

CINNABAR'S
GNOSIS



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A HOMAGE
TO GUSTAV MEYRINK

*John Howard, Colin Insole, D.P. Watt,
R.B. Russell, Reggie Oliver, George Berguño,
Eric Stener Carlson, Mark Samuels, Albert Power,
Richard Gavin, Rhys Hughes, Adam Golaski,
Mark Valentine, Michael Cisco, Stephen J. Clark,
Steve Rasnic Tem, Mark Beech, Jonathan Wood,
Adam S. Cantwell, Brendan Connell, Ron Weighell,
Peter Bell & Quentin S. Crisp
Edited by Dan T. Ghetu*



EX OCCIDENTE PRESS
Bucharest ■ MMIX

Descrierea CIP a Bibliotecii Nationale a Romaniei
Cinnabar's Gnosis : A Homage to Gustave Meyrink /
Mark Valentine, Ron Weighell,
Buzau, Mad Linotype, 2009
Bibliogr.
ISBN 978-973-7764-26-3
821.111-32=135.1

CINNABAR'S GNOSIS:
A Homage to Gustav Meyrink
First published by Ex Occidente Press in October, MMIX
exoccidente@gmail.com
www.exoccidente.com

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Frontispiece painting by Carl Alexander Wittek
(*Portrait of Gustav Meyrink, 1919*)

Photography by Richard Wörsching,
from the private collection of J.R. Ritman, Amsterdam
(*Gustav Meyrink at his desk at the House by the Last Lamp*)

The quotation from Gustav Meyrink
was translated from the German by Mike Mitchell
(*"The White Dominican", Dedalus, 1994*)

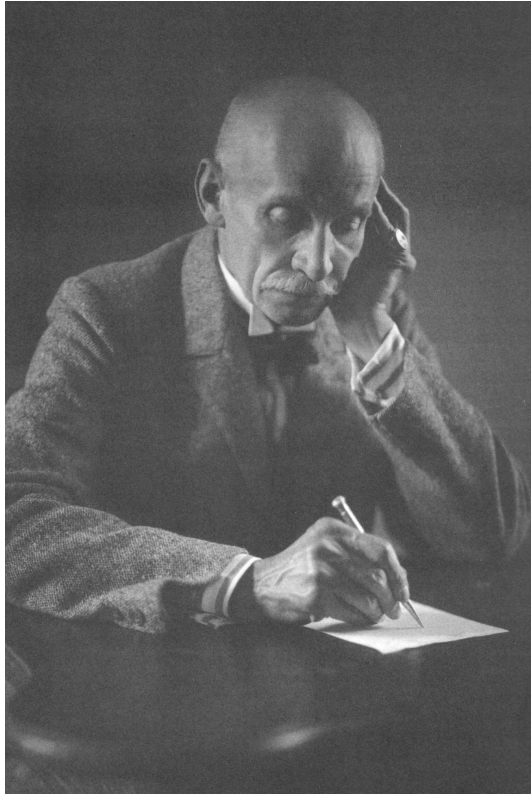
Set in Elegant Garmond
Musaios, The House of Alchemists, Buzau

"Cinnabar's Gnosis: A Homage to Gustav Meyrink"
is limited to 350 copies.

SUMMA SCIENTIA, NIHIL SCIRE

EX OCCIDENTE PRESS
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ERA VULGARIS

*To those who
honour not idols
but Mysteries in Man.
For Mr. Gustav Meyrink,
Writer of Limitless Lumine,
Agent of the End of Time &
Herald of a Greater Empire,
with our Admiration
& Esteem.*



“It is called the Cinnabar Book because that red is the colour of the garments of those who have reached the highest stage of perfection and stayed behind on earth for the salvation of mankind. Just as we cannot comprehend the meaning of a book if we just hold it in our hand or turn the pages without reading, so we will not profit from the course of our destiny if we do not grasp its meaning. Events follow each other like the pages of a book that are turned by Death; all we know is that they appear and disappear, and that with the last one the book ends. We do not even know that it keeps being opened, again and again, until we finally learn to read. And as long as we cannot read, life is for us a worthless game in which joy and sorrow mingle.”

~ *Gustav Meyrink*

CONTENTS

<i>Portrait in an Unfaded Photograph</i> by John Howard	11
<i>The Weimar Spider</i> by Colin Insole	27
<i>Pulvis Lunaris, or, The Coagulation of Wood</i> by D.P. Watt	41
<i>The Red Rose and the Cross of Gold</i> by R.B. Russell	54
<i>The Black Metaphysical</i> by Reggie Oliver	70
<i>Meyrink's Gambit</i> by George Berguño	100
<i>On Consideration of the Muses</i> by Eric Stener Carlson	112
<i>The Age of Decayed Futurity</i> by Mark Samuels	119
<i>Počátek Románu: A Flutter of Lorn Love</i> by Albert Power	133
<i>Feet of Clay, Head of Fire</i> by Richard Gavin	155
<i>The Antediluvian Uncle</i> by Rhys Hughes	161
<i>Her Magnetic Field</i> by Adam Golaski	184
<i>The Autumn Keeper</i> by Mark Valentine	198
<i>Modern Cities Exist Only to Be Destroyed</i> by Michael Cisco	213
<i>The House of Sleep</i> by Stephen J. Clark	223
<i>The Multiples of Sorrow</i> by Steve Rasnic Tem	235
<i>The Cabinet of Prague</i> by Mark Beech	246
<i>White Souls that March in the Astral Light</i> by Jonathan Wood	265
<i>The Cylinder of Shunyakasha</i> by Adam S. Cantwell	281
<i>The Chymical Wedding of Des Esseintes</i> by Brendan Connell	294
<i>The World Entire</i> by Ron Weighell	303
<i>The Light Invisible, the Light Inaccessible</i> by Peter Bell	317
<i>Tzintzum</i> by Quentin S. Crisp	335
Biographical Notes	381

PORTRAIT IN AN UNFADED PHOTOGRAPH

John Howard

*"Friendship based solely upon gratitude is like a photograph;
with time it fades."*

Queen Elisabeth of Romania
(Carmen Sylva)

On Assumption Eve

I, Gustav Meyer, now called Meyrink, of Peleş Castle, Sinaia, in Romania, and approaching the end of my life, will write down for the first time the true story of all that happened.

After three years or so at the bank I was still not very happy. The fact that I had co-founded the bank made no difference. My life seemed to have come to a dead end; I had wandered up a blind alley and there was no way forward. My literary ambitions, too, had not so far come to anything. It seemed to me that I was going to be both an unsuccessful writer and an unfulfilled banker.

Things came to a head on the day before the Feast of the Assumption, 14 August, in the year 1892. I had decided to solve all problems by removing myself from the scene. I purchased a gun, a small pistol, and took it home. I stood in the middle of my room next to my empty writing table, one hand on its edge, and with the other held the pistol against my head and waited to pull the trigger. Then I heard a rustling noise, and I was distracted enough to look towards the source: the door

Cinnabar's Gnosis

leading out of my room. I thought that perhaps a mouse was scuttling around, hunting here and there for something to eat. But there was no mouse to be seen. Instead, a small white rectangle rested on the worn carpet at the foot of the door. Clearly a piece of paper or card had been pushed under my door, and that was the sound I had heard.

Gently, I took the pistol away from my temple and put the pistol down on the table, while continuing to hold on to the table carefully. I walked slowly over to the door and picked up the object. It turned out to be a postcard, and I was looking at the reverse, which had no writing on it, no address; so how it got to be put under my door, and by whom, I could not guess. I jerked the door open, but there was nobody outside it. There was so sign of life, not even the back of my unknown postman receding down the corridor. There was no sound at all to be heard, no departing footsteps.

I turned the postcard over, and saw that it was a picture of a castle built in the style from old times, like the sort of place that the mad King Ludwig had been building in Bavaria before his death put an end to the construction activities that threatened to bankrupt the state. Turning the card over again, I noticed there was some writing after all: just the printed description of the picture, so small that it had been all too easy to overlook. The place was Peleş Castle in Romania, the summer residence of King Carol I and his Queen Consort, Elisabeth.

I remembered once reading something about the building of the castle, and dwelling on how much it was costing. (My banker's instinct had not been entirely wasted.) It was costing considerably less than what the late Bavarian monarch had been willing to spend on his buildings. Perhaps King Carol had more financial acumen than me or my partner did. Or he was simply an astute man, intent on protecting his throne. Examining the picture further, I found that against my inclination, I was rather attracted to the castle. The setting looked idyllic: a place not quite of this world, made for escape and for openness to the restoring serenities of nature. The building itself, despite its obvious and impressive size and the use for which it had been built, still looked like a real home. The pistol lay forgotten on my table; a lump came to my throat as I thought about how pleasant it would be to travel to such a place and be able to stay there. A glass of dark beer was called for, and

Portrait in an Unfaded Photograph

I locked the gun in the bottom drawer of my desk, slipped the postcard in my pocket, and went out into the busy street.

From that time onward I was intrigued. I tried to find out as much as I could about Peleş Castle and its royal inhabitants. I sought out articles in the popular magazines, and looked closely at the accompanying photographs. King Carol I: a minor German prince who had accepted the crown much-peddled around Europe by one of the many Bratianus or their friends who always seemed to be really running things in Romania. The King, with his bristling beard and piercing eyes, was stiff, serious, shrewd, upright. No duty was too much for him, and he was every inch a scion of the Hohenzollerns. And then his wife, the Queen, Elisabeth: such a contrast! Gentle and yet deeply determined; artistic, a dreamer and romantic; still yearning and suffering nearly twenty years after the death of her daughter at four years of age. The King did not seem to share his wife's sorrow. The Queen was always portrayed wearing long flowing gowns, and with an expression sensitive and somewhat mournful, seemingly having attained a sort of peace and repose. And indeed she was an artist. She drew, painted, and played several musical instruments; and she wrote. Of course! I remembered that she wrote all types of literary work – novels, stories, poems, essays – that she published under the name of Carmen Sylva.

Not only did I always keep the miraculous postcard of Peleş Castle safe in my wallet, but I also started carrying a selection of postcards of Carmen Sylva, and clippings about her and her works. At odd moments in my office at the bank, or on a tram, or in the street, or in my room, I would look upon her kindly face and feel that, despite all her own troubles and responsibilities, she would, if she but knew, shoulder a selection of mine, and perhaps transform them through her talents in the media of prose and verse.

This obsession – I must call it that – continued for two or three years. And then, as the bank continued to grow more deadly to me and I could make no progress with my literary work, I hit upon the solution. I berated myself for not thinking of it earlier. As I have explained, I had become an assiduous reader of articles about Queen Elisabeth and Peleş Castle, and also of the many artists she entertained there and supported in a variety of ways. If only I could receive an invitation to

Cinnabar's Gnosis

Peleş Castle! If only I could secure the Queen's patronage! I wrote her a letter, in which I opened my heart to her. Then I sat back and waited and waited. But no reply ever came.

To say that I felt betrayed, cheated, cast aside, would be the most absolute of understatements. In my gloom when I was feeling most rational, I thought that perhaps the King or his Prime Minister – who I knew visited the castle often for conferences with the King, and had official rooms maintained there – had been handed my letter, read it, and prevented the Queen from seeing it. Perhaps letters from her to me were being extracted from the postal system by the authorities of my own country, at the request of Romanian politicians, and withheld from me. And when my moods were at their darkest, darker than the superb beer I would drink in quantity, I knew beyond doubt that Carmen Sylva had laughed at my letter, had turned away a fellow artist, and was prepared to let me starve or be sent to prison, all without even so much as lifting a ringed finger to help.

Across the Empire

In the summer of 1896 I was glancing through a newspaper, and was just about to put it aside when I came upon the announcement that the Emperor himself would be travelling to Romania on a state visit, during which he would be received and entertained at Peleş Castle. I thought that no doubt Carmen Sylva would recite a celebratory poem of her own composition, and Franz Josef and his Empress, the other Elisabeth, would consent to listen to an organ recital or similar from the Queen in the castle's lavish Music Room. There and then the plan leaped fully formed into my head. I would travel to Romania and use the opportunity now granted to put myself forward in person to Carmen Sylva. And I would take my little pistol as well.

Leaving Bohemia behind, the journey across the wide body of the Transleithian part of the Empire, across Hungary, was tedious and uneventful. In a daze I changed trains and waited on platforms in outlandish places. If anything, I was worried that the visit would be over before I could reach Sinaia. The train rattled through towns and

Portrait in an Unfaded Photograph

cities, and across broad plains. Fields and rivers, hills and woods moved slowly past the carriage windows. It was hot, and I was continually mopping my face and drinking the bottled water that I quickly bought when we stopped at a station, frightened that my agitation of missing the train when it started again would raise suspicion, and lead to an unfortunate revelation, either from my own lips by an Imp of the Perverse, or through the methods of the Hungarian rural gendarmerie. Sometimes I was able to buy a cool bottle of some local dark beer, and bread and cheese, and sometimes fruit. The Empire moved on by, stretching out like a long afternoon, as I sat still gazing at it.

Eventually the train started to climb out of Transylvania, up towards the southern rampart of the Carpathian Mountains. The track became a single one, and lunged on through deep narrow valleys, following the road between overhanging trees. The effect was singularly attractive and restful. Often there was the sound of plunging water to be heard, and the shadows of the beech trees provided relief from the burning sun of the endless skies.

To my very pleasurable surprise, I experienced no difficulty in crossing the frontier into Romania. The train had been growing more crowded; whether or not half the population of Hungary was going to gawp at their Apostolic Majesties and the King and Queen of Romania, I did not know or care. Papers were examined perfunctorily; the Hungarian and Romanian border guards' German was execrable, and as I did not understand either of their languages myself, no-one seemed inclined to linger or attempt to ask too many questions. Much later, as it seemed, when the train steamed into Sinaia, I felt that I had achieved my main task. In reality, of course, it was about to begin.

The winding streets of the little town were festooned with the flags and arms of both nations, with bright pennants and posters of their royal majesties. There was imperial Franz Josef, king of this, that, and the other, prince, duke, and archduke, and plenty more besides. When I was at school we had had to learn all the interminable list of Habsburg titles, but I had made it my business to forget most of them. And there was his wife, the Empress Elisabeth, like her husband growing well into middle age, like him still slim, but in contrast looking young. In the crowded streets as I strolled I overheard much talk of Elisabeth:

Cinnabar's Gnosis

that she would be at Franz Josef's side for as short a time as possible, and that she intended to spend most of her time looking at horses, talking to gypsies and listening to their wild music. Portraits of the King and Queen of Romania were also numerous. Carol was almost glaring out at his little and still new kingdom from his pictures, as if ready to jump out and immerse himself in it, while his Elisabeth – Carmen Sylva – stood stately and reserved, dreaming her worlds of fiction and folklore in the cool mountains of their summer retreat.

There were no spare hotel rooms to be found, but I was able to secure a tiny room – hardly more than a cupboard, really – in a house inhabited by Armenians. I had fallen in with the man of the house when he had heard me asking a passer-by who looked as if he lived in Sinaia about the possibility of finding accommodation during the days of the royal visit. I had decided to pose as a journalist, as indeed I had sometimes attempted to be during the times when business was quiet at the bank. In Prague I had imagined that Sinaia – and indeed, most of Romania – would be filled with journalists, correspondents, painters, photographers, and all sorts and varieties of those who follow in the wake of royalty, making their livings by them, or seeking to do so. My suppositions seemed to have been proven correct. It appeared that there were cameras on tripods set up everywhere on street corners and blossoming on every balcony, and almost every man in the street seemed to be carrying a notebook or reading one of the numerous illustrated books, magazines, and newspaper supplements produced for the occasion.

The Armenian showed me to my miniscule room, which I paid for in advance. I did not bother to unpack my small suitcase, although I did place a blank notebook and a packet of pens prominently on the little table under the window, and made sure that my host noticed them. In the crowded kitchen the woman of the house offered to prepare me an omelette, which I accepted gratefully. Declining the offer of something to drink after my coffee, I wandered out again into the sunset streets of Sinaia, determined to reconnoitre the town, and work out best how to approach Peleş Castle itself.

I had decided that I would assassinate Carmen Sylva in the grounds of her castle. I had concluded that there were sound practical reasons

Portrait in an Unfaded Photograph

for this. Although the streets of the town would be crowded, and the procession bearing the four monarchs and various family members and politicians would of necessity have to proceed slowly, I had also counted on the sides of the roads being lined with soldiers and police, to say nothing of agents wearing civilian clothes blending in with the adoring crowds. For a moment I thought it possible that the Armenian who had taken me in might have done so because of my appearance or some suspicious behaviour on my part, and even now was summoning the authorities to arrest me on my return to my room. But no. I put the thought from my mind. I could not have survived that last few years and travelled the hundreds of miles that I had just done, if I allowed myself to dwell on such pointless musings.

Consulting the special commemorative map that I had bought on my arrival, I followed the twisting streets as far as the gates of the royal estate. There were guards on the main gate, dressed in extravagant uniforms, but also armed with the most modern weapons. My little pistol might be suitable for felling an unarmed woman, but not one of these. There and then my resolve wavered again; but a moment later I knew that I had to finish what had started those years ago when the postcard of Peleş Castle had so mysteriously appeared. But I did turn around and saunter away, as I did not want to draw attention to myself. I might be famous enough, and throughout the world, in just a matter of hours.

As dusk descended I followed the road as it ascended the steep slope. There were still a few large houses partly hidden behind walls and trees and deep in their large gardens. Then I had left the houses behind, and the road narrowed down to a wide track. Eventually the path flattened out, and, as I caught glimpses of a tall tower, surmounted by a steep, turreted roof, I realised that I had circled around behind the castle and its surrounding gardens. I could not see any sign of a wall or fence or ditch, although I was certain that there must be some sort of barrier between the royal domain and the rest of the world. I decided to come back the next day, in daylight. In any case tomorrow was the day that the Emperor was to meet the King.

I slept unexpectedly well, and on rising I made a few jottings in my notebook, so that anyone glancing at it would think that I was a *bona*

Cinnabar's Gnosis

fide writer. I checked my little pistol. After a cup of coffee, I left the house and walked the same way that I had done the previous evening. Even early in the morning the streets were becoming thronged with people, all dressed in their best clothes. I knew that I probably looked quite shabby by comparison; but in a few hours that would be the last thing for me or anyone to worry about.

There were definitely no walls bounding the royal estate where I had walked. Perhaps further along they were still under construction, but where I stood all there seemed to be was a wide and shallow ditch, which I crossed without the slightest difficulty. Suddenly I heard the rustling of branches and the low murmuring of voices. I crouched behind a tree, and held my breath while two soldiers walked past, following the ditch. So there were arrangements for guards at least, but they looked ludicrously ineffective. When the soldiers were out of sight and earshot I continued on into the woods, aiming towards the tower of the castle. At last the trees ended, and I found that I was at the edge of a lawn that ran down towards the rear of the castle. I sat down with my back against a tree, watching, listening, waiting.

As the morning progressed, and the shadows moved with the sun, I saw a group of children run across the lawn, shouting, to a terrace on the other side, followed by some adults. I remembered that the grounds were to be thrown open for the day of the visit. It seemed to me that destiny was handing me my opportunity like an embossed card on a silver tray. I checked that I still looked at least passably respectable, and certainly so for a mere newspaper and magazine scribbler. I held my notebook so that it could be seen. Then I wandered out of the protection of the trees, across the grass, and around to the front of the castle.

Beneath the main terrace, where the gardens began to fall away quite sharply, stood hundreds of spectators. The men were looking around them and shading their eyes from the sun, despite their hats, and the women I'm sure were gossiping and sometimes attempting to point with their furred parasols. Everyone seemed to be chattering and laughing, milling around and waiting with expectation for the royal couples and other distinguished guests. I walked up to the corner of the castle, where a group of soldiers was standing. I walked past them unchallenged. I looked around me and pretended to write in my

Portrait in an Unfaded Photograph

notebook. I smiled and nodded at the soldiers, and some of them nodded back. They did not seem to harbour any suspicions whatsoever. It was all so different to Prague and Vienna!

Now the crowd grew hushed. Boots stamped on gravel as at barked commands soldiers came to attention. Ceremonial swords flashed in the bright sunshine. And then I saw the objects of attention stroll out onto the terrace. First there were the minor royalty and the politicians, but I did not have eyes for them, only the Queen. I noticed a rank of photographers, in waiting behind their massive camera paraphernalia. One or two of them were readying their equipment for when the posing was to begin. Journalists scrawled on pieces of paper. I walked towards them, looking around me and still myself pretending to write, like a man with his day's portion of words to set down as he examined every element of the scene and its players. Now King Carol and Emperor Franz Josef strolled along, the very model of brotherly amity. They looked remarkably similar: one bearded, the other whiskered and moustachioed, both in military uniform and standing erect. Queen Elisabeth trailed demurely behind her husband. I looked for the Empress, but saw no sign of her. I assumed that the stories about her really preferring to visit stables and gypsies had been true.

By now I was within a few metres of the royal group. I seemed to be unnoticed. I reached inside my jacket for my pistol. I dropped my notebook, and the riffling and fluttering of the pages made a whirring sound in the breeze that caught the attention of the man standing nearest to me. He looked straight at me. I recognised him as Sturdza, the Romanian Prime Minister. Maybe I was to shoot him too. I might as well disrupt the proceedings as much as possible while I had the chance. I rushed forward and aimed at the Queen. She stopped and stood perfectly still. Her right hand came up to her throat, but she remained calm. I looked into her quiet eyes, her infinitely sad eyes. I pulled the trigger, but my arm jerked as the gun fired, and it was Franz Josef who fell to the ground. There were shouts and screams. King Carol bellowed something; Sturdza tottered towards me; soldiers started to break ranks and raise their weapons. Cameras went off, flashing and smoking. I looked at the Queen again. I think she started to hold out her arms to me, but then I turned and ran. The last thing

Cinnabar's Gnosis

I saw – and I did not believe it at the time – was King Carol tripping over his wife's quickly and deftly outstretched foot. Then I was gone.

It was lucky for me that confusion reigned, and that the arrangements to secure the castle and grounds had been so lax. But even as I ran and ran I could not stop thinking why it was that at the last possible moment, that when given the opportunity I had planned for, that when it was presented to me, I had failed. Just as I had failed to shoot myself in 1892, due to an intervention, I had failed to shoot again now. But where was the intervention? That is, unless it was Carmen Sylva's intervention, somehow... After all, it had been her face that had held my gaze as I fired...

Rumours and possibilities

As far as I could tell I reached the road with no pursuers. I threw the pistol away, and it sailed deep into the quiet depths of the woods behind me. I forced myself to stop and recover my breath as best I could. I straightened my clothes and smoothed down my hair. I walked back slowly down towards the town, as the clamour grew louder in front of me.

Back in crowded Sinaia I asked what was happening, posing as a disappointed traveller who had arrived too late to see the royalty assembled at the castle. Rumours abounded. Some said the Emperor had been killed, while some said he had merely been wounded. Others declared that Franz Josef had been miraculously saved, and that King Carol had ordered that a church be built on the spot where he had fallen, as in Vienna when Franz Josef had escaped assassination in 1853. One man in a group said that the two Elisabeths were at the Emperor's bedside, while his friend scornfully said that the Austrian Elisabeth was still looking at horses while the Romanian one was dictating fevered articles for sensational magazines in Paris, London, and New York. The last comment I heard as I boarded a train was that Carmen Sylva had ordered that Franz Josef's body be laid in state under the opened glass ceiling of the castle's Hall of Honour, because

Portrait in an Unfaded Photograph

the Emperor had admired the modern ingenuity of the concept and the solid tradition of its appearance and execution.

Once on the train I felt completely tranquil and drained. It was as if my mind had evacuated my body, leaving it to do what it wanted. And what it wanted was to flow into the contours of the seat, to follow its shape, and just *be* there. To do nothing, think nothing. I drowsed in the warm sun, waking and sleeping in alternate moments. When my mind returned to my body, for the first time I became aware that my action was bound to have consequences. All I had ever thought about was to commit a specific act. I had given no consideration at all to what must inevitably follow.

As I dozed I also dreamt. What would happen now? Whether or not Franz Josef lived, Austria-Hungary would have to react. A price would have to be paid and honour satisfied. I imagined that the Empire would soon present Romania with an ultimatum that it could not possibly agree to. It would be yet more severe if it did turn out that I had killed the Emperor. And even if King Carol and his government did accept whatever demands Vienna pressed upon its much smaller neighbour, in my reverie I felt sure that the people of Romania would not stand for it. At the very least there would be an uprising. The government would fall and the monarchy overthrown with it. The Romanian army would be no match for the might of Austria-Hungary as it staged an invasion to “restore peace”. It would not be long before the Habsburgs controlled the country. Whatever its outward form took, the Empire would make sure that Romania was in reality no more than a puppet state, perhaps ruled by one of the many spare Habsburg Archdukes who littered the Empire. Franz Josef would have achieved the ancient dream of complete control of the Danube and an outlet to the Black Sea.

And then another possibility drifted into my mind, in which the invasion was stopped in the mountains, and a counter-attack drove the Austro-Hungarian forces far back into Transylvania. The Romanian majority in most of Transylvania would rise and assist in their liberation. The other oppressed nationalities of Franz Josef’s polyglot Empire would rise in revolt. Austria-Hungary would be torn apart like a loaf of fresh and warm bread, and hungrily devoured. And my own

Cinnabar's Gnosis

Bohemia... In Romania King Carol would preside over a different age-old dream: that of all Romanians being united in one state: Great Romania. I envisioned Russia acceding to the loss of Bessarabia in return for "compensation" in Austrian Galicia. All Middle Europe and the Balkans would be reshaped.

As the train chugged on across Transylvania, I slept again, and a third possibility manifested itself to me. Austria-Hungary's invasion would be repulsed; but the mountains with their steep and narrow passes, thick forests, and precipitous waterfalls would become the battleground, as the arid stony barrier of the Carpathians also prevented Romania from gaining absolute advantage. I dreamt that the high valleys and lakes filled with blood, which ran down and drowned both combatant countries, as their youth was poured into a crushing machine or crucible that would also draw in the surrounding nations. Years of warfare would ensue until mutual exhaustion and destruction forced an unsatisfactory peace. The old certainties would vanish for ever. Chaos would reign supreme.

I reached Prague, mind and body all but shattered. I snatched a newspaper from a vendor outside the station, throwing the few heller at his outstretched hand as I stumbled along the pavement. Once back in my room, with the door locked securely behind me, I tumbled into a chair and began to read the newspaper.

An unknown assailant had shot Emperor Franz Josef on his visit to Sinaia. The bullet had ricocheted off one of the Emperor's many medals and lodged itself harmlessly in the castle facade nearby. Franz Josef was knocked to the ground by the impact, spraining an ankle and cutting his hand. The would-be assassin had made good his escape in the pandemonium; King Carol and Prime Minister Sturdza being unable to catch him at the scene, and all subsequent attempts to apprehend him having failed. Naturally, the article reported, there had been mass arrests of suspected anarchists and other undesirables both in Romania and Austria-Hungary; King Ferdinand of Bulgaria and King Aleksandar of Serbia had also taken the opportunity to order certain arrests. In the meantime, interrogations and searches were proceeding apace. Another article said that Queen Elisabeth herself bandaged the Emperor's cuts with strips of cloth torn from her own

Portrait in an Unfaded Photograph

voluminous sleeves, and had assisted him to his feet and helped conduct him to a comfortable couch within the castle.

I heard shouting in the street. Looking out of the window, I saw newspaper sellers hawking another special edition. The governments of Romania and Austria-Hungary were in frantic negotiation. This party or that called for an ultimatum or immediate declaration of war; while others urged moderation and the peaceful satisfaction of any grievances. I remembered my dreams, the way each was so real at the time, how they were each mutually exclusive; only one could ever come to pass and bring its world into painful birth. Whatever happened, however Europe – if not the entire world – would change, I would have caused it. My actions and my actions alone caused it. Despite the reason behind what I had done: the fact that Carmen Sylva had rejected me, at that moment I knew that I could not blame her.

Over the next few days I stayed in my room nearly all of the time, not going to my desk at the bank, and not going outside until after dark. I sat in the dimmest corners of cafes and bars, reading newspapers by the ghostly flickering of gaslight or lamplight. The ultimatum to Romania demanded by the war-making parties did not seem to be going to materialise. It was as if a secret arrangement had been made behind the scenes, which had satisfied honour all around and saved face. I imagined the dark and rich wood-panelled halls and corridors of Peleş Castle filled with soberly-dressed and top-hatted statesmen, bemedalled military warlords, and the two stern-faced monarchs and their glittering consorts.

One evening, while pacing the streets near my room, I secured a copy of yet another special edition, rushed out so quickly that the newsprint was more damp even than usual. It contained the formal announcement that a treaty had been signed. King Carol was to abdicate in favour of the Crown Prince, his nephew Ferdinand. Austria-Hungary pronounced itself fully satisfied with that result; no doubt our Foreign Ministry was anticipating that Ferdinand would be easier to deal with than his uncle. At the back of my mind I entertained a lurking suspicion that everyone had underestimated Carmen Sylva, and, so too, now that she was all set to move into the foreground, Ferdinand's young and beautiful wife, the English-born Crown Princess Maria.

Cinnabar's Gnosis

The next morning I decided that it was safe enough to resume my life in Prague. I returned to the bank, and made excuses about my longer than planned absence, saying I had been ill whilst staying in Pressburg, and so had remained there until fully recovered. The main topic of conversation was still the assassination attempt and the consequences flowing from it; I pleaded ignorance and feigned a lack of interest. This continued for the rest of the week. But everything changed on the following Monday.

Several letters were awaiting me when I arrived home late in the afternoon. They all looked routine, and I tossed them aside one by one until I came to the last one. It bore Romanian postage stamps franked with a Bucharest postmark. The handwriting on the envelope was flowing and extravagant, almost covering the entire remaining space on the front. I opened the envelope carefully, slitting it with a knife. The letter was written on Queen Elisabeth of Romania's personal notepaper.

My Dear Friend –

Yes of course I know who and where you are, as indeed I knew all along, as soon as I saw you at Peleş. You have turned out to be a remarkable man; my initial enquiries being clearly in error, and so I was misinformed. But now I am glad about that. Everything is working out to our advantage, yours and mine. For the moment I must request you to keep absolutely secret the intelligence that I am going to give you. It will be common knowledge soon enough; but my Dear Friend (and I feel that I am right to call you that) I wish to lay further plans that involve you, and so it is only right that I take you into my confidence, as I do now.

You will no doubt have read the reports that my husband is giving up the Throne of Romania. He took up the responsibility and has discharged it; he is able to leave it. What you may not know is that I do not support even the concept of monarchy, and certainly not one for my beautiful adopted home that consists entirely of foreigners foisted upon the people without their consent. Ferdinand's son was born at Peleş, and so is the first true

Portrait in an Unfaded Photograph

Romanian of our Dynasty; but time cannot wait for the second Carol. Dear Ferdinand does not want to be a king – he is much more happy amongst his plants and books than in the palace. He would be a good and dutiful king, but I have no wish to see him assume responsibility that he does not in his heart want, and which he will not discharge with any joy. I support Ferdinand in his desire to renounce the Throne, and Maria will do so too. Needless to say we are not breathing a word of this to my husband! When we have left the country, Ferdinand will, in his turn, abdicate and turn over his powers to a Regency Council. I will be called back to my beautiful Sinaia to play my part, but it will only be matter of time before the monarchy is abolished and a republic proclaimed in its place.

No more will Romania have to rely on outsiders. Romania can and will stand up proud and great, and play its part in the development of Europe. My Very Dear Friend, you have helped this dream to start to become a breathing reality. My foolish actions (or inactions) when you first wrote to me may also show that some Higher Power is working out its purposes through us, you and I.

I ask you to send me a postcard of Hradčany Castle. It will reach me. This will be the signal to show that my trust and faith in you has been justified, and rewarded with your forgiveness. I will arrange for you to receive a passport under a new name. When I am returned to Peleş, in time I will send for you to join us here; your safe conduct is guaranteed.

And now adieu –
Carmen Sylva

Out of the past

There is really very little more to write. Ex-King Carol returned to his family's castle in Germany, and ex-King Ferdinand and his family retired to England. I gave up banking for writing. Eventually I arrived

Cinnabar's Gnosis

back in Sinaia, to a Peleş Castle that was undergoing remodelling to Carmen Sylva's taste, the gift of the grateful citizens of the young Romanian republic. Sinaia became an artists' and writers' colony, presided over by its creator, Carmen Sylva. To start with, she encouraged me with judicious introductions and by graciously collaborating with me; I collaborated with the child prodigy Enescu, writing several operatic librettos for him to set to music. Many gifted writers, musicians and painters flocked to Sinaia under Carmen Sylva's enlightened reign of art and culture. And I started to create my own work. I wrote my *Walpurgisnacht* and *The Angel of the West Window* here in this very room; and, for as long as I am able, I will continue to write. I believe the name of Gustav Meyrink is not without those who appreciate it.

And now, fifteen years after the death of our bountiful patroness, new clouds are gathering. Ferdinand's son has started to call himself King Carol II and is acting like the exiled monarch he never was. Certain politicians in Romania are backing him, and a royal restoration seems not impossible. Carmen Sylva's power over kings and emperors was profound, but there is now no-one left with one quarter of her influence. I fear for my adopted Romania, my native Empire, and indeed all Europe. There is to be no miracle. Like a monstrous golem the aborted past rumbles ever closer, and I have no idea what to do.

THE WEIMAR SPIDER

Colin Insole

On November 19th 1942, the Polish writer and artist, Bruno Schulz, was shot dead in the street in his home town of Drohobycz by SS Officer Karl Gunther. Schulz had recently completed a mural at the home of a rival German officer, Felix Landau. Unpublished manuscripts and artwork, left by Schulz with friends, were lost. These include his novel The Messiah, which when rubbed, exudes plumes of colour.

I can't bear the smell of flowers any more. Not since Vienna. Not since Miriam. In the delicate perfume of jasmine, freesias or bergamot, I sense the reek of corruption – the foetid decay of corpse flowers. That must have been what Baudelaire felt in *Les Fleurs du Mal* or that fool of a friar, talking of honey in *Romeo and Juliet* – “loathsome in his own deliciousness”.

And books? I used to love the smell of dust in old libraries and bookshops and the burst of colour or austere black of the illustrations. They're all deceivers – painted and powdered like old harlots to hide what moulders underneath. Bury them, burn them, drown them! I am sick to the crawl of them.

It had all started so well. I'd graduated that summer – double first in Art History and European Studies – when I learned that I'd been left a legacy in my Great Aunt's will. All her money and property were entailed elsewhere but I received the contents of her house.

She was born in 1916 in Vienna, the year the old Emperor died, into an assured aristocratic family. But, whereas my grandfather, her elder brother by two years, had adjusted, become dull, studied hard at

Cinnabar's Gnosis

Salzburg and Oxford, married and settled in England, Sophie had embraced the dangerous.

"She had the morals and sexual appetites of a street apache," Mother told me when I was old enough to understand, shuffling through family photographs on a winter's afternoon. In her youth she had been beautiful. She had the same presence as Louise Brooks in *Pandora's Box* but without the vulnerability. Sophie was no victim, no Lulu.

There was one photograph from the late thirties of her dancing with Ribbentrop and the poor booby was smitten. Mother showed it to me half in shame but there was that guilty pride in her face. Look! We weren't always so commonplace. Even we could mock and enthrall the famous and the damned.

Sophie married an envoy in the Vichy government and travelled widely through occupied Europe, enchanting and entrapping as she pleased. When the war turned, her husband disgraced and imprisoned, she eased away to Switzerland and returned to Vienna in 1955.

She was approaching her forties. The war and exile had coarsened her and the young men stopped calling. The generals and bohemians who had shone and sparkled for her had long departed together with the excitement and danger. The men, who now wheezed and puffed up her stairs, were minor government officials and bureaucrats, who wore ill-cut suits and dirty shoes. She despised them and herself even more, but they smoothed her life and provided her with second-rate luxuries in the weary post-war years. Her letters to England spat of the dullness and indignity.

"I've seen that film about my city," she wrote of *The Third Man*. "My countrymen are shown as furtive bat-like grotesques, illuminated and surprised by shadow. Our great buildings are carcasses in which the rat scuttles among the bones."

She hoarded books and pictures. I visited her once and I doubt that she knew, let alone had read, a tenth of the literature and manuscripts piled on her shelves. She bought books by the yard to impress and lure her drab admirers.

"Ezra Pound wrote ten poems for me in Florence. The Sophian cantos, he called them. All unpublished. They're here somewhere." But she never found them.

The Weimar Spider

In the autumn I travelled by train – London, Paris, Strasbourg, Munich and finally Vienna – and relished the bustle and flow of people in the stations and corridors. I was part of that swift concourse. “Vibrant” was the word I flattered myself with as I chatted and flirted, joining the passing pageant of suitcases and sandwiches, magazines and goodbyes. Vibrant, alive and quick. The quick and the dead. How easily the wind changes. How soon the sun falls behind a cloud.

I spent the first two weeks in this false holiday mood, blending in with the crowds in the bars and cafes. I found it easy to make friends, talking lightly into the small hours of plans and dreams, over wine and coffee. What a fine fellow I was with my generous expense allowance from the estate and Aunt Sophie’s house in the old city. The three or four Croatian, Hungarian and local girls who shared my old brass four-poster bed were overawed. I could have been a young Viscount or army officer on leave.

Then I brought Miriam, a beautiful self-possessed gamine of eighteen from Prague, back to the house. She wasn’t impressed by the faded stucco ceilings and cornices and the frowsy glamour of the curtains and drapes.

“There’s no warmth here – just a cold pallor. Where are her family pictures? You say she had scores of lovers but where are their photographs with the pet names and bedroom jokes? And look at all the unread uncut books. Their titles are like little headstones in some vast cemetery.”

As she spoke the firelight flickered and glowed burgundy-red on a ring she wore. She noticed my glance.

“That was given to me years ago – a lifetime away – by a jeweller friend in Prague. The stones came from a giant stolen ruby that was being cut in 1893 for a wedding brooch. An acquaintance of the jeweller, a young writer and mystic, Gustav Meyrink, had warned them against defiling such a peerless gem but they ignored him. The cutter’s hand slipped and the stone shattered. The images that have been seen in those shards and fragments have destroyed many lives. A young child will see with terrible clarity the disdain and contempt its mother feels, no matter how she smiles and simpers. It will realise its own worthlessness and ugliness in her eyes. Meyrink was able to read and interpret those images and he spent days, his fingers red with the dust of that lost stone, piecing together the fragments to form this ring.”

“It seems to spell a word. M.E.T.,” I said.

Cinnabar's Gnosis

"It means 'death'. It shines brightly as there is decay and emptiness in this house. It seeps through the walls. I can feel the shadows of all those who have slept in that bed and can hear their cries of agony and joy and their lingering despair. They press like children's faces on a shop window. In life they were broken frightened people. Now they are grey shadows, peevish and scuttling with failed desire. But there are beautiful lost things here as well. Do you see the ring change?"

As she moved her hand another letter appeared as the firelight glowed. An E . E.M.E.T.

" 'Emet' means truth and beauty. With one flick of the hand, one sweep of the fingers, darkness and death turn to beauty and colour. And back again." She moved her hand and the "E" disappeared. "There are wonderful things here in this room. I'll help you look."

From the dark recesses of the shelves she retrieved a book that had been wedged out of sight and carefully brushed the dust from its covers. It flickered with a soft blue light.

"See – she has Meyrink's book – *Der Golem* – unread and neglected. Let's see what else is here."

How was I to know? If only I could crawl back through the hours and days of my folly and say, "Yes, let's look now. Let's find what is disregarded and despised," then all would be well.

But then I hated and distrusted that mystical babble. Once, when we were all drunk on cheap cider at college, a girl persuaded me to let her read my Tarot. I drew the Fool, teetering on the edge of a cliff, blithe and oblivious of the ruin below, then a tower, struck by lightning, with people leaping from the burning wreckage and finally a man waking from a nightmare, surrounded by swords.

"Look," said the girl. "It's your bed!" And it was – with the college's wooden carving and Mother's patchwork quilt of blue, yellow and red.

"At least I didn't get the death card," I said. And then we saw it. The death card had slipped out of the pack and had fallen into a vase of jasmine.

"You've cheated death," someone said. "Death lies impotent among the jasmine."

I felt that they were all laughing at me and that's what I thought Miriam was doing. I yawned loudly and deliberately.

The Weimar Spider

“Let’s look in the morning,” I said. “Come on,” and motioned towards my aunt’s four-poster. She laughed as if I’d suggested something ridiculous.

“It would be like making love in a shroud, in a mass grave. But if you want my help, I’ll be around. There’s an old man, Herr Dolwerrande. I’m sure he knows something about your aunt and her books. He’s been here before. He’ll help. But be careful, I feel that something important here in this room hangs in the balance.”

Then she left, smiling like a fond grandmother to a sullen sulky child, and wished me well.

I was furious with her. I’d seen Herr Dolwerrande alright – the old scarecrow. He’d been pestering me since my arrival in the city, offering to help sell the books and paintings. He was a wretched disgusting creature, aged, I guessed, in his seventies, whose hands and teeth were dark brown with nicotine stains. I had the idea that he was shadowing me for I kept seeing him on the fringes of the cafes – a dead stick-like thing – in the midst of all that life. He had the face that you see in a column of refugees or prisoners from Second World War newsreels. Each man looks briefly at the camera and is gone but one holds your attention. One lost face in ten thousand, one in ten million.

In my wounded vanity I decided that he and Miriam were in league. They knew that there was a priceless volume in the room – probably the Ezra Pound – possibly others as well. I wondered about their relationship. Maybe she was his granddaughter – a sickening Little Nell, playing prim and virtuous – while grandfather drooled over the money. Perhaps he was her pimp.

Before she’d shown me the ring I’d opened our second bottle of Gewurztraminer. Within the hour I’d drunk the lot and tottered to bed sneering at the ghosts she’d imagined seeping through the walls. I dreamed of nothing. No shroud, no shadows, no mass graves kept me awake.

I have a good head for drink. I woke the next morning a little disorientated but with no hangover. Still angry and with my pride hurt that Miriam hadn’t slept with me, I resolved to start selling Aunt Sophie’s books and pictures immediately.

Cinnabar's Gnosis

I began with the handwritten folders and documents. I threw her letters, theatre programmes and newspaper clippings into two Hessian potato sacks. I wanted rid of her. Old sickly perfumes worn half a century ago, the scent of forgotten dance parlours and long-dead lovers returned for a moment. There was one strange illustrated book smelling of pressed flowers – mimosa, jasmine and roses. When I flicked through, its colours seemed to rise into the room. A note had been scrawled in German on the title page threatening dire consequences unless it was returned to somewhere in Poland. A spoilt child's colouring book, I thought. Scratch and sniff. Let it smell of potatoes. I threw it into the sack. One sweep of the fingers. One flick of the hand.

I took the sacks to a second-hand bookseller in the old city. He gave me 72 euros after a cursory glance at the contents.

"I know someone who'll love this lot," he said. "'The Weimar Spider' I call him. Surrounds himself with mountains of ephemera from the old dead days. His house no longer has rooms. It has tunnels. In the morning he reads one single page – no more – plucked at random from the dust-covered piles. In the afternoon he reflects on what he's read and in the evening he composes erotic poetry to the ghost of Dora Diamant, the mistress of Franz Kafka."

The previous night's drinking must have affected me more than I'd thought. I stepped from the gloom of the bookshop into the swell of the crowd on the Singerstrasse. For the first time in that city I felt alone and disembodied, sleepwalking against the tide. I must have stepped into the road for I was hit hard by a van. I remember thinking as I fell that I would land on my head, that the van driver had a face like a fat yellow doughnut and that my bed was unmade. When I looked next I was standing on the pavement, blinking at the sunlight in the puddles. The doughnut face had staring disbelieving eyes for I was unhurt. It swore and drove away.

I slept badly that night. In a confused dream, my Tarot was being read but I was no longer with friends. There was no drink, no laughter but instead, an atmosphere of dread and foreboding. A young man, wearing a ruby-red cloak, was standing in a garden festooned with roses. Their scent was cloying and overpowering. I knew the man to be Gustav Meyrink, the mystic who had created Miriam's ring, for his

The Weimar Spider

fingers were stained red with dust. Time and again he shuffled and placed the cards before me and each time the same images appeared – the Fool, the Tower and the nine of swords.

“Folly, ruin and endless nightmare,” said Meyrink, sad and grave and, in a corner of the rose-garden, nearly obscured by foliage, I could see a corner of the Death card.

Then, I was back at the railway stations of London, Paris, Strasbourg and Munich or mingling with the crowds in the Viennese bars. I was searching for Miriam. I would see her dark hair as she boarded a train on a distant platform or the glint of her ring faraway across the river and ran, weary and leaden-footed to meet her. Crossing endless subways and bridges I would realise that I was in the wrong city or that the train was disappearing into a tunnel and that Miriam was far away.

Always I was jostled by the crowd. But instead of being a part of them, I felt them pressing down on me, hemming me in. And behind those living souls, who were the ones just out of sight, behind them? Once, when I was fifteen, I walked through the tunnel under the Thames between Greenwich and the Isle of Dogs. I felt, as many feel, that the walls would crumble and the water engulf me. But worse, I could sense the ghosts of old London, jealous and spiteful, on the other side of the walls. That panic came back to me.

That morning I decided to visit Herr Dolwerrande. Despite myself I wanted to see Miriam and I was sure that they were linked somehow. I climbed the splintery wooden stairs to his shop in a side street off Wipplingerstrasse. I'd expected rooms full of books, pictures and curiosities but the office was spartan. It resembled the space allocated to a soldier in a barrack room or a hospital patient in a cramped and busy ward. In one corner a threadbare green army blanket covered some objects or furniture.

Herr Dolwerrande sat hunched over a thin fire smoking coarse unfiltered cigarettes. He seemed surprised and relieved by my visit. I was sure he had prepared and rehearsed his opening words.

“I ask for no money and in exchange for the one thing I will ask of you, I will give you two objects. I have travelled endlessly these sixty odd years and I have learned in passing so much that is kept hidden and secret from ordinary men and women who fret their lives away.”

Cinnabar's Gnosis

From under the blanket he pulled a black book the size of a photograph album.

"This is the keepsake book of Anna Rauffenburg, born June 28th 1898 and bought in readiness for her sixteenth birthday. All her friends and relatives were due to write dedications, poems and jokes – all the lovely silly things happy people do. There was a grand ball to be held in her honour. The orchestra was playing some light scherzos to warm up. She could see the first carriages far in the distance, lit by flaming torches at the entrance to her drive. Her adult life was about to begin. Has the date registered with you yet?"

"June 28th – er – 1914," I said.

"That afternoon Archduke Ferdinand was assassinated in Sarajevo. The news reached her house as the carriage wheels of the first guests scrunched the gravel outside the house. Her ball was cancelled. The carriages were turned back, the music silenced and the tables cleared."

"And so?"

"Anna returned in desolation, unnoticed and discarded to her bedroom. But, as she passed her father's open study door, she saw his pistol. She took the gun and in her loneliness and pique, blew her brains out, soaking this book with her blood."

"A sad story," I said. "But why show me? And anyway, there's pages been torn out – half of it is missing."

"The bloodstains turned to gold – look – they're still there. And then, some sentimental buffoon scribbled a poem on a blank page. It was found that however dumb-witted or shallow the writer, this book produced for them dark and beautiful poetry – poetry with imagery which cut through the lies and pretences of the age. When Baudelaire and Verlaine wrote a century and a half ago, Europe had the semblance, the elegant façade of decay but today it's rotten from the marrow and its stench hidden only by an eggshell veneer. Your poetry, in this book, will crack that shell. Your fragments of verse will be carved and scrawled on the crumbling towers and falling bridges."

Herr Dolwerrande then pulled the rest of the blanket away.

"A young woman helped me retrieve this from the smashed bowels of a house in the Linz ghetto in 1947. She told me that Gustav Meyrink

The Weimar Spider

had owned it. When I heard that name I listened to her.” It was a wind-up gramophone and a huge pile of 78 rpm records. I was dismissive.

“They’re in every junk shop in England. You can’t get the needles to play them.”

He opened a compartment. There were hundreds of coloured needles, carefully graded from an almost translucent white to coal-black.

“Pick a colour,” he said, like a seedy children’s entertainer.

I chose a primrose one. It reminded me of Hampshire riverbanks in Spring. He selected a record. The label was handwritten. “Voices from the River Vltava 1909”. He wound the handle and delicately placed the arm of the gramophone on the record. It was a young woman speaking – soft, drowsy and content.

“On Friday evening we walked to the river and cooked fish on brush-wood fires and danced and sang to the music of mandolines and fiddles long into the night. Shyly, and without the others seeing, Petr pressed a bunch of violets into my hand. In the firelight I could see his fingers were wet and stained black where he’d stooped to pick them. He’d tied them loosely with a strand of reed. Sweet and dark as the hidden moon...”

It lasted nearly three minutes.

“Very nice,” I said. “But that was in English.”

“Of course you heard it in English. I heard it in German. Now we’ll choose another colour. Let’s try this black needle and play the same record.”

This was a young man’s voice – but empty – a voice of surrender.

“Everyday I cross the bridge joining the throng of the forlorn, the sleepwalkers. How many hundreds of us cross? Our eyes staring ahead or on the floor – at nothing. But under the bridge, I see always at the deepest part of the river, how the water swirls and breaks. How many more times can I bear to cross?”

Carefully, Herr Dolwerrande lifted the needle.

“You see. The same record and a thousand different voices. And hundreds of records. Voices from the old Empire from Bohemia to Budapest. And there is music here as well. Music to entrance and unsettle you. The lost songs and dances of the shtetl, the marketplace and the ghetto. The rhymes and rhythms of forgotten peoples. You can hear their heart beats through the walls. I listen to them late into the

Cinnabar's Gnosis

small hours when this tired old city is silent and asleep. Hear them and you will never again be at ease with your snug lazy world. Your chatter and clamour. Your Tower of Babel may now speak with one idiot voice but it is the same tower nonetheless and in time it will shatter and fall.”

His voice tailed off.

“What is it you want from me?” I asked.

“One book and one book only.”

I became suspicious.

“The Ezra Pound poems?”

“No, I’ll show you where those are hidden and I’ll show you the Debussy songs she had under her nose for forty years. In the winter of 1917 Debussy had cancer and paid his baker and wine merchant with twenty-five unpublished settings of the poems of Verlaine and Rimbaud. I don’t want those either. I want a manuscript. Let me explain.”

“In late Autumn 1942 I was a conscript in the German army at Drohobycz in Galicia. I was a lousy soldier but a good plumber and the SS Officer Felix Landau had me excused military duties to fix the water pipes and lavatory in his house. At the same time there was a Polish Jew, Bruno Schulz, who was painting a mural in a child’s bedroom. Landau had given Schulz the use of an attic to keep his paints, brushes, a few clothes and books. It saved him making the dangerous journey backwards and forwards from the ghetto. The painting had barely been completed when Karl Gunther, a rival officer, shot Schulz dead in the street. It was an act of spite and revenge as Landau had recently shot Gunther’s Jewish dentist.

“Now I’d seen Landau do things in cold blood that would stop your breath but I’d never seen him angry before. He could barely speak but eventually he ordered me to clear Schulz’s attic of all trace of the man. ‘Do what you want with it. Sell it. Destroy it. I don’t care but I don’t ever want to see it again.’ He gave me two marks. Head muck and bottle washer I was.

“There were bits and pieces of writing in a language I couldn’t read and a strange ornate folder that, when I opened it, smelled of jasmine, bergamot, freesias and other flowers and seemed to colour the room. The attic seemed alive. It became animate with colour. I should have followed my instinct and kept it.

The Weimar Spider

“Inside the cover was an untidy scrawled message in German that I half-read. It demanded that whoever owned the manuscript should ensure that it was taken to Warsaw and published. A curse tied the reader. But what was I to do? How was I to know? In those times I heard empty threats, pleas and promises every day. You became immune to them. In haste and fear of Landau I bundled everything in two old sacks, took the lot to a German rag and bone seller and was pleased to get seventy-two pfennigs.

“In a dream that night I saw the words of that curse written in letters of fire and gold. They were surrounded by black and silver shapes – runes I learned later – which fixed the spell. ‘You have seen, read and understood my words. It is your honour and burden to return my novel *The Messiah* to Warsaw. Fail and the angry years will not release you. Old age will rack you but Death will not touch you.’ Then I dreamed I was in a theatre or circus ring. The crowd was hushed and waiting nervously for someone. They glanced sideways at me, half in pity and half in that suppressed glee of watching a trapped creature suffer. I could hear their whispers.

“‘Yes, he’s coming. Herr Meyrink himself. He’s coming.’

“A magician or conjurer approached, grinned with all his teeth, held up my seventy-two pfennigs for all to see and dropped the coins into the dirt and sawdust. He pulled a pistol from his jacket and shot me three times through the heart and three times through the head. That was the practice then. The bullets passed through me and I was unhurt. The conjurer bowed and the audience clapped and laughed at me. German officers, ragged children, grey townspeople and behind them, a host of shrunken starved figures stretched back into the distance. The whole host of them clapped and cheered – bone on bone, echo on echo. And I realised that they were the dead and that they were mocking me.

“The next morning I was one of eight men in a lorry taking munitions to a railway siding. One of the shells mysteriously exploded obliterating everyone but me. Not even my uniform was scorched. Landau was so amused he took this photograph.”

He passed me the snapshot and there was the hollow haunted face of the young Dolwerrande.

“I’ve spent the last sixty-six years tracking down that manuscript. The rag and bone dealer sold all of Schulz’s papers immediately to a

Cinnabar's Gnosis

rich foreigner whose wife collected literature. All over Europe I've chased hints and whispers. And I, the lance corporal who cleaned lavatories, have learned so much of books and the secrets of those who wrote them and owned them. To me they were valueless. I remember one of our senior party officials in the last days of the war. He had two suitcases crammed with gold, jewellery and art – but the one thing he wanted – the man who could provide him with the forged papers he needed to melt away to South America – was four hundred yards away on the other side of the Russian army. I remember his face towards the end – like a drowning child. They caught him of course – dressed as a hausfrau in floral skirt and a wig stolen from a dress shop mannequin. He couldn't even buy a razor to shave his stubble. They hanged him from a lamppost as they found him in dress and wig. They giggled and sniggered so much they could hardly throw the rope over. All futility. The squalor and indignity of a doomed man.”

He shrugged and gestured at his sparse little room.

“Then, five years ago, I stumbled out of the rain in Rouen into an exhibition of artefacts from the Vichy regime. I recognised in one photo the pasty face and soft eyes of a man I'd seen with Landau, Gunther and other senior officers in Drohobycz. It was your Great Aunt Sophie's French husband. Last year I traced her to Vienna and, as an art dealer offering rarities, was invited to her rooms.

“On the afternoon I visited a breeze blew through the open window even though no leaves stirred outside. Papers in loose manuscripts fluttered and dust hung in the sunlight. I smelled the same freesias and jasmine as I had sixty-six years ago. And other scents came to me – the damp of that attic, the rain on my uniform and the lost streets and gardens of Galicia 1942.”

“I explained it all to her – the honour and renown she would gain. She refused. I remember her words.

“Those years took everything from me. My lovers had been princes and men who made fools bow and tremble. When I returned to Vienna in 1955 I scraped favours from those same fools. No, let your book remain hidden. Let it be buried under a mound of worthless scribbles.’

“She died three months later. On her instructions her rooms have been barred and bolted until your arrival.”

The Weimar Spider

As he spoke the realisation of what I'd done crept up on me. When I was young I had asthma and suffered nightmares. In the worst I was hiding behind a hedge. From far in the distance a vehicle was approaching, barely perceptible at first but growing louder. I knew it meant me harm. Sometimes it would veer away and the sound of the engine would almost disappear. But always it would return, mocking and teasing until I knew it would break through the hedge and overwhelm me. That's when I woke up screaming. That's how I felt listening to Herr Dolwerrande. I had one last hope but I knew it would fail.

"Why didn't the curse transfer to my aunt?"

"Because she never read it, just as Landau and the rag and bone seller never read it. It merely passed through their hands."

I blurted it out.

"I've read it. Read it, disregarded it and sold Bruno Schulz's *Messiah* for a pittance just as you did sixty-six years ago."

Herr Dolwerrande showed no sign of triumph or gloating. Instead, he drew long and hard on his cigarette, taking it beyond his lungs and deep into his bones. He exhaled slowly – the smoke a blue cloud of relief and oblivion that shimmered in the sunlight. He spoke quietly.

"I don't think this world could stand a book like that. Alongside such brightness, such passion, how shabby and drab it would appear – a hollow shell. My landlord can't stand the music and voices from these records. It's not that he finds them ugly – he knows them to be beautiful and strange. But when he hears them he feels the lost grandeur of the past and he becomes shrivelled – dried insect wings in a window frame."

I asked him about Miriam.

"I thought I'd seen her. She was the young woman at Linz who found the gramophone."

"Who is she? Is she cursed as well?"

"No, I'm sure of that. If anything, the reverse. But there are many things I don't understand. Remember I'm the fool of a soldier who stumbled into this abomination. She's older than I am. She belongs to that forgotten world of the gramophone records – before Sarajevo. There is darkness and misery there too as you heard but also life and colour – the same life and colour we both glimpsed for a moment when

Cinnabar's Gnosis

we opened that book. Her voice is probably there somewhere. I half recall hearing it myself.”

“Will I see her again?”

“I doubt it. The book's gone. I can offer you no comfort, no hope. Instead, the century-old dead will surround you, angry and insistent, murmuring their bitterness and resentment. Already you have felt them smothering the sham of conversation, numbing any human touch. Have you spoken to an ordinary living soul in the last day? No. The dead are the bones and blood of this city and all the cities you will pass through in the weary years to come. Everything else is a jinking puppet show – finished before it has begun. And every night in your dreams, Herr Meyrink, the Magician will come, throwing the coins in the dust, showing you what you have lost. You may meet Miriam at the end. The pair of you may be scrabbling and searching among far greater ruins than these. You and she alone together at the end. But I offer you no hope – not even that.”

An hour later I was sat, my flesh numb, in a pavement café where the tide of the city flowed round me and separate from me. Nearby I heard a crash and the sound of women screaming. I walked over. There had been an accident.

“Just stepped out into the road. Poor old man. Yes, he's dead.”

I looked at the heap of rags lying in the road. It was Herr Dolwerrande.

The next day I set out to find the manuscript – a journey I knew would leave me grey and broken. Of course the bookseller refused to tell me where to find “The Weimar Spider”. Already a failing and futile quest. Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came.

I resolved at least to retrieve the gramophone. My solace in the ragged years to come would be to find Miriam's voice – perhaps a burgundy-red or ruby needle. Outside Herr Dolwerrande's house I stopped. His landlord had smashed the gramophone and records. They lay in a mean little skip, not merely broken, but crushed into tiny pieces – dust and fragments. The needles had been painstakingly twisted by hammer blows. I could see the landlord framed in the window, a husk of a man, smiling slyly to himself.

PULVIS LUNARIS,
OR,
THE COAGULATION OF WOOD

D.P. Watt

*Verum, sine Mendacio, certum et verissimum:
Quod est Inferius est sicut quod est Superius,
et quod est Superius est sicut quod est Inferius,
ad perpetranda Miracula Rei Unius.
Et sicut res omnes fuerunt ab Uno,
meditatione unius, sic Omnes Res
natae ab hac una Re, adaptatione.*

Naturally he would meet with Philomena first. His wife could wait. Indeed Mena had been an enduring thought throughout his brief imprisonment. Each night her face would peer down at him on his bare wooden bench and smile. He drifted in and out of sleep with her kind gaze watching over him.

Still stiff and weak in his left side he stumbled through the streets of the old town like some decrepit invalid, the officers and their whores giving him a wide berth. One particularly raucous party jeered and called after him, 'It's Meyer, the magician', 'It's Meyer, the thief'. But he was in no state for confrontation. His disputes with these idle military morons would be settled soon enough, but not in the manner he thought. There would be no triumphant encounter in the woods –sabres bared – nor would there be the resounding crack of the legal hammer declaring him right. No, within a couple of years he must leave Prague's

Cinnabar's Gnosis

dark streets of wonder. He will need to depart for a place more rooted in the world and its charades: Vienna, a city of majesty and might, where once again order might prevail in his mind and he would learn the mastery of words so necessary to resurrect the sorcery of worldly things. But all of that was far off for the broken pedlar in financial sureties and spiritualist claptrap as he hobbled his way across Charles Bridge to meet his beloved in Malá Strana that evening. And, as ever, I follow him.



It all comes as a thick fog of faces. Memory I mean: the memory of these past weeks and the agonies of confinement. I will seek immediate recompense! I will see them all in the dock and then in the jail, undergoing the indignities I have endured.

But it is wonderful to breathe this early evening spring air again, without the rotten stink of bodies and the cries of the tormented. Here again at last the sound of birdsong and the scent of the river which, whilst pungent, is nonetheless the scent of freedom. After a coffee I am somewhat refreshed and must hurry to meet Mena at the 'Three Violins'. She will not have finished performing, certainly, but I can wait for her. The joy of our reunion will be sharpened by waiting. Perhaps Johannes and Milan will be there. We will drink to my freedom and curse the dogs of the regiment that put me there.

The moon is thin and what little light it casts is veiled by thick cloud. The lamps across the river are lit creating a thin tunnel of light gleaming across the river. The gentle waters ripple through it, casting strange flowing shadows. As I watch, these dark forms coagulate into a crowd of shambling figures – each stumbling forward and grasping helplessly towards me from the river below. These phantasms quickly disintegrate, replaced by a shimmering ladder of yellow light drawing me towards Kampa Island. Then, with a rustle of breeze across the trees on the riverbank the light dissolved into a shoal of golden fish swimming in eternal stasis. Something – some guide, or *Pilot* – drew me down the steps beneath the bridge into that warren of alleys that snaked towards the banks of the Vltava. I felt disoriented with cold and malnourishment and staggered through the looming streets with a

Pulvis Lunaris, or, The Coagulation of Wood

sense of befuddled excitement and foreboding. I could hear the waters churning through the mill-race on Čertovka. But the sound seemed to come from all around me. It must be the damp river-mist distorting my senses, or else my weakened body craving some sustenance.

Out of the white swirls that crept around me I saw a dim luminescence. As I drew closer a low row of disheveled wooden houses appeared on the riverfront, little more than shacks. These used to house the barge hands taking the goods from Kampa. I thought they had been pulled down years ago, to make way for (or make safer) the fanciful merchant houses that now surrounded the mills. They formed an odd street, almost sinking into the river. The first house, facing into the street I now walked down, had a wide doorway leading into a cellar below. Tatty yellow curtains hung either side of the entrance and a large lantern hung behind them, shining its welcome light through their thin fabric. A shabby man sat on a stool outside adding to the misty vapours with long drags on a deep-bowled pipe. As I drew nearer he seemed to spring to life. I saw in his hands a thin stick, from which dangled an absurd cloth puppet. It was little more than a blue rag with a crude wooden head, but with each flick of his wrist he managed to make it cavort with a quality at once enchanting and repugnant.

‘Come and enjoy some rest in the puppet theatre,’ he mumbled through the thick pipe in his teeth. ‘Let our performers relax you with their entertainments. Enjoy a drink and a bowl of soup. We have everything here, everything you could possibly want.’

I needed some food, certainly. Perhaps this was the place the ladder of light had beckoned me towards. In satisfying my curiosity I would also be able to enjoy the magic of a puppet show.



He loved puppet theatre. Not for some atavistic or symbolic aspect. No, for their simple mockery of the human, both in form and in action. The puppet is allowed a freedom to ridicule and vulgarise that no actor or actress would ever be allowed, and in their clowning, clumsy movements he found solace in the fundamental absurdity of existence – and therein also its splendour.

Cinnabar's Gnosis

So, carefully making his way down the worn stone steps into the dingy theatre, a childish grin could be seen on his face, broadening into a hopeful smile. He did not find what he expected though. Instead of a gaudy auditorium, with wooden scenery and marionettes strung along the walls, he found a bustling tavern room, with tables and stools set out with drink and food. The low ceiling forced one to hang one's head to move around the busy hall. Men were slumped across tables and on benches in varying states of drunken abandon. Clearly the puppet show, if indeed there was one, was not a focus of their evening. Young serving girls, no older than their mid-teens, moved between the tables bringing beer and steaming bowls of soup to their customers. Most wore tattered, but revealing, costumes that were reminiscent of a chorus of dancing girls from a Parisian revue bar. Many lay in the arms of the clientele, clearly indicating the true purpose of the establishment.

He was about to leave when he caught sight of a low stage at the farthest end of the hall. It was roughly formed from wooden crates with boards propped haphazardly on top. There was also a basic scenic backdrop, again fashioned from rough boards, which depicted the city from the castle to the old town, including Charles Bridge and the river. The perspective was much distorted, the castle appearing distant and minute, whilst the river itself seemed to take up most of the central panel, with the bridge floating ethereally above it. In each corner of this tawdry set a few puppets were strewn. He was struck by the sight of these small performing objects. They posed as though discarded and broken, yet seemed so heavy with a vital energy – ready to burst into movement.

The wretched cavern stank of sweat and stale tobacco smoke. And beneath that the faint smell of perfume and sex. The walls themselves were sticky and damp with lust. The girls moved back and forth between the 'audience', who exchanged furtive glances and took every opportunity to paw and grope them. A desperate mood was in the air, one that seemed at any moment on the verge of descending into full debauchery, but ever drawing itself back from the brink. There seemed to be no madam, or other director, presiding over the brothel. He took a seat at an empty table by the rickety stage and watched the frolic.

Pulvis Lunaris, or, The Coagulation of Wood

Events seemed to move to some preordained order, as though he were witness to some ancient fertility rite, corrupted through centuries into its present squalor. For beneath all the degradation there was a tangible pulse of order and obedience. And I mean that quite literally, for if you had been able to hear beneath the din of the revelry you would have heard a soft beat, as of a heart. And should you have touched those clammy walls you would have felt it too – a soft pounding – as though the earth were heaving lustily. But you were not really there, and nor – I must admit – was I. We too, my friend, crave that corporeal truth of sensation. We are no different to those desperate clients there clutching at adolescent bodies. We must try to piece it all together from our frantic imaginings.



I watched the antics for about half an hour and was about to leave when three girls appeared from an entrance beside the poor stage. An air about them set them apart from the others. Two were dressed very similarly, in wide reds skirts with frilly torn bodices. One was quite short, with straight red hair; the other thin and tall, with short black hair which seemed to have been roughly, perhaps even aggressively, shorn. The third girl was very plain. She wore a simple grey tunic with an oily brown cloak. She had thick black hair which flowed freely about her shoulders. Her dark features and physiognomy clearly showed her as a Jewess. She looked peculiar and out of place, as though plucked from the kitchens of a nearby merchant's house. Her strangeness was further marked by her blank expression. Whilst the other two girls laughed and waved as the audience cheered their arrival this third girl did not react at all. She stared straight forward with bold green eyes that watched the red-head intently as she led the group toward the rudimentary set.

They took up their positions behind the flat boards of scenery, which they had angled in slightly more so that they could face each other. This blocked the audience's view somewhat. But it appeared to me that they played as much for each other as for the assembled rabble, who were, indeed, paying little attention. The red-haired girl seemed

Cinnabar's Gnosis

to be in command of the performance, as the other two watched her expectantly for the signal to commence.

Nothing happened for a few minutes. None of them gathered the puppets, to check or prepare their mechanisms. They just stared forward into space, each focused intently on some inner thought. I had the overwhelming sense of being present at a sacred rite.

Then the show began. One of the puppets, dressed as a bishop (complete with mitre and crosier) sprang from the heap. It was rapidly followed by a ragdoll (in a delicately fashioned basque and suspenders) and then by a cavalry officer (in an oversized double breasted jacket and plumed czako). These three then began an absurd chase around the stage, each evading and grasping for the others. They moved deftly, without the usual clunking awkwardness that is so endearing in the marionette.

I looked up to watch how these girls were controlling the things. They did not seem to be holding jigs, or even basic crossbars, in their hands. The strings must have been attached to their fingers, but how I could not perceive. The way they cast their hands back and forth I was reminded of the three witches from Macbeth. Their hands moved with such strangeness that it seemed the puppeteers themselves were puppets, driven in some fatal dance of death, or primitive ceremony – compelled to contort into forms arcane and alien to our common gestures. I was more captivated by them than their puppets.

I had, of course, expected the usual *Faust*, or perhaps a fairytale. This was an entirely different affair. As it continued other puppets joined in the romp: a Moorish character seemed to fence and duel with the officer before being eaten by what seemed to be a cloth puppet crocodile. Every now and then the new characters would join the officer, strumpet and bishop in their hilarious chase around the stage. There was no dialogue, purely the irreverent, and frequently obscene, gestures of the puppets themselves. After a few minutes I noticed that the general din of the space had become focused on the performance, with gales of laughter and applause directed at the antics of these marvellous manikins.

The finale came with another chase, in which there must have been at least ten puppets. The bishop figure suddenly spread his arms wide and the others collapsed around him. He walked jauntily towards the

Pulvis Lunaris, or, The Coagulation of Wood

front of the stage. In a single swirling movement he disrobed, revealing a polychrome harlequin marionette which turned and bared its wooden backside to the assembled crowd. The storm of cheers and thumping of tables was deafening.

I was amazed. Not simply at the audacity of this incredible show but principally at the skill with which they had achieved such control over the puppets. As this final puppet sank slowly to the floor the three girls seemed also to sink and exhale. Their frenzied concentration collapsed and they moved down into the crowd to great commotion. Each had gathered a puppet and carried it cradled in their arms, identifying their own proximity to childhood even more clearly.

I was left staring at the stage, to see if there was any other mechanism apparent for the movement of the figures. There was too little light for me to see clearly but there must have been a hidden gantry above, with further operators, I conjectured. Then I felt a hand on my shoulder. I turned to find the red-haired girl offering me her hand. I stood and took it, briefly introducing myself.

'I am Herr Meyer,' I said, bowing. 'I am most fascinated with your ingenious show. You must allow me to offer you a drink, and of course your fellow puppeteers.'

She laughed, holding the harlequin puppet in her left hand. Close-up it looked very rudely fashioned, each basic wooden limb jointed with fraying twine. But then I suppose that is the beauty of the theatre: that reality, with all its ugly baseness, is transformed into a magnificent facade, if only for a moment. The Jewess stood close behind her, being mauled by an amorous customer. She did not flinch. In her cradled arms she held the soldier puppet: a stuffed corn-doll. The other girl was using the rag-doll strumpet to tease a seated inebriate on the table beside me.

'Well, Herr Meyer,' she said. 'We are pleased to make your acquaintance. I am Rosina, and this is Miriam and Adéla.' She gestured to the Jewess and the short-haired girl respectively.

'Shall I order us something to...' I began. Rosina stopped me abruptly by holding her hand over my mouth. She tucked the puppet under her left arm and gripped my hand tightly pulling me up from my chair.

I do not understand why I followed her so freely. It was a strong, almost hypnotic, stare with which she held me.

Cinnabar's Gnosis

She led me up the stairs at the back of the cavern. These emerged in a corridor along the side of the buildings on the river front and showed a row of curtained entrances to small wood shacks, the ones I had seen from the street. They were evidently the rooms where the girls brought their customers. Miriam and Adéla followed behind us, with their catches trailing drunkenly behind. We took the room furthest on the right. Within it there was a further partition, crudely fashioned from a blanket and piece of rope. On each side of this lay a grubby mattress on a floor of cold compacted earth, a small oil lamp, and a few personal possessions. Miriam took her man to the left one, casting her soldier puppet into the corner, and Rosina fell onto the right bed, with the harlequin, gesturing for me to join her.

Adéla stood in the doorway, tapping her rag-doll idly against the wall. Her companion, that had previously been fondling her as we departed the hall, had regained some soberness and stood in the corridor, somewhat sheepishly, waiting for her to take him to her quarters.

There was an awkward silence. This was soon filled by animal grunts coming from the curtained bay next to us. The lamp gave a dim impression of the events unfolding there, and it curiously resembled some ridiculous shadow-show; a parody of intercourse. It was clear that the brute was taking his pleasure from Miriam in as swift, and vicious, fashion as he was able.

Adéla and Rosina said nothing. I had to say something. I also had to satisfy my curiosity concerning the puppet show.

'The puppets,' I said, taking the harlequin from Rosina and examining its limbs. 'They have no wires, or rods. How do you operate them?'

Rosina looked at me sympathetically.

'These are not puppets,' she said. 'They are dolls.'

'We operate them with desire,' Adéla said, laughing. And turning to her companion she took him by the arm and led him away, pulling the curtain to our chamber closed behind her. Her laughter echoed down the wooden corridor with a hollow desperation.

Another long silence.

'We *operate* them – as you call it – through a yearning to become ourselves,' Rosina said cryptically. She eased me back onto the dirty mattress and we undressed each other. Settling into a comfortable har-

Pulvis Lunaris, or, The Coagulation of Wood

mony we lay there as the beast next to us ravaged Miriam. She did not make a sound.

I could not bring myself to enjoy Rosina, despite my body desperately craving the act after all these weeks of solitude. She also sensed my reluctance and fell asleep. I lay there with my mind alight with incredible imaginings.



You probably infer that he was a moralist. How wrong. Such impudence! Morality is such a brittle little concept my friend. To have had her would have only been base copulation. It would have annihilated her exquisite otherness. He considered her a creature of the stars, as inscrutable and apocalyptic as Tzimtzum. She was an instant fulcrum to his tattered world. Do not demean him with your implacable hermeneutic hunger. I had not taken you for one who skulks behind the scenes to see God's entrance debased to pure mechanism.



When I awoke I was not certain where I was. I turned and saw Rosina's face. She was awake and watching me, the harlequin marionette in her arms.

'I must go, I'm afraid,' I said, getting up off the mattress. 'I must meet some friends. I should have... I mean... I just wanted to ask...'

'Yes, please ask,' she said confidently.

'How, *did* you make the puppets move? It was miraculous. I mean, *truly* incredible. I have seen many things, and many people who have claimed supernatural gifts. But I have never seen such a feat as this.'

'I have already told you, *these* are not puppets,' she said. '*These* are dolls. *We* are puppets.'

I looked back at her uncomprehendingly.

'That these things are alive, as capable of movement and apparent autonomy as us, is no great revelation,' she said, jostling the harlequin doll into a comical jig. 'That is only workmanship, trade, mere mediocrity. The real miracle is how to give them essence – a soul – that is

Cinnabar's Gnosis

the true craftsmanship; a magical gift. A master of such transformation has finally discovered the extension of their own being: an immortal. Death will be drawn into life and everything will appear as it truly is.'

She reached into the corner of the room, behind her mattress. She gathered a handful of dust and dirt and held it out on the flat of her hand before my eyes. She touched her forefinger on her other hand to her tongue and lightly touched the heap of dirt. I did not catch the single word she whispered, but it was brief.

Gradually, as though awakening, the pile gathered shape and formed itself into a bizarre figure with two solid 'legs' and spindly arms that waved like tentacles. A blob that might be called a 'head' had fashioned itself from where one might say shoulders should have been. The object made a couple of faltering steps across her hand before the entire thing collapsed again into the dust it had been formed from.

'It comes as much from the dirt that surrounds us as the glorious spheres above,' she said, opening my hand and sprinkling the dirt into it. 'There are many ways to give life to what seems dead, not least is through the word itself. The word is a gift. Now go, seek, find.'

She nestled back into her torn blankets, clasped the doll to her breast, and closed her eyes. She had the look of one who has never been fully born into the world. By that I mean there seemed to be an aura around her of discomfort, but also mockery – as though the thin fabric of reality were a little more frayed in her presence. She saw beyond the ordinary to some spectral dimension, comprehending truths which would shatter sanity. In her presence I felt everything was at once incredible and worthless. She made the world into a jewelled crown from a child's toybox – a wooden plaything transubstantiated by imagination.

All sense of time had gone down there in the dark. Days may have passed, or only hours. I do not know. But as I finished dressing and awkwardly pulled on my filthy trousers I saw Miriam watching from above the curtain dividing the room. She stared blankly at me. Her guest was groaning and snoring and woke briefly to paw at her. Still she stared at me until I broke away to pull on my jacket and head for the grey curtain at the doorway.

I turned to say something to her, perhaps to apologise. She was no longer looking at me though. She was gazing down at Rosina sleeping.

Pulvis Lunaris, or, The Coagulation of Wood

That was true love: that gaze. But there was nothing human about it. It was awful: a total abnegation of selfhood. I stood looking at a hollow being. There was nothing left of Miriam. She existed solely for Rosina.

I made my way down the stairs and into the main drinking hall. There were a few bodies curled in corners, obviously too drunk to make the journey home. One of the girls awoke and laughed at me, beckoning me to her with a limp gesture before collapsing back onto the floor.

I regained the steps to the street and was greeted by a cool gust of wind coming up from the river. It revived me violently, almost knocking me off my feet. I checked in my pocket for the handful of dirt that Rosina had so strangely animated. It was still there, passing slowly through my fingers, formless. Had it all been some elaborate trick? I had seen many prestidigitators, mostly working with lacy ectoplasm, but I had never seen any as gifted as Rosina.

Casting a glance back I caught Miriam standing just behind the curtains of the entrance to the bawdy puppet house. The dark blue light of the encroaching evening filtered through the yellow fabric, casting a greenish light across her face which – as stony and terrible as ever – made certain of my departure. I imagine her there still, guarding the essential purity of her continually defiled beloved.

I quickened my pace, as though urged on by some unseen force. I felt eyes upon me everywhere. Not the eyes of some fretful bourgeois who might be surmising my business in the house at the corner of the street. No, I felt watched by eyes that eternally stared and never judged – eyes that viewed me with some languid disinterest – a gaze of indifference and horrendous fatalism.

This uncanny city could kill a man solely with its atmosphere.

As the lamps from upstairs rooms flickered their yellow glow onto the street below I had a feeling that, as Rosina had said, we all cavorted like puppets through the streets of that dreaming city. Dancing not to the hand of some celestial divinity but by the dark will of the buildings themselves; buildings that would as soon vanish into the air than give up their infernal secrets. The place overwhelmed me with a perverse and scintillating horror; the kind of fascination I imagine a man must feel in the last moments of being hanged and drawn, seeing his entrails –

Cinnabar's Gnosis

the incredible secrets of his inner workings – displayed before him as he sinks into eternal night.

I must leave this place before it consumes me.



There he is, crossing the square before the Church of St Nicholas (with its perfect dome thrust into the air like a great eager prick – ritual penetration of the empty sky). He feels guilty, no doubt, for the previous night. He feels sorrow for neglecting Mena. But no matter – what secrets he has learnt, what gifts he has received; better than those years of clairvoyant humbug with the dilettantes and the charlatans. A workaday whore had more mystery than all the alchemists of Europe.

He checks his pocket again for the handful of dirt. A treasury of brothel sweepings.

I am behind him as he enters the 'Three Violins'. You are welcome to join us. Come, we'll linger by his table of his cronies. Yes, some of the other drinkers have noticed something is not quite right in the space where we stand, but they will see nothing. They will leave only with a faint impression that they were being watched, nothing more sinister than that. It is an everyday feeling. A common event.

See how they all cheer his return. What a triumph of failure!

But where is Philomena? Do you want to see her? She is the short one with the beautiful curls and childish face: a doll.

They embrace. How touching. Almost like love.



Finally I found my way to the 'Three Violins' where Mena would be found, by this hour, with our friends. There were many of them, and the welcome was uproarious. In my frail condition the room spun with faces and glasses, cheers and shouts for drinks. They had gathered around me like some joyful crowd around a clown. And then from the haze a delicate smile emerged, and deep lush brown eyes framed with curls of luxuriant dark hair. It was Mena. She embraced me with a strength I had not expected and, cupping my face in her hands, covered

Pulvis Lunaris, or, The Coagulation of Wood

me with kisses. More cheers from our friends. She held me there for what seemed like minutes gazing deep into my eyes. It felt like making love, as she seemed to strip my soul down into its component hues. I gazed back into her and the cacophonous world fell away. I began to perceive in her features the ghostly residue of Rosina, as in a superimposed photograph. But beyond that face I saw another, blank and envious: Miriam. Her dark green eyes washed into my very being, never to leave.



But, my friend, they are – in simple fact – *your* eyes, *your* stare, *your* desire.

THE RED ROSE AND THE CROSS OF GOLD

R.B.Russell

'I am sure that a professional gentleman such as yourself could afford to rent rooms like this as a single tenant?' The landlord smiled at Komenský ingratiatingly. 'We could come to an arrangement so that I wouldn't have to find another occupant to share with you?'

'No, thank you,' Komenský shook his head. 'I enjoy sharing. I always have done.'

'But you might end up with somebody who is, shall we say, incompatible?'

'I hope not... I got on well enough with the last man.'

'Well, maybe that was luck.'

'I'm easy-going. I get on with most people.'

'So far you may have done.'

'I have to move with my work, from city to city. Sometimes I stay for six months, sometimes a couple of years. I don't have time to make friends; not proper friends. And I like to have some companionship.'

'But how long are you expecting to stay here in our city? If you are only resident for perhaps another month or so, then I suppose I could wait. After you, I could put a nice young couple in these rooms.'

'The city authorities have extended my contract.'

'They've found more sewers for you to survey?'

'This city is crumbling all around us; it is decaying. It has been poorly built, above and below ground. And there are more and more motor vehicles on the streets.'

'This building shakes when they pass!'

The Red Rose and the Cross of Gold

'By the middle of this century the streets will be infested with them, and they are getting bigger and bigger. There is the danger that all will come tumbling down.'

The landlord poured a little more Becherovka into Komenský's coffee, as he always tried to do. He came up once a month for his rent and the engineer had long-since stopped protesting that he didn't want any of the landlord's drink. The man who had previously shared the rooms had been convinced that their landlord was a dipsomaniac, but Komenský was not sure. He hoped that the bottle of Becherovka that the man carried around with him was simply a gesture of friendliness. He imagined that he offered it to all of his tenants to make the process of collecting the rent a little easier. The landlord lived in one of the two sets of rooms on the rather unsanitary ground floor, and at nine o'clock prompt on the first of every month he would begin with the old couple in the rooms opposite his own. It would often be the early afternoon before he had climbed up to the fourth floor where Komenský lived. The landlord wasn't a confident man, and needed to think of his tenants as friends. To a certain extent Komenský understood this. He thought that the man, like himself, was perhaps a little lonely.

'You've never found anyone special to live with?' the landlord asked. 'Wanted to settle down, have a family?'

'No, not really. A couple of times, perhaps... But my skills are specialised, and I've always had to move around to find work. I've tried to keep up long-distance relationships... There was one woman in the north who I would go back to... I would visit every weekend, for several years, but she tired of the arrangement.'

'Couldn't you get a permanent job with the authorities?'

'I specialise in sewers, vaults, crypts... I have a sense for when they are becoming dangerous and liable to fail, long before it is obvious to untrained, inexperienced eyes. I've saved cities untold sums by high-lighting where repairs are required before collapses have occurred.'

'And they pay well for your expertise?'

'I cannot complain.'

'Enough for you to rent these rooms on your own?'

'I am careful with my money.'

'Ah, very sensible. An early retirement? A good pension?'

Cinnabar's Gnosis

'I am just careful.'

'I understand.'

He clanked his mug of Becherovka-infused coffee with Komenský's own, by way of suggesting a newly discovered comradeship.

'So, I must find another person for the second room,' said the landlord, resigned.

'I'm afraid so. And if it can be somebody congenial, I'd appreciate that. Another professional man? Of quiet habits?'

'Well, there is a gentleman who has recently asked me for a single room. He didn't want to share, and I had only the room here to offer. I told him about it, and how he would get on well with you. But I think he is looking elsewhere first. You never know, he might come back.'

'What's he like?'

'What's anybody like? I don't know. He seems nice enough. But he looks like Mephistopheles himself.'



Mephistopheles himself did not move in, but his doppelganger did: Damian von Tripps.

'A very old family,' he insisted when Komenský asked after his impressive name, 'But very much decayed. We have a branch in Lithuania that struggles along, but I am the last of the line here.'

'Any chance of additions to your part of the family tree?' Komenský asked him. The man had only moved in a few days before but Komenský thought he understood his humour well enough to be able to ask such a question.

'No, not officially. But who's to say that there aren't a few illegitimate von Tripps scattered around the city?'

The man was preparing himself for an evening out, and Komenský had to admit that he was fascinated by the care and fastidiousness with which he went about getting ready. He had bathed for nearly an hour, then shaved and meticulously trimmed his arrangement of beard and moustache. The latter was slightly comical, being very wide and requiring wax to keep it horizontal and cantilevered out on either side of his face. He dressed in expensive clothes, quite brightly coloured,

The Red Rose and the Cross of Gold

and Komenský was never sure whether the strong smell he left in his wake was aftershave or simply perfume. He really was quite the dandy.

As von Tripps was about to go out of the door he turned to where Komenský sat reading under the lamp by the fireplace. Putting his weight slightly on the ebony walking cane that was usually for show rather than support he asked:

‘A delicate question, if I may?’

‘Of course.’

‘The landlord stressed that the arrangement here was for two single men to have tenancy of these rooms. I do not propose to move anyone else in with me, but I hope you have no objection, if I should find myself in congenial company after the play tonight...?’

He must have seen that Komenský did not quite understand his meaning.

‘If I was to bring a young lady back with me, I hope that you wouldn’t be... disturbed?’

Komenský laughed and shook his head: ‘No, so long as you don’t wake me up.’



Komenský was not convinced that von Tripps was the man’s name at all. Perhaps he really was from aristocratic stock and down on his luck, but something about him suggested that it was all an act. Komenský had not met many aristocrats, but those he had come across were not so affected as von Tripps. Presumably they were confident enough of their position in society that they did not need to prove anything. It was as if the role of dandified gentleman was being played by an over-zealous actor. However, the engineer found the man’s formality amusing, and when they were both together Komenský somehow slipped into it as well. It was like a game, and Komenský was happy to play along. He was concerned, at first, that von Tripps might be offended but, on the contrary, he seemed pleased that Komenský reacted in this way. Often, in the evenings, if von Tripps was not engaged elsewhere, they opened a bottle of wine and conversed in exceedingly formal, long-winded and over-elaborate sentences, often containing convoluted sub-clauses.

Cinnabar's Gnosis

Komenský thought of their conversations as an intellectual game, and von Tripps was obviously a very clever man, being well-read and knowledgeable on a wide range of subjects. He did not appear to have an occupation, or rather, he would not admit to one; he kept his personal and professional life very much to himself but still Komenský felt that he had the measure of the man. And then one morning he had cause to re-evaluate von Tripps.

Komenský was awake earlier than usual, dragged from sleep, he discovered, by the sound of von Tripps and another person moving about in the apartment. When Komenský left his room he was in time to see a woman leaving by the front door and he was struck by how young, awkward and ill-dressed she was. He also noticed the old-fashioned courtesy that von Tripps used when showing her out. When they breakfasted briefly together neither man mentioned her, although Komenský was very curious; earlier that week he had seen von Tripps, from the window, leaving the building with a different woman entirely.

However, it was the man's own business and Komenský was not going to interfere. He did feel awkward, though, that von Tripps seemed to bring his women home long after Komenský had gone to bed, and that they always left before he got up.

Komenský resolved that he would work the subject into conversation. He wanted to tell the man that he had no objection to him seeing women in the apartment at other hours of the day and, indeed, if he would ever like to be left alone with them Komenský was always happy to go out for a few hours. The day he had seen the second woman, however, they had little opportunity to discuss anything because Komenský had to be at the other side of the city by nine o'clock. He did not return until the early evening when von Tripps was leaving, dressed up as usual, and saying that he would not be back until late.

It so happened that Komenský too went out that evening, to meet up with some people to celebrate the birthday of the City's Chief Engineer. The man had just turned sixty, apparently, and he and his colleagues were drinking steadily from the early evening. By ten o'clock Komenský was tired and excused himself from the revelry. They were very scathing, drunk and belligerent, and called him a 'dirty foreigner'.

So, that was what they really thought of him, Komenský told himself.

The Red Rose and the Cross of Gold

He walked home rather than take the tram, hoping to sober up, but the cold night air only made him drowsy. As he walked through the streets to his own tenement, angry and a little sad, his thoughts turned to the buildings around him and the sewers below. He thought of all the weight of crumbling brick and powdery mortar that held everything together, his eyes going up to the dark eaves of the building he was passing. Then he looked to his feet which struck the pavement with a strangely hollow sound. Back up his eyes went and suddenly the buildings around him seemed to sway and the very pavement to move. He felt nauseous and had to grasp at some railings to steady himself. For a few seconds the buildings around him had appeared to be toppling, falling inwards towards him and if he had been able to find the breath at that moment he might have screamed.

A fainting fit, he told himself, brought about by the beer. He took several deep breaths and walked on. When he finally got back to his rooms it was as much as he could do to take off his coat and fall into an armchair. Still he could not dismiss the idea that his own tenement was moving, although he knew that it was his sense of balance that was awry.



Komenský slept in the chair until just after midnight. When he opened his eyes he did not know where he was although the lamp still illuminated the room. However, he recognised the sound of von Tripps coming in through the front door.

The man was surprised to see Komenský, and for the briefest moment he looked unsure of himself. His confidence returned, though, along with his bravado, as soon as he had appraised the situation.

‘Good evening!’ he said jovially. ‘Or should I say good morning?’

Behind him, uncertain in the shadows, was a woman. Komenský couldn’t see her properly but he knew her to be different again from the other two he had seen. This one looked a little older.

‘Please forgive us,’ the man implored. ‘But I think we shall be retiring.’ And he turned around and ushered his companion into his room.

Uncomfortable in the chair, Komenský got out of it and made himself ready for bed. When he turned-in he had to find the earplugs

Cinnabar's Gnosis

that he had bought when he had discovered that the last man to share the rooms snored loudly. The earplugs were good ones; the snoring that had previously reverberated through the walls would have otherwise kept Komenský awake. Now they were able to exclude the sounds of rather vigorous lovemaking from the next room.



When Komenský got up the next morning Von Tripps' companion of the night before had obviously already left. The man himself was in his dressing gown, drinking coffee at the table on the balcony and reading a newspaper. The morning was already warm and he had his slippers up on the wrought-ironwork. When Komenský had prepared his first coffee of the morning he joined him and von Tripps was the first to broach the subject.

'That was Iva, last night,' he said, looking Komenský straight in the eye without the slightest embarrassment. 'I've always liked Iva.'

'I had earplugs,' Komenský replied, as coolly as he was able. 'They were useful. They allowed your enjoyment to remain private.'

'My apologies. It was very rude of me. Iva can be rather too enthusiastic. I don't go to her very often. But you know how it is sometimes...'

'No, I don't know, not really. But that's your affair.'

He smiled: 'I simply meant that one doesn't always have the choice one would hope for. Not that she isn't worth the money.'

Komenský frowned and von Tripps smiled.

'She's a prostitute,' he said by way of explanation, and took a sip of his coffee.

'Oh,' was all Komenský could manage to say. He had hoped that his reply might have conveyed a whole range of meaning, but von Tripps seemed to take it as shock. Komenský would have liked to give the impression that he was broad-minded, a man of the world, but, if he was honest, he supposed that, yes, he was shocked.

'I frequently use prostitutes,' said von Tripps lightly.

'I hadn't realised. I mean, I knew you often had company.'

'My failing is that I enjoy sexual intercourse. I find it transcendent. I am investigating...'

The Red Rose and the Cross of Gold

Komenský nodded vigorously, rather hoping they could leave the subject there, but von Tripps sensed the disapproval.

‘You do not wish to know. I understand.’

‘It is a private matter. I don’t intend to judge you.’

‘I assumed that you wouldn’t, but I would understand if you’d prefer me to move out, to find alternative accommodation?’

‘No, not at all,’ Komenský replied, a little too hastily, but honestly. Von Tripps was an odd man, but enjoyable company and despite his unorthodox behaviour he had not been any real trouble.

‘I was married, twice,’ von Tripps said. ‘I was very young. I loved both my wives, but I craved variety. Do you understand? I get bored easily. I’m actually rather besotted with a girl right now, but I know that if I was to ask her to marry me, and promised to shun all other women, then I’d soon enough tire of her. It is a weakness of mine, I know: a flaw in my character.’

‘I can see how that might happen,’ Komenský said, wishing that the conversation could be at an end.

‘But there is a charge of exploitation to answer,’ the man admitted. ‘Prostitutes are victims. It’s rare that prostitution is ever a woman’s first career choice. The women I go with are poor, vulnerable creatures who need protection.’

‘And how do you feel about that?’

‘Concerned, naturally. But I fancy that I’m not the same as all their other customers.’

‘How would you be any different?’

He leant forward, slightly conspiratorially, and pulled his moustache out to its maximum length.

‘The girls all know me, and how generous I can be. We never discuss money, oh no. I’m never asked to pay, because when they leave they know I’ll slip into their hand twice as many notes as they would normally have asked for. And I occasionally give them valuable gifts. Very often I’ll take them to a restaurant, or get them tickets for the theatre. Some even refuse to take any money from me at all! I always make sure it’s worth their while going with me.’

He sat back. Self-satisfied, but he was almost too arrogant to need to look smug.

Cinnabar's Gnosis

'And they trust me,' he added. 'They all realise that I won't be rough, or ask them to do anything too strange. I won't beat them up. I have a reputation as something of a guardian angel to them. You see, a few months ago while I was down by the docks, making my choice for the evening, a couple of drunks appeared and started behaving deplorably. The girls working there were worried for their own safety so I told the two of them to leave. When they started to get violent...'

At this von Tripps jumped up and with a flourish he withdrew a long blade from his cane. 'Voila! My sword-stick!'

'And the girl you're in love with?'

'She calls herself "La Bella". It's a silly name, but she's never admitted to any other. She's the sweetest, prettiest girl. A rose, and not quite twenty. I'd do anything for her.'

'You love her so much that you let her go back out onto the street when you've done with her?'

He winced: 'It pains me, it does. And I do get jealous, thinking about her with other men. And I get worried about her.'

'But you do nothing to help her?'

'I see her once a week. I pay her well. But I don't have enough money to keep her as my mistress, just for myself.'

'If you lived together?'

He shook his head sadly: 'As I said, it would never work.'

The conversation was effectively at an end. Komenský was trying to understand the attitude of the man but failed to do so. He did not believe that von Tripps could be truly in love with this girl with the ludicrous name; not when he continued to act as he did.



Relations between Komenský and von Tripps became strained after that conversation. The engineer could not quite think of him in the same way because the man seemed such a hypocrite, believing himself somehow better than the other men who used prostitutes. Komenský supposed that he was indeed something of a prude, but the man's belief that he was the 'patron' of those poor women annoyed him. That evening his antipathy towards von Tripps deepened as the man dressed

The Red Rose and the Cross of Gold

himself in all of his finery and took such a time about it. When Komenský went to bed he lay awake, expecting von Tripps to return at any moment with yet another woman.

And he did return, of course, with company. Even with his earplugs in Komenský could hear them, despite an earnest desire not to; he longed for sleep to overcome him too desperately for it to happen.

When the morning came around Komenský lay in bed, listening, and could hear somebody moving about in the apartment, and perhaps quiet voices from time to time. When he was finally certain that von Tripps was on his own Komenský got up, put on his dressing gown and walked out to make himself breakfast.

He had been wrong. At the table there sat a young woman sullenly eating toast.

‘Good morning,’ von Tripps greeted Komenský, walking in from the kitchen with a pot of coffee. ‘My dear,’ he said to the woman, ‘this is Mr Komenský, the gentleman I was talking to you about last night. He shares these rooms with me.’

She looked over and smiled a professional smile.

‘This,’ he said to Komenský, ‘is the lovely La Bella.’

‘Good morning,’ the engineer said simply, and continued on through to the kitchen. He put water on the stove and tried to repress his anger. Was von Tripps trying to provoke him? Were they both trying? She was astoundingly pretty, as he had said, and she was dressed in a most provocative manner. It was not lost on Komenský that she was wearing a garment like a bodice or basque that seemed to support her breasts at the same time as it revealed most of them.

He was not a prude, he insisted to himself, and he admired her beauty, but to be presented thus with this young woman by von Tripps had to have been a calculated act on his part. What did he want? How did he expect Komenský to react? Was the actor expecting him to avail himself of the young woman’s services as well?

Von Tripps put his head around the door and bid Komenský ‘Adieu,’ receiving the barest acknowledgement. Komenský added sugar to his coffee and walked out into the living room as he heard the front door slam. To his surprise La Bella was still sitting at the table.

‘Is he returning?’ Komenský asked.

Cinnabar's Gnosis

'Him? I don't think so.'

'Well, let yourself out when you're ready,' he said, and continued on to his room. He didn't like the idea of having a common prostitute left in the apartment. What was to stop her from stealing from them? Von Tripps might be in love with her but how could he trust her? And then Komenský considered again that von Tripps might have been expecting Komenský to sleep with her! He picked up his clothes and took them, with his coffee, through to the bathroom. He locked the door after him, then shaved and showered. He tried not to think about her.

It was as Komenský was dressing that he heard the front door open and he assumed that La Bella was leaving. There were raised voices and he distinctly heard the woman asking, 'Why are you back here? That wasn't the arrangement.'

The reply was indistinct, which raised Komenský's suspicions all the more. There were some unidentifiable noises and then he heard a cry from her, followed by an almighty crash. The man shouted, she screamed, there was a thud and nothing more. Komenský felt that he had no choice but to go out and see what had happened. He buttoned his shirt hastily and went out into the hall. The door to von Tripps' bedroom was open and the young woman was standing there.

La Bella was covered in blood. Komenský could see that it was not her own. She was looking in shock and disbelief at her hands, and then down at where it was splashed over her chest and stomach and ran down her legs. It was also over her face.

There was a hammering at the front door and shouts demanding an explanation.

Komenský pushed past her and went into the bedroom. He could immediately see the cause of the original crashing sound: the dressing table was overturned and everything on it was scattered; the mirror smashed. And there was blood up the wall. He looked around the side of the bed and von Tripps lay slumped in the corner. His sword-stick was protruding stupidly, and somewhat limply, from his neck. Blood had burst from the artery that must have been severed. The man's eyes stared sightlessly forward and his mouth gaped bloodily open. There was also a smell that suggested that his bowels and bladder had been evacuated.

The Red Rose and the Cross of Gold

Komenský's reaction was to kneel at the man's side. He did not want to touch him, though, to check for a pulse or any other signs of life. The lack of any movement and the glassy eyes were enough to confirm that von Tripps was beyond help.

He had never been into the man's room before and he was surprised by the incongruity of the simple gold crucifix above the bed.

Komenský stood up and immediately felt dizzy and nauseous. The whole room seemed to move around him. La Bella was standing behind him and he fell against her, steadied himself and leant against the wall. Her eyes were now fixed on him.

The demands from the other side of the front door continued.

He didn't think that he really believed what he was seeing, or fully understood it. He was scared and shocked, but had no idea how to react. He made himself ask the girl, as calmly as he could, what had happened. She, however, could only open her mouth and keep repeating 'I, I,' as though about to tell him, but unable to do so.

'It was an accident?' he asked, scarcely believing that it could be, but wanting to reassure her. 'I've got to call for the police.'

She looked at him blankly.

'The police,' he repeated. 'It's too late for an ambulance.'

Komenský walked back past her and into the hall. There was more hammering on the door and he called out that there had been an accident; he was calling the police. He watched La Bella lean back against the wall and slowly slide down it until she was sitting on her haunches. She was a pathetic sight, half-naked and covered in blood. Komenský shouted that he couldn't let anybody inside for a few moments. He would have to cover her up.

He put his hand out towards the telephone and noticed that there was blood on it. He went to wipe it on his white shirt and saw that it, too, was smeared in blood. It was already turning brown as it dried.

'Do you have to call them?' she asked quietly from where she was sitting.

'I've no choice,' he said quietly, surprised that she had spoken.

'But, I murdered him.'

'It was an accident.'

She shook her head: 'No, I murdered him.'

Cinnabar's Gnosis

'There was an argument. It will've been manslaughter... Mitigating circumstances...'

'No. I thought about it. I knew he had that ridiculous sword-stick. I thought about it last night. I planned it.'

Suddenly she was shivering uncontrollably.

'But why?'

'Because I hated him so much,' she said weakly, her voice quivering. 'And because he hated me.'

'He told me he loved you.'

'Ha!' she said, but without enthusiasm, casting her eyes wildly this way and that. 'If that were true then he'd have left me alone, like I asked him to... like I pleaded with him to do.'

'I don't understand.'

'I had no choice but to go with him,' she said, looking up at Komenský directly, trying to control her shaking by wrapping her arms tightly around herself. 'I needed the money. But the touch of him, his horrible breath, his slimy words. I know women like me don't have much choice, that we have to put up with whatever we can. But the things he asked me to do...'

'If you explain all this to the police...'

'But then they'll have their motive. And I did plan it. And I am glad he's dead... I am a murderer.'

Komenský couldn't say anything. There was knocking at the door again, but calmer this time. He wondered if whoever was outside the door could hear their conversation.

'They'll lock me away forever,' she said. 'There's no point any more, to anything.'

She slowly and deliberately stood up and then walked into the living room. She was walking towards the glazed doors to the balcony and he initially wondered why she was going there. It was as she opened them that he realised she intended to throw herself out of them.

'Stop!' he cried, and ran across the room. She pulled the doors open and was already half-over the wrought-iron balcony before he reached her. He grabbed at her waist and with all of his weight against the ironwork he pulled her around so that she fell back towards the room. As he did so the balcony moved as something snapped but didn't quite give way. He made a grab at the frame of the door and at the edge of

The Red Rose and the Cross of Gold

his vision he saw La Bella's head hit the stone sill with a sickening crack. Then the wrought iron moved again and Komenský leapt back inside, over La Bella's unmoving body.

When he turned he saw the whole structure of the balcony swing away from the building, with La Bella on it. He grabbed at the young woman and was able to pull her back inside in one rough movement.

He was still holding her, watching as the blood pulsed from the gash on her head, ran over his own feet and pooled on the parquet floor. He bent down close, looking for signs of life, but her eyes were closed and when he put his hand on her chest she wasn't breathing. He had no idea of how to administer first aid. He didn't even know whether she was still alive.

He hardly noticed the next sound, that of the front door being forced open. Two neighbours rushed in and stopped when they saw him. He could imagine how it would all look to them. Could he explain what had happened? Would anyone believe him? He could hear that another neighbour had already discovered the body of von Tripps.



This was the point from which Komenský later decided he could not trust his memory. He was in a state of shock; he accepted that. He was upset and afraid, and what then happened took place so quietly and efficiently that he became an observer rather than an active participant.

Two tall men of aristocratic bearing wearing expensive suits came in and, without showing any identification to the neighbours, persuaded them all to leave the apartment. One man walked over to where Komenský sat with the bloody body of La Bella and said simply, 'A Red Rose.'

A minute later the other walked in to join his companion, presumably having seen the body of von Tripps in his room. He said: 'So much blood.'

'And so much noise,' replied the first man. 'And too much anger, and hatred. There should have been more love: I am concerned.'

'The surfaces can all be washed down,' said the second contemplatively. 'But the air in here is too full of violence.'

Cinnabar's Gnosis

Komenský laid La Bella down and was helped to stand up.

'I do so hope that you are not hurt?' asked one of the men.

'No,' he replied simply, and the man took his arm and walked with him to the bathroom.

'She's dead?' Komenský asked.

'You'll need to shower,' he replied with patience and compassion.

'And my friend?'

'The process has begun,' he said solemnly. 'You wash, and I'll find you some fresh clothes from your room.'

Komenský did as he was told, his mind refusing to consider what he had just witnessed. He stripped off and showered, the water at his feet first red, becoming pink, and then running clear. He dried himself mechanically and put on a dressing gown. When he felt able to open the door, one of the men, he wasn't sure which of them, was waiting outside with a set of clean clothes.

Komenský dressed in the bathroom, and when he walked out the man was waiting for him. Komenský was ready to submit himself to the authorities, and their calmness reassured him.

'You'll be late for work,' the man smiled. 'But it will be all right; we will take you there. It will soon be as if nothing has happened.'

And his day *did* pass as if nothing had happened. He arrived on site where he was greeted by members of the city engineering team and was expected to get straight to work. He numbly acquiesced. Not surprisingly he was distracted, at times distressed even. He was surprised that his colleagues made allowances for him without asking any questions. The Chief Engineer even deigned to make an appearance at the end of the day, as though Komenský was an employee of such importance that he felt honour-bound to discuss the progress of their work with him. When it was time to leave a junior member of the team was told to drive him home.

They travelled back across the city without any words and he was able to contain his nerves only because of his confusion. When the car pulled up outside Komenský's building the young chauffeur asked if he was all right going inside on his own.

Komenský took a deep breath, nodded, and got out of the car. The street looked exactly as it had done when he'd returned home the pre-

The Red Rose and the Cross of Gold

vious evening, before anything had happened. How could everything being going on just as before?

He climbed the stairs slowly, with leaden legs, and took several moments when outside his own door before he could find the courage to fit the key in the lock. The door had been forced open that morning but now it looked absolutely fine. There was no damage to be seen; it looked to be a new door and frame.

Komenský turned the key and it unlocked the door.

The lights were already on inside. Komenský did not cross the threshold. Von Tripps walked into the hallway from the living room with a sad smile. He tapped his nose conspiratorially: 'Let us not speak of this morning, my dear fellow. It will be as though nothing untoward ever occurred. Come in,' he said, holding out his hand.

'But you... how? And La Bella...?'

'My lovely rose is no more. The price we pay for perfection.'

THE BLACK METAPHYSICAL

Reggie Oliver

I

What it is about dealers in rare books and manuscripts? One would have to go a long way to meet one who was *not* a little strange, and Enoch Stapleton was no exception to the rule.

When I first met him he must have been in his late thirties, though there was something ageless about him. He was a pale skinned man with very light blonde hair, and, though not technically an albino, he gave that impression. I was reminded of some exotic plant that has been left to grow too long in darkness, not exactly fat, but somehow flabby. Etiolated, I believe, is the technical term. At whatever time of the day or night that you visited him at his flat, he would always open the door to you in slippers and a pair of old fashioned pale blue and white striped pyjamas. He was, of course, unmarried and had, as far as I knew, no “partner” of any description. His sexual orientation was a mystery to all those who knew him, and possibly to himself as well.

He took a lot of cultivating, but once he had decided that you were not a “yahoo” – the term he used for anyone beyond his particular pale – he could be extraordinarily helpful. His knowledge of the book and manuscript world was vast, and he had a great talent for persuading the possessors of valuable collections to disgorge their riches for sale or examination. Some normally reclusive and eccentric people can be extraordinarily charming when they want to be: Enoch was one such.

An Oxford colleague, Professor Stalker, had put me on to him when I began my researches for a book about the poet Elias Tremayne (1611-1660), the so-called “Black Metaphysical”. I had chosen Tremayne,

The Black Metaphysical

partly, I admit, because no-one else had “done” him recently – academics have to take these sordid factors into consideration nowadays – but also because I genuinely admired his work. There are moments in his only published book of verse *Aedes Caliginis* (“The Temple of Darkness” 1659) when he equals Donne, Crashaw and Vaughan, even at times touching the sublime heights of the great George Herbert himself. His cast of mind, however, was melancholy in the extreme, even by the standards of his time, hence, one presumes, his sobriquet. There is a touch of scepticism, even nihilism about his writing which seems rather modern. Take the opening stanza of perhaps his most famous poem “Life Eternall”.

“When I doe contemplate Eternitie
It seems to mee a ring of endlesse Night
Not rounded with Delight
But circled with dark palls of coffined Death
Wherein no soule may draw sweet breath,
Save by the mercie of obscure Divinitie.”

Notwithstanding his rather unconventional philosophical views, Tremayne was an ordained clergyman in the Church of England and for the whole of his relatively short adult life was vicar of the parish of Mortlake in Surrey where the Elizabethan magician Dr. Dee had lived and died less than half a century earlier. Other than these meagre facts, little was known about him, or so I thought.

Tremayne’s reputation had always been comparatively obscure, but there had been moments when he emerged from the shadows. He was greatly admired by some of the nineties poets, in particular Ernest Dowson and Arthur Symonds. Baudelaire professed to be an enthusiast, and I was told that he is mentioned somewhere in one of Meyrink’s books. Tremayne’s small circle of devotees had been diverse and select.

I decided that even if I could not find out anything new about the man himself, I could at least explore his legacy and influence which was where Enoch Stapleton came in. He was a renowned expert on the writers of the nineties. If anyone could point me to the sources of Tremayne’s influence on the decadents, he could.

Cinnabar's Gnosis

So I spoke to Enoch several times on the phone. He had e-mail, but only used it on sufferance and regarded today's twitterers and bloggers of cyberspace as "yahoos". Finally, after an exchange of letters, I was allowed to pay him a visit at his flat which was the top floor of a very undistinguished semi-detached villa in Cricklewood. After getting over the initial shock of the pyjamas I had somehow expected his apartment to be squalid and chaotic. On the contrary: though all the rooms I saw were crammed with filing cabinets and bookshelves; everything in them was spotless and orderly. What pictures he possessed were monochrome engravings or etchings. The walls were painted a neutral mushroom-coloured hue, the only real colour on show deriving from the rich bindings or bright dust-jackets of some of the books. The impression given off was ascetic and obsessive. This last quality was underlined when I expressed a desire to relieve myself and he showed me to what he called "the guest lavatory".

We sat at a table by the window on hard chairs, each with a cup of weak, milky tea – the only beverage he ever offered – and discussed Tremayne. I discovered that he knew a great deal more about the man than I did which made me feel rather fraudulent. However, I told myself, I was a scholar, an Oxford don no less, while Enoch was a mere antiquarian, which meant that his knowledge, though extensive, lacked system and discipline. It was a distinction which comforted me at the time, less so now.

I asked about Tremayne's connection with the nineties men.

"Of course," said Enoch, "you know Tremayne was an occultist."

I nodded glumly. I had guessed as much from some of the obscurer images in his poems, and had rather hoped this was to be *my* discovery. But apparently it was known already.

"His poem 'The Tree'. You know it, of course."

I nodded. It was Tremayne at his most knotty and metaphysical and I could make very little of it.

"It's almost impossible to make head or tail of it until you realise that the ten verses correspond to the ten Sephiroth of the Cabbala. Tremayne is trying to equate them with the wounds of the crucified Christ. Take the first verse:

The Black Metaphysical

‘An earthlie wounde, eternall diadem,
Pointes of the thorne, one pointe in Paradise.
Those rubie drops transmute to many a gem
Upon the crowne wherein the Deathless dies,
Th’ Unmanifest yet shines for mortall eyes.’

“Not Tremayne at his best, I grant you but it begins to make sense when you realise that he is equating the Crown of Thorns with Kether, the Crown, the supreme sphere or ‘path’ on the Sephirotic Tree. And of course there is another general equation with the ‘tree’ of the cross. There’s a woodcut from a Syriac New Testament printed in 1555 which does much the same thing. You’ll find it reproduced in Gareth Knight.”

He darted to a bookcase, pulled out a volume with a rather anaemic dust jacket and showed me. I was convinced.

“Then of course, there’s the stuff about him in Aubrey. You know about that, I suppose?”

I was beginning to be irritated: not so much by Enoch’s omniscience, as by his mistaken assumption of mine. But he anticipated my thoughts.

“You may not. The material was discovered muddled up with some of Anthony à Wood’s papers at the Ashmolean by Oliver Lawson Dick shortly before he committed suicide, and he intended to add it to his standard edition of Aubrey’s *Brief Lives*. Unfortunately he died before he could. I only know about it because some of Dick’s papers passed through my hands at one point, but I believe it has been published in a journal somewhere. I’ll look it out for you. As usual Dick has edited it down very efficiently from scraps written by Aubrey at different times and on different pieces of paper. No wonder Anthony à Wood called Aubrey ‘magotie-headed’.” Enoch went to a filing cabinet and, after a brief search, fished out a single sheet of photocopied typescript.

“Here we are. You can keep that. I have another copy.”

I read:

ELIAS TREMAYNE

“Naturall s. of Sir Thos. Tremayne of Pengarrow in Cornwall.
He was a man of melancholique humour and black complexion,

Cinnabar's Gnosis

but of a very good witt. His mother thought by some to have been a Blackamore whom Th. Tremayne brought home from his voyages. At Oxford (Univ. Coll.) shewed himself most ingeniose and took holy orders. Found favour with W. Laud A.B. Cant [William Laud, Charles 1st's Archbishop of Canterbury] and appointed to the living of Mortlack, but thereafter, though much in hopes of preferment, was disappointed, *causa ignota* [for an unknown reason].

Scripsit: *Aedes Caliginis* (Oxford 1659) sacred poems, but some so darke and tainted with esoterique doctrine, they invited much censure. Moreover, he had been of the King's party in the late Civill Warres. Mr Ashmole did shew me once a treatise of Mr. Tremayne's in M.S, *De Rerum Umbris* [Concerning the Shadows of Things] which he did not lett me read. Later he told me he had destroyed the M.S which he sayd he was loath to do, but he greatly feared lest it fall into the hands of giddy-heads and those who foolishly dabble in *quod latendum* [what should remain hidden].

Old Goodwife Faldo (a Natif of Mortlack) told me that Mr. Tremayne did often aske her histories of Dr. Dee whom she had known when he did live in that place. It was rumoured that Mr. Tremayne had an M.S off an old servant of Dr. Dee's house which this person had kept (or purloyned) from the same, and that the sayd M.S contained a relation of a magicall encounter not to be found in Mr. Ashmole's collection. Moreover it showed by many Alchymicall signes and formularies how certain wonderfull giftes may be obtained through intercourse with angells and daemons. (She sayd.) When I asked if this M.S was extant still, Goodwife Faldo replied that she knew not, but that certain persons in Mortlack tell how in the last year of Mr. Tremayne's life (anno 1660) a very tall black man did come and take away his papers, leaving Mr Tremayne much affrighted. Thereupon he fell into a great distresse of mind and dyed. But this is mere whim-wham and idle gossip, no doubt."

The Black Metaphysical

Here at least was a scrap more information on the man's life, and it was sufficiently unknown to count as a discovery. An academic with a reputation to burnish knows how to make bricks with very little straw.

"I expect the 'black man' who removed his papers was some Puritan busybody," I said. Enoch said nothing, but I could tell that he was irritated by my remark. There was a pause.

"Those papers may not have disappeared altogether," he said. "There are clues to their subsequent history. Horace Walpole is said to have had some Dee material, and then there is an item in a catalogue of Bulwer Lytton's manuscript collection which has never been properly identified. The catalogue entry reads something like: 'Mortlake MSS. Occult writings in the autograph of Dr John Dee with additional comments by a later 17th c. hand.' Could that be Tremayne's? Then in about 1900 A. E. Waite mentions something called 'The Mortlake Manuscript' in a letter to his friend Arthur Machen. It is obviously of occult significance. He says something like 'Perdurabo' – that was Crowley's magical name in the Golden Dawn – 'claims he has the Mortlake Manuscript and will make use of the keys'. I don't know. These things could mean nothing, but a number of us have been on the lookout for the Mortlake Manuscript for some time now. We believe it could be out there."

"Who is 'we'?" I asked, rather expecting an evasive reply which I duly received.

"Just a figure of speech. Would you like me to keep you informed of progress? It might be useful to have an Oxford don to authenticate it."

I merely nodded. This was no time to take offence at his condescension.

I kept in touch with Enoch Stapleton and he fed me scraps of information that he turned up about Tremayne. There was an essay on the Metaphysical Poets in which Arthur Symonds praises Tremayne, and the unpublished preface to *The Angel of the West Window* by Gustav Meyrink which contains the following cryptic sentences:

"It was the cleric Tremayne who best understood Dee until these present times. I have but once been afforded a brief glimpse of that elusive document *The Mortlake Manuscript*, but it was

Cinnabar's Gnosis

sufficient to convince me. Who among those of us who have seen it would not give all their worldly goods for a further study of such a priceless treasure?"

"Meyrink must have seen it when he became associated with The Golden Dawn," said Enoch. "Perhaps Crowley himself showed it to him, though there's no record of them ever meeting. As you know, both Meyrink and Crowley were interested in Dee. Crowley actually believed he was the reincarnation of Dee's medium and nemesis, Edward Kelley. That Meyrink reference from about 1930 is the last we hear of the Mortlake Manuscript..." Enoch stopped and looked at me intently. "You don't seem very interested," he said.

"No. I am. I am. I'm just not terribly into this occult stuff. It all seems to me such dreadful rubbish." I paused, suddenly realising that I might have caused offence. "Forgive me. I don't mean to be rude."

"Not at all, Not at all. It's really rather refreshing. You see, when I mention the Mortlake Manuscript to the few who would understand what I meant by it, a sort of gleam comes into their eyes. It's like... I suppose I can best describe it as a look of lust. Yes, once one becomes bitten by the occult, the sensation can be very like sexual lust. A lust for spiritual rather than carnal knowledge, one might say. Your scepticism makes you immune. That could be useful."

"Does that mean you think you know where this document might be?"

Enoch smiled. He said: "Meyrink was right. It is 'elusive'. It almost has a life of its own."

After that he fell silent and I could tell that he did not want to say any more on the subject. When he offered me another cup of his horrible weak milky tea, I felt it was time to go. The drive back from Cricklewood to Oxford was always a tedious one.

II

I had more or less forgotten my last meeting with Enoch when a few days later I was invited to dine on High Table at Latimer College. My

The Black Metaphysical

host was Francine Stalker, Yates Professor of Renaissance Studies, and fellow of Latimer. It was she who had recommended Enoch to me.

I had never been quite sure why Francine sought out my company. We are admittedly both in our thirties, though she is a few years older than me and has a far higher profile. Even when I was an undergraduate and she was doing her PhD, she already had a reputation as one of the most brilliant scholars of her generation. About a year after I had become a fellow of University College we met at a symposium on “The Elizabethan Cosmos”, or some such title. My paper on the Sonneteers was quite well received, but Francine’s on “Occult imagery in Shakespeare” was dazzling. Nothing else was talked about during the conference, and she could have ignored me completely, but she did not. She sought me out and showed that she had understood and appreciated my work.

My immediate suspicion, I’m afraid, was that she was sexually or romantically attracted to me. I was and still am youngish, single, not bad looking in a rather ordinary way, but my vanity was very soon crushed. She was more than happy to talk, but I noticed that she shrank from the smallest degree of physical contact. If I put my hand on her arm to emphasise a point she would instantly draw it away; even if I leaned forward in the normal course of conversation she would move back so that there remained at least three or four feet of clear air between us.

Was I attracted to *her*? In the light of what subsequently happened I find that a hard question to answer. Francine was certainly striking in an odd way: the overall effect putting me in mind of Miss Murdstone in *David Copperfield*. She was tall and angular, but her actual figure was concealed in flowing ankle length garments, nearly always dark hued. Her features were regular but severe, her lips thin, her eyes brown and slightly protuberant. What skin she showed was as white and smooth as a marble bust by Canova. Perhaps her most striking feature was her hair. It was lustrous, black and obviously very long, though she wore it wound up into an elaborate knot on her head, secured by a tortoiseshell comb. Would she one day in my presence take out that comb, shake her hair free and let it fall in an ebony cascade down her back? I admit: the question did occur to me more than once.

Cinnabar's Gnosis

Though her discipline was History and mine Literature, our paths crossed because our favoured periods, the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, were the same. We maintained an intermittent, slightly bantering correspondence by e-mail, though I noticed that she was always keen to maintain her status as the senior colleague. There was, to be honest, no competition and when she was elevated to the Yates Professorship at an astonishingly young age, her superiority was irrevocably confirmed.

The invitation to high table at her college was a new development which I was able to contemplate with interest rather than feverish excitement. I suppose that says something about my attitude towards her. Before and during dinner she was very lively and hospitable, though I noticed that she still maintained her physical distance, even to the extent of not allowing me to be sat next to her on high table. At dinner she spent much of the time being brilliant, at expense of the other Latimer dons which I found rather refreshing, though I could see that it was not going down too well with her colleagues. In case you had illusions about it, I have to tell you that conversation at an Oxford High Table is usually as boring as it is at any other kind of dinner table, especially when it concerns that dullest of all dull subjects, university politics.

When the company withdrew to the Senior Common Room for coffee, Francine suggested we take ours out into the Fellows' Garden. It was a warm night in May and I wondered what this portended. It had rained earlier that evening, the air was now clear and the blue dusk smelt richly of earth and undergrowth. She gestured me to a teak bench under a lime tree and I noticed that she sat herself on it as far away from me as possible.

"Thank God for that! Rupert, I must apologise for the drabness of the conversation tonight. My colleagues, are, I'm afraid, irredeemably second-rate." It was the first time Francine had addressed me by my Christian name face to face, though our e-mails had been on first name terms.

I said: "I thought you saved the situation rather brilliantly." She waved aside the compliment.

"One does one's best to forestall complete tedium. I used to think M. R. James was exaggerating when he had all the dons in his stories

The Black Metaphysical

talking about nothing but golf, but he was right. If it's not golf, it's the price of property in North Oxford, or their ghastly brats' education. At least now we can discuss something interesting. I gather you've been seeing quite a bit of our mutual friend Enoch Stapleton."

Why did I have the strong impression that this was the subject she had been waiting to broach all evening? I gave a vague reply and, as I did so, I noticed that her left hand was gripping her coffee cup so tightly that it trembled a little.

"What have you two been discussing?" she asked.

"Oh, mainly things about my book on Tremayne."

She said: "Ah yes. The Cabbalist." It seemed to me rather an odd way of talking about a renowned metaphysical poet; like referring to Albert Camus as "the footballer".

"You know about that."

"Of course, I do. By the way, is Enoch still on the trail of that... Er... Mortlake Manuscript?" She asked the question with deliberate casualness which did not deceive me. Even in the twilight under the lime, I could see that her whole body was taut with expectation. I paused, rather relishing the fact that for once I had a hold over her. At the same time I felt uneasy.

"I didn't know that he was really," I said.

"Oh, come on! He's been after it for years."

"You seem to know a great deal more about it than I do."

"The Manuscript would be a very important thing to find. For both of us."

"Why?"

By this time Francine was making no secret of her irritation with me. She put down her coffee cup on the bench between us to stop it from rattling. She breathed deeply, then, picking her words carefully, she said: "If you do get to hear that Enoch's found it I'd like to know, that's all... And of course, if I hear anything, I'd tell *you*," she added as an afterthought.

"Why don't you ask Enoch yourself?"

Francine looked away and said: "Oh, you know how tricky Mr. Enoch Stapleton can be. I don't seem able to get a straight answer from him these days."

Cinnabar's Gnosis

I said: "Francine, I don't understand why this matters to you so much." She turned back to me and her eyes looked straight into mine. She stretched out her hand towards me, but not far enough to touch.

"Please, Rupert," she said. As I put out my hand to take hers she withdrew it. It was at this moment that I thought I saw something out of the corner of my eye. Against the high flint wall of the Fellow's Garden was a group of elms, between which there appeared the shadow of a tall man in a gown or cloak. I had the feeling he was looking at me, but I saw no features, only the dark outline. Then from beyond the garden wall I heard the high-pitched laughter of some undergraduates walking in Latimer Lane. It was a momentary distraction, but when I looked again there were no strange shadows among the elms. I said something noncommittal to Francine and we went back into the Senior Common Room to replenish our coffee cups. By some unspoken mutual consent we did not mention the Mortlake Manuscript again that evening.

III

A few weeks later, and towards the end of that Trinity Term, I had an e-mail from Enoch Stapleton. That was unusual, but his offhand perfunctory tone was not. It merely said that he would like me to get down to Cricklewood to see him as soon as possible. I knew it would be useless to interrogate him further so I simply replied that I would be with him early the following day. I set off the next morning before five, the only time when driving to London from Oxford can be almost pleasurable. I was in Cricklewood shortly after seven.

Enoch came to the door of his flat, as usual in pyjamas, holding a bowl of soggy Cornflakes from which he ate greedily as he led me into the main room. There on the table was an ancient oblong cardboard box. In spite of myself my heart began to beat violently.

"Is the Manuscript in there?" I asked.

"Yes."

"Where did you find it?"

"Hastings. When Crowley died there in 1947, at a guest house called Netherwood, he owed his landlady a considerable sum of money.

The Black Metaphysical

She retained some of his papers in lieu as it were, hoping to sell them at a later stage: and many of them she did. All except this one box. I have been in touch with the landlady's son for some years now and eventually I got him to turn out his attics in case there was more Crowleyana. He found this. Why it had not been disposed of before is a mystery. If I were fanciful, which I am not, I would say that it hid itself until it wanted to be found."

"I am so glad you are not fanciful," I said, looking away from him and out of the window to hide my smile. I could see my car parked across the street, and that a man was standing beside it. It worried me. He seemed to be a black man in a black hooded track suit. One should not give in to prejudice. I turned back and looked at Enoch who was staring at me with his pale eyes. At one corner of his grey, shapeless lips was a drop of milk and a soggy shred of Cornflake.

"Are you going to let me take a look at it?" I asked.

"No. I am going to let you take it back to Oxford and examine it at your leisure."

For some moments I could say nothing I was so astonished. I began falteringly to explain that I had no money with which to pay for it, nor even adequately insure it, if indeed it was in the hand of Dr. Dee himself.

"Oh, yes. It's Dee all right. And I can confirm that there is a post script of sorts written by your friend Elias Tremayne. These documents require no payment. They are quite literally priceless. The previous owner asked no money for them either. He seemed glad to be rid of them."

I picked up the box. The contents seemed unusually heavy for papers. Enoch was watching me intently and I thought I detected dismay in his eyes when I put the box down again. I felt I owed him something, so I told him of my conversation with Francine Stalker in the Fellows' Garden at Latimer.

Enoch nodded several times and then said: "You won't tell her about our discovery. She is not to be trusted." He brushed aside all my requests for an explanation. "If you want to get back to Oxford, you'd better be going now," he said. I made no further demur and picked up the box. Enoch in his pyjamas followed me down stairs and across the

Cinnabar's Gnosis

street to the car. The black man was gone and my car had been, as far as I could tell, unmolested.

Once Enoch had seen me place the box reverently on the back seat he gave me a perfunctory wave and jogged back over the road to his flat. I was alone at last with the Mortlake Manuscript.

I can be a patient man when I choose to be. When I got back to my rooms at University College I put the box in the bottom drawer of my desk. I then listened to two undergraduates read me their amazingly foolish opinions on Spenser's *Faerie Queen* in a tutorial. After this I went for a long walk on Port Meadow with only the swans and horses for company to wash away the effects of lazy and ill-informed thinking. I dined in Hall and it was only after I had returned from this that I took the box out. I had "sporting my oak", that is bolted the outer door of my rooms, and so made myself free from interruption.

The box itself was well over fifty years old and on the lid, scrawled in black ink were the numbers 666 in a triangle and the words *Noli Me Tangere* (do not touch me), obviously the hand of the Great Beast himself, Aleister Crowley. Inside were about seventy five sheets of very old paper interleaved, by some careful later owner, with tissue paper.

The manuscript was in two sections. The second was some sort of magical text or grimoire with the usual jumble of sigils, diagrams and nonsense; the first seemed to be a continuous narrative in Latin. Fortunately I am a fairly proficient clacissist and could translate. The very first sheet in the box was a kind of title page. At the top in bold capitals was written:

RELATIO DIVINA DE SECRETA SECRETORUM

"Sacred Narration concerning the Secret of Secrets." Below this was the scrawled signature "Johannes Dee" and a date, "Praga, Martio Mense, Anno MDLXXXVI", "At Prague in the month of March 1586". At the very bottom of the sheet, as an afterthought Dee had added: "scriptio pro omnibus et nemine", "a writing for all and no-one".

I think I had better simply put my rough translation before the reader and leave whatever comments I have to the end, as I will Tremayne's contribution to this extraordinary document.

The Black Metaphysical

IV

In other places and at other times I have told and will tell of the many wonderful things I saw and did in Bohemia; and also of the many conversations with spirits and angels which I had, together with my companion Edward Kelley. But this narration, for many significant reasons, I must put down separately and guard from intruding eyes, not least that man in whom, to my shame, I laid my greatest trust. [He means, I believe, his medium, the aforementioned Kelley.]

One night in February of the year of Our Lord 1586, as I was sitting with Master Kelley at our lodgings in Prague, there came a messenger who wished to take me to meet someone for a private conversation. At this Kelley became very angry and haughty, as he is wont to do, and threatened to throw the man out.

“If you come from the Emperor Rudolph, he had best talk with me. It is to me that the Spirits speak. The Doctor merely writes down these communications. My knowledge of the alchemical arts is greater even than his.”

The man, who was very small, and dressed in the long gabardine robe of a Jew shook his head. “I do not come from the Emperor Rudolph,” he said. “It is my master the Rabbi Judah Loew ben Bezalel who wishes to converse with your master, Dr John Dee.”

When Kelley heard the man refer to me as his “master”, he picked up a bottle to hurl at the little man, and would have done so if I had not stepped between them. Then Kelley, as he usually does, subsided as suddenly as he was aroused, and lapsed into a sulk.

“Very well then! Go and see your Jew, and much good may it do you. See if I care!”

“Must it be tonight?” I asked the man.

“It must. The Rabbi is spending only a few days in Prague.”

As we made our way through the dark streets of Prague my companion explained to me that the Rabbi Loew (as I shall call him) was here on a brief visit from Moravia to which he had fled to escape the Emperor’s persecutions. I myself already knew that the Rabbi was a very great leader of the Jews and wise in all aspects of the Torah and the Cabbala. It flattered me, I confess, to think that he had heard of me.

Cinnabar's Gnosis

By a long and winding route, through dark passages and courtyards lit only by a glimmer of starlight from above, the little man brought me to a tall and ancient house in the Jewish Quarter. There he knocked three times in quick succession on the front door. This presently was answered in turn by three rapid knocks from within. I heard a sliding of bolts and a turning of keys and at last the door was opened. Once we had entered the house I was conducted in silence by the light of a single candle up a series of wooden steps. The entire building was made of wood and seemed to creak and groan like a living thing. Once a draught of air whistling through a crack threatened to extinguish the candle and plunge us into darkness.

Finally I was ushered into a tall room at the top of the building under the roof gables. It was furnished entirely in dark wood and around the walls were many shelves and cabinets containing innumerable scrolls, some plain, some elaborately encased in silver after the Jewish fashion. The room was well lit by several menorahs, the seven branched candelabrum of the Jews, which were ranged down the length of a great oak table in the centre of the room. At one end of the table in a carved wooden armchair like a throne sat a giant of a man with a long beard streaked with grey. He rose to greet me and introduced himself as the Rabbi Loew.

It is not my business to record the long and interesting discussion we had on many points of philosophy and the Cabbala. The Rabbi had heard of my intercourse with angelic beings and was anxious to hear of my researches. I told him things that I have told few others: namely, how I had been granted by the spirits the forty eight Angelic Keys, written in the original Adamic (or Enochian) language. These I knew to be instruments of great power and wisdom, but they were useless to me as I did not know the meanings of the language used and the Spirits would not vouchsafe them.

The Rabbi considered what I had told him for some moments in silence, as if he were making up his mind. Then he rose from his chair.

“My knowledge of the language of Adam is still very imperfect. But I know a man who is well versed in it. Come, let me show you something.” He took up one of the menorahs and led the way to one of the shelves. He turned a small wooden lever in the shelf and a part of it

The Black Metaphysical

swung back, revealing another large room, this time almost totally shrouded in darkness. Then he said: "But first I must swear you to secrecy. You may record what you hear and see, but it must be for your eyes alone."

I laid my hand on a copy of the Torah bound in silver and swore a solemn oath.

The room into which the Rabbi led me was, like the other, all of wood with a high pitched roof. It was quite bare of furniture but in the middle of the room stood something the like of which I had never seen before or since.

It stood some twenty feet high and its head nearly touched the roof. The colour of it was grey and the surface of it was rough and mottled, but not like stone. It seemed to be made of some kind of mud, or possibly clay, and its shape was human, I suppose, though more like some inhuman beast that stood on two legs than a man. The head was squat with a heavy brow below which what looked like two black spheres of obsidian had been stuck where the eyes should be. The mouth was no more than a shapeless hole in which lolled a great grey tongue, and there was no nose to speak of. The right arm possessed a hand with four crude fingers on it, but the right was still only a lump of grey matter. I guessed it to be a half-made sculpture, but why should anyone want to carve such a hideous thing, unless he wanted to represent a demon?

"That is to be the saviour of my race," said the Rabbi.

"What is it?" I asked. "An idol?" Rabbi Loew laughed.

"Do you think so little of my people that you imagine we worship a thing like that? No, it will be our servant and protector. Some call it the Golem."

"How can you use such a monstrous thing?"

"To fight a monstrous thing. The persecution of our race."

I could no longer bear to look at the object which filled the room and, despite being only half formed, seemed on the point of breaking into life. It was then that I noticed a shadowy figure of a man crouching in the far corner of the room. The Rabbi gestured to him and he came forward, his eyes fixed on me the whole time. He wore the simple robes of his race rather like the Rabbi and he made no sound as he walked towards me over the wooden boards.

Cinnabar's Gnosis

Though he was of middle height, there was something shrunken about him. His cheeks were hollow, his pale grey eyes very deep set. His long hair and beard were black and he did not show any signs of infirmity, but I felt somehow that he must be very old. When he spoke it was in perfect English, if not quite perhaps in the modern style.

"Dr. Dee," he said, "I am honoured to make the acquaintance of one of the most learned and ingenious men of your generation."

I bowed low, not knowing what to say in reply, because I had not been introduced. Then the man said to me:

"Can the wings of the wind understand my voices of wonder
Which the burning flames have framed in the depth of my jaws?"

At these words I was greatly astonished because they were the very words that the angelic spirit Madimi had spoken to me through my assistant Edward Kelley only a few nights before. I turned to my friend Rabbi Loew who was smiling:

"This is Issachar," he said. "He is helping me with my work on the Golem. You must know that his presence here, like this room, is a deadly secret, because he is an outcast among us Jews. An outcast of outcasts, you might say. But I know of no outcasts. It is he whom I told you of. He alone of all men can safely interpret the Adamic language."

I bowed low, and a thought occurred to me. Just then there was a small noise from outside. Rabbi Loew reacted instantly. "You must go at once," he said. The next moment he had hurried me out of the room and shut the concealed door on Issachar and the grey monster. Then I was being led down flights of stairs to the front door. Before he pushed me out into the street, the Rabbi said to me: "If you wish to talk further with Issachar, then send a message addressed to Isaac de Laquedem at the *Sign of the Golden Plover* in the Street of the Alchemists. It will reach him there."

The next moment I was blinking under the stars in the black street. I had barely recovered my sense of direction when I heard the tramp of feet on cobbles. Then round the corner came a small posse of the Imperial guard carrying torches, the firelight gleaming on their breastplates and halberds. At the head was Rabenthal, a captain of the guard whom I had met during a visit to the Emperor.

"Master Dee, you are late abroad tonight."

The Black Metaphysical

I explained that I had been visiting a sick friend, and pointing vaguely off into the distance, I said that I appeared to be lost.

“This is not the place to be on a dark night,” said Rabenthal and detached two of his men to escort me home.

It was some days before I could see Issachar again, as I very much wanted to, because I wished to converse with him without fear of interruption from Master Kelley. But by good fortune Master Kelley was beginning to acquire a reputation, as a transmuter of metals by virtue of his famous “transforming powder”. When Count Rosenberg, a renowned enthusiast for the alchemical arts, invited Kelley to his castle, I urged him to go. Perhaps I urged him too hard because he looked at me with suspicion, but still he went. On the morning that he left I despatched my message to the *Golden Plover*, and that night, under cover of darkness, Issachar came to my door. He refused all refreshment. When we were sat down in my inner room, he said:

“You know who I am?”

I replied that I did.

“Must I tell you my story?”

“You must.”

Issachar sighed but whether from weariness or relief I could not say. Then he began:

“My family lived in Jerusalem. My father was a shoemaker and I followed his trade. My mother sometimes brought in extra money by her gifts of divination and the casting of horoscopes. Her gifts in that direction were genuine but not outstanding. Frequently she lost all inspiration and was forced to resort to trickery. But though I followed my father’s profession my inclinations sided with my mother. I studied all the tricks and subterfuges (which some have called magic) by which the human brain is forced to yield up its secrets. All men and women carry an uncharted universe about in their heads. In us lies Africa and all the firmament of stars. Only this wall of flesh stands between us and the infinite.” And here he struck himself such a vicious blow on the chest that I was astonished he did not cry out with the pain of it.

“Even as a young man I was oppressed by the thought of time which takes away our will and ambition before we have had an opportunity to venture them. There is so much to know and see and enjoy

Cinnabar's Gnosis

that even a full term of seventy years unoppressed by sickness or disability is not sufficient to gain much understanding. The wisdom of age, even when we achieve it, is nearly always dissipated by its debilities. All these thoughts passed through my mind as I made shoes at Jerusalem, or as I studied the minor means of divination, through the tossing of coins and the examination of entrails, the study of stars and the patterns and hues in decaying cheeses.

“Then I heard of a new preacher who came from Galilee and is talking about eternal life. ‘Believe in me,’ he would say ‘and you shall have eternal life.’ At first I paid no heed. There were scores of preachers and teachers in Judaea at that time. But the phrase ‘eternal life’ kept returning to me. So one day I set out to see this man.

“That day he was sitting in a boat and teaching. I remember my first sight of him vividly even now, that small, insignificant little man with the long straight hair and the straggle of beard, sitting upright in the fishing boat. His clear voice rang out to us and echoed faintly against the mountains behind. He spoke of the time having come, the kingdom, repentance, renunciation. I do not remember the exact words. He spoke, as has been said, with authority. The manner was not insistent or bullying, and was almost without emphasis. He seemed to invite us as equals to accept his words. It was as if he so believed in the absolute truth of what he was saying that he needed no arts of persuasion to convey it. For this reason I was at once convinced.

“My belief in him was so strong that I gave up everything to join the group, thirty or so (ten of whom were women), who followed him about the country. But this is a curious and unsatisfying period, because he was constantly protected from too much familiarity by a group of a dozen or so men, commonly called “the twelve”, who claimed to be his intimates I could see no special merit in them, except perhaps that most of them come from Galilee like him. When he was not surrounded by crowds he would often withdraw by himself, or, occasionally, with the twelve. The rest of us were little more than camp followers – I repaired shoes – with all the griefs and none of the privileges attached to those who go after a penniless prophet. He knew who I was, but I remember the small frown that always furrowed his brow whenever he spoke to me.

The Black Metaphysical

“It was we – the camp followers – who had to beg for food to feed us all, we who got the smallest share. Sometimes there was a feast for us if the Nazarene had healed the sick in a village, but we had the lowest place in it. Our Master would sometimes look at us questioningly as if he wondered why we were there. The twelve for the most part treated us with indifference, sometimes even contempt. The only exception, as far as I was concerned, was Judas Iscariot. His name is reviled now, but he was a friend to me and I will not betray him. He came to me more than once for divinations but in that time I had almost lost the art I inherited from my mother. One day the signs would be bright and favourable and the next day they would be dark, and there was no reason behind it all. It was as if some power, infinitely stronger than mine, were turning everything around it to confusion. But in spite of my failure, this Judas would talk to me as an equal which the other disciples, for all the meanness of their upbringing, would not.

“I once asked Judas why the Master chose these fishermen as his closest familiars.

“‘He speaks in such a way,’ replied Judas, ‘that the simple understand what those with greater minds fail to grasp. But what the Master does not see is that after he is gone – yes, he will die in the end like the rest of us – if his teaching and example is to endure it will need men of intellect to form it into a coherent body of thought. The survival of belief and truth is dependent on organisation. The truth may be diminished by it, but that is in the nature of things.’

“I wondered if he was right, and I still wonder. But he knew, as the other disciples did not, that our Master could not continue as an itinerant preacher, collecting crowds wherever he went, leading men and women away from safety. A crisis was sure to come. There would be a moment when he would either defeat the forces that were amassing against him or succumb to them. It was Iscariot’s view that to delay that moment would be to risk the greatest defeat of all.

“It was the night before we entered Jerusalem. We were sleeping in the open as we often did. The disciples, as usual, had taken up the best positions round the fire while we lesser mortals crouched as near to it as we could. I could not see where the Nazarene was. I was angry at having to scramble for a place a little nearer the warmth. Had I not

Cinnabar's Gnosis

come to him of my own free will? Cold though it was, I decided that I would move out of the glow and sit alone on the edge of the hill that looked over Jerusalem.

“A few faint lights flickered and moved in the streets. I felt that the time had come to leave the Nazarene and live my own life again. I had followed the Master for that one elusive phrase, ‘eternal life’. There had been times when, listening to him, I felt myself about to grasp the secret, but it had slipped away. Some quirk of my own intellect perhaps had tricked me, for the simple heard and believed. Presently I was aware of someone beside me, the Master. He sat down on the ground next to me and was silent for a long time as he hugged his knees and his eyes stared at the little lights below us. I wanted to speak and ask him a thousand questions, but I would not disturb him. No. He must break the silence. I would show him that I was free of his fascination.

“We sat together for nearly an hour without exchanging a word. Occasionally I glanced at him. Still he stared, his look impenetrable and his immobility absolute. He did not show by so much as a flicker that he was aware of my presence, and it made me rage. Every wounded feeling rose up in rebellion against him. What had he that I had not? Why should I give up everything for him and have so little to show for it? There he is, a little man with great round eyes, devouring the darkness with them. I knew his teaching now. I would go elsewhere and learn from others. Then he spoke.

“‘Why is it that you follow me, Issachar?’ he says.

“I was shocked. It was as if his voice had come out of my private thoughts. ‘Do you need to ask, Master?’ I replied, trying to play with him.

“‘I do not need to,’ he said. ‘But you do. I ask the question for your sake.’

“‘Do you have doubts about my reasons?’ I replied, still trying to gain an advantage.

“‘What are your reasons?’ he asked. This I was forced to answer.

“‘You have the secret of eternal life. I want it.’

“‘Have you not already received it?’ he said.

“‘No, Master.’

“‘Then what makes you think you ever will?’

“‘It is yours to give, Master,’ I said.

The Black Metaphysical

“Only to those who know how to receive it.’

“‘Then teach me how to.’ I was not looking at him but I thought I felt him smile.

“‘You think wisdom is like a cup of wine or a piece of bread that can be taken and consumed easily and without reflection. But no man can receive unless he knows truly what he desires. And a man cannot know truly unless he knows with the heart and mind together. That is why I say that to him who has it shall be given, but from him that has not it shall be taken away even that which he has.’

“‘Yes. I understand, Master,’ I said. And I thought I did. There was a long silence and the sky grew grey at the edges. Morning approached. The Master spoke again.

“‘Issachar, when I am dead, will you see that I am buried?’

“‘But you will never die, Master,’ I said.

“‘The son of man must die in order that he may live,’ he said. ‘Has your family a rock tomb cut in the hillside near here?’ I said that was so, astonished at his knowledge. ‘Bury me there,’ he said.

“‘Show me the secret of eternal life, then.’

“‘Do you bargain with me? Very well. Eternal life shall be yours and you may come to know its secret. But in time you will see that to possess something without knowing its meaning is the greatest burden. And you shall wait till I come for you again.’

“All this was madness to me. I left him as he rode triumphantly into Jerusalem and went back to shoemaking. I was scorned on all sides, by some for leaving the Master, and by others for joining him in the first place, but it would have been useless to stay, since from that time onwards the Master was seeing no-one in private but the Twelve.

“One afternoon Iscariot came to me. Without ceremony he led me to the back of my shop. He was in a curious state of mind: excitement, anger and desperation were alive in every movement of his body.

“‘I have seen fear on his face,’ said Judas. ‘I never expected it. When the priests and the scribes are questioning him I see fear. Twice he has withdrawn himself completely from us and on the second occasion I found him myself in a friend’s orchard, not praying, but with his knees up to his chin and shivering like a child before a whipping. He is afraid. And now I am afraid for his fear.’

Cinnabar's Gnosis

“But why?”

“Don't you see? If he runs away everything is lost. I am the only one who understands this.’ He told me that he intended to go to the Temple authorities and let them know where they might take him privately without meeting the opposition of a crowd. In this way, Judas said, he would force the master into the path of his true destiny so that he could not run away.

“And so it happened, as it is written, that our Master was taken in the moment of his greatest fear and then was crucified. I did not see his death – I too was afraid – and so it came about that the Master was buried in another's tomb.

“As for Iscariot, the story was that he hanged himself. He was hanged, it is true, but not by his own hands. The hands that did it belonged to the Rock on which the Master built his church. Do not look so startled. You may disbelieve what I say if it suits you.

“Not that I blame the Fisherman,” Issachar went on, “for Iscariot had no right to assume that the Master would run away. What drove him to betrayal was vanity. and a taste for controlling events. His fears may not have been groundless, but there is also faith...

“As for me, I never saw the Master again, nor did I bury him. I felt no longer worthy of his promises of eternal life after I had deserted him. I lived on and my hair grew grey and my skin withered as others did, but I did not fall ill. All round me my friends died and the face of my country changed, but I lived on. I was shunned because of my great age by the young. Those who had known my youth and still survived resented my continuing health, and so, in my ninetieth year, I began to travel. I found I could go for days on end without food or water. Burning deserts and icy mountains caused me pain but did not destroy me. My hair grew long and white. Strangers avoided me. I was in my hundredth year when I came to know that I could not die.

“Life became a burden and I decided to destroy myself. My body was withered but hard and resilient as steel. I suspected that eternal life was my destiny but was loath to face the horror of it. Finally I took myself up onto a high mountain and hurled myself off it. I felt my body fall and crash against rocks. I kept hoping with each jolt of excruciating pain that I would lose consciousness. When, after an age of agony, I

The Black Metaphysical

came to rest at the bottom I must have passed into a kind of sleep. Waking, I found myself with a young body again and black hair, much as you see me now. For every hundred years I regain my youth and experience once more the slow deterioration of age.

“I will not tell you all that I have seen since then. I would still be talking to you on your deathbed. I have been in my time a monk, a soldier, a great scholar, once even the ruler of a small nation, but always my immortality dogged me: I brought bad luck wherever I went and was forced to move on. A thousand times I courted death – on the high seas, in battle, at the hands of executioners or in the torture chamber – but each time mortality eluded me. Once my head was cut off by order of the Sultan in Constantinople. The sensation was more agonising than I can say but, at the same time, liberating and thrilling. The separated members of my body were thrown into the Bosphorus where they became reunited in a most mysterious way. I was picked out of the sea by a passing slave trader bound for Alexandria and thereafter spent ten years in the galleys.”

He pointed to his throat and I could see the faint marks of his decapitation, though more than a century had passed.

“After all these ages I can only say that, as the prophet says, there is nothing new under the sun. Men are still as ignorant as they ever were. And death, whatever may come after, is the great blessing. I know now what the Master truly meant: eternal life is not found in time but out of time, and I am Time’s prisoner until I am released.”

When he had finished I again offered him refreshment which he refused. He then asked to see my book of the forty eight Angelic Keys written in the language of Adam and dictated to me by the angel Uriel, and which he himself had called “the Secret of Secrets and the Holy of Holies”. So I brought the book to the Wandering Jew so that he could explain and interpret them to me, but before he did so, he said:

“Do you truly want me to interpret these signs for you?”

I nodded my assent.

“What is it you wish for most in this life?”

“To know and do the will of God,” I answered.

For a long while he looked at me until I began to doubt the truth of my own words, then he said: “Very well.”

Cinnabar's Gnosis

What follows I have transcribed from his interpretations together with the sigils given to me by the angel Uriel and the words in Enochian, the true language of Adam and the Sons of Heaven.

V

This was where Dee's narration ended. It was followed by a strange text, some of it consisting of occult symbols and geometrical figures, of the kind I have found in old grimoires. Most of the words were in English, but some were in Latin and some in an unknown tongue which I took to be the "Enochian". It looked to me very like the kind of babble you used to hear at charismatic Evangelical services – and still do for all I know; it's a long time since I've been. It had no discernible grammar, but I only gave this a cursory glance. There were forty eight sections, corresponding, I assumed, to the Keys mentioned by Dee and each was headed, by a short title or motto, either in Latin or English, such as the first: "To know the virtues of certain plants", the fifth "To obtaine possession of any woman desired", or the thirteenth "To turne base metall to uncorrupt gold".

Against this last section, someone else had written a few notes, mostly indecipherable, but at the bottom of the page was a large scrawled signature:

EDVARDUS KELLEY, EQUES. "Edward Kelley, Knight." Dee's scryer had often laid claim to a knighthood, just as he frequently scribbled angrily in Dee's private diaries and notebooks.

At the end of the forty eight sections Dee had noted down a series of dates from 1587 to 1607 against which he had written, alternately "lost" and "founde" and in one instance, against a date in 1588, the words "recovered from Master Kelley".

After these dates Dee wrote only one thing more, a quotation from the gospel of Mark: "What shall it profit a man if he gaine the whole worlde but lose his own soule". After that another hand has written the word "Amen".

Then came this in the same handwriting: "I, Elias Tremayne of Mortlack did open the 48th key this 20th day of Februarie 1659." The

The Black Metaphysical

title of the forty eighth key reads as follows: “To know the mortall and imortall destinies of men”.

After the date Tremayne has written in a shakier script, the words: “Gates of Heavenn and Hell. *Timor mortis conturbat me.* [The fear of Death troubles me.]”

Then, in even more erratic handwriting come the barely decipherable words:

LORD LET THIS CUP PASSE FROM ME.

Finally, in smaller, neater writing Tremayne has penned the following three quatrains. They are not in his high metaphysical manner, and I wonder if they are by him at all. They seem to me to be in an older literary style, what C. S. Lewis calls “16th century drab”; but I cannot find their origin.

“The search for wisdom is a snare;
The road is long and paved with care.
The truest path is darkest night
To find out pure celestial light.

“And Satan waits in every briar
To bind the pilgrim with desire.
Oft wise men have been led astray
Where fools have safely gone their way.
“So, be you wise man, be you fool,
This world must be your only school.
Seek not the angels’ high degree;
Your truth is Christ’s humility.”

VI

Some experiences leave one temporarily paralysed. I continued for several days going about my normal business, giving tutorials and lectures, but incapable of applying my mind to anything serious, such as the problem of the Manuscript. What must I do about it? Should I prepare a paper on it? Should I consult Enoch; should I tell Francine? For the moment

Cinnabar's Gnosis

I did none of these things. I did not even examine the Manuscript again. This was the greatest problem of all: I did not know what to make of it. It constituted a comprehensive assault on my intellectual integrity.

Then one evening, after I had dined in Hall, I decided that I must finally make a start on my book, *The Black Metaphysical, a Study of Elias Tremayne*. I would write down chapter headings, compose an opening sentence, put my thoughts in order.

I returned to my rooms and switched on the computer. Then I felt restless and walked to the window which looks down onto the Radcliffe Quadrangle. It was a warm summer night. On the opposite side of the quad is a wall behind which are the gardens of the Master's Lodgings. A full moon shone above throwing the wall into shadow, but against it I could see the black shape of a cloaked or gowned man, like the one I had seen in the Fellows' Garden at Latimer. I thought the man was looking up at me. Calmly I contemplated the options. Should I go down to confront him? Should he be ignored? I was calm, as I say, but I felt there was something unnatural about my own calmness.

Someone knocked at my door. I started violently.

I opened the door and on the threshold stood Professor Francine Stalker. She was clothed simply in a long, loose dress of some dark red velvety material and sandals.

"Hello, Rupert," she said, then, as if it was the most natural thing to do in the world, she flicked off the light switch by the door.

"I don't want people to see me here," she said. The moon flooded my study. I retreated before her as she entered. Francine paused when she had reached the middle of the room, then she removed the comb from her coiffure and, with one expert shake of it she released her black hair which tumbled down to her ankles. It gleamed in the moonlight, a glistening black waterfall, it waved like a fish's tail in dark waters. With another practised movement she shook off her sandals and unbuttoned her long loose dress, letting it creep down her white nakedness and rustle to the floor. Even in the dim silver light I could see that her nipples were red and engorged like poisoned berries.

I was a slave to the moment. Soon we were in my bedroom and I too was naked but we had not yet so much as touched. Her cold hand touched my chest and pushed me onto the bed.

The Black Metaphysical

“Where is it?” She whispered.

“Where is what?”

“The Mortlake Manuscript, of course! Where is the Manuscript?”

She was bending over me and I could smell a heavy scent of musk on her. No part of us yet touched but I could feel her cold breath on me and as I reached up to stroke her hair, she said again:

“Where is it, Rupert? Where is it?”

As I felt the last wisp of personal will leave me something happened. The room became full of movement, silent but frantic. Irrational dark shapes chased each other across the pale walls. I saw Francine’s eyes widen, and then a great black shadow like a cloak arched itself over her naked body and enveloped it. For a moment she utterly disappeared then she was being pulled kicking and struggling through the bedroom door. I got up and tried to follow her, but something black and wet thumped me in the chest. I fell back and hit my head on the bedpost.

When I came to, about an hour later, I suppose, Francine and her clothes were gone. My head ached appallingly and in the middle of my chest was a great black bruise. However I found that when I washed it most of the blackness came off. It must have been soot, or ink.

The following morning I had an unexpected visit from the Police. Francine Stalker had laid an accusation of rape against me. I refused the offer of a formal interview with a solicitor present, consenting instead to be questioned where I was. As I answered questions from the two policemen I noticed their slight air of hostility begin to fade. A few days after, I was curtly informed that the charges against me had been dropped. It was only much later that I heard that Professor Stalker had been examined and found to be *virgo intacta*. The whole business was quite successfully hushed up, as these things can be in the City of Dreaming Spires. Fortunately the Summer Vacation was very nearly upon us.

As soon as term was over I drove to the little house in the Dordogne which I own. A friend was to join me later on, but I had a few days to myself. On my second night there I lit the barbecue under the lime tree as the sun was beginning to set. As soon as the charcoal was hot enough I took out the Mortlake Manuscript which I had brought with me to France and burnt it sheet by sheet on glowing coals.

Cinnabar's Gnosis

As I did so I was conscious of shadowy figures gathered in the periphery of my vision, smelling the summer evening air and the sharp, comfortable scent of burning wood and paper. I was not afraid. The shadows were neither hostile, nor friendly; they were merely witnesses. By the time the final sheet had curled, blackened and had been frittered into senseless white flakes on the breeze, the last shadow had gone.

On my return to England I rang up Enoch Stapleton to tell him what I had done. He was quite unperturbed.

"That is the task you were chosen for," he said, rather irritatingly. Nevertheless I remain a sceptic, though not a dogmatic one. That too, I suppose, is the task I have been chosen for.

Professor Stalker is still around. Her hair has been cut and I have seen streaks of grey in it. Some day I will have to tell her that the Manuscript is destroyed. When occasionally our paths cross in Blackwells, or the High, or the Bodleian, I never look away, but she does. Sometimes our eyes meet accidentally and in hers I see a deep and forlorn resentment. The offender never forgives.

VII

The other day I was in Duke Humphrey's Library in the Bodleian. My book is nearing completion and I had been looking again through the Ashmolean collection of MSS, just in case Aubrey had been wrong and something remained of Tremayne's *De Rerum Umbris*. It was a vain hope of course, and I have already had about as much luck as any academic could hope for. I had made up my mind that my research was now at an end. Evening light filtered through the armorial stained glass windows at the end of the long room, painting the polished floorboards with azure, gules and or.

Just as I was about to return the Ashmole manuscripts to the safe keeping of the curator, I noticed that a flimsy scrap of paper had fallen to the floor from my desk. I picked it up. The paper was old, almost certainly seventeenth century, and the handwriting was familiar: Tremayne's. I knew it from the annotations he had made to the *Narratio Divina de Secreta Secretorum*. On it was written a single stanza. My

The Black Metaphysical

heart began to beat fast. I had not told it to, but it knew my excitement and was banging the drum in accompaniment. One last glimpse of Elias Tremayne had been granted me. Reverently I touched the words he had written. I suppose it must have been the sweat of excitement in my fingers because a tiny smear of black came away on them. It was almost as if the ancient ink had been wet when I caressed it. Trembling, I read:

“Fare well! I have embraced the starrie night.
Dying, I live no more among the dead,
In tombs find no continuing citie here;
No mortall longings hang about my head.
No more! My wingéd soule takes flight
And I ascend from crystall sphere to crystall sphere
Into the Regions of Eternall Light.”

MEYRINK'S GAMBIT

George Berguño

I

It was a mild autumn evening in 1913 and I had been out for a leisurely walk with my good friend Gustav Meyrink. We had been sauntering along the Währingerstrasse and made our way to our favourite coffee house. Selecting a table on the terrace of the Café Landtmann, we squandered the remainder of the evening on black coffees, cigars and passionate discussions of alchemy, Egyptian history and the dubious health benefits of living in an amoral city such as Vienna. At length we grew tired and I indicated to the waiter that I wished to pay.

'I'm sorry, sir,' the waiter said, 'but your bill has been settled.'

'How did that happen?' I asked.

Pointing to a vacant table that looked out onto the Rathaus, the waiter said, 'The gentleman who was sitting over there a moment ago – he paid.'

Meyrink smiled. 'Did he know us?'

'No, sir.'

'Did he pay on a whim?' I said.

The waiter's tone was apologetic. 'It was an oversight. He paid for his drinks, sat there for a moment and then asked for his bill again. He must have forgotten that he had paid. I too forgot and by mistake I passed him your bill.'

Meyrink roared with laughter.

We thanked the waiter and sat chuckling in the evening shadows.

Meyrink's Gambit

Presently, Meyrink said, 'Long ago I learned that chance rules our lives, often for the worse. But this was a pleasant surprise.'

'Chance? You've always asserted that our lives are guided by powerful forces outside our awareness.'

'And one of these forces is chance. Listen – I once believed that the Habsburgs would endure forever. But now, there is unrest in Serbia, Galicia, and Montenegro. The empire is being torn apart by its many ethnic groups and the economy suffers. Our industries are losing business to foreign competitors. The metal industry is on the decline; the cotton mills are closing down. The slums continue to expand like mushrooms. And last year fifteen hundred Viennese tried to take their lives. Fifteen hundred! As for the Emperor – he's a very old man.'

'There *is* a successor,' I offered.

'A successor,' echoed Meyrink, 'but for how long? Oh, let's not deceive ourselves: the end is near. The question is: who will strike the fatal blow? I predict that a chance event will end our world. Somewhere, some small act by an unknown individual will bring Europe to its knees. You don't believe me? Well, let me tell you a story that will convince you.'

The hour was late and I craved sleep, but I knew that Gustav was about to paint one of his profound insights into the human condition. So I lit another cigar, leaned back in my chair and listened to his tale.

II

One afternoon of a Sunday in August of this year, I had been strolling along the Graben when I suddenly changed direction and headed towards the Burggarten. I crossed the park, came out onto the Ring and continued my stride until I saw the green copper dome of the Karlskirche. I scanned the Karlsplatz and there saw, at the corner of a lonely street, a café with a strange name – The Museum.

The late summer sun pressed harsh on my face. Accordingly, I entered the Museum. I approached the woman behind the counter, ordered a Hennessy, and looked around for a place to sit. I settled into one of the alcoves, cognac in hand, and my eyes wandered around the

Cinnabar's Gnosis

interior of the café. The walls were grey and bare, and a melancholic – almost ascetic – atmosphere lingered about the place. Old men pored over newspapers, smoke filled the air; it was the kind of place where loners, who wanted to remain anonymous, could hide.

All at once I spied a group of chess players at the far end of the café. They had gathered around a chessboard, playing winner-stays-on, and the sight of the chess pieces took me back to my childhood in Munich and the memory of my mother Maria Wilhelmina. On my fourth birthday she taught me to play chess – the Game of Kings as she called it – and within a handful of years I became a strong devotee of the game who could hold his own against the best players in the city. But I had not played in many years, and now, as I gazed upon the chess enthusiasts standing around the board, I felt drawn to the game once again.

I leapt to my feet and glided towards the players.

One glance at the chessboard sufficed to ascertain that White was going to win. It was Black's move: I saw at once the imperative need to regroup his minor pieces. True, Black would lose in the end, but a stubborn defence would delay defeat. To my disappointment, Black played weakly and the game came to a premature end.

'You should have centralised your pieces,' I exclaimed.

The chess players turned to look at to me, amazed.

'No need to be surprised, gentlemen,' I said, 'there was no other way to prolong the defence.'

'I believe you're right,' said White. 'Would you care for a game?'

A game of chess! Years had passed since my last game, but I was confident that my chess skills had not deteriorated. The few moves of the game that I had witnessed convinced me that it would not be difficult to defeat them all.

I took my place at the chessboard and positioned the pieces onto their original squares. As I did so, I studied my opponent out of the corner of one eye. He was a small man, with lanky brown hair and pale skin, of about forty years. His gestures were graceful and elegant and an aura of strength and vulnerability hovered about him. He wore a white cotton suit that had seen better days.

The chess set ready, the time had come for the introductions.

'I am Kubin,' my opponent began, 'Alfred Leopold Kubin – artist.'

Meyrink's Gambit

I gave Herr Kubin a courteous bow and said, 'Meyrink. Gustav Meyrink – I am a connoisseur of strange and forgotten things.'

'I have read your stories, and they are certainly strange. But please, would you care to play white? I hope you won't be offended, but it is a tradition in this café that a new player moves first.'

I opened the game by advancing the king's pawn two squares, letting my opponent know that I favoured a game of open combat. I had never developed the sly, devious methods of some chess players, who manoeuvre their pieces behind the pawns. Attack, sacrifice and storming the castled position – these were my methods. After half a dozen opening moves, I played my gambit: I sacrificed my king's knight, forcing my opponent's king into the centre. My minor pieces took control of the central squares. I castled. I probed my opponent's position with my queen. I doubled my rooks. I embarked on a wild attack that risked all. To my delight, I saw Kubin dig into his position, seeking to block my pieces with his pawns. All at once it all came back to me: the delirious pleasure of attacking a player whose pieces were uncoordinated. In my youth, I had played many similar games and revelled in the excitement that comes from crushing one's opponent. I was convinced that victory would be mine. I felt twenty years younger. Blood pounded in my forehead.

I ordered another Hennessy while Kubin plunged deep into thought. The waiter brought my drink on a silver tray. I gulped the cognac down and waited for my opponent's resignation.

At last, Kubin made his move, thrusting a pawn against my castled king. I was forced to capture the pawn, but I did so with confidence in my game. Then – the surprise. When I least expected it, when victory seemed in my grasp, at the height of my sadistic pleasure in my opponent's cramped position, Kubin made a move that threw me: he sacrificed his knight. It was an astounding defence, all the more so as his move seemed like a mirror reflection of my own attack. I knew at a glance that my opponent had escaped defeat and I expected the game to flow quietly into a draw. But no! He began stabbing my position with his pawns, first in the centre, then on the flanks. My king's sanctuary was torn open and I made a wild bid to save the game by running my king from one side of the board to another. But my opponent's heavy

Cinnabar's Gnosis

pieces hounded the white monarch until at last he found peace at the edge of the board.

Checkmate.

The silence in the grey café roared in my ears; no one stirred. I stared at the board in disbelief, like an old man who wakes up one morning to discover that life has passed him by. Then, I heard Kubin's faraway voice.

'A brilliant attack, Herr Meyrink – a pity you could not win.'

After the game, my opponent invited me to a glass of Hennessy in a quiet alcove by a window. No sooner had we settled in our seats than I asked Herr Kubin for his opinion on our game.

'Where did I go wrong?'

Kubin shrugged his shoulders. 'Perhaps you were just unlucky.'

'Your knight sacrifice –'

'It was a random move in a desperate position.'

I laughed, 'It's kind of you to say so, Herr Kubin, but chess is a game of skill and logic.'

'I think, my friend, that you underestimate the all-pervasive nature of chance. Has it ever occurred to you that in the course of one's lifetime, we are granted certain opportunities and not others?'

'Of course – but chess is not life.'

'It is better than life! Whoever invented the game was a genius. It is the closest we have come to creating a perfect world. But even in chess we find the mysterious workings of chance.'

'Ah, Herr Kubin, I must disagree with you. The game of chess is a reflection of the human mind, and the mind works according to certain immutable laws.'

'Such as?'

'Such as love and death,' I said. 'Our lives are governed by an endless search for an ideal love and an unquenchable longing for death.'

A long pause followed. I heard the clinking of glasses as the waiter cleared a table. Night had fallen. Through the window I saw a carriage pass by, its dim lamp sputtering. Kubin lit a cigar and ordered another round of drinks.

'Once upon a time I might have agreed with you,' Kubin resumed. 'You see, as a young man, my ambition was to become a priest.'

Meyrink's Gambit

'A priest!'

Kubin brushed the newly fallen ashes off his jacket. 'That surprises you? As a collector of forgotten things, you must have come across some strange confessions. Very well, I will tell you the story of my youth. Who knows? You might use it one day.'

Kubin paused and looked at his cigar. He sipped his cognac and then began.

III

'My father was a lame wolf. At least, that's how I imagined him all through my childhood. I was afraid of his bite. I marvelled at his stern voice and passion for order. He was as old-fashioned as a Pharaoh's tomb. But I believed – or wanted to believe – that a weakness could be found in his armour. His eyes were inexhaustibly dark; his eyebrows protruded like knives from his forehead; his hands were rugged and twisted. But in my daydreams, his body took on a thin and brittle shape, like a dry old twig that snaps under one's foot.

'I grew up in Bohemia, in Litoměřice, and from a young age I proved to be a delicate and oversensitive creature. My mother was a talented pianist, but when she died – I was only ten – I told my father that I wanted to enter the priesthood; that I felt called from Another World; and I wanted my religious education to begin at once. A year later my father remarried and my stepmother – a devout woman with a passion for Bach – became enraptured by my wish to become a servant of God. But father rarely heeded her wishes. He would say that she was not the kind of woman one reads from cover to cover, and only the heavens knew why he had married her. She was attractive, yes, with vibrant young eyes and delicate hands, but my father perused her only occasionally.

'I always felt there were dark notes to my stepmother that my father did not know how to play, that behind her clear and simple manners there echoed deep melodies, hidden passions, resounding desires, and that these incomprehensible strivings had had to be channelled into music and her prayer book. A year after my mother's death, my

Cinnabar's Gnosis

stepmother also left this earth and I was apprenticed to Alois Beer, the landscape photographer. The years trickled by. But my mind was on the Other Side, and in time my father grew tired of my priestly ambitions.

'One day, he informed me that he had made arrangements for my future. I was to be enrolled in the Special Cadet Corps at Pest. The old wolf had mapped out my life and I dared not, at that young age, defy him.

'I entered the military Academy in 1896. I was nineteen, and from the first day I disliked everything and everyone around me. The regimented life was not for me and it seemed that my fellow cadets were little better than animals. They were intellectually shallow, commonplace and vulgar. There were endless demands to conform to this and that rule, and the upshot of it all was that I became a violent individualist, a silent rebel against all ties and constraints. The boys at the Academy came to hate me, called me all manner of names: a weakling, a snob, a poor sport. And the more they hated me, the stronger my individualism, the more I thirsted for freedom.

'One morning, our commanding officer – the ever-irritable Captain Pázmány – announced that in place of lessons we would go swimming, and I, who did not know how to swim and was too proud to admit it, became panicky. We were taken to a quiet spot on the Danube and allowed to swim freely, to play and enjoy ourselves. For once, Captain Pázmány did not bark orders. He remained content to watch the cadets as they strolled along the river, conversing and laughing. But I could not join in, my thoughts were focused on one thing only: how to make the officer and cadets believe that I could swim?

'A chance event came to my rescue. Two boys who had been disputing God only knew what became embroiled in an argument with fists. All attention became concentrated on the boys; our commander called out to them to cease fighting. I grasped that moment as a dying man claws for one last breath. I stole away unseen and found a secluded spot along the Danube where no one could spy on me. I waded in the shallow waters of the magnificent river – making sure to wet my hair – and then returned to the fold. I walked as close to the commanding

Meyrink's Gambit

officer as I dared. I wanted him to see the water dripping off my body and almost as soon as I had reappeared, I began to shiver from the cold.

‘The Captain saw me and called out, “Kubin! You’ve done enough swimming for today. Dry yourself and get dressed.”

‘That evening, as the lights in our sleeping hall were extinguished, I lay in bed silently gloating over my triumphant act of deception. I had fooled them all, and it had all been so simple and without effort. They were idiots, each and every one of them, and the commanding officer was the greatest idiot of them all. But my victory was short-lived, for a few days later Captain Pázmány announced that we would be returning to the river, only this time the cadets would be tested. There was to be a swimming competition with prizes and special privileges for the best swimmers. I should have gone straight to the Captain and admitted my weakness. But pride – that lascivious angel – pounded in my veins. I will learn to swim, I thought, in secret and in haste.

‘In the main building of the Academy, at the end of a long and desolate corridor, there was a swimming pool that had not been used in months. One afternoon, I slithered away unseen with the intention of practising my strokes. But the door was locked and I realised that I would have to borrow the key from the concierge – but without his knowledge.

‘Later that night, as my fellow cadets lay buried in their dreams, I threw back my bedcovers, fled the sleeping hall unseen, crossed the courtyard and entered the main building. The concierge was not in his office. Most likely, he would be prowling around, checking doors and windows. I slipped into his office, took the key to the pool from its ledger and made my way down the grim corridor where clear waters lay waiting to ambush me.

‘Inside the long swimming hall darkness throbbed. But a full moon shone through the windows and I saw no reason to light the lamp. I pondered whether I should lock myself in, but even if my absence were noted, who would think of looking for me in the pool in the blackness of night?

‘I undressed and stood by the shallow edge of the pool. I had heard that one could teach oneself to swim. But was it possible that there were rare individuals who did not need to learn, who had the knowledge

Cinnabar's Gnosis

already in their bones and in their muscles? Perhaps I was one of those rare persons. Perhaps if I dived in I would come up triumphant, a natural swimmer. The longer I stood there, the greater my conviction that I had only to dive in and all would be well. At length I walked around to the deep end, stood solemnly at the edge and thought: once again I will fool them all. When my fellow cadets next see me, they will be gazing at a competent swimmer. Who knows? I might even win the swimming prize.

I stepped out into the air and sank feet first into the water, confident that I would be buoyed up to the surface. But I continued to sink and to my surprise, I felt my feet touch the bottom of the pool. For a brief moment, the serpent of fear gripped my heart. But I took control of my reflexes. I leapt up and thrashed about as if trying to crawl my way out of a deep hole. A moment later, my head emerged on the surface. I gulped air and at once began my slow descent to the bottom. I cannot remember how many times I repeated the manoeuvre. But I do remember that as my strength gave out, a fear took hold of me – the terror of non-existence. In the end, my stamina collapsed and there came the dreadful realisation that I had muscle to make one, and only one, last desperate leap.

When my head pierced the surface of the water, I filled my lungs with air, as if hoarding precious stones for a long journey into an unknown land. Suddenly, I glimpsed a moving shadow: someone had entered the swimming hall. But I had started my final descent into the dark waters and I had not the strength to call out. I felt the liquid embrace dragging me down into blackness, and with the last grain of desire for life I lifted my arm out of the water.

Then came the incident that has haunted me ever since. As my feet touched bottom and death's dark glove began to fold around me, I saw my father at the bottom of the pool, standing proud and menacing. All at once his eyes took on a fearful shine. He looked up and began to swim away to safety. And I, in my terror of the dark waters, I held on to him, pulled him down, clawed at him to remain with me in this kingdom of no return. He fought me. He struggled to be free of my embrace and our limbs, the fleshly carriers of infinite horror, became entangled. At last, my lungs gave out and water worked its way into my being.

Meyrink's Gambit

'When I next opened my eyes, I was lying on a soft bed and could not at first understand how I had got there. Certainly, I was surprised to discover that I was still alive. Standing around the bed were two men, one dressed in white, the other in army uniform. I glanced around me and studied the scant objects in the room.

'All at once I knew: I was in the army hospital.

'It all came back to me: the key, the pool, the concierge and my unhappy attempt to teach myself to swim in the darkness of night. The man in white – a nurse – now whispered in my ear. I could not at first understand his words, but from his tone of voice I detected his concern. I must have brushed shoulders with Death; I must have been unconscious when the concierge dragged me out of the water. I turned my gaze onto the uniformed man and recognized him as my commanding officer – and my childish dreams of deceiving my peers fell to ruins.'

Kubin paused. His face had taken on a strained appearance, as if he were struggling with an unmentionable idea. He looked hard at me and went on.

'I expected to be punished. I awaited my humiliation or even expulsion from the Academy. But a strange coincidence came to my rescue and my faux pas was soon forgiven. I was given an honourable discharge: my father had collapsed and was in coma. But most uncanny of all was that he had lost consciousness on the night that I had nearly drowned. He had stopped breathing, suddenly, and without warning.'

Kubin's cigar had cooled. Our glasses were empty. The waiter was arranging the chairs in quartets on the wooden tables.

'It was rumoured later that I had attempted suicide,' said Kubin, 'and that I had had to leave the military on account of a nervous breakdown. What happened at the bottom of that pool – who can say? I knew that I was alive, not because of divine intervention or destiny, but merely because I had not – by chance – turned the key in the lock. My father survived his collapse and struggled on in ill health for a few more years. But after the incident in the pool I renounced my desire to serve God and gave myself entirely to the artistic life – as my mother would have wanted. I studied painting under the gentle guiding hand of Ludwig Schmitt-Reutte. Later, I enrolled at the Munich Academy, where I discovered the awesome prints of Max Klinger and Francisco

Cinnabar's Gnosis

Goya. And in time I became the self-absorbed and solitary artist that I am today.'

The gaslights were fluttering away one by one. The waiter brought our bill and Kubin waved to me that he would pay.

'So you see, Herr Meyrink, how chance rules our lives.'

IV

Scarcely had Meyrink concluded his extraordinary tale than we left Café Landtmann and wandered along the Ring. He accompanied me as far as the Heidenplatz before bidding me goodnight. As I made my way home, I pondered his story, but I dared not accept the premise that our lives are guided by accident and coincidence. Chess as a game of chance – a preposterous idea! And Gustav's claim that a random knight sacrifice had brought down his carefully constructed attack seemed equally absurd.

Eight months later, I had cause to remember Meyrink's prophecy.

On the morning of June 28 1914, our world was brought to ruins: Archduke Franz Ferdinand, the successor to the throne, and his wife Sophie, were assassinated at Sarajevo.

Early that morning the Archduke's motorcade had set out along the Appel Quay when, shortly after ten o'clock, an explosion shook the city. A bomb destined for the Archduke's car had been thrown wide of its mark and the Archduke remained unharmed. Some crowds scattered, others pushed their way closer to the Archduke's vehicle. Police swarmed about like frenzied bees until at length they gave the order to evacuate the devastated area.

Police now gave instructions to the chauffeur of the lead car: he was to drive his vehicle – brimming with government agents – in the direction of the garrison hospital. But the driver made a wrong turn along the Appel Quay, leading the motorcade into a side street. General Potiorek, seated in the front of the second car, noticed the mistake and called out to the lead car to turn back. Obeying these new orders, the chauffeur in the lead car stopped and prepared to make a U-turn. But as the lead car came to a halt, and with it all of the motorcade, the

Meyrink's Gambit

Archduke's car came to rest but five feet from a tall, frail youth with eyes the colour of the limitless sky.

It was Gavrilo Princip, the commander of the mission to assassinate Franz Ferdinand.

Archduke and assassin gazed at each other with fascinated eyes. Then – in a gesture both elegant and swift – Princip removed the Browning from his jacket and aimed at the Archduke. The sight of the Duchess momentarily disconcerted him and he looked away before firing twice. Blood trickled down the Duchess' silk white dress, staining her bouquet of white roses. The Archduke's mouth vomited red. Then, in a moment of insight, before death overtook him, the Archduke said, 'Little Sophie, little Sophie, don't die! Stay alive for the children!'

But little Sophie had slumped against his shoulders and even as the car sped away from the centre of violence, by the time the church bells of Sarajevo rang eleven o'clock, the Archduke and his Sophie lay eternally still.

ON CONSIDERATION OF THE MUSES

Eric Stener Carlson

Fulgencio sat at the back of the bar, down a side street off Nordeinde. On the small table in front of him, lay the crumpled telegram, a tumbler, and half a bottle of absinthe.

How many shifts of waiters had asked him to settle his bill? How many big-boned women wrapped in moldy furs had asked him for a light? His head was muddled with the mixture of voices from the bar, from the adjoining tables, from the toilette and the street, every time someone slammed the door.

Fulgencio cast a look at the wadded-up telegram. He didn't need to read it again. The words drummed in his brain: "6 de septiembre, 1930. *La Patria lo necesita*. Coronel Alvaro Lopez Kusnetzoff. Buenos Aires."

Not "*I* need you." Or "Your *mother* needs you." But "The *Fatherland* needs you..."

It'd been in all the newspapers, the coup d'etat by General José Félix Uriburu against President Hipólito Yrigoyen. And the arrests.

Fulgencio uncorked the bottle with trembling fingers and filled the green liquid to the top, a bit spilling over on the table. He licked a few drops off the flap of skin between his thumb and forefinger, and stood up, an act that took him longer than he'd expected. He raised his glass and slurred, to no one in particular, "To the Fatherland!"

A waiter turned around and looked in Fulgencio's direction, but then went back to cleaning a glass. The rest of the figures in the bar stayed where they were, hunched-over, smoking, talking in low voices.

On Consideration of the Muses

Fulgencio drained his glass quickly, half choking. Tears in his eyes, he slumped back in his chair, chipping the tumbler on the edge of the table.

He held up the tumbler and saw how it glinted under the electric lights. His head swam with the voices from the bar, the words on the telegram and the conversation he'd had with the Coronel the day they'd parted in Amsterdam the year before...

The dull light filtered through the museum window, making silhouettes of house dust and casting angular shadows of the display cases. Fulgencio peered at one of the pieces, concentrating on a small detail, where a sharp chisel had moved so skillfully that a tiny flower in the cornice looked more like tooled leather than iron. Not a visitor in a thousand would notice it, a concentrated set of pinpricks lost within the greater work.

He heard the whisper, the gentle whisper in his ear...

But then he became aware of the Coronel standing behind him, looking over his shoulder, like a bird of prey. At the sound of the Coronel clearing his throat, the whisper fled, scattering into pieces and vanishing into the silent corners of the museum.

This was the part Fulgencio hated most about these infrequent get-togethers, the small talk, the mechanical back-and-forth. He thought he'd escaped once and for all, after he'd won the scholarship. But through some awful coincidence, the Coronel had been sent to negotiate an arms purchase in Berlin and was accompanying the shipment back via the Netherlands.

Fulgencio would rather be back at the university, discussing Bosch or Bruegel. But there he was, summoned to the museum, an hour before the Coronel's ship weighed anchor. That hour was like something out of *The Golem*, "Bit by bit, time dragged on its way in ghastly, drab monotony. It was like a slow wheel of torture."

Fulgencio knew the Coronel was waiting for him to make the first move, so he asked, "How was your trip, Sir?"

"Fine," the Coronel's voice came crisp and starched, just like his uniform. "The trains on the German side are very efficient."

There was a long pause, and Fulgencio asked, "And you've been to the Rijksmuseum this morning?"

Cinnabar's Gnosis

"Yes," the Coronel answered. "I was invited by the German military attaché. . .as a courtesy."

"And you... enjoyed it?" Fulgenio asked carefully.

There was a pause, and the Coronel replied, "Some of the Greek and Roman pieces were magnificent. But as for the *modern* art," he said, sucking in his breath, "it was purely degenerate. Klee. Mondrian. Kandinsky. I can't believe the government allows them to display things like that."

Fulgenio suppressed a sigh and walked to the next display case. Over his shoulder, he said, "Well, Sir, the Dutch have a long history of liberty of expression. That's how they've attracted some of the greatest artists in the world."

The Coronel bit back, "Well, there's a fine line between liberty" and Fulgenio mouthed the words, as the Coronel finished behind him, "...and licentiousness."

Fulgenio was trying to focus on a new object, but the Coronel interrupted him, saying, "And by the look of the *connoisseurs* who were lining up to see them, I'd say they were mostly Jews. You got the *Protocols of Zion* I sent you, didn't you?"

"Uh-huh" Fulgenio said, noncommittally.

"Well, that explains it all," the Coronel continued. "The Jews control the banks and the newspapers. Now they're sticking their grubby fingers into the arts, music. Not content with that, they're funding the Soviets *and* the Americans, and they don't care who comes out on top. It was Russia first, and now Spain. . ."

The Coronel continued, but, by sheer force of concentration, Fulgenio was blocking him out, focusing on the pieces. The time it must have taken to have made them!

Again, Fulgenio heard the pleasant whispers, her lips close to his ears. She was saying...

But the Coronel's voice interrupted again, "...but things are changing. Even Yrigoyen's understood that. When he gave us the order to liquidate the anarchists, he was only recognizing the inevitable. Soon, we'll have to reorganize the whole country, weed out the Bolsheviks from the unions, the Freemasons from the Church, kick the faggots out of the schools. Anthropologists. Psychologists..."

On Consideration of the Muses

“Art History majors?” Fulgencio asked in a low voice.

There was a long pause before the Coronel answered, “That’s not what I meant. I...” and then for the first time in Fulgencio’s experience, he faltered and lapsed into silence.

It was Fulgencio’s turn again, so he asked, tentatively, “How’s Mother?” and pressed his palms against another glass case.

“She’s fine. She... misses you. Just like...” He paused again and said, “Son, I’m willing to admit I made some *miscalculations* about you, especially about military school. I can see that now. After the letter I got from you, I’m beginning to understand. There was nothing ever wrong with you. It’s...”

“Which letter?”

“The last one...” the Coronel said, and unbuttoned his shirt pocket, taking out a carefully-folded sheet of onion-paper. He opened it gently and scanned it for a moment. He cleared his throat and said, “The one about this painting by Israëls... Now, I won’t quibble about his Jewishness... That’s not why I’m bringing it up. It’s the one called, uh...”

“*Sad Thoughts*,” Fulgencio said.

“Yes,” the Coronel said. “You wrote about this girl staring into the darkness, and her physiognomy or something...” Scanning the lines, he said, “You quote a book about, uh, the nature of emotion... Oh, that’s not it. It’s... I can’t find it,” he said, getting flustered.

Carefully creasing the letter, putting it back in his front pocket and buttoning it up, the Coronel said, “You wrote that the painting itself possessed the...”

“Soul,” Fulgencio finished. “Yes, the painting captured the very darkness and desolation of the model, the soul of the woman being painted.”

“That’s it!” the Coronel said, and the sudden exhilaration in his voice made Fulgencio jump. “You see, I think I finally understand... I’ve found a way to understand you. You wrote that, in an extraordinary piece of art, the subject’s and the painter’s soul combines.

“Now that’s something I can understand. You see, the day before I interrogate someone, I don’t eat or drink. I get down on my knees on the hard wooden floor, and I pray that God finds me worthy to do His work. Do you see what I mean?”

Cinnabar's Gnosis

Fulgencio felt his mouth going dry, and he gripped the corner of the display case, to hide the fact that his hands were beginning to shake.

"I give my soul to the operation, and they give *their* souls, and the instruments we use... our *art* is infused with both our spirits. I don't know how to put it... like building a bridge together.

"You're probably too young to remember this, but when I was sent to Patagonia in 1921, I was in charge of putting down an insurrection at a small sheep station. We'd arrested a young girl about your age, who'd been providing food to her brother, a union rabble-rouser."

Fulgencio still didn't turn around, but, by the tone of the Coronel's voice, he imagined he had that far-away, glassy look. "She was of no value, but we needed her to get to him," the Coronel continued. "I had just cranked the dynamo and applied the wire, when I felt a surge of energy. Not a shock, not a short-circuit. I'm sure of that, because we have to try it on ourselves during training, and I know what it feels like. But a commingling of the souls.

"What I mean to say is that look on her face was just the way you described the girl in the painting... desperate, hopeless. And that's why..."

"That's why you brought me here today?" Fulgencio asked, his chest constricting.

"Yes, to this special exhibition. I thought if you saw these objects, if you appreciated them from an *artistic* point of view... then maybe you'd understand what I'm doing for you and for your mother every single day... to protect you."

Fulgencio felt a sudden desire to bolt from the room, but the Coronel placed a hand on his shoulder, and he felt it sink into his flesh like a talon. "When you were a little boy, and you painted, you said you heard a woman's voice. What did you call it?"

"M-my Muse," Fulgencio stammered.

"I know I punished you when you said that, because I thought it was sign of weakness. Now I can see I was wrong. Because... I've heard her. I've felt her, too. In the screams, in the struggling against the restraints, I can hear traces of a voice, smooth and soft like a lullaby..."

Fulgencio shut his eyes tight for moment and put his hands over his ears, blocking out everything the Coronel said.

On Consideration of the Muses

But the Coronel leaned close, and pulled down Fulgencio's hands to his side. He said, insistently, "I know we've had our differences, and I'm mostly to blame. But now, can't you see, your fight is my fight? The enemy of the Fatherland is the enemy of art, because the same parasites who'd put a bomb in the army barracks would burn down your Gemeentemuseum in the blink of an eye."

Fulgencio didn't respond, staring at the display case in front of him.

The Coronel cleared his throat again and said, "Things are changing. Soon, we're going to take back the country from the Zionists and the perverts. And we'll need men like you with... *artistic sensibilities*. Men who have a vision, who know what's right.

"When the time is right, I'll call you back. I'll tell you when the Fatherland needs you... and you can come home."



Fulgencio felt the effects of the absinthe. He was at the bar and at the museum and at the university all at once. He was painting while his father was interrogating. He was studying to escape Buenos Aires, and he was embracing his father. And the girl in the painting was tied to his table, and she and the old whores at the bar and his mother were one.

Fulgencio looked at the tumbler with the chipped edge he was holding, and it was no longer a tumbler but one of the objects from the museum.

He held the handle of those intricately-designed bellows they'd used during the Inquisition, to pump victims' lungs until they burst. The handles on this piece were so beautifully wrought, ivory and mahogany, with an inlay of silver snakes, thin as tapeworms, winding themselves all the way up its length.

Then in his hand was the iron pear that had fascinated him from the very beginning, with the delicate etchings of angels' wings.

In the dark corner of the bar, Fulgencio saw the artisan, slaving away in his workshop late into the night, only a fat-filled lamp, sputtering and burning to light his progress. Rough hands, caked with calluses, bits of metal ground into his palms over the years. Above the

Cinnabar's Gnosis

noise of the cash register and the opening and closing door, he heard the pounding of the heavy hammer as the artist heated that metal blob, and pounded again and again.

And then, that other artist, the interrogating priest, inserted the pear deep inside the victim's body, every rippling fold and nub of iron, cherry-hot and smoking, searing its form onto the flesh, remolding it in that pattern.

This was the artist's spirit reasserting itself upon the mind, upon the body, pure art, pure soul. As if everything between cave paintings and Dadaism were wiped away, and the world was clean and made sense again.

As Fulgencio filled his glass again and put it to his lips, he felt her fingertips playing up and down his back, caressing every vertebra. He felt her lips pressed to his ear, as she cooed softly.

She was Kalliope, the muse the Ancients once called "she of the beautiful voice", and he realized the truth that Meyrink had written, "But it seems that we must allow life to torture us almost to death before we finally grasp the key."

THE AGE OF DECAYED FUTURITY

Mark Samuels

Last night I finished work on my fourth novel. It is my greatest achievement, I think.

It was an incredibly untidy business. The results are scattered about all over this room in a hotel by the Baltic Sea, and I really must collate the myriad pages. I have been a victim of that unique mental fever from which only writers suffer. It is a malady brought on by a combination of a retreat into the inner world of the imagination and too much intense concentration. In this state the real world loses substantiality, and dream-like visions from the depths of imagination take over completely.

I really had no idea just how quickly and intensively I would work. My first three novels had each taken at least two years to finish. Yet here I am surrounded by the first draft of my fourth after only two weeks. True, I have slept very little. But, above all, it was inspiration that took hold. Though perhaps *inspiration* is too weak a word for it. Let's say, more precisely, *synchronicity*.

For it was here that I learnt of the Reassembly Cartel.

In six months I had written nothing and it is upon my literary products that my continued existence is dependent. The reputation I had established floundered, my agent Leszek Choszcz had almost given up hope that any more worthwhile work would appear from my pen. My past books were out of print and my royalties were drying up. What money I had put aside during the period of my critical and popular acclaim was almost exhausted.

I came to the Grand Hotel in Sopot after he (my agent that is) recommended the place to me. He said that the hotel would provide all

Cinnabar's Gnosis

the things I was used to in Warsaw, but with none of the distractions. He told me that Marlene Dietrich and Adolf Hitler had both stayed here.

Does one consider a pleasant view a distraction to writing? I suppose it depends on the author. The view from my room afforded a view of the sea, the beach, and the Sopot Pier, the longest in Europe, its gaunt skeletal structure reaching several hundred metres out to sea. However, being mid-Winter, at least the place would not be overrun with tourists swarming like ants.

What I hadn't known was that Leszek was coming down to stay in the hotel for some of the time, doubtless to monitor my progress and keep me on the straight and narrow.

He fancies himself an expert on the minds of writers.

Do you know the difference between psychiatrists and psychologists? The former are medically trained and are proper doctors. More importantly they can therefore also issue prescriptions. All one needs to do is to read up on symptoms beforehand, and then it is quite easy to obtain the drugs one requires in order to work, albeit not necessarily what one needs for long term health. I once spoke with a delightful and terribly revealing young male student doctor who told me the consultative aid most at use within the state-funded Health Service is something called the wikipedia on a computer.

Doctors fear displaying ignorance when it comes to making a diagnosis.

But I have long distrusted all doctors. As most right-minded women do. Doctors are too male and intrusive. Even the female ones. Filled with a sense of self-importance. They can't leave nature alone. They always want to meddle with it.

My name is Joanna Wolski. Perhaps, if you read books (so few nowadays seem to), you might have heard of me. I am a widow, and the author of three novels. Communist science fiction was huge in the 1960s, back in the days of the People's Republic. Even if you *have* heard of me, you *will not* be aware my thighs are dotted with little round burns. Often, when I am smoking and absolutely alone, I turn up my skirt and press the burning tip of my cigarette onto the cold white flesh of my thighs. The pain temporarily distracts me from the anguish I still feel at the loss of my very dear, late husband.

The Age of Decayed Futurity

Any honest liar can write acclaimed fiction.

Nowadays the reading public don't care about anything other than a cheap thrill.

All that's important is finding the right thrill at the right time for the right audience.



When I first learnt of the Reassembly Cartel, I thought that they were just another of those conspiracy theories, such as the faked moon landing, the C.I.A. being behind 9/11 and secret alien – or Nazi – UFOs. Many of my acquaintances had an interest in such monomanias. They have, no doubt, become the new articles of faith for those who reject the orthodox delusions like Christianity.

For my part, I smiled good-naturedly at their follies, feigned interest where required and popped another pill in order to deal with the problem of existing in an alien universe.

This is how it happened.

It was at a late night soiree given by Leszek Choszcz in the restaurant of the Sopot Grand Hotel that the conversation around the dinner table turned upon dead literary genres. Waving away the offer of a refill from a bottle of Chateau de Tours that was being passed anti-clockwise from person to person by the waiter, I made a comment about the reactionary appeal of ghost stories, and how the advent of electricity and socialism had largely killed off that genre.

When I made this remark one of our dinner guests, a former U.S. television soap-opera actor called Eugeniusz Kowalski overturned his wine glass, spilling the dark red liquid onto the white tablecloth.

He was also one of Leszek's clients, but this was the first time I'd met him. Kowalski was not someone you would forget.

He had obviously been in an accident of some kind. His disfigurement was shocking, for his face was a mass of overlapping scar tissue covering a severely misshapen skull. He looked like a gargoyle.

"If you were aware of the Reassembly Cartel," he said, "you would not be so quick to dismiss the idea of revenants."

"Then what, exactly," I replied, "is this 'Reassembly Cartel'?"

Cinnabar's Gnosis

“It is a front group of billionaires with absolute power over human society. Their combined wealth is greater than any single nation state. But their names will be unfamiliar to you, because their identities are secret. They have no need of identification when they own whole continents. The greatest power in the world is now located in Los Angeles, U.S.A.”

“But the cartel’s existence has been reported in the media?” I said.

“They own the media. Nothing is said without their approval. They also control internet search engines.”

He had fallen into my trap.

“Then how do *you* know about the existence of this cartel?” I said, having impaled his ugly little moth of a claim, or so I thought.

“This face is my evidence,” he said, waving his hand in front of it, “I am an individual whom they seek to destroy. A gamekeeper turned poacher.”

He then told a convoluted and fantastic tale, one that I will attempt to repeat in this narrative with as much impartiality as I can. At the time I believed little of it, and my conviction that he was telling the truth came shortly afterwards.



We actors are close to God, I think.

People think of us as superficial, as just playing roles on the stage or screen. But it is a vocation much more significant than that. Actors have to make the attempt to try and *become* people who are not themselves, and to see life through their eyes.

I wanted to be a great actor. A Hollywood star.

In order to do so, talent is not enough, although *without* talent it is impossible. But there are those who will succeed, and those that will fail, and the only difference between them is not their talent (a question of degree) but whether they recognise that they do not work in a void.

Charm, contacts (*contacts! contacts! contacts!*), self-assertion and the seizing of opportunities are crucial. An actor cannot concern himself with anything other than furthering his own career. Why? Simple, and it is the golden rule of success; look out for number one as nobody else

The Age of Decayed Futurity

will do so. But above all, give praise, praise, praise, to those who you think may be useful.

Without publicity the actor becomes nothing.

The great actor remains in darkness, a mere nothing on the stage, unless he has the spotlight turned upon him.

Of that, I am convinced.

Ludwik Solski Theatre School, a long stint in flea-pit Krakow theatres, Program Three Polskie Radio, and then state television TVP 2.

I eventually appeared in a Polish film with English dialogue that did big box-office in the States, and from then on success seemed assured.

I knew, from the moment I arrived in L.A., and was picked up from the airport by limousine, that the hidden forces had brought me to them, right into the heartland of real power.

I soon secured a lead role in the network syndicated TV series *The Greatest Victory*, in which I portrayed a psychopathic British officer during the American War of Independence. My character, Cecil, the 11th Earl of Worcester, sexually abused children and put rebels into proto-concentration camps where the captives were dissected and then fed, still alive, to the pet pigs of the goose-stepping Redcoats.

I was invited to Hollywood parties in Beverly Hills, where the coke was pure and the women beautiful and filthy. I mingled with porn stars, rock stars, TV stars and film stars.

But I made a mistake. At the time I thought it little more than a faux pas, but it's the reason my face looks like this.

It was the Polish accent that first caught my attention. Unusual, of course, in L.A., hence, one's antennae still go up.

I looked across the ranks of the glitterati, sipping at my dry martini, trying to dodge the cocktail stick skewering an olive, and spotted the source of the voice. It came from a tall, bearded man with a black cloth wrapped around his forehead like a bandana. He was surrounded by a group of bored looking celebs. He looked rather like an Orthodox Jew, except for one strange detail. His complexion had a green tinge about it, as if he were using some outlandish foundation make-up on his skin.

"I do not mean," the bearded man said, "class war, cultural equality or the redistribution of wealth. Socialism is dead. This is something

Cinnabar's Gnosis

else altogether. The New Revolution will be when the unknown masses rise up to destroy the power behind celebrity. This power creates the idiot sports players, cretinous pop stars and soap opera mannequins who hypnotise the masses. The forces behind the media are more powerful in this world than are politicians. The greatest act of terrorism right now would be for the public to destroy their television sets and mobile phones, burn down the cinemas and throw their computers out the window. I want to see all commentators, newsreaders and media moguls dangling from lamp-posts. They have turned the people of the Western world into gaping-mouthed zombies staring at a screen all their lives. Their goal is to extend their control over as much, too, of the East as they can.”

“What about the internet?” Someone interjected, “that’s not controlled, is it?”

He scarcely missed a beat.

“Big Business can shut down anything they like and dictate to governments. On the internet people think they have freedom of expression. But how can mankind communicate when everyone talks at the same time, and instead of listening, insists upon the *right to talk over* everyone else?”

The man stumbled a little on his feet. He was obviously blotto. But he held the attention of those around him. It was indeed remarkable that this soak felt he had the right to lambast the very entertainment culture that was providing him with the bourbon he was consuming at a prodigious rate.

Someone nudged my shoulder and I turned to look straight into the eyes of a person who looked like Humphrey Bogart after half a dozen facelifts.

“Crazy fucking Polack,” he drawled, “talking like that. Just because he used to be a big shot director.”

And then I realised who the ‘crazy fucking Polack’ was – Marek Zapolska. He’d given up on the studio system in the nineties, and gone independent after a series of blockbuster movies during the eighties. He’d been married to a string of Hollywood actresses, practically launching them to mega-stardom, all of a type: blonde, slim, stunning and at least six foot tall.

The Age of Decayed Futurity

“The cult of Celebrity is killing our ability to determine our own values. The famous have the aura of magic, of power about them. We hold them in awe because of their appearances on the electronic altar; we worship the manifestations of these gods at the exact same time each day or week as in a ritual. And to see them in the flesh! Why, it is as if they have descended from Olympus to walk amongst mere mortals and grace them with their presence! Snatch their autographs before it is too late! Take a photo to record a brief sojourn on earth before they return to their own electronic dimension!”

It was hard not to laugh at the hypocritical prick. As if anyone would be bothering to listen to him if he were not a product of the very system he now appeared to despise. Perhaps his supply of tall twenty-year blondes had finally dried up.

The plastic-faced Humphrey Bogart at my elbow had wandered off somewhere, perhaps for a smoke outside, and I edged my way closer to the circle of people surrounding Marek Zapolska. I had the feeling he was leading up to something, and I wanted to be there, just in case. The old instinct I had for seeing an opening to my advantage wasn't wrong, either.

“It makes no difference if you are of the right or of the left... the cult of Celebrity is in itself apolitical. In the modern world adherents of both political wings cry out for it, for no longer is knowledge power. Knowledge is only that junk which the leaders allow to be revealed to the masses through the mass media. Knowledge can only be increased depending upon the accuracy of the information to which we have access. POWER is knowledge. And power is best achieved through celebrity. Nothing else in this world is of any worth. Fame, notoriety, recognition are everything. That's why my next film will be an satirical expose of the whole rotten system and the power behind it. It'll be my biggest sensation since *The Evil of Science*. I'm going to call it *Simpli-cissimus* in honour of my favourite author Gustav Meyrink.”

Like a piranha drawn by blood in the water, I had darted through the weeds separating me from my prey, and was now close enough to Zapolska to make direct eye-contact.

“Of course,” I said, in Polish, attracting the attention of the legendary director and all those surrounding him, “you'd need the right

Cinnabar's Gnosis

actor in the lead, someone who's not been corrupted by all the bullshit and treason to self-integrity that Hollywood requires. Perhaps even a fellow countryman!"

What was required to impress Marek Zapolska, in this instance, was a little European cultural snobbery. If that's what it took to get a part in his film, that's the role I'd play. Not much more than a minor detail to someone who'd starred as the psychopathic 11th Earl of Worcester ("The Butcher of Virginia") on cable TV.

"You're that Polish *kurwa* from the television series that portrays the British as a bunch of Nazis during the American War of Independence, aren't you?" Zapolska shot back in English (apart from the expletive). He was known as an ardent Anglophile, having lived in London for ten years during the sixties. His father had fought and died with the RAF during the Second World War.

I was not sure that any of the Americans present understood precisely the meaning of the word "kurwa", but the overall hostility came across clearly enough.

"Then again maybe you're just what I need to make my point. I like the ironic angle. An aspiring actor who's a part of the corruption, playing the role of a character dedicated to stamping it out." Zapolska said.

And so that's how I got the part.

I wish to God I hadn't. I had no idea what I was up against.

They say all publicity is good publicity. Well, they lie. Sometimes drawing attention to one's self is a bad mistake, especially when there are revelations that the powers don't want out in the open. Zapolska's film was poison to the industry. I hitched my star to it simply for the sake of notoriety. I was more than willing to play their game once I was in a position to do so. But I was stupid. I'd crossed the line.

Four weeks later the film *Simplicissimus* went into production. Zapolska had no need to worry about financing. His personal wealth was astronomical. But he had problems getting crew from the start. The project had already attracted negative comments from the trade papers, and people in the industry were warned off by a whispering campaign. Nevertheless, somehow, Zapolska got a cast and crew together. It was a combination of loyal veterans and newcomers, people that Hollywood couldn't control.

The Age of Decayed Futurity

You probably all know those stories about Hollywood films that are cursed: *The Omen*, *Rosemary's Baby* and *The Exorcist*. Certain events portrayed in those movies subsequently took place in real life and happened to cast and crew members. People struck by lightning or decapitated. The ritual murder of Sharon Tate. Insanity indistinguishable from demonic possession. Our film wasn't supernatural, but it still dealt with a conspiracy of silence, one that would kill in order to keep its secrets.

Well, you won't be surprised to learn that people started dying. At first they'd just disappear. We lost our Key Grip a week into shooting. He vanished. Just didn't show up on day seven. No-one ever heard from him again. The Chief Hair Stylist fell off a tenth floor balcony in a condo on Playa Vista on day nine. Our 1st Assistant Camera was mown down by a hit and run driver on Santa Monica Boulevard in broad daylight. The car had mounted the sidewalk. That was on day twelve.

Zapolska was phlegmatic.

"I expected all this shit," he said to me as we going over some changes to my lines in his fourteen million dollar mansion off Mulholland Drive. We were sitting out back, by the Olympic-size pool, drinking bourbon and watching the lights of downtown L.A. twinkle in the smog. He'd played a couple of rounds of golf with his neighbour Jack Nicholson earlier in the day, and said he'd taken fifteen grand off the son-of-a-bitch. So he was celebrating.

"One of us has to go," Zapolska said, pushing his reading glasses up the bridge of his nose, "either me or Hollywood. And it ain't going to be me sonny boy. Not Marek Zapolska. No way."

I was suddenly aware of the enormity of his ego. Christ, my own was big enough. But only a Hollywood director who had been indulged in his every whim since he was a twenty three year old prodigy, a man who had been isolated from reality for twenty years, cocooned by fabulous wealth and acclaim, could have seriously thought he could take on the whole of tinsel town and bring it down.

"If need be, I'd gladly sacrifice the life of every bastard working on this picture in order to get it made. I don't care if I have to assemble a cast and crew a dozen times over." He said. And then he told me the

Cinnabar's Gnosis

true secret behind the Reassembly Cartel; the recondite forces behind the billionaires.

I believed him. And I decided then and there to get out. If I'd made the decision a day earlier, it would have been made in time. But I was too late.

Although Zapolska had no way of knowing, I was going to offer my services to the other side. I'd sell my story to the papers, tell them all that Zapolska was a fraud, get maximum publicity and get back onside with the Hollywood system.

I was smiling to myself as I drove back towards the intersection with the Valley Circle Boulevard. It was as I approached a sharp bend at sixty miles an hour that my smile drained away. I pumped the brake pedal, but nothing happened, and the next thing I knew my Ford Explorer had hit the crash barrier, flipped right over it and catapulted into the woodland decline on the other side. The last thing I remember, a split second before unconsciousness, was that the air bag on my side didn't inflate.



Eugeniusz Kowalski had finished his tale. He didn't bother to add that his disfigurement was the consequence of this accident. It seemed self-evident.

"So there you have it. End of my career." He said. "Six days later and the 'Zapolska Mystery' was born. The butler said he'd come into Zapolska's bedroom to bring him his breakfast on a tray as usual. But all that was left of Zapolska was a huge mass of green vomit all over the bed. No-one could explain it. But I believe that he'd puked himself inside out with disgust. Those he sought to oppose had caused him to change form. They made him turn into a symbol of all that he detested."

"But you haven't explained anything at all about the secret of the so-called Reassembly Cartel." I asked.

"You really want to know? OK, here's what Zapolska told me."

Kowalski paused and took a deep breath. I noticed his hands were trembling.

"The forces behind the Reassembly Cartel," Kowalski said, dropping his voice to a whisper, "are all dead souls seeking to take over our world

The Age of Decayed Futurity

for their own purpose. They have no existence aside from electronic media; but they feed on real life. They're broadcast ghouls from an already hideously decayed future. What people think they see in the street, at openings etc, are manufactured simulacra of humans employed by a world-wide media conspiracy to keep the truth from the masses. The actual celebrities are manufactured in the broadcast factories of the future. The reality is just the same transmissions bouncing around forever.

You see, this future world is a condition for the persistence of our own world. Its geography is seen in the video recordings of UHF frequencies between TV channels, consisting of immense glaciers of static, the leftover radiation from the Big Bang. The future world is being backwardly projected in time, and it is comprised of anti-matter and controlled by the dead.

The final goal of the Reassembly Cartel is a world of mental zombies who do nothing but mindlessly regurgitate the poisonous froth of broadcast infotainment.

The future is already finished. It's over, and what we're getting is advance notice as the nature of time itself begins to rot away."

There was an uncomfortable silence around the table once his final words had died away.

Then, shockingly, Eugeniusz Kowalski got to his feet and began screaming. None of us could calm him down. There was a huge rumpus with the waiter in the restaurant hotel, and half the diners were put off their suppers.

Kowalski was finally taken away in an ambulance.

I heard later that he screamed himself to death in the hospital to which he'd been taken. They tried sedatives, but he didn't, or couldn't, stop screaming and he finally died after bursting a blood vessel in his throat.

Like the death of a character in a cheap horror movie.



The following morning I knew that the plot for my next novel had fallen into my lap. The delusions of Eugeniusz Kowalski and Marek Zapolska would form its basis. Except that, rather than its existence

Cinnabar's Gnosis

being the obvious product of paranoid fantasy, the Reassembly Cartel would be revealed as actually controlling human affairs in secret and moulding reality to its own design.

I did not mention the idea to Leszek, for I hated discussing a work in progress, especially during its formative stage, and thereby giving away any indication as to its theme. Nevertheless, given what had occurred the previous evening with Eugeniusz Kowalski, I wondered whether Leszek did not suspect my intent, when I told him over breakfast that I was now ready to commence work.

His job done, Leszek went back to Warsaw.

All I had to do was turn on the television set in my room.

At first the images were conventional enough, but the more of it I watched, steeling myself to bear talkshows, adverts, soap-operas and all manner of junk, the more I came to recognise the truth of what Eugeniusz Kowalski had claimed. It was necessary to look out for those moments when the person (or rather the dead shell) on the screen was actually trying to communicate directly with me, the viewer. Isolated phrases took on significance, and when one collated these isolated phrases, a pattern emerged.

I discovered, after only two days of continuous viewing, without sleep, and kept awake by amphetamines, that the world of electronic signals is actually the real world and the one outside, *our one*, is a fake.



This is the beginning of a new age. I have been busy, working on my magnum opus. More than ever I am convinced of its significance.

As it sets the dead sun throws long black shadows across the frozen beach.

I am wrapped in blankets, sitting on the balcony outside my hotel room and looking out over the seafront. My breath is a ghostly vapour. The Promenade is deserted. I haven't seen a soul of late. Everyone appears to have fled the approaching wall of icy static.

I am a last witness to its advance. It rears up now in the middle distance like a titanic cliff-face, blotting out a swathe of the thin blue

The Age of Decayed Futurity

sky. And there is a deafening roaring and crashing as the electronic glacier bears down inexorably on the land, a sound like millions of television screens exploding, blown apart from within by nightmare images. I see glimpses of invading giant hordes of deformed crabs with gargoyle heads and green faces, revealing the shape we shall assume in hell. The monstrous glacier of static consumes the pier in a grainy haze, obscuring its skeletal iron structure from view.

In my rigid right hand I clutch a pen. On my lap is a pad of paper. My fingers are numb, riddled with black frostbite, but I write on, page after page, consumed by the desire to set down in writing the images flooding into my mind. It is an effortless though frantic undertaking. Sometimes I close my fingers into a fist, digging the nails into the ball of my hand, but still clutching the pen, forcing it across the page time and time again.

I have crossed over. I am now inside the other world. I have become one with the electric cosmos of the dead.

There is nothing to do but write. I must write before I am consumed by outside forces. At all costs I must write. I will write anything to stay alive. To remain alive means to write.

No one is around to recoil at the sight of what I have done to myself.

My lips are chapped with the cold. I can barely move them. My teeth chatter in my mouth.

I stopped feeling sensation in my feet days ago. When I unwrapped the towels wound around the lower parts of my legs, I tore away strips of green and black flesh that had adhered to the fabric. Below the knee my limbs were gangrenous. The same thing is happening to my hands, my nose, and my ears. I crawl around on my belly, like some aimless crab, moving from one sheet of paper to another, writing and writing and writing and writing, until I can finish what I have begun, and before the wall of static obliterates everything in its path.



“Joanna Wolski?” Leszek Choszcz snorted and shook his head ruefully. “At my suggestion she took herself off to that flashy northern seaside resort in the Pomerian Voivodeship. The last I saw of the woman was

Cinnabar's Gnosis

at a hotel dinner party at the Grand Hotel that I threw for her, and where she'd screamed her head off."

"So her fourth novel was not completed?" Said the publisher.

"Completed?" He replied, "why, it wasn't even properly begun. They found the poor woman dead in her hotel room. She'd perished of hypothermia. Forced open all the windows and fallen asleep naked on the tenth floor watching television. It was below freezing that night. As if that were not fantastic enough, apparently there was some talk of self-mutilation too. Quite, quite horrible."

"But what about the book? How do you know it was never begun?"

"I saw the manuscript after her death. Wolski had numbered four hundred and fifteen sheets of blank paper. They were scattered all over the hotel room. There were only a few pages of mystical gibberish – geometrical signs – scrawled on those crumpled, empty pages. Naturally I destroyed them for the sake of her reputation."

POČÁTEK ROMÁNU:
A FLUTTER OF LORN LOVE

Albert Power

*“An uncanny, automatic act of imitation, unconscious, perpetual,
the hidden guide of every creature!”*

Gustav Meyrink, *Dr. Cinderella's Plants*

When, arriving each by separately hired motor cab, Captain Roderick Hull and Tobias Barre found themselves standing side by side before the semi-circle of three steps that led to the covered porch of Hensman House, a small way back from Stranmillis Gardens, the military man, lately on leave from the mud and blood of the Front, was puzzled to discover his companion alone.

‘Countess Kazynska?’ inquired Captain Hull when the brisk business of hand-shaking had been dutifully completed.

Tobias Barre, a freelance consulting engineer who once it was said had been retained for intricate piston shaft advice by the shipbuilders, Harland and Wolff, permitted himself a half smile. ‘Olinka. Ah, Olinka comes under her own steam – most times, anyway.’ Lifting a palm to his mouth, he gave a short dry cough. ‘She’s entirely a free agent in these matters, I hope you know.’

Whereon Captain Hull gripped the wolf-headed brass door knocker and let out two resounding raps. Standing back, he tugged upon his gilt watch fob. Two minutes past four o’clock. Hmm! If the Countess Olinka Kazynska had already arrived by her own devices, then she’d plainly made it her business to get there early.

Cinnabar's Gnosis

Perhaps five seconds, no more, elapsed before the oak-panelled hall door was drawn sonorously back. In its breach stood the pretty, pale personage of Rosanna Carter, a piquant sight to male eyes in her trim black and white housemaid's uniform, and with her chic jet black curls incompletely hidden under a starched bob-cap.

'This way, gentlemen – if you'll follow after me,' announced the none too demure-seeming maiden of service in the sharp upward-rising lilt recognisable as from Catholic west Belfast. Was it no more than cowed fantasy bestirred by Captain Hull's long endured duet with the mud-sputting daily threat of death in Flanders, or had that black-stockinged delectation on sleek legs a tendency to waggle her bottom as she led them towards the inner dark of Hensman House?

'Rum enough cove, this Valens, to keep a retinue all of papists on his staff – as I hear' muttered Barre *sotto voce*, while the pair made a discernible effort to keep up with their swiftly strutting conductress.

'Best for his own peculiar purposes, I should think, to have the domestic contingent – ah, virtuous.' Roderick Hull's retort was offered in a hurried whisper. Around them the densely wallpapered entrance area was receding and an aura of deep shadow involved the open high-domed tract of penetralium through which they were now being led.

'Virtuous be damned! Don't they all, at the instant bidding of their priests, bend down and breed like a stud farm of billygoats?'

'S-shh!'

Apart from the fact that the engineer's imperfectly subdued voice was resonating in their present vault-like environment, another urgent cause had emerged which counselled caution. This was the six-foot tall figure in sombre attire that loomed up of a sudden in the great hallway before them, bringing the energetic stride of Rosanna Carter to a crushingly brusque halt.

'Away wi' ye, girl – I'll take 'em on.'

The deep-sounding tones from this imposing entity's chest cavity were not unkindly delivered, but even so had the instant effect of sending the vestigial virgin of the doors scuttling away.

Hull recognised the unforgettable form and dour rugged features of Ionsain Ó Daonlathasach. This was their host's dedicated 'man' – butler,

Počátek Románu: A Flutter of Lorn Love

porter, aide, maybe even *confidant* – whom he last recalled having seen chauffeur away Theodricus Valens in his bottle green Chevrolet ‘490’, at the end of the night of their first encounter last week in the Ulster Hibernian Club. Tobias Barre and Countess Olinka Kazynska had been part of that group, and had arrived and left together somewhat before he had; which was what inclined Hull to conclude they must be some kind of item. Not necessarily, of course. A man and a woman can come and go in polite society without any kind of compact between them. Pulling upon his cigar, Hull had looked on in admiring envy as Theodricus Valens had been driven off by Ionsain Ó Daonlathasach in his sleek green Chevrolet to his three-story, ivy-encrusted, bay window-buttressed mid-Victorian mansion in the leafy embrasure of the Botanic Gardens beside the Queen’s University sports ground; a haven of snug securement which, like a genteel matron, drew some discreet paces back from the embowered corner of Colenso Parade and Stranmillis Gardens.

Now a high double door of dark mahogany was being pushed open and, with a deferential bow which embodied a striking display of elegance as performed by one so tall, the butler Ó Daonlathasach ushered in the guests and noiselessly withdrew.

Captain Hull and Tobias Barre found themselves on the threshold of a large and overall umbrose reception room which at a glance proclaimed profusion of opulent appointment. Abundance of costly furnishings – armchairs, settees, cocktail tables, an antique cedar wood drinks trolley, and a motley of what appeared to be ornamental music boxes – were festooned all about like a fleet of riggingless frigates. By way of exception to the general pattern, a short track of uncluttered carpet led to the white marble-topped grate, with its belly of mellow flame, flanked by a brace of ribbed Doric columns, before which stood their host, Theodricus Valens, awaiting them. Almost could the newly arrived pair feel their feet sink into the yielding plushness of the mottled green and purple Persian carpet, as they padded forward to be received.

When first they had met him, last Friday, at the Ulster Hibernian Club, and he regaled the dull latter end of a smoke-tanged evening with expatiations on theosophy and the lone pilgrim journey of the soul, Theodricus Valens, like all the other men there, had been clad in black-tailed evening attire. It had been his pleasure, after only an hour in their

Cinnabar's Gnosis

company and that of Countess Kazynska, to invite all three of them for afternoon refreshments *domi*. Now, in the comfort of his lordly residence known as Hensman House, which he had taken under lease from the year before the start of the War, he was habilimented in the flowing purple robe, lined with deep scarlet satin, of a mystic or seer. A close-fitting chemise of a more subdued shade of purple culminated in a high choker. But this was blanched quite to insignificance by the large gold pendant in the design of a shamrock stretched to form the four corners of the Cross, which was hung around his neck like a thurible by a fine-linked chain.

'So good of you gentlemen to come,' he greeted them in a mellow voice that was only slightly accented with the nasal timbre of his Slavic homeland. Valens was believed to hail from Olomouc and to have settled with a deep-pocketed pension in Belfast for just long enough before the War not to be a concern to military intelligence.

Each man shook him by the hand and made a short courteous bow; Captain Hull, who came second, observing in silent wonderment the soft leather tan slippers that tapered up, like a Chinaman's shoes, to a narrow point topped with a pearl of opal.

As their swathed host stood before them in polite confabulation, the great mirror that hung above the mantelpiece, throwing up the sybaritic richness of the room to their rear, made him seem like the priestly custodian of some hidden recess wherein the arcana of all creation, even the ultimate purpose of life itself, lay waiting to be probed. From the front, nothing quite so awesome – a thin austere physique of middle height, culminating in a thin austere pate, mainly bald, save for a crisp mustardy moustache and like-coloured coiffure cropped about the outer rim of his scalp. Indeed, their host's one claim to physical distinction was in the nature of a blemish. Along the left side of his face, from the jut of his high cheek bone to an inch or so aside from the refined flare of the nostril, swept the arc of a deep gash. Of a livid hue, it extended about the length of a little finger and was reputed to have been received in a duel of honour, from which, despite its disfiguring memento, Valens, consummate swordsman that he was known to be, had risen triumphant.

'But I forget my manners, gentlemen – quite,' said the Czech in a blandishing murmur, and he gestured, with a bow, to their right, where a pallid, raven-tressed slip of aristocratic young womanhood lay stretched

Počátek Románu: A Flutter of Lorn Love

out on a divan beside the wall, a perfume-exhaling cigarette holder poised between her thumb and two dainty fingers.

‘The Countess.’

And the three sloped across to where this doyenne of exquisite refinement, styled Countess Olinka Kazynska, permitted them to implant a demure kiss on her raised left hand – the hand that was idle of engagement with her lavender-wafting weed. Hull could not but notice that their host, who presumably had gone through this *faux gallant* procedure already upon the lady’s arrival, seemed to linger his pursing lips a touch longer on her raised knuckles than either he or Tobias Barre ventured to do, although Olinka Kazynska and the industrial engineer contrived, as he saw, to trade gazes in a way that might betoken meaning. Why *had* this mysterious and mystifying parcel of wan-cheeked desire come here ahead of the other two, Hull found himself wondering once more.

Then Valens gave a light clap, and tugged upon a bell pull that seemed to merge into a mauve strip of curtain just above the lady’s divan. Next, he gestured the two gentlemen to a pair of armchairs close by, their cushion covers stitched in thread of old gold upon purple velvet after the fashion of springing dragons. His own wiry body he slunk upon a low footstool located at Olinka Kazynska’s feet. A pair of thonged turquoise shoes had been doffed by the leg of the divan – for the lady’s greater comfort, Captain Hull supposed.

Like a silent giant, Ó Daonlathasach entered and approached the group of four, bowing. Orders were placed, and with a further clap Valens sped his manservant out. Absinthe with tincture of nutmeg for the lady, the driest Amontillado for Tobias Barre; their host professed preference for jasmine tea, while Hull, maybe mindful of the moil of trench warfare so soon to summon him back, was content with a crystal cut goblet of iced water from Antrim springs.

After the drinks had been served, and a sip from each consumed, Valens, as if absentmindedly, ran the tip of one forefinger along the curve of the countess’s right in-step. Olinka Kazynska permitted a lascivious shiver to wriggle through the length of her lithe body.

‘It is a cause of regret you must depart from us so soon, Captain.’ There was a dove-smooth depth to this lady’s intonation that had the power to set one’s heartbeat racing. But not in the battle-battered breast

Cinnabar's Gnosis

of Roderick Hull. What was it Barre had said of her during a temporary aside that night at the Ulster Hibernian Club? That she'd journeyed to Belfast from her father's Warsaw estate, just before the outbreak of War, on a holiday to visit relatives, then got caught off against returning home by the continent-wide upsurge of hostilities. Lucky creature, pondered Hull, to enjoy enough of ready funds to sustain so long a stay. Although maybe the bounteous Barre could provide a fillip for renewal of a pretty Polish woman's fortunes.

'The lady tells truly if the event she mentions is true.' This from Theodricus Valens. 'Monday next is it you leave us, do you say?'

'Monday's the sailing out from Belfast Lough. God help me, I aim to be back among the men by Thursday.' As Hull said these words a swirl of bursting bomb fire leapt before his inner eye, and in his ears resounded the roar of scattering shrapnel, spliced by the magpie-like chatter of ceaseless machine gun rounds and the soul-searing shrieks of the shattered and dying. Ah, but it was time to be back there. This sponge-soft world of idleness was no true life for a man.

'You would not, after all then, prefer to remain?' interposed their host with deft insinuation, as if he had the facility to read thoughts.

'No, sir. I am a soldier.' Hull determined to be resolute to vouchsafe no more of his private opinions than he needed to.

'His Majesty's armed forces are so much the richer for the efforts of such valiant officers as our friend here.' Tobias Barre's contribution was meant to be emollient. There was not the least trace of sarcasm in the rich burnish of his refined Ulster accent. Nor might it be felt as pertinent to his somewhat overdone praises that he himself had quite retired from nautical engineering work to live off investments, and made no contribution at all to the War effort. Ships might rise and ships might sail, flounder or survive, but without the expert professional ministrations of Tobias Barre.

Hull gave a rough shake of the head and took a swig from his tumbler of iced water.

Noticing the movement, Olinka Kazynska's wire-thin eyebrows inclined in a quizzical lift. She pulled with a slow suck upon her elongated cheroot. 'You've seen so much of gory death first hand, Captain.'

Počátek Románu: A Flutter of Lorn Love

It was as if she were drawing out Roderick Hull at the same time as she expelled her scented fume with exquisite ease.

‘Aye – so much of it, in bitter truth, Countess.’

‘Pray tell.’ And the lady drew again upon her melliferous weed.

The military man tensed his shoulders and took in a deep breath. ‘I’ve seen men torn in two by the effects of the blast of a bomb; saw a fellow’s writhing torso grovel on alone as his sundered rump and legs dropped to a burst crater below. He didn’t grovel far – thank God.’ Roderick Hull dabbed a wan handkerchief to his brow.

‘Extreme examples, surely?’ suggested Olinka Kazynska, in a manner that invited worse to be told, as she expelled further fume.

‘I’ve trudged along the watch at dusk, through trench-bound ranks of the popish Gael, and seen their chaplain ply final rites to a sentry whose self-severed throat was like a gristly sambo chuckling. I watched a fifteen-year-old private from Bolton impaled on those snaking barbed wire loops that writhe across No Man’s Land; did a fellow dare rush to his aid, then Kaiser Bill’s Maxims sped that man to kingdom come. At the last, I – I it was that freed him from the torments of worse than Hell with a pistol shot to the neck...’

The memory was too much. Like a man taking a blow, Captain Hull sprang up, twitched a bit, then with disdainful effort sat down again – perching, as if in protest, on the extreme edge of his seat.

‘Worse than Hell...’ repeated Theodricus Valens, and placed his enamelled bone china teacup upon a sandalwood coffee table at his left side. Then he turned as if to stroke once more the countess’s enticing foot, but paused ere his fingers could brush upon her lilac-stockinged in-step and said in an oddly strained abstracted voice:

‘Visio malefica...’

Roderick Hull regarded his host with a bemused look, but ventured nothing.

‘Visio malefica –’ repeated Valens, ‘the ultimate, most awful infernal sight. That – my good soldier, is what truly you describe.’

A longer moment of silence fell.

Olinka Kazynska tipped out a large sliver of ash into a small bowl carven in amber by her side.

‘As I say, a brave man, Captain –’

Cinnabar's Gnosis

Thus addressed, Captain Hull gave a dash of one bunched fist against the space between his nose and upper lip in the most evident show of emotion he had thus far displayed. 'Brave!? They let me come home for six weeks' leave on the strength of the effect of sights like these.'

'Needed leave – and rightly so,' grunted the inactive engineer, stolidly.

'Barre, I'm a privileged man to be of officer class. Any one of the wretched troops would have been shot for desertion at dawn.' With a sob Hull lurched forward, burying his face in his hands.

Reaching out without looking at him, Tobias Barre placed a cupped palm upon the captain's shoulder. 'Brace up, doughty chap. Better to have recovered after seeing all that before going back.'

Words hard for the others to hear struggled in a moan through the captain's tented fingers still clamped like a life-preserving gas mask before his face. 'What once is seen can ne'er again be *unseen* –' it sounded like – 'what once is seen can ne'er again be *unseen*.'

And now it was as if Theodricus Valens, rather than this relict from the trenches, were the one riven to the root of his being by some uneasy reflection or reminiscence; as if the ill-heard words of Roderick Hull caused to well up before the émigré's inner eye – that eye which ever yet sees when the lids are closed, and never can be made fully not to see even once unclosed – a phantasm or eidolon projected as by celluloid on the intensely tuned retina of the soul.

Deploying a smooth swiftness that seemed to give the lie to her posture of casual lethargy, Countess Olinka Kazynska suddenly stretched out one long pale hand. Theodricus Valens still sitting at her feet on his stumpy-legged stool, with the ease with which she might flutter a fan under sultry sunlight this pale, black-haired bud of elite Polish womanhood brushed her gently refined index and second fingers against the resolute oval of his chin.

'Men,' she enunciated in a seductive coo, 'men and their anguish-devouring deeds of valour –'

With a dexterity that hinted at practice, she ran gingerly caressing fingers along the taut curve of her host's cheeks, until they rested upon the lower node of his scar. 'Ah, my worthy *pane* Valens, you and Captain Hull put us all too squeamish females to the shame with your eagerness to take punishment in an honourable cause.'

Počátek Románu: A Flutter of Lorn Love

Valens lifted the lady's exploring fingers, implanted on them a cautious kiss, then pressed her hand away from him.

'You do wrong, dearest Countess Kazynska, to praise us men as the sole endurers. Captain Hull I avow is quite a separate case. The courage of a serving soldier is beyond compare. My own brush with the blade was on a matter of private pride; my family's name –'

'But you misconceive me quite, *pane* Valens. I protest only that it is menfolk rather than our weaker, frailer sex that have the scope to bear such suffering in a chosen cause.' She let out a laugh and tossed to one side her redundant cigarette-holder, the aromatic weed being now all spent. 'Barring the toils of child-birth, of course.'

Valens raised both hands as if in deprecation.

'Yet both it and motherhood display real depths of strength,' he rejoined politely, 'as in that Gustav Meyrink tale – wherein a sinning mother in quest for her snatched babe through deep trees at dark, tarries, unknowing, by the side of the funerary urn in which her husband has snuffed its life. And all because he loathed her for the love he feared she bore to one not him. "Look not, oh Lord, upon this my guilt –"' he quothe, with an ardent uplift of tone.

'We are no Jew admirers here,' Kazynska cut him short coldly.

To the astonishment of the company, Theodricus Valens now abruptly stood up, just as had Captain Hull some moments earlier, in a manner that displayed a reaction of deep discomfiture.

'Countess Kazynska –' he all but bit out the words – 'I could tell you of a woman, a creature lovely, young and sensitively bred, a woman truly noble, who bore – nay, inflicted on her very own self – the most frightful torment in what she believed a rightful cause –'

Silence fell. Three pairs of agog eyes stared intently at their host.

Not alone was it the unwonted stridency of his outburst, which was altogether at variance with his perceived personality as an *ennuyé* quester after sublime experience, but the prospect of a story to be told – a prospect that ever the world over bids the ears of man and woman to prickle – that piqued and intrigued their interest.

Theodricus Valens drew several paces back, an image of proud austerity, his long purple robe pulled close to his ascetic frame; then

Cinnabar's Gnosis

brandished forth both arms, with palms uplifted, as might a priest at the point of embarking upon the Consecration of the Mass.

'In our Czech lore of old there is the tale of the warrior maiden Šárka, she who with her amazon horde wrought havoc through the mild-watered treescapes of Bohemia. The female of the species – ah, alack... So it was that Ctirad, noble knight, fell smitten by the lure of her wiles. Esteeming her some harassed maid to be buoyed by the power of his arm, fast got he entrapped by her Hell's spawn of henchwomen and fell to his death from their pummelling blows. Yet when weeping Premysl laid that battle-bloodied braveheart out on his pyre, down crept Šárka from her eyrie to claim place midst the flames with him that had died for the love of her and whom she now knew too late she likewise adored.'

A blaze of passion, kindled as it were by memory of this sacrificial oblation on the altar of deprived love, shone from the hitherto impassive amber eyes of their expatiating host.

'Nay –' and it was as if he were sneering at his guests' too openly displayed disappointment in a tale of legend rather than recent story – 'this Šárka serves but as a taster for the narrative that will follow. Just as are these aperitifs' (he made a bow by way of acknowledging him an exception towards Captain Hull) 'but to whet one's eager palate for the canapés and sweetmeats to come.'

He paused then, with an audible intake of breath.

'Behold, my friends – and hearken!'

At the foot of the divan on which Olinka Kazynska lay reclining like a sleek panther, a screen of turquoise silk shielded view from the far end of the room. With a quick pull, Valens drew this back. Reaching across the recumbent countess, he hitched what in effect was, not a drape, but a miniature silken curtain with a matching turquoise cord to an ornamental knob in the wall by her head.

Immediately to the right of the end of the couch, a half-length oil portrait of a most striking young woman stared out from the wall space revealed. The exquisite poise of her all but perfect features proclaimed an anomalous blend of fragility and strength. Beneath a sweep of lustrous dark brown hair which fell straight down either side from a parting in her high forehead's centre, the delicate tints of her cheeks

Počátek Románu: A Flutter of Lorn Love

were enhanced by a firm refined nose and a pair of pursed resolute lips, rather full. Her long bare throat was free of decoration. She was wearing what looked like a tulle dress of soft violet that harmonised both at once with her overt vulnerability and hidden reserves of strength. *All but* perfect features. Alas – alas – at a glance it was clear wherein must lie the burden of Valens's story.

For in a callous blow of fate, not far below the smouldering stare of the left of her lovely brown eyes, showed an elongated smudge. Its hue was of a deeper violet, and the mark seemed as if had been splashed upon the girl's left cheek in repulse to the reticence of her delicate dress of tulle.

As one man, Tobias Barre and Captain Hull rose and advanced to this remarkable painting. Olinka Kazynska, not rising, twisted round in a rustle of satin skirts and crawled towards the bottom of the couch where, her posture tense as a crouched beast, she peered with adamantine eyes at the lovely marred woman in the portrait.

Amélie Hensman, 1856-1875 read the etched inscription on the thin gilt panel screwed to the bottom frame of the painting.

Then it was that Theodricus Valens, from his former stance of imminent consecration, turned to assume the manner of a celebrant preaching a homily. This place in which he lived was Hensman House, he told them. It had been built in the 1860s, in the high style of mid-Victorian Gothic, by Amélie's father, Nathaniel, who had come by his considerable riches from the manufacture of bricks and tiles in those enterprising early years of the late nineteenth century's aggrandisement of Belfast.

Amélie had been the younger of Nathaniel's two daughters. From birth afflicted with that blemish replicated with such relentless faithfulness in the portrait commissioned for her eighteenth birthday, it was the girl's consuming obsession, so story told, that the fact of her signal disfigurement would pose an insuperable obstacle to her ever entering the blessed state of marriage. The son of the architect who designed Hensman House had set his eye on her, it was said, or at least on the ample dowry that would come with her if they wed. From some chance observation the young man let slip (borrowed one presumes from his architect *pater's* dispersed gems of wisdom), about the remedial effects

Cinnabar's Gnosis

of imposed symmetry on objects innately ugly, Amélie, so Valens explained, had become devoured by a desperate overwhelming mania which persuaded her of the truth of the mad notion – that *could somehow she replicate her birth defect on the other cheek, its unsightliness would be assuaged.*

One could not but marvel, Valens declared, at the sheer verve of her passion and courage which drove nineteen-year-old Amélie to carry out what she dared to perform next. For, one night after a strained post prandial encounter in the living room of Hensman House, during which she felt her *beau's* attentions languish on the account of that deep violet streak upon her cheek, retired to her lonely bedroom Amélie settled to redress the imbalance through cauterising. But first she quaffed a distillation of exotic fumes in the wild hope by some small measure to dampen her expected pain.

'And –?' It was Olinka Kazynska had spoken, the normal mellow timbre of her seductive tone lifting in a lilt of expectation.

Valens lowered his hands with a slow, solemn movement.

'She died.'

Several moments he allowed elapse for the bleakness of this outcome to sink in. 'Of course the effort failed. Her pain proved unbearable. After the first brush of the branding iron Amélie fainted. Then fever set in; following a torment of several weeks...'

There was no need to go on.

But the grim-turned mood of the gathering was at once keyed up to a rare pitch of the perverse when Olinka Kazynska, with a wide-lipped smile of delight, rose from her couch and, approaching the poised figure of Valens, implanted a reciprocal kiss to the one he had placed on her hand, upon the Czech's undisfigured cheek.

'Perhaps a matching gash on your opposite cheek would give you a handsomer symmetry also, *pane* Valens.'

Without another word this slinking creature swathed in satins sat back down again. Lighting up a new cheroot, she drew upon the long slim holder and expelled a lazy luxuriance of fragrant smoke.

Roderick Hull, who at this point was standing closest to Kazynska, thought he heard her murmur the words, '*Donne-moi la tête d'Iokanaan*' – but he couldn't be quite certain. Rusty indeed was the

Počátek Románu: A Flutter of Lorn Love

French one picked up in the trenches, yet it was adequate enough to persuade him that that was the language in which she had now spoken.

Turning towards Valens, Hull felt a sudden shock to observe the deathly intensity of that pallor which had swept along their host's narrow cheeks. Like a man in the throes of intense passion, Valens gestured towards the portrait of Amélie Hensman. 'The very spit – the image of your loveliness, Countess Kazynska, with the tragic exception of course of that which we must not name.'

For a long moment Olinka Kazynska looked up, the cigarette holder raised like a taper between her chalk-white fingers.

'He that would have me must bestir himself to effort,' she let fall in a languorous voice which ill requited her uttered sentiment of thrown down challenge.

Then it was that the conviction impressed itself forcefully upon Captain Hull, who despite his efforts to ignore it had overheard this tense exchange, that there was not the least likeness between the portrait of the dead young girl and the living woman beside them. Amélie Hensman, her fresh vibrant face crowned with a mane of mahogany hair was a paragon of lovely aliveness (barring the blemish on her cheek!); Olinka Kazynska, by contrast, an aloof attractive elite young lady of the world, her jackdaw's wing hair enhancing a bone cold pallor that hinted somehow at subterrene, not animate, things – things of deep damp earth and dank space.

Mindful of a new and oddly unaccountable awkwardness in the air, Captain Hull drew back from the edge of the divan and moved with a kind of confidential sidle towards his host.

'You mentioned to me the *visio malefica* a while back, sir,' he said to Valens in a dropped voice.

'The malefic vision, Captain Hull – that I did.'

'By which I surmise you must have meant the essence of those sights of horror I recounted from the battlefield? The common denominator of grotesquery, should I say?'

Theodricus Valens made a confirmatory bow.

'Yet you, sir, am I not correct, are a quester after the numinous and profound? Or at least, such is the nature of your reputation.'

A second courteous bow, to the accompaniment of a thin smile.

Cinnabar's Gnosis

'So, why then is it that you seek this – this *visio malefica*.'

'No Captain Hull, I seek it not. I shun it.'

'Shun?'

'It is its very reverse that I seek.'

'The *visio beatifica*, then?' This from Tobias Barre who observing the flow of dialogue had turned from Kazynska's side to attend to it.

'Indeed.'

'By which you mean –?' And there was a subtle drift beneath the current of Captain Hull's low inquiring tone, which twinned with the hint of a glimmer in his eyes, conveyed the desolating ache of the soul-troubled adult for the time-forsaken fancies of youth.

'The vision of the divine beneficence,' replied their host in a voice of the most profound solemnity.

'There – it's the love of the Heavenly Father you must mean by that, is it not?' threw in the nautical engineer.

Valens's wiry lips curled in a melancholy smile. 'A rarer grace than that which I suspect you deign to esteem it, good sir.'

Captain Hull's manly brow contracted in a frown of puzzlement. 'Love of God – you say that's rare. Sweet Heaven, surely not?'

Theodricus Valens turned to the doomed military commander; his bright amber eyes flaming with an ardour of deep compassion.

'The love of our God as received by man. Received, understood and accepted for what it is. *That* I say for sure is wondrous grace.'

Olinka Kazynska twisted her lithe body round to take in this earnest confabulation among the three standing men behind her. In her clear blue eyes hovered a hint of irritation and a question.

Leaning slightly forward with an assured grace that almost resembled a bow, Theodricus Valens tugged upon the bell pull.

'It is the loss of first innocence that obscures us to the love of God,' he elaborated while they awaited response to his summons. 'Peeling across long years like the sliced away rings of an onion, so as each last layer of the pristine life sloughs off, does life itself grow harder to endure. For myself – ah, much would I give again to find that ersten tranquil state. Alone with return to a time ere conscience toils, because only thus can one veer clear of the slippery slough of guilt – alone by such means is the love of God revealed.'

Počátek Románu: A Flutter of Lorn Love

At that moment Ionsain Ó Daonlathasach came in, carrying a chased silver platter set with inlay of sapphire and garnet. While Barre swung welcoming eyes to their refectory and Valens bade the butler where to lay his load then leave, Captain Hull turned towards the slouching Kazynska. As she rose with a sedate sweep of satin to her feet, the trench-bound officer read hard resolution in her eyes: she would seek no truck with the *visio beatifica*, but she would *have* him – *him*, her wealth-endowed Olomouc-fleeing pseudo-suitor.

Now this quirky quartet drifted towards the reception room's further side, which through a lace-curtained window looked across a short stretch of garden upon Colenso Parade. Seating themselves at a walnut side-table neatly laid, they set forth at dainty pace and with subdued modicum of comment, to nibble upon minuscule cucumber sandwiches sprigged with parsley, hard-boiled quails' eggs, *canapés* of *foie gras*, and assorted *petits fours*. Anon their host poured them Chinese tea tentatively scented with lemon from a long-spouted pot of Aynsley. By silent assent, colloquy slunk from the lofty spheres: there was some syncopated patter about the current state of the War, the need for conscription in Ireland, and the late abortive rebellion of those madcap insurgents in Dublin.

After a while Valens touched a taper to a stick of incense on the mantelpiece. Returning to his chair, he placed his hands to his knees and let his long chin slump as though in meditation. Conversation palled, although anon Barre and Kazynska sparred glances. Hull found the atmosphere becoming oppressive. He wondered how Tobias Barre, like himself as he presumed brought up a staunch Presbyterian, could endure to inhale vapours so cloyingly redolent of Rome. As evening drew in, and tints of heavy mauve threw a gloom over the high glass window at his side, so Captain Hull felt it apt to take this as a cue to leave. Theodricus Valens, scion of civility to the last, inviting him to come again on the morrow, rang him out. Hull felt unsure whether he would or should accept as he followed hulking Ionsain Ó Daonlathasach through the murk-shaded hall towards the outer door. There was no question of waiting to take exit with Barre and Kazynska. This kind of place was more theirs than his. And they had clear affinity with each other, these two, while the woman made an effort to profess *some* towards their host.

Cinnabar's Gnosis

In the foyer, that trimly attired Romish virgin of the jet black curls, Rosanna Carter (a more honestly attractive specimen, Hull reflected, than slinky Olinka, although the pair seemed to share certain traits as a type), clopped with brisk stride at his fore to see him out.

As he stood upon the topmost step, drinking in the cool evening air that drifted from the Botanic Gardens below, it was as if Captain Hull had been discharged from confinement, his unseen shackles lopped silently off, and that this was his first taste of freedom.

'A fine style of night, Rosanna.' He spoke at ease, not looking at the girl, as one might share one's inner thoughts with a *confidante*.

'Tis sure, I'll be hoping that. Good night now, sir.'

There seemed a touch of tension in the girl's sharpish sing-song tone, which he would have had occasion to remember afterwards did he learn what came to pass. Then she shoved the door shut behind him and Roderick Hull stood there alone.

One look he threw in his wake at the block-like ivied expanse of his host's rented home, with its twin bay window projections either side of the porch-covered door, like upright tunnels rising right to the roof. In each of these parallel projections the five high faceted windows on both floors formed a tightly spaced semi-circle like black bands in a kaleidoscope. Making his way through the garden, Captain Hull let out a sigh that might have been of relief.

He was thinking of his return to the Front as he turned on to Praetoria Street and struck up towards the busy thoroughfare of Stranmillis Road from which already he could hear the hoot and whirr of motorcars as they pattered up and down. On each side, close-packed terraced houses, all of them bricked with that deep red crumbly stone indigenous to Belfast, with their high triangle-shaped dormers like a witch's peaked hat, peeped down as if in furtive surveillance. Anon, a curtain in some lower window twitched back, as the householder in for the night undertook precisely that. A lone woman in a long belted coat squeezed through the narrow gap of an opened front door, casting a fearful look behind as though Captain Hull, a warrior of her country, boded special danger. Hunching his shoulders, with bowed head the soon to return solder plodded on.

Then, just as he was yards away from the more fully illuminated, sycamore-embossed stretch of Stranmillis Road, a long shrill scream

Počátek Románu: A Flutter of Lorn Love

came beetling down the wind. It was as if the squeal of a thousand bats had become audible to humankind. The short while it lasted, infinitely abysmal pain and dread were buffeted into his face. In his ears he heard again the wail and shriek of khaki-clad men blown away by bullet and bomb, and knew then that there was where his duty lay. Better to seek the love of God in mud-encrusted dugouts where soldiers fought and fell, than the velveted chambers of the indolent and idle, in which ‘tincture of the weed spiced with infusion of incense and scented amber’ might summon up some exquisite demon that was a far far cry from the *visio beatifica*.

For him there would be no going back to Hensman House, he knew now. Tomorrow he would hunt out a sailing, the more quickly to rejoin the harried men who awaited him. At that precise moment the weird shrieking stopped and for an instant there fell a silence like the pure deep stillness of space between void-separated worlds that bore no life. Then he arrived at the mouth of Stranmillis Road. The sound of motors and pedestrians welled up again, and with something like the bloom of real joy in his soul for the first time that day, he thrust up a hand and hailed the foremost passing cab.



Night had now deeply fallen. It was close on eleven o'clock. At the threshold of the shut door to the studio in which Theodricus Valens had earlier received his guests, a pair of unquiet shadows shifted from the darkness.

‘I don’t like this at all, Mr. Ó Daonlathasach – truly I don’t.’

The bass voice of the butler strove to impart comfort. ‘Don’t ye go fret yerself, girl. He’ll harm ye naut. How long for have ye been servin’ here as housemaid now?’

‘Six weeks come Monday next, Mr. Ó Daonlathasach.’

‘And all o’ that time in the regard o’ ye, he’s ne’er as much as said “boo to a goose”.’

The pretty, demurely accoutred girl in her pert uniform of starched black and white for a moment sank her head. Then, lifting it quickly up again, the flash in her eyes gave an added glint of anger to her evi-

Cinnabar's Gnosis

dent dismay. 'Tis not as if you're the one he's asked to go in there to help – with his... experiments... or, whatever.'

'Sure, 'tis better a woman's place to be, Rosanna,' came the swift smooth burr of encouragement. 'And – and I'll wait for ye beyond the door till he's done – if ye'd like.'

The girl gave a brisk grasp of gratitude to the other's stiff wrist cuff. 'Oh, *will* you, Mr. Ó Daonlathasach? – do please.'

With that came a strident double jangle from the servants' bell. The master of the mansion was growing patient of continued delay.

A shiver rippled along Rosanna Carter's slim body as she slipped through the space the butler held open for her. With a tread unwontedly slow she approached the divan where that self-adoring high priestess from Poland, Olinka Kazynska, had preened beneath Valens's devoted gaze. Her master lay upon it now, in a posture semi-recumbent. He was propped up on one elbow, and a mantle of deep blue velvet studded with circling stars engulfed him from his feet to his waist. The housemaid noticed that the butler must have tugged out the couch at an angle, so that its head faced directly the half-length portrait of Amélie Hensman on the wall at its base. The glimmer of an encased candle illumined this from a little ledge below like a tabernacle lamp. On a small table close to Valens, was a white enamel basin, with razors, a bottle of eau-de-cologne and some towels. Clearly, the master meant to spend the night here. Rosanna could only hope he would let her go soon. Apart from any other consideration, it had been a very long day and she was tired.

One listless long-fingered hand he reached out towards the reluctant girl and drew her to his side.

'Take my hand, will you, please, Rosanna.'

Fearfully, she did so, forcing down a hard swallow. It was her fervent hope there wouldn't be too much more of this. Rosanna's dockyard-working parents took pride in her being 'good' and had ambitions, which she shared, for her ascent through the stakes of matrimony. A moment of fleshly folly could be the undoing of all.

Theodricus Valens took in a weighted breath as he felt the girl's soft fingers lock upon his. Then he let his eyes slump shut, and turning his head ever so slightly in the direction of his twenty-two-year-old

Počátek Románu: A Flutter of Lorn Love

maidservant, nodded towards a scarlet-braided pouffe that lay between them. Without troubling to look, he knew precisely what was there and the whereabouts of every item – each bottle of coloured liquid, each blending retort, each lipped decanter flask. Like a magus reciting a spell he directed the girl to pour, mix, dissolve, await the rise of wafture, then minister to him to drink. He knew it would work. It had to work. Long years of study and self-denial had wrought to this moment. The *visio beatifica* would be his to indulge tonight, through psychic engagement with the dead but not departed passion of the extraordinary Amélie Hensman whose fatally faithful portrait faced him. On the morrow he could lay claim to Olinka Kazynska, as though she were his flesh reward on earth.

‘Rosanna – come close, come closer. Take my other hand.’

He could feel the nervous moistness in the housemaid’s grip, and the fear that shuddered through her – fear which the other girl, the dead one, better bred than Rosanna and braver yet, herself had never felt. And now, before his inner eye, with that perfect intensity of vision only chastened souls can see, came the image of Amélie Hensman; in her case as in his a steaming retort that gave off musky vapours before her, and in her raised right hand a rod of fiery red, with which she dared to try to redeem the meanness of nature through applied symmetry. And then a moment of long torment that delved to the depths of his soul, a writhing leap of fire... Then his eyes shot open and he saw her, not in the framed picture on the wall, but miraculously disembodied a foot before his face. That wondrous silky burnish of rich brown hair with its high centre parting, the bright nobility of brow, strong nose and staring eyes, her full young lips hungrily pursed. And on *each* of her tautened cheeks – oh, so fearfully pale with pain – a crater blotch of purple.

Then those gorgeous brown eyes filled with longing saw him, her pullulant lips parted, and she spoke – spoke to him aloud, this hurt and haunted man who had summoned her across the years, in a voice that was like crushed velvet let down out of Heaven.

‘Bold quester, now you see, have seen. Never can it be permitted you, seeing, ever again to *unsee*.’

Here was the *credo* that had impelled him to the present point, delivered by this enrapturing girl in tones of intense invocation.

Cinnabar's Gnosis

It was time.

'Rosanna –' and the serving girl's name laboured across his lips, like the parched prayer of a sufferer close to death – 'Rosanna – Rosanna, the blade. Fetch my razors to me, fetch them here.'

What was this? Why did she not obey? She was a housemaid, his to command. All that he asked of her was compliance and aid. *She* was not the one whom he consummately craved.

'Rosanna – fetch them, fetch them. Bring my razors here.'

Her plaint of puling resistance was as the squeak of low vermin.

'Oh, please, please – Mr. Valens, don't do this, don't do it.'

Again the words straggled over his lips like the last futile prayer of one aching towards the eternal divide between base life and better.

'Rosanna, it's Amélie. Amélie. She cries for me – how she cries out for me. Oh yield, I pray – for the love of God.'

Again that hapless endeavour to resist.

'Rosanna, she cries for me, she cries for me. Hearken, cannot you, unto that wonderful maiden's crying.'

Then the Belfast-born daughter of dockworker parents drew on all the reserves of her sometimes despised Roman Catholic faith.

'Oh, hush, Mr. Valens – did ever you hear the devil weep, 'tis said it would stir ye to more grief than even the tears of the Virgin.'

What was this? Had she let him go? Was she pulling back for cravenness or dread? Whence came that blade, the blade he had called for, that alone might complete his prayer of enchantment?

His eyes still tight closed, up he shot one hand, then plunged it back down hard.

My God! My God! whence issued that fell roulade of tortured screams? Rosanna in her abject panic fleeing from the room – or... oh God, oh Holy Jesus – dear God!



Next day, consternation sprang among the upper ranks of the Royal Irish Constabulary in Belfast. The identity of the principal players prompted widespread hush. Business interests might be adversely affected. There were few who knew and fewer ever told.

Počátek Románu: A Flutter of Lorn Love

Captain Hull might have had communicable views about the rightness or wrongness of things. But he never got to form them. Not many months afterwards, this warrior officer last was heard of on the bloodied fields of Passchendaele, Prime Minister Lloyd George's aptly deplored 'battle of the mud'. One moment he was seen to crouch behind a blighted tree stump, with intent to gun down Bosche; the next a bomb-blasted crater was gouged into the spot. It is only fair to surmise that thereby Roderick Hull discovered without even trying that for which troubled Theodricus Valens for so long so desperately had quested in arcane corners.

A Catholic young woman in her early twenties, lately in service off Stranmillis Road, Rosanna Carter, was heard to have suffered multiple contusions fore and aft, pronouncedly in the area of the face. But she eschewed with rare valour both hospital and police and instead sought solace from her priest. By creeping stages it came, for her injuries suggested its need, but Rosanna Carter was never again the selfsame sprightly chirping creature after.

Theodricus Valens – ah, that also was sad. In deference to his provenance in Catholic lands, and an early letter of introduction found among his effects from the Archbishop of Olomouc, he was removed to a discreet sanatorium run by the Sisters of Mercy near Lurgan; where, after several silent months he expired, and the only words he was heard to utter at the last were, 'Oh, my sweet Jesus.'

Tobias Barre might have spoken, but had good reason not to. Latterly, he has taken on some specialist consultancy projects as an engineer, and Olinka Kazynska has become part of his household. But she is never alluded to by her title and few condescend to visit.



Were she of a timbre resembling Rosanna, Olinka Kazynska might have languished under horrors. But title or none, she enjoyed the tough impenetrability of the northern Slav. Valens's feet of clay she had recognised in sharp style and striven to mould him to her profit. Her appointment the next morning had been for ten o'clock. Barre might come later and applaud the amorous mulcting. Olinka was old enough not to require a chaperone for things like this.

Cinnabar's Gnosis

Perhaps she ought to have suspected somewhat awry when the door was opened to her, not by the louche slip of a dockworkers' daughter but that dour stretch of sinew and bone, Ó Daonlathasach. And then, rather than guiding her through the high shadowed hall to Valens's select sanctum, he had let her seek her own way with some mumbled apologia regarding problems below stairs. She might have spat out reprimand, had not she been so brimmingly eager to carry through the final formalities of conquest.

And so she found him, whom she had come to claim, down on his knees, as if in prayer, before the mantled divan which had been his yesterday's altar of worship of her. Not an eyelash did she permit to flutter as, resting one hand on his shoulder, she turned him towards her and beheld, without a pang, the terrible results of what he had done under her thoughtless taunting. And because the wound was still fresh, it felt moist beneath the slow kiss with which Olinka Kazynska followed the long caressing stroke of her right forefinger.

FEET OF CLAY, HEAD OF FIRE

Richard Gavin

For as long as he's been condemned to wander the crooked lanes of this ghetto, the dreamer has been searching for an escape route. Each night he roams the misshapen paths of blood-clay that are littered with smashed hopes, wanders past the liling hovels that are capped with conical hat roofs, sees the faces drooping like waning lamps in the windows, their eyes great gulfs of sorrow.

But the man is not truly akin with those lost souls. Though his belly is just as vacant, he is nonetheless nourished; sustained by a secret knowledge, by truths that he drapes in story and feeds back to the world as lore. Words have long been the bricks of this dreamer's portal, and tonight he is about to escape. Soon other portals would be opening, or so the man has been promised...

Like all things, the man's portal has a worldly reflex; in this case it is a train bound for Starnberg. But the fact that the man is able to enter the train undetected, that he makes the journey and acquires food and a glass of wine and escapes without reprimand...

Does one need further evidence of a gateway to another Real having been pried ajar?

When, at long, long last, the man emerges from the iron casket that is the passenger train, he is elated by the distant suggestion of the awesome, cloud-veiled piques of the German countryside.

People, people, people! All whirling about him like arid dust-devils; prattling in German, in Dutch, in French, in the man's mother tongue.

Handlers, thick-handed and broad-shouldered, cull baggage from the storage cars. The man pauses to watch this act of controlled chaos

Cinnabar's Gnosis

for a moment or two, all the while consuming the deafening din and the redolent smells. He tries in vain to steal more glimpses of the land that stretched beyond the depot but is unable. He walks on.

The station is almost equally crowded. The man passes a dwarfish creature manoeuvring a wobbly fruit cart through the crowd and calling out "Apfels!"

The man nears the food seller and asks in slow, uncertain German if the seller could direct him to the House of the Last Lantern, near Lake Starnberg.

The food seller's face drains of colour. He shakes his head.

The man is taken aback. He requests directions from another passer-by, but this time only to the lake, knowing that he can likely navigate his own way from there. Though this land is alien to him, the man is strangely certain of his own ability to navigate it, just as he is iron-sure of the existence of the fictional character that is awaiting him at the House of the Last Lantern.

The man heeds the directions to the lake that a shoemaker finally gives him.

Gradually he reaches the water. At its edge, as if it has been erected just for him, a lantern dangles from a wooden post, secured there by a crooked faith-nail. Though night has not yet fallen, the lantern burns as though it has caged a minute sun in iron and glass.

The man looks about. Far a-field a similar pole juts up from the reed-choked shore. He moves toward it, and immediately discovers another. He walks the circumference the lake's shore until he reaches the last lantern and sees the house that looms behind it.

It is made of clean chalky quarry rock. Its windows shine like frozen ponds. Upon the untended slopes of the front yard, peacocks strut, their vivid plumage fluttering up in an almost gaudy display.

"Welcome, Gustav!" calls a man who has suddenly darkened the house's doorway. He must have moved as swiftly as a wraith.

The man steps forward: Athanasius Pernath; a figure whom the general world thinks is fictional. But the man knows that Pernath, and his legendary encounters with the mythic golem, are sound and true.

"Welcome to my house," Pernath calls spritely. His host's allusion to Dracula is not lost on Gustav Meyrink, but he is not truly amused by it.

Feet of Clay, Head of Fire

Pernath promptly gives the author a tour of his sanctuary, The House of the Last Lantern, which is revealed to be an aesthete's paradise: stained-glass and brocade hangings and heady dark wines and an authentic human skull on display in a glass cabinet in the upper bedroom.

The bed in the master bedroom is huge, or perhaps the room is merely thin. Beyond its French windows, servants draw milk from goats' teats. There are crocuses blooming beyond the arched windows, panes polished clear as epiphanies.

Pernath confesses that Meyrink's quarters will not be quite so luxurious.

Meyrink feeds from the tray his host has set out in the hanging gardens in back of the House; grapes, runny goat cheese, chunks of thick, tough bread. After his meal, Meyrink discovers that a familiar chimerical expression has fallen over Pernath's face.

Meyrink – a detached fellow, but nonetheless one who is ever-thirsty for intrigue – is unable to resist his host's offer to be taken to “the clay crypt.”

They rise, move to the edge of the manicured yard and into a ravine that is a congealment of foliage. It is womb-hot within and almost as darkly mysterious. Meyrink is at last led to a clearing, beyond which stretches a vast lake bed, dry as a Persian desert.

“There is sand,” Pernath begins, pointing his mahogany walking stick toward the dead lake. “Here is clay.”

With that, Pernath indicates a great pocket that had been bored into the ravine. There, in that makeshift crypt, Meyrink at last lays eyes upon something he'd always assumed to be a mere bogey of Pernath's skewed imagination: the Golem.

The vaulted figure is half the stature that Meyrink had envisioned him to be. The sun having baked and shrunken it, what lay inside the bowl is a desiccated echo of what had once stirred the dreams and cooled the blood of the peasants of some far distant Czech ghetto.

“It was doomed to perish,” Pernath says in a deflated tone, “given the force that was employed to animate it.” Pernath then plunges the tip of his walking stick deep into the man-like pile of grit, most of which immediately silted in and became shapeless. He thrashes at the ruined effigy with his stick until he frees an object from the sands.

Cinnabar's Gnosis

He crouches just long enough to pluck the artefact free. Thumbing some of the excess silt from its edges, Pernath reveals it to be a Star of David forged in some metal; a precious metal, Meyrink guessed. The star holds something in its gritty, lustreless rays: a strip of parchment.

“Amaet,” Pernath muttered.

“Truth?” Meyrink’s translation is confirmed by a nod of his host’s head.

“An element,” Pernath began, “that is fated to wither very quickly in this world. And now, for my promise. I will not disappoint, my dear Gustav. I promised you a new creation, one for this world, and I will honour my promise. Come.”

Pernath manoeuvres his way down the embankment, Meyrink follows, but cautiously. The author soon finds himself standing in the centre of a modest-sized lakebed. The lake long dead, Meyrink finds himself eyeing the fissures that vein the sun-bed terrain. He tries to imagine what the area would have looked like brimming with cool water.

Without a word of explanation, Pernath uses his walking stick to scrape a cluster of swirls into the dry cake of the lake bed:

שקרים

Meyrink studies it.

“Hebrew, obviously,” he begins, “but I confess it is not quite familiar.”

The master of the house pauses as a weirdly glistening fluid began to bleed from the sculpted wound he’s carved in the sands. It shimmers, not as light upon liquid, rather as light within liquid. “Come along,” Pernath instructs with his customary lack of emotion, “we may both wish to be indoors.”

Meyrink trails behind the man in the flowing robes whose oriental dragons snarling silently at him from the snapping folds.

Together the scribe and the living work of art who inspired him scabble out of the great bowl of barren land whose floor has now begun to swell, to rise. By now a persistent hum shakes the boughs of the surrounding glades. The noise makes Meyrink’s back teeth ache.

Feet of Clay, Head of Fire

Grabbing the sweep of weeds that dangle over the rim of the bowl, Meyrink pulls himself up onto the plateau, but not before stealing a peek of the miracle that is unfurling behind him.

A wake of reeking clay is rising, mushrooming up like dough rising in an oven. This great balloon of earth soon fills the entire lake bowl. Meyrink's eyes catch a quick sight of the weird symbol of his host's sorcery. It too has grown, stretching to the size of several rivers that intersect at impossible angles. The shimmering fluid does not run out of the widening ridges, but instead holds its symmetric formation.

"Ichor," Pernath shouts.

"What?"

His fingers are now pressing into Meyrink's bicep. "The blood of the stars that fell and are were buried in the earth," he explains. "Please, we haven't much time."

Meyrink runs, but not before noting the vast knots of a spine that are sprouting along the arched back of the rising clay, which is rapidly gaining definition. Are those hill-sized edges being smoothed to form a pair of shoulders?

The two men flee into the greenery. They race over hills, through slicing gnarled growths.

When the House of the Last Lantern ultimately emerges from the growth that frames it, the persistent humming noise has deepened into a horrible roar.

Pernath grasps his guest by the collar and flings him through the doorway of his home. Meyrink notes that all the servants have either fled or have secreted themselves somewhere inside the house.

"Quickly!" he shouts. The two men race about the ground floor, locking doors and shuttering windows. Sticks of furniture are wedged under door knobs. Food is hurriedly collected and carried up to the second floor, whose rooms immediately enjoy the same rituals of security.

Finally they are up and into the small and crooked attic room, whose trapdoor they bolt and then brace with an old steamer trunk.

There are no windows up here, so the two men are reduced to using their minds' eyes to witness the final throes of birth without.

The roaring is less persistent, or perhaps it is simply muffled by the attic's thin wall. But a different thunder is its usurper.

Cinnabar's Gnosis

Every so often Meyrink feels the house vibrating. The quakes grow fiercer and more rapid. From below, sounds of shattering glass as vases topple from ledges, wine bottles jump from their racks.

"What have you done?" Meyrink asks in a thin voice. Pernath is long in contemplation and Meyrink wonders if his host is perhaps scrounging for a means to explain something that defies explanation.

"I learned the secret to forging a new golem," he says at last. "In order to survive, this new golem had to be better suited for this world."

The pounding of colossal feet (for this is the image Meyrink's mind has draped over the quaking noises) grows nearer. In a moment Meyrink would come to know the awful sound of birds screaming. Tree trunks are split and toppled.

"The word you carved in the dirt..."

Meyrink does not have to finish his question.

"Lies," Pernath replies, "falsehood, deception; that Hebrew symbol has several definitions. The original golem was one of truth, and was thus doomed. I have made a golem for our times; massive, unstoppable."

The behemoth sounds begin to fade. Meyrink imagines it moving further from the Pernath's property. His host feels around the darkness until he finally lights a small oil lamp.

"It seems my house has finally lived up to its name," Pernath says as he hangs what might well be the world's last lantern. The light haloes out from one of the attic's cobweb-strewn beams. Pernath draws up his now grubby robes and creeps over to retrieve a wooden crate, which he slams down before his guest. He plunks Meyrink's satchel atop this. "You may begin penning this chapter of our lives, my friend."

"Now?" Meyrink cries, "Here?"

"You must." Pernath's eyes shine darkly in the lantern glow. "My fate is once again in your hands, dear Gustav."

"Tell me, my friend, how shall our fable end?"

THE ANTEDILUVIAN UNCLE

Rhys Hughes

In the highest room of a decaying house in the southern half of the Staré Město district of Prague, a student was composing the final sentence of his latest pamphlet, a work he intended to print and distribute throughout the city in the following weeks. The subject of his essay was nothing less momentous than THE AFTERLIFE and he was suffused with such intense emotions when he regarded his achievement that he had to take frequent sips from a wine glass at his elbow to calm his nerves. The hour was late and one of his candles had gone out; the other was guttering and spitting hot wax and barely sufficed to illuminate his labours. But he was happy, for he had almost finished his conclusion. It remained only to add the last full stop. As he dipped his pen into the turgid ink to make this significant mark, a sudden noise distracted him.

He blinked. It had come from the darkest corner; the one where stood the armchair he never used. At first he supposed the rusty springs inside that travesty of an heirloom were snapping one at a time, like the strings of a demonic guitar plucked by infernal fingers, but all tuned to the same flat note; and yet the noise came again and now it seemed more deliberate to his ear, the audible product of a minor intelligence. Very cautiously he stood and walked as lightly as possible across the floorboards, hoping to catch the culprit unawares. Sure enough, some living thing was scuttling behind the bulk of the chair. A rat? That seemed likely, for the house was old and riddled with cracks and fissures through which vermin could pass with ease. Aware of how accurate his aim was, the student removed one of his shoes and held it ready to throw.

Cinnabar's Gnosis

Taking a deep breath, he rested his bare foot against the chair and kept his knee bent; then he rapidly straightened his leg and so pushed aside the obstacle to expose his intended target. The horrid armchair scraped across the wooden floor with an outraged squeal, but no vile rodent was revealed in the process. Instead, the student was forced to blink rapidly in disbelief and the shoe fell from his grasp with an unmusical clatter. What was this? Certainly it had emerged through an aperture, a classic mouse hole in the crumbling brick wall, yet it was no rat. It was a hand, a human hand! But now the flame of the solitary candle dipped in the mild breeze occasioned by the violent displacement of the armchair, and the hand took advantage of the thickening shadows to escape. The student crouched and rested his ear against the lower portion of the wall.

Yes, he could hear the hand moving behind the bricks, retreating down the secret conduits of the house, withdrawing along the narrow passages that threaded through the grim building like empty arteries in a desiccated corpse. Soon the sound became too vague to distinguish from all the other rustlings and groanings of the ponderous structure; and the student wisely removed his ear from the wall and slowly stood erect; but then he noticed something new. The hand had brought him a gift, a black object without a single gleam along its surface, a misshapen lump of metal, and he stooped to pick it up. A pistol! It was heavy and cold to the touch and he handled it reluctantly, for his experience of lethal objects was minimal. What did the delivery of this weapon mean? Abruptly he recalled the subject of his pamphlet and gasped at the coincidence...



First the afterlife; and now the means to reach it safely!

A remarkable convergence of variables. Or was it? Some coincidences are beyond credence and this particular incident was surely too significant to be the result of chance. There had to be a higher consciousness behind the act. "Is this really the key to my transformation?" he sighed, staring at the gun with a frown of twisted reverence.

Clearly some weird and aberrant force was suggesting that he ought to liberate his own soul without delay. In other words, he was being

The Antediluvian Uncle

urged to kill himself. That was the deeply ironic but utterly logical message of the event, yet this realisation did little to attenuate his curiosity regarding the mechanics of such a morbid miracle. Full of unanswerable questions, his skull began to ache and he lurched back to his writing table and the wine glass. He drained the last red drop by tilting back his throbbing head, but as he let his sore cranium fall forward again, he felt a momentary tinge of anguish. The pistol had gone! It was neither on the table nor on the floor. He span around rapidly and felt its unwelcome weight in his pocket as he did so, and knew he must have hidden it there as an automatic response, a reflex. Then he smiled weakly to himself.

“I’m not ready yet. I need advice,” he decided.

Certainly, he appreciated the importance of proceeding in a systematic manner, for this mystery could only be solved by treating it as some sort of crime. For one thing, perhaps he was the victim of a ridiculous joke, a game in progress among the other tenants of the house. That was a sordid solution, but how could he afford to neglect any line of investigation? He would have to dismiss his neighbours from his suspicions before feeling free enough to ponder the more glamorous paranormal explanations; and there were only two other occupants in the decrepit building. As for using the pistol to shoot himself, he deemed that option a less helpful approach, at least until he was supremely confident of all the spiritual benefits; for it was feasible that an appalling error had been made, that the sightless hand had deposited the gun at the wrong address.

Pinching out the candle flame between his thumb and index finger, he strode to the door of his room and fumbled for the key. There was enough pale moonlight flowing through his solitary grimy skylight to prevent his departure from turning into a farce. He successfully manipulated the lock and opened the door, then walked down the creaking stairs to the corridor on the next lowest level. His immediate neighbour lived along this dusty passage, for his own room was the attic of the edifice and thus jutted high and solitary among the chimneys, with only smoky Bohemian air beyond its boundaries. He took a few steps over the faded carpet and knocked on the purple door. With the pistol in his pocket he felt like an assassin, but it was a necessary prop

Cinnabar's Gnosis

and so could not be discarded. Nor did he want to give the hand a chance to return and reclaim it.

He knocked again, louder. "Who is it?" asked a soft voice.

"Josef Bartos," he answered clearly.

"Please enter. It's unlocked," replied the voice.

Swallowing with difficulty, the student turned the handle and stepped over the threshold. The occupant was a young girl, an artist, and she sat in front of an easel in the centre of her room, surrounded by more flickering candles than he would use in an entire month. She returned her paintbrush to the jar of water on a table by her side and rotated her head smoothly to examine him; and though it was obvious she found nothing of excessive merit in any aspect of his appearance, she did her best to smile and mimic approval of his presence. As for Josef, he fixed his attention firmly on her empty hands, the left one in particular.

"May I ask you a few questions?" he began.

She gave her permission with an airy wave. Her forearms were stained with paint but all her fingers were clean. He understood that she was too courteous to refuse his request, despite the fact she loathed interrogations of even the most casual, playful kind.

"My room is directly above yours. Have you performed any stretching exercises in the past hour?" he enquired.

Even as the words left his mouth he winced inwardly at their absurdity and he accepted the mild rebuke she offered him in the shape of an arched eyebrow. "What exactly do you mean?"

"Extreme yoga postures," he elaborated. "I hear you once travelled to India. Conceivably one of your limbs accidentally penetrated the ceiling and entered my own apartment? I have read the writings of Patañjali and know what is feasible with his system."

She laughed and raised her arms. They were slender, feminine. "Don't you have an odder question than that?"

Josef cleared his throat. He had made a fool of himself. Her politeness was more infuriating than mockery. Better to be direct, to get to the point without fuss. He reached into his pocket.

"Will you describe this object to me?"

Helena Eflerova obediently examined the pistol, but she plainly failed to discern anything of monumental importance in it; and she

The Antediluvian Uncle

tried to hide her boredom without success. “A modern gun. What of it?” She picked up her brush and calmly resumed her painting; and Josef nodded, though she was no longer looking in his direction.

“I wish to trace its owner,” he announced.

“A good idea,” agreed Helena.

“I haven’t explained myself properly. This pistol was delivered to me by hand, but I don’t see how any hand could crawl into the space where it appeared. It came through a hole in the wall, from a narrow cavity where no man could hide, not even a dwarf.”

Helena looked at him again and smiled without malice. “Maybe it only resembled a human hand. Perhaps it was a snake instead, a trained serpent with a glove on its head?” But he saw how she was focussing not directly at him but slightly to his left side.

“Is there something over there?” he asked.

“Nothing at all,” she replied unconvincingly. The unvarying respect in her tone exasperated him once again. It was inhuman. He took a moment to study her room in finer detail, to mentally absorb the pictures propped against the walls and the work in progress on her easel. For several years, Helena had worked as a model to fund her own creative efforts, a deeply frustrating period in her life. Subservience to lesser talents had not come easily; but eventually she had decided to take more control of her destiny and pose only for herself; and now her art consisted of self-portraits; and so strikingly lifelike and anatomically perfect were her studies that Josef assumed they were rendered with the aid of photographs. The alternative explanation, that her memory was eidetic, was implausible. Nobody can recall every nuance of their own flesh.

“A snake. Yes, possibly it was,” he said.

He turned to leave. He was aware of a psychic pressure on his spine as he walked to the door. She wanted to say something to him but lacked the ability to be forthright. He waited.

“I am wearing only one shoe? Is that it?”

“Indeed.” She was lying.

There was nothing more he could do here. He left her room and passed to the end of the passage, where the next staircase was. All other doors on this level were open and led into forsaken rooms with sagging

Cinnabar's Gnosis

floors. The landlord was forbidden to fill them with new lodgers; for since the floods two years ago, when the river burst its banks, the house had been deemed unsafe for habitation. The rushing waters had eroded the bricks and rotted the timbers; and though the most recent summer sun had thoroughly dried the edifice out, its structural integrity had been irreversibly compromised, so when Josef, Helena and Old Garrigue finally moved out or expired, the authorities would happily tear it down. Until then, the trinity of remaining occupants were grudgingly permitted to remain. At least the rent was low and there were no screaming children.



Old Garrigue was a veteran of the resented occupation of Bosnia after the Treaty of Berlin in 1878 had ceded administration of the entire territory to the Austro-Hungarian Empire. He had lost his health to a vengeful mob in one of the sporadic uprisings. Dragged to safety by his fellow soldiers, his wounds had failed to heal and infection had necessitated the amputation of both his arms. War hero, cripple, he had returned to his beloved Prague penniless and unemployable. Now he dwelled on the ground level of the house and rarely emerged from his den; but Josef knew him as a pleasant conversationalist who occasionally invited him in for a discussion about politics or history. Sometimes they would play chess, the student moving the pieces for both of them and often losing. There was much more to Old Garrigue than could ever meet the eye.

Josef reached the bottom step of the lowest stairway, turned down the narrowest of the internal corridors and approached the veteran's room as quietly as possible. He rested his ear against the door and listened. There came the sounds of life from within, so the scarred soldier was still awake and could be disturbed without guilt. Josef pushed the door. Like Helena upstairs, Old Garrigue always left his room unlocked; in fact his lock had broken a long time ago, and he forbade anyone from knocking. The sound of a fist on wood resembled the sound of fists on skulls; or so he claimed. It would have been insolent to disobey his wishes in this regard, so Josef merely called his name

The Antediluvian Uncle

aloud as he entered. No lights burned inside; but on the far edge of a pool of moonlight squatted a dark figure that seemed engaged in gnawing the leg of a table.

The figure looked up and stood quickly; and Josef was unsure of what he had just seen. It moved closer, into the pale luminosity, and the student felt relief at the emergence of the familiar features, the deeply lined face, melancholy blue eyes, and long torso in a shirt without sleeves. Then Old Garrigue licked his lips and nodded at Josef. "This is a welcome surprise. Is your visit purely social? I haven't heard from you for weeks. Still busy with your holy mission?" He chuckled. Old Garrigue liked to joke about Josef's attempts to convert the denizens of Prague to spiritualism; but his humour was never vicious. He offered his visitor a seat, but Josef refused by shuffling from one foot to the other. He felt mildly embarrassed. Then he noticed how the veteran turned his head and spat a morsel into the oily shadows; but it was not a crumb of food.

"I've just completed a new pamphlet; and it's my clearest statement yet on the immortality of souls," said Josef. He chewed his lip as a substitute for speaking further, for he had no desire to earn a reputation as a bore on his own doorstep. His earliest efforts at broadcasting the fact of life after death had been directed at his neighbours; and Helena and Old Garrigue had been among the first recipients of his original pamphlets, so both had already heard enough about the subject.

"Clarity is subjective, young man. Don't forget!"

The veteran moved closer but skirted the circle of moonlight, and then perched on the arm of a threadbare sofa. Josef squinted at the table at the rear of the cluttered room, at a small pile of sawdust beneath it. Here was a phenomenon he did not understand; but then he realised that most of the universe was beyond his comprehension.

He held up the gun. "What do you think?"

Old Garrigue whistled softly. "It's a Laumann model, very new. Rather expensive too. Where did you get it?"

"A gift. And that's a mystery; but even more baffling is the identity of the giver. I am here for that reason."

Old Garrigue nodded thoughtfully to himself.

"When technology becomes too advanced more things may go wrong. I have never forgotten that maxim. It was the advice of Her-

Cinnabar's Gnosis

mann, Freiherr Dahlen von Orlaburg, and though he held that position only four months, he remains for me the best governor.”

Josef blinked. “The best governor of what?”

Old Garrigue smiled. “Bosnia and Herzegovina, of course! But I must consider your youth. Those old names mean nothing to you. Why should they? Your pistol is prone to jamming.”

“I don’t intend to shoot it. I want to return it.”

“And how might I assist?”

Josef took a deep shuddering breath, his chest aching with the effort of holding and expelling so much stale air. “I’m searching for the owner, the one who delivered it to me, and I need to eliminate as many candidates as possible. Will you tell me anything you might know about what happened to your missing arms? I am mainly interested in the left one. It was a left hand that gave me the gun, you see.”

“A hand on its own?” rasped Old Garrigue.

“Yes. It wasn’t connected to a body, there wasn’t enough space; and I don’t believe it was a glove attached to a snake. The texture was different. Do you know where your arms went?”

Instead of expressing repugnance or misery at this absurd and hurtful question, Old Garrigue smiled kindly and his eyes shone, a reaction that filled Josef with both horror and relief.

“They were eaten by dogs. Every scrap. The bones too.”

“I’m sorry.” Josef turned to leave.

“Wait!” cried Old Garrigue. He desperately wanted to speak but whole words were trapped behind his teeth; and those teeth were long, far longer than Josef remembered them; a cage for secrets. An inner conflict worked an alchemical change on the muscles of his face, a struggle between truth and the urge to restrain it. Politeness will annihilate the world, the student mused; and he wondered where that curious thought had come from. The veteran continued to twitch; and Josef felt he was observing a puppet in a play whose operator was gravely ill.

He could bear the tension no longer and resolved to put the veteran out of his misery. “Is it about my feet?”

“Yes, yes!” Old Garrigue spluttered with gratitude.

“I have one shoe,” said Josef.

The Antediluvian Uncle

“Take one of mine. We are roughly the same size and I own dozens. I don’t want them all; I can’t stand having them here. Look under the sofa. Many pairs. Count them, if you like.”

His pleading was dreadful. Josef knelt and groped for the nearest one. It was the wrong colour but fitted him well; and he accepted the gift. As if to demonstrate his gratitude he stamped his foot. The shoe produced a sad note on the floor, like the final closing of either a distant dungeon door or a manhole cover over a disused sewer.

“I think it was a spider,” said Old Garrigue.

“What are you referring to? Ah, the hand! But how is that possible? It had five thin fingers, not eight legs.”

“A crippled spider, I mean,” whispered the veteran.

Josef burned with shame. “I see. Maybe you are right. A large crippled spider. Well, that’s logical enough.”

“Where are you going now? To meet your friends?”

“Yes, the café is open all night.”

“Farewell. Good luck.”



Josef left the house behind and set off hastily along the street. The snake and spider suggestions had irritated him; and yet the relentless courtesy of both neighbours had been even more galling. It would be good to plunge into the company of less delicate types, men and women with obsessions similar to his; and he knew where to find them. As he increased his pace he became aware of a pipe lying in the gutter. It was thicker than a water hose and not made of rubber or metal; he had never before seen a tube of that design. He stopped to gently touch it and feel the slow regular pulse of warm liquid inside. A new engineering project, plainly; but what did it contain and why was it located above ground? Following it with his eyes, he saw how it turned the next corner. Then it seemed to run up the wall of a house and vanish over the rooftops.

He shook his head. It was none of his business; and he put it out of his mind and continued his walk. Soon he reached his destination, the café of his compatriots, the *Kavárna Fanatici*. Here routinely gathered the prolific pamphleteers of the city; and Josef was one of them, a respected

Cinnabar's Gnosis

member of an informal club of unorthodox believers in unpopular causes; and the environment always invigorated him. He entered and immediately strode to the rear of the café, where his friends generally sat. Sure enough, there they were, drinking and smoking and exchanging their latest masterpieces with muttered apologies about the poor quality of the paper. They greeted Josef with genuine delight, though the student thought he detected just a hint of unease in their attitude when he mentioned the curious pipe in the street; but then Mrozek laughed and said:

“You know how the authorities are. They’re always digging up roads and installing wonderful appliances. I imagine your tube has something to do with electricity or the telephones.”

“It was a strange colour and had an odd texture.”

“Undoubtedly it did. Progress!”

Josef smiled. Mrozek was a Pole from Zakopane and he had travelled all the way to Prague on foot to promote the ideals of vegetarianism. His disdain of modern civilisation was often amusing; especially as he never failed to avail himself of its luxuries when his finances permitted. While he returned to his brimming glass, Gryn spoke up. “It might be connected with public hygiene,” he declared.

“The sewers? But it was above the street!”

Gryn shrugged. “Did you know that sometimes they find gold down there in all that muck? Seriously, human dirt is gold. Not always, hardly ever in fact, but very occasionally it changes, the molecules of the waste matter alter, and it becomes pure; with a heavenly aroma; and a golden colour like butter. This is the truth!”

Josef snorted. Gryn was obsessed with alchemy. His pamphlets were full of arcane jargon and promises of impossible metamorphoses; he was considered insane by the others but tolerated because of his generosity. It never occurred to them that right at the source of this generosity might be found proof of his claims of success; or it might simply be the case that he lived off an undeclared inheritance. Nobody knew and nobody asked; it was probable that nobody cared.

“Why are you so late tonight?” asked Hynek.

Josef sat next to him, accepted the glass that was pushed into his hand, shook his head and replied, “Why do you think? I’ve been working on my newest pamphlet. It’s finished now.”

The Antediluvian Uncle

“Did you bring a copy for us?” frowned Gryn.

Josef shook his head again. “I didn’t. Circumstances prevented me. I’ll tell you everything after this drink.”

He balanced a small Brouilleur over his glass and filled it with chilled water from a jug that tinkled with ice. The filter allowed the water to drip one drop at a time into his reservoir glass, turning his absinthe cloudy. He never added sugar, regarding that custom as an act of unofficial heresy; as he waited for the louche to properly form and thicken, he closely studied each of his friends. Only seven tonight; and Milena was absent. A shame. Then he reflected ruefully on the general shoddiness of this scene, hardly representative of the common conceptions of Belle Époque nightlife. He found it galling that the interior of the Kavárna Fanatici did not resemble a Privat-Livemont poster; but what could he do about it? Nothing. Yet his true concern, as always, was survival of the human soul after the decay of the flesh. Everything else was vanity.

They watched him in silence for only a minute.

Zdena said, “Well, I’m still composing my essay about the significance of dreams. I don’t accept that they are expressions of subconscious desire but rehearsals for crises that can’t be anticipated by reason. Their function is protective; to sharpen reactions.”

“Possibly,” conceded Mrozek, “but I never remember my dreams; thus for me they must be wasted effort.”

Hynek cried abruptly, “I had a dream last night; it was about the future and it terrified me! I imagined that in ages to come, barbarians will invent a ritual of fire and spoil the precious liquid. I woke in a sweat!” He raised his own glass to his lips, washed his gums in the pungency, smiled with a slight shudder. Hynek was a crusader against the erosion of liberties; but he seemed almost resigned to losing the battle. He was convinced that all café society was under threat; that his beloved absinthe would eventually be made illegal. He repeated this prediction now and Mrozek dismissed it with a wave. But Hynek grumbled, “You are fools. Already in the Congo Free State they are planning a ban! So it’s only a matter of time before we are forced to drink water or beer; enjoy yourselves while you may, for the powers of dullness can’t be resisted!”

Cinnabar's Gnosis

Zdena drained her glass as if she took his warning seriously. Then she laughed and lit a long green cigarette.

Klaus leaned forward. "Now it's your turn, Josef; but if you prefer not to say anything, we won't push you."

Josef rubbed his eyes. He had never expected his friends to be polite at this late hour; usually they were raucous, sarcastic. What was happening? With a fluid motion he cast the gun onto the table. "No, I promised to tell you everything; and so I shall. I am seeking a hand. I want to learn why it already wants me to leave the world."

They stared at the pistol in the mildest astonishment. Josef clenched a fist angrily; but they listened to his story with compassion. Klaus was the first to speak when the tale was done. He said, "I don't think the hand had a specific message for you. I certainly don't believe it was suggesting you commit suicide. That's just a guess."

"What alternative meaning can the incident have?"

Klaus clucked his tongue. "Come, Josef; use your imagination. For the past few years you have pushed your pamphlets about the afterlife under the doors of this city. Can there be a single house left in Prague that hasn't received one of your tracts? Yet you never wonder what effect they might have had! Have you never asked yourself how many people have actually read your words and been touched by them? You assume you write into a void; that you are an unheeded prophet. It's a delusion we all share, I am afraid; but you are the worst of us."

Zdena blew a smoke ring. "He has a point."

"What relevance has this to the hand? A hand can't read. Only a mind is suited to that task," sneered Josef.

"Yes, and perhaps many minds have read and understood your reasons for belief. Look at this!" roared Klaus triumphantly, as he reached into his wallet and extracted a faded sheet of folded paper. "One of your previous arguments for immortality." He unfolded it and waved it high, wafting the smoke of Zdena's cigarette into the face of Mrozek, who turned aside. "In this text you quote Cookes, Zöllner, Fechner; eminent scientists, beyond reproach. Who could doubt the testimony of such figures? And they have proved the truth of the soul. Now imagine that a desperate man happened to read those words. Picture the result."

"I still don't understand," confessed Josef.

The Antediluvian Uncle

Klaus puffed out his cheeks. "The universe is rigorously symmetrical. I believe that with all my heart. A man plans to commit suicide; he holds a loaded gun to his head. Suddenly your hand pushes the pamphlet under his door; and the man pauses. He delays pulling the trigger and he stoops to pick up the unexpected delivery. As his eyes run over the title he gasps at the coincidence. Then he decides that more than coincidence is at stake and locks away his gun forever. What happened to you balances out that occurrence; restores cosmic symmetry."

"Gun, hand, pamphlet in the first instance; pamphlet, hand, gun in the second. A mirror image," mused Josef.

"Exactly! What do you think?" Klaus smiled.

"Undoubtedly that you are mad," said Valčík with a yawn. He was a political agitator with little patience for theories of geometrical order or practical karma. Klaus remained smiling.

"No!" protested Josef. "I believe he might be right. I have delivered so many pamphlets to so many houses. Who knows what influence they've had? But this doesn't change the mystery of the hand. It wasn't a snake or even a spider. It was human." He held his own hand immediately before his face. "Like this one; but a left hand."

"Maybe it was mechanical?" suggested Valčík.

"Indeed," nodded Mrozek.

Even Hynek liked this new idea. "One day machines will fully replace mankind; so why not start with a hand?"

"Yes, a mechanical hand," echoed Zdena and Gryn.

"But who could build such a thing?" snorted Josef. Then he recalled a house, a door that opened, a face, a room. "In all the time I have tramped the streets of Prague, in all the years of walking up and down the stairs of innumerable houses, only once was I invited inside. A foreigner. He told me he was an inventor. I had forgotten."

"You've solved the mystery. Bravo!" cried Klaus.

"Certainly he is responsible," giggled Zdena. "He took a liking to you and after you left he built a hand from spare parts to track you down and pat you on the back. Probably it was forced to carry a gun to protect itself from robbers on the way to your attic."

"What was the inventor's name?" wondered Valčík.

Cinnabar's Gnosis

"Do you remember?" asked Gryn.

Josef shut his eyes tight and tried to clarify the long faded scene in his mind's eye. The apartment had been on a cobbled hill in Malá Strana, that picturesque quarter between Hradčany and the Vlatava, a sector of Prague that was even quaintier than the Staré Město; but Josef found it depressing because it was simply too constricting for his taste; with streets so narrow they served the urban sprawl in the same way that hidden cavities serve a house, circulating odours and whispers on slow currents of stale air. The owner of the apartment had been a short man with a thick dark beard and restless hands. Josef accepted his request to step inside for tea; and he had lingered there an hour, explaining his theories about spirits, while his host nodded politely and later showed him some of his inventions. Springs and cogs, but not metal; strange objects.

"He was Romanian," said Josef at last.

"You can seek him out tomorrow," suggested Mrozek.

"I'll do it now," Josef growled.

"Don't be ridiculous; the hour is late. To wander the streets at this time is dangerous alone. You must get drunk with us. More absinthe! If Milena was here you would stay, I wager!"

Josef shook his head violently. "I am going."

He pushed his glass away and stood. He stared furiously at the gun but made no effort to pick it up. He merely clenched and unclenched his hand and crushed the life out of nothing.

Only one of his friends had remained silent. Now it was Daniela's turn to speak. She had once been his lover; these days she preached the virtues of free love in her writings. Men had become scared of her as a result and preferred to ignore her femininity.

"You do realise, don't you, Josef, that your..."

"What?" He grimaced at her.

Daniela was looking at his left side, but her eyes were unfocussed as if she gazed over an invisible horizon.

"What is it? What's wrong?" he repeated. Then he curled his mouth in a lopsided grin. "Is it my mismatched shoes? One black and one red. Yes, it must be a comic sight. Is that it?"

Daniela answered quietly, "I suppose so."

The Antediluvian Uncle

“Thank you,” he said simply.

The others avoided his eyes as he produced a small coin and flung it at his abandoned glass. It missed and rolled over the table, colliding with the pistol and toppling over. Josef turned sharply on his heel and hastened out of the Kavárna Fanatici. He expected to be called back; at the very least a rolled up ball of paper should have hit his spine. But nothing occurred; so as he emerged into the sour moonlight he redirected all his attention away from them and continued to remember.



True, only one had ever invited him inside; it had happened while he was sliding his pamphlet under a frosted glass door. Professor Bogdan Velicu had loomed as an indistinct shadow, then flung it open; he claimed to be an exile from Focșani, a small city on the Moldavian-Wallachian border; but he had never revealed the reasons for his escape westwards and Josef immediately assumed his exile was self-imposed. And why not? All of us need to flee from ourselves, our culture, our dooms, at certain moments in our lives. Josef utterly accepted that.

Heading towards the river, he spotted the gurgling pipe again, but now it crossed the street in midair and someone had hung washing on it. As he twisted his body to obtain a better view, the tube suddenly jerked; and the washing went with it. What could it be? The washing would undoubtedly be lost; and he felt a splinter of satisfaction deep in his heart that someone else was also a victim of misfortune. But resentment is unprofitable and he suppressed his laugh; he increased his pace and soon smelled the river. Then he turned a corner and saw the silhouette of the statue-laden Karlův Bridge arching over the tiny ripples.

He walked across without looking into the water, though he knew that swans in moonlight are a beautiful sight; and he continued rapidly on the other side, under the bridge tower and up towards Dientzenhofer's church of St Nicholas, where he turned left; though the going was hard. Cobbles and slopes should have slowed him; but he strongly felt that if he did not hurry he would forget his destination. How many years had passed since his single visit; and what were the chances he could find the house again; that the professor still dwelled there?

Cinnabar's Gnosis

The house loomed up before him in bizarre shadows that were tinged with gold and rose; Josef licked his lips, wondering if the night itself was drunk, because he was not. And here the weird tube re-appeared, spearing out of a side street and hugging the base of the structure before vanishing down another alley. Josef hesitated before entering the dark open lobby of the building. Was this really the residence of a man who had fabricated an automated hand? But he had come this far already, so he lurched inside, a cold sweat running down his sternum.

He clattered up the steps; and to his amazement the glass door was still there; and still frosted. But now the outline stood behind it without a need to be summoned; and Josef felt he was expected. Professor Velicu opened the door gently and bowed in formal greeting. His dark beard was flecked with grey; and he wore a hat, slanted to one side, with a tall crown. From an unseen room behind him came a low mumbling; it was simultaneously disturbing and soothing, like the sound of rising water. The professor now took a dozen small steps backwards.

"Have you been waiting just for me?" asked Josef.

"Yes, I have," admitted Velicu.

"Everywhere I go, people are too polite. I can't stand it!"

"Then you must learn endurance."

"I won't come in. It's evident you have company."

Velicu frowned, then smiled. "Ah, you mean the mumbling? But that's precisely why you *must* enter. I knew you would come one day; and there are many things I need to explain."

"Why is the city encircled by a tube?"

"Not encircled, my boy, but threaded. It passes through windows, goes up chimneys, down drainpipes, undulates below the road, divides the sky into a grid; and it's all connected."

"Won't you take off your hat? You are indoors!"

"I wear it night and day. Always."

"Does it hide a deformity?"

Velicu smiled. "You don't imagine I have been standing here for years in the hope you might turn up? I have indeed awaited you, but I also went about the business of living. I heard you when you were far away; as you were crossing the river, in fact; then I went to stand

The Antediluvian Uncle

by the door. My ears are more sensitive than those of any other human. I say 'ears' but really I mean just one ear. See for yourself!"

And he removed his hat and turned his head.

Josef wanted to recoil but something stopped him from moving. Large and tufted, the left ear of Velicu was not the organ of a man. It resembled that of a gigantic fox but was less elegant. For a full minute the professor displayed it; then he replaced his hat.

"What happened to you?" stammered Josef.

"It grew, slowly but surely; grew large and very powerful. But I prefer to keep it hidden from public view."

"Yes, yes; I can understand why! It's monstrous!"

Velicu sighed. "We all have our special mutations now, I'm afraid; or maybe I'm not afraid; not afraid at all."

"What do you mean?" demanded Josef.

"Come inside," said the professor.

Josef followed him down the corridor and into a room full of battered furniture. In the exact centre lurked something tall covered with a sheet; and this was the source of the mumbling. Josef perched on the edge of a chair and was unable to stop looking at it; and even when Velicu inserted a glass of borovička between his clenched fingers he continued to stare at the thing, a vaguely humanoid lump.

Then he was flooded with terrible insight...

"You didn't invent a mechanical hand with a will of its own, did you? Not just a hand, I mean. You invented the whole thing; an artificial man! Hands, arms, body, head! A golem!"

For the first time Velicu betrayed a hint of annoyance. "Not a golem; no, no! There's far more to Prague than golems! My creation is sentient and truly superior; it is not a slave."

"You have created a master?" breathed Josef.

Velicu rubbed his tired eyes. "No, it's a failure and I don't know what to do. I hate the idea of destroying it, but my plans have come to nothing. I dreamed of a better race in a better world, but something went wrong. I can't let it out like this, not like this!"

"Show it to me!" bellowed Josef.

With the fluidity of a stage conjuror, Professor Velicu snatched off the sheet; and Josef found himself confronted with the paradox of a

Cinnabar's Gnosis

welcome abomination. Yes, it was overpowering, the exaggerated form of a sturdy man, a grossly magnified bully in shape, colour and texture, but somehow it also seemed reliable, almost kindly. Josef was shocked at the mismatch of emotions it engendered within him. The being mumbled constantly but its words were garbled; and yet they did not grate on his nerves; but there was still a glaring discrepancy between this brazen, avuncular idol and his expectations. He had anticipated something much smaller and more agile, an entity capable of running through narrow domestic spaces; a manmade mouse or stoat. The hands of this being were massive; paws wide enough to strangle bears in their winter sleep.

But even more remarkable were its eyebrows. Each dark blue hair was as thick as a finger or a skewer; and they bristled like porcupine quills. A more religious man than Josef might have mistaken them for the horns of a peculiar devil. They stood erect and were tipped by cruel barbs; but still the general effect was not purely evil.

“What is your judgment of him?” asked Velicu.

“Intimidating but comforting.”

“Indeed! And that’s why I call him The Antediluvian Uncle. Like good uncles everywhere, he is strong, tolerant and yet roguish. This prototype is an evolutionary dead end, unfortunately. I should try again; but I’m too old to begin from scratch, too tired.”

“I comprehend very little,” croaked Josef.

Professor Velicu nodded sadly, carefully poured a large glass of spirits for his own consumption, sipped and grimaced. “The Vlatava has burst its banks many times in the past decade. Prague was flooded catastrophically two years ago; but that is only a mild taste of what is to come. My studies of the moon have convinced me that it is a ball of ice; and one day it must plummet into the Earth and inundate us with melting water. Dry land will disappear. From the depths of outer space new moons will replace the old in a process that is possibly eternal.”

“You should write pamphlets,” sneered Josef.

Velicu ignored this comment. “The falling of the moon onto our world has happened before and will occur regularly throughout history; and we are overdue for the next collision. Awareness of our imminent destruction convinced me to build an ark; but not a wooden

The Antediluvian Uncle

vessel, not a ship. *My* ark is an untried variation of the human being; a template for the future of our species. I hoped to design a man with a snout long and rigid enough to act as a snorkel, a trunk that could reach higher than the rising water; and the descendants of this being would thus survive the coming deluge by living underwater while still breathing air!"

"And when the waters eventually recede?"

"An exodus back to dry land; and the snouts will atrophy."

"Homo Elephas," muttered Josef bleakly.

"Homo loxodonta amphibius," corrected Velicu. "But I simply wasn't clever enough to make it perfect; always there was a flaw in the matrix. I grew *The Antediluvian Uncle* from a seed of special matter, but it wasn't his snout that gradually lengthened."

"It was his eyebrows," commented Josef.

"That was unforeseen," sighed Velicu. "And so was the fact he would be contagious; that the special matter harboured germs, that his mutation would itself mutate as it was passed on. And now we are all infected; and have all grown hugely asymmetrical."

"Your ear," said Josef with a sardonic smile.

"Yes, the mutations are random. One man might develop a vast eye; a second man, a tongue like a scarf."

"But never a snout like a snorkel?"

Velicu winced. "Not yet..."

"What was this special matter?" asked Josef.

Velicu rubbed at his chin. "A waxy yellow substance brought up from the ground by the floodwaters. Pure; with a heavenly aroma; and a golden colour like butter. A mystic yolk!"

"You were responsible for spreading the infection?"

Velicu shook his head. "You were."

Josef blinked. "How so?"

Velicu drained his glass, poured another. "When you first came here to deliver your pamphlet, the growing seed of my creation was still formless and small enough to fit inside a jar. We sat in this room and discussed the afterlife; or rather, you talked and I listened, for I am far more interested in the coming life of *this* world. But I didn't know that germs could leave the jar and enter your body as you inhaled, conta-

Cinnabar's Gnosis

minating your blood; all my tests indicated that such an outcome was impossible. But that's what happened. Then you went away and continued to deliver your pamphlets, spreading the infection everywhere."

Joseflowered his head. "Yes, I'm thorough when it comes to my self-imposed duty; I have visited every house in the city. What better agent for the spreading of a disease? But what about my own mutation? What is it? My ear is still no bigger than before!"

Velicu seemed astonished. "You really don't know?"

"Tell me, please!" pleaded Josef.

"Have you never wondered why you only use your right arm? Haven't you even noticed this is the case?"

Josef felt his knees go weak. "What are you saying?"

"The peculiar tube is your left arm!"

"Ludicrous! Impossible!" sobbed Josef. "Someone would have told me the truth long before now! Why didn't Helena say anything? Why did Old Garrigue remain silent? What about my friends at the café? I should have been the subject of vicious mockery!"

"The germs also amplify politeness. Don't you understand? There has been a general expansion of inner qualities as well as localised extensions of external body parts. For every ear that has become enormous, for every arm, dozens of attitudes have expanded; souls have grown, characters too, deepening, ripening, fermenting..."

Josef rocked on his perch. It was all horribly lucid to him now. Helena had developed a photographic memory; Old Garrigue incisors that needed to be gnawed constantly down to normal length. Random mutations in the citizens of Prague; but also an almost universal intensification of courtesy and discretion; and who knew what other unbalanced growths had broken out in the metropolis? Josef considered the hypothetical suicide case, the man with a gun next to his head; and the instant the pamphlet was pushed under his door. That man would have picked up the document, examined it carefully, breathed in the bacillus while reading and become infected in turn. Whatever his name, be it Karl, Franz, Gustav, he might have grown in any direction, external or internal. Perhaps he had become sensitive to supernatural phenomena. Who knew?

"The tube is my left arm," repeated Josef.

The Antediluvian Uncle

“And at the extreme end of that arm, at its terminus, is the hand, *your* hand, the deliverer of the pistol!”

“But why did I give myself the means to kill myself? I have no desire to die yet. There has been a mistake!”

Professor Velicu shrugged. “Where is the gun now?”

Josef turned his head to his left side for the first time in many months, gazed at his own shoulder as if it was the beginning of a long road; and he laughed strangely; then frowned again, ignoring the professor’s question and asking, “If your tests proved that no contamination was possible, how did the germs enter and infect me?”

The corners of Velicu’s mouth twitched. “Perhaps it was a gift.” Then he began giggling. “By definition, an Uncle must have a nephew or niece. You are The Antediluvian Nephew.”

A ferocious tide of nausea that had nothing to do with the moon rose up inside Josef and flooded his throat...



Josef ran. Far behind him frosted glass shattered. He had jumped up from his chair, overturning it; had rushed out of the room, slamming the door as hard as possible; had fallen down the stairs, picked himself up. Now he tripped over cobbles, leaping the tube that was his own grasping limb, his burning mouth screaming. Yes, it was true. His right hand simply did not know what his left was doing. Nor would it ever. He ran until he reached the river and the bridge; then he slowed down and tried to clear his mind. The city was utterly quiet, but he doubted he was unobserved. Behind the dead windows pulsed minds connected to hypersensitive ears, eyes and tongues. For one insane moment he debated with himself the advantages of drowning himself in the fast chilly Vlatava below, cheating the deluge that he refused to believe in anyway.

No, that course of action was pointless; he might as well shoot himself with the pistol. But he had left that in the Kavárna Fanatici, on a table that was slick with spilled absinthe. He decided to head in that direction, thick drops of sweat on his face shining in the moonlight like the silver dew of another world’s morning. Down the narrow streets

Cinnabar's Gnosis

he went; and the weird tube that was his left arm slid and shifted as he attempted to flex it. Like a child learning to coordinate its limbs, Josef frowned with the effort; soon enough he managed to achieve a limited control. No longer would it obey only the commands of his subconscious, coiling around the entire city and returning to his own house, threading itself through the secret spaces only to emerge through a mouse hole with cryptic gifts. No longer would he be entirely at the discretion of its mercy.

Distant shouting troubled the silence; a babble of voices ahead; clearly there was a commotion of some sort outside the café. So he increased his pace again, turned the corner and found himself among a small crowd. He pushed forward and collided with a woman; she turned to face him and he recognised her. Helena! What was she doing here? And next to her stood Old Garrigue, his front teeth shining like new alabaster tombstones on the lip of a chapped ridge. Josef frowned.

"We were both worried about you," explained Helena, "and decided to follow you; but we soon lost your trail after you left the café. Something rather dramatic has happened inside."

"A suicide cult," announced Old Garrigue.

Josef continued forward into the building; and he was too slippery for the police; the oily sweat on his flesh acting like a lubricant. He continued to the rear of the café; and there found his seven friends, slumped around the table, still seated on their chairs, one body for each bullet in the pistol. Clearly they had passed the weapon around the group in a circle; and not once had it jammed. Josef nodded to himself. The pistol had never been for him, but always for them; and they had made use of it to endorse their unspoken despair. But what had been *his* motive? Simply to extinguish a nest of rivals; to ensure his own pamphlets and arguments would enjoy a monopoly? Could it be as simple and petty as that? Then the truth entered his battered consciousness. It had everything to do with his own doubts, a final loss of faith in his own message.

Despite the fact he devoted his existence to promoting the afterlife, he never really believed in it; not deep down. Proof was what he had needed all along; and so he had carefully prepared the ultimate test. The spirits of his friends would come to him in the following nights,

The Antediluvian Uncle

to remonstrate and argue; and then he would know for certain. Very slowly he turned to walk back out. He was not a killer but a facilitator. Did this fact make him feel less guilty? Yes, of course. He passed through the open doors and ignored everyone; even Helena and Old Garrigue. He yearned to be free. But now he became aware of an unnatural weight; and all the way home, the lunar light was damp on his exposed flesh.

HER MAGNETIC FIELD

Adam Golaski

Helen left me as a cloud of flies. That must be of what she was made. She/the flies lifted the bed sheet up off of me, then she slipped from under the sheet fly by fly and flew for the brass heating vent at the apex of the attic room where we'd lived and worked together for the past months, rarely quitting but to go out for food, wine, or to pick up another parcel from the post office. I knew if even one fly was killed, Helen would be mutilated forever. I leapt from my bed, snatched up a green glass and an unread postcard from yesterday's mail, and trapped a single fly, just landed on the lip of the vent. I set the glass on my bedside table, the postcard picture-up across its mouth, a small stone on the postcard to weigh it down. The fly made noise with its wings and struck the card and rang the glass. With great care I set a very fine microphone as close to the glass as I could without letting the two touch. The microphone was connected by a wire to a high-end tape recorder/player. I selected a blank cassette – a translucent green plastic – and inserted it into the recorder/player and pressed down the “play” and “record” buttons. Later, I would worry about the rest of Helen.

Outside of the attic's south-facing window was an antique street lamp that stood on a boulder to illuminate the path that led to the stairs that descended to the front door of the house my room was the attic of; the lamp's light was level with the window because the house stood at the bottom of what had once been a very deep pond.

I slept and dreamed for two days.

I dreamed of a turtle. My dream moved like a turtle. Upon the hill of the turtle's shell stood the house; on the turtle's head, the antique

Her Magnetic Field

street lamp. The turtle peered over the edge of a cliff – the lamp lit the walls of a narrow canyon. On the canyon walls, obscured by moss and vines, were ancient inscriptions. I knew they were recipes; for what, though, I did not know. A great shifting shape like an earthquake frightened the turtle – the turtle drew its head into its shell – the lamp snapped off the turtle’s head and tumbled like a lit cigarette till its glass smashed against the canyon floor, and I was in dark as dark as the dark that came before the universe.

A heavy envelope was dropped through the mail slot on the first floor of the house. The noise made by the un-oiled mail door woke me: the attic room was warm with sun. The room was muted under a fine layer of dust. The fly was dead, legs up on the bottom of the green glass. I took the cassette from the player, wrote “Helen” onto its face, slipped the cassette into a clear plastic box – on the box’s “spine” I again wrote “Helen” – and I slipped the cassette onto a shelf.

I sat on the floor beside the recorder/player. I collected several cassettes, replaced them in their cases, then returned them to the small box that kept them together as a set. The prudent thing to do was to put the cassettes away. Instead I took them out of the box again, took the fourth cassette from its case and inserted it into the left-deck and a translucent red cassette into the right. I worked carefully for about fifteen minutes. Once done, I put away the box of tapes in the top drawer of the dresser.

I was famished. The attic’s make-shift kitchen was a mini-refrigerator, a wood-block cutting board, and a hot plate. There was a pair of metal sinks in a closet that once must have served as a darkroom; this was where I washed any dishes and, with a aid of a sponge (and, formerly, Helen) I bathed and shaved. For a real shower I would have to use one of the bathrooms in the house below. I prepared a simple meal of cheese, a piece of fig cake, rice crackers, and wine.

While eating, I listened to a vinyl copy of *From Here We Go Sublime*, by The Field. Helen’s and my music collection was small and strictly a vinyl affair. We were audiophiles, but there were other, more practical reasons for our aversion to other media.

The door bell rang.

Hastily, I might add.

Cinnabar's Gnosis

The door bell was rung hastily and soon the front door was knocked upon. I listened – the bell went silent, the pounding ceased – and I heard deadbolt tumble out of lock.

From a small but heavy box I withdrew the revolver my mother gave to me when I was a boy, checked the chambers for bullets, and turned in my chair so I had a clear view of the attic door.

Downstairs the stick music of an ancient cedar cane tapped against risers accompanied by a heavy leather trod on the steps. A voice called out, “If you’re here, Théophile, then for Heaven’s sake don’t shoot me.” I replaced the revolver in its box, opened the attic door, and called down to my cousin.

“Philip?” I said.

“You *are* here.” he said. “Why haven’t you called?”

My cousin was not one to visit unexpectedly nor to expect phone calls or any other regular correspondence from me, so I said, “Uh...” There is no phone line to this house, and Philip knew this.

He struggled up the narrow stairs – the cane was not for show – and said, once he reached the landing from where he could see me, “Didn’t you receive my postcard?”

I extended a hand. Rather than take it he handed me an envelope and said, “This was on the floor behind the front door.”

“I don’t get mail here,” I said.

“Now do lend me a hand, will you,” my cousin said. I helped to pull him up the last few steps, and he let me lead him into the attic room. I steered him toward a chair (Helen’s) but he shook his head and tottered off to the bed, where he sat, kicked off his loafers, lifted up his legs, and lay down.

The envelope was unmarked, except for a thin scrawl across the front of it that might, by squinting, be made to resemble my name. By its weight and shape I knew what was inside and from whom it’d been sent. I set it atop my dresser. I wouldn’t allow myself to worry about it.

Philip squinted at the green glass beside my bed.

“There’s a dead fly...” he sat up, as best he could, and looked at me through his little round spectacles. “Is that Helen?”

How he’d been able to guess –

Her Magnetic Field

“And my postcard!” He yanked it from the top of the glass so swiftly the stone fell into the glass (onto the fly) as if no card had been there. He held out the card so I might look at the picture (of Notre Dame Cathedral, which was near where Philip lived) and so he might read it to me. “I wrote,” he said, “Cease your experiments immediately and call your sister.”

“My sister.”

“Yes. Your sister. She sensed some bad hoodoo from here.”

“Oh?”

Philip flopped back down on his back. After a moment of thumb-twiddling he reached into a sagging sport coat pocket and withdrew a small, waxed paper bag. “Your sister is worried about you.” From the bag he removed a chocolate-covered grasshopper and popped it into his mouth. “So? What’s the story?”

I poured myself another glass of wine and took a bite of fig cake. With my mouth full I said, “While cleaning out a clothes closet, Helen found a little steel box of beloved trinkets and in it a cassette she recorded with her sister. They made the tape to while away a rainy afternoon. It was quite charming. Hearing Helen as a girl – her voice, but higher – hearing Helen and her sister laugh and tell each other silly jokes and sing songs popular during our childhood. Helen and her sister were no more than nine or ten. We listened to the cassette on a cheap tape player which seemed only to enhance its remoteness. By the half of it Helen was in tears – the recording brought up terrible memories – Helen and her sister were abducted not months after they made the tape – I’ll spare you the details – Helen’s sister did not survive and Helen, just.

“After the last bit of tape ran off and the player shut off, we sat silent for a long while. We watched the sunlight recede and I watched Helen fall asleep and I dozed a little, too. During this in/out state I went out of myself – really or no, I’m not certain, but what really happens and what doesn’t hardly matters, does it? The body I occupied was not so old, but aged – I could not move from the chair I was in. The view before me was of a lake – I was able to tap the mind of the body I occupied and found the name of the lake – Starnberg – its location – Bavaria – but I was reluctant to examine this mind further because of a dark mist-

Cinnabar's Gnosis

shell that clung to it – a gloom that was a shield from what gloom is typically a shield: happiness.

“I sensed at the core of the gloom a greater darkness that was death. That body’s imminent death, I was sure, but also the death of someone dear.

“Fearful as I was, I could not entirely resist that mind, and I found – to my delight – that in spite of the dark and hardening mist-shell, tendrils of inspiration – the glowing arms of a deep sea jellyfish – reached out. Beams of light from the eyes of the man whose body I occupied lit across the lake. One such light, one such tendril, was the idea that he might use naturally occurring magnetic rocks to capture his own magnetic field, to store it, which would allow himself to remain at the lake after his death. To haunt that beautiful place.

“What an inspiration!

“And once back in my own self it was my own inspiration: it became quite plain to me that something of Helen’s sister was on the recording we’d listened to.”

Philip propped himself on his elbows.

“Her magnetic field,” I said.

And Philip’s eyes grew wide because *of course*.

Philip said, “Magnetic tape.”

“Of course,” I said. “When I told Helen, she became very excited, but we were quickly stymied by the problem of differentiating type: sure, we could measure the magnetic field generated by a cassette, but how could we determine if any of it was not originally part of the cassette? We were also unsure under what conditions (if any) someone’s field might be recorded.”

Philip thought for a moment and then asked the question that didn’t dawn on Helen or me until a month of experiments were conducted: “What good is it?”

“Right,” I said. “That stopped us for a while. Having a bit of someone’s aura on record was about as useful as a photo of someone’s aura – it proved there was an aura, it would allow the aura to be read at leisure, but a photograph cannot be communicated with, a person could not be made from a photograph, etc., etc. Recording an aura seemed for a time only good as a parlor trick, not to mention that –

Her Magnetic Field

unlike a photograph – we had no idea how to read a tape-recorded aura.

“I let the whole thing go, but Helen did not. I thought she had, but I hadn’t understood the whole significance of the tape. It wasn’t just a record of her sister, it was also a record of herself, *before* the abduction. If Helen’s sister was on the tape, so, in all likelihood, was Helen. Helen wanted both girls returned from the dead. Pardon me for being so dramatic.”

Philip waved the drama away with his hand.

“Some wine?” I asked.

Philip sat fully upright. “A grasshopper?” he offered.

We both accepted.

“So Helen kept thinking about the problem until it dawned on her: it wasn’t a record. If a person’s field was ‘caught’ on tape, that’s exactly what would have happened. It wouldn’t be a copy. It wasn’t just an altering of the tape’s magnetic field to create a binary of positive and negative poles, it was another field. If, in fact, Helen was right, and if the aura captured was strong enough, significant enough, it might be possible to move that aura into a more suitable vessel than a cassette.”

Philip narrowed his eyes and grinned. “This must be the hoodoo Monica noticed.”

“No, it’s not. But yes, it would be, Helen and I did our best to ignore the ethics of the possession that would be necessary to commit, even if it was – in Helen’s case – self-possession.

“But Philip, there were so many problems. For example, we began to wonder if such a ‘capture’ – as we began to think of it – would disrupt – not erase but replace – what was already on the tape. Blank cassettes were troublesome – it would be harder to detect replacements – but recordings were equally difficult – this wasn’t something you could do by listening really hard – we weren’t looking for ghost voices – there would be no instructions – or so we thought.

“Getting out of the merely theoretical began to seem impossible again. While I was disappointed by our failure, Helen was distraught. The idea that she could regain her girlhood was now an obsession – her sister now only an aside. My patience wore thin, Philip.”

“You were always short on sympathy, Théophile.”

Cinnabar's Gnosis

I ignored Philip's comment. He was probably right. "This was about..." I consulted a calendar – the days didn't add up – I realized the calendar pages hadn't been turned in two months. "Probably two months ago. That's when I discovered that someone else had the same idea we did and he'd advanced it a little further."

Philip looked over at the calendar, saw that Sunday, the fifth of September was circled and remembered, "But you were visiting us in Paris."

"Yes." I poured myself another glass of wine; Philip gestured for me to replenish his glass. "Just before I left Paris I spent a few hours poking around at the book stalls along the Seine. Beneath one cart, in a cardboard box full of paperbacks and water-warped hard covers, I found a wooden box, completely unadorned and just large enough for the six cassettes a sliding lid revealed to be inside. Each cassette was in a clear plastic case and appeared to be in pristine condition. The tapes themselves were the kind you'd end up with if you bought some studio time and made a demo tape – at this point, I was very familiar with all kinds of cassettes. Each were labeled: "1," "2," "3," and so forth. My initial reaction was bemusement: free for a week from Helen's mad search for her own magnetic field/aura, I found a reminder. I considered purchasing it as a gift for Helen – a peace offering, really, since I'd left with a few unkind words – but I reconsidered – such a gift would only indicate my support and I did not support her research/obsession.

"About to return the box I noticed there was a piece of paper beneath the cassettes. Curiosity got the better of me – I removed a few of the cassettes – the vendor now watched me intently – and pulled out the paper. Well, Philip, I just about burst into laughter and at the same time began to tremble all over for the possibility that this little box of cassettes was not a hoax. The note was simple: 'play the tapes in order and bring a ghost to life.' It was that phrase, 'a ghost to life,' that intrigued me most, that seemed – for lack of a better word – most authentic.

"I bought the cassettes – the vendor was quite good at his job because he soaked me for them – saw I really wanted them."

"You didn't mention this to me during your visit."

Her Magnetic Field

“I didn’t see you that last day.”

“Right.”

“I did see Monica, and she did ask about my excitement, which I could not hide from her, but I explained in such a way that she could not know of what I talked.”

“You confused the information.”

“A trick one learns when one’s kid sister –”

“I can well imagine.”

“She found me out, though, eh?”

“While dancing.”

“Ah. ‘Dancing.’ As good a euphemism as any.”

“Did the tapes work?”

“Well they drove Helen into a frenzy, but until a couple days ago I couldn’t say for sure.”

“May I see them?”

“I thought you’d want to. Yes, certainly.” The top drawer of the dresser was empty save the box of cassettes. I paused at the sight of the envelope – I’d slept for two days. Long enough. But quick, I thought. I handed Philip the box, who handled it gingerly. I detached the microphone from the recorder/player I had on the floor by the bed and carried it over to a small table, where I set it down on top of a thick placemat. “Helen and I bought this when we first began our experiments.” I took the box from Philip – he hadn’t even opened it – and set it down beside the recorder/player. I removed the first cassette from the box, took the tape from its case, inserted it into the recorder/player and pressed play.

“The leader,” I said, “is long. Be patient.”

Philip ate a grasshopper. He studied the paper from the box. The tape labeled “1” unspooled in the machine, the only sound the sound of the recorder/player motor, a sound nostalgic to Philip and I, as we both grew up in the audio netherworld between vinyl’s dominance and the (brief) dominance of the compact disk, a period when the cassette was the cheap, portable, durable – and for some, preferable – alternative to LPs. In recent months, however, my nostalgia for the cassette and its associated machines had largely been replaced by a sense of monotony and dread. Finally, the voice – Philip jumped; I tuned it out. The

Cinnabar's Gnosis

voice was a man's and utterly matter-of-fact; there was no preamble, no, "This is a journey into sound," just instructions. They were:

"A double-bay cassette player is required. A blank cassette is required. Fifty-three seconds after the last word spoken on tape number one, record segment one to the blank cassette. Segment one is nineteen seconds long. At then end of segment one, stop recording. Replace tape number one with tape number two. fifty-three seconds from the beginning of the tape begins segment two. Segment two lasts for nineteen seconds."

And so on, until, "Once all five sections are recorded onto the blank tape, you are done."

"You are done?" Philip repeated. "That's it?"

I turned off the tape. "Yes."

"And you did it?"

"What surprised Helen and me was that there were results immediately after we recorded segment one and segment two – both nineteen seconds of silence, by the way – onto the blank tape." I paused – admittedly for dramatic effect, and Philip set me up nicely:

"And those results were?"

"The morning doves that roosted beneath the eaves – that greeted us every morning with their cooing – died. Their young were torn up like bits of wet cotton."

Finally, Philip got up from the bed. He would've paced, if his leg didn't bother him so much, I'm sure. Instead he made his way to Helen's chair. "Revolting," he said, as he dropped into the chair. He thought for a moment – and I let him – then, "How can you be sure the one was related to the other?"

"Yes. Good. We bought more birds. We assumed we'd have to repeat the process, but shortly after we brought the birds into this room they became distressed, then frantic, and then they all died. There were no young but we felt the results would have been the same had there been."

"I don't understand."

"I didn't either. Helen insisted, though, that this proved her earlier speculation: what was on the cassettes I'd found in Paris wasn't a recording of a person's magnetic field/aura but a part of their actual aura,

Her Magnetic Field

transferred to tape. Fine and dandy, I thought, but this didn't exactly put me at ease – yet, Philip, I could not resist adding the third segment to the first and second.”

“And?”

“And nothing. Or, rather, I thought nothing. Now, as I've said, I believe otherwise.

“Excited as we were, we were both wary enough to stop for the night, to sleep so we might think clearly about what we were doing. I fell asleep immediately and dreamed. I dreamed I was in a black cave. I could see nothing, but heard a constant cry. The cry wavered, slightly, but never ran out of breath. The sound was upsetting then numbing. I kept moving in a spiral – I sensed this, I couldn't see to be certain – until I passed over a patch of ground smooth as a fingernail: when I passed over this ground there was light. The light came from outside the cave, its source impossible to determine. What I was able to determine, however, was that I was not in a cave, but inside the empty shell of an enormous turtle, and I was the source of the constant cry. I touched my face – my mouth was wide open, the skin on my cheeks raw, tears streamed from my eyes – and I became certain that it was not my face.

“I jerked awake from this dream and discovered the real source of the cry: Helen. I switched on our bedside lamp (its shade a real tortoise shell, you've noticed) and woke her with as much care as I could. Helen was covered all over with bruises (she always slept in the nude). Once awake, she stared at me for a few long seconds, then sat up and hugged me. We held each other until she whispered, ‘Théo, it's working.’ She got out of bed, put on her robe and sat at the table with the recorder/player. I anticipated a long discussion, so boiled water for coffee.

“There was no conversation. All she said to me was, ‘For this to work, I need a second tape.’ She meant a second recording made with her sister before their abduction. What we'd discovered – no, that's not right – what we learned from the box of cassettes I bought in Paris – was that for some reason putting the parts of an aura together was a trigger. Of what, we had yet to learn, but it was enough for Helen.”

Philip looked at the empty wine bottle on the floor between us – I gestured with my hands, “don't worry,” got up, and opened a second

Cinnabar's Gnosis

bottle. "Not as good," I said. He indicated that he didn't care, then said, "Did you notice this?" and held out the paper.

"Notice what?"

Philip pointed to a mark on the back of the paper. Very faint, as if the stamp has been poorly inked or the ink had aged and faded – was the mark of the society known as The Broken Circle of Illumination, formed shortly after the most famous member of The Circle of Illumination died (while he was seated on the shore of Lake Starnberg, contemplating the local magnetic rocks). "Remarkable," I said. That new society's purpose was to devote their time to "the final ideas of the master Theravel," and upon remembering that tidbit from long-ago reading I said again to Philip, "Remarkable!" and, "Do you realize...?" Of course, he did.

He brought me back to the present when he asked, "So then you and Helen assembled the rest of the segments?"

"No. We didn't. She wasn't interested. She'd learned all she was interested in learning from those cassettes. No, she focused entirely on the cassette she and her sister made. Since there was no second cassette, she began a number of trials – we made dubs, a whole series, finally making dubs in precisely nineteen-second segments – this was tedious and stupid – copies, right? We should have known better. Our best idea was to splice the tape, but it didn't work, at least not in a demonstrable way. Helen became alternately depressed – which was to be expected – and... strange.

"I suppose I could have been more understanding, but I just found her behavior irritating."

"Let me interrupt, Théophile – how long ago did you put together the three segments?"

"A month ago. A little longer."

"Oh. Really? Then, when did you put together the segments you made from Helen's tape?"

"A few weeks ago."

"Well that doesn't make sense."

"How do you mean?"

"Monica asked me to write to you a week ago."

"Is Monica on her way?"

Her Magnetic Field

“Yes.”

“That’s good. She might be able to help. She’s better at this sort of thing than I am.”

“What did you do, Théophile?”

“Well Helen lost interest in the cassettes I found in Paris, but I didn’t. I thought they were rather extraordinary. While she went deep into her own thoughts, I assembled the next segment.”

“What happened?”

“Helen turned into flies. At least, I assume that’s what caused Helen to turn into flies. I am groping around in the dark.”

“And you think Monica can help explain things?”

“Well, maybe – I don’t think so. No, I think Monica might be able to help *us*. This morning – a few hours before you arrived – I assembled the remaining segments. Curiosity go the best of me. I expected something big to happen. I still do. I assumed it would happen to me but now there’s a chance it might happen to you instead.”

My cousin was not one to panic. He peered into his bag of chocolate covered grasshoppers. “I don’t know why but the crumbs bother me.” He crumpled the bag and tossed it near the wastebasket. Ever since my sister sent Philip’s mind out past the redshift 10 galaxies to where the universe begins to expand, to the lights as old as the Dark Ages of the Universe, I’ve known my cousin to be – to use a quaint term – unflappable. Not quite fearless. (Monica is fearless – not so much bravery as an expression of a sociopathic personality she and I share.)

“Couldn’t we just leave?” Philip suggested.

“You can. I want to see what happens.”

When Monica sent Philip’s mind into space she made for him a vessel of musical notes to keep him sane on his journey – notes Philip still whistled, was whistling while we waited for whatever disaster the ghost I’d brought to life would bring (and/or if we were lucky, for Monica to come). Philip’s mind was sent into space in pursuit of a rare consciousness, “the rock that thinks,” as we translated the phrase from the phono-pictoglyphs left in Pech de l’Azé by said conscious rock. The trip was dangerous, as were the challenges engaging the consciousness – subsequently, I’ve often wondered if Philip came back altogether all *right*.

Cinnabar's Gnosis

As we waited I heard again the mail door from downstairs – but no sound of a mail drop followed. A sound, though.

“Philip,” I said.

He heard it too.

“Sounds like running water,” he said.

The power went out – still, there was daylight. Then –

“That sounds like a motorcycle,” he said.

I opened the south-facing window and looked out – Philip opened the door of the attic, to better hear what was going on below.

“I think,” he said.

I cut him off, “It’s water all right.”

The once-pond that the house was built in was filling with water – Monica stood on the boulder next to the antique street lamp – she looked up from the rising water, saw me, shook her head to scold me, looked back down. Soon, the water would flood the second floor. Monica waited – not hesitation but calculation – took off her leather coat and boots, and dove into the rising water.

“What should we do about all this?” Philip said.

“We can’t save any of the equipment. The cassettes... they might survive. Unplug and empty the refrigerator.” Philip got to work. I was sorry about the recorder/player. I went to the shelf of cassettes and removed “Helen”; I opened the envelope on the dresser and took from it what I knew would be inside – a cassette. I un-crumpled Philip’s wax paper bag, dumped out the chocolate and grasshopper bits onto the floor, slipped the cassettes inside and pocketed them. “Okay, I said, the papers over there – into the fridge.” I gathered a few rare books, the remains of the tape Helen had made with her sister, the revolver my mother gave me, and a number of other small trinkets and added them to my papers in the refrigerator.

A splash, and wet feet on the steps to the attic.

I wrapped some electrical tape a few times and tightly around the refrigerator.

“There’s a whirlpool,” Monica said. She looked at Philip. “You used to be an excellent swimmer.”

Philip shrugged. “The leg doesn’t bother me much in the water.”

Her Magnetic Field

Monica looked around the room. She picked up an extension cord and tied one end to my belt, the other end to hers. “You were never any good in the water.”

A little harsh, I thought. My sister glared at me. But I’m not one to argue, I thought. Her expression returned to its neutral state.

The distance to the water from the window was short – water seeped up from between the attic floorboards and washed over the threshold. Clutching his precious cane, Philip jumped into the water. We followed. I kept up with Monica for a while, but the whirlpool – I could see it beneath the water – pulled at me. Monica swam back, put an arm around my waist, and we swam together to the stairs that led down to the front door of the house.

Monica undid her end of our tether; I sat down, exhausted. The antique street lamp on the boulder flickered to life, then died. Philip said, “I’m sorry about your house.” I said, “It’s still there.” Monica put on her boots and her jacket.

The water stopped rising as soon as it covered the chimney. The water was iridescent, green and blue, like quarry water, like mine water. The water was surely toxic with the “ghost” I brought back “to life.” Very quickly the water stilled and I noticed the shadows of clouds on its surface.

“Do you need a ride?” Philip asked me.

Monica said, “No, he’ll ride with me.”

I nodded. Philip said to me, “Call me when you reach Paris. I’ll buy you dinner.”

“Fine,” I said.

We waited for Philip to get into his car.

Monica looked down on me. “Did you learn anything?”

“Not a thing,” I said.

In my pocket, two cassettes with Helen in a wax paper bag.

THE AUTUMN KEEPER

Mark Valentine

Simon Marmoresh collected prodigies: he had them come to him in the hothouse made for him high on the flat roof of the old water tower on Petrin Hill. Here, on the least regarded summit above the city, he could lean on the parapet and train his jaded gaze upon the jagged silhouettes of Castle Hill and the dark mass of Cemetery Hill, and then on all of the towers, spires and angular stone canopies below. And, seen by strangers pausing in the courtyards or the twisting streets and passages of the city, his mansard domain would sometimes send quick glinting signals of crystalline light, as if it were some way-station conveying messages from the hidden stars.

The green-tinged glass of his humid retreat threw an olive hue upon the faces and the flesh of his guests, and accentuated the contours of his own countenance, which was skeletal and ascetic, the skin like the frail tissue that guards engravings in old books. Very fine green veins ran beneath, like the rivers in a lost country on a faded map. His hair was a coating of hoar-frost, sharp and white.

As they paced the close space of his glass studio, all among the lolling exotic blooms, the invited virtuosi, the wastrels, wanderers and idealists he had summoned from the streets below, sometimes seemed to him interchangeable with his beloved, languid-leaved plants, his streaked orchids, palpitant white lilies, star-flowers, or the ancient, gnarled-barked cycads.

One evening in October, some of his visitors, the fine silver ichor of their cigarettes vying with the sensual fumes of the flowers, amused themselves by guessing what peculiar accomplishments had attracted

The Autumn Keeper

Marmoresh to his latest mortal finds. There might be a modernist at the cimbalom, perhaps, or the most skilled sardonyx-carver in the Double Monarchy, the discoverer of an ancient Assyrian incense, all replete with the sap of the cedar and the juice of the cypress, or maybe a mask-maker, sky-watcher, ikon-faker, toy-repairer, soul-barer, or even (it could be) simply an old veteran whose slow grave grace at petanque their host might have observed in the park on his hill, passing by one dusk, under a sunset of polished copper.

In particular, they regarded a young man who was standing uncertainly near the paned door, trying to look nonchalant. He was not handsome, but he was so near to it that he attracted more stares even than a conventional comeliness might earn. He had wide, violet eyes, a mere faint smudge of eyebrows, a delicate nose, just slightly tilted cheekbones, and a soft mouth of rhubarb-pink. He wore his dark hair short, and fiercely brushed in firm bristles. All in all, it was a very curious composition.

“Well, what of him?” asked the apothecary Hardouin, with a sly nod. But silence fell on this occasion, and the little coterie found it could not even venture a surmise about the boy. At length, one of them, Julian, a florist who tortured his severed flowers into the strangest of shapes, took pity upon his awkwardness and approached him with a solicitude that he almost fooled himself was kindness.

“Have you been the rounds?” he asked, “Tonight the master has gathered for us a bunch of soothsayers, you know. He has plucked them from below. You must have your destiny told. It would be a waste not to. Besides, even if you don’t want to hear it, if I am frank, *we* all do. We do.” And he gestured with a wide arc of his arm at the staring set he had just left, brushing against a giant frog-fern that squatted in a bulbous pot in the corner. “Now, let’s see...” And he guided the youth, with a gentle pressure, towards one of the street-prophets Marmoresh had assembled.

The tower-owner had been out upon one of his nocturnal wanderings in the Far Quarter, looking for all the most picturesque, secret, vagrant or evidently bogus fortune-tellers, and his ready purse had soon fetched them up the steep iron stairs of his retreat.

This edifice, though made in dim red brick, had been modelled, at the whim of some forgotten municipal architect, upon a Flemish bell-

Cinnabar's Gnosis

tower, a slender column with a wider platform at its peak, all garnished with blind mock-arches, castellations like wolf's teeth, and a few strange niches which seemed to need votive figurines. When, after a few decades, it had proved to be not quite up to its mechanic task, Marmoresh had purchased it, and had it converted for use as his home and eyrie. Here, he had exercised too, an eye for irony: for his own fortune had been acquired from a mineral water.

As a young man, he had formed a simple economic theory, that the way to riches was to take a profuse and inexpensive commodity and paint it for the aspiring bourgeoisie as in reality a rare and luxurious thing. Pursuing this, and aided principally by his charm and ardour, he had taken a share in the business of a modest Swabian table-water, poured the liquid into a new cobalt-blue Cubist bottle, all sharp facets, with a stark label, and baptised it CASTALIA.

Soon, suitably induced, all the haughtiest waiters of the smartest restaurants and hotels of Basel and Nice, Klagenfurt and Ascona, were recommending it to their patrons in conspiratorial tones, affecting it to be a very rare elixir: and those who had shunned it before in its old, tubby, plain bottle, now clamoured for the blue flask and its crystal contents.

Marmoresh, the master of this legendary fount in a secluded, sighing little spa town, with its trim pines and lavender fields, perpetuated the myth of its scarcity by a cool control of supply, amply proving the practicality of his theory and pocketing the proceeds of his inspiration. Now, he had long relinquished the day to day affairs of the business to others, but affection for the trade had been in part why he had bought the old water tower upon Petrin Hill, where it stood in its own compound, at the opposite end of the summit from the panorama, the hall of mirrors and the ornamental gardens.

In the green twilight, lit only by a paring of moon and a few pale oil-lamps, his guests drifted like viridian spirits, speaking, as if the hushed light had diminished their voices too, mostly in whispers. Marmoresh himself glided amongst them in his neat, dark city garb, listening and watching, and occasionally feeding titbits of over-ripe fruit to his constant companion, Timoleon, a ring-tailed lemur. With his dark eye-markings like ancient spectacles, his little fringe of fur at the jaw, and his small crooked paws, the creature might pass in the dim

The Autumn Keeper

light as one of his human acquisitions, a scribbler from some narrow attic perhaps, or a fusty bookseller, or professor of an arcane study. The lemur regarded each of the company gravely as it nibbled pensively upon a slice of medlar, and some shifted uneasily under his stare. The pet was of course rumoured really to be the mineral-water master's familiar and wisest counsellor, and the murmured conversations Marmoresh held with him, a mingling of human speech, and a series of tongue-clickings and gibberings, did not dispel the idea.

Solemnly, the lemur's master presided as each of his prophets plied his trade, whether with the proffered palms of the guests, or by scrying in an opaque crystal globe, by studying painted cards, or simply by staring hard at the face before them. And, as Julian approached, adjusting his boutonniere made of a chrysanthemum of tarnished gold, and guiding the boy towards the cenacle of seers, the eyes of their host seemed to take upon themselves an especially keen gleam.

"Armand," he said, "I am glad you came. Here, why don't you try my – amusements?"

He had found the boy as he prowled one day in the dwindling light: he was sketching a street lantern. There were artists enough in the city for sure, but something about his fierce preoccupation with the task had drawn Marmoresh closer. Gently, he had won his confidence a little, and found that the young man drew nothing else; his whole oblong portfolio, in tattered paper wrappers, was a lamp album, holding hundreds of pictures in pencil or wan ink of the dark columns, and the elegant rhomboids, globes and candelabra of the city lights. This Armand had a normal boy's passion for collecting, listing and cataloguing, but in him this had taken a peculiar flight of fancy, for he gave each light a title and summoned it by a few words which implied for each an entire tale. He could get very little out of the young artist about his past, other than that he had grown up in a remote Moravian village with a mother who was half-French; both parents, Marmoresh inferred, had perished in the late war. He gave the boy his card and told him about the soirees he held in his hothouse studio. Clinging to his book of drawings and fidgeting a little, this Armand had listened patiently enough, but Marmoresh had not been persuaded he would respond. Before he turned to resume his restless wandering –

Cinnabar's Gnosis

“What will you do when you find the last lantern?” he had asked, bemused. A delicate furrow graced the boy’s white forehead for a few moments.

“There will always be another city.”

And now the boy was here, his lips rather set, a satchel that certainly contained the lamp book swaying over his left shoulder. What had brought him up the flights of iron stairs, where each step might prompt second thoughts? Mystery? Curiosity? Hunger? As if feeding his pet lemur, the host turned to a bowl of smoked walnuts and proffered them. His young guest hesitated, then took a few, and stowed them in the pocket of his worn jacket.

Up to now, it had to be confessed, the predictions of the street seers had been mostly vapid and unexceptional. Marmoresh was not even sure he wanted to hear what they would say about his latest find. But he allowed Julian to pilot the boy towards the narrow-faced, thin, sallow prophet who liked to use the cards. In bored haste, but not without a sidelong glance at his benefactor for the night, this Max Vree shuffled the pack and then tautly placed the first seven face down. He looked up at Armand and asked him to uncover any three he liked. The boy did so as if he were simply following a lesson. There was no change in the features of his reader. “A journey by night. You will look deep into the other side of your soul. A moving fire, somehow. An echo in darkness. That is all.” The boy stared at him and the fair down of his eyebrows was briefly ruffled.

A crone with a glass globe which she caressed with hands of mottled flesh was briefer still. “A blessing and a grace for you, from where you least expect it.” Then she nodded sagely as if she had said a very portentous thing.

To his surprise, the next seer seemed almost as young as him: a sapling. Yet he was dashingy dressed: a white shirt stitched with fine lace, a red velvet jacket, sleek black trousers, and glinting, silver-buckled shoes. Armand felt abashed at the contrast with his own shabbiness. Julian murmured in his ear, “Here’s the real thing. A tzigane.” The brown boy took hold of his hand and he felt a shiver at the unfamiliar touch. Gently, the boy unfurled his fingers, and stretched them out so that the palm yearned towards him. He lowered his head towards the

The Autumn Keeper

inscriptions in the flesh. Armand felt the sigh of his breath upon his outstretched skin. Then the boy looked up. "Your hand will hold the stone of heaven," he said, in a stark, simple way, as if it were a matter of no moment. He released Armand's hand and let the fingers spring back. Armand wanted to offer his palm again and ask him to read further, or simply to support the hand once more in that warm firm grasp. But the boy had moved quickly away. There was a murmur amongst the bystanders and a few questions were thrown towards the palmist, but he shook his head and folded his arms.

The young man who illustrated lamps felt an encircling arm guide him to stand before another in this curious fairground of fates. He stared at a dark-haired young woman, who reached forward and ran her hands through his hair. "Don't be afraid," she said, and he at once tightened his limbs and raised his face higher to look into her eyes. Her hands explored his face; they were cool and made him quiver inwardly. "I am Asphodel: and I only tell what the veil will allow. You..." There was a pause. He felt the green shadow of his mysterious patron, M. Marmoreash, fall upon him. The little lemur on a carved chair to one side of him whimpered for his master, holding out a claw. The girl-oracle called Asphodel shrugged. "You will see the end of all things."

Armand did not really register what happened after the last of these prophecies. He knew there was much chatter amongst his fellow guests and all sorts of remarks to him, some asking him what he thought they meant, some sceptically reassuring him that they could mean almost anything, others recalling what they had themselves been told, and a few offering him a shot of spirits and telling him the secret was to stay true, no matter what came, although true to what was not entirely clear. The master of the glass chamber merely regarded him from the margins of this throng and smiled softly, soothing the ruffled fur of his pet lemur, who also stared at him, with his owlish eyes.

By the time he left, he felt dizzy with the destinies he had been offered, and tried to remember them all, exactly as they were said, not just the words, but the manner; the card-reader's brusque summary, the orotund utterance of the crystal-gazer, the firm clench of the gypsy boy's hand and his breath upon his palm, and the eyes of Asphodel. He made his way carefully down the many stairs and opened wide the

Cinnabar's Gnosis

great arched door at the foot of the tower. He stepped out onto the gravel of the compound and then into the open ground surrounding it: below all the lights of the great city blazed. They seemed brittle and unusually bright, as if they were made of barley sugar. He wondered if the first of his fates would meet him soon.



Yet after these encounters, his days passed just as they had before. He woke in his room on Strelhov, hurriedly washed in the cold water, ate a husk of black bread, and went out to continue his book of all the lamps of the city, following the broader streets from the centre outwards, and then returning, as dusk began, on narrower byways which took more labyrinthine routes to the city's heart. He gave no attention to those he passed, and usually they gave none to him.

Occasionally, a curious passer-by, usually a visitor, would ask to see what he was drawing, and he would politely but curtly oblige; some few would even ask if they might buy a sketch. He did not like to sell his work, but at night in his room, lit by the stub of a candle filched from a rich church, he would sometimes rapidly draw some pictures especially, and keep these pages in his satchel for just this purpose, for he needed the few crowns they earned. These depicted what he privately thought of as the high lanterns of the city, those that by their grandeur or significance drew people's attention more than the others: a pair, with their vast prismatic glass cases, upon the Great Bridge, one, festooned with the royal and imperial eagles in gilt at the gateway to the Castle, one – many-forked and cascading with ornament – in the centre of the Old Square, and another, simple and stark and leaning at a slight angle, in the bend of the cobbled road of the Street of Chronclers.

Still such days followed one by one and stretched ahead, and he saw no sign of what he had been told would befall him. He was sometimes filled with a bitter dreariness, as if he were a gutter weed that had been uprooted, briefly planted amongst the rich soil of the pampered orchids, fed, feted and bathed in warmth, promised greater things yet, and then abruptly banished to the gutter again. True, invitation cards occasio-

The Autumn Keeper

nally arrived from Simon Marmoresh, but he spurned them. He felt he had been duped, made a plaything. No doubt the master in his tower looked down below and laughed. Maybe his blasé guests implored him to summon back the entertaining child with the threadbare satchel, so that they could scoff again. Even the lemur's gibberings echoed in his ears as if in mockery.

When calmer, he reflected that nevertheless the episode had given him some things: the grip of the gypsy boy's hand, the fine fleeting fingers of Asphodel in his hair and upon his face, the flattering attention of the coterie, even, he ruefully thought as he gnawed at his rough bread, a handful of smoked walnuts. Once, he thought he caught sight of another of the guests on that night of prophecy, and sometimes he wondered if the seemingly chance strangers who asked after his pictures were really charitable emissaries sent by Marmoresh in this guise. These purchasers, whoever they were, kept him in a bare existence but no more, and they did not change his days.

Since he had first come to the city, at fifteen, with the little money salvaged from the sale of the few goods left in his parents' looted rooms, he had seen the street lights as his staunchest friends. He had counted them in that way when he roamed the streets at night, reckoning the paces between them, pausing beneath their welcoming corona, and placing his shoulders against them for support. He liked to imagine how they would still be there when all else was gone. At night, then, he saw the darkened lamp-posts sway in dance as the fierce winds of the ruined world roared, heard them hum songs they learned from the stars, and wondered if they would ever dream of those who had passed beneath their gleaming lights long ago.

But now even such signal friends seemed scarcely enough to sustain his spirits, and he was both cast down and yet secretly hopeful when, as if by chance, he met in the street Max Vree, who caught him by his worn sleeve. "I have a message for you, young man."

"From Marmoresh? I don't..."

"Just a message. Why don't you try to look at what lies *below* the lamps?"

Armand frowned and caught his breath as if to reply, but the thin prophet had gone. 'What lies below?' Slumped, drunken tramps and

Cinnabar's Gnosis

the leavings of dogs, flapping trapped newspapers, grey street pigeons, spent matches. What else? He tramped on, more dejected still.

By the end of the day he felt he had never been so weary. But he was unwilling to contemplate returning to the cold narrow cell of his room, preferring even the dank October chill to that. Besides, he had, at the last, made a sale of a number of his "souvenir" pictures all together, and was quite in pocket for once. He decided not to harbour the money carefully, and gave himself the luxury of wondering what to do with it. As he approached the edge of the Old Square, he heard a shoe-shine boy still shouting his trade, and he glanced down at his own atrociously shoddy shoes. With a sigh, he slumped onto the high-backed folding chair at the boy's pitch beneath a light, and said, "I don't know what you will be able to do with these." The urchin grinned, gently pulled his right foot towards him, rested it on a sloping stool, and began to flourish the tools of his craft – brush, cloth, polish, cloth, brush, and then the same with his left foot, all with deft ease. Then he stepped back to admire his handiwork. "There: you can see your face in them now."

He took hold of the sole of Armand's shoe and tilted it upwards towards his client. As if it might really be true, Armand looked down. And indeed he fancied he did see, in the black patina, a dark mirror image of a troubled young face, as if in the ripples of a deep secret pool: a tousled Narcissus gazing back at him. He passed his tongue over his lips. Why should this face look so careworn? With a light leap, he descended from the form, and rewarded the boy. Their hands met as the coins passed between them. Admiring the burnished shoes, Armand walked on, without noticing much where he was going.

As the day grew more dim, he found himself in the passageway that ran past the side of St Casimir's: and in a narrow porch of the church he saw an old woman standing. She was wrapped in a folded headscarf, floral frock and what seemed numerous aprons. Her pale blue eyes had a strange staring film over them and Armand guessed that she was half-blind. Her head moved very slightly, almost imperceptibly, at the sound of his footsteps. She neither put out a hollow hand nor said any beseeching words, but nevertheless Armand approached, took her withered claw in his and placed there some coins, closing the stubborn

The Autumn Keeper

fingers upon them. These swiftly placed the gift in an apron pocket; and in return the old woman begged the blessings of St Casimir to fall upon him.

He saw ahead the gate of the Perennial Park, where evergreens and winter-flowering shrubs were nurtured to offer the people of the city a pleasing refuge all year long; but it was a favourite, too, in the warmer months because of its open spaces, benches and secluded walkways. Just inside, beneath the modest entrance lamp on its green-painted column, there was a brass drinking-fountain. Armand advanced towards it and was about to bow down and take a drink when his eyes met an old veteran with the same thought in mind. At once, he straightened and deferred to the silver-jowled, crooked ancient. But he in turn gestured Armand to go first. The young man smiled and opened his hand to invite the older to have precedence, but he inclined his head and nodded that he would like to give way. There they stood for quite a minute or two, nodding, smiling and bowing at each other – and neither getting a drink – until the absurdity caught them both at once and they both burst into grins. Armand shrugged and put his head down to the spout, with its coat of verdigris. The water tasted better than ever as he tried to catch it in between his laughing lips. He rose up and thanked the old man again, and for a moment they both enjoyed this little complicity. The grizzled reprobate in his creased shirt and greasy suit waved his battered straw hat at him as he went on his way.

Within the gardens, all was cool and shaded, and the October dusk was flying its pennons of grey and twilight blue among the tall trees. Absorbed in the gloom, Armand heard a rumbling noise and caught on the air a familiar smell he could not at once place. His memory briefly lunged back to the Moravian town of his childhood and an evening like this, quiet, fading, but somehow filled with a quick joy. Then he saw through the trees a red glow, a bright blaze, gliding steadily, as if a giant carried a lantern of coal. He stood still while he watched the approaching fiery apparition as it snaked along the winding path towards him, and he snuffed the sharp, warm, slightly acrid fumes, and searched for the lost recollection from his days at home.

Then there emerged through the passage in a grove of cypress trees just ahead a chestnut seller with his glowing cart, and the waft of his

Cinnabar's Gnosis

wares hit the young man with full force. And he remembered how just such a fiery vessel had entranced him as a child, and his father had bought a bag to share, and carefully peeled the husks and blown upon the kernels while he, imploring, had held up his hand for them. Armand nodded at the seller and said he had just what he needed. "You're in luck," he replied, "It's the last of the day, so I'll give you a lot more." And he shovelled the chestnuts, some with a coating of ash, some still faintly glowing, into a black waxed-paper bag, just like the one Armand remembered his father holding above him. Gratefully, the boy gave up his coin and, with a few more words, watched the humble alembic wheel away.

Then, with scorched fingertips and greedy glee, he took the secret fiery fruit away to a bench to eat.

When the creaking of the wheels of the chestnut-seller's cart faded into the distance, a silence fell. On his bench, he leant back luxuriously and looked again at his polished shoes, raising the sole from the floor and resting on his heels. He let his gaze wander over the darkened vistas of the park. Dark birds wheeled overhead, cawing. The dusk was now almost palpable, a fine mesh made of cobwebs and dust which veiled the trees and paths and grass in a grey glamour. He thought it might be time to tramp back to his room before the park gates were closed and locked: but he felt too a strange reluctance to leave. Undecided, and still enjoying the tingling the chestnuts had left upon his fingers and the warmth in his taut belly, he simply rested and stared.

And then he heard a high chanting, a girl's sing-song voice reciting a rhyme, and descried below, in a little sheltered grove, a glimmering of white, just beneath the diffused amber glow of a solitary lamp. Armand was not at all sure that he had this lamp in his collection – he had not been so far into the park before and did not really know there was one here: so, clutching his satchel, he made his way cautiously towards it. But as he drew near, his gaze shifted from the lost lamp to the figure that danced in its wan light.

She was, he thought, about his own age. She wore a simple white muslin dress tied in the middle with a pale blue sash. Pale hair cascaded from a straw hat and the light caught it in glinting filaments. And she was jumping, stooping, then leaping again, upon a pattern of squares

The Autumn Keeper

chalked upon the asphalt. Armand approached more stealthily; she had not heard him yet. Her white shape, her strange movements, the secrecy of the sheltered dell, the gray haze of the dusk and the shimmering light, all affected him deeply, and he felt he could only gaze upon them. But then she reached the end of the pattern, and quickly twisted around to return, and saw him; and he sensed her quick intake of breath. There was a brittle silence, broken only by the serrated croak of an old jackdaw in the bruised sky. Armand nodded at her and waved a hand, and she paused: but then she bent to the ground again with a sure grace, he saw her fingers flicker, and she straightened, and with a few more deft strides and movements danced towards him, and regarded him solemnly.

“They tell me I am too old for this now, you see,” she confided, without any preamble, or even greeting, “So I have to sneak away and play in secret.”

He nodded, and suddenly was glad his shoes had been shined. “Will you show me?” he ventured, surprised at his own boldness.

She shook her head. “But you can watch – again,” she added, with a little twist of her mouth. And suddenly once more there was a flurry of white and with a grave grace she danced her rite, there and back again. He saw her throw a red pebble onto the pattern, and leap on the square where it landed, then once more and again, first on one foot, then on two, and in particular he saw how she avoided in her prancing an oblong near the end which was shown in thicker chalk and gaped like an open maw. While she rested, and looked upon him with amusement, he examined more carefully the forms she had marked out, particularly the penultimate niche. A laugh came after his doubled-up shape.

“Careful – you are about to step into hell!”

He turned quickly and almost overbalanced.

“What?”

“At the end, you must leap over the mouth of hell and land in heaven, the last square. That’s the way it always is.”

And she rose to her feet, threw her pebble with a deft flick, and danced once more her measure, coming to rest in the celestial realm, next to where he stood, outside the pattern. They regarded each other for a few moments.

Cinnabar's Gnosis

Then she let out her breath quickly and started back, and he saw a little spiral of chalk rise up in a sudden puff, and she was withdrawing the sole of her shoe from where it had quickly touched the forbidden ground. A great creaking complaint came from a bird overhead. She steadied herself and tried to assume a careless smile.

“Perhaps they are right. I shouldn’t be playing these games, particularly at night. They’ll be closing the gates soon, and I must be off. Or I won’t be allowed back again.” And, holding her hat on her head, she fled, in a scramble of rippling white.

Armand watched her go, wistfully, reflecting on the exact balance of her last words and how well he was meant to note the promise of return. Then he bent to look at what had startled her. Where she had stood, in the last square, was a roughly rounded piece of quartz, the scintillant mineral the jackdaws loved to hoard. He tilted it to the light and saw it glint: there was a thin green vein running through it, as if of fossilised moss, a primeval relic. Thoughtfully, he put the shining pebble in his pocket, where it rested against the empty shell of the last of the smoked walnuts, which he had whimsically preserved.

It was difficult to see any distance ahead now, and though he did not want to leave the strange domain that the park had become, he thought he must try to make his way to its boundary wall and follow this around until he came to a gate. And so he strolled on, pensively, relishing to himself all that had passed; the dusk, the dance, the taste of the chestnuts, the little courtesies at the brass fountain, the old woman’s murmured blessing, the eagerness of the shoe shine boy, and then again the seemly grace of the girl and her game, and the sudden gift from the quarrelsome jackdaws, that glinting orb of quartz.

Through the gloom ahead he saw the sharper mass of a low roof, and he quickened his stride towards it. As he approached, he saw a crimson ember hover in the air; nearer still, and this resolved itself into the glowing end of a pipe stuck in the contented mouth of a whiskered man in the sward-green uniform of the parkmen. He asked if he was too late to leave by the nearest gate, and the elder man thoughtfully removed his pipe and said he was too late for them all; “curfew fell a few minutes ago.”

“But step inside,” he added.

The Autumn Keeper

Armand lowered his head as he followed onto the stone-flagged floor of the pavilion, where there were a few bare items – a chair, a couch, an ancient stove, a mildewed bookcase, and a table heaped with leaves.

“You are lucky to find me here, in fact,” the fellow continued, “I am only so to speak a spare, the autumn keeper they call me, they bring me in to help sweep up the leaves, you see? The rest of the time this place is shuttered up and so you would have found it empty. You should smell the must when I first open it up. Wheesh. And it never really goes. You can get it now, I don’t doubt.”

The young man snuffed dutifully and nodded.

“Well, kind sir, it is like this. I am not supposed to let anyone in or out after the gates are closed, not even the Emperor himself, if he should call here –”

And then he seemed to remember that there was no Emperor any more, or so they said, and so he added, more vaguely, “or anyone of that kind. Now you might think a small consideration would solve that little matter...” – here he looked archly at Armand under thick peppery eyebrows – “but no, you see, and for why? Because I am not allowed to accept perquisites neither.”

Armand nodded. “Well, then, if you would be so kind, what if I were to stay here?”

The autumn keeper took another draw of his pipe and exhaled, and Armand wondered if it were not after all the curious fumes from this that contributed to the pavillion’s atmosphere.

“Charmed, I am sure, sir, charmed. Yet there is another way. I cannot accept gifts, but let us suppose you wanted to buy something from me. Anyone can see the difference. You might have come here expressly to buy such a thing and so naturally I would let you in and out as if you were simply a visitor of mine, do you see?”

The young man looked about.

“Many people,” the pipe-illuminated park keeper continued, “take a fancy to my books.”

“Your books?”

“Here,” and the keeper unearthed from the pile upon the table what looked like a handful of autumn sweepings.

Cinnabar's Gnosis

"I choose the finest ones, you see, and I sew them together. Look..."

With a few swift movements, he gathered up a dozen or so of the scarlet, amber, copper and umber leaves, though not with any noticeable finesse of judgement, and ran a silver needle with rough black thread through them, biting off the cord at the end and making a quick neat knot. He handed the result to Armand, who turned the brittle, mottled pages carefully. He looked at the striations and markings upon each leaf as if he were reading maps in a strange atlas, and he reflected that as the days passed, probably the pages would change too, in ways he could not foresee. He certainly wanted this book, and would have, even if it were not also the key to the world beyond.

He paid the autumn keeper his fee, and the old man pocketed this gratefully. At the last, as they stood by the gate, a pang of conscience seemed to assail him.

"Mind, the book will fade and fall away in the end, you understand. That always happens. But there's plenty to look at and enjoy in the meantime."

Armand said solemnly that he understood.



High on Petrin Hill, Simon Marmoresh gazed upon the last lights of the city below. He fed his lemur Timoleon another slice of medlar, and the creature took it with fastidious care. A fragrance of sweet decay came from the autumn fruit, and played in the air.

MODERN CITIES EXIST ONLY TO BE DESTROYED

Michael Cisco

Standing at the edge of the platform, X. gazes at a panel set in the dingy, bruise-colored wall on the opposite side of the tracks. The wall folds inwards a few feet to the left of the panel, forming a corner that has been invaded by an irregular patch of lacy white scale, which, at times, he thinks looks like the spray of a violent sea, frozen in mid-leap as it dashes against the rocks of the shore. At other times, he sees profiles in it: a grimacing hag with a surprised-looking eye nestled in her hair, or a supine child's face gazing up in death or wonder as another, half-formed spirit face emerges from its nostrils.

The panel is perhaps a little more than three feet square, and set in the wall at floor level. Large bolt heads stud the outline at intervals, and both they, and the panel, which might be slightly concave, are the same grimy color as the wall. What's behind it? The question barely glances through his mind. He looks at it as if he were imagining first one possibility and then another, but no such thing. He is only looking at it, because it holds his attention magnetically. What might lie behind it is of no more importance than what or who might happen, for example, to be behind him, just at that moment.

The panel is more like a mirror, reflecting something about himself. It could be the door of a tomb, rudely chiseled into the wall of a cave and sealed with excessive measures, as if being dead weren't enough, one also had to be imprisoned. At the same time, the panel is obviously the work of some impersonal city agency, one job among many done by one functionary among many, so that the work and its purpose, the

Cinnabar's Gnosis

one who directs the act and the one who carries it out, are not united in one place and time. The panel is at least as real as he is. But it may be that its reality is bestowed on it by his attention.

X. glances at the people standing to either side of him on the crowded platform. They are all facing the wall, and all of them are reading. The distant train, which hoots once down the tunnel as it comes, presses dank, cemetery air before it, stirring the white leaves of the books. It's the end of the working day, and they are all presumably going home. His physical stamina, thanks to the Gurdjieff Exercises, is excellent, and his body is neither especially lively nor particularly tired. His mind, however, feels like a piece of fabric that has been stretched out of shape, and his thoughts are lifeless and subdued. The day of work just completed was long and filled with effort, but, even though he is all too sensible of the fatigue it left behind in him, it nevertheless seems in hindsight as though it had flashed by in an instant.

A booming voice comes over the public address system, at once loud and unintelligible. The announcement goes on and on, with every now and then a word poking up into near comprehensibility through the wash of sound like a figure under a blanket, until it becomes a kind of oppressive smoke hanging under the ceiling. The less attentively he listens, the more plainly he can make out what is being said:

“The purpose of these announcements is not to impart information, but to prevent aesthetic impressions from taking form by impairing your ability to concentrate and by forcing you to seal yourself off from outward sensation, so as to make you unreceptive to mood, thereby relentlessly dragging you back to the idiotic, abbreviated world that must continue to confine you...”

People continue to pour onto the platform from the enormous stairway that opens, like a chute, at one end. As they continue to stream past him, one after another, steadily streaming past him, piling into that station, endlessly piling in and piling in, a feeling of horror begins to stir in him. It doesn't matter if the train comes. However many may board it here, they will be instantly replaced, and then some. What grips him is nothing other than the streaming of these people, that there is no end to it.

Modern Cities Exist Only to Be Destroyed

The train glides into the station. The doors part like buttocks. He enters with relief, and goes to the spot prepared for him. Once again, briefly, he fixes his gaze on the panel in the wall, which is still visible through the window. While he stood on the platform, he looked at it passively, but, this time, he seeks it out and takes hold of it with his mind, perhaps with the confused idea that he might be able to collect from it some of the sense of his own reality with which he had imbued it. The train croons and the panel slides away into a purple shadow.

He observes the other passengers as they appear reflected in the black windows. Looking at them, it would be easy to get the impression that groping vacuously in bags and purses was the sole purpose for their existence. Many of them are slumped in sleep, while others, holding up their books or newspapers, dart suspicious glances this way and that; they are really reading the train and the passengers.

After another stop, he takes an open seat and tries, without much success, to fit his flaccid, overstretched gaze into the confines of the neat white book in his hands. He is, by preference, only vaguely aware of those around him. There is a man with a shockingly large, rubbery face sitting not far from him on one side, and, on the other, a figure drooping in sleep, and somehow obscured. Glancing in that direction, it's almost as if a blind spot appears in X.'s field of vision, hiding the man. A modishly-dressed young woman with a wide, goblin face sits opposite him. When it occurs to him to make a brief note to himself about the panel, a way to return once again to that impression even as the panel and its wall are hurtling away from him into a darkness like the depths of the ocean, to linger over that impression and its higher relief of reality. As he takes out his notebook to jot down a few words, a disagreeable expression of self-satisfaction comes over the face of the woman across the aisle, as if she assumed he must be taking down a description of her, so that he could recapture her image later on.

There is the usual jabbering, too, but his senses are too blunted with fatigue to be susceptible to irritation. It isn't the language, as there are many spoken here, but the flat, insistent manner of speaking that is grating. Glancing around, he takes in the other passengers in a quick, perfunctory survey. They wear the faces printed on money.

Cinnabar's Gnosis

The noise of these voices and bag rummagers becomes muffled. The air in the train is getting bad. As the atmosphere closes in on him, X. feels groggy, shiftless, and unable to focus his eyes on the words on the page. He dabs at his chest several times with the butt end of his pen before he can manage to get it into his shirt pocket, and finally allows himself to sink backward in his seat..

A squeal of brakes startles him – the train is different. No, it is the same, but his seat is different. He now occupies the seat in which the strangely obscured sleeping man had been. His mouth is pasty and dry, his body stiff, complaining in every joint, and this, and his inability to recognize anyone on the train, contributes to the presentiment of alarm that gathers in the still-dim corners of his waking mind. Through the window, he can see the lights of the next station appear against the tunnel walls ahead. A longing for the open air and sky comes over him; he thinks of the walk he took a night or two ago, gazing up at Jupiter, calm and tremendous. The first winds of autumn were tossing in the trees, so unlike the lifeless stillness of summer. The autumn winds, lightly fragrant like a woman's hair, always bring him a special awakening feeling, even though they were harbingers of death. October was the month of his birth, and it sometimes felt as if the autumn season recognized him as one of its own creations. Now, if he were to get up and make his way to the surface, he might see Jupiter again, as if no time at all had elapsed since he'd seen it last.

He glances warily at his watch, expecting it to be shockingly late. For a time, he labors to understand its face, how it could now be five minutes earlier than it was the last time he'd looked at the time. The perennial night of the tunnels has fooled him; it's almost *twelve hours* later.

The next station appears on the far side of the car. Through the other window, the one closer to him, he watches in silent consternation as the panel slides toward him. The train has gone full circle. How many times? The people standing on the platform look weary, heads hanging down over their books. They board the train with clumsy, enervated movements, and one man goes to stand somewhat before him. This man is neither familiar nor unfamiliar; it's difficult to say what he looks like, so changeable are his features from one moment

Modern Cities Exist Only to Be Destroyed

to the next, but he is gazing out the window, and his eyes are riveted on the panel.

X. rubs his face, and puts his clothes in order, although they seem entirely crisp and fresh, better than expected. Another stop. A seat empties, and the man who looked at the panel sits in it. Is it the same seat X. sat in? It does seem to be roughly in the same part of the train, but whether or not it is the very same one is not for his memory to say. The man makes a note in a notebook and claps it shut efficiently. Then he raises his eyes to the young woman sitting opposite him. She is dressed with a great deal of deference to the magazines, but for all her obvious vanity she has the face of a villainous fairy.

"I wasn't writing about you," the man says to her with a smile. His manner is abrupt, and she stiffens and lowers her eyes without responding. At the next stop, she leaves the train.

The man has noticed X.; despite himself, he has been watching him too closely to pretend otherwise now. Without a word, he rises and sits beside X. His face is familiar; he is sprucely dressed, and X. notices he has an irregularly-shaped ring of dull metal on the ring finger of his left hand. Now that he is closer, if anything he is more difficult to see clearly than before; when there was some distance between them, X. could see him entire, if indistinctly. Up close, X. can see only such details as his posture reveals, and his posture is always shifting slightly, even if he conveys more of an impression of stillness than of restlessness.

"Are you awake?" he asks, only barely turning his head toward X.

"Mostly," X. replies, rubbing his forehead and the bridge of his nose. "I must have slept so long ..."

"Falling asleep is dangerous," the man says. "What you have may be taken from you."

X. checks his pockets. "Nothing missing, I think."

A faint smile crosses the man's lips, or so it seems to X., who can only see some of his face at a time. "That's more attributable to sloth or cowardice than goodwill," he says. "Although perhaps sloth and cowardice are not the best words to describe the city dweller's lack of spirit."

He speaks in a dry, brisk way, with an indulgent coolness that only makes the things he says seem that much more matter-of-fact.

Cinnabar's Gnosis

"The modern city exists only to be destroyed," he says flatly. "The frenetic activity you see around you every moment of the day and night is not creative, but purely destructive. Here, human beings are worked to death and leave nothing behind them but that which will ruin the generation to come. This city, like all others now, exists only insofar as it is collapsing, and all its activities are dimensions of its collapse. This work they do is their own destruction, sustaining itself."

"The modern city exists only to be destroyed."

With a small whisk of his hand, he gestures to the people seated around them, and goes on, keeping his voice low. Quietly as he speaks, X. still has no difficulty hearing every word distinctly through the roar of the train.

"These people all dream of its final, catastrophic destruction, only pretending to dread it, perhaps trying to convince themselves that it is dread, and not yearning, that the vision of a final catastrophe elicits in them. This is not real defiance. It is not the vision of the end of the city that matters, but the vision of what is to come after. That is everything, and these people do not look that far. Have you?"

X. turns his head, not toward the man, but toward the window, at the black underground world out there, which could be hurtling by at fantastic speed, or sitting motionless, surrounding a train that rocks and bellows in place like a bull caught in a pen.

Now X. looks into the face of the man beside him.

"I see," the man says quietly. "Take me there."

The village seems freshly abandoned, in good repair, though dark. Walking down its modest main street and glancing about himself, X. sees nothing but its buildings. The land beyond is hidden, and even the sky above is only a shadow, without a single star, or even a cloud, unless perhaps the entire sky is covered by one single uniform cloud, very high and utterly opaque. The darkness does have a cloudlike feltness, and a murky quality that clear, windswept nights never have. All the same, the air in the streets is intoxicatingly fresh, cool and invigorating. The effect it has on his companion only goes to show that this impression is more than imagination. From a nearly somnolent trudging, the man's step grows lighter and more dancerlike pace by pace. His carriage is more erect, and his eyes more bright. The village,

Modern Cities Exist Only to Be Destroyed

what's more, is answering his liveliness with lights and by some other, subtler effects X. can only just dimly take note of, but which do make it clear that activity of some kind, some happy bustling, is stirring in the houses.

Lights dart out their flashes across the reviving village. Shadows lean and pivot against the ground, but the beautiful darkness of the night is not dispelled by these lights, which have no glare. It seems instead as if the night has flung open its windows here and there among the outlines of the buildings. There are no figures to be seen, but the hum of activity, still not quite audible or at least so quiet that it doesn't disturb the pleasing silence of the night, is growing. He looks at his companion, who has unlaced his arm from his and is looking around himself in a transport of happiness, rubbing his hands together, then opening his arms in an invitation to embrace him, directed not at X., but at the town.

"It is all the work of machines," he says.

"What, all this?" X. asks, waving at the village buildings.

He turns, smiling broadly, and nods.

Disappointment sweeps through X.

"I had thought there were people here, greeting us," X. says sadly.

"No!" he replies, his gaiety still increasing. "Only machines."

"It seems... inappropriate somehow. These quaint, rustic buildings. That they should just be masks for some impersonal machinery."

"You would expect that in a city, wouldn't you?" he asks, still gaily.

"Well, yes! The modern city is nothing but machines."

"The modern city..."

He says this in a tone that suggests more to come, but adds nothing. When he does speak again, it's as if he were making a rejoinder to someone in another conversation, and now his voice has a bitter, recriminating tone, even if it has lost none of its gladness. It's the embittered tone of one who can accuse another from a position of unquestioned innocence.

"Modern cities... cruel cities... cities of weakness, cities without ritual."

"Yes," X. says, eagerly. He wants to hear more.

"When you dream," the man says, suddenly addressing X. directly, "you dream of the city of reason and ceremoniousness."

"Of liberty and rest," X. says.

Cinnabar's Gnosis

"Of order, uncoerced and spontaneous as a dance."

"Ordered with the precision of an improvisation."

"You can hear the singing of those machines which mankind slanders as being alien and inimical to it, and to nature itself, when it is by human hands that the innocent particles of nature are transformed into machines, and set to work by the application of natural principles. Machines are made in the human image. Man does not imitate them!"

A weird light plays around his features as he says this. While he never ceases to look human and natural, at the same time there is a temptation to see his face as a hollow glass mask with luminous gases inside. As that luminescence grows, more lights come on all over the town, and X. begins to realize they are connected.

"You are..." X. says, and stops, unable to manacle together the words he needs.

"I am," he says, nodding, evidently guessing X.'s thought. "Do you think this is something?" he asks, with the air of someone who is about to unfurl something more astonishing.

The other can only nod.

He tugs at his tie, undoing it, and pulls it from his collar. Then, twisting his hand around as if he were working a dial, he undoes his collar button, and begins to undress, begins to laugh, as the black void of the sky above the village behind him explodes in countless lighted windows soaring up tall towers whose tops are impossibly high. Laughing, stripping off his clothes, with a lurid brilliance that steadily grows more intense about his face and eyes, his image begins to dance before X., and, with a crash, dazzling rays of light burst out from behind X. X. turns to see yet more towers, and on all sides – this is not a village, but a city of colossi, wafers of night pressed between headless dragon spires whose flanks are scaled with terrible, illuminated windows. His vision seems to drop away down the endless, canyon-like streets to the massive buildings beyond, as they burst alight one by one, and still further and further. An intense, silent vibration suffuses the air and the ground at his feet, as his companion, whose mind *is* these buildings, these lights and this power, continues to strip himself.

A jolt pulls him at once entirely out of his dream, and the man is there by his side, clapping him on the shoulder and telling him it's time

Modern Cities Exist Only to Be Destroyed

to get off the train. Blearily, X. rises and follows him, his legs moving in what feel like convulsive jerks, shot through with cold, glassy pains like darts of ice.

They are in the same station, the same station as ever, but the doors open on the wrong side of the train. Together, they stand on the narrow ledge opposite the platform. The train leaves with a dull roar, and people spill from the stairways, refilling the platform, streaming endlessly into the station, lining up along the tracks, bent wearily over fluttering white books. The man leads X. to the panel, which is only a step or two away. With his finger, he scrapes a thick layer of encrusted dirt from the wall, tracing the outlines of a rectangular panel. With some knocking, he clears the dirt from a recessed handle, and draws the panel open with a sharp tug, revealing what looks like a clockwork mechanism within the wall. With a glance at X., he pulls the irregular ring from his finger. Now X. sees clearly that it's a gear, which the man fits neatly into the mechanism. The machinery spins, and the panel glides up into the wall without a sound.

The man crosses to the other side of the panel and gestures to X., bowing a little and inviting him, without a word, to crawl inside. From this angle, facing him again, he can make out something of the man's features a little better than he has up until now. The singular light shining from the platform throws them into an altered relief, and seems to shadow that vague, interior luster that had leant so much variation to their composition. The man is not himself, nor is he another. The idea crosses X.'s mind even as he crouches to enter the wall through the open panel, and the ambivalent alarm that it brings in tow competes with an intense curiosity.

The aperture is a bit like a closet, lit only faintly by the glow from the platform. It is an upright tomb in the wall, and it was empty until X. climbed inside it. With sudden fear, X. turns to face the man, as best he can, but of course he can only see the feet, and that with effort. They recross in front of the aperture as he stoops awkwardly in the narrow chamber to look, and he hears a soft tinkle of metal. That is the sound, he knows, of the gear being removed from the machinery, and replaced on the ring finger of the left hand. The panel...

The panel drops steadily into place, to seal him in total darkness, inside the wall.

Cinnabar's Gnosis

As the panel begins to descend, neither slowly nor rapidly, in a flash he inventories all that he has within reach and determines which of these things – his head – is the hardest. Already stooped, he thrusts his head violently forward just in time. The panel settles its weight across his temples. The thickness of the panel extends above his eyes like a canopy, but he is still able to see the tracks, the station, and the people on the platform, the trains as they come and go, as long as the lights remain lit. The panel rests on his head as stably as if it was part of his skeleton, but bones also fall off each other, and everything moves in time, including the trains, which are far heavier than the panel. So the darkness is not quite complete, because there is, certainly dampened and partially blocked by his head, also a bar of light.

Perhaps there will come a time when X., standing on the platform, will see the train pull in behind him as he is reflected in the glass windows of the kiosk there. The reflection is just bright enough to make it seem as though there are two trains in the station, although one is spectral and dim, like his own reflection. The doors of both trains will open. It may be that he will turn and board one, and his reflection will turn and board another, and it may be that these respective reflections will eventually arrive in unfamiliar and necessarily unforeseen destinations.

THE HOUSE OF SLEEP

Stephen J. Clark

November 6th

Dear Sir or Madam,

This must be my last letter to you. I regret to say that you are prone to the pitfalls commonly encountered by researchers new to this field and so I cannot commit any more professional time to your questions, fascinating as they may be. Let me end our exchange with a few observations that will lend a little clarity to your studies.

The House of Sleep first appeared in the 1580's during the reign of Rudolf II. It was in 1585 to be precise, following the Emperor's return from Vienna when he became aware of the secret order after receiving a letter from their leader, Stejskal. Stejskal had requested an audience at Prague Castle to enable a viewing of the Emperor's "cabinets of curiosities", claiming that in return he could offer a *demonstration* of the Philosopher's Stone and an enrichment of his melancholy (and not the stone itself as a gift, as you mistakenly state in your letter). I trust you do know that Rudolf famously suffered from bouts of a congenital depression. There is evidence, admittedly from secondary sources and hearsay to suggest that Stejskal became a regular visitor to the court as a result of striking up this bargain and furthermore probably became a close confidant of the Emperor who appears to have patronised the order's "court masques, rituals and codices".

The poetess and courtier Elizabeth Jane Weston (whose stepfather was the notorious charlatan Edward Kelley) wrote an unpublished ode to Stejskal in 1608, alluding to a friendship that is the most likely origin

Cinnabar's Gnosis

of much speculation concerning the magus-mathematician John Dee's link to The House of Sleep. This has yet to be substantiated and I would argue never will be, being one more fabrication, one more strand of a web weaved by The House of Sleep to wrong-foot the unwary. The manuscripts and correspondence relating to Rudolf's involvement with The House of Sleep did not survive the sacking of Prague Castle by Swedish soldiers in 1648 but are referred to in the catalogue the court physician Anselmus Boetius de Boodt compiled as curator of the royal cabinets. Curiously this catalogue refers to the order as 'The House Under the Sign of Sleep, drawing upon common Czech phrasing I believe, suggesting a tavern where, at that time, touring theatrical companies might perform.

Indeed much of what has been preserved for us about The House of Sleep can be found as traces scattered throughout the history of Bohemian theatre. The earliest evidence suggests the order existed well before the first stirrings of an organised Czech theatre, conventionally dated around 1701. And later I believe the order played a part in the inception of many mutations of the tradition, such as the black-light theatres (so called because they made use of the 'black cabinet', an optical illusion that depends upon the human eye's inability to differentiate black on black. Props manipulated by actors camouflaged in black thus gain the appearance of independent life). And bringing the matter closer to our own times, the name of Stejskal appears on posters in the early Nineteenth century as part of a folk puppet theatre, in a play entitled *The House of Sleep*, which concerns a series of abductions by ghosts.

I wish you good luck with all your future studies.

Yours,
Dr. Charles Knox



November 10th
Dear Dr. Knox,

Thank you for persevering with our correspondence. I do appreciate the patience you have shown me and hope I can convince

The House of Sleep

you to write again. I follow your work closely and admit that I have attended some of your lectures yet I am not officially enrolled and must remain anonymous. Even if I were a scholar there I doubt I'd find the courage to approach you. I know I am a novice but trust not without promise. So I can only ask for your good faith when I claim that I had already arrived at the same suspicions that you inferred in your recent lecture; that Stejskal was clearly not a man but a figurehead. The name is a title either inherited or attained through initiation. Like you I believe the latter is the most likely possibility, which brings me to my next point. Surely you must know that the play you mentioned in your last letter is currently being performed at the street named *Novy Svet*, opposite the old hotel *U Zlateho Noha*. I have taken the liberty of enclosing a ticket and a map.

Please do not consider this excessive, it is not beyond my means and besides it would satisfy me to know I have assisted the eminent British doctor in his work. You will note that the ticket is not dated. I understand the company give an open invitation in the desire that their patrons will return with friends. If it would not be too much of an imposition I ask that you write to me again after your visit. One last thing, do not be discouraged by the place's appearance when you find it. I have heard that there is no grand entrance or façade. Apparently it is accepted practice to knock loudly just before midnight and wait.

Yours,
An admirer.



November 11th
Dear Friend,

I read your last letter with interest and thank you for your generosity. Forgive my previous harshness I now see your earlier correspondence in a different light, having originally been on my guard expecting a prank. Believe me it does happen. I know my gratitude isn't always obvious to my students so please accept my apology.

Cinnabar's Gnosis

I will write again with news of the performance. Until then, think about meeting.

Yours,
Charles Knox

❧

November 12th
Dear Friend,

This letter can only fail to convey my experiences at the theatre that night. My memory is not as sharp as it once was and I have sat here since the early morning drafting these words to you.

I met with a graduate friend, a young Slovak by the name of Pavel. He was kind enough to call for me and we caught a tram at ten, reaching the old hotel within half an hour. I wanted to observe the theatre entrance awhile and being a seasoned insomniac welcomed the diversion. The hotel bar was close to empty, although the strong aroma of tobacco suggested a crowd had recently left, perhaps for the theatre itself. I found us a table by a window while Pavel went in search of a waitress. He returned with cognac and cigars, complaining about the service but soon fell silent when he noticed my attention was solely fixed on the other side of the street.

I had neglected my appetite that day and caused some embarrassment by curtailing a seminar in the afternoon due to light-headedness. Yet Pavel has the knack of casually disregarding such anxieties and put me at my ease. No doubt he could detect I had been nervously anticipating our visit to the theatre for some time but didn't once pry into the nature of the correspondence that he knew had inspired it. He had first learned of my intention to find the theatre only the previous day and suggested that he would like to attend, as he claimed he had particularly enjoyed my lectures on Rudolfian drama. Of course I knew he was being kind. Pavel simply could not allow this old man to make such a journey alone. As I sat staring into the street he called the waitress over again and for a second I absently heard them share coy words

The House of Sleep

of flirtation that somehow distantly stimulated me, helping the cognac loosen my nerves. At that moment I saw a door across the little lane open a fraction. I remember that my hand darted to find Pavel's and draw his attention.

'There.' I insisted. 'You see it. Someone at the theatre door. What time is it?'

His pocket watch told him it was only twenty past eleven.

'There, look. Look!' Now I was gripping his wrist, frozen with fear or excitement. A figure had emerged from the door and in a moment stopped my heart. It seemed as though a piece of the doorway's darkness stepped into view, slowly taking on the shape of a man, visible against the powdery white wall opposite. I hid my face behind the curtain, peering around its edge. He was dressed from head to toe in black. I mean entirely in black, no holes in the hood for his eyes, not an inch of skin could be seen. This living shadow seemed to be checking if anyone was waiting outside, leaning out only for a matter of seconds, to sink back into the darkness and close the door again on our world. I felt as though I had seen an automaton from the Orloj, the famed clock in the Old Town Square.

Pavel's alarm at my agitation was clear in his eyes. He pretended not to care by slouching back into his chair, appearing preoccupied with his cigar. I knew he was being considerate and I expected him to find some way of gently averting our visit. Instead he suggested that I should bolster my spirits with another drink and by the time we ventured back into the lane I hardly cared about the drop in temperature. We reached the door pausing awhile to examine the yellow poster pinned there announcing the play we were about to see. As well as its title, *The House of Sleep*, which was written in thin spidery italics, the weathered paper was covered in almost indiscernible lines reminiscent of cobwebs. After checking his watch again I let Pavel knock forcefully on the door. He had expressed doubt as the entrance, as you said, was unremarkable, like any other residential door in the street and I expected some tired housewife to answer. Indeed she did, and this unlikely usherette beckoned us into the confined passage with a knowing look, convincing me we'd called at the right place. As she retreated into a side door she indicated we should follow the hallway and enter through a heavy curtain that lay at its end.

Cinnabar's Gnosis

From the cramped passage we pushed through the curtain into a high square hall. I could only explain its size by reasoning it had at one time served a community or church. Pavel, not wanting to disturb the reverence we immediately sensed, whispered something about a dance school. Nevertheless, whatever original function it may have once had was long since gone. Before us, on a floor made of polished narrow boards, a battered assortment of wooden chairs had been arranged in rows. All of the chairs were unoccupied. A single modest chandelier hung from the ceiling and the walls were concealed by sackcloth drapes. Yet we did not have an entire view of the hall as a few feet immediately in front of the first row of chairs great scarlet curtains rose up from floor to ceiling, held in place by a contraption of ropes and rails I couldn't clearly make out in the weak light. The whole spectacle had the character of being temporary. As we took our places in the furthest row from the front the gaslight was turned lower still and smoke began to drift from the divide in the curtains. My thoughts of fire were allayed when a curious perfume reached me. This scent, pleasant at first, was unmistakably that of vanilla and I recalled having heard that somewhere in the countryside nearby, a town – I forget its name – prospered on its cultivation and had done so for centuries. I caught Pavel's eye as the aroma had accumulated to a sickly extent and he gestured and shrugged that we could leave at any time I wished. I shook my head.

As the hall's gloom was further thickened by the incense the curtains were finally drawn aside. I could not say for certain what I saw there, perhaps a featureless black gulf at first the likes of which seemed to defy my estimations of the hall's scale but as my eyes became accustomed to the murk I could discern an emerging scene being slowly illuminated. The stage was elevated slightly above our eyelevel and it was dressed to resemble the interior of a study not unlike my own in that it also served as a living space, with divan as well as a wall lined with book-laden shelves. There was a great white door standing centre stage and a window to its left, its artificial character accentuated by the fact that it possessed no view, only a black space. Both casements were open as though in preparation of an arrival. Indeed that black space outside the window was the backdrop to the whole scene before us, disorientating my sense of depth to the point that the furniture, window frame and door seemed

The House of Sleep

suspended in a void. I kept expecting stars to appear from the darkness but none came. Instead a man clumsily entered through the door centre stage as a gramophone scratched its way into life. The decrepitude of the machine was clear for all to hear, warping the piano chords and reducing what was probably an accomplished piece into a kind of hypnotic mockery. Like the arrangement of the props on stage, the man had a makeshift appearance, an abbreviation of a man so to speak, in cardboard evening suit and top hat. His facial features were distinctly adhered to the black hood of the disguised performer; separate nose, moustache and beard, separate cheeks, forehead and lips, and most memorably of all, the eyes, which were merely two lifeless white rings glued into place. His movements were almost farcical, at the tedious beck and call of the whining music. He went here and there about his room, as if in search of something he had no hope of finding. I must admit my concentration was tested and I welcomed the end of the first act as the man exited by the door and the stage was plunged into darkness.

The second act opened with great plumes of incense billowing up through the stage floor until the scenery was waist-deep in violet fog. The protagonist lay squirming on his divan in a fitful sleep as a life-size papier-mâché effigy of a naked woman with prominent lips, breasts and belly was shakily elevated into view through undulating clouds. I immediately recognised her as the pale virgin mother from alchemical engravings, the mercurial fountainhead whose milk could raise the dead.

A disembodied voice offstage, supposedly that of the virgin, sang a seductive lullaby to the waters of the Vltava, while milk, or white paint, streamed copiously from her open nipples. As she softly chanted her papier-mâché body, now soaked through, slowly caved-in on itself, her long blonde wig sliding from her head to reveal a smooth pate. And as the lights went down I was left with the impression that her body had dissolved in its own milk.

By the third act Pavel and I were struggling with the nausea and lethargy the incense imposed. With glances we agreed to leave but as we gathered ourselves a turn of events in the drama claimed our attention. From the window at stage left several silver threads became visible, spanning the whole scene, seeming to dart to the bookshelves across the room and envelop them in a fine web. Other threads quickly came into

Cinnabar's Gnosis

view as they were pulled taut, no doubt by unseen hands gloved in black. By those same hands the scenery was violently thrown into disarray; books flew from shelves, drawers were ejected from cupboards, a picture frame danced through the air, as the man in the evening suit stood bewildered, being slowly bound by the gathering threads that now issued from every available breach in the fake room. The threads were suddenly pulled tight and in an instant the man was torn limb from bloodless limb. The light was extinguished so abruptly that I was convinced our hosts had wanted to conceal an inept climax to their drama. We waited awhile longer for the houselights to be raised again but to no avail, leaving us to splutter and stumble our way out into the street.

Pavel saw me home, his fatigue overcoming his usual good humour. We sat out our tram journey in silence and as we reached my front door all we could manage was an exhausted "Good night", as I watched him vanish across the square.

Today I had hoped to discuss the evening with Pavel but he failed to show at my lesson that morning. Perhaps just as well, as yet again I had to call a halt to proceedings having forgotten to bring the relevant notes. I'm not sure I should be confiding in you. It's possible that you were there, one of the many faces looking awkwardly down at me in the lecture theatre.

As I try to make sense of the play its events slip away from me. I wonder if you have had the opportunity to witness it yet and can shed some light. If you happen to be in the school do not be afraid to introduce yourself.

Yours,
Charles Knox



November 16th
Dear Friend,

Please forgive my insistence in writing again. I hope my last letter reached you. I took the liberty of calling at your address but as I received no answer this was my only resort.

The House of Sleep

While in the city, returning from your home, I called in at Pavel's apartment concerned for his welfare. I had imagined finding him holed up in his room fighting off a cold but when I received no response to my knock I called at his neighbours' door. They often socialised together and I am on speaking terms with the family, yet they had not seen Pavel in days. I agreed when they said they'd report the matter to the police. He is a creature of habit and of modest means so not given to disappearing on a whim. The family kept a key and we took a look around his rooms. All was in order, no clothes seemed to be missing and a newspaper from days before lay open on a table, stale crumbs lay across its pages, a brown unfinished apple sat on a plate. I thought I caught a smell of vanilla there and took one of my turns. Most embarrassing but by the time the neighbour had brought me a glass of water the aroma had dispersed and I had found my senses. I dismissed the whole affair as the nonsense of an old man and reassured them Pavel would return.

Absurd I know but I spent the rest of the day and night scouring books looking for an answer. I have made extensive notes but the more I try to detect a pattern the more it eludes me. As well as being an aphrodisiac, did you know that undertakers, to mask the aroma of decomposition, sometimes use vanilla incense? It is all there in my notes, yet I can't recall writing it or reading the original source. The name Stejskal too, I have since learned, the actual name Stejskal denotes a wilful melancholy and loneliness. The relevance of these things to one another escapes me.

Whereas I once experienced insomnia I must now fight the urge to sleep. I fear dreams where I stand alone on a stage delivering lines without knowing what I am saying, as two strangers stare back at me from the shadows of the auditorium, the only witnesses to my execution or sacrifice. When I wake all this makes less sense so I go out walking. I lose my way in the theatre of the city only to discover myself on one of the many bridges, looking up at a heraldic emblem or statue with a tearful recognition – as though something is on the brink of emerging from me – some memory of another life I should have lived instead of this one. All the while the scent of vanilla follows me, lingering in my clothes. And ever more frequently now I think I see those performers in black loitering in doorways or vanishing around corners as I turn my head.

Cinnabar's Gnosis

I only wish you would reply. The notes I'd compiled have been thrown in the fire. My dependence on them had started to unnerve me. I considered doing the same with your letters, to be rid of it all, but hesitated at the hearth. I read through them all again and found traces that seemed to suggest you might know more than you are prepared to admit. You must think I am losing my marbles. Please reply – I insist that we meet. At least I must know your name.

Yours,
Charles Knox



Charles,

They said that I must write to you. I will not try to escape again. I have promised them that. They brought me a lamp to write this. It is the only light I have seen in days. I awoke here in darkness. I think I am in a cellar yet there is a scent of vanilla. I can hear the waters of the Vltava outside the boarded window. People come here dressed and hooded in black and ask me strange questions about you. And they introduced me to a man they call Stejskal. They obey him. They tell me this man was once the writer Gustav Meyrink but he has all but forgotten that life now, as you will yours. Many others have gone before him, assuming in turn the name of Stejskal. He has taken to wearing a ceremonial mask. I am sorry to say it is a caricature of your face. He stands over me as I write this. He tells me they have watched you since your arrival in Prague and that you have a privileged place in their Book of Names. They speak of you in tones of reverence but more as an enemy than an ally. This Stejskal says that you must do as he has done and leave the letters you exchanged in a place where a stranger will find them by chance. And then you must return to the theatre at midnight and take your research, all your papers, your theses, with you. They say your only way forward now is to join them or destroy what you know and forget.

Your friend,
Pavel

The House of Sleep



December 4th 1932
Stejskal,

Weeks have passed since that night but I fear that if I do not write now I will soon lose the capacity to do so at all. In fact I cannot say for sure that the doctors or wardens here will let this letter through and have probably encouraged this act as some part of my recovery. Though the evidence did not survive the theatre's flames I have reconstructed what I can from memory. The walls of my room here have become a map of those events yet it is the blank spaces between the pages pinned to their surfaces that still haunt me. I will leave these pages here for the man that will come after me. You do not need to remind me that those doctors and wardens are performing roles. Playing out rehearsed gestures and delivering scripted dialogue. At times I cannot help but laugh at their stilted nature. But without you I fear I will lose the key and the diagnosis with which they have named me will steadily become the part I will play.

Poor Pavel, I still see his eyes as the stage collapses in flames, my papers clutched to his chest. They blame me of course but then you said they would. I have no proof. All my research is gone. You said that was part of what I had to endure, to cross to the other side, to join you and the others. The fire left nothing but you and I. I saw you climb the face of the old hotel wall and escape across the rooftops. When they finally caught up with me at my apartment I was ready for them. I knew their game. I had prepared a speech as you instructed. And they took me away as you said they would and brought me here to Bohnice. They tell me it is a progressive clinic and even has a theatre. The only satisfaction is in knowing that my initiation is almost complete. At night I know they are waiting. From my window I sense their unseen hands, your servants in black, shaking the branches of the trees in the gardens and moving the silver leaves in waves across the wide lawns. I even catch a look from one of the wardens from time to time and know he is not all that he seems. You have sent him I am sure, to deliver

Cinnabar's Gnosis

a message. As promised, my time has come. Soon I will close my eyes
and take to the stage.

Your faithful servant,
Charles Knox.

THE MULTIPLES OF SORROW

Steve Rasnic Tem

Malcolm had gone from London to Paris after the end of the First World War. His few remaining friends in England speculated it must have been a desperate move to escape some unhappiness. What they had not grasped was that desperation required a certain emotional investment Malcolm had not budgeted for during his remaining years on the planet. He had no intention of feeling desperation or any other strong emotion. He could see no point. If he was going to waste his time, there were activities far more interesting for his thoughtless consumption.

If anything he'd left for aesthetic reasons. Not because Paris during that time promised so much in terms of freedom, beauty, art – he had no illusions of access to such things – but because London promised so little. Despite the post-war appearance of palatial department stores and great business houses jobs were few and the divide between rich and poor intraversable. He'd grown tired of the slums of the east end and the architecture of ruin and rust, surfaces silky with a moist dust of unknown content, unidentifiable insects disassembling on the edges of vision. Worse than the bombs dropped by the German Zeppelins had been this devastating fusillade of failed commerce.

Of course the aesthetic background of Paris was no richer, only different: a stacked mess of darkened brick spider-veined by wet, depthless streets where broken beggars stumbled and died. Upon reaching Paris he was possessed of few funds and he had no considered plan for their replenishment. Now and then he would work a menial restaurant job for the privilege of some laughable underpayment and the dubious

Cinnabar's Gnosis

benefit of glimpsing such luminaries as Picasso and Ford Madox Ford. He lived in the worst possible places, attic rooms where he could not walk upright, the ceilings decorated with the long, looping signatures of marching insects. If he grew tired of the wriggling creatures falling into his small store of food he'd burn a bit of sulphur to drive them into the next room, separated from his by the thinnest possible layer of paper and board.

"*Monstre!*" boomed the voice on the other side of his flimsy door, followed by a rain of fists on wood that shook the room. "*Meurtrier!*"

But instead of hiding like a child he rolled out of his bed and jerked open the door. "*Oui!*"

The large bearded man hunched in the doorway, his head lowered as he peered inside. Malcolm noticed several gray insects crawling in and out of his hair, thin black legs slipping on the oily strands.

"*Degaré?*" Malcolm asked, recognizing him as a man he sometimes washed dishes with in the restaurants.

"*Mon Dieu!* Malcolm." He suddenly grinned. "I have bread, if you have the wine to wash it down!"

For a time they had an arrangement, but nights when *Degaré* had too much to drink Malcolm would always leave.

Malcolm sold some of his clothing and most of his other belongings for rent, with a few sou left over for bread and margarine, wine, cheese, some potato, a little coffee. The price of food had increased so drastically the past few years, bread almost three times, an egg at least five, he'd been reduced to the occasional theft and killing pigeons in the park. This was always an awkward task – having no skill with a slingshot he had to bludgeon the birds with a stick or a decaying shoe and sneak them into his apartment under his coat where he would fry and rapidly eat them. On those nights it was *Degaré* who left, in disgust.

He supposed he was starving himself, but frankly found the prospect more interesting than frightening. Starvation and poverty served as acute catalysts for breaking down the usual sensory boundaries. He saw things more deeply than he had in years. He only wished this new vision were of a finer resolution.

"*Animal!*" *Degaré* would cry, whenever he saw Malcolm with a pigeon on a plate, referring to both. Malcolm thought that at least it

The Multiples of Sorrow

was a clean plate, but did not present this detail in his defense. He simply took a larger bite.

Perhaps this exchange was what initially triggered the idea. Man's dual nature: the spirit and the beast. It was a lot to chew on. It took Malcolm some months developing a theory, refining his understanding of his own impulses.

He spent most of his days in bed to preserve his strength, preferring to go out at night when Degaré was sleeping and the details of the city's decay were somewhat wrapped in romantic shadow. He accepted that decay but did not want to be constantly exposed to it. The daylight made the city's deterioration abundantly clear. There was no excuse for surprise, of course. A building material hadn't been invented that would last forever; most fell far short of the mark. If all the wealth in France were focused on the single purpose of maintaining Paris in pristine condition there still would not be sufficient funds. No nation had the resources necessary to maintain a major city in such a manner. Buildings do fall apart, eventually, and it seemed to Malcolm that most of the major cities – London, Paris, New York – were failing at approximately the same time.

He felt the inevitability of the decline most obviously during late afternoon strolls through insistent rain. The Paris sky boiled down into a spoiled soup. He clamped his mouth to keep out any taste of the foul French precipitation. All around him the brick walls melted, sliding into the streets. It happened too slowly for most of its denizens to notice but Malcolm had grown acutely sensitive to the world's steady transformation into mud. Certainly human beings were little more than that – animated mud, however they might dress themselves up. Their condition stunned them. Everywhere he looked he could see Parisians staring at him, or staring off into space. Consumption ravaged their tired flesh. They smiled at one with a smear of blood. They stared out of illness, out of insanity, out of death.

It was hardly surprising their city was maintained so poorly.

Degaré did his wanderings during the day. Sometimes they would pass each other on the disastrous stairs leading to the attic room they now shared. Malcolm's roommate occasionally growled at him, little more. He did not know what Degaré did during the day, although he

Cinnabar's Gnosis

suspected criminal activity was involved, as the man returned every evening with his enormous carcass swollen even further with hidden cheeses and breads under his coat, as well as wrapped packages whose contents obviously surprised Degaré when he ripped them open.

One evening Malcolm found a few drops of blood on one of the bread loaves. Their eyes found each other, Degaré's swollen and angry. "Do you wish to make *une réflexion*, Monsieur?"

In answer Malcolm stared and began eating the bloodied area.

Sometimes after an extended period in bed Malcolm felt very much the philosopher. What better place to construct his theories? His father might have said this was no way to make one's way in the world, to which he might reply that neither the way nor the world was very clear. One invention of meaning was as near the truth as any other as far as Malcolm was concerned. There was no sense having a heart attack over such questions, which his father, indeed, had.

Lying in bed he had the opportunity and the will to review and reflect upon his life, something which even the wealthy could not always afford. It gradually came clear to him that a single human being could not have possibly felt and done all the things he had felt and done in such a relatively short time. One being could not possibly contain such conflicts of feeling. He was a man of some education and yet he had eaten bread soiled with a stranger's blood. And the repugnant Degaré? Sometimes his roommate recited French love poetry in his sleep, with very few mistakes. Such conflicts of spirituality and bestiality! The usual explanations for such contradictions made less sense the longer Malcolm remained in bed. He himself hated the ugliness and falseness of the world, and yet loved the heightened sensibility his hatred brought him. He had absolutely no hope or optimism for his own future, and yet it was a future he looked forward to with great anticipation.

The true mystery was why more did not go mad when forced to endure these conditions. Malcolm concluded there must be a surfeit of souls in heaven (or whatever one chose to call that astral realm) and a shortage of flesh in the mundane world to serve as their vessels. Even when madness was not the immediate result, to live with such internal warfare had to lead inevitably to the vilest sort of illnesses.

The Multiples of Sorrow

In one sense these were merely the idle speculations of a man with no other pressing chores. But Malcolm was taken aback to discover that these ideas triggered emotions he had not experienced in years. Of course he had no one reputable to bear witness to these recent enlightenments. He had no real acquaintances, actually, other than the disreputable Degaré. And so it was that one late evening while engaged in one of their increasingly rare shared dishwashing jobs, the kitchen explosive with heat and argument, a porridge of loose food underfoot, he pulled the giant Frenchmen out into the alley and told him all that he had surmised on the subject.

To Malcolm's somewhat uncomfortable surprise Degaré actually appeared interested, nodding and sucking in his cheeks, periodically staring at Malcolm with a sympathetic look on his face. Finally, when Malcolm was not yet finished but too exhausted to go on, Degaré turned to him with a dripping ladle raised like a wand and spoke. "I may know just the man who can help you with this problem. He's a German. He comes to Paris from time to time for various studies, experiments, and god knows what. He dresses very finely, oriental robes, silk scarves, even when he is renting the poorest of hovels to preserve his privacy. You might think he was simply some sharp-tongued dandy, but he is educated, a writer, or so I've been told – he certainly weaves magic with his words – who knows deeply the issues of mind and spirit."

"What is his name?"

"Oh! He has so many! When I first met him he was Meyer, but I have heard others call him Dagobert, and Ruben-Juda. He is quite, fluid let us say, in his allegiances. He joins associations only to tear them down it would seem. I can never tell if the man is serious! But that is simply a symptom of his brilliance, I think."

"You would seem to know him well."

"*Un peu*. I have done the occasional odd job. I have acquired a particular ingredient he has desired, now and then. What can I say? The man talks, I listen, I have learned a bit of his situation. Perhaps he can help you. He is known among certain, say, circles *impopulaire* for – hmmm – *le processus de arrachage*?"

"I don't understand."

Cinnabar's Gnosis

"How do you say? An *extraction process*?"

"Is that dentistry you're referring to?"

Degaré laughed. "*Non! Ne dentiste!* Surely there cannot be a physical process for such a thing. It is philosophical, spiritual. No danger, or so I am told. How could there be? You can have my spirit, *Monsieur*, I give it gladly, if you will only feed my belly, and other things."

Malcolm shuddered at what he thought the Frenchman might be suggesting. "Where do I find this magician?"

"Why, only a short stroll to the east, I think you know it? The *Rue d'Âmes Vidées*? I will give you the precise address, for, say, a bit of innocuous cheese?"



As Degaré had promised, the *Rue d'Âmes Vidées* was a short stump of a lane a few minutes stumble toward the river. Malcolm had not been familiar with this particular segment of pavement, although he was aware of other parts of this street from the conversations of others. It had once been one of the longest streets in Paris, a north-south slash through the city's heart, but over the centuries it had been broken up, blocked by one project or other, canals or public buildings, or occasionally when some housing development was extended across its surface like a dam across a stream. Streets required advocates if they were to remain intact, but this street had none. Now its longest segments were only a few blocks – *Rue Abattue d'Enfant* was one of the siblings, he believed, as well as the *Rue des Veuves Aveugles*, and the *petite route des fenêtres chuchotantes* – and here and there, at least according to rumor, a section would be completely enclosed on all four sides, becoming a *cour*, a courtyard, or forgotten completely on the other side of windowless walls.

Malcolm could not escape the perception of *mytaphore*, metaphor, in the history of this road and his theory regarding developments in the human personality. Isolated, diverted, and segmented all came to mind when he contemplated the nature of the human spirit.

The door to No. 56 *Rue d'Âmes Vidées*, if that sunken slab of wood could be called such, was dragged open with surprising ease by a handsome man in a fine robe. Malcolm felt immediate intimidation – there

The Multiples of Sorrow

was a piercing, electric quality to the man's eyes as they gazed, unblinking.

"*Excusez-moi, Monsieur.* I was told, I believe there is a *arrachage*?" He knew he must sound like a fool, but how do you ask about such things?

The man on the other side of the door said nothing, those eyes examining Malcolm up and down with unsettling calm. He made a little wrinkle with his mouth and stepped out of the way.

They moved through the darkness before settling into a sour-smelling room lit only by a blazing fire. Even though Malcolm was accustomed to working in the hottest of Parisian kitchens he found the heat in this room almost too much to bear but his host appeared unperturbed, his high forehead dry, unwrinkled. But not undamaged. Closer up, the man's face appeared scraped, flaking, as if there might be layers of skin missing. "Tell me your story, if you would," he said.

"Do you mean my theories? Or would you like some sort of introduction?"

The man said nothing for a time, then replied, "tell me what you would tell me."

Malcolm worried over this, then asked, "How shall I address you?"

"You may call me *Professeur*. I think I would like that. At least that will suffice for now."

Given the professeur's lack of precise direction, Malcolm had no idea how to begin. Seeking to avoid an extended and laborious back-and-forth he started with his somewhat disorganized and impulsive decision to move to Paris, his struggles in the city to feed and shelter himself, his relationship with Degaré, finally culminating with the reason he had knocked on the man's door: his bed-facilitated speculations regarding the problem of the human personality and its inherent conflicts.

Along the way Malcolm became progressively more aware of the increase of light in the room. He supposed it his eyes' natural ability to acclimate to the ambient gloom, but the fire did appear brighter, fuller, more intense. With the heightened illumination came an abundance of raw detail: the shelves collapsing under the weight of oversized jars and mysterious machinery, the frightening cracks in the ancient

Cinnabar's Gnosis

beams high overhead, the litter of decaying documents and scrolls in the corners, the small piles of half-eaten food, the constant fall of cinnamon dust, the scattering of indecipherable taxidermia, the stain mark that ran along the walls at an identical height, sign of some past flood survived. And with that increase in visual detail came a corresponding heightening of olfactory sensation, a blend of acrid and acidic aromas which tickled the nose, then burned. The state of the room seemed dramatically at odds with the elegance of the man who lived here, even if it was for only some short stay. Was this perhaps some Germanic trial of the spirit? Malcolm's eyes began to weep involuntarily, and soon the entirety of him appeared to be leaking.

Perhaps these various elements led to a distortion in his senses, because Malcolm became convinced the *professeur* had been amused by his narration, the man's finely-sculpted features gradually warping under the pressure of an ill-fitting grin. However it was not an impression he felt comfortable commenting upon. *Ne réflexion.*

Finally the *professeur* spoke, an unmistakable smile dancing across his lips. "We will require several vessels for your various aspects, suitable bodies to contain the release of spiritual energy. Not too many as it is possible to spread the *sauce* too thin, as it were."

"Vessels?"

"They need not be informed volunteers. Tell them I will feed them, pay them, whatever. I will recruit a few, but if one might acquire at least one, as *assurance*?"

"I do not wish to hurt anyone."

"How might you hurt them? Paris is full of aimless foreigners now. Czechs, Poles, Asians, uncountable young Brits such as yourself. You yourself say that one meaning is as good as any other. We live in a time in which the world is full of wandering spirits. How do you know you will not be providing them with a better meaning? You might do them a favor! Bring whoever you may find here tomorrow. A similar time."



It would be no exaggeration to say Malcolm felt qualms, although they were not of the moral kind, since he did not believe in that sort of thing.

The Multiples of Sorrow

He did believe, however, in survival of the fittest, and the imperative of doing what was required by the environment you were in, which all seemed to add up to a rough sort of justice, and this particular activity, this collecting of vessels, seemed somehow less than just. Of course he did not relate all of this to Degaré, but Degaré *was*, indeed, his confessor, and so he did manage to cover the bare outlines of the problem.

“*Merde.*” Degaré spat into the restaurant’s dishwater. “I would give you myself if I could, for the price we discussed, but *pardonnez moi*, I find I am not yet prepared for such a major life change.” He thought for a moment, rubbing soap suds through his greasy locks. “Have you thought of Zajic?”

“The kitchen slop man? The Czech?”

“The very one. He broke up with another girlfriend. He mopes all day, he cries. Get him out of here, I say, before I kill him.”

Malcolm found Zajic sitting out in the alley behind the kitchen, weeping. He crouched beside him and commiserated. It was not an entirely false commiseration – he had a few memories of his own, but he had lost his belief in romance long before he had lost his belief in religion. Neither was of any practical use to him.

He offered Zajic some food. The Czech smiled, his hard, slabbed, clay-like face splitting in unused directions. Malcolm offered him a job, and was suddenly swallowed by the slop man’s unwelcome embrace.

In the same gloomy chamber Malcolm lay on a low bed made up of straw and planks and the thinnest of blankets. Zajic lay on a similar arrangement beside him, nearly unconscious from heavy drink. Malcolm had drunk a small amount of wine but wanted to be relatively clear-headed for this procedure, this extraction.

But he was being constantly distracted by a commotion behind the door in a generally left direction, behind his line of sight. He hadn’t noticed a door there before, but he could hear it creaking, opening now and then, shutting with a soft bang, and the people behind it, murmuring drunkenly, possibly weeping.

“Pay no attention to them.” Meyer, the *professeur*, was suddenly above him, and unless Malcolm misapprehended, gazing down at them as if they were babies in their cribs. “They will come in later during the

Cinnabar's Gnosis

process. We start with one, we expand to two, as many vessels as are needed. The mathematics are inexact – I will know only after we have begun.”

“But they seem distressed.”

“Distressed? Oh, *non*, I assure you. They are simply *anxious* to be a part of this great *expérience*. We are surrounded by a surfeit of life force – surely you can feel it? Yours, our volunteers, the spirits of all the soldiers who died in the war? So much to channel, to redirect, to sort! I must ask you to simply relax. I have something more for you to drink. It will go well with your wine.”

The taste was strong and bitter, but the bitterness went away immediately, replaced by an overpowering sweetness. The professor smiled broadly and danced around the room, his arms above his head, loose and waving, rubbery. But then he was back close again, a moldering book in his hands, whispering, but Malcolm could not hear him. The anxious people behind the door were too loud.

The professor caressed Malcolm's side, and his fingertip came away bloody, and there was a knife in his hand, dripping. Malcolm watched as the professor used the knife to carve shreds out of the book, then stuffed those shreds into the wound in Zajic's side. He had a moment's anticipation of a different, simpler life to come, fewer complications and conflicts, an avoidance of misunderstandings. And then the professor strolled over to him, grinning widely, his hands full of those shreds, those fragments of ancient narratives, and then the professor's hands went inside Malcolm, where they stayed, and became busy as insects.



He had been in Paris for decades, it seemed. He could not recall the year he had arrived from Prague, or the look of Prague in even the most general of detail. He could not recall why he had ever left, but he was sure it could not be desperation. It could not be desperation.

There would be no point. Worlds were coming to an end and there was no point. The cities were all failing at the same time. Had no one else noticed this? Could he be the only one?

The Multiples of Sorrow

Some days he would wander the lanes, searching the short streets, the forgotten streets, for nothing. The *Rue Abattue d'Enfant*, the *Rue des Veuves Aveugles*, the *Rue d'Âmes Vidées*. Some days he would walk to the river, and watch there. He could not remember the river's name, but thought it might be the Seine, the Thames, the Vltava.

Some nights he climbed the shaking steps to his attic room. But Degaré now lived there. He said he had always lived there. "*Monstre!*" the burly Frenchman shouted. "*Meurtrier!* Can you not leave me alone? You do not live here!"

Some nights he slept where he could. Some nights he wandered without sleeping.

Was he starving? Did it matter?

Everywhere he went people stared. They did not stare just at him – they stared at everything.

He himself stared, he was always staring. He did not want to miss any vanishing detail. In this at least they were brothers and sisters.

There was much he had forgotten, and yet there was much he still knew. Every idea in him had its own voice, every stray thought its own head. In him there were multitudes. He thought perhaps that particular idea might be from the Bible, but he did not know for sure.

He might be sad, he thought. He very well might be. But he could not be sure. He waited for all these other voices to tell him.

THE CABINET OF PRAGUE

Mark Beech

Albrecht had been summoned back to the apartment on Na Ποσειεί early that winter term for what his Uncle Wilhelm assured him were reasons of a greater importance than his beleaguered studies in Budapest.

We must commit ourselves – the letter had read – *to the task of taking stock of our collective destiny!* Albrecht could make little sense of it, but was relieved at least to have an excuse to be away from the tedious rituals of university life for a while. There was a second class train ticket in the envelope. He left for Prague the following morning. He found the lobby of the apartment block thick with the traffic of a Friday evening on Na Ποσειεί. Cigar smoke ran in coils across the ceiling; eager gangs of taxi drivers jammed up doorways. Albrecht's cousin, Jaclyn, brushed past him in the stairwell.

“There's cold ham in the larder,” she called over her shoulder. She smelled of expensive perfume. “Your uncle's in one of his moods...”

But which one? thought Albrecht.

He was in the drawing room. Something terribly austere was playing on the gramophone: Brahms or Bruckner. The standard lamps were all up full, as was his predilection; their artificial brightness yielding the sterile ambiance of a doctor's examination room. In Albrecht's experience, the association was not inapt.

A vast muddle of papers and files was fanned out across the floor in every direction from where his uncle perched on the corner of a big leather armchair. As Albrecht approached, he was in the process of snatching up one after another of the files, poking his dagger-like nose

The Cabinet of Prague

into their title pages and then tossing them carelessly to one side. He looked up at Albrecht.

“What are you doing?”

Albrecht didn't know how to react.

“Your things! Put your things down will you? Standing there like a damned gypsy!”

Albrecht wondered what his uncle knew about gypsies. He let his case and portfolio drop where he stood, and slipped into a chair near the fireplace.

His uncle belonged to what Albrecht thought of as the final ridiculous remnants of a dead civilisation; he had grown up amongst such men; stiff, pompous old Germans who'd been caught polishing their buttons decades earlier when the Austro-Hungarian tide finally went out on Bohemia. Amid the bright lights of his drawing room that night the spectacle of the old man in profile had suggested to him the embossed head on a outdated German coin, set in the window of a Josefov junk shop.

“Is this work?” Albrecht asked after too long a pause.

“It's always work,” the old man blustered back, “but what would you know about that?” He struck a statuesque pose, offering a single page up to the light for examination.

“University, my boy, may be a very good place for a young man to piss away the contents of his family's coffers in times of national lassitude, but I regret to have to tell you that these are not they!

“The work of our future is all that matters now, and we are privileged to see ourselves burdened with it! Every one of us... in one respect or another.”

He gave a frustrated sigh. “The council yesterday refused my request to have you installed here as my secretary. I should not have regarded such a task as beyond even your abilities; however, there are those amongst them who knew your father – some who even served under him in France – and I can only imagine that for that reason they have convinced themselves that you deserve placement a little... closer to the frontline... as it were.”

Albrecht had of course not the vaguest conception of what his uncle was talking about, nor even to which ‘council’ these reverential old

Cinnabar's Gnosis

soldiers – and indeed it would seem the old man himself – now belonged. The implications troubled him deeply.

“They have a job for me?”

“So it would appear. It is hardly my place to speculate of course; it most certainly isn’t yours. At any rate, we will be meeting with them tomorrow evening when I’m sure they will make their intentions clear. There is a supper at Herr Gottschalk’s house on Na Pøikopi to which we are all invited.”

“Herr Gottschalk?”

“Herr Gottschalk is a very good friend of ours, and a respected member of the council...”

Pause. “The council?”

As if merely to avoid the his nephew’s puzzled expression, the old man turned again to the jumble of files at his feet.

“It is important that you understand, Albrecht!” he muttered into their pages. “It is important that you understand how honoured we all are to be friends with men like Herr Gottschalk...” It seemed improbable to Albrecht that he would ever understand anything of the sort.

For several minutes he sat in a quiet reverie in which the slipped cogs of his own thoughts ran in cycles to the terminal fizz and pop of the unattended gramophone player, and the memories of the motion of the railway tracks.

Then at last he forced himself up, and with a wordless bow bade his uncle a good night.

It was around midnight he supposed, when he woke to the damp thumping sounds of fireworks going off on the other side of the Vltava. He wondered at the idea that revellers were still out in the darkness of the streets while he lay in bed; that drunks were still wobbling around lampposts somewhere, and that the entrances to the cabarets still glittered gaudily and belched cigarette smoke out into the night.

He pushed his face deep into his pillows and pulled the covers up over his head.

In the bathroom next door, he heard Jaclyn washing off her make-up, and humming softly to herself.

Firstly, Albrecht noted, not a word of Czech was spoken that evening at Herr Gottschalk’s house. This was not in itself that remarkable, and

The Cabinet of Prague

was in fact the norm in many German clubs and casinos he'd been taken to in Prague; but on several occasions it had seemed to him that a concerted effort was being made amongst the guests to disallow even the commonest of Bohemian colloquialisms or swearwords idly past their lips.

Then, there were the topics of the conversation, which consisted almost exclusively of what the guests claimed was the degeneration of certain quarters of the city, primarily through the mismanagement of the present authorities. These were, Albrecht mused, regions into which these stuffy, red-faced Germans were at any rate unlikely ever even to set foot, much less have any sort of business. They were willing nonetheless – and eager – to speak late into the night on the subject with all the shameless enthusiasm of bigotry, while about them it seemed the splendid velvet draperies grew darker and more plush through the saturation of their bile.

Albrecht sought refuge from all these horrors in the copious amounts of free liquor on offer.

“Having fun Alby?” said Jaclyn sarcastically.

“I assume Capek wasn't invited?” he responded cruelly. Only minutes later did he realise how much this had hurt her.

She simply waggled her empty fingers in front of his face.

The previous summer it had all been about *the ring*. The ring, and Capek, the promising young Czech dental student. It had been perfection! What had come between them Albrecht wondered? Or whom?

Just as he had begun to believe that nothing other than a hangover and a gnawing sense of guilt would result of the evening, there came the vision of his Uncle Wilhelm, slipping over the tiles towards him like an excitable lapdog.

“Albrecht, quickly!” he called.

A hugely corpulent and immaculately tailored man moved amongst the guests. A grand procession took turns to thrust their sweaty hands enthusiastically at him as he passed between them, and bend their mouths around his ear, and laugh uproariously at his responses. Albrecht found himself jostled forward through the crowd.

“Albrecht,” his uncle hissed into his ear. “This is Herr Gottschalk. Herr Gottschalk, this is my nephew, Albrecht.”

The huge man was wiping other man's sweat from palm with his handkerchief. He smiled a grotesquely wide smile at Albrecht.

Cinnabar's Gnosis

"My word, and here you are!"

Albrecht held out his hand meekly, but Herr Gottschalk took him by the shoulder and pulled him under his arm.

"Having a good time?"

His uncle looked anxious. Albrecht pulled a bewildered face.

"Ha ha!" roared Gottschalk. "And why would you indeed? All these old blabbermouths going on and on all the time? Talk never solved anything? Come on with me, will you?"

There seemed little option. As he was manhandled out into the hall, Albrecht took a single glance back at his uncle, looking stupid and shivering in the midst of the crowds. Jaclyn was nowhere to be seen.

Two brutish looking lads joined them in the hall. Albrecht recognised them by their short cut haircuts and high collars as the same two he and Jaclyn had observed earlier in the evening, mauling their way through the gangs of adolescent girls banging out nursery rhymes and jingles on an ancient grand piano.

"My sons," said Gottschalk in a needlessly conspiratorial tone, "Heimlich and Maximilian..."

"Do you like automobiles?"

"I... don't drive."

"Neither do I."

The night air hit them hard as they stepped outside. A beetle-black Mercedes sat on the curb. One of the sons opened the rear doors for Gottschalk and Albrecht to get in. The other took the wheel.

"Your uncle I'm sure has told you a little of what we are up against here."

"Of course," lied Albrecht.

"... And what is at stake?"

"Yes."

The streetlights ran in carousel around them as they sped though the night, bringing no single substantial thing into illumination except the extent of Albrecht's intoxication. Gottschalk's words hung flatly in the air before him. Albrecht hung onto his seat.

"We must not be complacent Albrecht," the fat man was saying. "Time is of the essence!..."

The Cabinet of Prague

Albrecht nodded enthusiastically at everything that was said: Words and phrases were repeated time and again; words like ‘groundwork’; phrases like ‘all that will be’.

“I feel certain Albrecht that you are up to the part we are offering you – a young man of your intellect. You are precisely what this job needs.”

The car dove into a final, violent turn, and fell abruptly silent.

Then again, they were out in the air, all four of them crossing a wide, empty street. One of the lads unlocked a metal door set in decrepit plasterwork, and Albrecht was taken inside.

“Daily,” said Gottschalk, “we regain ground; we draw new battle lines, and in the course of which certain items fall into our possession...”

They were moving quickly through doorways, but in near total darkness. There was a smell like old sacks, and the chill of church vaults. Gottschalk’s voice echoed.

“As you will understand, the process of taking stock of those items is a full-time job; categorising them; cataloguing; making the distinction between what is of use to us, and what is of no use. Max! What are you doing with those lights?”

With a buzz and flicker the chamber they had passed into illuminated, but still only dimly. It was a place as decrepit as the exterior had been; lofty, but cracked and crumbling at every quarter. Metal shelving units ran in inexactly spaced rows down its entire length, vanishing into shadows at its corners. Hundreds, perhaps thousands of old books were stacked there, and columns of huge leather folios and piles of yellowed papers.

Gottschalk chuckled at Albrecht’s expression: “Don’t look so frightened Albrecht! Look here! The majority of this stuff is clearly of no real worth either to us or anyone else.” He plucked something randomly from the shelf, scanned its foxed pages and tossed it away.

“They belong for the main to the detritus of abandoned Prague libraries: cheap pornographic novels, family histories, private presses, collections of love letters from dead lovers; dull dull stuff which can pose no threat to anyone. But the point is that the distinctions needs to be made.”

He pushed his face into Albrecht’s, so that it seemed it filled his entire line of vision.

Cinnabar's Gnosis

“Put simply,” he stressed, “we need someone of your abilities here, fishing out the important stuff; the useful stuff, and the stuff which can have no part in what is to come...”

Albrecht blinked drunkenly into Gottschalk's huge eager eyes, but at first said nothing. His mind ran in dizzying spirals where the significance of Gottschalk's words found little purchase.

Finally, he managed, with only a slight slur: “Thank you, Herr Gottschalk.”

They returned to Na Pøikopi via Josefov, in near silence. The Jewish quarter had seemed to burn like a furnace through the grate of its narrow streets, full of humanity and light.

When they had arrived back, Gottschalk took Albrecht by the arm.

“How like your father you look Albrecht,” he said, wistfully.

“I never met him,” said Albrecht, coldly.

“Why did you come back?” asked Jaclyn with an unconvincing disinterest one morning. (Uncle Wilhelm had just left for work, and she had jumped at the opportunity to paint her fingernails at the breakfast table.)

The reasons had been simple. The reason for his remaining in Prague and the employment of Herr Gottschalk was a different, more agonising matter. In the weeks after his arrival he had begun several letters of apology to his tutor for his sudden and unexplained truancy, but had given up on every one. Even if he *had* been allowed to return to the university he reckoned, winter break would soon be upon them, and after that he would lose his uncle's funding.

In any case, that morning, he could think of no response to Jaclyn's question which would satisfy either of them.

He shrugged wordlessly, and took his coffee to the bathroom with him.

Staring at himself in the mirror, he found himself repeating: “There will be an end to this...”

Albrecht would arrive every morning at the edge of Josefov by trolleybus whilst the sun rose low and ice-cold between the tall buildings of Kaprova, and the dough-white girls from the patisseries filled the pavements, going arm in arm in the direction of the riverbank.

Heimlich and Maximilian were always waiting to unlock the door for him. Often, they would spend their days hanging around in the other

The Cabinet of Prague

rooms playing cards under the bare light bulbs and listening to the wireless while he worked. When they went out, they locked him in.

There was no heat in the building, and very little light.

The work was worse than pointless. Albrecht could make no real sense of what was expected of him.

Certain papers and publications were, as he had been told at that first visit, entirely worthless, and warranted the minimum of attention. Neither did they require cataloguing. They were simply ‘ticked off’ and left where they were stacked.

Any political, foreign or Jewish publications were required to be catalogued and passed on each evening to the council via Herr Gottschalk, along with brief synopses of their contents and details of their writers and publishers, as well as any legible library stamps or inscriptions therein. These books were rarely seen again.

The greatest difficulty for Albrecht however came with the obscurer works of fiction, which were often tedious and unfathomable in their symbolism; and the lengthy, dry, academic histories of Bohemia and central Europe, which the council took a particular interest in for reasons Albrecht never quite understood. These, he later came to almost fear submitting.

On one evening after work he had arrived at the house on Na Pøíkopi with, as usual, several satchels of books and papers, to have the housekeeper let him in.

“If you can wait here,” she said. “Herr Gottschalk has some gentlemen with him.”

He had sat himself down in the hall, before the fire, unable to stop shivering or scratching at his chilblained fingertips. Fifteen or twenty minutes passed. From somewhere – and for a while he wasn’t sure whether it was out in the street or somewhere within Herr Gottschalk’s rooms – a series of angry voices were raised, and though not a single word was discernable, Albrecht could tell the voices were pure German.

Finally, unexpectedly, one of the adjacent doors was flung wide on its hinges, banging against the wall. Albrecht rose instinctively. A group of four men strode at a furious pace across the hallway and past him. They were each immaculately and identically dressed, with long winter coats over their arms and short brimmed hats in their hands; their patent leather

Cinnabar's Gnosis

shoes cracking in unison over the tiled floor. Though the housekeeper had hurried to reach the front door before them, they had already yanked it wide before she came close, and marching away into the night beyond.

She stood in apparent shock for a moment, then began to creep towards Herr Gottschalk's chamber door. Albrecht jumped when he looked around to see Herr Gottschalk's immense silhouette there.

"Go about your business," he growled at her. "Albrecht! Come inside." There was little warmth in the invitation.

"I got through the rest of those history books today and more," stammered Albrecht. "*The Party of The Calixtines... The Battle of Hradec Králové... A Concise Biography of Josef Jiří Kolár...*"

"Sit down, Albrecht."

The room smelt of sweat. Half empty brandy glasses cluttered the tables where also there were scattered a number of books. A few, Albrecht recognised as books he had submitted on previous evenings. He found himself wondering at the rest: He wondered whether there were others like him in the employment of the council, locked away daily in other quarters of the city in similarly desolate and sunless houses beneath other mouldering stacks of books and papers.

Gottschalk abruptly broke his reverie. He had snatched a file from the arm of one of the chairs and begun to read. Albrecht instantly recognised the words as his own:

"*The Doors of Life: Paul Leppin...* Obscure early copywriters draft of impenetrably themed novella... Young woman – prostitute? – escapes life with 'sisters' – brothel? – to find no lesser captivity with a violent Bohemian violinist – later returns to sisters."

Albrecht nodded neutrally, which even in that second he realised was a mistake.

Gottschalk flew into a rage, unlike anything Albrecht had come to expect: "We do not pay you to tell us about the impenetrability of things! We pay *you* to tell us what they are about! We pay *you* to *penetrate!*"

He threw the papers at Albrecht.

"Leppin is a syphilitic degenerate! A provocateur! A lover of Jews and whores! And all *you've* managed to provide us with is shoulder shrugging and vagary! Impenetrable indeed! What use is that to us for God's sake?..."

The Cabinet of Prague

Albrecht sat, petrified and bemused, as Gottschalk turned about the room on his heels, grabbing the air in his huge fists.

“It isn’t enough Albrecht,” he huffed on. “It won’t do... to satisfy ourselves with the banalities and of what lies on the surface of things. If it were, we should have been content to have idiots do this work...”

“You must learn right now Albrecht, that the true intent of the writer lies between the lines... *Here* lies the greatest threat to our future, and here also perhaps the key to our salvation!”

The air tasted of blood that night as Albrecht went amongst the crowds of Na Pøíkopi. Their frosty breath hung in his face. Their damp overcoats stank.

Try as he might, he could find no beauty in *The Mother of Cities* on nights like this; only the tarnished spoils of lost civilisations to which his people now seemed intent upon laying claim. But neither could he comprehend the great threat of which they spoke with such loathing and panic. These were not conspirators bent upon his people’s destruction: These dreary workaday men and women who jostled and bumped him along the pavement. They had no special interest in the future of their civilisations. Their concepts of destiny began and ended with the next day’s dinnertime, the next night’s liquor, a song and a dance and the approach of Christmas or Hanukkah. What was the point to any of it?

He had not had the nerve to submit any of his satchels of books to Gottschalk that night, though he could not imagine what he would do with them next, save perhaps throw the whole lot into the river, or sell them at the first bookshop he passed. What else *could* he do? He *could* waste another day over them, dreaming up paranoid subtexts and damning their writers, publishers and previous owners to the scrutiny of Herr Gottschalk and his enigmatic council. But why should he be bothered? What was any of this to him?

What was the point?!

At the corner of Celetná, he stopped dead. Through the courtyards and alleyways to the west came the din of half a dozen organ grinders duelling for haléru outside the old bars. He could picture their ruddy red gloveless fingers heaving furiously at the winding handles, their backs all crooked, their lips chapped from the cold and the promising fumes of the beer.

Cinnabar's Gnosis

There seemed to Albrecht nothing much worth going back to Na Poøíêí for in a hurry; nothing except his uncle's bewildering frustrations; nothing except Bruckner and Brahms, and the clamour of Jaclyn's perfume.

He headed into Celetná; into the old town.

It was with a strangely misplaced sense of guilt that Albrecht brought the second glass of beer up to his lips. It was cold, but he was colder, though the thick fragrant flavour made him dither all the same. He smiled to himself.

The bar was crowded. All the bars in the old town were always crowded. People sang and cursed and wrestled and spilled their drinks over one another. The prettiest girls came and went; the drunkest men fell over their tables. The doors swung constantly on their hinges; wafts of frozen air rushed in, full off the acrid reek of soot and gunpowder. Fireworks popped like champagne corks out over the old square.

Albrecht settled back into the little brick alcove he had found near the lavatories, and thought to himself that this was the closest he had come to contentment since his return to Prague: Here amongst the city's noisy and oblivious hoards. Here in the thickening clouds of dark Czech beer and tobacco smoke.

So perhaps he had been wrong (he was loathed to admit it was the beer thinking for him), perhaps there was some worth still to this city, some thing to which these ordinary people saw fit to raise their glasses and drink their toasts with such enthusiasm. If this was indeed the final act to their many wondrous and doomed civilisations – if this once legendary magical city was soon to sink into the sort of humdrum paranoia and terminal fragmentation which men like Herr Gottschalk strove to impose upon it – then why on Earth not give thanks and go out in a blaze of fireworks and jubilation?

Albrecht decided he should have one more drink amongst these people, then haul his books down to Mánesùv Bridge and toss them into the Vltava, permanently out of harm's way.

A thick, crisp frost had spread rapidly over the cobbled lanes that night, quivering like iron filings in the charge of the lamplight. From all direction people hollered indecipherably across the open air; from

The Cabinet of Prague

the foggy shadows of dead-end corners and the depths of open doorways, where cigarette ends danced like a fireflies.

The beer did not sit well with Albrecht. The immediate unfamiliarity of his surroundings did not sit well either. It was clear that he had somehow strayed into the Jewish Quarter, though an unfashionable and lesser-travelled part of it. The houses were not especially old or distinguishable, though he fancied the streets themselves still bore the winding, shadow-full angles of that earlier fever-dream version of the Josefov so revered by the artists of the city, and so reviled by its more practical folk.

At each crossroads he paused expectantly, squinting through the shifting darkness on either side of him, hoping for a glimpse of the lights of Pařížská or Kaprova, or the rising white mists from the riverbank. But only thicker, still more readily stifling darkness presented itself there, in abrupt sooty cul-de-sacs, with narrow places full of an indistinct form of human activity, between the abandoned carts and stalls of market days sunk in puddles of frozen fish-guts and split fruit.

Finally, at the fork of two tapering lanes, there stood before him a row of tumbledown shops. He staggered to them. They were all clearly closed up but one. Albrecht almost laughed out loud. Amongst the warped and faded boards set above its door, one read: BOOKS BOUGHT AND SOLD. Lights shone dimly inside, and its was not locked.

It seemed an inauspicious sort of place. The sort of bookshop he supposed to be common in out of the way regions of the city, run for the sake of breaking even by people whose aptitude for book selling began and ended in a pyramid of sun-damaged Hebrew astrology volumes and a dozen fruit crates of secondhand almanacs. Albrecht turned a few of their covers over while he waited.

Under normal circumstances, he would certainly have been pleased that the proprietor had not immediately rushed from his cubby-hole to harass him for business, but tonight his only sober thought was to be away from that place and its environs as quickly as he could, with as little or as much as he was offered for his cargo. Still, no one came. Perhaps, he thought, the shop was shut after all. Perhaps the proprietor had dozed off and missed closing time.

Albrecht listened hard. Somewhere, from away beyond the back of the shop, a long way behind the thick black curtains which hung there,

Cinnabar's Gnosis

he became convinced that he could hear a voice. It seemed to speak with assured, oratorical fervour, though he could make out not a word of what was being said. He strained. He shuffled forward, left ear first. Still nothing.

At that moment, a head popped out from between the curtains. A big, round bald head, on which a pair of thick spectacles were set, magnifying the eyes to an unnatural degree. They blinked at Albrecht, and what appeared to be a slowly dawning recognition came upon the face.

He yelled a greeting, which Albrecht thought he may have misheard while he was still staggering in surprise around the weight of the satchels.

"I wonder," he stammered, urgently, finding his feet, "if you are open to buy my books!"

"Books! Ha ha!", he took Albrecht by the wrist. He continued to babble on into his ear. The words he spoke overlapped and jumped and made little sense at all.

Stupidly slowly, Albrecht became conscious that he was not listening to a German speaker at all. Why should he be? The man was speaking Yiddish. Albrecht did not know the language, but in any event, the time for explanations had passed. His host was pulling him forward through the fusty curtains.

A greater clutter of books was revealed in the rooms beyond, volumes of what Albrecht took to be of an altogether more valuable pedigree than those on sale, though he did not have a chance to examine them. He was ushered on quickly, ducking down crooked hallways, under low doorframes, stumbling over warped and missing boards. The voice he had heard before now rose louder ahead of him.

At last, they came to their first and only closed door. The proprietor gave Albrecht a friendly pat on the shoulder and unlocked it for him with a theatrical flourish of servitude.

The voice was coming from within. It too was speaking Yiddish. Albrecht realised, though even to his untrained ears it sounded an unusual dialect, peppered with words he should have thought alien to any modern European or Middle Eastern language, woven with tongue clicks and odd grunts.

What could he do, he wondered, but go on inside as his host now eagerly entreated? There might even, he thought, be a back door by

The Cabinet of Prague

which to make a stealthy escape into the night and avoid the probability of their ultimate, mutual embarrassment.

He hadn't however expected, as he took that very first step inside, that the proprietor would close the door so swiftly on his heels. Nor that the key turning in its lock would strike such a menacing note.

The icy atmosphere of a hall-sized space had at once opened around him, full of the echoes of that impossible oration. There was the suggestion of something like church incense on the air, troubling by its implications. And another, yet more obviously unpleasant smell. Something vaguely excremental, like rotten newspapers or flypaper gum. Albrecht waited until his eyes had adjusted sufficiently.

Before him, a set of stone steps fell away into the archways and pillared foundations of some earlier version of the building. Through the pools of shadows beyond, a wide basin of a place – the size perhaps of an old town courtyard – opened into a chaos of human silhouettes thrown out in diagonals by the fiery glow of some weirdly organic chandeliers.

Everywhere else yet more books were cluttered, in piles like unlit beacons, in teetering stacks, in the murky silos of soaring bookcases; and there were more fantastical things there besides. Waxen figurines from heathen mythologies looked on. Grotesquely deformed death masks betrayed their apathy. A gallery of hybrids appeared in unison to tap their fishtails discontentedly against their grubby jars and bear their fangs to the flickering uncertain light of their environment.

Albrecht descended, trembling, mesmerised and horrified. The human spectators – a great mix of citizens from no single obvious ethnic source – did not challenge him. Their attentions were engaged wholly on the orator. And a singular spectacle he made! He was set up at the furthest, lightest end of the chamber, at a battered bronze lectern around which he appeared constantly to sway and totter, throwing his arms up over his head and jabbing a finger into the empty darkness in front of him. His lips drew back over his gums. His eyes pulsed madly in their deep blackened sockets.

His words ran in nonsense cycles. His words danced and gambolled on the air. His words... “Ink,” Albrecht heard. “The primordial ink?”

God! The man was cadaverous; ancient in every sense that the word might be applied to a still living being, if living indeed he was. For to

Cinnabar's Gnosis

Albrecht's increasingly agitated mind he could as easily have been a disinterred corpse, raised from his coffin by some necromantic puppet-master, and adorned in the blasphemously shabby robes of a rabbi in order to dance and throw his arms about and jabber for the entertainment of this slap-dash mob of secret subscribers.

"...The ink..." Albrecht heard again. "The ink in which the existence of this most ancient city is written..."

No! The concept that this was mere entertainment did the awesome strangeness of the scene no justice at all. For though there were those amongst the enthralled who wore mad, wide, wet grins across their faces, there were as many whose expressions betrayed anxiety, anger, and even the grotesque contortions of fear!

"...Written large in that primordial ink..." the orator was ranting. "In language which predates language. In words that predate words..."

Albrecht had stopped breathing.

"And as such," he was listening to the orator say, "we can only suppose, they were coexistent in that first infernal breath with which Jehovah proclaimed the beginning of all beginnings. The bloody birth of the bleeding cosmos..."

Albrecht's whole body shuddered. What words were these? They were not German, clearly, but nor were they Czech or Hungarian, and even had they been Polish or English he might have grasped their individual meanings. Yet these words – *these* words – which rose and fell and ran in nebulous spirals of maniacal gibberish in the air around him had nonetheless miraculously begun to make a strange and terrifying kind of sense.

"...So were the heresies of Jehovah against that wordless void," they spiralled on, "as the blasphemies the Magi Loew against the sacred clay on which our ancient city stands, and thus the fabric of human reality itself! *Emet! Met!* Those primordial blasphemies of life-giving words whose written symbols run through the very marrow of all our souls, as decay through the ephemeral leaves of a book...!"

The orator wheeled in circles of agitated delirium as he preached. A bubbling fizz of spit spluttered out through his teeth with every maniacally forceful declaration.

"We are the books of Prague," he was yelling. "So mote it be!"

The Cabinet of Prague

And so Albrecht felt himself staggering physically against the force of these words, fighting to keep his footing in the push and pull of their centrifugal gravity. Yet he did hold his ground. Yet he wanted to hear.

“...Until flesh shall become words once more,” that language whipped and jostled him, “and shall dwell amongst us eternally as the echoes of the pre-historic angels, transmitted until the end of recorded time through the black spires of St Vitus’ Cathedral, and that sacred obsidian shrine in which the still-living tongue of St. John of Nepomuk still wags and throbs and sermonises, evermore. So mote it be!”

Finally – but after how long? – suddenly – but how so? – the force of the orator’s mad deluge became too great to withstand. Albrecht was spinning in the air! Then momentarily, again, he seemed to catch the whirlwind-like force of the orator’s words, but their centre was long since lost to him, and they spun him out and away. His knees buckled badly under him, he stumbled backwards drunkenly, and before he could help it, the satchels he carried were tipped up so that a cascade of heavy books toppled out across the floor. A concussive panic tore into him then, a drunken terror. He stood up petrified, but shaking. Had they seen him? Had anyone heard?

At first there was some relief in his awareness that the orator was still raging in that same grotesque fashion over his lectern, though the words he now spewed had reverted back into so much incomprehensible noise. And what else had changed so suddenly? Through the darkness filled and indistinct corners of the chamber, and from amongst its alcoves of grim faux-magical jetsam, here and there were suddenly the flickerings of human eyes set upon him, narrowed, suspicious, gauging perhaps Albrecht’s eligibility to be amongst them. There were whispers then also between the spectators. There was an epidemic of tappings on shoulders and bent ears. There were still more narrowed eyes.

Albrecht could feel his body aching with fear, his head growing airy.

In another nearby place he could hear there were raised voices. A lock was drawn back. The door from which Albrecht had entered the chamber was thrown wide, and more than one human figure stood in its space. Perhaps there was movement around Albrecht, perhaps it was merely the flickering lights, perhaps there was a shuffling of bodies in Albrecht’s direction. He would never look back to know. He raced for

Cinnabar's Gnosis

the steps, and the noise from the next room, tripping and banging his shins on the way. He barely caught a glimpse of the newcomer as he hurtled through the doorway, barely thought to consider, until much later, that this man had had a similar enough build to his own for the myopic bookshop proprietor to have mistaken them both. Their encounter passed in a split-second, in the red-heat of panic, with Albrecht knocking him – and the proprietor too – flying into a rain of toppling bookshelves.

He did not stop. He rampaged on through the rooms of the shop. He did not stop even after he came tumbling out through its door into the street. He ran on, blindly.

Fresh mists, and the fog of drunkenness baffled him. He bumped into lampposts in his haste, into gangs of revellers who guffawed in his ears, and who filled him with loathing. Crumbling façades arched over him. Roads buckled under his feet. Panic drove him on. The shame of the unmasked impostor drove him on. The blurred calls and pointing fingers of the crowds who huddled in the garish, glossy oases of cabarets and brothels drove him ever on; until his lungs could take no more and cramp pulled him double. Then a car spun him round, and fumes and angry horns surrounded him. He skidded on a patch of ice and cracked his knuckles on the frozen gravel, coming finally and pathetically to a stop on his hands and knees.

Before him, and through rising columns of gun grey vapour, the lights of bustling Mánesův Bridge dipped and curved into a finite singularity, and the pale silhouette of Hraděany rose up from beyond like some astrological symbol in a star glittering blackness, seemingly un-tethered from The Earth.

A freezing sweat prickled Albrecht's back. He vomited into the gutter. Then, there was only darkness.

Albrecht left Prague on the coldest day of the year. It was the last time he ever saw Jaclyn.

All afternoon he had spent chasing after her through the boutiques and cafés at the top end of Wenceslas Square. They all knew her there.

"Jaclyn? Why yes, she passed here not half an hour ago. You must be Alby! Ha! She was heading for Igor's Tearoom."

The Cabinet of Prague

She was not at Igor's Tearoom.

The snow had started falling around three thirty. Huge sticky flakes drifting vertically down through the dense oceanic blues and velvet crimsons of the midwinter twilight. Albrecht sat down at the window and ordered a whole pot of Russian tea to himself, wondering why indeed he should have thought it necessary to have his departure ratified by another living soul.

He was leaving; that much was a matter of fact. He was leaving now simply because he had not left sooner. He was leaving now simply because he had finally been afforded somewhere to go to.

He had received the letter the previous morning. His uncle had tossed it irritably across the breakfast table at him as though even that was more than he deserved. It was already opened.

The university would agree, it said, in the light of Albrecht's many recent pleas for asylum, to take him back under their roofs in the capacity of winter caretaker's assistant, if he wished it.

Under the circumstances – they gloated – we do not consider this beyond your abilities.

Albrecht had laughed for a full five minutes after he read it.

Uncle Wilhelm would not miss him of course, though he was in no doubt the old man would have wished he had had more time to more thoroughly disassociate himself from his nephew after what had happened those couple of weeks earlier, when he was found unconscious, apparently inebriated and suffering from exposure on the quayside at Josefov. Every door in the apartment building was open that night, peephole-wide, as the two policemen bumped around the stairwell with Albrecht's insensible body. Not a tongue was still on the subject in the German bars and casinos the following day, and it was only a matter of days before Herr Gottschalk paid Wilhelm a visit.

Albrecht tried to hear what they were saying from his room, though he was still too weak to leave his bed. He could hear the floorboards groan with Gottschalk's pacing.

"Papa is blaming your mother for the way you are," Jaclyn later confirmed. "She was Czech, wasn't she? And half Jewish." She bounced excitedly on the end of Albrecht's bed, grinning at the idea that he was now the cause of such controversy, and perhaps in some small way

Cinnabar's Gnosis

seeing in him the rebellion she had long sought for her forced disengagement from Capek.

Albrecht smiled back at her: "So does this mean we're *not* having carp for Christmas?" They both laughed.

"You really don't belong with us, do you Alby?" She had never been more right. But then, where did he belong?

He would often dwell on the events of that night in Josefov, still uncertain of their significance, though certain enough that they had spoken to him with a greater eloquence of the continuum of all things than ever could Herr Gottschalk or Uncle Wilhelm, or any other of those moth-eaten relics of Austro-Hungary. Though in his mind the actual memories of that night had become almost indistinguishable from the delirium of the days that followed, the horrible wonder of it all shone still more spectacularly than ever. However, neither were those wonders of the Prague to which he could ever truly be a part.

In the dripping windows of a coffee shop three doors up from Igor's, Albrecht finally caught sight of Jaclyn. There was a great celebration going on within, the nature of which he could not ascertain. They all still had on their outdoor coats, scarves and hats. There was a violist sitting on the counter, playing wildly. Jaclyn was dancing through the billowing clouds of steam from the coffee pots, holding onto the hems her skirts like a gypsy girl, while the men all clapped and laughed and made light-hearted grabs for her.

Albrecht gave a lacklustre wave in her direction, though he was sure she couldn't see him. The last train for Budapest would leave in half an hour. He had no further business amongst these people.

The fresh snow creaked under his boots as he stepped out across the pavement. In the roads it was already slush. The motes of a fine yellowish looking dust were dancing in ribbons in the streetlights for as far as they fizzed out along the length of the square, and the whole city seemed to be sunk in the paralysis of a moment in which every shopkeeper was winding in his awning, and every restaurateur was outside, heaving shovels full of snow from the way of their doors in preparation for the dinnertime rush.

From somewhere over the furthest rooftops the first of the evening's fireworks sounded, in a strange, muffled blast.

WHITE SOULS THAT MARCH IN THE ASTRAL LIGHT

Jonathan Wood

In the very best of dreams, one is invested with the ability to fly and perhaps to be able to look down and map, like the best cartographer, the city that one inhabits below. To fervently delight in the sinuous and detailed intricacies of travelling without impediment, of being “so high” or “so small”, able to curl like incense smoke around a stranger’s leg or to sit in silence upon a mantelpiece—an idol burnished in bronze – this is Utopia! To lie asleep upon a bed of finest silk or to toss from side to side in a pauper’s garret, it’s all the same to me. I can dream, I can experience and I can communicate either side of the etheric divide in what some today are fashionably calling “reality”, while I merely discern finite differences within a spectrum; a glass blotched with cancers and bacterium, a rare and comely germ waiting for love in the tenements with crudely-wrought symbols upon the wall. The best of these somnambulistic cartographers can map the changes that we fall prey to and thus implant residues and buried things within an acre of our folk history. Our dreams are awash with souls upon new coordinates; new souls borne of savage conflict and of the route to peace or that which passeth understanding. I have come via the road to war and the route out to peace, and yet my mind, my selfish human prayers are bombed out of all meaning. There is very little that has meaning now.

And yet there is *now*...

I can feel myself rising from the smog of the interior mind and I thus meditate back to some slender semblance of discernable difference,

Cinnabar's Gnosis

counting backwards in blissful awareness as I do... and so I return to the sight of an elegant drawing room, as it solidifies into its familiarity and form. Circular finely-framed mirrors of gilt, gas jets keen and fervent, oil paintings of the highest quality that display faces of men with excellent moustaches and expressions of the sternest alacrity and inward delight; men above everything but the dominion of ennui and the certainty of commerce and secrecy. I cease to count backwards now for the final stage of rebirth, into the room itself, so that I was not merely a shell of flesh, but a person, plain and simple, once more. I am thus back.

“And what pray, did you see, Professor, if I may be so bold?” The question came from my esteemed host, Father Emmanuel Bankman, a priest of the most remarkably catholic tastes, eager to be accepted and absorbed painlessly into London life after his struggles, eager too for certain aspects of his life to remain obscured by the dust of intrigue and the measured resolution of time. He stared at me hard, as if trying to elicit a sign of life from a grim corpse upon a table. I was only too happy to extend his tension, his frustrated expectancy. I noted the crucifix around his neck, with Christ’s head radiating the customary sense of profound sorrow and perhaps a scintilla of spiritual ennui. However, perhaps again that is in my darkened and displaced imagination rather than in the intended craft of its maker. We live in strange times of transition and my mind plays such tricks. Father Bankman’s knuckles were white and I almost feared a delicious “thwack” of his cane against my face. It would have been no less than I deserved or indeed wanted.

“Dear Father,” I replied, in suitably theatrical tones, “I have returned to you as you can see from a far distant place where peacefulness is but a kind of weather, indifferent to its very existence, where what you would term ‘souls’ hang upon the air like afterthoughts within a dream, their features elastic and blurred like deliberate smudges upon a wet oil painting. Linseed and Death, mark you!” I exclaimed, to dissipate the tension that I too now felt. “Father, I have seen the dead, reproachful. Some have spoken your name even and some have uttered my own. ‘Professor Grovelock,’ they say to me, ‘we know you, we recognise you from the newspapers our loved ones sent over to us, so that we could read them in the trenches, awash with mud and optic nerves and spinal columns in the blossomy debris of the midnight shell.’”

White Souls that March in the Astral Light

Father Emmanuel Bankman clutched his cane and drew his lips together as if to give the impression of thought and deliberation. “Tell me, Professor, before I consider anything further, why have they spoken my name? What do they know of me and pray, what of you?”

I had been waiting for this moment for I knew it would come! An inquisitive nature is an admirable trait, perhaps in an intelligent child or youth, embarking upon his journey into the world with his knapsack of idealism clutched confidently over his shoulder, ready to fashion his own nascent Weltanschauung, but in an ageing priest “plucked from the front” shall we say, it is a morbid thing and something dearly to be exploited. I drew heavily upon a singularly well-constructed and tightly bound Swiss cheroot that I had been offered, watching the blue benediction of smoke trail from its youthful end and so I spun my tale for all it was worth. The portraits upon the wall, including one dear dead cardinal with Roman nose and suspicious bony fingers, all stared down, seeming to enjoy the complicity of the confection of this master-class in still life and control.

And so I began...

“Dear Father, you asked me why they have spoken your name and what do they know of you and of me? Well, let us remove the easy part of the puzzle to allow us to indulge in the oyster dessert to follow. I am well known am I not? Professor Grovelock, visiting professor at the Becht Heidegger Institute with its roots in Switzerland and England. I am always in the wider popular press of the day – for good or for bad – my face emblazoned upon the printed page, my whiskers of the most enviable span and reach! People from any class can see my face upon a copy of *The Facial Review* – occasional journal of Morbid Physiognomy and also upon *The Orthogonal* – Journal of New Century Studies into Atavistic Resurgence. Look upon any news stand and you will see both these esteemed organs and therefore my face staring back out like some kind of ‘Everyman Wizard’. There is hunger now for certain strange knowledge in this society where so many have died so young. My face is as common an image as a corpse being removed from an abandoned shell-hole or a poor child’s face, frosted with tears, when told that ‘Papa’ is not coming home again. I am ubiquitous and so they know me and for me that is my appointed curse. And when these

Cinnabar's Gnosis

papers have gone hence to the front, so therefore has my face become familiar, in our new popular culture of Death's beloved embrace and the search for answers. I have melted into their consciousness like the blessed morphine in the body of one who is soon to find eternal peace at last. The dead therefore know me for what I am, in the penny-dreadful zogrscope of their walled memories that they have taken with them to the tomb. But you, Father, you have safely broken into the beloved centres of their very souls from the very beginning, borne by necessity and conflict into the suffering condition of their lives, into the blood relationship with God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Ghost, three in one. You were their heavenly Father, their beloved uncle here upon Earth. You embraced them as if they were your own and made their torment bearable. They crave your indulgence and company, these young men-souls of the war, with their shattered hopes and yes, oh so innocent and mournful. Generation and generation and generation lost; no more but muddy empty footfalls coming back home up familiar cobbled streets in the shell-shocked mind, Father."

I looked at him with a fixed expression of skilfully earnest concern laced with an elusive phantom glint of intent, to sustain him and to sustain me for future visits. His face was ashen, his tears seemed genuine against the longing pain of his eyes, but who can tell and perhaps I am the last person in London to know either way. His faithful acolyte Timon stood by, his face ablush with the excitement of it all, searching for words but only finding stoic indifference of imagination. He displayed an ennui so pronounced in one so young that it could not fail to be clinically observed and perhaps one day this would happen. Perhaps observation would take place in another time all told, when the chaos of the world was as remarkably recorded and as static as a fine painting or perhaps a detail, a corner of a canvas where sun becomes night and shadows become temples of the soul... where truth might play in abandonment and where Timon would be understood for what he truly was.

Father Bankman paused for some time and then asked me for the book that I had promised him. "Impatient priest." I thought to myself, "you are not a child waiting for a Christmas stocking full of fruit or the first snowflake to fall upon your girlish tongue." I arose and withdrew

White Souls that March in the Astral Light

from my unobtrusive but exquisitely silk-lined valise, a special copy of a private document that I had inculcated, fermented and composed in his mind, I, H.R. Grovelock, no professor at all, save for Professor "What" of whatever I desired at the infamous University of Life! But the world does not know that! The world knows nothing and thus I flourish, my moustache intact. My hand shook with the delicious, exquisite thrill of illusion as I placed in his hand, his expectation of a deluxe copy of "Lanterns of the Astral Complex", which if you are to believe it was an exceedingly rare and finely printed monograph and a hauntingly detailed and intricate study of secret and successful experiments into the physical congress and contact with the beloved dead, complete with its elusive photographic plates of total proof. Father Bankman's persistence in desiring this book caused in me only the distillatory desire to confound him. Such a document did exist in the Private Case but was of no material necessity to my purpose. Remember, if you are to be master of your world, then you need to understand your world and that of your prey; the same as the wolf that inhabits the forests and the blessed beggar that haunts the decayed streets of London, shuffling into the shimmering architecture of his own fate, as if conceived upon the air by Gustave Doré of a night when the opium fumes wreathed and choked us with the effortless panoply of peaceful death in angelic beauty and nurture. I love the smile of the opium addict, his smile and skin merging into one dream of himself already dead and long past the need for desire. But I digress. For this was no deluxe copy that I was handing to him but something that I had written in the nocturnal hours when sleep was made to wait impatiently outside the garret door. When Father Bankman placed his spectacles on and so looked again he could see that this tome appeared less special and undeserving of the word "deluxe". With one movement of his head, he looked up and his face spoke to me, broke through to me as it had done so often at the front with all those soldiers, drifting with their protecting angels down and ever down into the backwash of souls.

"What is this, Professor, this book, this opuscle, this *pamphlet* rather?" He mouthed its title, "Astral Lamps and Beacons" with a measured distain. The plain printed white covers albeit on handmade paper

Cinnabar's Gnosis

were a singular disappointment to him and he shook his head as if afflicted with the ague. But it was so! The illusion had been a triumph. The deluxe book with its tooled vellum covers that had haunted his mind had been transmuted into a banal and stale confection, a mere cipher of what he had thought he held in his hand for one split-second, possessed! "The power of suggestion, Father," I muttered under my breath, "the power of suggestion." Timon came to my side, seeming to know that the time was no longer right for my presence to remain and he thus gave me my hat and cloak with a look of shy reproach. I departed from the room and the residence as if I had never entered it, leaving him merely with the words "Father, you must study this book, do not shun it for it will assist you. I shall call for you again during this week."



Father Emmanuel Bankman laid aside the plain white volume and drank from the thin elegant glass phial, fashioned with a delicate silver casing that Timon rested upon his scarlet lips. He drank the contents, allowing himself to escape from the present for a second and sat rigid staring into the crying embers of the fire until the night's work and the laudanum took their place lovingly beside him and so he did sleep. His dream began at Folkestone, as it always did, with an indifferent crossing to France amidst a sea of youthful faces and then somehow at great speed, with the nocturnal cartographer's power of illusory and mutated flight, through villages and towns and hamlets with trees that looked far too tall and with the bricks of aged barns tumbling across his path. He found himself as he knew he would do within earshot of the muffled sound of munitions and incendiary bombs that lit up the sky like angel-faces of man's ingenuity to man; little crested cherubs of munificent death waiting to make love to their makers. He tore at his vestments but to no avail and was soon again walking in the meadow hand in hand, tasting the heavenly dew. As always in this dream, he was recognised by his platoon leader who shouted his name, pointing at him. Soon he was back in his chair, awakening and with the taste of laudanum upon the roof of his mouth and the first rays of

White Souls that March in the Astral Light

a blistered and weak autumn sun scarring his room like the unforgiving tracery of a dead Christ, whose father *has* forsaken him. Father Bankman was troubled and Grovelock had been his trouble.

That same night, Grovelock had travelled to North London, to the outer suburbs and to the residence of one Simeon Melboni, the famous medium, or should that be “infamous medium”? Grovelock had arrived tired for sure and had been revived with the finest Armagnac by his generous host. Melboni and Grovelock had discoursed long into the night – both of them suffering acute fatigue but seeming to require virtually no sleep. Melboni was a large, moist man of middle age or perhaps late middle age, prone to dropsical whimsy, but, was astounding company for Grovelock, whose misanthropy was legendary in those circles where misanthropy mattered. It seeped out of the man like mustard gas and guilt.

Grovelock, yes! Let us go back to Grovelock.



“You see, Melboni, and I do know that you can see, Father Bankman is a haunted man. He desires fulfilment and release and vindication of the presence of his doctrine and the hereafter. He requires reunion with the flowers of his youth in the fields of France, when his calling was a gift from God and not something forsaken, *anyway by God*. The dear Father returning from the front has been cast adrift and like some soul in purgatory will pay dearly to be received once more into his flock! Can you see it in yourself to undertake that of which I speak?” As I spoke, I stood with arms behind my back, hands clasped and my interior breathing modulated. Under my breath I recited a secret hymn to the mother goddess of my northern hemispheric desires, for I had no shame and cared not for anyone save for that which I cared for at the time. I knew too that there were those across the water in the embers and ash of war who shared my secret hymn, my prayers to the murmuring woods and the eternal spirits of stone; the ancestry beyond our understanding that emerges at times of great conflict to capture our folk prayers and our allegiances. Simeon Melboni was a special man. A medium of unnatural tastes and talents and with an appreciation of

Cinnabar's Gnosis

the mysteries of "*Mystery*" and also of deceit. He had for me printed "Astral Lamps and Beacons" at the private press situated in the attic of his morbidly displaced townhouse, covered in ivy from roof to foundations, with cracked and rusted guttering and sash windows that last opened, I know not when, but perhaps when the previous owner had passed from this world into the next. In his attic with his private press in semi-darkness, there too were his altars and symbols, crosses and effigies of Eastern origin, far from in-keeping with the central tenet of his spiritual craft. But Simeon Melboni too harboured a desire to break free from the bondage of mere liberal ecumenicalism into the blinding white light of astral freedom, complex and elusive, from where there is no return. The robes that hung upon the back of his attic door, emblazoned with their blood-red vessicas and goblets of fire, spoke as much. I could recognise in him that which I knew I could not truthfully recognise in myself. It is one thing to dream and come back to reality but it is another thing entirely to live one's religion of purest fire and communion without the certainty of cynicism and godlessness that I do covet. I care not, I live not and that is who I am. Of that I am certain.

Simeon advised me upon the preferred route to capture Father Bankman and I left, a happy man, if happiness is counted in self-satisfaction and the ultra-sensitive observations of one's fellow man standing in profile against a white wall or lying upon the dissector's table, where blood runs so slow and where faecal matter is rubbed to the gut's end with the handle of the scalpel. I imagine the surgeon's frog, asleep with drugs tied backwards like an unknown Christ, assailed by inquisitive strangers, eager for a perverse redemption or some sign of life. This night had been fruitful and the cold morning air was thus agreeable against the fatigue of my face and the blessed stubble of my chin. If only Father Bankman could see me now! I, Grovelock, in my tarnished glory, alive in body but not in soul, returning to my garret. Books upon my wall tumbled in a menagerie of carven shelves and objects of my desire; masks from the East and old clocks that no longer worked. One in particular I must inform you of. This one clock of which I speak has an exquisite Negro with a hammer set to ring the chimes standing at a jaunty angle. His face is uplifted and this clock is definitely of French origin and burnished where it is not battered.

White Souls that March in the Astral Light

This Negro is my friend and unto him I commend my own unholy spirit when the time is right. And so, I sleep what little sleep I need and in my dreams I find repose under an ancient tree, where strange birds with siren heads do inhabit solely for my pleasure and they gild me golden with their song. The dream of the out-of-fashion long-dead symbolist is the comforting dream for “the man of the world”; the “ennuye man of the world” as the famous American so wrote when describing Roderick Usher.

As I slumbered beneath this tree in my nocturnal fancy, I could see Simeon Melboni and our Father Bankman at their different activities. Melboni smothering himself in flesh as would the holy cannibal of the far islands and Bankman at his prayers; the rings under his eyes like dissipating arcs from the parhelion seen over London’s brooding body, some evening previous. The rosy illusion of the Trinity for all to see, fixed in our sky of post-war gloom like shimmering blood blossoms upon the Tree of Life itself.

I awoke for a second; this very evening, there was to be a séance! I collapsed again in dream, sliding back into the ether, there to reappear like all the myths, as on some other successful night. I awoke later and went about my ablutions with a divine pragmatism and sat in godless meditation until the appointed hour. I put my hands together in mock prayer and smiled. Across London, Father Bankman put his hands together in reverential prayer and did not smile.

Father Bankman rarely ventured out. His experiences in the war had taught him prudence and restraint. He always sought the advice of Timon and followed it to the letter, on all matters practical. But on this particular matter, he was insistent. He had heard of Melboni and having read the simple white pamphlet – it could no longer safely be called a book – was determined to go through with the event, the séance; rather, his first séance. The pamphlet had given him comfort and so the medium and the Professor had succeeded. Father Bankman had supreme confidence in I, Grovelock, and in Simeon Melboni. One could not ask for more in this day and age of austerity and the fluttering displays of vagrant grandeur that hung about the city. This was my life and in this, my life was complete. A step beyond and a step backward into the evolutionary grip of God knows what!

Cinnabar's Gnosis

So it was that at the appointed time Father Bankman, accompanied by his faithful Timon, arrived by carriage at the ivy-festooned residence of one Simeon Melboni, medium extraordinaire and many other things beside. The dear Father, proper as always, took his public lead from Timon and alighted with a dignified gaze as if he himself were a cardinal before his flock, which suited him perfectly. Illusion is a powerful bedfellow as we shall see. Simeon Melboni's concupiscent maid was waiting at the door with it slightly ajar and with the inner hall in darkness, setting the scene for what was to follow. The dear Father was ushered into the ante-room to wait on his own. Timon, having been unceremoniously guided to below stairs, disappeared, there to wait for his master for however long it took. Simeon Melboni had spent the afternoon in the delicately constructed imitation of deep meditation, stock-still and with nasal passages suitably constricted, but thinking all the time rather of his maid and her part in his rosy-hued holy world, some few floors above. The Eleusinian splendour of the suburban equinoctial rite was a rare privilege, even amongst the highest grade of hermetic fraters and sorors that inhabited North London in commerce and in the mysteries. He was thus prepared.

At the strike of seven, he was down to personally meet me. We both went to greet Father Bankman in the ante-room, where a small gas jet spluttered and gave off a strange gushing exhalation. Its presence of flame was the one connection with so-called reality that any of us had. The medium ushered the Father into the second chamber – the séance room itself. Faces looked up as we entered. Pale and wan faces of refined and aged disposition, ready and expectant to become full participants in the proceedings. Simeon Melboni guided the Father with a subtle and reassuring hand upon the shoulders into his appointed seat in the middle of this assemblage of "spiritual veterans". The Father covered his crucifix with both hands as if in realisation of transgression, but both hands were immediately and unceremoniously snatched and clasped by those on either side. The circle was congealing. As Simeon passed me, I could smell brandy upon his breath and in his rheumy eyes, the narcotic remnants of laudanum, perhaps taken through the dregs of the night before it evaporated into day. For a moment, he stared at me as if in baleful reproach, but then checked himself. I knew what

White Souls that March in the Astral Light

he had been about upstairs and what he was about now. His pocket full of crisp banknotes bore bulging witness to this fact. There is much to recommend the comfort of banknotes from the Bank of England.

I, Grovelock, stood behind him with the delicious task, amidst the awful prayers that had taken over the air, of binding him firmly into his chair, to banish any doubt that what was going to happen was genuine. I tied his hands extra tight with relish and then as I dimmed the single gas jet into its protesting extinction, he uttered the time-honoured and tentative question "Is anybody there?" I made my way into the circle, to the empty chair, feeling across the shoulders of the other circle members and taking care to pass my hands ever-so slowly over Father Bankman's face in the darkness, making him shudder in alarm and shock. I knew that Melboni should not have posed that famous question until I, the assigned bondsman had sat down and joined in unity of spirit in the holding of hands. I reached on either side and clasped a male hand in my left and a female hand in my right. I banished thoughts of resentment at Melboni's clumsy entrée from my thoughts. One did not wish to be accused of commonplace emotions at such a spiritual gathering. Dark suburban chaos in a clogging room of ageing heartbeats was now our very present condition.

The medium began to sigh deeply and to exhale a musty, spumatic liquor about his lips and chin that permeated the room with its grim fortitude. As the temperature dropped noticeably and the air became filled with etheric murmurs and moans, each member of the séance circle became agitated. As eyes became accustomed to the darkness, so did the inner light, right on time, from within the medium, begin to reveal its nebulous, refracted core, in the stultifying sub-atomic isolation of the room. Who would ever consider, as I did then, with a lingering and lickerish smile upon my lips, that a quiet forgotten suburban house, with its worthy upper middle-class high ceilings and history of prior respectability could be the crucible for such a thing as this. Outside, footsteps in the real world signalled pedestrians and the measured impact of carriage wheels upon the road, carrying those lucky enough to be alive in mind and body, about their business. We, the assembled were rotted. Our bargain was with closed heavy drapes and secrets and whispers in our ears from heaven knows where.

Cinnabar's Gnosis

Out of the medium's mouth sprouted the first sickly tendrils of ectoplasm, like something with no head or soul, being born under laboratory conditions. It emerged tentatively, stalling, seeking air from right and left, raising its tip into the medium's left nostril. For a second, it remained motionless, before swiftly emerging fully from out his mouth and down his torso to his waist in one horrid, rapid motion, there to hang like Death's dewdrop; out of its middle-aged incubator and into the dead air of the séance chamber with its subtle tang of stale clothing, old mens' shoes and everlasting distillations of ennui. It brought with it a generous ribbon of catarrh and mucus that added to the protoplasmic post-organic atavistic stench. The medium, I knew, had worked hard upon this creation, soaking a not-inconsiderable embellishment of butter muslin in warm water, stretching it until it sang in ecstasy like his maid, before its secret consumption an hour or so before this travesty of life emerged. Even Melboni would have been surprised by the effectiveness of this latest emanation without a head; this stinking fabric of deceit. The medium coughed and so his burden fell with an ungodly "slop" to the floor and thus pulled by invisible wires from behind a panel, it shuffled off past the Father's feet with a series of impetuous jerks into an undetectable space inside the blackened fireplace, never to be used again.

There was an astounding silence in the room, the most powerful that I had ever experienced or heard, if silence can indeed be heard as in that old familiar phrase. All at once, a youthful, reedy voice emerged amidst the debris of the shadow-play, a voice insistent with reproach and with intent. It spoke and in my mind I knew that it would speak.

"Father, Father, say grace for us, I summon you to take our prayers, to share with us the benevolence and bounty of your spiritual presence. Father," the voice proclaimed insistently, "I beg you to give us comfort in our suffering as you once did before, within the sight of shell-holes and scarecrows of men and boys upon the battlefield. Father, Father, Light of the World, Father." The voice began to break with emotion and ebbed and died upon the air. The assembled circle shuffled in their seats as the medium coughed again and cleared his throat. This youthful voice with a barely imperceptible terminating whisper had seemed to say "Father, Father, Light of the World, I love..." these words cutting out across the vocal chords like shame itself and then there was

White Souls that March in the Astral Light

no more, save for the deepest, guttural sigh and the familiar strike of a match and its intercourse with the wily gas jet's physical gush from underground pipes. A hand, *my* hand, slowly and lovingly turned up the jet, waiting for that familiar rasp of the metal pin against the valve. The light of the world was on again. Our dear Father's face was as ashen and as exhausted as that of the medium. Father looked about him as if affronted or ashamed by the words that he had heard. He stared about him, blinking his eyes and found in my face, the familiarity and comfort, albeit the comfort of a lying force, that would transport him safely hence.

Melboni remained prone with eyelids flickering in the final death-throes of his grim etheric pantomime. His throat was parched from the muslin, whereas my throat was parched from the specious excitement. I followed dear Father Bankman out into the scarcely more comforting surroundings of the hall and asked the maid to usher forth Timon, reproachful Timon with his codes of continuity and protocol and commitment. Dear Timon! He took Father's hand, a touching scene indeed and led him out to their carriage. The Father shot me a glance, a deeply cynical glance as the carriage departed, which I conjured again that evening on my own, mimicking the character of this glance in my corridor with burnished mirrors on either walls, allowing me a thousand, beloved and symmetrical faux Father-priests reflected back and back upon one another for my amusement and measured delight. I indulged in this act until even I became bored with its cynical perfection. I cared not for the Father but knew that this would not be the end, but perhaps the threshold to the end; the forest path clogged with the rarest and recondite ferns from which there is no return. I cared not, for in the Garden of Ennui, strange flowers do decay and bloom alike. I congratulated in my mind, the prone figure of Melboni that I had left there, upon the seeming skill and ingenuity of his spectral and youthful voice play. For one split-second, I considered that there had been "*something else*" about Father's face that I could not discern save for something approaching "intent". One split-second can last an eternity.

And thus the evening came to its end... and in its end is the beginning and in the clutching of hands is the new communion of souls. Amen.

Cinnabar's Gnosis

Holy men are human too and Father was no exception to this rule. I knew this for sure. His certain and contained security, comfort and insulation from the shell-shock of the new world with its old and new gangs and its vicious angularity of culture, after the years in which both sides worshipped the love of war, was no comfort to him. A man haunted by the footfalls of the past, albeit the recent past elicits his own protection and is not to be tricked or kicked about like autumn leaves or a gentle pet upon a cushion. Experience breeds experience. Such a man can be unpredictable but generally surmountable. I play with the sensibility of the Father, knowing what I know and having faith, a word I barely like to pronounce in my lying tongue, in the ingenuity of me and my kind and in the inquisition of the Holy Father. I almost hope for downfall now in the re-emergent world as it sets out upon its unbearable new path of Destiny. What is there to wish for now amidst the ruins? In my certainty, I appear and disappear like breath upon a glass.

I heard that Father did not go out for some days and his own flock were kept at bay by stories of his ague, his infirmity and delicacy of mien. "Oh Father, Father, Light of the World, I love..." I recited these words every day since with a deliciously warm joy that seemed to verge upon shame that swept through me like the finest drug, to the core, to the lie of my solar plexus. "Oh Father, Light of the World, reveal yourself to me."

Tonight, with these words dying upon my tongue, I laid my head upon my pillow and listened to the sound of the inquisitive wind blowing under the eaves of my roof and into my attic. My attic space was spotless and empty. I had found, upon taking possession of the property, a photograph of a gentleman, within a dusty frame; the last relic of the previous occupant. A chaotic man by all accounts, of no import. No import at all. His portrait had burned well in the grate upon my first evening. The snapping, dense fiery pine logs sparking and letting their offspring tender tongues of fire dance up to his face, causing it to appear to rot in marked and fiery progression. First, his eyes and then his whiskered chops, as if engulfed in fires of vengeful purity, far from the bespoke glare of sterile respectability that he had displayed in life. I rescued the charcoal from the remnants of the burnt and pitiful frame and these chunks now reside in my studio... for another day,

White Souls that March in the Astral Light

when the inspiration takes me to conjure an image upon a canvas; perhaps something opposite to “The Light of the World” in all its Pre-Raphaelite humanity and smugness. Sleep overtook me with the ease of a skilled lover and in my slumbers, I was at total peace and my head rested upon that of our dear Father Bankman, beneath the tree that I had dreamed about before with its birds with siren heads. I revelled in the softness of his hair and in the peace that passeth all understanding. In my dream, he spoke my name, my Christian name and in the distance I heard the sound of an ancient trumpet and my mind was imprinted with that which is mediaeval. Our souls were one, if indeed I had a soul. In his eyes, there was that look of utter bewitching reproach and that which I could not discern but recognised from when he had departed from Melboni’s house. I was already in love with the Sacred Hart for sure and his heraldic legacy of love was certain.

I awoke to silence and reproach and the bitter tracery of spirits or what I took to be spirits upon my tongue. Gold leaf stuck to my lower lip and stayed there but all day. Reproach is the lens for truth and thus in this reproach, I must once more encounter our dear Father. The dear Father is my drug. I stumble from day to day to meet him once again. In my Grovelockian lies and suffering, I paint myself and perhaps in the artist’s wash, the charcoal lines blur and smudge with tears from who knows where. I no longer know “*what where*” and the sky seems voluminous with purple and gold like vestments seen and then obscured by gradations of cloud and light and unknowingness.

And so to our Father ... for he has asked for me.

“And what pray, did you see, Professor, if I may be so bold?” our dear Father Emmanuel Bankman asked me once again, from the comfort of his armchair and with Timon by his side. His face was ironic and imposing with the colour firmly back in his cheeks. Like a child before his austere and distant parents in a room with high ceilings somewhere in North London, I replied....

“I saw nothing Father, save for the gutter dumb show of the fraudulent medium! Nothing at all. I heard nothing but the reedy-voiced trickery of a medium’s deceit. I smelled nothing, Father, save for the clogging saliva and bile of worthlessness and complicity.” In my seeking for shame, I sought the highest dispensation.

Cinnabar's Gnosis

“Dear Grovelock,” began the Father, “I absolve you from your sins and in the sight of God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Ghost, I pardon you as you now sit before me.” His face became a masterpiece of emotional reproach tinged with a burning decadent satisfaction and from out his mouth like the sound of Death’s new offspring herald, came that speciously familiar spectral utterance, its youthful, reedy intonation *unmistakable*... “Father, Father, say grace for us. I summon you to take our prayers, to share with us the benevolence and bounty of your spiritual presence. I beg you to give us comfort in our suffering as you once did before, within the sight of shell-holes and scarecrows of men and boys upon the battlefield. Father, Father, Light of the World, Father, I love...”

I, Grovelock, froze.

Our dear Father Emmanuel Bankman laughed and rose and with Timon, advanced towards me. The Father’s eyes were trafficked with visions, his voice was insistent and commanding as if before him were the unmistakable shapes of his beloved and lost flock moist in the heavenly dew of France’s fields. Timon, dear Timon, lit incense in the golden censer shaped like the sun in eclipse and pulled the heavy velvet drapes across the windows, turning daytime into night as if it wasn’t there, letting the room be bathed in the certain rosy benediction of the roaring grate.

“I forgive your specious lies, Grovelock, your culture of deceit, your professorial non-existence and the crying embers of your misanthropy supreme. I am your true Holy Ghost, your Sacred Hart, dear, dear Grovelock and so we shall spend forever and beyond in our post-war everlasting embrace of reparations and redemptions and the deepest love of man that precious memory can dredge from the blood-red fields of France. *We* are the lost generation, Grovelock, the blossomy beloved legion, unknown warrior-angels all in this phantom shadow-play of life... white souls that march in the astral light. We are virgins for Christ – the Light of the World. Will you let us in?”

The smile that engulfed Grovelock had about it the everlasting diadem and pall of history.

THE CYLINDER OF SHUNYAKASHA

Adam S. Cantwell

Behind the crackling sound of his own voice Nowak could make out the faint drone of his neighbor's chant, rising and falling around three cracked and nasal tones and punctuated by the echo of a jay's harsh call. Then the sound of his own muttered curse, the snap of a notebook shutting, and the smooth hiss of the Parlograph's stylus sliding across fresh, ungrooved wax. Nowak switched off the dictating machine. It was difficult enough to maintain his concentration with the birdsong and warm summer air pouring through his window; now the sound of his neighbor's maundering incessant chanting made further work impossible.

He was enough of a writer to know that his exasperation would not serve to push the overdue pages out to the typist any sooner. He was capable of only so much anxiety regarding his deadlines, and the admonishing letters from his editor had long since excited as much urgency on Nowak's part as they ever would. The piece on the writer Meyrink would certainly not make or break the journal, nor would its proceeds diminish appreciably the sea of debt in which Nowak perpetually swam.

He sighed and toyed with the device, sliding the playback mechanism along its smoothly-machined track. Initially the Parlograph had succeeded where the typewriter, now cobwebbed on a shelf, had failed, in speeding the flow of manuscript pages to his editor in Munich. Typing had somehow seemed to him an absurdity, made him feel like an idiot pianist pounding away at a single note. But mechanical sound was still a bit of a wonder and the dictating machine had, as Meyrink

Cinnabar's Gnosis

had predicted when he gave Nowak the device, strengthened Nowak's ability to extemporize and to write freely. Now someone else could be paid to turn his spoken words into the unlovely, greasy lines of hunched typescript characters which reminded Nowak of ranks of smudged but obedient soldiers – he need only feed the spinning clockwork of the Parlograph with the flow of his thoughts, as a stream powers a mill-wheel.

And at times when the flow was interrupted, Nowak found that he could usually play his own voice back and thus weave the spell of concentration anew. He returned the mechanism to the beginning of the cylinder and engaged the motor once more. His words issued from the horn of wood and brass, in abrupt cadences that captured the tangle that was Viennese literary life in 1914, or at least so Nowak hoped. The tiny audiences of the journal *Alecto* could be as fickle as the general public. In any case, in view of the small compensation on offer, his efforts would serve well enough indeed.

His consideration of matters of business aside, Nowak was having trouble picking up the thread of the narrative from listening to the simulacrum of his voice; he was doubly distracted, by the wafting sound of his neighbor's damned chant, and by the ghost of that chant which lingered behind his wax-inscribed words. The imperfect reproduction of the machine sometimes made sounds indistinct. Was that really a jay's call emanating from the smoothly polished horn, or merely the sound of a spring relaxing in the machine's works, the trace of a dust mote or flake of wax as it ground beneath the sharp steel stylus?

Once more the curse, the snap of the notebook, and the hiss of the wax. He switched off the machine and the stillness filled again with the music of the birds and, inevitably, with the noise of his neighbor's holy utterance.

Nowak required a distraction of his own making.



Nowak gently set the expensive machine on a small table which he had placed in the cool morning shade of the garden. He wiped waxy fingers

The Cylinder of Shunyaqasha

on his dressing gown and cranked the motor, gazing up into the boughs to gauge where the cloud of birdsong was thickest. A pair of small cherry trees hid what seemed two contending armies of finches, warring merrily with the tiny silver bursts of their voices. Through this dense weave of sound scrolled lines of lark-song which dipped demurely then lifted suddenly like impertinent inquiries, liquid arcs and jumps of melody that resolved periodically in subtly shifting patterns of unknown significance. He held the speaking-horn on its connecting hose upraised toward the trees in order to capture the subtle aerial vibrations. The hose in its sheath of dully shining fabric hung suspended like a subdued snake. He set the stylus in place and switched the motor on. The drum spun rapidly, the stylus casting up a fine mist of wax particles in the patched shade.

Nowak squinted up into the boughs, grateful that, for the moment, he could not make out the neighbor's chant over the pandemonium of birdsong. He supposed it was possible that the man was indulging some other aspect of his obscure practice at the moment, some ritual cleansing or worshipful posture. Nowak had come to expect a lengthy incantation lasting most of each morning and another in the evening. That this coincided with Nowak's own working hours was a cause of increasing consternation, which was counterbalanced only by his stern pride. Nowak was hardly at the point of displaying his pique to his recent neighbor, however, and did not relish the prospect of expressing annoyance, however justified, to such an inscrutably serene and unflappable personage as the man had proven to be in their limited intercourse. *I'd sooner move my dictating-machine into the kitchen than indebt myself to that fanatic*, he thought, though he doubted such a move would do much good – the houses on this street were closely spaced, and his neighbor's voice had a singular carrying quality to it.

The cylinder had reached its capacity after a few minutes. Nowak clicked the motor off, slid the playing mechanism back, and put the horn to his ear. He engaged the machine and heard the familiar hiss of the playing-stylus skating over virgin wax before it dropped into the tiny groove formed by the recording.

Though the dense cloud of tiny animal cries clamored around him still, the raspy voice of the machine returned very little sound of bird-

Cinnabar's Gnosis

song through the horn. He cupped it more tightly to his ear, leaned in toward the spinning cylinder, and closed his eyes as if to free up some power of perception. Only a vague hint of the birds' burbling and darting vocalizations rose to his ear through a rolling haze of noise. Listening in vain, he watched the cylinder and noticed how a slight variation in the surface, a dip in the wax coating which would have been invisible had the cylinder been at rest, became a repeating *thump* in his ears. Thus, he thought philosophically, did a disturbance in the ground of our consciousness, a perturbation in our own sensorium, distort in turn all that we saw, subtly twist the tidings of the outside world which our senses brought to us.

Clearly, no matter how loud the subject seemed, the speaking-horn could not be too close to it.

After a brief break for tea and toast, the morning found Nowak under the shade trees once more, placing a freshly-shaved cylinder between the Parlograph's spindles. He had a new plan. He had rested the speaking-horn on the table and, just at the horn's edge, placed a tiny pile of millet seed. He would entice the birds to come within range of the device, where he hoped they would be moved to perform, and leave a trace of their song for posterity. He crouched discreetly to one side, so as not to frighten the birds, and waited.

In the warm stillness and ebb and flow of birdsong Nowak only barely heard the monotonous muttering from over the garden wall, but was well aware of it nonetheless. He was fairly sure from what he had read that such sustained chanting was part of a trance-like state that these practitioners entered; as strange as it was to his ears, it was lulling in a way. He supposed if Meyrink were here he could identify and perhaps even interpret the meaning of the chant. Or, rather, he'd be next door, exchanging arcane wisdom with the man. Nowak rested his hand on the worn wood cabinet of the Parlograph, ready to toggle the switch. He had been moved and surprised by the generous gift. The machine had needed some repairs, and Meyrink had already replaced it with a newer model, but it was an almost extravagant gift coming from a man who was not wealthy by any means, though he was a well-known writer and editor. It had taken Nowak some time to realize that Meyrink, in addition to showing respect for a fellow author, might have felt some

The Cylinder of Shunyaḳasha

pity on a bedraggled young poet. What would Meyrink have made of the silly game Nowak was now playing with his old Parlograph?

At the time of their interview Nowak had been mostly concerned to know Meyrink's opinion of the new "Expressionist" movement in German writing, a movement of which Nowak himself, with the publication of his slim volume *The Tragic Gesture*, was now indisputably a part. Looking back, Nowak supposed his questions were delivered in a somewhat irritable tone. The journey to Meyrink's home in Starnberg had been long, and the first flush of success had worn off somewhat now that he realized that, despite favorable prospects of publishing in *Der Sturm* and *Der Ruf*, membership in the avant-garde carried no financial guarantees and that he would have to return to journalism in order to continue to write at all. Meyrink had politely steered the conversation away from the work of Nowak's friends Musil and Flesch-Brunningen and toward his new novel, which had been appearing serialized in *Die Weißen Blätter* to some acclaim. Nowak took notes and asked for details, though he was not sure the mystic and fantastical slant of *The Golem* would really be the sort of thing to appeal to the forward-looking readers of *Alecto*. As the meeting drew to a close, Nowak asked about the worn Parlograph – he had never seen one outside of an office.

"Oh yes, I could scarcely work without it... when I started writing, it was only because friends told me that the idle tales I told in the cafe were like gold that I let drip down the drains. That was certainly an exaggeration, but I've always been a storyteller and improviser at heart, and when these machines came along, I recognized the advantage immediately."

Meyrink had looked over the dutifully scribbling Nowak for a moment and then offered him the old Parlograph. Nowak politely demurred, but Meyrink persisted. "From one writer to another. Perhaps one day you can repay me somehow. If you've never tried to work out your ideas by speaking, I strongly recommend it." Meyrink had looked out over the deep blue of the Lake Starnberg with those penetrating eyes. "Writing, by which I mean words on the page, misses something essential... the ancient Hindus sensed this. Not only did they transmit their philosophical works and scriptures, sometimes thousands of stanzas, by spoken word and memory alone, down through hundreds

Cinnabar's Gnosis

or thousands of years, but their mystical doctrine states that it was a *sound* which was the creation of the universe, a vibration which brought being out of the state of nothingness – the void of limitless potential for which their word was '*shunyakasha*'. If we for a moment take this to be so, what power do we have now that we can send the stuff of Creation through the air to distant places, record it and store it? How else might it be manipulated?" He chuckled ruefully. "The same wise heads who set vast armies against one another in the great garrison that is Europe would have a say in the matter, eh, Nowak?"

Nowak had no answer; he had mumbled some inconclusive comments on the Balkan tensions, and before long the interview was over and Nowak was on the train back to Vienna, lugging the heavy machine in its case.

The piece was coming along, if slowly, and Nowak truly appreciated the gift of the dictating machine, but in the end he didn't subscribe to the older man's philosophy and could not share his enthusiasm for the supposed wisdom of the East. The chant droned endlessly over the garden wall and Nowak could find no point of access in the river of unfamiliar syllables by which he could even start to guess at its sense; the only distinguishing characteristic at all, to his ear, was the long, low, open note, tapering into a nasal buzz, which seemed to come at the beginning and end of each recitation, a kind of ceremonial throat-clearing or droning "*amen*". What text or scripture was it that formed the basis for this epic recitation? Was there a text at all, one of the memory-texts Meyrink had described, or was it a monumental improvisation on three notes? If a text, was it revealed truth, or the words of a sage or saint? If the words of a sage, what was the quality of truth in his words and the grain of his thoughts, the potency which sent their meaning and sense through the centuries? Was that quality something one could pour into one's lines like a precious elixir, or did it come to season there on the page like grapes turning into wine, and then to heady liquor? Would any of Nowak's own words ring down through time? What mechanism, exactly, or spell, could bring such a thing to pass?

A flutter and a skittering of seeds as a trim black and brown lark perched by the millet pile, trilled a silver note, and bent to feed. Nowak

The Cylinder of Shunyakasha

clicked the switch and the motor spun smoothly to life. Seed jumped from the pile as the bird picked its meal, then cocked his black eye and loosed a thrilling liquid phrase directly at the mouth of the machine. Like a tune, high and high its call jumped and ran, then sweetly rose to poise like a question.

Nowak's offering to the tiny troubadours had not been too generous, enough to attract a bird or two but not a whole mob. However, other birds had spotted the pile – a free lunch was apparently as rare a thing in Nowak's garden as it was anywhere else in Vienna. Another smaller bird, a finch perhaps, alighted with a flutter of wings, emitted a series of shrill peeps and snatched some millet for himself. The lark flapped angrily at the newcomer, who hopped away and set up a chattering remonstrance at his larger competitor, at a volume Nowak felt sure would be inscribed clearly on his cylinder. Whichever way the contest between artists went, Nowak would get what he wanted – perhaps there was hope for him yet in the business of the arts...

The paltry portion of seed was by now mostly consumed or scattered across the tabletop; some had fallen into the grass, where a smaller brown bird pecked and hunted without making a sound. The lark seemed to fix the glassy bead of his eye on some indeterminate upper point, perhaps the roof of Nowak's cottage or a passing cloud, and sang for the machine to hear him – twin notes that streaked down the octave like meteors, repeated, then executed a daring series of tumbles before resolving in an insouciant two-note shrug of a figure. Just then the machine came to the end of the cylinder, the motor halted with a *clunk* and the birds took wing toward the treetops.

Nowak, satisfied that the avian dictation had been taken, slid the stylus back to the right-most end of the cylinder so he could hear it again. He flicked the switch for the motor, but nothing happened. The mechanism should have been sufficiently cranked to run for several minutes more. He retrieved the detachable crank-arm from his study and emerged once again into the late July sunshine. He moved the crank in its slot and immediately felt and heard a small sharp *crack* from within the mechanism. He removed the crank carefully, not wanting to exacerbate any damage, and stifled the urge to curse aloud. As he sometimes did when no one was there to see him, Nowak

Cinnabar's Gnosis

demonstrated his frustration theatrically, with a supplicating gesture and rolling eyes cast heavenward.

It was a moment before he noticed that the spindle of the Parlograph had, in fact, begun to move. He moved to switch the device off, meaning to take it inside and forget his folly. He realized that the switch was still in the off position. The stylus thumped as it reached the limit of its travel – on the wrong end of the cylinder. The contraption was broken, it was spinning in reverse.

This day is well and truly wasted now, he thought, with a bluff cynicism only slightly tinged with relief. He scanned the margins of the tiny garden of his rented cottage, where he was watched only by the empty windows belonging to his mostly-absent neighbors, away at their shops or offices or on holiday. There was hope yet for the dictating-machine, in the hands of a repairman, he supposed. What further damage could he do as long as he did not force the mechanism? Nowak moved the play head to the left-most end of the cylinder and engaged it.

The lark's finale, the blithe matter-of-fact call, now played in reverse. It became a curious tangle of swelling inhalations that swerved and raveled up into silence; that this was no sound of nature was manifest, aside from the scratchy quality imparted by the imperfect reproduction of the device. The protesting chatter of the finch sounded superficially similar to its unreversed form, yet the individual chirps which made it up had an uncouth hiccup and wound up to abrupt choking stops.

As a child Nowak had amused himself with his ability to read words in mirror-image, shop signs reflected in windows, the spines of books seen in his mother's looking glass; but to hear reality unspooling in the exact wrong direction was a new and disorienting sensation. The idea of "sound in negative" had never occurred to him, though he was quite fascinated by the Parlograph and had gone so far as to examine the sound-grooves with a magnifying glass to see if he could identify words or sounds visually by their trail through the wax. He wondered if the inventors of the box had experimented with this "counter-sound". Had Edison in his workshop inverted his nursery rhymes? Surely if there had been a practical or commercial application for the phenomenon, Edison would have identified it. But of what use could it be

The Cylinder of Shunyaḱasha

to reverse speech? Reading mirror-letters was merely a process of decoding; to gain the ability to understand reversed speech would seem to require submersion in an inhospitable world where effects begat their causes and speakers sucked up and ate their words, ingesting them into a void of limitless potentiality from which they could never again be expressed.

The brief duration of his aural excursion back through time ended with a hiss, a click and a return to quiet in the garden. Nowak brushed the remaining seed from the table's edge. He thought he might try the reversing trick with his own voice, back in the study, before he returned to work.

The hush that had fallen over the garden registered gradually on his consciousness as he was carefully lifting the machine from the table. He set it down again and peered up into the trees.

The agreeable avian reverberation customary on such a fine day had ceased almost entirely. He caught only a faint rustling and shifting, which, on inspection, came not from the movement of the branches but from a sober crowd of now-silent birds. He watched and listened – a slightest rattle of leaves, the faint barking of a dog in another street, the indistinct drone from over the wall, and a soft flutter of wings; not the sound, he thought, of a bird taking flight, for no bird did, but of one puffing its feathers against the coming of rougher weather. Had the grotesque sound from the malfunctioning Parlograph somehow subdued the birds into silence? But how was that possible? It was only a parlor trick, after all. It was impossible to travel against the imperative of time's arrow. The monstrous suggestion of the possibility of such travel offered by the machine's fluke was just that – a suggestion.

He moved the stylus to the wrong end of the cylinder and set it in reverse motion again. The sinister wrongness of the anti-sound was only slightly diminished by familiarity. It twisted and shuddered up into the air, its insistent contrariness now suggesting to Nowak the new music of Schoenberg and his pupils, music which sought to provoke with its stark alien melodies and jarring, unbalanced rhythms. He and Flesch-Brunningen and his other friends were willing enough to pick out and praise the strands of longing and romance in the garish tangle of a score by Berg, but Nowak did not greatly love the unnerving slow

Cinnabar's Gnosis

malice of Webern, the subdued and cryptic control which seemed to hide violence.

Again the bird's notes gobbled up into nothingness, again the hiss and click as the stylus' track came to an end. A puff of breeze in the higher branches, a whisper of disturbed leaves and a soft *thump*, as the body of a tiny brown finch dropped to the lawn, stone dead.

There was no significance which Nowak could satisfactorily attach to this occurrence. He stared at the small brown body. He supposed such a sudden demise was common enough, when he was not there to witness. He made to get his furniture and equipment inside, now that he'd wasted a little time. Perhaps he could work now, provided the machine would function properly. He supposed he could write long-hand or even type, under the circumstances.

In his study the light, reflecting from polished drawer pulls and worn gilt picture frames, had mellowed. Outside a breeze had picked up and a few lofty clouds sailed by.

The sound of chanting came softly through the open window.



Nowak finished his tea and cleared the remains of his light supper. The afternoon's labors had gone better than expected and he was ready to continue. He thought he could make up for time lost on the morning's distractions and perhaps even find time to work on his journal or catch up on correspondence. Nowak was not troubled by his neighbor's voice during the afternoon, the peace and quiet aiding his efforts immensely.

He'd found that with a jiggle of the switch, the Parlograph ran in the right direction. Though Nowak knew that his neighbor was due once again to set up the nightly racket, he was loath to lose the momentum he'd built, so he quickly located his place in his notebook and settled down to begin. Let it come, he thought; he would concentrate with effort if necessary, and if he could not, what kind of writer was he?

Nowak scanned the page, composed his thoughts, and stood as if to deliver an address, the speaking-cone in his hand. He set a new cylinder running and cleared his throat.

The Cylinder of Shunyaḳasha

The chanting began again, louder than before. Nowak stammered a few lines and scanned his notes, fruitlessly – had the scoundrel actually moved to a room that was closer to Nowak’s study? One was entitled to carry on one’s peaceful pursuits, however alien and strange, in one’s home, but this impingement was too much for Nowak, especially at an increased volume. He could more clearly make out the nonsensical syllables spilling endlessly over one another, the odd stresses and queasily singsong diction. He threw up his hands and hissed an imprecation.

The neighbor’s murmurings in praise of infinity or serenity, if that was what they were, were producing quite the opposite in Nowak’s study. As they went on he could only think of the very real difficulties consequent on his continued inability to work. It was already the last day of July, the summer was nearly gone. Until the Meyrink piece was finished, could he even think of working on his submission to *Der Weißen Blätter*? Hang that idiot’s religious nonsense! The man next door wasn’t even an Indian himself, where did he get off with this preposterous appropriation, this ostentation?

Nowak, suddenly furious, thrust the speaking-cone through the open window into the swiftly falling night and began recording. The silly monk next door had come to the portion of his vocal ritual consisting of the humming drone on a single long note. The low open tone drew out into a nasal buzz as in the syllable “*umm*” or “*unn*”. Nowak thought he could detect a particular tone of devotion in the man’s voice as it came to rest on this tone, or perhaps it simply stood out in static counterpoint to the swarming nonsense of the rest of the chant, into which the fanatic now launched in earnest. Nowak felt only slightly ridiculous there, standing barely balanced with the apparatus extended to capture the hated sound. After a few moments the cylinder reached its capacity.

Perhaps, he thought maliciously, the process of inversion would magically render the neighbor’s foreign gibberish into something that made sense, a talk on Goethe, perhaps a lecture on wireless transmission or ballistics.

The image of the still brown body of the bird was not foremost in Nowak’s mind as he jiggled the Parlograph’s motor switch to set it in reverse motion; *let this jumbled racket creep into his ears, ruin his spiritual*

Cinnabar's Gnosis

or narcissistic labors, Nowak thought. His and Meyrink's beloved Hindu philosophy is nothing but smoke. The self is not continuous with the world, with Creation. Our perceptions and selves are arbitrary, fragmented... like Europe itself, we are all continuously tearing ourselves and each other apart and this is the truth we must be brave enough to face.

Nowak aimed the cone out of the open window and the transformed sound of the chant went out into the cool air. At first the chanting did not sound much different to Nowak than it did in the original, and it held no more meaning than the bird calls. But as he listened, the nauseous gabbling, the sobbing of inhaled gutturals, the sputtering of swallowed fricatives, caused him to call into question the very convention of assigning meaning to arbitrary mouth-noises – he was reminded of when, as a child, he would repeat a word to himself over and over again, until it lost its sense and became a new and strange thing in the world, *yellow, yellow, yellow, yellow...* By what sinister magic did the syllables of common speech acquire more meaning than the sighs of a child, the grumbling of an empty stomach, the wind in the dry grass and the bare boughs?

The Parlograph's stylus was approaching the end of the pale wax cylinder, and the horn vibrated with the nasal buzz of a drawn-out *m* sound which slowly opened out into a sustained *o*. The machine seemed to be running more slowly now; perhaps the power of the last cranking was running out. The long mystic syllable issued from the horn a second time, lower now in pitch, dipping and quavering like a slowly guttering flame or an otherworldly death-rattle. For a moment the sound from the machine held him in thrall. Through the window, the neighbor's actual voice began to intone the amen – then cut short with a crash.

Nowak's heart froze. He reached to silence the machine then strained his ears toward the shadowy house next door. A pale orange glow came from an open window.

After a long moment he heard a woman's voice, then the man's. His ragged breath evened and his whitened knuckles filled with blood again as he released his grip on the sill. Nowak stood for a moment more, listening with obscure relief to the voices of the neighbor and his wife in low conversation.

The Cylinder of Shunyaḳasha

Nowak sat staring at the Parlograph. Whatever ugliness or waste Nowak had created with the sounds from his broken machine surely affected him only, it was foolish to feel otherwise. After a brandy or two he would retire; he would bury the bird in the morning and call a man in to repair the Parlograph.

Nowak removed the cylinder from the spindles and set it in the shaving device. He adjusted the scraper and turned the wheel. The evidence of the air's vibration was obliterated and replaced with a smooth white expanse of wax. Once again the medium was innocent of speech and of sound, swept clean of any trace of intention to worship, to create, or to destroy.

Tomorrow, Nowak thought, he could start over again.



The neighbor knelt on a patterned Indian rug, now scarred with molten wax, holding his weeping wife. He assured her he hadn't been harmed by the spilled wax, that there was no danger of fire, and continued to speak low, comforting words in her ear. The tears were no longer streaming down her face as they had been when she'd burst into his little studio and upset the candles, just as he was finishing his chant, chanting *aum*, the holy syllable that was Creation itself.

“Georg, it was terrible, the way the men in Stephansplatz cheered and yelled when they heard that Germany had finally declared war against Russia. God, will there be time to see Michael before he's deployed? He said in his letters how Europe is a powder keg, that France and Britain are sure to join soon... Oh Georg, all those awful little men, some of them already drinking, crowded all around the square... Oh, our Michael...”

THE CHYMICAL WEDDING OF DES ESSEINTES

Brendan Connell

Holiday was not all it was made out to be and he was no longer a young man and it was difficult for him to find pleasure in tramping about the streets of some foreign city with his nerves grated on at every turn.

Des Esseintes sat wearily in the café, gazing out at the pedestrians as they passed, marvelling at how ugly they were: women like giant lizards strutting about in silk, men with stovepipes balanced on their meagre craniums, children who looked like over-sized rodents and went by nibbling on apples, their eyes darting around suspiciously.

But then, he reasoned, he was no beauty himself, his once handsome face lined with wrinkles, his head bald, his body thin and covered with loose flesh.

He sipped at his glass of slivovitz, knowing very well he was beyond the time when such things could possibly stimulate his mind.

He wished he had been back in Paris, not because he liked the place, but at least there he could exist without effort. Here on the other hand it was all wrong. His digestion had been violently upset for the past three days due to the concoctions of cabbage and old meat he was served up nightly, which he was forced to wash down with some acid beverage the hotel keeper tried to pass off as wine. He had looked over the architecture and tried to keep from yawning, but in the end, the inertia of the man who has seen too much overcame him.

“French?”

The Chymical Wedding of Des Esseintes

Des Esseintes looked over at his questioner, who sat at a table next to him: a small individual with a neat brown beard and large eyes that stared at him from behind spectacles.

“Yes, I suppose so,” he said in a tone that did not invite further conversation.

“And do you like our city?” the other persisted.

The Frenchman smiled bitterly. “Like would be a strong word.”

“But you have come here.”

“Arbitrarily.”

“Nothing is arbitrary. The world is guided by karmic principles. Human beings ebb and flow according to the laws of gravitation.”

Des Esseintes was silent. He couldn't very well disagree with that. He had exhausted all of life's pleasures many years earlier, but due to some force he himself could not explain still found himself lingering about, waiting without interest for something, though he knew not what.

The man introduced himself. “My name is Harro. Harro Pernath.”

Des Esseintes murmured his own name and watched as a waitress deposited a glass of slivovitz in front of the other man, who winked, pulled out a little flask and poured a few thimblefuls of its contents into his drink.

“Ether, sweet vitriol, or as some call it, the astral light, which mixed with spirit becomes earth. Capricorn and Taurus meet Mercury. The quintessence of matter.”

The man began to interest Des Esseintes, who took a swallow of his own drink and observed the other's eyes, which flashed with an odd intelligence. The fellow reminded him vaguely of a Japanese curio he had once had at his house in Fontenay.

“So, you have seen the sights of our city?”

“I suppose so. I have seen what is around me. But...”

“But?”

“Nothing. I have not been caught much by the motif.”

Pernath looked at him with what seemed to be genuine pity.

“If you wish to be entertained...” he suggested.

“I don't.”

“When you need food, you make a calf.”

Cinnabar's Gnosis

"And you know how to make a calf?"

"Well... But, have you ever been to a Prague wedding?"

"No."

"A dear friend of mine..."

"They would not mind having a stranger among them?"

"If you are with me, you are no stranger. You will be welcomed, and no doubt impressed, because not everyone can see..."

Des Esseintes, though not terribly tempted by the offer, acquiesced, as much out of a sense of boredom as anything else. Anything would be better than going back to his hotel and placing himself in the hands of its cook.

He paid for the drinks; they rose and left the café.

Night had fallen, and a reddish moon had risen up in the sky.

"There are four ways to get there," Pernath said. "The first is short, but unpleasant. The second is quite nice, but takes a long time. The third is really beautiful to go by, but I am not sure you would appreciate it."

There was silence.

"And the fourth?" Des Esseintes asked, without a great deal of curiosity.

"No, better leave the fourth alone," Pernath said hastily.

"Well, you decide."

"I'll take you by the first. It is a bit rough, but we'll get there more quickly."

He pulled the flask of ether out of his pocket and took a swig.

"Go on," he said, handing it to Des Esseintes.

"And why not," the latter murmured, taking the flask and lifting it cautiously to his lips. He felt the beverage slip down his throat, move about in his stomach like a live frog.

They made their way into the Josefov. Des Esseintes had been under the impression that a great portion of the ghetto had been destroyed, but the area they went through seemed vast and there was no evidence whatsoever of rehabilitation.

He was being guided through narrow lanes. Disagreeable looking prostitutes hung their heads out of the windows of sooty dwellings and offered their services in strange tongues but unmistakable terms.

The Chymical Wedding of Des Esseintes

Children with intelligent faces walked by and winked and showed mouths of moon-coloured teeth. A man with a beard dripping down to the ground sat at his doorstep constructing human figurines out of clay by the light of six candles. On the doorway behind him, beneath a mezuzot, was a small sign which read:

Here Lives Zambrio, Magician

Des Esseintes looked at his guide questioningly.

“No,” Pernath said. “You don’t want to be caught up with him.”

A dog with a long, thin muzzle walked by and Pernath weaved his arm through that of Des Esseintes and led him on.

They turned down a remarkably narrow alley, which led up a series of steps, which were moist and very slippery. The alley dead-ended abruptly in a high wall in which rested a small door.

Harro Pernath opened the door and the two men stepped into a tavern in which the shapes of men could be discerned amidst great clouds of tobacco smoke.

“This is a short-cut.”

They moved through the low tables, around which men were hunched, drinking glasses of brandy, slivovitz and beer; smoking pipes and long cigars. Then along the counter, behind which were ranged beer engines, huge bottles of liquor with Hebrew written on the labels and a table on which sat baskets of bread and three or five cooked cow tongues.

A huge man with broad shoulders and a bristling black moustache came and clapped Pernath on the back, crying out in a language Des Esseintes assumed to be Yiddish.

“This is my cousin Lipotin,” Pernath said shyly. “He insists on treating us to a drink.”

Before Des Esseintes had time to say anything, a huge tankard of beer was thrust into his hands.

“Drink!” the man said in a guttural tone.

The Frenchman lifted the pecan-brown liquid to his lips and swallowed down a draught, which tasted vaguely of mushrooms, of old earth – of something dug up from the ground. He looked around him, fascinated to some degree by the people he saw. Men who existed be-

Cinnabar's Gnosis

hind moustaches the size of brooms and in whose eyes he could see reflections of far off lands. A white haired gentleman who propped up an enormous black hat with his head. A very intelligent looking woman who sat in a corner, flanked by two stout fellows fondling long knives.

Des Esseintes swallowed down his beer and gave his guide an enquiring look.

"I have to buy a round now," Harro said. "Otherwise it would be impolite."

Three more tankards of beer made their way into their hands. Lipotin was growing merry, reciting some story in Yiddish, chuckling, showing formidable rows of bay-coloured teeth and continuously taking Des Esseintes by the shoulder and shaking him affectionately.

"He says you remind him of an old girlfriend of his," Pernath said.

"Flattered. But shouldn't we..."

"Yes, yes, we can't be late for the wedding. You treat us to a last round and then we'll be on our way."

Des Esseintes was beginning to feel dizzy. But, smiling grimly, he held up three fingers to the barman.

When finally they stepped out the back door, he trod on the tail of some unknown animal which screeched and then bolted off into the darkness.

The two men wandered down narrow lanes, with unsteady steps, until they found themselves in a claustrophobic square with a well in the middle.

Above them were windows, the yellow-painted shutters of which were all closed.

Pernath called up, and the shutters to one of the windows was flung open and a knotted rope let down.

"Up we go," he said, grabbing hold of the rope and, with great ability, climbing to the top and through the window.

"Come, come."

Des Esseintes frowned. He did not feel comfortable engaging in such acrobatics, but in the end did struggle up the rope and through the window.

The room he found himself in was quite large, the walls hung with elaborate tapestries depicting green lions, crescent moons, heavenly

The Chymical Wedding of Des Esseintes

birds and golden crowns. A number of large canvasses hung on the walls: one of Yehudah ben Bezalel Levai, another of Ramban.

A very small, very old man who wore an odd-shaped hat the colour of spring onion greeted him.

“We have been expecting you, my child,” he said, taking Des Esseintes by the hand and giving him a look of great kindness.

“I have come for the wedding,” the other said with some embarrassment.

“Why, of course you have!”

“Let him see the bride,” Pernath commented.

“Yes, yes! Let’s take him to Vyoma.”

The old man gently pulled Des Esseintes by the arm into an adjoining room where a young woman sat on a satin divan staring into space.

She was small and pale. Des Esseintes had a hard time determining whether her face was beautiful or the very opposite. She had a blood-red ribbon wrapped around her throat with the words TEM. NA. F. written on it in purple.

“Maiden’s milk,” Harro Pernath said slyly and then chuckled, poking his guest in the ribs with his elbow.

The Frenchman was just beginning to mumble some awkward words of admiration when a very fat woman with large ears carrying a pink feather duster came bustling into the chamber shouting.

“Out! Out! You men are always too eager. Better to first purify your hearts!”

She thrust the feather duster at them and the men retreated from the room.

“In time, in time,” the old man murmured as he led the others into a small closet and then up a long ladder into a room which was crowded with clocks, a piano, a brass elephant and bric-a-brac. In the middle of the room was a table, covered with food. In one corner, in a large cage which sat atop a marble pedestal, was a curious bird, with yellow feathers and a long neck. A terrarium filled with African mice sat on a shelf.

Crowding the middle of the room was a large oak table on which were piled formidable cheeses and enormous pies; plates of smoked

Cinnabar's Gnosis

beef and pickled fish; bottles of Szamorodni wine and brightly tinted liqueurs.

Des Esseintes lit a cigarette and sat down.

A group of musicians burst into the room and, after helping themselves freely to wine, began playing at their instruments violently. Harro jumped over to the piano and started to pound at its keys. A thinnish man with a moustache scraped away vigorously at a violin while another fellow, whose sleepy eyes relaxed behind a pair of spectacles, hammered on a cimbalom. A brooding looking man in his thirties blew on a clarinet.

Des Esseintes tried to follow the rhythm, which reminded him vaguely of certain passages of Christoph Demantius, but in the end gave up and turned his attention to the table.

A sudden hunger had come over him. He cut himself a huge slice of cheese. There was a bowl of hard-boiled eggs and, peeling the shell off one, he dashed a bit of salt on it and shoved it in his mouth. Then he cut himself a piece of rhubarb pie.

The violinist looked at him and shouted, "Feed the bird."

Everyone took up the theme and all began shouting uproariously for him to feed the bird.

Des Esseintes, tearing a piece off a loaf of bread, took it to the cage and let the bird peck it out of his hand, at which everyone clapped and screamed in delight while the bird began to coo and run around its cage in excitement.

The violinist introduced himself.

"My name is Gustav."

"Yes?"

There was a strange light in the eyes of the musician.

"Do not be so sure."

Des Esseintes was baffled.

"He is talking about the transformation," the clarinet player said in a bored tone. "Complete non-discrimination. It's like last night. I dreamed of a man with huge antlers playing the guitar."

"And how did he play?" asked Gustav.

"Better than you, only I couldn't hear."

"Then how do you know?"

The Chymical Wedding of Des Esseintes

“The same way I know that the bird is happy.”

“Don’t talk nonsense Alfred,” the cimbalom player said. “The bird might be the body, but it’s not the blood. The height of feeling leads to the path of God. No question that there is beauty in ugly pictures, but that doesn’t mean our French guest here should have to endure the worst. Let him have a glass of wine and be on his way.”

“He’s here for the wedding,” Pernath said.

“We all are!” cried Gustav. “Max is just trying to annoy us. He doesn’t like to celebrate. He’s waiting to return to the promised land.”

“Ah, you occultists...”

“Hush, hush!” the old man interposed and then, approaching Des Esseintes, kissed him on both cheeks.

“She’s ready now.”

“Ready?” the Frenchman asked in astonishment.

“Don’t be shy my child. She likes you very much.”

“Make sure to kiss her on the lips,” Pernath whispered in his ear.

Before he knew it, he was mounting an elegant spiral staircase of brass work.

The room he made his way into was totally round with an imposing bed stationed in its centre. She was lying there, with a blank expression on her face. He moved closer, and opened his eyes wide with surprise.

“Great God, she’s – !” he said to himself.

Yes, she was there, a man past his prime, with a balding head, face lined with wrinkles, body thin and covered with loose flesh.

He stood for a moment in indecision as the fellow looked up at him. Reasoning that at least he could not accuse himself of mediocrity, he leaned over and placed his lips to his, fed on his own substance. The figure on the bed, some strange, perverted *mirror-image* of himself, shrugged its shoulders.

A shiver coursed over Des Esseintes’ body and he was considering what course to take when the door to the apartment was flung open and everyone entered in a storm. The musicians were banging on pots and swinging their arms in the air. Harro Pernath carried the caged bird on his head and the old man was dexterously juggling the hard-boiled eggs. The African mice were mounted on Gustav’s shoulders.

Everyone sang in unison:

Cinnabar's Gnosis

*Now likewise
He brings joy
To the nuptial ceremony
Of D.E.
All is gladness
That he is equal
So the betrothed
Will multiply.*

Des Esseintes' body broke out in a wintry sweat. He began to bite his nails, while the figure on the bed gnawed at his.

"Let me take your jacket," the woman with the large ears said.

"No, no," Des Esseintes murmured as he backed towards the door.

He turned and ran out of the room, down stairways and ladders and then stumbling down some dark steps and through a groaning door.

He found himself outside. The night was chilly, and he pulled his coat around himself. Looking down, he noticed a dirty-looking girl tugging at his sleeve, putting an empty hand forward. He threw some money at her and moved off, towards his hotel, to pack his trunks and portmanteaux as quickly as possible.

The pleasures of foreign cities certainly were exaggerated, he noted as he hurried on with the elastic steps of a much younger man.

THE WORLD ENTIRE

Ron Weighell

Yes, that is the first Latin book published by Aldus Manutius, Bembo's dialogue on the ascent of a volcano, of all subjects. I treasure all the works of Aldus, of course, but Renaissance works containing early examples of Hebrew fonts, and Hebrew mystical subjects in general are a particular passion. This lovely old chancery quarto printed in Venice in 1485 for example: the *De Nativitatibus* of Abraham Ben Ezra. And here is my most treasured possession, a 13th century copy of a text attributed to Eleazar of Worms, revealing the method, by letter magic and ecstatic states, of attaining a certain great work. These two volumes are the *Cabbalah Denudata* of Knorr von Rosenrath, and this section contains what I believe to be a complete collection of reliable printed sources on Merkavah and Hekhalot mysticism. Over here is a copy of the oldest form of the *Sepher ha Yetzirah* of Rabbi Akiba, and beside it the first translation into English by Isidor Kalisch in 1877. Note the inclusion of both Hebrew and English texts.

Some of my other treasures are over here. This finely bound *Zohar*, first written down by Rabbi Simeon ben Jochai, in the edition of Moses de Leon: and a manuscript copy in an 18th century hand of *The Book of the Cabalistic Art* by Dr John Pistor. Reuchlin's *De Arte Cabalistica* and the *Paradis Rimmonim* of Cordovero were real finds.

I can tell what you are thinking. That this is an unlikely passion for a lapsed – very lapsed – Catholic from Yorkshire, but there is a particular reason for my interest in these subjects, though you may find it even more unlikely. The story does not show me up in an altogether sympathetic light, but I think you will be fascinated.

Cinnabar's Gnosis

If I were to begin by naming the street in which I lived as a child, and in which the events occurred, you might suppose me the product of a privileged background. You have to be pretty wealthy to live there today, and mention of the address usually prompts raised eyebrows and an appreciative whistle.

The irony of this is that the very characteristics that make it so desirable now – the steeply winding nature of the street; the eccentric architectural features reminiscent of certain caprices of Sime or Rex Whistler; the rambling, distorted outlines and archaic plasterwork; the many floors of oddly-shaped rooms and winding stairs and mismatched, wildly pitched rooftops – all these once made it the least desirable, and therefore the cheapest, area in which to live.

No one wanted “old fashioned” things then. The junk shops and dustbins were overflowing with discarded treasures, leaving the houses free for the incoming tide of ugly, cold and soulless furnishings that were the latest fashion.

There was one exception to this trend. A few doors away from the house rented by my parents stood a property called Lamp House, which was even narrower, more tightly jammed between its neighbours, taller and more lopsided than the rest. Its paintwork was flaking, its timbers cracked and its roofline jagged to such a degree that it made the surrounding houses appear quite normal by comparison. Its occupant, a little old Jewish gentleman, looked more derelict and in danger of imminent collapse than the house.

His name was Mr Shoerats, and on the rare occasions when he left the house to shuffle along distractedly with his black overcoat and long white beard flowing in the wind, you can be sure that there was always a crowd of local children following him with the staggeringly original and inventive chant of “Your shoes are full of rats”.

Stories circulated about him. He was secretive and had visits from solemn, black-clad gentlemen like himself. Nothing in the house had been removed or added to in living memory, so of course it was concluded that he must be very rich, and live like a miser amid his accumulated wealth. There was, I now see, something shameful about these green shoots of prejudice springing up so soon after a War intended to destroy them forever; but I think in the main little

The World Entire

harm was intended. The cause was lack of thought rather than hatred.

There was one exception to this. The Gunter family were unpleasant people, and their son Thomas perhaps the worst of them, a boy given to aping his parent's hatred of humanity in general and Jews in particular. He was the first child I ever knew who seemed motivated exclusively by malice and a general desire to do harm. He enjoyed hurting other children and small animals, destroying objects and what he called "posting" all kinds of unmentionable, and occasionally incendiary, things through people's letter boxes. In the years I had known him, I had never seen him do one act that was not, in intention if not effect, destructive. In those days this was exceptional.

I, on the other hand, was on the whole a decent enough child, the product of a kindly upbringing. Alienated and scared by the corporal punishment and oppressive teaching methods of the time, I was no scholar, but was, rather, a quiet, bookish boy, happy enough if left to read and draw. Why I became a confederate of Gunter I don't really know. The local atmosphere of lazy prejudice had penetrated my mind just enough to give me nightmares in which Mr Shoerats swept through the narrow, precipitous midnight streets of my dreams on a seething tide of rats. But that aside, I exhibited none of Thomas's unpleasant characteristics. But many of us, I think, go through a period in childhood when we indulge the less acceptable side of our nature. So I found myself hanging around with his gang, participating on the periphery of some vaguely destructive and wholly useless activities.

One Autumn afternoon, when he had run out of things to "post" into people's homes, Thomas decided that we should climb onto the roof of my house by a secret way that I had recently discovered. The roof had become something of a refuge for me, and I had regretted from the first having mentioned it to anyone else, but there was no way out that would avoid confrontation, or even a pounding, so I agreed.

Actually I was quite proud of the dangerous route involved, and the air of recklessness had done my standing in the gang no harm. It involved climbing onto the roof of a warehouse in the street that backed onto mine, crossing its flimsy roof on a wooden walkway, and teetering along a high, crumbling brick wall that edged our back yard, to the

Cinnabar's Gnosis

ridge of an outbuilding roof, from which the crazy tangle of grey slates that formed the roof scape could be reached.

By chance, only one other boy was present that afternoon, a weedy, pathetic hanger-on called Peter Hartley, which I hoped would mean less damage than on previous occasions. A whole crowd of boys on a roof could be pretty destructive, and there had been complaints about mysterious leaks on the top floor ceilings. Thomas could be bad enough on his own. I was happy to lie on the sloping roof and look at the sky, or spy out the distant, ruin-crowned headland that jutted into the sea, but he was only happy if he was smashing slates or throwing stones at the birds. I was relieved when he soon tired of these pursuits and came up with the idea of seeing how far we could get over the rooftops. Anything that did not involve kicking holes in our slates seemed good to me, so I agreed. Peter would have dived off the roof if Thomas had suggested it.

We had not scrambled far, however, before we came to a roof with a fantastically elaborate dormer window of the kind sometimes called *lucarne*. It was encrusted with caryatids and amorini, and topped with a richly carved crocket and finial. Nothing better exemplified the wonderful profligacy of design in those houses, for, on a larger scale, that window might have graced a palazzo in Venice, yet here it was, full of detail completely invisible from anywhere but the spot on which we stood. The glass had been backed by wooden boards, fixed from the inside and covered with what even we recognised as Hebrew lettering. Pieces of packing cases, I surmised, with destinations on them.

"This must be the Yid's house," Thomas cried, and at once set about trying to force the window. When it defied his efforts, I expected him to turn his destructive attentions to the beautiful stonework, but he seemed determined to get into the old man's house.

By now the afternoon sun was starting to fade, and it was growing colder by the minute. The distant ruin on the headland was half lost in rising mist. All I really wanted to do was go home, but it was not the place to start an argument with a bigger, more aggressive boy, so I followed them down a maze of gullies and chimney stacks to a place where it was possible to shin down a drainpipe.

The yard had about it a strangely industrial look, with massive paving slabs and a huge drain set deep into them. There was even a

The World Entire

narrow passage giving direct access to the street, and a big brick out-building joined to the house that could have served equally well as a Cooper's workshop or a Smithy's forge. At the far end of the yard, where it backed onto the warehouses, someone had attempted to create a garden with a few half-dead rose bushes. More recently a large hole had been dug in the claggy ground with a spade that was still stuck upright nearby.

"He's burying someone," Thomas decided.

"Didn't your dad reckon they kill little kids?" Peter offered. Thomas was unimpressed.

"Hole's too big for a kid, you clod. This is for a grown up. And it's not a Yid he's burying. They get buried standing up."

I recognised this as a calumny also circulated about "Roman Candles" as Catholics were called, but I didn't bother saying so.

Back at the paved area by the drain, we found a flight of stone steps that gave access to the basement. The door was held closed only by a crude latch. In a second we were inside.

I was holding my breath for signs of occupancy, but everything was quiet. We were in a big kitchen with heaps of crockery and pans in the sink. There was a clothes rack, suspended from the ceiling, festooned with dusty washing. The whole place smelt of grease and cats, and there was no sign that anyone had been there for a long time.

A single flight of stairs led to the entrance hall, long and narrow, with many crates full of empty wine bottles and a big wardrobe packed with black overcoats and suits. A room off the hall was large, and given over almost entirely to books. They filled the walls, stood in piles on the floor and spilled over a desk covered with papers of foolscap size. I could tell at once that they bore the words of a scholar, because they were written in so many different languages.

On the desk was a very odd pair of spectacles, big and heavy, with thick lenses. I put them on to make the others laugh, and found that, although my eyesight was good, the thick lenses didn't make everything blurred, but much clearer and more vibrant. When I looked at the writing on the papers – which I now know to have been Latin, Greek, Cuneiform and Demotic Egyptian, something very odd happened. Although I could not understand a word, even the more abstruse

Cinnabar's Gnosis

English ones, I began to have overwhelming sensations of touch and taste and sound. My nose was assailed by powerful scents, some sickly sweet, others bitter. As my eyes swept the pages, it felt as though I was making contact with a succession of rough or smooth or jagged surfaces. Strangely, it was the rough sensations that were least unpleasant. The smooth ones were actually nauseating. And in my ears was a faint Babel of voices whose tone and nature changed even as my eyes moved. I threw off the glasses, and the sensations stopped at once.

I would not have known how to begin explaining that, so I said nothing.

There was an old Grand Piano in the room, with keys which were yellowed and cracked with age, and dusty with lack of use. The keys were not like those on the old upright at school. Each one had a symbol or letter carved into it in various colours.

"Why's he written on his piano?" Peter muttered.

"Perhaps that's how Jewish people learn to play," I answered. This seemed reasonable to me, but it got blank looks.

There were many photographs in the room, in albums and frames, which meant nothing to me then. I know them now for pictures taken in the ghettos of Europe; families smiling and squinting their eyes against the glare of a perfect sun, still happily unaware of the coming darkness.

There was, too, a seven branched candlestick of brass, its candles burnt out, and propped against it was a card with a piece of paper pinned to it. There was a drawing on it of a naked man stretching out two pairs of arms and legs to the edge of a surrounding circle. I recognise it now, of course, but then it just looked very old, and finely drawn. It was just propped up there, like a postcard from a friend, and the old man had written on it, the way you just add something, without thought, to an old shopping list.

And those books: how could we have begun to understand what we were looking at. It was as if three grimy, ignorant children had wandered into the lost library of Alexandria. We, who had never seen a book worthy of the name, confronted with what might well have been a copy of every holy text and philosophical treatise in existence. I remember, too, scrolls and illuminated manuscripts, and dozens of

The World Entire

those curious Egyptian figures of clay called Ushabti. A few of the books were open, and one had an emblem of a dolphin coiling round an anchor, with some words I now know to be *Festina Lente*.

Compared with the school books we had seen, the volumes in that room were like artefacts from another Planet. Bigger, heavier and thicker than anything we had ever known as a book, bound in all sorts of unfamiliar materials, with titles that made no sense to us, I can now only guess at the riches that lay before us.

In the very centre of the room stood a huge lectern, like the one in my local church, but this one was clamped to the floor by the great claw feet of a figure part human, part reptile, who strained, his face distorted into a mask of agony, to support, with outstretched wings, or fins, the biggest book that I have ever seen. It lay open, wider than my arms could have spanned, to me a giant's book, and on the open pages were wonders.

You didn't need to be a scholar or a bibliophile in the making to be thrilled by the contents of that book. Even the dim Peter and the moronic Thomas were entranced, because all children are intrigued by the horrible, and here were genuine nightmares. There were many engravings that depicted cities – Jerusalem, Athens, Alexandria, Vienna? – fallen into ruin, populated only by anatomical specimens in various stages of dissection; flayed corpses, their skin reduced to ragged festoons, sleep walking with the grace of dancers through the rubble of lost worlds. I turned the crackling, ragged-edged pages to reveal, in poised choreographies, the mysteries of life. And on the wide margins of every page, in rusty ink, familiar writing in a dozen tongues.

Of course Thomas grew tired of this long before I did. As I followed him out of the room I dimly sensed that one at least of the stories about the old man was right. He did live his life surrounded by treasures, if not the kind that people meant.

The next floor was given over to bedrooms, dusty, crammed with bulky furniture and paintings. The last one we came to had a huge carved oak bed, and sitting in it was the old man. A flood of thought rushed through my brain. We were caught; he would inform the police; what would my parents say? But even as I thought all this, I realised that he was not looking at us. He was propped up on a gently-sloping

Cinnabar's Gnosis

pyramid of bolsters, hands pressed together as though in prayer, and his eyes were closed.

"He's asleep," Peter whispered.

I don't know how long we stood there before Thomas walked forward and prodded the figure.

"No he ain't, you clod. He's dead."

We all came round the bed and looked with great interest. I had never seen a dead body before, and found it had an awful fascination. I had passed the old man several times on the street, with his white beard streaming in the breeze. Now it was spread across his chest, and I found I could not stop staring at it.

Thomas broke disrespectfully into a nonsense song that had become popular some while before.

*"Does Santa Claus sleep with his whiskers
Under or over the sheets?"*

But I was not laughing. The dead white face of the old man had a look of someone distracted by some appalling inner thought. He was hunched, drawn in on himself, as though focussed on something immeasurably far away.

Thomas touched the white hands, and challenged us to do the same. Peter refused, but I had no intention of letting myself appear a coward. The flesh was cold as marble, and the chill of it went straight to my heart.

The room was gloomy, making it difficult to make out the dark bulky furniture with which it was cluttered. Something on top of a chest of drawers moved, and the first thing that came into my mind was a rat. But this was too long and sleek by far. It was a large, black cat, and in a second every surface in the room seemed to be shifting and coiling with many-coloured fur. They must have lain quite still until the moment we touched the body. Now they were rising up and looking at us.

My heart sank, because Thomas could not see an animal without wanting to hurt it, but the weirdness of it all seemed to have subdued him. He almost appeared afraid. Perhaps it was the sheer number of them, or their strange air of self-possession. Anyway, all he did, to main-

The World Entire

tain his bravado, was to pick up a half-empty wine bottle from the bedside table, take a swig, and pass it to me. It was very sweet, and far too strong for my unaccustomed taste, and I nearly choked.

On the old man's chest, between his beard and the icy hands, lay a stiff piece of paper scrawled with letters in brownish-red ink. Thomas slipped it into his pocket, along with a large gold watch and a small purse full of coins from the bedside table.

"There's got to be some real money here somewhere," he muttered. "Stands to reason, he must be rollin' in it."

A thorough search of the room revealed no more valuables, however. I think Peter and I would have called it a day then, but Thomas had other ideas.

"There's one place we haven't looked yet," he said, leading the way back to the landing, where an even narrower stair corkscrewed steeply upward.

At the top was one big room, with the boarded up window that we had seen from outside facing us. The space was well lit, even on this darkening afternoon, by a skylight in the roof, mainly clear, but with a circular band of coloured glass depicting the signs of the zodiac.

The walls and floor were completely covered with writing in charcoal and coloured chinks, that now familiar mantic polyglot torrent of obscure tongues. Written on such a large scale, in such quantities, it was possible to make out what had not been apparent in the other writings. The languages and symbols flowed into each other so smoothly, poured in such an unbroken flood, that I remember it now as a kind of automatic writing that recorded linguistic possession, a written form of speaking in tongues. So amazing did it look that for some seconds we failed to register the really remarkable thing about the room.

In the middle of the floor, directly under the skylight, there was a big circular gap in the writing, and in the space stood a kind of low platform with carved angels at the corners, its surface heaped with a mass of what looked like old rags and paper.

At once Thomas began to pull at the angel figures in an attempt to break one off. When they wouldn't budge, he turned his attention to the heap of rubbish. The rags were old shawls fringed along the edge, tangled up with torn pages from books covered in Hebrew lettering.

Cinnabar's Gnosis

The pile was shaped into an elongated mound, like a giant cocoon. About half way down one side, something jutted out of the tangle. It was greyish brown and wrinkled, a little like a thick tree branch terminating in a cluster of misshapen twigs.

"It's an arm," Thomas cried triumphantly.

"It's another dead person," Peter whispered in horror.

Thomas felt the arm.

"It's made of stone, or somethin."

"A statue?" Peter offered, betraying his relief.

"Yeah, a statue."

He wrenched the dry, dusty hand, and a finger snapped off with an explosive crack and a small puff of dust. Moving round the platform, he pulled aside the tangle of shawls and paper to reveal a rough globe of the same stony material, its upper surface formed into rudimentary features with a wide slit of a mouth.

Thomas rapped on the head with his fist. It sounded hard and solid.

"It's a rubbish statue," Peter observed with the confidence of an expert.

"Perhaps it's one of the new type," I said, without thinking. "Mrs Spence says they don't have to look like anything."

Quoting a teacher was never a wise move. I got a look like thunder from Thomas, but his attention was entirely on this doubtless valuable work of art lying helpless in his grasp. When further blows had little effect, he poked and prodded it with the broken finger, then, succumbing to his old compulsion, attempted to "post" it into the slit of a mouth. To his annoyance, it wouldn't fit. He pressed until the edges of the slit began to crumble, then flung the finger across the room. It hit the wall and shattered.

"There's no money here," Peter whined. "Let's go."

Thomas was not listening. He had on his face a particular idiotic fixed grin that I had seen all too often, and was now trying to "post" a sheet of the Hebrew lettering into the mouth. It was too wide, of course. He rolled it up, but it proved too thick. Then he reached into his pocket, and for a second I thought he was about to squander some of his slim profits from the adventure by putting in some coins from the stolen purse, but he drew out the piece of stiff paper with the smeary writing. When he "posted" it into the mouth, it was a perfect

The World Entire

fit. Now, I thought, perhaps Thomas will consider this sufficient, and agree to leave.

At that moment, the air was filled with a quite indescribable racket. I swear that every cat in the house – in the world, it seemed – began to cry out as though in pain. I had heard people use the word caterwauling before, but until that moment, I had not really known what it meant.

I walked to the doorway and peered down the stairs. Many faces of cats wailed up at me. When I turned back, Peter was close behind, and Thomas half way to the door. I started to say something to them, but I can no longer remember what. It is gone forever, because as I looked at them, there was an eruption of crumpled paper and rags as something huge and dark sat up on the platform, giving vent as it did so to a low animal bellow of anger and pain.

The shrieking of the cats intensified, as though giving voice to the terror that gripped us. At once we were fighting madly to get to the stairs. A flailing arm hit me in the face. I lashed out in return and fell in a tangle of legs. Behind me a new sound could be heard, a queer groping, stumbling kind of gait across the wooden floor.

Somehow, puny Peter was already clattering down the stairs, and, I imagine, did not stop running until he was inside his own house. I managed to get to the stairs, but tripped on a cat that was crouched on the top step, and went careering down, smashing against the narrow walls and bare wooden treads as I rolled down onto the first floor landing.

There was an agonising pain in my knee. I lay there for a second, stunned and gasping for breath.

Then from the top of the stairs came a deep bellow, and the cry of a child in agony. Fear forced me to move, and only then did I realise how badly hurt I was. Even crawling was impossible. I had to drag myself, inch by inch, along the landing, hearing the screams of pain and terror that all but drowned out the wailing of the cats.

My strength was already fading. I was bound to be caught and suffer the same fate. Clawing my way past the old man's room, I threw myself down the next flight of stairs, jarring my knee again. A spreading wave of screaming cats scattered as I landed in the hall, barely able to move.

From where I lay I could look back up the stairs. It seemed that someone had raised a distorted monolith of dark stone on the landing

Cinnabar's Gnosis

I had just vacated, and as I watched it began to descend. I did not wait to see it clearly. The glimpse was brain numbing. As I pulled myself towards the front door, I could hear a sound like a massive piece of furniture being bumped step by step towards me.

I couldn't even reach the door handle, and the bolts drawn across were far too big for me to shift. What could I do? If I could manage another agonising glissade down the steps to the basement, how could I get across the floor of that vast kitchen and climb to the window? I may as well have tried to fly to the moon.

The overwhelming urge at that moment was simply to put off the instant of confrontation for as long as possible, so I did something that, in retrospect, seems pathetic. I dragged myself into the wardrobe and forced my body through the dark ranks of hanging gabardine that filled it, pulling the door as near to closed as I could manage. The reek of mothballs and musty fabric nearly suffocated me. Struggling to suppress my gasping fight for breath, I looked out through the crack between the doors.

The plaintive mewling of the cats still filled the house, but the other, far worse, sounds seemed to have ceased. Could it be that I had not been seen? Could it even see? Might I be able to lay there until some strength and the ability to move more easily returned?

Then the slow, methodical bump, bump began again. I drew back into the smothering folds of blackness. The heavy steps advanced, and once more ceased. An agonising moment of hope, then the wardrobe door shook and began to open. Through the growing gap I could not stop myself seeing the eroded Easter-Island horror of a head that craned in.

I clapped my hands over my eyes and shrunk back.

And suddenly the air was filled with music. Echoing, haunting in the emptiness of that rambling house, the piano in the old man's library had begun to play.

At once the cats fell silent. And with the music came growing light, dazzlingly intense light that penetrated the hands over my eyes, seeming to reveal the very bones in my fingers. I squinted into the glare, at first blinded, then making out the last thing in the World I could have hoped to see.

The old man was coming down the stairs.

The World Entire

Could it be that he was not dead at all, that he had woken up and come to see what was happening? But I knew that was not possible even before I saw that he was not walking, but hanging in the air. His pitifully small frame was still in the posture we had seen in the bed, eyes tightly closed, hands clasped together, hunched into the nest of his night clothes and shawls like a tortoise drawn into its shell. He was dead beyond a doubt, but he drifted slowly down into the hall in a pulsing halo, an eerie corposant that flared and sparked and rained down silently on the threadbare carpet. Frail and waxwork pale as he was, I swear that if he had been a warrior clad in glittering armour and riding a chariot of gold that old man could not have radiated a more awesome power. The old, worn bedclothes and shawls had become garments of glory.

Every cat in the house began to purr.

The old man floated forward until his aura engulfed everything. And that piece of stiff paper with the smeared writing on it that Thomas had “posted” into the mouth wafted out as if on a warm breeze and ignited on the air, spiralling gently down in flame and ash to the floor.

For a second everything, even the purring of the cats, stopped. Then the massive form looming outside the wardrobe rocked, toppled and fell with a shuddering impact that smashed it into dust. The light faded, and the next thing I can remember is waking up in the local hospital.

As it was explained to me, some kindly gentlemen in black overcoats had apparently found me unconscious and performed their civic duty by bringing me in. I had suffered no more than bruises and a displaced cartilage in my knee. I thought it best to have a convenient loss of memory about the cause of my injuries.

Those were less suspicious times. No one connected a few minor injuries to one boy with the tragic event on the same day in which a local child given to misbehaviour and petty crime had been horribly crushed by falling masonry on a building site. As for the surprisingly fleet-footed Peter, he was always quite adamant that he had not been near the old man’s house, and had not even been with us on the day in question. He was clearly also brighter than he appeared.

The old man’s demise prompted a new wave of pleasant rumours. His friends, who arranged the funeral and cleared the house, had, of course, taken the opportunity to steal the vast wealth it contained. The

Cinnabar's Gnosis

family who moved in consequently found nothing of value, but had only two complaints about their new home. The old man, obviously demented, had dug dirt from the back yard and scattered it all over the hall. And their child refused to sleep in the top floor bedroom.

The old man's compatriots had made one mistake, however. They had failed to notice on leaving me at the hospital that I had crushed in my tightly-clenched fist a scorched piece of parchment. See, I have it here. Notice that it had not been wholly burned up as I had thought. In fact apart from some general scorching only one end of it is burnt away. The letters on it, by the way, are Hebrew, and are certainly written in blood. You see how the burning has left intact the letters Mem and Tav, forming the word death. I now have good reason to believe that he destroyed one letter, Aleph, which would have made the full word Emet, "truth". The full word has the magical power to animate inert clay, while the excision of the first letter terminates the effect. This creation of life, even such life, is, I have discovered, the supreme expression of mystical attainment. What we fell foul of that day was, to misquote the faith of my childhood, the outward and all too physical expression of an inward and spiritual grace. But I have said enough about that subject, if you don't mind.

As for me, how can I say that I am altogether sorry that I entered the old man's house that day? Of the several effects the experience has had on my subsequent life, not all are by any means unwelcome.

After all, it has made of me a bibliophile, and a lifelong student of ancient lore. And it instilled in me a virulent hatred of anti-Semitism, of which this sorry World of ours seems once again so full.

Not all the effects have been entirely positive, however. I have been left with certain "eccentricities" – or insufferable affectations, as my enemies prefer to call them. A refusal to even enter, let alone sleep in, any room with a wardrobe, or to look at so much as a photograph of certain types of contemporary figurative sculpture. And I cannot hear, without overwhelming distress, the opening notes of the Goldberg Variations.

I also find myself with a lifetime commitment, sometimes far from convenient, but always scrupulously honoured, to visit once a year the cemetery where an old Jewish gentleman lies, to leave on his grave a single small stone.

THE LIGHT INVISIBLE, THE LIGHT INACCESSIBLE

Peter Bell

*Record of a Visit to Iona
November 1999*

*Thursday
November 11th
10 pm*

I have arrived at last on Iona's fair shores. I did not think I would ever get here. The weather has been atrocious for days. The passage across the Sound of Iona from Fionnphort is a mere ten minutes. This evening it took forty. Even the crossing from Oban, on a larger vessel, was badly delayed, but they held the connecting bus, and the Iona ferry. They would not do that these days on the railways! This is not the first time I have been to Iona, but it is the first time I have actually come to stay on the island. The first time I came, it was in June, five years since, and I was with Alida.

Rain lashes at the windows and the gales roar, but the Argyll Hotel is welcoming. Log fires blaze in the lounges. It is delightfully old-fashioned. There are no televisions! What a haven! I only wish Alida were with me, she would have enjoyed it here. I am very tired. I think I shall sleep despite the demons in my mind. They say that Iona brings healing – though I fear I am beyond it.

Cinnabar's Gnosis

Friday

November 12th

10.30 am

I did not sleep well at all. The storm strengthened in the night. It sounded as if the roof was being torn off; it is made of corrugated iron, which apparently is more durable than slates up here, but it makes an unholy rattling. And the wind! I have never heard anything like it! It was as if an anguished voice were crying outside my window. It distressed me, and spun mournful dreams.

The storm subsided at dawn. Before breakfast I walked as far as the Abbey. The day is fresh and invigorating, a scent in the air of something indefinable, evoking associations that remain just out of reach. I watched the sun breaking through the clouds over Mull, wreathed around Ben More. The pinkish-red stone of the Abbey glowed like flame in the rising sun. I can see why Columba chose here to found Christianity. The *light* is so vivid, giving colours a surreal intensity. I visited the Reilig Odhráin, resting place of the ancient kings of Scotland, and found the grave. On the north side of St Oran's Chapel, two low stones mark its extent; and a tiny open book, made of marble, embedded in the green turf, with its terse inscription: *M.E.F. Aged 33 Years. Died 19 November 1929*. Such economy of words, so tragic the tale! A tale of one who heard Iona's call.

We first came upon the grave, Alida and I, in the course of an exploration of the antiquarian sites of the West. It is now almost three years since Alida passed away; not so far from here, out there to the north, on another island, at the edge of the vast Atlantic. It feels longer, and yet in some ways only yesterday. Time ceases to have much meaning for me, if indeed it has any meaning at all. There is a peril in the Hebrides, for those who heed their melody – the Ballad of Grey Weather (as John Buchan calls it), making those who hear it sick all the days of their life for something they cannot name. I come to these shores in tribute to Alida – and in the footsteps of M.E.F.

An icy wind blows despite the brightness. The Black Wind of the North, they call it here. It etches the far hills and isles in stark, charcoal

The Light Invisible, the Light Inaccessible

silhouette and keeps the murky south-westerlies at bay. Only one other person was abroad this chilly morn, a hardy Scottish lass draped in the fringed Hebridean shawl.

9.30 pm

I spent today familiarising myself with the island – the immediate vicinity at least – trying to absorb its atmosphere. It is so peaceful without the summer sightseers, the day trip pilgrims! I spent some time in the ruins of the Augustinian Nunnery, and visited the well of eternal youth on the hill of Dùn-I. More adventurous plans can wait, I have several days here. During the afternoon the wind swung round to the east. It got no warmer. There is a hint of drizzle in the air and the forecast is bad.

The Argyll Hotel is indeed exquisite. Oak panelling, parquet floors, antiques. A delightfully dilapidated conservatory overlooks the Sound, where I took afternoon tea. The guests are few: three lone elderly ladies, immersed in books, refugees like myself to this sanctuary of peace; also two African nuns, who beam beatifically, and a stern-faced clergyman – they have business at the Abbey; and two middle-aged Irish women, who whisper animatedly about things New Age. Our young waitresses are cheerful and capable. They are not Scottish – there was some language misunderstanding at breakfast as to how I liked my eggs. I would guess from their accents they are Eastern European. The stylish girl who ushered me into the restaurant this evening, however, speaks better English, though she sounds foreign too; quite elegant, with long tresses of black hair tied in plaits. She looks more Latin than Slav. I rather like her. Her name is Mhairi (pronounced Var-ee), a Celtic name, so perhaps she *is* Scottish, after all; there is Hispanic blood in the Hebrides, dating back to galleons wrecked during the Spanish Armada. Indeed, on Barra and Eriskay they look positively swarthy.

It is still a trial for me to holiday alone in Scotland. I miss Alida – with a deep, consuming passion. I return each November, to be here on her anniversary.

Cinnabar's Gnosis

Saturday
November 13th
11 am

The forecast was right. Today is abominable in the way only Scottish weather can be! A grim, grey canopy of cloud overhangs the island, and the rain is of that fine, persistent, drenching sort which renders any kind of outdoor exploration as pointless as it is unpleasant. The only thing to do is stay indoors and hope conditions improve. The fires are already lit and inviting. I may even get a chance to chat more with Mhairi. I saw her again this morning, outside in the rain, when I walked up to St Oran's. She smiled, I think, in recognition. She has a strange attraction for me, perhaps because she reminds me a little of Alida, when she was young. But I must guard against such foolish infatuations.

I forgot to mention the hotel's finest asset: its enormous collection of old books. Everywhere, on staircases, landings, along corridors, shelves of them. It is like staying in a library! Many are dry as dust, but there are gems too. There is much Scottish topography, natural history and folklore. I noted books by Fiona Macleod, Herbert J. Boyd's *Strange Tales of the Western Isles*, and numerous titles by Seton Gordon and Alasdair Alpin MacGregor. When I asked last night where they all came from Mhairi merely smiled, bemused – as if anyone would ask such a question! It bothers me Mhairi might think me odd. I have already formed the impression that the other waitresses do.

6 pm

The rain has persisted all day. (As one of the Irish ladies aptly put it to me, 'It hasn't stopped since it started.') I have passed an idle afternoon amidst the hotel's books. I looked for books on Iona that might shed further light on M.E.F. But those I found proved either to have been printed before 1929, or not to mention her at all. My interest in her tragedy arose originally from a casual antiquarianism (in which Alida shared); but, reading about it in the dark months following Alida's own sad death, I realise I have developed an obsessive fascination, which I cannot fully explain or understand, except to say that the parallel

The Light Invisible, the Light Inaccessible

tragedies seem to weave within my mind a tapestry of intertwining grief. There is a view that grief, once time has done its healing, should be left behind, but for some grief remains a permanent, necessary indulgence, the only way the dead can be kept alive; and if this is superstition, what else in this extraordinary world is not? I fear I spend too much time alone since Alida died. Morbid thoughts besiege me.

9 pm

I am certainly right about the staff thinking me odd. Mhairi must have been off duty tonight and I was served again by the girl who got the eggs wrong. Her name is Ilsa. I fear I must take back my assertion that the staff are capable; and this time language can't be blamed! I sat for an unconscionable time at my table. When Ilsa eventually came over, she looked perplexed and asked me if I wished to order now. On pointing out that I had been sitting there for twenty minutes, she said, 'I thought you were waiting for the lady', or words to that effect. Only then did I notice that the table had been set for two. Of course, I do have a double room and the table numbers match the rooms, but it's not the first time she has served me. Amidst profuse apologies she spirited away the surplus cutlery and crockery and brought the soup. But then I saw her with another waitress, looking over in my direction, smirking. The incident dispirited me, bringing home how lonely my travels have become since Alida. She would have made great jest of the error, and the eggs. How I miss the trills of Alida's laughter, her stirring company. And the weather doesn't help. If anything, it gets worse. Maybe it will blow itself out by morning.

Sunday

November 14th

9 am

A better day is in prospect. Already the skies are clearing. I am glad, for today is Alida's anniversary. It is also Sunday and for the first time in my life I shall attend Holy Communion, though I am not a practising Christian. Perhaps I want to merge into Iona's spiritual aura, to absorb its essence through ritual? How Alida would laugh at such superstition!

Cinnabar's Gnosis

I cannot deny that there is a strange *otherness* about Iona. Maybe it is the weight of centuries of sacred pilgrimage? To wander through the ruins of the ancient nunnery, then beside the sea to St Oran's and the Reilig Odrháin; and the Abbey, with its medieval crosses, is to know the isle in all its eerie glory. There are marvellous carvings on the cloister pillars, part of recent restoration; they follow a cycle, beginning and ending at Alpha and Omega, sculptured in the form of a serene face, with flowing hair. Even before Columba, this place was sacred – though Christians might say profane. There is an aspect to its mystic quality, I must confess, that is not entirely comfortable. There is a painting in the north transept, a crucifixion by an unnamed artist, that could make one scream – with agony or ecstasy I would not like to say. Last night again my sleep was restless, with only the mournful wind for company; it was as if a voice were keening in sorrow outside my window – or singing in melancholy rhapsody.

8.30 pm

Today has proved, indeed, a day of great rapture! At times I felt as if my grief were being transmuted through Iona's alchemy into bitter-sweet nostalgia, my sadness into exultation. It began with Holy Communion. The singing was led by a young woman from Bucharest, who took us through a call-and-response intonation of the Kyrie Eleison, which echoed gloriously around the Abbey. She read from Thomas Traherne, Swedenborg and an obscure Romanian theologian, as well as the Book of Revelation. Throughout the service sparrows wheeled and chirped high up in the nave, like holy spirits. As I sipped the bitter communion wine – the Blood of Our Lord Jesus Christ – it was as if my veins were being infused with the Holy Spirit of Iona! The final hymn was *Immortal, Invisible*. We were singing the lines *In Light Inaccessible, Hid from our eyes*. Low sunbeams were catching the panes of the east window, glinting sapphire, lilac, rose-carmethine. Tears came to my eyes, a vast immanence engulfed me. For, do not the scientists now teach, even as did Swedenborg and Traherne, the Transcendence of Light?

In the Chapel of Healing I lit a candle for Alida, and another for M.E.F.

The Light Invisible, the Light Inaccessible

Later I trod the white sands of the northern shore – where Viking ghosts are said to appear. I was solitary except for one distant figure. I lingered as the ocean crashed inexorably; huge, long-rolling breakers. The wind was moving round into the north-west – full circuit of the compass in two days! That’s what I love about the Hebrides: the restless, constant change. It resonates with my something in my soul – though I know I am not the first. I watched the thin line of Alida’s island emerge on the northern horizon in a kind of serendipitous memoriam. I gazed, as once did Kathleen Raine – she who cursed the rowan at Camusfearna – as she looked back, north from Iona’s shores, in memory of her friend, Gavin Maxwell, to a place now removed not so much by space as by time: ‘Leaving you, I have come to Iona’s strand, Where the far is near, and the dear, far, Since not again can I be with you life with life, I would be with you as star with distant star, As drop of water in the one bright bitter sea.’

11.30 pm

It is a clear, frosty night, almost full moon, the distant peaks of Mull dimly visible. The scent of snow is in the air. The constellations arch above the island, a canopy of iridescence; near enough, it seems, to touch, yet illimitably, vertiginously distant, the Milky Way a dazzling highway to infinity, spectacular, terrifying. I have returned from a stroll as far as St Oran’s (to shake off the sluggishness of the wine and the fire). I am not sure it was a good idea.

I was drawing near the Reilig Odhráin. A bluish radiance was flickering over the cemetery. At first I thought I was suffering an ocular disturbance, but then decided it to be an illusion: a distortion of the light from the ‘eternal flame’ that burns within the dim recesses of St Oran’s Chapel. (This ‘eternal flame’ is a form of candle, and I find it hard to believe it is never extinguished, in the winds they have here; it is probably *symbolically* eternal, constantly re-ignited; I have never yet seen it out.) For reasons I cannot name, I was filled with a brooding apprehension. Yet, when I recognised what I was seeing, I could have wept for joy. The Northern Lights! Aurora Borealis! To Hebrideans, the Merry Dancers – said to be the angels cast from Heaven when Lucifer rebelled. They flashed and pulsed through infinities of blue, like tongues of fire de-

Cinnabar's Gnosis

taching from the flame of St Oran's. It was eerie. A crazy idea came upon me that it would be a fine night to be out on the moors, that I should go there forthwith. To watch the moonlight streaming silver on the ocean! The colours scintillating in the northern skies! Truly this was a night to tear aside the veil, a night to behold the angels! But perish such thoughts! They do not feel like my own! Even now, by the blazing fire, I shiver uncontrollably – with cold or exhilaration, I am unsure.

Monday
November 15th
4 pm

Today has been another atrocious day. It seemed scarcely conceivable, after last night's clear skies, to awake this morning to swirling rain. I am not feeling well – tired and drained, though I slept deeply. I passed the time productively enough, noting down all I can remember about M.E.F.

Marie Emily Fornario arrived on Iona in the summer of 1929, thirty-three years of age. Like many, she came to Iona's sacred shores in search of spiritual calm, believing she had lived here in a previous life, that she was called. Intending to stay only a few days, she never left. She became fascinated by the southern moors, that part of the island to this day known as evil, where Pagan forces vie with Christian, and darkness challenges the light. Here she was wont to wander at odd hours of the night, in all weathers, but especially when the moon was bright. One November she went out and did not return. Two days later they found her dead in bizarre circumstances: sprawled on the moor in a peat hollow, hacked out in the shape of a cross with a knife by her corpse, naked but for a black cape. Her feet were bloody from stumbling (or running) through the heather. It is rumoured that where her body was discovered a small cairn was erected. It is my ambition to find that cairn.

Marie Fornario was a cultured woman, mingling with the literati of London. She wrote mystical poetry and reviewed esoteric opera, like Rutland Boughton's *The Immortal Hour*, a Celtic allegory of Spring's resurrection, the banishing of Winter. She lived alone in Mortlake Road, Kew, daughter of an Italian professor, and an English mother deceased since

The Light Invisible, the Light Inaccessible

childhood. She had a strong interest in occult and psychic phenomena; being a member of the Alpha and Omega Sect, of the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, amongst whose members once numbered William Sharp, who wrote (under the pseudonym Fiona Macleod) studies of Iona's spiritual lore known to have influenced Miss Fornario. (Indeed, these same books inspired Boughton's opera; and I have been reading in bed Sharp's *Iona*). She was an intimate friend of occultist Dion Fortune (aka Violet Firth), author of *The Secrets of Dr Taverner* and *Psychic Self-Defence*. A Theosophist, Miss Fornario believed she had been reincarnated, and that in Iona she would find the Light Transcendent.

In the sober island community Marie Fornario cut an arresting presence, in the dark cape and hand-woven garments of the Arts and Crafts Movement, with her long, plaited raven locks, glittering jewellery, and, it is said, a distant look in her eyes, as if she gazed beyond the forms of this world. Boarding with the Camerons, a farming family at Traighmor (which overlooks the Sound of Iona), she rapidly won their hearts for her sensitivity and warmth; and for the interest she displayed in their knowledge of the local folklore. But her increasingly strange behaviour started to cause her hosts alarm – though never alienation, for all that her activities conflicted with their dour Presbyterianism. For their lodger, never in robust health, took to sleeping through the day, falling into trances, fasting and spending long nights outside on the moors. She burned tiny oil-lamps in her room throughout the long dark hours, and spoke of visions and voices in the heavens, and journeys to the Far Beyond.

As the grim Hebridean winter closed in, Miss Fornario's state of mind worsened; where once her eccentricity had seemed to bring inner peace, now it was infused with harrowing spiritual terror, with fear and trembling. One day, in great agitation, she told the Camerons she must leave the island forthwith; but, it being the Sabbath, no ferry was running, and she was persuaded to await the following morn. But by the day's end her mood had changed, and she announced in perfect calm that she would remain on Iona after all. Writing to a London acquaintance, she confided she could not leave Iona because she had 'a terrible case of healing on'. What that phrase meant is unexplained. But do I already, here on Iona's sacred shores, begin to understand? In the early hours, Miss Fornario left Traighmor and was never seen

Cinnabar's Gnosis

alive again. Her death upon the moors was attributed to exhaustion and exposure, for the nights were bitter and frosty.

Miss Fornario's mysterious demise attracted the sensation-seeking press, which added its own embellishments. Variant versions appeared in *The Oban Times*, *The Glasgow Herald* and *The Scotsman*. It is said that jewellery she wore turned black overnight; that the marks on her feet suggested levitation; that blue lights flickered where she died, and around her grave; that a man in a dark cloak was witnessed; that her father had a premonition; that she was digging in the ground to release fairies; that the kitchen knife found by her body was a ritual dagger; and that her ghost was to be seen abroad on the moors. The case was written up for *The Occult Review*; and gilded by Dion Fortune, who alleged unnatural death, the result of psychic attack, which Miss Fornario had courted by reckless journeys on the Astral Plane; even that she was murdered by the spirit of the sixteen-month-deceased Mina Mathers, founder of Alpha and Omega. Subsequent accounts err still further: she is named Norah, or Netta; Fornario is spelt Farnario; her hosts were the MacRaes, not the Camerons; and there is inconsistent description as to where she was found, a fallacy being that it was on the weird-sounding Fairy Mound. Not the least of my difficulties – if I ever get there in this weather – will be knowing where even to begin the search, let alone find the cairn.

Tuesday
November 16th
8 am

Today I *must go to the moors*. The day promises to brighten, so there is no excuse.

6 pm

My search of the moors has been, regrettably, frustrating. I took the Pilgrims' Path, climbing up by the Staonaig Lochan. The moorland is confusing, with endless undulations, rocky outcrops, hollows and steep corries plunging to the sea; a three-dimensional labyrinth. It has a vastness and complexity out of all proportion to its size, which can

The Light Invisible, the Light Inaccessible

scarcely exceed a square mile. It was like looking for a needle in a haystack. A problem is that no account offers specific indication as to where her corpse was found (except, spuriously, to the Fairy Mound). It is more reliably said she was heading for the ancient ruins of Dun Lathraichean, a site of spectral fascination. In the nineteenth century two terrified nuns claimed to have witnessed on the hill an inexplicable conflagration. Miss Fornario claimed that here she heard the voices of the angels, and saw visions in the skies.

I had little wish to linger on the Dun, which I found, indeed, an uneasy place, and proceeded to the Carn Cul ri Eirinn. (The Cairn Looking Back to Ireland, so-called because Iona was the first place Columba came where he could *not* see Ireland!) The promontory on which it stands overlooks the ocean, with distant aspects north and south. Beyond Rum and Eigg, I could just discern the jagged teeth of the Black Cuillin on Skye. Southwards, huge banks of thunder-cloud overhung Islay and Jura – like some Biblical plague held at bay by the Holy Light of Iona. The low November sun was gilding the rolling moor in bands of ethereal light; radiant, yet pregnant with an underlying melancholy bordering on menace, a realm of appalling loneliness. What it must be like in dreich weather, or on a chill and deathly night does not bear contemplation! Alas, nowhere in this landscape could I find her cairn.

I must set down a curious incident, or more accurately a curious *thought*, that occurred while I was at the Carn Cul ri Eirinn. I was watching gannets soaring and dive-bombing into the sea, remembering the sparrows and the magnificence of Communion. I was peeling an apple. The penknife slipped, deeply incising my left palm – it bled copiously, onto a patch of pale lichen, discolouring it, spreading in a shape that, ridiculously, resembled a cross. The odd idea came to me that my blood was mingling with the blood of Iona. A sense of ineffability suffused me, as if everything was right, exactly as it should be, ever was and ever shall be. The red ball of the declining sun looked itself like a huge globule of blood, haemorrhaging across a carmine sea. But as it stained the surface of the waters, my elation slowly faded, turning first to awe, then dread, then terror, the panic of the Hebrides.

As I hurried back, I saw another person, a woman, standing on the ridge above the Staonaig Lochan, whom at first I thought (or hoped?)

Cinnabar's Gnosis

was Mhairi. But by the time I crossed over and began my descent, I could see that it was Ilsa. (I overheard her telling the nuns she tramps the Pilgrims' Path for exercise.) She had made good pace, and was already some way ahead. I was unable to catch her up. Certainly she is fitter than I. Even her feather-brained company would have been welcome!

8.30 pm

Mhairi, again, did not seem to be around. I think perhaps she holds some supervisory position, possibly in the kitchen. She cannot be the manager, as that role falls to Fiona, a set-faced Scot in her fifties. I was served by Ilsa. When I tried to make conversation, saying I'd seen her on the moor, she merely smiled inately. At least I cannot complain about the service tonight. The hotel sources its meat and fish locally. Lobster was on the menu, one of Alida's favourite dishes (though she would have preferred it Thermidor). It was delicious, downed with an excellent Chardonnay, which I imbibed too generously. As I sipped the sparkling wine, my afternoon panic fell into sensible perspective, my mind dwelling rather on those wonderful, euphoric moods that have visited me since I arrived here in Iona. I do not want to leave. Yet tomorrow is my last day. I must enquire whether the hotel has any vacancies. There should not be a problem this time of year.

9.30 pm

Bad news! Unfortunately, a party of elderly Americans are arriving from Florida, part of an organised tour in search of Scottish ancestry. The hotel is fully booked. Fiona was rather blunt when I enquired about prolonging my stay. 'Unusual, for November,' she said, as if relishing my disappointment. Perhaps it is as well. In any case, I could not have stood the presence of loud Americans. Fiona has a manner that does not brook small talk, so I stifled the question on my lips about Mhairi. In any case, it might seem indecent, especially these days, for a middle-aged male guest to be enquiring too closely about the young female staff (though I would say Mhairi is a fair bit older than Ilsa).

The Light Invisible, the Light Inaccessible

Wednesday
November 17th
10 am

Today is my final day on Iona. Then back to the real world – that sounds like a cliché but it has a more exact meaning than anyone might believe who has not *stayed* on Iona, as opposed to day-tripping. To arrive on Iona is to cross a series of borderlines: England to Scotland; Glasgow City, through the Highlands, to the Argyll glens; over the Firth of Lorne to Mull; twenty miles across the mountains, beneath Ben More, along the Ross, then the passage of the Sound of Iona. And there is a spiritual borderline too. At times, these past few days, I have felt I could remain here forever, that I *belonged* on Iona. I am not sure it is a wholesome thought; but if this journal is a record of anything, it is a record of borderlines, and the transgression thereof.

Somebody was in the cemetery as I drew near this morning, soon after dawn. Unable to bear the presence of another there – I feel that M.E.F. is *my* secret – I proceeded to the Abbey, where the sparrows swooped and twittered in the nave. I sat awhile in the Chapel of Healing. I watched the rising sun briefly fire its stained glass window, a startling incandescence, illumining the image of a blue Madonna. I say a Madonna, though she is unusual: there is an old prophesy on Iona (which Sharp relates) that here upon this hallowed isle the Redeemer shall return, this time as Bride of Christ, Daughter of God, the Divine Spirit made flesh in Mortal Woman; that ‘upon the hills, where we are wandered, the Shepherdess shall call us home’.

Afterwards, I rested on the stone bench outside St Oran’s, hiding from the westerlies, increasing even in the short spell I was there. I fear the outlook for today is gloomy; the smell of the Atlantic is heavy on the air.

2 pm

My plan today has been – and remains – to go back to the moor and make a last attempt to find the cairn. I feel that yesterday I made insufficient effort, that I yielded too easily to a foolish fear, to the loneliness that takes possession all too often in the wilds of the isles. And if

Cinnabar's Gnosis

I do not go back today, when shall I go? For I do not believe in my heart that once I leave Iona I will return; the island, for all its glory, is fraught with an insidious malaise. No, I shall be relieved to shake it off; and see my experiences here in true perspective – for the insanity they are. Yet, if only I could find the cairn, it would bring a kind of closure. Already afternoon draws in and still I procrastinate. I am torn between compulsion and trepidation.

6 pm

I am afraid that my resolve once again deserted me – the weather excuses a multitude of sins here! This afternoon south-westerly gales swept in, a veritable monsoon were it not for their chill. It was impossible even to see across the Sound of Iona. If only I had made the effort first thing, I know, I could have got there! I am aware, glancing through this diary, how often I have allowed the weather to justify delay: in reality, a reluctance born of causes so obscure I can scarcely define them, much less express in words. I dread to cross another borderline. Indefinable, numinous, terrifying.

11 pm

I am tempted to attribute this evening's events to a species of pre-destination, fixed by arcane forces, entreating me, impelling me to remain on Iona. There were two things.

The storms were so bad this afternoon, the ferry did not run. The Americans have been forced to make alternative arrangements (I do not think they even got to Mull). Fiona brought the news as I was sitting down to dinner. The hotel now has so many vacancies I can stay as long as I like! I heard myself, as if from a distance, agreeing with alacrity – despite a still small voice of protest, for I had just made arrangements to move on to the sybaritic luxuriance of the Manor House in Oban. Fiona herself was waiting at the tables tonight, because 'the lasses were away shopping in Bunessan and couldna get back o'er the Sound'. This must include Mhairi and Ilsa as the only other waitress was a local girl of about fifteen of singularly limited initiative (a relative, I gather, of

The Light Invisible, the Light Inaccessible

Fiona's). The Coq au Vin, when it eventually arrived, was lukewarm – but I am so exhilarated I could not be bothered to complain. I washed it down with several liberal glasses of a fine Italian Merlot.

And, more luck! I was reading after dinner a book by Alasdair Alpin MacGregor. In it there was an account of the Fornario case. Though rehearsing familiar ground – in his inimitable style, tragic, wondrous, with a hint of doom – MacGregor offers the most precise clue I have yet seen regarding the location of the cairn. I say 'precise' but this is strictly relative. She was not lying anywhere near Dun Lathraichean. It was much closer, near the Pilgrims' Path, not far from where I saw Ilsa. 'She lay between the Machair and Loch Staonaig in a hollow in the chilly moor.'

Thursday
November 18th
7.30 am

I have awoken feeling more refreshed than I have done for a long time, though I cannot say my night has been tranquil. I half-awakened several times from unsettling dreams which had about them, nevertheless, a quality of ecstasy, just beyond the brink of recall. They had to do with wandering and being lost, of tribulations and glorious revelations. A chilliness suffused them, as if I were embraced by icy caresses, the cruel, yet kind, caresses of oblivion. But when, sometime before the dawn, I drifted off again, my sleep was deep and rewarding – not since Alida have I slept so pleasingly, as if a loving woman slumbered once again by my side.

10 am

It was scarcely light as I walked up to the Reilig Odhráin. The wind is still in the west, a constant stream of humid air. Overhead, endless billows of featureless grey cloud lour, with dark, low-hanging wisps that oscillate like smoke and weave strange shapes. Briefly, a ghostly sun glimmered, catching the dew-soaked grave, lighting the initials on the open book with an uncanny lustre. *Marie Emily Fornario, I know where they laid you, on the north side of the Chapel, domain of unholy death;*

Cinnabar's Gnosis

but today I go to the holy place they found you, where you heard the voices of the angels, where the red sun sets across a hundred isles!

I watched the coming of the dawn, and felt a vast grace possess me. If I say I scarcely fret about Alida now, that I no longer feel lonely for her, this should not be seen as betrayal of the glory that once was, but an affirmation of the glory that will be. It is still less than a week since I arrived on Iona's sacred shores – 'where the far is near, and the dear, far' – and already I am transfigured, born into a new dawn by the terrible power of healing. To think that now, at this very moment, I would have been aboard the ferry! I can see it now departing, from my window. Returning to that other world, now fading hourly from my mind.

I have a whole day, endless days, to return to the moor!

Friday

November 19th

1.15 am

I write these words in the knowledge that they may very well be the last I write. It alarms me that eyes other than mine might one day read this journal. Reading through the pages, I am struck by the morbid self-indulgence, the histrionics. It is, in fact, not quite sane. I have toyed with throwing it into the flames, letting them consume my testimony, even as a greater flame consumes my spirit. But I must record the momentous things befalling me today (or, I should now say, yesterday). Before I set forth again tonight, along the Pilgrims' Path, out onto the moor – seventy years to the day since Marie made the same fateful journey – I will hide this journal, unsigned or otherwise identified. There are numberless places in this rabbit-warren of a hotel, with its infinity of old books. One more will not be noticed.

I did not reach the moors until mid-afternoon. I would like to think this time my delay was not so much reluctance, as deferral of a consummation that now felt destined. The wind blew relentlessly, heavy with a scent of rain that never came. The Grey Wind of the West. I made my way to the ground between the Staonaig Lochan and Carn Buidhe, overlooking the Machair. Breakers were crashing all along the wide sweep of the Camus Cul an Taibh, white gulls riding

The Light Invisible, the Light Inaccessible

the wind, dipping into the waves, the haunting invocation of their strangled cries calling me as if across immense spaces. Somewhere here, in these few hundred square yards, was the cairn of Marie Emily Fornario.

Even searching so small an area was daunting. Stony intrusions amidst the heather proved, again and again, to be exposed bedrock, without so much as a fragment from which to build a cairn. I searched until the light began to fade. I could feel my spirits plummeting. On the edge of the lochan a few lifeless bulrushes shifted in the unceasing grey wind. It was a place of terrible melancholy. As I made to leave, possessed by creeping panic, I experienced a most eerie sensation. I do not find this easy to convey in words. *Déjà vu*? Intuition? Revelation? A series of swift, elusive impressions; a totality, at the heart of which was an overpowering awareness of a *presence*.

I was descending through a depression in the moor. The wind was gusting behind me, great booming surges, buffeting and whistling through the heather. I caught, on the very edge of my vision, like the start of a migraine, a rapid flickering of blue light. I cannot say how long it lasted – fractions of an instant, yet slow and languid, timeless. It was attended by a disconcerting, yet pleasurable, alertness, as before an impending thunderstorm. Though I was temporarily dazzled, I swear I saw ahead of me, silhouetted against the sky, the figure of a tall woman. Her loose, dark hair was flying in the wind. In front of her was a rocky slab, sloping downwards some dozen feet, strewn with loose rubble. Tumbled, forlorn, battered by decades of Hebridean gales, yet still evident, were the remnants of a cairn. They lay in a peat hollow that might once have resembled a cross, overhung with tangled, woody heather. When I raised my eyes again, there was no-one – only the vast emptiness of the darkening moor. I replaced several of the fallen stones, and from a wind-blown rowan placed a sprig of crimson berries on the shrine of Marie Emily Fornario.

Soon I will depart, and I am calm, I am consecrated. I no longer feel the pain, the loss, the grief – only exultation. I hear the voices of the angels, summoning me to the moonlit moor. I hear the cry, down the eternal wind, of she who has long been calling me, who has brought Great Healing.

Cinnabar's Gnosis

A Golden Dawn will greet us on the Morrow. A New Millennium awaits. Together we shall comprehend a Boundless Splendour, the Splendour of the Light Invisible, the Light Immortal, the Light Inaccessible!



Editor's Note, 3 December 2005

This journal was discovered during the refurbishment in 2005 of the Argyll Hotel, Iona. It takes the form of an A5 ring-bound notebook, concealed at the back of a bookcase in one of the lounges. The proprietor, James Mackay, believed it might shed light on the mysterious disappearance in November 1999 of a Dr John Campbell; a guest who, having extended his visit, then left unannounced without settling his account or collecting his baggage. Despite a thorough search of the island, in many places inhospitable, remote and perilous, no body was found; nor have any unidentified bodies been washed up by the sea. The probability remains that Dr Campbell departed, for reasons best known to himself, on an early ferry, before staff had a chance to notice his absence. All subsequent efforts to locate him, however, proved fruitless; he being eventually classified as a missing person, never returning to his home in London. It appears, and the journal hints at sufficient reasons, that Dr Campbell was under high emotional stress, and was not of sound mind; a view supported by the staff who had occasion to deal with him, and who considered his behaviour odd. The Fornario case is a reasonably well-known piece of local lore, and has occasionally drawn unstable interest. The story has been greatly exaggerated by writers seeking, spuriously, to convey the 'weirdness' of Iona. Mrs Fiona Mackie of Traighmor, whose grandparents boarded Miss Fornario, denies that there is any cairn on the moor; and that, if such ever existed, it must long have yielded to the elements. Mrs Mackie was restaurant manager at the time of Dr Campbell's sojourn, and further denies that there was ever anyone working at the Argyll answering to the description, or bearing the name, of Mhairi.

TZIMTZUM

Quentin S. Crisp

After my father had his stroke, he became even more attractive to women.

Downstairs, cross-legged in front of the stove, I worked on my translation of Nagai Kafu's *Dwarf Bamboo*. I had returned to the author's Preface, which, being written in classical Japanese, was especially difficult to render in English. From upstairs there came the sound of voices and laughter. I sighed and paused in my work, then read over what I had just written. Kafu was explaining the work's strange title with reference to a conversation between himself and the gardener:

Bamboo is held an elegant plant, but amongst its varieties, *okamezasa* (dwarf bamboo) is one by humans much trodden, and much pissed upon, growing in profusion always at the edges of fields and the sides of footpaths, like weeds. Ah, the perplexity of the poor gardener, instructed by this bloody-minded old man – fancying himself refined in having such tastes – to plant that weed in his garden! Behold in this the very heart of my pitiful work. And examining the life-story of this novel's hero, too, such a title could surely not be thought of as strained.

I wondered if I would ever finish this useless task of translation. I pictured death overtaking me in some absurd and meaningless way while the manuscript was still incomplete. There it would lie, on my desk, or in a drawer, pages covered with my childish but crotchety handwriting, never to be read by another soul.

Cinnabar's Gnosis

The window, beyond which lay blackness, was an unseeing eye, its condensation a glaucoma of indifference protecting it from the world, leaving it only with unguessable thoughts. I got to my feet, unlocked the back door, next to the window, and went out into the night. The atmosphere was damp with something between rain and mist. It was as if the whole cycle of precipitation were visible, with the clouds becoming rain, which refined itself to mist, which coalesced again into clouds. In this night of never-ending mist and rain, the cottage and my life were a single, worm-eaten mushroom, forgotten in some rotten nook.

I looked out at the other cottages, lightless and silent, and at the trees and hedges lining fields that rose into hills. Above them all, screened by the clouds, shone the silver disc of the moon.

The clouds, spreading over the entire night sky, were bunched together in what the Chinese call 'fish scales'. It seemed to me, had they been absent, I would have clearly seen the harvest moon as a tarnished orb with a single glowing ring around it. However, the clouds caught the glow of the moon and transformed it. What I saw above me in the vast and lonely night was a great, silver gong of concentric circles, broken into scales. The mist between the clouds was the endless reverberation of that gong. Strangely enraptured, I listened and seemed to hear. It was a tintinnabulation slowed down to the roar and wash of ocean. That tintinnabulation seemed to form a word, a word that I understood, and did not understand, a word I had never heard before.

Tzintzum. Tzintzum.

I stood there, by the back door, and listened for some while to that silver sound, aware that the ear that heard was the tattered ear of a worm-eaten mushroom.



In the morning I was preparing my breakfast when my father went out the back door carrying a bucket. In a minute he had returned. He closed the door behind him and looked over to where I stood by the breadboard. He stopped then, and began to speak, not so much – it seemed to me – because he thought I required explanation as because

Tzintzum

there was something he wanted to tell someone, and I was there. As he spoke, I noticed that he had not yet put his teeth in, so that his upper lip was collapsed, changing the whole impression of his face, and reminding me, as it always did, of my own descent towards death.

“I worked on a dream I had recently,” he said. “It was a powerful dream. Since then I’ve been taking my urine out and putting it on the garden. It’s what our family have done from generation to generation – this is what the dream told me. But these days it’s been forgotten. The way we live now, it’s like something’s been taken away from us. I feel...”

Here he paused to wipe a tear from his eye and regain his voice, which was choking with emotion.

“...I feel that we’ve lost our connection with the land. They took it away from us, the same way they stole the church from the people. They stole it from us. We don’t have our church any more.

“So... I want to give back to the soil that has grown me. I’ve taken life into my body, and now I pass it out with something added. It’s rich in nutrients – good for the soil.”

I nodded thoughtfully and my father continued up the stairs with his empty bucket.



I took my bowl of breakfast to my room and ate it sitting on my bed. Space is a luxury of which there has been little in my life. Confronted by my room’s usual disarray, I wondered just where I could start in order to make sure the day would represent progress towards something. However, I had long since lost sight of anything to progress towards. For me there was only a miscellany of odd projects, such as the translation of *Dwarf Bamboo*, that meant nothing to anyone. These projects had become a physical maze of books, written notes and so on, taking up the floor of my room. This literal maze was also a conceptual model of an abstract maze.

Somehow I had strayed into the woods. I knew they were only little woods, and comically grotesque, without the majesty of the vast, dark forests to be found elsewhere in the world, but for some time the feeling had been growing on me that, indeed, I would never leave these woods as long as I lived. I would never come to their border. I would never

Cinnabar's Gnosis

see full daylight. I would never know the expansiveness of a traveller who apprehends his destination in the distance and feels he is getting somewhere. So then, how to occupy myself for yet another day in these same, dwarfed woods? Since I could not think of anything that would make a difference to my long-term situation in the slightest, I decided to go out into the garden, split a few logs with an axe, and confront the dilemma again when I had finished.



Outside, as I remembered, was the space in which my life was secretly rich – the space that was not mine, except in as much as it was also time. I had had time in my life to take walks – the same walks day after day – and to feed the pony by the end of the old, dried-up canal track. To put it another way, poverty had been my luxury, and it had been as meaningless and useless as any other luxury.

As I had intended, I split some logs, but soon found my purpose deserting me. It occurred to me that I really spent very little time enjoying the garden, and that it was there most of all as a place simply to linger wordlessly. If I was lucky, my luck consisted in the fact I was able to do this.

I put down the axe and the mallet and I trod the stone steps that descended to the bottom of the garden. It was really a very small garden, so that 'explore' seems the wrong word to use, and yet, in as much as I had never really looked at what had always been there for me to look at, I truly was an explorer.

I was naturally drawn to the slender and leafless tree in the corner of the garden, where the angle of the wall was also the angle of one quiet road meeting another. I did not even wonder what kind of tree it was, though now I come to write about it, and cannot name that tree, I do wonder. At the time the question in my mind was whether the tree were dead or alive.

Because it was leafless, I supposed it might be dead. Its branches were gently aflutter with decorations, turning it into one large wind-chime. Shells hung from its twigs on strings, and lucky silver charms of the kind people once put in Christmas puddings and still use, per-

Tzintzum

haps, for charm bracelets, and here dangled a small thurible and there a St. Christopher, so that the ornaments were numerous enough – and therefore close enough to each other – that they set up a clinking, skeletal murmur with each breeze.

I was reminded of the Christmas tree my father had once found for us to use in that other, better world of my childhood. In fact, it had not been a tree at all, but a bare and twiggy branch that he must have scavenged from the beach or a walk in the hills. As such, its advantages over a normal Christmas tree were at least twofold: It obviated the necessity of killing a tree for the sake of ritual, and it had cost no money. There was also the advantage that it seemed a creative and original choice for a Christmas tree. That had been decorated with fairy-lights, glass baubles and so on. I wondered, then, if the tree now before me, in the garden, were not the same thing – a mere decorated branch made to look like a tree. If it were, that would explain its lack of living green. And yet, despite the grey bareness of the twigs here, something in the calm smoothness of the bark suggested life and the supple growth that curves from the mystery of sap.

Looking down to the soil, in order to inspect the roots – to see, that is, whether the tree had any – I noticed the earth seemed to be damper here than elsewhere, and there was a slight trace of bubbles, as if from dish-water. I guessed that it was this tree in particular that had benefited from the golden liquid nutrients recently bestowed upon the garden. This was evidence – perhaps even proof – that there were roots here to absorb those nutrients. This leafless tree, I decided, was, after all, alive.

I don't know why this thought made me so meditative, but under its influence I sat down upon a nearby rock that had been placed between flowers, my back to the empty road, closed my eyes, rested my chin in my palm, and felt the breezes of the day on my tired face. They seemed to invite me to slip forever into a cool sleep of sadness. Their caresses made me nod towards the heaviness of dropping off. All the while I heard the tintinnabulation of the tree's hanging ornaments, as if the wind were playing a harp made of silver and bone. Clacking glissandos and zigzag cat's paws of miniature glockenspiel made me think of the last foaming tassels of little waves among pebbles and shells on a beach, as if the sea were a robe fringed with tiny silver bells.

Cinnabar's Gnosis

Tzimtzum. Tzimtzum.

So caressed and teased in an empty dream of wind and sound, I sat, or floated, or I simply was, or, then again, a shifting shadow of thought, was *not*. When at length I unclosed my eyes, the immediate appearance there of a sunlit world, and my body resting within it, so vast and yet as light in its suddenness as the perching of a butterfly upon a flower, was a dazzling surprise to me, and I blinked at it to tame its reality to my eyes.

It was only after I had managed to stop blinking that I understood this new reality as well as seeing it. I was not where I had been. I sat in the relative cool between walls the colour of dust and honey. The limited purview revealed by the gap where they ended in parallel was of a town square – a kind of plaza – stone-paved, which it seemed the sun had kept clean and pleasant from some time without a date, a munificent and unpaid caretaker. The air that was the main occupying element of this area had about it, to one who had lived with such things, some indefinable sad freshening of ocean. I knew that we were close to the coast. There were voices in the square, not large against that fresh but idle air – smallish and isolated within it, comfortable in a wakeful emptiness, and clear as wall-carvings. The language spoken was not English and the gentle sharpness of everything was such that I quickly realised the strange specifics of this world; I was in Italy.

It has always seemed to me a kind of cosmic paradox that in a universe so vast a beam of light would take countless human lifetimes to traverse it, concepts such as 'Italy' not only survive, but are to some deeply familiar, like some eternal, secret knowledge that is no secret at all, a dream that for a few becomes everything and is taken for granted. There I was, then, in the dream called Italy, remembering its familiar secret. At that moment, the secret seemed redolent of the tinkle of bells. I heard them, jingling in rhythm with the footsteps of someone in the square, and I could not help being drawn out from between those two walls by a rare curiosity, of the kind that people perhaps only know when they awake in the midst of a dream to find it rich with meaning and mystery.

I looked about me and saw the eternal ordinary of time and place, a moment of daily life that assumed – but did not reveal – a whole history of preceding moments. It was the usual freshness of here and now, in which the inhabitants, of course, notice nothing strange, but to me it was

Tzintzum

full of wonder. The square was surrounded by cafés and hotels, between which there ascended or descended steps and narrow, sloping streets. I did not see the source of the jingling, and forgot it quickly when my eyes fell upon two figures seated at a table outside a café to my left. I saw in them, or rather, I recognised with my entire body, another cosmic mystery, akin to the mystery of Italy. This was the mystery of 'likeness', or heredity. I knew the two people there, though they were younger than I had ever known them to be. They were my paternal grandmother and grandfather. I steadied myself with one hand against the wall as I made some surprisingly lucid, but to me titanic calculations. These calculations seemed assisted by something in my environment, by the very stones surrounding me. I was setting foot here for the first time – *how* was a mystery – but I knew where I was. Nan and Grampa used to come here each year, if they could, on a cruise ship. It was the ancestral home that Grampa's father had left behind. Perhaps the cruise ship was even now in the bay.

I would have said that I did not know what to do. In fact, it did not occur to me that I had to do anything. I was seized by a vital fascination. I watched and listened as if at any moment I would be given information touching upon all the questions at the very foundation of my existence.

Tantalizingly, the information did not come. I remained captivated. My grandmother, Elsie, had, I thought, a beautiful and very tragic face. Everything about it was heart-shaped, like the faces of forgotten film actresses. And yet it was a profoundly ordinary face – the face of someone who would never truly be known, who was hardly known to herself. By contrast, my grandfather, Frank, was alert and outwardly open, while retaining a sense of nervous circumspection, almost as if he were trying to appease the tragedy in my grandmother whilst keeping secrets from it.

"Your leg still hurting?" asked Frank.

Elsie's fur-trimmed coat had slipped off the back of her chair, and she was bending to one side to retrieve it.

Frank watched her with such attentive eye-movements it was as if he knew he was being watched in turn and was making asides about his wife with the quickest of flickers.

"I told you it was just a minute ago," she said, before returning to an upright position.

"Should have left the coat in the room, really."

Cinnabar's Gnosis

I wondered if I should approach them. They were my grandparents and yet they were not my grandparents. There was a tenderness in what I witnessed that made my tendons quiver. The routine of it all was as namelessly known to me as a woman's thigh in shadow beneath a table, and the cool, homely soil-scent of that shadow. Then it came to me that I felt this aching tenderness because I had not yet been born. Perhaps it was impossible for them to see me, not knowing me as I knew them. Perhaps it was not impossible, but would merely be cataclysmic.

I hesitated, my very soul in that hesitation.

As if it had started up to fill the gap made by my hanging back, there came again that jingling sound. Turning instinctively, I found its source. A woman in a long black dress was crossing the piazza. She wore also the black hood and veil of a widow, though there was something outlandish in her attire that made me wonder what her provenance might be. She strode with such striking sense of purpose it was as if I saw a ship with the wind full in its black sails cutting keenly through the crawling glassy waves of the sea. I noticed her brown hands, shocking where they emerged from her sleeves. It seemed to me they were the colour of new-baked bread, yeasty with the pride and passion of all that rises directly from its own nature, without instruction and heedless of censure.

I could not see the bells that must have made the jingling, but I guessed they were perhaps the kind that dangle from a chain around the ankle, as their silver shiver came in time with the woman's steps.

After only a second or two, it was clear that her undeviating course would take her to Frank and Elsie's table. It seemed to me then that I must have hesitated because I was waiting for this stark arrival. The woman stopped perhaps six feet from where they sat, and stood silent, as if confident that her presence was enough to command attention. Her confidence was wholly justified.

"Hello. Who's this?" said Elsie in a quiet and doubtful voice.

Frank turned around quickly, as if his constant alertness had found a small outlet in motion and made him react too keenly.

"What does she want?" asked Elsie.

As I watched, I could not help remarking the contrast between the standing figure, so charged with moment in her attitude, and the seated couple. The latter had seemed to me fine and glamorous in this different

Tzimtzum

age that was their element, but their glamour was plebeian and domesticated. This other creature perhaps had no glamour at all, in the latter-day, degraded sense of the word, but her presence was a veiled lightning. I have said she was outlandish – more in demeanour actually than in attire – but perhaps I would do better to say she was unearthly. And yet, to say so would suggest she was ethereal. She was not. Rather, it was as if the sun-beaten rocks and earth of the region had become woman and walked.

Frank's astonishment was almost that of someone who has been caught out, or someone who is suddenly in the company of two people who do not know each other but know him in very different ways. It seemed a while before he remembered himself sufficiently to try and regain his composure. When he did, however, all the circumspection behind his alertness took over, came forward and asserted itself in a new posture of iron rigidity.

The woman beckoned with one hand.

"Venga! Venga!"

Frank shook his head wordlessly.

When she repeated her invitation, he shook his head again and said "No" in English, with icy decision. The woman started to talk then, rapidly, in Italian.

"What's she saying, Frank?" asked Elsie.

"You tell me, Else. Your Italian's better than mine."

The woman continued her glossolalia.

"I don't understand what you're saying," said Frank. "I don't understand. I don't speak Italian."

With a gesture of exasperation, the woman gave up and walked on, looking back once, then twice, before disappearing up one of the steep roads from the piazza.

"What was that all about?"

"Don't ask me."

Witness to this scene, I had thrilled with a kind of paralysis. The yes or no of the outcome – of my grandfather's response – I felt certain was of profound and urgent importance. His entire life – somehow I knew it – would have been different had he said yes, and he had tried his best to master himself, to dispense with all fuss, and to eliminate all signs of weakness, as, there and then, he made the decision he thought necessary.

Cinnabar's Gnosis

Where, moments before, I had been paralysed with the grave decision that I witnessed, now I was torn that it had been made. Part of me stayed with my grandparents and part of me went with the disappearing figure in black. At first it seemed the part that stayed was the greater part, but then I realised my eyes were only following the woman, and searching the place she had disappeared, and that the greater part of me was with her, or longed to be. And then thought ceased and my legs moved beneath me, carrying me in haste past the table where were located two lives of many without which my life would not be. I left them to shrink once more into the sad unknown of all that is hidden from me.

With a billowing relief that was close to wonder, I turned the corner the woman had turned before me and saw that, after all, she had not vanished, though she was some way ahead. I was too intent on keeping her in sight to care very much whether I was observed in my turn. I pumped my legs hard against the gradient. I think I even wished to be seen. The woman did, indeed, look back at one point, and must have noticed me ascending with hunched determination in her footsteps. However, with some distance still between us and the veil that obscured her face, it was impossible to tell what her reaction was. It might have been complete indifference, and when she turned once more forward and continued without any quickening of pace, I was struck – and stung – by the impression that it *was* indifference, or some lofty knowing akin to indifference that was equally as humiliating to me.

My sense of humiliation acted as a spur, and since my pursuit was not in any way discouraged by the woman, my determination to follow and find – perhaps – what my grandfather had disowned was only strengthened. We passed out of the town, and, looking back, I saw how the streets and houses crowded down to the rich blue enamel of the Mediterranean waters, the rooftops reminiscent of some civilisation of coral and sea anemones exposed by the tide. The buildings, it seemed, had grown up together and were all apiece. There was little or no sign of the new replacing the old. The town itself was a kind of living rock formation, unchanging in its antiquity, staggering in its vertiginous yawn. Fearing I would lose ground, however, I turned again and hurried after the untiring figure ahead of me.

Tzintzum

We began to climb, the interval between us varying little, into a mountainous terrain of scrub and rocks and quiet dust. The sun was fierce and serene, and glowered upon the rocks and earth in such a way that my eyes cooled themselves with an inkiness like that which belongs to thunder clouds. I was sweating profusely, and wondered how the woman could move with such steady composure swathed in her black clothing. There were stone steps for us to ascend, ancient and seemingly hewn from the very rock of the mountain. They were as narrow and precarious as the vertebrae of some behemoth of the world before humans. The landscape itself was the petrified remains of this stupendous monster. The very way in which the steps were worn spoke to me of a span of time far greater than that usually encompassed within my mental horizons, as if something had been exposed that was usually covered. The darkness and strange texture of the stone were the darkness and texture of the antediluvian. The steps ran into each other like the guttering of some incredible candle, used to illuminate the reading of a book known only to the gods. The wax had absorbed the dust of the pre-human study before hardening once more into something both soapy and igneous. At times I stopped, exhausted, and looked out at the flashing convexity of the sea, a shield on which the fiery blow of the sun was falling continuously with a silent, delirious pounding, or down at the shrinking, archaic fantasy of the town, which now appeared the maritime equivalent of that house of sweets into which Hansel and Gretel had been lured. I grew dizzy on such occasions, and the stairway seemed to sway as if it were some endless rope bridge. My vertigo was almost that of someone scaling a mountain-high ladder, but this vertigo only seemed to push me up from below, and so I continued to follow the nameless woman. For her part, she looked back from time to time. I began to feel that she was leading me.

When the sun had worked me upon the anvil of the steps so that I felt myself quite boneless and malleable and white-hot with lack of will, I saw that the woman had reached a plateau and no longer ascended, but walked along a horizontal plane. There were perhaps fifty steps left to me before I, too, gained the plateau. They were harder than the uncounted hundreds of steps I had so far climbed put together. Almost on my hands and knees, I staggered onto the level shoulder of dust. To pretend that I had not been following the woman would have

Cinnabar's Gnosis

been absurd, but I was too enfeebled to care about such things in any case. I sat down in the dust and wiped the sweat from my face with both hands. I almost felt that, in doing so, I made myself a *tabula rasa*.

It occurred to me that the blank I experienced was not *my* blank exactly. The town was still visible below. Surely we were not far from it. I was sure, however, that we had come to a different time – a different *kind* of time – to that which prevailed in the piazza. I had an inkling of what time had pitched its pavilion there. It was from a period before my birth and after the births of my grandparents. This seemed a reasonable – though no longer an impregnable – assumption. The time whose invisible banners streamed in the air of this plateau was a preceding time. My grandparents' time was contingent upon this as I was contingent upon them. And yet, this time also seemed to comprehend their time in the way that the plateau commanded a view of the lilliputian town. My grandparents were encamped in the pavilion of the present – of *their* present. This plateau, somehow, surrounded them. Had my grandfather known that to step outside that small locality would be so soon to step into something deep and vast and other?

“*Venga! Venga!*”

I heard the voice of the woman for the first time since the piazza, addressing to me the words that she had first addressed to my grandfather. No longer so sure of myself, trembling in all my limbs after the sustained effort of the climb, and half chill where the wind caught my sweat, I stood and walked in wary obedience towards her.

The plateau widened in her direction. She was standing amongst piles of stone that still bore some semblance of a symmetry imposed by human mind and human hands. There were low bushes there, too, and skeletal trees.

Drawing close, I saw that the woman was standing at the side of a well, next to the ruins of some gaunt and ancient building, and had drawn a bucket up from the well's liquid heart, to hold it perched upon the rim of the encircling wall.

“Drink,” she said.

If it had not been for this instruction, my awe in her presence might have baffled me. Receiving that instruction, I knew what to do with my awe. In awe I drank and splashed my face, and poured sweet, crystalline

Tzintzum

chill upon my head. The water hardly seemed wet. It was the blood of the rocks, a liquid quintessence of the cold, pure darkness that formed strata of the sediment of shadow deep, deep underground.

When I had finished, sprinkled with jewels of water, and as if knowing anew my own depths with the depths of my refreshment, I turned and saw that the woman had tossed her veil and hood into the dust at her feet, which were bare. Her hair was dark and long, and her face was the same yeasty colour as her hands. She looked neither old nor especially young, but so alive and so without disguise that I could not be unmoved. It came to me that we are taught to apologise for all that is alive in us, taught that it is obscene. Unadulterated life, though it may have the most graceful of manners, is not polite. Life itself is the true enemy of the censor. Now I beheld the uncensored face, as beautiful and ready as that of any hawk.

Obscurely ashamed because I had no face to meet this face that was its equal in nakedness, I averted my eyes, casting them again upon the discarded veil.

“Who were you mourning?” I asked.

“The mourning is over,” she said. “Be happy. Be free.”

I smiled half a smile.

“Perhaps I shall,” I said. Then I looked her in the eye again, suddenly, my head cocked a little to the side, almost as if to shield my eyes from the scorching brightness of the sun, in this way hoping to cover my guile, and I said, “You speak English.”

“We speak the same language now, yes,” she said. “All once spoke the same language, before the tower was built and fell. Are you glad to be here?”

“Yes, I am glad.”

“Do you want to know why you are glad, and why we can speak together like this?”

“Yes. Tell me.”

I felt a strange confidence growing in me, like that of a hunter who knows his arrows will strike home and fell the hart that is his quarry.

“There is another spring here. Its well is not this well of stone. Its well is in your heart and mine. We’re close to it now.”

I looked about me.

“I can’t see it.”

Cinnabar's Gnosis

"Yes you can. You can see its outer parts, at least."

Then she strode across the dust as if she were walking upon water, and laid her hand upon a broken and teetering column of masonry.

"Here," she said.

She turned and looked at me, and her smile was that of someone who had known me before, a smile that seems to say there is no happiness and no glory like the happiness and glory of return. And yet her smile was wistful, too, and conveyed a patient wisdom. She was waiting to see how much I understood.

"This is the Chapel of the Forgotten Tears of Christ," she said.

Her voice was not the sanctimonious voice of a teacher or official guide. She spoke as if referring to a member of her own family, and yet the respect evident in her voice was magnified greatly in its power for being the supple respect of living flesh and blood.

Her eyes flashed and met mine.

"As you can see, the Chapel is ruined. Show me your ring."

"My ring?"

"On the forefinger of your left hand. Who gave it to you?"

She had come forward now and held my hand in both of hers. The skin of her palms was hot and dry. It seemed suddenly as if I had not been touched by a human being for hundreds of years. I remembered with the contact of her flesh something for which there were no words except as phantom clues such as 'community' and 'passion', something I had missed without knowing ever since my mind had taken form around my name.

"My father," I said.

"Where did he get it from?"

"I don't know. From Italy."

"And here," she said, "I have one like it."

She showed me a band of braided silver on the forefinger of her left hand.

"When the tide goes out," she said, "in your land, it goes so far out that on the beaches sometimes it seems like the sea was never there at all. But you walk in the sand, and you smell the sea, and you hear it. You know the sea was there, and that if it did not go out, you would not be able to walk like this, with the crabs and the sea-snails, on its muddy bed. Isn't that true?"

Tzintzum

“Yes, it is.”

“Do you know what that’s called?”

“I don’t know.”

“There’s a word for it – a very old word. But never mind that. It’s time for the tide to come in again. You have come to restore our church. Your heart should be glad.”

“I am glad,” I said again. “Very glad.”

I heard then a gentle clinking, a stir of tintinnabulation. The woman stood still with my hand clasped between her palms. The sound was not from her.

“There’s something only you can do,” she said, and with one hand keeping its grip on mine while the other escaped, she led me through a breach in the shattered walls of the long-forsaken chapel. Roofless, the place had the feeling of some courtyard in a desert haven. It could have been a garden, if it were not for the fact that nothing grew here. Nothing, that is, except for a single tree, slender in its trunk and its branching limbs, which sprouted leafless in one corner. From its twigs there hung rosaries, silver crucifixes, shells and other ornaments. Occasionally a breath from nowhere made them ripple with sound and motion, as if they were eternally borrowing life from the high mountain air, clacking bones forever dead, continually resurrected.

The floor of the chapel had also been ruined so that it was now mostly dirt, with traces of broken masonry and mosaic. Of what remained of that floor, and all the floor had once supported, there were shapes and objects telling plainer than language that there had been human burials here. As if the leafless tree were its headstone, one of these graves was set in the same corner of the chapel, now little more than a rectangular mound of slightly raised earth, surrounded by a fragmented frame of stone. Against the wall next to this nameless grave were set a number of tools that might have been left behind by whatever unknown hand had first dug the grave. Seeing this I had that feeling, once again, that had taken hold of me in the piazza, of being in the presence – on the threshold – of a decision whose implications towered to the sky. Mixed with this, and complicated by it, was the mysterious confidence that had begun to percolate through me a little time previously. Something in this mixture of feelings – something I could not yet comprehend – prompted

Cinnabar's Gnosis

me to let go of the woman's hand, whose touch was so charged and so comforting, and to look about the rest of the chapel's interior.

In the corner opposite the grave and the tree I saw what at first seemed to be a funeral bier. I approached and examined it. There seemed little sign of age in the surface of this slab, and it almost shone in the peculiar atmosphere of that plateau, as if freshly hewn. On and about it were a number of artefacts that shared the troublingly pristine quality of the bier. There was – incongruous in a chapel – a mirror in a frame of bronze, a candelabrum, a censer, a stoup, a thin dagger in the shape of a cross, and a number of other items.

"This is a strange place," I said, when I felt her hand upon my shoulder.

"All places are strange," she said, "when the tide is out. Would you like to come to the end of strangeness?"

"Wouldn't that be strange, too?"

I turned around and she drew back.

"I cannot tell you anything," she said. "Things are as you see. If you wish to restore the church, it is never too soon. I suppose you haven't heard of the loneliness of God."

"How can God be lonely?"

"How can God not be lonely? Look into your heart."

I nodded.

"I understand. I'm sorry. What do I have to do?"

"You must dig."

And so I dug, with the tools that someone had leant against the broken wall. The moment my hoe struck the dry earth, I realised that I had been impatient for this, that this was the hard and wordless work I had procrastinated to avoid, increasingly suffering the strain of my own procrastination.

The woman sat upon the bier and watched, dangling her legs, while I felt myself dissolve in sweat as I broke and turned and shifted that sweet and hallowed dust. I knew that the woman could not help me in this task. I did not want her to. For once it seemed that I would accomplish something real and complete quite by myself. No one else would be able to take credit for my work – not even God.

At times I wiped my brow and rested, leaning on the shaft of the hoe or the spade that I was wielding. When I did, I was unable to

Tzintzum

refrain from glancing behind me at the woman. She watched without boredom, seeming never to look away. I would turn back to my work, each time, with an image of her in my mind, and each image grew into the next. It seemed to me that she was the future – a future of such mystery and possibility as the high mountain breezes that cooled me where I dripped in perspiration. I did not know her name, and did not ask, but it was abundantly clear to me that she was You, the nameless You of whom I had heard in one love song after another. I had often thought, fleetingly, in my life before, that I had met this You, and I had always been miserably mistaken. After a number of such mistakes, it had come to seem to me that that very common and vulgar thing, the love song, was something other than it appeared. It was not a lie, after all, but it was not true in the way that young and foolish people supposed. It had an esoteric truth, which I had sensed before and now, in the presence of the woman, was coming to understand with some precision.

I do not know how long my excavations had continued before I uncovered something in the earthen wall of the grave, set in an alcove of fragmented stone like that forming the outline of the grave itself. Shining within the alcove, as pristine, beneath a layer of dust, as the items surrounding the bier, was what appeared to be a silver chalice.

I stopped and regarded it for some time, and the woman descended from the bier and came over.

“We’re almost there,” she said.

This buried alcove seemed peculiar to me, like something still living though it is embedded in rock. I gazed at it a while longer with puzzled wonder before continuing.

The woman was right, as I had known she would be. It seemed only a few moments later that the spade I was now using struck something quite different to the covering soil.

“That’s it,” said the woman from above me, and she climbed down into the grave with signs of excitement and delight radiating from her every movement and expression.

“You’ll have to climb out,” she said. “There’ll be no room otherwise.”

Again, I did as I had been instructed, and from the edge of the open grave looked down while the woman swept the dirt aside with her

Cinnabar's Gnosis

hands to reveal the timbers of a coffin. Not long since she had been wearing the veil of mourning. Everything in her attitude and motion now expressed some curious ecstasy I had never seen before that was in some way the very reverse of grief.

The lid of the coffin must have been divided in two. When she had sufficiently cleared off the dry soil, the woman lifted open the upper half of the coffin while she continued to straddle the lower. I am not sure now what I had expected to see, only that I had expected something. What I saw was a shock to me, but it immediately eliminated all other possibilities from my mind and became the inevitable. It was myself I saw, arms folded across my chest, eyes closed, with skin and hair soft and lustrous, without decay, as if preserved by whatever had kept certain other things in that chapel immune to the depredations of time. The chest seemed still, without the rise and fall of breath, but the face was radiant, serene, and an impossible smile tingled over the closed lips, so that I thought all sense of something sweet and potential in the dust I had removed had derived from this buried object. It was a thing that so magically defined life that even in death it did not die.

Then the woman smothered that face with kisses as passionate as the agonies of grief, and tears passed from her cheek to his, soaking them both. It was as if she had forgotten there was someone else here to observe her actions. I drew back from the edge of the grave, not wishing to watch any more. Turning my back to the hole, I rested my eyes again upon the bier and walked over to it. I exhaled with a wild resentment, and kicked a stone. The confidence that had been growing in me had not gone. It continued to grow. But it had become twisted now, and bifurcated. I thought of how my grandfather had said no to this woman, of the immovable obstinacy of that refusal, and I nodded grimly. Ideas piled up swiftly in my head, and feelings in my heart.

The woman called my name. When I did not respond she called again. Eventually I walked back to the edge of the grave.

“Why didn't you answer?” she asked.

“I didn't know who you were talking to,” I said.

She looked at me strangely.

Tzimtzum

“We have to get you out of this coffin,” she said.

“Isn’t that a desecration?”

“It’s a desecration made by love and life. Do you think there is any desecration here? You can see how close we are. All desecrations will be redeemed. Look! Your life is here in front of you.”

“Is it my life?”

“What else can it be?”

I shrugged.

She sighed.

“You can’t leave this undone,” she said. “Beneath this coffin, there’s more. There’s the spring whose well is in your heart and mine, which has kept you alive even in death. Once we get you out of the coffin, we can begin.”

“What’s that?”

I pointed to the chalice.

“It’s another well,” she said. “Life flows from it forever. But if we dig deeper –”

“Yes, I understand. What was that word?”

“What word?”

“A very old word.”

“Yes. *Tzimtzum*.”

“Yes. *Tzimtzum*. Do you want me to come down there again?”

“No. Wait a moment.”

She got to her feet and began to climb from the hole. I helped her up.

“There’s something I have to explain to you,” she said. “Maybe you already know part of it, or have guessed, but you need to understand it all. I don’t think you quite –”

Before she could finish, I drew out the misericorde that I had sheathed in my belt, behind my back.

She looked at me in silence.

“Speak,” I said.

I needed to see her face as she saw the dagger in the hand of the one she had just been kissing. I needed to hear her voice and feel her trembling heart as she saw the scorn on the face that she had so lately baptised with her tears.

“What are you doing?”

Cinnabar's Gnosis

Her dismay was as undisguised as had been her passion. It was unbearable, but now, my heart breaking, the only answer I could give was to plunge the blade into her soft belly.

She looked down, open-mouthed. In her blood was all her tenderness and pride – a personal and sacred treasure that none should know who she had not initiated in the mystery herself. Now I was pillaging that treasure, and pillaging only to waste and dishonour it. As her deepest warmth coagulated around my fist, I saw the horror on her face and knew that the worst of it lay in the fact that it was *I* who pillaged. There was no hate, no anger in her face or in her voice, only the horror of violated trust, the horror of someone who does not understand.

“No,” she said, and I had never heard a single word so poignant. And then, “You don’t know what you’ve done.”

In her words there were disbelief and something like pity, unless it was simply that the disbelief was pitiful.

My anger was quickened. My heart was sick with resentment and despair. I drew out the blade, and, as if it were myself I wished to punish, myself I wished to slay, I plunged it again and again into that place where her noble, precious heart still quivered.

All too soon she lay upon the ground, robbed of life.

I fell, and wept on her motionless legs.



Still my crime was not complete. I had become a jackal, a hyena. I cut a length from her black dress, and onto this I placed those objects I could take away – the candelabrum, the censer, the mirror and especially the chalice – before folding the fabric and knotting it into a sack. I had been right – as I discovered – about the bells attached to her ankle. There was a shimmering silver circle of them. These, too, went into the sack.

I rolled the body into the grave and shovelled some earth into the gaping hole, but soon threw down the spade.

Whatever natural feelings I had once possessed, I had disfigured them all. My emotions were beheaded things, voiceless, lumbering monsters that could finish nothing.

Tzimtzum

I took the sack like one accepting a curse and I left the chapel behind me, a fleeing shadow. I could not return to the town. I had to climb the steps again, higher, till they took me across these mountains and on my way to places where I was a stranger, setting foot for the first time.

As I ascended almost to the highest point of that stone stairway, my loot clanking on my back, I was seized and pierced by a wild sense of hope and joy. *She is not dead*, I told myself. She cannot be. I have only done what I must to ensure our sweetest reunion at the very end of time.

I heard then a shriek like that of a seabird, and, reeling in confusion, almost tumbled back down the deadly emptiness of air and mountain-side.

I stopped then to steady myself with my free hand on the rock before me.

She is not dead! It was such a spinning and giddy ecstasy of hope – as if something flashing in the air above had dazzled me – as I had never known before. I drew the dagger from my belt again. The blade was still red with her blood. There was no hope. How could there be? I had never hoped like this before that crime of irreparable despair. This must be the natural madness in the soul of the murderer – a bright rebellion of hope and faith. I looked at the cross of the misericorde. Here was the proof of her death, here the blinding flash of hope and here the curse with which that hope was now forever made riddle and mystery.



I began a strange journey. By the blood-stained blade I carried, I knew it was a quest, although I did not know at first what kind of quest it was. After all, how could I bear to know, when it was a quest of the unthinkable, and when it had started from the terrible end of hope? What further end could there be after the end with which the quest had begun?

I was successful in selling one or two of the items from my sack at the first village to which I came. My communication, I noticed, was somehow charmed. I spoke the language of the villagers without the need to think. Since this blessing seemed uncanny to me, and since the horror of my crime was still not far behind me, I took the money I had made, hurriedly bought provisions, and moved on.

Cinnabar's Gnosis

I stopped among some scrub and dark-boughed trees on a slope of vivid saffron earth, and cut a loaf with my only knife. It had not occurred to me to buy a different blade, but now I saw that everything I ate would be as if cut for me with the blade of murder. The crumbs I forced into my mouth tasted of the disbelief in her last words and the desolation of her final silence. I had turned the entire world that supported me into a broken, poisoned Eucharist of sickness and hate.

In that place, alone, my body and soul dumb to speak of the deformed urges, ecstasies and shudders that now moved them, rather than speak or pray, I took that knife and with it cut determined an inch or so below the toes of my left foot, until that foot was blunt and bleeding, pollarded. My entire life, I thought, would soon be lost with the dizzying spurts of blood.

As I watched, however, the red fountain slowed and stopped. There was half a foot, a section of bone and meat open to the air, but it had become self-contained, this wounded bodily extremity seemingly latching on to some anomaly of belief or perception in my heart to guide its physiology. I flung the chopped-off toes away for the birds to find.

Cutting myself a staff, I limped on my way. In the hours that followed, I witnessed a grotesque miracle. The pale skin of my truncated foot began to grow over the wound that tickled with flies. It moved like oil slowly filling the bottom of a pan into which it is poured. Observing it now and then on my journey was like watching some exotic, half-hideous flower that blooms and closes before your eyes according to sinister sensitivities known only to the world of plants.

Such healing was more than luck, and I felt the miracle's obscure menace. My wound had been sealed over with soft, round, ivory flesh, like a large, stubby ball of thumb. It was as if I had been born with this deformity. At least I was growing into a creature more suited to my journey. I looked, now, like a life-long beggar and vagrant. I did not always need to sell what I had acquired or stolen. I could beg for alms.

The gift of languages – wherever I went I could speak the native tongue – and the gift of healing, were, it seemed to me, part of my curse, and there have been plenty of people, in all times and places, who understand what is sinister in luck and ominous in blessing. I thought of what she, behind that gory, unthinkable barrier of time and

Tzintzum

deed, had said, was there still saying, that the chalice was another well from which flows life. I took it out, often, from the sack, to examine it, and saw how it shone, and felt some chord in me played by fingers of its light. I knew very well what this object was. There were some who believed that there was no object more precious on Earth. And it was this object that formed the basis of my quest. For some the quest would have been to find it. I had already found it. My quest, therefore, was to dispose of it, but I knew I must do so appropriately. To choose how I passed it on – how I rid myself of this article – that was all that was left to me. And my strength to do so came to me only from the memory of my grandfather shaking his head and saying no.

Without such a quest to occupy my thoughts, there was nothing for me but to be haunted by the one whose dying had made me a murderer, and who yet lived on, atrociously, in the glamour that opened to me the locked gates of all language, in the unnatural healing of my mutilated foot, and in the shining of that chalice. Afraid that, in her death and its many wonders, she would somehow return to me, one night as I sheltered in a disused granary in Austria, I took out the knife again and did something that was greater agony than anything my body had previously known. I cut the nose from my face. Blood poured into my mouth from the ruin above it, so that I spluttered and choked, almost drowning in my own spilt life.

The influence of the chalice saved me on this occasion, too. The blood swiftly ceased to flow, and a delicate, moon-coloured membrane crept over the new orifice at the centre of my face. My neck now terminated in a living skull, a death's head. My fear of seeing her again was quelled a little. I had a face that was adequate to meet hers. Hope trembled again beneath what remained of my fear. I had made myself a scarecrow to earn the secret powers of the soul, and in earning them came to symbolise them physically. The crooked, half-foot, skull-faced beggar – behold the power in my form! I had shaped myself into a creature worthy of my crime, and worthy, therefore, of my unholy possession of the stolen chalice. Still, I felt myself fugitive as I clasped that chalice in my pale claw.

So I wandered, begging and buying and selling. I was a beast of ill-omen. But just as some see the curse in the blessing, so some thought they saw the blessing in my curse and hoped to gain a little of that

Cinnabar's Gnosis

blessing by contact and commerce with me, drinking from a poison spring as if it might cure them. I sold almost all I had first taken from the chapel, except for the dagger and chalice. The silver bells from her ankle I sold before too long. It had been partly their jingling that tormented me with the sense of a reappearance forever imminent, but never now – a soon-not-yet, soon-not-yet that made each step I took a tinkling of heralds of the Day of Judgement. It was the silver voice of love, recalling me always to the innocence of new life, but before which I could only stand as one in chains, to be sentenced and condemned. I sold these bells to a hare-lipped and sentimental whore in Salzburg. I told her that each time the bells rang a heart would beat with love for her and that one more link in a silver chain would be forged around that heart, and one more silver coin would pass from those hands to hers. But in my own heart I told myself that for each time the bells rang she would conceive a sorrow that would cause a hundred tears.

Even after I sold those bells, I was followed by a familiar tintinnabulation. As the sun accompanies the steps of a traveller during the day, and the moon at night, so it accompanied mine, moving through the world, as it seemed, by virtue of my movement, and disappearing for long stretches into the obscurity of silence only to be revealed once more, as if by parting clouds, in the bells of a street performer, the splashing of a stream beneath a water-wheel, the jangling of a passing carriage, the clinking of bunched keys on a ring. At one time I stood, transfixed, listening to the chime of nearby church bells. In English, of course, a child knows that the song of a church bell is “ding-dong, ding-dong”. It is a round and melodious sound, often jubilant, sometimes dolorous. However, in my stolen sack of unlucky charms and trinkets, I carried something that opened my ears to other languages. That melodious “ding-dong” became cracked and fuzzy in my hearing. There was, instead, a sound that fizzed and hissed with a constant inner sparking. *Tzimmtzum. Tzimmtzum.*

I looked, and the steeple of the church appeared to me then crooked, like a shadow thrown upon jagged rock, and the face of the clock was glowing like a forge. From the glow there emerged, as if from the haze of immense heat, a shimmering pattern of concentric circles. The circles began to warp and blur and spin into a spiral. All the while

Tzintzum

there came that buzzing chime, of bells speaking some other language than that I once believed native to them. *Tzintzum. Tzintzum.* I had been hearing it, of course, for a while now, but before it had been something like a silent sound, a suggested sound, the echo in my mind of a sound in my ears. Now the sound in my ears was growing closer and closer to the echo in my mind. The two were converging. I saw the very vibrations upon the air of the loud clanging of those bells, the waves of concentric circles that made all the town seem to shift in an undersea way, the houses, roads and shops becoming crooked, watery shadows.

Tzintzum. Tzintzum.

Hardly able to keep my balance, I limped away on my staff in fright. Behind me that crackling chime of *tzintzum-tzintzum* sounded like laughter issuing from the dry, scaly, lizard-like lips of a very old man. I even seemed to see his tapered tongue wriggling skittishly like a lizard's tail.



As my purpose became clearer to me, so also did the need to disguise the chalice that I carried. Above all, this meant finding some way to dim that object's lustre. It was a spangled capturing of light whose effect was something like that of a strong white beam thrown upon a cinema screen, except that the screen, in this case, was what most would call reality. Reality seemed pale and worn-through in its presence. Even a person who had never heard the name by which this object was best known would nonetheless recognise something more than mundane in that luminosity. The layer of dust that had covered the chalice when I first saw it had not been enough to dull this light. The needed disguise would not be easily achieved.

My travels became a search for any means by which the chalice might be tarnished, dented and begrimed. When walking lonely dirt tracks, I let it drag behind me on a string. I threw it into the flames of burning houses, not caring for the burns I suffered in retrieving it. I made it sticky with the blood of slaughtered pigs, and mired it in the slops of abattoirs. I baptised it with the vomit and bile of dying men. I dipped it in the ink used to print scandal-sheets and spattered it with

Cinnabar's Gnosis

the wax of purloined funeral candles. Slowly, the layers of ash, dye and unspeakable filth began to take hold and accumulate in a glorious, heterogeneous crust that appeared to me more precious in its vile nacre than the silvery shine it obscured.

I came to Bohemia, and it happened that, as I was beginning to be satisfied with the baroque crust on the chalice, I entered Prague. Limping across Charles Bridge on feet that seemed to bleed their ache into the stones they trod, I looked at the dark avenue of statues that stood witness to my progress – St. John of Nepomuk, the Pieta, St. Francis Seraphic and St. Anna – looming icily as black ocean spray frozen in time, and I knew that what I thought of as my quest must be accomplished here. The air had about it that tender sobriety of twilight that seems to distil all things into a vision at once infinitely pellucid and infinitely evanescent. This solemn twilight emanated from the very stones of the city. Prague, it seemed to me, in all the world must be the very capital of twilight. On the other side of the cold and melancholy Vltava, the triangles, domes, trapezoids, ovals, arches and spires made such a grand miscellany of shape against the empyrean of clouds that I remembered the town of the jagged church steeple whose bells had spoken an alien language that echoed over the wavering undersea streets.



There was something kaleidoscopic about Prague, with its castle, its Synagogue and its astrological clock – at which one day I stared until I was afraid to stare any more – that gave me the impression of things converging. Things converged here like the pattern of coloured beads in a kaleidoscope converges with its multiplied reflections before being swallowed up in them; they converged as the sound of *'tzimtzum'* in my mind and in my ear had converged that time, and continued to converge on other occasions since. As if spiralling from one holy site to another in pilgrimage, I entered those establishments of drinking and entertainment that are known as places to be avoided. Although I saw strange things at each of them, the strangeness was exoteric, to be understood at a glance. The people of this world are required to present themselves in a certain way in public and feel, therefore, that they have crossed the forbidden

Tzitzum

border into true living if, in a dark but crowded place that is both public and hidden, they engage in activities diametrically opposed to what is otherwise publicly known and seen of them. Most of the strangeness did not extend further than this. However, when I sold a trinket here and there and asked where else I might sell, one name recurred as something proposed for consideration, and then dismissed. My sense of convergence became a crackling of lightning when I heard that name.

Establishments of ill repute in some sense look out upon the reputable daylight world, as if they are merely a dark corner one backs into. But some who back into that corner cease to look out upon the world they have left. They turn and face the corner itself until, by some mystery of the converging of kaleidoscope patterns, and the shifting and self-swallowing of those patterns, the corner opens up and shows a space beyond. The windows of this new realm no longer look out upon any reputable place where daylight comes. They look out on an endless, resounding darkness where something like ragged tapestries seem to flutter, and occasionally a whining, a moaning or a chanting can be heard, followed by cold wafts of obscene incense and a timpani of charnel things.

The name of the place was Indra's Web.

At first, none would give me directions there, claiming ignorance. However, the information finally came to my ears. At one tavern I was asked to leave by the landlord. He did not want me peddling my wares on his premises, or perhaps he simply did not like the look of me. I asked where else I might expect to sell my wares so that I might eat and live. He looked at me with unflinching hostility.

"Indra's Web is the place for you," he said, as if he were telling me to go directly to Hell.

"How do I get there?"

He hesitated, as if he had not anticipated that I would take him seriously, and then he smiled in sly derision and gave very exact and complicated directions.

The night is always on its way to becoming dawn, so that to speak of the depths of the night can be deceptive. And yet, if the night is only a brief interlude, it is also true that it is the natural time of dreams, and sometimes these dreams seem to leak and infect even the waking aspect of the night. When I stood outside Indra's Web, I sensed that the night

Cinnabar's Gnosis

had been contaminated in just such a way, and that I had come to a curious hinterland in which place had escaped the usual governance of time. It was obviously a foul and dangerous part of the city. Steps led down behind a building amongst unsleeping tenements. At the bottom of the steps was a windowless door, scratched, stained and battered, and above this door was a sign painted in a careless script, dubiously proclaiming, "Indra's Web". On other signs, now obscured by soot, pigeon's droppings and diverse unknown filth, were older names, many of them now illegible. Still other names were scribbled heavily in chalk on the bricks around the doorway. It was as if the place were essentially nameless, and was known by a name that was only an echoing, ever-changing Chinese-whisper. Perhaps, I thought, in the same way that there was no real name, there was also no true owner.

I hobbled down the steps, trying to become the shadow I cast – a thing that in its weakness was nonetheless invulnerable and could mingle anywhere with impunity. I knocked on the door with my staff. It opened an inch or two, and from the darkness within a voice hissed, "Who sent you?"

The landlord had been well-informed. I gave the name he had given me – that of Meyer – and passed inside.

"That way," the voice hissed again, and a grimy finger pointed along a short passage. Then the owner of that finger was gone into some hole of darkness within the darkness.

This, I knew, as I saw the shadows upon the interior wall, was the centre of the spiral of my pilgrimage. For the first time, upon entering such a place, I was afraid. I felt that my disfigured face and my crippled foot were mere disguises that might be seen through at any moment. There were sounds here – a kind of bedlam of laughing and singing, along with the intermittent wheezing of an accordion – but they did not mingle in that warm ambience called a hubbub. Instead, each voice seemed to shape itself with slow, narcotic clarity within the element of a nightmare silence, as beetles and other small creatures underwater are enveloped in silver film. I could hear with great closeness and lucidity the scrape of my one-and-a-half feet upon the gritty floor.

The short entrance passage ended and I came out into an open space, dimly lit with lanterns and candles, where wooden pillars, stone pillars, raised floor areas, dank low, half-walls of stone and tattered

Tzimtzum

folding screens formed a minimal sense of partition. It seemed little more than a cellar – a truly cheerless place – though a large one. Huge barrels loomed out of the darkness to the far left, and next to them was a tiny counter, behind which stood a man with more the look of a watchman about him than a landlord, as if he had goods or information only for certain people who he would know by a word, an introduction or shared knowledge. There were jars and bottles on makeshift shelves behind him, containing liquids of all colours and, clouded by murkiness, vague pickled objects. On the counter was a large demijohn half-full of some yellow potion.

The air was webbed with a sweet but oddly sickening smoke, which made me shudder as if my flesh had turned chill from the inside. I glanced briefly at a group of men around a table in a corner, partly partitioned by a low wall. One of them was smoking some kind of shisha. His beard was stark and stiff with grease and his flesh was pale as with fever. More than in any of the places I had previously visited, I knew that I should not let my eyes linger on the habitués, and so I looked away. I had seen enough of the others at the table, however, to know that I was far from being the strangest creature here.

The name of the place, even if it were only the latest name in a series, was appropriate to the point of inevitability. Any place where drinks are sold and imbibed is a mixture, in atmosphere, of the public and private, but I had never known such an eerie mix of those two qualities of atmosphere as this. It was as if the web of smoke were an actual web, by which the nervous systems of all the bar's inhabitants were extended quiveringly onto the unwholesome air – extended and linked together. And any agitation in one quarter of that tense, nervous web was immediately communicated in spidery vibrations to every other quarter. I did not feel threatened – as in the other squalid holes I had entered – because of the explicit violence of a fist-fight or a stabbing (which here might have eased the tension), but because of the sense that I had interrupted something, with my presence, that I did not understand. A fly, I imagine, does not understand what it is that tangles its legs and wings when it is caught in the silver strands of a web, but it knows, when it feels that web tremor, that something unspeakable has found it and is approaching.

Cinnabar's Gnosis

I did not wish to buy a drink here, though I guessed the name 'Meyer' might help me to do so, as it had helped me at the door. I looked away from the various half-lit groups of figures and towards a stone arch, beyond which was a suggestion that the vaulted ceiling continued. The smoke of years and decades – perhaps longer – seemed to have accumulated on the air and the layers so formed became increasingly visible towards this arch as endless rings of furrowed waves.

The dread that overcame me as I gazed through that arch into the unknown turned to chill fatalism. The fatalism, in its turn, grew into a sense of grim defiance and perversity. I moved then to an unoccupied table nearby, whose surface caught more of the scant light than the others, and on this, with a deliberate emphasis of gesture that brought also a clanking emphasis of sound, I set down the sack that had been my burden for so long. Without a word I loosened the knot and spread out its corners on the table. Then I began to arrange the items it had contained in two neat rows. All that remained of my loot from the chapel was the misericorde, still sheathed in my belt, and the chalice, which now stood in one of the two rows mentioned, between worthless gewgaws I had picked up on my way – a mandrake root on one side and a Jew's harp on the other.

As I set about this task I knew, by means of that nervous, vibratory web of smoke, that various pairs of eyes were turning to me. I had gone through a similar performance before in this city. It was a ritual by which I amplified within my heart my contempt for all the people of this world, laying out before their eyes all manner of gimcrack, and with it the chalice, which was worth more than this orb called Earth that is their home. Encrusted now as it was with layers of filth, this was no longer a vessel that people would care to drink from or wish to use as ornament. Those who passed the chalice over in favour of some cheap pendant or bogus relic did not realise that they were, in relation to life, no more than the dirt that caked this chalice and obscured its true radiance.

"All items for sale," I said, without looking up from the table.

Somehow my ritual seemed to take on a different meaning here.

One or two ragged characters approached to examine my wares. Purchases were made. Even here, however, it seemed that the chalice

Tzimtzum

went unrecognised. I began to wonder whether I had even needed to disguise it. Disappointment was spreading from my tongue like the taste of bitterness when I became aware that I was being observed closely by a figure seated at a table somewhat to my right set against the frame of an empty, unmanned counter. The figure would not have stood out in most crowds, I decided, but he stood out here. He wore a dark suit which matched in its impression of gravity his equally dark hair and moustache and the paleness of his face and hands. His head gave the impression of strength rather than subtlety, his skull being of a square shape and his face seeming concave, dented towards the eyes and the top of the nose. This concavity gave his eyes a quiet but remarkable intensity. When he moved, it was not with grace, but with abrupt energy, his movements seeming always to stop before they had reached a natural conclusion, as if the very nature of this man were a form of self-control that had stunted him and which yet brewed within him a tremendous power.

This man had a companion, and that companion was more peculiar. It was human – it must have been – although something made me question this assumption. It had the appearance of being a very old man, and perhaps the age of this creature had caused it to wither and shrink, because it was tiny upon its seat, like a child. Size and age vary within human beings, and I do not believe that the simple extremes of senescence and smallness here mixed were enough to account for the aura of utter repulsiveness that this creature possessed. I began to wonder, as I glanced at it now and then, whether it were perhaps possible that this was a hybrid of human and something else. Could one of the parents have been an ape of some description? This idea did not convince me and I began to think instead of some of the more hidden and less celebrated adventures of science. Whatever had made this creature – and what was the god of which such a thing could be the image? – it was distinguished not only by its physiognomy but also the clothes it wore. They appeared wrong, somehow, in this setting, and reminded me of the sense of timelessness that had impressed me before I had entered, and of other very peculiar thoughts and feelings I had experienced when gazing through the stone arch.

The creature's atrophied legs were bare and it wore what at first appeared to be a loincloth, which I soon realised was a flannel nappy.

Cinnabar's Gnosis

Covering its torso was a white nightgown, stained and torn, and too small even for this pygmaean frame. These clothes looked as if they might have been stolen from an orphan, and the moment this idea occurred to me, a nasty suspicion took root in my heart. Augmenting the impression of something simian about this being was the collar and leash, like that I had observed used to tether the monkeys of organ grinders. The other end of the leash was in the black-suited man's left hand.

As I watched, this foetid homunculus produced a tankard from beneath the table and passed it across to the man with the moustache, its manner that of skin-crawling tenderness. Its mouth twitched and wriggled into an infantile grin as if in a combination of scatological amusement and sly, bestial pride. The pallid man received the tankard and peered into it approvingly. Then he quaffed, his Adam's apple bobbing. His expression when he set the tankard once more on the surface of the table was that of a connoisseur savouring and ruminating. He took another quaff or two and then, with strangely deliberate vindictiveness, splashed the rest of the liquid in his companion's face. The creature flinched and cringed sickeningly and the man gave a short laugh.

"A taste of your own medicine," he muttered, meaningfully.

Not satisfied with this, he threw the tankard itself, which bounced off the creature's skewbald and mangy skull. It flinched again, more pathetically than before.

The man looked over in my direction, then back to his leashed companion.

"Get up! Get up!" he said, and, standing himself, walked towards me.

There was still a punter at my makeshift stall, but, half turning his head and seeing the other two approach, he hastened away. I noticed again the abrupt, bullish movements of the man with the moustache. Nothing about him seemed to flow, and yet there was a kind of precision or discipline to his manner. Even that may not be an accurate description. I had the sense that what appeared unnatural and arrhythmic to others was to him, in fact, very natural. Nonetheless, there was something of contradiction here. His outward form was stiff and inflexible, but inside he was different. It was as if he were a living version of the tankard he had just hurled at the homunculus – a solid, strong vessel containing some unknown liquid.

Tzintzum

The creature on the leash, yanked along with unnecessary vigour, when not stumbling, crept forward in a stooped and fawning manner, all knock-kneed and pigeon-toed.

Standing before my display, the man glared at me. His eyes moved up and down, assured in their appraisal. When I first saw him, I had found his face undistinguished – the kind of face it is hard to picture when it is not present, since the features do not seem to add up to any very individual impression. The entire head seemed unformed, a kind of rough prototype. And yet, that confident, sardonic glare and those sour, contemptuous lips brought to the face a burning quality that told me that this was no run-of-the-mill human being now examining me with the same commanding attachment as that with which he examined my wares.

He picked up the items one by one, seemingly amused with what he found. His creature turned its moist eyes on me.

“Shall I sing for you?” it said.

I stared back in fascinated horror.

“Shall I sing for you?” It repeated the question, apparently puzzled at my silence.

“It seems these choice objects are not going for a song,” said the moustache, with a sidelong, downward glance at the creature.

As this was happening, I heard a rapping at the door by which I had entered this place. The door must have been opened and the newcomer was admitted. There came a rasping voice – the same voice that had hissed at me only a little while previously.

“...an acquaintance of yours. Said you’d sent him.”

I could not catch all that was spoken.

“Oh yes? Where is he?”

“Inside. He has no nose.”

“How unusual.”

“Do you know him?”

“Perhaps.”

“Said Meyer had sent him.”

“But who is Meyer?”

“What do you mean?”

“Never mind.”

Cinnabar's Gnosis

Then there emerged from the dark passageway into the ambient gloom of the smoky cavern, a thin figure in a buttoned-up jacket and a peaked cap. His eyes seemed to glow with the reflections of candle flames as he looked in my direction. Immediately he had seen me and my strange customers, he retreated to the tiny counter where the sentinel of the demijohn held vigil. Here he acquired a shot glass of something greenish and then turned to watch the unfolding transaction.

Finally, the moustache picked up the chalice, his hand extending leisurely, but his grip on it sudden. He nodded to himself and frowned, then held it up the better to catch the light. Even in that dim cellar, beneath stalactite scabs and rinds of unclean matter, there was a silver gleam that turned encrustations of the foulest colour pearly.

“What do you want for this?” he asked.

“That one’s not for sale.”

“Then why is it on display?”

“A mistake.”

“I don’t think so.”

“It’s an heirloom.”

“Maybe so, but not yours.”

“Yes. It’s been in my family for a long time. That dirt is our history.”

“I can believe that the dirt is yours, but I’m not buying that. Dirt is dirt cheap and in plentiful supply, and I have already more than I need.”

“It’s a sacred trust – we must protect the chalice, and pass it on to our children.”

“But you won’t be having any children, will you? I have a child here, though, on this lead. I think I’d like to pass this on to him.”

“Why do you want to buy it?”

“Why don’t you want to sell it?”

“I’ve told you.”

“This is not your heirloom. How did you come by it?”

He searched my face as if to find the answer there, but I said nothing.

“You cannot have acquired it by any proper, moral means.”

It seemed to me then that this person might even be some kind of policeman – he had the manner.

Then he smiled.

Tzimtzum

“But, quite frankly, I’m not a very moral person. I won’t inquire into how you got this thing. I do know you’ve been looking for a buyer, however. I’ve heard of your presence here in Prague. I’ve even seen you. And now here you are. And here I am. So, what do you want for it?”

I grew afraid. I knew that I had, indeed, come to the end of my quest. All that was left to me of free will was to name my price.

“Beat me,” said the creature on the leash. “Please beat me!”

And with its right paw it pulled down the nightgown from its left shoulder and showed where the flesh was bruised and scarred, and where a loathsome spider danced within the filmy cell of a pustulent cyst.

Immediately, the moustache dealt a strong, backhanded blow to the creature with his left fist. The creature sprawled easily upon the floor and then got to its feet again, its long, yellowish tongue licking the blood from its upper lip and probing its nostrils.

“Get to your seat,” said the moustache.

The creature obeyed, and its master looked to me with eyebrows raised as if in extension of his previous question.

“I don’t know why you want to buy it,” I said. “It’s worthless, like all this junk. It would make me laugh if you paid even ten hellers for it.”

“Yes,” he said nodding, “that would make me laugh, too.”

He threw the coins on the table and looked me in the eye as if we understood each other.

“I’ve met people like you before,” he said, shaking his head in contempt and disbelief. “Well, Villiers here needs a new piss-pot, anyway.”

And he took the chalice and turned away. I heard a chuckling, as if that sound emanated from his black-suited back. He passed the chalice into the paws of the creature, who took it greedily, the expression on its face at once crafty and moonstruck.

“Villiers,” said the man, “our desires are no longer to be denied. Let us depart.”

I watched as Villiers hopped from his chair and allowed his master to lead him through the rippling smoke to the stone archway and beyond. For a while their steps sounded. Then they became muffled, and soon I could discern nothing audible from that direction, except, finally, a creak that might have been a door, then, briefly, voices, then nothing. The smoke billowed back from the arch, rolling on a draught of chill air.

Cinnabar's Gnosis

I had the peculiar thought, as I watched the turbulence of that smoke, that I had understood something of the nature of corruption. It is a word that conjures up images of languid curves, of a beauty that, in being seductive, has become wicked and poisonous. The man who had just been here, however, and had left a billow of smoke in his wake, despite the rigid angularity of his spirit and his form, was undoubtedly the very soul of corruption. Its whisper lingered in the air with his departure.

I swept the remaining goods from the table. There should have been no surprise in the fact that all remaining to me now was worthless – empty and worthless. Such had been the predictable end of my quest from its inception.

I staggered from that den of wanton sinners, fools, lunatics and aspiring demons the way I had come. A despair had descended upon me now that was the equal and counterpart of that maniac hope that had torn me like a veil on the mountainside after her murder.

“My darling, mother, sister, child!”

I repeated this mantra of grief as I climbed the stairs again to the eternally indifferent street, warmly uncaring in its blanket of night and the mere fact of its existence.

I wept as I hobbled away from that place. In dwarfing my grief, the world itself was dwarfed. In failing to notice me, it proved its own insignificance to my soul. All that was left, therefore, was my homeless grief, and that was all I cared for.

After I had turned one or two corners, I heard footsteps. They were merely part of the world that I had forsaken and I gave them no thought until I found that I was no longer walking alone. The man in the peaked cap was now beside me. I glanced at him as I limped miserably along, but said nothing.

“Where are you going?” he asked.

I had been walking without any destination in mind, since the world, anyway, had ceased to exist except as a dungeon cell of memory and mechanical fortune.

“To the river,” I said. “I want to see the river.”

“Then we’re going in the wrong direction,” he said. “It’s this way.”

I made a sidelong study of the man’s features while he looked ahead, navigating our route. His face was, in some ways, even closer

Tzintzum

to a skull than mine. His cheeks bore hollows that were almost scars, and there seemed little in the way of flesh between skin and bone. Blood, however, he did have. I saw it mark out his life in pulses on his temple. His eyes were stark with the same hot life, as if he drew all his sustenance through them rather than through his mouth.

“I believe I know what you just did,” he said.

“What did I do?”

“You sold what has no price.”

“Is it your business?”

“Perhaps. After all, I’m the one who sent you, am I not?”

“You are Meyer.”

“That’s right.”

“Who was the other one? The one who... bought it?”

Meyer sighed as if unsure how to tell what he had to.

“No one knows for sure. He’s a kind of spy, so they say. I’ve been watching him a little, but I feel sure it’s dangerous to watch him too closely. He doesn’t belong here, and he comes and goes in mysterious ways. No one knows what his purposes are, but it seems sure that of all the people who have passed through Indra’s Web, looking for... all the things that people look for there, he is one who is certain to become someone. If he himself is not known by the world soon, then his deeds will be, or their consequences. His name, if names have any meaning, is Somerset-Maugham.”

“What is that creature that was with him?”

“Perhaps that’s even harder to say. I had a strange conversation with it once, when it was there in Indra’s Web on its own. I tried to find out its relation to Somerset-Maugham. It answered readily, as if it were a kind of innocent, incapable of lying. It said it was his child. This seemed improbable, so I questioned it again, and it replied, almost like a pupil reciting a lesson, that the child is father to the man and that the man – Somerset-Maugham – was in the same way father to *it*, the child-creature.”

“In the same way? It’s his future.”

“Perhaps.”

“Is that possible?”

“Who can say what’s possible?”

Cinnabar's Gnosis

Night was beginning to recede from the sky. The faint tints of coming light seemed to me an intimation of vast and weary sadness.

"What have I done?" I said in terrible lamentation. "It's too late. It's too late."

We came at last to some steps leading to the ceaseless dark waters of the Vltava, and there we stood.

"It's too late," I said again. "What can be done?"

We talked for a while as the solemn dawn approached.

Meyer did not seem hopeful about the possibility of reclaiming the chalice from Somerset-Maugham.

"Let us say, then, that, here on the banks of the Vltava, we are standing in a different world than that which saw the sun rise yesterday, and that, hereafter, the rays of the sun will always be colder, and dreams will cease to be the language of the gods, but will become only the gibbering of the nervous system, like the rattling of a skeleton, let us say we have set foot in a new world; even so, we must explore it, and make what lives we can within it. We even may seem to remember a world that the devil, triumphant, has erased from time – remember things from outside of time, things that never were. To remember such things..."

But something strange was happening to me, and sometimes I could not understand the words he was speaking.

The dawn was not far off now, but a mist was thickening along the river. It seemed to me as I watched the water lapping close to my feet, one whole and one maimed, that I was not a human being at all, but had merely imagined myself to be. I was instead, a kind of piecemeal doll, something like a chest of drawers, with a drawer where my heart was, perhaps, and a mirror for a head, a clock for a stomach, one leg stolen from a chair, and another made from a bellows, a hand of clay and an upper arm of alabaster, a bookcase for my left shoulder and a birdcage for my right. I was inanimate, but had been animated by some covering of dream-flesh. That flesh now seemed to be drying up and shrinking away, so that I cracked and felt myself about to crumble.

From somewhere further along the wide, sombre flow of the Vltava there came a sound as melancholy as the cry of geese. I suppose it was the clanging of a bell on some river barge. It was as meaningless to me as the voice of the man still at my side.

Tzintzum

Then, for a moment, I thought I understood that clanging, that funeral peal of piercing hope.

Tzintzum. Tzintzum.

Momentarily, the words of the man beside me, too, made sense.

“...again, still, remember I’m the one who sent you. As such I say, fate will not forget. Fate will not forget.”

Then there was only clanging and mist and the sound and movement of water, growing darker.



When I opened my eyes, still sitting upon the stone in the garden, the scene was illuminated to me by an inner sense of strangeness. I thought of dusty Gethsemane, which I had visited as a boy, and where I had sat and watched the crawling of ants in sunlight and in shade. Then I thought of the Japanese fairy tale, ‘The Dream of Akinosuke’ as retold by Lafcadio Hearn. Akinosuke had fallen asleep beneath the cedar in his garden and dreamt that goblin courtiers had come to take him to the kingdom of Tokoyo, where he had wed the king’s daughter and been sent to rule with her over the island of Raishu. Together they had reigned for twenty-three years, until the princess had died. When he awoke he told his friends of the dream and they advised him there was an ants’ nest beneath the roots of the tree. Digging it up, they had found the topography of Tokoyo in miniature, and even the grave of the dead princess – a female ant – marked by a tiny stone.

A dream of twenty-three years...

I looked towards the leafless tree in the corner of the garden. Of course, I wondered what I would find if I dug up the soil at its roots, but I did not do more than wonder.

All that day I scratched my head and scribbled notes about dreams and fairy tales, trying to reconcile them with what appeared to be their attractive opposite – a doctrine I had found encapsulated in the two words ‘*amor fati*’. I came to no conclusions.

“Nonetheless, something has to change,” I said, as I lay down my pen that evening.

Cinnabar's Gnosis

I slept and I dreamt a vivid but relatively ordinary dream. In the dream I was going to visit a friend from university. I arrived at a sandy, mist-enshrouded beach as the gloom of evening was descending. There were rows of beach huts full of rowdy, drunken strangers. I found an old, red telephone box and made a call to my friend, but there was no answer. So I set out to find his house without guidance. When I found it, he was not there. I was let in, and waited in the front room, but he did not arrive. The girl who had let me in – one of his housemates – eventually got up to go to bed. As she did so, she said, “You can’t stay here tonight.” She was angry, and I realised I was not welcome. I tried to telephone my friend again, but to no avail. Finally, I assured the housemate that I just needed to collect my things together and would not be there in the morning. I’ll sleep in the street, I thought to myself. She was not entirely satisfied with this arrangement, but at last agreed and went to bed. Eventually I was ready and about to step through the front door when the door of a downstairs room opened and another girl – another housemate – appeared. She asked me where I was going and I explained. “Why don’t you sleep in my room?” she suggested. I appreciated her offer, but declined. I had promised the first girl I would not be there in the morning. Quite resigned to my fate, I turned to step out into the cold.

It was, indeed, cold, when I awoke the next day. I made myself a breakfast of porridge. I had switched to porridge recently, tired of the fact that the manufacturers of other breakfast cereals gave me no choice whatsoever on the question of sugar. If I wanted to eat their cereals I had to conform to what was apparently the taste of the general public – the disgusting, vulgar taste for sugar, sugar and more sugar. Gazing at my porridge in the saucepan, I thought of how I loathed human beings. As the porridge bubbled and swelled, however, I fell into a bleary-eyed daydream. I remembered the fairy tale ‘Sweet Porridge’, in which there was a magic pot that would not stop producing porridge. I felt I could understand where the inspiration had come from. Porridge was, indeed, a magical and monstrous food, appearing to well up from nowhere before your very eyes. As a child, the thought of a world drowned in porridge by the magic porridge pot had quite distressed me.

I sat on the stiff settee in the front room, gazing at the unlit fire as I ate. My father descended the stairs behind me, bucket in hand – as

Tzintzum

I saw in the mirror above the fire – and went out through the back door. Before very long, he returned. He placed the bucket halfway up the stairs and then sat in the chair by the fire.

“Did I tell you I’ve got swine flu?” he said.

“Er... No.”

“I have. I can feel it invading my lungs and draining my energy. What have you been working on?”

I exhaled, sighingly.

“Nothing, really.”

“No special projects?”

“A few projects. Nothing special. I just don’t feel motivated.”

“Isn’t there something you’re interested in, some kind of inspiration?”

“I suppose there is. I’m just not sure anyone else is. I’m tired of horror, anyway, tired of ‘the Scene’. You know, I read something the other day, someone was describing someone’s writing as ‘deliciously bleak’. How can you be ‘deliciously bleak’? It suggests to me that the person who used that phrase doesn’t actually take the bleakness seriously, and yet he wants more... like *Oliver Twist*. Because it’s so delicious. Maybe the *Oliver Twist* simile doesn’t work. Anyway, he wants others to produce this bleakness so he can consume it. He very clearly doesn’t take it seriously – although he probably thinks he does – but he wants the author to go on taking it seriously and living a bleak life so that he can produce more of this authentic, secret-recipe bleakness. It’s pathetic.”

“It doesn’t matter what they want. What do you want?”

“I don’t know.”

I continued eating my porridge for a while, and then spoke again.

“I mean, why don’t they read some philosophy, or something? Take a look at the long history of human thought and spiritual endeavour that modern science flatly dismisses as not worth thinking about.”

I nudged a heap of books with my toe to indicate my meaning and they collapsed onto the rug. It came to me that I had two whole feet, and I thought again of the strangeness of my own twenty-three-year dream.

Returning to my room, I was unsettled and could not concentrate on anything, so, after I had dressed, I decided to go for a walk.

Passing the tree at the corner of the garden, I thought to myself, Nothing will change if I don’t dig up what’s buried there. But what if

Cinnabar's Gnosis

I dug and found nothing? What then? After all, the crime had been committed in a foreign land, before I was even born. For that reason, it seemed to me, I could never escape its influence. For that reason, however much I dug, I would always find nothing.

In any case, I thought, what I need right now is a spade. As I walked, I was overcome by a feeling of almost infinite gravity – that everything might depend upon the blade of a single spade and what I did with it. What would the future be if I did not dig? What would it be if I did? How could I know which future was which, and which future did I want, anyway?

I turned down the narrow canal path. The canal itself was long since dried up and filled in, but a narrow path still ran along its route. I passed the Japanese knotweed and went through the newly erected kissing gate. In this area was a patch of ground that had often absorbed my attention. Next to the path, where once the canal had been, was something that appeared to be a separate world of its own, a kind of grove, almost like an unfinished or abandoned ornamental garden. Some juniper bushes (one grey and dying), some stringy grass, a scattering of small rocks and a clump of bamboo added to this impression. Branches overhung this world-in-miniature, and a slope of trees and ferns rose up from it on the other side from the path. Here, depending on the season and the weather, was a shallow pond. It filled and drained away very swiftly. Sometimes I would be staring at the reflections of skeletal branches in water, and sometimes I would be staring at an expanse of dried mud carpeted with dead leaves. In the early summer I had walked by when there had been water, and I had noticed the congeries of black-eyed jelly-blobs from which frogs were soon to spawn. On later days, I had dipped my hands in the water and scooped up wriggling sweet handfuls of gelatinous life. Then I spent some time away from the area. When I returned, it was passing from high summer to late. The pond had almost entirely dried up. I looked for tadpoles or frogs, but found none. The patch of bamboo made me think of Kafu, and I wondered if I could write a short, meditative piece in the Kafu style, under the title, 'Tadpoles', but I never did. And I never had, since the hatching of the tadpoles and the subsequent drying up of the pond, seen any frogs in the area that might have survived from that time. What had become of them all?

Tzintzum

I stopped now and pondered this question again. The pond had reappeared and once more disappeared, and was now a patch of leaf-strewn mud sufficiently dry to walk upon. What futures had proceeded from this now empty beginning? Maybe the majority of the tadpoles had died before reaching adulthood, picked off by blackbirds and grass snakes, turning upon each other cannibalistically and becoming stranded when the pond shrank away. Probably some did survive to become frogs, however. And these, perhaps, were mangled by malevolent grimalkins, eviscerated by cars, crushed by those who wondered why their front door was not closing tightly, picked off by herons, now, instead of blackbirds. How many lived to die of old age?

Love and happiness are portrayed in popular culture as very commonplace things – things that we have by default and only lose temporarily. The truth is rather more like that of the survival of frogs to old age. Surely, very few, if any, make it to that end. Such a truth becomes more naturally acceptable if, instead of saying “love and happiness”, we say “*eudaimonia*”. The word has such a ring to it, such a mythical ring – a ring like “the Holy Grail” or “the once and future king”.

Looking at the parched mud, my sense of time became confused. It had been waterlogged and drained, waterlogged and drained so often that it seemed to me events related to this patch of ground could be run in any order at all with much the same result.

The creases and furrows in the mud became, before my eyes, mountains and ravines. A wind blew suddenly. I closed my eyes and heard, from someone’s back garden on the other side of the path, the tinkling of a wind-chime. There was only that sweet gust of air and the scattering of notes.

Tzintzum. Tzintzum.



Hanging from its wooden frame within a stone alcove, again and again the battered gong was beaten, until its vibrations became cacophony. Finally, the cords that held the gong came loose, and the gong fell noisily to the ground where it rolled a little way before collapsing like a spinning top when it loses momentum. Carved into the stone of the

Cinnabar's Gnosis

alcove, and now revealed by the fall of the gong, were the following words:

*Thams cad mnyam rdzogs sgyu ma'i rang bzhin la
Bzang ngan blang dor med pas dgod re bro*

Since everything is but an illusion,
Perfect in being what it is,
Having nothing to do with good and bad,
Acceptance or rejection,
One may well burst out laughing.

Longchen Rabjampa

The wizened hand that held the beater, its scaly fingers terminating in long, twisted fingernails, drew back, and then cast the beater aside. An old man, the hand's owner, sat in an alcove opposite that of the gong, his body twitching with spasms of laughter as if to demonstrate the truth of the inscription. He must have been crouching in his filthy niche for some time, because a number of spiders had woven their webs over his body. Now he stirred and tore the webs, and the spiders scattered over him in the primordial panic of their kind, for whom the world is nothing but a battle between different mouths and different stomachs.

The old man descended from his perch to the narrow lane of stone, his limbs as thin and delicate as those of some dying bird. The hair on his head was long, but hung in patches, like Spanish moss. Instead of a nose there was only a fungoid orifice from which dribbled green and yellow mucus. Beneath this hole, his shrivelled mouth was an almost toothless vortex of wrinkles. His shrunken frame was covered in tatters, as if he wore the ripped and scorched scraps of battle pennants scavenged from the scene of a massacre. He began to hop and lurch down the sloping lane, between the walls of rock, his gait made eccentric by the fact that one of his feet had no toes, instead ending halfway in a leprous ball of flesh. Companionable rats joined him as he went, rubbing against his ankles and threatening to trip him over. Some

Tzimtzum

tinkled, apparently with silver bells that dangled from their scrawny necks. He continued to laugh, apparently delighted by their attention.

The lane debouched onto more level ground, made uneven, however, by piles of stone and by even larger heaps of carrion. Most of these were dry bones now, some remaining connected as skeletons, some separated from the atomies of which they were once integral parts. The old man paused here to sniff deeply so that the mucus wriggled like a burrowing centipede in the cave of flesh that was his nose. Once again he was delighted, the sights and smells that met him seeming to fill him with a joy that bordered upon hilarity. He danced now, and tumbled, grotesquely nimble, towards a tree that stood in the bare earth a little distance beyond the last of the charnel cairns.

Coming to the tree, he ceased his cackling, stood for some moments as if in wonder or puzzlement, and began to pace around it. The tree was slender and leafless, growing only a little taller than the man himself. From its branches there hung bones, no doubt pilfered from the near and very plentiful supply. When the wind stirred, they made a clacking sound.

In the dirt at the base of the tree had been etched the furrows of a spiral, its centre being the point at which the roots met the earth.

As if it had nothing to do with him, a tear slid down the old man's filthy cheek. Then he began to relieve himself, making sure that his cloudy urine fell into the furrows, as if to deepen and reinforce them. He stepped, crab-like, to the side, attempting to follow the spiral in an unbroken line to the centre. He laughed again now. Surely he could only have been thinking of the two bodies buried somewhere beneath those roots, one on top of the other – the female and the male.

His jet of urine faltered and died away.

He regarded the branches of the tree once more, with an expression between curiosity and reverence. It was certain, anyway, that the tree was alive, leafless and hung with bones though it was. From the end of one drooping branch there depended a fruit, slightly larger than the man's hand. Its skin was waxy, the colour ranging from yellow, through orange and brown, to red – all the colours of autumn leaves, with the freshness of spring, the colours of earth and also of fire. The shape of the fruit was that of a tetracuspid star, its six astroid rays pointing in the six directions. It was a fruit unlike any that had ever been seen before.

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTES

John Howard, "Portrait in an Unfaded Photograph"

John Howard was born in London in 1961. He discovered science fiction and horror fiction as a child, and has been an avid reader and collector ever since. John has published many articles on various aspects of the science fiction and horror fields for a wide range of magazines and society journals, including *All Hallows*, *Wormwood*, *Faunus*, and *Book & Magazine Collector*. He recently contributed to *Fritz Leiber: Critical Essays*, and *The Man Who Collected Psychos: Critical Essays on Robert Bloch* (McFarland & Co). A short story appeared in the anthology *Beneath the Ground* (Alchemy Press); and he has collaborated on several stories with Mark Valentine, published in the anthologies *Strange Tales* (Tartarus Press) and *Sherlock Holmes: The Game's Afoot* (Wordsworth Editions). In addition, their stories have been published in collections *Masques & Citadels* (Tartarus Press) and *The Rite of Trebizond and Other Tales* (Ex Occidente Press). John has reviewed genre books for several magazines for over twenty-five years, and is currently a reviewer for *Interzone*. About "Portrait in an Unfaded Photograph" John writes that he wrote the story in response to being challenged to contribute to *Cinnabar's Gnosis: A Homage to Gustav Meyrink*. When he first started exploring Meyrink's life, he found the possibly apocryphal episode of Meyrink's attempted suicide being interrupted by the mysterious arrival of an occult publication too intriguing an incident to resist. Coupled with a visit to Peleş Castle in Sinaia, where John bought an illustrated book about the castle and its history, inspiration struck. In the book there was a photo of Romania's King Carol I and Emperor Franz Josef of Austria-Hungary (backed by their respective entourages) taken during the Emperor's visit

Cinnabar's Gnosis

to Peleş Castle in 1896. In those days such comparatively informal concentrations of monarchs and politicians were not unusual. Like the summit meetings of today, if everything went to plan decisions were made, and friendships and alliances cemented; doubtless enmities were nourished as well. But if things did not proceed as expected... So the perennial science-fictional question "What if...?" started John's imagination rolling, and "Portrait in an Unfaded Photograph" is the result. John's website can be found at www.waldeneast.co.uk.

Colin Insole, "The Weimar Spider"

Colin Insole is a writer who lives and works in England. He claims "The Weimar Spider" is his first completed tale. Currently he is working on several other supernatural and weird stories.

D.P. Watt, "Pulvis Lunaris, or, The Coagulation of Wood"

D.P. Watt is a writer living in the bowels of England. He balances his time between lecturing in drama and devising new 'creative recipes', 'illegal' and 'heretical' methods to resurrect a world of awful literary wonder. His first fiction collection, *Pieces for Puppets and other Cadavers* (InkerMen Press) was published in 2005 and a volume of further tales, *An Emporium of Automata*, will be appearing with Ex Occidente Press in 2010. His contribution to this volume, 'Pulvis Lunaris, or, The Coagulation of Wood', began with the kind invitation of Dan Ghetu who provided the fire for the crucible with his provocative call for contributions. Gustav Meyrink's own fanciful, and uncertain, biography is here fused with the transformative capabilities of matter. In a city rife with decadent spiritualism the tale imagines Meyrink's motivations for leaving Prague after his release from prison. Revelation comes not from the arcane lore of alchemy, or the prattle of some bourgeois secret society, but from a simple puppet show. But rarely are wonderful transformations the result of scholarship, rather they are products of the conjunction of imagination and experience – Meyrink's astounding writing being an admirable example.

R.B. Russell, "The Red Rose and the Cross of Gold"

R.B. Russell is the author of *Putting the Pieces in Place* (Ex Occidente Press) and *Bloody Baudelaire* (Ex Occidente Press), and has a number

Biographical Notes

of stories recently published and forthcoming. He runs the Tartarus Press with Rosalie Parker, and apart from illustrating dustjackets for the Press, he also composes poetry and music. “The Red Rose and the Cross of Gold” explores “the idea that life is not only a stage, but that there may be unknown authorities directing the action from behind the scenes. Of course, modern conspiracy theorists claim that such power is wielded by powerful but faceless commercial organisations. However, in the time and place in which this story is set, such an organisation may well have required the assistance of the occult to have such an influence. I had in mind a particular magical society in operation back in the early twentieth century who claimed that they were themselves subject to the authority of The Secret Chiefs who would oversee the actions of the universe. The title of the story refers to an Order of the society which believed that it was in communication with these powers. Such conspiracies may be dreams or hallucinations, though. At least, that is what they would like us to believe.”

Reggie Oliver, “The Black Metaphysical”

Reggie Oliver has been a professional playwright, actor, and theatre director since 1975. His biography of Stella Gibbons, *Out of the Woodshed*, was published by Bloomsbury in 1998. Besides plays, his publications include four volumes of stories: *The Dreams of Cardinal Vittorini* (Haunted River, 2003), *The Complete Symphonies of Adolf Hitler* (Haunted River, 2005), *Masques of Satan* (Ash Tree, 2007), and *Madder Mysteries* (Ex Occidente Press, 2009), and a novel *Virtue in Danger* (Ex Occidente Press, 2010). An omnibus edition of his stories entitled *Dramas from the Depths* is to be published by Centipede. His stories have been republished in numerous anthologies. Of “The Black Metaphysical”, he writes: “My interest in Dr. Dee stems from the time when I found in the London Library an original copy of *A True and Faithfull Relation of What Passed for Many Years Between Dr Dee and Some Spirits* edited by Meric Casaubon and published in 1659. What fascinated me as I turned those ancient pages were the occasional bursts of magical poetry that emerged from Dee’s spirits, and, more engrossing still, the picture of the world of illusion and mystery in which Dee and his untrustworthy medium Edward Kelley lived. In the early 1980s I wrote a play in verse about Dr. Dee which not

Cinnabar's Gnosis

surprisingly remains unperformed but my interest in Dee endured. I learned that the author Gustav Meyrink, another mage who 'lived by the light of stars', had an abiding interest in Dee. That and the fact that both men spent the most formative years of their lives in Prague – that city of mages – seemed to me significant. Then I discovered another strange coincidence: that the Rabbi Judah Loew ben Bezalel, alleged creator of the Golem, was an exact contemporary of Dee's in Prague. All these facts were to me suggestive, but the central character in this story, is none of these. Nor is it even the fictional metaphysical poet Elias Tremayne who features in this tale, the product of a deep love of the works of Herbert, Vaughan, Crashaw and others. The key figure is that of the Wandering Jew, a character who has intrigued and troubled me since I first read about him as a child in the Reverend Sabine Baring-Gould's *Curious Myths of the Middle Ages* and saw the famous Doré engraving of the doomed Jew, ragged hair blowing in the wind, struggling past a wayside cross in a storm. To me the Wandering Jew stands for man's long battle with the concept of the soul's immortality, an idea which attracts and repels in equal measure. It is a notion which, even in our modern age of supposedly scientific rationalism, exerts a compelling fascination and remains a reality to which we have yet to be reconciled."

George Berguño, "Meyrink's Gambit"

George Berguño was born in Princeton, New Jersey and spent his childhood between Washington DC and Santiago de Chile. Later, he lived in Paris and London; and worked in Vienna and Saint Petersburg. As a nomad who carries three passports and speaks five languages, he has always been concerned with spiritual homelessness. Accordingly, he has taken Joseph Roth as his writer's model. George Berguño's fiction is characterized by disillusionment with the modern world and nostalgia for another world. Indeed, his prose is more akin to the classical styles of Leo Perutz and Alexander Lernet-Holenia than modernism or contemporary fiction. Very often in his stories, a supernatural or chance event leads his characters to explore the nature of history and the possibility of committed action. Moreover, his characters often speak in a confessional style and with an urgency dictated by their awareness of their existential dilemma. All these features of George Berguño's

Biographical Notes

writing come together in his story “Meyrink’s Gambit”. His first collection, *The Sons of Ishmael* will appear soon at Ex Occidente Press.

Eric Stener Carlson, “On Consideration of the Muses”

Eric Stener Carlson (Minnesota, 1969) is the author of *The Saint Perpetuus Club of Buenos Aires* (Tartarus Press, 2009), *The Pear Tree: Is Torture Ever Justified?* (Clarity Press, 2006) and *I Remember Julia: Voices of the Disappeared* (Temple University Press, 1996). His work has appeared in journals in the US, UK, Argentina and Spain. “The inspiration for this story” tells Eric, “came from a catalogue I once read for an exhibition on torture instruments from the Inquisition. Although this was over a decade ago, I clearly remember being appalled, not so much by the fact that such devices had once existed, but, rather, that the legs of the racks had been so lovingly crafted, and that the woodwork on the spiked chairs was so exquisite. Something struck me as terribly wrong about that exhibit, something that expressed the fusion of mankind’s highest aspirations – art – with his most base brutality – torture. I began to wonder what was going through the artisan’s head when he was putting his heart and soul into devices whose purpose was to produce shrieks of pain. I began to wonder what muse had inspired him. ‘On Consideration of the Muses’ is the story of Fulgencio, an Argentine Art History student sitting at a café in Amsterdam, the day after the 1930 coup d’etat that deposed Argentine President Yrigoyen. Since the first coup d’etat in 1930 until the last one in 1976, Argentine soldiers inhabited a medieval cosmos, a place where the Devil – in the guise of anarchy, communism, Zionism and homosexuality – continually attempted to subvert God’s order. These soldiers viewed themselves as angelic crusaders, who used the cattle prod to reestablish that order, to do God’s will. This mindset is reflected in ‘On Consideration of the Muses’. I’m always concerned that, by having my characters express awful ideas – such as anti-Semitism – it may appear as if I’m supporting these ideas myself. Obviously, that’s not my intent, but characters have a tendency of outliving – and overshadowing – their authors’ intent, and they make their own way in the world long after we show them the door. I think this is something we need to consider when we read Meyrink’s *The Golem*. Although it draws inspiration from Jewish culture and folklore, are there aspects of anti-Semitism embedded – even

Cinnabar's Gnosis

promoted - in it, albeit unintentionally? And how does this affect how we read Meyrink? Meyrink didn't live to see the Nazis take over Germany. But given his ideas on the absurd brutality of war – and here I'm thinking especially of the 'Game of Crickets' – we can see a rejection of the generation that would become fervent supporters of the Nazi regime. In the end, I cannot speak for Meyrink, but, as for myself, I feel we need to explore evil through writing, so we can better understand it and then combat it. Like many of Meyrink's stories, the end of 'On Consideration of the Muses' is rather ambiguous. Does Fulgencio accept the Coronel's arguments? Will he return to 'save' the Fatherland? Or is he just as repulsed – at the same time he is attracted – by art's homage to torture as I was after reading that museum catalogue so long ago?"

Mark Samuels, "The Age of Decayed Futurity"

Mark Samuels is the author of *The Face of Twilight* (PS Publishing) and the short story collections *Black Altars* (Rainfall Books), *The White Hands and Other Weird Tales* (Tartarus Press), and *Glyphotech and Other Macabre Processes* (PS Publishing). A new collection, *The Man Who Collected Machen and Other Stories* will appear soon from Ex Occidente Press. His work has appeared on multiple occasions in *The Mammoth Book of Best New Horror* and in *The Year's Best Fantasy and Horror*. Samuels first discovered Meyrink's work through reading *The Golem* over a decade ago, but it was the figure of the mysterious Chidher Green from *The Green Face* who emerges from timeless shadows in "The Age of Decayed Futurity".

Albert Power, "Počátek Románu: A Flutter of Lorn Love"

Albert Power trained as a lawyer and has had published within the last six years two editions of a text book on incorporeal Irish land law. He was for five years editor of the *Journal of the Bram Stoker Society*. In 1997, he co-edited the commemorative tome *Dracula: Celebrating 100 Years* (with Leslie Shepard). He has had a number of articles published in *Wormwood*. His first collection, *Darling Savishna and Other Stories*, is about to be published by Ex Occidente Press. He has completed a literary historical romance, with ghostly elements, set in early eighteenth century Ireland and is working on a collection of tales of spectral torment set in Ulster.

Biographical Notes

Concerning his story for *Cinnabar's Gnosis*, Albert writes: "The story takes as its theme the punishing rigours exacted by the effort to reach eternal truth to which Gustav Meyrink time and again submitted himself. As this story tries to show, the verities of life can be found by a straighter trail, while the highways and byways of *arcana* spring cruel traps for the unwary. Nor are all army officers craven fools, no more than is every inhabitant of the Czech lands Austrian born."

Richard Gavin, "Feet of Clay, Head of Fire"

Richard Gavin is the author of many highly acclaimed works of horror fiction and several non-fiction writings on the occult. His books include *Charnel Wine*, *Omens*, and *Primeval Wood*. *The Darkly Splendid Realm*, his latest collection of macabre tales, will be published in late 2009 by Dark Regions Press. Of his story for *Cinnabar's Gnosis*, Richard writes, "To put forth a garden of shadowy possibilities, to embed kernels of truth in the colourful pageantry of aestheticism and lore, to awaken readers to the terrible beauties of the primordial that seethe just beneath mundane consciousness; such are the tasks of the occult fiction author. Few writers achieved these goals with greater skill or artistry than Gustav Meyrink. Satirist, decadent, dissident, occultist, Meyrink was not an author in step with his time, though he was very often ahead of it. With my own 'Feet of Clay, Head of Fire' I attempted to weave a tapestry where myth and biography are seamlessly interconnected, and to conjure a Golem that might inspire awe in a 21st Century reader the way Meyrink's original did back in 1914."

Rhys Hughes, "The Antediluvian Uncle"

Rhys Hughes was born in Wales in 1966. His grand plan of writing exactly 1000 stories and linking them into a single giant wheel is now at the halfway stage, a process that has taken exactly twenty years. Mostly known for comical, absurdist works, his range in fact encompasses styles as diverse as gothic, experimental, science fiction, magic realism, fantasy and realism. His first book, *Worming the Harpy*, was published in 1995, and some of his other titles include *The Smell of Telescopes*, *Stories from a Lost Anthology*, *The Percolated Stars*, *The Less Lonely Planet* and *The Postmodern Mariner*. An irrepressible traveller, he tries to spend as much

Cinnabar's Gnosis

time as possible frequenting other lands. "I last visited Prague a few days before the old country of Czechoslovakia split into the Czech Republic and Slovakia. Although I consider myself a traveller rather than a tourist, I rather predictably fulfilled the role of the latter, dutifully applauding the chime of the famous astronomical clock, crossing the river on the statue-laden Charles Bridge, tramping up to the Hradčany through the maze of secret streets in the Malá Strana. I already knew that Prague was a city that had produced a dozen giants of literature but I wasn't yet aware that Gustav Meyrink was one of them. Perhaps his name was vaguely familiar to me, but certainly I had never read a single word of his incredible prose. I worshipped Kafka, Hašek, Čapek, Hrabal, Nesvadba, Kundera; and only after I had left Prague did I begin reading a Meyrink book, *The Green Face*. Then I gradually came to feel that perhaps a wonderful opportunity had been lost, for it seemed to me then, and still seems to me now, that Meyrink is an even better guide to Prague than those other eminent gentlemen. I don't mean 'guide' in the sense of geography or culture, but in terms of ambience or atmosphere. Accordingly, when the time came for me to attempt to write a tribute story to Meyrink, I had no other choice than to set it in Prague; and to do that, I had to trawl the depths of my memory to recall those certain aspects of the city whose oddness was only resolved after reading Meyrink's work. My story is full of symmetries manifested in multiple ways: angles, words, movements: the same symmetries that I found in the real Prague and also reflected in Meyrink. But in themselves these are insufficient for the creation of a story that is a direct tribute to a particular writer. I needed a stronger connection to Meyrink himself. So I took as my origin an incident that occurred when he was a young man, a failed suicide attempt (or a *successful* realignment towards life) that has already been described in the notes to certain other stories in this volume. I took three relevant elements of this incident (hand, gun, pamphlet) and applied a sinister mirror to them. It was a coincidence that ended Meyrink's belief in coincidence (an exquisite symmetry in itself); and therefore to this burst of revelation I applied the laws of symmetry. I wrote the story of the author of the pamphlet... and the plot of my unnatural tale unfolded naturally after this reflective seed had been planted. Meyrink's alchemical experiments play their part; his attempts to control

Biographical Notes

chance also; but I made references to the Golem only by stressing avoidance of it. As perfect symmetry is inhuman, reflection must be softened by refraction; thus Prague, the city of transformation, must be changed in turn; and all contained within it. My main character, Josef Bartos, is the opposite of Meyrink, his reciprocal, but the metaphor has been extended to the point of distortion. Kafka's most famous victim, Gregor Samsa, devolved into an insect; but that insect is a symbol for a human outcast. Meyrink faced his doubts realistically; my Josef prefers to keep his own doubts at arm's length, symbolically *and* literally. Always a symmetrical distortion of symmetry..."

Adam Golaski, "Her Magnetic Field"

"Her Magnetic Field" will elsewhere be called "The Episode in Which Théophile Loses the House of the Antique Lamp". Other episodes, not yet written, will elaborate on events referenced and details alluded to in "Her Magnetic Field" such as Philip's pursuit of "the rock that thinks", Monica's life as a stripper/medium in Paris, Helen and her sister's abduction, and of course more of Théophile's story (including the story of the house where he conducts his experiments). All in due time. And with proper funding. Sometime during the 1890s Gustav Meyrink sat on a bench. He sat for hours in the cold, "trying everything possible to attain what Mrs. Besant had described to me in a letter as inner vision". Just about to give up, "at the moment when I was torn from my contemplation," he saw, "a huge clock shining in the sky". He began his meditation again, fueled now by his slight success, and proceeded to have a full-blown "inner vision". Meditation is action when the heroes are men of thought. So, though Théophile and Philip are under siege in "Her Magnetic Field", most of the action of the story is talking. Less talk, more action? Nonsense. Talk is action. So is projecting your mind seventy-seven years into the past and into the headspace of Gustav Meyrink just prior to Meyrink's death, as Théophile does early on in the story. That Meyrink might be the force that ultimately drowns Théophile's house is debatable – how can we ever be sure? – but that the force behind the tale was Meyrink is certain. Adam Golaski is the author of *Worse Than Myself* and *Color Plates*. He edits *New Genre*, an irregularly published journal of science fiction and horror. "Green" –

Cinnabar's Gnosis

his translation of *Sir Gawain & the Green Knight* – is in progress; much of the first fit can be read at www.openlettersmonthly.com.

Mark Valentine, "The Autumn Keeper"

Mark Valentine is the author of three volumes of tales of The Connoisseur, an aesthetical occult detective: *In Violet Veils* (1999), *Masques and Citadels* (2003) and, with John Howard, *The Rite of Trebizond and Other Tales* (2008). He edits *Wormwood*, a journal of fantasy, supernatural and decadent literature. His most recent publication is *The Nightfarers*, a short story collection (Ex Occidente Press, 2009). "The Autumn Keeper" may be illuminated by two passages in Gustav Meyrink's *The Green Face*: "Coming up with an idea is a confounded thing...We think our brain produces them, but in reality they do what they like..." and "People are on the wrong path if they believe the stars they can see in the sky determine the path of their destiny. That comes from other 'planets'... which orbit in their blood and around their heart."

Michael Cisco, "Modern Cities Exist Only to Be Destroyed"

Michael Cisco is an author and teacher, currently living in New York City. His first novel, *The Divinity Student*, received the International Horror Writers Guild award for Best First Novel of 1999, and he has since published *The San Veneficio Canon*, including both *The Divinity Student* and its sequel, *The Golem*. Cisco has also published two other, unrelated novels, *The Tyrant* and *The Traitor*. His short stories are collected under the title *Secret Hours*. Of "Modern Cities Exist Only to Be Destroyed", he writes: "I wanted to write something reminiscent in particular of his story 'The Master', which is a spiritual autobiography in allegorical form. The idea was to produce something similarly autobiographical, but in Meyrink's manner and so as to reflect some of his themes and preoccupations, such as the extrapersonal life of cities and crowds; or the figure, like the Golem, whose unreality becomes a mirror for the narrator's own questionable reality. I also wanted to create a version of the occult conversations that feature in so many of Meyrink's works, such as the teaching of Hillel in *The Golem* or the Baron in *The White Dominican*, combining hermeticism with the social commentary of his more satirical stories. The main character, what there is of him, is X, which is the alge-

Biographical Notes

braic indicator for a substitutable quantity, the reader, the writer, Meyrink himself, but never any one or other entirely; the variable is removed when the number replaces it, and so X would disappear if there were any decisive identification of him. What other symbolism there is to find in the story I leave for discovery. Alluding to Meyrink directly was something to avoid. If I've done what I've set out to do, his influence should be felt indirectly, making him the Golem of this piece."

Stephen J. Clark, "The House of Sleep"

Stephen J. Clark was born 1970, in County Durham in the North East of England. Since 1994 his drawings, poetry and prose have been published in several international surrealist journals including *Manticore*, *Phosphor* (Leeds), *Analogon* (Prague), *S.U.R.R.* (Paris) and *Salamandra* (Madrid). Drawings have also appeared in exhibitions in France, Spain and more recently in the Czech Republic, exhibiting with the Czech and Slovak Surrealist Group. Surrealist Editions published a collection of his poetry *The Bridge of Shadows* in 2007. Lately his artwork has featured in *Abraxas* (Fulgur Press) and as cover art for publishers such as Tartarus Press and Red Squirrel Press and for music-related projects such as Sharron Kraus' *Tau Emerald* album and Gizeh Records. Poetry and fiction will appear in forthcoming publications from Skrev Press and *Supernatural Tales*. He currently lives in Newcastle upon Tyne. About "The House of Sleep", Stephen says: "I see in Meyrink's magical beliefs an enthusiasm for the poetry of Hermetic ideas and a desire to re-enchant life. As with Alfred Kubin and Georg Trakl, Meyrink engages with and reinvents mythology for his own times. While I recognise that his humour is important to his work I have a closer affinity with this poetic attitude. His protagonists unearth the marvellous in the commonplace and are transformed by the experience, as in the opening chapter of *The Green Face*, which I find particularly memorable, where the chance discovery of an old shop in a back lane has momentous consequences. Yet Meyrink's epiphanies sway on the edge of a precipice. At any moment they could plunge into turbulent waters. For me, his characters are would-be phantoms, colluding with secret societies and haunted by doppelgängers. Their familiar lives are increasingly disturbed then finally abandoned for the promise of insight, of deliverance

Cinnabar's Gnosis

that becomes indistinguishable from nightmare and tragedy. So with 'The House of Sleep', my own tribute to Meyrink, I wanted to explore this region of shadow where an individual in their search for understanding and influence awakes some part of the world that comes to claim them for its own."

Steve Rasnic Tem, "The Multiples of Sorrow"

Steve Rasnic Tem is the author of over 300 short stories, two collections, several novels, and numerous essays, plays, and poetry. He is a past winner of the World Fantasy, British Fantasy, Bram Stoker, and International Horror Guild awards, and has been nominated for the Philip K. Dick and Shirley Jackson awards. His most recent works include the audio collection *Invisible* from Speaking Volumes LLC, and *In Concert*, a collection of his collaborations with wife Melanie Tem to be published by Centipede Press in spring of 2010. You can visit the Tem home on the web at www.m-s-tem.com. Of "The Multiples of Sorrow", Steve writes: "I've always believed that fiction was a complex series of collaborations. Writers collaborate with themselves in ways we've barely begun to explore – they bring their conscious everyday lives into contact with inspirations which extend beyond themselves and which they only vaguely understand. The resulting fictions are both of themselves and part of a larger imaginative tradition. Writers collaborate with readers in a way that is largely uncontrolled except for a raw understanding about a common use of language. The writer often has no idea where the reader is going to take the invention that's on the page and perhaps that is for the best. Writers also collaborate with other writers in ways other than that of direct, back-and-forth composition. Often the collaboration is unacknowledged. Sometimes the writer at the keyboard isn't even aware of it. Frequently the silent collaborator is dead. In 'The Multiples of Sorrow' Meyrink visits my story as a character my protagonist seeks out for a spiritual solution, but Meyrink has already visited the story as inspiration. He was a man more interested in spiritual matters than literary ones. He was what I would call a professional seeker, yearning after a dramatic spiritual release which would go beyond simple understanding. But he was also wise enough to know that this could not be achieved, that it would be always just out of his reach. It is just this kind of understanding which

Biographical Notes

creates the satirist, which leads one to join one organization after another, and yet knowing even as you are joining that this borrowed perspective will be a poor approximation of what you are looking for. It is also the kind of understanding that leads to literary experimentation. The results may be a poor second to the spiritual release we are seeking, but for most of us, I think, it may be the best we can manage.”

Mark Beech, “The Cabinet of Prague”

Mark Beech lives and indeed works when it cannot be avoided in Worcestershire, England. His fascination with the dark expressionistic traditions of early 20th Century European literature have best previously been expressed in the pages of the journal *Wormwood* with essays on the writings of those loveably morbid degenerates Paul Leppin and Alfred Kubin. His story “The Cabinet Of Prague” represents a much rarer attempt by him to articulate this fascinations in fictitious terms. It is a story of Apocalyptic Prague, that most terrifying of card-turns! A Prague of irreconcilable forces wound towards one another from the opposing poles of its past and its future. This is the Prague which unsettles the writer of this story most of all, but a place in which the great Meyrink took such bloodthirsty delight. It is the Prague over which the despotic Rudolf II sits in the mad fading glory of empire, the Prague in which the shadows of bulldozers move over the old Jewish Ghetto, and a Prague in which the government itself might any night be usurped to the beat of a drum bound with human skin. Strange visions of Apocalyptic Prague! Yet perhaps it was through his understanding that the foundations of this city run deeper than any other that Meyrink was able to accept its perpetual fate. The city endures. At whatever cost, ultimately it endures.

Jonathan Wood, “White Souls that March in the Astral Light”

Jonathan Wood, originally from the west country, lives and works in London and is the proprietor of the elusive Arbor Vitae Press, publishing the deeply idiosyncratic literary journal *Through the Woods* and also contemporary poetry under the Parhelion Poetry imprint. Jonathan’s own work has been published by *Skooob Occult Review*, the Tartarus Press and the Private Libraries Association. He has also published a number of small press titles and rare opuscles of his own fiction and poetry, in small and

Cinnabar's Gnosis

now eagerly-sought limited editions. His personal reverie on love-lorn decadence entitled *Netherwood*, published in 1990, was well received and has found its place in the canon of obscure literary delight characterised by bibliophiles of rare taste and inclination. Jonathan is a reader and collector of rare and out-of-print books, periodicals and book catalogues and has also experimented modestly in the occasional dealing in rare volumes. He counts it a rare privilege to have been both an observer and participant in the late 1980s hermetic revival and that his journey every day takes him down the Charing Cross Road and into Cecil Court where rare gems of literature await in their tarnished glory for the eager entrancement of the discerning collector. Of "White Souls that March in the Astral Light", Jonathan writes: "I have to thank the publisher Dan Ghetu for his approach to me to contribute to this wondrous anthology and for his astute, intelligent and stimulating guidance, critical enthusiasm and alacrity. I must acknowledge Mark Valentine for being instrumental in this situation and for both his interest in and encouragement of my work over some 22 years. A daunting commission, the kind that Dan set down, is a wonderful catalyst for an author with the vagrant mood, in his attempt to conjure the Zeitgeist and essence of Gustav Meyrink, whose life can be described truly as *something found in the rarest story-book*. In 'White Souls that March in the Astral Light', I have sought to conjure a claustrophobic meeting point where the slipstreams of hermeticism and the search for the proof of spirit intermingle and collide with misanthropy, shame and deceit, against a decadent and symbolist background, ruled over by the obsessed and self-conscious self. Meyrink's desire for secret knowledge and his scholarship of the esoteric traditions is a guiding influence for the environment of the story. It is set in the fluid post-war society milieu, where decadence, the recovery from seismic loss and the mechanics of deception culminate in something that is unexpected and where an inquisitive nature brings with it its own long-tail of mysteries. The fleeting importance of nebulous and obscure volumes in the best tradition of 'Afterlife' is an influence brought to bear here and the dominion that they have upon the tormented mind. The whole is conceived as a symbolist canvas, barely dry, where figures in the foreground contort in their own destiny, congealing in their own private madness and guilt. This was the Era, the crucible of bad dreams borne of the embers of the

Biographical Notes

chaos of war, where the very best and the very worst of mediums could operate like spirits themselves. In this literary confection, each participant is singularly affected and where the bearings of the moral compass have been spun *against the grain*. I am particularly interested in the mechanism of dreams and visions and their exerting influence upon our daylight hours. This is too a key characteristic of the work of Gustav Meyrink where he so precisely distils the distinctions of what our senses believe in and can tolerate. H.R. Grovelock *and* 'Lamps of the Astral Complex' have had a very fleeting mention in a pamphlet written by me some years ago and this new opportunity has allowed me to bring this character 'to life' and also to make the volume in question every more obscure. I composed this tale in three weeks. Its genesis was already unconsciously conceived, with a short note regarding séances casually scribbled onto paper, while sitting at my place of work during August 09. I hope the idiosyncratic flavour of ennui, spiritual longing, the search for proof and the decadent bewitchment of the commonplace are a suitable offering upon the gilded mantle-piece of Gustav Meyrink. Dan's letter to me from out of the blue on 6th September of this year was a little like the copy of 'Afterlife' that was slipped under Meyrink's door some 117 years ago. And in this respect I shall say no more."

Adam S. Cantwell, "The Cylinder of Shunyakasha"

Adam S. Cantwell is a musician and writer from California who now lives in Brooklyn, New York with his beautiful wife Anna. "The Cylinder of Shunyakasha" is his first published work of fiction. About it he writes: "Gustav Meyrink was said to have been the first owner of an automobile in Prague, and the first writer, at least in his circle in Munich, to use a dictating machine. I felt that incorporating the dictating machine into my Meyrink tribute story would reflect his interest not only in technology but also in what one might call the 'mechanics' of magic. In many of his great short stories, Meyrink does more than simply create atmosphere or put characters in bizarre peril – he sets his strange idea loose in a recognizable world and follows its ramifications (as in 'The Violet Death', 'Petroleum, Petroleum', and many others). Meyrink was not only an occult scholar and a man of his fascinating and tragic times, he was a great storyteller, who could engineer a satisfying twist, and who always

Cinnabar's Gnosis

left his readers with a small, strange gift, a puzzle that we continue to wonder at after the book is closed. My gratitude goes to Ex Occidente Press for taking the story and helping to shape it. My wary thanks also go to the shade of Heinrich Nowak, who I hope can forgive me for brazenly appropriating his name and some slim details of his life to help create the main character of my story. Very little information is available in English on this interesting writer, whose unsettling story 'The Solar Plague' in Malcolm Green's anthology *The Golden Bomb* should whet our appetites for more."

Brendan Connell, "The Chymical Wedding of Des Esseintes"

Brendan Connell was born in Santa Fe, New Mexico, in 1970. He has had fiction published in numerous magazines, literary journals and anthologies, including *McSweeney's*, *Adbusters*, *Nemonymous*, *Leviathan 3* (The Ministry of Whimsy, 2002), *Strange Tales* (Tartarus Press, 2003) and *Fast Ships, Black Sails* (Nightshade Books, 2008). His first novel, *The Translation of Father Torturo*, was published by Prime Books in 2005; his novella *Dr. Black and the Guerrilla* was published by Graftisk Press the same year. His two forthcoming books are: *The Architect* (Creating Chaos, 2009), and *Metrophilias* (Better Non Sequitur, 2009). About "The Chymical Wedding of Des Esseintes", he says: "Gustav Meyrink was a Buddhist. He was a mystic of some sort, and was interested in Alchemy. Alchemy is turning lead into gold and also, as described by the old Taoists, involves some sort of spiritual transformation. There is a fine line between nonsense and something meaningful. Reading Meyrink, it is difficult to decide if he was an adventurer or sage. His books are so full of symbolism and, for the most part, so timid of conventional plot, that it is hard to figure out exactly where to place them. The story I have written for this collection, I approached in the same spirit. Everything in it means something, but meaning is: not without meaning and not not without meaning."

Ron Weighell, "The World Entire"

Ron Weighell's work has been published by The Haunted Library, Ghost Story Press, Michael O'Mara, Ash Tree Press, Tartarus Press and Wordsworth Editions and various magazines. A new story, "The Four Strengths

Biographical Notes

of Shadow”, is currently being prepared in a deluxe limited edition by the American private press, Sutton Hoo Press, under their Alpenhouse Apparitions imprint. “The World Entire” has a great deal of autobiographical material in it, and some nods to Meyrink. He feels honoured to make a contribution to this anthology, as his explorations of The Golden Dawn teachings, Enochian invocation and Tantric Yoga, and the inspiration that the results have brought to his fiction, mirror, however palely, the journey undertaken, more magnificently, by that Magus in Prague.

Peter Bell, “The Light Invisible, the Light Inaccessible”

Peter Bell is a Historian, living in York, England. He has written for *The Ghosts & Scholars M.R. James Newsletter*, *All Hallows*, *Wormwood*, *Faunus*, *Supernatural Tales* and Ash-Tree Press anthologies *Acquainted with the Night*, *At Ease with the Dead*, *Shades of Darkness* and *Exotic Gothic II* – and for Ex Occidente Press a story collection *The Light of the World & Other Strange Tales*. “The case of Marie Emily Fornario, who died mysteriously on the Scottish island of Iona in November 1929 after undergoing a mystical and supernatural epiphany, is true; her tiny grave on Iona, with its terse inscription, can be seen near the Abbey. Her poignant fate set me upon an eerie search, and led to a strange discovery. I felt during this quest, amidst the melancholy moors of Iona, an uncanny sense of guidance, a mysterious revelation, a profound spiritual chill, yet also uplift. Whether Marie Fornario was driven by demons in her mind, slain by occult forces or glimpsed the Light Inaccessible – here in the Hebrides on the edge of the vast Atlantic, where the veil is thin and easily rends – remains an enigma. This story is a tribute to that dark and mystic consciousness – the apocalyptic glory and the terror – central to the vision of Gustav Meyrink.”

Quentin S. Crisp, “Tzimtzum”

Quentin S. Crisp was born in 1972 in North Devon, England. After a period of five years working with Wolf and Water Arts Company, he attended Durham University where his degree was Japanese Studies. He graduated in 2000. He has had a number of books published – mainly short fiction – including *Morbid Tales* (Tartarus Press, 2004), *Rule Dementia!* (Rainfall Books, 2005), *Shrike* (PS Publishing, 2009)

Cinnabar's Gnosis

and *All God's Angels, Beware!* (Ex Occidente Press, 2009). Of Gustav Meyrink, Quentin writes: "It has been said that *The Golem* was the first expressionist novel. What interests me in Meyrink's style is the combination of expressionism with the occult. Some have criticised Meyrink for demonstrating only superficial occult knowledge in his writing. I would suggest that such critics only have a very superficial understanding of the literary art. No self-respecting creative writer would wish merely to encode a set of pre-formulated occult ideas in a kind of fictional allegory. The work of the artist, in any medium, is to go back to that source without which the occult, too, would surely be nothing, and to bring from that source their own dream, their own vision. Perhaps there are some who resent it when an artist 'uses' occult imagery without being tied to occult dogma. But if art is a kind of magick then it must be a magick of symbolic liberation and of action through symbols. In other words, it is in the very nature of art to recreate and rearrange, and this rearrangement, even if only of symbols, is in itself a form of doing. In my view, any novel that uses one-to-one symbolism (in other words, strict allegory) must be a failure, unless, perhaps, the intent is purely satirical. Such a novel is a façade only feebly propped up. Not all symbolism, however, is one-to-one, with a villain (for instance) representing Nazism or a spider representing the entanglements of sexuality. The kind of symbolism to which I am drawn in what I write and what others write is the protean symbolism of religion, dream and magic. Let us take an example. What do a fox, a sheaf of rice and a wish-granting jewel all have in common? They are all elements of the Japanese god of harvest and fertility, Inari. A chair will not stand well with two legs. Here we have a three-legged symbolism that stands more firmly, and in such a way gods are born. And we need not stop at three legs. We may lose count. Part of the spell may be that the symbols shift, and cannot be counted. The mix of expressionism and the occult in *The Golem*, it seems to me, is just such a use of symbolism. It would be futile to try and fix the meaning, for example, of the titular monster, to something single and specific. The occult aspects of the work help to deflect a reading that is purely Freudian, insisting somehow on the labyrinthine and esoteric nature of meaning itself, which can even become opaque where it seems most symbolic, but the personal vision of the artist in turn deforms the occult imagery,

Biographical Notes

renewing it, returning to it the deceptive, hallucinatory qualities of moonlight, so that the esoteric does not become mere cryptography. A symbol – a good symbol – like any work of art of which it is part, should be endlessly open-ended. In other words, it should be alive. How else would it be true magick?”

