

George Washington Slept Here

by Charles L. Harness

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1. OLIVER POTTS

Miss Catlin waited until her employer had laid his briefcase on the credenza and sat himself behind his desk. "Did you win your case, Mr. Potts?"

He beamed up at her. "Of course not, Miss Catlin. Any calls?"

"The local D.A.R. wants you to give a talk... preferably something early American. Refreshments."

"What was my last D.A.R. lecture?"

"Termite resistance of white oak log cabins, I believe."

"And that about exhausts my colonial expertise. On the other hand... refreshments, you said?"

"A colonial menu."

"Tell them I accept."

"They'll want to know the title of your talk."

"I'll think of something. And don't sound so cynical, Miss Catlin." He squinted at an engraved card on his desk. "What's this?"

His secretary sniffed. "Junk mail, Mr. Potts. I really shouldn't have brought it in. It just means somebody has accessed into the Bar Association roster."

"Gracious, Miss Catlin, it's an invitation. For membership in the Trust for Preservation of Mount Vernon."

"Translation: they want money."

"For a good cause, I'm sure. Wasn't there an enclosure?"

"Oh, Mr. Potts! You're so gullible." She handed him a folder.

"See, they're trying to duplicate some things that turned up missing when Washington died in 1799. Saddle bag, given to him by Congress in 1783. Long underwear, imported from London. A 1795 ten dollar gold piece. And so on. Where's your patriotism, Miss Catlin? They're trying to restore Mount Vernon the way it was when *he* died."

"Patriotism, Mr. Potts-- and I remind you I got this from you-- is the last refuge of a scoundrel."

"Send them one hundred."

"Mr. Potts. Your office needs painting. The reception room needs new furniture. That sofa is a disgrace. If you want to restore something, start here. Ten dollars. Not a penny more."

"Catlin-- oh, the hell with it. Get the phone."

She picked it up. "Oliver Potts law office." After a moment she said to him, "It's Mr. York's secretary, calling from Sena City. She wants to talk to you."

"I'll take it here. Yes, Miss Joyner? Accident? What? *Dead?* Good God." (Potts never used profanity) Miss Catlin watched his face in growing alarm as he listened further to the stricken voice in his earpiece. "Due in court this afternoon? But surely... the local guys... Nobody will take it? The judge... Oh. Oh. What a..." he mumbled the word as he looked at his watch. "The commuter flights leave on the half hour. I can just make it." He bounded from his chair, grabbed his attaché case, and dashed for the door. He called over his shoulder to Miss Catlin (who was standing there shaking her head): "Phone the printouts in to the plane... Sena v. Bridge Authority... Judge Roule... g'bye!"

* * *

Oliver Potts graduated tenth from the bottom in a law class of one hundred and forty-seven. He accepted his low estate philosophically. When he started his practice he assumed that rich clients with sure winners were not going to flock to his door. In this he was quite right. How then, he asked himself, shall I pay the rent, a secretary's salary, and sometimes eat? It was then that he made a remarkable discovery: for every winning litigant there is a loser. Fifty percent of all those anxious faces are losers. *They* are your clients! The field is white unto the harvest! Go get them, Oliver!

And so he did. Losers, sensing a kindred spirit, brought their cases to him in droves. Incredibly, some of them had money, and paid his fees. And so he acquired a certain reputation, absolutely unique in his county: during his entire professional career, spanning nearly two decades, he had never won a case.

Since he entered each individual contest expecting to lose, the foreseen result rarely surprised or disappointed him. But there was more to it. Opposition counsel dreaded taking the winning side versus Potts. Examples abounded. A prestigious law firm with a sure-win medical malpractice suit, after spending ninety thousand dollars in desk time, won a judgment of three dollars, of which they kept one-third. In another instance Potts lost a famous product liability case because of a local statute-of-limitations, but the notoriety stimulated a dozen additional cases where the statute had not run out.

In a case of alleged failure to pay for a newspaper, he successfully counterclaimed for false arrest, libel, kidnaping, and assault. But his client was still required to pay five cents for the paper.

Perhaps the closest Potts ever came to not losing was his famous hound-dog case. His client, serving a ten-year sentence, had been put in charge of the bloodhound kennels at the prison farm. Soon thereafter he walked out. Since he took all the dogs with him, there was no easy way to track him. Ten years later he was recaptured. Potts, his court-appointed lawyer, argued that the warden was criminally negligent and guilty of entrapment for putting his client in charge of the dogs. Potts argued further that the ten-year sentence must now be considered served, in that his client had cared for the dogs for a full ten years and indeed had set up a nationally known breeding farm based on the original prison nucleus. The care and feeding came to twenty thousand dollars, plus interest. His client went free, the state paid a large sum in settlement; yet Potts felt that he had lost, since his client had to return an equivalent number of dogs to the prison kennels. The warden and D.A. both took early retirement. They went partners on a chicken farm in eastern Maryland and were never heard from again.

The current curse at bar smokers: "May you win against Oliver Potts."

Potts accepted their opprobrium with rancorless resignation.

* * *

An hour after Potts left his office he was looking down out of the plane window. Below him, meandering off to the right, was the big river. From up here, though, it didn't look too impressive. And there were the twin cantilever towers, one on each side of the river, nicknamed George and Martha by the irreverent. Toys at this height, but soon they'd hold a span between them, and the whole thing would

be transformed into the great George Washington Bridge. Not intended to rival the famous George Washington suspension bridge in New York City, of course, but named rather in memory of Washington's early surveying trips into the wilderness. He had crossed the river on a raft when he was eighteen, and on the western side had carved his initials on Sena Rock: "G. W. 1750." The scratches were now covered by steel and concrete of the growing cantilever, but Potts had read that plaster casts of the legend had first been made, and that miniatures (made in Taiwan) could be bought at local souvenir stands.

That tower on the right-- "George"-- *that* was what all the fuss was about. He tried to remember some of the things he had read in the papers. His friend Fenleigh York had been insane to take the case. Or else the fee had been irresistible.

"Mr. Potts?" called the stewardess. "Mr. Oliver Potts?"

He held up his hand.

"You have a call."

"Thanks." Catlin had got the data already. Nice work. He walked back to the communicator cubicle, pulled the curtain behind him, and pushed the "Come In" button on the keyboard.

He watched intently as the screen came alive. First, the abstract.

Sena v. Bridge Authority

Plaintiff petitions order (a) restraining Defendant from taking a certain river-side parcel by eminent domain & (b) requiring Defendant to dismantle cantilever bridge tower from said parcel.

Good Lord! thought Potts. Fen took money for *this*? Well, let's go on. Now we get the people.

There's Judge Maximilian Roule, walking up the courthouse steps. (Nice holo definition.) Nervous springy man. Grim face. Combination of Louis the Fourteenth and Machiavelli. Maybe just the camera angle? Stiffest sentences in the state. Maximum Max. Lines of print now zipping in on the CRT. Net worth: indeterminate. Some sources say near bankruptcy. Others say he has recently recouped lost fortune. Hobby, bridges. Off you go, judge.

Next, Sena. Miss? Mrs.? York's client. And now mine. Is that her first or her last name? Named for Sena City? She's walking across a lawn. That's probably her house? Yes. The Bridge Authority let her move it away from the condemnation site. Fine figure. She turns, waves. Smiles. Beautiful face. Pale coppery complexion. Age, uncertain. Looks to be about twenty-five. Income, independent but modest.

And now, counsel for the opposition, Barton Badging. Bachelor. President County Bar Association. Presiding chairman local chapters FFV, SAR. President, Sena City Numismatic Association. Monographs: Seventeenth Century Immigrants to Tidewater Virginia; George Washington's Personal Silver Converted to Dismes and Other Coins. The holo showed Badging making a speech at a banquet table.

"Vocal" prodded Potts.

"Poor audio," apologized the cassette.

"Go ahead."

Scratchy words came from the little figure. "Fellow numismatists, twenty years ago I said to myself, there is a perfect 1795 gold eagle out there, waiting for me. Where? I don't know. All I know is, it's there. Do any of you know its whereabouts? If so, please tell me. Before I die, I want to see that beautiful coin, in proof condition. Not merely extremely fine. Not merely uncirculated. Not even MS--mint state. This coin at the end of the rainbow, this elusive piece of gold, will be in absolutely *proof* condition."

"And *you*," muttered Potts, "are an absolute crock." But then he stopped to think. "On the other hand, maybe this kind of thing is standard at Sena City. Watch out, Ollie."

Next, Marcus Reed, Bridge Authority Chairman. Coming out of the Sena Athletic Club. Looks both ways before he crosses the sidewalk to his limo. Entrepreneur. Politician. Billionaire. Reed is major stockholder in Reed Construction, Inc., building the Bridge.

Potts punched "hold." The little holo figure of Marcus Reed froze, glaring up at him as though affronted by the restraint.

Potts asked the computer, "Who are the other stockholders in Reed Construction?"

"Mrs. Reed..."

"And...?"

"There's a twenty-five percent slice, owner unidentified."

"Find out."

"Data insufficient."

He punched "run." The rear door of Reed's car opened and the great man got in.

Who opened the door for him? thought Potts. Of course, the chauffeur might have done it by remote.

He punched "reverse," then "run."

There. A hand; a blurred face. Potts zoomed in. Poor definition. yet... Was it possible? His heart began to pound. Judge Roule. Maximum Max.

It doesn't necessarily mean a thing, he told himself. Maybe they're old buddies from college. Maybe they're working together on a local charity. And maybe I'm the queen mother.

His voice was a dry crackle. "Breakdown, Roule's assets."

"Unavailable."

"Does Roule have an equity position in Reed Construction?"

"Unavailable."

"Terminate Reed. Give me the police report on the death of Fenleigh York, last night."

He watched the lines scroll up.

"York car accompanied by truck crashed through cable railings on Palisade Drive. York vehicle found on its back at bottom of hill. Truck burned midway to river. Unidentified witness states truck forced the car off the cliff, but locked bumpers with it at the last moment and went over with it. Truck reported stolen Wednesday last."

Then the ambulance report. Hospital report. Both York and truck driver DOA.

"Any holos?" asked Potts.

"No."

"Where was he going?"

"Data insufficient."

"Does Palisade Drive lead to the airport?"

"Yes."

"Did Mr. York hold a reservation?"

"No."

That didn't mean much, one way or the other. On a commuter flight you didn't generally need a reservation.

"Did he make a phone call to Capital City yesterday?"

"Checking. Yes."

"To whom?"

"It's listed simply as the Judicial Grievance Committee."

Oh God. Fenleigh was going to blow the whistle on something or somebody. The judge? Marcus Reed? But they had found out. And they took his whistle away. Permanently. His friend had been murdered.

And where, he mused, does that leave me?

"Fasten your seat belts," ordered the bland dead voice of the stewardess. "Extinguish all smoking materials. We are landing at Sena City Airport."

* * *

2. SENA

He parked his rental car in a nearby lot, dashed up the courthouse steps, and found the right courtroom by instinct. And so up the aisle and through the swinging gate at the bar.

They were all waiting for him.

The woman was a striking beauty. Light amber complexion, lustrous black hair and eyes. "Oliver Potts," he puffed. "Your new lawyer, if you want me."

She shrugged, as if to say, Do I have a choice? Then her mouth twisted into a half-smile. "Yes, Mr. Potts. Of course I want you."

He nodded, then walked up to the bench. "Oliver Potts, Your Honor, replacing Mr. York."

Judge Roule scowled. "All right. Tell the reporter, Mr. Potts."

On his way back to his seat he gave his card to the court reporter and stopped by to introduce himself to opposing counsel. He noted that Barton Badging was a prim-looking gentleman who wore gold-coin cufflinks, a tie pin fashioned from a coin, and had a gold-coin watch fob dangling from a heavy gold chain stretched across his vest. Opposing counsel stared up at him in grave distaste. "Barton Badging," he said. He made no effort to accept Potts's outstretched hand.

The judge hammered with the gavel. "If the social hour is over, we have a trial in progress." He glared suspiciously at the newcomer. "We know you by reputation, Mr. Potts. But let me tell you right now, I like things clear-cut in my court. A winner wins clean. A loser loses clean, and no funny business. That's it. Black and white. Do you understand, Mr. Potts?"

"I couldn't agree more, Your Honor."

"Good. So sit down, Mr. Potts."

Potts sat down beside his client.

"Motions?" asked Judge Roule.

Potts was immediately up again. His eyes locked with the judge's for one long moment. Patches of goosebumps raced up and down his cheeks, his arms, his back. His biceps contracted. His veins were awash in adrenalin.

It was happening to the judge, too. The lawyer read the body language clearly. The man behind the bench fidgeted, hew wet his lips with a thick wet tongue. He fiddled with his gavel. He returned the lawyer's stare uneasily.

In these milliseconds (while no one else in the room noticed) they measured each other like skilled swordsmen. They circled like wolf and prey, like cobra and mongoose. Starfish and oyster. The question was, who was who? Who was hunter, who was hunted? No way yet to tell. But Potts believed he would know very soon.

He spoke, and as he spoke, he opened the lid of his attaché case in a careless absent motion and switched on the tekt-x cube. He said, "Your Honor, as you may be aware, I am absolutely new to the case. So that I can familiarize myself with the issues, I request a continuance for one week."

Judge Roule stared down at the lawyer through wide-spaced eyes set deep under bushy brows. Slowly, his smooth cheek pads pulled back, lifting his mouth into a fanged grin. "No, Mr. Potts, no continuance."

So, thought Potts. Now we know. The roles are defined. You're the heavy. Just as I thought. Did you send out that truck that killed Fenleigh? Okay, Roule. I expect to lose, but in the process, you're going down. He said: "If I cannot have a week, Your Honor, could I have at least one hour with my client?"

"Oh, come now, counselor! Don't you read the papers? Surely you know this is the famous George Washington Bridge case. It's been going on in this very courtroom for days. Look at the reporters behind you, there in the first row." The jurist frowned, then sighed, as though unable to cope with the incompetence of imported counsel. He leaned forward. "Listen carefully, Mr. Potts. You won't need a continuance or a long rambling futile discussion with your client, because I'm going to brief you myself. The Bridge Authority is building a bridge, known as the George Washington Bride. As a preliminary necessary step, the state has taken by eminent domain certain access properties on both sides of the river. Did the state have the power to condemn and take? That's the main issue, Mr. Potts. Plaintiff claims the taking was improper, in that the parcel on one side of the river included the Sena Rock, given by the United States to a foreign power as site for an embassy or consulate or trading post, or something of the sort. Plaintiff also contends that the Sena Rock lacks the compressive strength to carry the weight of the structures that will eventually rest on it. She tells us that as soon as another five thousand pounds is added to the west cantilever tower-- the so-called "George" tower-- Sena Rock will collapse and the

tower will drop into the river. To prevent this, she asks that I order construction be suspended, and that the bridge site be moved one quarter-mile upriver." He favored the woman sitting next to Potts with a mocking smile. "Have I stated the case, Madame Plaintiff?"

"Yes, Your Honor," she said quietly.

"Then," continued the judge, "believing that the interests of Plaintiff's alleged embassy and of the Bridge Authority will be adequately protected by prompt proceedings, and bearing in mind that this court serves the public interest in searching for an immediate resolution of all issues, I deny Plaintiff's request for a continuance. We will go forward. For your information, Mr. Potts, Plaintiff completed her main case yesterday. Today we hear from the Defendant, the Bridge Authority. Mr. Badging?"

As Potts sat down he flashed a reassuring smile at his client. She did not smile back.

At the other counsel table, Barton Badging got to his feet. "Your Honor, we renew our motion for dismissal. Surely, this farce has gone far enough."

"I appreciate your viewpoint," said Roule. "On the other hand, this is a court of record. You must state your reasons."

"Yes, Your Honor. First, the alleged treaty, Plaintiff's Exhibit One. Plaintiff concedes it is written in a foreign language, unreadable by anyone except herself. Indeed, she concedes that the granting party, an alleged tribe of alleged Indians, vanished from this area some three thousand years ago. This alleged treaty is sheer madness, Your Honor." He paused and turned to peer over half-moon spectacles at Oliver Potts. He smiled. "But it doesn't stop there, Your Honor. No indeed. There's the matter of the identity of the foundation rock, the so-called Sena Rock, which Plaintiff urges is the site of her mysterious embassy. This rock, she would have us understand, is not part of the foundation bedrock of the area. It is not, she claims, native basalt, poured up from the bowels of our mother Earth two hundred million years ago, part of several thousand square miles of companion flow. Oh, no indeed. Nothing so geologically banal. *Her* rock is special. It was formed out of nothing; out of blank space, if you will, by esoteric processes known only to Plaintiff's countrymen. And why special? She does not say. She says only that it will not support the weight of the west tower." Mr. Badging chuckled mournfully. "Really, Your Honor, if you will but look out the window"-- he pointed, and they all looked-- "you can see that the tower is substantially complete, and that the alien rock-- if we may call it that-- is holding up nicely." He took the lapels of his jacket in pink hands. "If ever a case should never have come to court, it is this one." He bowed eloquently to the judge, perfunctorily to opposing counsel, and sat down.

Potts, who had been simultaneously reading, listening, and taking notes, now arose. "We oppose the motion to dismiss. The Bridge Authority is attempting to moot this case by completing the west tower during this trial. I remind the Authority that if the treaty is finally upheld, the bridge would be subject to dismantling and removal. At Defendant's expense, I might add. But that problem is minor compared to the risk of life involved with continuing construction. The records show that there are never less than ten workmen on the tower, and that forty or more are not unusual, including riveters, welders, crane operators, painters, and others. If Sena Rock collapses, the cantilever tower comes down, and most of these men will be killed." He took his seat.

The judge seemed to study the oak surface of his bench. Then he looked up and searched out the face of the woman seated by Potts. He said carefully: "The record is not sufficiently complete for me to rule just now on Defendant's renewed motion for dismissal. In any event, I have a couple of questions for Plaintiff. Madame... *Sena*, is it?"

She rose gracefully. "Simply Sena, your honor. It is an abbreviation of Asenaapeeneniwa, which, in the tongue of the Algonquian Indians, means 'Spirit-of-the-Rock.'"

"Hm. You are an Indian?"

"No."

Indeed? Of what race are you? Who are your ancestors?"

"I have no race and no ancestors."

"No games, young woman. Remember, I can hold you in contempt. Everyone has ancestors."

"Not I, Your Honor."

The judge's eyes flashed. "Not even a mother?"

"No."

"Then, how came you into existence?"

"I was made by... certain people."

"When?"

She hesitated. "I'm over twenty-one, Your Honor."

The judge sighed. "I see. Let's go on to the Rock. I gather that the people who, ah, 'made' you, also 'made' the Rock."

"Yes."

"When did they make the Rock?"

She shrugged. "Before they made me."

Roule's face reddened. "You are being evasive, young lady. I can accept a certain amount of evasiveness when a lady's age is involved. But the age of Sena Rock is another matter entirely. If you know when your people made the Rock, I require that you say."

"The Rock is at least ten thousand years old; possibly twelve."

"But not more than twelve?"

"Not more than twelve."

The judge frowned. Then he glared at the tittering courtroom audience, then at Oliver Potts, then back at the women. "You are aware of the state geologist's report, already stipulated in the pleadings?"

"Yes, sir."

"You know that report states that the bedrock in the abutment area is metamorphosed basalt, which is to say, tough, resistant greenstone, exposed locally some two hundred and thirty *million* years ago?"

"Yes."

"*Not* a mere ten or twelve thousand years ago?"

"True, Your Honor."

"How do you explain the inconsistency?" He leaned back in his plush highback chair, safe in the certainty there could be no rational explanation.

"It's simple, Your Honor. The geologist took rock samples at one-mile intervals. He missed the embassy site altogether."

"The embassy site, which is to say, Sena Rock, is not greenstone?"

"It is not. It just looks like greenstone."

Roule was thoughtful. "Let us back up a bit. Into this 'non-greenstone' the builders have cut great gaping holes. They have sunk giant rebars, they have poured vast volumes of corrosion-resistant concrete. On this basement rock abutment they have built a cantilever, with arms reaching backward from the shore and forward over the river. Sena Rock *looks* like bedrock. It is *acting* like bedrock. The cantilever tower is anchored to it firmly. It is supporting the tower nicely, just as greenstone is supposed to. But you say it isn't greenstone."

"It isn't."

"What is it, then?"

"Synthetic matter, Your Honor."

"Synthetic? You mean like synthetic fabric? Plastics? Something like that?"

"Not at all. The matter was synthesized from nothing... from space-- using an energy catalyst. The atomic spacings... silicon, oxygen, the alkali metals, are quite satisfactory for imitation rock, but they're all wrong for true greenstone."

During this interplay Potts had been dividing his attention between his client, the judge, opposing counsel, and the tekt-x cube in his attaché case. This device was actually a remote laser-reading polygraph. It cast out a 360-degree laser net and brought back modified pulses in the reflected beams that showed the standard vitals in selected nearby personnel: pulse beat, blood pressure, respiration, galvanic skin response, and voice stress. In sum, the reader was a lie detector that operated without attachment to the subject. In prior litigation Potts had used it successfully to conduct simultaneous and continuing screens of the witness in the box, the judge, opposing counsel, and his own client. He had never served in an ongoing trial where everyone told the truth all the time. The fact no longer amazed him.

Indeed, he accepted it (with morose reluctance) as a statement about the human condition, probably including himself.

He watched the recessed code lights on the tiny reader panel. He was getting some interesting readings from Barton Badging. His opponent was hiding something. I fear you have not led a lily-white professional life, Mr. Badging. But you're a featherweight compared to what we're getting from Maximum Max. The man was totally corrupt. Have to get back to him. But the judge wasn't the immediate problem. He could cope with corruption. The real trouble was with his client.

Sena wasn't registering at all.

It wasn't a questions of under- or overreacting. It was much worse. The tekt-x simply wasn't picking up any readings from her body. Nothing whatsoever. A marble statue would show more activity.

Perhaps the laser net was defective in her direction? He gave the box a quarter turn. Still nothing. He rotated the instrument back. As he did this, he saw she was watching him from the corner of her eye.

Ah, he thought. She's taking it all in. She knows what the tekt-x does. She knows she doesn't register. Now what?

"Sorry," she whispered. "I'll turn it on."

The little lights assigned to her suddenly lit up. The base lines for all her vitals showed absolutely normal: pulse, 70; b.p., 125 over 65; respiration, 16; perspiration normal; no voice stress. As if to compensate for her zero emotional level, his own light panel began to flash. *His* pulse, blood pressure, and galvanic skin index readings were jumping off the register. He had stopped breathing, but now his chest was beginning to work again.

"Could I give you a tranquilizer?" she whispered.

"I'm... okay."

No. He wouldn't believe it. Somehow, the little machine had malfunctioned. They do that. These modern electronic marvels... when they work, they work beautifully. But when they don't, everything comes apart. Maybe a short somewhere. Have the technicians check it out. Seems to be working fine now. I overreacted. What's the matter with me? This woman is insane. How did I get roped into this? Fen was never stupid. Why did *he* take it? Money probably. And now I've got it, and I've got some kind of duty to this madwoman. The county asylum is supposed to be around here somewhere. Maybe we'll all be in it before this is over.

For the next hour he listened to the drone of the enemy expert, as prodded and led by Badging.

"Now, Dr. Davis, you have heard Plaintiff's testimony that pressure alters the morphology of rocks and minerals?" said Badging.

"Yes, sir."

"Is that a danger here?"

"Not at all."

"Why not?"

"It is only *extreme* pressures that alter the characteristics of materials. At ten thousand atmospheres mercury solidifies at room temperature. At slightly greater pressures, boiling water solidifies, and graphite changes to diamond. At one hundred thousand atmospheres iron becomes non-magnetic. At slightly under one million atmospheres spinel is squeezed into perovskite. All these transformations are readily achieved in a diamond anvil pressure cell, and they all involve reductions in volume. However, such transformations cannot possibly take place under the pressures resulting from the west cantilever, the so-called 'George' tower."

"What is the average pressure on the George tower area?" asked Badging.

"Less than sixty pounds per square inch-- about four atmospheres."

Sena bent over to Potts. "It's not the average pressure that's critical-- it's the total *weight*. And they will indeed exceed *that*."

"Noted," whispered her lawyer. "We'll put you back on for that point during rebuttal." (If we get that far, he said to himself.)

"Your witness," said Badging.

Potts faced the expert. "Just now, Dr. Davis, you have offered considerable engineering data as to the

effect of pressure on minerals."

"Yes, sir."

"You did the experiments yourself?"

"Experiments? I don't understand."

"Well, for example, did you go into a laboratory, take a piece of coal, and apply pressure to it, say in a diamond anvil, whereby you noted that at a certain pressure the coal changed to graphite? Is that the kind of thing you did?"

"Oh, no. I just copied some data out of an engineering handbook."

Potts addressed the judge. "All of Dr. Davis's testimony is obviously hearsay, Your Honor. I move it be stricken."

Roule pointed to the computer screen on the corner of his bench. "You see the green light, Mr. Potts. Motion denied."

Potts showed amazement. "But, Your Honor, there's a long line of cases-- "

"The computer has spoken, Mr. Potts. In this court admissibility is determined by computer. Our computer accesses *all* relevant cases, and it is infallible. Error is inconceivable; hence no appeal lies to the state supreme court. And certainly in this case it is in the public interest that our decision be final as well as prompt. Do you understand, Mr. Potts?"

"Yes, Your Honor."

"Any further cross?"

"I'd like to pose a hypothetical to Dr. Davis."

"Involving what?"

"Plate tectonics."

Badging cried out, "Objection! Irrelevant."

Roule hesitated. He said, "Let's hear it, then I'll decide."

"Doctor," said Potts, "isn't it true that the Atlantic plate is subject to internal strains?"

"That's the current theory," admitted Dr. Davis.

"Such intra-plate strains, in fact, caused the great Charleston earthquake of 1886?"

"Yes, we think so."

"Now, if 'George' falls, mightn't the collapse trigger plate vibrations that will bring 'Martha' down, too?"

"I repeat my objection!" Badging was on his feet and waving his arms. "This hypothetical is highly improper. Your Honor, there has been no credible testimony that the George tower is any danger whatsoever."

"Ms. Sena has so testified!" insisted Potts.

"No *credible*, I said," reiterated Badging.

"Gentlemen, gentlemen, calm yourselves," rumbled Roule. "I agree with you, Mr. Badging. We'll strike the hypothetical question and answer." The dark eyes gleamed down at the visiting lawyer. "Mr. Potts, the court will take judicial notice that strong ties of love and affection existed between George and Martha Washington, and indeed that, when he died, she soon followed. However, these bonds and identities do not carry over into modern cantilever design, however named."

Potts sighed. "Nothing further, Your Honor."

As he sat down, the woman passed him a scribbled note: "The computer panel is rigged. The judge controls it by buttons under the bench."

Probably true, thought Potts, but how did she know? Did she have strange electronic sensors in her brain and/or body? He nodded to her, then wadded up the note. And there was another puzzle. Since they were going to lose on the merits, why did the judge have to resort to dirty tricks?

After a lunch break Badging put on several more witnesses: a real estate appraiser who testified to the value of the condemned parcel; a bridge engineer who swore the structure design met all codes and was absolutely safe; a gentleman from the U.S. State Department who explained the protocol for selection of sites for embassies and consulates and who denied that the Department had any record of a foreign embassy on Sena Rock; a psychiatrist who refused to look at Sena while he testified that she was ruled by delusions and hallucinations.

Potts objected to one and all, for various reasons, without avail. The green light for admissibility lit up on each and every occasion.

Late in the afternoon Badging said, "That's my case, Your Honor."

"Yes. Hm. A very thorough presentation, Mr. Badging." The judge peered at the clock at the back of the courtroom. "It's six o'clock. Will you have any rebuttal, Mr. Potts?"

"I'd like to consult my client about that, Your Honor. I've had no opportunity-- "

"You had a whole hour at lunch to talk to your client, Mr. Potts."

The lawyer stifled a groan.

"But," said the judge, "This is a generous court. We are, above all, fair." The sardonic eyes glinted down at the lawyer. "I'll give you the weekend. Court adjourned until ten o'clock Monday morning." With a swish of his robe he swept from the dais.

"All rise..."

Potts felt a great relief. It could have been worse. At least now he had a couple of days. Weekends are gifts to lawyers in mid-trial. A time for research, talking to the client, hunting witnesses, finding that crucial bit of data or that milestone citation to spring on Monday. Forty-eight hours to recover from Friday's trauma.

He closed his attaché case carefully. "We have to talk," he told his client.

"Where are you staying?"

"At the Colonial, if they're still holding the room."

"Drive over behind me. I know where it is. There's a good restaurant across the street."

* * *

3. DHORANS

She insisted on going up to the room with him. As they stepped inside, she held her finger up to her lips. He looked at her in wonder. She walked over to him and whispered into his ear: "Bugged."

He nodded. Somehow it didn't surprise him. He fished around in his case, brought out a micro-cassette player, and placed it on the night table.

They left quietly, down the back stairs to the street.

"What's on the tape?" she asked as they walked into the rear of the restaurant.

"Some high entertainment. It'll keep the goons glued to their earphones for a couple of hours."

"Standard equipment?"

"I never leave home without it. What's good to eat here, Sena?"

"I like the trout. They don't take them from the river anymore, of course. Probably flown in from Spain or Alaska."

He ordered quickly. "We must talk. Forgive me if I'm blunt and tactless."

"Go ahead."

"How old are you?"

"You heard me tell the judge."

"I'd like to hear it from you."

She would not look at him. "Everyone thinks I'm crazy. Do you?"

"No." (Chalk up one lie, Potts. But what could he say?) "Are you?"

"Sometimes I think I am."

"What are your earliest memories?"

"Is that important?"

"I can appreciate your reluctance." He shrugged. "A young friend once asked me, 'Should I put on my resumé that I have seen a flying saucer?' I told him, 'Don't admit it-- to anyone-- ever!' But since then, I've had second thoughts. Honesty has its points, too. Please answer, if you can."

"I've never told anyone before. Not even *him*." She sighed.

Him? Better not ask just yet. He waited.

"I came out of the Rock at sunrise," said Sena. "That's the first thing I remember. The great ship was there. Three or four of the People were standing around, watching me. I knew they had made me. They had copied an Indian girl of the neighborhood. I also knew they had given me much knowledge, and I knew what I was supposed to do to preserve the Rock. After a time they got back into the ship, and it made a soft hissing sound, and then it vanished."

"These People... what did they look like?"

"They floated... they pulsed... they vibrated... mostly they were balls of light... sometimes things stuck out of them, like coiling light rays..."

"Go on. What happened next?"

"That morning a herd of great horned creatures came down to the river to drink."

"Deer?"

"Much bigger. The giant bison, I think. Their horns were easily six feet across, point to point."

"Are you sure, Sena? The giant bison became extinct in North America about ten thousand years ago."

"That's what they were, though."

"How about horses? Camels?"

"Those too. And giant sloths. And big cats, what you call saber-tooth tigers. They're all gone, now."

Sandia fauna, thought Potts. All extinct by seven thousand B.C. "You were 'copied' from an Indian girl? Did you have much contact with the early Indians?"

"Not much. But they were there. They hunted the bison and the other hooved creatures."

"With bows and arrows?"

"This was before bows and arrows. But they had spears and were skilled with the atlatl-- the spear thrower. And there were cliffs nearby-- the Palisades, where Mr. York died. The early people stampeded the herds over the cliffs and took meat and hides down below. The cliffs were much steeper then."

"Why did your People select this particular site for the Rock?"

"It's one of the few places they could bring into focus with a matching plate on Dhora. The plates line up every two hundred years, and make sort of a bridge. Then they can cross over."

"Dhora?"

"Their world."

"I see." (He didn't.) "Why did they make you a female?"

"I believe they thought the Indians would consider me less a threat. In this they were only partly right."

"Oh?"

"At first the Indians wanted to kill me, but then I showed them how I could sink down into the Rock, and after that they were greatly afraid of me. They called me Asenaapeeneniwa, Spirit-of-the-Rock. Later... much later, they shortened it to just plain Sena. They brought me meat, still hot on cooking sticks, and later little corn cakes."

"Ah, so you do have an alimentary system?"

"Of sorts. Not like yours, though. I can take it or leave it."

"Let's see if I understand. You're not a true human being. You're really a sort of alien artifact. And so is the Rock."

"That's true."

"And you're about ten thousand years old."

"Yes."

"The river, the town, the county... all named after you? Not the other way around?"

"Most improbable, isn't it, Mr. Potts?" She seemed grimly amused.

He sat there, staring at her, rudely, tactlessly. She looked back at him. Finally he took a deep breath. "Your story is indeed improbable. But I would like very much to believe you."

"Then we are making progress."

"You and I, perhaps. But the case, no. There's no way we can stop the construction. If you're right, the Rock is going to collapse, and it'll take the tower with it. If you're wrong, the Bridge goes safely ahead. Either way, you lose. I can do nothing for you. I might as well go back home."

"Perhaps you should. It would be safer for you."

"York was murdered, wasn't he?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"He found out that the judge owned a big share of the Bridge bonds. He had hard evidence. So go home, Oliver Potts. You can still catch the late flight."

"No. Not yet. In any case, I'm staying for Fenleigh's funeral, tomorrow morning. I can't stop the Bridge, Sena, but perhaps you can think of some small, possible thing I can do for you."

"Not for me, Oliver. But how about the men on the tower? There are two elevators on the tower; traveler creepers, they call them. The first thing Monday morning, ten men will go up to the top of the tower on one creeper. Then the second creeper will be loaded with girders-- about two and a half tons, and then it will start up. As soon as it does, the Rock will disappear, the tower will begin to collapse, and those ten men must die. If you're really determined to do something for me, perhaps you can figure out a way to prevent those men from being on the tower when it collapses. Maybe if you explained all this to the judge, he'd order the men not to go up, at least temporarily."

"He'd never do it. He'd consider it an admission your case has possible merit."

"Perhaps you could talk to Mr. Badging?"

"He'd feel even stronger about it." Noting her concern, he added quickly, "But let me think about it."

"Yes."

"Now, we have to make plans. After Fenleigh's funeral tomorrow, I'd like to talk to you again."

"He was your friend?"

"We went through the university together."

"I'm so sorry."

As they left the restaurant, he asked, "What's that big brick building over there, across from the motel?"

"The County Sanitarium," she said dryly. "Maybe we belong there?"

"Not yet, not yet," he said absently. And now he remembered something he had been meaning to ask. "Earlier, you mentioned you hadn't even told *him*. Who was *him*?"

"George. George Washington, that is. We were sort of... friends."

"Oh." He looked across the street. The face of the main building was well-lit. Beyond the chain-link fencing and the bit iron gate he tried to read the gold letters on the façade, but they were too far away.

"Goodnight, Sena."

* * *

4. THE BLACK BAG

As the burial crew lowered the casket into the dark empty rectangle, Potts talked quietly to Miss Joyner. "Did he take a retainer?"

"It's in the trunk of my car."

After the service was over they walked to her car together. She opened the trunk and helped him lift out a heavy black leather bag. He laid it on the gravel of the parking lot.

"What in the world..." he muttered.

"A lot of old coins," said Miss Joyner. "He was going to have them appraised, but he never got around to it."

Potts studied the bag glumly. The leather was ancient, smelly, and cracking in several places. He sighed. Fen had taken Sena's money, probably old pennies. From the weight, maybe even lead counterfeits. And now Potts was stuck with it.

He said softly: "What did he think of her? Of Ms. Sena?"

York's ex-secretary shrugged. "I don't know. I think sometimes he thought she was crazy. She told him the coins were counterfeit, but contained gold."

"Gold?" He lifted the bag again and fought off an urge to open it on the spot. "You don't think so?"

"I don't know. I'm just a secretary, Mr. Potts."

"And one of the best, Miss Joyner."

"Can I help you carry the bag to your car?"

"Thanks, no." He opened the car door for her and watched her drive away. Next week he'd have to help her wind up Fenleigh's affairs. Just now, he had other problems.

* * *

Inside his motel room Potts drew the drapes, chain-locked the door, and very carefully opened the bag. On the very top was a fold of ivory-hued fabric, which he took to be a coarsely-woven mix of linen and wool. He eased it back carefully.

Despite the dim lighting, golden sparkles rose up and dazzled him. He stared, unbelieving. He reached in and picked out a coin at random. He adjusted his spectacles, read the date, then closed his eyes for a moment, then opened them again and read the date once more. This time out loud, as though to convince his ears: "Seventeen ninety-five."

A 1795 gold coin. My goodness!

Rings a bell. In fact, two bells. The Mount Vernon Trust sent me that notice... a missing 1795 gold eagle. And Barton Badging. Barton, are you still looking for a 1795 gold eagle? Proof condition?

He replaced the coin and picked up another. Seventeen ninety-five. The next, seventeen ninety-five. And another. The whole bag? Shades of Blackstone! The bag must weigh at least forty pounds. Forty pounds of 1795's? Counterfeits, Miss Joyner had said? Sena, where did you get these?

He picked up the phone and got Catlin at her apartment back home. "I need information about old coins. Look in your access index. I'll wait."

She was back in a few minutes. "There are several sources."

"Top three?"

"American Numismatic Association; Professional Numismatic Guild, Inc.; and National Coin Collectors. And guess who was past president of NCC?"

"Not Barton Badging."

"Yes, Barton Badging. Mr. Potts, shouldn't this be on scramble?"

He smiled, but his mouth was in a hard line. "Don't bother just yet. Anything more on Badging?"

"He wrote a book, Grading Guide for Eighteenth Century Eagles. And he's an Associate Authenticator. He can look at your coin and give you a certificate. He's really into this stuff, Mr. Potts. Go on scramble, now?"

"No, not just yet. Access his book, get what he says about the seventeen ninety-five ten dollar gold eagle."

"Right here. Liberty head. Designed by Robert Scot. Minted at Philadelphia. Seventeen point five grams, thirty-three millimeters diameter, reeded edge. Ninety-one point six seven percent gold, balance copper." She paused.

"How many minted?"

"Five thousand, five hundred and eighty-three."

"What's one worth?"

"The best listed is MS-sixty-five, uncirculated, last auction at one hundred thousand dollars. Mint proof is better than that. Only one known to be struck, and given to George Washington for approval. Whereabouts unknown."

"Very good, Miss Catlin. *Now* we scramble." He placed the electronic device over the phone mouthpiece and waited for the whirring to stop. "You there?"

"Yes, sir."

"The room here is bugged, of course. No problem with that. I've got a cassette override on it. But the interesting thing is, I think we picked up a tag on the computer output as soon as we plugged in to the seventeen ninety-five reference. Can you check it out?"

"I'll try. Hold on. Yes, it's coming in. There was a tag. It was routed to Sena City. Somebody there is alerted every time the seventeen nine-five reference is pulled out. But Sena City is as close as I can get. No name. No phone number. Is that any help?"

"Oh, yes indeed. Thank you, Miss Catlin. And goodnight."

Next call to Sena. "Please come over here as fast as you can."

Okay, Badging, he thought. You laid the tag on the circuit. You've got all the questions. Let's see if Sena has any answers.

* * *

As soon as she came in the door he showed her a written slip: "Room still bugged. I've put on Entertainment Cassette Number Two. We can talk softly."

He walked back to the leather bag on the floor and lifted the covers. "An extraordinary collection, Sena."

"I trust they are adequate for the retainer?"

He smiled without humor. "I have been given to understand that one coin-- just one-- would bring in excess of one hundred thousand dollars. And how many are here?"

"Originally there were eight hundred, but over the years I had to spend twenty, maybe twenty-five."

"All identical?"

"Yes."

He grappled with the mental arithmetic. Nearly eighty million dollars. Of course, not that much. After the first few got on the market, the price would begin to drop.

"Oliver," she said gently, "I don't even think about it. I told Fenleigh and now I tell you: they're counterfeit."

"Counterfeit. Oh. I see."

"No, you don't see. It's still forty pounds of coin-grade gold bullion, worth about three hundred thousand dollars on the New York market. Of course, there may be a slight problem with the copper content."

He had a feeling he shouldn't ask. "Tell me about the copper."

"They had to program for copper, to conform to the Philadelphia mint formula. Copper is added to coin gold for hardness, you know."

"Go on. There was a problem?"

"We didn't pay much attention to isotopes in those days. Native copper is a mix of Cu-sixty-three with about twenty-nine Cu-sixty-five isotope. Our Cu is all Cu-sixty-three."

"Is the lack of Cu-sixty-five detectable?"

"There are ways. First of all, though, you have to know to look for it."

"Would a professional coin authenticator be likely to look for Cu-sixty-five?"

"No. It would be outside his level of expertise. Anyway, he wouldn't have the equipment."

"Interesting." Something else was bothering him now. "Mr. York's secretary said he took your case on contingency. If he lost, you didn't pay. Is that so?"

"Yes, that was our arrangement."

"But you *did* pay. These coins certainly have bullion value, at six hundred dollars an ounce. If we lose, am I supposed to return the coins?"

"No, that wouldn't be necessary. Let me explain. It's true, the coins have bullion value just now. On the other hand, they're part of the Rock. If the Rock collapses, so do they."

Oliver Potts suppressed a moan. "So we're back to *that*. If the Rock goes, they go? Poof?" He pantomimed blowing a feather from his palm. "Like that?" He looked at her with raised eyebrows.

"Poof, like that."

"Hard to get more contingent than that."

"That's true."

"But *how* did you make them, Sena?"

"Actually, Oliver, *I* didn't make them. *They* made them for me. They made them on a matter copier."
"They...?"

"The People who made the Rock, and who made me. The Dhorans."

(Was he beginning to *believe*? Potts, *stop!* Remember that big red brick building across the street, with the chain-link fence.) He mused aloud: "And they made the Rock to be the Earth terminus of a bridge-- *their* bridge. That's kind of funny, isn't it?"

"You're not laughing, Oliver."

He smiled wanly. "Your original coin was fresh out of the Philadelphia mint when your People copied it. That was two hundred years ago. Have they been here since?"

"No. They're not really due for another couple of months."

"Where do they come from? Where *is* Dhora?"

"Dhora is the second planet of Alpha Centauri."

He had to think about that. "They've done this on other planets?"

"I think so, though I've never seen the other places."

"*Why* do they do it, Sena? What do they want?"

"The Rock is several things. Besides being a bridge terminus, it's also a weather station. It records interspatial dust, cosmic temperatures, interstellar radiation, that sort of thing. They need to know all that, because they have great interstellar commerce. Also, the last several times they were here, the Rock was a big trading post with the Indians. The Dhorans bought beaver furs with knife blades and beads and blankets."

"The beavers are long gone."

"I know; so are the Indians."

"Nowadays, I doubt we'd have anything they'd want."

"I don't know. They're great traders. They'll find something. You have orchids, butterflies, rosewood, seashells. They can give you a list."

"What would they offer in return?"

"Technologies."

Of course. But none of it was going to happen. Not now. "And you, Sena, why are you here?"

"I try to keep the Rock clear, at least for the two-hundred-year entries. Up to now, it's been just a question of clearing away leaves and storm debris. This is the first time the Rock itself has been threatened. As a preserver I'm not doing so well, am I?"

"You're doing fine, Sena." He didn't want to believe. Why was he doing this to himself? He shook his head vigorously, as though to shatter the fantasy. But it didn't shatter. It stayed right there. "The master coin, Sena, where did *it* come from?"

"*He* gave it to me. George."

"George *Washington*?"

"Your first president."

"He was just passing by? In seventeen ninety-five?"

"There was more to it than that. Don't you read your history? They were giving him hell about the treaty John Jay had negotiated with the British finally to end the War and define all the boundaries and commercial rights. The proposed treaty was tearing the country apart. Some told him, the British are stealing us blind, don't sign. The Senate said, sign immediately, before they change their minds. He had to think, weigh all the pros and cons. He got away to Mount Vernon, but they followed him there. And then one weekend he really disappeared."

"He came here?"

"It wasn't the first time. We were... old friends."

Potts found himself blushing. "I understand."

She reflected. "That summer, when he was still in Philadelphia, the Director of the Mint, David Rittenhouse, gave him that first gold eagle, struck specially for George's approval. George gave it to me. The Dhorans used it a few weeks later to make the eight hundred copies."

Oliver Potts found himself dreaming. George Washington, General of the Armies, First President,

Father of his Country, Model of Morality and Rectitude, easing his fading days with this beautiful woman. Ah, me. "Go on," he said.

"Well, he went back to Philadelphia and signed the Treaty, and so your United States got off to a good start. A few years later he was dead. Do you believe me, Oliver?"

He didn't answer immediately. He was staring at the leather bag. On the near side, something in mottled gold letters. "G.W.," he whispered. "His saddle bag?"

"He forgot it. Today, I guess you'd call it a Freudian wish to return. It made a good coin case."

Potts stared at the bag a long time. Finally he said, "I can't stop the bridge." He pushed at the bag with his toe. "Even with all this."

"No, I guess you can't."

He was frowning, and concentrating. An idea was trying to form. If he could just get it to crystallize... "Those men up there on the tower. When the next load of girders is brought up, the cantilever collapses, and they will all be killed." (After he said it, he realized he was not asking a question, but making a statement.)

She watched his face with great interest.

He continued: "And 'George' collapses whether or not the workmen are out on the cantilever arm."

"Yes."

"So it would be a humane act to keep the workmen off the tower until the elevators go up?"

"That's what I've been telling you. But you said you couldn't get an order from the judge--"

"Not the judge. Badging. Maybe." His idea was now almost complete. There was just one more thing. "Is it possible to show that these coins were in fact made in 1795?"

"Yes. By measurement of the copper oxide coating. X-ray apparatus is required, but it's readily available, and the test is simple and non-destructive. It's quite similar to Bragg x-ray crystal analysis."

"Would Badging be likely to have the equipment?"

"I'm sure he would." She studied him with growing surmise. "You have hidden depths, Oliver."

"Why, thank you." He beamed in gratitude. "I could be a real S.O.B. if I put my mind to it. I'll call him now."

A few minutes later he said, "He's home, and he's expecting me."

"Just you?"

"I want to talk to him alone. A thing is going to happen that you shouldn't watch."

"You're the doctor."

"Lawyer."

* * *

5. THE COIN ROOM

Barton Badging's eyes flicked from Potts's face to the bag he cradled in his arms. He stared at the bag, speechless.

(He's our chief bugger, thought Potts. Of course, the judge is in on it, too.) "May I come in, Mr. Badging?"

"Oh, of course, of course. I was a bit startled, that was all."

(So you were; but you haven't seen anything yet.)

"Let's go down to the coin room," said Badging. "Bit more private. Do you collect, Mr. Potts?"

"Not really. Don't know a thing about it. We are aware, of course, of your stature in the field. As a matter of fact, that's why I'm here."

"Not about the litigation?"

"No." (Although we may get around to it.)

"Down these stairs, Mr. Potts. Hold the rail. Can I help you with that?"

"Oh, I think I have it."

"You can put it on the tale."

"Yes, thanks." Potts looked about the room in genuine appreciation. Glass cases full of coin trays lined the room. Coins were framed in collections that hung from the walls like carefully lighted paintings. His host was indeed a serious collector.

Badging's eyes never left the black bag. He wet his lips. He fingered a necklace strung with odd-looking beads.

(Let's drag it out a bit, thought Potts.) "Interesting necklace," he said.

Badging's head jerked. "Oh. You mean this. It's Iroquois wampum. Very old. Made about sixteen thirty-seven, of shell bits, very carefully cut and polished. Once used as money, legal tender, six white or three purple were worth one English penny." Badging kept his eyes on the black bag, but now he let out a long breath and relaxed a bit. "People don't really appreciate money, Mr. Potts."

"No."

"There's something special about the sight and sound of bright jangling coins. To have, to look at, even to smell."

"Yes, of course." Potts looked across the room at a wall covered by bookshelves. "And to study?"

"And to study. I love books about money, ancient money, modern money. I've written a couple myself. And I have scrapbooks of tours through American and foreign mints."

"That all sounds pretty general. Do you have a specialty?"

"Of course. All serious collectors have a specialty. Mine is Americana, seventeen hundred to eighteen hundred."

"Fascinating, Mr. Badging. However did you get into *that*?"

Badging put his hand out and caressed the bag gently. He said, "It started years ago, when I had just hung up my shingle. I settled an estate, which, alas, turned out to be bankrupt. The widow paid me with the deceased's strong box, 'inherited as is from great-great-Uncle Philip.' I broke it open. One or two gold coins. Hardly worth melting down. And there were several other items. A great disappointment. Still, being a prudent man, I had the batch appraised. The report was a real surprise. There were Spanish reales, Massachusetts Willow Tree shillings, Maryland pennies, Virginia halfpennies, New Yorke tokens, Pitt farthings... The appraiser made me a six-figure offer on the spot. I never regretted turning it down. Oh, I may have had one small bad moment as I drove home from the goldsmith's: was I ethically bound to tell the widow about the true value? No, I decided."

(And, thought Potts, your conscience has never troubled you since.) He said, "I see the picture, now. It's inspiring, when we realize that from that nucleus, your present collection has grown. And of course, along the way, you probably became an international expert in early Americana?"

Badging nodded. His hand was on the leather cover. He was about to open the bag.

(It's time, thought Potts. He's going crazy.) "Plastic gloves?" he said quietly.

Silently, Badging opened the desk and brought out two pair. They put them on.

"Go ahead," said Potts. "Open it."

Badging did. With trembling hand he picked out one coin, looked at it, and almost dropped it. He laid it beside the gag and did several things: his eyes glazed, he put his hands under the table, and he stopped breathing.

Potts had watched bird dogs behave quite similarly before they settled into a rigid point. Just don't let him faint, he thought.

Slowly, Badging returned to life. His eyes opened. He whispered: "How many do you have here?"

"About seven hundred and seventy-five, so I'm told."

Badging thought a moment. "About forty pounds?"

"Yes."

"All identical?"

"Yes, I think so."

The coin expert closed his eyes again. They opened. This time his hands were on top of the table, but they were still trembling. "Mr. Potts, would you permit me to take one of the coins into the back room for a closer inspection? I assume you-- "

"Oh, you don't need to do that, Mr. Badging. I'm convinced they're counterfeits. I'm sure your tests

will show that. That's partly why I'm here."

"Counterfeits?" Badging's cheeks sagged as the blood began to drain away.

"It stands to reason, doesn't it, Mr. Badging? Nearly eight hundred 1795 gold eagles still in mint proof condition after two hundred years? I'm no fool, sir. And neither are you. The problem is how to handle the stuff as bullion."

Potts watched the collector's eyes. I would make a good mind reader, he thought. Greed makes a man deaf, dumb, and blind. He thinks he knows a genuine seventeen ninety-five as Da Vinci knows Mona Lisa, or as Parsifal knows the Holy Grail. I can read him. Just now he's thinking that copper promotes slow oxidation on uncirculated gold coins. The coating is only a few microns thick and it's invisible to the naked eye. However, it is detectable and measurable by techniques within the scope of his skill and equipment. "Go ahead," said Potts gently. "Prove it to yourself that they're counterfeit."

"Yes. Thank you. Please excuse me." Badging picked up the coin with plastic-sheathed fingers and disappeared into the alcove behind him.

Ten minutes later he was back. He wouldn't look Potts in the eye.

"I'm sorry," said Potts sincerely. "I told you they were counterfeit. Remarkable imitations, though. Now then, could we talk about the bullion value?"

"Bullion..?" It seemed difficult for Badging to concentrate.

"There is a small problem," explained Potts delicately. "Possession."

"Possession...? Oh, you mean possession of counterfeit coins?"

"Yes. Eighteen, U.S.C. 485. The Secret Service may not take kindly to possession of nearly eight hundred counterfeit gold coins. They'll have to be melted down."

Badging turned pale. "Melt... ah... no... well..."

Potts watched this with interest. He smiled. "That raises another difficulty. Because of the legal problems, it would have to be done under conditions of great discretion. My client doesn't know any goldsmiths; nor do I. But we thought you might."

The older man's face suddenly shone with a great light. "I know... one or two." He coughed delicately. "There would, of course, be a fee."

"My dear Mr. Badging, you don't understand. She wants to be completely rid of the coins. She wants no bullion back. She's simply trying to steer clear of the law."

"*She*? Ah! Madame Sena?"

"Yes."

"The crazy woman."

"So they say."

"What do you think, Mr. Potts?"

"She's certainly different."

They looked at each other. Badging sighed. It was coming together. Things said, plus things not said. "What does she want?" He put it almost petulantly.

"Thirty thousand dollars, plus a little favor."

"The money's reasonable. But I can't throw the case, Potts."

"No, of course not."

"So what's this 'little favor'?"

"Monday morning, when the first two loads of girders go up into the west cantilever tower-- 'George' they call it-- ten men will be at the top waiting with rivet guns. My client believes the tower will crash as soon as those elevators start up, and that those men will be killed in the crash. She requests that the men stay off both towers-- east and west-- until the elevators move on George. After that, you can do anything you like."

"Huh? You mean, the men on both George and Martha wait until the girders go up on George?"

"That's it."

"That's all she wants?"

"Plus the thirty thou, of course. At this point, she's simply trying to save lives. Both towers may be involved because of internal strains in the underlying continental plate."

"If George falls, you mean," said Badging.

"When George falls," said Potts firmly.

"Oh, God. You too?"

"Me too."

Badging shrank back in his chair. Then he looked at the mythic leather case, and back to Potts. He exhaled slowly. Potts relaxed.

Badging rubbed his chin. "Insanity aside, Potts, I'd have to persuade the on-site engineers. They'll howl, you know. They'll lose fifteen or twenty minutes, getting the men up there after the beams. No rational explanation. There'll have to be pay-offs. Not sure I can swing it."

Potts smiled. "We have faith in you, Badging." He pushed the case toward the other.

His host laid possessory hands on it. "I'll make out a check."

"Do we want to burden the record with a piece of paper?"

"Oh. Ah, no, of course not. Cash. You want it now?"

"That would be fine."

Badging went over to his wall safe and came back with three bundles of one-hundred-dollar bills.

"You want to count it?"

"Certainly not, Mr. Badging. You want a receipt?"

"No need for that. I am holding the bag."

Potts smiled. "Why, so you are. Got time for an anecdote?"

"Well, all right."

"It's about that very bag. Outrageous rumor has it that the Continental Congress gave the bag to Washington when he bade farewell to the army at Annapolis, in seventeen eighty-three. I imagine a thorough examination by a competent antiquarian would show the leather is no more than twenty or thirty years old. Those gold initials are probably actually for some chap named Gerald Whipple, or something like that. Are you all right, Mr. Badging?"

"Yes," said his host faintly. "It was listed as missing after his death at Mount Vernon in seventeen ninety-nine."

"What? What was missing?"

"Nothing. Nothing."

Potts arose and pushed his chair under the table. "Oh, there's one thing..."

Badging looked up. His mouth twisted into harsh lines. "The catch," he said bitterly. "Now we get it."

"The catch," agreed Potts amiably. "I'm informed the coins carry a curse. I promised Sena I would mention it. If the Rock collapses, the coins vanish." He smiled broadly.

They looked at each other. After a moment Badging smiled too. Then he began to chuckle. Then he leaned back and guffawed. Tears ran down his cheeks. Finally the laughter died away. Ignoring his guest, Badging leaned forward and clasped the leather case to his chest and began to shower kisses on it.

"I'll let myself out," whispered Oliver Potts.

* * *

6. SUNDAY AT SENA'S

Potts accepted Sena's invitation for Sunday dinner.

As she ushered him in, she said, "Actually, Oliver, I should be giving a great festive party in your honor, just as in the old colonial days, when someone important came to visit." She smiled at him as they walked into the dining room.

"That's hardly indicated, Sena."

"You're right, of course. But at least we can have the fixin's, just as they had in the old time: soup, river oysters, fish, roast turkey, chicken, duck, goose, beef, mutton, molded jellies, plum pudding, pies, cakes, tarts, spiced punch..."

He stared at her, appalled.

She laughed merrily. "Small wonder the men had gout and the women the dropsy. No, Oliver dear, actually, we'll have just a little dab of different things, all over on the side table. It's buffet style tonight. Take what you want. Just soup and crackers, if that's your preference."

They got trays and loaded up.

She poured him a tumbler of foamy pinkish liquid. "Sillabub," she explained. "Wine and cream. Old plantation recipe. The lipids in the cream facilitate absorption of the alcohol through the stomach lining. Knocks you on your ear."

"Like a double martini?"

"More like a triple."

Great, thought Potts. Oh well, maybe we can finally get to the bottom of things.

As they sat at table, he noted the strange music from the far side of the room.

She explained. "That's a 'player' spinet, otherwise genuine for the period. The strings are plucked by little quills."

"What's the tune?"

"That one is High Betty Martin. Next you'll hear Old Father George."

"G.W. again?"

"No, no connection. Although they were very popular in his day, and he *did* love to accompany me on the fife when I played the spinet."

"I didn't know he played anything."

"He wasn't very good at it, but he could pat his foot and keep the rhythm."

"Sounds like a good life."

"It was different. I once had a museum room, where I kept things characteristic of the period. But it all went into storage when I had to move my house."

"What's your house made of?"

"Not wood, or stone, or plastic. It's the same stuff as the Rock. When the Rock goes, so will the house, and everything in it."

He looked around. "Lots of tapestries."

"Actually, those are rugs. In colonial days they were too valuable to walk on. We hung them on walls and put them on tables."

She was in a reminiscent mood. It worried him. He had once observed the same mood in a man awaiting execution. "How did you get along with the early colonials?"

"Pretty well, until they caught religion. Then they decided I was a witch and should be burnt. That was about sixteen ninety. The town fathers chased me out here with torches and blunderbusses. But as they watched, I sank into the Rock. The preacher cursed the place in an elaborate ceremony, and then the warders stripped my house bare and tried to burn it. But it wouldn't burn. I stayed in the Rock for years. When I came out again it was seventeen twenty-five, and all was forgotten. Tea had come to the colony. Cups from France, no handles. When you went to a tea party you brought your own cup and saucer, and you sipped daintily from the saucer, not the cup. It's all different now."

"Did going into the Rock have any ill effect?"

"It was boring. And I picked up a little radioactivity. But it had a fast half-life and soon faded. I haven't been in the Rock since I emerged in 1725. There's no need, anymore. I'm quite harmless, now, Oliver. You have a higher radiation level than I do."

"Weren't they suspicious when you never aged?"

"Oh, I learned how to handle that. I aged with make-up and gray wigs. When I got *very* old I went away, 'died,' and returned as my 'niece,' to inherit the house and the Rock." She pointed to a framed portrait on the wall. "See over there? I was a 'grande dame' when Stuart painted me in seventeen eighty-two. That big white wig was quite the rage. Cost me four guineas. I slept on a headboard for several nights to preserve my coiffure."

Potts peered at the painting. "Really well done."

"You like it? George thought so, too. He developed into a fair connoisseur."

"He had excellent taste," agreed Potts.

"Some of today's things he would have liked; some not. He was a great dancer. He'd ride miles to a ball. Would you like to dance, Oliver?"

"I'm not so good at the modern steps..."

"I'm not either. A colonial favorite, perhaps?"

"Fine."

"The Rolling Hornpipes.' I take the spinet, he accompanies on the fife. What he lacked in talent, he made up in spirit."

"Huh?"

"George and I played together, back in seventeen ninety-five. I made a life-size holo at the time. I never played it back for him. I didn't think he'd understand." She walked across the room and pressed a switch.

And there they were. The general, standing tall, lips puckered, blowing into the little silver cylinder. Sena's fingers were dancing nimbly over the spinet keyboard. She was looking up gleefully at her musical guest.

Potts jumped up as though stuck with a red-hot needle. "Jesus X. God," he whispered. The tall white-haired man was, save for a towel draped around his middle, totally naked.

The lawyer emerged slowly from his paralysis. He found himself thinking of Hawthorne's famous comment: "Did anybody ever see Washington nude? It is inconceivable. He had no nakedness, but I imagine he was born with his clothes on, and his hair powdered, and made a stately bow on his first appearance in the world."

That's very strong sillabub, thought Potts.

"Come," said Sena. "Let's dance." She took his hand.

"But-- "

"I'll explain later."

And, so she led him into the sprightly gyrations of a vanished time to music provided by the Father of His Country.

It came to an end. The holo shut off automatically. The vision of lost centuries vanished.

Potts wiped a sleeve over a damp forehead. "Well?"

"He was out this way for the first time in seventeen fifty, surveying for Lord Fairfax. He was only eighteen, though he looked older. Oh, how handsome he was, with his thick red hair, his fine shoulders, his slim waist. We were lovers, Oliver. There are still some letters spread around in the archives where he mentions me. I was his 'Low Land Beauty.' He capitalized everything. I was not the only woman in his life, but I think I was the first. Sally, Martha, Eliza, all were later."

"He returned?"

"Yes, just that one time, in July seventeen ninety-five. The country was in a horrible mess, the worst since the Revolution. The Jay Treaty was supposed to bring peace with Britain. If we didn't sign, Britain would declare war. If we did sign, we'd face civil war at home. John Jay was hanged in effigy. Alexander Hamilton tried to defend the Treaty and was stoned. The house of the British minister was insulted by a mob. The British flag was dragged through the streets of Charleston and burnt before the doors of their consul. There was nowhere George could turn for objective advice. Knox and Hamilton had resigned from the cabinet. Only Randolph remained, and he was suspected of treason. And besides the Treaty, George had to go back to Philadelphia that fall and give his Annual Report to Congress. 'Sena,' he said to me, 'what the hell am I do to?' 'George darling,' I said, 'just now the main thing is to keep the *status quo*. Hold off war at almost any cost, at least for fifteen or twenty years. Let this lusty young country grow rich-- able to defend itself-- against the British, French, Spanish, the Barbary pirates, everybody.' 'But the *South*,' he said. 'They want to ship cotton to Europe, but under Article Twelve of the Treaty they can't, because it would compete with cotton from the British West Indies. The South will scream if I sign.' 'Look, honey,' I said, 'rewrite the West Indies Article, *then* sign the damned Treaty, and get it over to London before Congress reconvenes. The British will sign. Believe me.'

"I remember how he looked at me. He refused to wear his spectacles, so he couldn't really tell whether I looked old or young. Actually, at the time, I was made up to look about forty, but with a nice

figure and a good complexion. I applied more pressure. 'George, dear, the British don't want any trouble from us. They've got enough right there in Europe. The French have a bloody revolution in progress. A young artillery captain named Bonaparte has just run the British out of Toulon.' 'You are well informed, my girl.' 'I read the papers, General.' He said, 'And I suppose you have some thoughts about my Seventh Report to Congress?' 'I have indeed. Tell them-- and the country-- they never had it so good. Wayne's victory over the Indians at Fallen Timbers has brought peace in the southwest. In the northwest the Jay Treaty will bring peace with the British. Also, the Treaty will frighten the pants off the Spanish, and they'll concede commercial rights the full length of the Mississippi. Our population continues to grow, and the country to prosper. New canals and new roads are opening everywhere.' George stared at me. His mouth was wide open, and I could see the silver mechanism on his false teeth. 'Well, by God,' he said. 'You're right! Anything else?' 'My friend,' I said. 'you rode in here shivering even in your long underwear. I remind you it's the middle of July. Even with all the doors and windows open, it's still quite warm. And now you've stopped shivering and you've begun to perspire. I'd be pleased if you would let me launder your linen.'" She stopped and looked at Potts. "I gave him a towel."

"Yes. That's where we came in."

"He just needed a rest. Just a couple of days... and nights."

"Yes."

"Actually, I think he forgot some of his linens."

Potts thought about the coin packing. He nodded.

Sena said, "He went back to Philadelphia, signed the Treaty in August, and gave his State-of-the-Nation in December. Of course he had to put it in the stilted formal language of the day: "I invite you to join me in profound gratitude to the Author of all good for the numerous and extraordinary blessings we enjoy.' But there it all was."

Potts was thoughtful. "And it all came about just as you predicted."

"Almost exactly. But nowadays, who cares?"

"I care."

"You're a good soul, Oliver." She took his hand and led him to the bay window, where the full moon was shining in, sinking slowly but measurably just over the horizon, and just behind the tower, giving the illusion that a colossal skeleton was rising up over the edge of the land. They could almost hear a victory shriek.

Potts felt Sena trembling. "Your people will come for you," he said.

"No, I don't think they care. I'm not really real, you know. I'm just a figment of my own imagination."

"They care, and they'll come."

"Even if they want to, I'm not sure they can. The gate doesn't open for another sixty days."

"This is an emergency. They'll do something special. They'll be here." He held her against him.

"Keep talking," she said. "Tell me how they will come."

"A great big white ship, rockets blazing, will sit down on the courthouse lawn-- "

"No, no ship."

"Well, okay, no ship. We're in court, the judge is in the very act of handing down his decision, when suddenly the room is filled with this blazing radiance. It means their bridge has joined up. They call to you. You're not sure you want to go. You explain to them, you want to stay with me, to talk, and dance, and make love. They say, Sena, you *can't* stay. You *must* come with us, for we love you, and we have come a long way for you. You give me an agonized backward glance, and I think for a minute I might go with you. But we both know it wouldn't work. And the next moment you are gone, and the light is gone."

"And the bridge, and the Rock, and my house and everything in it. And the coins."

"Everything. Judge Roule is going to be a mite upset, not to mention Barton Badging."

"When I die I would like to dream. I will dream of you."

"Sena, stop talking like that. You're not going to die."

She ignored him. "But I don't know how to dream. I sleep when I want to, but I don't dream. I don't know how. It's a thing that only you humans do. If I could dream, I couldn't really die, could I?"

He thought, *Somnio, ergo sum*. I dream, therefore I am.

"Perhaps," she said moodily, "it would have been better if I had never met you. It would have been much easier to die. I would have had no regrets. It was cruel of you to come."

"Now you are reasoning like a woman."

"Am I really? A genuine flesh-and-blood woman? Perhaps I'm changing into a human being. You know, just as Pinocchio changed into a real live boy. Then I'd be safe, wouldn't I?"

He thought of lines from Andrew Marvell. 'The wanton troopers riding by / Have shot my fawn, and it will die.' He said, "you're already safe."

"You can spend the night, can't you?"

He squeezed her hand.

* * *

Several hours later, as he was drifting away in sleep, he managed to rouse himself. He tapped her on the shoulder. "Are you awake?" he whispered.

"What is it?"

He hesitated. Still, something had been nibbling at the analytic lawyer-lobe in his cerebral cortex. Out with it, Potts. "Sena, do you remember your radiation level in 1750-- when you first met *him*."

In the darkness he sensed her wakening astonishment. "It was still pretty high. George may have picked up several hundred rem. Oh, my..."

He tried to recall the relevant numbers. Yes, recommended maximum dose for the general public, one-half rem per year.

"I sterilized him, didn't I?" she murmured in a very small voice.

"Go to sleep, Sena." (It's all ancient history now.)

He lay there thinking. She *had* sterilized the youthful George. And since he could not have sons of his own, the young officers of the Continental Army became his sons: Hamilton, Lafayette, Greene, Wayne, Fitzgerald, Benjamin Lincoln... All of them. Small wonder he could dissolve mutinies with a gesture. Small wonder the men in epaulettes wept when he bade farewell at Fraunces Tavern. And as President he adopted the entire population as his family. Of course he was the Father of His Country-- which he would never have been if he had had children of his own body. So curious the chain of causation! This woman, lying here beside me, made a great man greater, thereby winning a long and desperate war for independence, and ensuring the successful birth and infant years of the new nation. Without you, "Low Land Beauty," we might still be vassals of Great Britain. Or worse.

And so thinking, he smiled and went to sleep.

* * *

7. CASE DISMISSED

The courtroom, three minutes before ten.

He felt her knee touch his under the table. He realized at once the contact was not meant to be seductive. Sena was seeking reassurance. He reached over and patted her hand.

Then he looked up. Badging was standing by the table, looking about the area nervously. "Potts, just a quick question about the coins." He added diffidently: "If you have a moment."

"Sure, Badging. You want to back out of the deal? No problem. Here's-- "

"No. No, nothing like that. But the coin wrappings. They look like long underwear, homespun linen, as a matter of fact, for a rather tall man. Do you know anything about them?"

"All I can do is repeat the tradition. George rode off without his drawers. Old wives's tale, Badging. Absolutely nothing to it."

"Yes, of course. Thank you, Potts, oh thank you, thank you." His face was glowing. He returned slowly to his table.

Glad I can bring a bit of cheer to you, thought Potts, even if it's only temporary.

"All rise!" intoned the bailiff. "This honorable court is now in session. Honorable Maximilian Roule presiding. *Sena versus Bridge Authority*."

Roule swept in, glared around the courtroom, then sat down and glared once more, this time at Plaintiff and her counsel. "Any rebuttal, Mr. Potts?"

"Yes, Your Honor. I'd like to show some holos."

"Of what?"

"Various bridge collapses. How they came about. What caused them."

"How is that relevant here, Mr. Potts? The conditions are not the same at all."

"The Quebec bridge *is* quite similar, Your Honor. Bedrock under the south cantilever was unstable. The rock dropped one-quarter inch. The cantilever weighed twenty thousand tons, the same as the cantilever in issue here. The center span in the Quebec bridge was nevertheless installed-- some five thousand tons. Whereupon the whole bridge collapsed, killing a number of men."

Badging was on his feet. "Your Honor!"

"Mr. Badging?"

"Plaintiff insists that another five thousand pounds of girders on our western cantilever is enough to overload the underlying greenstone, causing the Rock to collapse and the tower to fall. Now, Defendant does not agree with Plaintiff's assertion of human risk. Not one whit. Nevertheless, out of the boundless goodness of his heart, Defendant has agreed to clear men from both towers while the next load of girders is going up on the west tower."

Roule scowled at Potts. "That will have to satisfy you, Mr. Potts. It's a very generous concession; Defendant has no obligation to make it. I hold your proposed holos inadmissible. Anything further, Mr. Potts?"

The visiting lawyer sagged a little. "No, Your Honor."

Roule smiled at him coldly. "Well, don't look so hang-dog. You did fine, considering there was nothing you could do. Don't sit down just yet. Mr. Badging?"

"Yes, Your Honor?"

"Since Mr. Potts had no rebuttal, you have no surrebuttal. Now, Mr. Potts, back to you. Do you have a closing statement?"

"Yes, Your Honor." He began slowly. "First, this court is without jurisdiction in the subject matter of this case. Sena Rock is the territory of a foreign country, namely the Dhorans, an extra-stellar people. It was acquired by them by treaty with the Indians, thousands of years ago. That treaty was automatically assumed by the United States when it assumed sovereignty over the Rock. Foreign territory cannot be taken by eminent domain, but only by war or treaty, or abrogation of a treaty. None of these things have occurred."

"Just a minute," demurred Roule. "You're familiar with 33 U.S.C. 532?"

"Yes. It gives the states and state-authorized bodies power to acquire property for bridges. And I presume Your Honor is familiar with 33 U.S.C. 531, which says 532 doesn't authorize the construction of any bridge that would connect the United States to any foreign country."

Roule rolled his eyes upward. "There you go again., Mr. Potts. You persist in thinking the Rock was the terminus for a bridge connecting the United States with outer space?"

"Yes, Your Honor."

"Mr. Potts, do you realize that the County Sanitarium is just up the road?"

"I am aware of it, Your Honor."

"Anything further, counselor?"

"One more point, Your Honor. The case presents a corollary question. In taking the Dhorans' Rock, this court has taken property without due process of law, in violation of the Fifth Amendment to the Constitution. There is thus a second federal question. With all due respect, Your Honor, this case should never have come to a state court. Only the federal courts have jurisdiction. Thank you." He sat down.

"And thank *you*, Mr. Potts, for a most original presentation. Mr. Badging?"

"Your Honor, at the beginning of this trial, I moved to dismiss. Following the completion of Plaintiff's main case, I renewed this motion. I now renew once again."

"Before I decide your motion, Mr. Badging, I have some comments about bridges, and especially their construction and design. Actually, design has improved to the point where collapse is pretty much a thing of the past. Engineering skills have improved. Materials have improved. The designers autopsied their catastrophes, and they learned." The judge seemed to be in great good humor. "The big changes came in the late nineteenth century, when the bridge builders were trying to figure out how to handle the weight of bigger and bigger trains. Granted, they had a lot to learn. For in the decade eighteen seventy to eighty, four hundred bridges collapsed. But that sort of thing is all in the past. Bridges are no longer dangerous. Today we understand the basic principles of design.

"But of course, these are generalities and do not address the particulars of Mr. Badging's motion. To do that, we must refer to the evidence of record. And here we encounter a very basic threshold question, which sounds in the law of evidence, to wit, what weight are we to give to the sworn testimony of a witness who claims she is ten thousand years old, that she was made by creatures from outer space, and that Sena Rock is about to collapse. I say she is either lying or insane, or both, and that all of her testimony is therefore to be ignored."

He leaned back. "And having decided *that*, we come now to the final question, namely, whether the Rock is owned by aliens aforesaid, and if so, whether they have certain rights by treaty. I think to state the question is to answer it. And the answer must be, and is, no.

"I will now rule on Mr. Badging's motion to dismiss:

"Motion granted. Case dismissed. No appeal." He glowered at Potts and Sena once more, as though they were guilty of unspeakable offenses against law and humanity. "I want to see both counsel in chambers. You too, Ms. Sena. Just give me five minutes. I have to make a phone call. Court adjourned." He banged the gavel and arose from the bench.

Sena looked up at Potts anxiously. "It's all over. So what's he up to, now?"

Nothing good, thought the lawyer. "We'll just have to do in and see."

* * *

8. BRIDGES THAT MADE HISTORY

"Now that it's all over," said Roule, "I thought we might watch the load limit here in chambers, on closed-circuit TV." He looked at his watch. "The creeper travelers are loaded with five thousand pounds of steel. No men are on either tower-- courtesy of Mr. Badging, I understand. And in exactly twenty minutes the lift motors will turn on and the elevators are gong to start up on 'George.' So, we have to kill a little time. I've noticed that you, Mr. Potts, and you, Ms. Sena, have been looking, a bit covertly, I might add, at my pictures hanging on the walls. All bridges, aren't they? And very particular bridges, with one very interesting feature in common. All of them collapsed. Yes, Mr. Potts, that's what bridges do. Bridges collapse. Lawyers orate, grass grows green, women have babies, the sun shines, and bridges collapse. It's simply the thing that they do. But come along. While we wait for the George Washington Bridge to collapse, I'll give you the guided tour.

"We'll start way back. Here's Xerxes' bridge over the Hellespont, which he built for his invasion of Greece. Blown away by a storm in 481 B.C. Next, a fictional item: Wilder's bridge of San Luis Rey, just before it breaks. Those six people will be killed in the chasm below. Wilder believed God was doing them all a favor. And here we have a genuine historical structure, a truss bridge designed by Ithiel Town for rail traffic over Catskill Creek in New York state. It collapsed in 1840 and killed a workman; first railroad bridge fatality in the U.S.

"And here's my pride and joy. The photo is 'before,' of course. On December 29, 1876, this bridge fell into this gorge, near Ashtabula, Ohio. With it dropped two locomotives and eleven cars. Eighty died, not counting the bridge inspector, who committed suicide. Amasa Stone, the builder, was disgraced. We still don't know the cause.

"And here's another 'before.' In England, in 1879, this beautiful iron bridge over the Firth of Tay collapsed with a train, killing seventy-five people.

"We pass on. *This* is the Quebec Bridge, over the St. Lawrence. You mentioned this one, Mr. Potts. Actually, the facts were considerably more horrendous than you indicated. The first collapse was in 1907. The south cantilever fell during construction. Seventy-five men died. And, as you noted, the builders actually had prior warning: under the weight of the south arm, the abutment foundation did in fact drop one-quarter inch. After the collapse of the cantilever, they rebuilt, but then in 1916, as they were hoisting the central span, it dropped, killing eleven men.

"Next we see 'Galloping Gertie,' the suspension bridge over the Puget Sound Narrows at Tacoma, Washington. After gyrations worthy of a hula dance, it fell into the abyss."

Potts had witnessed mockery before, including some directed toward him. There were different kinds: some (at one extreme) playful and teasing (as between lovers and good friends); some (at the other extreme) cruel and moronic, as Christ's crown of thorns. But never before had he encountered anything to devastatingly cynical, savage, and sadistic as Roule's present exposition. It was a mockery multiplied by malignance. He found it horrifying.

Roule looked back at the trio. "There are several more, but time is running out, and I'm going to pass on to the final item." They followed him to the far wall. "It's the architect's rendition of our own George Washington Bridge." He added roguishly, "After completion, but before collapse." He leered at Potts from eyes half-hidden under the deep brow ridge. "Impressed, counselor?"

"I am, judge."

"And time is growing short. Let's return to our chairs and watch the screen. The big show is about to begin."

As they took their seats, Potts studied the TV screen. The view was excellent: the giant west tower of the criss-crossing steel girders. Strong and light. But not nearly strong enough, and not nearly light enough to survive the collapse of the Rock. From this graceful structure the engineers intended that great wings would form, aft for the Bridge access to the land, forward to connect with the east cantilever already reaching out from the opposite shore.

It saddened him. The engineers intended... the state and county planners intended... merchants and bankers and builders of villages and shopping centers intended... And all these fine intentions would go down the drain.

Sena reached over and took his hand. "Where are they?" she whispered.

"They'll come," he said. But he didn't really believe it. He already counted her as dead.

"I see that the creepers are loaded and ready," observed Roule. "And I'm sure all of you are wondering what's going to happen when they start on their way up the tower. Well, madame, gentlemen, I'll tell you. Nothing is going to happen. And that will prove that you, Ms. Sena, and you, Mr. Potts, are both insane." He smiled wolfishly at the two of them. "Young woman, you're not worth bothering with. But your lawyer is quite another matter. Potts, I've already called the sanitarium. I'm having you committed. The straitjacket boys will be here in ten minutes. Of course, if you want to leave now, your car's out front, and you can make the noon flight."

So *that* was your call, thought Potts. I might have known. He murmured, "It's an interesting coincidence, isn't it. Fenleigh York was on his way to the airport when his car was run off the cliff."

Roule sighed. "Yes, I suppose you have a point. It was most unfortunate. Would you believe, Potts, your friend thought he had uncovered some tasty evidence of corruption in the Bridge Authority. Something about sale of a big block of bonds to me for one dollar. Blatantly libelous. We tried to reason with him. But no. He was determined to take it to the Judicial Grievance Committee, and to the papers. So naive. What a pity. Sad, sad. Don't you agree, Mr. Potts?"

Most interesting, thought Potts. Barton Badging is sitting here, a witness to all this. Either the judge doesn't mind living dangerously, or else the coin expert is inextricably involved in the whole rotten scheme. He tried to catch Badging's eyes, but the other lawyer would not look at him.

The judge was talking to him. "I said, Mr. Potts, don't you agree?"

Potts shrugged. "Whatever," he said absently. His attention was momentarily focused on the TV screen. A man standing by the creeper traveler was waving to another out of camera view. The traveler was evidently about to begin its upward journey.

Roule looked at Potts sharply. "Have a care, sir. I can include your client in the certif-- " His admonition was chopped off in midsyllable.

Simultaneously Badging jerked, and his elbow knocked an ashtray of the arm of his chair. But the ashtray didn't fall. It just seemed to hang here, spilling ashes that didn't fall, either. Very curious, thought Potts. He looked over at the judge, who was now simply a very odd-looking statue. The man's face and eyes showed no particular emotion: no fear, no alarm. Then Potts realized that all sound had ceased. The judge... Badging... the whole room... everything was like a still photograph, framed in dead time. He whirled and looked at Sena. She stared back, wide-eyed, then shrugged, as though to say, Don't ask me!

Well, at least the two of them seemed to be free. How about outside? How about the Bridge? He looked across the room. No sound was coming from the TV; the scene on the screen was motionless. The foreman's arm was still lifted in immutable signal to someone unseen, presumably the elevator operator. A group of men in hard hats, who had been walking toward the tower base, had come to a complete stop, as though caught in a snapshot.

It was like a scene in *The Sleeping Beauty*, where the fairies cast a spell, and all motion ceases. The king and queen go to sleep. The knights and ladies stop in mid-motion. The butcher's cleaver halts in mid-descent. An enchantment of great power falls on everything.

Potts's jaw dropped. Then he slowly closed it. For now he understood. The Dhorans are coming. Maybe they are already here. They have come for Sena. In the nick of time. His thoughts were confused and blurry. How will they do this? What do they look like? He stole a look at the woman. She was peering... outward... at what? And now it was he who was afraid. He held her hand tighter.

The judge's library wall began to glow. The entire section of Atlantic Reports, 2nd, shone, then glittered, then vanished. Potts could see through the wall. See what? Certainly not the parking lot, nor the street, nor the Domestic Relations Annex. He saw things for which he had no name. Brilliant fleeting lights... strange-colored, glowing frondy things. And sounds... weird, tinkly, harmonious. He knew there was nothing like this on Earth.

Sena let go his hand, stood up, and bent over to kiss him. "I'm leaving now, Oliver."

"They cannot save the Rock?"

"No, it is too late. If I stay, I die when the Rock vanishes. From the Rock, I was made." She hesitated. "Oliver, in all these ten thousand years you are the only person I have ever been able to talk to. There are many wonderful things on Dhora. We could be happy together there. Please come with me."

"No, you know I can't. It wouldn't work. You are immortal, Sena. You would stay young forever, but I would grow old and die. Go, Asenaapeeneniwa, Spirit-of-the-Rock, and let us remember each other."

She gave a wild desolate cry and ran into the radiance.

Atlantic Reports, 2nd, instantly rematerialized.

Life resumed.

The TV screen showed that the creeper traveler, carrying five thousand pounds of steel girders, had begun its ascent.

At this instant the Rock vanished.

For a moment the cantilever tower carelessly and impiously named George seemed motionless, suspended over thirty feet of absolute nothing, as though it had forgotten all about the teachings of Sir Isaac Newton. Or perhaps it thought itself hung from some colossal sky hook. But then reality overtook it, and it dropped, silently and leisurely at first, and straight down. There was a brief time lag between sight and sound, as though the makers of this scenario had ineptly failed to synchronize these vital elements of the performance. But finally everything came together, and the impact was seen, heard, and felt in some sort of ragged order in Roule's chambers. The vibrations nearly knocked the TV set off its stand.

In horror and fascination, the three men watched. Sena's absence went unnoted.

True bedrock at the site, thirty feet below the now-vanished Rock, sloped down toward the river, so that the river-side floor of the tower had farther to drop. This caused the tower to fall toward the water. It did not fall in one piece. The skyward sections had farther to go, and they could not be hurried.

George in his final Virginia Reel, thought Potts. Truly a titan. The tower broke ultimately into three major pieces, all of which collapsed with grand gestures, as though waving at Martha across the river. Great Soul crying out to Great Soul, mused Potts. The upper sections fell finally into the river with tremendous prolonged splashes that drenched TV crewmen on the Bridge approaches half a mile back from the water.

The earth tremors continued, and the catastrophe now became quixotic. The TV cameras zoomed in on Martha across the river. The companion tower had begun to sway in a slow grand manner, as if opening a stately minuet. It was a strange and complicated movement, combining a sort of back-and-forth rocking with a side-to-side quiver. Things began to fall from the tower, girders, apparently. At first, slowly, and one by one. Then the tempo of destruction picked up, as though a gust of wind were blowing dead leaves out of a tree in late autumn.

With a great sigh Martha shook herself. She collapsed not as an integral piece of lacey steel, but as a jumble of awkward giant jackstraws.

Barton Badging turned slowly to face Potts. The mouth of the President of the Sena City Numismatic Association was a big slack O, and at first the words wouldn't come out properly. "My-- My-- The-- What-- ?"

Potts waited sympathetically, but there was really nothing he could do.

Finally Badging screamed, then dashed out of the room. "My coins! My ninety-fives! The curse!"

The judge watched this with a chalk-white face. He staggered back to his chair, but he collapsed on the floor before he could reach it. He lay there in a heap by his desk.

Potts shook his head. A stroke? Better call an ambulance. And what a bad time for it! Bet they're all headed out to the Bridge. He started toward the judge's phone, but stopped when he heard steps behind him.

Two burly young men in white jackets stood there, looking at him, then at the figure of the floor.

"Sanitarium?" asked Potts. "Judge Roule's commitment order?"

"Yeah."

"There's your man, on the floor. You'll need a stretcher. And he ought to have immediate medical attention."

"Okay, chief. You got the papers."

"We'll send them over later."

"Fair enough. We'll have him out in a jiffy. You see the Bridge fall?"

"I did. But it was no big deal. That's what bridges do. Women have babies, grass grows green, lawyers orate, bridges fall."

The two attendants looked at each other as though asking, Do we have the right guy?

Potts appreciated their problem. He smiled, then shrugged, as though to say, It's a good question. "Oh, just one more thing." He strode quickly to the wall and took down the architect's picture of George Washington Bridge. "When he comes to, he'll want this. Just prop it up on his night-stand. Should have a great calming effect on him."

* * *

9. 'S' FOR SILLABUB

"Well, Mr. Potts, how was the case in Sena City?" Miss Catlin sensed that Mr. Potts's mind was far away, and had been ever since his return that morning, and she put the question carefully.

"Sena. Fine."

"They treated you all right?"

"Oh, yes indeed. Memorable reception. The judge was remarkably hospitable-- wanted to give me free room and board. Opposing counsel unusually helpful. Client's story ultimately understood by everyone. All very much like right here at home."

There was something not quite right in his answer, but she couldn't put her finger on it. She said, "Did

you see the bridge fall? They interrupted TV programs all over the country to show it."

"Yes, I saw it."

"Are you all right, Mr. Potts?"

"Certainly. And it's time to get back to Earth. Where were we, before I rushed out last Friday?"

She examined a page in her notebook. "You had just asked me to send a ten-dollar check to the Mount Vernon Trust, and then you got that terrible phone call about Mr. York."

"I remember. Ten dollars?"

"Yes, sir."

"That makes me a member?"

"I suppose. Whatever *that* is."

"I want a second membership, actually a co-membership, for a couple of clients."

"Oh?"

"On the check, just say, 'For Sena and George.' Send the Trust ten thousand dollars."

"Mr. Potts! Are you crazy! You don't have ten thousand dollars!"

With careless nonchalance he handed her the big envelope. "Here's thirty thou, Miss Catlin. It might be best to deposit it before writing any checks. Also, would you please send ten thousand to Fenleigh York's executor."

She eyed him suspiciously. "Can we keep the other ten thousand, Mr. Potts?"

"By all means, Miss Catlin."

"Am I to understand you *won*?"

"No. I lost. The case was dismissed. My record remains unblemished."

She never knew when he was being sarcastic. "I understand there was some more excitement, following the bridge collapse." She watched him closely.

He looked back in total innocence. "Really?"

"I saw in the newscasts something about important people leaving the country. Marcus Reed, Chairman of the Bridge Authority."

"Yeah. To Brazil."

"And Mr. Badging went with him?"

"That's the rumor," said Potts.

"And we don't have an extradition treaty with Brazil? Mr. Potts?"

"Oh. No, I guess not."

"And that poor man, Judge Roule, still completely paralyzed from his stroke."

"So they say."

She bit her lip. He just wasn't going to talk. All right, then. Back to business here. "There was also the matter of the D.A.R. They wanted you to give a talk. You accepted. They want to know the talk title so they can put it on their programs. Preferably something early American."

"Ah, yes." he interlaced his fingers behind his head and leaned back and studied the ceiling. (Catlin was right, it needed painting.) He closed his eyes, and he saw that tall figure once again. George with a towel about his middle, playing the fife while his underwear dried. Sena at the spinet. That priceless holo-- gone now, with Sena's house. So be it. He could still hear the tune. He began to pat his foot. Ah Sena, did you (like Sally Fairfax, like Aliza Powel) ever enliven the Old Boy's dreams in that upper bedroom at Mount Vernon? I hope so!

And so crashing back. Alas. "Tell them the title will be 1795-- Year of Crisis."

She beamed at him. She hadn't expected it would be so easy. Maybe he was going to behave, after all. "And now just a little housekeeping matter. Where shall I file this new case folder? Under 'S' for Sena? 'B' for Bridge Authority? 'Y' for York? Or-- "

"S," he said dreamily, 'for Sena. For spinet. For saddlebag. For seventeen ninety-five. For sterility. But most of all for sillabub."

She might have known. Back to normal.