

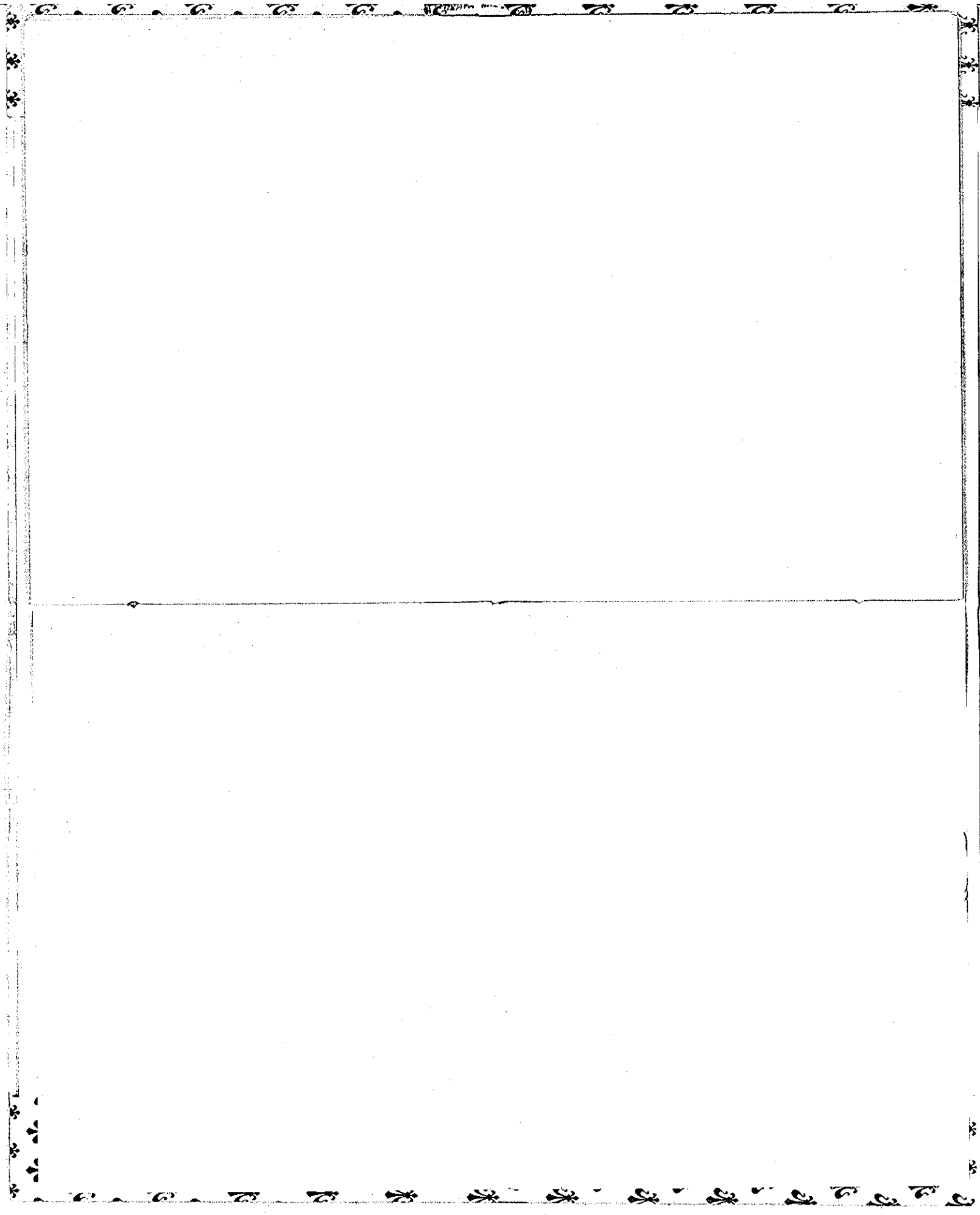
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AVRAM DAVIDSON

*Polly Charms,  
The Sleeping Woman*

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Archives  
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1977



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A924E52  
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Visitors to the great city of Bella, capital of the Triune Monarchy of Scythia-Pannonia-Transbalkania, have many famous and memorable sights to see, and will find many guides to show them. Assuming such a visitor to be so limited, unfortunately, in his time as to be able to see but three of these sights, and assuming the guide to be of any experience at all, there are three which will under any circumstances however hasty be shown.

One, of course, is the great Private Park, and, of course, the greatest thing about it is that it is no longer private: the first thing which the King-Emperor Ignats Louis having done, upon succeeding the reclusive Mazilian the Mad on the throne, being to throw open the Private Park to the public. The park is a marvel of landscape architecture, although this is perhaps caviar to the general. The general prefer to flock there to what is, after all, the largest merry-go-round in the world. And, next to that, the general prefer to stand and watch the vehicles on the New Model Road, which Ignats Louis,

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with great foresight, established for the exclusive use of what are now coming to be known as "motor-cars," in order (as The Presence sagely said), "In order that they may experiment without frightening the horses or be frightened by them." In a surprisingly brief period of time it became traditional for all owners of "motor-cars," between the hours of three and four in the afternoon, to make at least three complete circuits of the New Model Road. (The order that all such vehicles, whether propelled by steam, electricity, naphtha, or other means, be hauled to and from the Road by horsepower, is no longer enforced.)

The second sight which it would certainly be impossible to leave Bella without having seen is the Italian Bridge. Although this is no longer the only bridge which crosses, at Bella, the blue and beautiful Ister, the gracious parabolas of its eleven arches are always sure to lift the heart; the legend that it was designed by Leonardo da Vinci remains unproved. But of course it is neither the architecture nor the legend which brings most visitors, it is the site, midway across, marked by a marble plaque (*From This Point On The Italian Bridge / The Pre-Triune Monarchical Poet / IZKO VARNA / Having Been Spurned By The Beautiful Dancer, Gretchelle / LEAPED TO HIS DOOM / Leaving Behind A Copy Of His Famously Heart-Rending Poem / FAREWELL, O BELLA / A Clever Play Upon Words Which Will Not / Escape The Learned*) usually accompanied by some floral tribute or other. The late well-known character, Frow Poppoff, for many years made a modest living by selling small bundles of posies to visitors for this very purpose; often, when trade was slow, the worthy Popoff would recite Varna's famous poem, with gestures.

The third of the sights not to be missed is at Number 33, Turkling Street; one refers, of course, to The Spot Where The Turkling Faltered And Turned Back. (The well-known witticism, that the Turkling faltered and turned back because he could not get his horse past the push-carts, refers to an earlier period, when the street was an adjunct to the salt-fish, comb, and bobbin open-air market. This has long since passed. Nor is to be thought that

the fiercest action of the Eleventh Turkish War took place under the bulging windows of Number 33, for the site at that time lay half a furlong beyond the old city wall. The "Turkling" in question was, of course, the infamous Murad the Unspeakable, also called Murad the Midget. It was certainly here that the Turkish tide turned back. According to the Ottoman Chronicle, "Crying, 'Accursed be those who add gods to God!' the valiant Prince Murad spurred on his charger, but, alas, fell therefrom and broke his pellucid neck . . ." The Glagolitic Annals insist that his actual words were, "Who ordered this stupid charge? He should be impaled!"—at which moment he himself was fatally pierced by the crossbow bolt of one of the valiant Illyrian Mercenaries. But the point is perhaps no longer important.

A uniformed guard with a drawn sword paces up and down by the granite slab set level with the pavement which marks the place where Murad fell, and it is natural that visitors take it for granted that the guard is a municipal functionary. Actually, he is not. A law passed during the Pacification of 1858 has limited private guards with drawn swords under the following terms: The employer of such a guard must have at least sixteen quarterings of nobility, not less than five registered degrees in the learned sciences, and a minimum of one hundred thousand ducats deposited in the Imperial Two Percent Gold Bond Funds.

In the entire Triune Monarchy of Scythia-Pannonia-Transbalkania, only one person has ever qualified under this law: and that one is, of course, the unquestionably great and justly famous Engelbert Eszterhazy, Doctor of Jurisprudence, Doctor of Medicine, Doctor of Philosophy, Doctor of Literature, Doctor of Science, *et sic cetera*; and the guard is his own private guard and patrols in front of his own private home, Number 33, Turkling Street.

One afternoon in the middle late autumn, a heavyset man wearing the heavy gray suit and high-crowned gray derby hat which were almost the uniform of the plain-clothes division of the Municipal Police approached the guard and raised his eyebrows. The guard responded by

raising his sword in salute. The caller nodded, and, opening the door, entered Number 33. There was none of this petty-bourgeois business of knocking, or of doorbells. Inside the lower hall, the day porter, Lemkotch, arose from his chair and bowed.

"Sir Inspector."

"Ask Dr. Eszterhazy if he can see me."

"My master is expecting the Sir Inspector. Please to go right up. I will tell the housekeeper that she may bring the coffee."

The caller, who had expelled a slight sigh of surprise at hearing the first sentence, displayed a slight smile at hearing the last. "Tell me, Lemkotch, does your master know absolutely everything?"

The stalwart, grizzled-haired servant paused a moment, then said, casually, "Oh yes, Sir Inspector. Everything." He bowed again, and departed on his errand.

The caller trod heavily upon the runner of the staircase, of a dull, ox-blood color which seemed to glow in the gaslight. It had been pieced together from a once-priceless Ispahani carpet which had suffered damages during the Great Fire of '93 and had been presented by an informal syndicate of the poorer Armenian merchants.

"This is for remembrance," the spokesman said.

And Eszterhazy's reply was, "It is better than rue."

He said now, "You are welcome, Commissioner Lobats. You are not, as you know, invariably welcome, because sometimes you bring zigs when I am engaged in zags. But this business of the young Englishwoman, Polly Charms, promises to be of at least mild interest."

Lobats blinked, gave a respectful glance at the signed cabinet photograph of The Presence in a silver frame, considered a few conversational openings, decided, finally, on a third.

"Your porter is well-trained in simple honesty," he said. "He greets me simply as 'Sir Commissioner,' with none of this 'High-born Officer,' with the slight sneer and the half-concealed leer which I get from the servants in some houses . . . I needn't say which. Everyone knows

that my father is a butcher, and that his father carried carcasses in the Ox Market."

Eszterhazy waved a dismissal of the matter. "All servants are snobs," he said. "Never mind. Remember what one of Bonaparte's marshals said to that hangover from the Old Regime who told him, 'You have no ancestors.' 'Look at me,' he said; 'I am an ancestor.'"

Lobats's heavy lips slowly and silently repeated the phrase. He nodded, took a small notebook from his pocket, and wrote it down. Then his head snapped up. "Say . . . Doctor. Explain how you knew that I was coming about this Polly Charms . . ." His eyes rested upon another framed picture, but this one he recognized as a caricature by the famous newspaper artist, Klunck: a figure preternaturally tall and thin, with a nose like a needle and the brows bulging on either side like a house-frow's market-bag. And he wondered, almost bitterly, how Eszterhazy could refrain from rage at having seen it—much less, framing it and displaying it for all to see.

"Well, Karrol-Francois," Eszterhazy began, almost indugently, "you see, I get my newspapers almost damp from the press. This means that the early afternoon edition of the *Intelligencer* got here at eleven o'clock. Naturally, one does not look for a learned summary of the significance of the new price of gold in the *Intelligencer*, nor for an editorial about the Bulgarian troop movements. One does not read it to be enlightened, one reads it to be entertained. On hearing about this—this exhibition, shall we call it—upon the arrival of the *Intelligencer* I turned at once to the half-page of *Tiny Topics* . . . you see . . ."

Lobats nodded. He, too, no matter what he had heard or had not heard, also turned at once to the half-page of *Tiny Topics*, as soon as he had the day's copy of the *Intelligencer* to hand. And, even though he had already turned to it once, and already read it twice, he not only turned to see it in the copy which Eszterhazy now spread out over his desk, he took out his magnifying glass. (Lobats was too shy to wear spectacles, coming of a social class which looked upon them as a sign of weakness, or of swank.)

### New Interesting Little Scientific Exhibit

We found our curiosity well repaid for having visited a little scientific exhibit at the old Goldbeaters' Arcade where we saw the already famous Mis Polly Charms, the young English-woman who fell into a deep sleep over thirty years ago and has not since awakened. In fact, she slept entirely the raging cannot-shot of the Siege of Paris. The beautiful tragic English-woman, Mis Polly Charms, has not seemingly aged a day and in her condition of deep mesmerism she is said to be able to understand questions put to her by means of the principle of animal magnetism and to answer the questions put to her without waking up; also for a small sum in addition to the small price of admission she sings a deeply affecting song in French.

Lobats tapped the page with a thick and hairy finger. "I'll tell you what, Doctor," he said, gravely. "I believe that this bit here—where is it?—what rotten ink and type these cheap papers use nowadays . . . move my glass . . . ah, ah, oh here it is, this bit where it says, '*In fact she slept entirely the raging cannot-shot of the Siege of Paris.*' I believe that is what is called a misprint and that it ought to read instead . . . oh . . . something like this: '*In fact, she slept entirely through the raging cannon-shot of the Siege of Paris,*' or something like that. Eh?"

Eszterhazy looked up. His gray eyes sparkled. "Why, I believe that you are quite right, Karrol-Francois," he said. "I am proud of you."

Commissioner Lobats blushed, and he struggled with an embarrassed smile.

"So. Upon reading this, I looked to see the time, I calculated that the *Intelligencer* would reach you by twenty minutes after eleven, that you would have read the item by eleven-thirty, and that you would be here at ten minutes of twelve. Do you think it is a case of abduction, then?"

Lobats shook his head. "Why should I try to fool you? You know as well as I do, better than I do, that I'm a fool for all sorts of circus acts, sideshows, mountebanks, scientific exhibitions, odd bits, funny animals, house-hauntings, and all such—"

Eszterhazy snapped his fingers, twice. In a moment his manservant was at his side with hat, coat, gloves, and walking stick. No one else in the entire Triune Monarchy (or, for that matter, elsewhere) had for manservant one of the wild tribe of Mountain Tsiganes; no one else, in fact, would even have thought of it. Now came those flashing eyes, that floating hair, that so-untamed countenance, that air of savage freedom, here and now to be silently holding out coat, hat, gloves, and walking stick? Who knows?

"Thank you, Herrekk," said Eszterhazy. Only he and Herrekk knew.

"I will tell you, Commissioner," Eszterhazy said, "so am I!"

"Well, Doctor," the Commissioner said, "I thought as much."

Chuckling together, they went down the stairs.

At least one of the goldbeaters was still at work in the old Arcade, as a rhythmical thumping sound testified, but for the most part they had moved on to the New. Some of the former workshops were used as warehouses of sundry sorts; here was a fortune-teller, slightly disguised as a couturière; there was a corn-doctor, with two plaster casts in his window showing *Before* and *After*, with *Before* resembling the hoof of a gouty ogre, while *After* would have been worthy of a prima ballerina. And finally, under a cheaply painted and already flaking wooden board reading *The Miniature Hall of Science*, was a sort of imitation theater entrance. Where the posters would have been were bills in Gothic, Avar, Glagolitic (Slovatchko), Romanou, and even—despite the old proverb, "There are a hundred ways of wasting paint, and the first way is to paint a sign in Vloxx"—Vloxx. The percentage of literacy among the Vloxxfolk may not have been high, but someone was taking no chances.



The someone was certainly not the down-at-heels fellow with a homemade crutch who, pointing the crutch at this last bill, enquired, "Do you know what you'd get if you crossed a pig with a Vloxfellow?" And, answering his own question, replied, "A dirty pig." And waited for the laugh.

"Be off with you," said Lobats, curtly. The loafer slunk away.

There was even a bill in French.

POLLY CHARMS            SLEEPING BEAUTY OF  
SLEEPING WOMAN        30 YEARS SLUMBER 30  
ANSWERS QUESTIONS!    ENGLISHWOMAN ! ! ! !  
MOST REMARKABLE!      VERY UNUSUAL SIGHT!  
DOES SHE ANSWER FROM  
THE WORLD OF THE LIVING  
OR THE DEAD ? ? ? ? ?  
COME! AND ! SEE ! ! !

And so on. And so on.

The fat old woman at the ticket window, with dyed hair and wearing the traditional red velvet dress split under the arms, smiled fawningly at them.

"Permit," said Lobats, putting out his hand.

Nodding rapidly, she reached up to where a multitude of papers hung from a wire on clothespins, took one down, examined it, returned it, took another down, gave it a peep, nodded even more rapidly, and handed it out the window.

"Very well, Frow Grigou," said Lobats, handing it back. "Two tickets, please," putting coins on the counter.

Frow Grigou, instead of nodding her head, now began to shake it rapidly, and pushed the money back, smiling archly. "Guests, the High-born Gentlemen, our guests, oh no no oh no—"

Lobats turned as red as Frow Grigou's dress. "Tickets!" he growled. "Take the money. Take the—"

She took it this time, and hastily, extending the tickets, her head now rocking slowly from side to side, still smiling archly, but now with a puzzled note added, as though the insistence on paying for admission were some

bit of odd behavior which required the indulgence of the tolerant. "Always glad to see," she gobbled, her voice dying away behind them as they walked the short, dusty hall, "... High-born Gents... law-abiding... de-lighted..."

Only one of the five or six functioning gas jets inside the Exhibition Room had a mantle, and at least two of the others suffered a malfunction which caused them to bob up and down whenever a dray went by in the street; the light was therefore both inadequate and uncertain. And a soft voice now came from out of the dimness, saying, "*Billet? Billet?*"

Nature had formed the man who now came forward to look noble, but something else had re-formed him to look furtive. His head was large, his features basically handsome, with long and white side whiskers neatly trimmed so that not a hair straggled, but the head itself was completely hairless, with not even a fringe. The head was canted to one side, and the man looked at them out of the corner of one faded-blue eye as he took the tickets. Eszterhazy, almost as though automatically, and rather slowly, reached over and placed the tips of his fingers upon the man's head and ran them lightly over the surface... for just a moment...

Then he pulled them away, as though they had been burned.

"A phrenologist," the man murmured in English, indulgently, almost contemptuously.

"Among other things," said Eszterhazy, also in English. A horrid change came over the man's face; his haggard and quasi-noble features dissolved into a flux of tics and grimaces. Once or twice his mouth opened and closed. Then, "*Come right in, gentlemen, the exhibition will commence almost any moment now,*" he said, unevenly, in a mixture of terrible French and broken German. And, "... *one of the most remarkable phenomena of the age,*" he whispered, again in English. Then he seemed to fall in upon himself, his head bowed down, his shoulders hunched, and he turned away from them in a curious twisting motion.

Lobats looked with a quizzical face to Eszterhazy and

"It is one of the occult, or alchemical, sonnets of the Count of Saint-Germain . . . if he was . . . who lived at least two hundred years . . . if he did," Eszterhazy said, low-voiced.

Once more the voice—high and clear as that of a child, strong as that of a man—took up the refrain.

*Rien n'était, Dieu voulut, rien devint quelque chose,  
J'en doutais, je cherchay sur quoi l'univers pose,  
Rien gardait l'équilibre et servait de soutien.*

The Commissioner uttered an exclamation. "Now I know! I remember hearing—was years ago—an Italian singer—"

"—Yes—"  
"He was a . . . a . . . a whatchemaycallit . . . one of them—"

"A castrato. Yes . . ."

Once more, and for the last time, the voice, between that of men and women, soared up, magnificent, despite all distortion, from the great, curling cornucopia of the gramophone horn.

*"Enfin, avec tes poids de l'éloge et du blâme,  
Je pesay l'éternel, il appela mon âme,  
Je mourus, j'adoray, je ne savais plus rien . . ."*

The moment's silence which followed the end of the song was broken by another and more earthly voice, and one well-enough known to both Eszterhazy and Lobats. It was that of one Dougherty, a supposed political exile of many years' residence in Bella. From time to time one came upon him in unfashionable coffeehouses, or establishments where stronger drink was served. Sometimes the man was writing something; sometimes he explained that it was part of a book which he was writing, and sometimes he explained nothing, but scrawled slowly away in a dreamy fashion. At other times he had no paper in front of him, only a glass, into or beyond which he stared slackly. This man Dougherty was tall and he was stooped and he wore thick eyeglasses and now and then he silently moved his lips—lips surprisingly fresh

observed with astonishment and concern that his companion was—even in that dim and fitful light—gone pale and drawn, jaw thrust outward and downward in a grimace which might have been—had it been someone else, anyone else—fright . . .

But, in a moment, face and man were the same as before, save that the man had swiftly taken out a silken pocket handkerchief, wiped his face, and as swiftly returned it. And before Lobats had time to say one word, a thin and almost eerie sound announced a gramophone had added its "note scientific" to the atmosphere. It took a few seconds, during which a group of newcomers, evidently mostly clerks and such who were taking advantage of their luncheon time, entered the room . . . it took a few seconds for one to recognize, over the sudden clatter and chatter, that the gramophone was offering a song in French. Strange and curious were the words, and curious and strange the voice.

*Curieux scrutateur de la nature entière,  
J'ay connu du grand tout le principe et la fin,  
J'ay vu l'or en puissance au fond de sa minière,  
J'ay saisi sa matière et surprise son levain.\**

Few of those present, clearly, understood the words, yet all were somehow moved. Obscure the burden, the message unclear; the voice seemed moreover odd, un-earthly, and grotesque through the transposition of the primitive machine: yet the effect was as beautiful as it was uncanny.

*J'expliquay par quel art l'âme aux flancs d'une mère,  
Fait sa maison, l'emporte, et comment un pépin  
Mis contre un grain de blé, sous l'humide poussière,  
L'un plante et l'autre cep, sont le pain et le vin.*

Lobats dug his companion in the ribs gently and in a hoarse whisper asked, "What is it?"

\*from *Poèmes Philosophiques sur l'Homme*, Paris, 1795, quoted in *The Count of Saint Germain*, by Isabel Cooper-Ashley, Steiner, Blauvelt, New York, 1970.

and full in that ruined gray countenance. Officially he described himself as "Translator, Interpreter, and Guide," and he was evidently acting now in the first and second of these capacities.

"Gentlemen," he began (and he used the English word), "Gentlemen . . . Mr. Murgatroyd, the entrepreneur of this scientific exhibition has asked me to thank those of you who have honored him with your patronage, and to express his regret that he does not speak with fluency in the languages of the Triune Monarchy, whose warm and frequent hospitality . . ." Here he paused, and seemed to sag a bit, as though bowed beneath the weight of all the nonsense and humbug which convention required him to be saying—and which he had been saying, in one way or another, over and over, for decades. Indeed, he frankly sighed, put his hand to his forehead, then straightened, and took in his hand something which the entrepreneur had given: it seemed to be a pamphlet, or booklet.

"Mmmm . . . Yes . . . Some interesting facts, taken from a voluminous work written on the subject of the mysterious sleeping woman, Polly Charms, by a member of the French Academy and the Sorbonne. The subject of this scientific exhibition, the ever-young Englishwoman, Miss Mary Charms, called Polly, was born in—"

His remarks, which had sunk to a monotone, were interrupted now by several exclamations of annoyance, amidst which one voice now made itself heard, and distinctly: "Come on, now, Dear Sir ['Lijberherra'—sarcastically], save all this muckdirt ['Schejssdrekka'] for those there *gentlemen* who've got the whole afternoon at their leisure: come on, let's see . . ."

Lobats coughed sufficiently to draw attention. The voice hesitated, then went on, though in tones somewhat less rough and menacing, to say that they were working-people, didn't have much time, had payed to see this here Mss Sharms, and wanted to see her or their money back, so, "Save the French Sorbonne for the dessert course, for them as can wait, and let's get on with it."

Dougherty shrugged, leaned over and spoke to Murgatroyd, who also shrugged, then gestured to Frow Grigou, who did not bother to shrug, but, indicating by a flurry

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"Map by Prof. J. Westall, Dept. of Geography, State University of California at San Francisco"

of nods and smirks that she was only too happy to oblige and merely wondered that anyone should think otherwise, trotted swiftly to the side of the room and pulled at a semi-visible cord. The filthy old curtain, bearing the just-visible name of a firm of patent-medicine makers long bankrupt, began—with a series of jerks and starts in keeping with the hiccuppy-gaslights—to go up.

And Mr. Murgatroyd, not even waiting for the process to be complete, moved forward and with a smack of his lips began to speak, and then to speak in English, and went on speaking, leaving to Dougherty to catch up, or not, with the translation and interpretation.

"It was just thirty years ago, my lords and ladies and gentlemen, just exactly thirty years ago to this very day—" But his glib patter, obviously long and often repeated, plus the fact of the term *30 Years* appearing and in faded letters on several of the bills posted outside, made it at once obvious that the "thirty years" was a phrase by now ritualized and symbolic. Perhaps he, or perhaps another, had endowed Polly Charms with thirty years' slumber at the very beginning of the show's career; or, perhaps, and the thought made one shudder, Murgatroyd had been saying "30 years" for far longer than any period of only thirty years. "That young Miss Mary Charms, called Polly, at the age of fifteen years, accompanied by her mother and several other loved ones . . ."

He trailed off into silence, having been pushed aside by several of those honoring him with their patronage as they shoved up to see; in the silence, Dougherty proceeded with his translations . . . which may or may not have been listened to by any.

Eszterhazy realized that he had been expecting, for some reason, to see either a coffin or something very much like it. What he actually saw was something resembling an infant's crib, though of course much larger, and, at very first glimpse, it seemed to be filled with a mass of—

" . . . Professor Leonardo de Entwistle, the noted mesmerologist," Murgatroyd's voice suddenly was heard again, after the first burst of exclamations had subsided. His eyes shifted and met Eszterhazy's. The Englishman's eyes at

once closed, opened, closed, opened, and, as it were desparately, looked away. Where Eszterhazy looked was into the crib, and what he saw it was almost filled with was, or seemed to be, hair . . . long and lustrous golden-brown hair. Coils and braids of it. Immense tresses of it. Masses and masses of it. Here and there ribbons had been affixed to it. And still it went on.

And, almost buried in it, slightly raised by a pillow at the head of the crib was another head, a human head, the head of, and indeed of, a female in early womanhood.

"Can we touch it—uh, *her*?"

Murgatroyd muttered.

"One at a time, and gently," said Dougherty. "Gently . . . gently!"

Fingers were applied, some hesitantly. A palm was applied to the side of the face. Another was raised and moving down, though not, by the looks of it, or by the owner's looks, to the face; at this point Lobats grunted and grabbed the man's wrist. Not gently. The man growled that he was just going to—but the disclaimer fell off into a snarl, and the gesture was not repeated. Someone managed to find a hand and lifted it up, with a triumphant air, as though no one had ever seen a hand before. " He

And Eszterhazy now said, "All right. *Enough*. . ." He moved up; the crowd moved back. He took out the stethoscope. The crowd said *Ahhh*.

"That's the philosopher," someone said to someone else. Who said, "*Ohyes*," although what quality either one attached to the term perhaps neither understood precisely.

God only knew where the girl's garment had been made, or when, or by whom; indeed, it seemed to have been made over many times, and to consist of sundry strata, so to speak. Now and again it had occurred to Whomever that the girl was supposed to be sleeping, and so the semblance of a nightgown had been fashioned. Several times. And on several other occasions the theatrical elements of it all had overcome, and attempts had been made to provide the sort of dress which a chanteuse might have been wearing . . . wearing, that is, in some provincial music hall where the dressmakers had odd and

old-fashioned ideas of what a chanteuse might like to wear... and the chanteuses, for that matter, even odder ones.

There was silk and there was cotton and there was muslin, lace, artificial flowers, ruches, embroidered gorges, gussets, embroidered yokes—

The girl's eyes were almost entirely closed. One lid was just barely raised, and a thin line gleamed, at a certain angle, underneath. Sleepers of that age do not flush, always, as children often do, in sleep. There was color in the face, though not much. The lips were the tint of a pink. A small gold ring showed in one ear; the other ear was concealed by the hair.

"The hair," said Murgatroyd, "*the hair has never stopped growing!*" A kind of delight seemed to seize him as he said it.

Eszterhazy's look brought silence. And another flurry of tics. Several times he moved the stethoscope. Then the silence was broken. "A wax doll, isn't it, Professor? Isn't—"

Eszterhazy shook his head. "The heartbeat is perceptible," he said. "Though very, very faint." The crowd sighed. He removed the ear-pieces and passed the instrument to Commissioner Lobats, who, looking immensely proud and twice as important, attached himself to it—not without difficulty. After some moments, he—very slowly—nodded twice. The crowd sighed again.

"Questions? Has anyone a question to ask of Polly Charms, the Sleeping Woman?—ah, one moment, please. It is time for her daily nourishment." Murgatroyd, with a practiced flourish, produced two bottles, a glass, and a very tarnished, very battered, but unquestionably silver, spoon. "All attempts to make the mysterious and lovely Miss Mary partake of solid sustenance have failed. Nor will her system accept even gruel. Accordingly, and on the advice of her physicians—of the foremost physicians in Christendom—" Here he turned and beckoned to a member of the audience, an elderly dandy, audibly recognized by several as a ribbon clerk in a nearby retail emporium. "I should like to ask of you the favor, sir,

to taste and smell of this and to give us your honest and unbought opinion as to its nature."

The man simpered, sniffed, sipped. Smacked his lips. "Ah. Why that's Tokai. Bull's-blood Tokai." And he made as though to take more. Laughs and guffaws and jests. The contents of the other bottle were declared to be water. The girl's manager then ceremonially mixed the glass half-full of wine and half of water. He might have been an alchemist, proving an elixir. "Come on, now, come on. Some of you are in a hurry, you say... Questions?"

Snickers, jokes, people being pushed forward, people holding back. Then the ribbon clerk, glancing at his watch, a-dangle and a-bangle with fobs and seals, said, "Very well. One question and then I must go. Gracious Lady: Who is Frantchek? And where?"

Murgatroyd held the spoon to her lips, and, indeed so gently, raised her head a trifle. "Just a spoonful. Polly. A nice spoon of something good. To please Father Murgatroyd." The slick and hairless head bent over, indeed like that of a father cossetting an ill child. Slowly and slightly the lips parted. The spoon clinked against the even rows of teeth. Withdrew.

"Very well, Polly. You're a good girl. Father Murgatroyd is very pleased with you. And now, if you please, an answer to the question. 'Who is Frantchek? And where?'"

The lips parted once again. A faint, a very faint sigh was heard. And then, in the voice of a girl in her middle teens imitating one much younger, in tones artificial and stilted, Polly Charms spoke.

"*Why, Brother, I am in America. With Uncle.*"

All turned to the old dandy, who had been standing, one hand on hip, with an expression of one who expects to be fooled. But who won't be, even if he is. Because of expecting it. This expression quite fell away. He gaped. "Well, Maurits. And what about that?" they pressed him.

"Why... why... Why, Frantchek is my brother. He run off, oh, five-and-twenty-year ago. We none of us had a word of him—"

"And the uncle? In America?"

Old Maurits slowly nodded, dumbfounded. "I *did* have an uncle, in America. Maybe still do. I don't know— With a jerk away from the hand on his shoulder, he stumbled out, face in his hands.

Comment was uncertain. One said, "Well, that didn't really prove nothing. . . Still. . ."

And another one—probably the same who had loudly demanded the biographical details be omitted, now said, loudly, "Well, Miss, I think you're a fake, a clever fake. Wha-at? Why, half the people in the Empire have a brother named Francisek, and an uncle in America! Now, just you answer *this* question. What's this in my own closed hand, here in this coat pocket?"

Another spoonful of wine and water.

Another expectant silence, this time with the questioner openly sneering.

Another answer.

"The pearl-handled knife which you stole at the bath-house . . ."

And now see the fellow, face mottled, furious, starting toward the sleeping woman, hand moving up and out of the pocket. And see Lobats lunge, hear a sudden and sick cry of pain. See a something fall to the ground. And watch the man, now suddenly pale, as Lobats says, "Get out! Or—!" Watch him get . . . holding one hand with the other. And see the others stoop and gape.

"A pearl-handled knife!"

"Jesus, Mary, and—"

"—known him for years, he ain't no good—"

And now someone, first clutching his head in his hands, and then leaning forward, then drawing back and staring, glaring all round, face twisted with half shame and half defiance: "Listen . . . listen . . . Say—I want to *know*. Is my wife . . . is she all that she should be—to me—is *she*—" He doesn't finish, nobody dares to laugh. They can hear him breathing heavily through heavily distended nostrils.

Another spoonful. Another pause.

"Better than *she* should be . . . though little you *de-serve* it . . ."

The man will not face anyone. He leans to, one side, head bent, breathing *very* heavily.

And soon the last question has been asked, and the wine is all gone.—Or, perhaps, it is the other way around.

And, as Murgatroyd goes to put down the spoon, and the audience is suddenly uncertain, suddenly everyone looks at someone whom nobody has looked at before. Who says, "And so, Professors, what about the French song?" A spruce, elderly gent, shiny red cheeks, garments cut in the fifth year of the Reign, looking for all the world like a minor notary from one of the remoter suburbs ("Ten tramways and a fiacre ride away," as the saying goes) where each family still has its own cow, and probably up to the center of the city for his annual trip to have his licensure renewed; wanting a bit of fun along with it, and, not daring to tell the old lady ("Tanta Minna," probably) that he has had it at any place more risky, has been having it at a "scientific exhibition."

"Wasn't there supposed to be a French song?" he asks calmly.

Murgatroyd, at a murmur from Dougherty, produces a wooden tray lined with worn green velvet and covertly places in it a single half-ducat, which he watches rather anxiously. "For a very slight additional charge," he says, starting the rounds, "a beautiful song in the French language will be sung by the lovely and mysterious Polly Charms, the—"

Spectators show signs of departing . . . or, at any rate, of drawing away from the collection tray. A single piece of gold spins through the air, all a-glitter, falls right upon the half-ducat with a pure ringing sound. Mr. Murgatroyd looks up, almost wildly, sees Eszterhazy looking at him. Who says, "Get on with it."

Murgatroyd makes the money vanish. He leans over the sleeping woman, takes up her right hand, and slowly caresses it. "Will you sing us a song, Polly dear?" he asks. Almost, one might think, anxiously.

"That sweet French song taught you by Madame, in the old days . . . Eh?" And, no song being forthcoming,

he clears his throat and quaveringly begins, "Je vous envoie un bouquet... Eh, Polly?"

Eszterhazy, watching, sees a slight tremor in the pale, pale throat. A slight rise in the slight bosom, covered in its bedizened robe. The mouth opens. An indrawn breath is clearly heard. And then she sings. Polly Charms, the Sleeping Lady, sings.

*"Je vous envoie un bouquet que ma main  
Vient de trier de ces fleurs epaves:  
Qui ne les eust à ce vespre cueillies,  
Chentes à terre elles fussent demain."*

No one had asked Dougherty to translate the previous French song, sung by the eunuch singer (surely one of the very last) on the gramophone; nor had he done so; nor did anyone ask him to translate now. Yet, and without his gray face changing at all, his gray lips moved, and he began, "I send you now a sheaf of fairest flowers / Which my hand picked; yet are they so full blown, / Had no one plucked them they had died alone, / Fallen to earth before tomorrow's hours."\*

Still, Murgatroyd caressed the pallid hand. And again, the eerie and infantile voice sang out.

*"Cela vous soit un exemple certain  
Que vos beautez, bien qu'elles soient fleuries,  
En peu de temps cherront toutes fletries,  
Et comme fleurs periront tout soudain."*

"Then let this be a portent in your bowers," Dougherty went on. "Though all your beauteous loveliness is grown, / In a brief while it falls to earth o'erthrown, / Like withered blossoms, stripped of all their powers . . . Quietness.

A dray rumbles by in the street. The gas lights bob up and down. Breaths are let out, throats cleared. Feet shuffle.

\*from Ronsard's *Lyrics*, tr. by William Sirling, pub. by Allan Wingate, no date nor place of publication indicated.

"Well, now," says old Uncle Oskar, "that was very nice, I am sure." Smiling benignly, he walks over, and, into the now empty collection plate he drops a large old five-coppers piece. Nodding and beaming, he departs. It has been worth every *copperka* of it to him, the entire performance. Tonight, over the potato dumplings with sour-cROUT and garlic wurst, he will tell Tanta Minna all about it. In fact, if he is alive and she is alive, ten years from now, he will still be telling about it; and she, Tanta Minna, will still be as astonished as ever, punctuating each pause with *Jesus, Mary, and Joseph!* or, alternately, *Oh, thou dear Cross!*

Some follow after, some still remain.

"The performance is over," says Eszterhazy.

Lobats: "Over. Good afternoon to you."

And Frow Grigou calls after them, anxious as ever, "There is another performance at half-past five, Dear Sirs, and also at eight and at ten!"

Lobats looks at Eszterhazy, as though to say, What now? And Eszterhazy looks at Murgatroyd. "I am a Doctor of Medicine and a Titular Court Physician," he says; "and I should like your permission to make an examination of—" he gestures. (Dougherty, without looking anywhere in particular, at once begins to translate Eszterhazy's English into Avar, then slowly seems to feel that this is, perhaps, not exactly what is wanted at the moment, and his voice dies away.)

Murgatroyd licks his lips, the lower parts of his mustache. Almost, he licks the tip of his nose. "Oh no," he says. "Oh no . . ."

"And this," Eszterhazy says, calmly, "is a Commissioner of Police."

Murgatroyd looks at the Commissioner of Police, who looks back; he looks at Dougherty, who looks away; then he looks for Frow Grigou.

But Frow Grigou has gone, quite gone.

Excerpts from the Day-Book of Dr. Eszterhazy:

"... *Query Reuters for the precise date of the death by apoplexy of ENTWHISTLE, LEONARD (see Private Encyclopedia), British mesmerist and mountebank, sup-*

posedly in the midst of an exhibition or performance . . .  
" . . . no signs of any callosities whatever on the soles  
of the female's feet, or heels . . . degeneration of the mus-  
cular tissue, such as is found among the long-sentile, was  
not present, however . . .

"Murgatroyd declared, though reluctantly, that passage  
of waste materials was infrequent, and scanty . . .

"Murgatroyd was almost violent in reply to the tentative  
suggestion of Lobats that an attempt, by mesmerism, to  
bring the young woman out of this supposed-mesmeric  
trance be attempted. MEMO: To re-read story by Ameri-  
can writer E. A. Poe, The Case of Monsieur Waldemar.  
In this tale, a presumed account of facts, a dying man is  
placed under mesmeric trance of long duration (exact  
duration not recalled); removal of trance state or condi-  
tion discloses that 'Waldemar' has actually been dead,  
body at once lapsing into decay. Cannot state at present  
if the story is entirely fictitious or not; another story by  
same writer (Marie Roget?) known to be demi-factual.

"Obvious: welfare of young woman, Charms, is first  
consideration.

"Suggestion: Consider question of use of galvanic bat-  
teries, but only if—"

For some seconds the sound of running feet had echoed  
in the narrow street below. A voice, hoarse and labored . . .  
Then the night porter, Emmerman, entered. He was  
always brief. "Goldbeaters' Arcade on fire, master," he  
said now. Adding, as Eszterhazy, with an exclamation,  
ran for his medical bag, "Commissioner Lobats has sent  
word." The Tsigane had appeared, as though rising from  
out of the floor (where, indeed, on the threshold of his  
master's bedroom door he always slept), but Eszterhazy,  
waving aside the coat and hat, said two words: "The  
steam—". He followed the silently running Herrekk  
through the apartment and down the back steps to the  
mews, where the runabout was kept, and they leaped on  
it. Schwebel, the retired railroad engineer who maintained  
the machine, had been charged to see that a head of  
steam was always kept up, and he had never failed. With  
a sketch of a salute, he threw open the stable door. With  
a low hiss, the machine, Eszterhazy at the tiller, rolled

out into the night. Herrekk had already begun to toll the  
great bronze handbell to warn all passersby out of the  
way.

Lobats had said that he was "a fool for all sorts of  
circus acts, sideshows, mountebanks, scientific exhibitions,  
odd bits, funny animals, house-hauntings . . ." He might  
have added: "and fires."

Three fire engines of the newest sort, each drawn troika-  
fashion by three great horses of matching colors, had come  
one after another to The Street of the Defeat of Bona-  
parte (universally called Bonaparte Street), as near as  
they could maneuver, and made much with hoses into the  
Arcade. But the watchmen of the neighborhood, many of  
whom had been employed there before the modern fire  
department came into being, had set up their bucket  
brigade and were still passing the old but functioning  
leather containers from hand to hand. A sudden breeze  
now whipped up the flames and sparks and sent them  
flying overhead, straight up and aloft into the black sky—  
at the same time clearing the passageway of the Arcade  
from all but the smell of smoke.

Off in a corner, her red velvetreen dress flying loose  
about her fat body, Frow Grigou crouched, hand to  
mouth, mouth which screamed incessantly, "Ruined!  
Ruined! The curtains, the bad gas jets! The bad gas jets,  
the curtains! Ruined! Ruined! Ruined!"

All at once the firehoses heaved, writhed, gushed forth  
in a potent flow. The smoke turned black and clouds of  
steam arose. Eszterhazy felt himself choking, felt himself  
being carried away in the powerful arms of Herrekk, the  
Mountain Tsigane. In a moment he cried, "I am all right!  
Set me down." He saw himself looking into the anxious  
face of Lobats, who, seeing Eszterhazy on his feet and  
evidently recovered, gestured silently to two bodies on  
the pavement in Bonaparte Street.

Murgatroyd. And Polly Charms.

(Later, Lobats was to ask, "What was it that you  
found out when you put your fingers on the Englishman's  
head?" And Eszterhazy was to answer, "More than I  
will ever speak of to anyone.")

Eszterhazy flung himself down beside them. But al-



though he cursed aloud the absence of his galvanic batteries, and although he plied all the means at his behalf—the cordials, the injections, the ammoniated salts—he could bring no breath or motion to either of them.

Slowly, Lobats crossed himself. Ponderously, he said, "Ah, they're both in a better world now. She, poor little thing, her life, if you call that long sleep a life—And he, bad chap though I suppose he must've been in lots of ways, maybe in most—but surely he expiated his sins in dragging her almost to safety, trying to save her life at the risk of his own when her very hair was on fire—"

And indeed, most of that incredible mass of hair had burned away—those massive tresses which Murgatroyd (for who else?) must have daily and nightly spent hours in brushing and combing and plaiting and braiding... one must hope, at least lovingly... that incredible profusion of light-brown hair, unbound for the night, had indeed burned away but for a light scantling, like that of a crop-headed boy. And this shown in the dim and flaring lights, all a-glitter with moisture, shining with the drops of the water which had extinguished its fire. The girl's face as calm now as ever. The lips of the color of a pink were again so slightly parted. But whatever she might once have had to tell would now forever be unknown.

And as for Murgatroyd, Death had at least and at last released him from all need of concealment and fear. The furtive look was quite gone now. The face seemed now entirely noble.

"I suppose you might say that he'd exploited her, kept her in that state of bondage—but at least he risked his life to save hers—"

One of the watchmen standing by now stepped a pace forward and respectfully gestured a salute. "Beg the Sir High Police Commissioner a pardon," he said now. "However, as it is not so."

"What is not so?" Lobats was annoyed.

The watchman, still respectful, but quite firm: "Why, as the poor gentleman tried, dying, to save the poor missy. But it wasn't so, Sir High Commissioner and Professor Doctor. It was as one might say the opposite way. 'Twas *she* as was trying to get *him* out. *Ohyes*, Sirs. We

heard of him screaming, oh Jesus, Mary, and Joseph, how he screamed! We couldn't get in to them. We look around and we look back and there she come, she come out of the flames, sometimes carrying him and sometimes she dragged at him and then her pretty hair went all ablaze and they two fell almost at our very feet and we doused them with water... Y'see," he concluded, his eloquence exhausted.

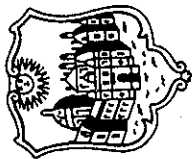
"Ah, stop your damned lies, man!" said Lobats.

Eszterhazy, shaking his head, murmured, "See, then, how swiftly the process of myth-making and legendry begins... *Oh! God!*"

Shocked, speechless, he responded to Lobats only with a gesture. Still on his knees, Eszterhazy pointed wordlessly to the feet of Polly Charms, the Sleeping Woman. The feet were small and slight. They were, as always, naked, bare. And Lobats, following the slight gesture, saw with a shock that even experience had not prepared him for that the bare feet of the dead girl were deeply scratched, and torn and red with blood.

*Abram Davidson was born in New York State in 1923 and attended elementary and high school and college there. During World War II he was a Hospital Corpsman, first with Naval Air, then with the 5th Marines. Later, he went to college in California, and then resumed his travels without graduating. He first appeared in print in 1946 and has been writing ever since. In 1961, -62, -63, he was Editor of the Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction, and also edited three of its then-annual anthologies. Mr. Davidson's stories have appeared on television and radio and in Colliers, Kenyon Review, Cavalier, True, Alfred Hitchcock's and Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazines, and Playboy, among others; and he has published over 15 novels, several collections of his own short stories, and one volume of non-fiction. He has won the Hugo, Edgar, Queen's, and Howard awards; has been married and divorced and has one son; and has taught at the University of Washington and the University of California at Irvine.*

*Books by Abram Davidson include the short story collections Or All the Seas With Oysters, What Strange Skies and Stars, What Strange Seas and Shores, and The Redward Edward Papers (scheduled for publication in 1978); one collection of articles (non-fiction), Crimes and Chaos, and (among other) novels, The Enemy of my Enemy, Röckl, Masters of the Maze, Ursus of Ultima Thule, the Enquiries of Dr. Eszterhazy, The Phoenix and the Mirror, etc. He has written one novel in collaboration: Joyleg, with Ward Moore. Major Work: For over 15 years Mr. Davidson has been gathering material for a trinity of trilogies based on the medieval Vergil Legend; of which one novel, The Phoenix and the Mirror, has appeared. He expects to devote most of his time at The College of William and Mary to preparing The Encyclopedia of the World of Vergil Magus. He has also written a few poems.*



A limited edition  
of one hundred copies  
printed by offset  
for the English Department  
College of William and Mary  
with the permission of  
the author.

Williamsburg, Virginia 1977

*Arcam Davidson*

Excerpted from  
*The Enquiries of Doctor Eszterhazy* (1975)  
Warner Books  
P.O. Box 690  
New York, N.Y. 10019

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