Science Fiction

The City on the Sand

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In Europe, there were only memories of great cultures. Spain, Portugal, Italy, France, England, Carbba, and Germany had all seized control of the world's course and the imagination of the human race at one time or another. But now these great powers of the past were drifting into a cynical old age, where decadence and momentary pleasures replaced the drive for dominance and national superiority. In Asia, the situation was even worse. The Russias struggled pettily among themselves, expending the last energies of a once-proud nation in puerile bickerings. China showed signs of total degeneration, having lost its immensely rich heritage of art and philosophy while clinging to a ruthless creed that crushed its hopeless people beneath a burden of mock-patriotism. Breulandy was the only vibrant force east of the Caucasus Mountains; still, no observer could tell what that guarded land might do. Perhaps a Breulen storm would spill out across the continent, at least instilling a new life force in the decaying states. But from Breulandy itself came no word, no hint, as though the country had bypassed its time of ascendancy to settle for a weary and bitter mediocrity.

Of the rest of the world there was nothing to be said. The Americas still rested as they had in the few centuries since their discovery: huge parklike land masses, populated by savages, too distant, too worthless, too impractical to bother about. None of the crumbling European governments could summon either the leadership or the financial support to exploit the New World. The Scandinavian lands were inhabited by skin-clad brutes scarcely more civilized than the American

cannibals. Farther east, beyond the teeming Chinese shores, between Asia and the unexplored western reaches of the Americas, no one was quite certain just what existed and what was only myth. Perhaps the island continent of Lemarry waited with its untold riches and beautiful copper spires.

And then, lastly, there was Africa. One city sat alone on its fiery sands. One city, filled with refugees and a strange mongrel population, guarded that massive continent. Beyond that single city, built in some forgotten age by an unknown people for unimaginable purposes, beyond the high wooden gates that shut in the crazy heat and locked in the citizens, there was only death. Without water, the continent was death. Without shade, the parching sharaq winds were death. Without human habitation, the vast three thousand miles of whispering sands were death for anyone mad enough to venture across them. Only in the city was there a hollow travesty of life.

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Ernst Weinraub sat at a table on the patio of the Café de la Fée Blanche. A light rain fell on him, but he did not seem to notice. He sipped his anisette, regretting that the proprietor had served it to him in such an ugly tumbler. The liqueur suffered. M. Gargotier often made such disconcerting lapses, but today especially Ernst needed all the delicacy, all the refinement that he could buy to hold off his growing melancholy. Perhaps the Fée Blanche had been a mistake. It was early, lacking some thirty minutes of noon, and if it seemed to him that the flood of tears was rising too quickly,

he could move on to the Café Solace or Chiriga's. But as yet there was no need to hurry.

The raindrops fell heavily, spatting on the small metal table. Ernst turned in his chair, looking for M. Gargotier. Was the man going to let his customer get drenched? The proprietor had disappeared into the black interior of his establishment. Ernst thought of lowering the striped canopy himself, but the shopkeeper-image of himself that the idea brought to mind was too absurd. Instead, he closed his eyes and listened to the water. There was music when the drops hit the furnishings on the patio, a duller sound when the rain struck the pavement. Then, more frequently, there was the irritating noise of the drops hitting his forehead. Ernst opened his eyes. His newspaper was a sodden mess and the puddle on his table was about to overflow onto his lap.

Ernst considered the best way to deal with the accumulating water. He could merely cup his hand and swipe the puddle sideways. He dismissed that plan, knowing that his hand would be soaked; then he would sit, frustrated, without anything on which to dry it. He would end up having to seek out M. Gargotier. The confrontation then, with the proprietor standing bored, perhaps annoyed, would be too unpleasant. Anyway, the round metal top of the table was easily removed. Ernst tipped it, revealing the edges of the white metal legs, which were sharp with crystal rust. The water splashed to the paved floor of the patio, loudly, inelegantly. Ernst sighed; he had made another compromise with his manner. He had sacrificed style for comfort. In the city, it was an easy bargain.

“It is a matter of bodies,” he said to himself, as though rehearsing bons mots for a cocktail party. “We have grown too aware of bodies. Because we must carry them always from place to place, is that any reason to accord our bodies a special honor or affection? No, they are sacks only. Rather large, unpleasant, undisciplined containers for meager charges of emotion. We should all stop paying attention to our bodies’ demands. I don't know how....” He paused. The idea was stupid. He sipped the anisette.

There were not more than twenty small tables on the Fée Blanche's patio. Ernst was the only patron, as he was every day until lunchtime. He and M. Gargotier had become close friends. At least, so Ernst believed. It was so comforting to have a place where one could sit and watch, where the management didn't eternally trouble about another drink or more coffee. Bien sûr, the old man never sat with Ernst to observe the city's idlers or offer to test Ernst's skill at chess. In fact, to be truthful, M. Gargotier had rarely addressed a full sentence to him. But Ernst was an habitué, M. Gargotier's only regular customer, and for quite different reasons they both hoped the Fée Blanche might become a favorite meeting place for the city's literate and wealthy few. Ernst had invested too many months of sitting at that same table to move elsewhere now.

“A good way to remove a measure of the body's influence is to concentrate on the mind,” he said. He gazed at the table top, which already was refilling with rainwater. “When I review my own psychological history, I must admit to a distressing lack of moral sense. I have standards gleaned

from romantic novels and magistral decrees, standards which stick out awkwardly among my intellectual baggage like the frantic wings of a tethered pigeon. I can examine those flashes of morality whenever I choose, though I rarely bother. They are all so familiar. But all around them in my mind are the heavy, dense shadows of events and petty crimes."

With a quick motion, Ernst emptied the table top once more. He sighed. "There was Eugenie. I loved her for a time, I believe. A perfect name, a lesser woman. When the romance began, I was well aware of my moral sense. Indeed, I cherished it, worshiped it with an adolescent lover's fervor. I needed the constraints of society, of law and honor. I could only prove my worth and value within their severe limits. Our love would grow, I believed, fed by the bitter springs of righteousness. Ah, Eugenie! You taught me so much. I loved you for it then, even as my notion of purity changed, bit by bit, hour by hour. Then, when I fell at long last to my ardent ruin, I hated you. For so many years I hated you for your joy in my dismay, for the ease of your robbery and betrayal, for the entertainment I provided in my youthful terror. Now, Eugenie, I am at peace with your memory. I would not have understood in those days, but I am at last revenged upon you: I have achieved indifference.

"How sad, I think, for poor Marie, who came after. I loved her from a distance, not wishing ever again to be wounded on the treacherous point of my own affection. I was still foolish." Ernst leaned back in his chair, turning his head to stare across the small expanse of vacant tables. He glanced around; no one else had entered the café. "What could I have

learned from Eugenie? Pain? No. Discomfort, then? Yes, but so? These evaluations, I hasten to add, I make from the safety of my greater experience and sophistication. Nevertheless, even in my yearling days I recognized that la belle E. had prepared me well to deal not only with her successors but with all people in general. I had learned to pray for another's ill fortune. This was the first great stain on the bright emblem of virtue that, at the time, still resided in my imagination.

“Marie, I loved you from whatever distance seemed appropriate. I was still not skillful in these matters, and it appears now that I judged those distances poorly. Finally, you gave your heart to another, one whose management of proximity was far cleverer than mine. I could not rejoice in your good fortune. I prayed fervently for the destruction of your happiness. I wished you and him the most total of all disasters, but I was denied. You left my life as you entered it—a cold, distant dream. Yet before you left, you rehearsed me in the exercise of spite.”

He took a sip of the liqueur and swirled it against his palate. “I've grown since then, of course,” he said. “I've grown and changed, but you're still there, an ugly spatter against the cleanness of what I wanted to be.” With a sad expression he set the tumbler on the small table. Rain fell into the anisette, but Ernst was not concerned.

This morning he was playing the bored expatriate. He smoked only imported cigarettes, his boxed filters conspicuous among the packs of Impers and Les Bourdes. He studied the strollers closely, staring with affected weariness

into the eyes of the younger women, refusing to look away. He scribbled on the backs of envelopes that he found in his coat pockets or on scraps of paper from the ground. He waited for someone to show some interest and ask him what he did. “I am just jotting notes for the novel,” he would say, or “Merely a sketch, a small poem. Nothing important. A transient joy mingled with regret.” He watched the hotel across the square with a carefully sensitive expression, as if the view were really from the wind-swept cliffs of the English coast or the history-burdened martial plains of France. Anyone could see that he was an artist. Ernst promised fascinating stories and secret romantic insights, but somehow the passersby missed it all.

Only thoughts of the rewards for success kept him at M. Gargotier's table. Several months previously, a poet named Courane had been discovered while sitting at the wicker bar of the Blue Parrot. Since then, Courane had become the favorite of the city's idle elite. Already he had purchased his own café and held court in its several dank rooms. Stories circulated about Courane and his admirers. Exciting, licentious rumors grew up around the young man, and Ernst was envious. Ernst had lived in the city much longer than Courane. He had even read some of Courane's alleged poetry, and he thought it was terrible. But Courane's excesses were notorious. It was this that no doubt had recommended him to the city's weary nobility.

Something about the city attracted the failed poets of the world. Like the excavation of Troy, which discovered layer upon layer, settlement built upon ancient settlement, the

recent history of the civilized world might be read in the bitter eyes of the lonely men waiting in the city's countless cafés. Only rarely could Ernst spare the time to visit with his fellows, and then the men just stared silently past each other. They all understood; it was a horrible thing for Ernst to know that they all knew everything about him. So he sat in the Fée Blanche, hiding from them, hoping for luck.

Ernst's city sat like a blister on the fringe of a great equatorial desert. The metropolitan centers of the more sophisticated nations were much too far away to allow Ernst to feel completely at ease. He built for himself a life in exile, pretending that it made no difference. But the provinciality of these people! The mountains and the narrow fertile plain that separated the city from the northern sea effectively divided him from every familiar landmark of his past. He could only think and remember. And who was there to decide if his recollections might have blurred and altered with repetition?

“Now, Eugenie. You had red hair. You had hair like the embers of a dying fire. How easy it was to kindle the blaze afresh. In the morning, how easy. The fuel was there, the embers burned hotly within; all that was needed was a little wind, a little stirring. Eugenie, you had red hair. I've always been weakened by red hair.

“Marie, poor Marie, your hair was black, and I loved it, too, for a time. And I'll never know what deftnesses and craft were necessary to fire your blood. Eugenie, the creature of flame, and Marie, the gem of ice. I confuse your faces. I can't recall your voices. Good luck to you, my lost loves, and may God bless.”

The city was an oven, a prison, an asylum, a veritable zoo of human aberration. Perhaps this worked in Ernst's favor; those people who did not have to hire themselves and their children for food spent their empty hours searching for diversion. The laws of probability suggested that it was likely that someday one of the patricians would offer a word to Ernst. That was all that he would need. He had the scene carefully rehearsed; he, too, had nothing else to do.

The rain was falling harder. Through the drops, which made a dense curtain that obscured the buildings across the square, Ernst saw outlines of people hurrying. Sometimes he pretended that the men and, especially, the women were familiar, remnants of his abandoned life come by chance to call on him in his exile. Today, though, his head hurt and he had no patience with the game, particularly the disappointment at its inevitable conclusion.

He finished the last of the anisette. Ernst rapped on the table and held the tumbler above his head. He did not look around; he supported his aching head with his other hand and waited. M. Gargotier came and took the tumbler from him. The rain fell harder. Ernst's hair was soaked and tiny rivulets ran down his forehead and into his eyes. The proprietor returned with the tumbler filled. Ernst wanted to think seriously, but his head hurt too much. The day before, he had devised a neat argument against the traditional contrast of city and Arcadian life in literature. Shakespeare had used it to great effect: the regulated behavior of his characters in town opposed to their irrational, comedic entanglements outside the city's gates. Somehow the present circumstance

destroyed those myths. Somehow Ernst knew that he didn't want them destroyed, and he had his headache and the everlasting morning rain to preserve them another day.

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As the clock moved on toward midday, the rain stopped. Ernst leaned back in his chair and waited for the sun to draw pedestrians from their shelters. He signaled to M. Gargotier, and the proprietor brought a rag from the bar to mop the table. Ernst left his seat to check his appearance in the Fée Blanche's huge, cracked mirror. His clothes were still soaked, of course, and in the sudden afternoon heat they clung to him unpleasantly. He ran his hand through his hair, trying to give it a more raffish, rumpled look, but it was far too wet. M. Gargotier returned to his place behind the bar, ignoring Ernst. There were voices from the patio. Ernst sighed and gave up the bar's muggy darkness.

Outside, the sun made Ernst squint. His headache began to throb angrily. He went back to his usual table, noticing the crowd that had collected beyond the café's rusty iron railing. A few people had come into the Fée Blanche, preferring no doubt to witness the unknown spectacle from a more comfortable vantage. It was nearly time for Ernst to change from anisette to bingara, his afternoon refreshment, but M. Gargotier was busily serving the newcomers. Ernst waited impatiently, his tumbler of anisette once again empty. He stared at the backs of the people lining the sidewalk, unable for the moment to guess what had attracted them.

“Now,” thought Ernst, “if I look closely enough, I will be able to recognize the backsides of every person I've ever

known. How tedious the world becomes, once one realizes that everyone in it can be divided into a dozen or so groups. That young woman there, ah, a fairly interesting knot of black hair, attractive legs, a thick waist. If she were to turn around, her face would be no surprise. Heavy eyebrows, no doubt, full lips, her upper front teeth protruding just a little. Large breasts hanging, her shirt cut to expose them, but it is ten years too late for that. It is too boring. I have no interest even in seeing if I'm correct."

Ernst smiled, realizing that he was deliberately avoiding any real observation. It was nonsense, of course, to think that twelve physical types might be enough to catalogue the shabby mass of people that filled the city. He had exhausted that particular entertainment, and rather quickly; what remained was the more tiresome prospect of actually describing the crowd. Perhaps M. Gargotier would arrive soon, interrupting the intellectual effort, scattering the energy, mercifully introducing a tiny but vital novelty.

"An interesting point," Ernst said aloud, imagining himself a lecturer before dozing students in some stifling European hall, "a genuine philosophical point that we can all grasp and taste for truth, is that there is nothing in the world quite like the opportunity of seeing someone make an ass of himself. Free entertainment is, after all, the Great Leveler, not death, as we have often been told. In the case of death, the rich are often able to regulate its moment of victory, staving off the final instant for months, even years, with purchased miracles of medicine. The poor take what they are given. But free entertainment is democratic! No one may say when a

spectacle may arise, may explode, may stumble. And then, when that moment comes, every man, rich or poor, must take advantage as best he can, elbowing aside the crowds all together at the same time. So, by sitting here, I have conquered them all, diversion and audience alike. And I can delude myself with my own analogies, considering death a lesser antagonist, and applaud my own immortality."

In a while, Ernst heard a ragged ruffle of drums, and a high-pitched voice shouting orders. Only the Jaish, thought Ernst with disappointment. It was only the new Citizens' Army; there would be little chance here to advance his position. He did not care for the local folk and their sudden and silly politics, and his own sort of people would not be long entertained by the fools' parade. He called M. Gargotier in a loud, rude voice. "Bring me some of that ugly Arab drink," he said. "It's noon, isn't it?" There was not a word from the proprietor, not a smile or a nod.

The people on the sidewalk, however, were having a wonderful time. Ernst could hear the rattling of the snare drums playing a syncopated, unmilitary cadence. The several drummers had evidently not had much practice together; the strokes rarely fell in unison, and with a little attention one could identify the different styles of each man. The slapping of the marching feet against the rough stones of the pavement was likewise without precision. Ernst frowned, looking at his own frayed, stained suit. If things could be arranged according to merit, then certainly he would be granted a better situation than this. He remembered the white linen suit he had owned when he first came to the city.

He had worn it proudly, contemptuous of the city's natives and their hanging, shapeless garments, all darkly sweat-marked, torn, and foul. That suit had not lasted long. It, along with the white, wide-brimmed hat and his new boots, had been stolen within a week, while he indulged himself at the Sourour baths. He had never returned to that establishment, nor any other in the Arab quarter. Now he looked much like those he had disdained on his arrival, and, strangely, that brought him a certain pleasure as well. At least he didn't seem to be a mere newcomer. He had been initiated. He belonged, as all the cityful of mongrels belonged.

So the time passed with Ernst trying mightily to ignore the exhibition in the street. Often the movements of the crowd opened spaces and he could see the garishly outfitted militia. The workmen and slaves of the city cheered them, and this made Ernst even more cheerless. He swallowed some of the local liquor in a gulp, holding the small wooden bowl on the flat of one palm. What good is that army? he wondered. The Jaish had no weapons. An army of no threats. And, beyond that, thought Ernst as he waved once more to M. Gargotier, they have no enemies. There is nothing on all of this damned sand but this single city. Just bread and circuses, he thought, observing the crowd's excitement. Just an entertainment for the groundlings. He had other, more important things to consider.

“Eugenie,” he thought, “magnificent horror of my youth, I would trade my eternal portion to have you with me now. How old you must be! How like these cheap dorsal identities I see before me, without personality, without more than the

instantaneous appetites, without the barest knowledge of me. They, who have drifted here from the living world, have been charred slowly to that condition. They have greedily accepted their lot, their badge of grime, their aristo suppuration, their plebeian filth. They left Europe as I did, to change slowly and by degrees of privation, like a slow sunset of amnesia, into this life of utter exhaustion. Never again will my eyes, my nose and mouth, the wet hairs of my body be free of grit and sand. The wealthy and I have had to labor to attain such an existence. But you, Eugenie, you had it with you all the time. You would be queen here, Eugenie, but you would be as ugly as the rest."

Ernst sipped more of the liqueur. He dipped three fingertips into it, and flicked the dark fluid at the backs of the people crowding against the railing. Spots formed on the clothing of a man and a girl. Ernst laughed; the too-loud noise sobered him for a moment. "You'd be ugly, Eugenie," he said, "and I'd be drunk." The heat of the African noon enveloped him, and the stillness made it difficult to breathe. Ernst struggled out of his old worn jacket, throwing it onto the chair across the small metal table from him.

"Marie, you don't matter. Not now. Not here. Africa would be perfect for Eugenie, but you, Marie, I picture your destruction among the million mirror shards of Paris or Vienna. So forget it, I'm talking to Eugenie. She would come right across that square, scattering the pigeons, the pedestrians, the damned army just the same, marching right across the square, right up to this café, to my table, and stare down at me as if she had walked the Mediterranean knowing

where I was all the time. But it won't work again. She wouldn't have thought that I could catch up to her laughing crime, that I'd still be the same rhyming idiot I always was. And she'd be old, older than I, lined and wrinkled, leaning, tucked in, shaking just a bit in the limbs, aching just a bit in the joints, showing patches and patterns of incorrect color, purples on the legs, brown maculae on the arms, swirls and masses on the face beneath the surgery and appliances. Then what would I do? I would buy her a drink and introduce her to everyone I know. That would destroy her surely enough, speedily enough, satisfyingly enough, permanently enough. Oh, the hell with indifference. I really can't maintain it.” Ernst laughed again and hoped some patrician in the Jaish's audience would turn around, bored by the mock military show, and ask Ernst what amused him. No one did. Ernst sat in glum silence and drank.

He had been in the Fée Blanche all morning and no one, not even the most casual early strollers, had paused to wish him a good day. Should he move on? Gather “material” in another café? Have a sordid experience in a disorderly house, get beaten up by a jealous *gavroche?*

“So, Sidi Weinraub! You sit out under all skies, eh?”

Ernst started, blinking and rapidly trying to recover his tattered image. “Yes, Ieneth, you must if you want to be a poet. What is climate, to interfere with the creative process?”

The girl was young, perhaps not as old as seventeen. She was one of the city's very poor, gaunt with years of hunger and dressed in foul old clothes. But she was not a slave—she would have looked better if she had been. She earned a trivial

living as a knife sharpener. Behind her she pulled a two-wheeled cart, dilapidated and peeling, filled with tools and pieces of equipment. “How does it go?” she asked.

“Badly,” admitted Ernst, smiling sadly and pulling a soggy bit of scrap paper from his pocket. “My poem of yesterday lies still unfinished.”

The girl laughed. *"Chi ama assai parla poco,"* she said. “‘He who loves much says little.’ You spend too much time chasing the pretty ones, no? You do not fool me, yaa Sidi, sitting there with your solemn long face. Your poem will have to be finished while you catch your breath, and then off after another of my city's sweet daughters.”

“You've seen right through me, Ieneth,” said Ernst with a tired shrug. “You're right, of course. One can't spend one's entire life chasing the Muse. Wooing the Muse, I mean. If you chase the Muse, you gain nothing. Wooing becomes a chief business. It's like anything else—you get better with practice.” He smiled, though he was dreadfully weary of the conversation already. The necessity of keeping up the pretense of sexual metaphor annoyed him.

“You are lucky, in a way,” said the girl. “Pity the poor butcher. What has he in his daily employment to aid him in the wooing? You must understand your advantage.”

“Is there a Muse of Butchery?” asked Ernst with a solemn expression.

“You are very clever, yaa Sidi. I meant, of course, in the wooing of a pretty girl. Were a butcher to approach me, a blood sausage in his hands, I would only laugh. That is not technique, yaa Sidi. That is uninspired. But these poems of

yours are the product, as you say, of one kind of wooing, and moreover the weaponry of another sort."

"So poems still work their magic?" asked Ernst, wondering if this meeting were, after all, better than simple boredom.

"For some young girls, I suppose. Do you favor many young girls with them?"

A sudden cry from the crowd on the sidewalk prevented Ernst's reply. He shook his head in disgust. Ieneth interpreted his expression correctly, looking over her shoulder for a few seconds. She turned back to him, leaning on the railing near his table. He, of course, could not invite her to join him. There were only two classes of people in the city, besides the slaves: the wealthy and those like Ieneth. She was forbidden by custom to intrude on her betters, and Ernst was certainly not the crusading sort to sweep aside the laws of delicacy. Anyway, he thought, her people had their own dives, and he surely wouldn't be made welcome in them.

"Ah, I see you disapprove of the Jaish," said Ieneth. "At least your expression shows contempt, and its object must be either our army or myself."

"No, no, don't worry, I have nothing but affection for you," said Ernst. He was amazed by his facile speech; generally he would have been reduced to unpleasant sarcasm long before this. In point of fact, he felt even less than mere affection for the girl. He felt only recognition; he knew her as another resident of the city, with little to recommend her in any way. He didn't even feel lust for her. He rather wished that she'd go away.

“Then it's the Jaish. That's a shame, really. There are several very nice gentlemen involved with it.” She smiled broadly. Ernst felt certain that she would wink, slowly. She did.

Ernst smiled briefly in return. “I'm sure there are,” he said. “It's just that I'm not one of them, and I have no interest at all in making the acquaintance of any, and I wish they'd stop spoiling my afternoons with their juvenile tin-soldiery.”

“You should see the larger story,” said Ieneth. “As long as they spend their time marching and carrying broom rifles, you will have no competition for the company of their mothers and daughters.”

“You mistake me,” said Ernst, “though you flatter me unduly. Surely it is hopeless for such a one as I, with such, ah, cosmopolitan tastes.”

“I would not agree,” she whispered. Ernst became aware that he had been staring at her. She reached across the railing and touched him confidentially on the shoulder. The motion exposed her wonderful breasts completely.

Ernst took a deep breath, forcing himself to look into her eyes. “Do you know what I mean then?”

“Certainly,” she said, with an amused smile. She indicated her little wagon. “I know that sometimes men want their scissors sharpened, and sometimes their appetites. And anyone may have a lucrative avocation, no?”

“When I was young, there was an old man who ground scissors and sharpened knives. He had a cart very much like your own.”

“There, you see? I am of the acquaintance of a—what shall I say?—an organ grinder.”

“I don't understand.”

Ieneth shook her head, laughing at his obtuseness. She motioned for him to come closer. He slid his chair nearer to the railing. She touched his arm at the elbow, trailing her fingers down his sleeve, across his hip, and, most lightly of all, over the bunched material at his crotch. “I will meet you here in an hour?” she asked softly.

Ernst's throat was suddenly dry. “I will be here,” he said.

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“A poem,” thought Ernst. “I need a poem. Nothing impresses the uneducated mind quite like rhymes. But it must be the right sort, or it will bring nothing but ruin and humiliation. How the women used to laugh at my romantic verses! How dismayed I was, left alone on the darkened balcony, holding the flimsy product of my innocent wit. The sonnet on the arch of her brow. Good God, how could I have done it? I wish I could return, go back to those iron moments, stand behind a curtain and listen to myself. I wonder if I would be amused. I cannot understand why those brainless princesses so easily dismissed me; they couldn't have been so plagued with clowns. I ought to have been kept as a refreshing antidote to dawning maturity.”

He took out a pen and began to compose on the back of a soiled napkin. The atmosphere of the Fée Blanche was not the best for the generation of poetry, he realized. But he also understood that the unknown recipient of his craft would be more awed by the simple fact of the poem than by any

singular verbal charm. Surely no friend of Ieneth's could be sophisticated enough to appreciate anything but the grossest of street chants. In that case, all that was required was a quick collection of lines, without attention to musical values, arranged visually in a recognizably poetic way. The ink from the fountain pen blotted on the napkin, spreading rapidly and obscuring each letter, obliterating all sense and intention. Ernst cursed and crushed the paper into a ball, tossing it to the floor.

“My life would have been greatly different, Eugenie, if this had happened while I loved you. If I had only known enough to keep my mouth closed, to express myself only in abstract looks and gestures, so that it all might be disowned quickly as worldly nonsense. Wisdom does not necessarily come with age, only silence. And that is the greatest treasure of all.” He returned his pen to his pocket and called for M. Gargotier.

In the time it took for Ernst to drink two more bowls of bingara, the parade had ended. The crowd broke up, shouting new slogans which Ernst could not understand. The other patrons finished their drinks and departed, and the café was again empty except for its single poet. The sun had marked noon and now, hotter still, moved down the sky just enough to hurt his eyes as he looked westward, across the street.

“West,” thought Ernst, rocking restlessly in his chair. “What absurd, empty thoughts does that bring to mind, to help pass this hour? One day after another. It gets to be so tedious. I should begin walking through this blighted city, through the wealthy sections clustered near this quarter, through the more populated tradesmen's quarter, through the

filthy paupers' streets, past the noisy, dangerous rim of utter human refuse just within the walls, beyond the city's gates and across the dunes. Then what? Then I would die in about twelve hours, burned by the noonday sun, chiseled by the windborne sand, frozen by Barid, the cold wind of night. Westward, toward the Atlantic, toward England and her debauched civilities. West, the direction of death, decay, finality, and poetic conclusions. Into Avalon. Perhaps if it weren't for Ieneth and her sly, snickering hints, I would wander off that way. Pack a picnic lunch, perhaps, and bake myself dead upon a hill of sand. I always dreamed of a heroic death, defending Eugenie's intermittent honor, or fighting for Marie's bemused favor. Gasping, I would lie upon the specified lap and the lady would weep. Her tears would restore my fleeing mortality. Then I would smile, as would Eugenie or Marie in her proper turn, amazed and joyful. A signal that would be for me to begin the dream anew. Another way of getting through the hours, though much too unfulfilling for my present needs."

Ernst watched the clock on the hotel impatiently. The pedestrians moved by in their aimless courses, and each ticked off a few seconds on the yellow clock face. Yet the traffic was too sluggish to move the clock's iron hands quickly enough to suit Ernst, and thus could not beguile his furious anticipation.

It was while Ernst was silent in thought, staring at the damned clock, lost in his own strange expectant horror, that someone moved a chair to his table and joined him. He looked up, startled. The intruder was a tall, thin Polish man

named Czerny, a wealthy man who had come to the city a political refugee and who had made his fortune by teaching the city's hungry inhabitants to require the luxuries of Europe. Ernst had been introduced to Czerny a few times, but neither had been overly taken with the other's company.

“Good afternoon, M. Weintraub,” said Czerny. “Although there are a number of tables free, I have preferred to join you. I hope you will forgive my rather forward behavior.”

Ernst waved away the apology, more curious about Czerny's motives. He did realize that the blond man was the founder of the Jaish, the Citizens’ Army, and its principal financial support. His appearance after its show was not mere happenstance.

“I'd like to speak with you for a moment, if I may, M. Weintraub,” said Czerny.

“That's Weinraub, without the *t.* Certainly. Would you care for a drink?”

Czerny smiled his commercial smile. “No, thank you. This new religion of mine doesn't allow it. But look, M. Weinraub, I wonder if you realize the service you could render, in the time you spend idly here?”

Ernst was slightly annoyed. Surely Czerny wanted something, and his patronizing attitude wasn't going to help him get it. “What service do you mean, Monsieur Czerny? I doubt if I have anything that you might envy.”

“It is your talent. As you know, the Jaish is still small in numbers, even smaller in resources. I have been doing my limited best to help, but for our purposes even all my savings would be too little.”

Ernst finished half a bowl of the liquor in one swallow. He raised his hand for M. Gargotier. “What are these purposes?” he asked.

“Why, liberty for all, of course,” said Czerny, disappointed that Ernst had need to ask. “We distribute leaflets at all parades. Surely you've seen them.”

“Yes,” said Ernst, “but not read them.”

“Ah, well. Perhaps if they were composed in a better style....”

“Might I ask who has the task now?”

“A young man of great promise,” said Czerny proudly. “Sandor Courane.”

Ernst leaned back, lifting the front two legs of his chair off the pavement. “M. Czerny,” he said slowly, “that is very interesting, but I must embarrassedly admit that you have chosen an inopportune time for this interview. This afternoon I have something of an assignation, and so....” Ernst settled his chair, smiled drunkenly, and shrugged.

Czerny looked angry. He rose from his seat. “M. Weintraub, I will return later. I believe it is time that you considered such matters as duty and honor. Perhaps this evening you will be more of a mind to discuss this. Good day, and have a gratifying ... assignation.”

“Weinraub,” whispered Ernst, as Czerny strode away. “Without the *t."*

Czerny walked swiftly along the eastern edge of the square until he came to a parked limousine. It was one of the very few automobiles in the city; Ernst did not doubt that it was Czerny's private car. The driver got out and handed Czerny a

gray uniform coat, taking the wealthy man's more expensively cut jacket in return. “Ah,” thought Ernst, “at least I rated a change of clothing. We shall see whether or not the same thing happens this evening. It is sad that so frequently the scheme of great men may be deciphered by such paltry tokens.” Czerny put on his uniform coat and waited until the driver opened the rear door of the limousine for him. Then he entered; the driver walked around the car and disappeared inside. In a moment the vehicle moved slowly away from the curb, its siren crying shrilly and the pennants of the Jaish whipping in the breeze. The car drove down the length of the square, turned along the north side, and went on for a short distance. Then it stopped again, and Czerny spoke with two figures on the sidewalk. From that distance Ernst could not recognize them.

“If I were you, Czerny,” he thought, “I would not involve myself too deeply with the people of this city. There is always the danger that you may find people to like or, most deadly of all, to love. What should you do, having fallen in love with some rare woman, and then find yourself betrayed? Ah, I anticipate your outraged reply. We are both too far along to have that happen to us again. Perhaps you are right, though one can never be too careful. But what if you are not betrayed, eh, Czerny? What then? No final demarcations, however painful. You have forgotten that. Nothing to chop it off before weariness sets in. Lifetimes go by that way, Czerny. Boredom and angry frustration are only the first symptoms. No mistresses for you, no other men's wives, no playful daughters of police commissioners. We find that we

need them, sooner or later. And that is the first of the body's spasms of death. Years, years, years in this city, with the same faces, yours and hers. Years, years, years. Do not stop for them, Czerny. Tend to your army."

Czerny's car drove away, and after a few moments Ernst saw that one of the two people walking toward him was the girl, Ieneth, without her knife-sharpening equipment. With her was another girl, taller and darker. Ernst rose from his chair by the railing, and the two girls joined him at his table. M. Gargotier, evidently expecting that Ernst would soon depart, did not come to take an order. He stood glaring in the bar's doorway, obviously resenting the presence of the two lower-class women. Ernst made a flamboyant gesture to summon the proprietor. He switched his drinking to absinthe, and the girls ordered wine.

"What is her name, Ieneth?" he asked, staring at the new girl. She looked shyly at the table.

"She is called Ua. In her language it means 'flower.' She does not understand our speech."

"How charming she is, and how lovely her name. Truly a flower. Convey to her my sincerest compliments." Ieneth did so. "What language is that?" asked Ernst.

"It is a strange dialect, spoken by the black people beyond the desert and the mountains. It is called Swahili."

"Black people? How interesting. I have only heard stories. They actually exist?"

"Yes, yaa Sidi," said Ieneth.

"And how did she learn the tongue? And you, also, for that matter?"

Ieneth closed her eyes, fluttering her painted lashes, and smiled.

Ernst turned to Ua. “What is this called?” he said, pointing to her foot. Ieneth translated, and Ua replied.

"Mguu," she said.

“And this?” said Ernst, pointing now to her ankle.

"Kifundo cha mguu."

“What is this?”

"Jicho." Eye.

“How do you say ‘mouth'?”

"Kinywa."

Ernst sipped his drink nervously, although he labored to seem casual and urbane. “This?” he asked.

"Mkono." Arm.

“This?” Ernst's fingers lingered on her breast, feeling the rough material of the brassiere beneath the cotton blouse.

Ua blushed. *"Ziwa,"* she whispered.

“She is indeed very lovely,” Ernst said.

“And worthy of reward for her, ah, agent?” asked Ieneth.

“Certainly,” said Ernst absently, as he moved his hand down past Ua's stomach, stopping at the juncture of her thighs. “Now, my love, what could this be?”

Ua said nothing, staring at the table. She blushed fiercely while she played with the base of her wineglass.

“Ask her what the word for this is,” he said. Ieneth did so.

"Mkunga," Ua said at last, removing Ernst's hand.

Ieneth laughed shrilly, clapping her hands. Tears ran down her cheeks as she rose from her seat. “Ah, your cosmopolitan tastes!” she said.

“What is so amusing?” asked Ernst.

"Mkunga!" said Ieneth. *"Mkunga* is the word for ‘eel.’ Oh, enjoy your hour together, yaa Sidi. You and she will have much to discuss!” And she went out of the café, laughing as she walked away from Ernst's disconcerted and savage glare.

* * * *

It was late afternoon, and already the sun was melting behind the hotel across the street. Ernst sipped wine now, for he appreciated the effect of the slanting sun's rays on the rich, dark liquid. He had discovered this by accident when he had first come to the city, strolling along the walled quarter's single, huge avenue. He had seen the red shimmers reflecting on the impassive face of a shopworn working girl. How much better, he had thought then, how much better it would be to have that singularly fortunate play of light grace a true poet.

“It may be a bit naive of me, nonetheless,” he thought. “After all, if these loiterers of the city lack the verbal sophistication to appreciate the verses themselves, how can I expect them to have any greater regard for the wielder of the pen? But I must defeat that argument by ignoring it if by no more rigorous means. I cannot allow myself to be pulled down into the intellectual miasma of these Afric prisoners. The sun must burn out all wonder and delight at an early age; it is only we unlucky travelers who can deplore their sand-worn ignorance.” He took some more of the wine and held it in his mouth until he began to feel foolish. He swallowed it and pushed the glass away.

While Ernst sat there, sucking the taste of the wine from his teeth, a young boy walked by on the sidewalk. He was

small, nearly hairless, and quite obviously had strayed from the neighborhood of his parents. He stopped when he saw Ernst. “Are you not Weinraub the wanderer, from Europe?”

“I am,” said Ernst. “I have been, for some time. Has my fame then spread as far as your unwashed ears?”

“I have heard much about you, yaa Sidi,” said the boy. “I never believed that I'd really see you.”

“And are your dreams confirmed?”

“Not yet,” said the boy, shaking his head. “Do you really kiss other men?”

Ernst spat at the boy, and the dark boy laughed, dancing into the street, hopping back on the sidewalk. “Come here,” said Ernst, “and I'll wrap this chair around your skinny neck.”

“It was only a joke, yaa Sidi,” said the boy, not the least afraid.

“A joke. How old are you?”

“I am nine, yaa Sidi.”

“Then you should know the danger of mocking your betters. I have the power to do you great harm: I may draw a picture of you. I may touch you with my left hand. Your mother will beat you dead when she hears.”

“You are wrong,” said the boy, laughing again. “You are a Nazarene, yes, or a Jew. But I am no rug-squatter. Touch me with your left hand, yaa Sidi, and I will gnaw it off. Do you wish me to fetch your supper? I will not charge you this time.”

“I tend to doubt your offer. In any event, I have a regular boy who brings my food. What is your name, you young criminal?”

“I am Kebap,” said the boy. “It means ‘roast beef’ in the language of Turkey.”

“I can see why,” said Ernst dryly. “You will have to work hard to take the place of my regular boy, if you want this job.”

“I am sorry,” said Kebap. “I have no wish to perform that kind of service.” Then he ran away, shouting insults over his shoulder.

Ernst stared after him, his fists clenching. “Ieneth will pay for her joke,” he thought. “If only I could find a vulnerable spot in these people. Without possessions, inured against discomfort, hoping for nothing, they are difficult indeed to punish. Perhaps that is the reason I have stayed in this capital of lice so long. No other reason comes quickly to mind.”

He sipped his wine and stared at the smudged handwriting on a scrap of paper: an *ebauche* of his trilogy of novels. He had done the rough outline so long ago that he had forgotten its point. But he was certain that the reflected light from the wineglass shifted to good effect on the yellowed paper, too.

“This was the trilogy that was going to make my reputation,” thought Ernst sadly. “I remember how I had planned to dedicate the first volume to Eugenie, the second to Marie, and the third... ? I can't remember, after all. It has been a long time. I cannot even recall the characters. Ah, yes, here. I had stolen that outstanding, virtuous fool, d'Aubont, put a chevalier's outfit on him, taken off his mustache, and renamed him Gerhardt Friedlos. How the fluttering feminine hearts of Germany, Carbba, France, and

England were to embrace him, if hearts are capable of such a dexterous feat. Friedlos. Now I remember. And there is no further mystery as to why I can't recall the plot. It was nothing. Mere slashings of rapier, mere wooings of maid, mere tauntings of coward. One thousand pages of adolescent dreams, just to restore my manly figure. Beyond the dedications, did I not also represent Eugenie and Marie with fictional characters? I cannot read this scrawl. Ah, yes. Eugenie is disguised in volume one as the red-haired Marchioness Fajra. She is consumed in a horrible holocaust as her outraged tenants wreak their just revenge. Friedlos observes the distressing scene with mixed emotions. In volume two, he consoles himself with the contrasting charms of Marie, known in my novel as the maid Malvarma, who pitiably froze to death on the great plain of Breulandy rather than acknowledge her secret love. Friedlos comes upon her blue and twisted corpse and grieves. I am happy, I am very, very happy that I never wrote that trash."

Ernst took his short, fat pencil and wrote in the narrow spaces left to him on the scrap. *My scalp itches,* he wrote. *When I scratch it, I break open half-healed sores. I have a headache; behind my right eye my brain throbs. My ears are blocked, and the canals are swollen deep inside, as though large pegs had been hammered into them. My nostrils drip constantly, and the front of my face feels as if it has been filled with sand. My gums bleed, and my teeth communicate with stabbing pains. My tongue is still scalded from the morning tea. My throat is dry and sore.* This catalogue continued down the margins of the paper, and down his body,

to end with, *My arches cramp up at regular intervals, whenever I think about them. My toes are cut and painful on the bottom and fungused and itching between. And now I believe that it pains me to piss. But this last symptom bears watching; it is not confirmed.*

On a napkin ringed with stains of chocolate and coffee, Ernst began another list, parallel to the first. *The very continents shudder with the fever chills of war. Europe, my first home so far away, cringes in the dark sickroom between the ocean and the Urals. Asia teeters into the false adolescence of senility, and is the more dangerous for it. Breulandy rises in the north and east, and who can tell of her goals and motives? South of the city, Africa slumbers, hungry and sterile, under the cauterizing sun. The Americas? Far too large to control, too broken to aid us now.*

Oh, and whom do I mean by "us"? The world is fractured so that we no longer know anything but self. *My self finds symptoms everywhere, a political hypochondriac in exile. Perhaps if I were still in the numbing academic life of old, I would see none of this;* l'ozio é la sepoltura dell'uomo vivo — *"inactivity is the tomb of the vital man." I have time to make lists now.*

Of course he found sad significance in the two inventories when he completed them. He shook his head sorrowfully and stared meditatively at his wineglass, but no one noticed.

Ernst folded the paper with his trilogy synopsis and the first list, and returned it to his pocket. He skimmed through the second list again, though. "'I have time to make lists now,'" he read. "What does that mean? Who am I trying to

distress?” Just beyond the railing, on the sidewalk bordering the Fée Blanche, sat Kebap, the little boy named “roast beef.” The boy was grinning.

“Allo, Sidi Weinraub. I'm back. I've come to haunt you, you know.”

“You're doing a fine job,” said Ernst. “Do you know anything of poetry?”

“I know poetry,” said the boy. “I know what Sidi Courane writes. That's poetry. That's what everyone says. Do you write poetry, too?”

“I did,” said Ernst, “in my youth.”

“It is lucky, then, that I cannot read,” said Kebap. He grinned again at Ernst, evilly. “I see that your usual boy hasn't yet brought your supper.”

“Why are you called ‘roast beef'? I doubt if you've ever seen any in your whole life.”

“One of my uncles called me that,” said the boy. “He said that's what I looked like when I was born.”

“Do you have a lot of uncles?” asked Ernst maliciously.

Kebap's eyes opened very wide. “Oh, certainly,” he said solemnly. “Sometimes a new one every day. My mother is very beautiful, very wise, and often very silent. Would you like to meet her, yaa Sidi?”

“Not today, you little thief.” Ernst held up the annotated napkin. “I'm very busy.”

Kebap snorted. “Certainly, yaa Sidi. Of course.” Then he ran away.

“Good evening, M. Weinraub.” It was Czerny, still dressed in his gray uniform of the Citizens’ Army. Ernst saw that the

tunic was without decoration or indication of rank. Perhaps the Jaish was still so small that the men had only a handful of officers in the whole organization. And here was the man again, to persuade him that the whole situation was not foolish, after all.

“You are a man of your word, M. Czerny,” said Ernst. “Will you join me again? Have a drink?”

“No, I'll pass that up,” said Czerny as he seated himself at Ernst's table. “I trust your appointment concluded satisfactorily?”

Ernst grunted. It became evident that he would say nothing more. Czerny cursed softly. “Look,” he said, “I don't want to have to go through all these stupid contests of yours. This isn't amusing any longer. You're going to have to choose sides. If you're not with us, you're against us.”

Perhaps it was the heat of the afternoon, or the amount of liquor he had already consumed, or the annoying events of the day, but Ernst refused to allow Czerny the chance to make a single argumentative point. It was not often that someone came to Ernst with a request, and he was certainly going to enjoy it fully. That in doing so he would have to disappoint and even antagonize Czerny made little difference. If Czerny wanted Ernst's help badly enough, Czerny would return. And if Czerny didn't mean what he said, then, well, he deserved everything Ernst could devise.

Ernst was amused by the man's grave talk. He couldn't understand the urgency at all. “Who are you going to fight? I don't see it. Maybe if you paid them enough, you could hire some nomad tribe. But it's still a good distance to ask them to

ride just for a battle. Or maybe if you split your tiny bunch in half, one part could start a civil uprising and the other part could put it down. But I really just want to watch."

"We will get nowhere, Monsieur," said Czerny in a tight, controlled voice, "until you cease treating my army as a toy and our cause as a tilting at windmills."

"My good Czerny," said Ernst slowly, "you reveal quite a lot when you say 'my army.' You reveal yourself, if you understand me. You divulge yourself. You display yourself, do you see? You expose yourself. There, I see that I must say it plainly. You expose yourself, but in this locality, at this time, that seems to be a most commendable form of expression."

"Damn it, you *are* an idiot! I'm not asking you to be a dirty *goundi.* We can get plenty of infantry just by putting up notices. If we could afford to pay them. If we could afford the notices. But intelligence is at a premium in this city. We need you and the others like you. I promise you, you'll never have to carry a rifle or face one. But you have to be man enough to cast your lot with us, or we'll sweep you aside with the rest of the old ways."

"Rhetoric, Czerny, rhetoric!" said Ernst, giggling. "I came here to get away from all that. Leave me alone, will you? I sit here and get drunk. I don't mess with *you* while you play soldiers. I'm not any more useful than you, but at least I don't bother anybody." He looked around, hoping that some diversion might arise to rescue him. There was nothing. Perhaps he might cause enough of a row with Czerny that M. Gargotier would ask that they both leave; the danger with that plan was that Czerny would be sure to invite Ernst

somewhere, some place where Czerny and his Jaish held an edge. Well, then, something simpler was necessary. Perhaps the young nuisance would return. With any luck, the boy would change his target; Czerny would be in no mood to ignore Kebap. Still, that didn't seem likely either.

Czerny banged the little table with his fist. The table's metal top flipped off its three legs, dumping Ernst's wineglass to the ground. Czerny didn't appear to notice. He talked on through the crashing of the table and the breaking of the glass. “Useful? You want to talk about useful? Have you ever read anything about politics? Economics? You know what keeps a culture alive?”

“Yes,” said Ernst sullenly, while M. Gargotier cleaned up the mess. “People not bothering other people.”

“A good war every generation or so,” said Czerny, ignoring Ernst, seeing him now as an enemy. “We've got authorities. Machiavelli—he said that the first cause of unrest in a nation is idleness and peace. That's all this city has ever known, and you can see the results out there.” Czerny waved in the direction of the street. All that Ernst could see was a young woman in a short leather skirt, naked from the waist up. She met his glance and waved.

“Ah,” thought Ernst, “it has been a long time since I've been able just to sit and watch those lovely girls. It seems that one should have thought to do that, without fear of interruption. But there is always war, disease, jealousies, business, and hunger. I have asked for little in my life. Indeed, all that I would have now is a quiet place in the Faubourg St. Honoré to watch the Parisian girls. Instead, here

I am. Observing that single distant brown woman is infinitely preferable to listening to Czerny's ranting.” Ernst smiled at the half-naked woman; she turned away for a moment. A small boy was standing behind her. The woman whispered in the boy's ear. Ernst recognized the boy, of course; the boy laughed. It would not be long before Kebap learned that even industry and enterprise would avail him nothing in that damned city.

“You cannot afford silence,” Czerny was saying loudly.

“I hadn't realized your concerns had gotten this involved,” said Ernst. “I really thought you fellows were just showing off, but it's a great deal worse than that. Well, I won't disturb you, if that's what you're worried about. I still don't see why you're so anxious to have me. I haven't held a rifle since my partridge-shooting days in Madrid.”

“You aren't even listening,” said Czerny, his voice shrill with outrage.

“No, I guess I'm not. What is it again that you want?”

“We want you to join us.”

Ernst smiled sadly, looking down at his new glass of wine. “I'm sorry,” he said, “I don't make decisions anymore.”

Czerny stood up. He kicked a shard of the broken wineglass into the street. “You're wrong,” he said. “You've just made a very bad one.”

* * * *

Dusk settled in on the shoulders of the city. The poor of the city happily gave up their occupations and hurried to their homes to join their families for the evening meal. Along the city's avenues, merchants closed their shops and locked gated

shutters over display windows. The wealthy few considered the entertainments and casually made their choices. The noises of the busy day stilled, until Ernst could hear the bugle calls and shouted orders of the Jaish as it drilled beyond the city's walled quarter. The day's liquor had had its desired effect on him, and so the sounds failed to remind him of Czerny's anger.

“There seem to be no birds in this city,” thought Ernst. “That is reasonable. For them to abide in this vat of cultural horrors, they must first fly over that great, empty, dead world beyond the gates. Sand. What a perfect device to excise us from all hope of reentering the world. We are shut up like lepers, in a colony across the sand, and easily, gratefully forgotten. The process of forgetting is readily learned. First we are forgotten by our families, our nations. Then we are forgotten by those we've hated, our enemies in contiguous countries. At last, when we have alighted here in our final condition, we forget ourselves. Children must be hired to walk the streets of this city, reminding us of our names and our natures, otherwise we should disappear entirely, as we have dreamed and prayed for so many years. But that, after all, is not the reason we have been sent here. We have come not to die, but to exist painfully apart. Death would be a cleansing for us, a discourtesy to our former friends.”

Ernst looked around him. The twilight made pleasant shadows on the stone-paved street surrounding the square. Some of the shadows moved. “Hey!” shouted Ernst experimentally. The shadows burst, flew up, flapped away in many directions. “Pigeons,” thought Ernst. “I forgot pigeons.

But that hardly ruins my thesis. Pigeons are a necessity in a city. They were sitting here, asleep on the sand, when the first parched exiles arrived on the spot. The abundantly foolish idea of building a town must have occurred to those unwanted knaves only after seeing the pigeons."

The city was certainly one of immigrants, Ernst thought. As he had escaped from a crazy Europe, so had Czerny. So had Sandor Courane. Ieneth and her false flower, Ua, had fled from some mysterious wild empire. Could it be that every person sheltered within the city's granite walls had been born elsewhere? No, of course not; there must be a large native population. These must be the ones most stirred by the absurd wrath of the Jaish, for who else had enough interest? Ernst lived in the city only because he had nowhere else to go. He had stopped briefly in Gelnhausen and the nearby village of Frachtdorf. From Bremen he had sailed to the Scandinavian settlements that bordered the northern sea. He had resided for short times in England and France, but those nations' murderous nationalism made him run once more. Each time he settled down, it was in a less comfortable situation. Here on the very lip of Africa, the city was the final hope of those who truly needed to hide.

Ernst had often tried to write poems or short, terse essays about the city, but each time he had given up in failure. He couldn't seem to capture the true emotions he experienced, feelings different in subtle, unpoetic ways from the vaguely similar emotions he had known while living in Europe. The poems could not reflect the pervasive sense of isolation, of eternal uncleanness, of a soul-deep loss of personality; these

things descended upon a European, only hours after arriving at the dune-guarded gates of the city.

He had early on made the mistake of showing some of these frustrated scribblings to M. Gargotier. The proprietor had read them politely, muttering the words under his breath as he traced his progress down the page with a grimy finger. When he finished, he had handed the paper back to Ernst without a word, and stood silently, evidently uncomfortable but unwilling to make a final judgment. Soon Ernst stopped asking M. Gargotier to read them, and both men seemed happier for it.

A small voice whispered behind Ernst. It was Kebap, the young fraud. “I know of another city like this one,” said the boy. “It was in Armenia. Of course, there wasn't sand all around to keep us in. This town was imprisoned by its own lack of identity. There were perhaps five thousand Turks living there, of which several may have been my true father. Indeed, ‘several’ hardly does justice to the whiteness of my mother's eyes, or the perfection of her skin, at least in those days of a decade past. But I must be modest in all accounts, so that later claims may be made with greater hope of acceptance.”

“You are wise beyond your years, Kebap,” said Ernst sadly.

“That is not difficult at the age of nine,” said the boy. “Nevertheless, I continue. There were perhaps half again as many Armenians, and some Greeks. Persians passed through often, bearing objects which they could not sell. These men rode on the backs of bad-smelling horses and camels of a

worse reputation, and we always deviled them continuously until they departed again.

“The houses in this Armenian wonder had flat roofs above stone walls, and it was the custom to grow grass upon the roofs. Naturally, with the best fodder in the neighborhood up there, our sheep and calves grazed above our heads. When we stood on the hillsides not far from this town, the houses were invisible against the surrounding plain. I forget what the name of this city was. One day my mother and several of my uncles took me on a long walk; we packed a lunch of cold meat and water, for the Persians had arrived early that morning and we wanted to escape their presence. We climbed far into the hills so that it was almost time for evening wagib when we stopped. I was asleep, carried by an uncle, on the return journey. I was told the next day that our city could not be found. Every time a herd of sheep was investigated, it was discovered to be firmly on the ground, not upon our familiar rooftops. We wandered the hills and the nearby country for weeks, searching for that disguised city. At last, we arrived here.”

“Your strategy was shrewd, Kebap,” said Ernst. “That is very difficult to believe.”

“It is fully documented.”

“I shall have to examine your records someday.” Ernst turned to see the boy, but there was no one there. “He is a quick monster indeed,” thought Ernst.

Night crept westward, sweeping more of Africa under her concealing shroud. Ernst sat at his table with his bits of paper and his little supper of cheese and apples. Around him the

city prepared for night but he didn't care. Customarily each evening after dinner he declared the day productive; arriving at this point, he ordered Scotch whisky and water.

“It is time to relax now,” thought Ernst. “It is time to pack away for the day the tedious, essential hatreds and hopes. It is time to sit back and bring out my informal thoughts. How I am growing to despise these memories even more than I despise their subjects. The very issue of my thoughts is soiled by this city, so that had I known the dearest saint of Rome in my youth, I could not think on her now with anything but scorn and malice. I am not interested by my musings, and their temper is becoming too acid for my dispassionate self.

“Eugenie, you seem to be suffering the most, though even now, at this unofficial time of day, I can still summon up nothing but a tepid dislike. You must hold a special position of disfavor in my heart; that is your fate, grow used to it. Marie, you look lovely tonight. A constellation of false memories enriches you. If I do not look at them too closely, I can successfully pretend a few moments of joy. Permit me this indulgence, Marie. I will do the same for you, if ever I'm given the opportunity.”

The people on the sidewalk were rushing by now, their faces marked by an intensity of purpose that was never apparent during the day's business hours. Despite Ernst's glum appraisal, the city held many sorts of wonderful things, nonetheless, things rare in Europe and prized by the slaves and the poor. For instance, there was a large colony of artists, and their pottery and sculpture had a certain reputation beyond the walls of the city, though not so great

that it attracted either merchants or collectors. Ernst was bored by clay pots, and he had little enough of his own art to offer in trade. At this time of day, the craftsmen of the city would be heading for the bars with their day's earnings, eager for the less tangible beauties of wine and poetry.

The citizens of this place of oblivion chased amusement relentlessly, as a plague victim might follow a hapless doctor in hope of miracles. At night, with only the cold cosmetic of moonlight, the city slipped on a shabby mask of gaiety, but no one criticized. Ernst smiled to himself, nodded to the grim-faced celebrants, observed in a clinical fashion the desperate pursuit of diversion.

It was a dangerous thing to pray that a lasting release might be had from the day's troubles. Each day was so like the previous day that the pleasures pilfered during the night cheapened with the sun's rising. It was as hopeless a thing as the Bridge of the Mad Berber, who cried for many years to the people of the city that a bridge be built—a gigantic bridge, the world's largest suspension bridge, an engineering marvel to catch the imagination of all civilized peoples. It would rise from the north gate of the city, span the immense waste of sand, cross the distant range of mountains, the narrow strip of coastal plain, the rolling leagues of the sea, to end at last, abruptly, curiously, on the island of Malta. It would be a hardship, indeed, for anyone traveling along that bridge. The Mad Berber chose Malta as the terminus evidently only because that island had been the birthplace of his mother.

Many of the people hurried along the street to the south, toward the Chinese quarter, where another eccentric resident

of the city, a weary, stranded Breulen duke, had long ago built a fantastic parody of various memorable sections of Singapore. Like many things in the city, this dollop of Asia seemed romantic at first, but soon distressed the observer with a richness of unwholesome detail. The Breulen nobleman had loved Singapore, the story went, or, at least according to other accounts, had been fascinated by written descriptions and never actually visited the island at all. In any event, he, like so many others of his class, at last took up residence in the lonely African city. His project to reproduce the more spectacular attributes of Singapore was no less insane than the Mad Berber's bridge, but in this case the duke had the wealth to accomplish his goal.

That had been many years ago, and now the false Singapore wore the decaying garments that clothed all the rest of the city. The imitation Tiger Balm Gardens were uncared for—a tangle of brittle growths perverted from their natural forms by the arid climate, the heat, and the genius of the city itself. There was a tumbling-down replica of the Raffles Hotel, but there was no mystery there, merely the scorpions scuttling across the littered parquet. Street dining stalls after the Singapore fashion once dominated a narrow alley, which was now used as a public open-air toilet. The Breulen duke died during the construction of a likeness of Singapore's Happy World; he was to have been buried beneath the joget platform, but his corpse was lost and never found again.

Following the street to the north, the strollers would reach the city's quarter, where replicas of more familiar scenes from

other lands dug at their buried homesickness. Ernst could see the brightly colored strings of lights go on, shining through the gaps between trees and buildings, diffused by mist and distance.

A canal ran parallel to the avenue toward the northern gates of the city. On its west bank were restaurants, bars, and casinos. Women danced naked in all of them. Diamonds were sold by old men in tents, and every building had a few young whores in the front window. There were areas set aside for dozens of different sports: bocci, tennis, and miniature golf facilities were the most popular. The large marketplace was lit by torches. All goods available within the city were also on sale here, at higher prices: fine leather goods; lace; gold and silverware; expensive woods made into furniture, alone or in combination with steel or plastic; perfumes; silks; rugs; every sort of luxury.

Floodlights went on, illuminating models of the ruins of Rome Staeca and Athens. The replica of the Schloss Brühl opened its gates, complete with exact representations of the ceiling paintings of Nicholas Stüber, and the furnishings in white and gold of the dining room, music room, and state bedroom upstairs. Other European landmarks were reproduced in bewildering combinations, but Ernst had only heard stories. He had never seen any of this. He preferred rather to spend his evenings dedicated to serious drinking.

* * * *

“Allo again, Sidi Weinraub, man of mysterious desires,” whispered a thin voice.

“Allo to you, Kebap, youngest scoundrel, apprentice felon. My desires are not so hidden after all. It is only that you will not open your eyes to them. My most supreme desire, at this particular unpleasant moment, is to have you sunken to your lice-ridden ears in that vast ocean of sand.”

“That will happen to me, no doubt,” said the boy. “That is the sort of thing that occurs to people like me, who have chosen the life of the shadow, the way of the murmured delights. I shall probably pass a good portion of my life bound to creaking wooden racks; or with right wrist chained to left ankle I shall languish forgotten in damp cells beneath this municipal fantasy; or perhaps someone such as yourself will capture me on an aristocratic whim and compel me to violate my principles.”

Ernst laughed. “You are doubtless in error,” he said loudly, drunkenly. “You shall not be the violator of those principles. You will be the violatee.”

“Ah, yaa Sidi, I must take exception. One cannot make such forthright statements as that. One cannot anticipate the odd pleasures of the leisured class. You, yourself, are an example of that.”

“I was merely deceived,” said Ernst angrily.

“Of course, yaa Sidi.”

“And if you do not cease exaggerating the incident, I shall grab you by your scruffy neck and imprison you on a rooftop of grass, where you can munch your life away like the mythical sheep of your babyhood.”

Kebap sighed. “Were you then so impressed by my tale?”

“No, but it gave me some interesting glimpses of the shiny new cogwheels of your intellect.”

“Then I will tell you of another town,” said the young boy. “This place will wipe all memory of the Armenian village from your thoughts.”

“A not overly difficult feat.”

“There is a town in Nearer Hindoostan,” said Kebap in a low, monotonous voice, “which has only one remarkable feature. The area around the city is infested with wild beasts of all kinds. Tigers roam the plains, fearing neither animal rivals nor human guile. Huge beasts somewhat like elephants browse the lower branches of the slender dey trees. There are other curious things about that plain, but my story does not concern them other than to say they caused the citizens of the village to erect a large gray wall. This mud-brick barrier is supposed to be for protection. It does serve to keep out the beasts at night, of course. It also reminds the townspeople of the dangers beyond, and jails them in their city as surely as if the gates were permanently locked.”

“How curious,” said Ernst scornfully. “Do you know, I don't care at all.”

“The principal occupation of the people of this city, in light of their self-imposed imprisonment, is to build and change their town, to provide entertainment both in the labor and in the enjoyment thereafter. And the model they have chosen to follow is our city, here. It was the wall that inspired them. You must know that the mayor's office here receives a letter from this village perhaps eight times yearly, asking for instructions on how they may reproduce the newest

alterations in our city. I have seen their version, and it is so exact a rendering that it would give you the nervous ailment peculiar to white Europeans. You would lose all sense of reality and orientation. This café has been built, table by table, tile by tile, bottle by bottle. The very crack in the mirror inside has been reconstructed perfectly, attention having been paid to angularity, width, depth, and character. A man owns the café, from whom Monsieur Gargotier could not be differentiated, even by M. Gargotier himself. And, do you think, there is a dejected drunkard sitting at this table, many thousands of miles away, whose eyes have the same expression as yours, whose hands flutter just as yours, whose parts smell as foul as yours. What do you think he is doing?"

"He is wishing that you would go away."

"That is mildly put," said Kebap. "I wish I could know what you really thought to say."

"You may find out easily enough. Ask that solitary winesop in Nearer Hindoostan." Ernst had been observing a dimly lighted tower across the square. He turned to look at Kebap, to fix the teasing boy with a venomous stare, perhaps to frighten him away at last, but Kebap was not there. Ernst sighed; he would ask the proprietor to do something about the annoyance.

Every quarter hour a clock tower chimed more of the night away. Sitting alone in the Café de la Fée Blanche, he could hear the distant carnival noises: sirens, the flat clanging of cheap metal chimes, the music of small silver bells, shrill organ melodies, gunshots, voices singing, voices laughing. In the immediate area of the café, however, there were few

people about—only those who had exhausted their money or their curiosity and were returning home. Occasionally, the wind brought tenuous hints of strange smells and noises. Still, Ernst had no desire to discover what they might be. Over the years, his route to the city had been long, and these days he was tired.

"I have returned," said Kebap. He leaned casually over the iron rail of the café. Ernst regarded him with some boredom, realizing that this was the first time in quite a while that he had actually seen the boy, though their conversation had been growing increasingly bizarre for several hours.

"There is no such town in Nearer Hindoostan," said Ernst. "There is no such perfect imitation of this corrupted city. The Lord of Heaven would not allow two pits of damnation in one world."

"Of course not," said Kebap with a wink. "Wherever did you get the idea that there might be another?"

"From the pigeons, of course," said Ernst, greatly irritated. "The pigeons have to come from somewhere."

"Why?"

"Have you ever seen a baby pigeon?" asked Ernst. "I don't believe I ever have. I always wondered where the fledgling pigeons were. We see numbers of adult birds around every day; there must be a proportionate mass of immature young. It is a great mystery. And one never sees a dead or dying bird, unless it has been the victim of some accident, generally caused by cruel or careless human agency. I theorize that pigeons are immortal, and the actual carriers and

disseminators of all human knowledge. This town of yours in Hindoostan is the product of unimaginative pigeons."

"You ask dangerous questions, yaa Sidi," said Kebap, his expression fearful. "We had wrens in Armenia, I recall. There were many newly hatched chicks, chirping pleasantly before dusk. But here, concerning the pigeons, you must learn to keep silent."

"I believe I know who your mother might be. At least, if she is not, Eugenie would be proud to call you her son."

"My mother stands over there," said Kebap. "She has not clothed her breasts, as she should in the evening, only because she hopes to beguile you. She is a very energetic person, yaa Sidi, and even though the hour grows late, she still reserves a place in her heart for you."

Ernst shook his head. The liquor had made him sick. "No, I am sorry. I have ceased hunting after hearts. Indeed, I thought no one followed that fruitless sport any longer."

"Then there is my older sister. That is her, on the far side of the square, pretending that she is an armless beggar."

"No, you tactless procurer. You still have much to learn."

"I am sorry again," said Kebap with a cruel grin. "My own body will not be available for perhaps another three years. These are the days of my carefree childhood."

Ernst stood up and screamed at the boy. Kebap laughed and ran toward his mother.

There were few customers in the Fée Blanche after dark. Ernst did not mind. His nights were entrusted to solitude; he actually looked forward to night, when he ceased performing for the benefit of the passersby. Now his only audience was

himself. His thoughts grew confused, and he mistook that quality for complexity. By this time, he was taking his whiskey straight.

There had been a woman, Ernst thought, later in his life than either of his juvenescent calamities. This woman had brought a great settling of his rampant doubts, a satisfaction of his many needs. There had been a time of happiness, he thought. The idea seemed to fit, though the entire memory was clouded in the haze of years and of deliberate forgetfulness. There was a large open space, an asphalt field with painted lines running in all directions. Ernst was dressed differently, was speaking another language, was frantically trying to hide somewhere. He couldn't see the picture any more clearly. He couldn't decide whether or not he was alone.

Somehow it now seemed as if it hadn't even been his own experience, as though he were recalling the past of another person. He had forgotten very well indeed.

“Your passport, sir?” he whispered, remembering more.

“Yes, here it is,” he answered himself. “I'm sure you'll find it all in order.” He spoke aloud in German, and the words sounded odd in the hot desert night.

“You are Ernst Weinraub?”

“With a *t.* My name is Weintraub. A rather commonplace German name.”

“Yes. So. Herr Weintraub. Please step over here. Have a seat.”

“Is something wrong?”

“No, this is purely formality. It won't take but a moment to clear it up.”

Ernst recalled how he had taken a chair against the gray and green wall. The official had disappeared for a short time. When he returned, he was accompanied by another man. The two spoke quietly in their own language, and quickly enough so that Ernst understood little. He heard his name mentioned several times, each time mispronounced as “Weinraub.”

Ernst shook his head sadly. He had never gone through such a scene with any border officials, and he had never spelled his name with a “t.” He stared at the hotel across the avenue and took a long swallow of whiskey. Now the Fée Blanche was empty again except for himself and M. Gargotier, who sat listening to a large radio inside the dark cave of the bar.

“Monsieur Weinraub?” It was Czerny, his gray uniform soiled, his tunic hanging unbuttoned on his thin frame. “You're certainly dependable. Always here, eh? What an outpost you'd make.” Czerny staggered drunkenly. He supported a drunken woman with the aid of another uniformed man. Ernst's own eyes were not clear, but he recognized Ieneth. He did not answer.

“Don't be so moody,” said the woman. “You don't have any more secrets, do you, Sidi Weinraub?” Czerny and the other man laughed.

Ernst looked at her as she swayed on the sidewalk. “No,” he said. He took some more of his liquor and waved her away. She paid no attention.

“Here,” said Czerny, “try some of this. From the amusement quarter. A little stand by the Pantheon. The man makes the best stuffed crab I've ever had. Do you know

Lisbon? The Tavares has a name for stuffed crab. Our local man should steal that honor."

"Alfama," said Ernst.

"What is that?" asked Ieneth.

"Alfama," said Ernst. "Lisbon. The old quarter."

"Yes," said Czerny. They were all silent for a few seconds. "Oh, forgive me, M. Weinraub. You are acquainted with my companion, are you not?"

Ernst shook his head and raised his hand for M. Gargotier, forgetting that the proprietor had retired inside his bar and could not see.

"We have met before," said the stranger in the uniform of the Jaish. "Perhaps M. Weinraub does not recall the occasion. It was at a party at the home of Safety Director Chanzir." Ernst smiled politely but said nothing.

"Then may I present my friend?" said Czerny. "M. Weinraub, I am honored to introduce Colonel Sandor Courane."

Czerny grinned, waiting to see how Ernst would react. Courane reached over the railing to shake hands, but Ernst pretended not to see. "Ah, yes," he said. "Forgive me for not recognizing you. You write verses, do you not?"

Czerny's grin vanished. "Do not be more of a fool, M. Weinraub. You see very little from your seat here, you know. You cannot understand what we have done. Tonight the city is ours!"

Ernst drained the last drop of whiskey from his glass. "To whom did it belong previously?" he said softly.

“M. Weinraub,” said Ieneth, “we've had some pleasant talks. I like you, you know. I don't want you to be hurt.”

“How can I be hurt?” asked Ernst. “I'm carefully not taking sides. I'm not going to offend anyone.”

“You offend *me,"* said Czerny, beckoning to Ieneth and Courane. The woman and the two uniformed men tottered away down the sidewalk. Ernst got up and took his glass into the bar for more whiskey.

* * * *

The lonely night passed. It was very late. Ernst drank, and his thoughts became more incoherent and his voice more strident; but there was only M. Gargotier to observe him now. He sang to himself, and thought sadly about the past, and, though he gestured energetically to the proprietor, even that patient audience remained silent. Finally, driven further into his own solitude, he drew out his most dangerous thoughts. He reviewed his life honestly, as he did every night. He took each incident in order, or at least in the special order that this particular night demanded. “The events of the day,” he thought, “considered with my customary objectivity. A trivial today, a handful of smoke.”

Only the bright, unwinking lights of the amusement quarter still pierced the darkness. The last celebrants had all straggled back up the street, past the Café de la Fée Blanche. Now there was only Ernst and the nervous, sleepy barkeep.

When was the last time Ernst had seen Gretchen? He recalled the characteristic thrill he got whenever he saw his wife's comfortable shape, recognized her familiar pace. What crime had he committed, that he was left to decay alone? Had

he grown old? He examined the backs of his hands, the rough, yellowed skin where the brown spots merged into a fog. He tried to focus on the knife ridges of tendon and vein. No, he decided, he wasn't old. It wasn't *that.*

Ernst listened. There were no sounds now. It had been a while since Kebap had last sauntered past with his vicious words and his degenerate notions. It was so like the city, that one as young as the boy could already possess the bankrupt moral character of a Vandal warlord. The festivals in the other quarters of the city had long ago come to an end. The pigeons in the square did not stir; there wasn't even the amazed flutter of their sluggish wings, lifting the birds away from some imagined danger, settling them back asleep before their mottled feet touched the ground again. They wouldn't move even if he threw his table into their sculpted flock.

There was no Kebap, no Czerny, no Ieneth. There was only Ernst, and the darkness. “This is the time for art,” he said. “There can't be such silence anywhere else in the world, except perhaps at the frozen ends. And even there, why, you have whales and bears splashing into the black water. The sun never sinks, does it? There's always some daylight. Or else I have it wrong, and it is dark all the time. In any event, there will be creatures of one sort or another to disturb the stillness. Here I am, the one creature, and I've decided that it is a grand misuse of silence just to sit here and drink. The night is this city's single resource. Well, that and disease.”

He tried to stand, to gesture broadly and include the entire city in a momentary act of drama, but he lost his balance and sat heavily again in his chair. “This is the time for art,” he

muttered. “I shall make of the city either a living statue or a very boring play. Whichever, I shall present it before the restless audiences of my former home. Then won't I be welcomed back! I'll let the others worry about what to do with these mean people, these most malodorous buildings, and all this sand. I'll drop it all down in the middle of Lausanne, I think, and let the proper authorities attempt to deal with it. I shall get my praise, and they shall get another city.”

He fretted with his clothing for a few moments, fumbling in drunken incompetence with the buttons of his shirt. He gave up at last. “It is the time for art, as I said. Now I must make good on that claim, or else these gentlefolk will be right in calling me an idiot. The concept of presenting this city as a work of art, a serious offering, had a certain value as amusement, but not enough of enchantment to carry the idea beyond whimsy. So, instead I shall recite the final chapter of my fine trilogy of novels. The third volume, you may recall, is entitled *The Suprina of the Maze.* It concerns the suprine of Carbba, Wreylan III, who lived about the time of the Protestant Reformation, and his wife, the mysterious Suprina Without A Name. The suprina has been variously identified on many occasions by students of political history, but each such ‘authoritative account’ differs, and it is unlikely that we shall ever know her true background.”

Ernst looked up suddenly, as if he had heard a woman calling his name. He closed his eyes tightly and continued. “This enigmatic suprina,” he said, “is a very important character in the trilogy. At least I shall make her so, even though she does not appear until the final book. She has

certain powers, almost supernatural. And at the same time, she is possessed of an evil nature that battles with her conscience. Frequently, the reader will stop his progress through the book to wonder at the complications of her personality.

“She is to be loved and hated. I do not wish the reader to form but a single attitude toward her. That is for Friedlos, my protagonist. He will come riding across the vast wooded miles, leaving behind in the second volume the bleak, gelid corpse of Marie, lying stiff upon the frontier marches of Breulandy. Friedlos will pass through Poland, I suppose, in order to hear from the president there a tale of the Queen Without a Name. I must consider how best to get Friedlos from Breulandy to Poland. Perhaps a rapid transition: ‘A few weeks later, still aggrieved by the death of his second love, Friedlos crossed the somber limits of Poland.’ Bien. Then off he starts for Carbba, intrigued by the president's second-hand information. Ah, Friedlos, you are so much like your creator that I blush to put my name on the book's spine.”

Ernst dug in his pockets, looking again for his outline. He could not find it, and shrugged carelessly. “Gretchen, will you ever learn that it is you he seeks? I have put you on a throne, Gretchen. I have made you suprina of all Carbba, but I have given you my own life.”

He longed to see Steven, his son. It had been years; that, too, wasn't fair. Governments and powers must have their way, but certainly it wouldn't upset their dynastic realms to allow the fulfilling of one man's sentiments. How old was the boy now? Old enough to have children of his own? Perhaps,

amazingly, grandchildren for Ernst? Steven might have a son; he might be named Ernst, after his funny, old grandfather.

“How unusual it would be, to bounce a grandchild upon this palsied knee,” he thought. “I doubt if ever a grandchild has been cuddled in all the history of this city. Surely Kebap could not accurately identify his own grandparents. Would they be anxious to claim him? He is, after all, somewhat of an objectionable child. And he has had only nine years to develop so remarkably offensive a manner. It is truly an accomplishment—all emotional considerations aside, one must give the wretched boy his due.

“There is something about him, though, that obsesses me. If there were not, I should without hesitation inflict some kind of permanent injury upon him, to induce him to leave my peace unspoiled. I detect an affinity. I cannot dispute the possibility that I, myself, may be the lad's own father. What a droll entertainment that would be. I shall have to explore the possibility with him tomorrow. Indeed, the more I consider it, the better the idea becomes. I hope I can remember it.”

He heard the rattling of M. Gargotier drawing the steel gate across the door and windows of the small café. The sound was loud and harsh, and it made Ernst feel peculiarly abandoned, as it did every night. Suddenly, he was aware that he sat alone in a neglected city, a colony despised by the rest of the world, alone on the insane edge of Africa, and no one cared. He heard the click of a switch, and knew that the Fée Blanche's own sad strings of lights had been extinguished. He heard M. Gargotier's slow, heavy steps.

“M. Weinraub?” said the proprietor softly. “I will go now. It is nearly dawn. Everything is locked up. Maybe you should go, too, eh?” Ernst nodded, staring across the avenue. The proprietor made some meaningless grunt and hurried home, down the street.

The last of the whiskey went down Ernst's throat. Its abrupt end shocked him. So soon? He remembered M. Gargotier's last words, and tears formed in the corners of his eyes. He struggled to order his thoughts.

“Is that the whiskey? I need some more whiskey,” he said aloud. There was an unnatural, cracked quality to his voice that alarmed him. Perhaps he was contracting some disgusting rot of the city. “There had better be some more whiskey,” he thought. “It isn't a matter of courtesy any longer. I require a certain quantity of the stuff to proceed through this. Gretchen would get it for me, but I cannot find Gretchen anywhere. Steven would get it for me, but I haven't seen Steven in years. One would think that someone in my position would command a bit more devotion.”

He wondered about his sanity for a moment. Perhaps the day's excitement, perhaps the liquor, had introduced a painful madness into his recollections. He realized that, in point of fact, he had never been married. Gretchen, again? Where had that name come from? Who could she be? Steven, the fantasy son? Ernst's father's name had been Stefan, perhaps there was some connection.

He called to M. Gargotier. “More whiskey, straight, no water.” He wanted to believe that there was still some darkness left, but he could already make out the lines of the

hotel across the street, just beginning to edge clearly into view from the mask of nighttime.

“I have never traveled *anywhere,"* he admitted in a whisper. “I did not come from anywhere.” He sat silently for a few seconds, his confession hanging in the warm morning air, echoing in his sorrowing mind. *Will that do?* he wondered. He looked in vain for M. Gargotier.

He could almost read the face of the clock across the street. He picked up his glass, but it was still empty. Angrily, he threw it toward the clock. It crashed into pieces in the middle of the street, startling a small flock of pigeons. So it was morning. Perhaps now he could go home. He rose from his creaking latticed chair. He stood, wavering drunkenly. Wherever he turned, it seemed to him that an invisible wall held him. His eyes grew misty. He could not move.

“No escape,” he said, sobbing. “It's Courane that's done this. Courane and Czerny. He *said* they'd get me, the bastards, but not *now.* Please.” He could not move.

He sat again at the table. “They're the only ones who know what's going on. They're the ones with all the facts,” he said, searching tiredly for M. Gargotier. He held his head in his hands. “It's for my own good, I suppose. They know what they're doing.”

His head bowed over the table. Soon he would be able to hear the morning sounds of the city's earliest risers. Soon the day's business would begin. Not so very long from now, M. Gargotier would arrive again, greet him cheerfully as he did every day, roll back the steel shutters and bring out two fingers of anisette. Now, though, tears dropped from Ernst's

eyes onto the table's rusting circular surface. They formed little convex puddles, and in the center of each reflected the last of the new morning's stars.
