

Lethary Fair

by Charles L. Harness

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1. The Alien Arrives

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At about noon on the second day of July, 2198, (I quote from Constable Ned Packle's report) Mistress Erithra Dollkin (age 83) had just emerged from Garshmeyer's Deli, where she had bought some herbal tea, when she noted this strange shadow moving slowly on the sidewalk in front of the deli.

She looked up.

Some sort of vehicle was dropping down rapidly into the street right into the No Parking zone in front of Garshmeyer's. It landed there with a hard clump.

That violation of a highly respected City Ordinance apparently not sufficing, the driver of the strange vehicle (which was topless now, with the roof rolled back), after loosening his seat belt, took a moment to adjust his clothing in such a way that he exposed his bare buttocks. Whereupon Mistress Dollkin shrieked, dropped her bag of tea, and covered her eyes.

Constable Packle was just down the Square in O'Malley's Barber Shop. He heard Mistress Dollkin's cry, and he rushed out, whereupon he observed her shaking finger and averted eyes. He listened two or three times to her stammered accusation, and then stepped forward and arrested the surprised felon, who had two heads.

Now, I think I can state it as a fact, the general citizenry of Lethary had never before seen a two-headed person. Of course, there were those rumors about one of the old baron's freak descendants, but that's all, just rumors. Yes, our two-headed visitor was a great novelty.

But mooning a respected citizen of Lethary while simultaneously parking illegally was just icing on the criminal cake. For alas, in the Alien's precipitous descent (that's what he turned out to be-- an Alien) his

craft landed on Dr. Dennis Banchou, an aged Buddhist monk. When they got the craft lifted up and hauled away, the old scientist-monk was dead.

Additionally, and perhaps of even greater concern to some, was what happened to Sara, a very beautiful geisha android owned by the Sixtrees Bar-Del-O. Apparently she was routinely headed for Garshmeyer's to pick up Percy Sixtree's lunch when she looked overhead just in time to get herself knocked down and crushed.

Since the jail was just down the Square it was a simple matter for Constable Packle to march the criminal over and lock him up.

The miscreant (who spoke a broken English-- which apparently he had picked up while orbiting the planet)claimed his/their name(s) were "John-Claude Berg." At least that's what Ned finally made out, and wrote in the police blotter. John was the head on the Alien's right, Claude was the other.

Me. My name is William Moncrief Whitmore. Call me Bill. Bachelor, age thirty-eight. I'm a lawyer, and that's how I got involved with the Alien.

I knew I was in line for court-appointment. The pay was nominal, the case was a sure loser. I had to get out of town-- fast. But Judge Martin Cloke was faster. He strode into my office just as I was making a reservation at the Surf and Sand, a seashore resort in Galveston.

The judge didn't sit down, he didn't even take off his hat. He spoke first, and he was using his mean grim tone of voice. "He needs somebody like you, William."

"Judge-- "

"Arraignment tomorrow morning, 9 o'clock. Be there."

"Now wait a-- " But I was talking to a closing door.

Now, I don't want to give the impression that Martin Cloke is *actually* mean. He isn't. He's a very decent man with a thankless job and a mortgage just like the rest of us. On the bench he's totally fair.

As a youth he had wanted to be a painter, and indeed while he was still in junior high school he had painted a masterpiece. He had been painting by the numbers, and accidentally moved everything up one number, so that cobalt blue became saffron yellow, and yellow became red, and so on. The astonishing result won first prize in the Provincial School Exhibit. His parents were of course delighted. Forthwith they got him the Van Gogh-Gauguin cerebral implant, plus all the accessories, palette, paints, beautiful white canvas smock, and so on. But somehow the implant wiring went awry: the chroma networks failed to connect properly, and there was a loss of color reception in the occipital lobe, with the result that the young aspirant could see, paint, and think only in black and white. So his parents switched him to law, which paid better anyway. But the chroma problem never went away. As a lawyer, and later as a judge, he tended to see things only in black and white, with no intermediate shades of gray.

Not a man to waste a thing as valuable as an artist's smock, the judge had in fact put it to extraordinary use. He had printed all his favorite Latin phrases on it in indelible black ink. He wore the over-printed smock only in his most important cases, and in these only on the last day, when he was about to hand down a portentous decision and was in need of the support of appropriate citations.

For his study of the law, Martin's parents bought for him the prestigious Harvard Lexus Implant, with Latin Addenda and a lifetime subscription to Connaught's Legal Updates. Equipped with these and a high native intelligence, he was easily the most erudite jurist in the Province.

I'll get to the Alien and his trial soon, but first some more history, starting with me.

My paternal grandfather, Hondo Whitmore, was a sergeant in the militia during the Border Wars. In *which* militia? Hard to say. Sometimes he fought *for* the baron, sometimes against, depending on where the money was. When he lay dying in the Old Soldiers' Home, he called me to his deathbed. "Dear boy, there will be no more money." (He had been drawing pensions and disability from both sides.) "You're on your own. Go into the law. Become a respected scoundrel." And with a gurgly chuckle, he died.

And so for the next six years I clerked in the law offices of Pillfeder and Wantech, and I learned the law.

As old Mr. Amos Pillfeder explained when I reported for work. "There is nothing strange, peculiar, or illogical about the law. You just have to understand that things are rarely what they seem. Generally, they're something else."

He was right. At first the law made no sense, but as the months passed it suddenly all came together. In the sixth year I took and passed the Provincial Bar exam and was duly admitted to the bar. I left Pillfeder and Wantech, opened my own office, and for the first month I starved.

And now back to the Alien. We had to be in court tomorrow morning, and I had yet to meet him.

Manslaughter-- that accidental killing of the old Buddhist savant Dr. Banchou-- was of course pretty bad. For this the Alien was looking at a ten-year prison sentence. But destruction of Sara might prove even worse, because she was owned by the Sixtrees.

Sara was an exquisite creation, and I had secretly admired her for more than thirty years. For me her demise was a painful personal loss, like watching the Mona Lisa pass through a shredder, or a Gutenberg Bible go up in flames.

I first saw her when I was ten years old. Word had got around that she worked for the Sixtrees in the upper floors of the Bar-Del-O. Even we kids knew what that meant. Once in a while we saw some of those girls. They might emerge in the early afternoon, looking very pretty, but dressed modestly in flowered prints. They might stroll around the Square, or beyond, generally in pairs. Sara was an exception. When she came out she was always alone. We knew she was a geisha android and was supposed to have special talents, but we never saw her dressed up in her geisha garb. Outside she always wore simple street clothes, much like the other girls.

The other girls came and went, but Sara stayed. What was Sara's specialty? What was it that set her off from other girls and other androids? There were all sorts of rumors, but nothing factual ever seemed to filter down.

Even as a boy I had this thing about her. Years later, when I started my law practice, I still fantasized. I wanted her, but I could not bear the thought of sharing her with other men. Maybe one day, when I was very rich (now *there* was a fantasy!), I would buy her, have her all to myself.

And now she was gone. No more fantasies. Sad, sad.

Back to now. I called over to the court clerk, Enos Phlutter, and got the details about her that I'd need for the trial. Enos read snatches from the Android Registrations. Sara, registered as Sakurako ("Cherry Blossom") had been made by Tokyo Androids, Ltd. and had been sold to a syndicate of Japanese metal consultants in Houston in 2065.

"For how much?" I asked.

"Three hundred thousand kroner."

I swallowed hard. "Three... hundred..."

"Thousand," finished Enos. "The entry says she was programmed with some sort of high-tech specialty."

"Worth three hundred thou? Some specialty! Then what?"

"Burl Dogger bought her at auction in 2088 for ten thousand kroner. He died in 2098. His will gave all his property, including Sara, to his first male descendant to reach twenty-one under the conditions of the will."

I thought about *that*. This was the famous Sixtrees will. I knew all about it, or thought I did. Actually, I didn't. Just then, all I could think was, my mysterious client was headed for prison. For such was the law, and the Sixtrees and their hired gun, Provincial Prosecutor Dave Clatchett, dearly loved the law.

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2. Arraignment

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Early the next morning I walked over to the jail. The Square was already full of people waiting for the courtroom doors to open, about half being our local citizenry and half out-of-towners who had come for the Fair. They all now welcomed the forthcoming trial as a free side-show.

And the minions of the media were also arriving. Word of the two-headed Alien had traveled around the world.

"Midnight" Madison, our local TV reporter, was already arguing loudly with Deputy Lon Satters, insisting on the right to interview the prisoner with his camera crew, but Lon was not impressed.

As I worked my way through the crowd, my attention was drawn to overhead, where a copter was hovering and making a great racket. The markings were clearly visible: "MBC," meaning Mogul Broadcasting Company, or, as some claimed, Mather's Bullshit Capers. Whichever, our Alien was now officially newsworthy. For MBC *was* Randolph Mather.

I watched his show later that day. There, he's interviewing our famous seer, Madame Batsky, in the courthouse corridor. She's barely recognizable. Mather evidently uses the new auto-make-up cameras. The machine erased forty pounds and forty years and changed her into a brisk day suit from the couturiers of Paris. Our famous seer was presented to the world as an attractive, well-dressed young business woman. She predicted "some surprises."

Now back in real time. I see Mather talking to Dave Clatchett in the courthouse foyer. Dave is looking very serious and grim. I'm actually headed for the jail stairs, but I can't help overhearing their last words. Mather says, "Mr. Prosecutor, do you think you'll get a conviction?" "Absolutely," Dave says. And that's all he says. But the way it came out on TV, the camera-modifier had Dave saying, Absolutely, Ran. I have yet to lose a homicide case. I hope MBC is there when the guilty verdict is handed down."

Oh, well...

Lon Satters was the deputy on duty. He was waving for me, and took me on back to the cells, where the new boarder was finishing up breakfast. Lon introduced me and left. The prisoner and I shook hands. He/(They?) had a firm five-fingered grip, same as any ordinary man.

What did he look like? Well, he was clean-cut, graceful, and immensely self-confident. Except for that second head, and aside from his clothes, he looked like a recent college graduate. Of course, those clothes-- pants, shirt, jacket-- *were* a mite distinctive. They seemed to change color from time to time, like a chameleon.

The blond blue-eyed head was John, the other, the brunette hazel-eyed head, was Claude. According to John-Claude two heads were the norm on his planet.

How had he come to Earth? His story: He was a geologist looking for certain metals in nearby solar systems when he discovered that his fuel gauge wasn't working. It read half full when actually he was down to his last few drops. He headed immediately for the nearest sun and went into orbit around what appeared to be a likely planet-- Earth, hopefully a source of fuel.

He explained what he meant by "fuel." It wasn't gasoline or diesel oil or uranium. The ship's nuclear packet still had several centuries of life. "Fuel" was the stuff in the guidance system, the brains of his ship. It was some sort of oil, volatile, odorous. Quite common on his planet. But here? By way of description he took my pen and drew this on my yellow legal pad:

[drawing]

"We call it 'one-legged man,'" he said.

I got it. The "Y" sitting on a torso represented two heads, normal for his people. A chemical formula, maybe? Something to look into later. Just now we had higher priorities.

And so (he explained) he had stayed in orbit for several days, trying to learn the language from media broadcasts. There were several different languages, but he finally picked ours-- English-- mainly because we seemed to be the civilization most likely and most able to help him. He put the ship on an auto-landing program, with the top down. The next thing he remembered he was standing in his ship trying to adjust his trousers. Nearby a lady was screaming. Seconds later Constable Ned Packle was handcuffing him.

"We're very sorry about this," John said. "We thought we were clear. Apparently the screens failed." Claude added, "We're especially sorry about Sara."

I looked at him sharply. There was no way he could know my feelings for the elegant android.

Doubtless he referred to their own legal exposure.

Anyhow there was Ned, unlocking the cell door with his big iron key. "It's five of nine, Billy. We got to git on up there."

He put cuffs on John-Claude, and we followed him up the stairs to the courtroom. "What's all that banging?" I asked.

"Hammers," said Ned. "Carpenters. They're fixing up the Baron's Box."

Interesting. And just a bit alarming. Of course the Sixtrees had a legitimate interest in the case, since the Alien had demolished an expensive piece of Sixtrees property. Still-- (I checked it later) no sitting baron had ever before attended court here.

Let me explain about the Baron's Box.

You'll find one in nearly every public auditorium. There's a Box in the opera house, one in the university assembly hall, the lecture auditoriums, the churches, anywhere the public might gather. This includes courtrooms. The fact that the baron rarely (or never) occupied his boxes seemed irrelevant to their continuing existence.

In Judge Cloke's courtroom the Baronial Box was in the middle of a rear balcony looking down at the bar and bench.

"Ned," I said quietly, "what's going on?"

He hesitated a moment, then replied in a subdued monolog. "They installed a one-way visi screen."

That meant whoever was in the Box could see us, but nobody in the courtroom-- not even the judge-- could see *them*. Curiouser and curiouser. And totally out of character with Cecil, Lord Sixtrees. The current baron loved being seen. Why was a puzzle. He was not a handsome man. He was fat. I mean *fat*. No, the party in the Box wasn't Cecil. Anyhow, he was presently in California making a movie.

So who would it be? Even if we had been out on the street with the mob of spectators, we wouldn't have been able to see anybody enter the Box, because the entrance to the Box is completely sheltered. The baron's car (windows up) drives into the secured underground garage, and from there one goes by private elevator straight up into the Box, and the public sees nothing.

Ned led us into the courtroom through the side door, and John-Claude and I sat ourselves down at the defense table and looked around. The prosecution table was loaded. There was Dave Clatchett, of course. Plus two other chaps, very well-dressed, very dignified. I recognized one of them right away-- J. Killian Murfree, a partner in a famous Chicago law firm. This was strange. So strange that it-- the situation-- talked to me. It said, there's something going on here, something beyond Sara. So what was it?

I looked around and up at the Baron's Box. Was *that* part of the mystery? The carpenters no longer hammered. They were gone. Did that mean the invisible occupant(s) had arrived? And if so, who... and why?

And now Lon opened the main courtroom doors and people began streaming in, mediamen first. In another five minutes we all rose for the entry of Judge Cloke. He banged his gavel once or twice and ordered his clerk to call the case.

"People versus John-Claude Berg," droned Enos. "Arraignment."

The judge said, "Will John-Claude Berg please rise."

My client and I got up together.

The judge studied his case file a moment. "John-Claude Berg, you are charged with, first, murder; second, felonious destruction of property exceeding in value one hundred kroner; third, indecent exposure; and fourth, illegal parking. How do you plead, counts one through four, guilty or not guilty?"

The two heads spoke in unison. "Not guilty, Your Honor."

"So noted." The judge closed his case folder. "Jury selection, tomorrow morning, nine o'clock." He started to get up.

I stopped him. "Your Honor, there's the matter of bail."

Dave Clatchett objected immediately. "Capital case, Your Honor. No bail."

"No prior record," I cut in. "And the city has seized his vehicle. He can't go anywhere. Furthermore, the jail is hot and humid. Matt Rootner still hasn't fixed the air conditioning. Constable Packle sits there in

his office under a circulating fan, and he sweats. It's cruel and unusual punishment back there in the cells. (Actually I didn't think John-Claude would be too uncomfortable. His remarkable clothes were temperature self-adjusting. He was better off than Ned or his deputies.) "Under the circumstances, we ask for release on his own recognizance."

The judge sat back down. He thought for a while. And we were all thinking, bail could indeed be a problem, for, as we all knew, the Alien had no money at all. (Actually, he had what he *claimed* was money, but it was good only on his home planet, back there on something he called Centaurus. His alleged money was thick gold discs, stamped with the bust of some two-headed chap. No good here, of course. All three hundred of them wouldn't buy you a cup of coffee at Garshmeyer's.)

"How about his vehicle?" asked the judge. "Can't he sell it?"

"We looked into that, Your Honor. Several of the area junk dealers have examined the craft, but not one has shown any interest. The Science Commission of Zurich has called and wants to look it over, with a view to making a bid. They seem to think the shell may be made of something they call 'colonium.' But they haven't arrived yet."

At this point in the proceedings my client seemed to jerk, as though startled by some sudden strange sight or sound. (I heard nothing out of the ordinary, just the continuing white-noise buzz of the courtroom.) Then he rose half-way in his chair and looked back toward the Baronial Box. For a long moment he stared at the visiplat there. Then he straightened out and sat back down again, and when he did, little smiles were dancing on both his faces. Something was going on, of course. I'd probably eventually find out, but just now we had other problems.

The judge looked right down at me and didn't bat an eyelash. "Bail set at one million kroner." He sounded grim and final. High, but then again, the Sixtrees were involved. So much for bail.

I said, "Your Honor?"

He sighed and sat back down again. "What is it counselor?"

"Regarding jury selection. Under our laws, my client is entitled to a jury of his peers-- two-headed people, that is. But there are no two-headed people on our jury rolls. So I move for a change of venue, with the trial to take place on his home planet, which is populated with two-headed people."

"Out of the question. The alleged offenses took place in this Province, and the trial must be held in the situs of the offense. The most I can do for you, both parties agreeing, is to have the matter tried to the court, without a jury."

Clatchett and I looked at each other. Neither wanted to do the other any favors, but we both saw advantages in a juryless trial. We spoke simultaneously. "We agree, Your Honor."

Judge Cloke eyed us suspiciously. Finally he said, "All right, trial set for tomorrow morning, nine o'clock."

And he whirled around and vanished into his chamber, whereupon my chief investigator, young Cassius Reervers, began tugging at my sleeve. I left with him, and Ned Packle returned the prisoner to his cell.

Cass had a tale to tell about the Baron's Box. We went over to Garshmeyer's for coffee while he explained.

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3. Spectators in the Box

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Cass Reervers explained: His little brother Ben, and Ben's close chum, Dick Kabell, had climbed

through the air duct, all the way from the engineering room, across the courtroom ceiling, and down through the intake shaft in the private garage. According to Ben, he and Dick were in fact trying to force the vent grate to get down into the garage when the baronial limo rolled in. They watched from behind the grate, cared but curious.

The garage doors slid shut. The limo door opened, the driver got out, looked all around, then went over to the elevator and punched a button. The elevator door opened. A heavily-veiled woman got out of the car.

"Go on."

"She walked over to the elevator and got in and went on up. The chauffeur got an electro-reader out of his pocket and leaned against the car, and yawned and began to read. Ben and Dick decided to go back the way they had come."

"And-- ?"

"The woman. She was young. She wore a funny looking veil that came down over both heads." He watched me to observe the effect.

"Two... heads?"

"It's true. Dick Kabell tells the same story."

I looked around. Nobody was paying any attention to us. A two-headed Sixtrees woman? Well, there was that rumor... But it was supposed to have happened ages ago, when old Burl Dogger was trying to preserve his genes to make a posthumous test-tube baby. The experiment, if you can call it that, may have gone slightly but tragically awry. Something wrong with the baby. Weird rumors, now pretty much buried and forgotten.

"We've got to swear the boys to secrecy," I said.

"I already did. They're now Junior Lizards."

A two-headed lady as a secret spectator in the trial of the century? This in itself invited examination. Who was this strange genetic offshoot of the thorny Sixtrees brambles? Name(s)? Age? Medical reports?

Cass was watching my face as I was thinking about these things. "Boss, I'll look into it. How high can I go?"

I studied him a minute. He studied me right back.

"A hundred kroner. And don't get caught."

Before we left Garshmeyer's I ordered a liter thermos of iced tea. "Take this over to Ned, from us. It might help him through the heat of the day. And tell him, as a personal favor to him, I have invoked a voodoo spell, guaranteed, money-back, and that the AC will surely come back on sometime tonight."

Cass gave me a funny look.

"And one more thing. Right after supper, have your two new Junior Lizards go back down into the courthouse engineering room and put the plug of the air conditioner cord back into its socket."

"Hm. They had to turn it off to get through the fan blades and into the air duct, didn't they?"

"No comment."

"Chief, you did the same thing when you were a kid?"

"Get out of here. We both have work to do."

* * *

I remained standing for a moment in front of Garshmeyer's, looking down at the chalk-lined spot where John-Claude's ship had smashed poor Dr. Banchou. It is cruel, and it is sad, but I am bound to report that that outline made a lot of people very happy.

And for Sara? Nothing. She was only an android. The only memorial lines for her were in my head. They would be there a long time.

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Cassius Reeves was indeed busy during the night.

On my desk early next morning was a photocopy of a couple of pages of letterheads of the old Cosby Clinic (torn down and replaced by the Lethary Central Hospital before I was born). The pages held writing so nearly illegible it had to be Dr. Cosby's own notes. That would have been Cosby Senior, who brought my father into the world, and who has been long dead.

I made a fairly clean translation with the aid of a Thessaly Interpreter, somewhat as follows.

..."She" has one rib cage, three lungs, two hearts, one liver, two gall bladders, two stomachs, one large intestine, one small intestine, three kidneys, one pelvis... Above the waistline she is two people; below, one.

"They" have distinct and separate personalities, preferences, tastes. These differences may become more pronounced as she moves into puberty. (Presently ten years old.) Both have IQ's exceeding 200. Total, 400+?

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***[Cass's note: "apparently several pages missing"]

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...there appear to be strong connections between the two brains, but how this is accomplished is not clear. Telepathy, not unusual in twins, has been suggested...

There were a few more lines describing the doctor's treatment for what was probably the common cold-- acetylsalicylic acid, citrus, bed rest, lots of liquids. It was signed R. Cosby MD with a scraggly date, xx Jan, 2109.

Cass had added a half-page with his own analysis: "Chief, this is absolutely all there is. There is only one two-headed person in Sixtrees history, and that one (and this child) is the lady in the Box."

When I read that I had to smile. Obviously, the report dealt with a two-headed child, born probably in 2098 shortly before Burl Dogger died. If alive today she'd be nearly a hundred. She would not-- *could* not-- be the mysterious two-headed beauty of the Baronial Box. For once, Cassius, you are wrong.

An invoice was attached to the little packet.

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The Lizard

Private Investigator

We Go Places You Wouldn't Dare

To recovery of Cosby documents thought destroyed by the Clatchetts, at great personal risk and peril KR 100.00

* * *

I sighed. Well, maybe Cass the Lizard was worth it. If *I* had tried to get those papers, Ned Packle would have caught me, sure.

But what did all this prove? I couldn't see any immediate connection with the trial. On the other hand Dave Clatchett had evidently ordered all copies of Doc Cosby's report destroyed. Why? He must have had a reason. Keep digging...

A word about Dave Clatchett. The Clatchetts have been in the service of the barony for several generations. Some say they have some secret hold on the barony, but nobody can point to anything definite.

Anyhow, some Clatchett or other has always served as overseer for the baronial estates, collecting taxes, auctioning the various Provincial offices, raising dowries for the daughters, keeping the sons out of jail, and so on.

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4. Dr. Banchou's Report

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Back in January I had learned that Dr. Banchou had written a scientific monograph that referred to a member for the Sixtrees family and that Dave Clatchett had confiscated all copies. And further that Dave's report to Baron Cecil concluded, "We were glad to learn that his kidney condition is terminal."

So who was this Dr. Banchou, who was an offense to the Sixtrees and whose life was accidentally snuffed out yesterday by my client?

We are told that Dr. Dennis Banchou accepted an offer to retire to the Buddhist Monastery in Lethary for several reasons; because the food and lodgings were free; because he loved the loose saffron robes of the monks. Further, since he was already bald, he fitted in effortlessly with the community of shaven heads. And finally and very importantly, he could continue to work on his hominid evolution thesis.

Well now, what was in this monograph that so greatly incensed the Sixtrees and their watchdog? Surely there was *one* copy left, somewhere.

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[Note by The Lizard: Three front pages missing.>

One hundred years ago the U.S. nuclear submarine Minnow was sailing out to sea past Battery Park, when something went wrong. It detonated and vanished, taking Manhattan, Staten Island, Brooklyn, and much of New Jersey with it. Forty million men, women, and children died instantly. Body parts were found as far east as Boston and in front yards in Milford, Pennsylvania. Traces of the immense dust cloud still circle the globe.

We have heard all this before. See for example, the footnote in Gaskell's History (5:3.10 which explains the mechanisms that made the catastrophe inevitable, what with the coffee pot so close to the Destruct Switch. However, save for the consequent radiation, none of that is relevant to this report. As the then American President said, "A tragic accident, but these things happen."

Hominid history shows a sequence of beneficial mutations, each arriving after a period of time shorter than the one before. This acceleration is particularly evident in that last million years. During this period each advance has brought a crucial cultural contribution that enabled each new species to dominate and replace the prior species....

[Some pages missing here.]

And here's the point: *The hominid line is still evolving.*

If evolution of the hominid line were proceeding on normal schedule we should not expect *homo superior* to appear until some fifty to seventy-five thousand years hence. But conditions are not normal. We refer, of course, to the mutagenic radiation from Minnow, which early spread to all quarters of the globe.

And so, considering the accelerated pace of the evolutionary process, our successors may be living among us at this very moment. Indeed, he-- she may live today in this very Province of Lethary. Evolutionary statistics suggest that the first such child will be a female, as favoring rapid reproduction of the new species. How will we know her? It would appear safe to say that, although *homo superior* (let's call "her" that) will probably possess many physical characteristics in common with us, she will nevertheless *look* different. Within her environment she may even be regarded as somewhat a freak (two

heads?), and be kept in seclusion as much as possible. Further, she may be expected to have a prolonged childhood and a delayed maturation, both of which would permit an extended learning process. We might predict puberty at fifty years, adulthood at one hundred, with a fertile maturity perhaps continuing for several centuries. She would probably demonstrate early skills beyond anything possible for *h. sapiens*.

An ever-increasing brain size has always been crucial in successful hominid evolution. But now, for us to evolve even bigger heads with even more gray matter, we encounter a serious problem: the female pelvis is already at its maximum. Bigger infant heads cannot pass through the pelvic cradle. Is hominid big-brain evolution therefore at a dead end? Surely not. We speculate as to physical differences that might achieve increased brain volume. Suppose *h. superior* is conceived with two heads? At birth, first one head passes through the pelvic orifice, then the other, then the rest of the baby. One head with the cranial volume of two heads wouldn't be able to pass through, but *two* heads, *seriatim*, surely could.

What advances will our new *h. superior* bring to the hominid line? We can only speculate. Looking back, "Lucy's" people, *Australopithecus afarensis*, were the bright stars of our hominid ancestry for 900,000 years. But think of the awe with which they might view the crude stone tools of their successors, *homo ergaster*!

The point is, the successor's accomplishments would be beyond the comprehension of their ancestors. And so with us, *homo sapiens*, as we speculate about *homo superior* and her world. When *homo superior* arrives, she will bring with her gifts queerer than we can possibly imagine.

[Note by The Lizard: Here follows a comment evidently in the handwriting of the Buddhist Abbot, Father Fois-Coeur.]

"Brother Banchou: Naming the two women will certainly bring down on us the wrath of the Sixtrees. I strongly urge that you withdraw the paper."

[The bottom third of the last page of the document was torn off here.]

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Well, it looks like Cass the Lizard is right. There was and is only *one* two-headed Sixtrees, and she was born a hundred years ago, and she is the lady of the Baronial Box.

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5. The Cremation of Dr. Banchou

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Before we get back to the trial, I'd like to explain how Dr. Banchou was connected to the Fair.

Our Provincial Fair is held in late June and early July in the fields east of Lethary, and climaxes on July 4 in the Square itself. The town overflows, and the excess population finds bed and board in local residences or lives in tents or on the bare ground. The baron takes his share of the Fair proceeds in all sorts of ways, but even after that, there's still generally enough to pay city expenses: the officials, schools, roads, utilities, etc.

Every year on the last day of the Fair, July 4, there is a special event. Last year, we had a man being shot out of a cannon and almost caught in midflight by a myopic trapeze artist. This year the spectacle was to be the cremation of the remains of Dr. Banchou in the Square, with guaranteed visible flight of his soul from the ashes. Front row seats, fifty kroner, bleachers, 5 to 25 kroner, depending on how far up.

Public cremation with visible ascent of soul was certainly a novelty, and the Fair business office sold

over twenty thousand tickets even before the Fair opened.

But later on both the City Council and the Fair Trustees agreed that maybe the idea was flawed. Back in January, though, it seemed like a winner. Clearly, the old savant-turned-monk was on his death bed. The mourning friars had given him the last rites and wept copious (lachrymator-induced tears over the shriveled body. The doctors gave him only hours to live.

But the hours stretched into the next day, and the next day into the next week, and the next week into February. They checked on him daily, but he showed no signs of imminent demise. Quite the contrary. He started putting on weight. From a wizened 80 pounds in January he went to 105 in February. In mid-March he rose from his bed. A week later he made a shaky circuit of the Square. The officials were in despair. To do this to them after all the trouble they had gone to!

For indeed they *had* gone to all kinds of trouble. Just to name one or two problems, they had had to get an Impact Statement from the Provincial Environmental Protection Agency. They would have to do something to mask the odor of burning human flesh. The Buddhists recommended a special oil of mint, and so the Budget Office bought a few kilos of the oil, but then immediately got slapped with an injunction by our prolific resident inventor, Peter Fahrni, who had a patent on this particular mint oil. They settled that for a few hundred kroner, only to encounter another problem, which was the old man's weight. He now weighed 110 pounds. But the Environmental permit covered only 100 pounds, so even if he died right then and there, he could not legally be incinerated. More kroner laid in the proper hands finally fixed *that*.

June came. The retired anthropologist was now jogging around the Square twice a day, yellow robes flapping triumphantly.

One group (headed by Cecil Sixtrees) tried to persuade the scientist to promise to go through with it *live*, in the event he couldn't see his way clear to actually dying in timely fashion. Lord Cecil (who owned the franchise on the front row seats) held up to the little man historic examples of saintly Buddhist monks who dosed themselves with gasoline and lit a match. The candidate listened politely, but said no. The Sixtrees scion referred him to the ancient Hindu ceremony of suttee, wherein surviving widows of the deceased maharajah were burnt alive on the pyre along with their late husband. Girl stuff, said the prospect, No.

Others took over. They tried to awaken in him a dormant loyalty to his Order that had made his comfortable retirement possible. They reminded him that Buddha himself had been cremated. (Perhaps overlooking the fact that the Holy Founder was dead at the time.) They pointed out that thousands of kroner had been spent on advertising the event. They explained how the Fair Band (already in rehearsal) would march around the leaping blazes playing Wagner's Magic Fire music, from Die Walküre.

No.

Darker solutions were quietly considered.

A team headed by Lord Cecil drove down to Black River, on the Loosianna border, to consult a famous obeahman. I give here Cecil's report. (Obtained in the usual way.)

* * *

The three of us entered the back room, where we were asked to sit on the floor by a side wall. The room was poorly lit by an oil lantern sconced on the wall opposite us, where an old black man sat on the floor. He lifted his head, and spoke: "Why have you come?"

"We need help," I said. "The Fair climaxes July 4. We had expected the monk Banchou to be dead by then, and we had planned to cremate the body in the Square on July 4. If we cannot do this, the Fair will have to refund a great deal of money. We will be bankrupt."

Dave Clatchett explained further, "So you see, it is important that this very troublesome fellow die in time for his cremation."

The old man said, "So laser him."

We were horrified. I said, "We can't do *that*. It's got to be natural causes."

Our host was silent for a long time. Then he said, "I will need something of his... a drop of his

blood...?"

"Sir," I said, "That might be hard to get."

"A lock of hair?"

"He's bald."

"Nail clippings?"

"A problem there, too. Isn't there some other way?"

"Alternates, yes. But not always entirely satisfactory. I am a very strong obeahman, but I say to you, beware, you may get your wish, and then some. Shall I go on?"

We had no choice, "Yes, please."

"Very well, you have been warned. Ten thousand kroner."

I handed him my plastic, and he ran it through the counter dangling from his neck as a pendant in a necklace of shark teeth. He returned my card and almost simultaneously he was holding a squawking chicken by the neck. Next, her head seemed to leap from her body in a shower of blood.

He held her with both hands and let the blood spurt down on the sawdust floor. He began to chant something. We finally made it out. "Jooli-duh... jooli-duh... jooli-duh..."

Flickering images formed around the blood drops. Miniature trees? I counted six trees, in two rows of three, the kind a child would have in a play village.

The chanting stopped. Everything was very quiet.

Between the tree rows we could see a tiny bald-headed figure in a yellow robe. He looked up, and just then something resembling a little metal boat seemed to materialize out of nowhere, hovering above the toy figure and the toy trees, and then it dropped with a hard plop and crushed everything beneath it, trees and doll-monk together. And then everything seemed to dissolve into the floor. The witch-man was gone.

We stared. At the time we had no idea what was happening. Later, we understood the little boat-thing was the Alien's ship, and that it had dropped out of the sky and had killed Dr. Banchou. The obeahman had done it all with holograms, of course. But how had he known? We continued to sit there for a while, just peering at each other in the dark. Somebody murmured, "Jooli-duh... Juli deux... *July two*...? Of course! That's when it will happen!"

"M'lord," Dave Clatchett whispered in a shaky voice, "let's get out of here." We did, fast.

* * *

So Cecil brought back a report that reassured most of the Fair trustees. However, just for confirmation, they checked in also with two highly reputable Los Angeles astrologers, both of whom claimed that the holy man would indeed leave this life on July 2, and could thereafter be peaceably and profitably cremated.

Mid-morning of July 2 came, and we must now report a final causative event-- the incident that sealed the fate of the scientist-turned-friar.

Peter Fahrni had formulated a pill that allegedly suspended Murphy's Law, which says (you'll recall), if anything can go wrong, it will.

Now, as an inducement to Fairgoers to buy the more expensive front-row box seats to watch the forthcoming cremation, the Committee bought several hundred Anti-Murphy pills and encapsulated a pill with each front-row ticket. You could buy the happy combination in a vending machine in front of Garshmeyer's.

Dr. Banchou, in an ultimate sardonic gesture, bought a ticket to his own cremation (Front Row, Center). He didn't stop there. With a supremely confident sneer (according to witnesses) he tore the Anti-Murphy pill from the ticket and tossed the pill into the gutter.

Ah, woe! It was a challenge even a most indulgent and charitable Fate could not ignore.

In that last moment of his life the old man stepped down from the curb and stood there for a moment thumbing his nose at the pile of wood and the drums of kerosene and the tins of mint oil stacked in the center of the Square. Then he moved aside a little to let Sara pass, and in the next instant he was

smashed. Old Doc Turner, our part-time coroner, said it surely happened too fast for him to feel any pain.

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6. The Trial Begins

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And so, at 9 o'clock on the morning of July 4, the trial of Jean-Claude Berg began. As before, the proceedings played to a packed courtroom. So as not to conflict with the cremation scheduled for noon, the judge had already agreed to recess the trial early.

Prosecutor Clatchett and I bowed with false courtesy to each other, and I noted that the Sixtrees were still surrounding him with big-city talent. At least, I thought, if he fails today he can share the blame.

Shortly after Ned Packle led us in, John-Claude turned around and both of his heads stared up at the Baronial Box, and then both heads nodded and smiled. At what? Was *she* in there, looking down on us? Probably.

Judge Martin Cloke entered. Everybody rose. A couple of warning bangs of the gavel, and everybody sat down again, except me.

I had a preliminary motion. "Your Honor, my client is charged with, and admits, illegal parking. The penalty is three days in jail or a five-kroner fine. Since he has been in jail now for three days, I request the charge be dismissed."

"Agreed," muttered Prosecutor Clatchett.

"That one dismissed," said Cloke. "Next, we have the charge of homicide, in that the vehicle in question fell on the Buddhist friar Dr. Banchou, knocking him down and killing him. Opening statement, Prosecutor?"

I'll skip the opening statements, mine and Clatchett's, both of which were pretty much routine. And now:

Judge Cloke: "Mr. Clatchett, call your first witness."

Prosecutor Clatchett: "I call Mistress Spring Stabler."

According to the police report Spring Stabler, a retired schoolteacher, had been on the sidewalk just a few yards from the event and had seen everything.

That crime of Vehicle Homicide requires that the defendant be positively identified as the man at the controls at the time of death. As for Mistress Stabler (and in fact for the next several prosecution witnesses), my job was simple: they must not be permitted to identify John-Claude as the driver.

I rose slowly, sadly. I hated to do this, but I had a client accused of murder. "Objection. Mistress Stabler cannot testify."

Clatchett looked genuinely surprised. "And why not?"

"Because," I said, "she is a convicted felon. Under the Rules of Court, a felon may not testify." I walked up to the bench and gave a copy of the record to the judge, then back to the Prosecutor's table with another copy.

"Yes, I remember," said the judge. he looked over at Spring. "A mugger attacked you. You defended yourself with a harpin, punctured his gut, and he ran away. You were arrested and found guilty of carrying a concealed weapon. I gave you 90 days, suspended. Right?"

"Yes, Your Honor."

"Well, I'm sorry, but you must understand, as a felon, you cannot testify."

She shrugged, turned and left the courtroom. As she passed the defense table she gave me a bitter

look. For which I didn't blame her. But nobody said life was fair.

"Next witness?" asked Judge Cloke.

Clatchett gave me an uneasy glance. "I call Evan Byron."

Evan Byron had once been rich, and had given lavishly of his bounty to the community. It was his last gift that had got him into trouble.

"Unacceptable," I said.

"That tax thing?" asked Clatchett.

"Yes." Evan, in a burst of religious generosity, had donated all his assets, down to the last farthing, to the Provincial Tax Board, and had claimed the donation as a charitable gift. But he had gone over the limit deductible for charities, and the excess had been disallowed. The Board demanded that he pay taxes on it. Plus interest and penalties. He couldn't pay. He actually served a year and a day in Hoban Pen for tax fraud.

"Unacceptable," agreed Cloke. "Next?"

"I call Mistress Dollkin."

He led her carefully through the horrifying moments of that morning in front of Garshmeyer's Deli, then turned her over to me for cross.

"Just a couple of short easy questions, Mistress Dollkin." I smiled agreeably, but she wasn't fooled a bit. She looked back at me suspiciously. "You never saw his faces, did you?"

"No, of course not. How could I? He was facing away."

"To be sure. But later, perhaps, you picked him out of a line-up at the Constabulary?"

"A... line-up?"

"You know, where they line up six or seven men, have them face away, and take down their pants, and you see if you identify what you saw on July second?"

She blushed deep red. "Oh, you mean, showing their...?"

"Exactly, Mistress Dollkin, showing their respective backsides."

"Oh dear, no!"

"But perhaps Constable Packle showed you his Interpol Mooner File, holos of internationally known mooners?"

"Interpol? No..."

"He just said, go on home? He'd let you know when to appear in court?"

"Yes, sir, that's all he said."

I shook my head in wonder. "Nothing further."

"Any more witnesses?" Cloke asked.

Clatchett called Constable Packle. Of course Ned hadn't been an eye-witness, and I wouldn't let him say much on direct. Clatchett gave up and let me have him for cross.

"Constable," I said, "Can you drive your car while mooning?"

He thought about that. "No."

"Nothing further," I said.

"Any more witnesses, Mr. Prosecutor?"

"Yes, Your Honor." This time he radiated victory. "I call Mistress Wanda Nagel."

I said, "Your Honor, a preliminary question?"

"Go ahead."

I faced Clatchett. "Mistress Nagel was physically out of the Province at the time of the incident?"

"Quit true. She observed the incident because she had an out-of-body experience that placed her in front of Garshmeyer's Deli at the time. And her OB travel fee is paid up, I might add. Further, though she is registered for OB only in Louisimiss, our respective provinces have a reciprocity agreement that validates her OB travel within our area." He folded his arms and rocked on his heels in cold triumph.

"But," I said, "she didn't arrive OB in time to see the actual incident?"

"No. Her testimony will not be directed to the *happening* of the incident, but to its aftermath. She will testify to what the android, Sara, said in the last seconds of Sara's life."

"Hearsay again? It's inadmissible." I thought that would deflate him. I was wrong.

He smiled in unfriendly fashion. "It's admissible as one of the hearsay exceptions. What the android said was a dying declaration."

Well, I miss one once in a while. Not often. But this one was a big one, and somehow it had slipped through. My esteemed opponent had been saving the best for the last. So I smiled tolerantly as my mind whizzed around and around and tried to dredge up everything I knew about dying declarations.

"Your Honor," I began, "as the learned Prosecutor points out, one of the exceptions to the hearsay rule is the so-called dying declaration. The exception is founded on the premise that a dying person, approaching the gates of Heaven, will not expire with a lie on his lips. Given this, we still have serious threshold problems: Sara was an android, not a human being; she has no expectation of an afterlife and had no deathbed pressures to tell the truth. The so-called dying declaration fails the basic premise on which the exception is based and is therefore inadmissible." I sat down. Let them chew on *that*.

Judge Cloke thought about it. "Mr. Prosecutor?"

Dave Clatchett rose, gave me his most forgiving smile, and addressed the bench. "Sara was an android, true, but an android with Class-5 AI. She had an IQ of 140. She had an emotional life. She had nobility. In the Richfield mine disaster, she saved lives at risk of her own. She loved life, even as you and I. There is not the slightest reason to doubt that she told the truth. Her statement is clearly admissible." He arched his eyebrows at me and took his seat.

I was immediately on my feet. "Your Honor, even assuming all that, we still have a problem. Admissibility requires that the dying declaration identify the killer. Sara never identified anybody. In fact, so far as can be determined, she never said a word. She died in silence." I sat down.

It took a moment for the judge to digest that. "Now, wait a minute... you mean...?"

Clatchett never let him finish. "Your Honor, I must protest counsel's attempt to mislead the court. As counsel well knows, there was indeed a dying declaration. In her last moment, as she lay under the vehicle, her right arm was free, and she held up two fingers, thus." (He demonstrated.) "Obviously, she was telling the world, the killer has two heads." He glowered at me and remained standing.

I laughed. "We certainly applaud Mr. Clatchett's imagination, and I'm sure I can never achieve a fantasy so charming. But alas, we find ourselves tied to the humdrum realities of the real world. There's no evidence that the two-fingered gesture was anything more than the last twitch of an expiring body."

"Two fingers... two heads... maybe..." muttered Cloke, as he studied the Latin phrase on his gavel. When he does this, I know he is flipping through the entries in his Harvard Lexus Implant, with the Updates. In all that, is there a file, 'Androids'? I grit my teeth. We wait.

His Honor sighed, then lifted his eyes and seemed to focus at a point in space over Clatchett's table. This was bad. It meant that he had come to a decision, and it would be for Clatchett. He was going to rule that the android's two-fingered signal was admissible as identifying my client as the driver of the vehicle. (Which of course the prisoner was, but legal proof is quite another thing.)

Cloke said, "There appears to be no reported case involving the dying declaration of an android. Well, then what do we have to guide us? Comparison with human models? Speculative extrapolations? Yes, both So guided, we conclude that-- "

We needed a miracle.

Which my client provided. John-Claude grabbed my sleeve and shouted, "What's that *odor!*"

Everybody gasped and stared at him. Me too. I couldn't think coherently for a few seconds. Then it hit me. The smell was burning mint oil. Which meant--

Judge Cloke banged his gavel a couple of times. "Counselor! Control your client!"

I was on my feet. "Your Honor, it's nearly twelve! They've started the cremation!"

His Honor muttered something. People were already heading for the door. He called out, "Recess until tomorrow morning nine o'clock!"

"All rise," the bailiff intoned to a nearly empty room.

And now my client was behaving very strangely. The eyes in both heads were closed tight. His fists were clenched. Very obviously he was concentrating... on *what?* Both pairs of lips were whispering, "Banchou... Banchou... wake up! *Wake up!*" Sweat formed on both foreheads and their sleeves wiped it away. And then it was over, and they were relaxed, and smiling.

"What was *that* all about?" I asked.

"Better get on out there, Mr. Whitmore," said John. "Don't want to miss the cremation," added Claude.

Clearly, they were teasing me. But they were right, I didn't want to miss the big show. Cass had already left.

And thus the decision on whether Sara's two-finger gesture was admissible as identifying John-Claude as the driver was left hanging. The ruling, when it came, would also bear heavily not only on whether John-Claude was responsible for Dr. Banchou's death but also for Sara's destruction. Not to mention the question of indecent exposure. My work was laid out for me.

As Ned led John-Claude out of the room, I noticed that my client kept looking up at the Baron's Box, and smiling.

Something was going on, something involving my client and the invisible female occupant of the Box. But no point in thinking about it right now. I had more serious priorities. I had to get back to the office.

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7. The Square

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At this point let me explain a bit of local geography. The Square, I mean.

Starting with Archives in the northwest corner, we proceed clockwise and in near alphabetical order with the Bar-Del-O, the Buddhist Monastery, the Bus Station, the Catholic Church, the Courthouse, Garshmeyer's, the Jail, Lawyer's Building, License Bureau, Methodist Church, Presbyterian Church, the Unity Church, and on around to the last office, Private Investigations, Tom Dorsey, Prop.

That office has been empty ever since I can remember. Make that *maybe* empty. For the place is supposed to be haunted by the ghost of Tom Dorsey, our first and original and perhaps overly zealous private eye. Tom was found one morning long ago hanging by his neck from a rafter in his office basement. It wasn't suicide. He had been shot three times through the head with heavy-duty lasers, following which, as though to teach him a lesson, he had been strung up.

On a dare I once spent a night in the old building. There were some strange noises, but the ghost never showed. Or if he did, I was asleep. I did a lot of exploring next day with a flashlight. I found old papers, fliers, ads, and so on, that nobody had bothered to clean up.

Here's one:

* * *

Tom Dorsey, Private Investigator

On the Square

In litigation? Witnesses provided, prosecution and/or defense, authentic, reliable. Substance-free blood, urine specimens. We can match any DNA.

Substitute papers. More authentic than originals. All documents. Licenses. Passports. Birth, marriage, death certificates. Expert calligraphy.

We can protect you. Guard dogs, clean or rabid. Cobras.

Surplus property discreetly disposed of.

Specialties: Involuntary weddings, Yale locks, undetectable poisons, Harvard diplomas, notarized horoscopes for resumes, collections by kneecap.

Liquidations, clueless but cheap. Let us bid on your contract. Satisfaction guaranteed.

I know now, ninety years later, who killed him, and why. We'll come to that.

Let's back up. The Bus Station. Its history for the last hundred years is intertwined with that of the Fahrni family. The story is, the great-grandfather, Eric Fahrni, then a young man, had walked into town looking for work and was tired and was about to sit down on the bench in front of the little building that eventually grew into the Bus Station, when he was distracted by gunfire within the building. Two men staggered out and dropped dead in front of him. At that moment the bus drove up.

A lady stepped over the corpses. "What's the fare to Clarksville?" she asked Eric.

"Two-eighty," he said. He knew, because he had read the schedule, and that was where he was eventually headed.

She gave him her kroner card, he slid it through his pocket register and returned it to her.

"Linthicum?" asked the boy behind her.

Linthicum wasn't on the schedule, and Eric had no idea where it was. "One-seventy," he said in his best agent's voice. The boy looked at him funny. "Special rate, today only," Eric explained. The boy paid.

By then Eric knew he was on to a good thing. He called the hearse, had the ex-proprietors hauled away, and put up a sign, Lethary Bus Station, Eric Fahrni Prop. As we know, he and his descendants prospered. It wasn't long before they bought the bus line, and so on.

Anyway, it's easy to understand why great-grandson Peter could always count on lavish displays of his inventions in the Station. We'd like to report that Peter made a lot of money from them. But we can't. He didn't. Except maybe with his pregnancy testing apparatus, better known as the "P-Machine."

Peter's P-Machine involved nothing really new. As we all know, shortly after a woman's ovum is fertilized, it releases a hormone called "CG"-- chorionic gonadotropin, which carries the word that her body is now under new management. CG is what the gynecologists test for, and so does (or did) Peter's P-Machine. The only difference is, his machine reports back within seconds.

Here's how it worked. The woman sticks her index finger into Slot A, where a sterile needle draws a drop of blood, which is mixed automatically with a solution of certain of Peter's unique chemicals. The mixture then gives a reaction, which is either positive or negative, and a little card pops out of Slot B. If the test is positive, the card says "Pregnant," and if negative, "Not Pregnant." Simple, huh?

Well, Peter installed his machine in the Bus Station in time for the Fair of 2185. It had heavy use there and appeared to be at least as accurate as the test offered by the local clinic.

But then came the Fair of last year, 2197. Ms. Hattie MacArthur, a widow of uncertain years, took the test "for fun." She was astonished and alarmed at the result. When she told Constable Packle, her current gentleman friend, Ned fainted and had to take to his bed. Within hours six beaming ladies (including two he didn't know) brought him tuna casseroles, flowers, and offers to sit up with him during the night.

Ms. Hattie was not alone in her agitation. It was high Fair-time, and a lot of girls had sneaked in for the test. Every one received a positive card. Word got around fast. Ned Packle became suspicious when his granddaughter stuck the finger of her doll Bubbles in Slot A and got a positive reading. He took the test himself. He was positive. They then found that all the cards were positive. Pregnant or not, if you took the test, you came out positive.

Who had engineered this ghastly joke? Suspicion fell on various possible culprits: the new Baptist minister (fourteen overnight marriages, where the brides refused to face their regular ministers); Dr. Weinbaum, the gynecologist (the line into his office stretched around the block); the Bus Company (fifteen young men left town the next day and another twelve the day following); and so on.

They were all wrong. The trickster was actually Jed Stark's boy Bitsey, playing around with his new toy printing press. He had replaced all the cards with his own newly printed positives.

Peter closed down the P-Machine, and life in Lethary eventually settled back down into a wary equilibrium.

But I seem to have digressed a bit.

Let's get back to real time and the cremation.

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8. Surprises in the Square

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I stood for a moment on the Courthouse portico and looked down into the Square. The stands lining the Square hid the crematory pyre in the center of the plaza, where a column of black smoke was rising. I shuddered.

Just then a roar rose up from the crowd. Every man, woman, and child in the stands was on his feet, and screaming. From where I was, their backs were to me and I couldn't see much. I crawled underneath the stands and was soon out into the open. Everybody was yelling and jumping and pointing. What they were pointing at was someone standing bewildered in the center of the pile. The flames hadn't reached him yet.

Then, while everybody was staring goggle-eyed, a familiar figure ran out into the Square and into the flames. He grabbed the creature, tossed him over his shoulder, and dashed out again. In seconds the two were inundated by dozens of eager helpers. The hero was of course Cassius, my ubiquitous assistant, and the man on the death-fire was of course Dr. Banchou.

John-Claude's little space ship had not killed him? Had it merely knocked him unconscious for two days? No. He had been dead, and I mean dead dead. And then what? I vividly recalled John-Claude's moment of deep concentration. I remembered their tense repeated command, "Banchou, *wake up!*" Something supernatural was afoot here. And was it just John-Claude, or was that entity in the Baronial Box also part of the act? Too deep for me!

Meanwhile, the crowd, on further reflection, began to mutter. While most individuals congratulated the little monk on his new life, some did not. They had paid good money to see cremation of a holy man, to be climaxed by his soul rising out of the ashes in the form of a white dove. So where was their cremation? Where was the departing soul?

Lacking a monk (for he had presciently vanished), a group of rowdies looked about for a substitute. They found Master of Ceremonies Buford Snyder, and despite his protestations of innocence they began dragging him toward the flames. But just as they were about to toss him on the fire, the timer on the dove-pen at the head of the pyre went off, releasing the dove in front of the bullies, and so startling and confusing them that they dropped Buford, whereupon he escaped into the crowd and was able to get home, where he stayed locked in his room for the next several days.

Now, back to Cass. Do you think my factotum extraordinaire got a nice thank-you note from Dr. Banchou? No. A "local hero" write-up in the Lethary Lancet? No, not that either. What he got was, arrested by Deputy Constable Bubba Cauker for interfering with a licensed civic event. I followed as Bubba led Cass off to jail in handcuffs. This was Bubba's first arrest, and the young deputy was very proud of it. Fortunately Chief Constable Packle was there. Ned didn't want to overrule his deputy, but we arrived at a solution that saved face all around. Cass promised he would never again rescue anybody from a burning funeral pyre, and they let him go.

I had to figure out what to do next. Since there had been no homicide, there was no longer any reason to hold my client. We headed back into the cells.

John-Claude knew I was coming, of course. But when I told him I'd have him out in an hour, he just laughed. John said, "And then what? Where would we go? Rooms are sold out all over town. It's comfortable here. Another night won't hurt." Claude added, "Anyhow, you need to get to work on that big damage claim."

He had a point.

And now they both gave me a hard serious look. "But before you go," John said, "tell us what, exactly, is this 'rule against perpetuities'?"

That one floored me.

"You've been thinking about it in connection with the trial," Claude said.

I took a long deep breath. "It involves a delayed transfer of property, like by gift during life, or a bequest after death. Vesting must take place within a life in being plus twenty-one years, or the transfer is void."

"As in Burl Dogger's will?" said John. "He willed almost his entire estate to a male child-- who turned out to be Lord Harry." "To vest on his twenty-first birthday," added Claude.

"True," I said. This was getting interesting. "But before the twenty-one years could run, there was a 'life in being,' namely the child who was conceived one hundred years ago *in vitro*-- by artificial means, that is."

"Mary-Louise Sixtrees," said John.

Now *that* was a very intriguing statement. Where had they got the information? Especially that name. Almost certainly from the lady in the Baronial Box. Which merely confirmed that which I strongly suspected by now, that he-- or she-- or both-- or all four-- were telepathic. I shrugged. "So it is rumored."

"Now, for the bequest to be valid, was it essential that she be alive at Burl's death?" asked Claude.

"Well, yes. Or at least *conceived*." I was beginning to see where this was going. "If there was a gap between Burl's death and Mary-Louise's conception, Clause One of the will fails."

"But *why*?" asked John. Claude echoed, "*Why* must Mary-Louise have been conceived before Burl died for Lord Harry to inherit?"

I shrugged. "It's supposed to make for clarity and predictability. There has to be a designated life in being at the time the will speaks. It goes way back into the foundations of English common law. If there was a life in being, the bequest was valid."

"Well then," aid John, "if valid, Clause One gave Sara to Harry Sixtrees." "But if *not* valid," said Claude, "he did not receive title, not do his descendants, and the Sixtrees have no case. Right?"

"A correct statement of the law," I said, "But we have no proof of any such time gap. So forget it." I rose to go.

"Wait," John said. "Mary-Louise tells us there *is* proof... a record-- she thinks an old video cassette-- that the Clatchetts keep hidden away in the Archives." "It's their hold over the barony," added Claude. "A sort of blackmail."

Just then I had a very strange thought: I recalled Lord Cecil's visit to the voodoo man, and the image of the little ship crushing not only the miniature monk figure, but also the six trees.

"She knows where they keep it," said John, "and she'll help you get it."

That didn't make any sense. "Now wait a minute. She's a Sixtrees. Why should she take our side against a kinsman?"

Cassius had been listening quietly. He now made his contribution. "Boss, if you can ask that, you just haven't been paying close attention."

Oh? I stopped a moment and studied the faces of my client(s). *Oho!* He was right. These... *four*... were in love. Good God! "Right," I said weakly. "Right, so *how* can she help us?"

"Early tomorrow morning," said Claude, "you'll find her in the baronial garage. Meet her there at eight. You know how to get in."

"Yes. But we're due in court at nine. Can't she start earlier?"

"She'll be busy all night," John said cryptically.

Doing what? I wondered. No answers, of course.

"The Archives are next door to the garage," said Claude. "She knows a way through the vents into the back rooms."

"Got it." And I was also thinking, meanwhile I still had a bit of research to do.

"For which you have the rest of the night," observed John cheerfully. He was the humorist of the pair. So Cass and I started back to the office together. The Square was still in a turmoil. And we noted a

very interesting sight. The Sixtrees chauffeur walked up to the row of mint oil cans, grabbed a three-liter tin by the handle, and nonchalantly walked away with it. Amazing. Why? Certainly not for himself. This was surely on orders of his mistress.

And so, as we weaved through the crowd in the general direction of my office, I was asking myself some new questions.

Had Jean-Claude asked Mary-Louise to get the mint oil? Was it perchance the exact oil he needed for his ship? I could go back and ask him, of course. But just now I didn't want him to suspect that I suspected anything. Maybe I should just ignore the whole thing. But no-- that oil. It was important to my client, and I wanted to know how and why. Where to start?

I recalled the description he had provided for his oil, the stick figure he had drawn, "man-on-one-leg." Meaning what? I didn't know. Maybe I'd get some hints if I did some research.

And now about my office. It's on the second floor of the Lawyer's Building between Elshea's Beauty Parlor and Ben's Shoe Repair. You enter a reception room, where you're greeted by Grazia, our built-into-the-wall frozen-face android. Beyond is a hall, and the first door on the right is our info room, where we have all the standard junk: terminals for hitting the Webnet, VR and holo demos, sample jury box. Next, into the conference room, then the library (mostly disc loads), and on into a machine and tool room. Down the hall again, to Cass's cubicle, more like a closet, with desk and chair. By certain contortions of his long legs he can lean the chair back, prop his feet on the desk, and take a nap and/or read one of his genuine paper comic books.

So now we are in the info room, and I am sitting at a terminal, and thinking. In court this morning John-Claude had been the first to notice the odor of burning mint oil. He almost certainly recognized the odor. So now, just to confirm something, I punched some keys and called up the negotiations of the Fair Trustees with Peter Fahrni in the patent infringement action involving the mint oil. Cass hovered over my right shoulder and watched with great interest.

First there were just a lot of words bouncing back and forth, the formal complaint, the formal answers, the subpoenas, motions, interlocutory decisions... and finally, what I was really looking for, the patent.

I scrolled the text carefully, line by line. Aha! And there it is, the structural formula of this special mint-scented oil:

[drawing]

I sighed. "That can't be John-Claude's oil."

Cass grinned. "Oh, yes, it is."

I hated it when he did this. I didn't look up. We both waited. I gave in. "Cass-- "

"Just turn it upside down."

I pushed the rotate key. And sure enough, there it was, the two-headed man on one leg. "Thank you," I said coldly. Everything fell together now. I continued, "Her chauffeur stole a can of oil, and I'll bet he's headed for the Impound Lot right now."

"Not exactly, chief. Forget the chauffeur. Yeah, he took the oil, but he's out of it now. He gave the oil to *her*. *She* has it, and *she's* headed for the Impound Lot."

"The ship is heavily guarded."

"So what? She's Mary-Louise Sixtrees."

I nodded. "She'll fill the control cup, but she won't take the ship. Not yet, anyhow?"

"Right. She has to clear John-Claude first."

I told him, "You might as well go on home. Before you go, though, would you get me a Fahrni Flashlight Kit."

That puzzled him. My turn to grin. "I'll be here a while. Early tomorrow morning I'll be out there somewhere with Ms. Mary-Louise. See you in court."

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9. Some History

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After Cass left I sat there thinking. I ought to go on home, too. Get a little sleep, get up early and be back at 8. Except that the adrenalin was still pumping, and I knew I wouldn't be able to sleep. So I would simply sit here in front of the TV, review things in my mind, maybe doze a little. Better set the alarm. Next time I'm up.

I let my mind idle along thinking about Mary-Louise Sixtrees and her very odd ancestry. her father, old Burl Dogger, died before she was born. And her mother, Lady Ditmars? We knew little or nothing about her. Not that it matters now. Save for Mary-Louise they're all long dead.

Also I'm thinking about my own family history. My maternal ancestors, the Moncriefs, owned a lot of land on the outskirts of Lethary, but lost it all during the Border Wars. Bluntly put, Burl Dogger, the first Baron Sixtrees, just plain stole it by force of arms, all under a thin veneer of legality. I'll get back to him shortly. But first, some more history.

The Border Wars didn't start as a secession. No, in the beginning, it involved an expulsion. Who was first? Some say it was Mississippi, some say Montana, some swear it was Texas. (I claim it was Montana, and that's how I'm telling this.) The story was that the town militia refused to let FBI agents arrest Mrs. Sadie Barrow for unlicensed possession of a starter's pistol, which she used to scare crow in her corn field. Worse, she had a bad attitude. Well, there had been a lot of such incidents lately, and this time the Federal Government was determined to do something about it.

The United States Senate voted to expel the offending state from the United States of America. (A surprise: Montana's two senators and all Montana congressmen likewise voted for the Expulsion.)

That was sort of like breaking a log jam. After that, there was an Expulsion vote every few days, often brought on motion by the state in question. The end came when neither house of Congress could muster a quorum. And so the Union died.

As might be expected, there was at first a bit of looting and vandalism in the ex-capital. The great bronze statue of J. Edgar Hoover (in his famous drag disguise) was toppled from its pedestal in front of the FBI building. Washington's homeless moved from the streets into the mostly vacant federal buildings. For fuel that winter they chopped down the sacred cherry trees lining the Tidal Basin, and they had a tendency to burn the wood in ancient fireplaces that had long been sealed up. Several buildings were lost this way, including the White House.

Of course today, a hundred years later, everything has long been cleaned up, and Washington is again a beautiful international tourist attraction. The White House is back, completely rebuilt and restored. Operated by a Japanese syndicate, it is now one of the best hotels on the East Coast.

At the beginning, though, there were border skirmishes, all kinds of trouble, fighting, chaos. Blood flowed. When things finally quieted down my ancestors found they weren't living in the State of Oklahoma anymore. No, it was now the Province of Lethary. Oh, it had *some* of Oklahoma, and some of what used to be the State of Arkansas, and it had lost a lot of land to what used to be the State of Texas.

The Moncriefs woke up to find that they no longer owned oil fields, acres of alfalfa, cattle, and such as that. No, somehow, legally or otherwise, it had wound up in the bloody hands of old Burl Dogger. Not satisfied with stealing those things, he then took "Sixtrees" as his new baronial name. Now "Sixtrees" was what the Moncriefs called their big manor house west of Lethary. It was named after the six big oaks at the gate house. This was bald insult laid on mayhem and theft. A Moncrief killed Burl's son in a duel, and that seemed to bring the feud to a festering conclusion. No, one thing more. In Burl Dogger's will, he bequeathed the Dogger dung heap to mother's grandfather, Bascomb Moncrief.

But to conclude my thoughts about history, the atomized country did in fact finally coalesce back together as the very loose Confederation of Provinces, and the penitent prodigals became almost law-abiding.

Back to Burl Dogger. What was he doing before he came to Lethary? The records show he was released from prison under the general amnesties of 2068, when most provinces, bankrupted by the Border Wars, decided it was cheaper to turn the criminals loose than feed them.

Burl found employment as a driver for the Borzoi Transportation Company, in which capacity he was able to notify his old gang as to shipments of payrolls, valuable cargoes, and so on. Yep, just as in the Old West.

On this particular day Burl was driving Coach Number Three, Tulsa to Houston. He had only one passenger, a young woman named Karen Bight, who was thought to be carrying a map showing a valuable mineral deposit. A few hours into the route Burl pulled into a side field just west of Lethary, and there he was met by his associates.

They searched Ms. Bight. No maps were found. The frightened courier explained that it was actually a cranial implant, readable only on a special scanner in Houston. They could remove the implant, but if they tried to read it with a commercial scanner it would self-destruct.

The conspirators conferred. Zilch Clatchett, their intellectual (having almost finished fourth grade), pretty much verified Ms. Bight's evaluation of the situation. They conferred some more. They couldn't go on to Houston. They couldn't turn Karen loose. So they sort of settled down right where they were, hoping that one day they could find a suitable reading machine, and meanwhile turning their activities toward more profitable enterprises, such as robbing my ancestors.

They never did find a proper reading machine, and when Karen died giving birth to Roark they buried her in an unmarked grave.

While I'm thinking these deep historical thoughts I punch the remote to the local news channel. I'm looking for "Midnight" Madison, our very own anchorman.

Here he is, in living holo, nonchalant, vaguely contemptuous. "A group of famous scientists arrived last night. Of course everything in Lethary is full up on account of the Fair, and so they had to take rooms in Mrs. Cotley's Bed and Breakfast, way over in Glendale. They finally rented a car (actually, Vincent Finewater's second hearse) at considerable expense, and eventually showed up at the jail and demanded to see our two-headed prisoner, who calls himself-- or *themselves*?-- John-Claude Berg. Ned Packle turned them away.

"The leader of the visiting scientists is, or rather was, Dr. Berzelius Aston, Director of the International Space Agency. It is our understanding that it was he who first suggested that the ship is made of colonium. We are told that Dr. Aston tried various ways to obtain a tiny sample of metal from the ship, but to no avail. This reporter has further been informed that when Mr. Aston's bribe offer of ten thousand kroner for a piece of the ship was refused in turn by Ned Packle, Judge Cloke, and the City Council, Dr. Aston broke down right there in the Council conference room and had a fatal apoplectic fit. Luckily, their rented hearse was waiting at the curb."

Midnight shakes his head, continues. "Why is colonium so important? Let's find out. I turn you over now by recent file tape to Dr. Henry Strope, our science editor.

* * *

Dr. Strope: "Between 2175 and 2195 the International Space Agency launched twenty-three probes built of the strongest known metal alloy and equipped with the new Delmar drive. Seventeen were sent toward next-door Alpha-Centaurus, four toward distant Rigel, and two toward the Andromeda Nebula.

"Hours after launch, each ship shifted into maximum velocity of two-thirds the speed of light. During the first day each reported good hourly progress. During the second day, however, each began to report problems. A meteorite the size of a marble, moving at a relative velocity of 200 km/second, had blasted away the fuel tank of Number One. For Number Two it was the gyroscope. In Number Three the hydraulic system. By the third day radio feedback had vanished for all ships.

"All space scientists agree that for such speeds a much stronger, more resilient shell is essential. Specifications have been drawn up, and it is now apparent that no such metal has ever existed, and perhaps in fact cannot exist. No matter. They call it 'colonium' and keep looking."

I yawn.

"...all... agree that only a ship built of... colonium can survive interstellar flights... zzz... zzz... zzz..."

"Bill Whitmore! Wake up! Five minutes of eight! Get over here!"

"Wha-- ? Who?" I was *asleep*?

The screen is projecting a miniature holo of a very pretty two-headed lady. (And I still don't know how she did it.)

I jump up. "On the way!"

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10. In the Archives

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At that moment my office door opened and Cass walked in. "Chief...?"

"Overslept," I mumbled.

He blew on his electric shaver, then tossed it to me.

I was quickly becoming almost alert. "Cass, nine o'clock you go into court and try to stall the proceedings until I arrive with Mary-Louise and the tape. Maybe. Go!" I ran.

On the way out I picked up the Fahrni Flashlight Kit, which he had indeed found somewhere and left for me. Cass, you did good. What I also needed was a cup of coffee. But at least I can shave, approximately.

Three minutes later I scrambled out of the air duct and onto the floor of the Baronial garage, and there they were.

And that's how I met the mythical Lady Mary-Louise Sixtrees.

She was a very beautiful woman, nearly as tall as I, erect, marvelous figure. One head was blonde, the other brunette, and each was coiffured in its own individual style.

I got to my feet and bowed deeply. "Milady, I'm Bill Whitmore, John-Claude's attorney. Call me Bill. And I have lots of questions."

The blonde said, "I'm Mary. She's Louise. Thank you for coming, Bill." She held out her right hand, and we shook hands. Then she held out her other hand. A tiny white pill nestled in the palm. "Caffeine," said Louise.

Remarkable. I took it and swallowed it with spit.

Mary said, "There'll be time to talk later. Right now we have to go into the air duct system. This way."

I handed her a flashlight from my kit and climbed up right behind her into the duct. She led the way on hands and knees in the wavering darkness.

"Through here," said one of them. We stirred up clouds of dust as we climbed down into a dim-lit room. I looked about quickly. It was filled with rows of metal filing cabinets. I sensed intuitively that the crucial tape would not be trusted to such commonplace surroundings.

Did they know where it was, I wondered. And if they did know, how? Maybe they had touched the mind of the Chief Archivist, the ancient but indomitable Nora Clatchett?

Mary-Louise had evidently been following my unspoken question. "Tom Dorsey, the P.I. told us about it," Mary said. Louise added, "We were about ten years old at the time."

Huh? "I thought he was murdered a few months after you were born."

"True," Mary agreed. "But his spirit... ghost?... was still around," Louise said. "He talked to us a lot. Still does. The Clatchetts killed him, you know, when they caught him sniffing around here. They knew what he was after."

"What *was* he after?"

"Same thing we are," said Louise, "the tape that proves I was conceived *after* old Burl died. Tom told us, if that ever came out, it would invalidate the will."

"Shh!" We were now in the central file room, and we had to be quiet. I guess we were not quiet enough.

A thin scratchy voice called out, "Who's there?" Simultaneously a laser beam swept the cluster of filing cabinets that sheltered us. It was of course the Chief Archivist, Nora Clatchett.

I called out, "Ms. Clatchett? Lawyer Bill Whitmore over here, with Lady Mary-Louise Sixtrees."

A dim light came on in the general area of our interrogator, revealing the bent form of a very old woman. In one hand she held a flashlight, in the other a hand weapon. "How did you get in? Well, no matter, you'll have to go. Nobody permitted back here, not even you, milady. So go on, now, both of you." She took a couple of steps toward us. We were now about three meters apart. Although our row of filing cabinets offered a considerable measure of protection for our chests, I took uneasy notice that her weapon was pointed at my head.

"Ms. Clatchett," I said reasonably, "this is an emergency. We need a cassette, which we believe is in your files."

"What cassette?"

"A video record of my conception," Mary said.

The archivist started, and her eyes seemed to widen briefly. "No... no... We have no such record. Now go. Get out, or I will shoot you both."

I whispered to my companion, "When I jab your arm, duck down and cover your eyes with your hands. Understand?"

They whispered back, "Of course."

And here I must pause, and take a moment to describe the Fahrni Flashlight Kit that I carried strapped around my waist. Actually it was just a canvas bag with four pockets.

Go back five years, when Peter Fahrni made a survey of one hundred Lethary households, asking: "How many flashlights do you have to have in order to be sure to find *one*?" He got answers ranging from 1 to 5. He added up all the answers, divided by 100, and came up with 3.3. Statistically speaking, if the home owner was to be certain of finding one flashlight, he needed to keep 3.3 flashlights in the house. Whereupon Peter offered for sale his famous Flashlight Kits, which contained 3 whole flashlights plus 3/10 of a third. ("A flashlight always guaranteed at hand!") We accepted his statistics but not his Kits. To his astonishment they were unsaleable. So he finally gave them away, which is how I had this one.

And here it gets interesting. The flashlights were laser-powered, of course, and it was a fact that 3/10 of a unit, if held in a certain interlocking way against the base of a whole flashlight, will drive the wattage way beyond the rated capacity of the unit. And *then--*

I jabbed Mary-Louise in the arm. We ducked down behind the filing cabinet and bent our heads and covered our eyes. I lifted the superpowered flashlight over the cabinet and pointed in the general direction of Nora Clatchett. The beam exploded in a blast of light.

The blinded archivist howled in pain and fired her weapon several times, but didn't really come close to us. Then she sank down near the wall and lay there, sobbing.

Mary-Louise and I got to our feet. "She'll recover in ten or fifteen minutes," I said. "We don't have much time."

The room was still vaguely luminous from residual laser activation. We picked our way over to the fallen crone, and I relieved her of her necklace of keys and her little weapon. She barely noticed.

"This way," Mary said. We proceeded on back.

Louise pointed to a metal door. "Through there. The cassette is in a safe in that room."

I tried a couple of keys before I found the right one. The lock responded with protesting squeaks. I reached for the door handle.

"Wait," Mary said. She cocked her head, as though listening. "Tom says, if we do it wrong, the door explodes."

"Tom?"

Louise explained, "Tom Dorsey." Mary added, "He's been with us all along."

If they said so... "All right, what does he recommend?"

Louise said, "First you *push* on the handle, *hard*. Push, Bill."

I did. We heard a faint metallic click from somewhere inside the door. "Now pull," they said in unison.

I pulled. The door creaked and groaned and swung out. A tiny fluor light came on somewhere. We brushed away some spider webs and cautiously stepped inside.

"Nora's awake," said Mary. "And she's calling the police," Louise said.

They shone their flashlight around the room. It was a small chamber, about four meters square, bare except for the formidable-looking safe that sat in the middle. I took a step toward it.

"Wait up!" Their mutual command was explosive.

I froze.

Mary explained, "Tom says this is where he got killed."

Oh, fine. I thought of the three holes in his skull.

"We can deal with it," soothed Louise. "Tom says, there are three motion-sensitive lasers, two in the walls, one in the ceiling. Once fired, they require three minutes to recharge. So here's what you do" "Take off your jacket," continued Mary, "wad it up, throw it at the safe."

Which I did. And it got blasted with three beams before it hit the safe.

"Come on in," they said.

I studied the iron cube. "What's the combination?"

"We don't know," Louise said. "However--" Mary began.

Just then we heard a series of muted bell-like tinglings coming from inside the safe. I said, "I believe Nora has just now booby-trapped it."

"Quite right," agreed Mary. "Just touching the safe," said Louise, "will detonate a bomb. This could be a problem."

I thought about that and the equally drear facts that the three guard lasers were merrily recharging and that anyway nobody knew the combination. "It's all over?"

"Not necessarily," Mary said. Louise added, "We need a moment with Tom Dorsey and John-Claude. Don't worry, we can figure this out."

One hundred and ten seconds for a five-way telepathic conference that included a ghost. I waited.

"All right," Mary said. "We have it. Stand over here, please." Louise pointed to a spot in front of the safe. Mary continued, "John-Claude and we are going to warp time. Recall the sequence a century ago, in the original scenario. The safe door stands open. The Chief Archivist places the cassette inside, then the bomb, then closes the safe door and gives the dial a couple of turns. So we think there will be about ten seconds when the cassette is in the safe with the door open, before the bomb is inserted. During those ten seconds you must reach in and take the cassette."

Louise tried to reassure me. "You'll not be touching the safe in real time. The bomb won't blow."

"Do you understand?" They peered up at me earnestly in the dim shifting light.

"Yes." Meaning, I knew what to do, but *how* they were going to do it, I hadn't the foggiest idea. The only thing I was sure about, if I fouled up in the next 30 seconds, the bomb would detonate. In real time. And if the bomb didn't get me, the lasers probably would.

"Get ready," Mary said. "At the count of three, reach in and *grab*. One... two... *three*."

It was insane. It was impossible. In a jerky nervous motion I reached back a hundred years and into the blurry outlines of unsolid iron. I grasped a little oblong box. "Got it!" I jumped back.

At that instant three laser beams intersected where my head had just been. Their meeting point glowed a dazzling blue, then vanished with an audible "pop."

"Let's go!" said Mary.

Oh, I was ready! I held the cassette carefully in one hand as we scrabbled along. "There's something-- an envelope?-- taped to the box... What--"

"We think we know what it is," said Mary. "We think it may be Karen Bight's implant," finished Louise. "The guide to the lost mineral deposit."

"Can you ladies decrypt it?"

"No," said Mary, "but we think we know who can." "May we have it, please?" added Louise.

"Of course." I tore the envelope off the cassette, felt something hard and needle-like, and handed it to them. "If you can decode it, I'd like a copy."

"You'll be the first."

John-Claude had known we were coming, of course, and when Mary-Louise and I pushed into the courtroom through the side entrance it didn't really surprise me that he was standing and looking towards the opening door. I stood there a moment with her.

John-Claude stared at her and she stared back, and then a weird blue light *crackled* between the two, and they laughed softly, in a strange shimmering quartet. And then it was over.

Love at first sight, I thought. But which one is in love with which one? None of my business!

John-Claude (both of him, that is) grinned, turned around, and sat down again at the defense table facing Judge Cloke-- who was staring at us wide-eyed, like most everybody else in the room.

At first all was silence. Then you detected a few raspy breaths, and then the whispers, and then the muted exclamations.

I left Mary-Louise at the witness bench next to Cassius, who carefully did not stare at her, and then I proceeded on past the bar and took a seat at the defense table next to John-Claude. He reached back over the bar and for a moment they held hands.

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11. The Tape

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By now Judge Cloke had pretty much recovered. "Counselor, we congratulate ourselves that you are finally able to join us."

I stood up. "My apologies, Your Honor. Extenuating circumstances."

"Well, let's get on with it. You had a motion, I think?"

As planned I began our third day in court with a couple of motions. "Your Honor, the court is asked to take judicial notice that Dr. Banchou is still alive and that there was therefor no homicide. Accordingly I move that the charge of homicide be dismissed and that Mr. Berg be released from prison."

"Agreed," mumbled Clatchett.

"So ordered," said Cloke.

I continued. "Also, Your Honor, since there was no homicide, Sara's two-finger gesture is not a dying declaration identifying a killer, and is therefore not an exception to the hearsay rule, and is inadmissible. And since there is no other evidence identifying my client as a mooner, I move that the charge of indecent exposure be dismissed."

Clatchett shot me a venomous look. "The People concur, Your Honor."

"The charge of indecent exposure is dismissed," said Cloke. "And now, let's see, what does that leave us?" He peered at his case folder. "Yes, the civil case, Sixtrees versus Berg, destruction of property, to wit, the android Sara, valued at ten thousand kroner. For plaintiff-- ?"

Clatchett's companion stood. "I'm J. Killian Murfree, Your Honor, Chicago Bar. I will represent Lord Sixtrees, with Mr. Clatchett as co-counsel."

"Opening statement, Mr. Murfree?"

"Yes, Your Honor. Under the law, identification of the driver is unnecessary. Liability attaches to the vehicle and its owner-- both already stipulated by Mr. Whitmore as Mr. Berg. The only questions remaining are proof of value and how Mr. Berg proposes to pay." He gave me an exotically wicked leer.

"Your Honor," I said, "the plaintiff claims a value of ten thousand kroner, and we will so stipulate."

This astonished both judge and opposing counsel. "So how can he pay?" blurted Cloke.

I smiled amiably. "There's nothing to pay, Your Honor. My client owes the plaintiff nothing. In fact, the plaintiff has no standing to sue for the loss of Sara. He does not own Sara. He never did."

"This is absurd," cried Murfree. We trace ownership back to the will of Lord Burl Dogger Sixtrees."

"Your Honor," I said meekly, "may I please go forward with my client's case?"

"And it had better be good," growled Cloke. "and I mean, really good."

"Of course, Your Honor. So, with the court's permission, let me start with a bit of well-known history."

"Objection," grumbled Murfree. "Irrelevant."

"Relevance will be clear, if I am permitted to continue."

"Go ahead," Cloke said.

"The story that I am going to tell is well-known, a tradition firmly established in the annals of our community. It is not offered in evidence as facts, but simply as a background for matters that will be offered later on in evidence."

"Most irregular," mumbled Murfree.

I ignored him. "In his closing years Burl Dogger gave considerable thought as to who should succeed him in the barony. Roark, his son by Karen Bight, had been killed in a duel with Giles Moncrief, who had then prudently disappeared. Roark left three daughters. There could be no more sons with Karen; she had died in giving birth to Roark.

"Burl remarried. He expected that his second wife, the Lady Ditmars, would give him a son. But five years passed, and no children at all. His thoughts turned back to Roark's three daughters, now grown. So how about grandsons, or even great-grandsons? *But* (the lawyers told him) you can't delay transfer of the property indefinitely. The law gives you a fixed term within which the transfer must vest-- within a life or lives in being plus twenty-one years. It's called the Rule against Perpetuities.

"That was fine with Burl. The life in being could be the life of any of his children with Ditmars. Make it (he said) the first male descendant born during the life or lives of my children with Ditmars, and when he reaches 21, he gets it all."

Dave Clatchett yawned loudly; the judge shot him a warning glare.

I continued. "But, they said, the Lady Ditmars has no children. We're still trying, Burl said. Also (he explained) I have a deposit at the Sperm Bank. If she and I don't have a child in the usual way, I'll give her a test tube baby. Preferably male, but it really makes no difference. If the baby is male, he takes the barony. If female, surely Roark's line will eventually give us a boy."

J. Killian Murfree stood up, opened his mouth, got an imperious signal from His Honor, sat down again.

I said, "And with that explanation, it's easy to understand the rather involved language of the will. Clause One says, 'I devise and bequeath the properties listed in Appendix A to the first of my male descendants to reach 21 and born during the life or lives of my children by the Lady Ditmars.' Appendix A listed the entire assets of the barony except for one item, stated in Clause Two. In Clause 2 Burl revenges the death of son Roark. We'll get to that.

"But now, back to the old baron. He lies on his deathbed. The succession is now an urgent matter. They review the will. The lawyers suddenly realize that none of the several living male contenders qualify. Why not? Because none were born during the life of a child of the Lady Ditmars, for indeed Ditmars has had no children. But how about future heirs? It is indeed the eleventh hour, but the hole can still be plugged if they act quickly."

The room had become very quiet. Clatchett and Murfree had turned toward me and were listening intently.

I went on. "and so history tells us that a test-tube baby, whom we know today as Lady Mary-Louise, was duly conceived and born, and that when she was five years old, Lord Harry was born to Roark's second daughter, and that twenty-one years later, with all legal requirements apparently satisfied, he succeeded to the estate and the title. All that was nearly a hundred years ago. Today Lord Cecil alleges

ownership by descent."

"*Alleges?*" whispered Murfree loudly. Cloke quickly shushed him.

I gave the visiting lawyer a nice smile. "Those are the events that explain the language of Clause One of the will. We now turn to Clause Two. As we know, Appendix A to Clause One inventoried all assets except one. That one exception is stated in Clause Two."

I looked up at the judge. "For a clear understanding of this exception I will ask that the court take judicial notice that there was a history of bad blood between the Moncriefs and the Doggers, and that the feud climaxed when Giles Moncrief killed Roark Dogger in a duel."

"Objection," Mr. Murfree called out. "All ancient history. None of this is relevant."

"It's highly relevant," I said. "It explains Clause Two of the will."

"I'll let it in," said Cloke.

"Thank you, Your Honor. Clause Two, the second and final grant in the will, simply says, and I quote, 'I give to my dear friend Bascomb Moncrief all the rest and residue of my estate.' Sounds like a lot, doesn't it? Well, we ask, what did the 'rest and residue' consist of? The answer is simple. It consisted of the only piece of property that old Burl did *not* list in Appendix A, to wit, a heap of barnyard manure, piled up against a fence on Barham Road." I set my jaw grimly. "Revenge was sweet. 'Dear friend' indeed!"

Murfree was on his feet. "Your Honor, there's really no need to take this any further. Counsel himself has traced the chain of title of our unfortunate android. Ownership is not in doubt. I move for summary judgment."

I laughed at him. "Your Honor, as to chain of title, learned counsel is absolutely right. But he errs as to where the chain terminates. I am not done. May I continue?"

"Please do." Cloke looked bemused. "And start making sense."

"Of course. Simply stated, Clause One of the will violates the Rule against Perpetuities and is therefore invalid."

I had thought the statement might bring on another period of dead silence; I was wrong. Clatchett had a sudden loud coughing spasm. Judge Cloke just stared at me, wide-eyed, open-mouthed.

I looked up at him almost apologetically. "Our Provincial Code 2112 adopts the rule and states it succinctly: 'No interest is good unless it must vest, if at all, not later than twenty-one years after some life in being at the creation of the interest.'" I looked over at Lawyer Murfree and smiled. He did not smile back. He just looked puzzled. As did most everybody else. A long steady buzz in the courtroom.

The judge tapped his gavel on the bang-plate. "Counselor, would you kindly explain *why* you think Clause One violates the Rule?"

"It involves the '*life in being*,' Your Honor, also called 'the measuring life.' It's a very crucial requirement in this type of postponed vesting. First and foremost, that life had to be identified. And here it was identified as the child of Burl and Ditmars, the Lady Mary-Louise Sixtrees, whom we had all presumed to have been conceived prior to Lord Burl's death. That's what the old baron and his lawyers were counting on, over one hundred years ago. If that's true, then certainly Clause One of the will would appear valid. But-- is it true? We think not."

I paused to catch my breath. Cloke and the other lawyers realized that I had finally come to the point. They were listening and frowning. I let them stew a few more seconds, and then I continued.

"We have mentioned Burl's deposit in the Sperm Bank. It's a matter of undisputed history that it was to be used if Burl was dying and had no children then alive. The sperm was to fertilize *in vitro* an egg taken from his very young wife, Lady Ditmars, and returned to her uterus. This would have given the lawyers a life in being during which the hoped-for male heir would be born. That was the expectation. It failed. We now examine how it failed."

Clatchett and Murfree stood up together. Cloke made a slicing motion across his throat. They sat down.

I said, "I offer in evidence a certified copy of the report of the Sperm Bank laboratory." I gave the original to the judge, and a copy to Murfree. "You will note on page two, Your Honor, that the Lab Director, Dr. Arthur Thompson, received a call at 11:15 p.m., May 10, 2098, from the old baron's

physician, Dr. Milton Newbury, stating that Burl was not expected to last the hour, and they should start the *in vitro* fertilization immediately. Which they did.

"The sperm was of course kept frozen in liquid nitrogen, and it took several minutes to thaw it. In the further course of testimony we will show the act of contact of individual sperm and ovum, which is to say, fertilization. I now call the Ladies Mary-Louise Sixtrees."

Clatchett and Murfree were bending towards each other and whispering. Murfree seemed to moan faintly.

Mary-Louise was duly sworn in. "Ladies," I said, "I show you what purports to be a video cassette, sealed with the certificate of the Office of the Archives. Can you further identify it?"

Mary took the question. "I saw you withdraw it from Archives about thirty minutes ago."

"Please read the label."

Louise took this one. "It says, 'Conception of Mary-Louise Sixtrees.'"

Whispers began sizzling all over the courtroom. The judge banged away and the noise faded.

"With the court's permission," I continued, "we will play the tape."

Murfree was up and howling. "No authentication! Maybe it's a fake. Where's the original cameraman? And in any case, it's irrelevant!"

"It's an entry made in the regular course of business," I said. "As such, it's entitled to a presumption of veracity."

"But how is it relevant?" asked Cloke.

"What it shows," I said, "bears directly on who owns Sara. This will become apparent if we are permitted to run the cassette."

"All right," said Cloke thoughtfully. "Yes, I think we ought to see it. I'll let it in." He nodded to the bailiff, who brought the monitor over and then darkened the room.

"The course of the run was followed by recording microscope," I said. "Times are marked on the frames. "As you will note, at 11:59 p.m. May 10, Day One, the spermatozoa were brought into the proximity of the ovum. One sperm penetrated the shell of the ovum at 12:01 a.m., May 11, Day Two, with characteristic symptoms of satisfactory fertilization." I motioned to the bailiff, who turned the machine off.

"According to the records of the Sperm Bank, at 12:10 a.m. Day Two the fertilized egg was transferred to Lady Ditmars's waiting uterus, and nine months later her grace, Lady Mary-Louise Sixtrees, our present witness, was born." Murfree had about reached his limit. "Your Honor, why do we have to listen to this? What's any of this got to do with the Rule against Perpetuities?"

"Mr. Whitmore," asked the judge, more curious than condemning, "what *is* the point?"

"The point, Your Honor, is the 'life in being' has to exist at the moment the alleged interest in Sara is created-- that is, at the moment the will becomes effective, which, as we know, is at the instant of the testator's death. The old baron died at midnight, May 10, 2098. Conception came next day, at 12:01 a.m., one minute after midnight. There was no designated life in being at the moment of Burl's death. Therefore Clause One, the bequest of the items in Appendix A of Burl's will, including Sara, violates the Rule against Perpetuities, and is therefore invalid, and Cecil does not own Sara." I was almost out of breath when I got to the end.

Clatchett jumped up, but Cloke waved him back down. "Counselor, you claim that Mary-Louise missed conception prior to Burl's death by one minute, therefore there was no 'life in being,' therefore the will was invalid, therefore Burl's great-grandson Harry should not have inherited, and therefore the estate, including Sara, should not have passed through succeeding generations down to Cecil. Is that it?"

"Precisely and beautifully stated, Your Honor."

Probably the sincerest (and maybe first) praise the jurist had received during his entire career at the bench. I caught the barest flicker of a smile.

Adverse counsel missed nothing of this. Murfree took the floor. "Your Honor, this is absurd. We're talking here of just one minute-- sixty seconds. Will we let one infinitesimal fragment of time upset a chain of title that has been in place for a hundred years? Ridiculous!"

Cloke sighed. "Just speaking hypothetically for the moment, if the Clause One grant *is* invalid, who

owns Sara?"

I looked up modestly. "The answer lies in the will, Your Honor. If Clause One is inoperative, we are left with Clause Two, which provides that all the rest and residue of the estate goes to my ancestor, Bascomb Moncrief, and then, by the laws of descent, on down to me. *I own all the items listed in Appendix A, including Sara.*"

Clatchett gave me a bitter look. "You are incredible!"

"Pure fantasy!" cried Murfree. (But I could tell he was worried.)

"Gentlemen," declared the judge sternly, "no more of that. I gather both sides rest? Very well, I will give you my decision this afternoon. The witness may step down. Recess until one-thirty." He rose and strode through the door into his chambers, shaking his head.

As the courtroom cleared, Clatchett and Murfree got up and came over to my table. Clatchett tried to smile, but succeeded only in hurting his face. "Can we deal?"

I looked up. "What's your offer?"

John-Claude and Mary-Louise watched this with interest.

Clatchett groaned. "I'll try to persuade Lord Cecil to give you a full one percent of the Sixtrees estate." He tried to look magnanimous, but he had never done it before, and he simply looked funny.

I laughed. "Don't bother, Dave. This afternoon, Cloke is going to give me the whole thing."

"Bill," said Clatchett quietly, "you know the baron controls the local police and the Provincial Militia."

"True, but right now he and his Zouaves are in California making a movie."

"He's flying back at this very moment, and the militia will follow as soon as he can arrange transportation. I hope we can work something out."

He and the prosecution crew left, probably headed for lunch at the Bar-Del-O. I had a very strong suspicion that no matter what Clatchett and I decided, my client and Mary-Louise would have the final word. I started gathering up my files.

"Lunch, chief?" asked Cass.

"Oh, yeah. Sure. Mary-Louise? John-Claude? Any choice?"

"Your office, Bill," said Louise. Mary added, "Perhaps Mr. Reeves can bring something in from Garshmeier's?"

"Chinese?" asked John. "With iced tea," said Claude.

Learning fast, I thought. "Cass?" But he was already gone.

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12. Decision

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So, back to my office, where we sat around our conference table and ate pu pu platter, wonton soup, moo goo gai pan, and things I couldn't name. My client and his girlfriends dove in with a relish.

We got into other matters quickly. "What's the story about the baron's militia?" asked John. Then Claude, "If the judge finds for us, could Cecil use his army to cancel the decision? Anybody?"

"Under extreme circumstances," said Louise, "we believe Nephew Cecil might well attempt to overrule the judge by brute force." "So," said Mary, "we have to consider carefully the baron's personal army, his Zouaves, about a thousand men and women."

"The army is a colorful lot," continued Louise, "with their bright red baggy trousers, brilliant blue jackets, white leggings, and black turbans, just as in the French Algerian armies of old. The baron, after experimenting with various uniforms, picked out the zouave style himself. And with good reason." Mary

laughed. "When he wears ordinary trousers he can't bend over without splitting his pants. But the zouave britches have plenty of room, and so that's what he and his army wear."

"But his army is presently out-of-town?" John said.

Louise explained: "He leased his army to Nonco Pictures, in Hollywood, to make the new TV miniseries, 'The Blood-and-Iron Brigade,' with the baron as the Field Marshal."

"So," said Claude, "can Cecil just pack up his army and dash home and by force reverse the judge?"

"Not likely!" declared Louise. Mary said, "We have it on good authority that the army likes it out there and will probably stay for sequels regardless of what Cecil wants."

"Well then," observed John, "it appears that, at least for the foreseeable future, Cecil can't count on his army. But how about the Fair guards?"

"Interesting question," said Louise. "When Cecil took his militia to Hollywood, he was mindful that the Fair itself would require police presence. Accordingly, before he left he had Ned Packle swear in fifty new deputies. This was no casual affair. Each of the new deputies had to have a special training implant inserted while reciting and imprinting the loyalty oath: 'I swear to uphold the laws of the Province... and so on.'"

Mary added, "It's a known medical fact that any conscious attempt to violate the imprint will result in copious perspiration followed by violent disabling headaches, leading to convulsions and even death if the mental conflict persists."

"Too bad we can't continue this," I said, "But it's time to start back. Perhaps we can sum up: Judge Cloke can't be overruled by an army half a continent away, and Ned and his fifty deputies can be predicted to support Cloke. Agreed? Let's go!"

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The courtroom was again packed, as expected. I ushered my brood in at exactly one-thirty. Clatchett and Murfree were already sitting at plaintiff's table, and Dave and I exchanged insincere nods.

We left Cass and Mary-Louise in the row behind the bar and I led John-Claude over to our table.

"All rise!" And so Enos Phlutter announced the arrival of His Honor, who told us to be seated and himself did likewise.

Cass leaned over the bar and whispered in my general direction: "Smock!"

My assistant is forever fearful that I may overlook the obvious. But I had already noted the smock, and I had already groaned an appropriate groan.

I have mentioned the judge's white smock-- a relic of his artistic career, saved, and now totally covered with Latin quotations. Wearing the smock meant the judge was going to hand down a thoroughly reasoned decision, lavishly sprinkled with gems in Latin in support of all points as he went along. It could also mean we were in for a long afternoon.

A hush falls over the courtroom. Judge Cloke is checking out something on the flap of his smock. "In the matter of Sixtrees versus Berg, *Per quod servitium Sara amisit*-- whereby he lost the services of his servant Sara, we find we are forced to answer a threshold question: *Does Plaintiff own Sara?*" he leaned back and looked very thoughtful.

I relaxed a little. He was starting out very sensibly, and translating his quotes for us. Hope he keeps it up. About the only Latin I knew was *Illegitimi non carborundum*: Don't let the bastards grind you down.

And now the judge is studying the right sleeve of his smock. "We do not make new law. We but seek to know what the law already is. *Sequamur vestigia patrum nostrorum*. Let us follow in the footsteps of our fathers. *Stare decisis*. We stand by past decisions. *Misera est servitus, ubi jus est incertam*." He looked over the room and smiled. "It's a wretched business where the law is uncertain."

I think I heard Cass's gentle snort behind me. I ignored him and sank a few inches down into my chair. By now, poor Dave Clatchett was probably trying to explain to unbelieving very expensive big city co-counsel how the afternoon would go.

Just then John-Claude leaned over, and John whispered into my ear. "Cecil... driving in from the

airport."

"Gotcha."

"To answer our threshold question," continued Cloke, "we must examine certain other matters of both law and fact. It is undisputed that Sara was listed in the Sixtrees assets on the death of the original Baron Sixtrees, Burl Dogger, and was bequeathed to his son Harry in Clause One of the Dogger will. But the validity of Clause One has been queried, on the theory that it must fail under the Rule against Perpetuities, as provided in 33 Provincial Code 2112. More specifically, a time gap is alleged between the effective date of the will and the conception of the designated life in being, to wit, one Mary-Louise Sixtrees. Times are evidently critical, and we must examine them with care.

"Now, as we all know, a will speaks from the time of death. *Testamentum, omne morte consummatur*. According to the records, Burl Dogger died at midnight on May 10, 2098. Surely no problem there. We next examine the life-in-being, *videlicet*, that of Lady Mary-Louise Sixtrees. *Qui in utero est pro jam nato habetur*. She who is in the womb is held as already born. We have clear testimony that she was conceived at exactly 12:01 a.m., May 11, one minute after the old baron's death. Is this fact dispositive?" He looked up and over the courtroom as though someone out there might have the answer.

Murfree jumped up. "Your Honor! It's just one minute-- sixty seconds! *De minimis non curat lex!* The law takes no heed of little things!"

Now that was downright stupid. Bad enough to interrupt the judge in the very act of handing down his decision. But *nobody* quotes Latin back to Judge Cloke. Julius Caesar himself would not have dared. It was like telling Praxiteles how to design the Acropolis, or Leonardo da Vinci how to paint the Mona Lisa.

His honor seemed momentarily struck dumb by the effrontery.

John whispered, "Murfree is... how you say? trying to delay... stall, until Cecil gets here."

That made sense. I whispered back, "How about his army?"

"Still in Los Angeles," said Claude, "but we think he will bring in some Fair police."

I nodded, took a deep breath.

The judge sighed, laid his notes aside and checked something on the hem of his smock. "*Multa in jure... etc. etc.*" (it was a long one, and I won't finish it. What it means was, there's a lot of illogical stuff in the common law, so what?) "So sit down, Mr. Murfree."

Clatchett pulled his colleague back into his chair.

Then-- *crash!*

Every eye in the courtroom looked around as the door burst open and Lord Cecil Sixtrees stumbled in, followed by three Fair guards.

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13. Changes

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During my lifetime I had not seen Lord Cecil more than half a dozen times, and never before this close. He was huffing and puffing, and his bloated cheeks were scarlet. Black spots burned in the centers of his eyes, which now darted about the crowded room.

Judge Cloke recovered first. And why not? This was his turf. "Leave the room!" he ordered the newcomers.

"No!" cried the intruder. "You must stop this silly trial!"

Dave Clatchett shriveled into his seat. Murfree seemed paralyzed. And now Cecil spotted Mary-Louise, and he hesitated. His eyes widened still further. "Aunt Mary-Louise? What are *you* doing here?"

She replied in a calm clear voice. "I'm a witness in this trial, nephew. My testimony may help Mr. Berg."

"And destroy the barony," muttered Clatchett.

"You shouldn't be *out*," protested Cecil. "you should be *home*."

But now it was clear that Cecil's whole world was at risk, and he'd have to attend to her later. He pointed to the judge. "Arrest that man!" he ordered his three policemen.

That was not smart. The guards looked at Cecil, at each other, at the judge, back to Cecil, and they began to sweat.

I noted that Ned Packle had his hand on his laser holster, and I wondered, are we about to revert to the Border Wars, where disputes are settled with guns? Oh God no! How to defuse this insanity?

In my loudest whoop-'n-holler voice I called out to the judge: "Your Honor! I request a conference in chambers!"

And so we all followed the judge back into his inner sanctum-- with Ned Packle but minus the policemen. We got His Lardship inside and seated on the sofa.

"Dave," I said, "would you bring His Grace up-to-date?"

The prosecutor's face went through several contortions before it finally settled down. "It appears," Clatchett said mournfully, "that the judge may be about to rule that you don't own Sara..."

"What? I don't own Sara? That's ridiculous!" Cecil's belly heaved in slow rhythmic indignation.

"And *that*," Clatchett continued fatalistically, "is just the tip of the iceberg. For if you don't own Sara-- and I repeat, *if*-- it's because Clause One of the will is invalid."

"Invalid?" sputtered Cecil. "Impossible!"

"It seems that the Clause might be invalid in view of a statute," Clatchett said, dripping woe, "the so-called Rule against Perpetuities. That would leave only Clause Two in the will, and since that gave all the rest and residue of the estate to Bascomb Moncrief, *he* would have taken all property listed in the Appendix, including Sara."

It sank in. Cecil turned white. He said to the judge, "But you haven't ruled yet? None of this is final?"

"No." Cloke's voice was a deadly calm. "I haven't ruled yet. I was about to rule when you interrupted the proceedings."

"Well, you're not going to make any ruling," declared Cecil. "This case is hereby dismissed. It is no longer before the court. Everybody will leave this room... go home... wherever... *Now!*" With an immense effort he stood up.

But nobody moved.

"Will I have to call my guards?" he demanded.

Back to square one? I wondered.

"That would be quite foolish," Cloke observed mildly. "The Fair guards are conditioned to obey the law as I pronounce it. If you and I disagree, it is I whom they will obey, not you." His voice took on an icy edge. "And to clarify matters and bring this litigation to an end, I will now officially state my decision."

The room was suddenly quiet.

As though showing respect for the silence, Cloke's voice was surprisingly soft. "I hold Clause One of the Sixtrees will to be invalid as violating the Rule Against Perpetuities, 33 Provincial Code 2112, whereby all items listed in the Appendix, including the android Sara, fall within the rest and residue of the Sixtrees estate, and thus became the property of Bascomb Moncrief and his heirs."

He looked up momentarily with narrowed eyes at the fat man. "It follows that Sara-- or whatever is left of her-- is presently the property of William Moncrief Whitmore by descent from Bascomb Moncrief, and that you, Cecil Sixtrees, have no property interest in Sara or anything else listed in the Appendix. Judgment for the defendant." He gave Cecil an almost sympathetic look. "Since you are now a pauper, the court will waive costs."

We all noted he had stopped addressing the chief complainant as 'Your Grace.' In Cloke's eyes, and I

guess in most everybody else's, Cecil was no longer baron. Then who was? Maybe nobody. For that matter, we didn't really need a baron. Burl Dogger had taken the title long ago as a matter of vanity, and it had sort of stuck.

I studied the opposition. Hard to say who looked sadder, Clatchett or Cecil or Murfree.

"I can take it all back," Cecil said weakly. "My army... in L.A... they'll come..."

"Nephew," interposed Mary, "your militia will do nothing for you." Louise finished: "They are going to do two more series. We believe they will remain in Hollywood indefinitely."

Clatchett talked briefly with his client. When they finished, Cecil's lower lip was trembling.

Mary-Louise leaned over toward me and we had a short three-way conversation. I said mostly, yeah, yeah...

I turned back to the fat man. "Cecil," I said, "by this decision I now own everything that you used to own. You will however continue to own the Bar-Del-O, which should provide income sufficient for your personal needs."

He chewed it over thoughtfully. "Can I keep my uniform?"

"Of course."

The room was quiet. "That about it?" asked Cloke.

Clatchett looked resigned, Murfree looked bemused. Cecil had stopped understanding anything long ago.

"There is one more thing," said Mary, "but we have to wait for John-Claude's ship to arrive."

"Your ship is over at the Impound Lot," said Ned Packle. "I can run you over there, no trouble."

"Thank you, constable," John said, "but that won't be necessary." Claude explained, "A friend is bringing the ship here."

Ned looked blank. "Somebody knows how to drive it?"

Just then the door opened and a resplendent vision walked in. "*I know how!*" she declared proudly.

"*SARA!*" I cried.

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14. Cherry Blossom

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We all stared. All of us, that is, except Mary-Louise.

I was probably the first to get it. Sara as a mass of hopeless junk had been tossed into the Miscellaneous Bin in the Impound Lot, and Mary-Louise had spent nearly all last night rebuilding and dressing her. And then had spent perhaps a few minutes more recharging the mint oil reservoir and tuning the engines of the space vehicle. That's why she had been unable to meet me in Archives until early morning. But why all the effort with Sara? Was she determined to repair John-Claude's damage before they left? Logical. But I sensed there was also another reason, and that before the day was out we'd know a lot more.

But back up. I remember that when Sara was crushed she had been wearing a white blouse, gray suit-jacket, and a simple matching skirt (split down the left thigh, a modest statement of her profession). Indeed, on the few times I had seen her in the past, she had worn something equally drab and unobtrusive. So now the contrast of past and present was startling.

For with the aid of fabrics and make-up Sara had truly bloomed into her full name, Sakurako, "Cherry Blossom." Mary-Louise had dressed her as a beautiful geisha.

Soft white synthetic skin covered her stainless steel body. As undergarment she wore a red silk

kimono, and over that, a gorgeous black and purple silk outer kimono, embroidered with designs of trout and insects emblematic of summer. Then the wide *obi*-- a sash wrapped around her waist and tied in a square pack in the small of her back, and all held in place with a slender red cord.

She began walking toward me in mincing steps. Split-toed socks covered feet that fit naturally and elegantly into high wooden clogs and were intermittently visible.

All this liquid rippling and flowing of fabric was stunning, but her face was the real knockout. It was painted an eye-scorching white, the "bee-sting" lips were a bright crimson, and the eyes and eyebrows were lined with red and black.

And the hair! A magnificent mass of contoured black, evidently spray-lacquered to hold it in an upswept chignon.

At this point I stole a glance at Mary-Louise. The expressions on her faces were protean. First, a sly amusement, then pleasure at our reaction to "her" handiwork. In particular she seemed to be watching *me*. Pretty clear, she knew, and had known, how I felt about Sara. But that was only part of it. I sensed that there was more to come, a lot more.

Sara stood in front of me. She seemed to study my face a moment. Then she knelt gracefully and bowed her head.

"Sara," I said, "that's not necessary. Please get up."

She did. "Master, I now belong to you. It is my pleasure to serve you. What do you ask of me?"

I closed my eyes and prayed for an answer. "Sara, you are now free. You belong only to yourself."

"Free?" I do not understand. During all my life, others have told me what to do. All my life, the barons held me in *kakae*-- strict captivity. For them I made much money. If it be your will, William Whitmore, I can continue this for you."

"No more, Sara. Your life is your own. You can go, you can stay, all as it may please you. What would you like to do? Perhaps we can help."

She appeared to reflect. The white make-up on her brow creased delicately. "I think, my lord *danna*, I would like to leave forever the *karyakai*-- the flower-and-willow world." Her clear gray eyes burned into me. "It would please me greatly if my master never again sold my body."

"It will be so, even as you wish. Your body is your own."

"My lord is generous. May I continue to say what would please me?"

"Of course."

"I would like to move into my lord's house. I can be of much service there, for I can cook, I can clean the house, do the laundry, go to the stores." (She now spoke in a rush.) "I play the shamisen. I am skilled in bed, and with my tongue I can tie the stem of a cherry into a knot..."

I cleared my throat hurriedly. "Sara--!"

She looked up at me, puzzled. "My lord is displeased?"

"Not at all. It's just that--"

"Or perhaps I can help in your office? I can file, I can work the computer, I can answer the phone, write down messages. I can take papers to court. I can clerk for you for six years, then take the bar, and be a junior lawyer with you."

She stared up at me brightly, and I caught a brief vision of Sara in full regalia pleading a case before a bemused Judge Cloke and twelve goggle-eyed jurors.

Mary called over to us. "I hate to break this up, but John-Claude and we will be leaving very soon, and before we go we'd like to clear up the matter of Karen Bight's implant."

I laughed. "The gold mine."

She ignored me and addressed Judge Cloke. "Your Honor, what I have to say now is an interesting footnote to this litigation. It should take but a moment. If Your Honor will indulge us?"

"Without objection, please go ahead."

"Thank you, Your Honor," said Louise. "We start with a bit of history. In the closing years of the twenty-first century a team of Japanese geologists surveyed the entire globe via satellite, looking for deposits of colonium. In New York their director encrypted their findings in a cerebral implant, which they inserted in the brain of a qualified courier, one Karen Bight. She was to take the strip to Houston,

where it would be decrypted in special decoding apparatus by the local survey team. The implant never reached its destination. The courier was waylaid by Burl Dogger and his gang. He had no means of translating the implant, so he held Karen in captive concubinage until she died in childbirth, giving Burl's son Roark to the world. On her death Burl cut the implant from her brain and filed it away for safekeeping. *This* is the implant." They held up for our inspection a thin sliver of glinting titanium.

"It is the only record of the Japanese survey," said Mary. "All other notes, records, and relevant personnel were lost over a hundred years ago when the Minnow blew up and took metropolitan New York with it." She handed the strip to Sara. "Sara was the decrypting apparatus that waited long years for this in Houston. It never came. But here she is now, hopefully once more in good working order, and we will ask her to decrypt it, if she can."

With a graceful, almost languid motion the geisha android worked her hand into the folds of her kimono and thrust the metal strip into an invisible slit somewhere in her chest.

At this moment I realized that Sara's rumored high-tech specialty was simply the ability to decode certain encrypted implants. It had nothing to do with sex. I felt oddly relieved.

Some seconds later she pulled out a tiny roll of white parchment and handed it to me. It had numbers and markings on it, but they meant nothing to me.

Mary said, "May I?"

I gave it to her. She and Louise stretched it out with both hands and examined it carefully. Louise said, "Three deposits. Gives latitude and longitude, precise to the meter. Number one-- Pacific Ocean-- looks like seven miles down, to the bottom of the Marianas Trench. Hopeless for present technology. Number two-- 50 kilometers from the North Pole, inaccessible under Arctic ice."

As they studied the rest of the tape Mary seemed to be making various mental calculations. Finally she finished, and both heads turned to me with wide grins. Mary said, "Number three, in a field just west of Lethary, on Barham Road. It's the corner under your dung heap." Louise added, "According to this, the deposit is extensive. Most of it lies near the surface and can be readily strip-mined."

John Berg commented: "The deposit must be considered priceless." Claude added, "Certainly worth several times the entire tax base of Lethary Province."

"Word will get around," said John. "Buyers will come in from star systems not yet entered in your catalogs."

"You'll need a good-sized space-port," said Claude. "Some of the ships from Andromeda are as big as the town Square."

I groaned. I didn't want this. I just wanted to be a country lawyer with a reasonable case load, not too light, not too heavy. Life in the middle lane. But I could see that wasn't going to be possible. Not anymore. And they weren't through yet.

"You'll be building your own ships," observed John casually. "We'll leave you three basic designs," said Claude. "The motors for two will be FTL-- faster than light-- which of course you'll need for inter-galactics."

"Of course," I said.

"You can do it," said Mary. "Hire some of the old NASA people," suggested Louise. "There's got to be a lot of engineering talent out there, just waiting to go to work."

"Any questions?" asked John.

Nobody dared.

"Some dung heap," muttered Cecil. "Not enough to *give* it away? For good measure we had to lose it to the law." After that the room was very still for what seemed a long time. I noticed then that Cecil had taken something from a jacket pocket: a small canister. I recognized it-- Fahrni's Canned Laughter, recommended for use when you sense the situation calls for hilarity, but you can't seem to get started. He sprayed it straight into his face. We all watched, fascinated. First we heard only a low dismal chuckle, but this rapidly grew in volume and soon changed into peal after peal of hysterical guffaws.

Ex-Lord Cecil was now laughing so hard that he had to hold his great belly with both hands, else it would bound away from him. And even when he finally quit, his stomach kept going for several minutes, like diminishing seismic aftershocks.

After that, as though waiting for him to finish, the two-headed lovers walked through the doorway, and a few minutes later we heard the thrumming of the ship as it lifted off. All was silent again. Where were they headed? It was anybody's guess.

Everybody now seemed to be looking at me expectantly. Why? I had no plans, no sense of direction, no instructions for anybody. I was tired, totally beat. I had to get away.

I looked around the room. Was this the end of it? Cecil looked sad, numb. Clatchett, grim, anxious. Murfree looked resigned, and was probably wondering whether Cecil had enough cash flow remaining to pay his considerable fee.

And our notable provincial justice? He looked not only happy, he looked wise. He now uttered what was to be his last Latin pronouncement of the day: "*Molae deorum molent tarde sed molent subitissime.*" I worked it out in my head. The mills of the gods grind slowly, but they grind exceedingly fine.

Directly in point, Your Honor.

"Sara," I said, "come with me. You and I are going to Galveston."

* * *

That evening I began packing again. I was absolutely starting for my little seaside cabin within the hour and Sara was going with me. Cass would have to handle the office all by himself for the next twenty-one days. I figured we would stay in touch and he could do no real harm.

Sara finished her own packing quickly. "I shall take only what I carry onto the plane, including my see-through red silk. A single pull will undo the *obi*. In our cabin, I will show you."

I loved to hear her prattle. Ah, Sara... perhaps I'm not as old as I think. I've been a bachelor all my life. I've never lived with a woman. Not sure I know how. Of course, they could argue, you're not a woman. They would be wrong!

A knock on the door. I looked up. I had a terrible suspicion.

I sat down on my suitcase. I refused to answer the door.

"Bill?" It was Martin Cloke. He spoke loudly. "You've got to help. Cecil's charged with fraud and embezzlement. You have to take his case. Come on, Bill, open the door."

"No! He doesn't need me. He's got his own hot-shot lawyers."

"No, he doesn't. Dave Clatchett's facing jail. Murfree has high-tailed it back to Chicago."

"Judge, be reasonable! I've got this reservation for a beach cabin-- "

"Bill, let's look at this another way. I haven't yet signed the Agreement we hammered out this afternoon. And even when I do, don't forget you'll need over fifty licenses and permits just for your colonium mine, not to mention what you'll need for your factories and buildings. And guess who's still Chairman of the License Board?"

I didn't answer. I was thinking hard.

He went on. "You want to give *everything* back to Cecil? Manor house, your six big oak trees?"

I thought about the surf at Galveston.

"Bill, you want to cancel the deal, throw it all away for a few days lying around getting sunburned?"

No answer.

"You have an obligation to the bar, William Whitmore. Especially since all this is your fault anyhow." How did he figure *that* one? But I didn't nibble.

He played his ace. "Suppose I gave it all back to Cecil, what would old Bascomb Moncrief think?"

Oh, unfair!

I knew what my great-grandfather would think. His grave was in the family cemetery in the grove just west of the old manor house. That grave would explode. Dirt and casket shards everywhere.

I took the damn case.

* * *

Later, much later...

The Parole Board released Cecil for reasons of health after a lugubrious tenancy of six months. In that time he had lost 180 pounds, and they didn't want him dying in prison. No matter. Ultimately with the help of the Bar-Del-O kitchen he got it all back.

Dave Clatchett is still doing time at Hoban. Nora visits him regularly. He wishes she wouldn't.

Cherry Blossom Industries Inc. launched its first ship last week, and our intrepid Captain Reeves expects to rendezvous with John-Claude and Mary-Louise in about two months. The Lizard is loaded with a lot of things she left behind, or didn't think about at the time, such as a couple of trunks of her baby clothes.