

THE WORLD IS A SPHERE

by Edgar Pangborn

Edgar Pangborn's stories of a post-holocaust North America have already been collected into one book, the fondly remembered Davy, and there'll be another book before long. "Tiger Boy" in Universe 2 marked his return to this richly imagined world, and here's another: a coolly impassioned story of the enslavement of tomorrow's mutants . . . and tomorrow's minds.

"WE HAVE slain bigger monsters," said Ian Moltas, Deliberator of the Ninth Ward of Norlenas. He had spoken aloud within his solitude; the words brought him no consolation, no increase of courage. After a while a man, or a people, will grow weary of slaying monsters, and then back comes the rule of disorder.

He stood by a western window of his museum in the tropic night, his hands pleased by the cool stone sill, his ears accepting the innocent clamor of the dark—insect shrilling, intermittent husky roar of a rutting alligator in the swamp at the border of his parkland, and now and then the trill and chuckle of the nitingal, bird of mystery. They tell us it's good luck to hear that on a clear night of the old moon.

No one ever sees the nitingal, yet it lived in the world at least two hundred years ago in the great time of the Republic, for the poets of that age spoke of it, and by that singing name.

Good luck? Ian Moltas no longer believed in luck of either sort. Out of confusions, sufferings, compromises, you won what you could: let God and the Devil contend for the rest.

"We have cut down monsters like you before," he said, and held up a clotted fist, shutting away the twinkle of lamps in the palace windows half a mile off across the parkland. He did not let his fist obscure the tender brilliance of the old moon declining. Under those lamps the Emperor's clerks might carry the day's toil to midnight or beyond—Musons all, of course, and therefore slaves dependent for life itself on the Emperor's whim. Dwarfish, with delicate hands, high foreheads, often that telltale six finger, the poor devils would scratch away at their mean tasks—recording, copying documents and correspondence, above all transcribing to fine vellum the latest imperial rantings and platitudes in the service of Emperor Asta's immortality; and no one would guess from the small pale Muson faces what fires might be ablaze behind their masks. Moltas supposed he knew a little about that; he was not arrogant enough to think that he, a Misipan of the ruling class, could know very much. To know anything at all of it might be regarded as treason to his peers.

The Emperor Asta was already officially a god by act of the Assembly of Deliberators (Moltas concurring—what can one do?), but he would not rest content with that. Two of the three preceding emperors had also been deified, so the bloom was off that peach. No—he meant to be known to eternity as a great thinker, statesman, and literary artist. Unfortunately, he had never had an original idea, and could barely read and write.

"We'll cut you down too." But Moltas, listening for the iron ring of rebellion in his voice, did not hear it. Can you have rebellion without the people? Can rebellion speak in elderly tones with a quaver, almost a note of peevishness? After all, the quarrel was not between him, Deliberator of the Ninth Ward, and the gaunt little egomaniac over there in the palace; it was between the spark of evil in the human world and the spark of good. As for the people—

The Republic! Ah, they said, the Republic! Yes, we must bring back the Republic, but not just now, because the Emperor (long live the Emperor) has promised to do it himself the first moment it seems practical. Bread and rice! More fights! More fuck-shows in the Stadium! Long live the Emperor! Fights! Fuck-shows! BREAD AND RICE!

And the Assembly of Deliberators, once the very heart and conscience of the Republic? Moltas thought: *Why, we are mostly old men, and the waves have gone over us. The Republic is not to be brought back only by remembering it with tears.*

The stone sill was paining his hands. He rubbed his fingers and straightened his elderly back, and

turned to the spacious quiet of the room he called his museum—like all the house, a little too grand and a little shabby. The spoils of a rich man's curiosity had accumulated here for thirty years. Not wanting to trouble a servant for such a trifle, he touched a taper to a bracket-lamp and carried the flame to a standing lamp on a long table in the center of the room. The table was of mahogany, careful Misipan workmanship of about a hundred and fifty years ago, from the last years of the Republic; but one would not think of it as old compared to the dozen treasures that stood on it, most of them from the American age, the Age of Sorcerers.

Oldest of all, he thought, was a crude two-faced image of blackened stonelike substance, probably clay, male on one side, female on the other, which surely belonged to some period earlier than the Age of Sorcerers, although the mere notion was heresy. A few years ago he had noticed the image in the trashy wares of a peddler from the north, who let it go for one menin, almost a junk price. It really had nothing in common with American relics. However . . .

Time was not, said the priests, until Sol-Amra made the world out of water and air and earth and fire, and gave it to the Americans, the Sorcerers, who became afflicted with the sin of pride, and were destroyed by pestilence and fire, all but a handful. And we, the remote descendants of that handful, are still corrupt, and must continue to bear the divine curses of poverty and mutation until the year 7000, when Sol-Amra comes to judge the world. Poverty is punishment for the sin of greed. Mutation is punishment for our lecherous nature. Most corrupt of all are the Musons, for does not the wrath of God show clearly in their dwarfish size, pallid faces, evil hands? So let them be safely held in slavery, and sacrificed at the Spring Festivals to take upon them the sin of the world.

One knew all that, and knew the necessity of ritual agreement. One also belonged to the not-quite-secret society of the Tera, discreetly smiling in private at the barbarity of the times; even smiling, very privately and rather dangerously, at Sol-Amra and the Lesser Pantheon. These traditions and legends, you know, said the gentlemen of the Tera—excellent stuff for the multitude. Must have something to keep them happy, while we pursue philosophy and pure reason and the quiet life.

If any visitor showed interest in the two-faced image, Ian Moltas would shrug and dismiss it as a curiosity of no importance, most likely made by the little naked savages in that wilderness away up north, west of Penn; or it might even have come from the scarcely explored lake country much farther north. But Moltas had seen enough of the barbarous wooden images and clumsy pottery of those savages to know that this two-faced image was nothing of theirs.

The other treasures on the table were relics of the American age, valuable but not unfamiliar to connoisseurs. A gray metal dish known to have come from the jungle-buried ruins east of Nathes (apparently called Natchez in the Age of Sorcerers, with heaven knows what pronunciation). A tiny cylinder of an unknown bright metal tapered to a hollow point, with part of an inscription still visible, a few of the antique letters that so closely resemble the Misipan alphabet. A disk of heavy glass with the mystic power of magnification. A tray of coins, some of corroded copper, others that appeared untouched by age.

Ian Moltas slumped in one of the massive chairs by the table. At the uncommon age of fifty-eight he was heavy but not fat, not very wrinkled, only somewhat gray. Mild sea-blue eyes belied the fierceness of his beaky nose; his flexible orator's mouth was darkly bracketed. He was wearing the scarlet loincloth of the ruling class; his sleeveless white tunic carried on the front the gold-and-green rice-plant symbol of the Assembly of Deliberators. Often if angry or depressed he sought for quiet in the contemplation of the clay image, and often found it. It must have been made, he thought, by fingers alone. How simple the gouges that marked the eyes! The mouths had been achieved by pressure of a thumbnail gone back to dust how many hundreds or thousands of years ago?

He looked up, startled and vague. "Yes, Elkan?" The slave had come silently, or might have been standing in the shadows several moments. He was trained, of course, to go about like a ghost, to be present suddenly whenever needed; but that magical quiet was also a part of the Muson nature.

"A peddler, Deliberator—perhaps not worth your time, but he was insistent. He gives his name as Piet Brun. He apologized for the late hour, saying he didn't wish to carry his treasure in the streets by daylight. This seemed irrational to me—whatever he has is carried in an ordinary sack—and I said so.

He replied, with a smile—a rather unpleasant smile, sir, or so I thought—that he felt stronger than others in the dark. I did not like him, Deliberator, but I told him I would bring in his name."

"Does he say what he has?"

"No, sir, only that he thinks you might want to buy it. He says he was Misipan born but has spent most of his time traveling and trading in the barbarous northern countries. His speech suggests it—trader's jargon, quite coarse."

"Well, I'll see him. These people often do have something. But let him wait a few moments—I want to talk to you." Elkan also waited, quiet as the clay image. He was tall for a Muson, nearly five feet, which modified the deceptive childlike proportions that most of them had because of their large heads and stocky bodies, and he was eighty years old, middle-aged for his breed. He stood with arms folded—they never lost an alertness that seemed to cost them no effort—and his pale six-fingered hands spread out over the elbows as if to emphasize their difference. "Elkan, you'll remember that two years ago, two full years, I introduced a measure in the Assembly which would have declared that your people, sharing a common ancestry with humankind, a common language, a history of coexistence—"

"—are and of right ought to be equal with the human race before the law and in every aspect of our social being." Forgive the interruption, Deliberator. The words—your own, I believe—have sung in my mind a long time." Elkan's eyes, large and luminous, now and then met Moltas' gaze like the touch of a roving beam of light. "The measure, I presume, has been defeated, sir?"

"Oh, the measure—no, not exactly, not formally. Many times debated, cut to pieces and cobbled together again, saved up in committee for further waste of words, but never quite defeated. I had no hope at any time—as I think I told you—of winning all or even most of what we prayed for. I did hope that by asking for all we might win something. If we had merely won that technical admission of equality, it would have become impossible, by any kind of logic, for the law to say, as it does now, that your people are to exist forever in a state of slavery. The Assembly was almost ready for that simple first step at the time of Asta's accession. No, Elkan, the measure has not been defeated, but— Oh my God, how am I to tell you? . . . Elkan, the best hope of your people was always the Assembly. Nothing good can be expected from any other political source. We Deliberators—we are all that remains of a Republic that once did uphold an ideal of virtue, limited though it was; and it's on my mind tonight that we are not much.

And I am obliged to tell you—you must know it for your own safety—the Assembly itself may be dying."

"There have always been passages of failing light." The Muson way, to state anything important as neutrally as possible, not in denial of passion—far from it—but in order to protect rational discourse from the tumults of the heart.

"Elkan, I have allowed myself to think that in talking to you—whom I have come to love as a friend, if I may say it—I am talking to others who cannot hear me directly. I do not want to learn anything about any groups of your people who may be living somehow in the wilderness, because like anyone I might become weak and betray you if my mind disintegrated under torture. However, if any such groups exist I wish them to hear this warning: be more careful than ever in the next few years while Asta lives. Do nothing to stir up the lust of violence. Asta is insecure. He needs a scapegoat, and your people would again be the victims, especially if the Assembly dies. He would not hold back from another Night of Knives—might welcome it."

Elkan said after a while, "The message will be transmitted, De-liberator. The advice may not be followed. Conditions change, my lord. The Night of Knives ten years ago was indecisive."

Moltas looked up, amazed at the overtones. Elkan's face was quiet as always. "Elkan, since the law forbids the freeing of Muson slaves under any conditions, I drew up a will which bequeaths you to my brother-in-law at Nathes. He is a kind soul, a scholar, and fortunate in that he knows almost nothing of the modern world, being concerned with the quarrels and delights of antiquity."

Elkan bowed. "An act of kindness, Deliberator." And it seemed to Moltas that the overtones were saying darkly and jubilantly: *If you die, my lord, I shall be with my people in the wilderness.*

"I'll see that peddler now."

Piet Brun stepped in with the brash grace of a tomcat, a small, bouncing man, gnarled and baldheaded, carrying a green cloth sack. Rudely he hitched a chair nearer the Deliberator's, waiting for no invitation to sit down. When Elkan brought in the second-best wine, Brun tossed off a glass as one swills water, clucked and patted his belly and said, "Very nice, sir. Much obliged." Behind Bran's back, Elkan shared Moltas' amusement with one lifted eyebrow, and faded from sight.

Casually Brun offered autobiography. He had been everywhere and done everything. Born at Alsandra (he said), at thirteen he had run away to join a caravan bound for Penn in the barbarian north. He had served as a mercenary in one of Penn's border wars with the Empire of Katskil (a rising nation, he thought). After that he had a nice thing smuggling spearheads of Katskil steel to the savages in the lake country. He married, but his wife bore a mue, as they called such monstrosities up north, and then another, so he divorced her as Penn law permitted, an action that made her a protected slave of the Amran Church. At mention of that church, Brun automatically made the sign of the wheel over his heart, and scratched his armpit.

Repressing distaste, Moltas inquired, "You became a member of that church, Misur Brun, although Misipan born?"

Brun glanced around the room, maybe looking for eavesdroppers. "Got some nice things here, m'lord. Well, the church—see, I'm a *practical* man, Deliberator. I leave the thinking to the priests—they get paid for it." He laid a grubby finger along his nose, and winked. "Up north, you know, you're a follower of Abraham—I mean, what the church says is the faith of Abraham, or"—he slid the edge of his hand across his throat—"ssst!" He gulped more wine. "I had me a junk shop for a while—did all right but sold out. Itching foot, m'lord. Been a bit of a rascal maybe."

Moltas refilled his glass. The politician in him instinctively searched for nuggets of information. "You'd say that Katskil is the major power up north nowadays?"

"Not a doubt of it, sir. They ain't a naval power yet, but they aim to be that too. Country's riddled with witchcraft, by the way. Church does its best to keep it down, I give 'em credit for that." He glanced at the two-faced image and his eyes skittered away. "That lumin kettle there, that's a nice little piece, m'lord, right out of the Age of the—so-called Sorcerers."

Moltas reflected that the little tramp could be an *agent provocateur* sent by Asta to tempt him into heretical remarks. "So-called, Misur Brun?"

"We, uh, speak in confidence?"

"Certainly, if you wish it so."

"Old slave's gone to bed?"

"Probably. In any case he doesn't eavesdrop."

"Shit, they all do."

"He doesn't eavesdrop, Misur Brun."

"Sorry. Excuse it. Must be your nice wine. No offense, sir—thing is, I been in trouble once or twice before, from speaking out. Now what I mean, it's my opinion them ancient people weren't sorcerers at all, anyhow not like the northern witches. They was just people like us, only they had a lot of knowledge and skill that somehow got lost, that's all."

"I hope you're careful not to say such things openly."

"I ain't thirsting to look down on the fucking world from no cross, Deliberator."

"I have never put anyone in danger of the cross."

"I know that. 'Round the wharves they call you 'The Merciful.'"

"I earned that name," said Ian Moltas.

"Yes, sir—it's one way of looking at things. Me, I can see how the world's all fang and claw. Man's got to look out for himself, nobody else will." He took up his green sack. "Like to see something really good?" Moltas nodded, expecting trash.

The trader took out first a small tripod surmounted by a semicircular loop a foot high, the whole device one solid or welded piece of one of the ancient silver-gray metals impossible to reproduce in the modern age. He set this on the table, and then brought forth a flabby piece of what must be ancient

Plastic in a curious flat harmony of mild colors, mostly blue and green and brown. At both ends of the lump were little metal devices. Brun placed one of these in his mouth, and puffed. Quickly the lump became a softly shining sphere. He placed it in the metal standard and tapped it so that it spun a long moment before quieting into rest. Moltas' mind whirled with it; as motion ceased he blinked and caught his breath.

"Gets you, don't it, sir? I picked it up in Penn from a collector who was afraid of owning it. That's why I could let you have it dirt cheap and still make a penny or two."

"But what is it?"

"A map."

"What are you saying?"

"The Sorcerers, if we got to call them that, knew that the world is round . . . The way it is up north, Deliberator, people believe that some of the Sorcerers, the Americans, are still around—you know, immortals, haunting devils. Church takes it seriously, or maybe"—his finger was laid again on his nose—"maybe it's just that keeping the devils in their place pays off. Useful things—like that kettle you got there—get the bad magic charmed out of 'em at so much a charm. I understand this was found in the cellar of some ruined building in the area near Fildelfia. The priests would've condemned it, but somebody grabbed it before they got there—"

"Round?"

"Ayah," said Brun with that unpleasant northern twang, and casually, as if dismissing something of no interest, but his eyes were too bright, too amused. "Pick it up if you like, Deliberator. It's not fragile—nor dangerous."

Ian Moltas did so, finding it astonishingly light. He touched the slick surface, so filled with soft splendor from the lamp, and the globe turned at his command. Without the twang, and without that undertone of sniggering laughter, Piet Brun said, "Your hands are holding up the world."

"You disturb me, sir. Naturally I am familiar with—certain philosophical theories."

"Sure." He was mocking again, or seemed to be. "Of course everyone knows the earth is flat."

Moltas was irritated. "On the contrary, there is obviously some curvature. One only need climb a hilltop—"

"Or go to sea, Deliberator, and watch the approach of another ship: first the tip of her mast, and then the tops'l—"

"I know, I know. But after all—" He set the shining thing back on the table. "A map? Perhaps only the creation of an artist, a fanciful mind."

"Speaking of going to sea, Deliberator, what is the shipping situation in Norlenas at present?"

"Shipping? Why, I'm not too well-informed. Normal, I suppose."

"You see, I'm like a stranger here. I just might be interested in buying or chartering some kind of seagoing tub, but I don't know what kind of expense I'll be running into. If I ask around the docks, I won't get an honest answer, so I thought I'd ask you."

The flattery was harmless, and probably sincere. "I don't really know very much, Misur Brun. What sort of ship?"

"She ought to be a hundred-tonner, two-master, I think, with one-level galley and sound slaves—no Musons, I wouldn't give a shit for your Musons in an oar-bank—"

"Misur Brun, all galley rowers of Misipa are freemen. There are no slaves except the Musons."

"Do you tell me!"

"I'm surprised that as a Misipan born you should have forgotten."

"Well, I ran away at thirteen, and before then I didn't take note of much except to wonder when my old man would get drunk again and beat up on my ass. Well, not less than a hundred tons, and I don't want no coastwise crawler. Shorten her masts if I got to, and if her keel's no good I'll go for more ballast." Ian Moltas noticed for the first time that the fellow's clothes were rather good, even expensive, his fingernails clean, and his eyes, when not veiled in slyness, were those of a visionary, a listener to the winds. "Ride low and steady—you got to meet big water on its own terms."

"You think of trading with Velen in the south, perhaps?"

Piet Brun stared beyond him. "Perhaps."

"Well—not much more than guessing, sir—twelve thousand menin might buy you such a ship. About refitting and a cargo, I just don't know, couldn't advise you . . . And while we are on the subject of money, what would I have to pay for this—relic?"

Brun smiled at him. "Twelve thousand menin." The sphere was a poem of blue and green and brown, floating in the room's silence.

"If," said Moltas presently, "you plan to explore the possibility that the world is a sphere—which of course is not unfamiliar to the philosophers of the Tera, although regarded as far-fetched—won't you need this"—he touched the world and made it spin again—"this map?"

"Made me some tracings," Brun said. The smile was steady on his blunt face; whether the world was a sphere or the footstool of Sol-Amra, Piet Brun had a joke on it. "Made a copy on silk, that I can blow up to size with one of them pig's-bladder toys they make for the kids. Crude, but it'll serve my purpose."

"The thing is certainly a map, as you say. Some of these names I recognize as being old American—almost common knowledge that the City of God Norlenas was once called New Orleans. But your map shows it in the wrong place, and the line of the coast is absurd. The course of the Misipa ends—about here."

"Deliberator, the legends of the Flood are true legends. They know that, up in the north. At the southern end of the Hudson Sea there's a mighty heap of rubble, masses of tumbled masonry, here and there the top of a tower jutting from the water so heavily buttressed by trash and silt that the strongest seas and tides haven't leveled it. They call that place the Black Rocks, but everyone knows it's the ruins of the greatest city in what they call Old Time. The floods came, Deliberator, but they didn't drain away."

"I know the legends. Well, Misur Brun, your price for the relic is outrageous, almost comic, but I will even pay it. If that surprises you, set it down to the whim of an old man who cannot go exploring. Ill write you a draft on my—excuse me." Elkan had appeared in the archway from the hall, looking frightened. Moltas went to him.

"Sir, the Emperor has sent a litter with bearers."

"At this hour?"

Aware of the peddler, Elkan sank his voice to the barely audible. "A lieutenant of the Mavid is with them."

"An escort, no doubt," said Ian Moltas, who knew better. Lieutenants of Asta's secret police were not sent on small errands of courtesy. "I'll go down presently. Has Madam Moltas come back from that banquet?"

"Not yet, sir."

"Bring me my jewel case from the strongbox in my bedroom, Elkan." He returned to his visitor. "Misur Brun, it will be best if I pay you with a jewel of about that value. You've come back to

Misipa at a very unstable time. Men go out of favor swiftly, sometimes die swiftly—curious times, very curious. It's possible—so quickly do fortunes change—you might have difficulty cashing a draft tomorrow morning, even though I have plenty of funds to cover it. But jewels will remain negotiable."

"Sir, whatever is convenient." Brun was flushed, still thrown off balance by the incredible success of his errand; it occurred to Moltas that he might have asked that price simply as a piece of impudence, a joke, a conversation piece to introduce genuine bargaining.

"Thank you, Elkan. Here—if you will take this to any appraiser in White Cradle Street, Misur Brun—"

"Sir, I would never question the Deliberator's—"

"I have a litter waiting for me, a late errand. Perhaps I could take you part way to wherever you're staying? Go ahead, please—I'll follow in a moment."

He needed that moment with Elkan, to stand there eye to eye, and hold out his hand as one does to any friend and equal. "I'll return, I suppose," he said. Elkan hesitated long; then the grasp of the six-fingered hand was firm and to Moltas very strange, a bridge between worlds that must somehow communicate with friendship, or die.

The lieutenant of the Mavid politely and correctly pointed out that the litter was small, with no room

for anyone but himself and his passenger. A genteel, patient man, in his black loincloth and black tunic with the emblem of crossed spears. Piet Brun spoke a mannerly goodbye, and walked jauntily down the dark street with a green emerald fortune in his pocket that might have bought the virtue of even a Mavid lieutenant. "We are going to the palace, I presume, Lieutenant?"

"Yes, sir. Why are you laughing, my lord, may I ask?"

"I could never explain it," said Ian Moltas.

The scrawny little body of Asta, Appointed of Sol-Amra, Lord of the World, defied the silken ease of his chair, incapable of relaxation; his tight face betrayed a hunger no world could satisfy. The audience room was cool and lovely under the mild lamps, the floor a mosaic of priceless imported marble, gray and rose. A naked Muson girl with a fixed smile held a platter of fruit near his chair, and Asta chewed raisins as if they were the flesh of enemies. "Sit if you wish, Deliberator."

A hundred and fifty years ago, when Ocasta, first of the Emperors, was crowned, the privileges of the Deliberators had been written into statute: an attempt of those who loved the Republic to retain some color of it when the reality was gone. Moltas could have taken the low stool, the only other seat in the room, without need of permission. That Asta had granted it was one of those petty victories the Emperor needed as some need coffee or marawan. And to remain standing would have been bad politics. "Manners, child!" said Asta, and gave the girl a brutal push toward Moltas, who took a fig and nibbled it for politics' sake.

She was small and pretty, like a child indeed at first glance, but Moltas could not guess her age. The platter was heavy, her thin arms in danger of trembling. Asta was known to enjoy the sterile delights of maintaining a harem of Muson women, his Empress being no more to him than a breeder of sons for the dynasty; and rumor had it that any of the girls who survived a few months of his pleasures were given to specially favored members of the ruling clique, as marks of the Emperor's esteem—disposable, in fact, like towels.

"Moltas"—the Emperor sighed with staged patience—"what do you *want*, man? A year ago, we recollect, we offered you a Treasury post—no sinecure, responsible work you could have done very well."

"Majesty, I felt that an elective post was a trust I could not abandon. My talent is in the framing and interpretation of law."

"We know that's what you say. Law and policy, hey?"

A tricky question. In theory, the Assembly might still debate imperial policy; in practice, the Emperor disregarded it. The Emperor proposed measures; if the Assembly did not ratify them they still became law, humorously described as Statutes of Misipa A.D.—Assembly Dissenting. But should the Assembly adopt measures unwelcome to the Emperor, his veto was final. The Assembly was a ghost, a graveyard of honor. One power remained to it, an intangible—the strangely passionate, inarticulate veneration the people still held for it as a symbol of an older time. Even in these sour years memory would not quite die, and A.D. laws were resented—blindly and ineffectively, yet the resentment was real, and the ruler of an explosive people could not wholly disregard it. Moltas said with an evasiveness Asta would understand, "Majesty, the Assembly's position on policy seems to require a day-to-day definition."

Asta smiled clammily and let that pass. "Well—not long ago, we offered you a title. Because we wished to make use of your unquestioned talents on the Advisory Council. You declined. We have been very patient with you, Moltas."

"I felt, Majesty, that a transfer to the Advisory Council would place me out of touch with the people, the citizens—"

Asta leaned forward, wagging a schoolteacher's forefinger. "Are you proposing to instruct us concerning the *people*, Ian Moltas? Don't you understand even yet that the people have one true friend, one only—the Emperor? Why do you think we are known as the Humanitarian, the Light-Bringer of Sol-Amra?"

Moltas thought: *off and running. This could take half an hour.*

It was less than that, but the sentences rolled on like chariot wheels, and a vision appeared of the

world as Asta saw it: the Misipan Empire expanding to the utmost, old Velen beyond the Southern Sea crushed, occupied, absorbed as far as the jungles at the lower rim of the world; the northern lands punished for their arrogance by Misipan crossbow and phalanx, Katskil industry harnessed to the Misipan chariot, Misipan law and custom and religion extending at last to all the limits of the earth—one state, one shining whole, dissent unknown and the Humanitarian sitting on top of it. "The state, Moltas—what is there but the state? Do you talk to us of the people, when our vision alone can see them as they are? Ants in a colony, leaves of a tree that perish to enrich the earth." Asta broke off, tightly smiling. "We forget you live on a diet of oratory. To business. We have a special project in mind, Moltas, and we are convinced that there are few other-ants—in the Empire who could do it as well as yourself. We are correct in thinking that you are much concerned with the welfare of the Musons? Even to the point of desiring certain changes in the ancient laws? This is true, sir?"

"It is true, Majesty. I think everyone knows it. Of course, the present temper of the times—"

"My dear Moltas, damn the times. Great men—and deities—make the times. I am the times, Ian Moltas. Now, we have in mind a definitive study of the entire institution of Muson slavery—a work of true scholarship . . . done under our auspices, of course, but without any interference with your scholarly efforts—to serve as a basis for intelligent recommendations leading to improvement. We are quite aware of—let us say, inequities, even cruelties, I'm sorry to say; and you ought to understand that the welfare of the Musons has always been close to our heart. Now we propose that you undertake this study—no restrictions of course, all facilities, any type of assistance you wish, in addition to our promise to give the closest consideration to any recommendations you make." *The tiger invites me to his den for this tainted tidbit—why? What does he want, that requires bringing me here after midnight, when he himself is red-eyed from lack of sleep?* "We have looked into the difficulties, Moltas, and find no legal objection to your assuming this task while retaining your status as Deliberator, with leave of absence."

"Majesty, are there other conditions?"

Asta caught the little slave's buttock and jerked her body to emphasize his words. "See, darling, see how they mistrust me, these everlasting politicians! Notice it, darling? Never fails." She achieved a dutiful giggle, trying to keep her tray of fruit from spilling. A ripe plum rolled and splattered on the floor by Asta's foot. "Clumsy idiot bitch!" The Appointed of Sol-Amra sent the girl staggering to the floor with a blow on the breast; a wave of his arm fetched a guard from the anteroom to pick her up and carry her out of sight. "Some of 'em aren't worth training," Asta said, "but she may do well enough at the farm. Seems healthy. I forget, Moltas," said the Emperor, who never forgot anything, "do you keep a Muson stud?"

Ian Moltas counted to eight. His marriage had not been blessed with children; he thanked God for it. "No, Majesty, that is a project I have never attempted."

"You might find it illuminating for the study we hope you'll undertake. Pity they're so long-lived and come so late to fertility—makes it difficult to experiment with bloodlines. Well, well, you mentioned conditions. Yes, honored Deliberator, we are attaching one condition, and if you suppose the gods themselves could rule men without a little horse-trading, honored Deliberator, your lifetime in politics has been spent in vain. Tomorrow a measure of considerable importance will be presented to the Assembly. It will not be well received, but it happens to be vital to larger considerations of Empire, and an A.D. law, honored De-liberator, will not do! Now, we have noted that some seventeen of the thirty-nine Deliberators have consistently opposed our best efforts toward the welfare of Misipa—obstructionists, reactionaries, selfish old men without vision. Perhaps a dozen others genuinely understand the necessities of the empire that must soon govern the world. The rest—waverers, sheep, *pliable* old men, whom you could sway in the direction of enlightenment. Tomorrow we wish to have your vote on the right side."

"The Emperor would allow a definitive study of Muson slavery to depend on a single political action of one Deliberator?" And Moltas wondered whether the guards would be in for him. He had spoken his unforgivable words in a mild voice; it was even possible that Asta was too stupid to understand all the implications.

Asta had not failed to understand. As he bent forward a flush of blood grew up around his eyes and receded; his voice also was soft. "You may have missed the point, Deliberator Moltas. We ought to have

said: we *prefer* to have your vote on the right side—but don't exaggerate your importance . . . What is your final answer?"

"Majesty, if I may, I should like to consider my answer overnight. Then my vote in the Assembly can be taken as my answer."

"I see. Very well." Asta relaxed, sighing with histrionic patience. "Perhaps you should remember that your vote is not in any way necessary—no more necessary, after all, than the Assembly itself or the continued health of its members. You may go."

Elkan was waiting to open the door, a ritual service he valued. "Elkan, when you spoke with Misur Brun before you brought him up to me, did he mention where he was staying?"

"Yes, sir. The Sign of the Fox, on Dasin Street. It's cheap but respectable."

"Curious fellow. And what a curious thing is a scale of values! The palace is in a poisonous mood, Elkan, and the Assembly may not survive tomorrow."

Elkan stood with folded hands; but when Moltas said no more, he took a torch from a bracket and went ahead to light the Deliberator's way up the marble stairs. "Sir, I ventured to set up another table in the museum."

"Ah, thank you!" Passing through the archway into the museum he saw Elkan's work at once, for the sphere of the world stood on the new table, and before it was the two-faced image. At each end of the table burned a lamp, and all other lamps were extinguished; thus the slave had said: *Here is the world, and here is man, and here is an imperfect light.* "Thank you and good night, Elkan."

He sat before the world in the half-dark, and though the idea of a round earth was perverse, grotesque, even ridiculous, somewhere there might be a truth in it. The sun moves in the heavens, does it not? The sun and the moon? Suppose those orbs are vastly greater than they appear to us. Then imagine some being existing on the surface of one of them: would not our sphere—our *sphere-seem* to his eyes as does the sun or the moon to ours? But if all things are in motion—

It is too much. If all things move and flow—if nothing is ever stable, but all creation is journeying—

Someone entered the museum with a rustling of a skirt—Keva, who would be distressed at his wakefulness. "Ian, aren't you coming to bed? (The banquet was a deadly bore, deadly.) How can you go on without sleep?" He leaned his head back against her breast. "Oh, I suppose it's politics, politics. I wish you wouldn't take so many cares on yourself. No rest?"

"Trouble brewing for the Assembly itself. It may blow over."

"Don't let things distress you so much."

"It's my life, Keva."

"You went to the palace, Elkan told me."

"Asta wishes me to make a scholarly study of Muson slavery."

"Why, that's wonderful!—isn't it? You'd be relieved from the Assembly? And it's something you want to do, isn't it?"

"A condition is attached. And the study itself would end in nothing but one more recommendation."

"I see. I suppose I see."

"What do you see, my dear?"

"I see that in order to satisfy some—some impossible standard of virtue, you're about to throw the Emperor's offer back in his face, never mind if it means your neck, your neck—I can't understand you. I never did understand you. This room, all those old things, dead things—oh, I see you brood and don't know where your mind is. Ian, we must live in the *present*, isn't it so?"

"It's a flash between infinities, a place to be happy and sad. It's not true that the present is the only place we know. I must look beyond, both ways. I can't change myself—"

"Ah, no more, let's not talk about it. Don't stay up much longer, Ian—please? My God, it'll be dawn in an hour or two."

"I'll come to bed soon, Keva."

"What's that absurd round thing?"

"A toy perhaps. Age of the Sorcerers. Go and rest, Keva."

When he was alone again Moltas remembered how some of the stars move, or seem to, like the sun and moon. One lamp was still burning at the palace, a busy, baleful eye; beyond it, the serenity of the dark.

The morning came heavy with wet heat and a hint of storm. In the lobby of the Assembly Hall lounged five of the Mavid with sword and dagger and riot club, neat in their black loincloths and tunics, pointedly disregarding the arriving Deliberators. By every tradition they had no right there; by an even older and graver custom, weapons were forbidden in the Assembly Hall. Moltas felt on his arm the touch of a friend, Amid Anhur; liver spots showed on the crinkled hand—Amid was old, too old, like many here. An evil of the day, no fault of Asta's, that only the rich could afford to try for election in this land that still believed itself to have a representative government, under an emperor who meant to restore the Republic any day; and few of the young were rich. Amid said, "I suppose we must ignore the vermin, Ian? Merely a squad of the wolf's personal fleas?"

"How long can we hold out?"

"A day—a week—a year."

"How many of us still possess our souls?"

The building was the work of the middle Republic; Amid Anhur stared at a groove in the threshold of the inner doorway, worn there by more than two hundred years of passage of Misipa's lawmakers. "A year ago I think I could have said twenty-four. Now, Barshon and Menefar dead—possibly of natural causes. The younger Samis murdered in a tavern, the Mavid not curious about his murderers, while his father remembers he has one more son. See Carmon there, pretending not to know I nodded to him. You and I are not safe to know."

"Come to my house this evening. I've bought a curious thing."

"Another antiquity? What about today, Ian?"

"This thing is timeless. I beg you come, have dinner with us. Keva would be happy to see you."

"Oh, I will come, gladly," said the old man, and they entered the hall. "We should concern ourselves with timeless things-while we have a little time."

Kalon Samis, month's Moderator, called them to order, his voice flat and schooled and careful, perhaps in memory of a son. There should have been continuation of a debate on the silk tax, but a sheet of parchment was quivering in Samis' fingers. "There is an imperial message which I am directed to read before the day's business." At the back of the hall a Mavid captain leaned against the bronze doors, his presence unprotested by anything more than angry glances and shocked disdain. "And gentlemen, my reading of this message is to be taken as a motion: formal debate may follow, but perhaps it should be limited. The message reads: 'It is the Imperial intention that the Assembly recognize second and third cousins and cousins by marriage of the Emperor as full members of the Imperial household, entitled to serve not only on the Advisory Council by reason of nobility, but also as consultant members of the Assembly of Deliberators, each to have one vote.' Now as I have said, debate should be limited."

Moltas was on his feet. Some others would soon have broken the stunned and nauseated silence—already he could hear choked words and heavy breathing—but Samis recognized him with a feeble nod. "Deliberators of Misipa, there are occasions when men may find it best not to accept a kick in the groin with murmurs of polite thanks. It is my view—"

It was not difficult, so long as he was on his feet and following the momentum of his own expert and powerful voice. The Assembly had always enjoyed rounded periods and poetic thunder, a part of the style—antique perhaps, but there was a place for it. And now, if a man chose to risk binding himself to the cross in the marketplace with a rope of words, the Assembly would hear him out courteously while he did it. "The cousins, it is true, may find our little gathering a bore at times—dull debates, tax laws, arguments, so many things to interfere with scratching or lifting the tail of a close friend." He introduced other jests and obscenities, although his ears told him that what little laughter responded was merely that of nervousness close to hysteria. Still, in a way they liked it—hanged men dance.

There was relaxation through the mass of well-known faces when he began to speak of the Republic. It was an Assembly cliché, to look toward that lost time with a nostalgia rendered harmless by futility. But

then they understood that Moltas was not speaking in that manner. He was speaking of the Republic as if it were a living place almost within the here and now—over a hill; a day's journey. He was asking them to think that what citizens have built once and lost, they may build again, a little better with good fortune. There were times, he said, when human effort appeared to generate nothing but suffering, error, confusion—but maybe even these times add a little to the sum of human understanding. "And there are times," said Ian Moltas, "when the will to struggle against evil seems to be altogether gone. This may be such a time. If the Assembly perishes, there will be no light until, somewhere in the land, you see light from the fires of revolution—not you, perhaps, for most of you will not be there.

And now I say, only to a few of you: we need not be ashamed if sometimes there is nothing better to do for an idea than to die for it."

The Assembly voted against Asta, twenty to eighteen. Samis abstained.

The Mavid captain was a trained speaker too. He strode front, ignoring Moderator Samis, and waited for his correct instant of silence. "By decree of Asta; Appointed of Sol-Amra, Lord of the World, the Assembly of Deliberators now stands dissolved. You will not leave the boundaries of holy Norlenas, and will consider yourselves under the Emperor's displeasure until he has examined certain charges brought against individual members of this body. You will leave the building quietly and go to your homes. That is all."

No longer sustained by the courage of action, his thoughts fluttered like startled doves. *Keva—what can I do?—she has relatives in the Imperial family—maybe—Elkan—there is the will—but he will go—money for Elkan—if only—Sign of the Fox in Dasin Street. Why, I will go and arrange with that fellow—might we not sail—you've got to meet big water on its own terms—*

But the Mavid captain had a particular message for him, halting him on the steps of the hall, with two of his men, in case there should be difficulties. Moltas said, "Gentlemen, the world is a sphere."

The captain said neutrally, "You are to come for questioning to the prison in the Seventh Ward."

One of the men was very young, almost a boy. "I will come without resistance, of course," Moltas said, but he wanted to address the boy. "You see, if the world is a sphere, life becomes interesting again—does it not? So much more to know. Do you understand?" The young face showed only alarm.

"We want no difficulty," said the captain, and locked Moltas' wrists behind him.

"Don't you understand, boy? If the world is a sphere, it may also be a star."