

I Opening

When is a magician a real magician?

The Aquarian Church of Cagliostro

November 1972

Once upon a time (it was in 1984 actually, that long ago) a man named John Disk achieved satori in a cell at San Quentin prison. It was like a million balloons bursting inside him and outside him at once, each balloon releasing a twinkle of light, each light a species of orgasm. Or, at least, that was the way he described it to Miss Portinari afterwards.

“Those are the best words I have,” he said.

“They’ll do,” Miss Portinari told him briefly.

Disk had received a life sentence for murdering the controversial magician, Cagliostro the Great. If there were any justice in our courts (*loud laughter*), the newspapers would have gone to jail with him, for they had planted it in his head that Cagliostro-the-commie, Cagliostro-the-dope-fiend, Cagliostro-the-sex-maniac, was un-American and, therefore, by definition, unfit to live. They had been riding Cagliostro’s ass, in fact, for more than two decades before Disk finally pulled the trigger and dispatched the loathesome creature to a well-deserved perdition. Disk was a believer in newspapers, back then.

“Rosenfelt doesn’t see it that way, of course. Rosenfelt and his buddies, the Rothschilds, want to crush free enterprise and competition. They call it socialism, but it’s really their own brand of capitalism. They been after me and Ford and every independent and maverick in the country for a hell of a long time. Crane the economic royalist. Crane the malefactor of great wealth. Crane the selfish interest. That’s their line—as if *their* interests aren’t selfish, too, the lying kike bastards. You remember all this, son. You remember what your father told you. It’s a big fortune, the Crane holdings, and they’re going to be trying to take it away from you, just like they’re trying to take it away from me. I earned every penny of it, when I invented ORGASMOR, and I don’t aim to ever let them take it away. From me or from you. You just remember why the bankers are all liberals, son. You remember who your real enemies are, and don’t think it’s those idiot socialists and other cranks. It’s those kike bankers who want the whole pie and are just using Rosenfelt as a pawn.”

That was old Crane, Tom Crane, the man who invented ORGASMOR, talking to his son, Hugh, in Central Park in 1934. Tom Crane was one of the last reactionaries; a tough, vehement man whose wealth was based on a swindle pure and simple. He never claimed, in any advertisement, that ORGASMOR actually created more orgasms, and the FDA never quite succeeded in putting him out of business for fraudulent representations; but the intelligent were inclined to regard

his customers as dupes. It is a fact beyond dispute that most people who bought ORGASMOR thought it would have some salubrious effect on their sex lives, and, since the formula was very little different from Coca Cola, a strict constructionist might say they were being defrauded. "It doesn't *poison* anybody," Tom Crane always said when that was discussed in his presence.

In fact, Hugh — who was only ten in 1934 and would reach 12 before he learned that the correct pronunciation of the President's name was Roosevelt — was only partially listening to his father's rambling anti-semitic diatribe. He had heard most of it before. Besides, the tramp was much more interesting. He was stopping each person who passed and asking them something. They all shook their heads and walked by rapidly. This was puzzling to the boy: If the answer was negative, why did the tramp keep asking the question? Didn't he believe the people he had already asked?

"You see, son, Rosenfelt and the DuPonts and the Rhodes scholars have got it all sliced up, and they have to get rid of people like me," Tom Crane was still rambling along his own paranoid yellow brick road when they finally came abreast of the tramp. The boy listened eagerly to catch the Mystery Question.

"Hey, mister, could you spare a dime, I haven't eaten in three days, mister, hey, listen, mister..."

"Get a job," old Crane said, walking faster. "You see, son," he went on, "That's the kind of good-for-nothing loafer who's destroying this country."

The boy, who was to become Cagliostro the Great, looked back and saw the tramp falling to the ground, very slowly, like the tree he has seen fall slowly after being chopped by the caretaker at the Crane country home Upstate. And, just like the tree, when he finally reached the sidewalk, the tramp didn't move at all, not one bit; he even seemed to get stiff like the tree did, only faster.

Miss Portinari had started writing to John Disk as soon as he was sentenced — but many people wrote to him, telling him he was the greatest American since Robert DePugh and would be released when the people rose up and drove the commie traitors out of Washington. Miss Portinari's letters were different: they never told Disk he was right, they merely offered sympathy for a human being locked in a cage. He didn't answer any of them until he had served a year and reached the point of despair at which he wished humanitarians and liberals had never succeeded in abolishing the California gas chamber. "Please come to see me, Miss," he wrote. "You seem to have a heart and I need to talk to somebody before I go crazy from being cooped up in this terribul cage. Please, come, Miss." She was there at the next visiting day.

Hugh Crane celebrated his fourteenth birthday in 1938 by climbing into the bed of the family's black maid, Sophie Hage. She had observed his precocity and wasn't surprised at the timing; and the deed itself, she had learned, was par for the sons and the female servants of the best families on Park Avenue. What was not normal was the passion that endured over several months, and the extent to which she herself was picked up and carried by it. Soon they were sharing secrets, just as if they were true lovers and equals, not master and servant.

"Nails and glass in your shoes?" she asked him on the day that Nazi tanks crossed the border into Czechoslovakia.

"I read about it in a book about saints that I got from the library on 42nd Street," he said.

"But that's crazy, mon." She was from Haiti.

"In a way. But I was only twelve then. And I finally did make it."

"Make it?"

"All the way. It was in the country place. I stole a whip from the stable. I kept hitting my back and saying, 'Lord, have mercy on me, a sinner. All night long. Just at dawn, he appeared.'"

"Jesus?"

"Yes. With a halo."

"You sure were one crazy young child."

"But I did see him."

Sophie looked at the boy for a long time. "I did better than that once," she said finally. "I *became* a god. Or goddess. Back on the island."

"What goddess?" he asked eagerly.

"You never heard of her. Erzulie, a great goddess in the *voudon* religion. I was about thirteen, just before my first period. These things usually happen to kids at that age. Yours did."

"What happened?" He was very intense.

"The drums were beating, and we were all singing. Suddenly I saw a white light bigger than all creation. Then it was the next morning, and they told me I had been Erzulie all night."

"You don't *remember* being her?"

"No. All those hours were wiped out, mon."

"I remember seeing Jesus. As clearly as I remember anything. The halo around his head was a white light, too — a very big white light."

In 1941, the Carter Brothers Carnival played in Xenia, Ohio, and some professors from Antioch College, hearing incredible stories about the mentalist, Cagliostro the Great, went to check him out. His act was what they expected: the girl assistant would circulate in the audience while he sat blindfolded on the platform.

"Now what am I *holding*?" she would ask, when somebody handed her a watch.

"What do I have in my *hand* this *time*:" that was a locket.

"Can you tell me what the *object* is?" — a wallet photo.

The professors nodded happily to each other: a simple (and traditional) substitution — code. "Let's give him a whammy," one suggested, signalling to the girl. When she arrived in their midst, he handed her a dragon-headed Japanese condom.

Without a blush, she called to the platform, "Tell me what I have been given by this person."

"It's against the law in this state," Cagliostro replied at once. "I would advise the man to restrain his sense of humor in the future." Everybody turned to look at the professors, including the Xenia cop on duty to prevent trouble at the carnival. Xenia cops do not like Antioch students or Antioch professors.

On the way back to Yellow Springs one professor said to the other, "That's quite a code. It even includes scumbags."

The next night they were back with a test tube of copper sulphate.

"Are you able to see the object that I have been given this time?" the girl asked; and the blindfolded Cagliostro replied calmly, "A test tube. With some blue liquid in it."

"That's a *damn* good code," the professors agreed, more fervently this time, as they drove back to Antioch.

(*There's no hope of salvaging anything* — the suicide note had said — *and you're going to have to make it on your own, just like I did. Rosenfelt has destroyed me and he'll destroy free enterprise.*)

The carnival was in Biloxi, Mississippi, that winter, and Cagliostro was trying his new gig, combining Houdini — style escapes with his mentalism act. He had been locked in a trunk, and the local police cooperatively used their best padlocks to secure the chains. He settled down to slow, regular yoga breathing — the escape actually took only a few minutes, but he was following Houdini's formula that the audience was more impressed if they had to wait a half hour for the

miracle. The yoga conserved the oxygen in the trunk against any possibility that panic, toward the end, might force him into rapid breathing. He timed the breaths against a slow AUMMMMMM, his mind drifted back to Park Avenue and a black maid whose framed picture of a Catholic-looking Jesus sometimes in certain lights seemed to have horns, and he relaxed his hands and feet (there can be no muscle tension in the torso if the extremities are totally limp) bringing her face back clearly, and he heard a voice shouting, "We're at war! The Japanese went and bombed some place called Pearl Harbor in Honolulu!"

"You're a disciple of his, of Cagliostro's," Disk said after Miss Portinari had been visiting him for two years. "I can tell by the way you talk."

"Yes," Miss Portinari said softly.

"Then how can you forgive me?"

The first fame of Cagliostro began while he was touring with U.S.O. during the War. He had abandoned mentalism and his act depended entirely on escaping from everything the MPs could devise to restrain him. *Variety* called him "the new Houdini" in 1945, just a few months before Hiroshima. His first arrest occurred in the fall of that year, possession of marijuana, the charges dismissed without a trial. (His agent's connections, the Crane family lawyer, the fact that the Crane fortune had not been wiped out *entirely* when ORGASMOR dropped to the bottom of the Big Board, and judicious oiling of what Show Biz and underworld people call "tin mittens" – officials on the take – contributed to this happy consummation.) He was one of the first guests on *The Ed Sullivan Show*, but was never asked to return due to a 1948 "morals" arrest: the girl was quite young and an "act against nature" was alleged. Once again, money changed hands and there was no trial. His career was mostly "in the clubs" after that; Hollywood and TV were both in one of their chronic contractions of cowardice at the end of the decade.

A second morals arrest, followed rapidly by a second pot bust, made him a little too hot for most club owners. Still – the crowds turned out wherever he appeared. The mob decided to set immediate money against caution, and he was allowed to go on working. Until his disastrous appearance before the House Un-American Activities Committee in 1950.

"You're *not* a Communist, you hardly *know* any Communists, you could have sung like a bird without hurting yourself," his agent said afterwards. "Why did you have to do it, baby?"

"Listen," Crane said angrily. "Do you think I can get out of a fucking set of *Junior G-Man handcuffs* if I let one single jot of fear get into my head? You don't understand. I can't let anything scare me; especially not shitheads like them."

"It's your own funeral," the agent replied glumly. "I'll tell you the plain and unvarnished facts. You're gonna end up like Chaplin. Two sex scandals, two drug scandals, and now this. You're gonna end up worse than Chaplin. You're box office poison, baby. From this day forward."

Crane served his contempt-of-Congress sentence at Lewisburg Federal Penitentiary, the "gentleman's club," as the Maf calls it, where the government sends those honored guests who are not likely to shiv a guard and climb a wall. He worked in the library with Alger Hiss. In 1981, John Disk, the man who killed him, read his notes on the yoga exercises he performed in his cell:

"It helps if you identify each letter of AUM with one of the three Gods of the Hindu Trinity. A is Brahma, the Creator: let it explode from the diaphragm upwards, like the big bang of creation itself. U is Vishnu, the Preserver: hold it so long that it vibrates, like the rhythm of life itself, the Big Beat. M is Shiva, the Destroyer: close the lips in a decisive bite of 'This is the way the world ends' as you enter the silence..."

“Today, unexpectedly, pure dhyana. It was so much simpler than I ever guessed, and it is obviously merely a matter of practice. I am no better or worse, morally, and no wiser or more spiritual. It’s no more ‘mystical’ than Pavlov’s dogs, or my straightjacket escape. Repetition is the whole key. Force the muscles and glands and nerves, force them day after day after day, and it happens. Yet it was marvelous, and I will never fully identify with ‘Cagliostro’ or ‘Hugh Crane’ or even ‘me’ or the perpendicular pronoun, ever again.

“Another successful dhyana. There’s nothing to it, actually. The brain just operates on the same principle as those fellows in *The Hunting of the Snark*: ‘What I tell you three times is true.’ (Three million times is more accurate.) If I had been on the Jesus kick of my childhood, I could have conjured up Jesus instead of just abolishing ‘Hugh Crane.’ What I tell you three million times is true...

“I can hardly write. Today I reached samadhi. It makes dhyana look like nothing by comparison. All my certainty is gone. I should be terrified, but instead I’m ecstatic. If this is possible, *anything* is possible, and I can hardly deny walking on water or casting a curse or any other ‘superstition.’ This is the point where I must be on guard; it is very tempting to lapse into total gullibility...”

These notes were not published when Hugh came out of prison. Instead, he brought forth a book cheerfully titled *There Is No Governor Anywhere*, which explained some – not all – of his magic escapes, and set this in the context of a philosophy which declared every individual a creator of his own universe. The polemics against government and organized religion were tactless, to say the least, for a performer depending upon public good will; Crane did not hesitate to identify his outlook bluntly as atheism and anarchism. The motto on the title page was taken from the *First Surrealist Manifesto* of his birth-year, 1923: “Total transformation of mind, and of all that resembles it.”

To everybody’s surprise, including Crane’s, the book became a best-seller, and he became the most controversial man in the United States. Even in the fearful fifties – even with American Legion and John Birch chapters constantly reminding everyone of his drug arrests, his sex arrests, and the documented fact that prison authorities had delayed his parole because of his homosexual seduction of a younger inmate – Hugh Crane acquired a new following. TV gingerly tested him on the egghead ghetto of Sunday afternoon, then promoted him to the late late talk shows.

He managed to end every appearance with the words, “There is no governor anywhere: you are all absolutely free.”

And around then – to the vocal dismay of press and clergy – a club-owner decided he was a “freak” act (“They’ll hate him but they’ll come”) and Crane was able to work as a magician again. The crowd overflowed into the street and many were turned away. Cagliostro introduced a new escape, from a lead box that had been *welded closed* in view of the audience, in addition to his usual stunts, and included a running humorous monologue of mildly satirical and anti-religious tendency. “Remember,” he told the audience at the end, “there is no restraint that can’t be escaped. You are all absolutely free.”

A pudgy Broadway columnist interviewed him the next day. “How the hell did you manage that lead box escape?” the columnist asked, off-the-record.

“I used real magic,” the Great Cagliostro pronounced.

“Come off it,” the columnist said; but Cagliostro merely grinned at him impudently.

His mistress at that time, Jane Ash, was a fairly prominent jazz singer in her own right – which made her friends wonder how she could be so completely enslaved by a man on the fringes

of failure and likely at any time to come a worse cropper than Fatty Arbuckle. A particularly close friend, who saw the whip marks on Jane's back, was especially shocked and puzzled.

"Why don't you leave him?" she asked.

"It's voluntary," Jane replied. "It's my own true nature."

The scandal eventually became an official rumor – "A nightclub Nostradamus, previously involved in other sex and drug offenses, is treating his ballad-belting sweetheart in a very sick way. Readers of a certain French marquis will know what I mean," was its first printed form, in the nation's most widely-read gossip columnist. "You've got quite a reputation as a sadist," Epicene Wildeblood, the literary critic, said to Crane the very day that appeared.

"Afraid to be identified with me publicly?" Crane asked. They were in Wildeblood's jet-set pad, on the Park, East.

"Oh, not at all, darling," Eppy purred. "How funny that I should know what you really are. *Don't I, babe?*" He lifted Crane's chin with the toe of his shoe.

"Yes, master," Crane mumbled.

"Oh, that sounded a little sullen. I think you're just a bit rebellious today, babe. That must be punished."

"Yes, master," Crane said, going to the closet for the ropes. After he was stripped, and lying face down on the bed, Eppy carefully tied his four limbs to the four bedposts.

"You are my slave and you can't escape," he said.

"I am your slave and I can't escape," Crane repeated, as Wildeblood mounted him, both of them perfectly aware that he could slip the knots at any time.

Crane took Jane Ash to the Rainbow Room that night and made a point of loudly and brutally humiliating her throughout the meal. She accepted it all (her hundred most intimate friends and enemies in the room noticed with disapproval) as if he had hypnotized her.

Jane actually took nearly a year to discover what was happening to her. It had started with a routine roll in the hay, but in the middle of it he lifted her to an unusual position. "What the hell is this?" she asked.

"Tibetan, angel," he said softly. "Relax and you'll enjoy it."

She relaxed, and it was the most extraordinary sexual experience of her life. After that, for two months, she followed all of his instructions, with growing delight and a firm belief that she was approaching that Ultimate Orgasm the Mailer fellow was always writing about. Then, one night, he brought out the ropes.

"Now, wait a minute," she said, "that's English. That's kink. Go to London if you want that."

"I love you," he murmured, his mouth moving south across her belly toward her bush; in a little while, she agreed to the restraints. He tied them very firmly, and then, to her relief, no weapon was produced. He didn't even produce his own weapon; it was entirely oral. After five orgasms, she found him sitting up and lighting a joint. In a minute, he held it to her own lips. "For the big one," he said. She smoked hungrily while he kissed and caressed her and muttered endearments, but she could still feel the ropes. When the joint was finished, he finally mounted her and galloped into some dimension of spasm she had never known before.

"God," she said, coming back to herself, "that *was* the big one." But he was reversed again, his mouth on her snatch, and her head spun.

The mild discipline began a few weeks later. "It builds up the charge," he said, and she found that it did. Soon she agreed that stronger discipline built an ever greater charge. When the sadism switched to a psychological level, she was too far gone to stop, living in a dark and pulsating cave

of ecstasy and pain millions of light years from common earth. She accepted degradation, humiliation and the growing vampirism which seemed calculated to slowly destroy her last remnants of ego. Once or twice, she remembered later, she had feebly protested, "Enough. Too much. Please."

"No," he shouted, "we're at the Edge. We've got to go all the way over."

("Yes, master," he would be saying to Epicene Wildeblood a few hours later, "Whatever you wish, master.")

"You could have lots of bookings, instead of just working in *public terlets*," his agent told him. "I could get you in *top-money rooms*. People would forget those drug charges, and those teenage girls, if you didn't keep reminding them by being even worse. The way you and Jane carry on in public, everyone thinks you're a kink. And you and that faggot, Wildeblood – everyone thinks you're a touch lavender yourself, buddy. Why don't you straighten out, for Christ's sake? You're going to end up a beggar."

The boy, who was to become Cagliostro the Great, looked back and saw the tramp falling to the ground, very slowly, like the tree he had seen fall slowly after being chopped by the caretaker at the Upstate Crane country home. And, just like the tree, when he finally reached the sidewalk, the tramp didn't move at all, not one bit; he even seemed to get stiff like the tree did, only faster.

"On your knees," Cagliostro said sternly, and Jane obediently crossed the floor on her knees.

"Ask for it," he said.

"I beg you, master," she said, "to stick your cock inside my cunt and fuck me and make me come again and again and again. Oh, please, master."

He lit a cigar, pretending to deliberate, and then blew smoke in her face. "No," he said. "I want you to suck me off. Nothing at all for *you* tonight."

But a few nights later, when he was on top of her and inside her, and chanting in Tibetan, she suddenly thought she saw a kind of light around his head and two horns sprouting on his temple, and then it was like a million balloons bursting inside her and outside her at once, each balloon releasing a twinkle of light, each light a species of orgasm. "Jane Ash" ceased to exist. Eternities later, re-entering time, she found he was again at the bottom of the bed, head between her legs, licking ferociously. She fainted.

He had a large library dealing with both stage magic and occultism and Jane had occasionally browsed in it. The next morning, while he was still asleep, she went back to it and searched in several volumes by Rosenkreuz, Therion, Iamblichus, Prinn, Dee and Kelly. "The Mass of the Holy Ghost" was variously described, but the Rose of Ruby was always identified with water and the first H in JHVH, the H of motherhood. The Cross of Gold had different meanings, too, but was chiefly fire and the J of JHVH, the J of fatherhood. Bringing the J and the H together, the wedding of Cross and Rose, produced the manifestation of the Holy Ghost in the form of a eucharist, which was then consumed by the alchemist. My God, she thought, that's why he goes down on me afterwards as well as just before. "The eucharist," old Prinn's words said blandly, "is both male and female, both living and dead, both fire and water; and yet its creation involves no violation of nature but merely obedience to nature's own laws, together with the proper spiritual attitude."

Professor Nosferatu of Columbia, an old friend of Jane's, listened raptly as she recited the words to him. "That's not Tibetan, whatever he told you," he said. He repeated it with correct pronunciation: "IO PAN IO PAN PAN IO PANGENITOR IO PANPHAGE. It's an invocation of the god Pan in classic Greek. 'Io Pan, Io Pan, Pan, Io Pan-All-Creator, Io Pan-All-Devourer.' " He looked at her curiously. "You know, I've heard some rather odd rumors about you and him."

"Whatever you've heard," she said with a faint smile, "is probably true. I want you to give me the name of the best shrink you know. I want somebody to work on my head and help me to stay away from him."

In 1963, while the nation sweated through the Cuban Missile Crises and a Mr. Oswald ordered a Carcano Mannlicher through the mails, Cagliostro the Great reached his 39th birthday. He was in Boston at the time, in a hotel room with a moderately renowned psychologist who was doing some novel research with a new chemical called lysergic acid diethylamide-25.

"Some people have had absolutely terrifying experiences," the psychologist was saying. "Some say they'd rather die than try it a second time. I want you to understand that fully before volunteering."

"85 per cent," Crane repeated from earlier, "had the most intense religious experience of their lives. Is that right?"

"Yes."

"Those odds are good enough for me." In 1982, John Disk read in Crane's posthumous papers an account of the next eight hours:

"It's like grass and a rollercoaster ride and Samadhi all happening at once: sensory awareness and the mind in spasms and the White Light flickering continuously. No, there are actually at least five levels, all simultaneous. Just like Lewis Carroll:

He thought he saw a banker's clerk

descending from a bus

He looked again and saw it was a

hippopotamus

And he looked again and saw it was the Eternal Father and Eternal Mother locked in the Rosy Cross; and looked again and saw it was his own big toe; and looked again and saw it was the Clear Light."

Cary Grant had already told all the show biz columnists that this magic chemical had changed his whole life for the better; Cagliostro, typically, went further and began urging its use on everyone. When the backlash struck, he and the researcher who had initiated him and a few other researchers and a couple of famous poets and novelists were widely denounced as "high priests of the drug cult." He became a favorite topic for the Sunday supplements and the more ox — like men's magazines; any hack could make a lively story by rehashing his pot arrests, his morals busts, the rumors about other sexual oddities, his public advocacy of LSD and anarcho-atheism, his mantra, "There is no governor anywhere," and the increasingly popular speculation that his escapes were actually performed through black magic.

It was a disappointment to all the people who loved hating him when he suddenly married the screen's best known sex-goddess, Norma Nelson, and settled down to what appeared to be a very monogamous and un-newsworthy fidelity-trip.

Norma herself was delighted that all those rumors about his sadism were obviously untrue. Their sex life was quite normal, and the Mass of the Holy Ghost was performed without restraints. She discovered, also, the basic secret of his escapes: he never accepted a challenge at once, always jetting on "urgent business" to another part of the country and only taking languid notice of the wager, casually accepting it with total cool, a few days later. The interlude, she found, was spent in duplicating the conditions proposed and finding the gimmick that would work and the misdirection that would distract attention at the crucial moment. She also learned the essence of the *okanna barra*, or "gypsy switch," which is the basis of almost all magic and most con-games.

The people who thought their own screws, bolts and chains were used in Cagliostro's escapes were as mistaken as those who think the handkerchief with a hundred dollars that they give the gypsy for blessing is the same handkerchief that comes back to them.

She also learned what alchemy was all about. "I thought that was all superstition," she said once, pointing at his shelves of old books on the transmutation of elements, the Mass of the Holy Ghost, the Kabala and the elixir of life.

"We do it almost every night," he smiled. "You have the Cup and I have the Sword. *Solve et coagula*, divide and unite – that's why I have to go down on you again at the end. The mystic number 210, that means us *two* becoming *one* in the peak and then falling into the *void*. You've got the Triangle and I cause the physical manifestation within it."

"You mean it's all a code? Why did they have to hide it?"

"Those who didn't got burned at the stake," he said. "Read about the witches and the Knights Templar sometime."

He also began teaching her the Tarot. "Now, the Fool corresponds to aleph in Kabala, the ox, or bull-god Dionysus. But aleph is the path from Keser to Chokmah, and, therefore, the Holy Ghost or semen. The Magus is beth, the house or temple; that is, the path from Keser to Binah, the womb..."

"Do you really think you're going to live forever?" she asked him once.

"Eternity is another code word," he said happily. "I won't get any extension in time from these rites. What I get, and you're beginning to get, is a deepening. Not more minutes but more fullness in each minute. That's eternity."

When Norma became pregnant, Cagliostro turned into the stereotype of an ideal husband, canceling bookings to be with her, joyously supporting her decision to employ natural childbirth, teaching her yoga to supplement the Lamaze conditioning techniques employed by her obstetrician. He filled her room with flowers and with photographs of the moon (some of his occult studies were involved here, she realized.)

One night the phone rang, and when Crane answered it, Epicene Wildeblood purred, "I'm in Hollywood for a week and I guessed you might want to see me."

"You guessed wrong," Crane said.

Norma's labor began prematurely, and the doctor quickly discovered that the baby was in the breech position. After a few hours, he realized this childbirth could never be natural. She accepted the ether and he performed a Cæsarian, only to find the infant, in turning, had strangled on its umbilical cord.

"Oh, God," she said when she woke and the doctor told her. "Oh, what a lousy God to make a world like this."

Cagliostro was caught by a gaggle of reporters coming out of the hospital. "How do you feel?" was the first question.

"How the hell do you think I feel?" "Where will the service be held?"

"There will be no religious service," Cagliostro shouted, hopping into a cab. "Haven't you fools heard yet? – God is dead!" It made headlines, and inspired editorials. One editorial – "Bereavement Is No Excuse For Blasphemy" – came to the attention of a 14-year-old boy, John Disk, who was tormented by desires which his priests told him were evil.

When Cagliostro returned to the clubs, his act had changed considerably. The mildly satirical patter between escapes had become biting mordant – "He's a new Lenny Bruce!" – and

entirely centered around his declared philosophy of anarchism and atheism. The escapes themselves changed each night, because he explained them and showed how they were done at the climax of every performance.

"Now you know how I fooled you," he would say. "Try to figure out on your own how your congressmen and clergymen fool you. There is no restraint that isn't self-imposed: *you are all absolutely free.*"

The evening after the newspapers broke the story that he and Norma had joined Joan Baez in refusing to pay taxes, a drunk began heckling him during his act, "Why don't you go back to Russia, you commie dope-fiend," that sort of thing.

No man hates socialism more than me," Cagliostro said intensely.

He and Norma were busted for possession of acid a few weeks later. "This is hard to fix," his lawyer told him. "You're too notorious now. The only chance I see is for you to vow to reform, lament the error of your ways, and promise to go on a lecture-tour speaking to teen-agers about the evils of drugs. Then maybe I can get you a minimum sentence. Maybe." Hugh's old friend, the Boston psychologist, was in exile in Nepal, having fled a 30-year Sentence in Texas; political offenders in general were having a rough time in the United States.

"I'll think about it," he said.

The very next week, he led the Show Biz contingent among the protesters at the 1968 Democratic Convention. A photograph of him being tear-gassed outside the Chicago Hilton is still reprinted whenever an article about him appears.

"You've had it," his lawyer told him. "As an officer of the court, I can't tell you what I really think. An unethical attorney, were he here, would frankly advise you and Norma to get the hell out of the country."

But a change came over the country when Hubert Humphrey, the new president, withdrew all the troops from Vietnam and began granting amnesty to political prisoners. Cagliostro and Norma, in the midst of the return to liberalism, received suspended sentences for the acid, and he was not tried with the Chicago Nine for conspiring the convention riots. IRS raided their bank account for the tax money instead of prosecuting them, and, by 1970, he was listed as one of ten top money-makers in Show Biz. His escapes were, the American Society of Magicians announced in an award, better than Houdini's; his habit of explaining each "miracle" after the performance only built up crowd-interest for the next challenge.

On May 1, 1976, Cagliostro and Norma were in Mexico City on a vacation. At lunch, she held up a 20 centavo piece and said, "Isn't that the same as the design on back of the dollar?"

"It's Masonic," he said. "The Mexican and American revolutionaries were both predominantly freemasons."

"What does it mean anyway – an eye floating above a pyramid?"

He started to explain about the Third Eye and the pineal gland, and then noticed that she wasn't listening.

"They're waiting for you," she said in a mediumistic voice.

John Disk, in 1982, read Cagliostro's notes on the next three days very carefully:

"I refused to believe it. I put her to every possible test, whenever the Voice spoke. Looking for evidence of auto-suggestion and self-hypnosis, I found evidence of auto-suggestion and self-hypnosis – *naturally!* I also found 17 things I couldn't explain. Most central was the fact that the message, when I finally encouraged her, came in Enochian, a language which nobody understands since all we possess are the 19 fragments received by Dee and Kelly in the 17th Century.

Yet she gave me 19 new fragments, and translated them, and the grammar and vocabulary are consistent with the Dee-Kelly skryings. Even if she had studied the Dee and Kelly fragments (which she swears she hasn't), concocting new sentences in that unknown language would be beyond the power of any human brain or even of any known computer..."

The 19 fragments of Enochian translated by Norma in the same trance in which the fragments arrived, became the 19 chapters of *The Aquarian Gospel*. Crane wrote in the introduction:

"It is impossible to doubt that these are the communications of a superior intelligence. If the reader is, as I am (thank God!) an atheist, the identity of that intelligence will pose severe mysteries. Is it interplanetary or interstellar? A being leaping across Time from some more advanced future, or past (Atlantis)? Does it come from dimensions tangent to, but not identical with, our own? I propose no answer to these questions, but I am sure that this intelligence, or others like it, sent the messages which founded the great religions of the past, and that such communications are the foundation of the belief in beings called 'gods' ..."

Norma was killed in an automobile accident the day the book was published. "What further proof do we need," a prominent clergyman wrote in his syndicated newspaper column, "that this foul and obscene 'revelation' comes from a source not divine but diabolical?"

Crane's first – and only – failure to escape from a challenge box occurred one month later.

The eye operation came later that year. "I can save one," the doctor told him, "but not both."

"A blind magician is worse off than a deaf musician, and I'm no Beethoven," Crane said simply. "Do the best you can."

He retained the sight of one eye.

"Much as we are inclined to sympathize," the *New York Daily News* editorialized, "we do admit to a strong feeling that there is divine retribution in the tragedies befalling drug-cultist Cagliostro 'the Great.'"

The Aquarian Gospel was burned by a citizen's group in Cicero, Illinois, that week.

"These powers, whoever and whatever they are," Crane wrote – in unpublished notes which John Disk read years later, weeping, "are determined that I abandon all else and become no more than the servant who carries their message. To this end, they are taking away from me, one by one, all other things which I value. Or, perhaps, I am merely in the terminal stages of a long-brewing paranoid psychosis?"

Hugh Crane celebrated his fourteenth birthday in 1938 by climbing into the bed of the family's black maid, Sophie Hage. Soon they were sharing secrets, just as if they were true lovers and equals, not master and servant. She even told him a small bit about *voudon* and the goddess Erzulie. "Are there any *voudon* groups in New York?" he asked her intensely.

The group in Harlem at that time actually combined elements of *voudon* and Masonry. Since *voudon* was already a blend of European witchcraft and African magic, and Masonry is a mixture of elements from Rosicrucian mysticism and French revolutionary free-thought, there were actually four traditions involved, and the Rite of Initiation was unique. Borrowed from the third degree of Masonry, it replaced Jubela, Jubelo and Jubelum with the *Grand Zombi*, and, since marijuana was involved, the ordeal became as real as in those days when candidates knew they would be killed if they failed.

In a dark cellar on 110th Street, the *Grand Zombi* demanded, "Reveal the Secret Word or I will kill you. Reveal the Secret Word and give up your quest for Truth and Power."

Hugh, repeating the formula taught him, replied, "Kill me if you must, but I will search again for Truth and Power as soon as I am re-born."

The *Grand Zombi*, black face above a black robe, raised his sword. “Do you fear me now, mortal?” he screamed.

“I have eternity to work in,” Hugh replied, according to rote. “Why should I fear?”

“Then, *die!*” screamed the Zombi – the part of the rite which had not been explained to the candidate in advance – and Hugh felt the sword cross his neck and saw the blood spurting.

He also saw the bulb which the Zombi squeezed to make the blood spurt out of the end of the sword.

And he saw more than any previous initiate in that cult; he saw the secret of truth and power completely.

He saw it again, in 1980, as he was coming out of his apartment for a morning walk in Central Park, and the wild-eyed young man stepped in front of him shouting something about “Anti-Christ” and “Devil-worshipper.” There were three quick blasts from the revolver. Crane cried, “I love you!” as he sank into the darkness, but the blood bursting upward into his throat clotted the words and John Disk never heard them.

The newspapers emphasized, maliciously, the smallness of the group who turned out for the funeral of Cagliostro the Great. In fact, it was small – most of his Show Biz friends had dropped him since he became a religious nut – but famous poets, psychologists and psychic researchers do not so often gather in one place to pay tribute to a man who was, after all, best known as a nightclub performer. The rite was simple – and, to the press, scandalous – consisting, according to the dead man’s wishes, of a simple reading of Yeats’s lines:

Cast a cold eye

On life, on death.

Horseman, pass by!

Joseph Wendell Malik, editor of *Confrontation*, a distinctly peculiar sort of leftwing magazine, purchased Crane’s unpublished manuscripts and began publishing them. To everybody’s disappointment, they were almost all about the psychology of perception – “Nobody ever really sees what’s in front of his eyes,” was their main theme – and they hardly mentioned his *Aquarian Gospel* revelations. One exception was an unfinished essay about a childhood experience:

“... Get a job,” my father said. Turning back, I saw the beggar falling to the ground, obviously fainting from starvation, but when he landed I knew, from his limpness, that it was more than a faint: that he was dead.

“It has sometimes occurred to me that there is a parallel here to the famous experience of the Buddha, who, like myself, had the misfortune to be born rich and only discovered what life is like for most people when he encountered a beggar and a corpse. Is this parallel an accident? I am not sure: I cannot say when I was chosen to receive the Aquarian message, the great affirmation that ‘All is joy,’ in contrast to Buddha’s equally-true equally-false and now obsolete ‘All is sorrow’ ...

“We never see what is in front of our eyes. My father did not see what happened to me when that beggar died; I have brought women (and men) to the edge of the Vision, and they, afraid to see it, ran off to psychiatrists ...

“What we see is inside our heads, a construction of our brains more than a reflection through our eyes; nobody has seen the real world, ever. That is why the answer to Buddha and the yogis is not materialism but magic, the transformation of the universe by Will ...”

John Disk said, “You’re a disciple of his, of Cagliostro’s. I can tell by the way you talk.”

“Yes,” Miss Portinari said softly.

“Then how can you forgive me? How can you keep coming here to comfort me?”

“You acted on your beliefs and took the consequences,” the Italian girl said simply. “That’s all Hugh ever tried to teach anybody. ”

The week LSD was legalized in the U.S.A., there was a CBS special about the Aquarian Church of Cagliostro. The young men and women in the cult looked much like Jesus Freaks, but were less dogmatic. Asked for positive statements, they usually answered either “Maybe” or “He was seeking; we are seeking.” One of their members, a Miss Portinari, astonished the interviewer by mentioning the Church’s petition seeking clemency for John Disk. “Why not?” she asked laughing, “He has a strong religion, too-even if it’s not our religion.”

Crown Point Jail, in Indiana, was called “the escape-proof jail,” when John Dillinger was brought there early in 1934. On the day he destroyed that name by escaping, an out-of-work magician was begging in Central Park. One thought burned in this man’s head – *With a little luck, I could be a second Houdini* – and he was thinking of it as he laid his spiel on Tom Crane, but when the cramp hit him and he felt the ground move in the big wobble of uncertainty, he remembered suddenly his previous life as Adam Weishaupt and before that his life as Mohammed and before that his life as Gotama the Buddha and before that it was like a million balloons bursting inside him and outside him at once, each balloon releasing a twinkle of light, each light a species of orgasm... “But that was just a hallucination,” Miss Portinari told me. “A dying man’s hallucination. There is no continuity in the ego from moment to moment, much less from life to life. Nevertheless, the little boy, Hugh Crane, picked up that hallucination telepathically, and it determined the rest of his life.”

“And what was the secret of truth and power — the secret he learned from the *Grand Zombi*?” I asked.

“Love and fear cannot coexist at the same time in the same mind,” she said simply. “If you make yourself love something, it can’t frighten you. If you make yourself love everything, nothing can frighten you.”

And they took me back to my cell, from which they thought I could never escape, and I walked through the walls. When I came back, my body was still in their custody, and I pretended that I had never left.

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