

The Face of an Angel

by Brian Stableford

When Mrs. Allison had gone, taking the photo-quality A4 sheet from the printer with her, Hugo Victory took another look at the image on his computer screen, which displayed her face as it would appear when the surgery she had requested had been carried out.

The software Victory used to perform that task had started out as a standard commercial package intended as much for advertisement purposes as to assist him to plan his procedures, but he had modified it considerably in order to take aboard his own innovations and the idiosyncrasies of his technique. Like all great artists, Victory was one of a kind; no other plastic surgeon in the world plied his scalpels with exactly the same style. He had been forced to learn programming in order to reconstruct the software to meet his own standards of perfection, but he had always been prepared to make sacrifices in the cause of his art.

Victory considered the contours of Mrs. Allison's as-yet-imaginary face for six minutes, using his imagination to investigate the possibility that more might be done to refresh her fading charms. He decided in the end that there was not. Given the limitations of his material, the image on the screen was the best attainable result. It only remained to reproduce in practice what the computer defined as attainable. He only had to click the mouse twice to replace the image of the face with an image of the musculature beneath, already marked up with diagrammatic indications of the required incisions, excisions and reconnections. Some were so delicate that he would have to use a robotic arm to carry out the necessary microsurgery, collaborating with the computer in its guidance.

Victory printed out the specifications, and laid the page in the case-file, on top of his copy of the image that Mrs. Allison had taken with her. Then he buzzed Janice and asked her whether his next potential client had arrived.

There was a slight tremor in the secretary's voice when she confirmed that a Mr. Gwynplaine had indeed arrived. Victory frowned when he heard it, because the first duty of an employee in her situation was to remain pleasantly impassive in the face of any deformation—but he forgave her as soon as the client appeared before him. If ever there was a man in need of plastic surgery, Victory thought, it was the man who had replaced Mrs. Allison in the chair on the far side of his desk. And if there was one man in the world who could give him exactly what he needed, Victory also thought, it was Dr. Hugo Victory.

"I'm sorry you had to wait so long for an appointment, Mr. Gwynplaine," Victory said, smoothly. "I'm a very busy man."

"I know," said Gwynplaine, unsmilingly. Victory judged that the damage inflicted on Gwynplaine's face—obviously by fire—had paralysed some muscles while twisting others into permanent contraction, leaving the man incapable of smiling. The injuries were by no means fresh; Gwynplaine might not be quite as old as he looked, but Victory judged that he must be at least fifty, and that the hideous scars must have been in place for at least half his lifetime. If he'd acquired the injuries in the Falklands the army's plastic surgeons would have undone at least some of the damage, and all employers had to carry insurance against injuries inflicted by industrial fires, so the accident must have been *a* private affair. Victory had never seen anyone hurt in quite that way by a house fire—not, at any rate, anyone who had survived the experience.

"Your problem is very evident," Victory said, rising to his feet and readying himself to take a closer look, "but I wonder why you've left it so long before seeking -treatment."

"You mistake the reason for my visit, Doctor," Gwynplaine said, in a voice that was eerily distorted by his inability to make full use of his lips, although long practice had evidently enabled him to find a way of pronouncing every syllable in a comprehensible manner. When Victory glanced down at the note Janice had made, the slightly monstrous voice added: "As your secretary also did. I fear that I allowed her to make the assumption, rather than state my real business, lest she turn me away."

As he spoke, the paragon of ugliness lifted the briefcase that he had brought with him and snapped the catch.

Victory sat down again. He was annoyed, because Janice had strict instructions never to permit salesmen or journalists to fill appointment-slots reserved for potential patients—but the mistake was understandable. Victory had never seen a salesman or journalist so unfashionably dressed, and the ancient briefcase was something a fossilized academic might have carried defiantly through a long career of eccentricity.

The object which Gwynplaine produced from the worn bag was a book, but its pages were not made of paper and its leather binding bore no title. It was not the product of a printing-press—but it was not Medieval either. Victory guessed, on the basis of the condition of the binding, that it might be eighteenth century, or seventeenth, but not earlier.

Gwynplaine laid the book on the desk, and pushed it towards Victory. Victory accepted it, but did not open it immediately.

"You seem to have mistaken the nature of my collection," Victory said, frostily. "Nineteenth-century portraiture is my speciality. Pre-Raphaelite and Symbolist. I don't collect books, except for products of the Kelmscott Press. In any case, I don't pursue my hobbies during working hours."

"This is to do with your work, not your hobby," Gwynplaine told him. "Nor am I trying to make a sale—the book isn't mine to sell, but if it were, I'd deem it priceless."

"What is it?" the doctor asked, curiously. He opened the volume as he spoke, but the first page on which his eyes fell was inscribed in a language he had never seen before.

"It's a record of the secrets of the *comprachicos*," Gwynplaine told him. "It appears to be complete—which is to say that it includes the last secret of all: the purpose for which the organization was founded, long before it became notorious."

"I have no idea what you're talking about," Victory told his mysterious visitor. "If you're hoping to barter for my services I'm afraid you've come to the wrong plastic surgeon." But he had turned to another page now, and although the script remained utterly inscrutable, this one bore an illustrative diagram.

Victory had seen a great many anatomical texts in his time, but he had never seen an account of the musculature of the human face as finely detailed as the one he was looking at. It was easily the equal of Durer's anatomical studies, although it was more intricate and seemed indicative of an uncanny appreciation of the inner architecture of the human face. It seemed to Victory that the author of the diagram addressed him as one genius of plastic surgery to another, even though the message emanated from an era in which plastic surgery had been unknown. His interest increased by a sudden order of magnitude.

"I hope you will permit me to explain," Gwynplaine said, mildly.

Victory turned to another illustration. This one had been carefully modified in a manner that was impossibly similar to the print he had taken from his computer only a few minutes earlier. A layman might

have seen nothing but a confusion of arbitrary lines scrawled on the image of facial musculature, but Hugo Victory saw a set of clear and ingenious instructions for surgical intervention. Victory decided that he wanted this book as desperately as he had ever wanted anything. If Gwynplaine could not sell it, then he wanted a photocopy, and a translation.

If this is genuine, Victory thought, it will rewrite the history of plastic surgery. If the text lives up to the promise of the illustrations I've so far seen, it might help to rewrite modern textbooks as well. And even if it turns out to be a fake, manufactured as recently as yesterday, the ingenuity of the instructions testifies to the existence of an unknown master of my art.

"Please go on, Mr. Gwynplaine," the surgeon said, his eyes transfixed by the illustration. Tell me what you came here to say."

"Comprachicos means *child-buyers*," Gwynplaine said, his strange voice taking on an oddly musical quality. "Even in their decadence, in the eighteenth century, the comprachicos took pride in being tradesmen, not thieves. They were wanderers by then, often confused with gypsies, but they were a very different breed. Even nineteenth century accounts take care to point out that while true gypsies were pagans, the comprachicos were devout Catholics.

"Those same sources identify the comprachicos' last protector in England as James II, and state that they were never heard of again after fleeing the country when William of Orange took the throne. The retreat into obscurity is understandable. The Pope had excommunicated the entire organization—one reason why the Protestant William was secretly supported by Rome against his Catholic rival—and such succour as those who fled from England could receive in France was limited and covert. The entire society retreated to Spain, and even then found it politic to vanish into the Basque country of the southern Pyrenees. They have remained invisible to history ever since—but they had been invisible before, and the wonder may be that they were ever glimpsed at all.

"Almost everything written about the comprachicos was written by their enemies, and was intended to demonize them. They were attacked as mutilators of the children they bought, charged with using their techniques to produce dwarfs and hunchbacks, acrobats and contortionists, freaks and horrors. It was true that they could and did produce monsters—but even in the Age of Reason and the Age of Enlightenment the demand for such products came from the courts of Europe, which still delighted in the antics of clowns and clever fools. The comprachicos sold wares of those kinds to Popes and Kings as well as Tsars and Sultans. The clowns which caper in our circuses even to this day use make-up to produce simulacra of the faces that the comprachicos once teased out of raw flesh.

"Yes, the comprachicos used their plastic arts—arts which men like you are only beginning to rediscover—for purposes that you or I might consider evil or perverse. But that was not their primary aim. That was not the reason for which the organization was founded, in the days when the Goths still ruled Iberia."

Hugo Victory had never heard of comprachicos, but he had heard that families of beggars in ancient times had sometimes mutilated their children in order to make them more piteous, and he had heard too that the acrobats of Imperial Rome had trained the joints of their children so that they could be dislocated and relocated at will, preparing them for life as extraordinary gymnasts. For this reason, he was not inclined to dismiss Gwynplaine's story entirely—and he was still turning the parchment pages with reverential fingers, still marveling at the anatomical diagrams and the fanciful surgical schemes superimposed upon them. "What *was* the reason for the organization's existence?" he asked.

"To reproduce the face and figure of Adam." That startled the surgeon into looking up. "What?"

"Adam, you will recall, was supposed to have been made in God's image," Gwynplaine said. "The comprachicos believed that the face Adam wore before the Fall was a replica of the Divine Countenance itself, as were the faces of the angels; when Adam and Eve ate from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, however, their features and forms became contorted—and when God expelled them from Eden, he made that contortion permanent, so that they and their children would never see his image again in one another's faces and figures.

"The comprachicos believed that if only they could find a means of undoing that contortion, thus unmasking the ultimate beauty of which humans were once capable, they would give their fellows the opportunity to see God. That sight, they believed, would provide a powerful incentive to seek salvation, and would prepare the way for Christ's return and the end of the world. Without such preparation, they feared, men would stray so far from the path of their religion that God would despair of them, and leave them to make their own future and their own fate."

"But there never was an Adam or an Eden," Victory pointed out, still meeting the oddly plaintive eyes of his frightful visitor, although he knew that there was not a man in England who could win a staring-match against such opposition. "We know the history of our species," he added, as he dropped his gaze to the book again. "*Genesis* is a myth."

But this book is not a myth, Victory said to himself, silently. *This is, at the very least, a record of experiments of which the accepted history of medicine has no inkling.*

"The comprachicos had a different opinion as to the history of our species," Gwynplaine told him, flatly. They knew, of course, that there were other men on Earth besides Adam—how else would Cain have found them in the east of Eden?—but they trusted the word of scripture that Adam alone had been made in God's image, and that Adam's face was the face of all the angels, the ultimate in imaginable beauty. Not that it was just the face that they were anxious to reproduce, of course. They wanted to recover the design of Adam's entire body—but the face was the most important element of that design."

This is nonsense," Victory said—but he could not muster as much conviction as he would have desired, or thought reasonable. There was something about Gwynplaine's peculiar voice that was corrosive of scepticism.

Gwynplaine leaned forward and placed the palms of his hands flat upon the open pages of the book that he had laid on Victory's desk, preventing the doctor from turning the next page. "All the secrets of the comprachicos are recorded here," he said. "Including the last."

"If they knew how to achieve their object," Victory objected, "why did they not do so? If they did it, why did they not succeed in bringing about their renaissance of faith and the salvation of mankind?"

"According to the book, the operation was a success," Gwynplaine told him, "but the child died while the scars were still fresh. The surgeon who carried out the operation died too, not long afterwards. The project was carried out here in London, not two miles east of Harley Street but the timing was disastrous. The year was 1665. Plague took them both. There was no one else in England with the requisite skill to make a second attempt, so a summons was sent to Spain—but by the time the call was answered, London had been destroyed by the great fire. The record of the operation was thought to have been lost.

"When William came to power and the comprachicos fled to the continent they no longer had the book, and their subsequent experiments failed—but the book had not burned in the fire. It was saved, and secreted by a thief, who did not know its nature because he could not read the language in which it was written. It was only recently rediscovered by someone who understood what it was. You will not find a dozen scholars in Europe who could read it—in a century's time, there might be none at all—but I am

one. What I need as well is a man with the skill necessary to carry out those of its instructions that require an expert hand and surgical instruments. I have been told that I might do well to take it to California, but I have also been told that I might not need to do that, if only you will agree to help me. I already have a child." He added the last sentence in a negligent tone, as if that consideration were a mere bagatelle.

"Have you also been advised that you might be insane?" Victory inquired.

"Often. I will admit to being a criminal, given that it is illegal to buy children in England now, or even to import children that have been bought elsewhere—but as to the rest, I admit nothing but curiosity. Perhaps the instructions are false, and the whole tale is but an invention. Perhaps the judgment of success was premature and the child would not have grown up to display the face of Adam at all. But I am curious—and so are you."

"If you wanted me to operate on you," Victory said, "I might take the risk—but I can't operate on a child using a set of instructions written by some seventeenth century barber."

"The child I have acquired is direly in need of your services," Gwynplaine told him. "So far as anyone in England can tell, I am his legal guardian—and no one in the place where I bought him will ever dispute the fact. The manipulations of the body and the training of the facial flesh that require no cutting I can do myself—but I am no surgeon, and even if I could master the pattern of incision and excision I would not dare attempt the grafts and reconnections. Your part is the minor one by comparison with mine, requiring no more than a few hours of your time once you have fully understood the instructions—but it is the heart and soul of the process, and it requires a near-superhuman sureness of touch. You cannot do this as a matter of mere business, of course. I cannot and will not pay you. If you do it, you must do it because you need to know what the result will be. If you say no, you will never see me again—but I do not believe that you will say no. I can read your face, Dr Victory. You wear your thoughts and desires openly."

As he tore his avid gaze away from Gwynplaine's censorious fingers Victory became acutely conscious of his own reflexive frown. "Who the hell are you?" he asked, roughly.

"Gwynplaine is as good a name as any," the man with the unreadable face informed him, teasingly.

"I want the book," Victory said, his own perfectly ordinary voice sounding suddenly unnatural by comparison with the other's strangely-contrived locutions. "A copy, at least. And a key to the script."

Gwynplaine could not smile, so there was no surprise in the fact that his face did not change. "You may make a copy of it afterwards, if you take care to do no damage," he agreed. "I will give you the name of a man who can translate the script for you. Have no fear that you might do harm. If you achieve nothing else, you might prevent the child from growing up a scarecrow. I think you understand well enough what costs that involves—though not, of course, as well as I."

Victory felt—knew, in fact—that he was on the threshold of the most momentous decision of his life. He had seen enough of the book to know that he had to see all of it. He was faced with an irresistible temptation.

"I'll need to see the child as soon as possible," Victory said, slightly astonished at his own recklessness, but proud of his readiness to seize the utterly unexpected opportunity. "I'll tell Janice to fix an emergency appointment for tomorrow."

Even at a mere thirteen weeks old, the child—to whom Gwynplaine referred as Dust—was as hideous as his guardian, although his ugliness was very different in kind. The baby had never been burned in a fire; the distortion of his features was partly due to a hereditary dysfunction and partly to the careless use of

forceps by the midwife who had delivered him, presumably in some Eastern European hellhole.

Had the child been brought to him in the ordinary course of affairs, Hugo Victory would have been reasonably confident that he could achieve a modest reconstruction of the skull and do some repair work on the mouth and nose, but he would only have been able to reduce the grotesquerie of the face to the margins of tolerability. Normality would have been out of the question, let alone beauty. Nor could Victory see, to begin with, how the procedures outlined in the diagrams illustrating the final chapter of Gwynplaine's book would assist in overcoming the limitations of his own experience and understanding.

"This is an extremely ambitious series of interventions," he told Gwynplaine. "It requires me to sever and relocate the anchorages of a dozen different muscles. There can be no guarantee that the nerves will function at all once the reconnections heal, even assuming that they do heal. On the other hand, these instructions make no provision for repairing the damage done to the boy's skull. I'll have to use my own procedures for that, and I'm not at all sure that they're compatible. At the very least, they'll increase the danger of nervous disconnections that will render the muscles impotent."

"My part of the work will replenish and strengthen his body's ability to heal itself," Gwynplaine assured him. "But the groundwork has to be done with scalpel and suture. If you can follow the instructions, all will be well."

"The instructions aren't completely clear," Victory objected. "I don't doubt your translation, but the original seems to have been written in some haste, by a man who was took a little too much for granted. There's potential for serious mistakes to be made. I'll have to make further modifications to my computer software to take aboard the untried procedures, and it will be extremely difficult to obtain an accurate preview of the results."

"It won't be necessary to preview the results," Gwynplaine assured him. "Nor would it be desirable. You must modify the software that controls the robotic microscalpel, of course, but that's all."

"That won't take as long, admittedly," Victory said. "Amending the imaging software isn't *strictly* necessary...but working without a preview will increase the uncertainty dramatically. The robotic arm ought to make the delicate procedures feasible, but guiding it will stretch my resources as well as the computer's to the full. If a seventeenth-century surgeon really did set out to follow this plan with nothing but his own hand to guide the blades he must have had a uniquely steady hand and the eyes of a hawk."

"You only have to step into the National Gallery to witness the fact that there were men in the past with steadier hands and keener eyes than anyone alive today," Gwynplaine said. "But your technology will compensate for the deterioration of the species, as it does in every other compartment of modern life. As to the lack of specificity in the instructions, I'm prepared to trust your instincts. If you'll only study the procedures with due care, and incorporate them into your computer programmes with due diligence, I'm certain that their logic will eventually become clear to you—and their creativity too. There's as much art in this business as science, as you know full well."

Victory did know that, and always had; it was Gwynplaine's comprehension of the art and science that he doubted. But Gwynplaine would not permit him to photocopy a single page of the book until the work was done. So Victory imported his own diagrams and his own calculations into his modified computer programmes, embodying within them as much arcane knowledge as the specific task required. He wanted far more than that—he wanted the whole register of secrets, the full description of every item of the comprachicos' arts—but he had to be patient.

There was a great deal of preparatory work to be done before Victory could even contemplate taking a scalpel to the infant's face, but the surgeon was as determined to get the job done as Gwynplaine was.

He cleared his diary by rescheduling all the operations he had planned, in order to devote himself utterly to the study of the diagrams Gwynplaine allowed him to see and Gwynplaine's translations of the text. He practised unfamiliar elements of procedure on a rat and a pig as well as running dozens of simulations on the computer. But time was short, because the child called Dust was growing older with every day that passed, and the bones of the baby's face were hardening inexorably hour by hour.

Under normal circumstances Victory would have required a team of three to assist with the operation, in addition to an anaesthetist, but as things were he had to be content to work with Gwynplaine alone—and, of course, the computer to guide the robotic arm. It was as well that Gwynplaine proved exceedingly adept in an assistant role.

The first operation took four hours, the second three and the third nearly six...but in the end, Victory's part was complete.

Victory had never been so exhausted in his life, but he did not want to retire to bed. Gwynplaine insisted that he could watch over the boy while the surgeon slept, but if Victory had not been at the very end of his tether he would never have consented to the arrangement. "If there's any change in his condition," Victory said, "wake me immediately. If all's well, there'll be time in the morning take a final series of X-rays and to finalise the post-operative procedures."

But when the doctor woke up again Gwynplaine had vanished, taking the child and the book with him. He had also taken every scrap of paper on which Victory had made notes or drawings of his own—every one, at least, that he could find. Nor had the computer been spared. The instructions for the operation had been deleted and a virus had been set to work that would have trashed the hard disk—thus obliterating all the other notes Victory had covertly copied on to the machine and photographs of several pages from the book that he had taken unobtrusively with a digital camera—had it been allowed to run its course.

Fortunately, it seemed that Gwynplaine did not understand the workings of computers well enough to ensure the completion of this particular task of destruction. Victory was able to purge his machine of the virus before it had done too much damage, saving numerous precious remnants of the imperilled data.

A good deal of work would need to be done to recover and piece together the data he had contrived to steal, let alone to extrapolate that data into further fields of implication, but Victory had never been afraid of hard work. Although the material he had contrived to keep was only a tiny fraction of what he had been promised, he had enough information already to serve as fodder for half a dozen papers. Given time, his genius would allow him to build considerably on that legacy. Even if he could not recover all the secrets of the comprachicos, he felt certain that he could duplicate the majority of their discoveries—including, and especially, the last.

In the years that followed, Hugo Victory's skill and fame increased considerably. He was second to none as a pioneer in the fast-advancing art of plastic surgery, and he forced tabloid headline-writers to unprecedented excesses as they sought to wring yet more puns from his unusually helpful name. He lacked nothing—except, of course, for the one thing he wanted most of all: Gwynplaine's book.

On occasion, Victory paused to wonder how the experiment had turned out, and what the child's face might look like now that he was growing slowly towards the threshold of manhood—but he did not believe in Adam, or angels, or the existence of God. The existence of the book, on the other hand, was beyond doubt. He still wanted it, more than anything his money could buy or his celebrity could command.

He did all the obvious things. He hired private detectives, and he scoured the internet for any information

at all connected with the name of Gwynplaine, or the society of comprachicos. He also published a painstakingly-compiled photo fit of Gwynplaine's remarkable face, asking for any information at all from anyone who had seen him.

Despite the accuracy of the image he had published, not one of the reports of sightings that he received produced any further evidence of Gwynplaine's existence. The detectives could not find anything either, even though they checked the records of every single burn victim through all the hospitals of Europe for half a century and more.

In the meantime, his internet searches found far too much. There were more Gwynplaines in the world than Victory had ever imagined possible, and the comprachicos were as well known to every assiduous hunter of great historical conspiracies as the Knights Templar and the Rosicrucians. Somewhere in the millions of words that were written about their exploits there might have been a few grains of truth, but any such kernels were well and truly buried within a vast incoherent chaff of speculations, fictions, and downright lies.

Victory tracked down no less than a dozen copies of books allegedly containing the teratological secrets of the comprachicos, but none of them bore more than the faintest resemblance to the one Gwynplaine had shown him. Some of the diagrams in the older specimens gave some slight evidence that their forgers might have seen the original, but it seemed that none of them had been able to make a meticulous copy of a single image, and that none had had sufficient understanding of anatomy to make a good job of reproducing them from memory.

He had all but given up his quest when it finally bore fruit—but it was not the sort of fruit he had been expecting, and it was not a development that he was prepared to welcome.

When Janice's successor handed him the card bearing the name of Monsignor Torricelli, and told him that the priest in question wanted to talk to him about the fate of a certain mutilated child, Victory felt an inexplicable shudder of alarm, and it was on the tip of his tongue to ask the secretary to send the man away—but his curiosity was as powerful as it had ever been.

"Send him in, Meg," he said, calmly. "And hold my other appointments till I've done with him."

The Monsignor was a small dark man dressed in black-and-purple clerical garb. Meg took his cape and his little rounded hat away with her when she had shown him to his chair.

"You have some information for me, Father?" Victory asked, abruptly.

"None that you'll thank me for, I fear," Monsignor Torricelli countered. He was not a man incapable of smiling, and he demonstrated the fact. "But I hope you might be generous enough to do me a small service in return."

"What service would that be?" Victory enquired, warily—but the priest wasn't ready to spell that out without preamble.

"We've observed the progress of your search with interest," the little man told him. "Although you've never publicly specified the reason for your determination to find the individual you call Gwynplaine, it wasn't too difficult to deduce. He obviously showed you the book of the secrets of the comprachicos, and you've indicated by the terms of your search that he had a child with him. We assume that he persuaded you, by one means or another, to operate on the child. We also assume that he spoke to you about the face of Adam, and that you did not believe what he said. Am I right so far?"

"I'm not a Catholic," Victory said, without bothering to offer any formal sign of assent, "but I have a

vague notion that a Monsignor is a member of the Pope's own staff. Is that true?"

"Not necessarily, nowadays," the priest replied. "But in this particular case, yes. I am attached to the papal household as well as to the Holy Office."

"The Holy Office? You mean the Inquisition?"

"Your reading, though doubtless wide, is a little out of date, Dr Victory. There is no Inquisition. There has been no Inquisition for two hundred years, just as there has been no society of comprachicos for two hundred years."

"Do you know where Gwynplaine is?" Victory asked, abruptly.

"Yes." The answer seemed perfectly frank.

"Where?"

"Where he has always been—in hell."

Somehow, Victory felt less astonished by that statement than he should have been, although he did not suppose for a moment that Monsignor Torricelli meant to signify merely that Gwynplaine was dead.

"He wasn't in hell nine years ago," Victory said. "He was sitting where you are. And he spent the next ten days with me, in the lab and the theatre."

"From his point of view," Torricelli counted, still smiling, "this was hell, nor was he out of it. I am borrowing from Marlowe, of course, but the description is sound."

"You're telling me that Gwynplaine was—is—the devil."

"Of course. Had you really not understood that, or are you in what fashionable parlance calls *denial*?"

"I don't believe in the devil," Victory said, flatly.

"Of course you do," the Monsignor replied. "You can doubt the existence of God, but you can't doubt the existence of the devil. You're only human, after all. Good may be elusive within your experience, but not temptation. You may doubt that the devil can take human form, even though you and he were in such close and protracted proximity for ten long days, but you cannot possibly doubt the temptation to sin. You know pride, covetousness, envy—you, of all people, must have a very keen appreciation of the force of envy—and all the rest. Or is it only their deadliness that you doubt?"

"What other information do you have for me, Monsignor?" Victory tried to sound weary, but he couldn't entirely remove the edge of unease from his voice. He wondered whether there was a level somewhere beneath his conscious mind in which he did indeed retain a certain childlike faith in the devil, and an equally childlike certainty that he had once met him in human guise—but the thought was difficult to bear. If the devil existed, then God presumably existed too, and that possibility was too horrible to contemplate.

"The child died," Torricelli said, bluntly.

Strangely enough, that seemed more surprising than the allegation that Gwynplaine was the devil. Victory sat a little straighter in his chair, and stared harder at the man whose smile, even now, had not quite disappeared. "How do you know?" he asked.

"You hired a dozen private detectives to search for you, who hadn't the slightest idea what they were up

against. We have a worldwide organization at our disposal, who knew exactly what to look for as soon as your postings had alerted us. The child died before he was a year old. Don't be alarmed, Dr Victory—you weren't responsible. So "far as we could judge, the operations you performed were probably successful. It was the adversary's part that went awry. It's all happened before, of course, *a* dozen times over. If it's any comfort to you, this was the first time since 1665 that the cutter's part was properly done. If he'd only been prepared to honour his bargain and let you help with the part that remained to be done...but that's not his way. You may think yourself a proud and covetous man, but you're only the faintest echo of your model."

"If you weren't a priest," Victory observed, "I'd suspect you of being insane. Given that you are a priest, I suppose delusions of that kind are merely part and parcel of the faith."

"Perhaps," the little man conceded, refreshing his cherubic smile. "I wonder if, perchance, you suspected Mr. Gwynplaine of being insane, when he too was only suffering the delusions of his faith."

Victory didn't smile in return. "I don't see how I can help you," he said. "If the resources of your worldwide organization have enabled you to discover that the child's dead and that Gwynplaine's safe in hell, what can you possibly want from me?"

"We've been monitoring your publications and your operations for the last few years, Dr Victory," Torri-celli said, letting his smile die in a peculiarly graceful manner. "We know how hard you've worked to make full use of the scraps of information that you plundered from the devil's book, while labouring under the delusion that he didn't mean to let you keep them. We know how ingeniously you've sought to use the separate elements of the operation you carried out on his behalf. I'm sure he's been watching you just as intently. We suspect that your busy hands have done almost all of the work that he found for them and that he's ready to pay you another visit, to offer you a new bargain. We don't suppose that it will do any good to warn you, although we'd be delighted to be surprised...but we do hope that you might be prepared to give the incomplete programme to us instead of completing it for him."

Until the priest used the word "programme" Victory had been perfectly prepared to believe that the whole conversation was so much hot air, generated by the fact that the lunatic fringe of the Holy Office was every bit as interested in crazy conspiracy theories as all the other obsessive internet users who were fascinated by the imaginary histories of the Templars, the Rosicrucians, the Illuminati and the comprachicos. Even then, he struggled against the suspicion that he had been rumbled.

"What programme?" He said.

"The most recently updated version of the software you use to show your clients what they'll look like when you've completed the courses of surgery you've outlined for them. The one whose code has finally been modified to take in all but one of the novel procedures to which the adversary introduced you. The one which would reproduce the face of Adam, if you could only insert that last missing element into the code—the tantalising element that the devil has carefully reserved to his own custody."

Victory tried hard to control his own expression, lest it give too much away. He had known, of course, that he had come close to a final resolution of the comprachicos' last secret, but he had not been able to determine that he was only one step short. But on what authority, he wondered, had the Monsignor decided that he was almost home? Did the Vatican have plastic surgeons and computer hackers at its disposal? If it did, would they be set to work on tasks of this bizarre sort? If so, had the men in question genius enough not only to steal his work but to read it more accurately than he had read it himself?

It was too absurd.

"Why would I give my work to anyone while it's incomplete?" Victory asked. "And why shouldn't I show

it to everyone, when I've perfected it? Surely that's what you ought to want—if what Gwynplaine told me is true, it ought to put humankind back on the path to salvation."

"He's not called the father of lies without reason," the priest observed. "He was an angel himself, before his own fall. He doesn't remember what he and Adam looked like, but he knows full well that the comprachicos weren't searching for a way to set mankind on the path to salvation. Quite the reverse, in fact. Why do you think they were condemned as heretics and annihilated?"

"I understand the politics of persecution well enough to know that so-called heretics didn't need to be guilty of anything to be hounded to extinction by the Church," Victory retorted.

"I doubt that you do," Torricelli said, with a slight regretful sigh. "But that's by the by. We'll pay you for the programme as it presently exists, if you wish—provided that we can obtain all rights in the intellectual property, and that you agree to desist from all further work on the project."

Victory was slightly curious to know what price the Vatican might be willing to pay, but he didn't want to waste time. "I already have more money than I can spend," he said, proudly. "The only thing I want that I don't have is the book I saw nine years ago—and I'm not entirely sure that I need it any longer. I don't have any particular interest in the faces of angels but I'm extremely curious to know what the results of the operation I performed might have been, if the boy had lived."

"You're making a mistake, Dr Victory," said Monsignor Torricelli.

"You needn't worry about me selling out to the opposition," Victory said. "I've dealt with Gwynplaine before. This time, I'll need copies made in advance—and then we'll be even. Afterwards, I *might* let him look at what the programme produces—but I'm certainly not going to let him walk off with it while I have the strength to stop him."

"I wish you'd reconsider," the priest persisted. "No harm will be done if you stop now, even though you're so close. The Adversary might be able to complete the programme himself if he steals the present version, but he wants more than a computer-generated image. He'd still need an artist in flesh, and that he isn't. He isn't even as clever with computers as he'd like to be."

"I find *that* difficult to believe," Victory observed, sarcastically.

"The reason he makes so much work for other idle hands," Monsignor Torricelli said sadly, "is that his own are afflicted with too many obsolete habits. It was his part of the scheme that went wrong, remember, not yours. It's as dangerous to overestimate him as it is to underestimate him. Don't do his work for him, Dr Victory. Don't give him what he wants. You know he doesn't play fair. You know who and what he is, if you'll only admit it to yourself. You still have a choice in this matter. Use it wisely, I beg of you."

"That's what I'm trying to do," Victory assured him. "It's just that my wisdom and your faith don't see eye to eye."

"We're prepared to give you more than money," Torricelli said, with the air of one who obliged to play his last card, even though the game had been lost for some considerable time. "You're an art collector, I believe."

"I'm not prepared to be bribed, even with works of art," Victory said. "I'm an artist myself, and my own creativity comes first."

"Human creativity is always secondary to God's," Monsignor Torricelli riposted. "I hope you'll remember

that, when the tune comes."

In the wake of Torricelli's visit Victory returned to his computer model with renewed zest. There was so much obvious nonsense in what the priest had told him that there was no real reason to believe the assurance that he was only one step short of being able to reproduce—at least on paper—the face of Adam, but Victory had no need of faith to season his curiosity. He felt that he was, indeed, close to that particular goal, and the feeling was enough to lend urgency to his endeavours.

Part of his problem lay in the fact that the transformative software had to begin with the image of a child only a few weeks old. When Victory used computer imaging to inform a forty-year-old woman what she would look like when he had worked his magic, the new image was constructed on the same finished bone-structure, modifying muscles that were already in their final form, removing superfluous fat and remodelling skin whose flexibility was limited. A baby's face, by contrast, was as yet unmade. The bones were still soft, the muscles were vulnerable to all manner of influence by use and habit, the minutely-layered fat still had vital metabolic functions to perform, and the overlying skin had a great deal of growing and stretching yet to do.

Even the best conventional software could only offer the vaguest impression of the adult face that would eventually emerge from infantile innocence, because that emergence was no mere matter of predestined revelation. Integrating the effects of early surgery into conventional software usually made the results even more uncertain—and no matter how ingeniously Victory had laboured to overcome these difficulties, he had not been able to set them entirely aside. He had to suppose that if and when he could produce a perfect duplicate of the comprachicos' instructions the surgical modifications specified therein would somehow obliterate the potential variability that infant faces usually had, but every hypothetical alteration he made by way of experiment had the opposite effect, increasing the margin of causation left to chance and circumstance.

Whatever the missing piece of the puzzle was, if there was indeed only one, it was obviously a piece of magical—perhaps miraculous—subtlety and power.

There were, in the meantime, other aspects of the comprachicos' field of expertise that continued to reveal interesting results and applications, but Victory had lost his ability to content himself with petty triumphs. No matter how much nonsense Torricelli had spouted, he had been right to call the project "tantalising".

The five weeks that elapsed between Torricelli's attempt to bribe him and Gwynplaine's reappearance were the most tortuous of Victory's life, and the fact that the torture in question was entirely self-inflicted did not make it any easier to bear.

This time, Gwynplaine did not bother to telephone for an appointment. He simply turned up one evening, long after Meg had gone home, when Victory was still working at his computer. He was not carrying his briefcase.

"You're a very difficult man to find, Mr. Gwynplaine," Victory observed, as his visitor settled himself into the chair on the far side of his desk.

"Not according to my detractors," Gwynplaine observed, as unsmilingly as ever. "According to them, I'm impossible to avoid—urgently present in every malicious impulse and every self-indulgent whim."

"Are you telling me that you really are the devil?"

"Don't be ridiculous, Dr Victory. There is no devil. He's an invention of the Church—an instrument of moral terrorism. Priests have always embraced the defeatist belief that the only way to persuade people

to be good is to threaten them with eternal torment. You and I know better than that. We understand that the only worthwhile way to persuade people to be good is to show them the rewards that will flow from virtuous endeavour. There has to be more to hope for than vague promises of bliss beyond death. If anyone's living proof of that, it's you."

"So who are you, really?" Victory tried, as he said it, to meet Gwynplaine's disconcerting stare with the kind of detachment that befitted a man who could repair every horror and enhance every beauty, but it wasn't easy.

"I was sold as a child," Gwynplaine said, his eerie voice becoming peculiarly musical again. "Adam's is not the only face the comprachicos tried to reproduce. The society is not yet extinct, no matter what the Pope may think—but its members are mere butchers nowadays, while men like you follow other paths."

"That was done to you deliberately?"

"It wasn't quite the effect they intended to produce."

"And before? Were you...like the boy you brought me nine years ago?"

"No. I was healthy, and fair of face. Angelic, even. I might have become...well, that's water under the bridge. Even you could not help me now, Dr Victory. I hope to see the face of Adam before I die, but not in a mirror."

In spite of his impatience, Victory could not help asking one more question. "Was Torricelli lying?" he asked. "Or did he really believe what he told me?"

"He believed it," Gwynplaine told him, his gaze never wavering within his frightful mask. "He still believes it—but he won't interfere again, because he also believes that the devil operates on Earth with the permission of God."

Victory decided that it was time to get down to business. "Where's the book?" he demanded.

"Safe in the custody of its rightful owners," Gwyn-plaine told him. "You don't need it. Nine years of nurturing the seeds I lent you has prepared you for what needs to be done. All you need now is the master key—and a child."

Victory shook his head. "No," he said. "That's not the way it's going to be done. Not this time. This time, I get all the information first. This time, I get to see the face on my computer before I make a single cut. No arguments—it's my way, or not at all. You cheated me once; I won't trust you again."

"If I broke my promise," Gwynplaine said, "it was for your own good. If I'd succeeded in my part of the project...but that's more water under the bridge. You're not the only one who's being doing things the hard way these last nine years. We're almost there—but I'd be doing you a grave disservice if I didn't warn you that you're in danger. If you'll condescend to take my advice you'll leave the programme incomplete until you have to use it to guide the robot arm. Don't attempt to preview the result. No harm can come to you if you work in the flesh of a child and allow me to take him away when you've finished—but I can't protect you if you refuse to take my advice."

"And what, exactly, will become of me if I look at the face of Adam on my computer before I attempt to reproduce it in the flesh?"

"I don't know. Nobody knows—certainly not Monsignor Torricelli. In contrast to the fanciful claims of legend, the Church has never had the slightest contact with the world of the angels."

"So your warning is just so much bluster?" Victory said.

"No. I'm trying to protect my own interests. I don't want anything unfortunate to happen to you before you repeat the experiment—or afterwards, for that matter."

"But you said before that the face of Adam would bring about a religious renaissance—that it would inspire everyone who saw it to forsake sin and seek salvation."

"I said nothing of the kind," Gwynplaine said, equably. "I only said that the comprachicos believed that. You already know that the Church believes otherwise. So do I. I may be privy to the comprachicos' secrets, but I'm not one of them. I'm their victim and their emissary, but I'm also my own person. For myself, I haven't the slightest interest in the salvation or damnation of humankind."

"So what *do* you want out of this?"

"That's my business. The question is, doctor—what do *you* want out of it, and what are you prepared to risk in order to get it? I've given you the warning that I was duty bound to offer. If you're prepared to take the risk, having had fair warning, so am I. I can't give you the book, but I can give you the last piece that's missing from your painstaking reconstruction of its final secret. If you insist on seeing an image before you attempt to produce the real thing I won't try again to prevent it. If, after seeing the image, you're unable to conduct the operation, I'll simply take the results of all your hard work to California. My advice to you is that you should find a suitable child, and conduct the operation as before, without a preview of the likely result. Take it or leave it—in either case, I intend to proceed."

"I'll leave the advice," Victory said. "But I'll take the missing piece of the puzzle."

Gwynplaine reached into the inside pocket of his ridiculously unfashionable jacket and produced a folded piece of paper. If he really had been in hell the inferno was obviously equipped with photocopiers. Victory unfolded the piece of paper and looked at the diagram thus revealed.

He stared at it for a minute and a half, and then he let out his breath.

"Of course," he said. "So simple, so neat—and yet I'd never have found it without the cue. Diabolically ingenious."

Gwynplaine did not take the trouble to contradict him.

Gwynplaine sat languidly in the chair, a perfect exhibition of patience, while Victory's busy fingers flew over the keyboard and clicked the mouse again and again, weaving the final ingredient into the model that would reproduce the face of Adam when the programme was run.

It was not a simple matter of addition, because the code had to be modified in a dozen different places to accommodate the formulas describing the final in-cision-and-connection.

Victory had half-expected the code itself to be mysteriously beautified, but it remained mere code, symbolising a string of ones and zeroes as impenetrable to the naked eye and innocent mind as any other. Until the machine converted it into pictures it was inherently lifeless and vague—but when the job was done...

In the end, Victory looked up. He didn't bother to look at his wristwatch, but it was pitch dark outside and Harley Street was in the grip of the kind of silence that only fell for a brief interval in the small hours. "It's ready," he said. "You'd better join me if you want to watch."

"If you don't mind," Gwynplaine said, "I'll stay on this side of the desk and watch you. I have patience

enough to wait for the real thing."

"If Torricelli were here," Victory said, "he'd probably remind me of the second commandment." He was looking at the screen as he said it, where he had set up the face of a three-week-old child. He had chosen the child at random; any one, he supposed, would do as well as another.

"If Torricelli were here," Gwynplaine said, "neither of us would give a fig for anything he said."

Victory drew the mouse across the pad, and launched the programme.

He had watched its predecessors run a thousand times before, without seeing anything unusual in the adult face that formed in consequence. He had run them so many times, in fact, that he had ceased to believe that there was any conceivable human face that could have any unusual effect on his inquiring eye and mind. When he tried to imagine what the face of Adam might look like, all he could summon to mind was the image painted by Michelangelo on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel.

But Adam did not look like that at all.

Adam's face was unimaginable by any ordinary mortal—even an artist of genius.

While learning the basics of medicine forty-two years before, Hugo Victory had been informed that each of his eyes had a blind spot where the neurones of the optic nerve spread out to connect to the rods and cones in the retina. Because he had always been slightly myopic, his blind spots had been slightly larger than those of people with perfect vision, but they still did not show up in the image of the world formulated by his brain. Even if he placed a hand over one eye, to eliminate the exchange of visual information between the hemispheres of his cerebral cortex, he still saw the world entire and unblemished, free of any void. That, he had been told, was an illusion. It was not that the brain "filled in" the missing data to complete the image, but rather that the brain ignored the part of the image that was not there, so efficiently that its absence was imperceptible. And yet, the blindspot *was* there. Anything eclipsed by it was not merely invisible, but left no clue as to its absence.

It was a blind spot of sorts—albeit a trivial one—that had prevented Victory from being able to see or deduce the missing element in his model of the comprachicos' final secret. It was likewise a blind spot of sorts—but by no means a trivial one—that had prevented him and every other man in the world from extrapolating the face of Adam and the angels from his knowledge of the vast spectrum of ordinary human faces.

Now, the blind spot was removed. His mind was no longer able to ignore that which had previously been hidden even from the power of imagination. Hugo Victory saw an image of the proto-human face that had been made in God's image.

Quietly, he began to weep—but his tears dried up much sooner than he could have wished.

His right hand—acting, apparently, without the benefit of any conscious command—moved the mouse, very carefully, across its mat, and clicked it again in order to exit from the programme.

He watched without the slightest reservation or complaint as Gwynplaine, who had waited until then to move around the desk, carefully burned the programme on to a CD that he had appropriated from the storage cabinet.

"I told you so," the man with the hideous face murmured, not unkindly, as he carefully set the computer to reformat the hard disk. "I played as fair as I dared to be. That wasn't the real thing, of course. It was just a photograph, lacking even the resolution it might have had. You should have done as I asked and

worked directly on a child, Dr Victory. It might require a dozen more attempts, or a hundred, but in time, one of them will survive to adulthood. *That* will be the real thing. At least, I hope so. The comprachi-cos might not have got it absolutely right, of course. Even now, I still have to bear that possibility in mind. But I remain hopeful—and now I have something that's worth taking to California, I'm one step nearer to my goal."

"It's strange," Victory said, wondering why he had utterly ceased to care. "When you first came into my office, nine years ago, I thought you were the most awfully disfigured man I'd ever seen. I couldn't imagine why the doctors who'd treated you after your accident hadn't done more to ameliorate the effect of the burns. But now I've grown used to you, you seem perfectly ordinary. Hideous, but perfectly ordinary. I thought nine years ago—and still thought, ninety minutes ago—that I could do something for you, if you'd only permit me to try, but now I see that I couldn't...that there's simply nothing to be done."

"It's not strange to me," Gwynplaine assured him. "I've lived among the comprachicos. I understand these things better than any man alive...with one possible exception, now. I hope you can find it in your heart to forgive me for that enlightenment."

"I don't feel capable of forgiveness any more," Victory said. "Or hatred either. Or..."

"Much as I'd like to hear the rest of the list," Gwynplaine said, apologetically, "I really must be going. If you see Monsignor Torricelli again, please give him my fondest regards. Unlike him, you see, I really have learned to love my enemies."

It was not until Meg arrived at half past eight that Victory had the opportunity to assess the full extent of the change that had come over him, but once the evidence was before him he understood its consequences easily enough.

Meg, like Janice before her, was an unusually beautiful young woman. A plastic surgeon had to surround himself with beautiful people, in order to advertise and emphasize his powers as a healer. But Meg now seemed, to Victory's unprejudiced and fully awakened sight, not one iota more or less beautiful than Gwynplaine. She looked, in fact, absolutely ordinary: aesthetically indistinguishable from every other member of the human race. Nor could Victory imagine any practicable transformation that would bring about the slightest improvement.

It was, he realised, going to be rather difficult to function efficiently as a plastic surgeon from now on. So extreme was the devastation of his aesthetic capa-city, in fact, that Victory could not think of any field of human endeavour in which he might be able to function creatively or productively—but the inability did not cause him any distress.

Even the idea that he was now in a kind of hell, beyond any possibility of escape or redemption, could not trouble him in the least.

Nor could the faintly absurd suspicion that he might have provided the means for the devil to free himself, at long last, from the voracious burden of his envy of humankind.