

The Custodians

by Richard Cowper

There has always been a strong sense of history present in science fiction, not only in the many parallel-world stories but in the firm realization that the past shapes the future. A proper study of history should extend in both directions in time. In this absorbing story Cowper takes us into the past, to an era when we will be in the future. It is strong and deeply moving.

Although the monastery of Hautaire has dominated the Ix valley for more than twelve hundred years, compared with the Jurassic limestone to which it clings, it might have been erected yesterday. Even the megaliths which dot the surrounding hillside predate the abbey by several millennia. But if, geologically speaking, Hautaire is still a newcomer, as a human monument it is already impressively ancient. For the first two centuries following its foundation, it served the faithful as a pilgrims' sanctuary, then, less happily, as a staging post for the Crusaders. By the thirteenth century, it had already known both fat years and lean ones, and it was during one of the latter that, on a cool September afternoon in the year 1272, a grey-bearded, sunburnt man came striding up the white road which wound beside the brawling Ix and hammered on the abbey doors with the butt of his staff.

There were rumors abroad that plague had broken out again in the southern ports, and the eye which scrutinized the lone traveler through the grille was alert with apprehension. In response to a shouted request the man snorted, flung off his cloak, discarded his tattered leather jerkin, and raised his bare arms. Twisting his torso from side to side, he displayed his armpits. There followed a whispered consultation within; then, with a rattle of chains and a protest of iron bolts, the oak wicket gate edged inward grudgingly and the man stepped through.

The monk who had admitted him made haste to secure the door. "We hear there is plague abroad, brother," he muttered by way of explanation.

The man shrugged on his jerkin, looping up the leather toggles with deft fingers. "The only plague in these parts is ignorance," he observed sardonically.

"You have come far, brother?"

"Far enough," grunted the traveler.

"From the south?"

The man slipped his arm through the strap of his satchel, eased it up onto his shoulder and then picked up his staff. He watched as the heavy iron chain was hooked back on to its staple. "From the east," he said.

The doorkeeper preceded his guest across the flagged courtyard and into a small room which was bare except for a heavy wooden trestle table. Lying upon it was a huge, leather-bound *registrum*, a stone ink pot and a quill pen. The monk frowned, licked his lips, picked up the quill and prodded it gingerly at the ink.

The man smiled faintly. "By your leave, brother," he murmured, and, taking the dipped quill, he wrote in rapid, flowing script: *Meister Sternwärts—Seher—ex-Cathay*.

The monk peered down at the ledger, his lips moving silently as he spelt his way laboriously through the entry. By the time he was halfway through the second word, a dark flush had crept up his neck and suffused his whole face. "Mea culpa, Magister," he muttered.

"So you've heard of Meister Sternwärts, have you, brother? And what have you heard, I wonder?"

In a rapid reflex action the simple monk sketched a flickering finger-cross in the air.

The man laughed. "Come, holy fool!" he cried, whacking the doorkeeper across the buttocks with his stick. "Conduct me to Abbé Paulus, lest I conjure you into a salamander!"

* * *

In the seven hundred years which had passed since Meister Sternwärts strode up the long white road and requested audience with the Abbé Paulus, the scene from the southern windows of the monastery had changed surprisingly little. Over the seaward slopes of the distant hills, purple-ripe clouds were still lowering their showers of rain like filmy nets, and high above the Ix valley the brown and white eagles spiraled lazily upwards in an invisible funnel of warm air that had risen there like a fountain every sunny day since the hills were first folded millions of years before. Even the road which Sternwärts had trodden, though better surfaced, still followed much the same path, and if a few of the riverside fields had expanded and swallowed up their immediate neighbors, the pattern of the stone walls was still recognizably what it had been for centuries. Only the file of high-tension cable carriers striding diagonally down across the valley on a stage of their march from the hydroelectric barrage in the high mountains thirty miles to the north proclaimed that this was the twentieth century.

Gazing down the valley from the library window of Hautaire, Spindrift saw the tiny distant figure trudging up the long slope, saw the sunlight glittering from blond hair as though from a fleck of gold dust, and found himself recalling the teams of men with their white helmets and their clattering machine who had come to erect those giant pylons. He remembered how the brothers had discussed the brash invasion of their privacy and had all agreed that things would never be the same again. Yet the fact remained that within a few short months they had grown accustomed to the novelty, and now Spindrift was no longer sure that he could remember exactly what the valley had looked like before the coming of the pylons. Which was odd, he reflected, because he recalled very clearly the first time he had set eyes upon Hautaire, and there had certainly been no pylons then.

May, 1923, it had been. He had bicycled up from the coast with his scanty possessions stuffed into a pair of basketwork panniers slung from his carrier. For the previous six months he had been gathering scraps of material for a projected doctoral thesis on the life and works of the shadowy "Meister Sternwärts" and had written to the abbot of Hautaire on the remote off-chance that some record of a possible visit by the Meister might still survive in the monastery archives. He explained that he had some reason to believe that Sternwärts might have visited Hautaire but that his evidence for this was, admittedly, of the slenderest kind, being based as it was on a single cryptic reference in a letter dated 1274, sent by the Meister to a friend in Basel.

Spindrift's enquiry had eventually been answered by a certain Fr. Roderigo, who explained that, since he was custodian of the monastery library, the Abbé Ferrand had accordingly passed M. Spindrift's letter on to him. He was, he continued, profoundly intrigued by M. Spindrift's enquiry, because in all the years he had been in charge of the abbey library, no one had ever expressed the remotest interest in Meister Sternwärts; in fact, to the best of his knowledge, he, Fr. Roderigo, and the Abbé Ferrand were the only two men now alive who knew that the Meister had spent his last years as an honored guest of the thirteenth-century abbey and had, in all probability, worked in that very library in which his letter was now being written. He concluded with the warm assurance that any such information concerning the Meister as he himself had acquired over the years was at M. Spindrift's disposal.

Spindrift had hardly been able to believe his good fortune. Only the most fantastic chance had led to his turning up that letter in Basel in the first place—the lone survivor of a correspondence which had ended in

the incinerators of the Inquisition. Now there seemed to be a real chance that the slender corpus of the Meister's surviving works might be expanded beyond the gnomic apothegms of the *Illuminatum!* He had written back by return of post suggesting diffidently that he might perhaps be permitted to visit the monastery in person and give himself the inestimable pleasure of conversing with Fr. Roderigo. An invitation had come winging back, urging him to spend as long as he wished as a lay guest of the order.

If, in those far-off days, you had asked Marcus Spindrift what he believed in, the one concept he would certainly never have offered you would have been predestination. He had survived the war to emerge as a junior lieutenant in the Supply Corps and, on demobilization, had lost no time in returning to his first love, medieval philosophy. The mindless carnage which he had witnessed from the sidelines had done much to reinforce his interest in the works of the early Christian mystics, with particular reference to the *bans hommes* of the Albigensian heresy. His stumbling across an ancient handwritten transcript of Sternwärt's *Illuminatum* in the shell-shattered ruins of a presbytery in Armentières in April, 1918, had, for Spindrift, all the impact of a genuine spiritual revelation. Some tantalizing quality in the Meister's thought had called out to him across the gulf of the centuries, and there and then he had determined that if he was fortunate enough to emerge intact from the holocaust, he would make it his life's work to give form and substance to the shadowy presence which he sensed lurking behind the *Illuminatum* like the smile on the lips of the Gioconda.

Nevertheless, prior to his receiving Fr. Roderigo's letter, Spindrift would have been the first to admit that his quest for some irrefutable evidence that the Meister had ever really existed had reaped but one tiny grain of putative "fact" amid untold bushels of frustration. Apparently, not only had no one ever *heard* of Sternwärts; no one had expressed the slightest interest in whether he had ever existed at all. Indeed, as door after door closed in his face, Spindrift found himself coming to the depressing conclusion that the Weimar Republic had more than a little in common with the Dark Ages.

Yet, paradoxically, as one faint lead after another petered out or dissolved in the misty backwaters of medieval hearsay, Spindrift had found himself becoming more and more convinced not only that Sternwärts *had* existed, but that he himself had, in some mysterious fashion, been selected to prove it. The night before he set out on the last lap of his journey to Hautaire, he had lain awake in his ex-army sleeping bag and had found himself reviewing in his mind the odd chain of coincidences that had brought him to that particular place at that particular time: the initial stumbling upon the *Illuminatum*; the discovery of the cryptic reference coupling Sternwärts with Johannes of Basel; and, most fantastic of all, his happening to alight in Basel upon that one vital letter to Johannes which had been included as a cover-stiffener to a bound-up collection of addresses by the arch-heretic Michael Servetus. At every critical point it was as though he had received the precise nudge which alone could put him back on the trail again. "Old Meister," he murmured aloud, "am I seeking *you*, or are you seeking *me*?" High overhead, a plummeting meteorite scratched a diamond line down the star-frosted window of the sky. Spindrift smiled wryly and settled down to sleep.

At noon precisely the next day, he pedaled wearily round the bend in the lower road and was rewarded with his first glimpse of the distant abbey. With a thankful sigh he dismounted, leaned, panting, over his handlebars and peered up the valley. What he saw was destined to remain just as sharp and clear in his mind's eye until the day he died.

Starkly shadowed by the midday sun, its once red-tiled roofs long since bleached to a pale biscuit and rippling in the heat haze, Hautaire, despite its formidable mass, seemed oddly insubstantial. Behind it, tier upon tier, the mountains rose up faint and blue into the cloudless northern sky. As he gazed up at the abbey, Spindrift conceived the peculiar notion that the structure was simply tethered to the rocks like some strange airship built of stone. It was twisted oddly askew, and some of the buttresses supporting the Romanesque cupola seemed to have been stuck on almost as afterthoughts. He blinked his eyes, and

the quirk of vision passed. The massive pile re-emerged as solid and unified as any edifice which has successfully stood foursquare-on to the elements for over a thousand years. Fumbling a handkerchief from his pocket, Spindrift mopped the sweat from his forehead; then, remounting his bicycle, he pushed off on the last lap of his journey.

Fifteen minutes later, as he wheeled his machine up the final steep incline, a little birdlike monk clad in a faded brown habit fluttered out from the shadows of the portico and scurried with arms outstretched in welcome to the perspiring cyclist. "Welcome, Señor Spindrift!" he cried. "I have been expecting you this half hour past."

Spindrift was still somewhat dizzy from his hot and dusty ride, but he was perfectly well aware that he had not specified any particular day for his arrival, if only because he had no means of knowing how long the journey from Switzerland would take him. He smiled and shook the proffered hand. "Brother Roderigo?"

"Of course, of course," chuckled the little monk, and glancing down at Spindrift's bicycle, he observed, "So they managed to repair your wheel."

Spindrift blinked. "Why, yes," he said. "But how on earth . . . ?"

"Ah, but you must be so hot and tired, Señor! Come into Hautaire where it is cool." Seizing hold of Spindrift's machine, he trundled it briskly across the courtyard, through an archway, down a stone-flagged passage and propped it finally against a cloister wall.

Spindrift, following a pace or two behind, gazed about him curiously. In the past six months he had visited many ecclesiastical establishments, but none which had given him the overwhelming sense of timeless serenity that he recognized here. In the center of the cloister yard clear water was bubbling up into a shallow limestone saucer. As it brimmed over, thin wavering streams tinkled musically into the deep basin beneath. Spindrift walked slowly forward into the fierce sunlight and stared down into the rippled reflection of his dusty, sweat-streaked face. A moment later his image was joined by that of the smiling Fr. Roderigo. "That water comes down from a spring in the hillside," the little monk informed him. "It flows through the very same stone pipes which the Romans first laid. It has never been known to run dry."

A metal cup was standing on the shadowed inner rim of the basin. The monk picked it up, dipped it, and handed it to Spindrift. Spindrift smiled his thanks, raised the vessel to his lips and drank. It seemed to him that he had never tasted anything so delicious in his life. He drained the cup and handed it back, aware as he did so that his companion was nodding his head as though in affirmation. Spindrift smiled quizzically. "Yes," sighed Fr. Roderigo, "you have come. Just as he said you would."

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The sense of acute disorientation which Spindrift had experienced since setting foot in Hautaire persisted throughout the whole of the first week of his stay. For this, Fr. Roderigo was chiefly responsible. In some manner not easy to define, the little monk had succeeded in inducing in his guest the growing conviction that his quest for the elusive Meister Sternwärts had reached its ordained end; that what Spindrift was seeking was hidden here at Hautaire, buried somewhere among the musty manuscripts and incunabula that filled the oak shelves and stone recesses of the abbey library.

True to his promise, the librarian had laid before Spindrift such documentary evidence as he himself had amassed over the years, commencing with that faded entry in the thirteenth-century *registrum*. Together they had peered down at the ghostly script. "Out of Cathay," mused Spindrift. "Could it have been a joke?"

Fr. Roderigo pulled a face. "Perhaps," he said. "But the hand is indisputably the Meister's. Of course, he may simply have wished to mystify the brothers."

"Do you believe that?"

"No," said the monk. "I am sure that what is written there is the truth. Meister Sternwärts had just returned from a pilgrimage in the steps of Apollonius of Tyana. He had lived and studied in the East for ten years." He scuttled across to a distant shelf, lifted down a bound folio volume, blew the dust from it, coughed himself breathless, and then laid the book before Spindrift. "The evidence is all there," he panted with a shy smile. "I bound the sheets together myself some thirty years ago. I remember thinking at the time that it would make a fascinating commentary to Philostratus' *Life of Apollonius*."

Spindrift opened the book and read the brief and firmly penned Prolegomenon. "*Being then in my forty-ninth year, Sound in Mind and Hale in Body, I, Peter Sternwärts, Seeker after Ancient Truths; Alerted by my Friends; Pursued by mine Enemies; did set forth from Würzburg for Old Buda. What here follows is the Truthful History of all that Befell me and of my Strange Sojourn in Far Cathay, written by my own hand in the Abbey of Hautaire in this year of Our Lord 1273.*"

Spindrift looked up from the page, and as he did so, he gave a deep sigh of happiness.

Fr. Roderigo nodded. "I know, my friend," he said. "You do not have to tell me. I shall leave you alone with him."

But Spindrift was already turning the first page.

That evening, at Fr. Roderigo's suggestion, Spindrift strolled with him up onto the hillside above Hautaire. The ascent was a slow one, because every fifty paces or so Fr. Roderigo was constrained to pause awhile to regain his breath. It was then that Spindrift became aware that the friendly little monk was ill. Beneath that quick and ready smile were etched the deep lines of old familiar pain. He suggested gently that perhaps they might just sit where they were, but Fr. Roderigo would not hear of it. "No, no, my dear Spindrift," he insisted breathlessly. "There is something I must show you. Something that has a profound bearing upon our joint quest."

After some twenty minutes they had reached one of the fallen menhirs that formed a sort of gigantic necklace around the abbey. There Fr. Roderigo paused and patted his heaving chest apologetically. "Tell me, Señor," he panted. "What is your candid opinion of Apollonius of Tyana?"

Spindrift spread his hands in a gesture that contrived to be both noncommittal and expiatory. "To tell the truth, I can hardly be said to have an opinion at all," he confessed. "Of course I know that Philostratus made some extraordinary claims on his behalf."

"Apollonius made only one claim for *himself*," said Fr. Roderigo. "But that one was not inconsiderable. He claimed to have foreknowledge of the future."

"Yes?" said Spindrift guardedly.

"The extraordinary accuracy of his predictions led to his falling foul of the Emperor Nero. Apollonius, having already foreseen this, prudently retired to Ephesus before the monster was able to move against him."

Spindrift smiled. "Precognition obviously proved a most useful accomplishment."

"Yes and no," said Fr. Roderigo, ignoring the irony. "Have you reached the passage in the Meister's *Biographia* where he speaks of the Praemonitiones?"

"Do they really exist?"

The little monk seemed on the point of saying something and then appeared to change his mind. "Look," he said, gesturing around him with a sweep of his arm. "You see how Hautaire occupies the exact center of the circle?"

"Why, so it does," observed Spindrift.

"Not fortuitous, I think."

"No?"

"Nor did he," said Fr. Roderigo with a smile. "The Meister spent a whole year plotting the radiants. Somewhere there is a map which he drew."

"Why should he do that?"

"He was seeking to locate an Apollonian nexus."

"Meaning—"

"The concept is meaningless unless one is prepared to accept the possibility of precognition."

"Ah," said Spindrift guardedly. "And did he find what he was looking for?"

"Yes," said Fr. Roderigo simply. "There." He pointed down at the abbey.

"And then what?" enquired Spindrift curiously.

Fr. Roderigo chewed his lower lip and frowned. "He persuaded Abbé Paulus to build him an observatory—an *oculus*, he called it."

"And what did he hope to observe from it?"

"*In* it," corrected Fr. Roderigo with a faint smile. "It had no windows."

"You amaze me," said Spindrift, shaking his head. "Does it still exist?"

"It does."

"I should very much like to see it. Would that be possible?"

"It might," the monk admitted. "We would have to obtain the abbot's permission. However, I—" He broke off, racked by a savage fit of coughing that turned his face grey. Spindrift, much alarmed, patted his companion gently on the back and felt utterly helpless. Eventually the little monk recovered his breath and with a trembling hand wiped a trace of spittle from his blue lips. Spindrift was horrified to see a trace of blood on the white handkerchief. "Hadn't we better be making our way back?" he suggested solicitously.

Fr. Roderigo nodded submissively and allowed Spindrift to take him by the arm and help him down the track. When they were about halfway down, he was overcome by another fit of coughing which left him pale and gasping. Spindrift, now thoroughly alarmed, was all for going to fetch help from the abbey, but the monk would not hear of it. When he had recovered sufficiently to continue, he whispered hoarsely, "I promise I will speak to the abbot about the *oculus*."

Spindrift protested that there was no hurry, but Fr. Roderigo shook his head stubbornly. "Fortunately there *is* still just time, my friend. Just time enough."

* * *

Three days later Fr. Roderigo was dead. After attending the evening Requiem Mass for his friend, Spindrift made his way up to the library and sat there alone for a long time. The day was fast fading and the mistral was beginning to blow along the *Ix* valley. Spindrift could hear it sighing round the buttresses and mourning among the crannies in the crumbling stonework. He thought of Roderigo now lying out on the hillside in his shallow anonymous grave. *The goal ye seek lies within yourself.* He wondered what had inspired the abbot to choose that particular line from the *Illuminatum* for his Requiem text and suspected that he was the only person present who had recognized its origin.

There was a deferential knock at the library door, and a young novice came in carrying a small, metal-bound casket. He set it down on the table before Spindrift, took a key from his pocket and laid it beside the box. "The father superior instructed me to bring these to you, sir," he said. "They were in Brother Roderigo's cell." He bowed his head slightly, turned, and went out, closing the door softly behind him.

Spindrift picked up the key and examined it curiously. It was quite unlike any other he had ever seen, wrought somewhat in the shape of a florid, double-ended question mark. He had no idea how old it was or even what it was made of. It looked like some alloy—pewter, maybe?—but there was no discernible patina of age. He laid it down again and drew the casket towards him. This was about a foot long, nine inches or so wide, and perhaps six inches deep. The oak lid, which was ornately decorated with silver inlay and brass studding, was slightly domed. Spindrift raised the box and shook it gently. He could hear something shifting around inside, bumping softly against the sides. He did not doubt that the strange key unlocked the casket, but when he came to try, he could find no keyhole in which to fit it. He peered underneath. By the trickle of waning light through the western windows he could just discern an incised pentagram and the Roman numerals for 1274.

His pulse quickening perceptibly, he hurried across to the far end of the room and fetched an iron candlestick. Having lit the candle, he set it down beside the box and adjusted it so that its light was shining directly upon the lid. It was then that he noticed that part of the inlaid decoration appeared to correspond to what he had previously assumed to be the handle of the key. He pressed down on the silver inlay with his fingertips and thought he felt it yield ever so slightly.

He retrieved the key, adjusted it so that its pattern completely covered that of the inlay, and then pressed downwards experimentally. There was a faint *click!* and he felt the lid pushing itself upwards against the pressure of his fingers. He let out his pent breath in a faint sigh, detached the key, and eased the lid back on its hinge. Lying within the box was a vellum-covered book and a quill pen.

Spindrift wiped his fingers along his sleeve and, with his heart racing, dipped his hand into the casket and lifted out the book. As the light from the candle slanted across the cover, he was able to make out the faded sepia lettering spelling out the word: *PRAEMONITIONES*, and below it, in a darker ink, the cynical query—*Quis Custodiet Ipsos Custodes?*

Spindrift blinked up into the candlelight. "Who will watch the watchers?" he murmured. "Who, indeed?"

The wind snuffled and whimpered against the now dark window panes, and the vesper bell began to toll in the abbey tower. Spindrift gave a violent, involuntary shiver and turned back the cover of the book.

Someone, perhaps even Peter Sternwarts himself, had stitched onto the flyleaf a sheet of folded parchment. Spindrift carefully unfolded it and peered down upon what, at first glance, seemed to be an

incomprehensible spiderweb of finely drawn lines. He had been staring at it for fully a minute before it dawned on him that the dominant pattern was remarkably similar to that on the lid of the casket and its weirdly shaped key. But there was something else too, something that teased at his recollection, something he knew he had once seen somewhere else. And suddenly he had it: an interlinked, megalithic spiral pattern carved into a rockface near Tintagael in Cornwall; here were exactly those same whorled and coupled S shapes that had once seemed to his youthful imagination like a giant's thumbprints in the granite.

No sooner was the memory isolated than he had associated this graphic labyrinth with the pagan menhirs dotting the hillside round Hautaire. Could *this* be the map Roderigo had mentioned? He held the parchment closer to the quaking candle flame and at once perceived the ring of tiny circles which formed a periphery around the central vortex. From each of these circles faint lines had been scratched across the swirling whirlpool to meet at its center.

Spindrift was now convinced that what he was holding in his hands was some arcane chart of Hautaire itself and its immediate environs, but at the precise point where the abbey itself should have been indicated, something had been written in minute letters. Unfortunately the point happened to coincide with the central cruciform fold in the parchment. Spindrift screwed up his eyes and thought he could just make out the words *tempus* and *pans*—or possibly *fans*—together with a word which might equally well have been *cave* or *carpe*. "Time," "bridge," or perhaps "source." And what else? "Beware"? "Seize"? He shook his head in frustration and gave it up as a bad job. Having carefully refolded the chart, he turned over the flyleaf and began to read.

By the time he had reached the last page, the candle had sunk to a guttering stub, and Spindrift was acutely conscious of an agonizing headache. He lowered his face into his cupped hands and waited for the throbbing behind his eyeballs to subside. To the best of his knowledge, he had been intoxicated only once in his life, and that was on the occasion of his twenty-first birthday. He had not enjoyed the experience. The recollection of how the world had seemed to rock on its foundations had remained one of his most distressing memories. Now he was reminded of it all over again as his mind lurched drunkenly from one frail clutching point to the next. Of course it was a hoax, an extraordinarily elaborate, purposeless hoax. It *had* to be! And yet he feared it was nothing of the sort, that what he had just read was, in truth, nothing less than a medieval prophetic text of such incredible accuracy that it made absolute nonsense of every rationalist philosophy ever conceived by man. Having once read the *Praemonitiones*, one stepped like Alice through the looking glass into a world where only the impossible was possible. But *how*? In God's name *how*?

Spindrift removed his hands from before his eyes, opened the book at random and, by the vestige of light left in the flapping candle flame, read once more how, in the year 1492, Christobal Colon, a Genoese navigator, would bow to the dictates of the sage Chang Heng and would set sail into the west on the day of the Expulsion of the Jews from Spain. He would return the following year, laden with treasure and "companied by those whom he would call Indians but who would in truth be no such people." At which point the candle flared up briefly and went out.

Next morning, Spindrift requested, and was granted, an audience with the abbot. He took with him the wooden casket and the mysterious key. His eyes were red-rimmed and bloodshot, and the dark rings beneath them testified to a sleepless night.

Abbé Ferrand was in his early fifties—a stalwart man with shrewd eyes, ash-grey hair and bushy eyebrows. His upright stance struck Spindrift as having more than a touch of the military about it. He wore the simple brown habit of his order, and only the plain brass crucifix, slung on a beaded leather thong about his neck, distinguished him from the other monks. He smiled as Spindrift entered the study,

then rose from behind his desk and held out his hand. Spindrift, momentarily confused, tucked the casket under his left arm and then shook the proffered hand.

"And how can I be of service to you, M'sieur Spindrift?"

Spindrift took a breath, gripped the casket in both hands and held it out in front of him. "Abbé Ferrand, I . . .," he began, and then dried up.

The corners of the abbot's lips were haunted by the ghost of a smile. "Yes?" he prompted gently.

"Sir," blurted Spindrift, "do you know what's in here?"

"Yes," said the abbot. "I think I do."

"Then why did you send it to me?"

"Brother Roderigo wished me to. It was one of his last requests."

"The book's a forgery, of course. But you must know that."

"You think so, M'sieur?"

"Well, of course I do."

"And what makes you so certain?"

"Why," cried Spindrift, "because it *has* to be!"

"But there have always been prophets, M'sieur Spindrift," returned the abbot mildly. "And they have all prophesied."

Spindrift waved a dismissive hand. "Nostradamus, you mean? Vague ambiguities. Predictions of disaster which could be interpreted to fit any untoward circumstance. But this . . ."

The abbot nodded. "Forgive my asking, M'sieur," he said, "but what was it exactly that brought you to Hautaire?"

Spindrift set the casket down on the desk in front of him and laid the key beside it. As he did so he realized, not for the first time, that the question Abbé Ferrand was posing could have no simple answer. "Principally, I believe, Peter Sternwärts' *Illuminatum*, " he said. "I felt a compulsion to learn all I could about its author."

The abbot appeared to ponder on this reply; then he turned on his sandaled heel, walked over to a wall cupboard, opened it, and drew from within another vellum-covered notebook similar in appearance to that which Spindrift had replaced in the casket. Having closed the cupboard door, the abbot stood for a moment tapping the notebook against his finger ends. Finally he turned back to Spindrift. "I take it you have studied the *Praemonitiones*, M'sieur Spindrift?"

Spindrift nodded.

"Then you will perhaps recall that its forecasts end with the Franco-Prussian war. Unless my memory deceives me, the final entry concerns Bazaine's surrender at Metz in October, 1870; the capitulation of Paris in 1871; and the signing of the treaty at Frankfurt-sur-Main on May 10th of that same year?"

"Yes," said Spindrift, "that is perfectly correct."

The abbot opened the book he was holding, flipped over a few pages, glanced at what was written there, and then said, "Would you say, M'sieur Spindrift, that Europe has at last seen the end of war?"

"Why, certainly," said Spindrift. "The League of Nations has outlawed—"

"On September 1st, 1939," cut in the abbot, "Russia and Germany will, in concert, invade Poland. As a direct consequence of this, Britain and France will declare war on Germany."

"But that's preposterous!" exclaimed Spindrift. "Why, the Versailles Treaty specifically states that under no circumstances is Germany ever again to be allowed to rearm!"

The abbot turned back a page. "In 1924—next year, is it not?—Lenin will die and will be succeeded by"—here he tilted the page to catch the light—"Joseph Vissarionovitch—I think that's right—Stalin. An age of unparalleled tyranny will commence in the so-called Soviet Republic which will continue for fifty-one years." He flicked on. "In 1941 German armies will invade Russia and inflict massive defeats on the Soviet forces." He turned another page. "In July, 1945, the fabric of civilization will be rent asunder by an explosion in an American desert." He shrugged and closed up the book, almost with relief.

"You are surely not asking me to believe that those fantastic predictions are the work of Peter Sternwärts?" Spindrift protested.

"Only indirectly," said the abbot. "Without Meister Sternwärts they would certainly never have come into existence. Nevertheless, he did not write them himself."

"Then who did?"

"These last? Brother Roderigo."

Spindrift just gaped.

The abbot laid the book down on the desk beside the casket and picked up the key. "Before he died," he said, "Brother Roderigo informed me that you had expressed a desire to examine the *oculus*. Is this so?"

"Then it really does exist?"

"Oh, yes. Most certainly it exists. This is the key to it."

"In that case, I would very much like to see it."

"Very well, M'sieur," said the abbot, "I will conduct you there myself. But first I should be intrigued to know what makes you so certain that the *Praemonitiones* is a forgery?"

Spindrift looked down at the casket. The whorled inlay on its lid seemed to spin like a silver Catherine wheel. He dragged his gaze away with difficulty. "Because I have always believed in free will," he said flatly. "To believe in the *Praemonitiones* would be to deny it."

"Oh," said the abbot, "is that all? I thought perhaps you had detected the alteration in the script which takes place at roughly fifty-year intervals. It is admittedly slight, but it cannot be denied."

"The light was not good in the library last night," said Spindrift. "I noticed no marked change in the cursive style of the entries."

The abbot smiled. "Look again, M'sieur Spindrift," he said. "By daylight." He pressed the key into the lock, removed the *Praemonitiones* from the casket and handed it over.

Spindrift leafed through the pages, then paused, turned back a few, nodded, and went on. "Why, yes," he said. "Here in this entry for 1527: 'The Holy City sacked by the armies of the Emperor Charles.' There is a difference. How do you account for it?"

"They were written by different hands," said the abbot. "Though all, I hazard, with that same pen,"

Spindrift reached into the casket, took out the cut-down quill and examined it. As his fingers closed round the yellowed shaft, it seemed to twist ever so slightly between them as though endowed with some strange will of its own. He dropped it back hastily into the box and flushed with annoyance at his own childishness. "If I understand you, Abbé, you are saying that these predictions were made by many different hands over the past seven centuries."

"That is correct. It would appear that the horizon of foresight is generally limited to about fifty years, though in certain cases—notably Sternwärts himself—it reaches a good deal further." The abbot said this in a quiet matter-of-fact tone that Spindrift found distinctly disconcerting. He reached out tentatively for the second book which the abbot had placed on the desk, but, seemingly unaware of Spindrift's intention, the abbot had casually laid his own hand upon it. "Now, if you are ready, M'sieur," he said, "I suggest we might climb up and pay our respects to the *oculus*."

Spindrift nodded.

The abbot smiled and seemed pleased. He placed the two books within the casket and clapped the lid shut. Then he picked up the key, took down another bunch of keys which was hanging from a hook on the wall, and, nodding to Spindrift to follow him, led the way along a cool white corridor, up a flight of stone stairs and along a passage buttressed by slanting sunbeams. They took several turns and climbed yet another flight of stairs. Spindrift glanced out of a window as they passed and observed that they were now almost on a level with the ruin of the prehistoric stone circle. The abbot's leather sandals slapped briskly against the soles of his bare feet and made a noise like a razor being stropped.

At last they reached a small oak door. The abbot paused, selected one of the keys from the bunch, thrust it into the lock and twisted it. The hinges groaned and the door squealed inwards. "This leads to the dome of the rotunda," he explained. "The *oculus* is actually situated within the fabric of the northern wall. It is certainly an architectural curiosity."

Spindrift ducked his head, passed through the doorway, and found himself in a narrow crack of a curved passageway dimly lit by narrow barred slits in the outer stonework. Thick dust lay on the stone floor, which was caked with a crust formed from generations of bird and bat droppings. The floor spiraled upwards at an angle of some ten degrees, and Spindrift calculated that they had made at least one complete circuit of the rotunda before the abbot said, "*Ecce oculus!*"

Peering past the broad shoulder of his guide, Spindrift saw a second door, so narrow that a man could have passed through it only with extreme difficulty. The abbot squeezed himself backwards into a niche and allowed Spindrift to edge around him. Then he handed over the key to the casket, saying as he did so: "You will find that it operates in the normal way, M'sieur."

"Thank you," said Spindrift, taking the key from him and approaching the door. "Is there room for only one person inside?"

"Barely that," said the abbot. "The door opens outwards."

Spindrift inserted the key into the lock and twisted it. The wards grated reluctantly but still allowed the key to turn. Then, using it as a handle, for there was, indeed, no other, he pulled the door gently towards him. A moment later he had started back with a barely suppressed gasp of astonishment. The door had

opened to disclose a sort of lidless limestone coffin, bare and empty, standing on its end, apparently cemented fast into the surrounding masonry. "What on earth is it?" he demanded.

The abbot chuckled. "That is your *oculus*, M'sieur."

Spindrift eyed the coffin uncertainly. "And you say Sternwärts built that?" he enquired dubiously.

"Well, certainly he must have caused it to be built," said the abbot. "Of that there can be little doubt. See there—" He pointed to some lettering carved on the limestone corbel which framed the "head" of the casque—*Sternwärts hoc fecit*. "Not proof positive, I grant you, but goad enough for me." He smiled again. "Well, now you are here, M'sieur Spindrift, are you not tempted to try it?"

Spindrift gazed at the Latin lettering. "Sternwärts made this," he muttered, and, even as he spoke the words aloud, he knew he would have to step inside that stone shell, if only because to refuse to do so would be to deny the noble and courageous spirit of the man who had penned the *Illuminatum*. Yet he could not disguise his reluctance. How dearly at that moment he would have liked to say: "Tomorrow, perhaps, or next week, if it's all the same to you, Abbé." But he knew he would be allowed no second chance. It was now or never. He nodded, drew a deep breath, swallowed once, stepped resolutely forward and edged himself backwards into the cold sarcophagus.

Gently the abbot closed the door upon him and sketched over it a slow and thoughtful sign of the Cross.

* * *

For no particular reason that he was aware of, Spindrift had recently found himself thinking about Fr. Roderigo. Once or twice he had even wandered out into the abbey graveyard and tried to locate the spot where the bones of the little monk were buried. He had potted about, peering vaguely among the hummocks, but he found that he could no longer recall precisely where the body of his friend had been interred. Only the abbots of Hautaire were accorded headstones, and even Abbé Ferrand's was by now thickly encrusted with lichen.

Spindrift found a piece of dry twig and began scratching at the lettered limestone, but by the time he had scraped clean the figures 1910-1937, he found the impulse had already waned. After all, what was the point? That was the surprising thing about growing old: nothing seemed quite so urgent or important any more. Sharp edges became blunt; black and white fudged off in to grey; and your attention kept wandering off after stupid little tidbits of memory and getting lost among the flowery hedgerows of the Past. *Quis Custodiet . . . ?*

The old librarian straightened up, released the piece of twig he was holding and began massaging his aching back. As he did so, he suddenly recalled the letter. He had been carrying it around with him all day and had, in fact, come out into the graveyard on purpose to try to make up his mind about it. Obscurely he felt he needed the ghostly presence of Roderigo and the Abbé Ferrand to help him. Above all he needed to be *sure*.

He peered around for a convenient seat, then lowered himself creakily so that his back rested against the abbé's sun-warmed headstone. He dipped around inside his woolen habit for his spectacles and the envelope, and having at last settled everything to his comfort and satisfaction, he extruded the letter, unfolded it, cleared his throat and read out aloud:

Post Restante Aries
Bouches du Rhone.

June 21, 1981.

Dear Sir,

I have recently returned to Europe after four years' travel and study in India, Burma and Nepal, during which one of my teachers introduced me to your marvelous edition of the *Biographia Mystica* of Meister Sternwärts. It was a complete revelation to me and, together with the *Illuminatum*, has radically changed my whole outlook on life. "*The truly aimed shaft strikes him who looses it*" (III.XXIV)!!

I could not permit myself to quit Europe and return home to Chicago without having made an effort to thank you in person and, perhaps, to give myself the treat of conversing with you about the life and works of the Meister.

If you could possibly see your way towards gratifying my wish sometime—say within the next month or so?— would you be so good as to drop me a line at the above address, and I will come with all speed to Hautaire.

Yours most sincerely,
J. S. Harland

Spindrift concluded his reading, raised his head and blinked out over the valley. "*Quis Custodiet?*" he murmured, remembering suddenly, with quite astonishing clarity, how once, long ago, Brother Roderigo had handed him a cup of ice-cool water and had then nodded his head in affirmation. How had *he* known?

Hurling out of the northern sky, three black planes, shaped like assegais, rushed down the length of the valley, drowning it with their reverberating thunder. Spindrift sighed, refolded the letter and fumbled it back into its envelope. He reached out, plucked a leaf of wild sage, rubbed it between finger and thumb and held it under his nose. By then the planes were already fifty miles away, skimming low over the distant, glittering sea, but the ripples of their bullying passage still lapped faintly back and forth between the ancient hills.

"Very well," murmured Spindrift, "I will write to this young man. *Ex nihilo, nihil fit.* But perhaps Mr. Harland is not 'nothing.' Perhaps he is something—even, maybe, my own successor, as I was Roderigo's and Roderigo was Brother Martin's. There always has *been* a successor—a watcher—an eye for the eye." He grunted, heaved himself up from the grave on which he was sitting and shuffled off towards the abbey, a slightly dotty old lay brother, muttering to himself as he went.

The counter clerk at the Bureau des Postes sniffed down her nose, glared at the passport which was held out to her and then, reluctantly, handed over the letter, expressing her profound disapproval of the younger generation.

The slim, deeply tanned, blond girl in the faded blue shirt and jeans examined the postmark on the letter and chuckled delightedly. She hurried out into the sunny square, sat herself down on a low wall, carefully tore off a narrow strip from the end of the envelope and extracted Spindrift's letter. Her sea-blue eyes nickered rapidly along the lines of typescript. "Oh, *great!*" she exclaimed. "Gee, isn't that *mar-velous?*"

Judy Harland, who, in her twenty-second year, still contrived to look a youthful and boyish eighteen, had once written on some application form in the space reserved for "occupation" the single word "enthusiast." They had not offered her the job, but it can hardly have been on the grounds of self-misrepresentation. Her letter to Spindrift had been dashed off on the spur of the moment when she had discovered that the Abbey of Hautaire was an easy day's hitchhike down the coast from Aries. Not that the information which she had given Spindrift was untrue—it *was* true—up to a point, that point being that her interest in Meister Sternwärts was but one of several such enthusiasms among which, over the past eight years, she had zoomed back and forth like a tipsy hummingbird in a frangipani forest. She had already sampled Hatha Yoga, the teachings of Don Carlos, Tarot, Zen Buddhism, and the *I Ching*.

Each had possessed her like an ardent lover to the exclusion of all the others—until the next. The *Illuminatum* and the *Biographia Mystica* represented but the most recent of her spiritual love affairs.

Her signing of her letter with her initials rather than her Christian name had been an act of prudence induced by certain awkward experiences in Persia and Afghanistan. She had survived these unscathed, just as she had survived everything else, because her essential self was hedged about by an inviolable conviction that she had been chosen to fulfil some stupendous but as-yet-unspecified purpose. The fact that she had no very clear idea of what the purpose might be was immaterial. What counted was the strength of the conviction. Indeed, in certain respects, Judy had more than a little in common with Joan of Arc.

A little deft work on her hair with a pair of scissors and a concealed chiffon scarf wound round her chest soon transformed her outwardly into a very passable boy. It was as James Harland that she climbed down from the cab of the friendly *camion* driver, shouldered her well-worn rucksack and strode off, whistling like a bird, up the winding, dusty road towards Hautaire. Just as Spindrift himself had done some sixty years before, and at precisely the same spot, she paused as she came within sight of the abbey and stood still for a moment, staring up at it. She saw a brown and white eagle corkscrewing majestically upwards in an invisible funnel of warm air, and as she watched it, she experienced an almost overwhelming impulse to turn round and go back. Perhaps if she had been under the aegis of the *I Ching*, she would have obeyed it, but Hautaire was now to her what fabled Cathay had once been to Peter Sternwärts—a challenge to be met and overcome. Shrugging aside her forebodings, she hooked her thumbs more firmly under the straps of her pack and marched on up the road. Old age had lengthened Spindrift's vision. From the library window he had picked out the determined little figure when it was still three-quarters of a mile away. Something about it touched his heart like a cold finger. "*Golden-haired like an angel.*" Had he not himself written that long, long ago, after his last visit to the rotunda? How many years was it now? Fifty at least. As far as the eye could see. Why then had he not gone back? Was it fear? Or lack of any real religious faith to sustain him? Yet everything he had "seen" had come to pass just as he had described it. Such crazy things they had seemed too. Sunburst bombs shattering whole cities in the blink of an eye; men in silver suits walking on the face of the moon; an assassin's bullets striking down the President who would put them there; the endless wars; the horror and anguish of the extermination camps; human bestiality. Pain, pain, always pain. Until he had been able to endure no more. His last entry in the *Praemonitiones* must surely be almost due now. Did that mean he had failed in his bounden duty? Well, then, so he had failed, but at least he had given the world the *Biographia*, and none of his predecessors had done that. And there was still the marvel of the *Exploratio Spiritualis* to come—that masterpiece which he alone had unearthed, translated, and pieced together. Perhaps one day it would be published. But not by him. Let someone else shoulder that burden. He knew what it would entail. And surely he had done enough. But the chill lay there in his heart like a splinter of ice that would not melt. "*Golden-haired like an angel.*" Muttering to himself, he turned away from the window, shuffled across the library and began making his way down to the abbey gate to greet his visitor.

* * *

As a child Judy had sometimes toyed with a fanciful notion that people grew to resemble the names they had been born with. She was reminded of it when she first set eyes on Spindrift. His hair was as white and soft as the wisps of foam on a weir pool, and he blinked at her waterily through his steel-rimmed glasses as he shook her by the hand. "You are very young, Mr. Harland," he observed. "But, then, to you I daresay I must seem very old."

"Are you?" she asked in that blunt way of hers which some people found charming and others simply ill-mannered.

"I am exactly as old as this century," he replied with a smile. "Which makes me four score and one. A goodly stretch by any reckoning, wouldn't you say?"

"And you've lived here all your life?"

"Most of it, to be sure. I first came to Hautaire in 1923."

"Hey! *My father* was born in 1923!"

"An *annus mirabilis*, indeed," the old man chuckled. "Come along, Mr. Harland. Let me be the first to introduce you to Hautaire."

So saying, he led her through the outer courtyard and down into the cloisters where, like dim autumnal leaves, a few of the brothers were wandering in silent meditation. Judy's bright magpie glance darted this way and that. "Say," she whispered, "this sure is some place."

"Would you care for a drink?" asked Spindrift, suddenly recalling his own introduction to the abbey and hoping, vaguely, that by repeating the pattern he would be vouchsafed a sign of some kind.

"I surely would," said Judy. "Thanks a lot." She shrugged off her rucksack and dumped it down beside the basin of the fountain while Spindrift groped around short-sightedly for the cup.

"Here, let me," she said, and, scooping up the cup, she dipped it into the basin and took a hearty swig.

Spindrift adjusted his spectacles and peered at her. A solitary drop of water hung for a moment like a tear from her square firm chin, and then she had brushed it away with the back of her hand. "That was great," she informed him. "Real cool."

Spindrift nodded and smiled. "That fountain was here even before the abbey was built," he said.

"Is that so? Then Meister Sternwärts may have done just what I've done."

"Yes," agreed Spindrift. "It is more than likely."

"That's really something," sighed Judy. "Hey, I've brought my copy of the *Biographia* for you to autograph. It's right here in my pack. I carry it around every place I go."

"Oh, really?" said Spindrift, flushing with pleasure. "I must say I regard that as a great compliment."

"The *Biographia*'s one of the world's great books," averred Judy stoutly. "Possibly the greatest."

Spindrift felt appropriately flattered. "Perhaps you would be interested to see the original manuscript?" he suggested diffidently.

"*Would I!* You mean you have it right here in the abbey?"

"It's in the library."

"Well, what are we waiting for?" demanded Judy. "I mean—that is—if it's convenient."

"Oh, yes, yes," Spindrift assured her. "We'll just call in at the guest wing first, and I'll show you your quarters. We can go straight on up from there."

Judy's unfeigned enthusiasm for the Meister was all the old man could have wished for. He laid out the original manuscript of the *Biographia Mystica* before her and guided her through it while she gave little

gasps and exclamations of wonder and pleasure. "It's just as if you'd known him personally, Mr. Spindrift," she said at last. "You make him come alive."

"Oh, he *is*, Mr. Harland. It is a gross error on our part to assume that life is mere physical existence. The *élan vital* lives on in the sublime creations of human genius. One only needs to study the *Exploratio Spiritualis* to realize that."

"And what's the *Exploratio Spiritualis*, Mr. Spindrift?"

"One day, I hope, it will be recognized as the *Biographia Mystica* of the human mind."

"You don't say!"

"But I *do*, Mr. Harland. And, what is more, I have the best of reasons for saying so."

Judy looked up at him curiously. "You don't mean that you've dug *up another* work by Meister Sternwärts?"

Spindrift nodded emphatically.

"Why that's marvelous!" she cried. "Sensational! Can I see it?"

"It would mean very little to you, I'm afraid, Mr. Harland. The *Spiritualis* was written in cipher."

"And you've cracked it? Translated it?"

"I have."

"Wow!" breathed Judy.

"I have spent the last twenty-five years working at it," said Spindrift with more than a trace of pride in his voice. "It is, I might pardonably claim, my swan song."

"And when's it going to be published?"

"By me—never."

"But why on earth not?"

"The responsibility is too great."

"How do you mean?"

Spindrift lifted his head and gazed out of the open library window towards the distant invisible sea. "The world is not yet ready for the *Spiritualis*," he murmured. "Peter realized that, which is why he chose to write it in the form he did."

Judy frowned. "I'm afraid I'm still not with you, Mr. Spindrift. Why isn't it ready?"

"To accept a determinist universe as a proven fact?"

"Who says we're not?"

Almost reluctantly Spindrift withdrew his gaze from the far horizon and blinked down at her. "You mean you *can* accept it, Mr. Harland?" he asked curiously.

"Well, I certainly accept the *I Ching*."

"But you must, surely, believe in free will?"

"Well, up to a point, sure I do. I mean to say *I* have to consult the *I Ching*. It doesn't decide *for* me that I'm going to consult it, does it?"

It seemed to Spindrift at that moment that he had reached the final crossroads. But he was still not sure which path was the right one. He stirred the air vaguely with his fingers. "Then tell me, Mr. Harland," he said, "for the sake of the supposition, if you wish—what do you suppose would follow if one succeeded in convincing the human race that everything in life *was* preordained?"

Judy smiled. "But most of them believe it anyway. Astrology, Tarot, *I Ching*—you name it, we'll believe it. The fault, Mr. Spindrift, lies not in ourselves but in our stars."

"Really?" said Spindrift. "I must say that you astonish me."

"Well, a lot's happened in the last thirty years. We're the post-H-bomb generation, remember. We got to see where reason had led us. Right bang up to the edge of the precipice."

Spindrift nodded. "Yes, yes," he murmured. "I know. I saw it."

"Come again?"

"The *Pikadon*. That's what they called it." He closed his eyes and shuddered. A moment later he had gripped her by the arm. "But imagine *knowing* what was going to happen and that you were powerless to prevent it. What then, Mr. Harland?"

"How do you mean 'knowing'?"

"Just that," Spindrift insisted. "Seeing it all happening *before* it *had* happened. What then?"

"Are you serious?"

"It's all there in the *Spiritualis*, " said Spindrift, releasing his hold on her arm and gripping the back of her chair with both hands. "Peter Sternwarts rediscovered what Apollonius of Tyana had brought back with him from the East. But he did more than that. He devised the means whereby this knowledge could be handed down to future generations. He was a seer who bequeathed his eyes to posterity."

Judy's eyes narrowed. "Just let me get this straight," she said slowly. "Are you telling me that Meister Sternwärts could actually *see* the future?"

"Yes," said Spindrift simply.

"What? *All* of it?"

"No. Only the biggest storms on the horizon—the crises for civilization. He called them 'Knots in Time.' "

"But how do you know that?"

"He wrote them down," said Spindrift. "In a book he called *Praemonitiones*."

"Holy Moses!" Judy whispered. "You just *have* to be kidding!"

"Sternwärts' own forecasts extend only as far as the fifteenth century, but, as I said before, he bequeathed his eyes to posterity."

"And just what does that *mean*, Mr. Spindrift?"

Spindrift drew in his breath. "Wait here a moment, Mr. Harland," he said, "and I will do my best to show you what it means."

A minute later he was back carrying the first volume of the *Praemonitiones*. He opened it at the frontispiece map and spread it out before her. Then he settled his spectacles firmly on his nose and began to explain what was what.

"This was drawn by Peter Sternwärts himself," he said. "There can be no question of that. It represents a bird's-eye view of the area within which Hautaire is situated. These dots represent the Neolithic stone circle, and the straight lines radiating from the menhirs all cross at this point here. I thought at first that these spirals were some primitive attempt to represent lines of magnetic force, but I know now that this is not so. Nevertheless, they do represent a force field of some kind—one, moreover, which was undoubtedly first detected by the ancient race who raised the original stone circle. Sternwärts realized that the menhirs acted as some sort of focusing device and that the area of maximum intensity would probably occur at the point where the intersection of the chords was held in equilibrium by the force field—what he called the *mare temporis*—sea of time."

Judy nodded. "So?" she said.

"He deduced that at this particular point he would find what he was seeking. I have since unearthed among the archives a number of sketches he made of similar stone circles in Brittany. And just off the center of each he has written the same word *oculus*—that is the Latin word for 'eye.' "

"Hey," said Judy, "you don't mean . . ."

"Indeed I do," insisted Spindrift. "After an immense amount of trial and error he succeeded in locating the precise point—and it is a very small area indeed—right here in Hautaire itself. Having found it, he built himself a time observatory and then proceeded to set down on record everything he saw. The results are there before you. The *Praemonitiones!*"

Judy stared down at the map. "But if that's so, why hasn't anyone else discovered one? I mean there's Stonehenge and Carnac and so forth, isn't there?"

Spindrift nodded. "That mystified Peter too, until he realized that the focal point of each circle was almost invariably situated a good twenty or so meters above ground level. He postulates that in the days when the circles were first raised, wooden towers were erected in their centers. The seer, who would probably have been a high priest, would have had sole access to that tower. In the case of Hautaire, it just so happened that the site of the long-vanished tower was occupied by the rotunda of the Abbey."

"And that was why Sternwärts came here?"

"No, Peter came to Hautaire because he had reason to believe that Apollonius of Tyana had made a special point of visiting this particular circle. There was apparently still a pagan shrine and a resident oracle here in the first century A.D."

Judy turned over some pages in the book before her, but she barely glanced at what was written there. "But how does it *work*?" she asked. "What do you do in this *oculus*? Peek into a crystal ball or something?"

"One sees," said Spindrift vaguely. "Within the mind's eye."

"But *how*?"

"That I have never discovered. Nor, I hazard, did Peter. Nevertheless that is what happens."

"And can you choose what you want to see?"

"I used to think not," said Spindrift, "but since I stumbled upon the key to the *Exploratio Spiritualis*, I have been forced to revise my opinion. I now believe that Peter Sternwärts was deliberately working towards the goal of a spiritual and mental discipline which would allow him to exert a direct influence upon what he saw. His aim was to become a shaper of the future as well as a seer."

Judy's blue eyes widened perceptibly. "A *shaper*?" she echoed. "And did he?"

"It is impossible to tell," said Spindrift. "But it is surely not without significance that he left Hautaire before he died."

"Come again?"

"Well, by the time he left he knew for certain that chance does nothing that has not been prepared well in advance. He must have realized that the only way in which he could exert an influence upon the future would be by acting in the present. If he could succeed in tracing the thread backwards from its knot, he might be able to step in and adjust things at the very point where only the merest modicum of intervention could affect the future. Of course, you must understand that this is all the purest supposition on my part."

Judy nodded. "And these disciplines—mental what's-its— what were they?"

"They are expressly designed to enable the seer to select his own particular vision. Having seen the catastrophe ahead, he could, if he were successful, feel his way backwards in time from that point and, hopefully, reach a *conjunctura criticalis*—the precise germinal instant of which some far-off tragedy was the progeny."

"Yes, I understand that. But what *sort* of disciplines were they?"

"Ironically, Mr. Harland, they appear to have had a good deal in common with those which are still practiced today among certain Eastern faiths."

"What's ironical about that?"

"Well, surely, the avowed aim of the Oriental sages is to achieve the ultimate annihilation of the self—of the ego. What Peter Sternwärts was hoping to achieve seems to me to have been the exact opposite—the veritable apotheosis of the human ego! Nothing less than the elevation of Man to God! He had a persistent vision of himself as the potter and the whole of humanity as his clay. That explains why, throughout the *Exploratio*, he constantly refers to himself as a 'shaper.' It also explains why I have shunned the responsibility of publishing it."

"Then why are you telling me?" demanded Judy shrewdly.

Spindrift removed his spectacles, closed his eyes, and massaged his eyelids with his fingertips. "I am very old, Mr. Harland," he said at last. "It is now over fifty years since I last visited the *oculus*, and the world is very close to the horizon of my own visions. Ever since Abbé Ferrand's untimely death forty years ago, the secret of the *oculus* has been mine alone. If I were to die this minute, it would perish with me, and I, by default, would have betrayed the trust which I believe has been reposed in me. In other words, I would die betraying the very man who has meant far more to me than any I have ever known in the flesh—Peter Sternwärts himself."

"But why choose *me*?" Judy insisted. "Why not one of the other brothers?"

Spindrift sighed. "I think, Mr. Harland, that it is perhaps because I recognize in you some of my own

lifelong reverence for Peter Sternwärts. Furthermore, in some manner which I find quite impossible to explain, I am convinced that you are associated with the last visit I paid to the *oculus*—with my final vision."

"Really? And what was that?"

Spindrift looked down at the parchment which had absorbed so much of his life, and then he shook his head. "There was a girl," he murmured. "A girl with golden hair . . ."

"A *girl*?"

Like a waterlogged corpse rising slowly to the surface, the old man seemed to float up from the troubled depths of some dark and private nightmare. His eyes cleared. "Why, yes," he said. "A *girl*. Do you know, Mr. Harland, in all these years that point had never struck me before! A girl, *here in Hautaire!*" He began to chuckle wheezily. "Oh dear, oh dear, oh dear! Why, that would be the end of the world indeed!"

In spite of herself Judy was deeply moved by the old man's transparent relief. Instinctively she put out her hand and laid it on his. "I don't know what your vision was, Mr. Spindrift," she said. "But if you feel I can be of help to you in any way . . ."

Spindrift brought his other hand across and patted hers abstractedly. "That is most kind of you, Mr. Harland," he murmured. "Really, most kind . . ."

* * *

At supper that evening the abbot stepped up to the lectern in the refectory and raised a hand for silence. The murmur of voices stilled as the brothers turned their wondering eyes towards their father superior. He surveyed them all in silence for a long moment and then said, "Brethren and honored guests . . . my friends. Here at Hautaire, we live a life whose fundamental pattern was laid down for us more than a thousand years ago. I believe it is a good life, one which has accordingly found favor in the eyes of God. My cherished hope is that a thousand years from now its pattern will have remained, in all essential respects, as it is today—that the spiritual verities enshrined in our foundation will be what they have always been—a source of comfort and reassurance to all God-loving men, a harbor of hope and tranquillity in a storm-tossed world."

He paused as though uncertain how to continue, and they all saw him close his eyes and turn his face upwards in mute prayer for a long, long minute. When at last he looked down upon them again, the silence in the hall was almost palpable.

"My friends, I have just learnt that certain European powers, acting in concert with Israel and the United States of America, have this afternoon launched an armed invasion of Saudi Arabia and the Trucial States."

There was a concerted gasp of horror and a sudden burst of whispering. The abbot raised his voice to carry over the hubbub.

"Their avowed aim is to secure for themselves access to the oil supplies which they deem essential to their national, political and economic survival. Under the terms of the Baghdad Treaty of 1979, the Arabs have called upon the Soviet Union for immediate armed assistance, and Russia and its allies have demanded the instant and total withdrawal of the invading forces. Failure to comply with this demand will, they say, bring about inevitable consequences."

He paused again and regarded them somberly. "I shall personally conduct a service for Divine Intercession immediately after complin. It will be held in the main chapel. It goes without saying that all our guests are invited to attend. *Dominus vobiscum.*" He sketched the sign of the Cross over them, stepped down from the lectern, and strode swiftly out of the hall.

In the outburst of chattering which erupted immediately the abbot had left the hall, Spindrift turned to Judy and seized her by the arm. "You must come with me, Mr. Harland," he whispered urgently. "At once."

Judy, who was still groping to come to terms with all the implications of what she had heard, nodded submissively and allowed the old man to shepherd her out of the refectory and up into the library. He unearthed the keys to the *oculus* and the rotunda, then hurried her up the stairs and along the deserted passages to the door which had remained locked for more than half a century. He was possessed by an almost feverish impatience and kept up an incessant muttering to himself the whole way. Judy could hardly make out a word of what he was saying, but more than once she thought she caught the strange word *Pikadon*. It meant nothing to her at all.

So much rubbish had accumulated in the narrow passage that they had to lean their combined weight against the rotunda door before they managed to force it open. They squeezed through into the crevice beyond, and Spindrift lit a candle he had brought with him. By its wavering light the two of them scuffled their way forward to the *oculus*.

When they reached it, Spindrift handed the key to Judy and held the candle so that she could see what she was doing. A minute later the door had creaked open to expose the sarcophagus, standing just as it had stood for the last seven hundred years.

Judy gaped at it in astonishment. "You mean you go in *there*?"

"*You* must, Mr. Harland," said Spindrift. "Please, hurry."

"But *why*?" demanded Judy. "What good could it do?"

Spindrift gripped her by the shoulder and almost succeeded in thrusting her bodily into the casque. "Don't you understand, Mr. Harland?" he cried. "It is *you* who must prove my final vision false! *You have to prove me wrong!*"

Into her twenty-two years of life Judy had already packed more unusual experiences than had most women three times her age, but none of them had prepared her for this. Alone with a looney octogenarian who seemed bent on stuffing her into a stone coffin buried somewhere inside the walls of a medieval monastery! For all she knew, once he had got her inside, he would turn the key on her and leave her there to rot. And yet, at the very moment when she most needed her physical strength, it had apparently deserted her. Her arms, braced against the stone slabs, seemed all but nerveless; her legs so weak she wondered if they were not going to fold under her. "The key," she muttered. "Give me the key. And you go away. Right away. Back to that other door. You can wait for me there."

The pressure of Spindrift's hand relaxed. Judy stepped back and fumbled the key out of the lock. Then, feeling a little more confident, she turned to face the old man. By the trembling light of the candle she glimpsed the streaks of tears on his ancient cheeks.

"Please go, Mr. Spindrift," she pleaded. "*Please.*" "But you will do it?" he begged. "I must *know*, Mr. Harland."

"Yes, yes," she said. "Sure I will. I give you my word." He shuffled backwards a few doubtful paces and

stood watching her. "Would you like me to leave you the candle?" he asked.

"All right," she said. "Put it down there on the floor." She waited until he had done it, and then, aloud, she started to count slowly up to sixty. She had reached barely halfway before the rotunda was buffeted by the massive reverberating thunder of warplanes hurtling past high overhead. Judy shivered violently and, without bothering to finish her count, stepped the two short paces back into the casque until her shoulders were pressed against the cold stone. "Please, dear God," she whispered, "let it be all—"

She was falling, dropping vertically downwards into the bowels of the earth as if down the shaft of an elevator. Yet the candle, still standing there before her just where the old man had left it and burning with its quiet golden flame, told her that her stomach lied. But her sense of vertigo was so acute that she braced her arms against the sides of the coffin in an effort to steady herself. Watery saliva poured into her mouth. Certain she was about to faint, she swallowed and closed her eyes.

Like magenta fire balloons, the afterimages of the candle flame drifted across her retina. They changed imperceptibly to green, to dark blue, to purple, and finally vanished into the velvety darkness. Her eyelids felt as though lead weights had been laid upon them.

Suddenly—without warning of any kind—she found herself gazing down, as if from a great height, upon a city. With the instant familiarity bred of a dozen high-school civics assignments, she knew it at once for her own hometown. The whole panoramic scene had a strange, almost dreamlike clarity. The air was unbelievably clear; no trace of smoke or haze obscured the uncompromising grid of the streets. Northwards, Lake Michigan glittered silver-blue in the bright sunshine, while the plum-blue shadows of drifting clouds ghosted silently across its placid waters. But this was no longer the Chicago she remembered. The whole center of the metropolis was gone. Where it had been was nothing but a vast circular smudge of grey rubble, along the fringes of which green shrubs were already growing. No factory stacks smoked; no glittering lines of automobiles choked these expressways; no freight trains wriggled and jinked through these latticed sidings; all was as dead and still as a city on the moon. This was indeed Necropolis, City of the Dead.

At last the vision faded and its place was taken by another. She now found herself gazing out across a vast plain through which wound a great river. But the endless golden Danubian wheatfields which she remembered so well had all vanished. The winds which sent the towering cloud schooners scudding across this sky blew only through the feathered heads of weeds and wild grasses which stretched out like a green and rippling sea to the world's end. Of man, or cattle, or even flying bird there was no sign at all.

When Spindrift returned some twenty minutes later, it was to discover Judy crouched in the bottom of the sarcophagus, curled up like a dormouse with her head resting on her bent knees. Fearfully he stooped over her and placed his hand on her shoulder. "Mr. Harland," he whispered urgently. "Mr. Harland, are you all right?"

There was no response. He knelt down, thrust his hands beneath her arms and, by a mighty effort, succeeded in dragging her clear of the casque. She flopped sideways against the door, then sprawled forwards beside him. He fumbled his hand inside the neck of her shirt, felt for the beating of her heart, and so discovered who she was. The last dim flicker of hope died within him.

He patted her deathly cheeks and chafed her hands until at last her eyelids fluttered open. "What happened?" he asked. "What did you see?"

She raised a cold hand and wonderingly touched his wrinkled face with her fingertips. "Then it *hasn't* happened," she whispered. "And it was *so* real."

"It *will* happen," he said sadly. "Whatever it was you saw must come to pass. It always has."

"But there was no one," she mourned. "No one at all. What happened, Mr. Spindrift? Where had they all gone?"

"Come, my dear," he urged, gently coaxing her to her feet. "Come with me."

* * *

The air on the hillside was still warm, drowsy with the summer scents of wild sage, lavender and rosemary, as the old man and the girl made their way up the dim path towards the ridge where the ancient neoliths still bared themselves like broken teeth against the night sky. Below them, the abbey lights glowed out cheerfully, and small figures could be seen moving back and forth behind the chapel windows.

They reached a point where an outcrop of limestone had been roughly shaped into a seat. Spindrift eased himself onto it, drew Judy down beside him and spread out the wide skirt of his habit to cover her. As he did so, he could feel her trembling like a crystal bell that, once struck, goes on quivering far below the threshold of audible sound. An enormous, impotent grief seized him by the throat. Too late he saw what he should have done, how he had betrayed the trust that Brother Roderigo and the Abbé Ferrand had laid upon him. But he saw too, with a sort of numb clarity, how he, Spindrift, could not have done it, because, within himself, some vital spark of faith in humanity had been extinguished far back in the bloodstained ruins of 1917. He could no longer believe that men were essentially good, or that the miracle which the genius of Peter Sternwärts had created would not be used in some hideous way to further the purposes of evil.

Yet what if he *had* gone that one step further, *had* published the *Exploratio Spiritualis* and given to all men the means of foreseeing the inevitable consequences of their insane greed, their overweening arrogance, their atavistic lust for power? Who was to say that Armageddon might not have been averted, that Peter's miracle might not have succeeded in shaping anew the human spirit? *Quis custodiet ipsos custodes?* Ah, who indeed, if not God? And Spindrift's God had died in the mud of Ypres.

The full knowledge of what he had done rose as bitter as bile at the back of the old man's throat. Desperately he sought for some words of comfort for the girl who crouched beside him and could not stop quivering. Some lie, some little harmless lie. "I did not tell you before," he said, "but I believe you are destined to publish the *Spiritualis* for me. Yes, I remember now. That was how you were to be associated with my final vision. So, you see, there *is* still hope."

But even as he spoke, the distant eastern horizon suddenly flickered as though with summer lightning. His arm tightened involuntarily around the girl's shoulders. She stirred. "Oh God," she moaned softly. "Oh God, oh God, oh God." A harsh, grating sob shook her, and then another and another.

A second flash threw the low clouds into sharp relief, and then the whole arching roof of the world was lit up like the day. An urgent bell began tolling in the abbey.

Something scratched a line like a blood-red stalk high up into the southern sky, and a ball of blue-white fire blossomed in strange and sinister silence.

And later a wind got up and blew from the north.