

PREFACE

During the first expansion of the Gaeian Reach, when every adventurous youth yearned to become a locator, thousands of worlds in remote places had been explored. The most benign of these worlds attracted immigrants; there seemed no end to the sects, factions, societies, cults or simple groups of free-thinkers who fared bravely off as pioneers to live their lives on worlds of their own. Sometimes they survived or even prospered; more often the alien environment defeated the Gaeian soul: the settlements decayed; the folk departed, sometimes leaving behind odd little clots of humanity which by one means or another came to terms with the surroundings. Some of these worlds, seldom visited and remote from public notice, provided substance for Thom Hartmann's haunting work *Lost Worlds and Forgotten Peoples*.

Gaeian philosophers recognized that a variety of social forces operated between the worlds, which could be classified by several systems: isolationist versus collectivist; centrifugal versus centripetal; homogenizing versus differentiating.

In the absence of a central government, order was maintained by the IPCC, originally the Interworld Police Coordinating Company, an organization dedicated to legality, order, the curbing of crime, with attendant punishment of criminals, pirates, miscellaneous sociopaths—a program which it performed with convincing efficiency. In the end, the IPCC became a de facto administrative agency which controlled

the smooth functioning of the Gaean Reach and everywhere projected an awareness of Gaean identity.

Incidental note: the unit of Gaean currency, the sol, has approximately the value of ten contemporary dollars.

Chapter I

1

As a boy Myron Tany had immersed himself in the lore of space exploration. In his imagination he wandered the far places of the Gaean Reach, thrilling to the exploits of star-dusters and locators; of pirates and slavers; of the IPCC and its brave agents.

By contrast his home at the bucolic village Lilling on the pleasant world Vermazen seemed to encompass everything easy, tranquil and soporific. Despite Myron's daydreams, his parents persisted in stressing the practicalities. "Most important is your education, if you are to become a financial analyst like your father," Myron was told. "After you finish your course at the Institute, that will be the time to flutter your wings for a bit before taking a post at the Exchange."

Myron, mild and dutiful by temperament, pushed the intoxicating images to the back of his mind, and enrolled at the College of Definable Excellences at the Varley Institute, across the continent at Salou Sain. His parents, who well understood his casual disposition, sent him off with a set of stern injunctions. He must concentrate with full diligence upon his studies. Scholastic achievement was highly important when a person prepared for a career.

Myron agreed to do his best, but found himself waylaid by indecision when it came time to propose a schedule of studies. Despite his best intentions, he could not put aside images

of majestic space-packets sliding through the void, of cities redolent with strange smells, of taverns open to the warm winds where dusky maidens in purple skirts served foaming toddy in carved wooden beakers.

In the end Myron fixed upon a set of courses which in his opinion represented a compromise. The list included statistical mathematics, economic patterns of the Gaeian Reach, general cosmology, the elementary theory of space propulsion, Gaeian anthropology. The program, so he assured his parents, was known as 'Economic Fluxions', and provided a solid foundation upon which a good general education might be based. Myron's parents were not convinced. They knew that Myron's decorous manner, though at times a trifle absent-minded, concealed a streak of irrational intransigence against which no argument could prevail. They would say no more; Myron must discover his mistakes for himself.

Myron could not dismiss the foreboding which his father's glum predictions had induced. As a consequence he attacked his work more vigorously than ever, and in due course he was matriculated with high honors.

His father suggested that, despite Myron's odd yearnings and unconventional course of studies, he might still qualify for a place in the lower echelons of the Exchange, from which he could launch his career. But now an unforeseen factor disturbed the flow of Myron's life. The disruptive influence was Myron's great-aunt, Dame Hester Lajoie, who had inherited great wealth from her first husband. Dame Hester maintained her splendid residence, Sarbiter House, on Dingle Terrace, at the southern edge of Salou Sain. During Myron's last term at Varley Institute, Dame Hester noticed that Myron was no longer a slender stripling with a vague and—as she put it—moony

expression, but had become a distinctly good-looking young man, still slender, but of good physical proportions, with sleek blond hair and sea-blue eyes. Dame Hester enjoyed the presence of nice-looking young men: they acted, so she imagined, as a foil or, perhaps better to say, a setting, for the precious gem which was herself. For whatever reason, during Myron's last term, he resided at Sarbiter House with his great-aunt: an education in itself, so it turned out. Myron was not allowed to address her as 'great-aunt', nor did she care for 'Aunt Hester'. She preferred 'Dear Lady', or the soubriquet 'Schutzel', as he chose.

Dame Hester fitted no familiar patterns or categories of Gaeon womanhood. She was tall and gaunt, though she insisted upon the word 'slim'. She walked with long strides, head thrust forward, like a rapacious animal on the prowl. Her wild mass of mahogany-red hair framed a pale hollow-cheeked face. Her black eyes were surrounded by small creases and folds of skin, like parrot-eyes, and her long high-bridged nose terminated in a notable hook. It was a striking face, the mouth jerking and grimacing, the parrot-eyes snapping, her expression shifting to the flux of emotions. Her tempestuous moods, whims, quirks and fancies were notorious. One day, at a garden party, a gentleman artlessly urged Dame Hester to write her memoirs. The fervor of her response caused him shock and dismay. "Ludicrous! Graceless! Stupid! A beastly idea! How can I write memoirs now, when I have scarcely started to live?"

The gentleman bowed. "I see my mistake; it shall never be repeated!"

An hour later the gentleman had recovered his aplomb sufficiently that he was able to describe the incident to a friend

who, so he discovered, had also excited Dame Hester's wrath. After looking over his shoulder, the friend muttered, "I suspect the woman has forged a pact with the Devil!"

"Wrong!" muttered the more recent victim. "She is herself the Devil!"

"Hmm," said his friend. "You may be right; we must take care not to annoy her."

"That is impossible!"

"Well, then, let us consider the matter over another gill of this excellent malt."

For a fact Dame Hester was not always discreet. She conceived herself a creature of voluptuous charm for whom time had no meaning. Undeniably she made a gorgeous spectacle as she whirled about the *haut monde*, clad in remarkable garments of magenta, plum, lime-green, vermilion and black.

Dame Hester had recently won a judgment of slander against Gower Hatchkey, a wealthy member of the Gadroon Society. In satisfaction of the judgment she had accepted the space-yacht *Glodwyn*.

Initially Dame Hester thought of the *Glodwyn* only as proof that whoever chose to call her a 'bald old harridan in a red fright-wig' must pay well for the privilege. She showed no interest in the vessel and rather than inviting her friends to join her for a cruise, she prohibited them from so much as setting foot aboard the vessel. "Amazing!" she told Myron with a sardonic chuckle. "Suddenly I have dozens of new friends, all bright-eyed and cheerful as larks. They declare that, no matter what their personal inconvenience, they would never refuse to join me on an extended cruise."

"Nor would I!" said Myron wistfully. "It is an exciting prospect."

Dame Hester ignored him. She went on. "They'll drift away when they find that I am planning no cruises whatever."

Myron looked at her incredulously. "No cruises—ever?"

"Of course not!" snapped Dame Hester. "Spaceflight is a weird and unnatural ambition! I, for one, have neither time nor inclination to go hurtling through space in an oversize coffin. That is sheer lunacy and a mortification of both body and spirit. I shall probably put the vessel up for sale."

Myron had nothing to say.

Dame Hester watched him closely, parrot-eyes snapping. "I see that you are perplexed; you think me timid and orthodox. That is incorrect! I pay no heed to convention, and why is this? Because a youthful spirit defies the years! So you dismiss me as an eccentric madcap! What then? It is the price I pay for retaining the verve of youth, and it is the secret of my vivid beauty!"

"Ah yes, of course," said Myron. He added thoughtfully, "Still, it is a sad waste of a beautiful ship."

The remark irritated Dame Hester. "Myron, be practical! Why should I gad through empty space or trudge through dirty back alleys, testing out strange smells? I lack time for my normal pursuits here at home. At this very moment I have a dozen invitations in prospect; they cannot be ignored. I am in demand everywhere! The Golliwog Gala is upon us, and I am on the committee. If I could get away, I'd spend a week at Lulchion's Mountain Resort. The fresh air is like balm for my nerves. You must realize that I am constantly on the *qui vive*!"

"No doubt about that," said Myron.

2

One morning Dame Hester found herself at loose ends and on sudden whim decided to inspect the *Ğlodwyn*. She summoned Myron and the two rode in her big black float-car to the spaceport and around to the storage yard. Halfway along a line of miscellaneous space craft, they found the *Ğlodwyn*: a ship of moderate size, enamelled in shades of gold and green, with trim and sensor bosses picked out in plum red. Dame Hester was favorably impressed by the glossy exterior surfaces, the vessel's size and solidity, and its interior appointments, which she found unexpectedly luxurious. "It is a handsome craft," she told Myron. "The saloon is quite commodious and the fittings seem of good quality. Nor could I complain of the décor; it is quaint but in good taste. I am surprised that anything connected with a blatant brute like Gower Hatchkey could be anything other than slovenly. His remarks concerning my person were truly beyond the Pale!"

Myron nodded thoughtfully. "Someday I will calculate what his statement cost him per syllable. A really exorbitant amount, when you think of it. After all, a syllable when spoken by itself conveys no meaning. If Hatchkey had separated his comment into syllables, then had read the list to the judge from bottom to top, the judge would have found no offense, and might have let Hatchkey off with only a warning."

Dame Hester became restive. "Let us take the subject no farther. Your ideas are absurd. Come; it is time to leave. I will mention the vessel to Dauncy; he is highly knowledgeable in this regard."

Myron forbore comment.

Dauncy Covarth had become a frequent caller at Sarbiter House. He was a hearty gentleman, bluff and dashing, with a crisp mustache and sandy-brown hair which he wore clipped short, in the so-called 'Regimental' style. Myron could not accurately gauge the degree of intimacy existing between Dame Hester and Covarth, but at the moment he seemed to be her favorite chum. With cynical disapproval Myron noted how, under the spell of Dauncy's gallantries, Dame Hester simpered and gushed like a smitten schoolgirl.

A few days after her visit to the spaceport, Dame Hester let fall a casual remark, to the effect that, perhaps someday, when her social calendar had eased, she might consider a short cruise aboard the *Çlodwyn*—perhaps to the nearby world Derard, where a cycle of bucolic festivals was said to be entertaining, what with the high-kicking peasant dances and outdoor banquets beside fire-pits where entire wild boars sizzled on spits and a wine keg with six spigots graced every table. Myron endorsed the project, but Dame Hester paid him no great heed. "Yes, Myron, I am aware of your enthusiasm; at heart you are an unmitigated vagabond! But that is no surprise! Suddenly I find myself with a great entourage of new friends, each of which, when the *Çlodwyn* is mentioned, describes himself or herself as a natural spacefarer, with the lust for adventure bred into his or her bones, and each expects to be invited aboard the *Çlodwyn* for a luxurious vacation. I have assured everyone that there will be no languid idlers aboard the *Çlodwyn* if I were to undertake a cruise."

"A sound idea!" declared Myron. "I am particularly well qualified; as you know, I took my degree in the College of Cosmology."

"Tchah!" Dame Hester gave her fingers a contemptuous

flutter. "It is all classwork and cookypushing, of no practical use whatever."

"Not so!" cried Myron. "I studied space dynamics, in all its phases, Gaeen economics, the mathematical basis of trans-dimensional propulsion. I am familiar with *Handbook to the Planets* and *Gaeen Cosmography*. In short, I am not just another dilettante! I am anxious to apply my knowledge to useful purposes."

"Correct and proper," said Dame Hester. "Perhaps someday you shall have the opportunity." She spoke somewhat absently. "By the way, since your studies have been so exhaustive, what do you know of the world Kodaira?"

"Kodaira? I don't come up with anything definite. In fact, nothing at all."

"So much for your expensive education," said Dame Hester with a sniff.

"There are thousands of worlds, some inhabited, some not. I can't remember them all. Even if I could, I would not trouble to do so, since the information changes every year. It is why the Handbook goes through so many editions."

Myron went to the bookshelf and found a relatively recent copy of the standard reference. He looked through the index. "Nothing here by that name."

"Odd."

Myron shrugged. "Sometimes a world has several names, not all listed in the Handbook. Why are you interested?"

Dame Hester indicated the magazine she had been reading. "This journal is edited and published here in Salou Sain. It has a wide readership among the upper intellectual strata and must be considered a magazine of prestige. This is the current edition. I have just read a pair of articles, both dealing

with an important subject. The articles are of unequal weight, the first being rather flippant. The second article was written by someone using a pseudonym, and is far more significant than the first, though both are thought provoking.”

Dame Hester took up the journal. The title, so Myron saw, was *Innovative Salubrity*.

“The first article,” said Dame Hester, “is called, ‘The Fountains of Youth: Fact or Fancy?’ The author, I am sorry to say, has given sensational treatment to a serious subject. Still, it provides items of information, which might otherwise be overlooked. His topic is rejuvenation and revitalization of aging tissue, a matter of concern to everyone.”

“True enough,” said Myron. “What have you learned?”

Dame Hester glanced down at the journal. “Much of the material is of no great value and is also marred by the author’s unfortunate attempts at whimsy. There is, first, a historical survey, then a discussion of faith healers, religious mania, and, of course, fraudulent practitioners. The author ends the piece with a waggish anecdote regarding the Eternal Hope Fellowship. He reports that the treatment is so expensive and prolonged that many of the patients die of old age before they are rejuvenated. The concept is poignant and, once again, facetiousness is not appropriate.”

“What about the second article?”

“It is different, in both tone and content, and certainly more consequential. Unfortunately, explicit details are carefully guarded. The author, who uses the pseudonym ‘Serena’, seems to be a woman native to the area. She describes some very advanced research conducted on a remote world she calls ‘Kodaira’. The thrust of the work is entirely therapeutic. The goal is to repair or reverse the effects of aging; there is no

tinkering with the genes. The editor's foreword to the article is inspiring. It reads:

Kodaira is known as the "World of Laughing Joy" and the "Place of Resurgent Youth". The source of this wonderful ambience is the unique fountain known as Exxil Waters, where a scientist called Doctor Maximus (not his real name) first studied the remarkable power of the water and eventually evolved the science of metachronics. The author knows the world Kodaira intimately, and uses the pseudonym 'Serena' to safeguard her privacy. Originally a scientist in her own right, Serena now resides in the vicinity of Salou Sain, where she devotes her time to writing articles based upon her experience as a comparative botanist. The editorial staff considers the following article to be one of the most important ever published on Vermazen.

Dame Hester looked sidewise to assure herself that Myron was paying attention. She asked, "What do you think of that?"

"I think that now I understand your interest in the world Kodaira."

Dame Hester spoke with muted annoyance, "Sometimes, Myron, your apathy becomes dreadfully tiresome."

"Sorry."

Dame Hester thrust the journal at him. "Read for yourself."

Myron politely accepted the journal and fixed his attention upon the article. It bore the title: "For the Select Few: Regeneration". Myron started to read: at first, languidly, then with

increasing interest. Serena described Doctor 'Maximus': "He is a tireless little man of enormous zest, who bounces, rather than walks, from place to place. He is impatient with prejudice, stupidity and cant, and rejects both social acclaim and social censure, and most of all the sheer weight of society. This is one reason why he continues to work on the remote world we shall call Kodaira. The second and more important reason is the fountain known as Exxil Waters."

Serena went on to describe what she called 'the real Fountain of Youth'. "The water arises in a volcanic spring from deep within the world, where it encounters a variety of complex minerals. It seeps through a dense jungle, absorbing virtue from herbs, molds and deep decaying humus. Finally it flows, pale green and faintly effervescent, into Exxil Pool. Doctor Maximus, a biologist by training, became interested in the unique newt-like creatures which inhabit the mud surrounding the pool. He noticed their hardihood and longevity, which far exceeded that of similar individuals elsewhere. After tests and analyses, he threw caution aside and drank the water. The results were encouraging. In the end he developed a therapeutic regimen, which initially was tested by volunteers. Finally, Doctor Maximus organized the New Age Clinic and began to treat clients who could pay the not inconsiderable fee."

Serena, with her husband, came to Kodaira in order to conduct botanical research. Serena chanced upon the Clinic and applied for regenerative therapy. She undertook the regimen. The results were entirely to her satisfaction.

"Doctor Maximus meanwhile continues his research, hoping to improve the program and discover the basic processes involved in the therapy. At the moment he believes that a

variety of factors cooperate to synergistic effect, and he wants to optimize active factors and reduce the sometimes irksome aspects of the regimen. He is aware that the therapy is not yet perfected and suspects that it may never be so, owing to the complexity of the systems involved. Meanwhile, he insists that the location of the clinic be kept secret, in order to avert a pell-mell onrush of the lame, halt and moribund. By the same token, he refuses to theorize as to whether his work, in the end, will benefit society, or the reverse.”

Myron put the journal aside. Dame Hester asked tartly, “Are you tongue-tied? What is your opinion?”

“Interesting, but vague and mysterious. Also highly expensive.”

Dame Hester stared at him incredulously. “‘Expensive’? What else is money good for? Doctor Maximus sells youth and life and vivacity! How can a price be set on such commodities?”

Myron reflected. “I expect that Doctor Maximus charges whatever the traffic will bear.”

Dame Hester made a sound of disgust and went back to her reading. After a time she looked up. “Tomorrow you can put your expensive education to some practical use. Go early to the Cosmological Library and systematically explore its resources. Consult all the indexes, trace down every reference, give your intuition full scope. For once in your life show a modicum of persistence. Achieve results! Find Kodaira!”

3

Two days passed. Myron, responding to his great-aunt’s instructions, had searched the voluminous files of the Cos-

mological Library without result. He had become convinced that 'Kodaira' was a name improvised for the occasion, and he so informed Dame Hester. She accepted the judgment without surprise. "It is as I suspected. Well, no matter. Tomorrow we will attend Sir Regis Glaxen's garden party. Dauncy Covarth has kindly agreed to be my escort of course, but there may be persons present whom I will want you to meet."

"Why me? Let them meet your chum Dauncy."

"Not another word, if you please. Be sure to dress appropriately; this will be a notable occasion."

"Oh well; just as you like," Myron grumbled. "I still can't understand any of this."

"You will, in due course. It is truly important, and I may well need your most active and alert intelligence."

Myron had no further remark to make, and on the following day he accompanied Dauncy Covarth and Dame Hester to Sir Regis Glaxen's garden party. Dame Hester had chosen to appear in an exciting ensemble consisting of a burnt orange blouse, deeply cleft, and a full lime-green skirt with a slit up the left side. The slit from time to time revealed a goodly length of left leg, which was encased in a yellow silk stocking. The leg was long and thin, the knee was knobby, but Dame Hester felt certain that pulses quickened and hormones raced whenever the slit allowed a glimpse of the lank member.

Sir Regis Glaxen's occasion was, as usual, notable for the perfect verdure of his trees and flowers, the sweep of his lawns, the opulence of the buffet and the *éclat* of his guests. Dame Hester's standards, however, were extraordinarily rigid. As she entered the garden, she halted and appraised the company with a darting sweep of her sharp black eyes. It was, so she decided, a mixed bag, and included a number of persons

with whom she was not prepared to associate. Meanwhile, the persons whom she especially wished to see were not in evidence. Restraining her annoyance, she allowed Dauncy Covarth to lead her to a table at the side of the lawn, in the shade of a great flowering hyssop tree. Dauncy seated her with punctilious gallantry. Myron thought the display, which had included a clicking of the heels, somewhat excessive, but Dame Hester accepted the attention with complacence. A waiter approached and Dauncy, with an air of wise expertise, ordered Pongola Punch for all.

Sir Regis Glaxen appeared: a round-faced gentleman of middle age, plump, pink and cheerful. He bent and kissed Dame Hester's cheek. "You'll find this very strange," he told her. "I could not see your face because that hyssop branch hung in the way. What I saw was a lovely yellow leg, and instantly I said to myself: 'Dear me! Surely I recognize that leg! It is the property of Hester Lajoie, the most ravishing of women!' The yellow leg told me all I needed to know. In my haste to join you, I tripped over a petunia, but suffered nothing and here I am."

"Ah, flattery!" cried Dame Hester. "I like to hear it, even when it's a transparent lie. I never want it to stop."

"This is an enchanted garden, where nothing begins and nothing ends," declared Sir Regis stoutly. "Eschatology is a dangerous lore!"

Dame Hester knit her brows. "I scarcely know how to spell the word, let alone comment upon its vagaries."

Sir Regis seated himself. "There is no past and no future; only the twinkling flicker of an instant which is the present. Tell me this, my dear Hester! Have you ever thought to measure the exact duration of that instant? I have tried, but

I know less now than ever. Is it a tenth of a second? A full second? Or the hundredth part of a second? The more you ponder, the more confused you become. The idea is diaphanous, and cannot be grasped!"

"Yes, all very interesting. I will think about it, or perhaps I shall have Myron do a calculation. Meanwhile, you may tell me who will be on hand today."

Sir Regis looked with rueful skepticism around the garden. "I'm not sure that I know. Sometimes I think I am entertaining half the riff-raff of Salou Sain, none of whom I have invited. Still, they are often quite amusing, and they drink my best wines with truly flattering gusto."

"You mentioned that you were inviting a certain publisher in whom I had an interest."

"So I did. You refer, I believe, to Jonas Chay, who—with a straight face, mind you—disseminates the *Vegetarian Herald*."

Dame Hester spoke with dignity: "I prefer to associate him with *Innovative Salubrity*, which is a more serious work."

"It may well be. Still, I fear I cannot supply Jonas Chay, who apparently has better things to do." Sir Regis looked around the garden and pointed. "Notice that tall gentleman yonder with the face of a herring. That is Chay's assistant editor; will he serve as an acceptable substitute?"

Dame Hester surveyed the gentleman in question, who wore a black suit, a brown cravat and long pointed yellow-brown shoes.

"He may be more debonair than he looks," said Dame Hester. "I would be pleased if you would introduce him to me."

Sir Regis dutifully went off and brought back the tall gentleman. "This is Ostvold Socroy, who assists Jonas Chay with *Innovative Salubrity*; and here Dame Hester Lajoie, one of

my favorite bon vivants and the new proprietress of a fine space-yacht, the *Głodwyn*.”

“I am pleased to meet you,” said Dame Hester. “Sit down, if you please, and tell me about yourself.”

Ostvold Socroy complied with the request. “There is little to tell. I work in the realm of ideas. I think, I judge, I communicate, I redirect.”

Dame Hester listened patiently, making an occasional comment, smiling graciously from time to time, even though there was little about Socroy to charm her. He was thin and bony, with a long pale face, a black beard, and a high forehead. Dame Hester might have forgiven him his appearance, had it not been for his manner, which was smilingly tolerant, as if he found Dame Hester’s foibles amusing but of no great interest. She was further prejudiced by his refusal to ingest anything other than herbal tea, which protected him from the antics induced by strong drink.

Socroy said at last, “But surely that is enough of me and my concerns. Tell me something about your space-yacht!”

“There is little to tell,” said Dame Hester politely. “It is a new acquisition.”

“That is truly exciting!” declared Socroy. “I’m sure that you are enthralled by the possibilities which are now open to you?”

Dame Hester spoke in a reedy voice. “I am not the intrepid spacefarer you assume me to be. For a fact, I have seen the vessel only once. I am told that it is quite sturdy. The hull is nicely enamelled in pleasing colors. The internal appointments appear to be comfortable. My friends want me to undertake a cruise, but my social calendar will not permit it. Still, perhaps someday—who knows?”

Ostvold Socroy laughed graciously. "When that time comes, I hope that you will consider placing me on your guest list. I know several card tricks and I play chansons on the lute. I fancy that I can make myself both amusing and entertaining."

"That is good to know," said Dame Hester. "I will make a memorandum of what you have told me." Dame Hester brought a slip of paper from her hand pouch and wrote upon it. "I suppose you can always be reached at your offices."

"Of course! Call me any time you like!"

Dame Hester nodded. "What with your knowledge of the publishing business, you should make a valuable addition to such a cruise. I suppose that you determine which articles appear in, let us say, *Innovative Salubrity*?"

"Well yes, to a certain extent."

"Did you arrange for the two articles on the subject of re-vitalization?"

"Oh indeed! In fact, I wrote the first article myself, to serve as an introduction to the second, more circumstantial, piece."

"Ah yes; most amusing and well-balanced. What of the second article? I am rather curious about this 'Serena'. I suppose you came to know her well?"

Socroy pursed his lips. "Not really. Jonas Chay was principally involved with her."

"But you must have formed some opinion as to her integrity?"

Socroy gave an uncomfortable shrug. "Not really. It was not suggested that I do so."

"She is a local woman, I believe. It's quite possible that I know her. In strict confidence, what is her name?"

Socroy gave a tolerant laugh. "You must ask me something else, my dear lady. We never divulge such a fact; it is against our rules."

Dame Hester nodded slowly. "I see." She took up the memorandum on which she had noted Socroy's name and looked at it thoughtfully. Her nose twitched. With her keen black parrot's eyes, she studied Socroy. He had been watching her intently.

"Naturally I would not want you to betray your trust," said Dame Hester. "Still, there is something you may tell me without straying an iota from your rules, and it will quite satisfy me. Who was the scientist whom the author accompanied on the expedition which resulted in his death?"

Socroy grimaced. He looked down at the memorandum, then back up at Dame Hester. "This particular fact is extraneous to the rules and I can speak without qualm."

Dame Hester gave an approving nod. "Your logic is sound! You are a valuable asset to your company! What was the gentleman's name?"

Socroy looked up into the branches of the hyssop tree, formed his lips into a prim little rosebud, then said, "He was Professor Andrey Ontwill. His work was sponsored by the College of Botanical Sciences at the Institute."

"My curiosity is satisfied," declared Dame Hester. "I have never met Professor Ontwill and probably will never meet his wife. Already I have forgotten our conversation." She picked up the memorandum and carefully tucked it into her handbag.

Socroy spoke casually, "And when do you think you might be going off on a cruise? I ask so that if I were in fact invited, I might arrange for a suitable leave of absence."

Dame Hester nodded. "At the moment I can announce no definite departure date. There are a dozen demands upon my time, and I must simply wait for favorable circumstances."

"Hmm," said Socroy. "The third of Baron Bodissey's 'Ten Succinct Apothegms' is 'sooner' is better than 'later'. My own favorite dictum is: 'Do it now!'"

"All very well," said Dame Hester. "However, a cruise cannot simply be ordained. It must be planned and organized."

Dauncy Covarth leaned forward, smiling in whimsical apology at Dame Hester. "Experience, my dear lady, has taught me a sad truth: time flows in one direction only! As the days pass none of us grows younger. Sometimes we postpone glorious schemes only to discover in the end that they never have materialized! Procrastination is the thief of life!"

Dame Hester, who liked to think of herself as ageless, was not pleased by Dauncy's references to mortality. "So it may be! Still I reject such dismal precepts! I shall maintain my thirst for life and love and every wonderful excitement for an indefinite period—forever, if my élan will carry me so far! I reject all contrary views!"

Ostvold Socroy inclined his head. "The concept does you credit!"

"Thank you," said Dame Hester. She looked up and down the length of the garden. "There is really no one here to interest me. Myron? Dauncy? I am ready to go."

Dauncy sprang to his feet and assisted Dame Hester from her chair. Ostvold Socroy also rose to his feet. He bowed. "I am pleased to have made your acquaintance, and I hope that we shall soon meet again."

"I shall look forward to the occasion," said Dame Hester. Taking Dauncy Covarth's arm she set off across the lawn toward

Sir Regis, who stood by the marble portal welcoming a pair of late-arriving guests. Dame Hester paused and inspected the newcomers. "Dauncy; who are those people?"

Dauncy studied the two, and pulled at his mustache. "I'm afraid I don't know."

Dame Hester muttered, half to herself: "Somewhere I have seen the gentleman. He is quite distinguished, don't you think? The woman, I should say, seems rather dashing. Her gown is not in the best taste."

Myron glanced sidewise at Dame Hester's own carnival attire, but made no comment. The newcomers were apparently persons of consequence. The gentleman was white-haired, tall, erect, with strong decisive features. He seemed considerably older than his companion, whom Myron thought quite attractive. Her age was not immediately obvious; she looked, he thought, both innocent and wise, to intriguing effect. Blonde curls were caught up in a mesh at the back of her head. Her skin, smooth tawny-gold, glowed with health and happy activity outdoors in the sunlight. The white gown which had excited Dame Hester's comment was notable mainly for its simplicity and the manner in which it molded to her elegant figure.

Dame Hester snapped, "Myron, try to control yourself. You are absolutely pawing the ground with your hooves!"

"Sorry."

Dame Hester, having induced contrition in Myron, turned back to the new guests. She mused: "I wonder who they are. The gentleman seems of some consequence; yet, he fawns over her in a most fatuous manner. It is what happens when a pretty girl chances to look twice at an elderly man! I hope, Myron, that when you become senile, you will try to behave with more dignity."

"Absolutely," said Myron. "I would never dream of anything else, unless I thought the chances were good."

Dame Hester only sniffed and said, "Come! Let us find out what is what."

The three proceeded to the portal and halted. Dame Hester said, "Regis, we must be leaving, though your party is most delightful! We thank you very much."

"Charmed that you were able to make an appearance!" declared Sir Regis. "By the way, allow me to present Jonas Chay, who publishes *Innovative Salubrity*, and this is Dame Betka Ontwill, one of his staff writers. This is Dame Hester Lajoie, and Myron Tany and Dauncy Covarth."

"I'm happy to meet you," said Jonas Chay.

"And I as well," said Dame Hester.

4

Dame Hester telephoned Betka Ontwill at her villa on the edge of Angwyn Heath, in the countryside five miles south of Salou Sain. The two appraised each other's images, then Dame Hester said brightly: "Perhaps you will remember me; Regis Glaxen introduced us as you were arriving at his party. I am Hester Lajoie."

"Yes. I remember you well, the lady with the red hair and the yellow stockings."

"Something of the sort," said Dame Hester graciously. "Your own frock, as I recall, was of a very tasteful simplicity, and truly charming."

"Thank you. That is nice to hear, coming from a celebrity."

"A celebrity?" Dame Hester gave a mischievous chuckle. "I wonder why? Could it be—"

Dame Betka said placidly, "Sir Regis mentioned that you own a space-yacht; it must give you a wonderful feeling of freedom."

"Oh, the space-yacht. I suppose you are right. The vessel came to me as part of a legal settlement, so I cannot claim to be a keen space-farer. I called, however, to comment upon your article in Jonas Chay's journal: the piece on revitalization! It is a topic in which I myself am interested."

There was a pause of several seconds. Then Dame Betka said carefully, "I am aware of this article. If you recall, it was signed by a certain 'Serena'. Evidently she wishes to remain anonymous."

"Yes, all this is clear. Nevertheless, I would like you to join me for dinner tomorrow night. I will send my car for you, and I can promise you an excellent meal. Further, the identity of 'Serena' will not be publicized, and your privacy will be assured."

There was another short pause. Then Dame Betka spoke in a voice now cold: "My name is Betka Ontwill; you are making some very shaky and even intrusive assumptions."

"Am I?" Dame Hester chuckled. "If so, and my assumptions are incorrect, the circumstances are even more uncanny than they now appear."

"This is totally preposterous," said Dame Betka. "I have nothing more to say. And now, if you will excuse me—"

"Just a moment. Your husband was Andrey Ontwill. The College of Botany register lists an Andrey Ontwill whose wife, some thirty-five years ago, was Betka Ontwill. Most extraordinary!"

Dame Betka said drily, "Yes; quite."

Dame Hester went on. "You are a striking woman, and you wear your clothes with panache. Your posture is erect, you look strong and capable, and your age is not instantly obvious! Could there be two unrelated Betka Ontwills? Could both Betkas have married scientists named 'Andrey' and gone off on jungle expeditions? Could both husbands be similarly dead? Very strange. Coincidence cannot be carried so far—especially just after a certain 'Serena' has published an article describing her revitalization on the world Kodaira. I am confused—but, even more, I am curious."

Dame Betka's voice was brittle. "You have no right to be curious."

"Incorrect! Your articles put you in the way of public attention and you are now the legitimate object of curiosity."

Dame Betka retorted: "Not when I take pains to use a pseudonym!" She compressed her lips, realizing that she had admitted considerably more than she had intended to this sly old creature.

"Be calm," said Dame Hester. "No matter what I learn, it will not be trumpeted abroad. I want information for my personal use alone. I am entitled to it, and you have no cause for complaint, since you chose to tantalize us with your hints and concealments. You are like a girl who teases a boy into a state of erotic frenzy, then primly cries out: 'How dare you!'"

"That is not what I had in mind. I wrote the article only because Jonas Chay offered me a large sum of money, which I badly needed."

"That is irrelevant. The effect is the same, and I have a right to pursue my inquiries. I am growing no younger, and the time is coming when I must peer behind the veil, so to

speak. I will postpone this moment by all practical means, including those cited by 'Serena'."

Dame Betka laughed without humor. "You are not alone in your yearnings."

"That is as may be! But I am quite alone in being Hester Lajoie! I strike my own personal path through the wilderness of life, and I intend to resist dissolution tooth and nail!"

"Perhaps so, but I have a commitment to secrecy, and I prefer not to discuss the circumstances."

Dame Hester nodded. "Certainly not over the telephone. We will talk tomorrow evening at Sarbiter House."

"I can make no such commitment."

"Come now!" coaxed Dame Hester. "We will enjoy a splendid meal, and you shall taste my best wines! A quiet affair, of course! And then there need be none of the sensation and publicity surrounding the mysterious 'Serena' that there would most certainly be otherwise."

Dame Betka stared grimly at Dame Hester. "Are you trying to blackmail me?"

"Yes," said Dame Hester. "You have fixed upon what is known as the *mot juste*. But it is a relatively painless process, and I will see that you enjoy an excellent dinner."

In a strained voice Dame Betka said, "I see that you lack all compunction."

"Not so! You do me a frightful wrong! I would never serve a Spanzenheimer Hock with devilled ox-tails, nor yet Romany Bull's Blood with whitebait."

"I am encouraged on that score, at least." Dame Betka wavered, torn between conflicting emotions.

"Just so," said Dame Hester confidently. "I will send my car to pick you up at about six."

5

Dame Hester's long black car called for Dame Betka at the hour specified, and transported her to Sarbiter House. She was met by Dame Hester and escorted into the pleasant gray and green drawing room, where the butler served aperitifs, and where they presently were joined by Myron. Dame Hester told him, "As you know, Dame Betka is a veteran of several expeditions to far-off worlds. Unfortunately, her husband was killed on the last of these expeditions." She looked aside at Dame Betka. "Perhaps I am tactless! Does it pain you to talk of the tragedy?"

Dame Betka gave her head a smiling shake. "By this time the pain has drained away. I don't mind telling you what happened. Andrey had ventured a mile into the jungle and was taking samples of sap from an iron tree. A creature called a bottle-bird settled into a cluster of pods at the top of the tree. A twenty-pound pod, mostly iron, fell a hundred feet and killed poor Andrey instantly. I'm sure that he never knew what struck him."

"Not the worst way to go," observed Dame Hester. "Putting aside this terrible event, you have lived a remarkable life, and I'm sure that you have a thousand wonderful memories! Where, for instance, did you go on your last expedition?"

Dame Betka shook her head. "It's not important, and it's something I prefer not to dwell on."

"Of course not!" said Dame Hester.

Myron watched as the ladies went on to discuss other matters in which he took no interest. He fixed his attention upon the agreeable image projected by Dame Betka. Tonight she wore a demure suit of soft blue-gray which went nicely with

her complexion and from which Dame Hester could draw no unfavorable conclusions. Initially Myron had thought of her as an attractive young matron not a great deal older than himself. Her golden curls were tucked up into a bundle at the nape of her neck, with a pair of golden tendrils trailing down at right and left to her shoulders. Her skin was as smooth as still cream, lightly tanned by the light of distant suns. However, without actively searching, Myron began to notice certain small signs which jarred against his first impressions. Her body was something less than youthfully flexible. When the three had walked in to the dining room, Myron, bringing up the rear, observed that the articulation of her hips, knees and ankles seemed rather stiff, so that she walked carefully, without elasticity or bounce. She was definitely a pleasant lady, thought Myron, but not the spring chicken she had originally seemed.

As Dame Hester had promised, dinner was a splendid affair of ten courses and nine wines, indicating that Dame Hester intended to induce in her guest a state of semi-inebriated satiety, to such a degree that the guest would grant Dame Hester whatever favor Dame Hester might suggest. Myron had seen the ploy in action before.

Over dessert Dame Hester begged Dame Betka to describe one of her more interesting expeditions.

Dame Betka smilingly shook her head. "I'm afraid I would bore you. Our work, for the most part, was quite routine: the collecting of samples, the gathering of specimens, the struggle of setting up camp in wild places, which was seldom entertaining, since many of the environments were far from hospitable. Still, we were dedicated to the work and never fretted at hardships. Andrey was a talented scientist and a

fine man; it was a great tragedy to lose him.”

“I’m sure of it!” intoned Dame Hester. “Were you far from civilization when it happened?”

Dame Betka smiled bitterly. “I was not there at all. At the time I was undertaking a course of treatment at a local clinic and a week passed before Andrey’s second in command informed me of the accident.”

“How dreadful! Then what did you do?”

Dame Betka shrugged. “We buried Andrey locally and I continued treatment at the clinic; it would have been pointless to do otherwise.” She turned Dame Hester another smiling glance. “I tell you this because it is all implicit in the article.”

Dame Hester’s mouth twitched, but she made no comment.

“In the end, I gathered our gear and all our records and returned to Vermazen—to rest, and take stock of myself and consider the future, which is what I am doing now. In a way, I’m sorry I wrote that article for Jonas. I think it might well have been an indiscretion, but the fee was hard to refuse, since it allowed me to clear up all our debts.”

Dame Hester seemed to hesitate, then put on a coy smile. “I know you don’t care to talk too much of your treatment—but tell me this. How does one gain admittance to the program at the clinic?”

“I don’t really know. The doctor is capricious, to say the least, and his methods are unusual.”

“Does the clinic take applications?”

Dame Betka began to fidget with the stem of her wine glass. “I don’t think I want to discuss the subject any further.”

“Answer me this, at least: could you recommend new patients to the clinic?”

“No.”

Dame Hester studied Dame Betka with somber calculation. "I am not one to intrude upon another's secrets, so I will ask you no further questions."

"I am glad to hear this," said Dame Betka. "You would only find my responses exasperating."

The dinner party came to an end and Dame Betka was driven back to her home on the Angwyn Heath.

6

The black car had departed, carrying Dame Betka home. Myron started for his room, but Dame Hester called him back. Myron reluctantly dropped into an armchair and waited, while Dame Hester paced back and forth on long bent-kneed strides. She had run her fingers through her mop of roan-red hair to create a disorganized tangle. Finally she halted, and swung around to face Myron. "Well then, what is your opinion?"

Myron looked at her blankly. "As to what?"

"You heard the wretched woman! She is as devious as an oiled snake! She came here intending to tell me nothing; she devoured her dinner with both hands, and when she had gulped down the last of the wine she belched three times for the sake of formality, then departed, leaving me no better informed than before. She gave me smirks, deceit and evasion; surely you must have noticed!"

"I was paying no great attention."

Dame Hester stared down at him. "Sometimes, Myron, you are utterly obtuse! Do you realize that she is older than I?"

Myron shrugged and frowned. "I thought that she might be a bit long in the tooth."

"In this regard, at least, you are correct. She married Andrey Ontwill thirty-five years ago."

"Amazing how she keeps her looks! Do you think that she is the 'Serena' who wrote that article?"

"Of course! She admits as much!"

Myron nodded judiciously. "The therapy seems to have helped her. She looks to be a young woman; at least, that is the semblance she projects."

"What of my own poor semblance?" cried Dame Hester passionately. "Everyone tells me that I radiate an invincible fervor that defies time! I feel within myself the essence of youth; it is inherent in every atom of my being: my bones, my spirit, my deepest yearnings! Dauncy Covarth tells me that I dance through life like a nymph through the eternal spring-time of my own imagination!"

"Dauncy has a silver tongue."

Dame Hester resumed her pacing. After a few moments Myron yawned and rose to his feet. "I think the time has come —"

"Be good enough to sit down," snapped Dame Hester. "When the time comes, I will let you know. Meanwhile, there is more to be said! Whatever the secret, I am entitled to know the truth! Why should I not participate in this miracle? No reason whatever, and I intend to do so!"

Myron sat in uneasy silence, watching Dame Hester stride back and forth.

She halted, turned to face him. "You are a student of Cosmology; now is the time to put this expensive training to practical use. I want you to locate 'Kodaira'."

Myron laughed and drew his fingers through his sleek blond hair. "My dear lady, 'Kodaira' is a fiction! It's a figment

of the woman's mind! It doesn't exist!"

"Nonsense! We've proved only that Dame Betka invented the name 'Kodaira'. I want you to identify and locate this world."

"That is easy to say, but I haven't a clue!"

"You have dozens of clues! Professor Ontwill was a botanist; go to the Institute, learn the facts regarding his last expedition—specifically, his itinerary and where he died. Surely these facts will be on record; am I correct in this regard?"

"Very likely. What happens next?"

Dame Hester gave a laugh of girlish excitement. "Can't you guess, when the *Glodwyn* is at my disposal? I shall attempt a voyage."

Myron was not surprised. "That is not a trivial project."

"Of course not! But in this regard I can rely upon Dauncy Covarth; he is knowledgeable in such matters."

"So am I, so far as that goes."

"That may be so. But your knowledge is theoretical. Dauncy's experience is practical."

"I see."

Dame Hester looked off across the room. She spoke pensively: "You may have noticed that Dauncy and I have been much together recently. I am a bit older than he, but what of that? A remarkable harmony joins our souls; Dauncy tells me that never before has he felt such a unity of purpose! He says that it is altogether inspiring. He brushes aside all considerations of age; he insists that mutual interests and generous hearts are more important than a few brief years."

"A few brief decades, more likely," thought Myron, but did not put the idea into words. He asked tentatively, "Are you making a serious commitment to this fellow?"

Dame Hester gave another gay little trill of laughter. "He is a distinguished gentleman, handsome, and sophisticated. His manners are perfect; he wears his clothes with the ease of a true cosmopolitan. If he makes a proposal, I shall give it serious thought."

Interesting, thought Myron, in view of other information which he had chanced upon.

Myron rose to his feet. "Time I was in bed. Tomorrow I'll look into the Ontwill expeditions."

At dinner of the day following, Dame Hester asked Myron, "Have you made any progress?"

"I'm starting to put the pieces together."

"And you will have definite information?"

"I believe so."

Dame Hester gave a nod of approval. "I have good news, as well! Dauncy has put himself totally at my disposal. He will hire a crew of seasoned professionals, who will work the *Ğlodwyn* with expert competence. The crew will be minimal. We shall carry neither passengers nor dilettantes of any sort. Dauncy will serve as captain and navigator; I will be what Dauncy humorously calls 'the Grand Poo-Bah', with ultimate authority. Dauncy insists upon this arrangement, and together we shall work the ship with spartan efficiency."

"All very well," grumbled Myron, "but I hope that your ban on passengers does not apply to me."

Dame Hester compressed her lips. "My dear Myron, this voyage is not a pleasure trip. It is dedicated to a single goal: therapy for my poor body, which has served me so well, but probably can use a 'minor tune-up', so to speak. Dauncy and I are agreed that there shall be no deviation from the rule."

Myron said, "Still and all, there must be some sort of slot

into which I can fit! I am neither physically nor mentally deficient.”

Dame Hester laughed. “Quite true! You are a nice-looking lad and you are trained in the field of cosmological studies. Still, the matter rests with Dauncy, who is assembling the crew.”

Footsteps approached the drawing room; Dame Hester turned her head to listen. “He is arriving at this moment. Take him aside and put your case to him.”

“I shall do so at once.” Myron left the room and accosted Dauncy Covarth in the foyer. “I understand that you are hiring a crew for the *Ġlodwyn*.”

Dauncy paused in the act of hanging up his cloak, and glanced down at Myron, fine military mustache bristling. “That is so.”

“Dame Hester tells me that if I want a place aboard I must apply to you. I’m sure you know that I have specialized in Cosmological Studies at the Institute.”

Dauncy smilingly shook his head. “It’s no good, my dear fellow. I’ve already filled all the billets with qualified personnel, and there is simply no place open. Sorry and all that, but that’s how it is.”

Dame Hester had come to stand in the doorway. Dauncy looked over his shoulder. “So there you are, my dear. I have just explained to Myron that the *Ġlodwyn* is fully staffed, with experienced personnel.” He turned back to Myron. “We think of this trip as a working expedition and are not prepared to entertain passengers.”

Dame Hester spoke kindly to Myron, “Perhaps another time, on a less serious voyage.”

“Quite so,” said Myron. “The world goes on.”

Dame Hester appraised Myron keenly. "You are nonchalant. I hope that you are still looking into that Ontwill matter."

"Yes, of course. I've already collected most of the significant information. As a matter of fact, I've been caught up in a fascinating side issue."

"Truly, Myron, I am not interested in side issues. Please, at this moment, let me have a summary of what you have learned."

"Not just yet. One or two of the facts are still uncertain." Myron turned toward the door.

Dame Hester called out sharply: "Where are you going?"

Myron made a vague gesture. "Oh—just here and there. Nowhere in particular."

Myron departed Sarbiter house, leaving Dame Hester frowning after him. "Myron is acting strangely," she told Dauncy. "Have you noticed?"

Dauncy gave a brusque laugh. "I am barely aware of Myron. No doubt he is a nice lad, but I find him just a bit of a milk-sop."

"Hm. I'm not so sure. Myron mystifies me. He often seems insipid and rather moony, but he is demonstrably intelligent."

"Perhaps so." Dauncy dismissed Myron from his attention. "The news is good. The crew has been engaged: a top-notch set of veterans. In two or three days they will be on hand and ready to go."

"I will want to meet them, as soon as possible. Can you bring them here, to Sarbiter House?"

"Of course; I will make the arrangements and let you know."

"That will do very nicely."

Two days passed during which Myron avoided Sarbiter House, and Dame Hester began to fret. This sort of evasiveness was really too bad of Myron! He knew how urgently she required full information, if only to soothe her restlessness. It was wicked for him to keep her on tenterhooks while he went his way, flighty as a will-o'-the-wisp. Providence be thanked for Dauncy Covarth, who was a safe harbor in a storm. He was stalwart and bold, a true gentleman, oblivious to the difference in their ages. Dauncy used a keen sensitivity to plumb to the inner essence of a person: that spirit which yearned for true understanding as well as the transports of more immediate joys! Dauncy was a jewel, a treasure, a rock of faith! In Dauncy she could and would trust.

7

The two days passed. On the morning of the third day Myron telephoned Sarbiter House. Dame Hester could hardly speak for vexation. "Well, Myron?" she managed to say. "You have kept us agog with suspense! Important events are in progress, while you keep me in a vacuum of information! Where are you? I must speak with you at once, since tonight I will meet the full *Głodwyn* crew. If I cannot so much as hint of our destination I will feel a fool."

"Oh, don't worry on that account! The destination exists; in fact, I've had the information well in hand for some time now."

Dame Hester's voice cracked as she tried to speak evenly. "Then why have you not done your duty and brought this information to me?"

"Today we will meet for lunch and everything will become clear."

"Stuff and nonsense!" barked Dame Hester. "At this moment, if you please, I want to hear what you have learned!"

"Sorry; there is no time just now. Do you know Floiry Place, north of the Old Market?"

Dame Hester pulled a haughty face. "It is not a part of town I like to visit."

"Today you must make an exception. I will meet you at noon precisely, under the Banjer Tower clock."

Dame Hester made an energetic protest. "This is a great nuisance! I cannot imagine your motives!"

"I will explain in detail when I meet you."

"Myron, please don't be tiresome! It is an unsavoury district, which I prefer to avoid! Why do you insist upon such foolishness?"

"It's quite simple. I have reserved a table at a nearby restaurant."

"Very well; as you like. Please be prompt."

Myron arrived at the rendezvous ten minutes early to find Dame Hester already on hand, pacing back and forth under the clock. For the occasion she had selected one of her more striking ensembles: a green cape, flaring wide at the hips; voluminous pantaloons striped green blue and black, tucked into ankle boots of magenta leather. A hat of silver mesh controlled her mop of roan-red hair and anchored a tall green plume which bobbed and waved as she marched back and forth. At Myron's approach, she stopped short and greeted him with a raucous cry: "There you are, at last! Do you know how long I have waited?"

"Not long. It is still five minutes short of the hour."

"No matter! It's all an absurdity. This is a disreputable neighborhood. I see no restaurant of quality! I see a Theater of the Nude; I see a dog-barber; yonder is a shop selling exotic herbs and vegetarian pellets. And what is that place yonder?"

"That is the Club Kit-Kat, a cellar cabaret. It is quite fashionable among the avant-garde. But come; they will not hold our table forever."

Myron escorted Dame Hester across Floiry Place and into a narrow lane which led down to the riverside docks. Dame Hester complained at once. "Where are you taking me? I do not care for ultra quaint! or even squalid establishments."

Myron pointed to an overhead sign, which read:

Zamski's Bohemian Grill.

"That is our destination. It is quite a decent place, though the clientele includes a variety of unconventional types, like yourself."

Dame Hester was pleased by Myron's description of herself. "Well, yes," she conceded. "I cannot deny my occasional recklessness. I am a woman who loves life! I suppose that a few old woohaws consider me unconventional. In a sense, it is a compliment! I fear that you, with your almost morbid rectitude, will never qualify."

Myron shrugged. "It is a matter of preference."

The two entered the restaurant and found themselves in a noisy dining room, high-ceilinged and decorated with theatrical posters. A waiter led them out upon an open terrace overlooking the river Chaim, and seated them at a table to the side, in the shade of a lucanthus tree. Myron glanced across the terrace and noted that a table beside the railing was oc-

cupied as usual by a couple taking an early lunch.

In general, Dame Hester was favorably impressed by what she saw. The tables were spread with gay cloths checked either red, green or blue, and fresh flowers appeared on every table. Grudgingly she admitted that the restaurant seemed, at least superficially, attractive. "Still, why are we sitting over here, crammed into a corner under a plant? Are no other tables available? Remember: I am a creature of the sun! I crave light and air and open space! Surely you must know my foibles by this time!"

"This table is the best I could get on short notice. The others are reserved for regulars. Are you hungry? Here is the menu. The devilled mandrake is a house specialty. The goulash is quite good, as is the stuffed cuttlefish."

Dame Hester tossed the menu aside. "I shall have a salad, poached eel and a bit of toast. You may order a flagon of good wine."

The waiter took their orders. Myron looked across the terrace, to the table by the railing, where the man and woman were finishing their lunch.

"Now then," said Dame Hester. "My patience has run its course! Tell me what you have learned of the Ontwill expedition."

"Very well. I visited the botanical library and looked through the records. I read the proposal for Professor Ontwill's final expedition, which detailed his itinerary and his destination. I saw the report describing how he had met his death. He had been killed when a twenty-pound iron-wood pod dropped from a height of a hundred feet to crush his skull."

Myron again glanced across the terrace. The man and the

woman, now drinking tea, were still engrossed in conversation. The man's back was turned and his face could not be seen. The woman was somewhat older than Myron. She wore a dark gray jacket buttoned close up to her neck with tight trousers of a soft rose-pink stuff which clung to her slender legs. Fine tawny-brown hair hung past delicate features; dark eyelashes hooded her eyes. She sat relaxed and languid in the sunlight, her mouth curving in a smile, as if every aspect of life were happy and amusing. The man reached forward, took her hands and made an earnest remark. The woman tilted back her head and laughed; apparently the world had become more amusing than ever.

Dame Hester said, "Please continue, Myron. You need not draw out your story for dramatic effect."

"As you like. Professor Ontwill died on the world Naharius in Virgo GGP 922; Dame Betka seems to have undertaken her therapy at a local clinic."

"Hmf. That is circumstantial enough. What keeps attracting your attention?" Dame Hester looked over her shoulder and followed Myron's gaze. The man at the table across the terrace raised the woman's hand to his lips and kissed her fingers with tender emotion. The woman bent her head forward and spoke a few words. The man sighed and glanced at his watch; it was time to leave. He bent his head and gave her wrist a playful little nip. The woman laughed, jerked away her arm, fluttered her napkin in his face. He seized her hand, began to gnaw at the knuckles. She jumped to her feet, dropped the napkin and the game was over; regretfully he joined her and the two slowly threaded their way through the tables. Now it could be seen that the man, his mustache bristling, his face complacent, was Dauncy Covarth.

Dame Hester made an inarticulate sound, half-gasp, half-croak. Her jaw sagged. She tried to call out, but she had lost her power of speech. The words, catching in her throat, seemed almost to strangle her.

Dauncy Covarth and the woman departed the terrace.

Dame Hester at last said, "That was Dauncy! Go after him; bring him back here!"

Myron shook his head. "That would not be tactful. Dauncy and his friend are busy with their private affairs."

"Go after them!" croaked Dame Hester. "Find out the name of that woman!"

"No need," said Myron. "Her name is Vita Palas; at least, that is the name she uses when she performs at the cabaret. I refer to the Club Kit-Kat, of course, out on the Place Floiry. The cabaret, incidentally, is where Dauncy met the lady, while acting in the comic burlesque: 'Captain Dog's-body and the Pirate Queen'. This perhaps is where Dauncy learned to be a spaceship captain."

Dame Hester glared at Myron. "How long have you known of this travesty? Is this why you brought me here?"

Myron thought a moment. "I have another explanation which I would rather have you believe."

"And what is that?"

"Since Dauncy and his ladyfriend were coming here day after day, I assumed that it must be a restaurant of quality which you would enjoy."

"Yes, the visit here was most enjoyable," said Dame Hester savagely. "Are you ready to go?"

"Not yet. I have not finished my pickerel, and I have ordered rum pudding for us both."

"Never mind your pickerel! Tonight Dauncy will bring the

ship's crew to Sarbiter House. I want you on hand, in the event that he feigns innocence. Never before has my trust been so abused! He is a monster of perfidy!"

8

Myron and Dame Hester took an early dinner in an alcove beside a tall window overlooking the landscape to the west, where a bank of low clouds reflected a dozen somber colors from the setting sun, including the opalescent greens and blues which were peculiar to the world Vermazen and for which the meteorologists had no explanation.

The meal was consumed in silence. Dame Hester trifled with a peach and a truffled sausage, and stared out the window to watch dusk drift across the land. Myron dined more substantially on mixed grill and a risotto of pine nuts and saffron.

Dame Hester waved away dessert and sat with hands clenching her tea-cup, while Myron stolidly partook of apricot tart. Beyond the window, the sky grew dark and the constellation known locally as the Unicorn rose in the east.

Dame Hester threw down her napkin. "Come. In ten minutes we will meet the *Glodwyn's* crew, along with that Covarth person."

But she hesitated before rising.

"I feel no shame. He is a personable fellow and quite persuasive. He will be rife with abject explanations, of course. But I see him now for what he is: a poseur with a blatant mustache. Still, what of me? If he is truly abject and truly penitent, how can I not forgive him? I am sorry to say that I

am as naive as a schoolgirl who never learned to say 'no'. Ah well, we shall see. I am intensely vulnerable to honest shame. I find it easy to blame, but even more easy to forgive. At heart, I am pure woman, generous and chronically susceptible to a kindly gesture. And yet, and yet: how could he waste a single instant on that vacuous trollop when he could share the rich intimacy of soul and spirit with me, Hester Lajoie? It is beyond comprehension!"

Myron put on a dubious expression. He started to speak, but changed his mind.

Dame Hester, despite her distraught condition, was as keenly observant as ever. "You were about to speak, Myron? I am curious to learn your views."

Myron raised his eyebrows and looked toward the ceiling. "I was about to say that your instincts will guide you through this jungle of emotion."

"Bah!" muttered Dame Hester. "I can never take comfort in your ambiguities." She rose to her feet. "You may wait in the drawing room, if you please. I will join you shortly, after I refresh myself." She paused. "Dauncy and the crew will arrive in a few moments. Ask Henry to serve them what they wish to drink. I must have a moment or two of tranquility."

Myron went pensively to the drawing room. He poured himself a tot of the best Frugola Brandy, then went to stand by the fire.

Five minutes passed. Henry appeared in the doorway. He spoke formally, with only a nasal overtone to hide his distaste for the proceedings. "Master Covarth has arrived with a party of friends. He says they are expected."

"It can't be helped. Show them in, then serve them what they want to drink—from the ordinary bottles, of course."

“Of course, sir.”

Dauncy entered the drawing room, followed by six persons, all dressed in the casual garments used by spacemen from one end of the Gaeon Reach to the other. Dauncy, however, wore the uniform affected by the officers of luxury passenger packets: a trim dark blue jacket, with brass buttons, gray trousers and a loose white cap. He looked around the room. “Where is Dame Hester?”

“She will be with us presently. Henry will serve you whatever you would like to drink.”

Henry fulfilled the orders. Dauncy said to Myron, “Here is the crew: a top-notch group. Yonder stands the Chief Mate, beside him the Chief Engineer, then the chef and the Chief Steward, along with a pair of technicians and pair of under-stewards. More than adequate for the *Ġlodwyn*, or so I believe.”

Myron politely acknowledged the introductions. He spoke to the crew: “Dame Hester will want to examine your references. You carry them with you, I hope?”

Dauncy spoke with asperity: “You need not concern yourself. I have taken care of every detail.”

Myron chuckled and Dauncy glanced at him narrowly, but before he could speak, Myron turned away to pour himself more brandy.

Minutes passed. Dame Hester at last appeared. She had changed into a short-sleeved dark red jacket over a swirling gown, striped yellow, red and black, with a dark red bandeau controlling her hair.

Dauncy stepped forward and gallantly doffed his cap. “Ah, my dear lady, you appear at last; you are absolutely stunning in that marvellous dress!”

Dame Hester stood rigid as a post, looking from face to face. She darted a glance toward Myron, who merely made a wry grimace.

Dauncy spoke on. "Here is our crew: all professionals of the highest competence. Let me introduce Chief Mate Atwyn and Chief Engineer Furth. Alois deGrassi our chef and beside him is our Chief Steward Vita Palas. Next—"

Dame Hester spoke in a low voice thick with emotion. "Dauncy, I cannot find words to express my feelings. You are a horrid insect which hides by day under a damp rock. You have attempted to smuggle your trollop aboard my ship, under my very nose. The act is so sublimely insulting as to cause me first to laugh, then to retch! You are so vile that you pollute the air with the stink of your miserable soul!"

Dauncy pretended bewilderment. "I fail to understand this—"

"Silence!" Dame Hester turned to appraise Vita Palas, who had dressed with scrupulous care in a demure gray skirt, a tan jacket, low workshoes and a small white cap under which she had tucked her fine light brown hair. "I consider you a contemptible sneak, with the morals of an alley cat. You may or may not be a prostitute; I can only suspect."

"Now then!" cried Vita Palas. "Don't you go slanging me, you raddled old hussy! I know your kind, all skin and spleen, and wrinkles to wrap over all! Your own morals are sewage, you with your dancing-boys and gigolos! Don't you try slanging me any more, or I'll snatch off your wig and really explain what I think of you! It will not be nice! It will turn your long nose blue!"

Dame Hester turned to Henry. "Expel Dauncy and this slut from the house. If they offer resistance, Myron will deal with

them quite brutally, so I suspect. Am I right, Myron?"

"I suspect that they will go peacefully," said Myron. "While you are at it, discharge the two stewards as well; they are comic dancers at the Kit-Kat Club."

Dauncy signaled to Vita. "Let us leave with our dignity. This woman has obviously gone mad."

"One moment!" cried Dame Hester brassily. "I want you to take note of this." She turned to Myron. "I believe that you are trained in Cosmology, and know the Gaean Reach from end to end?"

"That is for the most part true," said Myron.

"And you are capable of navigating the *Glodwyn*?"

"Certainly, so long as the autopilot works properly."

"Good," said Dame Hester crisply. "I now appoint you captain of the *Glodwyn*. You will make all necessary preparations for the voyage." She swung around once more to confront Dauncy. "Now, you ingrate and traitor, what do you think of that?"

Dauncy pulled at his mustache. "As before, I think you are a silly old woman."

"Henry! Eject these people!"

"This way, if you please," said Henry.

"What of us?" demanded the Chief Engineer. "That Dauncy fellow hired us from the list at the space terminal."

"You may leave your addresses and telephone directions with Henry; also your references, if you care to leave these documents overnight. I will look them over tomorrow. That is all for now."

The spacemen departed; Dame Hester and Myron were alone in the room.

"Now then, Myron," said Dame Hester, "I have a statement

to make. Your function is to manage the *Glodwyn* so that I am happy, secure and comfortable. I wish to enjoy the voyage.”

“I hope that this will be the case,” said Myron guardedly.

“Very well. Now then, as captain, you are a symbol of authority. You are not to slouch about, or peek through doorways. Therefore, cultivate a proper bearing! Throw your shoulders back! Speak in a resonant voice! Further, you must make decisions on your own; I do not want to be pestered by problems or complaints. You are captain; be as firm as necessary. Authority is yours; use it without compromise and without apology. Is all this clear?”

“Oh yes, it is clear enough.”

“Hmm,” said Dame Hester. “You show no signs of elation.”

Myron gave a short laugh. “There will be challenges to the job. I was thinking them over.”

“Hmf,” said Dame Hester. “So long as we reach our destination in a proper fashion, and I am not rendered numb with boredom and apathy along the way, there should be no severe challenges. And, naturally, I wish to return to Sarbiter House in good time and in good health, and—so I hope—revitalized, if not rejuvenated.”

“It will be an interesting voyage,” said Myron.