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# The Cosmopolis Literary Supplement

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No. 21 • June 2003 ~ Published with Cosmopolis No. 39

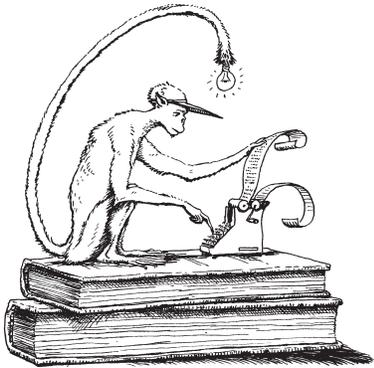
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## Editorial

Gentle Readers,

Fear not: the *CLS* is back—belated maybe, and that purely because of the editor's preoccupation with other matters, but it has now returned.

A few words as to its contents and its currently-projected future.

In this issue you will find the continuation of Tim Stretton's *Dragonchaser* and another short story (this time more worthy of its appellation, in that it actually *is* 'short') from your gentle editor.

I offer this somewhat un-typical tale instead of other things I had planned, because during my soul-searching of the last few months—the same process that led me to breaking my vows and actually writing an 'article' for *Cosmopolis*—I realized that, even though as the editor of the *CLS* I can allow myself certain liberties, I also am bound by the *CLS*'s brief, which is to publish work inspired and influenced predominantly by Jack Vance. I can take the liberty of penning endless editorials, but there are things even I may not do.

Unfortunately (for the selection of my works available for the *CLS*) I have recently discovered that many of my novels of recent years, with the exception of *Keaen* and its sequels, have been written less under the influence of Jack Vance—the influence is always there, of course; but not *predominant*—than under that of another great, namely Robert Heinlein. I therefore cannot in good faith submit these works to the *CLS*. I've tried but Editor-me rejected said submissions by Writer-me on the grounds of inappropriateness.

What then remains of my works that I can enter here, in order that Tim need not remain the solitary contributor?

Well, in the last issue there was *Lenny Ragg*, which was written years ago under the influence of *Araminta Station*, with a take on the kind of totally self-referential character Jack portrayed in *Kirby Wook*.

In this issue you'll find *Finnegan's Wake*. It's something I first wrote almost thirty years ago, in response to a challenge by someone whose name I have forgotten. I could not, he claimed, whip up a completely contrived story based purely on a title, and do so within some specified time frame, which, if I recall correctly, was something like two days.

We thought about the title. For some obscure reason James Joyce came into this and presto!

Over the years *Finnegan's Wake* (The Short Version) has undergone several re-writes, which have fleshed out the initial, rather skeletal, 3000-odd-word story—written by someone just coming to terms with the English language—into something twice that length. Its focus has also shifted somewhat, from ‘Tom Finnegan’ to ‘Father Kean’—and from just being a tale with a twist it turned into possibly the only recognizably ‘religious’ piece I’ve ever written. For, make no mistake, behind the scandalous, bawdy facade there lurks something more profound, and I hope you’ll find it.

How is *Finnegan's Wake* ‘Vancean’? I’ll leave that for the reader to judge. I know it *is* and I know that with each re-write it has become more so. Offence to Catholics and the Irish is purely incidental. My wife, who was born and bred in Northern Ireland, found little to offend her, so I can’t see any reason why anybody else should be offended. Still, I do not apologize if the story lacks a certain political correctness. It was far too much fun writing it.

About the future. Well, unless I sign a contract soon-ish for the sequels to *Keaen* (which I would, of course, like very much!) there is always *Finister*, which is the immediate sequel to *Keaen*, and precedes *Tergan*, which we’ve already serialized in the *CLS*. Despite this reversal of presentation, *Finister* is, I hope, independent enough to be read after *Tergan*. Of course, the ‘mystery’ it contains is already resolved for those who have read *Tergan*, but what the heck.

So this is the plan: in the next issue the beginning of *Finister* and more of *Dragonchaser*. That should keep us going for a while yet.

Of course, I’m hoping that maybe our *CLS* Composer Extraordinary, one Malcolm Bowers, can also produce something soon—and there’s Jeremy Cavaterra, who I *know* does have something, but is being coy about sending it.

So, gentlemen, bring it on! Don’t fret over your imperfections. To quote Cardinal Newman: “A man would do nothing if he waited until he could do it so well that no one could find fault.”

Happy reading.  
Till Noever



# Dragonchaser

by *Tim Stretton*

## Chapter 7

Three hours later the five men stood in front of Formello. Darkness had fallen and they climbed up through the woods, concealed from every view by dark cloaks. All five were armed; an act which would lead to death for the slaves if they were caught.

"This is your last chance," said Mirko. "None of you have to do this. You can wait here, or go back to the Urmalest now."

Florio shook his head even before Mirko had finished. "None of us loves Bartazan," he said. "That man owns my liberty. If I can discomfit him tonight, though it costs my life, I'll be a happy man."

"Hear, hear," muttered Damiano. "I'm with you, Ascalon."

"I gave my word," said Walisse. "That's enough."

Jenx smiled softly to himself. "I always wanted to see the inside of Formello."

"You've all memorised the map?" asked Mirko, and his companions nodded.

"One last thing—no killing if we can avoid it. My motives are essentially capricious, and I wouldn't have men die for my whims."

"Except us," said Jenx dryly. "Let's go."

Mirko lead the company across the drawbridge; as he had expected, the portcullis was firmly down.

"Guards!" called Mirko. "Open up immediately!"

There was a grumbling sound from behind the portcullis. "A moment, a moment! Have peace on my old bones." With this a face peered out. "Who assaults the peace of Formello?"

"Look alive, man! It's Captain Ascalon of *Sapphire Light*. I need to visit the slave pens."

The guard peered out, before unlocking a gate adjacent to the portcullis and issuing forth. "At this time of night? Can you not wait until morning?"

"Clearly not, since I am here in the evening. My lord Bartazan does not care for unnecessary delay."

The guard tutted. "My lord summoned you? Why did you not say?"

"In a manner of speaking," said Mirko. "I am attending to business of great import to him."

"And who are these ill-looking folk with you?" said the guard, peering into the slaves' faces.

Mirko knew this was a danger point—if the guard recognised Bartazan slaves, the game was up before it had begun. But Mirko was willing to gamble that no free member of Bartazan's staff had ever looked into a slave's face.

"These men are experts on slaves," said Mirko. "They are here to help me assess the quality of the men in the pen."

"Very well, captain, very well. This is highly irregular, but they say you Garganets are tartars when thwarted. I suppose you want an escort too."

"That won't be necessary," said Mirko smoothly. "We know the way to the slave pens, and I'll wager that your old limbs won't care for the walk."

The guard put his head on one side. "Well, I suppose I know you, captain, so it's not like letting a stranger into Formello. You'll answer for your friends."

"Oh yes," said Mirko. "They are every bit as trustworthy as I am."

The guard waved them through and they strode through the great corridors. "Where are the dungeons?" asked Florio.

"This way," said Mirko, "which unfortunately takes us away from the slave pens. But at this time of night there should be no-one around."

At length they reached the top of a flight of stairs which plunged down into darkness. "Down here," he said. "Remember to put on your dominoes."

They slipped on their masks and rapidly descended the stairs. Two guards chatted idly at a table where the remains of a light supper lay before them. Walisse struck the first with a mighty fist; the second slumped to the hilt of Damiano's sword.

"Jenx, Walisse: keep watch here. Fetch us if either of them stir. Jenx, hand me the keys."

Mirko, Florio and Damiano made their way down the corridor, opening the cell doors as they came to them. Most were empty; a few contained wretches in various stages of emaciation. Florio studied each man carefully, shaking his head each time. "He's not here. I didn't know him well, but none of these is our man."

Mirko paused in thought as he considered his options. "Where else can he be?"

"Dead," said Damiano.

"Already? Even Bartazan would stop at cold steel when he will have to account for his actions later. Remember, everyone knows he's here."

"I have other ideas," said Florio. "Formello is reputed to have a series of oubliettes. Where better to hide a secret prisoner?" He turned to the man chained to the wall. "Are there any other cells? Any other prisoners away from this corridor?"

The man croaked, an infirmity with which Florio appeared to have little sympathy. "Did you hear me?" he hissed, shaking the man by the ragged shirt.

"Downstairs," gasped the man. "There's a trapdoor at the end of the corridor. They say there's a special prisoner down there."

"Yes!" exulted Damiano, his eyes gleaming behind the domino. "Of course!"

"Thank you," said Mirko. "I'm afraid I can't release you as things stand; but if I'm successful Bartazan will find it difficult to maintain his dungeons."

The man stared glassily ahead as Mirko, Florio and Damiano left the cell. Reaching the end of the corridor, they found the trapdoor carelessly concealed under some rough matting. Impatiently Damiano tried the keys, until the last one turned the lock. Mirko gingerly lifted the trapdoor; beneath was a gloom too profound for sight.

Florio reached a torch down from the corridor wall and peered down into the darkness. Below was an oubliette, a squalid pit which gave off a noisome odour of damp; it was not an environment designed to promote health or longevity. In the corner crouched a figure in rags, evidently discommoded by the lights.

"Look up, man!" called Florio gently. "Who are you?"

The prisoner looked feebly up at the wan torchlight. His voice cracked as if from long disuse.

"Who am I? Who indeed? I had a name once, I must have had a name . . ."

Mirko shot Florio a meaningful glance. "Well?"

Florio shrugged. "I can't tell. Bring him up."

"Damiano! Get me some guard's breeches—we need to make a rope."

Damiano made his way back up the corridor and watched while Jenx divested one of the unconscious guards of his trousers. In no time Damiano had shredded them to make a serviceable line; Mirko dropped into the hole, made a loop under the prisoner's arms, and watched while Florio and Damiano hauled him aloft.

Mirko looked around the oubliette with a shudder. There was no light at all in the room, and the unwholesome damp odour was all-pervasive. He would not relish spending one night here; he could scarcely imagine the prisoner's torments.

By the time Damiano had pulled him back to the surface, Florio had completed his scrutiny. "It's him," he said.

Mirko looked at the man, his face drawn under a heavy black beard. "Who are you?"

The prisoner simply looked back at him.

"We've come to rescue you," said Mirko. "But tell me who you are."

There was a pause, a voice that seemed to travel from the stars. "Inisse . . . they called me Inisse."

Mirko gave a great sigh. "You are safe now, Inisse. We will have to leave you for tonight; rest now, and you will be a free man tomorrow."

The concepts appeared too much for Inisse, and he simply stared ahead.

"Now to get out of here," said Mirko. "The slave pens are up and right. We have to trust to luck somewhat. Dominoes off—they'll only attract attention if we're spotted."

Walissee dragged the two unconscious guards to the end of the corridor and, with a quiet smile to himself, dropped them into the oubliette, taking care to lock the door, before repositioning the mat.

The company made their way up the stairs from the dungeons, Inisse supported by Walissee in the centre of the group. Mirko and Damiano led the way, with Florio and Jenx bringing up the rear.

"Walissee," said Mirko quietly. "Do you think Inisse can walk?"

Walissee shook his head. "No chance at all."

Mirko nodded. "Then we'll need to use the other plan—which is, after all, rather more elegant."

They moved slowly through corridors, past the now deserted kitchens and larders, Jenx pausing to avail himself of a cold fowl which he ate as they walked. At length they came to a door leading out into the main grounds.

"Keep your eyes on me," said Mirko. "Florio, Walissee, Damiano, wait until I've distracted the guards and go ahead. Jenx, we'll meet you at the stables."

Mirko made his way over towards the slave compound and called to the overseer.

"Padizan! Come here! I want to talk to you," said Mirko.

"Who is it?" asked Padizan with a start.

"Ascalon. I need some new slaves for the galley."

"Now?"

"Do you want to tell Bartazan why he can't have them?"

Padizan scowled.

"Let's go into the office," suggested Mirko. "We can run through the ledger without waking the slaves and find some suitable candidates."

Padizan looked doubtfully over at the compound. "Where will they be going at this time of night?" asked Mirko. "Come on, it's cold out here."

Padizan ushered Mirko into the office and reached down the ledger. "For the galleys, you say?"

"Just so," said Mirko, "certain of the existing crew are intractable. A few new faces might boost morale. Strength, speed, docility: these are the key attributes."

Padizan paused for a moment. "You already have most of the decent slaves. Hapiste, Gorelio, Uttagarba, might fit the bill. At a pinch Maritono . . ."

The deliberations continued for several minutes. "Perhaps I'll leave it for now," said Mirko. "If I threaten them with Gorelio and Uttagarba tomorrow, they may pull with more vigour."

"Probably the best approach," said Padizan. "Any of mine you take, you'll need to exchange for one of your rowers."

Mirko nodded. "Reasonable enough, I suppose. I may look in again in a couple of days."

Taking his leave, Mirko made his way towards the stables. Jenx and Walisse were mounted on one galumpher of villainous countenance, while Florio and Damiano had selected a beast of milder disposition which did not convey a strong impression of robustness. A third galumpher, not obviously lame or vicious, had been earmarked for Mirko's use.

"Done?" Mirko asked Florio.

"Easy. I told a couple of the slaves what we'd done and they were happy to go along with it: quite enthusiastic, in fact."

"Excellent! But are these the best galumphers you could find?"

"The good ones were in the locked stables," said Damiano. "These will do to get us down the hill."

Mirko nodded and climbed aboard his own mount, pressed his knees together gingerly. The five compan-

ions on their three galumphers set off down the road to the Old Town.



## Chapter 8

The next morning a detachment of forty Peremptor's Constables, ten of them mounted on fine striders, presented themselves at the gates of Formello with a polite but firm demand to search the slave pens. Kanspiris temporised in the absence of the Elector, who had stayed in Paladria on business; but to no avail. The Lieutenant of the Constables offered the persuasive argument of his thirty-nine comrades and the force of the Peremptor's writ.

A search of the slave pens revealed that while twenty-one slaves were shown on the roster, twenty-two were in fact in residence. The Constables immediately conducted a roll-call, and the figure left over at the end was swiftly identified as Gambar Inisse, formerly the helm of the galley *Fanar's Glory*, missing since the previous autumn. Kanspiris was unable to give a satisfactory account of his presence, while the captain of the guard declined to offer an explanation.

Gambar Inisse was conveyed in a rattlejack commandeered for the purpose to the Temple of Fanar, where he was restored to the custody of his brethren. The Elector Bartazan of Bartazan House was arraigned by the Lieutenant of the Constables on charges of kidnap, false imprisonment and, since Inisse was an Adept of Fanar's Mysteries, sacrilege. This bill of charges, while by no means negligible, was not sufficient to deprive the Elector of his liberty. On payment of a bail of 1,000 valut and the Pledge of Good Conduct given by the Elector Nool Vavar, Bartazan was allowed to go his way, while a date for his Inquisition was set.

The events of the morning directly compromised Mirko's plans for the day. En route from the Urmalest to the Arba docks to conduct sea-trials, the crew found themselves stoned by an unruly mob, and required an escort of Constables to conduct them back to the barracks. Mirko was not dissatisfied to miss sea-trials, since he had enjoyed little sleep, but he sensed that his actions of the previous night had wider ramifications than he had originally realised.

Once the mob dispersed, Mirko made his way to the Waterside tavern, where the talk was all of the night's extraordinary activities.

"Who could have carried out such an act?" asked one man wondering of Mirko.

Mirko simply shook his head. "The ways of the Paladrians always surprise me. I fail to understand all the aspects of the affair."

Panduletta joined the conversation as she strolled past with a tray of beer. "For a fact, Bartazan is a rogue, to imprison poor Inisse, who had never harmed him at all—with apologies to you Mirko, as Bartazan's man."

Mirko made a deprecatory gesture. "I would never present the Elector as a model of rectitude; and indeed he does not employ me to do so. I just look after his galley."

"No doubt he would expect a more spirited defence from his servants," said a quiet sardonic voice: 'N'.

"Ah," said Mirko, unable to think of any response more cogent.

"I think we need to have a chat," she said. "Panduletta, beer—plenty of it—and whelks, a triple portion if you please. Ascalon, this way."

Mirko made his way to the corner booth invariably preferred by 'N'.

"Well," she said. "I assume you want to share something with me." Her eyes had the beginning of dark circles underneath and her cheeks had an unusual flush.

"Why?" asked Mirko. "If you remember, I broke off my connections with you yesterday; and you're the one who came looking for me."

'N' nodded her thanks as Panduletta brought over the beer and whelks.

"Don't think to play with me, Ascalon: I am more powerful—and more dangerous—than you have ever imagined. I want to know exactly what you had to do with Inisse's release."

Mirko leant back in his wooden chair. 'N' must be rattled to threaten so inelegantly. "If you want the truth, your callousness about Inisse vexed me. The letter that you caused to be published made his life worth nothing; and then you had the audacity to call me mercenary! Well, I saved his life, and I don't want anything for it."

'N' shook her head in silent wonderment. "Do you know how long we scheme and plot? How precisely we calculate our moves and effects? It was time that the

world knew Bartazan had incarcerated Inisse: that didn't mean it was time for him to be arraigned!"

"I can't see it does your principal any harm."

"We are not ready to move against Bartazan yet! His fury will be terrible; he will turn every stone to see who has betrayed him—and you are by no means the only false servant he has. What were you thinking of, to act independently?"

Mirko sucked a whelk from its shell. "You forget that I no longer work for you. I acted as a concerned citizen."

"As it turns out," said 'N' with an approach to a smile, "you haven't done badly at all. It was a very bold stroke, and can only hurt Bartazan's popularity; it may even cost him a couple of Elector's votes, although I doubt it. He may be unsettled by such an obvious strike against him, and he may respond precipitately. You've shown courage and resourcefulness, if very little sense."

Mirko smiled dryly. "Is that an approach to a compliment?"

'N' reached out and gently touched Mirko's hand. "Don't be so prickly, Ascalon. As far as I'm concerned our contretemps last night was a misunderstanding; more than ever I want someone capable inside Bartazan's household. Here's gold for your work with Inisse."

"I didn't do it for the money. My associates are slaves and unable to use their own shares."

"Why did you do it, then? No more 'concerned citizen'."

"Candidly? I did it to show you. Nothing more complicated than that—just to show you that a Garganet officer is impelled by higher motives than you give me credit for."

'N' looked up across into Mirko's eyes, her own expression inscrutable. "You didn't have to," she said. "If I thought you were for sale I'd never have worked with you—I might not be able to keep up with the bidding. I knew what I was getting and you haven't surprised me. There's a difference between needing money and being ruled by it."

"Why do you always have to pretend to have foreseen everything? Omniscience is for the gods."

'N' took a long swallow of her beer. "I don't like surprises," she said. "In my line of work, you get surprised, you get dead: it's a consideration that promotes planning and reflection. Now, if you're sensible, you'll tell me every detail about last night. I may be able to help you."

Half an hour later, beer, whelks and story were finished. 'N' sat silent in thought for a minute. "You showed considerable élan; took no more risks than necessary; and enjoyed a little luck. Do you think you can evade suspicion?"

"Why should Bartazan suspect me? He can see the progress I'm making with *Sapphire Light*."

'N's face seemed a little flushed from the beer. "Here's why. You turned up at the gate with four companions you represented as slave factors. Yet when you talk to Padizan—about slaves, too—there's only you. Kanspiris will talk to people; he will compare their accounts; and he will wonder where your four companions got to. That's not going to raise suspicions?"

Mirko cursed under his breath. "I'm sorry, 'N': it just didn't occur to me."

"Luckily," said 'N', "I can deal with it. If Padizan doesn't get to give a statement, there can be no discrepancy."

"'N'! Don't have him killed on my account."

'N' smiled and touched Mirko's hand again. "I won't have to. Trust me—I have to go and deal with Padizan. Be at the Plaza at sundown and you'll see."

Mirko returned his lodging to find an invitation from Carnazan to attend the trials of his large prototype, *Bartazan House Blue*. Since a launch for *Sapphire Light* was out of the question, he quickly made his way down to the secluded cove where Bartazan and his family occasionally relaxed.

Walking down the steep cliff path to the sand, he saw Carnazan instructing two slaves as they positioned *Bartazan House Blue* ready for its launch. Despite the heat of the day a large brazier gave off considerable heat. Nearby sat Larien, her legs tucked under her on a rug designed to keep the sand from her clothes. On seeing Mirko's approach she smiled and called him over.

"Mirko! I'm glad you're here—come and sit with me on the blanket."

Mirko went and sat down, and Carnazan broke off from his instructions to join them.

"Ascalon!" he said. "You've come at a good time—we're just about to launch. You'll see the basket is large enough to accommodate two persons. Larien won't let me go aloft myself but the slaves are keen enough."

Mirko looked across at two slender slaves, obviously picked for their wiry build. 'Keen' was not the first

word he would have chosen to characterise their attitude.

"Once the canopy has filled," continued Carnazan, "*Bartazan House Blue* will rise aloft to the limit of her tether. Eventually the air will cool and she will return to earth."

Mirko surveyed *Bartazan House Blue* with wonderment. Like the smaller version he had seen at Formello, there really was nothing to her but a wicker basket, some string, and a bag of sailcloth. Could she really be expected to lift men aloft?

"She looks a bit strange at first," said Carnazan. "There is no need for robustness: the important thing is that she's light, then it takes less air to lift her up."

The two slaves, Maddiran and Yarrew, climbed gingerly into the basket, concealing well any enthusiasm they might feel. Carnazan and Mirko dragged the canopy over to the brazier so that the hot air fed directly into the bag. The canopy began to swell, eventually reaching its maximum extent, but with no indication that she might be raised from the ground. Then, suddenly, the side of the basket began to lift. Mirko drew in his breath.

"Yes! Yes!" cried Carnazan. "Larien, Ascalon! Look! She is going!"

"Carnazan! This is amazing! You are a genius!" responded Larien.

Mirko smiled. "Already you have exceeded my expectations," he said.

Even as they watched, *Bartazan House Blue* lifted slowly away from the ground, as if unwilling to leave the security behind. Two feet, five feet, ten, twenty she rose, a gentle breeze pushing her out over the sea. Carnazan ran around the beach in circles, periodically stopping to hug Larien and Mirko.

Mirko still remained to be convinced of *Bartazan House Blue's* practicality.

"How does she come down, Carnazan?"

"Simple," he said. "The air cools, the craft becomes heavier, she glides gently to the ground."

At this point a great gust of wind caught *Bartazan House Blue* full on. She listed to the side, allowing a quantity of hot air to escape. Yarrew gave a yell of panic and immediately leapt overboard, plunging into the sea below. Maddiran stayed with the craft, but his weight unbalanced the craft still further. With a slow but remorseless predictability, *Bartazan House Blue* leaned sideways until all the hot air had dissipated. Maddiran

too jumped from the cradle, and joined Yarrew in swimming mournfully to the shore. *Bartazan House Blue* fell heavily to the water and wallowed heavily in the gentle swell. By the time Maddiran and Yarrew arrived, the waves had swamped *Bartazan House Blue* and she had sunk to the bottom of the cove.

Carnazan refused to be despondent. "There was much to be pleased with," he said. "The canopy performed as intended, and with a little more experience on the part of the crew, the effects of such gusts of wind could be mitigated. Sadly I will have to persuade my uncle to finance a second prototype."

Larien gave Carnazan a sympathetic hug. "You have made great progress," she said. "It can only be a matter of time before a successful voyage is made."

"You are right!" declared Carnazan. "I will approach my uncle immediately."

Mirko felt it wise to interrupt. "You may want to wait a while," he said. "He has been arraigned by the Peremptor's Constables today and may well be suffering a poor humour."

"Oh, I heard about that!" said Carnazan. "I've no interest in this political fol-de-rol. No doubt he's done something he shouldn't. Yarrew! Maddiran! Come with me! We need to find the Elector. Larien, you don't need to come if you don't want to."

"I've brought a picnic," she said. "It can't go to waste."

"Ascalon will stay, won't you?"

Mirko found this option preferable to facing Bartazan for any number of reasons. "I'd be delighted to share your repast, my lady."

Larien beamed, wholly mollified. "Look what I have here, Mirko: cold roast fowls, red salad, Minchu morsels, and some Televen wine. I've even brought goblets!"

"Just the thing," said Mirko, hungry despite the whelks and beer he had consumed for breakfast.

Larien poured two glasses of the rich cool wine. "Be careful," she said. "Televen is stronger than it tastes."

Mirko savoured his first glass, which had a subtle, fresh tang. They sat in companionable silence awhile as they shared a cold fowl.

At last Larien said: "How are you finding my uncle?"

"In truth, he does not seem as bad as I'd been led to believe. He was almost understanding about the Hanspar, and required remarkably little persuasion to agree to sack Fenneker."

Larien looked into his face. "Don't ever make the mistake of trusting him, Mirko. All the while you are useful to him, he will assume a reasonable approach; but once he does not need you, don't ever expect a favour. And this morning's business with Gambar Inisse will enrage him beyond measure."

Mirko wasn't sure how to respond to the topic of Gambar Inisse, although there was no way Larien could know of his involvement.

"Did you know he was there?" he asked.

"Oh, not at all," said Larien. "I knew he had dungeons, of course; if I'd thought about it, I'd even have guessed he put people in them, or why have them? But why should he have held Inisse? It's Chiess-Vervario who had the grudge. Now, of course, it makes sense: just one more vote for Peremptor Bartazan."

"Do you think he will win?"

"I'd like to say 'no', but I know how duplicitous he can be. I wonder how many other votes he's suborned one way or another. He won't win the Margariad, of course—sorry!—but he could yet force the Electors by other means."

"Would it be so bad if he did win? Is Medina any better?"

Larien's eyes kindled. "Anything would be better—"

"What? Are you alright?"

"I'm sorry," she said. "It's just that I know how many grudges Bartazan holds. He does not have a forgiving disposition. The whole House of Drall, not to mention Inisse, any number of political rivals: they'd all have to go into exile or be killed. I'll take Medina without any qualm: at least he's already settled his scores. Here, have a Minchu morsel."

Eventually the picnic was finished. Mirko, who had several goblets of the Televen wine, felt somewhat sleepy, while Larien was preternaturally alert.

"Can I ask you something?" she said as Mirko reclined on the blanket.

"You just did."

Her eyes twinkled. "You know what I mean. I'd like to do something wildly unconventional, which will amuse both of us and vex my uncle."

Mirko sat back up abruptly. "You begin to interest me," he said with a smile. Suddenly he didn't feel so sleepy.

"Next week is the day for formal nominations for the Peremptorate elections. Did you know that?"

"No. In truth I'd never really thought about it."

"Every five years the Peremptor holds a Grand Ball at Coverciano. All the Electors and their families are invited. Any Elector who can call upon the support of five others may challenge the Peremptor. Next Wednesday is the Ball. I'm Bartazan's niece; I get to go."

"Enjoy yourself."

"I want you to come with me."

"Ah."

"'Ah'? What does that mean?"

"It means I'd like to come with you, but I don't think it's a very good idea. I seem to remember you've been sniffy about the difference in our status before."

"You're actually very eligible," she said with a slight smile. "Garganet naval officer, galley-master, handsome in a rather grim way. . ."

"Sometimes—no, most of the time—I don't understand you, Larien. This is one of those occasions. What are you driving at?"

"It's really very simple, Mirko. Why make things more complicated than they are? I like your company, you seem to like mine, the Grand Ball is coming up, and I'd rather have you as an escort than some political crony of my uncle's. At the very least the victuals are good."

Mirko thought for a second. 'N' had told him to stay close to Larien; the event might provide some useful information for her; and he was by no means concerned with Bartazan's good opinion.

"Very well," he said. "I'd be delighted. Who else will I know?"

"There's my uncle, of course, although I doubt you'll be getting too much of his attention. Carnazan will be there as long as he remembers to show up. There won't be many galley-men, I'm afraid, although Drallenkoop will be there as Koopendrall's son."

"I'm sure I'll find plenty to entertain me," smiled Mirko. "What are you doing this evening?"

"Mirko! That's rather a loaded question!"

"It wasn't meant to be," laughed Mirko. "I thought with your taste for seeing your uncle discomfited you might enjoy an event I understand is taking place in the Plaza at sundown."

"Now you do have my attention," Larien replied. "But how do you propose we occupy ourselves in the interim?"

By the time Mirko and Larien had made their way back from the secluded cove, sunset was nearly upon

them. 'N' had evidently used her time assiduously, for the Plaza was crowded and expectant. With theatrical precision, on the instant of the sun's setting a herald in the gold and scarlet of House Drall stepped out onto the central dais, lit by two retainers with flaming torches.

"Now hear me all!" he called. "I am Forendan, the herald of my lord Koopendrall! Tonight will be unfolded for you a tale of woe, intrigue and heroism. Every man among you will have heard of the terrible and unlawful imprisonment of Gambar Inisse, Adept of the Mysteries of Fanar!"

The crowd muttered. Bartazan's acts were still fresh in their mind.

"Only last night, an act of personal bravery and conviction proud led to the release of this noble man! Gambar Inisse was immured within the deepest and darkest dungeons of Formello, the mountain fastness of the Ilkmeister Bartazan."

*"Grrr!"; "Down with Bartazan!"; "Bring him out!"*

"One man showed the courage of his conscience: learning of Gambar Inisse's imprisonment, he resolved to free him! His intrepid spirit deserves our adulation!"

Again the crowd responded to Forendan's prompts. Mirko was frankly baffled. 'N' had been intended to preserve his anonymity, rather than laud his deeds to the sky. Next to him, Larien snuggled into his side; she was enjoying the day.

"Do you want to see the man who saved Gambar Inisse?" called Forendan.

*"Yes!"; "Yes!"; "Bring him on!"*

"Behold, then, the man!"

From the base of the dais a figure was pulled up, richly adorned in cloth of gold. Mirko looked on in astonishment: it was none other than Padizan, the overseer of the slave pens!

"My friends," continued Forendan, "meet if you will the Gentle Padizan, formerly slave master with Ilkmeister Bartazan!"

Mirko gasped in sheer amazement with the rest of the crowd, although for not entirely similar reasons. The audacity of 'N' was beyond all reason.

"Sir Padizan, tell us, if you will, of the release of Gambar Inisse."

Padizan, not in Mirko's experience the most forthcoming or assured of men, cleared his throat.

"I, the Gentle Padizan, speak to you," he said in a voice only marginally slurred by drink. "Last night, when all good men slept, I descended to the deepest

dungeons of Formello. Unarmed, I fought with two guards and beat them into dormancy. I pulled the Noble Gambar Inisse from his gloomy pit, and concealed him in my slave pens. I sent immediately for the Constables before the alarm could be raised. I asked no boon for my deed, which represented its own reward. Nonetheless, I give thanks to those friends of Gambar Inisse who have furnished me with a small competence to compensate me for the position with the Elector Bartazan which circumstances have compelled me to leave at short notice.”

Padizan continued in this self-aggrandising strain for some little time, growing in bombast as he declined in coherence. The crowd appeared not to care; Padizan’s act had rescued the popular Inisse and paid back Bartazan for his arrogance.

Mirko realised what ‘N’ had done; by one means or another she had had Padizan spirited out of Formello and bribed to claim responsibility for the deed. Bartazan would need to pursue his inquiries no further and Padizan was anyway beyond the reach of further interrogation—implicitly, if not explicitly, under Koopendral’s protection. It was a brilliant manoeuvre and Mirko laughed aloud.

“What are you laughing at?” asked Larien.

“Nothing,” said Mirko. “I was just enjoying the ironies of the event. No doubt you will derive a certain amount of amusement from the developments.”

“I would never have imagined Padizan to be so audacious.”

“I imagine the lure of valut played a part. There are many folk who would pay well for such a moment.”

“No doubt,” said Larien. “Do you really live around here?”

“Why yes,” said Mirko. “Perhaps you’d like to visit the tavern where I spend much of my time?”

“Why not?” said Larien in high spirits. “I don’t believe I’ve ever visited a dockside tavern.”

The Waterside, never a genteel establishment, was by no means at its most refined, but what it lacked in punctilio it made up for in conviviality. Indeed, Larien attracted rather more conviviality than she might have chosen, and Mirko was obliged to use his elbows—and on one occasion his fist—to ensure that propriety was maintained. It was early in the morning before Mirko made it to his chamber, accompanied by Larien, who declared it was far too late to make her way up to

Formello. The day, Mirko felt, had contained more event than might reasonably have been expected.



## Chapter 9

The next morning Mirko, after seeing Larien to a rattlejack, made his way to the Urmalest. It seemed a very long time since he had been out on the water. This morning a significant workout would be necessary. He was pleased on entering the barracks to see that Cascais was present and eager for the fray. He was conducting an exercise regime with the slaves, who responded with dutiful if unenthusiastic compliance.

Mirko caught Florio’s eye as he went through his stretches, but it seemed Florio had returned to recalcitrant mode; he looked away without acknowledgement. Mirko sighed; he supposed he could see Florio’s point: companion in arms one day, slave the next.

“Quartermen!” he called. “Form your sections, prepare to march!”

The four Quartermen, Florio, Walisse, Damiano and a sneering swarthy man named Larze, drew up their men into order and led the way down to the Arba Docks. *Dragonchaser* was already out on the water, and *Excelsior* was just casting off. *Morvellos Devil* was preparing to sail, while *Fanar’s Glory* lay dormant: no doubt the surprise return of their helm had driven practice from their minds.

“Right!” said Mirko. “Today we’re going to restore our honour. Bartazan may be in disgrace; but *Sapphire Light* is not! You see *Dragonchaser*?”

“Yes, captain?”

“Today, we’re going to catch and pass her.”

“But she has a quarter mile on us!”

“That’s why we’re going to teach her a lesson. Jenx, beat Eight!”

Jenx grinned. “Aye, aye, sir!”

“Quartermen, I need you to keep the rhythm. The rest of you, just follow your Quarterman. Come on now, Eight is easy!”

Pull-pull-pull-pull. Pull-pull-pull-pull. *Sapphire Light* settled into an easy unforced rhythm. The bay was choppy with an unruly wind, and white spray coursed over the bow, soaking the men. *Pull-pull-pull-pull. Drag-*

*onchaser*, clearly not operating at full speed, came ever closer into view.

"Jenx! Beat Nine!"

Pull-pull-pull-pull-pull. Pull-pull-pull-pull-pull. *Sapphire Light* gained ever more speed, the waves cresting against the bow, sending up spurts of foam. *Dragonchaser* realised that *Sapphire Light* was testing her; Drallenkoop, at the helm, looked back over his shoulder and laughed.

"Come on, if you can!" he called back.

"They're mocking us!" shouted Mirko to the crew. "Quartermen, keep the rhythm there. Come on, let's beat them to the Hanspar!"

*Kestrel*, exercising nearby, eased out of the way. "Come on, *Sapphire Light*," shouted Dandret, her helm and owner. "Catch her and pass her! Come on! Come on!"

"Damiano! Damiano!" shouted Mirko. "Keep Nine, for Fanar's sake! I thought you wanted to see home! Florio, you're looking ragged! *Dragonchaser* ahead!"

Astonishingly, *Sapphire Light* pulled alongside *Dragonchaser*. Drallenkoop, at the helm, had little to do in a straight line race, and instead interfered with the instructions of the overseer, Mengippu: "Ten! Go to Ten! We can't let them beat us!"

Mirko knew that, however motivated *Sapphire Light* was today, she had neither the skill nor the energy to maintain Ten rhythm. If *Dragonchaser* could pull this off, *Sapphire Light* was beaten.

"Jenx! Keep Nine! They'll crack. Florio, Larze, keep the rhythm there."

Then, for the first time in Mirko's experience, *Dragonchaser* faltered. The unusual and punishing Ten rhythm had proved too much for her. The forward starboard quarter cracked first, losing any semblance of control. The bow swung around, coming across the wind and the current.

Mengippu was quick to react. "Stop and Nine! Stop and Nine!" he called, and the error was almost immediately rectified. But *Sapphire Light* was past and running clear for the Hanspar.

"Keep it going! Keep it going! We have her!"

And so it proved. In less than a minute *Sapphire Light* was past the Hanspar rock ahead of *Dragonchaser*. Mirko was not disposed to push his luck by testing Cascais' helmsmanship, or the crew's stamina for the pull back to shore.

"All stop, lads! Take a breather! Superb rowing, boys! We've beaten *Dragonchaser* today!"

Spontaneously the crew stood in their seats and to look back at *Dragonchaser*: behind them, and trailing in their wake! When had *Sapphire Light* last outsprinted *Dragonchaser*? No-one could remember. Mirko did not fool himself that this was the equivalent of a victory in a race; *Dragonchaser* had not been geared up for maximum effort until too late, no steering had been required, and the sprint had been nothing like race distance. But *Dragonchaser* was beatable, and they had proved it today; and arguably they had shown *Sapphire Light* was faster in a straight line; and if *Dragonchaser* were put under pressure she could not sustain Ten.

"Back to shore! That's enough for today. Jenx, beat Six."

The news of *Dragonchaser*'s eclipse was swiftly spread among the racing community, where it excited wildly different emotions, but never indifference. One Elector, high in his mountain fastness, grinned in wolfish triumph and raised a goblet to his galley-master; another, in the town on business, stopped in sheer disbelief, before setting the subject aside until he could make further enquiries. Two women of different temperaments also learned the news: one cursing aloud in sheerest outrage; the other, surprised and by no means delighted, nonetheless smiled to herself and wondered whether she had underestimated the Garganet after all.

Mirko returned to the Waterside in the evening to find that the morning's news had preceded him. Bartazan, whose popularity had reached a new low with Padizan's confession, now found himself revered for owning such a formidable galley. Mirko found two notes awaiting him; he turned first to the one bearing the seal of Bartazan House:

Ascalon,

I was highly gratified by what I learned of *Sapphire Light*'s recent performance, and naturally I attribute the improvements to the methods you have employed. Insofar as I will be meeting the Elector Koopendrall and his son at the Peremptor's Grand Ball next week, I consider the timing to be most opportune. You will oblige me by waiting upon me at Formello at your soonest convenience.

Of Bartazan House, Bartazan.

Short and sweet, thought Mirko. He tried to read between the lines for inferences of a bonus, but without success.

He recognised the handwriting on the second letter, and he was not surprised on opening it. He took it to his room and quickly deciphered it.

‘G’,

You have surprised me in many ways in recent days. Your rescue of Gambar Inisse, while rash and in many ways foolhardy, showed a praiseworthy sense of justice, and the unexpectedly strong showing of *Sapphire Light* this morning shocked many seasoned observers of the galley-races.

It is possible you have endangered yourself even more by the second act than the first; and probable that you do not even realise it. It is important that I see you *as soon as possible*. While it is melodramatic to suggest that your life is in danger, you are becoming more deeply involved in affairs you do not understand than you realise.

I cannot see you this evening, but I will meet you on the cliffs overlooking The Sorcerers at seven bars tomorrow.

‘N’

Mirko could not repress a smile at ‘N’s characteristic overstatement. For her, no act was without ramifications in secret policy and covert strategies. There was something rather endearing about her deadly seriousness—and of course the gold she commanded. There was nothing to be done tonight, and instead he went about selecting appropriate apparel from the parcels Enoxifer had sent him.

He debated the merits of the plum and umber coat, which offended his sensibilities the least, and the scarlet frock coat, which struck him as something Cascais might wear. In the end, he decided to save plum and umber for the Grand Ball, and chose scarlet for his visit to Formello.

Stepping out onto the waterfront he looked around for a rattlejack, only to find himself approached by a pair of squat ruffians. Clearly the scarlet coat had done nothing but mark him out as a dandy. Immediately his hand dropped to his rapier; before he knew it, one of the rogues was pinned against the wall with steel against his throat. The second was disappearing along the dockside at immense speed.

“Go!” said Mirko. “Be grateful I’m in a hurry and don’t care to wait for the Constables.”

As he settled back into the rattlejack he started to wonder. Wasn’t it coincidental that the ruffians had accosted him the instant he had appeared? What had ‘N’ written? *‘It is melodramatic to suggest your life is in danger.’* That wasn’t the same as saying it *wasn’t* in danger. Was such paranoia an everyday part of the secret agent’s life? It was a pensive Mirko who disembarked the rattlejack at the gates of Formello.

Inside the Banquet Hall, Mirko found himself distinguished immediately by Bartazan.

“Ascalon!” said the Elector with marked cordiality. “My lords, this is my noble galley-master who bloodied Drallenkoop’s nose. Captain, allow me to present the Electors Mompesson, Vilago, Solirat and Chiess-Vervario.”

Mirko bowed to the Electors, somewhat surprised to be introduced. It seemed he had become an electoral asset. Mirko noticed Chiess-Vervario, a dyspeptic bald figure; no doubt one Bartazan was keen to conciliate, since the Gambar Inisse affair had been somewhat injurious to his reputation. The Electors did not seem to be overwhelmed by Mirko’s presence; indeed Vilago appeared rather more interested in the contents of his goblet, while Solirat’s attention was focused on examining matter recently voided from his nose. Mirko wondered how secure Bartazan was of their votes.

Looking around Mirko also saw Larien and Carnazan, and resolved to quit the Electors’ society as soon as possible. Fortunately Kanspiris soon banged the great gong to signal the serving of dinner, and Mirko found himself seated towards the foot of the Great Table Heldegryn, away from the Electors, but adjacent to Larien and opposite Carnazan. Nearby sat Cascais. Before the food was served, Bartazan cleared his throat and stood up.

“My family and my honoured guests,” he said. “I am grateful to you all for joining me at Formello tonight. It has not been a good week for the House of Bartazan.”

A self-deprecating smile and pause drew mainly polite laughter from the table. Larien remained stony-faced while Carnazan appeared baffled. Mirko was sorry he could not see Chiess-Vervario’s face; he did not give the impression of a man to laugh at his own misfortunes.

“Nonetheless,” Bartazan continued, “I am not of a temper to be daunted. My arraignment by Medina’s lackeys is a matter of no consequence, an act of politically-motivated spite designed to turn the Electors of

Paladria against me. Naturally, such ham-fisted efforts will not succeed, and indicate only that the Peremptor is running scared. Next week is of course Declaration Day, and if I can persuade five Electors to endorse my candidature, hah hah, I propose to put forward my name for the third and final time for the office of Peremptor of Paladria!”

Kanspiris led what was by no means spontaneous applause. The Electors joined in dutifully, although Mirko detected no real enthusiasm. Carnazan gave an ironic cheer while Larien fought to suppress a smirk. The Lady Inuela, sitting next to Bartazan, evinced no reaction at all.

“You will all be aware that my arraignment was the result of an act of avaricious spite by a former servant, whom I had raised from humble origins. Such breach of fealty is not to be tolerated, and I can only assure you that I have taken steps to secure my dignity: more of this later. For now, I prefer to move to a more enjoyable topic. You will all be aware that I have engaged the services of Captain Mirko Ascalon of the Garganet navy to provide technical guidance in the preparation of my dear wife’s galley for the Margariad. Progress has been in line with my most optimistic expectations, and only this morning the renowned galley *Dragonchaser* came off second best to *Sapphire Light*. I am confident that the House of Bartazan will be celebrating a double triumph at the end of the summer. Captain Ascalon, please rise while the company salutes you!”

Mirko felt he had no option but to comply and stood rather self-consciously while goblets were raised.

“To the noble Captain Ascalon! And also to his estimable helm Vavar Cascais! Defeat to *Dragonchaser*!”

Mirko noticed that Larien’s non-cooperation extended to refusal to participate in the toast; Carnazan had no such scruples and held his goblet high. The Electors complied with a generally sour-faced ill-grace.

“Let me further pledge,” said Bartazan, “that should I be successful in my political ambitions, I will immediately appoint Captain Ascalon Master of the City’s Fleet. Now, let us begin our festivities, setting aside the petty machinations of our pitiful rivals!”

Mirko sat down and waited as the food was served. Master of the City’s Fleet! He wasn’t sure what it meant, but it sounded impressive; although since ‘Peremptor Bartazan’ would by then have no real need of

him, the chances of such an office materialising were not high.

Bartazan had outdone himself for hospitality tonight. No fewer than seven courses, each with carefully selected wines, were put before the discerning palates. The vegetables were crisp and succulent, the meats rare and flavoursome. Delicately-spiced pastes and sauces added savour to every dish.

Larien was in a curious humour; her mood best summarised as ‘distract’.

“Have I done anything to offend you, my lady?” Mirko asked quietly while their neighbours were distracted in conversation.

“Why should you think that?”

“Your conduct was more—open—yesterday,” he said. “I thought we had moved towards a certain intimacy . . .”

“You forget yourself, Captain. I enjoyed your company yesterday very much in an informal setting; but here I am the niece of the Elector, and must set frivolity aside.”

“I thought that perhaps you regretted the degree of intimacy you permitted me yesterday.”

Larien sighed. “Yesterday was yesterday; today is today. I imagined you to possess more sangfroid than to repine over imagined slights like some mooncalf.”

“So yesterday didn’t mean anything?”

Larien picked up a napkin and daintily dabbed at her mouth. “Really, Mirko, this is absurd. You expect life to be a dull homogeneity. Yesterday I was in the humour for a diversion, which was undoubtedly pleasant. Tonight I am tired and vexed; and your importunities do not help. A man of breeding would not pursue the subject.”

Mirko pursed his lips; Cascais leaned towards him. “Did I not advise you to attempt no flirtation with the ladies of Formello?”

“Cascais, if you have intellectual capacity to spare—by no means a foregone conclusion—I suggest you devote it to the theories of helmsmanship. One day soon, I will require you to steer *Sapphire Light* around rocks; another collision and it will be your last.”

Cascais sat back and smiled. “My father is the Elector Nool Vavar; I don’t think I’ll be off the boat this side of the Election, do you?”

“If you want to find out, just steer for the rocks.”

Kanspiris again rang the gong. Two slaves appeared bearing a covered silver tray. Once again Bartazan rose from his seat.

"My guests, I hope you have enjoyed the hospitality of Formello. I myself have not relished the occasion as I might, since the rancour of my former servant Padizan's betrayal has removed the edge from my appetite. No man betrays Bartazan House without paying a full price."

Mirko shivered, and thought back with amazement to his previous foray to Formello; if 'N' had not intervened, his unmasking could not have been long coming.

"With this in mind, I have prepared a tableau designed to assuage my displeasure, to entertain and to warn of the follies of treachery. Some guests among you may feel my lesson is somewhat mordant: this is merely proportionate to the extent of my vexation. Kanspiris!"

Kanspiris set down the salver in front of Bartazan. Mirko began to feel a terrible foreboding.

"Now!" cried Bartazan, "let us see how those who betray me are rewarded!"

Bartazan lifted back the cover, to reveal the severed head of Padizan, gold coins arranged in a symbolic stream from his mouth, and filling his empty eye-sockets.

"Traitor to the House of Bartazan!" called the head of the House.

Next to him, Mirko heard a gurgling sound: Larien had vomited copiously. She rose and ran from the room. At the head of the table was a crash as the Lady Inuela fainted and fell forward. Mirko's head began to spin—Padizan was dead because . . . *you are becoming more deeply involved in affairs you do not understand* . . . he had to get out.

Leaping to his feet, he mumbled: "The Lady Larien," and followed her from the Hall as quickly as his unsteady legs would carry him.

Mirko found himself in the black and white tiled hall. "Where is the Lady Larien?" he barked at a slave, who wordlessly pointed up the stairs. He shook off the attempt to restrain him and ran towards her apartments.

"Larien!" he called as he knocked on the door. "Larien! It's Mirko."

He waited while she dealt with the heavy lock. She opened the door and walked back into the room; Mirko followed.

"What do you want?" she asked, her face ashen and her eyes brimming.

"I just wanted to check that you were . . ."

"That I was what? Under control? That I was calm after my uncle had murdered a man I've known as long as I can remember *and served his head up on a plate?* Well no, I'm not under control! I'm angry and vengeful and frightened and . . . oh Mirko, how could he?"

Mirko took her in his arms and gently kissed her hair. Added to his guilt over the whole business, he now realised he found the situation arousing; an extra frisson of self-disgust ran through him.

"Your uncle is not . . . not a temperate character."

Larien continued to sob. "Padizan used to look after the stables when I was a child. He always used to make sure there was hay ready for me to feed the striders and gallumpers when I showed up. 'How are you, my chicken?' he used to say whenever I sneaked down there. Sometimes I'd go when I was meant to be at my lessons. What did I care for the history of the House of Bartazan? So I'd slip off to the stables. Padizan always used to take me back, of course. But he'd let me stay for a while and stroke the beasts."

"Oh, Larien, I'm sorry."

"It's not you, it's nothing you've done. My uncle's to blame, he killed that good man who'd served him for so many years for no thanks or reward."

Mirko clutched Larien tighter, as much to preserve his own balance as to give her comfort. His quixotic act to impress 'N' had led directly to the death of the slave-master. *Affairs you do not understand* . . .

"Larien, how can I work for a man like that? How can I carry on doing it?"

Larien wiped her eyes with a lace handkerchief. "Only you can say that, Mirko. They tell me how you have improved the conditions and treatment of the galley-slaves; if you went that would all be over. Maybe it's best for you carry on and do just a little good—Fanar knows there is little enough of it to spare. You are not a bad man, Mirko, and associating with one does not make you so."

"Who told you I had improved the slaves' conditions?" asked Mirko.

Larien looked up. "Oh, I don't know, it's galley gossip, everyone knows it."

"I only treat them with everyday decency. I'm sure Drallenkoop treats his slaves as well."

Larien sniffled and blew her nose. “Drallenkoop! He is our only hope.”

Mirko looked puzzled.

“You can beat every galley but *Dragonchaser*, I’m sure. Whatever happened on the water today, *Dragonchaser* is still your master.”

“I never claimed otherwise.”

“But Mirko—say you could beat *Dragonchaser* in the Margariad. Just imagine you could. You’d be coming round The Sorcerers in the lead and the race at your mercy. Would you do it? Knowing it would make Bartazan Peremptor?”

“The Margariad doesn’t make Peremptors: the Electors do.”

“Don’t say that! It’s sophistry. You know it’s not true. The Electors dare not refuse Bartazan if he wins—if you win—the Margariad. You know that. So tell me: if the race was in your pocket, would you win it?”

Mirko disengaged himself from Larien. “What else could I do?” he said quietly. “It’s all I’ve got. I came here to win the race, I knew nothing about the politics. When you’re watching, don’t delude yourself with false hopes, Larien. If I’m ahead of *Dragonchaser*, you can be sure I’m trying to stay there.”

Larien sank to her couch, sobbing again. “Mirko—I thought you were—I thought you wanted to do right. Go now, please go.”

“Larien, I can’t just throw away . . .”

“No justifications—just go. I need to be by myself.”

Mirko inclined his head. “Goodnight, my lady. I’m sorry.”



# Finnegan's Wake

by Till Noever

*Jesus!*

Tom Finnegan's head dropped to the bar with a thunk. It splashed into a mucky puddle of stale beer and cigarette ash. Tom took a couple of breaths, raised his head again, and wiped the mess off with a sleeve of his cardigan.

He could have cried.

*Pull yourself together man!*

The taproom of the *Golden Horn* was hazy; the smoke lay thick and Tom was drunk. He sniffed, drew up a nose-load of snot and ash-laced beer, tried to focus on a single clear thought. *Any* clear thought. He surveyed the other patrons. Around the curve of the bar slumped old Jack McCall: pissed out of his skull, his sleeves soaked in spilled beer. Presently he emitted a gutsy burp and slammed his glass onto the bar top. The glass held together. Tom Finnegan very nearly did not.

*I'm cracking up, and nobody cares.*

"Nobody fockin' cares," he said, to no one in particular and the world in general.

"Huh?" Pat Haggerty, who slouched on the stool at Tim's left elbow, leaned closer. Tim jerked back. Pat's breath stank like something had crawled into his mouth and died there.

"Why doesn't any of these stupid fockers want to die?"

Everybody was so damned alive and healthy! For years now — years! — it seemed as if Killen was, as sure as God, the only village in the whole of the county where people refused to die. Not even old Mary Flaherty, who must be close to a hundred, gave any indication that she was ready to join her brothers and sisters, all of whom had by now left for better things.

Tom cast another glance at old Jack McCall: a prime candidate for the Lord's immediate attention.

"It's the stout," Pat declared and followed the statement with a gargantuan eruption. "As true as God! The elixir of life!"

Finnegan shook his head. "Nahh. That's blarney."

Jack, the randy old goat, was just too tough, hanging in there far beyond his time.

Tom told Pat as much. Pat guffawed and slapped Tom on the back. "I could do with a decent crack myself," he admitted.

Exactly! People were born all the time: why couldn't they die with equal zest? If it went on like this the world would soon be overrun with the likes of Jack McCall and Jack McLaughlin, or maybe old Mary, the scheming bitch from hell. What a nightmare!

"Nothing better than a good crack," Pat affirmed. "Serious debauchery; licensed by tradition, state, and even—to some measure—the holy church. Nothing like this shite," he swept his glass around in a gesture encompassing the taproom, in the process almost hitting Ray Lafferty, who gave him a dirty look. "Same thing every night. Not a pair of willing tits in sight. Fockin' church. Fockin' priests."

Tom nodded. His sentiments exactly. His sense of universal justice was seriously offended. Even a village like Killen had a right to at least a couple of wakes every year. Preferably more. Like four years ago, when they'd had almost one every month. A lot of old folks had departed that year, together with a few younger ones falling victim to such unforeseens as traffic accidents, murders (well, *one* murder: Killen's first in living memory), and bar-room brawls. And then, of course, there had been old Mary's son, Father Flaherty, who died of an illness that the church had managed to hush up, by whatever means God only knew.

Rumor from out of town had it that it was something like cancer—but that didn't make much sense in the context. Tom had his own theories about that. Probably that new thing: AIDS. All homos got it sooner or later, and Flaherty had been as queer as they come. Everybody knew it, but nobody said anything—Father Flaherty had been the village priest, and one was careful about what one said about the clergy. Especially with that new sharp one, Father Kean, about! No flies on him. He looked right through you and seemed to know everything he wasn't supposed to.

God only knew what had made him so canny.

Tom and Pat proceeded to bewail the unrelenting boredom of a year without corpses and wakes, and drowned their shared sorrow in another glass of stout. It was God's truth: there was no way to get a decent orgy around here with Father Kean looking on and no corpse as an excuse.

*We need a corpse.*

*Any corpse . . .*

"You can always pray for it," Pat advised him, "though I'm not sure how God feels about prayers like *that!*"

Tom nodded skeptically and raised the glass to his lips again, viewing the rest of the pub's patrons through the thick, distorting bottom. Prayer, he reflected, was unlikely to help. He was willing to try it, no question about that. But he doubted that the Lord would start collecting folks just because Tom Finnegan whined about it.

*The Lord helps them who help themselves. . .*

Who said that?

Three weeks later saw Jack, the most likely candidate for ascent to heaven—or, more likely, descent into hell—still happily slurping his night-time stout at the *Golden Horn*, without showing the slightest tendency to bow out gracefully.

Not to speak of all the other possibles!

Scotty had survived his bout with viral pneumonia, and another hope, Frank O'Hara, had recovered fully from the injuries sustained when his irate stallion had kicked him in the chest.

Everybody else was just so healthy it was disgusting.

Three weeks later therefore found Tom Finnegan in Cobh, Cork City's port, where he had expected to find, if not licensed debauchery, then at least a couple of girls willing to go further than any of Killen's local tarts. He'd heard things; about what the girls in harbor towns would do for the sailors—even if those were mostly local fishermen who stank like they'd been sleeping in the bilges of their boats.

Despair had driven Tom to suffer the long—to him prohibitively expensive—taxi ride from Killen. Despair had pushed him into risking exposure to the city, where he'd never felt comfortable, because he knew nobody, and nobody knew him. All of which might have come in handy if he'd only known how things worked around the big towns. As it turned out, the wee hours still saw him hanging over a railing outside the *Admiral*, where they had kicked him out hours ago, because he had made such a spectacle of himself.

Never had he sunk so low. The girls had been rude, and wanted far too much for far too little. The company in the pub immediately recognized him for the country bumpkin he was and milked him for all he was worth. Then they threw him out and he stumbled across the promenade to the water's edge, where he threw up his

insides while leaning over a freshly painted railing—only it had been too dark to see the sign. Not that he would have been able to decipher it in his condition in the brightest sunshine either.

It was when he was staring out at the lights of the anchored fishing boats, the rank stench from the muck the low tide had exposed in his nostrils, and the sticky feeling of the paint all over his hands, that Tom saw his suspicions confirmed. It was then that he realized only too clearly that not only did the Lord not listen to him, but that rather he might not be able to hear him at all.

And how could he? What was one more candle amongst dozens of others? Who—even if he *was* the Lord—could possibly listen to the din and prayers by all the faithful—demanding, demanding, demanding. . .

Maybe that was it, Tom thought. Maybe it was even worse! Maybe the Lord was so overloaded with work that he had temporarily forgotten the citizens of Killen with their surplus population—and the resultant rampant boredom for those who were not surplus.

*Maybe He needs a wee hand.*

Eight days later, on a sunny Wednesday morning, they found old Jack McCall dead in his bed, lying on his belly, his head dug into his pillow. The local quack declared it to be heart failure brought about by advanced old age and too much alcohol. It was a reasonable guess and everybody believed it no sooner than it had been pronounced.

The wake for old Jack was great, leaving everybody with a hangover and a renewed sense of vitality. Pat Haggerty threw up over Tom, but Tom was too drunk to even know who'd done it. The morning found him lying in a field at the northern exit of the town, and God only knew how he'd gotten there. He stank and his head was killing him, but by God he hadn't had such a good time since. . .

Father Kean, in his reticent way—for he did not approve of orgies; not any more anyway—enjoyed taking part in at least some of it; before it descended too far into debauchery as the village made up for a year of lost opportunity. However, whatever enjoyment he may have derived from the matter was soon quenched when, on the day after the celebration, he not only heard the confessionals of all those who had participated—inflicted on him, it seemed, with unusual gusto and a complete lack of contrition—but also had

to listen to Tom Finnegan, who elaborated on just exactly how he had 'helped' the Lord's work along just a little.

Here also there was little, if any, sense of guilt.

On the contrary! Had not the righteous work been done? What did old doddering Jack have to look forward to? Wasn't he drunk blind every night he got home, emerging only to get himself re-immersed in the grog? And didn't the village have a great time seeing him off into the blue yonder?

What a celebration! What a feast! What joy! And wasn't Molly grand, parading around with nothing on but purple garters?

"I'm sure Jack's ghost enjoyed watching it," Tom said eagerly, as if expecting nothing but the priest's full and unequivocal approval of his heinous deed—as well as the heavily un-Christian and severely disapproved-of pagan aspects of his statement.

Father Kean had things to say then, tightly controlling the thunder that he wanted to release—but which would have given away the confidence of the confessional to all those still waiting to be absolved—some of which would surely be leaning as close as they could get, straining to hear what was going on behind the curtain. So it was in a harsh whisper that he lambasted Tom for his deeds; spoke of evil and sin, and hubris—a word that wasn't in Tom's vocabulary at all—and the damnation awaiting those arrogating to themselves the right to do the Lord's work.

All of this made little sense to Tom Finnegan, who had his own ideas about things like that.

Not that he contradicted Father Kean—after all, you wouldn't argue with a man of the cloth—but it seemed clear anyway that the priest was not thinking straight. It seemed to Tom that if a judge could condemn a man to hang, then Tom could do his own good deeds just with the same right and propriety.

And about Father Kean's advice about surrendering himself to the law . . . well, Tom knew better than that. He wasn't *stupid!*

The confessional was different altogether; sacred and confidential. Besides, Tom felt that it should be done, just in case the Lord did have some reservations after all. Better to be safe than sorry.

But the police and earthly law?—Pah!

Father Kean's voice finally ceased.

Tom sensed that a response was expected. He cleared his voice. "Father . . . I understand all that,"

(he didn't), "but will the Lord forgive me, even if I did do wrong?"

"If?—You mean you have any doubts about that?"

"Father, we all know what we know—and it seems you and I know different things." Tom paused and thought. "Just give me absolution then, Father, just in case the Lord has . . . reservations."

Choking sounds came from behind the grille. But then Father Kean, nowadays a faithful man of the cloth and in the service of mankind, showed his true caliber. He heaved a deep sigh of resignation.

"Yes, my son, the Lord will even forgive *your* sins."

He pronounced the sacred words, told Tom to atone for his sins in a number of excruciatingly complex and quite unrealistic ways; after which he repeated his admonition for Tom to give himself up to the police. As Tom listened he felt a weight lifting off his shoulders—like he always did after confessional.

"Thank you, father," he said politely, before letting himself out. Of course, he had no intention of doing any of those things the priest had imposed upon him—excepting maybe a dozen or so of the five thousand Hail Marys. The rest was quite unreasonable and just showed that the priest had no true appreciation of the situation here in Killen.

Months passed.

Killen continued to enjoy its spate of freedom from serious illness and accident—until Frank O'Hara, who never had a way with horses, but insisted on keeping himself in their company, had another encounter with his favorite black stallion. This time the horse not only kicked in his knee and dented his chest, but for good measure also smashed his head.

There was great mourning, followed by an even greater wake; leaving all those involved with a profound sense of satisfaction and accomplishment.

During Sunday mass, Father Kean, as he always felt he had to after an occasion like this, berated everybody about the perils of drink, sin, and debauchery. Still, as he administered the sacrament, carefully scanning his parishioners as they passed by him, he had the feeling that it was probably a futile effort on his behalf—and that he might as well talk about matters of higher esoteric content. It would pass just as high above their heads as his moralizings.

Only the women—well, most of them, and then it was mainly the married ones—agreed with him; but even

here it was probably not because of a comprehension of the higher ethics involved. They merely preferred their husbands sober and doing much needed work at home, rather than spending their incomes—earned or provided by the social service—at the local pub.

When Tom Finnegan filed past him, Father Kean, as always, gave him an extra intense stare—part of his continuing strategy to keep reminding the sinner that deeds done were still awaiting compensation. Tom, on his part, usually met these looks with the beatific smile of one elevated to angelhood. No contrition here at all, much to the priest's dismay. The certainty of forgiveness, confirmed by the absolution he, Father Kean, had bestowed on the man, had wiped out all traces of guilt.

All the stranger this time, it being only a day after Frank O'Hara's wake, when he should have been glowing with fulfillment, that Tom seemed tense and uncomfortable, and withdrew hastily after a quick perfunctory genuflection.

Father Kean felt uneasy for the rest of that Sunday, and most of Monday, until, in the evening, Tom showed up at the church and asked to have his confession heard. The pit in Father Kean's stomach grew into a black hole as a lurking suspicion, which he had been desperately been trying to suppress, received a grim confirmation. With admirable restraint he listened to Tom's sepulchral voice from the other side of the grille describe at great length just how he had helped to complete the 'Lord's work' this time.

"The bloody horse had already smashed his chest. He could hardly breathe. Just wheezing faintly, he was. So, why have him suffer? They would've just taken him to hospital and pumped him full of drugs until he died anyway. I merely helped him along with a wee tap on the head."

"A 'wee tap'?!?" Father Kean shouted. The confession box shook as he slammed his hand against one of the walls. "You smashed his skull, man!"

Tom grunted. "He was almost dead anyway. Surely that's what the Lord had in store for him. He just didn't do it right. I just finished the job. I'm sure Jack hardly felt a thing."

Father Kean, about to exhaust his priestly patience, contained himself with superhuman effort. After another sermon on the evils of Tom's doings, interlaced with frequent suggestions that maybe it was time to surrender himself to worldly authorities, he complied

with Tom's request for yet another absolution—no matter how hard it came.

Tom Finnegan left the church a contented man. Father Kean remained behind, tormented by his knowledge, his holy duty, and his obligations as a human being.

*He's done it twice, he reflected. As sure as God, he is going to do it again.*

And why not? As long as he's forgiven.

No matter how much he wracked his brain, Father Kean saw no way out of his desperate situation. Breaking the confidence of the confessional, directly or indirectly, was inconceivable.

But what else would do? Short of dispatching Tom in turn?

After some consideration of this alternative he rejected it—despite its undeniable appeal.

The other possibility was to remove the root causes driving Finnegan's insane murdering spree: a mixture of excruciating boredom and an obsession with wakes. Because of his own, not entirely unblemished, past Father Kean had some insight into the criminal mind; and he had an inkling that in a perverse way Tom's actions were based on a profoundly twisted sense of right and wrong. Meaning that Tom required more professional help than he, Father Kean, was able to provide: something a little bit more secular than the threat of God's wrath.

Providing acceptable entertainment for Tom Finnegan—short of a nice orgiastic wake—was almost impossible. Besides—and this showed Father Kean for the perspicacious observer he was—he suspected that 'helping' God's work along a bit could eventually prove even more satisfying for Tom Finnegan than his cracks.

Looking over his congregation on the next weekend Father Kean wondered glumly, and with a nagging sense of his own inadequacy, just who might be the next victim for Tom, sitting there in a corner on his own, a benevolent and happy smile lighting up his rosy face. Maybe old Mary Clannagh? She lived all alone—being too stubborn to exchange her old draughty house for a nice nursing home—and was looked after by an ambulant nurse, who wasn't there during the night. Or would it be Jack McLaughlin, who insisted on staying at the pub every night until closing time, only to drag himself stumbling along the walls of the houses through dimly lit streets, until he ended up, more often than not, in the gutter, rather than his house?

Who was Tom looking at? It was hard to tell; his eyes were all over the place.

I have to do something!

But what?

By the time the last mass on Sunday had been said, Father Kean had come up with a plan of sorts. It was a scheme born out of despair, but his options were rather limited. Besides, if Tom insisted on operating outside the law, worldly and divine, he, Father Kean, would certainly be forgiven for stepping just a wee bit off the straight and narrow himself.

If the truth be told, it wasn't something he was totally unfamiliar with.

On Monday Father Kean was suddenly and unexpectedly called away to attend to his seriously ill sister.

Father Kean did not have a sister. But the late 'Sean Kean' had, though definitely not for the one serving as parish priest in Killen now. But Sean Kean had died in a dark alley in Dublin, from knife wounds received as an unfortunate result of a disagreement with a pimp on his first, only, and fatal foray into the world of venal sex. A small-time thief and con-man called Sean McLeod found him there. In the man's pocket was a birth certificate. Why anybody would go to see a whore with a birth certificate in his pocket was incomprehensible—though years later, on renewed reflection, to Sean McLeod at least, the affair displayed unexpected shades of meaning.

Sean, following an impulse beyond his comprehension, disposed of the body by taking it to the west coast and dumping it from a tall cliff into the turbulent ocean—after smashing the skull and the jawbone beyond any possibility of reconstruction and stripping the balls of the finger tips of their skin. Then he traced his way back through Sean Kean's life—only to find an existence even more pathetic, though considerably less flawed, than his own. Sean Kean's parents had been dead for years. His sister was an imbecile in a asylum. The rest of his more distant relations didn't even seem to know he existed. Sean himself worked in a bank. His absence was missed, but not greatly. When he didn't show up, someone else soon filled his insignificant place. It seemed that nobody cared a fig about Sean Kean.

Neither did Sean McLeod. But he did something strange: he paid for Sarah Kean's continued residence in

the asylum. Not that he knew why, but he did. Something told him to. Or maybe was it *someone* . . .

About a year later Sean McLeod killed a prostitute. It was an accident, but it happened—and life was never the same again for him. They didn't catch him, but that was maybe even worse than if they had. That way the guilt lingered and festered.

Another year later, after some deft manipulations of the system, Sean Kean resurfaced from a mysterious absence and applied for admission to the priesthood—and all the vetting by the church came up with nothing to suggest but that here was a man who had stumbled through the vicissitudes of life and had finally found God—and maybe was a suitable candidate. The only person who might have declined to identify Sean Kean as Sean Kean was his sister—and she couldn't even recognize *herself* in the mirror. Her brother's faithful attendance to her financial needs though spoke for itself. Here, no doubt, was a man of conscience, equipped with a sense of right and wrong and duty.

Endless interviews later Sean was admitted to the seminary on a probationary basis. Eight years later he had his own parish. A clerical success story if there ever was one.

Nowadays Dublin and the past seemed far away—but somehow they weren't, as Father Kean surfaced in Dublin a day later, without a shred of clothing that would have given away his priestly destiny. His parishioners would have been even more astonished (and his superiors dismayed) had they known of the places he visited there, or the greetings the denizens of these establishments bestowed on him. Only dear lost sons were ever accorded that kind of treatment.

Father Kean—Sean McLeod again for a few brief days—took it all in his stride. So much in fact that, when he caught himself actually enjoying it, a brief bout of guilt—originating in the reformed side of his personality—threatened to give it all away. However, he subdued it valiantly and, until his return to Killen, handled himself and his temporary regression with faultless and enthusiastic aplomb.

"I thought you had reformed." Sarah McCluney eyed him shrewdly.

Sean shrugged. "I have," he said, the words sounding faintly false, even to himself, and surely even more so to her. If anybody knew him it was Sarah, who'd brought him up after his mother—who'd been a prosti-

tute and former colleague of Sarah's—had been murdered by a dissatisfied client.

"Then what are you doing here?"

He regarded her: a frail woman who might have been forty as she might have been sixty. Her gray hair and bowed figure told one story, the lack of lines in her face and the strength of her voice another. In the end it was the eyes that gave the game away. They were full of the wisdom and cynicism of a lifetime and more. Now they were fixed on him with a fond regard.

"You're wanting something," she stated.

"Guilty."

"And you're coming to Sarah to get it?" She grinned, and now she looked like she might have been thirty. She looked around the room they were in: the walls covered with racks and shelves holding a confusing collection of pots, jars, urns, bottles, mortars with and without pestles. The paraphernalia of an apothecary—or maybe a witch. With Sarah it may have been both. Sean still wasn't sure. She had always evaded the topic.

"It must be very naughty—what you're planning."

"It's probably immoral."

"Oh dear!" she said, pretending shock. "You've lapsed already! All that work for nothing."

Sean wondered what she was referring to. His time at the seminary, or the fact that he'd gone to extreme lengths to hide his identity.

"I've got a problem," he said, and explained it at some length, adding his proposed solution to the dilemma.

Sarah listened without interruption and finally nodded. "It seems to me, Sean, that the church has not been able to rob you of your creative spirit."

"No fear of that!" he assured her.

"Ha! If only you knew. Did I ever tell you the story of Clint Greeley? He . . ."

"You did," he said gently.

Sarah shrugged. "True. How could I not? Tried to stop you from making a fool of yourself often enough. But would you listen? No, you had to go and become a do-gooder." She shook her head. "Why, Sean? I'll never understand it."

"I owe," Sean said simply. "And debts have to be paid. This is my way of doing it." He looked up. "I get the feeling He approves."

Sarah grimaced. "I hope so," she said dubiously. "If nothing else, He should give you full marks for trying." She squinted at him. "Do you not doubt, Sean?"

"More than I care to admit," he said.

"What do you do then?"

"I pray and hope it goes away."

"Does it?"

"I think so."

"You *think* so?"

"That's all I've got right now."

She eyed him compassionately. "I wish . . ."

Sean shook his head. "No, Sarah—it's all right. *I'm* all right. Honestly."

"I hope so." Sarah sighed and got up. "I think I have exactly what you need."

Sean left the house a few hours, several cups of tea, three whiskeys, and a good meal, later. With him he carried a small vial of a clear and tasteless liquid that should help to teach Tom Finnegan a valuable lesson, and maybe turn off his appetite for wakes completely.

Sacrilege? Using the holy mass to administer a poison?

Maybe so, but Father Kean had weighed it very carefully in his head. The sacrament was the only opportunity he would have to get to Tom; and soon—before another parishioner fell victim to the man's goodwill. The administration of justice sometimes required a certain ethical flexibility.

Father Kean smiled grimly at the irony. Tom saw his own deeds as being sacred work of sorts. So did Sean Kean, nee McLeod.

What was it Tom had said? "*You and I know different things. . .*"

Indeed.

By the following Sunday there had been no more deaths in Killen. Father Kean heaved a sigh of relief. Maybe he was going to be in time to save the unknown victim. From the deftly palmed vial a drop fell into the sacramental cup just before it was handed to Tom—who promptly took his customary hearty swig. Father Kean casually eyed the returned chalice, turned to the next parishioner, stumbled over a non-existent obstacle, and thus spilled the remaining contents. He pretended due shock and dismay, pronounced a quick benediction, and then proceeded to refill the cup with uncontaminated wine. He heaved an inward sigh of relief. It seemed as if his congregation had taken all of these goings on at

face value. Apparently his old skills had not entirely deserted him.

The line of those awaiting his ministrations was almost at an end, when a shout and a commotion outside signaled to the Father that Tom Finnegan had taken the first step on the way to being taught an essential lesson.

The local quack, confirming Father Kean's low opinion about his competence, declared Tom dead; expired from a heart-attack. He did not bother to take him into his practice, but allowed Charley Brannigan, the undertaker, to cart the body away without further ado. Father Kean administered a posthumous rite and insisted on accompanying the corpse to Charley's mortuary: a large room tacked onto the back of Charley's house, where he practiced his arcane arts. It was a part-time job. When Charley wasn't taking care of corpses—an activity which had only recently become enlivened again—he was a plumber. He also had an illegal still in a secret room under the mortuary; thinking, not without justification, that nobody would dream of looking for the source of Killen's most sought-after poison right underneath the floorboards of the place where their loved—or hated—ones were prepared for the world below the daisies.

Father Kean explained his desire to accompany Tom's corpse by reference to his own dismay at a death that had followed so closely after holy mass. Once at the mortuary he chatted animatedly and managed to distract Charley sufficiently to prevent the latter from noticing what the quack had missed. Late that evening Charley and his helper had packaged Tom into a lovely coffin—skipping the embalming because the corpse looked good enough, and was going to be buried soon enough anyway. They also somehow ignored a complete absence of *rigor mortis*, which should have been a giveaway, but somehow wasn't. The task accomplished they went to the *Golden Horn* for a drink and a discussion of the next day's wake. Father Kean stayed behind, ostensibly to pray over Tom's peaceful body for one last time.

As soon as they were out of sight the Father rose from his knees and bent over the coffin. He reached in and lifted one of Tom's eyelids. He waved the other hand forth and back across the light shining from the ceiling. Tom's pupils, though dilated and sluggish, reacted enough to make Father Kean smile grimly.

"Can you hear me Tom?"

He nodded at the open eye, which was starting to water.

"Yeah, I know you can hear me. Hear me and see me and feel me, but nothing in this world will make you able to *do* anything but play dead—for the next day or so anyway."

Father Kean took his hand away. The eyelid stayed open, though the tears flowed copiously.

The Father pulled up a chair.

"Tomorrow, Tom, they are going to have your wake, and you are going to be the guest of honor.

"Just imagine it! Stuck in your coffin all night, while everybody else is having a good time—and you have to watch and listen to every bit of it—and there'll be nothing you can do to join.

"Imagine hearing them tell each other what they *really* thought about Tom Finnegan. Like something about your physical features; you know, like those jokes you cracked about old Frank O'Hara's wind-letting and his long nose and what the relationship between his nose and his you-know-what . . ."

Father Kean frowned. Did Tom's left eyelid twitch? Maybe he should . . .

He took the vial out of his pocket, unstopped it, pried open Tom's mouth, let a few drops fall inside, and closed it again.

"There. That'll keep you still." He patted Tom's cheek. "That's a good boy." He grinned. "And can you imagine what they'll do to you when you come back to life, and they find out that you aren't dead at all?" He winked at Tom. "You've heard about John Kerry and his little prank, haven't you? Remember what they did to *him*?"

Were the eyes watering even more copiously?

Father Kean grimaced. "I hope that'll teach you a lesson. Earthly law can't reach you, because you're hiding behind the confessional. But when this is done, nobody in Killen will acknowledge that they've ever known you. You'll be shunned, Tom: an outcast for the rest of your life. And when the day comes that you *really* die, there'll be nobody on this Earth to give you the wake."

He rose. "But that, as they say, is in the future." He closed the eyelids and dabbed away Tom's tears with a handkerchief. "Happy wanderings, Tom—and am I ever so glad that your dear mother died years ago, so she did not have to witness her son's shame."

The folks of Killen believed in having their wakes the proper way: like they had always done it, and would possibly be doing it for a good few years to come. None of the dilutions inflicted upon the sacred ritual by the encroachments of modern times and non-traditional attitudes were permitted. Booze was varied and plentiful, its quality less important than its volume. Women, though drafted kicking and complaining into much of the organizing of the event—the men being patently incapable of attending to all the fine details—were mostly kept away from the ceremony proper. They only spoiled the smooth flow of the orgy and the free expression of the attending personalities.

Jack had managed to organize Calvern Hall for the occasion. Everybody pitched in to make the occasion of Tom's demise into an experience to be remembered—if for no other reason but to honor Tom, whose love for wakes was proverbial, and who only recently seemed to have received a new lease of life when Jack and Frank had been taken so unexpectedly. That a man like Tom should be cut down just when he was getting on top of his depression . . . it was patently unfair—despite everything Father Kean said during the mass held for Tom on the following afternoon; that being the same day as the wake. But nobody argued with the Father. He was supposed to look the other way during the evening's festivities, and there was no point in antagonizing him—especially since he'd declared that he would be there, but not to mind his presence, and would they just go ahead and simply pretend that he wasn't there. The announcement had produced dubious looks from the men, and frowns of disapproval from the women, who thought that the Father's presence lent the occasion a degree of undesirable legitimacy.

But who cared what the women thought? They nagged far too much anyway, and the wake was an event sanctioned by tradition and church alike, and nothing a mere woman said could possibly change that. Besides, some of the looser—and not always younger—of the local ladies *would* attend; especially Molly O'Hearn, sparsely dressed in lewd black-and-red lace that was destined to come off in due course, as the festivities neared their climax.

Tom's face had undergone additional beautification at the hands of old Mary Flaherty herself. She had enhanced the pallid complexion of his cheeks with certain inscrutable ingredients from her ancient makeup

kit, and folded his—remarkably flexible—hands into a beatific posture over his groin. She had also dabbed off a few drops of liquid that had formed on the inside of his closed eyelids—but spent no further thought on the event. Corpses behaved in lots of funny ways she did not really want to understand at all, what with being so close to the precipice herself. Tom leaked—so what? When he was still alive he used to spit in your face while talking. He had a lot of liquid inside him, what with Charley not having drained him properly and all, and it was wanting to get out.

The coffin stood at a slant against the wall, in a small pool of shade from the ceiling lights, which had been let down on their chains to illuminate the long table the organizers had set up. From its position, the corpse—had its eyes been open—could have sighted right along the whole length of it. Father Kean, noting how hard it was in the smoky haze to actually discern Tom's face, decided that the guest of honor was missing out on an essential cognitive component to enhance his enjoyment of the event. He sidled across to the wall and, when he was sure that nobody paid any attention, pulled open both of Tom's eyelids just a bit. The eyes began to water copiously, but Father Kean, stepping back into the light and scanning his handiwork critically, decided that nobody would notice. He'd come along every now and then and wipe off the moisture himself.

Through the flowing tears Tom Finnegan now had the opportunity of participating in his wake to the fullest extent possible under the circumstances. The sounds, smells, and distorted visual impressions provided an exquisite torture, enhanced by the pain caused by being unable to participate, and the certainty of his glum and desperate future as an eternal outcast; without those he had known and drunk with all his life. Living on welfare in a hole like Cobh, poked fun at by the city slickers, exploited by the whores. A good life ending in misery and despair.

The tears flowed heavier—and not just as a physiological reaction to protect his exposed eyeballs.

The smoke drifted heavily through the hall, its stale tang mixing with that of drink spilled on table and floor. In the back a band of three fiddled endless jigs. The floorboards shook under pounding feet. Dissonant voices bawled off-key tunes, old and new, revered and trashy, funny and coarse. Shouts and curses, slurps and eruptions. Tom O'Hara called Tom Finnegan an 'old

fart'—to the grunting approval of Scott Welsh. There came the sickening sound of someone—probably John MacLarty—throwing up beside the coffin—followed by an assault of the sour stench of vomit. Molly O'Hearn, helped by the eager paws of a number of local gentlemen and lechers, stepped onto the table, and took off the overcoat that had so far concealed the full splendor of her tantalizing black-and-red underwear—not to speak of what it covered.

The height of torture! Tom could see Molly only too clearly—even through the visual distortions created by his tears. Though he had currently lost control over his voluntary nervous system, many other functions had not been impaired. The hormones now released into his bloodstream evoked a familiar reaction in this crotch. Despite the paralyzing poison his heart picked up by a few beats.

The ardor of Molly's gyrations increased. Her gartered pelvis twitched and thrust. Her ample bosom strained against the pathetic bra trying to hold it together.

*No!* His silent cry echoed inside his brain.

For just a moment the rush of adrenaline annulled a critical blockage in his brain.

He blinked.

Through the haze generated by drink and the effect of looking up along Molly's legs Pat Haggerty's gaze flicked to the coffin for the merest instant.

What was the strange reflection on Tom's face?

Pat squinted, but the fleeting impression was gone.

He shook his head and redirected his attention to Molly's increasingly suggestive and provocative movements. She was up on the table, almost within his reach, facing toward the coffin and Tom, thrusting her ample breasts in his direction, away from Pat, her legs spread apart, forming two sides of a irresistible sexual triangle, at its apex her red and black lace panties, most of them tucked in between Molly's twitching buttocks. The gyrations of her hips assumed a hypnotic air, invoking images of her lying under him like that, panting and moaning into the pillow with abandon and lust as he heaved and thrust.

Pat, forgetting where he was, started to reach out for those bulging mounds, when, through the triangular frame of Molly's incomparable legs, he glimpsed it again . . .

*Shite!*

His hand dropped to the table. His arousal deflated like a pricked balloon. He tried to re-focus on Molly's buttocks, but it wasn't working.

He glanced around at his buddies. "Hey Scotty?—Scotty!"

Scotty Fitzgerald, totally immersed in Molly's antics, one hand grabbing his crotch, turned around, irritated.

Pat made an urgent motion. "Never mind the tart. We have a problem!"

Scotty squinted at him. He suddenly realized what his hand was doing and dropped it. "You're drunk!" he declared.

"So are you—but never mind that! Come here. This is an emergency."

"Not *now!*" Scotty turned back to Molly, who was thrusting her hips at Tom's still form. "Get an eyeful of this!" he said over his shoulder. "Wouldn't Tom have loved it? Pity he isn't around to watch . . ." He almost sounded as if he meant it.

Pat took a firm hold of Scotty's sleeve. Scotty tried to shake him off, but Pat didn't let go. "I'm telling you, this is *serious!*"

Reluctantly Scotty allowed himself to be dragged away from the crowd, and into a corner.

Pat's voice dropped to a hoarse whisper.

"Scotty—what happens when a wake is not for the dead?"

Scotty regarded him with eyes glazed over by the alcohol. "What are you babbling about?"

Pat pointed over at the coffin. "I mean, what if he *is* around to watch it?"

"He's *dead*, you fockin' idiot!"

"I know that!—But what if he's *not*?"

"That's stupid! Either he's dead or he isn't. The quack says he *is*. So does the priest—and Charley. That's good enough for *me!*"

"What the fock does Charley know?" Pat hissed. "And what if they're *all* wrong?"

Scotty wagged his head. "I don't know," he ruminated, "but we'd have to stop the wake for sure. Then the Father'll probably have to say a lot of prayers to avert the Lord's wrath for taking a tradition in vain. We'll never hear the end of it with his tedious sermons and preachings!"

"Oh, I don't know about that," Pat said. "He looks like he's enjoying Molly just as much as the rest of us. Probably kicking himself for not being able to do it and all that."

Scotty followed Pat's gaze. "God's truth! The man's a lech—just like us lesser mortals!" he exclaimed. His attention was diverted to Molly, whose hands were reaching for the clasp that held her bra together at the front. A roar went up from the assembled men-folk—and, if the truth be told, from one or two of the women as well. The clasp came undone; the halves of the bra flew apart as Molly's ample bosom spilled forth.

"Whoa!" Scotty nudged Pat with the elbow. "Get a *handful* of those!"

Molly shrugged off the bra with practiced ease, and shook her upper torso. Her prodigious mammaries swung freely. Pat's eyes feasted on her. For a moment he glanced at Tom.

"Fock!"

"Definitely!" Scotty nodded, but kept his eyes on Molly who'd cupped her own breasts and held them up in Tom's direction as she swayed her hips to and fro in rhythm with the clapping and the roar of "Molly—Mol-ly—Mol-ly. . ."

"He fockin' *blinked!*" Pat shouted into Scotty's ear.

Scotty stopped clapping and shouting with the rest of them and tore his eyes off Molly to look at Pat.

"What?"

"I'm telling you. Something wrong!"

Scotty peered at him closely from eyes reddened by smoke, drink, and lust. "You really *are* drunk! What, with hallucinations and all."

"No!—I mean it! He was doing something with his eyes—as sure as God, I tell you. . ."

Scotty cast a longing look at Molly, who had begun the final stages of her performance by reaching for her garter belt.

He sighed. "Shite!" He moved off. "Stupid focker," he muttered under his breath.

They sidled over to the coffin and took up positions in the shadow on each side of it. The sight of Molly peeling away her stockings, her breasts hanging down like full single-teated udders, almost made Pat forget why they were here.

But then he saw something that killed his renascent erection on the spot.

"Look!" he hissed.

"What?"

As discreetly as he could Pat pointed. Scotty followed the direction of Pat's index finger. His eyes widened. Despite the hands folded above Tom's crotch what had happened underneath was unmistakable.

"Holy *fock!*"

"I told you there was something wrong!" Pat hissed.

Scotty shook his head. "That's a strange one, all right. . ."

He hesitated, looked around him, decided that nobody was watching, then reached over and lifted Tom's hand, shook it, let it drop it back across the other.

"Nahh," he declared. "Dead as a doornail."

"But he's got a. . ." Pat couldn't get himself to say it. "And look at his face! His eyes! They're open, for fock's sake! He's fockin' crying!"

Scotty frowned. "That *is* a wee bit odd. . ."

"Maybe his ghost is still somewhere in there, trying to get out?"

"A randy fockin' ghost? Trust Tom to give himself a hard-on even after he's dead!"

Molly had finished with the first stocking and had straightened up again, waving it above her head. The crowd roared, whistled, and shouted her name. With a casual flick of her wrist Molly threw the stocking over their heads. A wild scramble ensued, punctuated by shouts and curses. Kelly Doyle, the victorious claimant, returned to the table triumphant, waving his trophy. Molly, her gyrations never missing a beat, blew him a kiss, and jiggled her buttocks in his face. Kelly looked like he was going to faint right there and then.

"Lucky fock!" Pat forced himself to contain his envy at Kelly. He absolutely hated the stupid fuck. Pecker the size of a chihuahua turd. And there he was: ogling up Molly's ass.

He tore himself away from the sight and the thoughts. "Maybe we could help the ghost to leave," he said.

"What?"

"Just encourage him, you know?"

"You mean, *kill* him?" Scotty asked.

"He's already dead!" Pat pointed out, not unreasonably. "I mean, we'd just make sure he's. . . *completely* dead. You know—like we show the ghost that he really has to go. None of. . . this." He pointed at Tom's crotch. "It's indecent. How can he do this to a corpse—even if it *is* his own!"

Scotty nodded his agreement.

"You're right. It's disgusting. Just like him, too. Never had a proper sense of decency." He shrugged. "Besides, we wouldn't be *killing* him, would we now? I mean, he's already dead, right?"

"Right! We'd just be making sure."

Kelly Doyle had tied Molly's stocking around his neck like a scarf and was clapping and shouting louder than anybody as Molly started work on her second stocking. Dragging it out she was; working them all into a feverish pitch before she came to the climax. Molly, thought Pat, knew how to work a crowd. He used the distraction to creep around the hall looking for a suitable instrument to dispatch Tom Finnegan's ghost with finality. He found it on a side table, beside the ham. Hiding it behind his back he crept back to where Scotty was waiting.

"Here, that should do it."

Scotty nodded. "I'll stand in front of you."

"You want *me* to do it?"

"You're the butcher around here!"

"Oh, shite!"

"Come on! Nobody's going to look."

Pat glanced at the crowd. Molly was waving the second stocking above her head. Everybody's eyes fixated on the twirling wisp of nylon.

"Mol-ly—Mol-ly—Mol-ly . . ." the crowd shouted, stomping on the floor in unison. Molly rewarded them with another swing of her bosom.

Pat sighed. "Fock you, Tom," he muttered, and bent to the task at hand. With Scotty standing guard between him and the roaring crowd Pat turned to Tom. He looked up at the watering eyes and, finding them oddly discomfiting and unsettling, reached up and pulled the eyelids shut . . .

. . . but not before Tom had caught sight of the glinting object in Pat's hand.

Dear God—no!

Pat opened one button of Tom's immaculate white shirt just below the chest, and pulled the fabric aside. That way the wound would not be visible later. He placed the tip of the knife against the body and—as the crowd behind them scrambled after Molly's second stocking—leaned against him like one might against an old friend, using the weight of his body to drive the blade up under the breastbone. There was a little squishing sound, barely audible above the din. The knife sliced through the soft tissue and punctured the feebly beating heart . . .

. . . which finally stopped.

From across the room Father Kean had finally taken note of the two men near the coffin. At first he thought nothing of it, being far too distracted by Molly's antics. Pat couldn't know it, but his speculations regarding Father Kean's thoughts hadn't been that far off the mark; especially since, more often than once, Molly had definitely looked straight at him, and the last time she had taken her tongue between her teeth and cupped her breasts there was no doubt in his mind that she was willing and ready and that the gesture had been meant for him and him alone.

Not for the first time in his new career did doubts assail him. His reasons for joining the church and the holy service suddenly were called into question just as they always were when a beautiful woman thrust her sexual attentions upon him. And Molly, now going straight for the climax of her operation, was sending all the right signals. She was a slut, of course, but who cared? She knew the moves, and Father Kean had no doubts that he'd be in for quite an experience.

And probably expulsion from the church. Because Molly would talk—maybe later rather than sooner; but talk she would, and then it would be over for him.

Still, he was a normally functioning male, and Molly tugging at her panties and teasing them off her luscious, but amazingly firm, hips did to him what she did to everybody else. Especially since right now she looked straight at him again. Then, to a moan of disappointment, she let go of the panties and ran her hands up her side, just to drag it out a bit longer.

For a moment Father Kean's glance flicked across to the coffin. Tom, he thought distractedly, must be having the time of his life. Maybe this wasn't as much punishment as he'd hoped!

But what were *they* doing there? He stepped back to get a better view around Scotty at Pat—and froze as he saw Pat pulling a knife out of Tom's chest. The man inspected the blood on it with a look of inebriated puzzlement. Scotty took the knife and held it out of sight. Pat carefully re-buttoned Tom's shirt and wiped off his hands on the corpse's trousers. Scotty snuck off into the direction of the men's rooms. Pat stood for another moment in an attitude of contemplation and puzzlement, then turned around to watch Molly reveal her most intimates.

Father Kean stood mute.

The din in the hall flowed past him, but suddenly did not touch him any more. The screeching, stomping, clapping crowd around Molly O'Hearn had become irrelevant and peripheral. Molly herself had become just another slut whom he wouldn't have touched with a ten-foot barge-pole.

Father Kean made no move to help Tom. To have done so would have been futile and, above all, impious.

For him this was a moment of reverence. A moment such as life seldom offered to man; a moment that could not be contrived by anything or anybody. A moment he had tried to capture in his church a hundred times without ever succeeding—without even the hope really of success.

Epiphany!

Never to be shared with anybody.

But all the doubts . . . they were gone. Just like that. Forever. Because, after all these years of dreary silence in his soul, God finally had spoken to him.

Just three words; but they would see Sean Kean through the rest of his life.

Still they reverberated through his soul.

*Justice is mine.*

