

Mam Sola's House

THE two-sided image gazed into Patric Jonz from the window of an odd-goods shop, as they call such places in Filadelfia. He lounged in and bought it with a flurry of scholastic enterprise; his eyes and fingers had hungered for it. Having recently become secretary to the Curator of Antique Visual Arts at the Filadelfia Museum, Patric was making an earnest effort to develop a blend of scientific and aesthetic perceptions. He was always after developing something—memory, muscles, sexual staying power, executive ability—a splendid trait in young people, especially young secretaries.

Patric was twenty-three, born in 612. That was the year of the Trenton Convention when Penn, allied with Conicut, Nuin, and the other northern countries, took over the doddering Katskil Empire and established the Eastern Federation for all time or anyhow quite a while. It was the decade when the refinement of sailing ships made possible regular trade and communication with Europe and other far places, and we began to hear talk of a world federation and other marvelous dreams. Patric was a child of his age and would have said so himself. He enjoyed the coincidence that his life had started with the Convention that really did seem to have secured a lasting peace.

The image had a look of enormous age. To Patric's eye it was far out of harmony with his apartment's spanking new seventh-century decor. The two faces, blackened and lithified by fire—maybe its smoke had dissolved into the sky when mammoths were roving the grasslands?—viewed time and change with a tolerance that reduced anything so brief as a century to a flurry and a squeak. Patric had first removed everything from the mantel except the image. But then the two-faced god reduced the entire living room to modern banality. His nice brass-and-glass whale-oil lamp became flashy and meretricious, the pewter candlesticks gingerbreadly. His wool rug, an import from Main—too new, though it faithfully followed a patchwork pattern from the nineteenth century of the Christian period. And the scrolled woodwork, and—(O God, and O misery that he had to rent the damned place furnished!)—the plaster cherubs, the buggerly great frieze of plaster cherubs all around the room with fig leaves clinging to their theoretical rods and grooves by the power of faith alone! For you can't have everything, and our seventh century was after all an age that would give no offense even to that dear good lady of the faraway nineteenth, who was, among other things, Empress of India, and whose name for the moment escapes me. *And* the embroidered Holy Murcan texts framed under glass and glued to the wall in the sanitary modern manner so that viruses and drafts and unfavorable auras can't collect behind them. The late husband of the landlady Mam Gebler had paid 300 Penn dollars, pre-Convention value, inciting a journeyman artist to commit those cherubs. As for the texts, Mam Gebler's Aunt Essie—Esmeralda, the one who died of a kidney stone as big as your fist—had Done Them Herself.

There was no place for the image in Pat's bedroom except the bureau top. Primordial deities don't get on well with comb, brush, loose coins, bachelor socks. Aunt Essie had done another text especially for that room, by the way, the year Mr. Gebler died leaving hell's own pile of furniture and a passel of debts, which moved Mam Gebler to let out the place in furnished apartments for gentlemen with references. This text declared: THOU GOD SEEIST ME. Aunt Essie might have fucked up the spelling, but her anaphrodisiac intent was plain. She must have planned it as a defense for Mam Gebler's chambermaids. It wouldn't have stopped Patric, who had invented sex seven or eight years earlier, but Mam Gebler never hired any chambermaid who wasn't ugly as dammit and meaner than a bobcat. Patric, by his own admission, was a lover of beauty and an admirer of kindness.

He quit trying to fit the image to the apartment, and began carrying it in the pockets of shirt or loincloth. Sometimes when he undressed it clonked on the floor. The image took no harm from that, being tough as granite from fire and the ages.

It stood no taller than a big chessman and weighed five ounces. Surely the maker's tools had been his fingers. The sex parts of both male and female sides were sketched in rude bas-relief against the blob of shared trunk and fused thigh-region, and the gouges told endearingly of fingernail work. It did not quite suggest a fertility image to Patric's scientific eye. In his reading Patric could find no reference to a true hermaphroditic god of antiquity. On both sides the arms were folded above the navel, dim marks

indicating hands. Allowing for two sets of elbows, the artist had sculptured the forearms about half natural length. The blunt thigh-region ended flattened so the image could stand upright. The bottom was irregular as though someone had pressed the wet clay against a flat surface without trimming it.

Patric showed it one day to his venerated employer, the Curator Dr. (Sir) Winfield Hamlin, who placed it in the paper-leaved jungle of his desk and cleared his throat in long rattling blasts, mainly a device for keeping Patric's mouth shut while he reflected. "Ah, yes, there was a fad for things resembling this, fifty-odd years ago—time of the Republic—you know? Sixth-century catchpenny trash. A lot of it originated here in Penn, naturally. But Yankee ingenuity also intervened—hrrr. A Boston style—yes—or was it Cambridge—bushwa-type art with a learned flavor for the tourist trade."

"Yes, I know, Sir Winfield—an expression of Harvard indifference perhaps. However, I didn't think this—"

"Of course not. Obviously old. Genuine. Don't confuse me. Aaargh." Dr. Hamlin shoved long knotty fingers through his dense white-sprinkled hair and clenched his domineering brows. "Where in hell'd you find it, Jonz, mind if I ask?"

"Dever's Odd-Goods on Brod Street. Buried among the tourist stuff. . . . Could it be Old-Time, sir?"
"Hhrraaa."

"I mean of course, *early* Old-Time. That is—"

"Hr."

"Could it, Sir Winfield, antedate the Christian era?"

"How you do go on! It is primitive art," said Dr. Hamlin, whipsawed in the fantastic difficulties of thinking while young people talk. "Of course. Hwaargh (ptui). Of course it antedates the Christian period, the Greek, the Egyptian, Assyrian, Mohenjo-Daro, the whatever. Wha'd Dever want for it, mind if I ask?"

"A dollar."

"Ass. Dever, I mean." Ghastly upheavals and realignments took place in the ragged moccasin-leather of Dr. Hamlin's face, possibly the onset of a sneeze. His attenuated frame, six feet five when fully unwound, fidgeted in the hard small chair which the Museum felt to be suited to its executives and department heads because it kept them awake. The facial temblor resolved itself into a gaunt and demoralizing smile. "Jonz—or Patric if I may—this thing of course is of no value, but had you considered—rrr—donating it to the Museum? Quite possible some stray corner could be found."

Patric thought: *Why, the old son of a bitch!—so now I know; or do I?* He retrieved the clay image and rubbed it with his thumb, seeing Sir Winfield wince and look away. "I don't know, sir. I've grown sort of attached to it."

"Quite natural, my boy. One often does, to these worthless things. In the presence of prehistory and all that bullshit. You know, it's possible the Museum might undertake to underwrite some infinitesimal solatium, a *quid pro quo* as it were—hard to say."

Beginning to feel dizzy with a sense of power, Pat inquired with the bloody bluntness of youth: "How much?"

"Why, good God, my dear boy, I couldn't possibly— oh, some trifle, some nominal sum for the record. Hwaargh! The trustees have board meetings about things like that. I, of course, would be the logical one to bring it up before the—uh—the board."

"I see. Perhaps I ought to think it over."

"By all means," said Sir Winfield in a weak voice.

"Thought is the power that raises man above the beasts, if that's where he is." As Patric was politely escaping, he recovered partially, and roared a suffering addendum: "Don't you go showing that thing to any of my honored colleagues! You know there isn't one of those sods that wouldn't steal you blind!"

"I wouldn't think of it, sir."

"The goddamn board might go to five bucks."

"I must certainly think it over."

"You do that."

Ordinarily Patric dropped a penny in the hat for the beggar at the corner of Brod and Duli, but heading homeward toward the plaster cherubs that evening, he forgot. A placard certified the beggar to be a war veteran blinded at the battle of Ramapo in 602. Bare ends of thigh-bone showed how a surgeon had lopped them in a race with gangrene. A broad patch covered his eyes. Stung by neglect, the beggar mumbled a tired curse or two, learning not much from the lazy noise of Patric's receding steps. Patric Jonz was thinking about time, prehistory, civilization, the multiple faces of love and truth, and—*How much MORE than five bucks is it worth?*

The June air hung heavy with the scent of roses. From yards facing south, protected against the occasional frosts of winter, Patric also caught the bacchanal sweetness of blooming orange trees. Late sunlight was blessing the old city—four and a half centuries old at least, thought to be standing only a few miles from the site of a submerged metropolitan center of Old Time, that perplexing slice of backward infinity called by the Holy Murcan Church the Pagan Era, by others the Late Christian Period. A few have called it the Golden Age of Science, or just the Golden Age, and some with more justice call it the Age of Spoliation, since the earth ever since then has been poorer than a straw-fed mule.

By the old church on Mark Street Patric made his usual pause. The venerable building enjoyed a lawn and garden space inside a six-foot brick wall; the weathered yellow bricks and the wheel-and-spire tower of the church were now reflecting a beginning crimson of sundown. The church sheltered a chapter of the ancient order of Franklinites, an enclave of strict piety in an increasingly secular age, vowed to silence and notorious for good works.

The Curator's opinion ought to be sound. The little twinned god must be old beyond explaining or comprehending. Prodigiously older than the Holy Murcan Church, which as recently as the last century had enjoyed an undisputed vested interest in eternity.

Before the church rose one of those tall obsolete iron stakes. Why the devil, Patric wondered, did they preserve such objects, as though modern Murcanity saw nothing evil in them? He stepped into the bushes that the church considerately allowed to grow outside the brick wall. He supposed, loosening his loincloth, that you could ask the authorities about it, but you wouldn't win much light. Certainly not on the question: Does the Church imagine it might one day use the stake again in the traditional manner? It would be more profitable to ask the question of one of the Franklinites, since his vows permitted no answer but a grunt.

Comfortable once more, Patric considered the graffiti on the upper section of the wall. It amounted to a valued message center. Every few days a Franklinite would march out in bitter silence with a mop and bucket to clean away the notices, invitations, self-descriptions, diagrams, wishful fancies, etc., because of the fearful danger that they might be observed by the young (who often had put them there). Thus one could feel sure that any important communication found here wouldn't be more than three or four days old; the citizens felt a decent gratitude to the fathers for thus keeping the information up to date. Patric gave thoughtful attention to some words that looked fresh: *Ask for Thalia at Mam Sola's house. I found merit in her discourse.* The script was literate, the message not the usual tribute to a five-dollar prostitute; Thalia must have pleased someone of exacting taste. Patric sighed, mentally reviewing his wallet. Twelve bucks and small change, payday four days off. One must forgo either eating, or Thalia. At Mam Sola's, he had heard from rumor, there were drinks to buy and maybe other extras. One would live on peanuts and crackers the rest of the week.

He wandered on to a Mark Street bar named The Whitish Virgin. It was pleasantly lit by the slipper-shaped whale-oil lamps recently come into style. They do smoke worse than lamps with a glass chimney, but they have some charm, if the veiling is vented to carry off fumes. In this hostel they stood on firm shelves, high enough to escape being knocked over in a brawl. The straw and shavings were clean. A nicely painted nude above the bar was doubtless the virgin who gave the place its name. She stood elegantly beside a canopied bed, smiling at the observer like a lemon cream puff.

Patric ordered a beer. The place was quiet at this early hour. Only one other drinker stood at the bar, a slender but muscular young man whose blue shirt carried the hammer insignia of the Construction Workers Guild. He glanced at the black pen design on Patric's shirt without awe. Members of the Clerical Guild had become almost common in the last thirty years, since the Church had been obliged to

eff off with its restrictions on reading and writing. The blue-shirt said pleasantly: "Hot, a'n't it?"

"Ayah," said Patric, and smiled, nodding at the hammer insignia. "What branch?"

"Carpenter. As for the heat I figured you'd say that, but you people up here don't know what heat is. I've been down to the colony the last six months. Belltown, that's the asshole of creation. They needed carpenters and the pay was good. Twenty-six miles south of the Pottymack as the trail runs. Last settlement this side of Misipa, and the worst."

"There's been talk in the journals, government may decide to extend the colony all the way to the Misipan Wall."

"Been a lot of shit too. Meaning no disrespect to the journals—I know you Clericals go big for 'em."

"Not too big."

"Well, I call it stupid talk, about extending the colony. We're better off with a jungle no-man's-land between us and Misipa. Damned slaveholders. They built the wall, let 'em sweat behind it."

"Ayah. There's been mention of scouting parties in the jungle."

"Bullshit parties. I went on one of those. The jungle beyond the Pottymack is no place for human beings, Mister—never will be. What we did, see, we went off a little way into the big bush, far enough off so that Belltown folks couldn't see our campfire smoke, and set there with a thumb up. One of the boys had a gittur, and I play the corder, so the time passed nice enough. Then when we figured it was about right, our Clerical wrote up a report saying with a lot of big words that we hadn't found nothing, and so back to Belltown. By me it was a holiday, but not a real nice one, because that jungle is hell even if you ain't trying to travel."

"Ayah?"

"Believe me. Brown tiger's terrible, for one thing. There was at least two hanging around Belltown, and nobody could wing them—we had some damn good archers too. Lost three men. One was Bill Shawn, a friend of mine. The thing jumped a party he was with and carried him off in the broad day like a cat with a sparrow. You ever seen brown tiger?"

"Nay, never been out of Fil. I work at the Museum."

"That so? My name's Chad Snow."

"Patric Jonz."

" 'Know ya . . . And the heat down there, man, and the wet, and the lonesomeness. Your moccasins look all right when you take 'em off to go to bed, come morning they're all over green mold. Scorpions. Centipedes eight inches long—the sons of bitches rattle when they run. You get tired from an amount of work that wouldn't even get you winded up here. And that ain't all."

"Sounds like enough."

"There are—well, Mr. Jonz, they call you crazy for believing them stories—I don't know—"

"Call me Patric."

" 'Kay—Patric. Stories about—small people, in the jungle. Little bastards, less than four feet tall. Three feet some say. Supposed to be descended from Misipan mues that were bred for slaves for several generations, and then revolted and took to the jungle. I don't *believe* it, but down there, if you get a touch of swamp fever or something, you start seeing things. You know—something just gone out of sight behind a tree bole. I ain't going back."

"Bartender—couple more beers, on me."

"Why, thank you kindly, Patric. It's great to be home."

Behind him Patric heard a minatory roar of throat-clearing. "Home," said Sir Winfield, "has been defined as a man's castle, where he can get away from everybody but himself. It's overrated. I myself was married once. Rraaargh. Through no fault of her own, the poor wretch could not abide me. She now runs a genteel seminary for young ladies of the upper social strata, God rest her, at Rasbury Park. Beer, bartender. I have a surpassing thirst."

Patric felt haunted. Would the Curator have demeaned himself by pursuing his secretary through the streets on some disingenuous errand? The thought was unworthy. However, Patric, maybe because of a spotless conscience, was not in the habit of looking behind him, so it could have happened. This was

surely not Dr. Hamlin's preferred sort of bar. With his baronetcy and his income, he ought to favor high-toned drinking havens like the Penn Fathers Society, or the Art and Letters Club in the lush calm of Bethlum Street.

"Join us, sir," said Chad to the long old man who had already done so. "We were talking about the colony."

Patric mumbled introductions, hoping Chad would not be overimpressed by the "sir." He wasn't.

"Ah, the colony. An irrelevant political doodah superimposed on a contemptible patch of tropic efflorescence that would have been better left to the indigenous reptiles."

"I dunno," said Chad. "We done quite a bit of work."

"The Federation, in my view, would be better advised to further the liberal arts and allow the desuetudinous hinterland to remain *in statu quo*."

"You may have a point there," said Chad.

"As an arcanum of indifferent hispidulate boscage, it might have its merits. Not that I wish to grind my own double ax, but the matter is self-evident."

"See what you mean," said Patric.

"Ain't he a corker?" said Chad.

"I am. By the term double ax I mean that the history of art must employ procedures of both art and science; thus I stand frequently before the imminent prospect of falling between two schools."

"Sir—"

"Later, Patric. I loathe being interrupted." Apologetically, he tapped Patric's arm. "The boy's my secretary, . Mr. Snow, and besides, age has its privileges. Excellent beer. The fluid they describe as beer at the Penn Fathers Society is, beside this, diluted turtle piss. Your health, gentlemen!"

"How."

"Pros't," said Patric.

"The history of art, Mr. Snow, is my profession—that's why I drag it in by the ears."

"Call me Chad."

"With pleasure, Chad. And art is a wide subject. We must include, I suppose, the odorous mystique of politics, but we compensate for that by including the arts of brewing and distillation—ha! And of course the arts of love. Gentlemen, I give you love."

"Love," said Patric.

"Huh? Oh—sure. Love." Chad drank. "Ain't he a corker?"

"Yes. I am, it is true, a corker. Let me explain that. Before passing by here and most fortunately chancing to see you, Patric (if I may) I had already paused briefly at another oasis. There, at my very moment of entrance, a cork popped. Without human intervention. Spontaneously, I say, like the flight of a little bird. Rr."

Patric's fingers roaming in a pocket encountered the clay image, and he set it on the bar. The beer in the bottle of his brain had become an essential juice of benevolence. If he were to move his head it would slosh with love for all mankind. He did move it and it did slosh. "Let us drink to old gods and new loves."

"Admirable," said Dr. Hamlin.

Chad said: "Two arses, two faces, I be a son of a bitch."

Dr. Hamlin murmured: "And fingernail marks." A frayed gandyshank silenus, he lounged with intently brooding eyes, as though the sight of the image had swept him clear into the cool country of sobriety. "One may suppose he had no other tool at hand."

Patric suggested: "Maybe he (if it was he and not she) knew of no other tool?"

The Curator shook his head, in thought and wonderment, not in denial. Chad shook his head too, but nervously, as if at a buzzing fly. "I'd call that carrying marriage too far."

"You have a point there," said Patric. "Except I don't believe the artist was thinking about marriage."

"You mean he. . . ."

"Don't know. M' own philosophy marriage's very simple. Women. You got to treat 'em right. Love."

Sir Winfield said: "Patric (if I may) you are drunk."

"Nothing of the kind, sir. Slight nebriated is all. *In vino* lots of *Veritas*. That's a fact."

"If he was sober," said Chad, "he'd know you got to treat 'em tough. Only way."

"No no," said Patric. "No, I deny that paregorically. Toughness is a weariness to the spirit, like for instance once upon a time said Adam to Eve, 'For God's sake! My back is one big solid ache. It ain't that I mind begetting mankind, but couldn't we take a short break?' "

"He's drunk," said Chad. "You have to treat 'em tough, rough."

"Tender."

"Gentlemen, gentlemen!"

Chad asked uneasily: "Who's the old corker talking to, Patric? You got any idea?"

Dr. Hamlin scratched his neck. "Gentlemen, I feel that your difference of outlook has been expressed in simple and basic terms upon which I cannot improve. Tenderness versus toughness. Rr. It raises a number of shrewd and difficult points; but I would suggest to you that we do, inevitably, approach the proposition solely, and it may be narrowly, from the masculine point of view. Now there is—"

"He's such a nice little guy," said Chad. "I hate to think of him being, you know, swallowed up in the clutches of some—some—"

"I assure you," said Patric, "I have always been able to preserve the 'tegrity of a disintellected interest."

"Especially when he's drunk, like now."

The Curator inquired: "Do you boys want to be alone?" Chad didn't laugh. "I was about to say, there is a remedy for a too exclusively male presentment of our problem, namely the submission of it, accompanied I presume by demonstrations, to a qualified and impartial umpire—but first let me hasten to say that for the independent intelligence of both you gentlemen I have only the highest, the very warmest regard—"

"To you, sir."

"To you, Sir Winfield. Pros't."

"Thank you both, heartily. Now I should respectfully urge that in order to be qualified as a judge of the matter hereinbeforementioned, the umpire must be, as it were, a woman."

"Hear, hear!" said Patric.

"That statue," said Chad. "It kind of gets you."

"Thought you didn't like it," Patric said.

"Didn't at first. You have to get used to it. It gets you."

"An umpire capable by physical nature, namely a woman—"

"I mean it—*gets* you. Mind if I pick it up?"

"Not a bit. Go ahead."

"Balls," said Sir Winfield.

"No, honest, I was listening," said Patric. "And Chad here didn't mean to interrupt. You were talking about women."

"Well, I was merely trying to direct your thought and that of Mr. Snow to the consideration of a logical outcome, namely, the reference of your basic conflict to a judicially minded member of that profession which for some odd reason is referred to as the oldest. (Actually I believe the skilled design and production of spiked clubs for bashing in the heads of neighbors is a far older profession than prostitution, but for the moment we will let that pass.)"

"What conflict?"

"Tenderness versus toughness. Alcohol seems not to improve the quality of your attentiveness."

"Oh, that." Struck by a poignant certainty that one day Chad and he would be old weary men, the Curator dead, and that delightful wench—what was her name? —Thalia—Thalia might no longer have merit in her discourse, Patric felt darkly inclined to weep; manfully, he did not. "Daresay Chad's pro'ly right."

"What! Don't you stand up for your own views, young man?"

"Oh, I do, by *God* I do!" Patric struck the bar, accurately, and ordered beer. "Nothing counts with a woman like—like what did I say? Ten'erness. And of course staying power. I do not refer to quantity, a coarse conception. I would not have you think me on a level with Ezekiel Budworthy Gower, who could

comfort six quail in one hour with nine minutes for each plus a very short speech explaining his curious power. But it's ten'erness that counts."

"Would you bet on it, kid?" Through the haze, Chad looked incoherently annoyed, though maybe not at him.

"Wouldn't be fair," said Patric. "Here I am, known as a grandmaster of the erotic art throughout the civilized world—"

"Make it Filadelfia," said Dr. Hamlin.

"Known throughout Filadelfia as a lover without a peer. When I enter a room, women—you understand I'm zaggerating to make my point, but the principle is sound—when I enter a room—shit, Sir Winfield, what happens when I enter a room?"

"I don't know. But you are, in fact, willing to lay a wager on your position? I thought Mr. Snow's offer was eminently fair."

"What offer?"

"Why, if I properly understood the drift of our discourse, it was proposed that we should attend an establishment of the better sort, and there submit your difference of opinion to the judgment of some judicially inclined hetaera, if such can be found. Mr. Snow then offered to place the matter in the form of a wager. I myself, as a neutral party, am prepared to hold the stakes."

"Got no stakes," said Patric. "Pay-day problem."

"Possibly," Dr. Hamlin murmured, "some material object other than coin of the realm. ... As for the tariff at the establishment I mentioned, I am prepared to underwrite it in the interest of science and philosophy."

Chad burped and laid his knife belt on the bar. He pulled a ten-inch blade from a leather sheath and turned it so that the cold blue spat splendor in the lamplight. "Katskil steel that is. Look at the ivy design along the shaft."

"Remarkable," said Dr. Hamlin.

"Antique, too. Man that sold it to me said it was a hundred years old. Good as new, though. Wouldn't want to get in front of it. I've had it five years. If you're agreeable, Patric, I'll put it up against that cockeyed statue thing."

While Dr. Hamlin examined the old knife, Patric suffered a panic that he hoped would prove temporary. After all, his factual experience as a great lover was limited to an episode about a year ago with a doe-eyed waitress named Vickie who amused herself with him for a couple of months before very sensibly marrying somebody else. "Patric," she had said, "you are a sweet kid but you've got no sense. And no prospects." Well, what the hell—hope for the best. He mumbled: "Statue markable arche-o-logical significance."

"What?" said Chad.

"Oh, nothing."

"It's a deal?"

"Sure."

"Well, if the Professor's going to pay for the girls—"

"Girl," said Sir Winfield. "One of judicial mind. To assess the relative merits of the tough versus the tender approach—as if she didn't already know."

"All right. If the Professor's going to pay for the girl, le' me buy us a supper. Lead for the pencil."

"I will trail along," said Patric sadly, "in my capacity as a specter of gaunt poverty, useful walking comment on the depravity of the Lucullan table, and worth feeding if only for that reason."

"Oh, come on!" said Chad.

"I take this very kindly," said Dr. Hamlin, "although in exalting me to the academic height you do me a most undeserved honor, since I have never professed anything, except astonishment at the perpetual and quasiseraphic fatuity of humankind."

During supper at a nearby beanery Patric remained somewhat sad, although ready to admit, and prove, that the dust of the highway of life can at times be laid by beer. Chad tucked into roast mutton,

mashed potatoes and apple pie, and said virtually nothing. Sir Winfield, gone into a genial twilight mood, discoursed knowledgeable on a literary phenomenon of the late Christian period which had gone by the curious name of science fiction. It amazed him, he said, that when the possible was already fantastic—when these hysterical earth-destroying multitudes were already surrounded by automotive vehicles, flying machines, ships capable of journeying under water with the instruments for planetary destruction in their holds, even elementary space-flight as far as the moon—they should still have found it necessary to strain after the impossible and irrational in pseudo-scientific fairy tales. But it may have been (said Sir Winfield) a logical sort of compensation for disappointment and boredom, for the fact that in the field of genuine scientific discovery the sense of wonder had for them a very short life: Today's miracle was tomorrow's old sock. Consider for example the late Christian miracle called teevy, or sometimes telly. There really was such an electronic device, so long as the raw materials and technology had existed to maintain it—a box with a bulging illuminated front, like a pregnant soap dish, before which people sat in extended narcosis while images were transmitted from a central control point directing them to what they were expected to consume the following day. As sugar for the pill, the instrument also provided wholesome entertainment—soothing head-smashing, eye-gouging, shooting, disemboweling, all in vivid attractive color. An astounding feature of this device was that the subjects actually paid for the privilege of being thus mentally and emotionally back scuttled. Well, said Dr. Hamlin, to every age its own dementia, and our own will doubtless appear laughable to the inconsiderate people of the eighth or ninth century, ho-hum. "Um," said Chad.

The streets had become cool in the lamplit dark. "The place I have in mind," said Sir Winfield, "is known as Mam Sola's. It is, in my experience, a house of notable gentility, often catering to what I may term the academic trade."

"Right on, Professor!" said Chad, and Patric was moved to sing a popular item of the day, "Diddle Me, Dumpling, Di-doo-dah," in a careful baritone, while in view of the gay and almost impudiculous overtones of this charming lyric, Sir Winfield thought best to add, as a qualifying counterpoint, a rendition in A-major of "Rock of Ages," the two being somewhat blended by a strong patient monotone from Chad Snow in the general neighborhood of a low G-natural. Standing before another wall, imperfectly located but much needed, Patric said: "It seems to me we did that with distinction."

"Your A," said Dr. Hamlin, "in what I believe to have been the last chord, was abominably flat."

"Excuse me, sir: the original intention was to perform in A-flat."

"I regret, of course, the disparity in our views."

"I felt all right," said Chad.

"Ah, well! Ah, youth! I hope that you young gentlemen feel no slackening of ambition at this jitical cruncture. That is Mam Sola's house. The one with the rosy curtains. Down 'ere."

Chad said: "Y'hoo!"

"Rr—Chad o' man—I meant to speak of this earlier. When we present ourselves at Mam Sola's establishment we must restrain any (very natural) tendency toward abrupt sound patterns on the order of *Y'hoo!* It is not, sir, that one in any sense deploras the quality or the substance of—uh—*Y'hoo!* Purely a matter of doing the Romans."

"Understand perf'ly," said Chad, and he laid a protective arm over the Curator's shoulders, reaching up without difficulty. "Don't worry single thing, I don't hold it against you, Professor, that you can't hold your likker. Nothing against any man can't holslikker. We're going to take care of you. Relax, Professor."

"If you truly feel this unsolicited academic advancement—"

"Right, Professor! Advance! Up and at 'em! Oopsadaisy!"

A cragfaced maid in black and white admitted them with a somber nod of recognition for Sir Winfield. Sober except in the legs, the old man asked after her brother, a policeman in the Tenth Ward.

"Well as could be expected, Sir Winfield. A'n't had no falling fits all week, and they're taking him off swamproot. Just so he don't overdo, the doctor says. If you'll wait in the parlor—?"

"Certainly. Is Mam Sola at home to guests? We have something to discuss that may interest her."

"To you, Sir Winfield, and any friends of yours, I am sure she will be at home. Will I request the

presence of the young ladies?"

"Not yet, Hilaria. First we'd like Mam Sola's advice on a matter of substantial philosophical interest."

"I hope, Sir Winfield, it don't have nothing to do with them weekly inspections. Get her down, they do. We try, Sir Winfield. Nobody can say it against us that we don't try, Sir Winfield."

"I'm sure. No, this is just a matter of philosophy."

"Well, if that's all. I will inquire, sir."

Patric submitted to a squashy maternal armchair, perfumed and forgiving. He saw Chad's lips form and suppress a respectful "Y'h—" evidently heartfelt. Across the room from Patric hung a few severely drawn and quartered landscapes (but no wall mottoes) and a more advanced painting in the popular style called Modern Primitive, apparently dealing with the rape of Lucrece but in a manner that could give no offense.

From time to time a heavy red curtain at the far end of the room was bumpily but softly agitated, and parted an inch or so away from pleasant flesh that said "Ooh—parm me!" Chad leered at this evidence of intelligent life forms in extraparlorine space, Patric politely ignored it, and Dr. (Sir) Winfield Hamlin sighed.

Hilaria returned. "Mam Sola requests that you come upstairs to her private sitting room, being her arthritis is bothering her." Hilaria sniffed. "I will bring up the tea things."

"I know the way," said Sir Winfield, and he remarked to Patric and Chad with excusable vanity: "Constantia and I are old friends." He creaked up the stairway and ducked his head to ease his height through a doorway into a charming little sitting room done in gray and white with a dull red carpet and a pot of brisk geranium at the window. Mam Sola's rocking chair stood by a busy burdened sewing table. There were armchairs for guests, a tea table, and a few tasteful drawings, mostly of little cottages with here and there a well-conducted sheep. Mam Sola beamed.

"So delightful to see you again, Sir Winfield!" Without staggering, he stooped to shake hands with the delicate little soul. "Do excuse my not getting up—it's the arthritis. Ah, you and I are getting into the frosty I'm afraid, Sir Winfield, into the frosty. How fortunate that there is always the life of the mind!"

"Indeed yes, dear Constantia, and good works too—we mustn't forget good works." Sir Winfield made stately introductions.

The old lady smiled on Chad, and cocked her head at Patric with some curiosity. "Now I had a dear friend Lizette Jonz, librarian for thirty years at the Donner Street Church—a connection, I wonder?"

"I don't think so, Mam. My family was from Betlam."

"Ah yes, the Betlam branch. Lizette was very literary, you know. Her poems were often published in the *Murcan Advocate*. There was one about the lilies of death and corruption that I always thought was particularly sweet—I must have a clipping of it somewhere. These are sad days, aren't they, Sir Winfield?" Hilaria flatfooted in, loaded with tea things and gloom; Mam Sola poured, chatting on merrily. "But I often think of the past, especially the chariot races. Young people don't know what they've lost. Nothing but buggy and sulky nowadays—I know it's all progress and so forth, but it seems a pity. I always felt the chariot races at Lanster Field were so genteel!—you remember them, Sir Winfield. Teams used to come from as far as Jontown. All those splendid young men! And the Percherons! I used to take my girls over, you know, and the management always gave us a nice tent by the fairgrounds. Everything's changed now, nothing left but the bulgar element. Oh dear, I do so love my cup of tea in the evening! Now then, what's this Hilaria said you wanted to discuss? She said it was about theosophy, but I told her, I said, that can't be right."

"Philosophy, dear Constantia."

"I tell as is told to me," said Hilaria, and retired, hurt.

"It's odd," said Mam Sola. "This sweet little room often gives Hilaria one of her Moods. I feel we ought not to *yield* to such things, it being merely that the lady who previously owned this establishment passed away in this room at the age of seventy-two of a bilious attack. Spot of rum in your tea, Sir Winfield?"

"Thank you, my dear."

"It was very peaceful I'm told, and so long ago too—not the least occasion for Hilaria to take on so

about it. Now tell me about philosophy! I'm all of a perish to hear about it."

Dr. Winfield told her, at his customary length or a little more, remarking in conclusion that a young lady named Thalia had impressed him on an earlier occasion as being well fitted for the rendering of a judicial opinion. This reached Patric through the semi-opaque glow of his love for humanity. Is it possible, he asked himself, that a Curator of Antique Visual Arts would write graffiti on a brick wall? The implications for the human future are astounding.

"But," said Mam Sola—and checked whatever she was about to say. Patric felt that a message passed between her and Sir Winfield; no doubt all was for the best. His head sloshed. "Hmm," said Mam Sola. "Judicial. Darling Thalia! We're all very fond of Thalia. So very *thoughtful* of you young gentlemen to take an interest. And a wager!—dear me, how exciting. I always used to let my girls place little bets on the chariot races, you know—seemed to make it more interesting for them somehow, I can't think why. Thalia is a trifle more expensive, Sir Winfield. So well thought of, you know—I have been obliged to increase the honorarium to, ah, twelve dollars. Per hour or fraction thereof. That dreadful federal tax."

"We must pay for our political pleasures, Constantia."

"Mph! That's a ridiculous law that says they can't take it out in trade. Why, the bookkeeping it would save, if only a couple of my sturdier girls—"

"Constantia, my dear, the argument runs that tax money is a public trust, to be spent for what they humorously describe as the good of all. For this reason, as I understand it, the government insists on receiving it in a negotiable form for, and I quote, redeployment of basic resources. Now of course if some way could be found—"

"Oh, rootitoot, don't bother me with suchlike at my age!"

"But that would indeed," said Patric, "be a kettle of shoes of an altogether different color."

"You see?" said Chad. "You prob'ly thought he was asleep."

"So that will be twenty-four dollars plus tax," said Mam Sola. "Or—perhaps thirty-six, Sir Winfield?"

"Why, yes, thirty-six, my dear."

"So kind! Yes, just put it in the sewing basket. I'll go and speak to Thalia." The old lady paused in the doorway to chuckle at them, but she seemed faintly worried too. "Judicial—dear me! So very *original*, Sir Winfield!" She was gone for long minutes. Dr. Hamlin sat with his hands on the head of his cane and his chin on his hands, contemplating the young. Chad fidgeted. Patric sat quiet striving to encourage transcendental thought. Mam Sola rustled back into the room, and tapped Chad on the shoulder. "Miss Thalia will be pleased to see this gentleman first. Second door down the hall."

After Chad strode away, frowningly intent on his mission but looking rather less than tough, Mam Sola sighed and resumed her knitting, her neat small fingers busied with their share of the fabric of the world. The other ancient face, resting on folded hands, blinked slowly once or twice at Patric like the face of a mild old turtle in the sun. At some time, Patric unnoticing, Dr. Hamlin must have taken the stakes of the wager from his pockets and placed them on the tea table. Chad's antique knife lay there caught in the glow of Mam Sola's lamp, metal made living, a brightly savage phallic thrust. Beside it, the two-faced image was gazing directly and stolidly into Patric from its female side, as any girl might point out that eternity and so forth is all right if you want to bother with it, but—?

Patric understood after a while that the Curator was pronouncing his own doubtless illuminating commentary on these objects of art, but the old man's discourse was proceeding like an army of banners filing up a mountainside with no great hope of ever reaching a predicate verb, and Patric felt incompetent to give it adequate attention. It was still advancing, he thought, when his friend Chad Snow returned. Chad was not reeling exactly, only dazed and uncommunicative, sitting down, shaking his head with a bit of a snap, and saying: "Man!"

From the shadowed doorway behind Chad—well, at that time too some soprano downstairs was singing delightfully to a mandolin—Patric felt himself to be observed by the large, placid eyes of a girl in a pink bathrobe—or dressing gown, or robe, or something—who considered him with calm bordering on unconcern, and pointed, with a smile and a stabbing motion of a delicate hand and outthrust forefinger—at Dr. (Sir) Winfield Hamlin. The Curator rose, bowed to Mam Sola, Chad, and Patric (in

that order) and departed with Thalia.

To be chosen last is, by some lights, a mark of favor. It may imply that one wishes to hold freshest the memory of the person last chosen. Maybe it may.

Patric would have liked to direct toward Chad one of those all-purpose inquiries on the order of "How are things?" or "Warm, ain't it?" or "How they hanging?" which are the pennies and nickels of conversation—they won't buy much, but they chink. Chad, however, had closed his eyes and rested his head on the back of his chair; Patric felt it kinder not to disturb him. Ten minutes later, though, Chad opened both eyes for the purpose of contemplating Patric and winking one of them.

Patric also winked. To the best of his ability he strove to make this wink convey sympathy, fellow feeling tempered by the lightest touch of intellectual superiority, and a reaffirmation of his—one should not say *belief in* the presence of so much muffled uncertainty—of his *hopeful trust* that when his turn with Thalia arrived he would have this wager snaffled, cornered, in the bag. A massive load for one wink to carry; too much. Chad went back to sleep.

Mam Sola knitted; now and then she hummed.

Dr. Hamlin returned, only a little short of breath. He peered down on Patric and performed a slight motion of the thumb.

The second door down the hall opened at Patric's knock—his mother after all had been a schoolteacher and early training in politeness leaves its mark. Thalia smiled and closed the door behind him.

She was neither tall nor short, but in between; neither blond nor brunet, but in between; neither pretty nor homely, but—uh-huh. Patric said: "Well, hello! You know, I never know what to say?" Thalia smiled, and patted his arm with modest eloquence. She was neither young nor old.

Patric inquired: "Did they tell you about it?" Thalia looked puzzled. "I mean about the wager." Thalia nodded, and sat on the bed, patting the place beside her.

The pink bathrobe slithered down around her hips; she was examining a pink-slippered foot and apparently finding it more important than the discussion, though without a hint of rudeness. Patric sat by her. He hugged her tentatively. As she looked up at him, friendly but still-faced, he noticed that her gaze was centered on his mouth. Startled into what he immediately feared was an uncouth directness, Patric asked: "Darling, are you by any chance a deaf-mute?"

Thalia nodded. She made a motion or two with her fingers; Patric shook his head regretfully. On her bedside table lay a small slate and a piece of chalk. As she indicated them she shrugged, maybe a way of suggesting that the privilege of speech is overrated, or just saying that she didn't care about talking in this evanescent moment. Then she was caressing him, and he was responding, if not quite in the manner of a great lover, at least humanly. He was certainly being tender, he knew; it occurred to him also that maybe he wasn't being very exciting. Possibly that was why when she turned her face aside he suspected her of smothering a yawn.

She flung away the pink robe; his loincloth joined it. Laying back naked, she opened her arms imperatively, and Patric went into them, to lose himself in a quite satisfying little storm.

In the following quiet, forgetting her disability—if you can call it that in a world where everyone talks far too much and few ever mean what they say—Patric blurted: "Chad wasn't really tough, was he?" She had been looking toward his lips. She reached for the slate and wrote, *No, mostly he talked about you.*

Giving him no more than a glimpse of that, she rubbed out the words and wrote others: *To the Stakeholder: Let me think it over. I can't make up my mind.* She put the slate in Patric's hands and pointed amiably to the doorway. Impulsively Patric kissed her. She patted his rump kindly and gave him a little push.

Patric handed over the slate to the Curator, who viewed it lovingly and critically, slanting back his ancient head to bring the writing under his bifocals. He said: "Ah!"

"So exciting!" Mam Sola murmured. "My goodness, I nearly dropped a stitch, back there. What does she say?"

"Says she can't make up her mind."

Chad flung Patric an affectionate half punch. "Ain't she a corker?"

"Easily that," said Patric. "All of that."

"Ah—gentlemen. When a woman has one of these little difficulties about making up her mind, one the vital factors, gentlemen, is *time*. Never, never rush these things! Would it therefore be agreeable to both of you if the valuable stakes of this wager were kept in a place of safety until such time as Miss Thalia finds herself enabled to reach a decision? I have in mind specifically the tastefully arranged, carefully catalogued, and efficiently guarded precincts of the Philadelphia Museum, Division of Antique Visual Arts."

Chad said: "Well, I be a—"

"Actually, gentlemen, I see no other way out of our difficulty that is not subject to justifiable criticism on either practical or ethical grounds."

"Boys," said Mam Sola, "ain't he a corker?"

"How true that is, Constantia! Gentlemen, I await your views."

"Oh," said Patric, "I suppose she'll make up her mind some time."

Sir Winfield smiled with all his wrinkles. "My dear Patric (if I may) it occurs to me that she is under no such compulsion. Indeed I think I can say with some certainty that in this matter dear Miss Thalia will *never* make up her mind."

Chad asked: "Now, Professor, how can you be sure of that?"

"She promised me."