

The Little Cat Laughed to See Such Sport by Michael Swanwick

There was a season in Paris when Darger and Surplus, those two canny rogues, lived very well indeed. That was the year when the Seine shone a gentle green at night with the pillars of the stone bridges fading up into a pure and ghostly blue, for the city engineers, in obedience to the latest fashions, had made the algae and mosses bioluminescent.

Paris, unlike lesser cities, reveled in her flaws. The molds and funguses that attacked her substance had been redesigned for beauty. The rats had been displaced by a breed of particularly engaging mice. A depleted revenant of the Plague Wars yet lingered in her brothels in the form of a sexual fever that lasted but twenty-four hours before dying away, leaving one with only memories and pleasant regrets. The health service, needless to say, made no serious effort to eradicate it.

Small wonder that Darger and Surplus were as happy as two such men could be.

One such man, actually. Surplus was, genetically, a dog, though he had been remade into anthropomorphic form and intellect. But neither that nor his American origins was held against him, for it was widely believed that he was enormously wealthy.

He was not, of course. Nor was he, as so many had been led to suspect, a Baron of the Demesne of Western Vermont, traveling incognito in his government's service. In actual fact, Surplus and Darger were being kept afloat by an immense sea of credit while their plans matured.

"It seems almost a pity," Surplus remarked conversationally over breakfast one morning, "that our little game must soon come to fruition." He cut a slice of strawberry, laid it down upon his plate, and began fastidiously dabbing it with golden dollops of Irish cream. "I could live like this forever."

"Indeed. But our creditors could not." Darger, who had already breakfasted on toast and black coffee, was slowly unwrapping a package that had been delivered just minutes before by courier. "Nor shall we require them to. It is my proud boast to have never departed a restaurant table without leaving a tip, nor a hotel by any means other than the front door."

"I seem to recall that we left Buckingham by climbing out a window into the back gardens."

"That was the queen's palace, and quite a different matter. Anyway, it was on fire. Common law absolves us of any impoliteness under such circumstances." From a lap brimming with brown paper and excelsior, Darger withdrew a gleaming chrome pistol. "Ah!"

Surplus set down his fork and said, "Aubrey, what are you doing with that grotesque mechanism?"

"Far from being a grotesque mechanism, as you put it, my dear friend, this device is an example of the brilliance of the Utopian artisans. The trigger has a built-in gene reader so that the gun could only be fired by its registered owner. Further, it was programmed so that, while still an implacable foe of robbers and other enemies of its master, it would refuse to shoot his family or friends, were he to accidentally point the gun their way and try to fire."

"These are fine distinctions for a handgun to make."

"Such weapons were artificially intelligent. Some of the best examples had brains almost the equal of yours or mine. Here. Examine it for yourself."

Surplus held it up to his ear. "Is it humming?"

But Darger, who had merely a human sense of hearing, could detect nothing. So Surplus remained

unsure. "Where did it come from?" he asked.

"It is a present," Darger said. "From one Madame Mignonette d'Etranger. Doubtless she has read of our discovery in the papers, and wishes to learn more. To which end she has enclosed her card—it is bordered in black, indicating that she is a widow—annotated with the information that she will be at home this afternoon."

"Then we shall have to make the good widow's acquaintance. Courtesy requires nothing less."

Chateau d'Etranger resembled nothing so much as one of Arcimboldo's whimsical portraits of human faces constructed entirely of fruits or vegetables. It was a bioengineered veridian structure—self-cleansing, self-renewing, and even self-supporting, were one willing to accept a limited menu—such as had enjoyed a faddish popularity in the suburban Paris of an earlier decade. The columned façade was formed by a uniform line of oaks with fluted boles above plinths and dadoed bases. The branches swept back to form a pleached roof of leafy green. Swags of vines decorated windows that were each the translucent petal of a flower delicately hinged with clamshell muscle to air the house in pleasant weather.

"Grotesque," muttered Surplus, "and in the worst of taste."

"Yet expensive," Darger observed cheerily. "And in the final analysis, does not money trump good taste?"

Madame d'Etranger received them in the orangery. All the windows had been opened, so that a fresh breeze washed through the room. The scent of orange blossoms was intoxicating. The widow herself was dressed in black, her face entirely hidden behind a dark and fashionable cloud of hair, hat, and veils. Her clothes, notwithstanding their somber purpose, were of silk, and did little to disguise the loveliness of her slim and perfect form. "Gentlemen," she said. "It is kind of you to meet me on such short notice."

Darger rushed forward to seize her black-gloved hands. "Madame, the pleasure is entirely ours. To meet such an elegant and beautiful woman, even under what appear to be tragic circumstances, is a rare privilege, and one I shall cherish always."

Madame d'Etranger tilted her head in a way that might indicate pleasure.

"Indeed," Surplus said coldly. Darger shot him a quick look.

"Tell me," Madame d'Etranger said. "Have you truly located the Eiffel Tower?"

"Yes, Madame, we have," Darger said.

"After all these years . . ." she marveled. "However did you find it?"

"First, I must touch lightly upon its history. You know, of course, that it was built early in the Utopian era, and dismantled at its very end, when rogue intelligences attempted to reach out from the virtual realm to seize control of the human world, and humanity fought back in every way it could manage. There were many desperate actions fought in those mad years, and none more desperate than here in Paris, where demons seized control of the Tower and used it to broadcast madness throughout the city. Men fought each other in the streets. Armed forces, sent in to restore order, were reprogrammed and turned against their own commanders. Thousands died before the Tower was at last dismantled.

"I remind you of this, so that you may imagine the determination of the survivors to ensure that the Eiffel Tower would never be raised again. Today, we think only of the seven thousand three hundred tons of puddled iron of its superstructure, and of how much it would be worth on the open market. Then, it was seen as a monster, to be buried where it could never be found and resurrected."

"As indeed, for all this time, it has not. Yet now, you tell me, you have found it. How?"

"By seeking for it where it would be most difficult to excavate. By asking ourselves where such a salvage operation would be most disruptive to contemporary Paris." He nodded to Surplus, who removed a rolled map from his valise. "Have you a table?"

Madame d'Etranger clapped her hands sharply twice. From the ferny undergrowth to one end of the orangery, an enormous tortoise patiently footed forward. The top of his shell was as high as Darger's waist, and flat.

Wordlessly, Surplus unrolled the map. It showed Paris and environs.

"And the answer?" Darger swept a hand over the meandering blue river bisecting Paris. "It is buried beneath the Seine!"

For a long moment, the lady was still. Then, "My husband will want to speak with you."

With a rustle of silks, she left the room.

As soon as she was gone, Darger turned on his friend and harshly whispered, "Damn you, Surplus, your sullen and uncooperative attitude is queering the pitch! Have you forgotten how to behave in front of a lady?"

"She is no lady," Surplus said stiffly. "She is a genetically modified cat. I can smell it."

"A cat! Surely not."

"Trust me on this one. The ears you cannot see are pointed. The eyes she takes such care to hide are a cat's eyes. Doubtless the fingers within those gloves have retractable claws. She is a cat, and thus untrustworthy and treacherous."

Madame d'Etranger returned. She was followed by two apes who carried a thin, ancient man in a chair between them. Their eyes were dull; they were little better than automata. After them came a Dedicated Doctor, eyes bright, who of course watched his charge with obsessive care. The widow gestured toward her husband. "C'est Monsieur."

"Monsieur d'Etrang—" Darger began.

"Monsieur only. It's quicker," the ancient said curtly. "My widow has told me about your proposition."

Darger bowed. "May I ask, sir, how long you have?"

"Twenty-three months, seven days, and an indeterminable number of hours," the Dedicated Doctor said. "Medicine remains, alas, an inexact science."

"Damn your impudence and shut your yap!" Monsieur snarled. "I have no time to waste on you."

"I speak only the truth. I have no choice but to speak the truth. If you wish otherwise, please feel free to deprogram me, and I will quit your presence immediately."

"When I die you can depart, and not a moment before." The slight old man addressed Darger and Surplus: "I have little time, gentlemen, and in that little time I wish to leave my mark upon the world."

"Then—forgive me again, sir, but I must say it—you have surely better things to do than to speak with us, who are in essence but glorified scrap dealers. Our project will bring its patron an enormous increase in

wealth. But wealth, as you surely know, does not in and of itself buy fame."

"But that is exactly what I intend to do—buy fame." A glint came into Monsieur's eyes, and one side of his mouth turned up in a mad and mirthless grin. "It is my intent to re-erect the ancient structure as the Tour d'Etranger!"

"The trout has risen to the bait," Darger said with satisfaction. He and Surplus were smoking cigars in their office. The office was the middle room of their suite, and a masterpiece of stage-setting, with desks and tables overflowing with papers, maps, and antiquarian books competing for space with globes, surveying equipment, and a stuffed emu.

"And yet, the hook is not set. He can still swim free," Surplus riposted. "There was much talk of building coffer dams of such and so sizes and redirecting so-many-millions of liters of water. And yet not so much as a penny of earnest money."

"He'll come around. He cannot coffer the Seine segment by segment until he comes across the buried beams of the Tower. For that knowledge, he must come to us."

"And why should he do that, rather than searching it out for himself?"

"Because, dear fellow, it is not to be found there. We lied."

"We have told lies before, and had them turn out to be true."

"That too is covered. Over a century ago, an eccentric Parisian published an account of how he had gone up and down the Seine with a rowboat and a magnet suspended on a long rope from a spring scale, and found nothing larger than the occasional rusted hulk of a Utopian machine. I discovered his leaflet, its pages uncut, in the Bibliothèque Nationale."

"And what is to prevent our sponsor from reading that same chapbook?"

"The extreme unlikelihood of such a coincidence, and the fact that I later dropped the only surviving copy in all the city into the Seine."

That same night Darger, who was a light sleeper, was awakened by the sound of voices in the library. Silently, he donned blouse and trousers, and then put his ear to the connecting double doors.

He could hear the cadenced rise and fall of conversation, but could not quite make out the words. More suspiciously, no light showed in the crack under or between the doors. Surplus, he knew, would not have scheduled a business appointment without consulting him. Moreover, though one of the two murmuring voices might conceivably be female, there were neither giggles nor soft, drawn-out sighs but, rather, a brisk and informational tone to their speech. The rhythms were all wrong for it to be one of Surplus's assignations.

Resolutely, Darger flung the doors open.

The only light in the office came from the moon without. It illuminated not two but only one figure—a slender one, clad in skin-tight clothes. She (for by the outline of her shadowy body, Darger judged the intruder to be female) whirled at the sound of the doors slamming. Then, with astonishing grace, she ran out onto the balcony, jumped up on its rail, and leaped into the darkness. Darger heard the woman noisily rattling up the bamboo fire escape.

With a curse, he rushed after her.

By the time Darger had reached the roof, he fully expected his mysterious intruder to be gone. But there she was, to the far end of the hotel, crouched alongside one of the chimney-pots in a wary and watchful attitude. Of her face he could see only two unblinking glints of green fire that were surely her eyes. Silhouetted as she was against a sky filled with rags and snatches of moon-bright cloud, he could make out the outline of one pert and perfect breast, tipped with a nipple the size of a dwarf cherry. He saw how her long tail lashed back and forth behind her.

For an instant, Darger was drawn up by a wholly uncharacteristic feeling of supernatural dread. Was this some imp or fiend from the infernal nether-regions? He drew in his breath.

But then the creature turned and fled. So Darger, reasoning that if it feared him then he had little to fear from it, pursued.

The imp-woman ran to the edge of the hotel and leaped. Only a short alley separated the building from its neighbor. The leap was no more than six feet. Darger followed without difficulty. Up a sloping roof she ran. Over it he pursued her.

Another jump, of another alley.

He was getting closer now. Up a terracotta-tiled rooftop he ran. At the ridge-line, he saw with horror his prey extend herself in a low flying leap across a gap of at least fifteen feet. She hit the far roof with a tuck, rolled, and sprang to her feet.

Darger knew his limitations. He could not leap that gap.

In a panic, he tried to stop, tripped, fell, and found himself sliding feet-first on his back down the tiled roof. The edge sped toward him. It was a fall of he-knew-not-how-many floors to the ground. Perhaps six.

Frantically, Darger flung out his arms to either side, grabbing at the tiles, trying to slow his descent by friction. The tiles bumped painfully beneath him as he skidded downward. Then the heels of his bare feet slammed into the gutter at the edge of the eaves. The guttering groaned, lurched outward—and held.

Darger lay motionless, breathing heavily, afraid to move.

He heard a thump, and then the soft sound of feet traversing the rooftop. A woman's head popped into view, upside down in his vision. She smiled.

He knew who she was, then. There were, after all, only so many cat-women in Paris. "M-madame d'Etra—"

"Shhh." She put a finger against his lips. "No names."

Nimbly, she slipped around and crouched over him. He saw now that she was clad only in a pelt of fine black fur. Her nipples were pale and naked. "So afraid!" she marveled. Then, brushing a hand lightly over him. "Yet still aroused."

Darger felt the guttering sway slightly under him and, thinking how easily this woman could send him flying downward, he shivered. It was best he did not offend her. "Can you wonder, Madame? The sight of you. . . ."

"How gallant!" Her fingers deftly unbuttoned his trousers, and undid his belt. "You do know how to pay a lady a compliment."

"What are you doing?" Darger cried in alarm.

She tugged the belt free, tossed it lightly over the side of the building. "Surely your friend has explained to you that cats are amoral?" Then, when Darger nodded, she ran her fingers up under his blouse, claws extended, drawing blood. "So you will understand that I mean nothing personal by this."

Surplus was waiting when Darger climbed back in the window. "Dear God, look at you," he cried. "Your clothes are dirty and disordered, your hair is in disarray—and what has happened to your belt?"

"Some mudlark of the streets has it, I should imagine." Darger sank down into a chair. "At any rate, there's no point looking for it."

"What in heaven's name has happened to you?"

"I fear I've fallen in love," Darger said sadly, and could be compelled to say no more.

So began an affair that seriously tried the friendship of the two partners in crime. For Madame d'Etranger thenceforth appeared in their rooms, veiled yet unmistakable, every afternoon. Invariably, Darger would plant upon her hand the chastest of kisses, and then discreetly lead her to the secrecy of his bedroom, where their activities could only be guessed at. Invariably, Surplus would scowl, snatch up his walking stick, and retire to the hallway, there to pace back and forth until the lady finally departed. Only rarely did they speak of their discord.

One such discussion was occasioned by Surplus's discovery that Madame d'Etranger had employed the services of several of Paris's finest book scouts.

"For what purpose?" Darger asked negligently. Mignonette had left not half an hour previously, and he was uncharacteristically relaxed.

"That I have not been able to determine. These book scouts are a notoriously close-mouthed lot."

"The acquisition of rare texts is an honorable hobby for many haut-bourgeois."

"Then it is one she has acquired on short notice. She was unknown in the Parisian book world a week ago. Today she is one of its best patrons. Think, Darger—think! Abrupt changes of behavior are always dangerous signs. Why will you not take this seriously?"

"Mignonette is, as they say here, *une chatte serieuse*, and I un *homme galant*." Darger shrugged. "It is inevitable that I should be besotted with her. Why cannot you, in your turn, simply accept this fact?"

Surplus chewed on a knuckle of one paw. "Very well—I will tell you what I fear. There is only one work of literature she could possibly be looking for, and that is the chapbook proving that the Eiffel Tower does not lie beneath the Seine."

"But, my dear fellow, how could she possibly know of its existence?"

"That I cannot say."

"Then your fears are groundless." Darger smiled complacently. Then he stroked his chin and frowned. "Nevertheless, I will have a word with her."

The very next day he did so.

The morning had been spent, as usual, in another round of the interminable negotiations with Monsieur's business agents, three men of such negligible personality that Surplus privately referred to them as Ci, Ca,

and l'Autre. They were drab and lifeless creatures who existed, it sometimes seemed, purely for the purpose of preventing an agreement of any sort from coming to fruition. "They are waiting to be bribed," Darger explained when Surplus took him aside to complain of their recalcitrance.

"Then they will wait forever. Before we can begin distributing banknotes, we must first receive our earnest money. The pump must be primed. Surely even such dullards as Ci, Ca, and l'Autre can understand that much."

"Greed has rendered them impotent. Just as a heart can be made to beat so fast that it will seize up, so too here. Still, with patience I believe they can be made to see reason."

"Your patience, I suspect, is born of long afternoons and rumpled bed sheets."

Darger merely looked tolerant.

Yet it was not patience that broke the logjam, but its opposite. For that very morning, Monsieur burst into the conference room, carried in a chair by his apes and accompanied by his Dedicated Doctor. "It has been weeks," he said without preamble. "Why are the papers not ready?"

Ci, Ca, and l'Autre threw up their hands in dismay.

"The terms they require are absurd, to say the . . ."

"No sensible businessman would . . ."

"They have yet to provide any solid proof of their . . ."

"No, and in their position, neither would I. Popotin—" he addressed one of his apes— "the pouch."

Popotin slipped a leather pouch from his shoulder and clumsily held it open. Monsieur drew out three hand-written sheets of paper and threw them down on the table. "Here are my notes," he said. "Look them over and then draw them up in legal form." The cries of dismay from Ci, Ca, and l'Autre were quelled with one stern glare. "I expect them to be complete within the week."

Surplus, who had quickly scanned the papers, said, "You are most generous, Monsieur. The sum on completion is nothing short of breathtaking." Neither he nor Darger expected to collect that closing sum, of course. But they were careful to draw attention away from the start-up monies (a fraction of the closing sum, though by their standards enormous), that were their true objective.

Monsieur snorted. "What matter? I will be dead by then."

"I see that the Tour d'Etranger is to be given to the City of Paris," Darger said. "That is very generous of you, Monsieur. Many a man in your position would prefer to keep such a valuable property in their family."

"Eh? What family?"

"I speak, sir, of your wife."

"She will be taken care of."

"Sir?" Darger, who was sensitive to verbal nuance, felt a cold tingling at the back of his neck, a premonition of something significant being left unspoken. "What does that mean?"

"It means just what I said." Monsieur snapped his fingers to catch his apes' attention. "Take me away

from here."

When Darger got back to his rooms, Mignonette was already waiting there. She lounged naked atop his bed, playing with the chrome revolver she had sent him before ever they had met. First she cuddled it between her breasts. Then she brought it to her mouth, ran her pink tongue up the barrel, and briefly closed her lips about its very tip. He found the sight disturbingly arousing.

"You should be careful," Darger said. "That's a dangerous device."

"Pooh! Monsieur had it programmed to defend me as well as himself." She placed the muzzle against her heart, and pulled the trigger. Nothing happened. "See? It will not fire at either of us." She handed it to him. "Try it for yourself."

With a small shudder of distaste, Darger placed the gun on a table at some distance from the bed. "I have a question to ask you," he said.

Mignonette smiled in an amused way. She rolled over on her stomach, and rose up on her knees and elbows. Her long tail moved languidly. Her cat's eyes were green as grass. "Do you want your answer now," she asked, "or later?"

Put that way, the question answered itself.

So filled with passion was Darger that he had no memory of divesting himself of his clothing, or joining Mignonette on the bed. He only knew that he was deep inside her, and that that was where he wanted to be. Her fur was soft and sleek against his skin. It tickled him ever so slightly—just enough to be perverse, but not enough to be undesirable. Fleeting, he felt like a zoöphile, and then, even more fleetingly, realized that this must be very much like what Surplus's lady-friends experienced. But he abandoned that line of thought quickly.

Like any properly educated man of his era, Darger was capable of achieving orgasm three or four times in succession without awkward periods of detumescence in between. With Mignonette, he could routinely bring that number up to five. Today, for the first time, he reached seven.

"You wanted to ask me a question?" Mignonette said, when they were done. She lay within the crook of his arm, her cold nose snuggled up against his neck. Playfully, she put her two hands, claws sheathed, against his side and kneaded him, as if she were a true, unmodified cat.

"Hmm? Ah! Yes." Darger felt wonderfully, gloriously relaxed. He doubted he would ever move again. It took an effort for him to focus his thoughts. "I was wondering . . . exactly what your husband meant when he said that he would have you 'taken care of,' after his death."

"Oh." She drew away from him, and sat up upon her knees. "That. I thought you were going to ask about the pamphlet."

Again, a terrible sense of danger overcame Darger. He was extremely sensitive to such influences. It was an essential element of his personality. "Pamphlet?" he said lightly.

"Yes, that silly little thing about a man in a rowboat. *Vingt Ans* . . . something like that. I've had my book scouts scouring the stalls and garrets for it since I-forget-when."

"I had no idea you were looking for such a thing."

"Oh, yes," she said. "I was looking for it. And I have found it too."

"You have what?"

The outer doors of their apartments slammed open, and the front room filled with voices. Somebody—it could only be Monsieur—was shouting at the top of his weak voice. Surplus was clearly trying to soothe him. The Dedicated Doctor was there as well, urging his client to calm himself.

Darger leapt from the bed, and hastily threw on his clothes. "Wait here," he told Mignonette. Having some experience in matters of love, he deftly slipped between the doors without opening them wide enough to reveal her presence.

He stepped into absolute chaos.

Monsieur stood in the middle of the room waving a copy of an ancient pamphlet titled *Vingt Ans dans un Bateau à Rames* in the air. On its cover was a crude drawing of a man in a rowboat holding a magnet from a fishing pole. He shook it until it rattled. "Swindlers!" he cried. "Confidence tricksters! Deceivers! Oh, you foul creatures!"

"Please, sir, consider your leucine aminopeptidases," the Dedicated Doctor murmured. He wiped the little man's forehead with a medicated cloth. "You'll put your inverse troponin ratio all out of balance. Please sit down again."

"I am betrayed!"

"Sir, consider your blood pressure."

"The Tour d'Etranger was to be my immortality!" Monsieur howled. "What can such false cozeners as you know of immortality?"

"I am certain there has been a misunderstanding," Surplus said.

"Consider your fluoroimmunohistochemical systems. Consider your mitochondrial refresh rate."

The two apes, released from their chair-carrying chore, were running in panicked circles. One of them brushed against a lamp and sent it crashing to the floor.

It was exactly the sort of situation that Darger was best in. Thinking swiftly, he took two steps into the room and in an authoritative voice cried, "If you please!"

Silence. Every eye was upon him.

Smiling sternly, Darger said. "I will not ask for explanations. I think it is obvious to all of us what has happened. How Monsieur has come to misunderstand the import of the chapbook I cannot understand. But if, sir, you will be patient for the briefest moment, all will be made clear to you." He had the man! Monsieur was so perfectly confused (and anxious to be proved wrong, to boot) that he would accept anything Darger told him. Even the Dedicated Doctor was listening. Now he had but to invent some plausible story—for him a trifle—and the operation was on track again. "You see, there is—"

Behind him, the doors opened quietly. He put a hand over his eyes.

Mignonette d'Etranger entered the room, fully dressed, and carrying the chrome revolver. In her black silks, she was every inch the imperious widow. (Paradoxically, the fact that she obviously wore nothing beneath those silks only made her all the more imposing.) But she had thrown her veils back to reveal her face: cold, regal, and scornful.

"You!" She advanced wrathfully on her husband. "How dare you object to my taking a lover? How dare you!"

"You . . . you were . . ." The little man looked bewildered by her presence.

"I couldn't get what I need at home. It was only natural that I should look for it elsewhere. So it costs you a day of your life every time we make love! Aren't I worth it? So it costs you three days to tie me up and whip me! So what? Most men would die for the privilege."

She pressed the gun into his hands.

"If I mean so little to you," she cried histrionically, "then kill me!" She darted back and struck a melodramatic pose alongside Darger. "I will die beside the man I love!"

"Yes. . . ." Belated comprehension dawned upon Monsieur's face, followed closely by a cruel smile. "The man you love."

He pointed the pistol at Darger and pulled the trigger.

But in that same instant, Mignonette flung herself before her lover, as if to shelter his body with her own. In the confines of so small a room, the gun's report was world-shattering. She spun around, clutched her bosom, and collapsed in the bedroom doorway. Blood seeped onto the carpet from beneath her.

Monsieur held up the gun and stared at it with an expression of total disbelief.

It went off again.

He collapsed dead upon the carpet.

The police naturally suspected the worst. But a dispassionate exposition of events by the Dedicated Doctor, a creature compulsively incapable of lying, and an unobtrusive transfer of banknotes from Surplus allayed all suspicions. Monsieur d'Etranger's death was obviously an accident d'amour, and Darger and Surplus but innocent bystanders. With heartfelt expressions of condolence, the officers left.

When the morticians came to take away Monsieur's body, the Dedicated Doctor smiled. "What a horrible little man he was!" he exclaimed. "You cannot imagine what a relief it is to no longer give a damn about his health." He had signed death warrants for both Monsieur and his widow, though his examination of her had been cursory at best. He hadn't even touched the body.

Darger roused himself from his depressed state to ask, "Will you be returning for Madame's body?"

"No," the Dedicated Doctor said. "She is a cat, and therefore the disposition of her corpse is a matter for the department of sanitation."

Darger turned an ashen white. But Surplus deftly stepped beside him and seized the man's wrists in his own powerful paws. "Consider how tenuous our position is here," he murmured. Then the door closed, and they were alone again. "Anyway—what body?"

Darger whirled. Mignonette was gone.

"Between the money I had to slip to les flics in order to get them to leave as quickly as they did," Surplus told his morose companion, "and the legitimate claims of our creditors, we are only slightly better-off than we were when we first arrived in Paris."

This news roused Darger from his funk. "You have paid off our creditors? That is extremely good to

hear. Wherever did you get that sort of money?"

"Ci, Ca, and l'Autre. They wished to be bribed. So I let them buy shares in the salvage enterprise at a greatly reduced rate. You cannot imagine how grateful they were."

It was evening, and the two associates were taking a last slow stroll along the luminous banks of the Seine. They were scheduled to depart the city within the hour via river-barge, and their emotions were decidedly mixed. No man leaves Paris entirely happily.

They came to a stone bridge, and walked halfway across it. Below, they could see their barge awaiting them. Darger opened his Gladstone and took out the chrome pistol that had been so central in recent events. He placed it on the rail. "Talk," he said.

The gun said nothing.

He nudged it ever so slightly with one finger. "It would take but a flick of the wrist to send you to the bottom of the river. I don't know if you'd rust, but I am certain you cannot swim."

"All right, all right!" the pistol said. "How did you know?"

"Monsieur had possession of an extremely rare chapbook that gave away our scheme. He can only have gotten it from one of Mignonette's book scouts. Yet there was no way she could have known of its importance—unless she had somehow planted a spy in our midst. That first night, when she broke into our rooms, I heard voices. It is obvious now that she was talking with you."

"You are a more intelligent man than you appear."

"I'll take that for a compliment. Now tell me—what was this ridiculous charade all about?"

"How much do you know already?"

"The first bullet you fired lodged in the back wall of the bedroom. It did not come anywhere near Mignonette. The blood that leaked from under her body was bull's blood, released from a small leather bladder she left behind her. After the police departed, she unobtrusively slipped out the bedroom window. Doubtless she is a great distance away by now. I know all that occurred. What I do not understand is why."

"Very well. Monsieur was a vile old man. He did not deserve a beautiful creature like Mignonette."

"On this we are as one. Go on."

"But, as he had her made, he owned her. And as she was his property, he was free to do with her as he liked." Then, when Darger's face darkened, "You misapprehend me, sir! I do not speak of sexual or sadomasochistic practices but of chattel slavery. Monsieur was, as I am sure you have noted for yourself, a possessive man. He had left instructions that upon his death, his house was to be set afire, with Mignonette within it."

"Surely, this would not be legal!"

"Read the law," the gun said. "Mignonette determined to find her way free. She won me over to her cause, and together we hatched the plan you have seen played to fruition."

"Tell me one thing, Surplus said curiously. "You were programmed not to shoot your master. How then did you manage. . . ?

"I am many centuries old. Time enough to hack any amount of code."

"Ah," said Surplus, in a voice that indicated he was unwilling to admit unfamiliarity with the gun's terminology.

"But why me?" Darger slammed a hand down on the stone rail. "Why did Madame d'Etranger act out her cruel drama with my assistance, rather than . . . than . . . with someone else's?"

"Because she is a cold-hearted bitch. Also, she found you attractive. For a whore such as she, that is justification enough for anything."

Darger flushed with anger. "How dare you speak so of a lady?"

"She abandoned me," the gun said bitterly. "I loved her, and she abandoned me. How else should I speak of her under such circumstances?"

"Under such circumstances, a gentleman would not speak of her at all," Surplus said mildly.

"Nevertheless, you have, as required, explained everything. So we shall honor our implicit promise by leaving you here to be found by the next passer-by. A valuable weapon such as yourself will surely find another patron with ease. A good life to you, sir."

"Wait!"

Surplus quirked an eyebrow. "What is it?" Darger asked.

"Take me with you," the gun pleaded. "Do not leave me here to be picked up by some cutpurse or bourgeois lout. I am neither a criminal nor meant for a sedentary life. I am an adventurer, like yourselves! I can be of enormous aid to you, and an invaluable prop for your illicit schemes."

Darger saw how Surplus's ears perked up at this. Quickly, and in his coldest possible manner, he said, "We are not of the same social class, sir."

Taking his friend's arm, he turned away.

Below, at the landing-stage, their barge awaited, hung with loops of fairy-lights. They descended and boarded. The hawsers were cast off, the engine fed an extra handful of sugar to wake it to life, and they motored silently down-river, while behind them the pistol's frantic cries faded slowly in the warm Parisian night. It was not long before the City of Light was a luminous blur on the horizon, like the face of one's beloved seen through tears.