

## Part III.

With his clipboard and pencil in his perspiring hands, F. now stood before a heavy, old-fashioned door, the entrance to E. L.'s kingdom. It was a particularly nondescript day, neither sunny nor grey – in fact nothing at all. As a result F. was even more nervous, as the weather offered no opportunity to take refuge in small talk should conversation become difficult. The blank sheet of paper on F.'s clipboard – on which he intended to make shorthand notes on the statics and substance of the mill doubling as coded observations on E. L.'s experiments and his innermost thought and work – now began to soak in the moisture from F.'s hands,

forming gentle waves. On his first attempt, F. lost grip of the heavy doorknocker and it banged loudly against the door, startling his ears that were accustomed to the quiet of a TORRE & TASSIS office. He hastily attempted to make amends with an appropriate series of gentle and rhythmic knocks.

The small man who opened the door was nearly bald, and he wore an elegantly tailored three-piece suit, freshly polished spats, apparently the previous year's model by LUSCH & MAN company, who were renowned for their expensive and exquisite retro-design. "A man with hair on his chest, very good," he seemed to be saying, as he winked suggestively and invited F. to step in. "Mr L. is not

available, unfortunately, he is busy, out, not here. But do come in.” F. walked into the house, politely bowing gently, and at this very moment a rustling noise as if of waves breaking could be heard. The bald man abruptly turned to one side, picked up a nautilus shell that lay on a small pedestal next to the door, pressed it to his ear and exclaimed with pleasure: “*Mais bonjour, Monsieur le Capitaine, comment ça va . . .*” Paying no further attention to F., the man then disappeared, walking away into the house chatting, still with a twinkle in his eyes.

For a while F. stood motionless in the small hallway. His shoes sank into a thick carpet. The light in the room was indirect and seemed to be

strangely diffracted. There were three doors leading off from the entrance hall: the front door he had just come through, a closed door on his right, and another door right in front of him, through which the bald man had just disappeared. It was still slightly ajar. Through the crack F. was just able to see into the next room, which was much brighter than the entrance hall. He saw a number of shelves full of books and a writing desk with a peculiar machine on it, amidst piles of papers and writing equipment. Was this perhaps a vibration transmitter? F. had heard of Vibtrans machines, as they were also known, and had seen a sketch of one in an academic yearbook. He was reminded of this by the ensemble of

bronze-coloured funnels he now perceived – they were reminiscent in form of lily blossoms of various sizes. This machine could compress sound waves and transmit them to a precise point over great distances, and F. was sure that only imperial research institutions actually held them. The Vibtrans were kept so hush-hush that you could be forgiven for thinking that their very existence was no more than a deliberately spread rumour. It was said that they could even link up with direct regions of the limbic system of the brain, so that information did not have to be transmitted via the sometimes complicated medium of language.

F. was so fascinated by this machine that he only now realised the

presence of someone in the room he was looking into. He could hear the gentle scratching of a pen on paper and a dry rustling of material – perhaps a sleeve protector that was being jerkily drawn across a table with the motion of someone writing.

F. was still pondering whether to risk a closer look into the room before him, or rather to remain discreetly in front of the threshold, when the door was suddenly thrown open and the small man in the suit reappeared. With an almost flirtatious flick of his head, he signalled to F. to come. F. blushed, sensing that he must endeavour to remain composed, and followed.

“Anna, please bring us some tea”, the man called as he walked past, and

F. looked back into the study as he was already stepping through the next door. The pale girl who was sitting there, with a great mass of papers before her, briefly looked up from her work, and for an instant her eyes and F.'s eyes met. Hers were neither brown nor green nor blue; F. was never to forget them. Their depths included all the colours of the ocean, endless coral reefs in the fathomless light of the sea. F. was speechless, intoxicated.

“Miss Anna,” the man explained as they walked past on the way to the next hallway. And then, when they were out of hearing, he added: “She is no longer the same, since her diving trip to the coral gardens of the south Pacific. The poor girl is suffer-

ing from sporadic fits of metalepsy. Thanks to the raptures of the deep. You know, nitrogen narcosis, the, um, Martini effect, understand? It comes over her in the most embarrassing situations, and of course it cannot be treated. It is a very rare illness, hard to believe. The young girl is overwhelmed by a sudden belching, like hiccups. Not very ladylike, I am afraid. And that is just the beginning, the overture as it were, before the true sickness – the trances. You can see for yourself, Miss Anna is rather tense, cramped up between her shoulder blades, even now, although her last attack was weeks ago.”

These trances, the little man went on to say as he and F. walked along the hallway, A.'s periods of tempo-

rary mental absence, during which she remained fixed in a more or less elegant pose and metamorphosed into a statue of her own self, were veritable journeys to hell. She saw visions of herself and the world around her, shrivelled and distorted into worm-like shapes akin to Möbius strips, sometimes also stretched and wafer thin, in wavy, drifting shapes like algae in the current of the sea. Sometimes she saw herself from all sides, all conceivable sides at once, and saw herself seeing herself, sometimes she saw her surroundings quite clearly in precise perspective, only then to notice that she was in two places at once, a classic case of bilocation. F. was amazed. These visions, "Anna's morphoses," F.'s companion

whispered mysteriously, winking conspiratively, were like shining baroque helter-skelter rides, whose crystalline clarity was expressed in the intensity of their reflections, but they always ended in the same way. They ended by coming to an end: by coming to an end.

The man in the suit had now led F. rapidly along a seemingly endless corridor, which veered ever so slightly but continuously to the right, until they came to a small octagonal room without windows, where there were two armchairs and a table set with a tea service. "A cup of Darjeeling?" the man asked, already handing F. one. "Drink quickly, our time is running out!" F. took the delicate, almost transparent cup. The tea was

clearly still so hot as to be undrinkable. The little man also took a cup, drank it down in one go and then looked at F. expectantly and impatiently. F. put his cup to his mouth, drank cautiously, burned his tongue, and blushing deeply he attempted a smile, as he carefully put the cup back on the table. "Chinese porcelain?" F. asked, at last saying something after having been so respectfully quiet for so long. "Iceland Spar," the man replied. F. sensed an inquisitive gaze upon him, and then began to see double. He felt quite queer and he was worried that he was going to fall apart. "Oh," he nodded, while doing his utmost to keep his composure. His two partners seemed to take his disintegration rather soberly. Whilst

they had only just seemed ever so slightly distinct from each other but still evidently identical – F. recalled this phenomenon from those rare occasions when he might have drunken one glass too many –, it now seemed as if they had begun to very gradually diverge. "Extraordinary," one said quietly to the other, and made as if to stand up, while the other remained seated and gazed gently at F., offering him an aniseed liqueur. Now the other man put a bottle labelled "*ANIS*" and "*Eau Trophe*" and three glasses on the table, poured out the schnaps and passed a glass over to F., gesturing to him to drink. It tasted surprisingly like water. "Please excuse the double refraction ... Shall we?" One of his counterparts bade

him follow the other. F. nodded absent-mindedly and then did as he had been asked.

“Over there, please.” Opposite the door through which F. had entered the small room, a second door led into another corridor, slightly curved like the first one, and with no end in sight. Again F. was led along at near running pace, and this time they refrained from talking. F.’s thoughts began to wander, he tried to imagine the surprises that might await him. His companion seemed to become agitated; he looked at his watch and increased his speed. Finally they came to yet another door, in front of which the man stopped. He turned to F.: “That way please. I am very pleased to have met you, please come again

soon. Farewell!” After a brief handshake, F. walked into the next room.

#### Part IV.

Finding his bearings, he discovered to his great surprise that he was back in the study he had already seen. The writing equipment and papers were still on the desk, but the Vibtrans had gone. F. gingerly stepped up to the table and took a look at the many handwritten sheets and notes. They contained long series of numbers, sums and figures, listed vertically and added up at the end. F. picked up some of these papers and compared the notes. They all consisted of the same tables and numbers, in identical order, on all the sheets he looked

at, and all in the same neat, elegant hand. The only deviation, the only difference between these sheets lay in the final totals, in no case could F. find the same result. The numbers seemed to follow different laws on each sheet – their own logic which made sense on one sheet but produced infinite contradictions when compared to the others. F. began to put the papers in order, creating neat piles that he then leafed through, following the sense of order that he had learned over years of work in public office. He was looking for an explanation for the strange phenomenon of the numbers. Then one sheet, lying underneath all the others, attracted his attention, as it contained a written note instead of numbers:

Why does it make us uneasy to know that the map is within the map and the thousand and one nights are within The 1001 Nights? Why does it disquiet us to know that Don Quixote is the reader of the Quixote, and Hamlet is a spectator in Hamlet? And who gave the order to dive deeper than a thousand feet, although the captain was not on the bridge?

Completely puzzled, F. took the note, folded it carefully and put it in his waistcoat pocket. Then he walked to the door that led to the entrance hall, opened it quietly and slowly walked out without looking back.

### Part V.

In the following days and weeks F. felt like the characters in the serialised novel by the French author. He

doubted his own powers of reason and his accountability, whenever he thought of what he had experienced upon entering the strange world of modern science. So far no one knew of his journey to see E. L., no one had accompanied him, and no one could vouch for what he had seen. For days F. had not been able to look again at the small folded note he had taken away, then again and again he obsessively took it out of pocket, read it, folded it pedantically, and put it back in his pocket – it was his only evidence. He tried to make sense of what he had seen, to find some logic in the bald man, the shell, the study, the twisting corridors, the papers, the fact that the paintings and artefacts he had expected were nowhere to be

seen, and in their place were all these papers full of peculiar formulae and words. Then there were those eyes, her eyes. He was unable to find any system in what he remembered, and so, like a faithful dog, he kept on returning to one consuming image: the gaze of Miss A.'s eyes upon him.

F. wondered what he should do. He was back in the familiar surroundings of his office, had returned to his beloved *escritoire* and was again sifting through the incoming correspondence. This once so comforting and enjoyable occupation now seemed dull and meaningless. F. was dissatisfied. The French author's serialised novel continued to arrive with distressing regularity, and F. now read it without any enthusiasm.

One evening, under the pretext of bringing the bookkeeping up to date, and with A.'s endless numbers in mind, he stayed late in the office on his own. He took the note from his waistcoat pocket, unfolded it carefully, and laid it down on his *escritoire*. Then he opened all the drawers and closets, took out his beloved collection of letters and piled them carefully around the note. Next he took a blank sheet of paper and a light cutter and determinedly took his place at his desk.

It was time to deploy the depths of his collection, to transform the sink into a source. He wished to write the first letter of his life. As an archivist he was still dumb, yet he now knew which words had been

given him to use and seduce for his goal. The letter would be addressed to her, a letter she would cast her eyes on and read – with those eyes! A letter for her eyes only, a letter dedicated to her eyes. Therefore it must do justice to her eyes in every respect. It would have to be as they were. It would have to address them in the way they looked at him.

From all the letters that had found their way into his collection over many years, all the love letters, essays, diplomats' reports, correspondence between collegial teachers, doctors, mathematicians and biologists, letters from cousins and salon hostesses, from the world's embassies – from all these letters whose words and phrases he knew as well as

the imitated wood grain of his escriptoire, from all these treasures he now began to copy out single phrases that he would combine to create one perfect letter. The arrangement of the forms of address obeyed the same strict logic of the lists that he had seen on her desk. Each number matched a form of address, a colour from the order of corals, a resonant word from the world outside his office. Only in this way, by employing all the powers of science and all the depths of language in his collection, would he be able to find the right words to reply to the gaze of her eyes:

- i. i. Dear, [red]
- ii. Dearest, [red phosphor]
- iii. Beloved, [quinacridone red]

2. i. Honoured, (blue)
- ii. Highly honoured, (deep blue)
- iii. Most highly honoured, (ultramarine blue)
  
3. i. Esteemed, (yellow)
- ii. Highly esteemed, (Neapolitan yellow)
- iii. Most highly esteemed, (goldenrod yellow)
  
- You palimpsest, (ghostly white)
- my apnea.
- You synecdoche, (chiffon yellow)
- my anamnesis –
- my Mnemosyne – (slate grey)
- You anagram.
- my trope, (orchid)
- You anastrophe,
- You polytope – (steel blue)
- You Gorgonia
- You palindrome (u=u<sup>R</sup>), (peachpuff)
- You heterotype,

Warmly yours,  
 Your emirp, your Cotard syndrome, your pars pro  
 toto, indigo.

While he was writing these lines, F. felt physical sensations such as he had never hitherto experienced, a soft vibrating and tickling in his temples and pulsating warmth in his neck. His eyes were stinging too, as if he had spent too long in dusty rooms, and he had to keep blinking and shutting them. Almost unconsciously, F. drifted off into sleep – and the words began to increasingly resemble serpentine tracks without any meaning.

Again he was in a large room with no windows, and from the farthest corner a figure appeared – it was A. Swaying, or rather dancing, she moved towards him. Her silhouette began to circle faster and faster, until she stopped abruptly right in front of

him and was overcome by violent twitching and jerking as if she were being subject to electric shocks. Her face presented a strange contrast to her violently shaking body. Her eyes were closed, and Miss A. appeared to be in a state of great peace and tranquillity. She almost seemed to be smiling.

F. sank deeper and deeper. A new colour, something urgent then interrupted this movement. F. now let his lindworm thoughts take complete control. He soon lost sight of Miss A. Meanwhile the hissing in his ears became louder, and he seemed to be losing touch with gravity. Only with the most distant, very last, hesitant rear-guard of his winding and snaking consciousness did he manage to con-

concentrate with quite some difficulty,  
and to listen.