

Venus Rising on Water

Tanith Lee

Like long hair, the weeds grew down the façades of the city, over ornate shutters and leaden doors, into the pale green silk of the lagoon. Ten hundred ancient mansions crumbled. Sometimes a flight of birds was exhaled from their crowded mass, or a thread of smoke was drawn up into the sky. Day long a mist bloomed on the water, out of which distant towers rose like snakes of deadly gold. Once in every month a boat passed, carving the lagoon that had seemed thickened beyond movement. Far less often, here and there, a shutter cracked open and the weed hair broke, a stream of plaster fell like a blue ray. Then, some faint face peered out, probably eclipsed by a mask. It was a place of veils. Visitors were occasional. They examined the decaying mosaics, loitered in the caves of arches, hunted phantoms through marble tunnels. And under the streets they took photographs: one bald flash scouring a century off the catacombs and sewers, the lacework coffins, the handful of albino rats perched up on them, caught in a second like ghosts of white hearts, mute, with waiting eyes.

The dawn star shone in the lagoon on a tail of jagged silver. The sun rose. There was an unsuitable noise — the boat was coming.

"There," said the girl on the deck of the boat, "stop there, please."

The boat sidled to a pavement and stood on the water, trembling and murmuring. The girl left it with a clumsy gracefulness, and poised at the edge of the city with her single bag, cheerful and undaunted

before the lonely cliffs of masonry, and all time's indifference.

She was small, about twenty-five, with ornately short fair hair, clad in old-fashioned jeans and a shirt. Her skin was fresh, her eyes bright with intelligent foolishness. She looked about, and upward. Her interest clearly centred on a particular house, which overhung the water like a face above a mirror, its eyes closed.

Presently the boat pulled away and went off across the lagoon, and only the girl and the silence remained.

She picked up her bag and walked along the pavement to an archway with a shut, leaden door. Here she knocked boldly, as if too stupid to understand the new silence must not yet be tampered with.

Her knocking sent hard blobs of sound careering round the vault of greenish crystal space that was the city's morning. They seemed to strike peeling walls and stone pilasters five miles off. From the house itself came no response, not even the vague sense of something stirring like a serpent in sleep.

"Now this is too bad," said the girl to the silence, upbraiding it mildly. "They *told* me a caretaker would be here, in time for the boat."

She left her bag (subconscious acknowledgment of the emptiness and indifference) by the gate, and walked along under the leaning face of the house. From here she saw the floors of the balconies of flowered iron; she listened for a sudden snap of shutters. But only the water lapped under the pavement, component of silence. This house was called the Palace of the Planet. The girl knew all about it, and what she did not know she had come here to discover. She was

writing a long essay that was necessary to her career of scholastic journalism. She was not afraid.

In the façade of the Palace of the Planet was another door, plated with green bronze. The weed had not choked it, and over its top leaned a marble woman with bare breasts and a dove in her hands. The girl reached out and rapped with a bronze knocker shaped like a fist. The house gave off a sound that after all succeeded in astonishing her. It must be a hollow shell, unfurnished, half its walls fallen...

These old cities were museums now, kept for their history, made available on request to anyone — not many — who wished to view. They had their dwellers also, but in scarcity. Destitutes and eccentrics lived in them, monitored by the state. The girl, whose name was Jonquil Hare, had seen the register of this place. In all, there were 174 names, some queried, where once had teemed thousands, crushing each other in the ambition to survive.

The hollow howling of her knock faded in the house. Jonquil said, "I'm coming in. I *am*." And marched back to her bag beneath the leaden gate. She surveyed the gate, and the knotted weed which had come down on it. Jonquil Hare tried the weed. It resisted her strongly. She took up her bag, in which there was nothing breakable, seasoned traveller as she was, and flung it over the arch. She took the weed in her small strong hands and hauled herself up in her clumsy, graceful way, up to the arch, and sat there, looking in at a morning-twilight garden of shrubs that had not been pruned in a hundred years, and trees that became each other. A blue fountain shone dimly. Jonquil smiled upon it, and swung herself over in the

weed and slithered down, into the environ of the house.

By midday, Jonquil had gone busily over most of the Palace of the Planet. Its geography was fixed in her head, but partly, confusedly for she liked the effect of a puzzle of rooms and corridors. Within the lower portion of the house a large hall gave on to a large enclosed inner courtyard, that in turn led to the garden. Above, chambers of the first storey would have opened on to the court, but their doors were sealed by the blue-green weed, which had smothered the court itself and so turned it into a strange undersea grotto where columns protruded like yellow coral. Above the lower floor, two long staircases drew up into apparently uncountable annexes and cells, and to a great salon with tarnished mirrors, also broken like spiderweb. The salon had tall windows that stared through their blind shutters at the lagoon.

There were carvings everywhere; lacking light, she did not study them now. And, as suspected, there was very little furniture — a pair of desks with hollow drawers, spindly chairs, a divan in rotted ivory silk. In one oblong room was a bed-frame with vast tapering pillars like idle rockets. Cobwebby draperies shimmered from the canopy in a draught, while patches of bled emerald sunlight hovered on the floor.

Jonquil succeeded in opening a shutter in the salon. A block of afternoon fell in. Next door, in the adjacent chamber, she set up her inflatable mattress, her battery lamp and heater, some candles she had brought illegally in a padded tube. Sitting on her unrolled mat in the subaqueous light of a shuttered window which refused to

give, she ate from her pack of food snacks and drank cola. Then she arranged some books and note-pads, pens and pencils, a magnifier, camera and unit, and a miniature recorder on the unfolded table.

She spoke to the room, as from the start she had spoken consecutively to the house. "Well, here we are."

But she was restless. The caretaker must be due to arrive, and until this necessary procedure had taken place, interruption hung over her. Of course, the caretaker would enable Jonquil to gain possession of the house secrets, the holostetic displays of furnishings and earlier life that might have been indigenous here, the hidden walks and rooms that undoubtedly lay inside the walls.

Jonquil was tired. She had risen at 3:00 a.m. for the boat after an evening of hospitable farewells. She lay down on her inflatable bed with the pillow under her neck. Through half-closed eyes she saw the room breathing with pastel motes of sun, and heard the rustle of weed at the shutter.

She dreamed of climbing a staircase which, dreaming, seemed new to her. At the foot of the stair a marble pillar supported a globe of some aquamarine material, covered by small configurations of alien land-masses, isolate in seas. The globe was a whimsical and inaccurate eighteenth-century rendition of the planet Venus, to which the house was mysteriously affiliated. As she climbed the stairs, random sprinklings of light came and went. Jonquil sensed that someone was ascending with her, step for step, not on the actual stair, but inside the peeling wall at her left side. Near the top of the stair (which was lost in darkness) an arched window had been let into the wall, milky and unclear and further obscured by some

drops of waxen stained glass. As she came level with the window, Jonquil glanced sidelong at it. A shadowy figure appeared, on the far side of the pane, perhaps a woman, but hardly to be seen.

Jonquil started awake at the sound of the caretaker's serviceable shoes clumping into the house.

The caretaker was a woman. She did not offer her name, and no explanation for her late arrival. She had brought the house manual, and advised Jonquil on how to operate the triggers in its panel — visions flickered annoyingly over the rooms and were gone. A large box contained facsimiles of things pertaining to the house and its history. Jonquil had seen most of these already.

"There are the upper rooms, the attics. Here's the master key."

The woman showed Jonquil a hidden stair that probed these upper reaches of the house. It was not the stairway from the dream, but narrow and winding as the steps of a bell-tower. There were no other concealed chambers.

"If there's anything else you find you require, you must go out to the booth in the square. Here is the code to give the machine."

The caretaker was middle-aged, stout and uncharming. She seemed not to know the house at all, only everything about it, and glanced around her disapprovingly. Doubtless she lived in one of the contemporary golden towers across the lagoon, which, in the lingering powder of mist, passed for something older and more strange that they were not.

"Who came here last?" asked Jonquil. "Did anyone?"

"There was a visitor in the spring of the last Centenary Year. He

stayed only one day, to study the plaster, I believe."

Jonquil smiled, pleased and smug that the house was virtually all her own, for the city's last centenary had been twenty years ago, nearly her lifetime.

She was glad when the caretaker left, and the silence of the house did not occur to Jonquil as she went murmuring from room to room, able now to operate the shutters, bring in light and examine the carvings in corners, on cornices. Most of them showed earlier defacement, as expected. She switched on, too, scenes from the manual, of costumed, dining and conversing figures amid huge pieces of furniture and swags of brocade. No idea of ghosts was suggested by these holostets. Jonquil reserved a candlelit masked ball for a later more fitting hour.

The greenish amber of afternoon slid into the plate of water. A chemical rose flooded the sky, like colour processing for a photograph. Venus, the evening star, was visible beyond the garden.

Jonquil climbed up the bell-tower steps to the attics.

The key turned easily in an upper door. But the attics disappointed. They were high and dark — her flashlight penetrated like a sword — webbed with the woven dust, and thick with damp, and a sour cloacal smell that turned the stomach of the mind. Otherwise, there was an almost emptiness. From beams hung unidentified shreds. On one wall a tapestry on a frame, indecipherable, presumably not thought good enough for renovation. Jonquil moved reluctantly through the obscured space, telling it it was in a poor state, commiserating with it, until she came against a chest of cold black wood.

"Now what are you?" Jonquil enquired of the chest.

It was long and low, its lid carved over with a design that had begun to crumble... Curious fruits in a wreath.

The shape of the chest reminded her of something. She peered at the fruits. Were they elongate lemons, pomegranates? Perhaps they were meant to be Venusian fruits. The astrologer Johanus, who had lived in the Palace of the Planet, had played over the house his obsession and ignorance with, and of, Venus. He had claimed in his treatise closely to have studied the surface of the planet through his own telescope. There was an atmosphere of clouds, parting slowly; beneath, an underlake landscape, cratered and mountained, upon limitless waters. "The mirror of Venus is her sea," Johanus wrote. And he had painted her, but his daubs were lost, like most of his writing, reputedly burned. He had haunted the house alive, an old wild man, watching for star-rise, muttering. He had died in the charity hospital, penniless and mad. His servants had destroyed his work, frightened of it, and vandalized the decorations of the house. Jonquil tried to raise the lid of the chest. It would not come up.

"Are you locked?"

But there was no lock. The lid was stuck or merely awkward.

"I shall come back," said Jonquil.

She had herself concocted an essay on the astrologer, but rather as a good little girl writes once a year to her senile grandfather. She appreciated his involvement — that, but for him, none of this would be — but he did not interest her. It was the house which did that.

There was a switch on the manual that would conjure acted

reconstructions of the astrologer's life, even to the final days, and to the rampage of the vandals. But Jonquil did not bother with this record. It was to her as if the house had adorned itself, using the man only as an instrument. His paintings and notes were subsidiary, and she had not troubled much over their disappearance.

"Yes, I'll be back with a wrench, and you'd just better have something in there worth looking at," said Jonquil to the chest. Doubtless it was vacant.

Night on the lagoon, in the city. The towers in the distance offered no lights, being constructed to conceal them. In two far-off spots, a pale glow crept from a window to the water. The silence of night was not like the silence of day.

Jonquil sang as the travel-cook prepared her steak, and, drinking a glass of reconstituted wine, going out into the salon, she switched on the masked ball.

At once the room was over 200 years younger. It was drenched in gilt, and candle-flames stood like flowers of golden diamond on their stems of wax, while the ceiling revealed dolphins and doves who escorted a goddess over a sea in a ship that was a shell. The windows were open to a revised night hung with diamante lamps, to a lagoon of black ink where bright boats were passing to the sound of mandolins. The salon purred and thrummed with voices. It was impossible to decipher a word, yet laughter broke through, and clear notes of the music. No one danced as yet. Perhaps they never would, for they were creatures from another world indeed, every one clad in gold and silver, ebony and glacial white, with jewels on

them like water-drops tossed up by a wave. They had no faces. Their heads were those of plumed herons and horned deer, black velvet cats and lions of the sun and moon lynxes, angels, demons, mer-things from out of the lagoon, and scarabs from the hollows of time. They moved and promenaded, paused with teardrops of glass holding bloodlike wine, fluttered their fans of peacocks and palm leaves.

Jonquil stayed at the edge of the salon. She could have walked straight through them, through their holostetic actors' bodies and their prop garments of silk, steel and chrysoprase, but she preferred to stay in the doorway, drinking her own wine, adapting her little song to the tune of the mandolins.

After the astrologer had gone, others had come, and passed, in the house. The rich lady, and the prince, with their masks and balls, suppers and recitals.

The travel-cook chimed, and Jonquil switched off 200 elegantly acting persons, 1,000 faked gems and lights, and went to eat her steak.

She wrote with her free hand: *Much too pretty. Tomorrow I must photograph the proper carvings.* And said this over aloud.

Jonquil dreamed she was in the attic. There was a vague light, perhaps the moon coming in at cracks in the shutters, or the dying walls. Below, a noise went on, the holostetic masked ball which she had forgotten to switch off. Jonquil looked at the chest of black wood. She had realized she did not have to open it herself.

Downstairs, in the salon, an ormolu clock struck midnight, the hour of unmasking. There was a little click. In the revealing darkness, the lid of the chest began to lift. Jonquil knew what it had reminded her of. A shadow sat upright in the coffin of the chest. It had a slender but indefinite form, and yet it turned its head and Jonquil saw the two eyes looking at her, only the eyeballs gleaming, in two crescents, in the dark.

The lid fell over with a crash.

Jonquil woke up sitting on her inflatable bed, with her hands at her throat, her eyes raised toward the ceiling.

"A dream," announced Jonquil.

She turned on her battery lamp, and the small room appeared. There was no sound in the house. Beyond the closed door the salon rested.

"Silly," said Jonquil.

She lay and read a book having nothing to do with the Palace of the Planet, until she fell asleep with the light on.

The square was a terrifying ruin. Hidden by the frontage of the city, it was nearly inconceivable. Upper storeys had collapsed on to the paving, only the skeletons of architecture remained, with occasionally a statue, some of them shining green and vegetable (the dissolution of gold) piercing through. The paving was broken up, marked by the slough of birds. Here the booth arose, unable to decay.

"There's a chest in the attics. It won't open," Jonquil accused the receiver. "The manual lists it. It says, one sable-wood jester chest."

The reply came. "This is why you are unable to open it. A jester

chest was just that, a deceiving or joke object, often solid. There is nothing inside."

"No," said Jonquil, "some jester chests do open. And this isn't solid."

"I am afraid you are wrong. The chest has been investigated, and contains nothing, neither is there any means to open it."

"An X-ray doesn't always show—" began Jonquil. But the machine had disconnected. "I won't have this," said Jonquil.

Three birds blew over the square. Beneath in the sewers, the colony of voiceless rats, white as moonlight, ran noiselessly under her feet. But she would not shudder. Jonquil strutted back to the house through alleys of black rot where windows were suspended like lingering cards of ice. Smashed glass lay underfoot. The awful smell of the sea was in the alleys, for the sea came in and in. It had drowned the city in psychic reality, and already lay far over the heads of all the buildings, calm, oily and still, reflecting the sun and the stars.

Jonquil got into the house by the gate-door the manual had made accessible, crossing the garden where the blue fountain was a girl crowned with myrtle. Jonquil went straight up over the floors to the attic stair, and climbed that. The attic door was ajar, as she believed she had left it. "Here I am," said Jonquil. The morning light was much stronger in the attics and she did not need her torch. She found the chest and bent over it.

"You've got a secret. Maybe you're only warped shut, that would be the damp up here... There may be a lining that could baffle the X-ray."

She tried the wrench, specifically designed not to inflict any injury. But it slipped and slithered and did no good. Jonquil knelt down and began to feel all over the chest, searching for some spring or other mechanism. She was caressing the chest, going so cautiously and delicately over it. Its likeness to a coffin was very evident, but bones would have been seen. "Giving me dreams," she said. Something moved against her finger. It was very slight. It was as if the chest had wriggled under her tickling and testing like a sleeping child. Jonquil put back her hand — she had flinched, and reprimanded herself. At her touch the movement came again. She heard the clarity of the *click* she had heard before in the dream. And before she could stop herself, she jumped up, and stepped backwards, one, two, three, until the wall stopped her.

The lid of the chest was coming up, gliding over, and slipping down without any noise but a mild slap. Nothing sat up in the chest. But Jonquil saw the edge of something lying there in it, in the shadow of it.

"Yes, it is," she said, and went forward. She leaned on the chest, familiarly now. Everything was explained, even the psycho-kinetic activity of the dream. "A painting."

Jonquil Hare leaned on the chest and stared in. Presently she took hold of the elaborate and gilded frame, and got the picture angled upward a short way, so it too leaned on the chest.

The painting was probably three centuries old. She could tell that from the pigments and disposition of the oils, but not from the artist. The artist was unknown. In size it was an upright oblong, about fifteen metres by one metre in width.

The work was a full-length portrait, rather well executed and proportioned, lacking only any vestige of life, or animation. It might have been the masterly likeness of a handsome doll — this was how the artist had given away his amateur status.

She looked like a woman of about Jonquil's age, which given the period meant of course that she would have been far younger, eighteen or nineteen years. Her skin was pale, and had a curious tint, as did in fact the entire scene, perhaps due to some corrosion of the paint — but even so it had not gone to the usual brown and mud tones, but rather to a sort of yellowish blue. Therefore the colour scheme of clothing and hair might be misleading, for the long loose tresses were yellowish blonde, and the dress bluish grey. Like the hair, the dress was loose, a robe of a kind. And yet, naturally, both hair and robe were draped in a particular manner that dated them, as surely as if their owner had been gowned and coiffured at the apex of that day's fashion. She was slender but looked strong. There was no plumpness to her chin and throat, her hands were narrow. An unusually masculine woman, more suitable to Jonquil's century, where the sexes often blended, slim and lightly muscular — the woman in the painting was also like this. Her face was impervious, its eyes black. She was not beautiful or alluring. It was a flat animal face, tempered like the moon by its own chill light, and lacking sight or true expression because the artist had not understood how to intercept them.

Behind the woman was a vista that Jonquil took at first for the lagoon. But then she saw that between the fog-bank of blued-yellow cloud and the bluish-greenish water, a range of pocked and fissured

mountains lurched like an unearthly aqueduct. It was the landscape of Johanus's Venus. The artist of the picture was the mad astrologer who had invested the house.

How could it be that the authorities had missed this find?

"My," said Jonquil to the painting. She was excited. What would this not be worth in tokens of fame?

She pulled on the painting again, more carefully than before. It was light for its size. She could manage it. She paused a moment, close to the woman on the canvas. The canvas was strange, the texture of it under the paint — but in those days three centuries before, they had sometimes used odd materials. Even some chemical or experimental potion could have been mixed with the paint, to give it now its uncanny tinge.

A name was written in a scroll at the bottom of the picture. Jonquil took it for a signature. But it was not the astrologer's name, though near enough it indicated some link. *Johnina*.

"Jo-nine-ah," said Jonquil, "we are going for a short walk, down to where I can take a proper look at you."

With enormous care now, she drew the picture of Johnina out of the attics, and down the narrow stair towards the salon.

Jonquil was at the masked ball. In her hand was a fan of long white feathers caught in a claw of zircons, her costume was of white satin streaked with silver veins, and her face was masked like a white-furred cat. She knew her hair was too short for the day and age, and this worried her by its inappropriateness. No one spoke to her, but

all around they chattered to each other (incomprehensibly), and their curled powdered hair poured out of their masks like milk boiling over. Jonquil observed everything acutely, the man daintily taking snuff (an addict), the woman in the dress striped black and ivory peering through her ruby eyeglass. Out on the lagoon, the gleaming boats went by, trailing red roses in the water.

Jonquil was aware that no one took any notice of her, had anything to do with her, and she was peevish, because they must have invited her. Who was she supposed to be? A duke's daughter, or his mistress? Should she not be married at her age, and have borne children? She would have to pretend.

There was a man with rings on every finger, and beyond him a chequered mandolin player, and beyond him, a woman stood in a grey gown different from the rest. Her mask covered all her face, it was the countenance of a globe, perhaps the moon, in silver, and about it hair like pale tarnished fleece, too long as Jonquil's was too short, was falling to her pelvis over the bodice of the gown.

A group of actors — yes, they were only acting, it was not real — intervened. The woman was hidden for a moment, and when the group had passed, she was gone.

She was an actress, too, which was why Jonquil had thought something about her recognizable.

Jonquil became annoyed that she should be here, among actors, for acting was nothing to do with her. She turned briskly, and went towards the door of the chamber that led off from the salon. Inside, the area was dark, yet everything there was visible, and Jonquil was surprised to see a huge bed-frame from another room dominating

the space. Surely Jonquil's professional impedimenta had been put here, and the inflatable sleeping couch she travelled with? As for this bed, she had seen it elsewhere, and it had been naked then, but now it was dressed. Silk curtains hung from the pillars, and a mattress, pillows, sheets and embroidered coverlet were on it. Rather than the pristine appearance of a model furnishing, the bed had a slightly rumpled, tumbled look, as if Jonquil had indeed used it. Jonquil closed the door of the room firmly on the ball outside, and all sound of it at once ceased.

To her relief, she found that she was actually undressed and in the thin shirt that was her night garment. She went to the bed, resigned, and got into it. She lay back on the pillows. The bed was wonderfully comfortable, lushly undisciplined.

Johanus's house was so silent — noiseless. Jonquil lay and listened to the total absence of sound, which was like a pressure, as if she had floated down beneath the sea. Her bones were coral, and pearls her eyes... Fish might swim in through the slats of a shutter, across the water of the air. But before that happened, the door would open again.

The door opened.

The doorway was lit with moonlight, and the salon beyond it, for the masked ball had gone. Only the woman with the silver planet face remained, and she came over the threshold. Behind her, in lunar twilight, Jonquil saw the lagoon lying across the salon, and the walls had evaporated, leaving a misty shore, and mountains that were tunnelled through. The bed itself was adrift on water, and bobbed gently, but Johnina crossed without difficulty.

Her silver mask was incised, like the carvings in the house corners, the globes that were the planet Venus. The mask reflected in the water. Two silver discs, separated, drawing nearer.

Jonquil said sternly, "I must wake up."

And she dived upward from the bed, and tore through layers of cloud or water and came out into the actual room, rolling on the inflatable couch.

"I'm not frightened," stated Jonquil. "Why should I be?"

She turned on her battery lamp and angled the light to fall across the painting of Johnina, which she had leaned against the wall.

"What are you trying to tell me now? In the morning I'm going to call them up about you. Don't you want to be famous?"

The painting had no resonance. It looked poorly in the harsh glare of the lamp, a stilted figure and crackpot scenery, the brushwork disordered. The canvas was so smooth.

"Go to sleep," said Jonquil to Johnina, and shut off the light as if to be sensible with a tiresome child.

In the true dark, which had no moon, the silence of the house crept closer. Dispassionately, Jonquil visualized old Johanus padding about the floors in his broken soft shoes. He thought he had seen the surface of the planet Venus. He had painted the planet as an allegory that was a woman, just like the puns of Venus the *goddess* in marble over the door, and on the ceiling of the salon.

Jonquil began to see Johanus in his study, among the alchemical muddle, the primeval alchemical chaos from which all perfect

creation evolved. But she regarded him offhandedly, the dust and grime and spillages, the blackened skulls and lembics growing moss.

Johanus wrote on parchment with a goose quill.

He wrote in Latin also, and although she had learned Latin in order to pursue her study, this was too idiosyncratic, too much of its era, for her to follow. Then the words began to sound, and she grasped them. Bored, Jonquil attended. She did not recall switching on this holostet, could not think why she had decided to play it.

"So, on the forty-third night, after an hour of watching, the cloud parted, and there was before me the face of the planet. I saw great seas, or one greater sea, with small masses of land, pitted like debased silver. And the mountains I saw. And all this in a yellow glow from the cloud..."

Jonquil wondered why she did not stop the holostet. She was not interested in this. But she could not remember where the manual was.

"For seven nights I applied myself to my telescope, and on each night, the clouds of the planet sensuously parted, allowing me a view of her bareness."

Jonquil thought she would have to leave the bed in order to switch off the manual. But the bed, with its tall draped posts, was warm and comfortable.

"On the eighth night it came to me. Even as I watched, I was watched in my turn. Some creature was there, some unseen intelligence, which, sensing my appraisal, reached out to seize me. I do not know how such a thing is possible. Where I see only a

miniature of that world, it sees me exactly, where and what I am, every atom. At once I removed myself, left my perusal, and shut up the instrument. But I believe I was too late. Somehow it has come to me, here, in the world of men. It is with me, although I cannot hear it or behold it. It is the invisible air, it is the silence of the night. What shall I do?"

The holostet of Johanus was no longer operating. Jonquil lay in the four-poster bed in the room that led from the salon. The door was shut. Someone was in the room with her, beside the bed. Jonquil turned her head on the pillow, without hurry, to see.

A hand was stroking back her short hair; it was very pleasant; she was a cat that was being caressed. Jonquil smiled lazily. It was like the first day of the holidays, and her mother was standing by her bed, and they would talk. But no, not her mother. It was the wonderful-looking woman she had seen — where was that, now? Perhaps in the city, an eccentric who lived there, out walking in the turquoise of dusk or funeral orchid of dawning, when the star was on the lagoon. Very tall, a developed, lithe body, graceful, with the blue wrap tied loosely, and the amazing hair, so thick and blonde, falling over it, over her shoulders and the firm cupped line of the breasts, the flat belly, and into the mermaid V of the thighs.

"Hello," said Jonquil. And the woman gave the faintest shake of her lion's head in its mane. Jonquil was not to speak. They did not need words. But the woman smiled, too. It was such a sensational smile. So effortless, stimulating and calming. The dark, dark eyes rested on Jonquil with a tenderness that was also cruel. Jonquil had seen

this look in the eyes of others, and a frisson of eagerness went over her, and she was ashamed; it was too soon to expect — but the woman was leaning over her now, the marvel of face blurred and the mane of hair trickling over Jonquil's skin. The mouth kissed, gently and unhesitatingly. "Oh, yes," said Jonquil, without any words.

The woman, who was called Johnina, was lying on her. She was heavy, her weight crushed and pinned, and Jonquil was helpless. It was the most desired thing, to be helpless like this, unable even to lift her own hands, as if she had no strength at all. And Johnina's hands were on her breasts somehow, between their two adhering bodies, finding out Jonquil's shape with slow smooth spirallings. And softly, without anything crude or urgent, the sea-blue thigh of Johnina rubbed against Jonquil until she ached and melted. She shut her eyes and could think only of the sweet unhurried journey of her body, of the hands that guided and stroked, and the mermaid tail that bore her up, and the sound of the sea in her ears. Johnina kissed and kissed, and Jonquil Hare felt herself dissolving into Johnina, into her body, and she could not even cry out. And then Jonquil was spread-eagled out into a tidal orgasm, where with every wave some further part of her was washed away. And when there was nothing left, she woke up in the pitch-black void of the silence, with something hard and cold, clammy, but nearly weightless, lying on her, an oblong in a gilded frame, the painting which had dropped over on top of her and covered her from breast to ankle.

She flung it off and it clattered down. She clutched at her body, thinking to discover herself clotted with a sort of glue or slime, but

there was nothing like that.

She was weak and dizzy and her heart drummed noisily, so she could not hear the silence any more.

"Let me speak to the house caretaker," snapped Jonquil at the obtuse machine. Outside the booth, the ruin of the great square seemed to sway on the wind, which was violent, ruffling the lagoon in flounces, whirling small scraps of coloured substances that might have been paper, rags, or skin.

"The caretaker is not available. However, your request has been noted."

"But this picture is an important find — and I want it removed, *today*, to a place of safety."

The machine had disconnected.

Jonquil stood in the booth, as if inside a spacesuit, and watched the alien atmosphere of the city swirling with bits and colours.

"Don't be a fool," said Jonquil. She left the booth and cowered before the wind, which was not like any breeze felt in civilized places. "It's an old painting. A *bad* old painting. So, you're lonely, you had a dream. Get back to work."

Jonquil worked. She photographed all the carvings she had decided were relevant or unusually bizarre — Venus the goddess riding the crescent moon, a serpent coiled about a planet that maybe was simply an orb. She put these into the developer and later drew them out and arranged them in her room beside the salon. (She had

already moved the painting of Johnina into the salon — she felt tired, and it seemed heavier than before — left it with its face to the wall, propped under the mirrors. It was now about twenty-five metres from her inflatable bed, and well outside the door.)

She went over the house again, measuring and recording comments. She opened shutters and regarded the once hivelike cliffs of the city, and the waters on the other side. The wind settled and a mist condensed. By mid-afternoon the towers of modernity were quite gone.

"The light always has a green tinge — blue and yellow mixed. When the sky pinkens at dawn or sunset the water is bottle green, an apothecary's bottle. And purple for the prose," Jonquil added.

In two hours it would be dusk, and then night.

This was ridiculous. She had to face up to herself, that she was nervous and apprehensive. But there was nothing to be afraid of, or even to look forward to.

She still felt depressed, exhausted, so she took some more vitamins. Something she had eaten, probably, before leaving for the city, had caught up with her. And that might even account for the dream. The dreams.

She did not go up into the attics. She spent some time out of doors, in the grotto of the courtyard, and in the garden, which the manual showed her with paved paths and carven box hedges, orange trees, and the fountain playing. She did not watch this holostet long. Her imagination was working too, and too hard, and she might start to see Johnina in a blue-grey gown going about between the trees.

What, anyway, *was* Johnina? Doubtless Jonquil's unconscious had based the Johanus part of the dream on scraps of the astrologer's writings she had seen, and that she had consciously forgotten. Johanus presumably believed some alien intelligence from the planet he observed had made use of the channel of his awareness. For him it was female (interesting women then were always witches, demons; he would be bound to think in that way) and when she suborned him, in his old man's obsession, he painted her approximately to a woman — just as he had approximated his vision of the planet to something identifiable, the pastorage of a cool hell. And he gave his demoness a name birthed out of his own, a strange daughter.

Jonquil did not recollect, try as she would, reading anything so curious about Johanus, but she must have done.

He then concealed the painting of his malign inamorata in the trick chest, to protect it from the destructive fears of the servants.

Only another hour, and the sky would infuse like pale tea and rose petals. The sun would go, the star would visit the garden. Darkness.

"You're not as tough as you thought," said Jonquil. She disapproved of herself. "All right. We'll sit this one out. Stay awake tonight. And tomorrow I'll get hold of that damn caretaker lady if I have to swim there."

As soon as it was sunset, Jonquil went back to her chosen room. She had to pass through the salon, and had an urge to go up to the picture, turn it round, and scrutinize it. But that was stupid. She had seen all there was to see. She shut her inner door on the salon with a bang. Now she was separate from all the house.

She lit her lamp, and, pulling out her candles, lit those too. She primed the travel-cook for a special meal, chicken with a lemon sauce, creamed potatoes, and as the wing of night unfolded over the lagoon she closed the shutter and switched on a music tape. She sat drinking wine and writing up that day's notes on the house. After all, she had done almost all that was needed. Might she not see if she could leave tomorrow? To hire transport before the month was up and the regular boat arrived would be expensive, but then, she could get to work the quicker perhaps, away from the house... She had meant to explore the city, of course, but it was in fact less romantic than dejecting, and potentially dangerous. She might run into one of the insane inhabitants, and then what?

Jonquil thought, acutely visualizing the nocturnal mass of the city. No one was alive in it, surely. The few lights, the occasional smokes and whispers, were inaugurated by machines, to deceive. There were the birds, and their subterranean counterpart, the rats. Only she alone, Jonquil Hare, was here this night between masonry and water. She alone, and one other.

"Don't be silly," said Jonquil.

How loud her voice sounded, now the music had come to an end. The silence was gigantic, a fifth dimension.

It seemed wrong to put on another tape. The silence should not be angered. Let it lie, move quietly, and do not speak at all.

Johanus wrote quickly, as if he might be interrupted; his goose pen snapped, and he seized another ready cut. He spoke the words aloud

as he wrote them, although his lips were closed.

"For days, and for nights when I could not sleep, I was aware of the presence of my invader. I told myself it was my fancy, but I could not be rid of the sensation of it. I listened for the sounds of breathing, I looked for a shadow — there were none of these. I felt no touch, and when I dozed fitfully in the dark, waking suddenly, no beast crouched on my breast. Yet, it was with me, it breathed, it brushed by me, it *touched* me without hands, and watched me with its unseen eyes.

"So passed five days and four nights. And on the evening of the fifth day, even as the silver planet stood above the garden, it grew bold, knowing by now it had little to fear from me in my terror, and took on a shape.

"Yes, it took on a sort of shape, but if this is its reality I cannot know, or only some semblance, all it can encompass here, or deigns to assume.

"It hung across the window, and faintly through it the light of dusk was ebbing. A membraneous thing, like a sail. It did not move, no pulse of life seemed in it, and yet it lived. I shut the door on it, but later I returned. In the candle's light I saw it had fallen, or lowered itself, to my table. It had kept its soft sheen of blue. I touched it, I could not help myself, and it had the texture of velum — that is, of skin. It lay before me, the length of the table, and under it dimly I could discern the outline of my books, my dish of powders, and other things. I cannot describe my state. My terror had sunk into a sort of blinded wonderment. I do not know how great a while I stood and looked at it, but at length I heard the girl with my food,

and I went out and locked up the room again. What would it do while I was gone? Would it perhaps vanish again?

"That night I slept, stupefied, and in the morning opened my eyes and there the thing hung, above me, inside the canopy of the very bed. How long had it been there, watching me with its invisible organs of sight? Of course, its method had been simple: it had slid under the doors of my house — my house so long dressed for it, and named for its planet in the common vernacular.

"What now must I do? What is required of me? For clearly I shall become its slave. It seems to me I am supposed to be able to give it a more usual form, some camouflage, so that it may pass with men, but how is that possible? *How* render such a thing ordinary, and attractive?

"The means came to me in my sleep. Perhaps the being has influenced my brain. There is one sure way. It has noticed my canvases. Now I am to stretch this skin upon a frame, and put paint to it. What shall I figure there? No doubt, I shall be guided in what I do, as it has led me to the idea.

"I must obscure my actions from my servants. They are already ill at ease, and the man was very threatening this morning; he is a ruffian and capable of anything — it will be wise to destroy these papers, when all else is done."

Jonquil turned from Johanus, and saw a group of friends she had not communicated with in three years, gliding over the lagoon in a white boat. They waved and shouted, and Jonquil knew she had been rescued, she would escape, but running towards the boat she heard a metallic crash, and jumped inadvertently up out of the

dream into the room, where her candles were burning low, fluttering, and the air quivered like a disturbed pond. The silence had been agitated after all. There had been some noise, like the noise in the dream which woke her.

She sat bolt upright in the lock of fear. She had never felt fear in this way in her life. She had meant to stay awake, but the meal, the wine...

And the dream of Johanus — absurd.

Outside, in the mirrored night-time salon, there came a sharp screeching *scrape*.

Jonquil's mind shrieked, and she clamped her hand over her mouth. *Don't be a fool. Listen!* She listened. The silence. Had she imagined

—

The noise came again, harsher and more absolute.

It was like the abrasion of a rusty chain dragged along the marble floor.

And again—

Jonquil sprang up. In her life, where she had never before known such fear, the credo had been that fear, confronted, proved to be less than it had seemed. Always the maxim held true. It was this brain-washing of accredited experience which sent her to the door of the room, and caused her to dash it wide and to stare outwards.

The guttering glim of the candles, so apposite to the house, gave a half-presence to the salon. But mostly it was black, thick and composite, black, watery and uncertain on the ruined faces of the mirrors. And out of this blackness came a low flicker of motion,

catching the candlelight along its edge. And this motion made the sound she had heard and now heard again. Jonquil did not believe what she saw. She did not believe it. No. This was still the dream, and she must, she *must* wake up.

The picture of Johnina, painted by the astrologer on a piece of membranous bluish alien skin, had fallen over in its frame, and now the framed skin pulled itself along the floor, and, catching the light, Jonquil saw the little formless excrescences of the face-down canvas, little bluish-yellow paws, hauling the assemblage forward, the big balanced oblong shape with its rim of gilt vaguely shining. Machine-like, primeval, a mutated tortoise. It pulled itself on, and as the frame scraped along the floor it screamed, towards Jonquil in the doorway.

Jonquil slammed shut the door. She turned and caught up things — the inflatable bed, the table — and stuffed them up against the doorway. And the mechanical tortoise screamed twice more — and struck against the door, and the door shook.

Jonquil turned round and round in her trap as the thing outside thudded back and forth and her flimsy barricade trembled and tottered. There was no other exit but the window. She got it open and ran on to the balcony, which creaked and dipped. The weed was there, the blue-green Venus weed which choked the whole city. Jonquil threw herself off into it. As she did so, the door of the room gave way.

She was half climbing, half rebounding and falling down the wall of the house. Everywhere was darkness, and below the sucking of the water at the pavement.

As she struggled in the ropes of weed, tangled, clawing, a shape reared up in the window above her.

Jonquil cried out. The painting was in the window. But something comically macabre had happened. In rearing, it had caught at an angle between the uprights of the shutters. It was stuck, could not move out or in.

Jonquil hung in the weed, staring up at Johnina in her frame of gilt and wood and plaster and night. How soulless she looked, how without life.

And then a convulsion went over the picture. Like a blue amoeba touched by venom it writhed and wrinkled. It tore itself free of the golden frame. It billowed out, still held by a few filaments and threads, like a sail, a veil, the belly of something swollen with the hunger of centuries...

And Jonquil fought, and dropped the last two metres from the weed, landing on the pavement hard, in the box of darkness that was the city.

She was not dreaming, but it was like a dream. It seemed to her she saw herself running. The engine of her heart drove her forward. She did not know where or through what she ran. There was no moon, there were no lights. A kind of luminescence filmed over the atmosphere, and constructions loomed suddenly at her, an arch, a flight of steps, a platform, a severed wall. She fell, and got up and ran on.

And behind her, *that* came. That which had ripped itself from an oblong of gilding. It had taken to the air. It flew through the city,

between the pillars and under the porticos, along the ribbed arteries carrying night. It rolled and unrolled as it came, with a faint soft snapping. And then it sailed, wide open, catching some helpful draught, a huge pale bat.

Weed rushed over Jonquil and she thought the thing which had been called Johnina had settled on her lightly, coaxingly, and she screamed. The city filled with her scream like an empty gourd with water.

There were no lights, no figures huddled at smouldering fires, no guards or watchmen, no villains, no one here to save her, no one even to be the witness of what must come, when her young heart finally failed, her legs buckled, when the sailing softness came down and covered her, stroking and devouring, caressing and eating — its tongues and fingers and the whole porous mouth that it was — to drink her away and away.

Jonquil ran. She ran over streets that were cratered as if by meteorites, through vaulted passages, beside the still waters of night and death. It occurred to her (her stunned and now almost witless brain) to plunge into the lagoon, to swim towards the unseen towers. But on the face of the mirror, gentleness would drift down on her, and in the morning mist, not even a ripple...

The paving tipped. Jonquil stumbled, ran, downwards now, hopeless and mindless, her heart burning a hole in her side. Down and down, cracked tiles spinning off from her feet, down into some underground place that must be a prison for her, perhaps a catacomb, to stagger among filigree coffins, where the water puddled like glass on the floor, no way out, down into despair, and

yet, mockingly, there was more light. More light to see what she did not want to see. It was the phosphorus of the death already there, the mummies in their narrow homes. Yes, she saw the water pools now, as she splashed through them, she saw the peculiar shelves and cubbies, the stone statue of a saint barnacled by the sea-rot the water brought into a creature from another world. And she saw the wall also that rose peremptory before her, the dead-end that would end in death, and for which she had been waiting, to which she had run, and where now she collapsed, her body useless, run out.

She dropped against the wall, and, in the coffin-light, turned and looked back. And through the descending vault, a pale blue shadow floated, innocent and faithful, coming down to her like a kiss.

I don't believe this, Jonquil would have said, but now she did. And anyway she had no breath, no breath even to scream again or cry. She could only watch, could not take her eyes off the coming of the feaster. It had singled her out, allowed her to bring it from the chest. With others it had been more reticent, hiding itself. Perhaps it had eaten of Johanus, too, before he had been forced to secure it against the witch-hunting servants. Or maybe Johanus had not been to its taste. How ravenous it was, and how controlled was its need.

It alighted five metres from her, from Jonquil, as she lay against the death-end wall. She saw it down an aisle of coffins. Touching the water on the floor, it rolled together, and furlled open, and skimmed over the surface on to the stone.

She was fascinated now. She wanted it to reach her. She wanted it to be over. She dug her hands into the dirt and a yellow bone crumbled under her fingers.

The painting of Johnina was crawling ably along the aisle. There was no impediment, no heavy frame to drag with it.

Sweat slipped into Jonquil's eyes and for a moment she saw a blue woman with ivory hair walking slowly between the coffins, but there was something catching at her robe, and she hesitated, to try to pluck the material away.

Jonquil blinked. She saw a second movement, behind the limpid roll of the Venus skin. A flicker, like a white handkerchief. And then another.

Something darted, and it was on the painting, on top of it, and then it flashed and was gone. And then two other white darts sewed through the blueness of the shadow, bundling it up into an ungainly lump, and two more, gathering and kneading.

The painting had vanished. It was buried under a pure white jostling. And there began to be a thin high note on the air, like a whistling in the ear, without any emotion or language. Ten white rats of the catacombs had settled on the painting, and with their teeth and busy paws they held it still and rent it in pieces, and they ate it. They ate the painted image of the Venus Johnina, and her background of mountains and sea, they ate the living shrieking membrane of the flesh. Their hunger too had been long unappeased.

Jonquil lay by the wall, watching, until the last crumb and shred had disappeared into dainty needled mouths. It did not take more than two or three minutes. Then there was only a space, nothing on it, no rats, no other thing.

"Get up," Jonquil said. There was a low singing in her head, but no

other noise. She stood in stages, and went back along the aisle of dead. She was very cold, feeble and sluggish. She thought she felt old. She walked through the water pools. She had a dreadful intimation that everything had changed, that she would never be the same, that nothing ever would, that survival had sent her into an unknown and fearful world.

A rat sat on a coffin overseeing her departure, digesting in its belly blueness and alien dreams. The walls went on crumbling particle by particle. Silence flowed over the city like the approaching sea.