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A MIXTURE OF FERALTIES

By

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PART I: MILCORADIS OF PAVADARIS

I

THE LONG RUN TO NORODINAN

“I want you to rescue my daughter,” said King Voironis of Ensgabaen.

“I had thought you might,” said Milcoradis, smiling. “– Your Highness.”

“You knew? Where did you hear...?”

“I suspected, Your Highness. Yrtolk of Norodinan is well-known to you, and Princess Neradina is a dutiful daughter who has known for a long time that her

marriage would be made for reasons of state. If you had wanted her to marry Yrtolk, she would have done so, without requiring a test period of close acquaintance. I think she was kidnapped.”

“You know much about my daughter, for an outlander?”

“My father told me about her ten years ago, when he had some hope that I might marry her.”

“A Count of Pavadaris dared aspire—?”

“It was, if you remember, during the war with Lortorth, and marriage with me would have meant alliance with my distant cousin, the Emperor of Malath. And I am of blood royal on my mother’s side, though my father be but a count. In any case, there seemed some hope, and from what I heard of Neradina and what I saw in a painting my father obtained of her, I was quite smitten. Though I am no longer in love with her, I think it unlikely I shall ever love another. One such love is enough for a lifetime.”

“However that may be, you are right about the kidnapping,” said King Voironis. Milcoradis bowed. “Yrtolk has wanted for some time to marry Neradina, to cement our alliance against Gormund – and also, in my considered opinion, because the princess lacks not sex appeal. I refused his suit, without

telling him why. Yrtolk is a wielder of magic, and his children are destined to be wielders of magic, while the House of Nordos is forbidden by an ancient geas from ever counting a magic-wielder among its offspring, though we may employ magicians. A child of Yrtolk and Neradina, though a member of Dolas, would yet be offspring of Nordos and thus eternally accursed if he or she should ever directly use magic. Most people think we of Nordos possess great magic but prefer to use other magicians for what we deem are lesser purposes. Only your reputation for reticence and my desire that you understand the great importance of your mission cause me to mention this to you. I know it will go no further.”

Milcoradis bowed.

“The alliance could have been cemented just as firmly, as I was anxious that it should be, by Prince Nond-Im’s wedding Yrtolk’s daughter. Inolona might be a magic-wielder, but her children wouldn’t have to be and therefore, could be fitting – and safe – offspring of House Nordos. But before I could suggest it to Yrtolk, he had grown impatient and captured Neradina and her chaperones while they were riding in the Gorodonos Hills. He gave out word, which I could not contradict for fear of starting war, that she had almost agreed to marry him but wanted to know him better first. It is a scandalous suggestion, though she has six chaperones.

However, that now is the official story. I can't lead my forces into Norodinan because if Yrtolk and I were to weaken each other now, Gormund would invade us both, successfully. The alliance must not be broken. Neradina must not marry Yrtolk. And there is some danger that she would, strong-willed though she be. Yrtolk is an attractive man, and his magic has its origin in the roots of masculinity, though he is not known as a womanizer. It has been said that he last used these particular arts in the seeking of his first wife, and that he has since been reserving personal benefit of his arts for the time at which he should have decided to take a second wife, that he might thus be sure of her, no matter who she might be. His powers in that ambit are at their fullest during the full moon. And we have only three and a half days until the next full moon, thirteen hundred miles away. I doubt that Neradina could resist him then."

The King let his hands fall to the arms of his chair. "So...your job, if you will take it, is to make the rescue of Neradina the escapade of a knight-errant, without the backing of the kingdom. If it can be pulled off under that cover, you will have the gratitude of Ensgabaen and of House Nordos. And you may be the best man at the wedding of Inolona and Prince Nond-Im, which I doubt not will quickly follow.

“Tell me, Milcoradis, why do you undertake such perilous quests, even with your access to magical aids?”

“I seek the death that may not be avoided, Highness,” the adventurer replied. “I follow Doriadomri, who gives eternal happiness to men who lose their lives for a worthy cause. I risk my life while seeking every fitting means of keeping it. Such pleases Doriadomri. But genuine occasions for such escapades with sincerity of motive are few. I am more usually at the periphery of others’ dangerous doings, which often I find interesting enough.”

“Doriadomri has few followers these days, I fear,” said the King.

“The few he has try to serve him well; he deserves more,” said Milcoradis. “What can you tell me of Yrtolk’s stronghold and character, Your Highness? I have heard some things of him, but you know him better than anyone else, I should think. I may have heard wrong.”

“Yrtolk’s stronghold is a single tall tower, the tallest tower on the continent of Dismaen in this age,” the King said. “It is not within a castle, for the enclosing of outer walls around it would stifle the magic that envelops it, whence Yrtolk’s power comes. Its arrow-slits are magical, so that arrows shot from them fly seven times farther than ordinary bowshot and they never miss. At the top of the tower

is a crystal that makes moonlight bright as day for the range of arrows from the tower, and stores the moonlight to keep the stronghold environs lighted when there is no moon. As long as that crystal glows, Yrtolk's tower cannot be taken by surprise." Milcoradis smiled. "When any visitor comes within sight of the tower," the King continued, "Yrtolk questions him at a distance. And if his answers please not Yrtolk, who knows when men are telling truth, he escapes not death in likeness of an hedgehog.

"As for Yrtolk himself, he is a peculiar man," the King continued. "He will keep strictly to the letter of his word, once that word has been given, but he seeks diligently to keep that fact hidden and will rarely give his word. He has no compunction about having underlings wipe out an enemy with arrows or magic, unless that enemy can get close enough to pose a personal threat with sword or other hand-wielded weapon, and then he feels honour-bound to make defence solely with his own sword-arm and to accept defeat if it can thus be given him. He is a formidable swordsman. If you can defeat him in single combat over Princess Neradina, she will be yours to bring home, unless he should discover you have something else he wants, in which case he will consider that a new contest has begun between you. And he will not scruple to use underlings to gain what he

wants, apart from protection of his life.”

“Thank you, Your Highness.”

Milcoradis bowed again, picked up the scabbarded sword he had laid across a chair and fixed it to belt, swept his black cloak around him, and adjusted the mask he had removed, then turned to go. He turned back. “I assume I may use the services of your chief magician? He knows the truth?”

“He does. But he may not transport you toward Norodinan. Yrtolk would feel our magic being used against him and that would mean war. If Axpirc can give you aids that will enhance your own powers, he may do so, though I doubt he has any.”

“He can help me to them, though, Your Highness” said Milcoradis, and he left the private chamber of the King.

Yrtolk of Norodinan was gazing raptly at Princess Neradina, who sat on the other side of a small table on which three candles flickered, reading a romance. “It pleases me so much that you don’t pluck your eyebrows, as most women these days do,” said Yrtolk. “It suggests you value vision more than mere appearance, since eyebrows are safeguards of sight, and it enhances your beauty by

underlining the clear, pure marble of your brow.” Neradina smiled. “Not tonight, Yrtolk,” she said.

Admitted, after knocking three times, to the sanctum of Axpirc, Milcoradis said, “I’d like to be sent to the cave of Sezalina and brought back in an hour and a half.”

The corner of Axpirc’s mouth quirked. “Sezalina has a price,” he said.

Milcoradis found himself in darkness outside a stout oaken door set in a wall of rock in a mountain northwest of Ensgabaen. At least, that’s where it was supposed to be. He drew his dagger and rapped upon the door with its pommel, then sheathed the dagger. After a while, the door opened a crack, and a hag, an ugly one, peered out. “What can I do for you, Milcoradis?”

“Aren’t you going to ask me in?”

“Not hostile, are you? Sorry, but I have to check.”

“Not hostile,” said the knight-errant, and the door opened wide. The cave was bright with candlelight. She got him cakes and tea, and they chatted while they ate and drank. Wiping crumbs from her chin, she looked at him expectantly.

“I’m on a mission that needs the Lamp of Frirla and the Limithian Boots,” he said. She appeared to ponder.

“My usual price for lending these – or anything else – is that the borrower, if he be male, should lie with me,” said the hag. “But you can’t pay that.”

“Doriadomri would turn his face from me. At least until I’d done great penance.”

“Tell you what,” said Sezalina, “I’ll have you kiss me, as chastely as you like, but you must hold the kiss until I break it. When I do, you’ll have the Lamp of Frirla and the Limithian Boots.”

“Done.”

“Not done yet.” She came around the table and sat in his lap, turning up her face.

Milcoradis pressed his lips to the dry, ugly, wrinkled mouth with genuine affection, moving them in approximations of murmurings of chaste love. The texture of the old mouth changed, became soft, intoxicating, as Sezalina’s body turned voluptuous in his grasping arms. Suddenly he bore her up, kiss unbroken, and placed her gently on the table and put his knee upon it. Then he bethought himself of what he did, and concentrated all his energies upon kissing chastely, of

which Sezalina, having responded fiercely to his sudden passion, soon grew tired. She broke the kiss.

“Nearly had me there,” said Milcoradis.

“And ‘twould have been no sin for you, as Doriadomri reckons sin, for I took you unaware. Didn’t know I could work such magic on myself, now, did you?” The blonde vision chuckled. “Going to bed with a man’s great fun, in hag-body or this one, but it takes a kiss to make the change. I’m good for three days now, maybe better. It’s been said a chaste kiss is good for seven, and now I’ll find out for sure.”

“I hate to think of the use you’ll make of it.”

“Then don’t think of it, dear boy. You’ve got enough to think about if you need the Lamp of Frirla *and* the Limithian Boots. By the way, how did you know they existed, not to mention my having them?”

“I once did a favour for Orundoas. In return, he told me of six of the Nine Magical Aids for Heroes Who Battle Magic-wielders, and of the keepers of them.”

“Oh. That must have been some favour.”

Milcoradis smiled. “Orundoas seemed to think so.”

“Well, my son, I hope they come in handy for you. Just a minute till I get them.” She went to the back of the deep cave, and came back with a small, blackened tin lantern with a bulging lens set in the small door of it, and a pair of brown leather boots which were each fastened on the outer side with seven gold buttons and silver loops.

“Now, no doubt Orundoas told you all he knew about the Nine Magical Aids for Heroes Who Battle Magic-wielders, but I’m not putting my two in the hands of anyone without giving a full account of how they work. I’m responsible for what happens to you in your use of them.

“The Lamp of Frirla, as long as the candle inside keeps burning, will make night as bright as day for its bearer and his companions and keep it dark for all others – provided there’s a moon in the sky and that it’s covered by at least a small cloud. Using the lamp’s therefore a risky business, as Orundoas doubtless told you. But there’s one thing that only gets told to heroes who use the Lamp, and that’s the fact that the power of the Lamp can be used to bring over a cloud cover, of an hour’s duration, by the user’s circling the Lamp around his head three times and saying a four-lined rhyming evocation of darkness, that he has to make up himself. Even Orundoas doesn’t know that. At least, I’d bet he doesn’t. He

couldn't very well let on he did, anyway.

“The price of using the Lamp is a day's blindness for each hour's use. You can take the blindness any day within a year.

“Now, the Boots. The Limithian Boots will bear their wearer without tiring or need of rest for as long as he or she wears them, provided he travels on foot, whether he walks or runs. They will fit each wearer comfortably. They won't enable you to run any faster than you normally do, except that they will keep you ahead of any pursuit you may be troubled by, until the pursuer tires.

“The price of using the Boots is sleep, the sleep you must catch up on after taking them off: seven hours for each twenty-four in which the Boots are worn. The first time you take off the Boots, you will feel rested as if you have had a night's sleep – if in fact you did before you put them on – and will remain awake until seventeen hours have passed. Then you will sleep the full length of the time required. But if you put on the Boots again before sleeping, the next time you take them off you will fall asleep at once.

“You fasten the boots by starting with the bottom button on each Boot and fastening upwards. There will come upon you, after the fourth button on each boot, a strong disinclination to finish buttoning, which will increase with each

button, but unless you finish buttoning each boot, they cannot be taken off. There is no penalty for failing to take them off, except that life without sleep can become very boring.

“Well, there you are, sonny boy. Good luck with your mission.” They gossiped about Orundoas until the magic of Axpirc drew Milcoradis back to Castle Ensgabaen.

“What are these?” asked Axpirc.

“That is known only to the Keepers and certain selected heroes,” Milcoradis replied. And Axpirc had to be content with that, as he well knew.

“Are you awake?” Yrtolk called softly outside the door of Neradina’s room. Told that she was, he asked, still softly, “May I enter? I like to gaze on face of woman newly wakened, ‘fore she washes. ‘Tis a prospect most appealing.”

“Bugger off, Yrtolk,” called Neradina, laughing in spite of herself. She liked the idea of being specially attractive in the early morning.

Having put on his yellow doublet and green breeches, Milcoradis reached for

the right Boot of the Limithian Pair beside his bed in Castle Ensgabaen, and drew it on. He quickly fastened the first four buttons, but as his hand moved to the fifth, he felt the Boot was snug enough upon his foot and lower leg, and he reached for the other Boot. Then he remembered the Boot could not be taken off until fully fastened, and he reached again for the fifth button. A strong distaste for the whole process of buttoning filled his feelings. He wished some faster fastener had been invented, by magician or by cobbler, especially for the fastening of boots. He fastened the fifth button. The distaste for the process grew. He thought of taking off the boots and forgetting about the use of them. Then he realized his mission could not be completed without them, and he forced himself to fasten the sixth button. He had to clutch his right wrist with his left hand and place the right upon the last silver loop, before he could compel his fingers to push the loop over the last gold button.

He found he had to do exactly the same thing with the left boot. Then he put on his mask, picked up his knapsack, wrapped his cloak around him, and went down to the kitchen, where he had breakfast and got provisions for the long run to Norodinan.

Few people were stirring in the streets as Milcoradis went down the hill from

the castle and trotted through the capital, cloak flapping underneath the knapsack. After the guards let him out the eastern gate, he ran, marvelling at the lightness of his movement, to where the road entered Forest Dunomolis, out of sight of the city walls. There he removed his cloak, rolled it up, and put it in his knapsack, and took off his mask, which he put on top of the cloak. Then he began to run again, full out.

He was amazed at the ease with which he skimmed the road, his feet hardly feeling their fall on the hard surface, his legs moving swiftly without sensation of effort. He found he needed not to concentrate on moving forward in his running, but could turn his head to enjoy the autumn scenery as legs carried him easily onward. But as he ran, toward the end of the day the red and gold of autumn began to pall upon his sense, which normally had had fulfilment accompanied by feeling of effort of either his own body or of the horse under him. Lack of that sensation made mere visual perception boring for the warrior whose body was trained for effort. But still he skimmed along the road, putting mile after monotonous mile beneath him, until moonlight spread across the land and he skimmed through silver-thatched villages and grey-stone towns, feeling no longer any physical kinship with that past which he ran. Glad was he when it was time to

eat; bodily contact and taste was grateful sensation. Tempted was he to stop and take off the boots, but he dared not slow his journey. He could have borrowed a horse from town or farm he passed, and taken off the boots, but his plan, if all went well, called for taking off the boots at a certain time, and he wanted certainty that their taking off would not send him to sleep at once, so that time would have to be the first time.

Badly he wanted sleep, to ease the boredom of effortless fast movement, to make it again a novelty upon awaking, but otherwise he had no need of sleep, and had to force himself to move on.

By the second night he was in the Gorodonos Hills, having left the last small village at their base an hour or so before, when he came upon a man bloodstained and limping, who said he had been wounded by a Thonobilian swiftpard, kin to the Norbonial cheetah, which was following to toy with him as cat with mouse before killing. The swiftpard had taken him by surprise and bitten him through the arm before he could draw the sword it feared. The heart of Milcoradis sank within him; it was the will of Doriadomri that none in danger be left unsuccored by his servants, but escorting the swiftpard's victim back to that last village would take too long a time that could not be made up for Neradina's rescue before the full

moon. He drew his sword and accompanied the man back down the hills, senses alert for swiftpard, which now did not attack.

After seeing the man safe at the village, Milcoradis turned away with a heavy heart to start his run again. He tried to run faster than before, but the attempt was useless; effort was impossible while one wore the Limithian Boots. But a mile back to where he'd met the man, he had an idea: he ran once more to the village, gave the man money for new clothing and took his bloodstained doublet, then started on his way again. The swiftpard picked up the scent of the blood it'd thought it had lost and, since Milcoradis drew not his sword but ran, it gave chase. The Limithian Boots, true to their nature, kept the adventurer ahead of the sixty-mile-an-hour pursuit until the lost time was well made up.

It was moonrise on the night of the full moon that Milcoradis looked out upon the Plain of Norodinan, which held the high tower of Yrtolk. The moonlight shone down upon the plain and brighter upon the tower and upon the ground about for seven bowshot. The sky was cloudless, and the tower was, Milcoradis estimated, three miles away. He took out the Lamp of Frirla and his flint and steel, and lit the candle inside the lantern. Then he began to run, the nearness of danger banishing boredom for the first time of that long journey.

“I have finally figured out why Solomon says his beloved’s breasts are like twin roes in a field,” said Yrtolk, turning away from the moonlit window. “I never could see the connection. Surely, I thought, something spindle-legged like a deer could not be similar to a smooth and buxom woman’s breast, whose glory consists in that it hath not such appendages so long and slender. But the similarity consists in this, that each part of the two pairs compared is as like its fellow, in a different way, as the other pair are alike. That is true poetry. Only gazing on breasts as magnificent as yours, however veiled so modestly, could inspire me toward that divination.”

“Not till we’re married, Yrtolk,” Princess Neradina told him firmly.

“I wouldn’t want you without marriage,” said Yrtolk, joyfully. “Does that really mean you’ll—”

“Doriadomri, lord of light,
Make this moonlight far less bright;
Sternest god of warrior stark,
Grant this warrior hour of dark.”

“Damn! What the morofumpis happened to the moonlight?”

“Good gods, Yrtolk! I was about to accept you! What’s going on here?”

“What I want to know is what the morofumpis happened to the moonlight!

Guards! Man all the arrowslits! Check the bolts upon the door! Darofunil, that damn crystal’s your job when I’m busy; what the morofumpis—”

“The magic isn’t any kind that I’m familiar with, Lord Yrtolk, if it is magic,” said Darofunil, Yrtolk’s chief assistant magician. “Maybe catastrophe has overtook the moon. If the moon were destroyed, the crystal might no longer be able to prolong moonlight, without the primal source.”

“Away from the windows,” said Yrtolk. “Light candles well away from them. Bring my father’s deepest tomes; they may hint at something pertinent.”

Yrtolk’s rapid reading was interrupted a few minutes later by the loud pounding of the huge knocker on the tower’s oaken door. Guards massed around the entrance as Yrtolk supervised its opening. A man in yellow doublet and green breeches, travel-stained, cut in the fashion worn by Pavadarian noblemen, stood in the doorway. “Lord Yrtolk, I bring news of the cause of darkness and of what it may portend!” Yrtolk, whose magic had its origin in the roots of masculinity,

knew the man was telling the truth, and he did not probe beyond the man's appearance of excited concern for Yrtolk's welfare.

"Come in and tell us," Yrtolk said, beckoning. The guards stood aside, and the man approached, then suddenly whipped out sword. "Milcoradis!" said Neradina, who had been coming closer on seeing the stranger was trusted.

"I'm here for Neradina," the knight-errant told Yrtolk. "Draw your sword." He stepped back, and Yrtolk drew. They circled each other in the wide space near the tower door. Suddenly Milcoradis cut at Yrtolk's flank. Yrtolk's hand swept across his body in a quarte parry, and the cut was blocked. Yrtolk did not riposte. Milcoradis cut again at flank; Yrtolk's hand swept again across, then out, directing sword at shoulder, but Milcoradis ducked and turned sword up as Yrtolk, continuing his motion, cut downward. The younger man swung his blade around at Yrtolk's legs, and Yrtolk leaped off the floor, again cutting downward. Milcoradis parried. They again began to circle, then closed, exchanging cuts, parries, and counter-ripostes, Milcoradis backing toward the door, until both were tiring. Suddenly Milcoradis, having taken the measure of his man and weighed his various cadences, executed a highly rapid four-part attack with extreme premeditation, which could work at all only if all went as planned: after an open

feint at flank, prompting a perfunctory warding, he turned wrist downward as if to make a thrusting cut at his foe's right thigh, half-circled again at flank, brought sword back around Yrtolk's blade for feint at where the wrist would be, then jumped his edge a little to the right and down around inward to the left. While he was doing this, Yrtolk parried Earth septime, Earth quarte, and in response to feint at wrist, what he and Milcoradis would call smerthan and is known on Earth today as sabre quinte, which against cut at wrist would have been perfect but just then lent his blade to the planned disarming.

“You've beaten me for now. Take the girl – as far as my men will let you go once you're outside my reach. I've heard of you, Milcoradis; you won't threaten an unarmed man with murder even to protect yourself. The girl's mine, eventually.”

“I can hold them off for a while, fighting in the doorway.”

Keeping Yrtolk under sword's guard, Milcoradis said to Neradina, “Take off my boots and put them on yourself.” She knelt by his right foot.

“Hold on,” said Yrtolk, voice commanding. Neradina hesitated, hand on silver loop. “I want those boots,” Yrtolk said. “They're probably one of the Nine Magical Aids I've heard about. This changes things. My men will take them – you

can't change boots in the middle of a fight – and you'll die for no reason. Will that be following Doriadomri?"

Milcoradis sighed and shrugged. "Give them to him." He leaned upon his sword, projecting to the best of his ability, while his gut tried to boil with excitement, an air of total defeat, failure and despair, hoping with the very back of his mind he wouldn't have to keep it up more than a few seconds lest he start the peculiar telltale sweat, which Yrtolk's magic sense for truth could hardly fail to smell, that usually covered his forehead, now cooled after exertion, when he was keeping himself otherwise under tight control (he had just barely forestalled that sweat when running his bluff about the moonlight's failing).

Fortunately for Milcoradis, Yrtolk, calmly sure of the situation, again thought not of probing appearances. He drew the boots on, fastened each as far as the fourth button. Milcoradis straightened up. "Try taking them off," he said gently. Yrtolk tried. The loops would not come off. Milcoradis leaned lightly on his sword now, his attitude that of a man who has an enemy exactly where he wants him. (Inwardly, he was begging Doriadomri to dam the sweat he could almost feel starting). Yrtolk again failed probe. He didn't conceive of a double bluff, not against him. "What happens if you don't get them off will be your doing, not

mine; you're the one who put them on," Milcoradis said. "If you want to get them off, give me your word you'll give Neradina a horse and me the boots, and that neither you nor anyone acting on your behalf will follow us, except that a score will accompany as guard of honor to Ensgabaen." Trembling, Yrtolk promised.

Milcoradis told Yrtolk how to get the boots off, which Yrtolk, cursing at deceit successful, did with less difficulty than Milcoradis had had, so relieved was he, and Milcoradis put them on with greater trouble, and the party set out for Ensgabaen as soon as the moonlight cleared, Milcoradis retrieving his knapsack beside the tower's steps.

Back at Castle Ensgabaen, after a feast given for no official reason but really celebrating the return of Neradina, Milcoradis was back in the room he'd occupied the night before the long run to Norodinan, and he was about to take off, for the second time, the Limithian Boots when a knock came on the door. He opened it, and in came Neradina. "Milcoradis," said she, "I've wanted to sleep with you ever since Uncle Norbodis arranged that exchange of paintings ten years ago and tonight I'm going to do it, Doriadomri or no Doriadomri. If you don't, I'll say you used a Magical Aid to get me here to rape me." The threat was made in jest, of course, but suggested sincerely a brusque rejection would distress her.

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“If I must sleep with you, then I suppose I must sleep with you,” said
Milcoradis, sitting back upon the bed. “Just let me get those boots off.”

II

MILCORADIS AND THE AVATAR

“I have a boon to ask of you, Milcoradis, which is most important to me,” said the vision of sensuous loveliness who had just arrived at Castle Pavadaris.

“For what else would a woman previously unknown to me request a private meeting with a man of my, ahem, reputation?”

“It has been said that men devoted to the kind of chastity which Doriadomri deems right for bachelors can yet appreciate the allure of femininity sometimes called wanton,” said Lady Althea of Modon.

“No question about that. Truth can comprehend error, but error can’t comprehend truth.”

“If, then, what has been called wanton femininity can be shown to appreciate fully the discipline of perpetual virginity, you would admit that it has a truth equal to that of Doriadomri?”

“Truth does not contradict itself, though there are paradoxes and divergent

disciplines in its pursuit and its integrity. If what you suggest were really done, you would appear to have a point, my lady.”

“Shall we drink then, as prelude to further talk, to truth and justice?”

“You are aware, of course, that such a toast would bind me in your service if the cause in which you sought it were one I considered just?”

“I am aware, of course. I have brought with me a bottle of the finest Kalmedena for the purpose, should you choose to drink.”

“Kalmedena? Some choice!” Milcoradis took down two golden goblets from the top of a bookcase that reached to the level of his forehead and almost to the level of hers, and he was by no means accounted short of stature. She went to the door where one servant of each stood waiting, and came back to the table with a bottle of pure crystal, from which she poured.

“To truth and justice.”

“To Truth and Justice.” Each sipped and swallowed, she first by a little, then set the glasses aside, Althea looking into the brown eyes of Milcoradis with a serene gaze of limpid grey. And it seemed to the knight-errant-for-hire-on-quests-wholly-chivalrous that he was reading the mind of a goddess incarnate, a goddess ever-virgin, never-bearing, though often promiscuous, or what Doriadomri would

call promiscuous. He felt sublime wonder descend into the world of men, to lie with man after man, in age after age, giving of itself exultantly to cheer the chosen against deepening of despair in minds knowing themselves mortal, giving itself completely to each one of the elect, withholding nothing, so that even incidental healing of the half-seal on body's door to self occurred after each wholehearted gift. Milcoradis experienced each giving in a glow of heightened abstractedness which made no effect at all on the coarser natural level of emotion; he was still chaste as ever when the vision changed from royal raptures freely dispensed, to prick of knife at throat and a savage plundering of divine dignity.

His throat was bilish when he returned to his own, now most empty, as it seemed, single consciousness. "I did read in a rare book from Tellus that men and women all are gods or goddesses incarnate, to different degrees," he muttered. "The theory's given some weight here, it seems."

"Flippant...!" She checked herself, settling into a grim restraint. "I had to let him proceed, or withhold myself from the chosen forever if I'd been killed in this body, in these circumstances. But I've charged him with the rape, in my mundane manifestation, and he elected Cynics' Court, where the trial is set for next month. I want you to attend the trial and judge for yourself between me and the court if

the charge is dismissed, as rape cases often unfairly are. Unfairly to the victim, if not by the letter of the law. If you deem me wronged and the wrong yet unredressed after trial, bring the dastard to justice in a private duel. You're swordsman good enough to handle an ordinary military officer."

"You've got a deal, goddess."

"There is one other thing," the lady said then. "The mind can play peculiar tricks, and one of them is a skeptical rejecting later of what was known at the time to be direct revelation. I want your mother, a sister, or some old nurse whom you trust, to examine me privately and report to you on her finding, which your mind may contrast with the medical officials' report at the raper's trial."

Milcoradis brought the Lady Althea to his Aunt Mosinia's private chamber and returned to his study. When the avatar – or would that be avataress? he wondered – came back with his aunt and the confirmation that had been requested, that Lady Althea was at least physically *virgo intacta*, he took up the goblets for them to drink the Kalmedena remaining in them. He noticed that again she drank before him, perhaps a little hastily. After she had left, he told his waiting servant that he himself would see to washing of the goblets, and he dismissed the man.

At the trial of Obdon Nirboun in the High Court at Modon, capital of Dofollos,

it was quickly established, by the usual expert scientific evidence, that a sexual secretion of Obdon Nirboun, captain in the King's Army, had been found in the pertinent anatomical area of Lady Althea of Rosebloom Avenue on the night that the rape was alleged, and that she was not physically virgo intacta at the time of the examination, there being some indication, not conclusive, that her status had changed at about the time alleged. The lady herself took the stand after a rather perfunctory account, by two members of the King's Civic Watch, of the arrest of Nirboun, who had made immediately a statement to the Watch, which was taken down in writing on being repeated to the scribe of the Watch Captain. That statement was not being adduced in evidence, said Crown counsel.

The lady looked briefly at Milcoradis after taking the oath that called on witness of Sminamathia, the name under which Aphrodite is best known on Moryaen.

"I was walking along Scimitar Curve when I saw ahead the figure of a man who carried himself with the air of a cultured warrior," said Lady Althea. "I like the conversation of such men – most refreshing and bracing to the feminine mind – and so I hastened a little and fell into step with him – it was Obdon Nirboun – and remarked on the fine weather. Our conversation, which soon became chiefly

about the epic literature of war, was indeed pleasant, and I invited him to my home to continue it. Once there, I offered him cakes and herb tea, and the conversation did continue. He was a master of literary sly innuendo, and I took what I fear was a naughty and perhaps misleading delight in that. Possibly mistaking the direction my pleasure took, which was to laughter rather than to lasciviousness, he rather boldly suggested we adjourn unto my bedroom. I was indignant, most sore affronted, but he drew his dagger, damned me for a pernicious tease, forced me to the floor with threat of disfigurement, and had his will of me.”

“And what was that?” asked Crown counsel.

“Rough sexual intercourse, gluttishly enjoyed by him, much to my horror and dismay, and very painful.”

Lady Althea stood up well under cross-examination, and seemed unconcerned when defence counsel asked whether she was in the habit of taking cultured military men home for conversation. She said she was.

“Have you had sexual intercourse with many of them?” Her eyes flashed, and Crown counsel, rising hastily, objected that Section 447 of the Criminal Statutes of Dofollos prohibited questioning of the complainant in a rape case, about

previous sexual conduct. Defence counsel said he was prepared to argue that that law – of six months’ duration so far – was unconstitutional, in that it unfairly assumed the credibility of a rape complainant and prejudiced the trial of an accused, in cases where women were in the habit of picking up strangers for casual sexual indulgence and such pickup was alleged in the defence evidence. The Crown requested a day to prepare argument, which was granted.

After the arguments of counsel had been heard, the three High Court Justices set aside a day for research and discussion. Their decision after that, succinctly put by the Chief Justice, was that the law in question was indeed nullified by the constitutional right to a fair trial, in the circumstances outlined by defence counsel, where it might prejudice a defence alleging that kind of pickup, and that Lady Althea had to answer questions about past sexual activity, since counsel in this case had stated there would be, in the defence, evidence relevant to that. Lady Althea had to answer questions about her past sexual conduct. There had been, the answers revealed, quite a bit of it. She’d had sexual intercourse with all the specimens of literary virility she’d accosted on the streets, and there’d been many. Defence counsel had specific names available about which to ask.

“Would it be fair to suggest,” asked defence counsel, “that so far as you are

concerned, ‘literary sly innuendo’ leads quite as often to lasciviousness as to laughter?”

“Yes, my lords.” Her head was bowed, her voice subdued.

Nirboun’s evidence in his defence was that he’d apparently been found fully as acceptable as his predecessors and had had no need of force to enjoy the Lady Althea’s lovely body, albeit perhaps indeed a little gluttishly, if that were a word in the Dofollosan dictionary. He said that after they’d lain together, Lady Althea had poured wine and suggested drinking to their relationship.

“‘Casual swiving, however fun-filled physically, is no way to start a lasting relationship,’ I said to her then. ‘I never drink to a slut after the fact, whatever may be necessary to get to her twat at the start. Fine ladies who delight in war through “literature” are no fit companions out of bed for a soldier. I’d rather befriend a two-dinnik whore who’d fight for the right to choose her customers.’ I think the charge of rape was laid in revenge for my contempt.”

Lady Althea’s face was grey, Milcoradis noted. She was looking strait ahead. After the High Court – sometimes called the Cynics’ Court because the justices weighed the evidence on a purely logical basis instead of committing themselves, as juries in Court Ordinary sometimes did, to belief of some who testified – had

dismissed the charge, as Crown counsel, outside the courtroom, had warned the lady to expect, Milcoradis took her by the elbow and guided her to a nearby tavern, where he ordered wine. They drank, and he said he felt bound to pursue justice in her employment. She smiled wanly, and thanked him before she left to walk home alone. Then he bought from the landlord the glasses they'd used. It was a custom sometimes in Modon of lovers who drank together publicly, and the landlord, unacquainted with Milcoradis, thought nothing of it. Milcoradis took the glasses to his lodging and subjected them to certain tests not among the arts forbidden on technically advanced but essentially chivalrous Moryaen.

After the testing was finished, Milcoradis went to King's Barracks No. Five and invited Captain Nirboun out for a glass of ale, suggesting they drink to his recent luck.

"That wasn't luck, that was justice."

"There's sometimes luck we know nothing about, till someone tells us. Come drink with me and hear a tale thereof."

Seated in one of the taverns of King's Base Prime, Milcoradis told of his first meeting with Lady Althea, and Nirboun turned pale.

"I'd no idea I was screwing a goddess. How could I know? Man, I'm not to

blame. She looked like a slut, she talked like a refined slut, she reacted all sluttish while I did it. A goddess! I suppose you want my balls now? Goddess or not, they won't be got without a fight!"

"Calm yourself, Captain. She's no goddess, but carnal-minded twins if I mistake not."

"What?"

"I knew from the start she was no goddess. Philosophy shows there's only one God, Whose Nature is such Pure Being that if you could perceive it directly you couldn't imagine Him not existing, and I believe that that God is He Whom this world knows as Doriadomri. The beings worshipped by most non-philosophers are really spiritual intelligences much lesser in being, mistakenly perceived by imagination rather than intellect. I was the wrong object therefore for that particular deceit. Angels don't become incarnate. And I was instantly aware, once put on guard, how the deceit could have been achieved. I've some knowledge of the Nine Magical Aids for Heroes Who Battle Magic-wielders, and the Nectar of Klemnos is the worst-kept secret of the lot, as well as the hardest Aid to obtain. It comes from a slow-moving magical fountain kept by Fanubul the Sardonick, who will release one standard bottle, Dinmudian measure, upon defeat of an automaton

made solely to fight with a sword, or upon the death of a champion fighting that automaton, who'd agreed to represent in combat the person wanting the Nectar. Two persons may fight the automaton if they choose, but no more than two. It's never been defeated by one alone. The usual thing when the Nectar is needed desperately enough in some cause sufficiently noble, is for two Heroes to fight the automaton together and for the survivor to score against it at the precise moment its sword has transfixing the unlucky one. That gets the survivor a double measure of the prize.

“The Nectar of Klemnos enables two people who drink it together, within a league of each other, to communicate by telepathy, the one who sips first being the sender. She's a marvellous actress, even inside herself.

“Anyway, my guard being up, I took fingerprints of the ‘incarnation’ when she approached me and again after I saw her out of court. They didn't match. It's my guess they were using the nectar to enable one of them to enjoy her sister's couplings while remaining physically Miss Prim for her own pride's sake. Their parents both, I found through discreet inquiry, had been extremely devious people who enjoyed deception – or should I say duplicity? – for its own sake. Great practical jokers. It explains the existence of twins remaining a secret.

“I strongly suspect the sisters encourage hope of permanent liaison from time to time to obtain champions who can maintain their supply of Klemnic Nectar. It would be unlike them to be honest about the certain deadliness of the combat, which Fanubul disdains to warn of, and unlike their usual prospects to simply offer up their lives for Lady Althea, though these would doubtless see only suitable challenge in a risk suitably misrepresented.”

“Right on,” said Captain Nirboun, apparently thoughtful.

“You can use my evidence, and investigation to discover the other twin, to bring against the ladies a charge of conspiring to lay a false accusation against you, if you like. Or you can leave them to the tender mercies of Fanubul the Sardonick. He has a terrible vengeance for anyone known to use deceit to obtain a champion against his automaton, and an equally terrible punishment for those who are known not to be heroes and yet are known to use the Nectar to the detriment of people who are not magic-users. I don’t see how he could combine the two, but he is incredibly ingenious. It’s up to you. I wouldn’t have suggested the choice, but that I am bound to pursue justice in this particular case.”

“I think I’ll use the court system, and hope this Fanubul doesn’t get the news till after the beheading,” said Captain Nirboun. “What the hell, she was a good

lay.”

“This may teach you to be careful whom you call sluts,” Milcoradis remarked.

“Sluts resent it quite as much as the chaste. And the priests of Doriadmori teach that a man who lies with a slut is one body with her. I suspect his soul’s not greatly different.”

III

MILCORADIS AND THE HEADSMAN

“Dispossess those peasants, Ankhordon, and I’ll have your head in fourteen days,” said Drelauni of Pennofol, a knight-errant of Doriadomri like Milcoradis himself. Almost all present knew the threat was not idly made: no one threatened Ankhordon who meant it not: he had a short way with that particular kind of humour.

“Be damned,” quoth Ankhordon.

“Not for that. When even the judge who granted your technical right in strict letter of law could not forbear to comment on the strength of their claim in common morality, that claim had to be almost perfect.”

“Almost is not enough.”

“Not for peasants,” said Fillomos.

“To hell with you *and* your brother,” said Drelauni. “All right, then, the head it is. I’ll start preparing this evening.”

As Milcoradis and the new clerk of Tollim Advocate rode away from Manor Khordonhon, Musluas asked, “Did Sir Drelauni really mean that?”

“The head, the whole head, and nothing but the head. He’ll do it.”

“And be executed.”

“No.”

“What? Why not?”

“You’ll see. You just haven’t got acquainted enough around here yet. You’ll see. He won’t even need your master’s help, which served him so well on similar occasions before.”

“Before?”

“Before. Drelauni has been quite a champion of the little man against local petty tyrants.” Milcoradis would say no more; he enjoyed a touch of mystification from time to time. Musluas, who as a promising clerk-advocate was inclined to think of himself as having a natural talent for eliciting information, could not pry out another item.

Two days later, Fillomos failed to get an answer, even to shouting and pounding, at the bolted door of his older brother’s study in the North Tower of Manor Khordonhon, and had the door broken open. Ankhordon’s neck and

shoulders were slumped over the desk, above blood soaked into the list he'd made of new fields he'd got for sheep farming after dispossessing, quite legally, eighteen peasants whose families had held land from his forebears from time immemorial even in Ensgabaen. The head was on the floor behind the chair. The weapon, whatever it had been and wherever it was, had severed all at one razor-stroke.

Milcoradis called on Musluas after hearing the news in gory detail and repeated all of it.

“So Drelauni kept his promise, rather promptly,” said Musluas. “Does anyone know how? Motive and threat without means and opportunity aren't enough to convict for murder.”

“I know how it could have been done. One of the Nine Magical Aids for Heroes Who Battle Magic Wielders is the Axe of Bhornudin, in the keeping these days of Morrossus the Old. It was meant especially and exclusively for use against sorcerers in the act of casting spells against a hero from the protection of a sealed chamber closely guarded, but there were flaws in the original enchantment which permit it to be wielded, by one who knows them, in certain circumstances, against non-sorcerers. But in such a case it would not return immediately to

Morrossus for cleansing, as it normally does, but would remain in the possession of the user, with the victim's blood dried into it and liquefying every three hours, on the hour. Most incriminating, if one knows where to look for it.”

“Are you supposed to be telling me this? Aren't most Magical Aids dark secrets protected by geas?”

“I should be writhing in agony at your feet. If you hadn't already known. But I've heard from Spenuos Soddbrain of the sorcerer in your mother's ancestry and his blood-feud with the house of Pennofol. Throwing an unexpected axe into Drelauni's project could really have got him into serious trouble with the law.”

“Are you accusing me—?”

“You're probably the only person in these parts, and certainly the only one who heard Drelauni, who didn't also know of Drelauni's skill as an intuitively highly accurate, and almost-libellous, sculptor. It's too bad Master Tollim allows his clerks, when he has any, to talk to him only on business immediately in hand, or you'd certainly have heard in time to keep poor Ankhordon from the hell I fear he's gone to.

“Nope.” That was uttered as Milcoradis caught wrist wearing hand bearing dagger driving for his heart. His other fist knocked Musluas unconscious. Then he

disarmed the youth.

Sure enough, members of the Civil Guard alerted by Milcoradis found the still-bloody Axe of Bhornudin under Musluas's bed, and Musluas was duly committed to fair trial. The trial included able defence by Master Tollim, who at the sentence hearing made the most of pleading misguided idealistic sympathy for peasants Musluas hadn't realized were rich enough together to have even Master Tollim at his greediest diddle Ankhordon well and truly in the Court of Appeal. (In that court moral as well as legal right held sway, according to the Constitution of Engabaen, in which a young clerk advocate from distant Snudfing could not be expected yet to be much learned.) After the fair trial Musluas was duly executed with executioner's axe mundane.

IV

MILCORADIS AND THE DRIVING DRUG

“You are aware, Penduc Milcoradis, that Rendivian criminal law requires you, for the most part, to answer only ‘Yes’ or ‘No’ to questions put to you by the prosecutor or by counsel for the defence? That three exceptions to this rule may be allowed by the court? And that attempting to elaborate on such answers without such permission may be severely punished?”

“I am aware of these things, my Lord Chief Justice of the Middle Court of Rendivi.” Court etiquette required his lordship’s entire title in a witness’s first reply to him: “My lord” sufficed after that.

“Are you content to take the drug murnievin which will cause you to become violently and obviously nauseated if you give an answer you yourself believe to be false?”

“I am content to take it, my lord.” The golden beaker was given to Milcoradis and he drank down the contents, which took effect at once. Rendivian drug

science, managed and licensed under full and strict control of the state, was highly developed.

“Penduc Milcoradis,” said Advocate Nordumnis (for the defence), “were you with the accused Formend Micnoc on the night of Dobidon ninth, when a carriage he was driving was stopped by Constable Ormenc of the Rendivi Civil Militia?”

“Yes, my lord.”

“Did you smell any odour of the restricted drug sunievietae on the breath of the accused Formend Micnoc at that time?”

“No, my lord.”

“Penduc Milcoradis, are you a member of the order of Pobidion, which admits as members only males of noble blood who are without physical defect?”

“Yes, my lord.”

“Would the inability to smell be a physical defect barring admission to that order?”

“Yes, my lord.”

“I have no further questions, my lord.”

“Your witness, Indev Mudonis.”

“Thank you, my lord,” said the prosecutor. “Penduc Milcoradis, were you

riding roughly three-quarters of an hour in the carriage of the accused on the night of Dobidon ninth, before the constable stopped you?”

“Yes, my lord.”

“Did you smell sunievietae on the accused’s breath at any point during that time?”

“No, my lord.”

“Did he tell you at any time that he was using the drug sunievietae that night?”

“No, my lord.”

“Was the first half hour of your time in that carriage spent in the accused’s racing his carriage over a distance remarkable in that time?”

“Yes, my lord.”

“The accused is not normally that skilled a horseman?”

“No, my lord.”

“Had he attempted the same race with the same horses and carriage before?”

“Yes, my lord.”

“Twice?”

“Yes, my lord.”

“Would you think it fair to say he had failed miserably each time?”

“Yes, my lord.”

“Did he tell you why he was making these attempts?”

“No, my lord.”

“Did they seem important to him, in your opinion?”

“Yes, my lord.”

“Was he ever stopped by the police militia after those races?”

“Yes, my lord.”

“Twice?”

“Yes, my lord.”

“By Constable Ormenc?”

“Yes, my lord.”

“Had the constable charged him with anything on these previous occasions?”

“No, my lord.”

“Do you know any reason why the constable would lay that charge without smelling sunievietae on the accused’s breath?”

“No, my lord.”

“Can you imagine the accused’s racing so well without a drug to enhance empathy with horses, unless he had given his horses a drug to stimulate effort?”

“No, my lord.”

“Do you know whether he had given his horses such a drug?”

“My lord, I request permission to elaborate an answer for one time.”

“Granted, Penduc.”

“My lord, I was present when the horses in question were tested for residue of stimulant. So far as I know, no charges have been laid as a result.”

“Thank you, Penduc,” said the prosecutor. “I have one more question, my lord.

“Penduc, were you on the night of Dobidon ninth under the influence of any drug or disease which would inhibit your sense of smell?”

Milcoradis said, “No, my lord.” A thought occurred to the prosecutor. “Had you for any reason deliberately stopped up your nose on that occasion?”

Milcoradis hadn’t.

“Thank you, my lord. I have no further questions.”

Milcoradis was the last witness for the defence, and the summations followed quickly. The judge, in his own summing up, said that when two witnesses whose veracity was confirmed by murnievin in both instances, contradicted each other, there was always room for reasonable doubt. He dismissed the charge.

Back at Formend's house for a drink of Minuthian sminth to celebrate, Milcoradis said, "What in hell did you risk jail for with that bloody drug? It's normally available under permit, isn't it? Will you tell me that, since even Rendivian law on double jeopardy means my defect has saved your scapegrace neck? No more bull-mess about racing for the fun of it!"

"Milcoradis, old buddy, how could I refuse you an explanation? It goes no further, of course? Sit down, sit down. It's like this, old buddy:

"Mendumos, the Chief Administrator of Drug Science, is a rabid fan of horse racing, and I'm courting his youngest daughter. He's wanted at least one of the four to marry a superb horseman and she was his last hope, and she seems much in love with me. He was thoroughly disgusted, and set the condition that I race a carriage from Omnos to Disfosra in half an hour on at least one of three tries within the month, before he'd give consent for the match, which Quefuiua won't marry without. He didn't say I couldn't use drugs, which should have made me suspicious from the start, and then my application was taken straight to Taldiv Viphtamnos, so I knew something was fishy, and old Viph came up with a complicated interpretation of the rules that rejected my permit, on which I couldn't get an appeal heard for three months. And then an old sentimental-

sounding nekdiv who said he sympathized with young love and disagreed with the taldiv's interpretation, sneaked me a dose of sunievietae. I suspected he was put up to it by Mendumos, to ruin my reputation and my standing with Quefua, to stop the marriage. Daughters of Rendivian Administrators don't marry jailbirds. I was desperate. Then I remembered that a rule of our Order known only to Seventh Rankers would have allowed a Penduc of Pavadaris to enter long before that fight with Tovikon broke your nose, which I thought might well have destroyed your sense of smell. I gambled on that and invited you along for the rides. Clever, eh?"

Milcoradis could only stare at him. Surgeon Limnocos had come within a nerve's breadth of restoring his sense of smell after that fight with Tovikon.

V

SINE QUA NON

I have been reluctant quite a while to tell anyone this story. I feared too much it might be a delusional fabrication caused by some failure of my medication which otherwise went largely unnoticed. For I have a mental disorder, controlled well by a moderate prescription, which when I've been unmedicated has sometimes given rise to delusions, though never to hallucination, at least not on that scale. (It occurred to me that imagination might later have filled in visual impressions to complement delusional belief.) However, I have recently had the nerve to ask whether the memories of others regarding these events indeed match mine, especially since one of those persons asked the other day, in a telephone conversation, whether I have heard anything about Milcoradis of Pavadaris since last August. (I am writing this in June of 1996.)

It was on a sunny day last August, of which I remember not the precise date, that my sister Bernadette, my brother-in-law Ronald Nowell – visiting from

Calgary, Alberta – and I went for their first tour of Our Lady of Mercy Museum in Port au Port West. While Ron and I – Bernadette was still downstairs with Kay Abbott, chairmember of the parish museum committee – were looking at the antique cash register from Abbott and Haliburton Limited (oldest firm on Newfoundland’s west coast), we fell into conversation with prospective murderer and victim. A short, paunchy man with blue eyes and a blond mustache, looking about forty, remarked that his father still had at home in his attic such a cash register, from a village store in Ontario where his father had sometimes worked as an errand boy. After a brief exchange, he introduced the tall, black-haired, svelte, grey-eyed woman who was keeping very close to him, leaning, from a slight limp of the right leg, upon a plain and plainly serviceable walking stick. “She’s my sine qua non,” he said with a wide smile. “At least, that’s what she tells me. And I’m sure of it. I’m sure glad I met her back in—”

The beauty coughed, and he turned back to the cash register, explaining exactly how it worked. They didn’t seem to want to talk further, not to us, anyway, so Ron and I took off downstairs. We could hear some harsh whispering as we went.

We found Bern and Kathleen still talking about family history. Before we

could contribute anything, our new acquaintances joined us.

“Isn’t there a site somewhere around here where a peculiar murder took place about ten years ago?” said the male of the couple.

“Do you mean the Benoit trial case?” I asked. “Gerald Joseph Benoit and his male lover murdered Thomas Gregory O’Keefe in Piccadilly, further out. It was supposed to be a Satanic sacrifice involving sexual assault. I covered the trial in eighty-eight for The Western Star in Corner Brook.”

“I guess it was your accounts I read from the Canadian Press in Toronto,” said George Porter – if he’d given us his right name upstairs.

“They were a lot less comprehensive and less detailed than The Western Star,” I said.

“I guess. Piccadilly, you said? I think I know how to get there, from our road-map. I’d like to have a real place to fit with the stories. I kept them. It was an interesting case. Not that it matters, but as long as we’re this close...” He glanced at the tall beauty, who’d given her name as Anabel Leigh, pointing out that the surname in this case was not spelled like that of who I thought might be her namesake. She nodded, and squeezed his hand.

“What was the exact place?” Porter asked.

“It was called the mine road at the trial,” I said. They thanked me, and they left.

Soon after, as we walked toward the Nowells’ rented car, a man came down the steps of the nearby church (the largest wooden building in Newfoundland) who looked as if he’d mistaken it for a meeting place of the Society for Creative Anachronism – his costume included what I thought must be a thoroughly dandy sword. He asked us whether we’d seen a woman named Anubili, and described the beauty just departed. We told him we had.

“Know ye where she is now? ‘Tis matter of life and death. I must prevent murder.” Ron told him what we knew and offered him a ride. All four jumped into the car, Bern hoping her skills as a now-retired registered nurse would not be needed.

Ron is ordinarily a very calm and careful driver, and I guess he was careful then (I’m no driver myself) for the speed he made, but we made really good time to Piccadilly and stopped abruptly at a little house there to ask the way to the mine road. We got there just as Porter was unbuttoning his shirt. “What do you perverts want?” he asked. “Bugger off. Now.”

“You’d be dead soon if we did,” said our mediievally dressed companion, who

was ahead of the rest of us. “I am Milcoradis of Pavadaris,” said he – and what a shock I got: I’d always assumed I was being fed fiction about him and his “so-called world” – “and I am pursuing a witch of Moryaen called Anubili who must sacrifice seven men in sexual congress, on each of seven worlds, in places where such sacrifice was made at least once before, to gain eternal youth and power of which men rarely dream.”

Anabel Leigh whipped the blade out from her swordstick and lunged. Even faster, Milcoradis drew, parried, cut, sweeping off the head above the neck he’d aimed for. The head vanished on hitting ground, and the body burned fast with greenish-blue smoke without anyone lighting a match, till soon it too had disappeared.

“The rules of sacrifice needed that she give you at least veiled warning, Sir,” said Milcoradis to Porter, who looked much more shaken and relieved at narrow escape than distraught at love’s betrayal. “‘Not without witch’ would be my guess. It’s a favourite phrase of hers, in Latin, on our world.” Poor George was about the colour of the dissipating smoke. He said he’d like to rest in his car a while before driving back to his hotel in Stephenville, but he felt quite well enough to do the latter in good time. He asked what we intended to tell the police.

“The who?” said I, and all agreed that that would be the best approach, especially Milcoradis. We took Milcoradis back to Our Lady of Mercy Church, where he needed to be in the vestibule at a certain time. We talked in the car a long while, and I was finally quite convinced that he was who he said, and that my source of Moryaenan information was thoroughly reliable, and I got from him a lot of lore about his world, some of which I may well recount elsewhere. He was thrilled unto the core to be able to worship in the Flesh, that Flesh veiled as Bread in Our Lady of Mercy Church Whom so many tourists now ignore, the God Whom he had known on Moryaen as Doriadomri, Who had enabled his between-world travel through the agency of a Folk with preternatural gifts whom the heathen of his world sometimes mythologize as Elves.

VI

MILCORADIS AND THE OLD BAT’S EVIDENCE

Whenever Gradyon Finlin, recently employed by L. Wingdon Scalbas to protect him from the more fanatical animal-rights activists with whom Dr. Scalbas had a certain sneaking sympathy, said: “Don’t. Definitely don’t” – almost always in a deep voice quietly stern – hardly anyone ever did, whatever such person might ordinarily deem the courage of his convictions or with whatever eagerness he might view the prospect of what he intended. But for a short time in the seventeen-hundredth autumn since the Founding of Nerrennia, it was widely believed in a narrow circle of acquaintance that Dr. Scalbas had found the courage or embraced the eagerness required for pursuing an initiative from which Gradyon had desired him to desist. Dr. Scalbas, who had agreed with “those fanatics” in abjuring all petdom and held that animals must be free in the wild, or kept for food or work, or for painless experiment to further human progress, was no longer lively enough to decline that compliment of belief in his obduracy. “Of course

not,” some would have said.

The circumstantial case the police hoped to bring to court included a firm assertion by an ear-witness that Gradyon had presented his trademark prohibition in particularly sinister tones – for him: imitating the utterance of a pleading woman, with a keen sense of irony; he had been skilled in playing ladies – never female servants – on the Nerrennian stage before discovering an aptitude – while acting as Ingolala, the outlaw heroine of the First Tyrannical Epoch – for all sorts of armed and unarmed combat, which prompted his successful application for a change of guild. His use of that particular intonation was deemed especially ominous – and had always proved so, on the three previous occasions it was known to have been employed. No wonder, then, that he called in Milcoradis of Pavadaris on hearing that the knight-errant detective was visiting the city, to defend his reputation from an accusation of murder.

“The only evidence is circumstantial,” Gradyon told Milcoradis. “The old bat Scalbas kept on as a sort of honorary housekeeper because she was a highly efficient ordinary one in his father’s day, heard sounds of altercation – most unusual, even extraordinary – in her master’s laboratory and put her ear to the keyhole. A womanly pleading voice she claims she had to know – as mine, she

believes – was saying, “Don’t. Definitely don’t.” That, because of my reputation, was enough to frighten her thoroughly, partly because she knew how stubborn Scalbas was, and it also annoyed her much, because she didn’t like the thought of his being denied anything – in case he should concede. She tried to rush in to tell me off. The door was locked. So far as she knew, Anliga, our master’s sister, was upstairs drawing as usual that day of the week, and she didn’t want to ask her to defend her brother against me – that would shame him too much, the old bat thought, though she rightly believed Anliga herself would be quite safe from my deadly dangerousness. So she booted out the front door after the Municipal Vigilant ordinarily stationed on the busy corner a street west of there. He got to the house way ahead of her and used a poker from the fireplace to pry the lab door open. The window was raised, and Scalbas was dead on the floor, bleeding from both ears. The Vigilant, after making sure nothing could be done for Scalbas, looked out the window and saw me walking toward it after a patrol around the grounds. More astute than I would have given him credit for, he just asked me what I was doing. I said, ‘Right now, still wondering why the little old bat fled.’”

““You mean you didn’t investigate at once?’ says he.

““Why? What’s wrong?’ I asked.

“‘Stay right there,’ says he and aims his blowpipe. I dodged the tranquilizer dart quite easily, I must say, for a man of my age, and ran around for the door and met him running out, then stopped for him to arrest me, since that by then was his intention and I’ve always been law-abiding. But I stood on my right to silence and got a lawyer. We then got you.”

“I take it you used the term ‘bat’ in its literal sense the second time?”

“I can’t say anything else; I might impl– imply more than I could possibly be sure of.”

“You weren’t going to say ‘implicate’? As in implicate someone you’d rather not, for purely personal reasons?”

“I really can’t tell you any more. What I did say would be already in the Vigilant’s notes.” It was, too, word for word, Milcoradis found later; both policeman and former actor were well trained in verbal memorization.

“Ah,” said Milcoradis . “But a detective, even a private one, working by himself, even if employed by you, might properly implicate any reasonable suspect all to Hell and gone?”

“I didn’t say that.”

“No. I’ll see what I can do, though.”

Milcoradis went to the Scalbas neighbourhood and dawdled for several hours in a pastry shop where the local elderly gossiped over tea and tarts – Milcoradis loved tea and (pastry) tarts – then went straight to the Scalbas residence, asked to see the dead scientist’s artistic sister, and said to her at once, “I find it difficult to believe you’d attack your brother physically for freeing a live bat.”

“Is that what Gradyon – no, he didn’t. He wouldn’t.”

“Your fondness for that bat is well known locally, sources say.”

“Go to your splendid sources. I’ve nothing to say to you.”

“I’ve something to say to the Vigilans and the Civil Attorney, and to defence counsel. After that, they might as well toss a coin to decide which of you is charged, if either ought to be. The Vigilan investigation records show that your brother’s own recent records noted detailed and speculative sonometric research and experiments. A bat would have been ideal for one he had in mind. A man like him would have grabbed at any handy opportunity no matter whose feelings were hurt, provided only he didn’t contravene his own standards. What Enna Hannean really heard, I’m certain, was: ‘Don’t deafen it, Ley, don’t.’ It was so heartfelt your brother might have yielded entirely but for your use of the given name he hated from childhood though he was too accurate a man to discard the initial, so

he tossed your pet free out the window. At least Enna Hannean won't worry more about getting it tangled in her hair. Then you did to your brother, far more roughly, with simultaneous claps on the ears, what he'd intended for your pet bat. The pain and his resentment at being equated with experimental material so enraged him he had a stroke or heart attack; I'll wager the autopsy will show one or the other. If no one knows of previous tendency to whichever it was, the only criminal charge can be assault causing harm, resulting in accidental death. That's far from a capital offence in this highly civilized state. But I'm not anxious to see anyone charged, particularly, though it has to be done; I'll be satisfied with publicizing my alternative hypothesis wherever my client's name is smirched by any accusation or rumour of criminal assault on his employer."

"Don't you think his personal scruples about not dumping on a woman by himself to save his own hide are rather hypocritical?"

"Sort of. Letting an innocent man take the blame for what even a woman is thoroughly capable of, isn't even decently hypocritical; not even a pretence of morality. It's just plain cringing dishonest cowardice."

"You may go now."

"Yes, ma'am."

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Enna Hannean let him out. Besides being highly feisty for her age, she was a really nice old woman. She was rumoured to be a direct descendant of Ingolala. Milcoradis would never refer to such a person as an “old bat.”

VII

MILCORADIS AND THE SINGLE SIX

Gregnoir first of all added much to the highly formal, but spare, apology his servant had already tendered for his having asked Milcoradis to come to him. Normally, he should have gone himself to the knight-errant detective's recently established temporary office at the Dragon's Left Paw, one of Migeron's better inns in its higher-class residential section.

“I am the Keeper of the Sword of the Single Six, one of the Nine Magical Aids for Heroes Who Battle Magic-Wielders. The Sword has been profaned, or more probably defiled, and I may not leave this shrine until it has been purified. I need you to help me find out how much purifying is needed by reason of the offence committed against its purposes.

“This Sword was entrusted to me by Munresuel, one of the Far Unfallen whom heathens sometime mythologize as Elves, after one of his brothers made it specifically for fallen heroes helping fallen friends of any given Unfallen Man or

Woman. The day before yesterday, Hinglid of Lofos, then the First Fair Fighter of the Dedicated Order of Extremely Righteous Swordsmen, asked to borrow it for exactly such a quest, of which he – merely prudently, I assumed – offered to me no details. His integrity has always been such that it would have gravely sullied the friendship with which he always honoured me, had I made test of his veracity in that matter, and the strictures which safeguard the sword's purity did not quite require that of me. Last night, at midnight, the Sword was suddenly back in its place, with blood on it which I analysed to be that of three different humans. At morning, I learned that Hinglid was found slain at 17 Pecan Longroad, the home of Merchant Lingwod Forsnal, with the bodies of three highly skilled swordsmen not of his order, lying about him.

“I knew, of course, that Hinglid had been hiring out as guardian house-sitter to wealthy merchants on vacation with all their servants, who didn't want to lug with them on holiday all their gold and other valuables. He had been justly proud of his success so far at that: he'd killed two men at each of the homes of Unsgal Fogwood, Sneggal Lamsneg, and Pagwel the Unskilled, holding their homes and goods intact, getting much renown and significantly raising his rates as a result. He needed the money for a hapless nephew vastly unlucky at cards, whom he had

since induced to swear off gambling. Oh yes, Pagwel lives at 36 Olive Place, Sneggal at 15 Orange Avenue, and Unsgal at 23 Birch Longstreet, if you should need to question them for your investigation, which I pray will not take as much as three days. For in three days Munresuel must, he has informed me, withdraw the Single Six from service by fallen men unless it is purified by then.

“I have some little information which might help you to start, but after that I’m afraid you’re on your own, ungrateful as that may seem of me. I must not leave here, and the little I learned is due to the courtesy of another friend to whom those who have favours to ask of him usually repair themselves instead of summoning him to them. He is a scribe with the local weekly, who relishes reporting on our really rare seriously criminal activity in this city. He had learned, even before his visit here, that Hinglid had bought a quantity of semsenec, grown only in this locality, which wizards know to be useful in probing the integrity of any with whom one contracts a partnership. Hinglid gave the dealer an impression he wished to test the purity of his betrothed, who with her mother was visiting him and his sister. But that rings false. Hinglid would scorn to test by any means objective the honesty of any to whom he had once given trust. And he was depressed, which would have caused violent illness and severe fever for a long

time in anyone who used sennec, which ordinarily produces a profound repose wherein its user enters the souls he wants to prove.”

“How do you know he was depressed?”

“My friend the scribe had gone to his house for an interview about his recent exploits in house-sitting – he’d earlier refused all such requests, but my persistent friend was making one last attempt – and Hinglid’s sister Janille told him Hinglid was not available. My friend asked, somewhat impertinently I fear, what Hinglid was doing, and Janille replied curtly: ‘Depressed.’ My friend was sure she meant clinical depression, for she is the sort of purist in language who would have said, ‘In low spirits’ if she had meant her brother was only temporarily too gloomy for visitors.

“I need to know the depth of Hinglid’s mental disorder, if he had one recently. For if it extended to actual delusion, Hinglid’s real guilt might thereby have been much diminished, and the sword would not then need such stringent purifying as otherwise it must. I must know that, so far as is humanly possible; the rules are strict.

“Besides his own sword, sheathed and clean, and his bloodied dagger and his seal ring, not much was found upon Hinglid’s person except a wallet of twenty-

five crincri in gold and four scraps of paper, three of them pretty much soaked in blood long dried, and one fairly clean. The clean one bore only the number 1357. The others, apart from dried blood, showed yet distinctly each a different number. They had been folded together. The innermost had the number 3896, the second 1225, and the topmost 243. The scribe said his instinct told him there was a good story behind those numbers: if they represented the sums of crincri owed by Hinglid's nephew to different creditors, it would not be surprising that a warrior of Hinglid's reputation would take up house-sitting for high pay. What puzzles him is that Migeron should suddenly have so many half-honest bladesmen committing burglary and backing it up with murder.”

Milcoradis assembled and revolved elements of this narrative in silence for many minutes, then spent a few more weighing and judging. Then: “I think that the whole problem, especially the last aspect you mentioned, may be tolerably explicable,” he said.

“You have a hypothesis? Already? I can have any reasonable hypothesis confirmed or denied by magic fairly quick, if you have one. The hypothesis itself is what I need. What with grief and readying my spirit for what the purifying might require, my own mind has not been nimble, to speak the least of truth.”

“My speculation hangs together fairly well. Did you notice that with the intervening digits removed the first and last of each longer number represent certain house numbers on certain streets which might be significant here?”

“Oops.”

“Uh-huh. Also, a purist in language who was asked what a man was doing would not reply with a statement only of how he was feeling. I think Hinglid was doing something when the scribe asked his sister about him.”

“Deep rest?”

“Got it in one, my dear chap. The whole thing fits what one expert always calls the psychology of the individual. I would suggest to you that Hinglid’s nephew owed enough to make Hinglid highly anxious for his safety. When Hinglid got his first house-sitting assignment, he challenged a pair of honourable rascals who together were more or less equal to him in sword skill to fight him to the death for the more pertinent contents of the house he was guarding. He sent them the house number on the assigned night, camouflaged as we have seen, and took it back from their dead bodies when he prevailed. The venture was so successful that he repeated it, both as attempt at profit and as offering of his life in atonement for what was not legitimate in the first offence. A really fanatical Fair Fighter would

readily be able to convince himself he was quite justified in allowing a deed which he himself died trying to prevent. But after engaging his last two partners, he roused in himself doubts he should have had before, since even Migeron has not an abundance of really trustworthy scoundrels, I should think, and he bought the semsenec to examine their motives and intentions. When he found they were betraying him by bringing in a third scoundrel, since he knew he could not hope to defeat all three so skilled together, he had recourse to a lie to gain the sword that gives one man the skill and prowess of six, ensuring their downfall and his own death from his perverting the sword's purity of purpose. If I am right, may Doriadomri have mercy on his soul."

When Gregnoir's magic had confirmed the knight's hypothesis, both men knelt to make that prayer more formally. Then Gregnoir proceeded to the purification of the Sword of the Single Six, which he knew now would not be so demanding as he had feared.

VIII

MILCORADIS AND THE SCRIBE

Milcoradis saw strong elation as Holduen the news scribe plumped into the chair across the table. “Thought you’d be here again for breakfast today,” said Holduen. “Want to try a crime puzzle? I’ve got a small bet riding on it.”

“For me or against?”

“Against. I’m the sporting type, after all.”

“So what have you got?”

“A pretty busy day, actually. I was called just a while ago, right after the constables, thank Fortune, to the Grove of Ertimas behind our jolly host’s closest rival for the Brewer’s Cup last year. Corpse. Local Lothario, ugly fellow, unpleasing manners, no known explanation for his many frequent successes, almost all of whom he showed off in the tavern afterward by way of silent gloat. Stabbed to the heart. Nasty little amulet found on him, bearing this design.”

Holduen unfolded a neat, and indeed nasty, little sketch; he was a competent artist

at very least. “What do you think? Magic or superstition?”

“Magic, I’d say. Fairly definitely.”

“Explanation of unlikely frequent success?”

“I’d say so. Most likely.”

“No sign of the weapon, or of any he might have carried. I’d say he had none, wanting to seem harmless. Anyway I went back to the Omen building to show this sketch to the publisher, who knew maybe half what you do of magic. He was sprawled over the desk in his own office, desk being covered with blood apparently spewed from his mouth, and a robust country maiden in her early twenties, who must have got in through his well-known private door – no one in the newsroom had seen her – turned to me with a seraphic smile over a white blouse horribly reddened, and said with a broad rustic accent, “I killed the publichur!”

I got her to sit down, got her some tea while an apprentice ran for the constables. They heard her story, thanked her very much, tendered inquest invitation, and let her go – right after confirmation by the local sooth-sniffer. There was magic or miracle involved, or both, but no one has any theory of how it worked or was invoked, her least of all.

“Can you come up with a theory for all this? Especially the right one?”

“Good thing you specified. A real talent for fiction is a severe handicap for a detective in cases like this: he can come up with several narratives to account for any bizarre set of circumstances, the uncreative in his audience swallow the first version holus bolus and start a hue and cry after the wrong man, and the real criminal escapes. What seemed brilliant deduction was only wild concoction. But I’ll see what I can do. You say this yarn of yours is a pretty classic crime puzzle?”

“Pretty classic.”

Milcoradis assessed the elements. It took about six minutes.

“I’d say this country maiden blended incredible naivety with a strong sense of the wonderful in life and of her own importance in particular...”

“Damn.”

“She was a virgin.”

“It goes without saying.”

“I would speculate that your lamented Lothario asked her for directions on the street, was vastly surprised to find that one so sophisticated to all appearance was indeed a stranger to town life, and asked the maiden whose purity was evident to him despite appearances to pray for his aged mother in the Grove of Ertimas, with

him of course.”

“Close enough.”

“Once there, she found herself strangely and strongly attracted, feeling unaccountably and helplessly lascivious, and made one desperate bid to preserve the one virtue she really treasures, or maybe even knows about.”

“Not bad.”

“She prayed to Ertimas for a weapon, preferably a dagger, and then had one in her hand, right or left according to her bent.”

“Left, in fact.”

“He leaped at her and she thrust at him. The dagger went for the heart as if jumping by itself. The moment he died, she had a spiritual revelation of what his whole foul sexual history had been, not omitting the unsavoury gloating at the tavern. She spent the night at the Grove in a glorified daze of thanksgiving, then went to tell her wonderful story to the local weekly, going to the publisher’s door because she mistook the merely administrative employee of a free-guild reporters’ firm for the High Boss Supreme of the mighty Omen. She was about to tell him what had happened when he collapsed over his desk with a ruptured ulcer, or whatever the medics call it. You came in, and she, ignoring the plight of one mere

receiver of tales and the consternation of another such, eagerly declared, in all her new-made serene majesty, ‘I killed the pub lecher!’”

“You had help with this one, buddy! ‘Fess!”

“I once knew a much nicer virgin who’d had a highly similar experience wherein she asked Ertimas, though not in a Grove, for something like a dagger. I thought it might have been a miracle; that girl was an orthodox Doriadomrian and a living saint if I’ve met any. Now I’m inclined to suspect that that particular dagger is part of a class of nine devices generally deemed a trade secret among wizards and – other persons of a certain profession. Your story might draw attention to the advisability of asking Ertimas for that assistance in a maiden’s direst plight; it seems the sort of help one can count on, now, almost. Well worth trying, anyway. No good against mere force, if I’m right. The ravisher has to be using magic, I rather fear. Still. Oh yes, you might mention that while heathens like yourself worship Ertimas as Moon Goddess partial to more or less flighty maidens, we Doriadomrians merely venerate her – if indeed it could be ‘her’ – as that Angel of the One God whom He has placed especially in charge of promoting and protecting chastity.”

“Thanks awfully, Mil. I was fairly sure I could count on you for some angle

public rumour would overlook until I get it all in print. This story will go a long way. By the way, I bet the other four Omen scribes three drinks each to one for me that it would take you at least fifteen minutes to figure this one. See ya! Gotta go!”

Milcoradis finished his breakfast in mildly amused silence.

XI

MILCORADIS AND THE INSULTING SUITOR

“Ah, Milcoradis! If anyone can make young Thulstan see reason, you can! Make the poor young blighter apologize, please?”

Rawenna Wirdston’s uncle Jacsan was a bit doubtful, though, even while sounding eager and confident, Milcoradis sensed. Milcoradis was arriving late for celebration of the niece’s twenty-first anniversary of Baptism, a solemn occasion among Doriadomrians, and the banquet had been delayed for him – and a far more serious reason, or the family would have been quite content to let him join tardily and a tad less formally than usual. Milcoradis was there chiefly because he had saved Uncle Jacsan, the godfather, from deep embarrassment just before the fourteenth anniversary.

“We’re trying to keep Jothon and Thulstan from duelling to the death,” added Jacsan.

The facts of the matter, as given in wordy detail by the garrulous godfather,

may be outlined briefly, though he left out the most important one, which everyone around had known for many years. That was: an ancient curse prevented marriage between the Wirdstons and any of the whole clan to which young Thulstan belonged, upon pain of miscarriage of the first three children of any such marriage, who thus would be denied Baptism, since they would be miscarried dead. However, the curse indeed allowed for any amount of pre-marital fornication, with no harm whatever to any child who might result. The other relevant facts, then, may be thus outlined, more briefly:

Rawenna and Thulstan had been much attracted to each other (by reason of the curse which everyone had known about for many years) as to forbidden fruit of a highly romantic aspect and had sworn to marry neither each other nor anyone else, nor ever to fornicate at all. But at the dance that afternoon, the atmosphere around and especially between the two young lovers had become so highly charged, that most of their near relations had become engaged in distracting them, lest the temptation to sinning overwhelm them and they sneak off somewhere for the privacy even they had usually had sense enough to forbid themselves. Jothon in particular – he was Rawenna's brother, as Jacsan of course did not inform his listener – had led Thulstan out along the lake which was the pride of Wirdston

Holding, to question him about some intricacies of diplomacy wherewith he hoped to avoid quarrels among mutual friends temporarily much at odds with one another. After explaining all the various entanglements, Jothon had asked, “So what would you do, Thulstan?” And the barefaced bold, but still apparently pre-occupied, young lover had replied, “Rawenna,” in a tone at once lightly casual and expressive of most sincere and most immediate intent – far more immediate, it seemed to Jothon, than marriage could possibly be. Jothon was outraged and demanded an apology, which appeared to take Thulstan at first quite by surprise (most amazingly), and then young Thulstan had been furious and suggested, it almost seemed sarcastically, that Jothon challenge him. Jothon then was nothing loth, and both young men now were having seconds make arrangements.

“Were they near the skiff at the time?” asked Milcoradis.

“Be serious! What could–”

“The question is relevant, I assure you. I rather think that when the question you quote was put to him, young Thulstan waved a hand toward the skiff and said, “Rowin’, eh?” He always thinks better when doing something physically routine and rhythmical. Now he’s savage at being most insultingly misunderstood, and ready to fight over it.”

“I say, I think you’ve got it! By Jorze” – the Doriadomrian patron saint of peacemakers – “I think you’ve got it!”

And so it proved. Young Thulstan was rather flattered to be the centre of a case solved by the great Milcoradis, so that even he didn’t resent his looking a little silly when the facts came out, so much as he might have done.

X

MILCORADIS AND THE MADE MEN

“Rundel wanted you to have his cat,” Madaloo said, through tears, to Milcoradis, who had arrived late for the death of his friend. “Almost his last words were, ‘Tell Milcoradis he’s responsible for Nigh Caught A Mouse now.’”

“Then we’d better order an autopsy,” said Milcoradis.

“The cause of death was quite straightforward, Dr. Dunoos said,” replied Madaloo. “He’d been treating Rundel – alleviating the symptoms – for symfossia all the time he was sick. He was quite certain, the symptoms are unmistakable. Even I could see they’d hardly match those of any other known disease.” Madaloo, Rundel’s older sister, was a registered nurse.

“Still, I think we’d better have an autopsy,” said Milcoradis.

“You think he might have caught a rare zoonism from his cat?”

“It’s entirely possible he got something from Nigh Caught A Mouse,” said the detective knight-errant from Pavadaris.

Rundel had sent for Milcoradis to investigate what he thought was a second attempt by Mendumos, with a different accomplice this time, to inveigle Formend Micnoc into illegal drug use or forbidden possession of a controlled substance. The drug in question this time, if illegal possession alone were to be the charge, was, Rundel had suspected, dilontandis. This drug, strictly controlled under the State Drug Administration of Rendivia, came from a herb found only on a tract of land tightly patrolled, near the estate of Mendumos Monsuen, with whom Formend and his wife Quefuaia, Monsuen's daughter, had lived since their marriage. Monsuen, tricked into approving the latter, had done so with an ill grace and was rumoured to hope for a legal separation of the still devoted spouses. Dilontandis was reserved by law for highly profitable sale to the highly prosperous Far Unfallen of the Western Isles, who were rumoured to use it in their telepathic converse with the High Ones. Anyway, everyone knew these people wouldn't be doing anything wrong with the drug, or they wouldn't be Unfallen. It was said that attempts by Fallen men to use it would strike such men permanently dumb with no compensating benefit whatever. The herb it was derived from was largely ineffectual in its natural state, but when dried and then soaked in a particular brand of Rendivian perry it expanded terrifically and was

enormously potent. Drug-sniffing dogs had found enough of the treated and refined stuff to make three regular doses (as the Unfallen measured it) in a building across from Monsuen's estate, a building where Rundel and Formend had worked before Rundel's taking sick. The Civil Militia were still trying to trace the illegal possessor and were rumoured to be focussing upon Formend, but they had so far not enough preliminary evidence for an arrest or a warrant for questioning under murnievin; such warrants were hard to get under Rendivian law.

Rundel had been supervising research on the DNA of "made men", which sought to discover whether there was a genetic basis for their being mute. It was widely held that this "slave" class – believed actually subhuman though of human "parentage" – was innately mute from being produced through *in vitro* fertilization; they were simply the highest species of mere cunning brutes, as a result of being made rather than generated as a man ought to be; either God, or the gods, had not endowed them with spiritual souls, or they hadn't evolved as highly as humans – depending on one's belief system regarding the origin of species. Whatever the reason, the made men were never known to vocalize, even inarticulately like most brutes, not since the nobles of Rendivia had begun making

“slaves” two centuries ago. The practice had been started by heretical Doriadomrians who believed that God could not endow with spirit any “human” bodies so concocted; this sect was dominant in Rendivia and nowhere else in Moryaen, which anyway was far from universally Doriadomrian, though most of Moryaen knew at least dimly that the Far Unfallen approved of the Doriadomrian religion and no other. The chief rival religion was a variant of Tellurian Buddhism, which some Doriadomrians, like Milcoradis, joked was the worship of “the devil within.”

The autopsy found that Rundel’s terminal “illness” had been drug-induced. The drug was tuilnazifan, exceedingly rare even in Rendivia, where it was administered only, after a fair trial, to philosophers proven sophisticated beyond reasonable doubt; ordinary Rendivians felt that every sort of creature ought to have some beneficial use, and that was about the only one their society could come up with for tuilnazifan, since they refused to poison rats; that, besides being cruelty to brutes, would have reduced employment for cats and so might diminish their number; most Rendivians were even excessively fond of cats; they were the only brutes that might not be neutered; made men always were, because it was repugnant to reason that men not rightly generated should rightly generate. Both

the break-away Doriadomrites and Moryaenan Buddhism taught that. Milcoradis had to find a murderer, or rather the evidence that would convict one. Milcoradis conducted quite a few interviews, mostly, through sign language of course, with the made men who patrolled under strict supervision the gardens where dilontandis was carefully cultivated. None but the guards or authorized herb-gatherers had been seen in those gardens during the past two years, and Nicodemus Quaznar, the chief officer of the Controlled Substance Institute, often made sure the guards stayed tautly alert, walking his dog among them to sniff for any internal thieving, signed a made man. At least, that's what Milcoradis gathered, the made men's vocabulary not including "internal theft." Another guard confirmed that Lord Quaznar "often walked with dog."

Quaznar led the faction in Rendivia that most vociferously opposed liberating or enfranchising made men, or leaving them as whole as to all appearance they seemed to develop, if only to find out whether they could in fact generate normally, against a growing power of owners who had grown fond of many "slaves" and tried to insist against logic that these were humanly intelligent. Milcoradis arranged to meet Quaznar at a minor social occasion at the lord's residence and greeted his favourite dog most effusively, not minding at all when

the dog most persistently continued to lick his hand, which Milcoradis carefully refrained from washing afterward. Milcoradis later had the saline residue analyzed in the laboratory of an old acquaintance in Rendivia , then made a sworn deposition about its origin before a judge-inquisitor, who ordered a search of Quaznar's residence that found enough dilontandis to kill a horse. Quaznar was unable to produce a licence for that amount, and because of conflict-of- interest legislation, had never been permitted to sell to the Far Unfallen. The stuff found in Quaznar's house was of the same quasi-unique strain detected by the dogs at the site of Formend's and Rundel's laboratory. Falling apart at the prospect of certain disgrace, since any loss of face was at least figuratively fatal in his particular caste, he confessed to the police that he had murdered young Rundel for suspicions of which the latter had been trying to establish the truth. Milcoradis was almost overjoyed, even through his grief. Then the procedures hit a snag.

At the preliminary hearing, Quaznar, voluntarily taking the standard dose of murnievin – since that was not compulsory at a preliminary – repudiated his confession at trial, claiming he had been utterly distraught at being found not above suspicion as a CSI chief ought to be. He said Rundel must have “planted” the dilontandis in revenge for Quaznar's “complicity” in a scheme to help

Mendumos disgrace Formend – since “entrapment”, far from illegal, was positively encouraged in Rendivian jurisprudence as a test of civic honour. The prosecutor told Milcoradis in his office that he suspected strongly that Quaznar had found an antidote to murnievin – there’d been curious occasions of his being questioned as a witness before now – but he honestly felt he would have to withdraw all charges in three months’ time when the trial must proceed if at all.

After a month had passed, though, the procedures took a great leap forward: a hot-air balloon carrying three males of the Far Unfallen flew far past the coastlands, which was unprecedented, and straight to the centre of Disfosra, and the passengers immediately inquired after Madaloo and Milcoradis, asking to be taken to Civil Attorney Duëmis with them as soon as might be courteously possible. In his office, the chief of the three, named Caynuforthuun, told Civil Attorney Duëmis that the Unfallen had for many years encountered in their converse with the High Ones a kind of inarticulate “static” which the High had found to originate in the minds of made men of Rendivia. The High in charge of the Western Isles had investigated, discovering from their colleagues regarding Rendivia that some nobles made “slaves” for sale who had been rendered speechless by infusions of dilontandis when the slaves were developed enough to

feed. Matters had recently reached a point where, by Unfallen standards not normally discussed outside the Western Isles, intervention in the affairs of a sovereign fallen country was deemed warranted. The information those three provided enabled Duëmis to acquire all kinds of genuine goods on Nicodemus Quaznar and all his associates, and two months later all of them were tried on various capital crimes, including deceiving their society to its moral detriment, and executed after all appeals were summarily and swiftly exhausted. (During the trials, the distinctions made men had made to Milcoradis between Quaznar's "walking his dog" and his "walking with his dog," suggesting to Milcoradis that the dog was not then leashed, made a minor splash in the Rendivian press.) In vitro fertilization was promptly outlawed as being an unworthy way to begin human life, and the official use in court of murnievin was discontinued at least temporarily, some suspicions of Duëmis having proved correct.

"Thank you for avenging Rundel's murder," said Madaloo, hugging and kissing Milcoradis for the first time in years, as he was making ready to return to Pavadaris. Rundel's pet was to remain with her at least for the time being, they'd agreed. "I thought our cat was supposed to be some kind of clue. Nothing of the sort came out at any of the trials. Knowing you, I figured it was just being kept

back to mystify me.”

“I was the only other present when Rundel first saw the name Nicodemus in the Tellurian Gospel of St. John as a little boy,” said Milcoradis. “His logical but hopeless bungling of its phonetics has been our entirely private joke ever since.”

XI

DREAMS OF DUST

Wilfred Hynes woke. He was, thank God, in his bedroom, on the double bed with the high headboard that had been reduced when the family moved from an outport formerly prosperous, founded by his forefathers, none of whom had even dreamed of being a teacher like himself. He woke in a sharp sense of danger foiled, and in great relief. He remembered then the dream wherefrom he'd woken, which had something to do with having been roused from sleep and invited to journey far and fight fierce foes "beyond the fields we know" and return alive or gloriously dead, in Earth-time amazing short. Relaxed against piled pillows as usual when he read on bed in afternoons, he remembered being told at the end of the dream that he would remember just that much and what else was then being told him. Freakin' weird, or what?

"Wilfred of Newfoundland on Tellus, you have granted me great boon," a man named Milcorodos of Povodoros, or something like that, had apparently just been saying. "We have had together high adventure in deadly peril unto both our lives,

to rescue from disgrace a woman I have grown to love most dearly, who once made light of my own chastity on an occasion somewhat similar many years ago. I must have failed without your aid. I tell you this now, for it is all you will recall hereof unless you come again to Moryaen for risking of your life once more in a cause most worthy. If you do, it is as like you will be slain as it was of late, when you showed high courage. But if indeed you be so slain, your wife Agnes will be made to know for certain, when your body is brought home for burial, that you died full worthy a disciple of Doriadomri your Lord. So much the Unfallen have foretold, though they do not indeed foresee your death. But now you can no longer be content as was your wont to only read in books of high adventure while forgoing the reality. You must choose between your humdrum daily life on Tellus, then made deathly dull so far as fictions fare, or intermittent deadly peril on Moryaen for causes well worthy. You must make that choice within seven minutes of your full remembrance of these my words. But you must never let any other Earthman see any evidence of this doom upon you, or things will go with you far more ill.”

What horseshit one dreams sometimes, thought Wilfred. Who wouldn't choose a “humdrum” domestic life like mine, sharpened mildly with the spice of well-

wrought adventure fiction? It's served my turn for fifty years, so why would it sour on me now? "To hell with high adventure deadly perilous to my life," quoth he to dream-lost knight as if the latter had been real. So Wilfred picked up the copy of Neil Gaiman's *Neverwhere*, which doubtless had inspired the silly dream, from where it lay to his right on the green bedspread, intending to re-read the ending. The paperback fell apart, all the pages separate, in his hands, upon his lap. Heedless in inspired astonishment, he reached, turning to sit on edge of bed, to the bookshelf at his left and brought out his cherished illustrated copy of *Ivanhoe*. It fell apart exactly thus. A volume of Chesterton's essays from *The Illustrated London News* stayed utterly entire, as did the Douay Bible. He picked up a separated page to read, but it crumpled by itself in his hand, tearing when he tried to unfold it. He grabbed up some loose pages, dropped them, ran to the kitchen for a used shopping bag and back into his bedroom, stuffing the paper and the book covers into the bag before knotting the mouth of it as tightly as he could and putting that again under the garbage in the larger bag in his plastic garbage can. Agnes wasn't due home for another twenty minutes, thank God.

XII

MILCORADIS AND THE KEY KEEPER

Until recently, devout Rendivian Doriadomrites had deemed Adilphis the Venerable their best bet to achieve the precise formula for the mood-responsive life-prolonging drug mixture they called The Philosopher's Tone. (It was expected to preserve life and even youth but not to restore either of these.) But recently Adilphis had died in at least mildly suspicious circumstances in a locked room, as he apparently might have feared would happen. But the man who he had thought would be most dangerous to him just then, was at the time of the killing, if it was a killing, to all appearance himself in a locked room some leagues away. Some of the more knowledgeable devout were already speculating that a member of the Far Unfallen who was research mentor to Adilphis had during the last stages of The Experiment decided to Fall with unfortunate results for Adilphis. It seemed that Mentor Melomfulan had been offering somewhat cryptic counsel sometimes from the Distant West, transmitted the High knew how.

Zaccarazh District's chief medical examiner was much inclined to implement Autopsy Mode A, which, if the death were murder done by magic, stood a good chance of confirming that. If that were then confirmed, Mode A stood an even better chance of establishing a mystical link between the murderer and the body, even if the murderer had only recently Fallen out of the Distant Western original innocence where he would have been immune to ordinary magic. But the venerable chemist's secretary was claiming to have right on the tip of his memory, just out of conscious reach, some information which would suggest that Autopsy Mode B, which would discover any sort of mundane cause, should be the better course. The trouble was, the two kinds of autopsy, for some reasons possibly best known to the Far Unfallen, or maybe only to the High, were absolutely mutually exclusive; you simply had to have one without the other. The chief medical officer thought it prudent to lend some responsibility for the choice unto the famous Milcoradis of Pavadaris who was visiting in the area – he had an old and saintly uncle with some interest in The Experiment – and who ought therefore to be available for consultations of this kind. He suggested, when the latter was confirmed, that Milcoradis go into the matter quite fresh and unaffected

by any of the examiner's preconceptions and so should start by interviewing Adilphis's chief secretary and general manager, Monulfza. Milcoradis did that.

"I'm almost certain I'm forgetting something most significant," said Secretary Monulfza. "I have that nagging feeling that's never been wrong yet but is usually confirmed too late by right remembrance. But one thing I know is most important was our master's leaving all his keys, every one of them, in the keeping of Second Steward Urfolos, who was sworn never to use them himself and always to keep exact mental record of all those to whom he lent them. I don't know if that quirk was commanded of Adilphis or was one he invented to keep people from knowing those that were commanded; that was during the earlier stages of research, several weeks ago. There were seven of each, and there had to be no way anyone else could figure out which were which. It seems the High-brought voice of Melomfulan the Unfallen who counseled my master was quite insistent upon that. I have heard dark hints from some who shall be nameless, just for now, that possibly Melomfulan is no longer Unfallen, but I doubt that.

"Anyway, I was present when Melomfulan's voice warned my master against Urfolos, though without naming him. 'You must expose for what he is the man of the many keys among you, and you must send him far away, with all that

appertains unto his office, until your testing is successful, or I cannot answer for your safety. I may not say more. Much depends upon your own lore and judgement, as is fitting among mankind.’ I never heard anything else that either of them said to the other; that was the only time I was present when Melomfulan spoke to him.

“Before starting his last experiments, Master Adilphis had Urfolos lend me the key to his study to lock him in for three days. I gave the key back to the Second Steward, made sure he had all the others, after leaving open all the doors we might need to use, and had him conveyed under guard of four men-at-arms to his home village Drofuaas, ten leagues away. Master Adilphis was then to fast for those three days, sustained solely by the drug mixtures he was to inhale while seeking the precise formula which can prolong life preternaturally in Fallen humans who have by meditation and holy conduct achieved the serenity of soul which calms the body enough to benefit from the mixture. The drugs were presented to him in the locked study through the cat-door Adilphis had fitted up when he kitten-sat Nigh Caught A Mouse fifteen years ago for a friend of yours whose passing I still mourn. Only Herb-Gatherer Nadolus was allowed to pass

them through. So he would be a most likely suspect if Autopsy B turned out to be confirmatory. But there are factors opposing that supposition, as I shall mention.

“On the second day of The Experiment – yesterday – we heard a terrible scream, the sound of something falling, and then silence inside the study. We called loudly and got no answer, so we sledge-hammered down the door and found our master dead. All of us were horribly shocked except Nadolus – and he made no attempt to appear to be, as I think he would have if he were guilty. ‘Spirit’s will be done,’ was what he said.

Nadolus must have been much opposed in mind to The Experiment, but a dismissal here would have forestalled any future employment in his chosen trade. He is a Hazarite, believing that matter is evil and only spiritual reality is worthy of existence. He says all men should abandon the body to seek the freedom of the skies, and regrets that he is unfit so far to achieve that freedom for himself. But he quakes with pale deathly loathing at any mention, even, of swearing falsely or of oath-breaking, which he says is the ultimate Death of Spirit Eternal, and he swore a really mighty oath to assist Master Adilphis with The Experiment, with the very best of his ability.

“You know, it bothers me a bit that nobody actually exposed Urfolos as anything terribly dreadful, but I suppose Master Adilphis simply thought it enough he was exposed as dangerous to him. Anyway, that’s the story as I know it, except for the nagging missing memory. Any questions?”

“I’ve a few. Is it true that Nadolus lived his late childhood and early youth in Kalufum?”

“Yes, indeed. Why?”

“Was his oath to your master sworn in the Common Language, which the folk of distant Tellus call English, or was it sworn in the local dialect? I think Adilphis might have preferred his own mother tongue for that?”

“Right you are, Milcoradis. Exactly right.”

“I understand the local word for ‘ability’ and the Kalufad word for ‘judgement’, though spelled differently when written, are phonetically almost identical.”

“Really? *Oh, really? Oh, Doriadomri!* Sorry, I didn’t mean to be profane. But that has nothing to do with the nagging of my memory. I don’t think so. I don’t believe I ever knew that, till now.”

“You must have seen somewhere in your studies of foreign religions that upon distant Tellus, where the sect originated and whence some demons brought its writings here to Moryaen, the Hazarites were called Manichees?”

“That’s it, Milcoradis! That’s it!”

XIII

MILCORADIS AND THE RECKLESS RECLUSE

“I’ve asked you in, Sir Milcoradis,” said the Chief Constable of Rodorinos District, “because you’re just about my last hope to sniff out a witch. All I need is barely enough clue to justify a search warrant. If you can get that for me I’ll move fast.

“There are two sisters, Apdia and Nalea Hinkens, near Village Hadan, a league to the west. Each lives alone. All the women in Hadan seem to know which sister is an orthodox gynecological hygienist – more or less, short of actual midwifery – and which of them dispenses contraceptives for a rich profit, but none of the women will talk to any man about it, not enough to let us prosecute. Neither Sister will ever intrude, for any sort of gain, on the other’s ‘field of specialty.’ My sister-in-law overheard something about two years ago that confirmed the general situation, and that’s as far as I’ve been able to get. No one is at all willing to peach, not even the lawful nurse practitioner, apparently. All a woman’s sacred right to choose, you know, damital. The actual village midwife, who hates

witchcraft with all her honest heart and soul, not just because it's bad for her business, so far as we can find, is kept in the dark as much as anyone. It's an isolated, vicious little subculture unique to Hadan in this country; the women even go to each Sister in turn, or in pairs of one customer for each, apparently, to protect the Great Secret. We cops call the two sisters 'The Reckless Recluses' because they're so solitary and both so very careful not to give the witch away. Can you spare us two weeks? I can't ask for more than that of you.

"Our law says we can't get a warrant for two locations when it's clear that one of them must be innocuous. Both herb gardens could be inspected or even viewed only by a lawful search or through trespass, and evidence obtained through trespass would be thrown out of court."

"I can give a long, long time to catching a witch," said Milcoradis.

It took a week, of listening to a lot of social chat he found fascinating but so terrible he was always on the point of running away. He steeled himself to hear it all. It included one particular conversation in a public house much frequented by the gentler sex, so that his own frequenting it caused his masculinity, briefly, to be suspect by the villagers until he had closed the case.

“Yes my dear, those two will never get our lingo right if they stays here another ten years. And they never agrees on anything except our Sacred Right, why they settled here together I’ll never know, unless they couldn’t find no husbands back where they came from. Julaea keeps bringing Sister Nalea a bread pudding every visit, besides the regular fee. After ten years, she should be able to say ‘bread’ our way, even if ‘pudding’ is too much for her linguistics. She swears Nally told her she likes nothing better, but Nally told me herself she never said nothing of the sort. Just like a funny-talkin’ foreigner, my dear. Except I spose I shouldn’t call her foreign after ten years. And Halefa always brings Sister Apdia a cold flask of lemonade, because according to her, Dia likes nothing better than seeing a chilled ‘drank’ from a client. ‘Drank’ now. I mean, what? And I knows for a fact that Apdia always likes her lemon drinks hot. Now, my dear, I mean to say, foreigners or what? And they got men our girls should have had, am I right?”

Milcoradis thought for a few moments. He believed he was on to something. The “two foreigners” had been in here a few evenings earlier, and he’d heard samples of their “linguistics.” After five minutes more, he got up from the remains of his tea and scones. “Good riddance to the bloody snoop,” was the

remark his ear caught which followed him out. “He’ll never hear nothin’ from me.”

“I think you ought to get a search warrant for Sister Nalea’s premises,” Milcoradis told the chief constable. “Unless I’m far mistaken, I heard she likes to see a ‘brat’ pouting and Apdia likes to see a child drink from a client’s breast. Does that warrant a warrant?”

“I’ll make it do,” said the chief constable. “When they get results they’re harder to throw out in our jurisdiction than in some I know. Especially against witches.” That warrant got good results.

PART II: TALES MORE TRADITIONAL

I

HALF ELVEN, WHOLLY HUMAN

In all the ages of Man, there have been men who felt the need to combat ignorance and superstition, and deadly forces dimly known. Here follows a tale of two such men, of different ages.

B.C. – Orumirand of Felcath rode westward in autumn, toward an evil at least as great as the last he had destroyed; that evil could be most deadly to Men and Elves. A beggar who had slept the night in leaves beside the road from Acanor to Ardlan, woke in the morning at his coming, and to the beggar he looked as if he were a moving shadow, raised upright and made short, from among the long, still shadows of dawn. But when the beggar's sight had cleared a little, he saw that the hither side of horse and rider, where sun fell on them narrowly, seemed of a lighter shade of shadow, and he felt for a moment afraid. For there were half-

forgotten legends which told of frightful danger from cloaked and hooded Riders, out of Shadow, and the beggar had heard of them. But he had heard also of the Riders of Felcath and knew of them as courteous to common men. What strange evil they pursued, he did not know, but he knew that there was little strange about such evil as dwelt in him. Therefore, he lay no longer still in hope of being overlooked, but stood, as well as he was able, and said, “Hail.”

“Hail, father,” said a young man’s voice from within the rider’s grey hood, which hung about his face and did not move – for the rider did not turn his head. The grey horse stood still upon the road. “Will you take a ride from us, good father?”

The beggar wondered. Knights, or any horseback riders, offered not often rides to beggars. He had been hoping that a kindly carter would overtake him on the road. But “Gladly, son,” he answered, and the rider took his foot out of the stirrup on that side and offered his arm to the lame old man. But still he did not turn his head.

Some men might have tried to mount behind the rider, which is the common way, but the beggar had better knowledge of the Knights of Felcath, so he placed one hand upon the rider’s rigid forearm while the other gripped the saddle bow

and his better foot went in the stirrup, and seated himself in front, as if using sidesaddle, for what looked to be a shield, covered with fine leather, hung on the other side. But he looked not at the rider's face.

“We thank you, father,” the rider softly said.

The beggar shuddered and made answer: “Think not of it, son.”

And the rider laughed a low and gentle laugh.

A.D. – Wilm Olthorm woke and, as usual, cursed the day in which he would have to labour as a village blacksmith while his mind was pulsing with complex technological principles of an almost-forgotten past. Then he remembered this was the day he would start to pass on his knowledge to his son, knowledge that could mean Joruhn's death, and he was suddenly too tense to curse again. He left his wife in bed and got up to prepare breakfast, which normally he would have left for her to do, as the economic arrangements of this age made to seem practical and appropriate.

Olthorm fried bacon and eggs on the framework in the fireplace of the cottage's main room, over a fire started with flint and steel, and brought out the beer that he preferred to milk as a breakfast drink. As the bacon and eggs lost heat upon the table where he put them with the beer and his wife's bread, he thought

again about how best to tell his son the things the boy should know.

B.C. – When the beggar was for some time settled comfortably as might be and the horse had made good way upon the road, he began to feel a little sorry that the knight had come so soon. For otherwise he might have slept until the day was nearer noon and dinner, and the knight might have fed as well as carried him. But there was no cause for even this small sorrow, for Orumirand ate not quickly upon rising in this time of year but rode until the rising sun had warmed him on his way. He, like the beggar, had slept beside the road, but wrapped in his cloak of Elven weave, which kept one warmer, in cold weather, than had the beggar's leaves and branches.

As they rode in the cold of early morning, the beggar sometimes leaned away from the strange rider and openly stared at what the rider wore and carried, but he did not raise his eyes above the rider's chest. And he felt the rider did not mind the looking that he did.

The rider's sword hand, with fingers drawn out into the palm of his grey glove, was put behind the wide, soft leather belt which held his tunic close about his waist. The beggar knew that this was not because the rider flinched from feeling cold, but to keep the hand from numbness that the cold might cause. The tunic,

though also grey, was of a different weave from that of the cloak which held the horse's warmth for the good of steed and rider. And the rider wore grey breeches and black boots.

The rider had a sword at his left side on a narrow belt and at his right a dagger. And the pommel of the sword and the pommel of the dagger were covered each with a small, grey leather pouch, fitting closely, tied with tiny thongs.

The beggar thought he saw a movement of the cloak which was not caused by movement of the rider. And there was no wind. He nearly raised his eyes unto the rider's face, but he forbore. He kept his gaze toward the roadside as it slowly went back past the rider's shoulder.

Now, when Orumirand felt the day grow warm and his hand no longer needed his body's warmth behind the belt, he said to the beggar, "I have not broken yet my fast. I have enough for both of us." And he turned his horse to a level, open place by the side of the road and let the beggar down. Then he said, "It might be kindness for you to walk a short way from me and to turn away." He did not say to whom it would be kindness, and the beggar did not ask but did the thing the rider had suggested. Then he heard the rider alight, and he heard sounds as of the rider's taking something from a saddlebag which likely had been hidden by the

cloak. Then the rider walked past the beggar, and he held the sides of his cloak away from him, as if it sheltered other also. And the hem of the cloak was trailing on the ground: the beggar saw that it seemed the clasp of the cloak had been loosened, so that it hung more from the hood upon the head than from the shoulders. The warrior walked to the edge of the wood, and it seemed to the beggar, from small sounds scarcely heard, that something passed into the wood. The stranger fastened his cloak and turned, hood overshadowing his face, and went a few steps to a fallen tree, on the trunk whereof he sat. He held out with his left hand a pouch he had been carrying, and with his right a bottle and a cup, and bade the beggar eat and drink. The beggar poured ale into the cup, and took bread and cheese from the leather pouch, and gave the pouch and bottle to the stranger. He broke off pieces of bread and cheese and put these things back into the pouch, which the stranger left between them, leaning against the log. They were sitting side by side, and the hood still overhung the stranger's face, but the beggar knew the stranger was aware of him. The stranger moved the cloak back a little from his shoulders, and took out his dagger, and the greatly-polished blade of it for a moment caught the sunlight and cast it in the beggar's eyes and dazzled them. The stranger said, "I am sorry, father," and it seemed to the beggar that he was indeed,

and more sorry than there was need.

The stranger cut two slices from the loaf of bread and one slice from the cheese. He put the slice of cheese upon a slice of bread, and laid them down upon the pouch. Then he poured ale upon the other slice of thick-grained bread, until it was soaked, and put the bottle down. And he raised within his hood first the bread and cheese and then the bread and ale, till both were gone. When he was finished eating, he put the food and ale into the pouch, then wrapped him in his cloak and lay upon the ground, with head and shoulders against the log. And there he rested for a time, but ever he watched the road, and ever he listened all about them.

When he had rested for what seemed to the beggar over-long a time, the stranger rose and turned his head a little toward the wood. The beggar turned and sat the other way upon the log, away from the direction in which the stranger walked. He heard the stranger call a name, and he waited, until the stranger called, “Are you ready, father?” He turned and saw the stranger mounted, and went to the horse.

A.D. – Olthorm, his wife, and their son finished breakfast, which was always leisurely for them, and Olthorm and the boy got up and went to the forge, with neither speaking and Elana smiling a farewell, which always irritated Olthorm, as

they were only going to another part of their own building. They were going to make horseshoes that morning.

They got the primitive forge going. When the fire was burning well, the blacksmith said, “Joruhn, I am going to tell you something today that will change your life and maybe mine. I want you to promise you will not mention it to anyone else until I have said everything I have to say and you have answers to all the questions that occur to you. I will not ask you to keep it secret any longer than that. You may think you ought to tell, and I don’t want to interfere with anything you may believe to be your duty. Promise me?”

“Yes, Father. I promise.”

“Good boy.” Olthorm knew then that he would be able to give his son every chance to stay alive, but his fear and sorrow were not diminished, for, considering the boy’s upbringing, which he had influenced as much as he had dared, the odds were against him. The only advantage this primitive society had offered him lay in the fact that a boy was expected to follow his father’s teaching, and a father was expected to apprentice sons to his own craft except where the sons showed strong inclination or exceptional talent for some other occupation. And Joruhn had the makings of a really able blacksmith, and, what was more important and

meant danger for him, of a fine Steelmaster.

Olthorn said as he picked up the first piece of iron to be worked on, “We’ll make some horseshoes and then go for a walk on the hill, where we can talk in peace.” They worked on without words.

B.C. – As knight and horse-borne beggar moved past fields where labourers stacked wheat, one worker, stalwart, stood straight and looked at them, then waved, as if to someone he had known. The rider stopped the high grey horse, and the stranger strode toward them. And a boy followed the man.

The stranger stopped near. The Grey Rider drew back his hood, and the beggar saw, with some surprise, that he seemed a man of early middle age, handsome, with grey eyes and pale red-golden hair and beard. The Rider smiled at the beggar.

The Rider and the stranger looked at each other well, and it seemed to the beggar that each saw in the other something of himself. The stranger gave them greeting then, and then said to the Rider, “I am Falual, son of Naluon of Gorfirth.”

“Orumirand,” the Rider said, bowing in the saddle. “Your father was that Naluon who helped Morndilas?”

“Yes. I often brought him his meals while his wound was healing.” He stopped

speaking, for the beggar looked as if he would like to ask the rider something, and the Rider gave heed to the old man.

“I’d like to stretch, if you’re going to talk awhile,” the beggar said. The Rider helped him down.

“I have often wished to ride with you of Felcath,” Falual said. “But it’s too late now for me to be half-Elven.”

“You might have such a son. There are two Elven maidens no worthy man has sought. You could teach half-Elven lad a lot that he should learn.”

“There is a maiden here with whom I have talked much,” said Falual. “I think by now she hath refusal rights. Should she not marry me, I’ll ride when heart is whole again, and indeed it might take long, for Felcath. But tell not your Elven maids that one should wait for me.”

The boy, whom Falual had not noticed, tugged at his tunic, and put up his hand for Falual to bend down to him, and whispered to the man. Falual said sharply, “No.” Then Falual straightened and smiled at Orumirand, who thought he knew what the boy had asked, and had pulled up his hood. Falual put his hand on the boy's shoulder and said, “Dornufil, my sister’s son. Maybe someday he will go to Felcath.”

“I would gladly go, if it meant that I could—” said Dornuful before his uncle’s forbidding finger silenced him.

“Can you tell yet how far you have to go?” asked Falual.

“I never know that,” said Orumirand. “I only know when I have come where I should stop.”

“Must you keep going until you have to stop?”

“It seems the best way. We have a duty.”

“It seems to me,” said Falual, “that the best time for such a stop as you must make is evenfall, when towns and villages are quiet. You could stay here till near that time, for our village is just around that hill, and it is just a full day’s ride to the next.”

“You spoke long with Morndilas,” said Orumirand. “I’ll rest here for a while. That oak will be good shade till the high heat passes, and that clump of milanil will do well also. Thank you.” He rode toward the oak and the others went with him, and went past him as they reached the tree, and they stood with backs toward him while they heard him dismount, Falual holding Dornuful in front of him. After a while, Orumirand said, “Thank you.” As they turned, Dornuful saw the knight fasten his cloak while striding toward them.

“We can rest, father,” said Orumirand to the beggar. “Though I would like to help with the wheat if I may, when I have sat awhile, for seldom get half-Elven such work in fields near Felcath.”

“It would be privilege to work with you,” said Falual. “But ‘twould be great joy to me, and greater privilege, if you would but sit with Dornufil and give him a tale of the days of long ago, before men were. My sister would be greatly pleased.”

“Whatever says the son of Naluon. Come, Dornufil.” The boy and Orumirand sat down beside the tree, the half-Elven with his back against it, with hood and cloak thrown back, and the boy, with arms about knees, bent toward him. Other boys were looking then from where they worked with men, and Orumirand beckoned to them, and they came running after asking leave from father, uncle or older brother. And Orumirand gave them a tale both grim and beautiful, while the day wore on. But he said not a word of what Dornufil longed most to hear.

Falual drew near the circle, as Orumirand’s tale was ending, and when Orumirand had finished, he said to the half-Elven, “Have ale with us before we leave.” Orumirand took the proffered flask and drank deeply. He gave it back, and Falual drank, and Orumirand looked round at all who stood there, and then at

Falual. The son of Naluon waved for the boys to leave, except for Dornufil, and they departed. Falual, the beggar, and Dornufil turned away as Orumirand strode toward the milani, loosening his cloak. Soon they heard him mount his horse and turned toward him, and saw that his cloak hung, as it had before, over the horse's flank with room for something else between it and Orumirand.

“May we ride with you?” said Falual. “My horse is strong and can bear me with Dornufil and this man.”

“As you wish,” said Orumirand. “But riding behind me would be better.” He waited while Falual helped the beggar to the bare back of his white plowhorse, then vaulted lightly up and had a man who had approached, lift Dornufil up behind him.

Soon, Orumirand rode slowly on the road that curved to the right around the foot of a long, high hill, and Falual followed, with men and boys from the fields trotting close around him.

“Tell us about the half-Elven,” Dornufil begged.

“The half-Elven fight still the battle fought of old, by Men and Elves, against the servants of the Fallen High Ones, the demons who in this world lurk within the Shadows of the Laws of Life,” said Falual, as he had often said to Dornufil

before, while others moved closer to hear for the first time. “Those servants abandon the dignity of man, to abase themselves before the Fallen in exchange for ease and power. For the Fallen lure men to the Pit with dreams of power. Their servants make unseemly usage of that which is as dung untimely forced from the Body of Altanua, defiling the Garden of Him Who Rules, and they debase the Fire of Life, to make dead beings imitate the living. Of old they agonized with the Fire of Life those mysterious beings called kimildin who today give help to the half-Elven. For the half-Elven are drawn by sickness of the spirit toward the places where this evil sorcery is practised, and when they come to such a place they stop. But they know not the magic in itself, but the kimildin do, and the kimildin point out the sorcerers, and the half-Elven seize them or, if they must, they kill them. It is dangerous, for the half-Elven are not immune, any more than you or I, to the evil magic.

“So, the half-Elven know not the working of the magic, nor the kimildin the place of it, but thus they work together to find both place and magic. When a knight of Felcath comes to a place where his sore foreboding tells him the evil lurks, he stops and waits, giving the dwellers there fine tales at evening, until the dark magician works his magic and the kimildin finds him. The waiting is great

pain for the half-Elven, but the tales he gives are marvellous to hear, so that sometimes it is almost hard to pray that he have quick success.

“But Morndilas told me also that anyone who might learn more than I have told you concerning the kimildin is bound by severe, strict duty not to repeat it to anyone. I may not even tell you whether I know more,” Falual told his nephew and the others.

A.D. – Laying aside the last horseshoe, Olthorm said, “Let’s get a lunch and go.” He and Joruhn went to the residential section of their home, where Olthorm made roast beef sandwiches and filled a flask with beer. They left, walking through the village toward the hill at the far end, which showed a perpendicular wall of grey toward them. Once past the village, they made their way along a path that led southern, to their right. They walked in silence, Olthorm with suppressed anxiety and his son suppressed excitement and curiosity. They climbed the path, when it turned back northward, in silence, save when Olthorm gave Joruhn advice on where to put his foot sometimes, for climbing in those days was an art of which no detail should be neglected, and crossed the hilltop to the narrow clearing that overlooked their village and the quarry where stone had been cut for the village’s houses.

Olthorm sat, settling his back against a tree, and Joruhn sat in front of him, crosslegged, curious.

“Who is the Shaper of Souls?” asked Olthorm.

“The Shaper of Souls is the Perfect Shape,” Joruhn replied, “and he has shaped the world to contain a multiplicity of shapes, to share in his perfection and to make it manifest.”

“To whom is it made manifest?”

“It is made manifest to man, who shares the function of the Shaper of Souls and who by sharing that function has his own soul shaped in imitation of that spirit which is the Perfect Shape.”

“How does man share in the function of the Shaper of Souls?”

“Man shares in the function of the Shaper of Souls by using animals for human ends, thus raising them to share directly in work shaped by intellect, and to share affection, which is their highest approach to love, with a being who is higher than they. Thus men illustrate for themselves their relationship with the Shaper and the function of the Shaper, who has promised to raise man above man’s own natural level to share in the life of the Shaper Himself. Also, animals give glory to man by showing him as worthy of service, and they share in the kind of food and

shelter that man provides primarily for himself. The sharing of life and love by men and animals is the peculiar glory of this world.”

“What is the destiny of man?”

“The destiny of man is knowledge of the Shaper of Souls, which each man may everlastingly approach by his unique perception of the Dance of Shapes.”

“Why does man suffer?”

“Some men suffer because they have disobeyed the Shaper of Souls and thus merit punishment, and some men suffer because only in suffering can they reflect the intensity of the love the Shaper has for the souls of men.”

“What is the Order of Elder Scholars?”

“The Order of Elder Scholars is the body of trained perceivers whose duty is to study and explain the Dance of Shapes, in principle and in detail, for the advancement of perception of man the race. My father is an Elder Scholar, and I hope to be one.”

“You’ve learned your catechism well, Jorrie,” said Olthorm. “Those parts, anyway. Would you like to know why I had you learn it from your uncle instead of teaching you myself?”

“You always said it was better for a boy to learn with other boys, and I am an

only son, so it was better to learn with my cousins,” the boy answered, frowning.

“Was that not true?”

“I always said that, yes, and I believe it to be true. But most of the Elder Scholars do. But it is not the whole truth, because the catechism of the Elder Scholars is not the whole truth, and I did not want you to receive from me anything less than the whole truth. The whole truth is what I am to tell you today, and I did not want its telling to be shadowed by the Scholars’ catechism from my mouth. Every boy in this forsaken age must learn that catechism, if only for his own safety’s sake, so I had you learn it. But I would not teach it to you myself. What I have to tell you is literal truth, not poetry.”

The boy was silent. The implication that his revered catechism was nothing more than poetry was not strong enough in his mind even to startle him.

“The Elder Scholars are not the only guardians of knowledge, Jorrie. I belong to an order of which the Scholars are implacable enemies – the International Association of Mechanicist Scientists. I–”

“How can that be?” demanded Joruhn.

“That doesn’t make me a traitor, Joruhn. I’d be a traitor if I didn’t belong to the Order – a traitor to the human race, to races from outside this planet, maybe to

the very universe itself. That's more important than loyalty to a group of self-proclaimed scholars. This is what I want to explain.

“I want to tell you about the kind of knowledge we preserve, so that you can decide today the path your manhood will follow.” He paused. “Today you will either denounce me as an enemy of mankind, so that I can be executed by the authorities, or you will put your feet upon the path I walk in danger. I only ask that you consider carefully all that I say, and ask me any questions that come to your mind, before you make your own decision.”

“How could you be an enemy of mankind? You're one of the most important men in the village. Everybody needs the things you make.”

“True, but there are other things that I, as a Mechanicist, would rather make, and for making these things the Elder Scholars would have me killed. Any one of them would gladly give evidence against me if they knew. But look, before we go any further, I want your promise that if you decide to side with the scholars against the scientists, you'll tell me first, so I'll have a chance to run. You'd give me that chance, I think?”

Joruhn nodded, tears in his eyes.

“Good. Men who can trust each other should let each other know when they've

got to be enemies. And the Elder Scholars and the Mechanicists have between them the deadliest enmity the world has ever seen. It is the enmity of a blend of knowledge and ignorance, against knowledge.”

“What’s a Mechanicist?”

“A Mechanicist, my son, is one who knows and follows the art, the science, and the philosophy, of the machine.” He stopped, as if he had given a full answer, and he waited, showing no glint of humour. Finally the boy asked, “What is the machine?” Then Olthorm told him...

He described the steam engine, the gasoline-powered tractor, the radio, the airplane, the nuclear reactor, the laser pistol, and the computer, for he had a wide-ranging knowledge of anything, to that time invented, which might make use, in any way, of steel. Joruhn seemed enthralled by the ingenuity of their devising, especially the simpler ones, which he readily understood, and eager to learn more about the more complex.

“That will have to wait until you choose,” Olthorm said then. “Neither side wastes detailed knowledge on the uncommitted. And possession of detailed technological information would make you suspect to the Order and prevent you from rising in its ranks if you decide their side’s the right one. For you, my boy,

have the capacity to rise high, whichever side you choose. You're smart. We need you. But they'd always deem you too much tempted if you seemed well informed of our ways of working."

Olthorm sighed. "Things were simpler, men were wiser, in the old days. Technology developed in an open society, where books on all kinds of knowledge were freely available for anyone intelligent and educated enough to benefit from them. At least, that's the impression that history has handed down, such history as I've been given in outline. In the Learned Cities, which is the modern name for that society, people rejoiced in knowledge and tolerated all differences of opinion the range of knowledge led to. They might voice their opinions forcefully, but didn't use force just because they had opinions. They prized diversity as the chief property of matter, and looked for it in all matters. Many a moral stance propped up its opposite, which otherwise it might term wrong, by leaning against it rather than try to knock it down, and men of letters gloried in that rich variety of even 'contradictory' behaviour. Men were free.

"Science became so complex that it needed musical notation to express many concepts. Computer technology advanced until scientists were able through it, using the musical mode of terminology, to make contact with extra-terrestrial

intelligences, called Ulkueni, who had been monitoring our development until we were considered worthy of dealing with them as equals. They had great understanding of the natural laws being explored by the scientists of the Learned Cities, and they guided that exploration with a sure hand. Under that guidance, the learned men soon approached the art of telepathy, which the Ulkueni already possessed to an astonishing extent. We don't know for sure what form the experiments took, but it was established that the brains of animals – particularly of a species called the cat, which was apparently the most readily available – were susceptible to electrical transmission and reception. It's not clear whether that was evident to research or latent and had to be developed. But certainly after the experiments, cats – at least some cats – had that capability. The experiments, though, were highly painful, and the Elder Scholars have a theory that cats still exist but shun men because of a race memory of that treatment. That's why we train small dogs now to kill rats and mice.”

Joruhn's eyes widened. “Animals besides dogs were rat hunters?”

“They were naturals. Didn't have to be trained. Mice and rats were natural prey to them. From what I hear of them, though, the dog is the superior animal. A lot of people thought it wrong to ‘torture’ animals even to help make men

telepathic, but I guess they weren't the majority. Anyway, no wars were fought over it. You had to be rationally convincing to be politically effective in those days. No kind of knowledge was deemed evil. It can't be, no matter what evil use can be found for it. A warrior who was also a surgeon, for instance, could use his knowledge to put a foe out of action for a while instead of killing, and he could do it out of mercy or from a desire to enslave, or he could use it to torture exquisitely instead of killing mercifully, if his skill were great enough. All men held thus before the Destruction of the Learned Cities.

“The Destruction was almost certainly a nuclear disaster, either an act of war, or more likely technological malfunction. Whatever happened, in the upheaval that followed, men forgot the rational approach to knowledge, and soon many of the learned men encouraged that forgetting.

“The ordinary man turned against the learned men, saying they had delved into things man is not meant to know. There was a great popular reaction against all forms of science, and it was said that man is not fit to wield great power but must be content to drudge and suffer in the world, snatching but fleeting pleasures when time permits, lest he destroy the world – instead of trying to be its master and enjoy it fully. Then some scientists began to fear that all knowledge would be

lost, so they focussed the blame on mechanical lore, which had led to use of atomic energy. They were the first to use the term ‘Mechanicist’, for knowledge different from what they called ‘Naturist’. Which is nonsense, but the atmosphere of the age made it easily accepted. And that did save an immense amount of real science. For anyone who has enough Naturist knowledge can easily use it to build the bridges between processes that we call technology. If that had been a ruse for the preservation of all science, it would have been a dandy. After the initial scare, practical application of Mechanicism could have been restarted. In fact, many Mechanicists believed that was what the Scholars intended, so they pretended to join the new Order. They would have had to, anyway, to survive.”

“Traitors,” said Joruhn, apparently forgetting that if the word were accurate in this case it would still apply to his father.

“Being honest with an enemy has to depend on whether the enemy is honest,” Olthorm replied. “Anyway, if things had been as they had seemed, all would have been well, though there would have been a period of suffering for known Mechanicists.

“However, the Naturists were real traitors to science, not just feigned ones. Either that, or they became traitors to their fellows from jealousy for the

Mechanicists as benefactors of mankind. Though I think it's unrealistic to always impute the worst motives to your enemies. I think they really were moved by misguided fear of having the Destruction repeated. Anyway, they treated their new position as if it were the whole truth and nothing but the truth.

“Pretty soon, it wasn't enough for them to say that Mechanicism led to destruction; they had to say it was wrong to start with. They said Mechanicist inventions were actual misuse of scientific laws – ‘Offences against Lore.’ They said using a fuel-powered machine was like having unnatural coition with the spirit of the universe. How so fertile a union could be called unnatural is beyond me, but that's poetry for you.

“At least,” he added, seeing the look in Joruhn's eyes, “that's their kind of poetry. Real poetry has uses, in helping us to learn and savour the interlockingness of scientific concepts. But poetry isn't the highest linguistic art; precise scientific terminology is.” Joruhn shrugged. “That's what makes music so important.” It seemed to him that Joruhn was open to that idea; music had always been important to the boy.

“It didn't take long for the law to declare all Mechanicists enemies of mankind, after the original mob fury died down and the indiscriminate killing

stopped. The laws were fair, as laws go. Possession of anything powered by fuel was enough for a conviction, but it was also necessary for one unless a man was careless enough to advocate openly a return to those machines. The penalty was death; still is, of course. Scientists were to be considered converted unless proven recusant, so far as the law was concerned; though the Scholars themselves were more cautious. Those laws are hardly even remembered by ordinary people these days, though they're still on the books. The Naturists – the Elder Scholars – want these things to be forgotten utterly if possible.

“But we’re keeping them alive!” Wilm Olthorn smacked a fist into a palm. “We’ve kept them alive for centuries. And we’ll continue, if we can. If our sons, and others we can trust, allow us. If they’ll help. Some do, some don’t. The choice is yours.”

“It’s a hard choice,” Joruhn said.

“I’m not trying to rush you, boy. You haven’t heard it all. When you do, then I’ll ask for your decision.

“After the laws were made and solid evidence was required for a killing, things were easier for us in a way, but harder otherwise. Mechanicists could come out of hiding, but they had to watch their words. And they had to learn poetry to convey

concepts the the Naturists deemed important, which were in fact worthless.

There's nothing so disheartening as forced time-wasting, Joruhn. But our forefathers endured it, even became good at it, for it meant the survival of the race. The best Mechanicists adapted, became good Naturist poets, and preserved our technological heritage. Some even learned to enjoy such poetry, for amusement, to practice adaptation. The Mechanicists who couldn't adapt were weeded out, by the Naturist Scholars, and some were even exposed and executed, indirectly because their poetry was bad. That's why I've always been glad you show signs of being a good poet.

“Then, after a while, things got worse. The Naturists added religion to their act. Men had always believed in a Great Spirit who had made the universe or in mysterious lesser spirits beyond their knowledge who rule Nature and the lives of men, and the Naturists adapted that to their own purposes.” Joruhn was deeply disquieted, Wilm saw. “It was a smart move. A movement based on fear and poetry wasn't likely to stand the test of time, but religion has always been one of the survivor-forces. They formulated the catechism you were raised in, the catechism you must always profess, whichever side you take. They said the catechism was God's reward of knowledge to certain men for resisting

Mechanicist temptation. They don't teach all their doctrines to all men, holding that some are best reserved for those who are qualified to appreciate them and withstand opposing points of view. You have to be in the Second Rank, for example, like me before you're allowed to discuss the Doctrine of Shapes. That says God makes 'creatures' for the sake of the shapes they present to the senses: appreciation of these shapes and the qualities reflected in them, is the highest duty of man, after obedience to the inter-personal moral code. The Scholars say the inner structure of things exists only to support and present the outward shape, and that scientific knowledge of the inner structure is merely an aid, for those whose complexity of mind needs it to stifle boredom and maintain the zest. That is the most pernicious of all the Scholars' fallacies."

Olthorn wet his lips and shifted his position. "Real science has discovered that the outward appearance of a terrestrial being is incidental to the inner structure, which is designed for survival – survival of the individual, in the first instance, but primarily the survival of the species. Biologists have discovered that the body is merely an offshoot, so to speak, of the brain itself, though the Scholars insist that the body has some kind of unique quality, which they never name, that gives it value in itself. The rest of the body is a mechanism to preserve the brain. And

the brain of man is the highest form of brain on earth, a brain aware of its own knowing. The world is designed for the survival of that brain, and the better it serves that purpose, the better the world will be. The world must be made, like the body, an extension of the brain of man.

“Science doesn’t bear out the Scholars’ teaching that the world is just a temporary testing place to shape the soul for some sort of after-life that no one’s ever come back to describe. That teaching’s just an inference the Scholars claim to draw from the following of a certain way of life. You have to start following that way of life before you can see the value of it, they keep saying among themselves. And they say that the ordinary people, outside the Order, don’t need to know and choose that value intellectually, because they’re experiencing that value in their way of life. The way the Scholars have chosen for them.

“The Scholars’ way of thinking, as it’s explained to the lower ranks of the Order, is highly attractive, Jorrie. You know; you’ve been raised in it. It’s too bad, but I had no choice; as you grow older, you’ll come to realize there are some things you have no choice about.”

“I understand,” Joruhn said.

“Thanks, son. But I was saying – there are things in the Scholars’ teaching that

speaking right to your heart. The notion of beauty is very seductive when you've been trained to appreciate it. If the heart of the individual were all that mattered, it would be as good a way of getting along in the world as any. I almost fell for it two years ago. It's so appealing that I started to think that the Scholars' description of God might be the manifestation that God, if there is a God, had chosen for revealing himself to this age. But just at the right time, someone higher than I let it slip that the Third Rank's secret name for the Shaper of Souls is *aëlanu*, an ancient word meaning "that which is": "the way things are". That shook my soul, and then tempered it like the best sword I've ever made. It showed that the Elder Scholars truly believe as we do, that what really shapes our identity is our relating to the world around us. They just arbitrarily decided, because of their fear of nuclear holocaust, that their way, the way things are now, is the best one. And they foisted a whole religious hoax on what they know of the human race in order to preserve it."

Joruhn's shoulders shook and his hands covered his face. Olthorm waited till the sobbing stopped.

"Losing a personal, omnipotent guardian you've believed in all your life is a terrible loss," Olthorm said kindly. "A man endures it. A child forces himself to

believe forever, despite the lack of reason for belief.”

Joruhn dried his tears, set his jaw. “I’m not a child anymore. I’ll endure what I have to endure. But why do they tell us such comforting things when they aren’t true?”

“You’re a good man, Joruhn,” said Olthorm then. “They teach these things because they are at heart kindly men, who love the earth and other men, and fear that these will be destroyed by nuclear technology. For all their complexity of knowledge, they are only simple men who fail to realize we learn by our mistakes. For it may be that the race had to be burned once by nuclear energy, just as an individual child has to be burned once with ordinary fire before he really knows the value of avoiding mistakes with it. But we don’t abolish fire every time a child burns his finger. We Mechanicists want to make sure men know of that mistake and the machinery it was made with, so they’ll be careful enough next time. The *aëlanuists* don’t believe that will work. We believe it because we have to. Without that, there’s no future.

“The Scholars know as well as we that the Earth is going to die, the sun is going to burn out, the universe is going to run down – if the ‘natural’ course of events proceeds. They know that destruction is inevitable – millions of years in

the future, but still inevitable. And they're not willing to take any small risk of having destruction happen early, so we could seize the chance that nature offers to escape that. They feel destruction is inevitable anyway if man returns to nuclear energy, so they want to put it off until it can't help happening, and enjoy life as much as they can in the meantime. And they invent the Shaper of Souls to say that life should be enjoyed that way. They want man to forget the Destruction of the Learned Cities and never think again of what brought it about. They're training men to a way of life where the idea of doing things better with machines will probably never occur to anyone and will be harshly rejected if it does. Their doctrine that a man should have as intimate a contact as possible with the things he grows or makes, to reflect the intimacy the Shaper is said to have with the soul, would keep man from ever growing beyond manual crafts in practice, no matter how much beautiful theory fills his head.

“The *aēlanuists* shaped this doctrine because they fear the evil in their own hearts, feeling no one can become better than they. They know that if they used nuclear power, they would be strongly tempted to use it wrongly; they don't believe the race can be improved. But we believe that evil was necessary in the childhood of the race, as filthiness is part of individual childhood before toilet

training. The Destruction which the Scholars dread so much was the slap on the wrist we needed to get ‘toilet trained’ respecting nuclear energy. We believe it will work.

“By the way, Joruhn, you mustn’t think all your elders are liars. The lower ranks really believe all the doctrines and poetic imagery they and their pupils teach you, as formulated by the *aëlanuists*. They believe the *aëlanuists* are especially favoured by God. Quite possible, if there is a God and if the *aëlanuists* weren’t liars – all religions agree that God doesn’t favour liars. The point is, there are arguments for and against the existence of a God, so who’s to say whether he exists or not? And since we can’t be sure, isn’t it safer to act for ourselves without depending on him?”

Joruhn nodded.

“Some Mechanicists do believe in God, as a matter of fact, and they also believe that Mechanicism is an expression of his will for man. They say that if there is a God, then he is the highest kind of being possible, and man represents God on Earth as being the highest creature here. Even the Ulkueni, for their own reasons, never interfered with our status in that respect. And the believing Mechanicists say that since man is supposed to have a special relationship with

the highest kind of being, then this should be reflected in our relating to the natural world. They say we should relate with nature through other men, who are our world's highest representatives of nature. Therefore, men should relate to one another, in supplying our needs, through machinery, which is a product of man, and not through animals, the lower products of nature. For a believer in God, that seems to me a viable alternative to *aëlanuism*.

“Yes, Joruhn, it's possible to be both a Theist and a Mechanicist, if the Theistic arguments convince you. I just wanted to be sure you could bear not being a Theist, if they don't.” He smiled, and so did Joruhn.

“The thing is, since there's a choice between Naturism and Mechanicism, and since God, if he exists, has never done a thing to show a preference, who's to say which should prevail? Shouldn't there be free and open argument about that sort of thing, as there was in the old days?”

Joruhn nodded, face grim. “Sure there should.”

“The argument is going on among the extra-terrestrials – why not among us? Oh, yes, they're at it too, if the *aëlanuists* can be believed, and in this I think they can. We've lost touch with the Ulkueni, who we have to hope are waiting for us to regain technological equality, but the *aëlanuists* claim to be in contact with a race

called the Iladuar, who are Naturist aliens. The *aēlanuists* claim to transmit messages by speaking in a special language and receive answers in code through subtle atmospheric effects. Both Iladuar and Ulkueni seem to have much control over nature, but neither race uses it except to communicate general scientific knowledge. And the questions you ask to get that knowledge have to be carefully worded, and the background has to be thoroughly researched. So history says, about the Ulkueni. They're looking for equals, and I'd guess the Iladuar are also.

“So our Naturist-Mechanicist debate seems universal. I guess you'd expect the question to arise wherever intelligent beings began to make progress partly perilous. The Ulkueni resolved it one way, and the Iladuar the other. We haven't figured out yet how the Iladuar bridge space without Mechanicist technology. They must have tapped some inner source of power that technology could magnify tremendously, given the chance. Think what could be done with such a combination!”

Joruhn's face showed awe, if his father was any judge of the boy's expressions.

“Some have speculated that the Iladuar and the Ulkueni are so interested in us – if the Ulkueni still are – because they want to see the results, by testing on a

small scale, of combining Naturist knowledge and Mechanicist technology. We figure that if our small planet proves it can survive that kind of fusion, the Ulkueni and Iladuar might try it on a solar system, maybe a galaxy. Anyway, it's a theory that covers the facts we know. The Elder Scholars made great strides in medicine, for one thing, after claiming to reach the Iladuar. There must be a serious reason for that kind of help.

“Of course, they could just be looking each for allies on their side of the great debate, new voting members of an interplanetary federation. They'd already know technology's environmental effects on some worlds but might be doubtful of similar results elsewhere. Our vote would be decided by our experience, so a lot would depend on us Mechanicists.

“There's other speculation more to the point: it may be feasible to discover the original material source of the energy which started the great machine we call the universe. That's a theory soundly based on data transmitted by the Ulkueni before the great upheaval. What we've put together from it suggests that a great, united effort of intelligent races throughout the universe might be able to restore that primal energy. That would ensure the survival of all worthy races, and the human race could be one of them.

“That goal isn’t certain, but we deem it well worth striving for.”

He was certain Joruhn agreed, though the boy did not speak.

“But before we can even begin to strive, we must deal effectively with the *aëlanuists*. We must discredit them, convert them, circumvent them by spreading Mechanicism secretly among those we can trust, or simply outlast them, hoping the Ulkueni will wait for us. Maybe the best we can hope for is that this civilization will collapse or be destroyed and man be able to start again. But I’m more optimistic. We must rise among the Elder Scholars, hoping by subtle discussion to lead them to see behind the poetic imagery built up for them, the prosaic operation of mundane law. We must supersede the *aëlanuists*.

“It won’t be easy, Joruhn. It hasn’t been easy for me, and it won’t be easy for you – if you join. There’ll be a scattered smuggled document from scientists who have safe access to written sources, but most of your technology will come from me, by word of mouth, as I received it from my father. We’ll use a lot of mnemonic aids, most of them connected with music. And your memory will be even better trained by the Elder Scholars, if you can get among them. It won’t be impossible.

“The worst part will be the testing and the hunting, both involving music, to

which, by the time you're tested or hunted, you'll be thoroughly committed. The Scholars hold that music is first the Language of Praise for the Shaper, as you're probably tired of hearing, but we say it is the language of transmission of technology, the language of utilization. The two are highly similar in some ways, since praise of God is in part, at least, theoretically an appreciation of scientific wonders, but they are in some places strongly though subtly opposed. And once you've been committed to one kind the other is hard to take. You have to be quite an actor to fake appreciation for it.

“That's where the Test of Music comes in. Every time a man is about to be admitted to a rank of the Order, he is taken to the Hall of Scholars, which as you may have suspected is soundproof, and music is played to him for three days. Except for the necessary eating and sleeping, he does nothing but listen to music. If the Scholars like his reactions, they admit him to that rank. If they don't, he's expelled from the Order and watched closely for the rest of his life. It's a purely subjective test, but the Scholars swear by it. And I must admit I found the second test a bastard. I had a better appreciation of the differences, you see. Whether I'll try for the rank of *aëlanuist* I don't know yet.

“The hunting's worse. That's done by men who are real experts at both killing

and music. The Scholars don't talk much about them, maybe don't quite approve, but they certainly find them useful. Many a good man who's passed the Test of Music has fallen to the hunters. They live to sing and to hunt. Hunt men.

“These hunters only came to light a few years ago. We think they may be mutants caused by the Destruction, who bred true and are out to get revenge for being made different. But the main difference, so far as we know, is a wonderful singing voice, and considerable acting ability. They're shrewd psychologists. They wander from town to town, singing for their supper, singing songs praising the Shaper of Souls, praising men who've withstood the temptations of Mechanicism, or praising various 'heroes' of their own kind responsible for the execution of Mechanicists. That stuff is very hard to take. And if there's a slight slip in your reaction to their singing, they start singing directly to you, projecting the idea they're going to get you next. And you have to sit there and take it, with everybody watching you. It can go on for a long time. Since music is so popular now and these fellows are so good, people keep coming to listen to them every night for as long as they stay. And if you miss one of their concerts, you're immediately suspect, unless you've got a really good reason.

“The thing to do is not to break. If one of these fellows finally denounces you

as a Mechanicist, the Scholars take his word for it and kick you out and watch you all your life. Maybe they even search your house for Mechanicist artifacts, for the law allows such a search when a man is suspected on good grounds by the Scholars. But what the hunter really wants you to do is panic and go to your radio for advice or help – which no one could get to you in time, anyway. Oh, yes, I've got a radio, and a light-drill pistol, too, carefully hidden in a wall of the shop. Smuggling's not confined to documents. But as soon as you turn on your radio he's got you, because he has some sort of short-range electrical device, to which the Scholars turn a blind eye, because they haven't officially been told about it, for detecting radio transmissions. When he denounces you after that, you're done for, because they take your house apart, stone by stone if they have to, until they find the radio. Then you're tried by the authorities, with the Scholars giving all kinds of poetic evidence, and you're beheaded. That's worse than being watched all your life. The only hope you've got when you're caught like that is that you might be able to hold people off long enough with your light-drill gun to explain to them how such things work, or that you'll be able to scare them long enough, or kill enough of them, to get away. None of these is much of a hope. The ordinary man is fiercer now than he used to be. I wish we knew more about these

hunter bastards. We might counter them.

“Well, that’s the way it is, Joruhn. What you’ve got before you is a life full of mere affection for animals, including other men, and passive admiration of beautiful things, or a life of dedication to challenging thought, maybe outgrowing affection and possibly inventing new concepts of beauty, with the hope of saving your race from extinction. You can remain a committed member of a society which, though it deals at times with things of great complexity, gives a man no real incentive to explore that complexity but lets him keep on imagining himself to be at the simple centre of it. Or you can join a movement that will draw you like a magnet to expand your mind, to adjust quickly to new situations and new ways of doing things, to exercise the adaptability which can make man a well-respected and widely-established citizen of the universe. You can stay in a world where brute acceptance of pain and hardship in failure is put on a par with competence, or you can come into another, where effectiveness is given the value it deserves as the quality that can preserve the race.

“I guess I’m not being very objective about your choice, which must be made objectively, but I can’t help showing you the way I feel. You’re my son, and I want you with us, but it’s too big a choice to make on that basis. Though I might

also point out, since I've started, that you've also the choice of being dishonest with those about whom you profess to care most, or of being honest at least with those whose opinions you value. Do you want to decide now, or do you have some questions?"

"Now. I'm with you. With the Mechanicists."

Wilm caught the boy into his arms. Jorrie would not have to die in an accidental fall from the quarry's top.

"Let's stop in the tavern on the way home," Olthorm said. Usually, only men gathered at the tavern.

They did stop in, carrying their uneaten lunch, and Olthorm was pleased to see, when the landlord boasted that his dog Snapper was better than Olthorm's rat traps, that Joruhn showed no sign of having superior, secret knowledge.

As they crossed the street toward their home, Olthorm said, "We'll call the nearest agent of Information Central now, and give the boys the good news. How will it feel to speak with a friend you never met, hundreds of miles away?"

Joruhn smiled.

B.C. – A plaintive cry came from beneath the cloak of the Half-Elven, as they rode through the village, and Orumirand looked inside the cloak, then stopped

beside, and faced, the dwelling to his right, of a man whom Falual had thought they all knew well. He loosed the grey cloak and let it fall in a heap upon the horse's back. And Dornufil watched closely the cloak of Orumirand, as carefully as others watched for deeds of wrath 'twixt knight and sorcerer. And he saw a small, black form, seeming strangely cloaked and plumed, drop from the cloak and quickly move toward a building that Uncle Falual knew well. It disappeared inside the door a man had left open as he heard, loud, the voice of Orumirand. For Orumirand, bending, had slipped the knot that held the covering of his shield, slid left arm and hand into straps of gleaming shield revealed, dismounted on the right, as did Falual and the beggar while grey steed backward stepped, and shouted, "Sorcerer, come forth!" A door of the building opened and the man came out at once, pointing at the head of the Half-Elven with what Falual, from speech with Morndilas, knew for the magical instrument fíngalada. Not ducking, lest the fearful magic pass and injure others, Orumirand raised the shield, rectangular, wide enough and long enough to shelter his whole body from shoulder unto knee. As he did so, he turned his head and saw that no one stood behind him, and he dropped quickly to one knee, hiding wholly behind the shield. He knew not whether force magical was striking shield, which he knew would ward him from

it, but Falual and others saw light glow and dazzle and go out, upon the surface of the shield, as it had done when fignalada was pointed at Half-Elven's head.

Suddenly, he dipped head sideways, to the right, for quick glance forward, and as the fignalada was aimed that way by vigilant magician, he sprang up, made one step forward. Magical instrument was aimed again, this time at his right leg, and he quickly lowered shield, by bending knees and dropping hand but slightly.

Again, the glow and dazzle short was seen. But of this part of the fighting naught was seen by Dornufil, who was watching again for the kimildin.

A.D. – Throwing down the laser pistol, Olthorm in rage lunged turning for a hammer, seized it and, as the Elven-crafted mirror-shield was cast aside, rushed at his foe and died like a man, which many said later was better death than he deserved, on quickly-drawn sword of Orumirand, Half-Elven out of Felcath, in a year that Olthorm's order of materialist magicians called orylin dilginitandeni Acmin Dercmenotai: the two-thousand-three-hundred-twenty-second year in the Age of the Machine. It was for ordinary men but one of many thousands of years before the birth of Christ, for Whose coming to live as a carpenter in His Father's curious, hand-crafted world, the grey-clad knights of Felcath were sworn to cleanse the Earth, the Body of Altanua. Her surface then was called the Garden of

Him Who Rules, Who is the Shaper of Souls: *Aëlanu*, He Who Is.

As Orumirand withdrew his sword and bent over the body of his foe, and Falual, stepping on the fingalada, seized the reaching Joruhn, Dornufil saw trotting, with bushy tail held high and mouse between its teeth, the half-Elven's long-haired kimildin, from Arnfurn's tavern. It scooted to the horse, dropped mouse, said "*Mrowr*" in voice demanding, seized mouse and leaped, as grey steed quickly knelt, unto saddle and into open-topped basket hung behind the saddle, to the left, and half concealed by cloak.

B.C. – After a night of hearing tales of heroes sung in Orumirand's fine voice, Falual and Dornufil rode homeward, regretting that the Half-Elven would not be there the next night, when all their family could hear him, and Falual said to Dornufil, "You seem tonight like one who knows what others have not seen. Is it not so, my nephew?"

Boy's laughter meant for ears of one man only was heard where the High Ones, the Iladuar, sing before the Lord Most High, and also in the Pit, where the Ulkueni give hymns of their own kind unto their fallen ruler. "I can't *tell* you," Dornufil replied. And then he laughed again.

II

WHY THE GODS DID NOT ABIDE

Odin rose one day from the throne where he could see and hear all that happened in the world, and he called a council of the gods and said to them, “They that dwell in Darkness Under Niflheim have wrought the chains of death for him who is better than Balder. Shall we stay here while they are fastened, or do we ride south to fight his foes?”

Thor said, “Does this young god not die of his own choice? How can we save him, if we should?”

Odin answered, “I did not say that we could save him. What I asked was whether we should fight. I think it likely we shall fail, that Ragnarok is coming now. That is no reason not to do the thing we ought.”

Heimdall said, “Is it not foretold that Ragnarok will come to Asgard? Is not the way of death for each of us foretold?”

Odin answered, “That may be a false foretelling, Loki-spawned, to keep us here when we should go forth. But if indeed it should be true, must not truth of it then stop us? Shall we not try the truth of it, in a cause that we deem just?”

And another god who later was ashamed asked then, “Are we sure there is a need? If he should lack courage to fight, can he be said to die by choice?”

One-handed Tyr slapped the table with his Fenris-bitten wrist, but then forbore to speak his thought, for the memories of the other gods were fresh. But Odin answered for him, “The question is a good one, in its way, but any judge of warriors must know the young god lacks not courage. As Tyr can be the god of war because he could let harm be done to him, so the young god can let harm be done because he does not lack the strength and will to fight. It only seems to me that some dying in battle should be done on his behalf, and it seems there is none but we to do it. One of his men, with warrior courage only, tried, but the death has been forbidden him, and he will be saved till he can face a death like the young god’s own.

“We so far have had the strength to wait in our own place till doom should come to Asgard. Thus have we earned, perhaps, the choice of going forth in battle, if we deem it should be done.

“The need of our defending Asgard is not so great as we once thought it. This

Son of the God Who Is Behind the Gods has pledged that when he shall come back from Niflheim, he will begin to make Midgard anew, as a fitting dwelling-place for the heroes who will follow us. It will be as good as Asgard is, nor will it lack the laughter of warriors, for this one is a god for all. And it may be that if we can win this fight for him, he will not have to die to gain this power needed for both gods and men.

“I tell you now, I do not think that we can win,” great Odin told the gods. “The giants will be about us as we ride and will be wielding power from Darkness Under Niflheim, such power as men and gods have not beheld in dreams. And if we should defeat them, we shall be barred, I think, by Messengers from the World Above the Gods, against whom even gods are not allowed to raise our hands. But shall we not go where we may get their message? If it is not our weird to save the one we love, shall we not at least be told of it by those whose task it is to tell such things to men and gods?”

Odin paused and looked about at all the gods in turn. “I do not think that we shall even reach the Messengers,” he said. “But if we try and then we die in fighting, shall we not greet his gladdened face in Niflheim? And will it matter then if he must leave us there when he shall lead the heroes out?” Then Odin

stood and in a great voice said, “Shall we stay or shall we ride?”

And the gods all shouted with him: “*Ride!*”

Odin sat once more upon his throne, and he saw that they who dwell in Darkness Under Niflheim broke now the chains that had bound Loki; and snapped the bonds that held the Fenris Wolf, and loosed the Midgard Serpent from the bottom of the sea. Then he and his warriors, and all the Valkyries in their bright armour that shines forth on bright, clear nights, went out from great Valhalla and got upon their steeds. And as they passed the top of Bifrost Bridge, Heimdall told Odin that he saw about a hill far south a ring of messengers from the World Above the Gods, who stood and looked toward the north but made no sign. And between Bifrost Bridge and the Ring of Messengers, the frost giants were gathered, armed with power from Darkness Under Niflheim, such as men and gods have not beheld in dreams. Toward them Odin nodded, and Thor waved his hammer at them. And down the long bridge of Bifrost the gods of Asgard rode. So fast they rode and fiercely fought that one faint gleam of Northern Light broke for a moment the darkness over Calvary.

III

THE LAST ALBIGENSIAN

On an autumn afternoon long ago in Spain, a Spanish knight who was a poet, whose name has been forgotten, rode homeward in the wind. And the wind seized the cap he wore and threw it on ahead. At first he was annoyed, but then he laughed unto the wind a laugh both deep and loud and spurred his horse to race the wind and catch the cap.

As his horse delighted in the sudden speed and in his master's gamesome mood, so did the knight rejoice: in the sweeping over fields like a ship borne fast by sail, and in the bending, as of long grass stems, of his own spirit humbled into play, that would again straighten into soberness when the wind had died.

As the knight drew near his racing cap, he was aware of a windmill to his left upon the field to which the wind had drawn him from the road, and it seemed to him that there was about the windmill something wrong. But he still pursued the

cap and soon he caught it, leaning down from stirrup to snatch it up as steed sped on. Then gradually he slowed his horse to walking and turned and looked at the windmill. The thought came to him that the windmill did not obey the wind as leaves and sea-boats do, nor as trees and shrubs, for it moved not from its place nor bent before the wind, but seized the wind's own power and spun it round within a narrowness. It seemed to him the wind had been imprisoned; not accepted as a helpful guest, with gratitude. And it seemed to him a meanness that the lord of the air, who brings the clouds to send rain upon the crops and later comes to cool the labouring harvester, should be set to grinding grain like an ox, which itself gets good of what is grown to be ground. He considered this. And as he pondered, it seemed to him that he could see into the minds of mighty spirits hovering about the world, and grasp their plans for the earth on which his fellows had joy of life and love. He saw within their minds a vision, of animals no longer hallowed by giving living help to men, of air defiled, of moving things like monstrous insects, fed upon corruption brought from the bowels of Earth, of warriors depending, in their defence of life and justice, on forces not of life, and fair rivers strangled leaving wealth and power to men deceiving or deceived. He raised his head and shouted:

“From the tyranny of the engine

Nothing has been saved:

When the windmill waved its arms

The wind was first enslaved!”

and he resolved that this should be the first part of a poem that would show other men the vision he had seen, and make them wary of poisoning of spirit. But then he was determined that before setting pen to paper, he would destroy that windmill which was to him first symbol and, perhaps, since it brought to him that vision, a sojourning place, of those powers which would destroy man’s soul.

The knight’s shout reached, though faintly, the ears of a man in a cavern some way off, who had trained his hearing to catch the words of those who spoke in defiance of the spirits whom he served; he, the last Albigensian, who had lived in that cavern, without food or drink, for hundreds of years since he escaped mysteriously the Inquisition established by holy Dominic to save from execution by the state (whose strength the heretics undermined by condemning the breeding of its members) those who were not obstinate in error. He had besought the spirits whom he served, who had delivered him from the Inquisitors, for swift release from the body he deemed vile imprisonment, and they had told him that he would be released when he had rendered signal service.

When the Albigensian had heard the shout sent up by poet knight, he summoned

to him a spirit that was one of those he served, and he told the spirit the knight's words. The spirit said, "I will watch him; he may have had given him a sight into the heart of things." The spirit left the cavern and hovered near the knight, a thing he could not have done without being called by mortal man, so as to see the images that the knight had in his mind, and he saw there windmills overthrown and men warned of foulest mastery, and he flew back into the cavern where he had been called into the world. He told the Albigenian to call on men who trusted him and on the owner of the windmill, to resist the knight with force of arms. And he said that if the knight were given power magical by saying of the poem that he meant to make, then the knight would be opposed by strength spiritual.

The old man sent a summoning to a man who owed him gratitude for past advice, and the man came soon and asked, "What would you say to me, O Ancient Wise One?" For so was the old man known by people of that district, who did not know he was a heretic. The Ancient Wise One told the man that he had heard that a certain knight intended to destroy a certain windmill, and the messenger who brought the owner word of that would gain great favour.

The messenger hastened that night to the windmill's owner and told him that the poet knight, whose name they knew, though it has been forgotten since, meant the ruin of the windmill. And the owner summoned many men-at-arms and went to

guard it.

When the knight whose name we do not know drew near the windmill in the morning, with men who carried sledgehammers and other tools for wreaking havoc, and with some men-at-arms from his own household, he saw that he was well opposed, and began to sing the poem he had meant to write, much of which had risen in his mind during his night's sleep. And the song brought minor power magical, so that his men swept through the ones who would resist them, and his armed men guarded his workers while they set themselves to smash the windmill's gears and to bring the building down. Then came spirits summoned by the Albigenian from among the many that he served, and these gave greater power to those who served the windmill's owner, and those men took again the windmill and slew the knight and all his men, and the windmill stood, though it was not undamaged, and soon some servants of the owner were set to work at its repairing. The spirits who had been summoned to serve the windmill's owner went back to the cavern where they had been called into the world, and went whence they had come, except for one who lingered, that spirit whom the Albigenian had called the day before. And the spirit said to him, "Those words of that foul poem which were heard by those who served us, all unknowing, may do great harm if they are well remembered or repeated. You must advise the men who served us that they would

be severely punished if the whole truth were known by men outside. Tell them they must lie to save their lives, for once they lie, the poem will lose its hold on them. Make sure they take the knight's men from the windmill, back to his own home, and there dispose them as if they had been slain by fighting among themselves when seized suddenly by madness. And they must leave the knight himself beside the windmill, for lies are best when they contain a little truth, and spread the tale that, seized by madness, he thought the windmill was a giant and jousting at it with a lance and thus was smashed by one of the windmill's sails. Have them fling his body from the windmill's top, so that it looks well smashed. Others of our servants will make sure that this lie of ours will come to a man in prison who can be induced to make of it a tale that regardless of his own intention will advance our aims. Men must never have put before them the notion of a sane man's attacking a windmill because it is a windmill, and attacking where it is weak."

Things were done as the spirit commanded, that "joust with windmills" might become almost a magic phrase, for use against the deeds of valour done by knights who put own lives at equal risk, with body against body, when duty called for combat, and to be applied as well to straightforward resistance to subtle tyrannies. And when they had been done, the Ancient Wise One summoned again that spirit to his cavern, and said to him, "I have served you well of late, have I not? We have

done much to make men leave the false value they give to deeds achieved by strength or skill of body, when such deeds really matter, and we have thereby done much to save the soul of man from vile attachment, of feeling and of thought, to the foul material things by which he maintains bodily life, which he is falsely told will be part of glory for all eternity. May I not now demand release from the matter in which my spirit has been held so many scores of years?”

The spirit said to him, “You have squandered well your Master’s goods, and have helped others to squander more, and thus made friends with us who welcome you to an everlasting dwelling. Come with me.”

So perished the last Albigensian.

But after a time of torment, for after all that windmill was the property of a man who meant no harm with it, the soul of the poet knight rode well in wonder in the Wind Beyond the World, the Spirit of Truth, whose gift is wisdom.

Don Quixote de la Mancha, rest in peace.

VI

THE CURSE UPON THE MERMAID

One morning in the long-departed youth of the world, the winged youth Dornos flew over the limpid Sea of Thorakelz and he saw swimming, far down, the mermaiden Kelthana. He swooped low upon the sea and drew upon its surface a ripple with the toe of his left foot. Then Kelthana was aware of him and swam slowly to the surface. But he stayed higher in the air, where he had gone right after swooping, and waved toward the island Orfalzan, which was near them, and he flew unto the island and alighted, and he waited there. She swam to the island but little slower than he flew, for in that first sight of each other they had found themselves in love. And they walked together through the well-wooded island, which was beautiful, and they talked much, she telling wonders of the deeps of the sea and he speaking of the ways of eagles on the high cliffs of Karnov. And greatly

they longed to lie with each other, but they did not, for they feared what manner of children they might have, that might be born with a desire for the deeps of the sea and with the wings of Dornos. For the wings of Dornos were not as the wings of seabirds are. But ever when duties allowed, they came and walked and talked together on Orfalzan.

Now, Kelthana had a friend Orlania in whom she trusted much, and each of them told the other of all her thoughts and doings. But for a time Kelthana told not Orlania of her love for Dornos, but only said she liked to be alone upon the island, for Orlania was not one who would believe in resisting great desire born of love. But one day Kelthana told Orlania of her love, and said that she met Dornos every day she could. Orlania took it for granted that they were showing of their love by intimate passings with their bodies, and she asked, mischievously, what it was like to lie with one of the winged ones. Then Kelthana spoke, and it was indeed a little proudly, of their forbearance, and said they loved too greatly to take the risk of having children who might justly scorn at least one of them for passing on desire that could not be fulfilled. Orlania then was jealous of Kelthana and angry at her pride, and went and told the chief priest of the temple of Korlos that Kelthana had confessed to lying with a winged man of Kerathil, and she swore by Korlos that what she said was true. Kelthana denied it, when she was taken before the priests,

but she faltered in her telling of the truth, for it seemed to her that her tale was not a likely one. The priests did not believe her, but rather believed Orlania. And they set Kelthana upon the alter of Korlos, whom worshippers of Neptune deem a demon of the deep but whose own worshippers say he is an elder god, and there they put a curse upon her. That curse made her legs cleave together and to be made in the likeness of the hinder part of a fish's body, with scales upon it. And the high priests said that no man would ever love her from that time, nor any lie with her again or ever walk with her upon an island. (And there was deep scorn in their voices when they said the last.)

Kelthana knew her form was hideous, and she hid from Dornos, far down in the sea. But Dornos flew daily over the Sea of Thorakelz, neglecting many duties that he might do so, and every day until he became too tired to fly, he would swoop and make ripples on the sea with the toe of his left foot, hoping that Kelthana would come up to him. And one day he swooped too low, when he was very tired and should long before have left for home, and he fell into the sea. Then his wings were soaked so that he could not fly, and he struggled weakly in the water. But Orlania saw him and she signalled to Kelthana, for she was sorry for her spiteful deed, and greatly sorry of the shape that had been forced upon Kelthana. And Kelthana swam up swiftly to the surface, and she seized Dornos before he drowned,

and put his head above the water, and then she swam with him to the island, though it was hard to drag him, with his water-heavy wings. And when she had got him to the island and he could lie upon the shore, she was too tired to return at once to the bottom of the sea as she had wished to do. And she forgot for a time the form her god had made her take. Thus Dornos saw her in her new shape, and it altered not the love he had for her, though there was horror in him because of the dreadful change, and he could not keep back a sudden cry. Then he asked her what had happened, and she told him, that she had been cursed so that she could never walk with him again. And he said that if he could not walk with her, then he would sit with her, upon the island daily, for he loved her greatly and would always do so. Then he said that he would even lie with her, to prove the old priests wrong. And he called upon the gods of the air to hold them married, and they exchanged strong vows of love, and he bore her in his arms to a glade in the island woods, and there they lay together. And in that act was great pain for both of them, but thus they showed their love, each to the other. And the gods of the air, on whom Dornos had called, flew over them as they lay sleeping afterward, and they made such change in the body of Kelthana that her lying with Dornos would henceforward be a deed of pleasure for them both and that she could bear children. And the gods ordained, and so dealt with her body, that her children would be like unto herself and not

have wings or wish to fly but be true children of the deep and be content. Thus the gods of the air blessed the private marriage of Dornos and Kelthana.

Dornos and Kelthana met often on Orfalzan, on which Dornos ever carried her, and they lay together often. For, having put the curse of Korlos on her, the priests considered they had done their worst and would not interfere with her again, although Orlania, again turned spiteful, told them often that Kelthana was lying with a winged man on the island. And the priests helped raise the children of Kelthana, for, they said, they were starting to believe that there were other gods than Korlos.

Dornos and Kelthana had twelve children, six male and six female, and all of them had the form that had been given her. And none had any desire to fly, though they were interested in the things of air and cliff that Dornos told them in many visits to Orfalzan. And the priests of Korlos came there to him also, to learn from Dornos of the lore of the gods of the air, in which he had much learning. And the form of Kelthana and her children was pleasing to the merfolk, who love the forms of fishes, so that her daughters lacked not for suitors and her sons found favour with those whom they did seek. They all married and all had offspring, until one might deem that all the race of mermen were half fish in form as was Kelthana. But indeed there were many merfolk who had legs, even as you and I. But it was

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the children of Kelthana who caught best the imaginations of human sailors when these encountered the people of the sea, so that it is of them chiefly that old tales were told.

But of the winged folk of Dornos there are few, if any, legends.

V

THE RING OF LOVE

A young man loved a certain maid, but she would have naught of him but common friendship, so he went to an aunt of hers, that was said to be a wise woman, who was inclined to favour him, for counsel. The aunt told him he must get taken into Faerie and there eat nothing and nothing drink, for three days, no matter how hungry, thirsty, or sorely tempted. And at the end of those three days, if he had neither eaten nor drunk of fairy food or drink, the Queen of Faerie would offer him a boon, and he should ask for a charm to win the love of maid.

The young man went, therefore, to a fairy hill that was nearby, and danced on it by moonlight, and Fair Folk came out of the hill and danced with him in moonlight and drew him into hill when moon went down. And there were sights in Faerie that dazzled him, and food and wine of which the sight and smell did tempt him sorely, but he minded the wise woman's counsel and would have none of them, though

many Fair Folk seemed affronted at refusal of their hospitality, and he feared the Fair Folk.

On the second day, food and drink seemed less appealing of themselves, but he then more greatly wanted them, for he was hungrier, but he would have none of it, though more of the Elves were seeming more insulted. And on the third day, the appeal of the food and drink which they had of themselves returned more strongly, and he was much the more desirous by reason of his hunger, but he would neither eat nor drink, though some Elven folk seemed muttering dire threats of revenge against discourteous guest. And on the third day also, an Elven maid tempted him to lie with her, when he met her all alone in a glade within the hill, for the hill was greater within than without and seemed to be an outdoors rather than within, and he would not, for the love he bore the mortal maid, to whom he wanted to be faithful. And that was well, for that also was a test, of which the maiden's aunt had been forbidden to tell, and had he failed that test, the Elven maid had spurned him, and thus also all maidens ever, though he might perchance gain love of other men's wives if that were what he wanted.

Now, when the last of the three days was come to evening, the Queen of Faerie summoned the young man to her and offered him a boon. He said, "I would that you will give me the love of the mortal maid Lissorinda, if such is in your power.

For I would not wish to ask what cannot be given. But I would wish no other boon, but will take what cometh of your courtesy if that I may not have.”

The Queen gave him a ring of gold with an emerald set in it. “If you wear this ring always,” she said, “you can have the love of any maid you want. But it will give you love of one maid only, so you must wisely choose. Put it on when you are out of Faerie, and you must never take it off.” And she would say no more, though he asked what would happen if ring was taken off.

They led him out of Faerie, and he put on the ring when he was well outside, and he walked toward his home. And the weather was other than it had been when he had entered Faerie. On his way home, he met the maid he loved, and she said, “Where have you been these past three months? I’ve been sick with worry over you.”

He said, “Why?”

She said, “Because I love you.” And so they kissed and so walked home, and thus began their courtship. And when she admired his lovely ring, he said that he had found it when travelling afar, and had not been able to find the rightful owner.

One day, he was about to break some stones with a sledgehammer and he felt the ring uncomfortable between his finger and the hammer handle, and so, without thinking, he took off the ring and put it carefully in his pocket. Then he bethought

him what he had done, and he was horrified, and he ran to his love, saying he had a sudden sense that ill had befallen, but she still loved him, and he was much relieved, and he put the ring back on, and he worried for some days, but no dire consequences befell, and his worry grew less and later disappeared.

The love between him and his beloved grew, and they decided they would marry, and he took off the emerald ring to put it, for a moment, on her finger in token of betrothal, and the ring vanished. And his beloved asked him how he did that trick, and asked him to repeat it before he gave her the ring forever, but he said, “It’s gone, I lost it,” and he was afraid to tell her what had happened, lest he lose her love for knowledge of the charm upon her by his seeking. And she grew spiteful, and said, “You fool, to risk a juggler’s trick with the token of my love!” And she feigned greater contempt than felt, which yet grew more real as he continued fail explain, and soon she would have naught of him, not even common friendship.

VI

THE CITY AND THE SILVER WOLF

“Together, I think we might take him,” said the Lesser Warrior, as the Great Silver Wolf prowled toward them on the Road to Zammazkuz.

“We might, but is it certain?” said the Hero, eyeing the great beast doubtfully.

“Nothing is certain,” the Lesser Warrior replied, “but how many ever get to face the Great Silver Wolf and save a city from destruction? He must be met on the trail by at least one man who means to kill him, before he reaches any settled habitation, if he is to be stopped from wholesale destruction of the city at the end of his road. He approaches one city once in only three millennia. Are we not fortunate? Come, let us attack. Cheer up – men have even been known to win against him, the folklore collectors say.”

“You attack,” the Hero told him. “I have a Higher Duty.”

“What’s that?” said the Lesser Warrior.

“I am the Hero,” he said simply. “I have to stay around until the story ends. This is the duty of every Hero, and this story’s only started.”

“Shit,” said the Lesser Warrior, and he went and attacked the Great Silver Wolf, and was mauled and frightfully chewed up before he died and was devoured, down to the last drop of blood. So much for the Lesser Warrior, who had the great misfortune to be the hero of a story we aren’t telling at the moment.

So the Great Silver Wolf took one scornful look at the Hero, who was going on toward the city at a safe distance from the road, and turned back whence he’d come, along the road that led from Zammakuz. “I didn’t think that animal belonged in this yarn,” said the Hero.

But as he walked along on the road to Zammakuz, he heard a scream from the side of the road and he saw upon a bypath a young woman with a dagger, who seemed likely to catch her death defending honour from three great hairy brutes with swords who weren’t concerned with it but badly wanted something else. He knew he’d never get to the Story’s End if he should tackle those three, so he hung back upon the road and thought about his Duty. But then his blood boiled and he called upon the great god Shaggitt as he yanked out sword and ran right at them.

He never got a one of them, sad as it is to say this of a Hero, but he kept them busy long enough for the girl to stab one in the back and take off home, where she

was safe. The other two hacked him to bits and cursed him terribly, and that was the end of the Hero.

But the story went on, for more than a thousand years, though we haven't time to fill in all the details, for that girl who got away was pregnant by the Lesser Warrior, who'd been to Zammazkuz not long before – he faced the Silver Wolf partly to atone for that fornication, which was his only mortal sin – and a descendant of the son she bore later stopped the Great Silver Wolf on the road to some other city that I forget the name of.

VII

DEXTERITAS

Once upon a time there lived a king and queen in a country called C'nez (which name was also their surname), who had been able to have one child only, and that child was a girl.

The king was disappointed, as he had hoped to have a son for heir. He had the girl, whose name was Da'ar, taught all the skills of knighthood – wherein she came to surpass many knights – and of royalty, that she might sit as safe as might be upon his throne, as a result, in part, of her having learned to think and feel as most of her vassals thought and felt.

The queen did not much like this teaching of lordly arts to her only daughter, for she wanted her only child to rule as she felt women ought to rule, with men to advise. She decided to make a lady most gentle of her daughter Da'ar, and had her attend, as often as might be, to the instruction of a healer, who was said to be the

wisest healer in that country, in that age. Da'ar learned all the arts of healing and soothing, and of comforting, in methods both mundane and magical, as well as those of horsemanship and swordmanry.

Now, Princess Da'ar felt strongly that it would not be seemly to have the same hands used both in hurting and in healing, or that the hands which enforced the country's laws should be those that helped to ease the pain of a criminal justly whipped. Therefore she set her left hand chiefly to the skills of kingship and knighthood and her right hand to the healing arts. For she was of those who have equal skill in both hands.

While her father lived, the lady Da'ar had not overmuch to do with governance, so she gave herself greatly to healing. As a healer she gained great renown. But always she wore a sword on her right hip, though there was no one in that kingdom who would ever do her harm. And two other ladies rode with her also.

It befell one day that while Da'ar was returning from a visit to a farmer's ailing wife, she and her companions were stopped by a fell knight from another country, who had been traveling in C'nez and whose errand now was done, so that he might seek pleasure for himself whenever he might find it in his way. And Princess Da'ar was by far the most beautiful of these three ladies.

That knight bade Da'ar's companions to depart, and Princess Da'ar did bid

them likewise, for she feared that they might be overtaken if she herself should fall to that knight's sword. But her own sword could not then be seen by him, until she turned her horse. And when she did turn, that he might see it, the knight knew who she was, and he feared greatly. For if the lady failed to kill him, and if he killed her, knights of his own country and of C'nez would fiercely seek to deal to him a death most shameful. But the knight would not turn from a deed that he had set himself. He set spurs to his horse and after a few minutes of swift swordplay received his death, as his courage, lust and skill demanded, from the left hand of Da'ar C'nez.

VIII

MARCUS ROMANUS: A YOUTHFUL TALE OF ANCIENT ROME

But for the love of his friend Lucius, no one would have suspected Marcus the Roman of being Christian. Frugal, stern, unyielding – a throwback to the days of Manlius Torquatus and Junius Brutus – he had come by his sobriquet Romanus as honestly as he had acquired the rest of his valuable possessions.

Christians would not have suspected him: apart from the fact that none of these had heard of his conversion, there were the little matters of universal brotherly love and Christian forgiveness. Nero and his associates would gladly have experimented with a charge of Christianity could they have entertained any hope of inducing adhesion.

No one, I say, would have suspected Marcus Romanus of being a Christian had it not been for the love of his friend, Lucius, for money, which had always overcome the latter's growing suspicion of truth in the religion of the several men

he had already befriended to betray.

The trial went well. The very improbability of it made the accusation, once made, believable; the patricians, most of them, had always wished for his absence; the plebeians, all of them, now desired his death; and in record time almost, with the property settled according to law, Lucius was off to the races, which were followed shortly by a wild-feast exhibition at the Coliseum. Lucius had a good seat just opposite the low cross to which Marcus was to be bound – possibly because Marcus had been something of a runner in his day and the Coliseum bears and such were getting fat and lazy with high living.

As Marcus was led to his place of execution, Lucius anxiously wondered how the old fool's imprecations upon his head would be received by the populace – they were certainly going to earn a place on the Christians' list of famous last words. The defiant and dignified silence of Marcus throughout the trial, after his first proud denial – which would have exonerated most; the fanatics were notorious for not denying – had been most fortunate, but could hardly continue now. The dignity, yes, but not the silence. The outburst might be deemed merely a Christian rebuke in his accustomed pagan style, but – “Here it comes,” thought Lucius as Marcus turned in his direction. But Marcus remained silent. Of course: he would not be moved by fear; when the wrong was consummated, he would deliver in stern,

measured tones a just rebuke. This was more like it; men were rarely observed to restrain their tongues while their arms were stretching.... But now the work was completed.

“Lucius! I forgive you!”

Lucius was astonished, then amused, then highly angered at his actually having done Marcus what Marcus deemed a great favour, as all Christians would deem it. That was unbearable! And Marcus was right, moreover!

Goaded to truth he had ignored so long to such terrible effect, Lucius called out: “Marcus, I too am a Christian!”

Seeing the torn body of his former friend pitch forward on the sand, Marcus Romanus, an unholy joy piercing through his pain, surrendered himself to a happy death.

PART III: TALES MORE “MODERN”

I

ANONYMOUS . . . FOR NOW

I am going upward alone on a steep mountain path. I am lighter, stronger, more sure of myself, more aggressive, than I was before. Before...? I don't remember, but something has happened that made a difference. I don't think there would be anything to remind me of it if I looked back. Anyway, once one is on the mountain, one doesn't look back: the choice one made before is part of one forever.

I keep on up the path; I am sure I will reach the top: someone I can't clearly recall but whom I know, somehow, I trusted, told me that. I am not a mountain climber – it's one challenge I never met – so I won't have the exhilaration of conquest when I get there, but I've trained my perceptions to take in as much as can be received without the aid of violent emotion, and I know now that I will see as

much as I deserve.

Now there is pain. It is vague, somewhere in the chest, and I feel I am not used to this kind of pain. It seems to me that when I hurt, I usually know why. I don't like not understanding. I think I must always have felt that way – all my memories, if I ever had any, are gone. No matter; if I need any, I feel sure they will be given me. I trust whoever it was that put me on the mountain path and bade me trudge or climb, making that choice freely as occasion arose. I have always liked to walk, it seems, so I chose trudging.

The pain is worse than it was. There's still no reason or cause for it that I can see. There must be one that someone else can see.

I keep going. I'm getting tired. I keep going. The tiredness grows. I keep on going. The pain is worse. If I had no hope of ever knowing more than the pain and the path's going up and up and ever up but never reaching any top, I could not bear it. But I was told I'd reach the top, somehow, and I know I trust the one who told me. If what I almost fear were true, I would not be upon the mountain.

Above me now there is a cliff with the path leading into a cleft in that high wall, and I am sure that within the cleft, whether it be dark or light inside, the path goes ever up.

I have this choice: pain or terror. The pain is worse than it was. Time enough

to make the choice when I am at the foot of the cliff. The pain keeps getting worse.

There is a memory: I am standing with a fellow worker at the bottom of a cut in the earth, for the making of a road, and we need something that is just above us, at the top. The top of the cut is three or four times higher than I am. The whole side of the cut is soft, as the cut is not through rock. I don't want to look like a fool by taking a walk up a slow slope, back along the top of the cut to where the object we want is lying, back the other way along the edge, and down again along the sloping roadbed we've been working on. One retraces one's steps when one wants to see better something seen before; it's not appropriate when one is going just to fetch an object.

The bank of earth is vertical but soft, and the ground at its foot is soft; I see the climbing of it as a purely mental challenge, with no call for courage. Quickly my mind finds handholds, footholds; swift my body follows; soon my knees are between my hands upon the edge. I pick up the tool, or whatever it is, and go down the long way.

"You went up that bank like a ----- cat," my companion says. The adjective he used is not remembered on the mountain. But I am pleased at the memory. It is

a treasure on the mountain.

There is upon the path, just outside the cleft, a man with a sword; no, more than that, a swordsman. Somehow I know: I have been one.

He salutes. It is not a highly formal salute, but there is insolence in it, and a challenge. One cannot miss these things; he has projected them too well. He is an actor; I used to be one. I have no sword. I choose the path. The pain is worse. I try to cast it away or to see a reason for it, in order to deal with my opponent.

Opponent not enemy: there are no enemies upon the mountain.

I have no sword. I stand still; when there is something one should do and the right way of doing it means standing still, one may stand still upon the mountain. But it does not stop the pain. I have no sword. I close my fingers lightly, with tip of thumb touching the second section of the index finger, as if they held a sword, with the straightened arm slanting out and down. Slowly I raise the arm, making ceremonious the salute, until it is slanted out and up. When the salute is finished, I will go on, toward the swordsman. I trust the one who put me on the mountain and told me I could choose.

Elbow comes down to side, with thumb and forefinger nearly touching my chin. A sword is in my hand, one with a light, sharp blade and a French foil

handle. It seems strange that the sword should have such a handle. I slash the final phase of the salute, and smile, I think, despite the pain.

The knowledge that another person is before me, and that he is not my foe, does not cause the pain to lessen. We are both on guard. I am more aggressive than I was, more sure of myself. I advance.

We fence. Or do we fight? Fencers often call it fighting. Neither wants to kill, and each knows the other can't, though point and edge be sharp, but the point of fencing is to hit. I am more aggressive than I was. I am the attacker. He parries with ease every thrust I make and only my desperation keeps his point from landing. He reads my every move before I make it, projects false intentions that fool me every time.

I do not think he really means to hit me. But with every thrust he makes me feel that he does. He is an actor. I used to be one. Now, I am more myself.

The pain is getting worse. It will keep getting worse until some significant change is made somewhere. Maybe it isn't getting worse; maybe it is just that I'm becoming more and more aware that there is nothing in me but that pain. I still don't know what causes it.

We've been fighting for a long time. Somehow I have to win or know why I

ought to stop. I feel sure that I must reach the mountain's top if I am to leave the pain.

Someone I loved once gave me good advice about this kind of contest. I feel I should remember it. Please, let me remember.

There are memories:

Dad one evening comes into the living room and sits heavily beside me, saying, "Boy, your mother's grouchy tonight," and Mom, entering just in time to catch the remark, says sharply, "Don't abuse the boy's mother when your trouble's with your wife." Dad, for whom the study of law was never easy, is so pleased with her distinction of reason that he can't help hugging her.

* * * *

I am on the road outside our house with Larry, my best friend, and four others who have been after him for days. The biggest one, bigger than Larry, is fighting with him. It seems unfair. I want to help. If I do, they'll beat us both up, and besides, the fight is technically fair, for it is one against one. But now Larry's winning; good. One of the others is going to help the big one. "That's enough!" My shout has stopped the fighting. Dad has always taught me that men fight fairly, and I am mad. One more move and I am at them. Let them come, all four. I

don't care.

“Some time your dad's not there to help,” the big one says. I turn. Dad and Mom are at the window. Mom wants Dad to do something, and he won't do it.

“Where do you want to go?” I ask.

“I'll pick the time and place,” the tough kid says. The four of them walk away, not fast.

Larry and I go into the house, where I find Dad as pleased as he has ever been: “I didn't know you had it in you, boy!”

“You'd have had real proof if they'd kicked it all out of him,” my mother says.

* * * *

Dad is teaching me to fence, as his father had taught him. He says it's good for channelling aggression and developing reflexes. And he says sabre fencing is good practice for defending yourself with a stick. At first, he teaches me what he calls the fingerplay technique for French foil, saying it wouldn't be much use in a real fight with sword or stick but will make the wrist movement easier and faster when we get to it. We start wrist use long before I can become proficient with fingerplay, which takes a lot of practice. I wonder whether fingerplay has any value in itself, but I don't ask him. I decide to find out for myself what can be

done with it, and meanwhile do the best I can with the wrist action Dad is always using.

* * * *

Dad and I are fencing now almost as equals, but he'd prefer I showed more aggression: "Attack, boy, attack! Damn it, pretend there are four of me!" That makes me laugh and he glowers at me. We continue fencing, he deadly serious about channelling our aggressions and training our reflexes, and I playing musketeer with reflexes naturally deadly that somehow can't be used to strike back at him. But gradually we are learning from each other, though not much.

* * * *

"You're walking all over the boy," Mom says one day to Dad when they think I am nowhere about.

"Damn it, I don't walk all over him," Dad almost shouts. "I just want to show him how to be a man."

"You want him to watch that?"

"Damn!" He is really frustrated.

* * * *

Mom asks me why I let Dad "walk all over" me. I can't explain the whole

situation in a few minutes and don't even want to begin to try, so I counter with a teasing question I fully expect to be answered with a swift and strong swat in the chops: "What does he do all over you?"

"I married him for better or for worse," she snaps. "What promises did you make?" There is no answer to that, so far as I can figure, but a boy owes obedience to his father, the head of his house, unless the father commands something wrong, which Dad would never do.

* * * *

One night I really remember well, Dad comes into the living room, where I am reading, with a glass of wine in his hand and a general look of being temporarily somewhat mellowed.

"Had some wine with Robinson and he forced a bottle on me," he says, sitting in his big armchair and stretching out his legs. Arthur Robinson is a lawyer Dad hasn't had much use for until a few days ago, though it seemed to me they should have been friends.

Other local lawyers have nicknamed Dad "The Bull" for his masterful cross-examinations. He brings all his emotional strength to bear on witnesses, to keep them honest, and many a witness has decided to be honest when faced by my

father's obvious, and strong, contempt for mendacity or prevarication.

“I always thought that my way was the way to work,” Dad says, as if he felt what I was thinking. “It takes a really bad man to stick to a lie which breaks the contract under which we all support and protect our wives and children.

“I used to think Robinson tried to win his cases by faking concern for witnesses' feelings – their feelings when giving evidence and especially their feelings at the time in response to the situation about which they're giving evidence,” he says. “Robinson looks and sounds so solicitous and sympathetic, and from behind that facade come such subtle, skilfully-worded questions. I always thought he was trying to get witnesses to colour their evidence in his clients' favour.

“But Tuesday I saw that skilful questioning bring out some really accurate evidence, and for once I saw Art Robinson look really pleased, though it really didn't help his case a lot. And that suddenly fitted in with other times I remembered seeing him in action, and I realized then that by the time a man has explained and justified his feelings, he often has given a fair amount of accurate evidence. It came to me then that this was the whole object of Robinson's exercise: leaving honesty for God to judge, he went after the truth. I remembered

then that witnesses who'd bared their hearts to Robinson's sympathetic gaze had often got short shrift from the judge.

"When court was over, I asked him to have a drink with me at the club, and asked him whether my impression was correct. He laughed, said that murder will out, and asked me not to spread it around.

"I asked whether he ever felt like a prostitute: falsely using his own emotions that way. He laughed again, and told me he hadn't been manipulating such emotions, but only pretending to have them. For the most part, he didn't have any of that kind, but worked with intelligence and instinct. He said he's never told a witness that it would be good for him, from his point of view, to tell the truth, but only gives them the impression that all can be understood and therefore forgiven.

Robinson said that what he does is not dishonesty but only trickery," my father says. "But he feels it might have turned to full dishonesty if Jennifer had not decided to marry him.

"Then, since you and he seemed to me to be a lot alike, I asked him what the dickens a father does with a son like you. I didn't say anything about your problem with solitary vice, of course, which is no one's business but yours and God's, but I told him in a general way how we get along. So Robinson outlined a

theory he has about male and female, or masculine and feminine, relationships. He didn't apply it to any particular persons, but outlined his opinion dogmatically as a universal truth allowing of no exceptions. I'm sure he does that all the time just to start an argument, but usually he sounds so authoritative, nobody ever thinks there's any point in that. Except me. We have great discussions now. I think I'll invite him to learn fencing.

“Anyway,” says Dad, “Robinson says there are, in general, two kinds of men. One kind is masculine – active, aggressive, whatever – in the emotional heart-and-guts area, and their intellects and instincts are feminine, or passive, or responsive, reacting quickly to the situations their emotional nature gets them into. Their procreative instincts, for example, go into action when a woman responds favourably to their general effect of masculinity. They make good husbands – for the right kind of woman – and very good companions.

“The other kind he believes in are men who are feminine – responsive, reactive – in the general emotional area, and are aggressive at the intellectual and instinctive levels. They are open to every impulse, almost any suggestion that doesn't oppose an intellectual judgement already made. Their intellects try to fit into one complex pattern all the data their responsiveness lets in.

“Robinson calls that kind of pattern-formation the building of the castle of the soul,” Dad says. “The keep is the tower of moral obligation, that pattern of things that must be done or must be avoided. If the keep is lost, the soul’s in Hell.

“The outer wall is built out of perceptions of what’s appropriate, and these perceptions are valuable insofar as they are symbols, or reflections, of the obligations of morality. These perceptions you follow unless they conflict with essential morality or with courtesy to persons who do not share them. They are insisted upon when their beholding would be of value to someone else, or when you feel so strongly you cannot help insisting. By disciplining your imagination to proper use of these perceptions, you help safeguard your soul, Robinson says.

“He told me why he drinks no alcohol but wine – he had sherry at the club,” Dad says. “He says the changing of grape juice into wine is a pagan sacrament prefiguring the changing of wine into the Precious Blood, and the fact that only wine is changed so, is reason enough for him to drink wine only. (Unless acceptance of hospitality dictates otherwise, for example.) It seems he studied for the priesthood before he took up law. He didn’t say why he changed.”

Dad takes another sip of wine.

“Apparently the disciplining of these lesser perceptions is important to sexual

morality especially. In this second kind of man, sexual responses are usually pretty crude unless they come to see these responses as the ultimate way of possessing beauty freely given. But if they do, then for the most part they're satisfied if women show acceptance of the kind of admiration such men have for beauty, Robinson says.

“He says these men are dangerous when anything upsets their sense of order or justice, but otherwise don't often get angry. An insult has to be made official, so to speak, before they notice it.

“Anyway,” Dad says, “Robinson figures you may be the second sort, and he says I should give you the advice somebody gave somebody else for another young fellow in a book Arthur read, which is, if I remember correctly, ‘In the dangerous element to immerse,’ thus keeping the head above water to escape drowning.

“The instincts of that kind of man are directed to woman, and their intellects approve of that, but at the personal, emotional level, they hardly know where to start. Robinson said that if you're passive in that part of you, you have to learn how to use that fact to your advantage.

“He says that when it's time for you to marry, don't go running after just

anything in a skirt you'd like to go to bed with. What he thinks you ought to seek is a woman who is feminine – responsive – at both ends and aggressive in the middle. There are a few of them around, he says. I wouldn't know, myself.

“He doesn't claim that any of this is scientifically dead accurate, mind you. He calls it a good, medieval-style working hypothesis, a kind of myth to illustrate what he says is the duality to be found in all normal men and women. But he'll argue his best case for it, till someone proves him wrong.

“The way for you to catch a right one, according to him, is to be equally courteous to all, as if all women were of equal value, and let an aggressive one come after you to prove that that is not the case. If she does, talk a lot with her, to make sure you really complement each other. Then you're ready. He says he wouldn't be surprised to find one of the right sort moving in some day when you're talking pleasantly with one you don't have the slightest idea of being serious about.

“I don't know if any of that makes sense to you, son,” says Dad. “It seems to me that the only thing a man has to worry about is whether an action's right or wrong. But you and I don't seem to see things the same way, and I thought Arthur's way might make sense to you and help you. If it doesn't, I'd like you to

remember I didn't think of it myself."

How can I tell him he's finally given me advice that really makes sense?

"But I warn you, son, you'd better not use Robinson's insights, if there's any value in them, to seduce any woman." His expression makes me promise that I never will. He accepts the promise solemnly.

"By the way, Arthur says you can probably improve your fencing by using the acting ability you ought to have, to pretend and project an aggressiveness that will fool your opponent into thinking your feints are meant to land. And the responsiveness you ought to have, with the intellect we both know you have, should make you able to read your opponent's moves, so that you can seem open to an attack and then quickly and instinctively respond to it.

"You know," he says suddenly, holding up the glass and looking at it closely, "I think I've had just about exactly enough of this stuff." He sets the glass, half full, upon the table between us, and goes out. I hear him climb the stairs.

I don't like drinking after others, but I feel that Arthur Robinson would not leave good wine to be thrown out later. I raise Dad's glass in a silent toast and drink the wine.

I am sitting next morning at breakfast with my father when Mother comes in

humming, tousles my hair, and sits, still humming.

“I really had too much wine last night,” my father says. I sense that he is not apologizing for that fact itself, but using it to apologize for something else, and since I think I know what that something was, I am not prepared for my mother’s chilled “Oh, yes?”

* * * *

Robinson joins Dad and me in our private “salle d’armes” in the basement. He wants to pay for instruction, but Dad won’t have it. For one thing, he’d lose his amateur standing, and for another, he wants another partner so badly, he’d pay Robinson for learning. Robinson is a bit old for a beginner, but anyone can learn the mechanics of the sport, and Robinson is talented and devious. When Dad can’t get to practice, Robinson and I practise the fingerplay for which the French foil handle was designed. Robinson becomes a good fencer, quickly. He fools Dad fairly often, though Dad’s reflexes often save him from being hit.

* * * *

The Robinsons are good friends of our family, and often come to dinner. Jennifer is an earthy woman and frequently makes remarks for which Robinson reproves her. He never rebukes her directly on these occasions, but offers general

observations like, one night: “A modest woman would not make remarks like that in public.”

“And what happens when a modest woman makes such remarks in private?” says Jennifer. “When a man doth want to -----, any old excuse will do.” Her hips sway nicely as she leaves the table to get a drink of water.

“When a woman wants to talk, at no subject will she balk,” says Robinson. “We will discuss this in private, later.”

“Oh God, please, no,” says Jennifer, raising eyes to heaven in mock anguish. “Your Providence must know by now what his sneaky, debatical word games lead to.”

“What kind of word games?” Dad asks.

“None of your business,” the Robinsons say in unison. Dad shrugs. His wife, Eleanor, my mother, is pleased.

“Robinson has got something going for him, all right, whatever it is,” Dad says after they have left. “You remember what I told you,” he says to me, and I say I will.

* * * *

One day I go to the Robinsons’ house for a book Dad wants to borrow. I knock

on the door, and after a while Jennifer opens it. “You trying a pun, so to speak, on the English phrase, fella?” I don’t know what she is talking about, so I just look at her. “We do provide a civilized means of drawing our attention to someone’s being at the door,” she says, pointing to the doorbell. I tell her I’m old-fashioned, preferring sounds made by things obviously alive.

“Then don’t bother with either,” she says. “If the door’s open, come on in, and if there’s no one on the lower floor, then either leave or holler and take your chances.”

“All right.” I ask for the book, and after a while she brings it and I leave.

* * * *

I go to Robinsons’ to return the book. I gladly serve my father in such small things. I remember what Jennifer said, and walk in. I’m wondering whether I should holler or look further on the lower floor, when I hear a tender male voice from a room off this one.

“You really ought to have much fuller breasts, you know,” says Robinson.

“And why is that, my lover?”

“Breasts are symbolic of generosity, and yours is so abundant.”

“Generosity, my foot. I know what I want, my friend, and I’ll gladly give to

get it. If you think that's generosity, you may thank me as often as you like."

"You're mad, you know, to love me so, all intellect and ----," says Robinson.

"No emotion worthy of the name, till you decided to marry me. Men like me are made for manning the outer wall when the castle is attacked; we're savages, expendable, who sing like tomcats before battle. We man the outer wall to give the attackers an idea what real men can do when enemies reach the keep."

"Then I'll be the ----in' outer wall. Man me, you ----er."

"I don't like to hear you talk like that," says Robinson.

"No, you're prissy enough for both of us. I keep telling you, it's not a dirty word to me. I don't divide people into parts, like an intellectual dissectionist. I see you complete, entire, even if you don't believe anyone can see you that way. You feel there's an emptiness between your intellect and your instinct that in other men is filled, but I admire your honesty in admitting it, and I damn near adore you for offering your lovemaking as a sign of the Love of God for me. In all the lovemaking we have done, though you offered it that way, I have seen in you a deep love of your own for me, in action. Don't try to sell me that emptiness-of-heart crap you started out with, even if it was almost true then. You've filled the place you thought was empty.

“Speaking of empty places, must I remind you that I am not yet pregnant?”

Robinson laughs. I think, rather late, that I had better go. I pick up the book I’d laid on a table, and I leave quietly.

* * * *

The memories end; I must make do with what I have been given. I’ve been fighting with reflexes only while the memories were coming, and the pain is still there.

I fight more and more aggressively, the pain in my chest remaining as it was. I can’t hit my opponent. It seems impossible to read his actions and reactions, but I begin to think he means to punish me by keeping me where I must bear the pain and the emptiness the pain seems to float in. What have I done to deserve that?

I suddenly realize that my only chance of winning is to apply, as I think I used to do, Dad’s advice from Robinson, though somehow I’ve been made an aggressive fencer, not a responsive one. I open myself to impressions, though it makes the pain grow, and I find myself being kept at bay by an angry man. He seems to get angrier as I begin to parry with some ease his best thrusts and best two-part attacks. I also want to hit him, to draw blood, in case that will get me past him, on the way up the mountain.

His parries are getting faster, though, so I switch to the fingerplay in which Robinson and I had trained ourselves. It's faster than the wrist flip, if practised often enough, and my opponent finds it so. He becomes angrier, more aggressive, strikes faster, is determined to keep me where the pain will stay. As he moves more quickly and with greater ire, I sense that he is angry in the manner of a man seeking vengeance for an insult to a woman – mother, wife, daughter? One, two, or all three? Whichever, he's angry enough to keep me here for half of eternity. Whom have I insulted so?

I know what's going on! God, my God, I told you just before I died that I was sorry for them all. Must I now apologize to him for each?

Pain! Okay-okay! I'm sorry, Dad, I'm sorry! Who is it this time?

My opponent lowers his sword, as I do, and now I know his face. He names the girl. I see the depth of the harm I did, and I weep.

I ask how many girls remain to be avenged. He only smiles, and hands me wine in a crystal glass. His manner is courtly and ironic. I pour a libation, just off the path, and drink the rest of the wine, then give him back the glass. A messenger of some sort bears the glass away.

Dad and I salute each other, his salute courtly, ironic, graceful. At the end of

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my salute, my sword is gone. My father keeps his, steps off the path to let me
stride forward...

I am going upward alone on a steep mountain path. I'm lighter, stronger, more
sure of myself, more aggressive than I was before....

II

ONE MORNING IN UTOPIA...

Francis Walsh turned from the solemn priest and the acolyte and walked between and past the two waiting lines, straight toward the open door of his town's church. He stopped at the top of the stone steps beyond the vestibule, glanced round at the glowing sky of early morning above the rows of small neat houses across the tidy square of lawn and growing young spruce, and stepped lightly to the gravel beneath.

He followed the young man ahead of him around to the back of the church and mounted his bicycle in what was now the front rank of the parking lot. An air car full of senior officials was rising from the rear of the lot as he wheeled away, bidding the other man good morning.

People used to stay in church for as much as half an hour, he thought, thanking Him for coming to them. But He comes not to us alone but to the world for which

He died, of which we are each a small part. I suppose in those days the church building was the only place where one could find union with the will of God without the obstruction of lesser wills more directly before one. It must have been hard for a farmer or the owner or manager of a company to see God in the world around him when this world as he best knew it was subject to his own personality. Every man had his own world, to a greater or lesser extent, in that sense, and the church provided the only direct encounter with the non-ego, as I suppose a psychologist might put it. Now we see it everywhere – he waved to Michael Green, the gardener for his block – and we can see God in it.

He pedalled on, wondering what surprises God, working through Mr. Green and Florafax Landscape Ltd., was planning for him and Laura, and the two children, this spring and summer. The pale green over the mountain ahead was turning to deep blue now, and he wondered what intended rainfall, for what distant region of Earth, this might mean in the plans of those who knew these things in detail. Maybe the man in the brown suit and wide-brimmed hat, who usually went past about this time on the other bikeway, twenty feet to the left, was one of them; he looked as if he might be. Think I'll ask him one of those days; he'll probably think I'm a real nut if he isn't, but on the other hand, I may be able

to congratulate myself on a lucky shot in the dark. The idea tickled him. A whimsical sort of adventure, no doubt, but the difference between sin and eccentricity had been firmly established long ago, thank God. He knew the girl who passed next, and where she worked; he nodded, and she waved, more joyous than usual. He wondered what Company was responsible for that, trying to deduce as much as possible from his brief observation, even though no definite conclusion could ever be drawn thus. His own might have contributed. Some day they would all know the part each played in the others' lives on earth; meanwhile the world was full of things to wonder about and, more important, to wonder at. Like Laura's figure; nearly every line, every motion, reminded him of something he had seen before, though not quite in that way; often it summed up in her person several wonders perceived separately during his time away from her; perceiving with the aid of poetry and art her relevance to the other beauties of creation, had enabled him to keep their family small – that and the amount, which varied with cases, of information (psychological, biological, medical) now needed by parents possessed of a certain level of intelligence. Sublimation, the old psychiatrists called it. The modern word, incorporating in its meaning the rightness of the process, was preferable by far.

Reflecting again. The Christian reflects creation; he should not reflect within himself unless, a philosopher, he is equipped with proper safeguards. Surely his face must have revealed his introversion to someone who might have snapped a finger? He had missed the further deepening of the sky and God alone knew how many other things that would never happen quite the same way again. Putting his cycle in its place, he shook his head abruptly and opened his gaze to the deep green of the ivy climbing the walls in the moist shade of the office building.

Suddenly irreverent, he flicked a finger under the nose of the marble lion on his right and continued up the stairs, running his hand lightly over the carved scales of the ebony serpent that, straight enough to form a perfect bannister, yet somehow conveyed the impression of pain and rage emanating from the sleek and savage head beneath the lion's paw.

The lion, symbol of regal strength and ferocity; like Louis of France, someone had said once; a king of beasts in fact now that the reality he signified had come to pass. Something still was missing, though, and probably would not come until the end of the world.

Damn! He'd thought the same thing yesterday morning, and, he wouldn't doubt, the day before as well. Mind revolving in a single track. He shook his head

again – getting too frequent – someone at Psychexor might help – next month if it continued – and turned right, along the hall to his office.

His secretary was at her desk, less intricately carved than his, opening letters in leisurely fashion yet with a certain vibrant happiness about her. Engaged? No, that didn't account for the casual element unless it was feigned, and Anne didn't do that.

“Good morning, Mr. Walsh. Number One is coming in today. He's here already, I believe.” That explained it, perhaps.

“The Boss?”

“*The Boss.*” Not just Mr. Grierson, chairman of the board. “Number *One.*”

“The *Pope?*” That explained it.

“He's only been here once before, hasn't he, sir? That's what the memo said, Theresa told me.” Memos were written once, to make them official, then went by word of mouth. Manufacture of much paper involved pollution; and since everything, assessed and coordinated by the best brains in the thinking Companies, mattered a great deal to all, and each individual placed great value on truth of any sort, not much paper was needed. Now and again someone inadvertently or otherwise got something wrong, human nature being what it is

and nobody being perfect, but such occasions were rare and only the result of venial sins at the very worst.

“I don't know why the dickens the Pope would be coming here. His first visit was made just before I came to work here – ”

“Maybe that's why.” They smiled, then stopped; one had to guard against temptation, even on an occasion like this.

“– and no Pope has ever visited any company more than once, not that I've heard of. Some have never seen one at all.”

“The Pope has no official connection with any Company, has he?”

“Nothing on paper, no. By the way, you can put away those letters, Anne. A Papal visit warrants complete relaxation. I'm not sure a second one wouldn't rate a good, long nap.” He grinned. (The etiquette of those days demanded that employees look idle to show proper respect for visiting dignitaries, indicating that work was very thoroughly done in their absence, as indeed it was; nearly all Companies could have shut down unexpectedly on the same day without any great upset in anyone's life.)

Francis continued: “You see, there has always been a theory that the Church, as an institution, is separate and distinct from any other institution, particularly the State, which in medieval times was held to be subject to the Church.

“This doctrine – as it’s been called, though aspects of it have never received Papal definition – has been a source of conflict throughout most of history” (a particular hobby of Walsh’s) “and gave rise to persecution during one part of the Industrial Age, especially when the Church insisted on certain rights and obligations for the individual, which were not only justified but essential, as it turned out.

“The Church’s stand on birth control, for instance, caused most of the trouble – kept ‘love’ from being the opium of the people, for one thing – but then it resulted in the channelling of forces that were necessary for the formation of society as we know it.

“And when the Companies came to realize that the will of God jolly well *was* supreme and they’d better knuckle down, they came to find also that this worked more to their benefit, considered purely as companies, than any device of their own could ever have done.

“Just think about it a moment. Would you be able to put up with me and this office and the work generally, good as it is, if you did not think that God wanted it of you?”

He watched her face, the smooth skin wrinkling over the slender bridge of her nose as she confronted the unfamiliar. Then something seemed to break behind her placid blue eyes, and she beheld it. Then, “An occasional sin, repented and forgiven, is bad enough, but having to waste your whole ...”

“You see? It isn’t pleasant to think about, is it? And people in those days had to choose between the two, and some of them, if you can credit it, chose that ... There was pressure, of course ... But the church triumphed in the end, as she had always done before.

“At any rate, the companies were brought to their knees and allowed people to possess their own souls, and when they saw how well this worked, they started a great advertising campaign in favour of the Church. Another row nearly started over that, because there were certain methods the Church simply wouldn’t permit ...

“And all this brought about the Final Conversion – we hope. But even though the life of the Church now permeates the whole earth and the companies

themselves are obedient to the will of God as expressed by the Church, some sort of distinction is still maintained to exist between the two. I'm not sure exactly what kind of distinction they call it; Phil Brown of LogiCo tried to explain it to me once, but it wouldn't sink in.

“Anyway, what it boils down to is that while the Pope actually controls the whole business of running the world, there's supposed to be some difference in theory that might conceivably become manifest in fact.

“The Pope's own role has been mostly negative, anyway, consisting in denying or forbidding certain trends of thought or courses of action. There have even been cases, rare ones, of poems being brought as high as the Pope and rejected by him – after advice by the best mystics and theologians, naturally.

“The really positive work of the Church is done by the bishops and priests, of course. Direct exorcism is rarely needed, but the Mass is more important – to the person himself – than it had been for some time. Each of us can see, to an extent limited only by breadth and depth of his own vision, how our lives fit in with God's design for the world, and we are eager to offer them to Him.

“Each of us sounds a particular note in the Divine symphony and sends it as far as we can unaided, the Church putting an end to discords and offering the united harmony through the Word to the Father, Who alone can complete it.

“When I go to Mass, for instance, I can offer in a special way the appearance of God’s children clothed in dignity and grace before Him because our company prepares their clothing – assisted, of course, by those varied suggestions,” he waved toward her desk, “which we are ignoring for the present.”

“I do the same, you know, sir.” It was a perfectly justified rebuke, but she was also mildly piqued at his giving her as information something that everyone learned at school.

“Sorry, girl. I got carried away.

“Well, I’m going to read awhile.” He reached a book down from a shelf behind him. “If you want to run out and chat with the other girls, go ahead. They’re probably running all over the place by now.” He gazed through the window a moment, then lowered his head to read.

“Hey, Anne!” said a voice at the door. He looked up at Pauline Redmond.

“Sorry, Mr. Walsh,” said the dark-haired girl. “I was just going to tell Anne that

the grapevine has it the Boss is interviewing everybody here. Isn't that something?" She ran out, still excited, to spread the news further.

"E-ew-wheet-whee-ee-ew!" whistled Walsh. "I'll say it's something."

Anne looked at him, who'd never whistled like that before.

"This is practically unheard of," said Walsh. "I've certainly never heard anything like it. It hasn't happened to this Company yet – have you heard of this? It's rather rare – but now and again a Bishop will approve a certain product as especially fitting" (quick smile) "for the season – harmonizing with both the liturgy and the state of nature at the time – and everyone in his diocese wears, or uses, it throughout that season. And then the Bishop only mentions the matter to a few top executives – if he recognizes individuals at all, since the real concern is with the thing itself and what it means.

"And I can't see the Pope talking to us individually even about matters strictly spiritual, without our arranging an audience at Rome, unless we're all a lot of saints." He grinned again.

"We're members of his flock as much as the Bishop's, or even more so, but his is a bigger flock.

“*Say!* You don’t suppose we might be in the final age of Earth and he is selecting, as it were, the notes to be played in the last crescendo?” Walsh rose as he said this, laying the book aside, and was pacing the room. He stopped at the window and stood looking out. “I’ve often thought the world might end like that – the whole world brought into one soaring, swelling paeon of praise that must be maintained at a pitch of keenest intensity until He comes. And He might withhold His coming to test us at the last. Each of us might have to endure a great loneliness unfelt till then, and some of us might ...”

“Stop!

“You should pray that it does not happen that way,” she added.

“I do,” he said, turning his head briefly. “But I can’t help wondering ... Lead us not into temptation.”

He stood looking through the window a moment longer, then turned around, smiling.

“Well, whatever concerns me in all this, I’ll be told soon enough, wont I? Yes?” This last was directed to a man who, standing in the doorway, entered at this acknowledgement and bowed with deep respect.

Mmmm. Belongs to a top messenger service. The Advertising Curia wouldn't allow them that kind of uniform unless they were efficient and very fast. Must be the Pope's. No kid, either; mature, intelligent; about my age.

The other man seemed to be weighing him, also, though still very respectful, with as much reserve as an old English butler's.

"Will you accompany me to the Master, sir?" Poet in a messenger service. Only poets still held that "Master" was more fitting than "Boss", a title which had acquired the dignity of great age. The Pope must have some really important errands to be run in this sector. Trouble here, perhaps? Lead us not into ...

Walsh permitted the slightest hint of interrogation on his face. One did not lightly question the Pope, but it was customary to give a reason with any request, no matter who were involved.

"The Master is interested in the fulfilment of a directive issued from headquarters some years ago. It may have gone astray, and it is possible that no one on this side is really to blame in the strict sense of that term, but these things must be carefully checked." Astonishment showed on Walsh's face without any question of permission. This sort of thing was really unheard of. "It concerns," continued the poet in his precise adaptation to business phraseology, "a small

piece of land seventy miles southeast of here, which millions of years of evolution have rendered pre-eminently suitable for the growing of pine and fir trees and certain vegetables, and the raising of goats, with an excellent site for a house overlooking the sea.

“You were to have shown the beauties of this land and its uses, and its place in the scheme of things generally, to the Master, and then you were to have it shown to you.”

Walsh grinned. It was a friendly grin. “Anyone ever spoken to you about the value of careful choice of company, pal? All this one would do is provide suitable clothing for an informal visit or a ceremonial tour, if necessary, and I wouldn’t have everything to do with that, even. The—”

“Is not the outer covering of goats—”

“The State department of agriculture would be able to tell you who is under contract to do all the rest of that.”

“I gather that this is the point, sir,” replied the other. Anne, Walsh could see, was admiring his combination of purpose and deference, and wondering whether he might be single. (Some men of an earlier time, it occurred to Walsh, might have regarded her with some contempt, utterly unaware of normal feminine

gladness, unselfishly sexless in any physical sense, at manly good looks or masculinity meant for marriage in the abstract, on which her mind would rarely dwell when away from other maidens. Walsh himself when younger had heard his several sisters discussing handsome friends of his.) Too bad he was so mixed up. “The trouble seems to be that this work was never undertaken, and the whole area is now a summer resort for many persons.”

“My dear fellow,” Walsh began.

“Look, Francis, I’m rather a busy person today,” said the messenger, laying a hand upon Walsh’s shoulder. “Let’s just run along and explain it all to Him, shall we?”

III

STOPOVER AT ARVELIANE

“Arveliane,” said Barlow, and he sighed. And the others sitting at the table with him sighed as well, echoing the wistful, half-forgotten longing of youth for the unattainable which was in this instance symbolized by that far-off planet where all women, of whatever race or culture, wear veils that hide their faces but have skirts or dresses that open, without fastening of any kind, from the waist downward. We sighed again, we older men, all but one of whom had never seen with their own eyes the galaxy where Arveliane rolls its orbit past a sun which is much like that of Earth.

“Idealism,” said Barlow, “is largely an illusion.” He lit a cigar, the glow of his atomic-powered lighter a tiny spot of brightness in the dimly-lit dining room of the Voyagers’ Club, like the glow of a distant planet in the dim reaches of space. “I mean, of course,” he continued, “that what appears to be idealism is very often nothing of the sort. What we frequently call idealism in the young is often merely the possession and clear perception of their own ideals. To possess and to perceive your own ideal as an ideal, is not idealism, properly described. Idealism consists in thinking that other people have ideals.”

He drew profoundly on his cigar. “I knew an Idealist once,” he said.

We had rather thought he might. But replete with that content which follows a good repast, we were too full to move. There were four of us at the table with Barlow: a medical doctor, an accountant, a lawyer (a Doctor of Interplanetary Law), and an engineer. All four of us had experienced, each in his own way, the vast interminableness of space, and each of us had experienced, all in the same way, the limitless capacity of Barlow for attenuated narrative.

Barlow drew again on his cigar, lessening by some millimetres the length of it, and the glow of the cigar was like the glow of a cinderling planet burned up by some remote galaxial holocaust.

“Banon was a young Furnastian who had just got his third-officer papers when I became second in command of the Maridivan, just before her maiden voyage to Grafulk-on-Andromeda, by way of Arveliane.” The medical doctor stirred in his chair as at a breath of vague unease, though all of us knew somewhat of Arveliane. “All of our crew had had the usual instruction during basic training, of course, and everyone received as well the usual warning on the ship’s intercom as we moved in toward the spaceport terminal. I can still hear the Old Man’s voice – he was an Old Grontonian, you know – as he said in his deepest tones, ‘NOW REMEMBER, LADS, NO KISSING. ENJOY YOURSELVES AS MUCH AS YOU WANT, WITHIN THE BOUNDS OF NORMALCY, BUT NO KISSING.’”

We all applauded, politely of course but with deep appreciation. Barlow’s imitations of his interminable series of Skippers and Old Men were highlights of his otherwise monotonous narrations. But Barlow had not finished that particular imitation; he had only stopped for breath, a feat which, seldom witnessed, we all applauded inwardly.

““IF YOU KISS ANY WOMAN THERE, YOU’LL BE KISSING THE SHIP GOODBYE,”” Barlow quoted. There, he was finished. We grunted our appreciation, there being no need to applaud a second time.

“Not only the ship, of course,” said Barlow. “Most of them would do that gladly, after six months on board with only a scattered glimpse of women. But they’d be saying goodbye as well to the whole wide universe outside Arveliane – and if our boys were stay-at-homes, they’d have stayed, of course, at home. No one who kisses an Arvelianen female ever leaves her again, as of course you know. It’s one of their laws, so naturally the Federation is strict about enforcing it. I remember when –”

The accountant flicked out his lighter and reached forward, pretending Barlow’s cigar was out, and Barlow in thanking him forgot the secondary story he had almost begun.

“I could have saved the poor fellow, if I’d been alert,” said Barlow. “But there I was, feeling rather avuncular as the younger sort got all excited about their first landing on Arveliane, and I’d had a bit of a rough trip, as the Old Man had been a trifle space-sick part of the time, I’m afraid. So his talk just flowed over me, as it were.

“I can remember every word he said, though, for all of that.” The accountant stirred in his chair as at a breath of vague unease, though all of us knew somewhat of Barlow's memory for other people's words and for his own.

“He came and sat beside me in the lounge, while I was watching the boys head out toward the gangway, and started talking about the honesty of the Arvelianens. He was a handsome, green-faced young fellow with a yellow mustache, I remember. He said, ‘Isn't it remarkable to find a whole planet so free of inhibition and hypocrisy about sex, and still so warm and human? I've always thought of honest people as being a bit formidable and cold, you know.’

“He must have been aware I wasn't really listening, I suppose, in the same sense in which I was aware of what he said.

“‘Do what you like for fun,’ he was saying, ‘but don't pretend it means anything – that's really what they're saying to us, isn't it. I mean, fundamentally it's really healthy and honest. I mean, when people put their mouths together, it means their words are joined, that they speak the same thoughts, doesn't it? But sex isn't a matter of thought, it's just a matter of feeling, isn't it. I think they're splendid people; I don't see why everyone in the universe doesn't adopt the same customs. It'd really be a lot healthier.’

“I was tired, I suppose. That will have to be my excuse for not stopping him. I should have listened to him. But there, I have to listen to so many.” We all breathed a sigh of commiseration for Barlow. “But nothing he said really registered at all, until he came back about two weeks later.

“When he did come back, of course, it was too late.

The Old Man and I were in the officers' lounge, having a whiskey and soda from his private supply – Old Grontonians always have private supplies of whiskey and soda; I don't know where they get them. It was obvious young Banon was in love; nothing else makes anyone look like that except religion, and on Arveliane you somehow didn't think about religion.

“He just came straight up to the Old Man and saluted, and said, ‘Sir, I'm in love with Arandi –’”

“‘A randy what?’” asked the Old Man irascibly.

“Banon hardly noticed. ‘I'm in love with her, and she's in love with me, and I want to stay here, Sir.’

“It's not just a matter of staying here, Banon,’ the Old Man said. ‘You don't get permission to stay on Arveliane, you either get forced to stay or you leave

with the ship. You know that. If you get forced to stay, that means a dishonourable discharge also.’

“‘I know all that, Sir,’ said Banon.

“‘Even the Arvelianens consider a dishonourable discharge from this service a little bit – well, dishonourable,’ said the Old Man.” Barlow wasn’t imitating him now, because a young couple had come into the dining room, and he didn’t want them staring.

“‘I know, Sir,’ said Banon.

“‘There’s only one way you could get forced to stay here without being considered an outright criminal by their people, Banon.’

“‘Yes, Sir.’

“‘So. She’s pregnant, is she?’

“‘*No*, Sir. I love her, Sir. I wouldn’t do that until we’re married. But I kissed her, Sir. That means they’ll demand that I marry her and stay with her, doesn’t it?’

“‘The Old Man took that in, then opened his mouth, then closed it again.’”

Barlow imitated that, as the young couple weren’t looking his way at all. “He looked at me, and he looked at Banon, and he looked at me again. Then he looked at Banon. His face was flushed, and his mouth was working,” – Barlow flushed

his face and worked his mouth – “and he got up and went out. Just before he closed the door, he looked at me again. I gathered I was being left to deal with this. Suddenly I remembered Banon’s chatter of two weeks before. I felt that this was retribution now for my not paying attention to him then.

“‘Banon,’ I said. He was still at attention.

“‘Sir.’

“‘No copulation, eh, Banon?’

“He nearly got angry at that, but then he just blushed and said, emphatically, ‘No, *Sir*.’

“I sighed. I stood up. After all, I wasn’t a court of inquiry. I walked back and forth a bit. ‘You kissed her, Banon?’

“‘Yes, sir. I love her. She’s beautiful, and we think alike about a lot of things – about everything that really matters, and about a lot of things that don’t. I meant all that it could mean when I kissed her.’

“‘No copulation, eh, Banon?’

“He was dangerously close to yelling at me then, I can tell you, and if he had, of course, it would have been insubordination. But he merely said, between his teeth, ‘No, sir.’

“That’s what you think, Banon.’

“He didn’t exactly jump. ‘What do you mean, Sir?’ Barlow gave a splendid imitation of Banon, especially of Banon not exactly jumping.

“Banon,’ I said, ‘didn’t you attend the usual biology lecture about Arveliane during basic training, and the compulsory refresher course before this voyage?’

“Yes, Sir. But I’m afraid I didn’t pay much attention to the details, Sir. They seemed mostly to be just dirty talk in four-letter words. I already knew how to do – that sort of thing, Sir, and I already knew you aren’t supposed to kiss Arvelianen girls unless you’re really in love with them, and I didn’t really think I’d fall in love with one, so I didn’t really listen very hard, Sir.’

“You just sat back and daydreamed about the fine fun you’d have if you ever got there,’ I said.

“He really blushed hard then. ‘Yes, Sir,’ he said.

“Dirty talk in four-letter words, eh, Banon?’

“That’s how it sounded at the time, sir.’

“Didn’t really listen, eh?’

“No, Sir.’

“It was unnecessarily sarcastic, I suppose, but then I said, ‘If I tell you the facts, in words of three syllables or more, will you listen to me, Banon?’

“‘Yes, Sir.’

“‘Thank you, Banon. First, let me say that when the Arvelianens use for kissing a long word which means, literally, “a promise to speak with me to my children”, they aren’t just being poetic. They aren’t even just being poetic and sincere about something that really matters to them, Banon. The term has a meaning deeply rooted in the physical facts of the matter.

“‘You see,’ I told him, ‘the reason our version of sexual intercourse doesn’t seem to matter so much to them as it does to us, is that it never did matter so much to them. It’s never been the same thing for them as it has been for us. For us, it’s a fun thing that can be used to cause children when we want them – and only relatively rarely do we want them; we’ve got that aspect of our lives, at least, under complete control. But the concept of sex primarily as a means of forming children, is a part of the experience of our race and is probably a big thing still in our subconscious. If survival of the race becomes an issue, it will be important again in the future.

““But for the Arvelianens, Banon, it isn’t even part of racial experience.’ I think it had begun to sink in but I pretty well had my lecture planned from start to finish, so I went on with it. He’d been due a lecture, anyway, if not two. His face was rather white, though. He’d listen the next biology lecture he had to go to, I felt sure of that.

““On Arveliane, Banon, the biological components required for procreation are prepared, not in separate bodies, male and female, but in one body – the female’s. They’re prepared separately in that body, however, and can’t be joined, in the ordinary course of events, until a process is triggered that results in bringing them together.

““Want to guess how it’s triggered, Banon?”

“His voice sounded as if his mouth was very dry. ‘No, Sir. Not out loud, Sir. But why–”

““Why the sports equipment, Banon? That’s how the embryo is fed, Banon. You did hear the lecturers say, “embryo” once or twice, I hope?”

“He nodded. “Yes. Yes, Sir.’

““That’s why they’re so “promiscuous”. Any young woman will accept the offer of any young man to help feed her child, if she happens to like him, even if

she doesn't have one on the way; she likes the idea of a man's being glad to nourish.'

"His face went whiter, and I thought he was about to faint. I poured him a shot of whiskey, and gave it to him – the Old Man had left his bottle there. He drank quickly.

"'Sit down, Banon.' We both sat. I relaxed. 'There are some things that follow from this,' I went on. He nodded. 'For one thing,' I said, 'the Arvelianen women weren't always so pleasant about having a lot of men help feed their unborn or nonexistent infants. This took a lot of ground work by Federation PR men. Banon, are you following this?'

"He nodded again. 'Yes, Sir.'

"'That's good. This is important.'

"'Yes, Sir.'

"'You see, Banon, an Arvelianen male can't help a woman feed an embryo, until he's kissed a woman and made her pregnant.' Banon was sitting very still. 'The same wave of emotion which causes pregnancy in the female has a counterpart in the male which starts the food-supplying process going in him. The

feeding isn't nearly as much fun for them as what looks like it is for us, but they don't seem to mind it, I must say. I dare say they really like kissing.'

"Banon groaned, but as I say, he had a lecture coming to him. 'Now, Banon,' I continued, 'the Federation naturally discovered all this during the regular quarantine period which precedes the start of ordinary contact between races, and it quite easily decided the best way to make use of this. After all, junior members of any organization are always made use of by their seniors; that's the way of things. The story the Federation came up with, and fed to these simple people, is that our race reproduces in the same way, with one significant difference.

"That difference, our PR men said at the time, was that Nature's generosity is expressed in us by our young men's being able to supply food before, during and after pregnancy, to make sure our embryos are really well fed. Also, they said it was the custom among us for men to help with the feeding of each other's children, as we're basically a big-hearted race.

"And since we enjoy feeding so much, they *know* we're a big-hearted race.'

"There was only one thing on Banon's mind. 'It'd be like feeding a little cannibal,' he said – almost shouted, in fact.

“I was coming to that,’ I told him quietly. ‘That part of the female system accepts only the right kind of stuff. What’s more, it accepts even the right kind of stuff from only one male – the first male to do the feeding after the pregnancy begins. That’s why the women originally didn’t care for “promiscuity”. But because of the "generosity" Nature showed in forming us, they were quickly convinced of the goodness of our custom, and over the years that custom was adopted throughout the planet, as a gesture of goodwill.

“So all you have to do, Banon, is get some married friend of yours to make regular gestures of good will.

“The only thing you’ve got to worry about,’ I told him, ‘is to make sure you don’t ever give the game away. The Federation’s got a good thing going there, for spacemen and wealthy tourists, and if you were the cause of a break-up between us and Arveliane, I’m sure something highly unpleasant would happen to you eventually. And maybe to your wife – for she’s going to be your wife, no doubt about that.’

“That last didn’t worry him; he was so much in love he wanted to marry the girl anyway. But something bothered him a great deal. I waited.

“It’s such a waste,’ he muttered.

“‘What is?’ He didn’t answer. I thought a moment. Then, ‘No more than usual,’ I said.

“‘It’s not even the same purpose,’ he said then. ‘My God, what a mockery!’

“‘Pretending to feed a kid’s no worse than pretending to try forming one,’ I pointed out.

“‘It’s different,’ he said. ‘It’s different.’ He groaned again. ‘How can I ever be satisfied with kissing her?’

“‘Don’t be silly, man. Look– ’

“‘But it was no use,’” said Barlow. “‘I couldn’t make him see the point at all. He’d built up these people in his mind, you see, as somehow being something more noble than the rest of us, and then the novelty of a sudden notion was just too much for him.

“‘And there he was on Arveliane when I last saw him ten years ago, the only celibate – in our terms – on the whole planet, and he a married man.’” Barlow sighed again. The glow of his cigar as he drew on it once more was, in the darkened, smoke-filled room, like the glow of a new idea in a mind grown old and dim in contemplation of the interminable vastness of space and the long romance of progress.

VI

STOPOVER AT BRILEMNIA

“Bravery,” said Barlow, “is largely an illusion.” His cigar glowed like the residue of an almost extinct volcano on a planet already moribund in the declining years of a sun which had outlived the inhabitants of its slowly cooling system.

“Bravery,” Barlow continued as the cigar-end smouldered anew, “is usually merely the choice of the lesser of two evils which both are admittedly pretty terrific. Pure illusion.

“I knew a brave man once,” he added. We had rather thought he might, we the usual group of after-dinner listeners at the Interplanetary Travellers’ Club, recently so renamed.

“It was on the express liner Starscooter, of which I was captain for a period which gives rise to many a mood of pensive reminiscence during my comfortable years of semi-retirement. I was commissioned to deliver Ringross of Gimfloss back home in time for his death. You’ve heard of Ringross, the medical research pioneer who discovered the wonder drug usually sold under the brand name Yuthzpert? No? Possibly because it isn’t registered for sale among humans or, ironically enough, his own Brilemnians (whom his work was intended to benefit primarily), because of the notorious side effects, though it’s a remarkable success, medically and financially, among the Benatridites and Fredeldarians. Most beneficial to Fredeldarians. It prevents ageing for sixty years and you keel over dead at precisely the end of the sixtieth year. No pain, no discomfort even, no

complications, perfect health. Sixty years of whatever degree of blissful youth you want, and then *chunk!* Dead.

“Anyway, Rimgross was expected to die at what seemed to me the relatively early age of sixty-six, at the height of his fame and wealth and in the middle of a breakthrough experiment on Yuthzpert for Brilemnians, so I naturally assumed he’d caught the usual social disease from a Benatridite whore in the courses of his researches, but he seemed despite that to walk with a peculiar ease of carriage, which prompted me one afternoon to inquire, purely for the sake of making conversation, what ameliorative he’d invented for the relevant symptom. His answer revealed that he was in perfect health and was about to die only because that was the custom of his planet’s people at the age of sixty-six.

“‘We like to leave behind a decent, respectable memory of ourselves as viable humanoids,’ he said quite seriously (Brilemnians have no sense of humour, you know). ‘Who wants his kids to curse his memory as that of a dodderly old wreck whose clothes need changing for the same reasons theirs once did?’

“‘Doesn’t your alternative leave the offspring with the guilt of owing a debt they can never repay except through imposition of the same burden on their own kids?’ I said.

“Yup. Makes ‘em real good to the kids, though.’

“Thereby adding to the debt of the kids?’

“Yup.’

“Sounds like pride, the deadliest of all sins, to me,’ I said. ‘Whatever happened to the famous toast of the well-known Perry Lee of Port au Port East, which was plagiarized (in advance, unfortunately, so that he had no recourse) by another poet: “I will drink: ‘Life to the Lees!’”?’

“Pride! Of course its pride! What choice does a manoid have but be proud and arrogant, lest he be forced to believe in the age-old myth, which somehow still haunts even the very stars, of a Son of God – a God jealous of His right to bestow and recall life – who became man to give divine merit to humble helplessness, dreadful death and sacrificial selflessness?’

“Well, of course, he had me there, the Essential Instructive being not to argue religious issues openly on any sound spiritual or theological basis,” said Barlow, expirating the first really perfect smoke-ring of his interminable career, “so we took him on home to Brilemnia as expeditiously as possible, and he kicked off happy as a lark. Lord Jim couldn’t have done it better.”

V

STOPOVER AT COLIMNICOD

“Evolution,” said Barlow, “is sometimes an illusion.” He drew profoundly upon his interminable cigar.

“I once worked that illusion rather neatly,” he added. We had rather thought he might. Every confounded abstraction in the damned dictionary seems to remind

Barlow of some double-damned incident in his profoundly interminable career.

“It was during the epic voyage of the Centreprize to Colimnicod, which was a really primitive backwater when we discovered it,” Barlow naturally went on.

“Every woman on the planet had a fixed, respected niche in the industrial hierarchy, which existed solely to further domestic comfort and totally ignored that profound ideal of Progress For the Sake of Change and Progress which has colonized the Galaxy. The men stayed home and looked after the house and kids and private vegetable plots, and fought duels to the death, with rapiers, to resolve quarrels between their children and those of other men. Need I remark that they all had perfectly behaved kids? But nobody on the damned planet had any interest in trading with the Federation, and they had lots of resources well worth trading in, including an abundance of quadrilinium crystals for which they had no use at all but miniaturized sculpture.

“Well, I got some of the radical feminists in the crew – radical feminism was enjoying a profound revival then, fortunately – to ask subtle questions about why women on Colimnicod weren’t allowed to fight with sharp-pointed, sharp-edged rapiers, and they got the answer that the women had better things to do and were so firmly ensconced each in her own job that they hadn’t thought of fighting duels

anyway. But my feminists said the men were essentially cowards afraid to face the superior female fencer, so they were hogging all the domestic pleasures for themselves. The proof was that the kids were so polite that duels were hardly ever fought, in actual fact. If women were the homebodies, everyone would be able to find out who were the champion duelists. Thus my feminists. They said when they got the women sufficiently stirred up, that evolution inevitably leads on all planets to true equality of men and women, so on Colimnicod all people should fight duels and all people engage in industry. (We conveniently overlooked the fact that male is masculine and female feminine and these always find expression within whatever forms the artificiality of humanoid, rational culture may impose – through convention, not evolution.)

“Anyway,” continued Barlow profoundly, “the upshot was that the women are home washing dishes and fencing safely with foils and masks and reinforced jackets to determine social rank, and the men have got their aggressiveness channeled into the full flourishing futility of modern industry. The end result is lots and lots of purely financial profit for the Federation. Also, though less important,” – he drew reflectively on his cigar – “their kids are the worst damn brats you’ve ever seen.”

VI

STOPOVER ON DUMINDULAB

“I think probably I shall never even nearly forget,” murmured Barlow, who seemed semi-comatose in a half-conscious drowsiness subsequent to a good dinner, “my first time being sent undercover on a planet which had been impervious to Federation espionage devices. That was Dumindulab, you may remember, since it was one of the few ever found which were already so advanced in screening technology. We might have been able to override the level they had reached by then, but that would have put a damper on trade with them; they really valued privacy, all their highly varied cultures agreed in doing that, as we found later. They professed a high regard for being hospitable to strangers, even from off-planet, but our several first-contact envoys, who had all been male, had all committed suicide while on the way back to the ship. The on-board pathologist surmised they had killed themselves because of being ‘disembellished,’ as she put it, for ‘gender-related misbehaviour’; despite expert acquaintance with at least inanimate physicality of the opposite sex to hers, our pathologist was verbally somewhat prudish. As it happened, none of the cultural-

studies experts we had with us had any notion of what constituted gender-related misbehaviour anywhere on Dumindulab, and far less what might be a sample thereof in the city nearest the ship. Several of us more expendable younger members of the crew were asked to throw dice to see who would next investigate, and I threw the low number.

“I dyed myself the colour of the local natives, dressed accordingly, and went into the nearest city, which was evidently a centre of affluence and culture. I was wandering in a residential area that appeared upscale even by its own standards, greeting people with what a CultStud expert had assured me was standard politeness, when I felt that a gentleman of possibly later middle age was paying me attention closer than casual from the doorway of his house. (Persons of a certain social standing instinctively recognize others who share it, and always discern a certain air about a gentleman standing in his own doorway.) When I drew abreast of that doorway, this gentleman addressed himself to me with the equivalent of ‘If I may be so bold, young sir, could it possibly interest you to sleep with my far younger sister, most lovely and most lively, of about your own age?’ At least that is how my embedded UnivTrans seemed to render it, and that device has been advertised for decades as usually infallible.

“I am certain it would be a privilege of which I am most unworthy, noble sir,’ I replied, with what I thought was admirably cautious ambiguity. But that seems to have been the standard formal acceptance of a genuine offer. You have to be far more flowery and far more regretful if you have the temerity to decline, we later learned. He made a most expansive gesture signifying that all he had was mine, which was of course only a flowery formality as it usually is. ‘You are quite, ah, capable, young sir? That is absolutely requisite, it is always understood, for this sacred ceremony.’

“So far as one may judge in one’s own case, I am indeed capable, noble sir.’ At least I’d got the ‘noble’ right, as we found later. I was feeling quite capable, as it happened, though until then I’d never actually done much of anything with anyone else – or anything else, mind you. But then it occurred to me, remembering the dead crewmen, that maybe the privilege on offer was meant to be a one-of-a-kind occurrence. Too late to back out of it now, though, I felt; the older man was entirely pleased at having secured a partner for his younger sister, too entirely pleased to relish my renegeing. He had the air of being the kind of older man it would be dangerous to displease. I was about to ask what I might be

able to do in return for the granting of this privilege – and we learned later that that would have displeased him much. But he forestalled me.

“My young sister is upstairs, young sir. Her partaking of the ceremony has occupied her mind and person for some time. Only a very few have slept with her so far, not enough to honour her betrothed, whose dignity deserves in my estimation far more reassurance of her suitability.’ Well, that made sense in a sense. ‘Please precede, young sir.’ I preceded, until we reached a certain door, whereat Bigger Brother then took precedence, opening the door and entering and making another expansive gesture toward the big bed in the middle of the room. Sexy Sister – I never think of her by her own name, which had more consonants than a Polish surname – was lying under a luxurious covering, on the bed’s other side, but her outline under it justified the adjective.

“‘The Vesture of Love and Worth is on a chair behind the screen,’ quoth Bigger Brother. Ah yes, the screen; I hadn’t noticed that, being more interested in the Real Thing than in the imaginary – they must have been imaginary, I hope – scenes depicted on that screen. I went behind the screen, and quickly divested and invested. Anyone who wore that Vesture, voluminous and vast, must indeed have great Worth if he were able to work well in it, I thought. But I, deeming myself –

on reasonable evidence by now – equal to the occasion, flipped back the cover and climbed into the bed. I do mean climbed; it was somewhat high as beds go.

“‘Begin now,’ said Bigger Brother, settling into the high armchair a little way from the foot of the bed, to make sure we got it right. Seeing my expression then, he asked, ‘Would taking medication help you with your duty? There is no shame in being helped by medication in such circumstances. Rather otherwise, indeed.

“‘It might help one avoid being dismembered,’ I was sure I heard him add also. I did notice he was making a show of paring already neat fingernails with a moderately large and apparently very sharp knife.

“‘I think I would not decline a kind offer of medication, noble sir,’ said I. I felt strongly that if I were to do my duty under observation and maybe under advisement, or possibly even to applause, I would be obliged to do it helplessly compelled, so to speak. He poured a thin, delicate glass half full of something brown and bitter, and suggested I gulp it fast. I did so, sitting up in bed with Sexy Sister all asmile at me.

“‘When I woke, Bigger Brother was thoroughly and absolutely grateful to me for having proved, as six other young Dumindulabins had proved before me, that his young sister’s chastity maintained itself in utmost purity despite the most

approximate proximity to an attractive male other than her own most worthy betrothed. After a very few more occasions of this kind, that lucky bugger, as I can't help thinking of him, would be a proud man indeed. The males remaining in our crew were grateful also for the information I brought back.

“Different countries, different customs,” murmured Barlow to us listeners semi-somnolent and half-comatose after our stupendous meal. “Even on Dumindulab, some other countries have some customs even stranger.” We hadn't the heart to remind him he'd told us that story twice before, pretty well word for word.