

CHAPTER ELEVEN: The Jaunt

February 13, 1906

Six years into the twentieth century, the optimists among us cannot but hail the escalating march toward human perfection. We are surrounded by marvelous inventions our forefathers could scarcely have imagined, like the telephone and phonograph, and automobile and aircraft. Man is poised at the brink of a new epoch and nowhere is this more evident than the recent advances in medical science.

Although the development of X-ray imagery by the Teutonic physicist Roentgen has certain medical applications, it also promises to lay bare the spiritual realm to our mortal perception. Many philanthropists among the theologians are financing the advancement of this young science. We now have the means for the first time in human history to see the human soul. The implications are mindboggling. Throughout our ancestry, the spectre of man's physical end has often conjured doubt in an afterlife, and from this derives the abomination of modern atheism.

Who has not thought in a moment of weakness or melancholy, the possibility that death marks the limits of our being? The intellect shudders with horror and the heart palpitates with dread to think the afterlife might be a fallacy, that man's ultimate destiny is a hole in the ground. Our imagination, faced with no physical evidence to the contrary, traces our physical path to its logical conclusion – for horror.

Thank the Lord, we may proclaim, for the timely invention of X-ray photography. This technology will prove our existence beyond its temporary mortal shell. Many scientists are studying X-ray technology toward this end, because the human spirit should be visible within the

living body and invisible in the cadaver, having departed to friendlier climes than the lonely grave. X-rays have not yet shown a difference between the living and the dead, but they will in time.

X-rays are not the only technology being employed toward soul verification. Our capacity for fine measurement grows ever more precise, from the graphing of faraway galaxies to counting the tiniest molecules. Given this talent, scientists are busy determining the weight of the human soul. By measuring the precise weight of pre- and post-mortem subjects, a San Francisco authority has announced the weight of our eternal spirits as an averaged 13.3 grams. Good Christians have reason to cheer the knowledge of our transfigured weight and evidence of the Scriptures' joyous truth. However, the inconvenient fact that this figure corresponds to the average amount of fluids discharged from dying subjects is not a topic for wholesome discussion.

This latter authority has also discovered evidence against our loftier aspirations. His studies suggest the human brain may be a complex mollusk and the human body its highly adapted shell. If his tangential study has merit, our disparate individualities might be more akin to snails than to angels. Imagine your friend's eyes to be those of a mollusk and his skull its hiding place. Were you to view him sans corpus, you'd see a slug-like creature lurking behind those ocular portholes, with a long gelatinous tail for a spinal cord, sprouting a mesh of nerve connections through its extended shell, his body. Seeing him this way, you might as soon bludgeon him as buy him a sarsaparilla. To come home to your wife and children, and see them for their snail-like selves, would you hesitate to crush their skulls?

This in itself is sufficient reason to trust the Holy Scriptures. Even if physical proof of spiritual existence is as yet lacking, we have scarce option but to believe it will eventually come.

Perhaps no quantity of gadgets can transcend our physical existence, but the alternatives to blind faith are dreary indeed.

—Gordon Savoy, Editor, The San Francisco Sentinel

Rutherford Mifflin squinted through dusty goggles at the page flattened on his steering wheel.

“That’s the whole article? Seems abbreviated.”

“For God’s sake keep your eyes on the road!” said Savoy.



Mifflin spun the wheel and missed a flock of school children. The automobile careened across the lane, sideswiped a boardwalk, and knocked down a cigar store Indian. He fumbled with the clutch and pressed the accelerator to speed down Montgomery Avenue.

Savoy braced himself against the dashboard. “What’s the bloody rush? You must be going fifteen miles an hour.”

“That was Schicklegruber’s Tobacco Oasis. I couldn’t let them see me after I knocked down their Indian.”

Mifflin downshifted as their vehicle met with oncoming traffic. Yoked oxen plodded down the street dragging a hay wagon while two carriages sped northward. Mifflin tried to edge around the wagon, but another automobile caused him to withdraw.

“Damn these neophytes. A year ago automobiles were novelty but now every Tom, Dick and Harry wants one.” He rapped his knuckles on the dashboard. “Let’s drive from San Francisco to New York like Horatio Nelson Jackson. The journey takes a month and think of what we’d see.”

“An endless wasteland scattered with degenerates, apart from Salt Lake City. I prefer the train.”

“There are a quarter thousand automobiles in the city. Can you believe the number?”

“All tethered at Nob Hill come twilight, or in municipal stables. What a gratuitous luxury.”

“If Mayor Schmitz hadn’t allocated the funds to acquire motor wagons, I’d never pilot one of these infernal contraptions. Despite his lurid reputation, the mayor is not so bad a chap.”

Mifflin seized a lull in the northbound traffic, circumnavigated the hay wagon and continued down Montgomery. “Your article suggests my studies cancel each other out, but they really point

to the same conclusion of life being objectively worthless. Must you write with such a sermonizing slant?"

Savoy fixed his eyes on the dashboard. "Rutherford, you're a forensic pathologist and I'm a writer. To publicize your research properly, it must be embellished. With insufficient spice nothing tastes like nothing." He stretched back in his seat and watched the passing buildings. "You mean to pilot this contraption all the way to San Jose? Won't you run out of steam?"

"My vehicle burns petroleum, not coal, and at taxpayer's expense."

They clattered past the Crocker and Mills buildings to Market Street, and merged into a tangled procession of carriages, wagons, cablecars, omnibuses, and automobiles. The Grand Hotel blurred by, and the offices of the *Chronicle*, the *Call*, and the *Examiner*. The facades of the Phelan, Flood, Parrot, Spreckels, and Donahue buildings blocked out the dome of City Hall, beyond which the Mechanic's Pavilion raised its spires gaily.

"You're absolutely sure Madame Blaustein is meeting us?" said Savoy.

"Her telegram said to chauffeur you down, and that's all. Sometimes she seems Mephistophelean. Or am I wrong?"

"She can be a menace, but you're no Faust."

"Are you familiar with the ancient Greek term *Menis*? It means all-destroying wrath. Think of Demeter, I'd really hate to meet her."

"Far worse to keep her waiting."

Mifflin turned left on Eleventh to Harrison, turned right and angled south. They drove parallel to the train tracks and the city shrunk away.

"We should have taken a train," said Savoy.

"I've got cargo in the cadaver department to transport. There is no alternative."

Mifflin concentrated on the potholed road. San Francisco fell back into the fog and faded to a jagged silhouette. The vast hump of San Bruno rolled past and soon they were skirting the Bay on a plain of estuaries and mudflats. Savoy fished a vial from a vest pocket and fumbled with the cap.

“I hope that’s not laudanum, Gordon.”

Savoy sipped from the vial. “I’ve found a safe alternative in Bayer brand heroin. The cough syrup also works as a nerve tonic.”

“How is the foot healing?”

“I still have seventeen digits, which is seventeen more than nothing.”

“And your newly modified member?”

“No complaints so far.” Savoy balled his jacket into a pillow. The automobile rattled like a stagecoach and the air was clouded with dust. The roadway occupied a raised embankment alongside the rails. Train whistles muted the automobile’s engine, and the narrow road was congested with wagon traffic. Mifflin accelerated in spasms to pass one coach after another. Savoy resigned himself to the drive. He sipped heroin, pulled down his derby, and slouched back. The journey rolled along in rattling lulls punctuated by bursts of dusty momentum. Savoy woke alone in the parked automobile.

He climbed out and surveyed his surroundings. The automobile sat on a narrow peninsula flanked by reeds and cattails. Mudflats stretched beyond, interspersed with shallow estuaries and clumps of bulrush and snakegrass. The air stank of shit, thought Savoy. He lit a cigarette and limped towards the water.

The jetty terminated in a jungle of reeds where a dock sprouted to zigzag across the marsh. A strange animal stood on the dock some thirty yards away. Savoy squinted through the fog and concluded it was a horse.

He put one foot down and the dock creaked beneath his weight, but held firm as he walked the sagging planks. The animal gazed across the estuary with empty eyes. A mummified horse's hide was mounted on a sturdy oak frame and flesh hung in thin ribbons that fluttered in the breeze. On the animal's back rested a saddle stamped "7th Cavalry, Fort Lincoln." Savoy turned for the shore and saw Mifflin perched on the jetty's embankment.

"I wouldn't trust that dock, Gordon. The damn thing is rotted through and through."

Savoy carefully retraced his steps to the shore. "Where did you run off?"

"Call of nature. We'd fancy ourselves gods if not for death and defecation."

"You're as amusing as a crack in a glass eye. Where have you stranded us? This can't be but halfway to San Jose."

"My uncle took me duck hunting here when I was a boy. The birds are sparser now, but the scenery still looks the same."

"Like a damned swamp." Savoy tossed his half-burnt cigarette on the ground. "What's with the horse?"

"Horseback skeet shooting is the closest thing to Injun hunting since Wounded Knee. My uncle was a retired cavalry officer. We applied warpaint to the clay pigeons for authenticity."

"I'm not in the mood for target practice."

"We'll soon be off. First I'll need assistance with the cargo."

Savoy and Mifflin walked back to his automobile. The unlatched door to the cadaver compartment hung open.

“Bloody hell, what an awful stink,” said Savoy.

“The ice box thawed and the cargo ripened.”

Mifflin pulled out the sliding shelf to reveal a body bloated by decay. The formless face was sallow and mottled with lavender blotches. Savoy recognized the checkered jacket and trousers.

“Hugo Pritchett.”

“Was that its name?” Mifflin lit himself a cigar. He pulled on a pair of India rubber gloves. “I found him at the Muldoon sugar plant alongside five other bludgeoned cadavers. He appeared to be another chastised picketer until I noticed the delicacy of the hands. Then I found an uncashed check in his pocket signed by Madame Blaustein.”

“She’ll be glad to know the sum is still in her bank. He was investigating that silly labor dispute and must have fallen in the melee. Why bring him out here?”

“She suggested I misplace him instead of cataloguing him at the morgue.”

“Goddamn that woman.”

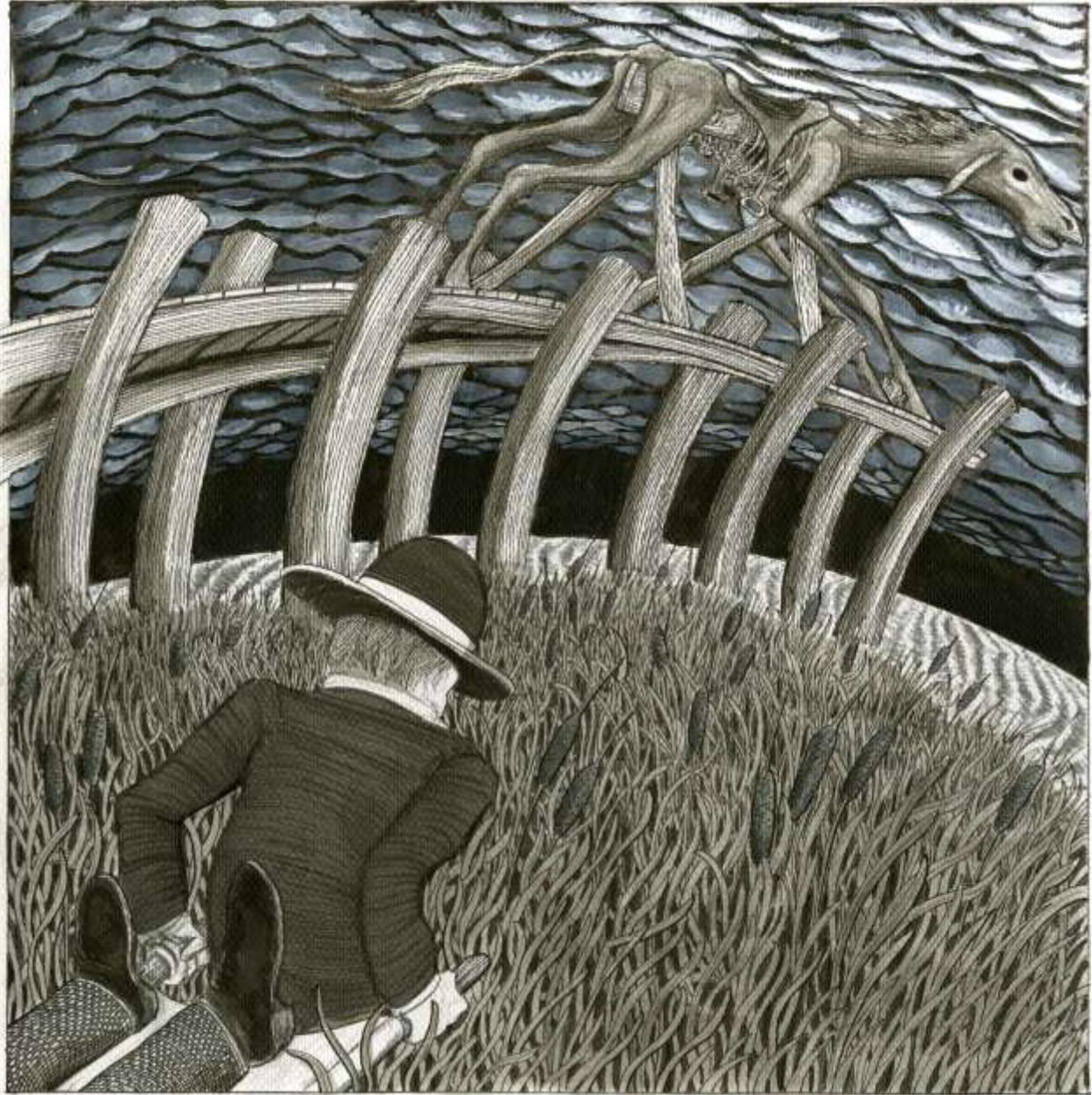
“I concealed him in a broom closet these last few days, but the morgue’s basement furnace has been on holiday.”

Savoy looked anywhere but at the corpse. “This isn’t right.”

“Nothing is truly right when from behind it’s seen as left. Am I left or am I right? All the same to this poor bastard.” Mifflin grabbed the corpse’s wrists. “Take the ankles. He’s lighter than he looks.”

Savoy hoisted the legs free and they hefted the body down the embankment through a thick tangle of marsh grass into ankle-deep mud.

“For Christ’s sake, this is madness,” Savoy pleaded. “These are brand new shoes.”



“Beyond those reeds,” said Mifflin. They trudged the estuary through cattails to a pool of stagnant water. Savoy wiped his hands on his trousers. He saw another corpse imbedded in the mire, a faceless head peeling to reveal patches of ivory skull.

“Who the hell is that, another Blaustein inconvenience?” said Savoy.

“I can’t recall. Resurrected by post-mortem belly gas, I suppose.”

“How many people are planted here?”

“They all died perfectly natural deaths and were dumped here because of bureaucratic convolutions.” Mifflin took a penknife and punctured Pritchett’s bloated stomach. The corpse whistled as it deflated. “Belly gas is the bane of bodily concealment.” He placed a boot on Pritchett’s face and forced him into the mud.

Savoy fled to the shore and doubled over to expel his guilt. When his dry heaves produced only a thin line of spittle, he climbed aboard Mifflin’s automobile and lit another cigarette.

Mifflin rejoined Savoy. “Nasty business. Promise me you’ll forget this interlude.”

“I’ve already forgotten.”

“Let’s hope the worst is over. I can’t stomach much more and I’ve got a cast iron belly.”

Savoy worked the ignition crank and the engine sputtered to life. Mifflin engaged the reverse and turned the automobile around. They bumped over railroad tracks and barely missed a southbound locomotive. Assisted by the syrup, Savoy slipped back into a comfortable daze and dreamless oblivion.

Sunlight roused him. They drove through the outskirts of San Jose. The smooth valley floor stretched for miles, lush green pastures interspersed by farmhouses and barns. Cattle chewed cud in the shade of walnut trees and valley oaks. Scents of rain-soaked manure and leaves wafted on the breeze. From the corner of a bloodshot eye Savoy glimpsed the Guadalupe River.

“We’re almost to the sanitarium,” said Mifflin. “I hope Madame Blaustein arrived ahead of us. I haven’t the faintest notion why we’ve been called.”

The sun hung low beyond the western hills and cast a warm glow across the valley. Houses, hedges, trees and barns basked in lazy luster, traced in tones of amber and burgundy. A dapper couple pushed a baby buggy on a boardwalk. Whitewashed picket fences threw shadows across yards overgrown with honeysuckle, nasturtium, and periwinkle. Children flew kites and played crack-the-whip.

“Rather idyllic,” said Mifflin. “Feels like another country.”

“The difference is the climate. Provincial bumpkins see too much sunlight.”

The marble sanitarium ahead had a sign crowning the wrought-iron gate: *Agnews State Hospital for the Insane*. A carbuncular sentry in white tunic and porkpie hat opened the gate. “Visitation ends in a half-hour. Best make your stay a short one.”

“We shan’t be long.” Mifflin pulled to a patch of grass, set the break and shut off the ignition. He stretched his back. “These machines shall fall from style, Gordon. They are torture on the ligaments and clot the gonad lymph nodes.”

They climbed a flight of stairs to a broad doorway, where the words *Abandon all hope* were penciled on the whitewashed arch. The small lobby was empty save for a clerk hunched over a dog-eared penny dreadful and an old woman drowsing behind her dusty desk. Savoy cleared his throat. The woman did not stir.

“Jezebel can’t hear you,” said the clerk. “Silence is her reward for artillery duty at Vicksburg.” He squealed like a gutshot rabbit into the woman’s ear. “A true Dixie spinster, with the choice position of being the superintendent’s aunt.”

Mifflin squinted through his monocle. “She reminds of a quote by Edward Young, or was it Blair? The phrase was certainly attributed to the Graveyard School.”

“We’re here to meet Madame Blaustein,” said Savoy.

The clerk stood from his book. “That slick little Jewess and her colored escort? She’s upstairs visiting the lump in cell two-twelve. Blaustein paid for your admission. Don’t forget to sign the registry.”

Savoy scrawled a fictitious name. The previous entry read J. Blaustein, and from two days prior, S. Blaustein. “Look at this, Rutherford.”

“Ludwig van Goethe? That’s not your name.”

“Not that. Look here.” He pointed out the younger Blaustein’s signature.

“That’s quite suspicious.”

The second floor was made of a long brick hallway interspersed with barred cell doors. A scream sounded in the hallway and Savoy ran to the open gate of cell 212.

“Gordon, you’ve arrived.” Judith wore a wasp-waisted, mutton-sleeved dress of pomegranate satin. Her hair was tied back in a tight knot and she held a riding crop in a gloved hand.

Savoy tipped his derby. “I hope I’m not tardy.”

“Not at all,” she said. “Our train was delayed by cows on the tracks and we’ve only just arrived. Alas, my stepson has been none too cooperative.”

“G’day, Mr. Savoy.” Gregory Beantree held a writhing man in his arms. His short and plump captive was cleanshaven, with curly black hair and crossed eyes. His head was too big, his hands were too small.

“This is your stepson?” said Savoy.

“My second stepson,” said Judith. “Meet Pully Blaustein.”

“Good day to both of you,” said Pully. He wheezed in Beantree’s embrace.

“This imbecile is Blaustein’s other heir?” Mifflin whispered to Savoy. “Nobody ever mentions these things to me.”

“Hardly knew myself,” said Savoy. “Judith, what’s the problem?”

“Pully has been conspiring with his naughty brother.” She whipped his thigh with her riding crop. He keened like a monkey. “Saul has had four visits with his brother since returning from Manila. Pully refuses to reveal Saul’s intentions.”

“Saul is my brother,” said the captive. “He ruled Jerusalem with shrewd benevolence and saw a queer sight on the road to Damascus. Afterwards I filled in for him and spread the splendid news. Circumcision is no longer prerequisite to salvation, so now the whole world is become the Hebrew Nation.”

“Hear that, Gordon? You could have saved yourself the trouble,” said Mifflin.

Judith struck her stepson again. “He is a bottomless well of vague obfuscations. Perhaps you should query him, as I’m quite liable to beat him silly.”

Savoy looked at the captive. “Pully, can you see me?”

“I see a shadow of a man. Gordon Savoy is his name. He asks me if I see him and indeed I do. I see his shadow.”

“Tell me about your brother.”

“The Canaanites have filthy beards, but oh, their women are beautiful. His loins are congested after such a dusty jaunt. Saul says my mind is a jumble of rusty padlocks and the keys are in a leviathan’s belly. But if the words of the Word are the keys to the world you’d know where to look: in a scroll not a book.”

“You demented little fool.”

“Allow me, Gordon.” Mifflin shoved Savoy aside. “Pully, you have a big head. Absolutely enormous.” He traced his fingers over Pully’s temples. “I’ll bet Jonathan Swift’s brain can’t hold a candle to yours. I’m something of an amateur phrenologist.”

“Leave my brain alone.” Pully struggled in Beantree’s grip. “My secrets are safe inside my skull.”

Mifflin massaged the simpleton’s scalp and yanked back his hands. “I’ve got your brain now,” he said, and cupped the nonexistent object. “I can vivisect to my heart’s delight.”

“Give me back my brain,” pleaded Pully.

“Now that your swollen cranium is empty of this tangled glob of gray matter, you surely possess enviable lucidity.”

“I do,” Pully sniffled. “I can see everything clearly. This moment, the future and the past fall here, right here. This endless heap of empty moments stretches out forever and ever but always points nowhere. It never ends. Only we do. These brick walls will crush everything.”

“Nonsense,” said Savoy. “Pure nonsense.”

“Many will die. Smashed to pulp and burned to cinders. Those who survive will see hell on Earth.”

Judith glared at her stepson. “That’s very nice, but what of your brother?”

“Saul told me our father was dead and you stole his money. Once he regains his inheritance, I’ll live with him and we’ll have tapioca pudding morning, noon and night.”

Judith sighed. “Gregory, let him go.”

“Yes ma’am.” Beantree released his grip.

Paully collapsed on the floor and surrendered to a seizure. His mouth leaked saliva and his eyes rolled up leaving only the whites visible. Judith knelt beside him. “Coroner, what have you done to him?”

Mifflin held out empty hands. “I didn’t steal his brain. It’s still inside his fat head.”

Paully’s spasms ceased. “Really? That’s good.”

Beantree hefted him on his bed and Judith tucked him in. “I’m sorry, Paully. Truly sorry.” She stuffed the riding crop into her purse and turned to her accomplices. “Perhaps I’m too quick to see conspiracies.”

“You didn’t drag us from San Francisco for such a tawdry occurrence,” said Savoy.

“This is a prelude to the pressing business of the day.”

The sentry from the front desk appeared beyond the doorway. “Excuse me, folks, but we got to lock up. Anything I can help with?”

“Sing the simpleton a cozy lullaby.” Judith handed the sentry a silver dollar. “Make sure he gets extra pudding come supper.”

Outside the sanitarium, they assembled around Mifflin’s vehicle. Judith scrutinized his vehicle. “Oh, dear. There’s not room but for two, or three if we squeeze.”

“How did you get from the station?” asked Mifflin.

“We walked thus far, but our next destination is farther yet. Can Gregory ride on back?”

Mifflin looked at Beantree. “You could fit inside the icebox. It’s quite spacious I assure you.”

Beantree wrinkled his nose. “Fuck no, I’ll drive. You can set Judy on your lap and squeeze Gordon in your cadaver trap.”

Savoy coughed into his fist and looked at Mifflin.

“I’m sure you’re a very good driver,” said Mifflin. “But I’m afraid the municipal regulations explicitly prohibit negroes from driving motor wagons.”

“What regulations?”

“The functional regulations that regulate functions.”

“Horseshit.”

“Gregory, you won’t mind running behind, will you?” said Judith. “We haven’t but a mile to go.”

Beantree spit on the ground. “Whatever you say, Judy girl.”

Mifflin, Savoy, and Judith arranged themselves in the automobile. Beantree worked the ignition crank and the engine rattled roaring. A sentry permitted them through the gate and off they drove, followed at a distance by Beantree.

The automobile sputtered along lanes lined by eucalyptus and cypress, and the entrances of country estates. Savoy watched stars twinkle in the twilight beyond the canopy of passing trees. Judith’s bottom felt pleasant on his lap and his groin hummed in syncopation with the automobile’s motor.

“Rutherford, I understand your research shall be publicized in this week’s *Sentinel*,” said Judith.

“Gordon has dedicated an entire page to my anatomical studies.”

“What do your studies suggest?”

“That death is very permanent.”



“It’s the hardest thing in the world to accept that death is the easiest thing in the world. Turn at this next drive, Rutherford.”

Mifflin pulled through the open gates up a driveway flanked by orchards in blossom, dormant gardens and pruned vineyards. A neoclassical mansion stood at the end of the drive, three stories high and fronted with marble pillars.

A guard drifted forward holding a lantern in one hand and a shotgun in the other. “What’s your business?”

“Keep waving that silly thing around and you’re liable to get hurt. I am Judith Blaustein.”

The man set down his firearm and consulted a ledger. He pointed to the entrance. “Doorman will show you in.”

“There’s a fourth member of our party on the way. Fetch him a glass of lemonade when he arrives.” She led Mifflin and Savoy to the entrance, and struck the brass dragonhead knocker. A procession of bolts clattered on the opposite side until the door swung inward.

The doorman glared with reptilian eyes. “Blaustein and party? You were expected earlier.”

“Spare your petty formalities,” she said. “Direct me to the interview.”

“He’s in the study to the left and has a nasty mood, I warn you.”

“No fouler than mine. Gentlemen, please stay here until I fetch you.”

Judith entered the parlor and slammed the door shut behind her.

“She’s a spirited filly,” the doorman laughed. “To which of you does she belong?”

“Leave us be, you servile dolt,” said Savoy.

“She does seem more saucy than normal,” said Mifflin. “The moon is nearly full and you know how women are. Confidentially, Miss Dexter’s been just like that for weeks.”

“Isn’t it queer our host is anonymous?”

“He, or even she, must be a huckleberry above the typical codfish aristocrat.”

Savoy walked down the hallway and around a corner, and nearly bumped into William Bromberger and the rat-killing dwarf from the Cobweb Palace. The dwarf wore a tweed shooting jacket and riding pants, and Bromberger was dressed exactly the same as Savoy. Bromberger sneered and Savoy balled his hands into fists.

“Fancy seeing you here in such a splendid outfit,” said Bromberger.

“A startling coincidence,” said Savoy. “Is my host your client?”

“In certain capacities.” Bromberger pushed past Savoy up a spiral stairwell.

“Puny world,” said the dwarf.

“A puny world for normal people but a giant world for runts.”

“Go to hell,” hissed the dwarf, waddling for the stairwell.

Savoy wandered through corridors in search of a lavatory until he decided to water a potted ficus. His attention drifted from his slow-healing member to a moth tangled in a sagging web. A tiny spider crawled around its prey and encased it inside a silky casket. Savoy was sympathetic for both players and questioned the morality of intervention. He considered freeing the moth or crushing them both, but decided to leave them be.

He buttoned his fly and found his way back to Mifflin, who stood with his ear to the parlor door. “Something odd is going on,” he whispered.

The parlor door creaked open and Mifflin leapt back. Judith appeared with her hair in disarray and her cheek smeared with mayonnaise. “Come join the negotiation, Gordon.”

“What are we negotiating?”

“Your future and mine.”

The study had two walls given over to bookshelves, ceiling-high and pregnant with dusty periodicals and leather bound texts. On a third wall examples of the taxidermist’s art perched at intervals, gazing through the varnish-tainted air. A stuffed grizzly stood upright in the corner frozen in mid-attack beside a Tiffany lamp. Next to the bear was a rat-like man holding a thick file against his chest. His slick hair was parted in the middle, and his large moustache was trimmed and waxed. In the center of the room squatted a Gallimard desk of floral motifs and flowing curves. Behind the desk sat a man inside a purple smoking gown.

The man regarded Savoy over steepled fingers. His cloudy eyes were sunken and his neck looked as fragile as Savoy’s wrists. He bared a set of store-bought teeth. “Quite the wee fellow, ain’t ya? Hardly bigger than me-self, with inverse blarney to peter girth.”

Judith held Savoy's arm. "Gordon, this is Jasper Muldoon. We've negotiated a satisfactory resolution of our differences."

"Both our interests been suffering," said Muldoon. "Sit down, sit down. You been causing more trouble than you know, boyo. What did I do to sour you?"

"I point out injustice where I see it. Nothing personal."

Muldoon snorted. "Got no clue how lucky you been, what with your maggot-brained crusades. Got my own Pinkerton man to find the skinny on Judy Blaustein and she ain't too hard to figure. Webster, give us the gazette on her majesty."

Webster leafed through the documents and cleared his throat. "Mrs. Felix Blaustein, born Judith Adele Jotkonen in Turku, Finland, in 1871. Mother a maidservant, father unknown."

"You're mighty dark for a Finn," said Muldoon.

Webster looked at her. "I warrant there was a gypsy in the woodpile. Or maybe a Jew."

Judith leaned forward and placed her elbows on the table. She cupped her hands together, looking at him.

Webster coughed into his fist.

"Continue," said Muldoon.

Webster looked from Judith to Muldoon. He continued, "Granted American citizenship at Ellis Island in November 1890, along with her older brother, Jalmer Jotkonen, a tailor by trade, and his wife, Fanny. The Jotkonen family resided in San Francisco as of February 1891, on Geary and Broderick. According to the records of Dr. Allen K. Bloch, Jalmer Jotkonen drank himself to death March 14. His widow departed for Michigan, leaving Judith alone. The same Dr. Bloch delivered a baby girl to Judith Jotkonen on February 27. She faced eviction one month later, at which time she was kinless and destitute.

“Babe was left on the doorstep of the Maria Kipp Orphanage with a brief explanatory note. A year later, the Applebaum family of North Beach adopted the same babe, now named Adelaide. In 1904, said Adelaide Applebaum expired while having carnal relations with Jericho Dill.”

All eyes focused on Judith, so pale and small. Dark eyes downturned, red lips folded into a bud of introspection. She looked up. They looked away.

The Pinkerton man continued, “No records exist for Judith Jotkonen’s whereabouts from 1896 to 1899, the year she married Felix Blaustein. The interim probably involved harlotry. We can conclude as much from three arrests between 1893 and 1895, two for solicitation and one for sodomy.”

Muldoon cackled. “Sodomy, Madame Blaustein. And you think you got the moral edge on me? Webster, what’s your opinion?”

“I only gather facts, Sir.”

“Factual little fink,” said Judith. “Standing there like a porcelain pig, so clean and smug after pilfering shekels from tossed-away chamber pots. Go ahead and smirk some more.”

Webster looked at Muldoon. “I’d opine she has a mouth, doesn’t she Sir?”

She smiled. “I wonder what I’d find in your attic, little man. I wonder what your wife would tell me. She lives in Oakland, doesn’t she? With your mother, and both your daughters. They live on Grand Avenue, don’t they?”

His face went pale. “How could you know that?” He looked at Muldoon.

“Clever minx, but not that clever,” said Muldoon. “If you were half as smart as you pretend then you wouldn’t even be here. Webster is factually factual, not bunko malarkied, or do you rascals say his facts ain’t actual?”

Neither Savoy nor Judith spoke.

His voice softened. “Now I know Jericho Dill since he was a boy, twenty-odd years. He didn’t purposely kill the girl.”

“They never do, do they?” said Savoy.

Muldoon frowned at Savoy then looked earnestly to Judith. “I understand your grind bone, but why so late? You put her in an orphanage and never looked back. Your own flesh and blood, Madam Blowsteen. Helluva thing to ponder. I was led to believe Felix wore your petticoats. But that ain’t the whole big skinny, now is it?”

“We struck a Faustian bargain.”

“Which one played Mephisto?” said Savoy.

“And which one played the dipshit?” said Muldoon. “Webster, read us the file on this little son of a bitch.”

The man re-opened his dossier. “Gordon Gladstone Savoy, born 1876 in San Francisco, orphaned there in 1880. Spent his childhood between three orphanages and four foster families, none who retained him for longer than six months. His academic record was slightly above average, and granted him early independence in 1890. From 1890 to 1892, applied to 13 colleges and denied admission to all. Employed sporadically through the 1890s, eventually drifted to Salt Lake City where he found service as a copy editor at the *Tribune*. During this time he was arrested five times and received misdemeanor convictions on three occasions, two for stealing library books.”

“Library books?” scoffed Muldoon. “Only a jackass steals a library book. You think you can lecture me for my indiscretions?”

“If I may interject,” said Webster. “I think you’re human filth, Sir. Filth as in excrement.”

Savoy shrunk back in his seat. "I took them to read, not to sell. I had no ill intent."

"They never do, do they?" jeered Muldoon.

Judith rose in her seat. She put her hands on the table. "So Gordon and I both have tarnished backgrounds. Along with you, Mr. Muldoon, we comprise a gaggle of gilded cockroaches."

Muldoon nodded slowly. "Very good, Webster. You can go now." Muldoon leafed through several blurry photographs and tossed them aside. "You may be a trespassing sneak, Mr. Savoy, but you ain't no photographer."

Savoy leaned over the desk and recognized the photographs he'd taken of the strike. "Those are mine. I took them last week."

"They betray nothing, boyo," said Muldoon. "Except a dreadful grudge against me interests. Peculiar thing is you got no cause to badger me. Maybe you're a socialist what likes to shit on the better half."

Savoy played with his cigarette tin. "Writing off my intentions as class envy is a bit presumptuous. Envy didn't kill my assistant. Jericho Dill did."

Muldoon chewed air. "The reporter shouldn't have meddled. You exceeded your station and he's missing."

Savoy shook his head. "He's dead."

"Hugo Pritchett is missing, Gordon," said Judith. "As far as we know, he's just been Shanghaied."

"He's dead and you know it."

"Whatever Pritchett's fate, you'll have chance for vengeance. You see, Mr. Muldoon and I are in agreement. There shall be a reckoning."

“Suggesting what?”

“A duel, Gordon, between you and the masculine brute.”

“This vendetta is between you and Jericho,” said Muldoon. “I was a fool to involve myself. You’ll have yourselves a mutual firing at fifteen paces. Kill Dill and I won’t fret. Disinvolve yourself from me affairs and I’ll wash me hands of the filthy business. I done right by Jericho, but time comes when a man has to stand his own ground, especially when he’s a loose cannon liability.”

“But a duel with weapons? You can’t be serious,” said Savoy.

“You a coward?” said Muldoon.

“Why, no.”

“We’re settled then. A week hence, north of Sutro Heights. Bring an unarmed second and Coroner Mifflin will do medical duty. Five will show and four will leave. Survive the duel and we’ll let you be, as long as you censure yourself in the future. But if Dill walks out, you won’t be writing them nasty little articles no more.”

Savoy and Judith sat on the mansion’s marble steps. A million crickets gave voice to the billion stars flickering across the sky. He lit a cigarette with trembling hands, and looked at Judith to gauge her culpability. She shrank under the weight of his gaze.

“Muldoon’s Pinkerton has exhumed more than one skeleton from my closet,” she said.

“And I have him at equal disadvantage with the fruit of your investigations. A duel is the only practical way to resolve this.”

“Am I that expendable?”

“We both are. If you should fall then I should follow. We’ll win or lose together.”

“You’ve gone insane, both you and Muldoon.”

“Oh, hush.” She ran her hands through his hair. “Dill is the larger target and you’ll have the advantage. It’s a gamble we must wager.”



“I could run away, leave town, just disappear.”

“You could do that, but I can’t.”

“Can’t or won’t?”

“You know there is no difference.”

“Then I’ll do it for you.”

“You don’t have to.”

“Don’t I?”

Crickets raked the silence with ceaseless mindless song. Then suddenly and without notice she started to sob. "I've become a perfect monster, haven't I?"

"Don't flatter yourself."