

ZEN AND LOATHING WITH THE GATSBY'S



EXCERPTED AND EXPANDED FROM
"PROMETHEUS FIT TO BE TIED"
BY PAUL HAWKINS

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Chapter 1

He was born early in the 20th century and he called himself Mr. Perfect, or in any case he eventually fell in with people who found it useful to dub him "Mr. Perfect," but his given name was Ernest White, and he was semi-well-known to the famous and semi-famous in that arabesque atmosphere of creativity, affectation, preening and posturing that had sprouted up in West between world wars like mushrooms after heavy rain. His money had opened many doors and he had rubbed shoulders with the best and brightest of his day, and if you look at group photos of the cultural elite on the Left Bank or the salons of New York or the French Riviera you can often see his tanned bright visage in the background smiling much more genuinely than the rest, because unlike them he was free from the guilt of sponging off the honest man to pay the tab, and he was the only one in the photos who didn't think he was smarter than everyone else. He wore white suits and tried to affect a degree of culture, and he was probably just successful enough to fool the small-town people he'd grown up with, but nobody else.

Chapter 2: 1920

It all began in the 1920's with a new-moned young man in a small Midwestern town reading an ad in the back of a magazine left behind in a hotel by a travelling salesman. The world was full of liars and fakirs back then – well, it is full of them now, but back then they used better fonts and had more alluring and a-leering illustrations, and the patina of Oriental mysticism had not yet been worn down to its base metal, and in the West there persisted a yet unburst soap bubble of optimism for a brighter future spawned by technology and prosperity. Especially prosperity. The mogul-rich were a new breed hence unknown to the surface of the earth and their transmigrations between continents birthed epicycles in their wakes like those of giants ships, and in those wakes spun facsimiles of cultures, swirls of color and of lives cast and dashed and hoped and remixed like spilled paints, clinging to the money and the inspiration and the excess, and moving into a form or a role that either held its shape and was towed along further in the slipstream of the vessel or else spun off lazily and detached to dissipate in the sea.

His existence was a bit of both, plus a stripe of pious prairie stock he inherited from his

ancestors and by no means had earned for himself, but one that nonetheless might accidentally buoy him the way a house might float intact miles downstream after a flooding of the Mississippi, or (as he had once read) the way a bamboo hut and its savage, painted South-Sea occupants might survive miles out to sea in the wake of a tsunami.

He was a tall, lanky adopted lad with a handsome visage and a shock of yellow hair. He knew he was handsome, and he had successfully sued his adoptive father for the right to the inheritance from his birth parents before its appointed time. From that day until he turned 18 he lived in a room in the nicest hotel in town. But for the availability of wealth it was a solitary life. He chose to be alone, to consider the prospect of the prospects before him, to consider himself in the company of himself. At nights he could be seen through the bright front hotel window sitting in the gilt parlor, his long body sunk into one of the large chairs, reading through magazines, burrowing his mind in the printed mix of high-minded passion and low-browed adventure and futuristic optimism. And slowly and slyly his self fell in love with an idea of itself like a bubble in champagne.

And at night that bubble floated amongst the thoughts and stories and curiosities his mind had accumulated, and he bobbed untethered in an ethereal infinitude of confessors and showmen and liars, each with his own outlandish gaudy farcical sphere – the wolf-boy the faith healer the pygmy shaman the snake oil mystic Hindu the lilting savant soprano farm girl the albino spelunker the cheesy British comedian, the bubble dancer the "Mister, I seen Jesus" transient the refugee the private dick the anarchist the Shadow. It was their lie with and against your lie – you're an enigma you're special you're a mystery no oath no credo no uniform can confine you; you're old you're young you're rich you're poor but always part of you is an airy angel, free to hold and mold yourself above the sloganized hypnosis of the Big Machine, the modern substitute for fate.

Ernest used to think that everyone was made for something wonderful.

He stayed in town until he graduated school in a ceremony his parents did not attend. The next day he struck into the world to fit himself into the menagerie of conceits he had ingested and invented.

Chapter 3

"Non-grasping is what you have to learn, non-grasping!" This bit of wisdom was intoned by a bosomy woman with a round monied face and a velvety royal blue dress and a blue-dyed ostrich feather hat. She was middle-age, rounded with comfort, but nonetheless flush with sincerity and enthusiasm. She brushed back a feather with a white-gloved hand and smiled at him. "Your desire is what leads to your misery and misfortune. Non-grasping is what you want. Non-grasping!"

The upper class world of the was full of spiritualistic promises and solutions, all spurned on by new cash-bloated classes looking to have their suddenly rarified existences endorsed by extra-planer beings who had been waiting for the emergence of this new sub-species marked by its level of sophistication and taste for imported crockery and ideas.

The young Ernest White found himself standing at the end of a gangplank with a suitcase in each hand and the whole of Europe spread out before him. The large, earnest society woman was waiting at the dock.

"It's so good to finally meet you – and to think our correspondence began from the ad in the back of a magazine!" she said. "Ah well, the Old Spirit is responsible for the new ways. We hope you'll go far as a member of our little theosophical society. We're certainly a diverse group but we all share one thing: an unqualified optimism about man's spiritual progress in this new unfolding age!"

She helped introduce him around and get him settled, and one week later he found himself invited to his first Theosophical Guild meeting. The lady introduced him to a small, odd group seated in an academician's parlor. Besides the society matron there was: a tall gentleman in a slightly out-of date black suit who sat with sufficient poise to signify his stature in the society; a shorter, hazardously dressed man with wild eyes, a bushy black beard and thick eyebrows; a thin, earnest young man Mr. White could only think of as "Pale Poet"; and a handsome young woman with long brownish-blond hair and chestnut eyes who always looked like she was about to laugh but never did. He took a seat between her and Bushy Brows at that first meeting, which was held in the cramped foyer of the stick-like black-suited gentleman, who was the headmaster at a dingy public school for children whose parents could not afford to send them where they wished they could.

The group of spiritualists met on an irregular basis as their schedules allowed, but they were enthusiastic and always had lively discussions. The meetings continued throughout the first fall of Mr. White's arrival in London, and he attended them in between art classes and architecture and anthropology lectures at a working university near his purposefully undistinguished flat.

At one theosophical meeting late in September a heat exchange occurred between the black-dressed man and the Matron:

"You have the money but you don't have the ideas!" he said.

She drew herself up straight and looked down at him. "I, sir, am a lady of rareification and refinement. And I have an impulse of charity toward the world that you sadly lack. Why, you yourself said that in a past life I was Joan of Arc."

Bushy Brows leaned across toward Ernest: "There wasn't enough tin in all of France to build that suit of armor!"

"What's that?" the Matron asked.

"Yours is a unique blend of caritas and amour," Bushy Brows replied smoothly.

She blushed all the way down to her pigeon bosom. "Why thank you! It's my inheritance, my gift." She tapped the middle of her forehead significantly. "My unseen eye."

Over the course of months their meetings and conversations and philosophies wound in and out of each other:

"It will be an age in which man finally achieves his spiritual ideals. Through technology, need will be conquered and work will yield to leisure, and leisure to learning and understanding. With the need to compete for survival defeated, the powers of cooperation and introspection will finally unfold, and social castes will give way to a new spirit of equality and cooperation. It is a journey the world will make with the help of a select group of luminary teachers – an elite order of souls pre-gifted by the Higher Powers to lead the Way. One of the purposes of our group is to find and forge this cadre of teachers, to enlighten them to their true vocation and coordinate them to the common purpose."

"That's where Mr. Weeg's work with young boys comes in," Bushy Brows said.

Mr. Weeg smiled, but tightly, and his eyes narrowed to appraise Bushy Brows' face for signs of irony. The Laughing Girl tucked her lip and looked down. Pale Poet just sat there looking like he might not have eaten in weeks and was subsisting solely on chlorophyll in the green veins beneath his skin.

"How will you identify these potential teachers?" Mr. White asked.

"Oh we are guided, guided!" the Matron said. "You, for instance – there is something about you the reveals and receives this spiritual opportunity. It shows in you like an opened door to your soul. Most men are not like that. You can take one look at them and see that every portal has been boarded and shuttered long ago. But you..."

"Yes yes," Weeg said hurriedly, "but he's too old. Too bad we couldn't have met him sooner. His mind is open enough to learn, but never learn and lead. To raise a leader you must mold his nature, not simply fill his head. You have to get a young boy for that."

The Laughing Girl bent down again, and Bushy Brows took the opportunity to waggle his brows at her, but no laugh was coaxed out.

During a break the Matron came up to him. "Oh, don't you let Mr. Weeg's opinions concern you. He's a great speaker and organizer, but when it comes to true spiritual intuition his skills are far inferior to my own. I could tell from your letters that you have a great thirst for the truth and a keen spiritual perspicacity. In fact, I was thinking of asking you to help me write a book of theosophy. I'll even give you author credit. My gift is for overflowing effusive sentiment, but my weakness is putting it into words. The moment I hover over paper I freeze, but I can tell from your letters that you're so good at it. We can meet in weekly sessions and you can help me write down my ideas..."

She had been such a generous hostess to him that he readily agreed, and after six months of sublimely platonic meets at her villa, with her cats, the first draft was done. The Matron declared it

a success and readied it for submission to the New Reformed Spiritualist Press. "Of course we'll have to think up a name for you," she said. "The readership we're courting expects a little something, you know, and if they see 'Ernest White' listed as the author they'll never turn past the title page. Let's see.... I know, let's call you 'Mr. Perfect.' With that gold hair and handsome young face of yours I'd say it's fitting enough – and it certainly ought to get them plowing through the chapters."

And he reluctantly agreed to the nom de plume, deferring to her superior sensibilities, and the small volume actually became something of a minor sensation among the tea-and-séance set. When the time came for a second printing the press sent over a photographer and took a picture of 'Mr. Perfect' seated cross-legged in a grassy field beneath the bo tree of his inspiration, palms upturned upon his knees and his fingers twined with oriental serenity. The Matron never stepped forward to take one jot of credit for the book's content, preferring to take credit for the discovery of its author instead. Mr. Perfect went on a small lecture tour of various provincial theosophical enclaves, mostly regurgitating the content of the book but now and then elaborating with his own ideas. And Ernest White couldn't help but feel a little proud at the book's reception. As he had written it he'd felt some darkness in his head get pushed aside, at least here and there.

The group continued its Utopian ruminations for the better part of a year, but ultimately it was Mr. Weeg's alleged misbehavior that cast a shadow over all their doings. They showed up at the school one blustery autumn day to find out that Weeg was no longer employed there. The next message they received was that the Matron had decided to spend the season in Nice to recover her health after the shock of the revelation. And so Mr. Perfect, Bushy Brows, Pale Poet and Laughing Girl all stood outside in the cold as the iron gates of the school were shut forcefully behind them.

"What now?" Bushy Brows asked.

Pale Poet shrugged. "Back to the whims of fortune, I guess. I doubt the fates will ever twine our threads together again."

"I started out as just the group's secretary but then became a member," Laughing Girl said, and seemed about to laugh but then didn't. "I haven't taken a note in months but they haven't paid me either. The one thing I need right now is a real job." With that she shoved her hands in the pockets of and walked away.

"So what now?" Ernest asked.

"To each his own!" Bushy laughed, with a note of bravado that was appropriate if a tad forced. And so one by one each drifted away in separate directions into the wet and the cold.

Almost immediately thereafter a telegram came from his mother saying his father was dying and would he come home? He ignored it, but at the second and third letter he bent to his mother's wishes and went back to the States, waiting for the old man to die and for him to be free again.

Chapter 4: 1925

He had gone home for his father's funeral and had unexpectedly found his heart broken in a love with a beautiful woman that had spiraled him abruptly to the heights of emotion and just as suddenly had crumbled, and in its ruin a dark mood settled in him. In his mind he felt his veins filled with the old sap and fate and poison of that place, and he was glad to leave it.

He returned to Europe. In fact, he pushed through it like he was trying to push through a jungle and let the branches rip the skin off him. He drew up the energy of the continent through the soles of his feet and set his sights to match its strength with his own. He saw a world polished and healed from war and papered over where it couldn't heal or polish, and he forced himself into the circles of names you would expect to hear dropped, the literary men and women and the artists, the pearls and the poses and the careful tilts of the head and the seeing to be seen and the dinner jackets and the cufflinks, and the philanthropist sponsors and the would-be philosophers who thought or sought to rein in a formula to attach to this or that tide of conceit, or at least to give one a name that lent itself to repeated reminding and concomitant fame when cast in print.

He attended a party his second night there, given by a friend of a friend of someone who had known him before. Someone laughed at his comments and he felt a part of a shadow fall off him and his self expand and someone asked who he was, and soon he was invited closer to the center of things, to the group of people were supposed to be worth knowing, to the writer who puffed his chest when retelling his adventures, to the man in his cups who shone like a diamond when he could exceed the gravity of his own self-destruction, to the artist who dismissed all adulation of his latest phase with the back of his hand but ended with the same hand cupped to his ear to hear the last faint human-breathed syllables of praise. He got to have a reputation for being a wit, for being too sardonic for his age but for being sufficiently sardonic for the age in general, and at someone's suggestion he committed a batch of his observations to paper and saw them published as thin essays in *Smart Set* under the collective title "The Love of Liberty and a Libertine of Love." They were glib and shocking in a predictable way. They were cast as a three-way dialog between Thomas Paine, Socrates and a flapper and made calculatedly deferential references to the latest personages in the quotable class. When they were collected in a thin volume he gave signed copies to the luminaries of the day and they pretended to be pleased, and he assured them they were nothing but they did buy him time while he worked on his great treatise. This brought nods of sympathy. Afterward whenever they saw him they'd ask about the treatise's progress, and they always seemed to commiserate with his halting efforts to rein in his one big idea before it got away.

A few months later he was at a party at Cannes, waist-deep in water with a girl on his

shoulders when he happened to meet someone he knew from several years ago. She was tall and had a hard look and had made the transformation from girlishly pretty to strikingly beautiful. She was the Laughing Girl from his old theosophical clique. He promptly discarded the companion and went over to meet her. They fell into each other right away.

"Why are you here?"

"My husband is an art dealer. He has recently acquired a few choice items plundered from Czarist Russia and is here to present them to a potential buyer."

"I need an art dealer for my trust. I've been told I have too much money in stocks and bonds and need to invest in something. Art, I'm told."

"Well, maybe he can help you."

In time Mr. Perfect found himself more interested in art than theosophy. Many of the young people in the borough where he stayed were artists, so by talking with them, he decided to become one too. They were all paint-daubed smocks and strong cigarettes and outrageous banter on the front steps of their boarding house, and it was lively just to sit among them, he in his spotless white suit.

"You – become an artist? But you create the greatest art of all, the free, hot lunch!" one of his friends said, turning to the rest of the artists for appreciative laughter, which they generously supplied.

"I'm serious," Mr. Perfect interrupted. "I want to learn what you do, what inspires you, what techniques you use, and why."

The paint-splattered jokester frowned. "I am not sure you have the soul, the calling."

But one dark girl among them suddenly stamped out her cigarette and laughed at the men. "Why don't you let him try? You talk about art more than you practice it, but here is a man who genuinely wants to try his hand. Maybe by teaching him you can remember a few things yourselves, other than how to drink absinthe and scoff and chew Wittgenstein."

And so they accepted him, but he made no artistic progress save to sleep with the girl and then find out she loved him or wanted him too much for his own comfort, and so he traveled alone around Europe for a long time, crossing paths with the Laughing Girl on occasion and then more often. He came to realize that here and there people knew of him, or at least of his slim theosophical book and of his book of essays and his money.

But as the years passed he came to realize that all of the relationships were hollow. He used them and they used him. He used them to hide himself in, and they used him to fund their junkets, their philosophies, their theories with a piece of art tacked on. And his relationships soured because at this vortex of confetti and distraction there was always himself and the idea that he wanted one thing dearly and he could have had it had he been strong enough at the right time.

After a while the intellectual cache from his slim book of essays had worn thin, and people

who used to enjoy the parties at the hidden spots got to dreading the sight of each other, and they were all grateful for the arrival of the Spanish Civil War. It gave a new gravity to their miasma and announced a previously unrealized yearning to separate the aesthetes from the Marxists and rinse the bad aftertaste of the last revolution out of their throats and off of their vocabulary. Laughing Girl's husband seized the opportunity to raise funds for the Lincoln Brigade but got caught double-dealing both his clients. Laughing Girl refused to bail him out and Mr. Perfect was too tired to cross her, and the man was murdered in jail. This left Laughing Girl monied and free but Mr. Perfect did not want her. He was tired of her. He was tired of everything. He uttered a potentially inappropriate opinion on the defenders of Madrid one evening and he found himself ostracized and dropped back into the circle of theosophical dabblers. The members had changed, and he kept their company for years, and in time he helped them to sponsor an expedition.

Chapter 5: 1939

The exploration party had fallen into bickering almost as soon as the boat had set sail, and it continued all along the way. It was late in the season to be heading toward the coast of Egypt, and the passage was rough. The sky refused to change from slate grey. Mr. White was with Laughing Girl, who had off and on across the decade fallen into the role of his companion of convenience. White had begun drinking heavily almost as soon as they were out of sight of shore, and Laughing Girl found herself being kneaded like putty under the pressure of a new admirer's eyes, and she gave them her attention. The attention's source was a new man in the circle of their old theosophists, a tall young man with bright green eyes who was supposedly a sensitive, or medium, and spiritual advisor. He would let the group know when they were getting close to whatever it was they had set out seeking this time.

"Don't let him get to you," an older Englishman whispered leaning into Mr. White as they both stood in the corner of the deck, away from the others. "He's just trying to get a read from everyone, a benchmark of their emotions, so he will notice any changes later on, as we all become susceptible to higher powers."

"You mean he's the boss's snitch."

"Now my boy!"

"You don't look so well."

"Hah – doesn't take a sensitive to find that out, I see. Things have been better. Since my Agnes died I have not felt myself. I'm all knotted inside, or something worse, I'm starting to fear. But this trip might take my mind off things, with its promises and possibility of remarkable discoveries."

Mr. Perfect lit a cigarette and looked out over the waves. "Yes. Did he say 'discoveries' this time, or 'insights?' I've noticed he's taken to using 'insights' more these days, as the discoveries

are so few."

"Here now my boy, you mustn't talk like that! The Leader means well. Sometimes poetry rolls back more untruths than science, and mystical experience more than poetry. Why, if nothing else we'll have a richer vocabulary to describe what we feel, and to know more about the universe through our feelings. The dead machine of science showed clearly how we must return to the animistic truths if we're to find meaning in life. My son, in his last letters from Verdun, before the gas..."

"Yes, so you've told me before..."

"And it's true! Why, even now the Leader is helping me to realize that in some way, my Agnes might not really be gone."

Mr. Perfect looked at him. "What do you mean?"

"Why the rolling back of all those doubts in my head, the replayed memories like a pack of gramophonic disks to crowd out the silence. He's teaching me not to be afraid – to lift the needle off the phonograph and just listen."

"Listen to what?"

The man paused. "To be receptive, to hear what might be there. If I listen."

"Uhm hm."

"To not try so damned hard to fill the silences!" His eyes were growing bleary.

"And what have you heard?"

"Well so far, that is to say, now, well any day now..."

"Yes..?"

"My boy, I've been so lonely, so lonely!" His eyes grew red and hard. His face looked like a sloppy cake. "Oh, to find the Orphic locale the sensitive anticipates, to bridge the gap just once..!"

Mr. Perfect walked slowly back to his cabin. His girl did not come back to him that night, or any night thereafter on the trip, and he did not care.

The theosophical group had recently fallen under the sway of a new leader. The Leader was international and enigmatic and he had some secret for preserving an appearance of youthful energy yoked to the service of advancing middle age. He had wavy black hair and sharp eyes and a beard-dark jaw and a lean face like a hungry wolf. In all his talk of enlightenment he spoke his words like a wolf snapping at a rabbit's heels. This was his degree of vitality, his enthusiasm. It was, as he'd say, the unshrouded energy of a truly authentic life. He was a member of several pan-cultural neo-mystical movements. He was always off rubbing shoulders with Yeats or Cowley or conducting a séance or being interviewed for Time and Tide.

Now he was on board the ship bound for some Egyptian ruin, but as usual his time for the group members themselves was scarce. He had brought some new guest on board with him, and no one had managed to see who the guest was before the two of them disappeared into seclusion. And he had also brought along with him the usual herd of 'cattle' - neophyte monied

spiritualist dabblers to be chatted, smiled, gripped, and relieved of cash for the cause. It was the other group members' job to make them welcome, to see to it that they had the spiritual experience they'd come along to seek, and if nothing else to hint that the guests had been eminently famous in past lives. Their instructions were as usual: no two women were to have been Cleopatra, and so on.

"It's not like him, even him, to duck out so soon after boarding? And who was that guest? Something's up this time."

"Shhh, here come some cattle."

"And that new sensitive – he's the boss's eyes and ears, I tell you! Seeing what we're saying while he's not around..."

"Shhh!"

Then the crowd of upper class dabblers came up.

Smiles all around. "We are blessed to be born in a gifted time! It speaks well of you that you perceive it..."

...But after the crowd moved on...

"It's something else this time, too. I'm getting tired of him..."

"Now look, if you're going to be all mopey, maybe you should go off by yourself for a while. You may be rich, but we need the cattle's money if the rest of us are to avoid another winter in London..."

Mr. White went down to his berth and spent most of the next several days there, listening to muffled voices come and go outside. He lay on his bunk and unfolded a picture from his pocket. It was from a young female admirer who had sought out his acquaintance. Another theosophical lecture, another crop of eager hopeful minds and hearts like moths drawn to the light of bright words, not knowing the only brightness was what they themselves brought to the tired ideas he pretended.

He liked their warmth, their youth. It was real. He was ready to be young again – again. He had begun receiving her attentions already when he and Laughing Girl were growing apart.

He lit a cigarette. How much time could this girl take him across? Five years? Three years? A month? Her blonde hair could be the border of a photograph to plunge into, to fold himself up and put himself back into his pocket and carry himself a little further. But as he looked at the photograph his eyes moved from the face to the black background behind it, and suddenly before him came a picture of the parties of his early days here, of the writer in his cups who had been the diamond to all their costume jewelry, the noble tragedy disappearing into his own vortex of despair, and he wanted none of it, none of the glory of protracted misery, none of the drowning in the eddies of the great vessels, the downward spiral in the expanding wake of the vessels of excess. He was tired and drew his breath. Enough with that. He put his cigarette to the picture and watched it curl and burn.

They arrived at the ruins in a sandstorm. The troupe was met by their native guides, mounted on camels, bundled beneath coarse robes, and led miserably through the stinging winds. Finally by night the storm had abated and they found themselves at the foot of a temple. They all walked into the shelter of the ruins and began to toss their robes to the floor. A small woman with clownishly smudged makeup cursed "finally!" and lit a cigarette. Others joined in a circle around her, sharing a light and complaining. The old Englishman moved off by himself, looking sad and absent. The cool, green-eyed Sensitive and Laughing Girl stood with a clutch of the cattle, looking remarkably fresh and vibrant, trying to rally their spirits with vague promises.

Mr. Perfect sat alone.

Two robed figures move quickly across the open space, paused to talk to no one, then disappeared into the shadows at the far side. Everyone looked, but then fell to conversing again, except for the Englishman, who moved to Mr. Perfect's side.

"The Leader, and his mysterious guest, I suppose?" Mr. Perfect said. "Got to get some fireworks set up in whatever room they plan to do their voodoo in."

The man just looked at him, and Mr. Perfect took a long, weary drag on his cigarette. "Well, aren't you going to scold me for impiety or something?"

But the man sat down heavily on a stone. "Why should I do that, my boy?" he sighed. "In this whole society dedicated to higher causes, why should I chide the one man who was willing to tell me the truth?"

Mr. Perfect's eyebrows raised. He sat down next to his friend. "Cigarette?"

The man demurred.

"Well, what has gotten into you?"

The man looked up. His eyes were still red and raw but there was some firmness to them. "My boy," he said, "My Agnes spoke to me last night – not in a dream, not in a séance, but in a memory, as crystal clear as I knew her myself. I was going down the hall to blubber like a baby, to cry to the seer about my missing her, my constant checking the pulse of my own loneliness, when a voice inside me from as deep as I know myself told me not to do that, that I had always been a better man than that, so I did not. Instead I sat on the edge of my bed, closed my eyes, and saw her. She told me something – or rather her face did, that face I had seen a thousand times in death and life, that face that glowed after she had delivered our son. It was a hard face – it was a face of Life. It told me that life was worth living just for it being life, and not to rush the end. She told me that she had not rushed hers, that our son had not rushed his, that life must unfold to its own purpose and we must trust it and live it."

"She told you ...?"

"Her face did – her memory did. Everything that was as real as she ever was, as what we lived together."

Mr. Perfect looked into his face.

"I will go home and busy myself, I suppose," the old man continued. "Where there is life there is purpose. I can find people to help take care of, families not so lucky as mine." He took a handkerchief Mr. Perfect had offered him. Then Mr. Perfect took a flask and had a small drink.

"And you?" the man asked him. "Surely after this trip you will do something different? Give up wasting your time with all this?"

"It's just the barest corner of my interests," Mr. Perfect began. "It's an amusement in its place, but yes, I have plans for casting my net wide again – the Far East, maybe, or the Mayans, or the aboriginal Australians..."

"Or whatever else it is you're always circling around."

"Circling?"

"Around some truth, some purpose. You're always filling time neglecting the obvious."

"I prefer the Vorticists," Mr. Perfect said, "defining the empty center by the collection of knick-knacks that swirls in around the drain. That's all we can ever know – the center's always inscrutable."

The old man nodded abstractly.

Just then a head popped around the corner. It was a young acolyte of the order. "Meeting down here in five minutes," he said, jerking his thumb down the hall behind him and disappearing again.

"Theosophy and finger sandwiches," Mr. Perfect said, dragging himself to his feet. He helped the old man up. "Come on," he said. "Hope your appetite is back."

They went down a low dark hall and emerged in a second chamber. It was low-ceilinged with sides that melted away into the shadows and purple smoke. The room was fuller than Mr. Perfect had expected. A second group must have already been waiting.

There was a small dais up front. Tall gold torches flickered on either side. Mr. Perfect looked around the room and caught sight of some of the faces in the firelight. He was surprised at who he saw – important faces. Not the usual art crowd, this. Here and there were politicians, some of important name, some aspiring to be. A military man here and there. A famous educator, several men and women of peerage, many former clerics.

Two shadowed figures moved up through the crowd from its left and as they came into the firelight Mr. Perfect recognized the Leader but now saw the second man with him – Pale Poet! Or at least the man who as a young man had been Pale Poet. Now though, like the leader his face was gold and hard and vigorous and bright-eyed. He had a magnetic gaze that laughed and challenged and comforted. He smiled and approved and scolded and all of it was welcome. He stood beside the leader and Mr. Perfect immediately realized that what he was witnessing was the joining of two leaders and, in the body of the crowd, two forces. The flock of big-wigs was Pale Poet's crew, apparently.

"Gathered believers," the Pale Poet began, "We have asked you here to inaugurate and

celebrate a momentous occasion – the joining of our two organizations – the joining of the select few with the Higher Purpose! The yoking of knowledge and talent, of effort and design. A new age of material possibility is upon us. The paint and the hand and the artist now join before the canvas of the world with a science of desire, a post-ideological economy of being"

"The ideal of a perfectable material world..."

"...be ready no matter who wins in the coming conflict..."

"...they killed Christ for less than this..."

Mr. Perfect yawned then reached for his cigarettes. He had heard it all before. A few new words tossed in for testing. As he tapped the silver cigarette case he suddenly felt a hand on his shoulder and he turned to see a strong man in uniform looking him in the eye.

"Bushy Brows!"

The man just stared at him. He had the same coal-black eyes from years before but now their fire looked tempered. "Nobody's called me that for years and I'd thank you not to start."

"But Bushy..."

"No smoking during ceremonial meetings. It detracts from the grandeur of the candles. If you're going to smoke, take it outside."

Mr. Perfect made one last look to spark recognition in his old comrade's eyes but roused none. So he turned and left the room. He walked down the corridor but noticed a hall opening to the side. He ducked under a velvet rope, and on an impulse, proceeded down it. It was dim and narrow and went on further than he had expected. At its end it took a turn into a passage that was truly ancient. He walked down toward a blush of violet light at the end. The walls were narrow and dusty and the ceiling was low, and he felt as if he were walking back in time. At the end it opened into a firelit room with a sarcophagus in the middle, its heavy slab lid leaning against one side.

He peered in the room and began to walk in. A voice stopped him.

"You can go in, but put this on. Out of respect, you must put this on."

The inflection of the man's voice caught Mr. White by surprise. Mr. Perfect looked to see a tall dark-skinned man inside the doorway. He was not one of their party, or, he thought, of the other. His bearing and clothing were native. His face had the ageless sternness of an alien system of authority.

"Put this on."

He held out a loose hooded robe of plain grey for Mr. White. White pulled it on over his clothes and then the man stood to one side out of his way. Mr. White walked into the vacant room.

The area was ancient but not dusty. Mr. White walked over to and looked into the sarcophagus. It was empty.

Suddenly he felt a great weariness in him. He stepped into the sarcophagus, sat down, and rested his elbows on its sides. He felt his head and body relax. He leaned back and closed his

eyes and felt his whole life breath out of him with a sudden sigh. "Oh God!" he thought. "Good God – I'm so sorry."

His mind was instantly pushed by something dim and waiting and predatory. A giant as big as the tide moved in his mind like a shadow. It fascinated and collapsed him. He exhaled, sat up again, and opened his eyes. He fumbled for his cigarettes.

"Not in here!" the guard announced sternly. "Outside."

Mr. Perfect rose and stepped out of the limestone box. He walked past the guard and retraced his route down halls, until at last he saw waning daylight coming from a doorway. He proceeded down the hall toward it and out into the sandy evening. It was quiet.

He fumbled for his cigarettes and realized he was still wearing the dingy grey robe. He raised its hood against the stinging sand then he turned toward the outer stone walls and cupped his hands to light a cigarette.

After he exhaled he listened to faint rising and falling murmur of the meeting still going on within. It confirmed that he was missing nothing, and so he took out of a batch of telegrams he'd been handed upon their boats' arrival and began to peruse them.

One caught his eye: "Urgent notice to Mr. Ernest White. Have tried to relay this message to you several times but have been unsuccessful. Your mother has died."

He felt the wind pin his head against the stone behind it.

"Please acknowledge receipt of this message at once."

He closed his eyes then opened them again. He felt his heart turn then sink, like all the world was a hole. He sank down against the wall.

One minute later he heard sharp staccato bursts coming from inside, then screams, then a violent scuffling.

He dropped his cigarette to the sand. Soon people began running out, their faces blanched, their clothes blood spattered. They did not stop to look at him, so White grabbed the shoulder of next fellow who raced by and the man fell down in the sand.

"What's going on in there?"

"One of the cattle went nuts! Said the cult killed his daughter. He shot the leader, and the other leader, and a lot of others besides. But an old English guy stopped him." The man pushed himself up off the ground and was about to run but Mr. White grabbed hold of him again.

"But the man who stopped him – is he okay?"

"Hell no, he's dead!" the man said, and tore himself loose from Mr. White's grip and ran away.

Mr. Perfect paused. Others went running past him. He folded his telegrams and placed them neatly in his pocket. He looked down and saw a small pistol lying on the ground where the man had fallen. He picked it up and put it to his head, pulled the trigger, but the gun did not fire, so he tossed it aside and started walking across the sand. The wind stirred up a vortex to hide him, and his unconscious steps led him back toward the home of his childhood.

