

Against The Day

by
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**First
Published**

2006

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N ow single up all lines!”

“Cheerly now . . . handsomely . . . very well! Prepare to cast her off!”

“Windy City, here we come!”

“Hurrah! Up we go!”

It was amid such lively exclamation that the hydrogen skyship *Inconvenience*, its gondola draped with patriotic bunting, carrying a five-lad crew belonging to that celebrated aeronautics club known as the Chums of Chance, ascended briskly into the morning, and soon caught the southerly wind.

When the ship reached cruising altitude, those features left behind on the ground having now dwindled to all but microscopic size, Randolph St. Cosmo, the ship commander, announced, “Now secure the Special Sky Detail,” and the boys, each dressed neatly in the summer uniform of red-and-white-striped blazer and trousers of sky blue, spiritedly complied.

They were bound this day for the city of Chicago, and the World’s Columbian Exposition recently opened there. Since their orders had come through, the “scuttlebutt” among the excited and curious crew had been of little besides the fabled “White City,” its great Ferris wheel, alabaster temples of commerce and industry, sparkling lagoons, and the thousand more such wonders, of both a scientific and an artistic nature, which awaited them there.

“Oh, boy!” cried Darby Suckling, as he leaned over the lifelines to watch the national heartland deeply swung in a whirling blur of green far below, his tow-colored locks streaming in the wind past the gondola like a banner to leeward. (Darby, as my faithful readers will remember, was the “baby” of the crew, and served as both factotum and mascotte, singing as well the difficult

treble parts whenever these adolescent aeronauts found it impossible to contain song of some kind.) "I can't hardly wait!" he exclaimed.

"For which you have just earned five more demerits!" advised a stern voice close to his ear, as he was abruptly seized from behind and lifted clear of the lifelines. "Or shall we say ten? How many times," continued Lindsay Noseworth, second-in-command here and known for his impatience with all manifestations of the slack, "have you been warned, Suckling, against informality of speech?" With the deftness of long habit, he flipped Darby upside down, and held the flyweight lad dangling by the ankles out into empty space—"terra firma" by now being easily half a mile below—proceeding to lecture him on the many evils of looseness in one's expression, not least among them being the ease with which it may lead to profanity, and worse. As all the while, however, Darby was screaming in terror, it is doubtful how many of the useful sentiments actually found their mark.

"Say, that is enough, Lindsay," advised Randolph St. Cosmo. "The lad has work to do, and if you frighten him that way, he sure won't be of much use."

"All right, short-stuff, turn to," muttered Lindsay, reluctantly setting the terrified Darby back on his feet. As Master-at-Arms, in charge of discipline aboard the ship, he went about his job with a humorless severity which might, to the impartial observer, easily have suggested a form of monomania. But considering the ease with which this high-spirited crew were apt to find pretexts for skylarking—resulting more than once in the sort of "close call" which causes aeronauts to freeze with horror—Randolph usually allowed his second-in-command to err on the side of vehemence.

From the far end of the gondola now came a prolonged crash, followed by an intemperate muttering that caused Randolph, as always, to frown and reach for his stomach. "I have only tripped over one of these picnic baskets," called out Handyman Apprentice Miles Blundell, "the one all the crockery was in, 's what it looks like. . . . I guess I did not see it, Professor."

"Perhaps its familiarity," Randolph suggested plaintively, "rendered it temporarily invisible to you." His reproof, though approaching the caustic, was well founded, for Miles, while possessed of good intentions and the kindest heart in the little band, suffered at times from a confusion in his motor processes, often producing lively results, yet as frequently compromising the crew's physical safety. As Miles now went about picking up pieces of the damaged porcelain, he evoked the mirth of one Chick Counterfly, the newest member of the crew, who was leaning against a stay, observing him.

"Ha, ha," cried young Counterfly, "say, but if you ain't the most slob-footed chap I ever seen! Ha, ha, ha!" An angry retort sprang to Miles's lips, but he suppressed it, reminding himself that, as insult and provocation came natu-

rally to the class from which the newcomer sprang, it was upon his unhealthy past that one must blame the lad's habits of speech.

"Why don't you give me some of that fancy silverware, Blundell?" young Counterfly now continued. "And when we get to Chicago we'll find us a 'hock shop' a-and—"

"I recall to your attention," replied Miles politely, "that all tableware bearing the Chums of Chance Insignia is Organizational property, to be kept aboard ship for use during official meal periods."

"Like Sunday school around here," muttered the picklesome youth.

At one end of the gondola, largely oblivious to the coming and going on deck, with his tail thumping expressively now and then against the planking, and his nose among the pages of a volume by Mr. Henry James, lay a dog of no particular breed, to all appearances absorbed by the text before him. Ever since the Chums, during a confidential assignment in Our Nation's Capital (see *The Chums of Chance and the Evil Halfwit*), had rescued Pugnax, then but a pup, from a furious encounter in the shadow of the Washington Monument between rival packs of the District's wild dogs, it had been his habit to investigate the pages of whatever printed material should find its way on board *Inconvenience*, from theoretical treatments of the aeronautical arts to often less appropriate matter, such as the "dime novels"—though his preference seemed more for sentimental tales about his own species than those exhibiting extremes of human behavior, which he appeared to find a bit lurid. He had learned with the readiness peculiar to dogs how with the utmost delicacy to turn pages using nose or paws, and anyone observing him thus engaged could not help noting the changing expressions of his face, in particular the uncommonly articulate eyebrows, which contributed to an overall effect of interest, sympathy, and—the conclusion could scarce be avoided—comprehension.

An old aerostat hand by now, Pugnax had also learned, like the rest of the crew, to respond to "calls of nature" by proceeding to the downwind side of the gondola, resulting in surprises among the surface populations below, but not often enough, or even notably enough, for anyone to begin to try to record, much less coördinate reports of, these lavatorial assaults from the sky. They entered rather the realm of folklore, superstition, or perhaps, if one does not mind stretching the definition, the religious.

Darby Suckling, having recovered from his recent atmospheric excursion, addressed the studious canine. "I say, Pugnax—what's that you're reading now, old fellow?"

"Rr Rff-rff Rr-rr-rff-rff," replied Pugnax without looking up, which Darby, having like the others in the crew got used to Pugnax's voice—easier,

really, than some of the regional American accents the boys heard in their travels—now interpreted as, “*The Princess Casamassima*.”

“Ah. Some sort of . . . Italian romance, I’ll bet?”

“Its subject,” he was promptly informed by the ever-alert Lindsay Noseworth, who had overheard the exchange, “is the inexorably rising tide of World Anarchism, to be found peculiarly rampant, in fact, at our current destination—a sinister affliction to which I pray we shall suffer no occasion for exposure more immediate than that to be experienced, as with Pugnax at this moment, safely within the fictional leaves of some book.” Placing upon the word “book” an emphasis whose level of contempt can be approached perhaps only by Executive Officers. Pugnax sniffed briefly in Lindsay’s direction, trying to detect that combination of olfactory “notes” he had grown accustomed to finding in other humans. But as always this scent eluded him. There might be an explanation, though he was not sure he should insist upon one. Explanations did not, as far as he could tell, appear to be anything dogs either sought or even were entitled to. Especially dogs who spent as much time as Pugnax did up here, in the sky, far above the inexhaustible complex of odors to be found on the surface of the planet below.

The wind, which till now had been steady on their starboard quarter, began to shift. As their orders had directed them to proceed to Chicago without delay, Randolph, after studying an aeronautical chart of the country below them, called out, “Now, Suckling—aloft with the anemometer—Blundell and Counterfly, stand by the Screw,” referring to an aerial-propulsion device, which the more scientific among my young readers may recall from the boys’ earlier adventures (*The Chums of Chance at Krakatoa*, *The Chums of Chance Search for Atlantis*), for augmenting the cruising speed of the *Inconvenience*—invented by their longtime friend Professor Heino Vanderjuice of New Haven, and powered by an ingenious turbine engine whose boiler was heated by burning surplus hydrogen gas taken from the envelope through special valve arrangements—though the invention had been predictably disparaged by Dr. Vanderjuice’s many rivals as no better than a perpetual-motion machine, in clear violation of thermodynamical law.

Miles, with his marginal gifts of coördination, and Chick, with a want of alacrity fully as perceptible, took their stations at the control-panels of the apparatus, as Darby Suckling, meantime, went scrambling up the ratlines and shrouds of the giant ellipsoidal envelope from which the gondola depended, to the very top, where the aery flux was uninterrupted, in order to read, from an anemometer of the Robinson’s type, accurate wind measurements, as an index of how rapidly the ship was proceeding, conveying these down to the bridge by means of a written note inside a tennis-ball lowered on

a length of line. It will be recalled that this method of passing information had been adopted by the crew during their brief though inconclusive sojourn "south of the border," where they had observed it among the low elements who dissipate their lives in placing wagers on the outcomes of *pelota* games. (For readers here making their first acquaintance with our band of young adventurers, it must be emphasized at once that—perhaps excepting the as yet insufficiently known Chick Counterfly—none would e'er have entered the morally poisonous atmosphere of the "*frontón*," as such haunts are called down there, had it not been essential to the intelligence-gathering activities the Chums had contracted to render at that time to the Interior Ministry of President Porfirio Díaz. For details of their exploits, see *The Chums of Chance in Old Mexico*.)

Though the extreme hazard was obvious to all, Darby's enthusiasm for the task at hand created, as ever, a magical cloak about his elfin form that seemed to protect him, though not from the sarcasm of Chick Counterfly, who now called after the ascending mascotte, "Hey! Suckling! Only a *sap-head* would risk his life to see how fast the wind's blowing!"

Hearing this, Lindsay Noseworth frowned in perplexity. Even allowing for his irregular history—a mother, so it was said, vanished when he was yet a babe—a father, disreputably adrift somewhere in the Old Confederacy—Counterfly's propensity for gratuitous insult had begun to pose a threat to his probationary status with the Chums of Chance, if not, indeed, to group morale.

Two weeks previous, beside a black-water river of the Deep South, with the Chums attempting to negotiate a bitter and unresolved "piece of business" from the Rebellion of thirty years previous—one still not advisable to set upon one's page—Chick had appeared one night at their encampment in a state of extreme fright, pursued by a band of night-riders in white robes and sinister pointed hoods, whom the boys recognized immediately as the dreaded "Ku Klux Klan."

His story, as clearly as could be made out among the abrupt changes of register which typify the adolescent voice, exacerbated by the perilousness of the situation, was as follows. Chick's father, Richard, commonly known as "Dick," originally from the North, had for several years been active in the Old Confederacy trying his hand at a number of business projects, none of which, regrettably, had proven successful, and not a few of which, in fact, had obliged him, as the phrase went, to approach the gates of the Penitentiary. At length, upon the imminent arrival of a posse comitatus who had learned of his attempted scheme to sell the state of Mississippi to a mysterious Chinese consortium based in Tijuana, Mexico, "Dick" Counterfly had absquatulated

swiftly into the night, leaving his son with only a pocketful of specie and the tender admonition, "Got to 'scram,' kid—write if you get work." Since then Chick had lived from hand to mouth, until, at the town of Thick Bush, not far from the Chums' encampment, someone, recognizing him as the son of a notorious and widely sought "carpetbagger," had suggested an immediate application of tar and feathers to his person.

"Much as we might be inclined to offer our protection," Lindsay had informed the agitated youth, "here upon the ground we are constrained by our Charter, which directs us never to interfere with legal customs of any locality down at which we may happen to have touched."

"You ain't from these parts," replied Chick, somewhat sharply. "When they're after a fellow, legal ain't got nothing to do with it—it's run, Yankee, run, and Katie bar the door."

"In polite discourse," Lindsay hastened to correct him, "'isn't' is preferable to 'ain't.'"

"Noseworth, for mercy's sake!" cried Randolph St. Cosmo, who had been glancing anxiously out at the robed and hooded figures at the perimeter of the camp, the blazing torches they carried lighting each fold and wrinkle of their rude drapery with almost theatrical precision and casting weird shadows among the tupelo, cypress, and hickory. "There is nothing further to discuss—this fellow is to be granted asylum and, if he wishes, provisional membership in our Unit. There certainly remains to him no future down here."

It had been a night of sleepless precaution lest sparks from the torches of the mob drift anywhere near the hydrogen-generating apparatus and devastation result. In time, however, the ominously cloaked rustics, perhaps in superstitious fear of that very machinery, had dispersed to their homes and haunts. And Chick Counterfly, for better or worse, had remained. . . .

The Screw device soon accelerated the ship to a speed which, added to that of the wind from directly astern, made it nearly invisible from the ground. "We're doing a way better than a mile a minute," remarked Chick Counterfly from the control-console, unable to eliminate from his voice a certain awe.

"That could put us in Chicago before nightfall," reckoned Randolph St. Cosmo. "Feeling all right, Counterfly?"

"Crackerjack!" exclaimed Chick.

Like most "rookies" in the organization, Chick had found his initial difficulties to lie not so much with velocity as with altitude, and the changes in air-pressure and temperature that went along with it. The first few times aloft, he did his duty without complaint but one day was discovered unautho-

rizedly rummaging through a locker containing various items of arctic gear. When confronted by Lindsay Noseworth, the lad in his defense could only chatter, “C-c-cold!”

“Do not imagine,” Lindsay instructed, “that in coming aboard *Inconvenience* you have escaped into any realm of the counterfactual. There may not be mangrove swamps or lynch law up here, but we must nonetheless live with the constraints of the given world, notable among them the decrease of temperature with altitude. Eventually your sensitivities in that regard should moderate, and in the meantime”—tossing him a foul-weather cloak of black Japanese goatskin with C. OF C. PROPERTY stenciled in bright yellow on the back—“this is to be considered as a transitional garment only, until such time as you adapt to these altitudes and, if fortunate, learn the lessons of unpremeditated habitude among them.”

“Here it is in a nutshell,” Randolph confided later. “Going up is like going north.” He stood blinking, as if expecting comment.

“But,” it occurred to Chick, “if you keep going far enough north, eventually you pass over the Pole, and then you’re heading south again.”

“Yes.” The skyship commander shrugged uncomfortably.

“So . . . if you went up high enough, you’d be going *down* again?”

“Shh!” warned Randolph St. Cosmo.

“Approaching the surface of *another planet*, maybe?” Chick persisted.

“Not exactly. No. Another ‘surface,’ but an earthly one. Often to our regret, all too earthly. More than that, I am reluctant—”

“These are mysteries of the profession,” Chick supposed.

“You’ll see. In time, of course.”

As they came in low over the Stockyards, the smell found them, the smell and the uproar of flesh learning its mortality—like the dark conjugate of some daylit fiction they had flown here, as appeared increasingly likely, to help promote. Somewhere down there was the White City promised in the Columbian Exposition brochures, somewhere among the tall smokestacks unceasingly vomiting black grease-smoke, the effluvia of butchery unremitting, into which the buildings of the leagues of city lying downwind retreated, like children into sleep which bringeth not reprieve from the day. In the Stockyards, workers coming off shift, overwhelmingly of the Roman faith, able to detach from earth and blood for a few precious seconds, looked up at the airship in wonder, imagining a detachment of not necessarily helpful angels.

Beneath the rubbernecking Chums of Chance wheeled streets and alleyways in a Cartesian grid, sketched in sepia, mile on mile. “The Great Bovine City of the World,” breathed Lindsay in wonder. Indeed, the backs of cattle far outnumbered the tops of human hats. From this height it was as if the Chums, who, out on adventures past, had often witnessed the vast herds of cattle adrift in ever-changing cloudlike patterns across the Western plains, here saw that unshaped freedom being rationalized into movement only in straight lines and at right angles and a progressive reduction of choices, until the final turn through the final gate that led to the killing-floor.

Close to sundown, south of the city, as the *Inconvenience* bobbed in fitful breezes above a sweeping stretch of prairie which was to be the site this week of the great international gathering of aeronauts being held in conjunction with the World’s Fair, “Professor” St. Cosmo, spying at length a clear patch of

meadow among the vast population of airships already berthed below, had given the order, "Prepare to descend." The state of reduced attention into which he seemed then to have drifted was broken soon enough by Lindsay, advising, biliously, "As I am sure it has not escaped your attention, Blundell's ineptness with the Main Valve, grown I fear habitual, has increased the speed of our descent to a notable, if not in fact alarming, degree."

Indeed, the well-meaning but far from dextrous Miles Blundell had somehow contrived to wrap the pull-rope leading to the valve mechanism around his foot, and could be seen moving that extremity to and fro, a bewildered look on his wide, honest face, in hopes that the spring-loaded valve would thus, somehow, close again—for it had already allowed an enormous quantity of hydrogen gas to escape the envelope in a sudden rush, causing the ship to plummet toward the lakeside like a toy dropped by some cosmic urchin.

"Blundell, what in Heaven's name!" Randolph exclaimed. "Why, you will destroy us all!"

"Say, it just got tangled up, Professor," declared Miles, plucking ineffectually at the coils of hemp, which only grew more snarled as his efforts continued.

With an inadvertent yet innocuous oath, Lindsay had sprung to the side of young Blundell, grasping him about his ample waist, in an attempt to lift him, in hopes that this would relieve the tautness in the pull-rope and allow the valve to close. "Here, Counterfly," the second-in-command snapped at Chick, who, jeeringly amused, had been lounging against a gear locker, "do rouse yourself for a moment and bear a hand with Blundell," that awkward fellow, disposed to ticklishness, meanwhile having begun to scream and thrash about in his efforts to escape Lindsay's grasp. Chick Counterfly rose indolently and approached the lurching pair with some caution, unsure of which part of Miles to take hold of, lest it but increase his agitation.

As the vital gas continued to stream in unsettling shriek from the valve overhead, and the airship to plunge ever more rapidly Earthward, Randolph, gazing at the feckless struggling of his crew, understood too well that the responsibility for the disaster nearly upon them was, as always, none but his own, this time for having delegated duties to those unskilled in them. . . .

His broodful reflections were interrupted by Darby, running over to tug at the sleeve of his blazer—"Professor, Professor! Lindsay has just now made a defamatory remark about Miles's mother, yet he's forever after me about using 'slang,' and is that fair, I ask you?"

"Insubordinate drivel, Suckling," sternly declared Lindsay, "will earn you

someday what is known among the lower seafaring elements as a 'Liverpool Kiss,' long before you ever receive one of the more conventional variety, save perhaps for those rare occasions upon which *your* mother, no doubt in some spell of absentmindedness, has found herself able to bestow that astonishing yet, I fear (unhappy woman), misplaced, sign of affection."

"You see, you see?" squealed Darby, "going after a fellow's mother—"

"Not now!" screamed Randolph, flinging off the young mascotte's importunate grasp and frightening him nearly out of his wits. "Counterfly, the ballast, man! leave that spastical oaf be, and jettison our sandbags, or we are done for!"

Chick shrugged and released his grip on Miles, proceeding lackadaisically to the nearest gunwale to unleash the ballast bags there, leaving Lindsay, with no time to adjust to the increased burden, to crash to the deck with a panicked cry, and the now all but hysterical Miles Blundell on top of him. With a loud twang that may as well have been the Crack of Doom, the line around his foot was yanked free of its attachment to the Main Valve, though not before pulling beyond its elastic limit the spring meant to restore it to a safely-closed position. The valve now remained ajar—the very mouth of Hell!

"Suckling! aloft, and quickly!"

The ready little fellow scurried up the lines, as Randolph, preoccupied with the crisis and staggering across the deck, somehow tripped over Lindsay Noseworth attempting to extricate himself from beneath the squirming mass of Miles Blundell, and abruptly joined his horizontal shipmates. Looking up, he observed Darby Suckling gazing down at him, inquisitively.

"What is it that I am to do up here, Professor?" called the ingenuous mascotte.

As tears of frustration began to gather in Randolph's eyes, Lindsay, sensing in his chief a familiar inertia, his speech only temporarily muffled by Miles's elbow, rushed, or more accurately crawled, into the vacuum of authority. "Return the valve manually," he shouted up at Darby, "to its closed position," adding, "you little fool," in a barely audible tone. Darby, his uniform fluttering in the outrush of gas, gallantly hastened to comply.

"Like me to break out some of them parachute rigs, Noseworth?" drawled Chick.

"Mr. Noseworth," Lindsay corrected him. "No, Counterfly, I think not, there scarcely being time—moreover, the complexities that would attend rigging Blundell in the necessary paraphernalia would tax the topological genius of Herr Riemann himself." This irony was lost, however, on Chick as well as its object, who, having at last somehow regained his feet, now went stum-

bling with serene insouciance over to the rail, apparently to have a look at the scenery. Above him, Darby, with a triumphant "Hurrah!" succeeded in closing the valve, and the huge airship accordingly slackened in its downward hurtling to a velocity no more ominous than that of a leaf in autumn.

"Well, we certainly scared those chaps down there, Professor," commented Miles, gazing over the side. "Dropping all those sandbags, I'll wager."

"Eh?" Randolph beginning to regain his air of phlegmatic competence. "How's that?"

"Well, they're running just lickety-split," Miles continued, "a-and say, one of them hasn't even got any clothes on, that's sure what it looks like all right!" From an instrument locker nearby, he produced a powerful spyglass, and trained it upon the objects of his curiosity.

"Come, Blundell," Randolph arising from where he had fallen, "there is quite enough to be done at the moment without more idle shenanigans—" He was interrupted by a gasp of terror from Miles.

"Professor!" cried that lad, peering incredulously through the burnished cylinder, "the unclad figure I reported—it is not that of a chap, after all, but rather of . . . *a lady!*"

There was an "eager stampede" to the rail, and a joint attempt to wrest the telescope from Miles, who, however, clung to it stubbornly. All meanwhile stared or squinted avidly, attempting to verify the reported apparition.

Across the herbaceous nap below, in the declining light, among the brighter star-shapes of exploded ballast-bags, running heedless, as across some earthly firmament, sped a stout gentleman in a Norfolk jacket and plus-fours, clutching a straw "skimmer" to the back of his head with one hand while with the other keeping balanced upon his shoulder a photographic camera and tripod. Close behind him came the female companion Blundell had remarked, carrying a bundle of ladies' apparel, though clad at the moment in little beyond a floral diadem of some sort, charmingly askew among masses of fair hair. The duo appeared to be making for a nearby patch of woods, now and then casting apprehensive looks upward at the enormous gasbag of the descending *Inconvenience*, quite as if it were some giant eyeball, perhaps that of Society itself, ever scrutinizing from above, in a spirit of constructive censure. By the time Lindsay could remove the optical instrument from the moist hands of Miles Blundell, and induce the consequently disgruntled youth to throw out grapnels and assist Darby in securing the great airship to "Mother Earth," the indecorous couple had vanished among the foliage, as presently would this sector of the Republic into the falling darkness.

DARBY SWUNG LIKE a regular little monkey hand over hand down the anchor line, gained the ground and, tripping briskly about beneath *Inconvenience*, adroitly caught each of the mooring lines flung down to him by Miles Blundell. With a mallet driving home, one by one, sturdy wooden pegs through the eye-splices at the ends of the hempen strands, he soon had the giant vehicle, as if charmed into docility by some diminutive beast-wrangler, tethered motionless above him.

The Jacob's-ladder now came clattering over the side, and upon it, presently, in uncertain descent, Miles, surmounted by a giant sack of soiled laundry. There remained in the western sky only an after-glow of deep crimson, against which could be seen Miles's silhouette, as well as those of the heads of the other boys above the curved rim of the gondola.

Since that morning, before the first light, a gay, picnic-going throng of aeromaniacs of one sort and another had been continuing all day now to *vol-à-voile* in, till long after sundown, through the midwestern summer evening whose fading light they were most of them too busy quite to catch the melancholy of, their wings both stationary and a-flap, gull and albatross and bat-styled wings, wings of gold-beaters' skin and bamboo, wings laboriously detailed with celluloid feathers, in a great heavenwide twinkling they came, bearing all degrees of aviator from laboratory skeptic to Jesus-rapt ascensionary, accompanied often by sky-dogs, who had learned how to sit still, crowded next to them in the steering-cabins of their small airships, observing the instrument panels and barking if they noticed something the pilot had failed to—though others could be observed at gunwales and flying bridges, their heads thrust out into the passing airflow, looks of bliss on their faces. From time to time, the aeronauts hailed one another through megaphones, and the evening was thus atwitter, like the trees of many a street in the city nearby, with aviatory pleasantries.

In short order, the boys had set up their mess-tent, gathered wood, and ignited a small fire in the galley stove, well downwind of *Inconvenience* and its hydrogen-generating apparatus. Miles busied himself in the miniature galley, and soon had fried them up a "mess" of catfish, caught that morning and kept all day on ice whose melting had been retarded by the frigidity of altitude. Around them the other groups of sky-brothers were busy at their own culinary arrangements, and roasting meat, frying onions, and baking bread sent delicious odors creeping everywhere about the great encampment.

After dinner and Evening Quarters, the boys dedicated a few moments to song, as a group differently engaged might have to prayer. Since their Hawai-

ian escapades a few years previous (*The Chums of Chance and the Curse of the Great Kahuna*), Miles had become an enthusiastic ukulelist, and tonight, after securing the scullery and restoring the mess decks to their usual spotless state, he produced one of many of the four-stringed instruments which he kept in his sky-chest, and, after strumming a brief introduction, accompanied the boys as they sang,

There's fellows live in little towns,
And those who live on farms,
And never seem to wander far
From smiles and loving arms—
They always know just who they are
And how their lives will go—
And then there's boys like us, who say
Good-bye before hello,
For we're the
Aces of the Altitudes
Vagabonds of the Void. . . .
When some folks shrink with terror, say,
We scarcely get annoyed.
Let the winds blow clear off the Beaufort Scale,
And the nights grow dark as can be,
Let the lightning lash,
And the thunder thrash,
Only cheerful young hearts have we!
For . . .
the Chum of Chance is a pluc-ky soul,
Who shall neither whine nor ejac-u-late,
For his blood's as red and his mind's as pure
As the stripes of his bla-a-zer immac-u-late!

That evening Chick and Darby, as the port section of the crew, had watch-duty, while Miles and Lindsay were to be allowed "ground-leave" in Chicago. Each in his own way excited at the prospect of attending the Exposition, the two lads shifted rapidly into dress uniform, although Miles encountered such difficulty in lacing his leggings, knotting his neckerchief with the needed symmetry, and securing correctly the forty-four buttons of his dickey, one for each State of the Union, that Lindsay, after having applied a few drops of Macassar oil to his own locks and combing them carefully, was obliged to go to his unskillful shipmate's assistance.

When Miles had been rendered as fit to be seen by the populace of “The Windy City” as he would ever be, the two boys came smartly to attention, dressing right at close interval in the circle of firelight, to await inspection. Pugnax joined them, tail still, gaze expectant. Randolph emerged from his tent in mufti, every bit as spruce as his liberty section, for he, too, was bound for earthly chores, his Chums of Chance flight uniform having been replaced by a tastefully checked Kentucky hemp suit and Ascot tie, with a snappy fedora topping off the *ensemble*.

“Say, Randolph,” called Darby, “you look like you’re going over to meet a girl!”

As his bantering tone, however, was not unmixed with manly admiration, Randolph chose not to respond to the *innuendo* with the *pique* it would otherwise have merited, instead riposting, “I had not been aware that fellows of your years recognized any distinction between the sexes,” drawing from Lindsay an appreciative chuckle, before promptly returning to moral seriousness.

“About the fringes,” Randolph reminded the liberty-goers, “of any gathering on the scale of this Exposition, are apt to lurk vicious and debased elements, whose sole aim is to take advantage of the unwary. I will not dignify it by naming that sinister quarter where such dangers are most probably to be encountered. The very vulgarity of its aspect, particularly by night, will speak for itself, disinclining all but the most reckless of their well-being to linger in contemplation upon, much less actually investigate, the unprofitable delights offered therein. A word to the wise . . . or, in this case . . . hrrumph, hmmm, howsoever . . . good liberty, boys, I say, and good luck.” Wherewith Randolph saluted, turned, and vanished soundlessly into the great fragrant darkness.

“You have the watch, Suckling,” Lindsay advised before departing. “You know the penalties for falling asleep—be sure that you impress them upon your watchmate Counterfly, who inclines, I suspect, toward sloth. Perimeter check once every hour, as well as a reading of the tension of the gas within the envelope, corrected, I need scarcely add, for the lower temperatures of the nighttime.” He turned and strode away to join Miles, while Pugnax, whose tail had regained its customary animation, was left to scout the bounds of the encampment, searching for evidence of other dogs and their humans who might seek unauthorized entry.

Darby, left solitary in the glow of the watch-fire, applied himself, with his customary vivacity, to the repair of the main hydrogen valve whose mechanical disruption earlier had nearly spelt their doom. That unpleasant memory, like the damage beneath Darby’s nimble fingers, would soon be quite un-

made . . . as if it were something the stripling had only read about, in some boys' book of adventures . . . as if that page of their chronicles lay turned and done, and the order "About-face" had been uttered by some potent though invisible Commandant of Earthly Days, toward whom Darby, in amiable obedience, had turned again. . . .

He had just completed his repairs when, looking up, he noticed Chick Counterfly by the fire, brewing a pot of coffee.

"Care for some?" Chick offered. "Or don't they let you drink this stuff yet?"

Something in his tone suggested that this was only the sort of friendly teasing a fellow Darby's age had to expect and put up with. "Thanks, wouldn't mind a cup at all."

They sat by the fire for a while, silent as a pair of drovers camping out on the western prairie. Finally, to Darby's surprise, "I sure do miss my Pop," Chick confided, abruptly.

"I guess that must be awful tough for you, Chick. I don't think I even remember mine."

Chick gazed dolefully into the fire. After a moment, "Thing is, I believe he would have hung on. If he could have. We were partners, see? Always had something going. Some swell little moneymaker. Not always to the sheriff's liking, but enough to keep beans in the pot. Didn't mind all the midnight relocations, but those small-town courtrooms, I never could get used to them. Judge'd take one look at us, up went that hammer, whiz! we were usually out the door and on the main road before it came back down again."

"Good exercise, I bet."

"Well, but it seemed like Pop was starting to slow down some. Wondered if it was me somehow. You know, the extra trouble or something."

"Sounds more like it was all that Chinese foofooaraw you mentioned," said Darby, "nothing you caused. Here, do you smoke these?" lighting up a species of cigarette and offering one to Chick.

"My Great-Aunt Petunia!" exclaimed Chick, "what is that smell?"

"Say, it's cubebs. Medicinal use only. No tobacco allowed on board, as you might recall from your Chums of Chance Membership Oath."

"Did I swear off? I must've been all confused in my mind. No tobacco! Say, it's the goldurn Keeley Cure around here. How do you people get through your day?"

Suddenly what sounded like a whole kennelful of dogs began to bark furiously. "Pugnax," explained Darby, noting Chick's alarmed expression.

"Him and what else?"

"Just ol' Pugnax. One of his many talents. Guess we'd better go have a look."

They found Pugnax up on his feet, clenched and alert, watching the outer darkness intently—from what the boys could tell, poised to launch a massive counter-assault on whatever was now approaching their perimeter.

“Here you go,” called an invisible voice, “nice doggy!” Pugnax stood his ground but had ceased barking, apparently judging the visitors nasally acceptable. As Darby and Chick watched, out of the evening came a giant beefsteak, soaring in an arc, slowly rotating, and hit the dirt almost exactly between Pugnax’s front paws, where he regarded it for a while, a single eyebrow raised, one would have to say, disdainfully.

“Hey, anybody home?” Into the firelight emerged two boys and a girl, carrying picnic baskets and wearing flight uniforms of indigo mohair brilliantine with scarlet pinstripes, and headgear which had failed to achieve the simpler geometry of the well-known Shriner fez, being far more ornate and, even for its era, arguably not in the best of taste. There was an oversize spike, for example, coming out the top, German style, and a number of plumes dyed a pale eclipse green. “Howdy, Darb! What’s up and what’s down?”

Darby, recognizing them as members of Bindlestiffs of the Blue A.C., a club of ascensionaries from Oregon, with whom the Chums of Chance had often flown on joint manœuvres, broke into a welcoming smile, especially for Miss Penelope (“Penny”) Black, whose elfin appearance disguised an intrepid spirit and unfaltering will, and on whom he had had a “case” for as long as he could remember. “Hello, Riley, Zip . . . Penny,” he added shyly.

“That’s ‘Captain’ to you.” She held up a sleeve to display four gold stripes, at whose edges could be seen evidence of recent needlework. The Bindlestiffs were known and respected for granting the loquacious sex membership on a strictly equal footing with boys, including full opportunities for promotion. “Yeahp,” Penny grinned, “they gave me the *Tzigane*—just brought the old tub in here from Eugene, got her berthed down past that little grove of trees there, nobody worse for wear.”

“W-wow! Your first command! That’s champion!” He found himself shuffling nervously, and with no idea what to do about his hands.

“You better kiss me,” she said, “it’s tradition and all.”

Even with the chorus of hoots it evoked from the other boys, Darby found the fleeting brush of her freckled cheek against his lips more than worth the aggravation. After introductions, Chick and Darby brought out folding camp chairs, the Bindlestiffs opened their baskets of delectables, and the colleagues settled down to an evening of gossip, shop talk, and sky-stories.

“Coming in over ‘Egypt,’ downstate Illinois to you, Darb, we caught us an upriser off a cornfield by Decatur, thought we’d be onto the dang moon by

now—'scuse me"—pausing to sneeze—"icicles o' snot down to our belt buckles, goin all blue from the light of that electric fluid, 's whirlpoolin round our heads—ahh-pffeugghh!"

"Oh, Gesundheit, Riley," said Zip, "but last time you told that one, it was strange voices and so forth—"

"We'd picked up a little galvanic halo ourselves by the time we got here," said Chick, "what with the speed and all."

"A-aw that's nothin," cried Riley, "next to dodgin tornadoes all day! You boys want real electricity, git on out to Oklahoma sometime, get a treat for your ears into the bargain that will sure's hell drown out any strange voices in your neighborhood."

"Speaking of voices," said Penny, "what have you heard about these . . . 'sightings' that keep getting reported in? Not just from crews up in the air but sometimes even from civilians on the ground?"

"You mean aside from the usual," Darby said, "fata morgana, northern lights, and so forth?"

"Different," Zip in a low, ominous voice. "There's lights, but there's sound, too. Mostly in the upper altitudes, where it gets that dark blue in the daytime? Voices calling out together. All directions at once. Like a school choir, only no tune, just these—"

"Warnings," said Riley.

Darby shrugged. "News to me. *Inconvenience*, we're only the runts of the Organization, last at the trough, nobody ever tells us anything—they keep cutting our orders, we follow 'em, is all."

"Well we were over by Mount Etna there back in the spring," Penny said, "and you remember those Garçons de '71, I expect." For Chick's benefit, Darby explained that this outfit had first been formed over twenty years ago, during the Sieges of Paris, when manned balloons were often the only way to communicate in or out of the city. As the ordeal went on, it became clear to certain of these balloonists, observing from above and poised ever upon a cusp of mortal danger, how much the modern State depended for its survival on maintaining a condition of *permanent siege*—through the systematic encirclement of populations, the starvation of bodies and spirits, the relentless degradation of civility until citizen was turned against citizen, even to the point of committing atrocities like those of the infamous *pétroleurs* of Paris. When the Sieges ended, these balloonists chose to fly on, free now of the political delusions that reigned more than ever on the ground, pledged solemnly only to one another, proceeding as if under a world-wide, never-ending state of siege.

“Nowadays,” Penny said, “they’ll fly wherever they’re needed, far above fortress walls and national boundaries, running blockades, feeding the hungry, sheltering the sick and persecuted . . . so of course they make enemies everywhere they go, they get fired at from the ground, all the time. But this was different. We happened to be up with them that one day, and it was just the queerest thing. Nobody saw any projectiles, but there was . . . a kind of force . . . energy we could feel, directed personally at us. . . .”

“Somebody out there,” Zip said solemnly. “Empty space. But inhabited.”

“This making you nervous, Chick?” teased Darby.

“Nawh. Thinking about who wants that last apple fritter there.”

Meanwhile Miles and Lindsay were off to the Fair. The horse-drawn conveyance they had boarded took them through the swarming streets of southern Chicago. Miles gazed with keen curiosity, but Lindsay regarded the scene with a peevish stare.

"You look kind of glum, Lindsay."

"I? no, not at all—beyond an unavoidable apprehension at the thought of Counterfly with full run of the ship and no one to supervise him, I am as cheerful as a finch."

"But Darby's there with him."

"Please. Any influence Suckling could exert on a character that depraved would be negligible at best."

"Oh, but say," reckoned the kind-hearted Miles, "Counterfly does seem a good skate, and I bet you he'll soon get the hang of things."

"As Master-at-Arms," muttered Lindsay, perhaps only to himself, "my own view of human nature is necessarily less hopeful."

At length the car deposited them at a street-corner from which, the conductor assured them, it would be but a short walk to the Fairgrounds—or, as he chuckled, "depending how late in the evening, a brisk run," and went on its way in metal-to-metal clangor and clapping. At a distance the boys could see in the sky the electrical glow of the Fair, but hereabouts all was in shadow. Presently they found a gap in the fence, and an admissions gate with something of the makeshift about it, lit by a single candle-stub, whose attendant, a scowling Asiatic midget of some sort, though eager enough to take their proffered fifty-cent pieces, had to be pressed by the scrupulous Lindsay for a duly executed receipt. The diminutive sentinel then held out his palm as if for a gratuity, which the boys ignored. "Deadbeats!" he screamed, by way of

introducing them to the quatercentennial celebration of Columbus's advent upon our shores.

From somewhere ahead too dark to see came music from a small orchestra, unusually syncopated, which grew louder, till they could make out a small outdoor dance-floor, all but unlit, where couples were dancing, and about which crowds were streaming densely everywhere, among odors of beer, garlic, tobacco smoke, inexpensive perfume, and, from Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show, somewhere up ahead, the unmistakable scent of massed livestock.

Observers of the Fair had remarked how, as one moved up and down its Midway, the more European, civilized, and . . . well, frankly, *white* exhibits located closer to the center of the "White City" seemed to be, whereas the farther from that alabaster Metropolis one ventured, the more evident grew the signs of cultural darkness and savagery. To the boys it seemed that they were making their way through a separate, lampless world, out beyond some obscure threshold, with its own economic life, social habits, and codes, aware of itself as having little if anything to do with the official Fair. . . . As if the half-light ruling this perhaps even unmapped periphery were not a simple scarcity of streetlamps but deliberately provided in the interests of mercy, as a necessary veiling for the faces here, which held an urgency somehow too intense for the full light of day and those innocent American visitors with their Kodaks and parasols who might somehow happen across this place. Here in the shadows, the faces moving by smiled, grimaced, or stared directly at Lindsay and Miles as if somehow they knew them, as if in the boys' long career of adventure in exotic corners of the world there had been accumulating, unknown to them, a reserve of mistranslation, offense taken, debt entered into, here being re-expressed as a strange Limbo they must negotiate their way through, expecting at any moment a "run-in" with some enemy from an earlier day, before they might gain the safety of the lights in the distance.

Armed "bouncers," drawn from the ranks of the Chicago police, patrolled the shadows restlessly. A Zulu theatrical company re-enacted the massacre of British troops at Isandhlwana. Pygmies sang Christian hymns in the Pygmy dialect, Jewish klezmer ensembles filled the night with unearthly clarinet solos, Brazilian Indians allowed themselves to be swallowed by giant anacondas, only to climb out again, undigested and apparently with no discomfort to the snake. Indian swamis levitated, Chinese boxers fainted, kicked, and threw one another to and fro.

Temptation, much to Lindsay's chagrin, lurked at every step. Pavilions here seemed almost to represent not nations of the world but Deadly Sins.

Pitchmen in their efforts at persuasion all but seized the ambulant youths by their lapels.

“Exotic smoking practices around the world, of great anthropological value!”

“Scientific exhibit here boys, latest improvements to the hypodermic syringe and its many uses!”

Here were Waziris from Waziristan exhibiting upon one another various techniques for waylaying travelers, which reckoned in that country as a major source of income. . . . Tarahumara Indians from northern Mexico crouched, apparently in total nakedness, inside lath-and-plaster replicas of the caves of their native Sierra Madre, pretending to eat vision-producing cacti that sent them into dramatic convulsions scarcely distinguishable from those of the common “geek” long familiar to American carnival-goers. . . . Tungus reindeer herders stood gesturing up at a gigantic sign reading SPECIAL REINDEER SHOW, and calling out in their native tongue to the tip gathered in front, while a pair of young women in quite revealing costumes—who, being blonde and so forth, did not, actually, appear to share with the Tungus many racial characteristics—gyrated next to a very patient male reindeer, caressing him with scandalous intimacy, and accosting passersby with suggestive phrases in English, such as “Come in and learn dozens ways to have fun in Siberia!” and “See what really goes on during long winter nights!”

“This doesn’t seem,” Lindsay adrift between fascination and disbelief, “quite . . . authentic, somehow.”

“Come over here, boys, first time for free, find the red get a pat on the head, find the black, get nothin back!” cried a cheerful Negro in a “pork-pie” hat, who was standing behind a folding table nearby, setting down and picking up playing-cards.

“If I didn’t know better, I’d say that was one of those monte games,” murmured Lindsay, politely suppressing his disapproval.

“No, boss, it’s an ancient African method of divination, allows you to change your fate.” The sharper who had addressed them now began to move cards around with bewildering speed. At times there were too many cards to count, at others none at all were visible, seeming to have vanished into some dimension well beyond the third, though this could have been a trick of what light there was.

“O.K.! maybe it’s your lucky night, just tell us where that red is, now.” Three cards lay face-down before them.

After a moment of silence, it was Miles who announced in a clear and firm voice, “The cards you have put down there all happen to be black—your

‘red’ is the nine of diamonds, the curse of Scotland, and it’s right here,” reaching to lift the sharper’s hat, and to remove from atop his head, and exhibit, the card at issue.

“Lord have mercy, last time that happened I ended up in the Cook County jail for a nice long vacation. A tribute to your sharp eyes, young man, and no hard feelings,” holding out a ten-dollar banknote.

“Oh, that is . . .” Lindsay began tentatively, but Miles had already pocketed the offering, amiably calling out, “Evening, sir,” as they strolled away.

A surprised expression could be noted on Lindsay’s face. “That was . . . well executed, Blundell. How did you know where that card was?”

“Sometimes,” Miles with a strangely apprehensive note in his voice, “these peculiar feelings will surround me, Lindsay . . . like the electricity coming on—as if I can see everything just as clear as day, how . . . how everything fits together, connects. It doesn’t last long, though. Pretty soon I’m just back to tripping over my feet again.”

Presently they had come within view of the searchlight beams sweeping the skies from the roof of the immense Manufactures and Liberal Arts Building—a miniature city, nested within the city-within-a-city which was the Fair itself—and began to see caped Columbian Guards on patrol, a reassuring sight, to Lindsay at least.

“Come on, Lindsay,” Miles flourishing the banknote they had acquired so unexpectedly. “Long as we have this windfall, let’s go get us some root beer, and some of that ‘Cracker Jack,’ too. Say, what do you know! We’re here! We’re at the Fair!”

MEANWHILE RANDOLPH ST. COSMO, though out of uniform, was still on duty. The detective agency he sought was located in a seedy block of the New Levee district, between a variety saloon and a manufacturer of exploding cigars. The sign read WHITE CITY INVESTIGATIONS. Randolph tugged the brim of his hat a bit lower, looked swiftly up and down the littered and shadowy street, and sidled in the entrance. A young lady typewriter who managed to act prim and bold at the same time glanced up from her florally-appliquéd machine. “It’s after bedtime, sonny.”

“The door was open—”

“Yeah, and maybe this ain’t the Epworth League.”

“I was supposed to see Mr. Privett?”

“Nate!” she screamed, causing Randolph to jump. Her smile was not unmischievous. “You bring a note from your parents, kid?”

In Nate's office were a combination sideboard, bookcase, and filing cabinet with assorted bottles of whiskey, a bed-lounge over in the corner, a couple of cane-bottom chairs, a curtain desk with about a thousand pigeonholes, a window with a view of the German saloon across the street, local-business awards and testimonials on the dark-paneled walls, along with photos of notable clients, some of them posed with Nate himself, including Doc Holliday, out in front of the Occidental Saloon in Tombstone, Doc and Nate each pointing a .44 Colt at the other's head and pretending to scowl terribly. The picture was inscribed, *More of a shotgun man myself, regards, Doc.*

"Since the Haymarket bomb," Nate was explaining, "we've had more work than we can handle, and it's about to get even more hectic, if the Governor decides to pardon that gang of anarchistic murderers. Heaven knows what *that's* gonna let loose on Chicago, the Fair in particular. Antiterrorist security now more than ever will be of the essence here. And, well, you boys enjoy the one perspective that all us in the 'spotter' community long for—namely, a view from overhead. We can't pay you as well as the Pinkertons might, but maybe we could work out a deferred arrangement, small percent of profits down the line instead of cash right now. Not to mention what tips or other off-the-books revenue might come your way."

"That is between you and our National Office," Randolph supposed. "For here at Unit level, our compensation may not exceed legitimate expenses."

"Sounds crazy. But, we'll have our legal folks draw up some language we can all live with, how's that?" He was peering at Randolph now with that mixture of contempt and pity which the Chums in their contact with the ground population were sooner or later sure to evoke. Randolph was used to it, but determined to proceed in a professional manner.

"Of what exactly would our services consist?"

"Got room on your ship for an extra passenger?"

"We have carried up to a dozen well-fed adults with no discernible loss of lift," replied Randolph, his glance not quite able to avoid lingering upon Mr. Privett's embonpoint.

"Take our man up on a short trip or two's about all it'll amount to," the sleuth-officer now, it seemed, grown a bit shiftier. "Out to the Fair, maybe down to the Yards, duck soup."

Strolling among the skyships next morning, beneath a circus sky which was slowly becoming crowded as craft of all sorts made their ascents, renewing acquaintance with many in whose company, for better or worse, they had shared adventures, the Chums were approached by a couple whom they were not slow to recognize as the same photographer and model they had inadvertently bombarded the previous evening.

The sportive lensman introduced himself as Merle Rideout. "And my fair companion here is . . . give me a minute—"

"You bean-brain." The young woman directed a graceful kick which was not, however, altogether lacking in affection, and said, "I'm Chevrolette McAdoo, and mighty pleased to meet you fellows, even if you did nearly sandbag us into the beyond yesterday." Fully attired, she seemed to have just stepped out of a ladies' magazine, her ensemble this forenoon right at the vanguard of summer fashion, the current revival of the leg-of-mutton sleeve having resulted in a profusion of shirtwaists with translucent shoulders "big as balloons, all over town"—as Chick Counterfly, a devoted observer of the female form, would express it—in Miss McAdoo's case, saturated in a vivid magenta, and accompanied by a long ostrich-feather boa dyed the same shade. And her hat, roguishly atilt, egret plumes swooping each time she moved her head, would have charmed even the most zealous of conservationist bird-lovers.

"Nice put-together," Chick nodded admiringly.

"And you haven't seen the turn she does down to that South Seas Pavilion yet," declared Merle Rideout gallantly. "Makes Little Egypt look like a church lady."

"You are an artiste, Miss McAdoo?"

"I perform the Dance of Lava-Lava, the Volcano Goddess," she replied.

"I greatly admire the music of the region," said Miles, "the ukulele in particular."

"There are several ukulelists in my pit-band," said Miss McAdoo, "tenor, baritone, and soprano."

"And is it authentic native music?"

"More of a medley, I believe, encompassing Hawaiian and Philippino motifs, and concluding with a very tasteful adaptation of Monsieur Saint-Saëns's wonderful 'Bacchanale,' as recently performed at the Paris Opera."

"I am only an amateur, of course," Miles, though long a member of the prestigious International Academy of Ukulelists, said modestly, "and get lost now and then. But if I promised to go back to the tonic and wait, do you think they'd let me come and sit in?"

"I'll certainly put in a good word," said Chevrolette.

Merle Rideout had brought a hand camera with him, and was taking "snaps" of the flying machines, aloft and parked on the ground, which were continuing to arrive and take off with no apparent letup. "Some social, ain't it! Why, every durn professor of flight from here to Timbuctoo's flying in, 's what it looks like."

The smoke from breakfast campfires rose fragrantly through the air. Babies could be heard in both complaint and celebration. Far-off sounds of railway traffic and lake navigation came in on the wind. Against the sun as yet low across the Lake, wings cast long shadows, their edges luminous with dew. There were steamers, electrics, Maxim whirling machines, ships powered by guncotton reciprocators and naphtha engines, and electrical lifting-screws of strange hyperboloidal design for drilling upward through the air, and winged aerostats, of streamlined shape, and wing-flapping miracles of ornithurgy. A fellow scarcely knew after a while where to look—

"Pa!" An attractive little girl of four or five with flaming red hair was running toward them at high speed. "Say, Pa! I need a drink!"

"Dally, ya little weasel," Merle greeted her, "the corn liquor's all gone, I fear, it'll have to be back to the old cow juice for you, real sorry," as he went rummaging in a patent dinner pail filled with ice. The child, meanwhile, having caught sight of the Chums in their summer uniforms, stood gazing, her eyes wide, as if deciding how well behaved she ought to be.

"You have been poisoning this *helpless angel* with strong drink?" cried Lindsay Noseworth. "Sir, one must protest!" Dally, intrigued, ran over and stood in front of him, peering up, as if waiting for the next part of some elaborate joke.

Lindsay blinked. "This cannot be," he muttered. "Small children hate me."

"A fine-looking little girl, sir," Randolph, brimming with avuncularity. "You are the proud grandfather, of course."

"Ha! D'ye hear that, Carrot-head? Thinks I'm your grandpa. Thank you, lad, but this here is my daughter Dahlia, I'm proud to say. Her mother, alas—" He sighed, gazing upward and into the distance.

"Our deepest sympathies," Randolph hastily, "yet Heaven, in its inscrutability—"

"Heaven, hell," cackled Merle Rideout. "She's out there in the U.S.A. someplace with the mesmerizin variety artist she run away with, a certain Zombini the Mysterious."

"Know him, by gosh!" Chick Counterfly, nodding vigorously. "Makes his molly disappear down a common kitchen funnel! *Imbottigliata!*' ain't it? then he twirls his cape? Seen it down in New Orleans with my own peepers! some awesome turn, you bet!"

"The very customer," Merle beamed, "and that beauteous conjuror's assistant you saw'd likely be ol' Erlys herself, and say, you'll want to close your mouth there, Buck, 'fore somethin flies into it?"—the casual mention of adultery having produced in Randolph's face a degree of stupefaction one regrets to term characteristic. Chick Counterfly, less affected, was alert enough to offer, "Well—an entirely admirable lady, whoever she was."

"Admiration noted—and you might examine little Dahlia here, who's the spit of her Ma, fulminate me if she ain't, fact if you're ramblin by some ten, twelve years hence, why ride on over, have another look, make an offer, no price too small or too insulting I wouldn't consider. Or if you're willing to wait, take an option now to buy, got her on special, today and tomorrow only, dollar ninety-eight takes her away, heartbreakin smile and all. Yehp—there, lookit, just like 'at. Throw you in an extra bonnet, I'm a reasonable sort, 'n' the minute she blows that sweet-sixteenth birthday candle out, why she's on them rails, express to wherever you be."

"Seems a little long to wait, don't it?" leered Chick Counterfly.

"—I could go age fifteen, I guess," Merle went on, twinkling directly at Lindsay Noseworth strangling with indignation, "but you'd have to pay in gold, and come fetch her on your own ticket. . . . But say now would you mind if I got a snap of you all in front of this Trouvé-screw unit over here?"

The boys, fascinated as always with modern sciences such as the photographic, were of course happy to comply. Chevrolette managed to mollify even Lindsay by borrowing his "skimmer" and holding it coyly in front of their faces, as if to conceal a furtive kiss, while the frolicsome Darby Suckling, without whose spirited "clowning" no group snapshot would have been com-

plete, threatened the pair with a baseball bat and a comical expression meant to convey his ingenuous notion of jealous rage.

Lunch-time arrived, and with it Lindsay's announcement of early liberty.

"Hurrah!" cried Chick Counterfly, "me and old Suckling here being star-board liberty section will just head on over to that Midway Plaisance, to have us a peep at Little Egypt and that Polynesian exhibit, and if we can fit it in, why some of those African Amazons too—oh, and don't worry, lad, anything you need explained, just ask me!"

"Come on, boys," Chevrolette McAdoo gesturing with a cigarette in a rhinestone-encrusted holder, "I'm headed in for work now, I can show you backstage at the South Seas, too."

"Oboy, oboy," Darby's nose beginning to run.

"Sucklinggg?" screamed Lindsay, but to no avail. Crowds of colorfully-dressed aeronauts had swept between them, as ships arrived and took off, and the great makeshift aerodrome seethed with distractions and chance meetings. . . .

In fact, just about then who should arrive, aboard a stately semirigid craft of Italian design, but the boys' longtime friend and mentor Professor Heino Vanderjuice of Yale University, a look of barely suppressed terror on his features, desperately preoccupied during the craft's descent with keeping secured to his head a stovepipe hat whose dents, scars, and departures from the cylindrical spoke as eloquently as its outdated style of a long and adventuresome history.

"Galloping gasbags, but it's just capital to see you fellows again!" the Professor greeted them. "Last I heard, you'd come to grief down in New Orleans, no doubt from packing away more alligator *à l'étouffée* than that old *Inconvenience* quite had the lift for!"

"Oh, an anxious hour or two, perhaps," allowed Randolph, his facial expression suggesting gastric memories. "Tell us, Professor, how is your work coming along? What recent marvels emerging from the Sloane Laboratory?"

"Well now, there's a student of Professor Gibbs whose work really bears looking into, young De Forest, a regular wizard with the electricity . . . along with a Japanese visitor, Mr. Kimura—but say, where can a starving pedagogue and his pilot get a couple of those famous Chicago beefsteaks around here? Boys, like you to meet Ray Ipsow, without whom I'd still be back in Outer Indianoplace, waiting for some interurban that never comes."

"Just missed you boys once, over there in that Khartoum business," the genial skyfarer informed them, "trying to make it out of town a couple steps ahead of the Mahdi's army—saw you sailing overhead, wished I could've

been on board, had to settle for jumpin in the river and waiting till the clam-bake subsided a little."

"As it happened," Lindsay, the Unit Historian, recalled, "we caught a contrary wind, and ended up in the middle of some unpleasantness in Oltre Giubba, instead of down at Alex, where we had counted upon some weeks of educational diversion, not to mention a more salubrious atmosphere."

"Why and bless me," the Professor cried, "if that isn't Merle Rideout I see!"

"Still up to no good," Merle beamed.

"No need for introductions, then," Lindsay calculated.

"Nah, we're partners in crime, from back in the olden days in Connecticut, long before your time, fellows, I used to do some tinkering for him now and then. Don't suppose one of you boys could get a snap of us together?"

"Sure!" volunteered Miles.

They went off to a steak house nearby for lunch. Though reunions with the Professor were always enjoyable, this time something different, some autumnal disquiet behind the climate of warm celebration, produced psychogastric twinges Randolph had learned from experience he could ignore only at his peril.

Having attended several useful symposia for airship commanders on techniques for avoiding the display of hurt feelings, Randolph could detect now that something was preying on the Professor's mind. In a curious departure from the good-hearted old fellow's usual "style," his luncheon comments today were increasingly brief, indeed on occasion approaching the terse, and no sooner had the *pie à la mode* made its appearance than he had called for the check.

"Sorry boys," he frowned, making a show of pulling out and consulting his old-fashioned railroad watch. "I'd love to stay and chat some more, but I've a little business to take care of." He rose abruptly, as did Ray Ipsow, who, shrugging sympathetically to the boys and murmuring to Randolph, "I'll keep an eye on him," followed the eminent Yale savant, who, once outside, lost no time hailing a carriage, holding out a greenback and requesting top speed, and just like that they were off, arriving at the Palmer House, where the functionary at the desk tipped a salute from a nonexistent hat brim. "Penthouse suite, Professor, take the elevator over there, it only makes one stop. They're expecting you." If there was a note of amused contempt in his voice, Professor Vanderjuice was too preoccupied to notice.

It swiftly became evident to Ray Ipsow that his friend was in town to conclude a bargain with forces that might be described, with little risk of overstatement, as evil. In the suite upstairs, they found heavy curtains drawn against the festive town, lamps sparsely distributed in a perpetual twilight of tobacco

smoke, no cut flowers or potted plants, a silence punctuated only rarely by speech, and that generally telephonic.

One could hardly have expected a widely celebrated mogul like Scarsdale Vibe not to attend the World's Columbian Exposition. Along with the obvious appeal of its thousands of commercial possibilities, the Chicago Fair also happened to provide a vast ebb and flow of anonymity, where one could meet and transact business without necessarily being observed. Earlier that day Vibe had stepped out of his private train, "The Juggernaut," onto a personally reserved platform at the Union Station, having only the night before departed from the Grand Central depot in New York. As usual, he was in disguise, accompanied by bodyguards and secretaries. He carried an ebony stick whose handle was a gold and silver sphere chased so as to represent an accurate and detailed globe of the world, and inside of whose shaft was concealed a spring, piston, and cylinder arrangement for compressing a charge of air to propel small-caliber shot at any who might offend him. A sealed motor conveyance awaited him, and he was translated as if by supernatural agency to the majestic establishment defined by State, Monroe, and Wabash. On the way into the lobby, an elderly woman, respectably though not sumptuously dressed, approached him, crying, "If I were your mother I would have strangled you in your cradle." Calmly Scarsdale Vibe nodded, raised his ebony air-canc, cocked it, and pressed the trigger. The old woman tilted, swayed, and went down like a tree.

"Tell the house physician the bullet is only in her leg," said Scarsdale Vibe helpfully.

NO ONE HAD offered to take Professor Vanderjuice's hat, so he held it in his lap, as an insecure young actor might a "prop."

"They treating you all right over at the Stockmen's Hotel?" the magnate inquired.

"Well actually, it's the Packer's Inn, Forty-seventh and Ashland. Right in the middle of the Stockyards and all—"

"Say," it occurred to a large and criminal-looking individual who had been whittling an image of a locomotive from a piece of firewood with one of those knives known throughout the prisons of our land as an *Arkansas tooth-pick*, "you're not of the vegetarian persuasion, I hope."

"This is Foley Walker," said Scarsdale Vibe, "in whom his mother claims to find virtues not immediately apparent to others."

"Guess you can hear that whole hootenanny from where you are," Foley went on. "Bet you there's even guests known to catch insomnia from it, eh?"

but there's equally as many find it strangely soothing. No different here at the Palmer House, if you think about it. Racket level runs about the same."

"Same kind of activities as well," muttered Ray Ipsow. They were gathered at a marble table in a sort of parlor, over cigars and whiskey. The small-talk had turned to surplus wealth. "I know this fellow back in New Jersey," said Scarsdale Vibe, "who collects railroads. Not just rolling stock, mind, but stations, sheds, rails, yards, personnel, the whole shebang."

"Expensive hobby," marveled the Professor. "Are there such people?"

"You have to have some idea of the idle money out here. It can't all be endowments to the church of one's choice, mansions and yachts and dog-runs paved with gold or what have you, can it. No, at some point that's all over with, has to be left behind . . . and still here's this huge mountain of wealth unspent, piling up higher every day, and dear oh dear, whatever's a businessman to do with it, you see."

"Hell, send it on to me," Ray Ipsow put in. "Or even to somebody who really needs it, for there's sure enough of those."

"That's not the way it works," said Scarsdale Vibe.

"So we always hear the plutocracy complaining."

"Out of a belief, surely fathomable, that merely to need a sum is not to deserve it."

"Except that in these times, 'need' arises directly from criminal acts of the rich, so it 'deserves' whatever amount of money will atone for it. Fathomable enough for you?"

"You are a socialist, sir."

"As anyone not insulated by wealth from the cares of the day is obliged to be. Sir."

Foley paused in his whittling and looked over as if in suddenly piqued interest.

"Now, Ray," admonished the Professor, "we're here to discuss electromagnetism, not politics."

Vibe chuckled soothingly. "The Professor's afraid you're going to chase me off with radical talk like that. But I am not that sensitive a soul, I am guided, as ever, by Second Corinthians." He had a careful look around the table, estimating the level of Scriptural awareness.

"Suffering fools is unavoidable," said Ray Ipsow, "but don't ask me to be 'glad' about it."

The guards lounging by the doorway seemed to grow more alert. Foley got to his feet and strolled over to the window. Scarsdale squinted, not sure if this should be taken as an affront to his faith.

Ray gathered his hat and stood. "It's all right, I'll be down at the bar," as he went through the door, adding, "praying for wisdom."

Down in the elegant Pump Room, Ray ran into Merle Rideout and Chevrolet McAdoo, who were “out on the town,” owing to a fortunate wager Merle had made earlier that day.

Couples in boutonnieres and ostrich-plume hats paraded self-composedly among the dwarf palms or paused by the Italian Fountain as if thinking about jumping in. Somewhere a small string orchestra was playing an arrangement of “Old Zip Coon.”

Ray Ipsow regarded the surface of his beer. “He seems different these days. You notice anything?”

Merle nodded. “Something missing. He used to get so fired up about everything—we’d be designing something, run out of paper, he’d take his shirt collar off and just use that to scribble on.”

“Lately he’s been keeping those ideas pretty much to himself, like he’s finally learned how much they might be worth. Seen that happen enough, Lord knows. This big parade of modern inventions, all spirited march tunes, public going ooh and aah, but someplace lurking just out of sight is always some lawyer or accountant, beating that 2/4 like clockwork and runnin the show.”

“Anybody feel like dancing?” offered Chevrolet.

UP IN HIS PENTHOUSE SUITE, Scarsdale had moved on to the business at hand. “Back in the spring, Dr. Tesla was able to achieve readings on his transformer of up to a million volts. It does not take a prophet to see where this is headed. He is already talking in private about something he calls a ‘World-System,’ for producing huge amounts of electrical power that anyone can tap in to for free, anywhere in the world, because it uses the planet as an element in a gigantic resonant circuit. He is naïve enough to think he can get financing for this, from Pierpont, or me, or one or two others. It has escaped his mighty intellect that no one can make any money off an invention like that. To put up money for research into a system of free power would be to throw it away, and violate—hell, betray—the essence of everything modern history is supposed to be.”

The Professor was literally having an attack of nausea. Every time Tesla’s name came up, this was the predictable outcome. Vomit. The audacity and scope of the inventor’s dreams had always sent Heino Vanderjuice staggering back to his office in Sloane Lab feeling not so much a failure as someone who has taken a wrong turn in the labyrinth of Time and now cannot find his way back to the moment he made it.

“If such a thing is ever produced,” Scarsdale Vibe was saying, “it will mean

the end of the world, not just 'as we know it' but as anyone knows it. It is a weapon, Professor, surely you see that—the most terrible weapon the world has seen, designed to destroy not armies or matériel, but the very nature of exchange, our Economy's long struggle to evolve up out of the fish-market anarchy of all battling all to the rational systems of control whose blessings we enjoy at present."

"But," too much smoke in the air, not much time before he'd have to excuse himself, "I'm not sure how I can help."

"Speak bluntly may I? Invent us a counter-transformer. Some piece of equipment that will detect one of these Tesla rigs in operation, and then broadcast something equal and opposite that'll nullify its effects."

"Hmm. It would help to see Dr. Tesla's drawings and calculations."

"Precisely why Pierpont's in on this. That and his arrangement with Edison—but there I go again spilling secrets. Bankrolling Tesla has given Morgan's access to all Tesla's engineering secrets. And he has operatives on the spot, ready day and night to rush us photographed copies of anything we need to know."

"Well in theory, I don't see any great obstacle. It's a simple phase inversion, though there may be non-linear phenomena of scale we cannot predict till we build a working Device—"

"Tell me the details later. Now—how much do you reckon something like that would actually, um," lowering his voice, "cost?"

"Cost? Oh, I couldn't really—that is, I shouldn't—"

"Come now, Professor," boomed Foley Walker, holding a hotel whiskey decanter as if he meant to drink from it, "to the nearest million or so, just a rough guess?"

"Hmm . . . well . . . as a figure to start from . . . if only for symmetry's sake . . . say about what Brother Tesla's getting from Mr. Morgan?"

"Well, ring-tailed rutabagas." Vibe's eyes with a contemptuous twinkle which colleagues had learned meant he had what he wanted. "Here I figured you fellows spend your time wandering around with your thoughts all far, far away, and Professor, why, you're just a damn horse trader without mercy's what it is. Guess I should summon the legal staff, before I find myself hanging in a poultry-shop window, two bits away from getting fricasseed. Foley, would you just crank us up long distance there on the telephone—get us Somble, Strool & Fleshway, if you'd be so kind? Could be they'd share some ideas on how best to 'spring' for a project of this scale."

The call went through immediately, and Scarsdale, excusing himself, withdrew to an instrument in another part of the suite. The Professor was left to stare into the depths of his ancient hat, as if it were a vestimentary expression of

his present situation. More and more in recent weeks, he had found himself approaching likewise the condition of an empty cylinder, only intermittently occupied by intelligent thought. Was this the right thing to do? Should he even be here? The criminality in the room was almost palpable. Ray certainly didn't care for any it, and the boys today, even in their usual unworldliness, had regarded him with something like apprehension. Would any sum the New York lawyers might be suggesting now be worth the loss of that friendship?

The Chums of Chance could have been granted no more appropriate form of “ground-leave” than the Chicago Fair, as the great national celebration possessed the exact degree of fictitiousness to permit the boys access and agency. The harsh nonfictional world waited outside the White City’s limits, held off for this brief summer, making the entire commemorative season beside Lake Michigan at once dream-like and real.

If there were any plots afoot to commit bomb or other outrages upon the Fair, the *Inconvenience* was ideal not only for scanning the grounds fence to fence, but also for keeping an eye out against any sea-borne assaults contemplated from the Lake side. Fairgoers would see the ship overhead and yet not see it, for at the Fair, where miracles were routinely expected, nothing this summer was too big, too fast, too fantastically rigged out to impress anybody for more than a minute and a half, before the next marvel appeared. *Inconvenience* would fit right in, as one more effect whose only purpose was to entertain.

The boys began regular surveillance runs the next day. The “spotter” from White City Investigations showed up at dawn, packing a small observatory’s worth of telescopic gear. “Broke these in on the Ferris wheel,” he said, “but couldn’t figure out how to compensate for the movement. Gets blurry and so forth.”

Lew Basnight seemed a sociable enough young man, though it soon became obvious that he had not, until now, so much as heard of the Chums of Chance.

“But every boy knows the Chums of Chance,” declared Lindsay Noseworth perplexedly. “What could you’ve been reading, as a youth?”

Lew obligingly tried to remember. "Wild West, African explorers, the usual adventure stuff. But you boys—you're not storybook characters." He had a thought. "Are you?"

"No more than Wyatt Earp or Nellie Bly," Randolph supposed. "Although the longer a fellow's name has been in the magazines, the harder it is to tell fiction from non-fiction."

"I guess I read the sports pages mostly."

"Good!" declared Chick Counterfly, "at least we won't have to get on to the Anarchist question."

Fine with Lew, who wasn't even sure what Anarchists were, exactly, though the word was sure in the air. He was not in the detective business out of political belief. He had just sort of wandered into it, by way of a sin he was supposed once to have committed. As to the specifics of this lapse, well, good luck. Lew couldn't remember what he'd done, or hadn't done, or even when. Those who didn't know either still acted puzzled, as if he were sending out rays of iniquity. Those who did claim to remember, all too well, kept giving him sad looks which soon—it being Illinois—soured into what was known as moral horror.

He was denounced in the local newspapers. Newsboys made up lurid headlines about him, which they shouted all through the civic mobilities morning and evening, making a point of pronouncing his name disrespectfully. Women in intimidating hats glared at him with revulsion.

He became known as the Upstate-Downstate Beast.

It would've helped if he could remember, but all he could produce was this peculiar haze. The experts he went to for advice had little to tell him. "Past lives," some assured him. "Future lives," said other confident swamis. "Spontaneous Hallucination," diagnosed the more scientific among them. "Perhaps," one beaming Oriental suggested, "*it was hallucinating you.*"

"Very helpful, thanks," Lew murmured, and tried to leave, only to find that the door would not open.

"A formality. Too many bank drafts have come back unhonored."

"Here's cash. Can I go?"

"When your anger has cooled, consider what I have told you."

"It's no use to me."

He fled in among the skyscrapers of Chicago, leaving a note at work suggesting he'd be back shortly. No use. A close business associate followed, confronted, and publicly denounced him, knocking his hat off and kicking it into the middle of Clark Street, where it was run over by a beer wagon.

"I don't deserve this, Wensleydale."

"You have destroyed your name." And without speaking further, turned, there, right out among the city traffic, and walked away, soon vanishing into the summertime clutter of noise and light.

Worst of all, Lew's adored young wife, Troth, when she found his breezy note, headed straight for the interurban and up to Chicago, intending to plead with him to come back, though by the time she got off at Union Station, reflection to the pulse of the rails had done its work.

"Never more Lewis, do you understand, never under the same roof, ever."

"But what are they saying I did? I swear, Troth, I can't remember."

"If I told you, I would have to hear it once again, and once has already been more than enough."

"Where'll I live, then?" All through their long discussion they had been walking, walkers in the urban unmappable, and had reached a remote and unfamiliar part of the city—in fact, an enormous district whose existence neither, till now, had even suspected.

"I don't care. Go back to one of your other wives."

"God! How many are there supposed to be?"

"Stay here in Chicago if you like, it's all the same to me. This neighborhood we're in right now might suit you perfectly, and I know *I'll* never come here again."

In an ignorance black as night, he understood only that he had struck at her grievously, and that neither his understanding nor his contrition would save them. By now he could not bear her woundedness—the tears, through some desperate magic, kept gelid at her lower lids, because she would not let them fall, not till he had left her sight.

"Then I'll look for a place here in town, good suggestion Troth, thank you. . . ." But she had hailed a hansom-cab, and climbed in without looking back, and was quickly borne away.

Lew looked around. Was it still Chicago? As he began again to walk, the first thing he noticed was how few of the streets here followed the familiar grid pattern of the rest of town—everything was on the skew, narrow lanes radiating starwise from small plazas, tramlines with hairpin turns that carried passengers abruptly back the way they'd been coming, increasing chances for traffic collisions, and not a name he could recognize on any of the street-signs, even those of better-traveled thoroughfares . . . foreign languages, it seemed. Not for the first time, he experienced a kind of *waking swoon*, which not so much propelled as allowed him entry into an urban setting, *like* the world he had left but differing in particulars which were not slow to reveal themselves.

Occasionally a street would open up into a small plaza, or a convergence

with other streets, where pitches had been set up by puppeteers, music and dance acts, and vendors of everything—divination books, grilled squabs on toast, ocarinas and kazoos, roast ears of corn, summer caps and straw hats, lemonade and lemon ice, something new everyplace he turned to look. In a small courtyard within a courtyard, he came upon a group of men and women, engaged in slow ritual movement, a country dance, almost—though Lew, pausing to watch, was not sure what country. Soon they were gazing back, as if in some way they knew him, and all about his troubles. When their business was done, they invited him over to a table under an awning, where all at once, over root beer and Saratoga chips, Lew found himself confessing “everything,” which in fact wasn’t much—“What I need is some way to atone for whatever it is I’ve done. I can’t keep on with this life. . . .”

“We can teach you,” said one of them, who seemed to be in charge, introducing himself only as Drave.

“Even if—”

“Remorse without an object is a doorway to deliverance.”

“Sure, but I can’t pay you for it, I don’t even have a place to live.”

“Pay for it!” The tableful of adepts was amused at this. “Pay! Of course you can pay! Everyone can!”

“You will have to remain not only until you learn the procedure,” Lew was informed, “but until *we* are sure of you as well. There is a hotel close to here, the Esthonia, which penitents who come to us often make use of. Mention us, they will give you a good discount.”

Lew went to register at the tall, rickety Esthonia Hotel. The lobby clerks and the bellmen on duty all acted like they’d been expecting him. The form he was given to fill out was unusually long, particularly the section headed “Reasons for Extended Residence,” and the questions quite personal, even intimate, yet he was urged to be as forthcoming as possible—indeed, according to a legal notice in large type at the top of the form, anything less than total confession would make him *liable to criminal penalties*. He tried to answer honestly, despite a constant struggle with the pen they insisted he use, which was leaving blotches and smears all over the form.

When the application, having been sent off to some invisible desk up the other end of a pneumatic house-tube, at length came thumping back hand-stamped “Approved,” Lew was told that one of the bellmen must conduct him to his room. He couldn’t be expected to find it on his own.

“But I didn’t bring anything, no luggage, not even money—which reminds me, how will I be paying for this?”

“Arrangements are in place, sir. Please go with Hershel now, and try to remember the way, for he won’t want to show it to you again.”

Hershel was large for one of his calling, looking less like a uniformed jockey than an ex-pugilist. The two of them scarcely fit into the tiny electric elevator, which turned out to be more frightening than the worst carnival ride Lew had ever been on. The blue arcing from loosely dangling wires, whose woven insulation was frayed and thick with greasy dust, filled the little space with a strong smell of ozone. Hershel had his own notions of elevator etiquette, trying to start conversations about national politics, labor unrest, even religious controversy, any of which it might take an ascent of hours, into lofty regions no high-iron pioneer had yet dared, even to begin to discuss. More than once they were obliged to step out into refuse-filled corridors, negotiate iron ladders, cross dangerous catwalks not visible from the streets, only to reboard the fiendish conveyance at another of its stops, at times traveling not even vertically, until at last reaching a floor with a room somehow cantilevered out in the wind, autumnal today and unremitting, off Lake Michigan.

When the door swung open, Lew noted a bed, a chair, a table, a resonant absence of other furnishing which in different circumstances he would have called sorrowful, but which here he was able, in the instant, to recognize as perfect.

"Hershel, I don't know how I'm supposed to tip you."

Hershel holding out a banknote, "Reverse tip. Bring me a bottle of Old Gideon and some ice. If there's any change, keep it. Learn frugality. Begin to see the arrangement?"

"Service?"

"That, maybe some conjuring too. You disappear like an elf into the woodwork, the more professionally the better, and when you reappear, you've got the hooch, not to mention the ice, see."

"Where will you be?"

"I'm a bellhop, Mr. Basnight, not a guest. There ain't that many places a guest can be, though a bellhop can be just about anywhere in the establishment."

Finding bourbon for Hershel was a breeze, they sold it here out of every street-door from dry-goods shops to dentist's offices, and they all waved away Hershel's greenback, being strangely happy for Lew just to start a tab. By the time he tracked down the bellhop again, the ice had all melted. Somehow this got back to Drave, who, deeply though perhaps unhealthily amused, struck Lew repeatedly with a "remembrance stick." Taking this as acceptance, Lew continued to perform chores assigned him, some commonplace, others strange beyond easy reckoning, transacted in languages he didn't always understand, until he began to feel some approach, out at the fringe of

his awareness, like a streetcar in the city distance, and some fateful, perhaps dangerous, invitation to climb aboard and be taken off to parts unknown. . . .

Through the winter, though it seemed like any Chicago winter, that is a sub-zero-degrees version of Hell, Lew lived as economically as possible, watching his bank account dwindle toward nothing, haunted both sleeping and waking by unusually vivid reveries of Troth, all stricken with a tenderness he had never noticed in their actual life together. Out the window in the distance, contradicting the prairie, a mirage of downtown Chicago ascended to a kind of lurid acropolis, its light as if from nightly immolation warped to the red end of the spectrum, smoldering as if always just about to explode into open flames.

Now and then, unannounced, Drave showed up to review Lew's progress.

"First of all," he advised, "I can't speak for God, but your wife is not going to forgive you. She's never coming back. If that's what you thought the payoff here was going to be, you need to re-evaluate."

The soles of Lew's feet began to ache, as if wanting to be taken all the way to the center of the Earth.

"What if I didn't care what it took to bring her back?"

"Penance? You'll do that anyway. You're not Catholic, Mr. Basnight?"

"Presbyterian."

"Many people believe that there is a mathematical correlation between sin, penance, and redemption. More sin, more penance, and so forth. Our own point has always been that there is no connection. All the variables are independent. You do penance not because you have sinned but because it is your destiny. You are redeemed not through doing penance but because it happens. Or doesn't happen.

"It's nothing supernatural. Most people have a wheel riding up on a wire, or some rails in the street, some kind of guide or groove, to keep them moving in the direction of their destiny. But you keep bouncing free. Avoiding penance and thereby definition."

"Going off my trolley. And you're trying to help me get back to the way most people live, 's that it?"

"'Most people,'" not raising his voice, though something in Lew jumped as if he had, "are dutiful and dumb as oxen. Delirium literally means going out of a furrow you've been plowing. Think of this as a productive sort of delirium."

"What do I do with that?"

"It's something you don't want?"

"Would you?"

"Not sure. Maybe."

. . .

SPRING ARRIVED, wheelfolk appeared in the streets and parks, in gaudy striped socks and long-billed "Scorcher" caps. Winds off the lake moderated. Parasols and sidelong glances reappeared. Troth was long gone, remarried it seemed the minute the decree came down, and rumored now to be living on Lake Shore Drive someplace up north of Oak Street. Some vice-president or something.

One mild and ordinary work-morning in Chicago, Lew happened to find himself on a public conveyance, head and eyes inclined nowhere in particular, when he entered, all too briefly, a condition he had no memory of having sought, which he later came to think of as grace. Despite the sorry history of rapid transit in this city, the corporate neglect and high likelihood of collision, injury, and death, the weekday-morning overture blared along as usual. Men went on grooming mustaches with gray-gloved fingers. A rolled umbrella dented a bowler hat, words were exchanged. Girl amanuenses in little Leghorn straw hats and striped shirtwaists with huge shoulders that took up more room in the car than angels' wings dreamed with contrary feelings of what awaited them on upper floors of brand-new steel-frame "skyscrapers." The horses stepped along in their own time and space. Passengers snorted, scratched, and read the newspaper, sometimes all at once, while others imagined that they could get back to some kind of vertical sleep. Lew found himself surrounded by a luminosity new to him, not even observed in dreams, nor easily attributable to the smoke-inflected sun beginning to light Chicago.

He understood that things were exactly what they were. It seemed more than he could bear.

He must have descended to the sidewalk and entered a cigar store. It was that early hour in cigar stores all over town when boys are fetching in bricks that have been soaking all night in buckets of water, to be put into the display cases to keep the inventory humidified. A plump and dapper individual was in buying domestic cheroots. He watched Lew for a while, just short of staring, before asking, with a nod at the display, "That box on the bottom shelf—how many colorado-claros left in it? Without looking, I mean."

"Seventeen," said Lew without any hesitation the other man could detect.

"You know not everybody can do that."

"What?"

"Notice things. What was that just went by the window?"

"Shiny black little trap, three springs, brass fittings, bay gelding about four years old, portly gent in a slouch hat and a yellow duster, why?"

“Amazing.”

“Not really. Just, nobody ever asks.”

“You had breakfast?”

In the cafeteria next door, the early crowd had been and gone. Everybody here knew Lew, usually, knew his face, but this morning, being transfigured and all, it was like he passed unidentified.

His companion introduced himself as Nate Privett, personnel director at White City Investigations, a detective agency.

In the near and far distance, explosions, not always to be identified in the next day’s newspapers, now and then sent leisurely rips through the fabric of the day, to which Nate Privett pretended to be listening. “Ironworkers’ Union,” he nodded. “After enough of ’em, a man begins to develop an ear.” He poured syrup on a towering stack of pancakes out of which butter melted and ran. “See, it’s not safecrackers, embezzlers, murderers, spouses on the run, none of the dime-novel stuff, put all that out of your head. Here in Chi, this year of our Lord, it’s all about the labor unions, or as we like to call them, anarchistic scum,” said Nate Privett.

“No experience with any of that.”

“You appear qualified, I should say.” Nate’s mouth went sly for a second. “Can’t believe you haven’t been approached about Pinkerton work, pay over there’s almost too good for a man *not* to sign up.”

“Don’t know. Too much of the modern economics for me, for there’s surely more to life than just wages.”

“Oh? What?”

“Well, give me a few minutes with that one.”

“You think working for the Eye’s a life of moral squalor, you ought to have a look at our shop.”

Lew nodded and took him up on it. Next thing he knew, he was on the payroll, noticing how every time he entered a room somebody was sure to remark, ostensibly to somebody else, “Gravy, a man could get *killed* out there!” By the time he got that pleasantry all decoded, Lew found he was more than able to shrug it off. His office and field skills weren’t the worst in the shop, but he knew that what distinguished him was a keen sympathy for the invisible.

At White City Investigations, invisibility was a sacred condition, whole darn floors of office buildings being given over to its art and science—resources for disguise that outdid any theatrical dressing room west of the Hudson, rows of commodes and mirrors extending into the distant shadows, acres of costumes, forests of hatracks bearing an entire Museum of Hat History, countless cabinets stuffed full of wigs, false beards, putty, powder, kohl and

rouge, dyes for skin and hair, adjustable gaslight at each mirror that could be taken from a lawn party at a millionaire's cottage in Newport to a badlands saloon at midnight with just a tweak to a valve or two. Lew enjoyed wandering around, trying on different rigs, like every day was Hallowe'en, but he understood after a while that he didn't have to. He had learned to step to the side of the day. Wherever it was he stepped to had its own vast, incomprehensible history, its perils and ecstasies, its potential for unannounced romance and early funerals, but when he was there, it was apparently not as easy for anyone in "Chicago" to be that certain of his whereabouts. Not exactly invisibility. Excursion.

Nate showed up at Lew's desk one day with a thick folder that had some kind of royal crest on it, featuring a two-headed eagle.

"Not me," Lew edging away.

"Austrian Archduke is in town, we need somebody to keep an eye on him."

"Fellows like that don't have bodyguards of their own?"

"Sure do, they call em 'Trabants' over there, but have a lawyer explain civil liability to you, Lew, I'm just an old gumshoe guy, all's I know is there's a couple a thousand hunkies down to the Yards come over here with hate in their hearts for this bird and his family, maybe with good reason, too. If it was just the wholesome educational exhibits on the Fairgrounds and all why I wouldn't be too concerned, but the book on young Francis Ferdinand is, is he prefers our own New Levee and high-life neighborhoods like that. So every alleyway down here, every shadow big enough to hide a shive artist with a grudge, is a warm invitation to rewrite history."

"I get any backup on this, Nate?"

"I can spare Quirkel."

"Somebody get Rewrite!" Lew pretended to cry, affably enough.

F.F., as he was termed in his dossier, was out on a world tour whose officially stated purpose was to "learn about foreign peoples." How Chicago fit the bill was about to become clearer. The Archduke had put in an appearance at the Austrian Pavilion, sat through Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show with a certain amount of impatience, and lingered at the Colorado Silver Camp exhibit, where, imagining that camps must necessarily include camp-followers, he proceeded to lead his entourage on a lively search after ladies of flagrant repute that would have taxed the abilities of even a seasoned spotter, let alone

a greenhorn like Lew—running up and down and eventually out into the Midway, accosting amateur actors who had never been west of Joliet with untranslatable ravings in Viennese dialect and gesticulations which could easily be—well, were—taken the wrong way. Uniformed handlers, fooling elaborately with their whiskers, gazed anywhere but at the demented princeling. Lew slid like a snake from one architectural falsehood to the next, his working suits by the end of each day smudged white from rubbing against so much “staff,” a mixture of plaster and hemp fibers, ubiquitous at the White City that season, meant to counterfeit some deathless white stone.

“What I am really looking for in Chicago,” the Archduke finally got around to confessing, “is something new and interesting to kill. At home we kill boars, bears, stags, the usual—while here in America, so I am told, are enormous *herds of bison, ja?*”

“Not around Chicago anymore, Your Highness, I’m sorry to say,” Lew replied.

“Ah. But, at present, working here in your famous slaughterhouse district . . . *are* many . . . Hungarians, not true?”

“Y— maybe. I’d have to go look up the figures,” Lew trying not to get into eye contact with this customer.

“In Austria,” the Archduke was explaining, “we have forests full of game, and hundreds of beaters who drive the animals toward the hunters such as myself who are waiting to shoot them.” He beamed at Lew, as if mischievously withholding the final line of a joke. Lew’s ears began to itch. “Hungarians occupy the lowest level of brute existence,” Francis Ferdinand declared—“the wild swine by comparison exhibits refinement and nobility—do you think the Chicago Stockyards might possibly be rented out to me and my friends, for a weekend’s amusement? We would of course compensate the owners for any loss of revenue.”

“Your Royal Highness, I’ll sure ask about that, and somebody’ll get back to you.”

Nate Privett thought this was just a knee-slapper. “Gonna be Emperor one of these days, can you beat that!”

“Like there ain’t enough Hungarians back home to keep him busy?” Lew was wondering.

“Well, not that he wouldn’t be doing *us* a favor.”

“How’s that, boss?”

“With more them damned anarchistic foreign-born south of Forty-seventh than you could point a Mannlicher at,” chuckled Nate, “sure’d be a few less of em to worry about, wouldn’t it?”

Curious himself about who might be his opposite number on the Austrian side of this exercise, Lew nosed around and picked up an item or two. Young Max Khäutsch, newly commissioned a captain in the Trabants, was here on his first overseas assignment, as field chief of “K&K Special Security,” having already proven himself useful at home as an assassin, an especially deadly one, it seemed. Standard Habsburg procedure would have been to put him out of the way at some agreed-upon point of diminishing usefulness, but nobody was willing to try. Despite his youth he was said to give an impression of access to resources beyond his own, of being comfortable in the shadows and absolutely unprincipled, with an abiding contempt for any distinction between life and death. Sending him to America seemed appropriate.

Lew found him sympathetic . . . the oblique planes of his face revealing an origin somewhere in the Slavic vastnesses of Europe as yet but lightly traveled by the recreational visitor. . . . They got into the habit of early-morning coffee at the Austrian Pavilion, accompanied by a variety of baked goods. “And *this* might be of particular interest to you, Mr. Basnight, considering the widely known *Kuchenteigs-Verderbtheit* or pastry-depravity of the American detective. . . .”

“Well we . . . we try not to talk about that.”

“So? in Austria it is widely remarked upon.”

Despite young Khäutsch’s police skills, somehow the Archduke kept giving him the slip. “Perhaps I am too clever to deal efficiently with Habsburg stupidity,” mused Khäutsch. One night when it seemed Franz Ferdinand had dropped off the map of greater Chicago, Khäutsch got on the telephone and began calling around town, eventually reaching White City Investigations.

“I’ll go have a look,” said Lew.

After a lengthy search including obvious favorites like the Silver Dollar and Everleigh House, Lew found the Archduke at last in the Boll Weevil Lounge, a Negro bar down on South State in the Thirties, the heart of the vaudeville and black entertainment district in those days, hollering his way into an evening which promised at least a troublesome moment or two. Barrelhouse piano, green beer, a couple of pool tables, girls in rooms upstairs, smoke from two-for-a-penny cigars. “Squalid!” screamed the Archduke. “I love it!”

Lew kind of enjoyed it himself in this part of town, unlike some of the ops at White City, who seemed skittish around Negroes, who’d been arriving lately in ever-increasing numbers from down South. Something about the neighborhood drew him, maybe the food—surely the only place in Chicago a man could find a decent orange phosphate—although right at the moment you could not call the atmosphere welcoming.

"What here are you looking at, you wish to steal *eine . . . Wassermelone*, perhaps?"

"Ooooo," went several folks in earshot. The insultee, a large and dangerous-looking individual, could not believe he was hearing this. His mouth began to open slowly as the Austrian prince continued—

"Something about . . . your . . . wait . . . *deine Mutti*, as you would say, your . . . *your mama*, she plays third base for the Chicago White Stockings, *nicht wahr?*" as customers begin tentatively to move toward the egresses, "a quite unappealing woman, indeed she is so fat, that to get from her tits to her ass, one has to take the 'El'! Tried once to get into the Exposition, they say, no, no, lady, this is the World's Fair, not the World's Ugly!"

"Whatchyou doin, you fool, you can get y'ass killed talking like that, what are you, from *England* or some shit?"

"Um, Your Royal Highness?" Lew murmured, "if we could just have a word—"

"It is all right! I know how to talk to these people! I have studied their culture! Listen—*'st los, Hund? Boogie-boogie, ja?*"

Lew, supposed to be disciplined in the ways of the East, would not allow himself the luxury of panic, but at times, like now, could've used maybe a homeopathic dose, just to keep his immunity up. "Hopelessly insane," he announced, waving a thumb F.F.'s way, "escaped in his time from some of the fanciest bughouses of Europe, very little remaining of the brains he was born with, except possibly," lowering his voice, "how much money you bring with you, there, Highness?"

"Ah, I understand," murmured the imperial scapegrace. Turning to the room, "When Franz Ferdinand drinks," he cried, "everybody drinks!"

Which helped to restore a level of civility in the room, and soon even of cheer, as smart neckties were soaked in suds, the piano player came back out from under the bar, and people in the room resumed dancing syncopated two-steps. After a while somebody started singing "All Pimps Look Alike to Me," and half the room joined in. Lew, however, noticing the way the Archduke seemed to keep inching stealthily but unmistakably toward the street door, thought it wise to do the same. Sure enough, just before sliding out the door, Der F.F. with a demonic grin screamed, "And when Franz Ferdinand pays, everybody pays!" whereupon he disappeared, and it was a near thing that Lew got out with his keester intact.

Outside they found Trabant Khäutsch ready with a two-horse hack poised for instant departure, and the Archduke's own double-barreled Mannlicher resting nonchalantly but visibly on one shoulder. As they were speeding along dodging grip cars, private carriages, police patrol wagons with their

gongs banging, and so forth, Khäutsch casually offered, "If you're ever in Vienna, and for any reason need a favor, please do not hesitate."

"Soon's I learn to waltz, I'm on my way."

The Archduke, pouting like a child whose mischief has been interrupted, did not offer comment.

LEW WAS JUST HEADED out to Kinsley's for a late steak when Nate called him into the office, reaching to fetch down a new folder. "Old F.F.'ll be out of town in just a couple more days, Lew, but meantime here's somethin for you tonight."

"Thought I might grab some sleep."

"Anarchy never sleeps, son. They're meeting right down the El line a couple-three stops, and you might want to take a look in. Even get educated, maybe."

At first Lew took it for a church—something about the echoes, the smell—though in fact, on weekends anyway, it was a small variety theater. Up on the stage now was a lectern flanked by a pair of gas lamps with Welsbach mantles, at which stood a tall individual in workmen's overalls, identified presently as the traveling Anarchist preacher the Reverend Moss Gatlin. The crowd—Lew had been expecting only a handful of malcontents—was numerous, after a while in fact spilling into the street. Unemployed men from out of town, exhausted, unbathed, flatulent, sullen . . . collegians having a look in at possibilities for hell-raising . . . Women in surprising numbers, bearing the marks of their trades, scars from the blades of the meatpacking floors, squints from needlework carried past the borderlands of sleep in clockless bad light, women in head-scarves, crocheted fascinators, extravagantly flowered hats, no hats at all, women just looking to put their feet up after too many hours of lifting, fetching, walking the jobless avenues, bearing the insults of the day . . .

There was an Italian with an accordion. The company began to sing, from the *Workers' Own Songbook*, though mostly without the aid of the text, choral selections including Hubert Parry's recent setting of Blake's "Jerusalem," taken not unreasonably as a great anticapitalist anthem disguised as a choir piece, with a slight adjustment to the last line—"In *this our* green and pleasant land."

And another which went,

Fierce as the winter's tempest
Cold as the smoth' ring snow

On grind the mills of Avarice
High rides the cruel-eyed foe. . . .
Where is the hand of mercy,
Where is the kindly face,
Where in this heedless slaughter
Find we the promis'd place?
Sweated, despised and hearthless,
Scorned 'neath the banker's boot,
We freeze by their frost-bound windows—
As they fondle their blood-bought loot—
Love never spared a sinner,
Hate never cured a saint,
Soon is the night of reckoning,
Then let no heart be faint,
Teach us to fly from shelter
Teach us to love the cold,
Life's for the free and fearless—
Death's for the bought and sold!

. . . moving from the minor mode it had been in throughout into the major, ending with a Picardy third cadence that, if it did not break Lew's heart exactly, did leave a fine crack that in time was to prove unmendable. . . .

For something here was striking him as what you'd have to call odd. Nate Privett, everybody else at W.C.I., needless to say most of the Agency's clients, none had too good of a word to say about the labor unions, let alone Anarchists of any stripe, that's if they even saw a difference. There was a kind of general assumption around the shop that laboring men and women were all more or less evil, surely misguided, and not quite American, maybe not quite human. But here was this hall full of Americans, no question, even the foreign-born, if you thought about where they had come from and what they must've been hoping to find over here and so forth, American in their prayers anyway, and maybe a few hadn't shaved for a while, but it was hard to see how any fit the bearded, wild-eyed, bomb-rolling Red description too close, in fact give them a good night's sleep and a square meal or two, and even a veteran detective'd have a hard time telling the difference from regular Americans. Yet here they were expressing the most subversive thoughts, as ordinary folks might discuss crops, or last night's ball game. Lew understood that this business would not end with him walking out the door tonight and over to the El and on to some next assignment.

IT MUST HAVE BEEN that Austrian Archduke. Look after one royal, everybody starts making assumptions. Anarchists and heads of state being defined these days as natural enemies, Lew by this logic became the natural gumshoe to be taking aim at Anarchists, wherever they happened to pop up in the shooting gallery of day-to-day history. Anarchist-related tickets began landing on his desk with some regularity. He found himself out by factory fences breathing coal-smoke, walking picket lines in various of W.C.I.'s thousand disguises, learning enough of several Slavic tongues to be plausible down in the deadfalls where the desperate malcontents convened, fingerless slaughterhouse veterans, irregulars in the army of sorrow, prophesiers who had seen America as it might be in visions America's wardens could not tolerate.

Soon, along with dozens of file drawers stuffed with the information he brought back, Lew had moved into his own office, at whose doorsill functionaries of government and industry presently began to appear, having surrendered their hats in the outer office, to ask respectfully for advice which Nate Privett kept a keen eye on the market value of. Of course this provoked some grumbling in the business, mainly from Pinkerton's, who, having assumed American Anarchism was their own personal cookie jar, wondered how an upstart like White City dared aspire to more than crumbs. The discontent became evident in the White City shop as well, as The Unsleeping Eye began to lure away personnel, soon more of them than Nate could afford to lose. One day he came bounding into Lew's office surrounded by a nimbus of cheer phony as nickel-a-quart bay rum—"Good news, Agent Basnight, another step up your personal career ladder! How does . . . 'Regional Director' sound?"

Lew looked up, poker-faced. "What 'region' is it I'm being packed off to, Nate?"

"Lew, you card! Be serious!" W.C.I. had decided to open a Denver office, Nate explained, and with more Anarchists per square foot out there than a man could begin to count, who better than Lew to ramrod the operation?

As if this were a real question, Lew began to recite names of plausible colleagues, all of them with an edge on him in seniority, till Nate's frown had grown deep enough. "O.K., boss, I get the drift. It's not up to you, that what you're about to say?"

"Lew, it's gold and silver mining out there. Nuggets for the picking up. Favors that you can name your own price."

Lew reached for a panatela and lit up. After a couple-three slow puffs,

“Ever come out of work in this town when the light’s still in the sky and the lamps are just being lit along the big avenues and down by the Lake, and the girls are all out of the offices and shops and heading home, and the steak houses are cranking up for the evening trade, and the plate-glass windows are shining, with the rigs all lined up by the hotels, and—”

“No,” Nate staring impatiently, “not too often, I work too late for that.”

Lew blew a smoke ring, and a few more concentrically. “Well now shit, there, Nate.”

FOR SOME REASON Lew felt uncomfortable telling the Chums of Chance about his transfer. In the short time he’d been riding with them, he’d almost come to feel more at home up in the *Inconvenience* than he did at the Agency.

The visibility today was unlimited, the Lake sparkling with a million highlights, the little electric launches and gondolas, the crowds in the plazas adjoining the mammoth exhibition buildings, the whiteness of the place nearly unbearable. . . . Faint janglings of music ascended from the Midway pavilions, a bass drum thumped like the pulse of some living collective creature down there.

Professor Vanderjuice was along for the day, having completed whatever business had detained him in Chicago. Lew’s detective reflexes warned him of something deeply evasive about this personable academic, which he guessed the boys were aware of, too, though it was their business what to make of it. His presence made it no easier for Lew to impart his news, but he did manage at last to blurt, “Doggone but I’m going to miss this.”

“Still some weeks till the fair closes,” said Randolph.

“I’ll be gone by then. They’re sending me west, fellows, and I guess it’s so long.”

Randolph had a sympathetic look. “At least they tell you where it is you’ll be sent off to. After the closing-day ceremonies here, our future’s all a blank.”

“It may not be quite the West you’re expecting,” Professor Vanderjuice put in. “Back in July my colleague Freddie Turner came out here from Harvard and gave a speech before a bunch of anthro people who were all in town for their convention and of course the Fair. To the effect that the Western frontier we all thought we knew from song and story was no longer on the map but gone, absorbed—a dead duck.”

“To show you what he means,” said Randolph, putting the helm over and causing the *Inconvenience* to veer inland, bearing northwest, toward the Union Stockyards.

“Yes here,” continued the Professor, nodding down at the Yards as they began to flow by beneath, “here’s where the Trail comes to its end at last, along with the American Cowboy who used to live on it and by it. No matter how virtuous he’s kept his name, how many evildoers he’s managed to get by undamaged, how he’s done by his horses, what girls he has chastely kissed, serenaded by guitar, or gone out and raised hallelujah with, it’s all back there in the traildust now and none of it matters, for down there you’ll find the wet convergence and finale of his drought-struck tale and thankless calling, Buffalo Bill’s Wild West Show stood on its head—spectators invisible and silent, nothing to be commemorated, the only weapons in view being Blitz Instruments and Wackett Punches to knock the animals out with, along with the blades everybody is packing, of course, and the rodeo clowns jabber on in some incomprehensible lingo not to distract the beast but rather to heighten and maintain its attention to the single task at hand, bringing it down to those last few gates, the stunning-devices waiting inside, the butchering and blood just beyond the last chute—and the cowboy with him. Here.” He handed Lew a pair of field-glasses. “That little charabanc down there just making the turn off Forty-seventh?”

As the airship descended closer, Lew watched the open vehicle pull up inside the Halstead Street gate to discharge its passengers, and understood, with some perplexity, that it was an excursion group, in town for a tour among the killing-floors and sausage rooms, an instructive hour of throat-slashing, decapitation, skinning, gutting, and dismemberment—“Say, Mother, come have a look at *these* poor bastards!” following the stock in their sombre passage from arrival in rail cars, into the smells of shit and chemicals, old fat and tissue diseased, dying, and dead, and a rising background choir of animal terror and shouting in human languages few of them had heard before, till the moving chain brought in stately parade the hook-hung carcasses at last to the chilling-rooms. At the exit the visitors would find a souvenir-shop, where they could purchase stereopticon slides, picture-postcards, and cans of “Top Gourmet Grade” souvenir luncheon meat, known to include fingers and other body parts from incautious workmen.

“Don’t think I’ll give up steaks just yet,” Lew said, “but it does make a man wonder how disconnected those folks down there’d have to be.”

“That’s about it,” the Professor nodded. “The frontier ends and disconnection begins. Cause and effect? How the dickens do I know? I spent my earlier hob-raising years out where you’re headed, Denver and Cripple Creek and Colorado Springs, while there was still a frontier, you always knew where it was and how to get there, and it wasn’t always just between natives and strangers or Anglos and Mexicans or cavalry and Indians. But you could feel

it, unmistakably, like a divide, where you knew you could stand and piss would flow two ways at once.”

But if the Frontier was gone now, did that mean Lew was about to be disconnected, too, from himself? sent off into exile, into some silence beyond silence as retribution for a remote and ancient vice always just about to be remembered, half stunned, in a half dream like a surgeon’s knot taken swiftly in the tissue of time and pulled snug, delivered into the control of potent operatives who did not wish him well?

THE BOYS GAVE Lew a gold-and-enamel Chums of Chance honorary membership pin to be worn beneath his lapel, which, upon being revealed at any branch anyplace in the world, would entitle him to all visitors’ privileges provided for in the C. of C. Charter. Lew in return gave them a miniature spotter’s telescope disguised as a watch fob, also holding a single .22 round which it was able to fire in an emergency. The boys thanked him sincerely enough, but that night after Evening Quarters argued late over the recurring question of introducing firearms aboard the *Inconvenience*. In the matter of Lew’s gift, the solution was easy enough—keep it unloaded. But the broader issue remained. “As of this moment we are all friends and brothers,” Randolph supposed, “but historically any ship’s armory is a free-standing volume of potential trouble—an attraction to would-be mutineers, and little else. There it sits, waiting its moment, taking up space that might, particularly on an airship, be more usefully assigned.” The other danger was less easy to speak of, and everyone—except possibly Pugnax, whose thoughts were difficult of access—found themselves speaking in euphemisms. For cases were known and whispered through the service, more certain than idle rumors or sky-stories, of extended duty so terrible in its demands on morale that now and then, unable to continue, some unfortunate Chum of Chance had decided to end his life, the overwhelming choice among methods being the “midnight plunge”—simply rolling over the gunwale during a night flight—yet, for those who might prefer less dependence on altitude, any gun on board would present an irresistible appeal.

Cheerfulness, once taken as a condition of life on the *Inconvenience*, was in fact being progressively revealed to the boys as a precarious commodity, these days. They seemed held here, as if under some unconfided spell. Autumn deepened among the desolate city blocks, an edge appeared to the hum of life here, invisible sometimes and furtive as worn boot-heels vanishing round the corners of the stately arcades where the boys resorted, in great shabby rooms, among the smells of stale animal fat and ammonia on the

floor, with glass-roofed steam-tables offering three choices of sandwich, lamb, ham, or beef, all heavy on the fat and gristle, stale odors, frown-lined women slapping together meat and bread, a shaken spoon that smacked the flour-heavy gravy on like plaster, eyes cast downward all day long, behind them in front of the mirror rising a pyramid of cheap miniature bottles, known hereabouts as “Mickey’s,” holding three choices of wine, red, white, and muscatel.

When not reeling about quite as uncontrollably as drunkards, the boys would gather to dine on these horrible wet-and-dry sandwiches, drinking the low-priced wine and noting with clogged humor how swiftly each seemed to fatten before the gazes of the others. “Hang it, fellows,” Randolph expostulated, “we’ve got to try to pull out of this!” They began to imagine, jointly and severally, some rescuer entering the crew spaces, moving among them, weighing, choosing, a creature of fantasy to bring them back each to his innocence, to lead him out of his unreliable body and his unique loss of courage, so many years in the making—though, much as he enjoyed unanimous admiration from the crew, it had not turned out to be Lew Basnight. He had moved on, as had so many in their lives, and they continued in a fragmented reverie which, they had learned, often announced some change in the works.

And sure enough, one morning the boys found, wedged casually between two strands of mooring cable, as always unconnected with any action they might’ve been contemplating, orders silently delivered in the night.

“Bear east is pretty much all it says,” Randolph in quiet consternation. “East by south.”

Lindsay pulled out charts. Speculation began to fill the day. Once it had been enough to know the winds, and how they blew at each season of the year, to get a rough idea of where they might be headed. Presently, as the *Inconvenience* began to acquire its own sources of internal power, there would be other global streamings to be taken into account—electromagnetic lines of force, Æther-storm warnings, movements of population and capital. Not the ballooning profession as the boys had learned it.

LATER, after closing day, as autumn deepened over the corrupted prairie, as the ill-famed Hawk, miles aloft, invisibly rehearsed its Arctic repertoire of swift descent, merciless assault, rapture of souls—the abandoned structures of the Fair would come to house the jobless and hungry who had always been there, even at the height of the season of miracle just concluded. The Colorado Silver Mining Camp, like the other former exhibits, was occupied now

by drifters, squatters, mothers with nursing infants, hell-raisers hired for the run of the Fair, now, their market value having vanished, returned to the consolations of drink, dogs and cats who preferred the company of their own species, some who still bore memories of Pugnax and his conversation, and excursions they had been out on. All moving in closer to the fires of Fair debris, once the substance of wonder, as the temperature headed down.