



House of Darkness

The Life of Jonathan Gorgius

Also featuring Simon Slope, Maxwell Backbone, Uncle Thurston, sailor Jack Blevins, and various other characters of some distinction.

Prologue

To begin, Jonathan Gorgius' father, Elbert, was a prosperous turnip, corn, and hay farmer near Guildford, a small, quaint town a short distance southwest of London.

Elbert was of above-normal height, stocky, ruddy-faced, and bordering on handsome, which handsomeness would have been greater were it not for a persistent tic on the right side of his mouth. And for some adjustments to his face due to, well, previous sporting activities. He was, on the whole, ebullient, however occasionally an inner antagonist would scratch--nay, claw--its way to his surface to manifest itself as disdain for the whole of humanity. Sometimes said antagonist was more specific as regards its targets, when *it* focused on individuals or institutions. Still, as it was not Elbert's greater nature to pass judgments on humankind, he invariably strove to suppress this unwonted and unwanted component of his personality.

Jonathan's mother, Cordelia--originally Cordelia Silk--was an intelligent, beautiful, and devoted lady of some refinement and great dignity. She was as tall as her husband, but slender, with a clear complexion and long, light-blond hair which she cut short in the summers. She retained her looks despite being a farmer's wife who helped her husband in all except field work.

Unlike their neighbors, both parents were self-educated to a degree. Cordelia's interests were broad, embracing literature, mathematics, a smattering of natural science, and anything else striking her fancy from time to time. A devoted reader, she spent much of her time attempting to instill said passion in her children. That was the sum of her, and as such she was generally the basis of the higher levels of the family. And, relative to Elbert, she possessed a delightful sense of humour. Her only significant weakness would be occasional but mild physical debility.

Elbert's passion was philosophy.

Human nature seems to hold that every person has a first memory; a face, a voice, an insignificant event, Not so with Jonathan; he was simply there, and that was all there was to it. Instead of a single first impression he had more complete images, including one of his father, whom he resembled only in their common, vague, reserved, and at rare times pessimistic, disposition. In appearance he mirrored his, and as he reached the age of five his view changed

forever when he realized he was vastly more of his mother's stripe within as compared to his father's makeup. Openly he was strong and intelligent, but inwardly he possessed certain weaknesses.

The family was joined two years after Jonathan's birth by a brother, Garrison, and though the parental molds were the same, the product was as different as different could be. As he grew, Garrison more and more resembled his father in build, but in temperament he remained with his mother. His only concession to his father was a slight tendency to assume the nature of a bulldog--occasionally a rabid bulldog--though mostly in the early stages of the disease; and thus he remained for the remainder of his life.

Elbert and Cordelia took turns tutoring their two prodigies, but as it became apparent one was more *prodigious* than the other, Jonathan was sent away at the advanced age of seven to a boarding school on the outskirts of Guildford. Garrison stayed home to have his prodigiousness enhanced, which enhancement lasted for twelve more years, and a large part the enhancement process involved farm work.

The school--Guildford Academy for Boys--accepted students from six to fourteen years of age whose parents or sponsors could afford the yearly tuition, and it was generally known the tuition varied in accordance with the affluence of the parents or sponsors. Girls were also admitted, but they were few. At the time of Jonathan's enrollment the boys outnumbered the girls twenty-four to three.

The headmaster of the Academy was Squire Middle; not a landowner or any such, but squire in name only. Nearing the age of forty he was of mediocre appearance; short, stout, pale and asthmatic. In what must have been an attempt to appear more academic he always brushed back the short, blond fuzz on the sides of his head, and combed forward the longer, darker, stiffer hair on top. Alas, after an hour or two in the classroom the top hair invariably rearranged itself in whatever way it chose. Observed only by the students, they had long since stopped sniggering and giggling, as it was no fun to waste their ridicule on someone who was unaware of the cause of their merriment, or who had possibly assumed their amusement was a consequence of his charm. Squire was ably and tactfully assisted by his marginally lovely wife, Adalia. She had long, coal-black hair, light complexion with a tint of pink, a firm and curvaceous figure, and she always exhibited an exceedingly pleasant manner. Never since the opening of the Academy had she shown even the mildest indisposition, even to her husband in his prickly moments. One of the already-perpetual community mysteries was how Squire Middle had captured the heart of Miss Adalia Muffett, and not a few of the locals had given up wondering by proclaiming the coming together of the two would be an eternal mystery. Still, some dogged souls now and then alluded to the stork showing up prematurely, but after a few months that suspicion bore no fruit, so to speak.

As the school years elapsed Jonathan instinctively found his niche, and that niche was as a popular, liked-by-all, studious, scholar. An indication of his popularity was his nickname, Gorgeous, which he had accepted with equanimity, partly because objecting would have been to no avail and would have only

certified his sobriquet.

Jonathan's first friend was Simon Slope. Simon, soon to be dubbed Slippery Slope, was in fact not slippery at all. He was undistinguished in all things; size, appearance, mental capacity, character, In appearance his mediocrity was indicated by his colorlessness, his moderately good looks, and his passable deportment. As regards deportment, he had the ability to both stay out of trouble and to get into trouble equally; thus he fit right in. His only unique attribute was that he was a chronic worrier. Despite his middlingness, Slippery Slope would be one of Jonathan's few lifelong friends.

The only truly singular student, however--and one of the brightest aspects in Jonathan's school years--was Phebe Moss, if she could be regarded as an aspect; a pretty and angelic girl a year older than he. When he was ten years old they had kissed once behind the school. She had blushed and run away, leaving him embarrassed and confused, and they never kissed again. Or, to say, not for a very long time.

So there, safe and secure, Jonathan floated along on a cloud of contentment, unconcerned with any thereafter.

And that, as pertains to any number of young lives, was the essence and complete summary of the genesis of Jonathan Gorgius. But for one idiosyncrasy; a foreboding that occurred more frequently until his dying day.

Part I

Chapter One

Young Jonathan Gorgius reaches an age of sentience as he happily roams his parents' farm. However he is not yet mature enough to consider anything more, as he lacks two attributes; knowledge and experience.

Jonathan loves and admires his parents, and his brother Garrison. As he matures he affirms his true love; Phebe Moss.

Jonathan Gorgius' life unfolded slowly, without bloom. After seven years at the Guildford Academy, at the age of fourteen he found himself obliged to face his future. He was mature for his age, yet planning his life was impossible, as it would be for any fourteen-year-old child. His only idea, nebulous as it was, had to do with going to some advanced school, or even to a university, but that seemed to be unattainable if only due to the financial requirements. Thus, in order to stave off any further decisions, he returned home with the notion that hard work would settle his mind and could possibly result in some revelations as to his course in life. But for a time he would be content to drift, rudderless and without wind, helping his parents on the farm.

Life flowed, turnips grew, corn was harvested, cows were milked, hay was mowed, birds sang, dogs and cats multiplied, chickens laid eggs, rain and snow came and went, people flourished, others fell ill, some died, babies were born, . . . , and the Gorgius family labored on each in his or her own way. Most of the neighbors were likable, community events were many, and churches were well attended. Less advertised was the drunkenness, licentiousness, wife beating, theft, and an underlying air of skulduggery. Worst were the yearly Guy riots in Guildford, when town residents celebrated Bonfire Night by dressing in costumes and masks and building a large bonfire, lit fireworks, and ran through the town with clubs avenging themselves against those whom they had perceived had offended them. Country folk stayed home, and as a rule the rioters did not venture into the countryside, and any who did would never have trespassed onto Elbert's farm, as it was common knowledge that he had spent some time in the ring, and even at his age none wanted to run the risk of suffering lumps, bruises, and black eyes; or worse, permanent cerebral trauma.

Elbert was the rock of the household; Cordelia the foundation. That was how Jonathan saw it, and he thought he himself embodied the doors and windows, while alas, Garrison was, well, nothing much. Maybe an outbuilding. He was neither significant, nor did he represent anything significant. He was bound to fall into the great masses of humanity who are to live and die leaving no trace or effect whatsoever other than the results of their consumption; food, water, air, . . . , and other resources.

Garrison was nothing. He lacked stability of temperament and even a modicum of higher-level mental brilliance. He was, in simple terms, simple. Not moronic, yet not bright. Simple. His only higher ability was deviousness, and at

which he approached excellence, but without actually excelling. He was content to remain on the farm, except for his periods of rebellion, which grew more frequent; rebellions like disobeying his parents, slipping away at night, Jonathan was fond of Garrison despite his brother's weaknesses, and he was sure he would retain the affection come what may.

Jonathan's only true joy lay in Phebe, his former schoolmate. Phebe Moss, the only child of a widower farmer, who, in addition to helping her father, Charles, worked at home stitching for a dressmaker in Guildford. She had many would-be suitors--most of whom had been chased off by her father at the points of a pitchfork--but she had only shown affection for one. Her father reluctantly allowed that one to visit her, but only on the condition they sit on the bench in front of the house in plain view from the window.

"You look prim and foxy today," said Jonathan.

"The two are opposites, Gorgeous," replied Phebe without the faintest self-consciousness or trace of jest, for that was what she had called him ever since their school days.

She was fair-skinned, with matching hair, and she was shapely. Further, she was the one who should have been called Gorgeous, but he didn't dare. And she always seemed to have a twinkle in her eyes.

Jonathan was at one end of the bench in front of the farmhouse and Phebe was at the other. By unspoken agreement there would be no overt intimacy because they were not yet of that mind, and because they both realized one misstep would be their last if they were seen by Phebe's father who was inside, yet Jonathan felt the strong impulse to surreptitiously reach for her hand. He shifted uneasily. "I can't help feeling we're being watched." He said it with a trace of sarcasm.

The day was as beautiful as a summer day could be; warm, with puffy white clouds, a light breeze, birds chirping and twittering all about, The kind of day conjured by a poet or some other imaginative writer supposed Jonathan. Someone with more creativity than he.

Phebe smiled apologetically. "I am sorry. Father has not been the same since my mother died ten years ago. My how time flies. And now he fears losing me too. And he has been in delicate health these last few years."

"I know, but what ails him?"

"Oh, this and that. Nothing very serious, but he has always been private. That's one of his strengths, but it's a weakness as well. I believe his affliction is psychological."

"It must be difficult for you."

"Oh, heavens no, I would gladly do anything for him."

Her white cat, Fluffy came and jumped onto her lap.

Jonathan turned to face Phebe. "Have you no plans for your future? Will you remain here for the rest of your life?"

"Of course I do. Have aspirations. Don't you? Does not everyone?"

"Not everyone. Some are like clocks. You simply wind them up and----"

Phebe laughed. "Stop. You're winding me up, as you frequently do. You enjoy it."

"Don't you?"

"I would never own to it even if I did. You are the limit." She petted Fluffy lightly. Fluffy closed her eyes and purred as she always did when she had no opinion on anything whatsoever.

"How old is Fluffy?" asked Jonathan. He eyed the creature.

"I don't know. She just arrived one day and took to me. Perhaps two years old."

Jonathan had to desist from saying something disproportionately affectionate. He was pretty sure he was Phebe's one-and-only, however he had been mistaken about matters of the heart before, and this was no time to say or do anything inappropriate. She was too precious and he was not about to ruin everything on a mere whim. Still, he felt it would have to be an exceedingly severe whim for her to throw him off. Something like asking her to choose between himself and her father, not that he would ever do something as ignoble as that. He was introspective enough to know him better than most people do. He had intuited it with certainty.

"Let me ask," Phebe began in her serious tone, "what you do in your spare time? Go to dances, drink in The Mangy Dog, procure women----?"

"What?" barked Jonathan, jumping to his feet. "Procure . . . , procure women? What do you think I am, a mangy dog incarnate in human form? Is that how you see me?"

"I, I'm sorry!" cried Phebe piteously, cowering back on the bench. "I didn't mean it. I was only trying to----" She dropped Fluffy to the ground and covered her face with her hands, sobbing pitifully.

Jonathan immediately melted. Her father be damned; he sat by Phebe and put his arm around her shoulders.

"It is I who am sorry," said he. Her shoulders were shaking and she kept on crying. "So very ashamed. All I can add is that, unlike you, sometimes I am weak and insecure."

Phebe wiped her eyes with the backs of her hands and smiled weakly at him.

"What in the world makes you assume I am strong, you silly goose?"

The front door of the house creaked open and out came Charles. Jonathan reflexively slid away from Phebe, back to his end of the bench.

"Well, well," muttered Charles, and with that he turned and strode to the barn.

Jonathan and Phebe stared at each other in consternation, then they both broke out laughing, silently, covering their mouths with their hands.

"I love you, Phebe."

He was hopelessly lovesick, and it had just come out. He had never, ever, said it before, and he expected either an outburst, more tears, or even ridicule, but she merely replied, serenely, "And I love you. I always have, even back in school when I was seven or eight years old." She spoke without a hint of blush or embarrassment.

"But I have heard the chin-wag about all of your suitors, especially as regards Slippery Slope. Simon. Word is he's sweet on you, and you----"

Humour was Jonathan's way of dealing with stress.

"Why, however did you know I was fond of Slippery? Are you a seer?" They giggled. "In reality my father ran him off at the business end of his trusty

blunderbuss. As far as I know it was the only time he had resorted to the blunderbuss, for as you know, his persuader of choice is his pitchfork, which he has used on all of the others."

"All of the others? I knew there were others, but all of the others? For heavenly day's sake how many are there?"

"There were many, I have to admit, but the pitchfork was a potent persuader. And I may add, my father's even allowing you to sit on the far end of the bench is his peculiar way of bestowing his blessing."

"Blessing! Then I would hate to be on his wrong side! A blessing in disguise I assume." But he felt a glow of contentment and happiness well up inside.

"Piffle! He likes you. He'll come around. It will take time for him to realize you don't intend to take me away from him."

"It could be he sees the writing on the wall and I'm the best of a sorry lot."

"Oh good---- You are either too modest or too simple and I suspect the latter."

Jonathan studied the ground in front of him and remained silent for a time.

"What?" asked Phebe.

"I was only thinking, if we, if we were attached and----"

"Attached? You mean married? Are you proposing to me?"

"Wha . . . ? No, I only meant----"

"You're not proposing?"

"No, I, well I would if you wanted----"

"Hah!" Phebe burst out. "Such an easy mark! I can humbug you whenever I want, just as you do to me. I can play the same game, and I may be better at it than you. Don't underestimate me Mr Gorgius!"

Fluffy approached Jonathan, flattened back her ears, and growled lowly and menacingly.

"Now Fluffy," said Phebe, picking her up, "be still. He can be vexatious but he's not so bad."

"Thank you madam," Jonathon grumped. "Why does the wretched creature dislike me so?"

"Because she's jealous. She knows you are about to steal me from her, and what a Casanova you are."

He felt himself melt slightly, like butter in the sun, and he fell back farther in his corner of the bench. Outdone by a girl and a cat. Defeated.

Phebe petted Fluffy. "Oh stop moping Gorgeous. We'll get things sorted, and if in a year or two we did become attached, as you so queerly put it, we would deal with any obstacles then. Maybe Father could come with us and----"

"Come with us?! Oh have some mercy!"

"Calm yourself. I have never seen you like this. Settle down or I will put Fluffy back on you."

"But he would still have Garrison!"

Garrison had been helping her father around the farm.

"Garrison? I don't believe you know father at all."

"Apparently not."

"First of all they are not close. On father's scale of one to ten, Garrison is a three. Or two, or on occasion one. Oh, not that he doesn't like Garrison, but

they have nothing in common. Nothing at all. No sirree. And two, I am certain father is aware, deep within, that his poor, abject neighbor will come to no good. At best he will be a ne'er do well, and at worst he will come to a tragic, even fatal and premature end."

"Mercy!" Jonathan shrugged resignedly. "Anyway," he concluded, "we will face our future when it arrives."

As he walked home the *we will face our future when it arrives*, rang in his head, but to offset the clanging was the sublime prospect of his life with Phebe. Birds sang more loudly and cheerfully, butterflies fluttered in extraordinary bliss, a cow mooed with delight, and even old, sour, neighbor Flynn waved and smiled. My, how bewitching Phebe was.

Chapter Two

Jonathan's life flows blissfully, interesting people abound, community activities flourish, neighbors squabble, . . . , but he is not unaware of the harshness of life and the travails of others.

Jonathon woke up and looked confusedly around. Then he remembered he had stopped hoeing turnips and was lying on a hayrick resting and enjoying the warm summer sun. What had happened? A dream, or fugue----?

Hoeing turnips was a task Jonathan enjoyed. The sun was bright, the insects were few, and the wind was just sufficient to wipe the sweat from his brow. Life was good.

There was an art to turnip hoeing, and it was an art not easily learned, or never learned. He had learned it; Garrison had not, and he never would. The technique was obvious nevertheless. One had to keep the blade sharp, do only one row at a time, slice the weeds with the blade as level with the ground as possible, and most of all never nick the turnips, as in time they bled like people. Most people, speaking of people, didn't care for turnips unless there was a food shortage, and there were often food shortages in the cities. For many there were perpetual food shortages. Jonathan, however, liked turnips to the point where his mother had once laughingly held up his appetite for them as yet another indication of his eccentricity. Her pointing out of his quirks was her way of complimenting him, as she saw all of his idiosyncrasies as gifts from above and signs of intelligence and wit, whether they were or no; and Jonathan had to admit to himself she was--purposefully or not--influencing him to turn more eccentric. Still, his eccentricities were mild and he had not taken on any hint of reputation in the area. He would keep it that way.

"Yo-ho!" came from far away and Jonathan could see even from an eighth of a mile away it was his best, yea possibly only friend, Simon Slope. Phebe was so much more than a friend that she----

Jonathan hoed another thirty feet down the field, then he stood leaning on his hoe as Simon drew near. He never called Simon Slippery Slope, and Simon never called him Gorgeous.

"Hello to you," Jonathan greeted as Simon came close. "And how do you do old chap? What brings you----?" He stopped and stared at the dark-purple swelling on his friend's upper left cheek. "What in the name of all that's---- So he's at it again is he? You didn't fall down an hit a rock did you?"

"It's not so bad. Looks worse than it is."

"Indeed it looks pretty bad."

Everyone knew Simon's father, Glazer, laid into him now and again.

"This time he's gone too far!" Jonathan threw down his hoe. "I'm going to go over there and----"

"Don't!" exclaimed Simon. "He's been drinking and he'll cane you too. He's too strong for you. For both of us. I'll wait until he sleeps it off." He held Jonathan by the shoulders.

"Then I'll get my father to teach him a lesson. He's old but in his heyday he was a prizefighter, and he's as strong as an ox. He could swat your father like a fly!"

Simon gripped Jonathan's shoulders tighter. "I know, but in the end it would only make matters worse."

"It can't get worse!"

"He only lays into me when he's blind, otherwise he's one of the best people you could ever----"

"You always say that."

"I confess I do, but it's true. Usually I leave until he comes around from his drinking, but this time he caught me by surprise. Normally I can handle him, and anything you or anyone else might do would only make my situation worse. Anyways your father could easily kill him. He could very well. They have never liked one another."

"Would that be so bad?"

"For your father, yes. I would not like to see him spend the rest of whatever time he has left incarcerated."

Simon's mother, Mildred, had died when he was only five years old, and that was when Glazer had taken to drink, a remedy at which he excelled. Fortunately for Simon his father had not begun flogging him until a year ago, and why he had begun had been a mystery until it had come to be known throughout the community how Glazer had taken up with a local widow whose husband had wasted away in a long, miserable demise. That, then, led to a further mystery; why would Glazer have begun beating Simon? Why, when his father's trysts should have been comforts, or would have at least been distractions? Simon had once speculated to Jonathan how his father was seized with bouts of self reproach over his dalliances with widow Bump. He had been pretty sure Sadie Bump herself was not the cause of his father's tirades; she was well-known and well-liked by all, and if she had any significant fault at all it was that she had over the years been somewhat overly-liked by gentlemen friends. Perchance she was still too-liked, but no one had said anything to that effect; not even in the pubs, where truth would eventually out, and often where too many truths were outed. Could it be Glazer only suspected such infidelities and took his suspicions out on Simon?

"You could stay with us for a while," Jonathan offered.

Simon looked down at his shoes. "Thank you, but it will be better if I stay at home. I can tell when he's about to go off on a fuddle, so I pack some things so as to be ready to leave when I see him coming home. I----"

"Well first off, that plan didn't seem to work very well."

Simon kicked at a turnip. "I didn't see him----"

"And second, where do you go?"

"Oh, sleep in somebody's rick, or under a tree if it's not too cold or raining cats and dogs."

"You cuckoo!" Jonathan picked up his hoe and waved it over his head as if to thump Simon with it. "You don't have to move in with us forever! Only for a

few days until your father dries out. I won't have it! You, sleeping in a stack of hay or under a tree. For shame! You will stay here!"

Simon backed up a step. "Well perhaps in your barn, if you have no objection to it."

"Barn?" Jonathan advanced, still waving his hoe. "I do object. I won't hear of it, nor will my parents, for whom I may speak. You will stay in our home as any decent person would, and that's an end of it."

Simon stepped back again and Jonathan saw a tear in one of his eyes. "Alright then, I will. Now I must go home and see to my father."

He turned and started to walk away.

"Home?" blurted Jonathan. "Are you addled? Your home is that way." He pointed in a different direction.

Simon stopped and turned back. "Oh, I know, but I can't go through old man Moss's place. Last time I was there he took after me with a muskatoon and I almost fouled my trousers. Worst of it was, there was Phebe laughing at me. It was the worst day of my life. Just as well though, she would never have anything to do with someone like me anyhow. Besides, I hear she's sweet on you."

"Sweet on----? No, not sweet on, but we do see each other when time permits."

Simon frowned. "Word is that time permits quite often. What puzzles me is how you get by her father, Charles."

"Oh, I also wonder also. It's one of life's unknowns. But I have speculated that I am the least objectionable of the immoral rakes who show up. And it was a blunderbuss."

"Huh?"

"The gun. It is a blunderbuss, not a muskatoon."

"Oh. Well. What a relief. I would rather be shot with a blunderbuss than a"

Chapter Three

Yet, and yet, there resides in the depths of Jonathan's mind an phantasm which he scarcely recognizes. He could not have described the phantasm even if he had been more distinct. If he could have, he would have seen it as a mild discontent. Why discontent? In time it comes clear; he has reached an age when he begins to ponder his future.

In the meantime----

Two miles away from the Gorgeous farm lay the farm of Torger Vigeland, a Norwegian who had emigrated from his old county about the time Jonathan was born.

In many respects Torger was every Norwegian, even though Jonathan had never seen any other Norwegians before. Torger and his wife Hildegaard were peas in a pod in looks; tall, blond, slim, with eyes bluer than the brightest of blue skies. Hilde was nearly as tall as Torger, and she was as beautiful a woman as anyone had ever seen, with a clear complexion and rosy-red cheeks, buxom build, and hair blond to the point of appearing almost white. Torger resembled his wife in appearance, but his hair and skin were darker and his eyes were more penetrating. His main distinction--which set him apart from everyone, not only from Hilde, was his Roman nose. It added two dimensions to his appearance, but not at the same time. The first was regal looks, and the second was ferocity; and both seemed to reflect his mood depending on circumstance. Most area people hoped for the first--good looks--because Torger was not one to be around when he was in his fierce stage; when he was likely to go on and on about how his ancestors had been Vikings centuries ago, how he felt like a Viking most of the time, and how he wished he could have been a Viking and could have sailed around raping, pillaging, burning, Not only that, when he was in his cups he was difficult to understand; *this* and *that* became *dis* and *dat*, *Viking* became *Wiking* and such, to where some who knew him thought he had a speech defect. Fortunately his Viking rants were only when he was drunk, and he drank very little. In his good-looks mode he was quiet and amiable.

Torger and Hildegaard had a daughter Jonathan's age--Marit--but no one knew much of her. She had not gone to his school, and she was seldom seen. Those who had caught glimpses of her, including Jonathan, were awestruck by her loveliness. She was a younger image of her mother, but with one significant difference; she possessed her father's Roman nose. The feature, far from being a defect, which in women it could have been, was an asset. It imparted on her a regal, noble appearance.

As with Phebe, many a young lad had attempted to worm his way into her company, and all had failed due to Torger's ferocity. His ferocity when imbibing--which he usually did when some rake was sniffing around his daughter--was terrible. Moreover Torger was even more persuasive in his protection of Marit

than Charles Moss was with Phebe. Community opinion was that he was bent on keeping her in the family fold for the rest of her life, and the equally common opinion was that his endeavor would naturally last as long as his life. In any case her life would be miserable.

Little did Marit know--how could she?--that Simon Slope had designs on her. Firm designs and honorable intentions. Having been put off by Phebe Moss, he had now turned to an even more challenging undertaking; winning the heart of a damsel in distress. In her high castle she was his Rapunzel. It would be a daunting endeavor and Jonathan had strongly hinted that it was an impossible one; nevertheless Simon was resolute despite all obstacles. And significant obstacles they were. First was Simon's personal aspect; and there he was not stellar. On the other hand he wasn't hard to look at either. Then there were his circumstances, and they were not capital either, but they were the norm locally, and anyway how could Marit know of anything outside her small circle? And so on. And in time Simon came to see himself as an gallant English knight on a white horse fighting for the one he loved who would, when he had succeeded in carrying her off, would share with him a life of love and bliss. A poor, simple mist of fiction, but it was the best he could conjure and put words to.

Jonathan had had conversations with Simon regarding their female designs, and while Jonathan's plans were more organized and far-reaching, Simon's were limited; limited to the point where he had no forethought at all beyond his immediate goals.

Jonathan and Simon lay in the grass beneath one of Simon's father's apple trees. Jonathan hoped a Newtonian apple would fall on his head and jog him to plan his future after he--he and Phebe--left to face their future together. He had strongly considered business, but that was as far as he had gotten, other than ruling out other options like farming, teaching, menial office jobs, He had entertained thoughts of becoming a writer of fiction, and as an admirer of Jonathan Swift he could emulate him and grown wealthy as well, but Simon had discouraged him in not-at-all uncertain terms bordering on insult, especially when he had unveiled to Simon his crack-brained idea of writing about a writer who is writing about a writer.

As indecisive as he stood though, he was ahead of Simon.

"I am waiting for an apple to drop on my head!" Jonathan suddenly blurted out.

"Whaaa? An apple to hit you on your head? Why, whatever for?"

Jonathan looked up at the large, red apple directly above him and willed it to fall.

"So I have an inspiration as to what to do with the rest of my and Phebe's lives, that's what."

"Ha!" Simon chortled. "That again. Rest easy, you'll know it when the time comes, and besides don't be so sure Phebe will----"

"There you go again," Jonathan interrupted good-naturedly. "We always plow the same ground, and I always tell you that part is in the bag. Each time I visit Phebe I can tell old Charles is softening. I venture to say he's even beginning to like me."

Simon waved away a bee. "As I indicated previously, it could be he simply

sees you as the best of a mediocre lot. Mind you I don't say it to offend you. I hope you're right, but all he has to look ahead to being left alone and----"

"Phebe told him we would never leave him alone, and that's the reason he has mellowed. And I'm not naive enough to fancy he's too dumb to know the writing is on the wall. It's only a matter of course until I get completely into his good graces." Jonathan shooed away the bee. "As I have said any number of times, it's you we out to be talking about."

"Bosh! There you go again, worrying, and if you can't find something in your own life to natter about you go on about someone else."

Just then the apple fell on Jonathan's head. "Ow! That hurt!" He sat up and looked about for the it.

Simon burst out laughing, got to his knees, and picked up the bright-red culprit. He presented it to Jonathan.

"How fortuitous," said Jonathan.

"How what?"

"Unexpected luck. Now I am inspired, and I look forward to sharing my inspiration with you." He chuckled.

"Shit." Simon grabbed the apple and threw it away with more emphasis than was required. "I suppose you're going to launch into one of your lectures on the necessity of my planning my life out from now until I am lying in bed giving my last blows, or lying in some ditch, or at the bottom of the sea, or wherever it will all end."

"Well," chuckled Jonathan, "I'll tell you what, if you go over to the Gypsy camp down by the Smith place and have them foretell your fate--just the part about how long you'll live--and you guarantee, the prediction, in bond, then I will come up with a plan."

"What do you mean by *in bond*?"

"Why, that you will pay me a certain amount of money if you don't reach the age they portend!" He laughed heartily.

Simon's jaw dropped. He had obviously never seen such an outburst. He slid to the trunk of the tree, leaned back against it, lowered his head, and closed his eyes.

Several minutes later, *bonk*, an apple hit him right on the back of his head.

"Ouch! And how can I pay the bond if I am dead?"

"Did it take an apple on the pate for you the figure that out?"

Chapter Four

Jonathan does his best to put himself in Phebe's father, Charles's, good graces. Months pass with little success. Only mild toleration.

Another half year passes and Charles grows, to a degree, physically infirm.

Jonathan was astounded. As he was about to enter the barn a far-away figure caught his eye, and as it drew close he saw it was Phebe, running full-tilt toward him. He threw down his pitchfork and hurried in her direction, knowing whatever the cause of her appearance, it wasn't good.

They met in the middle of her father's corn field, and she was in tears and more distraught than he had ever seen her.

"It's Father! He has fallen down the stairs and he can't move! He----"

"Is he conscious?"

"Yes, mostly. Oh, come quickly!" She grasped his hand and pulled him along.

"Can he move?" Jonathan huffed as they ran.

"No. Oh, hurry!" She stumbled and fell, but Jonathan helped her to her feet and they ran on, and he could barely keep up with her.

At last they reached their destination and without pausing Phebe passed through the open front door. Jonathan followed, and there, in the living room, at the foot of the stairs lay Charles, still, and curled up, with one leg at an unusual angle.

"Father! Father, wake up!" Phebe went to her knees and shook him by his shoulder, and he winced in pain and opened his eyes.

Jonathan nudged her aside and knelt beside them. "Sir, can you move?"

Charles merely looked up at him blankly. He was exceedingly pale and languid.

"I say, can you move?" Jonathan persisted. "Are you able to move your arms?"

Charles lifted the arm he was not lying on.

"Good. And your legs?"

Charles moved the leg that was not bent askew, and he was plainly in great pain.

Jonathan put his hand on Phebe's shoulder. "Go upstairs and bring down anything upon which we may lay him. A mattress, quilts, pillows; anything. Put them over there by the wall." He indicated the wall nearest where her father lay. "Do it quickly."

She was upstairs in a flash.

"Mr Moss," said Jonathan, "we will move you to a more comfortable position."

"Ane posin wi be mere comberbil."

"Excuse me?"

Charles stiffened. "Any position will be more comfortable."

"Oh. Yes indeed."

Phebe came back down the stairs kicking a mattress before her and carrying two pillows and two plush quilts. She placed the mattress, with one quilt atop, where Jonathan had pointed.

"Now, Mr Moss, we will move you. But first," he glanced at Phebe, "do you have any spirits?"

"Spirits? Only a little rum."

"Under the floorboard near the head of my bed, and make it quick," Charles snapped.

Phebe raised an eyebrow, then hurried upstairs. Charles managed a chuckle.

She returned with a small blue bottle. "What is this?"

"Tis an anodyne. Get a short glass of odd and put four drops in it," Charles ordered.

Phebe did as she was told, and Jonathan lifted Charles' head.

"Ahh," Charles breathed after he had downed the rum. "Well worth the fall, I should say." He smiled at Jonathan for the first time ever. "Now give me time to, eh, compose myself preparatory to you dragging me about."

Jonathan put down his future father-in-law's head and they all waited.

They waited, and waited, and just when Jonathan was about ready to take the bull by the horns Charles spoke.

"Time. I ain't gonna like it, but it's time."

Jonathan and Phebe traded glances.

"Alright then," said Jonathan, "but we're not going to like this any more than you will."

Charles gave him a menacing look. "The hell you won't. You wouldn't trade places for anything and you know it."

"Hmmm. Well, I'll take you by your shoulders and Phebe will handle your legs. We'll do it fast. It will be excruciating either way, slow or fast, so we may as well go fast. You have been in farm accidents and you have felt such pain. And I know you once fought my father in the ring."

"Huh. And I lost. I take it you don't know that taking heavy blows to the head isn't as painful as most regular people think. It mostly makes you dizzy. The body blows are the ones that----"

"Never mind. Now to the business at hand," Jonathan cut him off. He moved behind Charles' head and Phebe knelt at his feet. Charles turned pale.

"Wait!" cried Charles. "Stop. I'm not ready. I needs throw down another drink. Make it quick. And six drops this time."

Phebe mixed another potion and her father downed it in one swig. "Ahhh! Now to let it soak in," said he.

Jonathan and Phebe sat side by side on the bottom step of the stairs. "I can't wait much longer," whispered Phebe.

"Well we can't fiddle around forever," said Jonathan coldly. They took their places, and he braced himself. "On the count of three. One. Two. Three." They lifted and dragged their patient as expeditiously as they could, and as they did Phebe straightened her father's bent leg. Charles screamed, then went silent.

When it was over Charles was delirious with his eyes half open, and Phebe

lay insensible on the floor beside him. Jonathan fell back into a plush chair, unable to tend to either of them.

Long moments passed, then Phebe stirred, cast her eyes around until she focused on Jonathan, and she sat up. "Is it done?"

Jonathan nodded. "You were strong."

"We both were."

"But it is not we who need fortitude now; it is he."

"Indeed."

Jonathan rose from the chair. "I am reluctant to ask, but have it in you to go and summon Dr Lorn?"

"I am on my way." Phebe stood up. "I am already on my way." She turned and ran out the door.

Old Dr Lorn lived on the edge of Guildford, four miles away, and before Jonathan had a chance to help her, Phebe had hurried a horse out of the barn, jumped from a barrel onto its bare back, and thundered away man-style. Jonathan shouted after her, but she was gone. He shook his head and went back inside.

Back in the chair into which he had previously fallen Jonathan waited for Charles to wake up, and he mixed another dose of restorative just in case. He could tell even through the clothing how Charles' leg had swollen, but he was not about to remove any clothing without the doctor's or Phebe's go-ahead. No doubt his relationship with Charles was still touch and go. As he sat he was tempted to take a dram or two of the medicine himself, but he had never been a drinker, and from what he had seen of the general population over the years he never would be, nor would he take any of the drops.

A clock ticked somewhere. A fly buzzed. A cat entered and meowed but it was not Fluffy. And a dog barked outside. But Jonathan was almost oblivious. He leaned back and closed his eyes, attempting to block out everything. It would be some time until Phebe and the doctor returned, and he hoped to blazes she had found Dr Lorn at home. The worst that could happen would be that she would return alone; in which case he would be the doctor, and as such he would be the lightning attracter for Charles' pained wrath. Yet as the de facto doctor he would have leave to minister to his future father-in-law in whatever way he wanted to, since live or die--or anything in between--no one could fault him for trying. Except for Charles. Ah, well, nothing to be done until Phebe returned.

"Ohhhhhh!!!"

Jonathan sprang up from he knew not where, and in a moment he recognized where he was.

"Ahhhhh!"

Charles was in terrible pain, and Phebe had not returned.

"Ohh!" cried Charles. "More medicine."

Jonathan took up from the floor the potion he had prepared and gave it to his patient. Charles's hands shook as drank the contents of the glass. "More," he demanded. "Tis indeed kill or cure."

"No more, sir, for fear of you dying from the remedy rather than from the injury."

Charles glowered but remained silent, and the invisible clock struck four.

Jonathan went to the kitchen window and looked out but there was no sign of anyone. He returned to his chair at a loss as to what to do, if anything. Maybe he could talk to Charles in order to help him take his mind off his pain. It also occurred to Jonathan that doing so would ingratiate himself.

"The doctor will be here directly," said Jonathan.

"Humph. That quack. I have never liked old Lorn. All he does is walk around with his nose up, putting on airs. He's not fit to minister to beasts, much less humans." He shifted slightly. "I'll wind up with Phebe pushing me around in a bath chair for the rest of my life, but thankfully it won't be for long." He was uncharacteristically pessimistic.

"You mean a wheelchair?"

"Um? Well whatever you young people call them nowadays. I'm resigned to my miserable fate."

"Oh, now, now Mr Moss, it won't come to that. I'll see to it you----"

"You will see to nothing."

But Jonathan detected a note of appreciation in Charles's complaint.

"Tell me about your scrape up with my father," invited Jonathan.

"Fight? Don't mean my pummeling? Trying to distract me eh? Well, it wasn't my best fight. "I ran and dodged for a couple of rounds, however in the third or fourth round he caught up with me and hit me hard in the breadbasket, then he must have hit me in the head for the next thing I knew people were standing over me and your father was kneeling holding my head up, and I saw tears in his eyes. He is a----"

"Hark! I hear something." Jonathan ran to the window again, and sure enough there appeared Dr Lorn in his chaise, with Phebe beside him and her horse tied behind. They pulled up and the doctor moved to help Phebe down, but she brushed him off. He seized his black bag and strode to the door, but she held him back.

"Doctor, let me enter first and grease the skids."

He smiled down at her. "As you wish."

Phebe drew close to her father and went to her knees. "Now Father, I am aware you have had differences with Dr Lorn, but this is not the time to bring them up. And whether you know it or not he has no animosity toward you." She patted his shoulder.

"That sawbones is----"

"Come, come. Would you rather I send him away so you can lie here in pain and misery, and possibly die? Would you really do that?" One of her tears fell on his face and he flinched as if he had been struck.

"Well, send him in then."

The doctor knelt by Charles. "Now, then, what seems to be the trouble?"

"Seems to be? Seems to be? I'm lying here with----"

"Calm down. What is the worst of your injuries?"

"It's my left leg. It got bent sideways, and it hurts like Hades."

"Hmmm. It's straight now. Can you move it?"

"I don't believe so. It's all swollen and----"

"Let's get those drawers off." He removed his patient's shoes. "You may prefer to look away," said he to Phebe.

"I've seen such things," she blushed.

"Very well, you take the legs and I will undo the belt, then we'll pull off the----"

"Ohhh!" groaned Charles.

"Now," said Dr Lorn, and off came the drawers. "Well done."

The leg was swollen and greenish-blue.

Charles groaned again, and Dr Lorn commenced poking, prodding, and bending his leg.

"Where is the worst pain?"

"Hip."

"I don't think anything is broken. There may be some torn muscles and ligaments but not as severe as----"

Charles moaned.

"The healing will be protracted, and you will be an invalid throughout. Everything will have to be done for you, including moving you," he glanced doubtfully at Phebe, "personal needs," he glanced at her again, "and so on. I don't know how----"

"I will manage," said Phebe, and she in turn looked at Jonathan who nodded.

"I will also be at her disposal," added Jonathan. "There is farm work to be done as well."

"But how can you manage all of that when you have your own farm to run?" asked Phebe.

"Fiddlesticks, I am capable enough, and if it is more than I had bargained for I will call on Simon for help. He's a practical sort and he doesn't have so very much to do on their farm anyway. Don't fret."

Phebe smiled weakly at him, and the invisible clock chimed.

Jonathan added, "My first task is to set up a wheelchair, and I believe I have the makings for one."

"What a jewel you are," whispered Phebe. "My better angel. My cherubim."

"I heard that, my dear," said Charles.

"And I am glad of it," said Phebe. "I only desire you to appreciate what he----"

Her father uttered something undistinguishable.

Chapter Five

Charles softens.

The wheelchair Jonathan had fashioned was strong, if not elaborate. The only drawback was that the wheels were not large enough for the user to wheel himself, and Phebe was obliged to push her father about. She never complained. Jonathan had constructed a ramp over the front steps but someone always had to help her on both the ups and the downs of each outing.

As for personal needs, Charles had learnt to stand on one leg, turn, and sit on a large bucket. He would never on any account allow Phebe to empty the bucket; that was Jonathan's job. One of his jobs.

Jonathan's main employ was doing Charles' farm work, which he was ready and willing to do. Neither his father's farm nor the Moss farm were large and he had plenty of time for both.

Jonathan's father and Phebe's father had always maintained an harmonic relationship. Doubtless Elbert had no bones to pick. In that case there was no cause for concern on either family as to Jonathan's assisting of Charles. Or if there were it would have been on the part of Charles who may have appeared to be chagrined at being on the receiving end of the situation.

One fine day when Jonathan was sitting on one end of Phebe's bench and she on the other, with Charles in his rolling chair in front of them, Charles blurted out, "Young man I do appreciate your help, but I'm sorry I will be unable to pay you as----"

Charles was caught by surprise. "Why sir, you shall pay me nothing."

"What? What do you mean by that? You cannot mean Charles Moss does not pay his way! A harsh allegation I must say! I have never----"

"Hush, Father, that is not his meaning."

"Absolutely not," Jonathan added, "I meant to say I will not allow you to pay me, for if I did I would be mortified for doing what any decent neighbor would do. Don't misconstrue my intentions!"

Charles shaded his eyes with one hand and was silent for a moment.

Thunder rumbled in the west behind them, and the air was heavy and sultry. A neighbor--old Grimes--urged his horse on as he passed by trying to beat the storm.

Then, "I do beg your pardon. Your meaning had eluded me, that's all."

"Speak no more of it. I am happy to do anything I can."

Charles lifted his hand and peeked at Jonathan. "There is the other though."

"Other?"

Charles nodded toward Phebe.

"I'm sorry," Jonathan, perplexed, "I don't get your drift."

"I mean I am astute enough to know you're not helping me totally out of the goodness of your desolate heart." He again nodded toward his daughter.

"Father!" Phebe gasped.

Jonathan raised his hand to cut her off. "There, there." He turned to Charles. "I am hurt by your insinuation, however would that be so bad?"

Charles jolted as if he had been struck, then, again, he sank back into his chair. "Huh. Well I take it I will have to prepare myself to live alone sometime."

"Live alone?" Jonathan and Phebe voiced as one. "Far from it," said Jonathan. "We would never----"

"The thought of leaving you alone never crossed our minds," Phebe interrupted. "What a muggins! I am of the opinion you have been into the contents of your little blue bottle again."

She laughed, and Jonathan joined in. To their surprise and delight Charles managed a chuckle, weak as it was. The ice was broken.

The sun came from behind one of the clouds above, and a prismatic beam fell on Charles; and Jonathan thought if he were to become a writer he could never have adequately captured the scene.

Then the thunder broke louder, the sun disappeared, and the wind kicked up. It was time to go inside.

In the ensuing weeks Charles became stronger. Despite his significant mellowing as regards Jonathan, it would yet be an uphill climb undoubtedly taking months if not years, as if he were pushing a huge boulder up an incline, and Jonathan and Phebe were at the bottom of the hill hoping and praying he would reach the top, and that he would not come tumbling back down, boulder and all, to crush all three of them. If the worst happened, Jonathan brooded, he would go under willingly, as life without Phebe would be unbearable; but he would succumb only if he could push her out of the way in a final, grand, heroic act. Of course, he had to admit, she would not want to live without him, so God, was he going mad as a hatter? He longed for a good, stiff drink of Irish whiskey, but he didn't drink, therefore he didn't know if it would help anyway.

Jonathan and Phebe were sitting on the grass beneath the apple tree under which he and Simon had often sat. Charles had relented.

Some kind of butterfly alighted on Phebe's hair and Jonathan had stopped her from brushing it away.

"Let it sit. It becomes you."

"What kind is it?" asked she.

"Who can tell? They all look the same to me. It's yellow and black."

"You will never be an artist."

"I should think not."

"He will come to see you as a son."

"Who? The butterfly?"

She threw a half-rotten apple at him but missed on purpose. "Yes, the butterfly, you ninny."

"I already have a father."

"You shall have two."

"I will be glad of it. My father would have been quite enough, but two will

be even better."

"I heard Elbert was quite a bruiser back then."

"In his defense, the common opinion of him is it was only in the ring where he was a bruiser, and he never took it personally. He was only in it for the money, and I hear tell he took it easy on most of his opponents. Did just enough to win. In any case I have never heard him say anything ill of your father, and in fact I do believe he holds him in some high regard."

"Really? Well. I shall tell him that."

"Fine."

"Yes indeed, anything to ingratiate you." Phebe threw another apple past him. "Unless you are a ladies' man and leave me and my father here hoeing cabbage."

Jonathan retrieved the apple and threw it back at her with some irritation. "You think you're amusing, but you are not. Not by half. Do you take me for----?"

"Oh, am sorry. Forgive me." She crawled to him and leaned on his shoulder.

"Are you not afraid your father will see us?" grumbled Jonathan.

"No! I want him to. I will never again be afraid of that. And sitting like this where he can see us is my way of proving my everlasting love for you. Despite your being so peevish."

"I don't see myself as a ----"

"Oh, yes, you can be quite ill tempered at times, but nothing I can't deal with. Shakespeare tamed the shrew, and I shall tame you."

"I don't---- I don't think he----"

"Oh, let us talk of something else. Children. Do you like children?"

"I don't know. They are always just *there*, to be seen and not heard."

"I mean in married life."

"I hadn't thought about it. Don't all married people have children though?"

"Not all. Some don't want them."

"How can they not? I mean to say, eh, how can they avoid having children? Unless they are incapable or are chaste. And I never pictured myself as being chaste. Oh, I mean in the future. I am now. You embarrass me, Phebes."

"Good for me. And I am too. Now tis you who mortify me. Anyway, have you taken me for a prude?"

"I don't know. I wouldn't put it that way. And you needn't have told me you are, you know----"

"I should have been named Chastity," tittered Phebe.

Chapter Six

A dance of love. Kindly machinations.

Jonathan would never dance the polka. He had once told Simon--in strict confidence, and upon pain of a black eye--he would rather eat dog leavings. Not food, but from the rear end of the dog. Simon had responded by saying he would be happy to serve them to him on a platter, and had nearly gotten the threatened black eye. Further, when Jonathan had suggested that if Simon were so keen on polkas he could dance with Phebe, if he weren't such a rake and a rounder, and he himself had been in danger of receiving a black eye from Simon.

The country dance took place in Milton Smith's barn. Milton and his wife, Beatrice, were good, stolid people. Such was the sum of them; common in every way; looks, size, disposition, Their only distinguishing trait was more of a circumstance than a personal characteristic; the circumstance of being childless. Childless in a community of fertile neighbors. Some wag had observed how their dancing dexterity was in compensation for their barrenness, which observation naturally referred to Beatrice.

There was a large crowd, including Charles, who had graciously allowed Phebe to attend. Allowed, though, was not the word, because she had empowered herself beyond asking. As it was, Charles had felt compelled to attend so as to watch over her, as any caring father would do.

Jonathan sat as alone as he could, on an improvised bench at the back of the barn. He didn't mind Phebe dancing with others, and in fact he was relieved. He would only dance waltzes, and he didn't even like doing that.

Above him somewhere an owl was having a fit. Either it didn't care for dances either and was protesting, or, to give it the benefit of a doubt, it was possibly joining in the festivities. Jonathan had to consider another possibility; it was simply a booby. He liked owls, and despite others' not putting much stock in their reputation for being intelligent, he persisted in imparting uncommon mental acuity on them. Or could it be this one was simply an ignoramus?

The band comprised a fiddle player, a drummer banging on two inverted metal tubs, and an accordionist. The fiddle player was a skinny old guy with white, wispy hair and a long, drooping mustache. The drummer was hard to discern as he sat in the shadows behind the other players, perhaps with reason. And the accordion player reminded Jonathan of an Italian organ grinder. Or the grinder's monkey with a dark wig and a glued-on mustache. In the event, they weren't bad musicians.

The owl spoke up again, vociferously, and Jonathan still didn't get his drift. Or hers. The only clue to the owl's speech was, maybe, anyone who didn't care for the music could leave.

Phebe came to him with her hand outstretched; her sign a waltz was coming. He forced a smile and led her to the dancing area. On the way he

noticed Torger and Hildegard Vigeland were there, sitting with their daughter, Marit, squeezed tightly between them. Across from them stood Simon, and Jonathan couldn't help signaling to him to go over and ask Marit to dance. He was surprised to see Simon take his advice and stride across to where the Vigelands were sitting, but surprise turned to dismay when Simon bowed to Mrs Vigeland, took her hand, and led her onto the dance floor. Further, Jonathan sympathized with Marit, who sat stone-still with a nonplussed look on her face. She then looked up at her father with tears in her eyes but it was impossible to ascertain his feeling. Jonathan felt his lips move, mouthing silently, "A pox on you Simon." And as he and Phebe commenced dancing he steered them toward Simon in order to deliver a glare of reprimand. Which he did, but it was lost due to Hilde's delight at being asked to dance. The only positive part of the miserable episode was, like Hilde, Phebe was lost in the moment. "Dritt," Jonathan said absently. It was the only Norwegian word he knew. It meant *shit*.

So he and Phebe danced on, and as the music stopped, the owl--Jonathan assumed it was the owl; it could have been another bird--defecated on his head.

Back in the barn after having held his head under the water pump, Jonathan sat in his old place in back and watched his neighbors. Neighbor watching was interesting, if not enlightening. Some in the crowd had been in their cups; several to the point of collapse. One even persisted in falling down and getting up so many times that two large and temperate men escorted him outside, and after he returned twice they tied him to a tree with a Gordian-like knot which would have been difficult for even a teetotaler to undo. There he sat, only waking now and then to shout profanities.

So Jonathan sat, and the only interruption to his sitting was when Simon, having imbibed some courage, came and sat beside him.

"Well, lay it on me," said Simon. "Call me a chicken and a nincompoop, and anything else you believe appropriate, for I am all of them in one."

"I will not," replied Johnathon. "We all have our weaknesses. I did have an idea though. I was, going to ask Marit to dance, and I don't think old Vigeland would have objected to me. Then I would have handed her over to you while I distracted her father."

"He most likely would have been distracted as he gave you a good thumping."

"Possibly, but not likely, as I have learned some of my father's fistic skills."

"But oh, no, you would have encouraged me to do what I had not the courage to do; come right out and ask Marit to dance even if old Vigeland would have beaten me to a pulp. And if he had, you would have nevertheless declared me the winner."

"The winner? How could I have----?"

"Oh, yes, I know you better than you know yourself. In some way you would have tried to convince me I had been the overall victor, and sooner or later the fair maiden would fall into my arms and pledge to be mine forever and ever. It's in your character to unfailingly come out on top and to see others do the likewise. Top dog and all. Don't deny it, for it's as true as----"

"Balderdash! You have been tickling your innards with too much of that, whatever you've been drinking."

"Gin! Mother's ruin. I have no mother, but I am ruined. Gin, gin, gin, it makes you want to sin!"

"Stop it Slippery. We'll discuss your cowardice tomorrow. Time for you to go home, and I'll lead the way for you, as you're in no condition to walk alone."

"Slippery? Why, you never call me Slippery. Cowardice? I'm not a coward, I am merely prudent."

"Whatever you say, but when you recover we will devise a plan. No, no, don't interrupt, for I know you are often averse to planning--want of forethought--but only to long-term life planning, and I am referring to a shorter-time plans as regards Marit. No, quit butting in. I am persuaded you're capable of some foresight, especially if you are able to see the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow.

With that Jonathan escorted Simon home. On the way his charge alternated between hushed melancholy and occasional outbursts of indignation directed at life's vicissitudes and unjustness. When they arrived Simon had enough sense to go to the barn where Jonathan deposited him on a pile of straw.

"But won't your father be alarmed when you don't show up at the house?" asked Jonathan.

"No," said Simon simply.

"Hmmm. Now don't forget, when you have regained possession of your wits--which may take several days, since you are unused to imbibing--we will formulate a plan."

"Plan? What---? Oh, yes, a plan." And Simon fell asleep.

Jonathan hastened back to the dance, and when he got there Phebe was in a greatly animated state.

"Where on earth have you been? I have been worried sick. I feared you had been accosted by ruffians, or fallen down a well, or----"

"Pooh! I just took Simon home."

"You should have told me!"

"I had my hands full, and----"

"Yet, you should have----"

"Yes, I should have. Forgive me."

"I'll see."

The owl screeched.

"Have I missed anything?" asked Jonathan.

"They enlivened things by throwing out two more inebriates, and when some lad asked Torger's daughter to dance, he and Torger got into a shoving match which your father and Hobart Cleaver had to break up. The poor girl. And . . ."

The musicians struck up their last song and some people danced while others started to leave.

Then a pip formed in Jonathan's mind. Would it be possible for him to befriend old Torger Vigeland, as he had Phebe's father? Then he could introduce Simon to them, thus enabling him to worm his way into their lives. Aha! The pip became a scheme, and Jonathan would bide his time, waiting for the right opportunity. Mayhap Torger would suffer some misfortune as had Charles Moss. Jonathan didn't wish it, but things happen. Better would be if some lesser reverse would befall the family and Phebe could come to the rescue, then he

could worm his way in; or he could persuade his pugilist father to have a friendly chat with Torger; or . . . Jonathan felt a pang of remorse, but only a faint pang.

Chapter Seven

A lonesome traveler. Poor Garrison.

Garrison--poor Garrison--was a wastrel. There was no getting around it. An out-and-out wastrel no matter how else one regarded him, and Jonathan's poor parents were at wit's end. As was Jonathan, who, in addition to loving his brother, had another concern; what would Elbert and Cordelia do with Garrison when he and Phebe left to seek their fortunes? How could they possibly cope? It should be Garrison who was their keeper in their old age, not the other way around. Worst of all there was no reasoning with Garrison; he had not the innate intellectual capacity to absorb all but the most basic of responsibilities, duties, and concepts of life.

So as Garrison matured--in age only--he became more intransigent. The best to be said of him--and it was said by not a few--was that he was not outright wicked. He was sinful, but not malevolent. And what were his parents to do with him? The common verdict was, they could do nothing other than let him fall victim to his own ways.

Jonathan gazed toward the Moss place. He was replacing a rear shoe on their riding horse, a middle-aged grey gelding named Gunpowder, but he found it hard to keep his mind on his work. The distance was too great for him distinguish people, but his imagination filled in the blanks, and Phebe was always outside puttering around, or inside stitching on something the local dressmaker had given her. Despite having liberated herself enough to be able to go wherever she desired, she limited her walks to his place out of deference to her father, and Jonathan generally did the same as regards her. The only---

A figure approached from behind the knoll south of their house. As he slowly drew near Jonathan saw he was gaunt and bent, and carried a bundle on a stick over right his shoulder. When he grew close he stopped and looked about.

"You got dogs?" asked he.

"Dogs? One. Why do you ask?"

"Last place I stopped they sicked a dog on me."

"What? Where?"

"Dunno. Back there," he waved. "I don't think he speaks English. I couldn't understand him, but I understood the dog. Looked like a wolfdog."

"Wolfdog? I thought they were mythical."

"They are not. This is the second one I've come across, so I can testify they are not."

"Are you hurt?"

"No, I staved 'im off with my stick, then hit 'im over the head with it, but it was a close thing."

"Torger Vigeland," Jonathan said. He motioned for the man to be seated on

the rough wooden bench in front of their house.

"I'm not a beggar," said the man as he went to the bench. "Least I didn't used to be. All I wanted was a bit to eat, then I would have been on my merry way."

"For heaven's sake! Someone should have a word with Mr Vigeland and I know just the man to do that." Just then out the door came his father.

"Father, I fervently wish you would have talk with Torger sometime."

Elbert's face twitched on top of his normal tic. It wasn't the first time Jonathan, or others, had asked him to force a better attitude on someone. "We'll see," muttered Ebert, and he sat down beside the visitor.

They were all silent as the stranger surveyed the farm.

After a polite pause Elbert asked, "Where you from?"

"Far north of here."

Following local convention Elbert was silent for a while, then they shook hands and introduced themselves. The man's name was Brown.

"Brown eh," said Elbert. "And may I have your given name?"

"Well, you see, I have only one name. Brown."

"Only one---- Gracious, how unusual. At all events I won't ask----"

"My parents argued so long about a name they never did come up with one. Wound up callin' me Brownny."

"Oh."

The man's hair and complexion matched the color of his name, thought Jonathan, partly due to grime. Unavoidable in his wandering circumstances.

"None of my nevermind anyway," said Elbert.

Dark storm clouds came up behind them, as always in the west, and thunder rumbled.

Then, "You a miner?" asked Elbert.

"Was. How could you tell?"

"I have known some miners. It takes its toll."

"It does. Got to where I couldn't pull my weight, and when that happens you're done." He pulled out a piece of white cloth and coughed softly into it.

"They use you up, and when you're worn thin out the door you go with not so much as a thank you or a by your leave. I ain't complainin' mind you. Lots of folks have it worse, and feeble as I am, I still have my underlying health." He coughed into his cloth again.

"Again, I don't mean to be nosy, but may I ask your destination?"

"South. Far away from the mines as I can get."

"Well you won't have far to go until you hit the ocean. Then what?"

"I'll jump in and drown myself," giggled Brown.

"Now, now."

"I'll find some kind of work in order to keep the wolf away from the door."

"Ha!" laughed Elbert. "You don't seem to have great success keeping wolves away."

Jonathan went inside and came back out followed by Cordelia who carried a plate of bread and butter with a large slice of cheese, and a cup of tea, which she handed to Brown.

"This will do something to keep the wolf away," said Cordelia.

Jonathan noticed again her beauty and elegance, and again he wondered

how his father had captivated her, as he had never seemed like the captivating type. As a matter of fact even as a young child Jonathan had detected an indefinable distance between them which had shrunk over the years but had not completely evaporated.

"How kind of you," said Mr Brown. "You cannot imagine how in need of sustenance I am."

Cordelia smiled.

"I can," replied Jonathan. He looked up at the sky, then at his father. "Its late in the day, and no time to send someone away into a coming storm." The thunder grew louder and lightning struck a mile or two away. Elbert nodded in assent at Jonathan.

Mr Brown could scarcely stop eating to protest, but he managed to do both at once. "No need thoo worry bout me, I can----"

"Twaddle," Jonathan cut him off. "We have a special place in the barn for just such occasions. It is as nice an accommodation as you would find in our house; clean, comfortable, and private. You shall rest there for as long as you like." Then it flashed to mind the possibility their guest would try to become a permanent guest, but just as quickly he felt Brown was not the type who would impose.

Cows and horses in a neighbor's pasture were uneasy as they always were before a storm, and they turned toward home.

After the traveling miner had made himself comfortable in the barn Jonathan and his father sat on the bench waiting for the storm which was not far behind them. Jonathan wondered what his father would say, or do, about Torger, if anything at all.

"Wham!! Lighting struck closer, but neither of them moved. It had been dry the whole year and they needed the rain.

"I hate to butt in," said Elbert softly. He was seen locally as an unofficial sheriff.

"I know. It puts you in a difficult position."

"If I only knew he was physically abusing his family."

"Who knows, but I have reason to believe he, intentionally or not, is exceedingly stern with his daughter. He keeps her completely secluded."

Elbert threw up his hands. "I'd best wait until something substantial turns up. If I overdo things I could wind up in the birdcage myself."

"Well and good, but I will report any mistreatment I see or hear of."

"Hum."

Ten minutes later they went inside.

Garrison. What to do with him? Jonathan had more than once discussed what they would do when his time to leave came and his brother no longer had his support. Phebe was obliged to stay and care for her father. Jonathan knew, as things stood, Elbert could, with the help of Cordelia, who remained able bodied and strong, control Garrison, but what about the future? Having a wayward and possibly irredeemable son posed a long-lasting challenge.

The whole thing was too complicated to contemplate while working, so Jonathan retreated to the cool sleeping area in the barn. Poor Mr Brown had

stayed for two nights, then he had departed as nobly and in as high spirits as he could display. Jonathan and his father had loaded him down with all the food as he could carry, and they had given him a pair of shoes which were far better than the worn-out ones he had arrived in. They had also forced on him a new waterproof oilskin cloth to be used while walking, and as an under and over cover while sleeping. And Jonathan had seen his father slip a few shillings into Brown's hand. They had not expected showings of gratitude, but heartfelt gratitude was what they were shown, along with a tear in each of their departing sojourner's eyes as he trudged stoically away.

Back to the present, and the future. Jonathan had always felt he had a logical top story, as only those of sensible mind do. No bats in his belfry. Clumpertons and crackbrains may assume they are artful, but by their very limitations they cannot possibly be. They are only underhanded.

Well, and then, on again to the problem ahead--Garrison--and Jonathan had to face two facts: first there may not be any remedial action that could possibly be successfully applied to his brother; and second, generally speaking--and taking into account Phebe's father--what would he and Phebe do when his time to leave came? How could he just up and leave? Perhaps it would be easy to leave Garrison, harsh as it sounded, because it was extremely likely his poor brother would do himself in after he departed. But what about the others, even if his own parents were well?

A mouse scurried across the floor. There were mice in the sleeping area, but then there were mice in all barns, and in most houses. Jonathan suspected that the invention of effective mouse traps would take years, maybe decades, but eventually some clever tinker would contrive something effective. Personally he guessed poisons would work better.

Jonathan wished there were someone to whom he could go for sound advice, but there was no one. His parents were sufficiently quick at ordinary things but not at higher levels. It would be of no use to consult Simon or any other of his cronys. Phebe would be the most likely adviser if she were not loaded down with cares of her own, primarily concerning her father, but also concerning--- In any case inasmuch as his destiny--whatever it would be--was her destiny, she was in a vague sense part of the problem. Oh, what was a poor way to view her to be sure, but it did get him to the bottom of the quandary. The contemplative quagmire.

Chapter Eight

Garrison, a lost soul.

One fine, clear, sunny, windless day Elbert came outside to where Jonathan was listlessly walking back and forth in the front yard.

"Jon, I am worried. Garrison didn't come home last night."

"I know," said Jonathan. "I am worried too." His father only called him Jon when he was very anxious.

A hare hopped from behind the house, saw them, and hopped away.

"One of us is going to have to go looking for him," said Elbert. "Now I'm not one to shirk, but considering the mood I'm in I don't feel I should be the one."

"Not if you are in one of your, eh, humours. Better I should go."

"Yes. I am in one of my humours as you put it, and I'm afraid I would do something rash."

Jonathan had been picking up rubbish and he threw a stick onto the pile. "I'll walk, as I doubt whether Garrison will be able to stay on a horse even if I'm riding with him. I couldn't manage a horse and him at the same time. It's only four miles to town."

"Umph. Be off then, and be careful. Better safe than sorry. If you're not back by this evening I shall come looking."

Jonathan fetched his walking stick from inside the house and set out. He looked glumly back at his father, who stood stock still and emotionless.

It was not a hot day, and it would have been a pleasant walk if not for the circumstances. After a while a stray, grey mongrel began to follow him. As it was a friendly creature Jonathan welcomed the company, and if he had been in a better frame of mind he would have conversed with him.

Poor, unfortunate Garrison. Jonathan had years ago realized his brother's condition was not his fault; it was innate. Better if he were dead and gone. Oh, lord no, shame on him for such a thought. Good grief! They had never been close, not even as young children when most children got along with each other simply because. There was no getting close to Garrison. He was in a world of his own, and nothing would change the peculiar world he had been born into. They, he and his father, had tried to alter--or altogether reconstruct--that false and poisonous psychical domain, and they had failed many times. It had been like trying to tame a horse that couldn't be tamed and was only fit for the glue factory or the mystery-sausage maker. Alas, it was not that straightforward as regards Garrison; he could not be disposed of in the glue factory, and Jonathan sarcastically opined he wasn't even good enough for that.

Walking briskly on, Jonathan tried to shift his thoughts away from the morbid and morose up a level to the merely glum; what would he discover of Garrison in Guildford? Where would he be? Would he even be alive? Probably passed out in a pub, or lying in a gutter? Injured, half dead? Or well and

combative, refusing to come home? And what about the walk home? Would he be able to walk? If not, what then? He would be unable to carry him, and where could he leave him while he went home to get the cart? Oh, mercy. Jonathan removed his hat and fanned himself with it. He had the king of all headaches. The dog rubbed up against him, trying to comfort him.

When he got to Guildford Jonathan paused in the shade of a brick storehouse. It had warmed up, and the day wore on him, and what lay ahead made it seem even warmer. Hot. Usually on such hot days the insects were not very annoying, but this time they were worse, and biting.

After bracing himself Jonathan walked on into the heart of the town, down High Street, toward a drinking hole on a bystreet where he had found Garrison a year ago. He had to begin somewhere. The flies were the worst of the insects, as they frequently were in town.

He found the den and entered. It was dark and not in the least mellifluous, and a few minutes passed before he could see. There were several stinkards standing at the bar, and seven or eight sitting at tables. At first no Garrison, but when he stepped toward the back something caught Jonathan's eye. He moved closer. A middle-aged man sat nursing a tumbler of ale, and on his left, dozing, slumped over the table, was Garrison. It was a coincidence worthy of one of Charles Dickens' stories. Yet it was indeed Garrison, and the best thing was, he was alive. Jonathan moved close and put his hand on Garrison's shoulder.

"Oi, oi there! The man next to Garrison sprang up. "What you think yer doin?"

"I'm his brother, here to take him home."

The man paused for an instant. He was above average in size, well worn, mostly bald, rough-skinned, and rotten front teeth; what teeth he still had.

"Oh, no you don't. He ain't no kid and he can decide for himself what he wants tuh do. That's so ain't it Gary?"

Garrison raised his head and blinked at them. "Wha?"

Jonathan knew the game. Garrison chipped away at odd jobs, and every time he had made enough money off he went, and there was always someone to take advantage of him. Well this time the jig was up.

"I said he is coming with me."

"Is that so? We'll see----"

The man stood and took up his tumbler as if to strike Jonathan. Little did he know, while Jonathan was not of a violent temper, his father had taught him a few things about taking care of himself. The man turned florid and spittle ran from his mouth and down his chin. As he stepped forward Jonathan, whose left arm had hung at his side, with lightning speed raised it and clipped the thug on the back of his jaw, close under his ear, just so. Not a hard blow, but delivered quickly, with follow-through. Thus dispatched, the man dropped like a rock, not soon to get up again, if at all.

Jonathan got Garrison to his feet and half-steered, half-dragged him out the door, and they turned down an alley and away as rapidly as possible. Garrison appeared to be gaining his legs, and they dodged this way and that until it was safe to rest. They sat on a pile of fire logs, panting.

"We're going home," said Jonathan, putting his arm around Garrison's shoulders.

Instead of protesting Garrison looked at his brother with tears in his eyes, and Jonathan himself broke down. They hugged each other, and Jonathan reaffirmed to himself yet again how well he would always love his closest flesh and blood in spite of everything in bygone days, and whatever lay ahead.

Forgotten were the flies, the drunks staggering and crawling by, and the gawks. Nothing else mattered.

"Can you stand?" asked Jonathan.

"I'll try."

They headed for home. At first Garrison could hardly walk, but as they trudged on he gained some steam. Now and then Jonathan steadied him, and once in a while they stopped to rest, sitting under a tree or on a log or large rock. Then on they went.

About halfway home they stopped to rest under an old oak tree.

"I can't make it," said Garrison. "Leave me and I'll catch up."

"I'll wait."

"But I don't----"

"Now, now. Lie back on the grass for a while."

"I will, but I own part of my lethargy is the prospect of facing our parents. The guilt. It's always the guilt. It eats me up."

"We will deal with your guilt when we get home, but I have everything planned. I'll fend off Father and Mother and get you ensconced in the barn bedroom. There you can dry out and regain your senses, and we'll get things sorted tomorrow or the next day."

"How can you stave off father. If he is determined you will have not a ghost of a chance."

"Yet I cannot remember a time when he hasn't listened to me."

For a while Garrison was silent, then, "I have dried out before, but never for long. As for sorting, it will come to nothing. It never has."

"Nonetheless, this time it will. I have a strategy, and it may well succeed. Just you wait." But as he said it he wasn't so sure.

"Lord grant me grace," moaned Garrison.

They walked on, rested, and walked, until they were within sight of home.

"In the nick of time," observed Jonathan, "it looks like rain."

"Be that as it may, let me rest one last time. More to gather my wits for the coming storm. I refer to the family tempest, not the rainstorm."

They sat on the grass at the side of the road, and Garrison leaned forward with his head in his hands. "I can't be confronted by them."

"You will not be confronted. I'll handle that. Buck up. You go to the barn while I face our parents."

They entered the front yard to find both Elbert and Cordelia sitting on the rough, backless bench. Elbert stood up, but Jonathan, as he pushed Garrison toward the barn, motioned for his father to sit back down. No words passed between any of them. They were all beyond words, but Cordelia was not beyond tears.

Rain pattered down on them as Jonathan half-carried Garrison to the barn. They entered and Jonathan put his burden down on the straw pallet, and covered him with a quilt.

"I'll return later with some supper."

"No, thanks," whispered Garrison, and he immediately fell asleep.

"And now I shall smooth things over with our parents," said Jonathan to himself.

He did. Cordelia and Elbert had gone inside and were sitting at the kitchen table, side by side holding hands, something he had never seen them do.

"Don't distress yourselves, he is comfortable for now, and with your consent I'll take care of him tonight."

They nodded, and their relief was almost palpable.

"I'll go out to check on him now and again tonight, and in the morning I'll prepare him to see you. Are we agreed?"

They simply nodded again and Cordelia put her hand on Elbert's shoulder and he put his arm around her shoulders; something else Jonathan had never seen. Were they getting old? They were, but this was something more. Was there something in their past? Some event, or rift? Whatever it was, it was not his imagination.

Jonathan checked on Garrison twice in the night, and in the morning, late, he brought out some toast and tea, the sight of which caused Garrison to vomit.

"Good heavens," said Jonathan. "I wanted to present my plan for the rest of your life, but it is evident you are in no condition.

"Not yet. I need another day. Can you get them to grant me one more day?"

The next morning Jonathan returned to the barn with more toast and tea, and this time Garrison ate. While he did he kept glancing furtively at the door.

"Compose yourself, they won't come until I say," smiled Jonathan. "Not until we have our little talk. Are you up to it?"

"I believe so."

A mouse ran across the floor.

After Garrison had finished eating Jonathan spoke up.

"I'll do the talking, and you listen," he ordered, but he said it lightly and encouragingly.

Garrison gave slight nod.

"First off, if you keep up the way you're going you will die, either from drink or from a violent assault."

"Possibly, and probably, but would that be so bad?"

Jonathan winced. "Yes, and anyway I have never yet observed anyone like you who has burned the candle at both ends, especially at your age, who has not succumbed. My prophesy is a near certainty. That's all there is to it."

"Uh." Garrison leaned back against a pillar.

"You have been at it for years and fear does not seem to motivate you to mend your ways. Am I right?"

"Yes."

One of their horses neighed.

"So what shall be done with you?"

"Let me die?"

"No. Wrong answer. Have you any more ideas?"

"No."

"Then hear me out because I do, and they are more than ideas; they are ruminations I have collected over the years, and now I shall reveal them. Are

you prepared to listen?"

"Yeath I geth tho."

"Excuse me?"

"Yes."

"Then settle back and pay attention as if your life and well-being depend upon it, for obviously they do."

Garrison slumped down more against the pillar and closed his eyes.

"First, you are far removed from the shabby donkey you apparently see yourself as. You----"

Garrison opened his eyes and stared. "How can you say that? I am shabby, and everyone knows it. We can't all be like you! Handsome, brilliant, likable, sociable. It's unlike you to make even more of a fool of me by saying I am what I am not!"

"Good heavens Garrison, I wasn't ridiculing you, and I never will. Don't you know I'm better than that? Furthermore I presume to say, *fie on you* for thinking I would! Ridicule."

"You called me a donkey!"

"I did no such thing. I observed that you see yourself as one."

"Oh, lord." Garrison closed his eyes and slumped lower. "I am sorry."

"Then allow me to continue without interrupting me."

Garrison was quiet.

"Let me begin by straightening you out on some things. First, you have a dim view of yourself, beginning with your appearance. I will say you are not as good-looking as many, or as you may wish to be, but you're in no way the homely creature you see yourself as. With a bit of, eh, grooming and better eating you would be quite presentable. More than presentable I have no doubt. So we'll begin with that."

An owl flew into the barn, turned, and flew back out.

"We?"

"Yes. I will be with you all the way, as will our parents. Next we'll make it so you don't drink."

"And how do you propose to do that?"

"We, remember? We will keep track of you night and day. Make sure you keep your nose clean."

"How?"

"We'll have your written agreement. Irrevocable. Will you sign?"

"I suppose so."

"Suppose so won't do. Either you will or you will not, and again, answer as though your life depends on it."

"I will. Yet how could you stop me? What use is a written agreement? A piece of paper?"

"Fortunately you have a strong-willed brother, an even stronger-willed mother, and in case you haven't noticed, a strong-willed, and a physically strong, father." Jonathan almost laughed. "You will be outnumbered and out-muscled. You won't have a chance of going skidoo."

Garrison looked doubtful. "I could sneak out when no one is around, or at night."

"Someone will always be around. If not we will bind you to one of these

pillars. And even should you make your way to town there will not be a barman who will serve you."

"Not a----?"

"Father will speak to all of them, and when he speaks people listen. They will not even allow you to come inside. Furthermore anyone else who supplies you with drink will be well on the way to Hell. *Hell*, with a capital *H*. Perdition. Damnation. And I know you will agree it is a *capital* idea."

The owl hooted its way in and out again.

"Furthermore," resumed Jonathan, "you are not the dunce you think you are. And don't assume I am calling you one. I've known you for a long time," he chuckled, "and I have detected an underlying intelligence in you. Don't interrupt. Tis true. Maybe not the kind of intelligence enabling you to be a great philosopher or scientist or anything like, but you do have common sense, take my word for it. Have I ever been wrong?"

"There was the time you decided to climb the----"

"Stop. I was just a child. Sometimes I can't tell if you like having me on, or if you really are a dunce after all. Oh, and mind you, I'm not calling you one."

Garrison had been referring to the time Jonathan had climbed a tall tree and, paralyzed with fear, had been unable to come back down.

"Now if you will kindly allow me, on to the next subject. I believe if we get you on the road to recovery it would do you good to have a lady friend, and I----"

"Impossible!" Garrison expostulated. "I have been through it all previously, only to be rejected, and I cannot go through it again."

"Control yourself." Jonathan held up his hand. "I will assist you in that too. I have it all laid out. And you will do better sober."

"How in blue blazes can one guy do the courting for another. It can't be done!"

"Yes, it can. Have you no faith in me? Again, have I ever let you down?"

"Well, there was the time----"

"Hogwash! You're always quibbling. Don't play games with me. It can be done I tell you."

"Very well. I have little to lose."

"You don't. Now to the long-term proposals. I believe you will consider me correct when I propose ways you could--if we achieve the aforesaid goal--be a capable farmer. You see, your first step--quitting imbibing and so on--will be by far the most difficult. Taking farming to heart will be easy by comparison, if you have the will to do so. Father and Mother are not getting younger, and before we know it you will be the one to take over, whether you like it or not. Now follow me; our parents are not the only ones getting on; Mr Moss is already in tough shape, and that's why I'm helping him. I have no ulterior motive other than it's what neighbors should do. Oh, I do allow how getting close to Phebe may be a slight ulterior motive." Jonathan felt his face redden slightly.

Surprisingly Garrison was quiet.

"And here's the kicker. Oftentimes I have spoken about leaving here and doing something else for a living. I have some ideas, but for now my leaving will be a boon for you; you'll have the farm all to yourself; well, and our parents. No splitting anything with me."

"How could I manage without you if----?"

"Hold on. Here's what I'm getting at, but you have to swear you will keep it under your hat."

"You may depend upon it."

"Raise your right hand and swear on an imaginary bible, even though you are a heathen."

"I swear."

"Now I mean it, Garrison, if this gets out I'm done for."

"It will not get out."

"Poor old Mr Moss is in worse condition than people know. He had the leg accident, but now he's passing blood."

"No!"

"I'm afraid so."

"How?"

"When he empties his bowels. You know what that means."

"Dear me."

"Now here's the thing. Phebe doesn't know what she'll do with their farm, so she thinks she'll in time have to sell it. But I told her to hold it for you."

"You told her that? How can I ever thank you?"

"By doing all of what I have just put to you," replied Jonathan firmly.

"I will. I promise. But how could I ever afford it?"

"She will give you easy terms, and you will have to consent to let her live there as long as she wants, and to help her with the hard work."

"I, I don't know what to say. I will. Help her. But why not you? Surely you and she will marry?"

"Yes, but I thought I said, our idea is for me to leave on an undertaking which I have yet to figure out, and for her to wait for me."

"What----?"

"Tut, tut, none of that. I told you." He grinned and wagged his finger. "In the event, when you become a prosperous farmer you must remember to thank me for laying out your life for you."

"I do so right now."

"I'll fetch our parents. They are prepared and willing to do the best for you. They always have been." He was especially thankful for his mother, who was the true foundation of the family.

Jonathan turned to leave. "I wish I could wave a wand over Mr Moss and cure him."

"And over me," added Garrison, trying to hold back a smile.

Nonetheless Jonathan knew what was up. In spite of Garrison's best intentions and moral vows, he was weak, and prone to escape and resume drinking. It was time for strong medicine.

Together Jonathan and his father chained Garrison to a support post for days. After unshackling him they watched over him night and day for weeks, and, miracle of all miracles, Garrison underwent some sort of absolute and indelible moral conversion. One result was, from then on he could not stand the sight of drink.

Chapter Nine

Good news, bad news. Simon and Marit.

Jonathan was glad to find Simon alone. Had Simon's father, Glazer, been there the walk to their place would have been wasted.

"Mr Slope!" called Jonathan.

Simon looked up from whatever he had been hammering on at the anvil in front of their barn. He waved.

"What a beautiful day," exclaimed Jonathan. "Birds singing, cloudless sky, refreshing breeze."

Simon looked at him suspiciously. "What are you up to?"

"Up to? My fine fellow, why would you think I am up to something simply because it's a grand day?" He sat down on a tree stump not far from the one on which held the anvil.

"Because I know you, and when you are this lightsome I fear you're up to something." He gruffly turned his back to Jonathan and cranked the blower on his coal forge. Smoke belched up into his face.

"Good grief, I am only here to ask whether you want the good news or the bad news first."

Simon tensed and stopped cranking. He turned. "Don't trifle with me; I'm not in a buoyant mood. It's been a rum day."

"How so?"

"Never you mind. It just has."

Jonathan glanced toward the house and lowered his voice. "Your father?"

"Huh."

"I won't ask any more questions then. But I may have something to take your mind off whatever is troubling you. So as I said, do you want the good news or the bad news first?"

"Might as well get the bad news out of the way first."

"Torger Vigeland is dead."

"Dead?"

"Deader than mutton."

"What happened?"

"Gored to death by his bull."

"Gored? I've never heard of anyone getting killed by a bull."

"Bulls are like people. Some of them are just plain vicious."

Simon sat down on a large rock and wiped his forehead with his sleeve.

"Damn, poor Marit."

"And Hilde," added Jonathan.

"Oh, yeah. Torger wasn't great, but I can't imagine how they'll fare without him."

Jonathan was quiet for a while, and as he looked about he again appreciated how fresh and beautiful the day was. Not a day for discussing death. No indeed, it was a day to celebrate the continuance of life, and in particular the brightest allotments while one is able.

Simon, who had been gazing at the ground, looked up. "Then what's the good news?"

"The good news is, Torger is dead."

"Whaaa?"

"It's also the good news. I know it sounds harsh, but it's the way I see it."

"Jonathan, how harsh! I would never have guessed it of you."

Jonathan gazed off into the distance for a moment. Then, "Am I wrong? I gainsay I am not."

"No, but what a thing to say."

"I'm a realist. I live in the real world, and I tell the truth. Besides I would never say it to anyone but you."

"Nonetheless."

For several minutes they remained quiet. A bee came to rest on Simon's right hand but he merely looked down and studied it.

Jonathan broke the silence. "Has it dawned on you yet?"

"Hmm? Has what dawned on me?"

"The rest of the good news."

"What in the world could be good about someone dying?"

"I believe you understand quite well what I'm leading up to. Now, keep it between us, but I know things about Torger."

"What things?"

"He was despicable. For one thing, over the years didn't you see the lumps and bruises on Hilde's and Marit's faces?"

"No. Well now as you----"

"And I have it from reliable people there were other things. Vile things."

"No!"

"Yes. Furthermore I suspect his wife and daughter are glad to be quit of him. Of course I am unable to read their hearts, but I have it on more than just suspicion."

Simon sat with his mouth open like an idiot. The bee buzzed off.

Jonathan kicked the dirt with his heel. "Do you really feel Marit and her mother can manage alone?"

Simon cast him a curious look.

"You numbskull, this is your opportunity," continued Jonathan.

"You mean----?"

"Now is no time to let grass grow under your feet."

"But to move in like---- It would be indecent."

"Not really. It depends on how you look at it."

"Still."

"Regardless of what we or anyone else think, what happened happened, and that's all there is to it, and life flows on. You must collect yourself and join the flow, or sit here and rot. I once told you to bide your time. Well now is your time, and you must make probably the most important decision of your life."

Simon appeared stricken as he slid off the rock onto the ground.

"It would be a mistake to assume Marit and her mother would not be pleased."

"But again, would it not be devious of me at at time like this?"

"Simon, many things in life are not *either or*, and this is one of those things, or times, or decisions, or whatever we would want to call them, that should be regarded as both a convenient opportunity and a kindness. Simply because old Torger has kicked the bucket doesn't mean your advances would be indecent. Things in life coexist and are compatible all the time."

"Well----"

"Well nothing. And here's the real incentive; she likes you."

"Likes me? How do you know----?"

"Do I have to draw you a picture? Haven't you noticed how she looks at you at dances and other gatherings?"

"No."

"Then wake up. No one can make the decision for you," said Jonathan. And don't look so woebegone."

Simon sat silently with his face in his hands.

"It will be thumbs-up or thumbs-down. Unless you make no choice whatsoever, which would be the worst of all. At noon tomorrow I will wait under the oak tree between our places. If you meet me there at the appointed time, good. But if you are so stupefied you can do nothing, and don't show up, I will hold my peace and never speak of it again. Furthermore I will nevermore interfere in your personal life. At all events, have courage."

"Thumbs up," said Simon, his voice shaking.

He had arrived, albeit with a hang-dog look.

"Well, well, but why such low spirits? This is a bright day for you. Be of better cheer!"

"I'll try, but I'm about to take drastic steps."

Jonathan laughed. "Look at it this way; what have you to lose?"

"You may be right, but I'm the one facing the----"

"You astound me. You sound like you're facing the hangman. Time to move on. Here I have, for years, been formulating my future while you have shown no such interest, but now when it comes time to plan a simple thing like winning the heart of your beloved you cannot bring yourself to contemplate an approach. Simon, I cannot rearrange your brain; I can only strive to instill in you a measure of grit." He said it gently, and Simon appeared to take it well.

Simon stood straighter. "You're right. However, Lord give me strength."

They sat down in the shade of the tree facing each other.

"I'll be able to help you because I have a knack for such things, and because I have found myself in a similar situation with Phebe. With that, let me tell you I had given this situation some consideration even before Torger died. I had a feeling there would be an opening for you one way or another."

As chance would have it a bull meandered up to the nearby fence and stood looking at them.

"Now here's what we'll do,"

"Is that *the* bull?" quavered Simon?

"No. They gave it to a butcher on Guildford, on the condition that he would

never sell any of the meat in our area. Anywise, here's what we'll do."

"We?"

"I'll pave the way by going over to the Vigeland place, helping out. Eh, eh, don't interrupt, I am far from being disingenuous; I would do it anyway. Most people in these parts would do likewise, and I have been doing so for Phebe and her father for a long time, so I am well aware of my approach. Now be quiet."

The bull snorted as if he were irritated with the tone of the conversation, then lumbered away.

"I have found out that Hilde and Merit have been doing most of the farm work anyhow, but they could always use another hand and I will be persistent, in an unobtrusive way. After a while I will bring you with me, and you will be unobtrusive as well, nonetheless showing Merit some notice and attention, while at the same time saying and doing nothing overt. If my instinct is right she--having lived such a confined life--will take to you like a bee to a crocus. Then you can work your magic as only you can. Hah! Shush! Hear me out. As difficult as it is for you to turn your thoughts to the future, I will do it for you. Here's what will happen; sooner or later you two will be married, and as I leave to make a life for myself--though such time may be a while off--you will be farming the place, and you may even assume ownership of it."

Jonathan stopped to let his idea soak in.

Simon sat stone still and speechless. Just when Jonathan was about to jog him he spoke.

"Cunning."

"Cunning? Goodness no, that's too strong a word. It makes me appear to be a manipulator, and--leastwise in any unwholesome sense of the word--I am far from it. I dare say I am the opposite; a facilitator. I am a human moral equivalent of a saint."

"Good heavens," stammered Simon. "Saint Jonathan of Guildford."

"Saint Jonathan the Audacious."

"But please not, I pray, Saint Jonathan the Foolhardy."

Chapter Ten

Life goes on. And on. An advance. Elbert and Charles age even more.

Over the next months, and on, nothing of significance changed in Jonathan Gorgius' life. Others' lives had been changed from within or from without, or both, or they had even been transfigured. The most common alterations were due to aging, death, abandonments, and favorable advances.

One advance in which Jonathan had a personal interest was as regards Simon Slope. Not long after his and Simon's confabulations under the oak tree, Simon had won the heart of Marit Vigeland. Not only that, Simon, Marit, and Hilde were living happily on Hilde's farm.

Garrison had largely taken over his parents' farm, and he even had a female interest. A miller's daughter, Violet. Moreover, he and Simon had agreed to go together on another farm that was up for sale.

Elbert was still able-bodied but Jonathan had seen slight, almost imperceptible, weaknesses manifesting themselves. Nonetheless, Cordelia was well, and if Jonathan and Phebe ever formalized their plans for leaving, he was certain Garrison would do well with the farm and as to his parents' care. Elbert's only mental failing was, once in a while he would mumble something about his elm tree, Grim Reaper, and such; however Jonathan had to grant that his father had sufficient reason for pessimism.

Jonathan had spent considerable time reflecting on how to come up with a life goal. Sadly he had arrived at nothing; not even a figment of a plan, and the hitch was so marked it hit him on the head; one could not climb his way to prosperity if he started out destitute, unless he spent all of his life working his way to the top. And, Jonathan felt, he didn't want to live the rest of his days grubbing for money. He was ambitious, but he had to confront hard facts; he wanted to enjoy life too. Oh, he had saved a paltry sum; hardly enough to set up a really worthwhile and promising venture. The really irritating part was that he had plenty of ideas, but putting them to action required true capital. It was a conundrum he and Phebe had agonized over for a long time.

He had also consulted his mother who was possibly the most sensible person he knew, but she had had no ideas. She had said the knotty problem was insoluble for now, and again he saw how right-minded she was. They had always shared a bond, and he had ever confided in her.

Well, and all, there was nothing for it in the near future, so they--he and Phebe--decided to do the only thing they could do. Wait.

"Hope springs eternal," said Jonathan.

"For mercy's sake!" replied Phebe. "Platitudes aren't going to get us

anywhere."

"Nor is anything else."

They were walking, hand-in-hand down the lane east of her place. The sun was in its summer glory, the wind of the previous night had subsided, and it would have been an even more magnificent day if only they could have mapped out their future.

Jonathan tried to sneak a sidelong glance at Phebe's lower anatomy but she caught him.

"You lecher. I saw where you were looking."

"I was only, hem, noticing----"

"I know what you were noticing, Mr Lech."

"No, no, but you have filled out your dresses lately, that's all, and----"

"I do declare, then you have just called me chubby."

"No, I----"

She squeezed his hand and muffled a laugh with her other hand. "It's all right, you men can't help yourselves, I know that. Sometimes you could make a stuffed parrot laugh."

"You may be right, but you women aren't so lily white either. So there."

They stopped and sat on a large, flat, lichen-covered rock, and a light, cooling breeze caressed them.

"I am an optimist, and I feel something will turn up," said Jonathan. "It always does."

"No, it doesn't. You can say something will turn up, but you have no idea of whether it will or not. Sometimes you perplex me. On one hand an optimist, but on the other hand a realist. The two don't wash."

"I have a premonition."

"As do I, and it's a foreboding," said she.

"Oh please, not when I need moral support."

"And what do I need? A swift kick in the bum?"

She was becoming testy.

On another tack he said, "Look at the blue bird over there," he pointed to an ash tree to their left, "what kind of bird is it?"

"Since when have you been interested in birds? And how in Hades would I know?"

"Then I shall call it a bluebird."

Phebe snorted. She had never before snorted at him.

Chapter Eleven

Another year gone by. Uncle Thurston's letter.

One stormy, rainy day when Elbert was away, Cordelia took Jonathan to the barn.

"I want to talk to you," said she seriously.

"In the barn?"

"I always come here when there's something pressing on my mind."

"Pressing?" Jonathan braced himself.

The rain was coming down in torrents now. They were sitting on small casks, facing each other, and she moved closer and took his hands.

"You and I have a special kinship," she began. Her grip tightened.

"Yes?"

"I received an interesting letter from your uncle Thurston yesterday."

She appeared delighted, and Jonathan relaxed. Thurston Silk was her brother whom he had always liked. An elderly gentleman, genial and dignified, who, childless, visited them every year bearing gifts for him and Garrison; sweets, toys, His uncle had made a fortune by starting out with a single merchant ship, acquiring more, and then moving on to overseas trade. In his younger years he had sailed the seas, had many adventures, and then settled down in London with his French wife, Marie-Rose.

"He is going to pay us a visit, and this time Thurston is not bringing toys," Cordelia smiled, "I believe he has a proposition for you."

"A proposition? What?"

"He didn't say, but as he is not young anymore it may be assumed he is looking for someone to help him in his business."

For a moment Jonathan was taken by surprise.

"Well?" said his mother.

"I, I don't know----"

"Good gracious, what is there to know? How could you go wrong?"

A large, black tomcat came to the wide door, saw them, glowered, and disgustedly turned around and left. Jonathan took it as a reprimand for his indecision.

"Cats have never been fond of me."

"Well you have never been fond of cats."

"Will Marie come?" Then he realized he had blurted out the first thing to come to mind, which had nothing to do with anything.

"I can't say. Probably not. What's the difference? Look at you. After all the trouble you had helping Garrison and getting Simon to take a leap into life, here you are yourself, nattering and stalling. Compose yourself."

She sat radiating confidence and optimism.

"I wonder if I would be required to sail," Jonathan mused.

"Who knows, but if you were lucky you would. See the world. Spain, Portugal, India, . . . Maybe the Americas. What a wonderful life!"

Jonathan's stomach churned. The black cat returned.

"What about Phebe? And you and father?"

"Fiddlesticks. Phebe is like our daughter and we would take care of her. And Elbert and I are still able, especially now that Garrison is straight. And there's always Simon. Not that we would impose on him; only in a pinch. I must say you appear to be looking a gift horse in the mouth, knowing full well the horse is sound."

The cat glared at them--mostly at Jonathan--and made a rasping sound Jonathan had never heard from a cat. Then it resumed glaring at him.

"What shall I do, Tom?" asked Jonathan of the cat. The cat only lowered.

"You shall see what your uncle has to say," rumbled his mother, imitating the cat, "and then you will shake hands on it. After that," she went on growling, thinking herself clever, "you will discuss it with Phebe. The discussion will be short, for she will no doubt be thrilled at your decision. But you will waffle until you discuss it with Simon. Then you will be satisfied as to having done the right thing."

"Simon? He's a worse waffler than I am!"

"Thus he knows the consequences of waffling when there is nothing to waffle about. Now let us go back inside, Mr Waffler."

Jonathan sighed and stood up, looking around the barn.

"What are you looking for?" asked Cordelia.

"Drink. I am looking for some of Garrison's drink he may have overlooked back in his drinking days. My world is spinning."

"You don't drink and you never will."

"This time I am sorely tempted to start."

"Stop it!" She whacked him on the back of his head just hard enough to knock off his cap. "Hitherto I've survived one drunkard son, but only by the skin of my teeth, and I will in no way allow you to drink the devil's brew. It would drive me to drink also, and wouldn't that be a fine spectacle; you and me sitting out in the barn or somewhere getting soused? Mother and son, bonding."

"On the brighter side we would be famous in the community."

"Or notorious. Objects of ridicule and scorn."

Chapter Twelve

Uncle Thurston's proposal. Jonathan's proposal.

Uncle Thurston Silk had arrived late in the night, accompanied by his wife, Marie-Rose. There had been only small talk before everyone retired. Jonathan had made his bed in the barn in order to make room for the guests.

In the morning Jonathan almost tiptoed into the house, hoping no one would be up, but they all were.

"Johnny!" exclaimed Thurston. "You have finally arisen!"

His uncle had never been effusive, therefore Jonathan took his outburst as a hopeful sign.

"Good morning Uncle Thurston. How are you? And how do you find yourself Aunt Marie? You look well I do say."

Marie, even at her age, was still beautiful. Slight, of moderate height, mildly dark-completed, with long, raven hair that showed not a trace of white. She was French through and through, even in her speech, which, while easily understood, still had a delightful and even aristocratic accent. A manner of speech that accentuated her natural grace.

"I apologize for having put you out of the house," said uncle Thurston.

"In no way, sir, I----"

"Enough of the sir stuff. If we are to be, hem, well you must call me Thurston."

"Oh dear me, I don't know if I can bring myself to do that. May I call you----?"

"Well, well then, how about Uncle Silk? Will that do?"

"Yes, if you please uncle. I would prefer it."

"But in the presence of others please call me Mr Silk, depending on the station of those others. I'm sure the circumstances will be clear to you."

"Indeed. But am I missing something?"

His parents appeared to be enjoying the conversation immensely.

"I believe so, but we can take up my proposal after breakfast."

"Thank you uncle."

Marie-Rose had obviously been paying attention, for she had assumed a contented, almost light-hearted aura, just short of a smile.

"Now, and now, I believe tis time to finish breakfast, and we," uncle Thurston looked at Cordelia and Marie, "shall get down to business."

That was the ladies' prompt to tactfully retire.

The long and short of it--Jonathan and Thurston's conversation--was that his uncle wanted him to move to London and work for him--with him--as he had delicately put it, and he implied how, in years to come, they could broach the

subject of partnership. Jonathan heartily accepted, and as his mother had foreseen, they shook hands over the kitchen table. However he had one reservation.

"I must admit to a concern; that being how little I bring to the----"

"Pardon me," interrupted his uncle, "I know what I'm doing, so let me hear no more of it."

Jonathan, far from being the fainthearted wretch he had been in the barn with his mother and the cat, was overjoyed, and he could not wait to run and tell Phebe, but wait he did. The waiting was almost unbearable, but he would go that evening. In the meantime he sneaked away to an elm tree approximately halfway between his place and Phebe's and, climbing up halfway he hung a large, red cloth signifying good news. Black would have meant bad.

He returned home and sat on an old wooden box in front of the house facing his mother and Aunt Marie, who both seemed almost giddy.

"So, you 'av cemented en agreement?" said his aunt.

"Yes, I am pleased to say we have."

"There will be no back out now?"

"Definitely not."

"And when will you tell your sweetheart?"

"Tonight, if I may be excused."

"You are exgused," said she, waving her hand, palm down, in his direction as if blessing him.

Jonathan remained quiet. A strange idea had come to mind, as they often did. Strange ideas, often unrelated to anything current. His parents had several times wondered whether Thurston and Marie-Rose were in fact married. They didn't seem to care much one way or another; it had seemed only like mild curiosity. And as usual Jonathan was mindful of the incongruity of his cranial exertions.

That evening Jonathan hurried to tell Phebe the wonderful news. They met in her doorway.

"Bless you, Jonathan," she exclaimed, hugging him.

"Thank you, but I didn't do anything. It came as a bolt from the blue."

She put her forefinger over his lips.

"Oh, you knew. Nevermind. But did you pray for it?"

"Don't be silly; I abhor religion, as you do, and in any event how in the world could I have prayed for it if I had no idea of what *it* was?"

"I insist, you knew, whether or not you could have vocalized it even to yourself. And I further insist it could have been a general prayer for good fortune."

Now he knew she was tickling him.

"I would rather have resorted to a crystal ball, or a Gypsy tea-leaf reader." He reflected for a moment. "So what shall we do?" asked he in jest.

"Ask for more money."

"You ninny. I will be getting more----"

She pinched his nose and laughed, and it began to rain; a light, steady drizzle.

"I must be getting home," Jonathan said, "unless you insist I stay here for the night."

Phebe kissed him full on his lips, seized his shoulders, turned him toward home, and gave him a push.

He complied, and without glancing back he shouted, "See you tomorrow Miss Chastity. Unless I get struck by lightning."

She waved him away.

Uncle Thurston and Marie-Rose left the next day. He and Jonathan had agreed that Jonathan's apprenticeship, partnership, profession, employment, or whatever it was, would commence in a week. Thurston had left directions to his place of business which served as a residence, office, and storage floor. It was, Jonathan had ascertained, a large brick building not far from the river, and he was to reside there until he could find a flat.

Jonathan had always been fond of uncle Thurston, however he now had a sneaking suspicion there was more to his uncle than his cloudy childhood impressions had allowed. But he didn't know what, and even if there were a less-than-impeccable side to him, after all who of us are without fault? And surely it would be impossible for anyone, even a saint, to succeed in business without receiving and giving some hard knocks in order to get a leg up on the competition? Jonathan was aware he was about to enter the real world. And as an added cause for elation was his notion that Rose-Marie looked upon him as a son; or at the very least she regretted he was not her true flesh-and-blood.

Elbert and Cordelia were ecstatic at Jonathan's good fortune, and so was Garrison. Phebe, however, was torn. As to the long run she was all aglow, but as Jonathan's departure time drew near she was apprehensive. Jonathan had tried humour as a way of consoling her, but his approach seemed only to exacerbate her fears, so instead he resorted to honesty. In other words he acknowledged her worries while emphasizing their great opportunity.

"Garrison will look after you," said Jonathan.

"Yes, I know."

"It exceeds anything I ever hoped for."

"And more than I had hoped for too," replied Phebe.

Two days before he was to leave for London Jonathan hung the yellow cloth on the tree. It was the signal for Phebe to come to his place, and presently she was there, sitting in the Gorgius home with Jonathan, Garrison, and their parents.

Cordelia cleared her throat and addressed Phebe. "My dear, I, we, have something to ask of you."

"Yes?"

"When Jonathan is away we would like permission to look after you. As our daughter. The daughter we never had."

Caught by surprise, Phebe could not at first find her voice.

Then, "Why gracious, how thoughtful of you." She put her handkerchief to her eyes.

Cordelia went to her and embraced her. "There, there," she consoled.

Phebe leaned her head on Cordelia's bosom and sobbed quietly.

The rest of the family looked away until Phebe had regained her composure, and the black tomcat entered, lowered at them, then left. It was not their cat, and it was an unfriendly creature, but they had taken to it and had begun feeding it.

When everyone had settled down Jonathan stood.

"Then, Miss Phebe Moss, I also have a small thing to ask of you."

"Not to come with you. We have already agreed I won't until you are well settled and certain your position is secure. And I still have father to----"

"Oh, no, nothing so drastic you can be sure! But take my hands."

He pulled her to her feet. "I have surprise for you. Nothing really; only something to remember me by when I am away."

She smirked. Another of his silly pranks. But to her amazement he went to one knee, pulled something from under his shirt, and took her left hand.

"Phebe my love, with this ring I ask you to marry me."

She stared at the ring, at him, and then she recoiled into her chair in a dead faint.

"Phebes!" gasped Jonathan. "Phebes, what is the matter?"

They had all been in on what they considered to be only a merry prank, and now they were all aghast.

Jonathan turned to the others. "What am I to do? Have I----?"

Cordelia came with a wet cloth and smelling salts. After reviving Phebe with the salts she applied the cloth to her forehead.

"What happened?" asked Phebe, focusing her weak gaze on Jonathan. "You caught me unaware. Oh, now I remember. Oh dear, you almost put me under; you and your mischief."

"It wasn't *almost*. I did put you under," said Jonathan. "It was only to be a surprise."

"Some surprise." She sat up. "You nearly put me in my grave." She looked mechanically around at the other culprits, then back at Jonathan. "Six feet under," she murmured.

"I, we only----"

"We only, we only. Furthermore we can't possibly marry now!"

"No, I know that, but I wanted to reaffirm my love for you, and to give you the ring to, to, remember me by, no, that's not it, to----"

She was regaining her vigor. "Oh, I will remember you, you needn't worry about that!"

Jonathan heard a titter behind him. The crisis was over.

"Well, then," he began again, after he had found the ring on the floor, "with his ring I ask you formally to marry me, but not just yet."

More titters and giggles behind him, and Phebe laughed.

"I will marry you, but hold your horses. Mayhap in six months or more."

Then all was well and they joked and sang, and Simon showed up and joined in the celebration.

As evening approached Simon left, Garrison went to the barn for his evening duties, and Phebe prepared to leave.

"One thing," said she, "and it may seem queer to you, but after Jonathan leaves for London, may I have his pillow?"

Cordelia, through her surprise, said, "Of course you can. I will deliver it

myself."

Part II

Chapter Thirteen

Jonathan in London. Spencer Street.

The large brick building was as Jonathan had imagined--dark-red, three-story, and not old--and Spencer Street was close enough to the Thames for him to smell the putrid water.

Jonathan had been to London only once before, when he was only four or five years old, and he could recall little of it. Only busy streets and the unpleasant odours of everything from horse manure to rotten vegetables, and worse, including dead rodents. And the din. Now, despite his yokel upbringing, and possibly his country appearance, he had managed himself admirably and no one seemed to take any notice of him, not that he cared one whit.

He set down his carpetbag and the leather traveling bag his parents had gotten for him and rapped the door knocker three times. He paused for a minute, then rapped again, harder. Within seconds the door swung open and there stood a tall, almost-emaciated old man. He was bald except for the sides of his head, and he had a rough complexion giving the impression he had been put through some sort of grinding machine but had survived. He was well dressed however, and polite as he bowed slightly and beckoned Jonathan in, as if he had been expecting him, which he no doubt had.

Jonathan took his bags and followed the man down a dim corridor. It was a storage floor, but he was unable to tell what it stored. Several workers were busy moving in, out, and around, various boxes and other containers.

They came to a stairway and up they went. The old man didn't offer to help Jonathan carry, as he was obviously feeble and it seemed he would be lucky to climb the stairs unburdened.

The second floor was occupied by people at work in several enclosed offices but mostly at open desks. Others scurried around carrying papers, notebooks, and such. They ranged from young to old and they represented what Jonathan would have described as a random selection of English humanity; handsome, plain, less than plain, fat, thin, frumpy, ruddy, pale, jocose, despondent, Some sat scribbling away, others were staring at walls or at the ceiling, and some were bent over their tables with their heads on their arms as if they were asleep. Of the twenty or so there were two ladies.

Jonathan was led into a back room where sat his uncle at his desk examining a great ledger. He looked up.

"Jonathan! At last. Come in."

They shook hands.

"Hello uncle."

Uncle Thurston grinned and motioned for him to sit down on an office chair immediately in front of the desk, then he waved at the old man. "Thank you Jeeves," and the man bowed his head and left.

"Jeeves?" Jonathan asked curiously. "Really?"

"Yes, Martin Jeeves, a long-time employee who has nearly outlived his abilities, and now I keep him on because he is one of my few friends. And he's an old workhorse who cannot seem to stop working, so answering the door and pattering around at this, that, and the other keeps him busy and content. He has a room upstairs where Marie-Rose and I live. I must say, though, he is not mentally feeble and I still have him fill in for anyone in the office who is indisposed. He has done it all."

"I confess how, when I came face-to-face with him, I for an instant felt I had made the acquaintance of an elderly Dickens character."

"Oh, well, hum. Keep looking. In your treks around the city you may be fortunate enough to come across Dickens himself. I hear he often walks the streets studying people. People, buildings, and heaven knows what else? But a word to the wise, don't on any account approach him."

"Is he severe?"

"Most likely. From what I've heard he will merely walk away, however I personally know one young man who had persisted and had received a severe tongue lashing. But I should say who knows where he lives now? He has moved from town to town. Hmmm, yes. Anyway, are you a reader?"

"I like to read, yes, when I have time. I have read the great philosophers mostly. And you?"

"I have never had time. Always pursuing more." Uncle Thurston sat behind his desk with his hands folded together and peered at Jonathan, who was feeling uncomfortable. His uncle had aged.

"More?"

"Yes indeed. More ships, more trade, more lucre. More, more, and more. And what for?" He leaned forward with his elbows on his desk, put the fingertips of his hands together, and smiled broadly. "And I beg leave to ask you why? Why, nephew? What's it all for?"

"I'm sure it's beyond me uncle."

"Well, then, Jonathan, I will tell you. For little other than staying out of the poorhouse. However by the time you are secure you're old, and the poorhouse wouldn't be so bad. Hmmm. It would have been so much easier if I hadn't had to start from scratch."

"I'm sure."

"Well back to everyday reality. Allow me to get some odds and ends out of the way."

"Please."

"When I was young and just beginning your father helped me. I would not be where I am if it had not been for Elbert. So you see, I really didn't start completely from scratch after all."

"I didn't know."

"You wouldn't have. Elbert was never one to blow his own trumpet. And if you asked me how he helped, I would tell you; money."

"Money? I didn't know he had money."

"He did, and he does, and I assume you and Garrison will wind up with it one day."

"I wonder how he came into it?"

"Fighting, before he was married. For a guy who got thumped on the head as much as he had, he was shrewd too. He almost always won, so on top of the prize money, he had an accomplice--a confederate if you will--who bet on him, and that was where the gold was."

"Dear me. But why, then, do they sit on a small farm grubbing for a living?"

Thurston unfolded his hands, waved off a fly, and chuckled. "That's beyond me but I assure you they are not grubbing for money." Then he seemed to be lost in thought. "Now, looking back, years ago Elbert and I were in our cups, and he said something strange to me. Lord, I can't recall what it was. All I do remember is, it wasn't good. Oh, me, what was it? He was single at the time. Well, whatever it was it may have had something to do with how he had plans. And even if I could recall, propriety would prevent me from confiding in you."

"You wouldn't tell me?"

"It would depend, but at least I would refer you to your father. No matter, I have tried over the years and unfortunately, or possibly fortunately, I cannot for the life of me bring it back. Anyway if I were in your shoes I would let it pass. It goes back over thirty years and what good can come of dwelling on it?"

They both looked down and were silent as though they both agreed not to dwell on the lost conversation.

Then Jonathan spoke up. "Is hiring me your way of paying back my father?"

"What? Why no, I payed back Elbert years ago! Every pound. Every pence."

Jonathan bit his tongue. "Pardon me, I didn't mean it in such a way."

Uncle Thurston waved his hand dismissively. "Never mind it young man. Let me explain. I am getting old, and Marie-Rose is a few years older than I. We are childless, and you and yours are our only family. If you don't have family you have nothing, do you fully understand the depth of my meaning?"

"Yes, I----"

"I would have visited all of you more often but I was caught up in the insatiable quest for more lucre. More wealth--ever more money--so there you have it, and now I, we, are alone.

He leaned back and his head slumped forward, and he appeared no longer able to speak.

"I, I am so sorry Uncle Thurston," responded Jonathan. "I didn't know. I had no idea. I" He broke into a long, single, anguished sob.

"There, there," said his uncle.

A young lady knocked, entered, and placed a paper on the desk.

"Thank you, Helen," said uncle Thurston, looking up.

She glanced at them curiously then bustled out.

"Helen Cleeve," said Thurston. "She's new here. A lovely young lady, but keep your eyes off her."

Jonathan tried to smile.

"Now, then Mr Gorgius, shall we walk through the office? Then I will show you up to the living quarters where I believe you will be quite comfortable."

The workers, spying them, leaned lower over their desks, and those who had not been working busied themselves. None of them had paid any attention

to Jonathan when he had followed Thurston in, but now they did, covertly. All but one, a young man slightly older than Jonathan, who sat straight, staring at them with an unusual grin. When they reached his desk Jonathan greeted him.

"Good morning."

He was tall, thin, probably intelligent--for he had an intelligent look--handsome; those were his distinguishing features.

"And a hearty good morning to you too young man," the congenial worker returned.

Jonathan was taken by the fellow's openness which verged on audacity.

"Jonathan," said his uncle with one eyebrow raised, "this is Maxwell Backbone. Maxwell this is my nephew Jonathan Gorgius. He has come to work with us."

Jonathan and Maxwell shook hands, and Maxwell said, "I will not offend you with any Gorgeous chaffing; no doubt you have heard it already."

"And Mr Backbone, in return I will not inflict upon you any spinal allusions. There, you see, we are even. Though I add I am the long-lost son of Queen Victoria, so please show due respect."

"I shall bow and scrape."

Jonathan felt, nay knew, they would be best of friends.

His uncle nudged him on. They came to an old man who was scratching away in a register.

"Jonathan, this is Mr----"

"Yes, yes, glad to make your acquaintance," said the man without looking up. "Very pleased to know you," he added, still with his nose in the register.

Uncle Thurston winked at Jonathan and they moved on. The rest of the staff were more normal in appearance. There was another lady, this one approaching old age, and the remainder were men.

After they had finished their rounds Thurston invited his nephew to follow him upstairs. On the way up he whispered to Jonathan, "I remind you, you will call me Mr Silk when we are around the employees will you not?"

"Oh, yes. To be sure. Or Sir."

The third floor was quite large.

"The rooms over there, facing the street," Thurston pointed to his right, "are mine and Marie's. Over there," he pointed to their left, "are Uriah Heep's quarters, heh, heh, and here in front of us is your place. It's a bedroom and another room, and I expect it will suit you until we can secure a permanent place for you and, and Phebe, if you two follow through. As I'm sure you will."

They entered Jonathan's front room.

"Oh, my, this is too fine for me. You needn't have gone to such extremes," said Jonathan.

The room was not large, but it was neat and comfortable-looking, and well-furnished. The first specific thing to catch his eye was opposite the door, a large painting of his parents standing half facing each other with clasped hands and loving looks on their faces. They were younger than he had ever seen them. On his right was a small fireplace, and beside it a plush armchair. A table and two straight wooden chairs stood in the middle of the room.

The door to the bedroom was on the left, and they entered. The sleeping room was as welcoming as the main room.

Jonathan beamed at his uncle, and Thurston seemed embarrassed and said, "Never you mind. It's nothing," and he turned away and went out. Jonathan followed.

Back in the main room appeared Marie-Rose, and she smiled as if she would die of ecstasy. Jonathan was uncertain as to what to do but she saved him by running up to him, hugging him, and weeping delightedly. They clung to each other for a long moment, and when they parted she wept some more.

"I have a son," she said.

Then Jonathan cried, whereupon Thurston turned his back and went to a window, and took out his handkerchief.

"We will not be alone now," added Marie, wiping her eyes.

She was, as Thurston had said, quite elderly, and Jonathan noted again how beautiful she still was in her classic French-empress way, and he could understand how his uncle had been attracted to her.

Chapter Fourteen

Silk Fleet Associates. Secrets. Maxwell.

As a first step in urging Jonathan to familiarize himself with the operations of Silk Fleet Associates, Uncle Thurston had given him the run of the building, and in that capacity Jonathan had learnt more than if he had simply asked his uncle outright. Thus he had hung about in the second-floor office area and had gotten to know more of the workers, and had learned a good deal about the business; the merchandise they imported and exported, what part each employee had, who the real managers and supervisors were, and so on. Most interesting was the name of the company, and how many merchant ships Fleet had, which was four. Not as many as Jonathan had thought, assuming Fleet meant ships, but it was remotely plausible it was an allusion to some other attribute. However as he got a better grasp of the business he found out the lion's share of the shipping was chartered and the whole of the operation was more considerable than he had thought.

Jonathan talked with Maxwell Backbone occasionally and they had eaten their lunch together as well, usually down on the first floor while sitting on shipping crates. Maxwell was single, from a family of weavers, and he was clever. Clever as he was, and a rather cheeky, Jonathan had not decided whether he was particularly sagacious, and in the meantime all he could allow was that he was not dull. He had known that from the start. Anyway Maxwell had worked for uncle Thurston for two years, his uncle apparently liked him, and to Jonathan Maxwell was a reliable source of information.

"So you're about to take over from your uncle eh?" Observed-more-than-asked Maxwell. He shifted on his crate as they sat eating in a back room, and took a bite of his lard-and-onion sandwich. He sat chewing and grinning.

"Take over? Dear me, pray, not for my uncle's sake. I believe he has years ahead of him."

"Well he wouldn't have to die would he? He could still turn everything over to you," Maxwell persisted.

"Still, that isn't my intent. I am happy to simply have a steady job with a reputable company. Later on who knows, but I can't see very far ahead. I can't see far into the future. Can you?"

"Me? Oh I have some notions, but they are so far in the future as to be unknowable to a great degree, therefore I cannot formalize them, so don't ask me about them."

"Oh. Ha, ha!" laughed Jonathan. "But at some point in your life I will ask. I have a memory like an elephant." He took another bite of his cold-beef sandwich, and he assumed Maxwell was by no means wealthy if his sandwich was any indication. "I will ferret out your aspirations if it takes me the rest of my

days," twitted Jonathan genially.

"But why? What do you care?"

"Curiosity old thing. And you come across as a likable chap."

"Hum. Don't be so sure. I could be diabolical, aggressive, hardhearted----"

"Now, now."

Workers passed by and occasionally one would look in on them, but with little interest.

"I was just thinking," said Jonathan, "judging by your sandwich you may be less-than affluent."

"Not plush, but I am not a pauper either. I've been saving my money."

"For what? Getting married? Has some fair maiden got her eye on you?"

"No." Maxwell said it abruptly.

"Sorry, I don't mean to meddle in your affairs."

"Not at all, only it has to do with the long-range plan I just mentioned."

"You didn't. You said your future was unknowable."

"Why, I, er, don't quibble. Anyway it's common knowledge you yourself are well on the way to marital bliss."

"I am. I have to get my own quarters somewhere. A decent flat where my wife will be comfortable."

"Phebe?" asked Maxwell. "Didn't you tell me her name is Phebe?"

"Yes, and I look forward to her being here soon. In the meantime I trust and hope you will not leave the company."

"Oh, no, I have no inclination to do so, and in fact now that I know you will in due time be the head of Fleet I am mulling over the possibility of staying, with the confidence you will in time promote me. You will, won't you old boy?"

"Why I, um, dear me, you have a way about you. Aren't you putting the cart in front of the horse? First, why assume I will be in charge? I----"

"Who else?"

"I, uh, I don't know, but----"

"I'll wager you will eventually know."

"Maxwell, all I know right now is that you are an audacious soul and I don't know what to think of you."

Maxwell went back upstairs and Jonathan stayed, thinking of Phebe. How he missed her. They had corresponded almost every day, but---

"Eh, eh young man, no one is allowed in the special room without either Mr Silk or Mr Jeeves," someone said. That someone was Hiram Fig, the head of the shipping floor.

"Please excuse me, I----" Jonathan started, but Hiram broke in.

"Oh, it's you. Well, then, I reckon you're allowed. Pardon me, I didn't----"

"It's nothing. I shall follow the rules, and away I go."

Jonathan stood to leave and Hiram bowed slightly and retreated. But, lingering a moment, Jonathan stopped to take a closer look at the crates and other containers, and only then was he conscious of the aromas of which he had previously been unaware. Actually a mixture of scents, most of which were pleasant. What were, the sources? What did it all mean? And why the secrecy? Was there more to uncle Thurston than he had thought?

As he walked down the corridor to go outside Jonathan heard something,

and he turned to see Mr Fig locking the door to the room in which he and Maxwell had just taken their lunch.

Outside, resting against the front wall, Jonathan was beginning to suspect his new friend had no interest in the female sex. Puff or not he was certain Maxwell would be a steadfast friend.

In the ensuing weeks Jonathan had begun to feel he was learning the ropes, and Uncle Thurston was openly pleased.

And as for Jonathan's learning the ropes, he couldn't be sure, but he thought he had heard his uncle mumble something about him putting in some time aboard one of the Fleet merchant ships, and he hoped he had heard right because he would be eager to do so. The ships were not the newest--certainly not tea and opium clippers--but Jonathan had seen them and they were sturdy, well-kept, and capacious; and given that their trade was mostly in the North Sea, across the Channel, and down the French coast into and around the Mediterranean, they were adequate. He would bide his time, and when it was right he would hint to his uncle how it would serve the company well if he knew more about the workings of the ships. Phebe would not be wild about it, but she was always reasonable and she would appreciate how such a voyage would enhance his position in uncle Thurston's eyes.

Jonathan had found a flat not far from the Silk Fleet Associates building. It was on the second of three floors, with two bedrooms, a living room, and a small kitchen area. Not large, but clean, in good repair, and with quiet and respectable neighbors. Phebe would be pleased, but there was one hitch. They had to get married before she could move in with him, and the only decision remaining was where. She and his parents, who were now tantamount to her parents, and her father, were in favor of them being wed in a small local church near their farms, and considering most of the attendees were close by, their idea seemed logical. The fly in the ointment--really two flies--were Uncle Thurston and Aunt Marie-Rose, who, while not adamant, were disappointed. Jonathan could see it in them no matter how hard they tried to conceal it. Well, he thought, he was no dumbbell, and he was sure he could smooth things over with them, but it would take some doing to figure out concisely how to grease the way.

Chapter Fifteen

Phebe's father.

Jonathan, who had a desk on the second floor of Fleet was astonished at seeing Phebe approach.

"Phebes!" He sprang to his feet. "Phebes, what on earth?" In an instant he was gripped by utter fear. She had the look of death.

While everyone in the great room gazed in wonder Phebe fell into his arms, sobbing almost inaudibly. He held her for a moment then put her down on his chair and knelt beside her.

"What, pray? Tell me," implored Jonathan. "My parents? Your----"

"My poor father," sobbed Phebe. "He is gone."

"Gone?"

"Is no more."

"How? What happened?"

Maxwell approached. "Come, I will help you outside to the bench." He grasped Phebe by her upper arms and helped her up, and putting his strong left arm around her waist he guided her to the stairway and down. Jonathan followed in a fog of despair. The office workers looked away.

Outside Maxwell settled his charge on the dark-oak bench in the shade of the building, under the sign *Silk Fleet Associates*. Jonathan sat beside Phebe, and his curious thought was, *Silk Fleet Associates?* What associates? Uncle Thurston was not associated with anyone. He felt faint.

Maxwell sat on the other side of Phebe and he and Jonathan both put their arms around her while she wept, unable to speak. Passers-by looked askance at them.

After a while Maxwell rose, nodded at Jonathan, and went inside. Jonathan tried to remain implacable, and he knew it was best to say nothing until Phebe gathered herself. An elderly bulldog stopped and stared ruefully at them, stepped close to Phebe and licked her ankle in sympathy, then moved on. Birds twittered from high above under the eave of the building and Jonathan felt they were celebrating the tenacity of life. What a thought at a time like this.

With one final shudder Phebe wiped her eyes with her white handkerchief and looked up, and to Jonathan's bewilderment she had a smile on her face. A desultory one, but a smile nonetheless. "Forgive me," said she.

"Not at all, you have every right to cry. But you must tell me, what happened?"

"He tumbled down the stairs again."

"No! Fell down the stairs again? How in the world could he have----?"

"Same as before, but oh dear, this time I couldn't revive him, and later I wasn't sure if the fall had killed him, or if his heart had given out. Dr Lorn said the only way to be sure was to--oh I can hardly say it--open him up, but he was

reluctant to do so as even then he still couldn't be absolutely sure, and what would it matter anyhow? Oh, dear Papa!"

Jonathan stiffened, resolved to do his best to ease her pain.

"When will the funeral be?" asked he.

"When I, we, get home."

"Then it shall be the day after tomorrow. First I urge you to send a telegram to my mother to that effect. Then, knowing Uncle Thurston will surely let me go, I can't see any other impediment. Unless he and Marie-Rose want to go. Now, I will put you up in my flat for the night and I will sleep on a cot here on the third floor where----"

"Why?" interrupted Phebe. "You may well stay in your own flat whether I am there or not."

"Never. I would never taint your reputation by doing so."

"But I know nobody here, so how could----?"

"People would talk. They always do."

"Well----" She shrugged. "Then if I am to be as pure as newly-fallen snow, so be it."

Jonathan went on. "We'll take the morning stage. Now then, it is late and I'll get you settled in. But first I must go in and break the news to Uncle Thurston, and I don't relish doing so. He knew your father long ago, and he had a fondness for him. Wait here; I won't be long.

Phebe looked lovingly up at him.

Charles Moss had been lain in the repository of all detritus--living or dead--the Gorgius barn. Specifically in an earthen hole some six feet deep which was normally used to cool milk, butter, and other perishables. Jonathan had forbidden Phebe to come in. He was not the forbidding type, but in this case he had, though had to concede that she could see her father at the funeral if he was presentable enough. And it was only then when she told him there was to be no funeral; only a family gathering prior to burying him behind his house, if such was agreeable to all, who now comprised her family. Her new family. She had made it clear that Charles had never had any use for religion, and had actually detested all religious manifestations. "Just throw me in and cover me up, with no weeping and carrying on," he had always said.

On the day of the non-funeral the only attendees were Jonathan's family, Simon Slope and his wife Marit, and two old guys who Jonathan assumed were friends of Charles. Uncle Thurston and Marie-Rose had not felt up to coming. Charles, who had been wrapped in a canvas, was carefully lowered into the grave--not thrown in as he had wanted--and Phebe sprinkled a handful of earth on him. That was all. No prayers; nothing else. Not even any tears. Then they all trudged silently back to Elbert and Cordelia's place. Simon would return later and fill in the grave, with instructions to leave no marker, but they all knew he would, even if it were a crude wooden cross.

As they walked--Jonathan and Phebe hand in hand--he pointed out to her how slowly and unsteadily his father went.

"Times are changing," whispered Jonathan, and she looked sadly up at him.

"Good thing they have Garrison to care for them," whispered she in return.

"He has been behaving himself while you have been away, and not to spoil his surprise, he is going to marry Violet, the miller's daughter. A charming girl. Now don't tell. Act surprised."

"I will, because I am. Violet who?"

"Heh. Violet Miller."

"Violet Miller, a miller's daughter?"

"Yes. She's not going to win any awards for beauty, but she is a darling young lady. Short, dark, chubby, active; and delightful."

"When and where will the wedding be?"

"I don't know. Garrison will tell us. And on another note, I will say Elbert is yet, as far as I can tell, healthy at his core, though he at times walks ever so slowly. But I know for a fact he is still formidable when he gets his dander up. I saw him take after a chicken thief not long ago, and the thief, who was half his age, dropped the chicken like it was a hot potato and narrowly outran your father, and I confess I was cheering for the villain, as I knew his time would be up if Elbert caught him."

Jonathan laughed loudly at the thought.

"The really humorous thing was, the chicken got away and was never seen again. Elbert was too fagged to pursue it. He came up empty-handed on both counts, and even when he got back to the house he was bearish."

"To you?"

"No, to Cordelia, who henpecked him mercilessly as only wives are capable of doing. As I intend to do to you."

"You will never get under my skin," chuckled Jonathan. "More likely the roles will be reversed and I shall drive you to distraction. Think twice or thrice before you marry me."

Phebe tried to pull his nose, but he was too quick. "I have already thought twice," said she. "Speaking of, should we not be planning the wedding?"

They walked in silence for a moment, and a chicken crossed their path.

"Is that the runaway chicken?" asked Jonathan.

"Evidently not. Your father is paying it scant attention."

"When will a proper amount of time have elapsed?"

"Oh, several months I guess," replied Phebe. "I certainly didn't mean we should rush things. In spite of how I may appear I am devastated about my father, more than you can know. And that's not even taking into account propriety, though I confess I don't give a farthing about what others may think. I merely thought we could mull over some of the more general----"

"Such as what?"

"As, would you be mightily disappointed if we were to not have a church wedding?"

They stopped, and Jonathan took her hands in his. "We are of the same turn of mind," said he. "Could we not just jump the broom?"

"What do you mean?"

"In America when slaves were allowed to get married they would sometimes just throw a broom on the ground, hold hands, and jump over the broom."

"What?" sputtered Phebe. She tried to slap his face but he dodged. "You go too far!" She tried again, and missed again.

"Now, now. I was jesting! Settle down."

"I am not a slave in any sense, and despite marriage laws in this county I will never be your slave!"

"But you must own that if you were, you would be better off being my slave than----"

Phebe stopped abruptly and stamped her foot. "Stop! Stop picking at my only true sore spot. I won't have it! How dare you? If we are to be married you must know I am different than most other women. Not only will I not be humoured or indulged, I will do all I am able to improve the condition of women. We are not senseless, petty, frivolous things to be pampered and played with. Someday we will be doctors, barristers, and such, and yes, we will stand alongside men in the voting places. And the outcomes of the voting will be better than they are now. We will have a say in what we do with our minds and our bodies, and with our property, and"

Jonathan could only remain motionless and sober until she ran out of breath. When he felt it was safe enough to come closer he put his hands on her shoulders.

"Gracious," said he, "I had no inkling you were so adamant, or I would never have agitated you so. How unique you are, and I love your uniqueness. How could I not?" He knelt on one knee in front of her. "I pledge to support you in all you have just now unveiled. Will you forgive me?"

Phebe stared down at him, not in tears, but in resolute silence.

Then, "Yes, if you will pardon me for confiding my passions to you from now on, whether you are amenable to them or no. Do you?"

Jonathan stood. "I do, as long as they are not unfavorable passions of the heart regarding me."

"Of course not."

"Then if you will still have me as your husband I will practice saying *I do*. No more about brooms, on pain of, of----"

"Of course I will have you. Now enough squabbling and bickering. I trust we will never bring such issues up again."

"Never," said Jonathan, wiping his brow with his handkerchief.

Off they went, arm-in-arm, to catch up with the others.

Chapter Sixteen

Sands of time. Nothing exists, but life is good. Jonathan and Phebe marry. Marie and Rose. Uncle Thurston has an illegitimate son, Phillip. Thurston and Marie-Rose grow frail. Elbert.

Back in London Jonathan found, somewhat to his dismay, how content he was to be away from Phebe for a while. He had never had the feeling. The impression he was about to marry a tigress. No, tigress was too strong an appellation, as it only applied to her independent streak, and in every other compartment she was normal. But as a matter of fact she was never normal, thus his love for her. Remarkable. Singular. She was the epitome of singularity, in the best meaning of the word. Sterling.

Nevertheless. And nevertheless. He was content to be away from her for a while, to collect his thoughts and rearrange them.

The first to greet Jonathan as he entered the office floor of Fleet was his friend Maxwell Backbone.

"Good to see you again old fellow!" said Maxwell, shaking Jonathan's hand. "We could scarcely get along without you."

When they had first met Jonathan had suspected Maxwell of sarcasm at such utterances. Only later had he decided how sincere Maxwell usually was. Furthermore, Jonathan had initially wondered if his chum was trying to ingratiate himself in an attempt to worm his way into favor with Uncle Thurston, but in time he had decided his suspicion was too acerbic. As it was, and Maxwell being a steadfast and hard-working soul, any ingratiating with Uncle Thurston would come from himself and not from Maxwell.

Weeks elapsed, and Jonathan worked and learned as much as he could about the business. As a result of his acclimation he found he had longer evenings alone in his flat with little to do other than re-read Phebe's every-other-day letters. He had always read books when he could, but he had seldom had time for it. But now he had time, and he had begun to look through bookshops, and he had borrowed a number of books from Maxwell whom he discovered was a prodigious reader. Not only that, Maxwell was a reader of literary books, not everyday pap, and one of his books included a piece on the ancient Greek Pre-Socratic Sophist Gorgias; which piece jumped out at Jonathan not only for its similarity to his name, but owing to some thoughts he had had for most of his life, but which he had been unable to express to himself even had he been more astute. Gorgias' main tenets cast such a powerful impact on Jonathan that he grabbed a scrap of paper and wrote them down:

- 1) Nothing exists

- 2) Even if something exists nothing can be known about it
- 3) Even if something can be known about it knowledge about it cannot be communicated to others
- 4) Even if it can be communicated it cannot be understood.

Jonathan placed the paper on the tea table beside his armchair and leaned back with a weakness he had never before experienced; definitely not as the result of reading a book. He had never considered himself a profound thinker, and he still did not. Notwithstanding his limitations, what had caused the paroxysm which had fallen over him like a palpable cloud? Then, as he attempted to resolve that conundrum, another possible impediment came to mind; what would Phebe make of his philosophical cogitations? Would she think him mad? Or, given her progressive attitudes, would she support and encourage him? It was impossible to know, so what then? The answer was obvious; don't breathe a word to her. Well, surely not that drastic, but he could break it to her over time. He could imagine revealing the whole concept to Phebe all at once; "Madam, I will tell you there is no such thing as reality. All is nothingness." She would have him committed to Bedlam, and his only saving grace was that it no longer existed. She would, in the event, find another such institution----

And he wasn't so sure even he believed it. It was possible what he had always come to believe was preposterous, and he had fallen prey to his own imagination. Ridiculous internal blabbering, indicating he was moonstruck. Flights of fancy. Thereupon he stopped ruminating, a device he had long ago learnt to do, and he poured himself a short glass of port wine, thus ensuring his thoughts would remain quit of all such tittle-tattle.

Jonathan's overarching self-remedy was, then, to not think. So he did not think; he merely looked around the room. Several plush chairs, a kitchen-area table and chairs, an old second-hand clock on the wall across from where he sat in the armchair he had designated as his, a picture of two large, black dogs above Phebe's chair. He had never cared for dogs, the reason being they always slobbered on him. He couldn't tell one dog from another. Maybe they were terriers.

Phebes would turn their flat into a home.

Jonathan's life unwound like a clock. He and Phebe were married, he enjoyed working at Silk Fleet Associates, he and Phebe cared for each other, she became an active women's voting rights supporter, Jonathan studied philosophy, his father Elbert died, with his, Jonathan's, name on his lips, but Garrison took great care of his mother Cordelia, his friend Maxwell Backbone became an even closer friend, Jonathan stayed in contact with his old Guildford friend Simon Slope and his wife Marit, Jonathan and Phebe had two children, Marie and Rose, Uncle Thurston and Aunt Marie-Rose became very frail, and Jonathan learned that his uncle, in his youth, had born a son out of wedlock, Phillip, and when said object of his lust had disappeared never to be seen by him again, Uncle Thurston and Aunt Marie-Rose had taken in and nurtured a street waif until the boy, Pimm, had died at the tender age of five.

And, Jonathan mused, his Uncle Thurston had made him his virtually-adopted son; a true, legal partner of equal standing.

Of an evening when the children had been put to bed, as Jonathan and Phebe sat in front of their fireplace drinking their port wine and listening to the cold, winter wind howl outside, he turned to her and cast an especially warm and loving look.

"What?" asked Phebe.

He did not reply.

"Are you too into your cups on one small glass of wine?" asked she. "Or are you getting amorous again?"

"Neither," replied he. "I confess I was waxing on to myself, philosophically."

"Not blathering about nothingness again?"

"No indeed. I was turning over in my mind how well things have worked out for us."

"Oh, yes, they have. In large part because of you."

"I beg to differ. Mostly because of you my dear." He took another sip of wine.

"Oh, yes," said Phebe, "come to think of it I quite agree, thank you. Mostly by dint of my wisdom, wit, and hard work. You see, I am a dutiful and convivial little wife."

They laughed with yet more cheerfulness than usual as Jonathan got up and stirred the fire.

As he sat back down he explained, "I believe this may be the zenith of our lives. In an often cruel world how could anything be better than this," said he, waving the back of his hand vaguely. "If there is anything better, please tell me."

Phebe only beamed at him.

"No?" asked Jonathan. "You cannot divine anything better?"

"Only if we were royalty living with the queen. But that might not be so good either. No, I am certain you are right. Quite so. We are at our apex. I rarely agree with you, but now I must."

"Ho! You never fail to agree with me. It's your wifely duty, and you fulfill your many duties well."

"I beg to disagree. My prime duty is to dissent when you"

They prattled on for a while, then they were silent.

Jonathan glanced around at the improvements Phebe had made to the flat she had turned into a home. The pictures and photos on the wall--many of family and friends--the delicate and unique trimmings, and other personal touches. And their children's personal treasures. His favorites were the photographs of his parents and of hers. Her parents' photograph was older, as it included the mother she had never fully known. How could she have, she had been so young? A beautiful lady who was the genesis of a beautiful daughter.

On a sudden Jonathan sat up straight. "I have a story to tell you."

"Please."

"A singular story. More like an anecdote."

"Proceed."

"Before we were married and you arrived here, one day Maxwell and I

went into a room on the first floor to eat our lunch. There we were sitting on a crate, eating, and chatting about nothing in particular. Well, Maxwell went upstairs, and as I was finishing my sandwich, in walked Hiram Fig who told me no one except Uncle Silk and Mr Jeeves were allowed in that room. Then he recognized who I was, and he blushed, apologized, and left, but as I walked away I looked back to see him locking the room, and I have not seen it unlocked since."

"How extraordinary."

"Yes, but here's the really interesting part of my story. A week later, after work when everyone had left, I invited Hiram to sit outside on the bench with me and have a nip of something. At first he feigned reluctance, but judging by his bulbous, red, drinker's nose, I was sure he would join me, and after proper protestations he did. So out we went, me carrying a bottle of Old Tom Gin and two tin cups. We sat, and I poured, then hid the bottle behind the bench. Hiram protested as to the great quantity, albeit he protested rather weakly. Then we drank."

"Do you mean to say you got stiff?"

"Oh, my, no. I scarcely poured myself enough to dampen the bottom of my cup! Certainly not, but in the event, if I had it would have been in the line of duty dear girl," guffawed Jonathan. "And now, looking back, I should have taken my duty more seriously and drunk more. I have always had a fondness for gin, and----"

"Behave yourself!" barked Phebe, throwing a small, red chair pillow at him. "You have never liked gin or any other drink, you nincompoop!"

He held up his glass.

"Well, moderated amounts of wine," conceded she. "And even that puts you under."

"Grant me the liberty of continuing. It gets better. As with all tosspots, one stiff drink and Hiram was gone, and he asked for more. He was well on the way. Drinking like a fish. So I----"

"Had you no guilt?"

"None whatsoever. He was ruined anyway."

"Huh."

"So I plied him with more, and got him into a talkative mood, and pretty soon he was singing like a canary. So I turned the conversation to the mysterious room, and lo, what did I find out?"

Phebe shrugged.

"You won't believe it. I found out that Uncle Thurston is dealing in medicines; some legal, some not, and many which would result in uncertain effects one way or another, good or bad. Or of no effect. The sort of things found in an most chemist shops, sold above the counter or below the counter."

Phebe stiffened and sat up straighter. "No! You don't say so? You're telling me kind, old, respectable, Uncle Thurston is involved in the opium and heroin trade? Say it isn't so!"

Jonathan nearly cringed at her outburst. "I regret to say it, but tis true. The most charitable thing I can say is, not all of his imports are harmful, and some of them, I am sure, are helpful in the treatment of many illnesses."

"You and your long nose, prying into things which are none of your business. Oh, that you had never told me!"

"I now wish I hadn't," said Jonathan. "And that I had not been so curious."

"Uncle Thurston, of all people," said Phebe. "Does Aunt Marie know?"

"Probably not, else his goose would be cooked."

Phebe poured herself another glass of wine. "I still find it hard to believe."

Jonathan waited for her to take several sips, then, "Now, as I chew on some more, it makes sense. How do you suppose he made his fortune? Importing and selling beads and baubles, kerchiefs, Indian knick-knacks, and so on?"

"Indeed I had never thought about it at all, but----"

"Yes. However, life is harsh."

He reached for the bottle, but pulled back his hand, and they both sat in benumbed dismay.

Five or ten minutes passed, then Phebe broke their silence. "Let us put it behind us, and I hope Hiram doesn't remember the conversation."

"He won't. I had to help him home, and the next day he was back to his normal, abysmal self."

"And if the time comes when you own the company----"

"We."

"What?"

"When *we* own the company."

"If we own the company, I will implore you with all my heart to abstain from such sordid trade."

"*When* we own the company, not *if*. And you will not have to implore me."

"Bless you and save you."

Chapter Seventeen

Marie and Rose are Jonathan and Phebe's delights, and they flourish. A cab ride. Worry about Marie.

"Oh, you two!" exclaimed Phebe. Their two daughters, Marie and Rose, were busy completing the tent--constructed of chairs and blankets--that they were setting up in the living room. When they were done they furnished it with pillows and various decorations.

Marie, twelve years old, two years older than her sister, was dark-complected, with black hair and dark eyes. In personality and deportment she was ever so serious. Rose was her opposite; an exact copy of her mother in looks and in her light-hearted, angelic disposition. They were both tall, well-formed, and already beautiful, for which Jonathan was thankful, yet apprehensive; and he thought again of how unpleasant things befall beautiful women as well as homely ones.

"Now ladies," said Phebe, "when your home is complete what would you like for lunch? I can but notice you have no provisions, nor do you have a stove on which to prepare them."

From his armchair in a corner of the room Jonathan lounged, enjoying the three lights of his life. Phebe and Rose, who, if Phebe retained her looks until Rose matured, would almost be seen as twins; and Marie, who presented a beautiful contrast. Opposites in appearance and in other aspects of personality.

And there was one other telling difference between the daughters; a tinge of seriousness in Marie seldom seen in Rose.

Jonathan got up and strolled casually into the kitchen area, pulled the dark-brown cloth from the table, threw it over his head and shoulders, winked at Phebe, and went to his hands and knees.

"Oh my goodness!" shrieked Phebe. "A bear!"

Jonathan crawled toward the tent, growling. The girls' eyes widened, and they shrieked and took cover first inside the tent, then behind it. Jonathan slowly chased them, grunting and growling, and menacing them with his claws. They retreated to their bedroom, and he followed. "I have you trapped now!" growled the bear, but he purposefully moved to one side so they could, with merry cries and laughter, escape back to the living room. And so they played, and at last when Jonathan pulled off his cover both girls fell on him with hugs and kisses, and when it was all over and Jonathan was back in his chair, he reflected on how this was the best time of his life.

Phebe surely was not shallow, but whenever Jonathan attempted to engage her in conversation about anything like the meaning of life he got nowhere. She

would end the attempt with, *There is no meaning*, or *What a ludicrous question*. Which Jonathan already knew, since he was aware that for there to be meaning there would need to be a bestower of meaning, or leastways a guide; and because he had never personally conceived of or known such, in all probability there were none. No gods or other divine lights or prime movers, no human beings--philosophers or teachers, and he had read the work of many--to whom to turn. He was sure about the absence of divinity, but he had to admit there was one philosopher who had made sense to him; David Hume.

But what about everyday life? The best Jonathan had come up with was the feeling one should merely enjoy life to one's best ability, and that was all there was to it. Not long ago he had mentioned this humble opinion to Phebe, and her terse reply had nonplussed him. *You have harped on me for years, and I have always told you that.*

And, looking back, so she had. *You have a habit of expounding in things, but not listening*, she had said.

He had broached the subject with Maxwell Backbone, but Max had shown no interest, so, conceding the possibility that he was nuts, Jonathan had abandoned any further attempts at discussing such concepts with anyone else.

Jonathan rose from his old, stuffed, comfortable armchair and went into their bedroom where Phebe was sitting by the window mending clothes. His shallow meditations--and he knew they were shallow--had led him to a simply lead life mentality, and he hoped he could leave it at that. So in keeping with his resolution he decided it was time to begin in a new vein.

"My dear," said Jonathan, "We should get out more. How would you like to----?"

"Heavens no," interrupted Phebe. "You know how atrocious the streets are this time of year. The odour is horrific, and the rats. Oh, the rats! They get bolder every day. And what about the girls?"

"Yes, I have noticed how the girls too get more brazen every day."

"Compose yourself. You cannot fluster me. Not in the manner you try, therefore you will not gain much satisfaction."

"Well said, but do you----?"

"Not another walk."

"No, not another walk. I am suggesting we take a Hansom cab and do the town. Well, at least get away from our area and see the sights. And I know old Hattie next door would be glad to watch the girls."

"A cab?" She put down her work. "Isn't that rather extravagant?"

"I do declare, one of your many virtues has always been your thriftiness, but you should appreciate our financial situation now, and I feel confident we can well afford a jaunt in a cab, where I doubt there will be rats, and where the smell will be more bearable. Rats don't often come out in the daytime."

"Unless they are diseased."

"Quibble, quibble. I do acknowledge they are becoming bolder. Anyway what do you say Miss Phebes? Are you coming or not?"

"Give me a minute to get ready."

"Wonderful. And for an extra incentive we will stop at a pub where I can procure for us the best beer they have. We'll bring two of the largest glasses we have, and drink it along the way."

"What sort of ribald creature have I married?" giggled Phebe as she brushed her hair.

"On second thought, we will bring three glasses. I gather it's traditional to offer a drink to the driver."

"And the driver never refuses."

It was a delightful day, sunny and bright, not too malodorous, and not sweltering. The cab was clean, the driver pleasant and gregarious--if already a trifle tipsy--traffic was light, and all in all it was pleasant to be riding rather than walking for a change.

"Where to?" asked the cabbie through the opening in the top of the cab.

"Anywhere you please," replied Jonathan. "And no hurry."

"Anywhere, sir?"

"Yes. You are the navigator."

"Very well captain," said he with a laugh, and off they went.

"And please stop at a good pub where I may get a couple glasses of beer for the road. It would be our pleasure to get one for you as well if you would allow us to do so."

"Oh, well, as a general rule I don't drink while on duty, but since you are such a nice couple I will gladly make an exception."

Jonathan winked at Phebe, and she winked back.

As they rattled along both passengers quietly enjoyed looking at the pedestrians who represented the human family of London, and likely much of England. Jonathan knew the upper crust was not well represented, but then they were an insignificant portion of the populous except--and granted it was a substantial exception--for their great influence over the lives of the people who generally walked the streets; those who comprised the heart of humanity. No doubt in centuries to come they would be better represented. Common people.

"Oh, look at the pretty lady in the pink dress," said Phebe. "She is the most bewitching thing I have ever seen."

The lady was young, tall, and stately, and she walked erectly, looking straight ahead as though she was accustomed to being importuned by unsavory characters such as are met on such streets. She carried a larger-than-usual umbrella, and she obviously knew how to use it for more than protection from rain.

"Not as beautiful as you, dear," observed Jonathan.

"Pardon me?"

"I said----"

"I heard you. I have often heard such puffery from you." She had not even bothered to look at him.

"Nonetheless she strikes me as being kind of dowdy."

Phebe continued. "And here comes the most portly lady I have ever seen!"

"Ahem. How exceedingly benevolent of you. Some people would have said something like obese or corpulent, or----"

"But there is attractiveness beneath her plump figure, and with some moderation in her eating I believe she would be downright pleasing to the eye."

Jonathan held his tongue, knowing he could be acerbic. He had fought against it more and more as he grew older, and he hoped neither of their

daughters would be so affected. If either were to be, it would be Marie; but no, she was too good-natured to succumb to such darkness.

The driver stopped in front of a pub, The Golden Egg, and Jonathan got out. When he returned he was juggling his three glasses deftly but without undue finesse. He handed one to the cabbie and the other two to Phebe.

"Thank you kindly," said the driver. "Tis fairly early for me, but it would be disrespectful to refuse."

Off they went, and Jonathan whispered to Phebe, "It's a good thing old Dobbin can wend his way along by himself; I do believe our pilot is slightly under the weather."

Phebe took a drink, then replied, "Don't let me have more than one of these," she held up her glass, "lest I join our friend up top in merry inebriation."

"I will not allow you more than one. You have no doubt gathered it is ale, not beer. All the better to put you under my dear. To your health my dear."

A few years ago she had in fact downed three glasses of ale and Jonathan had had to pour her into bed.

"Have no fear," said Jonathan, "I remember your----"

"Oh, look, dancers!" interrupted Phebe.

In front of them, in the middle of the street, were a half-dozen people dancing and waving bottles, glasses, and mugs. In their midst stood a bobby who was trying, unsuccessfully, to move them; and as a further impediment was the congregation of bystanders, most of whom were egging on the boozers. Another bobby entered the fray. He was older than the other, and he knew how to use his club, beating back the celebrants one at a time; even knocking them senseless and dragging them aside if needs must. The younger bobby followed his example and soon they had cleared the street and Dobbin moved on as if nothing had happened.

"Good heavens," said Phebe.

"Yes. Two more ales and that might have been you being beaten and dragged," laughed Jonathan.

"Here," said she, handing her nearly-empty glass to him, "I have lost my thirst. Oh, goodness, look at that pitiful old man lying there bleeding from his head. And the shabby lady crawling on her hands and knees."

"It is a pity," agreed Jonathan. "Unfortunately they will probably be back at it in a matter of days, if they are not seriously injured. Poor devils, they never learn."

They rattled on for a while, then Jonathan roused the driver and had him turn around and take them home.

Chapter Eighteen

Time travels faster.

The older Jonathan got the faster time passed. Even clocks seemed to tick and cuckoo faster. And he was more subject to malaise. Everyone's hair turned greyer, they moved slower, their mental agility declined, and children aged faster. Dogs were mangier, cats scruffier, and buildings shabbier. Men were wrinkled and dour; women fatter, thinner, and generally more homely. Horses slower, organ grinder monkeys churlish, clergymen sour, nuns even more frustrated, barmen less friendly, barmaids plainer, and upper-class society less genteel. Birds sang bitterly, businessmen were impolite,

Jonathan had selected his knobstick. He usually took one of his ornate sticks, but this time he was in an exceedingly rancorous mood. He strode along on the verge of hoping someone would step in front of him and try to push him aside or importune him, but alas no one did. He came to a bench in front of a hatter's shop and plopped down, willing the hatter to come out and try to chase him away. The hatter did not, so he just sat, angry and dejected.

He sat, and he sat, and in time his darkness lifted to the point where he could watch people with, if not amusement, at least mild interest. An elegant lady in her mid-thirties hurried by in a elaborate light-blue dress with a bustle. Certainly not an everyday dress. Then passed a handsome, dashing fortyish man in a full black suit; though not to be taken for a member of parliament or anything like. Costermongers, bricklayers, dustmen, hussies, shop workers, an obvious street-walker, a sallow, slatternly lady of indeterminate age weighing nearly fourteen stone, many other ordinary people, An old man came by selling meat pies and Jonathan was tempted, but once he had turned bilious from eating such a pie, so he thought better of it.

And as Jonathan observed those of lowly station passing by, he realized their movements were slowing. But it was himself, relaxing. Nevertheless the awareness was shocking in its impact on him to the extent of being a major apprehension, never, ever to be forgotten. Phebe had told him he needed to unbend. She had said so now and then throughout their marriage, but maybe this time it would stick. When he got home he would plead guilty of obstinacy and hard-headedness, she would admonish him, he would hang his head, and in the end she would forgive him. Then they would each have a small glass of wine. And while they sipped he would again find himself sure she, in her innermost thoughts, secretly appreciated his talent for adding color to her life.

But for now, having mellowed some, Jonathan remained on the bench enjoying a more enlightened and magnanimous appreciation of mankind in all of its strengths and weaknesses, from vagrants, vagabonds, and pickpockets, to notables, would-be notables, and others from the upper crust. But mostly the general public going about their daily endeavors, some jocular, some in despair,

many with simple determination; most unfathomable.

A short, elderly pudgy man lost his bowler to a gust of wind, and along with it his wig. All-the-more humiliating since wigs were largely out of fashion. He retrieved his upper accouterments, jammed on his hat as far as it would go, hid his hair under his coat, and ran away to the tune of all-around good-natured laughter and some ridicule.

An utterly beautiful twenty-something lady stopped to look through a dress-shop window. Her long, auburn hair reached down halfway to her waist, and she cut a fine figure that did not go unappreciated by the hoi polloi who chanced to be passing by. A rounder staggered toward her and reached out, but a good-looking young man struck his wrist with his walking stick, sufficient to discourage him. The lady, unaware of her close thing, walked on.

A rough-looking man of advanced years came to the door, looked blankly at Jonathan, then peered up and down the street. Judging by tremors of the man's hands he was the hatter himself. In any case he was not far from retirement, or the grave. He looked down at Jonathan again and mumbled something unintelligible, then slowly turned and went back inside.

Then along the sidewalk came crawling a man, poorly dressed, not young, and drunk as a fiddler. The phrase *falling-down drunk* popped to mind and Jonathan smiled dejectedly.

The man had a perfectly round face and a nose like the top of a mushroom, but for it he would have been handsome. Ha!

The man stopped in front of Jonathan, looked up, tipped his cap politely, and asked, "Pardon me sir, can you tell me how much farther it is to the Golden Anvil?"

Jonathan answered, "Only three stones throw."

"Thank you kindly my man."

And on the pitiable unfortunate went.

There was no Golden Anvil pub thereabouts, but what matter that? Bless the poor soul.

Having had a sufficient dose of human nature, Jonathan took up his stick and turned toward home. The day had turned dreary but it had done him good to blend with the human family, and he felt better for it. His mind turned to ancient Greek philosophers; his usual solace, even though this time he was at ease and not in need of solace. But after a while he resorted to a mental device he had resorted to ever since he had been a child; he commanded himself to stop thinking. It had taken a long time to develop the ability--most people, even had they recognized their need to do so, could not have mastered it, as it requires the utmost determination and skill--withal he had perfected it. Phebe, who understood his foibles, had good-naturedly reproached him for it; however she was accustomed to his eccentricities, and had made no more of it.

Jonathan walked slower. He stopped and loitered in front of an apothecary and practiced his non-thinking. When he was successful, as now, his mood improved and he felt peaceful. When he was not successful---

"I say, we meet again!

It was the mushroom-nosed man, and he was going in the wrong direction; or, the right direction, because Jonathan had sent him on a wild goose chase.

"Am I closing in on the Golden Anvil?" The merry man tipped his hat again.

"You are."

Jonathan winked and the man thanked him and crawled on.

Jonathan's non-thinking spell was broken. He resumed his walking, whereupon a familiar reflection came to mind; how once in a while he longed for peace to the extent where he wished he could just retreat to a lone, dark, quiet, and comfortable place. If Phebe were to, to pass on before he, that would most probably be his lot; a dim and isolated remainder of his life.

Chapter Nineteen

Loss and sorrow. Cordelia succumbs.

Jonathan, walking deep in thought, pacing back and forth in front of the Fleet building, nearly bumped into someone. To his amazement it was Garrison.

"Whaa? Garrison? What in the world?"

He seized his brother and hugged him heartily, but received little response. He stepped back and saw the despair on Garrison's face.

"What's the matter? What ails you, Gary? Why are you here?"

Garrison broke into a flood of tears, and stepping forward he returned Jonathan's hug.

"It's mother," he sobbed into Jonathan's shoulder. "She is gone. She passed away yesterday. Gone, just like that. Not a word or a sign of any kind. She slumped over onto the kitchen table, gasped once, and----"

Jonathan pushed him away so he could look into his eyes.

"Dead? I can't believe it! She was so healthy and vital. What was it?"

"Dr Lander didn't know for sure, but he guessed it was sudden heart failure. He tried to gently tell me what had happened was not the important thing; the main thing was that she had died quickly, not slowly and in agony."

"Just so. Oh, god. But why are you here? A telegram would have done."

Garrison wiped his eyes with the back of his cap. "To spare you a cold, harsh telegram."

"Dear Gary."

They hugged again, then, "And for myself," moaned Garrison. "I know we haven't seen much of each other lately, but I needed you. That's all. You have always been my anchor in life, and I didn't know it until now. Not for sure, but now I do."

"Thank you, but you do have your wife."

"And what would I do without Violet, but with you it's quite another matter, and in fact she is the one who suggested I come here. She sometimes knows me better than I know myself."

Violet was the young lady whom Jonathan had, for all practical purposes, forced upon his excessively-shy, newly-sober brother. Though not well schooled she possessed native intelligence to a surprising degree.

"You had best come in," said Jonathan, "and I will send someone to fetch Phebe. Poor Phebes, she will be devastated."

On the way up to Jonathan's office Garrison said, "Violet is making the arrangements."

Jonathan sent a young office worker named Higgins to fetch Phebe; sent with instructions to not let her know why she was being summoned. "Now whatever, keep it under your hat," Jonathan had said.

While they waited Jonathan rehearsed what to say to Phebe. His mother

had been like her mother, and it was not going to be easy.

Garrison, who had aged physically, had matured within as well, as Jonathan could tell by his quiet bearing and the tactful way he had drifted to the far end of the room.

Well, nothing for it but to come straight out with it, decided Jonathan. Beating about the bush would not do, given Phebe's perspicacity. She would have suspected something bad had happened before she had even gone out the door. That presented, unfortunately, sufficient room for her imagination to grow, and he surmised that by the time of her arrival she would have some idea of who was the subject of the apparent distress if she took into account the ages of their closest family and friends.

The wait was eternal.

At last they heard footsteps, and in flew Phebe.

"Who?" was all she asked.

"Mother," returned Jonathan in a monotone, and he had to hurry around to the front of his desk to catch Phebe, who would have otherwise fallen flat on the floor.

"No," she moaned weakly as he held her to him. "No," again. "No, no, no, not mother."

Cordelia had been the only mother she truly remembered.

Jonathan held her more tightly, but as he did she broke away and screamed; a horrible, unearthly, shriek such as he had never before heard from human or beast. He was so unnerved his own legs weakened, and had it not been for Garrison he and Phebe would both have crumpled into a heap.

Garrison gently placed Phebe on the chair in front of the desk, and he stood behind her, holding her lest she fall forward.

Jonathan, in a fog, wobbled to his own chair, and therein he collapsed. He opened a desk drawer and withdrew his bottle; however after looking at it as if he didn't know what it was, he put it back.

An abject, miserable trio, still and mute. Somebody entered, put something on Jonathan's desk, then left. In through the open window behind Jonathan came the call of a fishmonger whom he knew and had purchased fish from, but whom he had never actually heard until then, having unconsciously ignored the street sounds. Then came the pieman, and after him came a tinker who once-a-week called out his wares.

Jonathan got up and looked out the window, half expecting to see a hearse, preceded by a mute to clear the way, yet the absurdity of his figment sent him back to his desk. So there was nothing for it but to remain standing, head swimming, unable to bear looking at the others, stricken.

After a time Phebe was beside him, taking his upper arm as though to hold him up, and perhaps she was supporting him, for he had become weaker than he had ever been in his life. In certain provinces of life she was stronger than he, and this was one of those times when her special province rescued him. Then came Garrison to his other side, also holding him, and a presentiment came to Jonathan the like of which he had never previously experienced; the beginning of determination. Ever so slight, but sensible nonetheless. His stomach felt better.

"Come away from the window," said Garrison as he and Phebe led Jonathan back to his desk.

So there they sat again. And sat. An office worker entered, placed some more papers on Jonathan's desk, and left, and it wasn't until he had slammed the door on his way out that Jonathan knew the young man had been there.

And they sat on.

Then all three roused themselves in unison, and it was Garrison, the least likely of them, who took charge.

"We must leave in the morning. Violet has set the funeral for the day after tomorrow, and the burial will be next to father, behind the church. She wasn't a church person but she had said several times she wanted to be next to father when the end came."

The vicar--Jonathan didn't even know his name--had given a heartfelt eulogy, the brief graveside service was intoned by a short, burly old man whom no one but the vicar seemed to know, and when it was all over everyone but Jonathan, Garrison, and their wives remained.

There was nothing to be said. Jonathan took the red rose from his lapel and gently tossed it onto the elm coffin. His mother's favorite flowers were red roses, and she had only wanted a plain coffin. She had sometimes joked as to how, if she were placed in anything ornate, she would rise from her box, chastise them all, then go back to sleep on top of the coffin. No danger of that; her container was as plain as could be. He felt a tear run down his right cheek, and wiped it away with the back of his hand. To his left, on the other side of Phebe, Garrison was leaning on Violet, shaking slightly.

Jonathan looked at his father's grave. Elbert too had had a simple service, as he had dictated.

Then Jonathan was overcome by the need to leave, lest he break down and embarrass himself. He firmed his hold on Phebe's arm and led her away, and the last thing he remembered was a dove cooing.

Chapter Twenty

A family outing.

Marie and Rose were interrupted as they played on the floor.

"Girls, how would you like to go on an excursion to Margate?" asked Phebe.

They left off with their blocks and other toys.

"What's Margate?" asked Marie.

"It is a seaside town where people may frolic in the water, swim, sit in the beach, and all other fun things. It is a wonderful place!"

Rose asked, "Where is it?"

"It is east of here. We will take the train."

The girls appeared bewildered.

"Have you been there?" asked Marie.

"No, but I know all about it, and I am eager to go and dip my toes in the seawater, see the sights and the people, and partake of the delicious food I have heard about."

"What is the matter with your toes?" inquired Rose.

"Ha, ha, nothing my dear. It's just a saying meaning to wade or swim."

"Will father come?" asked Rose.

"Yes, he would not miss it for anything!"

"Is he a good swimmer?" Rose went on.

"He is as good as I am"

"Are you good?"

"Heavens no, neither he nor I are accomplished swimmers. We both grew up on inland farms, and we have never seen an ocean. In fact we have never been swimming in our lives; not even in ponds or pools. If someone threw me into water over my head I would sink like a rock."

Both girls suddenly stood, wide-eyed. "You would drown?" cried Marie.

"Oh, I would thrash about and scream and gurgle, but down I would go."

"And father could not save you?" gasped Rose.

"No, I half believe he, were he beside me, would be the first to go under for good."

Seeing their despair Phebe held them closely.

"Oh, don't be alarmed, I'm not serious. No harm will come to us, and we will have a grand, glorious time."

Marie asked, "What will we do first mama?"

"Definitely first will be to purchase bathing suits, unless of we want to go swimming in our birthday suits."

Rose looked puzzled. "What are birthday suits?"

Phebe explained.

"Oh, mamma, you are so silly!" giggled Marie. "Sillier than father, and he is silly enough. And to imagine we will start our adventure by riding on a train. I

have always wanted to ride on a train."

"In a train I should say," said her mother. "We will be in a large carriage with other travelers, and the ride will be smooth, unlike horse-drawn vehicles on rough, bumpy roads. We will be able to relax and see the sights. I shall even pack a lunch for us to enjoy on the way."

The girls danced gleefully around Phebe, and only then did she realize how little of life they had seen, and she vowed to remedy their heretofore isolation in any ways possible, as part of their education.

"Phew! What is that smell?" asked Rose.

"It's the smoke from the engine," replied Phebe, "but pay it no attention, it's part of the ride. Oh look at all of the pretty horses!"

She pointed at a pasture with over a dozen horses of diverse colors; tan, brown, grey,

"May we have one someday?" pleaded Marie. She looked from Phebe to her father.

"Oh, I dare say not," responded Jonathan. "We live in a big city. Where would we put a horse? In your bedroom?" he laughed. "Goodness me!" He changed the subject. "Now I say, look yonder. Do you see the geese? Dozens of them, and"

"Lunch time," announced Phebe.

She opened her basket and began to distribute her delicacies, all centered around her always-wonderful beef pie. Best of all were the cherry tarts, loved by all, and her butter pudding. No one in the small family had ever been known to have turned down any of Phebe's offerings.

As they ate, Jonathan discreetly considered the other passengers, who ranged from the elderly to the very young; from those of the upper crust to those of middling status; on down to through the mediocre to the low and the poor. He admitted to himself he was only making judgments based on appearance alone; not upon sound knowledge or familiarity. Still and all too many of the human race are mediocre as far as intelligence is concerned. Ha, we all have brains resembling walnuts, but too many of us, alas, have brains the *size* of walnuts. *Oh, desist; such cynicism is contemptible.* Nonetheless how is it possible for masses to govern to any adequate effect? Maybe if Phebe and others like her could vote---

A young lady--indeed, a child--commenced crying; rather to say, howling at the top of her lungs. A man of some years worked his way through a coughing spell, and a young lady whom Jonathan could not see, as she was behind him and out of sight, seemed to be in tears for some reason or another. Others carried on laughing and having good times. Jonathan paused. In order to level the see-saw of humanity he decided to appreciate the good and the good-looking in his fellow travelers; the several dapper men, the comely ladies, the dignified elderly, There was no way of determining their intellect other than through observation. Maybe someday there would be a test of some sort.

"Oh, look," cried Marie, "that man is dancing!"

At the front of the carriage a slender, dark, middle age man with a large, red nose was indeed doing a jig.

"Pay him no mind," advised Jonathan, "I have heard buffoonery is not

uncommon on trains. If he does not calm down cooler heads will settle him, especially if he gets---- Well, goes hog wild."

He had been about to say *crazy*, or *violent*, but he had caught himself.

"Why is he wild?" asked Marie. "And why will they have to settle him?"

"He is stewed," explained Phebe quietly. "He has had too much to drink."

"Too much what? Orangeade? Does he have a stomach-ache? If he has a stomach-ache why is he so festive?"

"Never mind," said Phebe, "I'll explain it to you some other time. Oh, look at the dragon over yonder!" She pointed far away toward a hill.

"A real dragon?" shrieked the girls. "Where?"

"Oh, durn," chuckled Phebe. "It flew away!"

"Oh, mother, are you teasing us again?" asked Rose. "Are you? Father always does, but not you."

"Oh, I won't tell."

In front, after a few more minutes of the inebriate's performance, two younger men pulled his coat down over his arms and tied the sleeves together behind, thus binding him; while a third tied his ankles together with his belt. They then thrust him back down into his seat, and to the onlookers' astonishment one hero held the rascal down, one forced open his mouth, and the third gurgled a more-than-ample dose of something from a bottle down his craw. After a short struggle the dancer was quiet and the other passengers cheered, clapped, and laughed; at which the three heroes bowed politely and took their seats.

"I still don't know what ailed that silly man," murmured Rose.

Phebe answered, "I believe it is common for some people to behave strangely if trains go too fast, and----"

"Now Phebes," scoffed Jonathan, "don't fill the girls' heads with those old-wives' tales. You're not an old wife. 'Twas nothing of the sort. Maybe the poor devil was merely nuts, not drunk, and we can only bid him well when he wakes up." He guessed his explanation was as valid as his wife's.

Margate at last, although the journey had been pleasant and interesting.

The little family found lodging at Cliftonville Hall, a grand establishment presenting itself to the girls as the beginning of a majestic fairy-tale. The outside was magnificent, but the rooms were even more so. Phebe and the girls were enchanted; and Jonathan, had he voiced it to them, or even to himself, was as well. It was surely the beginning of five delightful days.

The room decor was *fancy*. Phebe's description, and Jonathan agreed. More artistic-oriented people would no doubt have come up with a more academic depiction, but to them *fancy* was adequate. Jonathan thought the general design, including the furniture, was French, but knowing little about such things he wouldn't have wagered one of his Fleet ships on it.

Marie and Rose tried every chair, every sofa, and both beds.

"Now ladies," said Phebe, "no bouncing. I fear you will damage something. You will have plenty to do when we are outside on the beach, and I may even frolic a little. Maybe even your father will too once he gets limbered up."

"Oh, not father," laughed Rose, "He's an old stick in the mud."

"Why shush, he is not," returned Phebe. "He has his charms." She tweaked her husband's nose.

As always he was good-natured, though Rose's observation had cut him ever so slightly, as he had never doubted his sense of humour. It had been one of those times when a seemingly innocuous comment hits home with undue psychic force. Oh dear. With heretofore unrealized meaning. If he were that tedious he would need to adjust his attitudes, with Phebe's aid and advice. But now was not the time or place to begin such an adjustment, so on with festivities.

"Enough sitting around here on our seats when we could be out enjoying the sun and the bracing air!" said Jonathan.

Marie and Rose jumped up and down in excitement.

"Shall we swim?" asked Rose.

"Not today dear," answered Phebe, "it is late in the day. But we can walk the beach and wade in the water, and see if there are any seashells. On our way we will look for bathing suits."

"Yaay!"

"Yaay," added Jonathan. "You will feel sea water for the first time, and you may also feel the fish nibble on your toes."

"Oh, I shan't want fish to nibble on my toes!" gasped Marie.

"Hush," said Phebe, "pay no heed to your father. At times like this you can't believe a thing he says. His humour is unusual and dry. The secret is to see the twinkle in his eyes, then you will know he is laughing inside. He is not impenetrable."

Out the door and all the way to the beach ran Marie and Rose, with their parents following close behind.

"Oh, the air smells so fresh," said Rose.

Phebe laughed. "Do you like it better than London air?"

"Oh, my yes! I wish I could breathe every day!"

Jonathan sat on the beach beside his wife. "I wish you could as well," said he, and he winked at Phebe. His neck and upper back muscles felt like they were loosening.

Then all but Jonathan removed their shoes and socks and gingerly stepped into the water. He, comfortable in his broad-brimmed straw hat, had two tasks facing him. The first was to appreciate his family while he could; while they were young and still with him.

The other undertaking could not wait either; enhancing his appreciation of other things. Things? Of whatever in life is good, instead of dwelling on the bad. The fact that there is so much bad--and likely if one put *bad* on one side of a scale and *good* on another, the bad would bottom out--however such a tilt should be all the more reason to concentrate on the good. It would entail considerable effort and determination in light of his constitutional dim view of the world and its inherent tribulations.

All three of Jonathan's ladies splashed and laughed, and Phebe was young again.

Without the support of religion one had to be braver than those of faith, thus the journey through life was harder. A compensation was, one would be spared having to live somewhere *up there* forever, and ever, and ever, . . . , which would be for him, Jonathan was certain, worse than plain and simple death.

Another facet of life had always been one of Jonathan's bugaboos; chance. Pure, plain, simple, random chance, accounting for many of life's ups and downs.

No matter how sharp-witted, industrious, or whatever else works to one's advantage---

Aren't you stating the obvious with all of your blathering to yourself?

Jonathan almost heard it as though some gruff old sage had leaned and said it into his right ear, and he shuddered.

"I know I'm not the smartest guy in----" he said, but he stopped and looked around to see if anyone had heard him talking to himself. No one had. Was he turning into a crack-brain?

You are far from as learned as you seem to assume, and you should look ahead. For instance, what if Phebe died, leaving you alone in your old age? What then?

Jonathan's whole body trembled, and he looked around again.

Suppose one of your daughters were to---

Jonathan jumped up and staggered toward Phebe and the girls.

"I cannot wait to find a bathing machine and then take the girls swimming!" laughed Phebe. "I hear sea water is good for the constitution. But first let us walk the jetty."

Chapter Twenty-one

Jonathan learns he has a sister named Libby. She and her husband are mysterious.

Jonathan came through the front door waving a letter over his head.

"Sit down in your chair Phebes! Life is, alas, never dull for us."

"What in----?"

"Sit!" And he sat in his armchair next to her.

"First we find out about uncle Thurston's illegitimate, eh, unknown son; now this from out of the blue."

He handed the letter to Phebe, and her hands trembled as she read it. When she had finished she tossed it back.

"I believe our interesting life is due to you and yours," she remarked.

"I cannot dispute that."

They stared blankly at each other for several moments.

"My father must have been hit in the head too many times in his prizefighting days. Oh, praise be, my mother never knew."

"How could she not have known of an illegitimate daughter? All those years? It tells right there in the letter how he took care of her. Libby. How could she have been kept secret?"

Jonathan's head nodded slightly from side to side. "Give me time. One thing after another. Was there ever anything like this in your family?"

"No!" snapped Phebe.

"But would you have known?"

"I should say so!"

"How?"

"I just would have, that's all. So stop carping about my family. The letter is about yours, not mine."

"As you say."

"So what does she want? This Libby?"

"She didn't say she wanted anything. Only to pay a visit."

"Oh, she'll have her hand out, believe me. It's second nature." But she said it lightly.

"Sir, your sister is downstairs and she wishes to see you."

Jonathan looked up from the inventory book at which he was working.

"I don't have a, oh, I mean to say please ask her to come up."

He put down his pen, closed the book, and waited. Then in walked a stunningly beautiful lady dressed in the finest of fashion. Light-pink dress; wide, black hat with pink ribbons hanging down each side, white silk gloves, and black

laced leather shoes of the finest quality. She was light-complected and fair-haired, with a young-girl's dimples. She smiled broadly, and Jonathan stood to welcome her.

"Libby I presume," said he, returning her smile despite his suspicions.

"Congratulations on being an excellent presumer," said she, holding out her hand.

Jonathan moved to the end of his desk to offer her the chair, but she waved him off with the back of her hand.

"Now, now, times are changing," said Libby, "and I am perfectly capable of sitting down in a chair on my own accord brother Jonathan."

"Brother Jonathan you say?" He sat back down. "I am sure you must appreciate what a surprise your letter was, and how cautious I, or anyone in my position, would naturally be. I say, I am flabbergasted."

"That's a natural reaction." She pulled off her gloves and laid them on her lap.

"How did you find me?" asked Jonathan.

"Find you? Oh dear me, everyone in London knows of Silk Fleet."

"I meant how did you suspect----?"

"Suspect? I knew. I have known all of my life. For as long as I remember. Our father kept it no secret."

"Not from you apparently, if indeed we are related in any way. Half sister, or however one puts it. But it was kept secret from me. Staggered is not too strong a word. Thunderstruck is----"

"Yes, yes," she waved the back of her hand, "and I am sorry. You will recover yourself however, and while you do so I want to make two things clear. First, I have not come here to make any claims. Second, please let me present my life story to you with the aim of convincing you your father and mine are one and the same. Will you let me do that?"

"Yes, but not now. I need time to come to terms with it all."

"In due time. I will leave you in peace. Just one thing though, having to do with claims, I again say, on my life, I will make none, and in fact probably I could not legally make any, as I am illegitimate. A female bastard, if that is a proper distinction."

"Oh, please, don't say that," Jonathan pleaded.

"Tis true though, so why not say it?"

"Spare yourself."

"If you insist, however I feel I am sparing you more than myself. In any event I would readily sign any document you desire, renouncing any claims you fear I may have as regards your fortune. I have married well and we have no need of anything more along the lines of further assets. Ah, there is a blank paper on your desk. Give it to me and I will write anything you say in order to assure you I am not out to hornswoggle you."

"Good gracious I don't feel that's necessary. You leave me at a loss."

"I have that effect on people," went on Libby. "And to reiterate and expand I will tell you I am well-educated, intelligent, lovely, and I have married up. I will say more about my husband some other time, but for now I will only add that I am the brains of our marriage."

"Modest as well," laughed Jonathan. "A bit conceited however." He was

beginning to like his mysterious half-sister.

"Anyone left in my position as a child is forced to sink or swim, and I imagine the majority sink. I swam, and I am still swimming."

Two weeks later Libby showed up at Jonathan's office again, along with her husband.

"This is my dear husband, Mathew Bumper. Mathew, my brother Jonathan Gorgius. We shall not split hairs as to our blood relationship; Jonathan's and mine. I hereby announce and declare that in spirit we are full brother and sister, and that's that."

Jonathan started, "Despite your mother, whoever----?"

"Eh, eh, I also declare we will never mention her. She is a sore subject with me." She scrutinized him. "You will agree to that?"

"Yes."

"Good. So to proceed, Mathew and I have been married ever since I was eighteen, and it has been, and is, a capital marriage."

Jonathan and Mathew shook hands over Jonathan's desk. Mathew was slightly below average in height and size, generally dark in all respects, and generally not-bad looking, except his face was round, and *round* was Jonathan's overall impression of him.

They chatted at length, mostly about nothing. Mathew knew, decided Jonathan, how many beans make five, though he often deferred to Libby, who was ostensibly more retentive, and of a commanding temper.

"Had I known of your coming," said Jonathan, "I would have made sure Phebe was here. She would have been delighted to have met you."

"And we----" began Mathew, but Libby interrupted him.

"And we her, but no mind, there will be time for that. Years I hope."

"So Mathew, what sort of business, or profession, are you----?"

"Oh, we will go into personal matters some other time. Not to boast, but for now only be so kind as to consider him a successful, affluent, man of affairs."

Chapter Twenty-two

Jonathan alone on a dark cliff.

The only illumination was from torches. Jonathan stood on a cliff looking down into what he sensed was a bottomless pit, yet he knew full well nothing was bottomless except the human soul, and the very concept of souls was balderdash.

The cliff was surrounded by black, barren, rocky mountains, whereupon were fixed the torches on all sides and on into the infinity in front of him. Infinity. Another ridiculous mental representation. Infinite, bottomless, unending, limitless, unbounded, His dizziness persisted but there was nothing to hold onto, and he had decided that if he fell he would avoid falling forward. He could not imagine anything worse than falling into a bottomless existence. Wait, nothing was bottomless, and the sudden stop would kill him. He could fall backward, but what then? There was no way off the cliff. He would die there. Or was he already lifeless and in hell? Impossible. There was no hell, or heaven, or any other such place. Religion, like other similar philosophical constructs, was nothing but twaddle. No rapture; no nothing.

Something inside him said, "You excel at negatives but you fall short when it comes to positives."

"Thank you. And whoever or whatever you really are, inasmuch as you seem to have such high self-esteem, peradventure you will assist me in getting off this damnable cliff?"

"Dear me no, there is only one who would be capable of doing that."

"Then," said Jonathan in as sarcastic and low a tone as he could bring, "You will condescend to tell me who said person or deity is?"

"She is not a deity."

"Who then?"

"Phebe. Your wife. She is your only hope."

"She's not here!"

"You don't say."

Jonathan looked around again. "I cannot escape, and she cannot reach me. And even if she could, what could she do? You must stop being despicable and tell me, who are you?"

"You know."

"Wait!"

But then he was alone. More alone than he had ever been. He sat down to steady himself. Was it a nightmare? He had never been bothered by nightmares, but what else could it be? There was only one way to find out. Either remain on the cliff and starve, or jump headlong into the unknown.

Jonathan stood and moved close to the edge. He had always possessed inner fortitude, however he had never faced such a severe life-and-death

decision. In his moment of weakness he whispered, "Lord, please be with me."

Then he jumped.

Down, down, down he plunged, darker and darker, whirling, tumbling, spiraling, colder and colder, . . . Then a splash! Water. The gorge was not bottomless, and he was saved. He would swim---

"Jonathan! Jonathan!" came a voice. Phebe. She was prying his eyelids open with her fingers.

"Ow! What in the name of---?"

"Wake up! Open your eyes! Can you see me?"

"Yes," replied Jonathan. "Of course I can. But I fell in the water and I'm all wet."

"I threw water on you. You were having a frightful dream."

"I knew you would save me," blurted Jonathan. "I knew you would."

"You knew? What are you talking about? "You're here in bed."

He sat up. "Bed? But you saved me, didn't you?"

"If you call throwing water on you and forcing your eyelids open, then yes, I did. Oh, my, you have never had such a dream before. What was it about?"

Jonathan looked about, then back at Phebe. "It was ghastly. I was standing on a cliff in the dark and only you could rescue me. But you didn't come, and I fell--- Oh, enough. You did come."

He wrapped his arms around her and held her until she protested that he was holding her too tightly.

"I hope this will not be a normal occurrence," said she. "You were breathing in and out like a concertina."

"Was I playing your favorite tune?"

"No! Stop your blabbering. I should have said like a bellows."

"It's not like me. I have never had such a troubling dream."

"I wish you would stop reading those philosophy books of yours. Whenever you do read them there is a change in you, and not for the better. Furthermore, when you reach the point where you act up at night, you have reached a climax. Consider me. You drive me to distraction, and the way you carry on at night frightens me. I fear you will harm me."

"Never!" said Jonathan.

"So you say, but at such times you're not yourself."

"Very well, I will start reading Jane Austen and the Brontes. Alright?"

"Yes, I believe so. What about Dickens?"

"Probably not. He is too verbose. Also too adjectival. What I mean to say, my dear, though he is marvelous in style and character development, he is far too long-winded, and somewhat too frivolous."

The next night Jonathan had the familiar dream. The only variation was, he recognized it was a dream, and he forced himself to wake up before Phebe was aroused, and in the coming weeks he perfected his ability to wake himself.

Chapter Twenty-three

Shadow of death.

Phebe had never been gravely ill.

Rose and Marie were in school, and Jonathan had left her in the care of an elderly, matronly neighbor, Mrs Toddle, while he and Dr Figgs walked back and forth in front of their flat.

"You must see me as a quack," said Dr Figgs. "Feel free to consult someone else."

"Certainly not!" replied Jonathan. "Yet if you feel yourself at a loss----"

"As I have said, I have never come across anything like this, and I have been at it a long time." He went on to tell what little he did know. "The only thing I am sure of is it isn't apoplexy. More likely lymphatic." Then, "For now all I can advise is to keep her as cool as possible, have someone attend to her at all times, and if she is able to drink give her water, if possible. I will return tomorrow."

They went outside. The doctor was a kind man and he took one of Jonathan's hands in both of his prior to departing.

When the doctor was gone Jonathan leaned back against the wall beside their kitchen window. He was lightheaded and he sagged to the ground.

"Good gracious!"

Jonathan looked up in a start. It was Maxwell. Good, faithful Max.

"Well I never! Here, let me help you up. Sitting in the dirt and filth won't help matters any." Max grasped both of his friend's hands and pulled him upright. "If you must sit at least do so on this old crate." He pushed Jonathan down.

"How did you----?" began Jonathan, but Max interrupted. He put a finger alongside his temple.

"Maxwell Backbone sees all and knows all. Now tell me her condition, and do not spare me."

"Ohhh," moaned Jonathan, "there isn't a great deal to tell. Last night she was more tired than usual, then lethargic, and she went to bed early. This morning I was unable to fully wake her, and she had a fever. She's not lucid. All she is able to do is mumble deliriously, but most of the time she's unconscious."

"Oh, good grief!"

"Yes. So I called for Dr Figgs." Jonathan's chin fell to his chest.

"Yes, yes?" Max roughly lifted Jonathan's head. "For heaven's sake control yourself man! What did he say?"

"He felt, and probed, and prodded, and mumbled, and shook his head, and----"

"Damn you!" cried Max, "What did he say!"

"He took me out here and told me he was baffled. He said it's like brain

fever, but several of the symptoms are different. Maybe some sort of contagion. He didn't go into details. He'll return tomorrow."

Maxwell shooed away a cat that was sniffing Jonathan's feet. "Shall I find another doctor?" asked he.

"Thank you, no, I have faith in Dr Figgs. If he doesn't know what ails Phebes nobody does."

"Figgs doesn't know, but you have faith in him?"

"I should have said I have faith in his not knowing. Many would pretend to know. Lay off me Max, things are irritating enough without----"

"Pardon me. I was attempting to help when there is no help. Oh, hang it, I'm only digging myself in deeper. Here, I'll sit by you on this other crate, and I'll keep my mouth shut. But is someone with her?"

"Yes."

They sat silently for a while, then Marie and Rose arrived home from school.

"I don't look forward to telling them," whispered Jonathan. "Anyway I guess you can hold down the fort at work while I'm bound here?"

"Most assuredly." Max stood, lifted his cap to the girls, and with a "Good day ladies," he departed.

The following day Dr Figgs returned. He leaned over Phebe's still form, frowned, motioned for Jonathan to leave and for Mrs Toddle to stay.

Jonathan sat down outside on his crate again and this time he was more stable than he had been the day prior, and he assigned himself the task of cogitating on nothing. Like a Buddhist is liable to do, though he hadn't read enough about the belief to be sure. No matter, under the present circumstances thinking of nothing was far better than thinking of anything at all, therefore he occupied his mind with nothing, and nothing, and more nothing, until thinking of nothing became thinking of something, and he had to give it up. And as soon as he did he was overcome by guilt--one of his common frames of mind--that he wasn't doing all he could for Phebe during her indisposition.

Dr Figgs was taking longer than usual. What could it mean? Jonathan wished Maxwell were there. Or anyone; even his girls. When he had represented to them the seriousness of their mother's illness they had been afraid for her and for themselves; nonetheless that morning as they left for school they seemed to have largely recovered, as young, resilient children do, and far from blaming them for indifference Jonathan was relieved.

Listening at Phebe's bedroom door was out of the question, despite the temptation. Still, it was tempting in view of his torment. If the doctor was unsure of her malady why was he lingering with her?

The crate was becoming harder, and---

The door creaked open and Jonathan got up.

"Ahem. I scarcely know what to say," began Dr Figgs. "This time I spent more time sitting and observing her in the aim of discerning something I had overlooked, but to no avail. She showed not the slightest sign of movement or speech. Unhappily there has been no improvement, and I am bound to say she has weakened ever so slightly."

"Weakened----?"

"Only slightly, yet I had hoped for improvement, not, well, I should say these cases are ever so delicate and unpredictable. The only thing I know is how quickly they resolve themselves one way or another. Another concern is water."

"Water?"

"Yes. We can live for a long time without food, but not very long without water."

"Lord."

Dr Figgs held up his hand to quiet Jonathan. "I can give her water through a tube."

"I feel faint."

"It's apparent you are distraught to a degree not even I who have seen more than my portion of pain and misery can appreciate; nevertheless all we can do now is wait, and if you are so inclined, pray."

As the doctor left Jonathan heard him mumble something about tubes.

When he was inside Jonathan did what he had pledged to himself never to do; he prayed. He sat in Phebe's chair, looked about to make sure no one else was there, folded his hands, closed his eyes, and prayed. It was a rambling and awkward supplication, though afterward he felt better.

For two more days Phebe lay insensate and Jonathan could not help noticing how her body had shrunk. Despite forced optimism he was now beset with doubt. He had always prided himself on being a realist, and strong, and often in his life--indeed very often--realism and strength had trumped all else, yet now all that remained was optimism. Possibly false optimism.

Nevertheless on the following day Phebe opened her eyes, gazed at the ceiling, then turned her head and smiled at Jonathan, who had been at her bedside day and night throughout.

"What time is it?" asked she.

"Time? You at last open your eyes and the first thing you want to know what time it is?" He laughed and cried at the same time. "The time, for pity's sake?"

She cast him a glum look. "What is the matter with you?"

"Me? What is the matter with me, you ask? You surely are an original! Ha, ha!"

"Stop! If it is not too much trouble," said she irritably, "please get me a glass of water. My I'm thirsty."

Jonathan did so, and after drinking the first she asked for more.

Then she asked again, "What is the time, and no more joking?"

"It is almost noon."

"Gracious, what has come over me?"

"You have been out for almost five days."

"Ha, ha!"

"Phebes, I am perfectly serious. You have been comatose for days. Insensible. Look at me! You understand when I am teasing and when I am in earnest. Can you not tell which I am now? Am I so inscrutable? And would I not be heartless to deceive you thus?"

She turned yet more pallid. "What happened to me?"

"The doctor wasn't sure. In his estimation it was akin to brain fever, but

not the kind he had ever seen. He didn't say, but I know he felt we were going to lose you. Oh, Phebes, what would I have done without you?"

He threw himself over her and sobbed.

"Ow! You're hurting me. And what do you mean by *what would you have done?* I would have been the one who died!"

"Oh, I am sorry." He sat back up. "Yes, you're right. How selfish of me."

Phebe held up her bare arms. "My how I have thinned, and how pale I am. And, and, oh, how did I perform my, my bodily, er, private functions?"

"You were in good hands, so to speak," laughed Jonathan. "I was beside you almost all of the time, and when I was away Mrs Toddle cared for you."

"Oh how mortifying."

"Do you refer to me or to Mrs Toddle?"

"Why, both. My only consolation was being asleep."

"Put it out of your mind. Today we'll get some broth into you, and tomorrow you will be up and about. Dr Figgs will be relieved."

Chapter Twenty-four

A sister lost.

The train rumbled and clanked along but Jonathan's thoughts were not to be disturbed. The pressure had been building for a long time, and for fear of exploding he had decided he must do something. Almost anything, for anything would be better than not knowing, thus he had informed Phebe that he had to go away for a while to get to the bottom of his *sister*. He had--from his *sister's* previous conversations with him--a notion she was in Bristol. She had let it slip, and as he looked back on himself he had confidence in two aspects of his abilities--his constitution--he was well above average in intelligence, and he tended to be dismayed at humanity in general. His ill regard had over the years turned into an asset because it enabled him to see truth and reality to a higher degree than most.

The other passengers were the usual common people going about their affairs, with the exceptions of several well-attired men whose affairs may have been elevated. One of those men, finished with his newspaper, reached over and handed it to Jonathan without looking at him. Jonathan took it and thanked him. It was the *Bristol Mercury*.

As the train rattled on Jonathan lost himself in the paper. The antics of parliament; the murder of a young lady; a scandal involving a member of the House of Lords; this, that, and the other. Page after page, then the agony column. Jonathan considered it beneath him to read about the trials and tribulations of others, but he could not resist the agony column. A man attempting to find a lost child, another man searching for his wife who had left him due to his drinking, a lady in distress owing to ill health who was appealing for money, And so forth. Some way to forget his own troubles Jonathan mused. A lady of *ample girth* but loving and caring, searching for a lifelong companion. Enough.

On the next page were the lesser items. Halfway down something captured Jonathan's glance and he backed up. In the crime section was an article concerning frauds perpetrated by a lady going by different aliases. Names like Flora, Cordelia, Estelle, . . . , and out popped Libby. Libby? Not his Libby to be sure. Ha! But then another name registered itself; Bumper. No! This was too much. Surely not Mathew Bumper! There was no given name for him. But hold on, at the bottom of the section there--lo and behold--it was, Mathew Bumper! Oh, lord have mercy. Right there in black and white. Jonathan's throat constricted and he had trouble breathing. He slumped forward and held his head.

"May I offer you a dram of gin?" offered the man who had given him the newspaper.

"Er, thank you, no. Very kind of you however."

"I reckon you will come around shortly," added the man who was still looking straight ahead.

"Yes, yes, I am sure I will. It's not an ailment; only a bit of ill news in the paper."

"Surely not a financial loss or death or some such?"

"No, nothing like that."

"Onward then, and all the best."

"Thank you," replied Jonathan, who was beginning to wonder if the man was blind.

With that Jonathan leaned back and closed his eyes. On the almost certain assumption the characters in the article were his *sister* and her husband, the first thing to figure out was what they had been up to, and in particular concerning him. Presenting herself as his sister in order to claim part or all of the company? A pair of swindlers bent on profiting from some former misdeed of his? No, there were no such misdeeds worthy of the word. Something in Phebe's past? Again no, as she was lily-white. What, then?

So since it was impossible to immediately ascertain what their scheme was, on to the next question; what to do about *it*, whatever *it* was. So there it was. Nothing further to do but sit tight until arriving at Bristol.

Jonathan relaxed. Having something immediate to do always made him feel better.

"If you please," said he to the blind man, "I will have that drink now."

The man reached somewhere and pulled out a bottle of gin and a small glass. He smiled at Jonathan and winked. "I knew from your looks you would partake sooner or later."

Back home Jonathan explained the whole affair to Phebe, who was astounded. "She seemed so nice."

"I can be such a blockhead," said Jonathan. "Impostors, they were."

"Never. You were only being decent, that's all."

"Perhaps so, however I will only admit to being a decent blockhead."

Phebe put down her coffee cup, reached across the table, and took his hand. "Well, Mr Blockhead, what now?"

"By the time I arrived at Bristol I had decided to contact the police there, and to my delight they had both Libby and Bumper in the lockup. The police had me make a statement, which only amounted to the fact she was not my real sister, and then they allowed me to see Libby, or whatever her name was at the time; however it was a short conversation. She wasn't very talkative, and when I taunted her she let loose with a torrent of invectives such as I had only ever heard from sailors on my walks down by the river. And when I asked her if she needed ten or twenty pounds from me so she could afford more luxurious accommodations she spat on me. On the way out I asked the desk sergeant what their game had been, and he replied they were still investigating but it appeared they had been getting by for years by forging relationships wherever and whenever, and with whomever they could, and then winnowing out those who could not be duped or could not otherwise be taken advantage of. Or those whose assets were insufficient. Then they concentrated on the rest."

Jonathan sipped his coffee.

Phebe stiffened in her chair and observed, "Then we are dupes. Gullible dupes."

"Don't be so quick my dear, for I fancy that had my *sister* gotten devious with us we would have been mindful of it."

"Hmmm. Still, how could she have imagined she could have swindled us out of anything?"

"As I said, she was simply playing the odds."

Phebe only grunted.

"You must agree," said Jonathan with a laugh, "she was wily and charming."

"You can say so now, but had she bilked us out of anything, however insignificant, you would now be sitting here laughing out of the other side of your mouth."

"The long and short of it is we were not bilked. She and her accomplice are cooling themselves in a cage and we are not a penny shorter. And as queer as I may seem to you, I am always content when I am active."

"Except when you get wet in a pub."

"Which I almost never do. So there it is and that's it."

Part III

Chapter Twenty-five

Time, time, time. Ship in peril.

Jonathan, now the sole owner of Silk Fleet associates, sat at his usual place; behind Uncle Thurston Silk's desk on the third level of the building. The level on which Marie-Rose and his uncle had lived. Their former quarters on the third floor of Fleet consisted of the three bedrooms, kitchen, living room, drawing room, and a study.

Jonathan was forty-two years of age, and Phebe forty-three. It had been his wont to pause and reflect on his past at odd times, and as he did so now he began with the unhappy memories. His father was gone, as were Uncle Thurston and Aunt Marie. Gone also were some of the Silk workers, including old Martin Jeeves, and Hiram Fig who had been the head of the shipping department.

On happier memories, Jonathan took comfort in knowing more than half of the employees from when he had first arrived were still there, including Maxwell Backbone. His relations with the employees were good, and the only rough time had been several years ago when there had been talk of them forming a union. He had gathered them all together and explained that if they did so, he would not go against them and his door was always open, however he would rather talk things through without the need of actual confrontation, and they had agreed. He had promoted Maxwell to office manager--at some embarrassment on his part because in many ways he viewed him as more of a friend than an employee--and Maxwell, who had a knack for working with and getting along with people, had smoothed things over.

Phebe provided his best memories, even those induced by her social activities, mostly set off by her voting efforts. She was avid, and he was supportive. And it gave her something to do; some focus.

Their two daughters, now young ladies out on their own, were as different as could be while at the same time similar in appearance and as beautiful as their mother. Rose--two years the younger and still aloof from any matrimonial designs--lived nearby and taught at a finishing school for young ladies; an employment for which she was well-qualified because she herself had attended such a school. And being nearby she was a regular visitor, and inspiration to, her parents.

Marie, contrariwise, returned Jonathan's reveries to a rude reality. She had always been Rose's counterpart; brusque, overactive, independent, willful, And while loving, she had never been inclined to listen to reason. Thus she had drifted away, and they had not heard from her in three years. The last time they had seen her was when she had strode into Jonathan's office hand-in-hand with an older, seamy-looking apprentice of some trade not revealed, and had declared they were going overseas for a while to a country also not revealed. Jonathan had tried to reason with her, but with no more success than he had ever

had. He had given them some money, and

Oh, enough. Jonathan revived himself. He was not a praying man, though he had actually done so once, for Marie when she had been ill.

Up with life and down with croaking. He had always contradicted himself; now a croaker, then an optimist, than back to being a---

There came a knock on the door, and in came Maxwell waving something over his head. "God-damn! One of our ships may have gone down." He slammed a telegram down on Jonathan's desk.

Jonathan felt his face blanch. He snatched the telegram and read; *Ship in peril. Have been----* The note ended, and someone, probably the local telegraph agent, had scribbled that the sending agent had provided no more information.

"That's Captain Black's ship, the Marie Rose. It's the only one at sea now. Damn."

Maxwell was in the habit of calling everything connected with Fleet *our* this and that, a habit appreciated by Jonathan as an indication of Maxwell's sense of devotion to the concerns of the company. Jonathan intended to turn over a share of the business to him one day.

Jonathan let the telegram slip from his fingers onto his desk, and he motioned for Maxwell to sit down. He groaned. "What now?"

Maxwell held out his hands palm up and his face dripped sweat. It was his only reply.

"Who gave them the message to send?"

Maxwell shrugged. "I telegraphed them back and they didn't know who the sender was."

They were silent.

Then, "How could Captain Black have sent a message if he were at sea?" asked Jonathan.

"Well that's one question I can answer," replied Maxwell. "Many years ago, in the wasted days of my youth, I was at sea for a while, and they often signaled to other ships."

"How?"

"Oh, shouting. Or by throwing messages in the water to be picked up with gaffs. It was common, especially giving messages to inbound ships."

Jonathan went to a small cabinet and took out a bottle of Madeira and two medium-sized glasses, he poured them full, handed one to Max, sat back down, and for a long time they quietly looked anywhere but at one another. A large, blue fly landed on the top of his head but he had neither the energy nor the inclination to chase it away.

When they had finished their drinks Jonathan directed his look to Maxwell.

"Yes?" asked Max.

"When this crisis is resolved I will turn over a share of the company to you."

Maxwell's jaw dropped. "No. You are under too much stress to speak of that. And I won't have it!"

Jonathan held up his hand. "I have thought about it for years, and what would we do without you. Not only me, but everyone who works here and depends upon us for their livelihood. Don't be so surprised."

"No, I----"

"As the master of this operation I hereby order you to stop your protestations!" Jonathan slapped his open hand on top of his desk, hard, and Maxwell melted back into his chair. Again they were silent, both looking down.

Then, to Jonathan's astonishment, Max jumped up, grasped the wine bottle, and poured their glasses full again, and sat back down. He raised his glass to toast Jonathan, and Jonathan returned the salute.

"But I do not agree," muttered Max, "to accept your offer. I will not do so on any account while you are soused."

"Soused? I'm far from----"

"Pooh, pooh."

"Then," smiled Jonathan, "I will sober up and repeat the offer, though I still insist I am not soused. Now there, that's an end to it."

"Still, I----"

There, there, if you stick to your contentions, instead of promoting you I may end up sacking you, and we can't have that. Now drink up, and we will take up the sinking of the Marie Rose in the morning.

In the morning, fifteen minutes before the offices opened, into Jonathan's office strode Maxwell.

Jonathan started at his desk.

"Bless me!" ejaculated Jonathan. "What in the name of----? You came close to putting me in my grave!"

Max flushed, but advanced rapidly.

"I checked at the telegraph office just as the delivery boy left on his route, and here's another message!" He waved it in Jonathan's face.

Jonathan snatched the message and read. *Pirates. Pirates.* Nothing else.

"We don't know where the devil they are," barked Max, "where they are going, if the ship has really been captured; nothing!"

"Pirates? In all my days I have never heard of pirates on our routes. The navy cleaned them out decades ago."

Maxwell's face was wet and he sat down and attempted to stop his hands from shaking. "What shall we do?"

"What can we do? Lord, where is Uncle Thurston when we need him? He had connections in the navy. Hmmm. Howsomever I do know a lad in the Admiralty. Younger than we are, and low in the hierarchy, but, well, it shan't hurt if I talked to him. At least it would get me in the door, and once someone hears the word *pirate* perhaps I would get some attention. If I speak loudly enough."

Jonathan tried to smile at *loudly enough*, but he couldn't.

The next morning Jonathan and Max were back upstairs.

Jonathan spoke. "The young man, Joseph Pibb, got me through the door, and up to the second floor where I was on my own, but I went to work, and I bumped into an old navy captain who had known my father."

"What luck!"

"Yes, you may call it luck, but give some credit for *savoir-faire*. You should have----"

"Yes, yes, but what then?"

"Old Captain March took a liking to me, and besides he was aroused when I

showed him the Pirates telegram, and he took me up to see a cranky bigwig who was equally upset and who wanted to know more. Of course all I could tell him was the name of our ship, and its normal route down to and around the Mediterranean, and that I took for granted it was now out in the Atlantic on its way home. Well, it was sufficient to get his temper boiling. He kept the telegram, got the name and other particulars, shook my hand, and assured me the royal navy would get to the bottom of it. He then turned and strode back into his office, and I could hear him roaring to his underlings, several of whom came running out purple-faced."

"Good gracious!"

"Yes."

Several office workers came and went, leaving papers on Jonathan's desk.

"What now?" asked Max.

"Nothing. What can we do? Unless you have some ideas?"

"No, I don't."

More workers entered and left, and Jonathan went to a window and opened it to let in some fresh air.

"You're not going to jump?" asked Max.

Jonathan sat back down. "No, I am going to prevail upon you to. To sacrifice yourself for the company."

"Har! It would be my luck to only injure myself, and end up selling cigars down on Fleet Street."

"More likely you would, even crippled, be a street dandy, throwing yourself on the good graces of the ladies."

"Trollops and hussies? Hmmm. Doesn't sound so bad."

They both grinned.

"Blast!" lamented Jonathan. "Oh, well, it's an old ship and I would have retired it anyway."

"Don't say so! It's the principle of the thing," said Max.

"Yes, but helvete."

"Helv----?"

"Hell in Norwegian. I knew an old Norwegian back in my younger days. Regardless, all we can do is carry on."

And carry on they did.

Chapter Twenty-six

Phillip appears and becomes part of the family.

Jonathan was interrupted from his writing by a worker from the first-floor.
"Beg pardon sir, but there's a gentleman downstairs as wants tuh see yuh.

Name of Phillip."

Jonathan put down his pen. Could it be?

"No other name then?"

"No sir. A dapper man a bit o'er your age."

"Well then, please send him up."

"Yes sir." The worker tipped his hat.

As he waited Jonathan surmised it was uncle Thurston's misbegotten son. Was he there to make some claim? After his experience with Libby Bumper and her husband Mathew, he was on guard.

Thump, thump, the steps came louder until there in the doorway appeared a handsome man of regular height, with mild and clear features, well built, and possessing bright--almost flashing--blue eyes, even in the dim light. He was dressed to a high degree in full, black suit, and when he took off his old-fashioned top-hat hat he revealed his full head of straw-colored hair.

Resting easier, Jonathan stood and welcomed his visitor.

"Are you who I presume you are?" asked Jonathan with mild and cordial composure.

"I believe I am," replied Phillip. He approached, and they clasped hands over Jonathan's desk.

"I am surprised," said Jonathan.

Phillip smiled. "As am I. I pictured you differently."

Jonathan came from behind his desk and drew his visitor to a far window where there were two plush, comfortable chairs.

As they sat down Phillip said, "May I ask what you know of me?"

"Next to nothing I'm afraid. And you of me?"

"I admit to knowing more of you than you do of me. Oh, don't fear, I have no ill intentions whatsoever I assure you. I have not shown up here to ask anything of you. Only your friendship, and only if you will accept mine. But as neither of us knows the other's heart, shall we leave things as they are for now?"

Jonathan inclined his head.

Phillip went on. "If I may, I will began."

Jonathan nodded again.

"I am by nature reserved, so I'll be brief. First, I shall say again, I am not here for any tangible gain. You must believe me, but if you cannot I shall gracefully and with no ill will leave. What do you say?"

Jonathan waved his hand dismissively.

"Thank you. And do you believe me when I say I am your uncle Thurston's

child?"

"I do, though that's about all I know of you."

"My mother's name was Levity Green, and I took her surname. What else could I do? I wasn't inclined to take Silk as my name. In any event she was a wonderful mother. Kind, loving, beautiful--though it may have partially led to her moral downfall--intelligent, caring. Everything one would want in a mother. She lived her entire life right here in London, and I grew up here. Aside from the stain resulting from her relationship with your uncle, I had a good life, and I am obligated to credit Thurston for assuming the financial burden of their relationship. My mother and I were well taken care of. The only thing lacking was a father. I grew up fatherless."

"I am sorry."

"But I was afforded an adequate education out of guilt."

"Businessmen, politicians, royalty, and the upper crust."

"I beg your pardon?"

"Oh, well. Then what?"

"I became a physician. I----"

"A physician?" exclaimed Jonathan. And he could not resist joking, "As a matter of fact I have this sore shoulder that pains me whenever I----"

"Ha! Then don't do whatever pains you!"

"As you are Thurston's son you have possibly inherited his knowledge of drugs. Did you know he used to import all kinds of them, both legal and illegal if I am not mistaken. Maybe they were all legal back then, I don't know, but he surely kept them well hidden in one of the storage rooms downstairs."

"Oh my, no, I didn't know that. Well. I would be sorry to hear if he consumed any of them himself."

"Not to my knowledge. He always seemed normal as far as I could determine. Normal as he could be, if you get my gist. Ha."

"My, my."

"You have seen some unusual, eh, medications?"

"I have, But I must add I am also a psychiatrist. One who specializes in mental disorders, and I spend most of my time in said area. Derangements, catalepsy, fits, and so on. After Shaftesbury's Lunacy Acts there have been improvements. Well, never mind it. And in any case, as with so many lives, there's the sum of it."

"Gracious," said Jonathan, "it amounts to quite a sum."

"Thank you. And as to you, I will yet, and yet again, assure you that whatever I know of your life has been learned only because of a simple longing for family. If it's too stressful for you I will understand. Far be it for me to push any of my inclinations onto you. Not at all. You have only to say the word."

Jonathan paused, controlling his emotion. Then, "Welcome to our family."

To Jonathan's surprise Phillip took out a white handkerchief and wiped a tear from each eye. Jonathan leaned down and pretended to tie his shoe.

"Have you a wife, or other friend?" inquired Jonathan.

"I do," said Phillip as he put away his handkerchief. "A dear wife. Mercedine. Mercy. You shall meet her, and I am certain you will think well of her."

"I know I will. My goodness, how this day has begun! It is not often that

such a momentous event occurs. And I cannot wait to introduce Phebe to you. She is my life and soul, and I would be unable to carry on without her. In return I am certain you will see her in a good light."

"It seems we are kindred in spirit if not one-hundred percent by blood."

"The tie through old uncle Thurston is close enough. Not to be gauche, but I had no idea he was such a rake. No offense intended."

"None taken, and I see we have a similar penchant for finding humour wherever we can and how difficult it is to find. Further, I will tell you I have long ago come to terms with any guilt about my, eh, my illicit lineage. In more direct words, Mr Silk, I don't give a fig." He laughed, and so did Jonathan.

Jonathan went to his desk and pulled out a bottle of red wine and two glasses. Having poured, he lifted his glass. "Here's to you Dr Green, and if I am ever in need of your professional services as regards head work--or shoulder work--I know I will be in the best of hands."

"And here's to you Mr Gorgius, and if I am ever in need of, well of whatever you import, I will avail myself. Who can tell, in my line of work I may need some not-normally-available medicines. Hah! Especially should you become my patient."

They drank, and bantered on. "Did you see much of uncle Thurston?" asked Jonathan.

"Oh, off and on, even after he had married. He was welcome enough. His only condition was that we never breathe a word to Marie-Rose. And she never knew. Or did she? You would know more than I."

"Not to my knowledge. I believe had she found out there would have been a terrible row. Jonathan raised his glass again. "To you, Mr Silk, as I am sure you have as legitimate a claim to the Gorgius name as anyone. Oh, drat, what a gaff! *Legitimate*. Oh my!"

"Bosh. Forget about it. You meant nothing by it."

Jonathan felt better than he had for ages, and it was not, he was sure, due only to the wine. He went again to his desk and withdrew two cigars.

"Whether or not you normally smoke cigars, you do now," said Jonathan as he found his matches.

"I do, and I will," returned Phillip.

"I confess I don't," said Jonathan, "other than on special occasions."

They sat in clouds of smoke.

Jonathan waved his cigar over his head and exclaimed, "Doctor, I always have the feeling I'm falling into a dark, bottomless pit. It haunts me day and night. What can I do?"

"You can drink more wine and smoke more cigars!"

And on, and on they went for an hour or more.

Chapter Twenty-seven

Poor Marie shows up again, then leaves. Ship found.

Silk Fleet Associates, now including Phebe and Maxwell Backbone, flourished, and the three partners carried on to different degrees, noetically and bodily.

Yet changes were to be expected. Jonathan could not fathom Phebe's and Maxwell's intellectual fluctuations--only the external manifestations of some of those alterations--but he was cognizant of his own shifts, one of which was an outlandish world view which was begun to creep into his consciousness.

What, then, was his mysterious inner, inner what? He could not even define his intuition, much less determine whether it was benign or malignant. Angelic or demonic. Or perhaps it was nothing more than an overly-fertile imagination.

Eventually, as months went by, Jonathan was able to put his finger on his thoughts, which had solidified. He had realized he was undergoing something of a permanent change of perception. And, for the better or for the worse, it would not be steered. He would either live with it and embrace it, or bear it, or he would go under and drown in a world of unreality. Further, he could not breathe a word of it to Phebe, as she had her own personal concerns, and in a peculiar way he was afraid to know what they were. He only knew she had them. He would do anything in his power for her, but he simply was not prepared to be a comforter now. A comforter beyond what he had always been. First he had to rebuild his own strength.

In his usual place, behind his desk on the third level, sat Jonathan. Normally he was busy, but not now. What was it? He scratched his nose with his feather pen and looked vaguely around the large third floor, with its rooms, storage areas, and all; but if asked what he had noticed most he would have been unable to answer. Only the flypaper hanging about.

Maxwell was out walking a tight rope; selling goods to shops and middlemen at the same time.

Jonathan screeched his chair around to face the window behind him. He had seen the street more times than he would have cared to, but boredom was a strong motivation.

Someone entered behind him.

"And a fine good morning to you Mr Backbone."

There was no reply.

"Well?" asked Jonathan. "Have you returned with pockets full of money

and orders under your hat?"

Silence.

Jonathan turned, and there stood Marie. He gasped, stood, then collapsed back into his chair, almost falling to the floor because the chair was still half turned. He straightened himself, then looked again at her. She had changed more than he could have envisioned; tawdry, and unhealthy.

"Father," she said in a tenor of voice he did not recognize. Rough and hoarse, to match her face.

Jonathan motioned for her to sit. He felt faint, and he was glad no one else was there. He put his hand to his forehead while trying to come up with something to say, but he was unable to concentrate.

"You look well, Father," said Marie dryly.

He looked up at her. She was wringing her hands in her lap.

"You also look well, er," and he choked off his words. "Bless you my little Marie, have you returned for good this time? Returned to stay? We can all begin again, and----"

"No, Father, I have my own life, to which I must return."

"What then? Where have you been? What have you been doing?"

She shook her head somberly. "Here and there. Doing? I shall not lay my travails on you, as you would not approve."

"Your mother isn't here, but I could----"

"No, please, it would only be painful for her."

Jonathan got up, walked around his desk to her, and held out his arms for her to stand, but she would not. An owl had gotten in through one of the open windows, and it hooted.

Jonathan put his hand on her shoulder and she trembled ever so slightly but did not draw away. The owl hooted again.

"My Marie, what can I do? Was it me? Your mother? What?"

"No, not you or Mamma, it was entirely me. Some of us are different, that's all. Born different, and we can do nothing about it. But it doesn't imply I don't love you."

"Then how can you do this to us?"

"I can't help it. There's something in here," she put her hands to her head, "that moves me. Controls me, and it has been there since I was little. I used to fight it, then I lost the fight. Oh, god, I don't know. All I do know is how much I love you both, but I am fated to be this way for the rest of my life."

"Have you sought help?"

"Oh, my yes, doctors."

"And? To no avail?"

"Alas, no. Laudanum and all, and I was even in an asylum for a time." She broke into tears.

"Dear, dear Marie. But again, what can I do?"

She wiped her eyes with the backs of her hands. "You can sit back down behind your desk," said she, and she tried to smile. "Please."

He did so, and the owl hooted.

"It simply is," Marie went on. "I know by now there is nothing to be done about it. If there were, don't you imagine I would have done it by now? You must accept the fact I am not like Rose."

Jonathan sat with his elbows on his desk and his clasped hands under his chin, gazing dolefully down. "Then why are you here?"

She apparently could not speak for a while, and she sobbed. Then, "You will think me crass, and I may be, but I am here again for money."

"Mon----?"

"Yes."

"Anything," moaned Jonathan, and he reached into a desk drawer and withdrew a leather bag with a drawstring, and placed it in front of her.

"Anything," he repeated.

Marie simply stared at it.

"Take it," ordered Jonathan. "Don't thank me. It would only hurt me all the more if you did, and all the more if you don't accept this token of my love for you."

Marie picked up the bag and rose to leave.

"Have you anyone?" asked Jonathan. "To care for you?"

She nodded her head.

"Then I will find some comfort in that, and in your promise to return someday. Will you promise that?"

She nodded again, turned, and left. The owl hooted and flew away.

When Jonathan was sure she was gone and no one else was near, he fell with his face on his arms, on his desk, sobbing.

The next day, early in the morning, Jonathan, his head again on his desk, succumbed to tears.

After a time Max entered and looked curiously at him. "No napping at work," he blurted.

Jonathan shuddered, wiped his face on his shirt sleeves, sat up, and composed himself. "Oh, gracious, what overcame me?" asked he. "I fell asleep and was having a dream."

"A bad dream from the looks of you."

"It was. Well, what of you? Are we wealthy?" As he spoke he recalled the bag of coins he had given to Marie. It was their entire month's worth of operating money.

"Oh, I did well enough."

"I insist you let someone else do such leg work."

"And I tell you I like it, and I am not bad at it. Nonetheless, what news have you here?"

"News? News. Let me see." Jonathan had recovered his form. "Oh, very little. Only that our ship has been located."

"No! You don't say?"

"I do."

"Then tell me. How did you find out, and what happened?"

"Captain March himself came here and told me. He was elated."

"Yes, yes, but what happened?" Max all but shouted as he sat down.

"Ahem. Our ship was somewhere off southern France, not far off, and some, ruffians--not real pirates--in a small, dilapidated but fast ship set about

harassing them. Shooting a small, old cannon at them, attempting to ram them, and so on. It went on for three days, and Captain Black began dropping messages overboard and trying to flag down other ships. Trouble was there were few other ships, and those there were assumed the flag-wavers were only being friendly."

"You don't say!"

"Black had only one old Baker rifle, and the pirates had several newer rifles, and the cannon they kept shouting they were going to blow Marie Rose to smithereens with. Finally by the third day the devilish scoundrels were attempting to ram our Marie Rose and the game was up. The next part is cloudy, but it seems the pirates boarded the ship and sailed it round and round in circles, evidently not knowing where to go or what to do."

"What about Black and his crew?"

"They were well treated. In fact it seems they were about to succeed in talking the malefactors into surrendering."

Jonathan leaned back, enjoying his narration.

"Well?"

"Oh, finally the Royal Navy showed up and the jig was up."

"Were they really pirates?"

"Heavens no, they were only a bunch of sozzled rogues, and I hear tell even Black and his crew pleaded with the navy to go easy on them!"

"You cannot be serious?"

"Sounds like they will even testify at the trials if they are allowed to present themselves for the defense."

"I never! Then what about our ship?"

"Ha! No worse for wear, the crew are bringing it in."

"I never! Charles Dickens couldn't have made up a story like that." Max smiled broadly, then, "Say, you look a little down."

"I own up to feeling somewhat forlorn," replied Jonathan. "I received a visit from my daughter Marie yesterday."

"Upon my honor! Then I shan't ask."

"Please don't."

Chapter Twenty-eight

Jonathan falters, but Phebe is his salvation.

Maxwell knocked on the door with his left hand, while supporting Jonathan with his right arm. The only thing Jonathan knew was where he was.

Phebe came to the door. "Oh lord, what has happened?"

"Let's get him inside," grunted Max.

They maneuvered him to the sofa and put him down.

"Oh, oh," moaned Phebe. "What on earth?"

"All I know is, he fell halfway down the stairway from his office floor."

Jonathan felt Phebe drape herself over him, sobbing. He heard their clock cuckoo but he couldn't count the cuckoos, and for that matter the canary seemed to be chastising him for something. The cuckooing seemed to go on interminably. When it stopped he heard Max say, "I'll go for a doctor."

Jonathan grasped Maxwell's sleeve. "No. No. I'll be alright. I will just have to watch my step henceforth."

Phebe sat up and she and Max eyed him narrowly.

"Honestly, I will," assured Jonathan. "We all have accidents."

"Well," said Phebe, "I'm worried."

Jonathan, with their help, struggled into a sitting position.

"Move everything; arms, legs, neck, everything you can," commanded Max.

Jonathan did so.

"Well?"

"Nothing broken I guess, but lord how everything hurts," quavered Jonathan.

Max and Phebe looked at him doubtfully.

"I assure you, nothing broken," said Jonathan.

"And you recall falling?" asked Max.

"Vaguely."

"How vaguely?" asked Phebe.

"Very vaguely. But have no fear, I'm alright now. To prove I am not addled, ask me anything."

Phebe frowned. "What is your name?"

"Oh, please! That's too easy. My name is Prince Albert. Ask me something else."

Phebe shrank back. "You, you aren't in earnest are you?"

"Surely not. How could you patronise me thus?" He fixed a disgruntled stare on them.

Phebe was moved to tears again and Jonathan was gripped by guilt. He tried to pull her close and put his arm around her, but the pain was too severe.

"Thank you, Max. Thank you. I suppose I'll be out of the office for a while."

"You will." Maxwell grinned. "Oh, yes, you will, but nurse Phebe, who is used to your foibles, will see you through."

"I will," blubbered she. "Bless you, Max." She ran into their bedroom.

After Maxwell had departed Jonathan sensed a wave of remorse. He had been too sarcastic. With reason--as reassurance--but not enough reason to behave so. He managed to stand and hobble to the bedroom where he knew Phebe would be in tears. And she was. He sat on the bed where she lay face down.

"Dear, dear Phebes," said he, "I am so sorry."

She stopped sobbing, but said nothing.

"I'm not usually so bad, but under pressure I can be unpleasant. My intentions were pure."

She rolled over and looked at him. "Pressure?"

"Nevermind, I will tell you later, but I cannot apologize enough to----"

She sat up, took his hands in hers, and held them more firmly than usual.

"I do mind, and you will tell me now, not later."

"I would rather wait a few days until my head clears."

"Now!" she barked. "Out with it." She squeezed his hands sharply.

Jonathan hung his head. It wasn't really his fault, but he was ashamed.

"Then here it is," said he. "I didn't stumble. Sometimes something comes over me, and this time it did at the head of the stairs." He choked up.

"Something?"

A dog set about barking and howling outside.

"There goes the dog again," said Jonathan.

"Dog, schmog, keep going!"

"Something having to do with humanity in general, and the prospects for general improvement. Everything in life seems so futile. Walking, riding, everything, look around at the people. It is so discouraging. That's it in a nutshell Phebes. I beseech you not to ask me for more until I have had time to collect myself."

She took him in her arms as she would a small, heartsick child.

"There, there. We will work it out together."

He looked up and took her face in his hands. "My anchor to life," said he. "What would I do without you?"

"You will not have to do without me. You have often laughed at me for my notions and premonitions, but you don't laugh when they come true, which more often than not they do. So fear not and believe me when I say you will never have to do without me. And let me also say, you do provide some relief to our otherwise lusterless existence. Nevermind the manner in which you flummox me to a degree."

The dog out back, a large, grey hound, ceased his forlorn clamor and moved on to yipping cheerfully.

"See there, your friend has found peace of mind also," smiled Phebe.

Jonathan had to chuckle at her optimism. Hers and the dog's.

Chapter Twenty-nine

Faithful daughter Rose. Rose finds a job as book editor.

"Dear, faithful Rose," said Jonathan.

He and Phebe were paying a visit to their younger daughter in her new flat only a ten-minute walk from Fleet. It was an exceedingly pleasant place, with kitchen, living room, and bedroom; it was well-decorated with new wallpaper and paint, ample and good-quality furniture; and above all in Jonathan's eye, it was immaculate. Moreover Rose had many personal possessions and garnishments with which to complete the adornment.

Rose, through charm, looks, and outgoing personality--but above all by virtue of her native intelligence--had landed a position with a publishing company, Purple Print, as a reader and editor, which position involved selecting books with promise, and if accepted by the higher-ups, correcting all errors. She had granted to her parents that it was a low-level situation, but it was not the lowest one in the company, and there was the possibility she would, in time, be promoted. And she had laughingly giped her mother by urging her to intensify her efforts to obtain the right of women to vote instead of sitting around doing needlework. Not that Phebe did needlework; that was the point of the quip. In the meantime Rose liked her work, and she did it well. Her fellow workers were pleasant, with the singular exception of one young man who had designs on her to the point of being obnoxious. All this she had conveyed to her parents with equanimity.

Jonathan had not in the least been surprised by Rose's rejection of the raffish young man, as she had characterized him, simply because she had never in her life shown any special interest in those of the opposite, eh, opposite, eh, whatever persuasion she was. Maxwell? Maxwell had never shown interest in women. Not in any romantic way. It was his nature. And Rose possessed her own incomparable nature. What was it? But to be sure she had not shown any proclivity toward other young women either.

"Nonetheless, she will move in here next week," added Rose, who had been chatting with her mother. "Her name is Honeysuckle. Honeysuckle Banks. She is working for a florist not far from here, and"

Jonathan snapped out of his reflections. "Who? Who is moving in?"

"My friend Honeysuckle. She and I met two or three months ago and she is pressed for money, so she will move here and we will share expenses. We are a perfect fit. Alike in so many ways, and both set upon moving up in the world. You will meet her soon, but she is away visiting her family now. You will like her."

"Oh, oh yes, I have no doubt we will," agreed Jonathan. "We respect your judgments and you have only only to introduce us and we will be friends."

He looked at Phebe to get her reaction.

Rose went on about Honeysuckle, her work, how Honeysuckle also had an unappreciated admirer at work, and then she moved on to more unwonted observations, but Jonathan lost his concentration. His only focus was on the small pendulum clock ticking away on the wall opposite him, and as he sat, seized with the feeling he could not move, the ticking became louder.

"Father? Are you well?"

Rose had come to him and put one hand gently on his shoulder.

"Well? Why, yes, to be sure, I am quite well. Why---?"

"You seemed like you were in a trance. You weren't blinking, and you have turned pale. We were concerned about the possibility you were having a visitation."

"Oh, ha, ha, no, I'm fit as the proverbial fiddle, and I fear I was off on my own on a business matter. Never mind."

"Well, if you say so, but I do urge you to pay rapt attention to us and our deep machinations." She said the last with kind sarcasm. "Who knows, you may learn a thing or two."

"I may well do," smiled Jonathan. "Though I have absorbed nearly all of your mother's wisdom I could learn from you, thus keeping that in mind I will attend to your every utterance and every mot, you may be assured."

"I am assured, so I am confident in inquiring about a sore subject."

"And what subject is that?" inquired Jonathan.

Rose returned to her chair, sat down, and regarded him solemnly. Phebe cast him a similar look, as if she knew what was to come.

"Marie," said Rose flatly.

"Marie? Have you seen her?"

"Oh, no. Well, not face to face, but I happened to see her walk by here, and I assumed she had come from your office. I ran downstairs and out, but she was gone. If I hadn't had to pause to put on my petticoat and----"

"Why didn't you tell us?" asked Phebe.

"Because of Father. He was so down in the mouth I was reluctant to bring it to an issue just then."

"But you were so lighthearted," huffed Phebe.

"Oh, dear no, I was overacting. I played the part too well, and I beg your pardon. As it is, tell me Father, was she, did she, did you see her?"

The clock struck eleven.

"I am afraid I did," answered Jonathan.

"Afraid? Is she poorly, or----?"

"I was so taken aback it was hard to tell. She came to my office, we spoke, and she revealed little about her circumstances; but she appeared careworn, or simply worn, and now, as I look back, I am compelled to say possibly ill, but I don't know that. I attempted to persuade her to stay, but to no avail." He felt his head slump forward, then he collected himself. "Darling Rose, it is my hope that when--I should say if--you have children, none of them will be as difficult as our poor, poor Marie. Oh, it's not her fault. She was born under a cloud. She said so herself. We are all born the way we are, but some are dealt a harsher hand than are others and there is no remedy for it. And that's an end of it." He felt a single, large tear run down his right cheek."

"Was there no good news at all?" choked Rose.

"Only that she has someone--not the same rat as before--which is in itself some good news. The first guy was unpleasant, from what little we saw of him years ago."

"Nothing more?" sobbed Rose plaintively.

"I gave her money, and she was gone."

"You gave her money?" said Rose. "Won't it only further her decline?"

"Possibly," owned Jonathan, "but what else could have I done? I feared her decline would have been worse had I not."

All three cried as one.

Then Rose spoke. "Father, could we not find her and place her in a hospital?"

"A Bedlam-like place you mean?" cautioned Jonathan. "Over my dead body! Not again. She has already been in a lunatic asylum once."

"No, decidedly not a Bedlam! A decent place where----"

"Oh, I'm at wit's end. I should have held onto her."

"Held?"

"Detained, imprisoned, whatever the hell you want to call it, it would have been better than this."

Rose and Phebe came to Jonathan and they all huddled; a woebegone, miserable, pathetic representation of the abyss of human despair. Beyond despair.

Chapter Thirty

Jonathan and Phebe walk by London Bridge. Jonathan thinks he sees Marie.

Jonathan and Phebe, strolling arm-in-arm, approached London Bridge. It was one of Phebe's favorite places. Jonathan was not as attracted to it as was she, and he came mostly to please her, with the stipulation they would not set foot on the bridge. He had seen enough of barges, tugboats, and all. The myriad of people appealed to him though. Most were from the same mold, but there were always some prominent personages. And then, as if by force of thought, along came a stocky man of indeterminate age attired in a hatter hat and clothes straight out of Carroll's Alice's Adventures in Wonderland. He didn't appear to be mad, still and all what was one to make of someone who dresses like that?

A flock of sparrows cheeped overhead and Jonathan wondered whether they could tell each other apart. And could they differentiate one human from another to any great degree?

Jonathan paused and bought a ladies' nosegay from young flower girl. He couldn't distinguish one flower from another, and Phebe was not the flower type, but the bright, warm, sunny day seemed to call for them, and she liked them. She picked out one of the best and largest of the flowers, a purple something-or-other, and stuck it on his lapel.

They walked on, but in spite of the fine day some of Jonathan's philosophical bugbears reappeared. Philosophical not in an academic sense, but in his personal way of looking at life. His layman's views. He had no pretenses of anything more; anything that would have been a benefit of higher education. He had been intrigued by the writings of René Descartes---

"Oh, look!" said Phebe, "A magician. I have always been fascinated by magicians, ever since I was a child, though I saw few of them. They lifted me from the everyday humdrum of living on a farm, and transported me to a life of fantasy I only otherwise found in books. Oh, let's go and watch him!"

She dragged a willing Jonathan by the hand, and when they were close he saw a low, wooden platform. Two stands with drawers stood on the platform, and between them was a tall, curtained enclosure. Off the right side of the platform and toward the back was a hardy-looking older man who reminded Jonathan of his father, likely because the man had several lumps and old cuts on his head, and an altered nose. No doubt he was the protector in case there were any altercations or attempts by the curious to peek where they had no business peeking.

The conjurer called himself *The Phantom of the Ether*, and to Jonathan's surprise he was young and handsome. Probably in his early thirties, with dark hair--from what could be seen from under his silk top hat--and he was dark-complected, with a thin, black mustache spiked straight up at the ends. He wore

a black suit and trousers and had the usual black cape slung over his shoulder. His only flaw, however slight, was his slightly larger-than-usual hooked nose; yet it lent mystique to his mien. And over him loomed his indescribable aura.

Of more interest to Jonathan was the Phantom's shapely assistant, blond and very attractive, who appeared to be of about the Phantom's age. She too was dressed in black; a dress which exposed more of her ankles and bust than some women in the audience evidently felt was proper. As she moved about on the platform her eyes flashed alluringly, and Jonathan saw from the corner of his eye Phebe's none-too-approving look. He tried to divert her.

"I have not seen a hat like that in years," observed he, motioning toward the magician.

"I believe you have not seen an anatomy like hers either," said Phebe, indicating the assistant with a wave of her hand.

"Anatomy?" The game was up, and he groped for words, and decided on humour. "Gracious, I hadn't noticed. How can you say that of me? I'm an old man and----"

"Old man my aunt Minnie. You have a long road ahead of you, and to my dismay you, like most men, have an eye for----"

"Pooh, pooh, only an eye for you." He reached for her arm but she moved away.

Phebe said, "I oughtn't have dragged you to his show."

He did not miss the laughter in her eyes and in her voice. Still, he was perplexed. It wasn't Phebe's way.

Jonathan moved close to her again and whispered, "Moreover, you would make a much better magician's assistant than this young lady would. You're better at hocus-pocus."

"Fudge." She didn't bother to look at him.

A girl of about twelve circulated through the crowd distributing handbills. She strongly resembled the magician, but without his too-ample nose. Jonathan took a bill and found the performance was to be in a hall close by, beginning at 7:00 that evening, and the next.

Meanwhile the Phantom had descended to the ground in the front of the platform and young children had gathered around him. He began reaching out and pulling black beetle-shaped insects from their ears and presenting them to them. Evidently the insects were sweets of some kind, for the children were eating them and begging for more. Next the Phantom coaxed a young, well-dressed man into joining him back on the stage. After some good-humoured banter and some tricks and flourishes the Phantom's assistant threw a lavishly-decorated, oriental-looking cape over the man, the Phantom waved a wand over him and said something, the lady pulled off the cape, and to gasps of astonishment the Phantom removed the man's tall hat and there, on his head, sat a tiny rabbit. There followed great applause, those who had been standing in back crowded forward, and others farther away who were attracted by the hullabaloo approached to find out what the excitement was about. Soon there was a gathering so large that those far from the stage were rudely pushing and shoving their way closer, and the magician's bouncer came to restore order and civility. Jonathan, always somewhat cynical, assumed the bouncer's actions were a routine part of the performance, though it was obvious the man would be

perfectly capable of doing some real bouncing if required.

Jonathan and Phebe maneuvered their way out of the throng.

"Never in my life!" huffed Phebe when they were free. "He did the impossible! And the bunny. Did you see how still it sat on the man's head? Was it stuffed?"

"Surely not," answered Jonathan. "I saw it move, and when the performer removed it, it left two small, round droppings behind."

"It did not!"

"Oh yes it did. I know rabbit leavings when I see them, and so did the young fellow on whose head they were left, from the look of him when he wiped his dome."

"Oh, dear, I missed that. The best part."

"And you can't purchase publicity like that," chortled Jonathan.

"Then we must attend tonight's performance," said Phebe. "Please say you will----"

"Marie!" shouted Jonathan. He pushed past Phebe and bounded away.

"Marie! Marie!"

Phebe was left astounded. Frozen in place as she watched her husband run away. Then she saw he was chasing a man and a woman who were strolling arm-in-arm, and to her horror, when he caught up to them he took the woman's arm. She shook loose of him and backed away, and the man struck Jonathan on the top of his head with his walking stick. As Jonathan sank to his knees and the couple hurried away Phebe ran to him, while all about people stared and wondered aloud at what had just happened, and just as Phebe reached her husband a stout, shabbily-dressed man gave Jonathan another whack on the head with his stick. Phebe pushed away the man and fell to her knees beside Jonathan, who had sunk even lower.

"What on earth were you doing?" sobbed Phebe. "Have you taken leave of your senses?"

Jonathan rolled sideways, took off his hat, and held the top of his head with one hand.

"Speak to me!" implored Phebe.

"I thought she was Marie," said he. "Our dear Marie. I was certain it was her."

"From behind? You thought it was her by looking at her from behind?"

"Oh, my head. They nearly brained me. Concussion of the brain."

"Ohh. But what were you thinking?"

"I wasn't thinking. Help me up. Let's get away from here."

She helped him up and hurried him away to a quiet by-street where she deposited him in the shade, on a large, old, wooden barrel.

Jonathan rubbed his head with his fingertips before putting on his hat. He appreciated that Phebe was not chafing him.

"Don't be hard on me, we are both of like opinion as regards our dear Marie. Only I am less stable than you, and my mind runs rampant sometimes, as you well appreciate. So, then, as queer as it must seem even to you who know me as well as you do, something in my belfry snapped. I'm sorry, that's the only way I know to put it to you, so it will have to suffice."

Phebe was still and quiet for a minute, after which she removed his hat,

softly kissed his head, and returned his hat. "I myself would have possibly done the same," said she. "I'm not so far removed as you might assume."

Chapter Thirty-one

Methodic doubt. More philosophy.

He was sure he was not a philosopher, or anything of the like. Not a great thinker; not intellectually distinguished in any way. Not dull, but not far in advance of many people. He owed his good fortune so far in life to chance, to an ample allotment of common sense inherited from his parents, and to good looks, also inherited. And mostly to Uncle Thurston, even though whatever was received from him was, as well, merely by chance. Everything in his life had been due to chance, and he, Jonathan Winthrop Gorgius, was, along with every person ever born, formed and influenced solely by pure, random, chaos; not through some divine providence; such being the province of fools. Granted the forgoing, then would it not be reasonable for him to assume he was--if not greatly intellectually distinguished, which distinction would by definition have to have been inherited from others--to some unique, significant, and other degree superior to oceans of others? Peerless? As a basis, his dis-affirmation of religion in itself had to count for something, and working from there, couldn't he build a personal world view which made sense to him, even if it were a simple credo he could live by?

Jonathan felt his forehead. As usual he got a headache whenever he pondered such things. Phebe had once said, "Well don't contemplate those things then!" Alack, he had not been able to stop thinking thus, and her advice had only reaffirmed his resolution not bring such things up with her. She was in no way shallow, but they had different interests and mentalities. As well, he had broached the concept with Maxwell who was no dullard either. He was grounded on everyday things--work and so on--and on literature, especially on Shakespeare. Jonathan had to admit to his eyes glazing over whenever Max pulled out a book of Shakespeare and paced back and forth waving one arm while reading in a loud, stentorian voice. Once Jonathan had asked him if he had ever been, or considered, taking up acting, and Max had gruffly said no, but he had obviously taken the query as a compliment, and afterward his readings in front of anyone who would listen had grown more frequent. Still, in the end he had to dismiss Maxwell as a source of help. They were, at a higher level, incompatible.

Jonathan had been walking randomly down this-and-that street in order to clear his head, but now he stopped and leaned back against the red-brick wall of a public house to rest. Mongers passed to and fro hawking their specialties, and one poor little girl of seven or so--thin and with a sickly pallor--was selling ribbons. He purchased three strips of red and paid her more than she had asked.

There were three decomposing codfish on the sidewalk to his left so Jonathan moved on, upwind, only to come upon a dead rat. He continued until he came to another brick wall, behind which was a greengrocer, and there he

stopped and again leaned. His head was better, and as he had so often done, he engaged in one of his favorite distractions; observing people. As he stood, those of all feather passed; men, women, children; young, old, indeterminate age; hale, ill, feeble-minded, seemingly sound of mind; and those of myriad other stripe. But to his dismay, none of any discernment or keenness. He could not suppose anyone of great intelligence, or even of some wit, would be standing idly as he was. No one with a lick of sense. Self-absorbed? Could be he was.

The passers-by included dogs, cats, pigeons, rodents, and to Jonathan's complete astonishment a monkey followed frantically by an organ grinder. The monkey, escaping with his cup, was dribbling coins as he ran, and the grinder was hindered in his chase by having to recover the coins. As they ran, people stopped their activities and laughed, and one elderly man tripped the grinder with his cane. Most of the onlookers were cheering-on the monkey.

A light moment, after which Jonathan resumed his meditations. One thing he had determined several years ago was how sometimes there are no good answers. No effective solutions to life's unfavorable vicissitudes; much less to horrendous misfortunes. No sufficient remedies. Then what? Oblivion? Nothing other than grinding, grueling, everyday struggles interrupted occasionally by revitalizing goodness?

Back came the organ grinder. He had regained his money and he was gaining on the monkey. By then the bystanders were for the grinder, and trying to capture the errant rascal. The whole affair was a sight to behold.

Jonathan stepped toward an abandoned wine cask and sat on it. For goodness sake, was he doomed to nothing more than worrying about his dear wife, his daughters--one of whom was a lost soul; the other far different--and least of them, himself. What had life wrought? And there was something else. He was mindful of another change in himself. A slight turn of some sort, whereby he had become ever-so-slightly sensitive to people in general. Surely not to those he knew, but to the poor, low, miserable, dust-heap masses of humanity. Elitist? No. Realistic? Yes! He was a supreme realist. In an obscure sense he had always known it, and now he had fully fathomed it! Plumbed the depth of his being. He would never return to his previous state of mind.

The monkey doubled back, caught hold of Jonathan's leg, and hid behind it. Along came the grinder, and as he and the creature were both winded the chase ended. Man and monkey walked away together as friends again, and all of the spectators cheered. The grinder turned, doffed his hat, the monkey tipped his, there was rousing applause, a few sympathetic souls put coins in the monkey's cup, and the show was over.

A wave of worry washed over Jonathan. A vague wave about nothing in particular, followed by a wave of sarcasm concerning humanity in general. Sarcasm had never been one of his penchants. Then he stopped himself. To his dismay he had to admit he was a master of sarcasm. Well, well, if presented in good humour what was the harm? And as a further amelioration of conscience, it may do some good. Then pity took hold of him. Pity for others.

The episode of the organ grinder's monkey turned his thoughts to a man named Darwin. Something about apes or whatnot and the origin of humans. Well, best not to get too far into any of that; life is difficult enough.

Then a flash of optimism replaced Jonathan's moroseness, and he again

confirmed his sometimes-weak conviction that, everything considered, life was good enough for him and his.

Chapter Thirty-two

Jonathan, Phebe, Phillip, and Mercedine grow closer. They go to a fine restaurant and get happified.

Phillip and his wife, Mercedine, had invited Jonathan and Phebe to meet them at a fine restaurant; Rules. Johnathan and Phebe entered and were escorted to the long table where Phillip stood to greet them.

"Ah, welcome," said Phillip, bowing slightly. He was dressed to the nines.

Jonathan and Phebe were also well dressed in their best attire, though it was apparent to Jonathan that they were not meeting the standards of either their friends or the others in the dining hall. The large hall was opulent beyond his expectations, with huge chandeliers; fine ornate sculptures along the walls; marble floors and wainscot; royal-purple full-length curtains---- Pure opulence.

They all took their seats, and Phebe, still looking around, opined, "I don't suppose we will find our usual boiled calf's head or haggis here."

Cringing, Jonathan put a finger to his lips, but Phillip and Mercy were unruffled.

"If you insist I will ask the waiter to see if he can have those delicacies concocted," said Mercy, and she burst out laughing, whereupon Phillip turned red in his face and hushed her.

"I am at a loss," said Jonathan to Phebe. "I fear we are here with independent spirits."

"Indeed," replied Phillip, "and each of us is more independent than the other."

To which Jonathan responded, "I have never been kicked out of any establishment, be it such as this, a pub, business office, church, or anywhere else. I, ahem, must profess my aversion to churches--holy-ghost shops--so they don't count. Anyway, in such circumstances I have found women often become ungovernable, so please ladies, control yourselves."

"You shall never be able to govern Phebe and me," laughed Mercy, "so it will save you a great deal of time and effort if you don't try."

All in all everything was intended and said in the best of fun.

"I am happy to say," said Mercy, "we are delighted to see you, and I speak for *What's His Name* here," she elbowed Phillip, "as well."

Mercedine was comely, nearly to the degree of beautiful. She was, Jonathan guessed, more his age than Phillip's. In composition she was of common stature, common hair color--that is to say, light brown--possessed common facial features, and in other ways most common. Yet Jonathan knew a majority of those who met her for the first time would instinctively see something in her amounting to more than the sum of her parts, internal and external. Internal, meaning cranial. And, Jonathan smiled inwardly, because the external *more* had naught to do with her larger-than-most and extremely fair breasts. It

was simply her aura. And she tended to squint, even in dim light.

Phillip's only great distinction was his hilarious way of telling jokes.

"Have you heard of the one-eyed prizefighter?" for example. "Every time an opponent threw a blow with his left hand the"

The jokes, puns, conversation, friendship, and general ebullient feelings were a tonic to Jonathan, and undoubtedly to Phebe as well. They dined on the best the place had to offer, they drank fine wine, Phillip told more jokes, Phebe contributed witticisms that Jonathan never would have imagined she was capable of, Mercy told humorous stories of her and Phillip's adventures, while Jonathan added his family stories that he was sure neither Phillip nor Mercy had heard. They went on and on; drank more and more; laughed merrily, and obviously more than any of them had for years, and were wont.

As their merriment waned Jonathan felt a soft kick on his ankle, and looking at Phebe he knew the merriment was drawing to an end.

"I am too far gone to stay longer," announced Phebe. Looking at Phillip--the soberest of them--she added, "You have worn me out." She winked. Then to all, "Away we go."

"How did you arrive?" inquired Phillip.

"Cab," said Phebe, "however if my besotted husband can walk I am sure we will make it on foot."

"Drunken husband? My dear wife, I am as sober as the Vicar of----"

"If you will permit me, I will procure a brougham for us all, thus avoiding any mishaps, missteps, miscalculations, miscarriages, mis-anythings."

"Thank you, but I insist I am perfectly capable of----" began Jonathan, but again the kick. "Eh, perfectly willing to pay for such a conveyance."

"We won't have it!" countered Phillip. "This was our idea and our expedition, and it will be ours until the very end."

So saying, he snapped his fingers for a brougham carriage.

The next morning Jonathan was the first to rise. He stood by their bed and looked at Phebe, but she only snored.

"Wake up, you sot," said he.

He had spoken softly, but she jolted upright and sat staring wildly about, then fixing her swollen eyes on him.

"Shame on you! Bite your lip. I never would have bellowed at you like that. You can be such a dog!"

He sat by her and tried, unsuccessfully, to grasp her hand.

"I beg your pardon, but I wasn't bellowing. I spoke quite softly."

"And what did you call me?" she.

"Call you? I only said *my dear*. Why, what did you----?"

She fell back onto her pillow. "You turd. It was something."

"I'm sorry. Oh, I don't feel any better than you look." He fell onto his pillow.

"And you don't look any better than I feel," grumbled Phebe.

"My how crabby you----"

"Oh, my head. Why did you drag me to----"

Fluffy jumped onto the bed and hissed at Jonathan. "Control your vicious cat," said he. Fluffy was the second Fluffy Phebe had acquired.

They rolled their heads on their pillows, looked at one another, and laughed.

"What a couple of wretches we are," said Jonathan, and I am more wretched than you."

"Plainly not. I am far more wretched than you."

They argued for a while until Jonathan relented and agreed that she was far, far more wretched and disgusting than he.

He moaned softly. "I am going back to sleep, and I don't care if I ever wake up."

"And I am going back to sleep. I feel I'm on the road to my tomb."

"Lord preserve us."

Fluffy growled at him.

Chapter Thirty-three

Equality. Jonathan beats the tar out of Phebe's antagonists.

"Being affiliated with no group, I still believe you would do better to designate a leader," declared Jonathan. He and Phebe were walking to the home of a member of the *House of Chicanery*, as she called the House of Lords. It was there where a group of a dozen or so parliament bigwigs met regularly; therefore it was one of the places where proponents of women's voting rights met.

"I suppose we will one day, but in the meantime we are still getting our sea legs. Anyhow I am a suffragist through-and-through in spirit."

"You may wind up in some place like the old Clink, where they used to put rabble like you."

"Balderdash, they didn't put women in the Clink back then," said she gaily. "In any case the accommodations in gaols are better these days, and don't you know, it would be a satisfaction to be locked up."

She had asked Jonathan to come along with her as protector, both from a halfwit who evidently despised women, and from a young profligate who was of the opposite disposition.

"I shall do my best," Jonathan had promised, "even though I am not in the least what anyone would call a basher."

A scrawny bulldog staggered up and sniffed his shoes. Jonathan regretted not having something to feed him. Life is tough he reflected, again, as he had found himself doing more and more. Here he was in the prime of his life and he was becoming a seeksorrow. At least he wasn't a bulldog.

Phebe laughed and slapped him on his arm. "If you are unable to handle these two, you are a weakling."

"If they are as mild as you paint them, why do you and your friends not deal with them?"

"We have! We beat them with our umbrellas until they leave." She waved her umbrella at him. "Despite our remonstrations there they are the next day."

"You must be more firm."

"Firm, you say? How can we be more firm without resorting to extreme violence?"

"You can't, but I can."

"Just what I hoped you would say. You're a man."

"My stars, here I am escorting you on your quest for women's equality, and to my astonishment you tell me I will do better because I am a man! That takes the cake!"

Phebe stopped and stamped her foot angrily. "It's not the same! Of course women are not as strong as men as regards physicality, but we are equal in intellect! More than equal in many areas. I have a mind to strike you on the pate with my umbrella."

"Good heavens!" Jonathan backed away from her.

As she waved her umbrella she noticed people were staring, and she calmed herself.

They walked on and Jonathan mollified her as best he could. He tried to take her arm but she brushed him away.

"I will rise to the occasion. However--and I am loath to ask--have you tried to ask the police----?"

"We have, but all we receive from them is ridicule."

"Then fear not, for I shall forcefully persuade them even if means a stint in the nearest lockup. As you see, I have my cherished knobstick. There, my dear, are you satisfied?"

"Not if you put it sarcastically."

"No sarcasm intended." He put his arm around her waist and she flinched but did not pull away.

They rounded the corner of a huge building and approached a score of well-attired young and youngish ladies, all with umbrellas deployed, though it was sunny and there was no chance of rain whatsoever. They were in a close circle, outside of which were two characters; both male. Off at a distance, under the shade of a poplar tree, stood two bobbies who were plainly anticipating the show. The older one, stocky and red-faced, slapped the younger one on the back while pointing toward the group of women.

When they were hard by the ladies Jonathan observed that the older pest was seedy and unkempt, and clearly a simpleton, therefore he decided to deal with him first. He closed on him and with one swift blow he knocked him on the top of his head and the man dropped to his knees, attempted to speak, then pitched face-forward on the ground and lay still.

Phebe ran up. "Have you killed him?"

"Probably not." He felt the man's neck, and he was still breathing. "He's still kicking."

Jonathan stood and turned to the younger man whom he had assumed would have taken to his heels, but it had been a false assumption. The piquant young man was standing stolidly and arrogantly. He was well-dressed in a red waistcoat, black trousers, bowler, and such, and he also had a stick, on which he leaned haughtily. Jonathan approached him while holding his own stick down in front of himself for protection. "Get thee gone, cheap libertine, and never return."

The man remained stock still.

Jonathan quickly struck him in his privy parts, and he fell to the ground in agony. He moaned loudly, groaned, rolled around, and at last managed to cast a brief, malevolent look up at his attacker. Then he rolled and groaned some more.

Jonathan watched impassively, and behind him the women cheered. He bowed to them, then turned to the two bobbies, bowed, and saluted. To his relief they bowed, saluted, and walked away.

The victim tried to get up, and as he did so Jonathan retrieved the man's walking stick and snapped it over his knee, then he picked up the man's bowler, dusted it off, and when its owner was fully upright he grasped the hat with both hands and forced it down over his head, almost covering his eyes.

"If this does not suffice to discourage you from loitering here," said

Jonathan, "I have two friends who will be more than glad to further dissuade you. I must, however, warn you their methods of dissuasion are more forceful. I believe their first attempt will leave you permanently unable to walk. Their next may leave you incapable of speech."

He grasped the wretch by the shoulders, turned him around, and delivered a swift, hard kick to his buttocks.

Phebe came and hugged him.

"Where is the imbecile?" asked Jonathan.

He crawled away, down the street," she pointed, "and into an alleyway."

"He crawled all the way?"

"He's a fast crawler. The poor guy. You were hard on him." But she pulled down Jonathan's face and kissed him, and again all of the umbrella ladies applauded and cheered.

"Hard on him? Yes. Nevertheless often that's the only way to get through to those like him."

"I had no idea you were so proficient with a stick," said Phebe.

"Oh, well, a mere scuffle. But before we were married I had been accosted by some street ruffians, and as chance had it I ran into a guy who introduced me to stick fighting. Turned out I was a natural, and in fact I rather liked going out on my own and giving lessons to those who attempted to rough me up."

"You never said anything about that. It makes me wonder what more I don't know about you," said she dubiously.

"Don't worry, I'm not by nature that way, and in time I got it out of my system. Though when aroused I----"

"Then I trust not many will arouse you."

"You tend to arouse me when you----"

"Stop it. Be good, lest I round up some more fighting cocks to test your mettle."

Chapter Thirty-four

A lost soul. Jonathan gets drunk. A sailing adventure.

Maxwell had always been enigmatic. If not to others, to him, thought Jonathan. Maxwell, his best friend--a real brick--yet at some deep psychical level unknowable. Once he had tried to fathom Maxwell's cranial workings by taking him to a local pub and plying him with drink, and while they both enjoyed the evening, the more Max drank the more enigmatic he had become. At the mention of women, Max had turned irritable, and when Jonathan, also influenced by drink, had persisted by offering to connect him with a comely young lady he had run into--literally run into one day on his street walks--his drinking companion had turned even more cranky, thus confirming Jonathan's suspicions in that regard. And when he had tried to smooth the waters with Max by tactfully indicating his open-mindedness, he had roiled those waters even more, and had spent the next quarter of an hour consoling him yet more by changing the subject, complimenting him on his weeds, inquiring about his family, and on and on.

After he had gotten Max cooled down they resumed their high time and spent the rest of the evening in high dudgeon, and deep in their cups. Their only restraints were Max's lack of interest in birds and Jonathan's own indifference to them on married grounds; though he did find himself glancing at some of them from time to time.

Maxwell Backbone, his best friend. Hmmm. Only friend? Hardly. And he didn't consider Phebe a mere friend; she was much more than that.

Jonathan looked at a ceiling, not knowing it was a ceiling. Not knowing anything, except his head hurt and there was a sickness in his stomach. And he didn't want to move.

After a minute or two Jonathan recognized the ceiling; it was the one above his and Phebe's bed. Phebes. He threw his right arm across her side of the bed but she was not there. He rolled his head to his left and there she stood. He rolled his head back, closed his eyes, and heard a moan that he recognized as his own. Then all was quiet and he waited for the outburst that was sure to come. Howsomever it did not come. Nothing. Then, to his utter astonishment Phebe knelt at his bedside, hugged him, and put her head on his chest.

"You poor dear," she whispered. "You poor, poor thing. What may I do to make you feel better?"

"Let me die," managed Jonathan. He felt her embrace stiffen.

"Now, now, don't be absurd. You'll get through this. In time. When you feel better I will fix you some milktoast to soothe your stomach."

"Ooooh! I will never feel better." A sickness rose in Jonathan's throat and for a moment he was afraid he would heave. "What time did I get home?"

"At half past twelve."

"Was I bad?"

"No. Only worse for wear. You kept saying something about Maxwell, and women, and stuff, but I was unable to make out what. I got you into bed, and you went to sleep."

Jonathan swallowed and put his hands over his face. "A saint. Saint Phebe. Saint Phebe of London. The best----"

"Shush. Go back to sleep. I will be nearby if you need me, poor thing."

"I thought you would be furious."

"Goodness no. You have been under a lot of pressure at work, and letting off some steam did you good."

"Ohhhh."

"And when you wake up again I will have the milktoast ready."

"Ohhh. The cure will be worse than the illness."

Their cuckoo clock bird cuckooed and he couldn't stand the sound.

The first thing Jonathan did later in the morning was stagger to the pitcher and drink two large glasses-full of water, after which he sat down at the kitchen table. And that was all; just sat. Came a clatter, and the first drayman of the day--the garbage collector--trundled by. As usual he seldom stopped to collect anything, and often he left more than he collected, as a result of refuse falling from his over-full cart. "There should be a drayman following the drayman," chucked Jonathan softly. In any case----

"Dear me," shouted Phebe, "you're blinking like an owl! A bloodshot owl."

Jonathan nearly fell from his chair. She had not shouted, albeit in his condition it had sounded so.

"Oh, heavens, forgive me," she said, lowering her voice, "I----"

"Never mind it. I'm too base to be offended. Have you in your heart to prepare for me a cup of coffee, or tea?"

"You poor thing, I will do so forthwith. Some milktoast? It's ready."

"Oh, no. But perhaps a little hair of the dog?"

"Oh, I daren't give you that. A dram of tea, and back to bed you go."

Jonathan tried to stifle a groan, but he only succeeded in muffling it.

Phebe, with her back to him as she prepared his tea, said, "Last night someone from the office came, wondering why you weren't at work."

"Who? Maxwell?"

"No. I didn't recognize him. I guess Maxwell is in as bad or worse condition as you, and he's not likely to be out and about either. You were both pretty-well tanked."

"Never again."

"Excuse me?" She turned to him.

"Never again," repeated Jonathan. "I have learned my lesson."

After tea, of which he could down little, Jonathan went back to bed.

After his recovery, which had taken two days, Jonathan was back at work. Those on the second floor either looked in surprise, or tried hard not to look at all.

Upstairs Max sat at his desk pretending to scribble away at something. He

glanced up, then went on with whatever he was not doing. Jonathan sat down at his desk, and as he was not yet in full fettle, he chicken-scratched on a piece of paper. It would be a tonic to get out from behind the desk for a while, but where? What? He had been getting restless for months without actually realizing it, and now---

"The ships, the ships!" someone shouted.

Jonathan dropped his pen. "What the----?"

"They're coming in! Both! What the deuce, they weren't to be here this soon!" announced Sam Plank, waving his hands over his head. "This is unheard of. What will we do? We haven't secured docks for them yet, and----"

"Be quiet Sam. Sit down and take some deep breaths."

Sam did so. He was easily excitable.

"Now," said Jonathan, folding his hands, "what is it that has chafed you so. It can't be all that bad. Another breath first if you please."

"Marie Rose and Cordelia were both seen entering the river," quavered Sam, his hands trembling in his lap. "What are we to do? What shall we----?"

"Now, now, it isn't the end of the world. Come, we'll go down to the docks and see what we can come up with, and you have heard of anchors, have you not?"

"Anchors? Why yes, of course I have heard of anchors. But----"

"Then off we go, and the worst that can happen is they might both have to anchor for a night or two, that's all. Come along, it's a nice day for a walk."

And there they were--Marie Rose and Cordelia, anchored and floating heavily in the water, laden with cargo. Cordelia was pretty, and Marie Rose was also, given she was new and had replaced her old namesake.

"A lovely sight don't you agree?" asked Jonathan.

"Oh, yes, surely," answered Sam.

Jonathan turned and smiled at him. Sam was as nondescript as could be; so nondescript it was even difficult to determine his age, though Jonathan estimated him to be in his early thirties. He was of medium height, weight, looks, and even intellect. His only distinguishing feature was his twisted upper lip which gave him a permanent sneer, even though it was not a sneer. He was definitely not the sneering type. Quite the opposite; a good, solid, trustworthy employee, and a likable---

Then it struck like a non-lethal bolt from the blue! Sail on the Marie Rose! That's what he would do. He had been languishing, seeking some distraction, and losing himself for a month or two aboard Marie Rose would be just the thing to clear the cobwebs from his mind. Abandon the office, leave everything to Maxwell, and sail the bounding main, free from everything!

"Sir? Sir?"

"Um, yes, er, I keep telling you not to address me as sir, Sam."

"Yes, I know, but are you well? You didn't answer me, and you were staring as if you were in a hypnotic state."

"How so?"

"Well, er, gazing off at the boats strangely, and, oh damn, you didn't seem right. Stone still, as though you were petrified. I once saw a tent show where a hypnotist made some people look as you just were, and it was as eerie as the

blazes of hell, and you were----"

"Now, now, Sam," he slapped him on the back, "I wasn't as bad as all that."

"What was it then?" Sam persisted.

"I will confide in you. Can you be tight-lipped?"

"The tightest," affirmed Sam.

"I have been out of sorts as of late. More as the months and years pass, and I believe boarding Marie Rose and being a vagabond for a time would help me snap out of it, don't you?"

"Snap out of what Mr Gorgius? I'm sorry, but I still don't understand."

"I cannot describe it, really, other than to call it the doldrums."

"Oh, now I comprehend your condition. The doldrums. We all get 'em now and again. I know I do, and my cure is a binge. Three or four days, and when I'm done I'm as fit as a fiddle. I'm sure it would do you good as well."

"You have no wife do you?"

"No, not on your life. If I did----"

"I tried your remedy, Sam, and only one night it almost did me in. And as you know I do have a wife, and thank my lucky stars she was patient with me, and nursed me back to health."

Sam laughed. "You must be feeling your age sir, er, well not that you're all that up in years, but it affects us all different. The booze I mean."

"It sure enough does, so now you see why I would prefer to go sailing. I imagine you and Maxwell and some of the others could manage things while I'm absent?"

"Oh, yes, but may I ask, how will your wife feel about such a long absence?"

"Ah, there may be the rub, but Phebe is understanding."

Sam appeared to be perplexed and unsure. "But for months?" he queried.

"I will ask you, and Max, to look after her while I am gone."

"Oh, dear me, I don't feel I should be trusted with----"

"I trust you completely. You're as good as gold. Now that's an end to it."

"As you say." But Sam said it with little fervor.

That evening, at home, over the kitchen table, Jonathan revealed his notion to Phebe. When he had finished he leaned back in his chair, cringing within. But she only sat, regarding him in a peculiar way, saying nothing for a long, slow, minute.

Then, "I declare it is the best idea you have had in a long time," said she.

Jonathan found himself taken aback. "You do?" was all he could croak.

"Certainly. You don't take me for a perfect fool, do you? I know you as well as you know yourself--nay--almost better, and don't believe for a moment I could not tell something was ailing you. Tut, tut," she raised her hand, "give me some credit for reading you. In any case you should go, and go for however long you must to resolve any issues you have. Furthermore I won't ask, in fact I insist that you do not tell me, of any such issues, until you return. So there. Rest easy."

Jonathan was stunned to the point of speechlessness.

"Oh, I don't claim to know all of your inner workings," said Phebe, "but I do make reasonable surmises."

Jonathan gulped. "Evidently so. Nevertheless if I were to attempt to

explain my thoughts to you, I would probably be unable to do so. I'm far from being a well-educated creature, therefore I don't feel disposed to entertain deep thoughts, yet I feel I sometimes do, and often they are not pleasant. Life itself is, or can be, unpleasant."

"You do entertain deep thoughts. And I agree that life can be unpleasant--everyone knows that--but in order to maintain your equilibrium you must remember to see the ups as well as the downs."

She picked up her cat, Flossy, and sat petting her. She had found Flossy on their doorstep and had taken pity on the young thing.

"I intend to, yet I haven't yet developed the ability to limit my cogitations," chuckled Jonathan. The conundrum--my conundrum I should say--is that I persist in hoping there is more in life."

"More? More what?"

"Oh, I can't say. Hmmm. Not the panacea of religion; that's preposterous. More than harsh physical reality, and more than the everyday rabble who comprise the common masses of humanity can imagine. Oh whatever---- This forest of fools in which we live. It does get tedious."

Phebe smiled and continued her petting. Flossy was young, white, and pretty well behaved; and the only downside of having taken her in was that Phebe was obsessed with isolating her from tomcats.

After a lengthy pause Phebe asked, "Then do you allow you will, on your sailing adventure, resolve some of your, eh, indispositions?"

"Who can tell? I'll try. Still, what harm can come of it?"

"None at all, unless you drown."

"Unless I---- Drown? Why what a thing to say! That's not like you."

"Oh dear. It just slipped out. Shame on me." She put Flossy back on the floor and set about wringing her hands.

"Now, there, don't fret about that," said Jonathan. "First you tell me to go, then you worry about me drowning. I can't figure you out. Anyway there's no drowning me, and if the Marie Rose went down we would be rescued by the Cordelia."

"Still, what if---?"

"What if, what if? Now, now, you have nothing to worry about; but if you persist I shall not go."

"Oh, dear, by all means go!"

"All right then, but no more fretting. I'm unused to your present frame of mind."

"And I am unused to yours. Howsomever we shall adjust, shall we not?"

"We shall. And I can't wait to cast off."

Chapter Thirty-five

The life of a sailor. Sailor Jack.

Jonathan's first and foremost resolution upon boarding the Marie Rose was to not, in any event, get seasick. His next resolution was to refrain from putting on airs, and to be treated as simply one of the seamen.

It was a lovely day, with a clear sky and a steady east breeze. Gulls followed the ship, sails billowed, orders were shouted, sailors climbed, the helmsman steered, and other crew members scurried about doing things that were mysteries to Jonathan. In all life was good.

As they reached the mouth of the Thames however, Jonathan's first resolution was put to trial, and he made for the starboard rail and struggled to contain himself, literally. He did manage to contain himself, but barely.

"Ow's it goin' sir?" asked someone. Jonathan composed himself sufficiently to turn his head, and there stood a not-very-tall, sturdy, boisterous-looking crew member. If he held any upper rank it was not apparent.

"Oh, well enough, thank you. And you?"

"I'm alays well sir. Never better. I'm a tough old nut."

He looked older than most of the others on the ship, and tough."

"Good. But will you please not call me sir?"

"An' why not? Erybody knows you are the big baboo of the company!"

"Good gracious! Well, baboo or not, will you please refrain from calling me sir? I have been cooped up in my office for so long I simply want to be----"

"No sir, t'ain't natural to address you by your name, whatever it may be, and----"

"Jonathan. Please call me Jonathan."

"Nay, sir, I will not. Report me to Cap'n Black if you must, but the closer he gets to retirement the more independent he becomes, perhaps even to you, and I doubt that he would repermand me. Or throw me orboard. Anyway I am much obliged to address you as I will. Tis my nature to respect me betters. I would make one concession though. If you perfer I shall address you as squire."

"Oh, no, I entreat you, not that. By comparison even sir is preferable."

"Then sir it is, and it's settled," said Jonathan's new friend. "Shake on't and tis done!" They shook hands heartily.

Jonathan released the rail and stood straight. "Why, you appear to be one of a kind."

They were offshore by then and the wind had kicked up.

"Thankey sir, I take it as high praise!"

"It is. However am I correct in assuming Captain Black has attached you to me?"

"Attached?" sputtered the sailor. "Oh, why I can't say."

"Won't say, don't you mean?"

"Ain't it the same thing? You've got me in a corner sir. That you have, and I'm at a loss as to how to reply. You're too clever for me!"

"Hah! I don't know about that."

"In any case sir I will be glad to look after you. To begin with, do you prefer hammock or berth?"

"Hammock or---- Why I would prefer a berth if it isn't too much trouble."

"Aha! I knew it! Then you will be next to me."

"Then who will I be next to?"

"Who?"

"I mean, what is your name?"

"Oh. Blevins. Me name is Jack Blevins."

"I am well pleased to make your acquaintance Mr Blevins." They shook hands again, and Jonathan felt his stomachache subside.

"Please, not Mr Blevins. Please call me Jack." One of Jack's eyelids drooped whenever he spoke.

Jonathan laughed. "And how may I do so if you persist in calling me sir? Tis quite unfair of you."

"Hum. Not unfair, 'cause we are of a different class."

"Stuff and nonsense! I am a farmer's son, and my mother was a farmer's daughter. I married a farmer's daughter, and I am fully down to earth, with no pretensions. Thus I will address you as Jack."

"Wery well, an' I insist on addressin' you as sir. Have our minds met?"

"Aye."

"Then let us go below and fix your berth."

The next day Jonathan felt better, though it had been a rough night rolling back and forth in his berth, alternating between bumping against the hull on one side and being caressed by the lee cloth on the other. He had not been ill, however. He got up and dressed. Jack was not there and he assumed he was on duty up top. Up top, down below, . . . Jonathan was already learning some of the curious nautical terms; and they were indeed curious. Lee, bosun's mate, aloft, gybe, and so on.

Apparently they were sailing hard now, as the ship was pounding and leaning. Jonathan wobbled to the ladder, remembering that Jack had said being on deck was better than being below--unless one was lying down--in rough seas. It smelled better up top too.

The skies had turned grey, and now there were no birds. The wind was colder, and the crew were busier. Jonathan held onto the lee rail with one hand and fixed the top button of his thick, blue, double-breasted wool pea-coat. He pulled down his tarred-felt hat.

"Arghh!" called Captain Black. He smiled broadly as he waddled up to Jonathan typical sailor fashion; a rolling, flat-footed walk. "Have you your sea legs yet?" asked he.

Captain Black was shorter than most, stocky, dark-complected, and known for both his bodily strength and his strength of command. He had a close-cropped black beard and dark, piercing eyes. He was never without his clay pipe--lit or not, and he always carried his bosun's whistle regardless of weather or any other condition.

"Not yet I fear," replied Jonathan. "But at least I'm not over the rail again. Where are we going?"

"South."

"I know, south, but where are we going?"

"You don't know where we are bound?" cried the captain, astounded.

"I am embarrassed to say I do not."

"You jumped aboard the Marie Rose with no idea? I can't believe me ears! We are heading for the Mediterranean, and on to Naples, that's where!"

"Do tell. Now I feel worse than ever."

"Where did you suppose we were going, the south pole?"

"Uff, my stomach."

"Haw! Never you mind that. You'll come around, and in any event there's nought to be done about it no matter what. Why I've known able-bodied men who sailed for decades without even having the hiccups suddenly begin throwing up the contents of their stomach worse than anyone ever had. It overcomes all of us sooner or later. Though I declare I have never been touched by it in all me years."

"Then I can only aspire to take after you. I do feel----"

"You do have a greenish tinge. Go midships where the bounding and rolling is not as bad, and fix your eyes on the horizon. That'll do the trick. Off you go. Captain's orders."

Jonathan followed the order and he soon felt better, and after a while he sat down an a large bag of something soft. He thought of Phebe, and he missed her, but as strong as she was he was sure she would never survive on a cargo ship. He himself would perhaps not survive, but until he went under he reckoned he would have time to do some serious worrying. Life was beginning to hit him harder than he had thought it would. All he would have wanted, if he had thought about it at all years ago, was how he and his would remain healthy, and such simple, marked things like those he had supposed everyone--regardless of their mental or physical condition or station in life--wanted. But now his affliction--nay affliction was too strong a word--his unease, disquiet, disposition or however he would put it, was, while not too harsh, unsettling. Not always, but more than he liked. No, there he went again. Liked was not what he meant, for he surely didn't like it. Oh dear. Well, well, sailing would clear his mind.

Sailing. He would have to pull his weight or be put to shame, and sooner or later he would literally have to pull his weight up mast. Up the ratlins and out on the yards. Heaven help him if the time came when he would have to climb all of the way to the topgallants. To his advantage he was physically fit and able, though admittedly rather unused to such exertions.

And as chance would have it the wind kicked up more, and up went a half dozen sailors to take in some sail. Jonathan's stomach rumbled as if he were about to lose the hard biscuit he had just eaten.

Chapter Thirty-six

One of the Crew (almost).

"I'm told you are itching to climb," rumbled Captain Black. He had come up behind Jonathan.

Jonathan turned. "Now that I have my sea legs I thought----"

"You will do no climbing. Hear me out. Ashore you are Mr Gorgius and I am Captain Black. Aboard ship you are Seaman Gorgius, and I am still Captain Black. If I am not mistaken that's a law, an' if it isn't it out to be."

"I could at least make it up to the first yard and----"

Captain Black lowered his voice and his amplification, and he put a hand on Jonathan's shoulder. "Young man, young and able as you may be, it takes years for one to become a competent climber. It is not the kind of skill you learn simply through grit and sheer pluck. If it were, you would be well-equipped, but as matters stand I mustn't allow you to endanger yourself and others. After all, I consider myself responsible not only for you, but to your wife Phebe. You know tis true, and please pardon me for speaking roughly, but I will not have you shipped home in a rum barrel, pickled."

The captain evidently saw how shocked his charge was, and composed himself. His eyes smiled slightly. "Moreover the crew would never forgive me for squandering our rum supply on one who had died. So drink your evening grog in peace."

Jonathan felt a wave of calm wash over his body. He had not known how anxious he had been as to his resolve to climb. The Marie Rose was not a large ship, having only twin-masts and mains, and the usual topsails and topgallants. Easy enough to climb, but unbeknownst to him he had been a mental wreck.

A gull spattered the deck, and Jonathan knew they were close to land. When he was by himself he was perfectly at ease for the first time since he had boarded the ship. The new Rose Marie. The old one and been salvaged by a shipbuilder, and, with steam engines being experimented with, Jonathan had estimated that his small fleet of sailing vessels would barely outlast him. And the eventuality would have come sooner than expected if he had been allowed to go aloft. As it was now he had the best of all; he would to be part of the crew but he didn't have to risk life and limb. And it would have probably been life.

Jonathan leaned back on the soft bag--actually more properly a sack--on which he sat, and looked up at the clear sky; bluer than he had ever seen. But then London wasn't a top spot for blue skies. There would be a letter or two from Phebe when they got to Naples, for Captain Black had given her his mailing place there. In return he could send a letter to her in reply, assuring her that all was well. Assuming all would be well. And he had a strong premonition it would be. Therefore----

"Ahoy there sir! Avast!"

Jonathan leapt up as if he had been prodded with a red-hot poker, and landed face-to-face with Jack Blevins.

"Jesus and Mary, Jack! You scared the wits out of me!"

Jack only laughed. "Glad tuh know you 'ave wits sir! Hate tuh 'ave a witless friend."

"Well you will not have such a friend, prosy or not, if you keep---- And who says *avast* anymore, for pity sake?"

"I do, sir. It carries a flair."

Jonathan fell back onto his bag.

"I heerd you will not be goin' aloft," observed Jack.

"You did?"

"We're on a ship. Just like walls, ships 'ave ears. This ship has twenty-four of 'em. Ears. Twenty-two if you don't count mine. Twenty-six if we count yours."

"As you say."

"I knowed they would never send you up." He pulled out his old, worn, brier pipe, pointed upward with it, then blew through it from each end.

"You knew?"

"Certn'ly. It takes years tuh----"

"Then why didn't you tell me? I made a baboon of myself."

"Oh, I'd never go that far. But we takes our entertainments where we find 'em here aboard ship, an' as the lubber you was the natural choice."

"Oh, well that's a horse of a different color," said Jonathan with all of the sarcasm he could summon.

"You ain't gettin' cross are yuh? We was only jestin'. I for sure didn't take you as a----"

Jonathan held up his hand. "Oh, pay me no heed. I tend to be too sensitive. Let's change the subject. What will be our cargo on the way back?"

Jack's eyes widened. "Whaaat? Your own ship and yuh don't know the cargo? I believe the sea air disagrees with you sir!"

"For heaven's sake, how am I to know what comes and goes on every ship."

"Why not? I do. An' if an old dog like me can keep track----"

"What are we carrying?"

"Wine," said Jack.

"Oh, you're right. Wine." He looked around before resuming. "Now I remember, but you can see how my mind is slipping, and why I had to get out of the office for a while. Keep it mum will you, but I've been going through a sticky time up here," he put his finger to his head, "and I have undertaken this journey in order to straighten things out."

"No! You? I never would'a thought it of yuh. Hmm. What's wrong?"

"It's like I'm too often testy around people; as though they annoy me almost always. Furthermore, I find myself wondering what life is all for. And the worst part is, personally, life is good. For the most part." Jonathan waved away an insect of some kind. "Have you ever felt thus?"

"Oh, yes. Doesn't everyone?"

"Possibly. But I'm----" He was going to say worse, but he checked himself. Jack wouldn't understand. "So here I am, getting myself sorted." He forced a smile.

"What kinda wine?"

"Kind? I have no idea. Maxwell takes care of that."

Jack was filling his pipe with dark tobacco. "Who's Maxwell?"

"He's a partner in the business. Owns a goodly share. Right-hand man."

Jack sat down on the deck, cross-legged, facing Jonathan. "Now that we're through breakin' yuh in I'll be serious."

"I would greatly appreciate it."

"I'll begin with the wine." He lit his pipe. "You must guard it on the trip home. These rogues," he waved his pipe, "will drink the cargo hold dry if'n yuh don't."

"Come now, they can't be that bad."

"That bad an' worse." He blew an enormous miasma of smoke. Bad as bad can be. The captain normally sets the guards, but as you're aboard I assume he'll assign you to do it, as it's your wine."

"Then what shall I do?" asked Jonathan. "Who could I get to----?"

"Me! Me an' Billy Apostalon. Yuh know, the big guy they always get when they need tuh move heavy cargo. Barrels and such. He used tuh be a wrestler, an' there isn't a man aboard this ship who'd go up agin' him."

"And you?" asked Jonathan doubtfully.

"Oh, don't you worry about me an' Billy Club," Jack chortled. "Anyways the two Billys an' I could handle it unless we were both on duty up top, an' in that event I have no doubt the Cap'n would change the rotation. An' if not you could stand guard."

"Do tell," muttered Jonathan. "I could if I had a billy club."

Jack blew a cloud of smoke in Jonathan's direction. "So it's settled."

"Where do we pick up the wine?" asked Jonathan.

"Naples. Beautiful place. Great wine, good-lookin' women, splendid food. You'll have some time to look about whilst us slaves unload an' load the ship."

On ploughed Marie Rose, and on. Then, when the wind was right, they tacked westward, and for the first time Jonathan was allowed to help with the sheets, and he, also for the first time, felt he was one of the crew. How did he know? He knew because no one paid him any notice.

Chapter Thirty-seven

Home again, home again . . . (from the sea).

"Home again, home again, jiggety-jog!" sang out Jonathan as Phebe out the front door to greet him. "Home from the sea; a true sailor become!"

Phebe threw her arms around his neck, and though not a crier, she sobbed, and could not be controlled.

"Now, now, I should have thought you would have been happy to be rid of me for a while longer."

She released her hold on him, stepped back, and slapped his face, but not very hard. "You didn't even write to me. I wondered if you were dead!" Then she clung to him again.

"Nonsense. I wrote to you from Naples. Didn't you receive my letter?"

"I did not."

"Well if I had died Captain Black would have notified you. In any event I received your letter."

"Ohhh," moaned Phebe.

They went inside.

"Come now," said Phebe, "sit here at the table and I will make us some tea."

"Tea? Tea! That's all you can say? You will make tea?"

So she sat and composed herself. They were both silent for a long while.

Then Phebe spoke. "Did you find some solace on your journey?"

"As to----?"

"Your, oh, whatever you call it. Meaning of life? Mental miasma. Try as I might it's all Greek to me."

Jonathan pondered. "I don't know. At the least I had some time off from the office, and I met some interesting characters. I learned about the ship, and, oh how I missed you!" He rose and kissed her on her forehead, and she broke into tears again, but rallied quickly. She picked up Flossy and sat petting her.

"As to my *meaning of life* as you put it, I see it more as a malady. Oh, don't be alarmed."

Phebe had stopped petting and was obviously concerned.

"It's nothing serious," consoled Jonathan.

"Then what is it?"

"I would rather call it a philosophical outlook on the reality of life. How harsh life can be."

"Well that's better," said Phebe with sarcasm. "And what a mouthful."

"Pooh-pooh. No need to work yourself into a passion. I'm solid as a rock. And if it will placate you, I will come up with a shorter and more moderate term. Let me see. How about mental disposition? Will that suffice?"

At last Phebe smiled, though wanly. "It will do." Flossy jumped down from

her lap and ran into their bedroom. "Though it appears Flossy does not approve of your appellation."

"Hah! You and your cats. They never like me. What is it about me that puts them off so?"

"There's no accounting for it. All I can say is you are the only one I have ever known who stirs up that reaction from cats. And it's only one of your unique characteristics."

"I should have preferred fewer unique characteristics."

"Tell me more of your voyage. How were the people?"

"The crew? Goodhearted, stout fellows mostly. Not above a little chicanery, yet it was part of their appeal. There was this one, Jack Blevins, who was quite the character. He was older than the rest, and, well, how would I describe him? Likable, and intelligent in his own way. Of all, I was most fond of him. He took me in and made a sailor of me, as best he could in such a short time. His appeal was more in what I didn't know of him than what I did."

"In what way?"

"Dear me. Well, for one thing I do not exaggerate when I reveal that long ago in his younger days he had been a rover."

"A rover?"

"A pirate."

"Gracious!"

"I found it difficult to imagine him in such an occupation. Cutting throats and all. Then again, people change."

"I hope with all my heart that you never change," giggled Phebe.

"And I trust you will never change," smiled Jonathan. "I see you as perfect."

"Oh, now. And how will you see me when I am old?"

"You will be like fine wine; better with age!"

"Now behave yourself lest I sic Flossy on you!"

And with that Flossy, who had returned, hissed at Jonathan. He escaped to the living room and Phebe followed. There they sat together on the sofa, holding hands and looking directly ahead at nothing. Jonathan relaxed, happy to be off the rolling ship, despite the rolling sensation he still felt. They simply sat. And sat. And sat.

Then Phebe asked, "So it was a safe and largely uneventful outing?"

"Safe? Why no, going to sea is never safe my dear. We lost one of the men overboard, one night during a storm, and----"

"Did you rescue him?" gasped Phebe.

"Heavens no! Rescue was impossible, as was well-known by every member of the crew."

After an indeterminate time Phebe spoke hesitantly.

"Again, and to put it to rest in my mind at least, please, will you attempt to again explain your, your mental disposition? Your philosophical frame of mind, if you please."

"To be sure. Now, as I regain my land legs, I am beginning to think more clearly and I believe it would help me to elucidate my thoughts and cogitations. I----"

"Thoughts and cogitations? You sound like a university professor."

"Only because I have always been a reader. Now, I will profess that I am something of an oddity in my cogitations, and I attribute my oddness to my being a realist. Total, absolute, undiluted realist. I have admitted it to you once; and I say *admitted* because it's not the blessing some might suppose it to be. In no way. More often than not it is a severe oppression."

"Oh, my!"

He squeezed her hand gently. "But don't fret, it's also a gift. No, simply happenstance. Gift implies a giver, and since neither I nor you have been subjugated by the religious, we know there is no giver. No bestower of anything. Still, I see it as what many would call a gift, and I prefer to live with such a gift than without it."

"Why?"

"Because I would rather be sentient and intelligent than ignorant and weak-minded. That's all. Simply put."

Phebe released his hand. "But since I do not feel the way you do, I am of lesser intelligence?"

The cuckoo clock bird spoke up.

"No. I knew you would ask that. I anticipated your concern, and I assure you, my dear, you are a bright, quick-witted lady of the highest order. Therefore----"

"Nonetheless----"

"Nonetheless nothing. Therefore if you view me as intelligent to some high degree, then when I say you are also intelligent to a high degree, you may be assured I am correct. Don't you see?"

"Unless---- Are you fibbing?"

Jonathan laughed heartily. "No, not fibbing!"

"Still, to play your kind of word games, you could be fibbing about not fibbing. Furthermore I don't see how my understanding of you is an indication of my intelligence?"

"It is because I say it is, and if I am as quick as you believe me to be, I cannot be wrong. Ipso facto you must concede the point. The point being, I am a superb judge of intellect, as well as of gorgeous young ladies in general."

He could see from her ever-so-slight, playful pout that he had won the game. And he had placated Flossy who came and rubbed against his leg. Jonathan moved to pet her, but she ran away. Something in her demeanor brought to mind Marie.

"Have you heard anything of Marie?" asked Jonathan.

His sudden shift gave Phebe a start. "No, I am sorry to say," and she melted slightly. "Oh, how I wish I had." She took his hand again. "As the years pass us by it's more difficult. I find myself hoping every time someone knocks at the door." She hung her head in despair. "Do you believe she will ever return to us?" asked she. "Or even contact us? Or we will ever again know anything of her? Despite our conversation just now, I feel you are more prescient than I as to such unknowns. Do tell me?"

Jonathan felt his head nod forward, but he lifted it. He had never been one to shed tears, but now he could not hold them back.

Chapter Thirty-eight

Dear Marie. A clue. Jonathan and Jack search for Marie. Rose begins to write a book.

Two days later the boat was still rocking and Jonathan supposed it would take several more days for the rocking to stop. Phebe had laughed at his duck-walk. And throughout his recovery he had no inclination to return to work; Maxwell had stopped by to report, and all was well, but for a drunken clerk who had had to be dried out; an old lunatic lady who had gained access to the office floor and had created quite a commotion until two stout, first-floor warehouse men had subdued her and kicked her out; and poor, old Winston Lazarus who had slumped over his desk, pen in hand, dead as a doornail. And oh, yes, the dead rat some joker had put in Sam Ladd's desk one evening after work.

"Ah, morning tea," said Phebe. "Tea and toast."

Jonathan was at the kitchen table. "We had no tea and toast on the ship, and I have come to appreciate it more than ever. All we had was water and our evening grog----"

"What is grog? I have forgotten."

"It's rum and water. Well, I always worried that if I drank only water and if it were bad I would catch something."

"So you drank only rum." She poured herself tea and sat down.

"Yes and no," smiled he. "But I watched the others to see if they were ill. They were my canaries in the coal mine. If one was unwell I was not concerned, but I had decided if two or more were queasy I would----"

"Drink only rum."

"No, not exactly. I would add some rum to my water and let it sit awhile. Either that would work or I would have to die of thirst."

"Or you could have added more rum and died cheerfully."

He ignored her. "Between water, water and a dash of rum, and the evening grog, I got by."

"And what about the wine? As the owner of the wine you could have resorted to that."

Jonathan put down his cup, put his elbows on the table and cupped his chin in his hands, and forced an expression of disgust.

"You try me sometimes."

She sat munching on her toast, suppressing a smile. "It's for your own good. A test, if you will. If the day comes when you either do not appreciate my humour, or you grow testy with me, I shall know you are failing. And a part of this test is my pun."

"What pun?"

"Why, a test, and testy!"

Jonathan covered his face with his hands and moaned. "Lord, grant me

patience. I may be a sinner, but I do not deserve this penance. I don't think it's a pun. And please shield me from my blessed wife's slings and arrows for the rest of my days. Lo, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of Phebe's drollery I feel no"

He went on until Phebe threw her toast at him. "Someday you will get your just deserts."

Jonathan entered their flat waving an envelope. "Look what I have found!"

Phebe leapt from her armchair and clutched her chest with both of her hands. "Ohhh! Ohh, what in the world? You will yet be the death of me!"

"It's an envelope with Marie's address on it."

Phebe collapsed back into her chair. "Marie? Oh, dear me." She clutched her chest again. "What does it say?"

Jonathan sat in the chair next to her. "There is no letter, but don't you see? Her sending address is on it."

He waved the envelope over his head, then handed it to her.

"But why did you not see it before?" breathed Phebe, holding it to her breast.

"Apparently it had slid under the desk, and only when I helped the charwoman move my desk to clean did I find it. Anyway, look at the address."

"John Mill in----"

"No, no, the sender address."

"Bristol!" exclaimed Phebe. "Our girl is in Bristol."

"Now hold on, it has been some time since she was here and dropped this, and she may have moved since then."

"But why is there no letter?" asked Phebe.

"Who knows? I remember she kept fiddling with her handbag. As I have told you, she was distraught to the point of mania. Shaking, and so on, so maybe it had fallen out into her bag. In the event, please also recall that I told you I regret having not physically restrained her and placed her in a, well, some place where she could recover from whatever ailed her, but I was not myself then. Unable to function rationally. Too confounded to----"

"Who is John Mill?" asked Phebe.

"How am I to know that? But I desire to find out, though I suspect he is Marie's companion."

"Then," Phebe broke in, "what are we to do?"

"Do? Why I will go and find her, and if, eh, when I do I will bring her home."

"You will abduct her? You will break the law?"

Jonathan gaped at her with inordinate intensity for a moment.

"If you put it that way, yes, I will kidnap her. And while I am at it I will look up this John Mill and have a word with him."

"Oh, gracious Jonathan. You don't say so? I fear you will have more than a word."

"I do say. Our little girl's life is at stake, and I will do anything within my power to save her, and I am of a mind to settle her abductor's hash while I'm at

it."

"Oh, no, pray not! Kill him?"

"Probably not, but you saw how I dealt with those ruffians back during your women's voting gathering. I am never to be underestimated."

"No, but alone you may have to contend with----"

"I will not be alone my dear. I will bring Jack Blevins with me. He's still hanging around here, more than likely drinking up his money until the next voyage."

"Jack, the pirate?"

"I only suspect he was a rover, long ago, but in any case, old as he is, he's rough and tough, and I would trust him with my life."

"How can you be so sure?"

Jonathan winked at her. "A man knows those things."

Phebe picked up Fluffy and sat petting her. Fluffy purred until she noticed Jonathan's intensity, then she growled.

"I swear," said Jonathan, "that cat understands English, and apparently she does not approve of my plans. Whatever the case, she is not amiable. If she were larger I would take her with me."

"She is mellowing."

They sat silently.

Then, "Now are you sure about this undertaking?" asked Phebe querulously.

"I am certain. Allow me to put it to you this way. What in life is more important to us than our daughters? Eh, Eh," Jonathan wagged his finger, "tis the girls, and that's all there is to it. Thus what have I to lose?"

"You forget. What do I have to lose? The answer is, you."

Jonathan pondered for a moment.

"My response is, would you have me do nothing and allow our dear Marie to perish?"

"Never. I was only wondering about your methods." Another silence, after which Phebe murmured lowly, "Yes."

"Excuse me?"

"I agree with your approach. But try to avoid undue trouble."

"There will be no trouble. I'm not going to war. I'm only going on a rescue mission." Jonathan smiled genuinely. "I shall say however, in a sense, I am my own mercenary."

"As you say."

"And Jack, the pirate, as you put it, is a good hand. If I can keep him away from drink."

"Then keep him away."

"I will."

"When will you leave?"

"The day after tomorrow. I have to make sure Jack is available, and"

Jonathan stopped talking and looked at a photograph on the wall, of his little family when they had all been younger and happier. A relic preserving--to the last detail--a time before their daughters had left their nest, and it was in essence all that remained of poor, dear Marie. And to a lesser degree--a far lesser degree--it was all that remained of Rose, though that feeling was more of a

longing to relive her childhood. Jonathan had often pipe-dreamed about going back in time to when the girls were little.

At the railway station in Bristol Jonathan and Jack directed a hansom cab driver to take them as close to the return address on Marie's envelope as possible, and in due course they came to an old, ramshackle, two-level flat house. It did not look like a reputable place.

Jonathan looked at Jack. "Well here we are. I come knocking with only an empty envelope in my hand. Luck."

"Luck," replied Jack dolefully.

Jonathan rapped on the door and was startled at an almost instant response. An old, thin, sloppy-looking lady stood scowling at him.

"And what do you want?" asked she, emphasizing the *you*.

"Oh. I am sorry to trouble you, but I have come from London searching for my daughter, and----"

"She ain't here. No women present."

She tried to close the door, but Jonathan held it.

"But, you see, it was probably a while ago. Her name is Marie, and----"

"Marie! Tall, thin, once beautiful, but now worn and haggard-looking? A small blemish here?" she put her finger to the middle of her forehead.

"That's her!" whooped Jonathan.

"That *was*. The trollop! She slipped out one night without taking care of her rent, that's what she did. Are you here to settle her----"

"When did she leave?"

"Months ago. Maybe a year. I don't care. Good riddance!"

"And you don't know where she went?"

"Of course not. We hardly ever spoke. And if I did know, don't you believe I would have tracked her down and made her cough up her rent? And I ask again, are you here to----?"

Jonathan persisted. "If I took care of her rent would you be able to remember anything about where she went?"

"Hmmm. I do recall something, but first the rent." She held out her hand and stated the amount.

Jonathan found the money, but only held it up. "If you couldn't find her to collect, how will you be able to tell me where she is?"

"First, I have been too bloated on gin to look, and second I admit to not knowing for sure. I only know where she was up until a fortnight ago." She reached for the money but Jonathan pulled it back.

"The location, then the money."

That afternoon Jonathan and Jack found themselves in a market place near the east side of the city. They got out of the cab, paid, and then stood looking about.

"So where's this 'er place?" asked Jack.

"Two-thirty-four----"

"I don't see no two-thirty anything."

They dodged a lumber wagon and took refuge on the sidewalk in the shade of a two-story haberdasher's shop. The area was even dirtier than the streets in London, and the odour bordered on overwhelming, but Jack didn't seem to mind. There were the usual beggars, peddlers, food vendors, and all.

"Give me time to think," said Jonathan.

"Take as long as yuh want," answered Jack, "thinking has always been one of me weaknesses, an' as you're paying through the nose for me time I am in no hurry anyways."

Jonathan had to smile. Jack was still Jack, and he knew he would never take any pay for his help.

After a while a man ambled up near them and set down some kind of apparatus, along with a fair-sized black wooden box. He sat on the box and wiped his forehead with his sleeve, then he turned and gazed back down the sidewalk. He was exceedingly small but he was neither a dwarf nor anything like. He was, Jonathan estimated, about thirty years of age, though because he was so wizened it was hard to tell.

"That chit looks tuh me like he knows the surrounds," suggested Jack.

However as Jonathan was about to make the man's acquaintance along came a tall, exceedingly-thin, consumptive-looking lady pulling a two-wheeled cart with a box atop.

"Bout time," grunted the small man. "Time's money."

The lady stopped and sat on her cart, huffing and puffing. She had long, dark hair and whiter-than-white skin. Her thin face matched her bodily thinness, and her nose was her thinnest feature of all, to where Jonathan wondered how she could breathe at all. But breathe she did, for she had clamped her mouth shut as she cast a look-of-death at her companion, who proceeded to open his black box, take out three white tenpins, and commence juggling them.

Jonathan decided to let them calm themselves before he approached, thus he sat observing the passers by; and a motley lot they were, with the exception of a small number who were conspicuously upper class, and those who passed by in carriages. And as he lingered Jonathan noted out of the corner of his eye Jack concentrating on a grog shop directly across the street.

"We'll have enough to do without that," said Jonathan without turning his head. Jack grunted.

The tall, black-haired lady and the small man finally calmed down, so Jonathan went to them, politely removed his hat, and with a smile he introduced himself as an out-of-towner in need of directions. The man stopped juggling and they looked at Jonathan skeptically.

"Why, I only came to you," said Jonathan, "assuming you are no stranger to the area. That's all. We're from London," he nodded toward Jack, "and we are trying to locate an old friend whom we have lost track of."

"Well, I ain't no tourist guide, I'm an acrobat, and juggler, and and something of a magician, that's what I am."

"I regret troubling you, but as you are a local I wonder if you would be so kind as to tell me where this place is." He handed a scrap of paper to the man.

"Huh." The man grudgingly looked at it. "That's---- It looks kind of familiar to me but I can't rightly recall for sure." He looked up at Jonathan with a glint in his eye.

"I see," said Jonathan. The lady cast him a sour look, then coughed into her handkerchief.

"It's my memory," said the man. "It always fails me at the most inopportune times. Exceedingly aggravating."

The lady kept up her coughing.

"If you are as accomplished at your profession as you are with your gift of wording, you are a wonder. Would a shilling refresh your memory?"

"It may well."

Jonathan took his leather purse from under his waistcoat and pinched out a shilling, which he held out to the man, but the lady snatched it and secreted it under her blouse.

"Well!" huffed the small man. Then he held looked again at the paper. "Down there," he jabbed his thumb behind him, "it's the two-story grey house with the red trim."

Jonathan could not hold back a laugh. "My what a tonic that shilling was."

The heretofore surly man himself could not suppress a chuckle. "Any time you need more directions I'm your man, but don't forget to bring a shillin'!"

Jonathan saluted and returned to Jack. "Money does talk, and it has a language all its own."

"Money an' booze," answered Jack.

"There was no time to get him boozy. Off we go! And I must again ask if you have Billy with you."

"Always. An' as you have your trusty knobstick I feel we are well prepared for come-what-may. Also, sir, as I have no doubt had more experience in such adventures, always stick close to yir quarry, as he might have a gun."

"Good advice."

"An' if you please, allow me to do the hittin'. I knows how to do it where it hurts the most but is least dangerous. We don't wanna get sent up for murder."

"As you say," acknowledged Jonathan.

Shortly they were in front of the grey house.

"I must own to being apprehensive," admitted Jonathan.

"Never you mind," said Jack, "I'll knock an' lead the way. All you have to do is stick close to me."

"I will. Here we go."

They ascended the several steps and Jack knocked. As he was about to knock again the door was opened by middle-aged lady of low degree. She was dressed in a tan, none-too-clean frock. Her dark-grey hair was slightly disheveled and judging by the way she squinted at them her eyesight was not good. She merely stood looking at them.

"Good day ma'am," greeted Jack, tipping his cap ever-so-politely. "We have come from London in search of our friend John Mill. Is he in?"

"John? My, yes, but when did you last see him?" She blinked rapidly at them.

"It has been some time," replied Jack.

"Oh, that would account for it. You not knowing. John is not well. Doing very poorly."

"Oh, dear. But is he well enough for us to see him? We have come a far

distance."

"Gracious. I allow he is, but don't get your hopes up, as he is exceedingly weak and he is never very talkative. Please, do come in."

They followed the austere lady in and Jonathan's first impression was the smell, for it was the smell of death.

"There." The lady indicated two straight wooden chairs.

"I am Joe an' and this is, eh, Phinny. An' you?" inquired Jack with more gentility than Jonathan could have imagined.

"I'm Daisy, John's sister."

"Sister? Oh. I had guessed you were his wife."

"No."

"May I ask, is his wife also here?"

"Wife? He was never married."

"No? And no prospects?" asked Jack.

"There was a friend, but she went away months ago."

Jonathan, whose eyes had become accustomed to the dim hovel, made out a narrow bed on the other side of the room, and there was a figure on the bed.

"I am sorry," said Jonathan, who had been quiet. "Where did she go?"

Daisy shrugged. "Don't know. She just left. Got a couple of letters from her, then nothing."

The figure on the bed stirred.

"But after that, nothing?" asked Jonathan. "No clue as to where she was?"

"None. We wrote to her at her return address, but the letter was undeliverable."

"Do you still have the letter?" inquired Jonathan.

"I'm sorry, no"

Daisy wrang her hands and hung her head. "Her leaving was for the best. He was unkind to her." She nodded toward the bed. "She was, well----" she whispered, "I was afraid he would kill her someday. What a thing to say of your kin? But he never was any good."

Jonathan attempted to rise, but Jack barred his way with one arm.

"How ill is he?" asked Jack.

"Very. He's in a bad way."

"Really none of my business, but what ails him?"

"We don't know. Dr Biggs didn't even know. It's likely consumption and it's affected his brain too."

"You have me sympathy," murmured Jack.

"I appreciate it, but nevermind commiseration, it never did no good. I'm only doing my duty as a sister, nothing more. And," she leaned closer to them, "I shall be glad when he's done and gone."

"May I go to him?" inquired Jonathan.

Daisy waved her hand dismissively and Jonathan approached the bed. A dark, hollow, sickly, mottled face peered up at him without blinking. Jonathan leaned closer and he saw beneath the emaciation a once-handsome countenance. His stomach became uneasy and he backed away. He turned back to Daisy and gasped, "What was her name?"

"Marie."

Jonathan feared he would faint, but he braced himself against a chair.

Marie. He had known all along. He felt the folding stiletto in his pocket--the one he had picked up in Italy as a souvenir--but what good would it do now? A few days, or a week, would do his work for him.

As Jonathan entered their flat and met Phebe she was immediately mindful of his continence. It was reflected in Phebe's, and to a greater degree. She rushed into his arms and fell to sobbing as if she would collapse and not recover. He held her close, and up, and they remained rooted where they were, and he wept too, but quietly. The cuckoo popped out of its chalet and bewailed its condition six times.

Jonathan half-carried his stricken wife to the sofa, and there they held onto each other as if they were awaiting the end of the world; and to them it was tantamount to Armageddon, for nothing could have been worse. Nothing worse; not even their own lives, Jonathan knew, and he was so at-one with Phebe he knew she felt as he did. How could they carry on?

And so they sat, together, fully united, not moving, not speaking, benumbed, until the cuckoo moaned twelve times. Twelve, for the apostles, penetrated Jonathan's consciousness. He shook it off and tried to rouse Phebe, who had apparently fallen into a deep sleep or a stupor. He went to the kitchen and returned with a wet cloth with which to wipe her clammy face, and finally she opened her eyes and began to weep again. He held her and soothed her, and after a while she revived as fully as she was able.

The were silent for a while, then Jonathan gained enough strength to begin their recovery.

"We must carry on," said he. "For Rose, and for Marie. Yes, for Marie, for we know she is alive, and I swear to you here and now; I, we, will find her. I swear it with all my heart. I will not go to my grave without her."

"Forgive me dear Jonathan, but how can you be sure she is alive? I don't mean to be----"

"I know it because I am her father. I am a full-blown realist and not given to nonsense, but I also know this with all my being; we will again hold our darling Marie in our arms."

He looked deeply into her eyes and knew he had reached her. "Do you not feel it as well?"

Phebe wiped her eyes with the backs of her hands. "I believe I do. But I am not a realist to your degree, and I may be given to flights of despair and pessimism. Furthermore I don't understand how you, in your real world, are able to maintain unfounded optimism, and I don't understand your philosophical machinations, therefore I cannot rely on them."

"Not machinations dear Phebes. And I believe you are making too much of my musings, when all they come down to is simple actuality. Oh, no, don't interrupt me; I know what you're thinking. How can I be thus and yet know Marie is alive? And I answer thus, if no other way; she was alive months ago, and why should we assume she is not now? And my other answer is, I, we, mere mortals--despite our better intelligence--retain instincts, and mine is telling me she is yet alive. Don't you have some faith in instinct?"

Phebe looked doubtful. "That sounds divine."

"Then let me tell you of another trick I have up my sleeve. A private detective whom Jack knows. How's that?"

"Private det---- How would a ruffian like Jack know a private detective?"

"I would not characterize him as ruffian. I admit he's an old rum bottle, but you should have seen the way he talked with the villain's sister. Smooth as silk and without his rough sailor's speech. And when he was done he lapsed into his old form of speech, just like that, and when I inquired as to why he normally spoke in such a rough manner he replied that it was just easier. Oh, he has a weakness for drink, but at bottom he's rock solid. And believe me, if he says a detective is good, we may be sure he is good."

Phebe smiled. Weakly, but it was a beginning.

Three days later Jonathan came home after work with splendid news.

"Jack has come up with just the detective. Bob Carp. Lives right here in London, and he has associates, or partners, or whatever they are, all over the country. We will have to provide a photograph of Marie, and a written description of any special facial markings, posture, height, weight, and anything else that might help."

"That is encouraging. Did the detective venture to say how long it will take to find her?" asked Phebe.

Jonathan's face fell, but he recovered. "His indication was only that it could take a considerable time, if I understood Jack correctly. He's hard to follow at times."

"We don't have many photographs of Marie, and I would hate to lose any of them in case; in case the worst happens."

"Ah, don't fret, the detective, eh, Carp, employs an artist who makes fine sketches from the photographs, and he has a knack for rendering them in such a way that enhances their usefulness to the detectives. Highlights some important features and so on. That's all I know. I'll meet detective Carp soon and I'll find out more then."

"All that is propitious," said Phebe.

"It is."

"Oh, and I have some more news. Rose is doing well at her work, but not advancing her position. Men, men, men holding her back."

"I had hoped for better----"

Phebe took his hand and led him to a chair. "Sit! If you will allow me, I will tell you. Rose has begun writing a book!"

"Do tell, a book! What is it about?"

"It's a fictional account of a young lady, much as she, who faces the vicissitudes of life. She didn't go much into it, perhaps because she doesn't yet know, but she did copy off the first part for us." Phebe went to their writing desk and took out some papers. "Here, read it and tell us what you think."

"I'm not a very literary person but----"

"Now Jonathan. Leastways you are an avid and astute reader, and it amounts to the same thing."

He read.

Estelle rose late that morning. Very late. She had been out with friends. Female friends. Not precisely painting the town red, but painting it nonetheless.

She slacked her thirst with a full glass of water, and water had never tasted so good. She drank another half-glassful, then fell into her shabby grey armchair and held her head with both hands. At first all she could remember was some rake about her age sitting face-to-face with her, leering. He hadn't been malicious looking, but he had been flirty and disagreeable to a high degree.

What else? Her friend, Ellen, had been drunker than normal. And her other friend, Bonnie, had made friends with a handsome fellow who had seemed harmless enough. But oh, that was all she could recall, so she crawled back into her bed.

He read on, and when he was finished he said, "I believe our younger daughter, thwarted as she has been as regards rising in the company, will yet prevail. Though she has had no special schooling in writing, she's a natural story teller if this," he waved the paper, "is an indication of what is to come."

"I knew you would be of that opinion."

"I am sure of myself," and he waved the paper again.

Chapter Thirty-nine

Poor Honeysuckle.

Marie was being sought, Rose was a budding author, Phebe was relentless in her women's suffrage activities, and Jonathan's second-best friend (Phebe was his best) Max, was well---- Ha! Maxwell was well! Jonathan ventured he should be the writer, not Rose, though he had to grant that his only writing talent would probably lie in his silliness and eccentricity.

But he was all too mindful of his growing concern regarding the harshness and narrowness of humanity at large. His awareness had been growing for a number of years, and he realized it was not a healthy persuasion. Furthermore, the growing awareness in itself was worrisome. *Harshness and stupidity, ha ha, ho ho; harshness and stupidity, ha ha, ho ho* at times ran through his mind. *Harshness and stupidity, ha ha, ho ho; harshness and* There had been no point in telling Phebe of his obsessions, or whatever he could call them. They had long ago pledged to never withhold things from one another, but this would never be a permanent secret; only a delay, and only if necessary. And if Phebes found out and objected to the delay he could always plead compassion for her peace of mind, as any proper husband was like to show. So, there it was.

Jonathan sat on the bench in front of Silk Fleet Associates. Business was slow, but the squirrel on the roof was busy, as Jonathan knew from the nut it had dropped on his head. Birds tweeted and twittered all about, but Jonathan couldn't distinguish one from another; not even a crow from a robin. Well perhaps not that bad, but---

Few people passed by, but one of the regulars, rain or shine, summer or winter, was the elderly rag-and-bone man named Joseph. He was a pleasant soul with always a cheerful greeting for anyone who returned his best wishes, and he always had a tip of his cap for those who did not.

"And good day to you Mr Fleet," Joseph said as he approached pulling his smallish two-wheel cart. He had always addressed Jonathan as Mr Fleet.

"And to you," returned Jonathan. "How is business today?"

"Middlin' to good, thankey," returned Joseph. That was always his optimistic reply. In addition to rags and bones, he collected bits and pieces of metal, and he and Jonathan had a tacit agreement. Occasionally Jonathan would pretend to pick up a coin from the ground in front of his bench and say, "Why look here, a piece of metal! I almost missed it." And Joseph, always with an equally straight face would respond, "Thankey sir, Oi wouldn't a' seen it meself."

Jonathan found it strangely comforting to go through the act, and he was sure Joseph felt the same. Some sort of mutual self respect, appreciated by

Jonathan all the more for the fact his friend never, ever, expected anything. Never. Joseph was one of the best people Jonathan had ever known, albeit he didn't know much about him. Only that he had a sickly wife, and they had no children on whom to depend. Once Phebe had suggested they do something for Joseph and his wife as a way of helping tide them over in their old age, and Jonathan had agreed. Perhaps a trust fund or some such.

Joseph trundled away, and the street was quiet. But quiet only for a few moments.

"Father! Father!" cried Rose who came running up.

Jonathan was on his feet in less than an instant. "What is it?"

"It's Honeysuckle! Oh, dear, I am at a loss!"

"What's happened?"

"She has drunk something. She's in a coma!"

"Heavens, what has she drunk?"

"Who knows? There was a little blue bottle. Oh, come quickly!"

She seized Jonathan's hand and dragged him along. "What did the sticker on the bottle say?"

"Oh, I don't know. Make haste! She could be dead for all I know."

They ran, dodging pedestrians, dogs, cats, carts, . . . People darted out of their way, children wailed, men cursed and shook their fists, . . .

At last they wheezed up to Rose's door and entered. There, in the middle of the living room floor lay Honeysuckle, on her side, with the bottle in her hand. Jonathan knelt, turned her on her back, and put an ear to her face.

"She's breathing."

He felt her neck for a pulse.

"Praise be! Weak, but regular. Make strong coffee," he ordered.

"Will that----?"

"Hush! Do it!"

He lifted Honeysuckle and placed her in the huge, stuffed, bright-red armchair.

"Honeysuckle, wake up!" He slapped both of her cheeks firmly but she did not respond. "Honey, wake up! How dare you do this to yourself?!"

He grasped her shoulders and shook her, and she moaned ever so softly.

Jonathan turned to Rose. "Have someone run and get Dr Paigne!"

"Dr Pain?"

"Yes. His office is not far away. People will know. Hurry."

"The coffee----"

"Damn the coffee! I'll take care of it. Go."

Then, as Rose went out the door, Jonathan removed the small bottle from Honeysuckle's clenched fist. The only writing on the label was Nervous Tonic, and Fibb's Pharmacy. He threw the bottle aside and vowed to get his hands on Fibb, whoever he was, but back to his patient. He pulled Honeysuckle up by her arms and grabbed her around the waist. Her head lolled sideways and her legs were useless but he compelled her to try to walk. She was light--perhaps only one-hundred ten pounds--and it was easy to keep her moving. Back and forth, back and forth, all the while speaking gently to her. To the window, back to the kitchen, to the window. Once Jonathan stopped to shut off the stove. Back to the window.

"Keep moving, Honey, I won't let you stop. I am in charge now, until the doctor arrives, and I forbid you to let up. Eh, eh, no sagging and giving up. Take deep breaths. Breathe, confound you! Keep breathing!"

And confound Dr Paigne. Where were they?

Despite his light burden Jonathan felt himself tire, but just then Honeysuckle's breath come strong enough for him to feel on his face.

"That's the girl. Keep going. We'll go on together; you and I."

At last Rose returned with the doctor. He was elderly but not yet old, medium height, lean, weathered to the degree where he resembled, thought Jonathan, a sailor, and other than that he was nondescript but for his indescribable look of intelligence.

Dr Paigne threw his hat on the table. "I was treating a young boy who had the croup," said he. "Rose has told me about our young patient." He advanced and patted Jonathan on the shoulder. "You have done well. I do have to say, however, than in cases like hers there isn't a great deal one----" He lowered his voice. "I should say it's----" He held out his fist, first thumb up, then thumb down. "Who knows? Anyway good for you for walking her, and if you want a second opinion I should say coffee would, will, be good for her."

"I wonder what she took?" said Jonathan. "When I get that pharmacist by the neck I will twist him so when he walks he will always be looking backward."

"You won't. Fibbs the chemist is gone. He drank too much of his own medicine a couple of months ago. What did she take? Laudanum I bet."

Rose sat on the sofa crying into her hands.

"Huh," said Jonathan. Then, "Wait, her legs are stiffening! That's the stuff Honey, we'll have you walking on your own before you know it."

"I must be on my way," said Dr Paigne. "Must live up to my reputation. Dr Pain. Nothing more I can do here. Keep her moving for a while longer, then fill her so full of coffee she will have to spend most of her time on the chamber pot."

"Or to relieve herself right where she sits," countered Jonathan sourly.

"Nevertheless," said Dr Paigne as he departed. "Or I shall have to administer a physic."

"Rose, I designate you the master of the chamber pot," declared Jonathan.

"The what?" asked Rose, drying her eyes.

"I charge you with the chamber pot whenever the needs arise."

"But----"

"For now we will place her on the edge of a chair. It may be messy, but it will be the best we can do."

"As you say, but you must stand behind the chair and hold her shoulders."

"Well----"

"Well nothing."

"If needs be then."

Jonathan urged Honeysuckle along faster.

"Reheat the coffee and get out the tube," he ordered. "We'll sit her down again on the sofa and ply her with----"

"Tube? You cannot intend to put a tube down her throat? You----!"

"Compose yourself. I only tried to inject a touch of levity."

"Levity, shmevity! Father, you can be such a vulgar----"

"I cannot deny it. But we'll carry on in spite of my coarseness, and what

have we here? She's beginning to mumble. Mumbling is a positive sign."

Rose, at the stove, retorted, "I never can tell whether or not you are serious."

Jonathan sagged, and his tone changed. "Sorry. Sometimes I can't either. But I am now serious when I say it's often my way of dealing with difficulties. That said, make sure the coffee is strong, for in a few minutes we will ply her with Dr Gorgius' Elixir of Life."

Rose tended to the coffee, Jonathan walked his charge, and the clock ticked. And ticked. And ticked.

When Honeysuckle went rigid and began to speak, even though it was gibberish, Jonathan said, "Here we go." He steered her to the sofa and put her down.

Rose brought a cup of coffee. "Hold her," said she.

After three cups of coffee and a productive session over the chamber pot, Jonathan and Rose agreed Honeysuckle would be safe in her bed.

Back in the living room Jonathan and Rose each sat searching the other's countenance for some indication of, what? Tranquility? It then dawned on Jonathan that anything after what they had been through would be tranquility, or peace, or what some eminent poet would describe better than he could.

Jonathan on the sofa, Rose on the stuffed armchair. They simply regarded at one another. They had nothing left within.

Then Jonathan poured them each a cup of coffee, and they were yet silent as they drank.

"What happened to her?" asked Jonathan.

Rose set her cup on the tea table, but said nothing. Her eyes became moist but she did not cry.

"It must have been something appalling," murmured Jonathan.

"She was violated." She said it simply.

Jonathan choked down his sip of coffee. "Violated? How the devil----?"

"You remember the place we go to? The pub with the back room where women are allowed? We went there, she and I, and a friend named Maggie and a few others, and we were drinking more than usual; more than we should have. I spent most of the evening fending off a drunken-but-harmless rascal, as did Honey, except her gadfly was neither squiffed nor harmless. At last I tired of the whole thing and my stomach hurt, so I asked Maggie to watch after Honey, and I went home."

There was a catch in her voice.

"Very early this morning I was awakened by a unfamiliar noise. I went into the living room to see that Honey had fallen on the floor, and in her hand was the bottle. It was then when she told me what had happened. I panicked and ran for you."

"Had she ever done anything like that before?"

"I'll say not."

"And you have never come across any such elixirs?"

"Never."

"Hmmm. I only inquired because if the bottle had been full she would now be dead."

"Oh! Oh dear. Then I will be on the watch for suspicious medicines, as well as for unusual behavior. Gracious me!"

As weeks passed Rose--who was now at home writing full-time--aided by Maggie, whose conscience bothered her, worked at nursing Honeysuckle back to health; bodily and spiritually. The spiritual nursing was the especially challenging.

"She has regained her physical well-being, but mentally she is as fragile as an empty egg shell," said Rose.

Jonathan sat on a park bench with Rose on his right side and Phebe on his left.

Rose went on. "She fears she has been poisoned."

"Poisoned!" gasped Phebe. "Again?"

"She means pregnant," explained Jonathan.

"Oh dear!" quavered Phebe.

"And you say the debaucher has vanished?" asked Jonathan.

"Yes," replied Rose. "Honey was desperate to find him, and I was unable to convince her he wasn't worth finding, but she insisted. Fortunately enough for her the rat had gone far away. Possibly left the country, but that was all we could find out. So Honey finally gave up, thank goodness; however her concern about bearing a child alone has increased to where she is nearly inconsolable, and I am afraid she may harm herself."

"Then I'm at your service," announced Phebe. "I recall you said Honeysuckle never knew her father and her mother died years ago, and a mother is what she needs. "When do you want me?"

"Oh, bless your heart," sobbed Rose. "Then she will have the best mother ever. Will you be able to come three days a week, in the afternoons when she is at her worst?"

"I will, and any other time you, or she, need me."

"Alas, there is more," quavered Rose. "As I said, she is dominated by the fear she is gravid, and she----"

"Gravid?" Phebe broke in.

"Yes. Pregnant, and she is bound and determined to not have a child."

"Good grief," muttered Jonathan.

"She is already intent on having a termination."

"Never!" exclaimed Phebe. "We will not allow it, will we Jonathan?"

"No, we will not," said he. "We will be her parents one way or another, legal or not."

"But she is of age!" said Rose.

"Never you mind," growled Jonathan, "I have connections. Anyway, one thing at a time. I long-ago learned not to form solutions unless there are problems."

"Yet, is it not prudent to plan ahead?" asked Rose.

"Absolutely, but in this case not too far ahead," said he. "Carrying plans into execution can be difficult, so first let us first see what happens."

"As you say, Father."

Nonetheless, after weeks, it became apparent that the stork would be on its way.

Honeysuckle was inconsolable. Someone had to be with her at all times for fear she might harm herself, and in truth she once tried to finish herself with a kitchen knife before being stopped by Phebe and Rose. Therefore Jonathan had stepped in the next day with strong medicine; the threat to either have her committed to a hospital, or to keep her at home with him and Phebe. He would never have committed her, but the caution sufficed. Still, all were watchful, and Jonathan and Phebe later confided to Rose how they were prepared to place Honeysuckle in a private care home if necessary. That and Honeysuckle's assurances were enough for the time being, and because Rose felt their patient's word was good, things settled down to a dull routine.

After a time Jonathan engaged a robust young lady from across the street, Marigold, to attend when required. Marigold had a pleasant appearance and demeanor, but she was the type who could thrash almost any man in a typical pub.

Honeysuckle's confinement went better than any had expected, and Dr Paine was pleased with her condition, and with her demeanor, which he said was the more important aspect.

Chapter Forty

Rose works on her book.

"She is such a comfort," observed Phebe, speaking of Rose. "What would we do without her?" she asked Jonathan.

"I have no idea. Thank goodness both of our daughters are not missing."

They had just attended an opera house where Jenny Lind had performed two solos, and were walking home. Phebe had been captivated; still she had observed how Lind was not as vibrant as in her earlier years. Jonathan hadn't voiced an opinion since he had not seen any of Lind's early performances, and as far as he knew neither had Phebe. And why had his wife been speaking of Rose practically in the same breath? His best idea was that Jenny Lind had reminded her of Rose. There was little or no resemblance, but, well, no matter.

"She lives out on the edge of town," said Phebe. "Wimbledon."

"Who? Rose?"

"You know who, you jackass." She hit him on his arm. "I would like to see her in person but she must be pestered enough as it is, and I have heard she is high-flown and not overly nice."

The streets seemed darker than usual observed Jonathan, despite the lighting, and he was glad he had brought his heavy stick. They had met several shady-looking characters.

Phebe went on. "She won't let me see any more of her book, no matter how hard I press her."

"Who? Jenny Lind? I didn't know she was writing a book."

Phebe stopped and stamped her foot. "How naughty you are tonight! Simply obnoxious! Are you determined to ruin a perfect evening by being so, so maddening? You see yourself as humorous, but some would only believe you to be unhinged. I don't but----"

"Please accept my apologies," murmured Jonathan. He took her outstretched hand and kissed the back of it. "I am sorry. I'll hush up and comport myself better."

He knew when Phebe had reached one of her limits.

"Very well, or you might find yourself walking alone."

"Well I don't want to do so on streets like these."

As he spoke two ruffians passed by and he prepared to do battle, but they kept moving.

After they had walked some more Jonathan asked, "So what about Rose's book?"

"I have asked her to let me read some of it but she absolutely refuses. She won't even tell me what it's about. Not even a hint. I'm hurt."

"She's insecure. She'll come around."

"Maybe, but I fancy she would let you see it."

They stepped around a cadaverous figure lying in the middle of the walk, presumably intoxicated, but possibly dead.

"He looks a little under the weather," observed Jonathan. "But as to Rose's writing, why me?"

"Because she holds you in greater esteem, and because you're an avid reader."

"Oh, that's not true that she holds me in higher regard. What a thing to say. You are well-enough educated and bright. Don't discredit yourself."

Another drunk approached, and he tried to fling himself upon Phebe, but Jonathan thumped him on the top of his head with his stick, and he tottered away all the worse for it.

Phebe drew in a deep breath, and exhaled. "I should have said she values your literary opinion more, that's all."

"Hmmm."

"I know you will strive to further her writing career, should it become a career," said Phebe. "You appreciate what the girls' lives mean to us. Even poor, dear Marie's, wherever she may be." She muffled a sob. "I didn't want to bring that up, but I couldn't help it. Back to Rose. Will you try?"

"Yes, I will. I confess I am as curious as you, and I apologize for being so contrary, or whatever I was. I'm thus when I'm fretful."

"I should have thought watching an opera would have calmed you."

"I wasn't going to say anything, but I can't tell one singer from another. There, it's out in the open. As far as that goes I can't distinguish a good violin player from a not-so-good one, or any other form as music. I'm a musical booby. I know little or nothing about birds and flowers either."

"Some would ask what you do know about," said Phebe, "however I admire you for the things you do know. Your areas of expertness. Your intellectual strengths. Your----"

"Now you're at it."

"What?"

"Having me on."

"So sorry."

They were getting closer to home.

"So you will ask to see Rose's writing?" asked she.

"I will. Tomorrow."

The next evening Jonathan went to Rose and asked to see her work.

"Father, I durst not. I have only begun, and have no idea of whether or not I will be even a middling writer. Don't ask me. Especially you. Not now."

She said it with such emotion that Jonathan relented within, and he could not proceed along that line.

"Fair enough," said Jonathan. "Spare me, I won't push you. But when you feel ready I presume you'll confide in me."

"I will. But only you, and if you give me any encouragement, then mother. And please don't encourage me if you see I am a disappointing scribbler."

"Good enough. Now don't go into a state, but will you at least tell me, briefly, what your book will be about?"

Rose got up from her chair and went to the stove on the pretense of

preparing tea water. She left off and came back.

"It's about a young lady who is intent on becoming a penwoman. A writer."

"I will be proud of you," assured Jonathan, "whether you succeed or fail, but I feel you will gain your end. And in light of that prophecy from the lips of the Oracle of Literary Opus--that's me--I hereby offer to be one of your proofreaders whenever you wish."

"Dear father, you shall be my only proofreader until, and if, my book is accepted for publication."

She came to him, brushed back his forelock, and kissed him on his forehead.

Then, unexpectedly, she asked, "Have you heard anything of Marie?"

All he could manage was to shake his head.

"Our dear, lost Marie," she sobbed.

While walking home Jonathan was shaken by Rose's query about Marie.

By the time he had reached their front doorstep, though, he had fought off his gloom by focusing on Rose's potential. He had seen her in her youth scribbling away, and if one could tell from those scribbles, and if her talent had persisted, she was sure to succeed.

And Marie. He would find her if it took him until his last breath. His final, ragged, gasping breath, and should it take that long, he would die contented knowing Rose would continue the search.

Chapter Forty-one

Jonathan asks detective Carp to continue the search for Marie. Jonathan meets a short man.

"Ah, good morning Mr Carp," greeted Jonathan. "Good of you to meet me. I know how busy you must be."

He shook hands with the friendly-looking detective. They had met at a pub halfway between their offices where they sat outside on a comfortable bench in the shade.

"And how do you do Mr Gorgius? Reasonably well considering the reason for our relationship? It must be difficult. Believe me I know. In my line of work I have seen everything."

A raw-boned old lady hobbled by holding a young boy's hand. They were apparently related, as Jonathan deduced from their large, similarly-shaped noses.

"I imagine you have," responded Jonathan. "Seen it all. The worst of humanity?"

"Most, but not all. The noble and the touching as well. Ahem."

Detective Carp was not distinctive-appearing in any regard, not young, and his dress was rather shabby, but Jonathan assumed such was his professional guise.

Carp continued. "Too often it's overwhelmingly depressing, but it has its rewards. And, I'm like an old bloodhound that can't quit the trail even when it's ever-more-difficult to run." He laughed softly. "It gets in your blood."

They were silent for a while, and Jonathan pondered how to ask his question; steeling himself.

Then, "Mr Carp, are you to give me depressing news or a message of promise?"

The detective was unmoved. No doubt he had answered such questions innumerable times. He looked down at the ground for a moment, then up at Jonathan.

"Neither, but if pressed I would not lean toward an abundance of hope." He cleared his throat. "We have searched hither and yon, up and down, and all around, and are yet clueless. The only cause for optimism is my associates feeling she has not fled the country. Why do they have that feeling? I dare say, at the, um, fees I charge for our services I am able to employ a number of colleagues, and some have retainers along the ports, none of whom have seen anyone matching your daughter's description. Not to say she couldn't have slipped through, but odds are she has not."

Jonathan tried to maintain his composure; nevertheless he felt his shoulders sag, and something undefinable washed down over his face. He stared at Mr Carp but could not speak. Two dogs began fighting in the street.

Carp got up and chased away the dogs with his stick, then he returned and

stood by the bench with his back to Jonathan, and was quiet. Passers-by ignored them and Jonathan felt alone, isolated from mankind; but yet, and yet, he was thankful Phebe was not there, and he could bear the burden alone. Until he returned home and had to give her the bad news, but then he could soften the blow without being disingenuous.

Minutes ticked by until Carp sat back down and softly asked, "Do you want us to stick with it? I realize I ask despite the fact that we have come up empty-handed, and I couldn't blame you if you wanted us to stop searching. And I must add I do not feel I am in a position to influence you one way or another, simply because despite our best efforts I still don't know any more than you do. I am, I confess, at a loss, as I have been more times than I want to confess. So I leave the decision entirely up to you."

Jonathan tensed. "Please keep on," said he. "I, we, Phebe and I, will never give up on our Marie. Never."

"Alright," responded Mr Carp. He took Jonathan's hand. "You know we will do our best."

"I do know. You are a fine man."

"I doubt that, but if by *fine* you mean conscientious, then I am. And if my work getting me down more and more is any indication, then I own I am."

On the way home Jonathan composed his report to Phebe, who had wanted to accompany him to meet Mr Carp. Now, after the meeting, he admitted to himself she would have been as strong, or stronger, yet part of the way of the world was how the burdens of such adversities invariably fall on men.

Adrift in his thoughts as he was Jonathan nearly bumped into a small man.

Jonathan tipped his hat. "Oh, I apologize, I was preoccupied and should have been paying attention to where I was going."

"I too was absorbed in thought." The almost-elderly, diminutive man tipped his hat. "I beg your pardon."

"Not at all, and may I hope you were not intent on anything distressing?"

"Nothing that cannot be dealt with. And you?"

"Very distressing I am afraid, but we do our best don't we?" Jonathan tried to smile.

The man was about his own age, Jonathan surmised, and he had a kindly appearance, unusual on the streets of London. Possibly due to his stature, kindness was his way of coping.

"We do our best," agreed the man. "But glory be, or rather, you do not look well. Is there any way I may help?"

Jonathan became light-headed. "Is there somewhere I may sit down?"

"Over here." The man lead him to the large front step of an abandoned building.

"There." He deposited Jonathan on the step. "Have you previously had such spells?"

"No. Uff-da."

"Excuse me? Uff-da?"

"Oh, an old Norwegian expression. Nevermind, I'm still more-or-less off balance. I need to rest."

"Do you live nearby?"

"Phebe and I live down there about two-hundred yards. She's my wife."
He pointed.

"Shall I fetch her?"

"Oh, no, no, I'll come around. But thank you, eh, may I ask your name?"

"Edmund. And your name?"

"Jonathan."

"I knew it! You look like a Jonathan."

"Ha! I won't ask right now, but when I feel better I will get to the bottom of how you knew. And in return I am compelled to say resemble a rowdy troublemaker."

"Ha, ha! You could not be further from the truth. I am a seminary student studying to become a Catholic priest. And when I am a priest, even at my age, you will be my first convert."

Jonathan let out a hearty laugh. "You will have your work cut out for you. I have never had any religious faith and I never will. I am a total nonbeliever. No creed whatsoever."

"An agnostic?"

"No, no, a perfect atheist to the extent that I am allergic to holy ghost shops, and to all godly people including priests. It's all drivel."

"What's a holy ghost shop?"

"A church."

"You don't seem to be so allergic to me, who may one day save your immortal soul." Edmund laughed heartily.

"Save my----? Well it doesn't matter since you have yet to become a priest anyway."

Edmund sat down beside Jonathan. "To be serious, pray tell me, right here and now, what ails you."

"Are you practicing ministering even without yet being ordained?"

"No," retorted Edmund. "People don't need to be ordained in order to help other people. Please take me for what I am, and what I am is one who tries to better the world by spreading a little kindness. Now tell me."

"It's my older daughter, Marie, who mysteriously left home years ago, and who"

Jonathan made his story short, and when he had finished he felt empty. He leaned back against the door of the old building and closed his eyes.

"I am sorry," said Edmund.

"Do you have children?"

"Why gracious no. Look at me." Edmund held up his hands. "Who would marry me?"

"I imagine there would be someone----"

"And in any case as a priest I will not be allowed to marry."

"But which came first, you deciding to become a priest, or you giving up on marriage? Chicken or egg?"

For the first time since they had met Edmund seemed baffled.

"Why I never---- I felt I was never to marry, that's all."

"It may not be too late." Jonathan opened his eyes and smirked. "There's still time to quit the seminary and look for some charming lady of your, well, your stature, and to live happily ever after."

"I thank you for not ridiculing me. I know you----"

"No, I'm serious. I live in the real world and I simply feel you should give secular life a chance"

Jonathan's advice resulted in a lengthy conversation which at times became heated. When the conversation ended nothing had been settled, but the two quickly became friends, and Edmund promised to visit Jonathan and Phebe soon.

Chapter Forty-two

Honeysuckle delivers a baby boy, then disappears. Rose takes the baby.

Honeysuckle Banks' time had come. Marigold, her nearby neighbor nurse, went to fetch Dr Paigne, while Phebe scurried about in a dither, doing nothing. Her only presence of mind had been her determination to have another neighbor summon Jonathan. After a while she collected herself sufficiently to put water on the stove, knowing doctors and midwives always required hot water. Then she remembered they also required clean towels, or rags, or some such, so she found some of each and placed them on the table beside Honeysuckle's bed.

Honeysuckle moaned and writhed in the bed.

"Now Honey, try and relax. Aid is on the way, and I am here. You needn't worry."

Honeysuckle gave her a withering glare but said nothing.

Phebe left the bedroom and looked out through the front window, but she saw no one but the usual riffraff, dandies, general passers-by, and an infrequent upper-class lady or gentleman.

After a while Jonathan arrived, but he remained in his chair and was no help at all.

The moaning grew louder and Phebe returned to the bedroom again. As she sat down on the bed and reached for one of Honeysuckle's hands in walked Rose.

"Am I in time?" asked Rose.

"Yes," said her mother.

Rose took Phebe's place. "Hold on Honey, I have never delivered a baby, and I am reluctant to do so now."

"Do you really think it is up to me when the baby comes? That I can *hold on*? If you were in my position you would soon regain your wits. Ohhhhhh! Had you not left me alone in that pub I----"

"Now none of that. We've been all through it too many times already. I thought you were being cared for when I left, and if you go down that road again, and scold me, I will say you were obviously not alone. Do you get my gist? You had *close* company, and furthermore, stewed or not, you must accept some responsibility. There, and that's an end of it."

Honeysuckle mumbled something and pulled the quilt over her head.

"I am so downhearted," whimpered Phebe. "For a great many women this is a blessed event, or at least not a sorrowful one." She began to sob.

Just then the door opened and in ran Marigold, breathless, but she only stopped and gaped, pop-eyed, at Phebe.

"Well?" asked Phebe eyeing her narrowly.

"Oh, he said he will come shortly."

"Who? Saint Nicholas?"

"No, the doctor."

"Shortly? Come shortly? How shortly?" asked Phebe curtly.

Marigold only shrugged.

Phebe folded her hands and looked upward. "Lord, in your infinite mercy, please save me from the humanity you have created. Amen." With that she fell into a chair and closed her eyes.

"Ma'am, is there anything I can do for you?" asked Marigold.

Phebe ever-so-slowly opened her eyes. "Please go in and help Rose tend to Honey until the doctor arrives."

"Tend to her?"

Phebe took a deep breath. "Go!"

At the point of everyone losing hope, came a knock on the door, and without waiting for an answer in strode Dr Paine.

"In there?" He pointed to Honey's bedroom.

"Yes, she----"

He went into the bedroom.

"I am at the end of my wits," sniffed Phebe, and again she sank back and closed her eyes. "What more can possibly misbefall your pitiful wife?" she gasped.

Yet again she clasped her hands and raised them.

"Have you taken leave of your faculties?" asked Jonathan. "You, a pew sitter?" But, seeing her distress he went on, "Oh, my, forgive me! What has happened? And you don't seem too eager to see me. Shall I leave and let you----?"

"No! No, come here and hold me."

Jonathan knelt by her chair and embraced her. After several minutes she had regained some of her inborn composure.

"It has been awful," said Phebe, "simply awful."

"Yes, I know, I was here. Though I wondered if I was in the way."

"Well, I confess I may have--I say *may have*--thought you should have been offering more help, but whether or not I did, I am so relieved to have you now. So relieved."

"As you should be," laughed Jonathan.

"What would become of me without you?"

Jonathan laughed again. "You would carry on with the aid of Rose and Marie, Maxwell, and other friends, and you would be just fine."

"I mean right now, dunderhead!"

"Oh."

"And in the long run, since you bring it up, I would not be just fine! Marie is----"

"Tush! I have told you, I will find Marie and bring her home. Have I ever failed you?"

"No. Nevertheless that does not intimate you will not fail, unless you claim, and can prove, you have occult powers that I and everyone else have not yet seen. For that matter, right here and now, demonstrate one of your special powers. Go on! Put my mind at rest."

Jonathan shrugged. "Now is not the time to wobble. We have a baby on the way."

"We? What would they do without you?"

And with that, in an abrupt turn, they laughed, and Jonathan formed a special memory as a result of having calmed Phebe. Calmed and consoled her as he always had, and always would.

And so they waited, and listened to Honeysuckle's moans and groans, and to Marigold's cries and sobs; and to Dr Paigne's intermittent, gruff remonstrances. They held hands and exchange worried looks, and once Phebe moaned along with Honeysuckle. It would never end, Jonathan said to himself, but when it did he would not eagerly anticipate what came next; Honey's frame of mind. Assuming the birth went well. The clock chimed but Jonathan was too preoccupied to count along as he usually did. And the longer they sat the louder the clock ticked, until it hammered in his head unmercifully, and the only one who could apply that mercy was Honeysuckle herself, but she would not. So on and on the blacksmith hammer fell.

Then silence in the bedroom. More silence. And more.

At length, the cry of a baby, and Marigold came out and beckoned Phebe to come in.

Jonathan wiped his forehead with his shirt sleeve.

The doctor appeared. "All is well," he announced. Then he paused. "Mother and baby have survived a longer-than-usual ordeal."

Jonathan could not help noticing something foreboding in Dr Paigne's countenance.

"You and Phebe must deal with the other on your own."

"The other?"

"The mother's mental state. It's not good. Whenever I have seen her I have wondered about it, but now I only know it is worse. And that's all I know, as I am only an old quack, not a mad-doctor."

"I know full well, and so do you, you are not a quack, so please give me at least some idea of Honey's state?"

"You shall soon find out, so I might as well say she is severely aggrieved to where she will not even hold her newborn. *Take it away*, said she, *it is a product of an evil union*. I couldn't fathom what she meant, and it is none of my affair, however I am sure you know, and I fear you and Phebe are about to share a burden of some kind. I gave her a strong dose of medicine and she will sleep soundly for hours. So, having said more than I should have, I bid you a good day." He departed.

Jonathan moved to his chair. He attempted to calm himself despite the sounds of a sudden disturbance coming from Honey's bedroom. He held onto the arms of his chair, determined not to move. Marigold, in tears, came running out of the room, through the kitchen, and out the front door. Jonathan gripped the chair tighter. What next?

Next out hurried Phebe who went into Rose's bedroom, slamming the door behind her.

What more, nonexistent Lord?, thought Jonathan. *Am I Job, to be persecuted thus?*

As if his living nightmare were real, out came Rose, holding the baby. As if in a trance she moved to a comfortable chair and sat cooing and soothing the newborn child. Jonathan was caught between fleeing to the bedroom and joining

Phebe, or remaining where he was and hearing the worst from Rose. He remained.

At first Rose paid no attention to Jonathan. Her attention was only directed at the infant, who as far as Jonathan could discern was sleeping.

Jonathan coughed, but Rose paid no notice. He coughed again, emphatically, and she looked up.

"Do you intend to speak to me," inquired Jonathan, "or am I to remain in the dark as to what the deuce is going on here?"

"Oh dear, I'm sorry father, only everything has overwhelmed me, as I am sure it has you. This has been a day to remember, and I am afraid the consequences will follow us through life."

"I feared as much, but tell me everything. Hold back nothing. I am strong."

"Indeed you are. Except during births. All in our family are, and I assert that even as regards Marie who will---- Well, here it is; all of it.

Rose told of her and her friends' night out and of Honeysuckle's *misadventure*, as she put it; most of which Jonathan already knew. Then came the shocker.

Rose breathed deeply. "In short, Honeysuckle does not want her baby."

"So cautioned the doctor."

"But now that it is out in the open, what is to be done, and by whom?"

As she spoke Phebe appeared. "I heard that," said she simply. "And I too feared it." She sat down.

Jonathan spoke optimistically. "It may be she will change her mind."

He looked at the others in turn but got no response. "Well?"

"I hold out little hope of that," murmured Rose. "However we must give her some time. Who knows? She is sorely tried. Furthermore I don't know that she will ever forgive me. She said she can no longer bear to stay in my old bedroom. I may never forgive myself, in spite of feeling I did nothing wrong."

Two weeks later when Jonathan and Phebe woke early in the morning, upon hearing nothing in Honeysuckle's room, they discovered she was gone, and they found a note.

Phebe and all,

No matter what I do I can neither forgive my own sins, nor can I find the goodness in my heart to forgive others.

Even worse, I cannot love my child. In my mind he is not mine, but that of a dastardly oppressor who forced himself upon me when I was helpless and vulnerable.

I am sorry to have left such a charge with--or upon--you, but I know not what other course to take. Even though I have no interest in the child, I nonetheless hope he will not go to an orphanage or any other such place.

I do not feel entitled to ask for your encouragement as I embark upon another

life; only perchance a tiny glimmer of understanding and sympathy.

You will never see me again no matter how long I live.

HB

"The 1836 Act is not always followed," replied Jonathan. "As hard as they try they cannot keep up."

Phebe had just asked him about registering Honeysuckle's baby.

"Let us do first things first," said Jonathan, "and we can always attend to paperwork later if need be."

"And baptism?" asked Rose. "If we don't register him how can he be baptized?"

Jonathan considered, but only for a moment. "Do we really desire to have him baptized? Honeysuckle is not religious, so why would we have little Wilfred watered down?"

"I just want to be sure there are no difficulties later in life," said Rose. She had taken Honeysuckle's child as her own.

"As we all do. But again, one thing at a time. The head counters are overtaxed the way it is. And I know a priest who----"

"A priest? You, of all people, know a priest?" interjected Rose.

"He's not a priest yet, and he is, I suspect partly because of personal circumstances, somewhat lax in his principles; or should I say in his outlooks on religion and life, and, well, I believe he could help us if needs must. Now, I don't mean to preach--and that's a poor choice of words--but I feel we should see to the more immediate concern; of what would happen if Honeysuckle should decide to return, now, or in the distant future?"

Phebe and Rose glanced at each other; then Rose said, "I presume we have all thought of that, but, without realizing it, or more candidly, without wanting to face the worst, have avoided considering such a possibility."

They all, standing in the living room, sat down. In Honey's bedroom little Wilfred began to cry softly. Rose had named him Wilfred because, she had later explained, *If not I, who?* And she had gone further, bestowing *Gorgius* on him--with her parent's permissions--as his surname. Why Wilfred? She couldn't say; only that she liked the name.

Then, as usual, Phebe and Rose turned to Jonathan for guidance, and as he had little to offer, he said, "As regards many of life's trials we can only persevere and meet each and every challenge with strength and determination. I know each of us is strong, and we are all determined." He smiled at them through his tears. "One more thing. We have Honeysuckle's letter renouncing claim to her child, and that will hold up well in the event we are called into court."

Chapter Forty-three

Jonathan and Jack again search for Marie. They go to Liverpool and rescue her.

"Jack, you're an original."

"An original what?" asked Jack.

"I meant it as a compliment," said Jonathan.

He and his old sailing friend Jack Blevins were again on the trail of Marie.

"I have, again, offered you a position in Fleet, and again you have refused. Yet every time I need help here you come. I feel so indebted."

"Harrumph! Thankey again sir, an' again I say I ain't the stay-put kind. Tis just chance how I'm a landlubber er'y time you need help, that's all. I say agin, I'll likely die aboard ship an' they'll slip me o'rboard when me time comes, an' I'll be too tough for the fishes to eat, that's wot. So if yuh please, no more o' that. Well, I may come tuh yuh for a pound or two now an' again if that's alright sir."

"It is alright, if only you will quit calling me *sir*."

They had taken the train to Liverpool on the vague report from detective Carp that Marie had been seen there. Carp never revealed his sources, and he had warned Jonathan the chances of the report being accurate were zero to ten percent; so low he had no enthusiasm for going on what he termed a *wild goose chase*, but he had felt obligated to inform his client. Moreover Carp was under the weather, and his man in Liverpool had come down with consumption.

"Tell me agin who Carp said tuh look for."

They were walking along Saint Anne Street.

"Huh. Not much to tell," said Jonathan. "A tall, dark man with a bulbous, red nose. Usually well-dressed in black, and carrying a black stick with a large scarab on the handle."

"What's a scarab?"

"It's a beetle that was sacred to the ancient Egyptians. Long life, or something."

"Huh."

"In reality they are dung beetles. Or were. I guess they still exist though."

"So in a manner of speakin', sir, er, eh, we are on the trail of a shit beetle."

"In a loose manner of speaking," replied Jonathan, looking away to conceal his smile.

"A tall, dark man with a big nose an' a shit stick? Not much tuh go on."

Jonathan said, "Well Mr Carp did allude to a dress shop called Madam Bovary's."

"That's a start."

"We would want more, still how many dung sticks can there be here in Liverpool? And we could even run across Marie herself."

"Right. We'll do our best, an' the big toe on me right foot hurts."

"The big toe on----? What has that to do with anything?"

"When-er me big toe hurts I alays have good luck. I won't go into it now 'cause you mayn't believe me, but for all of me life it's been one a' me omens. Recently I was walking down the street an me toe began acting up, an' sure 'nuff a while later I looked down an' there was a crown. I could go on, but----"

"Please don't, but I pray you're right."

"I'll not go on except to say that if I get the ague I'm really hot on the trail."

They walked on.

"We should start with Madam Bovary," said Jonathan.

"Who's Madam Bovary?"

"She's in a book."

"Ah, well books have alays been me downfall."

"Your downfall?"

"Yes. I read a couple in me younger days an' I got so befuddled I didn't know which way was up."

"I'm sorry to hear it."

"I 'ave Billy with me, an' you 'ave yir knobstick, so let us pay Miss Bovary a visit."

"Jack, do you have children?"

"Not as I know."

"Then it is impossible for you to know how I feel."

"As you say, but I did have a wife once."

"Oh, dear me, I didn't know."

"I told you once."

"Had a wife? Would I be too personal if I asked what happened?"

"Years ago," murmured Jack. "Died of the grippe. T'was horrid, an' slow, an' it 'most took me too. I was sorry it didn't. Never got over it sir. Never, an' never will till me dying day."

"I'm sorry Jack, I----"

Jack waved his hand On with life, such as it is." He slapped Jonathan on his shoulder. "An' I 'ave Tug."

"Tug?"

"Me dog."

"How can you keep a dog, with you off sailing so much of the time?"

"Rhodabelle looks after 'im."

"Aha! I knew you were up to something!"

"Now don't get any ideas sir, she is an old lady an' our feelings are strictly plutonic."

"Platonic?"

"Indeed."

"As you say."

"I do say. Now let's get back to business."

They located the dress shop, an attractive narrow two-story building displaying what Jonathan guessed were the latest fashions in dress in the windows.

Jack mumbled something.

"Excuse me?" asked Jonathan.

"Places like this are out of me line Mr Gorgeous."

"Gorgius. There's a difference. Um, yes, out of my line also. Let me see." He thought for a minute. "Ah, I have it!" He took Jack aside. "We find an comely, well-dressed lady whom we can persuade--inveigle if need be--into going in and purchasing a dress. While there she can ask if they know her long-lost *sister*, Marie, who may be going by another name, and so on. We'll give her Marie's picture to show, and make sure to tell our agent to present herself as mild, innocent, and only interested in her poor, dear sister."

"That may take some doin'."

"And I am the very one to do it," smiled Jonathan. "I have always had a way with women. Stand over there and watch."

Jonathan put on his best face and looked for a presentable lady who resembled Marie.

The first one to come along cast him a dark look and avoided him.

He approached a second one and tipped his hat. "I bid you a good morning miss, I am from out of town and I wonder if----" She tried to bash him over his head with her handbag.

Jonathan looked at Jack, then at the bobby on the corner who was turning his attention to him.

A third young lady approached, and Jonathan presented himself. To his surprise she stopped and smiled at him, and after he had explained his situation she agreed to help him. He gave her some money with which to purchase a dress, explained about his daughter--her *sister*--the tall, dark man with the big nose, and all else. In she went.

"I don't expect much," Jonathan said. He and Jack were standing off to the side of the shop, out of the way. He glanced in the bobby's direction, but the young man was busy shooing off an overly-raucus street vendor.

"My toe aches worse than ever," said Jack.

"Toe my ass."

"Well I may say, I 'ave often been called a *Jack* of all trades."

Again Jonathan was flummoxed; nevertheless then was not the time to question his eccentric companion as to what he could possibly have meant.

They remained silent. All sorts of people passed by. Dogs, cats, and other creatures popped up and disappeared. Birds came and went. A poor imbecile presented himself and Jonathan gave him several coins. A poorly-attired young man walked slowly by playing a flute, to no apparent purpose. And he and Jack were silent.

The young lady would never come out.

"She'll never come out," grumbled Jack.

"If my similar experiences with Phebe are any indications we will be here a while longer."

For a long while, nothing.

Then out popped Jill, their accomplice, smiling and carrying a parcel.

"Thank you for this dress," said she, "and I hope I have earned it."

She handed Jonathan a paper and went merrily on her way. Jonathan and Jack both tipped their hats.

"What is it?" asked Jack.

"It's an address for a tall, dark man with a big nose. Off we go."

"Me toe is never mistaken."

"Jack, you are something."

Jonathan heard a moan, then he realized it was his.

"Steady sir, you've 'ad a severe blow tuh the head."

The throbbing was intense. Jonathan moaned, long and low. Then, "Ohh. Don't call me sir."

"You didn't follow orders. When we are aboard ship the captain rules the roost, an' when we're about town you outrank me, but when we are on a mission like this I'm the captain an' you are the swab. How many times 'ave I told yuh that? Yuh pushed in front a' me, an' now look at yuh."

"Ohhh. What happened?"

"Yuh took after the big-nose man an' chased 'im here into the bedroom an' he hammered you on the head with a club. Now, let's sit you up against the wall."

He sat Jonathan up.

"There's a cut on yir head," said Jack.

He drew a bottle from somewhere, poured a few drops of the contents on the cut, and wiped it with his filthy handkerchief.

"Owww!"

"Steady, swabby," said Jack, "tis only rotgut whiskey."

"Which I would prefer to drink rather than----"

"Yuh can do both sir. Here."

"No, thanks. Oh mercy."

"Not to push too 'ard, sir, but as soon as yuh are able we have some things tuh attend."

"Give me a moment more. Where is my assailant?"

"In that there closet." Jack jabbed his thumb back over his shoulder and his left eyelid drooped.

"What if he wakes up?"

"He ain't gonna wake up."

"You mean----?"

"I brought me knife just in case."

"You killed----?"

"I shut him up for life. Beyond which I ain't sayin' any more, an' I never will, an' we will never speak of it again. I ain't eager to face the hangman an' dance upon nothin'."

Jonathan sagged, and held his head in both hands.

"Fine, but my last word on it is," Jonathan whispered, "you would make a good assassin."

"Never without good cause. Anyway, when yuh can, go to the bed," said Jack.

After a few minutes Jonathan leaned sideways, and on his hands and knees he crawled to the bed. There, under an unclean blanket, lay Marie.

"Marie! Is it you? My darling girl!"

She grasped his hands and they wept. She was thin and pale, but not beyond restoration he thought.

"I knew you would come, father. Oh how I have waited and hoped."

"I am not devout, but I see it as a miracle," said Jonathan. "A miracle if

ever there was one."

Marie sat up as best she could. "But first I will tell you something of which we shall never speak again."

She paused and collected herself.

"I have been terribly ill used in ways that----"

"In what----?"

"In ways no father--no matter how high or how low--would want to hear," continued Marie. "Such as that I will never be able to have children, how my general health may never be good, and on, and on. But I can't and won't--and I surely needn't--go into further details. Therefore that is why I am telling you now, for the first and only time." She raised her hand to silence him. "However I have no doubt I will be able to begin a new life, but only by completely repudiating the old one. If you believe in redemption please let me come home. If not, leave me now."

"Leave you? Never! Your mother and I have dreamed of this day ever since you left home, and we will neither leave you, nor will we ever let you leave again, even if we must put you under lock and key!"

They held one another and wept again.

"I beg yir pardon," said Jack, "but we must leave now."

He gently brought Jonathan to his feet, then he threw aside Marie's blanket and took her in his arms.

"If we can get around a few corners I imagine we will be safe," said Jonathan as he struggled to keep up.

As they walked people stared, and now and again Jack said, "Too long in the pub," which elicited smiles and titters.

A half-dozen turns and two side streets away Jonathan hailed a cab.

Chapter Forty-four

Nursing Marie back to health.

When Jonathan and Jack entered the front door carrying Marie, Phebe took one look and collapsed. While Jack carried the found daughter into the bedroom where she had reposed as a child, Jonathan knelt by his wife. But as happens only seldom and fortuitously in life--as usual without knocking--in strode Rose who looked down, saw her parents, and shrieked.

"In there, in there!" shouted Jonathan, indicating the girls' old bedroom. "Now! Don't stand there looking at us. Go!"

Rose staggered toward the bedroom as ordered, and when she was inside Jonathan heard another shriek, louder than her first and with a different tone, then all was quiet.

Jonathan lifted Phebe and carried her into their bedroom. As he laid her down on their bed she moaned softly and her eyelids quivered.

"Phebes," said he, "remain still. Marie is home at last."

At that Phebe opened her eyes. "Home? Did I hear you right? Our Marie is home at last?"

"Yes. Home and in her own bed again. Rose and Jack are with her."

"Is she----? Is she well?"

"As well as can be expected after her years of, eh, dissipation, but I'll tell you all about it when we are better. In the meantime be assured it is my belief that despite her present condition she may be restored to good health both physically and mentally."

"I must see her." Phebe struggled to get up.

"Not now. I'll go and thank Jack, and after he leaves Rose will clean up her sister, then we will let her rest."

"But----"

"No buts about it. Close your eyes again and rest, and I promise you may see your dear Marie this evening when she is better."

Phebe assented, and Jonathan went to Marie's room, then he followed Jack out the front door, thanked him several more times, paid him in spite of his protests; then he went and fetched Marigold, their close neighbor who had nursed Honeysuckle.

Leaving Rose and Marigold to care for Marie, Jonathan fell into his armchair intending to sit for only a moment. However moments became minutes, and he was awakened by Phebe who was calling for him.

"I don't feel right," said she. "I feel like I did that time I had brain fever or----"

"It wasn't brain fever----"

"Well and good, but it could just as well have been. Quit interrupting me. I am telling you *I do not feel good*. Is that beyond your comprehension Mr

Gorgius?"

"No. But don't unravel. If you grow worse I'll fetch a doctor, but for now I can see you are getting better, otherwise you would refrain from barking at me so. Barking is a good sign."

She sputtered incoherently, but then broke out laughing. "Fie on you; you always get the better of me, and the worst of it is how you make me laugh when I don't want to!"

"Woof! I should have been a doctor."

"You missed your calling. You should have been a circus clown, or a buffoon. Or a tinker."

"Now, now."

That evening Jonathan dismissed Marigold and allowed Phebe to see Marie.

Upon entering the dimly-lighted bedroom Phebe approached the bed without seeing. Then as her eyes grew accustomed to the gloom she saw the full extent of her daughter's condition and she was appalled and unable to control herself at the sight of Marie's shrunken frame, pale face, sunken eyes, disheveled hair, and generally languid appearance. She lurched forward and sprawled onto the bed beside the apparition she scarcely recognized, and there she lay, sobbing.

Jonathan moved closer to the bed but Rose stepped in front of him and sat near her mother with one hand on her and the other on her sister.

Then, to everyone's surprise, Marie spoke in a firm and unwavering voice.

"Please contain yourselves lest I too give in to weeping and wailing. Have mercy! I feel as frail as I must appear to you, however with some help I have no doubt I will be like new, given enough time and patience. So please, will you not grant me more composure? And can you not recognize how I have, despite my physical decline, retained my full faculties? The best you can do now is to leave off carrying on so."

The were all taken aback, and they attempted to try and restrain their emotions. They were successful to a point.

Jonathan, to his surprise, was the least successful and he found it necessary to withdraw from the room. Sometimes women are stronger than men, and in his case more often than he liked. He went outside and sat on the stool he had placed in front of their place. Only then did he notice the extent to which his head was reeling, and a curious longing came to mind; he longed for a good, strong swig of whisky. Or two. Or even of gin. And he didn't even drink, except in emergencies. Oh, his head.

A familiar vagrant to whom Jonathan was in the habit of giving coins stopped expectantly, but as his benefactor's condition was obvious, he shuffled on.

When he had recovered sufficiently Jonathan's first and obvious thought was wonderment at Marie's wayward life. Where she had been, what she had done, but above all, why she had left? But they had promised not to ask. And again, why had she left home? Had not he and Phebe provided her a more-than-adequate childhood? What had they done wrong? The guilt had been with him throughout all the years of her absence, haunting and hounding him every day

and many nights, and it had exacted a toll on him, and on Phebe. His only solace had been work.

Phebe came out and sat on the stool beside him. "How are you faring?"

"As best I can." Perhaps he had exaggerated his condition. "She is back and that's what matters. But you? You and Rose have been in there bearing the heaviest burden."

"No more than you, each in our won way."

"How is she?"

"Better than expected I suppose, after all she has been through."

"Oh, thank goodness." Jonathan took her hand and they leaned sideways on each other. "All the same, I have been sitting here worrying about when we ask her why she left, and about what she has been doing all of these years."

"As have I."

"And I have to remind myself, over-and-over, that we promised not to ask. Why she left is, in a way, the foremost on my mind. The guilt eats away at me. How did we fail her? What----?"

"As do I with the guilt," said Jonathan, "but we will sort it eventually. Give her time, and when she is ready perhaps she will tell us without our asking, and we shall get to the bottom of it all, and if there are amends to be made we will make them as best we can. In the meantime we shall spare nothing in order to restore her bodily health."

"I see improvement already," murmured Phebe.

"No one would fault you for seeing improvement, even if it weren't there."

"Do you mean to insinuate I am flighty?" Her look was severe.

"Flighty? No, decidedly not. I only meant to say----"

"Flighty. Here you are sitting outside while we are inside doing our utmost to save her, and you call me *flighty*?"

"Now Phebes, let's not quarrel. We have enough to occupy ourselves without squabbling. The last thing we need is our own *Punch and Judy* show out here in public."

The scrubby vagrant returned and Jonathan gave him a few coins, at which he touched his cap and wobbled on down the street.

A week after Marie's return Jonathan and Phebe agreed it was time to have a talk with her. She was still mostly bedridden even though she was able to walk on her own and sit in the living room occasionally.

Jonathan sat on a bedroom chair, and Phebe placed herself by Marie on the bed.

Phebe took Marie's hand and began. "We wanted to ask about your life away from us. Where you have been and what you have been doing. But we shan't."

Marie withdrew her hand from her mother's and turned her head to the wall. She was silent for a minute, then she turned back.

"I have feared you would ask me that, and as I have lain here I have considered how I would respond if you did."

Jonathan noticed Phebe start ever so slightly. "And how would you have responded?"

"I would not have."

Phebe shrank back ever so imperceptibly.

"Oh, dearest mother, and dearest father, do not take it in such a way. It has nothing to do with you. It's me, don't you see? I have lived a miserable, degenerate, abominable life; as odious as I am, and I never will be able to relate it to you. Any of it. I have been abused, taken advantage of, debauched and defiled--partly by my own doing--beyond words to describe. Indeed my life beggars description. To spare you, and myself, I will never speak of it, and if possible I would erase it from my mind. I know I can't, nevertheless I will try, and in time I may ameliorate it somewhat. So I beg of you, to the point of knowing I must again leave if pressed too hard, don't ask. Yes, to such resort, it is so distressing to me. I plead with you, will you accept that?"

Phebe had fallen to her knees with her head on the bed. "Yes, we will, anything, only don't leave us again. But----"

"No *but*s," said Marie firmly. "It is either or. Either you agree or you do not. And understand, if you do not I will be gone, and I will be lost. I am already flawed to such a degree."

"We agree," said Jonathan. "We agree, and that's that."

"Oh, thank you," sobbed Marie. "You may not fully know it now, but you have saved my life."

"And you ours," replied Jonathan. "Still I cannot resist saying when you came to me in my office and I gave you money, I should have instead restrained you and put you in chains if necessary."

"Kidnaped me?"

"If that's what you choose to call it."

"Wouldn't you have gone to gaol?"

"To the pokey for saving my own child? Hardly."

"I wish you had held me."

"And now I do believe it is tea time." He stood and they helped Marie out of the bedroom. But when they were sitting for tea Jonathan had a better idea. "Forget tea. It is an occasion for wine, and I have some left over from my sailing days."

They drank wine, then more wine, as they worked at easing their tensions. Jonathan could discern the improvements in his daughter's entire aspect, due to both time and the wine. He was also sure those improvements were appreciated by Phebe.

"To better times," toasted Jonathan. "Let sleeping dogs lie, and all that."

And to improve their joviality in strode Rose. "I will fain join you in your celebration!"

"Please do so Miss Shakespeare," giggled Phebe.

"Well, I am a writer, but alas, not up to Shakespeare's level." She kissed Marie and then sat beside her. "Am I to have any fruit of the vine, or am I to be a teetotaler?"

"Help yourself," said Jonathan, "But try to control yourself."

"As you all have," laughed Marie.

As Rose poured Jonathan again calculated his ulterior aim; inquiring not about Marie's past, rather why she had forsaken them in the first place? If he was tactful enough and assured her he would not attempt again to visit her past, surely she couldn't be offended. It had not been his intent to ask her, but only as

the wine had taken effect had he hatched his little plan. All-in-all though, a twinge of guilt nettled him, and he wanted to avoid vexing her and having his well-meaning maneuver cast back in his face.

So, after a tiny bit more wine, Jonathan took a long, deep breath, and began.

"What a happy turn of events," said he, "all together again just like old times. How could we be happier? It could almost be too good to be true. Oh, and allow me to let Rose in on our little agreement. We have agreed with Marie that we will never delve into her past. You will agree to that won't you?"

"Past?" said Rose. "Oh, if it is what she wants," she said addressing Marie. "I will never."

Marie thanked her with an inclination of her head.

Then Jonathan approached what he feared could precipitate a crisis, but he had to know.

"My dear little Marie," he began, but he stopped, seeing the unusual look Phebe was giving him. But too late now. "Not to revisit your past. No, however if you will ease my mind, mine and your mother's, given the worry we have endured during your absence, it would be fair of us to ask--not about your past, certainly--why you left us. Was it us? Something we had done, or a succession of injuries? The not-knowing has haunted us to the point of madness and frenzy at times. If it was our doing for mercy sake tell us. Even knowing we had failed you would be better than our state of ignorance as to the cause or causes which may have been our fault."

Marie's jaw dropped and she spilled her glass of wine.

"You?" said she. "How could you have ever thought that? Oh, dear lord no! It was never you. Oh, I am so ashamed."

"But what else could we have thought?" put in Phebe. "You, leaving without a word, and we not receiving even a note? What did you expect? How else would we or any other parents have reacted? Marie, we will never go into your hidden past, but you owe us this. To know why."

Marie collapsed to the floor and crawled to her mother as would a supplicant approach a divine higher being. She put her head in Phebe's lap and wept like a small child. And there they endured for many minutes. Throughout, Jonathan and Rose were still, and for him time slowed to where he looked at the clock in order to assure himself he was not somehow afflicted.

Rose approached him. "I must leave," whispered she. "I've left little Wilfred with a keeper."

"Go."

Virtually alone, Jonathan returned to looming prospect of settling once and for all the reason why Marie had left. He and Phebe had held firm on burying Marie's past, however he could never disregard her cruel departure. Even if she had not seen it as cruel, or had not intended it to be, cruel it had been.

At last Marie and Phebe wiped their tears and regained their senses, as Jonathan construed it. He allowed them more time to recover.

Then, "Now, dearest Marie, if your mother and I are to have any peace throughout whatever time we have left on this earth, we must know why you left us. We are entitled to that."

He half expected an outburst, but there was none. Marie merely sat

looking back and forth at them.

Then, "Yes, you are." She sat on the floor wringing her hands. "First, as you must know, I have always been unique, and in some ways not favorably."

"Well, we----" Phebe began.

"Often overly tenacious. Headstrong, if you will." She paused. "Father, do you remember how you used to forbid me from seeing Tommy Smith?"

"Yes."

"How he was nothing but trouble?"

"Yes."

"Well, I fell in love with him. Simply put, that's all there was to it. I was deeply in love with him, and he meant the world to me."

"More than us?" interrupted Phebe.

"Yes, I am ashamed to say, though it's not a fair comparison, and being so young I now know I really didn't see it clearly. Oh, I was hard-headed, and I can only ask for your forgiveness."

"You have it," blubbered Phebe.

"Yes you do," added Jonathan.

"Oh bless you!" cried Marie, and she broke down in near hysterics. When she had recovered herself she resumed. "So there I was, and away we went. Do you assume I am going to say everything was rosy, especially at first. No. It was abominable from the start, and it got worse. Tommy, who had enthralled me, became a monster. I should say, showed his true colors. Only then did I learn he had been in prison, though he would not tell why. It must have been serious because he had been in for two years. And it was only the beginning. Verbal abuse, then physical abuse, and eventually, if you can imagine, worse."

She suddenly turned surprisingly imperturbable, then went on.

"After a year of the unspeakable I slipped away one night, and never saw or heard a thing about him for years, until I found out he was deceased. Killed in a fight."

"Why didn't you come home?" asked Phebe.

"Shame."

"We would have----"

"Shame, and to add to it, it came into my head I was to have a child."

"We still would have----"

"Nevertheless," said Marie.

"And, and, I hesitate to ask, were you?" asked Jonathan.

"Yes, but I suffered a miscarriage."

Jonathan thought, *Praise be!*

"And after that?" asked Phebe.

Marie blanched, but did not falter. "The rest is easily told. Men, poverty, debauchery, illness, filth, So there you have it. And, as we agreed, no more. Shall I leave now?"

"Leave?" cried Jonathan and Phebe in unison. "Not on your life will you leave!" thundered Jonathan. "Even if we have to chain you to your bed."

"You needn't do that father."

"Well, to your bed at Rose's then, for she wants you to live with her."

Chapter Forty-five

Rose's book is published. Concern for Marie.

There was a knock at the door. Not Rose, who never knocked. But it was she, and she entered with an exceptionally bright smile.

"How does it feel to be the parents of a famous author?" she asked.

Jonathan and Phebe, at the kitchen table over breakfast, stared at her.

Jonathan put down his cup. "Famous? I am not in the least caught off guard by your success, but I do marvel at your sudden fame."

"Oh, I had to throw *fame* at you so I could see your reaction. The fame will come later." She sat down. "Have you no confidence in me?"

"Yes, but tell us the real----" Phebe began.

"The company I work for will publish my book, and not in installments, but in its entirety. Not under a male pseudonym either. My real name!"

Phebe clapped her hands. "How wonderful! After all this time."

Rose grew serious. "I must admit they liked my work very much; nonetheless they are not optimistic about it becoming popular."

"Indeed?" said Phebe, "Whyever not?"

"In spite of all of your, and others', efforts promoting women's equality, and oh, all the rest; blabber, blabber, blabber. I was born too soon. A century from now my opportunities would have been better. Could not you and father deferred having children?"

"Hmmm," said Jonathan, "I see why you are such a creative writer."

"Ha! Creative? Or am I just off my rails?"

"Both," said he, and they all enjoyed a laugh.

"I'll throw out the coffee," said Phebe, "this is a time for tea."

"Tea?" said Jonathan. "First thing in the morning? It will curdle our innards."

Rose laughed. "Well worth it. Put on the pot, Phebes!" She laughed again. She had never called her mother that.

They celebrated, and joked, and laughed on until they were in happy tears.

Then, after they had quieted down, Jonathan asked, "How is Marie?"

The abrupt change took Rose by surprise, and she merely stared at her father.

"Oh, don't think I am prying or using you as a go-between. Never. I would not do that, but as a parent I will try to look out for you and Marie until my dying breath, that's all. So if she has confided in you privately, I would never ask you to break a confidence not meant for us to hear, then----"

"Goodness no, not prying or anything of the sort. In any case there is nothing to tell. At least, I mean, anything of significance in the wise of your question. No, she is occupied in improving her health. Physical health I believe, and the other will only come later. And about the *other* she says very little."

"Very little," murmured Jonathan mostly to himself.

Rose went on. "The *other*. Hmm. If she says anything of her *blighted future* as she puts it, it isn't much. She has expressed concern about her limited education, her lost attractiveness, and most of all how her reputation might dog her if it gets out to anyone who knows her. She's downright gloomy, and I can't blame her. It's hard to see a bright future in her life, but maybe her somber mood is touching me."

"Is she too heavy a burden on you?" asked Phebe.

"Oh, no, I would do anything for her. It's only that I fret almost as much as does she. Her future and all. Mostly about when she is able to be out and about with nothing to do."

"I'll put her to work in the office."

They both jerked straighter in their chairs. "You will do what?" asked Phebe.

"It's obvious, Phebe-weeby, if she has nothing in her life she will succumb to physical or mental illness, therefore we must give her something more to live for. She'll start at the bottom and learn the ropes, and I'll pile so much work on her she won't have time for the past, self-pity, and all. She'll get up in the morning, moil and toil all day, crawl in bed at night, then rise the next morning and do it all over again. And throughout I will show my appreciation for how well she is doing. Ha! So there."

"You mean to say you will patronizer her?" asked Phebe with more than a hint of disapproval.

"Yes, and I don't view it as patronizing; more like therapy, and you two should regard it so as well. It's the very thing, don't you see?"

Rose frowned, but said, "Yes, I do see, and you may be right, although I would rather you go easy on the *show appreciation* approach. She is very intelligent and any attempt by you to lay it on thick will bounce back and bite you, and she will be worse off than ever; take my word."

"Yes, I see. You are almost as sensible as your mother, and obviously more than I. I will proceed with utmost discretion."

"I know you will."

"Therefore when we, mostly you, feel Marie is able, I will spring the trap."

"Oh, mercy, father, how you do overstate!"

"Yes you do," chimed in Phebe. "It would behoove you to remember, your age. No longer nineteen years old."

"I was merely saying it in jest. Or, more of a figure of speech."

"Well that's the rub when coming from you; we never know. You need to learn to control yourself. I now command you to control yourself. Your speech I mean. Your actions are commendable, and I do commend them, but your speech is often bombastic. Please tone down your, um, your tone."

Jonathan felt his face redden. "I will, I promise. I had no idea I was so annoying. And so young, I cannot help but add. Ha!"

Part IV

Chapter Forty-six

Time passes. Decline. Edmund comforts Jonathan.

Jonathan saw himself as a singular embodiment of the ancient Roman empire; specifically during its decline. He had recently read Gibbon's *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*.

And as was often the case his innate oracle piped up. *Tis not as bad as all that. Carry on, and . . . !*

"What did you say?" asked Phebe from her place on the sofa.

"Nothing."

"You said something about carrying on."

"Oh. I must have dozed off."

"Or I am hearing things. I do so sometimes."

"Never mind. We all do." Jonathan had been staying home more because of her condition. "I was just saying to Maxwell the other day----" But she had fallen asleep already.

Rose and Marie came when they could, as did Rose's adopted child, Wilfred, who was old enough to keep watch when he was not in school.

Wilfred was a delightful lad, loved by all in the family and liked in school. Rose had nurtured him better than anyone else could have. Well-formed, sandy-haired, blue-eyed, vigorous but not unruly, and--as was plain to see--quick of mind. And compassionate, all the more now with his beloved grandmother.

Phebe's affliction was the same as had tormented her throughout the latter part of her lifetime, and--while it had not occurred frequently; only every ten years or so--it had now struck harder than ever. Only a miracle, mused Jonathan, would deliver her. He had never believed in miracles, nor had Marie and Rose, thus they had sunk into mutual despair. The light of their lives was being extinguished, and how would they carry on without her?

Jonathan's confidence ranged, from day to day, from low to high. One day--a low day--he ran into Edmund, the exceedingly small man who had by now achieved priesthood. Over the years they had become fast friends.

"What a coincidence," said Edmund, "I had heard you and your family are going through a trying time."

"We are. Come along, we'll sit under this tree." He led Edmund to an ash tree. "I'm afraid Phebe may not pull through this time. She is evermore weak of body and spirit. I don't mean spirit in the way you do," he smiled wanly, "I mean weak of mind, and what is so dispiriting is how rapidly she is going downhill."

They watched a squirrel scurry about doing whatever they do at that time of year.

"I will say a prayer for Phebe tonight," said Edmund. "Whether or not you want me to."

"Oh, I don't mind. Can't do any harm."

"I have never heard of prayers doing harm, but let me confess to you how, the older I get the less faith I have in prayer. And looking back, I own up to never having had much, or any, faith in the first place. It just seems the universe goes on regardless." He looked searchingly at Jonathan. "What? You're not going to go into a lecture about religion, prayer, superstition, reality, and the usual?"

"No. I'm sorry for having done so in the past, but now there's none of that left in me."

"Oh, dear."

"And at the risk of being self-centered, I feel hollow inside, and I can't imagine how I can go on without her. In so many ways she has been the strong half of our marriage and I have been the tottery one. Oh, I know, everyone dies, others live on alone, many people have it worse. I'm sure in your line you've heard it all and more. Yet when you're in my position all you can do is dwell on yourself."

"I understand perfectly."

"But Edmund, enough about me. What about you? A degree of wavering on your part as regards religious faith? Are you managing financially. How is your health? Are you married yet?"

"Lord have pity on me! Save me from this barbarian. One thing at a time. Yes, sometimes I have strong doubts--to the point of abandoning my calling--but I always come around to right thinking. Financially I am secure. My health is good, if not excellent. And no, I am not married. Albeit there is someone I have been seeing."

"Aha, I knew it!"

"She is *of my stature* as you always kindly put it, and I would say to anyone she verges on beautiful. More important, she is an answer to my prayers. So there you have it, and do what you will with it."

"Good for you Edmund! And am I to believe we will be invited to the wedding?" Jonathan paused and grew downcast. "Well at least I would like to attend even if Phebe cannot."

"Very well, if it comes to a wedding. She is a splendid lady of high degree and I hope you will soon make her acquaintance. You and Phebe when she----"

"We should like to. When Phebes comes around. Thank you."

Chapter Forty-seven

Phebe departed. Phillip helps. Jonathan is transformed.

Jonathan could not bear to live without Phebe, but live he must because of Marie, Rose, and Wilfred. Notwithstanding his worldly obligations to them, his metaphysical life had ended. To put it bluntly, and as he had told someone, he was a straw man. A mechanical man with only one ability; caring for his family without infringing or being a burden on them. Maxwell ran the firm and did as well or better than he himself had.

Living alone in his flat had been unbearable so Jonathan had invited Rose, Wilfred, and Marie to move in, which they were delighted to do. When they were settled it was a tight squeeze, but they managed. Eventually, however, Jonathan knew it was time for him and Marie to move out, and it did not take him long to find a new home. Rather, an old home, and unique, for it did not start out as a home at all; instead an old, brick, three-story storage building. It was conveniently near his former flat where Rose still lived; and near the Fleet office.

Much work had to be done. Jonathan had the entire first level remodeled into storage rooms and maid's quarters, the second level into Marie's accommodations, and the top, commodious level for his own use. The cleaning and structural repairs alone took months, then the workers began at the first floor and worked their way up. As they worked Marie planned her rooms and he his. His would include a drawing room, a sitting room, a dining room, bedrooms, and a private room which no one else was allowed; and, as a special enhancement, a balcony.

In time Jonathan became more and more withdrawn, and the turn of mind agreed with him. A simultaneous and similar change had descended upon Marie, who also became more reclusive.

He had abandoned all expectation of Rose getting married, but he had taken for granted that Marie would. Why? Only the dim notion she would. Furthermore he had strongly urged her to take a position at Fleet, but she had demurred.

Well, well, what strange girls he and Phebe had introduced to the world.

Jonathan found that the world passed by more slowly than he had anticipated, thus he was torn between indifference as regards death, and his will to live for his small family. On average his see-saw of emotions teetered equally to each side.

One day Marie came upstairs and ushered in Jonathan's friend, relation,

doctor, and psychiatrist, Phillip.

"My dear friend Dr Green," greeted Jonathan. "Do come in and sit down."

They greeted each other warmly.

"And my friend Mr Gorgius. Possibly my best friend as I don't have an abundance of them," laughed Phillip.

They bantered in that vein for a while longer and Jonathan felt it did them both good.

"I say old fellow, how have you been? Word's out how you hole up here all the time. What's going on? You're not ill are you? If so you can confide in me."

Jonathan could not help feeling the mood change. "Oh, no, I am well. As well as one can be after a loss such as mine. And you? You look as good as ever. And how is Mercy?"

"She is in good health and in good humour, and still able to keep me alert. Ha!"

"Glad to hear it," said Jonathan. "We are all healthy. Except my departed Phebe, and to her I cling."

"I believe it is an obsession."

Jonathan smiled wanly. "I know that, but I can't stop."

"I thought as much."

"And I thought you thought as much. I knew that was why you came again."

"Not the entire reason. Friends help friends don't they? And as a psychiatrist----"

"I never thought I would see the day I would need to keep consulting a psychiatrist."

"And I never thought I would see the day I would need to approach you in a professional capacity."

"And I never thought----"

"Enough, Jonathan. Anyone can see you're down. You've been down in the mouth ever since your loss, and I am here to----"

"To bring her back?"

Phillip pulled back. Then, "That's not you my friend. Even in your bereavement it's beneath you to be so harsh. You can do better than that. You have obligations, and you cannot simply roll over."

He was met with a long, slow, groan.

"Take your time," said Phillip, "and when you feel able to proceed we shall do our utmost to improve your condition. Fair enough?"

"Yes. May I have Marie here when you do your magic?"

"If you wish."

"And do you really believe you can help me?"

"I do. I have been at it for years and I feel I have seen every possible disturbance of the mind. One main thing I have discovered is how the degrees of recovery differ. One can only----"

"What are my prospects?"

"They are extremely good unless you exaggerate your expectations; and by that I mean aiming for the impossible. You will have to keep one eye on reality."

"I shall try."

Phillip ministered to Jonathan strictly as a professional, Jonathan deported himself squarely as a patient, and Marie hovered and fussed through each session as herself, and to the extent allowed by Phillip. Twice he had ejected her from the room.

But by degrees, over months, Jonathan not only failed to get more firm grip on reality, he sank further into unreality; all the while being aware of his descent, and welcoming it.

Chapter Forty-eight

As several more years waft by Jonathan is transformed in an even more bizarre way, and he isolates himself yet more. Brother Garrison, his friend Simon Slope, and others pay final visits.

Time passed slowly. One ancillary consequence of his rehabilitation. Ha! Rehabilitation. Partial rehabilitation? Jabberwocky.

In the event, Jonathan was cognizant of another and more significant effect; his becoming even more of a recluse. He had retreated farther to his end of the floor, and enlarged and blocked off his area. Oh, not to keep anyone out, he was always approachable, yet he never went out of his way to see anyone. In truth he never went anywhere. And there he sat, often in the dark or in partial darkness. The rest of the time he read.

When the darkness and solitude became too oppressive he went onto the balcony in order to at least observe humanity, and so he could get some sun. The balcony was designed so he could see quite a distance over the top of its wall while not being seen by anyone close by.

Was he balmy? Undoubtedly. He had asked that question of both Marie and Rose and they both had earnestly but warmly and affectionately assured him he was. In response he had convinced them he was not quite as balmy as they had imagined, and that he had not lost his senses entirely. He had explained how he had lost faith in all but a very small portion of humankind, had given up faith in the future of humanity, and had ultimately come to where he simply could not tolerate seeing most people. He was a misanthrope. At first they were aghast, but as he went on to explain his position they calmed themselves, and in the ensuing months they got around to where they could see some reason in his highly extraordinary views. Not without, however, making their own views known. In the end they did allow how in his circumstances they would have done the same, and if they ever came to a similar end they would keep his solutions in mind. That last had shaken him to his core, and after mulling it over for a while he concluded they were surely his daughters, and perhaps in a hundred or two-hundred years scientists would be able to explain familial tendencies better.

Jonathan's therapeutic colloquys over many months had resulted, to his astonishment, in some improvement in his humour. Not jolly humour; but ease-of-mind humour. Whereas he would have wagered everything he owned he would have been wasting his time, nay, even degrading himself; now he welcomed his descent.

Phillip, who had given up his professional services, had helped by simply being there.

"You aided me when I sorely needed it," he had told Phillip. "Or, did your best to aid me. What life I have without Phebe you have improved merely by being here, and I am unable to thank you enough. I may even say you have kept me out of the madhouse."

They were seated in Jonathan's drawing room.

"Think nothing of it," replied Phillip, "but I would like to continue our sessions."

"Thank you, but I feel you have done more than enough, and taking into consideration my age, my circumstances, and the loss of the corporeal love of my life, I must reiterate, I know for certain I have hit the brick wall of my existence. Thus I am wholly dependent on my own devices. My only lingering mania is my penchant for conversing with Phebe, and--strange as it may seem--I am not at all trying to stop doing so."

"Conversing with----?"

"Yes, it gives me great comfort."

"Do you actually see her?"

"Oh, yes. Eh, eh, hold on. I'm not sure if she's really there--likely not--nevertheless what have I to lose? Furthermore, even a realist such as I can indulge in hope, nonsensical though it may be. Is that not so?"

"I don't know. I have never---- Only once have I personally tended a patient who---- She ended her life in a mad, eh, asylum. I think----"

"Well ha, ha, ha, and ho, ho, ho, don't take me so seriously Philip. What can be the harm? I'm not causing anyone pain; not even myself, don't you see? People indulge in such twists of mind all the time. Look at religion. It's nothing more than fantasy, but it makes the masses feel better. The same for astrology, oriental meditation, reading tea leaves----"

"Nevertheless, you? When someone like you embraces that sort of rubbish I----"

"Rubbish? Is that a medical term? Anyway don't be too concerned. I may be flighty, yet I don't believe I'm mad. Only coping the best way I know how. Put your mind at ease. Only if you see me walking the streets stark naked proclaiming I'm the king of England, or acting like a drunken mad hatter, should you call the men with the nets; otherwise allow me to indulge myself."

Phillip leaned back in his chair and appeared to shrink. "Then I will leave off, but know I will always be available."

"Thank you."

"It is dark in here. Do you never----"

"Every day I go out on the balcony for an hour and get some sun. Yes, and you know, it's like a restorative. I can't explain it other than to say it lifts my mood. Am I getting even more daft?"

"No, I believe not. I have had many patients ask that."

"Then I shall continue to sit in the sun."

"And will you continue to sit here in the dark? I have never had any patients who have done so. Oh, there was the old undertaker who said he had seen too many corpses. All he wanted was peace and nothingness. He was a strange one."

"Then by implication I am strange," laughed Jonathan.

"Oh, no, I didn't mean, well, you are!"

They bantered on for some time. Their conversation was lively; then they were silent.

After some time, "My goodness, the clock ticks louder every day," said Jonathan.

"Clock?"

"The one in the other room."

"Oh. If you say so."

"I do say. As we grow older our hearing usually worsens, but that infernal clock has gotten so loud I believe I must move it into a back room."

"Dear me."

Phillip got up to leave. "Please say you will join us at our place for dinner one of these evenings."

"Oh, um, I will be delighted." But Jonathan was prevaricating, and he knew Phillip knew. It was part of their mutual understanding.

"Garrison! Dear old Gary, how good of you to come again. You brighten my day immeasurably. Welcome, and sit down."

Garrison sat in a plush chair facing Jonathan. They were in Jonathan's drawing room. "Appears you could do with a little brightening; it's pretty dark in here. Do you keep all of your rooms this dark?"

"I do. Except when I'm reading."

"Goodness. How can you do anything in the dark?"

"Do? Well what would I do in the light? When you get to my age there aren't----"

"Age? Your age? You're not so old you----"

"Are you here to aggravate me?"

Garrison sagged. "No. I came because I want to see you, that's all. If I may, I will say you have not been keen on coming to Guildford."

"I have been occupied."

"Occupied? Why you just said---- Oh, I didn't come here to quibble. You are still my big brother whom I admire and look up to. You saved my life back when I was going astray. Now I'm here to do minister to you."

"Oh, yes. Hm. Thank you for your concern, but what makes you take for granted I need saving? I wonder if you came here at someone's urging?"

"No, not expressly, but I have heard rumors." Garrison waved the back of his hand. "And now this," he answered. "Alone in a chair in the dark. It strikes me as a bit odd."

"Oh, not in my case Garrison, and I assure you I am in a fair state of mind. If you came to see a broken man, I am not he. I'm the best I have been since losing dear Phebe. Oh, I'll never be altogether whole after that, but life goes on and I'm doing the best I can to keep her vivid in my mind. I will tell you, in confidence, one thing is I am weary of humanity. My elm tree is almost grown. That's an old saying. I should say, an old *saw*, heh, heh. They used to make coffins out of elm wood. But don't pity me, I'm well. All's well that ends----"

"Indeed. Nevertheless I am still at a loss as to what you do all day."

"I weigh things in my mind."

"You weigh----? Gracious. What more in life is there to weigh?"

"I'm back to thinking about the old philosopher, Gorgias. He was an ancient Greek who lived even earlier than Socrates. I read about him when I was young. In short he believed nothing exists, and even if it does we can't know anything about it, and if we could we would be unable to convey anything of it to anyone, and----"

"Hold on. Are you unhinged?"

"If I am, Gorgias was too. I shall never rule it out. Rule out that I may be unhinged. But allow me to move on. If we could convey that nothing exists, it couldn't be understood by anyone. So there we are."

"Sounds like you have found your personal--or should I say *peculiar*--ethos. Have thought of everything," said Garrison with a touch of sarcasm.

"Oh, I am not pettifogging, but I do sometimes delight in teasing people, and I shouldn't. I admit Gorgias was preposterous."

"Years ago you didn't. I remember you were singing his praises."

"You do? Oh, well, hmm. You have me there. I do, though, grant some credence to Plato's--actually Socrates'--cave concept. Life us such a----"

"Trial."

"Socrates? Trial? Ha, ha! Still, I continue to learn, and by the time I have dredged up everything of which I am capable, my time will be up."

"Come now. Time up? Oh, my!"

"We are all like trees. We grow skyward, reaching for the heavens, or for some other great goal. Some of the trees thrive, some are blighted, some are struck by lightning, others are used as firewood. Or coffins. We put down roots of everyday existence, and those roots are embedded in all kinds of soil, good or bad. And in the end all trees die or are killed." He hesitated, then, "Still don't assume I'm all that dolorous; I'm not. I'm quite content for the most part."

"I don't understand how you can be so sanguine."

"In the simple terms, I am drowsy and worn out. Life is, at best, a farce."

"And at worst?"

"A tragedy."

"A tragedy? Oh, my. As we sit here right which of the two? Tragedy or farce?"

"Farce."

"However you would come out of your seclusion in order to help one of your daughters, or your grandson, em, adopted grandson? Wilfred?"

"I would, however I can't imagine any other reason."

Garrison hung his head for a moment, then looked up. "Then I shall say one last thing before putting my concerns to rest. I find your protestations against normality hard to swallow. There. I'm done. Except----"

"Except what?"

"Is there anything else I can do for you?"

"No, but thank you. Marie, Rose, and Wilfred take care of me. Me, me, me. Enough about me. Tell me about yourself! That's what I want to hear. How is Violet?"

"She is well. Still regretting that we couldn't have had children, but that's old news. You recall that's why we always invited Marie and Rose to visit us so frequently when they were little. And if you don't mind we will still come and see

them when we can."

"Oh, indeed, and me as well. Now, tell me about my old childhood friend Simon Slope. How is he, and how is his wife Marit?"

"They are well. He inquires about you now and then. There's not much more to tell; they're getting greyer and moving slower. He broke down in tears when he heard about Phebe."

"Then please give him my regards and let him know I am happy to hear they are well. And, though you don't have to mention it to him, I do have a special communion with Phebes every day."

"Sit down Jack. There, on the chair where all of my best guests sit."

Jonathan gestured toward a luxuriant green chair.

"Where? Tis so damnable gloomy in here I can't even see me hand in front of me face. What's the matter with you?"

"This is my sanctuary. Three-hundred degrees to port, three steps forward, old salt. Mind your way."

Jack bumped into the chair and sat down. "Sanctuary from what?"

"It's been some time," observed Jonathan. "I'm glad to see how well you are."

"Well? See? How can you see me in this dreary place? For all that, is it even you? I could be sit'n by a vicious killer for all I know."

"My aren't you cranky? What has happened? Has Rhodabelle kicked you out or something, old boy?"

"Huh. Outta' me own home? Not likely. No, if I'm cranky tis cause I'm gettin' old, that's why. Don't you ever feel that way?"

"I do, but not often now that I am learning how to deal with it."

"What's yir secret?"

"My---- I have no great secret. But now that you ask I must start by saying I'm never what anyone would call joyful. Never have been. Well, not overall. Only in the moment. Moments. Like when one of my girls does something funny, or when Phebes makes me laugh. Times like that."

"Phebe? But she's, she's----"

Jonathan cleared his throat. "Oh, pardon me, I tend to forget. There's more than that howsomever, but no need to get into such now."

"Into what, sir?"

"A philosophy of mine. I'll let you in on it sometime, but now please tell me what you've been up to. Any time aboard ship?"

"No, me sail'n days are over, and so goes me life."

"Surely you don't imply your life is over?"

"The best part is."

"You look healthy. Why can't you sail?"

"Tis me eyes. They aren't what they were, specially in the dark, so what good is a swab who can't pull his weight on night shift?"

"I'm sorry Jack."

"Don't be. I guess me life ain't as bad as I'm makin' out, and I still have Rhodabelle. She keeps me goin' and that's more than some can say. Oh, dear

me, now tis I who am sorry, I didn't intend tuh----"

"Not at all. I assure you I am not bothered in the least."

"No?"

"No indeed. It has to do with my philosophy."

"Your philosophy? Now yuh have gotten me curiosity up again an' I'm all the more determined tuh find out more about it even if it involves gettin' yuh sozzled. Next time I come I'll bring a bottle of your favorite----"

"You needn't go to all of the trouble; I'll gladly tell you. Now, though, let us talk of something else."

They did so, and a lively conversation it was, of current country and world affairs, past adventures, and such.

When Jack got up to leave Jonathan asked, "It may be none of my business Jack, but are you alright money-wise. No, don't answer if I am overstepping. But I order you to answer me."

"I'm getting by sir."

"Well," pursued Jonathan, "I am going to make you swear to something. If you ever come up short you must come to me, and if I am in the ground please go to Rose. She is aware."

"You'd have me come hat-in-hand begging?"

"No! No! I am indebted to you for all you have done for me over the years. For one thing, if it hadn't been for you Marie would be dead by now. And when you accuse me of asking you to come hat-in-hand you injure me more than you know. I will hear no more of that. Now, hold up your right hand and swear that should you ever find yourself in dire need you will contact one of us. Eh, eh, none of that. Swear to it!"

Jack hung his head and did as he was told.

"That's better," said Jonathan. "I owe you"

"Very well, and how do you do Max?" replied Jonathan. "Still as hale as you were four days ago?"

Maxwell laughed. "Yes, even more so, but I was just thinking the other day, you will outlive me by many years. Eh, eh, don't interrupt, I am sure of it. I know things a vast number of others don't, like the old sailor you knew who had the mystic toe. Anything you want to know, just ask."

They were in Jonathan's sitting room and Maxwell took his usual chair.

"Then tell me, old wise wazir, what goes on at Fleet today?"

"What's a wazir?"

"Come-come now, all-knowing friend, you must know."

"Huh. Timothy Wall fell down the stairs and was going to take legal action against us until I informed him his effort would be expensive and fruitless, and how two others had seen him drinking just before he fell. You know, the bottle he keeps in his desk. Otherwise everything is in order. Say, it's darker than ever in here. I can barely make out your face."

"You aren't missing much. But get to the point; why are you here?"

Maxwell paused for a minute.

"It's a touchy subject," said he at last. "I'll get right down to it. Two

things. I was sitting in a park the other night, with a friend, and someone saw us embrace and kiss."

"A man?"

"Yes. And now it's all around the office." Maxwell hung his head.

"And you want to know two things?"

"Yes."

"Then first, no, you're not in trouble with me. You should know better than that."

"Thank you, but what about----?"

"The office workers?"

"Yes."

"Ignore them. Stand tall and act as nothing has happened, which in my way of thinking it hasn't."

"And should someone say something to me?"

"Tell them to do something obscene and physically impossible to himself, and if he persists against you send him here to me. You may presume I am too old to handle myself, but I lift weights and punch a bag in the back room. Leave him to me."

Max fell back in his chair and closed his eyes. Silence. Then, out of the blue, "There you have it Mr Gorgius, if you can thrash the workers you will outlive me. Nonetheless I am baffled by your way of life."

"I am as well. The only thing for certain is that I needs must work it out for myself, if there is anything more to work out."

"My dear Edmund," said Jonathan. "Whatever would I do without friends such as you?"

"You would fare very well I am sure."

"I always benefit from your society."

They were in their usual places in Jonathan's drawing room where they had been chatting for an hour about this, that, and the other. Then Jonathan turned serious.

"Edmund I am going to make a confession, and I hope you will not be cross with me."

"Why should I be? I have received quite a few confessions in my day."

"Not a sacred confession; a secular one."

Edmund nodded.

"I don't know your surname."

Edmund sat up straighter. "You don't? Goodness me. Why I----"

"And I never thought to ask. Are you offended?"

"Heavens no! I dare say not. I should have told you."

"Then tell me."

"Flint. My name is Flint. Edmund Allen Flint."

They both enjoyed a laugh.

"You may have told me," said Jonathan, "but perhaps not. I likely would have remembered *Flint*."

They laughed again, then Edmund added, "There is something else I have

failed to mention. I am growing. I have gained a half inch in height every month for the past year. Won't be long till I'm six feet tall. How about that?"

Without the slightest pause Jonathan responded. "I know you will. I have noticed your growth, and I was only wondering when you were going to mention it."

"Ha!"

"And," went on Jonathan, "I have failed to confess that I have been increasing in wisdom by the month, as I a sure you have not failed to notice. Soon I will be the the smartest man in England."

"Har, har, har! Well said."

"And another secret Edmund, I am not at all pious."

"Ha, ha, ha. That was never a secret." But Edmund's laugh was weaker. "You told me that a few times over the years; once when you had recently studied the inside of a pub. And I would have figured it out sooner or later anyway. Don't worry, I will not excommunicate you. Now, insomuch as we are letting out our secrets, I may as well tell you I am not without doubts myself."

"You don't say! And I must add, you have mentioned that to me from time to time, as I'm sure you recall."

"I do recall, and I am serious, but my doubts are few and infrequent. And I don't reckon there is a cleric who doesn't feel lack of conviction once in a while."

"Do tell."

"Yes, and since I am in a *confessional* mood--confessional, get it?--I backtrack on what I just said; my doubts are not few and infrequent, they are many and frequent." He paused. "Nothing? Aren't you going to jump up, wave your arms, and call me a hypocrite?"

"No. I will call you an intelligent realist. I can jump up if you like."

"Please remain seated. One caveat however; I have not totally abandoned my religion. It's difficult to----"

"You will eventually, and when you do, don't allow the guilt to consume you."

"Wilfred!" welcomed Jonathan. "I say, you visit me more than anyone else; even my daughters. Come in and take your usual place."

His-their-usual place was in the drawing room. Wilfred sat in his plush chair and smiled warmly. He had found a position at a publishing company, but not his mother's.

"As usual I am here to canoodle you out of a controlling interest in your business."

"And as usual I shall remind you that you are dreaming."

They laughed heartily. It was their standing joke.

"So," went on Wilfred, "what about at least lighting a candle in here?"

"Not now."

"Then are we to go out on the balcony?"

"Maybe later."

"Thank you grandfather. If it really is you. I can't see very well."

"Tis me."

"How may I be sure?"

Jonathan turned serious. "Hrumph."

Wilfred sat twisting his cap, and he didn't respond. The only sound was the clock in the back room.

"Alright," said Jonathan, "what is it?"

"It is two things." He quit twisting.

"First? Spit it out."

"I would like to know more about my mother, and this time I insist. My real mother, Honeysuckle. I've said it all before, but I'll say it again. Rose--my other mother, and as far as I can tell the best one, since she hasn't abandoned me--tells me very little, either because she wants to shelter me, or because she doesn't know."

"Hmmm. Both, my boy. She never really knew much about Honey. Not really, as we only truly penetrate those whom we have been familiar with over years. As for the other, she wishes to shelter you. But mostly the first. She simply doesn't know."

"Oh. I should have figured that out, and perhaps I had, but I wasn't sure, and I had to ask."

They gazed at each other without seeing.

"Now what's the other *it*?" asked Jonathan.

"It's about you."

"What about me?"

Wilfred hung his head. "It's embarrassing."

"Out with it!"

"Rose is a better mother than anyone could deserve, but----"

"What? Lord you have a time speaking. It's not like you. I know you're leading up to the Grim Reaper."

Wilfred looked up. "I don't know how I will get along without you."

"Without me? Ha, that won't be hard. Just carry on and try to remember the best in me, and to forget the worst! That's all." But he saw the tears in his grandson's eyes.

"I don't know if I can carry on."

"Good gracious, one would imagine you're the one who's dying, not me. Control yourself. Look sharp"

"Dying? You're dying?" Wilfred jumped up.

"Why no, not now, but I am getting old."

"Oh. Nevertheless when your time comes, what am I to do?"

"Do what you do now. Appreciate Rose and Marie, and all of your friends, live the best life possible, keep working, and so on.

"But you----"

"You'll still have me. Through your memories. What's the difference if someone is alive or dead? In your mind's eye it's the same, don't you see? Every experience or perception in life is in our mind, so in this case what does it matter if I'm here in body?"

Wilfred fell back into his chair. "That seems pretty hypothetical. When you're alive I can see you and converse with you."

"If you have known someone well you can still do it when they are no longer living."

"Whaaat? Are you going----?"

"Phebe for instance. At times I converse with her."

"You don't say?"

There came a knock on Jonathan's door, and Marie entered.

"Father, Simon Slope is here to see you."

"Simon? Bless my soul. Do show him in, by all means."

"Mr Gorgius," greeted Simon as he entered. "I am Muhammad come to the mountain. You are the mountain."

Jonathan rose from his armchair and they embraced.

"You have been reading," chuckled Jonathan.

"And I have been waiting for you to pay me, us, a visit, but sadly you never come. Are you well?"

Simon had aged, though not to the degree Jonathan had imagined. He was still the familiar old Simon both without and within.

"Oh, yes, quite well," replied Jonathan. "I should say, so-so. A touch of pleurisy now and again, and ague, but I do my best to ignore it. And you seem unchanged. How is Marit?"

They sat down facing each other.

"She thrives better than do I. I find it difficult to keep up with her. As a matter of fact she is my guiding spirit. My rock---- On dear me, here I go on about her, and you have lost your---- Oh, do forgive me. How thoughtless I am."

"Nonsense! Life goes on. Think nothing of it."

"But I'm sure I have touched a----"

Jonathan lifted one hand. "Nothing I haven't mulled over and over in my mind every day; therefore anything anyone else says amounts to very little. And, my dear fellow, everyone who comes here means well."

Simon's shoulders sagged and he slumped further into his chair and looked down.

"There, there," insisted Jonathan, "pull yourself together."

Simon looked up. "You were my strength, and here I am----"

"Enough of your blubbering! Now, then, on with life. Tell me, since you could not have children have you taken in any as you had once considered doing?"

"No. We waffled about it until it was too late, and now we wish we had. All we have are a few close neighbors and you and your family. As to the latter, I confess it is why I'm here; to make up to you and yours for my negligence; Marit's and mine. For your sake, and for ours. I know it's an old saw, but *life is short*. For us--for you and your family, and for Marit and me--it is short, but not too late to form a closer bond. Or is it? Too late?" He studied Jonathan pleadingly.

"Of course it is not too late," proclaimed Jonathan. "I never felt there was any need for making anything up, but as you apparently want to, consider it done. So there! There's an end of it. I proclaim us to be reconciled!"

Simon was abashed. "That's it? That's all?"

"Said and done."

"So easily?"

"Why not?"

"Indeed, why not? You never were one to beat about the bush."

"And did you feel my ill fortune would change me?"

"If so I should have known better." Simon brightened. "Marit will be delighted."

"As will Marie and Rose."

Simon got up and walked slowly around the room. "I say, you put up some attractive decorations but it is so dark in here it is hard to appreciate them fully. May I ask, why do you keep it so dark?"

"Much of my time is devoted to thought. That's all. I can't explain it in any other way."

"Ummm."

"Oh, I read a lot, so I light up the place then."

Simon came around and stood in front of his friend. "Do say you will come to see us sometime."

"Oh, well, yes, if I am able."

"You appear to be exceedingly able."

"Well, appearances are deceiving."

"Wouldn't you like to see the home place again?"

Jonathan was silent for a moment. Then, "I fear it would be very painful without Phebe. As you can see I have mementos of her all about."

"Doing your utmost to keep your memories of her alive?"

"My memories of her are what keep me going, and my dying utterance will be her name."

"I am sure."

"Oh, that damnable clock," grumbled Jonathan, "it gets louder every day, even though I have put it in another room."

Chapter Fourteen

Phebe incarnate appears.

"Phebes! I had begun to doubt I would never see you again. You have been gone for weeks," said Jonathan.

"You knew I would return, silly man."

"All the better for seeing you my dear girl. Where have you been and what have you been doing?"

"Where have I been? As you imagined, I have always been with you. You must remember how as you grew older you began to believe reality was suspect, and everything exists in our noodles. A queer position I thought, but you held to it."

"Yes. Nonetheless you have not appeared this vividly until now. I feel I could come and embrace you."

"You must not forget how you dictate my appearances."

"Yes. It slipped my mind. Come and sit on my lap."

"Oh, stop, you also know that's impossible. However, as you cannot embrace me, I could sit on your lap."

"What's the difference? Neither is possible for someone like you who is incorporeal. Now which of us is----"

"Yes. My mind is failing, as am I."

"I will join you directly, wherever you go."

"That too is impossible, but until you pass I will comfort you."

"As ever." He had the sensation that his entire body was shrinking ever so slightly. "You have always been my voice of reason and reality."

"Ha! Here we are like this, and you speak of reality."

"Pardon me, but remember I am still living in this vale of tears while you luxuriate somewhere in the ether."

Phebe laughed. "Luxuriate? Ether? Lord preserve me."

"You know full well there is no Lord. No doomsday either."

"None whatsoever."

"Or is there a loophole?"

"No. Are you weakening in your final days?"

"No. If I were to weaken it would be only so as to live on with you."

"You used to remind me of the myriad ways I was stronger than you. This is one of those times. When you pass we must part forever. In any case I must now leave, however I will return whenever you call for me, until your last breath, when you are no more."