

Dradin, in Love

Novella

By

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I.

Dradin, in love, beneath the window of his love, staring up at her while crowds surge and seethe around him, bumping and bruising him all unawares in their rough-clothed, bright-rouged thousands. For Dradin watches *her*, she taking dictation from a *machine*, an inscrutable block of gray from which sprouts the earphones she wears over her delicate egg-shaped head. Dradin is struck dumb and dumber still by the seraphim blue of her eyes and the cascade of long and lustrous black hair over her shoulders, her pale face gloomy against the glass and masked by the reflection of the graying sky above. She is three stories up, ensconced in brick and mortar, almost a monument, her seat near the window just above the sign that reads "Hoegbotton & Sons, Distributors." Hoegbotton & Sons: the largest importer and exporter in all of lawless Ambergris, that oldest of cities named for the most valuable and secret part of the whale. Hoegbotton & Sons: boxes and boxes of depravities shipped for the amusement of the decadent from far, far Surphasia and the nether regions of the Occident, those places that moisten, ripen, and decay in a blink. And yet, Dradin surmises, she looks as if she comes from more contented stock, not a stay-at-home, but uncomfortable abroad, unless traveling on the arm of her lover. Does she have a lover? A husband? Are her parents yet living? Does she like the opera or the bawdy theatre shows put on down by the docks, where the creaking limbs of laborers load the crates of Hoegbotton & Sons onto barges that take the measure of the mighty River Moth as it flows, sludge-filled and torpid, down into the rapid swell of the sea? If she likes the theatre, I can at least afford her, Dradin thinks, gawping up at her. His long hair slides down into his face, but so struck is he that he does not care. The heat withers him this far from the river, but he ignores the noose of sweat round his neck.

Dradin, dressed in black with dusty white collar, dusty black shoes, and the demeanor of an out-of-work missionary (which indeed he is), had not meant to see the woman. Dradin had not meant to look up at all. He had been looking *down* to pick up the coins he had lost through a hole in his threadbare trousers, their seat torn by the lurching carriage ride from the docks into Ambergris, the carriage drawn by a horse bound for the glue factory, perhaps taken to the slaughter yards that very day--the day before the Festival of the Freshwater Squid as the carriage driver took pains to inform him, perhaps hoping Dradin would require his further services. But it was all Dradin could do to stay seated as they made their way to a hostel, deposited his baggage in a room, and returned once more to the merchant districts--to catch a bit of local color, a bite to eat--where he and the carriage driver parted company. The driver's mangy beast had left its stale smell on Dradin, but it was a necessary beast nonetheless, for he could never have afforded a mechanized horse, a vehicle of smoke and oil. Not when he would soon be down to his last coins and in desperate need of a job, the job he had come to Ambergris to find, for his former teacher at the Morrow Religious Academy--a certain

GIFTS FOR ANY OCCASION:

- * THE HISTORY OF THE RIVER MOTH *
- * GAMBLING PRACTICES OF THE OUTLANDS *
- * THE RELIGIOUS QUARTER ON 15 Ls. A DAY *
- * SQUID POACHING ON THE HIGH SEAS *
- * CORRUPTION IN THE MERCHANT DISTRICT *
- * ARCHITECTURE OF ALBUMUTH BOULEVARD *

*ALSO, The Hoegbotton Series of Guidebooks & Maps
to the Festival, Safe Places, Hazards, and Blindfolds.*

Book upon piled book mentioned in the silvery scrawl, and beyond the glass the quiet, slow movements of bibliophiles, feasting upon the genuine articles. It made Dradin forget to breathe, and not simply because this place would have a gift for his dearest, his most beloved, the woman in the window, but because he had been away from the world for a year and, now back, he found the accoutrements of civilization comforted him. His father, that tortured soul, was still a great reader, between the bouts of drinking, despite the erosion of encroaching years, and Dradin could remember many a time that the man had, honking his red, red nose--a monstrosity of a nose, out of proportion to anything in the family line--read and wept at the sangfroid exploits of two poor debutantes named Juliette and Justine as they progressed from poverty to prostitution, to the jungles and back again, weepy with joy as they rediscovered wealth and went on to have wonderful adventures up and down the length and breadth of the River Moth, until finally pristine Justine expired from the pressure of tragedies wreaked upon her.

It made Dradin swell with pride to think that the woman at the window was more beautiful than either Juliette or Justine, far more beautiful, and likely more stalwart besides. (And yet, Dradin admitted, in the delicacy of her features, the pale gloss of her lips, he espied an innately breakable quality as well.)

Thus thinking, Dradin pushed open the glass door, the lacquered oak frame a-creak, and a bell chimed once, twice, thrice. On the thrice chime, a clerk dressed all in dark greens, sleeves spiked with gold cuff links, came forward, shoes soundless on the thick carpet, bowed, and asked, "How may I help you?"

To which Dradin explained that he sought a gift for a woman. "Not a woman I know," he said, "but a woman I should like to know."

The clerk, a rake of a lad with dirty brown hair and a face as subtle as mutton pie, winked wryly, smiled, and said, "I understand, sir, and I have *precisely* the book for you. It arrived a fortnight ago from the Ministry of Whimsy imprint--an Occidental publisher, sir. Please follow me."

The clerk led Dradin past mountainous shelves of history texts perused by shriveled prunes of men dressed in orange pantaloons--buffoons from university, no doubt, practicing for some baroque Voss Bender revival--and voluminous mantels of fictions and pastorals, neglected except by a widow in black and a child of twelve with thick, thick glasses, then exhaustive columns of philosophy on which the dust had settled thicker still, until finally they reached a corner hidden by "Funerals" entitled "Objects of Desire."

