

CLASSICS TO GO

THE BLUE STAR

FLETCHER PRATT

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Prologue

Penfield twirled the stem of his port-glass between thumb and finger.

“I don’t agree,” he said. “It’s nothing but egocentric vanity to consider our form of life as unique among those on the millions of worlds that must exist.”

“How do you know they exist?” said Hodge.

“Observation,” said McCall. “The astronomers have proved that other stars beside our sun have planets.”

“You’re playing into his hands,” observed Penfield, the heavy eyebrows twitching as he cracked a nut. “The statistical approach is better. Why doesn’t this glass of port suddenly boil and spout all over the ceiling? You’ve never seen a glass of port behave that way, but the molecules that compose it are in constant motion, and any physicist will tell you that there’s no reason why they can’t all decide to move in the same direction at once. There’s only an overwhelming possibility that it won’t happen. To believe that we, on this earth, one of the planets of a minor star, are the only form of intelligent life, is like expecting the port to boil any moment.”

“There are a good many possibilities for intelligent life, though,” said McCall. “Some Swede who wrote in German—I think his name was Lundmark—has looked into the list. He says, for instance, that a chlorine-silicon cycle would maintain life quite as well as the oxygen-carbon system this planet has, and there’s no particular reason why nature should favor one form more than the other. Oxygen is a very

active element to be floating around free in such quantities as we have it.”

“All right,” said Hodge, “can’t it be that the cycle you mention is the normal one, and ours is the eccentricity?”

“Look here,” said Penfield, “what in the world is the point you’re making? Pass the port, and let’s review the bidding.” He leaned back in his chair and gazed toward the top of the room, where the carved coats of arms burned dully at the top of the dark panelling. “I don’t mean that everything here is reproduced exactly somewhere else in the universe, with three men named Hodge, McCall and Penfield sitting down to discuss sophomore philosophy after a sound dinner. The fact that we are here and under these circumstances is the sum of all the past history of—”

Hodge laughed. “I find the picture of us three as the crown of human history an arresting one,” he said.

“You’re confusing two different things. I didn’t say we were elegant creatures, or even desirable ones. But behind us there are certain circumstances, each one of which is as unlikely as the boiling port. For example, the occurrence of such persons as Beethoven, George Washington, and the man who invented the wheel. They are part of our background. On one of the other worlds that started approximately as ours did, they wouldn’t exist, and the world would be altered by that much.”

“It seems to me,” said McCall, “that once you accept the idea of worlds starting from approximately the same point—that is, another planet having the same size and chemical makeup, and about the same distance from its sun—”

“That’s what I find hard to accept,” said Hodge.

“Grant us our folly for a moment,” said McCall. “It leads to something more interesting than chasing our tails.” He snapped his lighter. “What I was saying is that if you grant approximately the same start, you’re going to arrive at approximately the same end, in spite of what Penfield thinks. We have evidence of that right on this earth. I mean what they call convergent evolution. When the reptiles were dominant, they produced vegetable-eaters and carnivores that fed on them. And among the early mammals there were animals that looked so much like cats and wolves that the only way to tell them apart is by the skeleton. Why couldn’t that apply to human evolution, too?”

“You mean,” said Penfield, “that Beethoven and George Washington would be inevitable?”

“Not that, exactly,” said McCall. “But some kind of musical inventor, and some sort of high-principled military and political leader. There might be differences.”

Hodge said: “Wait a minute. If we are the product of human history, so were Beethoven and Washington. All you’ve got is a determinism, with nothing really alterable, once the sun decided to cast off its planets.”

“The doctrine of free will—” began McCall.

“I know that one,” said Penfield. “But if you deny free will completely, you’ll end up with a universe in which every world like ours is identical—which is as absurd as Hodge’s picture of us is unique, and rather more repulsive.”

“Well, then,” said Hodge, “What kind of cosmology are you putting out? If you won’t have either of our pictures, give us yours.”

Penfield sipped port. "I can only suggest a sample," he said. "Let's suppose this world—or one very like it—with one of those improbable boiling-port accidents left out somewhere along the line. I mentioned the wheel a moment ago. What would life be like now if it hadn't been invented?"

"Ask McCall," said Hodge. "He's the technician."

"Not the wheel, no," said McCall. "I can't buy that. It's too logical a product of the environment. Happens as soon as a primitive man perceives that a section of tree-trunk will roll. No. If you're going to make a supposition, you'll have to keep it clean, and think in terms of something that really might not have happened. For example, music. There are lots of peoples, right here, who never found the full chromatic scale, including the classical civilizations. But I suppose that's not basic enough for you."

For a moment or two, the three sipped and smoked in the unspoken communication of friendship. A log collapsed in the fireplace, throwing out a spray of sparks. McCall said: "The steam engine is a rather unlikely invention, when you come to think of it. And most modern machines and their products are outgrowths of it in one way or another. But I can think of one more peculiar and more basic than that. Gunpowder."

"Oh, come," said Hodge, "that's a specialized—"

"No it isn't," said Penfield. "He's perfectly right. Gunpowder destroyed the feudal system, and produced the atmosphere in which your steam engine became possible. And remember that all the older civilizations, even in the East, were subject to periodic setbacks by barbarian invasions. Gunpowder provided civilized man with a technique no

barbarian could imitate, and helped him over the difficult spots.”

McCall said; “All the metal-working techniques and most of chemistry depend on the use of explosives—basically. Imagine digging out all the ores we need by hand.”

“All right, then,” said Hodge, “have your fun. Let’s imagine a world like this one, in which gunpowder has never been invented. What are you going to have it look like?”

“I don’t know,” said McCall, “but I think Penfield’s wrong about one point. About the feudal system, I mean. It was pretty shaky toward the end, and the cannon that battered down the castles only hurried up the process. There might be a lot more pieces of the feudal system hanging around without gunpowder, but the thing would be pretty well shot.”

“Now, look here,” said Hodge. “You’ve overlooked something else. If you’re going to eliminate gunpowder and everything that came out of it, you’ll have to replace it with something. After all, a large part of the time and attention of our so-called civilization have been spent in working out the results of the gunpowder and steam engine inventions, If you take those away, you’ll have a vacuum, which I’m told, nature abhors. There would have to be a corresponding development in some other field, going ‘way beyond where we are.”

Penfield drank and nodded. “That’s fair,” he said. “A development along some line we’ve neglected because we have been too busy with mechanics. Why couldn’t it be in the region of ESP, or psychology or psychiatry—science of the mind?”

“But the psychologists are just operating on the ordinary principles of physical science,” said McCall. “Observing, verifying from a number of examples, and then attempting to predict. I don’t see how another race would have gone farther by being ignorant of these principles or overlooking them.”

“You’re being insular,” said Penfield. “I don’t mean that in another world they would have turned psychology into an exact science in our terms. It might be something altogether different. Your principles of science are developed along the lines of arithmetic. The reason they haven’t worked very well in dealing with the human mind may be because they aren’t applicable at all. There may be quite a different line of approach. Think it over for a moment. It might even be along the line of magic, witchcraft.”

“I like that,” said McCall. “You want to make a difference by substituting something phoney for something real.”

“But it might not be phoney,” insisted Penfield. “Magic and witchcraft are really pretty late in our world. They began to be talked about at the same time and on the same terms as alchemy, everything surrounded by superstition, lying and plain ignorance. In this world we’re imagining, somebody might have found the key to something as basic in that field as gunpowder was to the physical sciences. Some people say we almost made the discovery here. You know the story about this house?”

McCall nodded, but Hodge said: “No. What is it? Another ghost story?”

“Not quite. The old part of the house, the one where the bedrooms are now, is supposed to have been built by one of the Salem witches. Not one of those they hanged on false

charges, but a perfectly genuine witch, who got away before she was suspected—as a real witch probably would. The story is that she came here and set up business among the Indians, and as they weren't very expert at carpentry, she helped them build that part of the house with spells, so it would be eternal. The old beams haven't a bit of iron in them; they're all held together with pegs and haven't rotted a bit. There's also a story that if you make the proper preparations at night, something beyond the normal will happen. I've never done the right thing myself, apparently."

"You probably won't," said Hodge. "The essence of the whole witchcraft business is uncertainty. Haven't you noticed that in all the legends, the spells never quite come off when they're needed?"

"That's probably because there isn't any science of witchcraft, with predictable results," said McCall.

Penfield said: "It may be for another reason, too. Have you ever noticed that magic is the only form of human activity which is dominated by women? The really scary creatures are all witches; when a man becomes a magician, he's either possessed of a devil or is a glorified juggler. Our theoretical world would have to start by being a matriarchy."

"Or contain the relics of one," said Hodge. "Matriarchies are socially unstable."

"So is everything," said McCall. "Flow and change from one form to another is a characteristic of life—or maybe a definition of life. That goes for your witchcraft, too. It would change form, there'd be resistance to it, and an effort to find something to replace it."

"Or to remove the disabilities," said Hodge. "The difficulty with any power we don't really know about is not to define

the power itself, but to discover its limitations. If witchcraft were really practical, there would be some fairly severe penalties going with it, not legally I mean, but personally, as a result of the practice. Or to put the thing in your terms, McCall, if there weren't any drawbacks, being a witch would have such high selection value that before long every female alive would be a practicing witch."

McCall carefully poured more port. "Hodge," he said, "you're wonderful, and I love you. But that's typical of the way you put things. You cover up a weak point by following it with one that attracts everyone's attention away from the feebleness of your real case. Penalties for everything? What's the penalty for having an electric icebox?"

"A pampered digestive system," said Hodge, readily. "I doubt whether you could survive the food Queen Elizabeth ate for very long, but she lived to be well over sixty. If there were witchcraft, or ESP or telepathy running around in the world, there couldn't but be defenses against it and troubles for the practitioners. Had it occurred to you that even a witch couldn't spend all her time stirring cauldrons, and might want to lead a normal life, with a husband and children?"

Penfield got up and stepped to the window, where he stood looking out and down at the midnight Atlantic, throwing its surges against the breast of the rocks. "I wonder if it really does exist," he said.

Hodge laughed; but that night all three men dreamed: and it was as though a filament ran through the ancient rooms; for each knew that he dreamed, and dreamed the same dream as the others; and from time to time tried to cry out to them, but could only see and hear.

1

NETZNEGON CITY: MARCH RAIN

It was raining steadily outside. The older woman's tears and words fell in time, drip, drip. Cold, for the tall window at the room's end would never quite shut close, bottom and top not nest into the frame simultaneously. Lalette in her soutane felt goose-pimples and tried to shut out the sound by thinking of a man with a green hat who would give her a handful of gold scudi and nothing asked, merely because it was spring and she put a small spell on him with a smile, but it was not quite spring, and the voice persisted:

“. . . all my life—I have hoped—hoped and planned for you—even before you were born—even before you were born—daughter of my own—” (Yes, thought Lalette, I have heard that before, and it would move me more, but the night you drank the wine with Dame Carabobo, you told her how I was the product of a chance union in a carriage between Rushaca and Zenss) “—daughter—and after I saved and worked so hard—you miss the only chance—the only chance—don't know what I'm going to do—and Count Cleudi's not like most—”

“You told him what he offered was frightful. I heard you.”

(Sob) “It was. Oh, it was. Oh, Lalette, it isn't right, you should be married with a gold coach and six horses—but what can we do?—oh, if your father had left us anything before the war—all I sacrificed for him—but that is what all of us must do, make sacrifices, we can't have anything real without giving something away . . . Lalette!”

“Madame.”

“You will be able to employ the Art and have everything you want, you know most of the patterns already, he does not go to the Service often . . . and after all, it’s something that happens to every woman one way or another, and with the Art, even if he doesn’t marry you, he’ll find you a husband you won’t mind, it’s only men like Cleudi who want to be the first, a man who marries would really prefer a girl to have a little experience, I know . . . Lalette!”

Lalette did not answer.

“All the young ones come to the ball after the opera, Lalette. Count Cleudi will present you, and even if you don’t bring—”

(He would have not only a green hat, but southern-made lace at wrist and throat and a funny-looking man who spoke in a Mayern accent, thick as cream, and carried the purse because it spoiled the fit—)

“. . . as though he were just one of those . . . so considerate . . .” (I suppose we cannot control how we come by our parents) “. . . your father, like an angel out of heaven, and I could have taught you so much more if he—” (Now she is waist-deep in the past again, I’m going to hear it all over) “. . . really, for it is more like one step up than a leap down from a high place, which is always what we think before the first time . . . Lalette!”

“Yes, mother.”

Someone knocked at the door.

Lalette’s mother hastily daubed at her cheeks, heaved herself heavily from the chair, looked sidewise, saying; “We could sell the stone.” But before the girl could reply, the tap again. The older woman waddled across to the door and

opened it a crack; a long jaw and long nose under a wet turn-down hat poked in.

“I was just saying to my daughter—” began Dame Leonalda.

A pair of thin shoulders pushed past her as though not hearing, the man stood in the center of the room, sniffed and wiped his nose on his sleeve. “Listen,” he said, “no more stories. I have heard too many.”

Dame Leonalda gave him a doleful look and bustled back to her seat. “But I assure you, Ser Ruald—”

“No more stories,” he said again. “I have charges to meet and taxes.”

She put her hands to her face. (Lalette thought: her only device; I hope I shall not grow like that.) Ruald said; “But I do not wish to be hard, no, and I know you have no money just now. So I will be fair, and if you render me a small service, why then, it is not beyond me to forgive the whole four months’ arrears.”

Dame Leonalda took down her hands again and said; “What is the service?” (Her voice had something like a tinge of dread.)

Ruald sniffed again, darted a glance at Lalette, another at the door, and stepped close. “I have heard that you belong to one of the families of the Blue Star.”

“Who told you that?”

“It does not matter. Is it true?”

The dame’s lips worked. “And what if it is?”

“Why this, dame: it will not peril your soul to place a small witchery—”

“No, no, I couldn’t do such a thing. You have no right to ask me.”

The man’s face sneered. “I have a right to ask you for my money, though.”

“No, no, I tell you.” Her hands waved the air. “That Dame Sauglitz, they punished her with five years and stripes.”

“They will punish nobody for this; utterly private between you and myself. Is not your skill enough so that no suspicion of witchery will fall on you? Come, I’ll do better. I’ll more than forgive the arrears, I’ll give you quit-rent for four other months to come.”

“Mother,” said Lalette from the corner.

Dame Leonalda turned around. “This does not concern you,” she said, and to Ruald; “But how am I to know that having done as you wish, you’ll not denounce me before the episcopals?”

“Why as for that, might I not want your help another time?” She put up a protesting hand, but he; “Come, no more stories. I’ll—”

There was another tap at the door. Ruald looked annoyance as Dame Leonalda crossed the room in another rustle of skirts. Her voice was almost gay. “Come in, Uncle Bontembi.”

Rain shook shining from his cloak. “Ah, charming Dame Leonalda.” The paunch hindered his bow. “The greetings of

the evening to you, Ser Ruald. Why, this is a true evening gathering.”

“I was just leaving,” said Ruald, tugging at his jacket. “Well, then, Dame Leonalda, bear in mind what I have said. I’m sure we’ll reach accommodation.”

She did not get up as he went. When the door was closed she turned to Uncle Bontembi. “It is such a problem, dear Uncle,” she said. “Of course the child is perfectly right in a way, and it would be different if her father had left her anything at all, but with such a man as Cleudi—”

“The Count is a splendid gentleman,” said the priest. “I have seen him lose fifty gold scudi on a turn, but never his composure. And he is in high favor. Is there a problem relative to him? Not that his eye has fallen on our little Lalette? I would call that a matter for consent and rejoicing.”

“Ah, Uncle, it is this, if men only behaved as nobly toward women as they do to each other! He has set his eye on this dear child indeed, but not his hand, and says he will pay all our debts and give her a hundred gold scudi besides, if she will only accompany him to the opera and ball of the spring festival.”

Uncle Bontembi plucked at the button of his chin, and the smile left his face. “Hm, hm, it is certainly on the face of matters a proposal . . . You are certain you have not been employing the Art, Dame Leonalda?”

“Oh, no, never, never. And my dear little girl, how could she?”

The priest glanced sly-eye at the girl. “Yes, yes, she has her first confession to make. Well, well, let us think this out together. I will say the Count Cleudi is highly held in other

circles beside the political. There was some theological discussion at the Palace Bregatz lately, and the Episcopal was of the opinion that he had never heard sounder doctrine or better put than by Cleudi. Wherefore he cannot be very far from the laws of the good God and right moral, can he? And so his plan may be of greater benefit than first appears.”

“I do not want such benefits,” said Lalette, (but thought: then I should have the Art!)

“Oho! Our junior niece resists; this is not the true humility. Come, Demoiselle Lalette, let us look at it this way: we can only truly serve good and vanquish the eternal forces of evil through the happiness of others, for if it is our own happiness we seek, then others doing the same will make all unhappy, and so give victory to evil.” He signed himself. “Thus to bring joy to others is the true service of religion and moral, no matter what the appearance may say. Now in this case there would be three people given happiness. Yes, yes, the doctrinal point is somewhat delicate, but I cannot find it in my mind to disapprove. There is a technical violation of moral law involved, and I am afraid the Church will have to assess a certain fine against you, but I will make it as light as possible. Enough to remind that a good action should be done for moral gain and not material.”

“I do not love him,” said Lalette.

“All the more unselfish, all the more.” The priest turned to Dame Leonalda. “Have you not made it clear to our niece that the true love which puts down evil in the name of the major glory of God is something that rises out of and after union? Why, if she talks so, I will have to lay church-duty on her for approaching the doctrines of the Prophet.”

“Oh, I have told her, I have told her.” (The mother’s voice began to cloud toward another rain of tears.) “But she is so romantical and sensitive, my little daughter, just like those poems by Terquid. When I was a girl—”

Lalette let her face smooth out (as she thought about the opera ball and what it would be like), but even that was not much use, their voices kept picking at her until she went behind the curtain to her bed in the corner, where it was even colder beneath the blanket at first, so that she curled up tight. (If I were really married, the Blue Star would belong to me and my husband, and . . .)

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“But is it a genuine Blue Star?” asked Pyax. He turned toward Dr. Remigorius, who should know if anyone.

“Ah! Of that I cannot say. We have been deceived before. It is certain that the old woman has practised veritable witcheries; the Center of Veierelden found a record of a conviction against her in the church there. The only surety is in the test; and that is a test that only Friend Rodvard here can make. If it should be genuine, our game’s won.”

The lower lip of Pyax hung open among his pimples and Mme. Kaja’s ravaged face changed line. “It would be wonderful to have it,” she said, drawing out the long sound, and Rodvard felt the blood run warm beneath his skin as they all looked at him. “But I do not think her mother would permit a marriage,” he said. “How will you have me do?”

“Do? Do?” said the doctor, the little white planes at the corners of his mouth shining against the black fantastic cut of his beard. “Shall we school hens to lay eggs or rats to

suck them for you? Do what is most natural for a lad with a willing girl in his arms, and the Blue Star is ours. Will you have Mme. Kaja to teach you?"

The flush warmed Rodvard, and he said; "I—will you—"

Mathurin in the background opened his thin, tight lips. "Our friend is lapped in the obligation of the Church. Hey, Rodvard Yes-and-No, what moral do you follow? If it's to be that of the priests, you have no place with us. You are engaged as a soldier to the overthrow of all they stand for."

"O-o-oh, you are so wrong, friend Mathurin," said Mme. Kaja. "I understand. There is the heart—" she pressed a hand to a pendulous right breast "—but as my old friend, the Baroness Blenau used to say, hearts do not guide but to sorrow. Ah, friend Rodvard, believe me, if one is to have the great peace, one must deny the heart's message and seek the good of all beyond what gives pain at the moment." She slapped her breast again and turned to the others; "I know; he is in love with another."

Without reason, Mathurin said suddenly; "When I went to the court service with Cleudi last night, the old hog was drunk again. Fell on the floor at her royal prayers and had to be helped—"

Dr. Remigorius; "Will you still distract us, Mathurin? There is but one present question before this Center—the bidding of the High Center that friend Rodvard here obtain the Blue Star from Lalette Asterhax. Can we report to them that the task is undertaken?"

Pyax spoke, running his tongue across lips; "If he will not, I can offer through marriage and lawful lease. My father would be willing to give a dower—"

Rodvard burst into laughter with the rest, over the thought there could be enough money in the world to buy a Dossolan bedding for one of Pyax' Zigraner birth. (But the laugh ended bitterly for the young man at the thought that because they could see no better way he must give up his ideal of honor and true love. He tried to imagine how it would be to live with someone who did not love one again, but whom for honor's sake he must have married, and for a moment the intent candle-lit faces dissolved away; he felt a momentary strange sweet painful thrill before the picture in his mind changed to that of his father and mother quarreling about money, and she began to scream until his father, with contorted face, reached down the cane from the mantel . . . Oh, if one gives in love, it should be forever, ever, love and death—)

“—still place him,” Dr. Remigorius was saying, “but that will be a matter for the High Center. No, there's only the one thing, and we'll have the answer now. Rodvard Bergelin, we summon you by your oath to the Sons of the New Day and your desire to overthrow the wicked rule of the Laughing Chancellor and the old Queen, to take your part.”

Pyax smiled nastily. “Remember Peribert? We know how to deal with those who fall away.”

“It is not good to be hard on those from whom you seek help,” said Mme. Kaja.

“Be still,” said Remigorius. “Young man, your word.”

(One more effort.) “Is it so vital that we have this jewel?” said Rodvard.

“Yes,” said Remigorius, simply; but Mathurin; “This is the only true Blue Star of which we have record, and even this one may not be true. But if you will not make the effort to

win it, as ordered, there's still an escape. You are a clerk to the Office of Pedigree; find another Blue Star that we can have, and you're excused. But with matters so approaching a crisis at the court, we must have one; for we are the weaker party."

Rodvard saw Pyax touch his knife-hilt and once more wetly run out his tongue, so like a lizard's. Beaten; had he not himself in those long conversations until daybreak, maintained that among free men the more voices must make the decisions? With a sense that he was assuming an obligation to baseness, he said:

"I will do as you desire."

Dr. Remigorius' face cracked into a red-and-black smile. "Pfo, young man, you'll make a witch of her and she will gain her fortune."

Mme. Kaja came over to take both his hands as he left. "The heart will follow," she said.

2

APRIL NIGHT

Lalette looked up through branches to the purpling sky, then down from the little crest and across the long flat fertile fields, reaching out toward the Eastern Sea, where night was rising. "I must go," she said. "My mother will be back from the service." Her voice was flat.

"Not yet," said Rodvard, lifting his head from arms wrapped around his knees. "You said she would stay to talk with the fat priest. . . . In this light, your eyes are green."

"It is the sign of a bad temper, my mother tells me. She looked in the waters for me once, and says that when I am married, I will be a frightful shrew." (It was almost too much trouble to move, she was glad even to make a slender line of conversation that would hold her immobile in the calm twilight.)

"Then you must be fated to marry a bad man. I do not see—if you really loved someone, how could you be shrewish with them?"

"Oh, the girls of our heritage cannot marry for love. It is the tradition of the witch-families." She sat up suddenly. "Now I must absolutely go."

He placed his hand over hers, where it rested on the long green moss under the cedars. "Absolutely, I will not let you go. I will bind you with hard bonds, till you tell me more about your family. Do you really have a Blue Star?"

"My mother does. . . . I do not know. My father would never use it, that is why we are so poor. He said it was wrong and

dangerous. My mother's father used it though, she says, before she got it from him. It was he who told her to choose my father. He was a Capellan in the army, you know, and was killed in the war at the siege of Sedad Mir. My mother's father could read through the Star that my father wanted my mother for herself and not for her heritage. It was a love-match, but now there is no one that can use the Star." (Lalette thought: I really must not tell stories like that that are not true, it only slipped out because I do not wish to go back and hear her talking about Count Cleudi again.)

"Could not you sell it?" asked Rodvard.

"Who would buy it? It would be a confession that someone wanted to practice witchery, and then the priests would come down and there'd be a church trial. It is a very strange thing and a burden to have witchery in one's blood." She shuddered a little (attracted and yet depressed, as always when it was a question of That). "I do not want to be a witch, ever—"

"Why, I would think—" began Rodvard, (really thinking that in spite of her beauty, this was the reason she more than a little repelled).

"—and have people hating me, and those who want to like me not sure whether they really do, or whether it is only another witchery. The only real friend my mother has is Uncle Bontembi, and that's because he's a priest, and I don't think he's a real friend either, but keeps watch of her so that when she makes a witchery he can collect another fine for the Church." Rodvard felt the small hand clench beneath his own. "I'll never marry, and stay a virgin, and will not be a witch!"

“What would happen to the Blue Star then? You have no sisters, have you?”

“Only a brother, and he went overseas to Mancherei when the Prophet began to preach there. Somebody said he went beyond to the Green Isles afterward, when the Prophet left. We do not hear from him any more. . . . But he couldn’t use the Blue Star anyway, unless he were bound with a girl from one of the other families, who could witch it for him.”

Overhead the sky was deepening, with one faint easterly star a gleam, a long slow smoke rose in convolutions from the chimney of a cot down there, (and Rodvard thought desperately of the lovely light-haired girl who had come so many times to search witch-family records at his clerk’s cabinet in the Office of Pedigree, but she was a baron’s daughter by her badge, and even if he did obtain the Blue Star from this one, and used it to win the light-haired girl, then Lalette would be a witch and put a spell on him—oh tangle!). The hand within his stirred.

“I must go,” said Lalette again. (He looks something like Cleudi, she was thinking, but not so old and hard and a little romantic, and he had eye enough to catch the wonderful tiny flash of green among the blue when the sun dipped under.)

“Ah, no. You shall not go, not yet. This is a magic evening and we will keep it forever till all’s dark.”

Her face softened a trifle in the fading light, but she pulled to withdraw her hand. “Truly.”

He clung the tighter, feeling heart-beat, vein-beat in the momentary small struggle. “What if I will not let you go till lantern-glass and the gates are closed?”

"Then Uncle Bontempi will expect me to make a confession and if I do not, he will put a fine on me, and it will be bad for my mother because we are so poor."

"But if I kept you, it would be to run away with you, ah, far beyond the Shining Mountains, and live with you forever."

Her hand went passive again, she leaned toward him a trifle, as though to see more surely the expression on his face. "Do you mean that, Rodvard Bergelin?"

He caught breath. "Why—why should I say it else?"

"You do not. Let me go, let me go, or I'll make you." She half turned, trying to rise, bringing the other hand to help pull loose his fingers.

"Will you witch me, witch?" he cried, struggling, and his grasp slipped to her wrist.

"No—." She snatched at the held hand with the other, catching the thumb and crying fiercely; "I'll break my own finger, I swear it, if you do not let go."

"No. . . ." He flung her two hands apart. Lithe as a serpent, she wrung one and then the other from his grasp, but it was with an effort that carried her off balance and supine asprawl. He rolled on his hip to pin her down, hands on her elbows, breast to breast, and was kissing her half-opened mouth till she stopped trying, turning her face from his and whispering: "Let me go. It's wrong. It's wrong."

"I will not," and he released one hand to feel where the maddening sensation of her breast came against him and the laces began. (The thought was fleetingly seen in the *camera obscura* of his inner mind that he did not love her and would have to pay for this somehow.)

“Let me go!” she cried again in a strangled voice, and convulsing, struck him on the side of the head with her free hand. At that moment the laces gave, her hand came round his head instead of against it, drawing his face down in a long sobbing kiss, through which a murmur, softer than a whisper; “All right, oh, all right, go on.” (There was one little flash of triumph across her mind, one trouble solved, Cleudi would never want her now.)

Afterward, he knelt to kiss her skirt-hem. Her lips were compressed at the center, a little raised at the corners. “Now I understand,” said she; but he did not, and all the way home was eaten by the most dreadful cold fear that she would revenge herself on him with a witchery that would leave him stark idiot or smitten with dreadful disease. And the other, the other; his mind would not form her name, and there was a cry within him.

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All three of them were waiting, with that man of Count Cleudi’s—the olive-skinned one with such intense eyes—what was his name? Lalette curtsied; Uncle Bontembi smiled. Said Cleudi; “Mathurin, the baskets. I commenced to think we should miss the pleasure of your company tonight, charming Demoiselle Lalette, and my heart was desolated.”

“Oh,” she said, (thinking—what if they knew?). “But here is Uncle Bontembi who will tell you that to be desolate of heart is to serve evil and not true religion, since God wishes us to be happy; for since he has created us in his image, it must be an image of delight.”

“You reason like an angel, Demoiselle Lalette; permit that I salute you.” She moved just enough to make his kiss fall on

her cheek. Dame Leonalda simpered, but there was, flick and gone again, a frown across Cleudi's high-cheekboned face. "What a lovely color your daughter has!"

Mathurin laid out the table with napkins which he unfolded from the baskets. There were oysters packed in snow; bubbling wine; a pastry of truffles and pike-livers; small artichokes pickled entire, peaches that must have come from the south, since it was only peach-blossom time in Dossola; white bread; a ham enriched with spices; honeyed small sweetmeats of dwarf fruit. (If he were only more to me and less for himself, thought Lalette, he might be possible; for he does not stint.) They sat down with herself and her mother opposite each other and the two men at the sides of the table, so small that knees touched. Mathurin the servant stood beside her chair, but flitted round to give to the rest as occasion demanded. Cleudi discoursed—a thousand things, eating with his left hand and letting his right now and again drop to touch the fabric over Lalette's leg, which, laughing with talk and wine, she did not deny him. (An aura, like a perfume of virility and desire and pleasure, emanated from him; Lalette felt as though she were swaying slightly in her seat.)

"Lalette Asterhax; the name has fifteen letters," said Cleudi, "and the sum of one and five is six, which fails by one the mystical number of seven. Look also, how you may take it by another route, L being the twelfth letter of the alphabet, so that to it, there is added one for A, another twelve for the second L and so on, the sum of all being eighty-seven." (He has prepared this in advance, she thought.) "Being itself summed up again this eighty-seven is fifteen, so it is evident that you will be incomplete and thus lacking in happiness, until united with a man who can supply the missing figures."

“I am not sure that the Church would approve your doctrine,” said Uncle Bontempi. He had moved his chair around to place his arm over the back of Dame Leonalda’s, and she had thrown her head back to rest on the arm.

“You are clearly wrong, my friend,” said Cleudi. “The Church itself takes cognizance of the power of numbers, which are the sign-manual of enlistment under God against evil, rather than being the protection itself, as some ignorant persons would make them. Look, does not the Church in Dossola have seven Episcopalians? Are there not seven varieties of angels, and is it not dulcet to make seven prayers within the period? Whereas it is the heretical followers of the Prophet who deny the value of numbers.”

“Then,” said Lalette, “I must never complete myself by union with you; for you have five letters and the seven of my first name being added to them, make twelve, which is three by your manner of computation, and an evil omen.”

Cleudi laughed. “All, divine Lalette, your reasoning is unreason.” He poured more wine. “For it is clear that man and woman are each incomplete by themselves, not to be completed until they are united; else we were not so formed. Now such union is manifestly to the pleasure of God, since he arranged it thus, so that if anything prevent true union, it must be contrary to the ordinance of God. Is this not exact, Uncle Bontempi?”

Through Dame Leonalda’s giggle the priest smiled, his face curling in wrinkles around the fat. “Your lordship lacks only the oath and a drop of oil in the palm to be an Episcopal. I resign in your favor my chance of preferment.”

“But I’ll resign no chance of preferment.” Cleudi reached to squeeze Lalette’s hand, where it lay on the table. “A stroke

of fortune. I happened to fall in with His Grace the Chancellor only this morning. He spoke of the difficulty in finance, which is such that—would you believe it?—there is even some question whether Her Majesty will be able to take her summer holiday in the mountains.”

Dame Leonalda raised her head. “Oh, oh, the disgrace!” she sighed.

“I do not see the stroke of fortune,” said Lalette simply.

“A disgrace, yes,” said Cleudi, his mobile face for a moment morose. “But I was happily able to suggest to His Grace that the matter of taxes be placed in the hands of the lords of court, themselves to be taxed an amount equal to that due from their seignories, and they to collect it within their estates.”

“Again—the stroke of fortune?” said Lalette, not much interested, as she dipped a finger in the wine and drew arabesques on the table-napkin in the damp.

“His Grace was so much charmed with my plan that he offered me a place in the service, with the directorate of the lottery, so that I now am happy enough to be no more a Tritulaccan, but Dossolan by service of adoption.” He lifted his glass to Lalette. “I shall drink to your grey eyes, and you to my fortune.”

The glasses touched. “I do wish you good fortune,” she said.

“What better fortune could there be than to have you attend with me the first opera-ball of the season, and make the drawing of the lottery as its queen?”

Said Uncle Bontembi, in a voice as rich as though he were addressing a congregation; “Spring is the season most

calculated to show forth the victory of God over evil and the beginning of new growth and happiness. Not only do we celebrate the return of the sun, but the rejection of darkness, as the former Prince and false Prophet.” Lalette did not look at him.

“I will send a costumer to make you one of the new puffed bodices in—yes, I think it must be red for your coloring . . .” began Cleudi, and then stopped, his eyes seeming to jut from their sockets, as he stared at the wet design under Lalette’s finger. Her own gaze focussed, and suddenly she felt tired and very old and not wine-struck any more, for without thinking at all she had traced the witch-patterns her mother taught her long ago, and now they were smoking gently on the table-cloth.

“Witchery!” croaked the Count, but recovered faster than the shock itself, and slid in one motion to his feet, with an ironical bow. “Madame, my congratulations on your skill in deception, which should take you far. You and your precious mother made me believe you pure.”

“Yes, witchery.” She was up, too. “It would have been the same in all cases. I don’t want your filthy costume and your filthy scudi. Now, go!” Before he could sign himself, she splashed him with a spray of the dazzling drops from her fingertips. “Go, in the name of Trustemus and Vaton, before I bid you go in such a manner you can never rest again.”

Off to one side Lalette heard her mother sob; Cleudi’s face took on a look of dogged blankness. Without another word he let his hands drop loose to his side, trotted to the door and through it. Cried Uncle Bontembi; “We’ll see to her later. I must release him,” and rushed after, his fingers fumbling in his robe for the holy oil, his flesh sagging in grey bags above his jowls.

Lalette sat down slowly, (her mind devoid of any thought save a kind of regretful calm now she had done it), as her mother raised a face where tears had streaked the powder. "Oh, Lalette, how could you—" (the girl felt a wild flutter of being trapped again), but both had forgotten the servant Mathurin, who stepped forward to grip urgently at Lalette's elbow. "Rodvard Bergelin?" he demanded, and she recoiled from the temper of his face, then remembered her new-won power, and touched his hand lightly as though to brush it away, saying:

"And what business of yours if it was?"

"He is the only one can save you. The Blue Star, quickly! Cleudi will never forgive you. He'll have you before the Court of Deacons; he'll—" He ran round the table to Dame Leonalda. "Madame, where is the Blue Star? It belongs to your daughter, and she must leave on the moment. You will not know her if she has the torturers to deal with."

The older woman only collapsed into a passion of alcoholic sobbing, head on arms across the table. "I suppose I must trust you," said Lalette. "I think I know where it is."

"Believe me, you must. He is as cruel as a crocodile; would strew your grave afterward with poems written by himself, but not till he has the fullest pains from you. . . . Is it in that?"

Lalette had pulled aside her mother's bed, beneath which lay the old leather portmanteau with the bar-lock. Mathurin tried it once, twice; it would not give. Before the girl could protest, he whipped a knife like a steel tongue from beneath his jacket and expertly slashed around the fastening. The portmanteau fell open on a collection of such small gauds and bits of clothing as women treasure, Mathurin shovelling