



PARADISAL PARADOX

*"Now the serpent was more subtil than any beast of the field which the LORD God had made."
Genesis 3:1*

By B. D. Bieger

I

SITTING ALONE IN the corner of a busy lounge, a large man hunched eagerly over the table in front of him. He slid a small glass of verdant liquid under the tap of an ornate, crystal tank. After carefully adjusting the placement of the glass, he spanned a slotted spoon across its mouth and gently set a sugar cube in the spoon's bowl. As he adjusted the trickle of water from the tank, the liquid dissolved the cube and ran into the emerald drink below, turning it foggy and pale. Anticipation lit the man's eyes as he followed the process, fingering the greasy pale-gold mustache that glowed in contrast with his ruddy complexion.

Dondré considered himself a speculator, but, in reality, the fact that he had turned a profit off his inheritance was more due to luck than sagacity. He was soft and slow of both mind and body, and the few stirring occasions that managed to slip into the hubbub of his life proved that this softness could extend to his heart.

Had Dondré looked up when his companion seated himself in the chair across from him, he would have seen a drastically different figure. Georg's dry, creased skin, slightly hunched shoulders, and sagging lower lids were all signs of how the rigor of his studies had weathered his body. He wore the gentleman's clothes of yesteryear, and seemed scarcely to have removed them since. His ratty attire was surpassed however by his tattered beard. It was a narrow, misshapen thing whose growth seemed to have been kept in check not by a blade, but rather by the mechanical abuse associated with constant and vigorous musing and mulling. A pure example of how the body mirrors the character, Georg's disdainful carving out of superfluities and leisure from his life had left his body filleted of excess meat, boney and gaunt.

Georg gazed contemptuously at the man he had come to meet. "So, have you any thoughts on the matter, Dondré?" he questioned with monotonous patience.

Dondré collected his drink and sat back, "Oh...I have plenty of thoughts on the matter; however, I'm not a theologian and find such excessively moot discussions frivolous at best."

"There is nothing moot about it," Georg said as he settled in for a discussion by threading his fingertips together, "Can anyone really maintain that a reality in which trillions of people end up in eternal torment is superior to one in which everyone leads a blissful life?"

Dondré huffed a little and relented. "I can't help but think that what God has in store for His chosen people will be greater than anything a pre-laspar—a pre-Fall state could offer."

"His chosen people? Do you mean those select few who He deemed the least likely to bugged it all up again? What is new redemption in Christ if not a plan B?"

"But he knew all along that we'd muck things up and therefore planned something greater. And what of free will?"

"Greater?" Georg repeated, looking vexed, "In what awful existence could the damnation of innumerable souls be the greater? If you've heard anything of me, you know I am a Believer, but I am also an unabashed Utilitarian, as I

believe all sound men should be. There is nothing, mind it, nothing that can happen to the minority, no matter how infinite or lovely, that can justify the equally eternal horrors of the majority. And, it's true, free will is a positive thing, but it's not worth such a price. If we had lacked it, we would've never noticed it. 'Where ignorance is bliss, 'tis folly to be wise.'"

"Ah, but!" Dondré said with an excited gesticulation, "What of Mill's higher pleasures? Pigs are ignorant and happy, but we would disdain being put on the level with them."

This comment seemed to surprise, but also amuse, Georg, "Tush! That is just our arrogance coming to light. We like to fancy that our contentedness is better than that of pigs in some inherent way. Were we happy pigs, we would be just as content as happy humans or happy gods. If happiness is when a being's glass is full, it matters little the size of the glass, the capacity of its consciousness. A full glass, no matter its capacity, makes for contentment. The contentedness of pigs, those with but a small glass, however base we'd like to think it, outweighs our extreme discontent. Our groaning nature is just a sign of our empty cup. What really matters is that a being is as content as his awareness permits."

"I suppose—But damn it, Georg! I'm not getting into this just for false hopes. It's a mute point! The science isn't even conceivable, and won't be for hundreds of years. There's no use blathering about it."

"It is true. You are no theologian, and neither are you a scientist. I should like you to not speculate into the realm of my capabilities. I can make it happen. You are a businessman, and the only question you need worry about is if you want to be a part of it, if you're willing to, by supplying the funds, save the souls of an unimaginable number of humans, your brothers and sisters, and, of course, not go unthanked afterward."

"And you're sure nothing will change but—what was it?—our personalities or something? We'll all just be jolly and jovial and not a soul, past, present, or future, will have to fret about damnation?"

"Not in so few words, but yes. As long as I do my job well, yes." Here Georg poured himself an inch of the amber liquid in the bottom of a glass. "As long as I keep the pair away from that tree."

Dondré's business sense finally overpowered his original reservations. "Well, if there's the foggiest chance you can do what you say, it's worth a thousand times what you're proposing. Your proposal makes any other I've heard sound pathetic, and at a fraction the price! One last thing bothers me, though, d-do you think He'll," his voice shrank into a whisper, "you know, mind?"

"Why in Heaven should He? We'd be reverting to what He originally wanted! He has undoubtedly orchestrated this whole ordeal and tolerated all our detestable behavior for the sole reason that He knew we would one day mature to the point when we could return to Him. Humanity is His prodigal son, and He assuredly waits with open arms for our return. So, what do you say? Do we have a deal?"

"Eeh. Yes. I do suppose, yes."

"Good. You get me the funds, and I'll get me to work. Cheers."

Georg had picked up his glass and downed it before Dondré could blurt, "But the emulsification!" As he turned his back, Dr. Georg released a look of pity. He hated using such a fool, but it was for the best.

II

The stairs creaked as Dondré descended behind Georg into his laboratory. Dondré wandered around the room, aimlessly observing as Georg stood by the base of the stairs. The room was an irregular shape which produced many dark crannies. Its perimeter was lined with countertops that were covered with stains and clutter. Above these, shelves rose to the ceiling, save where high slits of window cut them short. Herbs abounded. Most had their leaves scattered atop the pages of open books, but a few were shelved in the labelled bottles that were randomly interspersed between books and folded charts. Candle stands were set in various places, all with their bases obscured in mounds of melted wax. Others hung from the ceiling and dribbled patterns upon the floor. Dondré glanced up with some concern from a small pile of teeth that was shoved in a corner. "This is a rather gloomy and confused place, Georg," Dondré hesitated, "How on earth do you find things down here?"

"It serves its purpose." Georg replied unirked, "I leave clean quarters to cluttered minds. Items need only be organized by either the hand or the head. I just find the latter easiest. Besides, a person with a singular ambition can never misplace items of any use to it."

"I see," Dondré said absentmindedly as he wandered farther into the room. On the far end there was a low furnace with a deep basin of sand upon it. In the sand was nestled a large beaker, discolored from long use. To Dondré's surprise, he found a dog, a black poodle, curled up next to the furnace. "What is this?" he question, bending over to pet it, "You didn't tell me you already had a partner, and such an unusual breed for a man of your—er—disposition."

Georg's patience began to visibly wear thin. "He was a stray, so I took him in. Do not let his attractive appearance fool you, he was born for the hunt. Now, are you satisfied that your money has been well spent?"

"I mean, I suppose. I just expected I'd be paying for more beakers and tubes and fewer..." Dondré glanced at the teeth in the corner, "...old books. Are you even going to use electricity in your processes?" inquired Dondré as he opened the covers of various dilapidated and brittle volumes, feigning indifference to the range of astonishing symbols he saw within.

"As I don't see the point in making things needlessly complex, I very probably will not. In its offended rush to rid itself of the spiritual realm, science has discarded a great wealth of useful insights. God, His angels, the Devil, they are all scientific beings, you know. They do not lay outside the realm of science but on a higher plane of it. The human and the spiritual are but two microcosms in a macrocosm governed by science. These old books, this so-called 'magic,' is nothing but the science of the spirits, and even the most rudimentary use of it is substantially more helpful than anything the more orthodox sciences can produce."

"This stuff makes me nervous. Doesn't it, in some way, go against the Bible?"

The dog whined.

"How often need I cite the greater good?"

"Alright, as long as I'm not directly involved, I guess I needn't worry about it. How do you know it will work?"

"Ohh, Thomas. I suspected as much from you, and so decided to make my test be your proof."

"What do you mean?"

"Your father died 27 years ago, correct?"

"Wull, yes, when I was sixteen. Why?"

"Describe for me the man who first informed you of his passing."

"Ahm, well, it was a stranger, actually, he rushed into the street looking for help as I was walking up to my father's house. He was a shabby fellow with a gnarly b—my God! It was you? Christ, Georg! You didn't have to kill my father!"

"You dolt. I didn't kill your father. To mess with physical things in history like that would be far too rash. Tut-tut. I did say that, and I meant it. When messing with something so vague and obscure as someone's salvation, it

can't possibly interfere with how the world actually is," he rubbed his neck, "But that was just a trifle compared to the number of years I must travel now. I will have to formulate something much more powerful. I trust I won't be hearing anymore of your doubts, Dondré."

"You cannot, for they no longer exist! One question, though. May I see you off?—when you go the next time, I mean. It wouldn't hinder the process, would it?"

He grunted. "It won't matter a bit where you are."

III

Georg reclined naked in a long, open-topped tank. Above him, stretching the length of the tank, was a pipe with holes along it, a sort of sprinkler system. This was attached to a large cylinder, or tower, and both were made out of a material Dondré did not recognize. He rehearsed Georg's explanation in his mind as he looked at the simple contraption.

The idea was to have a certain concoction, which Georg had called a derivative of ether, spread over him, but then run off and move on. "Apparently he's not to marinate in it, merely baste," Dondré thought to himself. The fact that there were no drains in the bottom of the tank confused him, but the whole process seemed disappointingly simple. There were so few moving parts. He still felt nervous, though, when, on the command of Georg, he opened the spigot and the shimmering green syrupy liquid began to trickle down.

Georg flinched as it contacted his skin and rolled off in a three-dimensional stream. "I hope you aren't easily undone," he said wryly, but with a wince. Dondré grunted and sat down upon a crate, sipping a scotch to calm his excited nerves. He noticed the liquid never seemed to hit the bottom of the tank, or perhaps evaporated the instant it did. He wanted to stare, but Georg's nakedness made him uncomfortable doing so.

Soon he couldn't help but stare. He sat up. Small dark spots seemed to be forming along Georg's rapidly moving chest and up his tensed face, everywhere the liquid hit. He noticed the liquid no longer ran off him, but vanished on contact. Georg gasped and began to scream horridly. The dark spots widened—and deepened. To his terror, Dondré realized they were actually holes in his flesh! They widened more, caved in, and joined together, exposing writhing organs as this liquid seemed to eat through them. His scream was snuffed into a gurgle as the two halves of his head collapsed together. Streams of brown liquid began to drain below the length of his body...but never settled on the ground. Did they fall through it? Wherever they went, soon the liquid and Georg were both gone, and Dondré was left alone, trembling on the floor with tears rolling down his red face.

IV

As he gasped, Georg noted with interest that his body had taken longer to coalesce this time. His first breath entered with a shocking chill, and a searing cold extended the length of his back. After his mind settled from the start, he realized he was lying in thin snow at the base of a tree. The bare branches swayed and clattered high above him. Winter, precipitation and seasons, in Paradise—that was unexpected. He laughed breathlessly at his irrationality. He'd never fully accepted many of the theories about Eden, but apparently he could not help being influenced by them.

Still trying to catch his breath, he stood up shakily and surveyed his surroundings. He was in a great forest of unfamiliar trees. Lingering snow glowed in the shadows at the base of their trunks. The atmosphere above them was cloudless and almost purple. He still felt as if he were breathing to no avail and gasped for air. He started feeling lightheaded. Dark spots appeared in his vision. His hands clenched up and felt as though a thousand worms were crawling up them. As his face began to go numb, he wheezed with a smile, "Ahh, the oxygen levels," and blacked out.

Coming to, he lay on the ground shivering from the cold earth he was on and the cold sweat he was in. He decided to relax a bit and recover. In the absence of civilization he had imagined silence, especially in winter, but this was far from the case. His surroundings were alive with a great number of unusual bird songs that mixed with the drone of bugs to form a chaotic and pulsing symphony. When he focused on them, he thought he could make out a subtle pattern or rhythm in their calls, but without fail, some rogue animal would throw everything off. An exception to a pattern is the worst form of chaos. "That will doubtless drive me mad," he said to himself in a somewhat motivational manner as he got up.

If his calculations were correct, he estimated himself to be within three hundred meters of both the Tree of Life and the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. Not knowing in which direction they lay, though, he walked a hundred and fifty meters out, minding where he came from, and was about to begin a perimeter when he noticed some unusual terrain in front of him. In an area where the trees were farther apart, there seemed to be a number of short mounds, spaced almost intentionally. He made a note to come back to the curiosity, but deemed his task of more importance and so continued on.

As he walked he looked about him cheerfully, admiring in wonder the virgin earth. "Abounding potential," he said to himself with a smile of excitement. He walked in this manner for a while, and came across a stream with steam wisping from it. Stepping down into the waters from the bank, his bluing feet revived with a sting. He warmed his whole body in the waters before looking around. Up the stream he noticed a patch of pure sunlight hitherto blocked from his view by large overlapping trunks. He decided to investigate it, and so began to wade towards it, the slick stones bruising his feet. The lively flowing of the waters still worked upon his fancy, however, and soon he found himself chanting this little verse:

"No longer shall your princely flood
From distant lakes be swelled in vain,
Nor longer through a darksome wood
Advance, unnoticed, to the main,
Far other ends, the heavens decree—
And commerce plans new freights for thee."

After crawling under a large fallen log that had obscured his view, he noticed that the glow was from a clearing ahead. Hastening to its edge, he saw two trees, still in leaf, in its middle. One had large, low-spreading limbs and a thick trunk, and the other was slightly taller with branches that would, he thought, try his reach. The sun here was

more direct and the air seemed warmer, but as his stream provided a straight path toward the trees, he decided to keep in it. Following it farther, he found that it terminated in a deep hole between the two trees, from which it sprung forth energetically.

Georg examined the two trees from the stream bed. The taller tree rose up on his right, its branches spreading a good measure overhead. Thickly mingled with the leaves were thousands of large, perfectly-shapen apples of mixed color. To his left, the shorter tree spread its branches farther out, and upon mounting the bank, he found them nearly level with his head. He was a bit surprised to see that the fruit of this tree was somewhat deformed and small. The apples appeared lumpy, and the skins, which were of rougher texture, even showed some signs of spotting. They were also all the same color, a sort of golden with a clouded luster.

He judged that this was the tree he was to guard, as it was inferior to the other in both stature and quality. He therefore swung himself onto a branch and rested against the trunk. He positioned himself so as to be able to observe the other tree, in case he had chosen the wrong one. Then, he waited.

For the first time since he had arrived, his mind was idle. He thought it curious, the calm he felt in the face of the annihilation of the human race—well, near annihilation. He thought of Dondré sitting on his crate, his shot nerves quaking as his shining, flushed face swept in circles over the room. He breathed a cracked apology to him, but he knew that never again would anyone have to avert his gaze in shame of the human body or in horror of its failing. He knew that he was about to fix forever anything that had ever been broken. “Petrarch’s heart, Caligula’s mind, Margaret’s spirit, and Christ’s body—all will go unbroken,” he whispered, “Every peasant—every child. It will all be made right.” Humanity was going to be reborn with a clean slate. But this new birth required the death of the old. The only part that confounded him was what was to become of himself.

His experiments had demonstrated for him quite clearly that time could only flow in one direction and that it did so with a swift current. This meant that, nothing at any point in time could be retroactive, nothing could swim up stream. He had, though, stepped out of the flow of time altogether, into the realm of the spirits, and reentered it farther up stream, a little nearer its source. He knew that anything he did now would have an effect on everything down stream, but nothing affected down stream, though it be the obliteration of his own parents, could in turn affect him.

He again mulled over the fact that he alone would remain of the fallen nature, and he would be living in a world with no savior, or, rather, he was the new savior, though he could not save himself. He thought of this neither proudly nor with remorse, for what was the salvation of one as weighed against the damnation of all? Perhaps Christ would still come to rescue the solitary soul of this damned savior.

It didn’t really matter whether he were damned or not. Either reality would be superior as a whole to the current one. He would be content with imparting any knowledge he could to the two and their kids while he lived among them. With the advances he could give them in the sciences, the arts, and even thinking itself, they could immediately begin to form a utopian civilization. He tried to imagine how far they could advance in even a few short centuries.

He was startled from his revelry by a sort of cackle. He dropped the leaves he had absentmindedly plucked and glanced up. Two figures darted through the clearing with remarkable pace, dodging or even leaping over any obstacles in their way. His body and heart jolted when he realized one was a lion. The other was a woman. A sense of the surreal sank in as he realized the woman seemed to be chasing the lion. “Can she mean to eat it?” thought he, “No, no. And look at the lion. He’s not exerting his full strength; he’s teasing her. They’re playing.” He watched in dumb awe as the lady pounced upon the lion, who, in turn, rolled over as if having been tackled and swatted at her with paws the size of her head before jumping up and bounding away again with her in pursuit.

This went on for a while before the lady, tired out, sprawled beneath the tree, a little to his left. Georg found himself taken aback by all he had just seen. He felt disappointed that he should meet the mother of humanity, as she amused herself like a child. Now she lay grinning with imbecilic mirth. He pushed aside his thoughts of indignity, for she was rising.

She stared intently at her section of the tree, apparently not noticing him, and pranced about with the look of a child detective. A stab of adrenaline tore through him as he realized that she was selecting an apple. His face cooled, though. She was much too casual about her selection. “Ah, haha, I get it,” he thought, glancing at the beautifully uniform fruit across the stream, “‘Mother of Science’ indeed.”

She had nearly picked three different apples, but kept changing her mind with a great flurry of gestures. Apparently she put enormous weight on which apple she chose, as if they all had unique tastes that could be perceived from their appearance. Finally picking one, she turned around to look over the field as she took a bite.

Georg’s mind returned to the task at hand. He slipped down slowly from the tree and gingerly started approaching her. When she noticed him, her face of happy contemplation erupted into a sort of excitement. She came bounding towards him. “Oh, another new one still?” she exclaimed excitedly. Georg noticed for the first time that scars of all shapes and sizes textured her already rough, dark skin. Trying to push aside this perplexing image, he readied himself to respond in what he had come in his studies to call “the lonely tongue.”

“What boundless variety exists!” she continued before he could speak, “It has the white of a flower but a body resembling the First, though much smaller and more awkward looking. Come. Let us go to the First so we can decide upon a name for you.” She turned and began to leave.

“Wait—” Georg broke out reflexively. The lady spun around.

“Beast! How do you make words? This is new indeed among you. Perhaps you are as some of the birds, though, making words with no meanings inside them.” She walked around him, eyeing him curiously as she took another bite of her fruit, which appeared painfully dense.

“My words are home to meaning, and I am not a beast. Do you mean to say, though, that none of your beasts speak?”

“Of course not...and I begin to think they would no longer be beasts if they did. But how did you acquire speech?”

“I will explain that later. Are there others like us?—More speakers, I mean.”

“No—well, there is The First. It is unusual for me to converse with any but him. There is also, of course, our Father, but He is not like us.”

Georg muttered to himself in German, “Hmm...Perhaps the snake was a metaphor. Or perhaps it really was possession, which seemed so unlikely.”

His companion watched him quizzically as he spoke. “Have you lost your speech, then?”

“Eh? Ah, no. I am sorry. Allow me to explain to you why I’ve come. I was sent to enlighten you, to show you how to live better and more fully.”

“How do you mean?”

“By teaching you to produce things with your hands and your head that will better enable you to control Nature.”

“Control it? Why would we wish to do that? It seems perfectly capable of controlling itself.”

“To utilize it, I mean, and to make it more comfortable for you. I can show you ways of making grand places that would protect you from the whims of Nature, the fluctuations in temperature, wind, and even lighting. Are you not cold now?”

“I do feel cold, but that is not bad. Neither is warm. The Father has devised mechanisms that allow us to adapt through exposure, and, because of this, these are harmless and rich sensations! Where is beauty without variety? Where perception without distinction? To tame Nature’s bite would be to fashion the dulllest of lives. Do you not cherish the differences in these sensations and wish to experience them, each to the fullest, while they last?”

“I do. They are nice to observe when in the mood, but it is also nice to be able to tell them to go away when I please.”

“If I could command the wind and the sun to hush, and they swayed to my bidding, I feel I would begin to think my place higher in this world than I ought. These things are brought about by processes which our Father alone should control. There is a stability in what you call ‘Nature’s whim.’ If I did not have these things thrust upon me with neither my thought nor permitence, how would I ever be reminded that there is a Being greater than me or learn to appreciate those things less suited to my immediate fancy?”

Georg contained his agitation. “How about this: you are, apparently, no stranger to physical hardship,” he gestured to her scars, “And you undoubtedly know the troubles of travel. If you want to go beyond a creek, you must always go down into it and climb the bank on the other side. I can teach you how to make large, clear walkways that extend over the waters and will allow you to get from one place to another quickly with neither struggle nor pain.”

“But...where then would the interest in travel be? Why would I forgo my swim? It sounds unbearably uneventful. What skill or fun is there in traveling quickly on a flat surface, without obstacles or challenges? And what are these scars but the chronicle of my adventures?”

“The goal of travel is to reach your destination, and these alterations would allow you to see, and appreciate, so much more in this world than you currently can. There are a unspeakable marvels in this world that make these fields and forests pallid in comparison.”

“I doubt that not, but what need I to travel who find what you call ‘pallid’ so marvelous? Why seek out the great if it only makes you disdain the small? I would rather see the world with uncallused eyes as it comes to me.

“I simply mean to show you how to find alternative ways of appreciating what you’ve been given. Besides, I believe your Father told you to subdue Nature.”

“Subdue as much as needed to permit living. I have no desire to subdue it further, especially at the cost of my living. If we frequent a place, our feet trod down a way clear for us. Is that not enough?”

Georg realized the futility of reasoning, at least in practical matters, with such an uncivilized and sensual mind. Perhaps she would see the need as their number increased. He decided to try another tactic. “Let us talk of something other than this, for I was sent to teach you other things as well, and perhaps you will be more accepting of them. I shall tell you of how you, and many other things work. It is a very interesting topic.”

“Tending the garden is one of my best loved delights! But what have you to tell me of it?”

A moment of silence passed before Georg parted his pursed lips. “I do not mean the work that you do. I mean the work that is done inside you. What is an example you can relate to? Ah. Digestion. I can tell you what happens to your food and why you feel hungry. That is practical and interesting, but there are much more astounding things I can teach you as well, like the fact that you and everything else alive are made out of very small pieces working with each other. You aren’t just a whole. You are a whole of parts.”

“Are you trying to speak of the kudja?”

“I don’t know this word, kudja.”

“You must know—the swirling orbs.”

“Do you mean the stars?”

“Technically kudja does refer to the stars and their colder companions as they are clustered, but it also refers to the smaller spinning clusters within everything, the smallest pieces of everything, though comprised of much themselves.”

The manner in which she explained this was like that of a parent patiently retelling a child something that he was already supposed to know. Georg’s face flushed. Planets. She knew about planets? How could she? And what were these other things she was trying to explain? It smacked of Dalton. But how? He stammered, “H-how do you know these things? Were you created with this knowledge?”

“No. These things have been explained to me throughout my walks with the Father. Does He not walk with you? I begin to wonder who sent you.”

Infinite knowledge—everything that can be known—simply explained by the one who designed it. Georg's stoicism momentarily faltered. Excitement and awe grew within him. He wanted to question the lady about everything, and, if he were able, gain an invitation to these walks. Kudja—he yearned to hear more. It was strange, such knowledge hid in such a seeming simpleton. Why did she seem so simple, though? “You seem to not wish to change your state. If you do not advance your lifestyle, what do you do with these things you know?”

“We do the obvious thing. We marvel at them, and thereby at our Creator as well. There are few better ways to adore our Maker than by reveling in the intricacies of His creation.”

His exasperation returned as quickly as the excitement had eliminated it. “But you can also utilize these things for the betterment—” He ran out of breath mid-sentence, weary, and acknowledged the hopelessness of continuing it. Content, she lacked ambition. She had shown that. He had been expecting and could accept ignorance, but a paralyzed or lazy knowledge is worse than ignorance. When given the materials to build something magnificent, who is the more infirm—he who cannot understand what to do or he who understands but is too complacent to care to build? Surely this invalid knowledge is worse than ignorance! It was nothing more than a damned hobby, like bird watching, this collecting of bits of fact only to shelve them aside and never put them to any real use. If it leads to actual progress, the awkward groping of a blind and self-disproving science is better than this.

The shadows were growing longer and he colder. A chill shook him. The lady spoke again. “I begin to feel your words do not mean anything, or mean too much. You seem to have trouble speaking them yourself. Where did you learn to speak such things? Let me fetch the First that you might explain to us both where you learned thus to speak, and that we might decide upon something to call you. You might not be a beast, but you are not human, or, if you are, you are a different sort, not only physically but in your head as well.” Of course it was clear that no offense was meant. To her, to say something was different was not to mean it was bad. After so saying, though, she skipped away, leaving Georg standing troubled.

He thought aloud to himself. “They have nothing to fear—no death, no condemnation. And they are content, right? They seem so. Then what cause for misgiving? It is an unimaginable contentedness. They had the mysteries of the universe and they are content to simply observe and applaud, as if everything were but a play for them. They are content. They are content to not get their hands dirty digging in the universal facts and building something wonderful of them. I could settle for ignorance, but this is something worse, a sort of educated ignorance, an ignorance of ambition. This lack of drive is the sole blemish on the cheek of this reality. But it is a fatal blemish. It foretells a stagnant humanity. He was right. The fool was right. I cannot damn humanity to be swine, or less. They must fall.”

He waded the stream and waited for their return.

V

Epilogue: Eve's Admonition

In an effort to comfort baby Cain, Eve bounced him softly as she paced in the light of a fire. Adam, worn out from his day's work, snored in a tent nearby. She whispered to her son.

"Oh, Cain, my innocent Cain. How small you are! And how you daily change! Many times I dreamt of what a young human would look like, but never could I have imagined the truth." She smiled as Cain began to play with and tugged upon the paw dangling from her clothes. Her smile faded, washed out by a sigh.

"A mother should never repent of the gift of life, for life itself is a symbol of hope and the potential for good. But I will never be able to forgive myself for the world I have molded for you. The very hand that now caresses you is the same that slew you, so long before your creation.

"I sometimes wish that you might not know the change, knowing nothing but it, but no. Such a crash will echo in the ears and hearts of all eternity. Even if it were not so, it is my doleful duty to remind you from whence we came, so we might always remember That which it is now our nature to forget.

"These gray locks and weary eyes which you now see were not always so, but were produced from the absence of our tree. Neither old age nor the death that shall follow are the worst of our curse, though. Would that they were. There was a far more dangerous and destructive side-effect of that fruit: the loss of contentment. Such a change came upon me!, the drive to do. Like drowning animals, we grasp at everything we have lost hold of—immortality, knowledge, and communion. Once the offspring of gods, we will forever try to regain that title, but only grow further from it.

"We had developed resistances before. Such things as pain, cold, and disease all became less intense after regular exposure, but we acquired a new resistance that day, a resistance to joy. Pleasures, once had, ceased to be so. Sources of happiness grew stale and had to be refreshed through variation. We always had to press farther and see more. Through years of alternations, those original pleasures have quite been lost. The paradise which used to fascinate us with its beautiful intricacies has been banished from us, though we remain within it. We look about us, see the dull usual, and long for something—anything—different. And blushes, which used to spring so involuntarily, now must be drawn." She wiped her eyes, exposing the faded scars on her arms. "But you will know this fallen state all too well."

"I have no doubt that this new ambition, this urge to progress and fathom mystery, will drive us to our ends. But not just our own. I have watched Nature herself deteriorate due to our quest for progress, and I weep to think that human progress must always be at her expense. As our first act of self-betterment, we fashioned clothes out of foliage, and now we do so out of slain animals. Thus we manipulate nature to protect and decorate the human body. While the woods readily give up their fruits, requiring us only but to grasp them, we make fields of forests, and toil in an effort to control what and how much we eat. Once we tended the garden for its sake, now we scrape the ground for ours. Ever this desire presses us forward, so we strive to amplify our labors by developing new tools and techniques.

"Work would be no enemy, though, if it were but useful. Too often our toils are in vain pursuits. In needless artifice we spend our time arranging plants in a hollow attempt to make them how they once were. Other times we spend our days in mindless amusement, neglecting the duties that surround us. Thus we are either absent from ourselves or incessantly busy, both conditions aggravating the other. Such vanity will evermore be the hallmark of humanity.

"Oh, that our first offspring should be this fruitless industry! How vile our begetting compared to that of our Father. Just remember, my second son, you cannot miss what you never had. All that drives you, all that makes you long for life, learning, and love, is the fact that you once had them in their truest form, and the one way to have them again is to surrender their pursuit."

THE END