

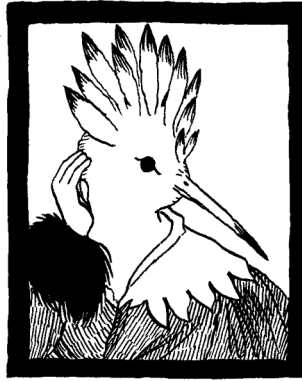
# WUNDERKAMMER

Vol. I

Fall 2009



The Flying Duchess Starling Hall The Transparent  
Auk Brand Comics



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Wunderkammer  
Volume one  
Fall 2009

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Sean C. Chiki

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# WUNDERKAMMER

Volume One

*A Collection of  
Amusements*

by

Sean C. Chiki



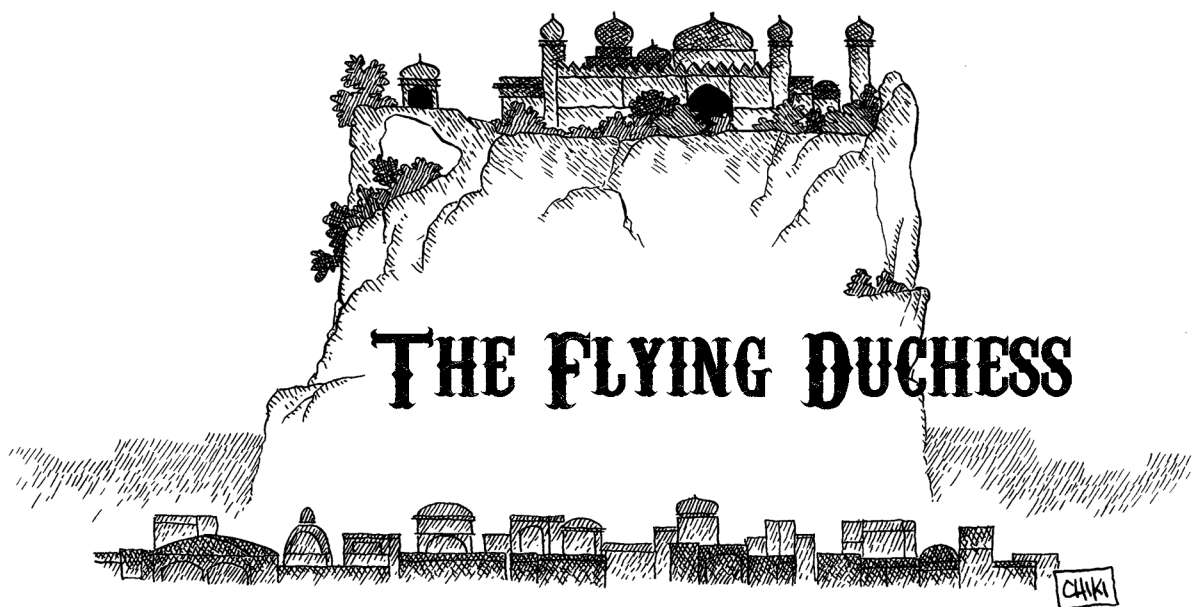
Auk Brand Comics

San Francisco

2009

*From the fond remembrances of Jane Vanterpol, the Rt. Hon., the Baroness of Lawnsboro-*

The Padmatmahal, seat of the Chanduraj of Gopur- now **there** was a ticket of some consequence... **if** you could get it. Of course by the time **I** got there, the Chanduraj were almost finished. I was just thinking about it the other day. Vaneswar... now that was one of those places... you know- fairytale, resort paradise for the hobnobs, nawabs and nabobs. It's a shame the city is a nightmarish dunghole now. It's been torn apart by civil war ever since the Union thought fit to remove the last legitimate claimant to a dynasty that stretched back for centuries.



Don't think to make sense of the actions of politicians though. They have a thought process all their own, which is singularly concerned with getting re-elected... a sort of vicious circle of party self-preservation that eventually becomes its sole purpose for existence. And as a politician myself, I've had the pleasure of seeing it firsthand. It was almost a relief when they handed me that life peerage to get me out of the lower house. After the varied sort of career I've had- airman, gambler, adventurer, spook- the life of a novelist (even one as bad as I) is much more to my speed. Put in an appearance at the Redchamber here and there and I'm all set. But Gopur... now what a pig's breakfast they made of that place.

I got to see it of course, before the balloon went up. That was back before the breakup of the Union and the New Secession. The world was a much different place then. The Iriandic frontier had been for ages the focal point for so much politicking, back-stabbing and out-and-out slaughter. But stability in the region was still a glimmer of hope in the minds of many, at least in the majority party, and it was for that reason that they decided to send a new resident to replace the old one who'd been making such a loud row about the futility of even maintaining the thing there anymore. The new resident, a great boob of a man named Sir Joost Basalmo, had just taken his post when I was handed my own travelling papers.

But this story starts years before that, before I got that tantalizing Lieutenant's commission from Sanclaire. The year was 4165, and I was a fresh young middy when an offer of navigator came my way...



WELL YOU'VE DONE RATHER NICE FOR YOURSELF I MUST SAY. UNDERSECRETARY TO THE PERMANENT SECRETARY OF PROMOTIONS AND ADVANCEMENTS. WHAT GIVES ARTI? WE'VE NEVER REALLY BEEN CHAUMS, HAVE WE? WHY'D YOU PULL ME FOR THIS GIG?

YOU'RE FAR TOO MODEST JANE. ALWAYS HAVE BEEN. BUT YOUR REPUTATION PRECEDES YOU. THIS JOB NEEDS AN ACE NAVI AND NO MATTER WHAT MY OPINION OF YOU MAY BE PERSONALLY, I CAN'T THINK OF ANYONE MORE UP TO THE TASK.

WELL THANKS FOR NOT SPARING MY FEELINGS. CHEERS.

CHEERS.



SO WHAT'S THE TUB?

THE 'GINNY SUE'.

THE 'VIRGINIA SUSANNE'?

KNOW HER?

KNOW HER?! MARTIN ARGENTINA IS A LIVING LEGEND AROUND FLEET! THE AMOUNT OF PRIZE THAT CREW RAKES IN... WHICH MAKES ME WONDER AGAIN HOW I BECAME SO LUCKY.



IT'S LIKE I SAID - YOUR NAME WAS AT THE TOP OF THE LIST. IF I WERE YOU, I WOULDN'T ASK QUESTIONS ABOUT SO SWEET A JOB.

I SUPPOSE YOU'RE RIGHT. WHO WAS THE LAST NAVI?

MOLLY FINCH.



HMMM... SOUNDS FAMILIAR BUT I CAN'T PLACE HER.

I DON'T KNOW MUCH BUT THERE WAS SOME PROBLEM RECENTLY WITH A RUN TO FAHRON. THEY THINK SHE WENT VEM.



VEM, EH? WHAT SORT OF BESON CLEARANCE DID SHE HAVE?

JUST THE STANDARD. WE DON'T THINK SHE GOT AWAY WITH MUCH.

STILL ...



... I'VE GOTTA TELL YOU... THOSE DIVISION 3 UNIFORMS GIVE ME THE GA-GA'S! I DON'T HALF FANCY YOU OFFICE TYPES...

BUZZ OFF!



WELL I BELIEVE FRIENDS ...ER... SHOULD NOT LET FRIENDS GET IN THE WAY OF HAVING A SWELL TIME. NOW WHAT I PROPOSE IS ...

SHE SAID SHE WASN'T INTERESTED!

PIPE DOWN YOU!

I DON'T BELIEVE I WAS TALKING TO YOU, SIR. MY WORDS WERE MEANT FOR THE PLEASURE OF THE LADY HERE.

OMPH...

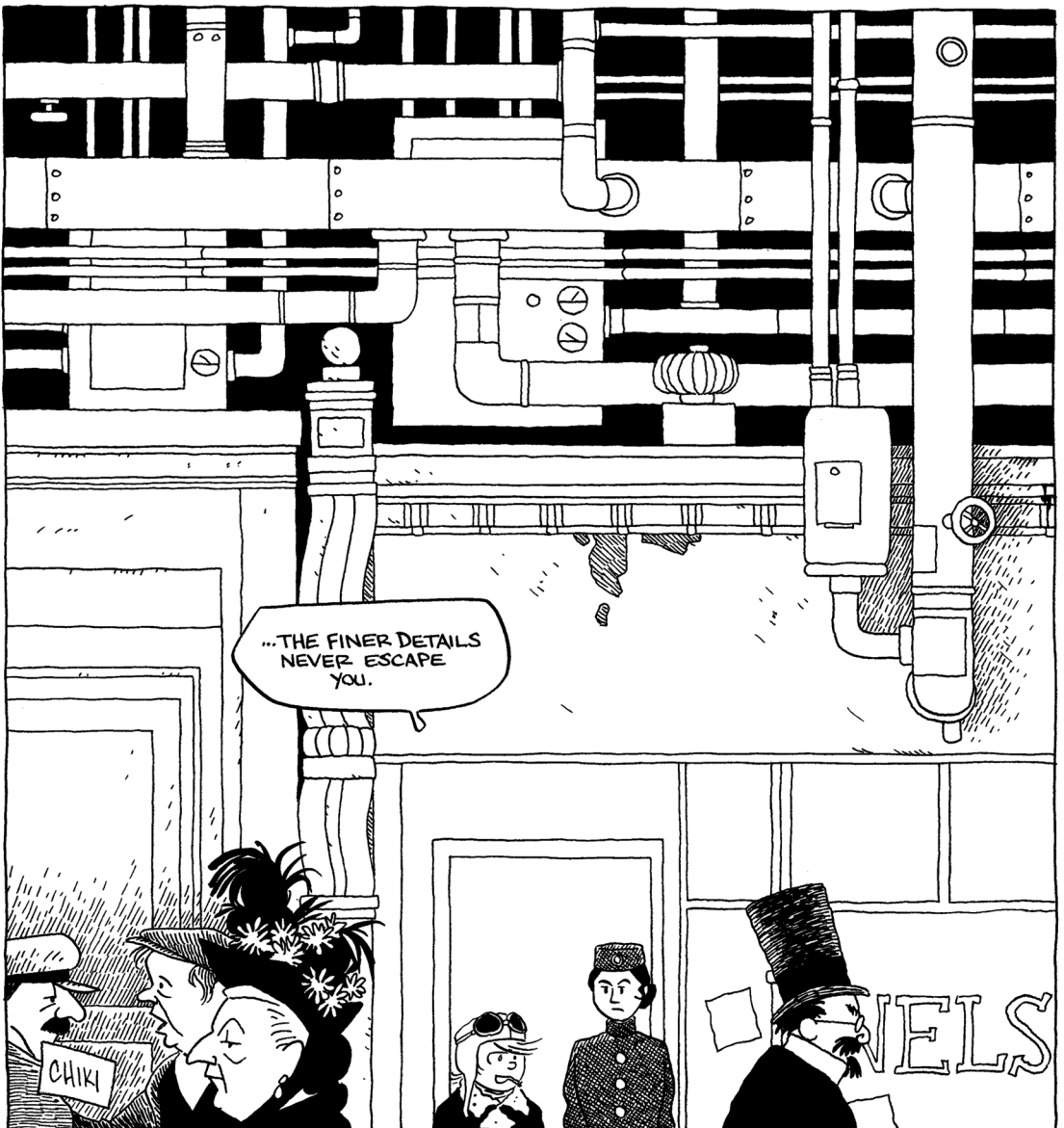
FLUMP!

I... I'M SORRY BUT I'M REALLY NOT INTERESTED. I WAS TALKING TO MY FRIEND...

YUP. A JOLT FROM ONE OF THESE BABIES AND YER NERVOUS SYSTEM'S JELLY. PLASMA WRENCH WAS THE BEST INVESTMENT I EVER MADE. HE'LL HAVE ONE HEADACHE TOMORROW. HEH HEH.

C'MON. LET'S GO.

UM, JANE... THAT WAS A FLEET LIEUTENANT.



Artemisia Anikulapo-Simms and I have had a long and rocky history, going back to when we were together at the Outremer Trading Co. Academy. She's from the Duchy of Miranda, of minor nobility. But *that's* not saying much- most Mirandans *are* and most have no money to speak of. Arti's family had to sell off bits of their estate to put her through school. But that didn't stop her from treating me like a peasant. I only got in through the Able Shipman's Scholarship, which meant active duty in Fleet upon graduation. They were handing the things out like candy back then because they needed ever more meat for the grinder. After Academy we drifted apart. I entered Fleet's Air Corp and began making a name for myself as a rising young navigator with some potential, earning my midshipman's stripe in no time...



TERTUL REPUBLIC

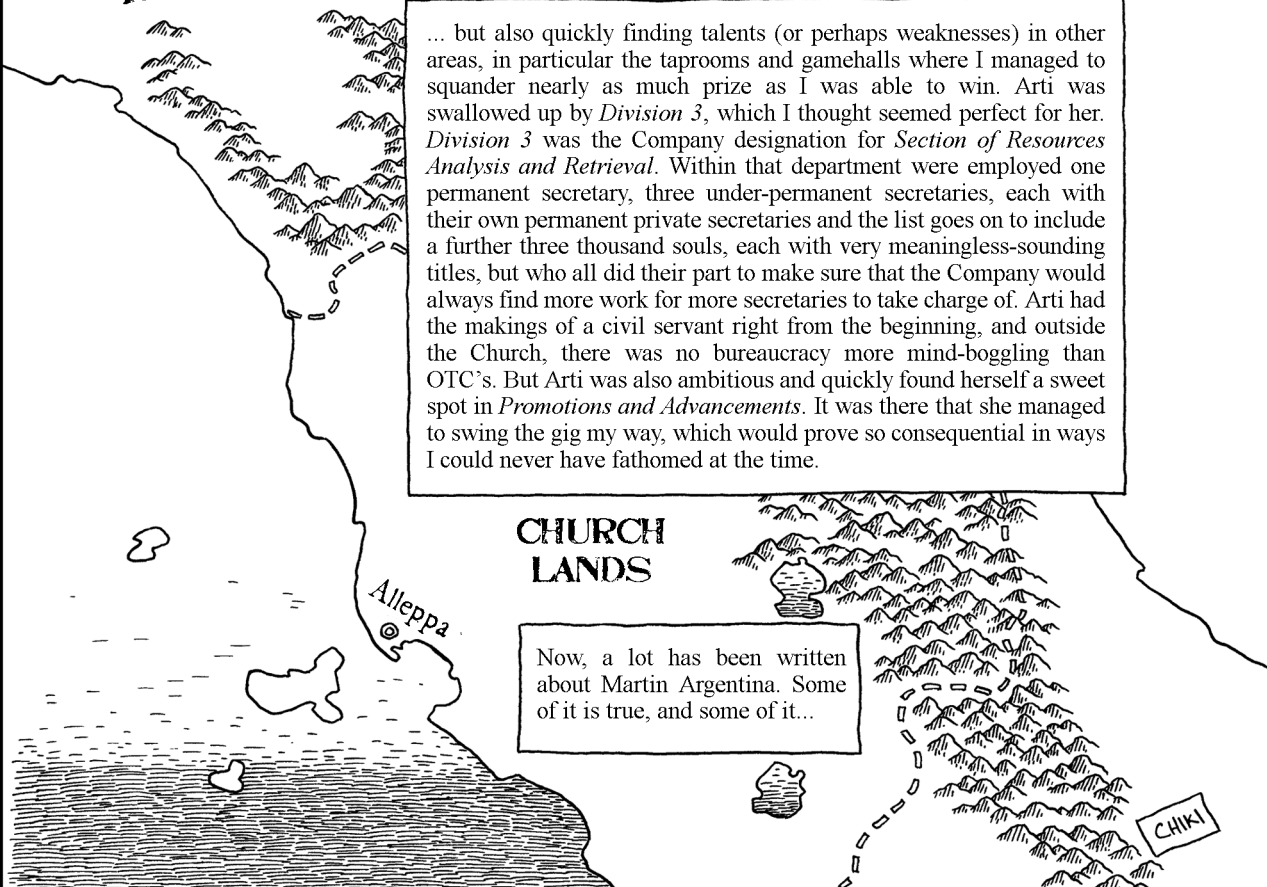
... but also quickly finding talents (or perhaps weaknesses) in other areas, in particular the taprooms and gamehalls where I managed to squander nearly as much prize as I was able to win. Arti was swallowed up by *Division 3*, which I thought seemed perfect for her. *Division 3* was the Company designation for *Section of Resources Analysis and Retrieval*. Within that department were employed one permanent secretary, three under-permanent secretaries, each with their own permanent private secretaries and the list goes on to include a further three thousand souls, each with very meaningless-sounding titles, but who all did their part to make sure that the Company would always find more work for more secretaries to take charge of. Arti had the makings of a civil servant right from the beginning, and outside the Church, there was no bureaucracy more mind-boggling than OTC's. But Arti was also ambitious and quickly found herself a sweet spot in *Promotions and Advancements*. It was there that she managed to swing the gig my way, which would prove so consequential in ways I could never have fathomed at the time.

CHURCH LANDS

Now, a lot has been written about Martin Argentina. Some of it is true, and some of it...

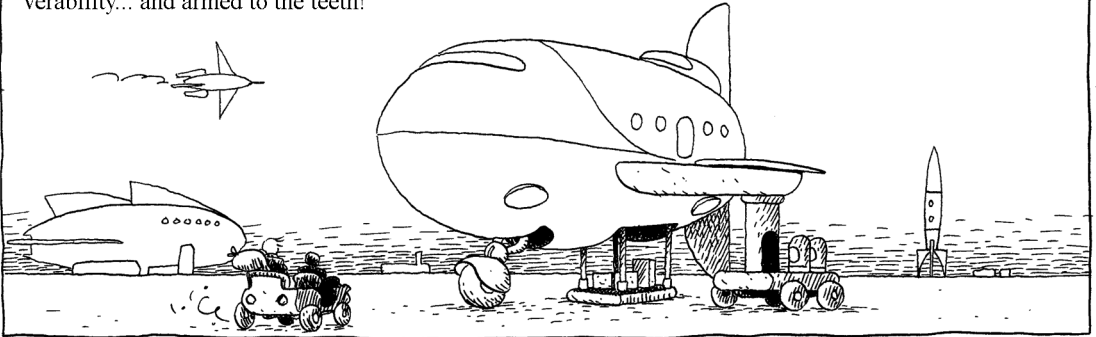
Alleppa

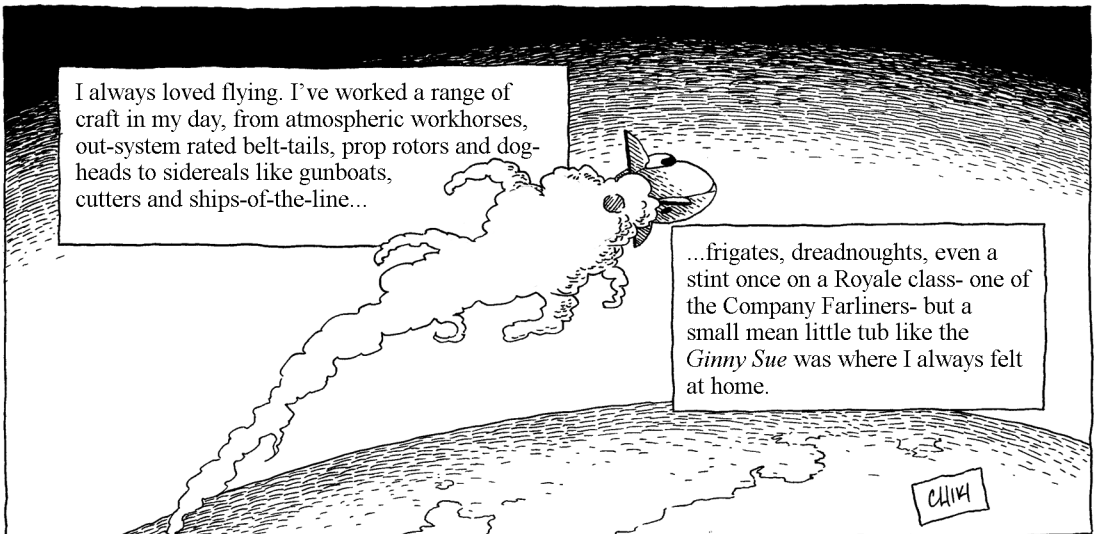
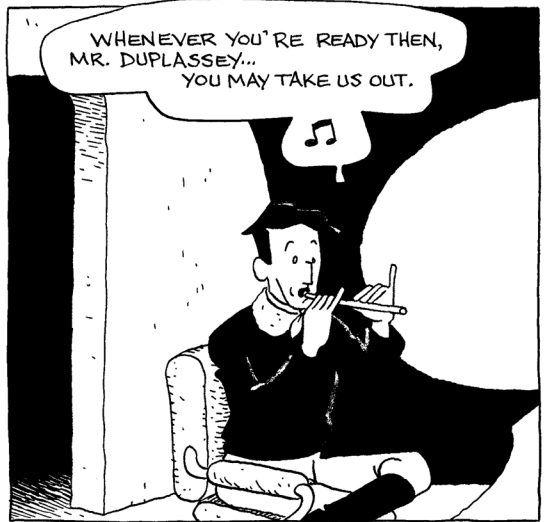
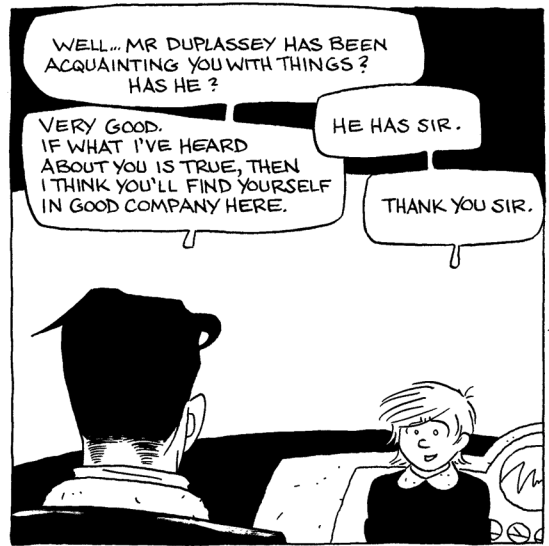
CHIKI





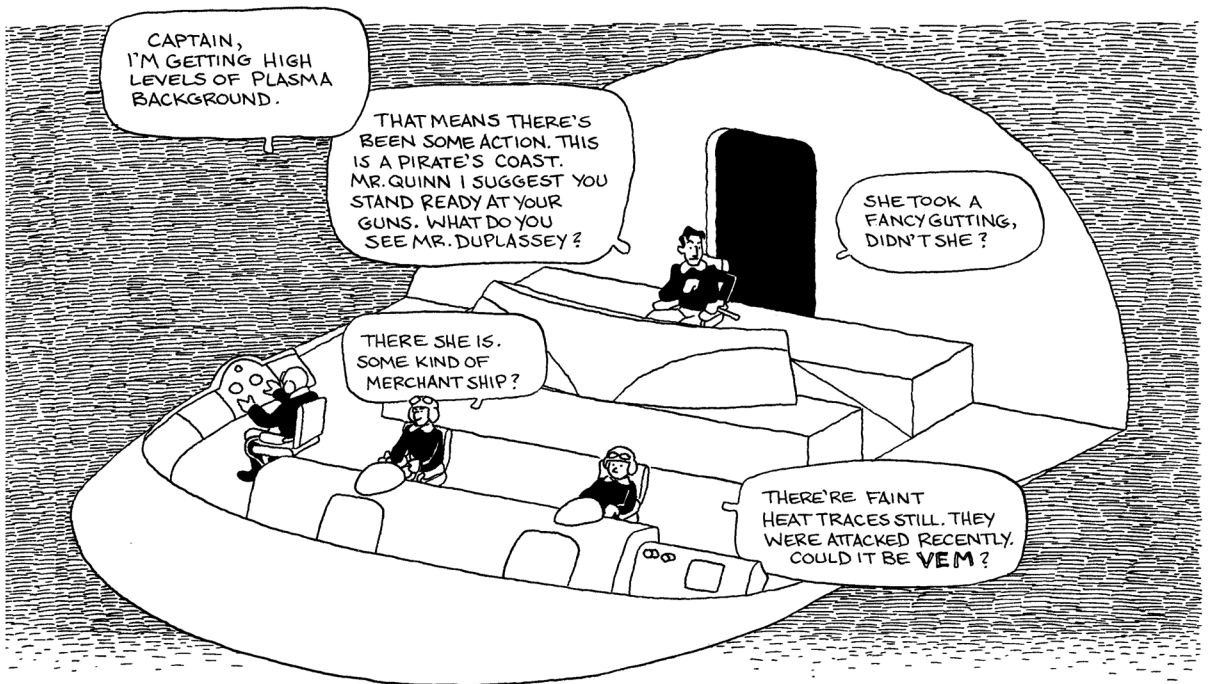
... Well, let's just say that the Captain had his faults. Who doesn't? And men who live life in a rather large way tend to have shortcomings that match. Regardless of that, Martin's reputation was such that a commission aboard the *Ginny Sue* was a much coveted gig for any young middy. The *Company Ship Virginia Susanne* was a split-tail bobcat light clipper manned by a crew of five souls. Besides the Captain, there was Duplassey the helmsman, myself as navigator, 'Handsome Jack' Quinn the Gunner and down below was our engineer Marek Handle. Our *freight* was not the usual sort. We tended to carry things for the Company which required *special* handling. That was why we were a small craft, designed for maneuverability... and armed to the teeth!





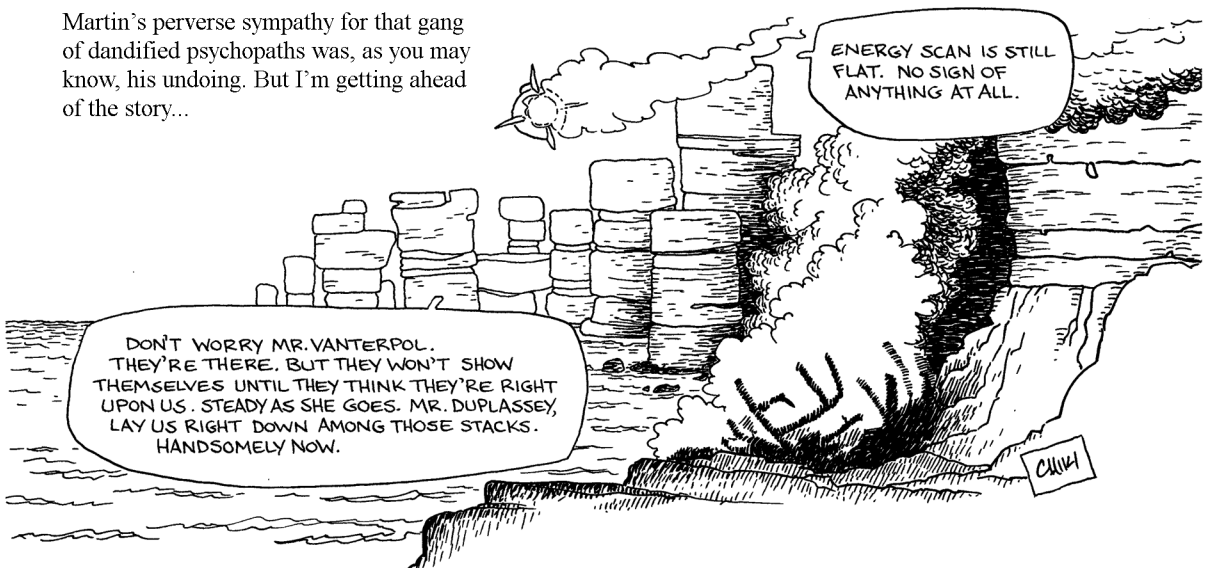
Before launching, I could feel her engines purring, nice and sweet. I'd place my hand on a bulkhead to feel her as she warmed up. Then there was the rush of pressure as she'd shoot up on a blast of turbos and catch a nice solar breeze at the top of the atmosphere... those were the sweetest few moments. It's been years now since I've set foot on anything larger than a litaway, but I still feel the same.

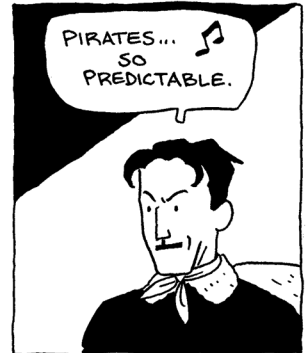
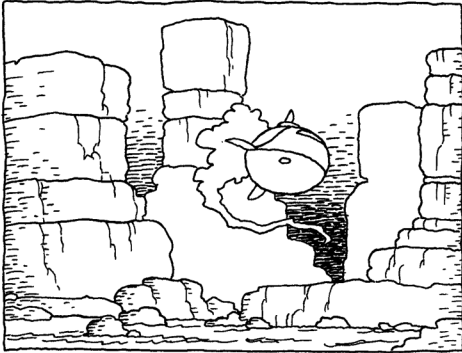
I've had many a cruise since that first one aboard the Ginny Sue, but in retrospect I can say that none of them proved as consequential. It happened as we cruised off the Amalfi coast. We'd come down out of the upper atmosphere because of an instability in the DRNS field. The first signs of trouble began clouding up the radiation gauge.



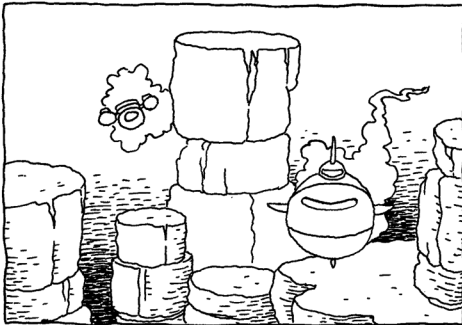
“VEM? Not likely. Not their style. The *VEM* aren't so much interested in loot as they are in stealing plasmate scuttle and the like... aside from their other antics that is. They seem to delight in chaos generally. Sick bastards... you have to admire them. Heh heh.”

Martin's perverse sympathy for that gang of dandified psychopaths was, as you may know, his undoing. But I'm getting ahead of the story...

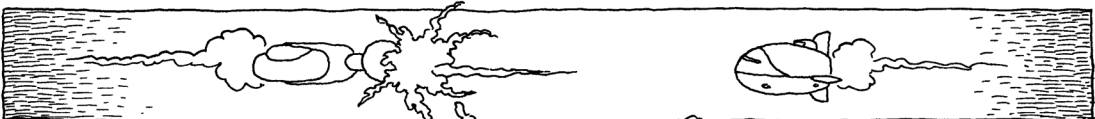
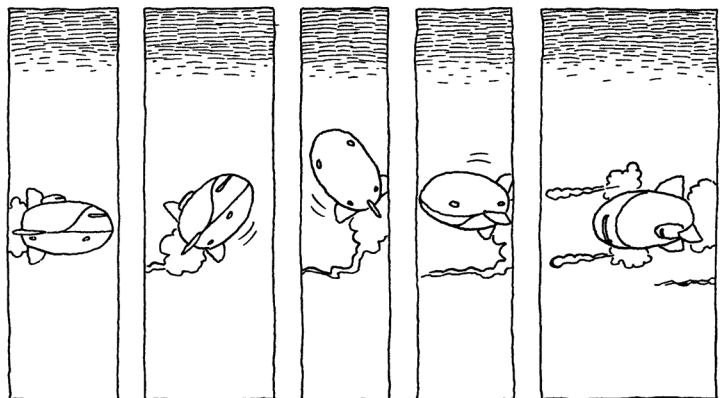





It was a small ragged gunship looking for an easy target... a heap of a filthy, run-down doghead, belching black exhaust as it hurtled into view. It took us a freighter. Assumed we had something they might fancy.



The gunship let loose with her bowchasers. The *Gimmy Sue's* hull shook as she took the impact.

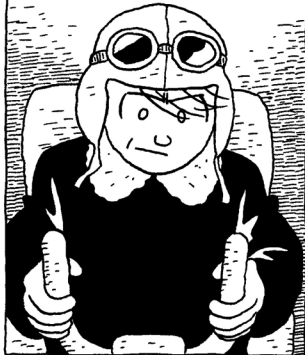


Duplassey'd sent us too close alongside the gunship and we'd picked up some of our own deflected plasma flack. The charge went through the electrical rigging and zapped him cold in his own bucket.



TAKE THE HELM MR. VANTERPOL, IF YOU PLEASE.

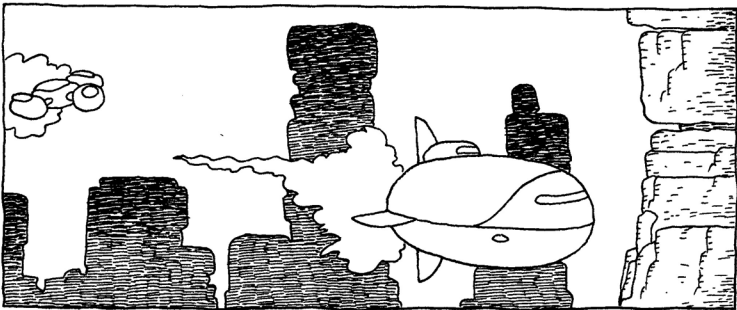
I prayed what little piloting I had would see me through this one!




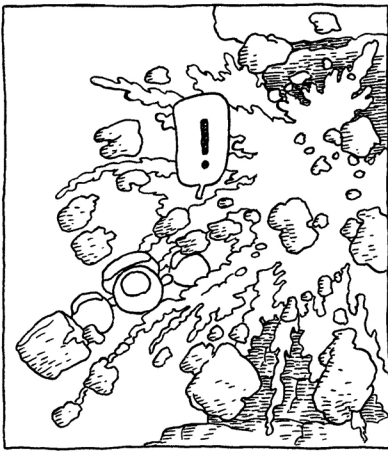
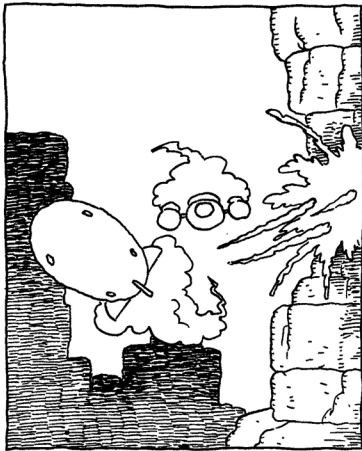
PUT US BACK AMONG THOSE STACKS... AND DON'T HURRY ABOUT IT. LET THEM CATCH UP. STAND BY WITH YOUR ROCKETS MR. QUINN. I WANT A NICE HOLE IN THAT STACK COMING UP TO PORT.



AYE SIR.



GIVE THEM A SHOWER MR. QUINN! PULL US OUT MR. VANTERPOL!

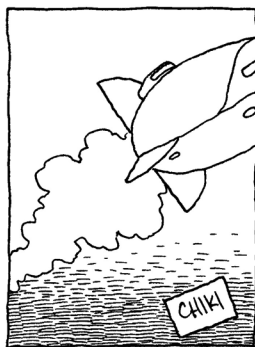
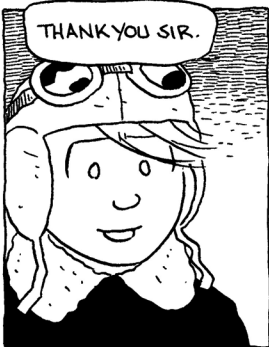


MR. VANTERPOL...

...THAT WAS SOME FINE FLYING. NICELY DONE.



THANK YOU SIR.

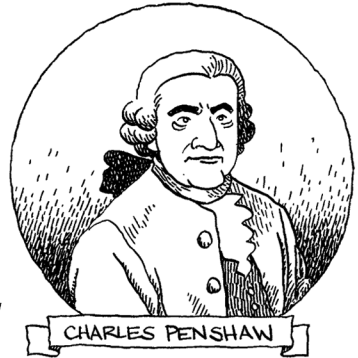


Next:  
the Raardsoff  
Amethyst

# A short history of the PENSHAW

Part one

THE FIRST EARL OF SUTTENHOW, CHARLES PENSHAW RECEIVED HIS PEERAGE DURING THE REIGN OF FREDERICK I FOR SERVICES RENDERED DURING THAT MONARCH'S INTERMINABLE WARS WITH HIS CONTINENTAL ADVERSARIES. LORD SUTTENHOW'S REPUTATION HAS BEEN FIXED IN THE MINDS OF MOST HOWEVER BY HIS LIBIDINOUS PROFLIGACY AND THE NOTED SAVAGERY WITH WHICH HE TREATED SERVANTS THAN BY ANY PROFICIENCY HE MIGHT HAVE HAD IN THE ARENA OF MARS.

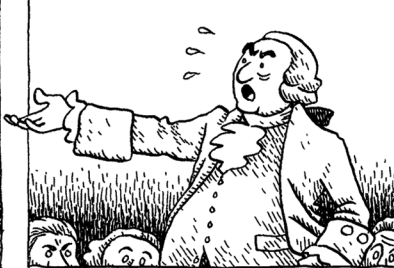


CHARLES PENSHAW

FREDERICK SHARED CHARLES' PROCLIVITY FOR DISSOLUTION BUT THEY WERE FAR FROM COMRADES IN ANY PLACE OUTSIDE OF THE BATTLEFIELD.



INDEED, NOT LONG AFTER BEING RAISED TO THE PEERAGE, CHARLES BEGAN USING HIS NEW POLITICAL VOICE TO BOLDLY CRITICIZE A NUMBER OF FREDERICK'S POLICIES.



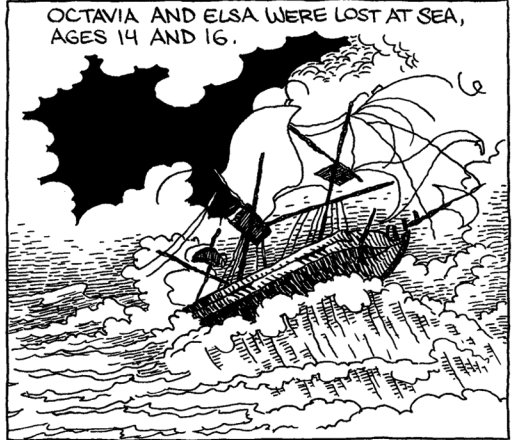
THEY ENDED THEIR DAYS BITTER ENEMIES BUT AS IT HAPPENED IT WAS NOT AN EMNITY THAT CROSSED THE LINE OF GENERATIONS.



CHARLES HAD ONE SON AND FOUR DAUGHTERS. EVERY ONE OF THE PENSHAW GIRLS WAS CONSIDERED AN EXCEPTIONAL BEAUTY, BUT NOT A ONE OF THEM WOULD TAKE A HUSBAND.



OCTAVIA AND ELSA WERE LOST AT SEA, AGES 14 AND 16.



ANNE MIGRATED TO THE SALONS OF PRETERBOROUGH, ACHIEVING NOTORIETY AS MUCH FOR HER MELODRAMATIC NOVELS AS FOR HER MANY LOVERS.



DEMETRIA WAS ENGAGED TO A GENTLEMAN'S SON AT 17 BUT HER PARENTS DEEMED IT INAPPROPRIATE. SHE WAS SO SHATTERED THAT SHE CLOSED HER HEART AND JOINED HER SISTER ANNE IN MAIDENHOOD. THEY LOOKED AFTER THEIR FATHER IN HIS DECLINING YEARS.



Next-  
Mad Catherine &  
the Penschaw Curse

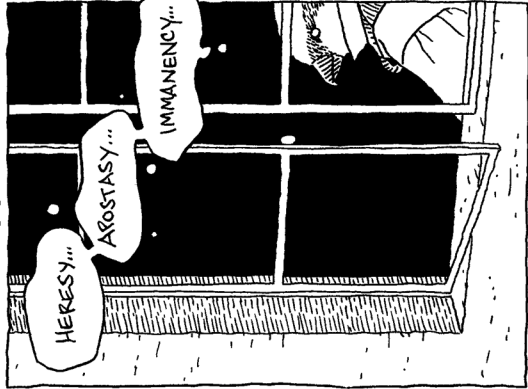
CHIKI

Oct. 1843, Mockby & Assoc.,  
Engravers, Epslow on  
Clynthe...

WE FIND OUR MAN, O'HARE,  
SITTING IDLY AT HIS WORK-  
TABLE, A PRISTINE BLOCK  
BEFORE HIM AWAITING THE  
INAUGURAL CUT. HE TRACES  
THE LINES ACROSS THE  
WOOD GRAIN WITH HIS  
FINGER AND HUMS A TUNE  
HALF-MINDEDLY, THOUGHT  
BITS MEANDERING THE  
DURATION OF QUARTER  
NOTES, ADAGIO.

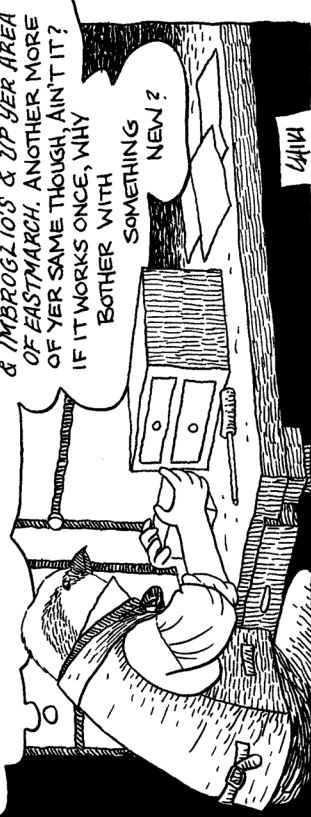


# Starling Hall

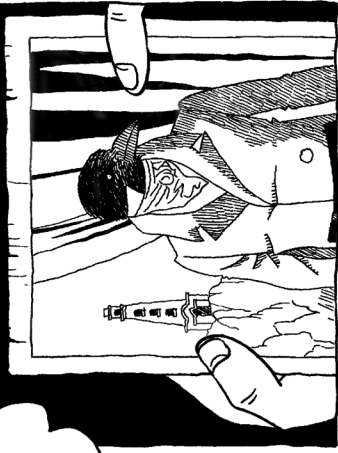


CHARLES... CLARENCE... FEETERSHIM, VIA VARIOUS PENSRAW OFFSHOOTS, BRANCHING CADETS  
AND SPROUTING BARK DAMP, ARRIVES TO TAKE HIS BARONY BY THE SEA... WHAT DOES HE  
DO THEN? BUILDS A LIGHTHOUSE OVER A MOOR... AN AMUSING JOKE, UPON WHICH TO  
SNUFFLE KNOWINGLY? RATHER EXPENSIVE FAMILY DEVICE OR MERE FOLLY? NO... IT WAS  
MORE THAN THAT. WHAT WAS IT HE DID? SOMETHING ABOUT CURVATURE IN THE AIR...  
GETS HIM A CHAIR... ROYAL SOCIETY 'N' ALL! MUST ASK THE DOCTOR. WOULD SURELY KNOW.

MR. REDMOND CUTLE, Esq... A VISITOR'S GUIDE TO THE CURIOS  
& IMBROGLIO'S & UP YER AREA  
OF EASTMARCH. ANOTHER MORE  
OF YER SAME THOUGH, AIN'T IT?

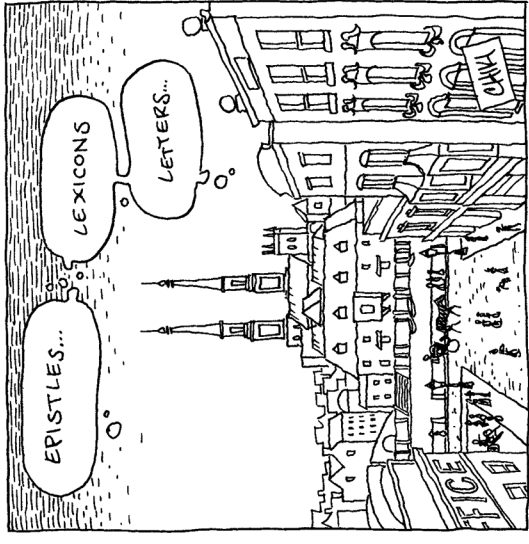


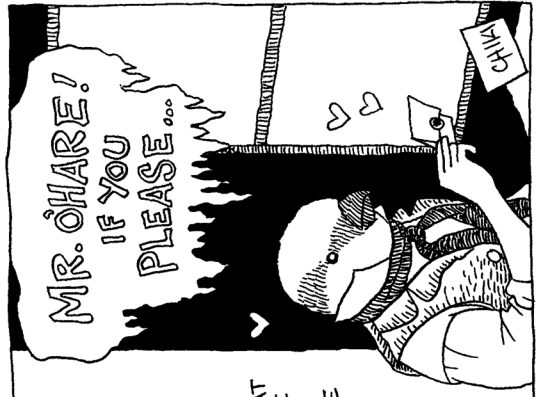
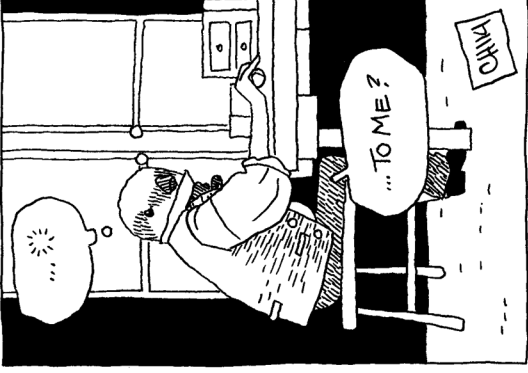
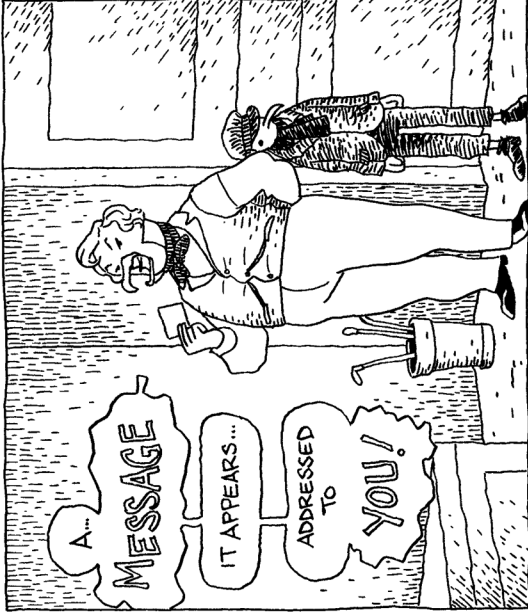
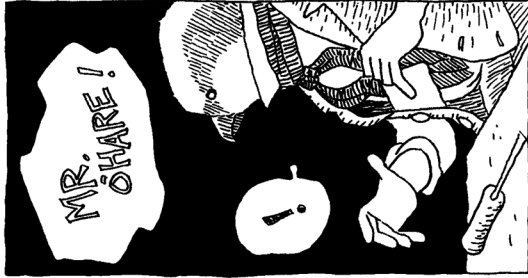
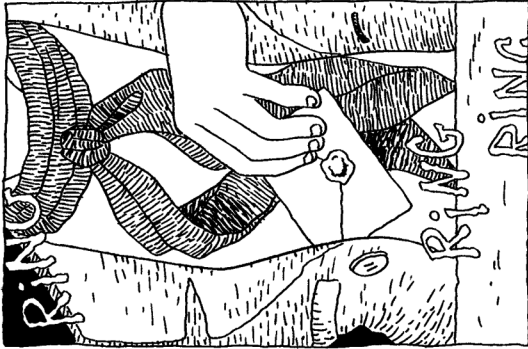
CAHNI



AN INBALANCE OF HUMOURS IS MUCH THE CAUSE OF  
O'HARE'S INABILITY TO FOCUS ON THE WOODBLOCK AND  
HIS CHRONIC DIVERSIONS OF ATTENTION TO THE  
WINDOW BESIDE HIS TABLE. FROM OUTSIDE COMES  
THE COMMON DIN OF THE CITY: THE HORSES AND GIGS  
AND CARTS, CABS AND TRAPS CLATTERING ATOP THE  
COBBLED WAY, THE FERAL BARKING OF DOGS, THE  
HOLLERED PITCH OF FISH AND FRUIT VENDORS, THE  
GENERAL HULLABALOO OF PUBLIC TRAFFIC.

THE VIEW FROM O'HARE'S WINDOW IS A STRAIGHT SHOT  
LOOKING SOUTH DOWN SCRIBBLER'S ROW, TOWARD THE  
EDGE OF THE BARROW AND THE NORTH EMBANKMENT  
OF THE RIVER CLYNTHE, WHICH SEPARATES OUR SIDE OF  
TOWN FROM SOUTHBEND AND ITS THICK WARREN OF  
RAMSHACKLE BUILDINGS. FROM THOSE RISE THE  
TWIN SPIRES OF ST. GORMATH'S CATHEDRAL, JUTTING  
DENTAL SPIKES FROM THE MAW OF MOTHER CHURCH.





YES SIR, TO YOU.

FROM THE LADY, \* \* \* IN QUEENSWOOD ST. \*

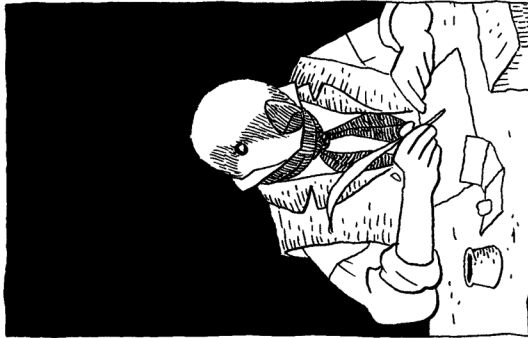
AND I IMAGINE IT IS NOT YOUR OBVIOUS GIFT FOR ORATORY THAT THE LADY SEEMS TO FIND SO COMPELLING IN YOU. NOW IF YOU PLEASE SIR, COME GET YOUR LETTER AND BE QUICK! THIS YOUNG COURIER HAS BEEN INSTRUCTED TO WAIT FOR A REPLY AND SINCE IT HAS BEEN SOME TIME APPARENTLY SINCE HE HAS EXPERIENCED THE VIRTUES OF SOAP AND WATER, I DO NOT WISH TO KEEP HIM IN MY SHOP FOR ANY LONGER THAN IS ABSOLUTELY NECESSARY.

MR. O'HARE! IF YOU PLEASE... COME GET YOUR LETTER!

HERE IS NO SECRET APPARENTLY TO O'HARE'S ADMIRATION OF THE CHARMING MRS. LANGLEY. IT IS ASSUMED AMONG SOME OF THEIR ACQUAINTANCE THAT THEY ARE INTIMATELY INVOLVED. IT IS A RUMOUR, HOWEVER, THAT FOR ONCE HAS NO BASIS IN FACT... AT LEAST NOT IN THE PURELY LITERAL SENSE.

HE STARES AT IT FOR SOME MOMENTS, FLICKING THE CORNER WITH HIS THUMB, ALLOWING THE SCENT OF LAVENDER TO SETTLE AND SUMMON FORTH A PARADE OF VERY TANTALIZING THOUGHTS, VERY PLEASING, WICKED IMAGES...

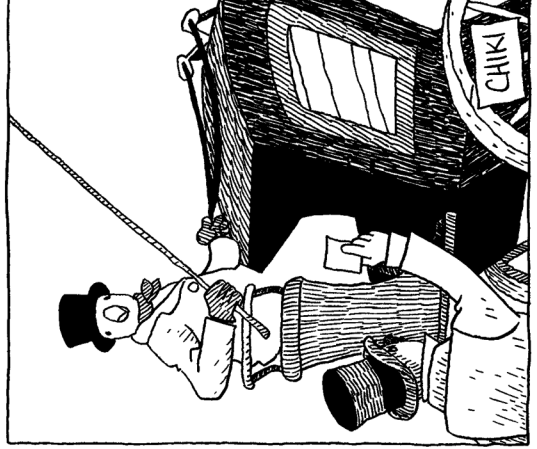
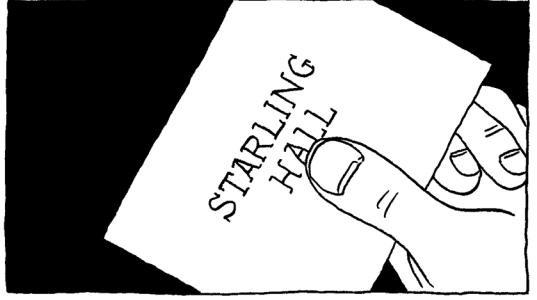
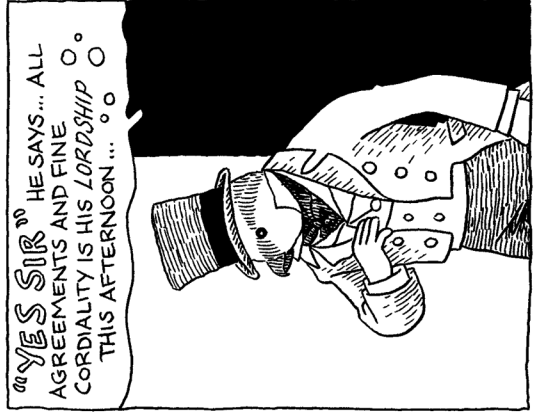
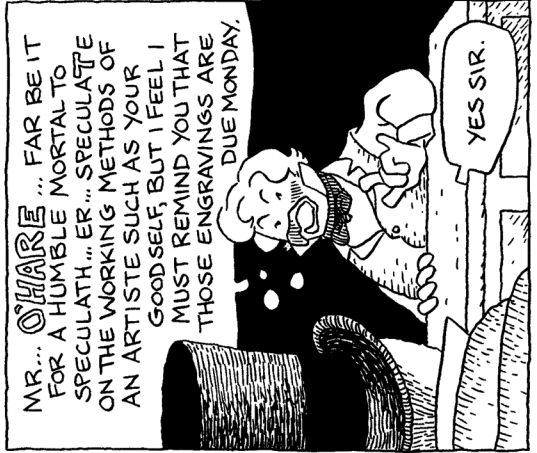
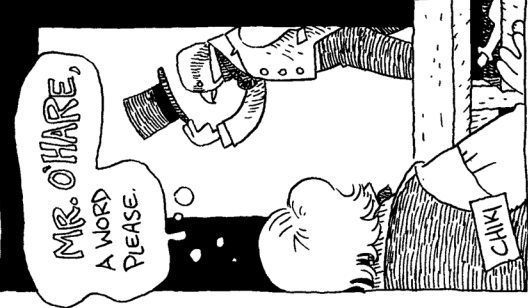


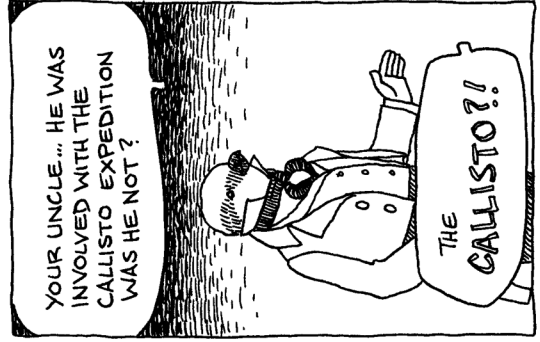
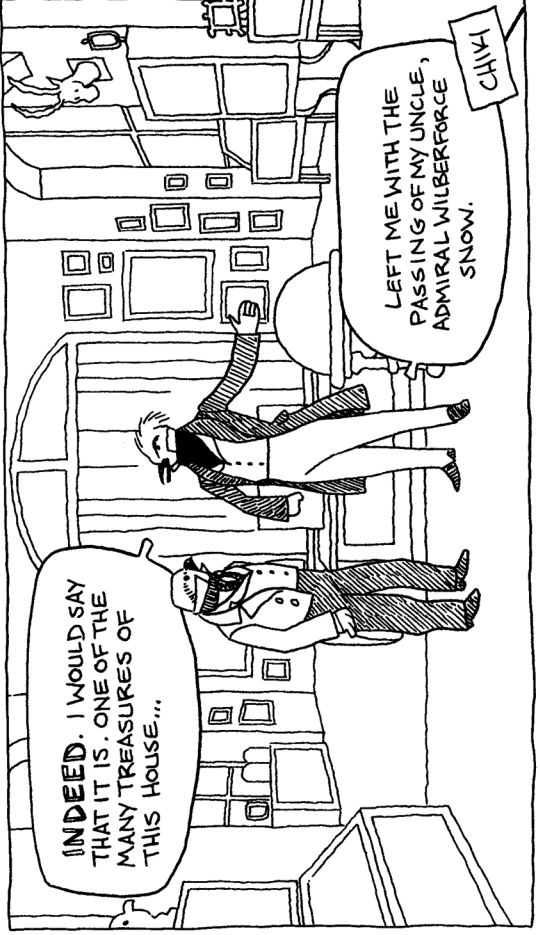
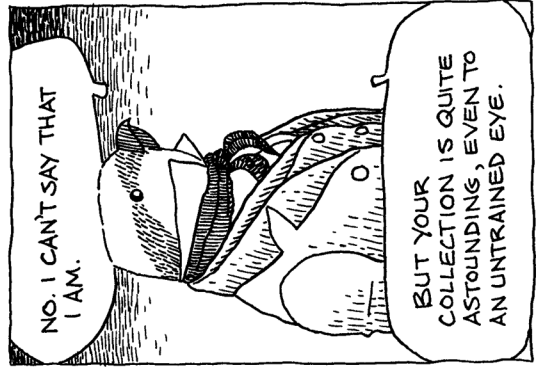
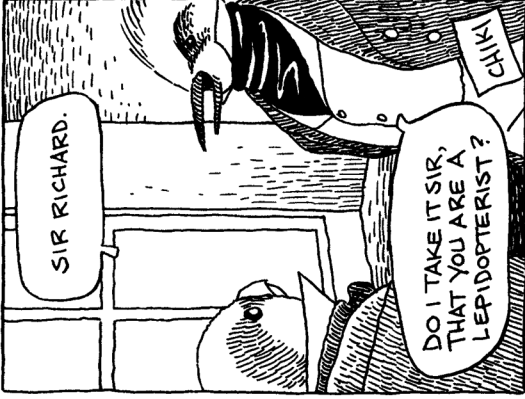
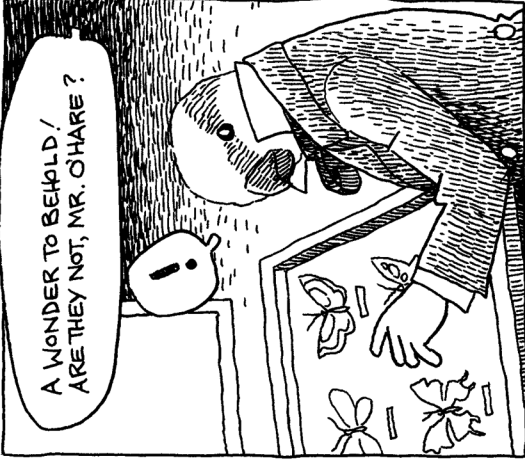
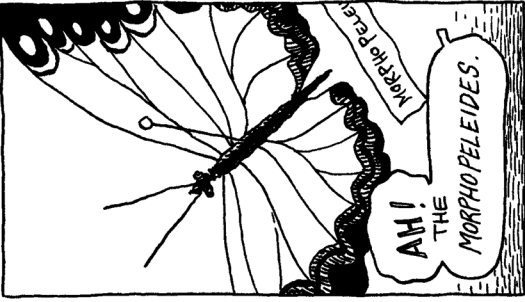
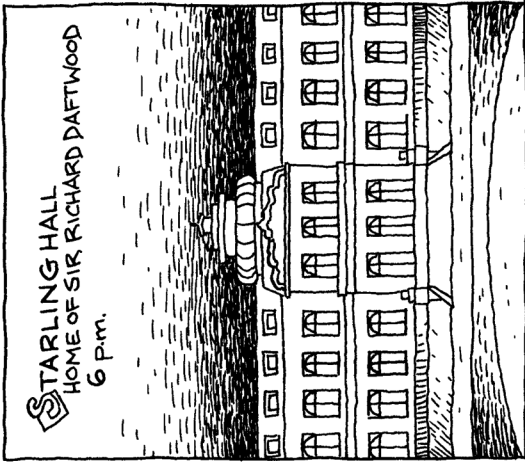


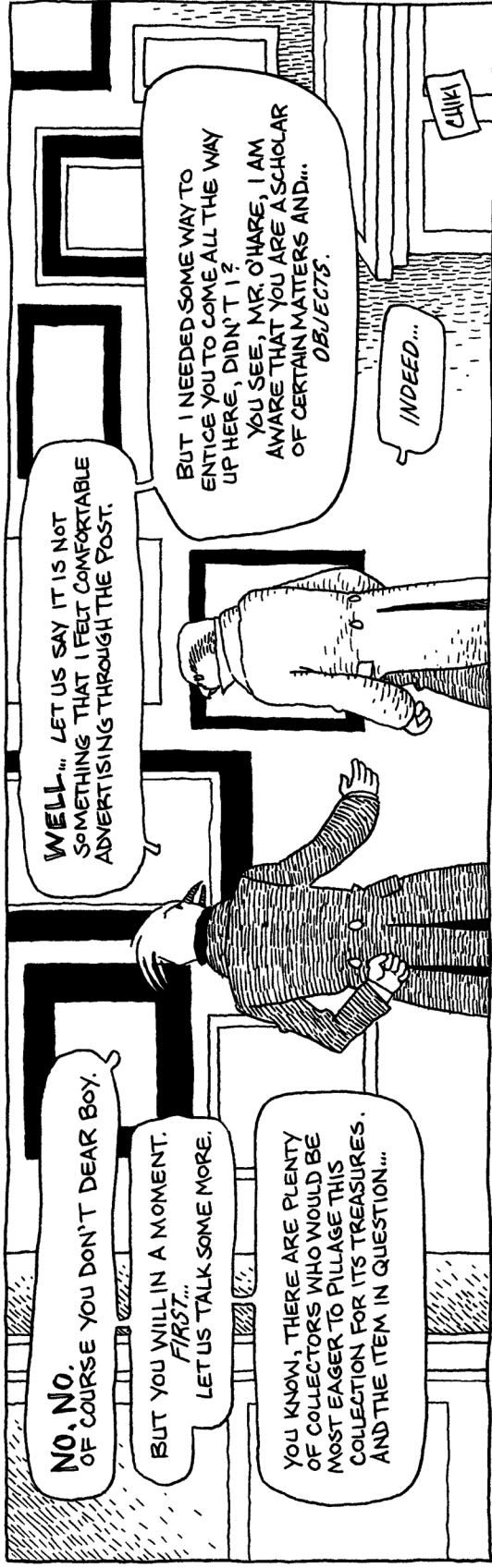
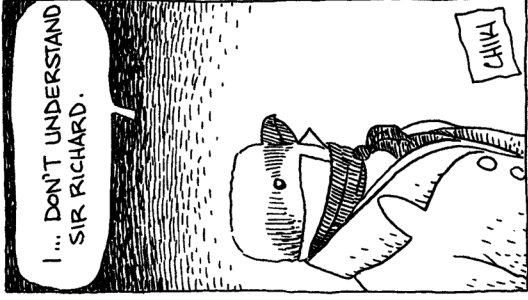
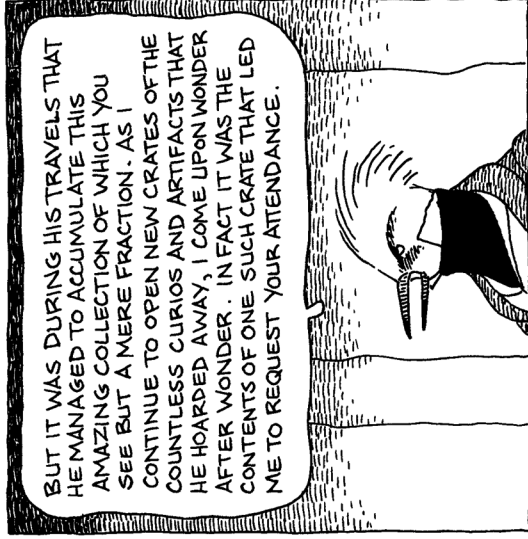
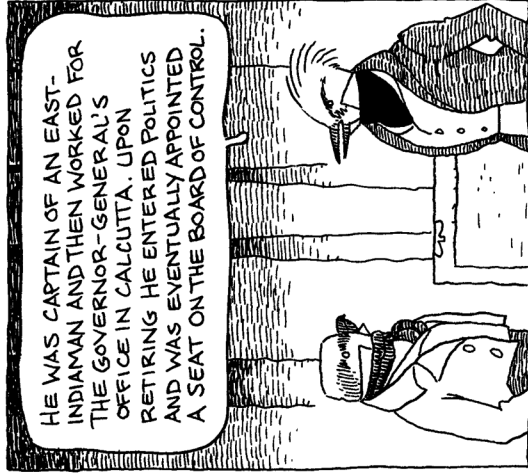
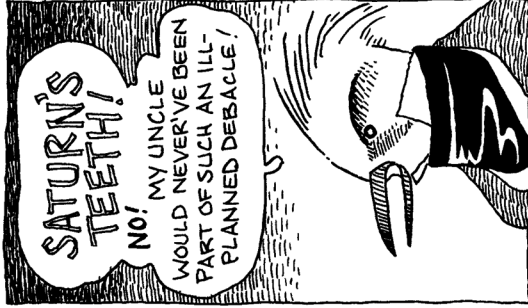
OHARE READS THE WORDS SCRIPTED IN A DECIDEDLY FEMINE HAND, IN CALLIGRAPHY THE PIGMENT OF INDIGO. AFTER A MOMENT'S CONTEMPLATION, HE SNATCHES A GULL AND A SHEET OF PAPER AND SCRATCHES OUT A REPLY TO MRS. LANGLEY. THIS HE DISPATCHES TO THE RUNNING BOY, PAYING HIM A FEW COINS FROM HIS POCKET.

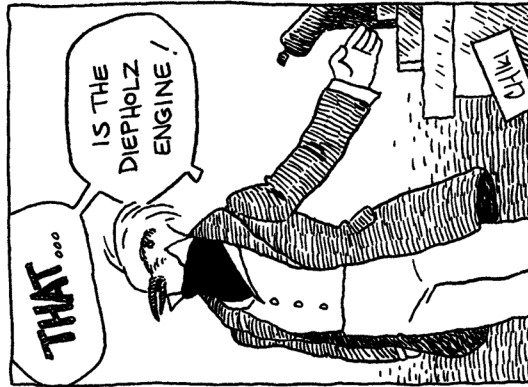
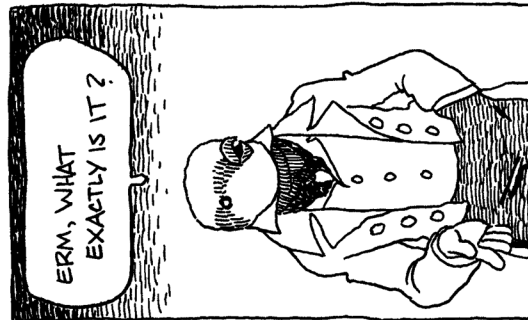
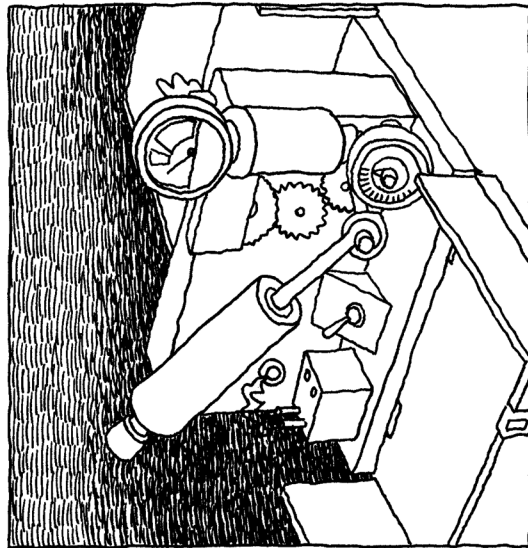
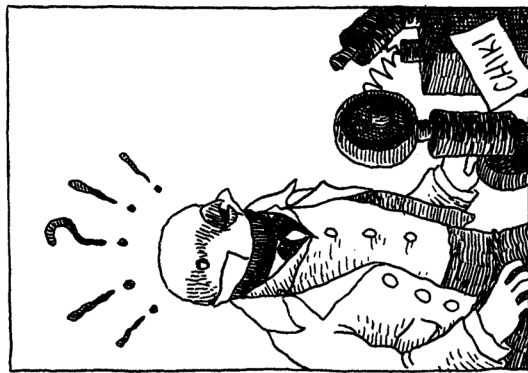
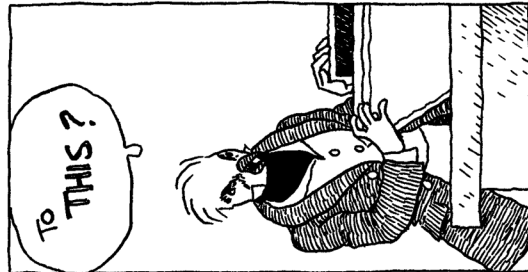


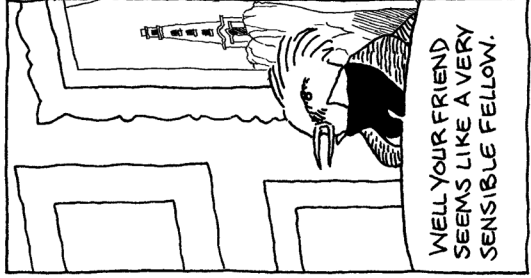
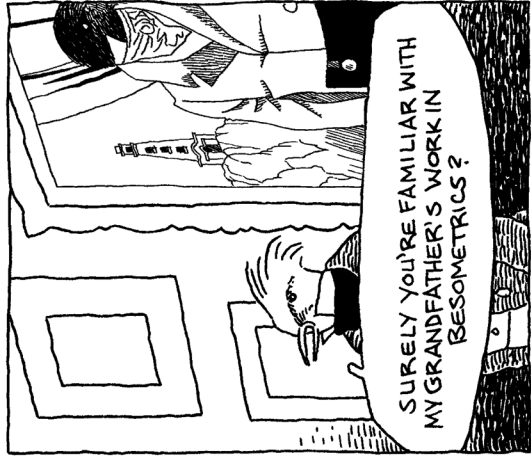
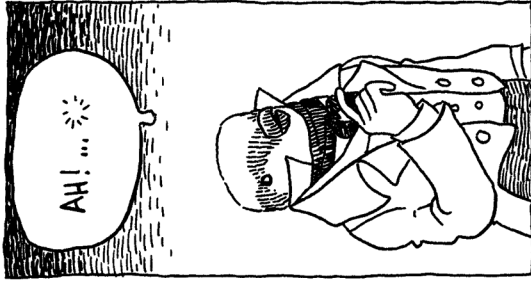
... FOUR O'CLOCK ...







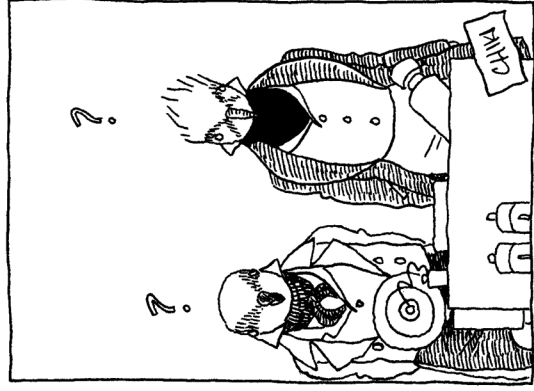
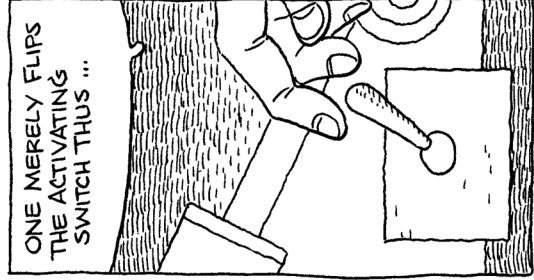
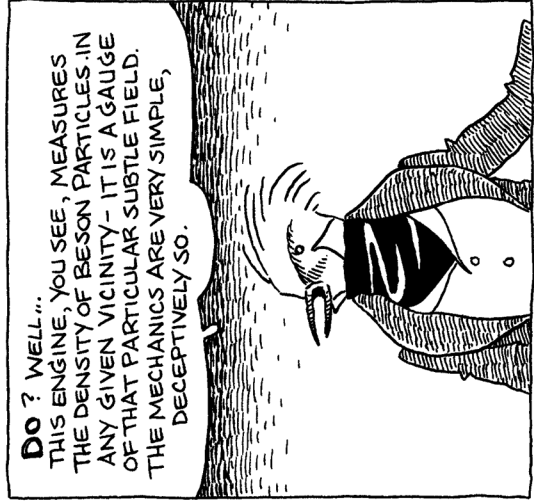
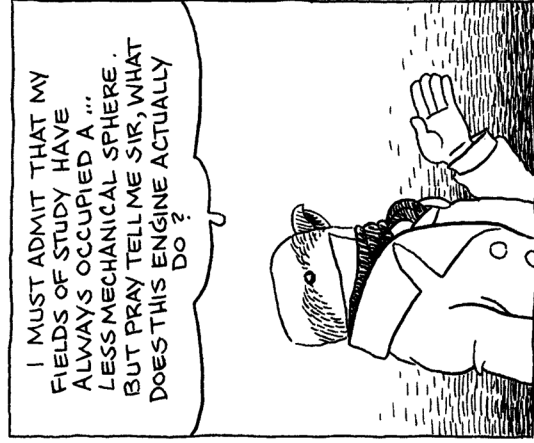


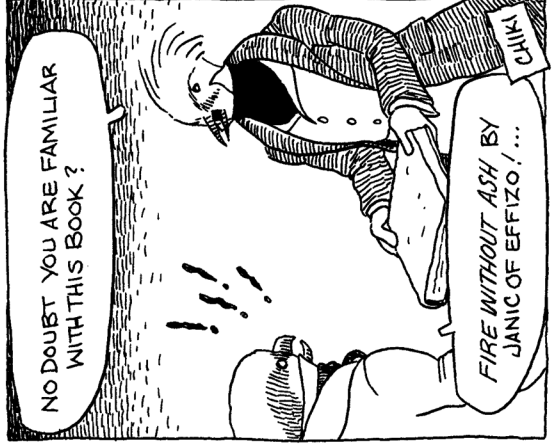
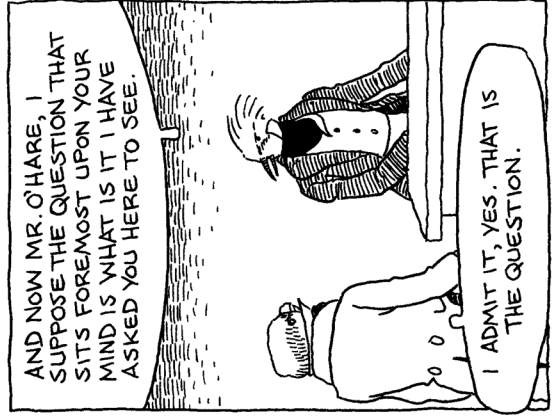
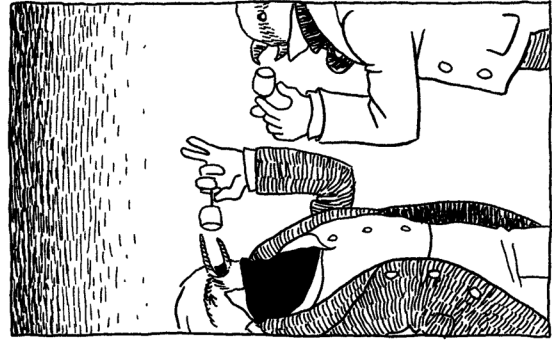
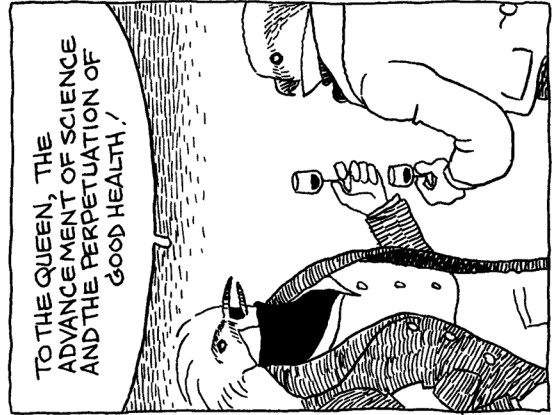
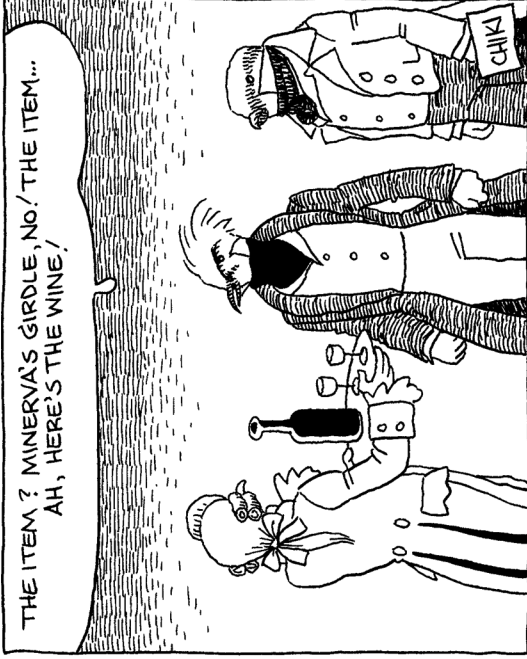
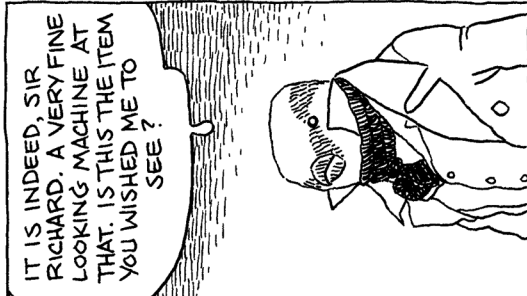
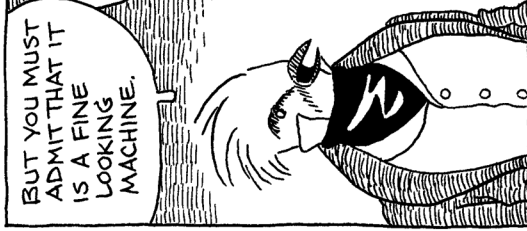
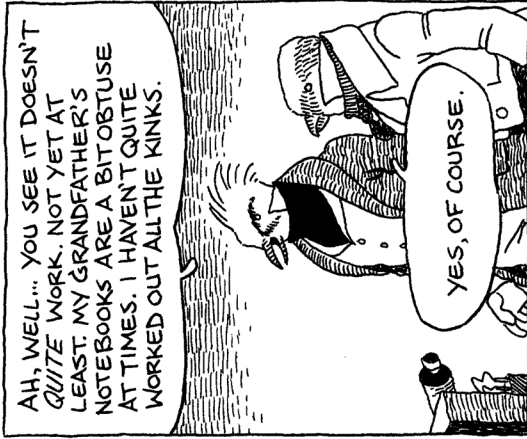


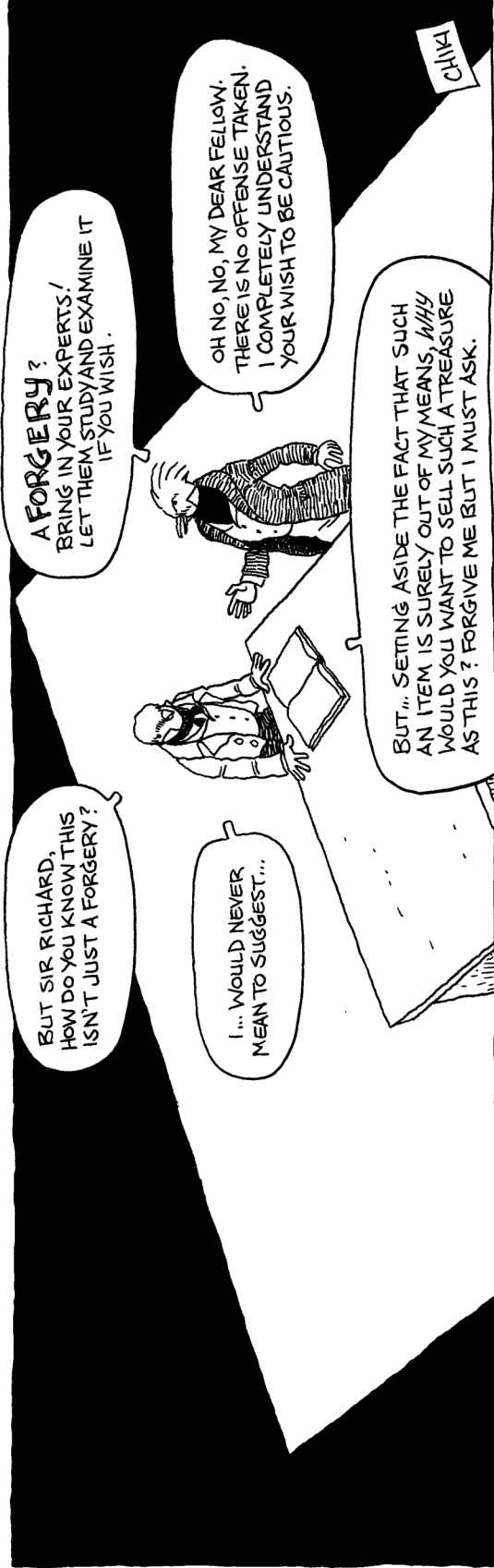
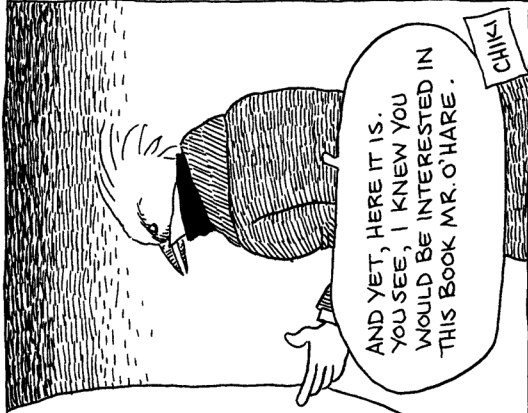
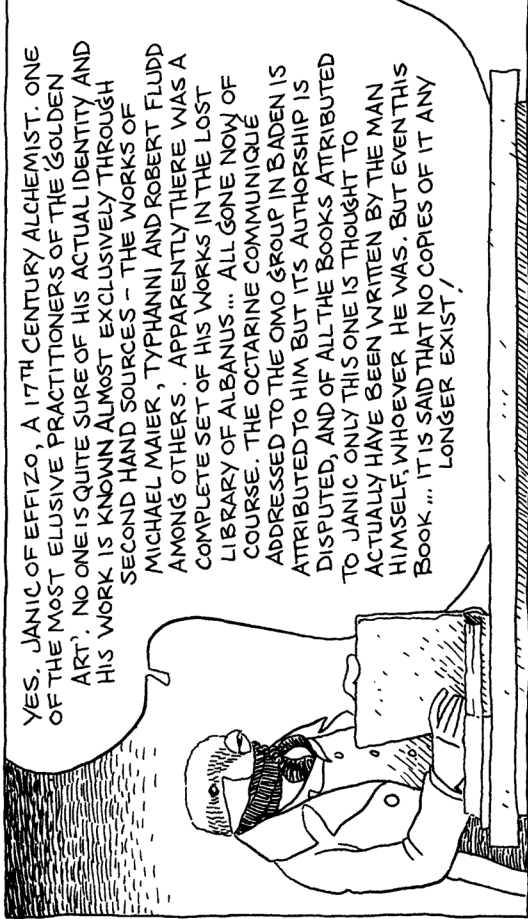
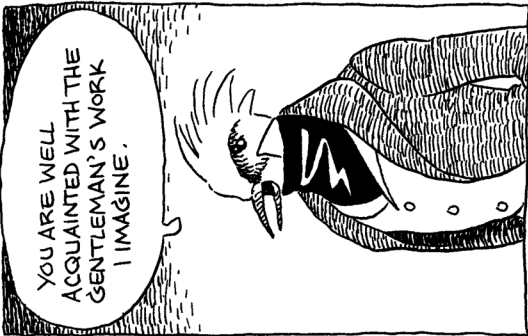
CHARE CONSIDERS THIS STATEMENT WITH A SMILE, ATTEMPTING TO RECALL ANY OTHER TIME DR. PALLADORUS HAD BEEN REFERRED TO AS SUCH.

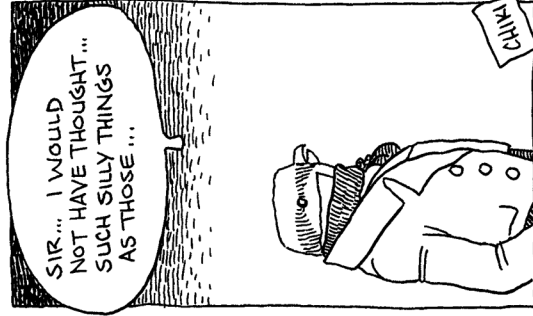
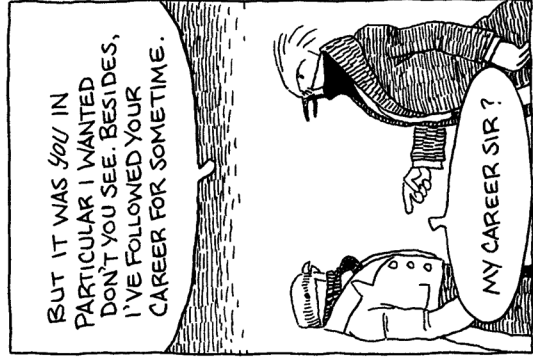
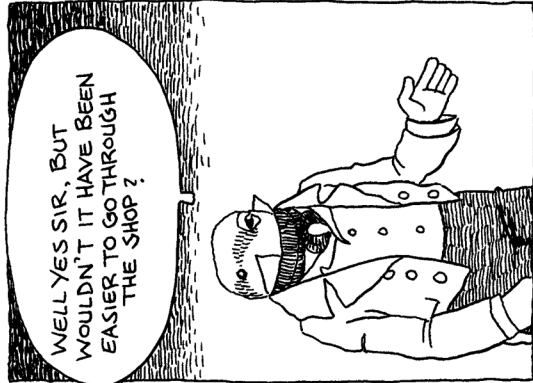
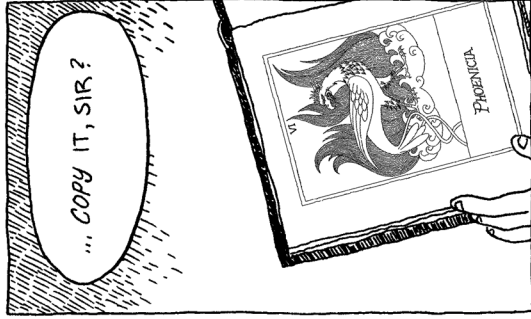
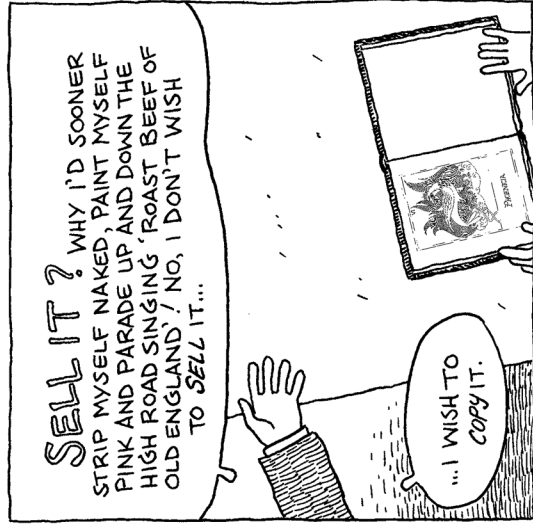


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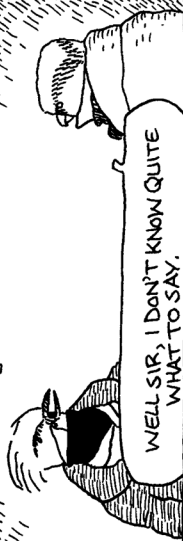






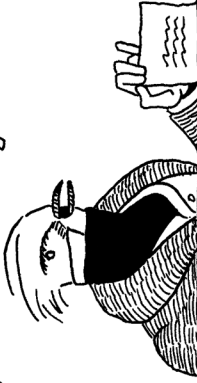


NO NO, MY DEAR FELLOW. WELL, THE BOOKS MAY NOT BE ART IN ANY HIGH SENSE ... BUT YOUR MASTERY OF LINE AND SHADOW AND FORM ... IT IS EXCELLENT. AND I BELIEVE I HAVE A DISCRIMINATING EYE FOR SUCH THINGS. BUT IT IS NOT JUST YOUR DRAUGHTSMANSHIP ... YOU SIR ARE A FELLOW SEEKER, ARE YOU NOT? ONLY ONE WHO IS SUITABLY INVESTED IN JANIC OF EFFZO AND HIS WORK COULD DO THESE ENGRAVINGS JUSTICE. YOU WILL UNDERSTAND THEM BETTER. YOU WILL KNOW WHAT LINES, WHAT DETAILS CANNOT BE VULGARIZED OR OBSCURED IN THE COPYING.



WELL SIR, I DON'T KNOW QUITE WHAT TO SAY.

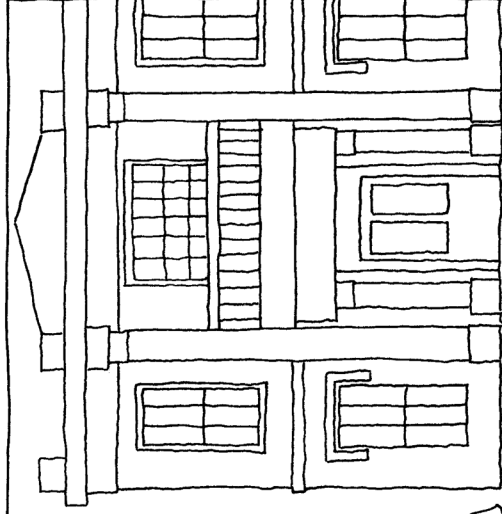
SAY NOTHING EXCEPT THAT YOU WILL ACCEPT THIS COMMISSION. YOU SHALL TAKE A SUM IN ADVANCE, WHICH MY MAN SHALL PAY YOU ON THE WAY OUT. YOU SHALL WORK HERE ... I WILL PROVIDE ALL THE TOOLS AND MATERIALS YOU REQUIRE ... AND YOU SHALL HAVE ACCESS TO THE LIBRARY AND MANY OF THE COMMON AREAS OF THE HOUSE. MAKE WHATEVER HOURS ARE CONVENIENT TO YOU ... THE HOUSE WILL ALWAYS BE OPEN. UPON COMPLETION, YOU WILL BE PAID THIS SUM. ARE THOSE TERMS ACCEPTABLE MR. O'HARE?



O'HARE ENTERTAINS SOME FLEETING THOUGHTS OF THE BLEAK PROSPECT OF DEBTOR'S PRISON ...



MOST ACCEPTABLE SIR.



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**Roth, Irwin Radole** September 27, 1917 – June 14, 1990

Pulp and comics legend, Irwin Roth passed away in his home Thursday evening. Roth is survived by one nephew, Clarence Stanton of East Liberty.

Born in Chatsworth, New Jersey, at the age of 23, Roth moved to Manhattan and eked out a living as a writer of science fiction and adventure stories before joining the staff of Jack Sloane Studios. There he co-created many of their most popular comic book series, foremost of these being The Magus, which ran from 1940 to 1954. In the early sixties, Roth broke with Sloane and left the studio.

Roth is probably best known for his sudden disappearance in October of 1966, following several years of financial hardship. After a little over a year, he was found wandering out of the desert in Arizona but seemed unable to say what had happened to him. He also denied knowledge of the whereabouts of Sloane, who had disappeared at roughly the same time and remains missing to this day.

Roth relocated to San Francisco in 1968, living in relative seclusion until moving in 1985 to Pittsburgh, where he lived with his nephew until his death. A memorial service will be held at People's Unitarian Church in Braddock, Monday evening at 7 p.m.

**Rene**

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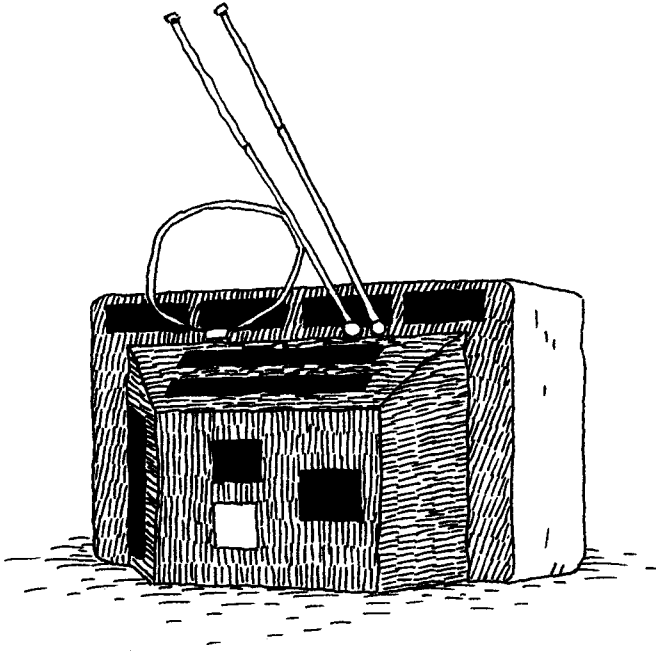
NIGHT. A BLANKET OF DARKNESS ENSHROUDS THE CITY. WHILE THE MANY SLEEP, A FEW USE THE COVER OF NIGHT TO PLAN AND PLOT THEIR EVIL DESIGNS. YET EVER VIGILANT STANDS A GRIM FIGURE, CLOAKED IN MYSTERY, ENDOWED WITH STRANGE AND OTHER-WORLDFLY POWERS- HERE STANDS THE...

# MAGUS



BY  
JACK  
SLOANE

# *The TRANSPARENT*



I remember when I first become aware of the transparent.

My name is Eoghan Nagy. I'm a cryptobibliographer. I study books, which may or may not exist. But most nights, I sit in front of the television.

The television is one of those old pre-cable models with two channel dials (UHF & VHF); a volume dial, which you pull out in order to activate the power; and one audio speaker, which is set behind a plastic grill and emits a shrill, caustic quality of sound, the tone existing entirely in the mid-range of the audio spectrum. The controls form a row on a brown, plastic, faux wood-grain panel on the front of the set, just to the right of the screen. At the very bottom of this panel, below the audio speaker, is another small hinged panel, which when lifted up reveals three, smaller knobs, which control the quality of the picture (brightness, contrast & color) and, sticking just a fraction of its circular surface out from the bottom of the set, is one further dial with a ridged edge, which adjusts the picture's balance. In addition, two rabbit ear antennae rise from the top. On one side of the set, marring the faux wood-grain shell is a black mark, or more of a welt, as if something has burnt and melted the television's synthetic skin.

The telephone rings. Then it rings again. It doesn't ring a third time. That's the signal for me to go to the window.

Amid the darkness, are the lights from the city, a luminous mosaic from across the river, projecting their yellow, blue, orange and white checkerboards upon the water and providing a backlight to the black steel mill directly below my house- a lifeless hulk, slowly crumbling into the ground. The mill used to belch cancer into the air, shrouding the city in another sort of night. I focus on a light directly across the river, it comes from the attic of a house in Oakland. This solitary light flashes on and off in long and short bursts.

I write down the bursts as dots and lines and consult the slip of paper with the code written out in pencil. The paper has been folded repeatedly and the pencil has started to smear and fade. I jot down the translation letter for letter. This is what it says: *Q to BR4*.

I quickly transcribe a message in return and send it out the window using a flashlight I keep close by. *Please repeat*.

A few minutes later comes the reply. *Q to BR4*.



Nicky and I used to drop acid before we played chess. The idea was to get to checkmate before we'd lose our ability to continue the game. Then he came up with the idea of playing by Morse code.

Four moves in, and already I can't understand how he wants to advance his Queen. I look at the pieces set up on the table near the window, and they seem like futile talismans- cheap, plastic dancers on a checkered, cardboard dancefloor. The magic that at times flickers from these objects is now muted or dumb. An elusive flicker, it appears only in the peripheral vision or lazy daydreams, understood only in relation to other things. But I suppose that's how everything is understood.

The telephone rings twice. I grab my paper and pencil and jot down the next message.

*Prince George. 11.*

Nicky and I are sitting in the Prince George Inn on the South Side. He sips a gin and tonic, I have a double shot of bourbon, and we watch Johnny Dupree play the organ in his Elvis costume to the accompaniment of an army of wind-up monkeys with cymbals.

"You don't have any paper on you?" Nicky asks.

"No, but I can get some from Stella. You want to trip tonight?"

Nicky shrugs.

"You should fuck her, you know."

I shake my head. "That's too complicated."

"No it's not. Next time you go to visit, just ask if she wants to fuck. That's all."

I sip the bourbon. "Angela always thought I wanted to sleep with Stella."

"Well... she's gone. She left you."

I pause to think about my ex-wife. But only for a moment. I think about my preoccupation with trivia and the way things seem to connect abstractly, and how those things become so much more interesting for me than the basic elements of a day's existence.

"Maybe I just don't want to prove her right about it."

Nicky snorts through his teeth.

My attention shifts away from the film of grease swirling around the surface of my drink to the activity that's mounting around us. People take masks from the walls of the club and dance strangely to Johnny and his simian orchestra.

Nicky grabs a discarded newspaper from the next table. Something catches his eye.

"Here, look at this! Isn't that the guy you like?"

He points to an obituary.

"Irwin Roth... yeah! God, I had no idea he was living in Pittsburgh."

"Not anymore. Maybe we can..."

His voice is drowned out by the rising din of the club.

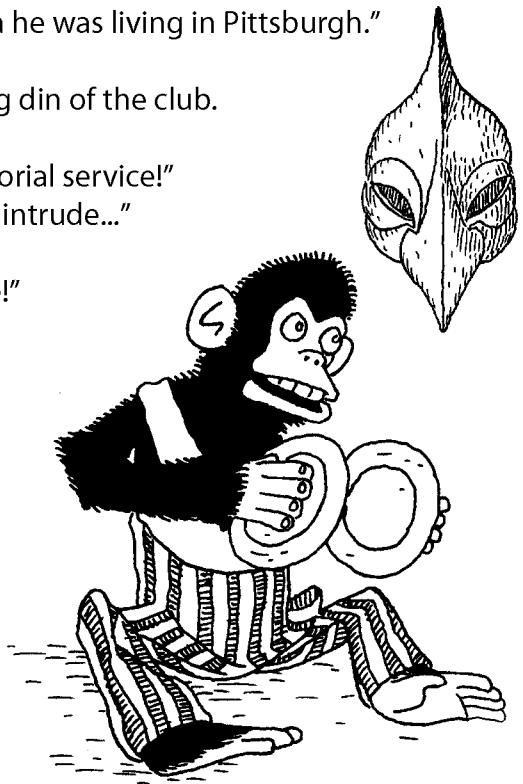
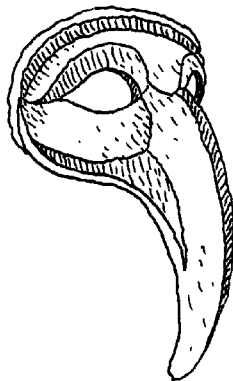
"What?!"

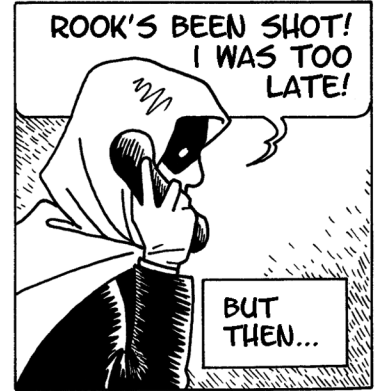
"I said maybe we can go to the memorial service!"

"No. It'll be family. I wouldn't want to intrude..."

"What?!"

"I said... fuck, let's go somewhere else!"





I dial Stella's number. It rings three, four times, then I hear the sound of the receiver carelessly being picked up, a pause for a second or two, a rustling sound, then...

"Hullo..."

"Stella?"

"... yeah?" I can tell she's whacked out.

"It's Eoghan."

"Oh... OK."

"You said you might have some of that stuff."

"Yeah. I just took some."

"Can I come over?"

"Yeah. Come over. I'm in the kitchen."

"OK."

"OK."

Her door is open so I go in, past the blaring television blaring that nobody's watching, on into the kitchen where Stella's sitting on the floor, her back against the refrigerator. Near her are the telephone and a plastic baggy with a sheet of blotter paper. A chunk of it's been torn off. I kneel down, look into her face...

"Are you OK?"

She nods with almost a smile.

"What do you see?"

"Glass."

I nod towards the baggy.

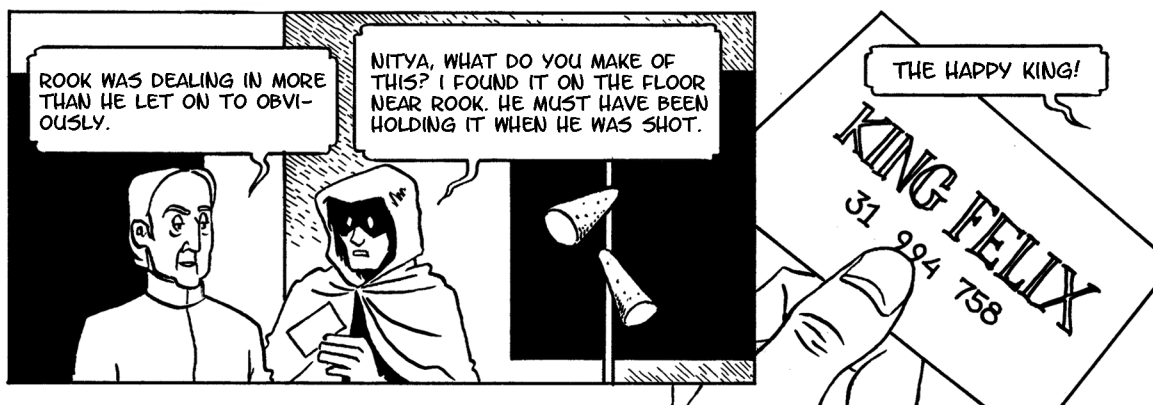
"How much a square?"

She holds up two fingers.

I stuff a twenty into the pocket of her shirt and tear off ten squares from the sheet. Each one is printed with the tiny words plus ultra. I notice a green flyer stuck to the refrigerator above her head. It's for a show she has coming up next week at the Sign of the Auk. On the flyer, an exotic woman reclines on a couch.

I look at Stella again. She's way past the seventh Aethyr, or some such place.

I don't feel like going home yet, but Stella's in no state to keep me company, so I put four squares of the blotter paper on my tongue and drop down onto the recliner. Stuffing pokes through rips in the pine green upholstery like sickly patches of grass in the cracks of the sidewalk. I watch the basketball game blaring on the television.



My mouth fills with saliva and I suck it out from where it gathers around my teeth, soaking the square, gradually turning the paper back into pulp, which sticks to the roof of my mouth. I look through Stella's cds. Thankfully she's a classical fan. I pick out Orff and some Chopin preludes. The taste of the paper and the faintest trace of speed make my nasal cavity cold and runny, and I begin to feel jittery. I play Beethoven's Moonlight Sonata. It's like introducing Heaven into my brain directly through my ears. I'm left with an erection and a perplexing urge to cry. I decide to go home.



When I get home, I turn the television on.

On the screen is a strange visage- not so strange in itself, but a strange sort of face to find on TV...

It is a man. A white man. Not quite elderly, but seems somewhat past middle age. Maybe the fact that his hair has gone completely white makes him look older than he actually is. The man is bearded and his hair seems longish, but it's hard to tell because he wears a hat. His lips are thin and so is his nose, which is longish and holds a pair of spectacles, perched about halfway down. The hat, or more accurately, the cap, is the sort of peaked style known as a cloth cap, but this one is made of black leather, or an imitation synthetic material, as it seems a little too shiny and a little too insubstantial.

The man doesn't speak, but raises to his lips one of those carved Meerschaum pipes. The carving is a ribald depiction involving a head of Bacchus and a smaller figure of a naked woman (maybe a Bacchante) cavorting ecstatically amongst the tendrils of his hair and vine leaves. The man holds the pipe with a hand clothed in a faun colored, leather driving-glove with holes on the knuckles and a wrist strap with a buckle.

He stares into the camera, as if directly at me. The effect is slightly unnerving, lasting for much longer than one would expect.

I can hear the phantom sounds of background noise- the echoey silence of a television studio, the shuffle of a cameraman's foot, the squeal of a butt rubbing against a vinyl seat, the cough which intrudes sheepishly into the void of non-talking. Finally, the man speaks.

And then I become aware of the transparent.



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Dance of the 7 Nethyrs**



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**at the**

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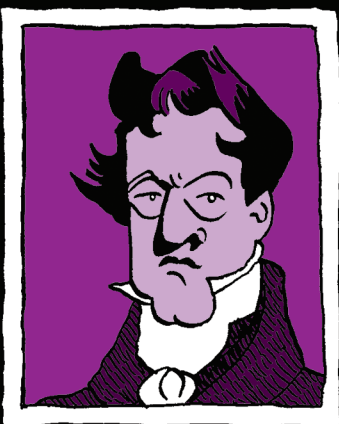
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show starts at 9pm**



The first known English translation of *Fire Without Ash* was published by Robert Fludd in 1616, having been brought back from his studies on the European mainland. It was believed that no copies survived the puritan purges of the Commonwealth, but Milton was said to have mentioned it and possibly had a copy. What is known as the Eastmarch edition first appeared in the collection of Sir Edward Penschaw. It has never been confirmed whether this was a copy of the Fludd edition or a new translation made from a European edition.

-*Curiosities of Eastmarch*, Redmond Cuttle, 1845, Jas. Langley, Epslow.



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