil saw the knife.

And then Vergil heard the voice. The voice never came from that butcher beneath the arch; it was toneless and dry and it was as though some clerk was reading something, one who reads a document whose contents are well known, yet need be read once more, before the signet is affixed. The voice had been speaking awhile before Vergil clearly made out words, the commencement of the line had been lost and he did not try to recover it. . . . *one Vergil, a wizard, sorcerer, nigromant and necromant. From him the protection of the Laws and the Magnates of the Very Rich City is withdrawn, and he is proclaimed Outlaw. He may be duped, drugged, drawn, stabbed, strangled, stoned; he may be poniarded, poisoned, bludgeoned, thrust through, or cast down. It be licit that he be burned or bled or hamstrung or hanged.* . . . And so the dreadful list, like a litany, ran on and on.

And on . . .

He was not aware of its stopping, but he was aware of its having stopped. And next he was wary and he was aware of someone saying to him, "But over you may be placed the power of the friends and councilors of Cadmus the King. And his and their protection may be yours. Twice sacred is he in his person and in his power; for, for one, he has been crowned a king and is thus on earth a reflection of the sacred kings of heaven and of hell; and for another, he is mad, and madness is like wisdom a gift of the gods. Averno is here. And the Roman Emperor is far away. And it may be that the Roman Emperor knows you not."

Likely it was that the Roman Emperor knew him not. It was most unlikely that any Roman Emperor would ever know him at all. Still, still, he was a Citizen of Rome, and could Averno withdraw from him the immense protection of that Citizenship? Why did he not inquire of them an answer to this question? Why did he instead ask an entirely other question? "Why do you say that I have come here to encompass the death of Cadmus?"

"Because we have seen, as though in a vision of the night, Cadmus transfixed by an arrow. And we have seen that arrow to have been of your designing."

Vergil felt his lips open and throat and tongue move. He perhaps heard not, but in his inward soul he felt, louder, something, than the loudest clap of thunder. The earth moved and shook, and yet it did neither shake nor move. And on the table in front of him, whose polished surface mirrored nothing now, he saw the fallen, shattered rose.

He saw the rose.

Out in the streets again, and feeling rather vertiginous, he asked, "Is there somewhere very near where I might for a moment sit?" No response coming, he looked around for his one-time beadle, saw him not. Saw no one else. No one behind him, that is. And no one at either side of the street. He saw no bench in an alcove; he saw no alcove. Neither was there so much as a doorstep or -sill. For lack of anything better, and rather than sit upon the street itself or squat upon his haunches, he leaned against the wall. It was all still so very odd—still, or, rather, again: the odd angles. The (he clearly realized this rather suddenly) absence of doorways . . . could he be in some

certainly peculiar street consisting only of the back-ends of properties? It was not impossible, but that there should not be even a tiny door for the servants . . .

For one moment more he was not even certain where the next corner was, so odd was the way the area was laid out, and then he saw some figure cross the street and vanish behind a wall; therefore behind the wall must be a corner. Suddenly his conjectures were swallowed up, as the details of that swift-passing figure came, by not quite afterthought, into his mind. It had been an armed man: What was such doing in Averno?—in any city, for that matter?—wherein, unlike the open countryside, only a soldier was, supposedly, permitted armed? It was possible that the man had some sort of license, a private watchman might obtain one—rather, his master might, on his behalf—but what was the weapon? A sword? Perhaps not. Certainly Vergil had observed a weapon. Ah, but the fellow had been helmed as well as armed! And a rather immense helmet it had been, too. This made no sense, no watchman would wear more than, at most, an iron cap. Had there not been something equally unusual about the way the man walked?—almost, stalked? Unusual, but certainly not unfamiliar. He had seen it, seen it a many times more than once, and now he recollected where.

Vergil was by choice no great frequenter of the Games, "the Games were not what they were," everyone said so. Whatever they were now, it was not to his own taste to go to them; but sometimes situations other than his own taste obliged him. That cautious, slightly stiff-legged stance or walk, that not-quite-crouch, relentless tread: yes. At one place on the sands stood . . . whichever. Toward him came prowling the other. The retiarius, perhaps, with his fisherman's net and his trident for killing a great fish. Perhaps the gladiator was not a retiarius. Perhaps he was one of those who used the deadly short sword, Thracian-style.

His, Vergil's, giddiness, which had seemed for a moment better, was now worse. It was of a quite different sort than that which had afflicted him at the end of the secret meeting of the friends of the king; it was something quite different and something quite worse, and it had to do with the man whom he had seen—

—was now, suddenly, seeing again: and nearer—

—and now again crossing the street, again at an angle at which no street should be—

—and nearer—

—wearing the great Thracian helmet, and yet carrying over one arm the reticulated net, a part of it in one hand ready to cast over the one he stalked—

But this was quite wrong, this was all quite wrong, it was much wronger than, merely, an armed man clearly not a soldier and within the city's walls; it was wronger by far than a gladiator in full trappings walking in broad daylight down an open street. It was the trappings themselves were wrong, even though Vergil could still not determine the nature of the weapon, if sword, if trident.

The retiarius would not be wearing a Thracian helmet. The Thracian would not be carrying the weighted net of the retiarius. What. What?

Suddenly it became of immense, intense, of the utmost importance to know what time of day it was. If noon, all might yet be well; perhaps the man was another lunatic. Cadmus? No. Familiar . . . now Vergil realized the man had, at this last crossing of the street he stood in, seemed familiar. But Cadmus, no. *What time was it?* What hour of morning had he, Vergil, started out? How long had he been out? He cast his eyes all round about. His heart swelled, he felt cold. It might be before noon, it might be after, noon it could not be: There were shadows in the street, short ones, but that was of no matter.

The man, armed, purposeful, seeking his intended prey, he in the Thracian helm, had of an utter certainty cast no shadow.

Thracian! *Thrax!*

Vergil had turned and loped away. Where he found a corner, he turned, down that way he fled. When he found another corner, he turned therein and fled down whatever street he fled . . . and fled. . . . Much time he did not think, but he was, in some other way, engaged in something much resembling thought: he was counting. He was not at first aware that he was counting. But he had not even stopped counting when by chance he bethought him of something someone had said, someone else, who? it mattered not *who,* had said, ". . . here in the web . . ."

Here in the web!

Was it the name of this odd, odd area, section of the city? What else might it be? What had Thrax in hand, on arm, to cast over to entrap, before thrusting home the sword or trident (and it could not at all matter which)? A net. What was a net? A web. Those who spun, did they not often, also, weave? Weft and woof: what was weave but web? And all the while, in the back of his mind, at the bottom of his mind, he heard a thrumbling, a buzzing, a buzzing as of some gigant fly: and he saw the huge spider spinning, spinning, spinning, to entrap the fly: a web.

And all the while, above, beneath, beyond these dread, dread thoughts, he heard a voice, slow and calm and steady, saying, *Third right, back one, two left, left four, back thrice.* . . . He stopped. He did not stop the thinking voice, he did not stop—even—moving: running it was he stopped. He kept on walking, but now he walked crab-style, sidewise, so as to keep in sight both right and left. What weapons had he with him, to counter, if encountered, the Thrax face-to-face, armed with either sword or trident? He had his knife in its sheath: much good might this do him, save of course the Thrax slipped; the Thrax, the retiarius, as all and every gladiator, was trained to walk so as not to slip. It must be some other weapon, different, quite different indeed, on which he must depend. And he depended now upon his memory. And he drew it forth, as knife from sheath, as sword from scabbard. *Third right, back one, two left, left four, back thrice.* . . . There was more, of course more: but this was the key. He knew that now. It remained but to be for one full moment quite, quite calm, to act as though no one pursued him, and to reflect. And the one full moment he needed not, it became clear in less than that: *Third right, back one, two left, left four, back thrice.* The key opened the lock, the lock moved the door. He was in the one hundred and twelfth labyrinth, or maze, set down in the book called the *Patterns* of Parthenopius. He had studied them for years and years, had he not studied them a decade? Had he not, having learned them, every night gone through them all for one full passage of the larger sandglass, every single one of the labyrinthine mazes there delineated . . . gone through them in his mind, of course; merely he'd checked them with those in the book when he had done.

Well. He had no book to check with now but he needed none. He

followed the proper turnings. He did not run. He felt, by and by, safe enough to turn his back.

But by that time he was out of the maze. Maze, labyrinth, web. Whatever Thrax had been designated to cast over him, Vergil was now beyond such casting. He was out of the web.

As for what he was now in, why, that, though perhaps safer, was certainly something else indeed.

If he had indeed been, this last time, time just past, indeed been in Averno, he was not certain . . . in a way he thought he could not have been; though if not there, where?—this he could not say. But he was, of a sudden, in Averno now, and in such a quarter of it where even the populace itself, to say nothing of strangers, was always in danger—a glance told him that—immediately it was not violent, but certainly it was criminous, and stinking of evil and rot. What was there here in this low quarter to occupy the sullen folk who filled and swarmed in it? Why, here lay the thieves' kitchens and the thieves' markets and the thieves' dens. Be sure (Vergil thought) that more than not the stolen items had been stolen from the strangers who came to the Very Rich City, whether they were themselves very rich or not, to trade. Or from their servants. Here, too, were the lairs of the poorest prostitutes, though it was too early for all but one or two of them to be stirring about for custom . . . if cupping a pair of sagging, withered dugs and leering from a window, as some wretched she was even now doing, could be called "stirring"—the one look at her face which he could not avoid convinced him that she was either imbecile or mad. "Syra!" she called out, crack-voiced. "Syra! Gypa! Hey!"

And then as well in the winding ways he saw often man or woman squeezing lengths of goats' guts in wash-buckets and basins full of liquids too murk and miry to term the process "cleaning"; and as often, and often right next to this, perhaps parted only by some chopping block, were pots of rank and rancid oil where shorter chunks of this delicacy were trying and frying, yielding smells as evil as the looks he had from those who flung their heads upward, their jaws outward, a gesture ugly in intent as aspect; the very offer to sell, an insult: "Sarsa! Hot tripa, cheap enough f'you!"

Who in the *names* of all the gods of hell would want to buy *any* of

the rubbish displayed . . . knives with broken blades, unmatched spurs and scraps of furs, wax-caustic portraits on boards cracked along the middle, shirts ripped down the back and stained with stains not only those of mud . . . and who mad enough to be tempted by hints of "Better stuff inside, boss"? Hints which, not taken, transformed themselves into filthy gestures, hoots of "Nabba! Nabba! Bugger-die!"

Surely they did not any of them, with their *Syra! Gypa! Sarsa! Nabba!* imply that any of them particularly thought this stranger Vergil was a Syrian, an Egyptian, a Saracen, a Neapolitan; merely cant words for outsiders, were these. And, for parting gift, the sneak-slung stone.

Vergil trod his way. Not that he was certain what it was. But there was a slight but quite discernible slant to the lane, and he believed that this, could he keep to it, would bring him eventually to the canal, whence he might surely find a way he knew, one back to a safer section of this city where little, indeed, perhaps nothing, was quite safe.

As no man's or woman's eye may trace the lightning whence it cometh, whither it goeth, but that the pattern of it once flashed remains before the eyes, slowly changing and slowly fading, so Vergil retained something of certain looks flashed upon him, certain glances flashed past him by sudden lifting-up of low-cast-down gazes, of certain words he not-quite heard and certain gestures near covert—he knew that there were here in these outcast wards some who meant to seize or slay him . . . perhaps one first and then the other . . . and he perceived the humor of the close-packed populace toward him beginning to grow worse. Some scuffle between a two or three of them of a sudden breaking out and attention drawn away from him, Vergil slipped between half-hovels into an alley scarcely wide enough for dogs to couple in; the space-way led to a rubbly courtyard with broken walls, and there on the slimy ground he saw a part of his salvation. He seized up a cloak of rags so foul and fetid that not even a common beggar would have touched it save to thrust it aside with a stick; might, nonetheless, someone—anyone—lay claim to it? if only to make trouble? He, recalling the adage *festina lente,* made *haste* to remove his own robe *slowly,* and left it alongside of where the other had lain crumpled. A mute trade of sorts? So be it. Who knew who

even now peered at him from this worse-than-jungle?—he got him into the thousand-times-worse-than-merely-wretched garb and made to muffle his face in its filthy folds. Some silent words spoke to him; under his under-tunic, invisible, still he had his purse, from it now he took the small rough-cast bell which Iohan had given him. He did not mean to summon a servant now—yes! he did! his servant was the fear his bell would summon by its sound; this, too, would serve him.

And best it serve him well.

Peering through the harsh and clotted cloth, he set his feet to walk without stumbling (though a slight stumble now and then he could not avoid: but it fit well one in his disguise, for he had bethought him suddenly to tear loose one jagged strip and wrap it, bandage-wise, about his left foot: some further detail to add to his mask) through the narrow places and the wider: see felon throng draw swiftly and not even sullenly apart! as he made his way, ringing; and save for that, in silence—scarcely he dared breathe through the ichorous clouts. If he opened his mouth to say so much as the word *Unclean,* he must have died. . . . In fear and unashamed to show it, they fell away and let him pass: not that a single one among them there pitied him nor would shrink to end his life with a well-thrown stone, but only that his body must then be needs moved: and none would dare move to move it.

And calling to mind another fell occasion, he wondered which was worse sound? The hoarse, harsh murmur of the hippotaynes hunting, coming in their companies from the reeds, or the slow, sad clamor of the leper's bell?

Averno.

The canal at last having been reached, and seeing not far from its slippery barm the slop-shop of some seemingly respectable—for Averno, anyway, respectable—trader in used garments, with no ado he stripped off filthy robe and false bandage, threw both into the canal; replaced his bell, now silent, in his purse and from the purse drew what he considered a coin sufficiently worth to require no haggling; tossed it in front of the slop-seller. Who, as though it were an everyday matter to be doing business with a haggard man clad in underwear, quick-picked first one robe, hefted and considered it, tossed it down and selected another: threw it easily up and over.

Vergil slipped into it, shook himself like a dog, once, twice, let the garment fall into place; it seemed clean. It was a trifle too large, what did such a thing matter. He observed the trader draw the coin close with his great toe. A look not quite incurious passed between them. Value given for value. No one need know everything about anything. A distant strand, a filthy city; deeds, not words.

Walking along now almost at ease, words to say came to Vergil's mind. His mind immediately reminded him that these were not words for him to say, but words that to him had been said. *Sissie summoned thee. And cruel Erichtho.* To refer to the Cumaean Sibyl as "Sissie," unless she was indeed a sister, this spoke either immense familiarity . . . or immense contempt; this last was impossible. It was unthinkable. *Had* the Sibyl a brother or brothers? A sister or sisters? Could the Sibyl of Lybya, the Sibyl of Sicily (this last, had he not been told had spoken to Cadmus?), be, indeed, sisters to she of Cumae? As for Erichtho. The name of this sorcerer was scarcely spoken even in "the woods," and, even there, never but in whisper. (Oak trees by midnight. Fire, meal, salt. Diana. Moonglow Selene. Cat and hare—The Apulian fellow had known anyway some of that. He had not, though, known Thrax . . . and the gods knew through what night-tangle Thrax's shadow now slipped . . . or on what errands.) Vergil strained for such scraps as he had heard . . . or, if not heard, then, somehow, however, had known without hearing . . . of Erichtho: some dim recollection or adumbration of a great battle. . . . Had there been a great battle involving, somehow, that name? Was there yet to be one?—And if him, Vergil, involving, *how?*

Question there had come. But answer there came none.

Some odd, *odd* sound seemed echoing, buzzing: He thought of the scene in his room that night. Thought absurd. As though she whose voice echoed as though from a thousand caverns forth could be confined in a bottle, like a fly! And yet, and so: *suppose!* Had it been so, it had been a sacrilege, or had it, would it? Had he not saved the fly's life? A mental note he made, though sterner than as though graven on marble with iron, to take the bottle far from the spidery corner, and release whatever buzzed within. . . . And if so it were the Sibyl, what message? When no words spoken?

Some speak. Some spin.

Some weave.

"Iohan! I'm damned glad to see you—"

"And I, you, Master. For—"

"That small bell you gave me? May have saved my—"

"Master, what I'm thinking, it's that it's best we consider getting back. Away from—"

And, as often when two talk more or less at the same time, they two more or less at the same time fell silent. After a moment the boy gave a slight bow, a slight gesture. Vergil said, "If you mean it is for me to talk first, you being man and I master, then what I wish to say is that I give you leave to finish what it was which you were saying."

Iohan nodded, swallowed, made a broader gesture. "Ser, such types has been roaming roundabout here, and such talk I hear talked by them I hasn't asked to say so much as *Salve,* and it's give me firm impression, ser, as there are them here who as you might say mean to speed the parting guest."

Vergil grunted. "Meaning us?"

"Therefore."

Vergil sighed. "There is so much I've observed of very recently myself as to make me feel I needn't ask you to say more right now. There's a great deal of unfinished business, but it may be that our own part in it may be finishable from elsewhere. 'Pay, pack, proceed' —eh?"

"Ser?"

"Traditional military order . . . of some sort. Matters not finished here? Let them send after me to discuss that. More advice wanted? Let them disburse for the advice they've had, then ask me for more. Do you observe, my lad, what it is which I am about to do?"

He had his money in his hand, his account tablets in the other. For a second only Iohan stared, and rubbed his brown curls. Then: "Ah! You be about to pay, ser. Then I'm about to pack, ser. And then—"

"—then we may proceed, ser."

Settling accounts with the lodgings-master took longer than Vergil liked, but an attempt to speed matters would have had no better result than the presentation of further demands, most of them and likely all of them for sure mythical—and then as well he wished to give no appearance of nervousness. Some accounts he paid in full

with no question, some he questioned but paid in full, some he simply refused with an impassive no. And as at last the keeper of the house made some particularly preposterous demand for sundry quintals of the best barley, Vergil said, "The best barley has never even been smelled in your stables. Take the money and snap your talley-sticks in two."

" 'Take the money.' I'll take the futtering money, sure, yes—and I'll take the horse too, until—"

"The horse is rented and her rent is up; if you'd like a lawsuit with her livery stableman—but perhaps you'd like me to report all this to the magnates instead?"

The man looked him full in the face and gave one silent snarl. Then, with a sullen shrug, he snapped his talley-sticks and tossed them away. Then he swept the money off the counting-board, and whither it went, Vergil cared not. The mare was saddled, the saddlebags full; he mounted. Only a step into the street and he struck his forehead. "The fly!" he said, sharply. Half-turned.

But Iohan was equal sharp. "That great fly in that great bottle, ser?"

"Yes! I must—"

"Ser, I've opened it and let out. The bottle, ser, be packed. The fly —who knows. Surely Master didn't want it? I can't certain recollect you ordered me to do what I done, but I be almost sure of it."

Vergil had no recollection of ordering it at all, but, it being exactly as he would have wished to have ordered, he gave his head a brisk shake. Then: "Where is the beast going?" he demanded. "Why are you leading her this way? This is not the way to the Great Gate at all; what ails you, boy?"

"Confusion ails me, ser, for it's not me as is leading she, but it's as she's got her own notions, and so far," as the mare picked up her hooves and increased her pace, "it's all as I be able to do is hold on to her. What? Give you the reins? Aye—"

But tug as he would, gentle her as he would, attempt to guide her as he might, the mare swerved not from her own course. "This is absurd. It is in fact so absurd that I shall let her go as she pleases . . . just to see *where* she pleases."

And where she pleased was to lead along the broad lane which, as every evidence of sight and smell indicated, led to the Dung Gate. To

the great jollification of loungers, loiterers, and guards. The chief duty guard was vastly diverted to see the fine horse anticking and prancing through the filthy puddles despite the evident desire of her master and his man to control her. Like cleave to like, the duty guard observed. Expel nature with a pitchfork, sure she do still return, he said, chuckling, absently fiddling with his filthy book and filthier pen. Then some notion occurred to him that checked his grinning and hurrawing for a moment. "Say, by duty I bennot suppose to leave yous gann out by thic gate," he brayed, some sudden definition of "duty" coming to his mind.

Iohan twisted his head. "The cursed trot's a vehicle with dung inside, ben't she?" he demanded, and trying, seemingly, to hold on to the bridle for dear life, else be tossed into the muck and steaming mud. At this the guard and lay-company laughed loud, Vergil reached for the book, had it in hand, crusty pen hasty dipped in ink which never saw India, scribbled his scrawl, tossed a coin, tossed the book, more curvetting, hoots, jeers: They were outside the walls. The chief duty guard howled that they were not to come back by the same way. "Nor by Herc we shan't!" muttered Iohan. The mare wrangled till the gate was gone from sight. Then she of a sudden settled into a perfectly steady pace.

"Hop up, Iohan, quick! She may get bored with good behavior!" The mare was no great heavy animal, but neither one she bore on her back now was of great weight . . . as weight be gauged in pounds. And—sure enough!—no sooner *was* Iohan fixed in his place, than she was off again; she ran, she ran, she ran at a swift but holdable pace . . . that is, one at which she held herself. Her mounts were content with holding on to her.

And then she cantered, and then she let herself into a quick but certainly a restful walk. And as she did she turned her head and rolled her eyes. Aside the road was an obelisk on which words and signs were carved. "What be that'n, ser, please?"

Vergil squinted to read the half-obscured words. "Ah, yes. Oh, so. That is the Proscription Stone. Anyone banished, exiled, or proscribed from the limits of the municipium the Very Rich City of Averno, let him take heed: These are the limits thereof, further he may not go, pains of death await him. . . . More or less that is what it says. And what say *you?*"

" 'Exiled *from*—' Well, ser. You say such, such I must believe it say. Leave them proscribe me, ser. No fear, my Herc, I'll violate them boundaries.—Ser, ser! Ben't the air cleaner?"

The very cleanly winds, which must indeed have felt themselves proscribed from entering the municipal limits of the Very Rich City, most certainly had blown the air here clean. The path was not the one which they had taken, coming in; what of it; nothing of it. Sooner or later it would reach a road. Meanwhile they were gone from Averno, passed clean out of its unclean jurisdictions, as the path turned (sure enough! very soon they came upon a paved way: Imperial stones it was the mare's hooves now trod; there was safety in the very sound and thought), though they could not see the city itself, yet that corner of the evening sky was fouled and smudged and seemed darklier than night: though now and then a flame, flames shot up.

Oft was I wearied when I worked at thee. . . . In a way, now, *now* being a fragment of *oft,* Vergil was weary. Weary, in one way, was far too weak a word. But in another way he felt as though a burden as great as any borne by mule or serf had been rolled from off his back and shoulders. It was the day's end in more than one sense. There was, rising now, moon enough to light them: against the horizon, the moon loomed large. Some remnants of day lingered to the side. Overhead, the stars.

They had passed the night in rude comfort enough at a clean-enough inn. At the early morning there was a cup of hot wine and a bowl of chestnut-meal well cooked. Thin mists swirled through the trees, they were up high, and on a strange road, but this did not bother: It was a road that would lead them back to the small port that was—still and again—home.

Where it led them before then, however, was to a small military post with a crow's-eye view of the surrounding country. A hare could not have come along within miles, in daylight without being observed, let alone armed men. It need have been no surprise that they themselves, then, were, so to speak, expected; the surprise was by whom they were expected.

"It be a lictor," said Iohan, in a dismal voice. Wiggled his back, and rubbed the nape of his neck.

"It is not only a lictor," Vergil said, by no means joyful himself; "it is *the* lictor. Ah, well. —Ser Lictor! Greetings!" He had hardly expected to meet him here, on the berm of a rural road, still holding his officially bundled rods and ax. There was, however, no pomander box, nor was one needed so near the sweet-smelling woods—expected by Vergil not, the lictor seemed surely to be expecting Vergil; why?

Soon answered. "Saw you coming down below at the bend of the road there," he said. There was no grimness in his manner, neither was it quite the same as it had been at their last meeting. Almost automatically he now drew himself up. "Master Vergil, a Citizen of Rome, I greet you in the name of the Senate and the People of Rome. His Honor the Legate Imperial is within, and . . ." And here formalities concluded. The man was more puzzled than anything else. Iohan, ceasing to fear for his back or his neck, slipped from where he had been holding the mare's head and clasped his hands for Vergil's more easy dismounting, then at once returned. Once again the animal looked back, rolled her eyes; then she bent to crop a clump of grass. None of her antic moods seemed now upon her.

"Well, Lictor, what is it? What brings you here, with his Honor back in Averno?"

A shake of the head. "Oh, he's not, my ser. He's within. And he's seemingly had a shock of some sort. I do want you to see him, as I'm sure he'll be wanting to see you, but first let me tell you what's this about . . . so far as I know what it's about. Seems that the Excise stopped some fellow ambling along on a mule and stopped him to ask for a declaration. Well, he—so they tell me, I wasn't there—puffed and huffed, said he was a courier on official business from the Very Rich City to his Excellence"—Vergil rapidly ran titles and authorities through his mind: His Excellence, that would be the Viceroy of the South, with office at, or, rather, right outside of, Naples, whose Doge was notoriously prickly about any possible rival in power—"and he needn't show nor even have nor make a declaration. Which in its way is of course true. However, for one thing: why, if bound from Averno to Naples, why be on this road? Hardly the most direct one. For another, if a courier, why going so slow?"

He looked at Vergil, as if expecting, or half-expecting, him to answer on behalf of the alleged courier. Vergil not doing so, on went the

lictor with his account. The unsatisfactory answer had given the excise men reason to make the fellow dismount, his baggage had been examined, they had indeed contained dispatches, but, although asked to wait till the matter were taken up with the soldiery, the courier had not done so. "Tried to cut across country, from this bend in the road to the other, foolish to think he could have gotten away with it, a mule can do it, yes; suppose he saw no bloody great cavalry horses, thought himself safe, but these wiry little hill-horses—ponies, almost—which the soldiery have got here can go most anywhere a mule can go, and go it faster. Shorten the tale: they locked him up for the night, then, having been informed that his Honor was stopped here—and also on route to see his Excellence—why, they brought all his burthen here, too. And his Honor, by authority so vested in him and his honored office by Imperial Sign and Seal, opened it. Which is what seems to have given him this shock. Please to come along, Ser Vergil."

Shock. It would not need too great a degree of bad news to constitute a shock for Casca, considering what low state of health and spirit the Legate Imperial had been in when last seen. Not many steps brought them across the invariable moat (dry now, but sharply staked: *one never knew)* and into the guard-post proper, nor thence into a small room, evidently the decurion's. The decurion was there, looking as like to every other decurion as to conjecture vision of there being somewhere, a mold to make them. And, there, too, was Casca. It was not certain to Vergil that Casca recognized exactly who this newcomer was, but the lictor having gotten as far as "You Honor, one Master Vergil, a Citizen of Rome, whom—" when Casca broke in upon the reintroduction. Vergil had heard the older man's voice as they had approached, wondered at its flat and high-pitched tone, but the tone turned as Casca now spoke to him.

". . . yes, it's true, it's true, it's true, I did fear that there might be some slackening in the reigns of state if I left at the usual time to make my usual report, but though half I hesitated to leave, more than half I felt I needed to discuss it all with the Viceroy, so leave I did at the usual time, and now I am confused about the time, and so you are here to help me." The rambling words, part-explanation, part-appeal, stopped. Abruptly. Almost at once Casca said, "Help

me, then. I say you must help." He turned his ruined face to the decurion. Who turned his own face to Vergil.

The decurion was inclined to be brusque. "Don't dally and stand about, citizen," he said. "You are required to assist the Imperial Officer—to assist *any* Imperial Officer when called upon."

"Decurion," said Vergil. "I am more than mere willing. I am indeed eager. But his Honor has yet to say, though he's asked my help, what help is it he asks of me. Ser Legate," he addressed the man who sat, sick-faced, crouched and quivering, before him in the guard-room, "what is it, ser, which—"

Casca said, "I am perplexed. I am confused. Badly, very badly confused. What is the date?" Vergil answered, now being able to answer a given question, though little he saw why it should be a matter of either confusion or perplexity: They were not, after all, some foraging party lost in woods for weeks. He named the month, named the number of the day, declared the relation to the ides and calends, he named the Consuls-in-Office, the Imperial reign-year, and the number of the indiction, that fifteen-year tax-cycle being just about to turn. There was a small smell of small wine and of old leather in the small room . . . doubtless the leather was that of the decurion's harness. There was also a small smell of the decurion as well.

". . . confused . . ." said Casca. "I wish that you would not confuse me, master . . . whatever your name is. Now tell me. Tell me ever so simply. The date. *What the date?"*

This time and before Vergil could answer, the decurion, a classically rugged-looking old legionary, face as leathery as harness, and with callouses under his chin from the helmet-straps of years; this time the decurion gestured Vergil, not to speech but silence, said, halfway between *Attention* and *At Ease,* "Ser. Beg to report. Eleventh day of September. Ser."

At this brief answer, couched in the military report terms familiar from years, old Casca seemed to gain control. To be . . . anyway . . . less confused. "The *eleventh* day."

"Ser. Eleventh."

Casca limply inclined his hand. Vergil, eyes following the movement, saw that there appeared to be an entire strongbox of documents next to the folding chair in which Casca sat. Sat, and trem-

bled. The Imperial Eagle was embossed in the upper right-hand corner; in the center was the single letter *A* and an insigne and under that the initials for Latin: "the Very Rich City." In size it was something between a dispatch box and a chest for treasure; it was made of cedar wood bound in bull's-hide; and it seemed to be not alone old but to have had a long, hard life. Though the box had been corded, tied, knotted, sealed, all this lay around it, with several clean and fresh cuts in the cordage. (Though the cordage had not been new, either: Averno had grown rich not alone from what it earned but from what it had not spent.) And toward all this gestured the Legate's wasted, quivering hand.

"Open it, Dec," he said. The decurion at once obeyed. A mass of documents lay within, some on parchment and some on papyrus. Some were certainly palimpsests, from which older writing had been thriftily soaked or scraped so that new texts might be inscribed thereon. Some of the number (Vergil could not guess what the number might be) had had their own seals broken; others, visibly, had remained unopened. Again Casca gestured, again the decurion obeyed an order; obeyed it correctly, though no words had passed. He picked up the first item, presented it to his superior. Who gestured that Vergil take it, that Vergil should open it; commanded, *"Read . . ."*

Not more than a few words of the commencement of a formal (and a lengthy) salutation had Vergil read when he was interrupted. "The date, man. *The date? What date?"*

"Ser Legate." He scanned it swiftly. "The thirteenth of September."

"The thirteenth? The thirteenth? How comes this to be dated the thirteenth?—when you both assure me that today is the eleventh?"

Vergil. "Merely at a hazard . . . a guess . . . documents are sometimes dated in advance in preparation for them to be signed subsequently . . . on the date designated, for—"

Said Casca, "These are already signed."

Vergil's eyes went at once to the bottom of the document in his hands. Whose signature was there he could not at once make out, he had a swift impression it had been signed in stencil, that great invention to aid those who could not write even their own names; but signed it had been. Perhaps Casca had made another gesture, for the

decurion, not skilled in the subtle movements of the accomplished secretary, had attempted to remove the sheet from Vergil's hands. Vergil did not yield it over, there was a silent struggle (Iohan said later that the lictor declared the decurion had actually put his other hand to his sword), then the thing passed from the one man to the other. And Vergil cried, "O the gods, Casca!"

He had seen one line, inscribed in ink as black as black ever was, but it burned as though written in fire. *—the sentence of death having been thus executed upon the traitor Cadmus, it—* It had been signed, it had been sealed, it had not been as intended delivered, it spoke in the past tense as of a thing accomplished, it was dated two days hence— " 'O the gods,' indeed," said Casca.

Casca, at their first meeting (over the good wine mingled with fresh clean spring water), had said of those in power in Averno, ". . . though they are savages and swine, they know well enough I've only to send one signal, and," he blew an imaginary trumpet, "down comes the legion. And that's the end of *that.*" But now he was saying something else, in a voice that was only intermittently firm.

"It is not the life of one lunatic that concerns me, that is not of any concern to me in the least. Those who are insane are sacred?" The question, purely rhetorical, was followed by no pause. Casca swept on, quavering voice or not. "Sacred because they have been touched by the sacred gods? 'Let the gods avenge offenses against themselves.' I was looking, I had been looking in the wrong place. Gazing altogether in the wrong direction—*as they intended I should do!* Intelligence they have none, but cunning, craft, slyness and guile—of this they have enough, enough, more than enough, they—"

"By *they* your Honor means the magnates of Averno?"

A gesture. "Whom else could I mean? Look, look at those damnable documents." Another gesture. "The magnates? Yes! But not all the magnates. I haven't even scanned all those decrees, sentences, documents, declarations. I can't tell you every name that is on them, because be sure that not every name has a sheet all to itself—there are lists! Ah, what lists! Listen, Master Vergil. There is a faction of the magnates that intends to make a clean sweep of every other faction. Much of what they mean, and what the reasons for meaning

it, is unclear to me, it is too murk, too thick. But I can tell you that they don't mean merely to put one man, mad or not, to death. They have down there the names of hundreds, Messer Vergil! I say hundreds. I say hundreds. Whom they mean to kill.

"Hundreds . . ."

And so Vergil came to know, knowledge swift and heavy and as sickening as a blow, what that dull, recurrent, and deep demand for *". . . Hecatombs . . ."* had really meant. Hundreds were to be sacrificed indeed. But it was not hundreds of oxen that were meant. Hundreds of men.

"Your Honor had spoken once to me of blowing one blast of the trumpets and bringing down the legion. Has—"

" 'Send one signal,' is what I said," Casca corrected him, almost absently. True: the trumpet-blowing had been mimed. "I was about to inform you that there must actually be three: one to the Commander of the Legion, one to the Viceroy, and one . . . for one last chance we must give them to shrink back from this series of—obviously—false trials of so many Roman citizens . . . and one to Averno. I—" A new and sudden thought struck him. "Would you bear this last one? We would give you an armed escort. You are already known there, so—"

Vergil had begun to consider the manner in which he might do this, when he was of a sudden overwhelmed by memories of why it was perhaps not the best thing in the world—for himself, for Cadmus, for Armin. He forced himself to stop thinking thus, useless catalogue of names, useless waste of time— "Ser Legate, here is what happened," he began. Got no farther.

"You would not wish to. Very well. Tell me later why not. One moment later." He pointed to an open set of tablets. "Take up the style, if you please, me ser, and write these words: *S. Apponal Casca, Legate Imperial, to the Very Rich City of Averno, Greetings. This is the decree. All trials and all other judicial processes are to be estopped and to stay estopped and in abeyance till further notice. Utterly forbidden that You execute any sentences of capital nature. At once acknowledge obedience.* Now seal it. —Decurion!"

"Ser!"

"Send this."

"Ser!"

The decurion saluted, left the room, could be heard barking his orders. *Send this!* Not, take your decade and bring this, *this*—and, if so, Vergil tried to imagine the entire ten men on their mounts riding calmly and confidently up to the gated walls of the Very Rich (very filthy, very decadent, very bad) City: he could imagine it. He could, even, imagine a one or at most a two of the cavalrymen thus matter-of-factly delivering these orders; what he could not, in this case, imagine, was the reaction thereto. "Would the Legate Imperial not consider assigning the entire force of the soldiery here encamped to this task?"

"And leave this post unmanned? Messages must pass, must be exchanged, you know. If I were well, if you were willing— However. What. A thought. Just now. An obvious one. What, what, what . . ."

But someone else had had that thought, someone from whose mind it had not escaped; from nowhere, there he stood before them.

The lictor.

"Your Honor. Permission to draw a third ration."

"Granted."

"Your Honor. Permission to depart on duty."

"Go."

"Ser. Hail and farewell."

"Hail and farewell."

In a moment Vergil saw through the tiny window three men on horseback: two soldiers, armed as usual, one with the sealed tablets and the tablets' purple badges, and the lictor, bearing the fasces. Naught else. Place there might be and time there might come, that so-far august emblem of order and of cogent rule and of well-tempered strictness sink, as all emblems might, and be degraded: not here and not yet. Vergil heard the hooves depart at a slow and steady pace, now almost soft upon the enclosed ground of the guard-station post, now hollow upon the bridge, then (with a single, threefold whoop of human voice) at the gallop along the stone-paved, the Imperial road.

Twice more did he, at command, indite the burthen of that message on other tablets. *To the Commandant, the Legion: One cohort at once to Averno, in danger of sedition, misprision, and misrule.*

CASCA. (No need to add, "Have all in ready if more be needed"; it would be done. Automatically.) The Commandant would of course notify the Viceroy and this did not of course excuse the Legate from doing the same; the Legate did the same. At rather greater length, but not at much greater. One man sufficed for each message. The decurion departed, reappeared, departed; once Casca murmured something to him, the decurion responded with an official-sounding syllable; later Vergil was to learn that this ensured Iohan would receive a soldier's meal: bread, garlic, salt, parsley, and the rough-and-ready wine of the ration; next the Legate put his hands before his face, at once removed them.

"Now there is time for you to tell me why you did not wish to return. *I* do not wish to return, think not this is any sort of reproach; speak on."

Had it been only that "one moment later"? And not, say, an hour? He began to, indeed, "speak on." Told the listening Legate how he had felt himself all but hustled off from and out of the stinking Rich City; some gifts, few, perfunctory, and an order for a money payment—and no extremely extraordinarily munificent one—cashable in either Puteoli or Naples, within a distinctly limited period of time. How, when he would further discuss his work there, came once more, at once, the familiar congee against which one felt there was no appeal: All right to go now, Wizard. How he had protested having heard no decision, no word, even, of refusal, denial, in regard to his plans for the fire-fields and how inflammable airs might be piped, and boiling water from the springs. *Responsum:* Master Vergil need give himself no further immediate concern in the matter. The Council of Magnates of the Very Rich City has even now already commenced giving Master Vergil's plans the attention they so much merit, attention the most profound. . . . Master Vergil will wish to mount, his horse and boy even now are waiting for him. . . .

. . . and so they were . . . though he had given no order.

An idea had flashed and shimmered while Vergil, aware of hands poised to press as he walked toward his servant and his horse, several of the magnates walking alongside him—seeming not so much anxious to see the last of him as preoccupied with other, deeper matters. This idea formed itself into a word he had not, dared not speak.

Poppaea. He had and dared speak another name, though. "I will wish to pay my respects to King Cadmus before I—"

And one man's emphatic *"Nuh!"* was not quite overspoken by another's. "King Cadmus is at present engaged in fasting, meditation, and prayer, and—"

And, "Therefore!" said Iohan.

Stooped, folded hands.

Vergil hesitated. Shrugged. Mounted.

"Clearly they wanted me gone directly and wanted me not to return," he concluded his recapitulation to Casca.

Casca's haggard face twitched. " 'Clearly'? Not to me, 'clearly.' "

Nor, in one second, was it "clearly" to Vergil either. This, all this, which he had just described—*had it happened?* It had *not* happened! What had happened was much simpler. —Simpler? Well . . . briefer. He and Iohan had decided to leave, and the mare—

Why had the mare so suddenly gone antic, gone into one of her moods, her "little ways," taken them would they or would they not by way of the least likely exit, the straight-topped Dung Gate, whence no man of social stature entered or left?—instead of via the arched way of the Great Gate? No answer came in words, but as though in some vision, a scene of mist contained within a crystal, he saw something . . . someone . . . waiting beneath an arch. . . . His name is Borbo.

His name is—*what?*

Over a table hung a rose, and deep within that table's surface a man stood beneath an arch, outlined by light, though else was dim: a figure brutal, strong, and coarse, watching the approach of a runner, of one running in a race, watching with a steady eye. This former's broad, blunt face had something of the look of an experienced gladiator, but there was in it no element of that caution akin to fear. And in his huge hands (huger, yet, his arms! his shoulders!) a hammer, huge. *Who? What?*

"Borbo is his name. A butcher is what he is. With his hammer he stuns the oxen. And when they stumble, then he plunges in the knife."

And then Vergil heard the voice—another and a different voice, not the voice that had just spoken—this voice never came from that butcher beneath the arch *(where,* the arch?); it was toneless and dry

and—he now realized, a trifle tired—it was as though some clerk was reading something, one who reads a document read sundry times before, yet need be read once more, before the signet is affixed . . . *one Vergil, a wizard, sorcerer, nigromant and necromant. From him the protection of the Laws and the Magnates of the Very Rich City is withdrawn, and he is proclaimed Outlaw. He may be duped, drugged, drawn, stabbed, strangled, stoned; he may be poniarded, poisoned, bludgeoned, thrust through, or cast down. It be licit that he be burned or bled or hamstrung or hanged. . . .*

The arch, beneath which the butcher stood: *where?*

The arch of the Great Gate, whence, it had been thought Vergil and his servant would emerge upon their leaving the Very Rich City . . . was *where.* They had been hurried, huddled, headed thither; and thither they would certainly have gone, had it not been for the sudden madness of the mare. It was a minor madness, but it was enough to have saved their lives; thus:

The scene of he and his servant having been hastened forth by sundry magnates to his, Vergil's, and his, Iohan's, doom and death—this, which one moment ago he had imagined had happened—this had indeed not happened. *But it had been intended to have happened.* The decree of outlawry had covered many contingencies, but it had not covered the contingency of a runaway horse. Idly, Vergil looked at his palm, thinking, I must give her some handfuls of best white barley. His hand was empty. His mouth, fallen silent, was empty, too; he fumbled for his cup, his cup was also empty; his cup, his mouth were equal dry.

To Casca: "Is there among these damnable documents one which proclaims my own outlawry?"

From Casca: "You may look. But does it matter. Averno shall not come to us, for all its documents. We shall go to Averno. Despite them."

Again that echo in his ear, his damnable, his echo-trapping ear.

I do not go to Rome.

Ah, no? But it may be that Rome shall come to you.

To Casca: "Can we do nothing, then, but wait?"

From Casca: "We can do nothing, then, but wait."

And, whilst they waited?

The magnates had, almost casually, proclaimed a State of Siege, as was, of course, their entire and proper right in law, and needed no pretensions that sapping operations were underway round about (and under) the walls, the black walls; it was, if one cared to call it so, a legal fiction: and the precise distinctions between a State of Siege and a State of War were no doubt of immense interest to the jurisconsults and their students in Apollo's Court. But here, as for the most part, it was a distinction without a difference. This had entitled the magnates to close shut the three known openings of the Very Rich City: the Great Gate, the Dung Gate, and the Water Gate, and to set booms across its canal, to station guards (read "troops") all round about the place. And so on.

Being no jurisconsults themselves, however, they had also ripped up the roads a good way through and into the mountains—*roads?* mere and narrow paths! At least some of the rocks ripped from the roads had been poised behind basketries and fences and heavy nets above the narrow passes, ready to be loosed at a word. At a word? Nay, at a gesture. A signal, be it weft or whistle. And loosed, of course, would be: though not as planned. So Averno had arranged to stay secret and secure, untroubled (the magnates, untroubled) during the few, very few days needed to carry out plans; after which—

But no city, not Averno with its three gates in its black walls (did the "bright tappetties" still hang there? wondered Vergil), not a city with twelve gates, nor even Thebes with its proverbial hundred, or be it Babylon the Great or be it even Rome—no city can ever entirely secure itself from anyone's getting in. Or getting out. There is always a sewer or a tunnel, remembered by one or two. There is . . . somewhere . . . always some forgotten drain, some archaic watercourse, a century, centuries, dried (or, perhaps, not entirely dried). Some crack, some cranny, a fissure through the riven caverns neath the earth, ones where no fires burned, on no map known to anyone, but nevertheless *known:* to someone. Somewhere an underground passage and somewhere a slanting shaft, dug, past times, in time of war by who knows? Oscans, Umbrians, Etruscans, Greeks, Romans, Carthagines, Saracens; what matter? . . . long ago stopped up . . . and long ago rediscovered . . . by whom? who knows? what mat-

ter? . . . and tunneled through again. Where there are customs and excises, there are smugglers. And so on. So on.

Thus: Wherever there is a barrier to getting in, someone, given time, will find a way through or past the barrier. And whenever there is a ban on getting out, someone will know a way to slip past the ban.

And some will start to do so at the first intimation of such a ban, some for one reason and some for another, and some will need no other reason than this one: Where things have become bad, things will become worse, and why wait?

Ten people, at least ten, had scrambled, tunneled, squeezed, waded, swum, dug their way out of Averno during its brief State of Siege; ten, at least, of whom the Imperial Authorities (and so, Vergil) had got knowledge. Some had escaped one by one, others at most two by two. They had not all escaped at one same time. Semel and simul? No. Full information of what had happened in Averno, then, was lacking. But the intent of the magnates as expressed in their documents (eventually every one of them read, and in detail: detail adding unto detail, fitting mosaiclike into the picture), the deeds of the magnates, as revealed by those ten who were questioned (Cadmus? *No.* Poppaea? *No.* Armin? *No.)*—and it was, in this case, just that: questioned. *Himself the August Caesar* had issued a blanket pardon. Not all, despite this, perhaps told all which they could have told.

The purpose of all this Avernian concealment must have been alone to prevent any interference; the deeds once done (surely the magnates thought), the trials, condemnations, executions of sentences, the "fines" and escheatments, the—in fact—bribes to be paid —and, actually, *paid!*—why, what else would the Authorities Imperial *do* but shrug? And pocket the plunder. To bring the matter a step closer in conjecture, suppose, just suppose that some whisper, let alone some shout, had indeed brought the legion out from its barracks not far from Naples; could the legion have gotten there in time, *there,* to Averno? Despite time, despite obstructions in the way? Supposing the legion to have mustered beneath the black walls, who would dare keep the great gates still barred and a-bolt? Not the magnates of the Very Rich City, to be sure.

To be sure that not a single pebble would have been let drop from a single crag upon the soldiers of the Empery (no such supposition

need obtain in regard to others, either striving to get in or to get out). And here came the cunning of Averno into play: Well could one imagine the mock alarm with which (later . . . safely later) they would have replied to any demand for explanation, sure though they expected none. "What? The roads blocked? The pass ambuscaded? The path walled up? But . . . and but . . ." See the eyes roll, the brows furrow, the hands deplore . . . *"But no!*

"Merely that road, path, and pass, was under repair!" And the canal, should it be asked—the canal was about to be repaired as well . . . drained and cleaned . . . The work of repair had begun *before* proclamation of the State of Siege! The workmen *of course* called back before the blockade could be cleared away. Regret! Immense regret! And next: "Perceive, however, the tangible evidence of this regret: The Very Rich City had of its own will levied upon itself a fine! So and so many purses, many, many purses, of gold. Be pleased to count. And . . . hah, the merest formalities! . . . a receipt prepared. A seal, a stencil, a monograph—anything! Merely as a form . . ."

Averno dealt much in form, in forms, and invariably the forms were crude. Yet by means of such crude forms, Averno had grown rich.

Had grown very rich.

Sometime during the time whilst they were waiting for reply from either direction, Vergil became aware of noise within the tiny fort, went without the room to see. There was, had been, a wooden watchtower, and, attached to this, a mast of sorts was going up: higher up. "Of sorts," it had been made of several spars now being put together with bolts and bars. There was indeed no crow's nest, but there was a cross-spar; and, the work of joining the parts being completed, some one of the soldiery was now being hoisted up to this. The decurion, on the instant of Vergil's appearance, vanished; the men, though ceasing not their labor, gave the newcomer glances not the most welcoming, though it could not be said that they were hostile glances. Almost at once one of them said to the others, "He be himself a mage—hoist away!" Whatever was going on was going on without official sanction, and, for all he could see, though entirely tangible, from what he had just then heard, contained or was in-

tended to contain, some measure of something intangible. Exactly next, the man going up, espying Vergil and having heard no doubt the comment, said, looking down, "Ser Mage, it is that I holds the rank of Raven in the Mysteries, and this gives me clear and far of seeing.—Steady on, there! Bring me up!"

The Mysteries. Of course! No military encampment however small but would have its lodge or coven devoted to the Mysteries of Mithras! Almost without thinking, Vergil raised his hands, clubbed them as though imitating paws, and gave one low and single sound: low, single, but extremely deep. The soldiers' heads gave as it were one single nod at once. What ranks within the Mysteries the others might hold it was necessary now neither to inquire nor to display. The one slowly going hoist aloft was Raven. Vergil was Lion. Enough.

Clutching fast the cross-spar, the man peered round about. Then he ceased to move his head, looked steadily toward Averno. Then he gave a cry, lurched. "Turno!" his mates called. "Turno, what see thee?"

"I be giddy; bring me down!"

Someone murmured, near to Vergil, "Bring him down, then; slowly, steady, bring him down, so."

On the ground, as they undid his harness, the man, pale, staggered, fell into a comrade's arms, was gently laid upon the ground. "Turno, what thee did see, soldier? Tell us, man."

"I saw blood and fire and someone . . . more than one . . . transfixed by an arrow . . . I be giddy, bring me down. Bring me down, mates." There was a brief convulsion. Turno became incontinent. There was a call for warm water, clean rags, a clean tunic. And, while one man went to get these, at once the others began to dismantle the jury-rigged mast. The soldiery was seldom idle.

One of them, the youngest it would seem, asked, as he grunted and tugged at the bolts, "If he did see 'Verno indeed, how dids he see an one man and one arrow? For it be greatly far." Someone, someone older, said something, low, to the lad, and the lad said nothing more.

But someone else had something more to say. "Raven . . . raven . . . I speak nothing of this here man and that there rank, but as merely of the bird, the raven-bird, it power of sight, it power—I say —be far, but I questions, be it clear? For this sight 'tis due alone to

the dread diet of the raven: for the raven eateth naught but dead men eyes."

Another: "Quiet, lest thee fright the lad; he will learn them thing soon enough. In the lodge, or out."

To Turno, he having been swiftly, gently, washed, and hastened into a clean tunic: "What else did thee see, man? Did thee see other soldier coming, mate?"

From Turno: "I be giddy. Bring me down."

Casca crouched in his curule chair, listening to Vergil's report of what had just happened. The Legate muttered something; as Vergil leaned toward him, cupping an ear, Casca, with an effort, cleared his throat, spoke again. "Seven kings select the Emperor," he said. "Yet, if all eight were here now, it could not affect what might be happening, there." He gestured in the general direction of the Very Rich City. Then, slowly, he straightened his slack back, began, slowly, waving aside a gesture of assistance, to rise.

"In general," he said, "I consider the teachings of Zeno not adequate as a basic principle of rule. Still . . . there is the fundamental Stoic saying: *There are things which may be helped and there are things which may not be helped, and one must learn which are which.* It is close in here, and it may be less close outside. Let us see."

Scarcely had they moved outside and settled their seats when the soldiery, who had been working in the far end of the walled yard, gave one great wordless cry; Vergil at that moment thought it must be one of those shouts such as men, soldiers or not—workmen, for example—use when they bend themselves to a sudden effort. No. Casca clutched at the bosom of his garment, half-rose from his seat, fell back, and, with his quivering hand, pointed.

Vergil jerked his head around. There, behind, beyond the fortress wall, a huge . . . *something* . . . like a red-hot lance-head . . . towered and trembled, high against the sky.

"Vesuvio!"

"No! Not—"

The earth gave a shivering movement.

"Then what?"

The chairs, as though of their own motion, or as though moved by men invisible, began to slide. Even one slight second before this,

Vergil had begun to shout his answer, was still shouting it even when the chairs were flung against the wall (wall which quivered but, marvelously, did not fall), even while the last elements of his cry were swallowed up by some other sound. As though every lion in every arena had roared at once. Fell silent. Roared again. Fell silent. Roared again. Fell silent.

In this last silence he heard the silent echo of his voice still crying answer within his mind.

Vesuvio?

Averno.

As when some great ship be found wracked ashore, evidence of what befell her may be deduced from such details as: Were her timbers scorched? Were they stove? Was her cargo jettisoned as though to lighten the vessel lest she stoop beneath a storm, or was her cargo found intact within her sand-filled hold? Such bodies as lay strewn upon the strand, were they but drowned or did they bear wounds? Was her apparel all in place or had her sails been stowed. . . .

But as for Averno, there were no witnesses—certes, none who ever did come forward—to tell of her very last hours. The testimony of those who had fled early, of those who had seen the preparations, the testimony of the intentions of the magnates as writ in hard black ink, and such testimony as that provided by the soldier of Raven rank (was it clear-seeing, clairvoyance of something then going on though past possible sight by normal vision? Was it prophecy? Was it . . . whate'er it was)—these, bit by bit, and word by word, built up a certain scene.

There were no witnesses to tell of the last hours of Averno, of who had gone first to the slaughter, who second . . . and who last. Cadmus, no doubt, they had saved till last. It would have been their way, the way of the magnates to have done so. As to how others had gone to death, the ways no doubt must have been various: some screaming and flailing, some praying, some cursing, some in Stoic acceptance and in Stoic silence. And Cadmus? What had his Sibyl said? *Cadmus was a man, therefore Cadmus was mortal.* Which is but to say that water wets and fire burns. If they had not bound his feet, and who knows if they had or had not, Cadmus had doubtless gone dancing; if they had not gagged his mouth, and who knew if they had not or

had, Cadmus had likely gone singing. This perhaps mattered not much (though much, perhaps, it had mattered to Cadmus). One thing mattered much . . . to Vergil. Mostly Cadmus had been mad, sometimes he had been sane. Vergil, knowing that he would never know, Vergil hoped with all his heart that Cadmus had not, then, been sane.

I see Cadmus, transfixed by an arrow: thus the vatic message. Vergil, a hundred years (so it seemed) after, was to ask himself, How had he kenned this soothsaying, at the time that first he heard it? Beneath the rose . . . Images of possible meaning had flashed across his mind like bolts of lightning, new one succeeding before old one had left off; as (1) *literally: an archer shall let loose an arrow from a bow and it shall pierce Cadmus's body*—(2) *metaphorically: arrows are symbolic of many things, as one speaks of the arrow of Eros, perhaps Cadmus in love*—(3) *allegorically: mayhap some stroke of state or fate shall bring his "reign" to sudden end*—

But the vision might have been a Sibylline saying or a Delphic oracle for all that any tincture or impression of the truth had entered Vergil's mind. How had one such story gone? the Emperor Marius sent the customary rich gifts to Delphi, asking, *When shall I die?* And the Pythonessa, sitting cross-legged in her shallow, fireless caldron on its tripod, had drooled and babbled and then, head jerking upright, clearly cried, *Beware the sixty-third year! The sixty-third year, beware!* Scarcely had Marius, then in the full flush of his maturity, finished chuckling—half-scornful, half-elated—when he had, in his royal tent, fallen, dozing, then sleeping; see him awaken to find himself alone and the tent alone, legions having, one after the other, in the night silently struck their own tents and vanished. To the one faithful servant who remained, Marius cried out asking whither had his armies fled, and why? The servant, loyal indeed but neither perceptive nor sharp, groping after any crumb of comfort, answering: They have gone to join General Sulla, who has proclaimed rebellion; but, sure your Imperial Highness need not fear that Sulla: he is old, he is old, *he is sixty-two years old!*

But at that moment (nor when as it were the echo of that moment had recurred when the Raven soldier called from aloft) had no tincture of impression been distilled into Vergil's mind that the *arrow*

might or could be an enormous drill intended to be lifted by immense engines akin to those that worked a catapult, and then dropped: a gigant pile driver driving the *arrow* into the surface and beneath the surface of that area beneath which (Vergil had revealed; he, *Vergil,* had revealed!) lurked and burned the "father-fire"; that this immense javelin, colossian dart, intended to pierce the Averninan earth's integument and free the pent-up flames therein beneath: not for any fleeting second had Vergil conceived this herculean steel could exist, let alone that it would enclose as, partly, in a cage, the body of the mad misfortunate entitled or mistitled *King.* Horrid vision. Dreadful thought. Arms and legs protruding as the enormous drill went up . . . and up . . . up . . . to pause some dreadful moment as the engine-workers slipped their stops and let it fall—ah, that fall! Like that of Icarus!

Transfixed! Oh, fatal word . . . and weak.

And to what end? For one, that the gigant drill should pierce new openings whence might flower the flames which alone constituted the gardens of Averno. (No real thought, ever, had been given to Vergil's plan that the hot vapors might be piped like water to wherever needed, there to be lit like lamps, to fire forges wherever forges be set up; no real thought given, ever, to his notion that the hot upquellings of boiling water be conveyed as common cold waters were conveyed via common aqueducts whither it would be convenient to receive and use them.) The only new thoughts in the minds—the common mind, one might say—of the magnatery was that new holes be pierced for new fires to be used in the same old ways. Thus: *one* end, *one* purpose. *First.*

Second, for another (some rhetor, silent as in a mime-show, accounting on his fingers the points to be made, in classic mode, appeared in Vergil's mind; whilst the most of the mind writhed in torment, this silent figure mimed and mowed, and moved its fingers as calmly and even as though the slightest bit bored to be demonstrating once again, Thus, Citizens and Conscript Fathers, we will recapitulate the reasons why study of the arts philosophical as well as martial be beneficial for the state: firstly . . . secondly . . .). *Second,* that the good gods of hell be pleased to accept this plan and that it be hecatombs as should please them: not as Vergil—ignorant as a maiden before whom oblique talk is made of maidenheads—had

assumed meant hecatombs of oxen; and Vergil had approved, thinking only that it could not hurt and the slaves would for more than once in an annum or in a lustrum have flesh-meat-roast to eat: nothing such like: It had been hecatombs of human sacrifices the hobgob magnates had meant; nothing else? Nothing more than Cadmus? Many more than Cadmus. Hecatombs. Plural. How many hundreds were to die, one after another, pierced, shattered, as the gret drill came down time after time to pierce the places within the rough ovoid that Vergil's diligence had calculated and reported upon, that neat reticulated grid he had draw, Sisyphean, almost, time after time, upon his maps?

For *this?* Only for *this?*

In effect: *yes.*

Only for this.

Thirdly, magnates and master workmen of the Very Rich City of Averno, as such sacrifice, essential and profitable as we ourselves know it to be, be full illicit and damnably forbidden by the Empire's Laws, and as it must be somehow excused and as it were "written off" on the accompt-books in which be listed all which pertains to the relations of the Very Rich City with the Very Rich Empire; therefore . . .

(Iohan's *therefore!* And the lad knew as much, which is to say as little as, on this, his master. . . .)

Fourthly, ah, what a good and slyly clever way to wipe clean the lists, wipe them free of many and many a score of aged sick and weak slaves and serfs and thralls whose fumbling labor does not earn their keep in moldy millet, spoiled spelt, and bad barley, with now and then some sop of broth boiled of rotten bones; as well, magnates, as well, *as well!* magnates, of all such whom we have known to be disaffected of our stern and meritorious rule, and all whom we suspect of interloping, too. We shall not only offer them like slaughtered oxen to the good gods of hell, Demogorgon and his devil-hosts, but we shall denounce them as criminals justly put to death for having committed sedition, treason, rebellion, lèse-majesté, conspiracy against Emperor and Empery by reason that they had nominated, selected, elected, coronated, approbated, and cooperated with aforesaid Cadmus, a subject daring to hold a title royal and without royal Imperial assent. . . .

Fifthly, may it please the Emperor, his Crown and Staff, the Senate, and the People of Rome to forgive the Very Rich City in its corporate entity, inasmuch as said Very Rich City has not alone escheated, confiscated, seized the estates of the rebels (on another list named by names), and does herewith assign, return, and pay unto the Treasury Imperial the proper halves and fourths and fifths and tenths, but also that the said Very Rich City does contritely fine itself for having taken even so short a time to contain and put down said rebellion; and said fines, richly appropriate to the Very Rich City, are also herewith produced and paid; may it please—

It must have been that final moment, the very final beat of the *beat beat beat* of the everlasting pulse-beats of that Very Rich and very damnable city; it must have been that final moment when the final drill was dropped, and much they must have sharpened it and likely more than once; it must have been but seconds after that final drill was dropped, weighted well, perhaps weighted more than the other times it had fallen, that Demogorgon, the chieftain of the good gods of hell, had shown at last the responsum to all the offerings, the (oft-repeated, often heard, never comprehended phrase!) *hecatombs! hecatombs!* Witnesses from below, there were none; witness from above, afar, more than a few.

The wily magnates had falsified the dates on their documents in more ways than one; there had been no time for any troops, legions, to reach the black gates in the black walls; even the three men with Casca's message had had scarce time to make scarce way through the rugged roadways, when—

The concussion of the drill's last drop had been faintly felt, yet that far away; first felt, then heard; then one immense lance of flame and fire was seen shooting skyward; then—

Had the walling mountains round about Averno not stood where they had been standing since before forever, what would have remained of all that part of the land? As it was, the mountains flung back what had been flung against them. Those who had seen the first flash and flush of flame from afar atop the hills had not seen the second, the force of the first explosion had flung them backward (as it had flung Vergil and Casca down from their chairs and against the walls and onto the floor), off their feet. Some had had the sense to lie

where they had fallen. It was said that fragments of the torn and tortured earth had fallen as far away as Rome; certainly some had fallen into the Parthenopean Bay, great Bay of Naples, between the mainland and the Isle of Goats, hissing as they sank. How fortunate for Naples and all its suburbs and exurbs that these lapides had, as it were, overshot those cities. And all other cities.

Tremors continued for a while. Presently, as Casca—bruised a bit in body, but, oddly, seemingly much more his old and pre-Avernian self in spirit—and Vergil, and the Viceroy himself, climbed the now again-firm mountains. And dared look down.

Where Averno had stood (stood? say, rather, squatted), nothing stood now. No fragment of its black walls remained to view. Down the bed of the canal, propelled by a fierce and scouring flood, still rolled one great torrent of boiling mud, though slackening as they watched, and poured into the sea, hissing as it poured; and yet a second, smaller sea of it remained . . . remained forever: Lake Averno, it came to be called, a lake of not-quite-lava, a vast bog of bubbling muck, a surrounding swamp of seething earth and slime and stinking gas, with here and there and there and now and then a spurt or jet of flame. And bubbles, like bubbles of black blood.

What "the good gods of hell" had given, and given to make the Very Rich City very rich, they had, it seemed, given ever grudgingly. And now they had claimed it all and taken back again.

They. And "Sissie and cruel Erichtho."

"The revenues of the South will never recover," the Viceroy had said, bleakly. Doubtless never. As for the Viceroy's own revenues, the following year for the first time he was to decline his exemption from the pro-consular lots. Into the urn with the other names had his own name gone, as (he having been of course at least once a consul) go it otherwise must have gone long before. He had (it was said) not even bothered to see of which province he had drawn the governance —grain-great Sicily, Aspania deep with silver, Chaldea the Far with its femminate men and bearded women, or distant, misty Picti-Land —but had merely handed the summons to his secretary with the single word, "Prepare."

Admirable.

No doubt.

But that was for the next year, and that was for the Viceroy. As for Vergil, and for now, *what?* For as for Averno: nothing.

Iohan had stood with them, so pale and drawn that Vergil would have been shocked, had not the greater, the unspeakably greater shock been spread out before them in what they had not yet learned to speak of as "Lake Averno." Casca was long silent (Vergil, totally silent, though his mind screamed several names, and over and over again); then Casca said, "It is just as well that I find I do not remember the name of whatever philosopher it was who said that the truest happiness possible for a man was to stand safely on a cliff in a storm and, watching a ship being sunk beneath the cliff, thank his guardian genius he was not aboard. I . . . somehow . . . I do not feel such happiness. Or any happiness at all." And at this Iohan had given a shuddering sob, then turned away his face and covered it with one hand.

On their way back to the small port city that was now, once again, home, Iohan—save for the few short questions and replies required by the performance of his usual work—had said nothing. It was not until (with no cry at all of *thalassa!)* they once again espied the sea that Iohan, having once looked back at the thin smudge of smoke which alone now marked upon the sky, murmured something else. It being too low for his master to hear, his master, after an abstracted moment, turned his face and raised his brows. "They did be canny things, them arts of fire and metal," the boy said. Then, an instant later, in a dogged tone different from the tone of puzzled memory, remarked, "They *do* be canny things . . . them arts of fire and metal."

"Yes," said Vergil. And, "We are nigh safe home."

The mare now turned again her head and gave him that characteristic, almost arch, look. He stroked her muzzle. "Thou good beast . . . served me well, well, well. . . . I cannot keep thee, though." She flung her head, still looking at him. Then it seemed as though, even whilst they regarded one another, that something dulled and dimmed in her eye, her head turned round and down, and she ambled on the road. And thus reminded of the essential and essentially unexisting details of quotidian life, Vergil said, "Iohan, when we are

to my lodging-place, tend the mare as best you can . . . and . . . ah! yes! see that you give her a double handful of the best white barley. . . ." Iohan nodded, nodded; unchanged, that wan, drawn look; and why "changed," should one expect it to be? Solely that a horse might eat, and eat, however scantly, well? "—and then . . . Iohan . . . I intend presently to speak you, about your . . . our . . . arrangements . . . employment . . . and then—Iohan—the mare must go back, of course, to Fulgence—so bring her back. Tell him to prepare his account. I shall . . . presently . . ." He moved his hand. What need of words. The boy nodded, nodded. They did not, man and master, look each other in the face. There was no need.

—Later, Vergil sat, blank, exhausted, in the sole chair in his rented room, the confused memory of the return from Averno unreeling before his eyes as though some tapestry or painted cloth upon two great spools. *Charge: one penny* for the Commander of the Legions (one shrug had he given at the sight of the site where once Averno had crouched). The Commander of the Legions . . . what time the Viceroy of the South had said something close to the Commander's ear, gesturing the while to Vergil; what had the Commander of the Legions said?—Nothing. What had he given Vergil? For that matter, what he owed Vergil? Nothing. He had given one shrug and he had given Vergil two decades of troops—they must return that way anyway—two decades of troops to company Vergil, his mare, his man, as they returned—lagging, lagging—aware of a total absence of joy. Suppose Sisyphus to have been acquitted his need of forever toiling up his hill in Hell, would he have made the last journey in joy? Or would mere fatigue have extinguished all other emotion, as a torch extinguished in a sconce? The troops were useful, very useful, the troops kept apart the hordes they met upon the roads. Hordes, hordes, some mere seekers after curiosity. "Master, Master, what happened?"—Some, so many some as to exhaust all pity. "Master, hast 'ee heard of such a one? my son? my daughter? my sister's son? Master, master, has thee heard?" He had not heard. And those who asked him naught, and told him naught, but did their best to avoid the soldiery, men of grom glance with many an unsaddled horse and mule and many an empty sack and cask and box, for who knows what they had hoped to find, for the tugging out and for the picking up? Nor did they dare purse lips to phrase the words their faces and

their glances saith well enough: salvage . . . plunder . . . loot . . .

Later, then, Vergil sitting, blank, exhausted, in his chair in rented rooms, now and then some thought coming straying to his wasted mind, as *Cadmus was made king in order that the king must die, there being no greater sacrifice than the sacrifice of a king,* or . . . many times, uselessly uselessly: *Whence came Cadmus, and what his early tale?* . . . there came again Iohan, all but dead with trudging and fatigue and latent, latent shock, saying:

"Master, Fulgence gives you full quittance for the steed, and he says, says Fulgence, 'There is no accompt, all is paid; if you are well, it is well, and he is well . . .' "

Some long while silence buzzed in Vergil's ear. Then he arose. "Iohan, youth is your blessing and youth shall be your cure, so lie you down and rest; I shall be some small while gone." And down he went the ladder to the level ground, and began to walk the streets, no destination in his mind, no purpose, no explanation, only some thought of the few coins still in his purse: how he would divide them with the boy, and then—But there was, really, no ". . . and then . . ." —Whom should he meet?

A woman, certainly not young, surely not yet old: the favored house-servant of the Matron Gunsedilla; what was the she's name? He knew it not; she knew him well. Up she flung her arms, and "Ah! Master Vergil! the gods be praised for having brought you safe again, grains and incense and drops of the best wine I will be offering them, for glad I am to see you—"

"Woman—"

"You will sure and soon come visit, ser? An old servant and a faithful one, I has my privileges, ser, I must tell you straight, matron has missed you, master. 'Missed you,' what do I say? Matron has languished, master. Since you gone away, ser, to tell the truth, and it's a funny thing of me, master, ser, that I *must* tell the truth, let them as like it not, lick—but let me mind me mouth, ser mage and master ser. Since you gone away, matron, she keeped to her room, she keeped to her room the untire time, master, and hardly scarce she eat a thing. To tell the truth, master."

Last of all which he would hear: the tale of the Matron Gunsedilla. Her image came into his mind, he thrust it away, he confused

it, he did not confuse, he was perhaps going mad, why should he not go mad, the image of the Matron Gunsedilla did not come clear into his mind at all, it was imposed upon, it lay beneath, the image of the mare. . . .

Prima, was that the mare's name? It made no difference. The way the matron turned her head and rolled her eyes, the way the mare rolled her eyes as she turned her head, the recollection that Matron Gunsedilla had studied magic: *how—!*

As though he read it on some fresh-writ scroll, clearly it now came to him: how she, being aware of the plot to bring him to Averno, but being unable to prevent it, in order to see him safe thither and safe there and safe thence, she had not only, somehow, caused the stallion, Hermus, to be ill, but she had, by the same and by whichever art, call it metamorphosis or—no, not quite shape-shifting—call it by whatever name, she had inhabited the body of the mare. Until that last moment when he had thanked the mare.

This, she, Gunsedilla, had done for him; this was the way her seemingly mad dash had saved him, had saved Iohan; could she, have anyone, have done more for him? Why had she done it? The reasons obvious, though the means complex. What could he now, henceforth, do for her? The answers obvious, though the question complex. Walking the narrow and the broader streets, he thought of all of this, and long he thought of all of this. At length he concluded that he, if he would not do more, could certainly not do less, than he had done before.

He would continue, not often, but as often as before, stop by of an afternoon, and discuss aubenry, envoûtement, white magic so called, and this and that and that and this. He would continue, as often as before, if not often, to come now and then of an evening to attend at the readings from Homer. And, however much, however often, he might feel at least a bit impatient, however much he might wish to ignore, when those very slightly protuberant eyes would roll his way, and ask their invariable and inevitable question, he would not ignore it, nevermore could he ignore it; he would reply, as always and as before:

"Yes, madame. Indeed, Matron. It was very well done, madame.

"Indeed . . ."

As before.

Aurelio.

Had his, Vergil's, feet carried him this far? To the new house he had builded for the freedman Aurelio? And such different, cleanlier, more worthy task, than that which came his way next! No. Aurelio was not sitting in his new house, Aurelio was but sitting on the barber's bench, awaiting his turn to be trimmed and shaved. Aurelio rose and bowed and gave a cheerly friendly smile, gesturing Vergil should sit beside him; Vergil did. Vergil saw no signs in the goodly old man's face of any toil or torment or of sorrow. Aurelio was perhaps, probably, not even aware that Vergil had left. So be it.

"Aurelio . . ."

"Ser. I hope I see you well, me ser."

"Aurelio—"

"Your new gray cap befits you well, me ser."

What babble was this? For so soon the words were said, Vergil, though well he knew he wore no cap, brushed hand over head: no cap. Again:

"Aurelio. As to your adopted daughter."

The old man nodded. Perhaps his blue eyes were not quite so clear. Age, with hast'ning steps— "Yes, sir, it has been done. It has been done, it has been registered, she be my daughter now as long I've planned, and we lives in that good house together with two good servants. And, by and by—"

"You spoke of chosing a groom-to-be for her, from the prentices of the better trades, Aurelio."

"I did, ser. And, ser, I shall. Fact: I'd begun already. None as I've found, as yet. But there be time, ser. There be time."

Something there was in Vergil's mind, something more than family chitter and chatter in a barber's shop. What. Anon it came to him. "Aurelio. What think you of the arts of fire and metal?"

A serious and considering look upon the old man's face. But not a puzzled one. "Why, ser, why, master, as for them, I've naught but great respect for them. It be no gewgaw, gimcrack trade, covering gingerbread with gold leaf or dipping marchpanes in honey. It be's a manly and a steady thing, as must last forever. Ah, Messer Vergil, they be clever, canny things, them arts of fire and metal."

It was to be. It was as good as done. Of course they twain young-

lings must suit each other. But, bend the twig, the tree inclines. Had he, Vergil, for whom never marriage had been arranged, left, such matters, all, to his own heart and head and pounding blood—had he had e'er such luck as would make him wish to urge such courses on another?

"Aurelio, there dwells with me, and you know where, a young man, as of now merely my body-servant and my horse-boy. But I know his nature to be good, and—"

The master barber beckoned to Aurelio, who gestured him a gesture, as he slowly rose. "I take your meaning, ser. And, so soon as both we've done, let us arrange a further meeting. And let us talk of this."

Hardly had he sat him on the barber stool, Aurelio, when the first journeyman barber beckoned to Vergil. Seemingly the man knew him by sight, else his first words proclaimed a liberty taken; "Ah, master, they have trimmed you ill: and, sure, it's been a few days, some, since you were last shaved at all." He sharped his knife, mixed the soft soap in the bowl, prepared the hot cloth. "Master Aurelio," the man said, stooping, in his confident, almost overconfident, barber's voice, "has got no more keen of sight, good man though he be; but truly, messer, from a bit away, just a bit, ser, it *do* look as though master wears a neat gray cap. Yet I'd ha' sworn the master's hair was black—"

"Oh, damn it, barber, man, it *is* black!"

Across the journeyman's smooth face, a trifle plump, passed a look of well-acted professional demur, as when one tells a glover that the gloves are tight. He said no word, merely with the gentlest of pressures urged Vergil forward to gaze into a basin, still, of water: as it might be one which someone like Gunsedilla had prepared to use to gaze at the reflection of the sun or of the moon. Vergil looked. He saw his features in the calm, reflective water. He saw himself flinch as he observed his sunken eyes, his hollow cheeks, how gaunt and grim his face, how pinched his mouth. *All this shall pass,* he thought, *with rest, and—*

He saw his beard, pitch-black; he saw his hair. His hair was gray.

Returning, reflective, to his house, beginning now to muse upon the future, and how he must, for all the tragic days just gone, he

should need get money in his purse; when there came upon him, running as full-tilt, who but Iohan. Who gasped, "Master! Master! Money! Money! Money!"

Startled, more than so, by this vocal repetition of his private thought, and thinking as perhaps the rent is sudden demanded in advance, said Vergil as much to soothe the lad as reassure himself, "Why, Iohan, I have not lately counted them, but there are coins enough inside my purse—" He made a move toward it. But Iohan, shaking his head till his brown curls shook, gestured with his right hand toward his left. The left held a small leathern case which Vergil had not seen before, and its straps the young man had wound tight around that hand, doubtless for safekeeping.

"Master," Iohan said, between panting breaths, "whenas I had tooken care of brushing out your robes and hanging of them up, so then I 'gins to unpack your chests and portmantles, ser; then of a sudden I takes to shaking, ser, then I needs must piss, so I step out to the gallery over the back-stable yard, though keeps I ever the outer door in view (having barred the inner)." And on he babbled: concluding, "And it be for sure upon my life, my master, ser, as ne'er I seen this case before." He swung its heavy weight by his left hand. "—But there it lay, when I return and lifts the ruddy robe as whosoever give thee . . . back there . . ." He did not mention the city's name; indeed, he never did again mention it. —"And there lay this case!" Was he sure he had not packed it? He was sure. Was and could he be sure that no one might have slipped it in the larger carry-case . . . *back there* . . . ? He could not be sure. Would he say he was so certain he could swear against he drown in water it had it been impossible for someone, somehow, to have stolen, swift, into his master's room, here, *here,* and slipped it—swift!—beneath "the ruddy robe"—?

His lips trembled. "I was taken sudden sick, bethinking me of—I could not swear. Indeed, ser . . . I thought I heard . . . perhaps saw . . . but nothing I can clearly speak of. Ser, I do not know!" He seemed he would, another question more, break into tears.

Two shops down, the shop of Cosimo the goldsmith and moneychanger. Who took the case up in practiced, knowing hands, opened it, aloud counted out, stopped at ten, the total tally, the purses sealed and sealed. "Ah, this is Rano's gold," he said, a slight glance at the

seals sufficing. He spoke softly, for goldsmiths seldom speak up loud. "Rano got him sundry golds outside, before—" He stopped short. Goldsmiths are not often wont to speak of one man's business to another. Cosimo counted on his checkered cloth. "Has Messer Vergil Mage perhaps heard of some newfangled system of numeration come forth, some say, from Araby?—some say, from farther yet? No matter. None." The gold was counted, the purses sealed again, a receipt was passed across the checkered cloth, a look exchanged; Vergil and his servant left the shop.

To Iohan, he said, "Half of this is mine."

The fellow stared at him. "Ser . . . *all* of it is yours."

"Half of it is mine. I shall take a house, somewhere. Buy books. More books. *Many* books. Set up an elaboratory. Perhaps I shall engage a boat and take some rest on the Isle of Goats." He gestured. There it still stood . . . did not stand . . . floated on the miraculous blue waters of the Parthenopean Bay.

"But half of it is yours. You will—as yet—take no house, buy no books, set up no elaboratory, engage no boat. If indeed you think to take some rest, it will be best, I think, that you take it apart from me for a while . . . for we shall part, I must tell you, Iohan. . . ."

"Master, I doesn't want to leave you—"

"—for a while, and it will be some great long while—"

"Master, hasn't I been faithful?"

"With a part of your half this"—he showed the receipt—"I propose to pay for your indentures as an apprentice in the arts of fire and metal, for you still find them to be canny things. Which indeed they are. And, when you have finished your apprenticeship, part of this shall pay your journeyman's fee. Part of it shall be your bridegroom's portion, if you are minded then to marry. And, when you shall have finished your master-piece, and become passed as a master into the guild, part of it shall be to set you up in work."

Iohan nodded, slowly, slowly, as all this was said. His face remained sober as before. When Vergil finished, he said, "And then, master, may I work for you?—*with* you? In that elaboratory?"

Vergil said, "There is time enough to think of that. So. Well. And what might you want *now?*"

There was no hesitation. "Ser, I has one brother, older than me, he works with horses, just as I did, but back in our village. He fed me

several year from his own share of the bad bread. Every day at one hour past the hour of noon, the carrier leaves from here for there, and I knows the carrier well, from old. If I might have one silver piece of money, ser—but one? only one? to send my brother?"

Vergil opened his purse. Removed one coin, handed it over . . . paused, with it still in his hand. "Iohan, I see that when all rents and such are paid, there still remains enough in my purse so that—you need not hasten, the evening hour is a good ways off—there are certainly more than four groats in the purse. Meet me at home, whenever you have done. And we shall visit the baths."

He slipped the coin into Iohan's palm. Who said, at once, "Therefore." And was gone.

Vergil wandered off more slowly. He wished the baths were open sooner, but here in this small place the drums did not beat that signal till the sun was setting. He needed the hot and healing waters. He would wait. He might look out for a bookshop, as he slowly walked. He had . . . after all, and it was an immense, an immensely terrible *all* . . . he had his fee. Who had paid it? Had Rano caused it to be slipped into the baggage, back . . . back *there?* Had someone else? Had someone done that, *here?* Was it possible that somehow, somehow, someone, some certain one, had spun herself a net, and such a net or web as spiders weave, sometimes a mere wisp of web, and somehow, sailed off upon it? Pausing here? Suppose Poppaea to have escaped, clearly she had not wished to tarry here with him; whither would she wander? Far, no doubt; no doubt so very, very far. Past the great Isle Taprobane, set in the center of the Indoo Sea. As far, perhaps, as Tambralinga and the Golden Chersonese, where honey dripped from the reed called succharum.

And, perhaps, farther.

Perhaps, though no Roman knew what lands lay farther; still, perhaps farther.

Such thoughts bemused him as he walked the street, the crowded street. Still the people spoke of what had happened . . . *there.* He heard one gossip-voice, as thus he slowly moved himself along, trying to think of other things, heard one gossip-voice saying, loudly, almost in a scolding tone, "Nay, but this is what *I* heard, I heard it true, that there went some great magus-man into that city and he did them wondrous works, and they would not pay him, nay, a stiver

not: whereat he cursed the city. 'You be curst!' saith he, and by his magery did turn it all to ash, to ash—did we not see that gray, gray ash? I heard it true—"

A greater weariness came upon him, then, than even before. Some other voice next whispered loud, *"Look! There he go!"*

A moment a silence. One moment. And another voice declared, "Ah, and see! Black o'hair he left, and now his head is turned as ashen-gray!"

He did not turn aside, but he could not avoid the faces that looked at him as he walked, of those who moved away, to give him way as he walked. Was there horror in their faces? Abhorrence? Terror? Fright? Not one shadow of any that. He might his whole life hence deny the tale. Always there would be some, many, who would believe it all. And what did they show, as they looked at him, believing it? Awe. None else. And then—

Along the street, riding the longest-legged mule ever Vergil had seen, own legs tucked under him, stooped over, and yet still visibly and preternaturally tall: *who?* Vergil did not wish to know, there were other things he wished to know. Should he, for once there being gold in his account, should he seek for home and wife? Bethink him of sons and daughters, family, heirs? And if not this very day—no, be certain not this *very* day—to commence upon such a matter, why, ah, what was the woman's name—she in her shoddy purple gown, who lived all but next door to him in his rented rooms? He need not even know her name, nor she, his; she likely, she of a certainty, had troubles, too. But whatever his or hers might be, for some hour or so they might forget somewhat their troubles in each other's arms. — Upon the mule! *Who?* The eunuch, Rano's eunuch. Who saw Vergil stop and stare. And halted then his mule, and gave a grave salute.

"But how did you escape?" cried Vergil.

" 'Escape'?" That unforgettable voice, high and rich as a rich-voiced woman's, yet strong as a man's, said, "I did not escape. I was not there. I had, indeed, already left. I have been here since before."

Still Vergil stared. Then: "Rano sent you off? He gave you leave to go? So—"

But no.

" 'Sent me,' my Wizard dear? *'Gave me leave to go'?* Ah, Master Vergil, Sage and Seer, it is little you had learned in Sevilla about such

things. I *went.* 'Frog,' I said, 'I am going Outside. I shall take such and such a sum with me to do some business; so hand me hither to my hand the seals for such.' And so, of course, he did."

There was little reason Vergil had to doubt. A strange relation, that between Magnate Rano and his eunuch. Stranger was it, though, than that between Magnate Rano and his matron? No. Question now beginning to form in Vergil's mind was now answered before being asked, answered there in the long street along the shore of the blue and great and tideless sea, under the sparkling sun and in the clear and brilliant air. "What shall I do? I shall do thus: A house I have engaged, and a warehouse, too. Goods I have purchased, and equipment, too. All is done as by law required. It is registered, I registered it, in Rano's name. And I sealed the same with Rano's seal. Is Rano dead? I know naught. What says the law? The law is not a man, and in this instance the law says naught. Till such time as Rano is declared to be dead, after which, his estate is approbed and settled, why, my Wizard dear, till then, by lawful proxy, *I* am Rano! *I* set the terms! The books of account are all *mine* to keep! *No* one stands between me and the way *I* want things done! *I* hold the rule and draw the lines across the sheets and pages of the records as *I* want them drawn and *when* I want them drawn. If not, I leave them clear and open. The buying is all mine and the selling is all mine, 'tis *I* allow credit and allot times and terms. Or, as the case may be, *dis*allow. *I* write the figures and *I* choose the type of figures to be written and it is *I* who determine the methods of calculation and of numeration.

"Everything is in the most perfect and efficient order and will so continue. When a time comes that it is said to me, 'Rano is legally extinct and all which is his demises to kinsmen thrice-removed,' or, 'escheats to the Crown Imperial'—or what or which—'so, therefore, Eunuch, stand by and accompt for every drachma, ducat, obol, groat, stiver, silver, and gold,' it shall be done. It shall be done." The man seemed perfectly confident, perfectly content; more, the man seemed happy, too! As happy be defined, or definable: those not-quite-human-eyes. . . .

Still Vergil stared. Then he moved his hand some slight gesture to where some semblance of dark cloud, shaped roughly as an upright

finger, tainted, still, the otherwise serene sky. "Are you not in any way sorry for him?" he asked.

"Ah, Wizard mine, and dear. Oh, Master Stones. 'Sorry for him, am I not?' But, oh. And ah. But yes. At least, you see"—the man moved a somewhat, the mule began to walk—"as much sorry as was he for me."

Vergil watched him again give his respectful salute, watched him ride off at a walk. There lay before him on the saddle a package, that is, some items confined in a net-bag. Their nature was no mystery. There were rolls of new papyrus. There were two, at least two, codex-books, bound in new bindings, red and black. There was, neatly folded, a checkered cloth. And there was also, the last to be identified as the strange gaunt man rode past all peering, what could be no other things than cases of pens. And bottles of ink. And flat sticks for ruling lines. Archimedes had had his circles, Euclid his triangles, Apollonius his cones. This one would have his arithmetics. *His.*

And Vergil? And the other men and the women in the teeming street? The eunuch had summed it up. Vergil had his stones.

(continued from front flap)

fiery bed of Poppaea, the beautiful wife of one of the city's most influential Magnates. With this forbidden pleasure, comes forbidden knowledge, and Vergil is drawn into a web of intrigue that threatens to turn the terrible powers of Averno against him.

For centuries, the lords of the city have thrived on the bloody sacrifice of their own people. Now they are determined to add one more name to the scrolls of Averno's dead . . . and to cast Vergil, now an outlaw, into the burning pits of the dying empire.

Avram Davidson is considered a master of genre short fiction. His unique and colorful style has won him a wide following, as well as the coveted Hugo and the Mystery Writers of America awards. He is also the recipient of the first World Fantasy Award for Short Stories. His previous novels include *Peregrine: Primus, Rogue Dragon,* and *The Island Under the Earth.* He lives in Washington State.

JACKET BY CANDY JERNIGAN

Printed in the U. S. A.
0187

A man stood in the light and shadow beneath the arch. A figure brutal, strong, and coarse, he had the broad, blunt face of a gladiator.

"Borbo is his name," said the beadle. "A butcher is what he is. He stuns the oxen. And when they stumble, then he plunges in the knife."

And then Vergil saw the knife.

And then Vergil heard the voice, dimly and out of the darkness. It was saying:

". . . one Vergil, a wizard, sorcerer, nigroment and necromant. From him the protection of the Laws and the Magnates of the Very Rich City is withdrawn, and he is proclaimed *Outlaw.* He may be duped, drugged, poisoned, strangled, drawn, or stoned; he may be poignarded, bludgeoned, thrust through, or cast down. It be licit that he be burned or bled or hamstrung or hanged," and so the dreadful list, like a litany, ran on and on . . .

from

VERGIL IN AVERNO

AVRAM DAVIDSON

ISBN: 0-385-19707-1