

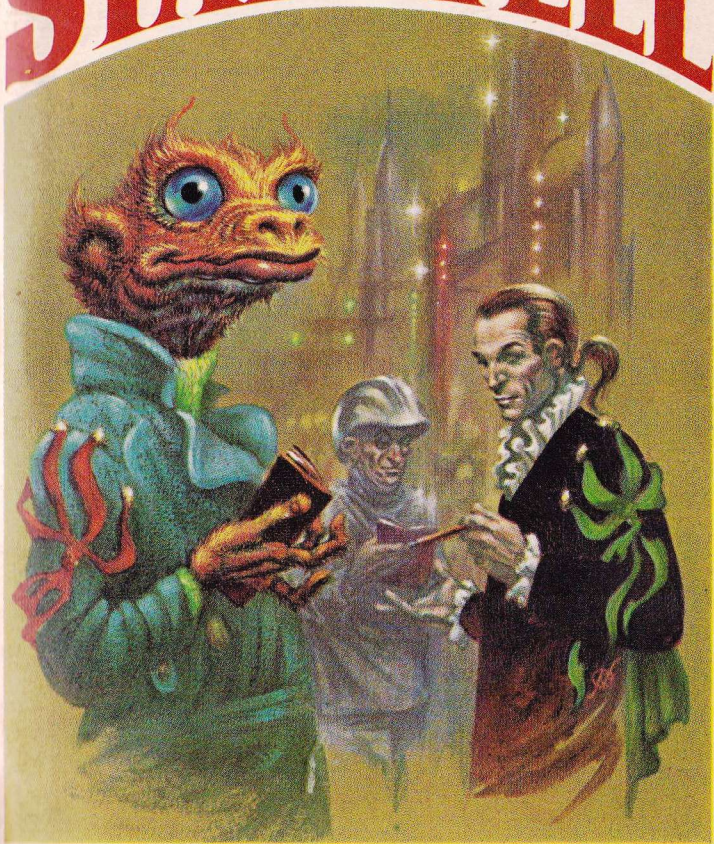
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• **ALEXEI PANSHIN.** •

AN ANTHONY VILLIERS ADVENTURE

STAR WELL



What was the terrible secret of this interstellar world?

The choice of weapons for the duel had been up to Villiers, and he had made an infelicitous choice—tinglers and knives.

Tinglers are tapering wands; a black dueling tingler destroys nerves with its touch. A dueling tingler, well-used, can kill. And Derek Godwin was a master, an artist, a killer with the tingler.

. . . There came a turning point in the duel. Godwin's stroke went in too low, and was parried. But Villiers did not parry as sharply as he might have; he was the merest bit off-balance. Godwin turned his disengagement into a sideswipe, and his wand tipped Villiers' left hand.

Villiers' hand opened and he dropped the knife. And Godwin knew then that Villiers' life was his, whenever he wanted to claim it. . . .

INTRODUCTION

STAR WELL is a wise, delightful, and well-turned book; and it is something I have never seen in science fiction before. It is the first of a series of novels that examines the proposition that the world is composed of small communities of mutual interest. When the pith of that statement is bared as astutely as it is in this novel, it does not matter which "small community" you belong to: STAR WELL hits.

I write this as the second volume of the adventures of Anthony Villiers nears completion. Looking for an analogue to this *roman fleuve* in the mainstream, I come up with *A Dance to the Music of Time*; perhaps *Men of Good Will*; definitely not *Jalna*. Twenty-eight-year-old Mr. Panshin's credentials for the undertaking are impressive. He is the author of one fine and solidly classical sf novel, RITE OF PASSAGE; he was the recipient of a "Hugo" award from the World Science Fiction Convention in 1967 for his critical writing over the previous year; he recently published the first full-length study of Robert Heinlein, HEINLEIN IN DIMENSION; his short stories have appeared in *Analog*, *If*, *Fantasy & Science Fiction* and *Galaxy*.

What follows is a gallery of gamblers, duels and doublecrosses, a minuet of manners and manners mangled; the machinery of the universe is speculated upon; inspector generals arrive to inspect it. And Anthony Villiers, gentleman *par excellence*, dashes through it all, buckling a swash or two, bungling a couple of others.

Mr. Villiers?

If you consider it impolite to strike up an acquaintance with someone you have not been formally introduced to, well—consider the introduction made.

SAMUEL R. DELANY
New York, April 1968

•ALEXEI PANSHIN•
AN ANTHONY VILLIERS ADVENTURE
STAR WELL

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STAR WELL

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FOR GEORGE PRICE

AND BOB TROESTER.

Cover painting by Kelly Freas.

Printed in U.S.A.

To history buffs, the year was 4171 A.U.C. To Christians, it was 3418. To Moslems, it was late in the year 2795. But by common reckoning, the year was 1461.

1

THE UNIVERSAL SOIL is not uniformly fertile. There are places where the stars don't grow. Cutting into the edge of the Empire of Nashua is the Flammarion Rift, named after—never mind. Anyone dead that long is fortunate even to be known by a hole.

The only features of the rift are a few pieces of random sky junk. No one knows where they came from. No one has ever determined their number or charted their courses. However, there are rumors that a few are inhabited by men who prefer a cold and irregular existence to the certainties of warmer climates.

One exception: one rock is a regular port of call for ships that venture into the rift. This planetoid, Star Well, provides a rest in passage, warehouses, entertainment, comfort, games—everything, in short, but a sun, atmosphere, and close neighbors.

Anthony Villiers entered the casino in Star Well and looked about him with an elegant air of assurance that some might have taken for arrogance. There was no day or night within the planetoid. Ships arrived at irregular hours with passengers on every sort of sleeping and waking schedule. The casino was open round the clock and the play remained constant hour to hour.

Villiers moved among the tables, pausing occasionally, watching the play and moving on. He placed no bets himself. He was dressed ahead of the first fashion. His shoulder ribbons were green, his drapeau a darker green. His heels were a half inch, moderate considering that his natural height was not great. His hair—brown—was free.

He had been at Star Well through the arrival and departure of three ships and was beginning to be able to find his way through the maze with a certain degree of confidence, and to recognize schedules. He raised his eyebrows slightly to see that the floor man was Derek Godwin and not Hisan Bashir Shirabi, the obsequious owner of Star Well, usually himself in charge at this hour.

Godwin was dressed stylishly, too, but where Villiers' clothes were a moderately voiced statement, Godwin's were a strident claim, the choice of a man with an uncertain background or uncertain taste. Nonetheless, he stood out in this company for other reasons: not only was he second in authority in Star Well, but he had a certain reputation as a dangerous man.

"Good evening, Mr. Villiers."

Villiers turned to find that the voice belonged to Norman Adams, a young gentleman he had had occasion to share a dinner table with. Though Adams was only a few years younger, he had a helter-skelter eagerness that made Villiers feel a sober dog.

"Mr. Adams," he said.

Adams nodded in the direction Villiers had been looking. "In truth," he said, "Godwin dresses well. I like the cut of his coat."

"Yes," said Villiers. "For parts as lonely as these, he manages to present an appearance that would pass inspection in grander company than he is likely to find here."

"Do you think so?"

Adams himself was dressed well, but conservatively, as though he had been much influenced by the taste of older men, or perhaps had but recently arrived from some comparative backwater. Nonetheless, Villiers had seen one recent ex-priest and any number of off-duty Naval officers on Nashua itself in whose company Adams could comfortably have fitted.

"Yes," Villiers said. "If you like his tastes, you might ask him for the name of his tailor while you have the opportunity to take advantage of it."

Adams nodded. "A good idea, sir," he said. "But Godwin is not precisely an *approachable* man. At least I don't find him so. He makes me feel like a puppy who doesn't know enough to sit quietly in the corner, and the more he retreats, the more I feel myself to press."

"Well, perhaps an opportunity will present itself," Villiers said.

Adams rattled the stack of tokens in his hand. "Do you gamble?"

Villiers said, "I seek to ape affluence by compounding my bills, but I have yet to find a game to my liking."

Adams laughed.

"Would you care to join me in a small game between ourselves?" Villiers asked. "Raffles, perhaps?"

Adams made a face. "I used to play that with my sisters."

"Simple games can still be interesting."

"No disrespect, sir, but I think I'd prefer a more active pleasure." Adams pointed at the colored fountain of the Flambeau. The red ball danced on the cone of flame and then fell as the fire died. "I feel my luck tonight."

"In that case, allow me to accompany you."

They walked arm-in-arm to the Flambeau table. Ad-

ams was much the larger, round-faced, not yet used to his size and strength, something of the puppy he had likened himself to. Villiers was small, slight and quick, and rather more reserved. Adams, enjoying himself hugely, placed emphatic bets, smiled widely when he won and drew pained breaths when he lost. He lost more than he won. Villiers stood at his elbow as the game followed its steady cycle. The game, like all its ancestors before it, allowed bets at varying odds, and Villiers played conservatively, small bets on odd or even, white or black. If he lost more than he won, he did not lose much. He offered Adams no advice on his play.

At last, Adams rattled three final tokens in his fist and then held them out on the tips of his fingers as he considered.

"Poor things," he said. "Well, one last bet. Let me see—fifteen is a round number and today's date."

"Today is the sixteenth," said the operator of the table. "The date changed thirty minutes ago."

"Ah," said Adams, "then the ship from Morian arrives tomorrow?"

"Yes, sir."

"Well. Nonetheless, I like fifteen." He dropped the tokens on the number and touched the brown and friendly figure in the background of the square. "And I had a pet gorf when I was a boy."

"A good reason for making a choice on a final bet," Villiers said. Instead of following his usual practice, he dropped his token on the picture of the little animal, too. "I believe I'll join you."

"The betting is closing. The betting is closing. The betting is closed."

The fire slowly rose, showing first scarlet, then luminous sulphur yellow. The fire swirled and flames of blue and green and purple played their own private games. On top of all the red ball bobbed, King of the Mountain. Then suddenly the flame was gone and the king was without his mountain. The ball floated slowly

down, a ball no longer. It touched the bowl, bounced, touched again, and collapsed in a puddle.

"Sixteen, animal, black," announced the table man. He and his assistant began raking in tokens and paying the few winners around the wide table.

"Damnation!" said Adams. "I should have followed the date! I knew it. I've been so close this evening. I hate to quit now." He checked his pockets, pulled out a purse and began counting his money. "Yes. If you will wait, Mr. Villiers, I will be back directly."

Villiers said, "Luck doesn't seem to be running our way tonight."

"But it is!"

Villiers measured the few tokens he held between finger and thumb. "Do you say so? Perhaps it would be best to let a final bet be a final bet and end the evening. Come, sir, I'll buy you a drink or a smoke, whichever you prefer."

Adams said, "No, thank you, Mr. Villiers."

A voice bid them good evening and they turned to discover Godwin. He, also, was a taller, more robust man than Villiers. His face was narrow and his nose large and pointed, which gave him a vulpine air. His long black hair was caught at the sides in matching ornamental pins with silver figures. He wore a thin mustache that he constantly sleeked with a thumbnail, lending the impression that it might be its narrow self from attrition rather than design.

"Good evening, Mr. Godwin," said Villiers.

"Enjoying yourselves, I trust?"

Villiers shrugged. "Indifferently. I must confess that I would prefer more individual sport. Would the house, in your person, favor me with a game of raffles?" He turned to Adams. "It is your intention, is it not, to continue to play Flambeau?"

"It is."

"Then, Mr. Godwin?"

Godwin regarded him with his usual cold glance. "You play raffles, do you? I might have supposed. But

up until now you have been content with the tables."

"Up until now it has not mattered to me whether I won or lost."

"I might oblige you, then, if you need to lose to a man rather than to a machine." Godwin raised a be-ringed hand and made two rapid hand signals.

"Mr. Shirabi allows you this much latitude?"

Godwin flared. "I don't need Shirabi's permission! He has no con—" Then he checked himself and lowered his voice. "Say, if you will, that I am trusted to the extent of a game of raffles."

"Ah, you play well, then?" Villiers turned to Adams. "If you will excuse us? Perhaps we may share an evening again before your ship leaves."

Adams salaamed with a regimental exactness. "Mr. Villiers. Mr. Godwin, sir."

Godwin grunted and turned away. Villiers joined him. Adams looked after them for a moment as they walked together between the widely spaced tables, his face tightening like a child's who has accidentally chosen the smaller slice of cake. Then he turned to go for his tokens.

As they walked, Villiers said to Godwin, "I confess I was surprised to find you on the floor at this hour."

"Oh?"

"It seems to me that on other occasions Mr. Shirabi has overseen operations at this time."

"You are very observant. Shirabi had some . . . warehouse work he wanted to supervise personally."

"There are things, then, that you aren't . . . permitted . . . to handle?"

Godwin gave Villiers a sharp glance, then smiled thinly. They had reached the side of the casino where a table and two chairs were being placed by two floor workers. One of them handed Godwin several packs of cards.

He motioned Villiers to take a seat. Seating himself, he said, "If Shirabi were here, would you have challenged him to play?"

"Perhaps."

"That coarse a man? I know you better than that. You would never sit to play with a man who is that obviously not a gentleman."

Villiers smiled faintly, but made no comment.

Godwin opened a pack of cards. "What stakes will you have?"

"You name them."

"Ten royals a game, five on crevasses, a royal for odd points."

"In that case, you must accept my vowel. I haven't enough to cover those stakes on my person. Or, if you would prefer, I'll go to my quarters and return."

"It won't be necessary," Godwin said. "Your losses can be added to your bill."

"Most kind."

"Shall we match cards for deal?"

"Not necessary," said Villiers. "Deal, Mr. Godwin."

Godwin dealt their hands, then placed the stock at the right. As he was dealing, Villiers said, "I am reminded. I meant to ask the name of your tailor."

Godwin regarded his cards briefly after completing the deal, then looked at Villiers. "Your clothes seem well enough, if a bit dull. Still, if you would like . . ."

Villiers laughed. "I've misled you, I'm afraid. This is not for my benefit, but for Mr. Adams. He seems to prefer your taste and my company."

"That puppy!" Godwin said explosively, and played.

"As you say. You both see him in the same way."

"We both?"

"You and himself. I think he feels his lack of polish and finds you the most shining gentleman in sight. It's a compliment, sir, I should think. You discard well."

"If you find the boy such good company, you might introduce him to your own tailor."

"My tailor, unfortunately, is not near at hand. And, again as you say, my clothes are dull."

Godwin looked at him across the narrow table. "And my tailor is at hand?"

Villiers shrugged and played a card. "I merely agreed

to ask for his name. I have no ambitions for such a striking appearance as yours. As you see, I have neither your size nor your dash."

"You say he prefers my taste and your company. Do you think he would prefer my company if I encouraged him?"

"Very likely," said Villiers.

The hand ended then with Villiers technically the winner. In money, he was slightly the poorer since Godwin had scored two crevasses, but the deal passed to his hands, giving him a slight advantage. He dealt methodically, with none of the slickness that Godwin had displayed.

"However," Villiers said, "I suppose that I would prefer that you reserved your favor."

Godwin raised his eyebrows.

"I suspect you might become irritated with Mr. Adams and find it necessary to kill him."

Godwin laughed. "You needn't worry, Villiers. I've made a resolution to avoid trouble this year. As Shirabi said, five men last year was excessive and one led to complications. A Naval ship put in to investigate. Quite naturally I was vindicated, but the answering of questions was a bore. And I agree—I would soon become irritated with Adams. *Mr. Adams.*"

Godwin leaned forward and picked up a discard. "Thank you. You know, there are several things about you that puzzle me." He played a card. "You are an enigmatic man, sir."

"Not at all," said Villiers. "If anything, I have a reputation for being altogether too open."

"Perhaps, perhaps." Godwin looked at him directly. "But you do dress well. No, no—you do. Your manners are—shall we say—better than my own. Your baggage is both expensive and of considerable size. Yet you travel with no servant. Do you not admit that this seems strange?"

Godwin played his last card and Villiers laid his hand down.

"You play well, Mr. Godwin. Shall we have a third hand?"

"If you like. But I'm afraid that it must be the last."

As Godwin dealt, Villiers said, "There is no puzzle, I'm afraid. My man and I have temporarily been separated by circumstance. I expect him to arrive on the next ship from Morian."

"Quite simple indeed," Godwin said. "Then tell me if you will why you insisted so genteelly on this game?"

"Again there is no puzzle. I have no objection to losing money at the gaming table. It is a normal living expense. However, I prefer the random games that I play to actually have a random element. If it is lacking then, in your words, I prefer to lose to a man rather than a machine."

Godwin paused abruptly in his play. Then, after a moment, he laughed coldly and laid down a card. "You are observant."

"If you mean your occasional lapses as we have been playing, they haven't been greatly expensive. If you mean the Flambeau table, being observant wasn't necessary. Your table man is an antic. He was chasing Mr. Adams' bets around and around the table, playing tag."

Godwin's eyebrows lifted and his thumb ran thoughtfully over his mustache. He raised his hand and made another signal. Almost immediately a hulk wearing the casino uniform was standing by the table. He was closer to seven feet in height than to six. His right hand was a broad scoop and his thumb was the size of two of Villiers' fingers. His left hand was in a pocket, toying with something. His nose was low-bridged and turned up on the end. In effect, the nostrils were set directly in the face. The face itself was round and piggy in appearance.

"Levi," said Godwin, "do you see Josiah?"

The hulk looked vacantly around until he saw the operator of the Flambeau table. Then he nodded, stretched a massive arm and pointed. "Uh-huh. He's there."

"Levi, escort him to my office and keep him there until I come. He needs to be talked to."

Levi made some *hurr-hurr-hurr* noises like a cold engine. Villiers assumed that it was a form of laughter.

Levi said, "Can I have some fun with him?"

"A little, Levi, but don't exhaust him."

"What does that mean?"

"Don't tire him."

"Oh," said Levi, and made his noise again. As he lumbered away, Godwin played a card. Villiers, however, watched the moron over Godwin's shoulder.

"In many ways he is a perfect instrument," Godwin said without turning to watch. "What do you think of him?"

"I must admit that I admire neither his style nor his wit."

Godwin smiled. "Games of chance don't tempt him. They're too complicated. He enjoys a simpler line of pleasure. And, Mr. Villiers, he is personally devoted to me."

"He does seem to be displaying a childish sort of delight in his work," said Villiers, playing a card, but keeping an eye on the commotion at the tables.

"Oh, that, too. His lack of general understanding is at times an asset, and at other times not. But he does fathom the principles of pain and reward."

There was a loud crash, all the more noticeable because the other sounds in the casino had ceased.

"I believe he does. He seems to be earning an extra portion of raw meat."

Godwin played a card and then turned to look. "I'm afraid not. Poor Josiah is more bruised than I intended. However, it may do Josiah good. He seems to need to learn a sense of restraint."

Villiers laid down a crevasse.

Godwin said, "You make your own points rather strongly."

Adams appeared then and said, "Good heavens, Mr. Godwin, what is going on?"

"Internal readjustments," said Villiers. "Were you winning, Mr. Adams?"

"Not hardly. I should have taken your advice. My luck continued off by a hair. It was damned frustrating."

Villiers laid down his last two cards. "Well, our game is over here. Permit me now to stand your host."

"Why, thank you."

Godwin slapped his hand down. "It seems that I owe you money, sir."

"You may deduct it from my bill," Villiers said. "Mr. Godwin, will you join us?"

"Too kind," Godwin said, "but I'm afraid that business will keep me here." He salaamed to Villiers. "You are a dangerous man to play against."

Villiers laughed. "As Adams said earlier, he used to play the game with his sisters."

"Mr. Villiers, if you are not a dangerous man, you had best learn to be one. Call that well meant advice."

2

OF ALL the known objects in the Flammarion Rift, Star Well is the largest. Its position has been adjusted. Where once it followed its own whims, now its location is relatively central and it can be reached with reasonable ease from all the populated stars on the borders of the rift.

From time to time, Star Well's position must necessarily be readjusted, since a cosmic anchor has yet to be invented and the peripatetic stars relieve unknown urges by moving in nine directions at the same time. (It may be ten: the theories of V. H. Rainbird [1293-1447] concerning the movement of the metagalaxy through the universal amnion, unfortunately left incomplete at the time of his death at the hands of Nominalist critics who objected to his experiments on the grounds that the universe might not survive them, are presently

being reconstructed by a study group. Word is awaited.)

On any objective scale, Star Well is a speck of dust and if it didn't constantly scream, the rest of the universe might one day wake to find itself isolated and alone. Nonetheless, it is large enough to fill its function.

From the outside, Star Well is unprepossessing. It is an irregularly shaped piece of rock some thirty miles long and, at its widest point, some ten miles across. The only exterior signs of man are the skeletal beacons and the metal lace landing webs. When a ship is docked, a few men emerge on the surface and there is a brief froth of activity, and then the beacons and webs are left to their own company again. Once in a while, when the lag between ships is great and the guests are bored, a party is taken hiking on the surface, but the last time this happened there was a quarrel and a death and a Navy ship came to investigate the circumstances. Ever since, the extra space suits have been locked in a basement room and used even more rarely than before.

Inside Star Well are, of course, the well-lit and comfortably furnished public sections where persons in passage eat, drink, smoke, sleep, gamble and are entertained. There are the quarters of those who serve them. There are any number of corridors and tunnels, warehouses, attics and basements. There are two landing ports. Nonetheless, inside a hunk of junk the size of Star Well, there are nearly two thousand cubic miles, and most of this dead rock remains dead rock, though there are rumors that after the advent of Shirabi there were changes. The story goes that if you are absolutely silent and touch a bare wall at exactly the right time, you can feel the secret work being done down in the bowels of the rock. Secret tunnels. Secret rooms. Shirabi has long been gone from Star Well, but the stories continue—which goes to show the impression that Shirabi made on people. A certain sort of man simply *looks* as though he would dig secret holes, have leg irons in his basement, and leave greasy moisture on your palm

when you shook his hand. (But go ahead anyway—touch the rock, barely breathe, listen. . . . *There.*)

There may actually be something to the secrecy story. In Shirabi's own time, a passenger somehow introduced himself into the tunnels and became lost. It was some time before his absence was noted and then a search was mounted. He was found at last, dead, apparently from exhaustion, shock and starvation, and possibly frustration, as well. Now that sounds unlikely, but again the Navy investigated and that one passed inspection, too.

In any case, there is no doubt that if you took all those sitting rooms, bedrooms, bathrooms, salons, dining rooms, casinos, kitchens, halls, reception rooms, offices, living quarters, hydroponics rooms, tunnels, corridors, warehouses, landing ports, (secret rooms) and (secret tunnels), and laid them in a row, end to end . . . well, as I say, they'd stretch out for quite a distance.

There were two ships on their way to Star Well. One was the *Orion*, the ship from Morian whose adherence to schedule had been confirmed by poor Josiah. (Don't think too hardly of Josiah, by the way. Running a Flambeau table can be deadly dull. Adding a touch of wit and imagination to the mechanical bore of randomness, doing more with the possibilities of control than merely taking an occasional well-funded idiot for one or two big bets—both of these should have been applauded as creative gestures. I don't blame Levi. He was merely an instrument. But Godwin—sometimes it's hard to sympathize with someone so lacking in the appreciation of artistic invention.) The ship from Morian was scheduled to lay over for eight hours, to exchange passengers and cargo, to leave mail, and then to continue on to Luvashe, the planet from which Villiers had just come. The *Orion* was on course and in firm hands, except for a third officer who sat like a lump in a corner of the chart room, befuddledly chewing on a cud of Fibrin. But this was his usual condition, overlooked because his uncle was

Baron of Bolaire. It was said that as long as he could be stacked in a corner and forgotten, he would continue to be paid and promoted, and in fact he did become senior captain of the line, still sitting in the corner and chewing to the end.

The Bolaire Line emphasized economy in all things at the cost of comfort. The main passenger cabin, included as a grudging afterthought by old Bolaire, measured twelve feet by fifteen. This was the largest passenger area on the ship. A double cabin offered a choice to its occupants: either both could lie in bed, one above the other, or the beds could be folded away and both could sit if they minded where they put their feet. There were seventeen passengers aboard ship, among them a covey of young girls being shepherded to Miss McBurney's Justly Famous Seminary and Finishing School on Nashua (sic) to learn to be fashionable ladies, but only two passengers enjoyed the comforts of the main cabin. The bear-leader and her five charges stayed in their own quarters, the fifth girl thoroughly unhappy with the situation and her roommate. The reason for the removal was that Mrs. Bogue, the escort, found the conversation in the main cabin not to her taste, and if she wasn't interested, she was sure that the girls would not be.

The topic of conversation was theology, and the girls, for their own private and inscrutable reasons, chiefest of which was Mrs. Bogue's non-interest—therefore, absence—professed themselves only too eager to stay and learn of these strange and interesting matters.

This was no use, however. Mrs. Bogue knew what she was being paid for—to deliver five girls to a school on Nashua. This she meant to do as efficiently and at as little trouble to herself as was possible. Consequently, she accused the girls of Massive Indiscipline, proof of which was their slowness to jump when she said "Frog," and decided the most effective method of instilling discipline was general confinement to quarters. The old ploys are the best ones.

The girls probably wouldn't have enjoyed the theology anyway. None of the other passengers did. Men stayed in their bunks reading factsheets for the third time about the shortage of body parts currently causing tremors in hospital stock issues on Morian. I mean . . . dull. But still preferable.

The captain even said to his first officer, "It's lucky old Bolaire isn't going to have a look at the cabin this trip. 'Under-utilized,' and next trip there would be half the space."

"Don't anticipate, sir. He may be waiting at Star Well."

"There's no need to worry, son. He never inspects a ship that his relative there is crewing on. It may be trust, but I think he hasn't got the stomach for it."

"I *heard* that," said the third officer.

And he did, but he forgot it before morning, and things you don't remember never happened. The third officer heard lots of things, all of which he noted down carefully and promptly forgot. Everybody and everything was always new to him. He was introduced to the captain for the first time every morning. When he finally retired, he was carted off his last ship and placed by his family fireside where his old, old mother read Mrs. Waldo Wintergood's animal stories to him every night.

The two theologians were an interesting pair.

One was a Trog named Torve, a light brown, woolly, six foot toad. He had a white belly and the faintest of black stripes on his back. His personality was lumpish. His motives were inscrutable.

And mark this: the Trogs, since their defeat by men some two hundred years before, had been confined by law to two solar systems. To travel anywhere outside these two solar systems, special papers were necessary. They were requested at every planet, at every way station, registered and returned. Fifty-three Trogs had such papers. Torve was not one of them. Keep your eye on him and watch what happens.

The other was a fraudulent old fart named Augustus Srb. Short, fat, intelligent, even magnificent, he wore

his mantle as a priest of the Revived Church of Mithra with a verve, a flair, that was not matched by his defense of churchly doctrine.

Mithra was worshiped six centuries before the founding of Rome, and has had his ups and downs ever since. He was Son of the Sun, and born of a virgin on the 25th of December. But then, so was everybody else. He died for the sins of all mankind and was reborn at the spring equinox. That's standard, too, as are the rest of the clutch: baptism, communion, and the promise of eternal life. Perhaps the one best point of the religion is this: the violet is sacred to Mithra, and consequently the cultivation of flowerbeds is encouraged.

Mithraism spent more than fifteen hundred years underground or as a minor element in other religions before its modern revival in the schisms of schisms and the loss of belief that ruined Christianity for a thousand years.

Mithraism is a good religion, if not a great religion. It certainly deserved better than Augustus Srb saw fit to give it in the face of Torve's earnestly presented case for some primitive brand of mumbo jumbo:

"See you, then, the *wholeness* so far?"

"Wholeness? Oh, yes, yes. I am attending you with interest. Continue, if you will."

"Wholeness is everything that exists. Outside is nothingness. But nothingness is ripe, ready to nourishmentalize fruit, and existence is reborn. See you?" Torve asked earnestly.

"Oh, yes." Srb nodded.

"Wholeness is born and grows, moving through nothingness and feeding on nothingness."

"Yes."

"Eventualistically, nothingness can no longer feed wholeness. Movement slows, then stops. Is like great heaviness in stomach after large meal. When movement stops, all collapses. In eye blink, wholeness shrinks to size of seed and all is stasis. Only in great by-and-by is nothingness ready to nourishmentalize again. Has

happened seventeen times since wholeness invented itself. Do you see?"

"No. I must confess that I don't. Perhaps we had better work on *nothingness* for a while."

"Oh, nothingness is simple. Is nothing."

Why did Srb continue to sit quietly listening to this? I suppose because he was given an equal chance to explicate Mithraism—but then he didn't take proper advantage of that. Perhaps because it was a way of passing the time. And then, how would it have looked for him to step out on a round of shoptalk? Appearances.

The other ship bound for Star Well was not publicly scheduled to stop there, and only a few people knew of its imminent arrival. It was a blackness against the blackness. It announced its presence in no way. It moved swiftly and certainly, and nobody aboard was fuzzed on Fibrin.

When Villiers rose that morning, he dressed himself and cursed happily at the difficulties of inducing a drapeau to hang correctly behind him without other hands to help. In addition to being decorative, and impressing people, servants had a certain usefulness in delicate and chancy matters like these. Villiers owned an odd and secret gaiety and he enjoyed this exercise of his capacity for wishing bad cess that he might the better spend the rest of the day being his normal good-humored, but reserved, self.

He put unfortunate wrinkles in three drapeaus and discarded them all. On the fourth try he finally achieved the drape he had been aiming for, and might have had sooner if he hadn't been enjoying himself so much.

His toilet completed, he considered himself in the mirror. He nodded at last and then went forth from his quarters in search of breakfast.

He chose to be served in the Grand Hall. Villiers followed the old dictum, *Live as you dress*. He dressed well. A plump, homely, good-natured girl served him an excellent breakfast. She had left the preserve behind

and went to fetch it. It was a living green jelly that grew on rotting vegetation on New Frenchman's Bend, and after an initial unfavorable reaction to it on first encounter, Villiers had decided that he liked the gloppy stuff and ordered it whenever he could.

He complimented the girl on the meal when she returned.

"Why, bless you, sir," she said. "Thank you."

"Tell me," he said, "do you live here in Star Well permanently?"

"Oh, no, sir."

"You don't mean you travel here from somewhere else every day?"

She laughed happily. "It's a five year contract between m'lord, the Marquis, and Mr. Shirabi. I'll be going home to Herrendam next year with the others. I'll be getting married."

"Congratulations. I hope you will be very happy. Are Mr. Godwin and Levi also from Herrendam?"

"Levi Gonigle is, but Mr. Godwin were here before I came. Even before Mr. Shirabi, some say. Levi's ready to bust the way they've taken to him here. Nobody wanted to give him work before and the Contract Master picked him out in particular. He wants to stay on after the contract. He doesn't want to go home."

She excused herself as a new couple entered the room. They sat at a nearby table and the girl hurried to serve them. Villiers turned his attention back to his meal, placing some of the jelly on his meat. It spread itself thin and put feelers down. He gave it time to settle, time to feel comfortable before he began to eat it.

While he waited, he amused himself by falling in love with the beautiful girl who had just sat down. Gorgeous, indeed. He craned his head a little to see her better. Yes. A delightful girl.

The girl was expensively dressed. She was a blonde whom pink flattered. Her hair was short and worn in tight little curls that played tweaky-fingers with each other over her forehead and around her delicate ears.

Her nose was unassuming. Altogether a sweet and lovely thing.

Her companion, a man somewhat older than Villiers, was also well-dressed—but more by good sense than by good taste. His figure was mediocre and he had contented himself with a cut of cloth that concealed. In short, he looked well enough if anyone ever bothered to look his way.

As Villiers finished his meal, and as the two were themselves served, the man spoke animatedly and with good humor. The girl, however, sat solemn throughout. For the most part, she kept her eyes on her food. She did look up at Villiers once, which pleased him.

However, when his meal was done, Villiers went his own way with only the briefest sense of regret, quite prepared to indulge himself in appreciation of the next attractive young lady he should meet, and equally ready to admire this one if he should see her again.

Now he considered various inexpensive entertainments and decided that a look at Star Well's shops might be in order. He found the appropriate level with no great difficulty, stepped off the lift, and began to walk the Promenade. He gestured politely to the people he met and passed the shops one by one, until at last he came to a shop that purported to sell the curious and ancient. He stopped there, and went inside.

Shops that purport to sell the curious and ancient ought of rights to be themselves curious and ancient, with dust and clutter and secret treasure. This shop had no dust and only a little clutter, so that Villiers almost turned and went out again. Neat tables and cases and shelves, all well-lit, held little promise of the sort of discovery he had in mind.

The approach of an elderly man from the rear of the store stayed his departure. The old man's hair was thin, his posture was stooped, and there were liver spots on the backs of his hands.

"May I help you, sir?" The voice was thin, but firm.

"Mr. Eyre?" Villiers had the name from the sign discretely attached to the door.

"No, sir. Mr. Spottiswoode, at your service. Mr. Eyre is on a purchasing excursion now, and won't be back for several months. Did you especially want to see him?"

"No. In truth, I wondered if you had any books."

"Oh, books may be had just down the Promenade."

"I'm looking for a curious and ancient book."

"We do have a few. If you'll just let me consult our records." Mr. Spottiswoode slipped behind a counter and found an index number and pulled forth a small drawer.

"The book is *Companions of Vinland*, by Otilie A. Liljencrantz."

"I'm sorry, sir. I misunderstood. I thought you simply meant an ancient book. I didn't know you meant a specific title. I never heard of this one. And that name."

Villiers spelled the name for the old man. Spottiswoode picked his way through his file, peering quite carefully at the cards. Then he stopped.

"Why, good heavens. We once had a book by Otilie A. Liljencrantz here. Something called *Randvar the Songsmith*. But we sold it long ago. And, oh, my—for a substantial sum. Fourteen royals."

Villiers nodded. "I know that one. It's relatively common."

"Common!"

"Relatively."

"Do you insist on an ancient edition? I should think that you could have a facsimile made for a few thalers."

"Unfortunately, there are no facsimiles. There is no way to make a copy without an original, and in my experience there are no originals to be had. I've searched widely. It was published in the days when paper was still used in books, and you know the rapidness with which paper deteriorates. As nearly as I can tell, the book was never reproduced in more permanent form."

"How do you know that it exists at all?"

"I discovered a reference to it in an ancient catalog

in my school days. I don't know that it exists now, but I do know that it once existed."

"Most interesting," Mr. Spottiswoode said. "If I might make a suggestion, sir?"

"Yes."

"Mr. Eyre makes frequent trips of purchase for this and his other shops. He is the proprietor of seven such shops as this on Yuten, Morian, and Trefflewood. If you would like to make us your agents and Mr. Eyre should happen to discover a copy of this book in the course of his travels, we would purchase it in your name."

"Or copy it if purchase was impossible," said Villiers.

"Or copy it. At a fee, of course."

"Of course." Villiers produced a purse. "You will wish a deposit, I'm sure."

Mr. Spottiswoode accepted the deposit. They settled on a royal as a fee for searching that would cover the more than immediate future. He took the various particulars Villiers had to offer and then asked for an address.

"Hmm. That is a problem. I travel, and the best address that I could give you has been somewhat uncertain of late." He smiled quizzically.

"Well, give me the best address, sir, and we'll trust that it arrives."

"I suppose we'll have to. Address it to Mr. Anthony Villiers, in the charge of the Duke of Tremont-Michaud on Charteris."

Mr. Spottiswoode raised his thin old eyebrows at that. That man's reputation had apparently traveled even this distance. But he set the address down, and carefully copied the personal mail symbol that Villiers showed him.

With his mind on books, Villiers continued down the Promenade to the shop that Mr. Spottiswoode had first indicated. There, after some judicious thought, he invested seven thalers thirty in a fascinating and profusely illustrated work entitled *Comparative Biologies*

of *Seven Sentient Races* and made no comment on the high price of the reproduction.

Instead of returning the way he had come, Villiers decided that corner cutting might prove to be quicker, as well as considerably more interesting. He didn't properly reckon just how interesting it would prove to be.

He continued to the end of the Promenade to the point where the walls drew together into a much narrower corridor. If he were to follow this hall for a distance of perhaps a quarter of a mile, paralleling a hall he had followed any number of times on the third level above, he should find either a lift or perhaps a staircase that would bring him home again.

As he walked, he thumbed the book, relishing the work. The book was solid and well-made, the layout attractive, the illustrations excellent three-dimensional likenesses. Although any number of supplements had been developed through the centuries, nothing had ever been invented to take the place of books. Taped records and films both required equipment to translate them into intelligible form. A book was portable and intelligible on the spot, and nothing could beat the smell of a freshly-made book, direct from the fac machine.

He found the chapter for which he had bought the book, the fourth, the chapter on that strange race known as Troggs. As he walked, he read. It told him a number of things he hadn't known before. Apparently different castes could be told apart by separate fur patterns. Scholars were a solid brown. Peasants were gray, often shading to olive on the head. Soldiers were black striped on a base of white. That didn't quite fit with the knowledge of Troggs that he had and he lifted his head to think and to check his direction.

As he looked up, he got the barest glimpse of a strangely appareled figure as it disappeared around a corner some distance ahead in the hall. It was dressed neither in clothes of fashion nor servant's livery nor even ordinary day wear such as any common man might wear. What it most resembled was the clothing that

might be worn for taking part in active field sport, a suit cut close to the body without frills, flaps, flounces, or furbelows. The color was solid black. Odd garb, admit it, for a place such as this that did not lay claim to as much as a gymnasium.

Private gymnasium, perhaps? Did Shirabi work out in his basement to keep his figure trim? If it were a matter of figure trimming, Godwin might be a likelier candidate.

On impulse, Villiers decided to follow. He snapped the book closed in his left hand and set out at a brisk pace for the cross-corridor into which the figure had disappeared. He reached it and turned. No one was in sight, but after the slightest of hesitations, he moved after.

The corridor was narrow and not well-lit. Its ceiling and walls and floor were cut as smoothly as any in Star Well, but here no one had bothered to polish the rock after the cutting was done. This was some sort of minor connecting link between more major lanes. The next large corridor was not far distant and the man in black tights must have turned there.

At the next corner, Villiers looked left, then right, and saw his man again. He was definitely familiar. He was young Norman Adams and what he was doing would definitely have to be described as sneaking. And lurking. And tippy-toeing.

Adams paused at the door to a stair and started to look behind him. Villiers pulled his head back, and almost automatically looked behind himself to see if he were being observed. He saw nothing. After a second, he looked again and saw the stair door closing.

Hot pursuit—after the game. When he got to the door, he opened it carefully and listened. Yes, sneaky foot-falls down the stairs.

When he was a small boy, Villiers had played this very same game in a dozen variations, and played it again at school. It was a damned shame that in growing up you had to leave such pure, pristine pleasures

in exchange for more serious pursuits. There is something elemental about trying to follow tippy-toeing figures in black without being observed. So down the stairs Villiers went, doing his best to match step for step, stopping when Adams did, then starting again. It wasn't easy, but it was fun.

He passed several doors going down, but still the footsteps continued. Then he heard a door swing and abandoning caution he took the stairs in threes and fours.

He reached the door he thought Adams had passed through and opened it. No one was visible and Villiers slipped through and eased it closed behind him.

He was in a large corridor much like the one he had entered the stair from. He cast around for sign of Adams and found none. He ranged up the corridor, then down, and finally settled on the nearest side-passage. He almost found himself wishing he had a hunting gorf, or a pack of dogs, the bases of the mature man's version of this game, but then discarded the thought as unworthy. Self-reliance was the thing. Sniffers and pointers took away the essential nature of the pursuit.

So, book still in hand, Villiers poked around. After a time, however, it became clear that he had mislaid Adams. Perhaps he hadn't, after all, passed through this particular door. Or perhaps he had hidden and doubled back through while Villiers was in another corridor. Or perhaps he knew his way well enough to have gone so surely to his destination that Villiers had simply gotten left behind. In any case, Adams wasn't to be flushed again. The quarry had won free.

It was then that Villiers discovered that not only had he lost Adams, but that he had also lost himself. In the twists and turns, in this maze that looked altogether too much the same, he had contrived to misplace the staircase.

He felt not at all fazed by this. He was lost, but not totally lost. He could not find a specific point again, but he knew in general where he was in relation to

where he wanted to be. He needed to find another staircase and follow it up to one of the public levels with which he was familiar and he would have no problem.

He decided to continue in his present corridor, but that proved to be no proper solution. The corridor shortly debouched into a great hall. In the hall was standing a great red machine like a mechanical grasshopper, and Villiers recognized it for an automatic unloader. This must be one of the ports of Star Well.

The hall came to an abrupt end beyond the grasshopper. Just outside, a ship would nestle in a web cradle. An extensor would reach to the ship and then doors in both ship and extensor would open. The grasshopper would move on rails to the mouth of the ship and then on rails back to the warehouses along the hall.

In a parallel hall, another extensor would reach to the ship and passengers would debark. It was through such a mechanism that Villiers had entered Star Well. But not this port, he thought. His attention had been on other things and he didn't remember the fine details of his entry, but though one port has much the look of another, he was certain of that much.

It seemed to Villiers that he might find the parallel corridor and from there find his way home, but on second thought he decided to stick with the method that he was positive would bring him right. So he probed on in search of a stair.

Some minutes later, he was striding along a corridor briskly when a voice halted him.

"Mr. Villiers?" The voice was tentative.

He turned. It was Hisan Bashir Shirabi himself, standing at an open door. Shirabi could never be mistaken for a gentleman no matter what his clothing. He hadn't the poise, the bearing, the look, the accent, the manners, the totality that Godwin, for instance, was able to present. It was unlikely that Shirabi had ever made the attempt.

He was moderately tall, and thin enough that he looked taller. He was dark and the edge of his hooked

nose was sharp enough that one felt he might use it as an offensive weapon. His mustache was black and thick, but not at all ragged: it had the lush surface of a tight-piled carpet. His manner was furtive in a way that Adams, try as he might, could never match. Adams temporarily assumed his furtiveness; Shirabi's was an ingrained part of his nature.

His clothes were common, and in this case, more than common. They were one-wear disposables and were marred by a number of darkening spots and stains. Shirabi was wearing gloves. He stripped them off, threw them behind him, and closed the door.

"May I help you, Mr. Villiers?" He could have been asking what Villiers was doing here, but he wouldn't ask that directly. Not him.

Villiers gestured politely. "Perhaps you might, Mr. Shirabi. I was seeking to take the stairs from the Promenade to the level of my quarters. I made the error of looking through this book as I walked, and quite frankly I haven't the least idea where I am. I would be honored if you would guide me, sir."

"Oh, glad to, glad to," said Shirabi. He pointed ahead and they set out. "You ought to be more careful. It's possible to become seriously lost down here. Has it been long, sir?"

There was a difference between a "sir" in his mouth and a "sir" in Villiers'.

"By the clock, only a short time. Subjectively, somewhat longer. I shall have to take a lesson from this and do less reading in unfamiliar surroundings."

Shirabi looked at him. "You don't seem shaken by the experience. I'll say that."

"Mr. Shirabi, it is my misfortune to very seldom show my characteristically violent emotions publicly. I assure you I've been disturbed beyond belief."

Shirabi found this young man discomforting to deal with. Consistently formal, consistently polite, and all too correct about not showing his emotions. It was impossible to tell whether or not he meant anything he

said. And sometimes it was impossible to tell what he meant by what he said.

"By the way, sir," Shirabi said. "Just how long is it that you're planning to stay with us? Somehow that didn't get noted down. We like to have that for our records. I mean, it wouldn't do to let people run up their bills indefinitely, so to speak. Not that it's any real worry where you're concerned, sir."

"I should think not," said Villiers, "considering that I reduced my bill by half last night."

"You did?"

"In a game of raffles with Mr. Godwin. As it happens, though, I expect to leave on the ship for Luvashé tomorrow."

"Didn't mean to press, sir. Just like to keep things regular."

Shirabi waved the way into a lift and they traveled upwards rapidly.

"One thing I don't understand," said Shirabi. "You're staying three levels above the Promenade. How did you manage to travel *down*?"

Villiers laughed. "It's plain to see that you are not a walking reader, sir."

"No," said Shirabi. "I'm not."

3

OF ALL the irrelevant qualities that men have chosen to cherish, immensity is perhaps the least worthy. The Nashuite Empire is easily the largest political entity of all the many misbegotten accidents under which men have lived.

On the face of it, the Empire is ungovernable. Communication and travel are of equal speed; both are slow, and the Empire is vast. Common law and common language are strained by distance. How long either will survive is a question. Moulton's classic, *The Dynamic Equi-*

librium of Unstable Systems, which describes the happenstance by which such a precarious proposition manages to reel along and hold together by its reeling, is worth the attention of every serious student.

And those bureaucratic boobs on Nashua actually spend the bulk of their time planning how the Empire may be extended! Every single one of them pictures himself as a spider sitting at the center of an immense web, every muscle movement having its effects at the ends of the universe. In actual fact, they tend to cancel each other out, though the idiotic little wars the Empire fights from time to time with the little confederacies, free planets, and shadows that line its borders may be laid at their door. Dumb, dumb, dumb. But they don't know any better. How could they? They never even heard of Moulton, any of them.

The farther one travels from Nashua, the more of a chimera the Empire becomes. There are planets where it has no place in waking thought—the word, like a phrase of song forgotten for twenty years, floats elusively at the edges of dreams and disappears altogether in the face of solid morning realities.

In the *Orion*, bound for Star Well, two of the girls on their way to Miss McBurney's Justly Famous Seminary were making secret plans in their cramped little cabin. The one in the lower bunk lay on her back looking upward. The one above was flopped on her elbows, thumbing a book.

The one below was named Alice Tutuila. Young she was, and darkly pretty. Her parents had carefully explained to her the point in going to Miss McBurney's. With schooling in being a lady, the cachet of an education on Nashua, her own attractions and her parents' able help, she would make a good marriage and live happily ever after. She was not so very romantic a girl that she failed to see the desirability of living happily ever after. Therefore she was willing to endure Mrs. Bogue, discomfort, homesickness and the traveler's dis-

ease with the thought that minor tribulation is always the lot of heroines.

The girl in the upper bunk was of far less certain origin, though the documents submitted in her behalf had been sound enough to satisfy the eye of Miss McBurney, who was unfailing in the requirements she demanded of prospective pupils. These were a sound enough pedigree for the school to maintain its social standing, and money. If faced with sufficient quantities of the second requirement, she would compromise just a teensie little bit on the first—but this time she was fooled.

But that was all right, because the girl in the upper bunk didn't want to go to Miss McBurney's Justly Famous Seminary and Finishing School on Nashua. She wanted all the good things that her parents wished her to postpone in favor of an education. She wanted to cheat, and con, and double-cross, and swindle, and defraud, and bamboozle, with just a bit of flimflamming on the side, after the manner of her fathers.

She was not overly pretty, not the sort of girl whose looks would hold your eye, not the sort of girl you would pick out in a room to fall in love with. She had sparkle and a lived-in face, both qualities that beautiful women can lack. Basically, however, she was just a girl—and that was perfect for someone with her ambitions.

She was planning to skip at first opportunity, and Alice Tutuila was—romantically—willing to help her, at least to the extent of making plans. For aid in settling on a jumping-off point, reference works—guidebooks borrowed from behind the theology discussion in the main cabin—were the thing.

"So what do you have there?" Alice asked.

"Star Well: 2 lndg prts, rms 315 (9th-1r), dng var. (Grand Hall 4A), gmg, th & a, a*, d*, p-(A), sh-(A), no ta, sked 3 wk + unsked. Circumstances make this one. Star Well is a tiny rock, but because of location, hub of the Flammarion Rift. Primarily an entrepôt,

and secondarily known for its gaming tables. Extremely dull, we're afraid, unless you gamble.' Then there's an owner-operator list. But that's all it says."

"What does the first part mean? All the abbreviations?"

"Let me find the table. Oh, yes. There are two landing ports, and 315 rooms, ranging from nine thalers up to one royal a day."

"They charge that much for a room? Wow."

"That is an awful lot. There's a variety of dining accommodations and a special note for the Grand Hall. It's—let me see—excellent and extremely expensive. Gaming, but they said that afterwards. Theater and amusements. Alcohol. Drugs. Perversions—limited and expensive. Shopping—also limited and expensive. No tourist attractions. Three ships a week scheduled, plus unscheduled."

"That doesn't sound very good, Louisa. It sounds kind of small. There's nowhere to *flee* to. You can't run away if you can't *flee* anywhere. Hey. Say, how about this: You hide in the closet of a royal-a-day room until the ship departs without you. A gorgeous gentleman discovers you there and is smitten with your charms. He offers on the spot to make you his mistress and carries you away to a life of sin and mad, mad passion. Oh, I love it." Alice hugged her pillow and closed her eyes.

"I'm not sure that would work. He might not like me that much. Or maybe he wouldn't be gorgeous. Anyway, I'll have to see the place." She thumbed ahead in the book. "Let me see what the next stop is like. Oh, this is much better."

"What's this about losing money to young Villiers?" Shirabi asked. He was wearing his gloves and disposable suit, and he was up to his elbow in chemical glop designed to make the plants he worked among grow up big, and straight, and strong, and healthy. After all too many years of nervousness and ill-health, the result of living under constant pressure in small rooms and deal-

ing only with symbols and symbols of symbols, he had adopted a hobby designed to put him back in touch.

"Plant a seed, watch it grow, baby it along—it's a real satisfaction," he liked to say.

He didn't care particularly what he grew, though he knew each plant as a friend. But flowers and food were irrelevancies. He just liked to see plants and know he had a hand in raising them. He liked to discover what food a plant liked best and supply it. He liked the feeling of fatherhood.

"I've won money, Shirabi," said Godwin.

"I expect that. I don't expect the other. I don't pay you to lose money."

"You don't pay me at all" Godwin said sharply. "Let's not forget that."

"No. But as long as you're here, you might as well do something for your keep. And I don't include losing my money. You know I'm saving every minim. You know ways to avoid losing."

"My money, too," Godwin said. He was sitting gingerly on a stool he had covered first, and was regarding his surroundings with distaste.

There was an essential difference between Shirabi and Godwin: If they were both drinking cider and eating summer sausage, which I hope you will agree they both might do, and each dropped his piece of sausage between the cushions of his chair, both would fish for it among the trash. But they would assume different attitudes for their search, and they would search for different reasons.

Shirabi turned around, straightening. "How did you lose?"

"Why don't you get rid of these weeds? I hate them."

"How did you lose?"

"Or hold these meetings of yours elsewhere."

"How did you lose?"

"He knew what I was doing and called me on it. No challenge. Just let me know he knew what I was doing.

He knows Josiah's Flambeau table is rigged, too. I had to stop, and he won after that."

Shirabi laughed. "No challenge? His type isn't like that. No, you must have ducked, my fine gentleman."

"Don't say that! I tell you that he didn't press the point."

"Oh, didn't he? Your reputation overwhelm him, did it?"

"I can handle him if I need to. I told him so, in a roundabout fashion."

"I'm sure he was impressed."

Shirabi was startled as Godwin came abruptly off the stool and across the room. Before he could drop the formula mixing bottle he was holding and bring his hands up, Godwin had him by the throat and was bending him painfully back over the hard edge of the tank. A green frond batted him lightly across the nose.

Tightly, exactly, word by word, Godwin said, "He did not challenge me."

With equal tightness, the result not of emotion, but of a constricted throat, Shirabi said, "Look at your suit."

With sudden apprehension, Godwin loosed the darker man and stepped back, looking down at himself. He could feel the wetness even before he saw it. His entire front was darkening rapidly with the formula poured on it by Shirabi. His lip began to tremble and his face to darken with anger.

The instant he was released, Shirabi ducked down, went under the tank and came up on the other side. With one clean motion he dipped his mixing bucket into the chemical sludge and brought it up at the ready.

"You ruined my suit!"

"That I did. I'm not one of your six a year, or whatever the count is. If I killed you, I wouldn't even bother to remember it. *Gentleman!*"

Godwin made a movement toward the front of his suit.

"Don't bother," Shirabi said. "You might kill me, but you'd get a bucket of chemicals in the face, and I guar-

antee you'd swallow half of it if I had to sit on your head and pour it down your throat."

After the briefest of hesitations, Godwin looked down at his suit again and the moment was over. That sort of fight needs momentum to turn deadly, and the momentum was gone.

"If I ever got into a fight with you, I'd kill you," Godwin said.

However, Godwin was not certain of this. Though Shirabi might not share his pretensions and might even resent them, he was no less dangerous for his common clothes.

Shirabi simply said, "Maybe. Maybe not."

Godwin had gone to considerable trouble to leave all commonness behind him, and it had never seemed fair that Shirabi should have more power here than a man of greater polish. Their dislike was mutual. Being the men they were, one day one might decide to kill the other. This time, however, Godwin simply nodded sharply and took his soiled suit away to be changed before it fell apart.

After Godwin had gone, Shirabi pattered around his plants thoughtfully. Once he took off his left glove and scratched his ear. Finally, he went to the service in the corner. The signal showed contact when the call was completed, but Godwin left his end of the conversation dark. An inconvenient moment, perhaps.

"Gentleman, I've been thinking and I'm starting to wonder about this Mr. Villiers of ours. If he didn't challenge you, he isn't the man I was taking him for. And I found him wandering down here this morning. Accidentally lost, he said."

"In the basements?"

"Yes. He's altogether too sharp for my taste. And he told me he was leaving tomorrow for Luvashe. That's where he came from. Why would he just travel out here and then turn around? Makes it sound like he was coming here *for* something. I only know one thing that could be."

"That's your problem, not mine," Godwin said. "From now on, I'm just keeping track of the split and my own job."

"What good will the split or your job be if we're caught with a basement full of thumbs, and pick-up a day away?"

"It's still your problem. You boor of a peasant! I should do you favors?"

"Zvegintzov."

Godwin thought that over for a few moments, and then said, "All right. You said he was leaving for Luvashé tomorrow. If Villiers did suspect something, he wouldn't be able to do much about it on his way to Luvashé, now would he?"

"If he leaves tomorrow, he's clear, and it was all an accident. I'll stop worrying. But have him watched every minute. And search his baggage."

The object of this speculation set out for dinner in the Grand Hall that evening. Just outside the plush purple entrance, he encountered Norman Adams. Adams was no longer in his sneaking clothes. He had apparently found his way home again and there changed into equally somber, but rather more socially acceptable apparel. This was just as well. It was unlikely that he could have entered the Grand Hall in his black skin-tights and not drawn rather more attention to himself than a gentleman of taste could like.

"Hello, Mr. Adams," Villiers said.

"Servant, sir."

"Will you join me for dinner?"

"I'm sorry, no. I dropped a royal last night, and the Grand Hall is rather above my touch now." There was an attempt on Adams' part to ape his usual buoyancy, but beneath it there was a tone of sullenness. It was much like a small boy who has been taught that good manners should mask unpleasant emotion, but who still wants you to know that his unpleasant emotions are being masked by good manners. The result, if the boy

isn't so small that his natural feelings overwhelm him ("Well, I *tried* to be nice."), is a peculiar sort of well-bred sulkiness. It's a tense and difficult effect to achieve properly, and mark it to Adams' credit that he was successful.

"Well, stand as my guest, then."

"No, sir. I think I've accepted too much hospitality from you already."

"But I insist."

"I have already eaten. If you will excuse me?" Adams turned and abruptly moved away.

Villiers raised his eyebrows and looked after Adams, and then instead of lowering his eyebrows and turning in to dinner, he raised them even higher. Yes, it was definitely the sound of crying behind him.

He turned and saw no one immediately, and then realized that it was in a purple alcove set in the purple wall that the tears were being shed. He investigated and found that it was the delightful young miss of his breakfast love affair. Her crying swelled in volume as he came into sight, at the same time the young lady apparently was redoubling her efforts to staunch the flow. There was an odd sort of relationship there that Villiers was not prepared to attempt to explain. Tonight the girl's hair was red and shoulder-length. It clashed horribly with her setting, but Villiers felt that it might distress the girl to tell her so.

Instead, he said, "Excuse me, young lady, but I could not help overhearing. Is there any way I may be of service to you?"

"Oh, sir," she said, "no one can help me now. I am beyond all help." She languished delicately and with so much grace that any objective observer must needs approve, applaud and appreciate.

"Well, perhaps not beyond all help," Villiers said. "Have you eaten dinner yet?"

"Oh, no," she said and dabbed at her eyes. "I do not feel up to partaking of food. I am far too upset."

"Ah, well," said Villiers. "I had thought you might

join me for dinner here in the Grand Hall. Quiet, good food, pleasant surroundings and a sympathetic ear—in sum they might improve the look of the world no end.”

She looked shyly up at him through beautiful lashes that might have been her own, and probably were not, but that in any case suited her admirably. “Perhaps they might,” she said. “I think I might take a light dinner after all.”

Villiers escorted her within. When they were taken to their table, he saw her seated on the outside. It is difficult to say it, but the time has come to admit of a deficiency in Villiers. Taken separately, the shade of her hair, the shade of her lips, her choice of dress color, and the surroundings were all unexceptionable. In concert, they made a constant series of minor and major discords that bruised his ear. The only word for a man like that is inconstant. Though he still found her extremely beautiful, his deliberate seating of her on the outside rather than against an immediate background indicates that his devotion was less than total. One cannot like that.

His presence must have been a calming influence, however. When the meal was brought, ordered while she was still occupied in rounding off her bout of tears with neatness, she found her appetite returned and fell to heartily. In sum, she ate rather more than Villiers did. It is possible that she was blessed with a metabolism that required vast amounts of fuel and easily burned all that she provided. There are such systems, and we who eat two light meals in a day and watch every bit of it turn to unsightly fat can only envy her.

Her story, presented between and during mouthfuls, was enough to shake the steadiest heart. At times, it so affected her that against her inclinations she was brought to tears again, a helpless slave of the poignancy of her own sad experience.

Her name was Maybelle Lafferty, and she was an heiress. That was the crux: being beautiful, innocent and an heiress. It had made her the target of fortune-

hunters since she was little more than the veriest child.

Her father was Ragnar Jacob Horatio Lafferty, primary manufacturer of fardels in the Empire, and the wealthiest of the wealthy on Livermore. She was the child of his old age.

"Daddy—dear, sweet, kind, lovable Daddy. He protected me and I never knew it. A man would come to call and I would receive him and find him altogether wonderful. Daddy would run him off and I thought Daddy didn't really love me, that he just wanted to make me unhappy, that he never wanted me to be married. I didn't understand." (This was one of the points where tears presented themselves and required coaxing to go away again.)

Resenting her father's interference, she saw in him an enemy to be thwarted. Then Henry Maurice had been introduced to her at a social evening at the home of a dear schoolmate. He was a mature man, a gentleman, a man of culture and taste unlike anyone she had ever known. Fearing her father's displeasure, they had met each other secretly, caught in the overwhelming swell of their mutual passion. Her father, discovering the meetings, had forbidden her ever again to see her Henry. At that point, Henry had proposed that they elope. She had packed her bags with the aid of her maid and set out with Henry into the unknown.

"Is he the gentleman with whom you breakfasted this morning?"

"Yes, that's him. Doesn't he look evil and repulsive?"

Villiers reserved comment.

Henry Maurice, it seemed, had presumed upon her innocence, and only now had she learned the truth. He was every bit as bad as her father had said. He was using her, coldly and calculatedly, as a steppingstone to her father's fortune.

She elaborately produced a delicately pink handkerchief and blew her nose. It seemed to be a method of forestalling tears.

Plaintively, she said, "But Henry doesn't know Daddy.

Daddy will never give him a minim, no matter what. Daddy loves me and he would pay to have me back, but Henry will never persuade Daddy to give *him* anything."

"That is unfortunate."

"Oh, but it's much worse. Henry is a cruel, brutal man. When he discovers his evil plotting is of no use, what will become of me? I'm afraid that Henry will abandon me, friendless and without a penny, in some gutter a hundred light-years from home and anyone I know. From my daddy. Or worse. If only I had someone to depend upon."

Villiers opened his mouth to reply, but before he could say a word, the girl gave a startled "Oh." At the corner of their table was the man who had enjoyed Miss Lafferty's breakfast company. He was dark and saturnine, at close range much more like the monster she claimed him to be than the god who had first laid claim to her affections. But then, not really so much like a monster, either. Dark, pudgy, glum, conservative, and angry.

"Servant, sir," he said shortly to Villiers and immediately ignored him in favor of the girl.

Villiers half-rose. "Equally yours," he said.

"Miss Lafferty, I desire a word with you in private," Henry Maurice said, and seized her firmly by the wrist.

"Oh, no, Henry."

"If you could postpone the conversation for a few moments, we could finish our sweet," Villiers said. "It would be a shame to leave half of it untouched."

Henry Maurice shot the least of looks at him, and then said, "Come. Come now. I insist. Excuse us, please."

The beautiful Miss Lafferty's resistance failed her and she left her chair murmuring, "Yes, Henry," her eyes downcast. But behind Henry's back she lifted her lashes and gave Villiers a penetrating glance that set a capstone in place.

"Servant," said Henry Maurice, and the two took their leave. He still held her by the wrist. They went

then from the room, she hanging back the least bit, but not so obviously as to create open scandal or provide cause for talk. It was apparent that the young lady was well-schooled.

Villiers looked after them until their egression was complete and then turned his full attention back to his dessert.

The door to Villiers' room slid silently open in its usual well-bred fashion. The doors to less expensive rooms were altogether a coarser lot, not nearly so prettily behaved or confidently quiet. This was not altogether the accident of chance it might appear to be, nor yet the acknowledgment of that generally recognized more sensitive hearing for which the rich are noted. It was, in fact, token of the larger number of people who had need to enter here without being observed.

Derek Godwin stepped confidently into the empty quarters. His confidence first was due to the black glasses that enabled him to see in the dark. He was not likely to accidentally bark his shins. His confidence was also due to his firm knowledge of his own abilities. He would be able to locate anything hidden, open anything closed, and replace anything taken without leaving a trace of himself. His confidence, finally, was due to the advance signals he would receive if Villiers were to approach. Another man would have been whistling, but this Godwin did not do since it did not fit the image he had of himself.

Neither his first name nor his last name were his own. Or, rather, they were his own, but by adoption.

Taken together, they epitomized to him all that he most wanted to be. There were times when he would go through a day bemused by the two words. Sounded in a multitude of accents, hummed in a myriad voices, they played merry maytag through the meadows of his mind. He was glad that he *was* Derek Godwin.

Oh, the ways we pick to misguide ourselves! Instead of knowing the gentry for the implacable enemies they

were and applying his considerable abilities to their overthrow, he did his best to become one of them and rejoiced in his ability to pass in their company. Even the desire of a puppy for the name of his tailor secretly pleased him. Such self-confusions are the chief reason that our world is not a far more golden place than it presently is.

So he set to work in Villiers' rooms, applying skills practiced by men since the first rabbit-skin valise. It is, after all, in the nature of openable objects that they be opened. It would violate the essence of their beings if they were not. *Wholeness* (remember wholeness?), in the fullness of time producing valises, satchels and pokes, must also inevitably produce Godwins to open them on the sly. Everything is implicit in anything: a cell implies a body, a grain of sand implies sand castles and picnic lunches, and a satchel implies Godwin, practicing his industry.

Villiers received a note. He left the theater where he had spent two hours watching mediocre provincial entertainment. He himself had been watched by two different men representing separate interests. One had been bored by the show and watched him well. The other, simpler soul, had enjoyed himself and forgotten for entire minutes at a time to observe Villiers. It didn't matter, however. He was still in plain view at the end of the performance.

A boy in Star Well livery came hurrying up to him as he stood outside, and handed him a note.

"For you, sir."

He accepted the coin that Villiers gave him and went off, where he was immediately intercepted by the second of the two men. When informed what the note contained, the man said, "Well, what do you know," and let the boy continue about his business.

The note said this:

You must see now the depth of my despair. Oh, please say you will aid me in this, my time of trouble.

Come secretly to my room and do not let Henry see you. He is already jealous. From one who reckons you her only friend: Maybelle Lafferty (Miss).

Hisan Bashir Shirabi entered his hobby room. In company with him was his most recent mistress, one of the contract laborers from Herrendam. By most standards, she was not attractive, though Shirabi professed to find her so.

His name was not his own, either, but neither yet so far from what it once had been that the relationship would not be apparent. Euphony and ambition were not his reasons for change. A temporary misunderstanding had led him to take the step in the days of his youth, and though the need had long passed, he yet retained his more recent name lest people be confused by further change.

By many standards, he was a deeply inadequate man. He chose unattractive women because he did not dare aspire to their more beautiful sisters. A simple lack of self-confidence.

He was totally incapable under most circumstances of asserting himself in the face of the well-born, a legacy of his upbringing that he was well aware of, fiercely resented, and was powerless to amend. Exceptions to this had occurred twice under conditions both bizarre and deeply humiliating to certain well-bred personages. Shirabi cherished the memories, though with certain reservations.

If Godwin was unhappy being less than equal to such a boorish, left-handed man, Shirabi was equally unhappy in the face of Godwin's pretensions. If Godwin were to make of himself what he wished to, then Shirabi could no longer effectively be his superior. The result was a continuing struggle.

This was not an accident. Though by many standards Shirabi was inadequate, nonetheless, he was more than able and more than a little ruthless in dealing with people and things on his own level.

It was with all deliberate consideration that Zvegintsov had assigned Shirabi to head operations in the same place where Godwin had previously been stationed.

"Tension is the secret," Zvegintsov used to say. "Put two able and incompatible men together and you can be sure you will see every penny that is rightfully yours."

The system does have its merits, but the two men must be chosen carefully. If the incompatibility is too great, unpleasant things occur. The two set their primary attention to fighting between themselves instead of watching for the Navy and making illegal gravy, like sensible men.

Shirabi had brought the girl here to his hobby room for a reason of the greatest sensitivity. He was totally unable to make love anywhere else. Consequently, placed discretely in the midst of his tanks and flowering friends, he had a bed. It was a nice bed.

The girl entered the room first. She gasped and said, "What happened here?"

Shirabi pushed past her and then stopped. His eyes widened. Abruptly, he seized the front of his purple robe (the decor of the Grand Hall had been his choice) and tore it savagely. This was not an expression of sexual passion overwhelming him in these safe and familiar surroundings. It was an outlet for sudden stress and sorrow. He rent his garments, he slammed one fist in another, his eyes filled with tears.

"But what happened?" the girl asked.

He turned, seized her by the arm and thrust her from the room. She protested crudely at this unwarranted treatment, but he was not listening. He closed the door behind her. In his mind, she had permanently been dismissed from his favor. Anyone who reacted so abominably in the face of crisis was clearly unworthy.

Through imperfect vision he looked at the empty tanks, at the greenery strewn about the floor, at the purple flower that had been laid with care on a pillow that was no longer nestled in the heart of a leafy glade.

Coldly executed murder must be answered in its own terms, and as he sobbed, resolution formed in his heart.

The door of Maybelle Lafferty's room was flung wide and Henry Maurice entered with a look on his face that bespoke anger and frustration. Startled, Maybelle sat upright in bed and clutched at the bedclothes.

"All right," said Maurice. "Where is he?"

4

YOU CAN CALL the Empire a fiction if you like. In many places, it merely has power enough to collect sufficient taxes to finance its own self-belief.

The Navy is the chief executive instrument of the Empire. The Navy fights wars, suppresses insurrections, patrols shipping lanes, enforces law, and investigates the unusual, as well as providing an added touch of color at celebrations of the Emperor's birthday.

On the planet of Nashua, a Naval officer is a self-conscious member of an incredible power structure. He may be a drone, a time-server. He may be both ignorant and arrogant. He may be ready to pick a quarrel. He may be conscious of his prerogatives and care nothing for his duty.

However, the farther that you travel from Nashua, the more responsible an officer is likely to be. The power of the Navy, while great, is more often a threat than an actuality. It has to be used with restraint, with an intelligent care that looks to result, that aims for stability, that knows the real world to be something other than the fantasies of men who have spent forty years in an office on Nashua. An officer may still be arrogant and unpleasant, but his company is mainly that of his fellows and they will see to it that he walks a careful line in public.

And if you are looking for a substantial friend, a man

to rely upon in all sorts of weather, a man who incorporates all the traditional virtues of the ancients: who is trustworthy, loyal, helpful, friendly, courteous, kind, obedient, cheerful, thrifty, brave, clean and reverent—in short, a total swell fellow—take up with a Navy man on detached duty. The farther out you are, the better a friend you will have.

The Bolaire Line ship *Orion*, bound for Luvashé, was scheduled to arrive at Star Well within the hour. Departing travelers would not be allowed to take possession of their new and narrow quarters until shortly before the ship was to leave, but still guests at Star Well assembled in number in the waiting room at Landing Port Two. The reasons were varied: some were meeting arrivals, some were interested in the news the ship would bring from Morian and its octant of the Empire, and still others enjoyed the displays of landing that could be seen on screens in the waiting room.

Villiers, who had reason to meet the ship, as well as to leave on it, started with time to spare. It was well that he did, because he took note of his surroundings as he came near the waiting room and found them unfamiliar. It was not the unfamiliarity in itself that gave him pause—he managed to find his way well enough—but that this was not the port through which he had come on landing, nor yet the port he had chanced upon in the course of his adventure the morning previous. He stopped, intrigued by a daisychain of thought. He consulted the time and then retraced his steps. Some minutes later, he arrived on the Promenade. He went to the shop at which he had bought his book comparing the various sentient races. The woman he had previously dealt with was there and she recognized him.

"Oh, hello, sir," she said. "And what is it today?"

"Have you any guides to Star Well?"

She reached beneath the counter and produced a map. These were on display throughout most of Star Well, and showed the newcomer how to find his way

about. They were extremely limited and only showed the most public of public places.

"No, thank you," said Villiers. "I had in mind something with facts, figures and history."

"Oh," she said. "Well, that's a matter of consulting our friend here. If we do, he'll know." She patted the book machine fondly.

She consulted an index and then tapped out a code order to the machine. It whirled very briefly, and then beeped in empty tones.

"I'm sorry," the woman said. "We just don't seem to have anything."

Villiers said, "I cannot swear to it, but I seem to remember that Wu and Fabricant had an entry on Star Well."

"Oh, we don't carry Wu and Fabricant. I know that. They said we were extremely dull."

"How nearsighted of them," said Villiers.

He was still being watched, by the way. Within moments after he left, the woman received a call of inquiry.

When Villiers arrived in the waiting room, among the other persons present was Norman Adams. Adams very clearly saw him enter, and just as clearly pretended not to notice. He turned his back and lacking anything else under which to hide himself, he covered himself in thought. He looked up only after Villiers had been standing in front of him for a full minute and seemed prepared to stand there forever.

"Mr. Adams."

"Mr. Villiers."

Villiers seated himself next to Adams and stretched his legs out comfortably.

"A fine day to meet a ship, is it not?"

"Oh, to be sure."

"Fine weather."

"I suppose."

"Mr. Adams, I flatter myself—may I flatter myself?—that I have some knowledge of the standard passes of

social dealing. When you wish to insult a man—the Cut Direct. When you wish to snub a man—the Cut Indirect. The Studied Insult, the Pertinent Reflection—to be overheard, of course—even the smiles available for twelve separate effects. It seems to me that they taught me that. I must admit, however, that yesterday and today you have shown me a mode I never realized existed before.”

“Sir!”

“Yes?” said Villiers, but Adams was unable to continue, being caught up in a conflict of speech, so Villiers proceeded: “I thought perhaps you might be so good as to help me expand my repertoire. How do you call this thing that you do?”

“This is intolerable!” Adams burst out.

“I agree.”

Adams mustered himself. “If you will name a place of meeting . . .”

“A duel?” Villiers laughed freely. “You mistake me, and I trust that I mistake you. I have no desire to do you harm—perhaps I have a more bloodthirsty manner of speech than I realize. I shall have to amend that.

“I meant to say merely that until yesterday we had been on good terms, and since then apparently not. I try to add my enemies by design rather than accident. Were we not on good terms?”

“I thought so,” Adams said reluctantly.

“Well?”

Adams sat silent under the question. Finally, nervously, he asked, “Did you follow me here today?”

“No. I’m meeting someone.”

“Did you follow me yesterday?”

“Yes.”

“Well, why did you follow me?” The question was a passionate one.

“It was curiosity,” Villiers said. “Why do you object so strongly to being followed?”

Adams’ reaction was most amazing. He said nothing for a long moment, slowly turning red, particularly

about the ears. It was as though he had expected anything from Villiers except a calm admission and an equally calm question. He never answered it. Instead, he rose and hastily left the room. And he did not return.

The quarters of Miss Maybelle Lafferty were good, though hardly approaching the scale of Villiers'. Still, they were extensive enough to provide more than one ready hiding place. An agile man such as Villiers might have found as many as six.

The sound of a hand at the door caught them unready. Expectation had withered and left them in such a state that they merely waited. Waiting had become their focus and they were not prepared for expectation fulfilled. Consequently they were flustered.

"Hide," hissed Maybelle. She cleared her throat and said, "Just a moment, please."

Henry Maurice, not nearly so agile as Villiers, and possibly lacking Villiers' self-possession, took advantage of the nearest hiding place. He went to his knees and rolled under the bed, thereby doing irreparable damage to the delicate shaping of his costume. Genteel dress was designed, if anything, to show that its wearer was not required to do gross, uncultivated things such as rolling under beds. Maurice took no time to think of the tactical disadvantages in emerging from underneath a bed to display his outrage. Doing his best to recapture the proper spirit for the occasion, he honed his lines and whetted his temper. By the time Maybelle reached the door, he was barely containing himself.

"Yes?" she said, opening it.

It was one of the uniformed, red-cheeked girls. "Oh, I'm sorry. I meant to clean. I can come later."

"That will be fine."

"By the way, I thought I heard something fall."

"It was nothing," Maybelle said, and smiled. She closed the door and sat primly as Henry extricated himself.

"Let's face it. He just isn't going to come. Maybe he didn't get the message," she said.

Henry wasn't about to waste that lovely anger. "He did get the message. I saw him open it. I saw him read it. It must be your fault! How did you botch it?"

"Maybe he doesn't like girls. Maybe you should have sent him the note."

"That's funny, but it's not constructive. He liked you well enough. He was looking you over at breakfast. He invited you to dinner. He was perfect: rich, well-mannered, young enough to be fooled, mild enough not to be interested in a duel. Just the sort who would pay. Just the sort who wouldn't enjoy scandal. Now what did you do wrong?"

"Henry, I swear I did just as you said. I told him the story. I told it the way we practiced. He just didn't come."

Henry sighed and sat down on the bed. "No, he didn't. You're right about that. Goodness knows, you can't act, but I thought we'd catch that pigeon, at least."

"Henry," she said.

"Oh, sorry. I know you did your best."

"There's always the boy. The big clumsy one."

"Adams? I misdoubt he has much money to spare."

"He must have some. He gambles. And I *know* I could fool him. Oh, say I can!"

Henry looked down at his askew clothing. "Well, if we're ever to pay our bills here and leave, we have to catch some coney. Sooner or later, God willing, there'll be somebody you can fool."

Within the landed *Orion*, the passengers assembled outside a closed bulkhead. Torve the Trog and Augustus Srb were at the head of the line. Mrs. Bogue and her five charges were in the middle of the line.

Alice Tutuila, who was not finding space travel as romantic as she had anticipated, craned to see *something*. She was more than a little tired of corridors, bulkheads and tiny rooms. Since she had been traveling,

she had yet to see stars, ships moving against the universal night, pirates, gallant gentlemen of title who managed rescues without soil, stain, or tying their hair in place, or any of the other staples of space she had reason to expect. And Mrs. Bogue, like a dog who knows the mind of a sheep, had kept her neatly herded away from the veriest hint of any of these delightful things.

Ships? "No gawking, girls." Gentlemen? "Come along. We haven't any time to spare." Even fat priests and odd foreign creatures: "That *isn't* the sort of thing young ladies are interested in."

It was romantic of her to wish for pirates. There have been times when such a wish would have been not only romantic, but beyond the bounds of possibility. But there are seasons of the year, and seasons . . . Which is to say that pirates would not have been completely out of the question. In 1460, the year previous, a group of disgruntled womanless miners, tired of their own company, had stopped a load of Holy Prostitutes on their way to the Temples of Gosh on Braunfels. After subsequent negotiation, the situation was regularized by the establishment of a local Temple of Gosh—and, in fact, this was the beginning of the rapid expansion of that formerly limited religion as the Priests of Gosh realized their strength of appeal—but the original action was clearly piracy.

And all that Alice could see now by straining was the line of people in front of her and a closed metal door painted a sickly yellow-cream. It was a far cry from pirates.

"Behave yourself, Alice," Mrs. Bogue said sharply, and accompanied the command with an equally sharp swat.

Then the door swung open. The line moved forward. On the other side of the door was a square corridor temporarily bonded to the *Orion*. They passed quickly through that and found themselves in a large, well-lit

chamber. Seated here, behind a counter, was the Empire's representative in Star Well.

Empire's Representative was an old man named Phibbs. His face was smooth except for saggy pouches under each eye, but his hair was white at the roots. He lacked energy, ambition, and intelligence, and he didn't know his rule book very well. What he did know, or thought he knew, however, he applied with gleeful zeal. He knew nothing of exception or tolerance and if he had, it would have made no difference—he found too much pleasure in the trouble he could cause people by the even-handed application of rules he had no part in formulating and hence could not be held responsible for.

Alice's friend Louisa, standing next to her, gave her a surreptitious poke. "Be careful, now," she whispered. "If you get Mrs. Bogue mad, we'll never see anything here."

Alice nodded. Ahead she could see the fat priest and the Trog talking to the old man in uniform behind the counter. Beyond them was a waiting room where a number of people were standing. Their own lines progressed not at all, the priest and the Trog continuing to talk to the old man. Then, at last, the priest was waved through and the Trog stepped back out of the line and just stood there waiting.

They moved forward, then. When they reached the counter, Mrs. Bogue placed the six sets of papers in front of Phibbs and spread them out.

"There you are," she said. She did not enjoy suffering nonsense and prided herself on always having her affairs under proper control, even down to something like having papers ready for inspection.

She pointed at the papers and tapped the girls on the head, one by one. "Jane, Fiona, Alice, Louisa, and Orithyia."

Phibbs was not feeling cooperative, however. The grim old lady was far too ready to direct his job for his liking. So he took his time over the papers, looking at

them one at a time, looking up at the girls they supposedly matched, and then back down again. One set, in actual fact, was a forgery, but he would never have been able to determine which—it had passed the inspection of sharper, abler men, and would again. But he took his simple, even time about looking them over.

"These girls seem to be in order," he said at last. "But what about you?"

Angrily she stabbed at the top paper. "That. That is mine."

"Oh. Oh, yes. Picture doesn't look much like you."

While they were talking, the girls enjoying their keeper's discomfiture, a gentleman separated himself from the others in the waiting room. He walked to where the Trog was standing apart and spoke with him for several minutes. The Trog had his back to the counter and Alice had a clear view of the gentleman. He was young and well-dressed, short and slightly built. His hair was brown and hung free. His features were not so regular and perfectly fashioned that he could be called handsome, but he had definite presence.

Alice attracted Louisa's attention with a bare nudge. Without turning her head, she whispered, "How about that one?"

The gentleman apparently took note of their gaze. He glanced at them, glanced again, and then returned his attention to the Trog towering over him. He finished speaking and the Trog turned and walked flat-footedly away. Phibbs made no comment on his departure.

Alice suddenly found her arm tightly clutched by Louisa, the other girl making the lightest of excited gasps.

The young gentleman walked directly up to them. He salaamed and said, "Miss Parini, how delightful to see you. I must confess it's something of a surprise."

Alice could hardly contain herself. "Miss Parini" was no one but Louisa. And Louisa was inclining gracefully.

"Mr. Villiers," she said.

Mrs. Bogue, stacking her papers together again, turned and said, "What is it that you think you are doing?"

In a barely audible whisper, Louisa said, "She's taking us to school."

Villiers, who may have heard Louisa, had already turned to Mrs. Bogue and salaamed beautifully.

"My good madam," he said. "Your servant. I am a friend of some standing with Miss Parini's family. May I join your company? I have been here in Star Well some few days, and I think I may know my way here well enough to save you time and extra steps."

"Well," she said, "I must say that it is pleasant to meet a young man for once who has sense."

"Anthony Villiers," he said, and smiled.

Make no mistake about it, he could be charming when he cared to be. I confess I don't understand the ins and outs of charm. Godwin introducing himself in this manner would have seemed sinister, oily and dangerous, never winning. Villiers, ordinarily reserved, won Mrs. Bogue immediately and with no apparent effort. There is no question: life is not fair. I hope you didn't think it was.

Phibbs said, "Sorry, these papers aren't sufficient. I know my book and none can say I don't. Any Restricted Sentient that comes through, I got to register . . . ah, register his . . . ah, Red Card, Permit to Travel and . . . ah, record his destination and length of stay."

"He's a fellow clergyman, sir," said Srb. "Do you mean to doubt his integrity?"

"I don't know what I mean. Where was I? Yes, look, regulations aren't my business. I just do my job. I pay—I mean I get paid for doing what I'm supposed to do and I know what I'm supposed to do and he can't go through, and that's all."

Torve said nothing. He just stood there on his great flat feet like a lump.

Srb said, "He can't leave on a ship unless he checks out through you. Am I right?"

"Yes. Nol Yes! Look, go away. Your papers are all right and you're holding up my line." Phibbs motioned for Srb to move on. "And, uh, you stand over there out of the way for a minute."

Srb said, "I'll see if I can't get you released."

"Thank you, but is not necessary, I think," Torve said. He removed himself from the line and stood where Phibbs had indicated.

Srb picked up the bag he was carrying by hand, gathered his skirts about him and like a great red water animal out of his element betook his fatness into the waiting room. He paused, looked at the people about him one by one, and then moved on.

Normal practice for a newly-arrived passenger who intended to spend any time in Star Well would be to go immediately to the Accommodations Desk in the waiting room. The only exceptions would be people leaving within hours and the very few who could not afford to pay nine thalers a day for an inferior room and who chose to wander as inconspicuously as they could manage from one public area to the next. Srb, of course, did not fall into either of these exceptional categories, but nonetheless he did not go to the Accommodations Desk.

He was looking over the people in the waiting room with some exasperation for the third time. He was standing near the exit, and was about to abandon the room altogether when an urgent "Hsst" brought his attention about. Behind him, just outside the waiting room, was a tall, awkward-appearing, soberly dressed young man.

The boy made a recognition signal in his palm. Left little finger, right palm, cross drawn bottom to top, right to left, and quadrants dotted in proper order. Srb responded with the countersign.

"You, I take it, are Junior Lieutenant Adams."

"Yes, sir, General Srb."

Srb was not a general in any military organization nor even in any of several religious or charitable hierarchies. He was an Inspector General of the Empire, in rank equal to a commodore in the Navy, and merited the appellation of general as a title of courtesy. He was himself a Mithraist with some private interest in the subject of comparative religion, but he was not a priest. He often dressed as one, however, the better to pass without undue attention in strange and suspicious sectors. A fat layman is one thing; a fat priest something else altogether. One can be questioned without embarrassment and the other cannot. Embarrassment is perhaps not the grandest and noblest way of putting others off-stride, but Srb cared little for niceties, rather more for results, and a great deal for his own safety and comfort. And he was not altogether unaware of the little privileges, portions and propitiations that a priest automatically attracts—what might be called the benefits of clergy.

"Why didn't you meet me in the waiting room in a normal fashion?"

"Him," Adams said, pointing to Villiers, who was now engaged in conversation with the Trog. "I didn't want him to see us together."

"Who is he?"

"His name is Anthony Villiers. I think he *knows* something."

"Just what does he know?"

"That's the trouble, sir. I'm not sure."

"Perhaps we had best meet in your rooms, then. Give me your number and we'll be certain that he doesn't see us together."

Only when Srb had the number and location of Adams' room and Adams himself had departed did Srb finally present himself at the Accommodations Desk. By then there were several people ahead of him. He took his place in line and set his bag down. As he did, Torve the Trog, having left his place by the line, came up.

"Is all right now," he said.

"Is it?" said Srb. "Very good, my friend. Shall we meet for dinner as we planned?"

The man just ahead of him in line turned at the sound of his voice. "Oh, Padre," he said, "I hadn't realized you were there. Please go ahead of me."

"Why, thank you, son. Bless you."

"I will see you later for dinner," Torve said, and left the waiting room. Before Srb reached the head of the line, the man who had been pointed out to him by young Adams also left in company with Mrs. Bogue and her five young female charges.

Now, Villiers was there to meet Torve the Trog. When Torve stepped to the side, Villiers crossed the invisible line that kept those in the waiting room separated from the arriving passengers. He took no notice of the other arrivals, but went directly up to Torve.

"Same old thing?" he asked, although that was not the primary question in his mind.

"Is as usual," Torve said.

"The day we find some proper papers to copy, things will be much simpler."

"Oh, I do not mind."

"What are the conditions?"

"Wait here one minute."

"Hmm. That's not so bad. Now the important thing. The remittance was not on Luvashe. Did you find it on Morian?"

"No," said Torve the Trog.

"God help us. I've halved my bills here, but I spent my last royal yesterday. I'm down to pocket change."

"I found news," Torve said. "Remittance was on Morian but we had left, so was urged forward to Yuten."

"Well, that's some relief. No doubt they'll be surprised to see us turn up again so soon. In any case, this will take some thinking about."

"Minute is up."

"Good." Villiers told Torve how to reach their quar-

ters and how the door might be convinced to let him enter. "I'll meet you there in a few minutes. I see someone I think I know."

"I have composition to think on. I will meditate until you arrive," said Torve. "*Thurb.*"

Villiers approached the covey of females, and Torve, his minute of waiting at an end, turned and walked away. Phibbs said nothing. He took no notice of the departure. When the line had passed him and he was closing up his counter, he may have had the feeling that he had mislaid something, but if he did, he didn't mention it.

5

MAN ONCE THOUGHT fire to be the wrath of the gods unleashed. Man learned to unleash a little wrath, too. Man once thought that flying was a sport reserved for the pleasure of birds, bats and horses, but man learned how to share their pleasure. A thousand things, dimly understood, feared, thought beyond control, have been added when their time has come around to the grab-bag list of the possible. Still, some few things elude understanding, and of these one of the chiefest is the kid business.

For a time, control was thought to be within reach. Parents could order their children to specification as they might order a home, clothing or any items of style. Happiness? Not by a damn sight. Ignorant parents found themselves saddled with children far more intelligent than themselves. Society found itself with a preponderance of females or males as the winds of fashion blew. And there simply is no way to turn a child in on a new model when the old one is found to be not quite as advertised or when one's tastes change.

Over five or six hundred years, all sorts of experiments were undertaken, but somehow in these modern times most babies continue to be born by the tradi-

tional method—catch-as-catch-can. The experiments never fulfilled expectations. No parent who can afford it will willingly settle for a malformed or idiot child, but neither will he order a child from a checklist.

But ordinary kids are unsatisfactory, too. One might wish that every parent could have a child who was consistently agreeable, never disputed authority, never disobeyed a sensible dictate, and in time grew up to be something he could understand and approve of. But children, even ones ordered from checklists, simply don't come that way.

In a family of conformists, at least one child will turn to cropping his head bald and performing contortionist exercises in the name of sport. In a family of the bizarre, at least one child will long for the security of a billion people who will dress, think, eat, work and play as he does, and comfort him. There is no way to prevent it. If you will remember, Socrates was condemned to death for corrupting the youth of Athens. He never did. The parents simply didn't know what time it was and needed someone to blame things on. And by private report, the Nashuite Emperor finds his second son's interest in Morovian Agrostology both perplexing and disturbing and has had any number of royal rows with him, during which he has tried to convince the boy to drop his study of grass in favor of more fitting pursuits. And, as might be expected, he has had no luck.

The results of a twenty-two year study of parent-child relations begun in 914 by the Petenji Institute indicated that in those days there was an eighteen percent chance that a parent would consider that his grown child had turned out badly, and a thirty-seven percent chance that he wouldn't understand him even if he were willing to accept him. And this says nothing about the ordinary conflicts involved in raising a child. I don't suppose that six hundred years have changed matters appreciably.

Poor incompatible families have a greater problem

than rich ones. At best, a poor father can send his boor of a son off to work in a field six miles in an opposite direction, ignore him at meal times, and spend his evenings in a different corner. A rich father has a more effective traditional ploy known as the remittance. In essence, a young man is requested to travel—anywhere—and is provided with a reasonable amount of money as long as he stays away from home.

This may be a happy solution—if the money arrives in the proper place at the proper time.

When Villiers returned to his rooms, Torve the Trog was sitting on the floor making *thurb, thurb, thurb* noises. His anatomy and fashion of sitting were such that his knees overlapped and his brown furry feet stuck out to the side. They were broad, spatulate things, not at all his most attractive feature. In actual fact, he had little to offer in the way of attractive features. He was large and lumpy and fur-covered, and his head seemed not to be in proper proportion to his body. What he most resembled, in fact, was a six foot tall mammalian toad that by some freak of nature walked upright. The one thing that kept him from being repulsive was his bulgy blue eyes. They were not merely little circles of blue—they were glowing aqua orbs that a medieval king would have been proud to trade a minor daughter for. A minor king might well have made that his major daughter. Even in these more enlightened times, Trog's Eye Blue has a connotation of appealing warmth.

The *thurb, thurb, thurb* noises were High Art. Villiers was not sure of the principles of the art, however, and Torve was unable or unwilling to explain them, but which of the two Villiers was also uncertain. At times he thought it was a matter of rhythm, at times modulation, at times subtle changes in amplitude. In any case, though he might not understand the art form in its own terms, nonetheless he did not find it objectionable. Think of it as the random chirping of a cricket or the wurble of the Fidelian ironworm.

"... *Thurb* ..."

Villiers let the door slide shut behind him and began stripping off his clothes.

"Catch the boot, will you, Torve," he said.

The Trog helped him to remove the tightly fit high-heeled boots and Villiers sighed in relief.

"There are times when I think my feet are spreading. Or perhaps they're still growing."

He lay back on the bed and closed his eyes. Torve returned to his composition. Even if Villiers had not been informed that Torve was inventing rather than practicing something he had put in final form, he would have known, or thought he would. It lacked a certain necessary *je ne sais quoi* of a polished work. Villiers lay listening for some minutes, putting his thoughts in order. Then abruptly he rose and crossed to the service corner. He left the picture off, feeling no need to honor a minor functionary with the sight of him in his under-clothing. But for you, who might be interested, their color was beige, his stocks were calf-length and well-filled, his body-piece cut with some looseness, and his curdler a Grene & McKenna worn in a reverse holster on his left hip. Villiers asked to be connected with Accommodations.

"*Thurb. Thurb. . .*"

"This is Mr. Villiers in the Palatine Suite."

"Oh, yes, sir!"

"It seems that my plans have altered somewhat. I'm not leaving tonight as I told Mr. Shirabi. I've decided to remain here at Star Well for some few days more. Will I be able to retain my present rooms, or will it be necessary for me to change them?"

"Pardon me, sir. I'll check." The clerk turned in the service screen and checked quickly. "No problem at all, sir. You can stay just where you are."

"Very good," said Villiers, and prepared to sign off.

"A moment, sir. I can't see you and I keep hearing an odd throbbing noise. Is the service in order?"

"Perfectly in order. Thank you."

Villiers turned. "Well, the least of our problems is settled." He sat again on the bed. Idly he tugged at the fringes on the canopy. "What we are going to do for enough money to leave here and reach Yuten, I don't know."

Without looking up, Torve said, "Is no need to worry. All will come to evenment."

"Hmm?"

"No need to worry. I do not worry. *Thurb. Thurb.* I have confidence. *Thurb.* In time fullness, many lines of occurrence come together—they make . . ." Words failed him and with paws he made a rounded motion and then planed it smooth. "We go then to Yuten, have money, all is well. See you?"

"I understand that you are confident."

Torve brightened. "Ah, you see."

"No."

"Oh, well, you are still good fellow, Tony. You understand little, but you are still good fellow."

"Thank you. For lack of any choice, I'll accept that as a compliment." Villiers pulled the holster free of the body-piece, the grip-tite backing making its usual skritch protest at being parted from what it had seized so tenderly. He set the holster down and began to strip off his stocks.

"Who was young female girl creature?"

"She's the daughter of a man I met several years ago—more than a bit of a rogue. One of the Parini-Blinoff-Branko Clan."

"These names?"

"They're all related to each other. If you meet a man with one of those names, it's a sign to be wary."

"But you call the father rogue? You?"

Villiers laughed. "Am I a rogue, Torve?"

Quite seriously, Torve said, "In some times."

Villiers laughed again. "Mr. Parini is a rogue in all times. In any case, Louisa Parini is being taken by that engagingly horrid woman to school on Nashua. I know the school. A school I was expelled from—for roguery—

used to have us practice our hardly learned manners on their girls. I don't envy Louisa. I think Miss McBurney invented stuffiness."

"You are dressing to go out?"

"Yes. I have Mrs. Bogue's permission to escort Louisa to dinner in the Grand Hall. A few thalers isn't going to affect our bill particularly, and I think she will enjoy herself. Would you like to join us?"

"No. Is thought, but I have seeing with Mithra Priest Srb. We will eat dinner. He understands little, too, but is needful for lines of occurrence that we . . ." He again made his rounding and planing motions.

"And our traveling together—is the key to that lines of occurrence, too?"

"Ah, you do understand!"

"No," Villiers said. "But pleased as I am that our lines of occurrence coincide, little as I understand the principle, from my side I would say the cohesive force was friendship."

"How could friendship be so important? I do not understand."

Villiers was delighted. "I knew it. The day would come, at long, long last, and at last it has. *You* don't understand."

"*Thurb*. Is my new composition. No, you have very strange mind. I do not understand. But is no mattering: favorable line of occurrence and friendship travel together. I like you—means nothing to me. Line of occurrence grabs you by neck and will not refree you—means nothing to you. We still go to Yuten together and both of us are happy."

"I'll be happier when the bills are paid and we are on our way."

"No need to worry. All will come . . ."

"I know. I know. All will come to evenment."

"Please tell me when is time to go to Yuten."

"I will."

Alice Tutuila bounced on the bed and said, "Oh,

wow! Dinner in the Grand Hall, and Mrs. Bogue is letting you go. How did you *do* it?"

Louisa was looking through her clothes. "I don't know what I should wear. Help me decide, Alice. I'm so excited!"

"But who is he—Mr. Villiers, I mean? You never told me. How do you know him?"

Alice aimed the questions in Louisa's general direction without anything so time consuming as a check to see which, if any, reached their intended target. Louisa, for her part, was insulated by her concern for her appearance, her mingled excitement and apprehension, and her own stream of comment. The result was a mild sort of bedlam, thoroughly enjoyed by both girls, but enjoyed rather less by Alice when she realized how little she was receiving in the way of cold, hard, specific information. She rose from the bed and crossed the room.

"What have you got there?" she asked. "Oh, no, that won't do. Here, let me help you."

She *hmm*ed her way through Louisa's dresses. "How do you expect to have him make you his mistress and carry you away in any of *these*? You'd better wear something of mine."

They crossed to inspect Alice's wardrobe. "Isn't it nice to have some *room*? I feel like just standing and breathing."

"It is better, isn't it? At least you're not going to sit up and bang your head tonight."

"Here. Try this on. I didn't let Mother see I took it, but I figured it might come in handy. It's very stylish."

Louisa held it up. "I can see. There isn't a lot to it, is there?"

"That's the point, silly. Now go on."

Louisa crossed to the dressing room. In a moment, she said, "I can't reach all the fastenings."

"Don't worry. I'll get them. Let's see what you look like."

Louisa posed in the door. "It's not that it's skimpy. I just don't think I'm quite ready for it yet."

She was right. It hung where it should have clung, partly because she lacked something of Alice's height, partly because she lacked something of Alice's development.

"I suppose you're right. We may have to make do with your blue. It's nice enough, but it's so *young*."

"Well, I'm young. I am young."

"But how can you get him to carry you away to a life of passion? Not in your blue."

"That was *your* idea, Alice. I just want somebody to help me."

"Do you think he will?"

Louisa took the blue dress to the dressing room and tunneled into the fabric. Her muffled voice said, "I don't know. I'm going to ask him."

"Who is Mr. Villiers and how do you know him?"

"I don't know exactly who he is. He and Daddy know each other from sometime, and he stayed with us once. I thought he was older then, but he's not really very old, is he?"

"Less than thirty, I think," Alice said. "He does seem nice, but maybe a bit stiff."

Louisa came out. This dress indisputably fit better, and actually became her more. The dress had a wholesome look, and she, like it or not, as she might not now, but certainly would later when she had time to appreciate the advantages, did also.

"Fasten me, please," Louisa said.

Alice came to her assistance. It is a perplexing question why women's garments should invariably be made in such a fashion that either contortion or assistance is required to close them. It is certainly not an insoluble problem to design closures that do not interfere with the lines of the clothes and are still within ready reach. The easiest answer might be that there are advantages in being able to ask to be done or undone.

Louisa said, "He really isn't that stiff. At least I don't remember him that way. I remember him as being very

funny." She began to look through her extra trappings and hangings.

"Oh, hey, I've got an idea," Alice said. She went to the service, and after studying it for a minute, mastered the controls well enough to place a call. "Oh, hello," she said. "I have a friend staying here in Star Well—Mr. Villiers. Can you tell me which room he is in?"

"Mr. Villiers is not in a room. Mr. Villiers is in the Palatine Suite."

"How much does that cost?"

"I beg your pardon?"

"The suite—how much is it per day?"

"Oh, come away!" Louisa said, but was ignored.

"The Palatine Suite is our best," said the deskman. "One royal a day."

"Oh, thank you," Alice said and rang off.

"You shouldn't have done that," Louisa said. "You don't ask somebody straight off like that. You ask one man where Mr. Villiers is staying, and then you ask somebody else how much the Palatine Suite costs."

"I don't see why," Alice said. "I wanted to know."

"But this way he knows what you're interested in. Not just Mr. Villiers, but money. You shouldn't let him know that much."

"I don't see why. And, oh, my—he is in the royal-a-day room! It's just like we said. Oh, you'll have to hide in the closet."

The door was tried, and then someone rapped. As Alice crossed to open the door, Louisa said, "I don't think I need to hide in the closet. After all, he is taking me to dinner."

"No, I mean afterwards, when our ship—" Alice stopped abruptly as she saw who was at the door. "Good evening, Mrs. Bogue."

Mrs. Bogue swept in. "Good evening, Alice. What's this about the ship?"

"Oh, nothing. I was just saying it's nice to have a large room after the ship."

"You're not dressed, Alice." She consulted a piece of

paper. "We have a table scheduled in the Buff Room in forty minutes. I want you ready to leave in twenty. And no nonsense. Good evening, Louisa. You're looking very well."

"Thank you, Mrs. Bogue."

"Turn around. Let me look you over."

Louisa turned obediently.

"Alice, stop larking and get moving. I think you'll do, Louisa. Now I want you to mind your manners particularly carefully tonight. Sit straight, mind what you say, don't eat and talk at the same time, be back by ten hundred, and be sure to thank Mr. Villiers for the evening."

"Yes, Mrs. Bogue."

"And, Louisa, I do want you to look your best tonight. I brought you this to wear." She held out a silver brooch.

"Oh, Mrs. Bogue, how lovely. Thank you."

"Here, let me pin it on. I thought silver would go with anything you chose."

Alice, coming to look, said, "Oh, it does."

Mrs. Bogue turned precisely and said, "Alice, you have just fifteen minutes. You had better use them to good advantage." And she left.

When the door had closed behind her, Alice said, "It does look nice, doesn't it?"

Louisa said, "And just when I was ready to totally hate her."

Alice said, "Oh, I still do. Just concentrate on remembering the way we had to stay in our room on the ship."

"Still, I didn't expect her to do a thing like this."

Adams let Phibbs out of the room, closed the door and locked it. Phibbs had his duties to perform. The ship that had arrived from Morian was due to leave for Luvashé and Phibbs had to check those departing at the landing port. Adams turned to face Augustus Srb, who was sitting calmly in a great chair smoking a pipe.

"I didn't think he'd know anything, sir. He doesn't seem to be a very bright man."

"No."

"I don't think we'd even have to investigate if we had a more intelligent man representing the Empire here in Star Well."

Srb puffed reflectively. "Is this your first investigation? This is, isn't it?"

"Yes, sir." Adams suddenly choked and began to wave the smoke away.

"Oh, I'm sorry. Is it bothering you?"

"Yes, sir. I didn't want to say anything before. I thought you were trying to bother Phibbs. But it makes my eyebrows feel as though they were crawling up my forehead, and my ears tingle."

"I'll put it out," Srb said. "I sometimes forget that not everybody shares my vices." He covered the mouth of the pipe with the palm of his hand. "The air will be clear in a few minutes. You must realize, Lieutenant, that we would have very few investigations indeed if we had more intelligent men representing the Empire. We have to make do with Phibbses because common jobs in unattractive places are ill-paid and consequently no one but old fools will take them. Then, when things go wrong, it's up to people like you and me to straighten them out."

"Yes, sir."

"Did they tell you why you were being sent here?"

"They said I was to be your legs, sir."

"I suppose you might say that. And my eyes, and my ears. And whatever else I need you for. I will sit, and you will run. But do you know why we are here?" Srb took his palm away from the mouth of the pipe and looked to see that it was out. He puffed on it to be sure, carefully separated the burnt ash from the un-smoked residue with a pipe tool, then knocked the residue into his smoking pouch. "I hate to see waste," he said, looking up.

Adams said, "They told me that there had been a number of investigations here in the past few years."

"Yes. Accidents, duels, one mysterious disappearance. However, the stories given have been good enough to pass investigation. The trouble is that there have been too many things here that required checking by the Navy. Besides this, around the borders of the Rift there has been an increase in several illegal traffics during the past few years, thumb running, in particular. On general principles, Star Well is going to be given a close look by you and me, and since we are going to do it quietly we are the more likely to find anything there is to be found."

"If there is anything."

"If there is anything."

"While I was waiting for you, sir, I poked around a bit. I didn't know what I was supposed to be looking for."

"Did you find anything?"

"No, sir. And Mr. Villiers followed me. He's the one I pointed out this afternoon."

"You know for a fact that he followed you?"

"Oh, yes, sir. He even said that he did. I think I like him—he's very polite—but I don't know what to make of him. He confuses me."

"I think I can understand that," Srb said dryly. "We may have to take our investigations elsewhere if it is clear that they know we are looking them over. For now, let's avoid being seen together and I'll find out what I can about your Mr. Villiers."

The *Orion*, with her new complement of passengers stuffed in their tiny cabins, with a fuddled third officer who was not even aware that there had been a layover, with a passenger lounge in which three were discussing Systematic Anarchy and another four were talking yachts (one maintaining that the day of two-man yacht racing was dead because the costs of owning and keeping small spaceships were prohibitive), but without Anthony Vil-

liers aboard, left Star Well bound for Luvashe some eight hours and twenty-two minutes after she had arrived. Between the time that the extensors were withdrawn and the ship actually left, Godwin called Hisan Bashir Shirabi.

"Villiers didn't leave on the *Orion*," Godwin said.

Shirabi said, "I know. I already received a call that he extended his room. Indefinitely—he didn't say how long he intended to stay."

Shirabi was the essence of quiet agreeability, and Godwin couldn't help smiling wolfishly. There are some people who need an occasional kick in the head to remind them of who they are. That was something that Godwin had learned long ago and applied any number of times to good effect. Calculated ruthlessness is an unnerving thing to face.

Godwin ran a thumbnail down the line of his mustache. "Do you want him eliminated? His baggage was clean."

"I don't think that's the main point. He's been asking questions and he didn't leave. We simply cannot afford to let him live. It's too big a chance. And there's only one way to do it, too. With the sort of money that he has, someone is bound to take exception unless he is killed in a duel."

"You mean you're dropping another one on my shoulders."

"Look at me," said Shirabi. He was a common, greasy, furtive man dressed in common purple robes. "He would never fight a duel with a man like me."

"And if he did, he would kill you."

"Probably, yes. But I don't want you to take chances. If you don't think that you can kill him in a duel, we'll find some other way. But the ship comes tonight."

As much as he wanted to be one of them, I think it would be fair to say that Godwin hated the well-born, and probably as greatly as Shirabi. The two of them had a beautiful thing in common, and neither of them appreciated the fact. Ah, the blindness that keeps us

from knowing our true friends and clasping them to us with bonds of steel. It has been ever so. Common interests are overlooked and the trivial divides.

Godwin said, "Don't fash yourself. I'll kill this one."

"Good," said Shirabi in the same mild tones. "Take him in the casino tonight."

Godwin nodded and the service blinked to black. Shirabi turned from the screen and looked at the table to his left. Laid out on it was an assortment of weapons: swords, tinglers, curdlers, vibro-blades. He smiled a secret smile that grew by stages into a thoroughly unpleasant laugh. Some people anticipate their pleasures.

6

I FIND IT HARD to believe in Inspector Generals. Look: men of utter probity who roam the Empire, commanding great personal power, but applying it only with restraint, secretly keeping their eyes on things, righting wrongs, checking on the practices of local rulers, calling in the Navy when necessary. I am certain, moreover, that they wait for no thanks, but simply do their duty and disappear into the night leaving bewildered but thankful people behind. And I don't believe it. People like that don't exist. Power does corrupt. Total personal honesty is a myth. Secret wrong righting is a make-believe game for children to toy with.

On the other hand, it is undeniable that the Empire desperately needs balance-wheels—call them Inspector Generals if you like. The Empire is inherently unstable. The Navy is saddled with all the disadvantages of size, of bureaucracy, of endless confining regulations. Corners are cut, laws are openly broken, little men are victimized, bribes are taken, and those whose idea of art is fragmentation, destruction and death everywhere flourish. Who stands for stability? Phibbses? Something better is needed.

Grant that you need Inspector Generals. Where are they to be found?

You cannot cultivate a garden and produce Inspector Generals. You cannot educate an Inspector General. You cannot train an Inspector General. You cannot turn a handle and let a machine crank out an Inspector General.

The job requires intelligence, honesty, individuality, creativity, judgment, and a wide variety of subtle talents not commonly considered to be part of the ordinary human battery, and subsumed under the inaccurate catchall title of "luck." "Luck" is a noise made by those who lack these talents and wish to dismiss them with a sniff.

You can take it as an axiom: celebrities who travel meet only fools, creeps, panhandlers and climbers. People they would truly like to meet never have the bad taste to present themselves. The quality that makes them worth meeting automatically determines they will never be met.

The same applies to Inspector Generals. The only possible candidates are those unsuited for the office.

It may just be that Inspector Generals don't really exist at all. They may be no more than a rumor invented to keep children good and men honest. In fact, I rather think that may be so.

Villiers escorted Louisa Parini into the Grand Hall. She was obviously minding her best manners and he made a point of matching them. Mrs. Bogue's admonitions had nothing to do with it, and neither, for that matter, did whatever plans or hopes she had in mind. It is simply in the nature of things that young girls being taken out to dinner by old friends of the family should play the game of being grown up, and that the friends, being friends, should indulge them. When both know what is going on, it can be great fun. The only question is how long the game is to be maintained before it is dropped in favor of more comfortable conversation.

Villiers saw Louisa seated. The previous night, Miss Maybelle Lafferty had been seated across from him

with the room as background, and at this very same table. We already know why she was seated against the room instead of against the wall. But mark that she had been seated across the table. Villiers took the same seat as before but seated Louisa next to him.

She was dressed becomingly in a style appropriate to her age. Her dress was blue, her brown hair was pulled back and caught in a silver circlet, and she wore a silver brooch. The two pieces were her only jewelry, and her dress had white trimming, but no ribbons or lace. She looked like everybody's idea of a daughter: warm, bright, reasonably cute, demure, friendly and well-behaved. She wasn't like that at all, but that is the way she looked.

Villiers ordered for them. The girl was the same homely, red-cheeked thing who had served him before. She seemed disturbed to see him.

"Oh, Mr. Villiers," she said. "I thought you left to-night."

"No," he said. "I decided to stay on just a little longer. The food here is too good to leave."

That was one of the things that Louisa remembered liking about him. While he lied little, he was excellent at being oblique. Adults tend not to count this among the endorsable virtues, but anyone who has had occasion to avoid answering a direct question directly and found that they could not will share Louisa's admiration. She herself was only moderately skillful at being oblique, but rather able nonetheless at keeping private what she wished not to be known. Alice was a wheedler and thought she had all that was to be wheedled. Mrs. Bogue was a pumper and didn't even realize that there was oil to be pumped. If they only knew. If they only knew. Ha.

The girl said, "Yes, sir," and left.

Louisa said, "How long has the tip of your left little finger been missing, Tony? You didn't have that before, did you?"

He looked at his hand. Not the whole joint, but the tip, down below the nail, was missing. It has not sud-

denly been misplaced. It has been missing all along. It's simply that no one has noticed it up until now. Don't wonder about it—just tell me the color of your next door neighbor's eyes.

"No, that's reasonably new. I had an accident. Something like two years ago; I was on Livermore."

"Oh, Fiona is from Livermore."

"Who is Fiona?"

"One of the other girls going to Nashua. But go on."

"I was temporarily without funds, so out of necessity I took a job rather than throw myself on the charity of the Fathers of Livermore, a council with notoriously limited and unpleasant notions of charity. I once read that practices not too different were considered proper punishment for religious unbelief in pre-Common Era times."

"But you didn't really get a job and work?"

"Perhaps not, but for the sake of the story let's say that I did work. This was when they were having the last great run of the white-horned rinderbeasts. The black-horned ones are smaller and faster and live in too rugged country to make it worth the trouble of digging them out, though I prefer them. They're far more affectionate and more hardy, too. Anyway, the word came that they were beginning to swarm and they were hiring every free able-bodied man they could find. I signed on as a flanker. Beaters work behind and run the sound machines: whistles, booms, sirens, gongs. Flankers work the sides and supervise the stringmen, net boomers, and dirt wallahs."

"I'm not sure I want to hear this," Louisa said. "You didn't really work a straight job, Tony?"

"Does that bother you?"

"Yes."

"I was supervising."

"I still don't like to hear about it. You wouldn't really do anything like that."

"Don't you want to hear the part where the rendering

machine lost its king cog and the tripwire took off the end of my finger? The rinderbeast never got rendered. In fact, it ate the end of my finger and died."

"Oh, that never happened," Louisa said.

"Well, I admit that the story needs polishing. But you would like the moral. I haven't had the finger repaired as a reminder to myself never to take another straight job."

"I like that," she said.

"And here is our dinner," he said. "It's just as well that the story had to be shortened."

So you see just how long the formal manners lasted. And you have a look at Villiers showing to better advantage than he does across a gaming table or making a cubitiflection in front of a bad-tempered woman of middle years.

The waitress rolled her cart to the side of the table and opened it to show the steaming platters under the hood.

"Here you are, sir," she said, and completely contrary to custom lifted a dish to the table. As she did, she bent close to Villiers and said, "I have to tell you. Be careful. They're watching you and they're asking questions."

"Who?" Villiers asked quietly.

"Mr. Shirabi and Mr. Godwin." Then in normal tones, she said, "There you are."

"Thank you," Villiers said.

Srb and Torve were eating together in another and lesser dining room. Prices were lower, food was simpler, the decor was plainer, and the service was distinctly better. It is a minor paradox that over-prompt service can cost an otherwise superb eating place its Wu and Fabricant 4A rating. Wu and Fabricant respect a proper sense of self-importance.

Torve the Trog was eating from a heaping plate of kumquats, Morovian sugar-grass, and ruvelo, a red root-paste common in this octant as a staple starch. These

kumquats were of a variety developed in modern times and Torve was eating only the sweet golden rinds and setting the little fruits aside. He would carefully strip the entire peel, set the naked fruit on a plate at his right, break the peel into little pieces, and then dip a piece into the rubelo, bring it out heavy with the red paste, and pop it neatly into his mouth. Then he would chew it at much greater length than anyone would ever think necessary.

"May I have one of your kumquats?" Srb asked, motioning at the side plate.

Torve passed the plate across the table. "Do, please. I only eat rinds. Fruit does not agree with my digestion."

He was a vegetarian, eating no meat whatsoever except for jellied whiteworms, a delicacy with little general appeal, but one he relished. Troggs in general were not vegetarians. Quite the opposite, in fact—they ordinarily relished their meat. Torve was a vegetarian by philosophy, however, for reasons obscure. The worms were a lapse that he apparently could not keep himself from making, but stolidly denied and attempted to hide as best he could. He apparently felt it a matter of shame, as well he might. Whiteworms.

Srb's meal was more usual. He began with chowder, proceeded to braised atman haunch sided with rubelo, sugar-grass, thet eyes, and Lima beans, and ended with a large slice of cheesecake. This is not to mention the kumquats. His beverage was beer.

Srb subscribed to a theory of great antiquity concerning the foundation of civilization, a theory beyond proof, but sufficiently within the bounds of possibility to merit endorsement. Civilization depends on stable living conditions for populations of some size that will allow them to build, invent, coin, keep records, and stock supplies for making war. Civilization in this sense is not possible for migrant populations, that is, populations whose staff of life is roots, berries and wild animal carcasses, the search for which keeps them eternally on the move. Civilization is the offspring of the inven-

tion of agriculture. But why did man take up agriculture? Not to allow himself to build, invent, coin, keep records, and stock rocks. That could not be foreseen. No, the invention of agriculture was to save men trouble in collecting the wherewithal for making beer. And when he drank beer, which he liked to do, Srb relished the thought that he was secretly preserving civilization without its knowledge, as was his duty.

Srb ate a kumquat and followed it with beer. "I noticed you talking to a gentleman this afternoon. Did he meet you?"

"Yes, is Mr. Anthony Villiers. He is copacetic fellow."

"He did seem of pleasant appearance."

"He is touring Empire, seeing everything. I travel with him sometimes."

"Hmm. Perhaps you might introduce me to him later."

"Is possible. Have another kumquat."

You may well wonder why Villiers should have been warned of the attentions being paid him. The waitress was neither sexually attractive nor notably intelligent, and she and Villiers were from completely different strata of society. Why should she warn him? It may be question-begging to say it, but Villiers *was* copacetic. In any case, accept that she did.

"What was that about?" Louisa asked.

"Nothing in particular," Villiers said, calmly serving them. "I'm being watched, and followed, and my baggage has been searched."

"Who's following you?"

"Don't be obvious about looking. At an angle to my left, not the table against the wall, but the next row, the gentleman in gray who looks out of place here in the Grand Hall."

"Oh, I see him. Alice would be thrilled to death. She loves things like this."

"Another of the flock?"

"Yes. She's the girl I share a room with. She's really very romantic. Why are they following you?"

"I'm not completely sure. There's some sort of illegal operation going on here, I think, and they're worried that I might have come to close to it." He closed the hood of the hot cart. "I had a notion as to what it might be, but then I wasn't able to check it out. But let's talk about more important things. How did your father prevail upon Miss McBurney to accept you?"

"Oh, you know Daddy. He bought one recommendation and encouraged several others. And he had Jack the Hand put together a proper set of papers."

"What are you supposed to be?"

"It's easy," she said. "I'm fifteen. My name is Louisa Parini. I have an older brother named Roger who is a senior lieutenant in the Navy, and I have a two year old sister named Anne. I have one mother. Daddy is a second son who had to go into trade. He imports rugs. Ornamental rugs for walls, not floors. His brother is old and has no children, and Daddy is his heir, and someday he'll be a margrave."

"Isn't that last gilding the lily just a bit?"

She set down her fork and looked at him. "What do you mean? Daddy proved every word."

"You do seem to know your lines."

"I've got a perfect memory," she said. "I can tell you anything you want to know down to the name of our gorf. I could bore you with stories."

That may seem unnecessarily boastful, but Louisa was not without her pride. She did know her story. It was her business to, and she did. The brother of her story was imaginary, but not the two year old sister, and even at two Anne knew what to say some of the time and what to do if she didn't know what to say: cry.

"Is your daddy still wearing his beard?" Villiers asked.

"Oh, sure."

"I always envied him that," Villiers said. "It wouldn't suit me, but he has the size to wear it. Why did he decide to send you to school?"

"Oh, that was terrible," she said. "He just got the idea from somewhere and he wouldn't let it go. You know

the way he gets when he makes his mind up. He wants me to learn to be a lady. But I can do it well enough already. I don't have to go to school. But he made me go and I couldn't change his mind."

"That's too bad," Villiers said. "I know your school. It's pretty strict."

"And four years," she said. She laid a hand on his sleeve. "Please, Tony, won't you help me? I don't want to go. I can already see what it's like. It's all rules. I don't want to live life by rules and schedules. I want to make it up as I go along the way you do, and Daddy, and everybody else."

"Maybe you ought to find out what living life by rules and schedules is like. Most people prefer it."

"I know I won't like it, Tony. And you never lived that way."

Villiers moved his chair back and relaxed. "You're wrong, Louisa. It's only in the last several years that I've made my life up as I went along. Since just before I met your father. Oh, I did break the rules, which you won't be able to do, but I lived under them."

Louisa said, "Why could you break the rules?"

"Well, because my background could stand investigation. If they threw me out of one place—which they did—there was always another. You're going to have to be more careful. But there are things they can teach you."

"I'm always careful. Sometimes I get sick of being careful. You're not going to help me, are you? You're just like Daddy." A sudden thought struck her. "Did Daddy hire you?"

"What?"

"Did Daddy hire you to see that I don't skip out here?"

Villiers laughed. "No, your father didn't hire me."

"Well, I wouldn't put it past him to have me watched."

"As a matter of fact," Villiers said, "I would appreciate your telling me where to contact your father. I have a job for Jack the Hand."

"You aren't going to help me, though."

"I need help rather worse than you do right now," Villiers said. "I'm not in a position to help anyone. I have no money at all. I have debts here that I can't pay. What I have to do now is discover some way to settle my bills and get passage to Yuten."

She brightened visibly. "Oh, *well*."

Villiers said, "No, my own way. I'm not on the con."

"I know," she said. "But I could teach you. We could be partners. I know everything Daddy knows."

"Everything?"

"Well, everything basic. You make most of it up to fit the circumstances."

"You'd better finish your dessert."

"Oh, please."

"I'm thinking about it. I am thinking about it."

Villiers stared off into the distance, and Louisa, cheered by this evidence of the consideration he was giving her proposition, pitched into her dessert. The idea of aiding Villiers in swindling their way from planet to planet tickled her fancy; it was a far more appealing picture than any that Alice Tutuila had ever painted in romantic transport, and it had the advantage of down-to-earth reality without being drab, dismal and dull. In short, it was as close to being the life she wished for as anybody could have designed, and not only was it *possible*, Villiers was actually *considering* it. The joys of fifteen year old girls in alt are notorious, and Louisa Parini was no ordinary fifteen year old girl. But she concealed her emotion behind her custard.

Villiers sat up abruptly. Louisa's eyes swiveled to him immediately, though she continued to eat.

"All right," he said.

"All right?" Her voice rose.

"No, all right, look at the far side of the room. Do you see the large young fellow in the brown coat? Sitting with him is an attractive girl in green with a black coronet braid."

"I do see them," Louisa said.

"If I'm not mistaken, within the next few minutes a man will come to their table and drag the girl away. Eat slowly and watch."

Louisa nodded and returned to her food, but kept an eye on the table. While they waited, Villiers told of his encounter with Maybelle Lafferty and Henry Maurice.

"And you got the note, but you didn't go?"

"No. Oh, here's Henry now. Watch."

They watched, and as they watched there was a surprise of the previous night's good work. Henry was rude. Maybelle fought tears. Adams (it was Adams, of course) rose and spoke. Henry seized Maybelle by the wrist and led her from the room to a privy conversation, she shooting a last glance of entreaty to Adams. Adams, after a long moment of contemplation, reseated himself. He, however, unlike Villiers, had sufficient sensibility not to return immediately to the conclusion of his meal, but sat silently in company with his thoughts.

"She has him," Louisa said. "But she's not very good. Even I could do better than that and I'm only fifteen. He must be very stupid."

"He is less than the brightest young man I ever met. Tell me, if you wanted to do some surreptitious looking around, would you wear tight black sweat clothes and tiptoe?"

Louisa giggled. "No. Did he?"

"Yes. What would you wear?"

"Ordinary clothes. And I'd be lost."

Villiers laughed. "That is better, I think. That's what I was, but I think it's also what earned the inspection of my baggage and the company of our friend in gray."

"He looks bored," Louisa said.

"I imagine he is bored. I tell you, let's invite him to share our company."

On the instant, Villiers rose and eased out into the aisle. He walked to the table of the man in gray and made his presentations.

"Sir," he said in his usual sober manner. "I could not

help noting that you dine alone. My lady and I are strangers here ourselves and know how unlively it is to be without company in the midst of a substantial journey. I trust I'm not presuming overly. My name is Villiers. We wondered if you would care to honor us by joining us for the evening."

To this well-turned invitation the man made no reply in kind. In fact, at Villiers' approach he had been obviously disconcerted. When Villiers spoke, the man blanched. When Villiers finished, the man rose and broke, unable to cope with the situation. It is a pity that the game of hare and hounds should suffer from savage rabbits and hen-hearted hounds, but if the world was as it ought to be we would all be playing wooden whistles and eating bananas in Eden, as my mother used to say.

When Villiers turned it was to see Louisa having the utmost difficulty in controlling herself, thereby betraying her lack of schooling in genteel conduct. If she had been at Miss McBurney's for even so long as a fortnight, most assuredly she would not have so much as quivered. He returned to the table and raised a mild eyebrow.

"What did you *say* to him?" Louisa demanded.

"I told you. I asked him to join us."

"Oh, Tony. You're funny."

Villiers offered his arm and Louisa rose to take it. "Would you prefer the casino or the theater?"

"The theater," she said, but not in tones that convinced him of her sincerity.

"There's no need to disney me. Do you really prefer the theater?"

"Oh, no! But you said that you haven't any money."

"I haven't. It's little matter, though. My bills are substantial enough to warrant my being extended credit, and we won't abuse it. We'll lose just enough that we can count ourselves entertained."

"Oh, that's wonderful. I've never been in a casino."

"In that case, we can count it part of your professional education. They cheat here."

Louisa laughed and stopped minding her careful steps.

As a girl unused to being escorted by gentlemen, she had been concentrating on holding tight to Villiers' arm and matching his pace. She looked up from their feet to Villiers' face.

"Did you see them do it?" she asked.

"Yes. I'll point out what to look for. I know gaming somewhat better than confidence swindles. Oh, by the way, I was about to ask you what game Henry and Maybelle are playing."

"You mean you didn't know? I thought you didn't go because you knew."

Villiers shook his head. "It's deficient of me, I admit, but I simply knew that they weren't genuine."

"Well, it's one of the very crude ones. I mean, Mommy and Daddy would never do it. Henry would have burst into the room and found you and Maybelle in bed. It would have turned out that she was fibbing and that she and Henry were married. Henry would have been very very mad, and you would have wound up paying them money. I mean, if you had any, that is."

"Would I, now?" Villiers smiled. "I'm almost sorry I didn't go, after all. It might have been very amusing."

7

MOST CUSTOMS are foolish in themselves, and equally so in the purposes to which they are applied.

Could anything be more arbitrary than the proper cut and hang of a drapeau? Present styles in drapeaus are shortly passé, and what once appeared nothing short of bizarre becomes commonplace. The article of clothing is as close to being totally without utility as any ever devised. And yet anyone who is anyone will wear a drapeau, comment at length on color, pattern and dash, and righteously reject the man who lacks one from all polite company.

Hold it no compliment to Villiers to say that he

dressed well. He did, but I should hope that you have better sense than to admire him for it. If you insist on admiration, at least let it be for his superb sense for the moderate and not for his conformation to the accepted.

Proper forks, orders of precedence, ceremonies of confirmation, all pageantry, any of the formal games we play are by any objective standard ludicrous. And since their normal application is to separate those who know and those who are from those who don't know and those who could never be, they are all the more foolish.

And yet there is point to custom, even given that any set of customs is as foolish as any other set. Custom frees us from having to turn every minuscule act into a matter for decision.

Villiers' mind was fixed on the problem of a successful rendezvous with his money. If all the routines of food, lodging, clothing, and relations with others were not routines but required consideration, decision and action, then Villiers would have been in the unhappy position of our pre-societal ancestors who spent twenty hours in a day curled in a foetal position under a tumble of rocks, paralyzed by fear, exhausted, aching in every bone, trying to summon enough nerve to venture forth into an altogether too real world. Custom freed him. It restricted the number of things that could possibly happen to him to a few that he was automatically able to deal with, and thereby allowed his mind to wander away on a pecuniary pilgrimage.

The point is this: shortly there will be a duel. Duels are silly, though, of course, no more silly than anything else. Simply remember that dueling is one of that peculiar set of customs to which Villiers subscribed, and with which he was prepared to deal. If you find it bothersome to see Villiers occupied so uselessly, bear in mind that throughout he was thinking of more important things.

The casino was a Mass for the faceless. There is an air to the gambling of most people that lends any casino

a brightness, a brittle edge, a tension missing elsewhere. The noise cuts, but these are the bloodless. The clink and rattle play counterpoint to a rising and falling hum of voices. Palms moisten. The controls shut down on certain motor nerves and jaws hang. Noise, money and emotion become a pinwheel and minds slip into self-hypnosis. If you are not a devotee of this sort of pleasure, there are only two ways to enter the casino, with innocence or as a wolf among sheep. Villiers entered the casino with his own particular innocent arrogance. Louisa entered as a wolf among sheep.

She looked over the room and then *sotto voce* said, "I see how they cheat people like these. It must be a dull way to earn money."

"It is a bit insensitive, isn't it?"

"We should be on our way in no time. Oh, that guidebook was wrong. It said that Star Well was a bore if you don't gamble. I think this is going to be fun."

"You read a guidebook entry on Star Well?"

"Yes, in the *Orion*."

Villiers nodded. "You said that your memory was good. What did the entry say? Not the commentary—the description of facilities."

"Oh, let me see," Louisa said, drawing in her breath and stopping to think. "Rooms were from nine thalers up to one royal, and there were over three hundred. Alice suggested that I hide in the closet of the royal-a-day room until the ship leaves, and then spring out and fell the gentleman with my beauty."

"I don't think you need to do that."

"She was very pleased to learn that you were living in the Palatine Suite."

"You may tell her that since I'm already thoroughly smitten, it won't be necessary for you to hide in my closet."

"That was the word she used!" Louisa said in delight.

"Closet? If I'm not mistaken it's the normal word for the facility."

"No. 'Smitten.' She said the gentleman would be smitten with my obvious charms."

"Well, I should hope so. Or should I? Listen—this Alice—do you tell her everything?"

"Tony! I don't tell her anything. Not anything real."

They had stopped by a dice table. They were not at the rail themselves, but stood behind the immediate players observing the course of the action.

Villiers said, "What else did the guidebook say? More specifically, how many landing ports is Star Well supposed to have?"

"Two. I do remember that."

"Hmm. That's what I thought I remembered. But I don't know how old the book is. Look, I want you to do something. I don't want to ask the question myself. Approach one of the employees and ask him how many landing ports there are. Innocently, casually."

"But I'm only fifteen," Louisa said. "If I'm alone, they'll put me out."

Villiers raised his eyebrows. "It's a shame to speak in terms of tests, but I do believe that you suggested a partnership. How good are you?"

Louisa was not the type to point out the implicit unfairness in the challenge. Villiers too easily assumed all rights including washroom privileges for himself, and applicant status for Louisa, while, in fact, it would be Louisa who would be leading Villiers into new byways, and Villiers the neophyte. But she didn't object. She didn't even actually feel grounds for objection.

"All right," she said. She turned away and fumbled in her privy kit. She made some adjustments to herself and then turned back again. The change was startling. This girl who hadn't been able to wear Alice's "stylish" clothes because they were too old for her now appeared slightly out of key in her own dress. She was trying too hard to hold on to a freshness of youth that was no longer hers.

"Better?"

"I'm extremely impressed."

Villiers wandered while Louisa went in search of a Star Well uniform. In a few minutes she was standing beside him again.

"Two," she said quietly.

"Well, that's it, then. They must be smuggling. And it's reasonable here. There are at least three ports in Star Well. I've seen a third."

Villiers sketched the previous morning's escapade in an undertone. "It seems that there must be an opportunity there for . . ." He paused.

"For us?"

"For something. I thought that Adams might be an investigator, but I'm not so sure now."

"Because he isn't bright?"

"At least because he isn't competent and experienced enough to handle a job like this by himself. If he's an investigator, then he must be assisting someone else. But I haven't seen anyone here I thought he could be working for. I'll have to think where the advantage lies, too."

Louisa asked, "Isn't this the same man you pointed out with Maybelle and Henry?"

"Yes."

"Well, I've seen him with somebody who could be his boss. Just before you came over and spoke this afternoon, he was talking to the Mithraist priest who was on our ship."

"Was he?" Villiers' eyes lit.

"Yes, and I never believed he was really a priest anyway. I thought he was just pretending to be one to get a reduction in fare."

"You're sure he isn't a priest?"

"No, but I don't *think* he is."

"I respect your judgment. I barely remember seeing the man, but I know who he's with tonight. I'll see what can be found out."

"I know who he's with, too," Louisa said positively.

"You do?"

"He just walked in with the alien he was always talking with on the *Orion*."

Villiers turned to see Torve the Trog in company with a short, fat priest in crimson. They were obviously wending their way between the tables toward Villiers and Louisa. A favorable line of occurrence, indeed, but that was Torve for you: a nexus.

"I believe they intend to join us," Villiers said quietly.

Torve stopped in front of them. "Is Villiers," he said.

Villiers gestured. "Your servant, sir. Anthony Villiers. This is Miss Louisa Parini. Louisa, my friend Torve." He looked inquiringly at Srb, who introduced himself.

"We traveled in the same ship," Louisa said as she allowed her hand to be taken.

"You did seem familiar," Srb said. "One of the young ladies on their way to school, I collect. You seem somewhat older tonight, however."

"It may be the hour," Villiers said. "Or the harshness of the light."

"Most probably. I saw so little of my fellow passengers, however, that I would be ill put to describe any of them. The passenger cabin was surprisingly empty. I was puzzled enough to ask the captain if there were sickness aboard, but he said the passengers simply seemed reclusive."

Torve had been growing increasingly restive through the polite round, in contrast to his patience in the waiting room.

"I think I go to read now," he said flatly. "Most interesting book you have, Tony, *Seven Sentient Races Biology*. I think I will read that."

Villiers said, "Have you finished *Rainbird*?"

"Oh, yes. Oh, yes. Most interesting, too, but unconvincing." He turned abruptly and walked away.

Srb cleared his throat. "I've enjoyed talking with him, and I think I like him, but I must say that I do not understand him. Does he often act in this manner?"

"Oh, yes," said Villiers. "In truth, he is very punctili-

ous, sir, but he is ruled by other conventions than ours and I don't understand them myself."

"Pardon me," said Srb, "but you did say that your name was Villiers, did you not? The name is familiar to me."

Villiers smiled. "It's a familiar name. We are a widespread family."

"No, sir, I have the acquaintance of Mr. Walter Villiers on Controlled Berkshire."

"In that case, I'm delighted to know you, Seigneur Srb. A great pleasure. I can own Mr. Walter Villiers no more than the most distant of cousins, but by reputation he is an undeserved credit to the rest of us. Will you do Miss Parini and me the signal honor of granting us your company for the evening?"

Louisa was following the conversation with great interest, at the same time remaining an inconspicuous presence. Until Alice had raised the point, she had not been aware of the contrast between Villiers in private and Villiers in public, and since she was rather more familiar with the private Villiers, she was finding his public person fascinating. She was interested, too, in Srb, who as she observed him more closely seemed less and less the priest he was supposed to be and more and more the gross master of a corps of secret investigators. Her imagination invested him with greater intelligence, cunning, energy and malevolence than strict evidence allowed, but then her natural sympathies were not inclined toward investigators, even Inspector Generals.

Srb made a courtly salaam and said, "My dear young sir, the pleasure is mine."

Villiers said, "We were engaged in looking over the various games. Miss Parini is a stranger to the casino and I had it in mind to explain some of the principles before she ventured to wager."

"Most delightful," said Srb. "I'm unfamiliar with gaming myself. Shall we say, then, that you have two students?"

"I would have thought you a gaming man."

Srb coughed. "An occasional game of raffles with my housekeeper. Five minims a game, a minim for odd points. It can run into several thalers in an evening."

"You're not unblooded then," Villiers said and ushered them forward.

Srb said, "A most interesting creature, Torve. On the journey from Morian we discussed theology at some length."

Villiers blinked. "Theology? I'm sure Torve knows nothing about theology."

"But they did," Louisa said. "I heard them."

"He explained to me several times a traditional myth of recreation. Bizarre, but most interesting."

"This is most interesting. Ah, could you summarize this myth?"

"Well, let me see." Srb did his best to reconstruct Torve's explanation of wholeness and nothingness and their interrelation. After a moment, Villiers stopped him.

"Excuse me, sir, but that's not theology."

"I beg your pardon."

"Do you recollect the book that I asked him if he had finished? That was a popular presentation of the cosmological theories of V. H. Rainbird—*The Seventeenth Universe*. What you have just described is Rainbird's account of the movement through the universal amnion of the metagalaxy."

"Good heavens. Are you serious?"

Villiers nodded.

"You mean to say that while I was talking theology, he was talking physics?"

"Yes. Apparently so."

"Hmmm. It seemed to make sense at the time. You've given me considerable food for thought, I'm afraid."

Louisa said, "Oh, these are pretty machines. What do they do?"

There were several high tables containing banks of the machines. A one, two, or five thaler token activated the machine, which then smiled invitingly. There were

twenty-five keys and twenty-five lights, and random connections between them. For your token, you were allowed to depress five keys. The machine paid off in varying amounts for color and pattern combinations. No intelligence was required to play; only the ability to put a coin in a slot and drop a hand blindly onto a key-board.

Villiers said, "In theory, these are gambling games. In practice, they're money-eating machines. Would you care to try one?"

"All right," said Louisa.

Villiers handed her a two thaler token and waved to a machine. She stepped forward and was about to insert the coin in the two thaler slot when a kindly-looking old lady elbowed her aside.

"My machine, if you please." She automatically inserted a coin, slammed the keyboard, and without waiting for the results moved back to the machine at her right. Three green lights showed, and two coins dropped into the cup. By that time, however, she was two machines away. When she worked her way back again, she mechanically scooped the coins from the cup without looking to see the number and dropped one back into the slot.

"It doesn't seem much like fun," Louisa said.

"Let's ask," Villiers said. "Excuse me, madam. Are you enjoying yourself?"

"Be quiet, boy," she said without turning her head. "I'm busy. Find your own machine."

Villiers waved Louisa to another machine. Her initial attraction to the machine had evaporated, but she went to it anyway.

While she deliberated over the keys, punching them one by one to get the maximum for her money, Srb said, "Do I take it that you are not particularly fond of gaming yourself?"

"Not of machine gambling, whatever the machine. These machines return thirty per cent of the money bet in them. I rather prefer games where my relative

ability to judge odds and make a proper play decides the issue."

Srb looked carefully at him. "It seems that you are an elitist, sir."

"An interesting observation. If I follow your meaning, an egalitarian might prefer to trust the even-handed justice of the machines?"

Srb brought out a pipe. "Do you have any objections if I smoke?"

"None," said Villiers. "Louisa?"

She looked up from the keyboard. Her last key yet remained to be punched. "Please go ahead. You know, I see why they punch it all at once. It's a terrible decision to make."

Srb tamped his pipe. "I think most pleasantly in metaphors," he said, "and smoking brings metaphors to mind."

Louisa punched the final key. The machine blinked and then made its own internal decision. Frozen randomly were two cold green lights, and one each of blue, red and amber. No money fell.

Louisa turned. "Is that all?"

"That's all," Villiers said.

The persistent strain of a simple melody that he could not identify ran over and over through Derek Godwin's mind.

He was floating slightly, knowing, numbering and naming all the mysteries of existence, feeling in control, feeling dangerous. It was time to move down to the floor, but he didn't go. He looked down through the one-way glass to the gambling tables below and savored the heightened feeling that comes before God-time. The power was within him.

He turned and inspected himself in his office mirror, the tune an obligato over his thoughts. He put a hand to his throat, played with the order of his cuffs, sniffed to clear his nasal passages, and turned to see that his drapeau (Farid Elegante) was exactly as it should be.

As he patted his curdler beneath his coat, he smiled at himself and turned his head to increase the resemblance he saw in his right profile to Ian Steele. He smoothed two errant hairs in his mustache. Yes, definitely Ian Steele.

Some people are compulsively late, some compulsively early. Godwin, by his toilet training, was compelled to be early, but he never let himself arrive until precisely the proper moment. The anxiety he felt as a result added to the electric power inside him waiting to be discharged. The feeling was good. The feeling was pure. He was a self-wielded instrument of destruction, holding his power back.

He turned to the door and as he went through he hummed the tune his mind had trapped. The name of it was still lost, so he put it back inside his head to play silently.

He came down the stairs from his office, the noise from the gambling floor swelling. He paused at the bottom of the stairs. His eye found Shirabi, found Levi Gonigle, found Anthony Villiers. And then Godwin stepped out onto the floor.

A formal excuse for the discharge of power was all that was lacking. Godwin saw it as no problem, however. The excuses were roadways and he knew every access route—he'd traveled them all. Given any A, Godwin knew the B that led inevitably where he wanted to go.

He worked his way around the floor. Eventually he was standing fifteen feet behind an unsuspecting Villiers, who stood speaking to a Mithraist priest and a non-descript girl. He almost felt sorry for Villiers.

Then Godwin stepped forward. Villiers was saying in a voice that was low, but scarcely inaudible: "No, the override controls aren't worked by the croupier. I think it's the man in buff at the end of the table."

Godwin was close enough to hear this. He smiled the briefest of smiles, and then he said loudly, "Is it your contention, sir, that the gambling here is less than honest?"

Villiers turned. He looked Godwin up and he looked Godwin down, as though somehow to fathom his intentions. Then, in even, calm tones, he said, "You know that it is, sir. You know that the gambling here is less than honest, and you know that it is my contention."

The duel took place in the Star Well dueling gallery, a long narrow room overlooked by comfortable seating on both sides. Louisa saw neither the room nor the duel, however.

News of the coming duel spread quickly. Some people left the casino immediately to get choice seats, and through them word passed out to a little world that Wu and Fabricant, good judges of these matters, had rightly found lacking in diversions. Godwin walked confidently through the hall in his patrician Sunday best. Villiers quietly asked Srb if he would act for him. Between and around were gamblers from the casino. Louisa recognized the old lady from the machines.

Louisa was quietly and genuinely frightened. She had no idea whether Villiers was. He was being quiet and formal, and certainly betrayed no fear of this large, gaudy and insistently murderous man. But she was frightened for him. The best thing she could think to do was not inflict her fear upon him. To be there but not obtrusively. If he were to look at her, she would smile as best she could.

As they passed from the casino, however, they were intercepted by Mrs. Bogue. She hurried up, and then used her elbows neatly and knowledgeably to clear her way.

"Mr. Villiers, I thought better of you. You let Louisa go into the gambling casino."

"Yes, I'm afraid I did."

"Do you care to try to justify yourself?"

"At this juncture, madam, I doubt my ability." Villiers spoke evenly, perhaps tautly. "I hope you will pardon me if I say my thoughts are not in order and my immediate presence is commanded elsewhere."

He turned away, and Louisa said, "Oh, Tony. Be careful!"

He swung around. "I'll try my best," he said, and smiled.

She smiled, too, a smile that broke when it was no longer seen.

"Come, Louisa," Mrs. Bogue said, seizing her firmly by the arm. "If Miss McBurney knew where you had been!"

"He may be killed."

"If Mr. Villiers is killed, so much the worse for him. I've no objections if these men want to duel, but if they die they shouldn't complain about it afterwards. They made the choice, after all. Now come along. This is no place for you. And what is that you have all over your face? Take it off this instant. Louisa Parini, I don't know you! I thought you were more sensible than the rest of the lot."

Louisa, reduced from being jaded to being a young girl again, let her face be scrubbed, but her head turned as soon as it was freed to look soberly at the people still trailing out of the casino.

When they reached Louisa's room, Mrs. Bogue opened the door. At the sound, Alice popped out of the dressing room. She was ready for bed and had been busy cleaning her teeth.

"Oh, hey . . ." she began, and then stopped as she saw Mrs. Bogue with Louisa.

Mrs. Bogue pointed back at the dressing room. "Finish, Alice, and then straight to bed."

Alice disappeared.

Mrs. Bogue looked at Louisa. "I'll thank you to return my sister's pin, which I made the mistake of lending you."

She turned while Louisa was reaching up to unpin the silver brooch. She crossed to the service and rang.

A freckled young man in uniform appeared.

"Do you know who I am?" Mrs. Bogue asked.

"No, ma'am."

"My name is Selma Bogue and I am in charge of the girls in this room and the rooms adjoining. You may check this in your records of accommodations. I want no calls going either in or out of this room."

Alice reentered the room and crossed to her bed, studiously minding her own business all the while. Only when she was safely covered could you see her ears prick.

"Yes, ma'am," said the Accommodations Clerk.

"Please note that this is to continue in effect until I notify you."

"Yes, ma'am. Would you like to have some leather sent up?"

"I beg your pardon, young man?"

"It's just one of the services of Star Well, ma'am. We have a wide variety of instruments available for the use of people of discrimination such as yourself."

"No, thank you," she said. "I don't need them. And no calls in or out."

She rang off and turned. She took the brooch from Louisa and said, "This is not the end of the matter, Miss Parini. I'll think of appropriate action." She crossed to the door. "I'll be in to check on you in ten minutes. Be in bed."

She left and locked the door behind her. There was a moment of silence, Alice lying as before, back to the door, Louisa standing exactly where she had been since she entered.

Then Alice turned over, put her chin on her hands and rested on her elbows.

"Tell," she said.

8

IMAGINE yourself in a duel:

You are going about your business—eating with friends, shall we say—talking, drinking, joking, a bit loud, perhaps, but doing no more than enjoying familiar pleas-

ures in a familiar manner. The only thing that modifies your enjoyment is that you have to join another party at ten—your presence is expected, and this means a certain amount of travel, an interruption in the continuity of the evening. But it's a minor point.

But then matters start to go awry. Henderson arrives with his boorish companion, Wold. Wold is red-faced, a bully, a man who enjoys picking at weakness, and he perceives weakness in you. Is it there? You are not sure yourself, but you resent his automatic assumption that it is, his joy in using you as a ball to be kicked and bounced as he pleases. You resist. He drinks heavily. You counterattack as best you can, worrying all the time that you are making a fool of yourself. Then he takes exception and will not be mollified. He wants satisfaction.

Caught up in events you want no part of, you find yourself clearing an area. You cannot beg off. That would reveal you not as a man of senses, of mild temper, and of friendly mien; it would reveal you as a man of small sensibility, a coward, a man by self-admission no man. You appoint Kahane to act for you. You do your best to seem in control of the situation. Through it all, however, your most urgent feeling is one of being in the wrong place. You look at the clock and see that if the world were working as it ought now you would be leaving, should be leaving, for your other party. Could you say so? No.

You look at Wold. His face is glistening and he is smiling. He has killed before. You know he is enjoying himself as he drinks. Squat, hard-muscled, a man who affords the time and money to keep himself adept in his weapons.

The weapons are matched and found to be comparable enough to suit Kahane and Henderson. All must be fair, you know. Fair?

It all seems so slow. People swim incomprehensibly through the edges of your vision, bound on errands that make no sense. Do you see money change hands? You

are not sure. You are offered a drink, and because your throat is dry, and because it is something to do, you take a glass of water.

But then, though time passes slowly, all is ready far too soon. Weapon in your hand—which of the many possible you are hardly certain—you face Wold across the room. The curdler—it is a curdler—is desperately heavy and solid in your hand. This isn't where you ought to be. This isn't what you ought to be doing. You want to tell somebody so, but you tighten your lips instead and concentrate.

When the words are spoken, you lift the curdler, seeing Wold doing the same, but faster, more surely. You point and pull. There is a damp, black explosion in your chest and your mind wobbles. You try to concentrate, try to concentrate, try to concentrate. Even on one thing: standing. But you find that you cannot. As the blackness becomes an expanding cloud and your knees give way, you wonder if your party will miss you. Will anybody care at all?

Duels fair? They're a *carte blanche* for a man with a talent who enjoys indulging it.

Or are they? Is there not even a possibility that sweat would blind Wold, that your hastily aimed shot would throw Wold's curdler aside, that you might be the instrument of a higher justice than you know? A possibility? Grant it.

"No lights," said Louisa. She slipped out of bed and went across the warm fuzz of the floor on hands and knees.

"But what are you going to *do*?" Alice whispered.

It had been a slow half-hour since Mrs. Bogue had checked the girls. The time had been passed in a darkness punctuated by exchanged whispers.

"I've got to know what happened," Louisa said. "And we left things *unsettled* between us." She was sitting tailor-fashion in the closet opening off the left in the

dressing room, and she leaned back to speak. She was fumbling in her bags.

"Oh," said Alice, "you mean he was interested."

"I guess you could say that."

"Well!" Then she said, "What do I tell Mrs. Bogue if she comes to check?"

"You don't know anything. You were asleep."

Alice leaned back and looked up at the ceiling. Nobody said anything for a moment and there were only a variety of rustlings and the sound of a bag being closed.

"How are you going to open the door?" she asked at last.

"Oh, don't worry about that," Louisa said, her voice submerged in the dress she was climbing into. "My brother, the one in the Navy, showed me how to open doors."

This was less than total candidness. The door, in fact, was a complicated one to breach, but Louisa was able to open it quickly enough that the ordinary observer would not have thought it locked at all. If you are able to pass that sort of thing off as a common skill learned on a rainy afternoon from an older brother, you are either very good or have considerable acting talent. Louisa was good.

"She wouldn't believe me, anyway," Alice said.

"Who?"

Alice bounced out of bed and crossed to the dressing room. "Mrs. Bogue. She wouldn't believe me, anyway. I might as well have the fun, too. I'm coming with you."

"Oh, that's nice," Louisa said. "Please do come."

They cracked the door on an open hall, were through it and had it locked again behind them in an instant and were around the corner. As soon as they found the time and the place to do it, they looked to their appearances, and soon were two young ladies enjoying a stroll of an evening, nicely-behaved, well-appointed, and all they ought to be.

Louisa led as best she could. Keeping a sharp eye out,

she got them as far as the casino, but after that she hardly knew the way. She hadn't gotten that far before and she had to make a blind stab.

It was odd. Perhaps because things had been out of her hands, she had felt only moderately anxious while in the company of Mrs. Bogue and in her room. Now, however, she felt a cold apprehension.

She had lost Villiers somehow. Her fear was peculiar. It was not so much that he was dead as it was that she would never find him again.

The halls began to take on a nightmarish quality. They led nowhere final, but simply led on. She and Alice were playing hide-and-go-seek in a labyrinth. Somewhere were warmth and color and people, but not here. She was cold—there were goosepimples on her arm. Everything seemed faded around her. The few people she saw were distant and their voices muted.

"Where are we going?" Alice asked.

"I'm going to ask this man," Louisa said.

She stopped the old gentleman. "Excuse me, sir. We're looking for the dueling gallery. Could you direct us?"

He stood only feet away, but he was distant and his voice was muted in her ears by more than his Imperial moustache.

"Certainly," he said. "It's not far. But aren't you girls a little young for dueling galleries?"

"Please, sir. There was a duel tonight. A friend was challenged and I have to know if he is all right."

"Well, I wouldn't go in if I were you. I'd wait outside. Too rough. Walk back with me and I'll direct you."

They followed his directions and shortly arrived at the dueling gallery. To no real surprise of Louisa's, there was no one outside and no noise within.

"Is this the right place?" Alice asked, looking about. "Where is everybody?"

"I don't know," Louisa said. "It's probably all over."

She was certain that it was, that it was beyond her power to hurt or help. There were stairs at either hand

that led up to the galleries, and directly in front of them the brown doors to the main floor half rolled back. It was dark within. Louisa stepped forward between the doors and raised her hand to bring on the lights. They came up slowly. The narrow floor was bare and gleaming marble. There were more stairs from the floor to the galleries.

Louisa didn't know what she expected to see. There was no public announcement posted. There was no tell-tale pool of blood. There was only a long, bare cold room.

"We could go back to the casino," Alice said. "People there ought to know."

"No," Louisa said.

"Why not? It's reasonable."

"I don't want to find out that way. Let's go to his rooms."

"Oh, great!" Alice said.

Louisa's feeling of strange anxiety continued as they made their way through the halls again. As though to accentuate it, they encountered no one. She almost wanted to call to everyone to come out of hiding, but then she was afraid of what would happen if she did. She wanted to run, or cry, or claw at the wall. Above all, she wished desperately she knew that key word that spoken would make the world run right again. And in the meantime, she continued to walk as steadily as she could.

To Alice, this excursion was so far no more than an excuse for vicarious pleasure. She was stepping along happily beside Louisa, her mind filled with romantic thoughts.

If Villiers was alive, it was up to them to find him. If he were in public, public reunions are dramatic. If he were in private, private reunions are poignant. The idea of a sexual liaison between Villiers and Louisa still held her, uncertain though she was in her heart of hearts that Louisa was made of the stuff of successful mistresses. And reunions, either poignant or dramatic,

along with self-concealment in appropriate closets, are the stuff on which successful fantastic passions are founded.

On the other hand, if Villiers were not alive, it was still in order to find him as efficiently as possible. Once found, his dead (or even better, dying) body was the perfect platform from which any young lady of proper sensibility could express her grief in terms and tones to inform the most unfeeling and insensate listener with an appreciation of her emotion. And once dead, well, beautiful things could be done in a school like Miss McBurney's with an aptly handled unhappy past. She was realist enough to know that.

Alice only hoped that Louisa would make the most of her absolutely terrific chances. If she failed now, in this hour of perfect possibility, a strain would be put on the friendship for Alice, and she wouldn't like that.

The results of what we do are hidden to us. We act as best we can and hope that what will happen is for the better rather than the worse. But we can never know beforehand.

The apparently simple—say, the ingestion of acetylsalicylic acid ($C_9H_8O_4$) that was common between the vogues for phrenology and manarveling—may have unforeseen consequences: several centuries of cumulated genetic damage that requires several further centuries to repair.

The apparently complex series of interconnections when flipped and viewed from a new angle may in fact have a single key linkage. Touch it and the Chinese puzzle falls apart.

The apparently frightening and hopeless situation may turn out to have a candy-cream interior. That has been the main premise of the happy ending since the return of Ulysses.

But all you do see in fact is the simple end of a headache, the myriad interlocked pieces of a puzzle whose key cannot be found, or the frightening and hopeless.

Perhaps, if our minds were trained to accept the idea and our language permitted, it would be altogether better not to believe in causality. Perhaps lines of occurrence in which events are not caused but occur of their own volition would be more satisfactory. This might salve the hurt presently resulting either from failure or success in perceiving the results of our actions.

If Louisa had not believed in causality, she would not have been blaming herself. First, was there anything to be blamed for? Louisa couldn't know, but nonetheless, such was her feeling of anxiety, it seemed to her that there ought to be. Otherwise, why should she feel blameworthy? Second, where was her fault? Dig deep enough and you'll find one. Villiers wouldn't have been in the casino if not to please her, and he would not have been saying things that could be taken so personally by Godwin. Both of these, of course, were untrue, but both were good enough for Louisa. She blamed herself.

She stood in front of the entryway to the Palatine Suite, Alice hanging a little behind her. Then she stepped forward and sounded the door, taking a pace back when she heard the ring inside.

After a moment there was a heavy trudge toward the door, there was a click while she was surveyed, and then the door slid open. Torve the Trog stood there, fur brushed and looking ruggish, eyes a luminous blue in the light, holding a book in his splayed fingers. If you had asked him and he could have put it neatly and intelligibly, Torve's view of what had transpired was this: the bell had a life-line stretching from coincidental creation to the moment its component atoms separated themselves at the name of an anonymous urge, and stretched along this line were a number of random rings. One of these had existed at a point slightly prior to one of a number of occasions that his life-line had taken him over to open the door. No involvement at all—merely the close approach of two lines of occurrence.

"Hello. Is girl from casino, Miss Parini, and female friend from the ship *Orion*."

"Yes, sir, Mr. Torve." Now that she was here, Louisa didn't feel able to rip away into the subject. Tentatively, she asked, "Um, is Mr. Villiers here?"

Behind her, Alice felt ashamed. Not half what it ought to be. Louisa was just too young, she supposed.

"I have not seen him since we were together in casino."

"But he was in a duel. He was in a duel and I wasn't there. He may be dead." Abruptly, Louisa burst into shocked tears.

Alice thought more highly of her then, though a faint would have been better.

Torve folded her against his fur. "He is not dead. I am sure of that. I would know instantly."

Louisa was soothed by his warmth of manner and warmth of fur. Imagine yourself being cuddled by a giant softly furry brown toad—appealing, isn't it? It turned her tears into occasional racking sobs, and the sobs into a quiet sniff.

"We must act," Torve said. "We are to go separate ways in determination. They may have taken him to cellars. Secret places."

"Oh, I know about that," she said. "He told me."

"Is good. You go there. Look for him as best you can. In mediantime, I will rouse help and search in higher places."

Silently, Louisa nodded.

"Go," said Torve. "Go well."

Louisa took Alice by the arm and turned. The door slid shut behind them. Torve opened his book, fingered through the pages, and then stopped when he had found his place. Reading, he crossed the room, found a warm spot on the floor that he particularly favored, and lowered himself in stages into his folded sitting position. He established himself comfortably inside his book.

"*Thurb*," he went. "*Thurb, thurb*."

Some distance away, on their course to the basements, the girls remained in an uncertain world in which Villiers might be either alive or dead. Their lines of occurrence and his had momentarily neared and then separated again, but never touched.

Soberly, Alice said, "I thought he was ugly. I mean I thought that when we were on the ship. But he's not."

"Oh, no," said Louisa. "He's understanding. He made me feel comfortable."

In fact, the edge of her anxiety was gone, and she no longer felt either blamed or blamable. She was still worried, but she also had the feeling that abler hands than hers had things in charge.

After a few minutes of walking, Alice said, "What are we looking for?"

"I'm not certain exactly," Louisa said.

She began to tell Alice a suitably edited version of the thriller that Villiers had told her. Alice was caught by every word. This was so much better than the little romance and duel that had previously occupied the stage. But she was also frightened for the first time.

"It should be somewhere below us. Mr. Villiers was going to his rooms when he became lost."

They were in a stairwell, proceeding downward.

"How are you going to tell when you reach the right floor?" Alice asked.

Louisa was opening the door on each floor as she reached it.

"I don't know. When it feels right," she said. "Then if I'm wrong, we'll try again."

"Maybe you should have let the creature explore down here while *we* went for help," Alice said slowly.

Louisa let the door close and went down the next flight. She tried the door.

"This is promising," she said.

"What?"

"Well, it's locked."

Louisa set to work on the door. In a moment she had it open.

"You said your brother is in the Navy?" Alice asked. "He must be all right. I've always liked uniforms."

"Come on," Louisa said.

They were in a corridor like other corridors. Its color was a functional light blue. The lights that came up in recognition of their presence were dim, and revealed the blue only as gray. They walked tentatively, the lights behind fading as they passed, the lights ahead springing to pale life like well-trained clusters of fireflies painstakingly taught the pleasures of unity.

"I don't think there's anything down here," Alice said. "I don't see anything."

"Hush a moment."

"I don't hear anything, either."

"Hush."

They made themselves soft and absorbent and lurked to catch any sound unwary enough to present itself.

"Nothing," reported Alice at last, not sure whether it was preferable that there be something or that there be nothing. Nothing, she decided firmly and finally.

"Well, I thought I did hear something," Louisa said. "It was just for a moment there at the beginning."

"Well, what sort of noise was it?"

Louisa looked at the larger girl and tried to decide. "Maybe footfalls," she said, at last.

"Well, that might have been . . ."

Alice stopped, trying to think what it could have been or what it could have been instead of that, and couldn't think of anything better or anything worse. Louisa looked at her, waiting, and then shook her head slightly and set out again. Alice followed after.

WHEN MANAGERS of illicit traffic meet, their biggest complaint is the employment problem. In a word, henchmen. There are all too few young crooks willing to take

training service under older and more accomplished men.

Shirabi was well aware of this. He did not own Star Well. He managed it for other men, who were themselves rather large managers of illicit traffic.

But did he have proper help? No.

He had employees enough. Two hundred and thirty-six of them. But first, over two hundred of those were contract labor and contract labor cannot be trusted. It either isn't bright enough or it isn't stupid enough. If it is stupid enough, it can't be used for very much—and crime can be demanding. If it is bright enough, it knows Rule J, that contract labor is legally responsible for the effect of the orders it obeys.

Part of the trouble was that the wages of sin are poor. The big men, the Zvegintsovs, quite rightly want to keep as much of what they make as they can. They don't share it readily.

Then, too, many young men are personally ambitious. The long, slow road uphill has no attraction. They go into small business for themselves.

Finally, Star Well was simply not an attractive duty station unless you were at least a submanager. People were bored here. Shirabi had, in fact, been assigned four extra hands, but they somehow hadn't gotten around to turning up. Deliberately ducking, he was sure.

So that left him how many active henchmen? Fourteen. That's all. Twelve of them were scheduled in the casino in three shifts. If there was anything else, a ship to load with thumbs, for instance, help at extra pay had to come from the off-duty shifts. He hated to think of how much sleep he'd lost, how many evenings he'd had to postpone pruning, how much of the actual *work* he'd done.

This point is included for clarity. It wouldn't be fair to have you imagine a band surrounding Louisa and Alice, a horde to be met by the sturdy minions of the Empire, an army ranked behind Hisan Bashir Shirabi. This is a small story. Outside is a vast Empire set in

a vaster universe. Billions delve and spin, fight and love. Storms and wars shake whole planets and are never noticed. Nonetheless, here money, love and life hang in the balance; important enough things, I think you will agree, without the necessity for overstatement.

Derek Godwin looked at the filled seats on either side of the marble dueling floor. The number of witnesses pleased him. They would see him doing what he did best. The tune was still running through his mind and he concentrated on that while he waited. He was ready. Only the weapons and Villiers were not.

The choice of weapons had been up to Villiers, and he had made an infelicitous choice for himself—tinglers and knives.

Of all his weapons, Godwin loved his tingler best. If he resembled Ian Steele at all, it was when he held a tingler.

Tinglers are tapering wands, brown or black. A brown practice tingler delivers a flowering shock. A good stroke leaves a welt that persists for a week. Well-used, a practice tingler can knock an opponent unconscious. A black dueling tingler destroys nerves with its touch. A shrewd stroke demands surgical repair. A dueling tingler, well-used, can kill.

And Godwin had no objections to using a knife. He was a left-handed man at heart, and knives are left-handed weapons. They distract, if distractions are needed. They parry, if parries are called for. And they cut, if a throat should be misguided enough to present itself.

Godwin's second, a fat young man named Harvey Chapeldaine, had helped him out of his coat and drapeau. These had been laid aside along with Godwin's curdler.

Villiers had also taken his coat off, but he was not ready. He was asking for a ribbon to tie his hair back out of his eyes. Godwin sniffed. His hair was held back at all times by ornamental pins.

No one presented a ribbon immediately. Then a lady in the gallery bent, tore a strip of blue cloth free and threw it down. There was applause and Villiers bowed before tying his hair.

Chapeldaine and Srb met with Shirabi. Shirabi offered a box of knives. These were matched, tested for balance, tested for edge, and two were chosen. Then Shirabi held out two black tinglers. They were a fair match. He switched them both on to show they operated satisfactorily and then switched them off and handed them to the seconds. They returned with them to the principals.

"Here, Mr. Godwin," Chapeldaine said.

Godwin took the knife first. He tested it in his left hand, feeling the heft, and then with Villiers at the end of his eye, he made a slice through the air.

Then he accepted the tingler, did an arm exercise with it and found it satisfactory. He turned it on, brought it a millimeter too close to Chapeldaine and then turned it off.

The dueling master was not Shirabi. He would have doubted his ability to bring it off, and in his doubting insured his own failure. Perhaps in a leafy glade, but not here. The master was named Bledsoe. He had been the first to present credentials. Shirabi liked the air of the professional, and took him on. Godwin, too, liked having a professional dueling master overseeing things. It improved the occasion.

Bledsoe stepped forward. He was middle-aged, grave, sure, a trace too thin-lipped to be likable. He waved for the principals. He had no flash, but rather the air of a Talmudic scholar.

Chapeldaine said, "Good luck, Mr. Godwin."

Godwin didn't answer, but stepped forward feeling the bounce in his stride and appreciating the electric thrill of anticipation. The weight of his weapons was good. The footing was good. The crowd was good. The dueling master was good. And the opponent was just fine. Villiers didn't look altogether inept: he showed

no nervousness, he didn't drop his weapons, and he was fit. But he was small and his reach was short. He could be held at arm's length and picked to pieces. Best was that he was due to have his balloon pricked and Godwin relished the idea of doing the pricking.

Bledsoe said, "Is there any possibility of resolving your differences amicably?"

Villiers raised his eyebrows but said nothing. Godwin said, "Let's get on."

"All right, gentlemen." Was there a faint ironic tinge? "The field is yours."

In this contest there was no canvas border, no stopping for a step out of bounds, no prettiness. In effect, after a fair beginning, nothing would interfere with the satisfaction of the quarrel.

Villiers stepped forward lightly and cautiously and their wands rapped. Godwin had thought to overbear him at the beginning but on impulse decided to be more cautious. There was no cost to himself. His mind hummed his tune as he and Villiers felt each other out.

There was a brief tentative passage, a minor challenge, the beginning of a well-trained response, a block, and disengagement. To the observers it was a disappointing tap, tap, tap. To Godwin and Villiers it was important and revealing.

Godwin checked with another obscure opening statement. Villiers replied promptly and properly. Godwin knew then. Villiers was sound. Caution had properly been in order, damn it.

Godwin used his weight and reach to back Villiers down the length of the floor. Step by step they moved. Toy mechanicals, they rapped and clashed their way along the room under the eyes of the hungry spectators.

Then, with a suddenness that astonished Godwin, Villiers counterattacked. He had more strength than one would have guessed, and first by means of fury of attack and then by momentum he forced Godwin to retreat all the way back to the center of the room. It was nice work, but Godwin had himself well-covered, and

at the center of the room they broke off and stepped back to consider each other.

"Very nice, Mr. Villiers," Godwin said, and brought his tingler up again.

Villiers merely nodded.

Godwin was certain of himself, however. In work at close range, Villiers was good enough that Godwin might be hurt, but as long as Villiers was held away he could be played with, picked at, and disposed of.

The spectators were caught by the duel. It was turning out to be no simple slaughter, no easily decided victory. Where Godwin had had their immediate backing, if not their sympathy, now many were starting to change their allegiance to Villiers. Godwin heard some calls of support and hated those who called for their fickleness, their lack of confidence in him.

Godwin moved again to the attack. He feinted with the knife, little used to this point, brought his wand into play and then tried a serious slash with his knife that missed. The miss was only by an inch and Villiers showed greater respect for the knife thereafter.

Then came the turning point. Passages are composed of questions asked and answered, improvisations on themes, the matching of common knowledge to build a bizarre duet. In the pure world of art, accidents, miscalculations and desperate wildness are mars. In the painful world of reality, they may decide clearly what art cannot.

Godwin went in too low, came up a hair too fast, and was parried. But Villiers did not parry as sharply as he might have. He was the merest bit off-balance. Godwin turned his disengagement into a sideswipe at a hand out of place. It was nothing that could have been counted upon. The opening was an accident. The ploy was a harmless essay: nothing lost, the slightest of chances for gain.

But his wand tipped Villiers' left hand. Villiers' hand opened and he dropped the knife. The knife bounced

on the floor and struck Villiers on the boot. Without looking he kicked it aside.

But his hand had been touched and he was missing an important weapon. His defense was that much less complete, and his offense was like a flying squirrel in stunt flying competition with a bird, good as far as it went, but lacking versatility. Godwin knew then that Villiers' life was his—the only question was when he was to touch the balloon. He made no decision. Enjoying himself was the paramount requirement.

The crowd, too, knew that Villiers was in trouble. As the knife fell, they sat the straighter and breathed the harder.

Godwin took Villiers step by step back down the hall again. All the way this time. All the way to the end. Threat, threat answered. Threat, threat answered. Threat, threat answered. But every time Villiers responded, he was forced to give ground. His hand was apparently giving him trouble, too. He was shaking it.

The end of the hall marked the end of the possible. Godwin would not be forced back from it again. Villiers would stay here until he failed to answer a threat or left an opening, and that would be it. Between here and the end of the hall.

The fight, except for Godwin's single comment, had been empty of conversation. Only a Cyrano fights and talks at the same time; most men lack both the lungs and the wit to compose as they fight, and as they conclude, thrust home.

Constant background rising and falling in volume. Slap and squeak of feet on floor. Clack and ring of weapons. Breaths, light and heavy. Above all, the one smell that Godwin loved and hated most, the smell of sweat.

He held Villiers at the end of his tingler, used his knife discretely, and then there was that final opening. Villiers was moving in with an attack, an act of desperation, and it was caught, of course. And there he was, open for the *mot juste* as he stepped back. Godwin

delivered the perfect wand stroke, the ultimate criticism of Villiers. And in that instant he knew the title of the song in his mind.

The stroke did not connect. In a frisson-filled flash Godwin saw that he had made a mistake. Villiers was not moving back. He was moving forward, inside the stroke and past Godwin, and as he passed, with supreme delicacy he brought his tingler down across Godwin's chest. Duels aren't fair if the wrong people win them!

It was as though his chest were no longer part of him. It was a wooden block being chopped by an axman. Chips and splinters. And pain, too, but detached. He knew there was pain, but he didn't feel it. He couldn't think clearly. He thought about thinking, and felt afraid.

He wasn't sure where he was. He *was*, and he was somewhere, but he couldn't have said whether he was standing, sitting or lying. He existed in a limbo where voices were, but where there was no sense in sound. There were colors moving in random kaleidoscopic patterns, but there was no coherence to them. Light hurt his eyes, and he wanted to ask for it to be turned down, but he couldn't manage that.

Then there was a face in front of him, so close that against his will he had to recognize it. It was Shirabi.

He summoned himself and managed to say, "Wrong man."

Shirabi said something in return, but the sound was fuzzy in his ears and he could make no sense of it. It seemed too much effort to try. But in that last moment of clear thought, he had known something he could no longer quite grasp. It seemed important that he should recapture it, however. Desperately, he tried. Words formed themselves in his mind and he struggled to articulate them.

"I'm a little teapot," he said at last, smiled, filled his pants, and died.

Flights of white-winged angels, their faces radiant, settled down about him and gently lifted him. He was

not at all the least of God's creatures, and they loved and respected him. They accepted him. And they carried him away in company to an altogether better world than any he had ever known. This last, of course, was unwitnessed by those others in the dueling hall, who had the misfortune to still exist on a less exalted plane.

Murder. It was murder of the foulest sort. That Shirabi got away with it was extreme luck.

He opened the box of knives for the inspection of Srb and Chapeldaine. There was no danger in the knives. They were their own sharply discreet selves. However, for practice, just to see if he could do it, he forced single knives from an entire rack on the seconds.

Any practitioner of card tricks knows how to make someone take a particular card from the whole of fifty-two. It is nothing so crude as sticking one card a half-inch out from the others in a fan. In effect, forcing means that you hand over a card and convince the subject that he has made a choice, much like a one-party election. The trick, actually, is not so much to hand the card over as it is to keep the person from wondering about it afterwards.

They both reached into the box at the same time and their hands brushed. They immediately withdrew their hands. There was the briefest of pauses, what might be called a questioning silence.

Then Chapeldaine said, "After you, Padre."

Srb dipped into the box and took knife the first. He stepped back and Chapeldaine took Shirabi's second choice. It was done that neatly, and all that you saw was two men selecting knives. That was all they themselves saw. But they were explicitly given the knives they took. When and how did it happen? It can't be explained; that would spoil one of the last bits of magic in the world. It happened, and it is very simple if you know what to do.

Shirabi turned then, closing the box, and set it in its

place in the bottom of the weapons rack. With his back to the seconds, he looked over the racks of weapons.

"Tinglers were the other weapon?" he asked. He knew quite well that they were, of course.

"Yes," Chapeldaine said.

Shirabi turned with tinglers in his hand. This was the important moment, the important test of his skill. One of the tinglers he held was a genuine weapon. The other, just as black, just as deadly looking, was only a practice wand. The worst it could deliver was an electrifying jolt. He had to put the first of these in the hands of Srb and the second in the hands of Chapeldaine at that moment in the proceedings when they both decided that the weapons they were holding were those they wished to keep.

He did it. He put them in their hands and took them away again. This demonstrated his impartial right to do such things. He switched them on and off. He moved them around. Each man got a touch apiece at both weapons, and then the tinglers were in their hands and they were on their way back to their principals.

Ask either Srb or Chapeldaine. Both would have declared themselves satisfied that they had examined both weapons in detail and made perfect free choice of the tinglers they held. Now Srb was whatever Srb was, and Chapeldaine was no fool. It is indeed unhappy that someone as able as Shirabi could be was also so limited in his ability to meet people. He was *good*.

Shirabi moved back and seated himself on the bench edge of the weapons rack. Bledsoe, the sober, saturnine man he had agreed to let run things, stepped forward and called for Godwin and Villiers.

Shirabi followed the course of the duel with heartfelt interest. The movement down the length of the hall found him wondering if he had made a mistake in what he had done. If Godwin was so good that Villiers was immediately overwhelmed, and Godwin attempted a finishing stroke and found he had none, then matters would become embarrassing.

But there had been the entry for Anthony Villiers deep in the volume of Martin and Morrison that he had taken from Godwin's quarters, so deeply buried that it could have been easily overlooked. The description, as much as there was, could be this Anthony Villiers. But was it the same at this distance? And if it was, all it proved was that the man *might* have the training to deal with Godwin. And on that slim a chance, he had acted.

He didn't want Godwin to live. He couldn't work with him, he couldn't work over him. Godwin was an offense in his eye. Godwin had ruined what he loved most and then acted as though nothing had happened. He wanted Godwin dead.

Shirabi smiled when the fight returned from the end of the hall. Hal

He gasped and feared when Villiers' hand was nicked. The knife dropped and that was as should be, but would anyone notice the difference? Could Godwin win? He did have a knife to kill with.

Back Villiers went toward the end of the hall. It seemed that he would be trapped there, and unable to retreat, would be systematically striped to pieces. The crowd hushed, watching, waiting for the right moment to fill the hall with a roar of heat. If only Villiers knew that he had nothing to fear from Godwin's tingler, could allow himself to receive a blow for the chance to deal one!

And then the crowd did roar. Villiers came in and past Godwin and Godwin was dropping both tingler and knife, was going to his knees. The stroke itself was hidden from Shirabi and most of the onlookers, but there was no doubt. Godwin was finished. The duel was ended.

But then suddenly Levi Gonigle charged over the rail and down on the floor. He gave an inarticulate, bull-throated call. He seized Villiers from behind and crudely tried to break his neck. Villiers desperately tried to switch his tingler back on so he could remove the

horrifying black presence that was bending and breaking him.

Shirabi had been moving toward the duelists. With Levi's arrival, he broke into a run. He couldn't allow Villiers to be killed here. If he was the entry in Martin and Morrison, he wasn't an investigator and Star Well was in excellent shape. If Levi killed him, all that would be ruined.

He swept the tingler from the hands that were still struggling to turn it on. He put his hands on Levi's shoulder and pulled with all his weight. It was not an attempt to dissuade Levi. He was not that strong. It was a bid for attention.

He yelled to Levi as he was shaken loose and fell in a purple heap. He rose from the floor and pounded Levi in the ribs, yelling all the while.

"Let him go! This is Shirabi. Let him go, Levi!"

Eventually the noise and swatting penetrated Levi's consciousness. He let Villiers fall to the floor. Villiers crawled away, gasping for breath, and was helped to his feet by Srb.

Levi said, "But he hurt Mr. Godwin."

"I know," said Shirabi. "But it was a fair fight."

Levi slowly shook his head, his eyes filling with tears. "Mr. Shirabi, don't you *care*?"

"Of course, I care," Shirabi said. "I'll find a way to settle things. Now, Levi, this isn't good for you to see. Go along you know where and I'll have something important for you to do later."

Reluctantly, Levi departed. A few in the crowd had spoken, but most were uninvolved with the remnants of their entertainment now that it was over, and the galleries were being emptied. Villiers was coughing, sitting by the wall, but seemed to be recovering himself. Now what was it that Shirabi had to do? Oh, yes, the weapons.

Bledsoe had Villiers' tingler in his hand and was idly looking at it. Shirabi had to get it back, needed them both. He began collecting weapons, starting with God-

win's knife. At the least sign from Bledsoe, he meant to be a walking weapons rack and have it from his hand.

There was a yap behind him and he turned to see that yattering fool, Ellis Phibbs. He barely knew enough to stagger out when the ships arrived and that was fine with Shirabi. But he also wanted to put his finger in every other public pie. He, like most, wanted to be wanted, and affairs like this gave him the opportunity regardless of the feelings of anyone else present.

"I heard there was a duel. I want to know about this. I have my duty to do. If the Navy wants to know about this one, somebody has to be able to tell them."

Then, abruptly, he caught sight of Srb, and just as abruptly he broke off. Shirabi saw that in a shocked moment. Others were busy, though Bledsoe did look up at Phibbs' arrival. Chapeldaine and the doctor were trying to prop Godwin up. Most of the crowd had already left or were jockeying for the doors. Villiers' attention was distracted. But Shirabi saw.

Phibbs said in a lowered voice to Srb, "If you're here, Mr. Srb, I suppose I'm not needed."

Srb said, in even tones, "I'm one of the seconds in the affair. If you have a duty to do, you had better do it."

Phibbs turned with the sense of the occasion just beginning to break in his mind. It was three stages of "Oh?, Oh, Oh." Then, officiousness recovered, but transparently, he said, "Who was in charge here?"

Bledsoe was caught, but not by the meaning of things as Shirabi was. He was caught by the grating quality of Phibbs' manner.

"Yes?" he said, and Shirabi snagged the tingler from his hands. "I was dueling master."

The two began to talk. Shirabi quietly picked the weapons off the floor, the calm regular order of a day, and took them over to the racks. When he turned away again, there were two tinglers lying on the bench in front, one of them Villiers', the other an exchange. Two

tinglers, in perfect condition to destroy. He walked from there over to Godwin, an imminent fear within him.

The doctor said, "I can't do anything for him. The best you can do is freeze him within the first minute of death. He can probably be brought back with proper facilities."

Shirabi nodded and bent close to Godwin. Godwin recognized him.

With effort, he said, "Wrong man."

Shirabi shot a look at Srb. "Yes. The wrong man."

Godwin suddenly had a desperate look on his face. His heels kicked with the effort he made to speak. At last, he said, as though it had great significance, "I'm a little teapot." And he died relieved.

"What was that?" the doctor asked.

"It's a mystery to me," Shirabi said. "Very strange." Then he turned and waved. The cold cart was rolled onto the floor by two men in white and wheeled rapidly toward them.

"The last time we didn't have a cold cart," Shirabi said, "and the Navy investigated."

The cart was opened with professional skill. There was a fluttering, a snowy flapping, and Godwin was totally covered. Then the two men bent, raised Godwin with tender care, and placed him within the cold haven of the cart. They closed the gates behind him, and bore him to his rest.

10

THERE IS a good old expression down home—to *cut and run*. I was once told where it came from, but I don't remember now. I do know that it makes sense to a man with a knife. It makes sense to a wallet-and-purse man. It makes sense to a cardplayer after a bad evening, and it makes sense to a sailor caught by an

enemy forty-gunner with his anchor down. To all, it means prudence. Shirabi, being a sensible man, proposed to cut and run.

He sat in the secret basements of Star Well on a white cold cart. There was a large brown book open on his knees. He was thinking.

All around him were rows of white cold boxes identical to the cart he was sitting on but without the wheels. All were awaiting the arrival of the black freighter.

Star Well was the hub of the thumb-running traffic in the Rift. It was extremely profitable, both in money and in leverage. Politics were affected, and stock gaming, as well as the obvious market for arms, livers, and hair pieces.

But Star Well was only the center of traffic for this comparative moment. The owners knew that eventually it would be discovered and Star Well would have to be run straight for a time.

Shirabi had his orders for the first sign of trouble, his private orders. Cut and run.

After Godwin's jealousy of Villiers had become apparent, after Martin and Morrison had served him another explanation for Villiers, Shirabi had not thought it likely that Villiers was anything like a secret investigator. That had left him free to use Villiers.

But just when the game was closing, up had popped Ellis D. Phibbs and a priest of Mithra who apparently was no priest of Mithra. If Shirabi was a rabbit, his employers had no objection to it, in fact were just as happy for it. Shirabi was a rabbit and he felt that this was the time to run.

Now he was waiting for the ship to arrive. He had every intention of putting the load of thumbs aboard and riding away, never to return to Star Well.

He was also waiting for his helpers to arrive, and he had Levi Gonigle out watching the halls to keep him out of trouble. He hopped down from the cart and closed the book in his hands. It was Martin and Morrison's *Index*.

He had cleaned his office, taking everything he wanted with him; everything he hadn't wanted to leave behind. He had brought Godwin's book with him for one last look. Now he didn't know what to do with it. He looked around. It wouldn't go with his own gear—he didn't want it anymore. He couldn't lay it on top of a cold box—shortly they would be carried out through an extendable corridor and into racks aboard the freighter. After a moment's thought and hesitant gazing about, he opened the cold cart on which he had been sitting and looked down at the still features of Derek Godwin.

"You always wanted to be a gentleman," Shirabi said, and laid it within Godwin's folded arms. The field shocked Shirabi's hands. It felt the way mint tastes.

It had seemed a shame to let Godwin go to waste. Shirabi certainly did not want him sent to advanced medical facilities and revived. Neither did he want him simply to spoil. It had seemed reasonable to have him wheeled below to join the bodies in transit.

Shirabi closed the cart again. "I never thought you were all that good."

He did a drum beat with the flat of his hands on the top of the cold cart and waltzed around it, but his elation had no conviction behind it. The whole unpleasant appearance of Srb had taken the punch out of his evening.

You couldn't miss it in Srb once you knew. He had *investigator* tattooed over his eyebrows. As other professions radiated promises of money and sex and dangerous adventure, he promised rehabilitation and other unpleasanties.

Shirabi was caught by the opening of the warehouse door. He turned at the noise to see Levi Gonigle. He was holding a girl under each arm.

"I caught them, Mr. Shirabi. I caught them," he said. "Can I have fun with them?"

Villiers had been accompanied to his quarters after the duel by Bledsoe, the sober dueling master. Srb had

pleaded pressing affairs, Villiers had thanked him for the services he had rendered, and they had parted.

Villiers was ready to return to his quarters after the doctor had had a look at his hand. His clothes, partly because he had laid some aside in order to fight, partly because of the exertions he had been forced to, were in disarray. To be fit again for public company, he would certainly have to repair his appearance. More important, he was still feeling the sudden force of the attack which Levi Gonigle had launched upon him.

Bledsoe said something, in his reserved and somber way, about his appreciation of Villiers' form, "now that he was free to speak," and volunteered his company to Villiers, who felt in need, indeed, and did not hesitate to say so.

Bledsoe said gravely, "You came to my attention earlier in the evening, however, sir."

Villiers, coat and drapeau over his arm, a bit shaky on his pins, but still presenting a tolerable presence, said, "Did I?"

"Yes. You did not see me, of course, but I sat at the next table while you were dining. I was frankly caught by the obvious friendliness between you and the young girl you were eating with."

That sentence might be taken in several ways depending on tone and time and the person speaking. Bledsoe's age, and sex, and dress, and manner ruled out a number of possibilities, and his tone ruled out several more, but even so, Villiers was not sure exactly what he meant or meant to imply.

Villiers looked casually at Bledsoe and said, "We are friendly," in a neutral voice.

"I'm not sure you understand me," Bledsoe said. "I was caught by the *friendliness*. It is a pleasure to see the few people in the world who can be that comfortable with each other."

Villiers nodded, listened, and occasionally said a word or two until they reached his suite. There he thanked Bledsoe for his attention, made his excuses, and went

within. It would have been in order to invite Bledsoe inside for a few social moments, but in truth he did not rate Bledsoe's company that highly and he had no genuine interest in any company until he felt a bit more himself. Bledsoe either understood or was willing to have it seem that he did, and went his way at a carefully chosen pace.

Torve the Trog was stitting on the floor reading and making his noises. His skin was one size too large for his frame. You didn't notice that particularly when he was upright, but when he sat or lay it tended to fall into occasional rumpled folds. These might appear anywhere, but most often around his stuffed tummy.

Villiers said, "Has anything transpired within the period I have been absent? Within the time that you have been present, of course."

Torve looked at him and said, "You are wheezy—I mean, weavy—in the head. Or do I mean wheezy? And transpired means that someone has died."

Villiers sat down abruptly. "Somebody has died. I was in the damndest duel that you ever saw. Fifteen minutes or so after you left, that fool Godwin stepped up and called me out. I'm not sure why. He may have thought me overclose, but I didn't think I was stepping that hard."

"Why! Why! Is no matter why," said Torve. "Thing happened, is all. What is important is *what* happened."

Villiers slowly told the whole story, and Torve nodded throughout.

When he was done, Torve said, "As I said—what is important is *what* happened. Couldn't be better, I'm sure."

"You're sure?"

"Certainly. And how is your hand?"

"Better than it ought to be. I don't think the nerves were killed. It's very odd." He stood up. "I think I'd better let Louisa know that I'm all right. She might be worrying, since she was dragged off."

He went to the service and tried to place the call. The

call was refused, of course, on the orders of Mrs. Bogue. "Oh, well," he said. He stretched and winced. "I'd better put myself back in order again."

"Is good idea," said Torve. "The imperative of time is that you go to the basement tonight. You should be feeling good to be up late."

Villiers shook his head. "I'm not going to the basements tonight. At worst, I'm going to bed. Tomorrow, I'll think what to do with the leverage we have. I had an idea while I was dueling, but then I dropped my knife and lost the idea and haven't tracked it down again."

Torve said, "Always you know 'why,' whatever 'why' is. I know the imperative of time." He scratched his belly slowly and significantly. "In here I know. You go to the basement tonight. That is your line of occurrence."

Try to argue with that.

Srb was a red flower in front of the service, a scarlet blossom in a heavy chair.

"No answer?" he said.

"I am sorry, sir, but Mr. Adams does not answer."

Srb thanked him and switched off. He lit his pipe and tried to think of an appropriate metaphor.

Villiers, rejuvenated—the rejuvenation facilities in royal-a-day rooms being excellent—appeared half-dressed in the door.

"Could you straighten the hang?"

Torve reached a hand up from the floor and bemusedly straightened the hang.

"Did I hear somebody out here a minute or two ago?" Villiers asked.

"Was nothing," Torve said. "Was mistake." Was in fact the girls on their way to the basements.

There was a ring at the door. Villiers raised his eyebrows and started for the door. He stopped just short to make his adjustments. The bell rang insistently again as he reached for the plate that would open the door.

Mrs. Bogue looked up as the door slid back. She was a woman who obviously liked to keep herself in order. Hair and clothes were uniform surfaces. Her hair was gray and she had done nothing to change that.

Firmly, she said, "Stand back, Mr. Villiers."

Villiers stepped back a pace and ushered her within.

"All right," she said, looking around the room. "Produce them, please."

"I beg your pardon," Villiers said, turning away from the door.

"Produce them, please."

"*Thurb*," said Torve, and Mrs. Bogue's startled head swiveled about.

"What is he doing here?" she demanded. "Mr. Villiers, it seems that I judged you very, very mistakenly. Sick associations with filthy animals! I may have failed now and then in my duties, but I want it said to my credit that all the time we were penned together in that miserable little ship I kept my girls from having anything to do with *that*."

She pointed a forefinger at Torve.

"We, I may be plain to say, are not Mithraists. Oh, I hope you aren't a Mithraist, too."

"No, madam, that is not one of my failings."

"Well, I want my girls produced, and I want them now. I would have them stay here no longer than is absolutely necessary."

"Which girls?" Villiers asked quietly.

Torve continued to read, throbbing from time to time. He took no real notice of Mrs. Bogue and her artistic displeasures, and showed no interest in the conversation.

"Louisa and Alice, of course. They know no one else. They are not anywhere else. Therefore, they are here."

"They are not here," Villiers said. "Please, will you tell me when you saw them last?"

"I may be the person who saw them most recently," a voice said.

All those who have involved themselves in amateur

detective work will be quick to tell you of their reliance on open doors, conveniently overheard conversations and passing strangers with vital information for the solution of their problems. In this case, Bledsoe, the dueling master, was standing in the doorway.

Villiers raised his eyebrows. He was a master of the eyebrow. "Where did you see them?"

"They were entering a stairwell. Bound for the basements, I would say."

"What does that mean?" Mrs. Bogue asked.

Villiers said, "You overheard quite a bit at dinner, didn't you?"

"Curiosity is one of my failings, though Mithraism may not be. In a word, yes, though I think this was a topic of conversation in the casino, not at dinner."

"You're right. It was," Villiers said.

"Can you handle things yourself, or shall you need help?" Bledsoe asked.

"Are you offering your services?"

"Goodness, no," said Bledsoe. "I'm no man of action. I was just curious."

The girls were placed on their feet in front of Shirabi. The taller one had a distinctly unhappy look, and she was shivering.

Shirabi looked at her and said, "I feel cold myself."

The other girl, the brown-looking one, said firmly, "We were lost."

Shirabi shook his head. "I don't believe you. I accept your presence as an added burden, but I don't believe that you were lost. Who are you involved with? Srb? Villiers?"

"Nobody!" said the tall one.

"Don't try to tell me stories," Shirabi said. "I'll let Levi have his fun with you."

Levi brightened.

"Levi, go out and guard the halls again," Shirabi said. "Go on."

Reluctantly, Levi allowed himself to be put outside

like a puppy put in the cellar. The same stiffening of the legs. The same reproach in a simple face. The same backward glances.

Shirabi followed him to the door. When he turned, the little hen said, "We were trying to find out what happened to Mr. Villiers."

"Down here?"

"Please, sir," said Alice. "It's the truth."

As said before, there were few occasions when Hisan Bashir Shirabi had been able to be totally rotten to people of higher station. When belligerence had been called for, he had been obsequious. When firmness had been called for, firmness had not been within him. When the necessary demands of the situation had been made, for blood, and agony, and total terror, he had been powerless to produce them. Except twice under humiliating circumstances. The shame was that they had been as humiliating for Shirabi as they had been for his subjects.

That was a terrible burden under which to live. Shirabi's worries about his impotence had crippled him almost as badly as his central affliction itself. He had not been the man for Zvegintsov that his natural abilities and instincts should have made him.

He had been shunted from one minor post to another, and now was here where his failing was of small moment, where it did not matter if a manager could cut the mustard or not. And now he was ready to leave, his little era ended. The best he could expect was another station that was no more important than this and possibly would be less.

Look at him: Hisan Bashir Shirabi, a man near the end of the line. Purple robes, dark face, sharp nose, black mustache. Everything for total menace except the element of presence. An empty man, less than the Himself he could have been, with green-lit eyes, an aura of looming evil, and a fluttering and flashing about his shoulders.

But there are occasions when the soul is freed and

like a great black bat flaps wildly toward the moon. The lost world below is dark and silent. All that exists is the madly striving heart, beating, beating, beating.

A warmth filled his chest. His ears rang. He felt himself growing in size. The girls seemed to stand at an immense distance from him. No, no—they were dwarfs. That was all.

He pointed two fingers of his right hand. He knew lightning would split forth from them if he chose, but he did not choose.

"Do you want to know about Mr. Villiers," he said in a low insistent voice. "Pieces. Ground. Minced. The fate of all. Chopped and sliced. Cubed and diced. Shaped in a ball. Beaten, eaten, but dead withal. Dead withal. Dead withal."

Both girls began to cry, as well they might. Shirabi smiled and grew.

"You're the next," he said. "Do you know what these boxes contain?"

He threw one open before them and then another and then another. The girls moved close together at the sight of the bodies.

"Every box. Every single box. And I have two remaining. I'm leaving here tonight and with me will be you."

It was amazing. It was exquisite. It was the striving heart rewarded. All the old bonds were suddenly gone. He was in this fantastic moment all that he had ever wanted to be, all that he had previously failed to be. Was it the death of Godwin, vanquished symbol of all that he feared and envied? Was it the sudden end of his obligations at Star Well? Was it the hour, the place, the situation, all forming that fertile moment in which he was able to pour out what previously had been so frustratingly damned within him? We shall never know. All we can know is that the lonely heart seeks its sweet fulfillment.

"There, there, loves. You're going to be thumbs. And legs, and toes, and arms, bones, veins, and nerves. You're

going to make somebody well again. Doesn't that make you feel *good* inside? Skins for the skinless. Shins for the shinless. Hearts for the heartless. Parts for the partless.

"Do you know what the greatest shortage in thumb-running is? *Small* body parts. I think they'll look forward to you."

He capered. He danced. He was an evil, flaming, purple presence. He moved around the girls, who were backed against the cold cart in which Godwin lay. Around and around he moved, his arms held high and his arms held low, and all the while he chanted his merry melodies. The girls held on to the awful white cart, held on to each other, and did their best to hold on to their reeling, tumbling senses. And from the door, Levi Gonigle watched through a crack with open eyes and slack mouth.

Srb answered the door at Villiers' signal.

"Why, Mr. Villiers. I didn't expect to see you again tonight."

"Sieur Srb, I wonder if I might speak with you. I haven't a great deal of time."

"Come in, then."

Srb closed the door and seated himself. Villiers remained standing. The room, he noted, had become invested with Srb's personal flavor, a characteristic nutty, toasted odor reminiscent of childhood afternoons.

"Sieur Srb, I would like to strike a bargain with you. I am in temporary financial straits. I need passage for two to Yuten. You, on the other hand, are here to learn certain things. No, don't pretend to look puzzled. We are both aware of who you are. Give me the use of Adams right now, and you can close down the smuggling here in a matter of minutes."

Srb drew deliberately at his pipe. "All right," he said. "Assuming we are talking of the same things, why right this minute? That might be difficult."

It would be difficult, of course. Srb had been unable

to raise Adams since his return from the duel. It had been a bad slip for that fool Phibbs to make in public. Time was an important factor now, and Adams could not be raised.

"Because Miss Parini and another of the girls from her class are already poking around in the basements. They may alert Shirabi. Even if there is no harm in that, they may be in trouble. You saw that Godwin tried to kill me. The girls may be hurt. That's why I want help now."

"Let me understand things," Srb said. "These two girls, in whom you have an interest, may be in trouble. You want them rescued. Besides this, you want passage for two to Yuten. That's not one thing as I count. That's two. In return, you propose to do your natural duty as an interested citizen of the Empire, and help to end an unfortunate illegal trade. That's one thing. Two for one?"

Villiers said, "This is not a time for horse-trading. If you want a second, let me say that I think I can find Mr. Adams right now. Can you?"

Srb looked at him for a long silent moment while he thought. He *was* a horse trader, and he hated to swap so easily. But his position was not that strong. Think of Adams—not that strong at all.

"I'll accept your point," he said at last. "If you can find Mr. Adams, you can have him and your bargain."

Villiers turned instantly for the door.

Srb said, "One thing, Mr. Villiers.

"Were you serious when you said we weren't discussing theology?"

11

WILL YOU admit that you have fears so breathtaking, so elemental, and so personal that you only allow them free run of your mind in the last hour of an October night?

Ca-lonk, a heavy distant door said reverberatingly to itself. A cold dusty echo. The girls, sitting close together at the base of the white cart in which Derek Godwin presently reposed, huddled and listened.

Shirabi had just turned away. His evil capering had been cut short by the arrival of a messenger. The freighter was approaching, and the overtime shift of second-dealers and double-shufflers from upstairs stood ready. His directions were required.

Shirabi looked down at the girls, who shrank before his gaze. "Back in a minute," he said. "Mind my place."

The girls pressed close together. They waited, afraid now that Shirabi had gone, but afraid also of his return.

Motor noises, smooth, cool and regular. Echoes, the inarticulate memories of distant voices. They shivered, touched by the cold winds that lurked in these closed halls.

They were as totally afraid as it is possible to be—mark by that Shirabi's growth in presence. If one was less afraid, it was Louisa, something of the practical jenny wren. She was afraid, but her mind was still working. Alice, on the other hand, was devoting all of her more sensitive nature to feeling terrified.

If the truth be known, Alice's life thus far had left her unprepared for the realities of romance. There is a *sine qua non* of romance she did not know: no weeping over corpses without true pain felt; no embrace by a lover without trials endured; no final rainbow without rain.

Alice, Alice, Alice was afraid. Alice was afraid. Alice was afraid.

Her heart throbbed so loudly that the hand clutched to her breast trembled. She became aware then of her own fear, and it was raised through awareness to a higher power.

The floor under her right hand was cool and dry. Louisa's back, where it touched Alice's arm and shoulder, was rigid. The cart was an uncomfortable support to her right cheek.

Terror is a hot flood. Terror is probing rivulets. Terror is cold spoom drift.

She waited in frozen terror for Shirabi to return. Unrecognized tears wet her cheeks. She didn't sob. She simply cried and knew not that she was crying.

A sudden icy creak drew her but her vision was blurred. She wiped her eyes desperately as heavy steps approached cautiously. When she could see, Levi loomed horribly above her.

He was soft, huge, gross, repellent. He was a wild idiot dressed in a uniform that proclaimed a nonexistent domestic nature.

"Want to have fun?" Levi asked with curious and heavy innocence.

She did not answer, but pressed closer to Louisa. He reached a slow hand toward her head, which she moved to avoid. The hand had the look of a whittled but unfinished block. The hand turned into a cypress knee which nudged her shoulder twice.

"Hey, want to have fun?" he asked.

Alice turned her face away and hid it in the crook of her arm. Her shoulder was seized and she was roughly flopped around and lifted by Levi's right hand.

"Hey," he said, and smiled. "*Hurr-hurr.*"

His teeth were the size of Alice's fingertip. His tongue glistened and flopped loosely.

Her mind was spinning as he looked at her and panted. Her knees would not hold her upright. He was so hideous. It did not seem proper to her that this terrible moment should be the end of her maidenhood. She had had more ambitious plans.

He continued to hold her with his right hand. He reached out and touched her with his left forefinger.

"Fun," he said.

Alice fainted. Consequently, she missed much of interest.

As he briskly walked, Villiers thought of knocking. Which is the most efficient order? Knock and try the

door? Try the door alone? If locked, do you knock, or do you try to unlock it?

He decided finally on directness. When he found the proper door, he put hand straight to it, and to his great surprise it swung open on the instant.

"All right," he said. "Where are you, Adams?"

Maybelle Lafferty sat upright in bed. Her long brown hair fell in a tangle over her bare shoulders.

"It's my husband. It's my husband. Oh, hide."

Villiers turned calmly and closed the door.

Adams, surprised, kicked wildly in the bedclothes. The sudden commotion and Maybelle's imperative took him out of bed on the far side to land sprawling on the floor. Then the fact of Villiers' presence and the sense of Maybelle's ululations struck at the same moment. He scrambled to his feet and stood there, a single stock his only piece of apparel.

"What do you mean?" he demanded of Maybelle.

"What are you doing here?" he demanded of Villiers.

"What do you mean?" he demanded of Maybelle.

Maybelle didn't answer. Her whole attention was devoted to her homage to Thespis. Her failures in talent and technique were more than compensated for by her beauty and enthusiasm.

"I'm here from General Srb," Villiers said in a voice intended to penetrate. "Junior Lieutenant Adams, you are needed by the Empire."

"But I don't trust you," said Adams. "How did General Srb know I was here? Tell me that."

Villiers said, "You underestimate your superiors, son. I think you will find that Srb always knows everything. Now, look."

Quickly, Villiers sketched the recognition signal he had been showed.

"I missed that," Adams said when he was done. "Would you mind repeating it?"

Maybelle only now realized that something was amiss. It wasn't Henry who had entered. It was Villiers, one day late. A frantic thought crossed her mind. By some

incredible chance had she written, "Come urgently to my rooms *tomorrow* night"? She looked at Adams in his single stocking and Villiers with his finger on his palm. Her mind was blank and there was total silence.

Then Henry was standing in the doorway. She felt relieved. All was in safe hands. She did not need to think. She went back to where she had been like a well-schooled girl.

"My husband! *Both* of you hide."

Henry stepped within the unlocked room at exactly the moment he was due. It was a pleasure to him to see things going well for a change. The door was unlocked, just as it should be. Directly in front of him was a well-dressed back.

He seized a shoulder, and said, "I have you, sir. You have been in private with my wife for more than twice the time it takes water to run from a broken jug. Explain yourself."

Villiers shook free. "If you don't mind." He finished resketching the recognition signal. Then he looked over his shoulder and said, "I think Adams over there is the man you want to speak to. I've not been here quite so long as you say."

Adams, recognizing the accuracy of the recognition signal on its repetition, stamped his bare foot and for the most part came to stiff attention. "Sir!"

Henry Maurice walked over to him, looked him up and down, and said, "I trust you can explain this."

Adams kept his gaze directed above Maurice's head to Villiers.

Villiers said, "General Srb and I are working in concert together here. You're needed, Adams—now. Get dressed."

"Sir!" Adams said, and turned for his pants.

Henry followed him and said, "I hope you can explain."

Adams shook his head as he put on his pants. "I can't explain."

"Well, what do you mean to do?"

"I'm going with Mr. Villiers over there. We're needed."

"Just make yourself functional, Mr. Adams," Villiers said. "You don't need to be decorative."

Henry turned to Maybelle. "Do you know what is going on here? What is Villiers doing?"

"I'm sure I don't know," she said. "He just walked in here a few minutes ago. He hasn't spoken to me."

"I beg your pardon, Miss Lafferty," Villiers said. "It was inexcusable. How are you this evening? It's pleasant to see you again."

He did his duty as Adams drew on his first boot. Maybelle received the gesture and inclined as gracefully as one possibly could while lying flat in bed. Very prettily.

Henry turned to Villiers as Adams drew on his second boot. "What do *you* propose to do about this intolerable situation?"

"Me? Why nothing at all, sir. Adams, are you ready?"

"Sir! I'm ready!"

"Come along, then. Good day, Miss Lafferty. Mr. Maurice."

He turned to the door and Adams hurried across the room after him. Pants, boots, shirt, but no coat. Gun in hand.

"Good," said Villiers. "You'll need that."

Levi Gonigle looked curiously at the girl hanging so limply from his hand. Had he shaken too hard? He didn't think so. He didn't remember doing it.

He prodded her several times, but she seemed to have lost interest. She was asleep. It was a very odd thing for her to do.

She didn't seem to be of any use, so he put her down and she lolled back against the cart. He poked the other one.

"How about you? Do you want to play?"

Levi reached into his pocket and pulled out a closed hand. He opened it to show in the center a red ball and a glomp of silver metal.

"See." He scattered the jackstones across the top of the closed cold cart. He bounced the ball over Godwin's hidden nose and made a sweep at the jacks.

If Louisa had been in a mood to play, it would have been a most unfair game. Elevenses was a cinch for him. The only thing to keep him from walking away with championship after championship was some minor difficulty in ball handling.

"Ah, there you are, Levi," Mr. Shirabi said.

Levi hurriedly stuffed the ball and jacks away. Mr. Shirabi didn't understand some things that were fun. Other than that, he was a nice man to work for.

"We need two more boxes," Mr. Shirabi said. He pointed.

Levi trotted over and picked up one. The boxes were large. The boxes were heavy. Usually it took two men to pick one up and carry it, but Levi could manage one by himself. He brought it back to where Mr. Shirabi was standing, and set it down.

Mr. Shirabi nodded, and straightened the cold box so that it was in line with all the others. "Bring me the dark girl," he said. "Gently."

Levi changed direction from the other cold box to the girls. He looked at them closely and thought the one who was asleep was darker. But he didn't want to make a mistake.

"This one?" he asked.

Mr. Shirabi said, "Yes."

Remembering to be gentle, Levi carefully lifted the girl and bore her to the open box. He laid her gingerly within.

"That's right," Mr. Shirabi said. "Don't bruise the merchandise."

There was a click and a hum and then Mr. Shirabi closed the box. The other girl was on her feet and she was backing away.

"Get the other box, Levi," Mr. Shirabi said.

Levi went for the box.

"Don't try to run," Mr. Shirabi said. "There isn't any point to it. But if you really feel you must, go ahead."

She started to dodge one way around the cart, and Mr. Shirabi matched her. Back, and he matched her again.

"You see?" he said.

Levi set the second box down. Mr. Shirabi straightened it and put it in line with the others, keeping his eyes on the girl, frozen behind the cart.

"Oh, is that how you wanted it?" Levi said. He was standing where he wouldn't be in the way. He didn't like to be in the way. People would say, "Levi, you're in the way," and then he didn't feel good, so he tried not to be in the way.

"Come on, now," Mr. Shirabi said, opening the box. "Climb inside."

"I've heard about those boxes," the girl said. "Sometimes they can't get you to wake up from them."

"That's true," Mr. Shirabi said, "but that's just the chance you take when you climb inside one. Come on, now."

The girl stood taut, and looked at them. Levi put his hand in his pocket while he was waiting and fingered his ball.

At last the girl's resolve wilted. She trudged over and put a hand on Mr. Shirabi's shoulder and stepped into the box. Then she lay down and Mr. Shirabi reached for the switch.

"Goodbye, thumb," he said.

The giant doors at the end of the warehouse began to move upward to allow the grasshopper clearance. When the doorway was clear, the grasshopper moved fluidly forward, bent, slid arms under the first cold boxes and lifted. Levi watched in fascination. He liked to see machines operate.

Villiers moved along with complete surety, Adams a half-step behind. Adams caught up.

"Mr. Villiers, you seem to know Mr. Srb better than

I do," he said confidentially. "What sort of man does he seem to you?"

"Firm, but fair," Villiers said. "Yes, I'd say firm, but fair. A mature man. Quiet, confident, deeper than he appears."

"Oh," said Adams. "You see, I don't know quite what to make of him. He smokes, you know. They expelled three senior cadets while I was in the Academy for smoking."

"You haven't been commissioned long, have you, Mr. Adams?"

"Well, sir, a year and a half."

"Try not to worry about it now," Villiers said. "Concentrate on being alert."

"Yes, sir," Adams said. "And I want to thank you for coming for me when you did. That was very embarrassing. Imagine, they were married. She must have told me several fibs."

Villiers nodded.

"But I don't think she was bad basically," Adams said.

"Shh," said Villiers.

Just ahead in the hall was someone Villiers recognized. It was Josiah, the Flambeau table operator. The marks of Levi's hands were still on him. He recognized Villiers and Adams and turned quickly away.

"Let's have him," Villiers said.

Before Josiah could dodge away, Villiers had him by one arm and Adams had him by the other. It was just as well that Adams was there because Josiah was considerably larger than Villiers and no doubt could easily have overpowered him and escaped. No doubt.

"What does he know?" Adams asked.

"Yeah, what do I know?" Josiah said.

"This gentleman is part of the crooked gambling here—I have no doubt he can guide us directly to the basements."

"The basements?" Josiah asked.

"What is this crooked gambling?" Adams asked. "The gambling here isn't crooked, is it?"

"The third landing port," Villiers said. "We want the smuggling operation."

"Oh," said Josiah.

"What do you mean by crooked gambling, sir?"

"Did you expect a man you suspect of heartier villainies to run an honest gaming house?" Villiers asked. "Josiah was cheating you systematically."

"Well, is that so?" Adams asked. His grip on Josiah's arm increased substantially in force and he touched the warm tip of Josiah's nose with the cold tip of his gun. "You'd better show us the way."

Josiah looked at Villiers with sensible blue eyes. "It's not that I'm craven, you understand. But if you're going to close things down, I suppose I'd better help you. Usual terms?"

"Usual terms," Villiers said.

"What does that mean?" Adams asked.

"It would only distress you, I'm afraid," Villiers said. "Perhaps it would be better not to know."

Shirabi closed the box over the second girl, and rose. He was pleased by his new personal force, strong enough to dominate already-terrified little girls. He rubbed his hands together and then flexed them. He admired the blue tracings on the back. They seemed to him an elegant corruption, like the veins in blue cheese.

The grasshopper deposited its second armload of boxes within the hold of the freighter. It poised like a father who means to let his baby son stand alone, and then reached out an inevitable steadying arm. Then it slid back on its rails into the warehouse.

The operator swung the front around briskly on its central pivot wheel. He brought the arms down.

"Over here. These boxes."

The operator, Achdut Haavoda, responded to the new authority in Shirabi's voice. "Aw, shit, Shirabi. Let me do it my way."

Shirabi said, "I want these boxes aboard next." He

pointed to the boxes at his feet, the ones containing the bodies of Alice Tutuila and Louisa Parini.

Haavoda shrugged, brought the grasshopper around, and made the indicated boxes part of his next armload. It meant refiguring his entire stacking order, but Shirabi didn't care anything about that.

Shirabi folded his hands over his stomach as he watched this load of boxes safely within the hold. It gave him a solemn satisfaction, the glow of a newly-blooded hunter who knows that today's pigeons stand for elephants tomorrow.

Levi was still watching the grasshopper with lips agape. He was toying with something in his pocket.

"Go to the door and watch," Shirabi told him.

"What?"

"Go to the door. And watch."

Shirabi got behind the cold cart in which Godwin reposed and began to push it. It started slowly, but once he had momentum going he found it easy to guide it parallel to the grasshopper tracks. The grasshopper was picking up another load and swinging around to follow behind him.

Ned Hornygold, the blond young captain of the freighter, stood in the extensor and looked at Shirabi coming his way pushing a white cart.

"What is it you mean to do, Shirabi?"

"It's another body. I mean to have it aboard."

The cart should have had another pair of hands guiding it. As Shirabi brought it up to where the captain stood, the left wheel dropped into the grasshopper track, the cart top lurching at an angle. Shirabi pushed forward and instead of bringing the wheel out of the track, the force wedged it in place.

"I'm stuck," he said.

Hornygold waved frantically at the grasshopper. "Stop there. Hey, stop."

"Little accident," Shirabi said, and shrugged apologetically.

Hornygold put his hands on the bar beside Shirabi's.
"Push or pull?"

"Let's try push."

They tried push.

"Maybe we'd better try pull."

They tried pull.

Of the four men at work in the hold, two were Shirabi's. They broke off work and came over to watch the extraction proceedings. Hornygold went down on his belly to look at the wheel.

Shirabi said, "Come on out here and lend a hand."

Hornygold said, "It's snagged. It's going to have to be lifted up. How the hell did you do it, Shirabi?"

Shirabi's man wiped sweat from his forehead and said, "Get Levi on it. He's the boy for the heavy stuff."

Shirabi turned. Haavoda was lounging at the controls of his machine. Shirabi waved and called for Levi.

Levi came in response to his master's voice. "Yes?"

"Levi. This cart is stuck. It won't go inside. The wheel is caught. The cart has to be lifted. Can you do it?"

"Oh, gee, sure."

He put his two hands to the end of the cart. He bent, strained, lifted, and the end of the cart came free.

"Very good, Levi," Shirabi said.

Suddenly, Haavoda, from his vantage point on the seat of the grasshopper, yelled, "It's Josiah. And he's got that Villiers with him. And another guy."

"They're onto us," Shirabi said. "Levi, it's Mr. Godwin in that cart! You don't want him left behind. Get him inside the ship."

His voice had a beautiful ringing quality to it. It inspired Levi with a full appreciation of his chance to do something for Mr. Godwin. He pushed with his strength at the rear of the cart and ran the wheel back into the grasshopper track. Puzzled, he pushed harder.

"Rafi, Mapai, get on it," Shirabi said, and his two men moved to join Levi. There was confusion of effort, and the cart went nowhere.

Hornygold backed toward the door of the hold. "Excuse me," he said.

"Aren't you going to fight?" Shirabi asked, pulling Godwin's curdler out and brandishing it.

"No," said Hornygold.

"On second thought, I believe I'll join you," Shirabi said. He thrust the gun at Levi. "It's the man who killed Mr. Godwin, Levi. Point the gun at him and pull the trigger."

He and Hornygold ducked into the hold of the ship and turned right for the control room. Hornygold's two crewmen were on their heels.

Villiers ran low through the warehouse, Adams at his right hand, Josiah behind them and even lower. The warehouse was a high rock-ceilinged cavern. There were huge open doors at the far end and beyond them a clutter of men and machines at the hold of a ship in cradle.

A man at the controls of a grasshopper saw them, called and then jumped down and made a dash for the warehouse doors. He found the controls and started the doors down.

Josiah yelled, "Achdut Haavoda! Stop! Mapai, Rafi! It's the Navy. Take terms."

The doors continued inexorably downward with all deliberate gravity. Villiers increased his speed, leaving the other two behind him. He hit the ground, rolled under the doors, thereby doing twice the damage of Henry's roll under the bed, with half the regret, and on one knee put his gun on Haavoda. Adams hit the ground and rolled too late. He bounced off the bottom of the door with an unhappy thump.

Haavoda looked at the curdler in Villiers' hand and very sensibly—he was no fighting man; he was a machine operator (two varieties)—said, "Terms."

"Terms," said Villiers, and immediately turned his attention to the other men. If you wonder how he dared, well, if somebody says, "Terms," and then doesn't quit,

nobody will play with him anymore. Both Villiers and Haavoda knew this.

There was a thump, the might of intention behind it, on the other side of the warehouse doors. They rang absentmindedly.

There was a final flicker of motion in the hold. Three men had their backs and shoulders to a cold cart in the last few feet of the extensor. The central one of the three was Levi Gonigle, holding in his two hands a gun that he was still trying to trace the origin and meaning of.

If somebody says, "Terms," and then doesn't quit, he may roam as he likes for the rest of his life, and all will turn away as he passes. The people will point and say, "He said 'Terms,' and then he didn't quit. He's a cheat. Don't have nothing to do with him." His only company will be rascals of his own stripe. It's silly, I will be ready to agree—but then it's no more silly than any other common convention.

"Terms," said Mapai, stepping to one side. "Terms," said Rafi, stepping to the other side.

"Terms," said Villiers.

Behind him there was news of an arrival. Adams' voice said with boyish firmness, "All right, you, there. I've got you."

"I've already agreed to terms," Haavoda apologized.

But Levi didn't say "Terms," and step to the side. He didn't know you could do that. Levi continued to hold the gun in his right hand. With the heel of that right hand and his left hand on the bar of the cart, he put his shoulders against the metal and lifted. He went, "Uhhh-uh," and the wheel was free.

A bell rang twice inside the hold of the ship. The hold doors gave a warning click and began to slide shut.

Levi didn't hear. He concentrated on getting the cart that held Mr. Godwin within the ship. He pushed hard to save Mr. Godwin.

The doors came smartly against the sides of the cart

as it rolled forward, and held it tightly. It wouldn't move.

Levi didn't know what was happening. Too much information for him to handle was flooding over him—carts that wouldn't go, ringing bells, shouts, people moving. Like a statesman faced with complexity, he turned to the simplest solution, which is to say, violence. He pointed the curdler in his hand and fired.

Haavoda was struck. He cried out in shock and then curled into a crying ball on the floor. Did Levi intend that?

Mapai, at Levi's left, hit the floor. He covered his red head with his hands and didn't look up. Rafi, at Levi's right, continued to stand. But he said in the most irritated of voices, "Dammit, Levi. Don't be stupid."

Villiers fired. Adams fired. Levi fell to the floor, the curdler popping from his hand as it slapped against the rock. Poor Levi—he understood consequences no better than Torve the Trog, and lacked Torve's alternative. And he was dead—whatever that means in this era.

Villiers and Adams ran forward toward the ship. They dodged past the body. Mapai and Rafi stood well out of their way. They went to ground on the left side of the cart, Villiers in front, Adams just behind.

"What now, sir?" he asked. "Isn't that all?"

"No. I saw some of them inside the ship."

"Oh," Adams said. "Well, I guess we'll have to dig them out."

Villiers said, "The control room should be up there." He gestured with his right thumb.

Adams said, "Respectfully, sir. One of us has to go forward. I'd like to volunteer."

Villiers allowed Adams full room to pop through the hole under the cart. "Right you are. It's your profession."

"And maybe my promotion," Adams said, and went knees, belly and then elbows through the hole.

He left Villiers with a greater impression of possibility than he ever had before. Villiers gave him a fair

count to be out of the way inside, and then went under the cart himself.

He pushed through and found himself short of the lee of a cold box. He wriggled and ducked into shelter. Then he brought his head up gingerly.

Through two hatchways and some intervening clutter, he saw parts of Adams going under cover in the control room. He heard the hair-prickling sound of curdler fire.

Adams called back, "They're not up here. Somebody's shooting at me outside in the corridor, though."

"Nobody's in the ship?"

"No, sir."

Villiers rose, looked for a local switch for the hold doors, found one, and tripped it. The doors began to open. He put hands on the end of the cart, pushed, pushed, pushed it free, retripped the doors and turned away. The doors came to a stop, bells rang gravely and then the doors began to close again.

Villiers said, "If you don't want to be shot, close the doors up there."

The doors behind him banged together.

"Yes, sir," said Adams. He kept his head down and duck-walked around the control room. After some moments he found his switch and closed the door. And they were alone inside the closed ship.

Villiers brushed himself off, his clothes disordered for the second time in the evening. He looked around at the contents of the hold. When Adams appeared at the control room door, Villiers was turning away.

Adams said slowly, "Sir? I've been thinking. Haven't we trapped ourselves? They've all escaped. If we try to get out, all they have to do is wait by the doors."

"On the contrary," Villiers said, "we've won."

"But, no, sir. We're trapped."

"Mr. Adams, do I understand you to believe that we are trapped *here*?"

"Yes, sir."

"Mr. Adams, *here* is a spaceship."

"Yes, sir."

"Star Well is a piece of rock. We are a spaceship. We are on the outside. We are the universe. They are inside, and we have them surrounded."

"Oh," said Adams. "Yes, sir."

Villiers smiled. "You did well, Mr. Adams. Mr. Srb is lucky to have you."

And as we know, Srb was lucky. If Srb hadn't had an assistant with enough initiative to prowling about on his own, Shirabi and his thumbs might well have slipped off into the universal night. Luck was what made Srb so successful an Inspector General. Sitting under that apple tree waiting for that top apple to drop. As it always did.

Adams was looking pale. "Did I do well, Mr. Villiers? I shot a man."

Villiers held his hand out, palm down. There was a barely perceptible tremble.

"See?" he said. "Don't worry. You did do well. All right?"

Adams nodded his head.

Villiers said, "By the way, Mr. Adams. Now that we are alone, would you favor me with the answer to a question of dress that has been puzzling me?"

"Certainly, sir," Adams said.

An hour later, with the bonds to Star Well cut and the ship in orbit around the rock, Villiers was sitting in the control room watching Adams trace linkages. This was Adams' area of competence. On background, he had been able to operate the ship. Now, model manual in hand, he was trying to understand it.

Villiers rose. Adams didn't notice him leave the control room. There were cold boxes in racks in the hold, and two abandoned on the floor. On impulse, Villiers knelt down beside the one he had used for cover on entering the ship and opened it. A cold box cover served two purposes. One was protection from the box's field, which was strong enough to disconcert, and the

other was esthetics. Most cold box cases were unattractive for any of several reasons. Villiers kept his fingers well back and the healthy-looking body within did not disturb him.

Louisa had been correct in having reservations about climbing inside a box. Some five per cent of the people put in cold boxes were simply not revivable—no matter, of course, to a thumb-runner, who never intended to revivify. At one time, a full ten per cent had been denied life, but the responsibility was found to be linked to a gene already being eliminated throughout the Empire as undesirable.

Villiers closed the cover and went to the next box. He continued on to the racked cold boxes. He opened and closed the covers. At the sixth box, he stopped. It was Louisa within.

The light overhead threw her face partly in shadow. Villiers looked down at her for a long moment, his finger touching the switch in its protective recess. But the question, after all, was already decided. He turned the switch off and cut the field.

People differ in their versions of passage in a cold box. Some are tossed in the billowing conflux of endless black clouds. Some spread glistening wings and fly. In almost all cases, people emerging suffer dissociation.

Louisa looked up and smiled. She knew enough to say, "Hello, Tony."

He said, "You've been rescued after a fashion. Come on down from there."

He helped her out of the box, and she clung to his arm. If she had still been terrified, she would have grabbed as much of him as she could get her arms around. If she had been calm and completely present, she would have taken charge of her own hands. As it was, she clung to his arm and her eyes lingered where they touched him.

Villiers explained what had happened in as unalarming tones as he could manage and he gradually got the feeling that she was with him.

At last he said, "Are your legs steady enough to walk on?"

"Yes," she said.

"Well, come on out and meet your other rescuer."

Adams was in a pantry off the control room. He emerged and set a number of edibles on a little table.

"They aren't very tidy, but they have some very nice things to eat. As long as we're waiting, I thought . . . Who's this, sir?"

"Miss Parini, meet, if you will, Mr. Adams of the Emperor's Naval Forces. Mr. Adams, Miss Louisa Parini."

Adams salaamed, but with a question hotly held. He finished his gesture, and asked, "Where did she come from?"

Villiers said, "She was in one of the cold boxes."

"She was? Well. Uh, sir. Since we're going to be here until the cruiser arrives, could I wake somebody up, too? I mean, it would make the numbers even."

Villiers said, "Just one. You'd better take your time over your choice."

Adams nodded and saluted. "Yes, sir." He hurried back into the hold.

Villiers waved Louisa to a seat by the tiny table. "Would you like some . . ." He read a label. "Would you like a porde roe sandwich? Say, Adams was right. I know this brand. I've seen this brand."

"Let's make one and split it," Louisa said.

"Fair enough."

Villiers hunted around, came up with a spoon, rejected it, and found another. He cut two fine slices of bread, buttered them lightly, spooned out the white eggs, and spread them. Was it only that evening they had eaten dinner? He fitted the sandwich together and then sliced it neatly apart.

He handed Louisa half. "Necessary skills," he said. "I was just thinking that it seems a long time since this evening."

Shyly, Louisa asked, "Will you answer a question?"

"Yes. Of course."

She set her sandwich down. "Have you been thinking about—you know, about what we said?"

Villiers nodded. "Yes—whenever I had a free moment. I think I will go from here to Yuten. If all goes well, I may find my three month old money there. But you, I think, should go to Miss McBurney's Seminary."

"Don't ask me to do that," Louisa pleaded. "Do you want me out of the way because I caused so much trouble?"

Villiers leaned over and gripped her hands. "Louisa, don't think that. I don't want you out of the way. I do sincerely doubt my ability to be the master confidence man you would have me be."

"Oh, you could do it, Tony," Louisa said.

"Oh, yes, possibly," Villiers said, smiling at the thought. "But it would mean such an extreme change in my way of life—dropping old connections and old habits, and making new ones. I'm not up to that."

"You mean you don't want to do it," Louisa said.

Villiers was unsure of his ability to make clear the difference between not wanting to become a professional confidence man and rejecting her. He thought there must be one.

"Let me ask you a question, then."

"All right."

"Can you outact the girl you saw at dinner?"

"The one in the black coronet braid?"

Villiers thought back. "I believe it was, yes."

"I *think* so," Louisa said defensively.

"How much?"

"Well, some."

Villiers said, "I didn't follow the note that she sent me. Do you remember? It wasn't because I knew what she and Henry Maurice had in mind. It was because she didn't play a lady well enough to convince me."

"And I couldn't convince you?"

"No, Louisa. I don't think so."

"Oh."

"I think they'll teach you at Miss McBurney's. I think that's what your father has in mind."

She rose without saying anything. She walked some feet away and gave Villiers her back to look at for some moments. He couldn't tell whether she was controlling herself or just thinking.

After a time, she said, in a calm little voice, "Tony, what are fardels?"

Just as there are frightening dreams in a late October night, there are leaping dreams of the possible that live in May. If May isn't your season, this isn't your story.

Alice Tutuila had passed her time inside the cold box in a happy puddle. She awoke feeling slow and drowsy. She stretched her arms. Then she looked up into the eyes of a large, presentable young man who was leaning over her. Her heart distinctly bounced, and she didn't even know as yet that he was a Navy man.

The young man turned and called, "Sir? Sir? I've picked one."

12

ADAMS BADE his farewell to Alice at the end of Phibbs' counter, but Villiers continued to walk beside Louisa in Mrs. Bogue's line. Mrs. Bogue was not pleased about his presence, but chose to say nothing. Control had slipped away from her on the night of the seventeenth and for the moment she was content to accept what she was given until she had her complete power again.

Louisa said, "And you promise you will see me if you come to Nashua?"

"If you are there, I will see you," Villiers said.

Last act curtain lines are either extremely clear or extremely equivocal. Louisa didn't want either total uncertainty or total certainty. She was willing to take moderate ambiguity and call it a first act curtain.

She said, "Well, goodbye, then, Tony."

He took her hand. "Goodbye, then."

Then he turned away. He walked back toward Adams, who had a hand half-raised in final farewell.

"Mr. Villiers."

It was Bledsoe, one of those bound out on the present ship. He nodded with deliberation as he spoke.

"Mr. Bledsoe."

Bledsoe held a card out to Villiers. "For you, sir. My card."

Villiers looked at it. Bledsoe said, "May I compliment you, sir, on your good advice to Miss Parini? It was excellently in order."

The name on the card was not Bledsoe. It was Pavel Branko, described as an entrepreneur. Brankol

Villiers said, "A cousin?"

"A second cousin, doing a favor. On the other side of the card is an address you may have interest in. For Jack the Hand. Good day, sir."

Louisa woke that night in the ship when a warm dream spilled into consciousness. The dream was made of pure feeling. She lay awake thinking about it. It was a very specific dream.

This room was larger than the room in the *Orion*. Alice was overhead, firmly asleep. Louisa stared at the bottom of the bed half the length of an outstretched arm above her.

Her mind was busy, busy, busy. First act, only.

It was raining on Yuten when Villiers and Torve left the Navy cruiser there. It was the rain of early summer, cool and pelting, and it made splashing circles, quickly gone, on the hard white surface of the field. The rain was wind-driven and irregular. Torve's fur began to mat as it grew wetter.

"It feels good, doesn't it?" Villiers said, as he bent against the wind.

A constant absence of weather is bound to be a bore. After several weeks in travel, it always seems pleasant

to feel wind and rain, to see the lightest of gray skies and dark little moving cloud ghosts, to walk on muddy ground and have the mud stick to your shoes.

They were the only passengers to depart. The rain was slackening as they reached the port terminal. The sun poured through a rent in the gray fabric and lit the tented world from within. The grayness of the world had a momentary glow and the puddles glistened.

There was the usual delay in Torve's clearance, settled in the usual way, at the usual cost in time. While they were waiting, Villiers was recognized by Lord Hawkwood's cheetah.

"Viscount Charteris," the man said, hurrying up. "Lord Hawkwood would be pleased for your company. An extremely pleasant week, I assure you. The affair is already gathering. No sharpers, no dubs, and it is winter now on his Kirkie estates in the south. The sport is excellent, as I make no doubt you will remember from last year."

"No," Villiers said. "I missed the occasion last year."

"Oh, I'm sorry," the cheetah said. He spent his time at Yuten's sole spaceport when Lord Hawkwood directed to let the right arriving people know where the action was. Common practice. "In that case, it would be a shame, a shame, if you were not to be present this year."

"Could you excuse me for a moment?" Villiers asked.

"You will consider?"

"Of course, sir." Villiers turned away as another cheetah he did not recognize rushed up.

"Sir, Mr. Graftoon's compliments, and could you favor—"

"A moment, if you will," Villiers said.

He left the cheetahs strutting and preening at each other and favoring Torve with dubious looks. Torve stood flat-footedly and waited.

Villiers found the general mail center in the terminal and went inside. It was half-asleep, lulled perhaps by the rain.

A single clerk was working behind the counter. He looked up as Villiers entered.

Villiers said, "Good day, sir. Would mail sent to Yuten as a general address be delivered here?"

"Yes, sir. It would."

"Would you check then and see if there is any mail for me? My name is Villiers."

The clerk nodded and walked to his left out of Villiers' sight. Villiers craned, but could not see him. It is hard to trust somebody to be doing something correctly when you can't see him doing it.

After a minute the clerk said, "You did say Villiers?"

"Yes, I did."

"Don't see anything for anybody of that name back here." He followed his voice out to the counter. "Were you expecting something in particular, or are you just hoping?"

"Something in particular. It should be coming from Morian, sir. And it will have a mark like this on it." Villiers sketched his personal mail symbol.

"Morian, you say. Well, hold on a second. A ship is just in from Star Well."

"Star Well?" Villiers said, raising his eyebrows.

"Yes. It could have mail from Morian. Star Well is the hub of the Rift, you know."

"Yes, I know."

"Just hold on."

The clerk turned and entered the maze of sorting bins, carts and boxes, ruck and clutter. There was a man at work back there, so colorless that he blended into the postal operation as one more piece of standard equipment. The clerk started him up and he performed some sort of intricate native function. When the clerk turned, he had a number of pieces of mail in his hands. He sorted through them as he returned to the counter.

He came to an envelope and leaned away from it to get a better look. "Hmm," he said. "Villiers. Have you got identification?"

"I just described that envelope," Villiers said.

"Yes," said the clerk, "but somebody might have told you what it looks like. I've got to have identification."

Villiers identified himself several times and received in turn the envelope.

"Fresh off the boat," the clerk said.

"From Star Well."

"Yes."

"There must be a moral there somewhere. Thank you."

It was the usual amount, little and late. Villiers looked at it, sighed, and then returned to Torve and the pair of cheetahs.

"My best to Mr. Grafton," he said, "but I'm afraid that my company is already spoken for."

He smiled pleasantly and Grafton's hawk sighed and gestured and withdrew.

Villiers nodded to Lord Hawkwood's man. "Lead on, if you will."

Of the men trapped by Villiers and Adams within Star Well, all but one were taken into custody with ease. Some had already agreed to terms and the others knew well enough how nonsensical it would be to hold hostages or don a space suit and hide in a crevice on the surface. These would only delay the inevitable.

Star Well was closed for a short time by its owners, who declared their surprise and shock at the actions of the manager they had trusted. They stated, however, that they saw no point in not taking advantage of the improvements he had added, and when Star Well opened again, it had three operating ports and enjoyed an immediate happy rise in the use of its warehouse facilities.

The one missing man was Hisan Bashir Shirabi.

He was not killed. He was not captured. He did not escape. He was never seen again in Star Well. He simply disappeared.

Shhh.

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* * *

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