

## VI

# THE MASTER OF THE CURATORS

“**W**hose apprentice?” echoed in the dark.  
As boldly as I could, I said, “Someone with a message.”  
“Let me hear it then.”

My eyes were growing used to the dark at last, and I could just make out a dim and very lofty shape moving among dark, ragged shapes that were taller still. “It is a letter, sieur,” I answered. “Are you Master Ultan the curator?”

“None other.” He was standing before me now. What I had at first thought was a whitish garment now appeared to be a beard reaching nearly to his waist. I was as tall already as many men who are called so, but he was a head and a half taller than I, a true exultant.

“Then here you are, sieur,” I said, and held out the letter.

He did not take it. “Whose apprentice are you?” Again I seemed to hear bronze, and quite suddenly I felt that he and I were dead, and that the darkness surrounding us was grave soil pressing in about our eyes, grave soil through which the bell called us to worship at whatever shrines may exist below ground. The livid woman I had seen dragged from her grave rose before me so vividly that I seemed to see her face in the almost luminous whiteness of the figure who spoke. “Whose apprentice?” he asked again.

“No one’s. That is, I am an apprentice of our guild. Master Gurloes sent me, sieur. Master Palaemon teaches us apprentices, mostly.”

“But not grammar.” Very slowly the tall man’s hand groped toward the letter.

“Oh yes, grammar too.” I felt like a child talking to this man, who had already been old when I was born. “Master Palaemon says we must be able to read and write and calculate, because when we are masters in our time, we’ll have to send letters and receive the instructions of the courts, and keep records and accounts.”

“Like this,” the dim figure before me intoned. “Letters such as this.”

Yes, sieur. Just so.”

“And what does this say?”

“I don’t know. It’s sealed, *sieur*.”

“If I open it—” (I heard the brittle wax snap under the pressure of his fingers) “—will you read it to me?”

“It’s dark in here, *sieur*,” I said doubtfully.

“Then we’ll have to have *Cyby*. Excuse me.” In the gloom I could barely see him turn away and raise his hands to form a trumpet. “*Cy-by! Cy-by!*” The name rang through the dark corridors I sensed all about me as the iron tongue struck the echoing bronze on one side, then the other.

There was an answering call from far off. For some time we waited in silence. At last I saw light down a narrow alley bordered (as it seemed) by precipitous walls of uneven stone. It came nearer—a five-branched candlestick carried by a stocky, very erect man of forty or so with a flat, pale face. The bearded man beside me said, “There you are at last, *Cyby*. Have you brought a light?”

“Yes, Master. Who is this?”

“A messenger with a letter.” In a more ceremonious tone, Master *Ultan* said to me, “This is my own apprentice, *Cyby*. We have a guild too, we curators, of whom the librarians are a division. I am the only master librarian here, and it is our custom to assign our apprentices to our senior members. *Cyby* has been mine for some years now.”

I told *Cyby* that I was honored to meet him, and asked, somewhat timidly, what the feast day of the curators was—a question that must have been suggested by the thought that a great many of them must have gone by without *Cyby*’s being elevated to journeyman.

“It is now passed,” Master *Ultan* said. He looked toward me as he spoke, and in the candlelight I could see that his eyes were the color of watered milk. “In early spring. It is a beautiful day. The trees put out their new leaves then, in most years.”

There were no trees in the Grand Court, but I nodded; then, realizing he could not see me, I said, “Yes, beautiful with soft breezes.”

“Precisely. You are a young man after my own heart.” He put his hand on my shoulder—I could not help noticing that his fingers were dark with dust. “*Cyby*, too, is a young man after my heart. He will be chief librarian here when I am gone. We have a procession, you know, we curators. Down *Iubar Street*. He walks beside me then, the two of us robed in gray. What is the tinct of your own guild?”

“*Fuligin*,” I told him. “The color that is darker than black.”

“There are trees—sycamores and oaks, rock maples and duck-foot trees said to be the oldest on *Urth*. The trees spread their shade on either side of *Iubar Street*, and there are more on the esplanades down the center. Shopkeepers come to their doors to see the quaint curators, you know, and of course the booksellers and antique

dealers cheer us. I suppose we are one of the spring sights of Nessus, in our little way.”

“It must be very impressive,” I said.

“It is, it is. The cathedral is very fine too, once we reach it. There are banks of tapers, as though the sun were shining on the night sea. And candles in blue glass to symbolize the Claw. Enfolded in light, we conduct our ceremonies before the high altar. Tell me, does your own guild go to the cathedral?”

I explained that we used the chapel here in the Citadel, and expressed surprise that the librarians and other curators left its walls.

“We are entitled to, you see. The library itself does—doesn’t it, Cyby?”

“Indeed it does, Master.” Cyby had a high, square forehead, from which his graying hair was in retreat. It made his face seem small and a trifle babyish; I could understand how Ultan, who must occasionally have run his fingers over it as Master Palaemon sometimes ran his over mine, could think him still almost a boy.

“You are in close contact, then, with your opposite numbers in the city,” I said.

The old man stroked his beard. “The closest, for we are they. This library is the city library, and the library of the House Absolute too, for that matter. And many others.”

“Do you mean that the rabble of the city is permitted to enter the Citadel to use your library?”

“No,” said Ultan. “I mean that the library itself extends beyond the walls of the Citadel. Nor, I think, is it the only institution here that does so. It is thus that the contents of our fortress are so much larger than their container.” He took me by the shoulder as he spoke, and we began to walk down one of the long, narrow paths between the towering bookcases. Cyby followed us holding up his candelabrum—I suppose more for his benefit than mine, but it permitted me to see well enough to keep from colliding with the dark oak shelves we passed. “Your eyes have not yet failed you,” Master Ultan said after a time. “Do you apprehend any termination to this aisle?”

“No, *sieur*,” I said, and in fact I did not. As far as the candlelight flew there was only row upon row of books stretching from the floor to the high ceiling. Some of the shelves were disordered, some straight; once or twice I saw evidence that rats had been nesting among the books, rearranging them to make snug two- and three-level homes for themselves and smearing dung on the covers to form the rude characters of their speech.

But always there were books and more books: rows of spines in calf, morocco, binder’s cloth, paper, and a hundred other substances I could not identify, some flashing with gilt, many lettered in black, a few with paper labels so old and yellowed that they were as brown as dead leaves.

“‘Of the trail of ink there is no end,’” Master Ultan told me. “Or so a wise man

said. He lived long ago—what would he say if he could see us now? Another said, ‘A man will give his life to the turning over of a collection of books,’ but I would like to meet the man who could turn over this one, on any topic.”

“I was looking at the bindings,” I answered, feeling rather foolish.

“How fortunate for you. Yet I am glad. I can no longer see them, but I remember the pleasure I once had in doing it. That would be just after I had become master librarian. I suppose I was about fifty. I had, you know, been an apprentice for many, many years.”

“Is that so, *sieur*?”

“Indeed it is. My master was Gerbold, and for decades it appeared that he would never die. Year followed straggling year for me, and all that time I read—I suppose few have ever read so. I began, as most young people do, by reading the books I enjoyed. But I found that narrowed my pleasure, in time, until I spent most of my hours searching for such books. Then I devised a plan of study for myself, tracing obscure sciences, one after another, from the dawn of knowledge to the present. Eventually I exhausted even that, and beginning at the great ebony case that stands in the center of the room we of the library have maintained for three hundred years against the return of the Autarch Sulpicius (and into which, in consequence, no one ever comes) I read outward for a period of fifteen years, often finishing two books in one day.”

Behind us, Cyby murmured, “Marvelous, *sieur*.” I suspected that he had heard the story many times.

“Then the unlooked-for seized me by the coat. Master Gerbold died. Thirty years before I had been ideally suited by reason of predilection, education, experience, youth, family connections, and ambition to succeed him. At the time I actually did so, no one could have been less fit. I had waited so long that waiting was all I understood, and I possessed a mind situated beneath the weight of inutile facts. But I forced myself to take charge, and spent more hours than I could expect you to believe now in attempting to recall the plans and maxims I had laid down so many years ago for my eventual succession. He paused, and I knew he was delving again in a mind larger and darker than even his great library. “But my old habit of reading dogged me still. I lost to books days and even weeks, during which I should have been considering the operations of the establishment that looked to me for leadership. Then, as suddenly as the striking of a clock, a new passion came to me, displacing the old. You will already have guessed what it was.”

I told him I had not.

“I was reading—or so I thought—on the seat of that bow window on the forty-ninth floor that overlooks—I have forgotten, Cyby. What is it that it overlooks?”

“The upholsterers’ garden, *sieur*.”

“Yes, I recall it now—that little square of green and brown. I believe they dry

rosemary there to put in pillows. I was sitting there, as I said, and had been for several watches, when it came to me that I was reading no longer. For some time I was hard-put to say what I had been doing. When I tried, I could only think of certain odors and textures and colors that seemed to have no connection with anything discussed in the volume I held. At last I realized that instead of reading it, I had been observing it as a physical object. The red I recalled came from the ribbon sewn to the headband so that I might mark my place. The texture that tickled my fingers still was that of the paper on which the book was printed. The smell in my nostrils was old leather, still bearing the traces of birch oil. It was only then, when I saw the books themselves, that I began to understand their care.”

His grip on my shoulder tightened. “We have books here bound in the hides of echidnes, krakens, and beasts so long extinct that those whose studies they are, are for the most part of the opinion that no trace of them survives unfossilized. We have books bound wholly in metals of unknown alloy, and books whose bindings are covered with thickset gems. We have books cased in perfumed woods shipped across the inconceivable gulf between creations—books doubly precious because no one on Urth can read them.”

“We have books whose papers are matted of plants from which spring curious alkaloids, so that the reader, in turning their pages, is taken unaware by bizarre fantasies and chimeric dreams. Books whose pages are not paper at all, but delicate wafers of white jade, ivory, and shell; books too whose leaves are the desiccated leaves of unknown plants. Books we have also that are not books at all to the eye: scrolls and tablets and recordings on a hundred different substances. There is a cube of crystal here—though I can no longer tell you where—no larger than the ball of your thumb that contains more books than the library itself does. Though a harlot might dangle it from one ear for an ornament, there are not volumes enough in the world to counterweight the other. All these I came to know, and I made safeguarding them my life’s devotion. For seven years I busied myself with that; and then, just when the pressing and superficial problems of preservation were disposed of, and we were on the point of beginning the first general survey of the library since its foundation, my eyes began to gutter in their sockets. He who had given all books into my keeping made me blind so that I should know in whose keeping the keepers stand.”

“If you can’t read the letter I brought, sieur,” I said, “I will be glad to read it to you.”

“You are right,” Master Ultan muttered. “I had forgotten it. Cyby will read it—he reads well. Here, Cyby.”

I held the candelabrum for him, and Cyby unfolded the crackling parchment, held it up like a proclamation, and began to read, the three of us standing in a little circle of candlelight while all the books crowded around.

“‘From Master Gurloes of the Order of the Seekers for Truth and Penitence—’”

“What,” said Master Ultan. “Are you a torturer, young man?”

I told him I was, and there occurred a silence so long that Cyby began to read the letter a second time: “‘From Master Gurloes of the Order of the Seekers—’”

“Wait,” Ultan said. Cyby paused again; I stood as I had, holding the light and feeling the blood mounting to my cheeks. At last Master Ultan spoke again, and his voice was as matter-of-fact as it had been in telling me Cyby read well. “I can hardly recall my own admission to our guild. You are familiar, I suppose, with the method by which we recruit our numbers?”

I admitted I was not.

“In every library, by ancient precept, is a room reserved for children. In it are kept bright picture books such as children delight in, and a few simple tales of wonder and adventure. Many children come to these rooms, and so long as they remain within their confines, no interest is taken in them.”

He hesitated, and though I could discern no expression on his face, I received the impression that he feared what he was about to say might cause Cyby pain.

“From time to time, however, a librarian remarks a solitary child, still of tender years, who wanders from the children’s room and at last deserts it entirely. Such a child eventually discovers, on some low but obscure shelf, *The Book of Gold*. You have never seen this book, and you will never see it, being past the age at which it is met.”

“It must be very beautiful,” I said.

“It is indeed. Unless my memory betrays me, the cover is of black buckram, considerably faded at the spine. Several of the signatures are coming out, and certain of the plates have been taken. But it is a remarkably lovely book. I wish that I might find it again, though all books are shut to me now. The child, as I said, in time discovers *The Book of Gold*. Then the librarians come—like vampires, some say, but others say like the fairy godparents at a christening. They speak to the child, and the child joins them. Henceforth he is in the library wherever he may be, and soon his parents know him no more. I suppose it is much the same among the torturers.”

“We take such children as fall into our hands,” I said, “and are very young.”

“We do the same,” old Ultan muttered. “So we have little right to condemn you. Read on, Cyby.”

“‘From Master Gurloes of the Order of the Seekers for Truth and Penitence, to the Archivist of the Citadel: Greetings, Brother.’”

“‘By the will of a court we have in our keeping the exalted person of the Chate-laine Thecla; and by its further will we would furnish to the Chatelaine Thecla in her confinement such comforts as lie not beyond reason and prudence. That she may while away the moments until her time with us is come—or rather, as she has instructed me to say, until the heart of the Autarch, whose forbearance knows not walls nor seas, is softened toward her, as she prays—she asks that you, consonant with your

o ce, provide her with certain books, which books are—’ ”

“You may omit the titles, Cyby,” Ultan said. “How many are there?”

“Four, sieur.”

“No trouble then. Proceed.”

“‘For this, Archivist, we are much obligated to you.’ Signed, ‘Gurloes, Master of the Honorable Order commonly called the Guild of Torturers.’ ”

“Are you familiar with any of the titles on Master Gurloes’s list, Cyby?”

“With three, sieur.”

“Very good. Fetch them, please. What is the fourth?”

“The *Book of the Wonders of Urth and Sky*, sieur.”

“Better and better—there is a copy not two chains from here. When you have your volumes, you may meet us at the door through which this young man, whom I fear we have already detained too long, entered the stacks.”

I attempted to return the candelabrum to Cyby, but he indicated by a sign that I was to keep it and trotted o down a narrow aisle. Ultan was stalking away in the opposite direction, moving as surely as if he possessed vision.

“I recollect it well,” he said. “The binding is of brown cordwain, all edges are gilt, and there are etchings by Gwinoc, hand-tinted. It is on the third shelf from the floor, and leans against a folio in green cloth—I believe it is Blaithmaic’s *Lives of the Seventeen Megatherians*.”

Largely to let him know I had not left him (though no doubt his sharp ears caught my footfalls behind him), I asked, “What is it, sieur? The Urth and sky book, I mean.”

“Why,” he said, “don’t you know better than to ask that question of a librarian? Our concern, young man, is with the books themselves, not with their contents.”

I caught the amusement in his tone. “I think you know the contents of every book here, sieur.”

“Hardly. *But Wonders of Urth and Sky* was a standard work, three or four hundred years ago. It relates most of the familiar legends of ancient times. To me the most interesting is that of the Historians, which tells of a time in which every legend could be traced to half-forgotten fact. You see the paradox, I assume. Did that legend itself exist at that time? And if not, how came it into existence?”

“Aren’t there any great serpents, sieur, or flying women?”

“Oh, yes,” Master Ultan answered, stooping as he spoke. “But not in the legend of the Historians.” Triumphantly, he held up a small volume bound in flaking leather. “Have a look at this, young man, and see if I’ve got the right one.”

I had to set the candelabrum on the floor and crouch beside it. The book in my hands was so old and sti and musty that it seemed impossible that it had been opened within the past century, but the title page confirmed the old man’s boast. A

subtitle announced: "Being a Collection from Printed Sources of Universal Secrets of Such Age That Their Meaning Has Become Obscured of Time."

"Well," asked Master Ultan, "was I right or no?"

I opened the book at random and read, "... by which means a picture might be graven with such skill that the whole of it, should it be destroyed, might be recreated from a small part, and that small part might be any part."

I suppose it was the word graven that suggested to me the events I had witnessed on the night I had received my chrisos. "Master," I answered, "you are phenomenal."

"No, but I am seldom mistaken."

"You, of all men, will excuse me when I tell you I tarried a moment to read a few lines of this book. Master, you know of the corpse-eaters, surely. I have heard it said that by devouring the flesh of the dead, together with a certain pharmacon, they are able to relive the lives of their victims."

"It is unwise to know too much about these practices," the archivist murmured, "though when I think of sharing the mind of a historian like Loman, or Hermas. . . ." In his years of blindness he must have forgotten how nakedly our faces can betray our deepest feelings. By the light of the candles I saw his twisted in such an agony of desire that out of decency I turned away; his voice remained as calm as some solemn bell. "But from what I once read, you are correct, though I do not now recall that the book you hold treats of it."

"Master," I said, "I give you my word I would never suspect you of such a thing. But tell me this—suppose two collaborate in the robbing of a grave, and one takes the right hand for his share, and the other the left. Does he who ate the right hand have but half the dead man's life, and the other the rest? And if so, what if a third were to come and devour a foot?"

"It's a pity you are a torturer," Ultan said. "You might have been a philosopher. No, as I understand this noxious matter, each has the entire life."

"Then a man's whole life is in his right hand and in his left as well. Is it in each finger too?"

"I believe each participant must consume more than a mouthful for the practice to be effective. But I suppose that in theory at least, what you say is correct. The entire life is in each finger."

We were already walking back in the direction we had come. Since the aisle was too narrow for us to pass one another, I now carried the candelabrum before him, and a stranger, seeing us, would surely have thought I lighted his way. "But Master," I said, "how can that be? By the same argument, the life must reside in each joint of every finger, and surely that is impossible."

"How big is a man's life?" asked Ultan.

"I have no way of knowing, but isn't it larger than that?"

“You see it from the beginning, and anticipate much. I, recollecting it from its termination, know how little there has been. I suppose that is why the depraved creatures who devour the bodies of the dead seek more. Let me ask you this—are you aware that a son often strikingly resembles his father?”

“I have heard it said, yes. And I believe it,” I answered. I could not help thinking as I did of the parents I would never know.

“Then it is possible, you will agree, since each son may resemble his father, for a face to endure through many generations. That is, if the son resembles the father, and his son resembles him, and that son’s son resembles him, then the fourth in line, the great-grandson, resembles his great-grandfather.”

“Yes,” I said.

“Yet the seed of all of them was contained in a drachm of sticky fluid. If they did not come from there, from where did they come?”

I could make no answer to that, and walked along in puzzlement until we reached the door through which I had entered this lowest level of the great library. Here we met Cyby carrying the other books mentioned in Master Gurloes’s letter. I took them from him, bade goodbye to Master Ultan, and very gratefully left the stifling atmosphere of the library stacks. To the upper levels of that place I returned several times; but I never again entered that tomblike cellar, or ever wished to.

One of the three volumes Cyby had brought was as large as the top of a small table, a cubit in width and a scant ell in height; from the arms impressed upon its sa an cover, I supposed it to be the history of some old noble family. The others were much smaller. A green book hardly larger than my hand and no thicker than my index finger appeared to be a collection of devotions, full of enameled pictures of ascetic pantocrators and hypostases with black halos and gemlike robes. I stopped for a time to look at them, sharing a little, forgotten garden full of winter sunshine with a dry fountain.

Before I had so much as opened any of the other volumes, I felt that pressure of time that is perhaps the surest indication we have left childhood behind. I had already been two watches at least on a simple errand, and soon the light would fade. I gathered up the books and hurried along, though I did not know it, to meet my destiny and eventually myself in the Chatelaine Thecla.