



Slender hands clenched tight the railing. Through salty mist the cable car crept, clattering like a clockwork leviathan. Three yelping hounds trailed the vehicle. Feral and fearless, they bounded and bobbed like wolves down Geary Street.

Gordon Savoy pocketed the tearsheet of his newest article and clutched the iron handholds. He observed the dogs in pursuit and fancied the object of their contention to be less the cable car than he himself. The laborer beside him emitted a tubercular chuckle. "Pay them no mind, me boy. They always heckle trains out here."

Savoy chanced a sidelong glance. The man was rather ugly. "What benefit do they derive from giving chase?"

"Maybe so they can revenge themselves for being born dogs instead of men."

Savoy wiped his hand upon his knee. "That might possibly be the stupidest thing I've ever heard."

The dogs eventually gave up their chase and fell back on one another.

Savoy yanked the brake cord and the cable car slowed to a halt. He snatched his briefcase from the luggage rack and leapt onto the dung strewn street.

The Pacific roared nearby. Clapboard shacks poked through the mist, concealing foreign laughter and the twang of a mouth harp. He cursed beneath his breath as he circumnavigated one puddle and then another. Fog hung so densely Savoy did not discern the boneyard until he was almost inside it.

The pauper's cemetery infested an acre of silty muck between an armless windmill and waterless canal, ringed by a grape stake fence and shadowed by a cypress that swayed its mossy branches in the salty breeze. A team of coolies worked their spades into the soil.

Savoy circled the fence to the entrance. A carriage was parked beside the gate with two horses straining at their tethers. The huddled driver doffed his hat at Savoy's approach. "Good day to you, sir."

"Likewise I'm sure. Who are your passengers? I'm covering the exhumations for the *Sentinel* and like to know who's in charge."

"Mine don't hold no rank. They come for curiosity."

"Anyone of note?"

"Miss Chloe Dexter and her fiancé. I think his interest is of the medical sort."

"The heiress to the Borax fortune? Her fiancé knows how to choose them. What is the gentleman's name?"

"A doctor, with death his sole specialty. If I don't disremember I think his name is Mifflin."

“Fancy that.” Savoy entered the rusty gate and trudged across the muck. A few grave markers were strewn about, some hewn from sandstone but most just redwood planks. The lettering on all but a few proved illegible, scoured blank by the elements. The coolies worked the westernmost corner and Savoy walked over to inspect their efforts.

The stench was a septic reek, green and rotten. It mingled with the ocean breeze to produce a curious fragrance. Repulsively sour yet enticingly sweet, it reminded Savoy of an absinthe and clam juice cocktail.



A stout Irish foreman and a dozen sweating coolies pried collapsed coffins from the sediment and hoisted out the remnants assisted by a donkey. They separated the coffins into moldered wood shards, mildewed linen and corpses in different states of decomposition. Savoy held his handkerchief over his mouth.

Some cadavers appeared recent. Savoy glanced at an uprooted marker dated a half-year past. A fleshy figure in a bescumbered calico dress sprawled atop the pile. Save for the absence of eyes the gray body was intact. The pile beneath comprised a dozen more, most of which were blackened bones. A coolie tossed what appeared to be a military doll atop the pile. On closer inspection Savoy recognized it for a curiously stunted child in a mini-Zuoave uniform.

“Is that Gordon Savoy?” Mifflin appeared through the mist dressed in a buffalo coat and a beaver cap. Beside him strolled a comely young woman. Thin boned and pale, she wore a taut paisley summer dress scarcely concealed by her chinchilla fur coat. Her blonde hair was braided into an intricate bun and her gray eyes were slightly asymmetrical. Savoy tipped his derby to Mifflin and gave a half bow to the heiress.

“My good man,” said Mifflin, “I was under the impression you were bound for Germany.”

“I’m a bit short of the proper funds. Madame Blaustein is very much distracted. Her husband is an invalid and relies on her exclusively.”

“Felix Blaustein is still among the living?” Mifflin turned to Miss Dexter and intoned, “Worst French pox on Nob Hill. A night with Venus, a life with Mercury. ”

Miss Dexter kept her eyes on Savoy. “Everybody knows Felix Blaustein. He used to play billiards with Papa before his illness.”

“Blaustein’s wife leads an active life,” said Mifflin. “She produces the *Sentinel* as a diversion.”

“I haven’t met Madame Blaustein but I’ve heard extraordinary rumors.”

“At any rate, I’m remaining stationary for the time being,” said Savoy. “I think San Franciscans can still derive benefit from my lucidity.”

Miss Dexter stepped from Mifflin. "That's very good of you, Mr. Savoy. May I call you Gordon?"

"Certainly."

"Your editorials create quite a buzz in some circles. May I shake your hand?"

"The pleasure is all mine, Miss."

"Call me Chloe."

Mifflin slipped between them. "What brings you down this way Gordon? Morbid curiosity?"

"The *Sentinel* is an advocate of cemetery relocation and posterity deserves an accurate record of the improvements. The vitality of our city is at stake."

"Corpse vapors," said Mifflin to Miss Dexter. "They cause respiratory ailments if not properly contained."

"I had property values in mind."

"We're putting ourselves in needless danger. There's only one known precaution that counteracts the vapors." Mifflin produced cigars and matches. "Tobacco smoke prevents the onset of lung ailments. Nicotine tar forms a pulmonary barrier against the mephitic particles in corpse vapors, and also protects against cholera and typhus."

Savoy glanced at the coolies. They were all smoking cigarettes.

Miss Dexter accepted a cigar. "Society deems tobacco uncouth and too manly, but if it's prescribed then it's dandy as candy." She sucked on the cigar and burst out coughing.

"Drawing on a cigar should be gentle, as you would a lollipop. Take caution not to swallow."

Mifflin offered one to Savoy. "I prefer nicotine in smaller dosages," said Savoy, and produced a pewter cigarette case.

The three puffed tobacco and observed the exhumations.

"I do enjoy the miracle of tobacco," said Mifflin. "Walter Raleigh was the modern Prometheus."

"Indeed," concurred Miss Dexter. "The same fate befell them both."

"Mifflin, what exactly led you to this desolate strand?" asked Savoy.

"My internship only applies through mid-week. Miss Dexter finds the process of dissolution fascinating, so we decided to make a romantic jaunt."

"We're having a picnic," she added. "Would you like to join us, Gordon?"

Savoy glanced at a maggot riddled corpse. "I haven't much of an appetite, I can't imagine why."

"The soil has curiously high acidity," said Mifflin. "We stand at the cusp of a minor estero and the dirt is dynamically boggish." He pointed at a half skeletal cadaver. "That chap's been dead for decades according to his marker. Yet he displays just a year's decay because this soil tends to mummify its guests."

"There's a Gold Rush woman in the glue cart who still has a face," said Miss Dexter. "She's quite pretty."

Savoy pulled the notebook from his briefcase and wrote in shorthand. A lurking question interrupted his note taking. "Have they released Jericho Dill?"

"You haven't heard? He's looking for you."

"What makes you so sure?"

Mifflin puffed placidly. "The plug ugly hoodlum is after a great many people, but he entertains a special interest in you. Apparently he was never properly acquainted with you or Madame Blaustein. Warden Tompkins had an uncomfortable visit last week at San Quentin, and the interviewer was none other than Jasper Muldoon."

"What did the sugar baron want?"

"He wanted to know about Dill's treatment and your meeting with him in particular. Maybe he's afraid Dill aired his dirty laundry in the shadow of the valley. They have a long history together." He gave Savoy a sympathetic pat. "Are you taking precautionary measures?"

Savoy patted the medical vial in his pocket. "I'm taking laudanum to calm my anxieties. My nerves have been in tatters and I'm losing sleep."

"That simply won't do." Mifflin walked to an exhumed trench. "Come here, Gordon, there's something you must see."

Savoy followed, trailed by Miss Dexter. The intact casket near the lip of the trench resembled a muddy cocoon. Mifflin gave the box a kick and heard a hollow thud in reply.

"This must be a remnant from yesterday's exhumations," Savoy said. "Why hasn't the casket been removed?"

"As a curiosity." Mifflin peeled back the sodden casket lid. The man inside was remarkably intact. The pickling soil had mummified his skin into parchment. He wore a moldy flannel shirt, checker-print trousers, and a woman's clogs. His face was frozen in a silent scream. Hands were absent from the cadaver's knobby wrists.

"As a journalist, what do you find remarkable about this fellow, aside for his arrested decay?"

“Did he lose his hands in a manufactory mishap?”

Mifflin shook his head and blew a smoke ring. “He was handsome on departure yet handless on arrival.”

“What the hell does that mean?”

“It means he chewed his hands off because the sorry bastard was buried alive.”

Savoy grimaced. “Is this possible?”

“When morphia fiends overindulge they fall fast asleep. In fact morphia comas are difficult to tell from death itself. The body temperature drops and sometimes the heart slows to a single beat per minute. Since lowlifes and vagabonds don’t merit autopsies, we plant them like potatoes. Then they wake up and get extremely anxious. With a couple hours of air to burn, they eat their hands to pass the time. Happens quite often. Silly fellows, those morphia revelers.”

“You’re joshing me, right?”

Mifflin probed the cadaver’s scream and extracted a desiccated thumb with an ingrown nail. He smelt it and frowned. “Voracious chap,” he said, returning the digit to the owner’s mouth. “A wonder he didn’t chew his way to freedom.”

“Good God, that’s horrible.”

“Beware of laudanum, lest you wake up in a similar predicament.”

Savoy kicked the casket shut. “You’ve got a fine point. I’ll combat my insomnia with whiskey from now on.”

Miss Dexter chimed in, "You could seek nocturnal liaisons with lady friends. If you're unable to drowse, carnal relations beget the sweetest slumbers." She glanced at Mifflin. "Or so I've heard."

Mifflin added, "When I inquired about your precautions, Gordon, I was referring more to sidearms than calmatives."

"You think I should arm myself?"

"Does China have an Empress? Does Russia have a Tsar? Of course you should arm yourself, this is America."

"I'm a journalist, not a dragoon. I've never fired a shot in my life."

"We'll soon change that." Mifflin reached beneath his overcoat and produced an ivory handled revolver, all jagged edges and jutting muzzle. He handed Savoy the weapon. "This is a Schofield spur-trigger .44. It's slow to shoot but makes big nasty holes."

Savoy held the gun by the trigger guard, uncertain how to proceed. "I can't shoot a horse pistol like this."

"Nonsense," said Mifflin. He turned toward the exhumation party and waved the foreman forward. "Paddy, be a saint and oblige us with a cadaver against the tree. We're going to indulge in target practice."

"Just dug out a fresh one," replied the foreman. "Yours, I reckon."

"What's the label and vintage?"

"Danzig Phelps. Off the Rock, one month hung."

“Do prop him up,” said Mifflin. To Savoy he explained, “Phelps was a callous jugulator, utterly irredeemable. I was there when they dropped him and good riddance.”

Three coolies hefted the bulky form from the corpse pile to the cypress tree. They propped the body against the gnarled bark and scrambled away in a timid shuffle.

They approached the tree. “I knew we’d meet again one day, but never so soon,” said Mifflin.

Danzig Phelps leaned gaunt and grim against the cypress. He had been a large man, bald and clean shaven, clad in prison pinstripes. His gut was swollen and a hemp noose dangled from around his crooked neck.

Savoy took aim.

“Cock the hammer. Good,” directed Mifflin. “Line the sights with the target. He’s a gassy one. Put one in his belly and he’ll pop like a party favor.”

“Are you quite certain we’re not violating some ordinance?”

“He’s fodder for the glue vats and nobody gives a damn. Shoot.”

Savoy pulled the trigger and the revolver kicked out a loud crash. The shot cleft a crater from the corpse’s thigh.

Mifflin yanked the revolver from Savoy’s hand. “Let me show you how it’s done.” He cocked the hammer and clenched his cigar in his teeth. The gun roared and a gash appeared in the tree’s bark a foot above the corpse’s head. He fired again and the wiry buzz of a ricochet whirred into the distance. He fired again and somewhere beyond the fog veil a window shattered and a woman shrieked. Mifflin cast the cigar aside. He took aim once more and his shot struck home. The cadaver’s gut ruptured in a spray of broth, bile, and entrails.

“Well done,” said Miss Dexter. She pecked him on the cheek. “Allow me a try.” Mifflin handed her the weapon. She took aim and fired.



The cadaver's skull splattered into liquefied brains and bone shards. She squealed in delight and embraced Savoy, then Mifflin. She broke away from his grasp and left the revolver in his hand.

She led Savoy over to examine the injuries they had inflicted. The stench was ripe. She'd discarded her cigar somewhere so Savoy lit her a cigarette. “We wouldn't want to fall sick from corpse vapors.” The hollow skull of Danzig Phelps was devoid a face and his abdominal cavity had emptied out. His audience smoked their cigarettes and dispassionately surveyed their work.

“To think that was a once a man, and recently,” said Savoy.

“Have you heard his crimes? That was never a man, it was a rabid dog.”

“You’re a marvelous shot. I’d hate to incur your wrath.”

“Hell hath no fury.” She produced a silk handkerchief and bent down to scoop something from the ground. “Here is the nose of Danzig Phelps,” she said to Savoy. “Keep this as a souvenir.”

“I am honored.” He rolled the nose in the handkerchief and stuffed the package in his pocket, intending to soon discard it.

He rejoined Mifflin, who stood reloading his revolver with thick metallic cartridges. “Do you always pack a pistol?”

“Whenever it’s convenient. My prison duties put me at odds with society’s dregs.”

“You’re right, I should arm myself. But I’d prefer something less imposing than a cavalry revolver. Perhaps a derringer?”

“They say size doesn’t matter so much as how you use it.” Mifflin snapped the cylinder of his revolver in place. “But they do say a great many things. And Dill is nasty as nasty gets.”

A whistle rang out from an approaching municipal officer. Mifflin walked to meet him and the coolies rose to watch.

“Good day to you, sir,” said Mifflin, holding his revolver by the barrel. “I’m Rutherford Mifflin, forensic pathologist with the city’s coroner department. What may I do for you?”

The officer removed the whistle from his mouth. “I heard shots. Everything square?”

“Very well, thank you. I’m conducting a ballistic test on this glue slotted cadaver. He was a hoodlum in life. Would you care for a shot?”

The officer grinned. “Mind if I use my own piece?”

“Be my guest.”

Mifflin and the officer walked side by side to the cypress. They unloaded their weapons on the remains of Danzig Phelps, the laborers resumed their toils, and Savoy and Miss Dexter grew closer.

The Geary Street cable car grumbled through the fathomless fog. Savoy slouched in the corner and jotted in his notebook:

The menace of morphia over-consumption: arrested life illustrated by arrested decay. Jericho Dill is looking for you. Preservative qualities of the bog-soil prolong the potential threat of corpse vapors. Jericho Dill is looking for you. Tobacco is not an affordable preventative for the destitute. Jericho Dill is looking for you. Adhesive and real estate stocks stand to benefit. Contact brokerage? Jericho Dill is looking for you. Chloe Dexter, heiress to millions, quite ravishing. Taken by a vulture. Jericho Dill is looking for you. Deutschland, first class, one way, is \$173. Jericho Dill is...

Savoy’s hand trembled. He reached inside his coat and extracted his laudanum vial. He unscrewed the cap and took a sip, then another. The trembling subsided. He glanced at the elderly gentleman seated across the narrow aisle. The man had wispy hair in an uncombed mess and his thick white moustache was also unkempt. Clad in black and frowning at the floor, he bore a remarkable resemblance to “Bitter” Bierce, the infamous journalist.

“Excuse me, but aren’t you Ambrose Bierce?”

The old man jerked his head. “Who the hell wants to know?”

“I thought you’d relocated back East.” Savoy moved across the aisle to sit beside the object of his intention. “You’re the only writer of merit employed by Hearst. I read the *Examiner* only for the Prattler.”

Bierce inched away. “My purse is empty and I’ve disowned the art of character assassination. And for the record, I’m armed.”

“I’m a journalist, too, though not of your caliber. I just read your latest article, the ‘Essay on Posthumous Fame.’ Splendid that. Also, ‘The Diversions of an Idler.’ ”

“Those were published months ago. What paper are you with?”

“The name’s Gordon Savoy. I edit the *Sentinel*. We’re a bit new but our audience is expanding. Let me show you the latest front page article.” Savoy unfolded an ink-smudged tearsheet and handed it forward:

November 23, 1905

Squatters befoul San Francisco’s most desirable real estate and render the land useless to development. These unsavory tenants are worse than Indians, Orientals, or Colored, because they pay no rent, contribute no taxes, and consume neither dry goods, produce, nor entertainment. They do not

participate in our economy yet enjoy the benefits of medieval lords over their vassals. Why then have we submitted to their authority? Because they are dead.

The tyranny of the dead has free reign in our lovely metropolis. From Fort Point to San Bruno, the air is rank and rancid. We have long endured the foul carrion stench issuing from our cemeteries. The stifling proximity of our dead is arresting our growth much as the Manchus retard the feet of their young women. The time has come to rend our restraints. Is the Yerba Buena Peninsula to be an exuberant city or a fetid necropolis?

Nearly a square mile of valuable real estate is occupied by Laurel Hill Cemetery in the Outlands, while the Jewish "Hills of Eternity" cemetery occupies the entire bluff west of Mission Dolores, with a view more appropriate to millionaire's mansions than Semitic cadavers. A host of smaller cemeteries are scattered across our city like festering sores from Land's End to Russian Hill. This property is made fallow and useless by death's dominion, and these graves stand as an offense to the common sense of the living.

Charity might bid misguided compassion for these loathsome squatters. Some may presume the dead have done their part and merit perpetual beds, free of charge, and defend the useless compost heaps. "We must tolerate them, for we'll one day be as they are," one might say, or "Allow their mortal remains safe haven, for they sleep in Christ, who is your Lord and Savior as well as theirs." Hogwash, says the Sentinel. We have an alternative.

The vast necropolis of Lawndale is an eager receptacle for yesterday's dead. This lies south of our city and provides a solution to our present blight. Transportation is convenient, as the Joost Electric Railway now runs directly from Market down to Lawndale, via a spur track, and has a special funeral trolley car, "El Descanso," specifically for the transfer of cadavers. We have no excuse not to exhume and transfer San Francisco's cemeteries. Our economy depends on this.

For the departed with no living ward to affect their transfer, the Graf Verklarung Glue Corporation has offered to cover all fees and dispose of unclaimed remains free of charge. They are currently working with Todsberger Real Estate Guild to exhume the pauper's cemetery near Ocean Beach. One can only hope San Francisco's cemeteries shall be removed en masse in the near future, and the Verklarung/Todsberger exhumations are an exemplary beginning.

—Gordon Savoy, Editor, the San Francisco Sentinel

Bierce smirked as he read. "You write for this snot-rag?" He handed the paper to Savoy. "I'd wipe my arse with the *Sentinel*, except the cheap ink would give me hemorrhoids."

"Sir, my newspaper champions causes Hearst won't acknowledge. I believe oligarchies to be obsolete."

"Oligarchy. Theocracy. Democracy. Mobocracy Pornocracy. They're all the same horseshit. Hearst's got a golden spoon stuck up his arse but he pays the bills. What's your excuse?"

"I haven't given up on humanity's potential."

Bierce broke into an asthmatic cackle. "You've really got the rhetoric down, crusader boy. Live some more and you'll see the truth. There's a festering turd floating between nowhere and nowhere, crusted over with vermin all squiggling round like maggots. And you're one of them and so am I. There's no God and there's no Heaven, and no angels singing 'traah-laah-laah.' But there is death, heaps of death. But death don't matter so much, cause when we get they're were not there to see it. Just like before we were born. Got me so far?"

"Yes."

“And that’s all the truth we have: Death, shit and death again. Every time you work, play or screw is a denial of death. Every word you say or write is a lie, cause the only truth is the shit and the death that frames the shit. We only got time to kill so we stir the shit and divide it into good and bad, black and white, this and that. But when we try to make an evil into a good, or vice versa, the world gets shittier. Why do you think that is?”

“Because it’s all shit to begin with?”

“Good boy. If you love somebody they’ll betray you. If they don’t betray you they’ll die. If they don’t die then you will. It’s the same way with social causes and beliefs. Once you know this in your heart you’ll finally be a brilliant journalist like me. But if you don’t see your words for lies then you’re the lie.” Bierce glanced out the window and pulled the cord. “This is where I get off. You know what Utopia is? It’s the froth at the surface of the cesspool.” He limped out the exit and vanished into the darkening fog.

Savoy sat motionless as the cable car resumed its journey. Outside a world rose up roaring and skulked past brooding and fell back into the void. He studied his hands. The silt beneath his fingernails was vulgar but no amount of digging could dislodge it.

Savoy rode the cable car downtown, got off at Van Ness and wandered down to Market Street. Moths fluttered in the lamplight. He joined the restless evening throngs. Twilight permeated alleys and boulevards and rendered people as phantoms who originated and terminated nowhere.

“Wuxtry! Wuxtry!” cried a street gamin, “Getcher *Examiner* here!”

“Keep your filthy rag,” muttered Savoy. “I’d wipe my arse with it but the cheap ink would cause hemorrhoids.” He broke from the crowd and followed Second Street to Folsom and circled the block to view the *Sentinel* office. The interior was lit by dampened lamplight.

Savoy reached into his pocket and fingered his office keys, one of only four sets. The printer, Pentti Salonen, might be working late on the press but this was not his habit. Savoy’s assistant, Eugene Sinclair, would also have long since gone home. Madame Blaustein left all responsibility for running the newspaper to Savoy and had no business there. He crossed the street. Two figures appeared in his office window and he recognized neither. He pocketed his keys and crossed to the opposite boardwalk.

A foghorn voice bellowed, “He’s down there, boys!” Three figures scrambled down the *Sentinel* stairs after Savoy.

He sprinted through puddles and past glowing gaslights and over boardwalks and nearly collided with a trolley on Market Street as his pursuers pursued him, panting like dogs.

He turned the corner onto Market Street and burst headlong through entangling crowds and dodged a jumble of gentlemen idling under the soft haze of a theater marquee. He crouched in the doorway of a closed storefront until his hunters passed him by, and then sprinted in the opposite direction through the alleys of the Tenderloin until his breath finally abandoned him. He hung his head gasping and wheezing and nursed his laudanum vial and calmly composed himself.

He exited a dark alley into the Barbary Coast’s sprawl of flophouses, saloons, brothels and opium dens. He saw sailors in servitude and cabin boys and catamites and malingering drunks with bedbugs in their sideburns and muttonchops flecked with horseshit. He saw aldermen with upturned collars who fondled prostitutes with breasts like cantaloupes or like crabapples, and slouching pimps and vagabonds who loitered to boast and share bottles of gin, and mumbling fiends that stumbled around in lonely

stupors and also dagger eyed dandies who patrolled the scene with pistols in their belts and bludgeons in their hands. The hoodlums sang:

“There’s a good time coming, boys,

a good time coming.

We may not live to see the day,

but earth shall glisten in the ray

of the good time coming.”

Savoy felt the scrutiny of predatory eyes. He approached the closest business, where a towering hawk nosed doorman with a drooping handlebar moustache seized him by the shoulder. “Entrance fee is a dollar, friend.”

“That’s absurd. I’m just here for hooch, not hootchy coochy.”

“We got Jager Fleischmann’s Automaton Wunderhunds tonight. It’s a special engagement.”

“A dollar to see dogs?” Savoy fished a silver dollar from his pocket.

The doorman snatched the coin. “These are special dogs.”

Savoy wandered into the saloon’s crowded interior. An old forte piano squatted in the corner of a small stage flanked by velvet curtains and backlit by a stained glass window. A mottled dun hound stood on its hind legs and leaned on the keys. Its massive paws banged out a barely recognizable rendition of the opening motif from Franz Schubert’s *Death and the Maiden*. The canine pianist shared the stage with a bitch of the same ambiguous breed. Dressed in a pink tutu, she danced on her legs with the

demeanor of dying ballerina. A third dog crouched atop the piano and howled accompaniment in a hypnotic mezzo-soprano: "Rooh. Rooh-yelp-rooh. Yelp-rooh-yelp. Rooh-yelp-rooh."



Center stage wriggled two mannequins suspended on crankshafts so their limbs weaved the pantomime of mechanical mimes. The two life sized dolls were fashioned to resemble Adam and Eve before the Fall and the embalmed hides of an adult man and woman formed their lifelike exteriors. Wire frames were visible through the translucent skin and the man's member had shriveled to leathery flap. Porcelain eyes peered from the painted clown faces to regard each spectator and send uncomfortable shudders through the crowd.

Savoy ordered a drink from the bar and watched the bartender closely for fear of Shanghai drops. The beverage they brought him tasted almost like beer. He pushed his way through the tables to a gap in the crowd but it was actually a deep pit dug in the floor and draped in chicken wire.

A man in an opera hat took the stage and commanded, "Auflosung!" The Wunderhunds ceased their performance. He announced the intermission and a stagehand stopped the automaton's movement. The three dogs followed the man offstage with wagging tails and nudging muzzles.

Savoy confronted the dog handler. "Excuse me, but are you Jager Fleischmann?"

The man rose from his Wunderhunds. "What may I do for you?"

"I'm a journalist. You have a splendid act. Might I pose a few questions?"

"Yah," said Fleischmann. He lit a cigarette.

"You've done wonders with the hound duet. What else can they perform?"

"They only play Schubert."

Savoy cocked his head at the motionless automatons. "Those dancing dolls are marvelous, but what do they mean?"

"The automatons are human and the hounds are their artists, therefore their redeemers, ephemeral gods. The dance becomes meaningless without narration." He blew a smoke cloud at Savoy. "Which are you mein herr, a dog or a god?"

"Is there a difference?" Savoy coughed. "Where did you come by your animals?"

“The hounds are Himalayan corpse-eaters from the mountains where the dead go unburied. Asiatic Gypsies sold them to me in Katmandu long ago. Intelligence is derived from food, therefore the hounds’ brilliance is deep as mans’ stupidity.”

“Imagine that. What about the dancing dolls?”

“The mechanical workings I found in Strasbourg. They are very old, perhaps from the French Court. The skins I acquired here, as they lose their elasticity every year. They are human, of course.”

“Just between gentlemen, where does one procure human skin?”

“The Verklarung Glue Company. Also, they sell good dog biscuits. My hounds love them.”

“I see,” Savoy nodded. He fumbled in his coat pocket for his notebook and found his balled up handkerchief containing the nose of Danzig Phelps.

“What is this?”

“If your dogs like Verklarung dog biscuits they’ll love this.” Savoy tossed the nose to the tutu clad corpsehound and she caught the morsel with a snap. She wagged her stubby tail and gulped the green flesh down.

Savoy tiptoed along the creaky stairs to his Russian Hill flat. The front door had been kicked in and the apartment was wrecked. His writing desk was overturned, his new typewriter shattered, journals and papers scattered across the varnished floors like snowdrifts. An inkwell spilled in an ugly black puddle. Across the floor and on his papers the large boots of Savoy’s hunters left their inky imprints.

Jericho Dill is looking for you.

He saw the shattered bolt and clenched his teeth and wedged his writing chair against the door as feeble security. In the bedroom his mattress was overturned and sliced by razors, and the framed tintype of his late parents splattered with opalescent paste. On the floral wallpaper he read an inky finger's scrawl: *I wil find yoo*. He wiped his parents' portrait clean with the sleeve of his coat.

His yawning wardrobe revealed emptiness inside and his shredded clothing lay strewn about like viscera. He nudged his tattered garments aside and climbed inside the wardrobe. He shut the doors to crouch in the darkness.

He fumbled for his laudanum vial and suckled for a moment before realizing the vial was empty. An infinite drop loomed below him and the tiny molten heart of the world was smaller than a marble yet dragged the universe in an endless empty spiral. Curled like a cozy fetus, Savoy huddled in the wardrobe's belly and shivered. It felt like a cradle and felt like a casket.