

Springfield, Virginia – 1959

The tribunal will not reconvene until I've had a chance to consider all the available evidence in my case. That is my right as an American and as an officer of the Central Intelligence Agency. If the testimony I've submitted is true, then the proof may be somewhere in that warehouse, and therefore I must be allowed to look for it. My persecutors pretend to regard this rule as an inconvenience, because without it they'd be permitted to empty the warehouse tomorrow to make more room for stolen Politburo cigar stubs or whatever else they want to archive out here in Virginia. But really it delights them. There's no easy way to take a measure of 'all the available evidence in my case', but I estimate it at about three hundred million feet, an alchemical prodigy of urine and rock salt and Mayan armor, glossy bales decomposing into nitric frass. To pick through it all with proper care, building a chronology and a concordance, is the work of decades. And I don't have decades.

This is how I know. During the failed Cuban War of Independence in 1868, a wealthy Spanish family called the Azpeteguias, who owned sugar plantations near the Valle de Viñales, were besieged inside their villa by their own farmers. They died of yellow fever, all sixteen of them, before they could be relieved by the army. It was decided to send the bodies to Havana for burial to ensure they wouldn't be desecrated by the locals. But the farmers ambushed the caravan in the hills, prying open the coffins and tipping the bodies into the dust. In 1953, when I was still working for the agency in Cuba, I did a significant favor for a friend of mine in Pinar del Río and afterwards he gave me a bottle of rum

that had been aged in a barrel made from staves of Azpetegua coffin wood.

I have about twelve ounces left. It's what's called a diagnostic liquor. According to folk medicine, the long aftertaste is the most volatile fraction of the rum escaping out of your mouth as tinted vapor after it's already washed through your guts. You taste yourself on it. There are some old bourbons with the same property. When I first opened it, back when I was in good health, Azpetegua *añejo* was the most exquisite rum I'd ever sipped, but now I can taste poison at the end of every mouthful, a bile so rank and doomy your standard pre-vomit is like maple syrup in comparison. One of these days I'll have a doctor palpate my liver just to make it official, but I know perfectly well what he'll tell me. Between my stomach and my lungs sits a wedge of black gristle. Instead of a functioning organ I have only a ruin, a sink-hole, a blocked sewer.

I'm forty-three years old. Alcoholism runs in the Zonulet family and it's going to kill me even younger than it killed my father. I will die long before I finish preparing my defense. Early on, I asked if I could have an assistant to help me hack through this jungle, but they said they wouldn't give security clearance to anyone but me. They've fucked me and they know it. Really, there is no need for the tribunal to reconvene, because a life sentence has already been handed down, in the most elegant possible fashion, with nothing so clattering or banal as a verdict spoken aloud. I am my own jailer, in the prison of my inalienable rights. They know I never wanted anything more to do with that temple, and now I'll be trapped for the remainder of my life among its ribbons of silver drool.

From the very beginning I've given the same testimony. I did everything I could to prevent what happened in Honduras, but the forces arrayed against me were too powerful (and some of those same forces are now discreetly overseeing my prosecution). The censure I'm threatened with is not proportionate to the rules I may have bent or broken in pursuit of entirely valid aims, nor to my peripheral culpability in a sequence of events that for the

most part were far beyond my control. I'm a fallible human being, and I regret the mistakes I made, but with a sound mind and a clear conscience I can avow that I was acting in the best interests of my country. I know dozens of guys back in Foggy Bottom who've done much, much worse and suffered nothing but commiserations on their bad luck.

I spent a decade with CIA, and three years with the Office of Strategic Services before that, and what do I have to show for it? Just one friend, Winch McKellar, my only ally in the whole crew. He's back from Jakarta now but he can't do anything to help. Sometimes I'm tempted to go to the *Washington Post* and tell them everything I know about Branch 9, and sometimes I'm tempted to burn the warehouse to the ground with myself inside, but what keeps me from either variety of self-immolation is that the proof I'm looking for, the proof that would vindicate the testimony I submitted to the tribunal, is somewhere on those shelves. In theory, I might find it tomorrow. That is, at least, mathematically possible.

In any case, if I do die before I hit the jackpot, I want it to be there in the warehouse. They'll wonder where the smell is coming from until they notice my body draped across a steel roof truss like a pair of sneakers tossed over a telephone line. No one will be able to figure out how I got up there and they'll have to fish me down with a crane.

So every night I stay there until ten or eleven o'clock at night with my flatbed editor and my notebooks. Then I peel off my gloves, say goodbye to the guard, and stop at the diner on the way home for a hamburger that tastes like scorched oakum. Back at my apartment, I don't sleep much, so I'm never sure how to pass the time. But now I have a hobby. Tap tap tap tappety tap.

This is going to be a tell-all. But the only person who's ever likely to read it is the junior from the Office of Security who, after my death, will be assigned to examine my papers and prepare a detailed report on their contents. Presumably, that whelp is going to wonder how I seem to know so much about what happened to people I've never met in places I've never been.

A great deal of what's done at the agency is textual analysis of some kind – often, in its methods, verging on literary criticism or scriptural exegesis – and one of the guys who helped train us in OSS was the Yale ethnologist Newton Mathers. He spent years studying the oral traditions of the Amazon, which are of inconstant usefulness if you're looking for solid historical fact, and he taught us always to look for what he called 'the stench of truth'. A stench is a stench because it's too complex and microbial and surprising to be merely an odor. Created things have odors. Natural things have stenches.

Since the whelp from the Office of Security will already have been told that before my death I submitted an absolutely cock-amamie testimony to the tribunal, he may assume this memoir is just an elaboration of that fantasy. But if he judges that it's detailed and consistent and lifelike enough to exude the stench of truth, and he knows I didn't have some treasure chest of surveillance reports and wiretap transcripts to draw from, he'll be looking for an explanation. Is it really possible that, from only the data I had available to me in the warehouse, I inferred the rest of the universe? That, from just a few clues, I filled out the measureless crossword?

In our first week with him, Old Man Mathers gave us Leibniz to read. 'Let us suppose that someone jots down a quantity of points helter-skelter upon a sheet of paper,' Leibniz writes in his *Discourse on Metaphysics*. 'Now I say that it is possible to find a geometrical line, whose concept shall be uniform and constant, in accordance with a certain formula, which will pass through all of those points, and in the same order in which the hand jotted them down. When the formula is very complex, that which conforms to it passes for irregular. But God does nothing out of order.' Even the jotting isn't truly helter-skelter. Everything happens for its own opaque reasons. Consequently, if you have enough of the points to deduce the formula that determines them, you can in turn deduce all the other points you don't already have.

If it sounds like I'm stretching Leibniz a little far, recall that he goes even further himself. 'When we consider carefully the connec-

tion of things,' he writes, 'we can say that from all time in a man's soul there are vestiges of everything that has happened to him and marks of everything that will happen to him and even traces of everything that happens in the universe.' In other words, you can deduce every formula from just one point. Maybe it will take a few days' interrogation for that point to break, but it will spill its guts eventually.

Yet that isn't how I did it. I didn't discover the formula. I didn't read the traces in one point or extrapolate from many, like a diligent intelligence analyst. I used a much cruder method, almost a cheat. I went to the aleph, the point from which all other points are visible. I crawled inside that temple in Honduras and I saw everything at once. If you asked the director of *Hearts in Darkness*, the most ill-starred movie in Hollywood history, he'd assure you that the gods talked to me in there. I maintain that the explanation is mycological. What the whelp will conclude, I don't know. He'll be my obituarist, my executor and my grave-robbler all rolled into one, so perhaps in the long run his opinion is the only one that counts.

When he sees the cinder block of typescript on my desk and realises he's going to have to crawl through the whole thing, perhaps he'll feel the same way I did when the guard flipped on the halide lamps my first day at the warehouse: I cannot possibly get through all this. That would be fine by me. I'm past the point of cultivating a readership, which I had to do not only as a crime reporter with the *New York Evening Mirror* but also a case officer of CIA. I remember a supervisor of mine once rejected my account of a brawl I'd witnessed among some communists in Paris because it was 'too Hemingway'. The reference was a little out of date but along the right lines. The agency generates millions of pages of documents a year, much of that in the form of first-person narratives, and although the internal literature of the agency may never have had its Modernist or its Beat period, it's absurd to suppose that a bunch of neophilic college-educated guys at their typewriters would be totally unaffected by what's going on out there at the publishing houses that in some cases

they're secretly funding. I asked my supervisor what style I should write the report in, and he shouted back, 'You don't write in any style at all, Zonulet, you just damned well put down what happened!' Obviously after that I couldn't write another word for about a month.

This time, though, I don't have to worry about critics. So I won't agonise about where to begin. I'm going to begin twenty-one years ago, in 1938, on 49th Street in Manhattan, with a bet.

* * *

The terms of this bet declared that for every ten seconds under sixty seconds it took the diver to wrestle the octopus out of the tank, Elias Coehorn Jr. would lose a hundred dollars, and for every ten seconds over sixty seconds, he'd win the same increment. The diver that night was a Chelsea longshoreman who could break your nose so badly with one right hook that a doctor would have to tweezer the cartilage out through your nostrils, and he'd never been known to take more than a minute and a half to humble an octopus. Once or twice he'd even flipped the beast out of the tank almost the instant the bell rang with the nonchalance of a teenage swimming-pool attendant retrieving a deflated flotation aid. 'The first thing you have to learn,' he'd been heard to say, 'is that you can't put a crotch hold on a fucker with eight crotches.'

Although Coehorn had stamped on his own wristwatch back at his friend Irma's apartment to emphasise some rhetorical point that could not now be recalled, he estimated that it was some time after midnight on Saturday, which meant he'd been up for at least thirty-six hours, and his own consciousness floated in a tank of champagne, gin, cocaine, hashish, Benzedrine and sewing-machine oil. Despite all that, he didn't need a slide rule to tell him that those odds weren't in his favor. And yet he'd taken the bet anyway, because he believed this particular octopus wouldn't give up so easily. Earlier, as he'd stood there with Irma admiring the noble bulge of its purple cranium, she'd pointed out that this captive Martian had only seven intact limbs. Petticoat

rags of intertentacular membrane trailed from the stump of the eighth. This octopus already knew what it felt like to fight for its life.

‘Hey,’ someone said to Coehorn, ‘anybody ever tell you you look just like that singer, uh . . . What’s his name?’

Coehorn rolled his eyes at Irma. ‘Frank Parker?’

‘Yeah!’

‘Only about half a million times.’

The impresario who organised these weekend sprees in the basement library of the derelict New York headquarters of the Bering Strait Railroad Association of North America had never bothered to clear out the rotting atlases from the bookshelves, and the sulfides in the blue inks had begun to give the dead oceans within an appropriately algal reek. Tonight the whole venue was so alarmingly crowded that if you wanted to provoke a morbid giggle from your date you could point at the precarious candelabras and make a reference to the recent West Side abattoir fire that had turned the Hudson into bouillon for a day. I was on my way to 49th Street myself, because I was hoping to run down a source of mine in the Boilermakers’ Union case I was looking into for the *New York Evening Mirror*, but I wouldn’t arrive at the basement for another few minutes. As I’ve explained, this memoir is going to describe a number of events that I didn’t see with my own eyes but learned about some years later when I went inside the temple.

The hubbub diminished a little as the diver got to the top of the stepladder beside the tank. The thin straps of his black swimming costume did such a tenuous job of containing his pectorals that they brought to mind a burlesque dancer’s lingerie. After taking a bow he turned back towards the tank and bent his knees in readiness like a marble Kratos on a plinth. ‘Good Lord, look at him,’ said Irma appreciatively. Coehorn himself found ostentatious sexual characteristics – in physique, dress, or behavior – to be unattractive in both males and females. Having sampled everything under the sun, he now felt that his ideal concubine would be a wiry hermaphrodite, equipped for any

configuration, groomed and tailored so exquisitely as to transcend sex. He tried to get the octopus's attention, hoping to communicate his warm wishes, but too many different refractive media were interposed. Then, as the bell rang and the diver made his short dive, Coehorn felt a hand on his arm. He turned.

'I didn't know you were a gambler, Mr Parker.' If you found this creature scampering around your kitchen one night you'd telephone for a fumigator, and although there was an oily familiarity to his manner, Coehorn was certain they'd never met before.

'Yes, I'm banned from the Saratoga track so I have to come here instead,' he replied sardonically. Two in a row. Sometimes he found himself resenting Frank Parker as deeply as if the crooner had adopted the resemblance as a willful mode of bullying. Parker was an Italian Jew who'd changed his name, whereas Coehorn didn't have a drop of Jewish blood. Plus Parker was at least five years older. The most insulting episode of all was when he was approached by a scout from a celebrity impersonators' agency called Seeing Double! who told him that he could probably get some occasional work if he were willing to pay for his own singing lessons.

'I ain't had the pleasure of your acquaintance, ma'am,' said the ratty man, turning to Irma, 'but I hope you'll allow me to say that the two of you make a very eye-catching couple.'

'We aren't together,' said Coehorn.

'Oh, I'm sorry. Well, in any case . . .' He stuck out his hand. 'Leland Trimble. *New York Evening Mirror*.' He really seemed to have convinced himself that Coehorn was Frank Parker. Coehorn was about to tell him to go to hell when he saw Irma turn pale.

Not more than thirty seconds had passed since the splash, but he was astonished, in a woozy sort of way, by what he saw when he turned back to the tank. The octopus seemed to be riding the diver piggyback, with its beak nuzzling between his shoulder-blades. Two of its tentacles were suctioned to the glass wall of the tank for leverage; two more had the diver's wrists trussed behind his back; a fifth tentacle was a long way down the diver's throat;

and a sixth, though concealed by the seat of the swimming costume, seemed to be equally deep in the diver's rectum.

The notion of an octopus getting the drop on a wrestler was as laughable as the notion of a greased piglet at a county fair trampling the farmhands trying to catch it, but on the other hand this could hardly have been a deliberate strategy on the diver's part, and the diver's bulging eyes were enough to assure Coehorn that he'd been correct in his earlier evaluation of the octopus's vigor. Apart from a few chattering girls at the opposite end of the basement who probably didn't even know there was a fight going on, an uneasy silence had fallen over the crowd. By the time the clock showed sixty seconds, you could tell from the kicking of the diver's legs that his current ambition was not so much to unknot himself from the rapine harness as it was simply to get up to the surface of the water where he might have a chance of breathing through his nose. But the octopus wouldn't even let him do that. He should have been able to hold his breath without any trouble for at least three, maybe three and a half minutes, but perhaps the shock of enclosing about a foot of mollusk at each end, like reverse food poisoning, had prematurely loosed a few pints of air. Coehorn wondered how that would feel. He'd had dicks in his mouth and his ass at the same time before but, fortunately or unfortunately, none of them had been prehensile.

'Which way did you bet, Mr Parker?' said Trimble.

'Long,' said Coehorn.

'Same here! You know, the rules say the clock keeps running until either the diver or the octopus is out of the tank. So, technically, if he croaks in there, they got to keep paying until somebody dredges one of them out. We've got a home run on our hands. Unless they argue that he's not in the tank any more because he's already in heaven, but I don't think they could get away with that.'

'You don't mean he could actually die?' said Irma.

'I don't see why not,' said Coehorn.

'Isn't anyone going to do anything?'

‘Like what?’

‘Smash the glass and get him out.’

‘What about the octopus? It’s only defending itself.’

‘You can fill up a sink for it in the men’s room,’ said Irma.

‘This waistcoat is lacewing silk and my tailor specifically told me not to get so much as a drop of water on it.’

‘For heaven’s sake, Elias, if I have to watch that man die I won’t be able to sleep for a year!’

Coehorn could never say no to Irma, who was very sensitive. Also, this would make a good anecdote. ‘Well, all right.’ He rolled up both sleeves, knowing there was a particular phrase you always said in this kind of situation. Then he remembered it. ‘Stand back, everyone.’

‘Hey, hey, hold on just a second, Mr Parker,’ said Trimble. ‘How much are you up?’

Coehorn looked at the clock. He was now up three hundred dollars. If he made five hundred dollars tonight, which would only take another seventeen seconds, he could hand it straight over to Irma to reimburse her for the money she’d lost on the paintings he’d taken it upon himself to entrust to that ‘charming’ ‘White Russian’ ‘gallerist’ while she was away in the desert, which would be a wonderful gesture. Surely she would prefer that to this capricious intervention in the life of a stranger, and if there was a choice of problems to solve, Coehorn always preferred to solve the one he could solve neatly with money. Admittedly, he wasn’t sure that in good conscience he was allowed to put off saving the diver’s life for another seventeen seconds. But perhaps he was allowed to put off making the decision about whether he was allowed to put off saving the diver’s life for another seventeen seconds for another seventeen seconds. That is, for another sixteen seconds. Fifteen seconds.

‘Elias!’ shrieked Irma.

By now the seventh tentacle of the octopus had blindfolded the diver, who was still wriggling like a bad escape artist but looked as if he was beginning to slacken. Shuffling from foot to foot, Coehorn willed the time to go faster. When he glanced at

the spectators behind him he found them as detached as masturbators. Deciding that Irma was right and he'd rather find her last hundred dollars somewhere else than wait another nine seconds, he reached for the metal stepladder so he could smash the tank with it.

But just as he was hoisting it unsteadily over his head, four hands yanked at his shoulders and the stepladder crashed back to the stone floor.

At first he assumed that some other gamblers who'd bet long on the octopus were trying to keep him from curtailing their prize. But then, instead of the punch in the nose he'd been expecting, he felt himself being dragged backward through the crowd.

Twisting left and right, he saw that his new escorts were two men in black serge suits, built like sasquatches, even more muscular than the diver. Coehorn owed a lot of people money but he was careful about the lenders he used – nothing more harrowing had ever resulted from his delinquency than a chocolate box full of dead cockroaches in the mail – so there was almost no chance that these were thugs here to collect. 'Irma, stop them!'

But Irma was now struggling to lift the stepladder herself, and the other spectators were still too entranced by the floor show to notice Coehorn's abduction. 'Whoever you're looking for, I can guarantee it's not me!' It wasn't until he was at the stairwell that he came up with another guess about what might have happened. 'Now, listen, I'm not Frank Parker! Do you hear me? I don't know what he's done but I'm not him! I just look like him. If he was younger.' He craned his neck for one last look at the diver but Irma and the tank were already out of sight.

I'd just arrived at the building, and at the top of the stairs I had to press myself up against the wall to let the three men past. The recent craze among midtown filing clerks for a new chewing tobacco that was supposed to whiten your teeth had turned the sidewalks here piebald. Outside, Coehorn found 49th Street painfully bright. 'Good grief, is it Sunday morning already?' he asked,

squinting. That's the only part of this I saw with my own eyes.

For the first time one of the sasquatches spoke. 'Monday morning.'

'Oh,' said Coehorn.

Without loosening their grips, they marched him to a Buick limousine parked at the corner. Waiting in the front seat was a chauffeur and on the back seat a steel bucket. Coehorn got in, moved the bucket from the seat to the floor, and sat down with a sasquatch on either side of him. 'We won't need this,' he said, 'I'm not going to puke. I never puke.' As the chauffeur started the engine, the sasquatch on Coehorn's left took from his trouser pocket what looked like an asthmatic's nebuliser. 'What's that?' said Coehorn. The sasquatch jammed the nozzle of the nebuliser up Coehorn's nose and gave the bulb three brisk clenches.

Coehorn felt as if he'd been shot in the frontal lobe with a bullet made of mustard powder and static charge. Turquoise flares went off in his eyes and he got a strange cramp at the base of his tongue. Then he felt the remains of his last meal stampeding out of him. He bent over the bucket and puked so hard he thought he was going to punch through the bottom. When he'd finished, the sasquatch on his right handed him a silk handkerchief and a glass ampule of lavender water, so Coehorn gargled and wiped his mouth before dropping both the handkerchief and the empty bottle into his dregs. The sasquatch cranked down the tinted side window, dropped the bucket into the road, and cranked the window back up before Coehorn could get any idea of which direction they were headed.

That was when Coehorn realised he wasn't swacked any more. Careful introspection didn't turn up the slightest blush of champagne, gin, cocaine, hashish, Benzedrine, or sewing-machine oil. He had no hangover. And he didn't even particularly want a cigarette. His head hadn't felt so clear since he was about sixteen. The tank had been smashed and now he lay there in a puddle with nothing between him and the grasping fingers of the world. As a child, Coehorn had been a drooping orchid – bilious and photophobic, deeply in love with his bed and his dog, so late to

puberty you might have taken him for a castrato – until the day he got drunk for the first time and discovered he could be as gallant as anyone else for as long as he forgot that he wasn't. 'What did you just give me?' he mumbled. The sasquatches didn't answer. Deglazed by this horrible new clarity, Elias Coehorn Jr. now found himself able to deduce his real destination without any trouble. The sasquatches didn't think he was Frank Parker. They knew exactly who he was.

They were taking him to see his father.

By the late 1930s, Elias Coehorn Sr. was an almost mythological figure in New York life, a frost giant or skyscraper khan, honored in the persecution fantasies of more raving Bowery bums than anyone else in the country. And he was not the type whose aura dissipates the first time you meet him in person. Quite the opposite. In 1934, during my very first week working at the *Mirror*, I went to interview an albino from Mott Haven who had managed to convince a lot of people that God was in the habit of schmoozing with him directly. God, he reported, had plenty to say about the dismal future of the United States under a socialist president. We'd scheduled the interview over the telephone, but when I arrived at his apartment he was no longer interested. 'I'm going to see Elias Coehorn this afternoon,' he said, meaning Elias Coehorn Sr. 'He told me I couldn't talk to the press in the meantime.' Elias Coehorn Sr., in addition to being one of the wealthiest men in New York, was an avid collector of Christian visionaries, and the albino was understandably giddy because this had the potential to be a very lucrative engagement. When I got back to the office, however, Bev Pomutz, my editor, called me a 'fucking witless mealworm' for taking no for an answer. So the next morning I returned to Mott Haven without an appointment, and I found a husk of the guy I'd met the previous day. He was curled up under a blanket like an invalid. 'Coehorn saw right through me,' he said. 'He knew right away I was making it up. The way he looked at me . . . It was so fucking scary.' 'So scary it almost turned your hair black?' I joked, facetiously. But

the ‘albino’ missed the joke. ‘No, actually, it won’t grow out black for another few weeks.’ He confessed that he paled himself with bleach, rice powder, and eye drops. ‘Coehorn saw that right away too. I don’t know how. Nobody else ever guessed.’

I never met Elias Coehorn Sr. in person myself (although I believe I later came very close – only a matter of inches between us). But everyone I knew who did, whether they wanted to admit it or not, felt like they’d barely escaped with their souls. Even Elias Coehorn Jr., who’d had a lifetime to get used to his father, and made a policy of regarding him with utter derision, had to steel himself as he was ushered into his father’s office on the thirty-second floor of the Pine Street headquarters of the Eastern Aggregate Company.

There was no chair on the near side of the titanic mahogany desk, so he asked for one. Phibbs, his father’s private secretary, started to say that he’d be happy to fetch one from the vestibule, but he was interrupted: ‘My son will stand and listen.’

Coehorn Sr.’s thin face was framed, as ever, by bushy white sideburns and an upturned detachable collar; he’d permanentised his style four decades ago, around the same time he’d permanentised his diction, ridding it of the last traces of the Pennsylvania workingman’s accent that would once have betrayed his origins on the outskirts of Hershey.

He’d started his first business making pard liquor in a shack at the age of fourteen. Pard liquor, in the 1880s, was still produced by sawing up any available dead horse that wasn’t worth tanning for leather, stuffing the meat into a barrel along with plenty of sorghum jelly and caustic potash, and flipping the barrel twice a day for a week before straining out the resultant brown goo, which local butchers liked to mix with wood chips to ensure a slow and steady burn when they were smoking hams or congealing blood sausage. The work was not pleasant, especially in summer. But because there was so little demand for pard liquor outside certain Dutch hamlets in southeastern Pennsylvania, nobody on this side of the Atlantic had ever bothered to start producing it on a large scale, so even a

lone entrepreneur with no initial capital using pre-industrial methods was able to stay competitive.

One winter, a butcher sifted from a bucket of Mr Coehorn's pard liquor an engraved wedding ring belonging to a Hershey schoolmistress who'd recently vanished without a trace. Dark conclusions were drawn, and Mr Coehorn might have been torn apart by a mob if that same afternoon the schoolmistress's body hadn't been discovered in the woods, intact apart from a few fingers most likely chewed off at some earlier juncture by one of the racoons with which the boy made a thrifty practice of bulking out his horse barrels. That incident spurred his decision to leave Hershey for Manhattan, where his career began in earnest. (He didn't entirely forswear the pard liquor trade, however: forty-seven years later, within one of Eastern Aggregate's dozens of subsidiaries, there was still a division manufacturing a comparable product, which was nowadays used as an additive in luxury women's cosmetics.)

'There was no need for a kidnapping, Father,' said Elias Coehorn Jr. 'You could simply have called.' He preferred not to concede that he'd been at all rattled.

'I did call.'

'We have placed many, many telephone calls to a variety of residences and establishments with which you have been associated, Master Coehorn, but with no results.' Phibbs had found infant fame as what the newspapers now called a 'medical miracle': he had been an ectopic pregnancy, developing outside the womb, and could not have survived but for a nearby fibroid tumor on the outer wall of the uterus that had soaked him generously in the blood it embezzled. His chinless head lolled on his long neck like a boxer's punch-ball.

'Yes, well, my friends know never to take messages. What's so urgent?' Before this Coehorn hadn't spoken to his father for over a year, and he had come to feel like a migraine patient who goes for so long without an attack that he begins to wonder if he's cured.

'I am never sure exactly how much willful or pretended ignorance

I am to assume on your part,’ said his father. ‘But you must be aware, I suppose, that there exists a body called the Coehorn Missionary Foundation.’

‘Am I to be presented as an exemplar of why their attention is urgently needed back here in New York?’ Coehorn had always found his father’s naïve schoolhouse Christianity, and in particular his obsession with latter-day Saint Francises who claimed to be in touch with God, to be his most mockable quality – and his most incongruous, too, given the rigor he applied to every other section of his life.

‘In Spanish Honduras, the foundation operates a mission station in the north-east, near a town named San Esteban at the edge of the jungle, bringing the Lord’s word to the river traders and the native Pozkito people. Eight days ago, they received an unexpected visit from two Frenchmen, begging for water and medical aid. They were the only survivors of a party of nine archaeologists who had ventured deep into the jungle. They were both feverish and one still had a three-foot arrow through his forearm. But they reported that they had found a temple. The settlement at Copán has long been assumed to be the easternmost of the major Mayan ruins, but this one was apparently almost two hundred miles further east, and its design was at variance with any such precedent.’

When he heard ‘Mayan ruins’, a picture came into Coehorn’s mind of the sort of limestone ziggurat with four-fold symmetry he’d seen in *Life*; but the small balsawood model that Phibbs set down on the desk was not quite like that, because instead of four stepped sides it had two stepped sides and two sheer vertical sides, like a pair of stepladders pushed together end to end to make a podium. When he picked the model up, it fell apart into two pieces. He could hardly be blamed for its shoddy construction, but his father nevertheless gave him a look he knew well from childhood.

Those looks. Sometimes, when you got a glimpse of the ice caves behind Elias Coehorn Sr.’s countenance, it was hard to believe he’d ever been able to father an heir: you’d expect any

woman who submitted to an injection of his animal fluids to be frozen solid from the cervix outward.

Nevertheless, Ada Coehorn had managed to survive the procedure – only to fall from one of Braeswood’s turrets the winter of her son’s sixth birthday in 1918. From the staircase of old dictionaries she’d built to get up to the high window (W–Z; R–S, T–V; J–L, M–O, P–Q; A–B, C–D, E–F, G–I) the police had concluded she’d been trying to free a moth that had got trapped between the sashes, but for a long time Coehorn had assumed, as anyone would in the circumstances, that in fact his father had murdered her. When he was fifteen, however, and he had the idea of bribing his Latin tutor to go to the Glen Cove courthouse and transcribe a copy of the coroner’s report, he discovered to his surprise and displeasure that it would be very hard for any reasonable person to dispute its verdict that neither his father nor his father’s butler could possibly have had anything to do with the death. For a second time, thirty-six years after the schoolmistress in Hershey, his father was grudgingly acquitted of murder, grudgingly because it would have fit so much better if he had done it.

‘I trust you won’t be too obtuse to appreciate the magnitude of this discovery,’ his father continued after Phibbs had retrieved the halves of the model, ‘but at any rate, the salient point for our purposes is that nobody else knows about it yet. The missionaries wouldn’t have permitted the Frenchmen to leave the mission station even if they were medically capable of doing so. The details were transmitted by cipher, and the sketches the Frenchmen drew were presented upside down to the wirephoto operator in La Ceiba as plans for a new gold mine.’

‘What does any of this have to do with me?’ said Coehorn.

‘I want this temple. You are going to fetch it for me. Preparations have already begun for an expedition to Spanish Honduras. A crew of native laborers will disassemble the temple, after which it will be carried out of the jungle stone by stone, loaded aboard a number of ships, brought to New York, repaired of its long neglect, and reassembled on the grounds of Braeswood where

the north firefly pavilion currently stands. You will be in command of this entire endeavor.'

Coehorn smiled. 'I'm about as likely to bring you back a basket of roc eggs from the Cape of Good Hope.'

'You are twenty-six years old, boy. I don't have to tell you again what I had already accomplished by the time I was your age. I have allowed you to waste all these years in your circus of jockers and dope addicts in the expectation that you would tire of such divagations of your own accord. But that has not happened. Enough is enough. Perhaps you were expecting that one day I would offer you the vice presidency of the radio division or some other puerile sinecure. But instead you are going to do some real work for a few weeks.'

'If the French archaeologists were delirious, how do you know these ruins are even real?'

'Their account of the temple was specific and plausible. This is not the architecture of delirium. I can assure you that unlike the Frenchmen you will be in no physical peril as long as you are not too careless.'

In the past, a direct order from his father would have been like a tentacle around Coehorn's throat, but these days he felt more confident. 'I'm afraid I have a prior engagement forever so I'll have to decline. A pleasure to see you, Father, as always.'

'You will do as I say or the money stops.'

'That's not much of a threat because you never give me any money as it is. I've learned to manage perfectly well on my own.'

'Actually,' said Phibbs, 'over the last twelve months your father has deposited nearly twenty thousand dollars in your bank account.'

Coehorn smiled and shook his head. 'No, that is certainly not the case.'

'Yes, sir, it is,' said Phibbs.

'But it can't be because I'm skinned out all the time.' Sometimes they let him make a withdrawal and sometimes they didn't but he never bothered to check the balance on the account.

'Whether or not you admit the existence of your allowance, you will have no more of it to spend.'

‘There’s a trust. Mother made sure of it. I know what I’m owed. I’ll sue.’

‘You are owed nothing. No lawyer will represent you. However: this is the last condition I shall ever set. For all I care you can convert to Kropotkinism afterward, or bigamize with a couple of Eskimo women. Get this temple for me and on your return your trust will be fully vested six years early.’

‘If I don’t go, who will do it?’

‘I’ll send Phibbs.’

That was hateful to Coehorn, the thought of Phibbs going to the tropics in his place, because a direct substitution would imply that he was on a level with this sniveling chamberlain. More likely than not, however, his father had already resigned himself to such a swap. More likely than not, most of his father’s plans had been drawn up with Phibbs in mind on the reasonable assumption that Coehorn would say no. More likely than not, if his father had been there to watch the farce with the octopus, it would only have confirmed his belief that his son was no good for anything. Since Coehorn wouldn’t allow himself to get caught up in the sort of dreary Freudian determinism that he found it so easy to identify in the emotional lives of his friends, he tried to see the instinctive appeal of proving his father wrong here as no better than a dog begging at the table. But he couldn’t ignore his father’s threat to take his money away, to smash the only tank that really mattered. He remembered how many of his acquaintances from his one and a half semesters at Harvard had disappeared from sight after the Crash, not all at once that fall but one by one in the years that followed, like a disease from the mainland spreading gradually across an archipelago. Now here was one more dose of Black Tuesday. If he had no money to spend, his New York friends would drop him, and he wouldn’t blame them because he’d done the same to others many times. He tried to form a mental image of the jungle, but the best he could do was the Brooklyn Botanical Garden. As it happened, on a recent Sunday afternoon there he had overheard a girl say, ‘Isn’t that Frank Parker?’ ‘No,’ replied her companion, ‘no, I

think it's that Rockefeller kid.' Coehorn was grudgingly willing to admit his resemblance to Frank Parker but he looked nothing whatsoever like any of the squinty-eyed Rockefeller brothers. There among the peonies he could feel his identity dissolving. But out in Spanish Honduras none of these names would yet mean anything at all. Not even the name Elias Coehorn Sr.

'Well?' said his father.

*

In Hollywood there was a slang term, bumps, for the strivers who came from all over the country believing they had a future in the movie business, a word derived from the stories of young actresses who got so desperate they threw themselves in front of studio limousines in the hopes of getting noticed by the powerful men in the back seats. In the land of the bumps, almost everybody dreamed of receiving a telegram like the one Jervis Whelt held in his hands. And almost everybody would have dismissed it as a belated April Fools prank if they had actually received it. '*See me at home noon tomorrow Arnold Spindler,*' read the telegram in its entirety.

As the founder-chairman of Kingdom Pictures, Spindler was second only to Jack Warner at the highest echelon of the movie business. 'Home', in this context, was his Bel Air estate, and he did not often invite guests there. He was famous, in fact, as a recluse and a paranoiac, ever since a near-fatal accident in 1929. An enthusiastic futurist in those days, he was not content merely to bang the drum for sound film and Technicolor, but had gone so far as to hire a team of aeronautical engineers to design and build an experimental non-rigid thermal airship that could be used to take aerial shots from static vantages at low altitudes with almost no engine noise. Instead of using a test pilot for its first flight over the Owens Valley, he went up himself in the cameraman's gondola. But the airship's envelope failed and it crashed into a ridge. Spindler, who barely survived, needed a series of marathon operations to repair his fractured skull. Since then he had seldom been seen in public and conducted most of