

The Percolated Stars

Rhys Hughes

*an astro-caffeine romp
in three cups
featuring
Batavus Droogstoppel
merchant and scientist
and Bourgeois monster
one lump or two?*

To Ray Russell
and in memory of
John Sladek
one of the finest science-fiction writers
who ever lived

"I have measured out my life with coffee spoons"
T.S. ELIOT

"The butterfly knows nothing about the death of the tailors,
about wardrobes conquering the sea.
Sirs, my age is 900,000 years..."

...You, moon, moon...
smoky moon of firemen,
do not be frightened...

Wind, I invite you to rest.
It is too late to dine on stars."
RAFAEL ALBERTI

Ultima Thule

I was travelling through the gorges of Montenegro on business. I wore my telescope at my hip, like a sword, and no brigands dared accost me. They remained at a safe distance, peering from behind fallen trees or tumbled boulders. In the generous pockets of my greatcoat, I carried two antique flintlocks — not for the sake of romanticism, but because the people of the forest are more afeared of sparks and the stench of sulphur than the cleaner detonations of our modern revolvers. Or so I had been instructed in Belgrade. My horse was a Lipizzaner from Jakovo, a sturdy mount which had served me well over the dangerous passes of the Tara Canyon. Another day and I would reach my destination.

Now the wars with the Turks and Albanians were finished, a terrible silence covered the land. Peace was a stranger to these gloomy hills and the villages and abbeys hidden among their folds. It fitted poorly, like a shrunken shroud. I almost longed to hear the strum of crossbows beyond the valley, a melody refined in these regions to a high art. But bandits were still unforthcoming, preferring to watch and wait. I did not resent my solitude too much in this respect, but compensated with my own songs, melancholy ballads learned in the beerhalls of Vienna. Nothing satisfied my mood; my lips had forgotten how to pout. A savage wind clapped leaves against my ears like ironic applause.

As evening approached, I sought shelter from the elements. Standing at a fork in the road, a ragged figure raised a fist and tried to snatch my reins. His beard twisted upon his chest in three prongs, as if it had been combed with a trident. In the twilight, his eyes sparkled fitfully, the left with wisdom, the right with lunacy. I decided to trust only one side of his gaze and shook him free. He pointed along the wider path and I deliberately chose the other, branches clawing my hair as I spurred my horse up the overgrown slope. Soon we had left him behind, together with the nightshade which sprouted at his feet. He had obviously been waiting many weeks in that location. For whom?

Certainly not for me — my operation was more secret than the groin of my employer, Nicola I Petrovic. The bishop-prince had timed his rule perfectly, taking much of the credit for doubling Montenegro's territory with one

scratch of a quill. The Congress of Berlin had earned him vital access to the sea; modernisation was at full tilt. In the fresh ports of Antivari and Dulcigno, ships were unloading steam-engines and tracks for railways, coils of telegraph wire and dynamos. He spent whole afternoons praying for a local scientific breakthrough, something to impress Russia and France, who derided his country as a technophobic backwater. So with church gold he had bought my talents.

The path grew steeper and narrower until I began to doubt its claim on any future map. Abruptly it broke out at the base of a cliff on which rested a ruined castle. The turrets jumped so seamlessly from the living rock that I would have mistaken them for unique stalagmites had they not betrayed their real function with windows and lamps. The entire southern wing of the edifice had fallen into the chasm below; the remainder bound itself to the summit with flowers. Exposed rooms and furniture blossomed over the edge; doors and staircases led from walls into nothingness. For a moment, I assumed the structure had been turned inside-out. Despite my exhaustion, I resolved to explore it.

Abandoning my horse at the foot of the heights and scaling a ladder pegged into the granite, I gained a ledge which twisted around the scarp and emerged, after numerous loops, before a brass gate. There was a bell and chain hanging from a bracket and I tugged this with suitable vigour. On the fifth pull, the gate opened and I was confronted with an odd kind of host — a withered fellow in archaic clothing, arms thrust elbow-deep into pockets more monstrous than my own. His pale hair retained tints of a fuller colour and the lines around his eyes were those of jovial youth rather than decrepitude; when he winked, they grew old. I guessed he had aged only on his upper layer of skin.

I waved my documents in his swarthy face.

"My name is Batavus Droogstoppel and I am a legitimate agent of the crossier. You are required to lend me every assistance. Bread and a glass of Vinjak will be accepted. Also, a soft bed."

He sneered. "What is the nature of your mission?"

Neither his accent nor his complexion were Montenegrin. In the stab of his vowels, I recognised Latin edges stropped on the leathery tongues of matadors. And his scented moustache curled at each tip like the screw of an olive-press. I recalled the apparition at the fork — was it a new fashion to cultivate helical facial hair? Yet this castellan, if such he was, had adopted no other modern styles.

"My brief cannot be divulged. The bishop-prince has sewn coins into my mouth to keep my voice heavy. It is your duty as a believer to invite me into your abode. Why do you giggle so? Are you aware of the penalties to be suffered for impeding the Church?"

"Naturally. But I merely desire a general outline of your quest. Is your assignment religious or political?"

I sighed. "It is a scientific enquiry."

His manner abruptly changed. Backing away from the door, he allowed me to cross into the dim passage. I strode forward warily and he gripped my elbow. I considered my pistol as a discourager, but I was put at ease by his chatter. As he escorted me down the corridor, he revealed himself as a kindred spirit, an amateur scholar.

"Yes, I am also a member of the fraternity. For twenty years I have devoted myself to private research in the discipline of geography. There are few creeds to compare with science."

"That is not Orthodox opinion. Are you a Catholic?"

"Here, the Vatican's followers are mostly Croats. No, my family was cast out of Spain for exalting atheism."

"Then this castle is not rightfully yours?"

"Oh, we were exiled centuries ago. We spread ourselves over Europe. It was my ancestor, Bartleby Cadiz, who raised this pile. Our names tend to repeat over the generations. Allow me to introduce myself. I am Count Unfortunato, last of the Balkan branch."

The passage widened into a circular chamber with a lofty ceiling. A fire blazed in a giant hearth; mouldy tapestries flapped in the currents of hot air. The furniture was elaborate but decayed. I noted in one nook a clock of rare design — a Mortice d'Arthur, gilt all faded, hands like appliances of torture. I welcomed his offer of a chair and a crooked mug of Nikšicko beer. He did not sit but paced the rotting carpet behind me in palpable excitement. There were books on warped shelves, navigational volumes and atlases. Finally, as if he was the last page in one of these tomes, he turned and came to a resolution. He leant over my shoulder and made waves in my drink with hasty words.

"I may be able to astonish you. My projects are nearing completion. A cataclysm in cartography is imminent."

"That is not my field. I am an astronomer."

Already I had said too much. Yet it was plain my host was a buffoon and posed little threat to my operation. He regarded the telescope on my belt and nodded, seizing the back of my chair in his overlarge hands, so that I grew concerned for the integrity of the diseased wood. I prepared to spring up; he fell back and tugged his chin. In a grimy mirror nailed above the fireplace, his agitation was refocussed as a genuine curiosity about my status. Because Petrovic had paid in small change, and because I wanted my slumber untroubled by the frettings of a clown, I snapped my pledge on the knee of my lower lip.

"I am hastening to Cetinje to confirm the discovery of a new planet lying inside the orbit of Mercury."

His reaction was bizarre. "Only one?"

"I can assure you that the significance of one unknown world is far greater than that of one unknown species."

"You mock my blood, Meister Droogstoppel. The Cadiz tribe are still human in many respects. No matter. So Nicola seeks to eclipse the renown of Petar II Njegoš? He is obsessed with progress. But why did he not ask me? I have petitioned him many times."

"Probably he does not trust your abilities."

"Cruel jest! What, may I ask, are your qualifications?"

This arrogance was typical of a Spaniard, a member of a realm which had enslaved my own. It required my most pedantic refutation. Puffing my chest, but without rising, I bellowed:

"I was a successful coffee-broker, resident in Amsterdam, before my profits enabled me to retire and enrol at a private institute. I studied telescoping under Benito von Clausewitz and mathematics with George Boole. After graduating with full honours, I took the chair of astronomy at the University of Chaud-Mellé, where I once observed a rent in the clouds of Venus. Through this, I noted seas, and a continent which I named after a forgotten thinker, Willem Bilderdijk."

"What relevance has he to your proficiency?"

"Pride in my origins and enthusiasm for the future. His romances of outer space inspired me to refine my instruments, which are now the best portable examples in Europe. I accept his teaching that intelligent life exists on other planets. In an imprinted manuscript he suggests a method of communicating with such beings by means of photographic images hurled across the aether on invisible waves."

Count Unfortunato rubbed his mismatched ears. "We all have unjustly neglected countrymen. In my own sphere I can mention Pomponius Mela. But I no longer consider myself Spanish — my grandfather traded a cellar of sherry for Montenegrin nationality. Petrovic is aware of this. Thus his reliance on foreigners is an affront."

"But do you possess equipment for the work?"

His eyebrows came together like duelling sabres, but the gaze below them was tinged with sly amusement. He abandoned his position behind me, stalked to the hearth and picked up an item from the mantelpiece. It was a crystal ovoid encased in a lattice, but with copper wires running from the frame into the egg. It resembled one of the vacuum tubes of Plücker, though it was wider and more ornamental. A wire had loosened on the bulb and he adjusted it with inept fingers.

After an age of this delicate work, the device suddenly glowed with a chill, silver radiance. "Have you any notion of what the bishop-prince really requires from a virgin planet?"

"A major scientific discovery to seal his independence. To cast off forever the Turkish cape of darkness."

"Ha! Nicola is only progressive in relative terms. Yes, he craves a measure of respect from his old allies. But he is hardly the rationalist you rate him. He yearns to fill the sky with new worlds for astrological purposes. Remember how horoscopes became redundant with the discovery of Uranus? A while before your time, eh?"

"And yours! I repudiate your brutal slanders."

Holding the strange lamp aloft, he moved toward a niche in the wall and glanced over his shoulder. "Come!"

I watched him cautiously. "Have you infringed any patents with that contraption? I am a champion of inventor's rights."

He gave no answer and I stood and followed him to repeat the query. The niche led to a staircase which twisted clockwise into the abdomen of the cliff I had recently scaled. I caught up with the Count on the ninth turn and reached out to grasp his arm, but there was something repellent in the idea of voluntary contact with a Cadiz scion, so I merely saluted his descent into a second chamber, larger than the first but cruder, the walls undecorated and the floors bare of furniture. In the centre of the room was a pit or well, sides coated with phosphorescent slime. Together with his electric lamp, this afforded the only illumination, therefore I was slow to discern the mass above it.

Suspended from a pulley system which was riveted to the ceiling, an iron globe swayed on a massive chain. It was watchful with portholes and a circular hatch opened on one side, accessible from the edge of the pit only by an athlete. I stumbled closer and saw a large propeller attached to the base of the orb. The whole scene was one fraught with tension and I laughed hoarsely to dispel my fears.

Count Unfortunato rested his lamp in a bracket on a wall and folded his arms in pride. "What would Bilderdijk say to this? Not even Monsieur Verne, not even Julius von Voss, might have envisaged such an adventure! How can Nicola employ outsiders when such a marvel exists already within his borders? Oh, that mulish vladika!"

"It looks like a submersible, but not for seas."

"We are not on Venus now, Meister Droogstoppel. I call this machine the Hadesphere and it has been designed to plumb the depths of Hell. The name is inaccurate, I grant you. This hole is not a mouth of Hell, but a gap between two competing Hells — the Christian and Moslem. Down there, how far I know not, lies the strangest land in creation. We will term it Ultima Thule, though again the label is fallacious, for the Thule of the ancients existed in the polar circle."

"You are moonstruck. It is simply a dried well."

"Enjoy the joke, for I have already failed to take soundings of the abyss. Now I shall conduct a personal tour. I am eager to map the limits of the forbidden, and surely there is nothing more proscribed to mortals than an examination of a cosmic flaw."

"Heresy! A hanging offence, my friend. The bishop-prince may accept a plea of insanity if I trade my rings for you. Are you really so absurd as to pit your pomposity against his?"

Count Unfortunato shook his head, his locks whipping his tears like albino snakes. "Merely saddened by events. Long decades have I toiled at this enterprise. I am the one who should drag Montenegro into the age of modernity. But it seems I am to be usurped by a Dutchman who seeks to do what? Calculate the orbit of a rock tied to the sun's apron-strings! The humiliation will shatter my heritage."

For an instant I was overwhelmed with sympathy. "We are brothers in science. Surely you do not begrudge my corroboration of a few numbers? A rival astronomer will accept the commission if I default, and the planet will be confirmed anyway. Petrovic is only augmenting observations made by Leverrier in 1846. The world already has a name — Vulcan. How can my success invalidate your own research?"

"You are right, of course. My desire to be first is irrational. But I worry about returning from the mission to find another man enjoying my glory. Yet I must risk the trip. Indeed, the motor is ready, so there is little to stop me departing tonight. The Hadesphere is fully provisioned and richly furnished. Would you care for a proper look, while

you have a chance? I will help you climb inside."

Reluctantly I nodded and the Count cast himself on all fours at the rim of the pit. "Stand on my back to reach."

Placing a dirty boot at either end of his spine, I strained for the handle of the hatch. It swung open and the capsule rocked, suspending me above the unfathomable chasm. I peered within and noted the rococo chair and pillows. There was no recognisable instrumentation, merely a crystal screen fixed to a bulwark, its function beyond my conjecture. I had seen enough to be satisfied, but the Count, yelling an obscure oath, suddenly raised himself up, depositing me through the entrance and onto the floor of the vessel. The hatch slammed shut. And only with the greatest effort could I understand his speech as it warbled through four inches of dense hull. He was erect again and smirking.

"The other solution to my problem is to send you down instead. Yes, the more I ponder the matter, the better this course of action seems. It will prevent you stealing my acclaim."

"Let me out! The carpet is utterly tasteless!"

"I think not, to both assertions. As I was saying, this is a funnel to a new kind of Limbo. There are many Hells, but none of them are fixed locations. They are bubbles which drift through the mantle of the Earth, following the progress of the matching religion above, growing bigger or smaller in accordance with the prevailing faith. When Christian soldiers triumph over Moslems, it is Lucifer who enjoys the extra space; when the Moslems win, it is Eblis. Montenegro is a domain where the two religions neither conquered nor blended, as they did in Macedonia and Albania, but collided and bounced apart. So the Hells are also moving away, unable to claim the region. A unique situation!"

"Please do not deposit me in this hole. How can you be so confident it leads anywhere? What if the Hells rub against each other deeper down? I might be dashed where they connect."

"That is not important. When the chain stops moving I will hoist up the orb. Your task is to make notes during the descent, on the sheets of paper provided. If your words remain intact after an accident, my theory might still be deemed valid by the Cetinje Court. Because I anticipate a long fall, this propeller will assist gravity. It takes its power from a dry-cell battery, rather like my electric lamp. I am fully convinced you will make an irreproachable observer."

"Imbecile! I specialise in celestial domes, not the magmatic deeps. You launch me in the wrong direction!"

"How true. And at wondrous velocity. Permit me to engage the motor. It is external and cannot be disabled from inside. Now farewell, Meister Droogstoppel. My own life is too important to jeopardise. Thankfully, no such hitch applies to your existence."

"Wait! There cannot be enough chain to reach right to the bottom. A ridiculous oversight! Open the hatch!"

"You are mistaken. When the Cadiz tribe moved to Montenegro, one of the conditions placed upon us by the ruling vladika was the forging of a link for every sin we committed. My family is most horrid — as a direct consequence, there is a vast surplus."

I raved at his facetiousness, but my curses were drowned out by the whine of the propeller. The globe shivered and I crawled under the chair in anticipation. Through the lowest porthole, I watched the Count prance to the side of the pulley system and grasp a lever. It was time to swamp my considerable intellect with regrets. Why had I abandoned the comforts of retirement for this brutal nonsense? I was consumed with a passion to snort freshly-ground coffee. My grotesque host glanced at me once before pulling the lever and the image of his pallid countenance accompanied my violent plummet into the maw of the ineffable. Worse: the air outside my prison hissed like a giant percolator.

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The plunge upset the loose contents of the iron vessel from their proper places and flung them about the interior with poltergeistic virulence. I was too numb to protect my face from the flying cutlery, tins of olives, bottles of brandy, writing materials, washing accessories and a score of miscellaneous items. But I had chosen my position well. The rococo chair was bolted to the hull and I was pushed against its lower surface rather than smashed into the ceiling. Speed is not a problem for me; I am quite comfortable on the latest Swiss and German locomotives. But acceleration is a separate phenomenon, one unfavourable to my stomach, which employed my ribcage as stepladder to my gullet.

I was conscious of the walls of the pit receding on all sides. Thus the emerald glow which oozed through the windows gradually dimmed as the slime became more distant. Gravity was soon satisfied and it was left to the propeller to relentlessly increase our rate of drop. I roved the orb with my eyes but discerned nothing which resembled a speedometer. Plenty of absurd embellishments — an aspidistra in a recess, a hatstand behind the chair, an antimacassar draped over it, a selection of portraits hung around the equator of the globe — but not even a clock or barometer for the measurement of time or pressure. The Count was plainly mad. Luckily, so was I — a temporary cure for fear!

As we attained terminal velocity, and my innards calmed, I was able to leave my sanctuary and survey the interior more critically. Rungs led to shelves and narrow walkways. An indicator of our haste was how steady the descent quickly became, though the orb was finless. While I rummaged through the cabinets, a sweat which had nothing to do with terror joined the droplets of fright on my cheeks. Friction had started to heat up the hull, boiling the condensation on the windows. Bolts creaked alarmingly. It appeared I was to be roasted alive, like one of Nicola's geese, which he habitually dressed in turban and spangled cape as a mordant joke, his farm lacking the more credible turkey.

A delirious thought assailed me: this vehicle was an oven and Count Unfortunato was the devil's chef (who was to say which devil?) while the pit was merely a monstrous dumb-waiter by which he sent down his dishes, one at a time, raw at the top, prepared at the bottom. Yet the paper and pen which he mentioned were in an unlocked box. To distract my mind from my plight, I tried to write a few lines. My hand shook too zealously for anything but a jagged scrawl

representing the knots of my nerves. So too was my appetite affected, looping in my mouth, and I shunned the edibles provided by my tormentor. In desperation I returned to the chair and sat still to await the eclipse of my life.

Within an hour I noticed a slight diminishing of speed. It occurred to me that gravity had defected from my host and come over to my side. A considerable amount of rock now lay above the globe and this too exerted a pull, an influence which would increase the deeper I went. Invigorated by this fact, I decided to sample some of the complimentary fare. Mouldy bread and maggoty cheese spilled from rusty canisters. How long had they been in storage? My optimism dispersed; I slumped in a funk. Each moment I expected to be flattened at the bottom of the pit. But when I risked a look through the portholes, there was nothing below but a green shimmer. Then I witnessed a curious phenomenon.

Having rested the pen on a table with the nib pointing toward me, I expected it to remain thus, but it had swung to point at the hull. Again I aimed it at my chest. And now before my eyes it slowly rotated back to its preferred position. I soon determined what had happened. The heating of the vessel had jostled the dipoles of the iron shell. As we gradually slowed and the metal cooled, these aligned themselves with the planetary poles, partially magnetising the craft. I leapt up, ruffling my hair. If the globe was fully magnetised, it would brake even more! After all, the bulk of the Earth's ores were now above it, a situation magnified by the tapering design of the infernal chasm.

While I brooded on how to achieve the magnetisation of the capsule, the opaque screen adjacent to the chair, which had been lying idle since I was tricked through the door, suddenly shone with light. To my dismay, a picture began to congeal just beneath its surface. I prodded the glass with my fingers, but it abruptly broke into a face, the loathsome visage of the Count. I was too shocked to consider a logical explanation. For a whole minute, I wondered how he had managed to conceal himself in such a narrow space. Then his voice shrieked:

"Meister Droogstoppel! Can you understand me?"

"Your voice, but not your character."

"So it works! There is a lens hidden above the screen, a microphone and a speaker. We are communicating over the void with live pictures. Do not expect this miracle to continue. The proculscope, as I call it, is a fragile device, prone to malfunction."

"You have perfected Bilderdijk's invention!"

"Almost. I cannot transmit across the aether, only along wires. The chain is also a coaxial cable. But impedance increases with distance, so the signal will become grossly distorted."

"Your face is already warped. I anticipate an improvement. Now tell me how to open the hatch. I urgently need to answer a call of nature and there is no commode within the globe."

"I apologise for that. A catch is located below the hinge. Press it with a thumbnail. But you may be sucked out."

"My bladder is insistent on the matter."

"How are you relishing the jaunt? Hell lacks the dimension of time. As you approach the margin between the netherworlds, the present will be leaked from your environment in both directions. You will travel back in weeks, relative to the surface. Already I estimate a temporal difference of one Monday between our meanwhiles."

"That would render our conversation impossible."

"You underestimate the talents of a Cadiz aristocrat. I imputed the substance and order of your dialogue."

"Do you plan to gloat over my destruction?"

"No. Your image has begun to flicker. The proculscope relies on two wheels marked with a spiral of holes. As the first wheel spins, it scans a subject, producing fluctuating voltages in a photoelectric cell. These voltages are relayed to a lamp whose rays are focused through the second wheel onto a translucent surface. The discs must be synchronised for the picture to be conducted meaningfully."

"And they are slipping? The information is doubtless arresting, but now I crave privacy more than theory."

"A question first, my Dutch guinea-pig. The chain is unwinding at a reduced rate. Why are you slowing up?"

"The effects of drag. Denser air pressure."

The lie satisfied him and he bowed. The screen went blank, save for a dot of light which bloomed at the centre like a nova, and I hurried to the hidden catch. I removed my belt and secured myself to the leg of the chair. The door flew open but contrary to the Count's warning, there was only a weak pull. I leaned into the cosmic verdegris, poked my tongue at the howling miasma of glow and wind, and drew a flintlock. The propeller cut a circle with a diameter equal to that of the capsule. I aimed along the seasoned barrel at a steep tangent to the curve, as near to the axis of the rotors as possible. The mineral sparked; the pan flashed. With an awful screech, the Hadesphere lurched.

I had shattered the propeller into fragments, each of which tumbled like rejected comets into nothingness. Simultaneously, while I choked on the sulphurous discharge, the globe doubled as a bell and a booming note vibrated up the chain. I prayed it would be too attenuated to summon the Count's suspicions to tea, when it reached his castle. I returned to the interior and uprooted the hatstand. Without motive power, the orb slowed even more and my second exposure to the subterranean elements was milder by a pair of Beaufort integers. The belt stretched as it bore my buckled fear and full academic weight. With one hook of the inverted hatstand, I pulled free both wires of the battery.

Employing the rotten cheese as a paste, I cemented the exposed tips to points along the hull. Dangling in this undignified position, my only tool the cloakroom adjunct, the operation was considerably more perilous than I can describe. But when it was completed, the battery drained into the metal and magnetised the globe. The deceleration was gradual, but it strained my lifeline beyond the snapping point. And so I hugged the hull in desperation, like an octopus choking a drowning diver's final bubble, with one difference — it was I who expected to slip and burst (hope and face) far from home; remote also from Count Unfortunato's Locker, a more claustrophobic case than Davy Jones's.

Never let it be said that vanity is a fault. My rings, two on every finger, preserved my life, sticking to the immense lodestone like molars in a treacle pudding. I crawled up the hull and through the hatch. For a long while I raved on the

chair, licking the blood from my knuckles. But here was a small triumph over my vile host and a genuine interest in his scheme now seeped into my mind. Presumably the denizens of Hell, whether the Christian or Moslem version, would not forget to investigate the gap which had opened up between them. What if they had colonised it already, leaving no room for my landing? I shuddered at the concept, stood at the hatch again and peered down anxiously.

Then I saw my first demon. At least, it played up to the comparison with marvellous dexterity, though it was too stiff to have anything more than a limited repertoire. I primed my remaining pistol and commended my soul to Galileo and God, in that order. But as I approached the monster, I saw it was artificial, an aerial machine of radically different design to the Hadesphere. For one thing, it was unconnected to the surface. For another, it was broad and flat. What I had taken for a single wing was a parachute stitched from gaudy cloth. What I had taken for skeletal limbs jutting at unlikely angles were — I blinked thrice — ah no! these were real bony limbs and skulls and spines!

But they were dead and had been arranged by a man. Constructed from human parts lashed with string, putrefying meat hanging from many of the fresher femurs, the raft carried a single passenger. He peered up as the globe swooped down on him, tugging on cords attached to the parachute. I envied his ability to steer his craft, but as I came within fifty yards, he swung in close again and called up:

"Jump across and bring some luggage with you!"

I paled. He owned the same accent as Count Unfortunato! Remembering my Spanish, I cried, "I am safe here."

His carious grin was visible as a negative moon on a background sky of bleached calcium, an unlucky augur.

"A cultured oaf? So how did my brother persuade you to climb inside that cauldron? Listen to me, if you prefer to survive. The centre of the Earth is less than a thousand miles below. Your vessel will be flattened on impact, like an ear, whereas I am drifting down gently enough to keep my kidneys in their present location."

Despite my brave efforts in slowing the Hadesphere, its inertia was still capable of smudging my retirement, so I made a hasty decision. The hatstand I left behind; I took the wine, the shaving kit, and, as an act of revenge, the procuscope, which I wrenched from its mountings with my empty pistol. Without a belt, my trousers kept falling down, so I pulled them off and made a bag from them for my possessions. Then I tottered on the threshold and flapped my arms across the divide. I am always fair to trajectories, but I slap them on the arc the instant they begin trouble, so perspective rarely misbehaves in my presence. My flight was perfectly judged and I crashed on the bony deck.

The pilot steered us away from the Hadesphere, which passed like an ossified eyeball, vanishing into tainted silence below. I rejoiced to be free of the galvanised oubliette — like a criminal forced to rot in his own ball and chain who uses his twisted morality as a drill to escape. I rose unsteadily to kiss my saviour, but he was emptying my sack, holding up a bottle and inspecting the label. He resembled the unluckier twin of my execrable host, and this is what he turned out to be, though his hair was lankier and his madness even saner.

I withdrew my lips and offered my hand. "Batavus Droogstoppel. What business are you conducting in Limbo?"

"The name is familiar. I have often heard it."

"I hold the chair of astronomy at Chaud-Mellé. My achievements have been documented in numerous journals."

"No, I was in Java twenty years ago. You were involved in a scandal concerning the exploitation of natives on coffee plantations. I remember how you sabotaged Havelaar's reforms."

I blushed. "Those days have passed. But who are you?"

"Bartleby Cadiz. Put away your surprise. I am not the one who built the castle above us, merely a direct descendant. There are seven hundred men with this name, all totally vile."

"Honoured to meet the exception."

"You are deluded. I planned to eat you and add your bones and shirt to my raft. That is why I beckoned you across. Your history of hypocrisy and greed has preserved you. As you can see, you are not the first to be cast into this oblivion. My brother has a habit of disposing of visiting scholars in this manner. We argued over the ownership of a rare clock, a Mortice d'Arthur, and he drugged me with a mouse paella. When I awoke, I was rushing through space, and I realised he had tipped me into the pit. But I am a resourceful rogue and I removed my cloak, holding it above me to catch the air. Thus I slowed my descent enough to be overtaken by his next victim, who satisfied my hunger."

"In that case, I no longer regret my support of the slave-trade. It is comforting to know I am also evil."

"After I had gnawed his skeleton clean, I sewed his clothes to mine with a bootlace and rested my feet in the stirrups of his pelvis. In due course, another victim fell toward me, then a third, and each time I was able to sustain myself on their flesh and blood, adding bones to my raft and garments to my parachute. I presume Unfortunato had an intimation of my survival. Twins are supposed to be susceptible to such events. He has been gathering the equipment necessary to survey the bottom for decades. A misreading of Pomponius Mela encouraged him to believe Ultima Thule is located downward. He held the volume at ninety degrees. Now it seems his nefariousness has earned him a vehicle."

"Why did he not design it earlier?"

"So you credit him with an innovative mind?"

I retrieved my trousers and pulled out the procuscope. "Additional proof. A machine to communicate images."

"Ah yes, he stole that from a Dutch fellow."

"Bilderdijk! So you know his work?"

"Not from books. He recited a few of his poems and stories before I sank my teeth into his neck. A pedantic meal, but with a broad sweep. Do all your countrymen contain so much gristle?"

"He was here? In this pit? Impossible! He died in Haarlem more than thirty years ago. You are a fabricator."

"He did not. Which one is his skeleton? I forget. He had a deformed foot. You are sitting on his head! Such a noble skull, once stuffed with tasty brains. I enjoyed his cerebellum."

"Wretch! You have digested a national hero!"

"He was condemned to death the moment Unfortunato cast him into the pit. He should never have accepted Petrovic's invitation to demonstrate his proculuscope in Cetinje. So many geniuses have come to grief after an offer of work from the bishop-prince! They follow the obvious route from Belgrade, through the Tara Canyon, and always plan to spend the night at our castle. Unfortunato confiscates their inventions and passes them off as his own. He wants to be known as a scientist, but his aptitude is not excessive. He thinks a Cartesian Dualist is a mapmaker with a rapier. He has even set the value of pi as twelve."

"Outrageous! Yet he filched naught from me!"

Bartleby winked. "Are you sure?"

I felt at my hip for my telescope, but it had gone. The finest lens in Europe was now in the possession of a debased charlatan. Obviously he had taken it while helping me climb into the Hadesphere. Retrospectively violated, I wept into Bilderdijk's blank eye-sockets. My sorrow was loud enough for a widow, but exclusive, and when olive fingers patted my head in sympathy (or else to judge its freshness) I promptly regained control over my emotions. Only my knees continued to knock violently, as if they were the property of a galvanised acrobat, bounding over the moon, and I cried up to Urania, muse of astronomy, for my tears to hop retrograde, a Ptolemaic grief, and rejoin my ducts.

So too I prayed for stability, for this grim vessel of lashed bones to cease grumbling as if it was ready to collapse like an abused tripod. She must have heard my plea. It held.

But the support of dead savants hardly helped. As I shifted my mass on the flying cemetery, vertebrae and elbows jabbed my delicacies. Men of vision, stripped of garb, and that which lies under shirts, bleached not by sunlight but scrape of Spanish teeth! And now I despised them for odd angles, instead of perching in meek admiration above. Fellow scientists! Stand on the shoulders of giants to progress; that is the maxim. Wedge a tibia between your buttocks to plummet; that is the fact. And every bare bone wanted to try my flesh for size.

It was partly my own fault for not wearing trousers, yet I expected rather better from shins which might once have run to attend lectures by Angstrom, Berzelius, Doppler, Kelvin, Laplace, Schwabe and other leading alumni, professional or amateur, who had graced the lecture halls of our continent's most renowned institutes.

I massaged my cheeks and confessed to a giddy spell. "An incapacity has overcome me. I am near to swoon."

"The effect of hunger, Batavus. There is still a vestige of protein in this occipital sinus. If your tongue will not reach, I can stretch it to the necessary length with my own."

"Desist! I am too empty to retch before a feast! Nor will I consent to humiliate Bilderdijk with a lick."

"As you please. Then accept this humerus from the Russian geometer, Nikolai Lobachevski. Not only is it rich in calcium, but the vitamins in the marrow operate only in Cyrillic!"

"Hold! Your molars are traitors to science."

There were no railings on the raft and I was loathe to sit right on the edge, but the impulse to distance myself as much as possible from my new acquaintance was unreserved. Contrasted with his brother's artifice, Bartleby's honesty was refreshing, but it threatened to puff my mind out of my brain, like a typhoon during an ape feast (but less of my Javanese exploits), and I felt a craving for staleness, the sort of bland society encountered in dusty offices and auction rooms. I started to hallucinate about ledgers and gavels, the implements used in coffee transactions; an espresso delirium, black and pungent.

At last I compromised and positioned myself on the opposite side to my pilot, legs dangling into the void, but with one thumb stuck into the mouth of Bilderdijk, and the other up his left nostril. His bite held me safe, while his nose welcomed this unexpected return of a certain amount of crusty Flem. Then to cheat my mind of a few worries, before it added into a scum which lapped the inner walls of my own skull, I diverted our discussion into more abstract realms.

"Your brother claimed that this pit leads to the past, because Hell nullifies the present. Was he lying?"

Bartleby shook his head. "Count Unfortunato has monkey grossness in his life, also a psychology of weasels, but on this point he is correct. Earth is not a spheroid, no more than a clog is a true shoe, though both can be walked on. It is a Klein Bottle. The distinction is great, if one trips down a spout, as we have done."

"Not only is this confusing, but I deem it irrelevant to our peril, even for the purpose of distraction."

"What do you know of hypertopology? The Mobius Strip is a form with only one side and one edge. It is akin to a solid shadow. A Klein Bottle is an extended Mobius Strip, a tridimensional shape which twists through the fourth dimension. A fourth spatial dimension, to be precise. The lip of the bottle is drawn back into the belly of the vessel, pulled through a side and fixed to the base. It has only one surface, and no inside. It cannot carry water, beer or pickles."

"May I assume that Mobius and Klein provided this information as an appetiser to their steaming viscera?"

"I picked the former's brains, if that is what you mean. The latter is still a young man and quite healthy. Not all who meet my brother fall for his tricks and pit. Listen now: the stem passes through the bottle's side only in the fourth spatial dimension. But a confusion has arisen in nature that it bends out of Time. The devils of the rival Hells are glad to exploit the anomaly. It is like muddling length with cheese, or width with green! The boilers which power their perditions are located in this chronic stasis. Far cheaper on fuel."

"And they rob our futures to stoke their pasts? Disgusting! What if I am taken to a point before my graduation? Must I resit my examination? My integral calculus is quite rusty."

"For every second you drop, Satan takes one back and Eblis another. So I do not think the effect will be too drastic. But you are muttering, Batavus. Do you doubt my hypothesis?"

"I have witnessed part of our planet's shadow crossing the moon. It was round, not fashioned like a jar."

"But that was in Chaud-Mellé, where the Earth is a florin. Here, we are below Montenegro, and Castle Cadiz really is

a bung in the neck of a Klein Bottle. I know what you are thinking! How can the shape of a world depend on what country you are living in? I have read my brother's books on geography and have noted the documental evidence. For example, Cosmas Indicopleustes surveyed the world and concluded that it was flat, like a sheet of papyrus. In Egypt, where he worked, his analysis is still true. So too Pomponius Mela claimed it was shaped like a matador's thigh. That is also accurate, but only in Spain."

"You are no less idiotic than your brother!"

"Unfortunato does not fully grasp these principles. He has tried on many occasions to construct a glass model of the Montenegrin world. Each time it shatters in his hands. He wraps his wounds with Mobius Strips in lieu of bandages, and then they fester and crumble, like the shadow of a rotting corpse. Anatomy of an umbra!"

I turned from his sophistry and blinked at the distant walls of the funnel. The Hadesphere was lost to sight in a nadir of glaucous pus, but its chain was a constant presence, churning the chthonic atmosphere into vapour as it dropped. I was drowning in a plague pit of ill emeralds! If the Earth was shaped as Bartleby averred, then behind the limits of this well lay not the rocks of the mantle, but the far side of the bottle. No need to pine upward for nations and landscape! Armies might be laterally surging within a carbine shot of my predicament, just behind the veil of slime; towns and universities, one possibly with my younger self hunched over a lens, adding to the sum of life or knowledge; plantations burning in the noon, rows of natives picking for the superior races. But no! the idea was too complex and unnecessary.

"This is what happens when unfettered imagination is not channelled by the disciplines of academic life."

"I will not argue with that, Batavus. I have created my own science down here. Non-Euclidean Theology! It was essential I found something to kill the boring hours between meals."

"Well you have succeeded in dispelling my nervousness by exhausting my credulity. I shall now try to sleep a little. You may sample the wine at your leisure. A change from gore."

He nodded and smiled to himself, opening the Madeira with his teeth and drinking a toast in my honour, but without offering me a drop. "Next stop, the border of two Hells!" He winked. "Of course, all the Hells are contracting with the amount of atheism rife in the world. A pity for one so erudite in metaphysics as myself!"

I decided at that point to become an agnostic.

*

I was dozing when the pit gave way to a gargantuan cavern illuminated by a miniature sun and furnished with continents and seas. Bartleby prodded my shoulder and I squinted back to my senses, marvelling at the panorama far below us. In my dazed condition, I concluded I was dreaming of Venus and looked upward, as if to discern the Earth in the heavens, but a roof of solid rock smashed my fancy on its jagged edges. Even then, the marks of chisels attracted my attention. This was not a natural formation, but a product of sentient industry, though it remained to be seen what genre of beings were responsible for such ambition. I still anticipated devils and the extras of popular diabolism.

The funnel through which we had dropped into this mystery could now be regarded as a stupendous chimney, and Castle Cadiz, perhaps the whole of Montenegro, as the congealment of infernal smokes from an unutterable stove. The chain of the Hadesphere continued to descend close to us, but the orb itself had landed in the ocean and was sinking beneath the waves like a megalomaniac urchin. When I mentioned this to Bartleby, he sighed at my spineless simile and tugged the cords of his parachute. The cavern walls curved out on every side, their furthest limits obscured by cirrus clouds and mists. We shredded a bank of lower cumulus and details of the landscape gradually came into focus.

Bartleby pointed at an atoll with white sands.

"I shall make for that island."

"Yes, it seems the lushest prospect on offer."

"Also, it is uninhabited."

He gestured at one of the larger landmasses and I nodded nervously. It was infested with towns and scarred with roads. Better to avoid local hospitality until we had the measure of our hosts! While he directed the raft, I shielded my eyes and stared at the sun. It hung in the centre of the vast space and we were now level with it, near enough for our cheeks to fry our tears, but safe from a cindering of our canopy. Yet there was something amiss in its heat — the hardness of ultraviolet light. It was a sun to bask slippers rather than lizards. As I pondered, embers hissed down from its surface and steamed on the surf. Was it possible to fuel a star on coal? Kelvin had assumed so.

Not that I held the English scientist in high account. But here was evidence for his smarting concept. Then I noted a moon, also diminutive, speckled with craters the size of sinks, and a handful of planets, based on the real members of our solar-system, including Saturn, with gleaming rings made from bands of platinum. Cursing the theft of my telescope and vainly attempting to interest Bartleby in the spectacle, it dawned on me that I had fulfilled my obligations to Nicola I Petrovic, discovering a set of new worlds for the edification of his rule, though admittedly not within his borders. Would I ever return to convince the bishop-prince of my fortune? And how to secure proof?

So intent was I on these practical problems, repressing my instinct to calculate orbits, while Bartleby fixed his attention on the geography below, that I failed to appreciate the convergence of our glide with the course of one of the smaller globes. Our raft vibrated, as if turbulence played the marimba on its ribs, and my companion announced a sudden loss of control. We were dragged sideways. I turned in time to greet a planet looming out of a raincloud. It hurtled past us, tipping our vessel at an alarming angle and snaring us in its gravity. As we trailed in its wake, I again inserted my thumbs in Bilderdijk's facial orifices, trusting his smirk and snort as viable handholds, exactly what they were. Slowly, the disc of the world expanded, like the belly of a wife after she has spent too much time with your best

friend.

"We are being drawn toward it!" I wailed.

"There is nothing I can do."

"What a disaster! Farewell to that atoll, with its cool springs and coconuts. We have been deprived."

"Let us hope it is not a barren planet. How big do you think it is? My estimate is the size of Java." I refused to be baited so obscurely. "Monster! It is no larger than your castle. Indeed, I wager its dimensions compare more favourably with the dining-room of that edifice."

"Then it must be very dense to exert such a force."

"Titanium ores, I suspect. The soil is black and undulates horribly over the surface. Volcanic activity."

"No, it appears to be made of brick."

Blinking at this latest revelation, I recalled my fear about devils and the prior colonisation of Ultima Thule, to employ the Count's absurd misnomer. Furnaces are made of baked brick (one wonders if they can cook themselves into existence) and the crucibles sold in Paris and Stockholm by debased followers of the chemist Orfila, who are eager to disrupt the periodic table by proving the presence of carbon in sulphur, are mounted on brick columns. So the material had a double connection with Hell, and images of fanned flames and bubbling brimstone mortared themselves to my anxiety. Was this planet one of the stoves of Satan or Eblis? And how to operate a bellows with claws full of trident and forked beard, save with an insulated tail? Would not Bartleby invoke fits of glacial jealousy in the hearts of every fallen angel?

For a grotesque villain, my companion seemed curiously heroic as he stood at the prow of the raft and worked the parachute cords to ensure a safe crash. He smirked at my distress. "Your titanium ores are bats. Can you not hear them click shrilly?"

"I thought that was Lobachevski's knuckles."

As we floated down onto the equator, the bats scattered like shaved eyebrows. The landing was rough, but our craft remained intact. Bartleby bundled in the parachute and we disembarked with incautious steps, eager to gauge the strength of the gravitational field. One bound might return us to the long drop outside. I diverted my attention from the continents which now lay to one side, a dizzying distance under the lower pole, and inspected our discovery. The horizon was so close that a man standing in the southern hemisphere might vomit into the northern. We hobbled to the relative stability of the arctic circle, where the sky span slowly and a varnish of frost cooled our tongues.

"If the bats do not return, we shall starve!"

"Your head may last me a week."

"Are all your solutions reprehensible?"

Bartleby sniggered. "Perhaps not. Where does this door lead, do you think? Celestial broom-cupboard, or larder?"

Having travelled to the centre of one world, the chance to dip into the depths of another, however modest, held scant appeal. But my foolish comrade was already knocking for admittance. Partly to my relief, wholly to my consternation, the unlikely door opened and the hat and head of an eccentric figure emerged. He was human and obviously English, with bushy whiskers and faded frock-coat. My command of the language was incomplete and his dialect did not facilitate matters — it was a northern synopsis of grunts and snarls — but with appropriate gestures I was able to form an adequate picture of his meanings.

"Now laddies, hast ye come to rescue me or finish me off? Six years I've been entombed in this bugger, and death's no whit less welcome than a rope-ladder. Yi, tha'rt a duo of villains, shifty and bent on trouble, tho' your shudderin' lips say otherwise. Slip the blade in, if assassins thou art, and let me be, but don't be sulky an' ormin' with it. Hurry it now, for I s'd think I wanna be worsen off than I wor before. What keeps ye? Eh, tha'rt a numb-arsed pair! Well then, if not killers or saviours, I'm sure ye mean some equal bother."

I bowed. "We are three of a kind, sir."

"All captives of artificial spheres," hissed Bartleby, and before I could protest his exemption from the description, he indicated his head, an allusion I had no wish to decode.

"Well, I'm believin' no tale, laddies, but come wi' me in here, and say whate'er ye came for. You're stout to brave this planet, and few men could wish for dafter companions on his leaving party, howe'er he has to go, for that's what I've chosen to throw, and ye are invited to partake. An' when 'tis done, I'll run an' run and hurl mysen right off the world, if I can build the momentum, for I can't bear my situation anymore. 'Tis more drab than a day in Birmingham."

We followed him down a ramp into a dusty area cluttered with broken tools, mops and buckets. It reminded me of the storeroom in my office at the University of Chaud-Mellé, the provenance of a janitor. But this one smelled of an abattoir. I reflected on the propensity of bones to jut so awkwardly into my recent activities.

Bartleby sniffed. "You dine exclusively on bats."

"No cause for surprise at all, lad, for 'tis all to be had. Kingdom Noisette's my name, private engineer to 'er majesty, Queen Victoria, an' wi' a tongue that's tasted corgi pie. Nowt o' that lark here, nor e'en a gross substitute, but I make do. Leathery ears an' all. I fling open the door and snatch a few in my hat, but not too often, in case I scare away every bat jack o' em. Best tuck in."

I declined his offer of a wing and flagon of gelid blood. And to ray stupefaction, Bartleby wrinkled up his nose in disgust, as if this was a cannibalistic ritual, and he a stuffy moralist. Kingdom Noisette took no offence at our reluctance and replied to my questions with a full mouth, demonstrating his lack of pretension, an earthiness ironically suspended between two Earths. He was a typical English engineer. With pig iron and Irish labour in his pocket, he might build a bridge above his waistcoat, a canal to flow over the bridge, a paddlesteamer to sail the canal, even a zoetrope to entertain the crew, powered by steam. This brick planet, I conjectured, was one of his designs.

"Not just the planet, laddie, but the whole cavern! Aye, with funds approved by Parliament. A superb philanthropic scheme, done jointly with the French, them blessed pee-whips! I'm screeting mysen, to no avail. It came about when we found a passage leading into the centre o' the world. Sorry I am now for my fine big heart. Dunnat thee think but what I loved mankind, all o' it, even those souls condemned to baste in brimstone. So I thinks to mysen, how grand 'twould be to rehabilitate 'em, tug 'em out o' Hell like whippets from a vat o' molten trombones, offer 'em a second chance at goodness. An' I formulated the technicals o' a plan, so I did, to extend the grotto already 'ere, and fit it out like a regular Eden to act as a sanatorium for th' damned."

My mouth fell open in amazement. Here was the exact opposite of the Cadizite ethos — a man so concerned with the notion of community he was eager to devote his professional energies to cheating devils of victims. They were extremists in different directions, and I was placed somewhere in the middle, always the point of greatest tension when two forces pull against each other. I feared I might snap between the opposition of base and noble, malign and grand, but the vectors slackened when I discovered that even Bartleby was appreciative.

"You mean to say," cried he, "that you widened this gap between the Hells as a facility to redeem the most evil beings in history? Are those towns below populated with delivered souls? They are! My ancestors might be present! What a magical project!"

"Aye, so it were. Did it wi' spades in part, an' also wi' politics. Eh, what a shame it seems, but we had to involve the French. Got shot o' the Turk wi' diplomacy, kicked 'em out o' Montenegro wi' treaties, as ye know, to gen'rate a temp'rary atheistic vacuum. Then did lift chain-link veils on all sides o' the cavern, and when the Hells return'd, the edges jammed fast there, and the souls were pushed through th' holes, filter'd out. Dear o' me, million at a time."

"But why the miniature planets and sun?"

Kingdom frowned, as if asked a question beneath his dignity, and he adjusted his tall hat with agitated fingers. "Why, bairn, to control the destinies of th' liberated ghosts wi' astrology. 'Twas that made 'em bad in first place. Born under wrong signs, they were! Yi, thou must realise th' connection 'tween zodiac an' jemmy. Aye, for all rascals in world is a misalign'd horoscope, wi' gouty hylegs and impudent ascend'nts. Reborn when they come out o' Hell, so they are, but under our artificial zodiac wi' only the kinder constellations."

I was certain he was jesting, so I cried: "Presumably you wanted to replicate the soothing sound of surf on shores, an operation requiring a mild but regular gravitational tug?"

"Aye, 'twas part. But astrology was th' main point. It's no toss-up 'twixt fate and free-will for me. Predestination's th' winner. Zodiac is the cause o' all bother or virtue, an' th' malted richness o' men's life is brewed by the stirring o' th' planets in the pan o' heaven. Th' souls in Hell 'ad a poor start up above, but down 'ere they are refashion'd in the mould of good 'uns. At least 'twas meant to be thus! But them French sneaked a diff'rent plan in, hoping to indoctrinate th' ghosts in Gallic manners, use 'em as colonists an' stake a territorial claim to Hell. The bicycle-breath'd schemers! What dost thou think o' that cheek? Brazen as a cornflower an' grimy as wet coal."

"Calm yourself, sir!" urged Bartleby. "We appreciate the traumas of the project's betrayal. But why did you secrete yourself in a brick moon instead of resisting these changes?"

"Nowt o' my doing! When th' planets were all but complete, my major French partner, Monsieur Nutt, asked me to check 'em all out in turn. So I climb'd through the service hatch o' this one, an' afore I could pinch mysen, th' scoundrel had closed th' door. Yi, trapped inside, my frantic thumpings ignored! And then th' pee-whip ordered th' worlds to be hurl'd into th' sky! Catapults threw 'em all into orbit, an' I was powerless to get out. Now Nutt rules down there."

He set his mouth in a grimace so lugubrious that no comedy antic on any stage, not even those of the Theatre de l'Rodent, whose rich patrons feign shock at current satires, could have upturned his sallow lips. Nor any electrical prod, not even those of the Hospital of St Scudéry, whose poor patients know a different kind of shock and current. His expression was frozen at a melancholic angle lying between the acute and obtuse. It was possible to deduct axioms of regret from this attitude, and theorems of injured merit, and I might have tried, but a sudden and violent lurch managed to attain what was above all human agency: the purely mechanical inversion of his scowl into a smile.

Bartleby steadied himself against a curved wall. "A perturbation in our trajectory! Standard behaviour?"

Clearly it was not, for Kingdom Noisette forced his smile back down with both thumbs, clamped it there in its former misery, shook his head, rolled his eyes to suggest the system's stability, the smoothness of the planetary orbits, even when all heavenly bodies were in conjunction, and shrugged his aching shoulders. This goaded my mind down particular roads I had explored before, while studying forces. I picked up a flask of bat juice and watched the colours swirl.

"I believe we may be able to escape with physics. As a scientist, I am astounded by the gravity of this tiny world. It is far too strong for the low density material used in its fabrication. Escape velocity should be roughly the Sunday afternoon cruising speed of a common snail, yet we are held down as firmly as if by a world a million times larger. And the core is hollow, not composed of stripped neutrons. Indeed, the bats have no difficulty perching and leaving."

Kingdom reached into his pocket and drew out a gold watch, pointing at the spidery minute hand, which was visibly turning backward. At first I did not perceive how a damaged instrument such as this might answer my query, but then the engineer roared:

"Artificial gravity, laddie! Calibrated in Leeds, and made entirely from time. Tha knows how both Hells suck the present out o' ye skeleton? But only a living creature has a sense o' time, not a planet, so men who stand on a surface down 'ere always exist slower than the ground beneath their heels. In the case of a moving surface, this means they constantly fall more slowly off it than the base itself moves, which catches 'em up and pushes 'em along. 'Tis like sitting on solid nullity! On one side o' the world, the present's sucked by th' Christian Hell, and on t'other by th' Moslem. Effect is no different."

Bartleby timed his pulse against the watch.

"The discrepancy is noticeable. You mean that before we can plummet into the sea from any point, the planet has already carried us somewhere else? You are talking about a special form of centrifugal force? But the bats, who care less about past or future, lose only fractions of seconds and thus do not adhere to the brick."

I shuddered. "Too many concepts have been introduced, none of which may be adequately resolved today. I fear that if our adventures were one of Bilderdijk's fictions, the good author would scratch out a great deal for the sake of clarity and balance."

Bartleby rebuked me impatiently:

"This is not a story but reality! So there will always be an excess of eldritch ideas. Grow up, Batavus!"

I meekly continued with my earlier assertion: "Escape from this orb is possible by inserting an amount of bats in the parachute of our raft. That should negate the artificial gravity enough to allow us to push off into the atmosphere and drift free."

"Worth an attempt," my companion conceded.

We climbed the ramp to the surface, waiting for Kingdom Noisette to follow. He was rummaging among some shelves for reserve bottles of bats, having already collected enough creatures to provide the necessary lift. He crooned brass tunes as he worked.

My lungs rejoiced to be back outside, breathing the pure air of the immense cavern. But my head recoiled at the whirling spectacle. I sat on the north pole, exposed legs dangling like solid pink meridians over the arctic circle, whole body rotating slowly on the icy axis. Bartleby also sought the relative stability of the highest latitude; he sat just below me and dribbled, perhaps forming an international date line, a grotesque creation, though the planet certainly needed a little geography. It must be claimed, however, that when a mapped feature is also its own physical analogue, the thrill of exploration is lost. We watched for the engineer to emerge, which was a brief enough look, for his tall hat soon rose out of the hole like the cone of a model volcano, ready to spill an ale lava above the red-brick tectonic plates.

We rose to join him, and the three of us made our way slowly to the bone raft, striding carefully over the equator, where the turning of our small world was most dramatically felt. Vertigo made our company four. I turned it away, by narrowing my eyes. It went! Peering at the continents and islands was giddy torment, but the planets, sun and moon afforded an abstract solace for the imagination, and I concentrated on these. Though every member of the real solar-system had a direct counterpart here, the engineer had added a sprinkle of new bodies. Between the sun and Mercury lay an unidentified globe, the size of an alabaster villa, glowing white with heat and exuding a miasma of scorched polish. I watched it for some moments, made a few primary calculations in my head, clicked my heels in glee and tugged at Kingdom's sleeve.

"Is that Leverrier's gem? The planet Vulcan?"

"Now, laddie, I s'd say it ought to be, if thou would have it so. I dunnat care for that name mysen, and 'twas going to be labelled Momus or Census, but we ne'er got round to an official naming ceremony, what with Monsieur Nutt launching the planets early. And we ne'er picked names for two others, neither. See that ebony world — aye 'tis real wood! — with the throbbing poles? Summat like Desmond might be suitable. What say ye? These extra bodies churning in the sky are for adjusting the zodiac, for all have beneficial properties only and work to cancel out a bloody Mars or murderous Pluto. But this ball we're standing on is nameless too. And considering as it lures bats, and ye hast decided to roost 'ere as well, I say we ought to call it after ye."

Tears of joy streamed. The planet Batavus! This was a deeper honour than anything the Cetinje court might confer on me. I bowed and tried to kiss his hand, which caused him much embarrassment, for he was a British northerner, and the single method of gratitude which he fully understood was the pulling of trouser braces until they snapped painfully back onto the nipple. I even forgave his advocacy of the worthless superstition of astrology, a pathetic vice seemingly present everywhere, from the throne of a bishop-prince to a lobby between Hells. I had no ambitions left: it was enough just to survey the horizons of my material dignity. And now I was reluctant to leave the place, for it suddenly seemed clever and good and the finest place to do business.

Bartleby spoke up. "Do you hear that noise, Batavus? It sounds like a huge storm rushing up from below."

I danced on my namesake, the lovely bricks.

"It is a typhoon or equivalent disaster. What say you, Batavus? Why do you ignore me? I must chew your head if you persist. Answer now! Have you really forgotten your own name?"

"I thought you were addressing the planet."

He pointed at the ocean and shook his head. "I fear there will soon be only one of you again. Look now!"

His statement was no threat to my flesh. He was indicating an event far under (or sideways, in perspective terms) which was causing the loud cacophony he had mistaken for adverse weather. The Hadesphere was rising gradually out of the water. Studded with barnacles, netted with seaweed, sequined with starfish and urchins, its progress was stately and smooth, but green liquid gushed from the open hatch. By leaving the door open, I had ensured the interior would be flooded. The antimacassar was probably ruined! It was obvious the vessel had touched the bottom of the sea, and had come to rest on the continental shelf. So now it was being reeled in by Count Unfortunato, from his vantage in Montenegro, in accordance with his experiment. How disappointed he would be to find the hull scarred by limpets instead of tridents! What a threat to his religious convictions! It was not sweet revenge, but briny.

By displacing a large quantity of fluid, the Hadesphere had altered the volume of the sea enough to influence the cycles of the planets. The sudden lurch we had experienced must have occurred at the moment when it lined above the waves. Now the untold gallons were pouring back, but we had already been wrenched onto a different orbit. For all the

engineer's clever talk of artificial gravity, there was still plenty of the natural stuff to contend with! And we were plainly on collision course with that great iron orb, lifting on its improbable chain back up the funnel. What to do? Bartleby and I urged Kingdom Noisette to greater speed. We seized an arm each and dragged him over to the bone raft. Release the bats into the canopy! His blistered fingers struggled to uncork the bottles. There was much confusion as Bartleby sought to assist him. The bottles slipped but did not break. Hurry, imbeciles!

With horrible inevitability, the Hadesphere rose higher, and planet Batavus sped toward it, or where it would soon be. The scene reminded me of the childhood game of conkers, in which two horse chestnuts strung on cords are encouraged to smash each other, under the guidance of tactical intelligences, to bits. Fortunately, I was never included in that sport, because I was friendless, and so could not envisage the brutality of the outcome from experience. This was a blessing. Now the final drop of cold water trembled on the lip of the hatch and fell back into the dizzy sea. The vessel was at a midpoint between ocean surface and celestial fusion, and its external properties, the portholes and rivets, became visible. I loathed the machine as dungeon and executioner. Iron against brick! Even an exclusive grounding in theoretical sciences could not obscure from me the identity of the probable victor.

Bartleby and Kingdom were prostrate on the ground, rolling over and over, attempting to snatch the bottles from each other's grasp. Too many fingers fumbled with the same necks; the corks were stuck fast, but this was not the right way to loosen them! I decided to launch the raft on my own, but it was too heavy to carry. Constructed from parts of people, it was not technically insensible, and thus existed slower than the surface of the world, which kept rising to close the gap every time I managed to lift it off the ground. I sighed and drew my pistol. At the very least I would defend myself and my namesake world with honour. I crouched on the horizon, one foot in the northern hemisphere, the other in the southern, like a professional duellist, and waited patiently. Sparkling Venus made a close approach, but it was swathed in cloud, and the continents I knew lay beneath remained as coy as ever.

At last the Hadesphere was level with Batavus, and the rival globes hastened together. The iron sphere loomed like a moon, and I sighted the pistol at the gleaming hull and depressed the trigger. Nothing happened! I had drawn the empty firearm! There was no time to reach for its loaded brother, so I reversed the weapon and cast it at the galvanised eclipse. It span through air heated by the extreme compression and passed through the open hatch into the interior of the craft, where it clattered on one of the walkways. I angled my head back, opened my lips so wide it seemed I might swallow the danger, and screamed, a wail which chased the pistol inside to echo among sodden furnishings. A lunatic urge to jump suffused me, to leap through the door and onto the rococo chair, but my legs were frozen. Bartleby and Kingdom were lying on my feet! I glanced down for a moment and then everything exploded.

*

I woke on my back under a coral sky. The sun was setting, not by sinking into the sea, but with sheets of tinted glass positioned by an automatic mechanism of great ingenuity. As these filters slid into place, the pink darkened to ruby, and thence to crimson. And they partly blocked out the sound of the spitting coals, so a profound peace descended on the world. I was happy on my bed of bruises, listening to the sea, dreaming of mugs of hot coffee and tropical maidens, though I could not imagine how I was there, instead of floating on the waves, mangled corpse nibbled by sharks and cuttlefish. The mystery was so extreme that I forsook the delight of the situation and turned on my side.

Bartleby Cadiz winked at me. He was crouching over his raft, wiping the bones with his sleeve, inspecting the parachute for rips. The fellow had enough audacity left to whistle a jaunty melody as he worked. With a treble moan, I clambered to my feet.

"How are you feeling?" he asked. "Still sore?"

"I must confirm that supposition! Why is it that we are alive after the awful cataclysm? What happened?"

"Planet Batavus has been destroyed. It was shattered and its bricks fell to Earth as a meteorite storm. The Hadesphere was undamaged and has been drawn out of the cavern. As we plummeted, my raft somehow caught us up and we floated gently down to this peninsula. Note the craters. These are evidence of the cosmic tragedy."

"Such striking pocks! What of the engineer?"

"Kingdom Noisette left to seek vengeance on Monsieur Nutt. I deemed it best not to intrude on a private battle. I have my own concerns. Some of the debris from the brick world opened a hole in the roof of a hidden cavern. I have peered over the edge and believe that it leads to another Hell, a third perdition located below the other two. What an opportunity to check my theories and endurance!"

"Bartleby! It is a short route to misery."

"Not so. In Non-Euclidean Theology, only a curve has that property. My scheme is to drop straight down."

"How shall I return to Earth without you?"

"Kingdom said there was a staircase at the end of this peninsula. I wish you luck. Here is the bag of your possessions. It contains a razor. A shave might be appropriate, for you have grown a beard since the start of your adventure, and the Coriolis force of the brick world has twisted it into three absurd spirals. We are sartorial, the Cadiz dynasty. Now I must bid you and your chin goodbye."

I blinked. The stars were coming out, thousands of little lamps set into the icy rock of the giant roof.

"See how they mimic the real constellations!" I whispered. "And the miniature planets twinkle across the ecliptic! There is Jupiter with its daubed red spot! Uranus, with its thin aluminium rings, no match for the precious bands of Saturn! And here is Desmond, brass knobs glittering on dark wood, like an aerial wardrobe!"

"Goodbye again," said Bartleby.

"But you fail to understand! The worlds travel the zodiac, ensuring that no soul is reborn without a favourable horoscope. Yet the influence will extend upward as well as down!"

With an audible shudder, the last glass filter slid into place over the coal sun. It was night, soft, balmy, romantic, and the waves slurped against the beach like walrus tongues, hairy with phosphor. The stars in the stony empyrean did not glitter; they were sharp and stable. How were they maintained? I should not like to replace the bulbs in Cassiopeia. A ladder of lunatic height would be required, though it might be rested on the crescent moon for extra support.

Bartleby pondered. "You believe the project has meddled with events on the surface? It is not unlikely."

"The extra planets have adjusted the horoscope not only for spirits down here, but mortals up above! Astrological beams, if they exist, must radiate in every direction, and if they can pass through solid rock they will soak the outer populations as well. We have been thriving above the innards of a second solar-system. Since it was activated, there has been another player in the game of fate."

"That may explain sundry political and cultural upheavals of recent years. Are you no longer a sceptic?"

"I am primarily a realist. What has the ruination of planet Batavus done? Altered the equation! Tipped the balance! This unnerves me, I must confess. The system is now damaged."

"Perhaps we are a little more free again? If so, I welcome the doom of every planet. But I am weary of talking. I wish to begin my voyage to the lower Hell. Farewell once more!"

I now saw that he held Kingdom Noisette's tall hat in one hand, and his braces in the other. I felt suddenly fearful for the engineer, but I kept silent. Bartleby had filled the hat with bricks from the collision, using the elastic braces to connect it with his raft. Then he sat in the middle of the lashed bones, waved to me and threw the hat down an unseen hole. The line pulled taut and the raft began sliding toward the edge of the exposed cavern. The despicable traveller, eyes shining in starlight, steadied himself on the legs of scholars as he picked up speed, whooping and howling like a monkey in the jaws of a wolf, both nailed to a sledge and sacrificed to an active volcano.

The abyss, which was invisible from my position, suddenly belched a cloud of sulphur and an infinitely thin laugh. I could not approach, not even after Bartleby tottered on the edge and went over. My curiosity was shrivelled, and I turned and started striding in the opposite direction. My hunger was immense, but my pace did not slacken. Only once did I look over my shoulder, but there was no Bartleby and no flames. The route was cool sand, between clumps of reeds. I kept hoping to glimpse footprints, those of Kingdom Noisette in particular, but the ground was undisturbed. Had he really gone to search for Monsieur Nutt? By coincidence, the Dean of my University used the same name.

At the end of the peninsula, I encountered a spiral staircase which speared up into a rocky overhang. There was no need to walk to the walls of the cavern, and I was grateful for this, for they also served the far side of each Hell, and I did not want a damned soul being reborn over me as I passed. The metal steps took me up to an impressive altitude, lower than planet Batavus, but high enough to view the continents and islands, even the atoll which had been our first destination. I entered a hole in the ceiling and was back in the bowels of the Earth, exhausted but eager to push onward. The steps became a ramp in a tunnel, curving smoothly up and illuminated by infrequent lamps.

I was now on the reverse side of the stars, vulnerable to a flipped zodiac, a feeling I did not enjoy. I kept going and an hour later met my first fork, with the tunnel branching into two. Keeping to the left, the direction I always favour, I soon came to a second. These forks became a prominent feature of my return, rendering subterranean navigation almost impossible. Much more welcome, at civilised intervals, were dining areas where a traveller might rest and eat. The food was generally very bland, jars of marmalade and the like, but no less welcome for that. Throughout my ordeal I remained alone; not once did I even catch the echo of a boot in an adjacent passage. So peaceful!

Yes, but how I grew to loathe such quiet! I was bored beyond tears, my only distraction, apart from food, coming from observing the changing character of the surrounding rock depending on which route I chose. Soon it became clear I had entered an enormous vein of silver ore. I resolved to follow it as far as possible, marvelling at its purity. My ascent was facilitated by a series of moving stairways upon which I slept with much mobile profit. Higher up, an electric funicular was even more efficient. But there were still many stretches where my legs had to perform. Once I came to a circular window set in the wall and gazed through at a totally unexpected vista. The entire galaxy!

Behind the toughened glass was a cosmic void, sprinkled with remote stars and planets, smudged with nebulae. Looking down, I perceived there was no base to this bubble of wonder, and recalled Bartleby's claim that the Earth is shaped according to what country one happens to be standing in. If the world under Chaud-Mellé, my home, was really fashioned like a florin, this would explain the silver. I was working my way up through a coin! And this window was at the limit of one of its flat sides! Whether this was a conceit or not, my terminus was the edge. I continued without lingering. Weeks passed; months. I was losing a considerable quantity of the past time I had recently gained.

At last a door appeared at the end of a corridor. I gingerly opened it and staggered into a musty room with a familiar smell. It was full of broken telescopes! This was my own storeroom! I squinted and fumbled out of the clutter, mentally berating myself for not examining the room more carefully before packing it with useless equipment. I emerged in my fine office, ready to collapse into my leather chair. But a sudden noise from above alerted my suspicions. A fellow was unscrewing a telescope from an iron tripod in the observatory. It was myself! I was preparing to answer the summons of Nicola I Petrovic! I had voyaged back in time to a point just before my departure to Cetinje.

It was vital that I precede myself there, preferably without myself knowing. I ran out of the office and through the campus. Students sighed at my ungainly appearance, my triple beard. I did not look like a tutor, and would be thrown off the premises if I did not leave first. Along the dark streets of Chaud-Mellé I raced, to the train station. I had scraped silver from the tunnel wall and so paid for my ticket with shards of the world. I had the advantage of experience over myself. My carriage rolled through Austria and Carniola like a soot sausage, reaching Belgrade less than one accident

later. I jumped from the locomotive and strolled Stari Grad, a region of shops and markets.

Here I found stables and a horse. I did not obtain firearms. Silver may be plentiful beneath Chaud-Mellé, but a man without trousers has few pockets in which to keep it. I galloped through the Serbian wilds to the borders of Montenegro. Through the Tara Canyon I limped, with foamy lips and blistered rump. Finally I came to the leafy path which led to Castle Cadiz, noting there was no old man to dissuade me from spurring my mount up the narrow way to the isolated cliff. The bones of another horse were scattered around the base of the ladder. I climbed to the summit but did not immediately ring the bell on the gate. Creeping around the building, I peered in at a small grimy window.

Count Unfortunato was sitting in his chamber, sniffing my telescope and frowning. Then he raised it to one ear and rolled it like a cigar. I saw that the lens was charred, as if he had tried to ignite it. The fool had spoiled a valuable instrument! Putting out of my mind the disturbing fact that my other self also had a copy of this device, I hurried to the gate, pulled the bell and hid behind a bush. The Count came out, glanced over the edge of the cliff in confusion. I slipped in without being seen and made myself comfortable in his main room. The table had been set for supper. My flintlock, the empty one I had cast at the Hadesphere, rested on a pillow on a chair like a guest.

I sat next to it, helping myself to wine. When my host returned and beheld me there, his jaw swung open.

"Meister Droogstoppel! How did you change back?" His eyes travelled to the firearm on the cushion and he rubbed his brow. "This situation is most strange. There are two of you?"

I spluttered. "Another two, you mean?"

"No, no! You are this gun. When the Hadesphere came up, I noted how you had been transformed. I concluded from this that my ancestors abided at the bottom of the pit, for they were skilled at turning men and women into blunderbusses and pistols. Allow me to tell you about the mightiest warlock of them all, Ugolino Cadiz."

I lifted a hand for silence. "Save the family history. I am here to destroy you before my other self arrives. I do not want you tricking him into that iron sphere. It is cruel."

"Ah, so he is on his way? I hope the telescope he is carrying is an improvement on the previous one. The leaves were wrapped too tight for a satisfying smoke! Bitter as nutmeg."

"Gothic clown! Prepare your garb for blood."

He adjusted his cuffs and bowed low. There was no resentment in his action, merely a misplaced confidence in melodrama. Possibly he believed he might win the duel, or that I would spare him at the last minute. The prospect of dying certainly held few terrors for him, whether because he could not take my threat seriously or because he was tired with existing was difficult to judge. He certainly preferred to act the latter, for he indicated an object in front of the hearth: a glass vessel with a warped stem which pierced its own side. A Klein Bottle! It was empty, as it had to be, for such jars have no inside.

I muttered: "You have completed your model."

"A globe of the Montenegrin planet! It has taken me long decades to perfect. I have finally managed to produce an unbroken one! Thus my life is complete and I may die without rancour. But let me defend myself with this pistol. For you it is suicide."

Before I could raise my own firearm in fair combat, he snatched the flintlock from its cushion, interrupting its repast, aimed it at my face and pulled the trigger. Flint sparked on a dead pan. His cheeks turned a peculiar shade. I drew my primed weapon slowly, inserted the barrel into his gaping mouth and blew off the back of his cranium. He swallowed most of the fumes, leaving the atmosphere of the chamber remarkably clear. He slumped wetly, like a bag of grease. I dragged his corpse down the steps to the lower room, depositing it over the rim of the pit. The Hadesphere swung on its chains above the chasm, dented but firm. Now I had tasks to perform, cunning plans to implement.

Back at the dining table, I neatly wrote out my calculations of the orbit of Vulcan, or Momus, or whatever the body might come to be called. I left Castle Cadiz and clambered down the cliff to the forest path. How long before I met myself? I tugged my triple beard, but the spirals were stubborn. I expressed fury at my inefficiency. Doubtless, I was trotting along at an easy pace, admiring the scenery, wondering at the silence of the bandits, perhaps even praying for the twang of a crossbow to shatter the stillness! What a naive dunderhead! Just when I thought I might take root in the soil, there was a crash in the undergrowth and my steed came into view, with myself mounted atop.

I lunged for his coat, thrusting my page of equations into his deep pocket. Recalling my role, I pointed at the broader path. He frowned and mulled his options. This was the real test! If he disregarded my advice, as I had done before, and took the narrow route to Castle Cadiz, I would have to share Unfortunato's loot with him. It was a gamble. Perhaps not. With the demolition of planet Batavus, events did not have to follow the guidelines of the earlier future. I held my breath; so did he. Different air but same lungs! Had the mechanics of fate truly been disrupted? They had, for with a sigh he shook me away and urged his horse down the wider road toward Cetinje. Time to prance!

Now I was sole owner of the building, unless Bartleby returned from his extra Hell. The edifice did not interest me; I cared only to plunder the most valuable fittings. I felt less guilt for cheating my other self of his share than I should have, for I had given him the solution to the charting of a new planet, and this would secure his scientific status. I prayed he had the sense to keep my calculations to himself, deliberately failing to confirm the bishop-prince's sightings and saving the fabulous discovery for his return to Chaud-Mellé. If I knew myself (not so simple a feat) that is precisely what would happen. Back in the Castle, I began selecting the finest items to steal.

With a single horse, there was no hope of plundering everything. My choice had to be judicious. The most valuable of the Count's possessions proved to be his cumbersome clock, the Mortice d'Arthur. On its own this was worth my weight in platinum. I forsook the trinkets and baubles, the silk tapestries and dusty paintings, for this wondrous mechanism. With a disgusted snort, my steed sagged under the mass of cogs and springs. Yet I did not overload it with so much as an additional spoon. We would walk together to the port of Antivari. But I carried the Klein Bottle,

gently lowering it into the sack made from my trousers. I had a notion that the odd jar might expedite a new career.

I was bored with astronomy and wanted to return to the coffee-trade as a major dealer. I knew the business, how to forge the right contacts. My time in Java would prove invaluable. My other self might handle stars on his own; I was for beans. But setting up would be difficult. What did I have for capital? Silver nodules, my rings, the antique clock. Success could not be guaranteed with so little. I needed something to give me an edge, a gimmick. Then it came to me: the proculscope! I had supported it with affection since wrenching it out of the Hadesphere I saw no reason why it should not repay the favour. An appliance such as this surely had to be a powerful weapon in commerce.

What if one was installed in every household? It would enable a sly merchant to broadcast messages by electricity to millions of individuals extolling the merits of coffee consumption! A form of devious persuasion based on moving images! Already I envisaged ridiculous families crouched over a flickering screen, marvelling at the mesmeric pictures which were nagging them to spend coins on my commodity! These coffee advertisements might be constructed like miniature plays, with bathetic caricatures and plots. Perhaps two highly irritating lovers would be shown seducing each other over a pot of coffee? This story might develop from one message to the next! It was horrid and perfect.

Obviously there would have to be a few serious productions, adapted dramas, documentaries or news items, to distract viewers from the purely mercenary nature of the operation, but coffee propaganda would be at the heart of an evening's proculscope entertainment. To redefine coffee as a lifestyle instead of a beverage! My fate was percolating: how grateful I was for the termination of the influence of the brick Batavus! Clock and bottle on horse and shoulder, I left the gorges of Montenegro for better business. When I arrive at your town, watch how I use my implausible jar to serve my product, an instant espresso, to clients. And how, lacking an interior, it saves liquid and money!

Thais Von Oort

My talents are diseased — they rot like unsold lepers. My writing, once lucid, has become grotesque. Healthy words drop off the page and wither to mute stalks. I replace them with conceited ones, even as a gangrenous surgeon stitches thumbs in place of lost toes. I have attained a grand floridness in cuff and brow. Often, when I am thirsty, I drain jars of ink, dip my quill into my mouth and prepare reports that will never be read. Here is one such: do not listen.

The house is empty, the rooms are abandoned. I have shut myself in the attic with my apparatus. The skylights, positioned at random in the roof, turn a fractured eye to heaven. My work is a sort of wink; I move between the windows with my lenses, attempting to flirt with a frigid cosmos. It is the season of migrations. Wild geese slap my house on the slates like a friend who is also a bully. From such collisions, I derive protein, feathers and other essentials.

The town below ignores me: the people who move in ceaseless revel are too intent on enjoying the doom to glance upward. But I am selfish; the approaching twilight holds finer raptures for me. They may finish the wine, soured with petals — what use have I for dull senses? I wish to heighten feeling, to taste fully the very thing they despise. No man will share my pitiless joy; I will die in chaste loneliness. Ravaged is my frame, muscles wasted beneath my shirt. It matters little; they will bear me toward the final consummation.

It is dawn. The celebrants are still revolving, driven by the urge to hide every moment from sobriety. I recognise a handful of the soaked fools, once comrades. Bladders are emptied in the gutter, even as fresh jugs are raised to sallow lips. High above, in the urinary liquefaction of the morning, there is a purple streak. This line slices the empyrean like the divine wound of the female sex. Helplessly, I lunge at it with my syphilitic instruments, my impotent astrolabe. I begin to see erotic metaphors in every flaccid aspect of reality.

While my desperate colleagues delude themselves into thinking it is possible to exist wholly in the present, I am engaged both to the future and past — a bigamist who jumps rooftops from one to the other. Perhaps I should describe my relationship with memory and hope as a threesome: a girl dances behind me, her avatar burns ahead. Two aspects of one image, sharing tongues like slippers. On the back of faded envelopes, I attempt to scribble mathematical formulae, but strings of variables keep turning into phrases, lines of excessive poetry.

Thais! Why did you spurn me? Now I must steer my decaying intellect into the abstrusest regions of calculus. I shall have you back, despite your loathing, in a single devastating instant. Lanced to the core, your interstellar body will melt in my embrace. We will burst simultaneously, atoms plugging the nostrils of the sun. Without us, the world will cool, days turn over in bed and post-coital shame descend on the dying cities. But how long after our conjunction will humanity lurch on? No more than a year. Permit me to conjure details!

Refugees from a myriad parties will migrate forever, never finding those ultimate joys they seek. The carnival atmosphere which covers the planet will grow noxious. When the last feverish meteorologist is dunked to mull a glass of wine, our love will be forgotten. I care not. We will settle on some icy plateau, whipped by lusty winds into a sifted parody of passion. The desert springs will groan... I cannot continue with this threnody — my quill has snapped. When the next goose kisses a skylight, I shall quickly pluck and resume...

I first met Thais in a brothel. Like most professional astronomers, I was a virgin. My life was golden and precise, calibrated and equated. The collars of my shirts did not flap, buttons held cuffs together like the leaves of an onanistic novel. I worked in an academic institute where an expensive telescope had been sabotaged by students. Venturing down to the river in search of a replacement, I mistook the bordello's sign — a magnified sperm — for that of a lens-grinder. Entering with a pocketful of change entrusted to me by the Dean, I decided to stay and sample the dubious delights on offer.

Most of the girls were lunar in their abscesses. I was surprised to note that the deeper the pocks, the higher the charge. These harlots, I afterwards learned, had turned their defects to advantage, proving more accommodating than

conventionally-orificed whores. Feeling that congress with them would be faithless to the moon, I passed over. At last, at the end of the line, I paused and nodded.

The courtesan I had selected was an orchid from some dying garden, tended by a perfumed gardener. It seemed inconceivable that so strange a flower could bloom in that hothouse of plague. Perhaps this anomaly was arranged by those who know curiosities are best shown amid pollution. Or it may be that her qualities were overlooked, so novel was her version of exquisiteness. Unaware of the protocols of such establishments, I clicked my heels like sundials, shook her hand rather too formally, and introduced myself with an elaborate bow.

"Batavus Droogstoppel, Ph.D."

She smiled with one corner of her mouth. "Thais Von Oort." I kissed her odd name as it came out. The syllables stung. Her top and bottom lip were rival flavours — honey and grave.

I examined her more closely. Her skin complaints were very minor: a pale melanoma on one cheek. Her skull was cast in an Oriental mould, and though completely shaven it was obvious from her lashes that her missing hair was tangled and red. Her limbs sheathed bones capable of dancing on a tightrope in an unlit circus. She was short, with a curious stoop, and wore a dress which protruded stiffly from her lower back. Her teeth were crooked; her earlobes had been stretched by heavy rings almost to her shoulders; her small breasts were asymmetrical. Unlike her colleagues, her defects were ones of horrid charm.

I inquired her price and she frowned. "That is difficult to say. It depends on what you have to lose."

"My career and rather extensive memory."

Her eyes glittered. "I am cold and dirty, like an antique snowball. I may infect you with sluggish diseases."

Astronomy is a science full of cryptic patterns; the star-clusters of Orion, the unborn foetuses we call nebulae... coded recipes for some deeper understanding... we still fumble to decipher. I am blabbing: let me record that I accepted her remark with a laugh. "Ha, ha, ha! He, he, he! Hi, hi, hi!" It was, I assured her, a good joke; no less amusing for being incomprehensible. "But I wish to enter you in due course; what is the cost of that? My wallet is frustrated."

Silently, she took my hand. Her touch was as icy as a lens. Awkward as a tripod, she led me up a narrow flight of steps and guided me into a room with a view of the river. The decor was shabby but grandiose; large mirrors covered one wall. Floorboards creaked under my pedagogic shoes. I did not try to seize her at once, but stood by the window, back turned away. I wanted the benefits of distance. This isolation was necessary to preserve my identity. I could never abandon my training or violate such imperfection with impunity. Taking this delay as a lack of commitment, she rang a little bell on a bedside table.

Before I extracted my gaze from the window, the wardrobe in the far corner shook and the door swung open. A naked black man stood framed by the darker wood; his muscles were like full coffee jugs. An erect penis, resembling a monkey's arm clutching a blood orange, seemed not to belong to him at all. I imagined it sewn onto his pelvis with the iron wire of his pubic hair. Thais nodded, flicking an absent fringe. "A joy-horse," she announced. I bristled with resentment.

Slowly, with considerable dignity, he stepped forward. "He has been conditioned to respond to the bell," she explained. "His erection pushes the door; his seed oils the hinges."

I pouted sombrely. Environmentalism was the current rage. But I had no need for a joy-horse, whose function is to stimulate the lusts of the jaded and bashful. Rather than argue, I remembered my manners and asked for him to commence. I expected Thais to bend over the bed and hoist her skirt, revealing a minacious entrance, her erogenous lobby. I understand that men whose organs curl to the right prefer to puncture girls in this manner. Eager to witness the coupling, the slide of girth into softness, I squatted down close by her side.

She pulled me to my feet, entangling her fingers in my hair. "It is dangerous to enter me more than once," she growled. "Desmond is a former client. Now he resides in the brothel, a vassal to whores. He licked me like a melon; pips trickled down my thighs. After he burst inside me, it took weeks for his root to recover. Another such experience would finish him. Do not expect human sacrifice."

"I am a scholar, not an overgrown jungle god."

Smirking at the bitterness in my tone, she indicated the open door which led onto the landing. "Go and call the maid. Request clean sheets for the bed. The trick rarely fails."

I stepped out and followed her instructions. A servant came running with linen, a petite girl with slim hips, nervous eyes, hands which had folded too many ironing-boards. Her hair was fine, prematurely white at the tips, etiolated, like certain kinds of seaweed in hyperborean gulfs. She hurried into the room with lowered head; I realised that only Thais knew how much bodily fluid would have to be exchanged before the further passage of forms in or out of the chamber was feasible. A liar I am not, even during eclipses, but it was remarkably easy, as well as thrilling, to shriek at this domestic creature:

"A crimson louse scuttled under the pillow!"

She nodded and stripped the bed with agonising efficiency. With all the stealth and maintenance of a creosoted panther, Desmond crept behind her to introduce his cupidinous simian. A second time, I anticipated the position so detested by missionaries in Java and Timor — no politics in the bagnio please! — but again my imputations were devoid of veracity. Rather than deliver his surprise while she stretched over the mattress, he politely tapped her shoulder with his strong fingers. She turned with quivering nostrils, as if to receive further orders. But the monster had an agenda which was already polished.

Sliding his palms into her cleavage, like Satan praying between two colliding worlds, he ripped her bodice asunder, spraying the room and my nose with little hooks and buttons. Her arms rose to shield her breasts, but he held her wrists in one hand and lined them high, so that nothing but stale air came between the curves of her exposed bosom

and scrutiny. Moral turpitude and weak knees prevented me from assisting her. How far can a frolic go before it becomes rape? No use claiming she enjoyed his mastery, his uncompromising attentions, which managed to be both savage and tender. The principle is general.

Rubbing his chin over her breasts, he stiffened her nipples, which seemed to flicker in the dim light of the room, broadcasting signals of varying intensity against the walls, like infinitely distant, therefore essentially feminine, pulsars. He dropped to his callused heels, tongue traversing her salty belly as he did so, an equatorial mollusc greased in mahogany sap and other wardrobe juices. Too blunt to seek refuge in her navel, it continued to her belt, leather strap returning the kisses in French mode. I fumed. No article of suspension had ever dallied with me thus! Should I soot my epiglottis?

Thais appeared to read my thoughts. "On your turn, you may have my lower guts for garters, if you like."

"I am Dutch! Reserve such tenders for Cretans!"

With filed teeth, Desmond rapidly masticated the leather, adding to my bill, until it broke like a frayed tendon in a hangman's arm, sending the remainder of the maid's garment puddling to the rough floor. Now she slapped the crown of his head with both palms, right in delight, left in hatred, camouflaging his burning scalp with bruises. Her knees resembled a senile binary system, or a double exposure at differing seasons of the planet Mars, without canals. They were in obvious communication with his pulsing fruit. How joints and genitalia exchange messages like that is a mystery worthy of thesis and scalpel.

Fully nude, she was a disappointment, like a Neptunian moon drained of liquid argon seas. A maid requires an apron to ripple over her shores and certainties. But my desire to complain was no less distant, and when she refused to widen her legs, encouraging Desmond to utilise the groove formed by her parallel thighs as a course to my purchase, I could hardly resist applauding. He rested his moist harvest in the cleft of the false buttocks produced by the compressed knees, like one leg of a tripod in a canoe, on the way over a Borneo river to study a rare transit, then slid it up to the closed plantation gates.

His manners were those of a rival landlord. He used the ape's theft to simultaneously knock for admittance and batter entry. Here was siege, investment and transfixion in one. Bulb touched lip — he pushed and she rose into the air, her whole weight centred on his glans. As if a statue rode an obelisk, there was no penetration. Did she own a marble hymen? A maid could hardly be a virgin! No, it was the radius of his shaft, which needed to be square-rooted to fit, but was actually swelling with damage from levering her mass. His visage demonstrated the repertoire of strain and my ovation became almost mocking.

They stumbled around the chamber and he supported her hips with his large hands to save his girth from rupture. I was disgusted, attributing his failure to unofficial positioning — direction of penile curl really does determine entry requirements. Boy and girl are two pieces of love's jigsaw — always begin at the edge! — and if they do not connect, spare pieces must be sought. No good forcing or even oiling the knobs: picture and afternoon will be meaningless! Losing confidence in his own methods, Desmond relaxed. He expelled a deep sigh of surrender, and now it seemed he was offering her a reversed sword.

A shrewd gesture, but the pommel stuck fast on the threshold of her acceptance, too broad to slip past the flesh lintels. As if bored by his inability even to capitulate, the maid yawned, but lower than her mouth. This manifestation of tedium in a delta region was the key to unlock her modesty. She opened wider and suddenly was speared through, sliding down nine stressed inches, so that her stomach collided with his, filling the room with minor thunder, snowy cumulus fighting nimbostratus on the cusp of summer. And yet this renewed violence, the jawing of victory from the snatch of defeat, did not excite her.

On the contrary, she appeared more apathetic than before. Pulling a feather duster from the band of her bonnet — which had not been removed because the ribbons were indigestible — she blandly proceeded to banish dirt and granulated grime. As her joy-horse lurched from window to wall, she flicked every surface with the faded feathers. Desmond was ravishing her at last, lifting her up to the end of his one-note oboe and allowing her to slither back, with an unusual glissando squelch. Distributed over the totality of his blindman's punt, her mass was less dangerous, though his sufferings were still inordinate.

With each thrust, the maid's expression became yet more nonchalant, and her enormous eyelids began to close over her weary orbs. Desmond was near to collapse, knees buckling, taut buttocks dripping with tropical sweat. As they passed us, the maid took the opportunity to dust my torso and head. She did not extend such attentions to Thais, whom I judged far above or below purity — it amounts to the same thing! Soon the room was spotless, the crest of the strokes enabling her to reach the ceiling and sweep the plaster rose from which depended a baroque lamp. But her steed was approaching a frothing discharge.

"What do you conclude?" Thais inquired.

"Most invigorating. Yet I am troubled by the right ascension of his pole. This is not the southern hemisphere, thus it curls incorrectly for such coitus. He must stab from behind. The academic texts agree on this. Have you minimal regard for science?"

"We prefer experiment to theory. But soothe your fraught spirit. No violation has taken place. The real Desmond lives in the mirror. This is an extruded and hardened reflection."

I gazed at the wall of doubled images, observing that in the cosmos beyond, the realm which has been compelled to mimic ours, his member did bend to the left. I was satisfied enough to indulge in some metaphysical speculation, right there in that house of earthy conjunctions, that hole of flagrante by proxy, that paradise.

"I stand six feet from the looking-glass, so my image appears to be twelve feet away, yet it rests only on the actual surface of the mirror. What has happened to the other six feet?"

"Desmond borrowed them for a grave."

I frowned, for my question was purely rhetorical and the last thing desired was a logical answer, especially one so disturbing. Consider its relevance to my profession, which utilises two wholly different kinds of telescope — refractor and reflector. The first is a tube closed at both ends by lenses, which focus the light; the second is open at one end and uses a curved mirror for magnification. Like most stargazers, I employ a reflector; it does not suffer from chromatic aberration, that irritating smudge of colour when distant bodies are expanded through glass. Mirrors are also easier to mount than lenses.

But if the missing distance in reflections was really available for other purposes, then I had unleashed millions of parsecs of rogue length into the world. If so, I hoped they might make their own way without any fuss, and perhaps discover some breadth in the process. Else there would be anomalies in every spatial movement. A trip to the baker's might last a century on a bicycle. How tragic to be held responsible for stretching credulity so far! The Dean would dismiss me from my post; much as I now intended to dismiss a maid from hers.

Thais had not joked about Desmond needing a grave. He had folded to his haunches, though he still managed to work his pump. Overheating, he would certainly soon detonate, probably launching the girl into the air and through the window. It was my duty to save both, so I picked up the pillow of the bed, made a show of searching under it, stroked my chin in mock-ratiocination and called to her:

"Enough! It was not a crimson louse but a vermilion spider. Thus your presence is no longer necessary."

She disengaged with a shocking slurp and lumbered from the chamber, hips rolling like those of a puppet sailor operated by a trainee kraken. Despite her triumph over her horse, she had not come off lightly: it was doubtful she would be able to walk properly for at least another month. Fortunately, Desmond had not climaxed; I say this with some confidence, even though his shaft was basted in pearly juice, for Thais had little trouble in helping him to his feet and returning him to the wardrobe, where he acted the part of coathanger. A flaccid penis would have been quite inadequate for such a weighty jacket as mine, pockets brimming with tripod bolts and bronze coinage.

"Did that spectacle adjust your declination?"

"It certainly did, Thais. But it was superfluous. A joy-horse is a symbol of resentment. Though I have been impotent since my observatory was destroyed by a freak tornado, I am content with my problem and have developed a compensatory perversion."

"You must implement it now. Remove my dress."

The fabric slid easily off her hard skin; secured by a single clasp in the form of a sperm connected to an egg — so that stripping was like a reverse conception — the material almost seemed to evaporate from her calcified curves, lining up and dispersing on the brumal currents which rose from her flared nostrils in two parabolic cones. I expected tattoos or navel-rings, to accompany the boorish jewellery in her lobes, but her body was unadorned and terrible. Her nipples were long and hard and very pale, icicles created by centuries of decanting polar milk, or spines of a Lapp's dream of a cactus. I knew I would cut my tongue on them — even affix receipts for astrolabe repairs.

She guessed my mind was on instruments, for she indicated her white vulva, undisguised by any hair, and mumbled: "Astrolabia!" Another joke, and a good time to complete my laugh.

"Ho, ho, ho! Hu, hu, hu! But is that a tail?"

"Yes, Batavus. The one part of me you must not touch. I shudder to imagine what germs you might pick up from caressing it. No medicine yet devised would effect a genuine cure."

Circling her, I marvelled at the three or four vertebrae which had survived the conventional transformation into human. A vestigial tail! Professor Tatto at the University would be delighted! Evolution clearly felt no need to set up its ladder in this part of the city. I asked her a number of questions concerning its practicality; she was reluctant and evil in her answers. She could not wiggle it or use it to peel fruit. It was hairless and short, a stubby nonsense: a white thumb pointing at the primitive. I am rarely an elitist when it comes to rating civilisation, but with Desmond in the wardrobe and Thais disrobed, I felt like a tutor marking down a remedial continent. King Solomon's Mines had to be close, possibly sunk in the corner spittoon.

"I would like to take a spectrograph of this."

"My patience is wearing thin. Claim your privilege and leave, or I will ring for the horse to jump you." And my coat shook, indicating that Desmond and his penis were in agreement. As if to encourage me further, and distract my attention from scientific methodology, she added: "What is your favourite sensory experience?"

"The smell of a new telescope..."

It sounded facetious, but I have always adored the odour of a fresh mirror in a metal tube: the removal of a circular wooden dust-cover from an unused reflector, like a cork from a Jeroboam of coffee liqueur, then application of nose to stellar orifice and a deep inhalation! I love the scent of nebulae in the morning, just before false dawn — they are more delicious than cakes or ankles. A virgin focus which loses its innocence after a lusty pointing at Hellix in Aquarius, or Tarantula in Dorado, is my ideal, though I am not as choosy as some — Rosette in Monoceros is a fair target to turn a callow spyglass into a professional telescope. Try it at home, if you live beneath a sky!

"Really, Batavus! Will you never desecrate me?"

I unbuttoned my shirt and fumbled for the bundle I keep strapped to my chest. A dozen celestial maps spilled to the floorboards. "How can I concentrate with Desmond watching me?"

"He is studying his own reflection in the mirror. He is a double of himself; that is rather unusual. Most people have doppelgangers who are someone else. The cook in the kitchen below believes that Desmond is his double; an unfortunate irony. Not all doubles are animate or even bound to the land. Yours is surely a cloud."

Controlling my excitement, I gestured at the charts. "I want you to squat over the constellations and trace each

outline with womanly juice. They are laminated and thus reusable."

Without a flicker of amusement, she obeyed, folding her legs flat, so that her vulva touched the pages. Propelling herself with the sides of her feet, she glided easily across the glossy maps. I nodded approval at the glistening snail's trail she left in her wake. This effluvia was what I hoped to collect, but unlike other females, who apparently drip the dew of peaches from their pink portals, Thais deposited a hard frost which palpably lowered the room's temperature. Starting with Andromeda, finishing with Vulpecula, she iced every picture pricked in the heavens by the imagination of Arabs and Greeks. Oh for a lactating bosom! A full reservoir to spray over the Milky Way!

"Does the zodiac require special treatment?"

"No, Thais. There is a sign between Scorpius and Sagittarius known as Ophiuchus. I should find it impossible to decide whether to include it in any roster of extra services. It grazes the ecliptic and thus is technically part of the zodiac, but no planet stays within its territory for long. It must be a barbaric host."

"Then there is nothing more to be polished?"

"Not in our galaxy in this aeon."

She stood and I aimed my eyes at her tail, managing to blink at the tip before it was covered by her dress. She crooned: "A missing pattern? What happens if one is bom under it?"

"Horoscopes! Thais, you are a gelid jester!"

Picking up my charts, I secured them to my chest. My jaw chattered. It was suddenly winter in the chamber; I removed my coat from Desmond's hanger, emptied one pocket onto the bed and pulled it on. She inspected the cluster of coins and nodded. I was free to depart; back to college. As I adjusted my collar, she strode to Desmond and attached a string to his monkey. The other end was fixed to the inside of the wardrobe door. Then she rang the silver bell. His erection collapsed immediately, like a campanile struck by lightning, and the door slammed with such immense force that the room cowered. At last I was embarrassed; to simply walk out seemed ghastly manners. I offered my hand to Thais, but she snorted over it, and it recoiled in my sleeve.

"Ugly Batavus! You must never see me again."

My throat had run out of laughs. So my heels ran out instead, away from the brothel, no crab in a bed, down the stairs and into the hot street, where even the shadows burned away my memory of her grotesquely divine matrix. I sweltered under a storm of falling leaves, down by the greasy river, in the narrow alleys where living trees were incorporated into the architecture of shops and theatres. Without the Dean's change, I was airy enough to gain awful velocity. And so I did, until I tripped on the cobbles of the private street which dipped to the University. My buttons popped and the celestial charts scattered again. But this time, like sheets of sugar, they broke into thousands of splinters, clouds of utter cold tumbling from the incident.

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The college canteen was a dreary place, decorated with vertical mosaics of soot, but the company was convivial, and here I chose to engage with the few colleagues I respected. We occupied an elliptical table under a window set too high to afford a view onto the campus. At no time did we stretch to peer through the glass at scantily-clad girls. Our attention was focussed at a point beyond the cosmos of the student, however lithe and female; we maintained rigorous standards of conversation. Coffee as dark as a burnt retina was our sole indulgence — recall how much black there is in the sun! Pure espresso in wide cups; mirrors for a man with a wicked heart but sweet liver. Each time I raised the brew to my face, I feared I was going blind. But there is often yellow in sightlessness, and cheetahs may sometimes be visible.

At any rate, that is what Christopher Blayre told me. Our Registrar was a wise fellow, newly transferred from the University of Cosmopoli to replace Petrarch Mandylson, who had been found guilty of fraud. Blayre and Mandylson had left their mark on our institute in different ways. No scholar might have a bizarre adventure without loaning it to Christopher for his private delectation. He solicited tall tales in the same way his predecessor had begged for clandestine funds. Of all the academics, only I had failed to provide Blayre with a manuscript detailing some eldritch personal exploit. I simply had nothing startling enough to offer him. It was too early to write about Thais; I desired a more dramatic conclusion to our celestial coitus than the powdering of my maps. And the vestigial tail was an anecdote, not a narrative.

Blayre was present at the table, as was Trajan Pepys, the Bursar, a stout man with a face lined like an indecipherable diary. Opposite Pepys sat Professor Tatto; next to him, Doctor José de los Rios, from Toledo. Our gathering was rounded off by Joachim Slurp, the Prelector, a man who dried grapes in his purse. We all had diverse eccentricities and diffuse wisdoms. Bravo for us! Blayre was hustling for original yarns, and I was considering the feasibility of extrapolating the history of Desmond from the gradient of his erection, an integer I had memorised. Apart from the difficulty of jerking truth out of a genital angle, the resultant story would have to remain in the closet with the meat that generated it. But I was spared such trouble by Professor Tatto, who launched into a memory of a musician with a feline phylogeny.

"Yes, a vibrant conductor," the honourable buffoon avowed, "and he used it as a baton, you know. His tail, I mean! Batavus, you have turned green. Have you been sniffing Uranus?"

"Not for weeks! My attention is sunward..."

"Still looking for the planet which is supposed to lie between Sol and Mercury?" chortled Pepys. "Or up the skirts of Venus? How debauched a man who spies on naked atmospheres!"

"The stargazing world is genuine," I protested. "And a transit is due next week. I invite you to my chambers to

witness the phenomenon. I shall name the discovery after Momus."

"The god of ridicule? Is that appropriate?"

Slurp muttered: "Herr Batavus has chosen well. His profession is a systematic circus with lapsed clowns."

"Why not Zumboo, god of monkeys?"

"Fie, Tatto! Such an obsession with tails!"

This raillery was halted by Blayre, who raised a languid but rough hand and said: "We accept our learned colleague's overture. An assembly in his garret will be most diverting."

I inclined my head and smiled, though my heart was pounding. Tatto returned to his report. I ached for relevant details, links between the maestro with a brush and the whore without a bush. But he was a waffler and quack: he expounded on his scepticism concerning tailed men and the dubious character of previous examples. His conductor remained the only authenticated specimen of homo caudatus, a fact which disinclined him to believe his own evidence. This was taking scientific empiricism too far, but he was adamant that repeatability was an essential component of what constituted truth. He stated this thrice, to make it more secure. Pepys, de los Rios, Slurp and Blayre questioned him eagerly on the physical and behavioural parameters of his subject.

"Did he sleep with a fish for a pillow?"

"Was he a social climber? Did he stick in trees?"

"Active mouser or a basket-case?"

At last I could no longer control myself. I jumped up on my chair like a student anarchist and blurted:

"Were his lips rival flavours? I mean... Do not assume I am happy to kiss a cat... Or a celestial object, but... That is, to say... If a fellow lusted for something exterior to his species... engaged in heavy petting with, for example, a comet..."

The canteen fell silent. Blayre rolled his enigmatic eyes and the grinding was audible. Then tongues clicked in counterpoint, a wry fugue of disgust and my whole body deflated.

Pepys attempted to save me: "Talking of perversions, I once knew a man with a phobia of diphthongs. I chased him with an encyclopædia, a copy of Æsop and a palæolithic ægis."

"What! No Muswell Hill Elitists!"

Contrivance is never aloof in the canteen, and now the door opened to take over from the Bursar's brave but ineffectual assistance. Skulls gratefully swivelled at this source of distraction. But my shame turned to alarm as the Dean inserted his oily face and snagged his gaze on our table. Our leader rarely entered the dining-area; he was opposed to the absence of garlic. He trotted briskly across. So I dismounted to a more submissive altitude. When he reached my side, he grinned, draped an arm across my shoulder and lisped: "I lost my way, but all to the good. The college is a labyrinth without a cord."

I bristled. "Another Cretan reference!"

"Now Batavus! Did you obtain the replacement?"

The query bewildered me, but then I remembered. The telescope! How could I admit the money had been used to buy release in a brothel? Such a confession would ensure my dismissal. Would a lie satisfy his ears? To cry that I had been robbed? He had a short way with failure of any sort. It was far nobler to bluff my way through the encounter. I indicated my brimming mug of coffee. "Here it is!"

He leaned over the espresso. "Peculiar design. I see nothing inside but an expanse of ineffable blackness."

"The interstellar gulfs," I announced sagely.

He wept at the poetry. "The endless void! Space is truly deep. But tell me, do all telescopes smell good?"

"Only percolated models. Never instant ones. Come, let me focus it for you. Thrill at the resolving power!"

Taking a spoon and a small pot of milk, I adjusted the focal length by stirring the liquid and pouring in a tight spiral of cream. Delighted by the spectacle, the faultless beauty of creation, the Dean lowered his face until his nose pierced the surface.

"Behold the galaxy of Andromeda!" I bellowed.

"I see it clearly. But wait! It is dissolving! The spiral arms have broken off! A cosmic disaster has struck! To witness such a cataclysm in my term of office! All those stars! All those planets! The civilisations which surged over secret continents..."

I was compassionate. "They felt nothing."

My words, and the sniggers of my colleagues, were muffled by a near clatter and a far explosion. The canteen shook. Stone fragments cracked a window. The city had experienced a meteorite shower! We clambered over each other to peer out. A few girls were lifting their skirts to display their knickers to an irregular glowing lump which cooled on a knoll. You know how they lavish more affection on animals and minerals than men! In the distance, new falling stars punctured roofs and bridges. Members of the Orionid storm, I was sure; always an active array. These meteorites would look rather fetching behind glass, in the small museum attached to my Department. It was important to scoop them up before the silly public contaminated them with dirty thumbs and ideas; the venture would require funds for transport to the impact sites.

The Dean considered the proposal. Cream dripping from his nostrils, he finally assented. He delved into his wallet and removed enough francs to buy the hindquarters of a tram — or another spell with Thais! I took the proffered coins with a little bow, winking at the portraits on each denomination. There is something about Dean Nutt which I am reluctant to accept: his French origins. Certainly an impostor, but for what reason I have no inkling. I nodded to my colleagues, stalked from the canteen and selected another set of astral charts from my office. This time, I would encourage the shaven harlot to trace the paths of the planets across the ecliptic, including the epicycles. The retrograde motions of her Jupiter would be particularly exciting — perhaps even jovial! Ho! What a genius of humor I

am! So thither to depravity!

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At least a dozen meteorites had to be collected first, to prove I was no shirker. The stone on the knoll was first in the bag; it had seen what I only dream, underwear of assorted hue and cut. Female students have very intense seductive powers, but they channel them into exams, charming the rubric off a question, rarely the buttons off a questioner. At least not on our campus. My subject is a disadvantage in lusty dimensions. Nothing is earthy in a science where the only available bust is a brass skull of Copernicus. But no use complaining: I had money to pay for it, and Thais was ruder and staler than any fresher. I found the second rock wedged in the neck of a Laocoön statue. The star had broken the head and taken its place; cosmic, if not cosmetic, surgery.

Down to the river I cavorted, passing through a park where two men were duelling, one with sword, other with litter-stick, as if over gems or thighs. Surely they were not fighting for the meteorite at the bottom of this crater? Into the sack! I ran off like a child. Soon I was in the street with the sign of the sperm. In my delirium, I entered the café on the ground floor, stumbling toward a chef who wore vegetable epaulettes. He reminded me of Desmond, and my gape must have betrayed this allusion, for he ignored my tongue, which requested meteorites, and listened to my lips, which demanded whores. Up the stairs he ushered me; to the hall of selenic ladies. I surveyed the line. Mare Crisium! At the end, I stopped and strolled back down. Where was Thais?

"She does not exist? What do you mean? Speak, you radically fissured strumpets! I am Batavus Droogstoppel, connected with the highest places! How dare you occlude her heavenly body?"

Brushing aside the pleading arms like wisps of helium cloud, I made for the chamber where we had romped. The door was unlocked. The interior was basically the same: bed, mirror and wardrobe. But the lack of Thais was a compact presence, a rent in the coitus-continuum. I rapped on the side of the wardrobe. No reply. I grasped the handle, pulled with all my might, but it would not budge. Then I noticed the bell on the table. One tinkle and the upright coffin burst open. Desmond stood in a cascade of sweat, root throbbing like a broiled sausage. It had beaten my biceps in the tug of war! I saluted it, because I always admire an underdog, even a pork dachshund, but my raised fist left no doubt that it might descend to skittle this lugubrious mongrel away.

"Where is she, you overcast freak?"

To my amazement, the brute answered in extremely polite and lilting tones, as if he had been educated! But more to the point of oddness, it was not the solid Desmond, the man, who spoke, but his reflection. Flesh lips moved, but the voice came from behind me, from the wide expanse of silvered glass. Indeed, the surface of the mirror was vibrating like the membrane of a telephone. As it flexed, the flat Desmond, the image, took on a vitality denied to the protruded version. I could believe that this was the real person; I listened carefully. And now I felt a little shame for my prior attitude to the dark races.

"She has moved on," the soft voice warbled. "Her orbit compels her to journey through a cycle of brothels."

"Thais has found a job elsewhere? An address!"

"I have none. She visits the lowest dives of the city in a complex spiral. Eventually she may swivel back."

"Then I will wait! How long, my ebony friend?"

"She passes this way once every 140,572 years. There are countless bordellos on her course. She must pass through every one. The spiral is inward. When she reaches the hub, it is reversed. If you are determined to tarry here, I must counsel patience."

I smote my defunct groin. The comet allusions were growing yet more marked! Despite the azimuthal appeal of Thais, I was too busy to linger for a hundred millennia in a bawdy house — I should lose my job. Better to explore other bagnios on my own initiative. My darling snowball, and her absolutely frozen vagina, would be easy to find, with a thermometer and basic meteorological research. Patrolling the slimiest alleyways, taking readings of localised temperature; I knew how to proceed. With a wave at Desmond, I lifted the silver bell to ring him back, but before I sounded a note, he grinned sardonically.

"I watched what you did with her. And all that nonsense about penis slant determining method of entry! Where did you gain your knowledge of sexuality? What books were your source?"

"Traitor! I learned the act of love from astronomy manuals. The sky was my tutor. The sprinkled empyrean was my Vatsyayana! When I lay down along the equator on the isle of Sumatra, the stars undressed above me. Like an eel on a spit I was! I saw Saturn rush to enter Virgo; her hymen was too tough and he bounced off. Science may term it retrograde motion, but I call it failure to snatch a maidenhead. So the gassy suitor tried again; he offered her a ring and was successful! You dare to laugh? Then explain the existence of Camelopardalis! That constellation was not even known until 1624, when Jacob Bartsch peered out of his window. You think the Greeks ignored it? Impossible! Thus it must have been conceived from the congress of Perseus and Cassiopeia."

"What a lonely tragic worm you are, Batavus!"

In anger, I cast the bell at his clapper. But it chimed as it flew, and the wardrobe door slammed shut, protecting him. I stormed out, heels scarring the bare boards. In the corridor, I encountered the maid, hands on hips, duster in bonnet. She smirked and I muttered something about an abstract interest in crimson arachnids. Unable to pass, I stopped, heart sinking in my chest, more embarrassed to observe her clothed than in the buff. Wagging a finger, she ordered me to poke out my tongue. I shut my eyes and obeyed, anticipating a fathomless kiss. But to my anguish, she drew her duster and flicked it across the moist organ, tickling my buds, provoking a violent fit of dry retching.

"I missed a bit the first time," she explained.

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Since the collapse of my observatory, I had relied on a small three-inch reflector to continue my work at home. It was powerful enough to resolve many planetary nebulae, but fully portable. Mounted on a wheeled tripod, it was a nomadic instrument, wandering the length of my attic from glass window to crystal skylight, helping me to stalk binary systems and rogue asteroids. At that moment, I was bothered with the sun, which was hiding a planet from astronomers, clutching it to its bosom. Sol is female, and has bigger spots than the moon, but her radiance is a mascara. An object inside the orbit of Mercury had been glimpsed for decades; it was my job to determine its position. Because it set so soon after its mother, this was a task for the day, for torrid noon.

Only through a transit would it reveal itself: a tiny circle moving across the face of the sun. My telescope was aimed at the blazing globe, the tongues of Helios. I had removed the dust-cover, so that the photons rattled into the hollow tube, struck the concave mirror and were bounced into the lens. To place my retina to eyepiece would result in blindness, a gouge with a fusion poker. I had set up a cotton screen, onto which an image of the flaming ball would be projected. This is also the prime way of studying an eclipse! The white cloth fluttered in a slight breeze and the solar pool seemed to age with each wrinkle. The secret world, my own Momus — or Census, a second option — had not yet made its debut, and I warmed my hands on the unblemished disc.

A commotion at my door, and I descended to admit my friends. Trajan Pepys led the way, followed by Tatto, Blayre, de los Rios and Slurp. But Dean Nutt had also joined this party, uninvited! Grumbling, I fetched an extra chair to the attic, positioned it behind the others. My colleagues settled in front of the screen and blinked at the silhouette of the sun. A ribbon of cloud passed across the circle; a bird. I lifted a finger to my lips and checked my watch. Now for the proof of my calculations! As a mathematician, I am careful and precious. The moment arrived; just for a blink, failure basked. Then, at the very edge of the disc, a notch, tiny but conspicuous, appeared. A worm was biting the molten axis about which our planet turned! Celestial corruption!

Slowly, this speck crawled across the vast searing expanse. Mite in a desert! I threw back my head and laughed, while the assembled worthies mumbled in awe. A new discovery for the college! One at a time, starting with Tatto, they called encouragement. Keep at it, Momus! You can do it, little world! Feet stamped, palms collided, chairs scraped. Pepys was on his feet, whistling. What pluck! Give space one for me! Almost there, my boy! Finally, the spot gained the far side of the sun and fell off, back into the cool void. The attic erupted; hats were thrown into the air, to smash against the ceiling. Even Dean Nutt was dancing, though not with a partner. I was certain he had a false notion of what had happened, but I had no desire to negate his celebration.

"Well done, Batavus! You have become an asset!"

I stroked my chin: "That is not untrue. But more funds might assist my work further: old coins, new worlds."

"Will a score of guilders suffice?"

My nod was slight but firm. "A prudent number."

He delved and passed; my pockets jangled. I showed out my comrades, and one other. José de los Rios gave me his carnation. My reputation was established; I was secure. The Dean was the last to go — he lingered to speak with me. Lowering his voice and glancing about, he whispered: "Who was she, Batavus? That lovely creature!"

I was aghast. "How did you find out about her?"

He frowned. "On screen, of course!"

There had been a misunderstanding. He was not referring to Thais, but to another female. The sun! For the Dean, my experiment was nothing but a moving picture show. He had confused science with the cinema. His smile was exploitative and he leered as he added: "It is the big one I am interested in. Not the little piece."

"Certainly. Her name is Sol. She is hot stuff."

He dribbled horribly. "Ask her to visit me in my office. I might be able to accelerate her career. I have contacts. Just between you and me, Batavus, I think she may become a star!"

I grinned. "Some would say she already is one."

He slapped my back. "Good fellow! But let me offer you some advice. Hire a pianist on the next performance."

After he had gone, I returned to the attic and fixed the dust-cover on my reflector. The tube of the telescope was glowing; it had drunk too many sunbeams. I blistered my fingers touching it. Collapsing the screen and closing the shutters of the oriel, I inspected the cash tricked from the ridiculous Dean. Enough to buy a thermometer! Surely tracking down a prostitute was less arduous than discovering a planetoid? Thus I managed to delude myself in my instant of glory.

*

I had no plan for investigating the bordellos of the city, other than to roam at random through the streets. The establishments did not advertise themselves; word of mouth was deemed sufficient to maintain an influx of clients. My thermometer dangled from my belt, striking my groin like the spine of a deflated codpiece. A mercury model; the conveyance of alcohol into the deeper zones of the city would guarantee robbery with violence. The fluid metal rose and fell less in accordance with natural conditions than at the chill cripples who graced most doorways. No matter how bland the entrance to a tenement, these beggars provided an ornate flourish, a complex swirl of rags and absent bones. I realised they were interfering with my measurements and I cursed them.

As I wriggled further into the urban pocks of the downtown slums, I began to comprehend the immensity of my

task. Every other dwelling was a whorehouse, slick with gin and semen, neither spruced with tonic, vulvas steaming and flexing like radiators or kettles. On the stairways, lepers petitioned me for employment, offering themselves as assassins who might squeeze through catflaps and other unlikely spaces, and discard not only the blade after the deed, but the hand that wielded it, so that evidence would be non-existent. These too prevented me from using science to gain my desire. Catching their dread plague, my instrument shed its numerals, so that calibration was dismembered and accuracy exiled to a colony. How I shrugged the partial pariahs to bits!

Often the owner of a bordello would nod at my description of Thais, insisting she had already passed on. Many would question her essence and claim that I was chasing a blizzard. The more inventive madams offered a normal girl with a tail chained to her rump; the trick was harrowing and I shielded my gaze. Soon I was out of money, for a fee was demanded even when a client did not copulate. Now only the bottom of the rotten barrel was affordable: those hovels — never call them houses! — of ill-repute which festered in that quarter below imaginable depravity. They at least would accept garments as payment, so that a customer might enter muffled to the chin, and leave with only sores to hide his modesty, after he had enjoyed, nay endured, uncanny intimacy.

There are two underworlds in our city: the outer, maintained by the municipal authorities for the sake of foreign visitors, where colour and vitality nudge the senses; the inner, my new destination, which had been forced between the encroaching follies into an area of collapsed sewers. The latter is considered necessary to provide the villains of the former with nightmares — else pillows will remain dry and unspoiled, and geese will never need to be plucked to manufacture fresh ones, and another old industry will be ruined. The inhabitants of the central pit have erected ladders and walkways around the mating shacks which constitute its major architectural wonders. The sewers run with grease, and ramshackle canoes trade epidemics between notable odiums.

Months previously, I had briefly scanned a prohibited guidebook dug out of the archives of the college library. Blayre had shown it to me as an incitement to adventure; if a stunt could be made criminal as well as carnal, he was mollified. That volume listed theatres, taverns, cockpits and other venues repudiated by the government. The appendix on bordellos was well-thumbed — by the thumb which leaves white prints! One infamous entry was a brothel on stilts, in the shade of a pigsty constructed like a pagoda, a single hog on each level, the cleanest building in the mire. I struggled to remember the details as I tripped down the mazy ways into the filth, napkin tied around nose and jaw, boots wading in regurgitated toxins, looking for the elevated abyss.

There were no cripples or lepers here: they were too afraid of what lurked under the opaque waters. The rainbow scales of serpents shimmered in the saturated dusk of alleyways. I chased a token quantity, foolishly convinced they were connected to Thais. Icy tails! Below the struts of a cankerous pier I fumbled. But this was a desperate, not seaside, resort, and the jetty was an illusion; I was beneath the brothel! I searched for a method of access; the hairs on my nape told me she was near. Lamenting the ache in the hole reserved for my soul, I berated my addiction to her callousness. It is the same when I blow kisses at Pluto; the speed of an osculation is two tongues a sigh, far too slow to hit that planet before stripping and dying on the solar winds.

While I wallowed in sludge and self-pity, a cacophony, the grinding of cogs, giant wheels coated in molasses, echoed from an adjacent alley. I hurried to explore, throwing myself into the path of a bicycle! And it was my true love mounted on the adapted saddle, leaning forward, ringing her bell at my glacier reflexes! The collision was like a star casting a ray which bursts on a lorgnette; all that distance not to be seen! No, I was the twinkle, she the lens! I knew my knees were injured; they folded under me and I squatted in slime. She span over my skull, landing on her rump, which boomed like an armadillo bell. But she was up again rapidly, frowning so deeply that I started to drown and had to loosen my shirt to breathe. Then I lunged for her garters.

"In motion again, Thais? Do not hide from me!"

"Dunce! You have damaged my tail!" She hoisted her skirt and craned to inspect the appendage. It was bent at a slight angle. I was intrigued to detect two or three extra vertebrae.

"A crooked cauda," I muttered. "How charming!"

"Frustrated fool! You have knocked me off course! My trajectory has been altered. I was heading for that mounted brothel, irresistibly drawn by the gravity of its sordidness. But now I must shoot off at a tangent! Who can calculate where I will end up?"

I giggled. "Surely no harm has been done?"

"Harm! You might have inaugurated a catastrophe! What if this minor deflection results in a major collision?"

"Pshaw! Pshew! Is this benumbed banter?"

She was serious; her grimace was huge, far wider than her mouth, or mine, or a draco's frill, or even the name of the third brightest sun in Cetus — Kaf'aljdhma. Fear pinched me.

"Have I accidentally endangered the world?"

Without uttering another sound, she dredged up her bicycle, settled on the saddle and accelerated through the shallows. I pursued her. "Come back, Thais! I will absorb your shock."

She evidently disagreed, and increased her velocity. Pedals rotated like the chambers of my scrotum; I skated on submerged cobbles. Narrower and narrower, the streets; into a gloom stitched from smells. She pulled away from me, and my heels throbbed like cupboard meat. But I refused to abandon the chase. Now she was gone, and my direction was speculative. I kept going, deeper into the turmoil; so deep I passed clean, or unclean, through it, emerging on the other side, racing outward. Still I lurched, and finally arrived in the expensive suburbs of the city, where tall and thin mansions rose behind trees, and parted curtains revealed pianos and people so wide they must have digested the missing flesh of the cripples and lepers. Lost things always turn up.

My strategy was at fault. Instead of hunting Thais, I should attract her to me, with guile and physics. She had betrayed her weakness: the actual tug of a brothel, the gravitational field set up by any abode where love was purchased. Her orbit was determined by the location of these houses. No point trying to map her route: fluctuations of force, with the hiring or expelling of girls, would nullify my estimates. Thus I must create my own bordello, a decoy to pull her in! Swindling more cash from the Dean, who wore a cautious frown on his nod, I visited the markets for suitable fittings and adjuncts. On one stall, I found scarlet drapes, lanterns of a darker hue, iron bedsteads, music-boxes with punched rolls, handcuffs, and much else besides. Truly indecent!

My attic was soon a perfect imitation of a sumptuous bagnio, erotic lithographs on the walls of the stairwell, to spiral the blood up to the reinforced bed. A revolving disc on the windowsill flashed the red light over the rooftops; unlike my rivals, I had science for an advisor. There was a single flaw: no madam to run the establishment. A solution came to me as I fluffed the heart-shaped cushions. A bodice was constructed from my graduation gown; a wig from an armillary sphere stuffed with wool. It is shameful to admit, but I enjoyed fabricating a cleavage. A monumental effort of will not to pour cream down the fissure! Time was sifted by an hourglass: easier to fiddle when paying by the hour. In lieu of towering shoes, I pasted prisms to my slippers.

I waited a week, growing impatient in my disguise, turning away men who managed to knock on the door without hands. Were the furnishings too weak to disrupt her flight? How could I increase the gravity a notch? It was an academic problem, for she came, whipping chills down the chimney, frosting the skylights. I answered her summons and struggled to remember my role as she wheeled her bicycle inside and locked it to the hatstand. Pouting sickly rouged lips, I drawled:

"Have you arrived to take up a position?"

"As many as feasible," she replied. It was a delightful concept and I jiggled my false bosoms with ardour.

"Kindly follow me to the interview room."

She scrutinised the garret with a cynical squint. I gestured at the bed, the satin sheets, and added: "Shed your attire and stretch over it. I wish to inspect and rate your yoni."

"Beware! It has superconductive properties!"

Despite this warning, she obeyed without rancour, pulling off dress and stockings, bending forward, feet planted firmly on the floor, as far apart as the distance of an ejaculation squared, pressing face and upper body into the mattress, arms extended, springs moaning at her density. I was treated to a cruciform perfection. Her buttocks were cold and tight, the cheeks of a statue; they did not wobble as I patted them, eased them open in my mockery of an appraisal. I clucked affirmative noises with my scorched tongue. No rose-gate here: the spout of a frozen maelstrom! And below, the hoary arras to a domain of stiffness and breakage. Inner lips glowed with eerie luminescence; her vulva's summit featured a display of tiny northern lights. Aurora clitoris!

With a shiver, I relaxed my grip, allowing the ashen globes to move back. Terrible temptation to massage the tail above, which had grown two extra vertebrae and was still twisted.

As if aware of my lust, she cried: "Unsafe!"

I circled the bed, draping my creased vision over the hollow of her lower back, her ridged spine, steep shoulders, extended neck and finally her head, with its smooth scalp. Wait! Was this the beginning of stubble on her pate? Spots, evenly spaced; flush with the level of the skin, but dark red, like pinpricks. I toyed with her mutilated ears, caressing the lobes, gently removing the rings. Then I pounced! With a howl, I snapped handcuffs through the holes! These implements had been lurking under the pillows. Fixed to the bedstead, she now wore the frame as jewellery, and it suited her, or rather me — my purposes, I mean! Despite her hopeless position, she attempted to resist, thrashing about, shaking the piece of furniture like a giant clockwork flea.

"You have passed my test, Thais."

"Batavus? You do not appreciate the danger!"

"I believe I know what you are. Beyond the orbit of Pluto, at least two light-years from Sol, spins the Oort Cloud. A conglomeration of snow and exotic frost. The womb of comets!"

"Festoon of fatuity! What of it?"

I sucked an aching ear: "It is your double!"

Waiting for her struggles to subside, I mused on the horror of this unobservable region, and the trauma of its movements. A bowl of ice! Did this imply the stars beyond were wrong? Had astronomers been deceived by an unknown lens? Were they more distant than conjectured, but bloated by the walls of the phenomenon? Oh, for a hammer — Europa on a pole! — to smash the liar! Until then, the satisfaction of a baser urge! Undressing with trembling fingers, I shed my morals. From torn bodice, bogus bosoms tumbled; from pounding head, armillary sphere; from smudged mouth, dirty speech. To ease her curiosity, I said:

"My impotency will not hamper our congress."

"No human may have me twice. If you try, you will end in a situation more constricted than Desmond's tomb."

"He was a closet hero. I shall take precautions."

Turning her head to peer at me, Thais snorted. My nudity was absurd and famished, a transparent sheath for my spirit. A shrivelled lingam in a threadbare nest of fibres was the best my masculinity could offer. But I had scant use for a flesh erection: rigidity and power can be adjusted more accurately with alloys. Off with the sheets which hid my telescope! I unscrewed the device from the tripod and strapped it to my pelvis with a belt. Have you ever tried to strut with the vanity of moons cradled in your groin? It is ungainly, but not entirely unwelcome. No need to worry about

deflation or prematurity; it will stay hard and true in any lobby. Even the mouth of a red dwarf will not be able to exhaust it. The cosmic dildo is tempered with unsupple stars.

There are quite a few members of the public who are ignorant of the system used to rate the power of telescopes. My three-inch reflector is more than two feet long; the first measurement refers to the diameter of the mirror. Imagine a penis the size of a man's arm, with the girth of a grapefruit, or small meteorite, fabricated from metals. I challenge you to compare your own root with that! Thais was impressed, for she raised one eyebrow and licked the other; her tongue, like her tail, had grown. Swaggering closer, shiny cylinder swaying with the motion of my hips, I positioned myself directly behind her. Though her nails were not shaped like keys, she scratched at the handcuffs in her ears, but she was still less frenetic than I deemed necessary.

"Thais! Do you not fear a difficult ride?"

"My internal muscles will crush your optical priapism."

I was amused by this thought, the Newtonian character of her faith, which relied on a matrix of kinetic forces. "You think I desire to enter you with the tube? To focus a cervix?"

"Why else tie a phallus to your genitals?"

"Pshiw! This is not a refractor."

Her confidence faltered. "What perversion do you intend? I hope you realise the macroscopic consequences!"

"I have thought of nothing else, since you squatted over my charts. You are my muse and mithridate, my Mastigophora and Möbius. I know I may not keep you, but once only was not enough! To ease my life, I must cure myself of you! Seize the ultimate you can provide! Once satiated, I will be free again to pursue abstractions."

"My limits are far beyond your endurance."

"Not so. My stamina is adequate. Once I stood in a garden, studying a satellite of Saturn — Tethys, I believe — for seven hours, with only a flask of hot cocoa and one flapjack. You will learn! But now a hint as to the nature of my superlative vice."

And I plucked the dust-cover from my instrument.

She gasped: "The pipe is hollow!"

"Indeed. Not a phallus at all. We may consider it to be an extruded vulva. And what is that on your back?"

"My tail! You aspire to use it as a male organ?"

"Darling Thais! I have the vagina; you have the penis, reversed but compatible with my dimensions. How my precision equipment aches for your anatomical discrepancy! An anti-rape!"

She winced at the paradox, and so did I, for logical contradictions stain the mind and are best avoided. This was a special occasion. Taking care not to touch her with my skin, I pushed the opening of my apparatus over her tail, gently sliding it forward until the very tip made contact with the mirror at the base. She grunted once, theatrically. I could not feel her whole length inside me, as is usual in erotic novellas, because there are no nerve endings in a telescope, at least none that I am aware of, but the imaginary sensations were spectacular and ineffable. Now her substitute member had fully rammed my false orifice. What joy in being a cannon! She wriggled, adding to my horrid delight. No escape until I had milked her bone javelin dry of marrow!

"Cretin! Something is wrong! You must dismount."

Panting, I replied: "There are no rules in love, Thais! Pleasure is the sole tenet. Eros is an anarchist."

"But the telescope is full of sunbeams!"

"My debt to Momus, the world I have discovered. There was a transit and I acted the dispassionate voyeur."

"You have set me off too soon..."

I continued to thrust, as regularly as possible, but it was obvious she was changing. The auburn spots on her scalp were rising out, turning into tiny hairs. Her metabolism was accelerating! Now I comprehended her reference to sunbeams; a comet is generally an uninspired object, but as it nears the hub of a solar-system it starts to vaporise. The tail grows to inordinate length; the dirty body erupts into gas, lashing space like a swept fringe. Soon locks were swirling about her shoulders, disordered and diabolical. I should have been shocked enough to withdraw, but flame tresses excite me. My oscillations increased in power. I sobbed; still a cerebral joy, but prodigious. Though no climax was possible like this, I bounced on the brink of an apocalypse.

While she bloomed, in that narrow attic, rather than in the kitchen of Sol, notions of morality were irrelevant. I was unable to pause in my motion. Not that I am shirking responsibility for subsequent events, but I am a man as well as an astronomer. There is a point after which coitus negates the future; all that matters is the moment. Such was my position as her hair cascaded down her back, over her rump and onto my telescope. And now came proof of an old mystery. There are recorded cases of female ejaculation; my colleagues, with the exception of Blayre, are sceptical of the evidence. But my instrument confirmed the rumours: with a massive convulsion, it pumped all its remaining solar energy into the tail of my sweetheart. I was drained and damaged.

Yet still I copulated! Multiple release is feasible with a yoni and controlled experiments in this field are never unwelcome. Thais muttered to herself in a strange language — the vowels, if not the music, of the spheres! Her hair filled the attic, knocking over ornaments, an ocean of autumn colours; I was choking on ringlets! But I continued to thrust for a second culmination, which would be dry and unlit, and was only cheated of it by an irresistible force which pushed me away from her. It was not connected to her hands; my telescope seemed to be dismounting of its own accord! Then I perceived the cause: the tail was stretching, thickening, doubling in size every minute. I fell back, saved from injury by the red tide which surged throughout the room.

I attempted to rise, but was paralysed with terror. The tail curled high, descended like a cyclopean club and struck the bed, shattering the iron frame. Thais was free! And she was no longer even partly human. Her hair became finer

and finer, blowing in an impossible storm, for windows and door were locked, though I might have trapped some solar wind in the reflector, dispersing like streams of neutrinos, now bursting erect from the top of her head, passing through the ceiling. But the tail was solid and lethal, and I swooned away at the idea of it coiling around my neck, taking its revenge on my respiration! Blackness was a relief, and I even remember my final thought before unconsciousness — had the pubis of the harlot also sprouted a quantum forest?

I was roused by the bells of a fire-engine. The particles exploding from my roof may have given the impression that my house was ablaze. The telescope lay flaccid on one thigh. Unstrapping it, I returned it to the tripod. My brain screamed and my limbs were filled with platinum. Then I stumbled over a moving tail! Thais was still here! But no, it led out of my door onto the landing. I lurched out and discovered it sliding around the bannister, down the steps. I peered into the stairwell. Wrong again! It had already passed through the hallway and into the street. I hurried back to the attic, stood at the window and searched for her on the road. The tail followed the route of the gutter, like a rivulet, but the spine which owned it was nowhere to be seen.

Then I looked up and clenched my teeth in disgust. My neighbourhood is one of parallel streets, neatly arranged as far as the city limits. A demolished house opposite permitted me to gaze at the next avenue in the series. It had a gutter which also contained a tail. Ruined buildings in that street provided visual access to the next row. The same tail! Every street here has at least one gap in its dwellings. I looked beyond: tail again! Fourth and fifth terrace, the tail! Had she stretched her way out of my domain like a cosmic snake? My eyes rose higher. Tail in the sixth road! The seventh! And not a pedestrian to quake at this apotheosis of a comet-girl! Eighth and ninth! At last I spied her on a distant mountain, like a hydrogen knot on a parsec whip.

I entertained the firemen reluctantly, for I was deeply disturbed by the romp, and its subsequent germs, and had no desire to contaminate them; I am selfish with unease. They had seen the tail, but concluded it was the hose of a rival station, and that the blaze had been extinguished. I did not contradict them. When they left, after denuding my pantry of coffee, I cast myself on the bed and tried to brood. But I am too thoughtful for that. Thirst soldered my tongue to my teeth; I crept to the sink. Before I reached it, I passed my tipped desk. A bottle of ink had rolled across the floor. Impulsively, I picked it up, removed the cork and swallowed a mouthful. It loosened words: not from tongue but fingers. I cut a quill, selected a sheaf and began to write my adventure in blue saliva. Because I prefer a purple style, blood needed to be drawn from my gums before my tale could be handed to the Registrar.

While I was struggling with the ending of the first sentence, I was startled by my telescope, which sneezed! I wiped my lips and waited. And it coughed! The device had contracted a virus from the harlot's tail, as worlds may do from the appendage of a genuine comet. I crept over to it, loathe to linger too close. But it sneezed again, and consumed with pity I wiped its moist rim with my sleeve. What pathogenesis lay in store for me? Fortunately, I know little about medicine and was relatively safe; I am convinced that insight into disease sabotages the immune system. Thus surgeons must wear parabolic mirrors on their brows to deflect bacteria. But I tended my reflector for the remainder of the evening, and into the night, pouring a soothing drink of honey and brandy into the tube. Steam from a kettle was wafted over the focus, but it had soon sneezed so much that the viewfinder was patently sore.

On the stroke of twelve, a violent spasm whirled the machine on its bearings, flicking mucus in a wide circle, before it came to rest at the window in a different position. Just out of curiosity, I placed my pupil to the lens. I was greeted with a smudge of polluted white. Fluid on the mirror? No, for the stars in the background were clear and precise. Then I squeaked in triumph and terror. A comet! My telescope had discovered a new example! This is a rare occasion in the career of an astronomer. And the first man to provide details of its trajectory is allotted the glory of naming it! I scribbled calculations with my quill, on the side of the device, until enough evidence had been collected. Then I slumbered. Dawn licked me awake; I hastened to college, desperate to communicate my find before a major observatory chanced on it. The comet was a gift to Thais, a foolish attempt to apologise to her.

The gates were open, but the campus was inhabited only by cleaners. Chlorine fumes scoured telescopic fevers from my nostrils; I waited on a bench outside the Dean's office. He finally arrived and I confronted him with my news. He was ebullient, for the addition of a comet as well as a planet to the pantheon of local space was a remarkable coup not only for the institute but his regime. He gave me permission to summon colleagues and journalists to a conference. I was too nervous to prepare a coherent speech. When I strode into the vast lecture-theatre, to both genuine and ironic applause, I allowed my guilt to prattle. Duplicating my equations on a blackboard, scarcely aware of the mass intake of breath, a reaction which so depleted the available oxygen that a balloonist in the audience cast off his trousers for ballast, while another emptied his pipe on the head of the fellow in front, I roared:

"And this new object shall be known as Thais!"

"An irregular appellation, Batavus!" shouted Blayre, from the front row. "There is no deity by that name."

I replied with conviction: "I think there is!"

After this show, I paced the corridors of my Department. From every scientific establishment in the world, congratulatory telegrams arrived. A special edition of the city newspaper was thrust into my hand. My face loomed from the front page, above a flawed report of my presentation. At the bottom, in smaller type, a paragraph detailed how a mysterious cable had appeared the night before, threading through seven thousand streets, vanishing no less incongruously. A third story insisted that the borders of an adjacent country had been redrawn. The girl was heading to a place beyond the reach of any man, and I had done this. I pictured her sliding over ranges, through deserts, under the ocean, perhaps through a fissure in the seabed; a hydrothermal vent. Below the tectonic plates! What life would she dally with down there? Not me! But this was speculation; Tatto and Slurp came to me with proven wine.

We sipped almost to oblivion and sobered nearly to sense. Pepys and de los Rios joined the party. The festivities blurred night and day, and erased memory, as they must do to be significant. Pitiful comedy this: I should have

remained drunk. In the centre of the city, in a square below the truncated cathedral, a gala was arranged in my honour. Fireworks and harlequins; any excuse. Geese crossed the sky, over the comet's path, an arrowhead on a shaft. But no, that was much later; tonight. At the time, Thais was too small to be seen with the naked eye. How she would hate to be observed any other way! Musicians strummed cheap guitars; mulled wine simmered on lamps. Nobody guessed what they were really celebrating: the end of all suffering. Perhaps they regarded my celestial darling as just another gunpowder rocket, bright for amusement against the Pleiades, but eternally reusable and lavish of fuse.

I went down with my comrades. People were so determined to enjoy my achievement they forgot about me. Hundreds of shoulders were not offered to carry me around, but hats studded the square, having fallen from high arcs, making perambulation a risky business. Pepys stubbed toe on beret; Totto on trilby. Cold heads, prime targets. A clown wept into a lute, so that the melody slobbered its own encore. Police kept order with truncheon and hoof; eyes, ears or mouths sewn up. Further along, a masquerade; men with false chins, absurdly long, chasing a tailor. And here a concert of clockwork singers, one a virgin, with impossible cube for zither. I felt pain in every nerve and vomited a ball of ions; lightness of spirit does not garnish me. Among the revellers, I recognised sundry pocked harlots, true paradigms of the demi-monde, skirts lining like tides in their own mellow pull. And I raked not even one.

A month passed and Thais grew prominent in the heavens. She came to dominate the sunset, when no other star dared appear, as she had briefly governed another purple dome. The firmament had a duelling scar; she was livid. One autumnal morn, I entered college to be greeted with execrable silence, as if a giant tongue had been extracted from the foundations. A telegram on my office desk fluttered when I opened the door; I caught it and read the message I had been waiting for. Numerous observatories had computed that the comet was on collision course with Earth. The accident with the bicycle! I had spoiled her natural orbit and prevented her from limiting the damage by bursting the corona with sunlight! I should admit nothing, save to Blayre, who would approve. Later, a pact of astronomers vowed to keep the catastrophe secret, but it leaked out. Dirges replaced aubades, with no adjustment of tuning.

Thus the philosophy of the carnival changed, not the potion. One at a time, my friends abandoned me for the bottle. They rejoined each other in the park, arm in arm, dancing; gavotte and pavane. Blayre was last to leave, not because he shared their aims, but in case a story might bloom in the cinders of society. A fine way to complete his collection! Alone, I wandered the passages. The undergraduates responded to the crisis with opium and japes, a minimal shift of behaviour. When I was sure that most buildings were vacant, I shuffled into the canteen to acquire coffee. At my traditional table sat Dean Nutt, peering into the depths of a mug. He grimaced at my entry and indicated his espresso's meniscus. Cheated of a relaxing isolation, I stomped to his side. He rubbed his cheeks, rattled his saucer. He had dropped all pretence of a French accent and there was an obscure clarity in his enunciation.

"Is it true, Batavus? Are we all doomed?"

"Utterly," I answered. "To bits!"

He sighed. "What a semester! First the destruction of the Andromeda galaxy, and now the end of the world! But tell me, might it be an error? What if this comet is only a figment? A feeble hope; I know. But I still fail to sight it with this telescope!"

I joined him at the lens of his beverage.

"The sable void and nothing more," I concurred. "But purely because you have not focussed it. Attend!" Picking a lump of sugar from a nearby bowl, I dropped it into the coffee. "There it is! A cosmic cube of solid hydrogen, ammonia and carbon dioxide."

"It has begun to dissolve! Are we saved?"

"An optical illusion," I murmured. My hand knocked the cup. "I have broken it! Replacements are costly..."

He did not dip into a pocket for his purse. "No matter. The college will have to be closed. The cleaners have gone. Your Department has been lost under impervious layers of dust."

"Then I must leave: to die far from you."

As I went, he gripped my elbow. "A favour! That actress in the film you showed! Is it too late to press you for an introduction? Kind solace in a mordant hour! Nothing unsavoury."

"A meeting can be arranged. Climb to the top of the cathedral spire before dawn and she will ascend on the eastern horizon." This was an act of generosity which I instantly regretted, so I continued: "Stare at her as she rises. Do not blink! Keep your eyes open until the darkness comes into them — she will be yours alone!"

Thus I waved and departed. Outside, I realised that the Engineering faculty was still operating. Men were clustered around pipes and screws, evidently trying to figure out how to fit them together into a form that had never existed before. The result would be phallic; I was positive. I pushed through the gyrating drunkards on the streets, vintage despair in my arteries. To the domain of lepers. I engaged one as an assassin; such an easy contract, for I was his target. A simple suicide, shorn of doubt and terror. I braced myself for the blow, my debt to the race for Thais, a tragedy to be compared with the hampered love of Ægeus and Æthra, an analogy I voiced aloud, but it did not come. Because of this comparison! The leper was running away — so keen to escape me that he left his feet behind and had to lurch on his stumps. I was bewildered, and accused him of slack technique. The soulless heel!

As I squatted in my gloom, it occurred to me that he was the fellow with a phobia of diphthongs! He had contracted leprosy by avoiding all ligatures! Ponder, for that is clever. I should not have referred to the classical lovers; the double blow was too gross. As mating spiders to an arachnophobe. But this was more than coincidence; it was not time for me to die. Fate had offered me a brief reprieve. I returned to college. The engineers were busy with materials. They still believed in the salvation of everything. They were erecting a ballistic missile to blast the comet away from Earth. I did not assist them, but I watched carefully, waiting for inspiration, for my personal quest. I finally grasped that Thais did not hate me — she was coming back to aid my groin. I held a celebration on my own, with astrolabes rather

than alcohol. Engineers threw a bucket of rivets over my sociopathic cranium.

In the centre of the campus, they primed the missile. A last chance to avert disaster. But who would steer the thing? A suicide mission; too responsible for students, too merciless for humans. Fast claustrophobia, the worst kind. Posters were pasted on walls asking for volunteers. Some lunatics turned up, were interviewed, expelled. At last it was announced that a suitable candidate had been found, a man with experience of small rooms. For a moment, I was thrilled. Then I learned his name — Desmond! The joy-horse could fly the device, I had no doubt of that, but he would sabotage his own lungs. When the comet struck the magnetosphere, ripples of energy akin to the sinusoidal waves of a silver bell would engulf his vessel. His manroot would instantly stiffen, forcing open the hatch. Air gone, his capsule would double as a real coffin. And my missing six feet of reflection would be eternally lost.

*

Now the world is intoxicated; I alone have ambitions. The best is yet to come, but not for you. Still I toil hard, for there is one trifling, but complex, detail left to address, and undress! Calculus is a rude friend. In the corner of my garret, my telescope has sprouted hairs. I watch as auburn curls undulate between the legs of the tripod. Pubic lice crawl over the unchaste reflector — they descend onto the bare boards and I make novae of them with my heel.

My instruments are diseased — they rot like defrocked astronomers. I write to soothe the fever which consumes them. I share the illness, but slyly maintain myself on quinine and laudanum. When a tooth tumbles from my gums, I grind it to powder and seal the grains in the hourglass. The molars keep good time; the incisors run slow. As I compose my words, I am aware of the gnawing drip of enamel dust as it chews away my hours. The perspiration on my brow resembles saliva. Not the spittle that must be passed in a kiss, but in a curse.

Were I more assured of my ability to write, these words would not grace this page. There is no longer a place for the products of genuine talent. Why construct a shining edifice with blind slaves? Unless there is a giant eye to see for all! But my knowledge of the woman, the comet, the girl who is a snowball, filthy, cosmic, drawn to Sol like dew, from the regions beyond Pluto, that immense void between the last planet and Proxima Centauri, where a shattered shell of ice turns like a Ptolemaic sphere, focussing the stars beyond, a belt, a zone, a cloud — call it what you will! — this knowledge, I repeat, might imitate that eye, that hypothetical sense, and peruse this scrawl. A mystic concept — a wisdom to learn a life. And recite it well.

The fumes from the wines below have filtered into my space. Who is that hurling cups at a dancer? It is Blayre and Slurp! For the Registrar I write, though he will not bother to complete his collection with this manuscript — but I must prove I can be intrepid and strange. Two things remain: first a title for my tale, else it is nude. Shall I call it: *The Smell of Telescopes?* That has an arcane bite, like the twinkle of Arneb in Lepus, but no, too catchy — I am an academic, not a raconteur. Try again: *A True Report of the Hairy Star and Shaven Girl, Both Designated Thais, Experienced at Longitude 46 32N, Latitude 10 30E, by Professor B. Droogstoppel, in the Days Following His Days in the Coffee-Trade, Every Detail of Which can be Vouched For By Him, or Check For Yourself If You Have Doubts.* Eureka! Much better!

The second and last task concerns the exact location of impact. It was easy to determine that the comet was heading for Earth; middling to calculate our continent; difficult to specify this city. Now I must work out the street, the cobble, where it shall fall. For at that point, only there, will I be granted a chance to meet her again. Yes, implausible as it sounds, I hope to stand beneath her when she strikes. Perhaps it will be on the roof of a building? Naught will keep me from that sacred spot. I will wait and remove my trousers, and something incredible will happen in the final moments before the collision, I am sure. My defunct manroot will uncurl and lift up its head.

When my observatory was destroyed by that tornado, the telescope in the structure was caught by the energy and spiralled into the sky, as if it was bored with simply gazing at the constellations and wanted to meet them in person! It climbed, and my genitals fell, to preserve the cosmic balance. But Thais can tip the scales again. She will. As the comet hits the thermosphere, my penis will start to stir. Once she rips through the ozone layer, I will feel the draining of blood from brain to groin. Down with her into the troposphere, where weather lives, and I shall be a man again. Urethra! For the first part of the entire world to feel the whole weight of heaven will be my lust.

The Wardrobe World

I never intended to rescue my other self. Honest! The puddles of wine reflected the hard stars. The city was dark and in turmoil. I knew how to survive the imminent catastrophe — my preparations were made. There was no need to save anyone else. But then I started to doubt the wisdom of this selfishness. If my parallel ego was destroyed, might it not have a dismal effect on my own health? He had split from me, yet we were the same. We were both Batavus Droogstoppel. A matter of some weeks defined our only difference. He was an astronomer and I a coffee merchant, but these vocations were mere glitter and froth on our personalities. Under our careers, we were identical. I originally assumed that to abandon him might be less traumatic than to misplace a shadow. Now I feared it would be akin to losing half my confidence. I decided to take him with me when the comet struck. If he agreed.

First I had to locate him. It was not difficult, for I had spied on his activities ever since he returned to Chaud-Mellé. I wanted to avoid an accidental meeting. I knew about him, for I had been to the centre of the planet, and he had not. His fame was excessive. Posters declared his discovery of Thais. When this achievement turned to horror, he became an ogre. People spat at him in the street, as if the fated collision tasted of poisonous slime. My business improved considerably in those last days of civilisation. Coffee was in great demand as a stimulant. Nobody dared to waste a minute of life before the apocalypse. Sleep was banished from the mental landscape, which increasingly came to

resemble the urban maze itself. I saw men and women with their thoughts like tangled alleys, dim stairways, decaying cellars. Money was worthless, but I accepted it, for I still believed in the future.

The comet grew brighter until it seemed to visibly burn the rest of the sky. Workers left their posts and the electric streetlamps failed. A few enterprising souls set fire to buildings instead. Others bore lamps and flambeaux, but these merely sooted the already black mood. Values of dubious heritage were resurrected. Ritual dances and odd ceremonies were conducted in the squares. A bridge collapsed under a wedge of revellers, but most survived, clinging to planks in the hot river, which gushed and spun them beyond the suburbs. There were duels on roofs. But coffee lost none of its fashionable or essential status. I sold the last of my sacks for a fantastic profit. One humid dusk I ventured forth and chanced on a million smoking beans rolling down a hill. Why had they been ignited? The smell was wonderful and the earlier rain which had puddled among the cobbles became a fine espresso.

When I grew anxious for the safety of the rival Batavus, I used my maps of his progress across the metropolis to predict his movements with more accuracy. I saw how he forsook the college and shut himself in his garret. He was calculating the precise point of impact. Only a genius of my calibre could do that. It endeared him to me. A rocket containing a mirror was fired into space. Its original occupant was supposed to be a nude man. My other self argued for the shiny substitute when the college Engineers went to visit him. So many questions! I knew he was not mad. I wear sundry rings. With the point of a diamond I cut open the side of my impossible jar. I attached hinges and a lock to the removed segment and replaced it, creating a hatch. It was my capsule for the void. We would share its interior. I slung it over my back on a strap strong enough to carry a hyperspatial emptiness.

It hummed with a low note as I bore it down the streets. The night mist had never condensed on the neck of a Klein Bottle before. How Count Unfortunato would grimace at the thought that his model was responsible for preserving me from liquidation! And not just me — the other me too! Not that he could make any facial contortion now, for he was quite dead, and not a moment too soon, unlike the alternative Batavus, who was three weeks early, but his (and my) ugliness is not melodramatic. We wince at times, but not with flared nostrils. When we roll our eyes, chew scenery and lurk, it is with some justification. The Cadiz family prefer all the hints of evil, because they have read too few books. They do not imagine those responses are clichés. Indeed for them, thunder and bats are still genuine effects. Their ignorance of irony in this context is perhaps the most grotesque fact about them.

I had encouraged a clown to scale the facade of the tenement where my previous self resided. In return for a gallon of cappuccino, the fop lifted one of my ingenious proculscopes to the ledge outside a skylight. Then he fell and smeared the street with greasepaint. Why do men follow the urge to prance as harlequins whenever apocalypse threatens? I cared nothing for his fate, of course, for the device was in position. Now it would be easier to monitor the astronomer at work. I returned to my own room, adjusting the controls on the receiver. The scanning disc rotated and the miracle of live picture communication betrayed the scene inside his garret. A gentle breeze knocked the lens of the machine against the window. He believed it was a goose. I discovered that later. Meanwhile, I strained to discern the detail on his charts. It was difficult, but I persevered, for both our sakes.

As he narrowed down the possible impact sites, so my own knowledge and anxiety widened. The comet was going to strike Chaud-Mellé. For the lovelorn fool who was my twin, the impending collision was a tryst. The whole firmament was the family of his future bride, though the marriage was not expected to last longer than its instant consummation. But once he computed the exact spot, he grew extremely nervous. A sweating groom and rancid virgin, a man whose passion had only eroticised a telescope, he made a feeble show on my flickering screen. In protest, I would avoid paying my proculscope license, had the authorities resolved that one was necessary. They had not. Now time was too short to legislate for such a cynical tax and my annoyance remained hypothetical. All the same, faces in that mode, with pompous eyebrows living on a squint, tend to justify lies against modern technology.

We both adore science, which is the raw fuel of his shape, but only commerce can really satisfy my profile. He was in love with a sphere of frozen methane which was currently rushing toward our planet at frantic velocity. I preferred assets. I observed him at the very moment his icy mistress informed him of her full intentions. She did so with equations more elegant and complex than the swirl of knives clashing on my gables when two clowns battled over a glass tear and a bottle of glue, as once they had. The comet named Thais was heading for the truncated cathedral at the core of our city. It would smash into the broken spire, vertical and merciless. The most imposing edifice in the metropolis was a choice so fitting I almost suspected divine control. But coincidences are very common. Men who study stars and shares will often encounter patterns in chaos and must not be thrilled.

The hour was near. He washed quickly in a tub and left his garret. His manroot was stiff and compelled the rest of him to limp along. With such a hindrance to his progress, akin to a midget's staff on the wrong side of a cripple's pants, I would be able to catch him easily. Or so I rashly thought. Soon he would owe me his being, a notion which swelled more than my pride. I too grew erect in that zone. It was ludicrous. To the door of my apartment I stumbled, wrenching it open and hopping down the stairs, following the hissing wires which linked the two ends of my proculscope. Out into the street, where they dribbled along the gutter, turning corners at frightful speed, I lumbered after them, falling with each step rather than walking, faster and faster. Chaud-Mellé is such a lunatic city in terms of layout that I should never have found my route without this aid. Forever lost.

I reached the house which carried his garret on its shoulders just as he dipped into an alley in the distance. I snagged my foot on one of the wires, and the transmitter of my device crashed down from its place on the ledge and splintered before me. The ground glass screen and iron scanning disc would confuse the drunken carousers, if any came this way later, who trod only flagons, petals, drumsticks, sausages, soft hats, smocks with large black buttons, and other paraphernalia of carnivals, into the gaps between the cobbles. A technological litter might be so forgotten it was new and sobering, for all men were pierrot now, apart from myself and myself. And speaking thus of us, I forsook

the clue of the wires, which like an inverse gift from an Ariadne of the future, where my machine belonged, could guide me to the house of a Minotaur with only one horn, but not out.

The metaphor is not entirely proper, for considered as a single unit, which was our correct state, we had two horns, and this physical truth was too uncomfortable for denial. I followed him down the alley. And so the chase proceeded, two men who were the same man, both cursed with unfeasible erections, mine from an automatic surge of glee at my own cleverness, his from the prospect of making love to a comet, hopping and stumbling and lunging in identical footprints. I carried the Klein Bottle on my shoulder. It slowed me down. No matter how I exerted myself I could not close the gap. He pulled away from me. Ought I to spank my monkey now to relieve the disadvantage? I could not conduct that process on the move, and the minutes of stasis while I worked over a suitable mental image would cancel the time gained from increased ease of groin. Onanism was no practical option.

I spurred forward, in feet terms, meaning I increased my pace, but I still approached him no closer than the tip of his shadow, thrown from the newly risen moon, which was stuck on the horizon like the grimace of a tragedy mask. The longest shadows in our city, cast from angles almost parallel to the ground, have a greater reach, potentially, than the most tedious streets. That is long. Our erections were not. And yet I believe his was generally stiffer and more manly than mine, and throbber at the root, for he lusted after his comet more than I quivered at my analytic aptitude. Perhaps we were authentic romantics after all.

I wondered what aspects of us were doubled or halved. We had separate bodies, but shared esteems and destinies. Had we one animus between us? Were the individual sperms in the globular cisterns of our meaty hoses divided in twain like tiny bosoms on confetti leashes?

Now a mob of festive buffoons blocked our way. They swung wine in a myriad vessels of motley materials. My earlier self thumbed his nose at them and wove through before they could react. I was not fortunate. They were aghast at allowing him to escape and were determined not to repeat their mistake. As I sought to ignore them and push on, they snatched at the strap of my jar. I decelerated and came to a gasping halt. Ugly and unamusing, they pouted under artificial smiles. I have never enjoyed the tradition of clowning. The slapsticks of harlequin are best reserved for picking massive noses. Balls juggled are an insult to geometry. Plunging off ladders into buckets is a game for wets. Circus tents are symbols of all that is flappingly empty in society. The masses make a fuss but have nothing to say. Their little lives are pies in the face enough. Not that my stupid captors realised this.

"Come and drink with us," they blurted, "for our doom is nigh and a man should dip his end in wine."

"Fewer opinions on that, if you please!" I instructed them. "It is an obstruction to my objective."

One of them indicated my trousers. "He is excited."

"Has he a lady waiting, do you think?" cried another. "Then we must follow and study his technique."

"Silence your painted mouths!" roared I. "The unseemliness of your suggestion defies credence. Batavus Droogstoppel know a female! Ugh! How do you think I became the richest coffee merchant in Mitteleuropa if you can attribute such dalliances to my purpose? Never! I am chaste, bitter and odd. A solitary genius with proven academic credits, concerned only with wealth and prestige. Begone, you pale loons! I will never willingly allow myself to be buttonholed by those whose own buttons are large and black and sewn to minimise the discomfort which accrues from periods of sitting on fake crescent moons."

"We are pierrots and must follow our natures. But can you prove you are truly the infamous Batavus?"

"Cretin! Know you not my chin? It ordains the labels of all brands of the finest Javanese brew to be purchased in the stores of our city, albeit on the face of a handsome actor."

"We are drunk. But it is familiar. I apologise."

"Sorry is never enough for me! I believe only in reparations. What material object will you offer me?"

"A glass tear for your cheek?"

"Bah! Such gala baubles sicken the stomachs of my yesterdays and tomorrows. I order you aside thus!"

And I swung my jar about their heads on its strap.

"The world is ending! All of us must die!" giggled one, as the side of the heavy bottle connected with his temple. Then he spewed a week of undigested wine upon which his companions slipped. His kidneys must have been indolent. Now a real circus show began, as they slid and windmilled their arms, struggling to keep their balance. I swung again and foolish brains splattered from comedy thin skulls. Perish all clowns! The joke, which I always missed, is on you! Here was revenge for those years I was accused of lacking a sense of humour. The strap held true and soon every callow jest was bashed out of them.

From the gutter, one muttered to himself: "He was the barbarian who caused our brother to plummet from a windowsill. I remember now! Meister Droogstoppel, murderer of mummies!"

"I accept the compliment with satisfaction," replied I. Shouldering the jar again, I turned on my heel. I breathed deeply. I was exhausted. I stepped over their bodies and stumbled along. My monkey returned to the trees. The unplanned flow of so much stale blood to my system flushed my face, replacing the glow of my dying rage. The other Batavus was now out of sight. I entered a large square and gaped up at the cathedral. The architecture of Chaud-Mellé is so stupendous and strange it discourages tourists. Had the spire of this edifice been finished, it would have lured every electric tempest on the continent. Pig iron, pitted with dents and rouged with rust, it grumbled rather than thrust into the clouds.

"Batavus!" I shrieked, revealing my existence to him for the first time. I could hear him scaling the ladder on the inside of the spire. I hastened to the door, the eternal rumble of my jar setting the teeth of the icons chattering. It was pitch in there, too dark to see priests or congregation, though the soft snigger of prayer inside heads led me to conclude a service was in progress.

I felt my way through another door. I was inside the spire, at its base, where the founder of our metropolis, the fabled Wraith MacDonald, held his original parliaments. Chairs were still tumbled from its final session, more than five hundred years earlier. I reached the ladder and gazed up. He was almost at the top.

"Batavus! Batavus! It is me, I mean you!"

"Who? Who?" he replied. His voice did not sound like an owl, for a boring simile can never be correct.

"It is I, the late Batavus Droogstoppel."

"You do not seem dead," he sneered, and I guessed he had maintained his erection, because something hard kept slapping against the rungs and playing the bent notes of a discordant epithalamium— a nuptial song in brutalist manner. His groin conducted his ascent, but his baton had not won the respect of his ferrous orchestra. Nor had his fringe sufficient momentum to serve as a substitute.

"No, you are the early Batavus! I can explain."

His disregarded the offer and kept climbing. There was nothing for it but to follow. I licked my palms with sticky spittle and continued my pursuit of myself, rung by rung. There was less light pouring down from the opening at the summit than I anticipated. Part of the hole had been boarded over. A temporary platform of planks had been constructed across the mouth of the truncated spire. From the bottom of a deep well, stars can be seen in the daytime, but all that filled the heavens now was the crackling orb of Thais. Its tail was behind its body and so it no longer resembled a comet. All the same, its analogy to a woman was strained and my younger double's romantic inclinations remained no more sensible than before. Now he hauled himself up. His feet dangled and he lost a shoe. I decline to accuse him of a conscious attempt to knock me loose. The item of footwear bounced off my bottle.

"Kick not the flask of our salvation!" I cried.

But he was too eager to secure a stable position on the platform to offer an excuse which would redeem him in my (and therefore his) eyes. I had the alarming impression he was being helped up by unseen arms. Might others already have occupied the apex of the spire? This was a problem I had overlooked. Clowns gambol everywhere. I should have known better. As it turned out, my fresh expectations were also subverted. But that minor surprise is still ahead. Hush, me!

The sweat dripped from my brow as I strained upward. Each iron rung was a bar of fire on my palms. At last I reached the top. I drew myself onto the partly completed platform. Nobody came to assist me. The reason was justified. Before I absorbed the details of my surroundings, I still wanted to berate my earlier self. It was pure instinct. He had forced me into this fraught vertical exploit.

"Did you lay these boards?" I demanded.

His reply was a muted shriek: "Ah, it was not me!"

And then I saw the proof of his assertion. The platform was holding a quartet of figures who were not clowns. They were worse. I would label them as Aztecs or denizens of a related Mesoamerican culture. They wore feather cloaks and intricate stone masks. They had created an altar with an oily flame. Why had I not observed this from below? Because the comet had framed the spire, taking responsibility for the fire and smoke. Then I knew they were pleased beneath their impassive beaks, because manroots stiffened below loincloths, and now I was the maverick, the only flaccid male high above the appalling streets, in which sense alone was virginal and all lunacies were experienced.

Batavus was seized by his limbs before he could lower his trousers. They bore him toward the altar, its flame and obsidian knife. He thought of his assailants as enemies of romance who wished to disrupt his erotic bliss with his comet love. I knew them as retrograde cultists, agents of superstition, blacker than the clowns in faith, students of history who had confused madness with learning. We had interrupted a rite. An absurd endeavour to deter Thais by appealing to gods of an ancient lost empire. Then I noted a toad squatting under the altar. Our sudden appearance had given them the opportunity for a more potent sacrifice. My parallel self was held down next to the flame. It withered the hairs of his armpit. As he squirmed, he called the name of his interstellar sweetheart. But this merely confirmed their delusions.

"Thais! Thais! Thais! Frigid femme fatale!"

The pervert was really in love. How embarrassing! I was ashamed to reveal my silhouette in public, but he did it for me, for the quartet of mock priests leaned over him, draping him in layers of bogus shadow, and my inability to prevent the visibility of his penumbral shape was total. Now the volcanic blade was raised.

I tried my best to decoy the brutes. I pretended an interest in the customs they had adopted. "What gods do you appeal to? Who bevelled the edges of this altar? Nice piece of work, by the way. Where do you obtain quality obsidian? Very shiny! Are these feathers from toucans? Do Aztecs pay tax? What are the hours like?"

They turned to regard me with the contempt of masks, which is worse than any affection but also identical. Then the toad croaked and back to their task they returned. All at once, they shouted out names, the chief Aztec gods, or so I believe. But the power of this chant was lessened by the fact their accents were Swiss.

"Tlaloc! Xolotl! Tezcatlipoca! Coatlicue!"

It was time to act. I had no strategy and threw up my arms in utter despair. I had wishing the jar from my shoulder, resting it on the floor but gripping the strap, and now this reflexive motion hurled it into the air. Desperation must have amplified my strength, for it went high. Then it turned slowly once and came down. I wailed in alarm, for if it missed the spire and landed in a street below, my one chance of avoiding expiry would be lost. At my shout, the priests glared at me. I pointed and they followed my finger. The flask was descending in an upright position, its circular base directly above the altar. From where they stood, it seemed a solid translucent globe, not a storage vessel at all. By lucky chance, it overlapped with the more remote comet. Through the narrow eyeslits of their masks, these two objects must have merged into one. They obviously assumed Thais was colliding early.

For a few seconds they maintained the charade. "Tloque Nahuaque! Huitzilopochtli! Ometeotl!" But then they lapsed back to their original identities. "Emmental! Edelweiss! Rolex!"

I took advantage of their panic. "The comet lady is here! Your new idols have abandoned you. Behold!"

And I clapped my hands to mimic the boom of turbulence in the upper atmosphere as the comet barged through the planet's magnetic field, and whistled shrill arias with my lips, to simulate the evaporation of solid methane, ammonia, carbon dioxide and other gasses which formed this Oort Cloud bullet, whole sheets of dirty ice peeling off the nucleus, hissing as they fractured and boiled. Perhaps I overdid it, but the priests were so stupefied by this turn of events that they all stepped back. One pace each they took, simultaneously, from the four corners of the altar. Over the edge of the platform they tumbled. I watched the masks fail to frown before they lost their collective balance. Then they were gravitating to a fatal meeting with the cobbles. The impact of their bodies was drowned by that of the jar, which landed on the fire, extinguishing it. I rushed to my other self and embraced him.

"They wanted to cut out your heart," I told him. "Normally I should not mind, but I speculate it belongs also to me. We must enter this jar together, which is why I caress you now, as practise for our long shared confinement. It is our only hope."

He struggled upright. "How dare you plot to sabotage my nuptials! Be my guest in the matter of climbing into that flask, but do not expect me to accompany you! My mistress will soon be here. I must be ready to greet her. Stand aside and permit me to remove my trousers. I recommend compliance with this demand, oaf!"

"Oh Batavus! You are as pompous as myself."

"That is scant reason to fiddle with my knees so. Do you wish Thais to discover me in an adulterous clinch? That may not discourage her, for she is not alive. Nonetheless, I will oppose all designs on my fidelity. She is my cold exclusive darling."

"No comet is a suitable wife for Batavus!"

"For me? What do you mean by that? True, I am a genius, unlike most other men. I occupy the highest plateau of intellectual attainment. Even astronomers with access to tropical climes cannot better my discoveries, for my telescopes are more cunningly fabricated. Even so, you attribute incorrect motives to my passion. I do not desire a wife. My affair with Thais will be shorter and superior to standard human relationships. She will demolish me. Bliss and doom!"

"You are no longer responsible just for your own life. Your entire physiology belongs to me also. You are my past self, split and displaced in time. If you die, how can I continue to exist? My own reality follows yours. Thus I have a selfish duty to rescue you from annihilation. Into my jar you must go! Do you agree?"

"Never! The loss of my virginity is imminent!"

"Then I must employ physical force. I shall strike you like this! And this! Then bundle you inside!"

But my fists were ineffective against his cranium. He was between me and the altar, so I could not reach my jar, which is a weapon that can blank any consciousness. He simply shouted: "Ouch!" But he did not defend himself. His hands were too busy with his belt, unbuckling it, undoing the buttons of his trousers. Now these were around his ankles, exposing his throb. It was modest but eager. I hit him again and again without success, until it finally dawned on me that although his brain was in his skull, his mind was in his monkey. I changed tactics. With a fistful of my heaviest spit, I knelt and delivered a ferocious uppercut to his purple fruit. It oscillated wildly from lower belly to thigh and the man behind it collapsed. I had knocked him out at last! I can still recall the squelch of the contact. It sounded like an oboe landing in a marsh after being discarded by a clumsy balloonist. And I know men who fly who have tried to learn solos.

Enough of pointless figures of speech, at least until the world is destructed! I opened the lock on the hatch and pushed the early Batavus into the jar. I did not look up, for fear of being petrified by what I might see. I did not gaze down, for the sake of symmetry. I gritted my teeth until the caffeine stains squeaked. I wriggled after him, into a fit tighter than my favourite purse. The limited air was already stale and the condensation of our twin breaths opaqued the glass. I wiped an irregular porthole with my elbow.

He stirred sluggishly. "You have maliciously denied me a supreme sexual experience! Curses on you!"

"There may be time for others later."

"Deceiver!" he spat. "Thais will still connect with this spire and vaporise us, but I can no longer enjoy the event! This vessel will turn into a gas in the wink of an accelerated eye, and our molecules disband and disperse into bland infinity."

"Not so," I answered. "It is a Klein Bottle and therefore lacks an inside. Whatever it holds cannot be damaged from the exterior because it logically resides in an impossible place. So how can any impact, however unimaginable its scale, hurt something which does not exist? Not even a supernova is able to scorch an interior which is not there. We are safe. We shall survive this apocalypse."

He scratched his bruised head. "I am convinced there is a flaw in that reasoning, but it eludes me."

I shrugged. "Wait and see. Provided the hatch is tightly sealed, I anticipate no trouble. The mental strain of what we are about to witness is our major peril. It might drive us crazy. Fortunately, because of our unique gestalt condition, if one of us is only driven half mad, we will be no more than one quarter insane, which is normal. For the meanwhile, I would be obliged if you extracted your foot from my mouth. It lacks a shoe and the condition of your sock is abysmal. I confess that mine are worse, by a factor of three weeks, but that is not the point. Relativism applied to foot garments is a cheesy credo. It is crackers! However grim my own, they do not excuse yours."

"What is that you are saying? Your voice is muffled. I cannot hear you. Kindly remove my monkey from your ear. I cannot reach. Yes, that is better! Why are you groaning now?"

I shook my head. "It is not me, but the awaited entry of Thais into the magnetosphere. Almost here..."

"Are you scared, Batavus? Or is the sudden slackness of your bowels attributable to bad food and wine?"

"Idiot! Those are your bowels, not mine!"

"I contest the point. But yes, they are incredibly similar in style and power. Possibly it is for the best I did not consummate my desire in this state. Thais is rather fussy."

"Comets cannot have opinions on hygiene!"

"You misunderstand. I was referring to the living Thais, the harlot with the bicycle. I adore them both, because they are one, a little like us. If you are me, where were you when I met her in the brothel? Ah, you had already split from me by then?"

"It was after I came back to Chaud-Mellé from Montenegro and set up my coffee business. You remained an astronomer, of course. While I was developing the potential of the procuscope in advertising, you stayed at the college, swindling the Dean as I once did. I imagine you used the funds he provided for your own purposes? That was the traditional trick to play on the dunce. Nice chap."

He nodded. "He is probably blind now."

I did not ask for details of this diagnosis. As we writhed in each other's arms, desperate to attain a comfortable posture, an eventuality which seemed fated to be always elusive, for whenever I felt settled in one warped recline, he grumbled of cramps and thrashed to alter it, and the same the other way, as we so twisted and contorted, I repeat, extra portholes were wiped at random in the misty sides by the jutting angles of our extremities. Thus our view was mostly clear in every direction. I peered up and now it seemed a giant mother was coming to suckle me with her breast. I giggled with the memory, but it was false, for I had never been fed anything as a child, relying for sustenance on the scraps found on my interminable crawls through the mysterious house where I was born, chiefly rodents in mousetraps and spiders behind furniture. But I had a theoretical impression of what a massive breast might look like and this object satisfied those parameters.

There was no milk to be had. It was a comet.

My earlier self began to weep. "Thais! It was not my fault! I have been abducted and impounded by myself!"

"It is coming down right on top of us..."

"Yes, she always liked to take control. See how she flushes crimson with passion! You have denied me that."

"Hush! It is merely the combustion of inflammable elements such as methane from friction in the ozone layer."

"Pah! How unromantic an analysis!"

"Its diameter is now greater than your ego!"

"She is a lady, not an example of mathematical solids! Less of her euclidean attributes! Show respect!"

"I fear it will not repay the gesture."

"Why should she? She is perfect. A goddess. Her human avatar almost destroyed my telescope with sheer ecstasy. What do you conclude her real interplanetary self might achieve?"

"It will be utmost. I stiffen to speculate."

"No need to inform me of that. It is poking me in the eye. She will accuse us of the spartan deviance."

"I will repudiate that! The only intercourse known to me is that of the stock exchange. No fluids involved, unless they be assets! But talk of this nature is needless. Thais is a comet."

"No, she is the ideal symbol of herself!"

"Was I really so maudlin in my younger days? Three weeks must be a long time when the lives that diverged at that juncture have wandered so far apart. Our merger is strained."

The tears poured down his cheeks. "What will become of me? A virgin in a jar! How I hate you, Batavus!"

"Brace yourself, unworthy me! She is here!"

He smiled in acknowledgement that I had finally used the feminine gender with reference to the comet. And in truth, I did not feel absurd doing so. It was feasible a compromise might be reached on this issue of definition. A task for later, for now we had other matters to occupy our intellects and emotions. Thais had entered the troposphere. The sky went totally black. Even through the wall of the flask I thought a monumental gasp rose from the city below. All my memories of my life on the surface of our world knotted themselves in my belly. What awaited me now? Would I ever slurp coffee again? Would we asphyxiate before an opportunity to develop new careers arrived? I am exhausted now, paralysed with nervous tension and surging fear, on the point of losing consciousness. Thus I must hand over the task of continuing this narrative to my earlier self. Pray give him your full attention.

*

The sky did not become black, as the late Batavus has probably declared. It went white, but with a glow so intensely hot and milky that it denied sight. Friction was responsible for this, plus the fact that the sphere of boiling ice acted as an implausible lens, magnifying the stars behind it, including some in distant galaxies which were exploding, by a factor of trillions. The city was swamped with light of an ultimate purity. And I computed that the hardness of this cosmic radiation had already fried all unsheltered citizens. The photons rained like subatomic daggers onto bodies, peeling skins from skeletons, jabbing nucleic acids to worthless broth. Clowns were shredded whole. They were spared the Shockwave. While ray twin drooled and rested, I sought to extend my arms in an embrace. It was the best I could hope for, a symbol. But I was denied even this tiny consolation by my narrow confines.

There was an instant when the outer surface of Thais and our bottle gently touched, a single frame frozen in dreamtime, but I am dismayed to report no tender revelation at this beautiful contact. First, it was too fast. The ideas in

my mind were able to travel no more than the distance of one synapse before the kiss was over. Second, I was bitter that ajar had claimed the privilege rightly reserved for my monkey. It should have been my amorous groin which first introduced the comet to the substances of Earth. A tour of our home planet for my love! Follow my fruit, tip to root, my darling! It will lead you to my pelvis, beyond that to my feet, then the spire of the cathedral, through this to the street, beneath the cobbles to the secret network of tunnels, still hurtling down into solid rock, magma, the iron core! Stones and crystals and metals later! Monkey first! That was the correct order.

Batavus had arranged my disappointment and I resented him, but also I concluded he was a person I might exploit. If he cared so much for my health, I had a strong bargaining tool in my possession. He was ugly, to be sure, but his presence dissolved the need for a mirror when I combed my hair. Not that I ever did. There were differences between us. My chin was smooth, shaved daily with a scalpel inherited from Trajan Pepys, the most generous (or forgetful) of my former colleagues. The later Batavus wore a triple beard, as if his head was really that of a gorgon, placed on his neck the wrong way up and denuded of most of its snakes by age or a ghoulish barber. There were coffee smears on his garments. His cynical eyes were grey, and for the main chance, like mine. But my lust was for an unobtainable woman. From what he had related, he was more anxious to import beans than sexual maladies.

How the flask shook after the initial caresses of our radii! Yes, I am aware that I harangued my other self for using geometrical terms when discussing Thais, but they are useful and I am a hypocrite. I believe he is too. The incredible fact is that it was not annihilated! We seemed to become enveloped in the comet's head. It was all around, like a terribly gorgeous new cosmos which had abruptly taken over the duty of fixing our existence in reality. My previous assumptions about the mechanics of the collision now proved to be wholly false. I envisaged a huge crater, dust cast into the atmosphere, a winter lasting decades, a slow extinction of human life, the last revellers succumbing in a party among fossil trees, though in fact no wine would be available — all grapes cancelled by the absence of sunlight, in solidarity with other fruits. No photosynthesis. Such was the scenario I predicted.

I had never considered the option that Thais could seriously damage the planet itself. She might punch through the crust into the mantle and melt in the reservoirs of magma and radioactive elements found under the ground. That is all. So I was amazed when the force of the impact pushed our jar through the boards which formed the platform over the opening of the spire, down through its awful hollowness, into the floor at the base of the cathedral, and still onward, through solid stone, under and below and beneath, grinding the rocks to granules, always down, like a crystal decanter drowning in talcum powder — into a sudden empty space, massive and ridiculous and misplaced. What had happened? No molten minerals came to lick our sides. There was more dust and grit. Thais had evaporated; I felt an ache in my heart. My manroot deflated again and for all time, or so I imagined, for only she in stellar form was a cure for my impotency. The blood leaking back to my chest did not ease the rub in my ventricles like a tepid poultice from within.

No, this wound was sentimental. I sighed over my twin, for his face was quite unmissable, and the oxygen boost must have roused him from his swoon. He opened his eyes. I licked my lips. For minutes we said nothing and thought less. Then we began to converse properly. I had questions to which his answers were alarming and true; the same was so in reverse. We eased ourselves into the great difficulties with small talk. We asked if we were shaken, broken, shocked by the collision. Mostly, yes. Inquiring about the weather was redundant, for we were swathed in grains of stone. These clouds of igneous pollen might sneeze the nose of heaven, if there was a constellation with that name: Nasus or Emungere. Choose another if you please! Not that there was, in my galaxy at least, nor in Andromeda, which supposedly fell apart in my Dean's presence; an optical illusion I now considered possible fact. Finally I indicated the swirl and shrugged my shoulders, as if pumping words.

"We are still falling under the ground."

He was less dismayed than I had expected. "The centre of the planet is hollow. This is my second visit."

"We have been knocked into this inner void? What are the chances of us ever returning to the surface?"

"None," he answered crisply. "I believe the comet has shattered the entire world. There are no more continents to stand on, merely crumbs of rock. The shell has been pulverised."

I gurgled. "Impossible! Thais was a large comet, true enough, but a fraction of the density of Earth. I can accept the existence of a crater leading to some internal volume hitherto unknown to geographers, but the complete trituration of the planetary crust is an amateur concept. Shame on you, Batavus, for advocating it!"

"We have much to learn from each other."

I bristled. "What do you imply by that?"

"Once my knowledge of hypogean realms was identical to yours. But I know from experience what awaits us down here. There is a series of tiny planets, a miniature solar-system."

"Help! I am trapped with a scientific heretic!"

"Pause your accusations, Batavus! We must redirect our astronomical acumen inward if we are to thrive again in the discipline! The grains of stone and water vapour of the boiled oceans will form a new looser shell about this interior system. When we pass below it, and visual clarity is restored, you may observe these minor worlds for yourself. Until then, I suggest you do not mock my status."

"Bah! You are a coffee-broker, not a genius,"

"The two conditions can overlap. Do not try my patience! We are the same, but I am stronger, for you have allowed love to weaken your limbs. Your teeth are loose and thus easy to dislodge with a punch, and the one who loses a molar in combat is always the loser. Everyone knows that. My knuckles are enough to remove all."

"Fists up? How will you achieve that in here?"

"Good point. Therefore let us not argue! See how the mist of debris already becomes thinner? It will mostly remain

in its original position, or else dissipate into outer space, because the grains are so light. Any heavy object like us which managed to survive the impact might gravitate toward the centre and take up a new orbit around the central sun. Let us be watchful for such chance items,"

I cried out at once: "I see one! An edifice!"

He squinted through the veils of gossamer dust and nodded, striking his forehead on the glass. "A castle."

The structure in question was ponderous and demented. Towers warped at weird angles, the turrets of an incompetent, or diabolical, geometry. The bastions, quoins, crenels, merlons, loopholes, galleries, archivolt decorated with torus and fascia, parapets and colonettes were fabricated with an alien disease in mind. But I sought to find grace in its debased grotesqueries, the habit of all tourists, more especially when the sight conies to them, as this one had. I ought to mention that the building was inverted, its spires pointing down, and numberless items cascaded out of its windows, machines and devices of every unimaginable kind. It rotated slowly back into the shredded mist.

"Quite a fairytale fortress!" I enthused.

"No, no! I recognise it as the abode of Count Unfortunato! He is my enemy. He is dead now, but still I trust him not, for he was an absolute Cadizite, and they sup with tricks."

"I wonder what they dine on when they do?"

"A metaphor, Batavus! They are cunning; that is all I meant. Better for us never to encounter that building again! But worry less about past terrors. There are plenty to come."

I pointed at another mass of brick which flew out of the dust. "Is that one too? It has a nasty door."

"Its gables are familiar. But I cannot place it."

As it span closer and then away, I smiled. "Ah, it is the refectory of the University of Cosmopoli. Our Registrar once worked there. Do you recall Christopher Blayre, Batavus?"

"Yes I do. A fellow who collected narratives."

"I wrote one for him. I doubt this adventure will ever become part of his hoard, for he is probably deceased, and we lack writing materials and the will to compose paragraphs."

"Ugh! What is that ovoid just to your left?"

I gasped with fright when I turned to behold it. A globular shimmer of warped shape, less solid than the drifting structures, more organised than the dust and vapour clouds, it throbbed along at a terrific rate, a bubble of utter despair in a bath of neutral chaos. I glimpsed limbs and heads, writhing and screaming. Millions of them packed together. Tighter than my twin and I, if such squeezes were possible! It was a sight which would never leave me, a nightmare within nightmares to the nth power. It was a multiple personification of the very worst headache experienced by the Universal Mind. It was all that was bad and gross in arranged atoms. It was an excuse to hate sentient order. My relief when it passed was so tangible I blew a kiss at anything in the cosmos which was not it, but I have no time to list those articles.

"Tell me that it was not real!" I whimpered.

Batavus was also trembling. "It was. One of the Hells which existed under the ground, between the surface and the central space. I am unable to state whether that example is ruled by Satan or Eblis. I did not note any demons or their garments. There might be Hells other than those two, so it wiser not to hypothesise. Now the world which nested them has been smashed, they have been cast free."

"Let us hope it sails off into far infinity!"

"Yes, a pertinent wish. But I think we should soothe ourselves with the aid of a subject change. Find something to discuss which has nothing to do with perditions of any sort!"

I racked my imagination for a topic, anything to distract our minds from the sight we had just endured.

At last I traced an outline on the glass sides. "Why is this vessel etched with a false map of Europe?"

"Not false. Merely relative. Our jar is a model of Earth considered from the location of Montenegro. Within the borders of that country, our world is designed like a Klein Bottle. Elsewhere it takes variant forms. Our planet has no objective shape."

"Balderdash! You spout humbug, old Batavus!"

"Not at all. Leaving aside the daunting fact that now the world has no form at all, consisting solely of a soup of particles, I shall merely add that from our home city, Chaud-Mellé, it was configured like a coin. Actually a silver florin, undated."

"Well, this really is remarkable news..."

"Indeed so, young Batavus. It might also explain how the comet was so easily able to shatter the world, because all it had to destruct was a disc rather than a globe. We assumed that the collision would produce excessive heat, but if that was the case, the silver would have melted and reset in an asymmetric lump. This did not occur. I now believe that This was archetypally cold, to the extent that she instantly froze the florin and turned it brittle. Thus it fractured with minimal fuss. Only unique chills may accomplish this."

"Wait! The clouds outside are composed of comminuted minerals and steam. I spy no silver. Evidence for your theorem is lacking. Therefore I am ethically bound to reject it."

"Foolish Batavus! We are no longer in Chaud-Mellé, thus the florin analogy does not apply. Our metropolis has been eradicated. My excellent theorem still holds true. The national system of fluctuating world shape has been disordered into oblivion!"

"Then it is of no more than historical value."

This thrust wounded his pride. He sulked in his cramps, as I sobbed in mine, for I despised the notion of subjective topology. And while we refused to talk, our flask left the obscuring dust and entered the zone beneath, which was

clear and flecked with tiny lights, so many that both of us gasped together. A sprinkling of twinkles, hard and beautiful and cold. It was vastly more invigorating than peering at the night sky had been. Even on moonless nights beyond the city limits and its skyglow, I had never witnessed such a monumental number of stars. But they altered their position with unreasonable haste, a frantic procession which made the naming and remembering of new constellations impossible. Soon we had become part of this outrageous galaxy and not a few stars connected with our vessel's sides. They varied in size from coins to fists, fluctuating and flickering and sometimes popping.

Batavus spoke out from his mood: "They are lamps. Artificial stars. They were set into the ceiling of the central cavern, but the impact has shaken them loose. Some have been crushed and the individual shards are also new suns. This has thrown astrology into tumult! There is no longer a fixed zodiac. All men are free!"

"Astrology? Pooh, Batavus! No time to jest!"

"No, I am a believer now. We shall see. As the bulbs wear out, this galaxy will be thinned. Entropy is inevitable, I fear. And now our fates are ungoverned, they too may burst at any moment. No matter. The view is fine enough to be any man's last."

"Speak for yourself! I desire only to spy the tail of my beloved as my ultimate optical indulgence..."

"Each to his own, even when he is the same."

We passed a spinning lamp, mirrored on one side, so that it flashed signals of dubious merit over our encapsulated brows. A pocket pulsar! I closed my eyes against it, for I did not want to confuse these blind and natural signals with those transmitted by an alien intelligence. I told myself they were random. I was convinced by this, but remained uneasy. A xenobiological lifeform would not care to meet me, nor I it, not because I am timid, but for reasons of resentment. I prided myself so much on my practical talents, grinding the best lenses in Europe, that an encounter with superior technology would decimate my confidence. And the lifeform would suffer the anger engendered by my disappointment! Nicer never for aliens and Droogstoppels to meet.

I returned to an earlier theme, for it still troubled me. "If Thais had struck any location other than our city — Uruguay, for instance, or Hampstead Heath — the world might now not be ruined? Is that a logical outcome of your prior assertion?"

He nodded. "It is. Unfortunately for humanity, if not ourselves, it crashed in a state where planetary shape is more fragile and susceptible to breakage. An unlucky trajectory!"

"The fault is mine. I knocked Thais off her bicycle and so diverted her orbit. Recalling the incident now has almost reactivated my groin. I remain impotent, however. It is a phantom erection! If the girl has not survived, I may never rise again."

"You exaggerate! I witnessed how your monkey stiffened in our chase through the streets of Chaud-Mellé."

"Would to Zumbao it had! No, that was merely a miniature telescope which I slipped down my trousers."

"Might I see it? I love to handle tools!"

I thrust my hand into my pants and retrieved it. It was quite warm and ready for action. "Be my guest!"

He was. He raised it to his favourite eye, but as it passed under his nostrils, he grimaced. "Pooh! It pongs! I had imagined the smell of telescopes to be more heavenly."

"We share the same soul. If I die, you should inherit mine. But I will cut you off without a scent if you continue to insult my monkey's odour! Respect yourself, Batavus!"

He chuckled. "That is easy enough. But look!"

"What is it? What do you observe?"

"Some of the points of light have resolved themselves into discs. Those are the miniature planets I mentioned. And I can see the central sun. It is shining directly below us."

After a pause, I said: "We are heading that way."

He lowered the telescope. "Yes."

"Will we take up an orbit around it, Batavus?"

"I fear we have insufficient angular momentum. I predict, with all the despair of a goose in the domain of Nicola I Petrovic, or migrating against your garret, one doom in oven, the other on glass, that we shall actually fall into its photosphere."

"And be frazzled by penetrative solar rays?"

"No, for that sun is powered by coal. It emits no hard radiation. A slower death awaits us in this jar if we land in the grate! Mulled alive in our own whines! Batavus broiled!"

"Well, that is a perfect anticlimax to my day!"

"Yes, but I am confused by the profusion of planets in orbit around the sun. There seem to be far more than I recall. And there is something else below us now. A winged object!"

I demanded the return of my instrument to share the revelation, but he refused, declaring a selfish eye. Within a minute, however, the thing he had alluded to came into general focus. I thought at first it was an enormous bat, flapping across the manufactured void. Then I realised it was made of metal and wood and canvas. Had the problem of powered flight finally been solved by a subterranean inventor? I knew that many savants on the surface had attempted to construct such a device. Balloonists had mocked them, throwing down rotten vegetables from their baskets onto the engines, as if to soup them up, for on their own they were inadequate to achieve the dream. Different designs had failed equally. The one beneath was an example of the style known as ornithopter. Its wings flapped and it boasted no propellers. There was a pilot and two cockpits, one behind the other. Luckily, they were open.

Coincidence is a marvellous word. And it proved itself true again by the fact that the late Batavus regarded it as highly as I did. On a more utilitarian level, it so happened that the trajectory of our flask and the flightpath of the

device converged at the point of this second (empty) cockpit. We landed it in very firmly. The ornithopter bucked and swayed. The pilot grappled with the controls. He turned his head at our intrusion and blinked enraged eyes.

"You are too heavy for it! Cast out now!"

I opened the hatch from the inside and the other Batavus pushed his mouth as far out as he could. The jar exactly fitted the cockpit, making it impossible for us to evacuate it. We were still stuck, but mercifully no longer plummeting. Batavus said:

"We have no control over it from here."

"Your presence is straining my motor! I shall have to find a world to land on to conduct repairs. I shall charge you for this work. If you have no money, I demand a signed pledge to the effect that you take full responsibility. What are your names?"

I had no funds on me, though my twin did, but all the same we ought to decline to pay bullies, however clever they are at aerodynamics. Thus the second option was the best one to take, as a delaying tactic. In one voice, we replied: "It is Batavus."

He did not turn his head. "He is you then, I take it?"

Batavus glowered at me. "No, I am Batavus!"

So I returned his look. "No, I am Batavus!"

The pilot sighed. "Gentlemen! I hope merely to secure compensation, not to order your crucifixions! Less bickering, if you please. How much can you afford to spare in hard change?"

"Our pockets are unreachable from within ajar!"

"Then I shall convey you to a planet where you may empty them on an entire hemisphere! Behold, I spy a world directly ahead! It seems stable enough. I believe it is Peaseweep."

"Idiot! No such place. I have been here before."

"Ho! So you presume to tell me my business? Such arrogance! It will cost you double as a punishment. I am the excellent Dmitri Sneakios! The best architect since the Demiurge!"

"We are unfamiliar with that personage."

"He created the first universe for God."

The late Batavus raised himself up to his full height. He did not do this in reality, because of his constricted position, but the sneer on his free lips left scant doubt that such a bodily extension had just been psychologically implemented.

"I have spoken in person to the man who designed the planets of the inner solar-system. His name was Kingdom Noisette. He told me the names of most of them. The rest were unlabelled. They were generally the same as those of the real sun's family."

The pilot laughed sourly. "So that northern buffoon tried to steal my credit, did he? Such ingratitude! He had absolutely no notion how to invent worlds! He came to me with his scheme and I made the planets for him in my factory in Plovdiv. Did you know the city? Delightful! He was a fussy customer indeed. He kept specifying what he wanted, but after I produced it, he would shake his head and order an alternative. For every 260 worlds I built, he took one! Yet I demanded payment for all my work. No wonder he almost bankrupted the Treasury of England! Waste not, want not, is my motto. I stored the unused worlds in a warehouse. I did not imagine they would see service."

"Ah! When Thais smashed the Earth, the extra planets spilled out of the warehouse? Is that what happened?"

"Not only them, but this starclipper too."

"A grandiose title for a flapping doodah."

"Be that as it may, this is a genuine spaceship. I invented it as a means of travelling from one manufactured world to another. But Noisette refused to buy it. He had run out of money. So I kept it for myself. And when the comet hit, I used it to escape the catastrophe. The atmosphere down here is fresher than what existed at the surface. The planets move through air and the drag will gradually slow them down. They will spiral into the sun. However, long before then, most of them will already have collided with each other. Their orbits are random and chaotic. After the big doom, myriads of little ones are due! I anticipate an age of impacts before the system settles down."

"Yes, we appreciate the peril. And this news spoils astrology even more. Presumably the bodies of the original system turn in safe orbits? Why not steer for one of those?"

"There are twenty-seven of them."

"A charming number! But how were they named?"

He counted them off on his fingers. "Momus, Mercury, Venus, Earth, Mars, Hleems, Jupiter, Saturn, Desmond, Uranus, Phorcys, Cottus, Sooty, Neptune, Osiris, Priam, Jaspar, Dido, Monkey, Pogsmith, Pluto, Gleeful, Magus, Plonker, Ark, Otho and Erebus."

"That is incorrect," my twin muttered.

"The list is perfect. What is your objection?"

"One planet was called Batavus. A brick world infested with bats. I deemed it a delightful spheroid."

"No, that was Plonker. A minor effort!"

"Noisette insisted it was untitled. Did he lie?"

"Not at all! He simply forgot to ask me what it was. An incompetent fellow in many regards. An amateur."

"What are the rejected worlds called?" I asked.

"Are you sure you want to hear?"

"Go ahead," I responded. "We are quite ready."

Taking a deep breath, he recited:

"Hestia, Cybele, Demeter, Egg, Argola, Hecate, Glaucus, Salad, Plutus, Hymen, Critter, Virachocha, Isis, Robigus, Shakti, Diphthong, Picus, Zurvan, Villa Lobos, Libitina, Shagpat, Hoof, Cupido, Gardel, Janus, Enkidu, Bony, Watermelon, Mithra, Entrerrosca, Cormoran, Olwen, Fib, Haute Couture, Dorsal, Pomona, Horus, Spoon, Pig, Balder, Sumana, Pleb, Mendips, Iceblink, Brigit, Shovel, Demonstration, Yomi, Fevanga, Tucket, Krishna, Spangle, Cortes, Monitor, Themis, Swagger, Cyrus, Loki, Stocky, Barrel, Galen, Romulus, Archnid, Hansel, Gretel, Pumpernickel, Fluke, Church, Leto, Quiche, UPPERCASE, Gower, Rangi, Merlin, Rahu, Haven, Bismuth, Lantern, Gyges, Fado, Messalina, Opal, Dumbo, Sloplar, Mekon, Terminus, Twinkler, Bába Yága, Nimba, Guayahona, Cheeky, Ivory, Jabberwocky, Deadpan, Claudius, Simmer, Gosh, Euterpe, Touchy, Stoker, Nameless, Titus, Adobe, Sindbad, Medusa, Aldiss, Rose, Photogen, Karaz, Uncle, Tlön, Coco, Asterion, Verdi, Mousetrap, Brush, Templar, Tangle, Odin, Verruca, Praline, Harum Scarum, Kaggen, Zorilla, Cello, Fosfor, Bahia, Juventas, Tieck, Poppy, Hippolyte, Fluff, Chryses, Gong, Lagash, Amazon, Quill, Horlicks, Ubu, Tinto, Midriff, Ops, Wiggly, Tartarus, Russell, Assumpta Serna, Smirk, Panurge, Zapatillas, Jasmine, Morano, Hairstyle, Vug, Blazer, Hesiod, Caspar, Tesla, Rhombus, Cool, Bachata, Sucrose, No, Gunk, Felicity, Tempo, Vertumnus, Quagga, Zeno, Olivine, Tyburn, Tyneside, Sallust, Orlando, Rushmore, Gutter, Pandora, Geryon, Orejitas, Bungle, Python, Sladek, Rebec, Montezuma, Miasma, Shadow, Pointy, Guajira, Riboflavin, Aniseed, Cartwheel, Pan, Sangraal, Candide, Xeethra, Dogger, Wombat, Gallura, Crusoe, Octave, Necessitas, Alecto, Clotho, Scruffy, Ming, Spume, Casanova, Panda, Hopscotch, Yu Zhuo, Tickle, Cuddle, Tragacanth, Boss Hog, Greenhorn, Bohio, Nisaba, Saltarello, Drawbreath, Glissando, Verismo, Willis, Tisane, Pearl, Russian Doll (with its five internal satellites: Moon(Moon(Moon(Moon(Moon))))), Specky, Bagpuss, Bhanavar, Serafina, Kâramanèh, Chump, Pausole, Bilitis, Carob, Stairway, Pygmy, Talos, Fastitocalon, Electrum, Tango, Sahib, Flintlock, Castle, Tallow, Aruba, Asturias, Xerxes, Empty, Trantor, Flashman, Greaves, Ego, Toadlicker, Cravat, Cigar, Lyonesse, elective, Singe, Salsa, Hood, Powys, Falafel, Penguin, New Sark, Salty, Monad, Immersion, Maesteg, Wonky, Zzeeookhaaezaza, Zonstth, Tarihthas, Ioazazeth Azaze Asazeth, Astrapa, Tephioide, Antonios, Sinetos, Lakhan, Politanos, Opakis, Paidros, Odontokhoos, Diaktios, Knesion, Eyidenos, Polypaidos, Entropon, Dromos, Azarakaza Aamathkratitath, Zorokothora, Aaaaoozorazazzaieozazaeeiiiiaieozoakhoeooythoezaozaezeezeeaozakhozaekheyeytxaaeethykh, Ozeozaeoz, Kroblath, Khenobinyth, Loia, Doxogenia, Yyy, Cynocephali, Tanet-tur-Taac, Sulky, Roily, Trimetrogon, Ix, Rumpus, Penknife, Koshka, Harvard, Stttuuttteerr, Jackeroo, Redwood, Massif, Zaharoff, Parnassus, Belial, Swashbuckle, Wishful, Dunk, Parnell, Quiff, Gimme, Eber, Pyrone, Mint, Sparta, Charming, Scorcher, Chyme, Snowflake, Phoebe, Suspire, Mundungus, Dante, Parody, Zumboo, Tick Tock, Ginastera, Yaffle, MacDuff, Casita Blanca, Beso, Salma Hayek, Hypothesis, Stranger, Octopus Monster, Toerag, Unknown, Dusk, Parsec, Arakkis, Hochigan, Widow Ching, Pericles, Better, Zoline, Catoblepas, Roughneck, Snore, Scipio, Idlewild, Satire, Unthank, Duckling, Chinelato, Speck, Spock, Knob, Parsley, Lungful, Prepuce, Chenar, Omensetter, Census, Breadbox, Pecorino, Prenderghast, Gallifrey, Gallico, Plume, Baal, Othello..."

"Enough! Enough!" we wailed. "Our ears are battered!"

"I understand," replied Dmitri. "It is sufficient for you to know there are seven thousand surplus planets now in circulation. Some names were even duplicated. Chitty and Chitty, Bang and Bang, are four such examples. I constructed so many!"

"A terrible workload! Why were they rejected?"

Dmitri shrugged. "I cannot say. Many are superior to those worlds which were chosen. Zapatillas, for instance, is more beautiful than any which made it into the solar-system, and Argola is almost as gorgeous. And there is Wombat, the largest of all, for it served as the warehouse where the others were originally stored. The ginger globe, Willis, also has its moments, though I am at a loss to specify them. Yet my personal favourites are the love planets — Casanova, for women, and Watermelon, for men. They were designed to safely cater for the amorous needs of an interplanetary population. Casanova is black rubber, studded with stiff nodules six inches in length and quite thick. Some are ribbed. Visiting ladies can pleasure themselves, thousands at once, without the company of men. A contraceptive device on a grand scale, relieving the tensions of countless futuristic wives. As for Watermelon, that is a reciprocal, for it is also rubber but dotted with holes. It can absorb trillions of gallons before it must be emptied."

"What decadent designs!" we protested. "Obscene!"

"Not so. It is healthy to be interested in the whole of human life, including its erotic aspects. But if such talk makes you uncomfortable, we must focus only on the technical side of planet building. Most of my worlds are spherical in shape, and all are hollow, with the exception of Empty, which is devoid of internal space. All are open to visitors, but I ask that you treat them with respect. Do not light fires on the wooden worlds, nor blaspheme on holy ones."

"We are Batavus! We shall do as we please!"

He shrugged. "The point is academic, for I note from my gauge that my oil pressure is low. I am unable to fly as far as a planet with your extra load. Therefore there has been a change of plan. I now intend to jettison you immediately. Farewell."

And he turned the ornithopter into a roll.

He was strapped to his cockpit. We were perched loose inside ours. We fell out, once again plunging through the firmament. We shrieked and quivered our nostrils and erected our nape hairs. Down among stars and the flotsam of absurd nightmare. Toward the sun we accelerated, though at a slightly altered angle, which had a hint of the tangential to it. Where we eventually landed, I did not care, provided it was not one of the loose Hells. Then the other Batavus noticed something rushing up to intercept us. No, that was an illusion. We were falling faster than it, because our shape was smoother. We could not catch the wind of our own making, unlike it. We watched together. It was not a castle, university or perdition. For that: gratitude!

"Is it another planet?" I wondered.

"No, it appears to be a large square object adrift in space. Grief! It resembles a gargantuan book!"

"Another starclipper? Does it have wings?"

"None. It really is a volume. Octavo with leather covers. Now it is opening and turning itself to the first page! So tell me, young Batavus, did you slip a drug into my wine?"

"We have not drunk together, old Batavus."

"Ah, true! Then I am not hallucinating. Hullo, what is this? Heads are appearing over the edge of the page! I recognise the faces! It is my colleagues from the University!"

"Christopher Blayre! And next to him, Professor Tatto and José de los Rios. Not to mention Trajan Pepys."

"Do not forget Joachim Slurp. Who is that other chap with the tall hat and bushy whiskers? It is Kingdom Noisette! And he is hugging Dean Nutt! We must be in a lesser Hell. They hated each other. Are we going to approach them? It seems we will."

I opened the hatch and called out: "Ahoy!"

The occupants of the literary raft waved back. Christopher Blayre cupped his hands around his mouth and shouted: "Batavus! An unexpected pleasure to meet you here! Why are there two of you? No matter! We are gliding without power. Can you throw us a line? Ah, I see you are in a similar predicament! Not to fret!"

"What are you doing in a musty tome?"

"Just before the comet struck, I collected the most valuable staff members and led them to the library. I wondered if we might employ the biggest volume as a sort of bunker. With an axe, I hacked a hole inside the thickness of the pages, rather like one of those trick books used to conceal valuables, and we crouched down. There was a sudden flash and we were travelling among these stars."

"You should have been incinerated instantly!"

"Yes, I have pondered long on that. It occurred to me that choosing this book was extremely propitious. It is the complete text of all the scrolls which were lost in the burning of the library of Alexandria in 47 BC. It seems that one omnibus copy was made and has been lingering in our University ever since. I suspect that fate could not bear to abandon such works again and so spared it."

"That cannot be right! You cut out the pages!"

"Maybe I caught fate by surprise? Anyway, here we are, refugees of the apocalypse! How are you, by the way? Do you have coffee on you? Not a drop! That is too bad! Biscuits?"

"None. Are there many survivors in total?"

"Hard to say. I suspect that anybody who was airborne at the moment of collision might not have been killed. But ballooning is an expensive hobby. So I conclude about eighty."

"We are moving apart! Will we ever meet again?"

"This cosmos is smaller than the one outside, but it is still very large. So I doubt it. Now cheerio!"

"Wait! Let us arrange a rendezvous point, just in case! I miss the lot of you, the old college japes!"

"Yes, but where? These planets are unfamiliar to us. So even if you named one, it would be of no help."

"There is a sphere more distinctive than the rest. It is a wardrobe world. It is called Desmond. It looks exactly like the item of furniture from which it derives its cognomen. Try to get there somehow! We will do likewise. Until then, safe voyage!"

"Desmond... the wardrobe world... understood."

Thus ended my penultimate encounter with my noble Registrar, though his continued existence was much later to play a vital role in the story of Batavus and reality, which in fact became one. Christopher Blayre was a smart fellow, doubtless, and an amusing one; not a chump. But at times I felt he tried too hard to be a puppet master. All the same, we owe him the writing of the final chapter of everything, possibly to balance his vandalism of the book he now employed as a flying vehicle. Enough! I am jumping the plot, which develops over aeons. Do not read this paragraph until I have had a chance to edit it. Damn, no time to do that! It will have to remain. On your own head be it! I now return to the present and our drop toward the sun. We witnessed our first colliding planets. From both sides, they hurtled. We believed we would be smashed between them, but fell through before they hit.

The accident was stupendous. Both globes shattered immediately and fragments of continents and mountains rained on our jar. They gave me a headache. Because of this, I need a rest. I shall return this narrative to the control of my other self. Indeed, we will alternate this burden for the remainder of our tale. Rivets and bolts continued to rattle on the glass sides. The planets had been iron. It was idle to speculate on their names. Before I fell asleep, I wished upon a star. But there were so many of them they outnumbered the total sequence of all wishes, and thus I was awakened again with the immensity of possible hopes. I cast them from my mind like ballast, preferring to slumber without optimism than with yearnings. This was suitable and realistic, for we increased speed as the sun's gravitational pull snared our mass. Direct all your mistrust at the late Batavus now.

*

My other self is prone to a particularly insidious form of exaggeration. He tends to imply that situations are worse than they really are without directly stating so. I blame it on his youth, his earliness. I have not read what he has written, nor shall I get the chance now, but I suspect he has tried to give the impression that the colliding planets hit each other no more than a few inches above our jar. In fact, the distance was more like a yard. I do not believe his use of hyperbole aids our cause, which is to relate impartial facts. This is a small issue, but a crucial one. Thus it is fortunate that control of this narrative has passed back to me. I stress this point because what follows is an adventure

which by its very nature might lend itself to frantic overemphasis. Only rigorous attention to such details as correct distances will prevent this episode from seeming absurd and untrue.

We did not fall into the sun. It is important to clear that matter up immediately. We came close, but our plunge was a fraction of a degree out. Had we continued our original plummet, a solar bake would have been inevitable. But Dmitri Sneakios had altered our downward trajectory and we merely grazed the roaring orb of coal. Yet we did not pass it safely. I gasp to confess that we went into an extremely tight orbit around it. Sealed in our vessel, we began to baste in our own sweat. True, it took several minutes before the heat penetrated the insulating glass of the Klein Bottle, and in this pause we thanked our fates for what we still assumed was a lucky escape. Far to all sides, rushing planets collided or narrowly missed each other. But my attention was mostly sunward, for it was a fascinating body in its own right, and I was eager to note how it worked. It was a vast grate.

In many ways, this was disappointing. Coals were the major feature of its surface, spitting and rolling, the occasional iron bar thrusting up from within to stop them spilling into space. These blackened metal guards were modelled on the spikes of a portcullis, topped with arrows, and I was reminded of a thousand fireside vigils in an equal number of infantile winters loaded with mad uncles. Bring me cocoa and muffins! A cruel mirage, for this structure was more akin to an industrial furnace than a domestic hearth. And we, falling out of the sky, were closer to slag and scrap than guests or nephews. The processing of Batavus! Would we melt and fill the flask with genius liquid? Or merely shrivel in our jar like a pair of forgotten moths left on a windowsill in the sunlight of an entire summer? Sparks gushed and enveloped our confines and shapes rose to crumble in the cinders.

"I can see a salamander!" cried Batavus.

"Be silent! An illusion created by your headache and the flicker of the flames. However, I am willing to beat you soundly, if it will assist your memory of this spectacle in future days, for actual observations of the creature are amazingly rare."

"I will pass on that offer."

"Our orbit is so close! We are skimming embers!"

This was so. The base of our flask almost trailed in the top coals, bouncing on those few which jutted higher than the rest. So stifling did it become inside our capsule that I briefly opened the hatch, hoping for a breeze from our rapid rotation which might enter and cool our brows. A wind there was, but it was scorchingly hot, a sirocco in the deserts of all devils' hearts, and I quickly slammed the door shut again. We lolled our tongues, panted our breaths.

"We seem to be increasing speed, old Batavus!"

"Yes, it is a slingshot effect, repeated and amplified each time we complete a single orbit. We will continue accelerating until we reach an unspecified terminal velocity."

"I care not for that word! Desist from its use!"

I frowned. "Do you mean terminal?"

"No, no! There are two of us and our fates are inextricable. It is the adjective single which dejects me!"

"Your request will be considered objectively."

Now we were rotating so rapidly that the colours of the sun changed their names, shining one along in the spectrum. And the planets, stars and space flotsam on the other side lost all nodal semblance, forsaking their points to become unbroken trails, thin bands of pallid blaze which circled the firmament in such numbers that the entire sky was aglow with no speck of darkness left intact. Then the hues of these too altered and dimmed and grew insubstantial, for they were sliding out of the visible spectrum, and the eyes of a Batavus, late or early, cannot peer into the domain of ultraviolet light and gamma rays. It was clear we were Hearing a speed which no artificial bottle had yet attained. Yet we felt no urge to celebrate this record. Indeed I reserve only contempt for those fools and daredevils who are always attempting to go faster in some vehicle or other. I prefer armchair stasis.

"What do you estimate our rate of travel, Batavus?"

"Many millions of miles per hour!"

"I agree. I believe we are close to the speed of light. The notion has made me feel quite sick. I do not wish to vomit inside this vessel. We must escape our predicament."

"My stomach is no less unsettled on this matter."

"If we open the hatch again and dangle a leg each, we might be able to push against the coals and propel ourselves back into space. Remember that festival we attended in Java?"

"Ah, when you punished that escaped slave by sealing him into a pot of coffee beans and brewing him?"

"No! I allude to the fakir who strolled across that pit of coals in the town of Semarang. There were no blisters on his soles. Therefore I submit that we too might attempt such a torrid feat. A single bound with both our knees and we might be free."

"The fakir? Yes, I recall him. That fellow Havelaar was there too, agitating for social reform. Soft idiot! It is natural for the peoples of lesser nations outside Europe to be harshly treated by their masters. What else are they to do all day?"

"Enough nostalgia! Prepare to push!"

"I am opening the hatch now!"

"Ouch! Ow! Arrgh! Yow! Ooh! Aiyeee! Yip! Eeek!"

We closed the door and blew on each other's feet. The failure was ours, but a shame shared is not halved. It is doubled. Bums are crafty in the way they parcel their pains. At first they hurt fast and sharp, then they fade, and one is tricked into the belief they have gone, but slowly they return, not quite throbbing, not really stinging, but doing something which is a bit of both; the affected flesh seems to generate its own heat from within. I often wonder if a

kettle might be boiled on it. This sunburn was not the standard kind: it did not tan our skins to the shade of slaves. It did not bring back all the old feelings in that respect — or disrespect! It did not remind us of our colonial mansion and the Dutch nuns in underwear. No. But it is pertinent here to remark that Havelaar, the radical traitor to race, married a Javanese girl and claimed she was equal to a person!

That proves beyond doubt his utter insanity.

Less of the truths of modern science! We are busy hurtling. Plenty of time for eugenic lessons later!

Batavus came up with an alternative plan of escape. It was based on my own Law of Motion Sickness. If you have never attended my lectures at the University of Chaud-Mellé, you may be ignorant of it, and yet it can be stated thus — every impossible journey produces an equally unlikely regurgitation! Here was ample opportunity — if our bellies did not hold back through fear or pomposity — to demonstrate a practical use for it. The timing of the first pulse was critical. Are you ready, Batavus? Open the hatch now! I am delighted to report that the twin jets roared as one through the hole. Although we had eaten and sipped little, our digestive systems made a special effort, giving up the very last drop of bile from each liver, every final spot of insulin from the pancreas, to add to the few cakes and ales lingering in our guts. Up the oesophagus flooded this mix, to seriously alarm the tongue.

I heard it hiss as it struck the sun. There was a smell of burning broth, excluding carrots, and one or two of the coals were extinguished. But the reaction pushed us out of orbit back into the ventilated void. A wild cheering hurt my ear, for Batavus had parked his lips there. But it was drowned by the din of my own mouth. The drag of the atmosphere soon slowed us down to a mere hundred miles per hour and the cosmos came back into conventional focus. Yet it had changed! There were more stars, but they were smaller and dimmer. Fewer planets too. Had the whole universe used our brief absence to settle its domestic arrangements? It could not be, for the task was simply too immense, and we had spent less than one hour whirling around the sun. It was a riddle whose decoding would have to be delayed. But unlike the triumph of my monkey, I did not predict a wait of eternity before resolution.

Licking my finger with acid spittle, I extended it though the open door. "Decelerating constantly. Less than the maximum velocity of a big girl's bicycle now. Still slowing!"

"Although I adore Thais, I am famished!"

"Of course you are! Our bellies are empty. But I am happy that you acknowledge the scarcity of proteins in romance. Nor do erotic feelings contain carbohydrates or vitamins."

"Let us seek a world with a restaurant."

"Pshaw! And you expect me to pay for you? Even if I felt generous, which I do not, it would avail you nothing, for these planets are fresh from a warehouse in Plovdiv and uncivilised. Did you not heed the words of Dmitri Sneakios? It is possible that functioning brasseries exist on several of the globes, but they will be unstaffed. Can you imagine what that means? We would have to serve each other and wash the plates later and tip ourselves. Mundane chores!"

"No hunger can dull the horror of that!"

"Exactly. So I suggest we grub for roots where we can. Besides, we have no control over this flask. It will land where destiny wishes. And in my view, that will be the spheroid which now looms ahead. It seems a green world, covered in forests which may bear edible fruit. I hope the trees will provide a soft landing."

"Its disc expands to fill the entire sky!"

"We are making our first planetfall together. I have done this once before, but I am no less agitated."

"Hold on, Batavus! No, not onto that!"

"Too late! I have it in an unbreakable grip..."

"Promise to let it go when you can."

"I do! I shall! I will! Help!"

Closing my eyes, I listened to the change of note as we entered an atmosphere with a high oxygen content. It replenished the staler air in our bottle as it filtered through the swinging hatch, which Batavus had forgotten to lock. My heart pounded and my mind felt light. Forests are places where bears and fungi dwell. I did not wish to be eaten alive or poisoned to death. But I welcomed the chance to answer a call of nature in the undergrowth, safe from view.

"How long before we reach the surface?"

Leaves rustled beneath us. "About now!"

Our jar had struck the top of the dense canopy which extended over most of both hemispheres. We crashed from one layer of slim branches to the next, as if falling down a ladder. At every wooden rung we slowed a little. We came to a gentle rest on the ground below. We crawled out in relief, too cramped to stand. Then the suppleness returned to our limbs and we danced for joy. The trunks were very tall for a miniature world, between fifteen and twenty feet. They formed a swaying ceiling over us. There were a few spaces where a tree had decayed and fallen. I caught a glimpse of the sky and the tiny sun in the ersatz distance and frowned. It was no longer a disc but a loop.

The other Batavus joined me and groaned. "Why has it turned into a ring? Has it consumed its own core?"

I shook my head. "I doubt it. There is another explanation, but it is rather startling. Do you remember how Earth took a variety of shapes from the perspective of sundry countries? The same must be true for the sun. It changes form depending on what planet it is observed from. Thus from here, it looks like a band. No, that is not correct. Not only does it look different, it is different."

"There is a hierarchy of analogies in this subjective topology of yours? I care less and less for it."

"You are entitled to your dullard opinions."

"Come, let us seek victuals..."

We paraded among the trunks and I located a sheltered spot for the emptying of my bladder — I employ the rude word without shame! Not much to spare, because I was dehydrated from the vomit incident, but rituals are a palliation

in themselves. I buttoned up and returned to my twin's side. He was vainly struggling to swing on a creeper, as if he was lord of the jungle, or the pendulum of an organic clock. His grimace was not much of an improvement on a ball of worms, magnified. He knotted facial muscles, strained and gibbered. His trousers were around his ankles and his knees knocked together violently.

"What are you doing?" I shouted.

"I am trying to conjure another erection."

"Monster! This is a virgin world, unsullied by man! You must take your turn after me in this endeavour!"

And I dropped my own trousers and struggled to beat him in the race for the spheroid's maidenhead. Call it exhaustion or decency, but stiff was a quality which entirely eluded both our manroots. We flopped among the fallen leaves, stirring them in the wind. Then I pulled up my pants and let them be. We sauntered onward, sharing the jar between us, for I was now too weak to carry it alone. Exploring a brand new world is less invigorating when you finally accept the disturbing fact it has already been settled. This revelation was ours when we entered a clearing. Long and narrow, it resembled a landing-strip. That is exactly what it was. At one end rested the starclipper which had deposited us into our solar orbit. I glanced around but saw no trace of Dmitri. It stood there and its wings vibrated alluringly, and I knew that a chance for revenge on the maker of planets had come to us.

"Let us climb in and fly away!" I whispered.

"Do you know how to operate it? What if it refuses to flap for us? We will look very silly if we fail."

"Too late to worry about our public image, Batavus! We shall work it together. We are cunning enough."

We tiptoed across the clearing to the spaceship's side, positioning the Klein Bottle in the rear cockpit. We squeezed into the front, for we were adept at occupying small spaces. Then we investigated the controls. A concealed motor whined and the starclipper began to beat its wings. We depressed a lever and the machine gently rolled forward, taking a little jump which rattled our bones and bruised our brows on the oil gauge. Now we understood that something was amiss. This gauge indicated high levels of oil, the opposite of what Dmitri had claimed. So too the device had a gleaming surface, whereas before it had been rather dull. I could accept that it had been repaired since our last encounter with it, but not that it had suddenly become newer. I pulled back on the lever which seemed to adjust elevation and we hopped again, higher and harder. We were rapidly running out of runway. Forest ahead!

"Give it more juice, Batavus!" cried Batavus.

"What does that mean?" I spluttered.

He shrugged. "I am uncertain. It seemed appropriate. I read it in a novel, one of those scientific romances in the manner of Monsieur Verne. It is what the crew of flying things often call to each other when there is danger of striking a mountain or being punctured by a guided missile. Whatever it means, please do it..."

"Ho! What farfetched tosh! What idiocy!"

"But you must have read the same book! It was in our childhood. And it gave us a lifelong love of science."

"Curse you! What a time to discuss literature!"

"Tug firmly on that rod, Batavus!"

"It is too stiff! It will not budge! We are sure to crash into that tree! Incidentally, the work in question was written by a student of the renowned Willem Bilderdijk. His turns of phrase are inferior to those of the master and his metaphors more strained. Hold tight! Close your eyes! What is wrong with this lever? But I enjoyed that chapter where the hero drops a phlogiston bomb on Berlin."

"No, you must be thinking of a novel by Julius von Voss. Pull up or we are doomed! Or was it one by Emile Souvestre? There have been so many I am apt to become confused. I believe we have read every Zukunftsromane in existence. Look out! The trees!"

"I am not skilled enough to work these controls! Farewell, Batavus! Another few yards and we shall be dashed to bits! By the way, I disagree that we have read all novels of future history, because several new ones have appeared in recent months, and our schedules have been too busy for such leisurely pursuits. But I did read a review of one by a chap called Percy Greg. It was a Utopian tale."

"Another? I am so bored with those! They are prim and didactic and boast minimal character interaction and plot innovation. Help! We have a final chance to evade disaster! Listen carefully to me, Batavus! Pretend the lever is your monkey! Pull it!"

"Yes, yes! It works! We are rising into the air properly! Now pluck a leaf from that tree for me to wipe myself! See how close to its top we fly? We were very fortunate there. But some Utopian narratives are worth reading. Bulwer Lytton handles the genre very well. And I recall a story about the mutated fish-men of a glass Atlantis which demonstrated a keen intelligence in its approach to underwater commerce and business. It had a tragic ending. The bubble burst."

Batavus reached over the side and grasped the highest leaf from the summit of the tallest tree. He wiped his own forehead with it and passed it to me. I wrung the grease out of it and mopped my cheeks. The machine pitched and yawed before I managed to fully control it. Then we heard an abrupt crack! It came from the clearing we had just left. We rotated our heads and witnessed men in elaborate costumes rushing out of the forest. They were gesturing at us and aiming muskets in our general direction. A fellow more furious than the rest had scaled a tree and was balancing on the thinnest twigs at the apex. He loaded his antique firearm with care, balanced it on the crook of his arm and pulled the trigger. There was an abrupt flash and the detonation knocked the dimwit off his perch. Others began climbing trunks. Their clothes, which included ruffs and wide hats with long plumes, hindered them.

"That world is inhabited. I am bewildered."

"Dmitri must have misled us. And I find it difficult to accept this is his starclipper. There are too many little

differences. I think there may be more than one in existence."

"And we have stolen it by mistake! Ah well!"

"They are shooting at us again, Batavus. They mean to destroy us. I am grateful they are not marksmen."

"Yes, they do seem to have strange ideas on the subject of aim. For example, that imbecile discharged his weapon at almost ninety degrees to our course. He must be a beginner."

"What if they chase us in other spaceships?"

"We shall soon be out of the atmosphere. We can lose them among the star clouds. Interesting that you should mention guided missiles in that novel of yours, for it seems our assailants are deceived into believing they already possess such miracles. What a gang of morons! Someone ought to explain to them that the bullet still follows the line of the barrel after it leaves the weapon. I may write a pamphlet about projectiles and return to scatter copies over their settlements. In the meantime we must celebrate, for we have acquired a steerable vehicle at last. And with it we can locate the wardrobe planet."

"A college reunion on Desmond! Marvellous!"

"Fancy dressing like characters from the past! Musketeers! Do they not appreciate how daft they look?"

"That is obviously our task, Batavus!"

"Ho, ho! And we are safe from them..."

It was at this instant that something heavy struck me on the crown of my skull and bounced from mine to his. We both yelled. The lead ball had lost much of its force, but it still raised a painful lump. Dropping inside the cockpit, it rolled around our feet with an irritating hollow sound. This was the gift donated by that first discharge, that crack we had subsequently ignored. As the planet rapidly dwindled to the size of a bruise, we rubbed our aching heads.

"How did that happen? Unfair!"

"Of course! In a sense, those guns really do fire guided missiles. Out here in the airy void, the bullets are attracted to any main source of gravity. Once we escaped the planet's atmosphere, that became us. So aiming directly up was enough. Once a ball is in space, it will fall of its own accord toward a larger object."

"Two shots were fired. Where is the second?"

"About a mile away to your right."

"Here it comes! Can we take evasive action?"

"No. However much we spin and roll and loop, the bullet will still gravitate toward us. The best advice is to duck your head between your knees. Or mine, if they are closer."

"It has hit! The starclipper and I tremble!"

"Are you hurt, Batavus? Am I hurt?"

"No, Batavus, and no! But behold the flask!"

"It has cracked! Impossible! It survived a collision with a comet. What is a bullet compared with that?"

"All the same, it has happened."

"I anticipate trouble from this circumstance. The Klein Bottle was our major refuge at times of apocalypse."

"What if more shots are discharged?"

"We must be out of range now. The throttle is at maximum. There are so many spheroids in this system they will never find us. Take heart! We shall have no more dealings with musketeers. Such ridiculous attire! How can a man step out in public in stockings? Indeed, I maintain that their entire charade is an error, for that world was arboreal in character and musketeers are indigenous to meadows, where they can get a clear shot at their rivals. I conjecture they intended to dress in Lincoln green, hose and jerkin, and mince as outlaws with bows, long and cross, robbing from the rich to give to the poor, until the poor became rich and the process had to be reversed. But something went wrong and they muddled their eras and fashions — a bunch of sapheads!"

"Did you note any other landing-strips on the surface? It is weird how we stumbled upon one so rapidly."

"Not so. There are probably many hundreds, but so narrow are they, relative to the forest cover, that they are invisible from space. Yet I am still confused by the alterations in the cosmos within the last hour or so. Dmitri claimed these extra planets were stored unused. Were they colonised while packed in mothballs?"

"It is quite feasible that immigrants broke into the warehouse and occupied the vacant globes. Like vermin. Where is Plovdiv? In Bulgaria! That explains much, for that nation is plagued with gypsy types, beings who will settle and ruin any territory the moment they spy it. Ah me! I have just recalled that Bulgaria no longer exists! Nor Chaud-Mellé! How will we obtain an espresso in space?"

"I am sure reality will provide one eventually."

"If only we knew how awfully true that statement will become! Flap onward, Batavus! We have no country."

"Wherever we lay our jar, that is our home."

"Look! What is that? It cannot be!"

Far overhead passed a thousand starclippers in a wedge formation. A sight to make fleets of pterodactyls jealous. They were identical to our own, but trailed toy balloons on strings, lending them the appearance of giant birds clutching grapes after a raid on some heavenly orchard. Even from this distance the random bursting of those globules could be heard. Also laughter, forced and hysterical.

"Who are they? Where are they going?"

"Lend me your miniature telescope!" I demanded.

He did so. After a while, one grows used to the odour. I pointed it at the equilateral triangle of spaceships and gasped. I beheld billowing smocks and large black buttons, painted mouths and glass tears. It was a chilling sight, comparable to the earlier passing of the Hell, but glib. This was an ancient madness, born on the outdoor stages of a

more brutal and innocent time, indulged in by unwitting puppets and shadows of hands on fabric screens, exported to booths on beaches, housed in marquees and variety halls. A grossly grim tradition on the move yet again, infecting the actual stars with unfunny horror.

"It appears to be a flotilla of clowns."

"Impossible! All harlequins were liquidated by Thais. She was their lethal Columbine, a niche for their sepulchral urns! Some nasty man must be projecting a zoetrope image onto the celestial dome! Are you certain that Count Unfortunato is fully dead?"

"Yes, but I would not put it past his ability."

"I hope our individual enemies can tell us apart! I am loathe to be rebuked for your basic misdemeanours."

"And I for yours, Batavus! Now hush and watch!"

We shuddered at the idea the clowns might notice us below. But they were too intent on their destination, wherever that was. They passed and we were secure once again. Our forward pant of relief was so enormous it reduced our speed until we revolved our heads in mid-sigh and added this thrust to our motor. Now the formation of aerial buffoons was far behind us and the bursting of coloured balloons no more than a fading memory of pricked bubbles in bathtubs and coffee cups and Borneo surf, which is an unhelpful comparison, because I remember those with accuracy, especially when I bathed in coffee on that island and each rising glob had a triple significance. How I adored leaning forward to bite them when they showed their rainbow domes between my knees! And the slaves who hurled fistfuls of cane sugar into the liquid at my command! Great days! Once I itemised every bubble my metabolism produced. It was a list more helpful than one may care to admit in polite society.

"What is this new obstruction ahead?"

"It seems to be a fragment of a shattered world."

"Yes, it is a tectonic plate, a whole continent, loose in the void. A collision with another globe must have dislodged it. As Dmitri pointed out, space will slowly depopulate itself of such bodies, until stability is reached. But lo! what is atop it?"

I squinted and gasped. "People! Shuffling about!"

"They are employing it for a raft! Have they clung to it ever since their home planet was annihilated?"

"That is the most logical explanation."

"They are packed so tightly! There is no room even to sit! Do they deserve our sympathy for this? I think not! Our own ordeal in the flask was considerably worse. I conclude that they ought to express gratitude for the easy life they are leading. Refugees? Pah! That is nothing! How would they like the strictures of a jar? Not much! Decadent wretches! A disease on such feeble survivors."

"No, not an ailment. Boa constrictors! Sure, and other snakes too. Plus Komodo Dragons! Clowns also!"

"Death to weaklings! Dandruff to them!"

"Our own scalps often flake, but we are strong. We are Dutch! What is the point of that unless to dominate and rule? The tulip rhymes with whip; the windmill with overkill and grill — and I have broiled many a rebellious worker on an iron fence. For we must be obeyed at all times. We are Batavus, Batavus, Batavus!"

"There is just the two of us actually..."

"Oh, I like to exaggerate..."

"Flap closer and let us interrogate them. They might have access to the solution of the mystery which confounds us. On second thoughts, pull back! If that drifting continent snares us in its gravity, it will force us to land and crush several dozen, and then the others will undoubtedly become hostile, not to mention the unwholesome stains on our fuselage. I say we should ignore them entirely."

"Too late! We have been spotted! Do not wave back!"

"They are shouting something at us!"

"Fly no nearer, Batavus! Let them bawl as much as they please. Plug your ears immediately! Now they are casting us a line! Do they expect us to tow them somewhere? The arrogance!"

"We have no choice. It has looped our tailfin."

"Can you climb out and sever it?"

"Not without risk of falling into yonder void again. My advice here is to play along, tug them to the nearest habitable world and allow them to treat us as saviours and heroes."

"A profitable scheme. We shall be revered."

We signalled back at the refugees, indicating that we were planning to land them on a stable planet. The cable pulled taut and rivets popped on our rudder. The strain on our engine was excessive but we flew on. I noticed a shimmering blue disc ahead. An alluring globe with dark oceans as well as land, and clouds wisping themselves across the hemispheres. A feminine planet in some measure; hard to say exactly why. The polar caps sparkled as we circled it, searching for a safe spot to come down. There was no question of descending onto ground, for the jolt would injure our human cargo to the point of death. Nor could we ditch in the sea without losing our spaceship, which was clearly not designed to float. A cunning compromise had to be reached. It was. We spotted a wide beach and dipped toward it. Sharing the controls, we touched down on soft sand but dumped the loose continent in the breakers.

The tectonic plate with its consignment of people splashed into the shallows, spraying foam in a high arc. Now it served as a genuine raft, surfing the gentle waves to shore and lodging firmly on the beach behind our starclipper. Its passengers swarmed off, bending to kiss the sands, spitting out the yellow and pink grains in distaste. They were rumped, fevered, feeble. I unhooked the line from the ornithopter and watched as the incoming tide lifted the lost continent, dragged it back out to sea, deposited it further along the beach. We had made a serious contribution to the

geography of this planet. Already seals were flopping and barking out of the water to colonise it. And soon limpets would play hard to get on its rocks. Batavus and I strutted around the humans in our debt. They were still too distressed to demonstrate proper gratitude and adoration. It would come, we assured ourselves.

After a few minutes, we judged them ready to begin work as praisers of Batavus and lined them up in rows. Far too many had to be guided into position with slaps. Finally they complied. "Bow before us!" we snapped. But we waited in vain for them to remember their manners. Over and over again we roared: "Bend the knee, wretches!" Still they stood and blinked quiet eyes. "Debase yourselves now!"

But it was a waste of shouting. They were stubborn. Then they began to talk all at once, babbling at us and shrugging their shoulders. Truth dawned: they did not speak Dutch. We repeated the demand in a variety of languages. They remained at a loss. We tried French, Spanish, Portuguese and Italian to no effect. We blurted the order in Indonesian. Then Latin and Greek. Still they pouted and scratched their heads. It was plain our desire for acclaim had been frustrated by a cultural barrier. What might be their nationality? I recognised none of the words they used. In a fit of temper we walked the lines, cuffing the emaciated fools. They fell to the ground, but it was not the same.

There are only so many faces you can bruise before a rest period is required. The young Batavus and I sprawled on the sand and yawned. As we did so, a shadow passed over us. It had the outline of a kite. I watched the fabric object filling with wind. Then my eyes followed its cords to the horizon. They were connected to a kind of sledge. Not dangerous. The kite dragged it along with jerks and a driver grunted. His visage can be described as dubious. As he came closer, I saluted his sandyacht, for we were guests on his territory, at least for the meanwhile. I am practical as well as principled. Then I saw how long in years he was, how small a threat to my designs, and I dropped my hand quickly, to save the gesture for someone who mattered. His clothes were rags, his beard was dirty and tangled. His skin was sallow. There was a fire in his eyes, true, but he was mostly a bad specimen. However, he spoke fluent German, although his accent was unsuited to its gutturals.

"I am the ruler of this planet."

"Greetings to you and your people," I replied.

"No, I am a solitary. The single inhabitant. I saw you appear in my sky while I loitered on another landmass. I came as fast as I could. The winds are not as strong as they were. These days it takes almost an hour to sail once around the equator."

"Standards are declining everywhere!"

"Yes they are. But welcome to Normnbdsgsrutt."

"An unpalatable name for a planet..."

"Perhaps so. But it is one of the four hundred, and equal to any of its competitors in this microcosmos."

"Your powers of computation have been addled by senility. There are seven thousand globes in the system."

"No longer. They still smash themselves, but it is less of a frenzy now. One day there will be none left, and a giant Hell will drift alone through space, for unlike worlds, they absorb each other and grow after collisions. But what can I do for you?"

"We towed these refugees here at our own expense. Yet they decline to offer themselves as our slaves."

"Have you employed the argument of obligation?"

"We cannot. They are ignorant of common parlance. They are not from Europe, nor any of its colonies."

He nodded once, his beard dipping inside his dirty shirt, which was torn and lacking a collar, and remarked: "Then they have forgotten their origins and must be deemed a new race. Thus they will speak the language of their home sphere but no other."

I sighed. "And what might that be?"

He picked his nose. "I have no idea. It is surely unrelated to any tongue of Earth. It evolved on its own."

"Will you teach them one of our languages?"

His dark eyes glittered. "Why?"

"So we can return in the future and receive the praise which is our due. We saved them from starving to death in the void. It was a glorious act of charity. We want our reward."

"I promise to treat them correctly. Is that not enough? I was alone on this world. Now I have an entire population to deal with. But I shall not complain about that. In fact it makes me very happy. All the same, I might lecture to them in English, as an amusement for myself. Loneliness has been a problem for me recently."

"Why that particular language?" I wondered.

"Because it seems the obvious interplanetary choice. I have always assumed that if authentic aliens suddenly entered our solar-system, they would automatically comprehend phrases such as 'Cup of tea, old stick?' and 'Dashed weather for cricket, tiffin, punting, what ho?' and 'Tophole shot, you are a brick!' and anything to do with rain, warm beer, queens. English is natural to outer space."

We recoiled. "Tea? Tea? Speak not of filth!"

"Ah! You are zealots of the coffee cup? I thought as much. But tell me honestly: am I not familiar to you?"

I stared into his face. "You are an ugly old man."

The other Batavus added: "We never socialise with ancient cretins, only young ones, so the answer is: no!"

"Well, that is useful. Yes, very useful."

"What is your own nationality? I cannot place it."

But he merely muttered under his breath: "A fusion! A grand scheme! Domination of all! Commentary caddies!"

"What did you say? What are they?"

He repeated the words: "Commentary caddies!"

I clenched my fists. "We demand an explanation of that remark! What secret does it conceal? Why do you lisp? You are an irritating fellow! I like you not! Define the meaning of commentary caddies on the instant! A concise description, if you please."

He tapped his head. "A fusion."

The other Batavus drew me aside and whispered in my ear: "I believe he might be a sage. He acts like one."

"Do you judge that of possible benefit?"

"He mentioned a fusion. Might he not be capable of blending both of us back together? I would welcome that. To be housed in one frame again! What a relief! There are advantages in being double, but they are sorely outweighed by the defects and perils."

"I agree. We have to take care of two lives."

"And feed twice the number of bellies. All the agonies of existence are duplicated. It is not healthy."

Separating from our little conspiracy, we asked our host: "Are you possessed of an ability to merge items?"

He smirked. "Not yet. But in time I shall be."

"What objects will you be able to combine? For instance, we already know how to unify cream and coffee."

"My researches, which are wholly mental at this point, have carried me far beyond that stage. I hope to integrate organic solids: flesh and bones and viscera. The stuff of life!"

We waved patronising hands. "Then proceed with your studies. We are leaving you now for other realms. But when we come back, we will request the fusion of our divorced parts into one unit. We shall also expect to enjoy the veneration of these refugees. Until then, Batavus is satisfied with you. There is no higher honour."

He became furtive, wrapping his beard around his fingers, chuckling to himself and winking ominously. "When I have the tools at my disposal, I shall control the local universe! There are no resources here. I need transport to escape. Your starclipper is therefore impounded. It belongs to me now! But I am hungry. Ravenous!"

"He rants," I cried to Batavus. "Let us depart."

"Possibly he is still a sage," my younger self said, "but one given to occasional delusions of grandeur."

"We must distrust his claim to be able to mingle things. Yet it may be worthwhile paying him a repeat visit."

"Just in case... No-chance is too remote..."

We climbed inside the ornithopter and started the wings flapping. I was entertained and also disturbed to note the expression on the face of our host. He was torn between rushing forward to wrest the controls from our grasp, to prevent our departure, and running to the refugees, to beg food. At least that is what I assumed his second option entailed! What a sad lunatic! To anticipate nourishment from a gathering of men and women who were themselves almost skeletons. In the end, they proved a stronger lure than us. But we did not linger to witness his failure. What a shock he would receive when they thwarted his advances, spilling empty pockets into his cupped hands! I even thought they might attack him and chew him up entirely for his tactlessness.

As we soared out of the atmosphere of Normnbdsgsrutt, I regretted a lost opportunity to interview our host more precisely on the alterations in the cosmos. But it was too late to return. Our engine was damaged and we needed to find a world with mechanical facilities. Plus we were quite capable of solving the puzzle on our own, if we applied ourselves. I was busy flying the starclipper, but Batavus was free. He consulted his mind for long moments, digging in his outrageous ear with the gnarled nail of his least favourite finger, as if trying to scoop out truth nuggets with the wax, but the mine of information was behind the drum, in his memory. Nonetheless, his voice had access to it, for it spoke words which seemed both reasonable and unbelievable.

"Time dilation. That is the answer."

"What exactly do you mean by that?" I muttered.

"Our orbit around the sun," he said.

"Yes, I understand! That was one of Fizeau and Foucault's theories. It was named Rather Special Relativity."

"Unfortunately, it was never published. But we read the manuscript courtesy of Christopher Blayre, who probably stole it. With the problems created by the end of the world, it is unlikely to reach a wide audience now and may have to be rediscovered."

"That is a shame. But we can present experimental proof of its main tenets in the form of ourselves."

I was referring to one logical consequence of that radical theory. We had travelled so rapidly during our awful solar incident that our own time relative to the rest of the system might have stretched. There is a formula for this. I do not have it with me today. But the idea is simple enough. Nothing can move faster than light. As bodies accelerate to that maximum velocity, they must undergo remarkable changes. As the speed of light is the distance it has travelled divided by the time it has taken (but it is always the same) any disagreement over the distance implies a dispute over the time, and there must be indecision over the former, for there is no absolute space. None!

Ponder a man who spills a cup of coffee on a woman in a locomotive. He is travelling third class on the most rickety carriage. To somebody standing beside the track, for instance a suicidal lover, or businessman whose shares have collapsed, the distance between the spill and splash might be fifty yards, because the locomotive has chuffed that far down the track between the events. How the man wishes this estimate was true from his position too! But in fact, relative to him, the distance can be given in inches. Certainly he is within range of a swung handbag. She is mad and keeps all her money in there in small coins. Such a heavy weapon turns his face the colour of mocha, but all he spills now are tears. So it is painfully obvious that distance is not absolute. But if the speed of light is, then time must also be variable. And in fact, the faster a body moves, the slower it runs. Time, I mean, not the body. For Batavus in his flask, spinning about the sun, one hour had passed. For all other objects it might have been years.

How many exactly? We could not know until we made planetfall again and asked for the date. I looked up and let loose a laugh. Desmond lay directly ahead! The polish on its knobs still gleamed, and the varnish on the grain of wood was pungent even from this distance. Our academic chums would soothe our chronic anxiety on the issue of time! The brown disc of the wardrobe world had a homely look about it, an atmosphere of snug mystery. It was based on one of those old imposing closets with a nutty flavour and intricate but solid carvings on the door, a piece of furniture which looms above the curious explorer in the obscurest room of a large empty house. This was no plywood shack! It was oak or teak. We accelerated toward it, but a mist of crushed stars drifted down and enveloped us. Visibility was reduced to zero, and we had to close our eyes to prevent the ground glass blinding us. When we finally escaped from the cloud, Desmond had gone.

*

Fear not, O Reader, that our wanderings through outer space are entirely random! Everything that happens to us has a place in the resolution. The flights from planet to planet in our starclipper are the spinnings of an awful (and wondrous) web — as if we linked these earthy (and magnified) nodes on the intangible thread of our schedule, ready to pull them tight at the grand finale, the spheres knocking together and dangling like the weighted balls on the rim of a cast net. But that is not the way it felt when we emerged from the fog of glass. We believed we had simply failed. Desmond was lost again, and we were frustrated, like men who must remove their shirts but have no place to hang them. Incidentally, do not accept the metaphor of the wardrobe world resembling a tall cabinet in an empty house. My later self rarely ponders before he narrates. If that house is empty, how can it contain furniture?

Desmond was spherical: another objection to the comparison. True, I can envisage the storing of a jacket within it, and possibly other items of fashion. For a moment, when we first spied it, a sublime jangling had seemed to issue forth from inside — the celestial harmonies of millions of swaying coathangers. But there are more points opposed to the analogy than servile to it. No wardrobe in my experience has an equator, tropics and poles. Nor electric storms roaming the upper reaches of its magnetic field. Desmond had these. All the same, it was not a planet which nature might create alone, and indeed it was the product of a carpenter, so the wardrobe label is no less accurate than any other, and more homely. Thus I vote now to retain it. In my paired condition, I had a block vote. For every one cast, two were returned. It is an effect witnessed at the very small level, among subatomic particles, the quantum realms, but scarcely in the bigger picture. Talented us!

Our engine really was overheating and we desperately needed to find another world, or drift helplessly in the void for an unspecified period which might have aeons tucked under its belt of stars. The wings flapped awkwardly now, like those of a tired vulture, and the machine bucked and swayed as if its passengers were arrows in its flesh. There were planets ahead, black and menacing. One had a firm outline; the other was blurred and unfocussed. We chose the former. It expanded rapidly in size, but no features grew out of its umbratulous surface. It seemed an utterly bland sphere. Then I realised it was not so smooth. It was pitted with craters at regular intervals, holes which revealed themselves as thicker shadows on the global landmass. These pits had been gouged neither by meteorites nor asteroids, for they were too neat and systematic. They were products of iron drills. They were orifices!

We licked our lips in excitement. "Do you know what object this is, Batavus? I think it is Watermelon!"

"The love planet for men? Useless to us!"

"Ah! We are impotent. I had forgotten that! Let us fly past, for my pride can no longer tolerate the sight!"

"Wait! Something is stirring down there."

"On the surface of the world?"

"No, in my trousers! It is a new erection!"

"Impossible! How can that be? Grief! The same thing has happened to me. It is a miracle! Does Watermelon possess the power to wake the snake from hibernation? Is it a restorative tonic for the depths of pants? How may we express our gratitude to it?"

"By attributing the phenomena to the correct source! Look, Batavus! It is astrology which has saved us! That other planet is Zumboo, and it has just passed behind Watermelon."

I rubbed my eyes and watched as the sphere with the blurred outline enjoyed a thorough eclipse. Now we were close, I saw that it was a hairy orb, covered in wiry tufts, which explains its nebulous silhouette. Then I snapped my fingers and sniggered.

"Of course! The planet Zumboo must influence erections, because it is named after the god of monkeys! And now it is occluded and therefore temporarily paralysed in astrological terms. Its psychical control over groins has been shut off. In other words, just for the duration of this eclipse, we are no longer fated to be impotent! Our basic manroots are free to decide their own destinies!"

"We must not waste this opportunity!"

I glanced at Batavus and nodded. We descended into the atmosphere (sweat and pheromones) of Watermelon. We landed on the rubber equator, straddling the date line. The ground was soft but firm, and as exciting as the garters of a Malaysian whore — note that I prefer the garters, which are emblematic of shares in rubber plantations, to the whore, who is a female and thus not part of my emotional cosmology (the fact that Thais is an exception must be one of the eternal mysteries of plot). We leapt out of the ornithopter and regarded our environs. The surface was slippery, but some men have a poor aim. That is understandable. We were overwhelmed with choice. I simply did not know where to begin. So many of the holes were incredibly alluring, I was bound to want to change my mind in the middle of coitus. Then my later self suggested that we were now potent enough to take them all.

"Really? Do you think we might manage that?"

"Yes! The ultimate orgy in the history of the microcosmos! And if we both move along in the opposite direction to the path of Zumboo, we can extend the eclipse by keeping it behind Watermelon. We will violate an entire planet. What a monkeyfest!"

I shivered. "Use not that word!"

He frowned. "Which one? Microcosmos? I picked it up from our last host. Does it intimidate you?"

"No! We are identical on that issue. I was referring to behind. After all, we have no idea what these orifices really represent. Their portals are wholly undesignated!"

"Pshaw! Pshew! Are you shamed by the Cretan vice?"

"Only in public! And you are here!"

"I shall turn a blind eye. And you can return the favour. Listen, I will take the southern hemisphere, and you may have the northern. If we both start at the poles and spiral our way up or down, we will meet here again in the knowledge that we have loved a complete world. Then we will depart, because to stay with a lover after congress is to display signs of maturity, and that is the rim of the slippery path to the sticky sump of liberalism, which we are pledged to avoid. We must pump firm and fast and then abscond like bounders."

"Yes, yes! Let us begin immediately!"

Batavus gripped me by the shoulders. "Remember not to let the side down, younger self. Resist the temptation to indulge in foreplay. Do not treat Watermelon with tenderness."

"I shall pretend it is Thais! She awoke all my perverse instincts. Already I feel brutal and primordial."

"Your emotions certainly match your looks."

"Enough banter! Onward to debauch!"

We parted company and I hurried to the north pole. Before entering it with my manroot, I placed my eye to the aperture and looked down into the centre of the world. It was dark and damp. But I saw an eye shining through a peephole at the antipodes. It was Batavus, of course, infected with the same curiosity. I cannot say whether he was embarrassed or not to be caught in this act of voyeurism. I suspect he was, because I felt ashamed — and he was me. Then the eye was withdrawn and replaced by the purple glans of a throbbing monkey. I did not wish to observe this, so I followed his example and pushed in my own. The passion of the experience was slightly spoiled by the knowledge that we were racing to consummate every orifice in Watermelon's body. The first back to the equator would be granted a moral advantage over his twin — perhaps moral is the wrong word. But any excuse to strut justifies itself! I believe that the slurp of my manroot as it slid into the rubber was more musical than his. This must remain debatable — I hope!

As we pumped on opposite sides of the planet, the whole globe began to undulate. When we pushed together, it slightly compressed Watermelon, turning it into a sort of bellows. A faint breeze and the odour of issue hissed from all the other holes. At last I was finished and moved to the next orifice, which was located one degree of latitude below the pole. I pleased this one too, and the next, and the one after that, exhausting every aperture within the arctic circle in the space of an hour. Zumboo remained eclipsed; the laws of planetary motion were far more intricate down here than they had been on the main surface. I do not like to talk too much about my lovers — this news may come as a surprise to you, for I described my affair with Thais in detail — but the truth is that most aspects of my brief romance with her remain secret — and I care not to betray Watermelon, at least beyond whatever treachery is necessary. Thus my verbal pants must remain closed.

In accordance with my honourable coyness, I now jump forward to the moment when we met at the equator, at the very spot where we had landed. Batavus was exhausted but happy, and so was I. The race was a draw. Both of us claimed to be satisfied with this, because we had no choice, but I was still convinced that I was the better lover. My other self had never ravished a comet's tail with a telescope! Yet I was smug enough to hide my smugness, as all great smuggers do. I was feverish with need for cups of coffee, for I do not smoke tobacco, and the symbolic lighting of the cigarette is for me a waste of fire: all the less to brew the bean! What with caffeine withdrawal and penis withdrawal, we were both taken aback by the climax of the adventure. Then Zumboo emerged from retirement and our monkeys sagged. Farewell gibbon and orang-outang! And goodbye to the love planet too! For we were ready to flee, our wings flapping us toward the sky, grumbling while we sighed.

"Our engine is about to break," I muttered.

"We must seek another planet immediately — a place of more people but less fun. Not Zumboo. Try that one."

"The world which is swathed in red smokes?"

"Yes, it seems friendly enough — because I cannot make out details on the cloaked surface. But if I could, doubtless I would appreciate the horrors we are soon about to face."

"Hurry! The motor is whining like a slave!"

"Ah! It has broken. But we are on a glide path! There is a name for the technique of landing without power."

"The verb you are thinking of is volplane."

"Shall we try that? Or crash to our deaths instead?"

"Decisions! I propose the former..."

And so we prepared ourselves for the descent through the atmosphere of yet another world, the nose of our disabled ornithopter pushing aside crimson mists which smelled of gore. This orb was larger than Watermelon but smaller than Normnbdsgsutt. Its gravity was eager to make a closer acquaintance with our mass, but not so insistent that it pulled off our wings. We passed under the clouds and saw a world of small lakes, dozens of islands and causeways leading to stone cities. There were many houses and pyramids and small areas of desert between them, each with a single cactus planted in its exact centre.

"This reminds me of Mesoamerica!" cried Batavus.

I raised an eyebrow. "Really? When did you go there without me? Did you enjoy vacations at my expense?"

"No, I mean that it resembles the environment of the Aztecs. If you direct your attention to that temple down there, you may observe that an altar has been erected on its roof and a sacrifice is taking place! Look at the obsidian dagger in the hands of the priest! See how he smears the oil of mashed chillies over his victim's torso! Hark at the wails of the poor man as it stings his nipples!"

"Which temple? The one we are heading for?"

"Yes, that is correct. The one we are about to unavoidably land on, interrupting the ritual and probably earning the wrath of the priesthood and the entire indigenous culture."

"How unlucky! But I am ready."

"No you are not; neither am I. Hold on anyway!"

As we soared over the city, and the smokes filled our lungs, I knew that my rescue from the false Aztecs on the steeple of the cathedral had something to do with this coincidence. It was as if fate wanted business to be concluded properly before letting us go again. I do not spoil this new incident by admitting that we emerged unscathed from it: so fast did events move between now and later that to recreate their genuine tension is not a feasible task. One moment we were menaced by obsidian; the next by painted smiles. And after those, other things too. So that the agenda of our experiences must read like a lazy abridgement until we once again encounter Christopher Blayre on Desmond. No matter. My narrative is very complex and wordy. If you have read it this far, you must be intelligent enough to fill in whatever details you think fit; unless your neighbours speak the truth — that you are a gibbering oaf who reads onward because you simply do not understand when to stop. I do not believe them. I will give you the benefit of the doubt.

"I wonder what mashed chillies on a monkey might feel like? Perhaps no different to the way mine feels now, for I believe I have contracted a disease from Watermelon. I itch!"

"So do I. It is the price of carnal pleasure."

"Worth paying, possibly. Very difficult to make a final judgement. Tell me, have you ever read any novels by authors who might have started writing since we entered this universe — bearing in mind the effects of time dilation? I suspect they have names like Haggard, Doyle, Rohmer, or anything else you care to concoct."

"Why? Do they feature Aztecs?"

"I was hoping you could tell me that. I have never read any. But we need examples of Europeans escaping from such situations, and I wondered if those nonexistent authors might come to our aid. Yes, I agree that it was a slim hope. Ah well! Let us at least crash with dignity. I trust we shall not be expected to rate their princesses as beautiful? For me only cold women are bearable to behold."

"Cease lusting after Thais! She is long dead!"

"Unlike our own demises, which are due shortly. Is it worth jumping out before we hit? Wait! What if we climb into the Klein Bottle? Then we will be protected from the impact."

"Why did we not think of that sooner?"

"Oops! How silly! Too late now..."

But despite our fears, we skidded to a relatively gentle landing on the flat summit of the temple. The priests swarmed around us. Even if we had not disrupted their ceremony, they still would have reserved us for sacrifice, because Aztecs, whatever planet they live on, do not care for outsiders, or rather they like them too much — for the wrong reasons. I smiled at them, the dusky brutes! But they did not understand the superb law that a Dutchman is immune from assault. Our nation is one of rulers, and our sadism is more humane than that of the Spanish — who interbreed with the natives! — or of the British — who offer them tea! — for the whips in our hands are honestly flicked and the blood drips without fake tears, the bile without guile. Our colonists are the least hypocritical of the big European exploiters. Only the Belgians come close to matching us, but they have a tendency to murder their vassals before working them sufficiently. That is bad business.

We were dragged out of the starclipper. We were shown the tall pots which would hold our livers, and the fire which would burn our hearts to ashes, adding more scarlet smoke to the atmosphere to blend with that of those already sacrificed here and on other pyramids. Then we were forced down onto the altar and the dagger was turned before us, flicking lights into our eyes, reflections of sparks on the obsidian. This blade was not cold stone; it had already been warmed in the chest of our predecessor. Blood stained the feathered cloaks. Masks grinned without emotion. Above the clouds there was movement. Were birds of prey coming to peck out our lungs, after the knife had sawn open our ribs? No, they were too big for eagles. Then I gasped. Starclippers! Hundreds of them! Down they flapped through the mist, but the priests were glaring at us and noticed nothing amiss. They were chanting loudly:

"Omecihuatl! Nanahuatzin! Quetzalcoat!"

"The last of those names was opposed to human sacrifice!" roared my elder self, to keep their attentions focussed on us. But the priests did not speak any of our languages, so the attempt was in vain. Nonetheless, they still did not turn to behold the descending ornithopters until the first bucket of water was emptied over the flame at the altar. It hissed out and the priests jumped in alarm. More buckets came down; flour bombs and cream pies also. This invasion fleet was manned by clowns! They were the same harlequins we had spotted passing overhead soon after departing the world of the musketeers. Now they shrieked and blew little trumpets. The priests huddled together and roared:

"Après-ski! Chamois! Cuckoo clock!"

Once again they had reverted to type. But these words of power were equally useless against the wrath of the clowns. Lust in their squinting eyes, hunger at the edges of their painted smiles, they bombed the city, igniting the

clouds of flour with short fuses, and using this thunder to announce their imminent arrival to the indoor inhabitants of the planet. Batavus and I had the presence of mind to leap off the altar and run for our starclipper. We could not take off in it, but we sought sanctuary in the Klein Bottle. Back to the insufferably cramped conditions of before! But at least we were protected from the barbarism of pierrots. I wish to confess that I have never enjoyed the laughter of other people — it has always grated my ears — but I was strangely thankful for the theatrical giggles which now filled the sky, for they were tokens of our rescue. In our flask, these sounds were muted, but not enough to prevent us joining in with nervous chuckles of our own.

Now the fleet began to land and the invaders jumped out. They were like pantomime locusts pouncing on crops of pure ritual. The priests had no time to fetch their clubs from their underground armories. And knives are too short to deflect slapsticks.

Have you ever witnessed a battle between Harlequins and Aztecs? Few people have, and it is not a pretty sight. Or rather it is too pretty: a warping of that term, which is itself a fallacy when applied to anything other than coffee and astronomy. Imagine a clash between zany and crazy, smocks and feathers, sentimental and corny. It is truly abominable! And in case you are itching to point out that there are differences between pierrots, harlequins and clowns, I shall merely state in my defence that I am Batavus Droogstoppel and ignorant of such minor disciplines as the categorisation of buffoons. I have an excellent mind, and it is reserved for reckonings of a higher order — the quantity of stars and beans in a given constellation or café. Therefore it matters not whether a pierrot is sad, and a harlequin ironic, and a clown acrobatic — they can all be located in the Set of Idiots. That is enough for me, and should suffice for you also. If it does not, then you are a secret adherent of circuses and should be banished from this tale! Off you go: no delaying! You have been caught out and must slink away.

Still here? Then you are clearly one of the righteous — a hater of the tradition. But let me record now that the clowns utterly vanquished the Aztecs. If I was a man who utilised colloquial phrases, I might say that the feathered dolts were trounced. But such expressions are against the spirit of the Dutch language and therefore evil. The clowns suffered losses, true enough, and many of their bodies wore obsidian splinters in their hearts later, but they were more numerous than their enemies. When the entire flotilla had landed, it crowded out all the spare land on the planet, knocking over cacti and chilli plants, some spaceships sprawling on others like mating crucifixes with hinges instead of nails holding up their crossbars. In the aftermath of conflict, blood turned the flour to gory glue. Petals and feathers were trampled underfoot by enormous shoes with curly toes and a vanguard of victors climbed our pyramid to examine our grounded starclipper. They were astounded to notice us huddled close inside our jar. They bent nearer and struck the side with slapsticks. My ears rang painfully, but we refused to emerge. Then they circled it with frowns, tripping each other up as they did so. Finally, I decided to try reasoning with them. I called out:

"Begone, theatrical cretins! We are Batavus!"

And they answered in a peculiar form of Italian: "How can this be? He is only a mythical bogey. Yet you have his face and attire and tone. Glory be to the holy unicycle! Praise the flung flan! Our trick flowers which spray water runneth over..."

We replied: "Vuoi scherzare! Do you worship us?"

They shook their heads and exchanged wry glances. "No, you are the devil of our religion. We thought you merely a story. A long time ago, a vile monster by the name of Batavus Droogstoppel hired a clown to climb a building. But it was a snare, for the windowsill was slippery and the gentle creature fell to his death. Batavus had arranged this. And later he knocked other clowns down with a jar. Now we know the legend is true. And we have a chance for revenge."

I rolled my eyes. "Here we go again..."

"What do you intend to do?" asked my older self.

"Force you to unicycle on a tightrope which will be stretched from here to Mousetrap — the world of sprung doom! If you succeed in getting there, you will die immediately. If you fall off before reaching it, you will die more slowly. If you decline to make the attempt, we shall kill you in another, even slower, way."

"Well, we are not coming out of this flask."

All at once, they began striking the side with their slapsticks. My head now became a house for a small explosion, a single detonation which grew rapidly through puberty to adulthood. Within ten minutes it had the ambitions of an active volcano, but not the style. I cannot vouch for my other self, but I was on the point of quitting the refuge, deeming even the balancing escapades planned for us by the clowns to be preferable to this cacophony. Suddenly we were saved by another band of invaders! The universe has always been a violent place, and the microcosmos was merely a more condensed version of it.

The clowns turned their faces to the sky and the glass tears pasted on their cheeks were dislodged by real ones. Beyond the clouds, horribly close through the rents, was another planet. It loomed larger and larger until it covered half the sky. It eclipsed our predicament with a bigger and possibly worse one. It was a battered world with chipped paint and a curious rolling motion through the heavens. I felt I was standing at the bottom of a ramp down which a giant steel marble was racing. And I noted other features on its surface which I could not comprehend: silver bands more firm than clouds which doubled as lines of latitude. Little figures scuttled along them. Parasites?

"Is this a collision?" I screamed.

"No, it seems to be inhabited. I believe they plan to deliberately ram us! But who are they? Who?"

And one of the frightened clowns answered: "It is the pirate world! It is Penknife — scourge of skies!"

Batavus and I exchanged glances. Penknife! A fearsome and romantic name for an orb of buccaneers. Then we saw it did resemble such an item. A Swiss Army Knife to be more precise (which the Aztecs might have been happy to fall victim to, if they still lived). It must have housed more than a dozen implements under its crust. And now one of these

gradually opened from its socket: a big knife. I could not see the machinery that rotated the blade around its hinge. When it was fully extended, I caught a brief glimpse of the other layered tools inside the sphere. The sheer variety of utensils surprised me. There were saws and bottle-openers, a corkscrew and bradawl, even a magnifying glass and tweezers. But I could not imagine a practical use for the massive toothpick — unless to lever banana peel from under the gums of the real Zumboo. Only gods had mouths so huge. I finally appreciated why Kingdom Noisette had rejected many of the designs of Dmitri Sneakios.

Now the oncoming planet stabbed our own world and its blade pushed deep through the crust and into the mantle. Both spheres shook and the clowns were thrown down. Then hundreds of corsairs began running along the knife, using it as a bridge.

Have you ever witnessed a battle between pirates and clowns? It is not an amusing sight. Imagine a clash between fierce and foolish, rough and guff, romance and whimsy. It is grotesque! But the pirates did not completely carry the day. They butchered about half the clowns, but were driven back by the remainder. They lost a third of their own crew. Most of the ornithopters were smashed, stranding many of the pierrots on this sphere. The Klein Bottle was snatched by a swarthy pirate and slung over his back. Perhaps he mistook it for a flask of local overproof rum — at any rate it was taken with the other loot. We were being kidnapped! With dastardly shouts, he crossed back to his home world, ran up the slope of the northern hemisphere to a hatch and dropped down inside. The interior of this planet resembled the hold of a galleon — with decks of wood and hammocks. Somewhere below, we could hear the creakings and clankings of the machinery which worked the blades and other tools. The big knife was being withdrawn and shut. Then the globe rolled away into space, leaving far behind the scenes of carnage.

Penknife was steered with love. By this I do not allude to the sort of carnal lusts that my younger self is so addicted to. Plus he is a liar, especially when it comes to erotic incidents. He did not slurp more on Watermelon than myself. Indeed all errors in this combined account can be attributed to him: he is a less fastidious and technical fellow than yours truly. But this is turning into yet another digression. How can a planet be powered by love? To explain the reason, I must first describe the Captain of the Pirates. It is often said that love makes the world turn round. I had always assumed it was momentum. However, in this case the cliché is correct. The leader of the buccaneers, to my astonishment and horror, was not a man. Nor was she an ape or puppet. Therefore she must have been a lady! Yes, I shudder as I write these words! A pirate with a bosom! Surely those are confined only to amateur musicals staged by societies of housewives in the name of some insipid charity? Not so. There are real female pirates. I have met one, and so has Batavus. What did she look like? Pain and honey.

Charlotte Gallon. The most beautiful woman in the universe. I held my hands to my eyes when I first beheld her. Also the most dangerous. A strange aura enveloped her, from her head of lustrous black hair to her lovely bare feet, with her gold ankle bracelets and toe-rings. Her skin was dark brown; her eyes even darker. She had much of the Javanese about her, but she was in fact the descendent of Amerindians from Saskatoon. I thought her smile was sensuous but cruel, and I continued to stare at it through the gaps in my fingers. Batavus was likewise affected. I believe he judged her even superior to Thais! I was bemused by her tongue, which spoke French with a curious lilt. A seashell necklace swung between her breasts and her beringed fingers tapped the hilt of the sheathed cutlass at her hip. I was scared, entranced, bewildered. I could smell an exotic drink on her breath: rum mixed with lime juice, sugar and crushed ice. I now realised that all things fell in love with her instantly. The fabric of spacetime bowed before her in admiration, warping reality so that her world might roll down the incline.

That is how she steered her planet with love! Simply by showing her face to whichever quarter of space she planned to traverse. And to brake the orb, she employed a silk veil.

I know what you are thinking.

If the planet rolled and she stood on its surface, she would rotate with it, showing her face to more than one quarter of space and stalling this amorous method of propulsion.

But she pulsed her countenance with the veil.

The procedure worked a treat. Many engines have an instant of zero power built into them. They rely on inertia to carry their moving parts into the next cycle. Even electric motors. This Pirate Queen understood mechanics. Almost male, her brain.

She regarded us with her evil gorgeousness.

"So these are our new crew members? What talents do they possess? I wonder if they can handle a sword or pistol? Tell me, double fellow, why did the clowns try to murder you?"

Batavus said: "Because they knew we were on your side! Because they knew we wanted to work for you..."

That was his ploy to help us escape from this quandary, but I think that honesty is the best policy, and so I silenced him with a sharp wave and delivered the following speech:

"Stop! That is incorrect. Our name is Batavus Droogstoppel. We are almost the same, but I am a coffee merchant. Perhaps you have seen a few of my advertisements on the proculscope? Which is my own favourite? Hard to say. Probably the one in which the couple who are no longer so young finally decide to try kissing each other with mouths full of coffee. The best coffee in the world comes (came!) from Java. My export business was a model of efficiency. My rates were very low, because I did not pay the workers on my plantations. In the story, the couple flirt for many weeks before admitting that they have certain smugnesses in common and that a union of their living arrangements might be a fruitful concept. Both are wealthy, privileged and cynical. That is the proper way to be! The actor who played the male lead was called Anthony Skull, and later he appeared in another proculscope show, a fantasy known as Bunty, the Deer Slayer, which was set in a posh abattoir and was basic venison propaganda. Such a facetious fellow! When it was time for his first kiss with the equally annoying actress, my coffee sales tripled. Anyway, they knock back a big

cup each and lock lips. Then they dribble the fluid into their partner's throats. It scalds their tongues! They disengage and start slapping and biting, blaming the other for hurting them. The relationship starts to fall apart from this moment. It is amusing! Then something snaps inside the man's head and he picks up the kettle and batters her senseless. To develop this scene, I employed only the most misogynistic writers, those who inhabit the 'fantasy' and 'horror' genres. They derived considerable sexual pleasure from constructing it. I know I did! No offence to you, I mean! After all, you hold power over us and I must watch my step in your presence. Anyway, after she collapses to the floor, he boils the kettle and while he waits for the water to heat up, he strips her naked, plugs her orifices with coffee beans and carries her to the bathroom. He dumps her in the bath. Then he pours the boiling water over her! He makes many trips from kitchen to bathroom, until the tub is completely full. But at this very moment, just when he is about to slurp the bloody coffee from the top of the bath with a straw, there is a knocking at the door. It is her mother and father, come to visit her! What can he do? There is only one thing. He invites them in for coffee. They accept! Yes, and they sit there, dipping their mugs into the bath while their facile daughter bobs on the currents and twitches..."

Charlotte narrowed her eyes. "Kill them."

"What?" I blurted. "What? What?"

"You are boring, and that is the biggest insult any man can offer me. Leave while I consider the best way to destroy you. There are many options but I want a relevant one."

And she indicated the door. We left and climbed the stairs to the surface of Penknife. It was a balmy eternal night and the filters were cooling over the sun, which from this planet was a rough cube. Staring over the edge of the horizon at the stars below, we witnessed a horrid sight: an amorphous sphere drifting through space, packed with kicking souls. It was one of the loose Hells, but larger than the previous one we had met. I wondered if our host on Normnbdsgsrutt had uttered truth when he claimed that the separate perditions were colliding and fusing together. If so, the final result would be a panspiritual perdition of unimaginable dread. One single giant Tartarus encompassing all faiths. An ecumenical agony! Gehenna Gross!

As it passed under us, there was a time wobble. A handful of pure minutes were stolen from both our bodies. I knew all about the ability of a Hell to snatch time from a living person. It was how they managed to keep functioning beyond entropy.

Thus we were outside on the surface for a shorter span than either of us would have liked. Instead of quarter of an hour, it was only ten minutes. I resented the Hell for this! And now I heard the Pirate Queen calling us to face her terrible judgment. Warily, we opened the hatch and lurched down the steps to her cabin. There was no chance of cooling her anger and preserving our lives.

"Goodbye, myself! And goodbye to me!"

Our residence on the pirate planet had been so brief! After we were abducted and taken below deck, our jar was passed around with the other looted flasks and barrels. A pirate raised the spout of the Klein Bottle to his lips and attempted to drink from it. Because of the dim lighting inside the world and the general weakness of vision of the crewmen (many of the corsairs wore eye-patches) he did not realise that it contained us rather than alcohol. Annoyed by the dearth of liquid within, he shook the jar roughly. Out we tumbled.

"You are not rum!" he had complained.

"Our characters are," we said.

"Not good enough," he responded, after a suitable ponder. "I shall take you to meet the Captain..."

And so he did, a Batavus under each arm.

Charlotte received us in her cabin, which was cluttered with dozens of ornaments, stolen from a hundred worlds — as she freely admitted. To our eyes it seemed an emporium of sticky, lovely, sultry, barbaric, cool and roasted madness. There was gum mastic from Zzeeookhaaezaza; strange perfumes from Xeethra, Maesteg and Toadlicker; slippers from Zapatillas; boxes from Pandora; flutes and guitars from Villa Lobos; spices from the desert planets of Arakkis and Willis; soggy bread from Duck; parchments and unopened letters from Hymen; books from Ghyll; yerba mate and other bitter drinks from Gardel; tortoises from Zeno; gambling implements from Mundungus; arcade machines from Engelbrecht; pogosticks from Greaves and elective; thinking caps from Bagpuss; mysterious things indeed from the sphere known only as Unknown. She even offered us the first food we had tasted for days: a piece from Carob, the shattered chocolate-substitute world. We crammed as much into our mouths as possible, for we could not guess how long we might have to subsist on just geology. Batavus chewed a region of low hills; I ate an entire canyon. Soon I felt sick, and the gorge began rising in my throat.

But now she said: "You must walk the plank."

"That is so unoriginal!" we hissed.

"Exactly. That is part of your punishment. Doom by cliché! However, the sentence must be postponed until we can secure a proper plank. There are many planks inside Penknife, but they are mostly of inferior wood. I want a nice length of board, varnished."

"I know a place where one is available!" I cried.

Batavus frowned at me, but I had not lost my reason. I saw a way to help ourselves in the guise of aiding the Pirate Queen. She tugged at a lock of her glossy hair and said:

"Tell me immediately or I will kiss you."

That was a threat to overload my system, but it was unnecessary. I cast myself at her feet and wept.

"Desmond! That is where! The wardrobe world!"

And Batavus backed me up. "Yes, Desmond! Full of planks. Made from planks, if the truth be revealed!"

She glared at both of us with her brown eyes and we felt our hearts melt and reset in irregular shapes. Finally she

added: "That is rather a good idea. Show me the way to it!"

"We do not know. But if you loosely hold aloft a coathanger, it may swivel to indicate the direction."

"Ah! You propose a form of dousing?"

I shrugged. "Well, it is no sillier than astrology — which has now been proven to be true. So why not?"

"Do you have a coathanger?" asked Batavus.

She frowned and smirked at the same time, and fingered her necklace with supple fingers. Then she nodded at a lackey. He ran to fetch one. I felt a tightness in my throat when he returned with the specified item. It was one of those bygone wooden contraptions, not the fancy wire kind, but it still turned in her grasp, pointing like one of the experimental aerials of Maxwell and Crookes, in their quest for a mechanism to detect radiant energy — there had even been some talk that a German scientist called Hertz was working on a method of using such radio waves to propel messages across the aether. I deemed it an absurd tale. The procuscope was the best way of communicating images and sounds over long distances. An upstart with a name which is a synonym for pain stood scant chance of making my appliance obsolete! But all that was sometime in the past. Now the coathanger rotated innocently and Charlotte noted the direction. She climbed onto the surface with her veil, and we felt the planet abruptly change direction, rolling elsewhere.

It took half a day to reach Desmond. Then the Pirate Queen shut off her face and Penknife moved through space in neutral. We were dragged to the deck and tied together at the waist with a long belt. From the hold, an elastic cable was brought up — a product of planet Bungee. This was looped under our armpits. We balanced on the rim of the horizon, peering down at the wardrobe world. Charlotte drew her sword and prodded us into space. The cutlass tickled our fears. We fell the mile or so through the wind with a lingering scream, one superior to that of the actress in the procuscope story — but I never paid her anyway, because she was female and therefore a slave. Batavus bit my earlobe as we rushed and turned in each other's embrace. It was not erotic! But we felt ourselves gradually slowing down as the cable stretched.

We hit Desmond with considerable force, although the tension in the elastic saved us from squashing ourselves flat. Our feet smashed through the surface and splinters stuck into our ankles. We grasped a brass knob each and hauled ourselves up. Penknife was high above and the pirates on it were tiny, so we thumbed our noses at them in safety. Below my feet I heard movement. We found a hatch, pulled it open and descended a hundred wooden steps into the interior. We pushed our way through curtains — ah no! these were hung coats of all materials and sizes — and tripped over a few which had slipped to the floor. There was an overpowering smell of mothballs and pressed flowers. And shadows which were not jackets. Now a light in the dark! Not a candle, but a glowing glass cylinder: a Plücker tube! Was I back in the castle of Unfortunato? Where was the Vinjak? No, the whispers were many and friendly.

"Batavus! Batavus Droogstoppel! At last!"

I blinked. For an instant, I thought I was back in Chaud-Mellé, in my lovely University, in the store cupboard of my office. But this cheap illusion was soon dispelled. For I recognised the voices easily enough, but not the faces from which they issued. A group of very old men stood before me, dressed in faded clothes.

I swallowed. "Christopher Blayre? Is that you?"

"Where have you been, Batavus? We have waited forty-seven years for your arrival. Did you forget our arrangements? That is so typical! And I note you have shirked the responsibilities of growing older. But how are matters with you? Everything perky?"

"I take it this is no longer the 1880s?"

He waved a dismissive hand. "I trust not! The year is 1927. How can you possibly mislay dates like that?"

"Time dilation!" I blurted. "An accident!"

He stroked his chin. "In that case, the fault is not entirely yours and I forgive you. Many things have happened in your absence! This inner system has been mostly colonised. Descendants of the survivors of Thais have settled on the inhabitable worlds. But there are just four hundred of those left now, and many of them will probably be annihilated before the year is out. Their orbits are very complex. There are many refugees too, whose home globes have been destroyed but who roam the void seeking to invade and occupy new spheres. The clowns are one such group. Their planet, Coco, was smashed in a collision with Bismuth, but they fled in their star clippers before the end. They are direct descendants of clowns who floated above Chaud-Mellé on bunches of balloons. As I said before, only those in the sky at the time of the impact managed to escape with their lives. Aviators and suchlike."

"Survivors of the impact! Were there many?"

"Few, but enough to breed and return the population of humanity to a figure approaching a million. All sorts of cultures have arisen. I am writing a history book about it."

"Talking about books, what happened to the giant one you were using as a boat to ride through space?"

"It was seized by the inhabitants of Torquemada, the inquisitor's planet, and garrotted. They tightened a steel band around it until the spine broke. That was after torture!"

I shuddered. "Did it confess first?"

Blayre nodded. "Everything. And scribes wrote it all down, so the entire contents of the great library of Alexandria have been reclaimed! That must be why fate allowed me to hack out the pages with an axe. It makes sense now. I feel less of a vandal!"

"We have already encountered some weird worlds. There was one which housed a society of arboreal musketeers."

"I suspect that was Sherwood-Dumas."

"And one named Normnbdsgsut, ruled by an old man with a sandyacht who seemed charmingly eccentric."

Christopher Blayre retreated a few steps. "That was Bartleby Cadiz! A blighter! You are lucky to be alive!" My jaw dropped and attempted to dent my chest. My younger self had no idea why I was affected so strongly. "Bartleby Cadiz! The cannibal?"

Blayre mopped his brow with his sleeve. "Yes. He threatened to eat the entire population of the microcosmos. Although many of the separate worlds were at war with each other, they temporarily paused hostilities to band together and overpower him. After a nasty struggle, they managed to maroon him on an uninhabited planet. They took heavy losses doing so! Then an exclusion zone was decreed around Normnbdsgrsutt, to prevent any spaceships falling into his hands."

I gulped. I did not tell Blayre that I had deposited a planetful of refugees there. Delivered into the maw of an ogre! Much better for them to end up in a real Hell than in the clutches of Bartleby Cadiz! Because he had been a wizened old man, I had not recognised him. Only later had we worked out that our accelerated orbit around the sun had propelled us into the future. But I wondered how he had escaped from that other Hell all those years ago, for the last time I saw him he was parachuting on a bone raft through an infernal fissure in the bottom of the inner cavern. I decided to remove him from my mind. But Blayre was still musing on the news I had brought him. He snorted.

"A sandyacht, you say? But he was exiled without any possessions. A world without mineral resources was chosen as his prison, for we did not want him digging up ores with his bare hands and smelting them in active volcanoes and recreating technology and inventing an ornithopter. Of all planets in this microcosmos, Normnbdsgrsutt is the most sedate. I cannot imagine how he obtained his vehicle."

Batavus spoke up. He was ignorant of Bartleby Cadiz and thus highly trustworthy in his remarks on the fellow, because they were not tainted with reflexive horror. "Perhaps the struts of his sandyacht are made of bones and bound with sinews. The kite is his coat, attached to the main chassis by tendons. That is my guess."

I swallowed. "You are almost certainly right."

"But where did he get the bones from?" demanded Blayre. "The planet was entirely unoccupied by humans."

"From seals?" I wondered. "We saw them there. Which reminds me: how did they survive the original apocalypse?"

Blayre considered the conundrum. "Maybe a zoo was transporting them from Greenland in a huge dirigible?"

I gnashed my teeth. "Drat! You are so clever!"

"And they fell down through the water vapour, nibbling passing fish until plopping into the oceans of Normnbdsgrsutt!" added Batavus, in his most oily tone. I thought he was trying too hard to flatter Blayre, but our Registrar turned and gestured at the other figures in the depths of the interior, who now moved forward.

"Allow me to reintroduce you to your colleagues!" he said. "It has been a long time for us, Batavus..."

As they shuffled closer, I bowed with a modicum of real respect and shook the hands of each in turn. There was Professor Tatto, Trajan Pepys and Joachim Slurp. Behind them stood José de los Rios, Dean Nutt and (to my surprise) Kingdom Noisette. And behind them, a shape I was shocked to recognise. It was Desmond! The genuine Desmond! The black man! Lurker in the best brothels of Chaud-Mellé! Slave of comets and ravisher of maids! Joy-horse without a pampas! Panter without a voice! Owner of the biggest monkey in spacetime! Mirror man without depth! But something had changed in his manner. He was injured or disturbed. Alone among these people, he had preserved his youth. But to balance this discrepancy in some strange system of biological geometry, he had grown spines! They glittered along his back and shoulders like the fused ridges of a glass reef, or like an inappropriate borrowing from a polished stegosaur. Then I realised these were the shards of a broken mirror.

"Desmond!" I cried. "How did you get here?"

Blayre answered for him: "He does not talk. The mirror acted as his larynx, and that was blasted into space on your advice. When the rocket struck the magnetosphere, its hull rang like a bell. His erection tried to leave the mirror, despite the fact his reflection was two dimensional only. But he was conditioned to grow excited by ringing sounds, and this one was the greatest peal in history! The warping of geometry shattered the glass, which rained in fragments. Desmond was in his wardrobe at the time, in the brothel, but some psychic connection must have synchronised his flesh monkey to his mirrored one. It grew stiff and opened the door. He wandered to the window and then passed through it onto the balcony. A terrific excitement seized him, but he had no idea why. The fragments of the mirror fell onto him, sticking into his bare torso. And thus he was finally reunited with his own double!"

Batavus nodded at me. "As we shall be one day."

"Through an occult fusion," I agreed.

Blayre ignored us. "It was painful for Desmond, but also satisfying and reassuring. With the jagged shards embedded in his flesh, his 'self' is no longer bi-locational, but his personality is more fragmented. That is the paradox of his being. He is happier, but more frustrated. And one segment of mirror is still missing."

"How did he get from Chaud-Mellé to here?"

"The brothel was destroyed by the Shockwave. His balcony broke free from the building, and with its awning acting as a parachute, it floated down and landed on his namesake planet."

"Another of destiny's silly games?"

Blayre shrugged. "If you please. But I have more important subjects to discuss with you. We want to formally invite both of you to take part in a project of universal significance."

"Very kind of you, for sure," I said. "But I have so many questions to ask these other gentlemen first. Besides, we are not here to stay. If we are lucky, we have five minutes."

"Do you have special business elsewhere?"

"Oh yes!" I sighed. Then I turned to Kingdom Noisette and expressed my amazement at his presence, partly because I thought he had been eaten by Bartleby Cadiz. He adjusted his hat, stroked his whiskers, hooked his thumbs

in his braces and retorted: "Aye, laddies! Tha don't know how I climbed out o' the cavern, with all my anger and nowt o' mi hat, to seek and paste Dean Nutt, my blasted rival, eh? Well now, by time I reached the University where 'e Deaned, I cam 'cross this Blayre fellow first, and 'e says, who I'm looking for? I replies, Nutt, sir! And boots and braces! if'e don't inquire into every aspect o' my history, asking this an' that an' this agin, for he gathers stories, many as possible, from academic wights, and I was one o' those, and it turn out I have not enow time to finish my piece, and so he leads me to the library where Nutt and others are waiting! But he says, do not scrap here, laddies! 'Twas a mite difficult to restrain mysen! The world is coming to an end, they announce, and we must all crawl inside a book, which we did, so that I can finish my tale! And we tumbled down into the centre o' the Earth, where I had come from, and drifted in the void, and I spoke my piece, but by that time I felt no 'atred for Nutt. We made up our differences, and that's that!"

Batavus shook his head. "I comprehend you not."

"It is Northern English," I explained. "And a remarkable example of trust and forgiveness. But what is even more astounding is the fact that Dean Nutt can still see! Did you stand her up, sir? The sun, I mean. She was very enthusiastic to meet you."

The Dean looked abashed and replied: "Excusez-moi, Batavus. I know you went to a lot of bother to arrange that tryst. I did go, but when I saw her rise over the horizon, something inside my heart went dead. She looked like a single mother! Big and round and rosy. I had envisaged a slimmer sort of damsel, a virgin."

I cleared my throat. "So you ran away? Perhaps blind dates are not your thing? Gouge — I mean good — for you! There is no bitterness in my voice. It is just an illusion."

Christopher Blayre said suddenly: "Shall I reveal what has happened to the microcosmos in more detail?"

I bowed. "A very kind offer. However, we have no time to listen to lectures. We must shortly return to the pirate planet to attend our own executions. But if you care to lend us the history book you are writing, we shall be delighted to study it."

"Unfortunately, I have only one copy. But you may read the synopsis I have prepared, as a substitute."

"Yes, that will save precious hours."

"Well, here it is," he said.

It seems to me, as I ponder the composition of our whole narrative, that I am working harder than the early Batavus, penning more words than he. It is unfair. However, if I try to hand it back to him now, he might refuse and in the battle of wills which followed, the project would have to be forsaken entirely. To avoid this eventuality, but also to earn the rest I deserve, I now attach the synopsis which Christopher Blayre wrote for the benefit of an imagined posterity. I have altered nothing. It was a useful document for us, and should be for you, because it explains all the main points of our environment, the general history of this universe and the vile people who dwell within it. There is even a paragraph about the separate and unified Hells. When it is concluded, the narrative will switch back to the other Batavus. It is critical that you appreciate the differences between our styles. He is the second most important human in existence. He is the second most lovely soul. That is a very poor rating compared with mine! I pity him.

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A GENERAL HISTORY (OUTLINE) OF THE MICROCOSMOS 1880-1927

Not all life was extinguished when the comet Thais struck the Earth at one of its main points of weakness. A surprising amount of people and animals were aloft at the time. Balloonists and suicides falling out of buildings comprised the majority of these. The former drifted down very gently into the inner solar-system, the latter fell more quickly through the dust and debris of the shattered Earth. But a few thousand survived from both groups. And a small but significant number of humans had taken refuge in various indestructible objects. There was Batavus Droogstoppel in a Klein Bottle and several other faculty members of the University of Chaud-Mellé in a giant hollow book which enjoyed the special protection of fate. A warehouse in Plovdiv was pulverised by the blast and spilled seven thousand miniature worlds into the microcosmos. These dropped into the void faster than people, drawn into orbit around the central sun by gravity. The most enterprising survivors rapidly settled on these modest planets. Life was tough at first, a struggle to obtain enough nutrients and water. There was the added danger of being annihilated in one of the frequent collisions between spheres.

The period from 1880 to 1885 was marked by disorganisation on most of the worlds. But within a few more years, proper societies started to evolve again. Their members tended to idealise the occupations they had pursued before the apocalypse, using the symbols and rituals and customs of their former careers as the basis for brand new nations. Thus a dozen bakers (thirteen in total) who were manning an airship during the impact now invented a culture in which all cakes were sacred. And several gangs of clowns who had inflated too many toy balloons with hydrogen, stepping out of their houses to join the farewell gala only to float up and away, founded a jestocracy in which identical cakes were held to be practical, not holy, devices. Similarly, four Aztecs who plunged from the truncated cathedral, but who bounced on trampolines placed there by acrobats, were still aloft when the Earth dissolved and thus in a position to organise a community based on their Mesoamerican values when they finally landed by coincidence on a world named Montezuma. There are many other examples of individual groups using their own particular habits as the seeds from which to grow unique civilisations.

These isolated cultures might have remained harmlessly absurd, but at the start of 1890, the machinations of one man altered everything. He was called Dmitri Sneakios and claimed to be the architect of the spare planets. He owned a

method of propelling himself between the worlds. His device was an ornithopter, also known as a starclipper. He possessed the only one in existence. However, delusions of grandeur now compelled him to tour each planet, sharing the secret of the device with its denizens. It appears he wished to create an interplanetary empire, with himself at the head. Soon fleets of starclippers set off from all the worlds at his request. But instead of indulging in trade, as he had hoped, they chose the option of war. Outer space became more dangerous than ever with the additional hazard of ornithopters on raiding missions. Sneakios vanished and was never seen again. Perhaps shame forced him into hiding. Cultures which had dragged themselves out of the artificial dust and slime of the new worlds for a whole decade were wiped out. Those that endured became increasingly militaristic. Thus the flower sellers of Bhanavar perished, while the gauchos of Borges thrived.

By the turn of the century, it seemed that continuing warfare would achieve what Thais had not. The extinction of mankind. Innocent planets were caught up in the battles. Burning ornithopters off the shoulder of Rutger filled the heavens with a fireworks display of doom. Robigus and Cool, the two most populous Worlds in the system, were entirely denuded of their inhabitants. And where there was not murder, there was rape. A flotilla of lighthouse-keepers goosed Gallico. Only the ugliest spheres were safe from sexual violation. Even then, the most perverted invaders revived old techniques to continue the debauch. The northern hemisphere of Beadle was forced inside a giant paper bag before ravishment. As for Watermelon, no man has since dared to land on its surface, for fear of catching something nasty. Where there was not rape, there was the rack. On Torquemada, for example. And where there was no rack, there was ruin in financial sectors. Import and export potentials remained unrealised. On Willis, the price of ginger tripled. On Ark, it collapsed. On Ghyll, which was entirely occupied by readers all called James Gilbert, vellum to print volumes became unavailable.

At last, in 1901, salvation arrived in the form of a general threat which united all the warring powers. On a bone raft slung under a gaudy parachute, a man floated out of an unknown Hell to digest every organic portion of the microcosmos. His name was Bartleby Cadiz and his sojourn in his particular perdition had given him a supernatural appetite. From world to world he drifted, stuffing the indigenous flora and fauna into his mouth. He licked clean the planets Sulky, Templar, Hippolyte, Hush, Fosfor, Doxogenia, Paddy Whack, Gunk and Supper. He even tasted Uranus. It appeared he could never cram his fill. Doubtless that was one of the torments inflicted on the damned souls where he had been. The curse had infected him also. Although he had managed to escape, it remained. Thus a raging gastronome menaced the local universe, and each military power could do nothing to stop him. He munched the pilots of starclippers for breakfast. Then he descended on their home worlds and gnawed their wives and children for lunch. Dreadful weapons were invented to eliminate him. Large dogs were bred and trained to bite his raft to pieces whenever he landed, but he simply devoured them.

A mood of panic gripped the planets. The leaders of sundry cultures met on the neutral sphere Snore to form a pact. The Confederacy of Small Worlds was pledged to rid the microcosmos of Bartleby Cadiz. Gathering a fleet of starclippers some 20,000 strong, they set off to tackle him. He was assaulting Tyneside when they tracked him down. His burps smelled of legs. Nets were cast at him, but they had been woven from organic fibres and he simply chewed his way free. Then suicide tactics were tried. The desperate pilots aimed their ornithopters directly at him. Thousands and thousands of vehicles crashed down, burying him under layers of wreckage and debris. Finally he was knocked unconscious. His body was dug out of its temporary grave and wrapped with chains. Then he was suspended from four starclippers by his limbs, and flapped to the outer atmosphere of Normnbdsgsutt, where he was released. He accelerated through the clouds and the friction heated and melted his chains, unbinding him. But exile on such a placid planet was deemed sufficient to keep him out of harm's way. The purpose for which the Confederacy was created no longer applied but it did not break up immediately,

An age of peaceful progress followed, and the population of many of the worlds returned to their previous levels. As refugees fled from the colliding spheres and settled on others, cross-fertilisation of cultures took place. It seemed that eventually there would remain only two worlds in the system, both with enormous populations and diverse customs. After these collided, there would be nowhere left to live. Astronomers argued about which two would be the last survivors. Professional gamblers began betting on the locations and names of these globes. Odds were calculated and debated. Chryses and Hochigan emerged as the favourites. Populations relocated to these planets in anticipation. Other worlds declared their allegiance to one or the other. Somehow the game became aggressive. Then a certain number of rebellious spheres which had aligned themselves with Hochigan announced their intention to split from the Confederacy and set up their own Union. They adopted the flag of Hochigan as their own. They refused to trade with the Confederate worlds. In 1908 civil war started. Once again, fleets of starclippers darkened the heavens. The Union force burned numerous Confederate planets.

The war lasted until the end of 1912 and almost half the population of the microcosmos was killed. The Union had better generals and tactics but the Confederacy had superior numbers and machines. At last the Union was compelled to surrender. Draconian laws were passed against the rebel worlds and the peace settlement was stained with rancour. Even the songs of the Union were banned. Whole spheres became prisons where men smashed rocks to extract ores to feed the Confederate economy. Drunk on military success, the presiding government rapidly became a dictatorship based on suppression of dissent and the brainwashing of its citizens. The leader of this hegemony took the name LARGE UNCLE and spent every minute of the day watching his people and slapping them on the wrists when they sighed or frowned. He appointed himself head of the Gesture Police and hired an opera house on the planet Monorchid to serve as his Ministry of Shrugs. Nobody was allowed to utilise an expressive face or shoulders. Violation of this rule would earn the offender a fortnight in the notorious Broom Cupboard 101, among smelly mops and strange liquids in buckets. Only the most reckless dared blink in public.

By 1919, this totalitarian interplanetary empire became a victim of its own success. It sought to expand out of the microcosmos into the old universe. Bases were established on Floyd and Balder, the fringe worlds most distant from the miniature sun. An expedition to colonise the real Mars was mounted. The ornithopters were sealed and pressurised, to cope with the vacuum of genuine space. Rocket engines were fitted to the tips of the wings. And then one morning, the elite of LARGE UNCLE'S barbaric forces set off toward the walls of dust which marked the boundary of the microcosmos. They never returned. It is unlikely that they reached Mars. LARGE UNCLE had underestimated its distance, because the astronomer he consulted on the subject had not been allowed to shake their heads when asked if it was near. Deprived of the support of his best troops, he was relatively easy to overthrow. The common people rose up and beat him to death with forceful gestures. The Ministry of Shrugs was demolished and the Gesture Police consigned to history. However, the people were unable to organise a substitute government capable of ruling so many worlds at once. The Confederacy was disbanded.

Some of the individual planets returned to war, but most did not. A second age of peace and prosperity ensued, less spectacular than the one which had preceded it, but perhaps more fundamentally stable. In 1923, a loose collective of non-aligned spheres was inaugurated. A treaty signed on the globe Rose guaranteed closer trading links and connected exchange rates. The Treaty of Rose was the first important step in the genesis of the Uncommon Market. A side effect of this pact was the impossibility of waging new war among the member planets. The economic consequences would be too devastating. Slowly, the loose collective drew tighter. Three of its key spheres, Loki, Stocky and Quiche, voted for much closer political ties. Enthusiasm for this project was muted among the other members and downright hostile on Yaffle and Cravat. All the same, it went ahead. The rise of nationalist feeling on the reluctant worlds was meteoric. Before it became an authentic danger, however, it was removed by real meteors, which rained down for days on Yaffle, decimating the electorate. Cravat quickly renounced opposition to links, despite the fact that the meteor shower had been purely coincidental.

In 1925, the Uncommon Market renamed itself the Uncommon Community. It was the grandest economic block in the microcosmos. But the 'panther' and 'lacquer' economies of the fringe worlds were also gaining in power and prestige. Floyd and Balder forged special relationships with Arakkis and Willis, the famed spice worlds. They attempted an identical strategy with Sucrose and Pointy, with only limited success. War might have been expected, but for some reason it did not come. People were tired of such immature pursuits. They began to suspect that conflict was a mutation of the artificial order built into the system. A mystical cult arose around the character of Dmitri Sneakios. He was regarded in some quarters as a Creator figure, a sort of god. This cult was shared among planets within the Uncommon Community, but also outside it. This helped to foster good will between the fringe worlds and those nearer the sun. The belief that Sneakios had concealed a 'secret' somewhere inside the system became an almost mandatory act of faith. But even the priests of this religion did not know if this secret was mathematical or metaphysical, nor whether to pursue it in space or on the ground.

Another reason for the growing unpopularity of war between separate spheres was the gradual realisation that a greater danger had manifested itself externally to the settled cultures. This threat was metaphysical and very grim. As the number of planets within the microcosmos continued to decrease through collisions, it was noticed that the Hells which were loose in the system were similarly reduced in number. But not in value. In other words, when the Hells collided, they did not shatter each other to granules, but combined into one bigger perdition. Eventually one vast Hell would exist comprising all the others. There was substantial unease about this prospect, but nobody could say exactly why. It seemed to be a menacing situation, but there were none sufficiently skilled in theology to confirm or condemn this general feeling. Then the name Bartleby Cadiz was remembered. He had direct experience of Hell. Also he had boasted of his expertise in a discipline he had invented: Non-Euclidean Theology. A risky plan was drawn up to consult him on the topic. There was no doubt this would be a suicide mission. A volunteer was picked from one of the lesser cultures and sent on his way.

He was provided with an ornithopter with a specially weakened frame made of papier-mâché and just enough fuel to take him to the atmosphere of Normnbdsgsrutt. A string trailed behind him, fixed to a pair of empty tin-cans, one in his cockpit, the other on the world of Asterion, which was the nearest sphere at that time to Normnbdsgsrutt. The pilot reached his destination and his starclipper glided down onto the target planet. It landed safely in the ocean, instantly absorbing water and dissolving into useless pulp and glue. He swam ashore with his tin-can. Waiting for him was Bartleby Cadiz with open mouth. As the pilot was eaten, he asked his tormentor various questions concerning the fusing Hells. Despite the fact his main interest was food, Bartleby also retained much enthusiasm for Non-Euclidean Theology. He answered that when all the Hells were one infernal object, the total time absorbed by them would be spent at once. A Hell maintains its existence by stealing seconds from sentient beings who dwell outside it. Since the beginning of time, the individual Hells have accumulated trillions upon trillions of years. The combined sum of available centuries is unimaginable.

Even while he was being chewed and digested, the pilot communicated these findings to his colleagues on Asterion. He spoke into his tin-can and the impulses vibrated up the taut string and were amplified through the tin-can at the other end. Bartleby Cadiz proceeded with his lecture. The whole point of a Hell was to make the souls within them suffer. The longer they were contained inside the Hell, the more they suffered. Thus the demons of the perditions, once the blending of their terrible realms was complete, would form a council and decide to accelerate the universe far into the future. This would mean that the souls in their care could be exposed to innumerable millennia of extra suffering in less than one second of real time, by the discharge of all the stored years. To put it simply, the release of the accumulated time back into the universe would age it by the exact number of centuries which had been absorbed from it via the body-clocks of its sentient organisms. And if the universe found itself suddenly millions of

aeons ahead in the future, it would mean the damned souls had been suffering for that much longer. This devilish plan would create a short-cut to eternity.

Bartleby could not know for certain that this would happen. But it was his best prediction, based on the axioms of Non-Euclidean Theology. The worlds of the microcosmos saw no reason to doubt him. The pilot was now all eaten, but he had relayed enough information for the mission to be judged a success. However, the communication string was still pulled taut, and Bartleby saw a chance to escape. He began climbing up it hand over hand until he was almost out of the atmosphere. At last, the weird vibrations which were travelling up the line to Asterion were deciphered by the authorities for what they were, and a pair of scissors was called for. The string was cut and Bartleby fell back. The situation was dire. There seemed to be no way of stopping the Hells merging and jumping the entire universe far into the future: an event which would spell doom for all the worlds of the microcosmos, not to mention its sun. A depression settled over the myriad cultures and communities. A faint hope remained in finding the 'secret' of Dmitri Sneakios, for this might be some sort of antidote to the amalgamation of the perditions. As of the present, no progress has been made in this quest.

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Batavus and myself finished reading and handed the document back to the Registrar. It had explained much, as promised, but also raised many new questions. I did not accept everything. I thought Blayre had exaggerated at many points. I was now inclined to label him as a fantasist. Some of the passages had plainly been written in jest. The idea that a dictator would willingly call himself LARGE UNCLE was the most farfetched of all. It seemed a lazy invention. But other details had plainly been designed to muddle the issue of what was real and what was false. For instance, I was impressed with the papier-mâché starclipper and the tin-can speaking device, because these seemed quite feasible, although the latter machine was clearly an inferior version of my own proculscope. I wondered if any patents had been infringed, and whether I might sue for compensation in the courts, if there were any courts in the microcosmos. I voiced this thought aloud and Blayre frowned.

"There are indeed, but even if you won your case, it would benefit you nothing. Money has been abolished on all the worlds. My synopsis is accurate to the start of the year 1927. However, a few more things have occurred in recent months which I have not had leisure to note down. The old Uncommon Community has renamed itself the Uncommon Union and is now a rigid theocracy dedicated to finding the Secret of Sneakios, which may well be an abstraction. As such, all commercial business is disregarded. Hence the total absence of currency."

I recoiled. "That sounds nightmarish!"

"The Uncommon Union likes to keep a Utopian account of itself, and perfect societies always come cheap."

Batavus rubbed his chin and asked: "If only forty-seven years have passed since the impact of Thais, how have so many generations risen in our absence? Your document implies mighty wars and losses of population. These could not have been recovered so fast. Too much has happened to be plausible in under five decades."

The Registrar smirked. "Ah! I see your difficulty. It is obvious to me that I have not explained myself adequately. Forty-seven years indeed have expired since we last met, but those are not terrestrial years. The Earth was destroyed, remember? Years are now variable, depending on the orbits of all the planets, which are often erratic and random. It is the average of every individual year which is cited as the microcosmic year. At this moment, the rate is approximately twenty Earth years to our one. So the time-scale 1880-1927 is actually far longer than you may suppose. Closer to several centuries, perhaps."

"Impossible!" I bellowed. "You should be dead!"

"Yes, we did age in the normal fashion, until we became the old men who crowd around you. Then something remarkable occurred. Torquemada was destroyed in a collision with Tlön. The reclaimed library of Alexandria was lost yet again. But we had listened to the torture of the book, and we knew what it confessed to the scribes. The information is inside our heads. Together we are that library. Thus fate will not allow us to age. Our metabolisms are held in stasis."

"Seems logical enough," I conceded reluctantly.

Blayre rubbed his hands and stared at us intensely in turn. "It is our intention to build upon this knowledge, to increase it for the sake of the human race. We want to set up a Foundation which will oversee the events of the microcosmos — and adjust them where necessary to maintain stability, for stability is desperately needed if the Secret of Sneakios is to be found. I am not confessing that I believe in such a secret. But it is our one chance of avoiding the time-spending-splurge of the Hells. At the very least, we must try!"

"A Foundation?" I muttered. "An excellent idea. And where will you establish it? Here on Desmond?"

Blayre shook his head. "On a globe outside the main trading routes. We do not want our Foundation to be discovered. There are two candidate worlds: Terminus and Parody. I favour Parody. Now we have fulfilled our obligation of waiting for you, there is nothing to stop us departing to reconnoitre and pick one of these planets."

"Good luck!" cried Batavus and myself.

Blayre glanced at the floor. "The question is: will you join us? We need academics, intelligent people who can preserve the knowledge of the old human race, and expand it also."

We shrugged. "Your offer is very kind. However, we are not free to make such decisions. As you may note, this elastic cable is starting to stretch. It will shortly spring us back to the pirate planet and our own executions. Thus we must pass on your offer! Indeed, we ought to select a suitable plank before it is too late."

"Very well. Take one from the surface."

Shaking hands with all the worthies in turn, except Desmond, whose palms glittered with pointed fragments of mirror, we ascended back to the outside. Penknife was high above. It had passed the wardrobe world and was still rolling in neutral through the void. The elastic rope now began to drag Batavus and myself sideways across the surface. We fell to our knees, grasping the edge of a plank. We held on for dear and bargain life as the tension continued to grow. Our fingers throbbed, but we did not relinquish our grip. Then the nails which held the board fast to the hemisphere began to pull out. With a vile ripping noise, the plank came loose. And we were sprung out of the atmosphere, fumes of varnish fading in our nostrils until we were once again in the clean air of the void. Stars banged against our heads, some of them breaking and winking out. It did not seem that we moved. Rather that Penknife rushed toward us, its disc expanding and warping into a sphere as we approached. Then it was no longer above us, but we were above it, and falling down into the waiting arms of burly pirates.

They cushioned our fall, though their sturdy muscles were almost as hard as the deck itself. Charlotte was waiting for us, a veil over her face, making her beauty seem more mysterious and therefore alluring than ever. She inspected our plank, nodded her approval and ordered it to be nailed down with one end jutting over the horizon. She drew her cutlass and severed the elastic rope, which was coiled and taken below. Then she jabbed the point into our spines.

"Walk the plank, lubbers! That is my wish."

"Yes, O Knitter of our Fates, O Comet of our Voids, O Lens in our Scopes, O Cream in our Coffee..."

The truth is that we were willing to be executed by such a goddess. Charlotte knew this and revelled in her power. But we felt ashamed, for she was a member of a dark race and should have been hateful to my Dutch eyes. And yet now I judge dusky maidens to be the most beautiful of all. I despise the Pirate Queen for thus corrupting me. Batavus feels exactly the same as I do, but we never discuss it. I can tell from his quivering expression and trousers when he beholds the night: for every shadow must remind a man of Charlotte Gallon, if he has seen her once. We preserve a mutual silence on the issue, for the sake of our colonial beliefs. To be a bigot becomes increasingly hard as the years warp on. To deny equality of status to all humans requires a monumental act of faith, in the teeth of so much evidence against discrimination. But I am a product of my age and cannot betray the values of the Nineteenth Century. And if you claim that you can then I reply that you are an indolent liberal who has never tasted real power, who has never tasted real coffee, prepared by chained slaves on your plantations, while you lounge on a verandah, a monocle in an eye, fanned by a girl worth less than the smallest denomination coin, while the fish of your supper roast on spits laid along the very line of the equator, and your workers are forced to eat bugs and worms under the wafting aroma, and commercial orders from home pile up on your desk. Why should I renounce such a birthright?

We fell through space, screaming and burning, too filled with panic to wonder where we might land, if anywhere: for it was feasible we would become little planets of our own, orbiting the sun and starving to death in a few weeks, but not before sinking our teeth into each other, biting the flesh from our other self. There was also the possibility of passing through a powdered star cloud and being shredded by the specks of glass. Whole man at top; stripped skeleton at bottom. Indeed, there were bones loose in the microcosmos, though whether products of blind stars, hungry cannibals or some other hazard was impossible to determine. We held each other as we plunged, our necks pushed back by the acceleration. Penknife receded above us rapidly. We forced ourselves to look down and instantly considered this action a mistake.

Directly below us: a throbbing Hell!

It pulsed and wobbled like a soap bubble moving across a bathtub to knock against the knee of a dirty man. But the knees were inside it this time. Limbs and faces strained against the surface tension of the globe. They were unable to break free. And other shapes within, gliding through the minuscule gaps between the pressed bodies, flowing and splitting and reforming. Demons! One congealed into humanoid form, forcing the Hell to swell slightly, and glanced up at us with a terrible smirk, before again dissolving into plasma and dream.

Batavus tapped me on the shoulder politely.

"What is it?" I replied weakly.

"I care not," he said with effort, "to enter that."

Suddenly I grew enraged. "You interrupted my silent fall to tell me something so obvious! Curse your head, Batavus! I was trying to enjoy my final minute of undamned life in peace. Bah! May the demons in there jab forks into you harder than into me."

"But we are the same. Our buttocks also."

"Naturally. But I do not believe these demons employ tridents. They are surely too modern for those."

"What are we going to do now, Batavus?"

"Start running. When our feet touch the surface of the Hell, it may be possible to run over and off it."

"And back into the void? A pleasant thought!"

"Wait! Something odd is happening. It seems to be no closer than it was! We are falling toward it but we are not reaching it. What does this mean? If anything, it is shrinking!"

"We are falling up from it, I believe."

"Yes, but how? And look: the pirate planet is growing bigger again. Our plunge has gone into reverse..."

"Ah! The Hell below is stealing our time!"

"Of course! It is taking away our most recent seconds to add to its own collection. This may or may not be lucky, depending on how Charlotte absorbs the news. No, on second thoughts, I do not believe she will ever know, for Penknife is rolling backward and we shall land on the opposite side to that where the plank is located. Brace yourself, Batavus! Do not pinch my nipples! Prepare to splat!"

We struck the underside of the pirate planet, rolling and sprawling to a halt near one of its lesser attachments, a

massive corkscrew. If we concealed ourselves here we would be safe. We slipped into the gap which separated the corkscrew from a vast screwdriver, clung to the former and breathed deeply, sniggering in relief. The machinery inside was complex, fascinating and spotted with rust. It was just possible to squeeze down through the cogs and springs into the interior of the world. But pirates roamed freely about the decks and we could not afford to linger. What we wanted was some food and drink, and our Klein Bottle most of all. Before giving ourselves a chance to lose our nerve, we set off on the mission. We sneaked among the hammocks and sleeping ruffians, crawled among tubs of tobacco and barrels of rum. Once we heard Charlotte giving commands for a raid on another sphere, and the sweet ferocity of her tone almost delayed us in the open. But we knocked our brains free of her influence and dipped behind a lifeboat moon.

There were several of these escape satellites, none in particularly spaceworthy condition, but sturdy enough all the same. They represented our best chance of fleeing Penknife intact. How could we drag one to the surface without being apprehended? That was the main difficulty. Further along we crept, coming across the Klein Bottle in a little niche full of empty flasks and vessels. We snatched it up, stole some biscuits from a plate left carelessly on a shelf, and returned to our hiding place. When Penknife commenced its next raid and the pirates were busy fighting, the opportunity to launch the lifemoon might arrive. Until then, it was best to sit tight, resting our heads on the rim of the corkscrew and reducing our voices to whispers. Neither of us wanted to keep watch, so we bedded down together, the dry crumbs of our meagre supper mingling unpleasantly with the sickly sludge of Carob which still stagnated at the base of our guts: like warts bobbing on gangrene juice. It is certain that I snored, because Batavus did, with my mouth.

We were still sleeping when the voice of a lookout bellowed: "World ahoy! Amontillado, the sherry orb!"

And the dulcimer tones of Charlotte drifted up from below: "Prepare for ramming! Extend the corkscrew!"

Suddenly we were no longer hiding just under Penknife's surface. We were dangling in outer space! We clung to the slippery helix for all we were worth. In the distance, a planet made of glass loomed out of a mist of dead stars. It was full of a rich liquid and had a massive cork for a north pole. Penknife began to rise above it, aiming for this weak point. I still gripped the Klein Bottle by its straps, and the door in its side swung open and shut like sardonic applause. Now the pirate planet turned again and began its dive toward its prey. As it accelerated, it revolved on its axis, turning the corkscrew. Batavus and I were spun out, hanging on as centrifugal force tried to fling us off. Faster and faster! It was impossible to cling on for much longer. And even if we did, it would not help us survive, for the impact of the metal helix striking the cork and boring through it would probably break our bones and rupture our organs, and our blood would spoil the wine.

"Farewell! Batavus! I can hold on no more!"

"Nor I! Is this a vintage doom?"

"A very bad year, I suspect. See you in Hell!"

I was bewildered. "Which one?"

"They must all be the same eventually."

"If we let go now, we will fly off in different directions, because we are gripping opposite sides of the helix. We will become separated in outer space, probably never to be reunited. I cannot stand this thought. In a few minutes, centrifugal force will accomplish that task for us. If we act now, we may avoid segregation."

"Indeed. You let go first and I shall follow."

"Count to one tenth of a second after my release before unclenching your fingers. Thus we shall hurtle through the void on the same bearing. I wish you luck. Remember our motto?"

"Yes! I do! Guile and physics, Batavus!"

With a roar so bold and acute that it startled my abject terror out of my body, allowing my fingers to relax for an instant, I was violently ejected from the gravitational pull of Penknife. I was cast away like an interloper without a wallet (or stomach) from the balcony of a revolving restaurant at the top of one of those crystal towers which exist only in some retrospective view of the future, a creation of any old fantastical novelist's whim, in a city congested with locomotives which chuff on a single track and automatic men nourished by electric current. No, that is too modest and feeble a simile! No place of repast, however elevated, whether steam driven or worked by hitherto unknown means, such as pulses of subatomic energy, could rotate so rapidly. A proculscope recording of the image I have just described would have to be accelerated by a factor of several thousand to match the truth. And no technology exists to save proculscope pictures, at least none I am conscious of, which illustrates yet further the awkwardness of this conceit. If I had time to delete it, I would! But I am in too much haste for such luxuries. This chronicle is my final act and must be finished.

I speeded through the void, and Batavus was not far behind me. Then I heard an awful juddering. Penknife had penetrated Amontillado! The tip of the corkscrew was drilling into the north pole. Soon I was five miles distant from the appalling orgy, but the sound of the cork popping, the glug of the sherry as it poured out of the poor planet, the clink of too many bullying glasses in ruffian toasts: these carried to my burning and receding ears with the grim clarity of a memory of the most embarrassing dinner-parry of my life, when I drunkenly fondled myself while reciting a speech backward from a standing position on a table. My right foot had taken purchase at the bottom of a full soup tureen. My bonus was reduced that financial year, and I had to treat my slaves with extra savagery to recoup the loss. The social pain had remained with me for several years. And this celebration was no better. Luckily, Batavus was still behind me and blocked some of the lesser harmonics of the bacchanal: the ho-hoing! and dead man's chest-ing! Neither of these appealed. Nor made they much sense. How I detest pirates! They have no notion how to steal properly. It should be done within the law!

A pale disc seemed to be our new destination. It shimmered like the implausible snowball it was. A sphere made of

fluffy ice! I glanced back at Batavus and undid my belt. I threw it like a lariat and he caught the other end. Then we pulled ourselves together. Whatever we might now have to face, we would do so as one! That is the safest way. The nails in the soles of our superior Dutch boots glowed red from friction. I shut tight my eyes. It was obvious what was going to happen. I felt the wash of icy wind as we entered the atmosphere of this new world. Our heels hissed. I chewed the collar of my late self to stop my teeth chattering themselves to crumbs. Dental bills can be extortionate! Goosepimples roamed my arms and torso. Tongues of freezing vapour licked my face. Then we struck the surface. But we were not flattened. Our smouldering boots melted the ice beneath us. A hole opened in the ground, closed above us as the fluid we had briefly created froze again. We thawed and sibilated ourselves under vast sheets of solid methane, hydrogen and helium. Down through erupting bubbles of spontaneous gas we plummeted, as if we broke wind to champion the cause of subzero geology. But the vapours set again above our heads. Finally our footwear was extinguished and we came to a halt, entombed at the core of this cryogenic globe.

*

Batavus has betrayed me. He has contributed another curtailed section to this joint narrative. I thought I had tricked him by switching narrators after the insertion of Blayre's synopsis, but he has refused to shoulder the responsibility of taking you, the reader, through our sojourn on the planet known as Snowflake (for such it was) and out the other side, into a domain where secrets were piled on our ears like gems. He has used our lengthy period of suspended animation as an excuse to return the task to me prematurely. Because I was unconscious, I did not know. I will fulfil my duties for your sake, but I will not forget. He shall be compelled to supply a lengthier passage to make up his shortfall. I vow this! But let me bank my ire outside the page now, for I must focus on the nothingness which filled our brains in our glacial grave. Most thoughts slowed fast, came to a halt while my boots still cooled. The Klein Bottle was beneath me, resting against his shoulder: it was the last object I noticed. Then there was absolute whiteness, but not a visible shade of that pancolour, for there was no light at that depth, save for a few rogue photons weary and lost from too many refractions and reflections on the voyage through millions of separate strata of elemental ice, each one a substitute lens or mirror, depending on its atomic structure. These particles had little part in the creation of the grandiose pallor which now was all. It was a psychological tint alone, the whiteness which comes with cooling a brain until its synapses achieve a state of superconductivity and an automatic thought circles forever in the suddenly frosty jelly, the final idea and that alone, for only one can loop when no blood flows to inspire others. And that last idea is: whiteness!

Dmitri Sneakios had claimed that all his planets were hollow except one called Empty. But Snowflake lacked space on the inside, unless there were caverns presently unknown to us. I thought that Sneakios had told a deliberate lie. Later, I discovered that he had not. Snowflake collapsed in upon itself in 1906, reducing its size but increasing its density. We truly were stranded at its centre. And not only stuck there but comatose too, perhaps even dead! A horrible thought now, but not then. Whiteness! That was my solitary concern. I should have realised that all situations have their advantages, for I was not in any Hell. But even comprehension of this fact was beyond me. Whiteness! The very antithesis of coffee and plantations and drums in the night, which are black or dark green, smoky and unfeeling as the blisters on the hands of a slave, ancient, uncaring and dim. Our nullity was monomaniac: an endless ring of order. The end of all complexities. Variety undone!

Something stirred against my face. A lick.

Not a tongue, not a knife. Something between the two. Warmly rough, salty in my nostrils, on my lips.

Flooding my ears, throat and lungs.

Spiralling into my belly like a model whirlpool, restarting my dead heart, cracking the cords of crystal which were my arteries and veins. A lapping motion, not too pleasant.

It was hot! It boiled! Bubbles of sloppy fire!

I tried to raise my arms, to shield my face. They were still locked in ice. But there was less resistance now. My knees jerked. Whole strata of frozen gasses deliquesced around me, their layered uniformity turning into something more chaotic: a landscape of melting sculpture, jewels of ice emerging from the swirl, polyhedra lifting from wild vapours only to hiss away to clouds without form.

Above me, the sky was made of water.

The cosmos had become a kettle! It was teatime!

It was the elevenses of reality!

No other explanation... yet!

Batavus moved beside me. The jar came lose from his shoulder with a satisfying squelch. His eyes blinked.

We coughed water, failing to communicate.

The sky was right on top of us. There was no more space between the ground and heaven. It was the ebb-tide of the empyrean! The universe had flooded itself. So I wept for it.

Batavus smirked and I pretended to have something in my eye. And my arms broke free at last, and the rest of me! I shifted and struggled. We swam in a mixture of boiling water and transient atmosphere. The methane clouds choked us, but bursts of oxygen diluted them. Bubbles rumbled and wobbled through the liquid sky, seeking a direction in which to rise. It was a simulation of the drifting Hells loose in the microcosmos. Without the souls and devils they lacked purpose. Now a bubble enveloped us from below and gave us a chance to talk.

"The ice world is melting," I spluttered.

"Yes, but why? This water is scalding me. Where has it come from? I fear we will soon be cooked alive."

"True. My knees are already boiled tender. They require only a mild parsley sauce to render them palatable."

"You exaggerate, Batavus! They are too wrinkled!"

"I am not a housemaid! You insult me!"

"Indeed I do not. My mouth deals only with facts. No herb condiment can rescue the taste of those caps!"

"Enough! The bubble has almost risen away from us. We shall have no opportunity for discussion when it has gone. Let us not waste one moment of breathable atmosphere bickering!"

He scratched his head. "What else can we do?"

"Climb inside the flask once more."

"You are right... glubglubglubb!"

The bubble had departed. We were submerged again.

The sky was immense above us, curving away from the horizon, which was formed by melting icebergs. The frozen helium evaporated first, for the solid elements which comprised Snowflake all had individual boiling points. It cut gaps into the world, leaving mountains and canyons where none had existed before. Most of these drifting cliffs of ice were pure nitrogen. They collapsed quickly, but far more slowly than some of the other gasses, which practically exploded the moment a drop of hot water touched them. We were inside the Klein Bottle now, but the hatch seemed to be defective. It closed but did not form a tight seal. As we drifted through the rupturing ice sculptures, hot water trickled in. It flooded over our boots, tormenting our toes.

The jar seemed unsure which way to float. Where was the surface of this impossible ocean? We bobbed in the margins between sky and ground, where water and ice, energy and stasis (and hope and despair) struggled for drastic supremacy. I glanced down, toward the ice. The planet which had held us prisoner was rapidly dissolving. It grew translucent and an eldritch glow began to shine within. There were lights on the far side! I realised I was peering through the remaining hemisphere of the globe, half of which had already evaporated. What was left was a lens with the stink of the low numbers of the Periodic Table. Hydrogen, Beryllium and Fluorine glaciers broke free, their atoms jumping and snapping to mist. As they vanished, the stars which pierced the melting orb grew hard and bright. Whereas before they had paraded unseen below us, under the ice, they now seemed to wheel above us. My sense of direction was constantly adjusting itself. Gravity was our teacher, inverting my orientation, so that down and up swapped roles. Snowflake was gone! We were adrift in a flask on the biggest sea imaginable.

Now the final icebergs sank around us, some of them hovering for a moment on their own gasses as they dissolved from the bottom. The sound of hissing diminished, but did not cease entirely. There was no land. I wondered if a world made entirely of water had collided with Snowflake. This speculation was not quite right. We simmered alone. Fresh air came in through our damaged hatch, but it burned the lungs. Stifling! Yet we were still entranced by the appearance of the stars. The constellations were etched in the heavens with real lines! The stars were joined up in recognisable patterns by glittering walkways. This was most unexpected. It was wholly absurd. How could this be? Such lines are products of the atlas and chart: a conceit which attempts to give credence to old myths and legends. Astronomers despise them as childish whimsies, as crutches for the amateur stargazer, the sort of idiot who says 'The Plough' when referring to the rump of Ursa Major, or who confuses Mercury with Venus twice a year, one morning, one evening. I want no lines in my patterns! I am an expert, a scholar, a boffin.

"How has this happened?" I asked Batavus.

He shrugged. "An engineering project? Catwalks between the stars? A silly scheme which has spoiled the sky."

"Indeed so. Though I suppose certain minds, such as those possessed by girls, might see some merit in them."

"They would call them pretty in their ignorance."

I turned a smirk on him. "Even Thais?"

He flushed with rage. "Not her! Her intellect was almost masculine in its refusal to endorse the cute."

"Shall we berate these lines together?"

"I doubt that will help. They seem rather solid."

Clicking my fingers, I cried: "Of course! Remember what we learned about subjective topology? Depending on which country you stand in, the planet below you is a different shape. And depending on what planet you are viewing them from, the stars also alter. It is obvious this analogy holds true for all cosmic objects. The constellations together form the galaxy. From the surface of separate stars, the galaxy must also change its appearance. Are you listening? From the surface of a star the galaxy will look different. Not only that. It will be different. In this case, its constellations are connected."

"We are on the surface of a star? No, I cannot believe that. Stars in the microcosmos are mere lamps. They are not big enough to float on. They are not composed from fluid."

I hissed sharply: "This star is the sun!"

He gasped and wiped his brow with my sleeve. Then he nodded, tears trickling down his cheeks and diluting the perspiration at the edges of his mouth. Finally he snorted: "Yes, you are correct. The sun is a star and we are bobbing along on its corona."

"But why is the sun made of water?"

"The last time we visited, it resembled a hearth."

"Maybe it still does — in the depths!"

"If the walkways between the stars are real now, might we use them to stroll out of the microcosmos?"

"Alas no! for they only exist while we are located on the sun. The moment we leave to step onto them, they will disappear! The frustrations of the universe are manifold, dear Batavus!"

"Ah! Let me set this straight in my own mind. In terms of location and observer: nation affects world, planet affects

sun and star affects galaxy? It seems so apparent now!"

"Easy when you know," I quipped wearily.

We drifted along on a rapid current in awed silence. Then I spotted a whirlpool ahead, a maelstrom of stupendous size. The water was boiling furiously, and the eddies and swirls were irresistible. Our Klein Bottle was sucked into the vortex. We yelled to no avail. Down in the depths we plunged. The water grew hotter and hotter the further we descended. Both of us poked our tongues to pant, but we could not extend them far enough to obtain relief. We aided each other. I pinched his between fingers and thumb and pulled; he did likewise.

It did not help. We steamed in our sweat!

We puffed at each other, but our breath was also torrid and humid, though not with passion. With calorific value!

To the bottom of the sun we sank!

Batavus and Batavus: reluctant solar divers!

The starlight and the glow of the lines which joined each member of a constellation faded above us. But another source of illumination below now filled our vessel with its ruddy throb, and burned the submerged and fantastically remote horizons into charred profiles. I feared we dropped into a region of active seabed volcanoes. The light was orange and harsh but undefined bubbles of superheated water rose out of it to knock their circumferences against our glass sides. The turbulence was terrific! The pressure was ridiculous! We were ninety miles down and the bottom of the ocean finally lifted to greet us.

I recognised the coals and spikes!

The original sun, drowned but unrepentant!

Spitting embers in the iron grate!

We settled on the top layer of coals. But we did not come to a rest here. The fists of fiery carbon rolled aside and our flask sank down to the next level. Still we did not stop. The fuel rose around us, covered our vessel! We were inside the fire!

Sparks showered through the gap in the hatch!

We stamped them awkwardly to ashes!

Sweat blinded me, stinging my eyes with salt. But I felt our vessel continue to sink, working its slow way through the coals to the base of the hearth. The stacked anthracite rubbed against the handle of the jar and I winced at the grating noise...

Finally: an iron floor! Pulsing red.

And a knob, also aglow, protruding from it...

Some sort of service door. I turned to Batavus and said: "Undo your trousers. I have a sudden inspiration."

"Is this a good time for that sort of thing?"

"Pervert! I know your monkey as well as my own! What use is that to me? Is it fabricated from asbestos?"

"Not at this present time. Here they are!"

I took the proffered garment and wrapped it around my hand. Then I flung open our own hatch and grasped the knob directly below. It singed the trousers with a joyous hiss! No more would my younger twin strut in public with an unbranded crotch! He would not be taken for the maverick he was, merely for a dolt. I yanked the knob and the service door swung open with a clang. There was a little square space behind it. The flask fell through and the door slammed again, the mass of the shifting coals pressing down on it. Safe once more!

It was cooler in here, but hardly comfortable.

My younger self sneered. "Well, you have rescued us from a Batavus barbecue, but now we are entombed alive!"

"Yes, this seems to be the end of the story for us. Stuck in a jar in a little room at the core of the sun."

"Even Christopher Blayre would not credit it!"

"Unless he was intoxicated..."

"An iron shroud! How I despise this fate! Curses again on you for rescuing me from my beloved Thais!"

I dismissed him with a wave. "Yes, yes! Yawn!"

"And look at my trousers! Ruined..."

"Ah well! At least you sacrificed them for the sake of an exploit. And they have finally been sterilised."

He lowered his tone as if embarrassed. "Batavus, I believe there is another door below us. It leads deeper into the sun. I think we might be in an airlock. Shall I try it this time?"

I nodded. "And you may utilise my trousers..."

"Wretch! They will not singe on a cold knob! A cruel jest! I demand that we share your pair from now on."

"I reluctantly agree to your request, on condition you stop talking about Thais! What is she contrasted with coffee?"

He frowned. "The same as a knife compared with a spoon. You are me. If you had met and telescoped her..."

"I concede your point. On odd days, you may wear the good trousers. On even, you shall go naked or foolish; the choice is yours. But less of the banter! Reach for that knob!"

With a grimace, he thrust his bare hand through our pendulous hatch and pulled open the inner door. We fell into an enormous chamber, a mile or more in diameter, which was yet cluttered with all manner of objects. We were inside the sun! There were panes of pyrex glass in the walls and these glowed with the light of the coals outside. But the room was still dim in most of its corners, for it was piled with so many curios that it seemed a repository for pure shadows: the objects which cast them acting only as their envoys in the extruded world. Our jar crashed onto a table and tipped over. We crawled out, dazed and relieved. We explored our new environment with the easy grace of men who have been threatened with odd extinctions too often. Among the giant balls of string, clocks, cabinets and

hatstands, books, pots and stuffed animals, tapestries and bicycles, chairs, candlesticks, mandolins, baskets and boxes, stood something with the semblance of an umbrella. But it had more than one canopy, and these opened and closed themselves in an intricate sequence. The gentle breeze created by the vibrations formed words. It was talking to us! The patter of raindrops can be mistaken for a language, but this brolly made sense. And it even addressed us by name!

"Welcome to the sun, Batavus Droogstoppel!"

"Thank you, Herr Umbrella," I said.

The canopies flapped anxiously. "You do not recognise me? I suppose it was too much to ask. Ah well!"

And it sighed like many parasols closing before being conveyed into the rooted shade of a tall house.

Batavus stepped closer. "We have met before? Were you that umbrella which stood propped against the far wall in the Chapel of the University of Chaud-Mellé? Nobody ever bothered to claim it. For years and years it remained there. A dusty feature."

"I am not a true umbrella. I just look like one."

"But that might also have been true of my example. After all, there were rumours about the organ playing at night after everyone had left. I do not know how it managed chords. All the same: I have experienced many stranger things in recent hours."

"I doubt that. What is the year now?"

Batavus and I cried together: "1927!"

The umbrella had no head to shake. I was grateful for that, because its laugh was immensely ironic and an accompanying gesture of equivalent scorn would have been unbearable.

"No," it finally replied. "It is 200,000,000 AD."

"That is hard to believe," we gasped.

"But it is accurate. How you survived so long is a mystery to which I hope you can provide a solution."

"I am bewildered," I answered.

"Where have you come from?" it prompted.

I muttered: "An ice planet..."

"We were frozen at its core," added Batavus.

"Ah! That must have been Snowflake! The sun is dying. It is turning into a Wet Microscopic Giant. This is the eventual destiny of all phoney stars of comparable size. It is swelling outward. It has already claimed the fifty worlds which were nearest to it, Momus, Parnassus, Mercury and Dante included. It is almost a hundred miles in radius! The solar-system is coming to its inevitable end."

I shivered. "Has the guarantee expired?"

"Yes. But yours clearly has not. You have been cryogenically frozen for thousands of millennia! The expansion of the sun thawed you out! Its surface has now reached Snowflake..."

"You mean to say we just took a second leap into our own future? We are chrononauts as well as Dutchmen?"

"That is correct. Prettily put."

"Who are you? If not the brolly in the Chapel..."

"A notorious personage. I am... Dmitri Sneakios!"

Batavus and I fell into each other's arms, partly because we wanted to hide our sniggers in our armpits, but were not supple enough to serve ourselves in this regard. "Silly!"

The umbrella bristled. "It is not! I am serious!"

"Sneakios was a man. He had a head."

Batavus qualified this analysis: "Also a monkey!"

"Though we did not see it!" I cried.

"Nonetheless he was human..."

The umbrella flapped all its canopies for many minutes, fanning the mirth out of our faces and drying our apprehensive gums. It was shouting at us in pluviological anger: "Fools! I was a man! That was aeons ago! I replaced my organs and limbs as they wore out. I became an automaton. My heart was electric! Then when those parts rusted away, I fitted new ones and continued the process through the centuries. Each time, I made a few errors. These magnified over countless lifetimes. Eventually my form was no longer that of a person. It had mutated by infinitesimal degrees into something completely different. Now I am the exact opposite of a man. Do not goggle at me! It is the first price of my immortality. There are two prices. The second is yet higher."

Batavus rubbed his chin. "Surely as these new components erode, and are replaced by others, you will phase back into being a real man at the end of another two hundred million years?"

"Idiot! How is that possible? To fit replacement parts I need hands and I have none. I AM A SODDING UMBRELLA!"

I sympathised. "That is unfortunate."

"It is a one-way transformation," it grumbled.

"What is your secret?" I asked.

"I have many. Which one do you mean?"

"Why not give us a list?"

"Much too tiresome. The onus is on you to ask the right question. I shall answer truthfully if I can."

"Very well. How many worlds remain intact?"

"In this system? With the evaporation of Snowflake, just seventeen. The others were pounded to granules in

collisions, or drowned and boiled away by the sun. Most long ago."

"Does parsley grow on any which remain?"

The broolly pondered. "Possibly on Salad or Gosh."

I glanced slyly at Batavus. "And would a sauce prepared from such a herb go well with my knees..?"

"Yes, yes, I believe it would."

I bounded about the room in joy. "Ha! I was right!"

"Is that all?" it inquired.

I interrupted my victory celebrations. "By no means! Why are there so many items of junk down here with you?"

"When I still had legs and arms, I roamed the microcosmos gathering spare parts and storing them here. I was already replacing my organs and bones by the end of the first interplanetary war. That was before I went into voluntary exile. The heart of the sun seemed the best hiding place. Nobody tried to look for me here!"

"But why has the corona become water?"

"When the original Earth was destructed by Thais, its oceans turned to steam which lingered at the rim of the inner system together with the dust from the mother planet. In time, it began to cool and condense. The first rains fell through the void ten million years ago. They were drawn to the sun like the morning dew. They formed a shell of fluid around the hearth. This expanded as more rain was added. As I said before, this sun has outgrown the orbits of many of its worlds. It will continue to swell until there is no steam left..."

"We saw none in the sky when Snowflake dissolved."

"It usually rains only at night."

"Why does it not extinguish the coals?"

The umbrella seemed to construct a chuckle from many rustlings and whispers. "They do not burn in the standard way. They do not need oxygen to maintain combustion. When I first designed this sun back in Plovdiv, I knew I wanted a totally new type of fuel. So I invented nuclear power! The forced fusion of two atoms releases incredible amounts of energy in a sustainable 'reaction'. But the technology did not exist to use proper atoms, so I settled for models."

"And what did you use for those?" I asked.

"Why! Lumps of coal, of course!"

Batavus had a question of his own: "Did you ever meet the Queen of the Pirates? Her name was Charlotte Gallon."

The broolly formerly known as Sneakios sighed and flapped and seemed to blush from its struts to its hooked handle. "Ah! Yes! How could a man of any shape, even that of a portable shelter, forget her? I visited her when I still had lips to kiss her shadow."

There was a general silence as we waited for the ache of sentiment in our chests, or shafts, to fade, though our lips, or canopies, mouthed identical phrases without speaking: "O Day of our Weeks! O Dark for our Lamps! O Congress of our Berlins!"

"A magnificent lady," we all said at last.

Burning coals shifted on the other side of the windows. We shuffled uneasily in the orange effulgence.

"Any more questions?" murmured the umbrella.

I held up my hand in the affirmative. "What is the second price of your immortality? You alluded to it."

"It is an unavoidable side-effect of a very long lifespan. You know how the years seem to get shorter as you grow older? When you are only a child, each year takes almost forever to pass. It is a purely subjective phenomenon. By the time you are a young man, the years start to speed up quite rapidly. They have accumulated a dizzy pace by your thirties. When you are forty, fifty, sixty they accelerate faster and faster. They seem to leave you behind! You can do nothing to stop them! It is almost as if you have slipped out of synchronisation with outer time. The world spins too fast for you to regulate your own body-clock by its rotations. Death rushes toward you. It is the highest gear in the cycle! All this happens because of percentages. When you are five, one year is 20% of your life, a sizeable chunk of your history. When you are twenty, a single year is just 5% of the whole. By age eighty it is 1¼% and so on. I have existed for nearly 200,000,000 years. Thus each year to me is a tiny fraction of a percentage of my entire span. It is therefore insignificant. It heaves past so fast, I barely notice it."

"But you are aware of us now!" I protested.

"That is true. I am able to interact with you, but that is not the same as feeling you are still here."

"I assure you we are," huffed Batavus.

"Yes, yes, I know that! But for you, our conversation is proceeding at a much slower rate than for me. Indeed, I perceive it as taking place in a flash. It has already gone, as far as I am concerned, winked out. I am presently accelerating toward the end of time itself, when reality no longer exists in any form. The years will seem to attain the velocity of light and I shall reach eternity."

I chewed my lip. "The price of immortality is indeed heavy. But let us return to our question and answer session. Your secrets are nice, but I am more interested in your Secret."

"Ah! The Secret with a capital'S'. You should have said. You want me to reveal the Secret of Sneakios?"

I nodded. "That is correct."

"It is simple enough. It concerns the plan of the rulers of all the Hells to splurge-spend their accumulated time once they are blended into a Pan-Tartarus. I hope to sabotage this fiendish plot, to negate it with one of my own. I do not want so many surplus millions of millennia awash in the microcosmos! They will hasten the universe even faster toward its ultimate doom, and in my condition, which is already ultra-brisk, I wish to savour each aeon individually."

I remarked: "Your cause has become the cause of the Uncommon Union. And you are a god in that empire."

The umbrella sneered. "The Uncommon Union was destroyed so long ago even the descendants of its few survivors no longer remember its name! I informed you that only seventeen planets remain intact. The orbs of that Union are not included among them. There is only one big culture left in the system. It is located on Montezuma."

"Not the clowns?" I spluttered.

"No, their distant scions. The Tories!"

"They have evolved from the clowns?" gasped Batavus.

"Devolved," corrected the umbrella.

"May Zumboo peel our monkeys!" I blasphemed.

"Even the gods are dead now. The clowns were stranded on Montezuma. They adopted the trappings of the indigenous civilisation. A combination of clownish intellect and Aztec cruelty produced a community of blatant Tories. They are nasty. They are stupid."

"But are they a threat?" I demanded.

"Not until recently. They lacked support among the electorate (who dwelled on the other planets). But now they have chosen a leader who is ambitious and ruthless. He is determined to stamp the mark of the Tories on the remaining populations."

"Surely there are too few voters now?"

"He plans to fix that. He is called Lakov Valuge."

"Any relation to the Albanian poet?"

"No, the name is a coincidence. Two of the surviving worlds are the love planets, Casanova and Watermelon."

"Surely they cannot vote for him?"

"True. They are inanimate objects. But he intends to connect a hose from one to the other. More precisely, from Watermelon to Casanova. When the remaining ladies of the unscathed spheres next decide to hold one of their sisterly orgies, the dastardly rogue plans to open a valve in this hose. The man-juice stored inside Watermelon will flow and fill Casanova until it is full. He has already pricked holes in the rubber nodules. He will then compress Casanova, forcing the issue up the hard protuberances and into the wombs of the women!"

"He will impregnate every single one of them!"

"Exactly. And then in nine months, he will have many more potential voters whose minds he can start to corrupt with the sickening propaganda of Toryism! Such a man is Lakov Valuge!"

"But how will he squeeze Casanova?"

"By creating a black hole inside it. The sides will shrink and the extra pressure will provoke the multiple ejaculations. The next sisters only orgy is due tomorrow morning!"

Batavus knitted his brows. "How can you know this if you spend all your time hiding alone in the sun?"

"I am an umbrella. The rains tell me. They percolate down through the solar ocean and the coals and tap on my windows. I listen carefully to them. Do not say that I am mad."

"So the droplets have developed intelligence?"

"There have been a lot of changes in the past twenty million years or so. But now you are being nosy."

"Why do you not oppose Lakov Valuge today?"

"Because I need his black hole for my own scheme. If I can dangle it from a chain, it will become the pendulum of a gravity clock. As it swings right across the microcosmos, it will warp spacetime and suck in as many seconds, minutes, hours, days, weeks, months, years, centuries and millennia as the Pan-Tartarus can spend. Thus it will neutralise the splurge with every tick and lock! I cannot build a black hole on my own. It is not my field. I must borrow one."

"How will this Valuge tyrant create one if you — the great Dmitri Sneakios — cannot? I am startled."

"He has an advantage over me. He is able to merge lots and lots of unemployment black spots. They are a Tory speciality. When he has mixed enough of them together — presto!"

"A black hole," I agreed. "And a ruined economy."

"Such is the dream of the Tories."

"How does this relate to the Secret of Sneakios?"

"Ah! That is concerned with the science of astrology! You know why the inner solar-system was set up in the first place? Kingdom Noisette and Dean Nutt wanted to rescue damned souls from all the Hells and give them a second chance. Rehabilitate them. A more controllable zodiac was designed, one which would prevent evil from being fated. When the Earth was smashed by Thais, and the surplus planets spilled into the system, the intricate workings of this system were totally disrupted. But there is a backup zodiac! Yes, I thought ahead! I made careful preparations. One of the planets which has survived all the collisions is Earth, not the big Earth, but the little one. It lay between Venus and Mars in the original design. Now it orbits quite alone, with its ancient miniature seas and model cities and facsimile pollution. It is a very close match for the big Earth. Do you understand?"

"You mean it has plantations and colonial mansions on its Java?" I blurted, unable to restrain myself.

"It does, but that was not my main point."

Batavus frowned. "Ah! It is hollow?"

The umbrella shook itself. "Yes! But not only that! All my planets are shells (except one, long gone). Earth contains another microcosmos at its core! An undefiled solar-system of twenty-seven worlds! This is the backup zodiac. It can be set manually, and the configurations will influence events in our microcosmos."

"Ingenious!" I cried in delight.

"If you do not wish the Hells to leapfrog the universe trillions of centuries into the future, I charge you with the following task — land on the little Earth and enter it, and then manipulate its inner planets into a horoscope favourable

to my plans. In other words, I want you to set this second zodiac into an arrangement which will guarantee success for Lakov Valuge's prototype black hole, and thus my own hopes of making and starting a gravity clock..."

Batavus and I consulted each other on the proposal. "We accept your quest. But how will we leave the sun?"

"I have a spare starclipper. It is no use to me now. You may borrow it. There is a larger airlock on the other side of this chamber. One of the advances that has taken place in your absence is ornithopter design. The cockpits are now hermetically sealed. You will not get wet. But you cannot depart until twilight — after the rains come to cool the corona, but before the solid filters shut over the surface to establish dusk. I suggest you set the engine to maximum the instant you leave the airlock. The starclipper is constructed from papier-mâché. It was discovered long ago that this was the most economical material to build flying machines. But it will turn soggy in the solar ocean if you do not hurry! Good luck to you, Batavus! The horoscope I suggest is: Momus and Mercury in Aries; Venus in Sagittarius; Earth and Gleeeful in Libra; Mars, Jaspar and Otho in Pisces; Hleems and Pogsmith in Taurus; Jupiter in Leo; Saturn, Sooty, Priam, Dido and Magus in Aquarius; Desmond and Ark in Gemini; Uranus in Capricorn; Phorcys, Neptune, Osiris, Monkey and Erebus in Cancer; Cottus and Pluto in Virgo; Plonker in Scorpio. No need to place any objects in Ophiuchus, the thirteenth Zodiac constellation. It is only for show. The settings I have just specified will ensure that I am destined to convert the black hole into my gravity clock."

"How will you accomplish that without arms?"

The umbrella opened and shut its highest canopy in a wink. "I have certain methods. You need not learn what they are. Be satisfied that I have shared the Secret of Sneakios..."

"We are!" I insisted. "And very grateful too!"

"I did not pass it to you for free! There is a price! In return, I demand you give me your Klein Bottle."

"You ask too much!" I began, but then Batavus whispered in my ear, reminding me that it was cracked, so I lowered my head and sighed. "Very well, it is yours. It is impossible anyway."

"Yes! A jar which has no inside!"

"In that case, why do you want it so badly?"

The umbrella quivered with anticipation. "For centuries I have been unfulfilled! Something was missing from my current shape. At last I know what it is! I shall be comfortable!"

I voiced my best guess: "An umbrella-stand?"

"Yes, that is what I need it for!"

"Shall we slot you inside?" I suggested.

"Oh! Yes, yes!" it drooled. Or maybe a few old raindrops leaked out of its undulating fabric head. I picked it up by the shaft and thrust it firmly but smartly into the neck of our flask. It began to flap and moan with a pleasure that was not intellectual, and I blushed deeply. Batavus was also embarrassed. We turned to look for the starclipper which we now owned. I hoped we would find it out of earshot of our squirming host. As we hurried away, it interrupted its frantic panting to cry: "By the way, dear Batavus... Take the subatomic bazooka on that desk with you... You may need it for your own protection... The microcosmos is even more perilous than it was... It fires a single blob of compressed neutrons... It will destroy most types of matter... Remember the Zodiac sequence... The door on the surface of the little Earth can be found in Rio de Janeiro... Use the model of Sugar Loaf Mountain for a handle... Twilight is due in less than one hour... Oh! Yes! Yes! YES!"

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We left the sun in the recommended hurry, surfacing through the ocean as the rains lowered its temperature. It was dry and comfortable inside the starclipper. The glass canopy of the sealed cockpit allowed clear vision in every direction. But there was little to see. There was a cord on the dashboard which was linked to a bell on the nose of the vehicle. We took turns pulling on this, to warn monsters or seals of our approach. It was fun but unnecessary, for there were none. Just swirls and eddies. With a stately flap of its wings, our ornithopter propelled us out of the solar seas and back into space. From every side, the edges of the filters were closing fast. I heard them meet with a clang under us. Water poured from our fuselage and slicked the hard surface of this artificial sunset. One more minute and we should have been trapped beneath it! As we dripped, we grew lighter and faster. In the heavens, the galaxy started to change shape. The lines connecting its constellations faded. Now they were gone and the stars became lonely again.

We flew onward for many hours. The microcosmos was shockingly empty compared to the way we remembered it. Then we saw a planet. As we turned to fly past it, I guessed it was Montezuma. But its red smokes were blue and through the gaps in its clouds I saw strange absences as well as the pyramids with their sacrificial altars. These latter structures were now festooned with bunting and tiny flags. But I pointed at the other things and wondered aloud at their purpose. Everything in the universe, whether good or bad, should have a function, and it always does, but these weird lacunas did not. In the context of reality, they did not work. There was no other way of putting it. Batavus shared my unease, but he had already realised what they were. He cried:

"Unemployment black spots! Remember what Dmitri Sneakios said? This Lakov Valuge fellow must be collecting them. When he has enough, he will doubtless press them together into a black hole. What a villain! Then he will convey the hole to Casanova."

"I wonder how he will avoid falling in himself?"

"He will probably keep it at a level just below critical mass until it is positioned at the centre of his target world. Then he will add the final pinch and commence running."

"Final pinch? Ah! He will resign his position? That extra speck of unemployment will be just enough."

"And then he will reapply for his job. Almost certainly he will get it. Can you credit such cynicism?"

"These Tories sound awful! Steer away, Batavus!"

He did so. We raced through the airy void. The front of our vehicle was fitted with a starcatcher, a sort of gridlike scoop designed to push aside powdered stars, for countless collisions had reduced many of them to sharp splinters. Without this attachment our fuselage would have been shredded by dozens of nebulae. We flapped awkwardly into one giant cloud of tiny grains, scratching our canopy to opacity. When we emerged on the far side, we threw it open and discarded it. We rang the bell again, for there was nothing else to do. We yawned. I raised my pocket telescope to my eye and searched for little Earth. Two of the seventeen planets shone below, but they were the wrong colour.

"What are those up ahead?" Batavus called.

Another pair of globes loomed out of the glass clouds. I smirked to myself, for I recognised one as Watermelon. Then I spied the rubber hose joining it to Casanova. It bulged slightly as some thick liquid trickled down inside it. Lakov Valuge was plainly more organised than even Dmitri Sneakios had suspected. He was already implementing his plans. I briefly wondered if we might cut this hose with our tailfin, but I remembered in time that we were made of papier-mache. The idea was silly! All we would achieve was our own destruction! It was better to fly past and keep our fingers and monkeys crossed that we could find Earth in time. Otherwise we had nothing to look forward to except a cosmos full of infant Tories! I felt sick at the prospect. Hideous!

Like accents above foreign letters, remote starclippers flew out of the furthest reaches of space and steered for Casanova. Even without the help of Sneakios and his revelations, I knew they were piloted solely by women. They veered all over the place! I was very surprised they did not stall more often! Or possibly I was merely attributing the defects of my own vision to their assumed lack of competence. To be frank, I no longer knew how to maintain my prejudices properly. Too much had happened since the Nineteenth Century for me to continue using it as a valid reference point for my behaviour. Was I growing soft in the middle age of reality? I shook my head vigorously and peered again. This time the ornithopters betrayed no sign of wobble or timidity. How peculiar! The revolutionary consequences of this observation had no chance to work themselves out in my mind, for Batavus interrupted me.

"They must be the ladies bound for the orgy."

"Yes," I said. "And they do not need men to help them. These days, sisters are doing it for themselves!"

My other self frowned, grappling with this statement, which was an insight I could barely process myself. We squirmed in mutual redundancy and embarrassment. Then he remarked:

"Incredible to think that in our day females with such tastes lived only on a single island in the Mediterranean called Lesbos. And now they are free range in the microcosmos!"

I cleared my throat. "Yes, it is remarkable."

"Well..." stammered Batavus. "Well... I mean: what do they actually do when they reject male caresses?"

"They rapidly become hysterical!" I snapped.

"Yes, I imagine their wombs float loose inside them, causing fevers and tantrums. I heard of such cases from Professor Tatto. And they make noises down there as they drift around. Strange whistlings and melodies. It is said that some composers..."

"This subject is disagreeable, Batavus!"

He lowered his head in shame. "You are right. I am sorry. But look! There is another planet just ahead!"

"Is it Earth? The continents are different."

"Maybe the tectonic plates have wandered over the centuries? No! It is not the one we seek. But I know it."

I blurted: "It is Normnbdsgsrutt!"

Batavus gritted his teeth. "I do not suppose it is possible that he is still there? Bartleby Cadiz?"

"We can find out. Skim its surface!"

"And if he is? What shall we do?"

I patted the subatomic bazooka which lay in the cockpit next to us. There was no need to say anything more. We dived into its atmosphere. I spotted a sandyacht racing across a beach. We kept pace with it, flying ten yards or so above its sail, taking due care not to let its occupant make a leap for us. The grizzled face glanced up. Its rotten expression was one of ultimate hunger and bitterness. Then it broke into a grin. I shouted down: "Greetings, miscreant!"

"And the same in return, Batavus!"

"How have you remained alive for so long?"

"I might ask you that question. But for me, the answer is simple. I regularly reincarnate myself as myself. It is an ancient Cadiz trick, to be used only in the direst emergencies."

"The mechanics of that seem improbable."

"Not at all. I die and my body is consumed by worms and bugs. They pack themselves inside my decaying frame. Then my soul, my will returns, and takes them over. They give themselves to me. They operate as organs and flesh. They work together like communists. I am reborn! This process can be repeated endlessly. And it is."

"You are made of worms?" I cried.

"Yes, Batavus: famished ones. How they squirm!"

I wrinkled my nose. "Have you eaten nothing since our last visit? I surmise that you have been punished correctly. Two hundred million years of starvation. You deserve that."

"You are too cruel! But have you forgotten the refugees you gave to me? I ate them and bred them, and ate them some more! They lasted dozens of centuries! But in the end they became inbred and tasteless. I cooked all of them in a

slap-up stew. My finest meal! It did not satisfy my gut because of my damnation: the curse of eternal appetite. But my ears were pleased by their pitiful screams."

"Gross brute! We have come to gloat. Now we shall depart. And then we will free you from your torment."

His eyes twinkled. "You mean it? Ah! it is a trick! You plan to do something violent to poor Bartleby!"

"Wait and see!" I returned. We rose back out of the atmosphere and turned in space. I aimed the subatomic bazooka at the equator, pressed the trigger and watched as the blob of neutrons erupted from the nozzle and struck Normnbdsgsrutt with an indescribable boom! It conjured cracks over its surface. These fractures joined together, spread, widened. Then the planet just vanished! It had turned to a fine powder which blew away on the winds of space. It was gone.

Batavus and I shook hands. "Well done!"

But we had underestimated our old enemy. Bartleby must have climbed into his world through a service door. As the dust of the globe cleared, something large and white shone in its place. I whimpered as I stared at it. My elder self knew what it was, but I did not. I felt the desiccated kiss of superstition on my mind's lips. In Java I had been infected with certain foolish terrors: it is unavoidable for anyone closely associated with slaves and their primitive beliefs. Such fears are spelled with the alphabets of unreason, and it is difficult not to learn a few letters by default on the way. Thus my reaction.

I hissed: "That planet has a skeleton!"

For we were now confronted by a crude orb of bones knotted tightly together. And peering from just under its surface, gripping two ribs as rails, Bartleby Cadiz waved ironically.

"Thank you for your trouble!" he called faintly.

"It is a calcium raft!" muttered Batavus. "Exactly like the one he had before, in the pit below Montenegro. He must have stored the bones of the refugees inside Normnbdsgsrutt, joining them with sinews. We have accidentally released the rascal!"

Now a huge canopy opened above the bleached sphere. It was a giant parachute made of stitched shirts!

"He is back to his old tricks," said Batavus.

We watched in agonising impotence as Bartleby gripped the strings which steered the parachute and soared away from us with a wave. In our papier-mache starclipper, we could neither hope to fight nor trap him. We were weaker and slower. He caught a sudden thermal and was soon gone. I loathe being outwitted and the cannibal had done it again! It was best not to think about it. I forgot him.

"Come, let us seek Earth," I muttered.

We continued through the void. Many hours passed without a glimpse of another planet. The loneliness of the microcosmos was intense. Then I spotted a familiar sphere. Its varnish had smudged, its knobs were green and its surface was scarred with shallow scratches, but it was still an impressive piece of geological furniture. Desmond! The wardrobe world! I gestured at it and wondered aloud whether its singular occupant might be at home. It seemed unlikely after so many centuries, but Batavus judged it worthwhile to investigate. I turned the nose of the spaceship toward the wooden globe. Then Batavus made a mistake. In a burst of enthusiasm and playfulness, he grasped the cord to ring our bell. I lunged for him, but it was too late. He jerked it.

The tinkling sound crossed the mile of breathable space and bounced off the northern curve of the planet.

"May the coathanger gods save us!" I hissed.

Suddenly a pillar of some kind shot out from the surface of Desmond and grazed the tip of a wing. Our starclipper nearly tipped up. Batavus was too alarmed to observe this column more closely. He concentrated on seizing the controls, steering us away from it. I knew exactly what he was thinking. At first he believed a ramming device had been extended, similar to one of the attachments used by Penknife. But even from brief lateral glances, he realised it was not armed with a spike or barb. As his confusion replaced his fright, I decided to reveal to him the facts of the chaos he had so carelessly caused. And in truth, I derived a sly pleasure from the trauma I knew this would generate in his heart, loins and other places where he was tender.

"Desmond is certainly inside," I remarked.

"How can you be sure?" he asked.

"Because that enormous pole is his erection."

Batavus blushed and added: "Sorry!"

"Yes, it is activated by the sound of a bell. See how it has grown in length! There must be millions of years of repressed thrill in those yards of meat. I suggest we land on the far side. That monkey would rip us to ribbons if we struck it."

"I concur. It is even stiffer than our resolve."

"No, Batavus: nothing can be so firm!"

"True, but it has extremely impressive veins..."

"Yet we are the vainest of all..."

Nodding to himself with a divided grin, half smug, one third scared and one sixth inspired, Batavus circled the world and set us down safely away from any hint of penis. On the outside of Desmond, our starclipper, with its papier-mâché frame, resembled one of those yellowing sheets of parchment (an invoice or memorandum) which can often be found pasted by their own vacuums or grime to the underside of antique wardrobes during a change of residence, when the furniture must be loaded into a cart and trundled to a new house, in a better or worse area of the same city, but a catastrophe for the transported chattels, which will always be knocked and abused by the removal men, who care nothing for your things, and why should they? Other men have probably caused damage to their possessions at some

point in the past and they are merely passing the resentment on. It is almost the same as the guiding principle of imperialism. The Dutch were bruised by the Spanish in the Sixteenth Century, so we waited three hundred years and kicked Java. If it had survived, I dare say Java would have followed suit, picking on Timor or some other weakling. Two things identical: moving house, colonisation.

We jumped out of our omithopter, located the door which led inside the planet and fumbled our way through the crumbling coats on their wire hangers. Desmond the man was truly there! But he was pressed against one side of his glorified cloakroom. We had a view of his naked rear. He was thrusting hard into the bulwark. Directly opposite him, on the far wall, hung a mirror. It had been pieced together from numerous fragments. Only one shard was still absent, but the reflection within was healthy enough despite the lack. The cracks made this doubled man appear worried rather than old, for the flesh between the lines was firm and glowing. I looked him up and down, and saw that the image of his monkey was missing. Irony still existed in the universe! With a surge of satisfaction, I turned to address the extruded man. I simpered:

"Well, well! How is the ebony joy-horse today?"

And Batavus added: "Still in penile servitude?"

The man remained mute. The reply came from the mirror, which flexed like a diaphragm. Because of its condition, I had to lean far forward to catch the sense of its words. It spoke in a broken accent, but it still betrayed an education superior to any that should be offered to a member of the inferior races. It said:

"I no longer entertain guests. I have retired."

I feigned ignorance. "What are you doing to that wall? Is it a new type of game? What are the rules?"

"Some idiot rang a bell and set me off!"

I smirked. "That is a shame."

"Yes, my erection is too long to contain within this planet. It is fortunate for me that there is a hole in the side. When you tore up that plank, you created this puncture."

"Is a mile-long erection uncomfortable?"

"Indeed it is, you insincere toad! My body contains a lot of blood under extreme pressure and most of it has departed my brain for my tool. I feel quite dizzy. It is a nuisance!"

"Why have you not aged with the microcosmos?"

"I am a reflection, Batavus! I am made of photons, not atoms! I can see that your knowledge of physics is extremely limited. My mortality departed long ago. I cured myself."

"You extracted the splinters of your mirror from your body? Was it a painful operation? I am curious."

"No, you are vengeful. You despise the fact I am intelligent. Back in that brothel, I belittled you, or so you felt. No black man has ever treated you thus! You are bitter."

"Perhaps so," I conceded. "All the same..."

"Yes, it was very painful. But the piece holding my monkey is still loose in space. I have been searching for it since your last visit. Will I ever find it? I do not feel like a genuine reflection without it. Yet a missing manroot is surely better than a small one. Thus it is you I am sorry for, Batavus! The scars on my torso and arms are a small price for the reconstruction of my mirror. My dangler is all I require to complete my euphoria, my destiny. You will never be happy, because you want what cannot exist: power without consequences. My perceptible penis has gone, but your mental monkey never was!"

I waved my fists in fury. "You lie! Subhuman!"

Batavus was calmer. He demanded: "Why has the planet Desmond never collided with another globe? It seems too coincidental to be true. There are only seventeen survivors in total."

"But it has suffered many impacts. You assume that every collision must end in annihilation. That is not true. It depends on what materials the world is made from. The stone, iron and brass globes are more likely to emerge unscathed from accidents than the chocolate, glass and cheese ones. I have been lucky, true. But the wood of this world can absorb the force of knocks very efficiently."

"That explains the scratches on the surface!"

"Yes, and Desmond is not the only world to be a veteran of impacts. For instance, Willis collided with Pam a decade or so ago. They produced three moons in the catastrophe — Rachel, Tom and Luke — before flying apart. These moons now follow a complex orbit around both parent globes, generally remaining in the vicinity of Pam, but joining Willis on random weekends. And the two fringe worlds, Floyd and Balder, actually collided and fused into a single dumbbell."

I scratched my chin. "How peculiar!"

The mirror sighed. "Not really. I always felt, given enough time, that Floyd would become Balder..."

"Are Chryses and Hochigan still intact?"

"Alas no! Gamblers lost a lot of money on them. Luckily money was outlawed at that time. Everything equalised itself. But now I require a favour from you, Batavus. I know it was you who rang that bell! I want you to ring it again, to deflate me."

I considered the request. I am brutal and bellicose, but sometimes I like to be kind. It makes me more savage the next time. So I nodded in the affirmative. "That is feasible."

"I shall do it!" volunteered Batavus.

"So many strange adventures!" I mused. "One is given to wondering if they should be written down."

"For posterity, you mean?" chortled the mirror. "There is precious little of that left! But each to his own."

I scowled. "I enjoy preparing reports..."

Batavus left the chamber. I heard him walking about on the surface above my head. I said nothing to the mirror. We were both embarrassed. I do not know why. We waited for the tinkle of the starclipper's bell. It did not come. Then my elder self returned. He held a wing of our vehicle under one arm. He smirked at me.

"What are you doing?" I roared. "What is that?"

"For our report," he replied, grinning. "We need something to write on. This wing seemed an ideal material. Our spaceship is made of papier-mâché. Have I done wrong, Batavus?"

"You ripped the wing off to use as a notepad!?"

"Yes. To save you the bother."

I frowned. I could not think of any reason to justify the anxiety I felt in my stomach. I shivered and moistened my lips with a cold tongue. Then I cried: "Well done, Batavus!"

He blinked slowly. "There is a mistake here..."

"Yes, but what! Ah! I know..."

"What is it? Pray tell me, younger self!"

"You forgot to ring the bell!"

He raised his hand and slapped his own forehead with an open palm. I smiled at his childish expression. He exclaimed: "Doh!" Then he went back upstairs. Again I waited with the mirror for the tintinnabulation, the jingling of the bell, while the stars that oversprinkled the heavens probably span, for from the surface of this planet, subjective topology ensured they resembled gyroscopes, but nonetheless I listened for that bell and the merriment (or at least erection collapse) its melody might foretell, keeping time in a sort of defunct rhyme — like this one! But again it did not come. Batavus ran into the chamber in a profound sweat. He was screaming: "Manroot ahead!"

The mirror bulged. "A glass monkey?"

"Yes, yes! The final fragment is spinning toward us! I saw it from a corner of my eye. I came down at once!"

"Was it on a collision course?" I demanded.

"It will skim the surface..."

Suddenly the mirror let out a piercing shriek. And the man pressed to the wall began to writhe. I stepped toward the reflection and peered closer within it. Desmond had turned pale. His face was contorted with agony. At the same time, the man sagged in the middle. He was deflating! And the planet lurched around us!

"What is happening?" I bellowed.

The reflection opened its eyes and spoke with extreme difficulty. I was reminded of the slaves I had disembowelled in Sumatra. "My physical monkey has been severed... The edge of the glass penis... My manroot has castrated itself... I am a eunuch..."

Batavus hissed to me: "The spurting blood is acting like a rocket engine. We are moving out of our current orbit! We will accelerate like this until we shut the penis off!"

I held up the leather belt of my trousers. It had not fulfilled its original function as a garment support for a long time. But now I saw a substitute use. "Tie this around his monkey at the root! Buckle it where his simian meets his pubic jungle!"

Batavus ran to obey. He tightened the belt at its highest notch and Desmond stopped leaking. We were still rushing through the void, but now our speed was constant. The torment on the face in the mirror was still extreme, but its colour had stabilised to a milky octaroon. It gasped a few disjointed phrases at intervals.

"Groin disaster... Sing soprano... Emasculated..."

Batavus regarded the paper wing under his arm. "It seems to me that without a working spaceship (I felt there was a disadvantage to pulling this off) we desperately need another mode of transport. I propose that we convert Desmond into an interplanetary vehicle. This project requires very little work. Whenever we wish to accelerate, we loosen the belt. It is already calibrated in notches."

"I second your proposal. But how can we steer it?"

"By walking in step in the same direction on the inside! The equal and opposite force generated by our feet should turn the globe. Once it is pointing in the desired direction, we can activate the monkey motor. I calculate that there is enough blood in Desmond's body to conduct a tour of the entire microcosmos!"

I giggled. "Shall we find out for sure?"

"Yes indeed! This will teach him to know his place in the hierarchy of racial types! Where shall we go first?"

"South! I say we head south!"

"But there simply are no directions in space!"

"Sunwards then! No: north! Away from the sun!"

"We can look for Earth the slow way."

"Via the outer limits! Via the twilight zone!"

"What a remarkable thruster we have on this vehicle, Batavus! Just the technology for 200,000,000 AD."

We danced among the dangling coats. "It is fun to be puerile! Very satisfying and rich! So imperial!"

The mirror watched our antics through pain-shrouded eyes. It wanted to remonstrate with us, perhaps to plead, but moans had replaced all the words in its throat. We ignored it.

"Let us try to rotate the world," I suggested.

The operation required several minutes of practice. We had to match our paces precisely, walking toward the furthest wall and pushing firmly back with our heels. On the seventh attempt, we succeeded. The boards of Desmond creaked and its coat hangers jangled as the orb shifted position. At last I was ready to give orders:

"Loosen the belt, Batavus! Notch factor five!"

"Aye, aye, Batavus!" said Batavus.

I felt a sudden inexplicable urge to shave the tops of my ears into points with a knife. I shook it away, deeming it an effect of stress. We had been through so many ludicrous events that it would have been more surprising if I had not suffered from the occasional delusion. No human mind, even that of a Dutchman, can be expected to remain in full health after narrowly escaping a dozen bizarre demises. But it did not matter. We had gained mastery over the wardrobe world! It belonged to us now! A fit sphere to convey a genius and a genius wherever they wished to fly. With the monkey rocket on full power, we barged our way through nebulae and star-clusters. We took it in turns to operate the belt. The mirror had stopped whimpering. It merely hissed and babbled now, as the horror on the face of the reflection slowly become resignation and despair. It still hurt him, I knew, and this luscious thought swelled my own monkey with stale blood, my first viable erection since the eclipse of Zumboo. Revenge for that time he humiliated me in the brothel! Yes, I would make him suffer! I am Dutch. It was right.

We travelled a single circuit of the microcosmos, a tour which took twelve hours. Most of that time we kept the monkey at maximum thrust. We tightened the belt and shut the engine down only to change direction. It was a superb voyage: we visited the eight corners of the local universe. Frequently one of us would ascend to the surface to keep watch. The few remaining planets were no obstacle to our progress. Space was too empty now to worry about collisions. We passed the remains of Amontillado and felt nostalgic: this world had been drunk so long ago! Our nearest miss was with a sphere which I suspected might be Slopjar, for it had brown polar-caps, but there was no way of confirming this. And we soared less than a mile above a globe upon which stood a single figure: a leper who bore an uncanny resemblance to the cretin I had once paid to assassinate me. Remembering the list recited by Sneakios, the name Diphthong entered my mind: I cannot say why. It was a minor mystery. More important was my eventual sighting of the little Earth. It floated directly ahead and my pocket telescope resolved its blue smudge into a clear disc holding all the familiar continents and oceans.

I went below. "Halt engines! Buckle the belt!"

"No need. We are out of fuel."

Batavus had not lied. The fleshy Desmond stood slumped against the wall. He had turned completely white — like a grub! And his reflection in the mirror rested with folded arms, sunken cheeks. Both were utterly flat and quite dead. My heart soared.

"Perfect timing! We shall coast the rest of the distance. We have no way of crossing open space: when we pass Earth at the nearest point, we must jump together! A run up will be necessary. I suggest we take our places at the equator to be ready."

We did so. Standing on tiptoe to peer over the horizon, we watched Earth approach. I saw that we were destined to glide within a few yards of it. But when we leapt, the backward pressure of our feet would propel Desmond in the opposite direction, so it was essential that we acted in tandem, else one of us might be left behind. Slowly the cloudy blue disc grew big. We were returning home!

The moment arrived. We ran, holding hands, not because of addiction to the Cretan vice, but to avoid the danger discussed above. We jumped and felt the wardrobe world rumble away behind us. Batavus paddled with the detached wing. We landed somewhere in Africa. We did not wish to get our feet wet, so we took the long way to Rio de Janeiro, stepping over the Red Sea into Arabia and walking across Asia to the Bering Straits, which were a full yard wide. We bounded across this and continued down through Alaska, Canada and the United States, into Mexico and then the Central American republics. I was in such high spirits that I acted the perfect gentleman, throwing my scorched trousers over the Panama Canal for my elder self to step on. I swear that my intentions were good! It is not my fault that it sagged under his weight and gave him a six-inch dipping! He dried himself with sighs.

We traversed Colombia and Peru, vaulted over the Andes into Brazil, picked our way through the miniature rainforest and finally reached Rio de Janeiro. Batavus was very impressed with the coffee growing potential of this country, but I reminded him that business could wait. Already we had wasted too much of our time punishing Desmond. But I was horrified to discover that the door under Sugar Loaf Mountain was open! It yawned at us like a toothless mouth.

"Someone has preceded us!" I cried.

"Look!" screeched Batavus, and I followed his pointing finger. He was gesturing at the sky. A moon was emerging from a star-cloud. It was large and white and very sinister.

"Bartleby Cadiz!" I gasped. "He is here!"

We ran through the door and down a corridor. We entered a cavern which my elder self claimed was a superb model of the one he had fallen into under Montenegro. The hollow centre of the Earth! The stars were set in the ceiling in proper constellations, and the miniature planets of this second inner solar-system rotated in careful order. But a man was altering their positions with a pole! He stood astride two islands and pushed Saturn along in its orbit until it glowed in front of the constellation Aries. I realised he had already adjusted all the other worlds to suit his own designs.

"It is he!" moaned Batavus. "But what is that?"

On another island, an atoll with white sands, stood a monster which even nightmares might have bad dreams about. I distrust my ability to describe it in coherent words. I shall do my best, but you must fill in the actual terror. Pretend there is an intruder in your room! Or that a tentacle has just wrapped itself around your ankle! Jump up now, ruffle your hair and yell! If you have obeyed these instructions, I thank you for helping me write this passage. If you have not, you are an inferior sort of human. I suggest you seek employment in a plantation. The chains stop hurting after the first year.

"I recognise its head!" shrieked Batavus.

"And I recognise its body!" I spluttered.

On first sighting, it seemed a quadruped not too dissimilar to the giraffe or llama, albeit smaller and nastier. It had four legs. The back pair were short and terminated in hands with opposable thumbs. The front pair were longer: they had reversed knees and ended in backward feet. A long thin neck decorated with barbaric bangles, in the manner of some of those women who dwell in the mountains of Thailand, carried aloft a head which was human but incredibly ugly. Its eyes were closed and the beast was quiescent. I even thought it must be dead, for it did not twitch at all, and its flesh was an unhealthy grey colour. As I peered at it more closely, I realised that it was in fact an artificial creature, made up of two separate beings which had been joined. Then the truth dawned! It was the headless body of Thais von Oort! My icy darling! The monster's neck was really her tail! Her back legs were her arms! Why had Bartleby fused a strange head to her spinal cord? Why was she positioned on this atoll? Why did she not love me?

Batavus pointed at the face. "Count Unfortunato!"

"The owner of the castle which passed us when we plunged into the microcosmos? What rotten luck!"

"Yes, it is he! But I shot him dead!"

"So that explains the large hole in his jaw?"

"My pistol was a flintlock..."

And now Bartleby Cadiz noticed us and turned with a sickly grin. He lowered his pole and called out:

"Welcome to my scheme, Batavus! Thank you again for freeing me from Normnbdsgsutt. I have nurtured this plan for so long! I thought I had missed my chance, for the Pan-Tartarus is almost a reality now, and its splurge-spending of time will take us all to the end of everything. No more planets or astrology! Nothing! But it is not too late after all! I worked quickly. I worked hard."

"What exactly are you doing here?"

"Creating the ultimate mutant! The Cometary Cadiz!"

"Cometary Cadiz? Ah! Now I understand what you meant by commentary caddies. You lisped to mislead us!"

He shrugged. "One of my many tricks..."

Batavus asked: "But what is a Cometary Cadiz?"

"Why! It is the culmination of all the horror that the Cadiz family has strived to introduce into the universe. It is a liar, cheat, pervert and murderer which can fly under its own power anywhere it chooses! Half comet-girl, half brother, it can dwell with perfect ease in vacuum. It can endure solar winds with just a flick of its tail — or in this case neck! — and smash real worlds, big worlds, to tiny pieces. The tyrants of the microcosmos have always been unambitious. They lack grandeur. But I am different. When it awakes, I shall sit astride the Cometary Cadiz and ride it out of this tiny solar-system into the adult cosmos beyond! There are galaxies far away which are still young! They will last for a million more centuries! By the time the final star fades in this system, I shall be gorging myself on virgin planets and tender civilisations! I will become a god to them. I must eat, eat and eat! The Cometary Cadiz is my steed. I may also sleep with it."

"Your monkey is not for her! Thais is mine!"

He sniggered and shook his head. "You flatter yourself, Batavus! Do you really believe she will remember you after all this time? It is most unlikely. She does not even have a head! It was severed by the collision with her namesake comet. When I first returned from my Hell and was free to wander the microcosmos, I discovered her body slumped on this planet. It must have fallen from Chaud-Mellé and landed here. Probably her skull was vaporised and no longer exists. With the Count, the opposite was the case. I found his head next to her body, but the rest of him was missing and doubtless destroyed. I dragged both sets of remains into the Earth. I knew what I wanted to do with them, but I was too hungry! So I decided to go and feast before returning to implement my project. Unfortunately, I was captured and exiled to that bland globe. Only now have I been able to come back and finish my task!"

"We apologise for helping you," I sneered.

Batavus was also annoyed. "When you mentioned a fusion, we hoped it might be possible to recombine us."

Bartleby bowed ironically. "I am sure it is. But that is of little interest to me. Now watch! The creature is quite dead at the moment. It is just the body of Thais stitched to the head of Unfortunato. But soon it will rise and live again! Behold!"

"How will you reanimate it?" I demanded.

"With astrology! The process is already underway! I have forced the twenty-seven worlds of the second inner solar-system into new positions, alignments which are favourable to resurrection. Yes, I have altered the local sky! I have set the horoscope of the Cometary Cadiz so that it is fated to come alive! Pushing Saturn into Aries was the final adjustment necessary. Already it is stirring!"

And so it was. Colour flooded into its cheeks: a deep purple, quite inhuman and tasteless. Then its back legs, which were arms, moved. With dreaded inscrutability, it began rocking back and forth, pushing against the floor of the atoll with alternate hands, waving its sinuous neck. I gasped as the eyes opened, slowly focussed and twinkled. The mouth gaped and a heavy tongue flopped out onto the greasy chin. Then the bangles on its neck vibrated and it hissed:

"Meister Droogstoppel... Meister Droogstoppel..."

"Go away!" I screamed. "Leave me alone!"

Batavus whimpered: "How can it talk? Its neck is a tail. It has no vocal-cords! It should be mute!"

Bartleby chortled. "The bangles are wires taken from Entrerrosca, the lute world. They work like a voice-box. Incredibly mellifluous! Do you appreciate beautiful diction?"

"No! I do not! Tell it to be quiet! Please!"

"Meister Droogstoppel... Meister Droogstoppel... Can you understand me? Meister Droogstoppel... Can you understand me?"

"Your voice," I replied, "but not your character!"

Batavus rounded on me with fists. "That is my riposte!"

"Fool!" I growled. "How can I plagiarise myself?"

"Meister Droogstoppel... Long time, no see."

"Bah!" I huffed. "You look ridiculous perched on the tail of Thais! I should be there instead of you!"

"First come, first impaled, Meister Droogstoppel!"

Bartleby sighed deeply. He barked at the Cometary Cadiz: "This is no time for pleasant banter! Kill him!"

And the foul mutant leered at me. I knew it was ready to leap from the atoll. I felt the energy in its grotesque frame: the ability to fly across the distance separating us in a blink. We were finished! Batavus jumped into my arms, and I into his, at the same time. For a second, we managed to support each other above the ground. Then we collapsed under the persuasion of gravity and sprawled in the sand. I waited for a vast shadow to cool my sweating brow: the eclipse which would spell the doom of the most lovable and clever astronomer and merchant to ever lift eye and whip to lens and lackey. Goodbye, sweet Batavus! Reality will never look upon my like again! Poor universe!

The Cometary Cadiz did not spring.

Its shadow did not loom to chill my final breath.

It would have come, but something distracted it. Something in the sky. Whatever it was, it also caught the attention of Bartleby. Then I stood and helped my later self to his feet. One of the minuscule worlds in this other system was undergoing a change. Shielding my gaze from the tiny sun, I saw that it was the Earth!

A third planet Earth! No bigger than an orange!

A hatch had opened in its side...

Seven miniature figures emerged and strolled forth.

They closed the hatch behind them and stood on Ipanema Beach with folded arms, dressed inappropriately for the climate of Brazil, in stiff frock coats and starched collars.

I recognised all of them. So did Batavus.

"Christopher Blayre!" I warbled.

Batavus added: "And the others too! Professor Tatto, Trajan Pepys, José de los Rios, Joachim Slurp, Kingdom Noisette, Dean Nutt! It is the Foundation! The Foundation is here!"

"But I thought it was going to be located on Parody or Terminus! I assume this must be a Second Foundation?"

"A good guess," squeaked Christopher Blayre.

I cupped my hands around my ears to hear his little voice clearly. Then I asked: "How did you become so small?"

He shook his head. "We are not really here. We died millennia ago. Fate finally decided to discard the great library of Alexandria once and for all. We are proculscope recordings!"

"You have developed the technology to save electric pictures? That is wonderful news! Have you patented it?"

"Damn! I knew we had forgotten something!"

Batavus asked: "Did you set up the Second Foundation to deal with such anomalies as the Cometary Cadiz?"

Despite the size of his forehead, I noted Blayre's frown. "No, we misplaced the first one. So we needed another."

"But you have anticipated all this!" I blabbered. "You worked out this entire conversation in advance."

"There was very little else to do."

"Will you save us from the Cometary Cadiz?"

"I knew you were going to ask that! Sorry, we are out of biscuits. Wait! Perhaps you requested something else! What can it be? Ah! You want us to save you from the Cometary Cadiz?"

"Yes, that is the correct option," I wailed.

"No worries. It has already been arranged. We drilled a hole in the top of Venezuela so that our proculscope images might peer out. We spied on Bartleby and saw what he was doing. It fitted our predictions. So we manipulated the zodiac inside this Earth to defeat him! There is a thud microcosmos beneath my feet. We pushed its planets into a horoscope that will ensure the destruction of your Earth, which is now fated to crumble into dust in the very next second..."

There was no time left to reply.

Suddenly we were floating in space...

The void was all around, but it was not serene.

It was packed with incident!

As the powder of the Earth dispersed on the wind, I saw many things not recommended as beneficial to sanity.

A black hole swinging on a chain...

A giant Hell wobbling across the heavens behind it.

The Cometary Cadiz adrift in front.

As the implausible pendulum swung from one side of the microcosmos to the other, it ticked and tocked...

It seemed to suck in what the Hell was disgorging.

Then it sucked in the Cometary Cadiz.

Which blocked it! Stuck in a black hole!

The abominable creature thrashed and writhed, but to no avail. Both projects were ruined. The Cometary Cadiz was jammed fast: the clock was broken. I clutched Batavus for comfort.

The first of three angry voices struck us:

"Meister Droogstoppel... Meister Droogstoppel..."

The second came from an unseen source. It sounded like the Sapping of an umbrella: "My gravity clock! Idiot!"

The third was the nastiest of all.

Bartleby Cadiz paddled himself through the void toward us. All his dreams had been spoiled. He shouted:

"You are to blame for this, Batavus!"

There was murder in his eyes...

There was hunger on his lips...

We turned to run. But we were standing on nothingness. Our boots could not grip the surface of the void. I felt we had reached the nadir of our existences. But we had not. Out of the horizon came a fleet of strange vehicles. They resembled starclippers, but they were alive. It was almost as if pilots forced to remain inside their ornithopters for too long had fused with their machines into a new species. They flapped like a worm's dream of birds.

Behind us, I heard Bartleby grumble:

"The forces of LARGE UNCLE have returned at last! But I shall eat you before they do, Batavus!"

We closed our eyes. Something bit into us. It was not a tooth. It was the hard jaw of countless aeons...

We were still floating in space, but now we saw nothing. We were adrift in darkness. As our eyes slowly adjusted to this impenetrable gloom, we began to perceive scattered objects among the emptiness. No, that is not correct. The blackness was ultimate. We sensed these other bodies. Among the lonely tenebrosity they bobbed, equidistant and identical. There was no sound. They did not speak. It was obvious what had happened. Bartleby Cadiz had been cheated of vengeance by the Pan-Tartarus, which had spent all its accumulated time in a single burst. Instead of radiating in all directions through the microcosmos, as might be expected, this spurt of years had erupted from the Hell reservoir in a thin jet to strike us. We had absorbed its full impact. We had evidently been cast into the future again, safe from our enemies, but at a point when even the last star had died. Nobody else from that era had accompanied us. We were pioneers and refugees, captives of fate and age.

It is strange to relate, but we no longer felt like individual men. The fusion of our forms had not taken place, and yet our identities were now combined. We were we and just that. Indeed, we cannot state with any confidence which of our bodies is writing this section of the narrative. It scarcely matters. We concluded that the Foundation run by Christopher Blayre had arranged the sabotage of Dmitri Sneakios' black hole pendulum for its own purposes. It was our own fault too, because we had neglected to set the horoscope as requested. Thus the gravity clock had never been fated to work. Ah well! No use crying over broken singularities! But why had Blayre wanted the Pan-Tartarus to spend its time? It was an enigma. But an answer came to us. In the farthest future, our new present, there are no worlds or stars. There is no zodiac. Therefore Hell can no longer be destined to exist via the medium of astrology. Hell is an essentially unhealthy notion, and thus a (mentally) unstable one. Without fate it is too fragile to exist. It dissolves!

And that is what had truly occurred. The Pan-Tartarus had committed accidental suicide! It had spent itself out of the preordained universe and into the oblivion of a free-will reality. We sniggered at the irony of this! Our laughter was echoed and amplified on every side. Again we became aware we were not really alone. Then a voice filled our heads. We pulled at our ears, but they were still cool. Someone was talking to us without using sound! A smart trick!

Welcome to paradise, Great Father!

We shook our skulls and blinked in the total murk. Then we replied in the same way. How can we hear you?

Telepathy. We have evolved the skill...

But that must have taken billions of centuries! What is the year? How far have we come into the future?

It is Infinity AD, Great Father!

We gasped. Infinity AD! Surely there was no such date? But then we understood that without stars and planets, there could be no more time. And the end of time was eternity. As we tuned ourselves more finely to our environment, we knew that we were surrounded by people who closely resembled ourselves. They held hands at full arm's length and smiled to each other, nodding in a highly refined form of smugness. We felt truly happy for the first time in our lives. How could this be? Were we among kindred spirits? We made a final attempt to assert our uniqueness, the quality which had always kept us apart. We focussed our huge minds and beamed a shout across the universe:

We are Batavus Droogstoppel...

You certainly are! And we are your descendants.

Impossible! You are Droogstoppels too?

Is it worth being anything else, Great Father?

No! Of course not! Not at all!

And then we comprehended the mechanics of this joyous situation. It was our dalliance on Watermelon! We had filled that love planet with our seed. Our testicles are Dutch. Therefore their juice is superior to that of males from other cultures. Our sperms had wrestled with theirs. To be blunt, ours had overcome the opposition. We had dominated and controlled the sludge inside Watermelon. So when Lakov Valuge positioned his black hole at the core of that sphere, collapsing its sides like a bellows and forcing its contents to shoot up the pierced nodules on the surface, it was our issue alone which entered those randy ladies! We had impregnated the sisters of the microcosmos! We were primogenitor of the time beyond time! There were no planets, but there were Droogstoppels! Yes, paradise had indeed become real! We danced around our smiles, as young women in a lost era had once gyrated around their handbags. A handbag!? There were no receptacles of any kind in this cosmos. Then we recalled that we had been thinking aloud, as all thoughts must necessarily be from now, and we received the following reply:

Your guess is accurate, Great Father. It was Watermelon. She is our fabled mother. She no longer exists.

What happened to Lakov Valuge and his Tories?

Destroyed! He resigned too early and was digested by his own black hole. His party fell apart soon after.

They were just a bunch of devolved clowns!

Ho, ho! Yes, Great Father!

So what is life like in Infinity AD?

Very agreeable. We pay no taxes. We indulge the Cretan vice without shame. We say pshaw! and pshew! a lot.

We have dreamed of such a place all our lives!

There is only one disadvantage. We must avoid gathering in crowds of more than three people at once. Without planets, all the gravity in this universe is generated by us. If too much mass is assembled in one place, it will start to pull in everything around it. We will end up with a giant planet made of people! We understand. No mob events. It is the same as Martial Law. That is a small price to pay for heaven.

Yes it is, Great Father...

We continued to float for an indefinite period. But to be honest, there was an itch growing in our souls. Our legs twitched. To be born as a floater is one thing. Our descendants had never known firm ground. It was different for us. We craved to stand again on something solid. Soon this desire became unbearable. We did not know what to do about it. But an idea came gradually into our brains. There was powdered glass in the vicinity, the last remaining clue to indicate that stars had existed at all. The grains struck our faces, worked their way up our sleeves. They abraded our monkeys. We each grabbed a fistful of this powder, pressing the tiny splinters together into a ball. Then we combined these spheres into a larger orb. We continued to work like this, collecting glass and adding it to the expanding globe. Gravity held it fast. And now it began to attract more grains on its own. Lamp pollen drifted toward the sphere and settled there. It was now an automatic process. We started to burrow into its surface, hollowing out the core, for we thought it best to copy the style of Dmitri Sneakios, the only planetary architect we had ever met. And strange to relate, we modified its shape almost by instinct into that of a Klein Bottle. Around us, we sensed vexation.

What are you doing, Great Father?

Building a world. For the sake of nostalgia.

Are you sure this is wise?

Do you seek to oppose our wishes?

No, no! Great father! Please continue...

We did so. Soon we had a planet not only large enough to stand on, but one able to accommodate an afternoon stroll. Before we transferred ourselves from the void to its surface, we briefly argued about what to call it. Even though we felt more like one man than two, my elder self declared his intention to call it Montenegro, after the place where he had done the business that inaugurated his arrival here in paradise. I wanted to name it after Thais, my sour sweetheart. Proving that we were combined into one identity, we decided to compromise. We would call the new planet Desmond! Yes, it was right that we had another wardrobe world for our own personal use. For we had never hung up our jackets! Never! Although we had lost our trousers many times, more times indeed than we had pairs to spare, our jackets had remained faithful to our torsos. Now we had a chance to take them off and store them away! With a cry of joy, we waded through nothing and stepped onto our virgin orb. Then we helped each other off with the garments in question. But as we did so, we were startled by telepathic screams.

Great Father! We are drowning!

Glubglubglubglubglubb!

What was happening? Our faces were suddenly wet. Hot liquid washed over us! A pungent aroma flooded our nostrils. We spat and coughed and wheezed. Coffee?! Of all things!

Then we knew. We had constructed our planet from the remains of stars. And a collection of stars is not really a world. It is a galaxy. Subjective topology was to blame again! From separate nations, a world will change shape. From separate planets, the stars must alter. From separate stars, the galaxy will transform. But what if you stand on a galaxy? What then? The analogy continues. From separate galaxies, the entire UNIVERSE must look different. And not only look different, but be different! From this galaxy, which we had just invented, the universe was coffee. There was no vacuum in its volume. There was mocha. A very rich blend, dark and smoky. Coffee! All was coffee! And every one of our descendants was drowning in it.

Somehow we opened the hatch we had fitted in the surface of Desmond and took refuge in the hollow centre. The seal was good. The coffee was omnipresent, but we were the last bubble of air in eternity. And it is time to say goodbye. Our oxygen will last a week at most, and then our sanctuary will become our tomb. Lost on the currents of infinite coffee forever! A painful pleasure in many ways, that idea! But before we die, we must endeavour to set down our experiences in writing. That is what we are doing now, on the wing of our starclipper. We are only one, but we still take it in turns. Nobody will read this account, but if they do, it means our story is false and the universe is safe after all! If you are there, we are not here. Please be there!

But one thing is certain. Batavus himself, at the very least, is a mug, an empty mug that is always ready to receive the vast amounts of coffee which will fill it, and overflow, and wash away all life forever. Batavus in his pomposity is eternally a cracked and chipped vessel in the ultimate form of things, partly because there is nobody else to adopt the role. And so he may escape suffocation by flinging open the hatch and drowning instead, with rapid beatings in his heart, and little twitches in his face, for coffee as strong as this is a powerful stimulant, more than his twin systems can absorb. But he will make after all a spluttering conclusion to this cosmic comedy. It is very good to have been Batavus. Much better than to be you. So there!